

Murder Under the Gum Trees: Book Two

A Curious Visit



JESS LEA



Chapter 1

BESS CAMPBELL ADJUSTED HER RAINBOW coat made of recycled plastics, then pulled on her emerald-green woolly hat. She'd knitted it herself in the shape of a Viking's helmet, and it made a striking contrast with her red hair. If there were spirits haunting this place, why not give them some colour to enjoy? They spent enough time in darkness.

She said that to the guide leading the ghost tour, but he gave her a funny look.

The guide shone his lantern at the display wall. It was engraved with names: *Martha. Maria. Susannah. Eliza. Ann.* Few other details were known. She wondered what it said on the women's tombstones, if they had them.

Shivering, Bess thrust her hands into her coat pockets and stamped her feet against the flagstones. No moon tonight. Icy breezes whipped across the yard, plastering her skirt to her legs. Normally, Bess liked being outdoors; she loved nature, found it invigorating. But she wasn't sure about this place.

The prison walls were high, made of rugged sandstone. Weeds grew through the cracks. Behind her was the site of the old punishment cells. They had no windows, just small, rough vents too high to see out. Women condemned to those cells had to climb down underground, into the earth.

"That was a lesson," the guide explained, "to show them where they were headed in the next life if they kept breaking the rules."

There had been a lot of rules in the women's penitentiary built here in Tasmania in the 1820s, back when the island off Australia's mainland was still called Van Diemen's Land: an infamously wild, cold, and dangerous prison colony at the edge of the world.

A woman could be punished for not working hard enough when washing laundry with frozen hands. She could be punished for swearing, or falling asleep in chapel, or eating more than her share of bread, or sharing her sleeping hammock too enthusiastically with another woman.

Talking was discouraged too. Visitors to the prison remarked on how the women and children moved about the place in silence, like ghosts.

While the story disturbed her, Bess longed to see a ghost. Or a bunyip or a UFO—anything unearthly and hard to explain. She'd always been drawn to the colourful side of life, to anything whacky, creative, and eccentric. That was why she had moved to the kooky small town of Port Bannir three years ago—to work in a quirky gallery and live in a tiny house in a field.

But then her lovable boss had been killed and the gallery taken over by new managers who didn't like Bess at all. A year ago, they'd transferred her to the promotions team in their Melbourne office.

While city life was convenient in some ways, Bess knew her employers were sidelining her. After months of spreadsheets and Zoom meetings, her spirit felt starved. She missed her old job. She missed her beloved chickens, now living with her brother. Most of all, she missed the sense of adventure she used to feel every day.

This trip around Tasmania might help. Bess needed wilderness and beauty and strangeness in her life again.

The guide held up his lantern. "Through here were the nurseries. Hundreds of babies were kept crowded inside, neglected and half-starved. Those who survived were snatched from their mothers and sent away to the orphan school. They say some nights, when the wind blows down from the mountain, you can hear the screaming."

Bess pulled her coat tighter, her skin creeping. Maybe she didn't want to meet the spirits of this place after all. Could suffering, despair, and anger be so strong that they left an imprint on the locations where they occurred?

The guide began to talk about the women who'd been imprisoned here—thieves, poisoners, arsonists—and the sinister matrons who controlled them.

"You see where that cell is marked on the ground at the end? Once we had a blind visitor whose guide dog refused to go inside. And over there by the staircase? People complain that the photographs they take of that spot don't turn out. All they get is a dark image." The guide lowered his

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lantern. “I brought my daughter here when she was five. I left her alone while I went to fetch something. When I came back, I found her crying. She said a woman in black had been angry with her. But there was no one there but us.”

A door banged. The woman beside Bess jumped and let out a muffled shriek. The guide’s lantern swayed, light and shadows lapping across the walls. Footsteps rang out against the flagstones.

The guests bunched up together like an anxious herd. Those footsteps were coming closer. People whispered, “Is this part of it?”

Bess stepped forward. She didn’t want to miss anything.

The gate to the yard flew open. A black silhouette stood against the gloom. She was tall and lean, and the air around her seemed to hum with a strange energy.

In the dim light, her face appeared as white and angular as fresh-cut marble above her black clothing. Her features were strong with a certain stark beauty; her eyes were shadowy, her hair jet black. Her long fingers flexed as if searching for a neck to wrap around.

She stepped forward. Her gaze swept the crowd, her dark eyes glinting malevolently. “Would the owner of a blue Nissan Pulsar, numberplate XIR679, move it immediately, as it is taking up two spaces.”

Bess bit her lip, fighting not to laugh.

“If you’d done that at *my* museum, you would have been banned,” Margaret Gale said.

* * *

“You missed a good start to the tour while you were parking the car,” Bess told Margaret. The group, slightly shaken, had moved on to examine the matron’s cottage. “Thanks for dropping me at the entrance.”

“I wouldn’t have needed to, if certain people had learned basic driving skills.”

“Do you think it could make a good topic for a gallery exhibition? Haunted prisons of Australia?”

“Plenty of source material.” Margaret brushed a speck from her long black coat. She knew a lot about colonial relics, having once run a museum full of them.

Bess and Margaret had loathed each other back in Port Bannir when they first met. They were professional rivals with very different views on how to manage a gallery. Bess had thought Margaret a snarling control freak who needed to move with the times, while Margaret had considered Bess an incompetent, irritating hippie. It had taken them some time to recognise how much they both looked forward to their arguments and how much they really had in common.

“Haunted prisons are a scam, though,” Margaret said now. “When I was locked up for murder, I didn’t meet any ghosts.”

A pleasant-looking family turned around to stare at her.

Bess rushed to explain. “It was a false accusation; she was released...” It was hard to sum up quickly what had happened in Port Bannir.

The parents hurried their children away.

Unperturbed, Margaret examined the cottage door. Her indifference to what other people thought of her was a quality Bess found both attractive and maddening.

Someone’s phone sounded, disrupting the guide’s speech.

“They should bring back the punishment cells for that.” Margaret did not bother to lower her voice, despite Bess mouthing, “Be friendly!”

Margaret’s refusal to compromise and play nice was another thing that frustrated and occasionally delighted Bess.

As the group moved forward, Margaret said, “You’re still thinking about new exhibitions for that gallery of yours, then?”

“It’s not mine.” Bess pursed her lips. “My manager hasn’t let me make any decisions about exhibits in months.”

“Which is why all their recent shows have been abysmal.” Margaret might be bad-tempered, but she had always been loyal.

“Thank you.” Bess took her hand, ignoring the way Margaret stiffened and seemed to stop herself from pulling away. Margaret never minded when people thought her odd, but public acts of affection were foreign to her. It was one of the things they’d agreed to compromise on, just as Bess had agreed to respect Margaret’s detailed systems for bookshelf arranging and sock folding.

She squeezed Margaret’s long, cool fingers, touching the nails which were filed back smooth. “Are you enjoying our holiday?”

“I’m enjoying the ruins.”

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“Wait till you see what I’ve got planned.” Bess knew she sounded overeager, but the past few months had been hard.

When she and Margaret had got together at last after many misunderstandings and some dangerous adventures, Bess had assumed they’d earned their happily ever after. Instead, real life had intruded once again: frustrations at work, changing living arrangements, family tragedy. She didn’t regret any of the time they’d spent together, but she wished it could have been smoother sailing.

They needed a break, a reset. Bess was determined that they would enjoy it. “I’ve got our itinerary planned. There’s lavender ice cream, llama walking, a petting session with Tasmanian devils, a honeybee encounter...”

“As long as I don’t have to do all four at once.” Margaret looked as if she would be happier lurking around another crumbling old prison, but Bess wasn’t having that. Ghosts were interesting, but life had to be lived too.

She gripped Margaret’s hand tighter, willing the warmth from her own skin to flow into her partner’s.

They followed the tour group outside again.

The guide explained, “Over there is the site of the old infirmary. It was freezing, dirty, and damp—you were more likely to catch a disease than be cured of one. Sometimes, on a still night, you can hear the sound of nails being hammered into wood as if someone were making a cheap coffin...”

Bess flinched and glanced at Margaret, who didn’t seem to react. Until a message beeped on Margaret’s phone, cutting through the quiet.

People turned to stare.

“Seriously?” Bess hissed as Margaret turned her phone to silent, the muscles in her face working in repressed embarrassment.

“It may have slipped my mind,” Margaret whispered without moving her lips.

“Who is it?”

“Hmm.” Margaret frowned at her screen. “Not a number I recognise.”

The guide finished and invited everyone to explore the compound. “But be sure to leave before ten because that’s when I lock up. And trust me, you don’t want to spend the night alone in here.”

A group of tourists ventured over and asked with big, hopeful smiles if they could take a picture with Margaret.

“No,” said Margaret. She stalked off to look at a display of historic manacles.

Smiling as hard as she could, Bess was left to explain to the tourists that Margaret was just another visitor, honestly, and not an actor playing a ghost at all.

* * *

Margaret could barely see the road. Her headlights lit up a few metres of bitumen rolling out like a conveyor belt, but there was no telling what lay beyond. A fallen tree? A car accident? A kangaroo springing from the bushes about to hit their windscreen? She cursed herself for agreeing to a late-night tour and a motel outside of town. She'd grown up in the country and should have known better.

The road was lined by murky shapes: bracken, tree stumps, dead animals swept aside by logging trucks. This island was lush and beautiful, but it was also the roadkill capital of Australia.

“You’re smouldering again.” Bess turned up the heater.

Margaret’s fingers began to thaw. “I’m concentrating.”

“I know a smoulder when I see one. It’s like I’m travelling with Lord Byron, if he used colour-coded packing cells in his suitcase and wiped down the whole motel room with disinfectant.”

