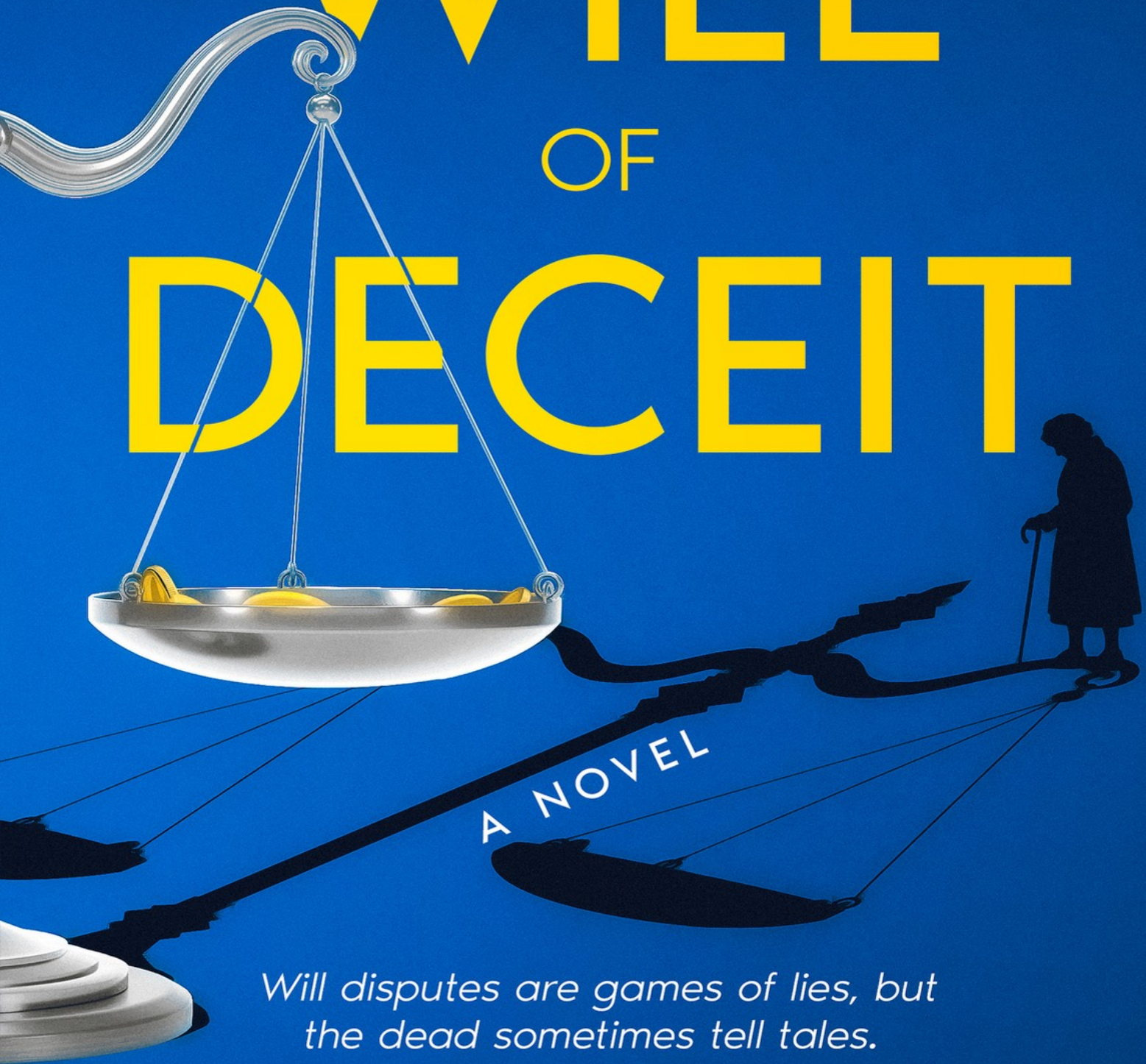
A WILL OF DECEIT



A NOVEL

Will disputes are games of lies, but the dead sometimes tell tales.

L.A. RAINE

PRAISE

FOR A WILL OF DECEIT

Testimonials relate to the earlier edition of this work, published under the name Lorraine Cobcroft.

"Some books make an impression. *A Will of Deceit* makes an impact... riveting, thought-provoking, and deeply relevant."

— Jennifer Buccas

"A journey into a gripping legal battle and the intimate architecture of human motives... a book that thrives on detail, character depth, and emotional resonance."

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— Reedsy Review by Emily Ormondi

A WILL OF DECEIT

WILL DISPUTES ARE GAMES OF LIES, BUT THE DEAD SOMETIMES TELL TALES.

L A RAINE

RAINBOW WORKS

Revised Edition.

First published by Lorraine Cobcroft, 2025

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by Lorraine Cobcroft writing as L.A. Raine

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No artificial intelligence (AI) tools were utilised in the writing, editing, or production of this novel.

Content Advisory:

This novel contains mature themes and adult content, including profanity and references to spousal abuse, child abuse, and paedophilia. These elements are integral to the narrative and have been handled with care and artistic discretion. Reader discretion is advised.

I respectfully and sympathetically dedicate this story to:

- *all executors who have had to defend a will contest*
- *all those wrongly deprived by legal processes overturning the wishes of the deceased; and*
- *all the corpses who would surely turn in their graves if they could see their loved ones fighting over assets they had a moral right to leave to whomever they chose on whatever terms they considered appropriate, just as they had the right to gift as they pleased while they lived*

That [to do justice] is not my job. My job is to play the game according to the rules.

Justice Learned Hand

There is a higher court than courts of justice and that is the courts of conscience. It supersedes all other courts.

Mahatma Ghandi

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PART 1

THE WILL DISPUTE

Will disputes are games of lies…

1:1

BRITTANY

Monday, July 13, 2015

"JUNE 26, 2015, WAS a momentous death day."

The sign on my door read 'Brittany McFarlane, LLB (Hons).' Joanna Wynne glanced at it, then hobbled into my office in ritzy boots, flicking at dyed copper hair and making that odd announcement. No hint of a traditional greeting, and she continued without removing her large-lensed sunglasses or even drawing breath.

"Thirty-eight revellers at a beach resort in Tunisia were murdered by an ISIS gunman.

"A Saudi bomber killed twenty-seven and injured 227 at a mosque in Kuwait.

"Traditional marriage died, with the United States at last legalising same-sex unions.

