

THE SELF-MADE SAINT

CHAPTER ONE

If you want to change the world, go home and love your family.

—Mother Teresa

Adelaide, South Australia.

February 2019

Judith Drainger refused to be disappointed by incompetence, but it did make her angry. Take this sodding screen door that just wouldn't damn well close. Despite having its handle yanked and twisted, the tongue still refused to find its groove in the lock. See? Useless. Judith flung it out of her way and stepped outside. Behind her, the door hit the aluminum frame with a particularly obnoxious bang. She sent it a warning glare before turning back to examine her brand new street from the verandah of her brand new house, in her brand new country.

She decided it was best that she hadn't known what to expect of Rowntree Street, Goodwood. Starting any new life adventure at her age was enough fuss, you didn't need to imagine you'd be immediately happy or thrilled with things.

“For a start, it's not London chaos,” she murmured, pulling her creased blouse out from her already wet underarms. “And it definitely isn't as wild as Dadaab, which will suit me just fine.”

At seven o'clock, the summer evening was warm, the suburban street draped in wilting sunbeams and shadows before the lampposts came on. She heard the chitinous whirr of cicadas and was pleasantly surprised to see her favorite jacaranda trees growing on the verges, their

purple blossoms clinging to the ends of skinny grey branches. As beautiful as any of the ones she'd planted with the kids in the refugee camps of Dadaab.

But for goodness sake, why was it so quiet? Searching for life on the deserted footpaths, Judith finally spotted a man coming from the small collection of shops on the corner. An unwieldy surge of excitement sent her heart racing and she hopped down the steps to her front garden. He was tall, nicely built, wearing large sunglasses and a jaunty pair of red trousers while walking a small dog. It seemed like fate when he stopped in front of her broken gate to let his little dog sniff at a jacaranda tree. Though still airplane-stale, Judith was determined to impress the natives with her friendliness, so she raised one hand in 'hello' as the other smoothed her cap of brown hair. But the gentleman didn't see Judith's smile or her wave as he waited for the dog to squat and vacate its bowels amongst the fallen purple blossoms. Then he just jiggled the leash and hurried on.

Judith was slim but tall with it and knew he couldn't possibly have missed her when she called out, "Excuse me, I saw your dog defecate by that tree. You should pick it up!" Yet he only continued walking with the frozen shoulders of a person who knows that he's being yelled at by a stranger but has decided not to respond.

"Honestly, who wears sunglasses at night?" She asked though there was no one to hear her. Marigold always stayed indoors. "I'll have to watch out for *him* in future." But she knew it was really shame that made her cheeks burn. Of course, he let his dog poop outside her house, even in the evening gloom she could tell hers was the worst one on Rowntree Street

This afternoon when Judith had gazed out through the window of the Uber, she had decided the old cottage looked like a sad fat face – two windows for eyes either side of an

ancient screen door for a nose, and a silver verandah that curved down over the beige front like a blunt cut fringe. All the beautiful flowers in planter boxes from the advertising photos were gone, leaving behind their dirty rectangles on the painted concrete steps.

Judith felt her skin prickle and could only suppose that the neighbors were watching her from behind their curtains and wondering at the woman silly enough to buy the old place. Not wanting to make a further spectacle of herself, she hurried back inside, only to stub her toe on one of the hard-shell suitcases sitting in the dark hallway. When she stopped short, the screen door crashed against her backside making her squawk in surprise.

“Well, sod it! I don’t like you either,” she scolded the house which had so poorly welcomed her with its mediocre façade and faulty door. “But I’m not going anywhere. My poor Cassandra will be so relieved that I’m finally here.”

Judith jabbed at the hall light switch, illuminating a dusty, cone-shaped fixture on the ceiling, and revealing the doors of two smallish bedrooms crammed with unmade beds and too many cardboard boxes. Limping down the hall, her navy suede loafers made unpleasant sticky noises on the old floorboards and she mentally added sanding and polishing to her to-do list.

Stopped in the doorway of the kitchen-dining room, Judith stood with hands on her narrow hips. From this exact spot, she could look across the sea of beige boxes, through the opposite doorway, over the bubble-wrapped armchair in the tiny lounge room, and then out the open back door into darkness. From outside, she heard a distant siren and didn’t know if it was an ambulance or the police. Everything was different here. Everything. Hot tears stung her eyes and she was forced to pinch the bridge of her nose to stop that nonsense. But she couldn’t do anything to stop the whispers:

Best get on with it before you go under it, Judith.

There's always someone who's got it worse, Judith.

Be grateful for small mercies, Judith, and for God's sake, put some lipstick on.

The formerly indomitable, Mrs. Marigold Henley had only been dead six months so Judith didn't miss her yet, but ever since the day of the funeral she couldn't seem to escape her mother's whispering. Judith knew that Marigold certainly would've hated this tiny cottage. She would have sniffed and called it humble when she meant awful, then congratulated Judith for not caring about civilized trappings such as wall to wall carpet or picture rails.

Always such a savage, my Judith, Marigold whispered.

