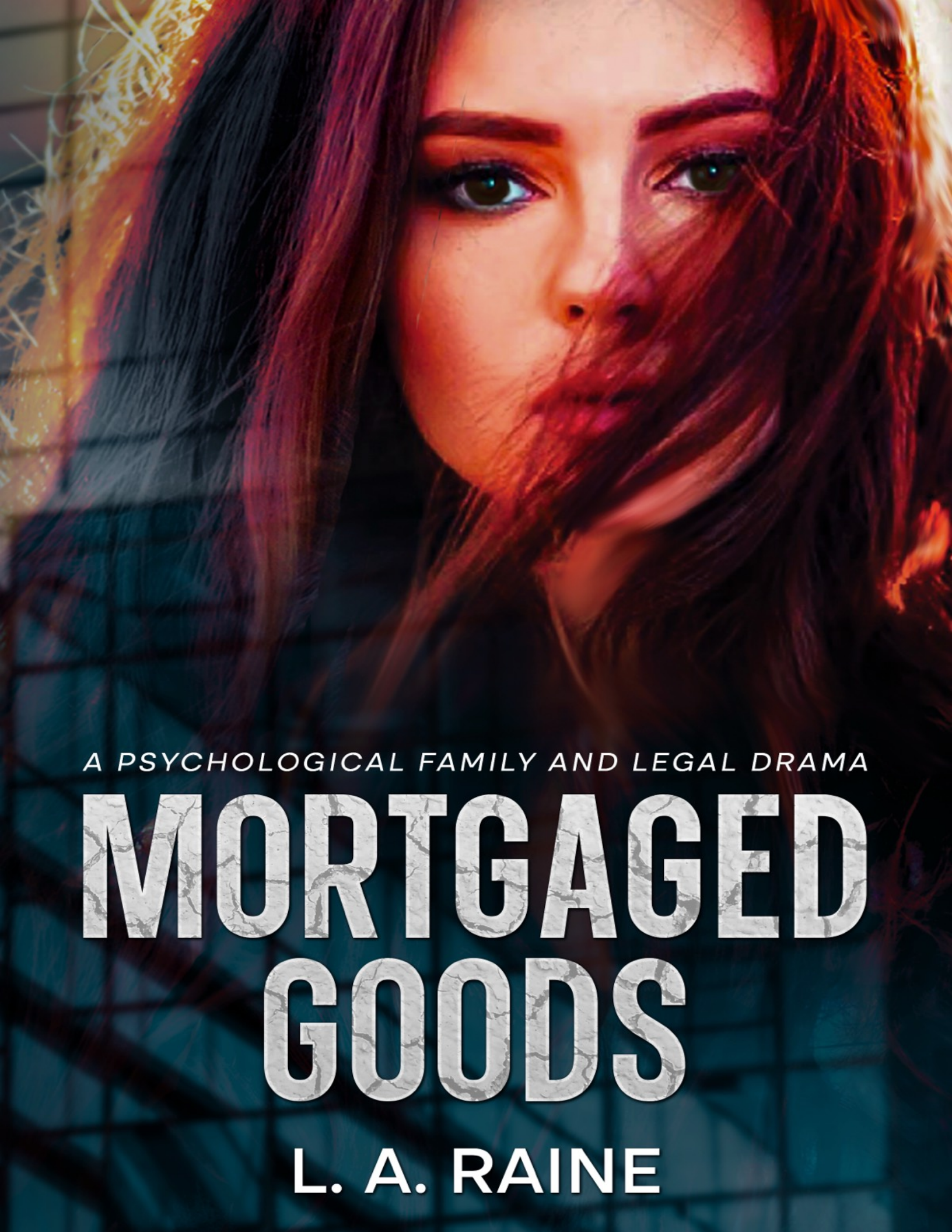
A PSYCHOLOGICAL FAMILY AND LEGAL DRAMA
MORTGAGED GOODS
L. A. RAINE

PRAISE FOR MORTGAGED GOODS

Testimonials relate to the version originally published under the name Lorraine Cobcroft, now writing as L.A. Raine

Critical Acclaim & Awards

"A story that will grab readers from the very first words and won't let go until the very last."
— **Tracy A. Fischer**, *Readers' Favorite* (5-Star Review)

"The story and Nata linger after reading. I would love to read more... and find out what comes next."
— **Jennifer**, *Ink and Insights* (Awarded 5th Prize, Literary Titan)

"A compelling family saga and legal drama with psychological thriller elements and strong emotional depth... strong commercial potential for fans of dramatic literary fiction, legal suspense, and tragic romance."
— **Manuscript Critique Review**

Industry & Literary Curators

"What immediately stood out to me... is the tension between reinvention and inheritance. Natalya's transformation into Natalie Dreyer feels carefully constructed... a life built brick by brick on chosen family, hard work, and professional success."
— **Tony Elison Jr.**

"A layered architecture of emotion and suspense that is quietly demanding to be shared. From the very first glimpse of Nata's

world, your story revealed both a sharp intelligence and a rare, intimate tenderness."

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"The emotional complexity, the moral tension, the haunting truth buried in Nata's story—it's the kind of layered, socially charged drama that lingers long after the last page. *Mortgaged Goods* doesn't just entertain; it asks questions that matter."

— Eleven Vale

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— Sarah Collins

"The themes of identity, hidden truths, and resilience resonate strongly... exactly the kind of story that would spark thoughtful discussions."

— Ani Karapetyan

Reader & Community Reviews

"*Mortgaged Goods* grabbed me from page one and didn't let go. Natalie Dreyer is smart, layered, and deeply human... You've created a story that blends professional ambition, emotional trauma, and relationship complexity with real grace and grit."

— Charlotte Hayes

"The author speaks from her heart. It shows. They are not words we read, but feelings straight from the author to the reader. This is a superb book."

— Marj McRae

"I absolutely loved this book. Beautifully written and hard to put down. Sensitive, emotional, and heart-wrenching at times... I highly

recommend it."

— Jan Peters

“Powerful Stuff Wrapped in Beautiful Words: [Raine] explores the intense emotions of self-confidence and the fortitude of the human spirit.”

— John Staunton, Amazon Kindle Review

MORTGAGED GOODS - SAMPLE FILE ONLY

A PSYCHOLOGICAL DRAMA OF LOVE AND DECEIT

L. A. RAINE

RAINBOW WORKS PTY. LTD

Mortgaged Goods

Revised Edition.

First published by Lorraine Cobcroft, 2015

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DEDICATION AND EPIGRAPHS

For Suzie, who is indeed a woman of value

"To become the person someone else had imagined for us is not freedom – it is to mortgage our life to someone else's fear."
— Deborah Levy

"The only disability in life is a bad attitude."
— Scott Hamilton

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Also by L.A Raine: A WILL OF DECEIT
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ONE

They buried a woman this morning—and with her, a thousand fears and nightmares. Lies no longer haunt them. Burdens have been lifted, ambitions lost and souls found. Trauma, a birth and a revelation have transformed them all.

"I'M PREGNANT," Natalie said.

It should have sent Hetty floating in the clouds, but her daughter's eyes were cold, and there was a harshness in her tone that sent a little snake of fear to wrap about Hetty's ribs.

"I have to abort, Mum. Unlike you, I'm not cut out to be a mother."

Hetty stared at her in silence. An old wound had opened deep inside her, and a thousand memories, like playing cards, were shuffling in her head. She felt heat rising in her neck, and ice forming in her belly. She studied her daughter and saw the coldness give way to nervousness. Nata was waiting, now, for the shout of horror—for the chiding and recriminations.

"It's a new world, Mum," Nata protested weakly. Her forehead creased and her eyes misted, but she kept up her pretence. "Liberation. Women have choices now."

"Man-made changes, Nata," Hetty sniffed. "Physics and nature… they don't change. We're still all made the same."

