

Murder Under the Gum Trees

*A.
Curious
Woman*



JESS LEA



Chapter 1

MARGARET LOOKED AROUND THE DARKENED museum, and weighed the harpoon between her hands. She shut her eyes for a moment, the blackness deepening and settling around her like a cloak. The chill air, the silence, the weapon in her grasp... For a moment, things were as they should be, and she was almost at peace.

Opening her eyes again, she shook her head. No, that was an illusion. Nothing was settled here, and she had work to do. She stepped out into the main display area, her shoes striking the stone floor with a hollow clunking sound.

A key jangled in the front door, and a young woman's voice sounded, nervous and tentative. "Hello?"

Her assistant.

Margaret didn't reply.

From outside came a creaking noise as the wind bent the trees. The windows rattled in their tiny frames. This old stone building wasn't designed for letting in light or fresh air. It squatted close to the earth, huddling down against the icy gusts that came screeching in off the bay, straight from Antarctica.

It had been built as a watch house in the nineteenth century. The small, dim rooms now used for storage and office space had once housed bushrangers, pickpockets, drunks, and poisoners on their way to the chain gang or the gallows. Rumour had it, some nights in those rooms you could hear things: a hammering on the doors, a scrabbling of fingernails against the stone.

Margaret had never heard them herself, but perhaps the ghosts were afraid to disturb her.

The main display room, once the old courthouse, lay in silent gloom. Another power cut, thanks to the storm, and the sun was late to rise at this time of year. The main switch was all the way over by the front door, but it didn't matter. She knew every inch of this place, and the darkness never troubled her.

Her eyes adjusted, and she could make out the crouching forms of long-dead animals: a team of stuffed huskies, their eighty-year-old fur dull and patchy, pulling a sleigh. On it sat a dummy dressed in explorer gear from the Scott era, his body shapeless in canvas trousers and a hooded smock, his eyes hidden behind slitted leather goggles.

Margaret returned his blank gaze for a moment then glanced to the right to meet the reproachful glass eyes of a fur seal, its relatives long since hunted to extinction in these parts.

"Moth-eaten old monsters," she'd heard Kelly, her assistant, describing them to a friend with a shudder, when she thought Margaret wasn't observing her. A mistake; Margaret was always observing. "Why can't we be a proper, modern museum?"

Margaret assumed that meant a place full of touch screens, flashing lights, and cheerful recordings explaining how gravity worked. A glorified childcare centre: a place that never showed people anything they didn't wish to see. Well, Margaret had not come back to this little map smudge of a town to make people happy.

She caught a flash of movement and swung around. But it was only her reflection in a glass cabinet. The cabinet's contents—miniature replicas of the Erebus and Terror—would have looked harmless by daylight. But here in the shadows there was something eerie about the ships, as if they had been shrunk by witchcraft along with their human crew, to be frozen behind glass for eternity.

"Hello there?" Kelly's voice had grown plaintive; she must have forgotten the location of the main switch.

Margaret's mouth tightened in distaste. Incompetence irritated her, and so did obvious fear. She did not answer or pick up her pace as she made for the entrance, her heels beating a slow rhythm against the stone. In the shadows, an alien figure loomed beside her, its arms and legs swollen, its

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domed head enormous, faceless, made of gleaming metal: an antique diving suit. Margaret acknowledged it with a glance. Then she stepped out into the vestibule and flicked the main light switch to the building.

Kelly screamed.

The lights flickered and blinked bluish-white. Their flash illuminated Margaret's reflection in the front window, gleaming against the semi-darkness of the outside world. Tall, lean and angular, clad entirely in black. Her short dark hair was slicked close to her skull; her ivory face seemed disembodied, surrounded by darkness. The shadows and flashes of harsh light exaggerated her high cheekbones, firm jaw, Roman nose, and shadowed eyes. Her feet ended in towering heels; her fingers were clad in black gloves. They flexed like spiders. She held the harpoon in a practiced grip.

Kelly's shriek—choking, bubbling, spanning several octaves—would have made a Hammer Horror heroine proud. Then the lights came on properly.

Things steadied, and Margaret saw her usual reflection this time, standing calmly before the reception desk. She wore her black work suit, plain but elegantly cut, with a high Mandarin collar and silver cufflinks, along with the black cotton gloves she always used when handling exhibits. Like this harpoon from an old whaling ship, now under restoration here.

"Calm yourself, Ms Petrovich." Margaret kept her voice deadpan, her expression composed. She had not put down the harpoon.

"Oh, Ms Gale! I didn't know you were here. I forgot where the light switch was, and I... I got a scare."

"Please, Ms Petrovich, show some self-control." Margaret sniffed in disdain. "This is a small coastal maritime museum. What is there to alarm you here? We only deal with shipwrecks, scurvy, snow-blindness, mutiny, rum, sodomy, and the lash." She drew the last word out with a long, sibilant hiss.

"Sorry, Ms Gale." Kelly swallowed and made a desperate attempt to look professional. "I was just about to get things set up for the school tour this morning." She shifted from foot to foot. "I thought... I thought I could lead the tour, if that's okay, Ms Gale? I could use the practice and, well, after last time..." Kelly flapped a helpless hand.

Perhaps she did not like to refer in detail to what had happened the previous time Margaret had hosted a school group here. In Margaret's opinion, her management of the situation had been perfectly appropriate, but that meek little rabbit of a teacher had looked rather shaken.

"Certainly." Margaret laid the harpoon back in its cabinet in the front display. Then she pulled off her black gloves, finger by finger, and tucked them reverently away. She could sense Kelly watching, wide-eyed.

Margaret locked the cabinet, clipped her key chain back in place, and straightened up slowly. She turned her head with a predator's lazy grace.

"Have you nothing to do, Ms Petrovich? I do hope we are not boring you here?"

"Oh! No, I'll get on with..." Kelly scuttled away, her expression equal parts resentment and fear. A reaction Margaret was used to. A reaction she welcomed. She could almost hear Kelly berating herself for studying museology in the first place, when she would have been much happier with a nice job in a bank.

When she was alone again, Margaret Gale permitted herself to smile.

Chapter 2

BESS WOKE WITH A JOLT. Through the window the dawn sky was pale grey, but the room was still dim and huddled with shadows. Someone was watching her.

Adrenaline pounded through her. Her heart hammered, her limbs jerked. Her right hand shot out to grab the full, metal water bottle she kept on the windowsill. She gripped it tight. She would not be helpless this time.

Flinging off the blankets, Bess sat up—and gasped as the crown of her head thudded into the sloped wooden ceiling. Eyes watering, she swung around to face the intruder.

There was a scratching sound of claws against wood, then a triumphant, warbling shriek.

Her vision cleared, and she found herself looking down into the bright amber and black eyes of a rooster.

Russet and scarlet coloured, with a great plume of white tail feathers, Bess's housemate stood on the top step of the ladder that led up to the loft bed. He chortled to himself, his wattles quivering. He was waiting for breakfast.

"Oh, you little..." Bess dropped the bottle and flopped back onto the mattress. She rubbed her aching skull, then let out her tension in a hoot of laughter. "Oh, Genghis." She scooped him up into the crook of her arm. "Where would I be without my brave defender?"

