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MAYA LINNELL

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Kookaburra
Cottage

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1

The winery car park was swirling with rubbish when April Lacey pulled up on a blustery summer's day, and she groaned, wondering how many early-morning tourists had driven into Lacewing Estate, taken one look around the tired, litter-strewn entrance and headed straight back out.

Tugging on the handbrake, she jumped down from her Hilux ute and reinstated the fallen sandwich board before chasing after the windblown litter.

A gust of terra rossa soil followed April inside, settling on the polished concrete floor.

'What a gale,' said Fran Lacey, emerging from the barrel room. 'Strong enough to blow the milk from a teacup. Thought you'd be halfway to Adelaide by now.' Fran plucked a navy-and-orange brochure from the pile April had brought in, casting an appraising eye over the gold embossing and thick card.

Even covered in dust, next door's brochures looked expensive.

'I should be,' April said, 'but the builder had a cancellation. By the way, I found the yard plastered with Winklin Wines promotions. I'll send them home with Archie when he comes over next week.'

Fran glanced out the window to the neighbouring vineyard. ‘That little boy needs friends his own age, just like a certain someone else I know. A ten-year-old should be surrounded by nose-picking, bug-hunting, trouble-making little boys, not someone almost two decades his senior.’

April shook her head with a grin and kissed her stepmother on the cheek. ‘Love you too, Franny.’

‘Good luck with the builder,’ Fran called, dusting the wine bottles. ‘And make sure you lock your doors when you hit Glen Osmond Road. More car jackings on the news last week.’

April waved goodbye and stepped back out into the warm morning. She walked towards the dilapidated stables in the middle of the shiraz and chardonnay vines, just a few hundred metres from her home. A Commodore ute towing a trailer was parked alongside the stone building, and when she got closer, April saw the builder was still sitting in the car, phone to his ear.

Tradesmen were thin on the ground in the rural South Australian town of Penwarra and she was grateful the builder had called her when he’d had a cancellation, even if it meant a later departure for the city.

It’ll be well worth it, she told herself, waving off the builder’s apologetic ‘be there in a minute’ gesture.

April checked her own phone, wondering where Justin was. There had been no reply to her message this morning. *Another winemaking dilemma?*

Or maybe he’d assumed this builder would take one look at the old stables before laughing in her face, like the last tradesman she’d requested a quote from.

Shrugging off the memory, she pulled open the double doors. The hinges shuddered under the weight of the aged oak, and April’s eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim space.

Although it had been decades since the last tenants lived there, the earthy aromas of the Clydesdales that had carted grapes from the vineyard to the winery still lingered in the air, along with a faint hint of straw and the rich leathery smell of saddlery. These days, the stables were a jumble of stored clutter. *Not for long*, thought April.

Dust from the rough and ready paddock-rock walls rained down on her navy linen dress. Not bothering to brush it off, April reached for the light switch, then turned when a low whistle came from behind her. The builder crossed his arms, his experienced eye assessing the structure.

‘You know it’d be cheaper to build something completely new rather than renovating this old hut, right?’

‘Have you been talking to my boyfriend?’ April laughed, given the small town and the many links between the nearby communities, it wasn’t out of the question.

The builder shook his head. ‘Just telling it how it is,’ he said, before introducing himself as Gordon Whitty. ‘A small space like this might seem easy, but working with materials this old . . .’ He trailed off, noticing the hopeful look on her face. ‘I’m not saying it can’t be done, but even if you’re keen to help out, it won’t be a cheap exercise.’

Not a screaming endorsement, but not a flat-out refusal either. Looking around at the dirt floor, dilapidated roof and cobwebs, April felt a thrill of excitement—despite the challenges, she knew these old stables could be the bed and breakfast she’d always envisaged.

Gordon pulled a metal ruler from his pocket and gently scratched at the mortar holding the stones together. The lime and sand mix yielded easily, sending a sprinkling of grit to the ground.

‘Truth be told, I’m surprised the council and heritage team approved it. You’ll want a structural report, an energy

assessment, a new floor and depending on the quality of those timbers, the whole roof might need replacing. And that's before you can even start working on an ensuite or that loft you mentioned.' He continued to rattle off the jobs one by one until he'd run out of fingers.

'I've already got the plans drawn up and those things taken care of,' said April, unable to keep the enthusiasm from her voice. 'The paperwork side of it was pretty lengthy but I've been saving and planning this for years. I've just got to find someone brave enough to take it on.'

'Or crazy enough,' came a droll laugh from outside. April looked over the builder's shoulder to see Justin Magill in the doorway, his hair like a cockatoo's crest in the wind, dimples flashing and a smile that softened his words. The breeze picked up, and a small cloud of dust seeped through a crumbling mortar line in what April hoped would become the mezzanine bedroom.

'There you are.' She introduced the builder to her boyfriend. 'Hopefully Gordon here sees it as a challenge, not a folly.'

The builder looked between them, perhaps noticing the way she said 'folly', and held up his hands. 'None of my business either way; if you're willing to pay for the work, I think I can shuffle it in between a few other projects.'

April beamed as Gordon quizzed her about the project and discussed the timeline. She had barely let herself hope they'd find a builder willing to give the old building a chance.

Ten minutes later, when Gordon had left, and April had kissed Justin goodbye, she pulled onto the Riddoch Highway and set the cruise control to 110 kilometres per hour. Although it was still early, heat was already shimmering off the asphalt. She'd only just got up to speed when her father's number appeared on the touchscreen display.

‘I’ve already locked my car doors, Dad,’ she said, preempting a repeat of Fran’s warning.