“Do you know what people do in motel rooms?” Margaret shuddered. “You’ll thank me when you don’t get giardia. I can’t believe you nearly drank out of one of their mugs.”

“Your flying tackle to stop me was impressive,” Bess said. “You’re a great loss to women’s rugby.”

“Thank you.”

“Please tell me you’re enjoying this trip a little.”

“I always enjoy your company.” How strange to think that she had once considered Bess the most aggravating woman she’d ever met. Nowadays, Margaret could not imagine being without her.

She thought back to a hike they’d taken yesterday near Cape Raoul at the southern end of the island. Bess had led the way to the lookout point over the jagged cliffs. The sea foamed and churned far below.

Yelling “Wow!”, Bess had scrambled over the rocks to get closer, until a massive gust of wind blew her coat out like a sail and Margaret had to haul

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her to safety, Bess laughing in delight. Her freckled cheeks were pink, her red curls damp under that ridiculous Viking hat, her buxom body panting from exertion.

Margaret wondered yet again where this woman got her energy from. *It's not like me to be this lucky.*

It reminded her of the way she'd felt when she and Bess had first got together two years before. A startled, unexpected joy, a sense that the future might indeed turn out to be better than the past.

Then new problems had come crowding in, and little by little, that lovely optimistic feeling had been tugged away. Could she recover it again out here?

Bess said, "How about that sea yesterday? Majestic!"

Margaret didn't dare take her eyes off the road. But she breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of the other woman's organic shampoo, a light herbal aroma. Bess always smelled like a garden.

Her tone a little too casual, Bess added, "I wouldn't mind being buried at sea. To return to the elements, become part of that wild, primal energy... When you think about it, it's the most spiritual way to go."

"Humph." Margaret knew what Bess was hinting at: a brass urn sealed in plastic and stowed with care in Margaret's locked suitcase.

She wasn't sure why she had brought the urn with her, except that she didn't like to leave it at home. You heard of burglars breaking into houses while the owners were on holiday and trashing everything. And Tasmania wasn't such a bad place to take someone's ashes. Her family had gone on a trip here once when Margaret and her sister Deirdre were children and their mother was still alive, before things went wrong for the Gales once and for all. Margaret couldn't remember much about that holiday, but she thought Deirdre had enjoyed it.

Still, she wasn't prepared to have the conversation Bess had been dancing around, about what to do with Deirdre's ashes. Knowing Bess, the conversation would involve a lot of talk about workshopping, healing, and radical acceptance. Probably with some moonstones and rose quartz thrown in.

Margaret didn't scorn the idea as she once would have. Actually, it gave her a kind of tender pain to know that Bess cared. But she couldn't think about those things now. She'd spent enough time organising Deirdre's

funeral, managing her will, closing her bank accounts, paying her medical bills, sorting through her belongings...all the bureaucracy of death. She couldn't give any more time to that tonight.

Changing the subject, Margaret said, "Not a bad tour this evening, despite the silly ghost talk. Some of the displays needed updating, though."

Bess sighed. "You must miss your own museum."

"I never think about it." Margaret cringed at the obvious lie. That museum had been her life's work: a bluestone nineteenth-century courthouse filled with artefacts from sailing ships, the whaling industry, and Antarctic voyages. She'd devoted each day to the history she loved and the tourists she hated, and it had given her life structure and discipline. When developers had forced her to sell the place, she had managed to negotiate a good price, but it left her feeling like she'd lost a limb.

As if she'd heard Margaret's thoughts, Bess said, "Do you think that's why you struggled when you went to work for that antiques auction house?"

"I did not 'struggle'." Margaret sniffed. "If I told people the truth about what their grandparents' old junk was worth, and if I refused to sell preposterous figurines of television characters, that wasn't struggling. It's called having professional standards."

"I thought it was called getting sacked." Apparently even Bess could only put up with Margaret's snapping for so long.

"I was not sacked. It was a mutual separation."

But where she would head next, Margaret had no idea. Changing careers at her age? And right now, when all the world apart from Bess seemed so foolish and irritating, so poorly run and badly designed and...grey? Her vision blurred and she blinked hard. *Don't you fall asleep.*

Something burst from the darkness and shot across the road. Margaret stamped on the brake.

The car screeched to a stop, jerking them forward and back.

Bess gasped.

The bushes waved on the side of the road as a long tail slipped inside and vanished.

"God." Margaret squeezed the steering wheel. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Bess loosened her grip on the seatbelt.

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Recalling Bess's history with car accidents, Margaret berated herself for her carelessness. "I'm sorry. It took me by surprise." Her voice shook. "What was it—a cat?"

"A possum, maybe." Bess pressed her face to the window, but nothing moved in the darkness.

"Terrible driving," Margaret said, angry with herself. "I put you in danger. I should have hit it."

"No, you shouldn't." Bess gazed out into the night. "Do you think it could have been a quoll? Those spotty animals with the fluffy tails and the pretty little faces?"

"I've no idea." Margaret got the hire car moving again, driving slower than before and scanning the road until her eyes watered. The rush of adrenalin had left her jittering.

No more country driving after dark, she decided as she turned into the motel carpark. It wasn't safe.

Still, as she climbed out of the car, she felt a rush of dizziness so intense she had to clutch the door handle. She'd been so lifeless for so long. Was it possible that what Margaret secretly craved was not healing and peace but a little bit of danger?

* * *

In the motel room, Bess gathered up her silver spotted pyjamas and cruelty-free toiletries while Margaret checked her phone. There was an email from a neighbour who'd been collecting her mail: two more bills had turned up in Deirdre's name. One was from an insurance provider who explained they could not close her account until the account holder contacted them personally. Margaret gritted her teeth. She would call them tomorrow and ask if they had a Ouija board. The other bill was from a phone company whom Margaret had informed about Deirdre's death. Their computer system had addressed it to "The Deceased".

And she had a missed call and voicemail from that unfamiliar number again. They must have come through during the ghost tour after she'd switched her phone off.

"Everything all right?" Bess stood in front of the bathroom mirror, brushing out her thick, wavy red hair.

“Another call.” Margaret studied the number. “Has Deirdre’s oncologist thought of one more charge to add to the bill? Or are her cretinous in-laws ringing again to ask how much money she left them?”

“At this time of night? Probably a wrong number.” Bess took out her toothbrush. “Hey, I’ve been thinking: do you reckon we should get an Asian-style squat toilet installed at our place?”

Margaret put down her phone. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve been reading this amazing book about gut health and good bacteria, and it says the best position is actually—”

“I withdraw the question. And absolutely not.”

“You’re so conventional,” said Bess around a mouthful of toothpaste. “Well, do you think I should become a foster mother for rescue goats? I’ve been reading about that too.”

“Oh, that’s easier.” Margaret checked their maps for tomorrow. “No.”

Bess spat out her toothpaste. “Have it your way.” She arranged her vegan cosmetics along the sink, nudging too close to Margaret’s toiletries.

“We said you would keep your things on the left-hand side.”

“Fine.” Bess moved everything farther away, although she made a point of leaving her cactus and kale recovery lotion next to Margaret’s toothbrush.

Margaret narrowed her eyes. “Are you trying to provoke me?”

“Play your cards right...” She grinned, then pulled Margaret down for a kiss.

Margaret stiffened in surprise, then returned the embrace.

Bess pressed her warm, full body up against her, sliding her arms around Margaret’s waist.

The tension in Margaret’s muscles began to seep away, as though she were sliding into a soothing bath. She felt Bess’s lips moving as she smiled, felt the laughing flutter of her breath. Her kisses were often like this: light-hearted, joyful. Disarming.

That was not a thing Margaret was used to—not a thing she had ever wanted before she met Bess. Could one person change you that much?

A few minutes later, while Bess sang Dolly Parton songs under the shower, Margaret decided to stretch her legs. She should check that message too.

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The night sky was clear, the air crystal-cold and scented with eucalyptus. In the bushland behind the motel, things rustled and crunched and squeaked.

“Margaret?” She didn’t recognise the woman’s voice in the recorded message. But there was something about it—an alto pitch, crisp consonants, a slight breathiness—that made her listen hard.

She thought she had heard that voice before, a long time ago.

“I hope you’re the right Margaret Gale,” the voice said. “Otherwise some poor stranger is about to be confused...” A quick note of laughter, like a bird’s cry. Margaret frowned. Again, there was something familiar about it.

“You might remember me,” the voice went on. “We met on graduation night, 1997. Vivienne Bolt.”

Margaret froze. Her breath hung in the cold air.

“I’d love to do all the what-have-you-been-up-to-all-these-years guff,” said the voice, “but Ivy, my grandmother, has fallen asleep at last and I don’t know how long I’ll have. So I’ll cut to the chase.”

Margaret gripped the phone. She remembered that voice now, with its rounded vowels and hint of an English accent, although Vivienne had been born and bred in Australia.

Back on graduation night when they’d met, Margaret had asked Vivienne about her unusual way of speaking. “Snobby relatives,” was Vivienne’s reply, “and the most God-awful elocution teachers at boarding school. Two-hundred-year-old harpies who hit us with walking sticks—truly! God forbid we should sound local.” Her white-blonde hair blew in the night breeze, the black shapes of trees in Melbourne’s Alexandra Gardens behind her. In the lamplight of the gardens, Vivienne’s pale skin had an eerie glow. “I’m not from any country,” she laughed, and Margaret had thought of sprites, of mermaids.

Now Margaret stood motionless as the past returned without warning, slicing through the present.

