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Sweet Damage

Written by Rebecca James

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REBECCA JAMES

Sweet
Damage

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For Charlie

I still dream about Fairview.

In my dreams the house is more than it was in life; the building taller and more imposing, the hallways longer and more labyrinthine, the inside colder and darker than the real thing ever was. In my dreams Fairview is a maze of dark passages and shadows, steep staircases that twist and turn in nightmarish knots. I run through the house in a panic, never knowing whether I'm chasing or being chased, trying to escape or wanting to be found. All I know is that a scream echoes loudly through my head – a scream prompted by what I'm about to discover, what I know I'm going to see around the next corner, or the next.

Anna is sometimes in these dreams, lingering, ghostlike and elusive, ahead of or behind me. No matter how much I chase her or call her name, I can never reach her. She'll appear for a moment, smiling, her arm reaching towards me, only to disappear

around a bend, or into a shadow, like an illusion or an apparition. A wisp of smoke, dissolving into air.

In my dreams it's as if the house itself has sinister intentions, as if its very foundations contain a malign force that seeps into the floors and walls and contaminates the air within, changing the lives of all who enter.

In real life, though, it wasn't Fairview that was responsible for what happened. It was the people who did the damage.

PART I

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‘Tim, you’re going to have to grow up,’ Lilla says. ‘Get a real job.’

‘I do have a real job,’ I say. ‘I go to work. I do stuff. I get paid for it. Seems real enough to me.’

‘Okay.’ She sighs. ‘Maybe real’s the wrong word. You need a more sustainable job. One that will at least cover your rent and food. A job that means you can be independent.’

‘What you’re really saying –’ I raise my eyebrows at her – ‘is hurry up and move out.’

‘Yeah.’ She shrugs. ‘Since you mention it, you can’t stay here forever. Sleeping on my couch isn’t exactly a viable long-term plan. Not with Patrick here.’ She reaches across the coffee table and grabs her laptop, opens it on her knees. ‘And if you refuse to get a proper, I mean a more *lucrative*, job, we’re just going to have to find you some kind of dirt-cheap alternative.’

I close my eyes and hope that she'll get distracted. Stop trying to fix my life. I know I have to sort myself out and I fully intend to. Just not today.

After a moment she elbows me. 'Listen to this one. It actually sounds quite good. And it's in Fairlight.' She reads aloud: '*Large furnished room in spacious house. Share with one other. One hundred dollars a week. A hundred bucks, Tim. Cheap as.*'

When I don't reply, she turns, nudges me again. 'Are you going to call or what?'

'Must be a dump,' I say grumpily. 'Mould. Rats. I can imagine it.'

'You have no money, Tim,' she says. 'You'll just have to take what you can get. Dump or not.'

She picks up my phone, stabs numbers into it. 'Come on.' She pushes the phone against my ear so I'm forced to take it. 'Just ask. It can't hurt. Stop being such a loser.'

Some bloke called Marcus answers and we exchange information. He asks me how old I am, if I'm employed and whether I'm willing to take a trip to Fairlight to see the room and meet my potential housemate, a girl called Anna. I wonder why Anna isn't taking the call herself. He gives me the address and I tell him that I'll head up there later this afternoon.

'Can I just ask one question?' I say before I hang up.

'Of course,' says Marcus.

‘Why’s it so cheap? What’s the story?’

Lilla elbows me, makes a face. I ignore her.

‘It’s a large house,’ Marcus says in a smooth tone. ‘Very large. Too big, really, for one girl to live in all alone. You’ll understand what I mean when you see it. And Anna’s only twenty. It would be helpful to have someone around. That’s all I want to say over the phone. If you meet me up at the house we’ll be able to tell you more in person. But rest assured, there’s nothing to worry about. The conditions are very reasonable.’

Conditions. The word has an ominous ring to it. I wonder why the room hasn’t been taken and conclude that the ‘conditions’ can’t be as reasonable as Marcus promises. There must be some kind of catch. If something seems too good to be true, it’s usually because it is.

*

Though I’m suspicious of the insanely low price, I decide to go and take a look. Lilla’s boyfriend, Patrick, comes home, and the air of hostility that seeps off him is almost as thick as the stench of his aftershave. Suddenly the space feels far too small. Lilla’s right. I have to find somewhere else to live. I jog downstairs and out into the burning heat, just in time to catch the next bus to Fairlight.

The house is enormous. Built of sandstone and brick, it stands two storeys high and is the biggest and most impressive house in a street full of pretty flash houses. It's the kind of place you can't help but notice as you drive or walk by. The kind of house that makes you wonder about the people who live there. It's surrounded by lush green gardens, big lawns and beautiful trees and is so unexpectedly grand that I wonder if I've made a mistake. It even has a name. *Fairview* is engraved in fancy writing across a sign on the front gate.

