

House of Wishes

Jenn J. McLeod

“Bricks and mortar make a house, but the laughter of children makes a home.”

Irish Proverb

Scribbled in a child-like fashion across the bottom of both pages are two unsophisticated signatures as distinctive as their owners. Above them, in increasingly crooked lines, are their wishes. But how can she—a stranger—grant them?

*She is a part of their lives for a mere blink in time.
The substitute mother they scream for at the height of their pain.
The friend they cry with at the depth of their despair.
Sometimes, in a forgotten part of the cemetery,
she is the person who weeps for them.
But she cannot play God.*

Can she?

CHAPTER 1

Forget-Me-Not, Western Sydney

Having waited in the wings many times in the past twenty-four years, poised to step onstage and play her part, Beth wishes *this* scene was make-believe, because the blur of tears suggests she is far from ready to face reality.

‘Hi, I’m Beth Fallone,’ she tells the suited young woman behind the reception desk. ‘I realise it’s late in the day. I somehow missed your message.’

The woman—girl really—stands and smiles.

‘No worries. I’m Katrina.’ She points with pride at her name badge before presenting a pen and a typed form clipped to a board. ‘You need to sign and date,’ she says while drawing the 2014 desk calendar closer, should Beth need a prompt.

She doesn’t. Today’s date is already etched into a memory that has collected far too many painful reminders in recent years.

‘Take a seat if you like, Mrs Fallone.’ A stilted arm indicates the adjacent room filled with spongy sofas and perfectly placed cushions. Bowls of wrapped mints and tissue boxes decorate several small tables, and the excessive amount of floral arrangements exacerbate Beth’s queasy feeling. ‘If you need water, there’s filtered—’

‘No, thanks,’ Beth interjects. ‘I want my mother, that’s all.’ Her tolerance isn’t what it used to be and her surroundings are not helping.

‘Of course.’ The employee walks away from the reception desk and calls back, ‘I’ll get them for you now.’

‘Them?’ The mumbled word stirs a sour taste. *My mother is not a ‘them’*. For forty years she’s been *everything*.

She wants to scream. Instead, she surrenders her sleep-deprived body to a sofa and stares down at the typed form on her knees. Still sick with grief, somehow she’s managed to survive the destructive hate-the-world phase when, for the first time in her life, she had wanted to cause physical harm to another human being. She could, surely. Despair can make a person capable of almost anything. A month on, less angry, Beth’s determined to get this next step done—hopefully without taking her bad mood out on an employee who’s simply following a well-practised script for what must be a difficult job.

When the girl returns, Beth's head is bowed, both hands cupping her ears to mute the melancholy music seeping from hidden speakers.

'Mrs Fallone? Are you okay?'

Beth looks up but doesn't think to correct her marital status. Such detail is unimportant when hanging from the girl's right hand are two ... *gift bags*? Arm outstretched, she's offering them with a shop-assistant smile as though Beth has snaffled a bargain pair of shoes. A *thankyou* hangs on her lips as she stands, but Beth can't utter a word with the significance and unanticipated heaviness of the parcels punching a final, devastating blow to her badly bruised heart.

Beth's immediate thought is to examine the contents. Why? What does she expect to find? Something to tell her this is all a misunderstanding, a mistake, a nightmare—one Beth never imagined finding herself in so soon. Then again, nothing in her life has stayed the course: not marriage, not motherhood, and not her childhood dream of stardom. Beth's greatest fan, the one constant in her world, is—was—her mum. Best friends more than parent and child, the pair regularly joked about living to ripe old ages, together in the same Over-55s village. 'We'll liven the old buggers up,' her mother would say.

A strange noise pierces the silence and Beth realises it's her. She's laughing and crying all at once while spewing an apology over the employee. 'I'm so sorry. I'll be fine in a minute.'

Or never! Beth tells herself. At that moment, holding her mother in a gift bag, Beth doesn't know how she'll ever be fine again.

'This is all very new,' she tells Katrina whose expression has shifted from practised sympathy to uncertainty. 'What I mean is ... I wasn't expecting *this*.' She raises the gift bags and watches what's left of the girl's smile disappear.

'I-I don't understand, Mrs Fallone.'

Should she explain? Did the young stranger need to know Beth Fallone—consummate performer—is more familiar with the Hollywood version of death and dying? Like when the movie director shouts *action* and powdery ashes dance like dust motes in beams of sunlight. Drawn towards heaven, the scene is supposed to offer hope and strange comfort to those left behind to mourn.

