

## **Praise for *The Underhistory***

‘An original take on the secrets that houses keep, with every page drenched in foreboding. *The Underhistory* has all the hallmarks of a contemporary gothic classic’

**Erin Kelly, author of *The Skeleton Key***

‘A heartfelt and chilling gothic tragedy. Unbearably creepy, original and devastating’

**Chris Whitaker, author of *We Begin at the End***

‘An inventive, layered haunted house novel, where ghosts reside amid the dust and each room holds its own message for the unwary visitor.

Kaaron Warren is one of a kind’

**Alison Littlewood, author of *A Cold Season***

‘A unique jewel box of a book. Tense locked-room thriller meets haunted house gothic, pulled off with immense skill’

**Lizzy Barber, author of *Out of Her Depth***

‘A remarkable tour de force of a novel from a master storyteller. The structure of the novel is innovative and the tension never flags, while Pera is an extraordinary and satisfyingly ambiguous narrator. Startlingly good’

**Leonora Natrass, author of *Blue Water***

‘Eerie, menacing, and totally original’

**Philippa East, author of *Little White Lies***

‘Hauntingly creepy, this twisty, layered thriller will upend your expectations and spin you deep into a house of dark secrets. I utterly lost track of right and wrong, and was gunning all the way for my new favourite heroine’

**Rachael Blok, author of *The Scorched Earth***

‘Suspenseful, evocative, dark and original. Highly recommended’  
**Diane Jeffrey, author of *The Silent Friend***

‘A wonderfully weird and creepy journey through a haunted house,  
peppered with moments of proper darkness’  
**Tariq Ashkanani, author of *Welcome to Cooper***

‘Hauntingly dark and beautifully written, *The Underhistory* keeps  
you on edge throughout. There are moments of humour interspersed  
with tragedy and fear. A brilliant read with a wonderful protagonist’  
**Guy Morpuss, author of *Black Lake Manor***

‘Sinuous, slippery, and wrong foots you at every turn. I’ve never read  
anything like it’  
**Tim Glister, author of *A Loyal Traitor***

‘Unusual, clever, poetic, haunting and utterly thrilling’  
**Louise Swanson, author of *End of Story***

‘Totally unique; I haven’t read anything like this for a long time, not  
since the heady days of Iain Banks’ unpredictably dark novels. The  
sinister suspense that builds up as elderly Pera takes us on a tour of  
her ghostly family home is masterful. This book will stay with me for  
a long time’  
**Jo Furniss, author of *Dead Mile***

‘An elegant, Gothic delight with an eerie seam running through  
every page. Read on a dark, cold night if you dare’  
**Victoria Dowd, author of *The Supper Club Murders***

# THE UNDER HISTORY

KAARON WARREN



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**PART I**

# **THE TOUR**

*Ike calls most of them DW (Dead Weight), to be discarded. He tells them it stands for Dark Warriors and they are all stupid enough to believe him.*

*He's told them all they are the chosen ones, You'll be the one coming with me, he tells them all but they won't. He'll take Devon, because his family are loaded and can bankroll the escape. Davo, who had a handy flair for violence. Wayne, because he knows where the old lady's house is and what's inside it. Chook, because he looks ordinary, a middle-aged white man, and you need one of those. And Alex, who is willing to commit extreme violence at any time, because you need one of those, too.*

*He'll owe Byron for this, of course. For picking them up outside the jail and driving them to safety. But what are big brothers for?*

*Even a big brother like Byron.*

# 1

## SINCLAIR HOUSE, 1993

Looking back, Pera figured out that at the very moment Ike shot his first victim in the jailbreak, she was cleaning up the blood spilled by a visitor who fainted after seeing the rat king. It wasn't a big spill, but she knew from past experience that even a small amount of blood would smell bad in a couple of days. It was always the Underhistory, the cellar, that got them. Sometimes it was fright, or tiredness, or the closeness of the air. But if someone was going to collapse, that's where they'd do it.

It was the second-to-last Sinclair House tour of the season, and admittedly her heart wasn't in it. Usually she'd pack up and leave after the last tour, to be away during flood season. But she was tired. This year, she would stay at home.

After that tour, she had gone into town for the last time, pulling into a parking spot right in front of the hair salon and giving herself a cheer. You never wanted to be late for an appointment with Marcia.

Pera had walked through the door with minutes to spare. Marcia glanced up and rolled her eyes.



