

Till Marriage Do Us Part

a novel

Bianca Bowers



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Poetry Books

Death and Life (Paperfields Press, 2014)

Passage (Paperfields Press, 2015)

Love is a song she sang from a cage (Paperfields Press, 2016)

Pressed Flowers (Paperfields Press, 2017)

Butterfly Voyage (Paperfields Press, 2018)

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TILL MARRIAGE DO US PART

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Where does love come from?

Where does it go?

That crackling birth and monotone death

Are we nothing more than lithium-

batteries

with an expiration

— *Bianca Bowers*

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Bronte

2016

In the months following my confession to Aden, I swam every night—when the first star appeared alongside the waxing half-moon, when flying foxes flew west, when lime tree frogs began their nocturnal chorus, when carpet pythons slithered out to hunt, when blue-backed night-spinners wove their sticky webs, and when nuclear families congregated around the dinner table. Unlike my morning swim, when I pushed my lungs and muscles to capacity, that night swim was my escape.

After a few token tumble turns and laps, I would float on my back, watch the night slowly devour the remaining daylight, and fantasise about Luther—a man who desired me as much as I desired him. I would envision Luther and I sitting side by side on pool chairs, like a real couple. I would scheme up ways to surmount our impossible situation: me, married with children in Australia; Luther, married with a child in America. And finally, I would try to wrap my head around the fact that I had fallen in love with a man who I had not yet met in person.

There had been a time when I had secretly managed to love Luther from a distance. A time when the fantasy had been enough to sustain me. A time when Luther and Aden had been separate planets that had orbited safely around me. But that time had passed. Luther and Aden were no longer orbiting; they had both collided into me, into each other, and

Till Marriage Do Us Part

we were all haemorrhaging equal amounts of love and-hate.

I loved my husband, but I was in love with Luther. That night swim was everything.

PART I

Fourteen Months Earlier
2015

CHAPTER 1

Aden

September

When I charged through the kitchen stable door at 7 a.m. I found Bronte with her hands knuckle-deep in a bowl of minced meat that she and the twins fed to our pair of resident kookaburras every morning.

I held her chin and kissed her. “Morning, beautiful. Guess what?”

She rolled a piece of mince into a ball and placed it on a bamboo cutting board. “Judging by the goofy smile on your face, I’d say it’s good news, whatever it is.”

“You got that right,” I said. “The vines are weeping.”

“Aah,” said Bronte, “cheers to a new season of growth.”

“This is going to be a good year for Ghost Gum Winery, Bront. I can feel it in my bones.”

Leyla hopped off her chair and tapped me on the thigh. “Why are the vines sad, daddy?”

I swept her into my arms and twirled her around. “The vines aren’t sad, honey. It’s just a saying. You see, the vines go to sleep during winter, and while they’re asleep Daddy and Grandpa Judd and all the other workers prune the branches so that new buds can grow when spring arrives.”

“Has spring arrived yet, Daddy?”

“It has, honey. In spring, the vines start to wake up and we know that they are awake when sap starts to seep from the

pruned branches. The sap looks like a tear drop, which is why we say that the vines are weeping.”

Bronte smiled and pointed to the mug beside the percolating coffee pot.

I put Leyla on her chair and ruffled Liam’s hair. “What kind of dinosaur are you drawing, Liam?”

“Spinosaurus,” he said, without looking up.”

I caught Bronte’s eye and she chuckled. I filled my favourite green mug three-quarters of the way and topped it with milk. “Has Dad been and gone already?”

With the kookaburras’ minced meat laid out neatly on a plate, Bronte had stacked the blue plastic bowl in the dishwasher and was pumping eucalyptus soap into her hands at the sink. She turned on the tap and shook her head. “I haven’t seen him yet.”

Like my boyhood days, growing up on the family’s blueberry farm in Coffs Harbour, I could set a clock by my father’s early bird routine at Ghost Gum. Each morning, Dad rose before the sun stirred and the winery’s free-range rooster, Walter, crowed, eager to tend to the vineyards for a few hours before he visited the main house at 7 a.m. to drink his coffee and talk to his grandkids. *Morning son*, he would say, his brow beaded with sweat and his fingernails caked in moist dirt.

I checked my watch and gulped more coffee. “It’s seven fifteen.”

“He’s probably spending quality time with the weeping vines.” Bronte scooped two heaped teaspoons of muscovado

sugar into a blue mug, filled it with black coffee and stirred. “Why don’t you save him a trip and hand-deliver his coffee to him today?”

I drained my cup and stood. “Good idea. You three have fun feeding the kookies, and I’ll see you at lunch.” I kissed each one on the forehead and exited through the stable door with Dad’s coffee mug in my hand.

A thin mist laced the property, and grey kangaroos grazed on the sloping bank that led away from the house and down toward the Eucalypt forest and Verdelho vineyards. The only audible sounds were the warblers, whip and mistletoe birds. One thing I loved about the Granite Belt was its unique climate. Unlike the rest of Queensland, which pretty much had two seasons of hot and hotter, the Granite Belt experienced all four seasons due to its thousand-metre elevation above sea level.