Judith didn't always answer her mother aloud but tonight she needed the comfort of winning an argument. "You would've hated the camp tents I lived in too, Marigold," she said. "I've told you before, it's the people who make a house a home. It's why I sent Cassandra to boarding school as early as I could. Unlike you, I saved my girl from her unhappy home and I'm here to do it again."

Last year, when Judith had been forcibly retired from her volunteer work, then her mother had died and her thirty-two year marriage to Terry Drainger had tottered to its own coffin, Judith defied the deluge of well-meaning pity and decided to take on a new mission—she would move to the other side of the world to reconnect with her precious only child, Cassandra, and rescue her from the domestic prison she'd fallen into. Cassandra might be twenty-nine but she still needed her mother. This was going to be their time together. This time, Judith was going to get it right.

Well, I still think fifty-nine is a little old for a new beginning, Judith.

Judith was proud to say that she had let the divorce settle quickly and sacrificed what her lawyer had decreed was her proper due from Terry. Her only demand had been that he would pay the rather exorbitant cost of her special South Australian residence visa, expediting the complex immigration process so she could get to Adelaide before the year was out.

Terry was so good to you. You won't find another like him, Judith.

Then – just like that – she was free. Not just out of the house on another three month mission for the UNHCR, she was out for the rest of her life. And just like a mission. . .

“Yes, three months and I’ll make this house a proper home,” Judith said, nodding to the chipped walls and the naked lightbulb hanging from the ceiling as if it was already done.

Oh, it's bound to be harder than that, my girl.

“Only because it smells like other peoples’ dinners and cardboard in here,” Judith muttered back. “We need some fresh air.”

Judith waded through the boxes to get to the window nearest the dining area, the one that looked out onto the green pine palings of her side fence. The window lock was a simple metal bolt in the top corner, and the wooden frame slid up with disturbing ease. There wasn’t a security screen or bars, so she leaned out over the narrow corridor of nettle bushes. With the tall fence in the way, she couldn’t see into her neighbor’s window so that was a relief. Privacy. A dog barked in a backyard nearby and the cicadas chattered louder now that night had properly fallen. But she still couldn’t hear any people noises, no shouts, no chatter, nothing normal. Her heart began to race as if she was nervous, beating erratically, as it did more often now.

Judith pulled back from the window and closed her hands into fists, sucking in a deep breath. “That’s enough of that,” she admonished the faulty organ. “There’s nothing to panic about. Triage will straighten out these problems. Take the worst one first and let’s keep going.”

Remember when that little camp psychologist suggested your Triage was the symptom of a dissociative disorder? The nerve of it!

“Jurgen and I always laughed at Melissa, she was a twit,” Judith muttered, refusing to be distracted as she pulled her phone from her back pocket. She re-checked the message exchange with Cassandra they’d had when she got off the plane that afternoon. There was still no reply to her last question. But Cassandra had confirmed she was coming by tomorrow for lunch. So until then, Judith was left all alone feeling like she might’ve made . . .

Do you think you’ve made a terrible mistake, Judith? Oh, shame. I did warn you, didn’t I?

Judith lifted her chin. “And it’s always rough on the first night in a new place. I just need—”

“Coo-wee!”

The shrill cry echoed through the house, then the crash of the broken screen door followed. Someone had come inside. With instincts chiseled sharp from years of dangerous workplaces, Judith didn’t panic but dropped into a crouch and assessed the risk.

“Coo-wee!” the voice cried again. Now Judith was sure the intruder was a woman as she heard quick footsteps slapping their way down the hall to her.

“S’only me.” Slap, slap, slap.

The intruder entered the room. “I saw the moving truck and wanted to pop over and introduce myself. Thought I’d do the neighborly thing and bring you a little welcome to Rowntree Street too.” She offered a tea-towel covered plate to Judith as she rose to her feet again.

Though never one to pass quick judgement, Judith couldn’t say she was impressed with this invading neighbor. The woman was probably in her mid-sixties, short and dumpy with square shoulders and long arms. She had a round face, soft jowls folding around a tiny chin, and wore thick lenses in her eighties-era glasses. Her hair was mostly grey, cut short above the ears but droopy across her forehead. She was wearing a fleece top with a cartoon kangaroo dressed in an apron, mop cap and spectacles with “*World’s Best Grandma*” written underneath it. Her beige cotton trousers were ironed with hard creases down the front and short enough to reveal swollen ankles and bare feet.

“I’m Martha Thompson and I just live next door, number twenty,” the woman said, as she looked Judith up and down before meeting her gaze. “You’ve got poor Gladys, God love her, in number sixteen on the other side of you. She won’t be visiting, what with all her troubles, but that’s a story for another time. Still got lots of boxes, eh? I’d love to help you unpack but I’ve got this bad back, you see. It’s all I can do to bend down for the oven these days. Still, I made you these biccies – we call ’em Anzacs, like the army corps, you know?”

Gladys, army—what? “I’m Judith Drainger,” she began but Martha was already chuckling.

“Oh, I know who you are, Judith Danger,” Martha said. “But even if I didn’t: you’re the image of your daughter, d’you know that? Same green eyes, same tiny waist, and legs as long as

a stork's. It's only the hair that's different, isn't it? She's a carrot top and you're brown as a nut. Anyway, I was the one who helped your Cass with the baby while she was taking all the pictures of the house for you. She told me you were moving from Africa, or something, and that you might be a bit nervous by yourself at first. It's a big change for you, isn't it? Losing your mum and divorce and all that?"

