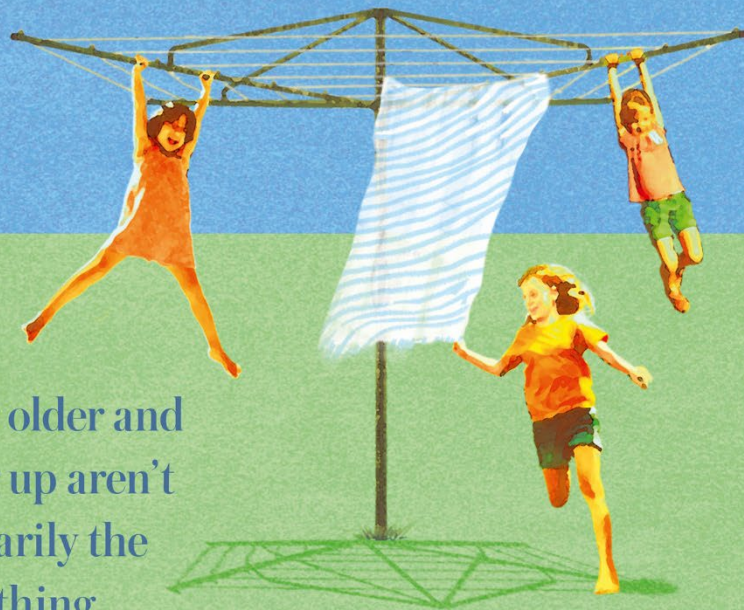


# family baggage



Growing older and  
growing up aren't  
necessarily the  
same thing ...

Ilsa Evans

## Prologue

Enid Tapscott was dying. She knew this with a certainty that felt congealed within, thick and visceral. Like marrow itself. The odd thing was that she felt removed from it all, as if the inevitability of her dying had robbed the concept of power. Instead she was utterly relaxed, her blood warm, limbs heavy, mind deliciously foggy. Enid thought that she hadn't felt this tranquil for years. Certainly not since the seventies anyway, when for a brief period of time she had floated through life on a cloud of weed.

Even if awareness of her own imminent demise hadn't been curled within, it was easily discerned from the attitudes of those around. Fatalism wafted into a miasma that hung from the ceiling like mist. The hushed voices of the nurses, the shiny-eyed solicitude of her children, and especially the sudden appearance of her mother. This last had been a dead giveaway, in every sense of the term, as her mother had been cremated nearly half a century ago. Yet there she was, superimposed on the IV drip stand, gazing beatifically down on her daughter. Clearly death had done wonders for her personality.

Under normal circumstances, as in when she wasn't busy dying, their defeatism would have irritated Enid. But then, she supposed, if she wasn't dying, then it wouldn't be an issue. She blinked slowly, trying to unravel this philosophical enigma. Soon it too drifted away. Her mother sighed. It was the soundtrack of Enid's childhood. She wondered if at some point her life would flash before her eyes. Maybe it already had and she'd missed it. Typical. It would have been a short feature anyway. Childhood, marriage, motherhood, death. Hopefully reincarnation was actually a thing, and she got another shot.

Her mother sighed again. It occurred to Enid that she was being judged not on her lack of achievements but on the detritus left behind. She wanted to explain that she'd had no warning. Otherwise she would have spring-cleaned the house and scrubbed the casserole dish from last night's stew. She would have done that load of washing. She would have also pre-purchased one of those funeral plans, chosen the songs (anything but 'Amazing Grace'), prerecorded a stoic goodbye message and written her own eulogy. She would have put together a will. And she most definitely would have burnt that old diary, destroyed the letter hidden in her wardrobe, culled her memorabilia box, and discarded the vibrator nestled amongst her sensible white underwear. Actually, she probably would have thrown out the underwear also. Soon people would be literally rifling through her smalls.

