

## THE PERFECT GIFT

### CHAPTER ONE

A YOUNG man boasting a straight back, used deliberate steps to march up to the open casket. For a long moment, he stared at the dead woman lying in the coffin. Eventually, he lifted his gaze to study the small group who had come together to pay their last respects. The young man's expression portrayed someone who seemed detached, totally uninterested. His actions dictated the fact he wanted to be somewhere else.

The young man slowly returned his attention back to the viewing. He leaned over, staring closely at the old woman, deep in thought. Her face showed no sign of any anguish; she may have encountered throughout her lifetime; her stories gone forever.

A middle-aged woman, fresh tears cascading down over her cheeks, followed slowly in the man's footsteps. She stood next to him speaking in low whispers.

"Why did you come?"

"I needed to see for myself." His voice sounded full of scorn, bordering on hatred.

"I repeat my question."

"Don't talk to me," he growled. "In a few minutes, I'll be gone, never to return." He squared himself to the woman so he could look her in the eyes. "You'll never have to see or hear from me again."

"That suits me fine."

An old man, leaning heavily on a walking stick, shuffled forward. Standing between the two, he whispered. "Not here, not now."

"Who are you to tell me what to do?" growled the young man. He glared cruel eyes at the old man.

"Jake, can't you speak nicely?"

"Shut up Bernice. I'll speak anyway I want."

"You shouldn't have come; there's nothing for you here."

"I'll be the judge."

"I hope you didn't come for money?" questioned Bernice.

"There is no need for you to know the reason why I came."

Bernice bowed her head, sobbing quietly. She hugged the book she held tighter for comfort. "I refuse to fight with my only brother."

"At last, you're starting to see things my way. I choose what I want and when to do it."

Bernice glared directly into her brother's eyes. "Your black suit matches the color of your nature. Here, before you go, read this. You owe it to mother," she insisted, shoving the book at him.

"I owe her nothing. I warned her not to stay at the Oasis. She didn't listen."

Jake snatched the dull red leather-bound book from his sister and threw it onto the floor next to the coffin. He marched past the onlookers to the outside.

Bernice picked the book up, studying the expensive cover for damage. Sighing heavily, she held it tight against her chest. Stepping into the sunlight, Bernice glared at her brother, lighting a cigarette.

"I see you're into a healthy lifestyle."

"What's it to you? Why do you even care?"

"I know you should've given mother and father a chance before turning your back on them or the Oasis."

"Poppycock! I decided I didn't want to live in a prison."

"I've never viewed the Oasis as a prison."

"It's high time you did."

"How can I, I've always loved the place," answered Bernice, again shoving the book at him.

"What's the book?" snarled Jake.

"Every one of mother's thoughts is recorded in the book."

"In her memoirs," corrected Jake. Pulling off his tie, he gave a non-caring shrug of a shoulder.

"Why don't you read the book for five minutes," urged Bernice. The sparkle in her eyes forced Jake to hesitate.

The old man who stood at the coffin emerged from the graveyard quiet funeral chapel. He stood on the top step, grinning. His furrowed brow depicted he'd seen too much sun over his lifetime.

"Stop smirking," yelled Jake, lifting his fist into the air. "Old man, if you want to fight, I'm ready."

"Come, sit in the privacy of the quiet room overlooking the grounds," hinted Bernice, stepping in his way.

"The only destination I'm interested in is the local hotel for a drink."

Bernice cleared her throat. "Please, we have much to discuss." A soft, pleasant expression swept her face. Her tone of voice could melt the heart of any man.

Jake slipped out of his pinstriped suit jacket and dropped it over his arm.

"I'll give you five minutes; not a second longer."

Bernice pointed to a narrow path, leading through the manicured garden to another building not far from the chapel. She climbed the steps and waited for Jake to catch up. The moment they entered the building and walked into the small room, she closed the door.

Leather bound law books each one in mint condition filled the bookcase adjacent to the door. A Tasmanian oak table and three chairs were set up in front of the window. The grey carpet looked new.

"Sit down. I want you to read the first page," jeered Bernice, shoving the leather-bound book under his nose.

"What if I don't want to sit?"

"I insist." Her soft, gentle voice, her feminine facial expressions, she left on the other side of the door. The tone in her voice now sounded cold, almost hostile.

Jake pulled a second cigarette from his pocket, placing it in his mouth.

Bernice reached out, yanked it from between his lips and threw it in the small bin next to the table. "You can't smoke in here," she scolded.

