

PROLOGUE

The Outback – A Taste Of Italy

The car shuddered along the uneven, rutted, *cursed* road, Tony thought, feeling the steering wheel vibrating in his hands. Then, a sign: ‘Repair Work’. Even after slowing a little, the gravel continued to lash the car’s underbelly. Stones spat and ricocheted as if flung against a corrugated roof. After the gravel, the car hit another pothole. Headlights dipped and shook. Along the side of the road, the shapes came out from the darkness. Standing alone with arms above, fingers spread, reaching and waiting to grab. They spooked Tony. Eucalyptus trees were wild designs.

Another kangaroo leapt for cover as the lone car passed. “Look out, Skippy. Don’t want you across the front of the car,” Tony said, picking up pace again.

Rosa was sitting easy, observing illuminated flashes of eucalyptus. She moved her hand back through her hair. “You could slow down. There’s no hurry.”

“You need to drive quicker to smooth out the ruts. They should make a proper road.”

“It’s the Outback, Tony. Anyway, the children don’t care—they’re asleep.”

“And we need to travel two hours to see a movie.”

“You should be thankful that we can see a movie in the next town.”

“Yes—and what a place it is.”

“I’ll take the children myself, next time. You can walk.”

“Perhaps it is a better walk.”

“I hope you enjoy a hundred miles of walking.”

“I might run away.”

“You usually follow. You would go lazy without me.”

“Perhaps I would not be so confused.”

Tony lowered his window just enough for a gush of warm air to hit his forehead. How refreshing, he thought, hearing the Ford’s droning engine shiver loudly over the unrelenting road. Then, tasting the dust in his mouth, he put the window up. “One day, Rosa, I’ll have the road paved for you. And buy a better car.”

“This one is fine.” Rosa moved across the seat and put herself next to him. “What’s wrong with you tonight?”

“I’m just seeing things the way they are... The Outback’s a strange place.” His fingers loosened a little and flexed around the steering wheel. “What about another house by the ocean, away from dust and flies? Somewhere for you to paint?”

“And paint more ocean?”

Tony took a broad hand from the wheel and rubbed his chin. “You know—we could always go back, Rosa.”

“And where would that be?” The words lacked zest.

The car continued to shudder in his hands. “Perhaps we could go back to Italy one day. If you want to have a vineyard next—why not have it there? I don’t think this place is so special.”

She gave him a knock on the knee. “You haven’t even tried it.”

“I’ve seen it. There is nothing here—maybe a few bored animals with nothing to do but eat.”

“You see what you want to see.”

“I suppose.” His head tilted from side to side. “What am I doing here with you? All I’m seeing is dust and flies most days.”

“You followed me.”

“To be with you—not this.”

“You say this on my birthday?”

“How will I ever explain it to you?”

“You’re going to stay with me. And for no other reason than you want to stay with me.”

Turned skyward

“I’m getting tired of this conversation.”

“Good.”

“You win again.”

“Yes, so slow down and put your arm around me—you big gorilla.”

How she made him love her. He slowed the car and put an arm around her.

“Are you angry?”

“Why would I be angry—even with you?”

Right again, he supposed, slowing down more, with just one hand on the wheel. The road wasn’t that bad, the trees not so spooky. Anyway, it did him no good to argue. “When they fix this road, people will come to see the most beautiful woman in all of Australia and Italy.”

Rosa rested her hand across his thigh. “It would have been nice to see the same movie together.”

“Yes.” He gently squeezed her shoulder. “I know. But I couldn’t sit through a movie like *The Phantom of the Opera*.”

“You may have learnt something.”

“Who the Phantom was?”

“That things are not always as they seem. You should learn that one day.

“If you are teaching, Rosa... anything is possible. I think.”

“The children will learn that.”

Tony waited a moment, not only to get his thoughts together, but to tease her a little. It was time for that. She had all the answers—always. But without a question... “Yes, Isabel is like you—a painter, a romantic dreamer, somebody for the Phantom. But Joey is more like me—likes football, muscled, like... like the Incredible Hulk. He’s at the age of chasing girls. You need to keep an eye on him. You ought to be watching him,” he said, quite pleased with himself.

