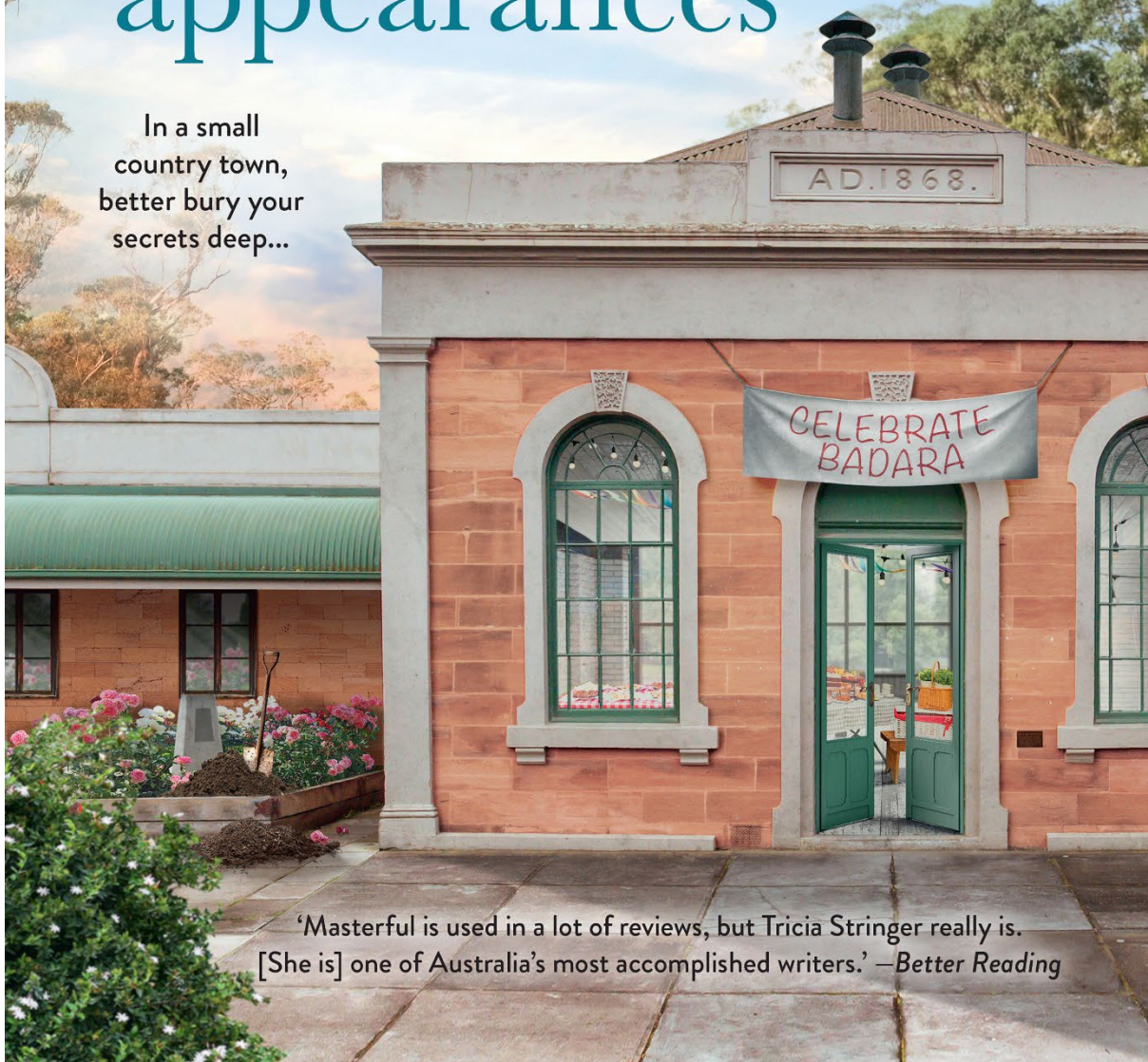


BESTSELLING AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR

TRICIA STRINGER

keeping *up* appearances

In a small
country town,
better bury your
secrets deep...