"Don't tell me what to do. I need something to settle my nerves. I don't like it here. I want this moment to be over so I can get back to the city. It's where I belong. If you stopped to analyze what I just told you for five minutes, you'd know I'm right."

"Is it the reason why you smoke?"

"That is none of your business."

"I guess it's a fair comment."

"I'm thrilled to the back teeth, we finally agree on a second idea."

"Brother, even though we don't get on, I'm happy you decided to come. Your presence means a lot to me."

Jake answered in a flat voice. "I'm thrilled to be here."

"Why do you have to be so cynical?"

"I've told you this before. It's my business, not yours."

Bernice's shoulders slumped. She looked away to hide her tears.

"What did you expect?" queried Jake.

"Couldn't you have come for a visit at least once in the last twenty years?"

"Tell me, who in their right mind would want to visit the Oasis? The place isn't exciting. In fact, it's an isolated, boring hole in the ground."

Bernice stared her brother in the eyes.

"It's a lovely place. If you'd only given it the chance it deserves you might have found it therapeutic. If you came to stay for a week, you'd never want to leave."

"Spare me the grief. It's a boring, horrible place. I grew up there just like you."

"We had great times waiting for the leaves to fall off the trees so we could kick them high in the air. Not to mention saying what we thought a cloud resembled or what it might change into as it floated above our heads."

"If you say," growled Jake, interrupting. "I used to dream every night about leaving the dry, dusty forsaken land. When I left, I never looked back." Glaring at his sister he dropped the book Bernice gave him onto the desktop. "If you had followed me you'd feel the same way I do now. The city's nightlife made me rich. The city itself is exciting beyond belief."

Bernice gently picked up the book. Forcibly she pushed it against Jake's chest. "Read it. You owe the dead woman. If you've forgotten who she is, the woman is your mother. Her name is Naomi."

"Again, I tell you I owe her nothing." Jake glanced at the waste paper bin and lobbed the book through the air. It missed the bin, landing heavily on the floor.

"Maybe missing the bin is an omen," hinted Bernice.

Jake grunted. Retrieving the book from the carpet, he grinned maliciously. His second attempt successfully ended in the middle of the bin.

Bernice thrust her knuckles onto her hips. "If this is the last thing I ever say to you, so be it. The city, the money, will never replace the splendor of the Oasis which sits in the middle of the Australian outback. Nothing compares to the morning glory that fringes the white clouds every new day, the birds, the cattle, or the peace the place brings."

"Forget the wise old words. Tell me one thing before I leave. The old man hobbling up to the coffin, who is he? He resembles the local street bum."

"He's no street bum. He came to say a few last words and to relive old memories." Bernice walked over, picking the book out of the bin. She cut into the path of her brother, marching for the door. "Sit down and read." Again, she shoved it into his ribs forcing him to hold the book.

"Tell me one good reason why I should read it?"

"I've already told you it contains mum's entire memories."

"I don't care," Jake argued.

"You should."

"Out there in the middle of Australia, she was never a mother to me. I'm happy I left home at an early age. The city helped me grow up."

The door to the room opened. A man wearing a grey two-piece suit and a loud tie hanging from his neck walked in.

"Excuse me, Sir, are you Jake Stanton?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I'm the solicitor in charge of the family fortune."

"Go away; you're not needed."

"Sir, the book you are holding has been left to you in the dead woman's will."

Jake massaged his temples. "What is it about this stupid book?"

The solicitor lowered his voice, the tone changing from friendly to authoritative.

"Before the reading of the will commences, you and your sister must read the diary. Failure to heed this simple command will see you both automatically cut from the inheritance."

Jake's deceitful city nature slipped into overdrive. By kicking the chair across the room, he wanted the man to know he wasn't happy. He pointed directly at his sister's green eyes.

"I'll read the first and the last page."

Opening the leather-bound book, Jake commenced reading.

## CHAPTER TWO

THE SMALL quaint church overlooking the tranquil bay looked picture-perfect. The ten bouquets of freshly picked red roses tied neatly at the end of each pew were exquisite. The flower girl and bride's maids looked superb.

The bride glanced at the long narrow window at the side of the church altar. She watched a brown leaf fall from the large oak tree. She marveled at the way the sea breeze helped it float gently to the ground. Looking away from the window, she faced her childhood sweetheart. The expression on her face radiated love and devotion exactly how a new bride should. Her long white silk dress included a lace veil to hide her nervousness.