But Enid had been given no warning. She'd been as fit as a fiddle until six o'clock last night. She knew the exact time because the ABC News had just begun and she'd been standing at the kitchen bench with her cup of tea, wondering, as she did most evenings, where the past eighty-three years had gone. After that her memory was less clear. The cold of the kitchen tiles through the long night, the rubbery feel of her face, then disembodied voices and the smell of the ambulance. All leading up to this state of rather delightful laissez-faire consciousness. She could have done without her mother's presence though. After all these years, it was probably time she told her that. She opened her eyes but instead found the view blocked by a fleshy face, millimetres away, every pore magnified. Enid recoiled, making a noise somewhere between a gasp and a gurgle.

The face immediately pulled back, blurring and then elongating into a body before separating into two more. Like a triple exposure. Enid blinked, trying to focus. Realisation blossomed. These were her daughters. The ties that tether. The Sorter, the Settler and the Sook. Not that she would ever use those words out loud. She tried to smile, but the corners thickened within her cheeks. Now she could also see her grandchildren, standing over by the wall, and ... her eyes darted around the room. There he was, curled in an armchair in the corner, head down. Her son. Enid's gaze softened. She willed him to look up but understood why he could not. How hard this must be for him.

Enid dragged her attention back to his sisters. She felt a rush of urgent energy and, for the first time, fought against the inevitable march of death. She needed more time. She needed to tell them to watch out for their brother. She needed to extract promises. He was so vulnerable. She ran a tongue around her mouth, moistening it in preparation. But the words congealed even as the faces merged back into one, and then slowly faded. Soon all that remained was a soundless smog of

colour and light. Her mother's sigh was a feather-soft breeze, beckoning her towards the darkness. And she realised ruefully that she had simply waited too long. It was over. The story of her life.

## Chapter One

### Monday morning

*Today I went to Ethel Ferguson's Tupperware party. I have no idea why. She didn't even serve booze. The only interesting bit was when they were talking about favourite pastimes (because Connie Duff was trying to spruik Hobbytex), and Ethel's fat sister-in-law said hers was diaries. Writing them kept her from murdering her family. So I thought it worth a try. Anything is worth a try.*

George found the diary almost immediately. She hadn't been looking for it; hadn't, in fact, even suspected its existence, but when she rifled through the desk drawer, there it was. The size of a slim paperback with a padded cover that, judging by the binding, had once been crimson but had since faded to the colour of dried blood. She'd picked it up only because it seemed out of place amongst the jumble of receipts and cheque stubs. It smelt old, like archives and dust. George slipped her glasses on, flicking the book open to the first page. Then she sat down hard on the desk chair, blinking with surprise.

There was no doubt that it was her mother's, and that it was a diary of some sort. She knew that writing as well as her own. Tightly contained cursive with the odd curlicue that bled into words above and below, making them sometimes difficult to decipher. The acerbic observations were also typical Enid, but the diary itself was most definitely not. The introspective nature of it, even apart from the edge of desperation.

From the hallway came the sound of a key in the front door. George tensed guiltily and then remembered, with a fresh shaft of pain, that her mother was dead. Enid Tapscott was not about to walk through the door and catch her daughter going through her personal items. There would be no withering look that, no matter her age, made George feel like a child again. Her eyes welled. They had been doing that a lot over the past week.

She could hear her sisters bustling along the passage now. George thrust the diary back into the drawer, reburying it. This was as instinctive as her earlier guilt. It was fuelled by a fierce desire to keep it to herself, at least temporarily; to be the first to devour the words. It was like being offered a final get-together. Just her and her mother. She pushed the drawer closed and then ran her hands down her pants, as if ridding them of the diary's dusty scent.

Both her sisters were in the kitchen. Kat was putting away milk while Annie unwrapped a bakery box. George plonked herself at the table, pushing aside some papers to make room for her elbows. She propped her chin on cupped hands and watched them, drawing comfort from their presence. They had always been close. They even looked similar. Fair complexions with hazel eyes, neat features and mousy hair that each, to varying degrees, kept short and livened up with highlights. Kat had lately opted for a rather dramatic pixie cut with dark streaks, while Annie always went for attention-grabbing colour. This month was plum. George herself preferred low-maintenance, with just enough colour to hide the odd strand of grey. Their looks were all Enid. Even their brother resembled her a little, certainly far more than he did his father. It made George a little sad sometimes, that this lovely, devoted man had left such a faint stamp behind.

