

OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

UNCORRECTED READING COPY

Not for sale, review or quotation.

If you would like to review this book,
please contact the publisher for a finished copy.

OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

KELLI HAWKINS

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

HarperCollinsPublishers

Australia • Brazil • Canada • France • Germany • Holland • Hungary
India • Italy • Japan • Mexico • New Zealand • Poland • Spain • Sweden
Switzerland • United Kingdom • United States of America

First published in Australia in 2021
by HarperCollinsPublishers Australia Pty Limited
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000
ABN 36 009 913 517
harpercollins.com.au

Copyright © Kelli Hawkins 2021

The right of Kelli Hawkins to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the *Copyright Amendment (Moral Rights) Act 2000*.

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced, copied, scanned, stored in a retrieval system, recorded, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia.

ISBN 978 1 4607 5922 6 (paperback)
ISBN 978 1 4607 1294 8 (ebook)
ISBN 978 1 4607 8675 8 (audiobook)

PART I

FIRST OPEN HOUSE

SATURDAY, 5 JULY

MORNING

I pulled over just in time. Opening the car door, I leaned out and breathed heavily, staring at the asphalt. It felt like my intestines were being yanked around my insides by a sadist jerking on a string.

In short, I felt like shit.

My stomach heaved. The contractions were remarkably like childbirth. To distract myself I compared the two types of pain. The ferocity. The lack of control over bodily functions. For a moment I almost convinced myself this might be worse than the twelve hours prior to Sascha's birth.

A needle-stab pierced my lungs: nothing to do with the hangover.

Sascha.

I hugged the pain to me, unwilling to let it go.

After a minute or so I sucked in the clean winter air and sat up, squinting at my surroundings through watery eyes and a curtain of lank unwashed hair.

Turrumurra: one of Sydney's most desirable suburbs, filled to the brim with mortgaged-up bankers and lawyers. Houses here had landscaped pools and attached cabanas, tennis courts, long gravel driveways with turning circles for Range Rovers. I peered around, trying to imagine living in a place like this.

I couldn't. The wide-lawned suburban street was so quiet. *Too* quiet. Even the usual 24/7 drone of traffic chugging up the Pacific Highway just a few blocks away was somehow inaudible. It was like a scene from an early episode of *The Walking Dead* – when everything was still orderly and beautiful and ominously serene. I pictured dead-eyed zombies lurching from behind the nearest house to converge on my car, all grasping arms and bloodied mouths.

Don't be stupid, Kate. Are you still drunk?

Maybe I was. I started to calculate just how much I'd had the night before but suddenly I didn't want to know. My brain hammered inside my skull as if trying to batter its way free. With a lurch, I realised I probably shouldn't be driving and made a mental note to watch out for RBTs.

I gathered my hair into the best ponytail I could manage, ignoring the tremor in my hands. My nausea had eased, thank God, but I knew the reprieve would be brief. I stared at the ground again, revelling in what a disgusting human being I was. Wallowing in it. Rolling around in my own disgusting-ness like a dog in the remnants of a dead animal.

Never again. No more drinking.

I burped, grimacing at the taste – wine, with sour overtones. The bitter, chemical aftertaste of the previous night's takeaway pizza was in there somewhere too.

Not tonight, anyway. I swear it.

Even as I made the vow, another part of my brain chortled and rolled its eyes.

July 5th. Probably not the best day to try and give up the grog.

Today was the anniversary.

Ten years.

OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

* * *

I scrounged through the junk crammed into the centre console of my car. With the least manky tissue I could find I wiped my eyes then blew my nose. I hauled my legs back inside the car and grabbed the bottle of Coke sitting in the sunlight on the passenger seat, the weak sun through the window just warm enough to fog the plastic. The lid hissed open and I took a couple of big gulps, the hit of sugar and caffeine making me groan. I peered at the dashboard. 11.27 am. Swigging one more mouthful, I screwed the lid back on, slammed the door shut and started the car.

Two left turns down empty streets and I was there.

A disproportionately large number of cars and people swarmed around a well-kept Federation-style house marked by a For Sale sign. A modest house, by Turrumurra standards. A flag poked from the side of the sign at a 45-degree angle but it sat flaccidly in the morning stillness. Two small Open House markers skewered neighbouring lawns, complete with arrows, though they were superfluous given the crowds.

