

I

Alex shivered as the wind that blew through the city echoed the coldness inside her. She huddled deeper into the blanket about her shoulders and looked out the window of her hotel room at the branches of the trees waving back and forth in the park across the road. Her thoughts were in turmoil and she studied the piece of paper that lay on the small writing table in front of her. The poem she had written earlier in the evening reflected her dark mood on this particular moonless night and the soft glow of the table lamp did little to cheer her.

**‘In the darkness of night
He hovers.
The cry of the innocent,
He does not hear.
Death stalks near,
Out of reach...
Yet it does not come.’**

An image of another moonless night years ago popped into her head and a cruel smile appeared before her. Alex shut her eyes and felt panic engulf her as adrenaline coursed through her body and her limbs went weak. Her breathing became shallow as she stood abruptly and knocked over the chair she had been sitting on; a black fog threatened to engulf her in its cold infinity.

Through the chaotic thoughts that flooded her mind, Alex clutched at the air in front of her until her fingers made contact with the edge of the writing table. She held on for balance and managed to whisper despite her dry throat, “I ... am ... safe. I am ... safe.” The black fog lifted momentarily and she made her way to the bathroom on unsteady legs. A box of Valium was sitting on the vanity and she popped two tablets into her mouth and swallowed them without water. She waited with eyes shut until she felt the adrenaline rush subside and when she finally opened them it was to find her face reflected in the mirror.

“My God!” she exclaimed as she took in the tear streaked and blanched cheeks; her deep amber eyes reflecting fear.

“It’s okay, it’s okay. You’re safe now,” she said to her image. Then, she went back to the bedroom where she straightened the chair she had knocked over earlier and draped the blanket over her shoulders once more. She looked down at the poem on the writing table. The words jumped out at her. **‘Death stalks near...’** But why hadn’t it come for her?

She pushed away this thought and looked around the room where she had been living during the past week. It was about time she found something less expensive. The small hotel in the city had suited her purpose when she had first arrived in Sydney, but she needed more time to decide whether to stay on in her hometown, and she couldn’t go on paying hotel rates.

In fact, she wasn’t even sure if she should have come here in the first place. She had been away for close to twenty years and could have stayed away forever, but something deep inside her told her she had to face her fears. She couldn’t keep running away from her stepfather indefinitely; and the only way to exorcise this stubborn ghost was by confronting it. *Easier said than done*, she thought; but she owed it to herself to at least try and put the past behind her once and for all.

Her eyelids started to grow heavy with the effect of the tablets and though she tried to keep her thoughts focused on her problem, she could not help but fall asleep on the unmade bed.

* * *

It was early morning when Alex woke to find sunlight shining on her face. She felt rested and eager for the new day and the rustle of a newspaper being slipped under her door spurred her into action. She slipped out of bed and retrieved the paper; but first a much needed shower and breakfast.

Once she was comfortably ensconced in the hotel's café, she saw the advert in the "share accommodation" section:

"SURRY HILLS – to share with gay couple"

She looked up from the ad, knowing instinctively that this would be a safe haven for her and hurried through breakfast so she could race to her room and make the phone call.

A soft male voice answered the phone and Alex introduced herself and expressed her interest.

"Yes, it's still available," said the voice on the other end of the line. "If you want to come over this afternoon and have a look, you can meet both of us. I'm Steve Wicks and my partner's name is Matthew."

"Is two o'clock suitable?" Alex asked as she jotted down the address Steve gave her. "Great, I'll be there." She replaced the receiver with a feeling of optimism.

Privacy was very important to her and she didn't want to share with females, who were bound to bring home their boyfriends; and definitely not with heterosexual males. But a gay couple was just right. She doubted they would pay much attention to her; and all she needed was a place where her privacy would be respected and where she could concentrate on pulling herself together and at the same time get on with her work in peace.

She had been writing for newspapers and magazines as a freelancer for close to ten years and had enjoyed a good reputation with her editors. Twenty years of travelling around Australia, never putting down roots, had served her well in her career. She had left home at age fifteen and gone to the outback where she managed to find work at various sheep and cattle stations. She spent several years doing the kind of grueling work that took her mind off other, more dangerous, thoughts. She had tried her hand at everything – mending fences, herding in sheep and cattle, general maintenance around the station and homestead, cooking for the boys during shearing season, and she even had a go at shearing. During this time in her life she met some wonderful people. Fond memories of Harry, an old shearer with a tanned face full of lines and skin rough as cowhide, came to mind.

Harry had been a good friend to the lonely and shy teenager she had been at the time. In fact, he had been like the father she'd never had; taking a protective interest in her and teaching her the way around the station where she had first worked.

Those had been good days – days of hard work, but also of friendship and fun. Days of shearers and cattle hands swapping tales of the outback. Tales that Alex had absorbed and compiled in her diary as she travelled to places off the beaten track and that would one day turn into amusing and endearing stories. These were the tales that eventually found their way into discerning travel magazines and newspapers and that finally began to earn her a reputation and living as a travel writer.

That had been the beginning. She had then gone on to write about her travels through wine country, lush green rainforests and endless miles of open ocean beaches, as well as the

many cities of the vast continent that was a part of her. But during all that time travelling, writing and living a gypsy kind of life, she had never returned to Sydney. Until now.