Some variety lay in their sizes though, and in reverse proportion to their age. As the eldest, Kat was also the slightest, while Annie was a couple of inches taller and wider. George sat in the middle, which seemed to be her wont in life. The mediator between the two. But the main difference had always been in their personalities, marking them even in their fifties.

'Already made a start then?' asked Kat. 'Please tell me you found a will or something equally helpful?' She got three mugs down from the cupboard. She was wearing a lovely sleeveless lemon

top and skinny jeans. George hadn't worn jeans for a decade. Skinny or otherwise. Her sister turned, displaying the tattoo that encircled an upper bicep. It featured leafy roses, very pretty until a closer examination revealed a thread of barbed wire intertwining the foliage. Kat had gotten it in her early twenties, much to their mother's disgust. George didn't have any tattoos either.

'Well?' asked Kat now, looking at her enquiringly. 'Is that a hard question or something?'

George blinked. She thought of the diary. 'Oh no,' she said, rather airily. She waved a hand for good measure but then thought it might look a little like she was channelling the queen. She propped it back beneath her chin.

Kat lifted an eyebrow. 'Are you all right?'

'Yeah, sure.' George followed this up with a shrug, because she wasn't all right. She hadn't been all right for a week. She was the opposite of all right. She was asunder.

'Look what I brought!' exclaimed Annie. She tilted the bakery box to reveal a selection of pastries. 'Something to help us get through. I thought ... you know. She'd have liked this.'

George smiled at her sister even as she felt her eyes glisten again. Their mother always had pastries when they were visiting. Neenish tarts were her favourite. The sight of them here, now, actually churned her stomach. She'd eaten little since it happened, which was odd because usually food was her crutch. But it was like the enormity of what had happened filled her belly. There was no room for anything else. Kat abandoned her coffee-making and came over to the table. She dropped her bag on the table and pulled out a chair, flopping down with a groan.

'Bloody hell,' she said in her husky voice. George had always envied her older sister's voice. She could have worked in radio, or on telephone sex-lines. The only time George sounded like that was when she had a bad cold, and then the surfeit of mucus generally negated the sexiness of the voice.

'How weird does this feel?' continued Kat. 'Being here like this?'

'I keep expecting her to walk in,' said Annie slowly. She looked towards the lounge room. 'And tell me off for taking over. Make me go sit down.'

'Yep,' said George. She took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes.

Kat nodded. After a few seconds of silence she dropped her head and began rummaging through her bag. She took out an iPad and her mobile phone, laying them neatly on the table. Then she looked up again. 'So ... how have you both been?'

George shrugged. There were no words. She guessed that Annie felt the same way as she didn't reply either, instead busying herself with arranging the pastries on a plate.

Kat persevered. 'Recovered from the funeral yet?'

'Oh. My. God.' George grimaced. This was easier to discuss. In fact, the funeral had been so bad that it was almost funny.

Annie stopped what she was doing. 'Worst funeral ever.' She shook her head and then let out a snort of laughter. '*Fawlty Towers* awful. It was only missing John Cleese.'

The sisters fell silent again, remembering. On one level, of course, a funeral *should* be relatively awful. George imagined few people turned to each other after burying a loved one and said, 'What fun! Can't wait to do *that* again!' But their mother's funeral had taken this to new heights. Or depths. For her, the day had even begun badly. Fierce altercations with both offspring over outfits, one wanting to wear ripped jeans and the other shades of red (the former arguing that her grandmother would prefer her to be comfortable and the latter that *his* grandmother had been a fan of colour. Both were wrong). By the time that was over, nobody was on speaking terms and George herself had only minutes to get ready.

Not that it mattered. Gale-force northerly winds whipped her hair into a beehive. They'd arrived at the funeral home only to discover that the slideshow USB had been left at home. Her son Leo made the dash back while she went to mingle with the family and friends now gathering, buffeted by wind. Platitude after platitude, each accompanied by a hand on George's arm, anchoring her in place. She'd taken on so many layers of grief that even her ankles felt thick.