Grow up, Beth! She silently chides. At half her age, Katrina of Forget-Me-Not Funerals is more equipped to deal with reality, and more acquainted with mortality and misery. *And it's all your fault, Mum. You equipped me so well for life. Why didn't you prepare me for the inevitability of your death, or tell me how much it would hurt?*

Glancing at the two bags, Beth knows one thing. Her mum and Anton should be together, because for ten years they were never apart. She's also wishing she hadn't volunteered to collect both lots of ashes because the burden seems twice as daunting, twice as sad. As lovely as Anton was, Beth doesn't want to share her grief. Saying goodbye to her mother is hard enough.

'Hold on a minute, Katrina.' Beth inspects the label with her mother's name printed in sparkly purple pen to match the bag. 'Why are there two smaller containers of ashes in *this* bag?'

'Mrs Fallone, I ... um ...' A red blush explodes over the girl's neck and cheeks. 'I'll get Mum for you.'

Before Beth can finish mumbling, 'Your mum can't help me', the girl has disappeared into a back room.

She sighs, collects her handbag from the sofa with her spare hand, but as she turns sharply and bangs her shin on the corner of a coffee table, an intense pain shoots up her leg. When she bends down to rub the spot, stars whirl, forcing Beth to sit again.

'I'm so very, very sorry for the confusion,' a voice says.

Beth hears words reminiscent of her mother—a chronic apologist raised by religious parents—but when she stands, she sees a woman whose voice is as ethereal as her appearance: skin ivory, hair ebony, eyes cerulean, but with lips blood red.

'Hello, I'm Jesamiah Huckenstead. This should've been with your mother's ashes.' The stranger, dressed entirely in mauve and smelling like a life-size lavender bag, holds out an envelope. 'As you'll see, her wishes are very specific.' The woman is talking while walking a bewildered Beth back through the reception area, opening the front door wide to let her pass. 'Should you need to contact me, however ...'

Beth glances at the proffered business card:

Madgick & Associates—Trust Managers
In Madgick we trust.

'Take care of yourself, dear,' the woman says, letting the stationery and the envelope fall into the gift bag with the ashes. 'Have a good and safe trip.'

'Trip?' Beth repeats.

With her head spinning from the somewhat rushed exit, both her hands busy with bags, and her gaze intent on the contents, it takes her a few seconds to look up. When she does, the

woman is gone, the door sign flipped to CLOSED, and Beth is on the footpath outside Forget-Me-Knot Funerals alone—utterly and desperately alone.

Back in her car, Beth eases the envelope open as if whatever is inside needs to stay contained until she's ready. The truth is, Beth is nowhere near ready for more surprises—good or bad. She's already said goodbye to her mother too many times: at both the hospital and the funeral service. Beth's not sure she can manage another farewell. Not yet.

These last weeks have been the cruellest. She's not only lost the two people who were her world, her mum lingered for two weeks. Long enough to give Beth hope. When the doctors eventually asked, and Beth understood her mum's beautiful heart could stay beating in someone—saving another family from pain—the most difficult decision had been made a little easier.

A tear lands on the two notepad pages she's slipped from the envelope but, with barely a few lines above the scrawled signature, there's little ink to smudge. The page is headed: *MY WISH*, while the other sheet is reminiscent of a treasure map, a childlike diagram with squiggles and symbols surrounding a circle at the centre. The envelope's contents pose two simple questions in Beth's mind: When had her mother prepared for her death? And why is she wanting half her ashes placed with her partner in a lawn cemetery of his family's choosing, but insisting her grieving daughter spread the rest in a country town Beth has never heard of before now?

'Why, Mum?' She slumps in the car seat, slaps the letter on her knees, and opens the Maps app on her mobile phone. 'And where the hell is Calingarry Crossing?'

CHAPTER 2

Two Weeks Later

Still some distance from her destination, according to the last signpost, a flash of grey and a thud forces Beth to brake. The suddenness sends her hatchback into a slide and the rear wheels into a ditch. Although the car—along with her scream—stops dead, it takes a moment to realise what she's done.

When the red dust settles and she spots the lifeless kangaroo on the opposite side of the road, Beth eases herself slowly out of the driver's seat. She knows to approach with caution, like when a lorikeet strikes her lounge room window. If left alone, a dazed bird will often recover. Hopefully, the kangaroo is only stunned.

She inches closer. 'I'm so sorry.'

Why didn't she see the animal in time to react? Why was she not watching for wildlife? There's been no shortage of victims, with carcasses in varying stages of decomposition dotting the country road for kilometres. She should have been more careful. If only she'd driven slower.

