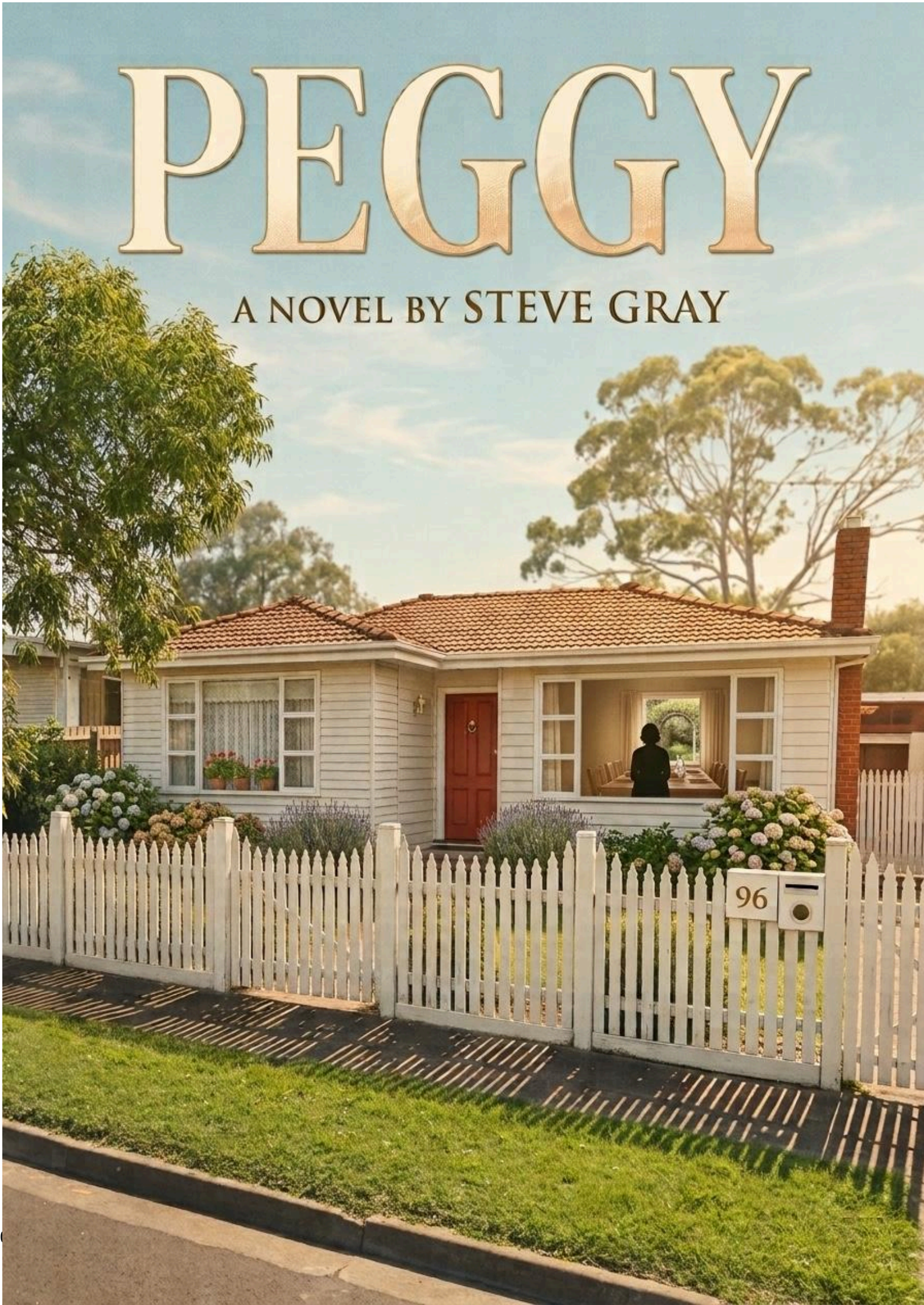
PEGGY

A NOVEL BY STEVE GRAY



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Chapter One

Arthur sat in the cab of his HiLux ute, the engine giving one last shuddering rattle before falling silent. He didn't get out straight away, instead, he rested his scarred, dirt-stained knuckles against the steering wheel and stared through the passenger window across to 96 Marigold Street, it was a service road to a busy highway across a grass verge.

Many years ago, this house had a pulse. The weatherboards were a crisp, defiant cream, and the lawn was trimmed close, back when Jack Hill still had the knees and the will to push a Victa. But the soul of the place had always been through the windows. Peggy Hill used to keep those roller blinds snapped up high and the glass crystal clear.

The windows were referred to as 'picture windows' back in the day, smaller windows to one side that could be opened to let air in and the main central pane of glass,

was big. They were expensive, but they allowed a fantastic view out to the front of the house. When it was first built the view out the front, across a main road would have had less traffic and fewer houses across the road, that was a later development.

Arthur remembered that Peggy would sit there at the dining table, a silhouette past the lace curtains she never liked, pulled back, watching the street like a sentry guarding a border that had already been breached. Even before the events that changed everything, she sat there.

Arthur somehow thought that it was fitting that one of the last big jobs of his Handyman career would be working at Peggy's house, with various jobs done here over many years. And now as retirement loomed large, once the jobs are done here, that should be the last of the place and apart from some other small jobs, Arthur would finish up his long career serving the local community.

The house now looked like a corpse that had been left out too long, grey, withered, missing its soul, windows marred by dust, settled into place by raindrops scattered across the once pristine glass. The gutters were choked on one side with leaf litter, sagging like heavy eyelids. The blinds, those same blinds, were rolled down now, faded and frayed in places. They had seen better days.

Arthur reached into the centre console and pulled out the small ring of keys Christine, Peggy's daughter, had given him at the hospital. She barely even looked at him when she handed them over. She stayed focused, her movements clinical, her face a mask of professional exhaustion that hid a thirty plus year old spirited soul. She was there as her Brother passed away, she felt a sense of duty to be there, more for her mum than her Brother Gary.

Drugs had ruled his life for a while now, and finally this last hit was just that. She was so annoyed, it had only been two years since mum passed away and now her brother. Christine knew that it would thankfully mark the end of police calls at all hours, Gary wanting to be bailed out for various misdemeanours and altercations.

Christine recalled the fun they had as youngsters, then the sibling rivalry, followed by the abuse meted out by their father. It was hard to tell when that might happen, less in the later years but still an issue. Peggy told the pair, 'Your father doesn't know his own strength.' It didn't make things right but the kids would always have to be aware.