“You just keep your eyes on the road and watch out for kangaroos. Leave the children to me.”

“Yes, my dear.” He was smiling now; he couldn’t help it. How she had a way to change things. “I’m glad you find some use for me,” he said, with a wide smile firmly fixed.

Her finger tapped his thigh. “*Some use.*”

“Ohh, I’m a lucky man.”

“I’m a lucky woman, but sometimes you test me.”

“And when would that be, Rosa?”

“You’re flirting with the woman at the hotel. What’s the point of it?”

She was stretching him beyond humour. “Rosa, how can you be the way you are—so beautiful—and think I would look at another woman, that she would mean something to me?”

“She is yours if you want her, be honest about it,” she said, keeping her voice soft.

“And of course, there is somebody who is doing more than looking at you.”

“I’m not flirting.”

“But every man looks at you—has always.” His tongue pushed against the roof of his mouth. It didn’t seem fair. Flirting didn’t complicate things. “Would you be jealous?”

“Why would I be jealous?”

That was Rosa, believing them both to be free, sharing their lives with others. Their life was to be enjoyed in every way. They had married on a whim. Yet he couldn’t do it with another woman—wouldn’t do it. Rosa was the one for him, and she wanted to be with him, while she also freely admitted to her lovers. No secrets: she would tell him as much as he wanted to know.

Currently he had the new doctor to hear about, who apparently was on a quest to discover something more about himself. That was life with Rosa, and had been from the start. It seemed she needed something more in her life—to be evolving. Why? He didn’t see the need for the constant change, when things were good. Travel was good, but why always start over again? He needed to keep her grounded; she was a good deal younger than him. Perhaps he had grabbed her too soon? He would have her back in one place—plain and beautiful. He was too much in love.

She tapped his thigh. “You know what to expect from me.”

He raised his brow. “Help me to understand her, Father. She’s a good woman—but one who makes it difficult for me.”

Turned skyward

“Enough.”

“Yes, enough.” He rubbed down her arm and kneaded the point of her wonderful elbow between his fingers. How he wished to keep her between his fingers and away from the doctor’s touch. He began to hum a tune for her, since the shimmering road vibrations had taken their toll on the radio from the last trip. His tune stopped. No... one from the movie, *Phantom of the Opera*. Yes, ‘*Music of the Night*’. He knew the tune well enough. He began humming again.

Her head rested against his shoulder. It made it all worthwhile, to feel her like that. With his arm around her, he felt such strength. He was still a part of her.

After going through the tune a couple of times, he lifted his foot from the accelerator and gently touched on the brake, slowly bringing the car to a standstill. “Mmm... And now we have cows on the road. What next?”

The road was littered with cows. He was tempted to honk the car’s horn, but even to his eye the cows looked in poor condition, as they staggered into the light. It would also wake the children.

“Rosa, why do these cows want to use the road at night? Are they going to the movies?”

“The midnight show. Look at their eyes.”

The cows’ eyes glowed fluorescent green as they wandered through the beam of the headlights and plodded around either side of the car, so weary that a few of their bony hides almost rubbed against the car.

“Should I tell them to hurry up? They’re going to be late?”

“Let the sleepyheads pass. You’ve stopped right in their path.”

“You know best, Rosa. But I thought the road was for the people,” he said, momentarily magnetised by the cows’ slow movements. He then tapped on the steering wheel. “Get off the road, you fools. It’s not a place to sleep.”

“Quiet.” Rosa looked back over her shoulder into the back seat. “Still sleeping, children?”

“I’m sorry—but these are very slow cows. There’s a whole string of them. There could be hundreds of sleepyheads yet... One, two, three... The sheep will be next.”

“Are you getting tired?”

“Maybe the cows will fall asleep first... Keep coming... Moo, moo. Tell me, Rosa—how is it that we are sharing a road with cows in the middle of nowhere? Tell me again why we are here.”

“Because it is nothing like what we are used to.”

