

KILLING CROWS

By Laree Chapman

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Then:

Life is messy, no matter how you live it. Sometimes, though, you can choose a tidy ending.

The thrashing in the pool stops. The water calms to reflect the halogen lights and galvanised metal fencing around the concrete feeding ponds. The breeze that catches at my hair is warm but I shiver. My hands tremble as I press against the pain that radiates out from my chest. Once it recedes, I punch triple zero into the phone.

‘Hello? Ambulance. Police, yes, police, too. My husband’s been killed by crocodiles.’

I give the operator the details and wait for the sirens.

Now:

The evening star comes out, hangs there in the apricot sky as the sun slips behind the mountain. I’m standing outside my daughter’s house, and in this house, I will not find a welcome. But, we have unfinished business. So, welcome or not, here I am. I pull the suitcase out of the boot and wheel it behind me.

Lights flicker into life, illuminating the sprawling house and gardens. I walk past agapanthus and giant strelitzias, sculptures of crows struggling to break free from the rock, until I come to the front steps. A woman appears at the open door, a slim figure, darkness edged in golden light.

‘Mum?’ She leaves the doorway and stands at the top of the steps, arms akimbo. ‘What are you doing? You can’t come here.’

I keep moving. The suitcase wheels bump on each of the wooden steps as I drag it behind me.

‘Hello, Caro. Nice to see you, too.’ I don’t lean in for a kiss and neither does she. ‘I thought we needed to talk.’

‘Well, I don’t.’ She crosses her arms, blocks my ascent. ‘If you want to visit, drive back down to the Valley Pub. They have rooms there. Maybe I’ll meet you for lunch one day, if I find the time.’

There’s movement in the doorway and Alice, her daughter, appears, followed by Caro’s husband Brent. He leans past Caro to pick up my suitcase like it’s a child’s lunchbox and carries it inside.

‘Good of you to visit at last, Jane. Might brighten up the place.’ He glances at Caro before he disappears back inside the house. ‘Make a nice change.’

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Brent puts his arm around Alice and tries to herd her into the house but she shrinks away from him and runs back to stand before me. Caro shoots me a furious glare and follows Brent inside, mouth twisted. Alice stares at me. We've never met, my granddaughter and I, not in the thirteen years since her birth. Not for the want of trying on my part. Once Caro left home she made it clear she wanted nothing to do with her father and I. She'd written once to say Alice had been born but the rest of their lives and her career I'd had to glean through Facebook and Insta.

'You can sleep in my room, Gran.' Alice tilts her head a little. 'Tell me all about Mum when she was a kid. She must have been awful, yeah?'

'If your grandmother stays, she'll be sleeping in her *own* room, Alice. You need a good night's sleep for school.' The voice comes from somewhere inside. 'Now come in and eat.'

Alice leads me inside to the table, already set for dinner, and pulls out a chair for me. Before I sit, I face Caro who's dishing up in the kitchen.

'Is there anything I can –'

'What do you think?' Her face is a study of contempt, one eyebrow arched. 'Why would you even ask?'

I shoot Alice a quick smile and sit, watching as she fetches cutlery for me and a wine glass. Brent pours a red wine and I sip it, nod my appreciation. Caro serves the meal, a mango chicken, and delicious. I turn to Brent.

'How's your business going, Brent? Any more government contracts for Grandale Industries in the pipeline?'

He looks bemused. 'How do you know my company's been awarded government contracts?'

'Let's just finish our meal in peace, please.' Caro forces the words around a mouthful of chicken. 'Everyone has a big day tomorrow. My exhibition is coming up and I'm nowhere near finished. Happy families can wait for some other time...if we must.'

I'm silent. It's hard not to buckle beneath the waves of anger she emits, but now I know what's driving the emotion, I can understand. It's still no salve for the sting in her words. After dinner, she refuses my help in the kitchen and disappears outside before I can say anything.