I greeted the seasonal workers, who had been hired to trel-lis the Marsanne, Verdelho, and Petit Verdot vines that were rousing from their winter sleep, and sought out the team leader, Benny—a Spanish backpacker who funded his travels with seasonal work.

“Morning, Benny. Have you seen Judd this morning?”

Benny shook his head. “I think he’s still at home.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I usually see his boat when I walk along the river, but I did not see it today.”

My neck muscles twitched as I scanned the area. The

Severn River divided Ghost Gum into two parcels of land: the bigger parcel housing the family home and majority of vineyards; while the smaller parcel contained Dad's two bedroom white-washed cottage and remaining vines. Dad's sixty-second commute to work involved crossing the Severn in a teal speed boat each morning. I reached into the back pocket of my jeans for my mobile and asked Benny to hold the cold coffee cup while I dialled Dad's number.

"Is everything okay, Mr Aden?"

"Please, Benny, call me Aden. I'm probably worrying for nothing."

Benny nodded.

"Straight to voicemail," I said.

Benny handed back the coffee cup. "If I see him, I will tell him that you are worried."

I smiled and nodded. "Thanks, Benny."

The walk to the river along the dirt track usually took five minutes, but I made it in three. Considering Dad habitually extinguished the fire in the wood burner before setting out in the morning, it didn't bode well to see remnants of smoke drifting from the chimney as I neared the mini jetty where Dad's boat should have been tied. I contemplated my best move—to walk back to the main house and drive; or follow the river on foot until I reached the bridge, and walk to Dad's cottage. I opted for the bridge.

My anxiety about Dad aside, the weather lived up to Queensland Tourism's official catch-cry: *Beautiful one day*,

perfect the next. The resident white heron stalked fish in its favourite spot between the bullrush reeds, and a black cormorant sunned itself on a boulder jutting out of the river. A gang of cockatoos screeched from a nearby gum tree, and sunlight glinted off the water, where unruly patches of water hyacinth spread like fishing nets. Too bad the council considered the plant an environmental weed; the floating flowers were a sight to behold. As I approached the bridge, a group of wallabies hopped off in the opposite direction and a cloud of white butterflies wafted around purple and yellow wildflowers.

Once across the bridge, I ran the kilometre to Dad's cottage. His muddy boots stood outside the door, indicating he was inside. I rapped my knuckles against the blue door and called out. He didn't answer. "Dad?" I said louder. He didn't reply. I twisted the handle, but the door was locked. Feeling frantic, I inspected windows and peeped between curtain cracks as I circled the cottage and ransacked my memory for the location of Dad's hidden spare key. But with no way in, I grabbed one of his work boots to smash the glass in the lounge window and climbed inside.

Seconds later, I found Dad in his bed. His lifeless pulse and cold skin confirmed the worst. In between performing CPR, I put Bronte on speaker phone and asked her to call an ambulance. Thirty minutes later, the paramedics declared him dead on arrival, citing a heart attack as the likely cause of death.



On the day of Dad's funeral, while Bronte entertained the twins and catered to a full house, I spotted Bill the bank manager walking up the driveway. I thought it odd, but considering Dad's popularity, I quickly dispatched any negative thoughts and met him at the front door.

"Hey, Bill, thanks for coming to pay your respects." I stepped aside to welcome him in. "Can I get you a drink?"

Bill shook my hand. "I'm afraid it's not a personal visit, Aden." He scanned the open-planned living and dining room, where people stood in groups and talked. "Can we talk privately?"

My gut clenched. I could think of nothing positive about a non-personal visit from a bank manager.

"Aden?"

"Yup, sure, let's go into the home office." I gestured with my hand for him to walk ahead. Bronte caught my eye as Bill and I passed the living room. She raised her hands in the air and frowned as if to say *what's up?* I shrugged and shook my head. Inside the office, I closed the door and gestured for Bill to sit down on one of the two grey armchairs across from the desk.

I spoke first. "What's so urgent that it couldn't wait?"

Bill scratched his balding head. "It's the merger."

"What merger?"

"I discussed it with Judd before he, err, before his heart attack."

"Dad didn't mention a merger."

Bill cleared his throat. "One of the Big 4 banks is buying

Granite Union, and the merger has triggered an array of financial audits on random business accounts. Judd's account was flagged."

I took a couple of beats to run the hypotheticals through my head before I answered. "Flagged? For what reason?"

Bill placed his briefcase on the desk and released the two locks with a clicking sound. "In addition to the hefty mortgage on the winery, Judd had another parcel of debt."

I had been sitting back in my chair, but I leaned forward and placed my elbows on the desk. "What debt? I don't know about any debt."

Bill removed a manilla folder from his briefcase. "He didn't want to tell you, Aden."

