

THE LOST PROPERTY ROOM

TRUDI CANAVAN

Aurealis and Ditmar winner TRUDI CANAVAN is the author of the bestselling Black Magician Trilogy, which includes *The Magicians' Guild*, *The Novice*, and *The High Lord*. All three books entered Australian top ten SF bestseller lists and went on to sell internationally. Neilsen BookScan rated the trilogy as the most successful debut fantasy series of the last ten years, and in 2006 it had sold over 500,000 copies.

Her second trilogy, Age of the Five, also received bestseller success. *Priestess of the White* reached number three in the *Sunday Times* hardback fiction bestseller list, staying in the top ten for six weeks. In 2006 she was offered a seven-figure advance for a four-book contract to write the prequel and sequel to the Black Magician Trilogy.

In the story that follows, Canavan conjures up a dusty, magical room in Melbourne's Flinders Street Station so that we may see for ourselves the Draconian nature of consequence...

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In the park, people were dancing in the rain, laughing and cavorting. Trinity rolled her eyes skyward. This pathetic drizzle was not worth getting soaked over. Already, patches of blue were visible as wind hurried the clouds onward. It would take much more than this to break the drought.

The rain might relieve her of the chore of watering her garden. She was heartily tired of bucketing grey water from the washing machine, shower and kitchen onto her plants. Restrictions only allowed her to use fresh water twice a week, and her small fernery needed a lot more than that.

As she reached the shelter of Flinders Street Station, she paused to shake and then fold up her umbrella before joining the queue of people filing through the turnstiles. The ticket machine sucked in her ticket then spat it out, the clunk within excessively loud and heavy for the processing of such a light bit of card. Once on the train she opened her bag and took out the cover of her umbrella, carefully placing it underneath her wet umbrella on the seat beside her. Then she took out her knitting.

Pausing to admire her handiwork so far, she smoothed the neat stitches of a striped sock, then set to work. Suburbs, bridges and stations flashed by unnoticed as she knitted through the tricky patterning of the heel. Counting stitches and rows. Slip, knit, slip, knit, turn, purl back across. As always, the absorbing rhythm soothed her. Eventually she recognised the familiar sound of the boom gates a suburb from her station. She was just two rows from the end of the heel. One station to go before she must pack it away. She hunched over her work. Her needles and fingers flew. As the train pulled into the station she finished the last stitch, stuffed her work into her bag and hurried out of the train.

The air was full of glitter. Sunshine lit thousands of tiny droplets as they drifted toward the ground. A sunshower. Pretty.

As the train pulled away from the station the droplets abruptly gained weight and size. She groped for her umbrella and froze, her stomach sinking as she realised it was still lying on its cover, on the seat beside the one she had just vacated. On the train.

The rain hammered down on her head in mockery. She ran to her car.

* * * *

Reciting directions under her breath, Trinity made her way down the corridor, not completely sure coming here had been a good idea. Her shoes clacked on the hard grey linoleum floor, the sound echoing loudly no matter how lightly she tried to walk. At the end of the corridor a window framed a square of perfect blue. The rain of the afternoon before might as well have been a dream, for all the good it had done. None of the gardens or parks she had glimpsed out of the train window looked any less brown and withered. The dams and reservoirs were still between twenty and thirty per cent full, according to the morning news.

The directions she had been given stated that the room she sought was at the end of the corridor. She thought back to the call she had made that morning.

‘Hello? Is this “lost property”?’

‘Yes. How can we help you?’ The voice had been sexless, but had the dryness of old age.

‘I left my umbrella on the train last night. The girl I just spoke to said that if anyone has handed it in it would have come to you. Did you receive

any umbrellas since then?’

‘Oh, we get lots of those. Sometimes dozens of them, if it’s been raining a bit. Was this last night, did you say?’

‘Yesterday afternoon, about five.’

‘Well, it might not have come through to us yet. Why don’t you come in this afternoon?’

‘Can’t you ... can I leave my phone number? Could you call me if one comes in like mine. It’s black and —’

‘It’s better you come in, dear.’

Trinity hadn’t argued. Old man or woman, like all mature aged workers in this day of privatisation and downsizing, he or she was probably understaffed. She doubted there was anybody free to hunt for her umbrella among all the others that came in on rainy days. It was surprising, really, that a service like a lost property room still existed.

