

## Prologue

One final time, Dorothy Ryan prepared to play the game. The game from her teenage years, dreaming of a life in musical theatre. Her eyes would close as tight as possible as she hoped with all her might that when they opened, she would be on a stage in Broadway.

Solo in a dazzling spotlight, she sang her heart out to an enraptured audience. Music filled the theatre as her voice soared to yet another high note. Thunderous applause followed and she opened her eyes to bow with a flourish.

The disappointment was always the same. The stage was her bedroom. No audience, only dolls in a row on her bed. The music was her little sister singing to herself in the next room.

With no vocal ability to speak of, her dreams vanished under the practical guidance of a mother who wanted her children properly educated. Dorothy left the game behind when she departed River's End at the age of twenty.

Now seventy-nine, Dorothy was back in her hometown after five decades, clinging to a final wish. She closed her eyes and wished; wished when they opened she would be in her old room in Palmerston House.

Just a daydreaming teenager again before this lifetime passed like the blink of an eye. Before she lost what mattered. Before her own choices shattered the life of the person she cared most for in the world; choices that destroyed true love.

Dorothy opened her eyes. She was still here, seated at a small table in a dismal motel room with a lumpy bed and peeling wallpaper. Her wrinkled hands were spotted from age and her failing heart still pounded uncomfortably in her chest. So much for games.

She smoothed out an ivory page of delicate writing paper. Few people mattered to Dorothy. Her only grandchild, Christie, was one of them and this letter would say goodbye.

Her hand hovered over the paper, the expensive pen not making contact as she thought about another letter she had written over a month ago. Had Martha even read it and understood the urgency of her older sister's request? Dorothy sighed and put down the pen.

There were things that needed saying before Dorothy died and it had taken every bit of her resolve to write.

*Dear Martha,*

*I have battled with myself over the wisdom of this letter. After all these years - this lifetime we have been apart – I ask myself if it is right to tell you what happened that night... and in the days and months afterwards. Will knowledge give you peace and let you put this to rest? Perhaps your absence from my life for almost half a*

*century has been to protect yourself from finding out. Perhaps you gave up on me.*

*I am a coward to have waited until now, when my life is so close to its end, but I cannot go to my grave with this burden. You see, I know what happened.*

*You need to understand, I acted out of a desire to protect you from yourself. Mother and I had grown increasingly concerned by your poor choices; not only with the girls that you called friends, but the danger you insisted on placing yourself in with Thomas Blake. As if a man like that could ever be suitable for you! Yet you ignored our concerns and turned your back on our pleas, spending all your time with him. Mother was beside herself. Did you ever think for one moment of anyone other than yourself back then?*

None of this would have happened, none of it, had Martha ever cared about anything her mother, Lilian, or sister said, instead following the rather bad example of their carefree father, Patrick. Martha was somehow the perfect combination of both parents, wild and stubborn, generous and passionate like Patrick, as well as proud and selfish, sensitive and protective like Lilian.

By the time Martha was born, nine-year-old Dorothy already knew to treat the locals with civility but nothing more. She understood the unspoken rules. In the small town of River's End, the Ryan family were wealthy, influential and quite separate from the community they lived in.

Martha was different, enchanting all who met her with a gorgeous smile and genuine interest in others. *Ah, thought Dorothy, the beautiful one, the smart and funny child everybody loved. Especially me.*

Dorothy sipped on a half-cold cup of Earl Grey. It would have tasted better in one of her bone china cups and properly made by Angus, the only man she had not scared away over the years, mainly, she expected, due to the generous salary she paid him to run her house, but this ageing motel only provided thick white mugs and an old kettle. The need to stay in River's End had taken precedence over Dorothy's distaste for the surroundings. No, this room on the back street of the town would suffice until Martha arrived. She glanced at the paper to remind herself to write to Christie, but the other letter filled her thoughts.

