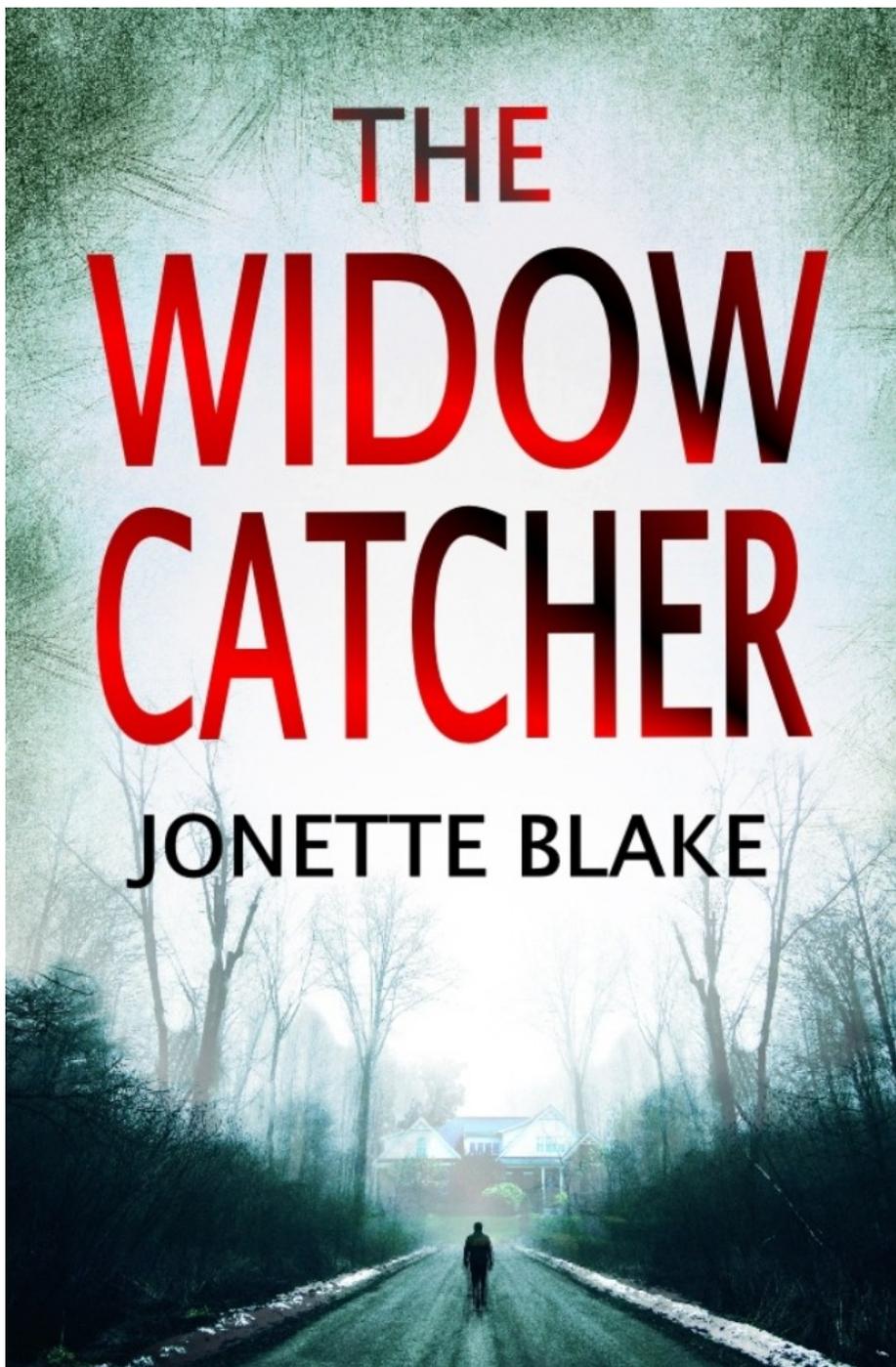


**THE  
WIDOW  
CATCHER**

**JONETTE BLAKE**



THE  
WIDOW  
CATCHER

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The Widow Catcher  
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This book is based in Australia and uses English (Australia) language.

# PART ONE

# Chapter 1

## Susan

### ONE WEEK AGO

The setting sun cast a shadow on the headstone. A cool wind blew down the mountain. Susan Johnson tugged at her long woollen coat thinking she would soon be trading this blustery weather for tropical bliss and poolside cocktails.

She placed a hand on the headstone to steady herself and leaned over to drop a bouquet of lilies on the gravesite. She regretted not being able to bend low to lovingly place the flowers in the slot provided, but if her seventy-six-year-old body tilted even a few degrees she would topple over. It was embarrassing having paramedics lift her off the floor.

“This is goodbye for now, love,” she told the ten-years-dead occupant. “Just for a little while. I won’t be visiting because I’m off on a holiday.” She smiled and nodded. “Yes, I know what you’re thinking. I never go anywhere by myself. But I’m not going alone.”

The snap of twigs pierced the frigid air. Her grip remained on the headstone for support. But she managed to twist her head to catch a glimpse of the noisemaker.

Someone was here.

“I won’t be long,” she told the man. “I was just telling Eric about

our trip.”

The man stood with his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his trouser pants. The sunlight framed his body, and she wanted to picture him as an angel, instead the image of angry plovers at the beach protecting their nests popped into mind. The sneaky way they flew towards you with the rising sun blinding you to their attack meant you heard the *click* of their beaks too late.

She pushed off this sense of trepidation and the chill that followed. It was just nerves. This trip was something new for her; it was bound to give her goose bumps.

She returned her attention to her late husband’s grave. “We’re in for a storm. You’d better batten down the hatches.” She laughed gently, then her features grew serious. “My new friend has promised to take me to North Queensland. Well, to the airport at least. That’s a big help. Once I’m on the plane I’ll be fine. Ah, Eric, I’m finally going to a place where the nights are warm and I wish you could be coming with me. I’ll be gone a few weeks.”

“Susan,” her visitor called out. “I’m ready when you are.”

“We’re off to the airport,” she told the gravestone.

The day had finally arrived when she was going on holiday. Without her friend’s support, she’d never have found the courage to say ‘book it’. He’d helped with booking the flights, hotels, and the tourist destination. He’d even created a week-long itinerary. She fumbled in her pocket for it but couldn’t find it.

*Where have I put it?*

Never mind. Her friend would have a copy.

She was finally going to see the Great Barrier Reef. It had been a cast-aside dream until her friend had searched on the website and

found a tour operator with a glass-bottom boat who specialised in trips for people with mobility issues.

“Susan,” he called out again. “We don’t want to be late.”

“I’m almost done,” she replied, though the wind snatched away her words. Once, she’d had the strength in her lungs to be heard over an earthquake, but years of cigarette smoking had reduced her voice to an almost inaudible wheeze.

She spoke to the headstone again: “I know you think he’s only using me for my money, but he’s never asked for any. He’s not like that.” She patted the headstone. “I’ll bring you back a present.”

She hobbled over with the aid of her cane to join the man.

He lifted a bouquet of flowers from a shopping bag at his feet. “I brought something to show my respects,” he said, thrusting them at her.

Yellow roses were *her* favourite; they’d be wasted on Eric. Her late husband wouldn’t have known a rose from a weed.

The man smiled at her. “Will you place these on his grave for me?”

“I thought you said we were in a hurry.”

“I said we don’t want to be late. We have time to say our goodbyes.”

She glanced back at the gravesite. There was a lot of uneven lawn between here and there. Her cane had sunk into the dirt already and almost tripped her over a dozen times.

“You should take them yourself,” she told the man.

“Susan, I feel downright scandalous taking his wife to the airport for the first real holiday of her life. I can’t go over there and rub this in his face. Even in death, a person has dignity. My mother used to

tell me that all the time. She was a nurse at a hospital in Sydney. Saw people dying every day. A lot of elderly people, too. The stories she told me of comfort she gave them in their final years has made me the compassionate man I am today.”

Susan knew a snow job when she heard one. She was old, arthritic, deaf in one ear, probably riddled with emphysema, but she was not stupid. Still, a sense of gratitude swept over her. She would have been locked inside the aged-care facility forever if her young friend had not convinced her to do something *adventurous* with the remaining years of her life.

“All right,” she said. “And then we’re off to the airport.”

She gripped her cane in one hand and the yellow roses in the other and set off across the uneven lawn.

“Be sure to inhale the perfume before you place them on the grave,” the man called out. “I asked the florist to select the most delectable bunch.”

Susan stopped and pulled the bouquet closer to her face to take in the scent. This bunch was strong. Probably perfumed. Everything was perfumed these days: soap, washing powder, toilet paper, tissues. As if the big companies could convince the population that life *smelled* like roses, therefore it must *be* roses.