Lloyd Lacey chuckled. From the sound of the wind whistling against the phone, she guessed he was outside, assessing his grapes.

‘Righto!’ said Lloyd. ‘Keep your hair on, we’re only looking out for you, you know. Fran said you finally had a builder turn up. No wonder Justin was late. Is the builder any good?’

April let the comment about Justin pass, knowing it wasn’t wise to add more fuel to that particular fire—not with vintage looming and the hot summer creating an extra level of stress for the winery staff.

‘Gordon seems great, Dad,’ April said, checking her rear-view mirror. She cranked the air conditioner a little higher. ‘With a bit of luck, we’ll have the bed and breakfast ready for the first guests in spring.’

Leafy green vines whizzed past on either side as April drove out of Penwarra and allowed herself the pleasure of imagining her bed and breakfast in its finished state, with striped curtains fluttering in the windows, flowers on the dining table, sumptuous French linen on the bed and glowing reviews from honeymooners whose married lives had started at the converted stables in the vines. It was only when the Adelaide skyline came into view that she wondered why her father had told her that Justin was late. *Wasn’t he up to his eyeballs in winery stuff, with her dad? Where had he been this morning if not at the winery?* She shook the thought away, blaming the heat and the ad hoc appointment with Gordon for the misunderstanding.



Connor Jamison rummaged around in his suitcase for his sunglasses. They had never seen the light of day in England,

but were now an essential frontline defence against the dazzling Australian sunshine.

He smoothed down his white-blond hair in the hotel's bathroom mirror, tucked a paper map into his back pocket and stowed his sunnies inside his suit jacket, right next to his wallet. He was about to shut down his laptop so he could lock it in the safe when the Zoom ringtone sounded.

Connor accepted the call and his sister Heidi appeared on the screen. 'Even with jetlag, you scrub up well.' Her incredulous tone made him grin; she'd seen him decked out in his finest for concerts, weddings and funerals umpteen times before. 'And that sunshine streaming in through your window!' Her breath fogged the air. 'I'd sell a kidney for just a fraction of it.'

'I've barely defrosted,' he replied. 'Though with this Aussie weather, it shouldn't take long,' he said, eyeing the knitted cap pulled low over Heidi's brows, her red fingerless gloves and the bright woollen scarf wrapped around her neck. 'Is it snowing at home yet?'

Heidi shook her head. 'Trying to, but all we've seen so far is sleet. Enough about our miserable British weather though, how was your fancy event? Met your new boss yet?'

Connor shook his head, glancing at the hotel's digital alarm clock. 'It's tonight, I'm just heading off now. The rest of the winemakers are meeting for drinks beforehand—a bit of Dutch courage before we stride into a room full of Australian icons.'

'They're no better than any of you lot,' said Heidi, her eyes flashing. He wasn't sure if it was from sisterly pride, or simply because she was patriotic, but it was touching all the same. 'You might end up teaching *them* a thing or two about vineyards and vintages.'

'That's not quite how this program works,' Connor reminded her. 'We're here to learn from the experts.'

A knock sounded on his door and Connor stood.

‘Have a great night, Con, and make sure you call Mam and Dad when you get back tonight, they’re itching for updates. They still worry, you know.’

Connor brushed off her concern with a quick farewell. He knew she meant well—all his family did—but ever since the accident their concern had at times felt suffocating.

The knock came again, along with a cheerful hurry up. ‘C’mon, lad. Adventure awaits!’

Recognising the Scottish brogue of Fergus, one of the winemakers who’d caught the same flight from Manchester, Connor stowed his laptop in the safe and stepped out to meet him.

The conference venue wasn’t far from the hotel, and the sunshine was warm enough that most of the young winemakers, who’d travelled from the northern hemisphere winter just days earlier, carried their suit jackets over their forearms.

‘This is when the fun starts,’ Fergus said, looking left and right at all the people, as if he were entering a ballroom of royalty instead of a conference room full of the nation’s top winemakers.

Anticipation bubbled in Connor’s stomach. He’d applied to be part of this international program several times over the years and now that he was finally here, he was both nervous and exhilarated. But would it be the fresh beginning he’d been so desperate for?



When the waiter sashayed past with a tray of champagne flutes, April grabbed two glasses, quickly downing the first as she surveyed the conference room. Yesterday had been a

long day, with the four-hour drive to Adelaide blowing out to over five hours thanks to roadworks in Taillem Bend and an accident requiring a detour through Murray Bridge. She'd missed the first workshop, but made up for yesterday's late start by arriving early this morning and sitting up the front of each session, taking notes and photographing the most pertinent presentation slides.

Setting her empty glass down on a wine barrel, April picked up a program, scanning the information about the international winemakers' exchange.

As if on cue, a group of newcomers emerged through the big double doors on the far side of the room.

Even if one of them hadn't been wearing a kilt, she would have known immediately they were the international newbies. They moved as a pack towards the wine bar, and one of them pulled a phone out and snapped a selfie beside the distinctive kangaroo logo on the banners for the DestinationSA Program. The program was synonymous with the food and wine tourism industry, and a key reason April had chosen to attend the city function.

'They look happy to be here, don't they?'

She turned at the sound of an amused voice, surprised to discover that while she'd been watching the new arrivals, someone had been watching her. A lady with an off-the-shoulder gown nodded in the direction of the bar. 'I always like seeing fresh faces in the industry, and this program with the UK winemakers and viticulturalists is a win for everyone, don't you think?'

April recognised the woman instantly.