*Mother feared for your future and wrote often; asking me to speak with you, reason with you about the boy. Of course, I knew that would be not only a waste of my time, but quite likely hasten you into an unsuitable marriage. Thomas, after all, could not have been anything other than a rebellious fling, and Mother should have left things alone from the beginning.*

*It was only after speaking with Father on one of his visits to the city, I realised you were quite smitten with Thomas. Father liked him. Typical, for he thought the Blake family to be salt of the earth. Mother and I considered Thomas to be controlling and have few prospects. Father believed him to be of strong character and highly*

*creative. He even said Thomas was perfect for you, as a lesser man would never handle your spirit the way he thought Thomas did. Nobody had ever settled you in a direction, yet Father believed Thomas knew exactly how to manage your wild ways.*

Dorothy shook her head crossly. No point going over it all again. She needed to write her farewells to Christie. As she picked up the pen, another memory intruded and her hand trembled. It was 1967. The year that changed everything.

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Patrick Ryan stood by Dorothy's lounge room window, contemplating the hustle and bustle of Melbourne city several floors below. The outlook was straight down a main street filled with mid-afternoon shoppers, cars and workers. In spite of the early hour, Patrick helped himself to a glass of whiskey from the small bar Dorothy kept, mostly for his visits.

"Father, you've got a long drive ahead!" Dorothy scolded.

Patrick tapped the window. "Do ye see the Clydies now?"

Dorothy rolled her eyes behind his back. "The streets are getting too busy for the horses, Father, and besides, we don't have milk delivered to the apartment."

Patrick turned around. "All this progress - does it not make ye want to come home?" A third generation Australian, Patrick nevertheless spoke with the soft Irish accent of his father and grandfather, in spite

of living in rural Victoria for decades. It was somehow out of place in Dorothy's modern apartment.

She shook her head, not sure how to answer. Her life had been in Melbourne since boarding school days, punctuated by long summer school holidays in River's End she tolerated for her mother's sake. The reality was she loved the progress, loved her job as a trainee manager at a department store, and rather loved the young man she was seeing. Going "home" would stifle her.

"Before I know it, Martha will be all married and gone as well. Both my girls disappearing in the blink of an eye."

"What do you mean, married? Martha won't marry Thomas Blake!" Dorothy was alarmed.

"Have ye not spoken to yer sister in so long? Young Thomas has our Martha all worked out. She might not always like it, but he has the upper hand there and them being wed will change her ways." Patrick chuckled, and drained his glass. "Ye be coming to the engagement party when they have it?" He put the glass back on the bar and picked up his jacket from the back of chair.

"Engagement? I think I must."

"I shall tell yer sister to hurry up and arrange that party so both my girls will be together again."

If Martha was engaged to this boy, Dorothy needed to speak with her. It may not be too late to change her mind and if anyone could talk sense into Martha, it was her big sister.

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Now, her mind refused to release the past and her heart overflowed with anguish. The letter. She desperately hoped Martha received the letter.

*I should have stayed in the city, or left the country, anything other than come home for your engagement party. It was obvious from the moment I returned to Palmerston House the relationship was serious. Mother refused to attend your party of course, and I was terribly worried for her state of mind. All she ever wanted, Martha, was for you to finish your education and marry well. You need to understand she had nothing at all to do with the events we speak of now.*

*You were surprised I attended your big night in the local hall. It was as though you did not know what to do with me, so you sent one of your friends to keep me company. She was quite the chatterbox about her feelings around your engagement. Thomas' parents left early. Father was there for quite a while, but wandered off to meet one of his cronies for yet another whiskey. There was one chance to change everything and I found myself in the position to set the wheels in motion.*

*Please come to River's End, dear. Please come home and let us speak one more time. I would come to you, but my heart is not strong and more travel is out of the question.*

*As always,*

## *Dorothy*

With both hands on the table to support her weight, Dorothy stood up. Every bone hurt and her heart thumped oddly, as it was prone to do now. She shuffled to an armchair in the corner of the room. The memories of 1967 spun around in Dorothy's head and she leaned back, eyes closed.

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Limestone cliffs towered above the perfectly curved, white sands of River's End beach. Mid way along its kilometre shore, a shallow river cut through the sand, forming a lagoon near the tideline. Close by, an old jetty somehow resisted years of exposure to the open ocean to stand strong against the assault of the high tide.

Although well after midnight, the air was hot and sultry with a whisper of a breeze to offer relief. Out over the Great Southern Ocean, a storm silently brewed. It drifted towards land, lightning flashing ominously within rain-laden clouds.