The minister's eyes sparkled. He used a distinct deep tone of voice to close his debut wedding. Naomi and Bill Prescott, I now pronounce you man and-."

"Hold it. Freeze the wedding service," yelled a young woman standing in the exact center of the main doors leading into the church.

Her words cut deep into Naomi's spirit. She turned away from her future husband to glare at the person who interrupted her day. The one hundred strong onlookers, the same ones who made a ruckus over her four-thousand-dollar wedding dress were gob-smacked.

For far too long the old church remained barren of sound. Naomi's heart skipped a beat. She wondered had the priest heard.

A rude mix of deep and high-pitched verbal diarrhea erupted from the guests. Every eye in the weatherboard building stared at the barefoot woman in a torn sky-blue dress. She stood square to Naomi just inside the main door holding a baby while sweeping a young girl closer to her left hip.

Three kids fanned out from behind her.

Naomi scanned the sullen group. Switching her attention back to her future husband she whispered. "Bill, do you know this woman?" Her voice sounded alarmingly calm.

"I've never seen her before in my life," he mumbled back.

Naomi watched the woman boldly march along the pale red carpet. She abruptly stopped at the foot of the altar. The woman stared at each of the bridal the seemed to study Naomi's wedding dress. Switching her gaze to Bill, she spat at the slate tiles he stood on.

"Excuse me," growled Bill.

"Bigamy is against the law, darling," snarled the woman.

"Excuse me," scoffed Naomi, echoing Bill's remark. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I'm here to stop this farce of a wedding."

The tall, thin, woman swept long blonde hair from her face.

Naomi's best friend and bridesmaid, Kaite, stepped forward, shoving a tight fist at the woman.

"You might want to reconsider your thought," she yelled through a locked jaw. "Leave before this scene turns ugly. You certainly haven't been invited."

The woman pointed her finger at Bill. "I can prove I'm this man's wife."

Naomi folded her arms. "Let's see the proof."

Bill started to fidget. He focused on the many faces of the congregation hoping they weren't about to lynch him. "Yes, let's see this so-called proof."

The woman snatched a photo of Bill and her on their wedding day from the hand of a young sobbing four-year-old girl. The woman smirked dryly, shoving it under Naomi's nose. Unraveling a copy of the marriage license, she handed it to the priest.

His shocked expression said it all.

### CHAPTER THREE

NAOMI LAY flat on the bed staring at a dirty smudge mark on the ceiling.

"Kaite, Bill had been an amazing man, the perfect gentleman and easy on the eyes. He didn't have to work too hard to sweep me up into his fantasy world." She sighed, jumped from the bed and walked across the room to the window.

Kaite rolled her eyes. "The falling leaf must've been a bad omen. It's been two years today. Get over it."

"I can't."

"Tell me something, did lover boy pay you any money for ruining your day? The dress cost you an absolute fortune let alone everything else he made you buy."

"No."

"Do you know where he is or what he's doing?"

"No."

"My dear girl, stop moping about this tiny shoe box-size apartment. Let's go out to have some fun. I can already hear the nightlife calling from the Melbourne CBD, and the sun has yet to set."

"I don't feel like doing anything," confessed Naomi on a sigh.

"What about the bloke you met recently. Heard from him lately?"

"Don't even start to mention him. Sometimes I feel he's out there still watching every move I make."

"You never did say much about him," grunted Kaite.

"There's not much to tell. We met on the dance floor three months ago. By the end of the night, I figured him for a creep. I ordered him out of my life."

Kaite looked out across the Melbourne skyline at the setting sun. "You're right, he did look like a creep. We should go to the local nightclub to meet someone new."

Naomi lowered her gaze to the street below. The people rushing past their building reminded her of ants. She knew the streetlights were about to blink on. The city's nightlife will soon follow. She

loved the dancing, the smell of the countless coffee shops, the restaurants and the theatres. She turned from the window, walked across the room and sat on the end of the bed.

“I’ve made up my mind, no more men.”

“Don’t make me laugh,” giggled Kaite.

“This time, I’m serious. Men are big trouble. The only thing they want is a quick roll in the hay. When they get bored, they dump me and go onto the next one. I’m convinced there’s not a man anywhere in Australia who cares enough about a woman to treat her like a lady. I’ve been searching for years hoping to discover a man who is honest and will stay by my side for my entire life.”

