

**THE
CHANGING
ROOM**

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*To Mum – who taught me to value preloved clothes
and storytelling.*

ANNA

Anna felt queasy when she saw the rows of black letters that jumped across the page: *Your services are no longer required.* At the foot of the letter was the bold signature of William Randall-Jones, written with the Caran d'Ache pen she had given him for Christmas, two weeks earlier. Anna looked out the window of the twenty-fourth floor of the open-plan office on Phillip Street with views across the Sydney Botanic Gardens, Potts Point and the Harbour.

She folded the letter, put it in her handbag, took her jacket from the back of the swivel chair and walked away. At the lifts she faltered, turned and went back to collect her award for Executive Assistant of the Year, which she had received the day before.

*

'This is a special occasion,' William Randall-Jones, managing director of the management consultancy firm Delaine Newton, had said to the gathered staff. 'And it is a surprise for our very own, our very important and irreplaceable Miss Anna Lamont.'

Anna, hovering at the back of the room, had started at the sound of her name.

‘Come and stand beside me,’ he beckoned. She walked to the front and turned to see the faces of the hundred or so staff. A few smiled at Anna as if they were in on the secret. Others played with their mobile phones. Most wore the navy corporate uniform that Anna had helped design. Anna’s colleague Elsie, from accounts, handed William a gift bag.

‘It took a great deal of *subterfuge*,’ he said, relishing the word. ‘It is so hard to do anything in this office without Anna knowing.’ The staff tittered and William put his hand in the bag. ‘We nominated Anna for this highly contested award.’ He held up the trophy. It was a gold star rising from a wooden base. ‘And she deservedly won Executive Assistant of the Year,’ he waved the trophy in the air, ‘for her dedication and hard work in the position.’

He turned to face Anna and his eyes beckoned her to enter the secret place they shared. ‘Anna, you have truly earned this award. I am,’ he turned and faced the staff, ‘we all are so proud of you.’

The staff clapped and cheered when Elsie opened a magnum of champagne and passed the first glass to Anna.

‘Congratulations.’ William lowered his head and gave Anna a kiss on the cheek. A peck, not a full-blown kiss. Still, her cheek tingled and she almost spilt her champagne. He put his hand on her arm to steady her, his large, firm yet gentle hand. His wedding ring glinted in the light.

‘To the best executive assistant in New South Wales,’ he said, then whispered in her ear, ‘We’ll have our own private celebration tonight.’

That evening, while unpacking groceries onto her gleaming kitchen bench, Anna reflected on the past twenty years of being executive assistant to William Randall-Jones, as well as his lover. He had been christened Rufus William Randall-Jones and he allowed Anna to call him by his first name, Rufus, in

private. Everyone else, even his wife, called him by his second name, William, which he thought was more commanding.

Anna calculated she spent as much time with William as his wife, Rachel, did. There was every day at work, her special night with him, and Saturday mornings.

Saturday mornings were when they spent time like a normal couple with a routine. Rachel gave him a free pass to play golf. He'd arrive as Anna was waking up and climb into bed with her for morning sex. Anna would cook breakfast, which they ate in the courtyard while reading the morning paper. Then they'd go to the local golf range rather than William's usual golf club. After lunch and a glass of wine, Rufus would leave to spend the rest of the weekend with his wife and family. If anyone had asked her, Anna would have said she was content.

Anna opened the red wine to let it breathe, pulled out the chopping board and checked her knives were sharp. She diced the vegetables rhythmically, like her mother had done.

She took out the triple cream brie from the refrigerator to soften. She melted the salt-free butter for the *soupe à l'oignon* and prepared crusty slices of baguette sprinkled with Gruyère cheese for the griller. She'd decided to be a little more daring than usual by making mini-soufflés for dessert. They had been her father's favourite. She took out her bowls and set up the ingredients so she could have them ready to pop in the oven. The food was rich for a warm summer evening, but Anna's place was cool and it felt celebratory.

While she waited for William to arrive, Anna changed into the kimono he had given her for her sixtieth birthday, three years previously, saying it matched her ageless beauty. He'd bought it on his last business trip to Japan. She'd made the travel bookings and Rachel had accompanied him to help entertain potential clients. His wife was a silent director of the company, which William said was mainly for tax purposes. Anna recalled her

excitement when she was promoted to the position of William's executive assistant, several months before they became lovers.