'Masterful is used in a lot of reviews, but Tricia Stringer really is.
[She is] one of Australia's most accomplished writers.' —*Better Reading*

one

Present day

It's not easy to disappear. Hard enough for one person let alone a mother and three children, but Paige believed she'd pulled it off. Sun streamed in through the kitchen window, warming the canary-yellow benchtops where she was slicing fruit for the kids' after-school snack. She lifted her gaze to the row of brightly coloured geraniums lining the fence beyond the window and allowed herself a smile.

They'd been in the little town of Badara in rural South Australia for six weeks and no-one had come looking for them, and there'd been no unexpected knocks on her door or weird deliveries. She had a new phone and a new number that, apart from the children's schools, only her best friend Niesha had, plus she'd given it to her parents but they rarely made contact, and Levi's other grandparents who lived in New Zealand.

It had been hard not to stand out when they'd first arrived. Badara was a town of around three hundred people if you also counted those living on nearby farms. Anyone new was immediately under scrutiny. Naturally the locals had shown interest in the newcomers. Paige knew how to be polite without giving too much away and so far she'd managed to keep people at arm's length.

The house had been a surprising windfall. She'd had no idea where to hide and Google had come to her aid. Her frantic search for a rental that was both cheap and far from Melton, Victoria, had turned up this fabulous old house, with its large rooms and high ceilings. It came partly furnished, and the best part was the ridiculously cheap rent. After driving for three days, with road-side campouts, she'd been exhausted and the kids cranky and she'd been terrified that she might have dragged them all this way to a non-existent house. In the dull light of that grey after-noon it had looked a bit worse for wear and the garden was part overgrown and part dead, but the house had been true to the photos and her distant landlord's promise of being weatherproof and liveable.

"Mummy, I'm hungry."

Levi's plaintive voice and big imploring brown eyes brought her back to the present.

"Have some apple." She handed him a quarter of the fruit she'd been doing her best to cut the bad bits out of. That was the only thing that hadn't changed – the difficulty she had trying to feed her kids. She'd used her meagre savings to move them, and buy the new phone and some extra bits of furniture. It hadn't left a lot to build up her staples.

"I'm still hungry," Levi wailed.

She handed him a second piece of apple and put the remains plus another apple and a pear into a bowl.

"We'll have the rest after we get Kodie."

"Yay!" The little boy clapped his hands.

Paige strapped him into the stroller and set off to meet her daughter at the school gate. Levi was chanting his sister's name and kicking his legs in time to the beat.

"Kodie! Kodie!"

The sound of the school bell rang out in the distance. Paige picked up her pace. Luckily it wasn't very far from their place to the school.

Kodie was already waiting at the oval gate, kicking her foot against the wire of the fence. Paige bit back the command for her to stop. The shoes had been new at the start of the school year. But she could tell from the scowl on Kodie's face they'd end up in an argument. *Pick your battles*, she'd been told once by a mum with five kids. It had been good advice.

"Hey, kiddo," she said instead.

"Kodie!" Levi called.

The scowl slipped from Kodie's face and she bent into the stroller to hug her brother. She stayed half in, half out tickling him. Levi kicked and laughed. The stroller was a flimsy thing bought at a second-hand shop and the faded material was already ripped in a couple of places.

"Steady up, Kodie," Paige said.

The little girl gave her brother one last tickle under his chin and stepped back. He tugged off her hat and dropped it to the ground. She stuffed it in her bag. Paige resisted telling her fair-skinned daughter to put it back on her head. Instead, she turned the stroller in the direction of home.

"There's a newsletter," Kodie said and handed over a crumpled page. "Some of my class are showing their constructions."

Paige glanced at the newsletter, which had several smiling kids holding up buildings made from cardboard, pipe cleaners and coloured paper.

"Mine's not there."

Kodie's statement was matter of fact but Paige felt a stab of conscience. She'd asked the school not to include Kodie in any photos that may appear online. Kodie didn't know that, of course.