She took a deep breath. This was a strange scent. Stronger than most. Not rosy at all. More like yellow jonquils. They had a stink that could cause nostril hairs to fall out.

She coughed on the odour. Her cough turned into a fit, one that fifty years of smoking ensured would bring a crushing pain to her chest.

Then her head began to swim. Her vision blurred. Her chest should have gulped for air. Instead it felt like it was sealing itself shut,

jam-jar tight.

She twisted and tried to run toward the man who was still dappled in hues of orange and pink as the sun set behind him. She called out for help but her voice was lost. She couldn't move.

The cool wind raced along her body like a knife, except this wasn't the wind. This was an invisible chill attacking her veins.

Her limbs grew weak. She lost her grip on her cane.

*A stroke? A heart attack?* Years of being warned about the impact of smoking did not lessen the shock that it was *actually* happening.

Unable to support herself, she fell to the ground.

"Help," she called out, though her voice was barely above a whisper.

The sun was setting faster now. Her visitor was now a dark, ominous shadow.

A shadow that wasn't rushing to help her.

He should have grabbed his phone and called for medical help.

He should have raced over to her and administered first aid.

He should have done *something*.

Instead, he stood at the edge of the cemetery with his hands thrust in his pockets, rocking back and forth on his heels.

"Help," she spluttered in between chest-breaking coughs.

She couldn't get enough air into her lungs.

The man still did not make any movement to help her.

At last, he walked towards her and knelt down to stare into her face. His stare was vacant, expressionless, and when he tilted his head and frowned, she realised it wasn't a *vacant* stare, but one of *curiosity*.

As if he'd never seen someone die before.

She reached for his hand.

He reached out for her.

His hand moved to the left toward the flowers. She noticed he wore gloves.

*Had he been wearing them earlier?*

The bouquet of flowers were pushed closer to her face. The pungent stench had lessened, as if her senses had adapted to the stink. More likely they were numbed by something else. Chemicals.

Now she recognised the scent. It was...

Sharp pain shot throughout her body. Her muscles contorted. Her vision blurred.

She saw his shadow fade away.

And then everything went dark.

# Chapter 2

## MONDAY

A rusty anchor sat in the walkway outside Salty Dog's restaurant. Each summer, to a backdrop of either blue sky or storm clouds, hundreds of tourists snapped photos of themselves and the anchor. Of those hundreds, at least five offered money to dig it up and take it home. The people in Batemans Cove were as protective of the anchor as they were of its other landmarks. The hundred-year-old pepper trees on the foreshore of the river. The Anchor Inn, built in the thirties. The blue wagons with pinstriped wheels that sold ice cream and coffee in summer. At least three separate citizen-run historic societies fiercely guarded the town's heritage against commercial evolution, as if moving the anchor or cutting the trees might uproot them from the past and set their town sailing into the unknown.

A blistering wind roared down from the surrounding Clyde mountain and up the river to the front door of Salty Dog's. At least nobody would be offering money for the anchor in this weather. The town was safe for another night.

As I opened the car door, my grip on the handle was as fixed as the anchor. I couldn't explain my apprehension, but it owned me. My mother used to say that someone walked over our graves whenever we got a chill or a sense of foreboding. *Unlikely*, I would reply, *considering I'm not dead*. Teenage logic failed me now. My skin crawled with unexplainable and chilly trepidation.

“We’re late,” Richard said from the driver’s seat, snapping me out of my fugue.

“Only by fifteen minutes,” I replied.

Richard shuffled in the seat to face me. “Delia, if they wanted us here at seven fifteen, they’d have said seven fifteen.”

Never marry a know-it-all.

“Richard.” My growly tone came from years of practice, first as a wife, then as a mother, and now as an exhausted bank teller of fifty-three who’d been on her feet all day.

“You don’t have to come,” I told him. “It’s just a work dinner.”

“Your work *farewell* dinner.”

“Actually...”

A car horn tooted. Saved by the bell, or in my case the impatient driver of a silver Mercedes.

“I’ll go park round the corner,” Richard said. “Do you want me to come in or not?”

“Of course I want you to come.”

What else could I say? No, go home and make yourself something to eat, and whatever you do, don’t text me every half hour to ask when I’m coming home? Don’t call me to pick up something on the way home. Don’t leave a mess of crumbs on the kitchen bench because you ate toast for dinner.

But I never said these things. Only in a hidden chamber in my mind did I find the courage to tell people what I really thought.

I got out and stood on the sidewalk to watch Richard drive around the corner to park somewhere on the street. As the brake lights came on, it sent off the mental equivalent of a post-in on the fridge that the dent in the rear bumper still wasn’t fixed. I had better call my sister,

Madison, before Richard began the next chapter of *Delia's irresponsible sister*. Sometimes I defended her—she was forty-eight-years-old, five years younger than me, but would forever be my kid sister. But sometimes I didn't defend her because I believed him.

I stared out into the dark night sky waiting for Richard to appear, wondering what life would like if he was no longer in my life? I'd gotten a glimpse of *life without Richard* three months ago when he'd suffered a heart attack. It had plunged a knife into my heart and shattered our beautiful, safe world. Our two children—Tristan and Georgia—had been mortified to learn of their father's mortality, as if all their illusions of Santa Claus were shattered once again.

If his heart attack had shaken us, it had set Richard into a frenzy where he wanted to snatch time like it was a petal in the wind. He had insisted the kids *get out of the house and spread their wings, before it's too late*, the gut-wrenching words he'd shouted to them as the ambulance had whisked him away.

A month later, Richard had purchased each of our children an airline ticket to anywhere in the world. Georgia had chosen Finland. Tristan chose Africa. I put my hand up for Europe, but a stroke of fate chose our holiday destination for us when Richard's uncle had gifted him an early inheritance: a forty-foot motorhome. Less than twelve months old. It had a kitchen, television, bathroom, double bed, cabinets. All the conveniences of a modern home except *none* of the conveniences of a modern home.

Richard loved the gift from his uncle. It had put a smile on his face that I jealously wished to take credit for. I hadn't seen him smile for a long while. Even before the heart attack.

Of course, he wanted us to use the motorhome. Not just for

trips here and there. Not just for weekends, or to use as a spare bedroom when family visited during the holidays. He wanted us to travel around Australia for twelve months in this home that was like a home but was not.

He was happy. How could I tell him that I didn't want to go? How could I snatch away a dream that belonged to the person who had stood on the precipice of death and returned clutching a permission slip to do everything today because there might not be a tomorrow?

And so I said nothing.

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The wind whisked by, and it seemed to get a grip on my despondency and tore it away just in time for me to see Richard come around the corner. He began skipping down the path.

*Good lord, he's going to dance. And he'll probably sing.*

The singing was worse. He could do that anywhere, sitting down at the table, on the toilet, all the way around Australia for twelve months.

*Go away, sour mood.*

A glass of wine often helped.

*Used to.*

The chilly breeze slapped into me, forcing me to acknowledge that I was covering up the seriousness of his heart attack with my annoyance at the motorhome trip. His heart attack had terrified me in a way I'd never expected. All of my early whimsical desires to travel

Europe, and then retire to a cottage by the beach with wild birds dropping in for a feed, had been shredded into confetti. A crushing weight had settled on me.

I was terrified of dying, and just as terrified of living because Richard had pushed my babies—they were twenty-four and twenty-two but would forever be my babies—to the other side of the world. I needed to be the fixed point on a GPS so my babies could find their way home.

“Richard, behave,” I said, a smile tugging at my lips. His antics worked to pull me out of a sour mood. “You’ll slip and put your back out.”

“Too late.” He smiled and feigned an injured back which forced my heartbeat to quicken: *Not again.*

He wrapped his arms around himself, and said, “It’s breezy out here. You could have gone in. I’m not going to get into trouble between the car and the restaurant. Though I did see a sign on the art supplies store that they’re holding painting lessons. I could learn to paint.”

I could tell from his expression that I was giving him my famous Delia stare.

“I’m kidding,” Richard said. “I wouldn’t know one end of a paint brush from the other.”

“Why would I go in without you?”

Richard laughed. “To order us some drinks. I assume your work is paying for them.”

My mood dropped as fast as that anchor in the parking lot must have dropped to the bottom of the ocean. Richard was on doctor’s orders to take things easy. But nothing anyone said could convince him otherwise. To make matters worse, I was supposed to be the supportive

wife and cheer him on.

A blast of icy air hit me and I hurried into the restaurant ahead of Richard. A young woman greeted us at the front and pointed to our groups' table at the back. From the corner of my eye I saw his neck twist to get a view of the line at the bar. Free drinks and a husband with a purpose: bad combination.

I grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the table. Metres away, I suddenly stopped and tugged at his arm, dragging him off to the side, concealed behind a potted palm.

I lowered my voice. "Richard, please don't tell *anyone* about the trip."