Vivienne’s message continued: “I looked you up online and phoned your employer. By the way, their silly receptionist really shouldn’t give out phone numbers to any nicely spoken lady who calls claiming to be an old friend. I wanted to ask your advice about something, but they said you’d

left and were travelling here, and I thought: perfect!" That laugh again. "For me, I mean."

She cleared her throat. "Margaret, I need a favour. My grandmother is ill and I'm staying at her house at seven Renfeld Lane, outside a town called Mount Bastion. You won't have heard of it; it's rather a dump. But... Well, strange things have been happening."

Margaret held her breath. Strange was right. Vivienne Bolt calling her? Vivienne, whom she had imagined long gone, whisked away twenty-five years ago? How could Vivienne be here in rural Tasmania of all places?

The voice said, "I'm afraid this will sound completely barking, but I promise I'm compos mentis. It's just... I think someone is trying to harm us. My grandmother has a large antique collection; all her money is tied up in it. Ghastly things, but valuable. I'm trying to sort out her finances to make sure she's looked after because she'll need to go into care soon. She's getting worse, poor old girl, and there's only so much I can do."

A pause.

"But things have been going missing. A silver-plated Art Deco cigarette lighter, a porcelain nymph, an amber paperweight. Things small enough to slip into a pocket. I noticed it this week when I was cleaning her disaster of a house. And now I wonder how many other things have been swiped!"

Vivienne took an audible breath. "It's not just the thefts. Someone scared away the two carers I hired to help look after Ivy. One of them left after her car tyres got slashed three times in our driveway, and the other quit when she found a piece of glass in a sandwich she'd left for herself in our kitchen! And— Look, I know it's a drafty old building and perhaps I'm letting the atmosphere get to me, but sometimes I swear I hear noises. Something moving around in the house. It makes my skin creep."

She laughed again, this time a little desperately. "I don't dare report it. Ivy would have a fit if she knew; she's so ill, and she's devoted to her collection. And this is a small town. Ivy relies on the local businesses for groceries, medication, transport. If the police started questioning her neighbours, things could become very difficult.

"Listen, Margaret, I'm thoroughly embarrassed to call you out of the blue and drop this in your lap, but I remembered how you said you planned to start your own museum one day, so I did some research into you. I hope that's not too intrusive, but you must know there are intriguing stories

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online about a museum you used to run. It's clear you know a lot about antiques, and you're a—a friend of mine. Could you stop by? Look over Ivy's collection, help me do an inventory, figure out the extent of the loss, advise me on what to do? It would be ever so useful. And perhaps...perhaps with your brains, you might be able to figure out what's happening."

Vivienne exhaled. "Listen to me blathering on! Are you still listening? I know I've got no right to ask you for anything after all this time, but...I've got nowhere else to turn, Margaret."

A computerised voice took over: "To return call, press two. To replay message—"

Margaret hung up and stared into the night.

A bloodcurdling screech ripped through the darkness, making her jump. There must be a masked owl in the bushland nearby. It was a sound that had always made her think of witches.

Chapter 2

“BUT WHO IS THIS VIVIENNE?” Bess asked the next morning.

Margaret’s jaw was firm as she drove, her eyes narrowed in concentration. But since that was her resting face, it didn’t tell Bess much.

“I met her at university in Melbourne. Or rather, the night after I graduated from university. She’d done her honours in fine arts and was about to head to Rome on a scholarship.”

“Nice work, if you can get it.”

“We skipped the graduation party because everyone else was drunk and obnoxious,” Margaret said. “We went for a walk around the city and along the Yarra River instead. Then we went our separate ways and I never heard from her again. Strange that she would contact me now.”

Bess thought there was something curious about Margaret’s tone. Did she sound distracted? Vague, even?

Still, Bess was determined to make the best of things. “Well, it’s a mystery. Let’s go and solve it! I’m always up for an adventure, and I like meeting new people. It puts water back in my well.”

“Here we are.” A sign directed them off the highway towards Mount Bastion.

This town had not been on Bess’s list of places to visit on their Tasmanian holiday. As they pulled onto the main street, she could see why. Some parts of Tasmania were heaven for tourists, with breathtaking views, fluffy native animals, fine wine, and gourmet food, but Mount Bastion was not one of those places.

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Instead, the town had a general store, two dilapidated pubs, a tatty-looking Chinese restaurant, and a community centre whose sign said OPEN MOST TUESDAYS. No school or doctor's surgery. Whatever industries had once sustained the area were long gone. Port Bannir had been like Manhattan compared to this.

Incongruously, there was an antiques shop in an old Edwardian building. She wondered where they found customers.

As they drove down the quiet street, two locals turned to watch.

"Shall we find somewhere to have lunch? Or did your friend invite us to eat with her?"

"She's not my friend," Margaret said. "I told you, it's been twenty-five years. And no, the message about theft and sabotage didn't mention lunch. But given the broken-glass-in-the-sandwich story, I'd suggest we buy something in town."

One pub was shut. The other bore a sign: KITCHEN CLOSED DUE TO ILLNESS.

Seeing Margaret raise her eyebrows, Bess said, "Let's try the general store."

When they pushed open the doors to the shop, the people inside turned to stare. Bess saw their own reflections in a fridge door. Margaret was tall and thin, her short dark hair slicked back. She was clad in black, including black leather boots and matching gloves. Bess was short and plump, and wore cats-eye glasses, a jacket in psychedelic patterns, and a hand-knitted hat in the shape of an octopus with tentacles streaming down her back.

The place fell silent. If a piano had been playing, it would have stopped.

Bess took two juices from the fridge and made a point of smiling as she approached the counter. After all, the energy you put into the world was the energy you got back. Most of the time.

"Petrol station's down the road," someone blurted out. "They sell maps, if you're lost."

"Thank you." Bess kept smiling. "But we are exactly where we want to be."

Margaret ordered a sausage roll in a less friendly tone. Then she said quietly to Bess, "Do you mind us stopping here? I don't know what's happening with Vivienne. But we won't stay long."

“Of course I don’t mind. I love new places, new people...” Bess turned to the woman behind the counter. “Are any of your pies vegetarian?”

The woman stared at her as if she’d ordered peacock tongues in jelly. “No.”

Well, maybe not all new people. Bess ordered a pastry that looked fossilized, her tone a little less perky now.

She turned back to the counter. “We’re looking for number seven, Renfeld Lane. Do you know—?”

“Nope.” The reply came before she’d finished asking. The woman busied herself at the register. When Bess looked over her shoulder, everyone else seemed engrossed in other things.

While Margaret paid, Bess studied the community noticeboard near the door. There were ads for sheep dip, pest exterminators, mental health crisis lines, and a Rotary Club dance scheduled for that night. And a large poster, tacked over the top of several others. It showed a portly man with long silver curls, a leather Akubra hat, a swirling scarf, and a smug look.

“Dorian Visser LIVE. Local writer in residence reads from his critically acclaimed work, *Crossroads House: Inside Australia’s Most Haunted Homestead*”.

She was about to call Margaret over when a message sounded on her phone. “Oh wow.”

“Good news?”

“Yes!” Bess caught herself. “Well, no. Our chief curator has broken both legs skiing, just when his second-in-command went away on maternity leave.”

“My sympathies to them both.”

“But it’s left the gallery short-staffed.” Bess chewed her lip. “And they need to start planning next season’s exhibitions.”

“Really? Perhaps now they wish they hadn’t spent months turning down your ideas and inventing meaningless tasks to keep you busy.”

Bess studied the message. “This could be my chance.”

“After how they treated you, they don’t deserve to benefit from your hard work and talent.”

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“Maybe not, but I can’t quit right now, can I?” Bess spoke without thinking, then regretted it. She didn’t mean to make Margaret feel as if her own unemployment was forcing Bess to stay in a job she hated just to pay the bills—although there was some truth in it.

“If I could get one more strong exhibition under my belt, I could leave on a high note,” she continued. “It would look great on my résumé, and it would make me feel better about my time there. Plus it would make those bozos realise how wrong they were to take me for granted.” It wasn’t good karma to dwell on bitter thoughts, but you had to give yourself permission to be imperfect sometimes. “So stuff ’em.”

Margaret shifted from one pointy-toed boot to the other. “I am...sorry. The way your employers have treated you has been unacceptable. And it started because of me.”

When Bess’s previous boss, Leon, was stabbed to death in his own gallery, many people in Port Bannir had assumed Margaret, his business rival, was responsible. Bess’s new employers had been happy to go along with that explanation, and they had not liked it at all when Bess had believed in the woman’s innocence and set about proving it.

She grasped Margaret’s arm, feeling the sinewy strength there. “Totally worth it.”

Through the shop window, she sensed several people staring as she craned up to kiss Margaret firmly on the mouth.

And stuff you too, she felt like calling back over her shoulder. But she managed a big, joyous smile instead. Living well was the best revenge.

“Now let’s go and meet Vivienne. I can’t wait.”

* * *

“Oh boy,” Bess said fifteen minutes later as they pulled up outside a set of high iron gates that must have been elegant a hundred years before. Now they were half swallowed by creepers. Welded into the gates were the words CROSSROADS HOUSE.

The property backed onto a national park and was framed by blue gums, blackwoods, and silver banksia trees. The grounds of the house must have been pretty once, but now the lavender bushes and hollyhocks were fighting for survival against blackberries and weeds.

Bess felt sorry for places like this. They made her want to jump the fence with some garden shears, a shovel, and a sack of organic mulch.

“What...?” Margaret stared, her mouth hanging open. “She can’t live *here*?”

The house was a ramshackle old mansion with sagging gable windows, moss covering the roof, and paint peeling off the pillars that held up the front porch.

Trying to stay positive, Bess said, “Well, it’s got character.”

“It’s got termites.”

