

Belinda  
Alexandra  
*Southern Ruby*

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

## ONE

# *Amanda*

Sydney, 2004

On Friday 17 September at 11.20 am, my life changed forever. I was standing in the master bedroom of a house in Mosman, staring at the queen-sized bed and deciding whether to dress it in neutral colours or go lavish with a silver-beaded satin throw, when my mobile phone rang, giving me a start. I was tempted not to answer it, but a glance at the number told me it was Tony from the real estate office.

‘Amanda?’ He sounded out of breath. ‘Can you come back to the office? I need to talk to you now.’

Some people say that when something terrible has happened they had some sort of premonition of it: a sick feeling in their stomach; a lump in their throat they couldn’t swallow; a prickle down their neck. I didn’t feel any of those things. The breezy spring day and the stunning house with its panoramic view of Sydney Harbour had put me in an exuberant mood. Styling prestigious properties for sale wasn’t the job I’d intended

to end up in when I graduated from my Master of Architecture degree the previous year, but it beat being unemployed.

‘Sure,’ I told him. ‘I’m at the Dennisons’ property. The delivery team have already been so I can lock up and be there in fifteen minutes.’

When I climbed into the Holden Barina Nan and I shared, I could smell her perfume, Youth Dew, lingering in the air. I reapplied my Russian Red lipstick and smiled when I thought of Nan always imploring me to tone down my love of striking colours. While she sported the polished ‘au naturelle’ look, I saw my style as ‘luxe alternative’ — dyed black bob, winged eyeliner, black nail polish and a tailored skater dress teamed with Doc Martens. Before I turned the key in the ignition I scrutinised the Dennisons’ modernised home one more time: its Regency white and beige rendered exterior; the topiary plants leading to the front entrance; the plantation blinds in the windows, all evenly angled. It was my job to see that the house was presented perfectly to prospective buyers.

My gaze travelled to the house next door. It was a red-brown-brick Federation home, circa 1912, still occupied by an elderly lady who had been there since the 1930s. The slate-tiled roof was intact but badly in need of repair, as were the peeling window frames and sagging front veranda. Tony described the house as an ‘eyesore’, but to me it was a diamond in the rough. I imagined that inside it was a treasure trove of original cast-iron and tile fireplaces, high ceilings and picture rails. While Mosman Council had conservation guidelines, they allowed for significant adaptations. I had no doubt that as soon as the elderly lady died and the house went up for auction,

its guts would be ripped out and replaced with indoor-outdoor living areas, open-plan rooms, rear dormer windows and Juliet balconies that had never been part of the original design.

Although I was addicted to my mobile phone, laptop and iPod, I was drawn to things with a sense of history like a bee is to flowers. My Master's had been in restoration architecture, and what I longed for was to take an old house and restore it to its former glory. Along the way I'd discover historical gems that told the story of the residence: wartime newspapers; rusted tools and cooking utensils; yellowing accounts printed in Spencerian script; and, most thrilling of all, a stash of love letters hidden away behind a skirting board. But Sydneysiders were as enthusiastic about capital gains as they were about renovating and my fantasy of a commission like that was a long shot. It was one of the reasons that, apart from a short stint with a senior architect converting a Victorian terrace in Surry Hills into a restaurant and some work experience with the Heritage Council, I'd been unable to find a permanent job.

As I turned onto Military Road and headed back to the Neutral Bay office, I wondered what Tony had wanted to see me about so urgently. I hadn't even thought to ask him. Another person might be worried they were about to be fired, but I had no such concerns. Tony was practically family. Nan had worked as his office manager for the past thirty years. She was also godmother to his now grown daughter, Tamara. When I was younger, I used to pretend to the girls at school that Tamara was my sister. I wanted to be like them, with parents and siblings, and didn't want them to know that Nan was all the family I had.

I parked my car in Nan's space, adjusting the seat back to her petite height like a well-trained husband leaving the toilet seat down, and took my style portfolio from the back seat. Julie wasn't at the reception desk, and by habit I glanced in the direction of Nan's desk. She wasn't there either. The orchids she'd bought at the beginning of the week still looked fresh in their crystal vase, but folders and Post-It notes were strewn over her desk and the floor. Her chair was pulled away from her desk. Nan was famous for her orderliness and the disarray was puzzling. But it was only when I saw Anne, one of the agents, crying in the kitchen that I knew something was wrong.