I double-check the address. It's definitely the right place, and most definitely not the dump I expected to find.

The front door opens as I'm walking up the path, but it's so bright outside and so dark in the house, I can't immediately see who has opened it. When I reach the top of the steps I find a man waiting in the doorway. He's neatly dressed in a shirt and trousers and he looks me up and down as I approach. I'm scruffy in my shorts and T-shirt, and for a moment I consider apologising, until I remember that I'm looking for a place to live, not applying for a job.

He puts out his hand. 'Marcus Harrow,' he says. 'You must be Tim?'

He is taller than me by a good head-length. His hair is dark, his face strong.

I hear footsteps approaching from the hallway and a woman appears beside him. Like Marcus, she is tall and dark and dressed in business clothes.

‘This is my sister, Fiona,’ he says. ‘Fiona, this is Tim.’

‘We’re friends of Anna’s,’ she explains. ‘She’s waiting in the kitchen.’

They lead me down a long, wide hallway. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. The floor is polished timber, the ceiling high and decorated with elaborate plasterwork. We pass numerous rooms, all with their doors shut, and an enormous staircase that leads to the upper storey. At the back of the house we come to a big kitchen and dining area. Unlike the gloomy hallway, this room is full of windows and light, with French doors leading out to a courtyard and a garden beyond.

A blonde girl is sitting at the kitchen table. She’s thin and pale, with an unhappy expression on her face. There’s something vulnerable and frail about her that makes me wonder if she’s sick.

‘Tim,’ Marcus says. ‘This is Anna. Anna London.’

She stands up, puts out her hand, then immediately withdraws it. She says hello in a very quiet voice and stares down at the table. Marcus said she was twenty. She seems much younger in person.

‘Nice to meet you,’ I say.

‘Thanks,’ she mutters.

‘So, Tim,’ Fiona says. ‘Marcus said you work in a restaurant?’

‘That’s right,’ I say. ‘Just down in Manly. Not far from here. Ten-minute walk at most.’

‘And your job is reliable? Secure? You’re not likely to be unemployed in the near future?’

‘I work for my old man,’ I say. ‘I don’t think he’d fire me. Wouldn’t exactly be good for family relations.’

It’s meant to be a humorous comment, to lighten the mood, but nobody laughs. Marcus’s face remains blank. Anna stares down at her fidgeting hands. Fiona flashes a tight smile. ‘Very good,’ she says. ‘Well, that’s probably enough interrogation for now. I suppose we should take you up to see the room.’

I follow the three of them back into the darkness of the hall and up the staircase. Fiona leads the way. I walk beside Anna. I try to catch her eye, smile, make some kind of friendly connection, but she stares at her feet the entire way, avoiding my gaze.

‘Fairview was built in 1890,’ Marcus explains as we make our way up. ‘And so although it’s a large and perfectly comfortable house, you might find it lacks a certain modern aesthetic.’

Like light, I think to myself.

‘It’s certainly different to most Australian homes,’ he continues. ‘More British in style. Some people don’t like it. But I think it has its own charms.’

Everything about the house, including the staircase, is grand and generous and carefully made. The place is obviously worth a fortune, but it's also gloomy, and cold. A bit oppressive, even. It's stinking hot outside, the sun so bright the streets seem to shimmer in the glare, and yet in here it's dark and cool and cavelike, another world altogether.

*

When we reach the second floor, Fiona stops at the first doorway we come to.

'There are a few rooms you could have,' she says, 'but this is one of the nicest.'

She opens the door to what must be the best bedroom I've ever seen. It's large and bright and filled with enough furniture to make it inviting, but not overly crowded. Stepping into it from the gloom of the hall is like stepping from a cave into sunshine. The walls are white, the floors a warm timber. Large windows frame an impressive view of the Harbour. There's a double bed on one side, a wardrobe on the other, and a large timber desk tucked into one corner. An expensive-looking rug sits on the floor.

'There's no ensuite,' Fiona says. 'But there are three bathrooms up here – and one is just across the hall – so you and Anna wouldn't have to share.'

I think of the tiny bathroom I've been sharing

with Patrick and Lilla for the past few weeks, the squat toilets that were the norm in Indonesia. A bathroom to myself would be a luxury I've never even considered.

The room itself is a thousand times better than I could have imagined. I turn around to take it in, then walk to the window and look out.

'This view,' I say, shaking my head. 'It must be one of the best in Sydney.'

'It certainly is spectacular,' Marcus says, stepping up next to me. He stares through the window for a second, then looks at his watch. He straightens up, pulls at the cuffs of his sleeves and moves his feet together in an abrupt, almost military manner. 'Right. So that's the room,' he says. 'Fiona. We should probably get back to the office.' He looks at Anna. 'I presume we can leave you two here to figure things out?'