Bess clambered down the ladder and into the main room of her tiny house. The pot-bellied wood heater had burned itself out and the chilly air nipped at her ankles. Still, as she looked around her, she felt a surge

of warmth. The room smelled deliciously of wood-smoke and last night's homemade apple crumble.

There was the kitchen ledge and barstools she'd sanded and varnished herself. A fold-down couch with bright cushions she'd embroidered, the rainbow rug she'd knotted together from scraps of old clothing, and a fruit-bat mobile she'd made dangling above her head. It had been a year, and Bess wasn't missing television at all.

There was the little gas-bottle stove, the kitchen chopping-block, and the bookshelves that covered the eastern wall, holding everything from Virginia Woolf to Pippi Longstocking. Not to mention the tiny camping fridge, containing nothing but milk, yoghurt, and a few beers. Everything else kept fine in the outdoor pantry at this time of year. Why had she ever thought she needed to pay huge energy bills to keep a big fridge full of crusty old pickle jars and withered vegetables? She'd been such a sheep back then.

Bess nodded to her belongings as if greeting old friends. She reminded herself to pay attention. *Every moment is unique.* This was home, all twenty square metres of it, and it was all hers.

She glanced over at the chickens' corner. On the cold winter nights, Genghis, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne would settle down there in an open drawer, wearing the paisley chook-nappies that Bess had made for them. She recalled where her pets had been living before being rescued: the garbage-filled yard of a squat behind Bess's flat in the city. Some hippie housemate had brought them there as chicks and forgotten about them. After weeks of looking out the window and seeing their distress—left without water for days on end, their hutch filthy, Genghis bleeding from a dog attack—Bess had finally had enough. The night before she left Melbourne for Port Bannir, she'd jumped the fence under cover of darkness, like a plump, angry ninja, and stolen them all.

She reached down to scratch her companion behind his comb.

"All in the past, mate," Bess murmured, remembering her counsellor's advice. "Acknowledge the memory, then place it gently onto a pretty little raft full of flowers, and let it float out to sea." She swept back her tangle of red hair and remembered to smile. *You are in charge of your emotions. So choose joy.* "Breakfast?"

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Her feet crammed into gumboots and with a coat over her pyjamas, Bess stepped outside. Out here, the air was so cold it made her cheeks ache, but the sunshine was dazzling. She smelled damp foliage, possum droppings, and crisp, clean air. Dew glinted on the grass and on the small granite water feature Bess had installed (recycled water, of course). It was designed to promote tranquillity. The gum leaves above her seemed to have been brushed with silver; the paddocks stretched as far as she could see. Magpies were warbling, and the chooks hopped down the steps behind her to peck around in the dirt. Bess hugged herself and breathed deep.

“I am fully present,” she repeated, as she did every morning. She wriggled her fingers and toes, anchoring herself inside her solid, freckled body. “I am grateful. I am valid. And I deserve to be happy.”

She sat down on the steps, reached for her ukulele, and picked out a few verses of *Botany Bay*. Soon she would go back inside and eat the fruit muesli she’d made for herself—with a handful of Coco Pops thrown in because Coco Pops were okay as long as you ate them mindfully. Then she would get on her pushbike and head into Port Bannir for another day at the best job she’d ever had.

What did a few nightmares matter when she was living the dream?

She hummed along to the cheerful ukulele melody of a song about exile. How could she not be happy? Everything she loved was right here.

* * *

Bess was still humming to herself as she cycled into Port Bannir. She passed the bakery, the Country Fire Authority shed, the town hall, and the charity shop, waving to a few locals on the way. Some waved back; some didn’t. Not everyone in town was a fan of Bess’s workplace, but she assured herself that they would come around in time.

Turning off the main road, she puffed her way up a sloping gravel track. The thick scrub and banksias hid the coastline from view, but she could smell the cold, salty sea-spray and hear the whoosh of the waves. Then she rounded the corner. The vegetation thinned away, the wind whipped her hair around her face, and there it was: the bright azure of the harbour, the white beach, and at the end of a rocky promontory, her destination.

The Cabinet of Curiosities.

On the outside, the building was stark: great, dark concrete slabs that made it look like a Soviet missile silo. Bess didn't like that, but her boss Leon insisted it was perfect. He said it gave visitors no inkling of what they would discover inside. *They come in expecting to be disappointed*, he said. *And then we blow their minds.*

"Morning, Christos." She nodded to the security guard as she chained up her bike and changed her shoes.

"Bess. Nice day for it."

She checked her appearance in the glass sliding doors. The polka-dot rockabilly dress was her own creation, cut to flatter her heavy breasts and hips and her plump, shapely arms, their skin creamy beneath the freckles. Teamed with cat's eye spectacles and glossy red sling-backs, the effect was eye-catching.

Back in the city, Bess had spent years hiding in the frumpy, overpriced clothes that were sold begrudgingly to fat girls, and enough was enough. Nowadays, she was determined to make an impression.

"Is his royal highness around, Christos? I've got something for him."

"Try the vampire room." Christos yawned. Then he sauntered down the path to deal with the first busload of tourists, who were already craning their necks and pressing their noses to the coach windows, desperate to have their minds blown.

* * *

"Bess!" Leon waved with his free hand. With his other hand, he snapped a picture of himself inside the coffin. "One for the social media feed?"

"Why not?" Bess glanced around. Inside the Cabinet of Curiosities, the lighting was kept low. Leon wanted to create place of mystery, he said, not some sterile museum or gallery.

The vampire room featured half a dozen upright coffins, which members of the public were encouraged to try for size and comfort.

Satisfied with the shot, Leon hopped nimbly out of the coffin. He brushed down his mustard three-piece suit and twiddled his waxed ringmaster-moustache.

"So, Bess! My right-hand woman, my consigliere, my fairy godmother—what have you got for me today?"

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“Well...” Bess returned his smile. Leon might be a bit pretentious and pleased with himself, but this place was special. “I know where we can get our hands on a moa egg.”

“Not the great prehistoric monster-birds of New Zealand?” Leon’s eyes widened.

“The very ones.” She showed him the photo. “Nine hundred years old, ninety percent intact, beautifully preserved. I thought we could exhibit it inside one of those Victorian gilded birdcages, hung from the ceiling.”

“Brilliant!” The newspapers said Leon was Australia’s most successful cynic, but the promise of a new exhibit made him bounce and beam like a child at Christmas. “Put a cuttlefish in the cage, yeah? And one of those little mirrors with bells.”

Bess nodded and made a note.

“Any news on the Andean mummy?”

“They’re still holding out for the original price. But I’ll beat them down.”

“I know you will.” Her boss grinned and rubbed his hands together. He set off on one last check of the building before the tourists were admitted. Bess hurried along at his side. “Anything else I need to know?”

“Well, I’ve been going through the visitor feedback.” Bess consulted her notes. “The forty-foot tapeworm is a winner, and the schoolkids love posing for photos with their heads in that set of diprotodon jaws. But I should tell you, the wall of Edwardian cock rings has had quite a few complaints.”

“I see.” Leon fondled his moustache. “Did you get them in writing?”

“Yep.”

“Excellent. Pick the most outraged ones, and post them on the website.”