Hetty knew her coolness frustrated her daughter, but Nata should have been grateful for her response; for the calmness that did not come easily, but that Hetty knew was required of her. She arranged cups and a platter of fresh-baked muffins. "Fancy… my little girl a mama," she exclaimed. Her tone told Nata she was not taking the second part of the announcement seriously. Not for an instant.

Joe would focus on that last declaration. He would talk about morality and God's will… about right and wrong. He would lecture

Nata about a woman's place… the role God intended for women… being grateful for God's wonderful gift. Hetty always tried to be more understanding, more open-minded, a confidante for her. She needed that from her mother, Hetty believed. But she couldn't hide her thoughts. Nata knew her mother considered abortion a wrong that could never be forgiven.

Nata frowned deeply, and Hetty could tell the guilt demon was biting. She'd seen that look often enough.

"Mum, please," Nata whispered. "Don't make this harder for me. I need for you to understand. I can't have this baby. Our careers… everything's right at a critical point. We're working on a huge case… one that will make Karl's name in the profession. Success will secure his partnership and secure our future, but an interruption now would ruin things for us."

Hetty forced a smile. "What you're thinking… it's not so unusual for a woman who finds herself in the family way unexpectedly, 'specially given all the plans you and Karl made. But you'll adjust. Maternal instincts kick in and—"

"I have to abort, Mum," Nata whispered. Her tears flowed freely now as her hand crept down to caress her belly. "Karl insists I must. He—"

"It's not Karl's decision, love," Hetty told her. "This life… it's living in your body, and—" She halted in response to her daughter's weeping. She rose to walk around the table and pat her shoulder.

"I shouldn't have expected you to understand," Nata sobbed. "It was selfish to tell you even, knowing how much you wanted children… knowing you never… How could you know how—"

"Ah, but I do know, love. I've been where you are now."

The protest died on Nata's lips. Her disbelieving eyes challenged Hetty.

"When I was quite young, long before I met Joe. Lost it at five months. Should have been a relief. My circumstances… they were far, far worse than you can even imagine. But the pain of loss… I never forgot. A woman doesn't. It's in our make-up: maternal love. We can't fight it. No matter what our situation, once that tiny life starts to grow inside us—"

Nata shook her head and raised pitying eyes to meet Hetty's. "Oh God, Mum! I never knew. I just always thought… Why have you never told me? If I'd known, I never would have—" She broke

off in a shuddering sob, then waited, crying silently, while Hetty dusted off the sad old memories and replayed them, then put them aside.

"I feel for you, suffering such pain," Nata said, putting her brave face on again momentarily, "But career women are different, Mum. Modern women, we're not like your generation."

Hetty refilled their teacups. "Modern women? Yes, they're different, all right. Smarter. Better educated. Higher expectations. Regarded differently by menfolk and society. The rules have changed, Nata, some for the better. But young women still bear babies and push prams and play in parks with toddlers. They still talk on and on, at gatherings, about their offspring. And those that can't conceive… well, they spend a fortune on IBM don't they?"

"IVF, Mum." Nata laughed softly, but her fragility showed through.

"Whatever," Hetty continued, "Making babies artificially. And that's after they tried all the natural treatments and fertility clinics and such like. Modern women want to be mothers just as much as I did."

"Some modern women. Some of us are quite content to pursue careers and live as childless couples. And some don't even want a man."

"Lesbians were about in my day, too, though they didn't make such a noise about it back then. And spinsters, back then, generally admitted openly to being unhappy about being left on the shelf. Barren women? Well, they just had to live with the pain, unless fate stepped in. Like it did for me.

"Do you remember the day you came to us?" Hetty's eyes misted now as she reached into a store of favourite memories and selected, again, that so-often replayed recording of the joyous June day, in 1985, when Lidiya Popovich brought little Natalya—now known as Natalie—for Hetty and Joe to love.

❄

"SHE SWEAR SHE LUFF HER, Hetty. She say she come back for her… soon." Joe's voice was low and pleading. His Dutch accent came through strongly, as it always did when emotions ran strongly. It had

been 22 years since Gottfried Johannes Dreyer migrated from the Netherlands, settled in the Melbourne suburb of Footscray, and changed his name to be more Australian. Aged 34 when he migrated, he had married Hetty two years later. Hetty had come as an infant and grown up an Australian in a Dutch household. Joe was still Gottfried, and he was still Dutch.

"She's a child, Joe, not a chattel," Hetty shouted.

He stared at her, disbelieving. In twenty years of marriage, Hetty had never raised her voice at him before.

"So long as she never know," he said mournfully. "Pray she stay long time and never learn why."

Hetty dabbed at her eyes and swallowed hard. Her anger wasn't with Joe.

"We want child, Het," Joe protested. "What it matter how she comes to us? Can't we just be grateful, and luff her?"

"For how long?" Hetty sniffed into her handkerchief. "I'll love her, for sure," she mumbled. "But that's the problem, isn't it? What do we do when they come for her?"

"Maybe never will. Meantime, at least child haff proper care. If we refuse, where dey take her?"

Hetty sniffed again, then retreated to the bathroom to repair her face. The child mustn't see a woman distressed.

Returning to the kitchen, Hetty set to making sandwiches ready for toasting. She arranged fresh-baked pastries on a silver tray. She set the table with her best lace cloth and the good china, and placed a dozen prize pink roses in a glass vase in the centre. Then she dressed in her Sunday best. Her long black hair was pulled into a tight bun near the nape of her neck, and she fastened it with a thin ribbon instead of the usual plain band. She even pushed two jewelled combs into the hair above her ears. Returning to the tiny, cluttered parlour, she plumped and rearranged the cushions, adjusted the blinds and straightened the ties that held the curtains back. Then she set to pacing nervously about, eagle eyes searching for any little thing that might be slightly out of place.

Joe perched on the edge of an armchair, pulling at his goatee beard. Outside, the sky was muddy. The few trees that lined the streets were naked. Dead leaves skittered in an irritable wind, dancing with empty cigarette packets, chocolate wrappers and soiled Kleenex.

“Sergei’s old rattletrap got no heating,” Joe said. “They get here chilled to the bone.” He stoked the fire and placed a little stool by it for little Natalya to toast her freezing toes. It crackled and popped as the flames licked blackened logs. Orange lumps of glowing charcoal fell by the hearth. The walls were smoke-stained and there were little burn holes in the carpet near the fireplace, but the room was cosy and inviting.

Moments later, a dented brown station wagon clattered to a halt at the front gate. A thickset man emerged from the driver side. He was a hard, ruddy-faced fellow, shabby and unshaven. His belly flopped over the top of his trousers, bouncing as he walked. A grubby, shrunken jumper stopped just short of his waist. The sleeves were too short. He rounded the car and stepped onto the creaking boards of the veranda without stopping to open doors for his wife or daughter.

The woman unfolded herself from the passenger seat and tugged at the rear door, beckoning to the frightened child huddled against the far side door. The mother tottered perilously on thin, heavily-veined legs, liberally littered with bruises and scars. There was a ragged cut across her top lip and she sported a prince of a shiner. Hetty could guess who gave her that. Sergei looked every bit the beast Joe had described.

Natalya followed her mother with downcast eyes, shoulders hunched, dragging reluctant feet. Joe opened the front door without waiting for a knock and urged them to hasten in to the warmth. Sergei helped himself to the best chair, his bulbous nose snorting disdain. The woman nodded silently as she passed and perched on the edge of the chair farthest from the hearth. The girl, though, spoke precisely and politely.

“Hello, Mr. Dreyer. How are you?”

“Call me Joe,” he replied with a smile, but the father glared at him and barked that she must never be so disrespectful.