Having an affair with a married man wasn't something Anna had expected or intended to do. But William was special – he was smart, driven and important. He told her he only stayed in his marriage because of the business and the children. Rachel was demanding and volatile compared to the calm and quiet Anna, whom William called his 'port in the storm'. Many years before, he'd sworn that when the children were grown, he would divorce his wife and be with Anna. Since then, the children had finished their studies and left home but there had always been a family or business crisis to deal with, so the divorce never eventuated.

Anna didn't actually mind anymore. She enjoyed caring for him at work and had become accustomed to sharing him. It was enough for her. She had grown to appreciate her organised life, which was divided into compartments – one for work, one for her private time with William and one for her few friends. It was only rarely she missed having her own family. She was an only child and both her parents had died by the time she was forty-five.

Anna heard the key in the door and checked herself in the mirror. She noticed some new strands of grey hair and wondered how long William would continue to love her as she aged. Her fears were swept aside when she saw him in the doorway holding an enormous bunch of red roses.

The following morning, Anna sat at her desk as usual and went through the emails in her inbox, sorting the items which needed to go to William, the matters she could deal with and those which could be delegated to other staff. She printed out the diary for William and placed it on his desk, dusted the photos of his family on the bookcase and checked he had a clean suit, shirt and tie in his office closet. She polished the sign on his office door, *William Randall-Jones, Managing Director*, until

it shone. Anna would have preferred to call him Mr Randall-Jones at work, but he insisted all staff call him William.

Anna paused to smile at the award, which she had placed on the shelf above her computer screen. Her name was engraved on a plaque at the base. In a month, she'd move it out of sight. There were no other personal items around her desk outside the managing director's office.

While waiting for his arrival, she guarded his office against unscheduled intruders. Anna glanced at the personal diary she kept in her top drawer and made an advance booking at the newly renovated and impossible-to-get-into restaurant Quay for his wedding anniversary.

She straightened her skirt, which modestly came to just below her knees, and checked her tights again for ladders. When pantyhose replaced stockings and suspender belts some time in the late sixties, Anna was relieved. They were so much neater and easier to wear. These days, Anna had observed, most of the young women in the office didn't bother with tights but walked around bare-legged, and one didn't even shave her legs.

William was running thirty minutes late. She went over his appointments. There was nothing she'd forgotten and no out-of-work meetings. She checked the traffic report on the internet and found out an accident on the freeway was causing delays into the city.

One of William's colleagues came by to deliver documents for clearance. Anna dealt with the issue without revealing William was running almost an hour late. The traffic had cleared and was now flowing smoothly. His mobile phone went to message bank. Perhaps someone in his family was sick.

Anna prioritised his appointments. There were several that could be done by another staff member and she made those calls first to give the officers time to prepare and to free up time later in the day. She was careful not to give any hint of her concern.

She was on her third call when she saw William get out of the lift. He looked dishevelled and worried. His hair flopped onto his forehead and his tie was undone. Anna readied herself to respond to whatever crisis had befallen her beloved.

There was someone behind him, a woman, talking to him as she followed. Anna stood to greet them and recognised Rachel, whose voice was getting louder as they approached. Something must have gone terribly wrong for his wife to follow William into the office.

‘You two-timing son of a bitch,’ Rachel yelled as they reached Anna’s desk.

‘Honey, it’s nothing.’ William gave Anna a sad puppy look. ‘Come into my office and we’ll sort this out. There’s a simple explanation.’

Anna rose to follow them but Rachel turned and blocked Anna’s entrance. They were in full view of the open-plan office and the staff were craning their necks to witness what was happening.

‘And you. You husband-stealing, conniving witch.’

Anna was dumbfounded. She could barely understand the words that flew around her. Rachel stood nose to nose with her, blocking the entrance to William’s office. Anna longed to see his face, to be assured this was a mistake, and everything would be all right. Instead she faced Rachel, whose lipstick was smudged.

‘So, what do you have to say for yourself, Miss Husband-Stealing Secretary?’

Anna tried to usher Rachel into the office so she could shut the door and get some privacy. Rachel refused to move.

