

FOURTEEN

Gerry lay with his hands clasped behind his head, staring at the far wall of their bedroom. It needed painting. *The whole place needs painting.* The walls in the hallway still bore marks of the kids' attempts at home decorating, back when they were preschoolers, a million years ago. He heaved a heavy sigh. Here it was Christmas morning, and the house was silent as a tomb. *You know your kids have grown up when they don't come pounding in at sparrow fart on Christmas morning, demanding to open their presents.* The realisation made him feel old, and melancholy.

There were other reasons not to be cheerful. If it hadn't been for Chris, the Sydney developer, coming through with a nice fat cheque, Visser Kanaley wouldn't have been able to pay their December wages bill. The two or three staff who'd left the firm lately would not be replaced any time in the foreseeable future. Every day, it seemed, another client cancelled, and Gerry had a nasty feeling – which he hadn't shared with Marcus – that the Kansas City gallery people were getting cold feet about their planned extension. If he could just keep them on side for another six weeks, till he could meet with them in person after the New York conference . . . *Yes, that meeting's going to be critical. Make or break.*

Susanna, lying on her back beside him, was snoring gently. He

shook her shoulder; she murmured, and rolled onto her side. Gerry contemplated her sleeping face. Disappointing, the way she'd been so distracted lately, ridiculously preoccupied with this paper she was writing, and her damn art show. For a moment he found himself envying Chris his marriage to Terri, not only a wife but a savvy business partner. Someone who understood what was going on in the wider world.

Sunlight was seeping in now around the edges of the blinds. Gerry was just thinking of getting up and going for a run, since his family was apparently going to treat this like any other day and sleep in, when he felt a soft stroking on his arm. Susanna had woken and was looking up at him with a drowsy smile. 'Hiya, handsome,' she murmured.

The irritation he'd been stoking faded away. 'Hello, sleepyhead,' he said, smoothing back her tousled hair. She caught his hand and gave the knuckles a little kiss. 'Merry Christmas.'

He was just lowering his head to kiss her when they were interrupted by muffled voices from the hall, and the bedroom door being pushed vigorously open. In came a tray, carried by Seb, with his sister right behind him carrying another. On their heads were those cheap sets of reindeer antlers, bright red, Stella-Jean's festooned with green tinsel.

'Merry Christmas!' they yelled in unison.

'Well, if it isn't Prancer and, um, Blitzen,' said Gerry.

'Hello, kidlets.' Susanna sat up, plucking at the neck of her nightgown, which had slipped somewhat indecorously to one side. 'Merry Christmas. What've you got there?'

'It's the Christmas Day travelling cafe,' said Seb proudly as he put his tray down on the foot of their bed. 'See – cappuccinos all round. I made them!'

'He wouldn't have had a clue if I hadn't showed him,' said Stella-Jean. 'Also on the menu: croissants!'

'With Jeejee's apricot jam,' their mother said, smacking her lips. 'Yum yum.'

Gerry took the cup proffered by Seb, and allowed his daughter to wriggle a Santa Claus hat onto his head. ‘And there I was getting all sentimental about the way you guys used to storm in here before dawn, squawking, “Has Santa come? Where’s our presents?” This is a vast improvement.’

‘Damn straight, Pop,’ said Seb. ‘Santa’s little helpers, that’s us.’

Gerry bit into a croissant that had spent rather too long in the oven and shattered now into a shower of flaky crumbs. The kids perched at the end of the bed, munching and chattering. Susanna was laughing. He felt a powerful wish to nail this moment to the wall, capture it for all time. This silly, happy, perfect moment. ‘For smart-arsed teenagers,’ he said through his mouthful, ‘you’re not too bad.’

‘Sorry I was asleep when you got home last night, sweetie,’ Susanna said to Stella-Jean. ‘How was your visit to Faith Rise with Auntie Ange?’