Surprisingly, she was happy to be home. Sydney had changed dramatically in the last twenty years, especially so since the 2000 Olympics. The city had turned into a hive of never ending activity and Alex looked forward to becoming a part of it all, immersing herself into this place that was in her blood.

* * *

Steve Wicks was a gentle looking man in his mid thirties. He was slight of build, bordering on the skinny side, and his brown hair was thinning. Alex's first impression of him was that of a person truly at peace with himself. Steve had a look of serenity about him that revealed itself in his soft brown eyes, as they shone with an indefinable quality Alex had never seen before except in paintings of Renaissance angels. She felt instantly at ease with him.

"Alex Dorian?" Steve greeted her in a friendly voice. "Please come in. We're just making tea. It's such a chilly day today."

He was right, Alex thought as she followed him into the house. Although it was only April, autumn had turned out to be very chilly this year and despite the sun that was shining in full force the cold wind from the previous night lingered on.

The house was a two storey Victorian terrace in pale yellow with the traditional federation green trellises and balcony railings. It was charming and Alex liked it immediately. Once inside, she caught a glimpse of tasteful contemporary furniture pieces complemented by antiques before she was led into a kitchen with a strong French provincial influence. But it was not the pleasant atmosphere that caught her attention; instead, it was the young man who stood at the breakfast counter pouring hot water into a Mexican earthenware teapot.

It took all of Alex's willpower to stop herself from staring at the vision in front of her because when her eyes first rested on him she thought she was looking at an angelic being disguised in human form. "Hi," the vision spoke to her. "I'm Matthew Davis. Would you like a cup of tea?"

Alex nodded, dumbfounded at the beautiful young man. She was mesmerised by the tall, tanned figure with the perfect athlete build. Piercing blue eyes looked back at her from an extremely attractive face that was almost boyish and yet strong, framed by golden light brown hair that was casually swept back from his face. An aquiline nose and sensual mouth with perfectly white teeth completed the picture.

"Alex, please have a seat." Steve broke the spell as he gestured toward the rustic kitchen table. Matthew finished with the tea things and he and Steve joined her.

The sun seemed to shine from Matthew's eyes and Alex was tongue tied for the first time since she had been that shy teenager who had left home. She quickly reminded herself that the guy was gay and, in any case, she was immune to men. At this thought, a shadow from the past threatened to rear its ugly head, but this time she was able to control the beginning of one of her panic attacks and instead accepted the mug of tea from Matthew.

"Thank you." She figured his age to be somewhere in his mid to late twenties.

"So you mentioned on the phone that you're a writer." Steve addressed her in his soft voice.

Alex forced her attention back to him. "Yes, I freelance. I write travel articles."

"You moved around quite a lot then?" This from Matthew.

“For the last twenty years or so.” Alex hoped they weren’t going to ask her too many questions.

“You don’t sound very excited,” Matthew observed. This earned him a reprimanding look from Steve.

“Perhaps Alex is tired of travelling and wants to put down roots.”

Steve was very perceptive, Alex thought; or perhaps she was easy to read. “You’re both right,” she said to them. “No, I’m not that excited about travelling anymore and yes, I am looking to put down roots.”

“Sorry.” Matthew apologized. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“That’s okay,” she reassured him. “You have a right to be curious about me.” But secretly she wished he wouldn’t become too curious.

“Well, as for us,” Steve explained. “I work in the hospitality industry running functions and Matthew’s an actor.” There was special pride in his voice as he referred to his partner and Matthew blushed under his tan.

“A hopeful actor at this point.” He gently corrected.

Alex had a sip of tea and managed to avoid his eyes. Instead, she turned to Steve as he continued speaking. “Tell me, Alex, how do you feel about living with a gay couple?”

Alex coloured at his direct question, knowing she would have to offer a convincing response. “I hadn’t actually thought about it that way.” She did not want to explain the real reason as to why she believed living with a gay couple would be a safe haven for her and this made her feel guilty. She liked Steve and did not want to start their housemate relationship with a lie, but she could not help it. This was not the time for her to start talking about her past.

“As a writer, I need lots of privacy,” she was suddenly inspired to say. “And I figured that sharing with other females wouldn’t give me the solitude I need. You know, a lot of the time girls will bring home boyfriends and such; and they like to chat a lot, too.” She hoped Steve and Matthew would not find this too lame an explanation and looked from one to the other to see how this was received. Steve gazed back at her with an understanding look that seemed to say that he knew she was hiding something. This unsettled her. Matthew looked suspicious, and she felt uncomfortable under his scrutiny.

“Let me show you around.” Steve came to the rescue and Alex was silently grateful to him.

“Thanks for the tea,” she said to Matthew and stood to follow Steve. Matthew nodded in response and she had the feeling he did not like her, which made her feel inexplicably sad.

Steve motioned her out of the kitchen and made his way down a hallway with polished floorboards that led to a staircase. Opposite the stairs was a set of French doors leading to a tastefully furnished lounge room that contained a mixture of antique pieces and a couple of modern cream leather sofas.