‘I suppose you think he loves you.’ Anna felt spittle hitting her cheek and put her hand up to wipe it off, the hand William had lovingly kissed the night before when he was leaving, telling her how fine her fingers were and how wonderful she was.

‘Well, he doesn’t,’ Rachel continued. ‘He told me. You are nothing to him. Just a convenience. No more than an itch he needed to scratch.’

Anna felt goose bumps on her skin, her milky skin William had licked and said was as refreshing as sorbet.

‘He loves me,’ said Rachel. ‘He’ll never leave me. I’ll be damned if I’ll let you have him, so pack your bags and go. Right now!’

Anna couldn’t move. Her legs felt like concrete blocks. She desperately wanted to see William. To ask him what to do.

The phone on her desk rang and jolted Anna back into action. She moved to pick up the receiver.

‘Don’t touch the bloody phone,’ screamed Rachel. ‘Don’t you get it? You don’t work here anymore. You’re sacked, you stupid slut.’

Anna felt like she’d been slapped. Slut? She shuddered. And the sack? Rachel couldn’t. William wouldn’t. Anna tried to get into the office where William was pacing up and down. Rachel blocked her. Anna fell against her desk before grabbing her box of tissues and fleeing to the women’s toilet.

Her mother would have been horrified to hear the ugly noises coming out of her mouth as she closed the cubicle door and sat on the toilet seat, sobbing. Anna stifled her sobs, stuffing the tissues into her mouth to muffle the sound, almost choking. As reason seeped into her mind, she settled herself, discarded the tissues, washed her face and waited.

She wasn’t sure what she was waiting for. Some signal, perhaps, that everything was all right and the whole scene had been a mistake. But she knew deep down it was over. She’d always made sure William took no remnants of her with him: no lipstick, strange scent or button undone. But the night before, she’d been tipsy and hadn’t done her usual thorough last-minute check before sending him off.

Chattering staff neared the toilets. Anna returned to the cubicle, locked the door and listened for any comment on the morning's events. There was none.

When the staff had gone to lunch, she snuck back to her desk. She opened the letter and saw the words, collected her things and took the lift to the ground floor. Once on the street, she stood alone, squinting in the harsh January sunlight. Car fumes filled her nostrils and she felt disoriented.

Although a brisk walker by habit, when she began moving again she lagged behind a surge of pedestrians, automatically following the same route across the CBD she'd travelled most days for twenty years, past an upmarket fashion retailer, fast-food outlets, stepping round a homeless man sitting with bowed head, his back propped against the wall of a bank, to Martin Place, where she caught the bumpy bus to Leichhardt. The bus was unusually empty. Anna took a seat at the back and stared mindlessly out the window at the plants growing on buildings at Central, at the old Broadway store and the trendy bookstore and cafes on Norton Street. At Marion Street she climbed off the bus and dawdled past the renovated terrace houses towards a home that no longer made sense.

2

MOLLY

On the same morning, thirty kilometres to the south-east in the suburb of Liverpool, people were talking at Molly. They seemed to be doctors and nurses.

‘Where a’ my kids?’ she croaked.

A nurse told her the children were with Molly’s grandmother.

‘We tried to contact your mother, dear, but without success. Apparently, she’s interstate and has no intention of returning.’

Molly felt a severe jab of pain in her rib when she rolled over. She yelped and tears flowed onto her pillow.

*

The first time Molly met Joe was five years ago and she heard the throbbing of his motorbike before she saw him. It was an old Harley Davidson, with the muffler removed. He rode it up Bigge Street to the coffee shop where Molly was hanging out after school with her best friend, Lindy.

When the dashing figure on the bike came into view, Molly raised her skirt a few centimetres to show off her lightly tanned legs. She flicked her blonde hair and smiled her most radiant

smile, the one which caused her grandma to tell her she was too pretty for her own good.

He untangled his lean body from the bike.

'He's mine,' she whispered to Lindy, and sauntered over to him. 'Wanna give me a lift home?' she said in her lowest voice.

He looked straight into her eyes through the lenses of his wraparound sunglasses. The lenses made his eyes look like the mud pools that formed at the side of Molly's road when it rained too much. Deep and dark. She ran her hands down her skirt to her thighs.

Joe put his head on the side and looked her up and down, as if she was a china doll in a pawn shop.