He matched my conspiratorial tone. "Why not?"

"I haven't told them."

His brow furrowed. "Haven't told them about the trip, or you haven't told them that you're quitting?"

"Both."

Richard raised his eyebrows, giving me a look of disapproval. "Delia, we're leaving as soon as the motorhome is packed. We've planned this trip for months. I thought this *is* your farewell dinner."

I nibbled at my lower lip. "Actually..."

"What? This *isn't* your farewell dinner?"

"With the holidays and everyone being on leave, it got so busy at the bank that I haven't had the chance to break the news. Pritpal has been on leave and only got back this week. She's been in her office all day on the phone. To be honest, I think there's a rumour circulating that we're closing. And if we're closing, then I'll be made redundant. That's better than quitting."

I could see his mind ticking over. With the rent from our home

and a redundancy payout, we could possibly live stress free for six months. How he planned to live stress free for the *other* six months was the reason I woke up in the middle of the night, plagued with images of us picking berries in the hinterlands or farming crocodiles in the far north.

Richard glanced over at the table. “If this isn’t your farewell dinner, then why are we here?”

Relief coursed through me, as if I’d dodged a bullet. I shrugged. “I honestly have no idea.”

Prism Bank wasn’t renowned for splurging free dinners on their staff. At best, we got to take home the stationary.

Richard frowned as if he too knew this. “Okay, so we don’t say anything yet until we know more. But the minute we find out this meal is their way of avoiding paying wage increases, then we tell them.”

I gripped his arm. “If I tell them about this trip, they might fire me now.”

“So we’ll start our trip earlier.”

“We can’t afford to leave any earlier.”

“Sure we can. I’m already knocking back renters for our house.”

*I don’t want to rent out the house. I don’t want to go on this trip. I want my life exactly the way it was before this heart attack. I want my children at home.*

I wanted to say all this, but Delia Frost never made a fuss. It said so on my employment records. It made me a model employee at the bank. I could calm any situation by biting down on anything that worried me. Other people had their super powers, and I had mine: denial.

“Richard, please don’t breathe a word about the motorhome or

our trip or that you want me to quit. I know you're an impatient person, but the timing is not ideal right now."

"Impatient? We've waited three months for this. You sound like you don't want to go."

"It's not that, it's just that none of them are the motorhome type. They'll be bored."

His demeanour slumped. "Great. What am I supposed to talk to them about? There goes my entire repertoire."

I laughed at his pouting face in spite of my frustration.

I felt someone's gaze on us, and I turned to find Andrew Nelson, the insurance manager, and his wife Poppy, had stepped up to the foyer. Andrew was the silver Mercedes driver. I recalled when he had bought the car to work to show it off to us. He'd won it in a lottery. He was the luckiest person I knew: This car wasn't the only luxury item he'd won in a lottery.

Andrew followed behind his wife, who wore her disapproval of life in general like a badge of honour. I had no idea how he had ended up with her. Andrew was kind, sweet, charming, the kind of man who the old ladies in town adored. He was an extremely attractive young man, in his mid thirties, and when he winked at me as he trailed behind his wife, my insides warmed.

Okay, so it wasn't *only* little old ladies who were charmed by our insurance salesperson.

We headed toward the table. From the worried look on everyone's faces, I could tell they were equally confused about our presence here.

Andrew and Poppy positioned themselves near Pritpal Patel, the bank manager, and her husband. In the middle of the table was the

manager from a neighbouring branch who covered Pritpal when she went on leave. He was with a woman I assumed was his wife. Seated beside them was a casual employee who floated between bank branches up and down the coast.

I nodded at each of them. They nodded back. If our faces were computers, they were currently in 'sleep' mode while our cheeks and jaws took a break from smiling: *Yes, it is a beautiful day. Can I help you? The grandkids are coming down for the weekend, how lovely. Who's next? Is that a new haircut? Good morning. Yes, it is a beautiful day. Oh, the grandkids are coming down for the weekend...*

There were two empty seats at the far end next to the youngest members of our branch, Jason Franks and Sandra Hill. Neither had brought a partner with them. As far as I knew, they were both single at the moment.

Richard and I took the empty seats: it didn't skip my tired mind that Richard chose the empty seat next to Sandra. She was twenty-two, had long dark hair, wide blue eyes, and wore too much lipstick. She did her job. Period. Her job. If it wasn't on the job description, she skirted the task. And yet she had dreams of becoming a bank manager.

I sat next to Jason. Also twenty-two, Jason had lived his whole life in Batemans Cove, and unlike many other young people in the region, he had no desire to leave. Most of our elderly customers had personally known Jason's parents—now both deceased due to a tragic car accident—and he was their somewhat adopted grandchild.

These two were real sweeties who reminded me of my children. Or perhaps it was the other way round. Perhaps they reminded me of my children so I had projected the image of sweet kids onto them.

Sandra leaned in close and whispered to me. "Hey, Delia, did

you hear about Susan Johnson's funeral? It's this week."

"I didn't know she was dead."

Sandra nodded. "Newspaper said she died a week ago. She was found dead at the gravesite of her husband. Died of a heart attack. Guess the cigarettes finally killed her."

"Dead? That's awful. She was a nice lady."

Sandra shrugged. "Not to me, she wasn't. But she was your customer, I thought you should know."

"Thanks. I wonder why it took the paper a week to report it. They're usually quick to write up the obituaries."

"Dunno. Maybe she didn't have anyone to write one."

# Chapter 3

Everything in the restaurant had a nautical theme, right down to the cutlery. Engravings of fish and ships decorated the knives and forks. I was fixated on the mermaid on a spoon handle when the main course arrived. Snapper pie. My favourite, though news of Susan Johnson's death had deflated my appetite. She was a sweet old lady who came to the bank every Thursday regardless of whether she needed cash or not.

"How's the snapper pie, Delia?" Pritpal asked. She was in her mid-thirties, of Indian descent yet without a hint of an accent, having grown up in Sydney and moved to Batemans Cove a few months ago. *To explore more of this great country*, was how she put it. The truth was that the city branches had more managers than they could allocate to positions. If she wanted the job, she had to move. With only a few months experience in our branch, we were at the 'getting to know one another' phase.

"Delicious," I told her.

"Nothing but the best for Prism."

So far, she was a good manager, although a bit too much of a stickler for the rules. Our customers didn't care for 'the book' that she claimed we had to abide by. None of us broke any laws. But our customers weren't numbers.

Pritpal stood up, then she moved her finger like she was stirring the air. Her husband, seated beside her, took this cue and began pouring champagne into her glass and into the glass of those seated close by. Then he passed the bottle down the line until one by one, all our glasses were half-full with champagne.

A hush fell over the table.

“I have an announcement,” Pritpal said.

There was an inaudible *snap* of everyone’s necks as their gaze went directly to Pritpal’s stomach. I glowered at everyone around the table. Couldn’t a woman in her thirties have an announcement that *wasn’t* a pregnancy?

“I’m not pregnant,” Pritpal said with a roll of her eyes. She gave a fake laugh. “If I was I wouldn’t be drinking this.” She swung the glass through the air. “But I do have exciting news. Our little branch has caught the attention of head office.”

Silence invaded the table. Everyone seemed frozen to the spot. I had no idea what capturing Head Office’s attention entailed, but it couldn’t be good.

Pritpal’s smile turned to a frown, then finally to a smile again. “It’s not what you’re thinking,” she said. “We’re getting a star rating.”

The collective sigh of relief that swept over the group could have blown out the candles. A star rating in the banking industry was a sign of good business and great staff. We could take this as a personal achievement, but what strings did this star rating come with?

Once more, my gaze travelled around the room. It wasn’t clear if the staff thought this was a good or bad thing. Their partners were clearly impressed. The staff seemed to be waiting to see the fox at the end of this carrot stick.

“All thanks to you,” I said, raising my glass at Pritpal. I put the emphasis on ‘you’ as if to send a silent message that any extra work from this *attention* was her fault.

I saw a few nods of approval from the other employees. They joined in and raised their glasses and cheered Pritpal.

She blushed. “You’re an amazing team and these past few months have been better than I expected. My husband and I relocated to the south coast to explore more of this great country. It’s clearly been the right decision for my career, because Head Office has decided to expand our business model. No, they’re not just heaping more work on us. They’re going to open up a business division to solely look after corporations and they’re going to hire a manager from within. A Business Manager. Just think of it. One of you could be heading up a new team. Of course, I will provide full support to anyone who’s interested.”

“They should just give the promotion to Delia,” Andrew said. I didn’t detect any resentment in his tone, until he added, “She has seniority.”

“You mean I’m old,” I replied blasting him with an icy stare.

He laughed. “Age is just a number.”

“I feel a hundred.” I slugged back on my wine, hoping it could numb the ache in my feet and neck.

