

**DEBORAH
CHALLINOR**
The Jacaranda House

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*In memory of Lorain Day – colleague,
mentor and friend*

Part One

Chapter One

May 1964, Kings Cross, Sydney

Polly Manaia swore as she dropped her bag of groceries, watching in annoyance as several tomatoes rolled into the gutter. Oh well, too bad, they'd wash off. This would all be a *lot* easier if her flatmates weren't so insistent on getting their beauty sleep and managed to drag themselves out of bed before midday. *She* worked at night too, sometimes later hours than they did. And she had the dry horrors and a pounding headache, but there was absolutely nothing in the cupboard so someone had to buy food. She gathered up the tomatoes, wiped a bit of muck off one, and dropped them back in her bag.

It was half-past ten in the morning and the Cross was just waking up. The night people, which should include her, wouldn't be out for hours as the clubs and bars were shut, but the day people were in evidence, opening up the cafes and the delicatessens and the fruit shops. She waved glumly to a few people she knew, bought fresh rolls from the French bakery, and some cheese, pastrami and salami from the deli. She ordered the spicy salami because she knew the girls didn't like it, which would teach them for lolling around in bed.

By the time she'd traipsed home she felt quite sick, and had been forced to eat a bread roll in an attempt to subdue her nausea. Nothing about her outing had cheered her up. It was a

nice sunny morning but the sun had been too bright and hurt her eyes and head. Every loud noise had made her jump then wince, it was warm and she'd sweated to the point that she could smell last night's booze coming out of her pores, and the crows and pigeons that seemed to be forever squawking and shitting round the Cross had got on her nerves. It was a relief to step inside the cool, dim foyer of the big old house on Bayswater Road in which she, Rhoda and Star lived.

They had the whole upper floor to themselves – three bedrooms, a small kitchen, a lounge/dining room, a bathroom and toilet, another little room where they stored their costumes, and several balconies – though they did have to share a laundry with the people living in the two flats downstairs. There was a back lawn too, but not much of one, and no one cut the grass or took care of the shrubs and wildly overgrown flowerbeds, but there was a pair of jacaranda trees that bloomed gloriously in spring.

The house needed painting inside, some of the floors were on a lean, a couple of the windows wouldn't open properly, a dozen leadlights had been replaced with plain glass (or plywood), and mould grew on several interior walls in the winter, but she was still stately. There were fretwork arches, ceilings of fancy pressed metal – once white, now a bilious yellow – dark timber panelling everywhere, picture rails in the sitting room and hallway, and great timber fireplaces that hadn't been waxed or cleaned for decades. The flat's shabbiness wasn't helped by the fact that it was filled almost exclusively with furniture and bits and pieces from the St Vincent de Paul shop over on Oxford Street but everything was comfortable and serviceable, if not exactly stylish.

Polly had moved into the house in 1956 when she'd arrived from New Zealand. She'd had different flatmates then. They'd left some time back, to be replaced first by Rhoda the following year, and then Star in 1959. They'd shared the flat ever since, fairly happily despite their bickering, and had no plans to change their living arrangements. Polly counted Star and Rhoda as

among her best friends, not that she had many. She had hundreds of acquaintances, but not many close friends. They worked in the same business, in the same part of town, during the same nocturnal hours, and they knew all the same people. Polly's only other good friend, someone she really trusted, was Evie Palmer, whom she'd known in Auckland.

Polly headed up the stairs from the foyer, still enjoying the cool respite. Doors to the left and right of the staircase were closed, indicating that the downstairs flats' occupants were either out or still asleep. She plodded up to her own flat, wondering if Rhoda and Star were up yet, unlocked the door, and went in.

No, they weren't – she could hear them both snoring.

She unpacked her purchases, put the cheese, meat and tomatoes in the fridge, and left the bread rolls on the kitchen bench. She thought about waking the girls, but instead went into her bedroom and shook four ten-milligram Valium tablets from an unlabelled medicine bottle, put them in her mouth, and washed them down with a slug of brandy. Then she carried the bottle, a sticky glass and her cigarettes out to the balcony off the lounge room and gingerly sat down in a wicker chair. It was ancient and the wicker was unravelling and someone's arse was going to go through it one day. Rhoda's, probably.

She poured a drink, took a long sip, and waited for both it and the Valium to take effect. The Valium would help settle her jangling nerves, and the brandy would at least postpone her hangover. The nerves, she knew, were left over from the methedrine she'd had the night before, but she needed it, to work so late. She'd taken a couple of Quaaludes before she'd gone out that morning, to take the edge off her jitters, but all they'd done was make her feel confused about what cheese to buy at the deli. And she hadn't had a drink before she'd gone out because she didn't like to go up the street stinking of booze. She lit a smoke, sighed and wondered if she was getting too old for the life she was leading. It was too bad if she was, because she didn't have any other kind.