“Upstairs we have two bedrooms and a bathroom. Unfortunately, we don’t have an ensuite in our room so we all have to share.”

They reached the top of the stairs where the hallway’s timber floor was covered in what looked like a fine antique Persian rug. The walls were painted in a burnished gold tone and were dotted here and there with French impressionist paintings, giving an effect of elegance with a touch of “Olde World” charm.

The main bedroom was decorated in the same colour theme as the hallway and the furniture in the room was once again a mixture of old pieces and contemporary ones: a Queen Anne writing desk; modern built-in wardrobe with sliding timber doors; an antique dresser that

looked Georgian; an early 20th century queen size bed, with an elaborate brass bed head crowned with a canopy of white mosquito netting. Here again, the walls were decorated with French impressionist paintings.

Alex liked the style of the room, even though it was rather eclectic, and she warmed toward Steve for showing her around his inner sanctum. She felt a strong connection between them. "Who's your favourite painter?" she asked as she took in the different pictures.

"Monet," he said, and added with a smile. "Of course I wish these were real instead of reproductions, but beggars can't be choosers."

Alex laughed. "I know what you mean," she said, thinking of all the years she'd spent living out of a suitcase with not a great deal of money to show for it.

Steve closed the door to the room and led the way to another doorway. "This is the spare room."

Alex took in the modern theme of the room. The colour scheme was the same as the upper part of the house, but here the built-in had sliding mirror doors and the double bed was framed in Oregon pine, with a matching writing desk nearby. A window with timber venetian blinds looked down onto a surprisingly large back garden, lovingly landscaped, that gave way to a small sandstone terrace with a rustic outdoor dining set of wrought iron.

"Great garden. Do you look after it yourself?" Alex admired the neat flower beds bordering alongside a large pink frangipani tree.

"Yes, I'm the gardener in the family. Matthew doesn't go anywhere near the plants. It's a shame."

"I know," Alex replied. "Gardening can be very therapeutic."

"I was just thinking the same thing."

Alex turned back to look around the room and liked the feel of it. There were modern prints by various artists on the walls that were very colourful and full of life. All except the one hanging above the bed. This one was a black and white photograph print of two perfect male bodies facing each other. It depicted two attractive faces in profile and two bare torsos, almost touching down to naked hips and exuding a raw sexuality that Alex couldn't explain. Sudden fear gripped at her throat and she stared at the print as if mesmerised.

"Alex?" Steve called out gently, but received no response. "Alex." He called out louder this time, finally getting her attention.

"Oh. I'm sorry ... I just sort of wandered off there, didn't I?" She sounded a little breathless.

"If the print bothers you we can take it down."

"Uhm ... No, no, it's okay, really... I was just thinking of something else." She knew she made a poor liar, but was thankful he did not comment further.

"Well, that's it then. The tour's complete. If you have any furniture you want to bring along we can store all of this away."

"No, it's okay. I don't have furniture." Alex had recovered by now.

Steve walked her back downstairs and to the front door. "We have a couple of other people who'll be dropping by to see the room. So if you leave me your contact number I'll call you once we make a decision."

"Of course. By the way, I think I should tell you that I'm looking at accommodation for the short term; maybe three months or so. I'm not yet sure whether I'll be staying on in Sydney. It's difficult to decide where to put down roots." Alex felt she had to be truthful about this much

at least. She really wanted the room. She liked Steve, and even the disturbing Matthew. She liked the house and the suburb; but she just wasn't so sure about that unsettling print.

"We're flexible with the time frame." Steve's voice intruded into her thoughts. "This is the first time we decided to get a housemate, so it'll be a testing time for us, too. It's probably best to have a short term arrangement."

"Okay. Then I guess that's all. When will I hear from you?" Alex tried not to sound too eager.

"We'll make a decision by tomorrow."

Alex took out one of her business cards and wrote the hotel's telephone number on the back. "I'm staying at the Phoenix. If I don't get the room I'll have to look for something else fairly quickly. Hotel rates are not very kind to the pocket, so I would really appreciate a reply either way."

"Don't worry, you'll have one. I'll call you tomorrow morning," Steve reassured her.

"Thank you. It's been great meeting you and Matthew. Until tomorrow then." She stepped out into the small front garden and admired the beautiful roses bordering the street fence. "I see you also keep this in tip top shape."

"It keeps me fit," Steve replied. "Nice to meet you, Alex. We'll talk soon."

"Goodbye." Alex stood on the sidewalk and waited until he closed the front door. Suddenly, she felt alone.

II

It was evening by the time Steve and Matthew finished showing the room to other interested parties and they were both tired when they finally settled down to a pizza in front of the TV. Matthew enjoyed having Steve at home on a Saturday evening. It was rare for him to get Saturdays off from his hotel job since most functions took place during the weekend, but Steve had requested this particular weekend off well in advance so they could show the room together.

“You’ve lost weight again,” Matthew remarked casually, pretending to watch the animal documentary that was playing on the television.

Steve nodded, helped himself to another slice of pizza and leaned back against the comfort of the leather sofa. Matthew was sitting cross legged on the floor by the coffee table. “You haven’t told me how you’ve been feeling lately,” Matthew persisted.