How's this for good luck? she marvelled, introducing herself to Stephanie Scouller. 'I've just finished your audio-book on winery marketing,' April said, trying not to gush. 'It felt like you were talking directly to me the whole drive

to Adelaide yesterday. If I hadn't been running late, I would have pulled over several times to take notes. No wonder it won you so many awards.'

Stephanie inclined her head modestly, though she was clearly pleased, and fixed April with a broad smile. 'Glad you got so much out of it. After all those years in the industry, I wanted to help others wade through the marketing and branding jungle without bankrupting their wineries. It's a tough market for small wineries, every employee wears multiple hats, every dollar counts.'

'You're not wrong, there.' Grateful for the low lighting inside the conference room, April toyed with a loose thread on her pink lace dress—it had looked so elegant on the Penwarra charity shop mannequin, but on closer inspection it had a few faults in the lacework—then added brightly, 'I hope you've brought boxes of books with you, I'm sure there'll be a queue at the signing table after your keynote speech.' She didn't mention that Stephanie's name on the conference program, along with the DestinationSA workshop, had sealed the deal for April's city trip.

'I've booked a one-on-one session with you tonight.' April rummaged in her handbag, grabbed a business card and passed it to Stephanie. Like her dress, the business card was a little tired around the edges. 'Hopefully you can steer me in the right direction for grants and marketing opportunities. I'd love to get involved in the DestinationSA program, but I don't even know where to start.'

Stephanie stowed the business card in her leather purse with a nod. 'That's what I'm here for,' she said. 'That food tourism program has been the making of so many of my clients. Once you're on their books, you'll see a huge upswing in visitors and promotion. If you want to chat leadership opportunities and rebranding, we can look at that too. Loads

of potential for keen young winemakers and vitties looking to make their mark on the industry. Tell me, have you applied for the young wine leaders' award?'

April looked up from under her fringe, feeling suddenly shy. On paper, she was probably the perfect fit for the young wine leaders' award: she just scraped into the under thirty age bracket and she was from a winemaking family . . .

April drained her second glass of bubbly, searching for an explanation that didn't sound like a cop-out. 'I'm just a horticulturalist, not a winemaker. My folks run a small winery and I mostly work off-farm, but I'm hoping to open a little B & B on the property and I've got some great ideas in the pipeline . . .'

April trailed off, wishing she hadn't mentioned the DestinationSA program. There was so much to do before they could even think about applying and she didn't have a firm plan in place yet. *Justin's right, I shouldn't try to run before I can even walk.*

April ran a hand over her wavy hair and deflected Stephanie's attention back to the group of newcomers. 'I wonder how many of those international crew are coming down to the Limestone Coast? We're always struggling for workers in our region.'

Stephanie picked up her glass of wine and gestured towards the bar. 'Let's go find out.'



The buzzing room, the enthusiasm of his fellow ex-pats and the free-flowing wine were the perfect ingredients for a good night. The minute the formalities were over, Connor's new friends grabbed their jackets and handbags.

'We've paid our dues for the evening; waddled onto that

stage like a bunch of penguins and made small talk with the hobnobs sponsoring the program,' said Fergus, rising from his chair so fast his kilt nearly flicked up. 'Let's cut loose.'

Connor looked around the function room, then back at the program. 'According to last week's email, I think we're supposed to stay and network.'

Fergus grinned, tucking his scruffy ginger hair behind his ears. 'You're off to Rossvale in a few days, I'm heading to a winery four hours south of here and the rest of the group will be scattered across the state. We'll have more fun making our own after-party, don't you think? Hindley Street beckons.'

Connor laughed. He'd read enough TripAdvisor reviews to know Hindley Street was where you went if you were looking for trouble. 'I think I'll stick around,' he said, scanning the room. 'Apparently there's a marketing and tourism team here, offering free mini-consultations after the event.'

'Suit yourself,' Fergus shrugged. 'I'm off the clock for the night. Catch us up later, when you're done brown-nosing!' He jogged off to join the rest of the group, leaving Connor alone at the table. Connor pulled out the conference timetable, reread the spiel that had caught his eye earlier, and went in search of the team from DestinationSA. If their collaborations between small wineries, catering teams and corporate clients were as successful as their website promised, he wanted to find out more.

He headed towards a group of people carrying clipboards and pens. Connor couldn't see a formal line, but a petite, dark-haired woman in a pink dress was deep in discussion with the clipboard-wielding officials, so he hung back, letting the Australian accents in the room wash over him.

Connor's ears pricked up as he eavesdropped on her conversation. He gathered she was keen on boutique accommodation; *Smart*, he thought. The Kiwi winery he'd worked

for had diversified with luxury guesthouses and glamping tents to great success.

A waitress walked past slowly, her eyes darting down at her tray as if she were holding a live grenade. Connor wasn't sure if it was her braids or her frown of concentration, but she reminded him of his littlest sister, Pippin, and even though he wasn't particularly thirsty, Connor held up his hand.

'I'll grab a water please,' he said.

She looked at him gratefully. 'The quicker I get rid of this load the better. It's only dumb luck I haven't dropped a tray already.'

'First night waitressing?'

She nodded, then gasped as the glasses wobbled.

'It gets easier,' Connor said, giving her an encouraging smile. 'Just make sure you keep the tray balanced.'

Connor turned to see the conversation wrapping up in front of him.

'That's great, I really appreciate your help,' the pretty brunette said, shaking their hands. Connor caught his breath when she turned her sunny smile on him. Her eyes were almost hidden beneath a dark, heavy fringe, but he could see they were sparkling with excitement.