Christine looked up, as Arthur arrived in the doorway of the Hospital room and greeted him with a half smile. ‘Just make it sellable, Arthur,’ she whispered. ‘Strip the wallpaper in the back room, paint it white, erase it. You’ve been there a heap of times, you’ll know what to do. Mum always trusted you to do the right thing, so, you know, I’m expecting the same.’

Arthur nodded respectfully in agreement and after brief condolences, he left, keys in hand, sensing the weight that Christine had to bear at that time. It was a few days before he could get there, down the main road, into the service lane and parked out the front.

When he climbed out of the ute, his knees popping, a grim duet with the protest of his rusted door hinge. He picked up his main tool bag with all the basics in it. Well worn from years of use.

Arthur remembered a Saturday back in the late 90’s. He’d been over to fix a badly leaking tap in the kitchen. He’d looked out the kitchen window and saw Jack out there in the backyard, ‘tiddly’, after four or five beers, tossing a cricket ball at Gary and a young teenage Christine.

It looked like a family at play, until you saw the kids’ shoulders, hunched up to their ears, bracing for the impact of the cricket ball. Peggy had been standing right next to Arthur, drying a plate.

‘He’s just letting off steam, Arthur,’ she’d whispered, her voice as thin as tissue paper. She then sighed, ‘Better the backyard than the kitchen.’

Sarah was four years old, ‘attached’ to Peggy’s leg, one thumb in her mouth, her other hand holding Peggy’s dress, she was the youngest, and to Jack she was the ‘apple of his eye.’ Arthur knew that Jack had a ‘reputation’ for treating his eldest two harshly, but out of professional courtesy he knew better than to upset a client by saying anything about it.

He would have sleepless moments about it, ‘Is it okay to see a parent abuse a kid? Or their partner for that matter. Bruises on the arm or leg, all fobbed off as ‘Jack letting off steam’ or ‘I bumped my arm on the door.’ Arthur reconciled it as ‘nothing to see here.’

There were other times, differently difficult times, like when Sarah went missing twenty one years later on Saturday the tenth of October 2015. She was twenty five. She was meant to catch up with friends and would often hitch hike to Torquay. This day she walked down to the Torquay road at ten thirty in the morning, but then vanished.

Peggy's smile, although at times strained by family 'things', was now gone after this event. She would sit now for hours on end pondering the situation. At least in the past she was more active in the community. Friends didn't come any more, they didn't know what to say or do. In the first few months Peggy wanted to only be by the phone, in case Sarah called, it didn't happen.

Jack took it hard, the 'apple of his eye.' was gone. He then often said, 'A big part of me has gone, I don't know where she is, I don't know what happened, I want a phone call, a picture, anything, but there's nothing.' His health declined, some suggested that he died of a broken heart from that one event.

Arthur remembered arriving at the house to do some work, Peggy's eyes had remained fixed on the street, looking for the daughter who never came home, the one who hitchhiked into a vacuum and left the family to implode in her wake.

Even years later, he had been painting the white picket fence at the front of the house, the event that altered the family forever had been long gone, he could see Peggy's silhouette, same spot, every day for years. Lost, tormented by the daughter who never came home, somehow it made him breathless just thinking about it.

Now, Arthur reached the front porch. The timber front porch groaning a little under his work boots. He felt less like a handyman and more like an undertaker. He had a rough idea of what he'd find inside: the smell of Gary's stale cigarettes, the ghost of Peggy's peppermint tea, and the deep, permanent dents in the hallway plaster where Jack's 'steam' had left its mark, let alone anything created by Gary.

He slid the key into the lock. It was stiff, resisting him, as if the house itself wanted to keep its secrets buried in the dust and long grass, somehow vague notional symbols of its discontent.

The lock gave way with a metallic snap that echoed down the hallway, as Arthur pushed the door open, the air was heavy, thick with the scent of unwashed clothes, old

cooking smells, and the sharp, chemical tang of Gary's final months. It was the smell of a life lived in the dark.

Arthur reached for the light switch, but nothing happened, power disconnected. He sighed, stepped into the hallway, all the doors were closed, he opened the front bedroom door, that let some light in, he then entered the bedroom and opened the roller blind.

As he headed back towards the hallway he remembered some of the many small jobs he had done here in the past. Adjusting doors, fixing stubborn door handles and latches. He turned at the doorway, and looked across the room, the old dressing table that used to be against the far wall was now gone.

Peggy had that table set out immaculately, hand mirror, jewellery box, lace doilies, hair brush, He found the table later on out in the garage, one leg broken and a scratched table surface. The mirror on the back cracked with half of it missing.

All that was left in the room was the old double bed. Peggy had told Christine that there was nothing wrong with the bed, even though Christine had suggested that she get a new one ages ago. Arthur looked at it, saggy and dusty, straight to the tip.

Arthur turned and faced the hallway, opening the other doors on the left, to let more light in as he moved through.

The hallway was a graveyard of 'pipe dreams.' Stacks of yellowed newspapers Gary had collected for 'research,' half-dismantled electronics he'd sworn he'd fix and sell, and the subtle greasy stains on the wall where he'd leaned his head while nodding off. No one was really sure why Gary set up his 'office' in the hallway, but there you go, sometimes there was no rhyme or reason, Arthur thought it might be because there's no windows for people to look in on him. Such is the power of paranoia.

Arthur's boots crunched on something, he looked down. A glass drug pipe, shattered. 'Damn shame, Gary,' Arthur muttered, his voice sounding thin in the hollow house.

The bathroom, off the hallway between the bedroom and the kitchen, had seen much better days, nothing broken, just barely cleaned during Gary's time 'living' here the past few years. Arthur opened the mirror clad wall cabinet, there were some bits and pieces

there, an old Gillette razor, a shaving brush, some pain killers in a dusty box and ear buds sitting upright in a small chipped, white porcelain bowl.

He made his way to the dining room. This was Peggy's 'station.' The table was still there, though one leg was propped up by folded pieces of cardboard, it was missing a wheel. The wheel was located later in the second Kitchen drawer.

He stood for a long moment exploring the silence, then remembered Peggy sitting here, her hands wrapped around a mug of peppermint tea, eyes fixed on the road out front, waiting for a daughter who was never coming back and a husband who always seemed to be coming home too loud, too angry, too unsettled, a bitter savagely broken soul after Sarah's disappearance.

Then there was the in between times, then the times after Jack passed, she would sit and have coffee, then the morning paper would arrive, she would read it front to back, then carefully folded it and put it in the kitchen. She would prepare breakfast and then sit back in the same spot and eat. Then sit and watch, after five to ten minutes the breakfast things were cleared to the kitchen and washed up, then left to drain on the side of the sink.

Sometimes she would stand at that kitchen window and watch the birds land on the clothesline. She might then reminisce about the good and bad times she witnessed out in the yard. Then she would return to the dining room table and sit until lunchtime.