I took the folder from Bill and paced the wooden floorboards while I scanned the contents. The file indicated that Dad had borrowed the deposit for Ghost Gum, which made no sense, because he'd told me that he'd used the money from the sale of our family's blueberry farm. I stopped pacing and sat behind the desk. "What's going on here, Bill? Dad borrowed the deposit for Ghost Gum? What happened to the money from the farm?"

Bill sighed. "I have no idea, Aden. This might be something he takes to his grave."

I scratched my head. "So what happens now?"

Bill removed another document from his briefcase. "Like I told Judd, I'm afraid I have to offer you an ultimatum."

"What's the ultimatum?"

Bill swallowed and looked down. "You either have to pay a

lump sum or, err..."

"Or what?"

"Or foreclose on the winery."

"What?! Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I'm sorry, Aden. If I could do something, I would."

"How much is the lump sum?"

Bill closed his briefcase and squirmed in his seat. "A hundred and fifty thousand."

I bolted out of my seat with such force that I dented the wall behind me. "A hundred and fifty grand?! Jesus, are you kidding me? Bronte and I don't have that kind of money lying around."

He smiled weakly and laughed. "Any rich friends?"

I placed my palms on the desk and glared at him. "No, Bill. No rich friends and no fucking family left either."

"Any investments you can cash in?"

I put my hand up to signal I'd had enough. "You know as well as I do that everything Bronte and I have is invested in Ghost Gum."

Bill stood and nodded. His knuckles had turned white from clutching the briefcase.

I rounded the desk and stood opposite him. "How long do we have to come up with the money?"

He swallowed and stepped back. "Seven days."

"Ha!" I spat out. "Let me get this straight. If we don't come up with the money in seven days, we lose everything we've

worked for?”

He took another step back. “I’m afraid so, Aden.”

“When did you speak to Dad?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You said you’d already spoken to Dad about this. When?”

Bill stepped back again and whispered his reply. “The day before he died.”

Afternoon light streamed through the window, but my head plunged into a dark abyss, and the term ‘seeing red’ took on new meaning as my heart redirected all of the blood from my body to my eye sockets. Bill muttered something about the contract he’d left on the desk, but his voice sounded like it was underwater—muffled, distorted, and impossibly far away. I tried to speak, but the words were trapped in my throat, like debris in the Severn after a flood. I sensed Bill turning away from me—sneaking out with his tail between his legs—and though I wanted to pummel him, I stood in place like a gargoyle, because I couldn’t summon a single part of my body to act. Everything I had worked for, and all I cherished, teetered on the verge of collapse, and I had no aces up my sleeves.

When the door clicked closed, I staggered to the window and gazed at the rows of vines in the distance. Thoughts ran through my head a hundred miles an hour. What the hell was Dad playing at? Why did he need to borrow the deposit for Ghost Gum? What did he do with the proceeds of the blueberry farm? Thanks to Bill-the-fucking-bank-manager, I might never know.

A tap on the shoulder prised me from my thoughts. I turned to find Bronte's anxious face.

"What happened? What did Bill want?"

I experienced a new sensation—a lethal cocktail of adrenaline and rage. I thought back to our wedding day and Bronte's vows. *Aden, you're my Lake Saint Clair—deep and tranquil.* That line struck me at the time, and continued to stay with me every day after we married. Above loyalty, kindness, respect, and support, tranquillity remained Bronte's primary need. A need I was about to renege on.

Bronte was reaching for my hand. "Aden, speak to me. What happened?"

"Irony is what's happening, Bronte. Iro-fucki-nee."

She stepped back and looked at me like I was a stranger. "You're scaring me. What the hell is going on?"

"Bill-the-fucking-bank-manager stopped by on the day of my father's funeral to tell me we're gonna lose the winery. That's what's going on."

"You can't be serious?"

"I'm as serious as my father's heart attack, Bronte. We are going to lose everything we've worked for. We're going to lose the winery when the vines are weeping. How's that for fucking irony?"

CHAPTER 2

Bronte

September

The moment I saw Bill and Aden head into the study on the day of Judd's funeral, I knew that Bill hadn't come to pay his respects. I scanned the room for our neighbours, Marjorie and Fred, and found them talking to Jill and Laurie Evans, who owned the Tulip Tree Vineyard in the nearby town of Ballandean. Out of all the people in the Granite Belt community, Fred and Marjorie were as steadfast as the region's renowned house-sized granite boulders. Their farm supplied the bulk of Queensland apples, and they grew every variety from Granny Smith to Pink Lady, Royal gala to Red Delicious. They were good people: salt of the earth, great sense of humour, and refreshingly politically incorrect. Outside of the funeral, I had rarely seen Fred deviate from his Steve Irwin get-up of work boots, khaki shorts and shirt, while Marjorie regularly donned an apron. Today, neither were recognisable in black suit and dress.

I took the twins by the hand and headed towards Jill and Laurie.

Fred spoke when he saw me. "That was good of Bill to pay his respects."

