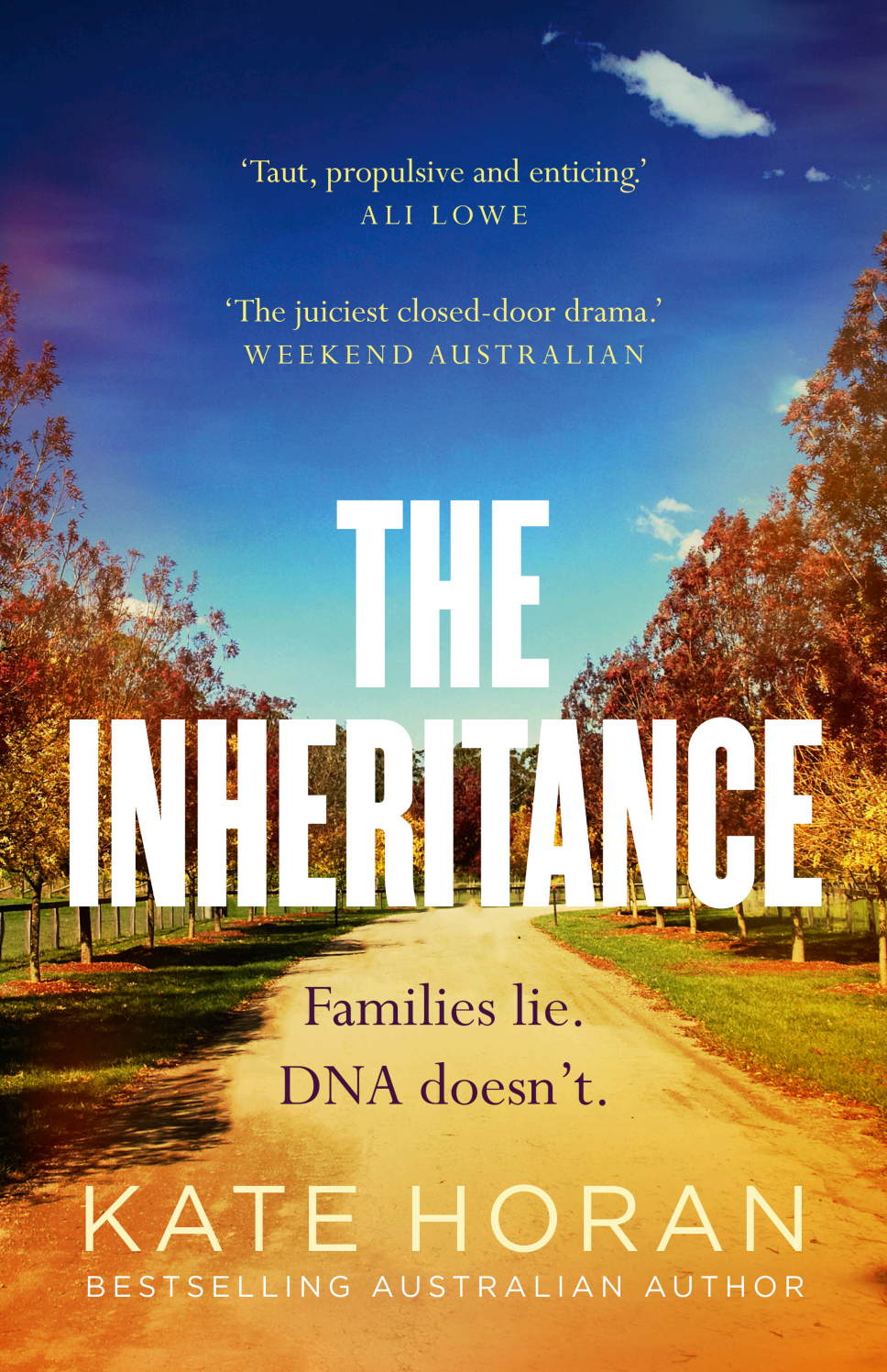

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WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN
THE
INHERITANCE
Families lie.
DNA doesn't.
KATE HORAN
BESTSELLING AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR

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DNA Sleuths Facebook Group

Anonymous: Has anyone here gifted DNA kits to expose a family secret? I'm thinking this Christmas might be time for the truth to come out. Finally. Interested to hear your experiences, good, bad or otherwise. No judgment please.

Top comments

Mary Louise: Be careful anonymous. You never know which secrets the DNA will reveal. My innocent curiosity about our family history revealed a case of NPE. My elderly mother hasn't spoken to me since.

> **Anonymous:** Thanks **Mary Louise.** What is NPE? Sorry, I'm new around here.
>
> **Mary Louise:** NPE is a Non-Paternity Event. Get what I'm saying? More common than you think. Turns out my mum was a bit too friendly with my dad's best man …
>
> **Anonymous:** Oh, wow, sorry to hear that.