The ICU doctor's muttering to his nurse echoes in Beth's head: *Ten kilometres per hour can be the difference between life and death. If the idiots had slowed down and driven to the conditions, this woman might not be fighting for her life.*

Beth's mum had been a cautious woman. She would have insisted Anton drive slow in the wet that night, and she would have seen the warning signs for Beth today. It's what she did: watch out for the people she loved, protect her only child and patch her wounds—the real and the emotional.

'Oh, Mum, why am I here?'

Intruding on the roadside silence is the *woosh* of wings and the cawing of a lone crow circling the lifeless kangaroo.

'No! Shoo!' Beth's shrieking proves ineffective as more birds appear, wary of the strange, now sobbing human with the flailing arms and a vocabulary that would put a truckie on a two-way radio to shame. For every bird she shoos, another shiny black scavenger lands, eager to pick at the dead or dying.

'No more, please,' she cries as hopelessness folds Beth's legs at her knees and she drops to a squat to catch the rush of tears in cupped hands.

Though desperate to stay strong, like her mum insisted women should be, Beth has locked too much inside these last few years. *No more.* As her gaze skims the creature she's killed, the endless plains and empty road, she realises no one can hear her weeping out here.

The pity party for one lasts long enough to bring the entire outback's population of flies to the kangaroo, and to have the murder of crows gain enough confidence to edge closer. But Beth's now conscious of the failing light, the precarious angle of her little hatchback, and the vastness and isolation of the landscape. The road running north and south is an undulant ribbon of black between flat, colourless fields stippled with small shrubs, ancient fence posts, and two wonky windmills as motionless as the poor creature. Closer to the road, gum trees with towering trunks and sprawling branches cast shadowy fingers over the plains. In their grey grasp is a mob of kangaroos standing erect and wary. *Are they family?*

Keen to feast in peace, the crows close in, no doubt drawn to the exposed soft part of the creature's belly. Glancing one more time through teary eyes and mumbling a heartfelt apology, Beth is startled when the animal moves. She gasps and clears the blur of tears with a swipe of a shirt sleeve. There it is again—a ripple under the skin.

'You have a baby in there? Oh, no, no, please, no!' Another mournful cry erupts so violently, the dozen crows take flight. Why couldn't she have run over a snake or a fox? Why a national icon—the one with a pouch and a family? She has to do something. But what?

The crows regroup on the ground, while overhead, the territorial call of the kookaburra starts out soft.

'Go ahead! Laugh, you stupid things.' They're watching her crouch over the animal, even though she has no clue what to do. Is it un-Australian to know so little about the national emblem, except that it's depicted proud and strong on the country's Coat of Arms?

She stands to change position before squatting again and trying a different approach. 'Just get it over with, Beth.' Accessing the pouch is tricky and requires two hands—one to stretch the opening, while the other feels inside. 'Oh, good grief!' She's clamped her eyes closed and is making strange whimpering sounds when a warm *something* wiggles against her fingers. Frightened, Beth yelps and falls back on her butt. 'Ouch!'

While brushing the sharp stones from the soft flesh of her hands, Beth recalls the part-time nail technician—and self-proclaimed fortune teller—had jabbed at the spongy base of Beth's thumb and said, 'Hmm, your Mount of Venus is unusually hard and flat.' She'd explained it was a sign of a person lacking family connection.

Beth's response had been to laugh and tell the woman as loopy as her earrings, 'You wouldn't say that if you knew my mum.' Ten minutes later, hiding in a shopping centre toilet

cubicle and inspecting her palms and their supposed lack of meatiness, Beth had told herself the woman was whacko. There was nothing abnormal about her hands. *Nothing at all!*

‘What bloody bunkum!’ her mother had said the next day while deliberately hiding her own meaty Mount of Venus. ‘Ignore the silly woman. You have beautiful hands and we have a wonderful connection.’

Beth’s inspecting her beautiful but smarting hands pitted with gravel and the odd speck of blood when another burst of Kookaburra cackles prompts her to try the pouch again.

‘All right! All right!’ She calls back. ‘Give me a minute. I’ve never done this before.’ And she’d rather not, but she can’t walk away when there’s the possibility of a little life in need of saving.

With the sun trekking rapidly towards the horizon, however, she must do this fast and get on the road before the day turns dark and more wildlife are on the move.

‘Need help?’

A male voice shocks Beth to her feet and she spins too quickly, almost losing her balance.

‘Whoa there!’ He grabs her by the elbow, stopping Beth from hitting the ground a second time. She’s not about to pass out, but she is sweating and her mouth is thick from too many takeaway coffees and too little water.