Tony was alone in his office, shuffling papers. As soon as he spotted me through the glass partition he rose from his chair, pale as a sheet, and fiddled with the middle button of his shirt. 'Amanda, you're here!' His voice had a high, tight edge to it.

He ushered me into his office and shut the door behind him. Steve, another one of the agents, watched us from his desk, his face frozen. The reception console rang but no-one made a move to answer it.

'Is everything okay?' I asked Tony.

He had trouble meeting my eyes and ran his fingers through his hair. A sensation of dread crept into my heart. Had something gone wrong with the business? Was he about to tell me the agency was in receivership and we were all out of jobs?

'It's Cynthia,' he said, turning even paler. 'She collapsed after this morning's sales meeting.' Tears came to his eyes and he struggled to continue. 'They couldn't revive her. She died on the way to hospital.'

I stared at him, not comprehending. He couldn't possibly be talking about Nan. We'd had breakfast

together in Crows Nest before I'd dropped her off at the office and headed to the Dennisons' property. She'd been fine then: a woman in perfect health who looked fifteen years younger than her sixty-five years. She was going to retire in another two months and we planned to travel around Europe together. No, he couldn't be talking about Nan.

'Amanda,' his voice penetrated my thoughts, 'do you understand what I'm saying? Your grandmother had a fatal heart attack. There at her desk this morning.'

Steve joined us in Tony's office. 'I'm so sorry,' he said, squeezing my shoulder. 'It's a terrible shock! It happened so suddenly. We didn't even get a chance to call you ... and then she was gone.'

A cold, clammy feeling crept over my skin. I rushed from Tony's office towards Nan's desk, staring at it as if something would give me a clue as to why the world was spinning around me. Nan's handbag was there under her desk, and her sweater was hanging on the back of her chair. Maybe she'd gone to the ladies? Then I saw the needle caps scattered on the floor — left by the paramedics after trying to revive someone with adrenaline. The grim truth of what Tony and Steve were trying to tell me started to sink in, shutting off parts of my body and turning me numb.

'No!' I said, gasping for breath. 'Nan!'

Tony's arms were around me, guiding me into a chair. 'She's at North Shore Hospital. I'll take you to see her — they'll be waiting for your instructions.'

I stared at him, trying to come to grips with this new reality. When he said, *she's at North Shore Hospital*, he was talking about her body, wasn't he? Nan was gone. And I hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye. The

terrible realisation hit me: while I'd been thinking about decorating themes in the Dennisons' house in Mosman, Nan had been lying here on the floor, dying.



The five days and nights after Nan's death that I spent alone in the house we'd shared were unbearable. Grief rocked me in waves and I struggled for breath as if I were drowning. I kept expecting to hear her key in the door or see her in the kitchen in the morning making omelettes or avocado on toast. Every time the telephone rang, I thought it might be her calling for me to pick her up from her embroidery class or to put the oven on in preparation for making dinner. But the sympathy bouquets of white lilies and roses that seemed to arrive by the hour were a reminder of what I found impossible to accept.

'Nan, I thought we'd have at least another twenty more years together,' I called to the empty rooms. 'Remember, you always said that you'd give me away at my wedding. You were supposed to be here to see your first great-grandchild.'

My grandmother would have been shocked at my slovenliness. She had been very proper and nothing was ever left out of place. Books had to be returned to bookshelves and I hadn't been allowed to study anywhere except at my desk. But after her death I wore the same clothes several days in a row, let the dishes pile up in the kitchen, and slept wherever the mood took me, which was usually in one of the olive green velveteen armchairs in front of the television. I was grateful that Tony liaised with the funeral director for me and Nan's best friend, Janet, took over the task of calling Nan's friends to

inform them of her passing. Nan wouldn't have come apart like I did. She would have squared her shoulders and persevered, abiding by her favourite motto: *The show must go on.*

Janet and the ladies of the local Uniting Church seemed to anticipate that I wasn't made of the same sturdy material as they were. Like Nan, many of them were country girls who had come to the city to marry their bank manager and accountant husbands. At the wake after the burial, they laid out a feast of finger sandwiches, tea cakes and mini quiches on a lace cloth on Nan's walnut dining table, and left to me the task of opening the front door to welcome the mourners. Many of them expressed a shock that mirrored my own: 'But she'd never had a sick day in her life!'

The arrival of Tamara and her partner, Leanne, in their lemon-yellow Volkswagen was a welcome reprieve. Only Tamara, with her Italian colouring and her Slavic cheekbones, could carry off wearing a black tie-dyed jumpsuit to a funeral.