Eventually, as the rosellas flitted about in the jacaranda trees and the sun crept slowly across the long grass in the backyard, she nodded off.

*

She awoke with a start: someone was banging about in the kitchen. She stretched, stood and wandered inside. It was Rhoda, looking in the cupboards. ‘Morning!’ she said. ‘Have you seen the frying pan? I’m doing eggs.’

‘There aren’t any,’ Polly replied.

‘Aren’t there? Bugger.’

‘But I went out and got rolls and a few things from the deli.’

‘Thanks, darl.’ Rhoda opened the fridge door. ‘Ooh, pastrami!’

Polly sat down at the dining table in the lounge room. Her hangover had receded now, though her head felt as though it were stuffed with cotton wool. She watched Rhoda as she fluffed about, artfully arranging the food on a platter.

Rhoda was twenty-seven and stood six feet and one inch in her bare size-ten feet. She had wide shoulders, a slender body and long legs. Her soot-black hair was shoulder-length, her eyebrows were plucked into dramatic arches, and this morning she had a hint of stubble along her jawline. As she moved about her pink nylon negligee and matching robe floated around her, creating an impression of casual glamour.

Star’s bedroom door opened and she clomped out in her fluffy mules, satin robe fluttering, grumbling and scratching her head. Star was always in a shitty mood when she woke up.

‘Morning!’ Rhoda trilled.

Ignoring her, Star sat down at the table, lit a cigarette, then launched into a protracted spasm of phlegmy coughing, which she did every morning.

Once that was out of the way, she rasped, ‘Is there tea?’

‘Won’t be a tick,’ Rhoda said, setting the platter of food on the table. ‘Polly went out and got all this. Isn’t she a sweetie?’

‘You look like crap,’ Polly said to Star.

She did, too. Her hair was flat on one side and sticking out on the other, there were smudges of black kohl and mascara smeared around her eyes, a glowing red pimple had erupted on her chin, and she looked shattered.

‘So do you,’ Star said.

‘I know.’

At five feet eight inches tall, Star was shorter and more compact than Rhoda.

She’d been taking hormone pills – bought off the street – so barely grew a beard at all. She also had the beginnings of breasts, of which Polly knew she was very proud. Her wavy hair was collar-length and dyed platinum blonde, though her arched, plucked brows were still their natural dark brown. She was twenty-six, though very occasionally she behaved as though she were fourteen, which could be quite annoying.

Star and Rhoda were a double act at Les Girls restaurant and all-male revue: Rhoda was Jane Russell and Star was the late and very lamented Marilyn Monroe, and they were really quite talented: they wore gorgeous and beautifully made costumes and could both do their own vocals. They weren’t female impersonators – they were men choosing to live as women, which was what they considered they truly were. Rhoda was known throughout the Cross as Rhoda Dendron, and Star as Star E. Knight. Their ‘past life’ names were, respectively, Gary Hicks and Colin Jessop, which they loathed as relentlessly loutish and blokey, and kept to themselves. They were also camp, though neither currently had a steady boyfriend, although now and then someone would bring a man home for the night. Polly never did.

In fact, Polly hadn’t been involved with anyone for a long time. When she’d arrived in Sydney she’d worked in a brothel for two years, and who had the energy for a love life while they were doing that? She’d saved a decent nest egg but she’d hated it. No matter how much she drank she couldn’t keep the ghosts from her past bedevilling her so she’d chucked it and gone to

work as an exotic dancer. There'd been a man for about a year but he'd wanted to own her, and he'd hit her and been too fond of the drink, like they all seemed to be, and she couldn't have that, and there'd been no one since. As always, she was happier by herself.

'Good night at the club?' Rhoda asked, joining them at the table and lighting a cigarette.

'Same as usual,' Polly said. 'Busy. Rowdy. One of my pasties fell off.'

'Embarrassing!' Rhoda said.

Polly shrugged. It hadn't worried her. By law exotic dancers couldn't strip completely nude and were required to wear G-strings, and pasties over their nipples, but one coming off was hardly the end of the world. 'I didn't even notice. I was a bit hammered.'

'You're always a bit hammered,' Star said.

'Not *always*.'

Star took a big slurp of tea, then swore when she burnt her mouth. Eyes watering, she said, 'You know, love, if you keep going the way you are, one day you'll wake up and your lovely face and that beautiful body will be gone. And then you'll be sorry. You won't be Heliopolis the Dusky Maori Maiden any more – you'll be Heliopolis the Raddled Old Bag.'