Arthur went to the dining room window and pulled the cord on the roller blinds. The blinds shrieked as they rose, letting in a jagged slice of morning sun. The dust particles danced violently in the light, revealing the true state of the room. The lace curtains needed to be removed, but for now he simply pushed them open as far as they would go.

That's when he saw it, a tiny detail. He wasn't at all sure why it stood out, but it did. On the left hand side of the edge of the bottom windowsill, there was a small, intentional scratch in the timber reveal. It wasn't a random scuff from Gary's blustery chaos. It was a neat, carved arrow pointing downward toward the floorboards.

Arthur knelt down, his old joints protesting. He cleared away a pile of junk mail addressed to *'The Occupier'* and ran his fingers over the hardwood boards. One of them felt different, not loose, exactly, but not nailed down with the same permanence as the others. It was also shorter in length than the other boards, so that was a bit of a giveaway.

He reached into his tool bag, pulled out a broad sharp chisel, and wedged it into the tongue-and-groove joint. With a gentle levering motion, the board popped up.

Underneath, nestled in the decades of dust, wasn't just a wad of cash, which is what Arthur half expected. It was a plastic Tupperware container, sealed tight, resting on its edge. A bit dusty but it protected the contents. Arthur peeled back the lid to reveal the contents.

Inside sat a thick stack of fifty-dollar notes. At first Arthur thought it was a stash of cash that Gary had left behind, but no, the container was too dusty for that, he soon thought that it was possibly Peggy's 'getaway' money that she'd never had the courage to use. There was also a small box, lined with blue velvet. Arthur opened it. In it was a silver locket, the kind a young girl might wear, missing its chain.

Inside that was a tiny grainy photo of Sarah, smiling at a side show carnival somewhere, and a folded-up slip of paper with a phone number written in Peggy's elegant, shaky script.

Beside the number, Peggy had written: *'In case Christine forgets why I stayed.'* Arthur looked back in the hole, nothing else left to see, he then put the floor board piece back in place. He placed the contents on the dining table, wondering what to do next. He headed out to the kitchen to survey the place a bit more.

Arthur looked out at the backyard through the grime-streaked glass. He saw the Hills Hoist closeline, rusted and tilted like a crooked cross, he then noted the long grass he would later have to mow. He then thought that Peggy hadn't been 'sneaky' just to spite Gary or hide her money, it had been there long before Gary's drug issues.

He looked at the stack of cash. It was enough to cover the repairs Christine wanted, with plenty left over. But as Arthur looked at the blue box, he wondered if the money was the least important thing Peggy had hidden. Memories, items of value, he didn't know just yet, but he would keep his 'wits about him' as he cleared things out.

Arthur had always been the most honest person with all of his clients, and so the money and locket would be left for Christine to advise him on, and the locket with the phone number? No, that was for Christine to handle as well. She had said she would drop

in at some stage to check progress but wanted to be sure things were well underway before she did that.

Arthur put the items in a kitchen cupboard out of view, his mind half wondering if he should take the money with him, just in case someone decided to break in and check out the place. No, his head got the better of him and the items tucked out of the way, out of sight out of mind. One thing was sure, Arthur had to keep a keen eye on things, who knew what else might be hidden.

The door closed and double checked with a solid pull on the handle, thoughts then went to the back door, yep that had been locked, walking out, Arthur's mind then turned to better times at the house, when Peggy would wave him good bye, then thank him for another job well done. He often went away with a feeling of satisfaction and no job was too small for long lasting customers.

A check of the letterbox, a quick clear out of the junk mail. He turned and smiled, there was lot’s to be done and this was just the start.

Chapter Two

Arthur returned soon after the first visit to scope out the works further, grass to be mown soon, Arthur got a mate to do that, he was too old to mow heavy grass any more. Then there was the cleaning of the windows, inside and out, each one then opened to let in fresh air, notes taken about which ones needed to be attended to for sticking and any dry rot.

The garage had some items in it, Arthur was careful sorting all that out. The lock on the side door needed some ‘careful persuasion’ to get it open. Arthur hated putting a spray lubricant into locks as it gums them up, and if you did, basically they can become rather useless. His trusty graphite container was empty and he was reluctant to get more, this little container had lasted fifteen or so years.

Lock open, the folding main door was now able to be opened, it needed some work as well. Light flooded in, there were some long grass ‘runners’ that had grown across the floor, they were soon ripped out. There were a few boxes of dusty items, some old tools, but nothing of value, these were cheap two dollar tools, a small rusty saw, a few screwdrivers and the like.

On the timber garage frame there was an old dog lead, it had clearly been there for a long while, Christine later filled Arthur in, it belonged to their old dog Harry, he had passed away many years back, ‘Harry was very much mum’s dog, he was always old to me, and finally one day he didn’t make it through to the end of the day, Gary and I were quite young, but dad hung up the lead and vowed,’ ‘We would not get another dog, any mention of it upsets mum too much, so no more.’ Christine said, ‘nah throw it out.’

There were other boxes, a small one on a very dusty bench with an assortment of rusty screws, a shelf under the bench revealed an old manual for a HR Holden. It looked like it hadn’t seen the light of day for a long while. Arthur thought it probably hadn’t been opened much, if at all. He recalled Peggy telling him one day that Jack had bought this car, it was top of the line in its day and it sparkled. He loved it so much, the first few weeks there were short trips to all sorts of places, a picnic here, an excursion there.

Petrol was cheap back then so trips out on a Sunday afternoon were simple, and cost effective fun. The beach, well they didn’t go there for fear of the sand getting into the car. But all sorts of other places were explored, the Botanic gardens in Melbourne, even a trip to the zoo. Christine and Gary marvelled at how this new car meant a new dad, Jack never did or said anything bad or even slightly abusive while out in the car. He called it ‘Helen Robertson.’ That’s what he wanted the ‘HR’ moniker to stand for.

Jack would wash the car at the drop of a hat, Christine wanted to help and it took some time before Jack allowed her to do that, after all it was his pride and joy. He would say to Christine, ‘This is my car, I don’t come into your room and ask to wash your toys, mum might wash your clothes and all that but I’m not here to do that either. So this is pretty special.’

Jack finally gave in and let her wash the car months later, he instructed her on how to do every detail on the car, inside and out. Jack would call out, ‘CHRISTINE, Have you washed Helen yet?’ He would have a giggle at that.

Back in the garage, there were some simple, very rusty, garden implements, secateurs, and a small tree saw. Arthur thought that was funny there was only the scraggly fruit tree at the end of the backyard and a narrow garden bed across the front of the house, then another one down the left hand side of the side fence with some plants that barely needed any attention.