“Already done.” Bess flipped through her to-do list, as they walked past a cabinet labelled “Rubber Chickens Down the Ages.” It was right next door to the Bearded Ladies’ Hall of Fame.

Bess said, “Now, that news crew will be here at ten for your interview.”

“Great!”

“Are you sure you want to film it inside the bouncy castle made of blow-up sex dolls?” She chewed her lip. “The lighting in there is not flattering.”

“Of course! I chose this suit to coordinate with it.”

“All right, it’s your funeral. Hey, speaking of suits, what do you think of this? The artist is keen for a quick sale.” She pulled up photo. “It’s a suit made entirely from the labels cut from hundreds of other suits.”

“Love it!” Leon whooped. “You totally get me, Bess. You get what I’m trying to do here.” He opened his arms wide. “When I was a kid, I used to get so excited by school trips to the museum or the art gallery, but they always turned out to be rubbish. Cabinets full of rocks, paintings of gloomy old people, and cranky grown-ups telling us to *shush*.” He groaned. “Dreary, elitist nonsense—intellectual child abuse! For twenty years, I refused to set foot in one of those places. I became a successful restaurateur instead; my cookbooks topped the bestseller list and people flew all the way from Tokyo just to taste my birthday cakes made entirely of sashimi.”

“I’m a vegetarian myself,” Bess reminded him.

“But when my Sydney restaurant burned down, I had a crisis of faith. Did I really want to rebuild and do the same thing for the next twenty years? Or did I have the guts to start something really fresh?” Leon nodded to himself. “So I took the insurance money, and I took one hell of a risk. I started this place—and not in a wealthy, culturally literate big city, but in a little coastal town where I used to come for holidays as a kid. People said I was out of my mind. Who would travel all the way from Melbourne just to look at a crazy gallery full of the weirdest, most amazing shit I could get my hands on?” He narrowed his eyes. “And you know what I told them?”

“That the public would love to drive four hours to see an exhibit of historic condoms?”

“Ex-actly!” Leon grinned. “And I was right. Look at this place—it’s buzzing! In the past five years, we have transformed this town into a hub for regional tourism, and all those stuffy big-city museums are struggling to imitate *our* style. We’ve proved it’s possible to show remarkable things in a way that entertains the public instead of boring them into a coma. Do we tell people to shush? No, we do not; our staff go up to visitors and engage them in conversation. Do we say ‘Don’t touch’? Hell no—we encourage it! Do we post long, tedious essays next to every exhibit and make people feel like they’re obliged to read everything before they’re allowed to look at the object itself? Fuck, no! Instead of plaques, we have screens beside the exhibits with a rolling Twitter feed, where visitors can post their own thoughts on what they’re looking at while they’re looking at it!”

“Some of them do post ‘this is shit’, though,” Bess cautioned him.

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Leon waved that away. “Yeah, but they say it *ironically*.” He let out a happy sigh. “I’m so bloody proud of this place and of my team. You all took a risk working here, but boy is it paying off, right?”

“It’s the most interesting job I’ve ever had,” Bess said truthfully.

Leon took a little leap in the air and clicked his heels together. “And in light of that... Bess, there’s an item I’d really, really love you to secure for me.”

Bess wrinkled her brow, waiting. Then realisation dawned. “Oh, Leon... I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

“Come on, Bess! It’d be epic!”

“I’ve called the Maritime Museum about that item three times, Leon. She refuses to sell. She wouldn’t even come to the phone; she made her assistant take the call.”

“So, go there in person. You can persuade her, Bess; I have faith in you.”

“She’s meant to be a tough character, Leon. I’ve never met her, but she’s got quite a reputation in town.”

“Sure, for running the world’s most boring museum.” Leon rolled his eyes. “Small-town local museums—is there anything more dire? Open one afternoon a week and run by a historical society whose members belong in a fossil display themselves.” He grimaced. “Model ships? Coins? Foghorns? Jesus wept. Then the bloody woman gets her hands on one truly fabulous item and she keeps it in storage! It’s positively criminal.”

“Maybe. But...”

“Anyway, she must be in need of the money. I’m sure no one visits her place any longer, not since we arrived in town. Offer her double if you have to. I want that item, Bess!”

Bess sighed in defeat.

“I’ll do my best.”

“You’re a star.” Leon paused to enjoy one of their new displays—a wall of television sets showing people soulfully performing one-hit wonders in sign language. (To judge from the performer’s expression, “Tainted Love” was especially moving.) “And can you block out some time in my diary today? I need to do some focused thinking about next year’s headline exhibit.”

“Sure.” Bess made another note. “What’s it going to be?”

“Well, so far I’ve only confirmed the title,” said Leon. “I’m thinking of calling it *Blood Is Thicker*. What do you reckon?” Bess gave a half-hearted

nod and hoped it would not involve any abattoir photos. “And hey, Bess, about that suit made of labels. Is there any chance of getting it here in time for my interview? Maybe I could model it for the cameras.”

“I’ll get Mikiel onto it.”

“Wicked. Thanks.” Leon hesitated. For the first time that morning, a look of uncertainty crossed his face. “Unless... You don’t think it might make me look like...well, like a bit of a hipster, do you?”

“No.” Bess did her best to look shocked. “Of course not.”

“Thank God.” Leon’s expression cleared. “You know me, Bess. If there’s one thing I can’t fucking *stand*, it’s a hipster.”

He twirled his moustache, lit up his pipe, and hurried away.

* * *

Bess coasted back into the town centre, conscious of a few odd looks from the locals she passed; cyclists were rare in Port Bannir. As she dismounted and chained up her bike, she had to admit that Margaret Gale’s Maritime Museum might turn out to be boring on the inside, but it was certainly housed in a more handsome building than Bess’s own workplace. The old colonial courthouse was beautifully maintained, and it had a dour grandeur about it, like a haunted house that only accepted ghosts of historical significance.

Contrary to Leon’s prediction, this local museum kept normal business hours, and the doors were already open. A large noticeboard was propped up outside. It read:

Welcome to the Port Bannir Maritime Museum, guardian of this district’s rich and colourful past. We trust you will enjoy your visit.

No food or drink.

No flash photography.

No mobile phones.

No backpacks.

No touching the exhibits.

No running in the display area.

No refunds.

“No diving in the shallow end,” Bess murmured to herself. She read on.

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Toilets are for staff and visitors only.

Visitors making excessive noise will be asked to leave.

Visitors changing children's nappies in the display area will be asked to leave.

Pirate impressions in a Maritime Museum are NOT

ORIGINAL, and may result in visitors being—

“—asked to leave,” Bess finished under her breath. How horrible, to think that a museum curator could resent her own visitors so much. She could imagine Margaret Gale now: ancient, crabby, crusty, and shrill, the sort of mad old biddy who terrorised local councillors and wrote letters to the newspaper complaining about her neighbours who didn't bring in their rubbish bins on time.

Although... Bess hated to admit it, but part of her was a tiny bit envious of anyone who felt free to enforce the rules so rigorously and without apology. Bess had been pretty appalled the first time she'd seen parents changing their baby right on the table at the café at Leon's gallery. They hadn't reacted well when she'd asked them to use the bathrooms instead. “We thought this was a family-friendly place!” the woman had hollered, from underneath Leon's signed photograph of Betty Page.