Natalya was not a pretty child, though she had the look of a girl who might grow to be beautiful. Her ginger hair, in a blunt bowl cut, was too short for a girl. A gappy fringe sloped awkwardly across a high forehead above dull green eyes, shadowed with dark circles. An angry pink welt travelled from left ear to chin, and a bright red nose seemed to run incessantly. She sniffled and snorted and made little coughing noises.

Lidiya Popovich looked mournful. Worry lines creased her brow, and her nicotine-stained fingers danced nervously in her lap. Hetty could find no words to say to the woman. How could a mother do this? It defied comprehension. What could one say in such a strange and tragic situation?

Hetty went to the kitchen to toast the sandwiches and reheat the water in the kettle. Lidiya and Natalya followed, watching her in silence. When she was done, she fetched the pastries and cakes from the larder and called the men to the table. She caught the appreciative glances as they eyed the feast she'd prepared, but the girl and woman nibbled with polite reserve. Sergei gorged without restraint—not even a pretence of manners.

When the meal was done, Lidiya rose and reached out a work-hardened hand to stroke the child's head gently. "Mama will come back for you soon. I promise," she whispered. The child gave no reply, but just stared, expressionless, at a photo-covered wall.

"Min' your manners, girl. See you behave proper, y' hear?" Sergei's voice was harsh. There was no affection in it. He turned to Joe. "Teach her right, von't y'. Like her Papa do. Gotta train her be a good girl. Beat her good if she disobey. No spoiling. She gotta learn respect."

Joe glared at him. "I'll not be raisin' hant to child. Never struck woman or child in my life, an' won't be startin' now."

Sergei glanced at Hetty. "Must 'ave got lucky in the vife stakes, eh? Got one already trained proper. Not like Lidiya here. She need lots a' teachin'. An' de girl too. Inherited 'er moder's stroppiness. Y'll be needin' to beat that outa her."

"I'll not be raisin' hant to child," Joe repeated firmly.

"Achh! Never been Papa before. You learn quick. Kids need discipline. Sparing stick spoils child."

"Dere's other ways," Joe said, with a sympathetic glance at the girl.

"Sure. Belt instead of stick. Vorks as vell. An' I make sure not spare it. You follow my example. Train her up know her place… respect men… vork hard… make some man a good vife. I don't stand for any cheek… not from 'er or 'er mozer."

Hetty nursed a gratifying thought that, after today, Sergei wouldn't be deciding what he would or wouldn't stand for from the child, but she kept the thought to herself. She felt for the poor

mother, but then, the mother chose the man. The mother brought the child into this dreadful man's world. There was no help for those that chose such a fate.

"Just go," Joe spat. "We take goot care of child."

"Better care than she's had these past eight years," Hetty muttered under her breath, turning so they couldn't read her lips. She turned back to ask the woman had she brought the child's favourite toys. She had no interest in the faded, tatty clothing she expected would fill a battered suitcase—were there one—but a cherished doll or teddy? Something familiar to give the child comfort. They had brought nothing at all. The girl had only what she stood in.

Hetty left Joe to show the couple out. Taking the child by the hand, she guided her through a door at the rear of the kitchen to the little room they had prepared, so many years ago, for the child that never came. Joe had papered the walls and Hetty made pretty blue and yellow floral curtains. A patchwork quilt covered the bed and a huge black and white panda with a yellow ribbon around its neck perched on a pillow. Joe had painted an old desk and fitted the drawers with new plastic knobs. A patterned rug covered most of the polished linoleum floor. There was a wardrobe in the far corner that would now be filled with dresses. Beside it, a tall chest of drawers waited to be loaded with pyjamas, underwear and play clothes. A porcelain doll sat on top, in the corner, presiding regally over a neat arrangement of combs, brushes and hair ribbons—a few meagre treasures kept from Hetty's own long-forgotten childhood.

There was no reaction from the child as Hetty led her into the room. She just stared blankly. Of course she must be quite overcome with fear and confusion. Strange people. Strange place. Her Mama and Papa gone, with doubtless little explanation. She won't go to her old school and she won't see her friends again, if, indeed, she'd been permitted to make any. Somehow, Hetty suspected life in the Popovich household was rather lonely and dull.

She will surely settle here soon enough and enjoy the warmth and love we'll surround her with.

Ah, such plans they'd had for a child. But year after year had passed with Hetty cursing the monthly period that always came right on time, until, finally, they had accepted the awful reality of her barrenness. But now? Perhaps only for a fleeting moment, they were

parents. And however brief the interlude, they would cherish every minute and dote on the child as if she were their own.

❄

"THEY NEVER CAME BACK FOR YOU," Hetty whispered, returning to the present. "I often thought perhaps we did wrong, just keeping you. Maybe we should have gone to the authorities. But we loved you so much. We wanted you. You were the perfect daughter… the child every mother dreams of raising."

"Until now," Nata said softly. "What I'm planning to do… I should never have expected your forgiveness, let alone understanding. But I have to, Mum, for our marriage. Karl demands—" She broke off in a shuddering sob. When she had calmed a little, she turned to Hetty with tears streaming. "It would break Joe's heart if he knew. He must never—"

"He won't know, because you won't do it, love. Trust me, I know. You will be a wonderful mother, and you will adore and enjoy your child—just as I have always adored and enjoyed you."

Nata rose hastily, then, and grasped her bag. She didn't stop to rinse her teacup or place her plate in the sink. She fled without giving Hetty the customary farewell hug.

"I hoped you might understand," she called back from the door. "But I should never have expected you could. I'll see you in a few weeks, when it's over. Someday, maybe, you'll forgive me."

Her words were punctuated with sobs, and her hands were shaking.

The door slammed and she was gone.

TWO

"WHAT ON EARTH possessed you to tell her?" Karl's tone was taut. A worried frown sliced his forehead.

Nata shook her head, her eyes brimming with tears. She sat on the bed with her arms cradling her knees and her chin resting on them.

"What possible good can come of her knowing? You should have kept this between us and just gone and done what was necessary. Nobody ever needed to know."

"Perhaps I wanted her to talk me out of it," Nata whispered.

Karl's startled gaze jerked to meet hers. "We've discussed this, Nat."

Since the day they returned from their honeymoon, Karl had steadfastly refused to use the nickname Nata had always been known by. He persisted in calling her Nat—with a hard "a"—despite her frequent protests that she disliked the abbreviation intensely.

"Neither of us ever wanted children and we both know that even if we did, now is the worst possible time. We agreed you'd abort. It's all arranged."

"You agreed, Karl. I submitted, like the good obedient, subservient wife I was taught I must be. Like the trophy wife you wanted."

Her words cut him like a whip, and he flinched. "You're not yourself, Nat. It's understandable. Hormones. They go crazy, I'm told. Phillip warned me—"

"Phillip! You discussed this with a work mate? What has any of this got to do with him?"

"He gave me the details of the clinic. His wife's been there. Maybe you could talk to her… get some reassurance from someone who's been through it and knows what it's like… what you're feeling."

She thrust herself back on the bed and began to sob aloud. Flustered, Karl perched beside her and reached out to stroke her

hair, but she pushed his hand away.

"Don't, Karl. Don't touch me."

He sighed loudly, sending her a look of mingled pity and exasperation. He rose to pace the floor.

"Natalie," he said, sitting again, but with his back to her and his forehead cradled in his palms, "I understand this is painful for you. Regardless of your ambition, our plans, I guess all women have moments of—"

"Our plans? They were your plans, Karl. I wanted a career, but lots of women have both. Lots of husbands support their wives, help with housework, care for the kids. We are luckier than most. We can afford household help, a nanny. Hetty and Joe would have helped. But oh no! The great and insightful Karl Albrecht mapped out our lives and—"

"And you agreed. Remember?" he snapped, raising his head to turn and glare at her. "Said, in fact, that you had never wanted children. Said your career was what mattered most to you, and you could not let pregnancy and commitment to raising kids get in the way of success."