“Come on, it’s interesting.” Bess always defended the downtrodden, even houses. “What would you call that architecture?”

“Criminal?” Margaret winced. “I can see it’s been altered a few times. Stolid Victorian manor farm meets Edwardian new money, meets Art Deco hangover, meets whatever they were thinking when they added those gargoyles.”

“But if the owner fixed it up, it could be worth a lot of money.” Bess led the way through the gates. “I wonder why she hasn’t?”

“Perhaps I got the address wrong.” Margaret hung back. “Vivienne wouldn’t live somewhere like this.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s just a building.” Bess pressed forward along the gravel path that was overgrown with flatweed. As she neared the entrance to the house, she said, “Places only seem good or bad because of the meanings we attach to them. If we can let go and just breathe into the moment—”

“In that house? We’d breathe in black mould.”

“—then we can calm those judgemental thoughts and accept things as they are,” Bess finished, pitching her voice loud enough to cover Margaret’s disbelieving snort. “Try a one-minute meditation with me.”

“No, thank you.”

“You can’t spare one minute?” Bess had reached the front steps but saw no reason to rush. She shut her eyes and spread her arms wide. “Right now, I’m wriggling my toes and noticing the ground underneath me.” The awareness made her smile. “I’m becoming conscious of my breathing and how each breath is different from the last, like the moments of our lives.” She shook her shoulders to loosen any tension. “And I’m repeating to myself, ‘I am safe, I am loved, I am forgiven.’”

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She knew Margaret would dismiss this as hippie nonsense, but Bess wished she would not. If Margaret could bring herself to believe those things, surely she would be happier.

Finishing with a big, delicious exhale, Bess spun around to demonstrate how much better one minute made her feel. She caught her foot in a rabbit burrow, toppled, and sat down hard on the gravel, crashing into a heavy object that tipped over, drenching her in something wet, cold, and smelly. The object hit something else, which shattered.

Water soaked through her clothes; she had fallen over a birdbath. Evidently no one had cleaned it in a while, and she was spattered with pond scum and slimy leaves. The birdbath had broken in two when it hit the other object, which looked like it might have been a garden statue. A nymph maybe? There wasn't much of it left.

Margaret helped her up. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine." Bess looked down at the broken items. "But that's not good."

"I'd say you did a few hundred dollars' worth of improvements."

The front door of the house opened. Two women appeared in the doorway, one in a wheelchair. The younger one was slender with piercing green eyes and long white-blond hair pulled back. She looked to be in her forties, but her skin was flawless and very pale as if she had never been allowed outdoors. There was a delicate air about her, but her sharp cheekbones and pointed chin hinted at a kind of strength.

The other woman must have been past ninety. She was stick-thin, her body shrunken and hardened as if life had drained the juices out of her. Her brittle white hair was yanked back and skewered to her skull with an expensive-looking silver pin. Matching silver pendant earrings dragged her withered earlobes down towards her shoulders. Her hands, gripping the arms of her wheelchair, were gnarled and veiny but looked like they had once been strong.

The two looked like a very old but powerful witch and a sad fairy held prisoner by her spells. They stared at Bess as she stood next to their broken ornaments, drenched and dripping slime from her octopus hat.

In a voice that sounded like a deep croak, the older woman said to the younger one, "Get rid of them. You know I won't have *people* here."

The younger woman flinched as if she knew the rules only too well.

Margaret felt as if she'd put her weight on a step that wasn't there. The younger woman was Vivienne?

For twenty-five years, her memories of Vivienne had run on a loop in some darkened cinema at the back of her mind. Vivienne smoking French cigarettes without filters, her hair gleaming like platinum under the wet streetlight. Vivienne talking about the Louvre, the Tate Modern, the Uffizi, her young voice world-weary as she explained that they were all right but not what they used to be—now, the Buchmann Galerie in Germany, that was interesting, cutting edge. She wouldn't mind going there.

She and Vivienne had walked along the wall of the moat outside Melbourne's National Gallery, looking over the darkened city with cheerful disdain. Below her in the water were hundreds of coins tossed in for luck, now wearing away. "People are such sheep," Vivienne had said. "You have to make your own luck." The wall sloped higher until her lace-up high heels were level with Margaret's heart. Margaret had held out her arms to help her jump down.

How could Vivienne be *here*?

During those twenty-five years since graduation night, she had wondered sometimes what Vivienne was doing. The young Margaret had pondered the question while she struggled along in junior curator jobs whose pay mocked her education and ability. And later on she'd wondered about it again as she worked to set up her maritime museum while battling a hostile town and caring for an ageing, angry father.

It had cheered her up in a strange way to picture Vivienne poring over medieval manuscripts at the Vatican or restoring seventeenth-century folios of Shakespeare's plays in the British Library. Still looking poised, chic, and somehow otherworldly as if these expert jobs would suit her well enough until a better opportunity arose. Perhaps to become an advisor to some top-secret government agency or marry into minor royalty.

Never would Margaret have imagined Vivienne living in a rotting old house in a town much shabbier and lonelier than Port Bannir, caring for an elderly relative who seemed worse than Margaret's dad.

This was all wrong.

She felt thrown off balance and, quite unreasonably, betrayed.

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* * *

“Please don’t feel dreadful,” Vivienne said for the fifth time.

Bess, who believed you should apologise for accidental breakage once, then pay for repairs and move on, longed to reply *I don’t, but clearly you think I should.*

The visit was not going well.

Breaking those garden ornaments had been a bad start. Vivienne had insisted on lending Bess some dry clothes, which was nice of her, in theory. Then she fossicked through her wardrobe, pulling out size-eight garments that wouldn’t fit before handing Bess a frilly pink robe (“antique Edwardian peach lace,” she’d said) which clashed eye-wateringly with Bess’s red hair.

Not that Bess believed in body anxiety or restricting women’s colour choices. But she suspected that Vivienne did.

If Vivienne was subtly unwelcoming, there was nothing subtle about her grandmother. When Ivy wasn’t squinting at Bess through cloudy eyes and barking loudly, “Who’s the blob with the red hair?” and “Why did you let her break my things?”, she was grabbing at Vivienne and snarling, “Who are you anyway? Where’s my Viv?”

“I’m sorry about her,” Vivienne whispered to Margaret. “Her pain medication makes her confused.”

Which was terrible, of course. Bess tried to feel pity for them both.

Despite its rundown exterior, Crossroads House was neat and functional inside. It needed repairs—there were patches on the walls covered in rough plaster, and the furniture looked at least eighty—but the two women seemed to live here comfortably enough. There was a stairlift installed against the wall by the staircase to transport Ivy up and down.

Bess spotted an alcove in the wall at the top of the stairs. It held a display pedestal with some item in a glass box. She squinted. “Is that an animal’s skull?”

But her companions had walked on.

The walls of the entrance hall were decorated with black-and-white photographs of the property in its heyday. Cattle grazed in sunny fields while workers hurried around, filling carts with timber and stone. In those pictures, Crossroads House was new and ostentatiously wealthy—every roof tile and brick seemed to gleam. People posed in the driveway next to

vintage cars: men in three-piece suits and waxed moustaches, women in Edwardian lace and enormous hats.

Where had it gone, all that bustle and success?

Ivy snapped at Vivienne, “Why would you invite strangers here? You know we don’t do that.”

Bess wanted to ask *Why don’t you?* But after the birdbath incident, she didn’t think she should cause further tension.

Maybe Ivy was worried about protecting her antiques. The place was full of them. Delicate brass and enamel carriage clocks bonged on the sideboard, and blue and white Chinese vases sat on occasional tables. Dainty porcelain shepherdesses peeped out from glass cabinets.

Bess knocked over two brass statuettes and an umbrella stand. She wasn’t really clumsy, but she was used to living in a tiny house furnished with sturdy, brightly coloured things she’d made, knowing that if they got broken, she could mend them or turn them into something else.

What was the point of living in a gigantic house and tiptoeing around your own belongings?

Still, she could have stayed positive about Crossroads House. It was Vivienne’s behaviour that Bess found hard to excuse.

Their hostess had barely asked Bess a single thing. She was too busy questioning Margaret and listening intently to her replies as if preparing to write Margaret’s biography.

When Margaret described running her own museum, Vivienne clasped her hands, saying, “I knew you would do something distinctive. You were always one to follow your own passions and to hell with everyone else.”

Vivienne raised her perfect eyebrows when Margaret talked about the difficulties of managing staff, suppliers, and visitors. “I can’t image how you did it, Margaret—every single day? I simply can’t bear dealing with *people*.”

And she waved a dismissive hand when Margaret mentioned leaving the auction house where she had worked in the city. Vivienne declared, “Most people who work in those places are cretins. If they didn’t have the brains to appreciate you, you were right to withdraw.”

Listening to the conversation as she trailed behind, Bess could not help comparing Vivienne’s responses to her own. Back in Port Bannir, she had ticked Margaret off for being too hard on her staff. She had urged Margaret to wait and reflect instead of leaving that auction house in a huff. And the

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first time they met, Bess had gotten into an argument with Margaret over an antique dildo and told her crossly that her maritime museum was cold, unwelcoming, and dull as dishwater.

Was she, Bess, the negative one here? The idea disturbed her.

On the other hand, she wanted to roll her eyes at Vivienne and say, *Come on. You can't think every single thing Margaret's done is that damn impressive.*

And what about Margaret herself? Her manner was strange. Gone was her usual haughtiness, her sharpness and air of authority. Instead, she seemed awkward, almost baffled, and she kept darting nervous glances at Vivienne as if she could hardly believe this was happening. What was that about?

With an effort, Bess told herself to cheer up and change the subject. Breaking into their conversation, she said, "So, Vivienne, tell us about this house. It must be an amazing place to live."