Following Margaret Gale's list of rules, the noticeboard concluded:

This museum covers Australasian and Antarctic history exclusively. To avoid embarrassment, kindly refrain from asking questions about polar bears. Please note: the 18th century cat-o'-nine-tails in Room 3 is a DISPLAY ITEM ONLY.

Bess blinked several times. Then she straightened her polka-dot dress and stepped through the doors.

Inside Margaret Gale's museum, the lights were operating-theatre white. The air held a faint tang of disinfectant. Bess's footsteps rang against the stone floor.

“Full fee or concession?” asked the jumpy-looking kid behind the information desk. His nametag read Kenneth.

Bess explained that she was here to see Ms Gale, and no, she didn't have an appointment.

The colour drained from his face. “Did you call ahead of time, Miss, or...?”

“No. Is your boss in?”

“She’s... she’s in.” His Adam’s apple seemed to be trying to leap to safety. “But she doesn’t really like it when people drop by without a booking—”

“Won’t take a minute.” Bess smiled and brushed past him, sensing she could be here all day otherwise. For goodness sake, she knew jobs were hard to find in Port Bannir, but the young man’s cringing manner seemed a bit over the top. He was working for a museum curator, not a Disney villain. Surely.

Inside the main display area, a woman whose nametag read Kelly was lecturing a group of school children about what it was like to travel in a convict ship. They were the only visitors in the room, apart from a couple of bewildered Chinese tourists, who had probably gotten lost on the way to Leon’s museum. They were examining a cabinet of sextant’s tools, which were in beautiful condition. Leon would have laughed at her, but Bess found that stuff kind of amazing. To think people had travelled right across the globe using nothing but longhand sums. Bess could barely make it home from the supermarket without her well-thumbed map of Port Bannir and Surrounds.

Still, Leon had been right about the museum in general, she decided. Ships’ logbooks and travelling trunks—snore. And so much writing! Plaques everywhere; surely no one had the patience to read them? And all those stuffed animals gave Bess the creeps.

One display made her feel quite queasy: a life-sized dummy dressed in oilskins brandished a harpoon gun, while another hung from the deck by a monkey belt, about to skin a fibreglass whale, which was liberally spattered with red paint. Beside them, another model whaler sat, scraping flesh from blubber with a large knife. Was it really ethical to show that stuff to kids? Bess didn’t mind her own gallery’s exhibits of occult paintings and surgical leeches, but there were limits.

She glanced around in search of Margaret Gale. Bess could picture her: just like the cranky old substitute teachers they used to have at Bess’s school. Wearing wrinkled stockings and a droopy cardigan and false teeth that would shoot out of her mouth when she yelled at you.

Seeing no one fitting that description, Bess wandered over to a cabinet against the far wall. The lid was unlocked and open, and inside lay the most marvellous old flintlock revolver. It was a battered thing, but splendidly

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engraved, and Bess could imagine it being waved around by Ben Hall as the bushranger held up the mail coach at Jugiong. Although she knew she shouldn't, she couldn't resist reaching into the cabinet to run an admiring fingertip over the barrel.

She felt a rush of air and saw a flash of silver. Out of nowhere, a sword came swishing down to halt in mid-air, half an inch above her wandering fingers.

Bess froze. The weapon looked old but viciously sharp. Not an actual sword, she realised—the shape was wrong—but just as alarming. It must have been heavy but it hung in the air perfectly still. Slowly, Bess's gaze slid up the long blade and handle, to a black-gloved hand and a dark sleeve, then higher still, to gaze into the eyes of her opponent.

The woman was a good foot taller than Bess. Her face was white, her black gaze narrow and focused, her hair lying close to her head like a sleek dark cap. Her perfume was faint but spicy.

The woman glanced down at her blade, poised over Bess's knuckles. When she spoke, her voice was deep and resonant. "Hands. Off."

Bess eyes widened. Very carefully, she drew away from the antique gun.

Her assailant waited until Bess had stepped back, before laying her weapon down in the cabinet next to the revolver.

According to the plaque on the wall—which Bess felt keen to read all of a sudden—the weapon that had just been brandished at her was a boarding knife from an old whaling ship.

Bess swallowed hard, composing herself. That perfume drifted around her.

Margaret Gale was not what she had expected.

* * *

Bess Campbell was *exactly* what Margaret had expected.

As she peeled the black cotton from her fingers and extended a reluctant hand to be shaken, Margaret reflected that the so-called wacky individualists who worked for Leon Powell all looked as if they'd come out of the same inner-city sausage machine.

It wasn't just their preposterous dress sense—although at least this one wasn't wearing roller skates and a monocle. And it wasn't just that they lacked any appreciation for history or museology. No, it was their arrogance

that grated on Margaret, their sense of entitlement. Who were they, after all, but a bunch of failed graphic designers who had been in this town all of five minutes? Look at this one—she'd barely set foot in the museum and she was already trying to steal things!

Margaret fixed her guest with a look that would have frozen the beak off a penguin.

“Ms Campbell, I presume. If you've come about the matter you discussed with my assistant last week, I'm afraid you have had a wasted journey. Do feel free to take in the exhibits before you leave.” Margaret gave a thin smile. “Our gift shop has a charming picture book about a ship's cat which you might enjoy.”

To her surprise, Bess Campbell did not crush easily. In fact, she seemed to have recovered from the boarding knife incident remarkably quickly. She had the nerve to smile and say “Actually, Ms Gale, I came by to apologise. We went in too hard before, trying to persuade you to sell.”

“Indeed?” Margaret's eyes narrowed.

“Of course. The artefact we discussed is unique and precious; I'm not surprised you won't part with it. Something that unusual must be the centrepiece of your collection.” Bess looked around with an innocent expression, as if searching for the item.

Margaret growled inwardly. The little pest knew full well the thing wasn't on display to the public. “It's under restoration,” she snapped.

“Well, we at the Cabinet of Curiosities were wondering if we might come to a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

Margaret turned away, snapped the cabinet shut, and locked it. “No.”

“A lease system....”

Unbelievable—the woman was still talking!

“We would pay a substantial premium to host the item, with full acknowledgement of its ownership here.” Bess had the nerve to step between Margaret and the cabinet, obliging Margaret to look at her. She had light freckles all over her face and throat, and pale pink lips. There was a delicate tattoo of a drifting dandelion peeking out from beneath the strap of her dress.

“The exposure of your item in our gallery might benefit your business here.” Bess was rude enough to glance around the almost empty room.

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Margaret scowled. “I doubt that. The sort of people who enjoy your exhibits of exotic lavatories are unlikely to take much interest in our district’s seafaring heritage.”

“Actually, we’ve got a toilet seat from an old sailing ship,” Bess enthused.

She seemed on the verge of describing it, before Margaret’s look made her halt.

“We’d be more than happy to set up an exchange exhibit,” she said, changing track. “If there’s anything in our collection—”

“There is nothing,” Margaret said, “in that junk shop of Mr Powell’s that would be of the slightest use to us here. Now, if that is all...”

“Could I look at it?”