Polly knew that – Rhoda and Star had told her often enough. And just as often she'd ignored their well-meant advice.

She hated her stage name. Heliopolis was actually her real name, after the hospital in Egypt where her uncle had died during World War I, but she'd always been known as Polly. The ridiculous Dusky Maori Maiden part had been thought up by her boss, Joe Adler, at the strip club. It wasn't fair; Evie worked there as well, and she hadn't been lumbered with a stupid title.

She changed the subject. 'How was your show?'

'Star sang flat during "Diamonds",' Rhoda said.

'Well, I couldn't hear myself. Anyway, *you* fell off your heels in the middle of "Bye Bye Baby".'

‘That’s true,’ Rhoda said. ‘Got a round of applause for it, though.’

‘Crowd was good,’ Star said, making a neat little stack of salami slices, popping them into her mouth and chewing enthusiastically. ‘*Shit*, that’s hot.’ She spat them out. ‘God, girl!’ she said to Polly accusingly.

‘Is it too spicy?’ Polly said. ‘Sorry, my mistake.’

‘Fucking hell.’ Star shoved her chair back, clattered into the kitchen, ran the tap and drank a big glass of water.

‘Water won’t help,’ Rhoda said after her. ‘Milk’s better for spicy food.’

Star opened the fridge, drank straight from the milk bottle, burped, then returned to the table.

Rhoda said, ‘What a lady.’

Pointing at the salami, Star said, ‘You try some. It’s shocking.’

‘No thanks.’

Star bit into a bread roll, then glanced out the French doors opening onto the balcony. ‘Nice day. I might go and get my nails done.’

‘I might come with you,’ Polly said. ‘Later, though, after I’ve had a sleep.’

‘Shall we go for coffee?’ Rhoda suggested. ‘There’s a new place open on Darlinghurst and I’ve heard the cakes are divine.’

‘I’m watching my weight,’ Star said.

Rhoda said, ‘You are not. You had two kebabs on the way home last night.’

‘That was my tea.’

‘No, it wasn’t. You had a pie and chips for tea.’

‘Did I?’

‘We stopped at the chew and spew on Roslyn Street on the way to work, remember? *And* you had more chips at the club.’

‘I don’t remember that.’ Star looked at her platinum and diamond Rolex watch, which she’d recently bought at the market for three quid. ‘Shall we aim for two? I absolutely must shave my legs before I even *think* about going out the door.’

Rhoda said, ‘Oh, shut up about your legs. They don’t even need shaving these days. It’s *my* legs that look like they should be on a gorilla.’

‘Well, if you’re not happy about it get yourself some hormones.’

‘But the price of them!’

Star cut herself a piece of cheese. ‘If I can afford them, you can.’

Polly listened to them bicker while she finished her tea, then left them to it and went to her room, desperate for sleep. Opening the drawer of her bedside table, she looked through her stash for something that would send her off quickly. She sorted through bottles and packets of methedrine, Dexedrine and Drinamyl – all amphetamines, or speed, so of no use – and considered Seconal, Mandrax, and the Valium again, which were sedatives. Valium never lasted long, so she chose the Seconal, which should give her a good couple of hours. She took four and lay on her bed, curling herself into a ball, then closed her eyes and waited for the drugs to draw her down into darkness.

*

Star knocked on Polly’s bedroom door and opened it a few inches. ‘Pol, darl? You awake?’

No answer. Behind her Rhoda said, ‘She’s probably knocked herself out.’

Star opened the door all the way. Polly was on her bed, lying on her side, knees drawn up, her long, dark hair fanned across her shoulder and the pillow. She lay very still.

Peering in, Rhoda asked after a moment, ‘Is she breathing?’

Star crept into the room and bent down, her face inches from Polly’s. Then she straightened, gave a thumbs-up and crept out again, closing the door behind her.

‘Phew,’ Rhoda said.

‘Should we just leave her to sleep?’ Star suggested. ‘She must be knackered.’

‘Full of drugs, more like.’

‘Doesn’t mean she isn’t worn out.’

‘That’s true,’ Rhoda agreed. ‘I don’t think she’s very happy at the moment.’

‘We’ll bring something nice back for her.’ Star collected her handbag from the table and did a twirl. ‘How do I look?’

She was wearing a short-sleeved shirtwaist dress in blue and white striped poplin, high-heeled navy-blue sling-back sandals, and one of her many blonde wigs. She prided herself on being able to buy her clothes straight off the rack, whereas poor Rhoda, being so tall, often had to sew her own. But then Rhoda was an excellent seamstress, which came in very handy when it came to their show costumes.