‘Complete crap,’ said Stella-Jean, screwing her face up in disgust. ‘They didn’t even have proper Christmas carols, it was all “Sing Along with Gabriel”.’ She dropped her croissant on a plate and raised both hands high above her head, swaying to and fro with a dopey, wide-eyed grin. ‘Honestly! I think they’re all on some *drug*.’

‘They are,’ said Gerry. ‘It’s called “religious fundamentalism”. Now you know.’

‘Totally nutso. And to think they’re doing it all over again this morning. Right now!’ Stella-Jean rolled her eyes. ‘Poor Finn.’

‘Ah well, he’s working up an appetite for your mum’s roast turkey.’

‘Not that there’s ever been a problem with Finn’s appetite,’ Susanna added.

‘Mine either,’ said Seb, tearing another croissant apart and slathering it with jam.

With the croissants eaten and the coffee drunk, the moment, perfect though it had been, moved on, and the kids with it, to attend to last-minute present-wrapping. Gerry was in the kitchen making himself another coffee, since Seb’s effort hadn’t actually been that great, and turned the machine off to see his sister-in-law walking

through the living room, having let herself in as though she owned the place. Finn, he noticed, was over by the Christmas tree adding more presents to the pile, placing them carefully, one here, one there.

Angie paused in the doorway of the kitchen, looking around, presumably hoping to see her sister since she was avoiding Gerry's eye. She was wearing strappy sandals and a silky pink dress – you had to give the woman one thing, she always dressed well – but the look on her face was grim and decidedly un-Christmassy.

'G'day Ange,' he said. 'Cheer up: Christ the saviour is born, haven't you heard?'

'Yes, I *have* heard, thank you,' she said, casting him a death-ray glance. 'It's not *me* who needs reminding of the Good News.'

'And good will to all men. And women,' he said, handing her his own just-made espresso. 'Here you go.' She took it with a grudging thanks, peering at the perfect crema as though she suspected him of having poisoned it. 'Have to say, Ange, you sure as shit don't *look* like it's good news.'

'Do you mind not swearing, please?' Angie asked with furious politeness. 'Today, of all days?'

'Come on, swearing's one of this country's great traditions,' Gerry smiled, all amused superiority. 'Along with secularism. Did you know that more people nominate "no religion" in the census here than in any other country? And a *bloody* good thing, too, if you ask me.'

'No one did ask you.' Angie put down her cup, having drunk only a few sips. 'Excuse me.'

I think I will go for that run, Gerry thought, watching her sashay down the hall. *Less time spent around her, the better.* He laced up his running shoes and set off, into the glare of a summer morning that was already heating up, determined to enjoy an hour of exercise and solitude before the rigours of a day which would include one in-law too many and an over-abundance of rich food. *But that's the deal,* he reminded himself. *That's what I signed on for.*

By the time he got back, fabulous smells were emanating from the

kitchen, and he panted straight through the living room, past Seb and Stella-Jean haranguing each other about some adjustment to the Christmas tree, to find his mother-in-law standing in the kitchen, a fresh apron around her middle, basting the turkey.

‘Jean!’ he said, giving her lined cheek a kiss. ‘Merry Christmas. You look like an ad for a 1950s housewife. Why didn’t I marry you instead of a career woman?’

‘I was a career woman too, young man,’ she smiled. ‘Don’t tell me *you* don’t take women’s careers seriously either? My daughter assured me times have changed!’

‘Course I take women’s careers seriously.’ Jean opened the oven door and he hefted the heavy baking dish back in. ‘Just not as seriously as their cooking, that’s all.’

Jean picked up a wooden spoon and smacked at him playfully; Gerry pretended to duck. They both knew Gerry had nothing but admiration for his mother-in-law, who’d worked so hard, kept the family going, despite an invalid husband and a younger daughter who — well, the less said, the better. *And maintained her sense of humour*, he thought. *What a trouper.*

Tigger biffed his head against Gerry’s shin. ‘P’rrow, p’rrow!’ the cat said urgently. Gerry looked down and saw that strands of green tinsel had been looped around his furry neck.