Sandra huffed. “Seniority. Fresh is best. At least I’ve got qualifications from this side of the Depression.”

“Hey—”

Sandra was smiling at me. “Go on. Tell me to be nice to my elders.”

I poked my tongue out at her, making her laugh. Since Georgia had left, I had transferred my mothering traits onto Sandra. She seemed to be enjoying them—taking advantage of them if I was being honest—yet her gentle cracks about my age reminded me of Georgia and how much I missed having my daughter in the house. My son too. I missed them both.

“Delia can’t leave the teller section,” Jason said, his face turning pale. “Everyone loves her. They line up to be served by her.”

What Jason meant was that I couldn’t leave the teller section because who else would cover for him. He was a sweet kid, but sometimes, after a big weekend with his friends, he forgot how to log onto the computer.

While everyone around the table bickered, my anxiety levels rose. It seemed as if everyone was fighting over a job I had no intention of applying for.

I turned and saw Richard frowning at me. In the other direction, Pritpal was beaming a smile.

“The position will be won on merit,” Pritpal said. “And I recommend that each and every one of you apply for the position, even if you don’t want it, just so you can ‘stretch’ yourselves.”

Half the table’s faces sagged with the implication that a promotion created more work. Half of them moved an inch to the left or right as it dawned on them that anyone who wanted the job would be in competition with the person seated next to them. Pritpal didn’t seem to have noticed any of our distress. I’m sure she was busy thinking how this would look good on her reviews to head office. I realised then she’d probably only last another few months, after she’d proven something to herself. Then we’d be breaking in another new manager. And what sort of mess might Pritpal have created before she took off back to the city?

I sensed Richard’s gaze on me. Maybe he was right. Maybe it was time for me to move on.

I excused myself and got up to go to the bathroom. I felt someone following me and turned to see Richard close on my heels. He

waved me over to the bar.

“You’re not thinking of applying for this job, are you?” he asked.

“Of course not.” And that was the truth. I had avoided promotions at work for the past five years, and I wasn’t interested in a promotion now, even if it was a damned good way of getting out of this road trip.

I glanced around to make sure nobody could hear. “Maybe instead of resigning I could ask for twelve months of unpaid leave. I won’t be able to get my old job back at this rate.”

Richard’s features softened and he took my hands in his. “I’ll admit, I was worried when I quit work after the heart attack, but it was the best thing I ever did. My recovery will be quick and *I’ll* get a job when we return. I’ll take care of you, the way you’ve taken care of me over these past few months. Wouldn’t you enjoy planting in the garden and doing crosswords all day?”

“Good lord, Richard. I’m not seventy. And I’m not your mother.”

He rubbed his thumbs against the back of my hands and my heart started to melt. It felt good to be the object of his attention once again.

And then his face twisted. He was looking at me like I was about to die, like the whole world was about to die, any minute any of us could drop dead, so I slipped out of his hold and continued onto the bathroom. Afterward, not being able to stand the thought of going back to the table, I went outside for some fresh air. The wind was as blustery as earlier. Maybe it might pick me up and sweep me away.

A figure stepped out of the shadows, startling me. It was Andrew. He held a cigarette in his hand. He cast a furtive glance back

inside the restaurant.

“I thought you quit smoking,” I said.

He nodded. “I shouldn’t smoke these things. Bad for the lungs. Listen, don’t mind Sandra’s digs about your age or qualifications. You really ought to apply for that job. You deserve it.”

“I can’t apply.”

“Why not?”

Andrew blew out a plume of smoke and coughed. I waved my hand and crinkled my nose. His coughing fit stopped and he crunched the cigarette under the heel of his shoe, then he slipped it into his pocket. At least he was taking his rubbish home with him instead of tossing it in the garden.

“Sorry.” He pointed at the sign indicating no smoking within ten metres of the building. “Two reasons to give it up. Not good for me. Not allowed. Well, three reasons, not good for other people either. Just so long as they don’t give it to either of those two. Jason is learning insurance and he’s useless. Sandra isn’t any good either, though she does bring in the younger crowd.”

“As long as this change doesn’t affect my job,” I said, “I don’t care who gets it. What about you? Are you applying for the position? You should. You’ve been looking for a change.”

“Have I?”

“Sorry. It’s just the impression you give is that you’d rather be anywhere else than here.”

He sighed. “Guess my mind has been elsewhere lately. Poppy certainly wants me to apply. I saw the flash of dollar bills in her eyes as soon as the words left Pritpal’s mouth.”

I wasn’t the type to pry, so I said nothing.

“Maybe Pritpal has a point that we should all apply,” he said at last. “At the very least its fair.”

I shrugged. “They’ve probably already got someone appointed and this is how they make it *look* fair.”

Andrew nodded. “Could be.” His eyes suddenly widened. “Damn. Poppy has spotted me. I’m getting *the look*.”

A glint of *something* entered his eyes. I couldn’t put my finger on the expression—regret, anger, self-pity—but it was dark. Then he turned and headed for the restaurant. He stopped with his hand on the door. I thought he might say something, but he just shrugged and continued inside.

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By the time I returned from outside, dessert had been placed on the tables. Chocolate flakes sat atop a thick slice of cheesecake. I’ve never met a dessert I didn’t love, so I took to this cheesecake with gusto and let everyone chat amongst themselves.

It was on my last mouthful when I noticed that Richard and Jason were talking, their heads locked together like they were shaking secrets.

Snippets of the conversation floated to me:

“Twelve months,” Richard said.

“Sell up or rent out the place?” Jason asked.

“Rent it out.”

“Need special insurance for that. And for the motorhome.”

I kicked Richard under the table.

His head snapped around. At least he had the decency to look as

if he'd been caught saying something he shouldn't.

"I was telling Jason about the motorhome my uncle left me," he said. "It's worth eighty-thousand dollars."

"Why don't you sell it all? The motorhome. The car. The house." Jason asked. "Go on a real holiday."

Richard scowled. "Travelling around the country is a real holiday."

Jason sighed whimsically. "I'd love to go to Cancun. Or Amsterdam."

"The motorhome was a gift," Richard said, a little indignant. "I can't sell it."

"Probably wouldn't get eighty-thousand for it anyway," Jason said. "More like fifty. Paper value is different to actual value. And it won't be new anymore."

Richard's smile widened as he turned to me and said, "See. No point selling it."

"Yeah, it's worth more if it's written off, stolen, burned out," Jason said. "We had a woman come into the bank last week. She collected life insurance on her husband *and* the insurance on the car he was driving at the time."

"The poor woman," I said: it was literally an automatic response to *any* bad news about our customers.

"*Poor woman.*" Jason leaned in closer. "More like *rich* woman. I heard she had no kids. Think of all that money. Who's she gonna leave it to when she dies? I wonder if I should invite her to trivia at the pub."

# Chapter 4

## TUESDAY

The sun at six o'clock in the morning was like a cat's paw under a closed door searching for a way in. The alarm went off and I pulled the covers tightly over my head. I could hear the sun scratching, scratching, scratching at the window as this invisible hand tried to shake me awake. I hadn't slept well; Richard had snored and our pet bird, an African grey parrot named Monty, had decided to practice mimicking snoring so that I'd listened all night to it in surround sound.

As I wrapped my dressing gown around me, the sun reflected off the windshield of the motorhome parked in our front yard. Even in the morning light, I still couldn't see a way out of this year-long road trip, unless I took this promotion or convinced Richard to return to work. But that wasn't possible. His last employer had pushed him to work long days and long hours, and that lifestyle had damaged his health. If he could return to a lesser role, it might help, but Richard wasn't the type to sit idly by. Within a week he'd be back to his old habits. Twelve months off was exactly what the doctor had ordered him to do. We'd already wasted six months. Richard's plan to rent out our house to pay for their trip would cover his absence. With no mortgage and the motorhome paid for, the rent our house received would more than cover our trip. Richard had promised to only rent out the house to trustworthy renters. He'd do the background checks himself, though how he planned to do this I had no idea. Neither of us knew anyone in law enforcement.

There was a third option. Jason had said something interesting last night. The motorhome was fully insured. I could burn it. Though I didn't know anyone in the criminal underworld either.

Thirty minutes later I parked the car in the lot behind the bank and strode along the sidewalk toward the front entrance. The main street was quiet at this time of morning: Just a few women in slacks and shirts checking the postal boxes, a few dog-walkers, men in delivery vans stopped outside businesses, a few store owners putting out their signs. By mid-morning, this street would be a hive of activity.

I headed inside and straight for the kitchen located at the far end of the bank building because my earlier two cups of coffee had hardly made an impact. Employees showed up to work at Prism Bank half an hour before the doors opened. The idea was to get the bank ready to open the doors and let the horde of customers in. An old practice left over from when the bank was first opened in 1973, and it had taken half an hour to get the ledgers out of the safe and onto the counters, cash into the drawers, pamphlets in order, and to change the day and date on the manual clock.