For goodness sake, Cassandra had confided in this woman about her private business. "I was living in London but I've been working in United Nations High Commissioner Refugee camps in north-eastern Kenya for the last ten years," Judith said, then added more humbly, "as a volunteer English teacher." She braced, ready to deflect the awe this usually inspired in a first-time listener but Martha's gaze was perusing the disheveled state of the house, as brazen as you like. Judith cleared her throat, adding, "And my mother had been ill for a long time."

"Still, it's gonna be tough for you getting settled with no man to help." Martha's face crumpled in what Judith took to be a pitying expression. "Cass was so upset when she told me all about the divorce – Terry, am I right? Personally, I think it's great you've moved to be closer to her and Andrew and the baby, but she said you've never even met your granddaughter! O'course, I got to cuddle Emily a bit when they were here and she's a beautiful baby, bit on the skinny side, but like you, I guess. Where d'you want me to put these biccies?" Martha didn't wait for a reply but made her way to the kitchen and deposited the plate on the chipped Formica benchtop.

Judith ground her teeth and fumed.

"Cass gave me a key and I was the one who let in the delivery guys with your new fridge and microwave," Martha said, with a nod to the stainless-steel appliances. She didn't offer the

key and Judith hoped it'd gone back to Cassandra already. "I guess Cass picked you up from the airport. Is she still here?"

"Actually, I took an Uber. I didn't want to trouble *Cassandra*," Judith said. It always annoyed her to hear her daughter's beautiful name shortened to something that sounded like a cough.

"Aw, shame." Martha pursed her thin lips. "You're her Mum. S'not right to let you get about on your own in a new place."

Judith decided it was time to take back control from this nosy neighbor and her many opinions. "Look, it's been so lovely to meet you, Martha," she lied and used her superior height to herd the woman back down the hallway. "As soon as I'm settled, I'll have you over for tea but until then—"

"No worries, Judith." Martha didn't seem at all perturbed to be escorted out of the house. "Your screen door's broken if you hadn't noticed?"

She nodded and opened the offending door to hurry Martha along.

"The people here before you had a teenager and he was forever banging and slamming the thing at all hours of the day and night," Martha continued, her feet planted on the threshold. "O'course I could have my husband, Paul, have a look at it for you. He's not good for much but he is good at fixing things."

"Thank you but that's really not necessary."

“No trouble,” Martha said as she finally stepped out of the house and slipped those pudgy feet into a pair of green rubber clogs. “The noise really bothers me, so I’ll get Paul over here when it suits.”

Judith watched Martha’s square figure trundle down the cracked concrete path and make the short trip next door to her beautiful front garden, even in the dark the flowers and espaliered roses looked lush. “Goodbye, Martha,” Judith called and began closing over her screen door to make it clear this interaction was over.

“No point in saying goodbye, Judith,” Martha called back. “I’ll only see you later.”

Judith accidentally let the screen door slam in her own face. Sod it. Not only was she bothered by the door, but she knew her neighbors were too. She resented the responsibility it gave her after she’d only been in the house for one sodding afternoon.

Stomping back to the kitchen, Judith spied Martha’s ‘biccies’. She lifted the starched tea towel. They were flat brown discs, knobbly and not particularly attractive at all. She picked one up between her index finger and thumb and, raising it to her lips, she nibbled the edge. The combination of butter, sugar and oats danced across her tongue. With a sudden, violent need, she shoved the entire biscuit in her mouth and the wicked sound of crunching filled the silent room.

Judith wiped the crumbs off her lips with shaking fingers. She took the plate over to the sink. There was a plastic rubbish bin underneath it, but no bin bag yet, and the biscuits thudded against the sides with a hollow sound. She grabbed the nearest poison to hand and doused the biscuits in washing up liquid.

“There, no more,” she said as her heartrate slowed again.

Wasn't she awful! Marigold whispered.

Judith folded Martha's tea towel in a neat square and placed it in the center of the plate. She thought of Martha taking the time to make the ugly biscuits, bending her sore back over to get them from the oven, all for a pitiful new neighbor.

"I never asked for help," she muttered, "and there's nothing I hate more than a martyr."

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning, early enough that the sun hadn't hit the tops of the cathedral-tall eucalyptus trees in the lane behind her back fence, Judith stood on her step with a cup of Australian Breakfast tea, colored terracotta by a dash of skim milk. Jetlag had meant that she'd been up half the night listening to the house creak around her and sometimes a dog barking in the distance. But she'd still forced herself to get up at a proper time because you couldn't argue with the clock. The morning was already hot, the air redolent with the astringent scent of dry gum leaves, and the musical chorus of unfamiliar birds beyond her garden.

"Billy! Billy!" The shrieks came from that Martha Thompson next door. "Get yourself to school. No, I am not kidding. School, Billy!"