Most prospective buyers appeared to be families, which wasn't surprising. I double-parked in front of a nearly identical house across the road as a family approached their Kia Carnival, the parents dressed in conservative smart-casual Saturday attire, their punchy-kicky kids still clad in muddy sports uniforms. I rolled my eyes as the braying mother called for the children to climb in to the four-wheeled drive – pronouncing it *carn-i-v-aah-lay* in a futile attempt to make the people-mover sound sexy. Other families swarmed across the lawn like invading troops, the parents squinting up at eaves and pointing down at footings as though they knew all about eaves and footings and

weren't actually lawyers and IT professionals who spent their days in boring meetings or staring at computer screens.

The For Sale sign was dominated by an enormous photo of professionally styled, neat-enough but otherwise quite ordinary master bedroom.

So.

The house would be crap.

If that dull room was the home's best feature there'd be nothing better to see inside. I found my scribbled list of houses under the Coke bottle. Condensation had made the paper soggy, but it was still legible.

65 Waratah Dr. Turra. 11.30–12. McQuilty RE. \$1.95m+

I eyed the house again, snorted. *Too much.* They wouldn't get more than 1.7. Not even in this market. But it didn't matter. Not to me anyway.

That wasn't why I was here.

And I wasn't here officially, either. Yes, I worked at a real estate agency, but just in marketing. Writing flowery copy, laying out ads for the newspapers, that kind of thing. I didn't need to be here for work.

No, I attended open houses for other reasons entirely.

I climbed out of the car, the thudding in my head picking up pace and potency as I straightened. A flash of silver in the footwell caught my eye and I almost bent down to pick up the blister pack of paracetamol before cursing out loud, remembering I'd popped the final two at last week's opens.

'McQuilty Real Estate,' I cursed, pulling my hair free from the elastic and attempting to tame the frizz with my fingers. 'Please don't be Renee.'

I shoved the list into the back pocket of my jeans then joined the hordes advancing up the white gravel driveway, crunching

OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

with each step. Tiny white stones spilled onto the grass lining the drive. I shook my head.

Idiots.

At the front steps I waited as the crowd slowly fed through the entryway. Everyone paused obediently, reciting names and phone numbers in exchange for the chance to stickybeak through the home of a stranger. Maybe some of them were even serious about buying it. An Asian couple ahead of me spoke to one another in what might have been Mandarin. The small child between them toddled along, holding a hand of each parent, half-heartedly trying to pull free. It was so bundled up in a parka and puffy pants it looked like a colourful little sausage and could have been of either sex.

'Hello and welcome! Can I have your name please?'

That tittering voice. Renee.

Dammit.

I contemplated heading home, tempted to the car by the memory of sugary, lukewarm Coke. For a moment I wavered, visualising my apartment; imagined sitting on the lounge under a doona watching *Friends* reruns. Then, as I vacillated, the Asian woman moved to her left and I could see the darkness of a hallway through the wedged-open front door. Murmuring seeped from the building, frustratingly muffled. I paused, still undecided. Then a high-pitched giggle, the creak of a closing door.

Even an ordinary home could house extraordinary secrets.

My heart beat a little faster. I hadn't let Renee scare me away before. I would stay.

A couple of mobile numbers later it was my turn.

'Welcome! Can I —' Renee's maroon-lipsticked smile became a flat burgundy slash when she glanced up from her

iPad and saw me. 'Oh, it's you.'

'Hi Renee. Great day for it.' I had tried for cheerful bluster but came off sounding meek and insipid. My smile slipped a little.

Renee fashioned her mouth back into a semblance of a smile, but it didn't reach her eyes. Renee Crowley saved her full-wattage beam for those she deemed worthy. And to be worthy in Renee Crowley's eyes meant one thing only – you might buy a house. And since Renee Crowley did not believe I would buy a house from her today – or any other day – I could hardly blame her lack of warmth.

Particularly since she was absolutely correct in her assumption.

A nobody, Kate, that's who you are.

Mind you, I'd attended eight open houses before Renee remembered my face, so for a while there I'd been one of the smiled-upon. Until some local gossip nattered in her ear; filled her in on my ... *history*.

Told her about the *incident*.

She looked at me differently now. Like the rest of them.

Dr Evans, the sad-eyed psychologist I'd been referred to afterwards, had attempted to teach me a four-step plan to help deal with the judgement – or pity, as the case may be – of others. It, like all the therapy I'd attempted in the years before I gave it away, had proved useless. Dr Evans didn't get it.

No one did.

Pity was annoying, but I could deal with that. And the judgement, well, I deserved the judgement.

I deserved it all.

'Kate, isn't it?'

She got my name right.

OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

A sudden rush of pleasure filled me, followed swiftly by irritation for being grateful Renee-fucking-Crowley remembered my name.

Dr Evans would not approve of my neediness.

'Yes. Kate Webb.'

'And a mobile number for you, Kate?' Renee asked, her index finger poised mid-air, the lacquered, claret-coloured nail somehow managing to convey her disdain.

