

BILGARRA
SPRINGS:
CHAPTER ONE

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One



CURVE BALL

Aurora felt incredibly uncomfortable. These chairs were definitely not meant to be sat in for a long time — being forced to sit with her back ramrod straight wasn't something she'd had to do since primary school, and heaven knew, that was quite a number of years ago. She considered that for a moment: twenty years to be exact.

She flicked her eyes around the floor to ceiling book shelves filled with leather bound volumes. It looked very impressive, but having obtained a law degree herself, the prestige angle was lost. All that those books meant to her were reading and work.

She flicked her wrist to check her watch — 2:54 p.m. — twenty-four minutes in this torture device of a chair. She absentmindedly picked a single cat hair from her black skirt. Her lips twitched in the briefest of smiles. Typical of Orinoco, leaving her mark; that cat had an ego bigger than most people she knew.

She wriggled around in the chair, her shoulders feeling constrained in the suit jacket. She figured yet another meeting with her grandmother's lawyer probably called for a little more effort in dressing than usual, hence the black suit with its mid-thigh length, pencil skirt and tailored jacket. Just because it looked good didn't mean that it was necessarily comfort-

able, in fact, she couldn't help wondering if maybe there was an inverse relationship between how much the clothing cost and how comfortable it was to wear.

Mentally cataloguing her wardrobe in terms of cost and wearability, she was caught by surprise when the heavy, timber door opened and the elderly lawyer entered the room.- Aurora looked up and smiled. The edges of his lips twitched in what appeared to be a smile but it didn't quite make the grade. According to his secretary, he had been late due to a court appearance and Aurora hoped like mad that his nervousness was due to that and had nothing to do with the slightly mysterious call yesterday to come to his office for this meeting. She had figured it would be quite routine, after all, administering her grandmother's estate couldn't be too difficult — the only living family member was her!

'Good afternoon Aurora. I'm glad you could make it on such short notice,' the softly spoken words in keeping with the serious atmosphere of the room. He briefly adjusted his tie before seating himself, and after a couple of moments silence, in which he stared at his fingers splayed across the leather desktop, he leaned forward in his chair, slowly entwining his fingers, and looking about as unnerved as Aurora had ever seen the usually, eternally composed man.

'As I am sure you are aware,' he hesitantly began, 'I've called you in today to discuss the terms of your grandmother's will.'

He paused, expecting some sort of reaction from her, but Aurora remained still and silent, her face impassive and her eyes glued to his. So far he hadn't told her anything that she didn't already know. When it became obvious that she had nothing to say he continued.

'You no doubt know that your grandmother left her entire estate to you.'

With this Clive flushed a little nervously and cleared his throat, becoming visibly more agitated by the second, staring at his hands again rather than meeting her eye.

Aurora's grandmother told her after making her last will that she was the sole beneficiary, so okay, no surprises with the estate, but that didn't explain the lawyer's behaviour, which was seriously out-of-character. Maybe she was the problem. It wouldn't be the first time that her no-nonsense demeanour had put somebody off, but for goodness sake, as a lawyer he makes his living dealing with blunt and difficult people and he'd known her all her life!

It may have only lasted a few seconds, but finally she couldn't stand the silence any longer. She leaned forward in her chair, her face relaxing slightly and her voice gentling.

'Clive, please, just tell me what is going on.'

With that, Clive flushed a rather stunning shade, bordering on violet.

'I have no idea how to tell you this Aurora, so I'll get straight to the point. According to your grandmother's will, before we can legally transfer her estate to you, you have to spend one month living, and working, on a cattle station in Queensland.'

He paused, waiting for any reaction that may be forthcoming. When Aurora remained silent he opened a file and produced a pile of correspondence, accompanied by a slight frown.

'Your grandmother evidently knew these people and has had it all arranged for quite some time now, as this pile of letters shows. We've contacted them to notify them of her death and to enquire as to their willingness to honour the terms of her will. They have indicated their compliance.'

He paused to gather his thoughts before continuing.

'I have to say though, before you make any decision about this, I'm sure that this particular clause of her will wouldn't stand up to a challenge, and if you like, we can institute proceedings to have it declared invalid. It just may take a while.'

Aurora remained silent. Her grandmother's request had quite stunned her. They had always been incredibly close, but Gran had never mentioned this.

Not once.

Ever.

Why on earth would her grandmother have done this? This was not something that she wanted to discuss any further with the lawyer, so she schooled her face to show no reaction whatsoever to the news, an ability borne of many years of practice, and her reply came without the slightest show of emotion.

'I understand your concern Clive, but there's no need. I'll comply with the terms of her will.'

Clive flushed again.

'Please Aurora, take some time to think about this. Don't get me wrong, your grandmother was a truly wonderful lady, and she had my utmost respect, but I'm not sure what she was trying to achieve with this final demand of hers, and it all seems a little unnecessary.'

Fighting to maintain her composure, Aurora took a deep breath and gave what she hoped was a plausible reason for her agreement.

'Clive, you knew my grandmother almost as well as I did, and I'm sure that she had her reasons for stipulating what she has. I trusted her implicitly when she was alive and I can see no reason to change that now that she's dead. I will spend the month out on this property and I'm sure that Gran's reasons will become clear. When do I need to go?'