“You won’t get an argument from me,” replied Kaite. “There’s only one thing wrong; you’ll be lonely for the remainder of your life.”

Naomi flopped prone onto the bed. “I think I’ve made myself depressed.”

She eventually dragged her feet back to the window, palming an open hand at the city skyline.

“Surely I’m wrong. There must be a man out there somewhere.”

“If you quit trying so hard, maybe he might surface. Come on my dear girl, get dressed, the two of us are going out to have a great time and find romance.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

“EXCUSE ME, lady; my name’s Brandt. You’re in my seat.” He reached up to take hold of an overhead leather strap. He stood swaying slightly to the rocking motion of the train. His facial expression portrayed a little boy who’d lost the most precious thing in the world.

The woman, on the higher side of middle age, didn’t look happy. She stared at the man hovering over her wearing a plain dark blue suit, grey shirt, and matching tie.

“Just in case you have any doubts, I sat here first, sonny,” she spat.

“I always sit in the seat closest to the front of the carriage.”

“Do you really, since when?”

“Yesterday,” announced Brandt.

“Get a life.”

“Please, I need to sit in your seat.”

“Listen, fella; I can see at least twenty vacant places in this carriage alone,” mocked the woman.

“I’m asking politely,” pleaded Brandt.

“Go away fly. I don’t like it when men grovel. They sound pathetic. Deep down they’re not real men at all.”

A few people diverted their gaze from the fences flashing past the train windows to the man towering over the woman. Whisperings travelled at speed from person to person throughout the carriage. In less than a minute, laughter erupted from the forty commuters.

“I know I’m making a fool of myself, but what if I paid you?”

“Can’t you tell I’m not interested?”

Brandt fished for his wallet. “Twenty. I’ll be happy if you would accept a twenty-dollar note. The only thing you need to do is vacate your seat.”

The lady lifted her hand to hide her proud look. She winked at the young pregnant woman sitting opposite her.

“I’ll pay you two-hundred for the privilege of sitting exactly where you are.”

The woman looked up. “You must be desperate.”

“It’s imperative I sit in the seat. I’ve exactly three minutes remaining.”

A tall heavy-set man wearing a black biker jacket walked the length of the carriage. The man had rolled up his sleeves, revealing a large ugly tattoo of a skull and crossbow on each massive arm.

“Lady, is this bloke annoying you?”

“Yes.”

The heavily tattooed man grabbed Brandt by the tie, dragging him in close. “Fella, leave the woman alone. There’s a seat with your name on it at the other end of the carriage.”

“I need that particular seat she’s sitting on,” moaned Brandt.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t knock your block off?”

“I don’t need to give you a reason.”

"I'll punch your lights out mate if you don't walk away."

"Please, listen to reason. I offered to pay for the seat," explained Brandt.

"How much?" growled the man.

"This fly offered me two-hundred dollars," reported the lady.

The big man stared at the woman. "Lady, I'd take the money."

The woman stood, staring Brandt in the eyes, holding out her hand.

"Thanks for vacating the seat!" shrieked Brandt. He dropped the money into the palm of her hand and watched the woman walk to the other end of the carriage then saw her sit, scrutinizing his every move.

The moment Brandt spied the train which he hoped carried the young lady he'd seen in the nightclub a week earlier starting to draw level, the other commuters watched him staring out the window. Curiously they focused on the approaching train. Their whispers echoed the same words.

'What's so important?'

The two trains slowly drew level. Brandt couldn't hide his disappointment. He faced the people staring at him.

"When I drove to work the other day, I saw a gorgeous young woman sitting in the other train while I waited at the rail crossing. Except at the nightclub, it's the only other place I've seen her. I did hope to see her close up. She's not sitting where I thought she'd be."

"Try a different window," called the woman he'd given the money to. "This scene is more interesting than a TV show."

Brandt's pupils danced at the hope as he sprinted from window to window. He started to panic when the trains began to drift apart. Staring out of the last window he caught a glimpse of her. The young lady looked up, making a cursory glance his way. She flashed a quick smile before the trains forked to go their separate ways.

Brandt leapt into the air. He yelled at the top of his lungs. "She looked at me and smiled."

"I too saw a young good lookin' Sheila glance your way, fella," stated the man with the skull and crossbones. "She's a bit of alright. If I were you, I'd track her down even if it took me the remainder of my life. I reckon it was worth every cent of the two-hundred bucks you paid just to catch a glimpse."