‘Fabulous,’ Rhoda said. ‘Me?’

‘Gorgeous.’

Rhoda’s outfit was a teal-coloured shift dress with a cowl neckline, three-quarter sleeves and a matching fabric belt, white court shoes with two-inch heels and a white vinyl bag, and she’d teased up her hair and curled the ends out in a jaunty bouffant style, all of which gave her the appearance of being almost six and a half feet tall.

‘I couldn’t decide between the teal and my new burgundy two-piece,’ Rhoda said.

‘We’re only getting our nails done, aren’t we?’

Rhoda said, ‘And having coffee.’

‘Where is this new place, anyway?’ Star asked.

‘Darlinghurst Road. Well, I say Darlinghurst but it’s more like William. It *is* William, actually, near the intersection with Bourke.’

‘Are we walking?’

Rhoda said yes.

Star looked at her feet. ‘In these shoes?’

Rhoda made a face. ‘Should we get a taxi?’

‘Well, I’m not walking all that way in high heels.’

While Rhoda went downstairs to the communal telephone and rang a taxi, Star re-did her lipstick, then clattered down to wait with her outside on the street.

‘I feel a bit guilty now, leaving her behind,’ Rhoda said.

‘Polly?’ Star lit a cigarette. ‘She’s better off catching up on her sleep.’

‘Has she heard from her brother lately?’

They were aware Polly had a large family in New Zealand from whom she was more or less estranged, but not the reason why, though God knew they’d nearly killed themselves trying to find out. They suspected Evie knew, but she was as close-mouthed as Polly. They also knew Polly had a daughter, a girl named Gina, aged eleven, who was being raised by her grandmother, because Star had once sneaked a look at a letter that had come from Polly’s brother, Sonny, apparently the only member of her family who ever wrote to her. It was all a fascinating mystery and they couldn’t understand how Polly could keep all those secrets to herself. If it was them they’d have told *everyone*. After all, a trouble shared was a problem halved, but Polly seemed to think that a trouble shared was a trouble doubled.

‘I don’t know, do I?’ Star said.

‘I thought you might have come across her mail again.’

‘That was an accident. I didn’t mean to look at it.’

‘Well, wait till she goes out and have another accidental look. We might find out what’s worrying her.’

‘We could just ask,’ Star suggested.

‘Do you *want* your head bitten off?’ Rhoda said.

‘Not really.’

The taxi pulled up. Star took a last drag on her cigarette and they got in.

Rhoda said, ‘William Street, please, intersection with Bourke.’

The driver eyed her in the rear-vision mirror. ‘Nice frock.’

‘Thank you very much,’ Rhoda replied, setting her handbag primly in her lap. ‘I made it myself.’

Polly woke at a little before three o'clock, feeling a lot better. She knew, though, even before she got up, that the others had gone out without her. The flat felt empty.

She ran a quick bath and washed her hair, then spent half an hour drying it with her portable hair dryer. It had cost the earth, made a terrible smell of burning wire and plastic and was unbelievably noisy, but it did the trick. Then she did the dishes the girls had left on the table, swept the kitchen floor, and was having a smoke and a cup of tea when they arrived home, loaded with shopping.

'What's all that?' she asked, indicating Star's big paper carry-bag.

'Stuff.' She reached into it and withdrew a small bakery box. 'We bought you lemon cannoli. Your favourite.'

'Lovely, thanks. What's in the carton?'

Rhoda, who was cradling it, said, 'Er.'

Polly's heart sank. 'Come on, out with it.'

'Promise you'll keep an open mind?'

'No.'

Rhoda put the carton on the table. 'I *honestly* couldn't help myself.' She opened it and very gently lifted out a tiny grey kitten. 'Isn't she *adorable*? I fell in love with her the *second* I saw her.'

'Oh, Rhoda!'

'But she's a purebred Russian Blue. Look at her eyes. They'll go a *gorgeous* emerald green when she gets bigger.'

'I told her you wouldn't approve,' Star said. 'I told her it'll shit everywhere and be a total pain in the arse.'

Polly scowled. 'I thought we agreed we wouldn't have any pets?'

'But she won't *be* just a pet,' Rhoda said, squashing the kitten against her cheek and getting Max Factor pressed powder all over it. 'She'll be a special little *companion*. And not just to me: to all of us.'

‘You can’t keep a cat in an upstairs flat,’ Polly said. ‘Where will it do its business?’

Rhoda pointed at the big paper bag. ‘We bought a poo tray, and some of that stuff they tinkle in. And we got toys and special cat food and everything!’