I nodded by default. "I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation, but can I steal Marjorie and Fred for a second?"

Jill nodded profusely and uttered "of course" before moving away to join another group of people outside on the deck. As

soon as they were out of earshot, I spoke in a lowered voice to Fred and Marjorie. “Between you and me, I don’t think Bill is here on business.”

Marjorie’s eyes narrowed momentarily. “Surely he’s not making a business call on the day of Judd’s funeral?”

Fred stepped forward. “What do you need us to do?”

“Can you occupy the twins for me while I check on Aden and find out what’s happening?”

Marjorie took their hands. “Of course. Leyla, Liam, how about you delight me with your trampoline tricks?”

They both nodded and ran ahead. Fred patted my arm. “Take your time, love, and try not to think the worst.”

I nodded without conviction and thanked them.

I opened and closed the study door with the stealth of a church mouse. Inside, Aden stared out of the window, his jaw clenched. Bill must have been and gone. Not wanting to startle him, I called his name as I approached, but he was so lost in thought that he didn’t hear me. I tapped his shoulder. “Aden, speak to me. What happened? What did Bill want?”

He spun around with a stranger’s eyes. “Irony is what’s happening, Bronte. Iro-fucki-nee.”

“I’ve never seen you like this. Could you stop talking in riddles and tell me what’s going on?”

“Bill-the-fucking-bank-manager stopped by on the day of my father’s funeral to tell me we’re gonna lose the winery. That’s what’s going on.”

“You can’t be serious?”

“I’m as serious as Judd’s heart attack, Bronte. We are going to lose everything we’ve worked for. We’re going to lose the winery when the vines are weeping. How’s that for fucking irony?”

I reached for his hand, but he drew his elbow back to make a fist at the same time and punched a hole through the window, elbowing me in the corner of my eye. The blow propelled me backwards and I crashed to the floor in sync with the shards and splinters of glass that hit the timber and scattered like water droplets across the burgundy Persian rug. Aden moved from the window. Glass scrunched and shattered beneath his shoes. I held out my arm, expecting him to help me up, but he stood over me with his arms at his sides. A drop of blood from his knuckles splattered against my throat. “I can’t be here right now, Bronte.”

Though he towered over me like a Viking, with his lean, six foot five frame, Aden had always been akin to aloe vera gel on sunburnt skin—his mere presence, a soothing balm. His hazel-flecked blue eyes crinkled when he smiled, and signalled safety from the moment we met. If anyone had ever suggested that a fault line of rage lay dormant at his core, I would have viewed the concept in the same light as Jesus descending on a cloud.

I rolled onto my side, forgetting about the broken glass that blanketed the floor like a carpet. “Aden, wait.” But the pain of glass splinters buried in my palms stopped me mid-sentence, and I collapsed. Aden slammed the door.

I rolled onto my other side and got up in stages—knees

first, feet second—before I staggered to the door and went in search of Aden. I scanned the crowds for his head—nothing. The sound of the garage door grinding open prompted me out the front door and left toward the garage.

“Aden, wait, please don’t go.” But I was too late. He accelerated down the driveway, almost hitting a jacaranda tree on the way. People were outside then, whispering to each other. Marjorie rounded the corner with Leyla and Liam, only to stop dead in her tracks, release the twins’ hands and cover her mouth in shock. Fred, habitually calm under pressure, took control. “Right, I think it’s time for everyone to go,” he said, herding people towards their cars. I stood statue-like, not breathing until I realised I was holding my breath. With Leyla and Liam at my side, Marjorie ushered us into the house where she stirred sugar into a cup of water.

Leyla pointed at my eye. “Mummy, your eye is puffy.”

I covered it instinctively with my hand and Marjorie swung into gear. “Here,” she said, moving over to the freezer and retrieving a bag of frozen peas. “Sit down and ice that before the swelling gets any worse. And we need to get that glass out of your hand. Where do you keep the tweezers?”

“They’re in the ensuite bathroom cabinet,” I said.

“I’ll go,” said Fred.

“What happened, Mummy?” said Liam. “Where’s Daddy?”

I looked from Marjorie to Fred. “Daddy had some bad news, honey. He’ll be back in a little while.”

“How about some apple pie and ice cream in front of the telly, kids?”

Leyla clutched my arm. "I don't want to leave Mummy."

"Mummy needs to rest for a few minutes," I assured her.

Marjorie looked at Fred as he approached with the tweezers. "Will you settle them in front of the telly?"

Fred nodded and led the kids away, while Marjorie spooned apple pie and ice cream into bowls.

When they both returned, they sat on either side of me. "What happened, Bronte? Did Aden hit you?"

"Oh, God, no," I said, realising the implications of Aden storming out and me following behind with a swollen eye and bloody hand.

Marjorie took my hand and tweezed the first glass splinter.

I pulled my hand back. "Ouch."

"Sorry, love, but it's going to hurt."