‘How are you, Marcia?’

‘Running behind, as usual. Everybody’s always late.’ Marcia had ideas about herself and cutting hair in this small country town wasn’t amongst them. Pera cursed Claudia for being away; usually a haircut meant a house call and an excuse for gossip and champagne. Pera wasn’t keen on Marcia’s cuts but she had been desperate; she looked like an old hag. And Marcia had a loser for a husband, so Pera tried to be kind to her. ‘So, what miracle do you want me to perform today?’ Marcia said.

What Pera had seen in the mirror was not who she was. At heart, she was thirty-three. She dressed young but the wrinkles? There was little she could do about them apart from a face-lift and she didn’t want that stretched leather look.

She had picked out a new lipstick from Marcia’s selection. ‘Bit bright for your age, isn’t it?’ Marcia had said, and Pera had said, ‘You know how much I like colour!’ primping at her hair. She wasn’t bothered by these slights; they said more about Marcia than they did about her. Pera never left the house underdressed. She had a lovely silk scarf she bought in Dublin, shoes from Italy and her Chanel suits she would not be without.

The previous customer paid up, grumbling, and Pera had waited until Marcia gestured her into the chair, where she poked Pera’s hair. ‘Had a go at this yourself, did you?’ She had started combing Pera’s hair, tugging at knots Pera didn’t think were really there.

‘You’re hurting me,’ she had said. ‘Marcia? Can you be a bit more gentle?’

‘Jesus Fucking Christ,’ Marcia had said.

‘Is everything all right, Marcia?’

The phone had rung and Marcia had answered it, launching into a tirade. Pera had decided she'd rather wear her hair in a bun until Claudia came back than let this woman cut it in this state of mind, so she had removed the apron and sidled out of the shop without Marcia even noticing. She had too much to do to waste her time sitting there.

There were conversations every step as she did her shopping, with the wonderful Gwennie – seventy-five, bright and lively, she still cleaned her own gutters – and with Mrs Robertson, dressed as ever as if she were going to the opera; tailored jacket, silver and pearl brooch, diamond-studded watch. She carried a mahogany walking stick but mostly used it to wave at people.

Pera liked her small town; here, people knew her. Elsewhere she was old and could wait and wait and not be noticed in a shop. She was invisible. Here, she was still Pera from Sinclair House, the sole survivor, their famous girl.

'I thought you were off to Melbourne?' Mrs Robertson had asked. 'Your annual?'

'New Zealand, actually. Stocking up on non-perishables so I have things waiting for me when I get back.'

'I hope you've let the district nurse know. You know how awful she gets when she doesn't!' Mrs Robertson had eyed the milk and cheese but had said nothing. 'You enjoy yourself,' she said, patting Pera's arm. 'Did you hear? Mrs Bee's Wayne is getting out of jail. She's had a phone call from him. She's that pleased!'

'I hadn't heard,' Pera had said. She had written to Mrs Bee, telling her the lie about New Zealand, feeling bad about it but knowing it was all part of the deception.

‘Didn’t our Marcia go out with him for a while? Lucky escape, that one! For him, I mean!’ The two women had chuckled.

‘But between you and me, I think Mrs Bee is confused. They’re not letting that boy out. They locked him up and threw away the key for what he did.’

On the way out with her shopping bags Pera tripped and fell, cutting her knees badly on the corner of the kerb and twisting her ankle as well. Everybody fussed, wanting to call an ambulance.

‘No, no, I have a tour coming,’ she said. She did have one last group.

Later, when Pera had arrived home, the man from the stables had come to take her horses away. ‘Off for a month, are you? Where is it you’re going?’

‘New Zealand! Lucky old me. I’ll send you a postcard,’ Pera had said. The lie had come smoothly off her tongue, after weeks of convincing people she was leaving town. ‘One more tour and I’ll be off to the land of the long white cloud.’ She travelled most years. She’d planned to go back to Greece, but that seemed exhausting, so she’d booked New Zealand, but even that felt too much. Instead she had decided to stock up on food, barricade herself in and sleep, read, rest.

‘I’ll take good care of these beauties,’ the man had said, stroking the mane of one of her horses.

‘You always do,’ Pera had said. She knew she should just let him keep them for good, but they provided her comfort. If she heard a whicker or neigh, she could be sure it was a real horse out there, not a ghost.

