

Josephine Moon

*The
Jam
Queens*

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Aggie unfolded the piece of paper and lifted it onto the tip of her forefinger. She balanced it there, marvelling that something lighter than a tiny finch could carry such a heavy burden. For all the pain the words on the page inflicted, they may as well have been carved into steel bars and chained to her body.

Five choices, one impossible decision.

In a sudden burst of anger, she screwed up the paper into a ball and threw it across her small kitchen, where it bounced off the freestanding stove and fell to the floorboards. There it paused, stretching its wings and growing in size once more, refusing to be silenced.

She would have to speak to Gideon.

She retrieved the letter and flattened it to check the details. They still had time, about a month, which wasn't much, but enough that right now she could pretend this moment hadn't arrived.

Shoving it into her colourfully embroidered leather handbag, she returned to the task at hand, which was to make a new batch of

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strawberry jam, preparing as she was for the Royal Adelaide Show in a couple of months' time. The berries were out of season here in the valley, where the best local strawberries wouldn't be ready until November at least. These ones had been sourced from Queensland, which provided strawberries for the southern states over winter.

She had just pulled out her digital scales to weigh the fruit as she washed, dried and hulled them, when her mobile phone rang.

She checked the screen. It wasn't Holly, as she thought it might have been, and nor was it Savannah, calling from the cafe with some sort of business issue Aggie would need to sort out. It wasn't a number she recognised but it was local, so she answered it.

'Is this Agatha Hermann?' a woman asked, gravely enough to indicate that she was not an enthusiastic telemarketer. This woman had something important to say.

Aggie's gaze flicked to her handbag, in which today's surprise letter was buried, wondering if this call was connected. 'Yes,' she replied, automatically moving to a seat. A cold winter's draught slipped around the side of the kitchen door and she pulled her indigo cardigan tighter at her waist.

'My name is Ingrid, I'm a senior nurse at Angaston Hospital.'

'Is it Holly? Is she hurt?' Aggie had visions of her daughter being struck down by a car on a desolate road while out walking.

'Holly?' The woman was momentarily thrown. 'No. It's Valeria.'

'Mum?'

'Yes. She has you listed as her next of kin.'

This was surprising. At a frantic pace, Aggie's mind sought to pull these pieces together. Her mother was turning seventy this year, so a call from a hospital wasn't implausible. The part that was surprising was that her mother had asked for Aggie.

'But we haven't spoken in three months,' Aggie blurted.

Ingrid paused, then cleared her throat. 'Well, she's called for you now. Your mother has had a TIA.'

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‘What’s that?’

‘A transient ischaemic attack, otherwise known as a ministroke.’

Aggie felt herself draw in a puff of air that didn’t make it all the way down into her lungs. ‘Is she . . . okay?’

‘She is stable for now, though during the event she also broke her wrist. Look, are you able to come in? She’ll need someone to take her home and stay with her overnight.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Aggie said, observing the tremor that had begun in her hands.

‘Excellent. We’ll see you soon.’

The first thing Aggie thought when she saw her mother was that Valeria looked exceptionally well for someone who’d just had a stroke. Her mother peered from the bed where she was propped up by many pillows. A curtain divided her bed from whoever was on the other side. Her broken wrist was in a splint, elevated on yet another pillow beside her.

‘You seem disappointed,’ Valeria said, and returned her gaze to the open magazine on her lap.

‘No . . . I . . . it’s just, I thought you might be dying,’ Aggie said in a rush, her hand at her throat. It was deeply unnerving to see her mother like this. She realised with a jolt that she’d never seen her mother in a hospital bed at all. Somehow in her mind she had blended together all the times they’d spent at her father’s bedside as he died. But Valeria had never been the one in the bed before, only sitting beside it.

‘So, you *are* disappointed,’ her mother said, wryly.

‘No, of course not.’ Aggie rubbed at her brow now, clamping down on a rush of anger that turned her stomach to acid. ‘You called for me, as your next of kin.’ She said the words cautiously. ‘It sounded bad.’

‘A stroke is not bad enough for you?’

‘Mum, please. I’m trying here,’ Aggie said, calmly. Despite her mother’s apparent stoicism and still-sharp tongue, she’d undoubtedly had an awful scare today and was probably in shock, not thinking straight.

Valeria sighed and slid the magazine off her lap. She couldn’t quite reach the bed tray next to her, so Aggie took the opportunity to approach her and help.

‘Thank you.’

Aggie pulled up a chair and sat down, straight-backed. ‘What happened?’

Valeria made a disgusted noise and cast her eyes to the ceiling where a small television hung, the blank screen reflecting a miniature version of themselves. ‘I was in church this morning, as usual . . . and I simply came over all funny.’

‘Funny how?’

‘Things went black,’ her mother said, quietly now, her fingers picking at a loose thread on the hospital’s cotton blanket. ‘I tried to speak to Elca next to me but I couldn’t get the words out.’ For a moment, her mother’s face reddened and her eyes brightened with tears. ‘I tried to stand, but I fell. That’s when this happened,’ she said, nodding to her left arm.