"And Mildred Dolan finally succumbed."

Her last sentence had relevance to the matter she was here to discuss. Thinking her rant must, therefore, be concluded, I introduced myself. "Ms. Wynne? I am Brittany McFarlane. Pleased to meet you. Do take a seat."

She ignored my greeting and went on with her rant.

"The first two events interested me because I've often aspired to be a mass murderer: to purge the world of the unclean and the undesirable. I could happily murder Isabel Morgan and her brood. That would definitely make the world a better place.

"The third event was momentous because I've often considered a same-sex partnership. I hate men, with good cause.

"The final event was significant because Mildred Dolan claimed to be my mother."

Joanna Wynne strode to my visitor's chair, then, and thrust herself into it with the air of a petulant child whose sweets had been taken from her.

"Mildred wasn't my mother," she continued. "Irene Wynne was. But Irene disappeared almost half a century ago.

"Mildred was Isabel's mother, but she raised me, after a fashion. Or at least she would claim to have. Even she wouldn't boast of parenting well. But Millie's last will favoured me, and my long wait to collect should have ended with Mildred's passing.

"It appears my dear stepsister, Isabel, forged a replacement will. So I need a good lawyer to prove the new document a fake and ensure I get what is rightfully mine."

People can be weird, but my newest client's introductory speech was really quite bizarre. It rendered me, for a moment, somewhat discomposed.

My name is Brittany McFarlane. I'm a lawyer specialising in wills and estates. I've been qualified for almost four years now, and I'm proving to be exceptionally good at what I do.

I entered my profession fired with determination to make my name as a winner and eager to enjoy the spoils of war. But I also believed family provisions lawyers right wrongs—overturning wills made by the vengeful and malicious and restoring equity, soothing the hurts suffered by the wrongly disinherited.

Will bequests are windfalls, so why shouldn't named beneficiaries share their windfall with both the victims of malice and the lawyers who put wrongs to right?

More experienced colleagues repeatedly tell me that the kind of people who come to us are seldom victims of anything other than a deep sense of entitlement and a warped perception of fairness.

"No-win/no-pay agreements compel us to support the claimant's greed," my boss reminds us often. "And given that a lost claim discourages future claims, even the most ardent lawyer representing a defendant wants to ensure the plaintiff profits, even if the plaintiff is a malicious liar. And in my experience, most plaintiffs are."

I prefer to think most are truthful and have genuine claims. But as profitable as it is, mine is a dirty business. I watch as loved ones tear each other apart, and it can be depressing at times. But that's what families do, isn't it? Fight? Especially over money.

According to numerologists, my destiny number is six, which is said to mean I was placed on earth to spread compassion and love; to be a teacher, healer, friend, and empathetic coach.

Nah.

That would be my brother, Nicholas. He's a shrink. Twelve years older than me, he disappointed our folks terribly when he opted to study psychology. At first, he practised with a focus on profit. He sought out wealthy clients with messed up marriages or delinquent kids. Then Sarah came into his life, and the world turned. Now, he's all about kindness and giving and making it a better world for the less well-endowed.

We smile tolerantly when he starts on. Mum and Dad are hoping it's a stage he'll outgrow. Eventually, reality has to kick in.

Nic broke the mould, but I think it was inevitable I should follow in the footsteps of my forebears. We come from a family of lawyers, stretching back through three generations. Dad is a quiet achiever who, to his credit, occasionally puts the profit motive aside to take a case pro bono, though never without first ensuring doing so will enhance his reputation.

My mother drove my ambition. She quoted Vince Lombardi often. I grew up convinced that 'Winning isn't everything… it's the only thing'. And then, in law school, my tutors focused on teaching me how to win, and that law is a business.

"It's a fact, rarely confessed," my cynical parents claimed, "that lawyers seldom concern themselves with justice or truth. They ply their trade to win and to profit."

Call me an idealist. Despite my upbringing, I entered the profession determined to prove that justice and profit are not mutually exclusive.

"Justice is an unattainable ideal, and the pursuit of it is the province of dreamers," my mentors advised. "Truth is an abstract.

What is true depends on your point of view."

The latter statement is true, but I prefer to dispute the former. Maybe I do dream a little, but I hope I never grow as cynical as my more experienced advisers.

Clients like Joanna Wynne come to us hurt and grieving, and they lay their trust at our feet. They need more than objective legal representation. They need comfort and succour. I relish the opportunity to ease their pain and set things right.

"Eight lawyers spat me out before I found you," Joanna said. Her choice of words left me somewhat nonplussed.

I had heard the exhalation of pent-up breath into the phone when I agreed to take her case. Well, why not? It seemed like an easy win. She told me her mother left almost everything to the older, much more affluent sister, Isabel. Joanna was a needy pensioner living hand-to-mouth in public housing. She'd read the law. Dying mothers should provide for their needy offspring.

"Mildred always preferred Isabel," Joanna declared now, in a tone laced with bitterness. Extracting a tissue from her purse, she raised tortoiseshell sunglasses to dab at her eyes. The action appeared almost theatrical. I felt compelled to remind myself that people handle grief in different ways. Clients usually try to appear composed in my presence, but she had suffered a cruel blow.

"My father was wealthy," she said. "Mildred's actions deprived me of the comforts he would have provided for me.

"Millie was a cruel and vindictive woman, and we never got along, but she liked to appear virtuous. She talked a lot about honouring moral obligations. She knew I'd been wrongly deprived, and she promised to make it right.

"I was with her when she made her will. She named me the executor, and the bulk of the estate was to be mine, as it should be. But Isabel has always been a greedy and manipulative bitch. She's even more despicable than Mildred, and she would stop at nothing to hurt me."

She shot me a pleading glance. "What is the punishment for forging a will? A long jail sentence, I hope."

I studied her, considering what might be an appropriate reply. Mid-50s, maybe? Tall. Painfully thin. Ghostly complexion. Hollow cheeks. She'd have been pretty once, and she still possessed a sense of style. Though smartly dressed, her attire was well-worn. She

repeatedly flicked her long copper-red hair behind her shoulder. It was somewhat disconcerting that those dark glasses remained permanently on, even indoors.

Consumed with anger, now, she appeared to be exerting all her energies on hating the woman she perceived denied her a birthright and condemning the sister she both envied and despised. She paused a moment, seeming to collect herself. Assuming a more dignified pose, she said, "I've read the law. Mothers are required to provide for needy offspring. And I can evidence need. An earlier will favoured me."