Idly, Judith wondered why Martha had a young child living with her. But it wasn't her business, so she sipped her strong tea and continued studying her back garden. The yard was a simple rectangle bordered by a shoulder-high pine fence. In the right-hand corner there was a small shed which she had opened to find a pile of junk the last owners really should have disposed of themselves, and an oily lawnmower smell. She supposed she'd eventually need one, though right now the grass was mostly brown with large patches of sandy soil. A hexagonal clothesline, a Hills Hoist she'd been told, sat in the shade of the shed, with a plastic peg basket trailing down its one leg. It was clear that the single redeeming feature of her rough yard was a lone lemon tree, heavy with green fruits waiting to turn yellow. Beautiful and clearly productive, the fruit tree looked like a wealthy refugee in Judith's garden, so out of place yet stuck by circumstance.

Judith knew nothing about gardening and wondered if Cassandra did. Maybe she could ask her to help with all the decorating too? Judith had never had to make a proper home from scratch before. In the camps you got a bed and trunk to store your things. Simple.

Never ask someone to do something you can do yourself, Judith, Marigold whispered.

Judith had never asked for favors from anyone and she wouldn't start now.

There was more shouting from next door but it had moved to Martha's front garden. "Billy! You put one foot in that hoon's car then so help me God, I'll ..." There was a loud squeal of tires and a motor roaring away.

Not a child then, Judith thought, but a teenager. Taking another sip of tea, she noticed a confetti of old cigarette butts in the dirt by the corner of the back steps. Streaks of black soot decorated the concrete where they'd been stubbed out and she thought the orange filters looked strangely delicious.

Cigarettes – her solitary vice. She had only quit when she fell pregnant with Cassandra thirty years ago. She still missed it after all this time, but cigar-puffing Terry hadn't approved of women who smoked. Neither had Marigold. She'd said smoking made a lady look 'common' – always a cardinal sin.

And she couldn't smoke with a baby in the house anyway. Judith smiled as a thrill of anticipation trembled the mug in her hands. Today, she would finally get to meet little Emily. The hospital photos taken straight after the birth never did a newborn baby any justice, and Emily had been no exception, looking all bruised and puffy. But surely now she would be just as beautiful as Cassandra herself had been at four months.

Judith tossed the dregs of her tea onto the dusty lawn and made her way to the kitchen. She rinsed her tea mug under the spluttering tap. The window above the sink looked directly at the side of a steel-grey fence, and about six inches of the top of Martha Thompson's window. She noted Martha's curtains were white with orange spots on them and then realized that her own kitchen window didn't even have any hooks to hang a curtain rod from. There was so much to do and no one to help.

"No, stop that moping," she scolded herself before Marigold could. "Best get on with it before you go under it."

Judith checked her wrist before remembering her phone and Fitbit had both died overnight. So, time being of the essence and wholly digital, she became determined to find her missing electrical adaptors. There'd been no sign of them in either of the suitcases, but she might've packed herself some spares in the boxes that had left London with the removalist company three months before she had. Barefoot, she padded into the second bedroom across the hallway and began opening the alarming number of boxes that had 'office misc.' written on the side.

She unpacked recklessly, putting things on the floor in unstable piles. She tried not to think about the reunion to come because it was perfectly ridiculous to be nervous to see her own daughter, even if it had been two years since Cassandra had moved away to Australia to be with *that Andrew*.

That Andrew was an Australian dentist ten years older than Cassandra, with curly blonde hair and not particularly nice teeth. Cassandra and the dentist had only been going out for a few

months when Cassandra had declared herself in love with him and ready to move to the other side of the world when Andrew's UK work visa expired.

She was always losing her head over a boy, our silly girl! Marigold hissed.

Oh, and the good-bye party had been just awful. All the hours being stuck with a drunken Andrew as he extolled the virtues of the Australian paradise that was his home city of Adelaide: a big country town where families could live in peace and harmony, away from the violence and dirt of London. Oblivious to Judith's horror, he claimed Cassandra would be so happy in Adelaide she'd never want to come home again. And he called her "Jude" all night.

After moving to the other side of the world, Cassandra hadn't said much about Adelaide or talked about her life here. Judith was the first to admit that it had always been hard maintaining communication with her sensitive daughter, but during their many Skype calls, she had watched Cassandra grow even more distant and, she thought, sadder. Then, when the surprise pregnancy came, the calls had almost stopped.

Worse still for Judith was that Cassandra had never said anything negative about Andrew, or ever brought him up in conversation without prompting. Judith could only suppose that the poor thing was buried in denial about her unhealthy relationship. With a mother's instinct, she knew something was very wrong in Cassandra's world and she was determined to fix it for her. With her, she reminded herself. Of course it would be Cassandra's choice if she wanted to bring Emily to live with her.

Judith wondered if it could be that simple to get her family back together again. Or was she missing something important?

And are you quite sure she wants you here, Judith?

Judith pulled out a stack of tea towels that had been shoved in a rather valuable Kenyan pottery vase. “I can’t believe she thought describing a summer drought and blowflies would stop me from coming,” she murmured.

Remember, she even suggested you were in ‘shock’ from my passing and not fit to make proper decisions, Marigold whispered.

Judith frowned and paused in her rummaging. “She must’ve been terribly worried for me when you died.”

Perhaps it’s your weak heart that has her worried? The doctors said you had to watch your orthorexia or it’ll be up to Cassandra to look after you.