“I’m fine,” was the reply. Steve knew that Matthew was worried about him, but he was too weary to get into their usual “you have to watch your health” debate.

“I meant since you left the hospital,” Matthew went on.

Steve sighed tiredly. “I’m fine, Matthew; don’t worry.”

Matthew turned his attention once more to the program, but Steve noticed the look of frustration on his face. “This pizza’s delicious,” he said, hoping to distract his partner from his brooding mood.

Matthew’s response was heated. “How can you be so cool about all this?”

Steve looked at him with love in his eyes. “I’m at peace with myself.”

Matthew’s eyes filled with tears and it wrung Steve’s heart. He would give anything to be able to avoid hurting his loved one, but the fact was that he didn’t have anything left to give—his life was already given. Instead, he motioned for Matthew to join him on the sofa and held him as a mother might hold a frightened child. He could at least give him all his love and hope that it would be enough to sustain him in future.

“What did you think of Alex?” he asked, once again trying to shift Matthew’s attention.

“The writer?” Matthew was diverted for a moment. “Too intense, I thought.”

“I liked her.”

“Why’s that?”

“She values her privacy and therefore will respect ours. And,” Steve added thoughtfully, “she’s hurting inside real bad.”

“How can you tell?” Matthew asked, surprised.

“I just know. She’s intense, as you’ve said, but also trying to appear confident at the same time. She’s hiding some big hurt. She’s a lot like you, you know.”

“No way!” Matthew protested. He hated it when Steve saw too much into his soul; and he seemed to have the gift for doing so.

“Whatever you say.” Steve indulged him. “In any case, I think we should rent the room to her.”

“If you want to, it’s fine by me. I only hope she can cope with all of this.”

Matthew’s tone reflected the petulant child he could sometimes be and Steve humoured him. “Cope with what?”

“You know, the illness—everything. I just wish we didn’t have to do this.”

“We need the extra income now that I can’t work long hours anymore.”

“I can go to work, too, you know!” Matthew burst out.

“I’m not going to let you give up your dream for me. You’re young and have a good chance to make it big.”

“Steve, I can still work at some job. We don’t need to take in a stranger.”

“No. We agreed you’d concentrate on your acting. I don’t want to see you throw everything away for nothing.”

“For nothing!” Matthew exclaimed, a hurt look in his eyes. “How can you say it’s for nothing? I love you and I’ll do whatever it takes to—”

“I know, I know. I love you, too,” Steve interrupted gently.

His voice was so soothing that it had a calming effect and as Matthew leaned into him, Steve caressed his hair and Matthew felt his anger dissolve. “I’m sorry. The last thing I want to do is upset you. But you know we can still work this out without taking in a stranger.”

“Let’s just give it a go, for my sake. Alex told me she wanted to have a flexible arrangement, and that’s a good thing. It’ll give us the opportunity to see how we like sharing. If things don’t work out either way we can call it quits,” Steve reassured his partner. “Besides, I think Alex could benefit from our help.”

Matthew sighed. “You’re the only person I know who thinks about helping others when others can’t help you.”

Steve smiled wisely. “All the more reason to do it.”

Matthew looked at him, not understanding his meaning. He only saw infinite kindness in the soft, brown eyes he loved so much.

* * *

Alex was in her hotel room working on a two part series on the city of Perth as the wind outside echoed with the strength of the previous night’s. She felt cold and poured herself another cup of coffee from the jug she had ordered earlier from room service.

It was close to ten and she knew better than to drink strong coffee so late at night, but she was not in the mood for sleep. Images of Matthew Davis kept intruding into her mind. The more she thought about him, the more disturbed she felt. So much so that she gave up her repeated attempts at writing and went to stand in front of the full length mirror in the bathroom.

A woman in her mid thirties looked back at her with long black hair and amber eyes, legacy of her Irish ancestry. Alex didn’t know if she was attractive; although men had found her so in the past. She knew she wasn’t beautiful, but there seemed to be something about her exotic looks that appealed to the opposite sex. As for the rest of her body, she avoided looking at it, especially when naked. After all, this was the body that had attracted *him* and she was angry at it.

The skinny child’s body she had possessed years ago had matured into a full female form and though she realized her present body had nothing to do with what happened in the past, she made sure that no one saw or touched it. Since leaving home, she had gone out of her way to avoid anyone who showed the remotest interest in her and had taken to dressing in baggy clothes to hide her form as much as possible. Only after she took these measures did she begin to feel a little safer.

Now, the memory of Matthew’s beautiful blue eyes popped into her head. What was the matter with her? She turned from the mirror and went to sit on her unmade bed, wrapping her arms around herself. She’d seen attractive males in the past, but none had the effect that Matthew

had had on her. She acknowledged that he was the most attractive male she had ever seen, but this should not make any difference. In fact, she should feel fear of him as she had feared all the others. But in a rare moment of insight the answer came to her—Matthew was gay and therefore safe to look at, safe to appreciate. He was not interested in her.