'For God's sake, sit down,' she told me. 'Leanne can let people in for you. Now what can I get you to eat?'

Despite my dazed confusion I was amused by the thought of Leanne, with her leather jacket and spiky blonde hair, welcoming Nan's prim friends into the house.

Eating was the last thing I felt like, but Tamara brought me a plate stacked with sandwiches and a cup of steaming tea.

'I don't know how you stand living here still,' she whispered. 'Whenever I visit Mum and Dad I have flashbacks of tennis lessons and pony club. Do you remember when we got suspended from school for dyeing our hair candy pink?'



Tamara and I had always been experimental with our fashion. I cringed when I remembered how much that sometimes upset Nan. When I was eighteen I'd had wings tattooed on my shoulder blades. Nan didn't speak to me for a week except to say: 'Why would you spoil your beautiful skin like that?' I couldn't tell her that they symbolised my freedom after surviving school and were done in memory of my mother, who I'd hoped was my guardian angel. It was difficult to talk to Nan about my mother. Even after twenty-two years, the mention of her brought tears to Nan's eyes.

'Oh my God,' giggled Tamara. 'Is that Reverend Edwards? Isn't he retired now?' I turned to look at the white-haired man who was speaking with Reverend Taylor, who had conducted the service. 'Do you remember when he told Dad that he shouldn't allow me to learn karate in case I came under the influence of "oriental philosophies"?'

'Just as well you gave up karate and became a lesbian then,' I quipped.

Tamara threw back her head and laughed. Even I managed a smile.

'You know, the people here might be old-fashioned but they are kind,' I told her. 'I have more frozen casseroles than I can possibly eat, and the ladies in Nan's embroidery class are working on a portrait of her.'

Tamara grimaced and I knew she'd never understand. Her family was intact, including two sets of grandparents, uncles and aunts, and cousins by the dozen. She couldn't appreciate how important any sort of connection to other human beings was to me, no matter how tenuous.



After everyone had left, I caught my reflection in a mirror and realised what an alien I looked like in the house. The week before Nan died, I'd had my hair coloured liquorice black and a blunt fringe cut into it. My eyeliner and foundation had disappeared with my tears at the service. The bluish tinge of the new colour was unnatural against my skin and made my vacant eyes stand out strangely. While Nan was alive, our home had been a haven, but now the plush beige carpet, striped wallpaper and pinch-pleat curtains felt dismal and smothering. It was no longer a home, just a dated Art Deco house. Many times, Tamara had offered me a room in her rental in Newtown; and the inner city, with its eclectic cafés and vegan food, was more suited to my personality than conservative Roseville, where my sequined tops and polka-dot skirts stood out among the linen pants and chambray button-up shirts. But I could never have left Nan. Now she had left me.

I sat down at the upright Beale piano and played a few bars of Scarlatti's Sonata in F Minor, which had been one of my pieces for my final music examination. Busy with my university studies and trying to establish myself in a career, I hadn't touched the instrument since I'd left school, although Nan still made sure it was tuned annually.

My grandfather, who died before I was born, had bought the piano for my mother to learn on when she was a child. According to Nan, my mother couldn't be persuaded to touch it, preferring tap dance and softball to studying music. It seemed ironic then that the top of the piano held so many photographs of her, like some sort of shrine. I gazed at the pictures that showed her as a baby in her bassinette, on her first day at the same

school I'd gone to, and on the day she'd left for her road trip across the United States, where she'd met my father. That last photograph had always intrigued me. My mother had small, even features and the colouring of an English rose, but her peroxidized-blond hair stuck out in all directions. I couldn't help thinking that I'd inherited my rebellious streak from her, and that's what Nan had always been afraid of.

I transitioned from Scarlatti to 'Summertime' and remembered the first time I'd heard Ella Fitzgerald sing it — on a record at Tony's place. The music had moved something deep inside me: I fell in love with each phrase and every soft croon. Until then I had been addicted to Michael Jackson and Madonna.

But when Nan found me picking out the piece on the piano later she was furious. 'The only real musicians are classical musicians,' she scolded. 'Don't waste your time on any other rubbish.'

I knew even then that her comment had nothing to do with the quality of jazz musicians and everything to do with my father who had been a native of New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz. If not for a horrific twist of fate, I might have grown up in that Southern American city instead of Sydney. I might have been Amandine Lalande instead of Amanda Darby. I might have known my parents.