Judith scoffed, as she had scoffed since it’d been written on the medical form banning her from any more missions to Dadaab. “Orthorexia, indeed. Since when is concern for good nutrition a syndrome? It was that chubby, young doctor who had a problem with me working in Africa, that’s all.”

Maybe she would have kept shouting at Marigold, but the dust from the packing paper suddenly made her sneeze. Sitting back on her heels to search her pockets for a tissue, she heard people chatting out on the street. Then the loud squeak of her front gate. The conversation continued to the front door and she could make out Cassandra’s piping voice now. She peeked out of the bedroom window and saw the edge of her daughter’s figure.

Judith’s heart lurched, horrified to realize that she was still in her pajamas.

She’ll think you didn’t want to make an effort for her, and this is such a special occasion too. What a shame.

“No, I . . .”

But Cassandra was already knocking and there was no help for it. Climbing to her feet, Judith flapped her hands under her armpits, as if that might dry the sweat patches. She arranged her face into a happy expression, smile stretched wide and eyebrows high. Though when she opened the textured-glass front door, Cassandra was facing away from her, holding one of those baby carriers with the sun hood pulled up. She saw a bunny rug and a baby’s foot kicking about. Judith’s heart pounded in her chest. This was it. This was the moment that would make everything all right again. The funeral, the divorce, being forced to retire — all that would pale in comparison to reuniting with her daughter and meeting this precious baby.

“...so nice to see you again, Martha,” Cassandra called and then turned, squinting through the flimsy screen door. “Oh! Hello, Mum.”

“Morning, Judith!”

Judith’s gaze skittered to Martha shouting from her front garden. Today her neighbor was wearing a green tee-shirt decorated with glitter that sparkled in the sunshine.

Judith wanted to push open the screen door but Cassandra was standing too close to it, so she stood frozen with her hand on the handle, and stared into Cassandra’s wide, expectant gaze.

“I was just chatting to your neighbour, Martha,” Cassandra said. “She’s got a heart of gold, hasn’t she?”

For goodness sake Judith, open the door for your girl, Marigold hissed.

“You’re in the way,” Judith barked, sounding gruff as she choked on a wave of emotion. “Of the door, I mean. Sorry.”

“Oh, sorry,” Cassandra echoed and took a step back. Judith opened the screen door but the metal edge knocked the top of the baby carrier as Cassandra tried to come in. The baby wailed.

“Stupid door, sorry.” Judith turned on her heel and had led Cassandra down the hallway to the kitchen-dining room before she realized that she’d forgotten to hug her. Sod it! She was already making a terrible mess of things, like always. Cassandra would be cross now.

“Sorry we’re a bit early.” Cassandra’s lovely, expensive boarding school accent had changed. Her vowels were flatter, more nasal. “I did call but your phone was off.”

“Well, you’ll have to excuse me not being ready, I know I look a state.” Judith swiped at her sweaty pajamas again. “But you’d never really said when you were coming.”

Cassandra raised a fine red eyebrow. “I didn’t? Oh, sorry, Mum.”

Judith winced. That was the wrong thing to say. “It’s my fault, Cassandra, really it is.” She reached to give Cassandra a shoulder pat that didn’t quite make contact. “I’ve only gone and lost my electrical adaptors and my phone died. Silly sod that I am!”

A quiet fell between them. Judith wanted to tell Cassandra that she still smelled the same, like vanilla and flowers, and how happy it made her. She wanted to say Cassandra looked pale and exhausted and how that worried it made her. She also wanted to ask for a hug now.

“Would you like to meet your granddaughter?” Cassandra asked, but vaguely, like she was thinking other things too.

“Absolutely!” Judith cried and threw herself over the baby carrier but Cassandra was already moving away to put it on the dining table. Correcting course, Judith prepared herself to

be delighted at this first precious encounter, but when Cassandra stepped away, she revealed one of the ugliest babies that Judith had ever seen. She was very slim, with a head that looked far too large for her body. Pale blue eyes goggled out of a face tinged yellow with jaundice and her tiny nostrils flared. The fragrance of sour milk hung in a cloud over the carrier.

Shocked, Judith blanked on the baby's name. "Why, she's just. . . lovely, darling!" she said. "Shall I, can I, do you want me to pick her up?" But the baby promptly released a stream of orange-flecked vomit down her chin, whimpering in discomfort. "Oh dear, what's happened now? The silly sausage!"

Cassandra pulled out a packet of baby wipes from a giant handbag as Judith hovered behind, apologizing on behalf of the baby for being *such* a messy girl. "She's quite small for four months," Judith added, keen to impress Cassandra with her grandmotherly knowledge.

"Actually, my beautiful girl is five months old now." Cassandra scooped the baby out of the carrier and onto her hip, but the movement caused more vomit to appear.

Judith wanted to ignore the fact that Cassandra was just dumping all the dirty baby wipes on the dining table, but it made her fingers itch. She retreated to the kitchen to dispose of the wipes herself and make tea. Fussing over milk and sugar to drag the process out for as long as possible, she desperately tried to remember the baby's name, sure it started with an E or A. Amelia? Emma? When she couldn't procrastinate any longer, she returned to the dining table and placed the cup of tea in front of Cassandra. The baby reached for the mug from her mother's lap, and Cassandra moved it back across the table to Judith like a returned gift.