We both knew she would never call. To her, I was a number on a spreadsheet she'd give the owners to prove what a fabulous job she'd done enticing potential buyers inside their home.

I rattled it off anyway.

'Lovely. Take your time.' She turned towards the next people. 'Good morning. Welcome to 65 Waratah Drive. Can I have your name, please?'

I'd been dismissed. But instead of being pissed off with Renee, a familiar buzz spread through me. The thrill of a new house and all its buried secrets. Like that first sip of chilled white wine on a summer's afternoon, anticipation raced through my bloodstream; this was the drug that kept me coming back for more. The front door loomed, with all its promises. Promises of lives lived, of children growing and grown, of nightly dinners around a kitchen table. Of scuff marks on walls and broken light fittings and empty picture hooks. Everyday stuff. Family life.

Beginnings.

And endings, of course.

My pulse quickened as I walked through the front door.

* * *

The hallway was stifling and smelled like biscuits. Bloody stylists: always insisting on that just-baked biscuit smell. That, or freshly brewed coffee. I supposed it was better than the heady scent of cat's piss or overcooked vegetables. And, yes, some houses did smell that bad.

The Asian couple were still in the first bedroom, so with impeccable real estate etiquette I waited my turn in the hall. After a minute or so they emerged. The child – I still couldn't tell if it was a boy or girl – twisted back to look into the room, tugging so insistently on its parents' hands it was almost horizontal. As they dragged it away, the child started to wail and the parents shushed it and dragged harder.

I entered.

It was a child's room. Colourful letters on the wall above the single bed spelled out FLYNN. Other than this personal touch all character had been sucked out of the room in favour of good taste. Neutrals, with 'pops of colour'. In this case, royal blue and fire-engine red. For a boy. Obviously. A throw rug lay across the end of the white metal-framed bed, too artfully messy to be anything but staged. Toys, the retro kind adults adored but children didn't really find interesting – not compared to iPads and gaudy plastic shit from a discount store, anyway – were arranged on a white bookshelf. Collectable miniature robots had been positioned up high to protect them from grubby hands. A tiny Guns N' Roses t-shirt hung on a hanger like artwork to target the cool-young-family-moved-to-the-suburbs-but-haven't-lost-their-edge demographic. A wooden train track had been set up on the floor near a child-sized tepee – for that hipster touch.

Nothing in this room spoke to me of Sascha. Or of 'Flynn' for that matter. This was a stage-set masquerading as a child's

bedroom. But I started searching it anyway.

Moving swiftly, I pulled open the top drawer of the bedside table. Empty. Nothing in the lower two either. I spun around to the built-in wardrobe. The door glided open on oiled hinges. Empty again, but for a couple of taped-up wine boxes marked *Kids Books* and *Stuffed Toys* – annoyingly sealed up with masking tape. I slid the door shut.

Two small boys tumbled past me as I left the room, yelling ‘bags this one’ at the same time. One burrowed under the throw rug as his placid mother waited in the hall for me to exit. She gave me a ‘boys will be boys’ shrug and a beatific smile.

There was no sign of the Asian couple with their gender-indeterminate child in the hall or the next room. This one was a teen girl’s version of the previous room. White, aqua and yellow. Cool and calm. I grunted. No stinky t-shirts. No blue-tacked 1D or 5SOS posters in sight. Or whatever boyband girls were squealing about this week.

Bedside table, empty.

Built-ins, empty – save for half a dozen hangers at one end. I rifled cursorily through the clothes. Adult (female, mostly outdated) formal wear, shrouded in plastic. Nothing for me here.

Damn, damn, damn.

I left the room and crossed the hall, hearing ‘Choo-choo’ and the sound of clattering trains from Flynn’s room. The mother was probably letting the boys destroy the toys for five minutes’ peace while she texted her friend about their lunch date.

Next, the master bedroom: white doona on the bed, grey throw rug across a corner, a single geometric patterned aqua cushion positioned on an excess of white ones. It looked exactly the same as the photograph on the sign, , though it

was noticeably smaller when not seen through the wide-angle lens of the camera. But it was the generic black and white wall art that really gave me the shits. Three side-by-side typographic works, each one a single, apparently handwritten, word.

Imagine. Dream. Love.

Yawn, more like.

I'd seen the exact same prints in three houses in the past six weeks. The artist in me cringed.

By now I didn't hold out much hope. The owners had apparently moved on, taking their personalities with them. Nevertheless, I started on the room. Methodically I slid open drawers, checked behind the bedside tables and peered into the wardrobe. I experienced a moment's excitement after touching something soft at the back of a high shelf. An ordinary men's tennis sock, white, hardly worn. For a moment I considered it, since I'd found so little in my search so far, but it was virtually brand new.