"May I call you Joanna?" I asked, having until now deferred to professional etiquette.

"Just Jo, please," she said, smiling. "And as much as I'd like to avenge Isabel's greed and my mother's cruelty, I just want justice. I want what's fair… what was always rightfully mine."

Her tone, now, was earnest, with just a hint of regret. Her manner suggested good breeding, but it appeared she had fallen at some point. I suspected life had treated her unkindly. She appeared intelligent but displayed a strong sense of entitlement, a belief she'd been wrongly denied a life of privilege.

"We need to start at the beginning," I said, striving to sound soothing, yet indisputably in control. "If you've been unfairly dealt with in a will, the law protects your right of inheritance. Eligible persons can file a claim under the Family Provisions Act. I can represent you to do that, and you only pay me if your claim succeeds.

"Why don't you tell me, in your own words, what makes you think Mildred's will is a forgery? Give me a little background about your family and relationships. Do you feel up to doing that today?"

Her assertion of a forged will was most likely absurd, but I couldn't tell her that. I needed information to determine what might be behind her suspicions. And in any case, at some point, I would need to know the whole ugly story. Clients' stories are always ugly.

"Either the client or the deceased is despicable," my boss declares often, "and it matters little which."

It matters to me. I want to fight for fairness. Of course, there are always three versions of a story: the client's, the defendant's, and the truth. In Family Provisions Claims, the latter will rarely be exposed.

The cost of witnesses and evidence is just too high. A lawyer's job demands that her sympathies lie with her client. Profits depend on ensuring the client's version is accepted and they get what they, rightly or wrongly, believe to be their due.

My job is to accept most of what clients tell me, focus on the parts that appear to support their claims, and try my hardest to ensure they are paid handsomely and as early in the process as possible. Keep it out of court if possible, but make sure that if it ends in court —where good acting is every bit as important as on the stage—the client is thoroughly coached and their performance is perfect.

1:2

JOANNA

Friday, June 26, 2015

MILLIE'S DEATH WASN'T UNEXPECTED. She had been lingering at the door for months. Of course, Isabel was with her at the last, along with the priest Isabel called.

Millie called Isabel for help after my last visit. I upset the poor dear! Issie ran to her aid, of course. She helped her select a suitable care facility. She arranged her move into care, cleared out her home, arranged the sale, and settled her in.

Isabel visited Millie daily, took her shopping and to doctors' and specialists' appointments, out to visit friends and to parties… Isabel did everything for her mother.

Isabel had power of attorney and enduring guardianship, and no doubt took those responsibilities seriously. She pretended to love the old lady, and did everything necessary to appear a good and dutiful daughter. Appearances mattered a lot to Isabel. And to Millie, too.

With my disabilities, travelling to visit presented a challenge, but I telephoned often. My phone bill evidences long conversations. Millie loved to chatter.

A nurse called me when it appeared the old witch wouldn't last much longer. I made more effort then, turning up regularly with little food treats. I read to her sometimes, and I recited poetry. She loved Dorothea McKellar's rant about loving a sunburnt country, and

A.A. Milne's rubbish about a kid saying prayers.

I had accompanied Millie, many years back, to a lawyer's office to make her will. I'd spent countless hours telling her how successful and well-off Issie and her family were and how needy I was after all my misfortunes and the ill-health I suffered.

My incapacities mean I can never work. I will soon be confined to a wheelchair and need disability-friendly accommodation and a special vehicle. Already my knees are giving way, and I struggle to drive. Climbing stairs is almost impossible.

Millie readily agreed I should have whatever meagre wealth she had accumulated. She had done without a lot at times in her life, and she wanted to ensure I didn't have to suffer hardship after she passed.

Millie wrote me a letter after she went into aged care, pleading with me to visit. Silly woman ranted on about forgiving, loving me, and just wanting assurance I was well and happy. She knows I'm not well. And in my current circumstances, I'm certainly not happy. I can't think of anything I need forgiveness for. It's Millie and Isabel who need forgiving. I am the victim of their dreadful wrongdoing.

Millie was making it right. There was always a risk she might change her will. Her letter gave me welcome reassurance, though I fear I replied unwisely. I had no patience with her silly pleadings.

I'm sure Isabel doesn't know what the will contains. She will freak when she finds out. It's quite ironic, given the source of Millie's assets, that I should be the beneficiary. But it's justice. After the crime those two committed and the hurt they caused me, I'm entitled.

Millie chose a late hour on a stormy Friday night. Dreadfully inconvenient! A nurse called with the news. "I'm so sorry, Jo," she said. "Isabel was here earlier. She wanted to be sure you were notified.

"Isabel has seen to all the necessary arrangements," she added in a soothing tone. The undertaker will be along soon. If you'd like to come and see—"

I hate driving at night in a storm, and I had no desire at all to look at a dead body. Isabel and her darling husband would have made a big crying scene, of course. Probably kissed the corpse. God, how disgusting!

I was just relieved the old woman was gone. At last, I can spend the inheritance I have waited so long to claim. One shouldn't think that way, but Millie's time was up, and I needed what was now to be

mine. In a fairer world, she'd have passed her assets over much sooner.

"Oh, thank you, Nurse. Sorry, what did you say your name was? I am so upset I can't think straight just now, but yes, of course, I want to say goodbye to my dear… sniff… mother. Sorry, I'm—"

"It's all right, dear. Take your time. Just tell us if we can do anything to make this easier for you, won't you?"

"I am a little concerned you say Isabel is making arrangements. I know she had power of attorney. It may seem odd, I suppose, but I was named executor in our mother's will."

"Oh? Well, you need to work that out with your sister, dear. But I'll tell her you are concerned and she should speak with you. I think she was just concerned to have the body removed as soon as possible.

We do ask for the rooms to be cleared out expediently, you know. "We have a waiting list, I'm afraid. Shortages of care accommodation and home care packages. Never enough government funds. Sad state of affairs, but we do our best.

"I don't mean to pressure anyone, mind you. Take your time clearing out. I know it's a painful chore, dear. But if you can see to it soon, we'd be ever so grateful."

I didn't intend to do any of the menial chores. I would take whatever of Millie's valuables I wanted and leave the rest to Isabel or the cleaning staff. As for arrangements, Isabel was welcome to the hard work. I just wanted to take charge of the money and assets that were now mine.

"I'll be along in about an hour," I said, determined to keep up appearances for these last few critical hours.