Dear God, this Bess Campbell was nothing if not hopeful. Hopeful in that bouncy, perky way that Margaret had always found intensely irritating.

“Before I leave?”

“No.”

“It’s just that my boss is so keen,” Bess urged. “But if I could tell him that I’d seen the item and it was rubbish—”

“It’s a masterpiece!” Margaret could have slapped herself for getting sucked in by such an obvious ploy. But she was sick of this—sick of her precious collection being dismissed and ignored by the world’s teeming population of imbeciles.

Margaret’s phone buzzed in her pocket. She glanced down; it was the chair of the historical society. Calling, no doubt, to pester her again about hosting his grandfather’s collection of polished cow horns. Despite Margaret having explained to him in no uncertain terms that dairy farming had not played a significant part in this district’s colonial history, and that she was not running a council rubbish collection.

That decided things. She thrust the phone back into her pocket and beckoned Bess after her. “Two minutes, then.”

The item was kept under lock and key in the secure storage area. As Margaret unfastened the drawer and eased it open, she sensed Bess leaning in, craning to get a closer look. The pose caused the strap of Bess’s polka-dot dress to slip halfway off her smooth, freckled shoulder. Margaret fought the urge to reach out and snap it back into place. She did not like disorder.

“Oh...” Bess breathed. A delicate pink flooded into her cheeks. “Oh, it’s *wonderful*.”

Margaret couldn't help relenting just a little at the woman's obvious delight. It was rare to find anyone who really appreciated the artefacts here. And this one was unique all right. Encased in a leather travelling case lined with midnight blue silk and inset with a glass panel, it had clearly been treasured once. It was carved from the tusk of an elephant, decorated with the most exquisite designs—in China, most likely—and finished with the word *Diana* engraved in dainty cursive into the wings at the base.

"It was found in the estate of an Anglo-Indian military family, who migrated here after the Gold Rush to run a shipping line." When Margaret spoke about her exhibits, her naturally commanding tone dropped to a gentle murmur, as if soothing the precious things back to sleep. "It's been dated to 1880 or thereabouts. It sat forgotten in an attic for over a century—it was very nearly tossed out when the house was sold." She ran a caressing hand through the air above the treasure. "Handcrafted. Unique."

"Stunning," Bess agreed. "And how amazing, to think some liberated woman was playing with sex toys back in 1880."

Margaret froze. Her spine stiffened. So this was why the ghastly Mr Powell was interested in the item. She might have known. "It is a Roman-style fertility symbol." Margaret's voice turned steely-cold. "The Victorians were fascinated with pagan iconography. This was clearly based on the Roman *fascinus*, an effigy used to summon divine protection against the Evil Eye and guard the *sacra Romana*, the safety of the Roman state. Such symbols were found all over the ancient Mediterranean."

From behind her cats-eye glasses, Bess gave an incredulous stare. "You're joking, right?"

She did not dignify that with a response.

"Margaret. It's a dildo."

Margaret's nostrils flared. "I should be grateful if you would refrain from addressing me in a familiar way, Ms Campbell. I'm aware that Mr Powell's employees have, at best, a passing acquaintance with history, but I can assure you the item is an imitation Roman symbol. Admittedly the size differs somewhat from actual pagan artefacts, being—" Margaret cleared her throat "—significantly larger, and the reference to the goddess Diana is anachronistic in this context, but nevertheless—"

"You're taking the piss, aren't you?" Bess was still smiling, as if hopeful she might have missed a joke. "Mar—Ms Gale, this is clearly..." Bess

appeared to search for another way of phrasing it, before giving up. “A great big cock. And don’t you think it’s likely that Diana was the name of the woman who...”

“No, I do not, Ms Campbell.” Margaret closed the drawer so hard the item rattled inside it. “I realise some people would prefer a tawdry, fictional explanation. But this artefact happens to be part of the rich cultural heritage of our region.”

“Well, I’m not arguing with that.”

“And the fact you would exploit it for cheap, historically inaccurate laughs demonstrates to me once again that your...place of business has nothing of value to contribute to this town.” Margaret’s eyes narrowed as she folded her arms.

Bess blinked. “Excuse me?”

Margaret made no move to relent or apologise.

“What’s your problem?” Bess demanded.

“At present? Inefficient use of my time.” Margaret brushed an imaginary speck of dust from her gloves. “Now, if there’s nothing more...” She gave her best stare, the one that terrified tourists, cowed her staff, and sent tradesmen scuttling back to their vans to adjust the invoice.

To her aggravation, Bess did not flinch. Instead, she let out an incredulous laugh. “I came here offering an excellent deal,” she said. “It would have benefitted you more than us. Hell, we’ve already got our own display of historical sex toys.”

Margaret glowered. “It’s a faux-Roman—”

“—and you act like this,” Bess finished. “I can’t believe you’re so rude. No wonder no one wants to come here! It’s bad enough paying to look at old tin cans, without having Cruella de Vil taking your ticket.” She hoisted her handbag onto her shoulder and pushed her red hair back. “I’ll see myself out. If you come to your senses, you know where to find us. Just follow the crowd.”

Margaret lifted her chin. “That is not something I’ve ever made a habit of doing.”

The view from behind as Bess swept out might have been worth looking at, but Margaret didn’t. Instead she returned to the display room, took out her microfibre cloths, and set about rubbing finger-marks from a glass cabinet with more force than was necessary.

Inside the cabinet were the tin cans Bess had sneered at. They were leftovers, originally part of a stash earmarked for the Franklin expedition. Technically not Australian history, but the unfortunate Franklin's record as lieutenant-governor of Van Diemen's Land made the inclusion permissible in Margaret's eyes. If you knew where to look, you could still see the lead sealant. Those tins had been a wonder of technology at the time, a means of preserving food and keeping men alive for months in the frozen sea. Instead, so the theory went, the tins had poisoned the crew and sent them wandering off, mad, to their deaths on the ice.

Margaret scrubbed until her wiry arms ached and her face grew warm. These things *were* interesting. They were real, and they mattered. Why couldn't people see that?

By the time she'd finished, the glass was sparkling. She put away her rags and rubbed her hands with sanitiser until everything was clean again.

* * *

Outside, Bess straddled her pushbike and took some slow, angry breaths. Then she refreshed her lipstick, shut her eyes, and did another affirmation. As she murmured "I am grateful", she heard sniggers from the kids in the school group. They had left the museum and were lining up for the bus.

Bess's eyes snapped open. "*What?*"

Her voice was loud enough to turn heads. She reminded herself to calm down and be in the moment—but just at this moment, she didn't feel very grateful or valid at all.

Chapter 3

“BESS!” KYLIE LOOKED UP AS the plastic ribbons stirred in the doorway. Bess struggled through. Her face still felt flushed as she stomped up to the counter. The recollection of Margaret’s sneer made her long to pedal back to the Maritime Museum and throw an authentic sailing ship’s toilet seat through the window.

“Your place of business has nothing of value to contribute to this town.” Who the hell did that woman think she was?

It took an effort for Bess to remind herself to be present, to hear the slap of worn linoleum under her feet, and breathe in the warm air, enticingly scented with baking bread, fresh croissants, and golden-brown scones fresh from the oven. McKenzie’s Bakery was a Port Bannir institution. Tourists made day trips from Melbourne to stock up on rhubarb and white chocolate muffins, and truck drivers took the wrong turn-off on purpose so they could saunter innocently out of McKenzie’s with a steak and mushroom pie in each hand.