"I also said I didn't want a man in my life; that I would never let a man touch me that way; that sex was not an act of love, but a concession to the disgusting animal desires of men. But you were confident you could change my thinking about that."

"And I did."

"And conception changed my thinking about career versus motherhood. Conception that happened because I let you convince me that sex was an expression of love. Well, love made a baby, Karl. Your baby. Our baby."

He stared at her, eyes wide and anxious. The clock on the cedar bedside table counted the minutes of silence.

"You changed my thinking, Karl. And you should have taken appropriate precautions."

"Oh, come now, Natalie. Honestly! We don't have sex often, but I assumed you were protecting yourself."

"And why do you consider that my responsibility?"

"Because it's you who must suffer the consequences of unplanned conception. It's your body."

She glared at his back, seething, but his attitude shouldn't have surprised her. The signs were always there, if only she hadn't been

so blind to them. He was a charmer: handsome; rich; ambitious; successful. He was generous and attentive when it gained him what he desired, but egotistical and demanding; manipulative, often.

She was raised with precisely the beliefs Karl wanted his wife to hold: that the man headed the household. Women vowed to love, honour and obey. Good women did as Hetty did, but in Hetty's case it was not an onerous obligation. Joe Dreyer worshipped his wife and would do anything necessary to ensure her happiness. Joe was boss with Hetty's consent and on Hetty's terms. He asked nothing of her that she would hesitate to give. His love was unconditional, and his attention to her wants was unstinting.

Karl was different. His love had to be earned. She had earned it. He told her, often, she was everything he wanted in a wife: beautiful, classy, intelligent… successful and admired by everyone. He was the envy of his friends when he won her hand, and he delighted in their grudging admiration, just as he delighted in their grudging respect for him as a prospective partner in Melbourne's most prestigious law firm. But now, she had failed him. And it seemed he could withdraw his affection as quickly as he had bestowed it. He had made it quite clear what she must do to win it back. He had given a command, and he expected unquestioning compliance.

"This situation is of your making, Natalie. And you are the only one who can fix it. I've done what I can to help. What more can I do?"

"You could ask me what I want. Listen to me. Care about how I feel."

"Of course I care how you feel, darling. But you're not yourself. When you think about it rationally, you'll see that I'm doing what's right for both of us… what has to be."

He paced a while, then returned to sit beside her and gaze at her. His look was loving.

I'm being unfair to him, she thought. He cares. And it's true, we did agree, long before he signed Max Knight as a client. And I know what this case means for him. It really is the worst possible time to be pregnant.

"I'm sorry, Karl. I know we discussed this. We agreed. But pregnancy changed me."

He was right. Motherhood was never part of her life plan, and she always knew fatherhood never figured in his. So why did she

feel such delight at seeing a little pink line on a test strip a few days after her period was due? And why did Karl's stance, now, produce such intense resentment? And yet, a part of her embraced his thinking—shared his determination to return to the life they had planned. A part of her wanted nothing more than to be free of this encumbrance.

"I'm sorry, too, Nat." Karl mumbled. "It's hard for you, I know. But we have to be strong in our resolve, darling. It's an impossible time for us, with a partnership offer pending. I can't afford the distraction. What we planned to do is for the best. You'll see that when it's over."

The guilt demon plagued her now. A sharp voice stabbed her conscience, reminding her that there was a life inside her… reminding her of what the priests and nuns had taught: that human life was sacred; that if God blessed you with the ability to reproduce, you had an obligation to Him to protect and nurture, to give thanks, to raise your child to love and honour Him and to embrace His word. The voice reminded her of her ecstasy at the discovery of what their love had produced.

" 'Thou shalt not kill', Karl. It's a grave sin. We are Catholics, you and I."

"Lapsed Catholics, my dear," he laughed. The laughter cut her deeply. He should be angry or sad, not amused.

"I forsook religion, but I kept my conscience."

"It's not a life yet, sweetheart."

"We made love, Karl, and our lovemaking made a baby. Nothing magical happens at six or ten or twenty-four weeks that transforms it from a nothing into a life. The act of lovemaking makes the life, according to God's law. Man just makes up illogical rules for his own convenience. But men can't even make up their minds what they want to declare right and what should be said to be wrong. Until a few years ago, abortion—at any stage—was illegal. We change the rules whenever it suits social convenience, and then we try to claim superior knowledge and the right to discard God's law on the subject. Even the church does it. That's why I withdrew. Too much hypocrisy."

Clearly uninterested in her dissertation, Karl had begun to undress. She watched, annoyed, as he peeled off his shirt and exposed sculpted shoulders and a tight, lightly rippled torso. Unlike

most men his age who worked in sedentary jobs, he kept trim and fit. He turned to the mirror and lifted his shoulders, admiring himself. It was a habit that always irritated her intensely, though he had a body any woman would admire. Tonight, she wished there were nothing admirable about him… that his looks were as unattractive as his current demeanour.

He turned to study her for a moment, then moved toward her. For an instant, she feared she saw lust in his expression. The thought repulsed her. But as he stood gazing down at her, his expression turned hard and cold. Momentary relief gave way to fear.

"We've done enough talking," he said, adopting the commanding professional tone he used when annoyed with a difficult client or an unbending opposing lawyer. "It's time for action. Get up and pack your things now. We'll leave for the clinic at noon tomorrow."

"No," she whispered, and pulled away from him, fearing he might strike her for her defiance. There was fire in his dark eyes now and a burning red rising from neck to cheeks and reaching to the tips of his ear lobes.

She struggled for fresh resolve. "You are right about one thing, Karl." She was stroking her belly; making little circles with her palm. "It's my body, so it's my decision. And I haven't made it yet… not for certain."

"Then take your time, Natalie," he replied icily, his lips thinning to a cruel line. "But understand this. If you keep this baby, you raise it alone. I won't be part of any child's life, nor of its mother's."

He strode to the dressing room then, and he returned clad in shorts, T-shirt, and running shoes.

"I'm going for a run. When I return, if you've not come to your senses, I'll pack an overnight bag and go to Phillip's. This issue is not open to further discussion, Natalie. I've made my choice. Make yours."

The door closed, and she was alone with her indecision.

❄

LIFE HAD BEEN SO PERFECT. How had it come to this?

Natalya Popovich, at age nine, had changed her name to Natalie Dreyer and left a sordid past behind. She forgot the woman who had brought her into the world and the woman and man who raised her for the first eight years of her life. She forgot the older sister they had sent away a year before and the twin brothers she had known only through photographs and her mother's stories of better times. She forgot the squalid little cottage in the Melbourne suburb of Newport, where her birth mother and father danced the Barynya and sang Russian folk songs. She forgot the ever-present fear and pain and the frequent abuse that caused it.

As Natalie Dreyer, she blossomed, loved and nurtured by foster parents who adored her.

Gottfried Johannes Dreyer and Henriëtte Elke de Hass Dreyer—Joe and Hetty to those close to them—were old enough to be her grandparents. Immigrants from the Netherlands, they'd related tales of how they had met in Footscray, where Joe found a job as a sheet metal worker. He had changed his name to sound more Australian, hoping to close the door on a troubled past that remained a dark secret, but that shaped a complex character. Steeped in religion and committed to an authoritarian system, Joe balanced uncompromising discipline with loyalty, compassion and generosity. His wife complimented it with untiring patience, tolerance, and deep wisdom.

Joe had wooed the cheerful, ruddy-cheeked woman he met walking home from work one September evening, and had won her affection. He bought the little cottage before proposing, and presented it to Henriëtte as a gift when she consented to take his hand. They'd set about fixing and decorating to make a home for the child they yearned for but never conceived. Then Joe had come home one evening to announce that a workmate had asked a favour. He needed someone to care for his eight-year-old daughter for a time. Joe didn't share with Hetty what he knew of the man and his circumstances, nor the reason for the request. He told her only that the man was a beast, and the little girl desperately needed someone to love her. And Hetty had boundless love to give.