Then came the commencement music, where the carefully selected orchestral piece had been replaced by what sounded like the soundtrack from *Jaws*. The mourners all straightened as one, gazing around with surprise. They'd looked like startled meerkats. When finally they began filing inside, their footfalls keeping time with the build of the beat, George had thought it couldn't possibly get worse. She was wrong.

The celebrant, chosen during the fog of raw bereavement, delivered a service so monotone that he made Enid's life seem more depressing than her actual death. Great-Aunt Astrid had fallen

asleep, her moist snores punctuating the speech. The celebrant was followed by Aunt Margaret, who tried to liven things up so much that she'd sounded like a stand-up comedian. Just as she declared that Enid had *always* liked to make an entrance, Leo had done just that. He'd also changed his grey suit jacket for one of a cranberry hue that matched the hatband on his fedora. As he stood there, looking like a flamboyant version of Indiana Jones, the wind caught the door and slammed it shut with such force that even the coffin shuddered. Great-Aunt Astrid promptly fainted, smacking her head against the back of the chair. Everything had been put on hold until an ambulance attended, eventually giving her a cautious all clear.

Things hadn't improved from there. The slideshow froze on a close-up of her mother, the whites of her eyes glowing like a dystopian movie-still. The celebrant mislaid his notes for the closing. Somebody's child got a bloody nose. When finally the coffin rolled back through the curtain, the moving strains of 'Amazing Grace' were abruptly replaced by 'Everything is Awesome' from *The Lego Movie* as their brother's mobile went off. They left the building straight into a crowd of windblown strangers assembling for the next funeral, only to discover that Great-Aunt Astrid had been mislaid, eventually being discovered inside enjoying her second funeral for the day. All of which meant they were subsequently so late to the wake that most people had already left. All that remained was the catered food, still in the fridge, and so many flowers that the floral scent lodged like a potpourri lump in her throat. It was still there.

'Remember that *Jaws* music?' asked Kat now. She rapped her knuckles against the table, sounding out the beat. 'Da dum, da dum, da dum.'

Annie rolled her eyes. 'What about the celebrant?' She lowered her voice to mimic him. 'We are gathered here together to blah, blah, blah. Snore.'

'No, *that* was Aunt Astrid's contribution,' said George. 'And how about the slideshow? When it stuck on that bit with Mum looking possessed?'

'Bloody hell,' said Kat. She was playing with her iPad now. 'And you do realise that we're now blessed with a DVD of the whole shitshow? Which is just weird. Even if it was a lovely funeral, does anyone *ever* want to relive these things?' She glanced up. 'I don't re-watch movies I enjoy, let alone funerals.'

Annie brought over the laden plate. 'I don't know. I did have a favourite part.' She straightened the pastries, not making eye contact. 'You know when Kat started doing the eulogy and got stuck? Then we both got up at the same time and went to stand with her. So that she could finish. I'd re-watch that bit.'

George nodded. She smiled. It *had* been a lovely moment. The three of them, united in grief and solidarity. She suspected that they would need to draw on that, going forward.

'Well, we'd better get started,' said Kat, as if thinking the same thing.

They'd given themselves the weekend to recover; a sort of timeout, a bubble of normality that was anything but. Today, though, was the start of the sorting that followed a death. It was a convoluted process, George knew, just from being on the periphery of her father-in-law's death a few years before. And here it was complicated by their brother, who had yet to make an appearance despite having the least distance to travel.

The kettle began to boil, but Kat remained where she was. Annie took over, putting together mugs of coffee that she brought over to the table. She lowered herself into a chair with a sigh and wrapped her hands around her mug. George thought that her younger sister seemed tired, and her makeup was heavier than usual. A small glob of mascara nestled in the corner of an eye. George felt a surge of affection.

'Okay,' said Kat decisively. 'Here we go. I've put together an agenda.' She slid the iPad towards the centre of the table. Sure enough there was an agenda there, complete with dot-pointed action items. George blinked.

'You're unbelievable,' said Annie, leaning forward.

'Unbelievably good,' replied Kat smugly. Then she raised one eyebrow. 'Although do let me know if either of you would like to take over? I know I can be a little ... bossy.'