Cut into the face of one cliff was a steep staircase of narrow limestone steps. At the top of the steps, twenty-one year old Martha Ryan stood motionless. Heavy, dark brown hair framed a face of Celtic beauty then flowed down her back, almost to her waist. Emerald green eyes, normally alive with light and mischief, were as dark as the night and glistening with unshed tears. An ankle length, dark green dress accentuated her slender figure. Around her neck,



she wore a pendant, an “M” and a “T” entwined, and on the third finger of her left hand, a solitaire diamond ring.

She cast a tormented glance over her shoulder. A hot wind preceded the storm, lifting Martha’s hair and in spite of the heat, she shivered.

“Where are you, Martha?” From a distance away, a man cried out. Thomas Blake.

Martha ran down the steep steps at breakneck speed. At the bottom, she threw off her shoes and gasped as the still-hot sand burnt the soles of her feet.

Closer now, Thomas called again, exasperation resonating in his deep voice. “Martha, for god’s sake! Stop!”

Instead of stopping, Martha flew toward the tideline, where the sand was wet and cooling and presented a firmer running surface. Lifting the skirt of her dress above her knees, she raced along the beach until forced to an abrupt standstill at the edge of the lagoon. It overflowed as a king tide forced the fresh water back from the shore.

Heart pounding in her ears, Martha frantically sought sanctuary. The old jetty was close by, blanketed in darkness. Without thought she reached its rickety boards and hurried along them. The sky lit up with a flash of lightning and Martha skidded to a halt at the sight of huge waves covering the end of the jetty. The rapidly rising water lapped at her toes and she turned around to retrace her steps.

Twenty-three year old Thomas Blake stood on the sand at the end of the jetty. Reaching down, he unsteadily removed one shoe at a time.

Still dressed from their engagement party in black pants and a white, unbuttoned shirt, his expression was one of pure frustration. He tossed his shoes and socks to higher ground, crossed his arms and stared at Martha.

“Go away!” Martha’s voice was shaky. “Don’t follow me. You have no right!” She took a step backwards, unaware how precariously close she was to the edge of the timber boards.

“Either you come off the jetty right now, or I’ll come and get you. Martha, I mean it, I’ll carry you back to the cottage and I’ll--” A sudden crack of thunder directly overhead cut him off.

Startled, Martha jumped and lost her footing as a wave crashed over the boards. With a small scream, she slipped into the swirling water and disappeared.

Throwing off his shirt as he ran along the jetty, Thomas scanned the water where Martha fell. She surfaced for a second or two, before the power of the ocean and weight of the waterlogged dress dragged her back under.

Thomas leapt into the angry waves, frantic in his search of the water around him. “Martha! Martha, where are you?” he cried in desperation.

From half way along the beach, an echoing scream went unheard as thunder bellowed across the shore. “Martha! Oh my god, Martha!” Dorothy Ryan watched in horror as Thomas dived below the waves and emerged empty-handed.

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Dorothy's eyes flew open. She sat upright on the armchair, disoriented. Bit by bit, she remembered. River's End. November 2016. The memories of that night almost fifty years ago were raw.

She had to make sure Martha learned the truth, before it went to Dorothy's grave with her. A wave of dizziness made Dorothy's ears ring as she struggled to her feet. The room appeared to darken for a moment and Dorothy clutched at her left shoulder. Somehow, she reached the table and sat down. She scrawled a few words on the blank paper, her face white and grim from pain, her thin lips shaded blue. Her handwriting became illegible and the pen slipped from her hand. Angus would know what to do.

Dorothy forced her body to the sagging double bed. Despite the pain, she removed her shoes and placed them neatly on the floor. From an open cardboard box on the bedside table, she extracted a small photo album. Her breath ragged, she lay on her back, closed her eyes and willed her heart to steady, as her mind drew her back to that night on the beach.

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In panic, Dorothy ran toward the jetty. She saw Thomas appear for a second and dive under again. With a deafening crash, lightning struck the top of the cliff on the far end of the beach and Dorothy screamed.

This was too much to bear. The seconds dragged like minutes and still, there was no sign of them. She was a weak swimmer but she had to do something. As she tentatively stepped onto the jetty, there was a disturbance in the water and Thomas burst up, Martha in his arms. They both gasped desperately at the air to fill their depleted lungs.