Isabel wouldn't yet have started picking over Millie's things. Not that she had much, though a few bits and pieces of her jewellery might have some value. She would not have listed small items in the will, so I was entitled to take immediate possession of any unlisted items of worth.

I dressed carefully in a black jersey tunic, put on my dark glasses, drove to the nursing home and signed in. When the night nurse greeted me, I lifted my glasses and let her see my tears. Then I went to Millie's room.

I turned the recliner chair toward the window and poured myself into it, gazing out at ribbons of street lights, snaking lines of traffic

and reflected streaks of gold dancing across the wet bitumen. The storm had eased, but raindrops popped against the glass. Mirrored light played against the thin, watery trickles streaking the pane; a kaleidoscope in monochrome.

It was kind of creepy knowing a corpse lay behind me. I tried to avoid looking, but I couldn't help a glance at the pale, serene face, the crooked mouth hanging open, the gnarled old hands folded neatly across her chest on top of a crisp white sheet reaching almost to the old lady's chin.

Millie's eyes, partly open, were empty; expressionless. I couldn't bear to touch her, but I guessed the body must be cold by now. Not that Millie ever had much warmth about her.

A sickly-sweet smell lingered: cheap air freshener mixed with the smell of human faeces. Nursing homes always smelled like that, though: like death.

I've heard dead bodies sometimes make gurgling noises: body fluids rearranging themselves. That stage had passed already. Mildred had at last fallen silent.

A clock in the hall counted the seconds with an eerie click-click. Now and again, I heard the soft shuffle of rubber-soled shoes on polished linoleum, the squeak of a trolley or walker, a door closing, whispered conversations and morbid moans.

When the sounds faded, and I was certain nobody was near, I retreated to the lounge to make coffee and read magazines for a time.

At three a.m., all was deathly quiet. Staff were taking a break. I crept back to the room and rummaged, as quietly as I could, through the dresser drawers. Not much cash, but forty dollars would buy a meal out somewhere. I slipped it into my purse. Hearing aids? Worth a bit, no doubt. Millie paid a few thousand for them. An autograph book? It contained signatures of some big movie stars. Millie worked in a big city hotel in her youth, and she'd served a few.

I found Millie's diamond ring, a pair of diamond earrings, an opal pendant, a triple strand of genuine pearls, a sapphire pendant, and a black pearl brooch. A few other pieces of minimal value appealed as bling. As much as I disliked anything that looked cheap, sometimes, wearing quality jewellery didn't serve my objectives.

I flipped through the wardrobe. Nothing much of any use, but tucked away in the bottom of the cupboard, I spotted something wrapped in an old towel. Unfolding it revealed a small box. I opened it to find a crystal angel ornament Isabel's paternal grandmother had given her the Christmas she spent in the U.K. as an infant. It always took pride of place atop our Christmas trees. I didn't imagine it was worth much, but it gave me pleasure to envisage Isabel's disappointment at its loss. Isabel was every bit the sentimental idiot Millie had always been.

I'd had the forethought to bring an oversized handbag, so I stowed my hoard and then crept out. The undertaker was pushing the mortuary trolley into the lift as I signed out. I responded to his expression of sympathy with a nod and raised my glasses to dab at my eyes. And then I drove home, greatly relieved I would never need to visit that awful place again.

On Saturday morning, I went to the discount store and bought a cheap sympathy card. I wrote in it carefully:

Dear Isabel,

I hope it gives you comfort knowing our mother is in a better place—in heaven with the Father she so loved and a flock of caring angels. Our mother loved you very much. I wish you strength through the dark days ahead and a quick recovery from your grief.

Jo

I know about etiquette. Millie taught me. She was always very proper, dear Millie.

I tucked the card in an envelope, fixed a stamp on it and popped it in the red box out front. And then I headed for a trendy, up-market clothing store where I splashed nearly five hundred dollars on a super-smart, super-sexy little black dress to wear out dancing that evening.

Monday, June 29, 2015

At two minutes to nine on Monday morning, I dialled Mildred's lawyer to inquire what steps were required to release her cash and when I could receive my inheritance. I suppose it would have been prudent to wait a while, but I had sweated through an endless weekend, and I was impatient. Luckily, the lawyer was in, and the receptionist connected me promptly.

"How soon can you prepare whatever documents I have to sign?" I asked, adding that I wanted to get the formalities out of the way to avoid ongoing reminders that would trigger more grief.

There was an awkward pause when I posed my question, and then came an almost whispered reply.

"Jo, there's a later will. Your mother consulted me several years ago and asked me to draw a revised will. Isabel is the executor and the major beneficiary. I need her consent to release a copy of the will to you, but you have no executor authority, and your mother made some major changes to the way her estate is to be distributed.

"I'm sorry. I will call Isabel later today to ask for her permission to release a copy to you."

The fire began deep in my gut, and the heat rose, burning my throat. I felt as though my head would explode.

"Freaking bitch! Shit, shit, shit..."

I slammed the phone down so hard it should have shattered. Screaming, I swept my arm over the desk and knocked a Bohemian Cristal vase my father had bought for me at an art auction. I watched, aghast, as a $600 antique fell and shattered into a million pieces.

"Fuck! Look what you've done now, Isabel Morgan, you bitch!"

Within five minutes, I calmed and commanded myself to strategise. I phoned a local lawyer.

"I need you to make a formal application for a copy of my mother's will," I said, "and I need it done urgently. Like, this morning. And I need advice about contesting it also."

"When did she…uh…die?" he asked.

"Friday night."

He gave a weird little cough, as though expressing disapproval of my haste to start a fight over a bequest.

"Oh, I…uh…I'm so sorry," he mumbled. I refrained from telling him I wasn't.

"I can…uh…make an application for a copy of the will, but it's… uh… a little too early to be thinking of…uh…launching a contest."

He coughed again. I decided it was a whisky-drinker's cough. I would bet there was a bottle in his desk drawer. I visualised a bulging gut, ruddy cheeks and sagging jowls.

"Do you even…uh…know what the document states, since you…uh…don't yet have a copy?

"I think your focus should be on…errr… getting through the funeral and taking time to grieve. Give me your mother's name and…uh… her lawyer's name, and I'll get a copy of the will for you. You can…uh… call me in a few weeks to discuss contesting, assuming you still feel the need once once you've …you know… seen—"

I cut him off abruptly and gave him the details. He didn't have much of a profile anyway. He mostly handled the trivial stuff of conveyancing, making wills, and routine probate applications.