‘Where did you come from?’ She didn’t hear the car approaching over the raucous kookaburra chorus, but it’s right there, door open and parked near her hatchback on the other side of the road.

‘Are you okay?’ he asks.

‘A little light-headed, but I’ll be fine in a minute.’ A nearby log is the nearest thing to a seat, but as she tries to sit, he tugs her straight.

‘You won’t be fine if you don’t look first.’ He huffs, like she’s a child being told for the umpteenth time, and Beth detects a whiff of alcohol. ‘We never sit in the bush without checking a *Joe Blake* isn’t sharing the same bit of ground. Snakes are rather partial to long grasses and woodpiles.’

When the man’s grip relaxes, she eases herself down, grateful for the copse of shade-giving gum trees.

‘Now, let’s check out those hands of yours,’ he says.

Beth jerks her arm away. ‘There’s nothing to check. My hands are perfectly normal, thank you.’

His head cocks to one side. ‘They’re bleeding.’

‘Yes, well, forget about me.’ She folds her arms, tucking both hands out of sight. ‘The kangaroo is in a worse state.’

‘She’s an Eastern Grey, and I reckon there’s not much we can do,’ he says. ‘I’ll take care of it.’

It’s then Beth notices a rifle dangling in his other hand. Her shoulders fall, trapping a sob in her chest. ‘I wasn’t speeding. I didn’t see it in the shadows, but ...’ She almost chokes on the lump in her throat. ‘I-I think there’s a baby.’

‘Not uncommon,’ he calls over his shoulder. ‘The female Eastern Grey is almost perpetually pregnant, except when giving birth. Imagine that!’ His prattle continues as if this situation is an everyday occurrence for her. ‘The female of the species can freeze the development of an embryo until the previous joey leaves the pouch. That makes them pretty awesome mothers, in my book.’

Beth’s heart aches. She would’ve made an awesome mum.

‘I’m guessing you’re a city girl,’ he calls over the noisy squawks of pink and grey galahs squabbling over tree limbs as they flit overhead. ‘Most locals know when a roo takes on a car there’s rarely a good outcome. We can only hope it’s fast and painless.’ His words fade away, as if not intended for anyone else. ‘Unlike those left behind.’

Peeling his shirt away to expose a white T-shirt-type singlet over a taut torso, the serious stranger drops to his haunches beside the animal.

‘You will do something, won’t you?’ What’s she expecting? Floral arrangements and a full service followed by tea, scones and sympathy? ‘I mean, we can’t just leave it there.’

He smiles—finally—and it is kind rather than condescending. ‘There’s no helping this one, but by moving the carcass away from the road we’ll be protecting the birds and other animals that would otherwise loiter too close to traffic while feeding. As for this,’ he says, returning to the log where Beth sits. ‘This is why it’s important to stop and check pouches.’

‘Oh, my gosh!’ She instinctively cradles her arms to accept the tiny, hairless bundle of mostly ears, feet, and a tail swallowed up by the swath of navy-blue shirt. Unstoppable tears spill onto her cheeks as the joey’s nose twitches and two heartbreaking brown eyes stare up at her. ‘Please tell me this one will pull through.’

‘Probably old enough to be viable.’

‘Viable?’ She immediately regrets the censure. The man doesn’t seem to notice.

‘Worth the resources,’ he replies matter-of-factly. ‘The odds are never good with the tiny ones. Volunteers do what they can, but these days, with so many animals needing help

for different reasons, there's only so much a team of carers can do. Don't worry. What can't be saved is euthanised humanely.'

When he bends over to pick up the rifle he'd left next to her, Beth identifies the smell on his breath. It's the one she used to detect on Richard when he blamed his late arrival home on everything from bottlenecks caused by broken-down cars, to the broken-down actors he claimed were taking up space when they should bow out of the business gracefully. Her ex-husband was a producer and a director, so giving actors a hard time was in his DNA. Beth doesn't miss being married. She's glad to be clear of Richard and the whispered casting-couch references. What feeds her melancholy these days is missing out on motherhood, on feeling needed, and on the bonding experience that comes from nurturing a precious baby into a little person. Beth's heart breaks a little more when the joey in her arms wriggles. She is no substitute for a mother's warm pouch.

'He has to live,' she tells the stranger. 'He has to. You saved him. I'm not sure I was mastering the rescue technique very well.'

'You tried. Many drivers can't be bothered, while some farmers think the best roo is a dead one.'

A chill rattles Beth as the man heads for his car. With the air cooling, she fears for the joey's survival. When he returns with a spray can of fluoro pink paint, rather than the rifle, she's relieved but curious.