Everything was computerised now. Prism employees used this time to microwave ham rolls or wrestle with the coffee machine. In my case, I used this half hour to thumb through the local newspaper. Susan Johnson's death made it to page 10.

I read the notice. The reporter had mentioned that Susan was a member of the local bushwalking club, bingo club, and book club. She had a busier life than me.

Her funeral service would be on Thursday. I would volunteer to take up a collection to get flowers for the service.

I looked up to see Andrew Nelson striding towards the kitchen.

Experience told me to get the money off the staff *before* they started work.

I gave him no time to say good morning.

“Andrew, I’m taking up a collection for flowers for Mrs Johnson’s funeral.”

“Mrs Johnson is dead?”

“Yes. I heard about it last night at dinner from Sandra, but it’s written up in the newspaper, so can’t dismiss it as gossip. Will you put in a few dollars for a bunch of flowers?”

“Sure. Great idea.” He reached into his wallet and handed me a twenty dollar note.

“Wow. That’s generous.”

“It’s all I have on me,” he said. “Any chance I can get change?”

“No.”

He laughed. “Call it my good deed for the week then. How did she die?”

“It say here it was a heart attack at her husband’s gravesite.” I slipped the twenty dollar note into my purse in a separate section so I wouldn’t spend it on groceries accidentally. “I’ll buy the flowers and deliver them myself.”

“Oh, you’re going to the funeral?”

“Probably not. I’ll drop off the flowers at her home and see if her family needs a hand with anything.”

He nodded. “You’re a good woman, Delia. Richard is lucky to have you.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

He paused with his mug near his lips. “So tell me the other half.”

He'd caught me off guard. I hadn't meant to complain about Richard, but last night he'd thrown me under the bus by talking to Jason, despite me asking him not to, about our—*his*—road trip. It was only a matter of time before the whole bank knew of our plans.

"I'm surprised you don't know already," I said. "Richard told Jason and Sandra and we know how those two like to gossip."

"They haven't said a word to me."

"I asked Richard not to say anything last night, but he couldn't help himself. He did it deliberately." I felt the anger rise up inside me, but it was too early in the morning to be worked up. I still had eight hours of customer service to get through. I forced myself to calm down. "He wants us to go on a road trip in a motorhome that his uncle left him."

Andrew shuddered. "I'll never understand the appeal of living in a box on wheels."

"My point exactly. The worst part is that he wants me to quit work so we can go around the country for *twelve months*."

"Ouch."

"*And* he wants to rent out the house. To strangers. I have a sister who could mind the house for free, but Richard won't let her stay. I just don't know what to do."

"I take it you've told him all this." His eyes twinkled. A chat over coffee with Andrew was a typical way to start my working day. I considered him a friend, the type that I could safely talk to about home life because there was no chance of Andrew, Poppy, Richard, and I ever hanging out.

"You know I haven't said anything," I told Andrew. "It would crush him. After his heart attack, he became so depressed. I would have

said anything to cheer him up. This stupid trip was my idea.”

Andrew’s features shifted into a frown. “I didn’t know Richard had suffered a heart attack.”

I tried to recall who at work knew this. Then I remembered that Andrew had been on leave at the time. He’d missed the drama. And afterward, there seemed no point in telling him about it without it sounding like I was crying out for attention.

“It was three months ago,” I said.

He nodded. “While I was overseas. I’m sorry, Delia. That changes things. The dynamics are not in your favour. You can’t deny him anything from here on in or you’ll be seen as the bad guy. It’s emotional blackmail.”

I took a sip of my coffee. He’d summed it up perfectly. It was also a little harsh.

Andrew smiled a nervous smile. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything. It just reminds me of a book I’m reading for my book club. The main character has a spouse who sabotages everything just so she can get her own way and the term came up in the book. It’s nothing like your situation.”

“No, it’s not. This trip was my idea. Only now that I’ve thought it through, I’ve I’ve changed my mind. I like my job *here*. I like my life *here*. I don’t want to lift roots and float on the breeze. I’m not a dandelion.”

Andrew had the patience of a saint. He smiled and politely nodded. Then he said, “Perhaps this promotion is a good opportunity. You can get out of going on this trip.”

“I *do* have seniority. I could tell Richard that I couldn’t refuse the job.”

Andrew placed his mug on the bench. “Delia, it sounds like you need this promotion more than I do. And I don’t want to compete against you. I’ll back out of the application process. The job is yours. To be honest, I like my job, too. I’d only be applying because Poppy pressured me into it.”

While Andrew was my ‘home life’ confidante, I was his. Poppy was always pressuring him to make more money, apply for senior management jobs at other companies, gain extra qualifications, take a job in the city and travel home on the weekends. It was all about money for her.

“I was joking about the job,” I said. “I don’t want a promotion. It would be extra work and I’m getting too old for extra work. I should be transitioning into retirement.”

“*Please*. How old are you, Delia? Almost fifty?”

I gave him a gentle glare over the rim of my cup. We each had access to private employee information through the bank system: age, address, phone numbers. A rule of Prism Bank was that the employees had to have active accounts with our bank. How else could we promote our banking products to our customers if we didn’t have accounts with the bank ourselves?

Andrew *knew* I was fifty-three and I knew he was thirty-nine. But it was nice of him to knock three years off my age.

“It would be extra money,” I said, massaging the idea into something that Richard might consider. “We might be able to delay the trip while I save up more money. We haven’t travelled for years, not since the kids were little. I’ll bet everything cost twice as much as we realise.”

“More like ten times.” Andrew beamed a smile at me. “It sounds

like your mind is made up. How will you celebrate this promotion? Lunch? Wine?"

"I haven't got the job yet."

"It's a done deal."

My mood quickly deflated. "I can't celebrate. Richard would then know that I wanted this job. I promised him that I wasn't going to apply for it."

"This is the kind of conundrum the character in my book is facing." Andrew's grin turned mischievous. "Why don't you take a break from all this worry and come along to my book club group? We're having a meeting tonight. It's a place where you can talk about whatever you want, and nobody will say a word against you."

"I'm not really a book reader. I sit down to read a book and get too distracted with everything going on around me."

He shrugged. "I suppose our club isn't really about books. It's about getting away from whatever is troubling us."

"Is this where you tell me your problems?"

Andrew didn't take the bait. He said, "Come along and put aside your troubles. It might be good to feel like Delia Frost for a while, instead of feeling like someone else. It's important to take a break from being who people want us to be."

Since when had Andrew become so philosophical? I glanced up at the clock on the wall. Only a few minutes left and I hadn't heated up my oats for breakfast.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'll have to pass. I won't have read the book."

"It won't matter. We only spend ten minutes talking about books. And we review books of our choosing, based on a theme. This

month's theme is Red. Books with a red cover, or a character named Red, or the word red in the title."

"Little Red Riding Hood."

His eyes twinkled. "Good choice. You could talk about how the characters in the story are keeping secrets from one another and how that might prove eventful later on. Just come along and meet everyone, Delia. You'll have fun."

"One night of fun isn't going to change my life."

"What if I told you the book club is run by Karin van der Halt?"

My flesh tingled. I knew that name. *Everyone* knew that name. She was our most famous resident, having purchased a coastal property while she was a massive movie star and then retiring down here ten years ago. She occasionally appeared in the local paper if there was a writer's festival or the opening of a play at the local theatre.

The bell sounded, cutting off our conversation and signalling that the employees had one minute to get to their stations for the bank to open.

"Just let me know by the end of the day," Andrew said.

# Chapter 5

In between customers, I checked my personal emails. One from Tristan, my son travelling in Africa. He wished his father a happy ‘future’ birthday and a promise he would try to make it back in time for his ‘old man’s fifty-fifth’. I smiled at that. Richard hated being referred to as ‘the old man’.

At a quarter to ten, I was called into Pritpal’s office.

“Delia, come in. I’m following up on the applications for the Business Manager,” she said, shuffling papers on her desk as if to show that she was busy. “I have it on good authority that you’re applying for the position.”

I froze. Not the way a rabbit freezes when it sees a set of headlights, but more like a liar who has been caught red landed in the lie.

“Do you? Am I? I mean, of course, but I’m still working on it.”

“Good. Good.” More shuffling of papers. “Because I really want someone promoted from within. It will look good for the branch if it’s someone *from within*.”

Meaning that someone *from without* was already earmarked for the role.

Pritpal didn’t seem happy about this. Probably the Regional Manager had gone over her head. He had done this a few times to previous managers, hiring someone who was relocating from the city to the coast over a born-and-bred local. Not that I could complain, because that was how I’d gotten my job.

And it was how Pritpal had gotten her job. But this branch was

her baby, her opportunity to shine the light on her skills as a manager, and the reason she was pushing each of us to apply. I could see her striving to stay atop the waves and not be pushed under by the Regional Manager in the way she shuffled her papers around her desk.