'Look out,' he said, 'I bite.' His voice was like gravel under the motorbike wheels. Molly held his gaze, steady and sassy. 'That what yer after?'

'Sure am,' she said.

He swung his leg back over the bike and jerked his head. 'Get on then.'

Molly wrapped her arms around Joe's waist, feeling the heat from his leather jacket. Her skirt flapped in the wind, revealing her sensible underpants. Should've worn the lacy ones, she thought, as she felt the rhythm of the bike pulse up her legs. *Pop, pop ... pop. Pop ... pop. Pop.* She pressed her face to Joe's back and let her tears stream down onto his leather jacket. Tears of joy. Tears caused by the rush of the wind. Molly didn't care. She was happy. She wanted to stay glued onto the moving bike, feeling Joe's heart beat just above the bike's roar.

The bike stopped abruptly. Molly fell forward and her nose jammed into Joe's back. He prised her hands loose and dismounted. She blinked and saw the front lawn of a house, littered with bike parts.

'Wait 'ere,' he ordered, and walked towards the open garage at the side of the house.

THE CHANGING ROOM

Molly climbed off the bike. There were several other bikies inside the garage. Joe had his back to her and seemed to be arguing with one of them. She crouched on the gutter. The sun was hot and there was no shade. She watched the ants march along the gutter and into the overgrown grass. Her bottom itched and she squirmed.

‘She got ants in her pants?’ a tall, skinny bikie with a blond mullet called.

Joe walked away from the garage carrying a shiny motorbike handle and asked, ‘Anyone at ya place?’

‘No,’ Molly said, hoping her mother was having her afternoon nap.

When Joe pulled up at her house, Molly clambered off the bike, expecting him to follow.

‘Well, see ya round,’ said Joe. He revved the engine, did a wheelie and was gone before she could say anything. He turned the corner and the rhythm of the bike grew fainter and fainter. She stood alone at the gate, trying to feel him close to her, to picture him getting off the bike and going into the house with her.

‘What the hell ya doin’ out there?’ called her mother. ‘Will ya stop daydreamin’? Come an’ get ya poor old mum a cuppa.’

*

The following Saturday, Molly turned to scoop the last of the chips from the tray for a customer in the fast-food takeaway when she heard the bike. The unmistakable sound was etched in her memory. She breathed in, pulled the front of her apron down to show her cleavage and finished the order.

Molly worked on the weekends to make extra money, most of which helped pay for her school costs or household bills after her mother had drunk half her pension away. The takeaway was

greasy and smelly and Molly wore a full apron, which used to be white but was now a dull grey despite soaking it in bleach. Molly hated grey. She loved pastel colours. They reminded her of the spring flowers in her grandma's garden. She adjusted the grey cap and pushed the stray strands of her long hair underneath.

The door at the front of the takeaway opened and two of Joe's mates sauntered in, acting like they owned the place. The tall, blond bikie who'd made the comment about ants pushed over a chair. The other one put it back and Molly noticed he had a penis tattoo above the words *Dickhead Dave* on his arm. Customers moved aside to let them through.

Molly held her breath, hoping Joe would come in to buy his own burger, but also hoping he wouldn't see her. She wiped the sweat on her forehead with the back of her hand.

'You gonna serve me or not?' asked the next customer. She briskly took his order and filled it, spilling some of the chips onto the tray in her haste. 'Geez, you're in a right hurry. No tips for you today.'

Not that you ever tip, you stingy old bastard, thought Molly.

The door opened again, and there he was. Suspended in time for a few moments. Like a statue. Blocking the doorway so Molly's customer couldn't get out but had to go to the side exit. Joe took up the whole space, the queue parted and he stood surveying the menu above her head. She waited, barely able to breathe.

His eyes lowered and he saw her. She saw a flicker of recognition in his face, the tiny lift of his mouth. Warm breath flooded her. She smiled brightly and he loped towards her, taking long, slow steps to the front of the queue. No one stopped him and everyone in the queue moved to let him through like it was his right.

'What ya doin' tonight?' he asked.

'My friend Lindy's havin' a party at her place on Atkinson Street.'