“I must agree on that one.”

“So much empty space to do as we want, and it’s good for the children to let their minds wander.”

“They’ll get lost. I don’t know where I am—between one place and another.”

“We’ve had our time in the city.”

“Yes, I can still remember sharing the road with people and cars. Those were the days.”

“Does your big head ever run short of jokes?”

“Yes. I better save my humour for tomorrow, for the good people of Elura—in that splendid new café of Rosita. So what do you have planned for me?”

“A paintbrush for the alley wall.”

“And then?”

“I might let you rest... Perhaps you could spend more time with Isabel—if she is so different.”

He squeezed her shoulder again, in acknowledgement that Isabel was like her mother, while Joey was not unlike himself. “She takes after you. She’ll need to see the world too—and then some.”

“Make a design on the wall with her.”

“We can play with paints.”

“Yes—and that means you too.”

“I’ll tell Isabel about these cows. We’ll put a cow on the wall.”

Her elbow nudged his stomach.

Tony turned his nose to the open window and breathed deeply. “Yes—nothing like it. You need to smell and breathe it, the smell of dirt, dust—and cow, I suppose.”

Turned skyward

“While you are enjoying it...” She moved out from under his arm and took a brown paper bag from the glove box and retrieved a ready-made joint from it. “I’m going to walk with the cows.”

“Do you need to take that with you?”

“Yes. It’s my birthday.”

She opened the door and rested it closed behind her. Her figure quickly skirted across the crackling ground into the darkness amongst the cows.

Tony saw the flame of a match. It disappeared. Strange creature, he thought. You’ll wander back barefoot over the prickles without feeling your feet. Tomorrow, he thought, he would see a painting of cows, most probably cows that he couldn’t see: symbolic, meaning it was something else, not a cow. He would rather just a simple picture of a cow.

Expecting Rosa to have a few minutes with herself, he switched off the lights and engine. While waiting, he wasn’t so sure. What was that woman doing out there? Dark shapes were moving from side to side. Thankfully, a sliver of moonlight guided the cows around the car, their clumsy hooves plodding and falling into a beat as they passed.

Not wanting to startle the children or the cows, Tony got out and rested his door shut. He backed up against the front of the car; the cows didn’t seem to notice him. They were moving forward with incredibly little interest, he thought, with just enough mind not to bump the car. Their protruding hips carried his sympathies, however. He remembered the fat dairy cows he had milked as a boy.

I’m sorry, I am waiting for Rosa, he thought to say. Have you seen her? Is everybody going soft in the head? But it’s her birthday, so I suppose I can’t stop her from smoking, and she can put out her own bushfire. She’ll come back a different person, a different mood. Yes—yes, my friends—she’s an artist as well. And though I like smoke too, it is only when you are on a barbecue. No, I am sorry—I have milked a cow before. That was when I was young, though, and lived in a faraway place. But I do love Rosa. And she loves me most of the time, but she will love others as well. And that is a long story, my friends, and too much for your brains—trust me.

Edward Gordon

“Come on, Rosa. These cows will begin to talk back.”

“These cows will not talk to you, but only to me,” Rosa said, stepping out from behind a cow.

“You think?”

“Yes. I have been talking cow,” she giggled, moving towards him.

“Very good. You smoke, you speak another language.”

“Yes. Smelly cow language.”

“That is good.”

She stepped between his legs and put her cheek to his chest. “I feel good—much better for my birthday.”

Tony held her in one arm. “Shall we get back in the car?”

“Look up, you fool! See the stars—that is where I want to go one day.”

“Yes, I can see it now. After a new car, we shall buy a spaceship.”

Rosa pushed him back over the bonnet. Her arms stretched wide across his expansive chest. “It’s a beautiful night, Tony—full of scents, full of stars. Let us make love under this sky.”

“Don’t be silly, Rosa.”

“Why not?”

“Our children. Hundreds of cows walking by.”

“The children are asleep. Cows cannot take photos of us. I am sure of that.” She kissed him greedily. “Let us do it.”

“In our bed, yes.”