George exchanged a glance with her younger sister. Bossy was an understatement, but then Kat was undoubtedly also the most capable. Annie would probably over-complicate things and then take offence when it went awry, while she herself ... well, with a to-do list as long as her arm and her own life something of a mess, she was hardly the best choice to organise the clean-up of someone else's.

'No?' asked Kat now. 'Okay then.' She tapped one finger on the iPad to bring it back to life. 'So, first item. Let's recap. The lawyer has all the paperwork in hand but the whole process will take a while. The funeral's paid. We've got an appointment at the cemetery on Thursday afternoon to select the plot. Spot. Whatever they call it.' She cleared her throat and continued more quickly. 'But in the meantime we need to sort her bills.' She nodded towards the paperwork that George had pushed aside. 'We can check her desk for any other outstanding things.'

'I'll do that,' said George quickly.

Kat nodded. 'O-kay. And of course we need to discuss the elephant in the room.'

This was one of the things that had kept George awake for much of the night. Right on cue, the footfalls of the elephant himself could be heard beneath them. They echoed along the floorboards and then a door creaked, followed by the sound of Harry coming up the stairs. This house, their childhood home, wasn't large. Just a compact L-shaped lounge and dining, with the island bench serving as the divider between dining and kitchen. A hallway ran down the centre of the house, with living areas to one side and bedrooms to the other. At the end of the hallway were stairs leading down into what had originally been a garage and workroom. During their childhood, this workroom had been repurposed as an extra bedroom and then, twenty years ago, after her husband's death, their mother had embarked on a major renovation. Upstairs, this had just meant turning the second bedroom into a study, but downstairs was unrecognisable. An entire apartment for their brother, complete with bedroom, living area, and ensuite. All self-contained yet still dependent. Just like him.

Annie let go of her mug and drummed her fingers on the table. Nobody said anything. Moments later Harry entered the lounge room. He was wearing a pair of tracksuit pants and a t-shirt that featured Iron Man. It stretched across his midriff, giving Iron Man a lopsided girth that would have severely hampered his ability to fly. Middle age, or perhaps Harry's epilepsy medication, had erased the last traces of the slim, fine-boned boy. He stood awkwardly, casting them a rapid glance.

'Come on, mate,' said George kindly. 'Come here and sit down.'

He pointed towards the area by the island bench. 'That's where she was.'

All three sisters swivelled to follow his finger. They already knew, of course, and had each since been to the house for various reasons and spent time staring at the tiles, but there was still something magnetic about the area. Kat was the first to recover.

'But she didn't *die* there, Harry. She just had a fall. We've *all* done that at some time.'

Harry gazed at her. Their father used to say that Harry was a slow thinker but a deep one, and that was far better than the opposite. George could almost see him digesting this new angle. She tried to nudge him along.

'Even Mum has! Remember that time she slipped in the bathroom and broke her collarbone? Or when she fell off the chair putting up the new light?'

Annie joined in. 'That's right! C'mon, Harry. There wouldn't be a square inch in this house where *someone* hasn't fallen! It's what makes it a home.'

'Odd definition of home,' said Kat to her. Her lip quirked. 'Not sure OHS would agree.'

George was still gazing at Harry. He seemed almost convinced. She patted the chair beside her. 'Sit down. Join us. We're talking about what's next. You're part of this.'

Harry hesitated, and then shuffled over to the table. He sat.

'Did you enjoy yourself staying with Aunt Margaret?'

'No.'

George grinned at her sisters. They were very fond of Aunt Margaret, their father's sister, but there was no doubt she was the chatty type. Harry most definitely was not.

'Who rang you?' asked Annie suddenly. 'At the funeral?'

Harry looked at her, puzzled. 'No-one.'

'But your phone went off! With that Lego song!'

'That was my alarm.'

'Your *alarm*? What on earth did you need an alarm for?'

Harry looked at her as if she herself was a bit slow. 'For the funeral.'

'What? But you were already—'

'Leave it,' said Kat. She shook her head. 'We love you, Harry. You're a hoot.'

He nodded, as if this was indisputable. They fell quiet for a while. George found her attention returning to the tiles. Even though it was January, they must have been so cold overnight. She started as Annie pushed her chair back, scraping it across the floor.