'She's painting. She's always like this when she paints.' Alice squishes up her face, thinking. 'Or else, she's like this and then she paints.'

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Alice shows me around the house, with its nine bedrooms, multiple living and entertaining areas, a walk-in cool-room and a butler's pantry the same size as the kitchen. They'd built it with the view of holding exhibitions of Carolyn's art, Alice tells me, but that idea has stalled.

I've never seen the house before. Hell, I hadn't even known their address. I'd had to ask directions in the Valley pub. The rift between Caro and I had happened years ago and once she'd left to study art at university, she never came back. We weren't invited to the wedding, but I knew of it through her Facebook page. I've watched, from afar, as she built success upon success as an artist. Her dark, brooding style had wooed critics and the public alike. I love her work, too, but the pain she bleeds into every stroke rears at my heart.

'Wish you could sleep in my room.' Alice surprises me. I'd imagined Caro would have turned her against me. She is still a child but teetering on the teenage years, where anything a parent says is met with sulky insolence. It's the child's eyes that stare up into mine, and I remember other eyes, so much like hers.

'We'll have plenty of time to catch up tomorrow or the next.'

'Mummy said she'll make you leave tomorrow.' Alice picks up a cushion and hurls it across the bed. It knocks a statue of a crow off the bedside table and it smashes on the floor. 'Shit,' she says and runs from the room.

I sleep, but fitfully. Something wakes me and I lie in the dark unfamiliar room, listening. Muffled voices come from somewhere inside the house. It's an argument, by the rise and rise of the words, the cadence. I stare at the ceiling. Should I interrupt? Hardly. Should I try to bring peace? *No*. I remind myself of who I am, why I'm here, and do the only thing possible. Roll over and pull the pillow over my ear.

In this house the tissues of my dreams are ripped and desperate, full of anger and accusations. I wake to the pre-dawn birdsong and lie still for a moment before I remember why I'm here. I make coffee and take it into the garden, sip it quietly as the day begins. There are two things I must tell my daughter, and until that is done, I will find no peace. I walk back into the kitchen and smile when I see Carolyn and Alice.

'Morning.'

'No one has time to chat this morning, Mum.' Carolyn brushes past me to tip her half-drunk coffee down the sink. 'The rest of us have lives to live.'

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Alice opens the fridge and glances inside, then goes to open the heavy white door beside the butler's kitchen.

'Don't open that.' There is a flash of something furtive in Carolyn's eyes as she inserts herself between her daughter and the door.

'You're always saying I have to make my own lunch. But there's nothing in the fridge.'

'Feels like a tuckshop day to me.' Carolyn reaches into her jeans pocket and pulls out a twenty, hands it to a wide-eyed Alice. 'A treat.'

They leave to do the school drop-off and I stay at the table, contemplate an unappetising piece of dried toast. Instead, I go outside and sit on the verandah. In daylight the house and gardens appear even larger and I can see how it could be used as an art gallery, or even a function venue. I imagine nervous brides walking down the steps, a congregation of guests sitting on white chairs arranged on the lawn, the groom, waiting awkwardly for the first glimpse of his new bride. That's my trouble. I've always been a romantic. And what good has that ever done me?

The gardens stretch into the distance and I follow the path past ornamental trees and flowerbeds. It's a sanctuary from the real world, and the cool air that fills my lungs gives me fresh hope that I can connect with my daughter again. At the end of the path, nestled among the surrounding trees is a wooden yurt. Caro's studio. I step up to the door, but it's locked. Strange, I think, but even here, deep in the hills, there must be opportunistic thieves. I peer through a window but the sunlight has turned it into a mirror. I can only make out a collection of things perched on the inside windowsill. Feathers, bones, a small black wing. Found items, I imagine, like the fallen leaves and shells or pieces of coral she had used years ago as inspiration. I cup my hands on the window and lean in. Paintings are stacked on one side of the room, covered with drop-sheets. A table is littered with bowls, jars of dirty water and soaking brushes, loose sheets of sketching paper, a bird's skull yellowed with age.

