

BRONWYN HOWARD

DEATH & PREJUDICE



They say he killed his beauty queen girlfriend. But did he?

PROLOGUE

FIVE YEARS BEFORE

A human shadow detached itself from the double-storey house with its pillared porch and walls gleaming white in the moonlight. Frost sparkled on the grass and a chill wind sighed through the bare bones of leafless trees. The last of autumn's leaves crackled underfoot. His breath misted in the frigid air and hot tears slid down his face unnoticed. Bundled up against the cold, he leaned against the huge trunk of an oak tree and tried to tame the emotional tempest that raged within him - a maelstrom of fury, frustration and betrayal. How could she?

There was a loud boom from the large, rarely used kitchen at the back of the house, as the gas ignited. Windows shattered and the fireball, fuelled by the infusion of oxygen, rushed to consume the mansion. He wanted to stay and watch the destruction but some confused instinct urged him to run. He turned and, like the jackals that roamed the estate when no one was abroad, slunk away from the scene of his crime. To him, it was not so much a crime as a cleansing. She had shielded him from the world for years and now he needed to protect her from herself.

The fire's intense orange glow lit up the night sky like a volcanic eruption. Homeowners closer to the scene could hear the crackle and roar of it engulfing the sprawling house, set on a poorly maintained lot. More windows splintered and a lone pine tree exploded, sending sparks in all directions, to the consternation of the neighbours. It was late autumn on the African highveld and, as the rains ebbed and vegetation dried, the danger of wildfires loomed.

Perhaps it was this ominous possibility rather than a sense of altruism that prompted Gordon Miller, the nearest neighbour, to mute the television and alert the estate's security team. As he scrolled through his phone's contacts, he remarked to his wife, "I hope there's no one in there. I wonder how it started."

His wife sipped her wine and shrugged. "Who knows, darling? Those people are..."

Dispatch answered and Gordon quickly explained the situation. Ending the call, he told his wife, "They'll contact the fire department, the police, and get paramedics out..."

His wife shivered. "If anyone's stuck in there, they're most likely beyond help by now."

Gordon went to the window and pulled back the heavy curtain to get a better view. Beyond the reflections of their comfortable lounge, he could see the blazing home in its unkempt garden further down the slope. In the distance, the moon glinted on the Jukskei River as it wound through smallholdings and lifestyle estates, towards Diepsloot, a shanty town that had mushroomed into a more formal township over the years. He opened the glass sliding door, ignoring his wife's sharp admonition from the sofa: "Darling! You don't need to get involved."

"Yes, but that boy, Danny. He's not quite right, you know. He could be..."

She got up and re-filled her glass. "Darling, please. You've alerted the authorities. Let them deal with it."

He sighed and reluctantly closed the door. "All right, sweetheart."

"I know you've got a soft spot for him but he's so... strange. Gives me the creeps." She sat down and turned up the sound on the television. "Let's watch the movie."

Reluctantly, he turned back to the warm, pleasant room and sat in his favourite armchair. "Sure." Soon, they heard sirens wailing as emergency services responded. Through a chink in the curtain, he could see the red and blue reflections of the vehicles' lights. He glanced at his wife, who was focusing, rather determinedly, on the television.