'What's that for?'

He shakes the can. 'To any wildlife warriors passing by, a marked animal means a checked pouch.'

'I see, well, thank you for being a wildlife warrior for us,' Beth says, still perched on the log. 'We're very glad, aren't we, little one?' She fusses with the navy fabric, tucking a portion of the shirt under the joey's chin before glancing up at the man. 'Have we kept you from anything important?'

His shrug is small, the smile that follows barely there. 'You might've done me favour.'

'Oh?' She studies him, but there isn't a lot of his face visible under the wide brim of the tatty tan-coloured cowboy hat. What Beth can see suggests the man's younger than she first thought, with brown skin on muscular forearms, and tan moleskins stretched over similarly solid thighs. He reminds her of the swoon-worthy young dancer she'd worked alongside one season, whose favoured form of core strength training was horse riding in Centennial Park. Cowboy, as he called himself, would turn up for rehearsals in his hat, singlet and worn jeans still smelling of horse. Although not Beth's type, the guy was an amazing dancer.

‘Where are you headed?’ The man is standing over her now, his body blocking the ball of dazzling tangerine, soon to be lost.

‘Oh, um, a place called Calingarry Crossing,’ she replies. ‘I believe it’s near here?’

‘Good, because you’ll need a tow. I’ll drive you into town.’

Beth hesitates. With her phone in the car, she can’t check if there is reception to call for the breakdown service—if such a thing exists in the middle of nowhere. But no way will she get in a vehicle with someone she doesn’t know, especially if he’s been drinking.

‘It’s not far,’ he says, as if sensing her hesitation, ‘and I’d suggest getting this little guy settled. A stable temperature is vital,’ he adds. ‘He needs a pouch as soon as possible.’

‘A pouch? Do I want to know how you manage that?’

His gaze shifts from her eyes to her blouse, briefly. ‘If you’ll forgive the suggestion, the most immediate solution is down your top.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

He shrugs again as if she should know. ‘Without warmth and the beat of his mother’s heart, this little guy will be fretting. Keep your shirt tucked into your jeans and open the top few buttons to make a pouch. Easy! I’ll take the joey while you—’

Beth flashes a palm. ‘I can manage.’ If not for the concept of having a small beating heart against her breast, Beth might have found a sliver of humour in a situation that has her fumbling with the covered buttons on her blouse while a stranger looks on. ‘Okay, so you will need to help me,’ she says. ‘If you can hold my shirt open, I’ll somehow tuck his legs in and, ah ... Oh, there we go. He’s in!’

‘Perfect,’ the man says. ‘Now put one hand underneath for support, not that he’s likely to fall through. What I mean is, um ...’ His gaze darts around, looking everywhere but at Beth. ‘No different to a human baby in one of those papoose thingamabobs, really, and you look like a natural.’ He slaps his hands together. ‘Now the little guy is as snug as a buck’s-night bachelor in a barmaid’s breast, I’ll check your car. You stay put.’

Beth watches him walk away, grateful for the time alone to settle into her bewildering role as kangaroo incubator, while at the same time shedding tears for the newborn she’d cradled too briefly. For twenty-four weeks, her baby girl’s heart had beat inside Beth. If only the tiny organ had been stronger.

Now hatless, the brown-haired, brown-eyed stranger is back with Beth and brushing the dirt from his trousers and once-white singlet top.

‘You’ve grazed your hands,’ he says, looking down. ‘What else hurts? Are you okay?’

For some reason, Beth's tempted to answer both questions honestly: *Everything hurts and no, actually, I'm not okay. Not at all. Not ever again.* Since her mum's accident, no one has asked Beth directly, unless she counts those perfunctory enquiries disguised as casseroles, cakes, and condolence cards.

She forces a smile. 'I'm grateful you stopped today. I'm Beth, by the way. You've already introduced yourself to my bra. And you are ...?'

For more: visit www.jennjmcleod.com

Copyright

House of Wishes. First edition. November 19, 2019

Published by Wild Myrtle Press – an imprint of Pilyara Press.

Copyright ©Jenn J. McLeod

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher or the author. This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places or events are entirely coincidental.

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Creator: McLeod, Jenn J., author

Title: House of Wishes/Jenn J. McLeod

ISBN: Paperback 978-0-6485708-0-6 and ISBN: eBook 978-0-6485708-1-3

Subjects: Modern & Contemporary Fiction, Family Relationships, Australia

Dewey Number: A823.4

Cover design: Lana Pecherczyk, Bookcoverology

Printed and bound in Australia.