This was why she had found him so disturbing and why he aroused such strange feelings in her. She was safe to fantasise because he was off limits. The realisation brought colour to her face; she was thinking about sex. That horrible, terrifying, three-letter word she had avoided thinking about for so long. She suddenly jumped up off the bed and ran back to the bathroom where she splashed cold water on her face and reached for her magic Valiums, just in time to stem off another panic attack. Then, she slowly made her way back to lie on the bed and she curled up in a fetal position. Visions of Matthew haunted her until the drug induced oblivion took over.

* * *

She was running. Her legs felt heavy and moved as though in slow motion. The fear permeated through her body and threatened to paralyse her limbs, but she knew she must keep running. Up the stairs she ran, toward her room. She would lock the door and climb out the window to the safety of the busy street below. But she must hurry. *Hurry!* She urged her legs as she heard the footsteps follow close behind her.

After what seemed an eternity, she reached the landing outside her room and went to open the door. Too late. Another body came up from behind and shoved her into the room with brute force. She was sent sprawling to the floor and fear choked her throat. She could not scream, nor could she move. She turned and looked up at the figure standing over her and begged softly through her tears for him to stop. But he was deaf to her pleading. He locked the door behind him and approached her crouched form as he unbuckled his belt. Then, miraculously, she was able to move again and tried to get up. This resulted in a stinging slap across her face that split her lip open. She tasted the warm blood as it trickled into her mouth and she was enveloped in a paralysing panic.

Nothing could stop him now, she knew as she lay on the cold, uncarpeted floor; tears running down her cheeks. She closed her eyes and begged death to come and claim her this very moment. But death did not hear her plea. Instead, the familiar cutting pain shot through her female parts as the organ entered her and started its horrific rhythm; hard, hurting and plundering. And when she thought she would split in half she felt the warm liquid run down her inner thigh. The deed was over and he left her immediately, closing the door gently behind him. He was satisfied ... until the next time.

Alex sat up in bed, drenched in sweat. It was daylight outside and the nightmare was just that—a nightmare. An evil entity that came for her once in a while, even after all these years. Tears of anger and rage rolled down her cheeks as she pictured the monster who took her innocence away when she had been seven years old. She realized these were the tears she had kept inside her for so long only to be brought to the surface because she had allowed herself to find a man attractive.

Thank God he was gay and she didn't have to confront her past right now. She knew she wasn't yet ready to face the ghost. She could stall a little longer. Her past was dead and would stay dead for now. The present was all she needed to worry about, and in the present there were no evil men out to get her; only the disturbing image of Matthew. But she had everything under

control, didn't she? Living alongside of him would be fine because his attentions were only for Steve.

The telephone on her bedside table rang and jolted her out of her thoughts. "Hello." She answered on the second ring.

"Good morning, Alex." It was Steve.

"Hi, Steve, how are you?" She felt normal again.

"Very well, thanks. Matthew and I have made our decision, and if you're still interested we'd like to offer you the room."

Her heart lifted at the news. "That's great! Thank you. I'm so glad! And I can help you with the gardening. I've got a bit of a green thumb, you know." She knew she was babbling in her happiness, but didn't care.

"I'll take you up on that." Steve laughed at the other end of the line. "So when do you want to move in?"

"Any time, really. I only have one suitcase and my laptop." She was hoping to move today if possible.

Steve seemed to read her mind. "If you can manage it today it would be best. We're at home today and we'll help you settle in. I go back to work in the morning."

"Yes, today's just fine." Alex felt relieved she didn't have to spend another night alone.

"Come around three this afternoon. We'll be home by then with a set of keys cut for you."

"I'll be there. Thank you, Steve. I look forward to living in a real home." The statement was out before she could do anything about it.

"I'm glad we can be a home to you, my dear," Steve said gently. "Well, I guess we'll see you this afternoon."

"Yes, thanks once again. I'll see you later." Alex hung up with a big smile on her face.

III

Steve set to work on his roses and felt a sense of happiness in the moment. He had long ago learned to appreciate the present and detach from the past without worrying about an uncertain future. Matthew always told him he had become very spiritual since the onset of his illness and he agreed that this was the case.

Since he'd discovered his spiritual self, he had found peace and acceptance of whatever was to come. He paused for a few seconds to take in the warmth of the sunshine in the bright blue sky and listen to the twittering of the birds in the trees nearby. He breathed in the fragrance of the plants and flowers around him and this communion with nature gave him a sense of being part of the whole. He closed his eyes to capture the moment a little longer and was brought out of his reverie when Matthew stepped out onto the courtyard. He was dressed in faded blue jeans and a crisp white cotton shirt that made his tan stand out as an attractive contrast to the whiteness of the garment and his piercing blue eyes.

Steve paused to take in the picture he made, standing there so unselfconscious. He was convinced Matthew did not realize just how very attractive he really was. This was part of his overall appeal. Matthew possessed a "little boy lost" look that people, both male and female, found totally irresistible.

"I'm off," Matthew announced. "Wish you would come."

Steve smiled faintly. "I don't think your mother wants to see me somehow."

Matthew frowned. "If she expects me to visit more often she'll have to accept my way of life."

"Give her time, Matthew."

"You mean nine years isn't long enough?" Matthew remarked sarcastically.