'Sorry to hold up the queue, my appointment evaporated into thin air. So many good ideas!'

Connor smiled back at her, noticing how her rose-coloured lipstick matched her dress. 'Don't rush off on my behalf.'

'They'll probably start charging me if I stay any longer,' she whispered with a grin. 'And I've studied their website enough to know they're well out of my budget. Mind you, I'm not above loitering and eavesdropping on the other conversations. Too cheeky, do you think?'

He admired her pluck. 'May as well make the most of the opportunity.'

Connor was just stepping across to introduce himself when an unmistakable tinkling of glass and then a string of swear words came from behind them. He turned to see a tumble of glasses smashing on impact, the young waitress looking ashen, and a red-faced bloke with wine dripping down his trouser leg.

Connor started towards them, followed by the brunette he'd been speaking with.

'What a mess,' Connor said. 'That poor waitress.'

'Of course it had to be Dan. He's got two left feet and the worst butterfingers in the district,' the woman said.

'You know him?'

She nodded. 'My neighbour. Daniel Winklin.'

Connor took his jacket off and, averting his eyes, handed it to the panicked waitress. 'You might need this,' he said gently. The young lady looked down, shocked to see her white shirt was drenched. She clutched his jacket to her chest.

'He knocked the tray, I swear it wasn't my fault,' she said, tears carrying the mascara down her cheeks in murky black streaks.

Connor shook his head. 'You won't be the last person to drop a tray of glasses, trust me.' A steady stream of business cards fluttered from his jacket pocket, landing in the puddle of wine.

'Oh look, now I've gone and wrecked your things too,' the waitress sobbed, fishing out a soggy business card. 'I can't get anything right.'

'It's fine.' Connor kneeled down and began collecting the largest shards of glass. 'They're out of date anyway; my UK phone number won't work out here. I'd forgotten they were in there.'

'You teach music?'

Connor looked up to see the brunette in the pink dress examining a dripping card. With the cute dress, broad accent and dark eyes that crinkled with happiness, she was a sight to behold.

‘I teach piano, but only when I’m not making wine,’ he said, glancing away. If all Australian women were this attractive, he was going to be in deep trouble.

2

April had always known Dan Winklin was clumsy—growing up together, their teachers had kept boxes of Band-aids in their top drawers especially for him—but after his outburst drew the attention of everyone in the room, she could tell he'd had a little too much to drink.

As far as she could see, the pair of them were the only Limestone Coast representatives there, and while Winklin Wines might have enough money to weather a bit of bad press, Lacewing Estate didn't have that luxury. After the worst of the broken glass had been cleared up, she gently pulled her friend and neighbour aside.

'Can't take you anywhere, Winklin,' she said, looking over her shoulder. The British chap was reassuring the young waitress, and other staff had arrived with buckets and mops. 'What's going on?'

Daniel wasn't much taller than April's five foot three inches, and he was only a month or so older, but his shoulders sank at her question, making him seem even shorter and more world-weary than his twenty-nine years.

'Andre dumped me.' Even though Daniel's head was lowered, April noticed he was fighting back tears. She rubbed

his arm awkwardly, not sure where to start. While Daniel had doted on the French winemaker from the moment he arrived in town, she'd never warmed to Andre's haughty arrogance.

'I thought you guys were patching things up?'

'I thought so too,' Daniel sighed. 'But apparently our versions of fidelity are quite different. He was packing his bags to leave when I woke up this morning. Starting a new life in Tassie with his new lover, apparently.'

April winced, ready to suggest taking the conversation to a quiet corner when he straightened up and hailed a passing waiter. 'Which is the perfect reason to get rollicking drunk, I say! Better than sitting at home crying into my teacup.' He scooped two glasses from the waiter, keeping hold of them both. 'What about you? Tell me about your accommodation project. Any progress?'

April updated him on her meeting with the builder. 'I've had a couple of great sessions on marketing pillars and wine tourism today too,' she added. 'So with a bit of luck, the bulk of the building work will be finished by late winter, our marketing plan will be firmed up in the next few months and we'll be taking bookings for late spring, early summer.'

Daniel raised an eyebrow. 'And does the charming Justin still think it's a folly? Tell me you're not going to be the one baking fresh bread and making picnic baskets for your guests?'

Unlike Justin, cooking wasn't April's strong suit and Daniel knew it. 'I don't want to give anyone food poisoning. Of course he's on board; I'll do the gardens, and once he's finished with vintage, he'll magic up a menu of hampers using local produce. It'll be great.'

April remembered the Winklin Wines brochures cartwheeling through the car park. 'Which reminds me, I rescued

a bunch of your new flyers from the wind yesterday. They look great, really sharp.'

'Oh, those,' said Daniel, dabbing at a cabernet-coloured stain on his shirt. 'There's a typo on the second page, just toss them straight in the bin. Dad nearly had a coronary when he heard I'd signed off on the proofs with a single 's' in dessert wine.' Daniel gave a sheepish shrug. 'What's a few grand in the scheme of things, right?'

A few grand . . .? April wished she had that type of money to burn.

The handsome Brit stepped in beside her, and when she caught his eye, she sensed he was also holding his tongue. Even converted to Euros, the printing slip-up would probably fund a cross-hemisphere airfare.

'Dan Winklin, Winklin Wines.' Daniel stretched out a hand to introduce himself.

'Connor Jamison.'

April introduced herself too, warming to his quiet confidence and enthusiasm to learn from Australian wineries.