'Coffee?' she asked Harry.

He nodded. She put the kettle on and then began, incongruously, to scrub a casserole dish that sat by the sink. George looked over at Kat, but her older sister was now examining her mobile. After a few minutes the kettle whistled, a muffled shrill that cut uncomfortably across the silence. George closed her eyes momentarily. She didn't think she'd taken a deep breath since it happened. She had a sudden urge for camaraderie.

'It's not even been a full week,' she said. She chewed at her bottom lip. 'I keep thinking what I was doing this time last Monday. Before ... you know.'

Kat lifted her gaze from the mobile. 'Not wanting to be pedantic, but this time last Monday she was already in trouble. We just didn't realise yet.'

George stared down at her coffee. In trouble was a nicer way of saying dying. Dying, dying, dead. Her mother was dead. The sentence was an oxymoron; the words jarred.

'I know what you mean,' said Annie suddenly. 'And what's more, I think we'll always do that. Soon it'll be this time last month, then it'll be this time last January. Eventually we'll just say this time in 2020. But it'll always be there.' She paused to pour boiling water into Harry's blue mug. 'Like a wall. Before and after.'

George's throat felt thick. She gazed at Annie, willing her to make eye contact. But her sister kept her attention on Harry's mug. Steam wafted across her face. From beside her, George sensed Kat watching too.

'The Berlin Wall was erected in 1961,' said Harry, filling the silence. 'Some people say that it came down in 1989, but that's not right. Demolition officially began in 1990 and was completed in 1991.'

'Thanks for that,' said Kat brusquely. '*Totally* relevant.'

Harry flushed. George reached over to pat his hand. 'No need to be mean, Kat.'

Kat didn't reply. She stared down at the iPad for a few moments and then reached for the plate of pastries, sliding them across the table towards Harry in lieu of an apology. Annie brought his mug over to the table and took a seat.

'Okay then, let's get started,' she said. She sighed. 'No point putting it off.'

Kat nodded. She tapped on the iPad again. 'Back to the agenda then. And I have an idea I'd like to run past you.'

'Arson?' asked George. A small part of her wasn't joking. At around two that morning she had fantasised about the house being hit by a bolt of lightning. Preferably, of course, while it was empty. But that would negate the need for any decisions. It would all be done for them.

'Best not put that in the minutes,' said Annie. She leaned across to grab a muffin.

'Female arsonists aren't common,' said Harry around a mouthful of danish. 'And they usually do it for attention.' He frowned for a moment. 'Except with Terry Barton. In 2002 she burnt a love letter and set fire to 138,000 acres in the United States of America.'

'Impressive,' said Kat, lifting an eyebrow. She shook herself and looked back at Annie. 'I'm not taking minutes, smart-arse. Now do you want to hear my idea or not?'

'I do,' said George. She also wanted to ask Harry if he knew what was in Terry Barton's love letter but didn't want to receive a lecture on the US postal service. The amount of trivia he kept in his head was astounding. One of her mother's pet peeves had been that after the movie *Rain Man* came out, people began comparing him to the main character. But this essentialised people like Harry, as if one similar characteristic made them all the same. For starters, unlike that character, Harry could be relatively affectionate, never had meltdowns, and could not fathom maths. Even numbers only made sense in relation to objects. To him, the 138,000 acres just mentioned might as well be the size of their backyard.

'So then, it's like this,' continued Kat. 'You know how I've been sharing with Kathy Sheffield ever since I got back?' She waited for her sisters to nod. They all knew that she had sold her apartment early the previous year while undertaking a secondment in London. On her return, seven months ago, she had moved in with a friend. Kat took a sip of coffee and continued. 'Well, she met some bloke on Tinder and he's all but moved in, so it's a little crowded. I've been looking to buy, but to be honest, I don't mind putting that off until I'm sure I'm staying at the Melbourne office.'

'You're thinking of heading off again?' asked George. The words caught in her throat.

'No, not really,' said Kat. She shrugged. 'Anyway, here's my idea. I move in here for a year. So we can take our time with ...' she paused, her gaze sliding across to Harry and then away. 'Things. And we can make a few repairs, spruce the place up. Get it, you know, ready.'