Natalya had arrived at the Dreyer's confused and frightened. She understood that her parents were leaving her there for a while, but believed they intended to come back for her soon. Hetty Dreyer seemed a nice enough lady, but Nata was overcome with fear of Joe.

He was so terribly tall and straight, with that dignified air and proper manners and that grave expression on his weathered face. He was not at all like Papa, but he was a man, and girls must always please men.

With her parents gone, Hetty led her back to the kitchen and took her on a tour of the tiny cottage. Joe poured tea and seated himself at the dining table, newspaper spread before him. Hetty waited patiently by the toilet door while Nata relieved herself, and after, while she washed. Mama had taught her hygiene, but she was afraid to dry her hands on Hetty's clean white towels. She tried to shake them dry. Hetty passed her a hand towel.

"It's all right, child. The towels are here to be used."

She was hesitant, but obeyed.

"We must get you some clothes," Hetty said. "Will you come to the mall with me?"

Nata nodded silently. She was frightened, but she had been taught to obey. Hetty fetched her handbag from the sideboard and leaned to peck Joe's cheek. "The child needs clothing," she said. "I'll take her to the stores now. I'll be back in time to make dinner."

Joe nodded and turned back to his newspaper. Hetty took Natalya's hand and led her out into the street.

❄

"AHHH! How pretty you look, my pet!" Hetty exclaimed. "Look in the mirror, sweetheart. Do you like what you see?"

"She looks so lovely in that," the shop assistant said, smiling. "But she doesn't seem too interested, does she?"

"Everything is strange. Her mother and father are ill, you see. They've left her with us, but she doesn't know us well. She's frightened, poor child."

Hetty chose four pretty dresses, shorts, T-shirts, pyjamas and underwear. She asked about school uniforms and a coat. Natalya was confused and afraid. She kept her eyes downcast and her expression grave, until one new dress took her fancy. She twirled before the mirror, flicked at her hair, and even ventured a tiny smile. "Pretty," she whispered.

"You sure are, my darling," Hetty replied.

"We need shoes now," Hetty said, "but first, how about a milkshake? It's thirsty work trying on dresses."

Natalya nodded silently.

"She can wear that dress," Hetty said to the assistant. "Just remove the tags, please." They discarded the clothes she had arrived in. Hetty handed her a bag to carry, gathered up the remainder, and led her toward the cafe. "What flavour do you like?"

Nata stared blankly, her lips pressed tightly together.

"Two strawberry milkshakes, please," Hetty said. She pulled out a chair, indicated for Nata to sit, and took the seat across from her. When the drinks were placed in front of them, she dropped the straw in, sipped, and smiled broadly.

Hetty had almost finished when Nata finally pushed the straw hesitantly into her glass, but she couldn't disguise her delight at the taste. Her eyes lit as she sipped. She'd never had strawberry milkshake before.

As they started for the shoe store, Natalya quietly slipped her hand into Hetty's and smiled up at her. Hetty's kind, gentle manner had won her over. As long as Joe kept his distance, she was confident living in the Dreyer house would be okay.

❄

"WON'T you model your new clothes for Uncle Joe, Natalya?" Hetty asked when they returned from the stores.

She shook her head vigorously, dropping to sit on the rug and hug her chest tightly. She was afraid of Joe. She would stay in her room where she was safe from him.

"It's all right, darling," Hetty assured her. "Just put some play clothes on and we'll put the rest of your new things away for now. Tomorrow, we must get you some books and toys. Do you like to play with dolls? The one on the dresser is yours now, my dear. You can take it down and play with it, but be gentle with it, won't you?"

Natalya remained seated on the mat, staring at the floor. Hetty hesitated for a time, then lifted the doll down and placed it beside her. She quietly slipped out and closed the door behind her.

Joe tapped softly on the door to Natalya's room, calling to her. When she ignored his soft knock, he turned the door handle slowly.

He pushed the door open. She was seated on the mat, dressed in play clothes now, with the doll in her arms.

"Achh! Wonderful!" Joe exclaimed. "Fount something to play wid. Mind you handle gently, now. She's precious. Aunt Hetty made a start on dinner. Wants to know what you like to eat, young lady. Spoiling you, yes? All dem nice clothes, and now wantin' to cook favourite. Tell me what I tell her t' make."

Natalya kept her head down and her lips zipped. Her grip on the doll tightened.

"No need to be afrait of us, little one," Joe said, trying to sound reassuring. "But you must answer when I ask question. It is manners. I know your papa taught you manners, yes?"

Terror and rage flooded over her then, at the mention of Papa. Her head jerked suddenly. She lifted her arms above her head, still holding the doll tightly. Then her arms came thundering down.

She hadn't meant to break the doll, but it caught against the corner of the dresser. Craaaaack! It shattered. Tiny pieces of porcelain sprayed over the rug and her folded legs. Stricken, she leapt up and pushed past Joe. She ran through the kitchen and down the hall to tug at the front door. Hetty was close on her heels, but she made it out the front gate and was half a block away before Hetty, panting heavily, caught her arm and swung her round to face her. Hetty's face was red and dripping and her neck was pulsing. She held Nata tightly.

Joe came up behind her then and scooped her up in his strong arms and carried her back to the house, back to her room. He placed her on the bed.

"That doll belong to Aunt Hetty. Meant a lot to her. An' you can't be runnin' off like dat, girlie. Aunt Hetty is too old to be chasing young girl all about de streets. You papa—"

Natalya was shaking violently, terrified. She'd heard Papa telling Joe to beat her hard if she did wrong, and she knew what she'd done was really bad. She'd heard Joe say he'd never hit her, but she didn't believe it. He'd never had a naughty little girl to deal with before.

"Shhush, Joe," Hetty called firmly, pushing ahead of him. "It was mention of her papa that upset her, can't you see? She's frightened, is all. She needs comfort."

"Can't haff her smashing things or running off, Het," he said, shaking his head. Natalya cowered and huddled close to the wall,

now even more convinced he was going to beat her, or maybe send her away.

"It's all right, Natalya," Hetty whispered. She moved closer to the bed. "It's all right, sweetheart," she repeated. She sat beside her and reached tentatively to touch her arm. Natalya pulled away.

"Poor child is terrified," Hetty said. "Heard her papa, didn't we? Probably expects a beating now. Her papa would thrash her for sure."

"No need to be afrait, Natalya. No-one in dis house will raise a hand to you," Joe said, but his words didn't reassure her. She had done a terrible thing. She deserved a thrashing; she knew she did. It puzzled her why they seemed so distressed that she was frightened. Papa never cared about her fear. He only cared that she learned a lesson.

She hugged the wall, trembling and confused. Hetty reached across and touched her arm gently. "I'll clean up the mess, and then we'll leave you for a while. I'll fix something nice for your dinner. We'll talk later."

Hetty turned and nodded to Joe. He returned to his newspaper. She silently swept up the broken china, tearfully picking up broken remains of the doll's head and body. Natalya watched her, overcome with remorse at what she had done. Part of her wished they would beat her… wished they would punish her somehow. Even Mama would have said she'd earned a harsh punishment for this.

Hetty tiptoed from the room. Nata was alone for a while. Alone in that pretty room with the panda. Alone with all the lovely new clothes Hetty had bought her. Alone, and overcome with guilt and fear and a burning wish that she could somehow put the doll back together—that she could stop Hetty being upset.

Hetty stole back into the room and stood beside her. "Oh, Natalya," she whispered, "what does a doll matter when I have you to love. Please, please, don't run away, child. I only want to hold you and love you and protect you. I only want to care for you forever, if you'll let me. We'll buy another doll tomorrow, and books too, and other playthings. And I'll cook your favourite foods, if only you will tell me what you like."