‘Oh, Mum,’ Aggie said, reaching out a hand to place on top of her mother’s unbroken one. ‘That must have been frightening.’

Valeria didn’t answer but chewed her lip. Then she laughed, emptily, and withdrew her hand from Aggie’s, running it through her short hair, the curls flattened on one side. She tried to fluff it up. ‘I must look a state.’

‘You really don’t,’ Aggie said. ‘You look amazing. Strong as ever.’

‘Yes, well, that’s how it is with these *transient things*,’ Valeria said, grinding her teeth over the last two words with distaste. ‘They come on and then they’re gone.’

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Aggie waited a moment. ‘I spoke to the doctor before I came in.’ Her mother glanced at her, suspicious. ‘She said the CT scan showed you were okay for now, but that these types of things are warning signs of what might still be coming.’

A stroke – that was what might still be coming. A full-on, life-altering stroke. It was deeply sobering. Valeria set her jaw but said nothing.

‘Did she talk to you about all this? About where to go from here?’ Aggie pressed her.

‘Yes.’

Aggie spied a pile of information leaflets on the over-bed table and nodded, but said no more about it. Her mother obviously wasn’t ready to talk about it, and clearly not with Aggie. ‘I thought you might have called Myrtle,’ Aggie said, then regretted it the moment her mother’s glare landed on her. No, Valeria wouldn’t want to call Myrtle either. She wouldn’t have wanted to call anyone.

‘Anyway,’ Aggie said, heartily, ‘I’m here now and happy to help.’

Her mother swallowed tightly and nodded.

‘I’ve got an overnight bag with me in the car,’ she went on, ‘so I can stay in my old room tonight to be on hand if you need me.’

‘Honestly, that’s not necessary . . .’

‘They won’t let you leave without a plan for support for the next twenty-four hours,’ Aggie said, ignoring the stab of emotion that her mother didn’t want her in the house.

‘What about the cafe?’ Valeria said. ‘Surely you’re needed there.’

‘Savannah can handle it. Trade has slowed now that winter’s here.’

Aggie felt her shoulders tense slightly as she spoke Savannah’s name. A teenage mother was not Valeria’s idea of a suitable second-in-command.

A teenage mother was not Valeria’s idea of *suitable*, full stop.

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With irritation flaring under her skin, Aggie almost opened her mouth to volunteer Holly instead, which she knew Valeria would prefer, but she held back the offer and ploughed on. ‘Come on. Let’s get you out of here.’

Aggie’s mother still lived in the house in which Aggie had grown up. It was a rendered stone home, built at the turn of the nineteenth century, set on forty hectares of farmland on the outskirts of town. It had once been a hundred hectares but after Aggie’s father had died, her mother had sold off sixty hectares and the sheep, and leased out the rest of the land. Today, the land ran sheep once more, which were visible in the distance and dirty grey from the drizzling winter rain.

‘I think I might go and rest,’ Valeria said not long after their arrival at the house.

‘Of course,’ Aggie said, bright on the surface but deeply uneasy beneath. She made Valeria a cup of tea and some toast, then turned on the heater in her mother’s room, and made sure she had her medications and water near her bed.

After closing the bedroom door softly behind her, Aggie wandered through the house, feeling like a stranger. The home was solid and worth good money, but definitely in need of a style update. It was stuck in the era of florals, lace, brocades and wood veneers, with at least five different types of floor covering throughout. It was cold, and damp hung in the air, so she set the dial on the heater in the living room too, then ventured to her old bedroom.

She hadn’t slept in this room since she was sixteen years old.

Gone were her posters of Michael Hutchence and *Beverly Hills, 90210*. Gone were her boxes of mixtapes recorded off the radio top forty countdown each week. Gone were her high school textbooks, the biology book almost too heavy to carry home each day in her

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bag, and the modern history book – the subject she had tried so hard in because her father taught it at university. He could bring history to life, igniting her mind, but she mused now that she could remember very little of it, and much less of her father than she would have liked, too.

She ran her hand along the brown desk in the corner of the room, then ducked down to see where she'd scratched *Mal* into the side of the drawers with the tip of a protractor. She ran her fingers over it, wondering if her mother had ever found it. She doubted it. She imagined Valeria would have burnt the desk if she had.

She sat on the edge of her single bed, the springs squeaky under her weight, and surveyed the boxes of random items that had been stored in this room over the years. Old exercise equipment, tax files, bags of clothes and bedding. Aggie wondered how many of her father's clothes her mother had kept, if any. She sneezed as swirling dust particles reached her nostrils. She'd have to give everything a good wipe down in order to sleep here tonight.

She pulled her legs up onto the bed and leant against the wall, remembering the tears, the endless tears that had soaked through her pillow on her last night in this room. The shame, the guilt, the fear, the confusion. Her mother had been firm, and her father had done nothing to stop it.

Her mobile phone sprang to life, jolting her from the memory.

Gideon.

Her heart rocketed to her throat, and her hand hovered over the phone as she deliberated whether or not to answer it. Eventually, she sent his call to voicemail.