'I've heard of Penwarra. Best shiraz in the state, yeah?' Connor said.

Daniel visibly pulled himself together, his maudlin musings about his break-up forgotten as he bombarded Connor with facts and figures about the grape varieties they grew, ageing periods and workforce issues.

Connor stood between them, quietly sipping his wine and nodding at the right moments while Daniel rabbited on.

April heard one of Fran's sayings in her ears, unbidden. *Handsome is as handsome does.* An apricot gown drifted through her peripheral vision, prompting April to remember why she was there and stop her imagination from wandering.

'I've just got to catch someone,' she said, shooting Daniel and Connor an apologetic look. Even though she'd already

suspected Andre the French winemaker was a cheating scoundrel, she'd be able to give Daniel her full attention and sympathy when they were home. She turned and headed in pursuit of Stephanie Scouller. There hadn't been time to chat for long after Stephanie's keynote speech, not with so many fans also queuing to get their books signed, but this wine tourism and marketing conference only came around once a year and she needed to make the most of this opportunity, for Lacewing Estate as well as her new bed and breakfast.

April picked up her pace.



Connor pocketed the Winklin Wines business card, wished Daniel all the best and made his way through the crowd and outside. He saw April sitting on a bench by the entrance and made his way over.

He wasn't sure what she'd hoped to glean from the conference, but he found himself hoping it had been worthwhile for her.

'Did you catch the person you were after?'

April lifted a shoulder in a shrug. 'She had checked out for the night, I should have made my move earlier. Then, to add insult to injury, the team offering free wine-related marketing advice waltzed out with their clipboards and banners. Just when I'd thought up a dozen more marketing questions.'

She sighed, leaning her elbows on her knees, then resting her chin on her hands.

'I don't think they were planning on doing overtime tonight,' Connor said gently, taking a seat beside her. 'The minute the clock struck 11, they capped their pens and headed for the hills.'

She twisted to meet his gaze, and along with a 'I know you're trying to cheer me up' look, there was something else too.

'Can I buy you a drink? I'm no expert on B & Bs, but I can share what I've seen in the UK, New Zealand and French wineries I've worked at.'

'I've just ordered a taxi,' she said, straightening up again. As much as she tried to hide it, the flash of reluctance in her eyes indicated she was momentarily torn between calling it a night and changing tack in pursuit of marketing titbits.

'Nightclubbing? I hear Adelaide's pumping on a Friday night.'

'You're welcome to it,' she said with a smirk. 'I'd rather drink a case of cheap white wine than set foot in one of those sleazy sweat factories.'

'What?' Connor acted shocked. 'How can you not love bad music, body odour and cheesy pick up lines? Though it does depend on the wine, I suppose. How cheap are we talking?'

Their conversation moved from the worst wine they'd tasted, to the sleaziest night clubs they'd visited, and Connor found himself laughing as she described a dive from her uni days. It was the first time he'd felt a spark since Phoebe.

Connor pushed away the thought, not wanting the past to cloud the present. He snuck another look at April, trying to get a better read on her, when the phone lit up in her hand, and just like that, a mask fell over her face. 'Anyway, I've got an early start tomorrow morning.'

Dozens of people milled around, waiting for Ubers and taxis. 'You might be waiting a while,' he said. 'Which direction's your hotel in? It's a nice night for walking.'

April quickly shook her head, her gaze darting down the well-lit street. 'Have you read the front page of the

Advertiser recently? Walking around the city at night is not for the fainthearted.’

He laughed. What would she make of the London crime stats? The stories his sister Heidi shared from her shifts on the beat were full of opportunistic crimes.

‘Don’t let me hold you up, though,’ April added. ‘I’m happy to wait, the taxi shouldn’t be too far away.’

As she lifted her phone, he spotted a photo of a shaggy golden retriever grinning at the camera.

Connor uncrossed his legs and leaned across to get a better look at the phone screen. ‘I’m in no hurry. Nice dog. Retriever?’

She turned, her hair tickling his cheek and her warm eyes crinkling at the sides as she nodded. ‘Mishka’s our winery mascot and chief troublemaker.’ April enlarged a photo of the dog lounging on a timber deck beside a fire pit, with fairy lights and fruit-laden vines dangling from a pergola. ‘Thinks she’s the lady of the manor.’

‘We had a retriever when I was a kid,’ Connor said, smiling as he remembered the placid pooch. ‘Duke was soft as butter but he was gentle and loyal, and didn’t mind when my sisters dressed him up in ridiculous Halloween outfits.’

‘Duke? As in Marmaduke?’

‘As in Duke Ellington,’ he clarified. ‘The—’

‘Jazz player,’ April finished, giving him an appraising look. ‘That’s right, you’re a piano guy.’

He sensed he’d just jumped a few bars in her estimation, and although he couldn’t take credit for his musical family, he was happy to see her guard drop a little.

‘I’m more of a Nina Simone and Billie Holiday fan myself, but I don’t mind a little Duke. Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker are on my playlists every now and then, too.’

‘So which region are you destined for? Barossa, Clare, McLaren Vale?’

Connor gave her the name of the Rossvale winery, one of the most prestigious in the state.

‘I’ve heard stories about their chief winemaker. Wait till you see this,’ she said, rifling through her phone’s photo library. ‘Now, where did I save it?’

April held up her phone for both of them to see as she scrolled and he caught a whiff of sweet, musky perfume.

Between the screenshots of website pages, close-ups of grapes and panoramic vineyard shots, there were dozens of photos of her dog and more than a few of vegetables.