‘Okay, I’m phoning the RSPCA,’ he called toward the living room. ‘You do know there are laws against decorating companion animals at Christmas, Stella?’

‘Leave Tigger’s necklace alone, it suits him!’ Stella-Jean yelled back. ‘Jeejee, don’t let Dad take it off.’

Jean gave Gerry a sweetly rueful smile. ‘I’m afraid I wouldn’t *dare* disobey my granddaughter. Not when it comes to matters of style.’

‘Style — is that what you call it? Watch out, Jean, she’ll have you in a set of gilded reindeer antlers any minute.’ He gave his mother-in-law a second peck on the cheek. ‘Well, I’d better get myself freshened up for the day’s proceedings, eh?’

Opening of the presents always took place while lunch cooked, with places assigned by long custom. Gerry sat on the couch next to Susanna, who was wearing a pair of dangly red earrings Stella-Jean had made; Jean, divested of apron, was in one armchair and Angie in the other; Seb was on the floor by the tree, poised to begin handing out the parcels in their brightly coloured paper, with Stella-Jean and Finn hovering. Gerry let it all wash over him, genially semaphoring delight at the socks Seb gave him and Stella-Jean's vintage shirt. Susanna's present was a genuine surprise, and a great one too: the tennis racquet he'd had a covetous eye on for months.

'It's perfect, Suze,' he said, standing to heft and twirl it. 'How did you know I was after this one?'

'I got a bit of advice from someone in the know, didn't I, Seb?'

'Welcome back to A-grade, Pop,' said Seb. 'And thanks for these!' He flapped the envelope containing the gift Gerry always bought: tickets for the two of them to the men's semifinals and finals of the Australian Open at the end of January, both the singles and doubles.

'Another few years, you could be playing there yourself,' Gerry told him. Seb rolled his eyes, but he went on, 'No, seriously. Your game's getting better all the time; once you're set up with the right partner, you'll be cooking with gas.'

'Maybe,' said Seb, removing the tinsel from long-suffering Tigger's neck and replacing it with a new black cat collar. Stella-Jean, watching with pursed mouth, nodded her approval.

Finn, after early signs of pending over-excitement, was now engrossed in the geometric puzzle someone had given him. Angie was spraying herself with perfume. Jean made a little speech thanking everyone for following her request and donating to NGOs on her behalf: a goat in Mozambique, a pig in Cambodia, a midwife's equipment in Ethiopia. 'I feel like a very rich woman!' she concluded, and they all clapped, though Gerry wasn't sure what it was they were applauding, exactly. Didn't matter; all in the spirit of the thing.

A whoop of excitement came from the verandah, and Stella-Jean

staggered back into the room carrying a sewing machine in its case, having followed a thread, spooling from its miniature parcel under the tree, out to where the machine had been concealed. State-of-the-art, apparently; her grandmother had arranged its purchase from a friend at the retirement village. ‘Absolute bargain,’ Susanna murmured in Gerry’s ear. ‘Mum says Betty’s eyes just aren’t up to sewing any more.’ Gerry kept to himself the observation that maybe Betty should have figured that out before she got a brand-new machine.

Seb was now distributing, frisbee-style, Angie’s identical presents. She had given each member of the family a CD: *Hold On To You: Four Songs of Praise by Gabriel McHale*, whose soulful photo graced the cover. ‘Gabriel composed every song,’ Angie announced, beaming. ‘And he plays the guitar, of course – and, ah, if you look at the credits, you’ll see *my* name. I’m one of the backup singers!’

Susanna, making enthusiastic noises, jumped up from the couch and began pressing one button after another on the CD player she’d never got the hang of. Gerry put his copy aside, not bothering to unwrap it. He saw Stella-Jean catch her brother’s eye, then glance meaningfully toward the rubbish bin in the kitchen, flicking her wrist as though to say, *You reckon I could piff it in from here?*

‘Very thoughtful, Ange,’ said Gerry. ‘You’ve single-handedly quintupled the guy’s Christmas sales.’