Arthur's mate Alex, turned up to mow the grass, there was some conversation about what he was doing in the next couple of days, Arthur needed to get some rubbish to the tip, then prepare and paint out the rooms. Alex had a few days he could commit to, the grass growing season being long gone, so that meant the main garden work he did, had slowed down.

Alex arrived two days later, old broken blinds, various remnants and dusty boxes etc from the garage all went into his trailer, he was soon back, ready to help with other things in the house.

Arthur gave him a bit of a rundown on the history of the house and his connection to it and the family. Alex listened with interest, his morning coffee being the thing he would measure time by in instances like this, he did his best to not let the contents get too cold. He was thankful that Arthur kept the stories brief.

They then started on washing down the walls, preparing to fix up the ‘dents’ in the plaster caused by a bout or two of ‘toxic masculinity,’ and then painting in a neutral light off white colour. ‘Antique White USA’ a standard colour which Arthur had applied to many walls over the years.

Each day the windows would be opened, then paint applied, radio on in the background, hits from the nineteen eighties, seemed to be the only music Arthur's radio knew. Alex didn’t care too much, it was more background noise to him.

The interior was painted and that took a while. The focus then went to the outside, large areas of peeling paint. The information given by Christine was to repair things and paint in ANY colour other than what it had been. Alex was given the task of cleaning out the gutters, some rusty areas needed fixing, and a plumber was called in for that task.

Arthur thought it strange in a way, that he had only found one ‘stash’ of items hidden away. He had a notion there would be something, somewhere else. His mind wandered, Alex had a question on a minor issue, that was soon sorted, then Arthur's mind headed off in a different direction.

It would be one of those two am waking moments that caused Arthur to have an ‘Aha,’ moment. As a kid he had a hidey hole as he called it, it was simply a corner of the family’s linen press in the hallway, tucked around the left hand side, he could put things away from prying eyes, there was a six inch recess on the hinge side of the door.

The next day at Peggy’s place he went straight to the ‘hidey hole space’ Yep he was right, there were two small boxes, one on top of the other, then a third one on the top shelf in a similar position. These all went to the dining table for looking at, but first he wanted to check other areas that were similar.

Even though the house was built in the early sixties it had built-in wardrobes in two of the three bedrooms, Jack was in real estate back then, and knew a thing or two about ‘desirable items’ in houses, built in robes was the big thing in luxury homes back then. Why the third bedroom didn’t have a built-in wardrobe was a bit of a mystery but it seemed to be a thing that Arthur had noted in other similar, older homes over the years.

Arthur found a small box on the right hand side of the main bedroom wardrobe. It was a small box, the type that jewellers put rings in.

Something caused Arthur to open it straight away, there were two rings in it, an engagement and a wedding ring. A small piece of paper in the bottom had a name on it ‘Ellie’. Arthur thought, ‘Oh well there’s another thing for Christine to sort out.’

A message came from Christine a few minutes later on his phone, ‘I’ve decided that the front fence needs to change, I’m after ideas please. It will need to have two gates in the driveway.’

Arthur thinks, ‘Well this job looks like it will go on for a while yet! So much for retirement.’ He had a few ideas for the fence, he measured out the length. Then recalled that he had painted it once, a few gruelling days in the hot sun trying to keep cool, it was a hot lead up to Christmas and the job was to make the place look good, ‘Family are coming over,’ said Peggy. She sat in the dining room and appeared to watch every moment.

Arthur took a look at the existing posts on the fence, some of these were rotted at ground level, so it would all need to go. He took a look up and down the street at other fences, a few different things showed up, brick, low timber, ranch style.

On his phone he had a range of example pictures for moments like this. He thought a tall slat type fence with gaps could look good, it would keep the traffic noise out to some degree and provide some privacy for a new owner. A few images were sent off, yep she liked the slat fence idea, it would be about 900 mm high.

Arthur wondered if Alex would do the painting? It was then decided to set the fence back from the path so a garden bed could be put in there, Christine preferred a softer look, especially with a high fence.

Alex turned up to help with some more maintenance items. The pair got talking, Arthur had a few more stories, he mentioned that Jack had worked hard over the years, and due to his involvement in real estate it was considered that he would have accumulated a nice sum of money, commissions and the like. Back in the day a fair bit of cash went back and forth.

To Arthur's knowledge most of it went into the bank, but there was some conjecture that there was some cash hanging about somewhere. Alex mentioned some of the older clients he worked for didn’t like the banks, due to the depression way back in the nineteen thirties. Some had tins buried in their backyards, a sealed lid with the tin wrapped in plastic could last a long time.

They looked at each other and Alex mentioned, ‘Perhaps someone with a metal detector could be useful?’ A phone call to a mate and Arthur had the ideal person for the job. Tom was a dab hand at prospecting and bragged about his gold finds on the goldfields of central Victoria.

A scan of the backyard turned up some rusty scraps of metal and other bits and pieces, but there at the back of the garage dead in the middle of the back wall was a solid signal, they dug and yes, they found a tin, wrapped in a rotting piece of hessian, it was an old Milo tin, barely any of the label left to identify it.

On opening it, there was about one thousand dollars in old twenty dollar bills, probably from the first printing of Aussie dollars back in nineteen sixty six.

There was a note in the bottom, faded a fair bit from when it was first written, ‘For Sarah, to help with her first house deposit.’ This raised questions, were the other siblings given a house deposit, If so where were they hidden? Arthur then thought, they were older, their deposits were probably handed out already.

Tom scoured the rest of the yards with his metal detection gear, no further ‘treasure’ was found.

For some reason Arthur then remembered that Peggy, when she was in a good mood, would sometimes talk in riddles, it was a fun thing for her. One that Arthur recalled was, ‘What's red and smells like blue paint? Answer: Red paint. That’s when he was painting the front fence. She mentioned that she liked to challenge the kids with riddles, some she made up but most she found in a cheap book of riddles from a newsagents back in the day.

At Easter time she would find places to hide their Easter eggs, and then to find them they had to figure out the answer to a riddle. She said it made Easter so much more fun than just scattering the eggs about.

Arthur now wondered if there was some way that she had left behind a riddle to hide the rest of the money, that is, IF she knew there was money. He also knew that her son

Gary was hungry for money to feed his drug habits, if he was able to figure out the riddle, presuming there was just one, then he would have taken it for sure.

Peggy had told Arthur she was worried about Gary, even from a young age he was a sneaky child, he could hide things, steal from the shops, usually small things like a chocolate bar, and all the time he never got caught by the people he stole from. He told her about it one day after a visit to the pub and then around to her house to ask for money. She was mortified, but aimed not to show it.