*

A few hours later, Molly looked at her pink-and-yellow dress with tiny roses, the one she'd saved her money to buy. She'd prayed each day it wouldn't be sold until she had enough, and now it hung in her scantily filled wardrobe. She tried it on over her lacy underwear and scanned herself in the cracked wardrobe mirror. There was something not quite right. Molly looked young and fresh. The dress skimmed her curves like butterfly wings, but the prettiness didn't seem to fit her anymore.

She realised she didn't want to look young. And she certainly didn't want to look fresh and ... and innocent. She wanted to look older and experienced.

Molly pulled all her clothes out of the wardrobe. They scarcely covered the bed and there was no alternative. She'd have to wear the dress. Then she spotted her old black boots with the scuffed heels and toes. They looked kind of angry. She put them on and thought she looked much better. But there was something missing. She found her denim jacket. She'd patched it with flower emblems, which she pulled off so the frayed, worn bits showed, and tried the jacket over her dress. It was tight on her but would have to do. She refreshed her black nail polish and left the house with a quick 'see ya later' to her mum, who was dozing on the lounge.

She needn't have bothered. There was only the usual crowd at the party. They stood around Lindy's backyard sipping soft drink and pretending they were having a good time. Some of the boys had smuggled in a bottle of vodka and were topping up the drinks. They teased Molly about her outfit, but soon went back to talking about the footy game. The girls talked about the boys and clothes. Molly was so bored she decided to go home early.

She was standing at the front gate saying bye to Lindy and explaining her mother had insisted she come home early when she heard the sound. In the distance and getting louder.

Joe and his mates rumbled down the suburban street, did a wheelie and stopped beside her.

'Goin' already?' he asked. Molly was flustered. Should she tell him she was leaving or go back inside. Would he follow her?

'Molly's mum told her she had to be home early,' said Lindy. 'But youse can come inside with me.'

Molly glared at her supposed friend. Joe looked at them both and grinned.

'Pity,' he said. 'Thought we'd make a night of it.' Molly could feel her heart sinking right down to her scungy boots. 'Well, Miss Molly, let's get ya home.'

Molly scrambled onto Joe's bike as fast as she could in case he changed his mind, praying he'd take the long way to her place.

She relaxed into his back, letting the motion of the bike and his warmth penetrate her and trying to hang onto every nano-second she was near him. He pulled up at her house too soon. She sat on the bike, hanging on for a few more moments.

'This is home, yeah?' he asked.

'I'm home here on your bike,' she whispered.

'Right then,' he revved the bike up and sped off.

They rumbled through the streets of the suburb, up the main drag past the closed shops and open cafes. They passed the school and the new shopping mall. On and on, where the houses were sparse and the street lighting faded, into the bush. Molly didn't want to stop or let go of Joe's waist.

There were six other bikes in the group. Molly had been too overwhelmed at first to notice them, and now she pushed them out of her mind. She focused on Joe and the rumbling of his bike.

The bikies spent the night racing around the track, doing wheelies and spinouts – daring each other to go faster, to rev louder. They drank beer from bottles in paper bags and smoked rollies with weed. Molly knew the smell of dope. Joe didn't offer her any and she was relieved, as last time she'd choked on it and she hated the taste of tobacco.

All night, Molly stayed as close to Joe as she could. The skinny, blond bikie with the mullet brushed past her in a way that felt deliberate while Joe was busy tinkering with a bike, and when she looked at him, he mouthed 'hot' at her. Molly was about to say something but Joe looked up from his bike and called out to him, 'Greg, c'm'ere!' and the moment was gone. She never looked at any of the others, fearing what else might happen if she made eye contact. All the while she longed to be alone with Joe.

When the sky lightened, Joe drove her home and left her standing at the front gate. Her whole body felt ravished, even though he hadn't touched her. She went inside and crawled into bed.

*

For her sixteenth birthday, Molly's grandma gave her money to buy and wrap a present for herself.

'That way, you get a present you want and I get the fun of giving it to you without all the hassle. Just make sure you act surprised when you open it.'

'Always spoilin' that girl, aren't ya,' Molly's mum said to Grandma. 'Tryin'a make up for ya mistakes with me.'

Molly blocked out the familiar tirade that followed. How her mum was ignored as a child. How Grandma spent every day writing letters to the authorities about the bloody war in Vietnam and every night crying for her dead husband.