"Not for some people," Steve replied in his soft voice. He understood exactly how Matthew's parents felt about their son being gay; and he knew some people would never accept it. His own parents certainly hadn't.

"What are you going to do?" Matthew was worried about leaving Steve alone while he visited with his mother.

"I'll potter around the garden for a while. Then I'm meeting Gazza for lunch; and don't forget Alex arrives at three."

Matthew shot him a sullen look. "How could I forget? First my mother, and now a stranger intruding into our lives."

"Alex isn't an intruder, she's just a housemate. I'm sure she'll keep pretty much to herself." Steve did not understand why Matthew had taken such a dislike to Alex, but perhaps it was not Alex so much as the fact that they would have a new person living with them.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry. I'm sure she'll keep to herself. She's just a little weird though."

Steve's curiosity was aroused. "How do you mean?"

"Didn't you notice the way she was dressed the other day? Baggy jeans and a pullover three times the size of her. No sense of style."

Steve was amused at the description. Matthew was obsessed with fashion and he was so fastidious that before they went out anywhere he often changed outfits three or four times before he was satisfied. "Maybe she doesn't have your sense of style," he pointed out, grinning.

“I’ll say.”

“Well, don’t worry about it. Just because she has no dress sense doesn’t mean she’s weird.” Steve smiled.

“God, Steve, sometimes you really get on my nerves. You’re so ...” Matthew was at a loss for the right words.

“So what?” Steve prompted him.

“So ... accepting of things,” Matthew accused him.

“You mean tolerant, don’t you? But you know more than anyone else that my motto is ‘live and let live’; otherwise how do you think I put up with your throwing dirty socks and underwear all over the bedroom floor when you change?”

Matthew made a face. “I’ll see you this afternoon, and don’t overdo it with the gardening. You know how it tires you out,” he admonished.

“Nag, nag. If I didn’t know any better I’d say I was living with my mother,” Steve teased and rolled his eyes. “And heaven forbid that!”

Matthew departed and Steve’s mind wandered in contemplation. He thought of his own parents, now deceased, and how they had never accepted his way of life. Steve had had no siblings and, as the only child of a church minister and his devoted wife, the shock had been too much for his parents.

He had only just turned eighteen when he announced he was gay, and that had been the last time he had seen them. His father ordered him out of the house, calling him the devil’s spawn; and his mother had cried with disappointment at the fact that her only son would never give her grandchildren.

Steve had not attempted to justify his way of life, he had always believed in “live and let live”. So he packed his clothes and few belongings and moved in with his first and only lover at the time, an older man by the name of Patrick. He left his contact number with his parents, but they never called.

Ten years later, a lawyer contacted him to let him know that his parents had died. They had gone within a few days of each other. His father had suffered a fatal stroke and his mother died a week later from a heart attack. The only thing Steve was left in their will was the bible his father had used for Sunday services. The family home, monies and other effects had been left to the church.

Steve did not attend the funeral nor did he feel grief at his parents’ passing. He merely felt sadness for them and pity at the fact that they had shut him out of their lives. Then, shortly after his parents’ death, his partner succumbed to a long standing illness and Steve inherited the house in Surry Hills from Patrick, along with a small mortgage. He decided to keep the house where he had lived for so long and where Matthew later joined him, when they met about a year after Patrick’s death.

During the first couple of years they were together, Steve and Matthew took out a further loan to renovate the house and restore it to its present glory, and it was around this time that Steve discovered that not only had he inherited Patrick’s house, but also the disease that had killed him. He tested HIV positive shortly after he and Matthew commenced renovations. Steve was not surprised, in a way he had been expecting it; and he thanked God that from the time he became involved with Matthew they had practised safe sex. The thing with Patrick could not be helped. Steve knew that Patrick had been unaware of his condition when they had first become lovers, so he was not bitter toward his first love. He simply felt destiny had stepped in and taken a hand.

Matthew took the news well at the time and, although Steve encouraged him to leave for his own safety, he had stuck by him. Their love possessed a strong bond that no disease could ever break. So they had stayed together and gone on practising safe sex. That had been five years ago, and their mutual love had grown stronger since.

Steve was grateful that Matthew was with him, as he himself had been there for Patrick. His biggest consolation was that Matthew was healthy and would live on long after he left this world. This was the reason for his peaceful state of mind.

* * *

Matthew was not in a good mood as he drove his old and rather beat up Corolla to the luncheon appointment with his mother. Steve had mentioned buying a new car this year, but with his illness getting worse and their dwindling income it had not been possible. What he could not understand was Steve's determination that he should persist with his acting and forget about working on a more regular basis. He knew heaps of actors who held part-time jobs to make ends meet, but Steve argued that he should attend acting classes to keep up his craft and concentrate on attending auditions as much as possible.

Matthew made a mental note to drop in on his agent sometime the following day and see whether there was anything going. Brent had not yet contacted him over the audition he had attended the previous week.

To date, Matthew had been fairly lucky in obtaining work. He was usually selected for modelling jobs, but the work was not steady and this was not where his dreams lay. He wanted to do real acting on TV or film, but so far his only work consisted of commercials and several small roles in soapies. The audition he had attended the previous week was for a small part in an American movie that was being shot on location in Sydney, and he really wanted it. This could be the break he had been looking for. The previous year he had missed out on a role in a big American blockbuster that could have meant an opportunity for him to get into mainstream film, and he had been down in the dumps for weeks afterwards.