Fergus Schmidt: I agree with **Mary Louise**. You sound very sure what the tests will reveal. Problem is DNA isn't selective. What if you blow the top off something else altogether?

Sara Power: WTF??? This borders on manipulation. It's morally questionable to say the least.

Karen Finn: Rubbish!!! She's just thinking of giving them the test, it's up to them if they do it or not. She's not planning to steal their saliva in their sleep!!!

Sara Power: Okay Karen

Karen Finn: Very mature! Also she said no judgment.

Tracey Dunn: Admin here, just a reminder about our Code of Conduct. Be kind, ladies.

Wendy Turner: Wouldn't it be best to have a robust conversation with the people involved? IMO DNA shouldn't be used for this purpose, real relationships are involved. Do you really want to be responsible for destroying the family?

Karen Finn: SECRETS destroy families!! It's not her fault if people have lied!

Tracey Dunn: Ok I'm closing the comments on this post because I need to go to bed.

*** * * Comments are closed * * ***

Chapter 1

Meg pressed the buzzer and drummed her fingers on her thighs as she waited for a voice on the intercom.

'Come on,' she muttered, fanning her denim shirt, wishing she'd worn something more appropriate for the early December heat.

She had an urge to buzz again, but resisted. The Rosedale nursing staff were stretched enough as it was. Instead, she focused on the sound of water bubbling over smooth pebbles in the water feature by the door. She closed her eyes, imagining she was standing in the shade of a willow tree beside a cool creek. She opened her eyes. No such luck. She was still at a care facility in Sydney's outskirts, too far from the coast to feel a sea breeze. With a looming deadline. She buzzed again.

'Yes?' an impatient voice said through the intercom.

'Sorry, it's Meg Hunter. Jenny's daughter.'

'Oh, good.' The tone softened. 'Come in.'

Stale air filled her nostrils as Meg stepped into the foyer, an acrid cocktail of stewed meat and disinfectant. A large woman got up from behind her computer screen. Doreen, according to her name tag. Meg hadn't seen her before.

Doreen gave Meg a pained smile. 'Thanks for coming down.'

'That's fine,' Meg said. Although it wasn't really fine. Pete would be going crazy. He'd already called twice.

'She's quite agitated, she's—'

A beep came from Doreen's pocket and she reached for her phone, shaking her head at the interruption. 'You know where you're going, don't you?' She was already walking back into the office.

Meg nodded. 'Of course.'

Patterson Wing. Room 422. She'd find it eventually. She'd only visited once since her mother had moved rooms. How long ago was that? A month ago? Six weeks?

She moved through the labyrinth of dark corridors, following signs with arrows and room numbers, until she reached an open area that was vaguely familiar. A small group of silver-haired ladies, decades older than her mum, sat on upholstered chairs, exercising with large elastic bands. Meg gave them a smile as she passed through to the opposite corridor. Yes, Jenny's room was down here on the right.

The first room looked empty. She stepped tentatively towards the door of the second room and met the gaze of a stooped man in navy pyjamas, standing behind a walking frame. His face lit up, clearly thrilled to have an unexpected visitor.

'Hello, there!'

'Oh, sorry,' Meg said. 'Wrong room.'

His face dropped slightly. 'Who are you looking for, love?'

'My mum, Jenny.'

'Ah, Jenny. Next door,' he said, jerking his head in that direction.

Meg thanked him and stopped outside the next room, watching her mother through the open door. Jenny stood at the window looking towards the garden, where the sun was starting to sink in the sky. The only sound was the distant shriek of cockatoos. She was still. Her blonde ponytail almost reached the waistband of her skirt. Meg had suggested a haircut a year or so ago, back when self-care was becoming too hard. Nothing too short, just shoulder length. A

long bob. But Jenny had protested, and Meg had given up. She was glad now. Jenny still looked like Jenny. Beautiful. Slightly fragile. Young, despite the streaks of grey.

There had been no grey in her mother's hair when the first signs of this terrible disease had made themselves known. At first, it was just little things. A forgotten name. A mixed-up plan. An overdue bill. Silly little things, easy to ignore or explain away. Her mother was only forty-six then. Who would suspect it? But when Jenny stopped getting book-keeping work from her longest, most-loyal client, Meg started to wonder.

At the first appointment with the neurologist, as they recounted all these little things in one heartbreaking conversation, it was obvious that something was wrong. Their worst fears were confirmed when Jenny failed a memory test, a test so simple that she had laughed when the doctor had given her three words to remember: pumpkin, train, chair. But when she was asked for the words just five minutes later, her brow had furrowed and she'd looked at Meg, glassy-eyed.

'Mum?' Meg said softly.

Jenny spun around and her face broke out into a smile. 'I thought you would never come. Where have you been?'