"Oh!" Vivienne looked startled, as if she'd forgotten her second visitor. She'd walked ahead of Bess; now she turned to look back. Her hair, held back with a clip, swayed between her shoulder blades in a single gleaming curl. "Well, I suppose it is. Some parts of the estate date back to 1837."

"Really?" Bess thought about mentioning the poster she had seen in town which claimed that Crossroads House was haunted.

But Vivienne was speaking to Margaret again. "Of course, it needs major repairs. More than we can afford right now."

"What's she saying?" Ivy demanded. "Money? You're not getting my money, missy."

"I don't want your money, Ivy." She never called the older woman Gran or Nanna, Bess noticed.

"What would you know about money?" Ivy said. "Burrowing away in a library all your life like a little mole? Reading books for a living? Ridiculous. Why aren't you married?"

"I restore and preserve rare volumes at the State Library in Hobart," Vivienne reminded her.

Ivy just snorted. The job sounded interesting to Bess; under different circumstances, she would have asked Vivienne about it.

"But when Ivy fell ill..." Vivienne continued.

"I'm not going into any bloody nursing home, missy, so you can stick that idea where the sun don't shine." Ivy clawed on a side table. "Where are my glasses?"

"You broke them this morning, remember? We'll get them replaced in the city." Vivienne said, adding tiredly, "Heaven knows when."

Then she turned to Margaret, and the energy rushed back into her voice. "You got my message. Perhaps we could talk?"

"Certainly."

Vivienne hesitated, glancing at Bess. "It's delicate."

Are you for real? Bess felt like demanding. She'd had enough of this. She imagined flinging off this frilly pink robe and stomping out of here in her underwear.

Instead, she took three deep breaths and waited for the moment to pass. When it did, she realised she didn't care. Why was she getting upset? They were only here for the afternoon, and most likely she would never see either of her hostesses again. She trusted Margaret, so what did it matter how anyone else behaved?

"I might take a walk around your garden." Fresh air would do her good. As she left, she saw Vivienne lay an imploring hand on Margaret's arm.

* * *

To say Margaret felt dismayed would be an understatement. If she weren't so averse to melodrama, she would have said her past had been violated. How could Vivienne Bolt be living like this?

This woman was Vivienne but not Vivienne: a faded negative of the girl from graduation night. She had Vivienne's ethereal beauty, her sharpness, her sarcastic drawl that seemed to draw you into a private joke against the rest of the world. And like on graduation night, she behaved as if she and Margaret had known each other for years.

But where was her optimism, her ambition? Where was that air of certainty that she could go anywhere and do anything if she deemed it good enough for her? Where was that sense of fun that had radiated from the young Vivienne as they'd strolled down St Kilda Road in a light mist of rain past the well-dressed crowds outside the theatres, with Vivienne expertly pretending to be a noisy American tourist, an expensive callgirl, a Russian

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spy? And the young Margaret, who rarely laughed at anything, pressed her lips together and shook with suppressed mirth.

What had happened to all of that?

“Sorry to leave you stuck here.” Vivienne nodded around the sitting room as she wheeled Ivy out the door for her nap. “Won’t be long.”

The old woman complained, “Who’s stuck? Why are you here? And who’s that long streak of misery in the black coat?”

Margaret shrugged. She’d been called worse.

Walking around the room, Margaret wrinkled her nose at the smell of damp that air fresheners couldn’t quite cover. She didn’t care for this place. Yes, Margaret liked historical relics, but her passion was for seafaring history with its importance to the rise of the modern world, its stories of peril and desperate endurance, its grim majesty. Scrimshaws carved from whales’ teeth, wheelhouses lashed by briny waters, surgeons’ kits, powder kegs, battered old maps, medals from battles on the high seas. Artefacts that even now seemed to carry a whiff of seaweed, rum, and blood.

Those items made Margaret feel invigorated. Ivy’s fussy ornaments and dark, stuffy rooms had the opposite effect.

Returning, Vivienne asked, “Are they any good? Ivy’s poured so much money into this wretched collection. At the expense of the rest of the house, as you can see. I hope the antiques she chose are actually worth something.”

“I’ve not had a chance to look closely. But I’d say, put together, they would make a nice little nest egg.”

“That’s a relief. Come and see the spare room; there’s more in there.”

Despite the size of the house, Vivienne and Ivy only seemed to use a few rooms. The east wing was shut up completely, Vivienne told her, pending repairs they couldn’t afford.

Vivienne led her upstairs and opened the door to a bedroom at the top. “Ivy bought these years ago.” Margaret looked inside and reeled.

The room was full of dolls. Porcelain dolls with leather bodies and hoop skirts, naked Kewpie dolls with wings, clown dolls with ball-joint bodies and sheepskin hair, World War I soldier dolls, character dolls with faces like real children and blue glass eyes. They were lined up on the bed, the windowsill, the top of the wardrobe. They peeped out of drawers and boxes. Some sat on little swings hung from the ceiling.

“Ivy says there’s ten thousand dollars’ worth.” Vivienne wrinkled her nose. “Repulsive, aren’t they? Come in, though. We won’t be disturbed here.”

“Are you sure? It looks disturbing to me.”

Vivienne shut the door behind them.

“You haven’t told me yet what you’ve been doing these twenty-five years,” Margaret said. How strange that all of their earlier conversation had been about Margaret herself.

“Oh, don’t worry; I haven’t been locked up here for a quarter of a century.” Vivienne sighed. “Although it feels like it some days.”

“When we said goodbye, you were about to head off on a scholarship to Rome.”

“Yes, magical stuff. The blue Italian skies, the ruins, the art, the carbohydrates...” Vivienne shrugged the way she’d done on graduation night as if to say, *It’s more amazing than most people could imagine, but it’s nothing special to me.*

“And what about after that?” Margaret pressed, still trying to reconcile this Vivienne with her own memories. “You talked about going to Cologne, Seoul, Tokyo...”

“All that and more.” She flashed a crooked smile. “I’ll tell you the full story one day. But for now, my time is dictated by Ivy’s medication regime and dodgy bladder, so I hope you’ll forgive me if we cut to the chase.”

It was dismissive, but Margaret couldn’t blame her. She had looked after dying people; she knew the score. She’d never imagined Vivienne, the ultracool loner, having to do it, though.

“In your message, you said someone had been stealing from Ivy and harassing her carers. And you thought somebody had been inside the house.”

“Yes.” Vivienne hesitated. “Well, perhaps. It’s hard to tell. By the time Ivy called me and I travelled down here, she was already really ill. I’m not sure what might have gone on before I arrived. Even if she remembered, she might refuse to tell me out of sheer bloody-mindedness. Still, I need to do the right thing by her. I know she’s rather an old nightmare, but she’s been on her own too long.”

Intrigued, Margaret said, “A property this far out of town... It’s an interesting choice for a thief. You’ve never noticed strange cars coming and going?”

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“No.”

“Do you have visitors? Employees? Carers?”

“No.” Vivienne played with her strand of pearls. “Not after what happened to the last two. The district nurse visits occasionally, and there’s a girl who looks after the garden.”

Margaret tried to hide her disbelief.

“Well, I didn’t say she was good at it. It’s hard to get help here. As for visitors... Ivy said Alan Moore from the antiques shop used to visit, offering to buy and sell things, but he stopped coming last year. Maybe she offended him. Then there’s that Visser man: a local historian.”

“Visser?” The name rang a bell.

“I don’t remember his first name. Ivy said he used to stop by, asking peculiar questions about the house. From what she said, I thought he sounded like a crank, but she seemed to find him amusing. She has an odd sense of humour. And then there’s Janine Jones. She’s from the historical society, and she’s phoned up a few times to talk about displaying some of Ivy’s antiques. She seemed pretty insufferable, and Ivy wasn’t well enough to talk, so I put her off.”

“What about friends? Relatives?”

“I don’t think there are any.”

“What’s wrong with Ivy, anyway?”

Vivienne didn’t seem to mind her blunt phrasing. “Take your pick. Heart murmur, infections, arthritis. She had cancer two years ago; she didn’t tell me until recently. I’m sure it’s back now.” Vivienne let out a breath. “I’m no doctor, but I’d say she has a year left at most. And whatever her feelings about nursing homes, she’ll have to go into care soon; I’m barely managing.”

“I’m sorry.” If Margaret had been a more demonstrative person, she might have hugged Vivienne. Instead, she said awkwardly, “You have my sympathy, but I’m not sure how much I can do. I don’t know how to track down a thief or a saboteur.” She moved towards the window, wishing she could let in some air. The panes were grimy, the wooden frames starting to rot.

“It’s good to see you again, Margaret.”

She turned to find Vivienne standing closer and gazing up at her. Her eyes were bright green, like moss.

“I’ve been harping on about my problems,” Vivienne said, “but this must have been a hellish year for you. I told you I’d been Googling—I hope you don’t mind, but I saw the funeral notice for your sister. I’m sorry.”

“Well...” Margaret was never sure how to reply to condolences. Not that many had been offered.

“Cancer, wasn’t it? Was it you who cared for her?”

A muscle twitched in Margaret’s cheek. “Yes. Until—until I couldn’t any longer.”

“Changes your perspective on things, doesn’t it? No wonder you stopped going along with silly workplace politics.”

“Perhaps.” Through the murky glass, Margaret could see Bess in the garden below. She was talking to someone: a woman with chestnut hair cut short like toothbrush bristles and a ring through her eyebrow. The woman wore a khaki shirt cut off to show arms that were tanned and muscular.

Was this the gardener who didn’t do much gardening? She was leaning on a shovel and grinning at Bess.

Margaret frowned, wishing she were down there now.