I took a deep breath and repeated Aden's words. "We're losing the winery."

Marjorie shook her head. "That can't be right."

Fred crossed his arms over his chest. "What's Bill playing at?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. We need to find Aden."

Fred patted my knee. "Any ideas where he went?"

"I'm thinking Judd's place?"

He stood and took his mobile from his pocket. "Leave it to me. I'll call if I find him."

CHAPTER 3

Luther

September

I didn't usually stand to attention when my wife, Tina, bellowed my name. But I was desperate for a smoke and a reason to leave the group of dads who were gathered around the barbecue drinking beers and discussing sport. I could hear the door bell chiming as I stepped inside the living area and headed for the hall. Tina was standing at the door—the top of her head at least a foot below the glass paneling—with hands on hips and lips pursed.

“Your mother is here.” She mouthed the words in disgust.

“Well, let her in,” I said.

Tina held up her hand like a stop sign. “Oh my god, Luther, did you invite her to my house?”

“Don't you mean our house?”

“You know exactly what I mean. Did you invite her?”

The bell chimed again.

“No, I didn't invite her. You told me not to, remember?”

“So why is she here?”

“Because her granddaughter is four today.” I gently moved Tina aside and opened the door. “Mom, I wasn't expecting you?”

“I know. I had to hear about it from one of my tarot clients.”

I looked at Tina, who rolled her eyes and set off down the hall like an ant on the march.

“Are you going to let me in, Luther, or do I have to stand out here like a traveling salesman?”

“Sorry, Mom.” I opened the door and stepped aside.

Mom smelled like rosewater and wore her usual summer pastel colors. Her bohemian nature had won my father’s initial affection and fueled his and Mom’s eventual estrangement. Funny how that works. I saw a similar scenario playing out in my life too.

Mom removed two gifts from her voluminous tie-dyed tote bag and handed me one. “One for you, and one for my little princess.”

I took the gift like a member of the bomb squad would take an unknown package. “What is it?”

“It’s a reminder to remind you about what’s important, Luther.”

I need a smoke, I thought and changed the subject. “Addy is outside with her friends. Follow me.”

“What about your gift? Aren’t you going to open it?”

“I’ll open it in a minute when I go for a smoke.”

She shook her head and tutted. “Still smoking?”

“Yeah,” I said, “old habits keep me sane.”

Outside, Addy spotted Mom and bounded over. “Grandma Beth, you came!” Mom dropped her bag on the grass and scooped Addy into her arms like a ballerina. Addy’s pink and white princess dress twirled like a whirling dervish and her

laughter echoed like sonar. I said a silent thank you in my head that she was gifting me five minutes of not having to speak to my mother. Not that I didn't love Mom. I did. But her life's mission was to push me to improve my life, follow my dreams, and never accept anything less than the best. In other words, she knew how to push my buttons.

"I'll catch up with you in five, Mom."

Mom put Addy down and held her hand. "Tell me you're not smoking at your daughter's birthday party, Luther?"

I took the box of camels out of my pocket. "Yeah, I am."

She tutted and turned to Addy. "Shall we go inside and open your gift from Grandma Beth?"

Addy jumped up and down, and I watched Mom walk away in a cloud of baby pinks, blues, greens and yellows.

I walked around the side of the house, leaned against the wall, and placed Mom's gift at my feet. Mom was right about my smoking, but I did use it as an excuse to escape from crowds—a small miracle for an INFJ. I shook my Zippo after the ignition failed on the first few attempts and inhaled. That first drag and exhale was like a shot of morphine—a domino effect of easing and respite, starting at my head and working its way down to my toes. I reached out to dismantle a red leaf from the neighbor's maple tree and turned it over in my palm. Our garden was another victim in the long line of victims who had been overruled by Tina's tyranny. Other than the oak tree, where I hung Addy's tyre swing, Tina had insisted that one tree with unruly roots was more than enough, and hired a landscaper to lay and maintain perfectly manicured turf and neatly trimmed garden beds.

I eyed Mom's gift and thought about how much I had loved her garden as a child. After my parents divorced, Mom bought a white cottage with stained-glass windows and an ancient golden elm tree in the garden. Sprinkled with crystal geodes, zen statues, birdbaths, and musical wind chimes, I'd never seen Mom happier than when she left Dad and followed her calling to guide lost souls by reading tarot cards and tea leaves.

My brother and I spent weekends with Mom, and Saturday afternoons were my favorite. While my brother chose to watch *Goonies* for the hundredth time, Mom and I would sit in the wisteria-shrouded gazebo, drinking tea and eating dainty sandwiches and jam scones while she read *Alice In Wonderland* to me. My brother called Alice 'a girl's story', but it fed my hungry imagination and laid the groundwork for what would later become my ideal, but impossible, woman. I still remember the sound of that wonky teapot lid clinking as she poured the English Breakfast tea.