Steve kept urging him to go over to Los Angeles for a few months to try his luck, but Matthew was not prepared to leave him behind. So the dream was put on hold. In any case, with the increasing number of American films being shot in Australia in recent years Matthew figured he had a good chance at making a name for himself locally.

As he daydreamed about his future, he steered the car automatically toward his parents' home in Darling Point. He veered right into winding Yarranabee Road and stopped outside a large Spanish style villa by the waterfront surrounded by a myriad of exotic plants and trees and enclosed within high black wrought iron gates. Matthew's mood was no better now than when he'd left home, especially as he was about to face his mother.

Two young females walking past on the sidewalk stared at him with admiring eyes, but he took no notice of them. He was used to getting looks like this and it irritated him that people seemed to regard him as some sort of beautiful object. This had happened to him all his life, even as a small child, and he remembered being "put on show" by his mother when he was a young boy. He had done modeling even back then and learned that most humans who came into contact with him only wanted to get close because of the way he looked. As a result, he had come to hate his image when he saw himself in the mirror and had grown up totally unselfconscious about his appearance.

Matthew was not a vain person even though he acknowledged he was attractive, but he did not think he was that good looking and he couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. In time, he had learned to identify those around him who responded because of his looks and he had stayed away from their superficiality. And then he had met Steve. His dear, gentle, loving Steve, who did not judge and who saw deeply into his soul and took him under his wing, away from the shallow kind of world in which he had grown up. This was the world of the rich—his parents' world—a world of high power and social events where only the crème-de-la-crème were seen. It was a world that Matthew had shunned and one where, due to his mother, he was still remembered as “straight”. In his mother's world, there was no place for homosexuals.

The young girls kept turning around, still snatching a look at him as he made his way to the gate and rang the security doorbell, but Matthew ignored them.

“Davis residence,” said a heavily accented voice on the intercom.

“My lovely Conchita, it is I, your favourite man.” Matthew teased the Davis' Filipino housekeeper.

“Oh, Mr. Matthew!” was the delighted reply as she buzzed him in.

She was waiting on the doorstep to the main entrance when he appeared through the dense foliage of the front garden. Conchita was a diminutive woman in her fifties with chocolate brown skin and a wide smile that was warm and welcoming. “Mr. Matthew, it's been so long. How are you?”

Matthew reached out and kissed her on the cheek. “Conchita, my life's not the same without you.” He beamed a happy look at her, feeling his dark mood lift.

“You are such a flirt.” She blushed with pleasure. Conchita had fallen in love with her “Mr. Matthew” on the day she'd first met him as a four year old. “Mrs. Davis is in the lounge waiting for you.”

“Thanks, Conchita.” Matthew entered the house.

“And Mr. Matthew,” she called out after him. “Next time, don't stay away for so long.”

His heart warmed toward her. “I'll come just for you, my dear Conchita.” Matthew left her smiling at the front door and made his way along a hallway filled with contemporary paintings and sculptures, until he paused outside heavy wooden double doors. He knocked and walked into a large, modern lounge room decorated in blacks and whites with expansive windows overlooking a wide balcony and the glory of the harbour.

“Hello, mother,” he said to the slim and elegant figure of Dora Davis.

“Darling, you made it.” Dora smiled at her beautiful son from behind the bar, where she was pouring a scotch on the rocks. “Anything to drink?”

“A Pellegrino, thanks.” Matthew threw himself down on an immaculate white leather sofa and watched his mother as she prepared the drinks. She looked very good for her age.

At fifty one, Dora still retained the classical good looks she had passed onto her son. She was tall and willowy slim, like a catwalk model. Her hair was platinum blonde and she had the same piercing blue eyes as Matthew. She was dressed in white silk slacks and a shimmering pale blue shirt that accentuated her beauty.

She joined Matthew with their drinks and took a seat on a sofa opposite his. “Darling, you've been a long time coming,” she chided softly and had a sip of her scotch.

“You could've come to visit me for once.” Matthew hated going through this routine. It was the same conversation he had with her every time he came to visit.

“You know how it is,” she said. “I've been busy with my charity work, plus your father—”

“How *is* father?” Matthew cut through the pretence of his mother’s lame excuses.

“He’s fine. We’re both fine.” Dora’s tone sounded a pitch higher than usual and Matthew knew she was lying. “You’re looking well, my dear. How is your acting work?”

Matthew indulged her by not asking anything further about his father. “Nothing major’s come up.”

“Well, they just don’t know what they’re missing. You’re so good looking; can’t they see that?” she said with indignation in her voice.

Matthew sighed. “Looks aren’t everything. So why did you call me over, anyway?”

Dora was momentarily taken aback by the sudden question. “Can’t I ask my son to visit me?” The high pitched tone again.

“Only when you want something,” was the rejoinder.

“Really, Matthew, sometimes you sound just like your father,” she admonished him. “But now that you mention it, there is something I have been meaning to ask you.”