“Look, Vivienne.” Normally, Margaret would have had no trouble saying, *I can’t help you*. But this time, the refusal wouldn’t come. It was the cancer talk, perhaps, or the mention of Deidre. Or maybe it was the shock of seeing Vivienne trapped in a miserable situation. She had remembered Vivienne as a sort of heroine, and heroines weren’t meant to end up like this. “I can take a look at your grandmother’s collection. I’m not sure I can help with anything else.”

“Oh, that’s perfect!” Vivienne grasped her hand. “You don’t know what this means to me.”

“Well...” Margaret shifted uncomfortably.

In the garden, Bess must have said something funny because the woman with the shovel laughed and gave her shoulder a playful push. Margaret imagined lobbing an antique doll at the gardener and knocking out her stupid eyebrow ring.

Vivienne was still hanging onto Margaret’s hand. Her fingers were cool and soft, curling like the spirals of a fern.

* * *

Bess was starting to feel better about the frilly pink robe.

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“Makes you look like one of those *Downton Abbey* chicks,” said the gardener, Ty, leaning on her shovel and giving Bess an appreciative once-over.

It didn't really, and Bess wouldn't have liked Ty much even if Bess had been single. She was too cocky and kept glancing at her reflection in the house windows as if to check that her hair was still good.

Still, Bess didn't believe in refusing a compliment. If the universe saw fit to send positive energy your way, why not accept it? She'd been feeling down on herself after that meeting with Vivienne, and that wouldn't do. She'd put in a lot of work over the years to achieve good self-esteem, and she didn't intend to give it up now.

“You've got a big job here.” Bess gestured around the neglected garden.

“Hell, yeah. Couch grass, bindiis, purple morning glory, milk thistles. Topsoil needs replacing. Couple of trees have got to come out before they fall on someone. Aphids. Mites. Rabbit burrows.”

Not that Ty seemed to be in a hurry to start work. She ran a hand through her short chestnut hair with a gesture that caused her shirt to ride up, affording a glimpse of tanned, muscular torso. Bess wondered if she practised that move in the mirror.

“It's sad that some gardens are allowed to get that way,” Bess said. “They deserve better.”

“Yeah, well.” Ty nodded towards the house. “Lady Face-ache never gave a stuff about people. So I s'pose it's a bit much to expect her to care about plants.”

“Who—Vivienne? Or Ivy?”

“The old biddy. Horrible woman. You know her family used to own half the town, right? Back when it was worth owning.”

“This used to be a wealthy estate, right?”

“Yeah. Both my grandfathers worked here. They reckoned the Bolts were mean as cat sick even then. And a bit funny in the head. But Mr Bolt had shares in every business in town and knew everyone who mattered. Course, that was a million years ago, but the old girl still orders everyone around.” Ty rolled her eyes. “You seen all her stuff in there?”

“The antiques?”

“Yeah. And that skull, whatever it is.” Ty screwed up her nose in distaste. “I don't like dead things.”

Bess tried to sound casual. “What's Vivienne like? Her granddaughter?”

“I never saw her till a few weeks ago. She lives in Hobart. Came back to look after the old lady.”

“That was good of her.” Bess admired anyone who gave up a career to care for someone they loved. Still, it made her uncomfortable to compare Vivienne’s sacrifice for her grandmother with Bess’s own family relationships, which could be described as mixed.

She imagined quitting work to care for, say, her mother, Yvonne. The thought made her shudder—not a reaction she was proud of. To make amends, she shut her eyes and did a quick three-breaths meditation, sending loving intentions towards Yvonne and wishing her a lifetime of very good health. And she meant it.

Ty rubbed the back of her neck, drawing Bess’s attention to a feathery tattoo of a dream catcher there. Noticing Bess looking at it, she said, “It’s my own design. I create original artworks.” She made it sound naughty. “Check me out on social—I’m LadyGardener96.”

This woman was shameless. “I’ll think about it.”

“Give me your contact details and I’ll send you a sample. No obligation to buy.”

“Another time maybe.” Bess nodded at the house. “Striking building, isn’t it?”

Looking disappointed, Ty said, “Creepy old dump, you mean. When we were kids, we’d ride our bikes out here and dare each other to touch the gates. You know there were murders in there, right? Like, a hundred years ago or something, when the place was new.”

“Is that right?” Bess followed Ty’s gaze towards an upstairs window. Something was moving behind the dingy pane. A dark figure. She was fairly sure it was Margaret.

“Bad vibes,” Ty said. “Maybe that’s what turned the old lady so evil.”

Somewhere nearby, a twig snapped. Ty swung around.

At the end of the garden where the property backed onto the national park, a clump of rhododendrons was waving.

“Hey!” Ty picked up her shovel and took a threatening step towards them. “This is private property!” The bushes stopped moving. “I know you’re in there! Piss off!”

“What’s going on?”

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The bush sprang forward and back as if elasticised. A row of conifers flailed about, suggesting an intruder was pushing through them.

Bess caught a glimpse of khaki clothing and a clump of foliage moving above the bushes. Was it attached to someone's hat?

A wire-link fence separated the garden from the bushland behind. The top of the fence vibrated above the treetops, like someone had shoved through an opening. Then everything went still again.

"What was that?"

"A pain in my arse." Ty rolled her eyes. "Nutjobs."

"Really?" Bess's ears pricked up at any hint of the unusual. "What kind?"

The back door opened. Vivienne emerged, holding up Bess's clothing. Margaret stood beside her wearing a scowl that seemed to inform Ty she'd better get back to work.

Ty grabbed her shovel and hurried into the lavender bushes without saying goodbye.

Chapter 3

MARGARET WAITED OUTSIDE THE BATHROOM while Bess changed back into her clothes. Bess had looked less than thrilled when Margaret asked if she would mind waiting while she looked through the old lady's collection.

But all Bess said now was, "I hope it's doing you good, seeing an old friend. Reminiscing."

"Hmm." Was Vivienne an old friend, really? She had appeared out of nowhere twenty-five years before by the side of a darkened river. Margaret remembered everything about it. A crowd of people shoved and squawked drunkenly around her, people who had rejected or ignored her for years. Amid their jostling bodies, Vivienne stood still. Her hair shone.

Vivienne talked about Tintoretto, quoted Catullus, and moved like a dancer. She said that the elite boarding school she'd attended was a dump, that their university was so parochial, that Australia was a wasteland. She spoke to the awkward, intense unpopular young Margaret as an equal, as someone who deserved to escape too.

But the next morning, Vivienne had vanished, and after one failed attempt, Margaret never went looking for her. She was no expert on friendship, but she didn't think it worked like that.

Margaret craned around the half-open door and saw Bess wriggling as she adjusted her skirt around her substantial hips. Then she buttoned her cardigan, leaving a hint of plump cleavage.

The sight made Margaret soften with desire and gratitude. "Thank you," she told Bess, referring to this visit and other things. Bess's kindness,

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her optimism, her ability to understand the things Margaret could not put into words. "I know Crossroads House wasn't on your holiday itinerary."

"As long as you're happy here."

"Well..." No, Margaret wasn't happy. It was strange trying to match her youthful memories of Vivienne with this woman who was both familiar and unfamiliar, and who seemed determined to introduce more problems into Margaret's life.

Still, she couldn't refuse to help. After what Vivienne had done for her on graduation night, Margaret owed her.

It was hard to explain those things, though, and Margaret worried it might make her sound weak, conflicted, or confused. She'd had to rely so much on Bess's loving compassion and patience over these past few months. And she was thankful for that, more than she could say. How she would have coped without Bess didn't bear thinking about. Still, part of her felt humiliated at needing so much help. It wasn't her style. Bess must have found it dull or frustrating sometimes, and surely it was time for Margaret to pull up her socks. Go back to handling her problems herself.

So she just said, "I'm not thrilled at the prospect of looking through Ivy's collection. But I suppose I should use my skills while I have them."

Margaret had applied for a couple of jobs back in Melbourne, but so far she hadn't even got an interview. At least Vivienne thought she was good for something.

"I'll try not to take too much time," Margaret added. "I don't want to waste your holiday."

"*Our* holiday," Bess reminded her, a slight edge in her voice. "You deserve a rest. You've done a lot for other people this year."

By other people, she meant Deirdre. Margaret stared ahead down the shadowy corridor. There were dark patches of damp on the ceiling.

Suddenly, she forgot it all: their Tasmanian holiday, her adventures with Bess, Vivienne's presence, the ghosts of graduation night. Other memories seeped into Margaret's mind instead: shower chairs and pureed food, bedpans and disinfectant smells. Her sister's hoarse breathing, every inhalation an effort, while her hand lay limp in Margaret's.

That wasn't doing a lot, though. If she'd really done a lot, she would have noticed Deirdre's illness sooner and done something to stop it.

“You need a break,” Bess insisted. “It’s okay to feel sad, but it’s also okay to relax, do things you enjoy. It might help you gain some perspective. Decide how you want to honour Deirdre’s memory and what you want to do next.” She touched Margaret’s arm.

Everything she said made sense, Margaret supposed—but it didn’t really help. She didn’t feel sad, just tired and guilty, and she didn’t think any number of beach walks or winery lunches was going to change that. Perhaps grief was another thing she had failed to do correctly.

“We won’t stay long.” Margaret stared out the window into the overgrown grounds.

* * *

As they descended the stairs, Bess asked, “Do you think she’ll mind if you don’t get through the whole collection?”

“Hmm?” Margaret seemed distracted.

“Vivienne. Will she be disappointed if you don’t manage to value everything?”

Bess tried not to let any unpleasantness enter her voice. She was opposed to jealousy; it was a patriarchal construct, and all it really revealed was the jealous person’s own need for confidence and spiritual growth. Surely.