So she had asked for their opening hours, scribbled down directions, and left work early to retrieve her umbrella on the way home.

Now, reaching the end of the corridor, she wondered for the hundredth time since making that call if one umbrella was worth losing an hour’s flexitime and getting lost in the bowels of Flinders Street Station.

Then she felt a now-familiar pang of loss. The umbrella held memories. Good memories of a holiday, a spontaneous purchase and friendship made and treasured. She didn’t want to let go of that umbrella any more than she wanted to let that long-distance friendship to end. Perhaps that was silly.

Anyway, she was here now. The door she faced wore a small metal sign that read: ‘The Lost Property Room’. She sighed and knocked. A moment later the door opened and an extraordinarily tall old man beamed down at her.

‘Come in,’ he said, his high voice recognisable from the phone call the day before. She found herself in a small room. Opposite the entrance was another door, but of carved and polished wood — surprisingly ornate in this place of utilitarian practicality. The old man slipped behind a thoroughly modern desk of glass and metal and checked a notebook.

'Trinity Hunder,' he said. 'Lost an umbrella, right?'

'Yes,' she said, reaching for her purse and identity cards.

He waved at the carved door. 'Go on in.'

No security checks, then. Not just old fashioned decor, but old fashioned trust. She shrugged and moved to the door. As she reached out to the handle he made a small noise.

'One word of warning,' he said. She turned to look at him. His expression was solemn. 'Only take what is yours.'

'Of course,' she replied. Not so trusting after all, she mused.

The wooden door opened easily. Beyond it was a corridor, shelving on both sides, lit by strips of weak fluorescent lights. She had almost expected oil lamps or candles, to match the door. The room extended a long way, the far wall indistinguishable in the dim, dusty light. She stepped inside and turned as she sensed the room was broader than just this long corridor ... and caught her breath in wonder and dismay. So many rows of shelves extended into the distance, she could not see the end of them.

The Lost Property Room was enormous.

'How am I going to find the umbrellas?' she asked aloud. A moment later she noticed the shiny bronze letters at the end of each wall of shelving. 'Cr-Da' shone proudly at the end of the shelf to her right. Smiling, she started walking.

She still hadn't spotted the far wall when she came to the 'Uk-Us' sign. Walking between the shelves, she chuckled as she saw the row of small guitar-like instruments painted with hibiscus flowers and hula girls. They must get a lot of stringed instruments, if they had an entire shelf just for the ukulele.

A mysterious array of bones, some freshly white, others dark with age, puzzled her until she saw the label 'ulna' on the front of the shelf. Perhaps mislaid by a medical student? A disturbing alternative occurred to her. But surely any skeletons found on trains were handed over to the police.

Conscious that time was running short before her usual train home,

she quickened her pace, passing purple light globes in several different shapes, jars of a dark brown powder, strange discoloured metal disks — some with Celtic knot patterns worked into their surface, a small glass-topped box containing a collection of pretty butterflies and a biology specimen jar with a strange cord-like object floating within.

At the end of the shelf she found the umbrellas. Just as she expected, there were a lot of them.

Paper parasols were piled alongside frothy lace and fur-trimmed fancies. Brightly coloured and patterned cloth and plastic contrasted with the more common black and navy. Sizes ranged from huge beach umbrellas in cream or rainbow colours, to tiny children's umbrellas, and even some that must be for dolls. Of the usual, city worker's umbrella, far more of the straight, metal-tipped kind were here than the collapsible kind she preferred. Yet both kinds were endlessly varied, some bearing monograms of famous designers or menswear manufacturers, company logos or the team colours of several different sports, cartoon characters or artwork. Some were plain, some sported carved wooden handles, some were cheap plastic, some wore slip covers and others were naked.

Of the one she had lost, there was no sign. She went through the shelf once, then again more carefully, running her hands over them, picking them up and putting them down again. All in vain. Her umbrella wasn't there. Either it hadn't reached the Lost Property Room yet, or someone had picked it up on the train and decided to keep it.

Disappointed, she stepped back and regarded the collection before her. All these umbrellas. And she was umbrella-less. Then she looked closer. Some of the less modern ones were dusty. Fingerprints marked where she had touched them. Clearly they had been lost long ago. Their owners hadn't come back to claim them, and probably never would. What harm would there be in taking one in place of her own? She remembered the old man's warning, but shook her head. It wasn't like she was stealing, since they no longer belonged to anybody.

