



THURSDAYS at ORANGE BLOSSOM HOUSE

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'Fulfilling and Australian as a
lamb roast and full-bodied
shiraz' *The Australian
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CHAPTER ONE

The house looks the same as it always has. As it looked when she was a wife here. When she was a child here, growing up in these sugar cane fields near Atherton that were once her whole world.

The house probably looked like this when her father built it, replacing the more ramshackle dwelling his own father had constructed. Given how flimsy the wooden structure is, she is regularly surprised that it hasn't fallen down. A house on stilts, like all the other Queenslanders around here. Ridiculous, really, that such a thing should exist. But it is still here. Like her.

From this position she has a view of the cane, and the hills behind it. Emerald green they are, all year round; right now they're the backdrop to the dark orange of the flames turning the sea of cane from green to black and brown. When she was a child Grace Maud thought the burnt fields were dead. She still wonders how nature can haul itself out of such wreckage and renew.

'Can I get you anything, Mum?'

Tom appears in front of her, lines streaking out from the corners of his eyes, grey strands in his hat-flattened hair. He looks like he has more years on him than he ever has when she thinks about him. In her mind he's always young. Maybe

that just means she's too old and her brain is stuck in gear somewhere around the 1970s, because he hasn't been young since then.

'What are you doing in here?' she says, then sniffs the air. There's a smell that takes her back to childhood, and flashes her forwards through her life. It's the smell of family and familiarity, of promising futures and hopes dashed. 'That cane's still burning. Aren't you meant to be watching it?'

'Are you telling me off?' he says, and while there's a little of the tone of the wounded child in there she can hear mischief too. He's always been cheeky.

'Yes, I believe I am,' she says. 'You're the boss now. You're meant to be keeping an eye on things.'

'*Now?*' He snorts.

She knows why he's snorting. In truth, he's been the boss since she decided to step back nine years ago at the grand old age of sixty-five. No brothers to inherit the place after her father died – the war took care of that. No husband to help her either – she took care of that. So she'd been running it mostly on her own for a while. Then Tom said he'd leave the city and come back to help her. Luckily for him his wife, Vivien, wanted to come too. That was the only reason Grace Maud felt she could step back: Tom had someone to take care of him while he was taking care of the farm, and the business, and the workers, and everything else that comes with growing cane and burning cane and cutting cane and shipping it off to be made into sugar and molasses and all the other things that a country needs to stay sweet.

'Grace Maud,' says Viv as she enters the room, bending down to kiss her mother-in-law's cheek. 'Have you been sitting in here alone all this time? Tom didn't tell me.' She glares quickly

at her husband. 'I would have come to keep you company. Has he even offered you a drink? Cup of tea?'

'Course I have,' Tom says tersely, then his face relaxes.

Grace Maud recognises that particular quickstep: you say something mean to the one you love then remember you're not cross with them in particular, but it's too late to take back what you've said. She and Tom do it to each other as well.

'I just haven't got around to telling him if I want one or not,' Grace Maud says, squeezing Viv's hand.

Every day of her life, she's grateful that Tom found this girl. A tall, broad-shouldered city lass who has no problem tucking her hair into a hat, pulling on her boots and rolling up her sleeves to get out there and do whatever's necessary to keep the farm going. When Tom met her he called her the 'New Farm princess' because she'd barely been out of Brisbane and she liked the comforts of city life. People can change, that's for sure. Or maybe they don't change so much as adapt.

'So would you? Like a drink?' Tom says, scratching the back of his head.

She smiles at him. 'No, thank you, love, I'm fine.'

As she's grown older her eyesight has become less than perfect, so to her Tom looks more and more like her father and her youngest brother, Frank.

Frank was the brother who returned from the war in 1945, but he was never strong enough to work the cane. Grace Maud doesn't know what happened to him while he was in New Guinea – he would never speak of it. He only made it to thirty-nine. Their older brother's name was the last word out of his mouth, and Grace Maud has always wondered if William appeared to Frank right then, as he passed between worlds. She likes to think so. It gives her hope that one of them, or both, will come for her when it's her time.

On the mantelpiece are the other Llewellyn family photographs. Her brothers are handsome in their uniforms, and in other photos they're rugged in their working gear, their hair plastered to their heads in the Queensland humidity. Next to them is a photo of Grace Maud and Ellie Maud. Their father thought it was a good idea to give his twin girls the same middle name, and always insisted on people using both names. It was his way of honouring his mother, he would say when anyone asked.