When he was under the influence of a few drinks, she would say to him, 'I've only got twenty dollars on me.' She would pull out her purse and hand it over. Depending on how drunk he was he would ask about the 'big money', Peggy never let on.

Arthur recalled that he was always paid in cash, Peggy would have him in for a cup of tea at the end of a job, then say, I'll be back in a second, then would turn up with a wad of cash depending on how much she had to pay him. He never asked about money and where it came from. He knew her to be an astute woman and would have it stashed away in a good spot. He knew it didn't come from the front room 'hidey hole', unless she had taken the cash out earlier… There were a number of possibilities.

The three small boxes from the other 'hidey hole' didn't show much, an article on real estate agent of the year carefully folded, it was about Jack's efforts that year in the category of regional agent of the year, it was based on the number of sales contracts done, rather than financial value. There were some war medals in that box as well.

One of the others had a false bottom that held, you guessed it, more cash, folded neatly, a false cover put on top and then some jewellery, some rings, a bracelet and a fob watch with a gold fob chain. Judging from the weight of these Arthur thought they may be of some value.

The last box had a piece of paper with a poetic letter and a miniature book, titled, The Life and Times of Mistress Mole. The poem read.

My Dearest Peggy,

They say two souls can be born worlds apart, speaking different tongues and trading in different lives, never knowing the other even draws breath. Back then, we were just strangers under different stars, unaware that we were the perfect fit, a match just waiting for a proper introduction.

But the universe has a way of working in the background, doesn't it? There are doors of opportunity and doors that can lead to misery.

Without us even trying, we were guided through the noise and the chaos of the world, being pulled to the same quiet spot. We weren't looking for a map; we were just following a gut feeling, a silent tug at the heart that knew exactly where it was going.

Then, the world finally narrowed down to a single door we both opened.

In that sudden, beautiful collision on a crowded tram, everything changed. Before I'd even had a proper squint at your face, I knew I'd found home. It wasn't just a lucky break, or a random run-in. It was the moment the dust settled and everything finally made sense.

That's not just a fluke, love, that's us.

Jack.

Arthur thought about the house in a different way now, was there more to be found?

Chapter Three

More things were taken out of the house, the old refrigerator had been turned off since Gary had passed away, Christine emptied it way back then, and propped the door open, she had pulled it most of the way out to be able to turn it off, then pushed it back in,

she instructed Arthur to get rid of it, ‘get a scrap guy to take it away, along with the washing machine.

That’s when things became interesting. On the back wall to the left of the power point. There was a piece of paper, there were two riddles and a nine digit number written on it.

It was uncovered when Arthur and Alex removed the fridge, the pair stood transfixed on the riddle for a while then wheeled the fridge out along with the washing machine. They explored a number of options and wondered if it was a clue to something big, or even small.

I wear a crown of white stone, yet I am not a king.
I have a heart of gold, long dug from deep within.
I once rode on wheels of iron, now I roam for fun.
I am home to the dragon, underneath the Aussie sun.

What am I?

Then…

One arrow is not enough, three arrows would be too many.
You need a keen eye, you need to keep low.
Don’t fall asleep, don’t get discouraged, look up.
But if you follow my clues, you will not be blue.

Arthur explained to Alex that the first ‘stash’ he found was indicated by an arrow on the front window timber reveal, so perhaps there was another one in another room somewhere? Alex suggested that it would be too simple to put it in a similar spot, so look into the clues a bit more, ‘Keep low, don't fall asleep…’ A bedroom perhaps and somewhere down low.

The pair searched the bedrooms. In the middle bedroom built in robe, there were some skirting boards which had been painted orange at some stage. That turned out to be Christine’s doing as a teen, she wanted a splash of orange, and that was as far as she got. Peggy put a stop to that, she said ‘Father will be FURIOUS!’ Father was never told.

Arthur pointed out that orange was the opposite of blue on the colour scale so that could be a clue. It took a while, as there was nothing obvious. Alex stood up, the pair had been on their knees looking for some clue. He then said to Arthur, ‘In the clues, it said, look up.’ Arthur flipped on to his back so he could look up. There it was, another tupperware box attached to the underside of the bottom shelf, it was a big flat box, there was a pencil arrow drawn on the wall below it, it was small, but it was there.

The lid came off and fifty dollar bills that were once taped together with paper bands around them, had given way over time, so money rained down on Arthur. There were thousands of dollars. A good thing that Gary never found this stash. He would have had a much shorter life, wait perhaps that could have been a good thing?

The cash was bundled up and counted, a phone call to Christine, this amount of money was too much to simply hide in a kitchen cupboard. In total there was thirty thousand dollars. Christine nearly fainted at her end of the phone. She gave Arthur a bank account number to put the funds into.

On going to the bank the teller said, ‘These old original notes in good condition were worth WAY MORE than fifty dollars per note.’ A quick search on the teller's computer showed some of them could be worth $2000 with some fetching up to $6000. She suggested that he chat to a person who dealt in old notes.

Another call to Christine, again, she nearly fainted, she gave Arthur permission to deal with it if he wouldn’t mind, and that he could take a fee for organising it.

There was a local currency dealer who took a look, then simply shook his head and whispered, ‘Wow…’ He agreed the value was substantial but his challenge was that he didn’t have the money in his account to buy all of it at once, he would have to trade some of it amongst other dealers and was very aware that scammers would target adverts for large number of notes, then there could be a break and enter, wanting to ‘cash in’ on the haul.

Arthur saw the point, but had to deal with the security risk of having so much cash on hand. He was advised to put it into a deposit box at the bank or a similar secure service.

He found a local service that suited the purpose, and then the slow but ‘rather fascinating’ process of offloading the old fifty dollar notes began.

His currency dealer had called a few other dealers, they figured they needed to form a network ‘offline’ to avoid scammers. All that worked well, but they still had to take the notes in small bundles, there was a lot of money involved.

Renovations continued, Fence replaced, painting done, inside and out, floor coverings removed everything cleaned out top to bottom. Christine agreed to having all the floors sanded and sealed, it was all good aussie hardwood and came up a treat.

Christine arrived in the middle of all this and thanked Arthur profusely for all he had done. Arthur pointed out the rings, with the name Ellie, ‘Oh that would be Grandma Noone’s old rings, wow, fancy that!’ That was one mystery sorted. Then the riddle behind the fridge and the number.

Christine said, ‘Oh, I’ve heard this one before, I think mum used it on us one time on holidays, way up the top end of the state, we stayed at a Motel and she said this so we could guess where we were going to go the next day… The answer is Bendigo. Not sure about the first line but the rest fits.’