\*

The blood in the cellar was cleaned away and the preparations for the last tour of the season were nearly done. On the third floor, Pera shifted the dusty mannequin dressed in a bloodied butcher's apron to the side, pushed a panel and opened the concealed door to her private stairway.

She'd added the secret door because people had no boundaries. No matter how many 'Private: Do Not Enter' signs she put up, people stamped up the stairs looking for her, wanting things, asking questions. She loved her apartment; so bright and sunny, so different from the rest of the house, which was full of history and stories. Up here there was simply the present and that was refreshing. It was a perfect space for a single person, making a small fourth floor. She had two bedrooms and too many closets, full of books, jewellery, memorabilia and clothing.

She spent a moment gazing out the window at the astonishing lawn full of flowers, all of them grown from the tributes she'd laid out there decades ago. She called Mrs Bee in Queensland, worried about the gossip she'd heard about Wayne getting out of jail – he always caused her grief – but there was no answer. Pera left a message and promised herself to call back in the evening.

Then she showered, spending too long but unwilling to leave the hot, comforting pressure of the water. She sang in the shower at the top of her voice, Puccini's '*O mio babbino caro*'. It always calmed her.

That calm left when she saw herself in the mirror. She again cursed the fact that Claudia, dear friend and hairdresser who would usually come to her to do her hair, was away, and that bloody Marcia in town, the cow, had been so bad-tempered she hadn't had the haircut and dye-job she desperately needed. She

washed her hair, then brushed it back. She'd tie it in a bun and play the little old lady for this tour group.

They never minded that. Her ankle was sore from her fall, so she took a cane out of the umbrella stand. Even better.

When she had a tour going through, she could mark off hours reliably. If not, only the clocks marked time and they were not trustworthy.

Just this last tour, then she could rest.

## 2

# THE DRIVEWAY

Pera walked down her long driveway to unlock the rusting gates. They wouldn't keep anyone out who wanted in, but keeping them locked did make people stop and think, realise they were entering private property. It was one of the little tricks she'd learned to try to keep her home her own. It was raining lightly and she was glad she'd had river stones raked over the driveway, to counteract the mudslide it could become.

Back at the house she put the kettle on and waited for the cars to arrive.

There was only one; a family of five, in a minivan. Mum, Dad, two boys, a girl. The kids all looked over ten, so they'd be more fun to frighten. Mum was last to leave the minivan, resting her head on her arms for a moment before the older child helped her out.

The final guest was a man who hiked up on his own, a small rucksack on his back, armed with a camera and a notepad. He was either a sceptic or a believer; she'd soon figure it out. He was a neat man who smelt of Fabulon; there was not a crease on him.

Six was a small number. Too many and there were gigglers at the back of the crowd, spoiling the fear. Too few and they thought she was one of them, a friend or a mother, wanting more of her than she was willing to give. Six was at the limit of this, but she was sure she could manage them.

The family were laughing and enjoying themselves, even as they stumbled in the drizzling rain over the already-swampy parking area, so they'd be good company. Tours always started out full of enthusiasm. A few minutes ago she'd felt a momentary temptation to hide until they all went away. Now, though, she was looking forward to being part of the family, if only for ninety minutes. She shivered, suddenly cold.

She stood waiting in the small copse of trees at the base of the fire stairs, her hand resting on her cane.

'Welcome to Purgatory Tours at Sinclair House, where time stands still. Although we are strictly limited to a ninety-minute tour! Most people find that's enough for a first visit. And a happy Mother's Day for yesterday to you!'

The mother smiled, and the girl hugged her. 'And many more,' the father said, kissing his wife.

'Lucky I made it,' the single man said. 'I wasn't sure. It was confusing, trying to get a ticket and finding out times and that.' He looked around at the others, hoping for confirmation. None came. 'You had to call for the time. And there weren't any tickets.' So, a believer; they wanted everything to be perfect. 'You need to be more organised than that.'

Pera leaned harder on her cane. In her mind she nicknamed him Lucky. It was a trick she used for forgettable men; name them after the first thing they said. 'I do apologise. I'm not so

good with watches, or with being organised. Never have been, but it is getting worse as I get older. Don't be surprised if your watches stop. It's partly me, but it's partly the house. People say the house is trying to stop time, that it is trying to recapture its era of greatness. Who knows? The tour is ninety minutes long, regardless. I'll keep track, don't worry.'

They liked that.

'Just you, is it?' the father asked. 'Looking after everything?'