I'd keep looking.

The sound of someone exaggeratedly clearing their throat made me thrust the sock back, squinting my eyes as my head pounded with renewed urgency. I turned, attempting nonchalance. An old man, tall and somewhat stooped, blocked the doorway. He wore a light-blue cardigan and beige pants and his face was tanned and grim, as if he usually spent his days gardening or bushwalking and was not happy about being in a stranger's house on a sunny Saturday morning. His frown of disapproval split his forehead in two.

I risked a hesitant smile. 'You've got to check out the storage, don't you?' I said. 'Some of these older places have bugger-all storage.' I waved a hand vaguely at the wardrobe. 'This one's not too bad, though.'

OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

His expression didn't change. I excused myself and walked to the door. He stepped aside to let me pass, mouth downturned. A dumpy woman stood behind him with a mildly confused look on her face.

'Having a bit of a snoop, wasn't she?' the man said to the woman – his wife presumably – not bothering to lower his voice.

My face grew hot and I couldn't stop myself from scurrying away.

Next was the living room, which, along with the kitchen, formed one large open space. A renewed blast of biscuit smell – chocolate chip – did nothing to help my latent nausea, so I tried to breathe through my mouth. A TV cabinet stood at one end of the room; a pair of light-grey lounges and the kitchen bench at the other. The open-plan layout told me the house had been renovated at some stage; the all-white kitchen was modern enough to suggest it had been quite recently. Renee should know better, I thought tetchily, cursing the fluoro brightness of the room for amplifying my hangover as I peered around. White kitchens were all the rage. She should have put a photo of this room on the sign out front.

Automatically, I revised my assessment of price. Maybe they'd get 1.8.

Several couples wandered around, some with bored children in tow. One man measured the lounge with a tape measure before his partner shook her head and sighed. Another couple whispered as they peered into the pantry. Perhaps it was too large, or too small – who knew? Others examined the walls and floors. Even the ceiling. No chance for me to search here. I ducked around the L-shaped bench and walked over to the kitchen sink where a window overlooked the backyard.

I sighed. It was more of the same. Not the sort of yard where I could picture Sascha digging in the dirt or calling for me to come and see a grasshopper he'd found. Too generic. Disappointing. The lawn was neat, with an older but freshly painted garage to the left and tidy, if uninspiring, gardens around the perimeter. More ridiculous white stones covered the driveway leading to the garage. The temporary absence of a Hills hoist could be deduced by a hole in the centre of the grassed area. Let's face it: no one wanted to imagine hanging out washing.

They were buying the dream, darling.

I didn't bother going outside. I could see from here the backyard would be as devoid of mementoes as the rest of the house.

Time to go.

* * *

As I walked back down the hall I wandered into a cloud of Chanel No. 5. My stomach started to do the little fluttery thing I knew well. I breathed shallowly, trying to stem the familiar wave of nausea. Renee's chirruping voice from the front door stopped me. I halted just out of sight and eavesdropped.

'Thank you, and what did you think of the house?'

'Well, it wasn't really my cup of tea. I'd expected the place would need to be extensively renovated but I'm afraid it's just no good. We're looking for something with a little more ... *charm*, you know? And a pool, of course – or at least the space to add one. The children are adamant we must have a pool.'

I couldn't see the woman who spoke but I guessed she was the wearer of the Chanel No. 5. Her vowels were strangely

rounded, like she was auditioning for the role of Eliza Doolittle in a school play but couldn't get the accent right.

'Mmm, I see,' Renee replied, her words dripping with fake sincerity. 'Ah ... I'm sorry I've forgotten your name?'

Typical Renee.

'Tammy.'

'Well, Tammy, we do have a number of other properties on our list at the moment —'

'Oh, I think we've seen everything currently available in this area. We've been back in Sydney for a couple of weeks now. We've lived in London for the last five years' – that explained the odd accent – 'and I've been desperately looking for somewhere. We just *adore* this area. My husband starts work in the city soon and we want to get settled as soon as possible.'

'Oh, Tammy! How lovely for you to be searching for a home on our beautiful north shore. It's so leafy and quiet. Just perfect for families. Do you mind if I ask what your budget is?'

'Well, luckily for us the pound goes a long way at the moment. My husband's given me a budget of four point five. Perhaps a little higher if I can persuade him I've found the perfect home.'

Renee's long moment of silence somehow managed to broadcast her happiness. Her next words were hushed. 'Tammy, you might be in luck. Something new has just come on the market. Today. We are only showing it to a select few at this time. Open houses will start next week. The owners have decided to go to auction, but it could sell before that, given the current market, so if you are interested ...'