Kylie leaned her fleshy arms on the counter. “Bad day, Bessie?”

Bess breathed slowly. “Well, *‘bad day’* is just a meaning we humans assign to a random series of events over a twenty-four hour period,” she explained, remembering how her self-help books had phrased it. “Did you know that most of our unhappiness comes from attaching meaning to things, instead of just practising acceptance?” She caught Kylie’s eye. “Pretty bad. And it’s barely lunchtime.”

“Speaking of which...” Kylie flourished her tongs. “The usual?”

“That’d be great.” Bess watched as Kylie packed up warm spanakopita and Greek salad for her, a jumbo egg and lettuce roll for Christos, a mini cheese and bacon quiche for Leon, and a selection of cakes for the staff afternoon tea. “Red velvet lamingtons? Is that innovation or sacrilege?”

“Only one way to find out.” Kylie added a couple to Bess’s order. “On the house.”

Some Port Bannir residents resented the Cabinet of Curiosities, complaining that the place had made traffic a nightmare, ruined the view of the peninsula, and attracted weirdos to the area—but most local businesses were all in favour. Kylie’s only complaint was that the tourists demanded her coffee and cinnamon rolls faster than she could make them.

“What’s been ruffling your feathers, then?”

“Oh, just a difficult meeting.” Bess shook her head. “Down the street, at the Maritime Museum.”

Kylie’s eyebrows shot up. “Not with Morticia Addams?”

“Ms Gale, yes.” Bess counted out her money. “Do you know her?”

“Oh, yeah. Her bloody security firm keeps ticketing my suppliers for parking in her driveway. I’ve complained, but it’s a waste of time. No one knows the bylaws better than her, and no one is better at scaring the mayor into doing what he’s told.” Kylie snorted. “I’ve seen him sneaking out of council chambers through the bin bay to avoid running into her.”

“She did seem a bit...confrontational.”

“She’s a witch with a capital B,” Kylie said. “Always has been. My cousin Gill was at school with her forty years ago. Just around the corner, at Port Bannir primary. And Gill reckons she was a piece of work even then.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. When she was ten, Margaret got banned from netball after a fight on the court, so she broke into the PE store cupboard and punctured every single ball.” Kylie, a lifetime member of the Port Bannir Football Netball Club, sucked her teeth in horror at this outrage.

“I didn’t realise she was from here.” Bess was surprised. Port Bannir had produced wool barons, conservative National Party MPs, and a few footballers, but somehow it was hard to imagine this town producing Margaret Gale.

“She left after school, of course.” Kylie nodded. “Melbourne, I think, or Sydney. Couldn’t believe it ten years ago when she came back. I walked past

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her in High Street and my jaw just dropped. Course, she pretended like she didn't recognise me. Lots of young ones go away saying they'll come home after uni, but not many of them do."

"Why did she come back, then?" Bess reached for the warm package and tucked it under her arm.

Kylie shrugged. "Who knows? So she could lord it over the rest of us, I suppose. Or maybe she just couldn't hack it in the city. After all, she might act like she's the Queen of Sheba, but underneath you can tell she's a bit, you know..."

"What?"

Kylie looked surprised that Bess hadn't caught on.

"Nutty," she said. "Mark my words, there's something there that's not right."

* * *

"Bessie!" Leon gave a deafening groan down the phone. Bess shifted it away from her ear. "You are killing me here!"

"Sorry, Leon, but she wouldn't budge." Bess clamped the phone between her chin and her shoulder as she strapped the food package to her bike.

"Come on, Bess, you're better than this! What happened to the woman who got me that set of Rita Hayworth's fake eyelashes for half the asking price?"

"I can't work miracles, Leon." Bess picked up her helmet. "If it's any consolation, there was hardly anyone in there. Her museum is very... old-fashioned."

"Obsolete, you mean." Leon gave a grunt of contempt. "Well, let the records show I tried to do this the nice way. But the rate that woman's going, it won't be long till she comes crawling to us begging for a quick sale. Then I might not be so generous."

As Bess peddled back to the gallery, even the smell of Kylie's baked treats wasn't enough to lift her spirits. She hated screwing up at work.

Really, she shouldn't have got the job in the first place. As if a fine arts degree and three years of working in an alternative gallery the size of a shoebox qualified her for a curator role at Australia's newest and funkiest tourist destination! But her brother had been urging her to get out of Melbourne and stop brooding over the things that had happened there. So,

she'd sent in her résumé, and after the most peculiar job interview of her life—Leon's questions had included "What's your favourite palindrome?" and "If you were a crayon, what colour would you be?"—she'd found herself employed. Her new boss told her he was less interested in qualifications than potential, and that a candidate's "vibe" was more important than their references.

The shock of actually getting the job had acted on her like a jolt of adrenaline. It had given her the nerve to get out of her funk and start afresh: build a new home, new habits, and a new attitude. *Fake it till you make it*, she'd told herself, as she worked harder than any of her colleagues. And to her own surprise, she'd done well. Today's clash at the Maritime Museum had been her first real failure in months.

She glowered to herself as she puffed her way up the drive. Who was this Margaret Gale, anyway?

* * *

"Miss Gale?" Christos the security guard munched his egg and lettuce roll. "Big scary butch one, right? Looks like the Trunchbull from *Matilda*?"

"What? No, she's very—" Bess stopped herself. After her confrontation with Margaret, she was not about to say that Margaret had looked striking and regal—beautiful in the way that a frozen clifftop or a medieval fortress is beautiful.

Instead, she settled for saying, "A woman's worth has nothing to do with her appearance."

"Aw, sorry," Christos said, through a mouthful of shredded lettuce and Kylie's homemade mayonnaise. "Yeah, my little brother had to do work experience at her museum—after he got banned from the supermarket, and the garage, and the funeral home. He said she was mean as."

"How so?" Bess sifted through her salad, picked out an olive and bit into it, relishing the firm flesh giving way to an oily, salty squish.

"Well, he was there one week, and she did not smile at him the entire time." Christos swallowed solemnly. "She reported him to the school for getting in fifteen minutes late, and when he borrowed one pencil from the stationary cupboard without asking, she said it was a criminal offence! Can you believe that?"

Bess thought back to the woman she'd met that morning. "Yes."

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“Scary,” Christos confirmed. “My brother, he doesn’t even like walking past the building anymore.”

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Bess said, “why was he banned from those other places?”

“Oh.” Christos finished his roll in one mammoth gulp. “Just for cracking his knuckles when he got bored. Unbelievable!”

“Seems a bit harsh.”

“I know. And he was good at it too; he could play ‘Colonel Bogey’ on them. And ‘She’ll Be Coming Round the Mountain’.” Christos crumpled his sandwich wrapper and scored a perfect hit into the bin. “Yeah, apparently Miss Gale was really mean about that, too.”