Thomas fought his way to the beach, one arm holding Martha for dear life. In the shallows, he stopped, utterly spent. The waves washed over them. Then, as though she weighed nothing, Thomas lifted Martha into his arms and stood up. With shaking legs, he staggered to the soft sand higher on the beach and there, sank to his knees, still cradling Martha, who wrapped both of her arms around his neck.

They stayed that way as the storm closed in. Shuddering gulps of oxygen gradually slowed to calmer breaths. The heat of the night began to dry them.

Dorothy retreated into the darkness. Every instinct told her to run to Martha and hold her tight in her arms, yet she forced herself away. Thomas Blake risked his own life to save her sister from certain death. Perhaps Mother had been wrong about him. Perhaps she had been. It was in Martha's hands now.

Martha seemed to have drifted into a half-sleep, safe in Thomas arms. He stared at her as if in shock she was there. She stirred and gazed up at him.

“Damn it, woman. You could have died, throwing yourself in the ocean!”

Martha pushed herself out of his arms, falling unceremoniously onto the sand. She glared at Thomas as she got to her feet, ignoring his outstretched hand. Hair soaking wet, dress ripped, her makeup ruined, Martha was a picture of ethereal beauty in spite of the anger on her face. Thomas stood and held his hand out again. Martha walked away.

“It’s not what you think.” Thomas said. “You don’t understand.”

Martha swung around to face him. “Understand? Oh my god, Thomas. I saw you!” Tears coursed down her cheeks. “It’ll be all over town tomorrow. She’ll tell everyone. How could she? How could you?”

“Let me explain.”

“I don’t want an explanation, Thomas. I saw what happened and I cannot endure this!”

There was a moment of silence as the words sank in before the sky opened and a hard rain pelted down to soak them again in seconds.

“I will not endure this!”

Thomas stared at Martha in disappointment. She drew a deep breath and tugged at her ring finger.

“Don’t do it.” Thomas warned.

Martha took the solitaire off and held it out, the diamond reflecting the lightning that flashed every few seconds.

“Put it back on before you drop it and stop being so damned melodramatic.” Thomas said.

“Oh, how can you say that?” Martha cried. “Don’t you get it? I’m leaving! It’s over!” She threw the ring onto the sand, turned and stalked off.

Thomas scooped up the ring and pocketed it, before striding after Martha. “Where are you going?”

He got no reply as Martha kept stamping through the sand.

Thomas stopped and bellowed, “Just wait for one god-damned minute!”

Martha spun around, her eyes flashing in fury. She grabbed her pendant, as if to tear it from her neck. Thomas covered the ground between them in seconds and captured her hands in his. He leaned down and whispered to Martha.

Dorothy followed, bobbing onto the sand when she was as close as she dared. She had not heard Thomas’ quiet words, but saw Martha raise her eyes to his, the anger replaced by confusion and sadness.

Thomas pulled Martha closer and traced the contours of her face with his fingertips.

The rain stopped.

The waves were the only sound.

Thomas wrapped his arms around Martha, holding her against his bare chest. For a long moment, it was as though even the elements held their breath.

Martha spoke without emotion. "It's over between us." She stepped out of his embrace.

Thomas shook his head and held her wrist in his hand. "It will never be over with us."

Martha dropped her eyes. "You see, I can't stay now. Not to face all those people and their laughter behind my back. After our engagement party of all times. And--"

Thomas cut her off. "That's what you care about? Your pride? Always your pride and your temper that gets between us! Well, go!"

Martha looked at Thomas in surprise. She tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip and brought her close again, his face near hers.

"Run away and think about what your pride is doing to us. No doubt your sister and your mother will be thrilled, but know this, Martha Ryan, I will wait for you!"

"Well, you'll be waiting forever, because I'm not coming back!" Martha tried to pry Thomas' fingers from her wrist, but his hold was firm.

"I'll wait for you. There," Thomas pointed to the almost submerged jetty, "at the end of the jetty, I will wait. Every day I will be there to meet the dawn, as we have done so many times. Promise you'll come back."

Hand over her mouth, Dorothy willed her sister to stay strong.

“Promise me!” Thomas insisted.

“Alright!” Martha cried out.

Thomas searched her face for reassurance.

“No, Martha. A proper promise or it’s not real. Say it.”