'It has a pool?'

'Yes, a gorgeous pool. Oh, it is nothing short of stunning, Tammy, honestly. It has the charm this house ...' – she paused

theatrically – ‘sadly, does not. It’s in your price range and it might be more to your taste.’

‘That sounds great. I’d love to have a look.’

‘Wonderful,’ Renee said, drawing the word out. ‘One of our senior agents, Roger, is taking care of the property. He’s arranged a VIP open house for today at around three, I think. Just let me find the address, I’m sure he texted it to me earlier.’

I stepped around the corner.

Renee had her phone out and talons scrabbling. She glanced up when she heard my approach, then hastily shifted her focus back to her phone, addressing me at the same time. ‘Oh, Kate, I didn’t see you there. I was just talking to Tammy. She’s looking to buy a home, a *family* home, in the area. She’s come from *London* recently.’

She made London sound like heaven. Or an orgasm.

The Chanel lady – Tammy – looked me up and down, apparently not impressed by what she saw: a middle-aged woman with a sheen of sweat, wearing unfashionable jeans, a navy sweatshirt, no makeup and holey Converse sneakers. My hair was in its usual state, somehow both frizzy and lank.

Tammy, on the other hand, looked as she smelled. Expensive. In a show-off-y but casual way. Pearls, crisp white shirt, jeans that couldn’t be more different to mine. Probably Gucci or some uber-cool brand I hadn’t heard of. Blow-dried hair, full makeup. What did surprise me was that she had two children with her. They’d been so quiet I hadn’t noticed them. The boy was about eight and the girl a couple of years older. The children, almost as neatly dressed as their mother, were ignored by both her and Renee. I’d never seen such silent, well-behaved children.

It gave me the creeps.

OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

Sascha had been a quiet child too, though I couldn't ever remember him standing so weirdly still and mute. Mind you, he'd been younger than these two when ...

I buried the thought, mentally shovelling dirt over it to keep those ghosts firmly entombed. This wasn't the time or place. I'd think about Sascha later, when I was alone in my apartment with a large glass of wine.

We all stood silently for a long moment. Tammy looked from Renee to me with a slight frown.

Renee caved first. She turned to the children and spoke in an even faker and higher-pitched voice than normal. 'Children! Are you looking forward to finding a lovely new house?' After a questioning glance towards their mother, both nodded solemnly at the watching real estate agent, who regarded them with a palpable lack of interest, before directing her beady eyes my way. 'Can I help you with something else, Kate?' she asked, her polite smile for Tammy's benefit, not mine.

'No, thanks, Renee. I'll be off.'

I squeezed past Tammy and her silent and staring children – the stench of her perfume so strong I held my breath lest I vomit all over the polished timber floor – and out into the fresh air, but then I moved to one side, head cocked, listening.

Renee gave Tammy the address. I raised my eyebrows.

The house certainly would be expensive, that was one of Wahroonga's hoity-toity-est streets. Something about the address rang a bell in my jangling brain, but I couldn't put my finger on what, or why.

'The Harding house,' Renee sighed. 'You will just *love* it, Tammy.'

* * *

The Harding house.

I was unable to subdue a smug little smile as I put two and two together in my hungover brain and realised Renee was talking about *the* Harding house. I'd heard of it, of course, as had most people on the north shore.

Now I understood her reluctance to say the address in front of me. Renee believed I wasn't worthy, that the Harding house was too good for me. I couldn't disagree with her.

But that didn't mean I wasn't going to be there on the dot of three.

I tuned back in. Renee asked her golden-egg-slash-new-best-friend about hotels in London. She was travelling to Europe next year and was dying to stay somewhere *delightful*. On the Thames and near Harrods, if at all possible – did Tammy perhaps know of anywhere like that?

The lawn was empty now, most of the oglers having raced off to their next open house. I crunched back down the pebbly driveway. Partway along I stopped, staring down at the smooth white stones, again shaking my head. Stones like this made a mess of a lawn within days. I'd bet money the current owners of this place had been out here that morning, picking up stones that had inevitably migrated to the lawn and putting them back on the drive, swearing at each and every pebble as they did so. I bent down, plucked a stone at random and straightened back up. I flipped it over and over again on my palm, considering.

It was lovely and smooth and so, so bland.

Perfect.

With a sense of satisfaction, I slipped it into the front pocket of my jeans and continued to my car.