* * *

“Mad Margaret?” It was nearly five and the ticket desk at the Cabinet of Curiosities was quietening down at last. Irene was sorting through the receipts with one hand and adjusting the dial to the easy-listening station with the other. “Heavens, everyone remembers her. My next-door neighbour Candice was at high school with her.” Irene shook her head and whistled silently. Her lips were pleated from decades of smoking. “Not nice at all.”

“How do you mean?” Bess sorted through Leon’s mail. It was the usual: requests for media interviews and threats from copyright lawyers.

“Oh, you know. She was one of *those* women.” Irene gave a meaningful look.

Bess had been subjected to her views on the decline of traditional family values before. Either Irene had never noticed that she was working at what one newspaper had dubbed the Smithsonian for Sickos, or else she was hoping to convert people from the inside.

“Soon as Margaret arrived at school, the teachers and the other children knew she wasn’t right,” Irene continued. “Still, they tried to be kind to her. But then she became obsessed with this other girl. Amy, her name was. Amy had a boyfriend—I think he was called Jacob?—but that didn’t stop Margaret from following her around and writing her crazy letters. Candice saw one once. She said it was obscene.”

Bess blinked, trying to imagine Margaret Gale writing smut.

Irene’s eyes were bright with the thrill of exposing other people’s bad behaviour. “In the end, poor Amy had to leave town—that was how bad

it got. Absolutely sick! And no one could do a thing. Course, you're not allowed to say anything against them nowadays, are you?"

"Wasn't this back in the eighties?" Bess asked, but Irene ignored that. Just as she'd been ignoring Bess's rainbow pin all year.

"I'll tell you one thing." Irene slammed the cash box closed. "I wouldn't let my daughter work there. Not for a million dollars."

"Your daughter's looking for work now?" Bess heard herself snap. "What happened—did they stop screening midday television?"

Then she apologised to Irene, because Margaret Gale probably didn't deserve defending. And besides, it had not been a compassionate thing to say, even if Bess had enjoyed it for a second.

* * *

"Malcolm Gale's eldest?" Hilda cleaned the toilets and the café at the Cabinet of Curiosities. She put her bucket down and gave Bess a dark look over her squeegee. "That girl was always a wrong 'un. You can tell—it's in the eyes."

"People said she stalked a young woman and punctured some netballs," said Bess.

This won a snort from Hilda. "I'm not talking about all that. I'm talking about the murders."

Bess stared.

Hilda sprayed the glass front of the cakes cabinet with detergent and gave it a cursory wipe, just to build anticipation. Then she said, "When Malcolm's daughter was at school, she started hanging around another girl."

"Amy," Bess prompted. "Who had a boyfriend called —"

"Jacob, yes. I used to babysit him when he was little." Hilda craned forward until Bess could see the milky cataract in her left eye. "And do you know what happened to Jacob? He went around to the Gales' one night to tell Margaret to leave young Amy alone." Hilda lowered her voice to a death-rattle. "And he never came back."

"You mean...?"

"Postman found him lying by the front gate the next morning. Dead as a doornail." Hilda shook her head. "Seventeen years old."

"That's terrible. But why would you think...?"

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“Everyone thought the same thing. Margaret was alone at the property that night; her father was away. And before the week was out, she’d gone too! Packed a bag and scarpered, and no one knew where. Do you think that’s how an innocent person behaves?”

“Well—”

“Then twenty years later, she had the nerve to show up here again like nothing had happened.” Hilda whistled through her long front teeth. “Moved back in with her father, and wouldn’t say a word about where she’d gone or what she’d done. Why Malcolm took her back I’ve no idea. She’d never come home to visit once in all that time.” Hilda paused. “Not that you could blame her much for that, I suppose. Her old man was hard on his kids. A bit of a bastard, really. But after his daughter came home, Malcolm stopped going out. My Gus hardly ever saw him down the pub anymore; he even skipped the regatta and the footy club awards night. We started to wonder if she was keeping him locked in the house. Then one morning Malcolm walked down the drive to pick up his newspaper—and he just dropped dead! Nothing the matter with him; he’d always been strong as an ox. I know; I used to clean the doctor’s surgery.”

Hilda gave the dangerous smile of a woman who’d once known every bunion and haemorrhoid in Port Bannir. “Malcolm was found in his pyjamas by his front gate, with the newspaper still in his hand.” Hilda paused for effect. “In the exact same spot where poor young Jacob had died!”

“Maybe he took offence at a headline,” Bess suggested “the *Port Bannir Advertiser* does love a bad pun.” This won a glare from the old woman. “Well, come on, Hilda. It’s a sad story, but it doesn’t mean anything. People do die.”

“Hmph.” Hilda wrung out her mop with such vigour that slimy water splattered across Bess’s shoes. “Especially people who get on the wrong side of Margaret Gale.”

* * *

The road out of town was dark and empty by the time Margaret turned her immaculate black sedan into the driveway of the old Gale property. Tall pines lined the path, shivering in the wind and casting jagged shadows.

The car purred up the concrete drive. It had been dirt and potholes when she’d first come back here. She’d paid for the repairs herself, keeping

a close eye on the labour and querying every item on the invoice. Still Dad had complained—that it wasn't needed, that she was getting ripped off, that the work was shoddy, that she was only doing this so people would think he had dutiful children, when in fact....

She slammed the car door, the sound ringing across the yard and the empty paddocks beyond.

Margaret unlocked the security door and the deadlock. She wiped her feet on the outside doormat, then the inside one. After closing and relocking the door, she stepped out of her shoes and hung her keys on the plain metal hook.

Standing by the hall table, she slid the old ivory letter opener into the first of the envelopes she'd pulled from the mailbox. The paper sliced open with a soft crackle. She couldn't stand raggedy edges.

Gas bill. Water bill. A statement showing that the pharmaceutical shares she'd chosen had tripled in value. A grovelling letter from an antique dealer apologising for the delay in delivering a map she'd ordered and promising to knock ten per cent off the price. They'd learned their lesson last time. Oh, and there was another letter from that development company.

Margaret took out her phone and paid the invoices. Then she switched on the shredder and fed the mail into it, watching old debts and deals turn into confetti with a satisfying whirr. Never put personal papers in the garbage intact. You never knew who might go through them.

The house was cold, but she never used the heater until after dinner. Walking towards her bedroom, she saw the red light blinking on the landline phone's answering machine. Almost no one called that line any longer. Just wrong numbers, or people trying to sell her a different phone deal. Or...

"Margaret?" The voice on the answering machine was hushed and hiccupping, like someone calling secretly for help in a hostage situation. The red light flashed: five new messages.

"Margaret? So I was thinking, do you suppose I might have gallstones? The doctor says not, but I didn't describe my symptoms very well. I don't know why, I get so nervy in there. Or am I being silly? I know I'm silly, I'm very silly, but could you call me anyway?"

"Margaret, next door's been doing it again—they've been putting rubbish in my bins! It's disgusting, it smells, and no one believes me, but

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they're doing it on purpose to make me upset, it's all because I complained about that dog of theirs, and, and..."

"Margaret, someone's broken into my house again. The coffee cups are in the wrong places and the light's on in the laundry..."

"Margaret, you're not coming around tonight, are you? You didn't say you were, but I thought I'd call. Someone might see you and say something. It's not—it's just not a good idea, Margaret..."