Cassandra dabbed at the baby's wet onesie with another wipe and Judith tried to think of something sympathetic to say. The baby whimpered in the silence.

“I’m sorry there’s no biscuits to have with our tea,” Judith blurted out and caught a frown from the goggly-eyed baby. “But I suppose you’re still trying to lose all the pregnancy weight anyway.”

Cassandra stared down at her baby, running a fingertip over the fine copper hair matted with cradle cap. “Actually, Andrew says he loves my new curves. Which is very sweet even if it is a lie.” She rolled her eyes, but her little smile said she’d like to believe him.

Judith had already sized Cassandra up and could tell that she was at least a stone heavier than she’d been at the goodbye party. But now wasn’t the time for her sensible advice to lose the weight before another month passed. Cassandra would certainly take it badly if she was under that Andrew’s influence. Or, worse, maybe she was taking after her dreadfully obese father?

“Lovely.” Judith took a sip of her tea.

“I think it’s thirty seven degrees today,” Cassandra said. “You should get air-conditioning installed or it’ll be unbearable in here before too long.”

“The heat doesn’t bother me, darling,” Judith said. “Dadaab got much hotter than this.”

“Of course, I’m sure in the camps it was harder,” Cassandra said. “Nothing could ever be harder than life in the camps.”

Judith didn’t know how to answer that when Cassandra already seemed so irritated.

“I’m sorry the house is still such a tip,” Judith said, giving her self-criticism as a peace offering. “I only sent over a few bits and pieces with the moving company, but I have so many more boxes than I thought I would.”

“It’s so nice to see Grandmother’s shelf again.” Cassandra said, gazing at the Queen Anne dresser as if it was Marigold herself standing there, half-covered by a dust sheet and tucked in the corner. “It was her pride and joy, wasn’t it?”

“Well, it was a gift from Baroness Stockwell herself,” Judith and Cassandra chorused together. Cassandra giggled, but Judith added as she always had to, “Marigold’s mother was a just a kitchen maid, you know?”

“I know.” Cassandra’s smile faded. “I thought you hated everything of hers. Why’d you bring it?”

“I did. I do,” Judith said. “But it’s just that. . . it’s the only thing of hers that speaks to me.”

“I really wish I could’ve come back for her funeral” Cassandra said. “It was so hard being pregnant and trapped over here. And I know it was difficult for you having to help her when you didn’t get along and . . .”

Judith waited for Cassandra to make a point but her daughter seemed a little lost, her eyes drifting about the disheveled room as she continued, “You know, Andrew and I discussed calling her Marigold but with Grandmother just passed it seemed too soon or something. I know she’d wanted me to be married before I had the baby—”

“Believe me, Marigold doesn’t need any more attention than she gets— got,” Judith interrupted. She returned their conversation to a more relevant topic, the one that was probably concerning Cassandra most. “Of course, as it is, the house needs a lot of work before I even get settled. The photos on the internet made it look so much nicer than it is. But never fear, I’ll get it sorted.”

Judith thought she was making things better but Cassandra's eyebrows pinched. "Sorry? It might be ugly, but the cottage is solid," she said. "Honestly, Mum, I could only do my best when you told me to drop everything and find you a cheap, little house in a city you've never even visited before!"

Judith flinched from the force in Cassandra's shrill words, her own anger stirring. Yet, seeing her daughter sitting there with baby vomit on her wrinkled shirt, she only said, "Of course, darling. Don't blame yourself, please. I'll just have to work a bit harder than I thought, that's all." She looked around the box-filled room. "After all, what else have I got to do?"

Cassandra's eyes glassed over. "Well, I would've thought—" But Judith didn't find out what Cassandra would have thought because the baby released another cascade of vomit, and they were both distracted by the minor emergency of finding more wet wipes and undressing her.

"Is she not well?" Judith asked, careful to use her mildest tone.

"She's fine, Mum," Cassandra said as she struggled to drag the wet onesie over the baby's large head. "We're starting solids this month and with her jaundice and colic it makes it hard to get her to keep food down."

The half-naked baby directed its bulging eyes at Judith as if begging her to give Cassandra some sensible advice.

"If she's not thriving then perhaps it's a problem of whey intolerance, darling," Judith said, studying Emily's little ribcage and bloated tummy. "It's quite common, you know."

“There’s nothing wrong with her!” Cassandra spoke in that shrill tone again. “I weigh her every week and took her to a pediatrician already. He said to give her more milk until I find something she likes to eat.”

Judith was sure she was right and that the pediatrician was probably an idiot. “It’s not as dramatic as all that, Cassandra. I do know something about infant nutrition, and I can help, you know.”

“I’m not being dramatic!” Cassandra’s voice cracked as she surged to her feet. She looked between Judith and her whimpering baby and seemed to struggle with a decision. “Would you just cuddle her for a minute, Mum? I have to run to the loo. I’m despair—desperate.”