George gazed at her. She loved the idea, instantly, even if a tiny part of her felt dislodged by the fact that it was Kat providing a solution for Harry. Usually that was her role. Regardless though, it was procrastination with purpose. Her favourite combination.

She got up to get a glass of water as she played with the notion, examining the edges.

'But that'll give you a longer commute,' said Annie now. She was frowning. 'Besides, aren't we better off just biting the bullet? Putting it on the market?'

George glanced at her quickly as she sat down again. In the last decade or so, Annie had developed a soft v across the bridge of her nose, which capitalised when she frowned. It was doing that now. It occurred to her that Annie might have money issues. She had long suspected that she was still partly supporting her adult son, so it was certainly possible.

'Nah,' said Kat. 'We'll get a better price if we fix it up a bit.' She waved a hand towards the kitchen, which featured mosaic tile and mission-brown trim. 'If we invested say, ten grand, we'd get ten times back at point of sale.'

'Ten grand!' exclaimed Annie.

Kat gave her a shrewd look. 'Yes, but it can come out of Mum's savings. You do realise they were fairly reasonable? As soon as probate comes through, we'll be splitting that four ways.'

'Oh.' Annie sat back as she digested this. 'Oh, okay. Of course.'

'I think it's a great idea,' put in George. She felt lighter already. 'I really do.'

'Harry?' Kat smiled at their brother. 'You get a say too. How do you feel about me moving here for a year?'

Harry was brushing icing sugar from his fingers. 'William Wordsworth lived with his sister Dorothy,' he said, without looking up. 'They were very happy.'

'Well, there you go,' said Kat. 'Perhaps we shall write poetry together.' She turned back to her sisters. 'But there's two conditions. One is that I'm not a replacement ... carer. If you know what I mean.'

George knew exactly what she meant. And she could help anyway. She nodded.

'No poetry,' said Harry. 'I don't like poetry.'

'Like with his finances and everything,' said Kat, still addressing her sisters. 'We have to share the ... responsibilities.' She slid her gaze across to Harry for a moment and then brought it back. 'And the other condition is that we need to clean this place out first.'

'What?' Annie's v deepened once more. 'Clean it out? All of it?'

'No poetry,' said Harry, more firmly this time.

George patted his hand lightly. 'There'll be no poetry, Harry. We promise.'

'All of it,' said Kat emphatically, as if there had been no interruption. 'I don't want to live in a shrine. Nor do I want anyone asking in a year's time what happened to this or that. What I'm asking is that we spend this week clearing *everything* that's upstairs. There's lots people will want, but after we divide it up, we donate the rest. I've got my own things in storage.'

George considered this. One week wasn't a lot of time. It might be a small house, but it was crammed with belongings. And memories. Every drawer full, every surface crowded, every wall laden. But if that was the price, then she was more than willing to pay it. She opened her mouth, but Annie spoke first.

'Apart from anything else, not all of us can take a week off just like *that*.' She clicked her fingers for emphasis. 'We have jobs. *Regular* jobs.'

George rolled her eyes. She knew that this last had been directed at her because it was a dig that Annie made quite regularly, mostly good-natured but with, she suspected, an undercurrent of envy. In fact George's job required the same input as a more traditional one, like Annie's nursing. She taught professional writing part-time at the local TAFE, and also produced a column for a national newspaper weekend supplement. But Annie often conflated flexibility with leisure. Besides, she acted like George just cribbed information from Wikipedia. She was very wrong. Mostly.

'Plus I've got Tom staying,' continued Annie. 'And he's only here for this week.'

George had more sympathy with this. Annie's son had flown down from the Gold Coast as soon as he'd heard that his grandmother was ill, and was leaving again this coming weekend. 'You

don't have to be here every day though,' she said now. 'And maybe Tom'd like to be involved anyway? He could pick a few mementoes to take back with him?'

'I've already spoken to the removalists I used last time,' said Kat. 'They can bring my things over next Monday. Sorry, Annie, but if I'm going to do this, I'd rather get it done.'

'You were pretty confident we'd say yes then?' said Annie, raising her eyebrows.