She wasn't always on her own. She had part-time employees who sometimes came in to manage the tours and the money. She'd given them all the month off, though. She said, 'Just me and ghosts today! I like to say this place is like a railway station and the ghosts get off and on, then travel from room to room.'

The parents shivered.

'In an old house, human heat or breath can do damage. Just by their presence, people do damage. They change the room conditions. These changes are like ghosts. It's like leaving a shadow of yourself behind. Something of all of you will remain here forever – as long as the house stands. The house is a sum of all who walk through her.'

Pera smiled. 'Do you want to continue? Many don't, once they hear what I have to say. You can wander the grounds instead if you like. Get a feel for the place that way. Dangle your feet in the pond. You'll leave intact, no risk. Only the brave continue.'

They almost always all continued, even though she gave the impression otherwise. Every now and then someone *would* stay outside; those who continued gave off an air of slight superiority. The person who stayed outside would be anxious, looking for



a change in the others. Something missing. Something less. Or something more.

‘There are ghosts even here, in this small copse. Would you like the tour to begin before it begins?’

‘Of course,’ they all said, feeling treated. Special. She hated ruining the illusion that they were invited guests, so didn’t like asking for the entry fee at this point. She would sort it out when they got to the Mint.

The copse had once been perfect, long ago when they had a caretaker who also acted as a gardener. He was a wise old man, she’d thought, but she was only nine then and anyone tall seemed wise. She walked with him collecting wood sometimes, and she remembered him saying, ‘I call this layer in the copse the understorey. Useful stuff but if you don’t keep it under control and a fire comes through, oomph.’ He slammed one palm against the other as if he was mimicking a rocket taking off. ‘Always a use for it, anyway.’

She thought he meant ‘understory’, that there were stories under the leaves and twigs. Things she shouldn’t hear. Like when she smelt butter and golden syrup and followed her nose to the kitchen, and the cook emerged with her cheeks bright red and gave Pera a plate of biscuits. Oats and chocolate with a tiny bit of peel.

Pera told her family about the understory, and they adapted the name for their cellar. They called it ‘the Underhistory’, because all the secrets lay under the surface.

They liked to have funny names for many rooms. Pera followed in the tradition when she rebuilt the house.

### 3

## THE UNDERSTORY (THE COPSE)

‘Would you like to hear about the caretaker’s ghost story? He was the one who tended this copse, as well as the rest of the grounds, and the house. This is his cautionary tale about deserting your family.

‘He knew my father in the First World War, and afterwards, when Dad offered him the gardening job, he took it in a flash. Times were tough, then. Thing was, though, and he admitted this later, he abandoned his wife and daughter. He never sent money back, not even a letter. It was like he wanted to pretend they didn’t exist. Certainly my dear old dad didn’t know about them until after the accident.’ She always called it the accident, long after it was proven a deliberate thing.

The caretaker had sometimes got confused and thought Pera was his daughter. She felt sorry for him, and he was always kind to her, so she let him. He made treacle toffee on his small stove.

He’d tell her things, about the copse floor and what lay beneath, and about how to get ahead in life. He told her, ‘If you can make a person feel guilty, you can get them to do anything.’

Pera told her tour group, ‘It was only after he died, and they

were trying to figure out who would get his things, his money and his medals, that they found out that his family even existed.'

The father shook his head. 'Terrible. Who does that? Didn't he care about them at all?'

'Not long before the accident he disappeared for a while. I found out later he went home to find his wife and child. He wasn't fully in control of his senses by then, and he'd started to scare us, staying up all night raking leaves, disappearing for days at a time, that kind of thing. What I heard was that he went home and stood in the street calling for them, until someone told him, "Don't bother, mate. They're long gone." That's what we heard. Whether or not it's true, we never knew. Maybe they just moved away? Maybe she married again? Nonetheless, he came back believing his neglect had caused their deaths.

'After that he was worse than ever, getting drunk and lashing out. He still did his job, though, and he and my father had helped each other a lot in the war, so he stayed on. So, he was here. When it happened.' She paused and nodded her head. 'Now his ghost haunts the copse. His guilt keeps him here, anchored to the place he pretended he belonged.'

'Sad,' the mother said. She had deep lines around her eyes, although she was quite young. She was tired; Pera wondered if it was parenthood and life, or something else as well.