Paige glanced over the rest of the newsletter and her eyes stopped at a notice about a fitness group, Tuesdays at the local hall. Now that they were settled she should make the effort to mix more in the community.

"Have a good day?" Paige asked.

"Yes."

"How did your morning talk go?"

Kodie shrugged and strode ahead. Her little legs might be thin but they were strong. Her close-cropped blonde hair tufted up as if she'd been dragging her fingers through it and her backpack banged against her back with each step.

"Would you like me to hook that on the stroller?" Paige asked.

"It's not that heavy."

"I know but..." Paige was silenced by the determined jut of Kodie's jaw.

A willie wagtail hopped ahead of them singing cheerfully then fluttered up onto a fence as they passed.

"I could walk by myself, you know," Kodie said, ignoring the little bird that once she would have stopped to admire and talk to.

"Jayden does."

The only thing that had bothered Paige about Badara was that there was no high school so her oldest, Jayden, had a twenty-minute bus trip to Wirini Bay Area School each day. The bus picked up and dropped off the students at the primary school gate. Even though it drove right past their door Jayden had to walk to the primary school to catch it.

She didn't like that he was so far away from her during the day, but at thirteen he was street smart and knew not to give too much away. She'd also told him the reason for their move – not the real one. She felt guilty making Levi's grandparents the scapegoats but Jayden would never have come with her otherwise. He was a good kid but he'd dug his heels in at the idea of leaving his friends behind in Victoria. She'd had to come up with something to change his mind.

Ahead of them a car came a bit too fast around the corner and slewed to their side of the road.

"You're big enough to walk by yourself, Kodie, but it's the other silly people we have to worry about."

Paige nodded towards the car.

It slowed and continued along the street at a more sedate pace. The young P-plater kept his eyes straight ahead as he passed them.

“That’s Jayden’s friend.”

Paige looked back as the car turned the next corner. “How do you know?”

“He’s been at the playground when we’ve been there.”

The poor excuse for a playground was dirt, with some swings and a small climbing frame. Badara was a pretty little town, nestled between some low hills and a dry creek bed – there were plenty of nice gardens and big trees but like some of the houses and older buildings, the park had been neglected. It was at the other end of the main road that ran past their place. She’d taken Kodie and Levi there not long after they’d moved in. Paige had found the unloved park depressing and hadn’t gone back. It was Jayden who’d offered to take his brother and sister there a few times lately.

It had surprised her. Often helpful with his younger siblings in the past, since the move he’d spent a lot of time on his own in his room. She put it down to him turning into a teenager and having a room of his own at this new house – something he’d never had in the flats they’d lived in most of his life.

She should be pleased he’d made a friend but he was only thirteen. A P-plater would have several years on him and what kind of seventeen- or eighteen-year-old wanted to hang out with a much younger kid? A knot formed in her stomach and the worry that had left her for a couple of weeks returned. She’d let her guard down.

They crossed the road and Kodie hurried ahead. The place they were renting was on a corner. The house itself faced a side road, and the old shopfront attached to the house was on the main road. The owner had said they could use the big room in the old shop if they wanted to. There was a door into it from the house. Paige had liked

the notion of the big space. Not that she had any idea about what to use it for other than extra space for the kids on a rainy day; they'd had not a drop of rain since they'd arrived.

They could hear the loud music thudding from the house before they even got part way along the drive.

"Jayden's home." Kodie took off at a gallop and Levi strained at his seat straps.

"Jayden," he echoed.

They both adored their big brother. She hoped he was in the mood for their attention. She rounded the house. Jayden had opened the louvre windows and the thud of the bass boomed.

She frowned. It was too early for him to be home.

"Steady up, buddy." She bent to unstrap Levi, who was straining so hard against the straps they threatened to rip from the stroller fabric.

Paige was the last inside. Jayden's door was shut and Levi was hitting it with the palm of his hand.

Kodie stuck her head out of the kitchen. "He said he'd play ball with us, Levi, but we have to leave him in peace for ten more minutes. I've set the timer on the microwave."