Kat shrugged. 'I haven't locked it in, but, well, you have to admit it makes sense. We could do a SWOT analysis if you like? I've already done my own but happy to do one together.'

'No need,' said George quickly. 'I've just swotted in my head. The strengths and opportunities *clearly* outweigh the weaknesses. The biggest one being of course *you*'—she turned a rueful expression on Annie—'not being there.'

Annie snorted. 'Don't lay it on *too* thick.'

'But we'll do our best to push through despite the pain,' continued George, laying a hand against her heart. 'My two can help. We'll cull and divide and sort out what we think you'd like. Then you can just come around next weekend and check out the fruits of our labour.'

Annie's eyes widened as she processed this. She shook her head slowly. 'No. I suppose I could swap a few shifts. I've taken the next few days off anyway. We should all be here. Tom too.' She flicked a glance at George. 'And yes, I know what you did just then.'

'And *that*, ladies and gentlemen, is how it's done,' said George smugly. She hadn't raised two children for nothing.

Annie grinned, then turned back to Kat. The grin vanished. 'Although, hang on ... *how* will we divide things up? We need to make sure it's fair.'

'Actually I had a thought about that too,' said Kat. 'Given there's four of us, and four grandchildren also, we need to have a plan. A friend did this thing with her family. Stickers.'

'Stickers?' asked George. She had a sudden recollection of her mother doing something similar when she'd cleared out downstairs prior to the renovation. 'Like what Mum did?'

'That's right. Except we each do it. With everything.'

'Can't we just talk about who wants what?' asked Annie. She was frowning again.

Kat shook her head. 'I don't think that'll work. Not by itself. There'll be arguments, and people feeling like they've been talked out of stuff. There's definitely some things that more than one person will want. I just want us to come out the other end still talking to each other.'

'So what happens if we all put stickers on the same thing?' said Annie stubbornly. 'We'll *still* have to discuss it. And there *still* might be arguments.'

'Not if we also include priorities,' said George slowly, thinking it through. 'Like every person gets to put say, an asterisk on one of their stickers for the thing they absolutely want. Their favourite thing. One for each person.'

'Two,' said Kat so quickly that George knew she had been thinking along the same lines. 'Two each. That way, even if they miss out on one, they have to get the other.'

'I don't know,' said Annie. Her v seemed indented. 'It seems a bit overly complicated.'

Kat shrugged. 'It's just a suggestion. I'm happy to put it to a vote.'

'I like it,' said George quickly. The last thing she wanted was conversations with others about memorabilia. About what meant something, and why. She gazed into the lounge room and then shook her head. Even the thought made her feel nauseous. 'I vote yes.'

'Huh.' Annie sat back. 'Well, then it seems I lose anyway.'

'In 2016, two sisters had their brother murdered over an inheritance,' said Harry. He turned his blue mug slightly to the right, and then straightened it. 'They used one of their sons to do it. He's now serving eighteen years behind bars. United States of America again.'

'Well, nobody's murdering anyone here,' said Kat firmly.

'Besides,' added George. 'If we're talking about my son, then there's no problem. He rarely does anything I ask.'

Kat had already turned back to Annie. 'I don't want you to feel like you're being talked into anything. If you come up with another idea, feel free to pitch it.'

Annie shrugged. She reached across for another muffin and then plucked out a blueberry, staring at it. 'Seven days, hey? That's a lot to get done in seven days.'

'Absolutely doable,' replied Kat firmly. 'All we have to do is plan it out and remain solution-focussed. Eyes on the prize. We've got this.'

George nodded slowly. She felt the familiar burn behind her eyes, but even so, felt better now that plans were being put into place and she had a framework within which to move forward.

Although Annie was right. It would be a tall order within seven days. Doable, especially with Kat in charge, but at a stretch. It was also a little biblical. Except in this case it was seven days to dismantle a world. To sort through the belongings of a lifetime, finalise paperwork, divide possessions, draw a line between then and now. This last would be the most challenging because drawing lines was not her forte. They usually blurred, the leakage meaning that everything stayed with her. Baggage accumulated across a lifetime. Maybe at some stage, one day, she would have to sort through those also. But not just yet.