I took my last drag, stubbed the cigarette, and pulled my cell from my back pocket to open my notes app. I was thirty thousand words into my third book in a paranormal series, and inspiration would descend at the most inconvenient times. I typed madly, trying not to lose a single thought as each one rushed into my head like a flash storm. My wheelhouse was paranormal, and I frequently toured haunted houses in and around Andover and Salem. I wrote and published the first book in my paranormal series the year Addy was born, through Createspace—Amazon's independent publishing arm. With miniscule control over my mar-

riage and life, the notion of submitting to be rejected ninety percent of the time did not appeal. The desire to own my writing far outweighed my fear of being a commercial failure in the traditional sense. My Twitter account provided solace in that sense, with many poets and writers in the same boat and sharing a similar philosophy.

Tina knew nothing about my writing, and I wanted to keep my secret for as long as humanly possible. Which is to say that Tina would eventually find out, because she was like a ferret, or Sherlock Holmes—perpetually in someone else’s business, prone to sniff for clues.

I put my cellphone in my back pocket, picked up Mom’s gift, and summoned all of my energy. I would need every last drop to deflect Mom’s ideas about what I should and shouldn’t be doing with my life, and avoid Tina’s moaning about my mother. As I rounded the corner, I glanced over at the barbecue. The dads had finished cooking the sausages and the kids were squirting ketchup into bread rolls. Tina had her back turned toward me while she gossiped with her group of likeminded friends— Kelsey, Tiffany, Britney, and Madison. I headed for my basement, thinking I’d bought myself a few minutes when I found Mom sitting at my desk with one of my books in her hand.

She pointed to the gift in my hand. “You still haven’t opened your gift.”

“I told you, I was having a smoke.”

She waved the book. “Does Tina know about these yet?”

I shook my head. “No, and I’d like to keep it that way,

thanks.”

“Why would you want to keep this from your wife?”

“Can we not do this now, Mom?”

“You’re right, Luther. Let’s do the gift opening instead.”

Thinking I’d avoided the conversation about my marriage to Tina, I sat on the old brown Chesterfield sofa, that the previous owners had left behind, and tore a corner of the pink and silver gift paper. Mom put my book down and joined me on the sofa.

“This again?” I said, ripping the paper to reveal Mom’s original copy of *Alice in Wonderland*.

“What do you mean, this again? I thought Alice was your favorite?”

“She was my favorite when I was a kid, Mom. But it’s a little late for fantasies and fairytales, don’t you think?”

“People who say it’s too late are people who have given up, Luther. At a minimum, you could share some Wonderland magic with your daughter.”

“I will read the book to Addy, but I don’t see what relevance *Alice in Wonderland* has in my life.”

“Hand on your heart, Luther. Do you honestly believe Tina is the one?”

“Please tell me you’re joking, Mother. My wife is throwing a birthday bash for our daughter, your grandchild, and you’re asking me if Tina is the one. What the actual fuck?”

“There’s no need to curse, Luther. The question is simple enough. Do you love Tina or have you settled for Tina the

way you settled for May?"

I twisted in my seat to face her. "That's a low blow, considering how my marriage to May ended. Why can't you be happy for me?"

"That is precisely why I'm pushing this, Luther. It's not my job to be happy for you. It's my job to ensure that you are truly happy. There's a difference, you know?"

"This is why I hardly visit you anymore, Mom."

She raised her right eyebrow and smiled a knowing smile, which usually meant she had anticipated my response. "Your father has conditioned you into playing it safe your whole life, Luther. Do you want your daughter to inherit your philosophy?"

"I'd rather play it safe at this stage than subject Addy to the childhood I endured."

"I'm sorry you still see my divorce from your father as a negative in your life, Luther. Don't you see it would have been worse if we'd stayed together?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't see that."

She reached for my hand. "Your father and I are like magic and science—each tries to cancel the other out. Living with both of us under the same roof would have been a constant tug of war. Your stepmother is a far better match for him than I was."

I stared at her while she patted my hand. Mom had a way of removing the scales from my eyes, but I rarely admitted she was right. "I haven't eaten all day."

She stood and clapped her hands together, pleased to have

a mission. “Tell me what you want.”

“I trust your judgment,” I said, “as long as you don’t bring me a salad.”

I watched her ascend the stairs like a candy floss cloud, and only when I heard her shoes squeak on the top step did I turn my attention to the book. I smiled at the memory of *Alice in Wonderland*, and the old childhood excitement filled my belly and ignited my imagination like a match to drought-stricken kindling. Mom wasn’t completely wrong. I had settled. And not just in my marriage to Tina; I had been settling my whole life.

Love at first sight.

Soul mate.

Pfft.