His sister-in-law shot him that death-ray look again. ‘This CD is already selling *hundreds* of copies. And *these* ones are all individually signed, if you care to notice.’ Susanna got the CD player working and the room was filled with slow guitar chords and a warm tenor voice.

‘I thought I’d been left alone

Thought I’d no one to call my own . . .’

Jean said, ‘Your friend has a very nice voice, Angela,’ and Susanna murmured agreement. The chorus began and Angie sat up very straight, eyes bright with excitement, as the women’s voices joined Gabriel’s:

‘I will hold on to you

And to your soul, it’s true . . .’

Unable to stomach it, Gerry got up quietly and went out to the kitchen. He lifted a corner of the muslin covering Jean's glazed ham, staring at the thick, cross-hatched skin studded with peppercorns. Or were they cloves? The treacly song continued, dripping infuriatingly note by note into his brain. He moved things around on the bench without any purpose. *How long does this go on for?* Another sappy verse, and then at the second chorus Angie could contain herself no longer and started singing along.

'You'll sit right by my throne

You'll never be alone

Because I'll . . . hold on . . . to-oo you . . .'

Gerry could see her through the opening between the two rooms, and she could see him too, though no one else could. He lifted his face toward the ceiling, throat long, and began to soundlessly imitate a dog baying at the moon. Angie's voice, *ooh-yoooh*, broke off abruptly and he turned away, laughing to himself.

The moment the song finished, Angie turned the CD player off.

'That was really lovely, Ange. I'm so thrilled!' Susanna said.

'Dad! Last presents!' yelled Stella-Jean. It was family tradition that everyone had to be in the room for the unwrapping of each gift. Gerry came back to his seat and watched Finn savaging a piece of the bright paper he had laboured so hard to colour, to get at whatever was within.

Gerry noticed that Angie was still standing by the CD player, with her arms crossed and a face like thunder. Seb, in charge of distribution, picked up a final parcel. 'Here, Ma, lucky last's for you.'

Susanna read the little card, smiled at her mother and carefully unwrapped the rectangular parcel, revealing several sketchbooks of various sizes, along with drawing pens, pencils, and a set of water-colours. She knew at a glance that all these materials were of the highest quality. Jean must have visited a good art supply shop, asked for advice, spent quite a bit of money. 'Thank you so much, Mum,' she said, with a heartfelt smile.

‘For your exhibition, Susie,’ Jean said. ‘The beautiful pictures you’re going to make.’

‘So, *now* you’re recognising Susanna’s talent,’ said Angie suddenly, her voice hard and penetrating. Everyone jumped.

‘What on earth do you mean, Ange?’ Susanna asked.

Angie was staring at their mother with angry eyes. ‘It was *you* who talked her out of art school,’ she said. Jean’s face had frozen. ‘It was you who made her go into teaching. She could have been a brilliant artist if it wasn’t for you!’

‘Don’t *say* that!’ cried Susanna, distressed. ‘I never —’

‘Let’s not get carried away, Ange,’ Gerry drawled. ‘*Brilliant artist.*’

‘And you!’ Angie rounded on him furiously. ‘Did you ever encourage her? No. You’d rather have a *ping-pong* table.’

‘That’s quite enough,’ said Jean in a steely tone.

‘Ping-pong!’ cried Seb, jumping to his feet. ‘What a great idea. Come on, you guys.’ He jerked his head at Stella-Jean, who hauled Finn up with her, and the three of them skedaddled down the hallway. The adults were left, vibrating with tension, around the festive tree.

‘You’re wrong, Angie. I know you mean well but you’re wrong,’ said Susanna, trying to make her voice firm.

‘She’s talking complete rubbish, is all,’ said Gerry. ‘But what else would you expect from someone who thinks Adam and Eve rode around on dinosaurs?’