Nata turned slightly to stare, bewildered, at the crying woman.

"We only want to love you, Natalya," she said softly. "Won't you please, please let us love you?"

❄

DINNER WAS LATE. Hetty served up soup and left-over fish pie with ice cream and canned fruit for dessert. Natalya ate silently, but enjoyed the food. After dinner, Hetty ran a warm bath for her and left her to wash herself.

At half-past eight, Hetty tiptoed into her room and lightly touched her head as she lay stiffly, eyes tightly shut, pretending sleep. Hetty moved to withdraw, but suddenly Nata stirred. She turned on her side and reached out and put her hand over Hetty's.

"Papa said I should call you Mrs. Dreyer," she said. "You're not my aunt."

"Then perhaps I can just be your friend," Hetty replied. "I know what your Papa said, child, but 'Mrs. Dreyer' is far too formal. I really don't mind if you just call me Hetty. It is my name."

Natalya smiled. "I'm very sorry for breaking your doll, and running away. Thank you for being kind to me. I'll be a good girl from now on, if only you'll keep that man away. He musn't come into my room, you see?"

"Joe? My dear girl, Joe would never hurt you. He loves you just as I do."

Natalya pulled away from her again.

"It's all right, darling," she whispered. "I'll protect you. I won't let Joe come close again." Hetty kissed her fingers and pressed them against Natalya's cheek. "Sleep tight. Dream sweet dreams, my darling." She withdrew and closed the door.

❄

THOSE FIRST FEW WEEKS, Nata dreamt often that her Papa came for her. She woke sweating and sobbing.

"Come to Papa, leettle one," he called. "Come show Papa how much you love him."

"I want Mama. Where is Mama?"

They had been dancing and singing. Papa stamped and waved his arms and roared with laughter. Mama looked fearful, but he ordered her to sing louder and dance faster, and she obeyed. Papa

stopped, now and then, to take another deep swig from a bottle. He'd become unsteady on his feet, and then he'd fallen. He blamed Mama. He hit her and punched her and she cried out. Then he locked her in their bedroom, and Nata turned ashen white and started to tremble.

"Mama is unvell, my child. But Papa is here. Come, geeve Papa a hug."

"You hurt Mama."

"Mama make Papa angry, leettle one. You know vat happens ven Papa is angry? You and your Mama and Elena, you must do as Papa tell you, treat Papa with respect. Papa teach you respect. Sometimes ze lessons hurt. Papa doesn't like hurt you, but ze lesson must hurt so you remember."

He pulled her to him and she smelled his foul breath and stinking sweat. He rubbed his stubble on her face and it scratched painfully. He took her hand, guiding it over the rolls of belly fat, down… down… down…

"No, Papa. Please, no!" The tears came and she tried to draw her hand away. She hated touching him there.

"Is all right, leettle one. Papa loves you. You gotta learn how make men happy. Make Papa happy."

"Mama! Maaaa—" she screamed, but he covered her mouth with his shovel-sized hand, and he pressed his fat fingers painfully into her cheek.

"You mus' do as Papa say," he commanded. "Leettle girls mus' obey."

She struggled, but he held her tightly and huffed his hot, sour breath into her open mouth so that she tasted his foulness. "You obey Papa," he said, "or Papa beat you proper."

She learnt to avoid the beatings, though she hated what she had to do to please him. Often, he gave her sweets after. He would let Mama out and she would limp to the stove to make his dinner, her face flushed and her eyes swollen; scald marks down her cheeks. She would give Nata knives and spoons to lay out on the table, and then she would bring bowls of broth and thick slabs of black bread. When she had cleared away, she would draw Nata to her and kiss the top of her head and whisper, "My darling baby. Such a good little girl. If only Mama could protect you from him!"

❄

HETTY CAME TO HER, sometimes, when she cried out in the night. She held her and rocked her and whispered that she was safe now and everything would be all right.

"Whatever did he do to you to make you so afraid?" she asked over and over. "What memories torment you, little one?"

Nata never told. She dried her eyes and wiped her nose, snuggling against Hetty. Hetty hugged her and stroked her as her Mama had done. "You are safe here, little one," she told her. "Joe and I… we only want to love you and protect you and help you forget whatever horrors you endured."

Joe never beat Hetty. He was kind to her. True to his promise, he never once beat Nata either. It took months for her to learn to trust him, but once there was trust, love slowly followed. He never made her touch him. He never rubbed a stubbled chin on her or breathed sour breath over her. His face wasn't pock-marked and ugly like Papa's. He was taller, and trim, and always well groomed. He drank wine in moderation; she never once saw him drunk. She never heard him raise his voice in anger either, though he was often stern with her. He demanded courtesy and respect, but he was always polite.

"I wish to talk please, Nata," he would say, tapping lightly on her bedroom door. "May I come, please." She knew his tone well, and she knew what that request implied. He would ask her to sit on her bed and he would stand beside it, towering over her and looking down with that grave, disapproving frown that set her to trembling. It was a different fear from the fear she'd had of Papa. Perhaps it was a healthy fear, but she never ceased to fear his disapproval, and to seek his endorsement of her choices.

"Your behaviour does not please me, Nata. I think you know what you done wrong, yes?"

She would hang her head and confess her sin, and he would lecture her sternly. The lecture invariably ended with, "You will make confession and ask de priest for penance, an' now, until you learnt lesson, you do extra hart chores insteat of enjoy free time."

He didn't punish her often, but when she incurred his displeasure she was compelled to scrub that front veranda, on her hands and knees, until the boards were snow white and her hands

burned and her knees throbbed. She raked leaves in autumn until her hands began to blister. She washed windows and whitewashed the fence and picked up litter from the street in front. Hetty would tell him he was being too harsh, but he replied that life was hard. "Hart work never hurt," he would say. "Discipline child is unpleasant job of parent, but I do duty as father."

When he was satisfied that she'd been punished enough, he would say, "You done goot, Nata. When you accept punishment and not complain, and put good effort into tasks, you make me prout." He would hug her and tell her he loved her and she would glow.

He sent her to music school and dancing lessons and to deportment classes to learn the rules of etiquette and how to behave as a lady. He set high standards of academic performance, demanding she spend long hours studying. Hetty often had to make excuses for her failure to do the chores she was assigned. Joe believed in the value of work, and that idleness equated to temptation. He left her no time to contemplate mischief.

He insisted she dress conservatively. Until she turned sixteen, she wasn't permitted to have her ears pierced, to wear make-up, or to date. When she was older, he set and enforced a strict curfew. He insisted her escorts collect her from the house and deliver her right into the living room after, and he embarrassed her with his interrogations of them and his little lectures.

"You're so old fashioned," she complained to him often. "You don't understand young people. It's a different world from the one you grew up in, and you are trying to impose the same rules your Papa imposed on your sisters in the old country. It's not fair."

"Life not fair, my little one," he would reply. "I not say sorry for making you behave how I think right for girl your age. You resent it now, but someday you thank me."

But with the strict discipline and sometimes frustrating rules came overwhelming generosity. Nothing was too good for Joe Dreyer's little girl. She knew he went without a great deal of life's comforts to keep her well-dressed, send her to good schools, and give her opportunities that few girls from working class families could ever hope to enjoy. Joe Dreyer had big plans for his daughter, and he cultivated big ambitions in her. She would please him. She would make him proud. Nothing mattered to her more.

❄

TREE BRANCHES BOWED GRACEFULLY under the weight of new shoots, reaching and bending obligingly to shade little groups congregating on the university lawns. March was coming to an end, and the late autumn sun polished the leaves and sent tendrils of light to dance over the golden tassels dangling from the mortarboards of the triumphant alumni.