A market gardener, perhaps? He wanted to ask her about her vegetables, to see if they were a profession or a passion, but the moment disappeared when he saw a photo of her hanging off another bloke’s arm. Although there was no ring on her finger, the photo explained her reluctance to go out for drinks.

She found the image she was after and enlarged it.

‘One of my uni mates snapped this photo last vintage. The winemaker, Johann Riverton, rolls out a swag in the middle of the vineyards and sleeps there when they’re waiting on ripening,’ April said, chuckling. ‘He sets his alarm hourly so he knows the moment the grapes are ready to harvest.’

‘I’d heard he was a hard task-master but . . .’ Connor gave a low whistle. Still, if camping out in the vineyard was what it took to make award-winning wines, he was prepared to give it a go. ‘Well, I guess I didn’t come all the way to Australia to twiddle my thumbs.’

April put her phone away as a convoy of taxis pulled up outside the conference centre. He looked at his watch, surprised to see it was past midnight already. It had been a long time since he’d lost an hour talking about dogs and wineries and jazz, and even though he now suspected she was off limits, he was still disappointed.

‘I think that’s mine,’ April said, pointing as a taxi with distinctive branding pulled in. ‘Thanks for keeping me company; it was nice getting to know you, Connor Jamison.’

Connor opened the cab door and bade her farewell, but before he could close it, he heard his and April’s name being called.

Spinning on his heel, Connor saw Daniel Winklin, the drunk chap from earlier, waving from the top of the stairs.

‘Dan?’ April scrambled out of the cab. ‘Hold the taxi a minute, please.’

They made it to the bottom of the stairs just as Daniel lost his balance and pitched forwards, stumbling down a few steps before finally catching the metal handrail. They let out a collective breath, but from Daniel’s moan, it was clear he’d hurt something on his way down.

Connor’s left leg had been aching all night and he discreetly flexed his foot to ward off cramping before crouching by Daniel’s side.

‘All right, cobber?’

‘No wonder Andre left me, I can’t even get down a flight of stairs without making a scene,’ Daniel spluttered.

‘He’s sozzled,’ April said, shaking her head and patting down her neighbour’s pockets until she found a wallet. Connor couldn’t help noticing the yellow banknotes in the wallet, confirming his initial thoughts. *Dan Winklin wasn’t short of coin.* April pulled out a hotel key card and with a bit of prompting, confirmed the hotel Daniel was booked into.

It took a few attempts, but eventually they managed to hoist him down the stairs and into the waiting taxi.

‘Will you be right getting him into the hotel room?’ Connor asked after he’d plugged Daniel’s seatbelt in for him.

April cast a hopeful glance at the taxi driver.

‘You can keep talking as long as you like while the meter’s ticking, but I’m not hauling nobody to their hotel room,’ the driver said with a shrug.

‘I can help if you need,’ Connor offered. ‘No offence, but you’re only tiny and he’s kind of heavy-set.’

He could see her hesitation, but when Daniel’s head sagged against the leather seats and something between a moan and a snore erupted from his lips, she relented.

‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘I’m going to need a hand.’

They got in and buckled up.

‘You come to Adelaide often?’ called the taxi driver from the front seat.

April and Connor both shook their heads. Daniel snored.

‘I flew in a few days ago,’ Connor said. ‘Hopefully, I’ll spend more time here, though.’

‘Beautiful city,’ said the driver, a laconic pride in his tone as he changed lanes and navigated the streets. ‘Safe as houses. Cleaner than Melbourne. Like a big country town really.’

April chuckled. ‘I’m not so sure about that. Dan left his wallet in his car in Penwarra last week; keys in the ignition, in the main street. Both were still there when he came out of the supermarket, but I don’t think you’d have the same luck here.’

While April’s view of the city seemed to be tainted by potential dangers, Connor couldn’t help appreciating the anonymity the city afforded him. Since getting on the plane in Manchester, nobody had looked at him with pity, or rubbed his arm and asked how he was holding up.

Mind you, he thought as they roused Daniel and helped him to his hotel room, I’ve never had a neighbour pulling off my shoes and ushering me into bed when I was completely rat-faced either.

‘Can you fetch him a glass of water?’ April asked, pulling a packet of painkillers from her handbag and sitting them on

the bedside table. By the time Connor had returned with the water, she'd written a note on the hotel-issue stationery and placed it beside Daniel's bedside table.

'He *is* a lucky guy to have such a nice neighbour,' Connor said, grinning at the note, which said exactly that and was signed with a smiley face.

Once Daniel was settled, they headed off, both reaching for the elevator button at the same time.

'Sorry—'

Connor laughed, feeling a warmth where her hand brushed his. From the way she jumped backwards, she'd felt it too.

'You go,' he said.

They stood on opposite sides of the lift and he waited for her to exit first.

'Do you want me to walk you out or find you a taxi?'

Smothering a yawn, April shook her head. 'I'm good, thanks, my hotel's just two doors down.'

Connor said goodbye and headed towards the CBD. He looked back when he reached the traffic lights, but April was nowhere to be seen.

He pulled his new phone from his back pocket and dialled his Scottish friend's phone number. 'Where's the party at, man?'

Despite the loud music in the background, he could hear Fergus cheering. *You're here for a good time, not a long time*, Connor reminded himself.



April slathered her olive skin with a generous handful of sunscreen, trying to remember the last time the heat had continued so far beyond harvest. The vines at Lacewing Estate had handled the warm weather pretty well, and the grapes had come off without a hitch, but the hot summer had

knocked her extensive veggie plot and frazzled the fussiest flowers in the private garden she managed in Mount Gambier.