“I can only do what’s feasible. I’m sure she’ll understand.” Margaret’s old firmness returned, and Bess was relieved to hear it. Perhaps she had imagined Margaret’s strange manner around Vivienne before.

Margaret added, “I know how to say no to people, don’t I? I’m not a soft touch. Once I sacked a man on his birthday when he’d just had his wisdom teeth out.”

“You did?”

“He persisted in mislabelling exhibits in my museum.” Margaret scowled at the memory. “Who confuses a recording of the mating cry of an elephant seal with one of a walrus fight and then argues about it?”

Bess smiled. That was the old Margaret. Maybe there was nothing to worry about. She tried not to dwell on the memory of tiny, delicate Vivienne hovering around Margaret, almost vibrating with enthusiasm, like a hummingbird searching for nectar.

But no, Bess was not going to obsess about that. It wasn’t healthy. “Do you mind if I don’t hang around while you’re valuing the antiques? I think

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I offended these women, breaking their things, and it's not like they know me. I might take a walk instead."

"All right."

The good thing about being with someone as socially unusual as Margaret was that she didn't mind when you weren't very polite to people. In fact, she didn't seem to notice.

Bess didn't love the idea of leaving Margaret alone with Vivienne, but she could be an adult about that. She trusted Margaret, after all. However difficult and odd she might seem to other people, Margaret had always been loyal to Bess and loved her.

And what a relief it would be to stroll in bushland instead of sitting in that house, striving not to move a muscle in case she broke something else. She let herself out the front door, walked back through the gates, and found a track she'd noticed earlier that cut into the bush. It was just wide enough for a car.

Wallaby grass brushed against her legs and stringybark trees loomed above, their tough, fibrous bark looking like it had been shredded. Leaves crackled underfoot, cobwebs glittered between the bushes, and birds chortled. The air smelled of eucalyptus. She breathed deeply.

How she had missed this, cooped up in her city office. Her employers had messaged her today, demanding a briefing paper she'd already sent them a month before, wanting the code for the photocopier which she had stuck on the machine before she left, and asking if the hummus in the fridge was hers. (It wasn't.) Evidently, they did not respect Bess's holiday any more than they respected her work.

She was determined to quit, but it wouldn't be easy, especially with Margaret unemployed. If she could pitch one last successful exhibition, surely that would allow her to leave on a high note and find something better. She mused over the idea; she'd always had a preference for Australian-themed shows. Kooky art, forgotten histories, exhibits that celebrated this weird, wild country.

Something growled nearby.

Bess swung around. Not growling—humming. A wasp's nest? She scanned the bush, getting ready to run.

Something red showed through the trees. Frowning, she stepped off the track, crunching through the undergrowth. The humming grew louder.

Tied to a tree, suspended in midair, was a joint of meat. A sheep's leg maybe? The skin was stripped off, the flesh crawling with flies.

Someone was trying to lure something to this place.

She swivelled around. A minute ago, she'd been blissfully alone in nature, but now that feeling had gone. Was she being watched?

A bird gave a strangled warbling cry. It was a big black currawong, its sharp beak pointed straight up. The flies droned on.

Then something flashed in the sun. A small square camera in camouflage colours was strapped to a tree, its glass eye trained on the hunk of meat.

The hairs on Bess's arms prickled.

A few steps farther, and she spotted a large aluminium frame draped in canvas and camouflage netting, tacked to the ground with tent pegs. It was half-hidden by branches and uprooted shrubs piled around it for concealment or to muffle sound.

Bess lifted the flap. Inside, someone had left a folding chair. There was a vent in the fabric wall with a tripod set up in front of it, waiting for a camera. She crouched in front of the gap. It afforded a clear view of the hanging meat.

Something streaked past. She swallowed a gasp, her body tensing. But it was just a pademelon, a small fat fluffy creature—like a kangaroo that had shrunk in the wash.

Her breath escaped in an anxious laugh. Bess shuffled out of the hide and made her way back to the track.

Who had set this up? What were they after? How many animals here could eat a piece of meat that size? A family of Tasmanian devils maybe? A spotted-tailed quoll? A bird of prey?

Had that camera caught her image? The thought made her uneasy.

The track reached a fork. The main path, broad and flat, continued into the national park. But another trail curved off to the left. It was much rougher, just thick, lumpy grooves cut into the ground by the tyres of a 4WD. Mud had spattered the undergrowth. The tracks looked recent.

Bess hesitated, twitchy from the sense of being watched. Probably she should go back to Crossroads House and let this remain a mystery. Be sensible, live cautiously. Just like she had been doing for months in her city office, feeling her soul grow smaller with each little grey day.

To hell with that. She followed the rough trail deeper into the bush.

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* * *

For the next hour, Margaret worked. It had been weeks since she'd been asked to value antiques, and it felt good to limber up her mental muscles again.

She looked at sterling silver thimbles and tortoiseshell hair combs. She examined crystal letter openers, a scalloped china oyster plate hand-painted with purple wisteria, ivory lace doilies crocheted with butterflies, and a Victorian horsehair fly swish with a handle made of carved bone.

Vivienne made notes to check against her grandmother's inventory later to see if anything was missing. If Ivy would tell Vivienne where the inventory was, of course. That wasn't guaranteed.

Margaret tried to ask Vivienne questions about her work and life in Hobart, but they couldn't speak for long. Every few minutes, Vivienne hurried away to answer shouts for assistance from her grandmother. Ivy needed the toilet, another blanket, the curtains pulled, a cup of tea— "But not like that one you made this morning; that tasted like it had been through a horse!"

Vivienne never complained, but her delicate jaw seemed to clench tighter each time. It wasn't pleasant to see a free spirit trapped like this.

Mostly Ivy sounded like a bully, but once or twice she seemed bewildered and scared, crying, "What's happening? I don't know what's happening!"

At last, the cries stopped. Ivy must have fallen asleep.

Vivienne said, "Fancy a stroll outside?" She smiled, but the frustration in her voice was unmistakable.

They set off on a lap of the outside of the building. Noticing a thirty-year-old BMW parked at the end of the drive, Margaret said, "That's an interesting old car."

"It's rather a nightmare, actually. Has a fit of the vapours every few months. I bought it second-hand from a colleague, so it would feel too rude to get rid of it."

That statement baffled Margaret. She would have parked that defective piece of junk across the colleague's driveway and demanded her money back. So would Bess, although she would have used more compassionate words.

Vivienne added, “The car won’t start at all now. Inconvenient, under the circumstances.”

“Do you need help?”

“A man from the garage said he’ll come next week. I’ll manage until then.”

“It must be difficult here.”

Vivienne sighed. “I hadn’t visited in years. Ivy discouraged it. She never seemed to want to see anyone. When she got really ill, she called me back. I nearly fainted when I saw the state of the house.” She touched Margaret’s arm. “Thank you for examining her collection.”

Margaret shuffled away a little. All that touchy-feely business was far too common nowadays. Like those frightful people who tried to greet you with cheek kisses—ugh. “Well, it looks valuable, and I’ve not found any fakes or problems yet. But I’m afraid someone else will need to complete the task. I can’t finish it today, and we’ll need to leave soon.”

“Oh.” Vivienne stopped.

“As I explained, I’m here with Ms Campbell, my partner. We’re on... holiday.” The word sounded unseemly to Margaret. She didn’t take holidays, and to take one now when she was out of work seemed the height of indulgence. As if she’d bought herself a Lamborghini. Still. “I can’t disrupt Ms Campbell’s plans. We have bookings, deposits...”

Vivienne stepped closer. “If they’re only Ms Campbell’s plans, surely she could manage without you for a couple of days?”

Margaret frowned in confusion. “Well...no. Ms Campbell and I are together.” Margaret might not be very interested in wombat feeding, cider making, or jam tasting, but she didn’t intend for Bess to do those things alone. She liked being there to see Bess’s exuberance, her wholehearted enjoyment of all things Tasmanian.

“I see.”

“Apologies.”

“I understand. It was selfish of me to assume you could drop everything and come to my rescue.” Vivienne braced one hand against the side of the house. Her fingers were so pale they seemed almost translucent, her nails perfect little pearly-pink ovals.

“There are plenty of antiques dealers. You could invite someone...”

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“Here?” Vivienne gave a sad chuckle. “I might as well ask them to come to the moon. But it’s all right, Margaret. I’m not incapable—”

A creaking, cracking noise. They looked up.

The air whistled as something huge and heavy plummeted from above. Margaret recoiled, one arm flying up to shield her face. The object hit the ground, sending splinters and metal screws flying.

It was a shutter from the upstairs window. Its mate was hanging by one hinge. Margaret grabbed Vivienne’s elbow and hurried her away. Her narrow arm felt fragile as if the bones might snap.

“Good God!” Vivienne shook.

“It didn’t hit you.” Margaret wasn’t very good at comforting people. Cautiously, she moved to examine the fallen item. The wood was rotten, the paint peeling, the hinges eaten away by rust. “You’d better call a handyman.”

“Somebody pushed it.” Vivienne’s voice was level, but her eyes had grown huge. “They...they tried to kill us.”

Margaret stared. “This is a decrepit old building. I’m sure it drops parts like a leper.”

“I saw someone!” Vivienne pointed up at the window.

“There’s no one there.”

“I saw an arm.” Vivienne managed a laugh, but it sounded desperate. “Oh, I’m sorry, do you think I’m making it up?”

“Well, no, but... Wait here.” She hurried around to the front door.

The foyer was empty. Margaret paused, listening, then jogged up the stairs and opened one door after another until she found the right room. It must have been the old nursery; there was a small ancient bed draped in mosquito net and musty-looking children’s books in a cabinet. Nowhere for a person to hide.