"Margaret, can you call me, please? Sheila next door said someone in the bakery was asking questions today. About you. Margaret? This isn't good for me. I'm supposed to take things quietly. Can you call?"

There was no change to Margaret's expression. She hit "Delete" five times, her finger holding the button down on the fifth occasion until the machine screeched in protest.

After replacing the phone, she ran a hand over her sleek hair, and continued on down the corridor.

* * *

Bess was still frowning as she locked the back door to the gallery, retrieved her bike, and coasted down the empty driveway. The crowds had gone, and the street leading back into town was silent.

There was only one person in sight: a young woman Bess didn't recognise. Not a local. She had short, feathery, white-blond hair and a fluttering sundress that looked completely inadequate for Port Bannir's climate. Her features were delicate and there was a wistful look about her, like a pre-Raphaelite maiden waiting by a tower window. Except this woman was leaning against a baby-blue hatchback.

When she saw Bess approaching, she gave a limp wave. "Excuse me?" She had a thin, whispery voice.

As Bess pedalled nearer, the woman looked at her properly and flinched. The sight of a plump woman doing physical exercise seemed downright obscene to some people; Bess had noticed that before. She reminded herself to practice Buddhist nonchalance and avoid assigning meaning to the moment. Otherwise she might have been tempted to run over that breathy-voiced bimbo's toes. "Can I help you?"

"Is this...?" The woman craned forward and lowered her voice even more, which seemed weird to Bess, since there was no one around. "Is this where Leon works?"

“Leon Powell?” Bess nodded. “Yes, this is the Cabinet of Curiosities. But I’m afraid it’s closed for the night. Are you with a tour group?” She wondered if the woman might be lost. Her pale blue eyes had a way of glazing over every few seconds that made Bess think she wouldn’t be much good as a navigator.

“Oh no.” The woman gave a tiny giggle. “I’m Arwyn. Arwyn Ross.”

She seemed to think the news would amaze Bess, but Bess had never heard her name before.

“Did he not tell you I was coming?”

“Um, no.” Was this woman a dealer or a critic? Or one of the eccentric artists who showed up here sometimes, trying to spruik their works? Bess would have put her money on the latter. “If you had a meeting scheduled with him, I’m afraid he’s gone home for the night.”

“Oh!” Arwyn Ross covered her mouth. “Oh, I am *useless*, I didn’t realise! How stupid of me not to check.”

“We open at ten tomorrow.” Bess thought about asking who Arwyn was and why Bess should have heard of her. But it was getting chilly, and she didn’t want to get trapped out here chatting to a conceptual artist. “Good night, then.”

“Good night.”

But as Bess pedalled away, she noticed that Arwyn was making no move to leave. She stayed leaning against her car and gazing up the drive, towards the locked and empty gallery.

A bit odd, but they got all sorts of visitors here. Riding back into town, Bess soon put it out of her mind. She was more troubled by the encounters she’d had earlier this afternoon.

It wasn’t just the accusations against Margaret Gale, she decided, as she reached the old post office. It was the fact that she, Bess, was gossiping, swapping stories behind another person’s back—stories that were outlandish and nasty, and probably untrue.

Bess didn’t snoop into other people’s lives. It was unethical and bad for her karma. Was she turning into a judgemental mean girl, like the other women in her family? Or was she just turning into a local?

She glanced up and down the deserted High Street before unlocking her letterbox. Night had settled over Port Bannir, and the traffic had faded to the occasional rattling cough of a farmer’s ute. The only other sound was

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the muffled din of voices in the pub. The sky was stunningly clear. She had never seen stars like these in the city.

Bess checked her mail once a week. Thanks to her solar panel, she had nothing much in the way of power bills now. She'd ditched the credit card last year, and she paid rent to the farmer in cash. No subscriptions apart from her crafting magazines, and no junk mail. No car insurance or registration. She would never have those things again.

Sometimes a friend sent a postcard from Bangkok or Berlin or Barcelona, always ending with a promise to catch up when they got home. And sometimes they did, but it always involved Bess catching the bus to Melbourne. After their first visit, her friends hadn't been keen to drive out here a second time.

"It's so *far!*" they'd grimaced, as if the distance was shorter from the opposite direction.

Bess felt her mouth tighten. Maybe they just didn't want to see her again. To be reminded...

She shook the thought away, wiggling her shoulders until they loosened. Guilt was pointless and resentment was toxic. Those emotions probably gave you cancer, or back pain, or thrush.

The letterbox turned out to be empty except for a square cream envelope. The cardboard felt heavy and embossed; her name was printed in an elegant copperplate font. She turned it over, imagining a communiqué from a mysterious benefactor, or an invitation to attend a school for wizards.

Then she realised what it must actually be. She sighed, and ripped it open.

*You are cordially invited to the wedding of Richard
James Horner and Melanie Ruth Campbell*

Why did they always include the middle names, Bess wondered? In case she might have another sister called Melanie? One was plenty.

The thought of cramming herself into some taffeta monstrosity and following Melanie very slowly down the aisle caused Bess to feel a little queasy. So did the invitation's words "and partner".

Her family had never liked any of the partners Bess had brought home before. Not the tattooist or the animal rights blogger. Not even the one who

was running for parliament and had been on the news and everything. All those women had got a similar reception from Bess's folks.

Her sister had stared like she was watching America's Skankiest Dance Moms, and her mother had pulled the same face she'd pulled when Bess had been sent home from school with nits. (Stoical, yet repulsed.) Her dad had excused himself to check on the barbecue, even though they were going to a restaurant.

She shook her head. Admittedly it might have helped if the tattooist hadn't spoken in Monty Python quotations most of the time, a quirk Bess had tried to find adorable at first. And yes, it would have been better if the political candidate hadn't been running for the Outlaw Party and worn her Mad Max costume to Bess's parents' anniversary dinner. And okay, she would have preferred it if the animal rights blogger hadn't been an hour late to dinner after getting arrested at a petting zoo and then asked Bess's parents for a loan....

Bess sighed. Girlfriends. Well, at least she wouldn't have that problem this time around.

She was busy reminding herself that self-pity played no part in her life now and that she was grateful for every one of life's experiences, even going solo to her sister's wedding—when she heard it.

The screech of brakes ripped through the evening silence. She spun around, her insides plummeting with dread. A second later came the crash and hailstone sound of breaking glass. Then the roar of an engine speeding away into the night.

Bess found herself hunched over, one hand clamped across her mouth. Her neck and shoulders were tensed for impact. Her bag, keys, and wedding invitation were scattered around her feet.

Shaking, she bent to pick them up. Up and down the street, lights were going on and people were spilling out the pub doors in search of the commotion. Bess got unsteadily to her feet and followed. She traced the noise halfway along the street until she reached... Oh.

Above the front door, a blue security light was flashing. It reflected off the pebbles of glass that lay scattered across the footpath and the reception area. So much glass—it crunched under her feet and lay in a carpet inside the building. Fragments were sprayed across the reception desk and the

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window ledge. The instrument of this destruction had skidded all the way across the marble floor. Bess stared.

Someone had hurled a brick through the door of the Maritime Museum, and it wasn't even her.

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A CURIOUS WOMAN

BY JESS LEA

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