'It is. He's always here. He usually shows himself to girls the age of his daughter.' Pera looked at the young girl. 'You'll feel a kind of shimmer in your eyes, and you'll feel sudden heat, as if there is a fire at your back. If you feel warm all of a sudden, that's why. He's there, trying to give you a hug. That one last hug he never got.'

The girl stepped closer to her father and hid her face in his side, and Pera knew this would be a good group. You only needed one suggestible one for it to work. She may have overestimated the girl's age, though. The boys were perhaps thirteen and twelve, and this girl eight, she thought now.

'Shall we go inside? Watch out for the ghosts on the fire stairs. We start our tour near the top of the house, so it's a bit of a climb. I hope you can rug up. It gets very cold in this old house. Don't worry, I've got fires in some rooms so we'll be cosy enough.'

Once upon a time she'd always lay out ghost traps for tours. Tricks and mirrors to make them believe. She didn't do it much, these days. Too tired. She felt energised by this group, though.

She let the boys go first up the stairs, calling, 'Be careful' when one, then another tripped. Lucky wiped his hands on his pants; she hadn't warned them about the flaky paint.

'Now,' she said as they climbed the fire stairs past the second floor. 'Be careful here. People often say they feel a push in the back. Hold on tight. The ghost only goes for the strongest in the group.' She used to say weakest, but no one ever owned up to that. Once she started saying the ghost only went for the strongest, *voilà!* Suddenly men felt a firm hand in the small of the back.

## 4

# THE LOFTY HEIGHTS (HAZEL'S ROOM)

The mother was panting by the time the boys reached the top. 'Let's wait a bit,' Pera said. She was fit herself, but there were a lot of stairs. She unlatched the glass door that led inside and said, 'Welcome to the room at the stop of the stairs. Or, as my family always called it, the Lofty Heights. We were a funny lot, gave silly names to some of the rooms. This room is dedicated to my sister Hazel, because she was the first of us to become an angel.'

The six tour members crowded into the small room. Their movement raised the dust, and with the sun coming through the high windows and the glass door, it really did look as if angels were dancing. A bed with a crocheted blanket lay along one wall, with a knotted rug covering most of the floor. A dressing table with a large round mirror and a neatly placed brush and comb sat near the internal door. A small fire burnt in a hearth along the fourth wall and a modern water cooler sat in one corner.

'When did your sister . . . become an angel?' the mother asked.

'So, so long ago. Nineteen thirty-six. I was only around five.'

Pera didn't really understand it as a child. All she heard were

snippets, that her sister had died ‘in obscure circumstances in a St Kilda alleyway’ according to the newspapers.

Everyone knew who killed Hazel. It was her boyfriend Simon Sheely. There wasn’t any mystery; he was found with orange peel in his pocket (he ate oranges constantly, as another man might chew gum), and there were more pieces in Hazel’s fist, flattened, all the pieces matching together like a jigsaw puzzle.

‘He was locked up for life, becoming a Catholic and confessing all and atoning for the murder before being beaten to death by another prisoner, so you’d think there’d be no likelihood of him being here to haunt us, what with all that repentance. But what I say is that some people are all talk and no truth, when it suits them.’

Pera had never been to St Kilda, not in all her sixty-two years. There was something about the name that frightened her; she knew it was those early stories. She misheard it as ‘Saint Killed Her’ and pictured it as a place dark and terrifying, where holy men waited with weapons and women’s screams were not heard. She knew that wasn’t true, but still she saw no reason to go.

Pera had adored her sister Hazel, who was twelve years older and so sophisticated. Sophisticated enough to leave home without her parents’ blessing and work at the telephone exchange. As an adult, Pera realised her family were trying to protect her from grief by not giving her all the details, but all it did was make her more curious about the truth. Her imagination filled in details that weren’t there.

There were gaps in her mother, spaces where Hazel should have been.

‘We rarely spoke about Hazel after her murder, and her room,

here at the top of the fire stairs, was kept locked when I was a child. My sister Justine, who was mad for ghost hunting, had all of us terrified of even passing the doorway, because she said that killers always hid out in the victim's bedroom and they liked to come back over and over for new victims. I pretended I had no fear; I'd stomp about outside the closed door calling "Oh, Mr Killer, are you there? Or are you hanging by the neck until you are dead?" Such is life. I was going through a Ned Kelly phase then.'

The girl laughed. 'I *love* Ned Kelly!' she said.

'Remind me later. I have a little present for you. A souvenir of his life,' Pera said. She kept a store of such things, matchbooks and miniature models, shards of bone.