“I promise!” Martha’s voice almost broke with emotion. “Okay? I promise I’ll return! Now let me go!”

Thomas released Martha and she sprinted back along the beach as fast as she could. Thunder boomed again and a flood of rain began.

“I love you, Martha Ryan!”

His voice reached her through the rain and she glanced back.

Thomas was a shadow on the sand. She reached the bottom of the steps, picked up her shoes and ran to the top in tears.

Thomas stared after her, swaying in shock.

The realisation of what just happened hit Dorothy. This man had saved her sister’s life. She saw the world crash down on him as he dropped to his hands and knees on the sand. As lightning hit the waves near the jetty, Thomas raised his face to the skies and cried out. “I will wait, Martha.”

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Now, on the lumpy bed in the dingy old motel room, Dorothy lay with her eyes closed. Against her chest, she clasped the photo album



with both hands. It was open on a photograph of Martha and Thomas, taken on the beach at River's End, holding hands and laughing.

A single tear escaped. "I'm sorry." Dorothy's final breath was like a whisper.

# Chapter One

Christie Ryan gazed out of the window of the Qantas A380, recognizing the landscape below with a sigh of relief. Only minutes now and she would be home in Melbourne. She had not slept during the fourteen-hour flight from Los Angeles, worrying, instead, about the last conversation with Derek, her fiancé.

He had been abundantly clear about his expectations in a short, tense phone call two days ago. “You need to think about your priorities, Chris. Use your time on the flight home wisely, because we’ll be talking once you’re back. I’m over the separations.” He hung up before she could respond.

The veiled threat bothered Christie. Derek knew from the beginning her career as a specialist make-up artist took her away for weeks on end to film sets around the world. Their first glimpse of each other was during one of her shoots in London, where he had been doing business as a property developer. Since then, he had always been so proud of how sought after she was and often bragged to his friends about what he jokingly called her “brush with the stars”.

The flight gave Christie time to think. She loved Derek but she also loved her job. There had to be a way to compromise and with the next three weeks at home, she intended to spend that time showing Derek how much he meant to her.

The giant plane banked over Brimbank Park, interrupting Christie’s thoughts. She wanted to kick her shoes off, have a shower, and enjoy

a cup of coffee from her own machine. Once Derek was home, they could talk.

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Christie dropped her bags inside the front door and went straight to the window of the living room to drink in the colour and movement that was Docklands. She never tired of the waterfront with its bright cafes, yacht filled marina, and the myriad of visitors and residents who made it such a unique part of Melbourne. Across the narrow strip of water stood Etihad Stadium, the massive all weather sports and concert arena.

Christie draped her jacket across the back of a chair, not noticing it slipped straight off. She tossed her handbag onto the sofa, half of its contents spilling out. Only the view mattered. Taking her shoes off, she curled her toes into the carpet and began to unwind from the long trip.

The soft tones of an acoustic guitar drifted in from next door. Ray must be home. Ray and his partner Ashley were as much friends as neighbours.

Derek opened the front door soundlessly, pausing to admire Christie's slim silhouette at the window. The afternoon sunlight glinted off her long, chestnut brown hair and the well-cut skirt showed off her slender legs. He glanced at her jacket and shoes on the floor, frowning at the spilled handbag on the sofa.

Putting his briefcase onto a small stand, he closed the door with a click. Christie spun around, her face lighting up with a beautiful smile of welcome.

Derek half smiled in return. “When did you get in?” His eyes darted back to the mess. Christie picked up her jacket and put it back on the chair before hurrying to him and sliding her arms around his neck. He wrapped his arms around her waist and brushed her lips.

“You look tired. Rundown.” Derek stared critically.

She regarded him with a smile. His face was developing lines that matched his greying red hair, but it suited him so well. She loved the style of the man, always well dressed and carrying himself with the air of someone who knew he was not only handsome, but successful as well. He was only an inch or two taller than her five foot eight stature, but he worked out, so Christie only noticed the small difference when selecting shoes, as he hated her being taller.

“I need a shower.” She slipped out of his embrace. “Coffee would be awesome!” With a grin, Christie tossed everything back into her handbag, grabbed her jacket and shoes, and swept out of the room. A couple of minutes later the shower came on.