Still, it might upset him. Examining the dustier umbrellas more closely, she thought back and asked herself if she'd given him any particular details of her lost umbrella. She could remember saying it was black. She might have described it as collapsible.

Of the dusty, collapsible umbrellas, one had a wooden handle carved into a simple but delightful representation of a duck's head. Smiling, she picked it up, took out a tissue from her bag and carefully wiped the dust

away.

It would do. She felt a pang of guilt as she strode toward the exit, but pushed it aside. The umbrella was going to waste here in the dusty, hidden rooms of the station. She was giving it a new home. A good home.

To her surprise, when she stepped outside the building, it was raining. With a smile of happy satisfaction, she opened the umbrella and let the last of the dust wash away.

* * * *

On the television screen, images came and went as relentlessly as the rain outside. Trinity sighed. Why was drought always followed by flood? Why did too much have to come on the heels of too little?

It had been raining so long now it seemed that it had always been raining. But she knew that wasn't true. Thinking back, she sought her last memory of the sun shining, then laughed at the irony. It had been the day she'd replaced her umbrella.

Trinity looked out at her garden and frowned. Where it had once been dry and withering, now her rejuvenated plants sagged in soft, unsupportive soil and the grass had turned to mud. She hadn't had to carry buckets of water out from the house for weeks. Instead, she'd had to pot up a few of her more fragile plants and place them in sheltered positions.

Unfortunately the rain was not filling the dams or reservoirs. It was strangely local, falling mainly on her side of the city. The only time it had fallen elsewhere had been the day she had visited her mother. Of course, it had rained not just on that day, and not just at her mother's house, but all the way to her mother's house, making the drive unpleasant and a little hair-raising. Her mother had accused Trinity of bringing the rain with her.

A map now appeared on the television as the weather report continued. She sighed again as she saw the single patch of blue over her suburb.

'These are freak weather conditions,' the charming young weatherman said. 'The cloud cover remained in place all night, despite a change of wind direction. In the last few days it moved toward the city during the day, then back to the east. All this time it has been growing smaller, but conditions within the rain storm are increasing in strength rather than weakening. The Bureau of Meteorology has never recorded a

phenomenon like this before. They have issued a warning of a possible mini-tornado and advise residents to secure all loose items and to remain inside ...'

A chill ran down Trinity's spine. Into the city and back again. Like it was following her. *'You've brought the rain with you.'*

Shaking her head, she turned the television off and picked up her car keys. She pictured herself trying to explain to her boss why she hadn't come to work. *'The Bureau of Meteorology said I should stay home and secure all loose items.'* At least it was better than *'There's a freak storm following me around.'* She took a step toward the door then, hearing a squelching noise, looked down.

A slowly growing dark patch was spreading over the carpet.

'No!' she gasped. The flood of water was coming in under the front door. Rushing to the entrance, she opened the door and stared down at a large pool of water lapping at her front step. It spread from her door out to cover half her front garden and driveway. As more water spilled into the house she snapped out of her shock.

She needed something to block it. Sandbags. They always use sandbags during floods. Grabbing a coat from her hat rack, and some plastic garbage bags, she hurried out the back door to the gardening shed, soaking her shoes and stockings as she discovered more puddles. The sands she used for potting mixes would have to do. She filled the bases of the bags, rushed back to the house and patted them into place around the door.

It was hard to tell if it was working. And the sodden patch of carpet had grown much larger. Not large enough, she decided, to justify calling the State Emergency Service. They were, no doubt, occupied with fallen trees and power lines — much more important hazards than a little wet carpet. Sighing, she picked up the phone book and found the number for her insurance company.

After twenty minutes on hold, she took out her mobile phone and called the office to warn them she was going to be late. Then she returned to listening to the recorded message of the insurance company's line, slowly grinding her teeth in frustration.

'HellohowcanIhelpyou?' a voice finally said.

‘My house is flooding,’ she began. ‘The rain won’t stop and —’

‘Oooh! Do you live in that street where the freak storm is?’