“What happened to the boy I once met?” Her body pressed down over his. “My want is now. This cannot wait, Antonio Vivaldi—make your sweet music.”

He sighed, looking into the stars. “We’re getting older.” He sighed again, but in a more playful manner, feeling the warmth, the lunacy of it all. “Very well, if you want to do this. But you will help me paint tomorrow.”

He rubbed the small of her back as she kissed down his neck and inside his shirt. Trying to think of a luckier man at this moment, he felt the softness of her hair fall through his fingers. He brushed her cheek and held her face, looking deep into those transcendent brown eyes.

Turned Skyward

He reached forward and kissed her eyelid. “Yes, after fifteen years I need you more than ever—Rosita the Beautiful. I am a fool. I should tell you these things more often.”

“Then tell me tonight.”

“Your kiss is perfect,” he said, slow and soft.

She kissed him full on the lips and pulled him closer. Pulling her lips away, the corners of her mouth slowly lifted. “Your kiss... mmm. It’s okay.”

“Then I’ll try another way.”

As he stood up, Rosa rolled back against the bonnet. Forgetting the cows, or anything that could ever come between them, he stood nestled between her legs, rubbing his hands across her thighs. He slipped open a button on her blouse and felt through for her breast.

Her fingers feathered down his muscular arms. “Are you now more willing than I? What a strange creature you are.”

He smiled, breathing in her scent and that of the passing cows. “That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

Her hands brushed over his. “Well, are you ready?” she said, in a whisper that fell between the beat of cow hooves. “It’s my birthday—I hope you are ready in front of these beasts.”

Tony stepped back, slipping off his sandals. The dust and grit wedged between his toes as he turned and looked back to the cows. There was an idea that somebody was following behind the cows, but Rosa had to come first.

Standing beneath so many stars with her, he didn’t want to disappoint. The night air had his insides crawling with raw feeling for her. Even if the grit beneath his feet were to suddenly spike and sharpen, he would rather have his body bleed into the dust, than let her go now. In his life, he was waiting to become something. She was so much—everything. He stepped out of his shorts and underpants and looked down over his hardened cock.

“And does that really belong to you?” she asked, wriggling her pants out from under her skirt.

He hadn’t expected to see himself like this tonight, standing half naked, in

the middle of a road moving with cows, with the children in the car. He had to smile. "It seems to."

"Yes, it seems to know me well," Rosa giggled, sitting on top of the bonnet.

"Yes..." He moved forward between her legs.

"The children, remember? So let's be quiet."

She never kept herself quiet and had probably woken the children many times. He kissed her, first with his hands on either side of her, then with one beneath her blouse and bra to feel the rising swell of her generous breasts. She arched her back and lowered herself across the bonnet, allowing him to move freely.

Looking over her, he paused for a moment. For Tony there was nothing better than seeing the glint in her eyes; they held the magic between them. She truly wanted him tonight. He felt it as he kneaded her breasts with his large hands.

From her breasts, his hands moved downward, following the soft curve of her body. He lightly pinched the hem of her skirt, twisting it a bit from side to side, making her hips wiggle with it.

Their smiles were wide as he hitched up her skirt.

"What is next?" she asked.

"Sit up."

She sat up and perched her feet on the bumper. "Yes, I am here," she said, with her eyes locked to his. She pushed herself back nearer to the windscreen. "Will you reach me from there?"

He caught her wriggling feet and pulled her heels back to the bumper. "I think so," he said, pushing her thighs wider and pulling back her skirt, before he rubbed both hands over her pussy.

Rosa sighed, stroking her fingers down his arms. "Yes—for my birthday."

As clumsy hooves plodded around the car, Tony's fingers moved over the silky hair of her crotch and tantalised her hidden flesh. She moaned softly, biting her fingers as she lay back on the bonnet feeling his touch, which she had refined over the years.

Turned skyward

Her knees lifted and widened as her heels contracted upward from the bumper to the bonnet.