I yanked open the driver's side door and flopped in, reaching across for the Coke bottle at the same time. A couple of

centimetres of stale black liquid sloshed around the bottom of the plastic container. I finished it off in two greedy mouthfuls. It was warmer than last time, and pretty flat too, but that didn't stop me. My car's dashboard clock said it was 12.08. What to do until 3 pm?

Lunch?

The brief thought of food was immediately replaced by sudden, intense nausea. I flung open the door and repeated my earlier head-between-knees scenario, retching violently then spitting foul-tasting saliva onto the tar at my feet. And I knew – again, from far too much previous experience – the vomiting phase of this hangover was done.

Thank-fucking-Christ for that.

I sat up, wiping my smiling mouth with the back of my hand, light-headed with relief, knowing I would feel normal again soon. As I pulled the door shut I glanced across the street. Renee stood at the boot of a silver BMW, the open house flag in her arms, a small sandwich board at her feet. She stared at me, her mouth twisted into a moue of revulsion, eyes boggling like a character from a cartoon.

My face flushed red and hot. I sank into my seat, removing my hand from my mouth like I'd been slapped. Renee swung back to her car, placing the items into the boot hurriedly before slamming it shut and marching around to the driver's side. She sped off without looking at me.

Great. Another reason for Renee to hate me.

I glanced down at my spittle-flecked sweatshirt then at my shaking hands, surprised by how puffy and veiny they were. How old. My nails were bitten as usual, and one hand was marked by a shallow scratch I couldn't remember getting. A drunk's wound. I grabbed the wheel tight to stop the tremors.

My skin shone with sweat, my knuckles taut and white. I glanced down at my stomach with distaste. The waistband of my jeans cut into my flab. I felt bloated; strange, given I'd spent most of the morning emptying my stomach of its contents. My body looked foreign to me, which was weird, as I'd been putting on weight fairly steadily for years now. I guess in my mind I was still a skinny gymnast with a six-pack and muscular calves. I undid the top button of my jeans, enjoying the release of flesh that spilled out and over the denim, then felt repulsed by it. Repulsed by my own body. As if in response, it growled, a long, low animal sound. Suddenly I was starving, nausea gone.

Fuck Renee.

I needed food.

I shrugged off my earlier worries about RBTs, deciding fried chicken was worth the risk of being booked. My stomach groaned and gurgled as I drove down the highway to the nearest drive-through. I took my oily box of chicken and parked in an alley behind a Chinese restaurant. When only bones and gristle lay on the greasy napkin I leaned my head back against the headrest, trying to work out if I felt better or worse.

I couldn't decide.

Setting the alarm on my phone, I wound my seat back and fell immediately into a deep sleep. When beeping woke me I blinked, peering out the window, startled by an elderly Chinese man watching me with impassive eyes. He wore a bloodied apron and perched elegantly on a milk crate at the back door of the restaurant, a cigarette dangling from his slender fingers. My eyes felt gummy, and drool had leaked out of one side of my mouth. I wiped it away and wound the seat back up, averting my gaze. The man's innate dignity made me feel even crappier. I surreptitiously buttoned up my jeans, hoping he couldn't tell

OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

what I was doing, then started the car and drove off.

I'd left myself half an hour. As I approached the house I put the window down in an attempt to disperse a couple of fried chicken farts, hoping to get them out of my system. The last thing I wanted was to add 'stinky farter' to my list of the day's embarrassments.

But when I pulled up at the Harding house all thoughts of farting vanished.

I fell in love with the place.

AFTERNOON

The Harding house was perfect.

Sitting in my little yellow Hyundai with ten minutes to kill, my eyes roving over each brick and tile, mesmerised by the symmetry of the house, but also the imperfections that somehow made this house perfect, I knew – *I knew* – this was it. This was the one. And even after all that went down later, I still believe the Harding house is the most exquisite home a person could ever have or want.

The Harding house, or Highfields, as it was officially called according to the sign near the gate at the start of the drive. Highfields was a landmark in Wahroonga but locals had always called it the Harding house. It had been in Brett Harding's family for generations. Everyone was shocked that he would even think about selling it. Of course, I didn't know all this at the time. My first thought on seeing the Harding house in the flesh – well, in the bricks and mortar – was, *Why, oh why, would anyone ever sell a house like this?*

The house was old, that was obvious, though I couldn't have guessed at a date. Despite attending open houses most weekends over the past couple of years, and despite working at a real estate agency, architecture wasn't really my thing. But I found out from the slick, glossy brochure I got my hands on later that the house was Georgian Revival, built about 1930. The façade was reddish brick, double storey and rectangular.

OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

Pleasingly symmetrical, there were three windows along the top floor, balanced on the ground floor with two windows and an impressively porticoed front door. Each of the five windows was charmingly framed by deep blue shutters. The roofline was steep, the tiles neatly capped by a chimney – like the cherry on an ice-cream sundae.