'Of course,' Anna says, nodding. 'You should go.'

'Are you sure?' Fiona says. 'Are you okay?'

'I'm fine.'

Marcus and Fiona say goodbye. As they leave, the sound of their shoes clattering down the staircase is the only sound in the house. Anna doesn't say a word. Nor does she look at me. She stares straight ahead, motionless, trance-like. It's not until the noise of the front door being pulled shut echoes through the passage that she moves. She closes her eyes and puts

her hand on her cheek. It's a strange, private gesture, as if she's forgotten that I'm there.

'So,' I say. 'It's an excellent place.'

She opens her eyes. 'Thank you.'

I wait for her to make some effort at conversation, to ask me a question, or tell me something interesting about herself, but she just stands there, twisting her hands together nervously.

Not only is Fairview like something from another world, but so, I think, is Anna. She barely speaks, and when she does, her manner is so formal it seems unnatural, forced, as if she's speaking from a script. She holds herself in an awkward, slouched-over way, as if she lacks the confidence to stand up properly and face the world, as if she'd rather disappear. Her hands are in constant motion, clasping and unclasping, pulling at her clothes.

I get the distinct feeling that I'll have to take charge of the situation if I want to get anywhere.

The room is so much better than I expected that I'm tempted to say I'll take it, no matter how strange Anna is, or what the conditions are, but I know I should ask some questions. One hundred dollars a week for a room like this is insanely cheap. There must be some kind of catch.

'It's an awesome room,' I say. 'And I love the house. But when I rang earlier, Marcus told me there were

some conditions. His word, not mine. Do you mind if I ask what they are? The conditions?’

She nods and if she seemed uncomfortable before, she is much more so now. She stares down at the floor, twisting her hands together frantically. Her face turns noticeably pink.

‘I have . . .’ She mutters something so quietly I can’t hear it.

‘Sorry?’

‘I have agoraphobia,’ she says too loudly.

‘Agoraphobia?’ I repeat. I’m familiar with the word but have no real idea what it means. ‘I’m not sure—’

‘It’s an anxiety disorder,’ she says. ‘I have panic attacks.’

‘Right. Okay. Panic attacks.’ I smile apologetically. ‘Sorry. I feel a bit stupid, but I’m still not sure what . . .’

‘I can’t go out. I panic if I leave the house.’

‘You can’t go out?’ I try not to act too startled, but am not entirely successful. ‘*Ever?*’

‘I don’t leave the house at all,’ she says.

‘That must be tough.’

She blinks, turns away.

‘Sorry. I don’t really know what to say. I mean, that must be full on. Have you ever—’

‘No,’ she interrupts. ‘No, I haven’t.’

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to be . . . How long have you had it? How do you get by?’

‘I’ve had it for a while now,’ she says. ‘I haven’t been out for six months.’

A lifetime, I think.

‘Marcus and Fiona have been helping,’ she says. She lifts her chin. ‘But they can’t do that forever.’

We’re quiet for a minute, both of us staring at the view. I wonder how she can handle seeing all that beauty outside, the sun and the sky, the boats on the harbour, when she’s trapped inside, all day, every day. The idea of looking out at a world that you can’t be a part of is unfathomable to me. A kind of torture.

‘Okay,’ I say eventually. ‘So you need someone to get stuff for you? Groceries? Bread and milk and stuff? Are they the conditions Marcus was talking about?’

‘Yes, that’s mainly it,’ she says. ‘I could shop online for most things, I suppose. But it’s not always practical. And Marcus really thinks I should live with someone. In case of, well, an emergency or something like that. Fairview is so big . . .’ She trails off.

‘So basically you write lists and I get stuff for you?’ I say. ‘Is that how it would work?’

‘We could have a system,’ she says. ‘Whatever you need to make it easy. I wouldn’t be a nuisance.’

I lift my shoulders, grin. ‘I think I’d like the room. If you think I’d be suitable? I mean, I suppose you’ve got some questions of your own?’

‘Not really.’ She shakes her head. ‘You can have it

if you want. You seem pretty normal really.’ For the first time, she flashes a smile. ‘More normal than I am, anyway.’

We go downstairs and talk through a few more details. She gives me a key to the front door, shows me where the laundry is, off the courtyard. By the time I leave I’m on a bit of a high. The room is fantastic, and more than affordable, and the house is in one of the best spots in Sydney. Anna is definitely odd, but that doesn’t bother me. From what I can tell, she’s just timid, a bit nervous – nothing that worries me. Maybe I can even help her, I think. At the very least, I can bring some life into Fairview, open a few doors and windows, let the light in.