Pera poked at the glowing coals of the open fire with tongs.

'I can smell oranges,' the girl said. Pera nodded and winked at her. 'Not everyone does,' she said. 'That's your gift, I guess.' The others sniffed, hoping to smell it too, and they all did, now it was mentioned. Pera loved this moment, when they smelt the dried peel she'd stirred into the fire and the trick worked.

'It's not my sister who rests in this room, but the man who killed her. I don't think he feels guilty. I think he is waiting for her to come up the stairs. Many ghosts are benevolent, lonely or lost, looking for something they never found in life. A killer, though, who is tied to the place his victim most loved? They can make you feel as if you are drowning. As if you can't draw a breath.'

They called it 'obscure circumstances' because he had drugged Hazel, beaten her, drowned her in a bathtub, and then dumped her in an alleyway, and they didn't know which of those things

killed her. They only caught him because one clever policeman had matched the orange peel pieces, and managed to draw a confession out of him.

Sometimes, if Pera was lucky, the water cooler would gurgle at this stage, giving them all a fright. Today it didn't happen, although one or two of them coughed in the dry, dusty room.

'Help yourselves to water,' she said, and the cooler did gurgle then, but there was no menace to it. 'This isn't Hazel's original room, of course. That burnt down with the rest of the house. As I said, my parents used to keep it boarded up, left exactly how it was. Isn't that sad? It was the only room I wasn't allowed in and it frightened me. I hated it. I can see why now, in retrospect. They knew things that I didn't, and I felt left out, but they didn't want a child to hear stories of violent murder. If you want, you could take the children out into the corridor. They could look at the funny cartoons on the walls. Done by famous people, don't you know.'

The father led the youngest son out; the daughter refused to go. 'We're going to have a surprise party for Mum after this,' she whispered theatrically. 'Don't tell her!' Pera put a conspiratorial finger to her lips.

'Most of the items in here are things we found in the rubble of the original house. I didn't recognise them all, but friends of Hazel told me these things belonged to her.' Pera took a silver ring holder from the dressing-table drawer, turned it over in her hands. 'I think if my mother were alive, she'd have changed the room as the years passed, to reflect the life Hazel could have had.'

The mother sniffed and Pera saw she was crying. 'That's very sweet, dear. You have a great deal of empathy.' She drew the



woman in for a comforting embrace, enjoying the scent of her, the perfume Giorgio, Pera thought. Brand new; a Mother's Day present, she assumed. She sighed. 'Of course, I never had children myself, to my sorrow.'

She led them to the staircase and down to the kitchen on the ground floor. The range had been heating to a high temperature and she opened the oven door and slid in the tray of scones she had ready. There was a pot of soup on; she always had a pot of soup on.

## 5

# HOME OF THE RANGE (THE KITCHEN)

‘There were men posted to my house during the First World War. Before being sent to the Front. I wasn’t born then, and my dad was in Egypt, “taking the record”, he called it, watching men march off to Gallipoli and the Western Front. There were lots of bedrooms spare in the house. We call them men but they were only boys. Some of them as young as sixteen.’

‘Only a few years older than you guys,’ the father said, touching the youngest son on the head, letting his hand rest there until the boy slumped to the ground in an exaggerated joke that made them all laugh.

‘They trained every day, marching around the grounds. If the weather came in they’d march around inside the house, single-file, doing a circuit of some of the rooms you’ll visit today, the replicas at least. The kitchen – it might even have been one of them who nicknamed it Home of the Range – the waiting room, laundry, the boot room, back veranda, conservatory, foyer, back to the kitchen. If you looked closely in the old house you could see the path they wore.

‘They all got called up to the Front. Half of them thought they were in love with the girls from town who came up to help out, so there were tears, long, sad farewells. Lots of “see you soon” and “when I get back”. The butcher’s daughter was even engaged to one of them; there was a photo of them together. Young and bright and surrounded by light. That got burnt in the fire, of course. One of those ladies worked here for years, putting on the teas when I had a big party. She still comes up the hill sometimes but I don’t make her cook anymore. She’s eighty-seven years old! None of those soldiers came back.’ This statement, while untrue, always entertained.

Lucky said, ‘What were their names? Is it a matter of record?’