He didn't point out that it annoyed his daughters no end and led to much teasing at school. And by the time the girls worked out they didn't have to use the Maud part, it was too late and they'd grown accustomed to it. Besides, it bound them together. They were Grace Maud and Ellie Maud, the Llewellyn twins of Atherton. Even after Ellie Maud moved to Melbourne, married a Hungarian man and took his name she was still Ellie Maud. Still Grace Maud's most beloved person.

When Tom was a baby Grace Maud would sit in this same spot, nursing him, gazing at the photos and the view. The panorama of her life and lifelines. She never tires of any of it. That's not why she moved into town. She moved because Tom and Viv needed to have their own home, even though they said they wanted her to stay. Their daughters, Felicity and Edwina, were grown by then and living elsewhere, but they come home occasionally and Grace Maud knows the place would be too crowded with her here too.

Besides, her great-nephew, Luca, needs his own space – as Grace Maud is reminded when he ducks his head to walk in the side door and only takes a couple of strides to reach her. Ellie Maud's husband was a giant and their grandson is six feet four.

'GM,' Luca says, bending in half to kiss her cheek. That's what he's always called her, partly because 'Great Aunt' doesn't

appeal to her – or ‘Aunt’, for that matter – because it has a hint of dowager about it and she’d like to think she’s not old enough for that, and also because he’s young and the young seem to enjoy adapting their elders’ names.

‘Luca, darling,’ she says. ‘Is Tom being nice to you?’ She glances at her son, who rolls his eyes.

‘Kid gloves, Mum. Like you told me.’

‘I did not!’ Grace Maud says, but her indignation is fake: she did ask Tom to go gently on Luca in his first weeks on the farm. He is helping them out, after all; it isn’t his dream to be a cane farmer. Just because university didn’t turn out to be right for him and he left after one semester, that doesn’t mean he’s going to stay with them forever. Luca has never spent more than a few days in a Far North Queensland summer, or spring, and once he realises what it’s like to live in humidity for months on end he might head for Cairns airport with nary a backwards glance.

‘It’s fine, GM,’ Luca says, grinning. His dark-brown curls fringe his face, and Grace Maud can see that his already olive skin has taken on that look of baked-in dirt that is the result of layers of suntan. ‘Uncle Tom hasn’t got me doing anything dangerous.’

‘Tom, mate,’ says Tom, who is not Luca’s uncle but his second cousin. ‘Just Tom.’

Luca nods. ‘Sorry. Forgot. Um, Tom, they’re asking for you. Something about the plough?’

‘Sure, mate. Mum, you staying for dinner?’

Grace Maud looks from her son’s expectant face to Viv’s. She knows they genuinely want her to stay, but being in this house that is no longer her home has made her more nostalgic than is good for her. It’s why she doesn’t visit often. She’s only here today because it’s the first day of burning and Tom insisted

she come, as if it's a ritual that she has to take part in every year. It's nice that he still thinks of her as being part of the business. It's her name on the title, so she supposes it remains her business too.

'No, I think I'll get back,' she says. 'While it's still light.'

What she really means is: *while it's still light enough for you to not tell me that I'm too old to drive myself home*. That's been their one battleground lately: the fact she won't give up her licence. Why should she? Not being able to drive would sentence her to a life stuck in her house, and she can't bear the idea.

Tom looks disappointed and she's caught off guard. She forgets, sometimes, that he loves her. It's so easy to forget when it's never said, even when she knows that he's like her in that respect: they use actions, not words, to convey what they feel.

'Thank you for having me,' she says, pushing herself up from the chair with great effort. She sits too much these days and it's made getting up more difficult than it should be. All those years of riding horses when she was younger have made for stiff hips now, and they complain as she half-waddles towards her handbag.

Tom, Viv and Luca follow her down the stairs to her car.

'See you, Mum.' Tom bends and kisses her on the cheek, then Viv does the same.

'GM,' Luca says as he wraps his long arms around her. She squeezes him briefly then turns and lowers herself into the driver's seat.

The air is heavy with the cane smoke and she looks towards the fields that are on fire. No matter how many times she sees it, she wonders at the majesty and brutality of it: growing those verdant crops then setting them ablaze to prepare them for cutting.

She's seen that pattern in her own life: allowing something to grow, then doing something dramatic to pare it back. Or to destroy it. Perhaps it suggests that she's heartless. Or perhaps it's all she knows. After a childhood spent observing the pattern, it's in her blood and her marrow and the very gristle of her. She has known for a long time now that the way we grow up leaves an imprint on us that is both profound and invisible. Our own individual system of ley lines. And she has spent her lifetime wondering if all we do is follow those lines without knowing why, our course plotted before we are even conscious of it.