Judith had wondered why Cassandra was being so short-tempered, but needing the loo explained everything. She took the baby into her lap and gave directions to the bathroom, pleased that she’d remembered to lay out soap and a hand towel that morning. The baby squirmed, so she sat her on the table edge, sticky legs dangling. Her head wobbled and a blue vein throbbed under the pale skin of her forehead. Judith thought it was sad that Andrew’s ordinary genes seemed to have trumped Cassandra’s lovely ones. “What are you doing to my daughter?” she whispered as she studied the baby for any signs of malnutrition or illness. “And what is she doing to you?”

Clearly as sensitive as Cassandra, the baby’s face scrunched, and she let out a hideous wail. “No, no, stop that,” Judith scolded and stood to press the damp, vomit-scented baby to her chest, but only succeeded in making her cry louder.

Cassandra entered the room at a run. With red-rimmed eyes, she regarded Judith holding her screaming daughter and something in her middle seemed to crumple. “Mum, is she okay?” Her hands were already extended to take the baby.

Judith felt an acute sense of failure in her first act as grandmother. “I don’t think she likes me,” she joked, handing the baby off.

“Don’t worry, it’s not you. She didn’t sleep well last night and needs a nap. We’ll have to do lunch another time.” The anger gone now, Cassandra’s tone was flat and exhausted. “I’m sorry. Even when I do all the right things she still gets out of sorts.”

Judith nodded, relieved that Cassandra was finally admitting she needed her help. And when Cassandra pulled a Ziploc from her handbag, extracting a pink rubber pacifier, Judith started immediately. “No, no,” she said. “Darling, that the cheap soother will cost you thousands of pounds in orthodontic bills later.”

“Now who’s being dramatic?” Cassandra said, but she was asking the baby as she tucked her into the carrier again. Whisking up the second pile of used baby wipes, Cassandra took them to the bin in the kitchen and Judith saw her looking down for a long moment—at the mess of soggy biscuits. Judith braced herself for a lecture but Cassandra’s lips were pressed in a hard line when she collected up the baby carrier from the table and slung her enormous handbag over a shoulder. Judith followed her to the door, knowing she should say something but felt tongue-tied and stupid.

Cassandra stopped on the threshold and turned back. “I’m really sorry, Mum, this wasn’t quite the reunion that I’d hoped we’d have. I honestly thought that we could talk more about—”

Judith saw the pain in Cassandra's eyes and leaped to forgiveness, giving it generously so that she wouldn't blame herself for their little tiff. "Never mind, darling. That's life with babies, isn't it?"

Cassandra's cheeks flushed red under the freckles that she'd never tried to hide. "I wasn't blaming this on Emily."

"Emily!" Judith gasped the name in relief. "No, of course not. It's not Emily's fault at all. She's *lovely*."

Cassandra stared for a moment, but Judith couldn't quite place her new expression. "Okay, we need to go," she said, "Goodbye, Mum." She marched to the silver Subaru parked in front of the cottage. The stupid screen door slammed in Judith's face before she could get by, and she flung it open with a curse. Cassandra was already putting the baby carrier in the back.

"No point in saying goodbye, darling, I'll just see you later!" Judith shouted, then winced at herself for repeating Martha's corny words. "You and *Emily*!"

CHAPTER THREE

It took a temazepam-induced good night's sleep and waking fresh the next morning for Judith to remember that keeping busy was the proper remedy for her worries about Cassandra and now Emily. She was sure that yesterday some important thing had not been said, some vital action had not been taken, and she hadn't conveyed to Cassandra that she was absolutely delighted to be in her life again.

But moping about her mistakes solved nothing, and she was a firm believer that if you couldn't fix one problem, then you should fix another. Standing in the kitchen, stirring her second cup of tea, Judith decided that she had to get the house looking like a home. Her first priority was organizing the basic utility services, as well as reaching out to Cassandra to see if she knew any good homewares places. The list of chores was endless, and it all started with a fully charged phone.

Walking from room to empty room she didn't enjoy how very quiet the house was. She told herself to appreciate it, soon she would have a baby and Cassandra here, demanding all her time and attention.

Then your silly girl will have you to feed Emily properly. Such an unfortunate looking child, isn't it a shame that Andrew. . .

“Food. I’ll need to get in food, won’t I?” Judith said. The new car hadn’t been delivered yet but, for goodness sake, the shops were only half a mile from her house, which was perfectly walkable on a lovely, sunny day.

Naturally, she had already researched the nearby options and, at the end of her short stroll was delighted to find that the collection of shops matched their online photos. She visited the bakery attached to a busy café, Beans and Brew, the IGA mini-mart, Costello and Sons Fine Butchery, and the Goodwood Greengrocer. There was also a lovely wineshop, Goodwood Quality Cellars, with a very gregarious young man behind the counter who reminded Judith of one of Cassandra’s old boyfriends from university. This was the only reason she might have chatted to him overlong and was convinced to buy a bottle of gin made somewhere called Kangaroo Island. By the time she headed home, her canvas shopping bags were bulging, and her cotton shirt was stuck to her back.

She was walking down Rowntree Street, cursing her spendthrift ways, when she spotted a man just ahead wearing bright red trousers. Her heart beat a double-tap and she hurried, already planning her diatribe for the inconsiderate dog owner. So excited to catch her quarry, she didn’t notice that Martha Thompson was standing with a group of women in front of her garden gate.