Arthur said, ‘Well that’s good! So what about the number?’ That took longer but it turned out to be a bank account number for an account with the Bendigo Bank. It was in Peggy’s name. More money, Christine never revealed how much other than to say, it was substantial and quite a find.

Then there was the locket with Sarah’s picture and a phone number. Christine was stumped. She shook her head slightly, she hadn’t seen a picture of Sarah in a long time. She gasped, then said, ‘Wow…’ The phone number was their house number, but why would it be written in there? And the rest of the note, *'In case Christine forgets why I stayed.'* Christine sighed, ‘Yep I always knew mum stayed for Sarah, so freakin’ sad that. I got away as did Gary in his own sweet gruelling way, but mum had to stay, she had to put on a false face, and look like everything was good.

‘What about the cash?’ Enquired Arthur, He then added, ‘Could it have been your mum’s running away from home money?’ Christine looked at him with a sense of puzzlement on her face.

She furrowed her eyebrows for a second or two and she shook her head, noting, ‘I don’t think so, she had control of the bank and paid the bills so she had access to cash, but it could be, there’s a reasonable amount of cash there to last a while, but I always had the sense that mum would never leave dad, and he was the same. This last note proves that too.’

The three boxes were next, the small book, the poem, more cash, and the jewellery. Christime said she had seen the fob watch when she was a kid, probably one of the grandfathers and judging by the gold chain, worth a bit.

The poetic letter, well that was Jack's way of saying he loved Peggy. Christine shook her head and mentioned, ‘He could be a really lovely bloke, and many of his clients really liked him, but in the end things became different, I think it was the alcohol speaking, and then of course Sarah’s disappearance.’

Finally he pulled out the tin with Sarah’s house deposit in it. He slowly passed the note to Christine. She looked, shook her head and said, oh my I had forgotten about that, Dad said he hated the way that deposits were set up on houses, being in the business he was able to earn decent commissions, and so he provided all of us with house deposits, so where was this hiding?’ Arthur told her about the metal detector and this being buried behind the garage.

Christine pointed out, ‘We were lucky with dad’s job, he could earn really good money at the time, and that set us up well in the future. There were a couple of estates that dad helped to set up, and once the subdivision was sorted he got paid, because he took part in setting it up with the land owner, so he was an investor in the initial part of it.

Then the sales person who was meant to handle the sales, left to go interstate, so dad took over the sales, he knew every inch of every block, which made it so easy for him. He was able to sell those quite fast, for some reason there was a lot of interest in those blocks.

He got the bug from that, and was the go to guy for estates and blocks of land. One time he knocked back a client who had some land to sell but didn't want to subdivide, but wanted a premium price for it.

Dad said, 'No, for us to be involved it would need to be subdivided…' Anyway it turned out one of the other people in the office saw an opportunity, bought it from the land owner, sat on it for a while, the value went up, and then they got dad to organise the subdivision, bingo more sales, more commission.' He pointed out that he and Alex had wondered where all this money came from, and now he knew.

Arthur plucked up the courage to mention Peggy's bruises from time to time… 'Yeah mum and dad had their moments, mind you he had some bruises as well you know!' That was something that Arthur hadn't taken into account. He knew that it didn't make things right, but in a way it evened things out a little.

The pair sat for a while and pondered all that had gone on, she filled him in on some of what Gary had been up to in his last days, an overdose got him in the end. She noted that he got progressively worse after mum passed on, 'It hit both of us hard, he came in and found her in bed, passed away, probably that night, he thought it was strange that the back door was locked and the blinds were still down at 10am.

Then there was the effect of Sarah going missing, that had us all wondering, driving about looking for her, and it caused all of us no end of worry, Mum took it hard but Dad, all of a sudden the 'apple of his eye' was gone. He was 'out of sorts' for a long while after. And then about a year later he had a heart attack and died.

Sometimes I would dread coming to see mum after dad died. She would just sit and watch like a freaking zombie out that big window. Waiting for the phone to ring with good or bad news. Gary was the same, he just started to drink a bit, then got in with some bad people, and bang he was on drugs, so sad.

Sad that he died fairly young, but also a blessing in a number of ways. Mum hated that he would come looking for money to pay for his habit, but she was smart enough to

get around him, and would only give him twenty dollars or less. Then, when she passed away he moved into her house, and well you saw the mess he left.

Anyway, one of Sarah's friends at Torquay said she should have rung Peggy and tell her that Sarah hadn't arrived on Saturday, but got distracted, no one will ever know if that might have made a difference. One of the challenges to all this was that Sarah always seemed to be able to get a lift from someone fairly quickly, occasionally it would be someone she had had a lift with before.

She had been warned about hitchhiking, but had done it so often. Right through to today we have nothing to go on, it's just a mystery. Christine cleared her throat, and slowly spelled out to Arthur that the day Sarah went missing was very strange, or 'rather surreal.'

Chapter Four

Sunday the 11th of October 2015 Late afternoon, Penny, and Jack were preparing the evening meal, 'Hey Jack, did Sarah say she would be home tonight for dinner? I can't recall?' He wasn't sure.

At eight o'clock Peggy became concerned that Sarah hadn't turned up, a phone call to her friend who told her that she hadn't arrived yesterday. She then called the police station, and made a formal report.

Jack took it upon himself to go and look, he headed out in the car and spent a few hours scouring every inch of the road from their place to Torquay and back with a lot of side roads in between.

Peggy rang everyone she knew who knew Sarah, and asked if they had seen her since yesterday, 'No.' was the answer, she had simply vanished. Gary turned up on the Monday, Jack had taken the day off work, together they scoured every inch of roadway, path, ditch and waterway they could locate, nothing, not a trace of anything.

The police asked what she was wearing, both Peggy and Jack had little clue. Sarah was a ‘bit of a free spirit’ and would sometimes change her clothes part way through the day, so it was anyone's guess.

Sarah’s work colleagues were stunned to hear that she hitch hiked, let alone went missing. None of them had any clue that gave any evidence that was worth chasing up, she had vanished. Christine arrived late on Monday, she was also at a loss to explain anything, the clues were not showing up, there was nothing to go on. She did her best to console Peggy, and then Jack, Gary was at a loss he hugged Chrtistine, both shaking their heads in disbelief.

Any discussion with the police about the case drew a blank, they would often say, ‘We get upwards of 150 missing person cases per week across Victoria. BUT we do keep lines of enquiry open.’ Jack kept on their backs, one senior officer laid it out straight to him. ‘Listen, I get that your daughter has gone missing, of the 150 plus that go missing per week in Victoria a percentage of those simply show up, runaways, then there's those who have clearly met with foul play from someone they know, an ex partner, etc.