By the time I had reached adulthood, that’s what Dad had taught me and that’s what I believed. I was a Capricorn through and through—a rational thinker who rarely let emotion creep into my decisions. I learned early on, growing up poor in Boston, that life and love had the hallmarks of a series of boxing matches that were fixed in my disfavor. It was with this deeply entrenched philosophy that I followed the path of least resistance in my professional and personal life, transitioning comfortably from high school into marriage with my high school sweetheart, May, and into the mailroom of a Consultancy Firm that offered tender and proposal writing services for the plethora of firms who bid on Boston City Projects. Much like my progression in the workplace, where I slowly moved through the ranks from the mailroom to assis-

tant to Tender Writer and eventually Department Manager, my marriage to May was more of a logical conclusion than an act of true love. Was I happy with May? I guess. I mean, what is happiness? Two people, who share a history and still like each other in the present? If that's what happiness is, then yeah, I was happy with May. But happiness ended abruptly the year we lost our first child—Lily-Rose—to SIDS.

May and I never recovered. She thought I blamed her, and though I tried to tell her otherwise, there were days when I couldn't stand to look at her because there was a small part of me that did blame her. After living in a state of estrangement for a year, May moved out, and we divorced soon after. I can't say Mom didn't warn me, but I can say I ignored her advice.

I met my second wife, Tina, at a work function. Tina was a boss woman right from the start; she knew what she wanted, and she took charge of everything. After my relationship with May, Tina was a breath of fresh air. And, while I wasn't head over heels in love with Tina, I did take Dad's rational-over-romance philosophy to heart when Tina proposed that I propose. What felt like a carousel ride from the moment I asked her father's permission—interviewing wedding planners, organizing guest lists, poring over seating plans, suit fittings, picking a best man, tasting every wedding cake from chocolate to vanilla to lemon to lavender—strongly suggested that I married Tina in the hopes that we would make a good partnership. I also figured Tina's extrovert would complement my introvert. But the honeymoon wore off faster than an eraser on pencil scratchings. I quickly learned that Tina's extroversion was materialism in disguise. Her propensity for dinners, parties and barbecues stemmed from her need to ex-

hibit her material status—the size of our house, the cars we drove, the number of times she won *Salesperson of the Month* at Falconer Realty. Again, I can't say Mom didn't warn me. But of course, I knew better.

CHAPTER 4

Aden

September

I drove like a hoon to my father's cottage. All the while, the debt parcel swallowed my mind like the cumulonimbus cloud was swallowing the sun. I couldn't lose Ghost Gum. The winery was more than my dream; it was my entire world. I opened Dad's front door with the newly cut spare on my keyring. Inside, I ran cold water over my bloody knuckles and pulled out bits of glass that were embedded into my skin before wrapping my hand with a gauze bandage I found in the first aid kit Dad kept under the sink. I started my search in the kitchen, opening drawers and cupboards, before moving to the linen cupboard and ending with a single box under Dad's bed. Dad wasn't a hoarder—after Mum died, he was keen to sell the farm and move forward. He gave Mum's clothes and belongings to the Salvos and only kept a handful of photo albums. Needless to say, my search yielded nothing. Feeling desperate, I sat on the edge of Dad's king single bed and spoke. "Dad, if you're listening, give me a sign, please. We're about to lose everything we worked for."

Just then I heard tyres on the gravel outside. I moved the curtain aside with my finger and saw Fred. Bronte must have sent him. For the first time since my outburst in the study, I thought about Bronte. I had hit her in the eye with my elbow and she'd fallen on broken glass. And what had I done? I had stepped over her and left her to deal with a house full of people. *What an asshole.*

“Aden?”

Fred was knocking on the door.

“Fred,” I said, opening the door and stepping aside for him to enter.

“Everything okay, mate?”

I shook my head and ushered him to the small round table in the kitchen diner.

“Bronte said something about losing the winery. She must have misunderstood you, right?”

I scowled and shook my head. “She didn’t misunderstand. Granite Union is merging with one of the Big 4, and apparently my father had a secret parcel of debt that has triggered a bank audit.”

“What parcel of debt? I thought your dad used proceeds from the sale of the blueberry farm?”

“That was going to be my next question. I was hoping you might know something about Dad’s affairs?”

Fred shook his head. “Sorry, mate, your dad never said a word to me.”

I pushed my chair back and slammed my fist into the table. “I don’t know what to do, Fred. I’ve never experienced this kind of rage before. I can’t get my head around losing everything we’ve worked for.”

Fred stood and put his hand on my shoulder. “Listen, mate, there must be a way around this.”

“There is a way around,” I said. “A lump sum of a hundred and fifty thousand.”

“Jesus,” muttered Fred. “Look, mate,” he said, scratching his head, “Marjorie and I could help out with fifty..”

I held up my bandaged hand. “I appreciate the offer, Fred, but I couldn’t take your money, and the bank shouldn’t be putting us in this position.”

“Are you sure there’s no other way?”

I shook my head. “Bill explained the situation clearly: pay a hundred and fifty thousand in seven days or foreclose.”

“Crikey, Aden. And he didn’t give you any warning before today?”

I sat on the edge of the sofa and put my head in my hands. “He allegedly spoke to Dad the day before he died.”