The window was open, though. Yellowed lace curtains moved in the breeze.

A stair creaked, followed by a thump on the floor below. As if someone had leaped down and landed on the carpet? Margaret rushed out and leaned over the banister in time to glimpse the side door slamming shut.

She dashed downstairs, hauled the door open, and looked outside. The garden was wild here: black wattle, she-oaks, a choking tangle of blackberries merging into the bushland beyond. A person could have reached it in seconds, scrambled inside, and vanished.

The wind tugged at the door, almost tearing it from her grasp. Maybe it had been open when she arrived and had simply blown shut?

Returning to Vivienne, she said, "I didn't find anyone. There were a few sounds, though. I can't swear someone didn't leave the house." Margaret's cheeks were warm, her heartbeat cantering.

In a strange, flat tone, Vivienne said, "They'll come back." She walked shakily to a garden bench and sat down.

"Who are 'they'?"

Her hostess tried to laugh. "I wish I knew. Whoever has been doing this: the thefts, the noises, the damage. It seems they know that I've been talking to you, that I'm trying to stop them. Clearly, they're not happy."

"Now, now. We don't know that anyone was there. Pull yourself together." Margaret made herself pat Vivienne on the shoulder.

Vivienne shot her hand up to grab Margaret's arm. Her fingers dug in hard. She drew Margaret down until they were face-to-face. "I'm not making it up. Someone has been coming into the house. And I can't do anything! Ivy refuses to leave. I'm stuck here..." Her voice cracked, and Margaret saw tears in her eyes.

She remembered the first time she had looked into those eyes. A bridge over the river at night with the darkened shapes of city buildings and the sky clouded over so that no stars were visible.

Margaret had been in danger. In her shock and fear, everything had seemed to stand still.

And then Vivienne had appeared. Illuminated by the lamppost above them as if standing in a spotlight, her eyes were as large and green as a cat's. She'd laughed and asked, "Do you need my help?"

"Yes." And in that moment, Margaret had felt a strange sense of having entered into a bargain. What would Vivienne ask in return?

Now she sat down beside Vivienne. "Don't be upset. I don't know what's happening, but there's bound to be a rational explanation." Some consolation seemed to be required, so she gave Vivienne's shoulder another stiff little pat.

Vivienne's head drooped in exhaustion, a warm tear splashing onto Margaret's hand.

* * *

A Curious Visit

Bess followed the dirt track deeper into the wilderness. Gumnuts crunched underfoot, and she was wary of snakes. This landscape called for desert boots, thick hiking socks, and trousers with lots of pockets. Not a skirt, tights, and funky zebra print ballet flats.

Something rustled in the undergrowth: an echidna, its golden-brown spikes bristling, its snout probing the soil for insects. As she drew closer, it curled itself into a ball of spikes. She smiled. It made her think of Margaret. Exotic and defensive to the rest of the world, but strangely cute to Bess's eyes.

The track turned into a clearing. There was a caravan and a dusty red 4WD, the remains of a campfire, properly extinguished, and a well-worn swag in army green. No rubbish scraps, cigarette butts, or dogs running loose. Evidently, these were experienced campers. But this was not a legal campsite.

Bess could call out. Say hello, ask casually what they were doing here. But she had listened to too many podcasts about serial killers to go chatting with strangers in the outback. Besides, there was no one around.

A tree bough groaned in the wind. She crossed the clearing, feeling way too visible in her bright teal cardigan and matching tights. At the caravan door, she stopped, glanced over her shoulder, then knocked.

No reply.

She tried the door and found it unlocked. Tensing, Bess pushed it open and slipped inside.

The interior was gloomy, the curtains drawn. She clicked the door shut, then squinted in the dim light. The bed and seats were folded up into the walls. A collapsible table took up most of the floor space. It was covered by a map held down at the corners by binoculars, a compass, and a hiker's drink bottle. The map showed green spaces, tracks, contour lines. Someone had added circles, crosses, and notes on sticky labels. The light was too faint for her to make out the writing.

She opened a cupboard. It was crammed with tinned foods, bottled water, toilet paper, bags of rice. Not the sort of packing for a weekend camping trip.

The beam from her phone's torch hit the far wall, illuminating pieces of paper pinned to a corkboard. There were old yellowing newspaper clippings

and printouts of articles. Faded black-and-white photographs. Pictures drawn by hand.

Next to all that was a poster with an image of something that looked like a weird-shaped rug. She leaned in. No, it wasn't a rug but a skin, curled and leathery at the edges, splayed out where the limbs would have been. Bess trailed her fingers down stripes of deep brown, honey, and grey.

Footsteps.

Bess dropped her phone with a crash. Swearing silently, she groped on the floor, grabbed it, and switched off the torch. Then she crouched, holding her breath.

From outside came the sound of boots tramping through the undergrowth.

Should she stay here in case they went away? Open the door and brazen it out? Arm herself with something?

As she tried frantically to decide, an explosion catapulted her to her feet. A gunshot!

She wrenched open the caravan door and half-tumbled down the folding stairs. The sound had come from her right. She took off to the left and plunged into the bush.

Gasping for breath, she crashed through the dried ferns and button grass, the air rushing in her ears. Her sturdy legs and arms pumped as she shoved branches aside and hurtled over fallen logs.

No one was following. After several minutes, she stopped and doubled over, clutching a stitch in her side. Her face was scorching. Where was she?

All around were trees. Bess struggled to slow her breathing. Leaving the trail was arguably more dangerous than confronting the person with the gun. People went missing in the Australian bush every year, and some were never seen again.

Oh, this isn't good.

There wouldn't be much phone reception out here. Would she wander around in the wilderness until she died? Would she end up in one of those vaguely sneering newspaper headlines? *City woman with no hiking experience found dead in the bush fifty metres from the road...*

Bess looked down at her teal tights and zebra-print ballet flats, now covered with dirt and animal droppings. The coroner's report would make her sound like an idiot.

A Curious Visit

A noise. She listened hard. Rumbling, then a heavy rattling whoosh. A logging truck! She was near the road! Bess took off towards the sound until she glimpsed bitumen through the trees. The road was familiar—it led to Crossroads House.

It took her several minutes' walking to recognise the feeling that rushed through her with every clanging heartbeat. It wasn't just relief or fear. It was elation.

* * *

Margaret left Crossroads House and pulled the gates shut behind her, flakes of rust and dirt dropping around her feet. The gates wouldn't shut all the way, and the lock was clogged with spiderwebs. Margaret's own house had an alarm system, deadlocks, and sensor lights, but it seemed Vivienne couldn't keep anyone out.

She leaned with both hands on the roof of her car, her pulse throbbing in her temples. A bird called nearby with a screech like a siren.

When was the last time she'd felt like this? Her breathing fast and shallow, her muscles taut, her senses sweeping the surroundings for every sound and movement. Primed for danger, awake and alive.

Margaret's thoughts raced back to Port Bannir, to everything that had happened there two years ago. She heard the smash of glass as a fanatical woman beat her way into the museum, determined to attack her. She saw the two policemen who'd loomed up in front of her to arrest her for a murder she hadn't committed. She tasted the salt between Bess's breasts as Bess leaned back against Margaret's car, her white skin glowing in the freezing night air. Her laughter and sighs as Margaret ran her hands and adoring mouth all over her—

A touch on her shoulder. "Margaret?"

Bess's red hair was tangled, her shoes muddy, her cheeks flushed. Margaret grabbed her face in both hands and kissed her hard.

Bess laughed breathlessly. "What's gotten into you?"

Margaret grasped her around her waist. They both burst out at once: "You're not going to like this—" and "I have a favour to ask."

Bess laughed again. "You go first."

"Well..." *Ridiculous*, Margaret scolded herself. *Pull yourself together.*

She should hustle Bess into the car and drive them both away from here, away from this excitement that made her hands shake. She should drive them back to their regular lives where Margaret could go on hunting for jobs, cancelling Deirdre's loyalty cards and library memberships, and fielding calls from third cousins ringing to check that her sister had really died. All those things she should be doing.

Instead, she blurted out, "Would you mind if we stayed a couple more days? I know you don't like this place and neither do I, but—"

"No, that's what I was going to ask you!" Bess started to smile, then looked perplexed. "But why do you want to stay?"

"I—" How could Margaret answer that? *Because there are things I can do effectively here, things I can fix? Because being in danger for a second made me feel fully alive again?*

Rejecting that, she said, "It's silly, but Vivienne is convinced someone is stealing from the house and trying to... to hurt her." It seemed melodramatic to say *kill*. "It could be all in her head. But there's a chance something is happening, and either way, she and her grandmother are very isolated. They need help."

Bess frowned. "Is this dangerous? For you?"

"Not at all." She banished the memory of that falling shutter. "I would finish valuing Ivy's antiques, identify anything missing from the inventory, and try to connect Vivienne to some assistance. I imagine she'll persuade Ivy to sell some items to pay for care in a nursing home. That's all."

Yes, that was all she was proposing to do, and there was nothing especially strange about it. No need for her to feel so agitated and thrilled. She asked Bess, "But why do you want to stay?"

"Well, you know I wanted to pitch one last exhibition to the gallery so I can leave my job with a recent success. I think I've found the perfect topic for a show here in Mount Bastion!"

"Oh yes?" Margaret tried to focus. "What sort of show would you make about this place? Rural potholes of Tasmania?"

"No." Bess's eyes sparkled with excitement. "I think I've found a cryptozoologist living in the bush. And he's hunting the Tasmanian tiger."

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A CURIOUS VISIT

BY JESS LEA