Then the rest, well, it depends on us getting ANY evidence to follow up with, in cases like this there’s nothing, therefore we have nothing to go on. We have to hope that in some way, someone who may know something, may spill the beans and give us some sort of a clue. Until then all I can say is with nothing to go on, we can’t really proceed any further.’

Jack thanked him for his openness, it didn’t help him sleep much better, but there was somehow a small sense of ease. Jack started to drink more, a few glasses at the pub, then as his friends got sick of hearing his sad story, he would just drink at home. Peggy didn’t mind one or two, but it got to be many more.

He stacked on the kilos and became disinterested in things, then nearly a year later he died, the doctors said it was a heart attack, he was found by Peggy in the backyard, she had been out shopping for a few hours, and at some stage that day he ended up on the ground. The report from the doctor suggested he had been there for about four hours, judging from his colour, and the pooling of blood due to gravity.

‘Mum was inside, standing at the kitchen window, and finally looked out after having put the kettle on to make a cup of tea. He was out by the clothesline, maybe he was heading out to the garage, she wondered what he was doing, and then in an instant had a panic attack, and called out ‘OH JACK,’ she then headed out the back door to check on him, she knew enough to be able to say he was clearly dead. She rang me and I was able to tell her that, ‘Yes by the sounds of it he is dead…’ The rest of that day was a blur for Mum.’

There were plenty of people at the funeral, Christine said Gary was beside himself, mum was just numb, she could recall many of the good times they had as a family, but just as easily the challenging times. Drunkenness, raised voices, pushing and shoving, generally out of the sight of prying public eyes.

Gary spiralled into drug nirvana after Jack's death, there was already some thinking that he was ‘dabbling’ in weed, and then mixing with friends who were addicted to other substances. It all spiralled madly out of control.

It would be a few months after the funeral that Gary turned up on Peggy's doorstep. He was in a glazed eye state, Peggy didn’t know if he was drunk or somehow otherwise mind altered? She asked, but he didn’t say, slurring some words, and mixing up others, all the while he was seemingly somehow happy.

It was a time when Gary wanted to know a few things, like ‘Why was dad so abusive at times, to all of us, and other times he could be so nice, and then how come you didn’t protect us from him or why didn’t you leave? Peggy only had some answers, since the funeral she had formulated some ideas around these things but also still trying to reconcile the loss of Sarah, it was all so complex.

Gary sat listening, Peggy had put the kettle on, Gary knew that would settle things. Peggy methodically went through outlining what she could, ‘Father was a driven man, wanted the best for his kids, Sarah was his favourite, Christine next, and then you, simply put he expected so much more of you being the boy in the family.’

The discussion went to the abuse, ‘Dad needed to let off steam, and you kids were it, if not it would be me, that was embarrassing, bruises, cracked ribs, punch marks in the walls, we couldn’t have people over they would see those.’ Gary opened up about the abuse meted out on him and Christine. Chasing the cricket ball, being hit by the ball, be it a cricket ball, or football, being tackled in the backyard. Being told off for getting too close to the new car ‘Helen Roberstosn.’

Peggy didn’t have a choice but to listen, her heart sank at each mention of a tackle, harsh words, resentment and the fact she did little to protect the kids and or herself for that matter. Gary kept going, Peggy’s mind wandered, what would things have been like if she had stood up to Jack? There was no way she could answer that one. She then thought about what may have caused him to be the way he was, abusive.

Bang, Gary hit the table with the flat of his hand, Peggy jerked in her seat, her trance broken by the noise, Gary yelled ‘Are you even listening mum!’ Peggy responded, ‘Yeah, I’m listening, every day I was with your father I have been listening, trying to figure out how to handle a man who on return from the Vietnam war, was somehow different, even though his role in the whole affair was a simple clerical one well away from the front line. He didn’t see any action but it changed him nonetheless, perhaps it was the guilt that he was there but didn’t see any active duty, perhaps it was the thought that it was going to upset his professional career.

I don’t know, but something changed. Despite all that, he returned, earnt good money, and gave us a few holidays, a new car occasionally, the ability to have nice clothes, a nice house, and all that. This house was considered high end in the day, Jack went to a lot of trouble to make sure the builder got things right. So here we are the remnants of Jack’s goings on.’

Gary sat transfixed by Mum’s little chat and a rant about things. It put some things into place for him, but that wouldn’t be enough. It was all so complex, in his mind at least. Dad gone, Sarah missing without a trace, there were too many questions, and not enough answers.

Gary left that day on a whimper, he had hoped it would be a roar, but that didn't happen. Peggy asked him to look after himself, and get off drugs. He gave a smile that lasted all of five seconds, Gary said, 'It's easy to say, there are demons involved, harsh critics that grind and pummel, it's hard, but I keep my wits about me…' He gave a brief smile again.

He stood, and gave a brief stretch, then headed off after a quick hug that Peggy hoped would linger, he was out the back door. Peggy watched as he went past the kitchen window and then out the front to his car, parked in the driveway. She had to get used to the fact that he would drive under the influence of whatever drugs he was on.

The next visit Gary was asking for a loan, 'Mum, I just need some cash to get me by, I'm waiting for my pay to come in, and my money is tied up in a term deposit I can't access just at the moment.' She asked how much, he replied 'Three hundred would be good.' She smelled a rat. Years of raising her 'kids' meant that she could read them like a book, his micro body language would spell out his real state.

Peggy was smart, she had two purses, one for occasions like this, that had only twenty dollars in it and another with her 'real money.' She showed him the contents, agitated he asked if he could take her to the bank and get some more. She mentioned the pension didn't go into the bank until Thursday. She mentioned she would be up at the bank then, and could get some out for him. He agreed although agitated.

Peggy rang Christine to ask what she thought about her brother asking for money. She said 'I would be very surprised if he's even got a job, last time I saw him he was clearly drugged up.'

She added, 'Remember mum, he will more than likely want the money for drugs, then remember that he always comes in the back door, if you see him coming, and he doesn't see you, head out the front door, hide a spare key in the front somewhere so you can get back in. Oh, and if he becomes aggressive, mention to him that you are his mother, and if need be you will call the police.'

Sometimes Peggy would see him coming, sometimes she would be out the front door and head next door to Mrs Greavens, long time friend, even if she wasn't home Peggy could sit out the back in a covered in area and listen for Gary shutting the back door when he realised Mum wasn't about.

So far she had resisted giving him any decent amounts of money, one time he argued with her to give him a hundred, he got fifty dollars. He scared Peggy with his raised voice and desperate pleading. He always said it would be a loan but never paid her back.