I went to my desk to google for lawyers who specialise in challenging wills and have a track record of winning. By noon, I was armed with a list of telephone numbers and a greatly strengthened resolve.

I found Brittany McFarlane on my ninth call. Some of those I'd spoken to earlier were more than mildly insulting, though I have to admit I was too emotional in my initial calls. Two lawyers said only a bottom feeder would take the case, whatever that meant.

Brittany was eager to assist, though she also suggested I would want to get through the funeral and give myself time to grieve before commencing a legal action. I refrained from responding that I had no intention of attending Millie's funeral, much less mourning her passing.

I asked Mr Google to tell me a little about Ms McFarlane.

Brittany is relatively new to the game, but she's had some substantial wins already and no losses. Her profile describes her as ambitious, driven, caring, and empathetic. Committed to fairness. Well, here is her opportunity to ensure fairness prevails.

I was a little fazed to see that Brittany's brother, the good Doctor Nic, is a shrink who 'counselled' me in a past life.

How did I not recognise the surname?

Is him knowing me relevant? Probably not.

I searched for Dr Nic's profile. He is the father of a 'special' child, as Isabel is wont to call them. Isabel has a granddaughter who 'isn't right'. That was Mildred's idea of a tactful reference to a deformed kid or a retard. I prefer to just call it like it is.

Anyway, hopefully, Issie and Nic have never connected and won't. But then, so what if Isabel and Dr Nic know each other? It's just that anyone other than me passing information about Isabel to my lawyer might screw up my plan. I need Brittany to know only what I choose to tell her.

I called Brittany, requesting the first available appointment. I have rehearsed my spiel.

Stay calm, Jo. Present like the wounded lady seeking help to heal.

Brittany's reply, mimicking that of others who urged restraint, was upsetting, but I had to play along.

"Take some time out to grieve," she said.

"You are right, of course," I crooned, thankful she avoided the more common platitudes. "I am so consumed with sadness. I am not thinking clearly. Still in shock, I guess. Thank you for your kindness. I will look forward to meeting you in a fortnight."

I put the phone down and began planning, but I found myself pacing my dark, narrow hallway. Eight steps to the front door. Eight steps back. Ridiculous, but I was finding it impossible to focus.

I turned into the single tiny bedroom to scrounge in a dresser drawer filled with pills, hoping a generous dose of Diazepam might settle my nerves.

Two tattooed bums were revving a souped-up dirt bike and throwing down crushed cans in an already heavily littered driveway, obviously enjoying causing a major disturbance.

Fuck public housing!

'Struggle Street' they call this place. I call Bidwill hell. Not much honest struggling going on in this crime-ridden slum.

I closed the blinds against the depressing view, stuffed cotton wool in my ears, and curled up on the sofa with a comforter and a novel I hoped might prove an adequate distraction. Two weeks is forever, but I have no choice. I will calm myself and use the time to plot my course.

I have travelled this road before, but in another jurisdiction. I challenged my father's will in the California courts. I won, too. I haven't studied law, but I'd make an excellent lawyer. My intelligence rating is far higher than over ninety percent of the population. I could have been anything I wanted to be if not for Mildred's crime.

I must study New South Wales law now. I will, of course, pretend to defer to Brittany's superior knowledge. I must be suitably demure and respectful when in her company. But my superior intelligence will ensure my claim succeeds, and I get what's rightfully mine.

A few days later, I took a bus to the city and walked past the offices where Brittany works—an elegant building overlooking Darling Harbour. Curiosity beckoned. I went in, rode the elevator up to the fifth floor, and idled across the terrazzo-tiled floor, admiring the vast engraved-glass reception desk.

I walked over to the massive curved glass wall and gazed down on the Boardwalk along which I imagined Brittany often ran, and out at the little sailboats bobbing on a sea of the deepest turquoise blue. Sinking into the wave-shaped Italian leather sofa, I let the softness swallow me for a time.

The whole building smells of money. Well, at $400 an hour, who couldn't afford marble columns and million-dollar views?

This is where I belong. And I'd be here if not for Mildred. But my situation is about to improve substantially. Brittany McFarlane is going to see to it. And it isn't going to cost me a cent. No win, no pay! Not that there's any chance of losing. I've done my homework.

Brittany McFarlane always wins.

Always.

July 9, 2015

I hate funerals. I can't tolerate all the fakery and pretence. I told Millie I wouldn't attend hers. No doubt some mourners would comment on my absence and ask if I'd sent an apology or excuse. I didn't see why I needed one.

At 11:00 am—the scheduled funeral commencement time—I turned on the television. I curled up on the couch with a bottle of vodka and drank a toast to Irene Tibbs, who became Irene Jacobs, who became Irene Wynne, who became Mildred Dolan, who was Mildred Schweizer for a time but became Mildred Dolan again, and who was never who she pretended to be.

Late the following afternoon, I was dozing when I heard a loud knock. Nobody ever visits. I tell nobody where I live. Must be a salesman, but I guess if I don't answer, he'll keep knocking and hurting my head. I went to the window and peeked out.

Bryan Winterwood! What the hell is he doing here?

Bryan is Isabel's farm manager, and she loves him like a son. He is also one of the few people in the world who knows where I reside, on account of him being one of my many sexual conquests. But I stopped giving him thrills nearly two years ago when he stopped drinking and gambling and became a model employee. I detest the man he has become.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, opening the door just far enough to see him stubbing his cigarette on a balcony littered with ash and crushed butts. His disarming manner and unkempt look reminded me of Lieutenant Columbo, minus the trademark coat. A shabby public housing unit block in Bidwill would make a perfect scene for an episode. For sure there had been murders here at times. This place is crime capital.

"Special delivery," he said, glancing at the box resting at his feet. "Isabel intended to give you these at the funeral, but since you didn't appear—"

"Why should I? I told Mildred I hated funerals and I wouldn't be at hers. She was fine—"

“She would hardly care, since she wouldn't see from inside a box who was present and who wasn't. Funerals are for the living, Jo. Isabel might have appreciated some support.”

I ignored his comment and pushed hard on the door, and he let it close. I watched from the window to ensure he was gone before I opened the door to retrieve the box. A note on top declared it contained some items of Mildred's that I might appreciate having.

I opened the box to find Millie's small television set—something I appreciated as the one in my bedroom was clearly on the way out—and a bunch of framed photos with me in them.