It hadn't been the most memorable summer on a personal level, either, and she felt a little like the plants, not yet back to full strength after a rough January and February.

Leafy greens brushed April's legs as she walked between the raised garden beds, filling a bucket with sun-warmed tomatoes. She'd been relying on the drip irrigation system to keep her crop hydrated but as the all-important Penwarra Show raced closer, it was clear the garden needed an extra boost.

She dragged a sprinkler around the side of house. Mishka dashed across the yard and April couldn't help smiling at the fluffy golden dog frolicking in the arc of water, snapping at the droplets.

The only downside of having a trophy-winning garden, she mused, is the hot afternoons spent shifting sprinklers and shade cloth instead of swimming. Still, she had a reputation to uphold, and short of a blistering drought, there was no way she'd enter wilted, sub-standard veggies in the show's produce competition. Once Mishka was soaking wet and suitably sated, they headed towards the winery.

Her father, Lloyd, emerged from the shiraz plot in a wide-brimmed hat that had seen the full gamut of Limestone Coast seasons. Tanned legs peeked out from under his baggy drill shorts and white chest hairs sprouted from the collar of his faded chambray shirt. Lloyd shaded his eyes and pointed to the stables.

'Your renovations are rocketing along,' he said, pulling a dog treat out from his pocket for Mishka. 'New roof was an instant upgrade.'

April agreed. True to his word, the builder, Gordon, had worked tirelessly to get the major works done over the last few

months, replacing the rafters and riding the local plumbers like a jockey until they finished re-sheeting the tin.

‘The place was in surprisingly good structural condition for something built over a century ago. Now it’s watertight, we can keep working throughout the worst of the weather.’ A blowfly buzzed past, and although the sun was now nipping at their skin, April knew the blustery winds and lashing rain would be relentless once winter set in. ‘Who would have thought, getting this far on such a fool’s folly?’

The term had been Justin’s parting shot, a final sprinkle of salt over her bruised heart.

‘I never doubted you,’ Lloyd replied, his wry smile reflecting hers. He reached out and squeezed her shoulder. ‘Only a fool would underestimate you, my girl. And that lying, cheating idiot was the fool in this situation, just remember that.’

It felt like yesterday that she’d returned from the Adelaide conference to discover Daniel’s partner, Andre, wasn’t the only winemaker playing around. April wasn’t sure what was more humiliating: finding out Justin had left her for his ex-girlfriend or her complete obliviousness to his infidelity.

Once the initial heartache had eased, she’d thrown herself into the renovations. Converting the old stables, with its crumbling walls and unlimited potential, had proved the perfect project to channel her anger into productivity.

April swallowed the lump in her throat and showed her father the new steelwork they’d installed around the entryway, adding strength and security to the original oak doors.

Mishka sniffed around the piles of recycled timber flooring for mice and spiders, both of which continued to frequent the building. When April switched on the lights, the room brightened, chasing away the dull ache that came when she thought about Justin.

Lloyd gestured to the heavy beams straddling the ceiling. 'You going to paint those?'

April was horrified by the suggestion. 'Not a chance, they're one of my favourite things about the stables. People booking a B & B in the middle of a winery are going for rustic, Dad, not shiny chic.'

'I'll take your word for it,' he said, nodding as she stepped him through the floor plan.

It was stuffy inside the stone building and a sheen of sweat glistened on their foreheads when they returned outside.

'Can't say I'll be sorry to see the cooler days arrive,' Lloyd said, watching as she locked the double doors before pocketing the key. 'Hopefully it eases before the show. If it's this hot, they'll definitely be down on gate numbers and entries. Now, Fran mentioned the cooking section, didn't she?'

April blinked. Why would her stepmother mention cooking when she knew April had nothing to contribute? 'You mean veggies?'

Lloyd shook his head as they walked side by side between the vines. 'There's been a stoush in the cooking department. Audrey and Eileen are at war, apparently.'

April couldn't help laughing. The trestle tables in the cooking pavilion always groaned under the weight of Audrey Cartwright's and Eileen Mawson's baking, and there was little doubt the two ladies could singlehandedly feed Penwarra's entire population for morning tea if they pooled their show-day entries.

'Haven't they been threatening to pull out for years? I'll believe it when I see it.'

'Don't laugh,' said Lloyd, snipping off a few spent bunches of grapes the pickers had missed. 'I think it's serious this time. Fran said they're boycotting the event if the show society doesn't appoint a new judge.' He gave a guilty laugh. 'And

she may have nominated us to cook a few things, to help fill the tables.’

Of all the things April had imagined for the week ahead, cooking was so far off the list of priorities that she found herself chuckling.

‘You’re hilarious, Dad,’ she said, calling Mishka back to her side. ‘But thanks for the laugh, I needed that.’ She grinned as she turned to him, and it was only when she met his eye that she realised he was half serious.

‘Given we can’t really help with donations this year, I’ve said we’ll help out this way instead . . .’ He paused, looking sheepish now.

April shook her head, clipping the lead back on Mishka, who was intently eyeing off a little blue wren. ‘No, no, no,’ she said. ‘You’ve got the wrong person for the job. I’d try putting together a posy or entering the flowers if the garden section was desperate, and you know I’ll fill the produce tables with whatever veggies survive this heatwave, but I’m the wrong gal for baking. You know it, Fran knows it, even Mishka knows it.’ The dog barked as the blue wren flitted away to safety.

‘You didn’t know anything about renovating either, but I’ve seen you helping out with this project. Every time I walk past you’re leaning over the sawhorse or learning how to use a new power tool.’