“Hello, here she is!” Martha called out in a tone that suggested Judith may have missed an engagement. “You’ve got your hands full, love. Come and meet the girls.”

She could hardly avoid the “girls,” as they took up the entire footpath. Beyond them the figure in red trousers disappeared off down the street. Judith’s heart was still pounding for the planned confrontation, and she found it disorienting now to be surrounded by a cloud of sweet perfume and cheerful introductions. But more than that, her hands were swollen mitts of pain,

and if she had to put her heavy shopping down, she wouldn't be able to pick it up again, which would necessitate the need to ask strangers for help and make a nuisance of herself.

"Hello, everyone," she said and tried to sidle past a very plump lady in a fuchsia-pink shirtdress. "I would stay and chat, but I'll just get my shopping inside. I've got cold things here."

"Go on, put it down before you fall down, love," Martha said and stepped out of the gate to intercept her.

"Oh, yes, put it down," other voices murmured from the well-dressed crowd of women.

"No, really, it's fine!" Judith had to stagger away when Martha lurched in to try and take the shopping. "Really, Martha, don't!"

Martha stopped and blinked owlshly for a moment before the corners of her mouth turned down. "Have it your way, Judith. I'm only trying to help."

Naturally, Judith felt bad for shouting. "Sorry, but if you don't mind, I just need to get inside." The chatter around them had died, and she felt everyone's eyes on her as she hurried away, almost tripping on the broken concrete path of her front garden.

"Is that an accent?" she heard somebody ask behind her back.

"Yep. British," Martha answered, and as if that explained everything, there was a chorus of knowing *ohs*.

Judith felt herself flush as she negotiated the key with a sore hand and pushed her way into the house. She'd been warned about how Australians saw Brits. Andrew had been very clear that they were viewed as pompous and stuck-up. "Course, it all depends on the accent too," he'd extrapolated. "Your sort of plummy one doesn't go down too well, Jude."

Flushed, Judith put her groceries away in the empty cupboards, the loaf of bread and minute steak in the freezer, and the salad vegetables next to the lonely carton of skim milk in the fridge. She immediately plugged in her new adaptors and began charging her phone and Fitbit with a profound sense of relief. Soon she would be able to count everything in her life again, from the seconds on the clock to her own steps. With everything neatly arranged, she ran her swollen hands under cold water, cursing at the pain. She caught sight of the elegant gin bottle. Perhaps one glass could be considered medicinal?

Drinking in the daytime, Judith? Well, don't let the neighbours see you do that, Marigold sniped.

Even through the closed kitchen window, Judith could hear Martha's friends. Someone was shouting, while the others laughed uproariously. She dried her hands on Martha's tea towel and then hung it on the oven door. Right, enough nonsense. She would keep her word, go out and properly introduce herself, disproving their ignorant notions of British snobbery.

But by the time she had got to the front door, Judith thought that maybe she could just get the mail, and if the women still wanted to say hello, then she would be open to a conversation.

Back out in the glaring sunshine, Judith squinted as she made her way down the path and headed for the steel mailbox next to her front gate. Its position seemed designed to make someone have to go out and chat with neighbors when the mail could simply be put through the slot in the front door. Another odd Australian thing to get used to.

She studied the three letters that had arrived for the previous owners, M. and T. Phillips, and then looked over to Martha's house. Using the envelopes to shade her eyes, her other hand rose to wave 'hello'. No one waved back. Angry with herself, and with Martha too, quite frankly,

Judith turned on her heel and didn't quite understand what happened next. One moment she was making a beeline for the front door, and the next her toe had caught, the world tipped forward, and suddenly she could see underneath the front verandah, her face pressing into the scratchy grass. When she tried to pick herself up, she heard a squawking sound and realized it was her own cry as pain exploded in her ankle.

Oh, what've you done now, you clumsy thing? Marigold whispered.

"Judith! Judith!" Unfamiliar voices were shouting close by. She smelled a powdery perfume, and then one side of her face was pressed by Martha's hot hand.

"Is she out?" someone asked.

"Don't think so, Marg, her eyes are open," another said. "Martha, is she all right, you think?"

"Better take her to the hospital," yet another voice added to the hysteria. "I'd take her, but I've got that appointment with the podiatrist to get to."

Beige cotton-clad thighs loomed in Judith's face. "I'll take her, she's my neighbor," Martha said.

"You've got a heart of gold, Martha, really you do!" the voice with the podiatrist appointment said.

Judith tried to push herself up into a sitting position. "It's all right, don't fuss." But her eyes closed against the pain, and she felt a waterfall of wetness over her left eye.

"Oh, that's a lot of blood!" someone screeched.

“Never mind, head wounds bleed a lot,” Martha said, and Judith could only silently agree with her. “All right, chook, let’s get you on your feet and to hospital.”

“Oh, Martha, mind your poor back!” someone protested.

“Never mind my back, poor Judith’s in real trouble,” Martha replied, resolute in her martyrdom.

Judith tried to protest again, but it was no use. She really did need help, and Martha was the only one offering it.