She gave me a conspiratorial smile. *Solidarity, sister*. But this was her obstacle to conquer; I had my own.

Pritpal leaned back in her chair. “I think it would be good for you to go through the interview process. It’ll be a boost to your confidence.”

I sat up straight. “What’s wrong with my confidence?”

“Nothing. It’s just... I’ve noticed you’ve become withdrawn lately. Ever since Richard’s heart attack. I can tell his health is weighing heavily on your mind. Can I confide in you? My mother stayed at home to look after my father and she grew to resent him. It was as if she’d joined a club of women who were waiting for their spouse to die. I admire my mother greatly. But she is not a happy woman. Not anymore. I can’t interfere with your decision, and family is important, of course, but so is independence.”

*Solidarity, sister*. I could have hugged her. I could also have pierced the top of her yogurts so they went bad before she had a chance to eat them. My solidarity sister had no right to meddle in my personal affairs.

But it was obviously meddle in people’s personal affairs day. Andrew had accused me of losing my identity, and now Pritpal was cautioning me about losing my independence.

I stood up and gave her my winning customer smile. It was true: I’d won an award for having the brightest smile during a mystery shopper visit.

“Thank you,” I said. “I will keep working on my application.”

She reached across the table. “Delia. I didn’t mean to overstep a boundary. You’re the most efficient employee I have. I don’t want to lose you. Literally or figuratively. Look, I know I’m only new here and things sometimes go off course, but I mean to stay and I mean to make this a *profitable* bank.”

She’d said the word I dreaded most. *Profit*. A majority of our customers were elderly people, a handful were wealthy, but most were scraping by on the pension. Who did she imagine she was getting these *profits* from?

My father’s parenting doctrine guided me into the kitchen: sugar fixes everything. I found Jason snapping the lid on the now-empty biscuit jar. The rule was that whoever ate the last biscuit had to go to the supermarket to buy more.

Jason let out a heavy sigh. He’d been caught red-handed. “I’ll go in my lunch break.”

Pritpal had rattled my nerves. Since I could no longer relieve my frustration with sugar, I had to offload it somewhere.

“We’re buying flowers for Mrs Johnson,” I snapped at him. “I’m not gonna be the only one who chips in.”

He gave me a sheepish smile. “I don’t have any cash on me. Can I owe you?”

“You already owe me for the last collection.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet to show me that it was empty. “Why do all our customers die on us anyway?”

“They’re old. This is a retirement community. People from the cities flock to us for a slower pace. They look to *us* to make sure we have their best interests at heart, not to treat them like numbers or a

means of making *profit*.”

“O-kay.” He was looking at me wide-eyed. I could tell that he was regretting eating all the biscuits. I rarely lashed out at anyone. He knew it. I knew it. But for once I wasn’t rushing to apologise.

“Put me down for ten dollars,” he said. “I promise I’ll give you what I owe you next pay.”

I glared at him until his wide-eyed innocent look turned to one of terror.

*Good lord, what was I doing taking my frustration out on Jason?*

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“What sort of flowers are you gonna buy?” he asked, taking a side-step toward the doorway. “She liked roses.”

“Roses? How do you know that?”

That terrified look again. I don’t think Jason had ever seen me this cranky.

I should point out that there are a few things that rile me up instantly. Talking about my finances and my family. Andrew had made me feel poor for bringing to my attention that Richard and I did not have enough money in the bank to cover a twelve month road trip. And Pritpal had made me feel like the world’s worst woman for taking care of my husband.

“It’s her password on her account,” Jason said, still edging close to the door. “She kept forgetting the PIN so I told her to change it to something she’d remember. She chose her favourite flower. Roses. I told her not to tell me, but she whispered it to me anyway.”

Many of our elderly customers often wrote down their PINs on slips of paper, and quite often they told us these numbers or gave us

the slip of paper so that we could help them at the ATM. It was something we simply couldn't avoid doing. It was either have them lose their card in the machine or go to another bank that provided a service to meet their needs.

“All right,” I told Jason. “I’ll put you down for ten dollars.”

He nodded and rushed out of the kitchen.

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For the rest of the day I thought of kittens. Rainbows. Unicorns. Cheese platters. Sunsets. Walks on the beach. Wisteria in bloom. To picture these was to invite a smile, and I was thus able to smile at customers all day long. Yet, as the clock drew closer to five the images changed. No longer sweet kittens but vicious, feral cats. Storm clouds. Dishes piled in the sink.

My good mood was waning more frequently and I suspected why. I used to look forward to going home, despite the mess the kids would have left for me to clean up. It wasn't that this mess made me feel useful, on the contrary. It meant I could feign annoyance with the kids and they'd hide in their rooms while I had the house to myself for an hour before Richard came home. I would catch up on reading or watching TV. Now when I arrived home, Richard was *there*. Waiting to show me his latest purchase for the motorhome. Waiting to know I'd planned for dinner. Waiting for me to pour a wine and chat.

I wanted to do none of those things.

Andrew returned from a business meeting and headed to his

office. I locked my cash drawer and told Jason I'd be back in a minute.

"That book club meeting," I said. "Is it in town?"

I was surprised this book club meeting had been on my mind. It was better than going home. Besides, a woman like Karin van der halt was bound to serve finger food and drinks.

Andrew nodded. He picked up a pen and wrote down an address. "It starts at five thirty."

I looked at the clock then at the address. Ten minutes to finish work. Ten minutes to drive home and change, then another twenty minutes to make it across town.

Andrew must have read my mind. "I go straight from work. Karin won't mind if we get there early. She might even give you the grand tour of her place. It has a fantastic view of the ocean."

I clutched the slip of paper like it was a million dollar note. Then I froze. What excuse could I give Richard to explain my sudden disappearance?

Andrew gave me a conspiratorial look. Then he winked at me. "Is Richard expecting you home? Does he even allow you out of the house? I can't blame him. If you were my wife I wouldn't let you in sight of another man. But this group is mostly women. *Old* women, so he needn't worry."

"I'll be there," I told Andrew, then I phoned Richard to tell him I was working late.

I couldn't justify the lie to Richard. He wasn't the type to ridicule any hobby I undertook. But he might have toppled my courage and it was fragile. Pritpal was right. What had happened to me? I used to be a strong, independent woman.

"Working late?" Richard asked. "Why?"

“It’s a regional meeting.” Prism Bank held all-staff teleconferences once a month. The employees shared a roster as to which of us would stay behind and take notes for the others. “It’s my turn.”

“It was your turn last month.”

“Only because I’d swapped with Sandra a few months ago.”

“Oh, okay. What time will you be home?”

“These things only run an hour, two at the most.”

I’d already decided I would spend an hour or two at Karin’s book club. I had too much to do when I got home to have the whole evening off. There was ironing, dishes, lunch preparations. Then the glass of wine I’d been holding out for all day followed by a long, hot shower.

“I’ll get dinner for myself then,” Richard said, with the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old faced with a plate of carrots.

After I hung up, a knot took up residence in my stomach. I’d never lied to Richard before. Well, apart from the lies I’d already told: that I hadn’t quit; that I wanted to go on this trip; and now that I was working late.

# Chapter 6

Ten minutes later, excitement coursing through me at meeting a celebrity, I followed Andrew's silver Mercedes across town. He drove to a part of town that I knew only by name. It was a suburb that went nowhere, there was no thoroughfare, no commercial businesses, no reason for me to go there except to visit someone. And I knew no-one who lived here.

The sun was setting, but there was enough light to admire the newly built homes with eucalyptus trees in the backyards and native plants in the front.

Andrew pulled over out front of a house with cars already piled in the driveway. It was nothing like I expected. I had expected an imposing fortress. Karin's home was a single-storey modern design, a rendered brick construction, painted greys and blues with a painted concrete driveway that led to a double garage with two massive blue doors. A picket fence out front with a flower bed planted right up to the street.

I got out of the car and stood on the street to peer into her yard. Andrew had mentioned a view to the ocean. Tall gum trees blocked it from the street.

"Come on, I'll introduce you," Andrew said.

He strode up the path that ran alongside the driveway. It weaved around a row of rose trees. I wanted to stop and admire them, but Andrew was already on the porch pressing the front doorbell.

I joined him just as the door was opened by a woman in a wheelchair.

I had never seen Karin van der Halt in person. Only in the local newspaper every now and then at a book festival or art event. I wasn't aware she was an invalid.

Karin gave Andrew a curt nod, then she looked me up and down as if I was here to steal her silverware.

"This is Delia Frost," Andrew said. "She works at Prism Bank with me."

Karin peered into my eyes. Then she gave me a half-smile. "Welcome to my home. Everyone is already here. Today of all days they came early. Come on inside. Andrew, will you put the kettle on please?"

"Sure."