Something black slams into the window beside me and I stumble backwards, land on my backside in the garden. I'm winded for a moment. The bird, a crow, lands beside me. It staggers but stays on its feet. From inside the yurt more crows throw themselves at the window. I struggle back onto my feet and wonder how they'd been trapped inside. The free crow flies to a nearby tree and perches on a low branch, cawing mournfully, before it flies off. I check to see if I've done myself a damage. I'm miraculously intact. How would I

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explain that? *Oh, by the way, Carolyn, while I was sneaking around your studio I fell over and broke my hip.* A tiny bubble of laughter catches in my throat.

There's a noise on the path behind me, the scuff of a shoe on concrete. I know it's her before I turn and any thought of laughing, even at my own clumsiness, evaporates. Her face is stiff with rage.

'Who do you think –?' Her eyes are glassy with unshed tears. 'You know I don't want you here, don't you? Not near me, not near my daughter, not near my art.'

'Carolyn, please. We need to talk.'

'We are not talking. There's no reason for you to be here. Remember all the times you *weren't* there when I needed you? *No?* Well, I do.'

She retrieves a key from her pocket, unlocks the door and slips inside, slamming it behind her. The birds erupt in panic again and I hear their indignant cries, see their desperate wings flapping against the window. I back away. A bench made of wrought iron and wood is close by and I sink down onto it gratefully. The pain in my chest is in full bloom and I close my eyes, focus on creating a cool stream of blue water that spills over my head, across my shoulders, down my chest to the rest of my body. It's a meditation that helps manage the pain. Slowly, it recedes to something I can handle, but I stay on the seat, listening to the sound of the breeze sighing softly in the leaves.

I flinch as the studio door slams open. Carolyn has a phone to her ear, eyes widening as she listens.

'Yes. I understand. No, he's working, so just me. I'll be there in twenty minutes.' She hurries past me but turns back for one final order. 'Leave.'

I hear a car start up and I wait until the sound disappears down the driveway. I'm not going anywhere. Whatever has gone wrong on the other end of the phone, Carolyn has left the studio unlocked behind her. She tells her life through her art and I hope to glean some clue of what is happening to her, now. Crows are a new motif in her work and I'm puzzled at this use of them.

I crack the door open, slip inside and pull it closed. Like a many-eyed black hole, the cluster of crows stare at me, cocking their heads, shifting and moving, but not ready to fly. They wonder what threat I am to them, and I take a moment to wonder the same about them.

Dust sheets cover most of the paintings in the studio and I pull them off with a flourish. It was the same way Carolyn had revealed her early paintings to me so long ago. Those days

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her work was filled with colour and light. Greens of the rainforest, reds and blues of birds and animals, yellows of sand and sunlight. These paintings are monochrome, a shadowed world. Carolyn's world, and it holds every pain, every betrayal and rejection, every moment of defeat, drying on the canvas for all to see. Set against harsh landscapes and dismal skies, the crow hover over bodies in various stages of decay. More crows hunch on top of shackled men, tearing strips of flesh from living victims. It's impossible to look away. These paintings are even darker than her previous works, and I realise my cheeks are wet with tears.

I spy something in the bottom corner of the last canvas. *Crows: strip flesh and blood to reveal truth. Bear witness to truth.*

I don't understand what it means. just as I hadn't understood why Caro's paintings had darkened at the same time as I was having treatment for cancer. Months in hospital, chemo, flying home to north Queensland after each bout. It's a cure to rival the disease. I finally surfaced from the last round of hell, only to discover my daughter had slipped into that awkward angry teenage stage parents talk about. I'd lost her and no amount of trying ever brought her back. Instead, she became introverted, argumentative, spending long hours in her room. Only when she was painting did she seem to come alive.

I replace the dustcovers. Something is very wrong here.