From the street you couldn't see much of the house at all, just glimpses of red brick through the hedge of leafy camellias. To get to the Harding house you turned down a long driveway, entering through handsome wrought-iron gates, which today stood open. The long, cobblestoned, slate-grey driveway finished at the front of the home in a turning circle that wrapped around a central garden bed of hedge and white roses. The garden beds on the outside of the turning circle were landscaped, though not in that meticulous overdone way of so many show homes. These gardens screamed – or I should say whispered – good taste.

The Harding house was worth a fortune; that was obvious immediately. There were bigger and more ostentatious houses on the north shore, but this was something special. The perfect family house. It was the sort of place I'd envisaged Peter, Sascha and me living in one day.

Back when I still had a family.

I pushed the thought away and sat in my car for a long minute, drinking in the beauty of the house, nervous at the thought of entering. This time I agreed wholeheartedly with Renee; the Harding house was too good for me. Too perfect for me to soil with my farts and my fat presence. With my old clothes and unwashed hair and greasy fried-chicken fingers.

Too perfect for my ... *searching*.

I almost started the engine up again and drove straight home.

And what if they'd renovated badly? Minimalist, like the last house? Or, even worse, decorated in the 1980s?

Ultimately, though, it was the thought of what I might find inside that kept me from leaving – that made me desperate to enter.

A car door slammed and I twisted around in my seat, startled. A blue Lexus pulled up behind me, as shiny and modern as if driven straight from a car lot. The man who climbed out of it was almost at me by the time I saw him. A tanned face filled my window. The face was classically handsome, clean shaven and oozing with an excessive confidence that marked him as a real estate agent. His thick dark hair was neat, with grey streaks at the temples. The grey gave him a distinguished air, in that annoying way that only seemed to work for men. And then the face grinned at me, displaying a few wrinkles in the corners of his eyes and the whitest and straightest teeth I'd ever seen. I desperately hoped the stench of my farts had dissipated.

'Hi there, I'm Roger Bailey. McQuilty Real Estate.' He paused, waiting. Before I had a chance to reply, a dense cloud of aftershave wafted into the car like a low-lying fog, as if catching up to him. *My God*. Any lingering fart smells would go undetected by this man – or by anyone within a ten-metre radius – unless they had the nose of a bloodhound. It was hard to believe he could smell so strongly of aftershave unless he'd applied it just seconds before. I held back a cough.

'Oh, um, hi Roger. Nice to meet you. I'm ... Tammy.'

Shit. The real Tammy had better be running late.

'Well, hello there, Tammy. Great to meet you too. Renee told me you'd be coming. So you're the lady from London then? Back in Australia for good, I hear?'

'Ah, yes, that's right,' I said, trying not to squirm.

OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

'We have another few interested buyers coming along today, though it looks like you and I are the early birds,' Roger continued with a smile. 'If you'll wait a moment I'll pop inside and check everything's ready and give you a wave when I'm done. And perhaps ...can I ask you to move your car just a little bit further around the circle? Maybe park it to one side if that's alright? Thank you so much, Tammy, I'll see you in a moment.'

Roger walked towards the house. I put him at about five years older than me, maybe fifty, but he was in great shape. Trim in his expensive suit. Striding off in ridiculously shiny black shoes. Was he the type to shine them himself? Maybe. I watched him go, wondering why I'd never met Roger before. I'd heard his name mentioned by other agents, including Vivian, my boss, and it seemed odd I'd not attended an open house he'd run. Maybe he only sold homes like the Harding house. And homes like the Harding house weren't usually open for inspection to the general public, that is, plebs like me. Most of them were shown *by appointment only*.

Why not this one, then? The question intrigued me but I had no answer.

I watched as Roger bounded up the front steps and consulted a piece of paper before pressing buttons on a keypad near the front door. He stood back, staring at the door. It swung open before him as if unlocked by the power of his gaze. I had a tantalising glimpse of the graceful curve of a staircase; of gleaming parquet floors.

No keys needed at the Harding house.

Roger crossed the threshold then spun to face me.

Shit, he asked me to move the car.

I glanced down at my motley bunch of keys, hanging from the ignition. I couldn't even remember what half of them

opened. Often – swearing, wasted and reeling – I dropped the whole lot at my apartment door. Or lost them among the tissues and coins and old scrunched-up shopping lists in my oversized handbag.

Be nice to have a house with a keypad.