He headed through the doorway.

Karin's smile faltered. She gripped my hand in hers. Then her tiny dark eyes drilled into mine. I immediately sensed I wasn't welcome here.

"I'm sorry," I told her, slinging my bag over my shoulder and trying to pull out of her surprisingly strong grip. "I shouldn't have accepted Andrew's invitation. He'd made it sound as if new members were welcome. I'll leave."

"It's too late. The game has already started. You must stay to the end."

She let go of my arm and then glanced up at me. "Push me inside," she said.

I grabbed onto the handles and wheeled her into the house.

Gazing around the room, I counted four other women. They were all elderly, but Andrew had already warned me of this. I had hoped there might be someone famous amongst her group. Two of the members I had seen in the bank or around town before. The other two I

had not seen before.

Karin pointed to an empty spot near a sideboard, so I pushed her over to it. It seemed that we had walked into the middle of a conversation.

“She was my neighbour,” said a lady with alabaster skin and wearing a green dress. “We grew up together. I simply cannot believe it.”

“What happened?” asked a dark-skinned lady, wearing a stylish running suit.

“Susan Johnson died at the cemetery while delivering flowers to her husband’s grave,” said the first woman.

“How dreadful,” said the second.

“That’s how I’ll go, I imagine. Dropping dead of a heart attack while dressed in my finest clothes. Someone said she had a travel itinerary in her pocket. Poor dear never went on a holiday in her life. Her scrooge of a dead husband refused to take her anywhere.”

Andrew entered the room and everyone hushed. I could sense their gazes following him from the doorway and right up until he took a seat on the sofa. I slipped away from Karin and rushed to grab the empty seat beside him. It felt safest to be with someone nearer my own age. Then I realised we were seated in front of the coffee table where it was piled high with cakes and sweets.

I leaned over to Andrew. “What am I doing here? And don’t say it’s for the food. I’m not ten years old.”

Andrew leaned in close. “You’re getting out of the house for a while. It’s either this or bingo at the club.”

“Yes, this town needs to have more on offer for people my age. It caters for people who like fishing or bingo. Nothing in between.”

“Nonsense,” said a woman to my left. She reached over to grab a lemon slice. “We have bowling, bushwalking, bird watching, bingo, meat raffles at the club.”

“But nothing for young people,” said another lady as she reached for a scone. Then she turned to me. “Hi, I’m Pepper Goldsmith.”

“Delia Frost,” I told her.

Pepper put her lemon slice on a plate then she pointed to the woman in the opposite chair. “This is Sophia.”

Sophia shovelled a spoonful of cream and jam onto her scone. Andrew handed her one. I glanced back around in time to see Pepper drop the silver teaspoon into her handbag.

“Nice to meet you, Delia,” Sophia said.

“We’d better eat something,” Andrew said, nudging me. He selected a chocolate brownie. “Otherwise Karin will throw the whole lot out. She refuses to deal with leftovers.”

“Since when is cake a leftover. It can last for days.”

Andrew lifted his chin towards Karin. “Not in this house.”

It all looked delicious, and I had a sweet tooth. But there was so much of it to choose from. In the end I selected a chocolate brownie.

To Andrew I said, “You seem to know a lot about Karin. How long have you been coming to this meeting?”

He shrugged. “A few years.”

The front doorbell rang and a fifth lady arrived. She had short cropped hair speckled with silver. She wore a calico shawl that was so large it reminded me of a tee-pee. She carried a lamp shade and placed it on a table where there was already a ceramic jar in the shape of a grizzly bear. It was then I noticed there were towels wrapped in a blue

ribbon, like a gift.

“I didn’t know we were supposed to bring something,” I whispered to Andrew.

“Karin runs a stall at the local markets. She encourages us to bake cakes or bring in old items for her to sell. Then she donates the money to charity. Now, let me tell you about the group so you’ll know what to expect. The lady in the green dress is Virginia Talbot. She’s a lesbian but don’t act as if you know. She doesn’t like that it’s the focal point of her personality, but you will soon discover that it’s all she talks about.”

As if she suspected she was being talked about, Virginia’s back straightened, lifting her body tall so her head was almost above the gathering while she surveyed the room.

“The Aboriginal lady to her left, that’s Ruth,” Andrew said. “She’s married to a trucker. Virginia thinks she and Ruth used to be soul mates in a past life.”

“A past life?”

He nodded. “Pepper Goldsmith, the lady under the tee-pee, is an avid cruiser.”

I felt my brow crease. “Cruiser?”

“She goes on cruise ships each year. She has survived two husbands. Her latest husband died three years ago and that’s when she got addicted to cruising.”

“And what about Sophia?”

“She used to be a yoga instructor. Because of a slipped disc at age thirty, she put on weight and no amount of dieting has managed to shift it. It’s a sensitive subject. Don’t mention anything about how eating that brownie will put on kilos.”

“Anything else I should know?”

“Yeah, nobody talks about book club outside of book club.”

“Got it.”

A habit of mine whenever I visited someone’s house was to check out the interiors and gardens. Since it was growing dark outside, I was left with only the interior of this room to check out. It was exactly as I expected of a retired film star.

The walls were soft-cream with black trims. A matching set of soft-cream drapes hung from the windows. The carpet was cream plush, there were black chesterfield sofas, and the room was sprinkled with cushions in checker print and animal print rugs on the floor. It was like a house from the old Hollywood movie stars.

I finished my brownie and chose a lemon slice. By the time it was devoured, Karin pushed herself forward into the centre of the room.

“Welcome, everyone,” she said. “Let’s start our meeting. Today we have a potential new member. May I introduce Delia Frost. She works in town in one of our banks—”

“You can’t start yet,” Ruth said, gazing at the front door. “We’re not all here.”

Karin scowled. “Would you rather we start late or without everyone present?”

“I don’t have to be anywhere.”

“Not hurrying home to your man?” Virginia asked with a smirk. “Trouble in paradise?”

Ruth glared at her.

Pepper lifted a hand. “We should start issuing fines for people who arrive late.”

“You don’t need to raise your hand,” Karin said. “And, seriously, Pepper, you’re often late.”

“I’d be happy paying a fine.”

“With what would you pay?” Virginia said with a sneer. “Stolen items from the charity shop?”

“That’s enough, Virginia,” Karin said. “We’re not here to cause trouble—”

“We’re here to *escape* trouble,” the women said in unison.

Andrew leaned over and whispered in my ear. “This is a typical start to the meeting. They act as if they’re divas, but it’s just a bit of fun. Hard not to put on airs around Karin van der Halt.”

“They act like they hate each other.”

“Not at all. They’ll take a few minutes to release all their frustrations and then we’ll begin. Cup of tea?”

His smile and out-of-the-blue statement disarmed me. I let the old ladies bicker while Andrew poured a cup of tea from an old-fashioned kettle. He was the coffee-machine fixer at the bank, and I’d never seen him drink tea. When in Rome.

As he poured, I tuned out the bickering so that it was background noise, like sitting on the beach or at a park.

“This is nice,” I said leaning back into the sofa. “I can see why you like coming here.”

I caught Karin’s eye and gave her a smile. Her eyes narrowed.

“Am I sitting in her spot?” I asked Andrew out of the corner of my mouth.

He didn’t look up from pouring tea. “She’s sizing you up. She does this to all new members. It’ll pass.”

At last, Karin looked away and tapped the coffee table. “Ruth is

right. It looks like we're missing two members. Has anyone heard from Peter or Clarice?"

There were slow shakes of head all around. More reaching for cakes and slices. More slurping of tea. I caught Pepper's bony hand reaching for a silver coaster, then I caught her sideways glance in Karin's direction. When Pepper's gaze landed on me, I shook my head.

Pepper put her cup on the silver coaster and gave me a glaring look.

"It's the curse," Sophia said.

"What curse?" I asked, sitting upright.

I was met with silent stares from everyone except for Sophia.

"Our group is cursed," she said. "That's the fourth death this year."

A round of groans swept over the room. A few people said, "It's not a curse." "You always say it's a curse."

"Well it's either a curse or we have a serial killer on the loose," Sophia said.

# Chapter 7

A stuffed owl studied me, and at that moment I felt every bit the mouse that it must have hunted while alive. Even though I was used to a bird staring at me—Monty—this felt different, more sinister.

Shooing the dead bird away with a flick of my wrist, I sensed someone watching me. It was Virginia, and she sat at an odd angle, her back ramrod straight but leaning over to the side. She had a fierce grimace on her face as if she was constipated, or in great pain.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

She didn’t get a chance to reply. Karin raised her voice and said, “So who would like to start?”

From out of nowhere everyone produced a book. Ruth raised hers in the air: *Roses Are Red*, an Alex Cross novel by James Patterson. I had read that book, so it would be easy for me to join in the conversation at least.