I walk slowly back to the kitchen. Her car pulls up in front of the house and Alice jumps out, slams the door and sprints inside. She rushes past me, blonde hair flying, face scarlet. A door slams and I know she is in her bedroom. I make coffee for Carolyn. She accepts it grudgingly.

'What happened to Alice at school today?'

'You should be an hour up the highway by now.' She eyes me coldly. 'Don't think you can insinuate yourself into my life. I'm not one for second chances.'

'Listen to me. For a few minutes, that's all I ask.'

She sinks onto the curved bench seat that faces the window. 'You have one. One minute.'

It's better than nothing and I sit beside her.

'I was sick for so long, when you were young. The rounds of chemo, the radiation. Even when I was home, I was disorientated, in a constant rotation of pain and nausea, a cocktail of drugs. So much, that I lost track of the real world and what was happening, right

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under my nose. But I want to tell you now, I know. I know what happened to you, while I was too sick to realise.'

Her face blanches and for a moment I think she will be physically ill, but she pulls herself up straighter in the seat.

'I'm not playing your silly games, Mum. Nothing happened.'

She wraps her hands around the mug. Her fingernails are full of black and white paint. But, there's brown under the nails as well, and a rust-coloured streak on her wrist bone. The paintings in the studio are all blacks, whites, greys. I remember the look in her eyes when she stopped Alice from opening the door.

Suddenly the pain in my chest flares, overwhelms me. Darkness crowds in from the edges of my sight, pinpricks of stars. Caro's voice seems far away.

'Tablets. My handbag,' I gasp. I hear her leave but the pain recedes quickly, and I force myself up on shaking legs. I stumble to the cool-room door. A smudged brown fingerprint marks the stark white of the door. I grip the handle and wrench it open. Cold air hits me like a wall. One side of the room is shelves packed with cheese wheels, salami, cases of champagne and dozens of elite foodie stuff. The other side is full of hanging meat. A whole lamb, rabbit, chickens, a hind quarter of beef.

And Brent.

Brent sits on the floor in the far corner, hands and feet tied, gagged with something blue. A trickle of dried blood on his face contrasts shockingly with his bluish-white skin. Hope flares in his eyes when he sees me. He tries to talk through the gag but it comes out as grunts and squeals. He wriggles frantically, but the way he's tied, all his efforts are for nothing.

I study him for a moment until I hear Caro coming back, then I step back into the kitchen. Brent makes an animal noise around the gag but I close the door quietly behind me. I sit down again as Caro returns. She shakes the bottle of pain killers at me.

'I thought you needed these. Or is this a bullshit story?'

I take the bottle and swallow one pill dry. She sits down but can't resist a quick glance towards the cool-room.

'I found a picture of you on your father's phone,' I say. 'Three months ago.'

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The words sound innocent enough in themselves. Afterall, what father doesn't keep photos of his kids on his phone? But, she glances over her shoulder, checking Alice isn't within hearing distance.

'Okay, so you do know.' She leans in, drops her voice to a whisper. 'Why are you here, bring it all up again? Are you some kind of emissary for him, to try to foster a relationship between us. Open arms, forgive and forget. Yeah, it doesn't work like that. Every night before I go to sleep and every morning when I wake up, I pray that bastard is dead.'

'But, that's what I've come to tell you, Caro. You never need see him again. He *is* dead.'

'What?' Coffee spills from her mug but she doesn't notice. 'When? How?'

'He slipped and fell into one of the crocodile pools. The one with the big males.'

'*The big* –' She makes a noise, halfway between a laugh and a sob. 'Thank God, thank God.' Fat tears spill down her cheeks. 'But, he...he was always so careful when he worked with them. I can't imagine...' Her eyes narrow as she looks up at me and I can see her mind working through what must have happened. 'So, you killed him.'

It's not a question, but I nod. 'You know more than anyone he deserved it.'

'Pity you hadn't done it years ago.'

'Caro, I'm sorry. If I'd only known, it would have been different. I would have stopped him, taken you away.'