Gowned students gathered near the door of the great hall. Parents and friends took their seats inside. A group of prestigious looking men and women, some with age lines creasing their faces and hair liberally salted, mounted the stage. A gowned man approached the microphone. It crackled and popped, and then his voice rang out clearly, silencing the shuffles and merry chatter and drawing all eyes to him. Cameras danced and bobbed over the heads of the crowds. Shutters clicked.

Natalie Dreyer scanned the rows. Hetty and Joe were there, somewhere, primped and preened; dressed in their invariable "Sunday best". They would be sitting straight and tall, feet together, hands folded in their laps, faces flushed with excited anticipation.

"Appearances matter, Nata," Hetty had told her often. "You might belong to the working class, and have little, but you can still have pride. Self-respect. If you do an honest day's work, you can hold you head high, whatever your station in life. But you, my darling, will rise to a higher level. I know it. And we must ensure that we never embarrass you, no matter how high you soar."

Nata would never be embarrassed to introduce her parents. Joe was self-conscious about his accent and language. Hetty was painfully aware of her advancing age and ample figure. She wore long sleeves to hide the fleshy rolls on her upper arms, mid-length skirts to draw attention away from the angry bulging veins that lined her legs, and gloves to hide her work-worn hands. But Nata saw only the warmth in her eyes, the glow of her ruddy cheeks, and the deep dimples that framed her sunny smile. Still, she was pleased that they kept their little home neat and clean, and that they dressed with care. Their behaviour, in any situation, was always beyond reproach. The high standards they had held her to had stood her in

good stead. She won respect and admiration wherever she went, and she enjoyed untiring attention and aid from teachers and mentors.

The ceremony began. Endless tiresome speeches, interspersed with unenthusiastic clapping; monotones droning on and on. The audience was restless. Graduates were bored. At last, those in gowns and mortarboards were called to line up in the aisle. The name calling began.

Someone climbed the stairs, lifting his gown so as not to trip. He stepped forward. Handshakes. A diploma was handed over. Cameras flashed.

"Next…"

Another, and then another. On and on it went.

The last name was called. The graduates lined up for the procession back to their places. More speeches. Then the prize-giving began.

"…the highest honour this university awards—." Rich with promise, the Dean's singsong voice rang out. A dozen eligible graduates froze in anticipation, eyes swimming with excitement and flesh marbled with goose bumps.

"…for outstanding academic achievement and all-round excellence, an award presented only to students whose conduct and character is exemplary in every respect… a student who has set the bar high for those who will follow her… a graduate who, I predict, will make her mark in the heady world of corporate law…"

The atmosphere was electric. Nata barely dared to breath. She feared her pounding heart would drown out the Dean's announcement. And then it came…

"Congratulations, Natalie Dreyer…"

The sense of triumph hit her like a chill wind gust on a sizzling summer day. The crowd roared approval as she made her way to the dais. Happy tears streamed down lightly freckled cheeks. The floor seemed to sink away beneath her, so that she waltzed on air.

"Thank you…" she said mechanically. She stared, mesmerised, at the audience. A huge lump of emotion lodged in her throat, locking it. For a heartbeat of time, the words refused to form. She panicked. Then the lump exploded in a spasm of ecstasy. She gripped the microphone. The clapping lessened. She found her voice.

"I want to thank each and every one of my tutors for their unfailing patience, their generosity in passing on all they know, and

the sincerity of their encouragement and reassurances—

"The executive of Adams, Bryant and Company—to whom I was assigned as an assistant for work experience—for giving me the opportunity to learn from some of the most accomplished and respected lawyers in this state; and their staff for their patient help and guidance, and their friendship.

"My fellow students—whose companionship has brightened my days here. And all the wonderful friends who have supported and encouraged me, and who, I know, today, will unselfishly join in celebrations of my success.

"Most of all, I want to thank my mother and father, Joe and Hetty Dreyer, the world's best parents. This achievement would never have been possible without their amazing generosity, their untiring support and encouragement and, most of all, their deep and unconditional love. From the bottom of my heart, Mum and Dad, thank you. I love you."

The crowd erupted in cheers and thunderous applause. Natalie floated from the stage, joy clapping in her chest and roaring in her brain and her face split in a mammoth smile that she was certain nothing could ever erase.

Later, Hetty and Joe hugged her so hard she feared she might break. Hetty's happy tears wet her gown. With his shoulders thrust back and his head high, Joe seemed to have grown a full inch, and Nata was certain at any moment his swollen chest would cause his shirt buttons to pop.

"What you like us to buy you for reward dis time?" Joe mumbled, his salt and pepper eyebrows working vigorously. It was their custom to let her choose a special gift each time an achievement was recognised. Every favourable report card and parent-teacher interview had been richly rewarded.

She felt a sharp pang of guilt. She knew he borrowed money to pay her fees and buy her textbooks. She'd wanted to work, but Joe insisted she must devote herself entirely to study.

"You have given me everything already," she replied. "Now it's my turn to reward you."

"Ach!" Joe said dismissively. "We want a chilt. You were gift from Got. You are our rewart, Nata. Beautiful, smart, wonderful daughter who get up on stage and call us 'mum' and 'dad'. What honour! Now, show me certificate. Let me read…"

Karl came over, offering a handshake and asking if he might be introduced to her parents. She had talked with them about him often, praising his skill and telling them how he had mentored her through her months of work experience. Joe thanked him profusely for the effort he'd invested to aid their daughter's success.

"She is beautiful girl, yes?" he said, and Nata flushed crimson. "She has many talents also. Not just academic ability."

"Hush, Dad," she mumbled. "Mr. Albrecht is not interested in my looks or my talents."

"Ah, but I am, Miss Dreyer," Karl replied. "I am interested in everything about you."

"And excepting in a professional capacity, I am not the slightest bit interested in you, sir. So I would be grateful if you would restrict your interest in me accordingly," she snapped.

He nodded to her parents, his lips twitching in a half-smile as he departed.

Joe chided her—after Karl had gone, thankfully. He warned her sternly that courtesy and appreciation are as essential for professional success as ability and endeavour. "Look to me like Karl Albrecht able to help your career success, young lady. An' wanting to."

"Besides," Hetty added, "he's an attractive and charming man. You could do far worse. You might be focused on your career for now, but eventually you will want the attention of a suitor."

Pigs will fly. Nata accepted the rebuke with pretended contrition. She refrained from telling them, again, that she had no intentions of ever taking a romantic interest in a man. Joe Dreyer—her foster father—was the only man she ever intended to regard with affection. Her foster father was the only man she would allow to address her using terms of endearment.

Despite her protests, Joe and Hetty rewarded her: a three-month tour of Europe. London, Paris, Athens, Rome. She cruised down the Danube and took a gondola through the streets of Venice. She visited the world's most prestigious art galleries; craned her neck to see the top of the Eiffel Tower; skied in the Swiss Alps; and watched the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. It was an amazing holiday, and far too generous a gift; one she protested was well beyond her parents' capacity to afford. She swore, secretly, that she would repay them, someday soon. They had made such sacrifices for

her. But they would live in comfort—no, luxury—in their old age. She would see to it. She owed it to them, and she hungered for the day when she might be able to honour the debt.

Perhaps she would send them to Europe someday—or to America or Asia—or just on a romantic Pacific island cruise. She wondered if they would want to travel and to where. Did they ever crave to return to the "old country"? They never spoke of homesicknesses, or of family. She asked, once. They answered merely that this was their home now. They had a good life here. They were content. Hetty Dreyer was the kind who was always content with whatever lot fate dealt her.

Perhaps it was Joe's influence that made Nata a different breed. She wanted to conquer the world. She wanted greatness. She had her future mapped. The route ahead was crystal clear, and no man would ever stand in her way. Most of all, though, she craved Joe's approval. He had nurtured her ambition, and she wanted to fulfil all his aspirations for her. She wanted to make him proud.