Matthew waited patiently. If anyone should have been an actor in this family, it was his mother.

“The Taylors are hosting a big fashion event and they asked after you. I thought you’d ask their daughter to partner you.”

Matthew sighed with irritation. “Mother, when are you going to face reality? I’m not interested in Marjory or anyone else. I’m in a relationship already.”

“With a man!” she exclaimed, exasperated.

“Do we have to go through this again?” Matthew wished he had never come. He knew this would happen.

“Darling, how can you waste yourself like this when you could have any woman in the world?” Dora insisted. “Besides, your...uhm...partner, he’s dying. Doesn’t that worry you?”

Matthew’s face became flushed with anger. “I’ll always regret the day I told you about Steve’s illness. I thought my own mother would understand.” He rose from the sofa, slamming his glass on the coffee table, and started to make for the door. “I’ll see you around, mother. Say hi to father, if he’s interested in knowing I’m still alive.”

“Wait, darling, wait!” Dora ran to him. “Do you need money?”

A look of dislike crossed his face. He could not believe his own mother would be this cold and calculating, and trying to buy him. “Save my father’s money. I’m sure he can well spend it on his latest girlfriend.” He knew this would hurt her, but she deserved it.

“You leave him out of this.” Dora was suddenly on the verge of tears.

Matthew’s conscience pricked at him. “I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean it. It’s just that ... Well, it doesn’t matter. I have to go. I’ll call you sometime.” He opened the door.

Dora clutched at his sleeve. “Matthew, there’ll be interesting people at the fashion do. I hear some big American film director will be there.”

Matthew shook his head in exasperation. “Save it, please. Even the Queen of England couldn’t get me to go, unless of course, Steve comes too.”

“You take delight in hurting me.” Dora released his sleeve.

Matthew’s voice came back full of sarcasm. “And of course you don’t.” With this said he left her standing at the door and slammed out of the house.

* * *

Alex arrived on the dot of three with her suitcase and laptop. The front door was opened by Matthew. "So you're here," he said by way of greeting, his mood still affected by the earlier encounter with his mother.

Alex did not know how to reply to this. Thankfully, before she could say anything Steve appeared. "Alex, welcome. Please, come in. Matthew will take your suitcase upstairs." He ushered her inside the house with Matthew following and carrying in her suitcase. Alex looked after him in confusion as he started up the stairs.

"Don't worry about him." Steve sensed her feelings. "He had a bad day. He didn't mean to be rude."

Alex produced a weak smile in response. Matthew's reception had hurt. She had been looking forward to moving in and the last thing she wanted was to get off on the wrong foot.

"Come on through to the kitchen. Just dump your computer anywhere. We'll make a cup of tea."

Dear Steve, Alex thought—the peacemaker. "That'll be nice, thank you."

The kitchen was bathed in the bright light that came in through the windows and the French doors leading to the back garden. Alex looked out. "I see you've been working in the garden again. You pruned that tree over there." She pointed to a plum tree standing near the back fence.

Steve smiled, but before he could reply Matthew entered the kitchen. "Steve works too hard and he'll wear himself out. Perhaps, we can give him a hand sometime."

Alex assumed this was Matthew's way of telling her that he was sorry for his surly welcome and she felt better immediately. "Definitely," she said brightly. "I was just telling Steve the other day that I have a bit of a green thumb." Matthew smiled and suddenly the world was a much better place.

"You're on then," he said.

"Matthew hasn't got a single green finger on his body, let alone a thumb, Alex. But he makes great tea," Steve stated bluntly, but in good humour, and Matthew got the hint.

"All right, all right. I'll make the tea. You two sit down and chatter away."

This, they did. They sat at the kitchen table and Alex recounted some of her travel adventures at Steve's request. But it was obvious both men found her tale of old Harry really interesting because by the time she finished talking about her old shearing friend, they became aware that the sun was setting and the kitchen was enveloped in the advancing dusk of early evening.

"My God, I talked my head off and wasted your whole afternoon. I'm so sorry," Alex exclaimed, noticing the time.

"Don't be silly. We had fun. Your stories are really great," Steve said sincerely.

"Yes, I love to hear about the outback. Can you believe it? I've lived in Sydney all my life and the only time I ever travelled, was overseas. It's funny how we take for granted the beauty we have at home," Matthew observed.

"Well, I'm glad you enjoyed listening to me. I generally don't talk my head off, but you two have been a wonderful audience." Alex smiled, feeling happy.

"And your wonderful audience will cook dinner for you in your honour," Steve announced, and before she could protest, "But don't worry, we'll let you do the dishes so you feel needed."

Alex laughed. "It's a deal."

“Why don’t you go up and get settled now? I left some towels and linen in your room. We’ll eat in about one hour.”

“You look beat. I’ll cook,” Matthew said as soon as Alex was out of earshot.

“I must admit I overdid it in the garden this morning,” Steve said gratefully.

“Go lie down. I’ll call you when dinner’s ready.”

“Okay,” Steve agreed and left.

Matthew looked after him as he disappeared down the hallway. His biggest fear was that Steve would succumb again like last time and would have to go to hospital. Matthew didn’t think he could cope if anything happened to him.