It's not enough for her. It would not be enough for anyone. No words can ever erase those years, those scars, the pain that keeps finding its way onto her canvases.

'And if the cops work out you did it? I mean, a man who's owned a croc farm for that long doesn't just get clumsy one day and lose his footing. You could end up in jail for the rest of your life.'

I smile at that. 'I'd willingly spend a thousand lifetimes behind bars if I could only wind back the clock so it had never happened to you. It would be worth every minute.'

She hides her face behind paint-stained hands and cries in wrenching sobs. I slide along the bench and wrap my arms around her. Her body softens, momentarily, and she rests her head on my shoulder. With a jolt, she tenses and draws away from me.

'The photo? You destroyed it?' She gazes up at me for a moment. '*Wait*. He took more.'

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I nod. There were many more, and with each new photo I discovered, my fury had intensified, raging like a house on fire, until I thought I could set the whole world aflame and watch it burn. Instead, I'd followed him down to the crocodile pens one night at feeding time. The males hadn't eaten for some time. It was easy to bring the hammer down on the back of his head, thinking of how he had broken our little girl. His body crumpled into the water like a deflating pool toy. Crocodiles can smell blood in the water over a kilometre away. These crocs were on him in an instant.

The coroner filed it as a case of misadventure. I destroyed his phone's sim card. Hacked his laptop. I cried for the life we should have led, Caro and I, as I deleted every terrible photo, emptied his cloud storage, smashed the laptop and the phone up with the same hammer. I burnt his clothes, photos of him, anything that reminded me of him. And still I can't purge him from my thoughts.

But my Caro doesn't need to hear the details.

The pain in my chest chooses now to gather momentum. It must show on my face, despite my attempts to conceal it. She brings me a glass of water. I swallow another painkiller and push the worst of it back under my control. I won't let it stop me. Not yet.

'Why didn't you say anything to me?' I press the heel of my hand to my chest, count ten slow breaths. 'I would have –'

'Mum, he told me you'd die if I ever said anything to you, alright?' She wiped a sleeve across her eyes. 'He said it would kill you. That *I* would kill you.'

The strength drains from my muscles, my bones, and I sag back into the seat. I'm in a waking nightmare, but how much worse must it be for her? She had suffered, silently, because of me. How could he be so cruel? How could I be so blind?

It takes a few moments, but I find enough strength to sit up again, watch her eyes. They flash with anger and fear. But I must keep trying.

'Now,' I begin. 'About Alice.'

Caro's head snaps up. 'Alice has nothing to do with this.'

'Not about your father, no, but –'

She stands, but I grab her wrist and don't let go.

'Why is Brent in the cool-room?'

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‘None of your business.’ She breaks away and moves out of reach. ‘You can’t come hurtling into my life after all this time and start asking questions. You gave up that right years ago.’

She’s full of righteous anger and I can’t blame her. I had betrayed her. I’d left her in the care of a monster and each time I went away for more treatment, I delivered her up to him like an offering.

As I watch, any fight leaves her and she sinks back onto the seat beside me. ‘I wish you hadn’t opened that door.’

‘He’s done the same to Alice, hasn’t he?’ A plan is forming in my brain, even as she covers her mouth with her hand, trying to keep the truth inside.

‘Yes, he’s done the same fucking thing, alright? She’d changed, started acting out at home, school, too. Stealing, fighting.’

I nod. Signs I’d been too sick to notice or confused with adolescence. When Caro had rebelled I thought it meant she’d felt abandoned by me.

‘She’s terrified of him, I see it in her eyes. And two days ago, I caught him, running his fingers through her hair. Telling her how beauti —’ Caro clenches her jaw and stares out at the garden. ‘It’s what Dad...how he always started.’

‘What do you plan to do with Brent?’