Derek carried the suitcases into the bedroom. He could see Christie in the ensuite’s shower and for a moment contemplated joining her. Instead, he placed two bags on the bottom of the bed and opened them. He left her carry-on bag, which was her professional makeup case, on the floor at the end of the bed.

“I’ll unpack soon.” Christie called over the water, wishing he would stop fussing over a little messiness. She had rented this apartment for three years before Derek moved in, not knowing until a month later he purchased it soon after they met. He had been her landlord whilst they dated. He laughed it off when she questioned the secrecy.

Business, he said. No big secret. Since moving in, he insisted the place was immaculate, as if it was a show-home, rather than a real home. Christie tried, but her level of tidy was not the same as his.

Christie could see from his reflection in the mirror that Derek was still at the end of the bed. “How’s that coffee coming, honey? It was all I could think about on the flight.”

He came over to the doorway. “I hope you thought about more than coffee?”

Christie turned the tap off and Derek passed her a towel.

“Thanks. And I did. Think that is.”

“And?”

Christie started drying her hair. “And I would kill for a cup of your coffee... and a talk.” Christie peeked out from the towel.

Unconvinced, Derek wandered out and a moment later, started the coffee machine.

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Derek sat on the sofa, turning his phone around and around in his fingers, eyes drawn to the Melbourne skyline. Steam rose from two cups on a glass coffee table.

“Hey there.” Christie joined him on the sofa. “Oh, yum, thank you.” She picked up her coffee and savoured the first sip. “I’ve missed your blend.”

Derek put down the phone, ignoring his cup. “And I’ve missed you.”

Christie dropped a hand onto his leg. “I’m sorry it took so long. Lots of reshoots.”

Derek put his hand over hers. “But it’s always that way, baby.” It was a statement, delivered sadly. “Six weeks becomes ten. I might see you once in that time.”

Christie dropped her head. “I know, and I’m--”

Derek cut her off. “No. Let me talk.”

Christie put her coffee cup on the table and gave Derek her full attention. He was going to break off their engagement. Or tell her to change jobs. Coldness gripped her stomach.

“I’m so sorry,” he started. “I’ve expected too much and not given enough.”

Christie opened her mouth to reply, but Derek shook his head. “Still my turn to talk. Listen, when I told you to think about your priorities the other day, I was being selfish. You work every bit as hard as I

do, so here's the plan. When you have time off, I'll try to have time off. Like now." Derek jumped to his feet. "I've got a surprise."

He hurried to his briefcase and rummaged around, before returning with an envelope. He sat again and held it out. "Now, before you open it, I do know you've only just got home, but I really need this. We need this."

Curious, Christie took and opened the envelope, drawing out two airline tickets. Business class to Cairns, with connecting flights to Lizard Island.

"Six days there, baby. Just you and me at one of the world's most luxurious resorts. Okay?" His phone rang. He rejected the call. "So, we leave in the morning and get up there late afternoon. Just in time for cocktails. Yes?" His expression was like a little boy waiting to open a birthday present.

She glanced at the tickets again, dreading the thought of getting virtually straight back on a plane, but unable to do anything but accept. Derek was never spontaneous and she expected to be in the middle of an argument, not relieved at his change of heart. She took his hand. "This is wonderful, honey, thank you. Of course I'll come with you."

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. That sorted, he picked up his phone and got to his feet. "We can talk about a wedding date up there. It's time, don't you agree?" He did not wait around for an answer, checking his phone as he walked into the kitchen.

Christie watched him, half-puzzled, half-amused. One minute he had been almost desperate, and now he was back to business. His phone beeped as a message came through.

Christie wandered back to the bedroom, where she stood for a while, contemplating the value of unpacking.

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Derek had already packed a bag for Christie by the time she woke up the next morning. He brought her coffee and half-jokingly told her she only had an hour until they left. Jet-lagged, all Christie longed to do was go back to sleep but instead, she forced herself into the shower.

She took extra care with her make-up, masking the lines of tiredness. Christie deliberately chose clothing for the flight she knew Derek liked. A light apricot silk blouse and darker designer pants showed off her figure, finished with suede flat shoes and the ruby pendant he had given her last Christmas.

The doorbell rang and Derek called out, “That’s our driver. Need to go.”

It only took a moment for Christie to throw a small cosmetics bag into her handbag before she hurried into the living room.