There was also a manila envelope bulging with unknown content. I opened it. Isabel had sent me a photograph. A simple but elegant white coffin was covered in clumps of moss and pink, red, and white carnations.

White for purity. Hah! Mildred tut-tutted about me wearing white at my wedding to Matt. “Loose women shouldn’t pretend purity,” she declared, in a tone dripping with disappointment. “Dark red would have been far more appropriate, Jo.”

Dark red for evil. That was how she saw me. ‘Immoral’ was the term she used, taking care always to add that redemption only required repenting and committing to change; praying for forgiveness to a God I don’t believe exists.

Mildred wasn’t pure, and I have never aspired to be. I prefer black to dark red, though. Sure, it’s the colour of death and evil, but it also suggests power, glamour and sophistication. Authority. And it’s sexy when the style is tightly fitted and a little revealing. I like to look sexy.

I read the handwritten note on the back of the photo.

Moss, the emblem of maternal love, glads the heart when summer friends depart and the winter of adversity is upon us. Carnations for love and distinction. White flowers for remembrance, red for admiration, and pink for nurturing and unconditional love.

She sent a copy of the eulogy, too. I didn't read it, but I could almost recite it. It would be filled with praise of a 'loving, caring, generous woman whose remarkable strength and courage carried her through one tragedy after another, without her ever becoming even the tiniest bit bitter or vengeful'. It would have lauded Millie for her contribution to charity, her singing talent, and her devotion to her God and church.

No doubt there would have been a large crowd at the funeral—all the hypocritical matrons who kneeled with her every Sunday and their magnanimous and deluded husbands.

I wondered if, by not attending the funeral, I was sending the wrong message. I was supposed to be pretending to be the loving and devoted daughter. But why?

Obviously Millie didn't see me that way. She disinherited me, if the will naming Isabel as executor is legitimate. Why should I pretend grief over her passing?

Isabel also sent me a full accounting of the estate, funeral costs, etc. She didn't need to send any of this—at least not ahead of a lawyer's request—but that was Isabel.

"In accordance with her wishes," Isabel had written on as gilt edged card, "I have arranged a memorial service and scattering of Mildred Dolan's ashes to be held on Friday, 24th July. I sincerely hope you will join us on that occasion, Jo."

I crumpled the invitation and threw it across the room, and then I went to my liquor cabinet and poured myself a generous shot of vodka. I downed it in a gulp and poured another. And then I set caution aside and carried the whole damned bottle to the couch.

"A toast to you, Brittany McFarlane," I shouted. "Legal letters always rattle. And I've got a brilliant plan. I'll ask you to time the first one to arrive the day of Millie's memorial, when poor Issie will be wallowing in grief."

I gazed around the dingy little room with its scant, shabby furnishings. A squalid public housing unit. That's what I've sunk to. But not for much longer now. Tomorrow, I will call the architect. And then I will go furniture shopping. Not to buy just yet, but to look and narrow the choices, choose the lovely things Millie's money will buy me.

"Enjoy your little party on the 24th, Isabel. I won't be joining you. Fuck Mildred Dolan. And fuck you, Isabel Morgan. I hope Brittany

McFarlane crucifies you. But she'd better damed well do it soon, because I've waited long enough for recompense for what you and Mildred did to me And now it's my turn to drive the knife in.

"Now I get to make you pay."

1:3

BRITTANY

JOANNA WYNNE HATED FUNERALS. She announced that sentiment moments after I urged her to make herself comfortable and begin her story at the beginning. She removed her dark glasses and dabbed at her eyes as she added that she simply couldn't cope with attending her mother's. Her mood changed suddenly when I ignored her theory that the will was forged, and the glasses were replaced in disturbing haste before she began her next sentence.

"Isabel was distraught that I didn't attend. Evidently, a lot of mourners commented on my absence. Several asked if I'd sent an apology or excuse. I didn't see why I needed one. I told my mother, years ago, I wouldn't attend her final farewell."

She passed across a photograph her sister had sent her. A coffin covered in moss and carnations. I read the handwritten note on the back. Touching.

"Of course, everyone had enormous admiration for Mildred." Joanna's tone was acidic. "And trust Issie to pay attention to such trivial and ethereal things as the meaning of colours and flowers.

"She sent a copy of the eulogy, too. Here. Read this tripe. Sounds just like the canned BS we hear on television news every time they report a death. Nobody is ever a mongrel bastard, hated by all, are they?"

My client appeared to be hovering between grief and anger, but her sorrow was staged. Artificial. And the anger was far too controlled for comfort.

She had hobbled into my office with an exaggerated limp, favouring her left leg. She wore no eye makeup, but her face was thickly coated to achieve a pale, waxen look. Her attire was simple. Smart, but well worn. Tailored black trousers, white satin blouse and super-stylish high-heeled black suede boots.

"Shoes are always a giveaway," my dad used to say. "You can pick a person's financial status and sense of style by looking at their shoes."

I was guessing those boots to be Bared brand or similar. Likely in the $300 to $350 price range. And unsuitable for anyone even moderately crippled.

Shoulder-length straight copper hair was combed in a simple style, trimmed shorter at the front and cut on an angle over the ears. It looked dyed, but it wasn't a professional job. Tell-tale lighter roots showed.

"I'll need to contact your sister," I said, diverting her attention back to the business at hand. Failing to attend the funeral wouldn't help her cause. I would have to coach her to avoid sounding so bitter and cynical if the event was mentioned in the presence of the other side's legal team. But my concern now was with the accounting.

"I'll ask her for a full accounting of the estate, funeral costs, etc. and instruct her not to make any distribution."

Joanna handed me another document.

Isabel had noted all the costs associated with the funeral and all the outstanding bills she had paid, and noted that the bank transferred all cash savings to an estate account. She also noted her request to the aged care facility to return the bond money to the estate account, and she documented the amount. Odd. Executors aren't required to account so diligently to a minor beneficiary before receiving a formal request. Isabel Morgan attended to these executor duties with surprising haste.

"My dear sister—honesty and integrity personified. 'For the assurance of complete transparency' she wrote in the cover letter. There were even copies of all the receipts."

"Joanna, I need you to answer some questions," I said. "Simple questions to start with. Then I want to delve a little into possible reasons for your mother dividing her estate the way she did and your grounds for challenging… apart from the obvious, of course.