‘I have a newspaper article about it in one of the rooms. Remind me when I get there.’ He nodded. Pera actually didn’t mind his type; they were keen, dedicated and interested, if annoying. She said, ‘We had a lot of them going through. Group after group after group.’ She didn’t add ‘they all died’ this time. It seemed an exaggeration he might perhaps call her on.

‘The first time I saw their ghosts was my first night alone in the house after my husband died in 1963. A brain haemorrhage. I was sitting at this kitchen table, feeling very sorry for myself, as if no one had suffered like I had. Then I thought I heard men marching. Had I left the radio on? I didn’t have the energy to find out. Have you ever felt that way? So sad it makes you weary in every joint? You can hardly keep yourself upright. So I stayed put, and the sound of men marching grew louder.’

She stopped talking, allowing the silence to settle. The grandfather clock in the hallway had a steady, heavy beat, like foot-fall. The father, a clear cynic out to prove a point, stepped out to

look. 'It's the clock!' and his wife chuckled, relieved. 'We've only been here five minutes!' Lucky sighed.

'No. I didn't have that then. That was a gift from . . . well. From the grandson of one of those who died when the original house was destroyed. They're always leaving me presents. So no. I stayed put, and before long I saw them. On their circuit. Twenty young men, staring straight ahead, handsome and neat in their uniforms.

'The thing is, they were sunk to their knees in the floor. Because the floor in the new house is a foot higher than in the old. Rubble underneath, you know. So they were marching where the floor used to be. If you feel a throbbing in your ears, that's them marching. Even if you can't see them, you can feel the thrum of their feet.'

Even the father was quiet, staring at her, entranced.

'That poor butcher's daughter never did marry. She ended up training as a nurse and dying young, but I don't know what of. I like to think she is reunited with her soldier-love. That she marches with him, hand in hand, through my kitchen.'

The oven buzzer went. It was an old-fashioned bell, a contrivance people loved to hear.

'Scones?' she said. There was whipped cream in the fridge, and the table already set with jam, plates, neatly ironed napkins and cups for tea. She never charged extra; she liked to provide it as a treat. Made Pera think of the big raucous afternoon teas she'd shared with her sisters and parents and whoever else was around. They always had plenty of visitors.

Sometimes she heated the kettle in the fireplace, to impress, but it was too much effort today.

The mother bustled to help, and Lucky did, too, helping to tip the scones into a basket. Pera felt bad for calling him Lucky but it was too late; the nickname was set.

‘If we were having a more formal meal, we’d move all this into the dining room. We’ll go there next.’

‘Are there ghosts in the dining room?’ the older son said.

‘Only the ghost of cabbage past!’ Pera said, and they all laughed.

## 6

# THE UPPER ROOM (THE DINING ROOM)

Pera had found the dining table at an auction. It was as close a match as she'd found to the one her family had owned. There were decanters on a drinks trolley in the corner, and predictably the dad opened the stopper and had a sniff.

'It's only coloured water!' Pera said. 'Otherwise I'd offer you one.'

'That's a shame,' he said, and she relented, reaching underneath for a bottle of brandy. Pouring herself a large glass, she said, 'Who wants? Kids?' and they all laughed. The father took one, and Lucky, who almost seemed about to faint as she passed him the glass.

The daughter touched her fingertips to the wallpaper. 'Don't peel at that!' her mother said. 'Don't make it worse!'

'Isn't it stunning? Designed by Florence Broadhurst. My husband knew her. They all knew each other in the art world. It still cost me a thousand pounds just for this room. That's about \$20,000 in today's money! Can you imagine?' She never lit the fireplace in here for fear of smoke damaging the paper.

The group gathered around the large dining table. ‘Take a seat,’ she said. ‘Once upon a time we’d have dinner for twenty at a time here! Wonderful parties!’

Pera loved the smell of alcohol even as a child and she loved the way it made the adults so bright and funny. She tended to hide when her parents had a party so she could watch them. They did get annoying sometimes and insist on calling her Temperance. Or Tempe. *Tick tock*, they’d say. And *Tempus Fugit*, wisely. Or they’d say *Pera* but make fun of it. Her sisters had far easier names: Faith, Hope, Charity and Justine (because both parents had hated the sound of Prudence). Mostly she hid under the dining table, where she’d hear all the gossip and goings-on. She’d look at all the shoes and decide who each person was.

The tour group were looking at the items laid out on the dining table: postcards, letters, books, and other personal items.

‘Okay, I’ll bite,’ the dad said. ‘Why’s it called the Upper Room when it’s on the ground floor?’