Meg bristled. 'I've been working.'

Jenny's smile fell just a fraction. 'Yes, of course.' There was a crease now between her eyes as she looked past Meg into the hallway as though she'd been expecting someone else. She looked down at her hands.

'Is everything okay?' Meg asked. 'The nurse rang me this afternoon, she said you were upset.'

'She did?'

'You don't remember?'

Jenny frowned and looked out the window. She shook her head.

'It's okay.' Meg tried to keep her irritation out of her voice. She'd already missed one deadline this week. She felt her phone vibrate and looked at the screen. *Pete Garcia*. Damn. 'I've gotta take this.'

Jenny sat down in the armchair by the window as Meg stepped into the corridor.

'Pete, sorry I had to—'

'I'm getting a bit sick of the excuses, Meg. There are plenty of freelancers who would kill for the work. I need your story—'

'I know, it's nearly done. You'll have it in half an hour.'

'I was meant to have it an hour ago!' He sighed. 'Honestly, if it was anyone else, I'd tell them to forget it.'

'I know, I'm sorry.' Meg glanced in at Jenny. Her eyes were closed. Was she sleeping?

'Just make sure I've got it by six.'

He hung up.

The room was darker when Meg returned. Jenny's forehead was smooth, her mouth slack. The tension in her shoulders was gone and her hands lay motionless in her lap. Peace.

Meg took her laptop from her bag and sat on the bed, tapping softly at the keys.

She was doing a final read through half an hour later when a white-haired orderly appeared at the door, pushing a trolley. The smell of overcooked vegetables filled the room. He gave Meg a warm smile, then looked at Jenny.

'Dinner's here!' he called out.

Jenny stirred as he placed a plastic tray on the little table beside her. She didn't even glance at the plate with grey vegetables and some sort of meat, Meg assumed, under a pool of gravy. Her mother was somewhere else entirely, miles and decades from this small garden-view room. Meg could see the veil.

That's how Jenny had described it when Meg first broached the subject. A veil, between herself and the world. By then, they'd been avoiding it for months, carefully sidestepping it in conversations, both working hard to convince themselves that it was easy to think it was April rather than March, or accidentally put the kettle in the fridge. But then Meg saw the post-it notes on the cupboards and drawers in Jenny's kitchen. *Cutlery. Plates. Water glasses. Wine glasses.* God forbid Jenny couldn't find a wine glass. And then Meg couldn't pretend anymore.

'I knew you'd come,' her mother said, pulling Meg back to the present with a jolt.

'Of course I'd come, Mum,' she said, feeling like a fraud. It had definitely been more than six weeks since Jenny had moved into this room. How had Meg only visited once? But her guilt was pushed aside by the prickle of resentment that always followed.

'Did you drive from Hartwell,' Jenny asked, 'or did you get the train?'

'Where?' Meg said, unable to keep the frustration from her voice. The orderly reappeared with a cup of tea.

'Hartwell!' Jenny exclaimed. 'Do you still live in Hartwell?'

'I live in Marrickville, Mum.'

'Just play along, love,' the orderly whispered to Meg. 'It's better that way.'

Meg tried to meet Jenny's gaze, but she was staring now, just over Meg's shoulder. She studied her mother's striking eyes. Two concentric circles, golden-brown surrounding the pupil, the outer ring a dark blue, the markings of central heterochromia, which Meg had inherited from her. It was like looking at herself in the mirror, although Meg's markings were more pronounced.

And then, the veil lifted.

Jenny frowned. 'Meg,' she said, her voice lighter now. 'How long have you been here?'

Tears prickled behind Meg's eyes. 'Not long.'

'Will you stay?'

Meg looked at her laptop.

'Please?' Jenny's voice was reedy. Thin. 'We can watch *The Princess Bride*.' She reached out her hand, but her bony fingers could only brush against Meg's arm from where she sat. She dropped her hand again, staring into Meg's eyes.

Meg sighed. She reached for her laptop and hit send on her story. 'Yes, I'll stay for a while.'

The flat was dark when Meg arrived home. She took a tub of honeycomb ice cream from the freezer, which she kept hidden under a packet of peas and something unidentifiable in a Tupperware container, and slumped onto the couch, eating it with a spoon in the semi-darkness.

Then she messaged Pete: *Sorry for the delay on my story. Long day with Mum.*

She watched, bracing herself for his reaction. Three dots appeared.

Pulsing. Pulsing. Pulsing.

God, how long was his reply?

Then they disappeared.

She took another spoonful of ice cream, then looked back at the phone. Nothing. Oh God, this was bad. She needed Pete. He was keeping her afloat since the redundancy.

Her stomach churned and she put the tub on the coffee table. She rubbed her face. Tomorrow she needed to put in a very good day.