Clive seemed a little lost for words. This was obviously not the response that he had anticipated. He moved his hands under the desk and flattened his lips, his shoulders shrugging ever so slightly.

'They've left that decision to you. Anytime is okay for them, we just need to let them know.'

Clive's uneasiness had led to the atmosphere in the room becoming very tense, and Aurora found herself getting a little tired of the whole situation. One month wasn't a long period of time and quite frankly after everything that had happened recently the break would do her good.

‘Fine, I have some study leave due. I’ll see how quickly the university can arrange it and we’ll take it from there. Do you want to contact the people at the station or do you want me to?’

In order to avoid her gaze and to try and cover his agitation, Clive was riffling through the papers in the file that he had opened earlier: her grandmother’s file. Aurora’s eyes fixed on the words written down the side of the blue manila folder — ‘Estate of Isabella Lily Munro (Deceased)’. A lump formed in her throat; it all seemed so impersonal. The shuffling ceased and finally Clive raised his head.

‘We’ll make all the necessary arrangements. Your grandmother has a sum of money earmarked for all the costs incurred. You just need to let us know a suitable time for you.’

Aurora rose from her chair in front of his desk and assumed her most neutral expression. Clive rose also.

‘Thank you Clive. I should know something tomorrow, or at the latest the next day. I’ll contact you when I have something concrete. Thanks for your time and concern.’

She knew that she sounded emotionless, but these past week had been very, very difficult and she just simply wanted it all to be over and to get on with her life. Her grandmother had been her only living relative and her death had absolutely tipped her world upside down. Gran had been 88 years old when she died and it wasn’t that Aurora didn’t know that one day she was going to lose her, it was quite simply that the reality of the loss was just so much bigger than she had anticipated.

When Aurora went to leave, Clive gently reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder. The personal contact made her still instantly. Clive’s voice was much softer when he continued.

‘Before you go, there is an envelope here for you from your grandmother that we were only to give you after you had agreed to the terms of her will.’

He held out an ivory envelope with her name scrawled across it in her grandmother's distinctive handwriting. Tears welled in her eyes. Clive moved to the door, his hand poised on the door handle before opening it.

'I'll leave you to read it.'

An almost imperceptible nod was her only reply. With that, he left the office, leaving Aurora standing staring down at the envelope in her hand. Her trembling fingers made the job of opening it that much harder, but finally she removed the single sheet of ivory paper.

Dearest Aurora,

Thank you so much my love for honouring the wishes of an old lady. I have my reasons for doing what I have done and your acceptance of this means a great deal to me. Fiona Fairley is a very dear friend of mine and I entrusted her with the safe keeping of my journal many years ago and she is to pass it on to you. Always remember that I loved you dearly and I ask you to promise me one final thing – to always be true to yourself.

All my love,

Isabella.Xx

Aurora dug her teeth into her lip to try and stem the tears, nevertheless, a single tear dropped onto the paper, turning her grandmother's final kiss into a runaway black smudge. She could picture her grandmother's kind face, weathered with age but still beautiful, smiling at her as always. She lifted the paper to her nose and it smelled faintly of the scent that her grandmother favoured and the memories that it triggered seemed to surround her with Gran's presence. Even the final word brought back bitter-sweet memories. Gran had never signed anything except 'Isabella' at the end of letters, notes etc. Never Gran, Grandma or Nana and even though Aurora's grandfather and their friends had always called her 'Bella, she had still signed everything simply 'Isabella'.

She dropped her head as she very gently replaced the sheet in the envelope. The note was cryptic, which was very unlike her grandmother who was usually forthright and straight to the point. She figured it would become clear at some stage what Gran was getting at. At least she hoped it would.

Aurora was glad that Clive had left her alone — she was that overwhelmed and emotionally spent that she really didn't want to have to speak to anyone. She took a deep breath and left his office, quietly closing the door before moving down the carpeted hallway towards the main door. She merely smiled at the receptionist as she made her way past her and out onto the street.

Aurora figured that Clive would take whatever fees were necessary out of the Estate and quite frankly, he could explain it to the receptionist, or the accounts officer, or whoever the hell dealt with all that stuff. She really, truly could not be bothered.

Movement after being uncomfortably seated for so long felt good. She barely noticed the throng of people around her, lost as she was in the memories triggered by the final note from her grandmother. When she finally reached her beloved red Volkswagen beetle, which in true inner-Sydney fashion was

parked a mile away from where she needed to be, she got in and leant her head back against the head rest and closed her eyes, content to be still and silent.

After a few minutes she opened her eyes, sat up and turned the key in the ignition. How on earth was she going to explain this to the powers-that-be at the university? She rolled her eyes. It was mid-semester and they were not going to take it well.

As she put the car in first gear and manoeuvred herself into a small opening in the traffic she decided that she actually didn't care what they thought — what was the worst they could do, sack her? She flattened her lips. The way she felt at the moment, her job was just another unimportant blip on the radar of her odd life. Just when you thought it couldn't get any weirder, along comes another curve ball. She huffed out a breath and as she accelerated with the other cars through the intersection she mentally toughened herself up, and headed towards the university: no time like the present to tackle this issue and may as well do it while she was doing the 'power dressing' thing. Even the smallest advantage in the circumstances would be helpful.