Levi hit the door again. "Jayden," he called. Ten minutes or ten hours, the time meant nothing to Levi.

Paige knocked then opened the door. Jayden was lying on his bed, his eyes closed and the old radio he'd commandeered turned up as high as it could go. They were hit by a wall of sound. She scooped Levi into her arms and covered his ears.

"Jayden!"

She stepped into the room and turned down the music.

"Hey!" Jayden sat up, the smile that had been on his lips dissipating.

Levi struggled to get out of her arms. "Jayden, come play ball," he called.

"I told Kodie I'd play in a while." Jayden scowled at his little brother as Levi slid to the ground.

"What are you doing home from school?"

"I got a ride with Zuri."

"Who's Zuri?"

"My mate. He goes to Wirini Area and he lives on a farm the other side of town. He drives to school some days and he offered me a ride."

Paige did a quick calculation. Jayden finished earlier than Kodie but there was still no way he could be home at this time, even with a ride.

"Did you skip a class?"

"It was only art. Dracula doesn't care if we're there or not."

"Who's Dracula?" Kodie was peering around the door, wide-eyed.

"Mr Drakus. He's got two long pointy teeth." Jayden bared his teeth at her and gnashed them together.

"I care." Paige folded her arms. Back in Melton, Jayden had fallen in with a group of boys who were ambivalent about school attendance. It was another of the reasons she'd wanted to move.

"Don't make a fuss, Mum. It was one lesson and one ride." Jayden spoke with the authority of an adult.

“Zuri told me footy practice starts soon. He said I should come and try out. The under-fifteens are short on players.”

Paige’s jaw dropped. Jayden had never shown the slightest interest in sport before. “I thought this Zuri was old enough to drive. How could he be in the under-fifteens?”

“He’s almost eighteen. He’s playing A grade. He’s been telling me about the footy.”

“Do you even know any of the rules?”

“I watch the footy on TV and I’ve played a bit at school.” Paige studied her oldest son as her youngest climbed onto his lap. Jayden had always been lean and short for his age. He was showing no sign of the growth spurt she’d heard could come with boys reaching their teens. It was hard to imagine him surviving on a football field with older and bigger opponents. “I don’t know—”

“You said we were here to make a new start, Mum. It’s a way to meet people.”

Kodie sidled into the room and leaned against Jayden’s bed. All three of them were looking up at her.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Sweet.” Jayden jumped up as if she’d said yes and hoisted his little brother to his shoulders. “Get the ball, Kodes. Let’s go out the back.”

The backyard was an overgrown mess that Paige had partly tamed with a push mower and a small saw she’d found in the garden shed. On one side, just beyond the back of the house, was a cement slab where a building had once stood. The kids used it to play basketball and handball and any of the other ball games they made up that could include Levi.

Paige watched them through the window. How had the conversation gone from skipping school to playing for the local footy team? She shook her head, grateful the kids were at least happy and outside for a while. It was two days before her

Centrelink money was due and the groceries she'd bought a week ago were almost gone.

There was no takeaway food here, no nearby shop of any kind apart from the place she collected her mail. It had a faded sign saying mini-mart but sold nothing except a few second-hand books and magazines. She had enough bread and milk to get them through the next day. Then first thing Wednesday morning she'd have to drive to Wirini Bay to do a quick grocery shop, fill the car with fuel, drop some lunch at school for Jayden and then get back to Badara in time to make some lunch to drop off for Kodie. Right now she'd have to be very creative with whatever was in the cupboard to make something to feed her kids tonight.

She wandered into the kitchen. Her heart sank when she saw the fruit she'd cut up was all gone and the empty bread bag was on the bench. Jayden must have made himself a snack when he got home. That meant only half a loaf of bread in the freezer and there wasn't much cereal left. She sagged to a chair. Sometimes she didn't want to be a mother. The weight of the responsibility was overwhelming. The newsletter she still gripped in one hand caught her eye. She read the ad for the fitness group again. It was Tuesday tomorrow, perhaps she'd go. It was time she got out of the house and did something for herself.