One night he turned up, this was unusual. It was eight o'clock, he came in the back door as per usual, Peggy was in front of the TV, she thought she heard a car, but living on a busy road sometimes it was hard to tell. Gary sat in the chair next to her, there was no pleading for money. She offered a cup of tea, she had been caught off guard, she was partly scared and partly amused. He said no.

He chatted as if in a normal state, she asked, 'This is a late visit, you're normally here during the day?' He cleared his throat, raised his eyebrows and related that he had to be careful being out during the day, and so to avoid being seen by some people, he would simply move about at night rather than in the daytime.' Peggy didn't ask any further. She felt it was probably best not to know any details. Gary added that he was heading interstate for a while. He had a mate looking after his house down here, and so all that was fine.

The pair chatted for a while, Gary apologising for his bad attitude in the past, and how things had been 'difficult.' Again Peggy figured it was best not to know any details. She offered a cup of tea again, he said no, then soon after he headed off, adding in, 'I'll call you when I get back.' And with that he was gone. The back door handle clicked as he went.

Peggy felt a sense of relief and trepidation, glad he didn't drop in to ask for money but then sad that he would be interstate. Wondering if he would he be in a safe place, followed by what was happening that he had to be interstate?

Chapter Five

Peggy was a creature of habit, mostly at home, but shopping was always done on a Thursday. When Jack was working, his pay would go into their main account on Wednesdays, then when she got the old age pension the same thing happened. The money went in on Wednesdays. So shopping was logically done on Thursdays.

Peggy would treat herself to a simple lunch at a local old style cafe with a sandwich, coffee and sometimes a piece of cake. Then she would check her shopping list and head off to the supermarket. This meant she would be away from the house for sometimes, up to two hours. If she went to the library to get a book, then it could be longer.

This particular Thursday, she returned to find her house in disarray. Things had been moved about but not put back. The doors and windows had not been forced, so she then thought it must be Gary. She carefully looked about, things in each cupboard had been shifted, on each shelf, she knew he would be on the lookout for money, he wanted big dollars. She looked in the places where she had things'hidden'. They hadn't been touched. She had seen too many TV shows, and had too many ideas about finding places to hide things, most of all money and Jewellery.

Peggy wasn't one to have items of much value, the TV was old, but still quite serviceable thank you very much, and the other things she had were of sentimental value more than anything, some would say the house was 'sparsely decorated.' It just had the essentials, Peggy wasn't one to have a lot of possessions.

A phone call to Christine, who said the same, more than likely Gary. Peggy put things back in place, and carried on. Gary became progressively more aggressive, suggesting he take Peggy to the bank; he needed cash. She took out four hundred and gave it to him, she was solidly under duress, Christine and the police suggested that she have the locks changed and upgraded.

She knew that Gary only had the backdoor key so she invited Arthur to drop round and make the change. He put in a solid lock and an extra supporting piece of nine

millimetre plywood across the lock edge to provide some solid support if he tried to kick the door in. He then did similar to the front door to add to its strength.

Peggy then had heavy duty security mesh doors fitted, her local neighbourhood watch support person suggested that this would be a good way to keep her son at bay, window locks were also advised.

Arthur suggested that she consider parking her car out the front of the house so Gary couldn't block her in, that way she had some way of escaping. It took a while for Peggy to get used to that idea, but it made perfect sense. Christine rang Gary to have a chat, she advised him that she wasn't happy about him harassing mum. He hung up on her soon after.

Gary dropped around the next day and was most apologetic, he advised Peggy that he was looking for another job after the last boss put him off. Peggy suggested that he get off the drugs and clean up his act. He shook his head, he asked to come in, she said, 'Gary I have these security screens for a purpose, you now scare me, I don't know what drugs you take, and frankly it's none of my buisness… I have been advised to keep you out of the house, I'm sorry it's come to this.' Gary turned, then said, 'Yeah whatever…' and left.

Peggy sent a christmas card later that year to his address, it came back 'Return to sender' She drove by the house the next day, clearly it had changed hands. She rang Christine, she didn't know where Gary was, and his phone had been disconnected.

It turned out that Gary had sold his house, and was soon after arrested for drug possession with what was considered a commercial quantity. He was holed up in prison for a few years, Christine and Peggy thought the good thing about that was that he would be clear of drugs, and be 'dried out' by the end of his time.

It was three years later when Peggy passed away, then Gary moved into the family home shortly after getting a locksmith to pick the locks and create a key for him. It was then that Christine found out through a mutual friend that he had used the sale of his house money to buy a property he rented out. He lived in a cheap share house, later on he sold

his property, and well… who knows where the money went, it has been surmised that it went on drugs, and a fair bit of gambling as well.

Christine sought legal advice on Gary sneakily moving into the family home after Peggy died, Christine wasn't in dire straits needing the money from the sale of the place, so the advice suggested it might be easier all round to let him use it. He managed to pay the bills, except for the electricity in the end. He was in the will after all, so he was allowed half of the proceeds of the sale when that happened.

Holed up in the family home, he only had to worry about the incidental bills, rates etc. He didn't let anyone into the house unless he had to. His drug dealings, and other habits meant he had created a mess.

The day Gary was found by paramedics he had overdosed, curled up at a bus stop. A passerby noted that he had been there for a while, and soon after paramedics arrived, he was known to them. They did what they could, he was revived but things didn't look good, Christine was called, he was in the hospital, and she was told what had happened. Gary was on a ventilator at that point and barely existing.

Christine then went to the family home at Marigold Street, the back door was unlocked, a brief wander, the pace was a mess. She found Gary's bank statements and a stack of bills that had been paid. Then just the electricity that was overdue and about to be disconnected. She tried the light switch, yep they had already turned that off.

Gary's bank statements showed there was ten dollars in one account, and five in the other, not much to be concerned about there. His car? The police found it not far from the bus stop where he had ended up. It was towed and sold for scrap.

Gary lasted for a couple of more days and then faded fast, Christine was then at the point where she called Arthur, time to get the house to a saleable point, ready for the next chapter in its intricate life.

Arthur pulled up on the last day, a few small things to finish off. He pondered the stories and the various goings on, the tragedy of Sarh going missing, then Gary on drugs.

All the while Peggy sat in the dining room, day after gruelling day. Her husband passed away and then Peggy. Arthur pondered what Gary would have thought finding his mother had passed? All that was now left of the family was Christine.

Alex pulled up next, this was meant to be the last time that he would mow the grass. However it took a while for the property to sell so a few more visits were in order to keep the place pristine. The pair stood and chatted for a short while before completing their respective tasks and then marvelling at all the work that had been completed.

The real estate sign had gone up the day before, apparently there was strong interest in the house, but that faded, there was a drop in the price before a young couple full of excitable intent, bought the place. Its new chapter was about to begin.