‘Why didn’t you stop her?’ Polly accused Star.

Star made a face and shrugged.

Polly sighed. The main reason she didn’t want Rhoda to have a pet was because when it inevitably disappeared, or was run over on the street, she and Star would have to spend weeks nursing Rhoda’s shattered heart. ‘Well, the tray will have to go out on the balcony. We’re not having cat shit in the flat.’

Rhoda beamed. ‘She’ll be potty-trained in no time.’ She held the kitten up in front of her. ‘You’ll do all your plops in your tray, won’t you, my little sugar mouse? Yes, you will! Yes, you will!’

The kitten let out a squeak.

Polly glanced at Star, who stuck a finger down her throat. Plops?

‘What shall we call her?’ Rhoda asked.

Polly said, ‘Trouble.’

‘I like Cleopatra,’ Rhoda said.

‘That’s not Russian,’ Star said. ‘That’s Egyptian.’

‘Well, what about Anastasia?’

‘You’ll get sick of yelling that when you want her to come inside,’ Polly said.

‘I’m not letting her outdoors!’ Rhoda was shocked. ‘She was too bloody expensive.’

‘How expensive?’

‘Um, a bit over a hundred quid.’

‘For God’s sake, Rho, you can’t afford that!’

‘But I wanted her!’

Again Polly sighed. Rhoda had always been terrible with money.

‘What about Tatiana?’ Star suggested. ‘That’s Russian, isn’t it?’

Rhoda tried out the name. ‘Tatiana. I like that. Do you want to be Tatiana?’ she asked the kitten.

In response the kitten wriggled to get down and Rhoda put her on the floor. She immediately scampered to the exact centre of the lounge rug, half squatted while still managing to stand on tip-toes, raised her tail like a flag and let fly with a stream of diarrhoea as Polly, Rhoda and Star watched in fascinated horror. Then, after a series of body-contorting convulsions to complete the process, the kitten tore off and hid under the couch.

No one said anything for a moment, then the stench hit.

‘Fuck a duck,’ Star said, waving a hand in front of her face.

‘Oh dear,’ Rhoda said. ‘She must have an upset tummy.’

Polly pulled the neck of her top over her mouth and nose. ‘Jesus Christ, Rho, bloody well clean that up, *now*. That’s disgusting.’

‘How? It’s all runny.’

‘Get a spoon.’

Star and Rhoda looked at her, appalled.

‘A spoon?’ Rhoda echoed.

‘Yes, a bloody spoon. Scrape it up and scrub the rest with dishwashing liquid then blot it, then do it again with Dettol. Come on, before it stains.’

Star retched loudly. ‘I can’t stand it, I’m opening the doors.’

‘No!’ Rhoda cried. ‘She’ll get out!’

‘Too bad,’ Star said, and opened the door onto the balcony.

The kitten immediately shot out from beneath the couch, darted through the doorway, wriggled under the rusting wrought-iron lace balustrade, and jumped.

‘*Oh! Oh!*’ Rhoda shrieked, her long, freshly painted fingernails digging into her cheeks. ‘Oh my God, save her!’ She ran to the door of the flat, wrenched it open and pounded down the stairs.

‘Whoops,’ Star said.

Polly went out onto the balcony and looked down, expecting to see the kitten’s limp, broken little body sprawled in the long grass, but there was nothing.

A minute later Rhoda appeared from around the side of the house, the kitten pressed against her chest. ‘I’ve got her! She’s fine. She was halfway out the front gate!’

Pity it wasn’t all the way out, Polly thought as she went back inside to organise the dishwashing detergent, Dettol, a bucket, some rags and a spoon that would have to be thrown away. Or become Rhoda’s special breakfast cereal spoon.

Star followed her. ‘You know, seeing as Rho’s allowed a cat, I wouldn’t mind a little dog.’

‘Well, you’re bloody not having one.’

‘Why not? It’s not fair. Why’s she allowed a cat and I’m not allowed a dog?’

Polly turned to face Star. ‘Because this is an upstairs flat, not a bloody zoo. And it’s *my* flat, with *my* name on the tenancy agreement. It’s me who’ll cop it if the place gets wrecked.’

‘But you’re letting Rho have a *cat*.’

‘So share that.’

‘I don’t like cats!’

‘Neither do I!’

‘But you don’t like anything, Pol. The whole world pisses you off.’

Polly stared at her for a moment, stung. Was that true? Was that how everyone thought of her? After a moment she thought they probably did.

Or was she only thinking that because *she* thought she was a horrible person?

Deep down she knew she was a bad person. But she didn’t want to be, and it hurt.