“You don’t think it had something to do with Judd’s heart attack?”

“It’s too much of a coincidence, don’t you think? But there’s nothing I can do about it now.”

Fred put his hand on my shoulder. “Listen, mate, I promised Bronte I’d call if I found you. She’s in a bit of a state. Her face is swollen and Marjorie’s picking glass out of her hands.”

“You must think I’m a dick, but I can’t face Bronte and the kids. I’ve gone from hero to fucking zero in record-breaking time.”

“The situation is shitty, I’ll give you that. But you’re not at zero yet, mate.”

I walked to the window and looked at the river. My rage was dissipating and turning into dread. “What am I gonna tell them, Fred? Where are we gonna go? We have no relatives or..”

“You have Marjorie and me, mate. We’ll help you in whatever way we can.”

Fred’s phone started ringing. He checked the screen and said, “Bronte’s calling, mate. Can I tell her I’m bringing you home?”

I sighed in despair and nodded. “I was hoping to find an answer in Dad’s belongings, but there’s nothing. So yeah, I’m going home. This is not a problem I can run away from.”

“Good man,” said Fred.

By the time I got home, Bronte’s swollen eye had turned blue and both her hands were bandaged. The twins ran out, with towels wrapped around them, the minute they heard my voice. Marjorie followed suit. “They’re all bathed, Bront. Shall I fix them some dinner before we go?”

Bronte shook her head. “Thanks, Marjorie, you’ve done more than enough. Besides, there’s plenty of leftovers from the funeral.”

“Bronte’s right,” I said. “Thanks for all your help today.”

“The twins are welcome to spend the night or day with us tomorrow while you sort things out.”

“Thanks, Marjorie, we should be fine tonight, but I’ll check in with you in the morning.”

I walked Marjorie and Fred to the front door and Bronte helped the twins get dressed.

Bronte and I did not have a chance to talk until a few hours

later—after the twins had eaten dinner and Bronte had read them a bedtime story. When my exhausted wife sank into the sofa alongside me, I should have hugged her, leaned into her, let her in. I should have apologised for her eye and hands. Instead, I picked another fight.

“Considering the conversation we’ve got brewing, was it really necessary to include a bedtime story to tonight’s agenda?”

“Considering today’s events, and knowing how kids need their routine, I did think it was necessary.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “Whatever, Bronte.”

She sat up and glared at me. “Are you going to apologise?”

“For what?”

She gestured to her black eye and bandaged hands.

“Bill has given us an ultimatum—a hundred and fifty grand in seven days or foreclosure.”

“Did you hear what I said?”

I grabbed her elbow and squeezed. “For fuck’s sake, Bronte, did you hear what I said? We’re losing the winery!”

She flinched from the pain. “I am more concerned about losing my husband right than I am about the winery.”

“Are you fucking kidding me, Bront?”

She left me on the sofa and opened the sliding door. “Come here,” she said.

“Why?”

“Just humour me, will you?”

I joined her begrudgingly.

“What do you see?” she repeated.

“I see a blanket of darkness. What’s your point?”

“My point is that although you can only see darkness right now, you’re also well aware that there are rows of vines out there, and wallabies, and the Severn river, and...”

“And, and, and...Yeah, I get it. But it doesn’t change the fact that we’re gonna lose it all when the sun fucking rises tomorrow.”

“We can’t give up, Aden. There must be a way.”

Ever the optimist, she started running through hypotheticals. I pulled my iPhone from my back pocket, dialed Bill’s number, and shoved the handset into her bandaged hand. “Here, you speak to Bill, if you think you’re so special.”

Minutes later she handed the phone back to me. “You’re right. There is no wiggle room. We have seven days to find the money or we say adios to our home and livelihood.”

I shook my head in disgust. “What are we gonna do, Bront?”

She looked me in the eye. “The odds of us drumming up a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in seven days are low to none.”

“Fred offered to loan us fifty. But I turned him down.”

“Even if we accepted fifty, we’re still a hundred thousand down, and all we’d be doing is digging ourselves a deeper debt hole.”

“What are you saying, Bront?”

“Bill says that we’ll have four weeks to vacate if we are forced to foreclose.”

I kicked the deck railing. “I just wanna break things.”

“Don’t. We need to keep our shit together for the kids.”

She went inside to retrieve her phone from the kitchen bench top and headed towards the office.

I followed her inside. “Where are you going?”

“To make some calls. While you and Judd were planting and harvesting vines, I was building relationships with visitors and clients.”

“Are you asking people for money?”

She shook her head. “We’ll likely have to move closer to Brisbane, and either one of us or both of us are gonna need a job.”

She disappeared around the corner and I slumped into the nearest armchair with my head in my hands. I had built my dream over several years, yet Bill-the-fucking-bank-manager had razed it in seconds. I didn’t want another job. I didn’t want to lose my home, my vines, my life. My rage turned to despair the second time that day and I wept, like the vines outside.

END OF SAMPLE



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