April rolled her eyes. ‘Only because I have to, Dad. Justin was meant to be the hands-on helper, I was just supposed to take care of marketing the darn thing. But it’s not brain surgery. It would be like you jumping from the winemaking to designing labels and doing all the bottling. You’d do it if you had to, but that doesn’t mean you’d voluntarily put yourself in front of the firing squad.’ She wasn’t sure if it was the heat or the complete ridiculousness of his suggestion

that had her mixing up her metaphors, but April felt pressured. Her dad and stepmother had never asked her to cook anything.

They must be light on.

She cast her gaze across to the large mudbrick house on the eastern side of the vineyard, and in the distance saw Fran waving back at them from the clothesline.

Lloyd raised his hand, but instead of waving, he gave the thumbs-up signal. April grabbed his arm, pulling it down.

‘You’ve already registered me, haven’t you?’ She groaned theatrically.

‘It’s just to get plates on the table, love. You know how the committee gets about these things.’

April *did* know. In between winery commitments, her stepmother spent endless hours chasing, cajoling, plotting and planning ways to keep the show relevant and vibrant in the face of changing community interests.

‘Maybe if they can’t fill the tables,’ she said gently, ‘it’s time they threw in the towel?’

Lloyd baulked. ‘Don’t say that in front of Fran. It’s the ninety-eighth show and they’re determined to make it to the centenary. I can burn water as well as the next person, and Fran’s put my name down for a chocolate cake in the bloke’s section. It’s just to make up numbers, and nobody will know they’re our entries—anything’s better than nothing.’



Connor woke to a persistent noise somewhere outside the house. He prised his eyes open, squinting against the light filtering through the thin curtains, and struggling to work out who might be rapping on the door at the crack of dawn on a Friday.

'I'm coming,' he grumbled, pulling on a pair of jeans. It wasn't until he was halfway through the lounge room that he realised the noise was coming from his housemate's bedroom across the hallway, not the front door.

Connor was no stranger to the dynamics of sharehouse living. Awkward flatsharing experiences in London and backpacker hostels in Europe were par for the course, but his tolerance of his loved-up housemates had worn thin over the last three months.

He cleared his throat, hoping it might remind them how easily the sound carried through the flimsy walls. The banging stopped, followed by a giggle. Connor finished dressing quickly and slipped his toothbrush and toothpaste into his backpack, then grabbed a banana from the kitchen counter.

Strictly speaking, the fruit was his housemate's, but Connor reasoned it was a fair trade for the awkward early-morning wake-up. He shut the front door firmly behind him, unlocking the Camry he'd bought on Gumtree. The car had blown a tyre on its maiden voyage from Adelaide, and coughed out more smoke than a Newcastle coal mine, but it had been cheap. Which, given the volatility of his boss, Johann, had proved a smart decision.

Although his working day didn't start until 8 am, Connor had been leaving the house earlier and earlier to avoid the flushed faces of his housemates. The vibe at the sharehouse was the polar opposite of his new workplace, where the tension and camaraderie made it feel as cold as a snowy Christmas.

Connor pulled into the winery car park, unsurprised to see Johann's Audi already there, and tried to guess what mood the boss was in today.

He finished the banana, wishing he'd detoured past the shops for a proper breakfast, then leaned out of the car, using

his water bottle to moisten his toothbrush and wash his face. Connor waited until the piano-heavy jazz track finished before locking the Camry, pocketing the keys and making his way inside.

‘Morning, Johann,’ he said, stowing his backpack in the staff lockers. ‘What’s on the agenda today?’

The winemaker ignored him, taking a sample from one of the oak barrels. It was only after he’d swirled and sniffed and scowled at the red wine that he acknowledged Connor.

Another one of those days then. Connor made a small plunger of coffee and took his laptop to the timber table outside the barrel room. The week seemed warm for early autumn, with the soft golden light spreading across the vineyards and not a whisper of breeze.

Connor skimmed his inbox, pleased to spot Fergus Abernathy’s name. He eagerly read the reply, hoping he hadn’t sounded like a whinger in his email last night. From all accounts, his Scottish friend was having a great time in the Limestone Coast and sounded delighted to weigh in on the matter. Connor looked at his watch, then dialled Fergus, who answered on the first ring.

‘Alright, pal? Sounds like Rossvale isn’t treating you so well.’

Connor glanced through the window where Johann was making his way along the tanks, checking the fermentation. ‘The winery’s nice, but the mosquitoes are friendlier than the guy running the place.’

‘Well, there’re plenty of class wineries down this way. If you don’t like the one you’re at, join me. You heard from the rest of the crew? A few have already jumped ship for other wineries,’ Fergus said. ‘Ye wouldna be the first.’

Connor hadn’t kept in touch with many of the ex-pats who had flown into Adelaide with him in January, and the news made him feel better about the decision.

He ended the call and quietly packed his laptop away, still uncertain about calling time at Rossvale. But by the end of the day, after Johann had sacked a cellar hand and made the viticulturalist cry, Connor handed in his notice. He passed dozens of vineyards on his way out of town, knowing he could have approached other local wineries, but the lure of Penwarra wasn't just about the grapes or his Scottish mate. Not for the first time, he thought of April Lacey and the marketing tips she'd been so keen to learn at the conference. Had she put them into action since January? Was the guy in her phone photographs still in the picture? Would she be happy to see him or had she barely spared a thought for him since?

He set the Camry's cruise control and sat back in his seat. *Only one way to find out.*