He leant between her thighs and repeated his fingers' movement, this time with his flickering tongue. Her fingers slipped from her mouth and spread through his hair, keeping him there while he tasted her sweetness, dipping his tongue inside. She writhed from side to side, the tips of her hair caught in her mouth.

She was losing control, under this star-filled night, and Tony knew it. Just as her little cries of joy were about to diminish, he took his mouth away. His hips reached to hers. She was helpless as his hardness touched and teased her. He took her bottom into his hands and pulled her closer. He pushed into her heat-soaked desire.

Her legs wrapped around his back. "There is so much of you tonight," she let out in a soft rasping breath, feeling Tony's strength and gentleness inside her. "Why?"

He didn't know, but it was like she was feeling him from another place tonight. God, he felt her tonight. "It's only for you, my wondrous light." He had decided to give her much pleasure tonight, no matter. She wouldn't forget this birthday.

He filled her slowly, again and again, searching for what she could share with another man: to give her waves of heat, to have it fan out through her body, to have her body melting beneath as her orgasm overtook her, and to feel the purpose of his being—their connection.

Her hips heaved upward. "Si!"

His mind was leaving him—set wild and free. He built up speed; he gave back to her again and again, plunging into her with all his heartfelt strength. Again and again he did it, grunting, harder and harder the more Rosa lunged back at him. His body was for hers, his knees grated against the bumper for her. Then it came from her mouth. "Oh—oh—oh..." She wanted him more. His hands bit into her bottom as she bucked to have each thrust deeper inside.

"Let it go!" she cried out. He threw his head back and shunted like a

train, slamming his knees against the car, until his seed burst into her. He was hers!

Listening to the plodding hooves crush the road's grit, he stayed buried within her with his breath falling heavy across her lips. It had been one of their best; he was sure of that. So blessed were they within each other, they didn't see the wiry grin of a stockman on horseback as he tailed the last of the cattle.

Tony and Rosa breathed in the beastly aroma of the night air before they fixed their clothing and slipped back into the car. He put his arm around her and continued driving.

She caressed his thigh. "I won't forget."

"For that you should thank those blessed beasts."

"Yes, I will pray for the cows too."

"Mum," Isabel spoke up.

"Ah-ha. Are you awake, children?"

"I am," replied Isabel.

"Mmm. Did we wake you, my darling?"

"Yes—what were you doing?"

"We'll talk about this more tomorrow, about those special bedroom noises. And I will tell you how much your father loves me... Or maybe your father will explain these things to you."

"Now go back to sleep, Izy—like Joey," Tony said.

Tony kept the car at a good pace, riding the ruts of the road and welcoming the added warmth from his wife. He could take her again in the front seat now. God, what a lucky man Tony Vivaldi was to be living in this wide brown land. And so the car's shuddering had him thinking differently. God, is it a good idea to irrigate this barren land and grow grapes? Should I try and plant more seeds inside of Rosa? Why don't they make me more children, when I fill her so well? Or do you ask why two Italians are making love in the Outback?

His thoughts of God continued as the headlights opened the darkness before him. Soon another set of headlights appeared on the road coming towards them.

Turned Skyward

“Who would be wanting to leave our lovely town of Elura?”

“Somebody with a sound mind,” Tony joked.

“Heading to the city, where the land is concreted—I don’t think so.” She tapped his thigh.

“Slow down a bit and let him pass, anyway. Dip your lights.”

“I’ll do that, my love.” With his arm still around her, Tony dipped his lights and slowed a touch, and moved the car onto the shoulder of the road. The car shuddered more now; he tightened his grip on the steering wheel. The other car rushed upon him.

“Tony, slow down! Fermata!”

Tony pulled his arm from Rosa and clamped the steering wheel with both hands. Headlights glared into his eyes; the other car veered into his path.

“Fermata! It’s coming at us!”

Totally blinded, Tony hit the brakes and wrenched the steering wheel. The car skidded violently and tore off the road. It jumped sideways, soaring into hanging branches that gouged the windscreen. Screams melded with screeching metal; the car slammed into the tree. Then everything fell quiet, except for the radiator’s hiss. Then a little girl’s cry escaped the twisted wreck.