I drove the car a few metres further on and parked it as close to the outside of the turning circle as I could, then wound the window up and locked it, shoving my keys into the front pocket of my jeans with the pebble I'd collected earlier. The bonnet was pleasantly warm under my arse as I waited, but the air was chilly and I shivered when the sun vanished behind a cloud. Breathing in deeply, I wondered if it was possible for the air to be both sweeter and clearer here than it was in the rest of the suburb.

With the Harding house, anything seemed possible.

Roger opened the door and waved me in with one hand. In the other he held a mobile to his ear, and he mouthed *sorry* with a polite smile/half-grimace before turning his back to me. I scurried over to the house and up the front steps, farting once more on the way. At the front door I bent over and untied the laces of my scruffy black Cons and slid them off, hopping from foot to foot precariously as I did so. It hadn't seemed necessary to remove them at the last place, but they certainly didn't belong in the Harding house. I was pleased to note I'd worn socks that matched and were free from holes, but I scrunched my nose at the smell of them. I was glad Roger had moved a little further into the entryway and hoped he wouldn't notice the various odours emanating from my body.

'But, Steph, you know I planned to take the girls to the aquarium tomorrow,' he was saying as I straightened up and walked inside. Roger used a tight, unhappy voice I wasn't

supposed to be able to hear, but since he was all of three metres away and the house was silent and empty, of course I heard every word. I peered around, trying to give him privacy. 'But ... Yes, I realise that,' he continued with a glance my way, though I ignored him now.

I was too busy marvelling, slack-jawed, at the sight before me.

The Harding house.

From the sweeping staircase to the gorgeous furniture, it was totally, absolutely perfect. The entryway was the height of two floors, enhancing the sense of space. Warm light from the second storey window filled the area, but gently; there was nothing harsh about the Harding house. Nothing that jarred or unsettled. White walls made everything feel fresh. Under my socks, the intricate parquet floors were elegant but not fussy. It felt like a Goldilocks house to me: just right.

I exhaled, the mess of the morning slipping away like a bad dream.

Then Roger spoke, pulling me reluctantly from my reverie. 'Yes. Yes, I understand things change but —' he said in that same strangled voice. 'Of course not. Can't you do it another time? Yes. Fine, OK. Whatever.' Roger yanked the phone from his ear and spun back to me, annoyance writ large all over his face. But he was a professional. A moment later his white-toothed grin was back. 'Sorry, Tammy. That was my wife. We're just ... we're going through some ... having a few ...' He faltered, the mask slipping. 'We're in the process of separating. I was supposed to have my kids tonight.' He shrugged. 'Things change I guess, don't they?'

Before I could attempt a response, Roger came closer. I was surprised to see he was shorter than me.

‘OK, then. Welcome, Tammy!’ Roger said, his voice having returned to the slightly obsequious but somehow still condescending tone used by the majority of real estate agents. ‘Can I get your number please?’

I gave him my doctor’s phone number, which was the only one – other than my own – I could remember. No one else had yet arrived. Perfect. I knew the real Tammy was bound to be here soon, so I’d better make the most of the calm before the storm.

I started wandering from room to room.

First the kitchen. With its *de rigueur* whiteness, it should have been disappointing – like the house I’d seen that morning – but authentic touches of warm wood, stainless steel and bursts of colour somehow made it work. A KitchenAid mixer in apple green sat on the white benchtop. The blonde timber bar stools under the island bench appeared handmade. A toddler-sized fiddle-leaf fig in a yellow ceramic pot by the door looked so healthy I thought it must be fake, but one touch of a deep-green leaf confirmed that life very much flourished in the Harding house.

Next to the kitchen was a sunny conservatory with glass walls overlooking lush green lawns dotted with trees and surrounded by garden beds. You couldn’t see any neighbouring homes. To an apartment-dweller like me that in itself was the epitome of luxury.

The gorgeousness continued, room after room.

A formal dining room that actually appeared well used; a living area with the most comfortable tartan lounge imaginable (yes, I sat on it); a home theatre with armchairs for eight; a marble bathroom that somehow managed to remain understated; then, to top it all off, a library – all dark wood panelling with walls of

OTHER PEOPLE'S HOUSES

books like something out of a novel itself.

I circled the room, trailing my hands along the spines of the books, then reluctantly departed, making my way back to the kitchen. No biscuit smells here. The Harding house didn't need cheap smoke and mirrors. I walked over to the sink and peered through the kitchen window. Trees waved in the breeze. Perched cheerily on the windowsill was a cactus in a terracotta pot; a prickly pear, with flat, spiky pads arranged like a rabbit's face complete with lopsided ears.

I hadn't seen a prickly pear for years. Not since...

Then it hit me.

The cactus in the terracotta pot was the same as the one my husband had been carrying on the day we first met.