"Firstly, let's clear some confusion. You said Mildred wasn't your mother. I understand why you would refer to her as such, but..."

"What does it matter?" she snapped. "She claimed to be my mother. She raised me from infancy. She always claimed to have been married to my father for a time, though there was never a legal

union between them. She kept house for him. But for all intents and purposes..."

Her aggressive tone cautioned me to withdraw from further inquiry on that point. I changed direction abruptly, despite a burning desire for clarity. My stomach was knotting in the manner it often did when dealing with untrustworthy people.

"Okay. Are you married?"

"Widowed."

"Children?"

"No."

"Age?"

"Forty-nine. Almost half a bloody century."

"Family? Sisters, brothers? Apart from Isabel, I mean."

"Two much older step-brothers I acquired when my mother married for a third time. I've never actually met one, and the other only once, briefly."

"And your father?"

"Wealthy. Foreigner. I was born overseas. Millie left him when I was a baby.

"I found my dad when I was 23," she continued after a pause. Renewed a relationship with him and turned on Millie when I found out what she'd done to Dad. She never cared much about me. It was always IIIIIssssaaaabeeeelle! Little Miss Perfect! Even Dad preferred her over me, but he acknowledged I was blood and she wasn't. I hated my father, too, but he understood my needs and helped me out financially."

It struck me as unusual that a woman of Mildred Dolan's generation, and presumably a devout churchgoer—as Joanna's comment on the funeral suggested—should have three failed marriages. Jo told me Mildred lost her first husband just months into her marriage, and only weeks before Isabel was born. "Millie never got over losing her first husband," she added. "She was so bitter and twisted. Married Dad for his money. Never got it, though. He was way too smart for that witch."

"And your mother's will? You claim it was unfair?"

"Mildred's will," she corrected. "Left me twenty thousand. Might as well be the old one-penny tip, given the circumstances. The ultimate insult. All the rest—well over four hundred thousand—to Isabel and her brats."

That was positive. Such an unfair bequest almost guaranteed a win in a will contest.

"You've seen the will?"

"Of course."

She passed across a copy. She had tagged the page that mentioned her. Of course, the will gave no indication of the likely total value of the estate, though Isabel's reports provided that information.

Mildred had explained herself with the briefest possible note, claiming Joanna had already been well provided for and that fairness dictated Isabel should at last receive what her father left her so many years ago. She left a sizeable amount to one of Isabel's grandchildren, citing special need. Joanna had mentioned that one of her sister's grandchildren had a disability.

"And you think this is forged?"

"Past wills always split everything equal, except the most recent legitimate one, which left it all to me. She always claimed to love us both the same, even if she didn't act like it. Her latest will—the latest legit one, that is—recognised my disabilities and special needs and that Issie is well off."

Recent change of will. That put the odds strongly in Joanna's favour.

"Was there a reason why she might exclude you?"

"Plenty of reasons, in her twisted mind. For a start, I am not her biological child. She regarded me as a bad girl. Immoral. A heathen. I was always a huge disappointment to the prim and proper Mildred."

"So, perhaps you should tell me your story, in your own words. I'll draft a standard letter of caution and request for information to Isabel. It seems she's already supplied most of what I'll ask for, but she doesn't need to know you have passed it on. A formal request will confirm her obligations and your rights. Lawyers' letters always rattle people a little. She might even respond with a settlement offer."

"Not one I'd accept," she snapped. "I've read about the Family Provisions Act. I'm needy: a disabled pensioner. I should get the most. Reversing the allocation would be fair. Don't even think of suggesting I accept an offer of half."

"Is it likely Isabel would offer you half?"

"Who knows what the saintly and sanctimonious Isabel would be likely to do? And who cares?"

"Joanna, if she offered you half, you would be foolish to refuse," I said, striving to keep my tone gentle.

"I need more. I want more. And by my reading of the law, I'm almost certain to get more, given my needs and her situation. I hired you to make her pay… in more ways than one." She tossed her head and smirked as she added, with emphasis, "*Everyone* who displeases me pays."

We were seated in plush leather executive chairs arranged around a small conference table, mirror polished, with the company logo engraved into the centre.

She leaned back in her chair with the air of someone declaring ownership. Grief, or pretend grief, had given way to a disturbing arrogance, and I had an uneasy sense that my initial judgment of Joanna Wynne was way off. Still, no judge would condone her mother's treatment of her, no matter what claimed justification was offered. Her claim was valid, and I was in the business of profiting from progressing winning claims. Joanna would lose the arrogance as the case progressed. They all do.

Something about Joanna Wynne, though, made me uneasy. Some of her claims were confusing, to say the least. Her malice was palpable, and her expressions and tone were theatrical. I made a mental note to quiz Nic, without disclosing my reasons, of course.

I closed my first meeting with Joanna pleased she appeared calm and confident. I made a quick comfort stop while she leaned on the reception desk confirming her next appointment. I saw her, on my way back, striding to the lift. No limp.

Standing at my window, I watched her emerge from the building. Now a midget in a crowd of dwarves, yet still conspicuous by her height and carriage, she strutted along the Boardwalk and into a coffee shop. Her limp was staged. Those boots were ridiculously unsuitable for someone for whom walking was genuinely a challenge. And how did she afford such expensive boots on a disability pension?

I made some brief file notes, then packed up and headed for home.

Perhaps Joanna's last sentence should have sounded an alarm, but I was sufficiently arrogant back then to believe myself invincible.

For certain, nobody could have convinced me a woman who spent her years playing our welfare system and her father's sympathy could shatter my world—much less that she might have any cause to want to.