‘*Do?* I thought —’ Her hands clench into fists. ‘I haven’t thought that far ahead. Last night I confronted him. I expected him to say I was imagining things. Instead, he laughed at me. He said no one would believe an unhinged drama queen artist like me. He turned to walk away. I picked up a crow statue. I only wanted to stop him. I thought I’d killed him but I found a pulse. Maybe it would have been better if I’d done it properly. The rest you know. Except, I have no plan.’

‘Then, listen to mine.’ I covered her hand with mine. ‘You and Alice are going away on a holiday. Away from school, away from your painting. You’ve been working too hard lately. You’ll be travelling around the state or the country. Overseas, even. It’s cherry blossom time in Japan. Your pick entirely.’ Caro tilts her head and looks at me. I’m reminded of the crows in the studio. ‘All you have to do is remember Brent is working away. He left early this morning, long before you and Alice were awake. You didn’t even hear him go. *I* was up early. *I* told you he was gone.’ Caro starts to object, but I squeeze her hand tight. ‘Remember,

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the three of us had breakfast together – you’d just rekindled a relationship with your estranged mother – and I came out to the verandah to wave you both goodbye.’

‘But, what does this solve? We can’t keep him in there forever, and as soon as you untie him, he’ll call the police. I’ll never see Alice again and he’ll have free rein to do whatever he wants.’

‘Come back to the plan, Caro. I stood on the veranda and waved you goodbye, remember? I’m in the house alone. I’ll handle it from here.’ I wait for her to meet my eyes and nod. ‘Caro, there’s something else you need to hear.’

‘Oh, God, what else could go wrong?’

‘My cancer has returned. It’s metastasised into the bones and liver, the brain. I don’t have much time left.’ I remember the doctor’s words. ‘Well, no time, really.’

She looks like she’s going to burst into tears, or maybe laughter, but a thin keening sound comes from deep in her chest and she begins a slow rocking in the seat.

‘No, Caro. There’s no time for this.’ I hold her shoulders still, force her to look at me again. ‘Go and pack, now. For you and Alice. Take your passports, make it look like this was a planned trip. Leave Brent to me.’

She stands and hurries away. Within half an hour she’s back, dragging a suitcase, Alice following. A smile plays around Alice’s lips and she gives me a quick hug. My arms feel hollow when she breaks contact.

‘We’re going on a mystery holiday, Gran.’ Then, she’s down the steps and at the car.

Caro stops for one long hug. It’s this hug that I will take with me, with all its meanings: love, hate, gratitude, relief, grief, and maybe hope. I wave as they drive off and feel the sting of tears in my eyes.

Before I do anything else I go back to the studio and open the door wide. The crows take to the air, wings flapping, feathers and claws skimming the top of my head, catching in my hair, in their haste to escape. They fly through the door as a group and join the free crow, exalting in their freedom. Then they take to the wing and head into the sun.

In the house, I retrieve a full bottle of painkillers from my suitcase, slip them into my pocket and pour a long glass of water. Brent struggles in his ropes when I open the door, hope and fear jockeying on his face. I shake my head and he looks confused as I pull the door closed behind me. I switch the interior light on and locate the digital temperature reader. I

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punch in minus twenty degrees then settle down opposite him on a box of champagne. He squeals through the gag until his voice is nothing more than a breathy rasp.

‘What’s that Brent? She didn’t tell you there are no second chances? Who knew she’d take after her mother in that respect?’

His eyes widen in horror.

The cold seeps into my bones, making them ache. I pour the pills into my hand and wash them down with the water. In time the cold doesn’t seem so bad, then it becomes pleasantly warm.

Life is messy, no matter how you live it. Sometimes, though, you can choose a tidy ending.

Brent is silent, blue. Tiny icicles form across his open eyes.

I close my eyes and remember little Caro and our life before I became sick. A day at the beach, just the two of us. The sun bouncing off the waves, the smell of her hair, the sound of her laughter. She slips her hand in mine and we run across the hot sand into the turquoise sea.

Life is beautiful.