‘It’s a fair question,’ Pera said. ‘The Upper Room is the site of the Last Supper. This room is where I shared my last supper with my family. So it is to remind me of that last meal and all the other lovely ones we shared.’

## 20 JUNE 1941

‘Lots of notable people coming, Winnie,’ her father said to her mother. ‘Spruce up, shall we?’ He kissed his wife on the forehead. Mother always looked fine, but she had none of the glamour the girls admired in other women. She wore flat, sensible shoes –

always well made – and the same for her clothes, and she said she wouldn't wear lipstick again until the war was over and all the young men were back home safe and sound. Pera's father would say, 'But, my dear, they can't all come home. They can't.' He himself was far too old. He had 'lungs'. Pera had lungs like that, too. Prone to pneumonia.

It was Pera's father's fiftieth birthday tomorrow, and they were hosting a three-day gathering in his honour. This meant the visitors would be staying for two whole nights, a situation all five of the girls found horrendous, because it meant they had to be polite at breakfast as well, which they all thought was above and beyond the call of duty.

Mr and Mrs Wittner were the first to arrive. Pera remembered this very clearly, because until that first car came up the driveway, the girls were free. He drove the car himself, right up to the front door, almost up the step. He left his keys in the ignition, one of those people who assumed others would sort such things out for them. Men like him forgot about all the people in the war, forgot that many households, wealthy or not, had to park their own cars, bring their own luggage in these days. They had three children, all of whom sat in the back and refused to get out until Justine told them there was hot chocolate inside.

Mr Wittner dug deep into his pockets and tossed money about; he seemed to think it was funny. Mr Wittner was a very tall man with a deep, affecting smile. He was handsome and had dimples, which lent him a boyishness that made him look friendly.

Pera liked him in spite of his arrogance; he gave great whirlies, picking her up and spinning her wildly.



‘Lawrence!’ his wife said. She was one of the mousy ones. Even her fur wrap looked like mouse fur rather than anything else, and the girls had little time for her.

## 1993

Pera had many regrets about the loss of her sisters, and amongst them was that she had no one to remember those painfully annoying meals with. No one to understand. She still had two of her mother’s lipsticks – Alizarine Crimson and Rose Madder – long since gone rancid and lost all their colour.

‘Are there any ghosts in this room?’ the daughter asked.

‘Do you hear anything? Sometimes people hear the buzz of conversation, like the background noise in a movie restaurant scene. Sometimes I can remember the taste of Cook’s pea soup, because that was my favourite and I’ll never eat it again. Does anyone else have a food like that? A food that you love and is gone?’

Lucky put up his hand. ‘My grandmother’s chicken sandwiches. I don’t know what she did but no one’s ever been able to copy it.’

‘When I worked in the city, before the kids, this one corner shop had a beef curry I’ve never tasted anywhere else,’ the mother said. ‘It was so good! I couldn’t eat it now, I don’t think.’

‘That’s because you used to have lunch every day with Jeremy Whatsit,’ her husband said. ‘So of course it tasted better.’ But he kissed her cheek, and Pera could see how much he loved her.

‘What about you?’ she asked him.

‘I’m not very gourmet,’ he said. ‘I like everything. What about you, kids? What’s your favourite thing to eat?’

It wasn’t the question, but Pera didn’t mind. The daughter said, ‘Nana’s cheese on toast.’ One son didn’t answer, the other said, ‘Chips.’

‘You’re all making me hungry!’ Pera said. ‘Let’s move on.’ She guided them upstairs to the first floor.

# 7

## THE MINT (THE SAFE ROOM)

The room was papered with currency notes from around the world. Money people left behind, or sent her. Money she'd found. The carpet was a gentle mint green, and the furniture too. She used this as the spur to collect the ticket fee from her visitors.

'Look!' the daughter said. 'There's one from Nepal, one from China, one from something I can't even say.'

'Some say this room is haunted by the god of the love of money. My parents called it the safe room, because this is where the safe was kept, believe it or not! It didn't really have a name otherwise. But only the greedy are affected by the ghosts in here. If you feel your fingertips getting itchy, might be time to take a good hard look at yourself!' Pera laughed to show she was joking, but all of them rubbed their fingertips together. This happened every tour.

She dinged open the cash register she'd found in an antique shop in Canberra, making them all jump. 'Sorry! I need to collect the ticket money here. If you don't mind.'

They didn't.