Very clearly and deliberately, Angie said, ‘You don’t deserve to be married to my sister, you pig.’

‘Stop! Don’t *fight*,’ Susanna cried, waving desperate hands at both of them. ‘It’s Christmas.’

‘Do you *want* to upset Susanna?’ Jean asked her younger daughter forcefully. ‘Is that what you want?’

‘Hmmm . . . What Angie wants.’ Gerry leaned back on the couch, knees wide, arms folded. ‘I probably shouldn’t say this, but isn’t the answer obvious? Anything she can get! You know, Ange,’ he said, feigning a conversational tone, ‘I’m trying to remember if I’ve ever

known you to do anything but take, take, take. Even when Davey the Leprechaun was alive, you were round here every second day with your hand out.'

'My husband was a better man than you by far!' she said, face vixen-sharp. 'You always despised him, just because he was a carpenter and you're a big-deal architect.'

'No,' said Gerry. 'I despised him because he was a junkie. He didn't last long as a carpenter after you —'

'*Don't!*' Susanna cried.

Suddenly Angie snatched up her bag. 'I know none of you understand this, let alone *care*, but I'm going to tell you anyway. My life is guided by the knowledge that Jesus Christ was born this day for all mankind, and that he died for us too, so that we might know eternal life. That *I* might have eternal life. And now, I'm going! Because I *can't be* with people who don't share that faith.'

'Angie, darling, don't go!' Susanna made to jump up from the couch but Gerry placed one hand firmly on her shoulder, pressing her back down. 'We're your *family*. Please, stay!'

'Don't fucking plead with her!' said Gerry.

'Gerry!' said Jean sharply. 'Have *neither* of you got any manners?'

Gerry and Angie both ignored her, glaring at each other, eyes hot with a hatred neither had allowed themselves to voice before.

'You know what you are, Gerry Visser? You're a great big bully. You bully everyone around you. But you're not going to bully me!' At the hallway door, Angie turned, snapping 'God forgive you' before disappearing with a swirl of pink dress toward the games room.

'Oh, remembered you're a Christian, have you?' Gerry, standing now, flung at her back. Susanna let out a cry of anguish and made to follow her sister but Gerry said, 'No! Let her get the boy and go, if that's what she wants to do. You are *not* going after her.' He towed his wife by the wrist into the kitchen, and kept going out to the backyard.

Jean was left sitting alone and still in her armchair, but in a moment Angie was back, propelling a stricken-looking Finn before her.

Stella-Jean, behind them, cried, 'Wait, wait, let me get his presents!' and scrambled on the floor gathering his books, toys, T-shirts and shoving them into a plastic bag. Angie didn't even slow her stride, passing through the living room without a glance at her mother. Jean rose and held out her hand to Stella-Jean for the bag.

'I'll talk to her,' she said firmly. 'You stay here please, Stella-Jean.'

Jean hurried toward the car. 'Angie!' she called, and Angie, who was sitting with her hands on the steering wheel and the engine running, waited for her mother to give the bag to Finn, in the back seat. She could have driven away then, but she didn't.

'Come back inside,' said Jean, bending to the open driver's window. 'At least have the courtesy to come back and apologise to your sister.'

'Oh, this is *my* fault, is it?' Angie cried. 'What about *him*?'

'Gerry didn't start that, miss.'

Angie gave a screech of frustration. 'You've never taken my side, have you? Not once. You never cared about me, you never listened to me. *You never loved me.*'

Sternly, her mother told her, 'Angie, that's just not true.'

'Say it then. Say it! Say you love me.'

Jean closed her eyes momentarily. 'Don't be ridiculous. Of course I love you.'

'Say it like you mean it,' Angie cried with passionate heat. 'You don't *mean* it. You don't!'

Jean stepped back a pace from the car window, face set. 'Grow up, Angela, for heaven's sake.'

Angie glared furiously at her, rammed the car into gear, and drove off.