“Go ahead, Ruth,” Karin said. “We’ll go clockwise. What was your favourite part?”

“I loved the detective’s conviction,” Ruth said. “He doesn’t give up till he catches the killer. I give up too easily. Remember my knitting project?” A few heads nodded. “Gave it up already.”

“What’s your next project?” Andrew asked.

Ruth’s face crinkled into a grin. “I think I’d like to be a female detective.”

“I think they’re just called detectives,” Andrew replied.

Ruth gave him a confused look. “I mean I’ll only investigate cases where women are the victims.”

Virginia started clapping. “Brilliant idea. Men have enough support in this world.”

“It’s true. You’ll be run off your feet,” Sophia said with an incredulous look.

“Maybe you can find out why four members of our book club have died,” Pepper said. “Although if you believe Sophia’s claim, then it will make you a *paranormal* detective.”

Karin hit the wheel of her chair with her book. “That’s enough, Pepper.” She turned to Ruth. “Anything else about the book you liked?”

Ruth shrugged. “It was an easy read.”

“My turn,” Sophia said. She lifted her book in the air. It was a cookbook with red-frosted cupcakes on the cover. “Loved every single one of these recipes. Did not like having to do the dishes—”

Just then the front doorbell rang.

Everyone froze.

“Who could that be?” Karin asked. I detected genuine surprise on her face. Or fear. It was hard to tell the difference; I barely knew the woman.

Andrew stood up and put out a hand as if to stop anyone else from getting up. “It’s probably our latecomers. I’ll get it. You all stay seated.”

“I’m not able to do anything else,” Karin muttered.

As soon as Andrew vacated the seat beside me, Virginia stood up and hobbled over. “So tell us about yourself, Delia.”

I felt all their eyes on me. Luckily Andrew returned to the room just then, followed by a woman who looked as if she hadn’t slept in months.

“Clarice, is everything all right?” Karin asked.

Clarice started sobbing.

Andrew said, "Clarice came to tell us that Peter died last night."

"He was ill," Clarice said, dabbing a tissue at her eyes. "Cancer finally got him."

"Our condolences," Karin said.

Clarice handed Karin a book. "Peter was so looking forward to book club tonight. He tried to hold on as long as he could. His notes are on the inside cover."

"Keep the book, Clarice. And take as much time as you need to return. We'll be here when you need us."

Clarice removed a second book from within her handbag, shook her head, and said, "That's just it. I came to say goodbye to everyone. My kids have insisted I go and live with them."

A collective gasp erupted from each of their mouths. There were opposing comments flying around the room: "*You take care of yourself.*" "*That'll be the death of you.*" "*A babysitter is all you'll be.*" "*Nice to be with the family.*"

Clarice nodded. "I'm selling everything and putting the money into renovations, so I'll have my own section of the kid's house. I don't want to become a burden."

"You'll be a burden whether you're here or there," Virginia said. "Why not be a burden *here* where we can keep an eye on you?" Then her gaze locked onto mine. "Tell us what you think, Delia. You're young enough to have parents who are still alive. Would you want them moving in with you? You wouldn't. I say Clarice should stay here where she has friends and a supportive community."

Karin gripped her book tightly in her hands. "Clarice can do whatever she wishes."

“That’s the whole point,” Virginia said. “It’s not what she wishes. Tell us, Clarice. Tell us that you *want* to go and we’ll support you. Go on.” Virginia’s gaze swept over everyone in the room. “Her kids have been badgering her for years about moving in with them. It’s only because they want her pension money and a free babysitter.”

Clarice burst into tears.

Andrew cast a stern look around the room. “You ladies ought to be ashamed,” he said. Then he nudged Clarice out the room.

“Wait,” Karin said. “I can see my guests out. Everyone continue without me. I won’t be long.”

She disappeared with Clarice, and the conversation became subdued. It was time for me to leave, anyway, so I stood up and grabbed a slice of carrot cake.

My phone started buzzing. Perfect timing.

While I scrambled in my purse to grab it, I heard someone yell out about the ban of mobile phones while at book club.

“Sorry,” I sang out. “I won’t be long.”

I dashed out into an alcove off the living room, holding the phone against my ear. It was Richard.

“Hi,” I said, pleased to hear his voice.

“Just checking when you’re coming home,” he said. “I didn’t feel like cooking. Can you pick up something on the way home?”

“Really? You can’t get it yourself?”

“You have the car. It’s too dark to go for a walk and home delivery will cost a fortune. I can wait till you get home.”

“Yeah, I’m almost done here anyway. What do you want?”

“I don’t know. Surprise me. You know what I like. See you soon.”

I hung up the phone and returned to the living room, feeling all flushed. Karin hadn't returned and it would have been rude to run out of here without saying goodbye, so I sat down and waited for her to return.

Karin entered the room.

"You've been gone a while," Andrew said. "I was almost going to come looking for you."

"I had to check on the cat. She's been skittish ever since my accident."

I stood up. "I really should go. Thank you for this evening, and for the food." To the others I said, "It was nice to meet you."

"Next month's theme is the ocean," Karin said. "Pick whichever book you would like to read."

"Oh, I'm not sure—"

"Of course you'll return. Let me see you out." Karin lifted a hand when Andrew stood up. "Sit down, Andrew. I'm not incompetent. *I* will see my guests out of my house."

Andrew winked at me behind her back.

"Thank you again for letting me into your home," I told Karin at the door.

She reached under her shawl and pulled out a white envelope. She pressed it into my hands. Her voice was barely above a whisper as she said, "Don't open it till you get home."

"Oh, I can't accept this."

"You don't know what it is."

I felt my face grow warm. "It doesn't matter. I don't know you."

Though I doubted she was dealing drugs.

"Take this. It's important. Open it when you get home." She

raised her voice as if for the benefit of someone out of hearing range. “Safe drive home, Delia. See you next month.”

She pulled herself back into the room then closed the door on me. I sensed that someone was watching me from inside the house. I’d never been one to believe in ghosts, and I didn’t believe it was ghosts now. But a chill had settled on me that had nothing to do with the autumn wind.

By the time I arrived home, my house had been turned into a factory floor. Imagine saving all the bubble wrap and packing beans from every item you’d ever purchased and piling them into a closet. Then imagine coming home to discover someone had opened the door and let the beans invade every inch of the living room. That was how I saw it. With Richard sitting in the middle.

“Good, you’re home,” he said, smiling. “My deliveries came.”

He held four melamine mugs, one on each finger, in one hand and the instructions to a solar panel in the other.

Monty was screeching his hello.

“Hello,” I replied automatically.

Then Monty started to tell me about his day, speaking in Richard’s voice. I had to look at Richard’s lips to tell if it was him or the bird talking.

“Quiet, Monty,” Richard said. He began rummaging around through the packing beans. “There is a heated massage seat somewhere. For after a long day of driving. I considered getting two, one for each of us, but we’ll start with one and see if we like it. Mostly it’s for you. I know you hate the cold. We’ll test it and see if we like it. It’s got a thirty-day money back guarantee. See, I’m not completely irresponsible.”

“Did I say you were?”

I handed him a paper bag with a burger and fries inside. I'd decided to hell with his doctor's orders; he could eat takeaway. I was in no mood to heat anything up in the microwave, not while I still had all my normal nightly chores to complete.

I went into the bedroom to remove my coat. Karin's envelope was still in the pocket. I took it out.

I got the surprise of my life when I opened the envelope. Inside was a wad of cash. I counted out one-thousand dollars. *No way* could I accept this. I slipped it into my underwear drawer to return tomorrow.

A thousand dollars. We could use the money, *everyone* could use the money. There was evidence all over the living room floor to justify me taking this cash and putting it toward our credit card bill.

But why had she given it to me in the first place?

What a strange night this had turned out to be. And I couldn't talk to Richard about it, because I was meant to have been on a work teleconference. But I was dying to tell someone.

I sent a text to Madison, my sister, telling her I needed to talk. She didn't reply. I guessed she was out with one of her many boyfriends.

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That was the first 7 chapters of *The Widow Catcher*. I hope you enjoyed it. It's easy to purchase the complete book to find out what happens to Delia Frost. Simply visit the website <http://www.jonnetteblake.com> for

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# About the Author

Jonette Blake writes supernatural thrillers and suspense thrillers. She is the author of over ten books and dozens of short stories, writing as D L Richardson.

She was born in Ireland and grew up in Australia. She lived through the 80s and music is still a big part of her life. When she is not writing, she plays her piano and guitar, listens to music, reads, and enjoys the beach.

She has held jobs in administration, sales and marketing, has worked in HR, payroll, and as a bank teller. Her latest novel “The Widow Catcher” is based on the coastal town she lives in and her own bank teller experience.

Her books are standalone titles.

Find out more about Jonette Blake’s books by visiting her website

[www.jonetteblake.com](http://www.jonetteblake.com)