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SNEAK PEEK

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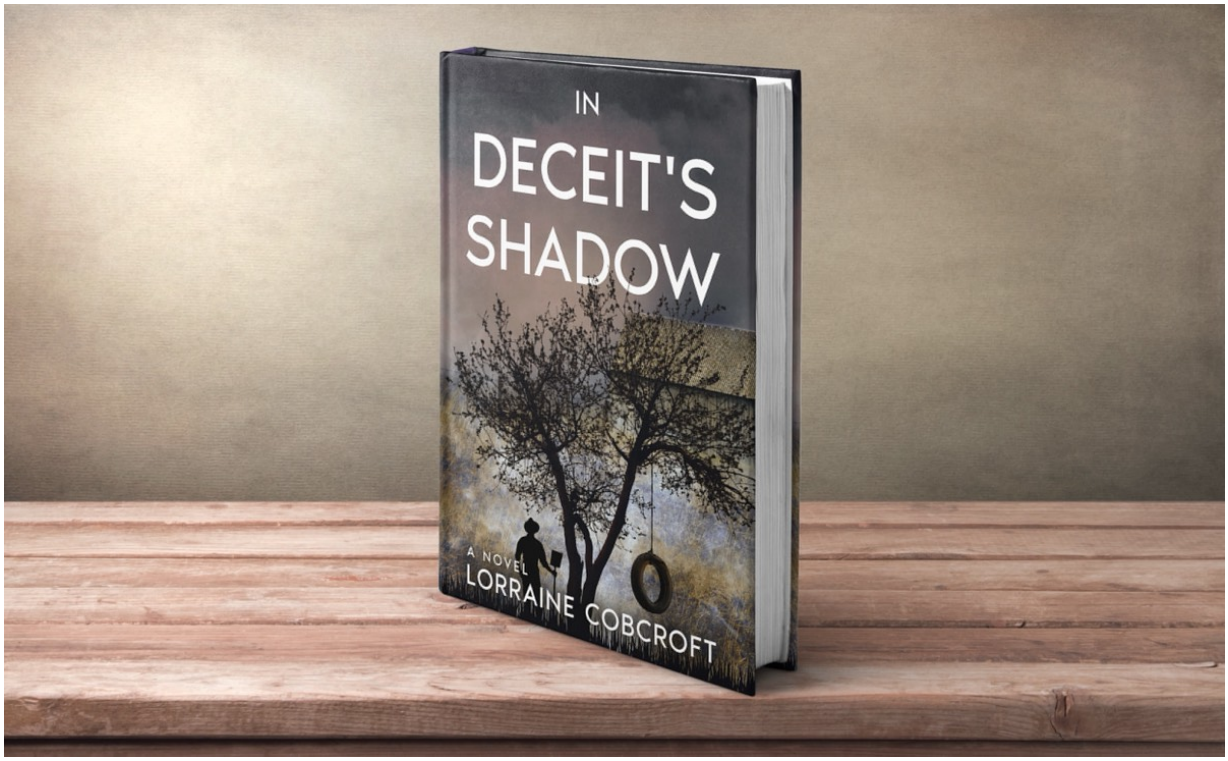

A dying legacy. A stolen birthright. A family torn apart by greed.

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.

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing as L.A. Raine, Lorraine Cobcroft writes 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.

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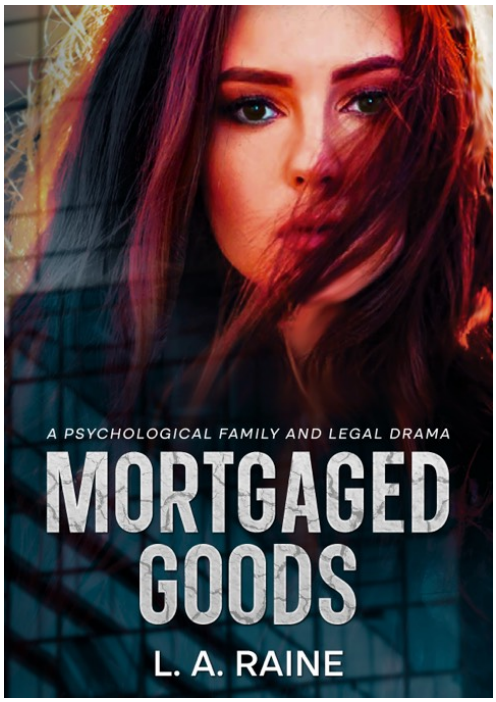

They buried a woman this morning—and with her, a thousand fears and nightmares.

Corporate lawyer, Natalie Dreyer, fought hard to escape a sordid past and prove her worth. When she married the wealthy and charming Karl Albrecht, she believed she had finally shaped her perfect world. But perfection is an illusion.

Facing trauma, disillusionment, and betrayal, Natalie is forced to confront her demons. When her baby arrives with a fragile future, her carefully buried past comes roaring back—along with the devastating lies that shaped her life.

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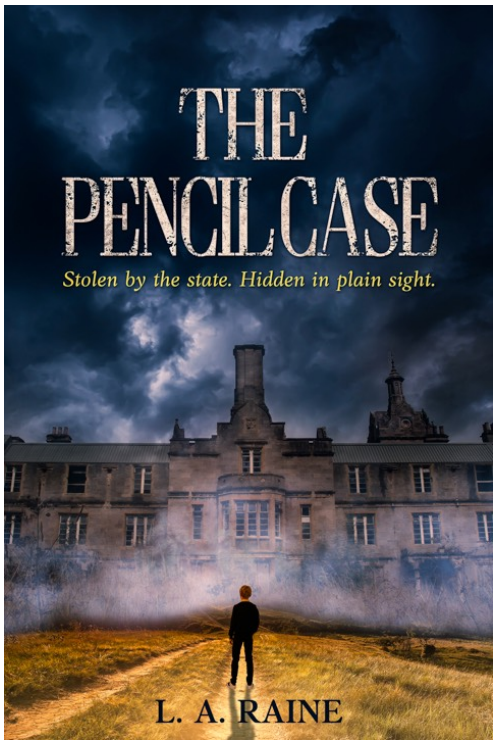

Stolen by bureaucrats twice, forced into the army at just fifteen, after being subjected to a Dickensian world of abuse in institutions, Paul Wilson's life was defined by a brutal battle against the system. For over two decades, he survived the cruelest injustices, believing he was entirely alone in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

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Fictionalised, but based on a harrowing true story, this is a deeply moving Australian epic celebrating the triumph of the human spirit and the unbreakable power of family love.

With the sweeping, true-story triumphant spirit of Saroo Brierley's ***Lion*** and the stark, systemic institutional drama of

Oranges and Lemons, this is an unforgettable Australian epic.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Authors live lonely work lives. For seemingly endless hours, their only companions are imaginary characters. Blank pages taunt them. Words challenge them to arrange and rearrange, and then, having agonised over paragraphs, to kill their darlings and start over.

Despite lonely months, though, few novels are ever completed without extensive help from special people. This one would not have reached publication stage without extensive help from my good friend, Tina Woehrle, without whose insights and encouragement I don't believe this novel—which languished in my bottom drawer for years—would ever have been completed. Thanks are also due to Louise Shellshear, who first introduced me—many years ago—to the frame narrative novel style. Also to

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