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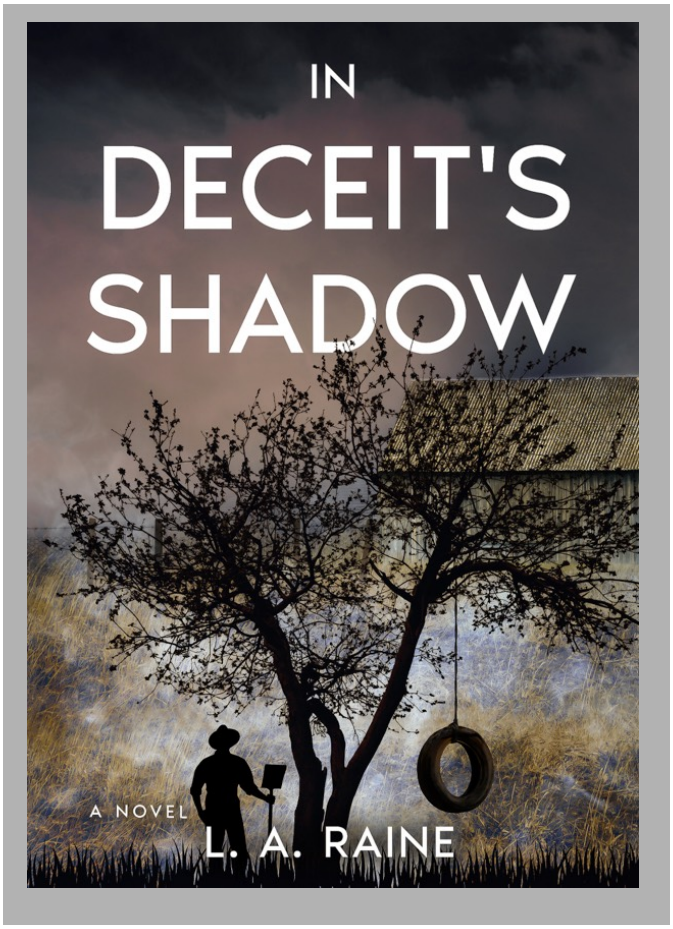
COMING SOON… IN DECEIT'S SHADOW

SNEAK PEEK: FROM THE AUTHOR OF A WILL OF DECEIT



An abandoned farm. A dying legacy. A family torn apart by greed.

Apple Tree Hill Farm was always meant to pass to the only son. For years, Tony poured his heart and soul into rebuilding the land after a devastating family tragedy—only for his older sisters to ruthlessly challenge their mother's will and strip him of his inheritance. Broken and betrayed, Tony left his loved ones to watch history repeat itself in the darkest way possible.

The sisters won the farm, but now the land is dying, and so is the conscience of the younger sister.

When a squatter exposes a long-buried secret, guilt turns to a desperate need for redemption.

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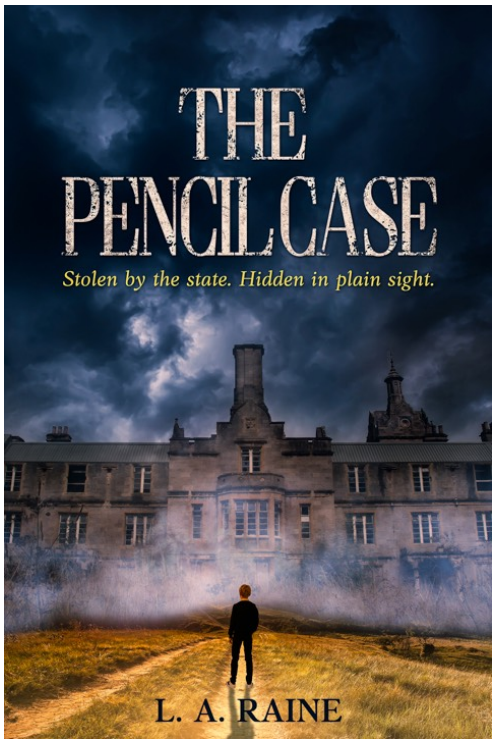

Stolen by bureaucrats twice, forced into the army at just fifteen, after being subjected to a Dickensian world of abuse in institutions, Paul Wilson's life was defined by a brutal battle against the system. For over two decades, he survived the cruelest injustices, believing he was entirely alone in the world.

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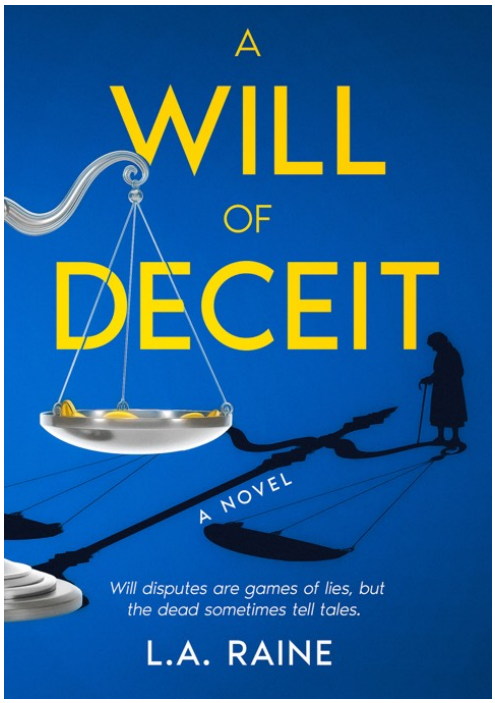
A carefully crafted legacy. An inheritance born from a lifetime of hardship. A psychological trap that could destroy everything she has fought to build.



For estates lawyer Brittany McFarlane, will disputes are straightforward. When she agrees to help Joanna Wynne contest a seemingly simple will, she expects an easy win. Instead, Brittany steps directly into a toxic minefield of family secrets.

Beneath the courtroom battle lies a dark history of deception. At every turn, shocking truths emerge about a deceased woman who was never who she claimed to be, driven by a client whose narcissistic ambition hides a ruthless agenda.

As the legal frame cracks open, Joanna turns on her own counsel. Facing threats that could dismantle her hard-earned career, shatter her brother's reputation, and push her own fragile mental health over the brink, Brittany watches her life rapidly unravel. Then the package arrives. What it contains changes everything, forcing her to choose between the courts of law and the courts of conscience.

***A Will of Deceit* is gripping domestic suspense wrapped inside a sharp legal frame; perfect for fans of Liane**

Moriarty, Gillian Flynn, Celeste Ng's and Scott Turow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L.A Raine is the chosen pen name of independent Australian author **Lorraine Cobcroft**.

Writing from her home on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Raine pens gripping psychological, legal, and family dramas that challenge readers to question their own views on justice, morality, and loyalty. Drawn to the complex realities of human relationships and the intricate workings of the legal system, her stories explore what happens when family bonds collide with the law.

When she isn't weaving intricate plots that examine issues of law and social justice, Lorraine lives in a semi-rural area of north Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, where she enjoys spending time in her garden, reading and reviewing great fiction, singing in a local choir, travelling with her husband in their motorhome, and sharing happy stories with three great adult children and five wonderful grandchildren.

Raine's extensively revised catalog is published independently, free from mainstream corporate gatekeepers, to deliver unvarnished historical truth directly to readers who care.

Every story Lorraine writes under the name **L.A. Raine** explores the sharp, emotional collision between family loyalty, systemic injustice, and the law. But some of the most compelling insights, character inspirations, and deleted scenes never make it into the final print.

An Invitation

Lorraine invites you to step backstage into her writing world. Please join her dedicated reader circle at ***Nudging the Page*** on Substack, to find:

Insider Insights: The hidden, real-life legal dilemmas and psychological cases that inspire her plots.
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