Derek stood at the open front door, talking to a tweed-coated man in his sixties. “Well, if you’re not our driver, how can I help you?”



Christie squealed in delight and rushed to throw her arms around the visitor. Derek stood back, bemused, as the older man returned Christie's embrace. After a moment, Christie stepped away.

"How wonderful to see you... oh, sorry." Christie said. "You haven't met. Derek, this is Angus McGregor, and Angus, this is my fiancé, Derek Hobbs."

She closed the door as Angus reached a hand out to Derek.

"Fiancé? Well, congratulations Miss Christie." Angus nodded.

"Thank you. Derek, Angus works for Gran. He cares for the house and grounds, and drives her and..." Christie tapered off at the sombre expression on Angus' face. "Gran?" Christie whispered.

"Oh, Angus?"

Angus sadly shook his head. "I'm so sorry, Miss Christie. It was a peaceful passing, if that helps."

Christie covered her mouth with her hand. Derek put both arms around her in a gesture of comfort, but over her shoulder, his face reflected his irritation. Of all times for this to happen.

"I am sorry for the short notice. Miss Dorothy left instructions. Her funeral is tomorrow and she specifically wanted you to attend."

Derek released Christie. "Not possible, I'm afraid. We're about to get on a plane. But we'll send some beautiful flowers and make a donation to her favourite charity--."

Christie put her hand on Derek's arm, her attention on Angus.

"Where is the funeral being held?"

"Chris, no! It's not like you were close to her; I mean you hadn't spoken for years!" Derek stalked away to pick up his house keys and phone. "We have to go or we'll miss the plane, baby."

Christie gazed at Angus, who was paler and thinner than she remembered. His twenty loyal years of service to Dorothy Ryan outlasted two husbands and now, his world had turned on its head with her death.

"Do you want to sit down?"

Angus shook his head. "The funeral is at ten a.m. tomorrow in River's End."

The name meant nothing to Christie.

"A town along the coast. Just off the Great Ocean Road. The original home of your family."

The doorbell rang and Derek flung it open, startling the uniformed driver on the other side. Derek pointed to two suitcases inside the door and the driver almost tripped over himself in his rush to pick them up and leave.

"Chris, I'm sorry about your grandmother, but we must go now." Derek collected Christie's phone from the coffee table and held it out.

"I have to go. Come with me, Derek. Please?" she pleaded.

Angus shuffled away to stand near the window, his back turned to offer some privacy.

“Come with you where? To the funeral of a woman who didn’t even care for you? I’m sorry to sound harsh but you know that’s the truth. We have a chance to get away and reconnect. Don’t you want that?” He took Christie’s hands in his.

“Of course I do. I’m only asking for a day... to say goodbye. We can fly out tomorrow afternoon instead. Can’t we?”

*Why can’t you see I need your support?* she thought. *Oh, Gran.* Sadness, frustration and helplessness all welled up and Christie pulled her hands away.

Derek scowled and turned to leave. One hand on the door handle, he paused. “I’m going. I’ll change your flight to a later one tomorrow.”

Christie went to his side. “Thank you. I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

Derek stared at Christie, his face blank. “Be on that flight.”

Christie nodded and reached up to kiss his cheek. Without returning the gesture, he left.

“I’m sorry to have disturbed your plans, Miss Christie.”

Christie hurried over to give him a hug. “Derek’s disappointed. I’m sorry for the way he spoke.”

Angus squeezed Christie’s arm. “You never need to apologise to me. We both know your grandmother had her moments.” He smiled at the understatement.

Angus was the only person to have tolerated Dorothy Ryan's coldness. He understood she was a proud woman whose life had not turned out the way she expected. She had little time for people, let alone the seven-year-old girl thrust into her custody by one of life's cruel twists – the sudden death of Rebecca and Julian, her daughter and son-in-law.

Gran had given Christie everything she needed. Everything, except her love and acceptance, the lack of which had driven her granddaughter away. Along with everyone else. Except Angus.

Sorrow swept through Christie. For all of her flaws, Gran provided a home and a safe place to grow up. She certainly deserved to have two mourners at her funeral that cared about her. For now, Christie pushed aside the hurt Derek's departure caused.

“Tell me about River's End, and please, tell me why Gran is being buried there.”