Trinity opened her mouth to answer, but no sound came out. Her whole body was suddenly cold. Her heart raced with a superstitious fear. To her horror and surprise, she realised she was about to burst into tears.

‘Hello?’

She hung up. Taking deep, calming breaths, she looked around. Somehow rain was pounding against the windows on *both* sides of the house, despite the shelter of the eaves. The woman’s words ‘. . . *that street where the freak storm is?*’ repeated in her mind. *That* street. Her street. Was the storm that small and concentrated now? Why was it concentrated on her house?

Suddenly she badly wanted to get out of the house. She fought back panic and made herself look at the patch of wet carpet realistically. It didn’t appear to be growing. *And it wouldn’t, if she left the house and the storm followed.* She needed to call the insurance company back, but she could do that from work or from her mobile phone.

Let’s test this theory that the storm is following me.

As she stepped outside, the rain began to pound with fresh intensity. Opening her umbrella, she splashed to the car, unlocked it as quickly as she could and ducked inside. The umbrella did her little good. The rain seemed to be falling sideways. Looking down at the bloated splodges of water on her good jacket, she groaned. Once she got to work she would have to delay starting on her duties even longer drying her clothes under the hand-dryer in the women’s toilet.

Starting her car, she turned on the wipers. Rain pounded the windscreen so hard, there was only a blink of time in which to see the world beyond. Carefully, she backed out into the street.

She turned onto the main road. Between the snap of the wipers she was relieved to see the road was empty of cars. The gutters were overflowing, so she stuck to the centre lane. Ahead she sensed as much as saw the curve of the rail bridge.

Then her car abruptly slowed, suddenly straining as if something grabbed at the wheels. She yelled as water sprayed up around both sides of her car and surged over the bonnet. Then she cursed as she remembered that the road dipped as it went under the bridge. A puddle always formed when it rained. Between sweeps of the wiper blades she could see that the puddle was more the size of a large pond.

The car began to bob like a boat as it half-floated in the water. Cold enveloped her toes. She looked down and cursed again as she saw that water was pooling around her feet. As it deepened she felt the car sink, its tyres scraping the bottom of the pond. Peering through the side window, her heart skipped a beat. The surface of the pond lapped at the car just below the windows.

This puddle was also a lot *deeper* than the usual one.

As the water inside the car rose toward her knees she grabbed the door handle, then paused. Opening the door would only let in water faster. The level outside was still below the window. She took hold of the winder and began to turn it. When it would no longer wind any further, she grasped the edges of the window and pushed herself up and out.

It was not easy, and at the last moment she lost her grip and tumbled out into the pond. Yet as water closed over her head she felt panic subsiding. She was not afraid of drowning, only of being trapped in her car. Getting her feet under herself, she stood up.

The pond came to her waist. She was soaked from head to toe. But, looking around, she saw that nobody was nearby to see.

The water in her car was brimming over the seats. She reached inside and grabbed her belongings. Wading out of the water, she turned to look back at her car. Rain stung her face. She turned away, but it continued to drive into her eyes.

Slowly she turned around. Felt her stomach turn over. The rain was driving toward her from every direction.

She was in the centre of the storm.

She was the centre of the storm.

The world seemed to shift. Suddenly it was a place where the impossible — the ridiculous — could happen.

*But if it's true, and the storm is following me . . . what caused it to?
When did this start.*

She looked down at the umbrella in her hand.

'No,' she heard herself say. 'It can't be. That's crazy!'

A white flash dazzled her eyes, then a second later the air, water and ground vibrated with the deafening boom of thunder.

Abandoning her car, Trinity ran for the train station.

* * * *

Her shoes left wet footprints on the grey linoleum floor of the corridor. The soles squeaked as she walked, the noise humiliating, but not as much as she imagined the next few minutes would be.

The Lost Property Room door opened at her knock. The tall old man looked her up and down, taking in her still-dripping clothes and matted hair, then smiled.

'Come in.'

She followed him to the desk. Placed the umbrella on a clear section of the glass top.

'I'm giving this back,' she told him. 'It isn't mine.'

His smile disappeared, but it appeared to take an effort. 'No?'

'No. I ... ignored your warning. Mine wasn't here and this was all dusty. It... well... it seemed like it, er, needed a new home.'

The old man nodded. 'And it proved to be an ungrateful house guest.'

She stared at him, reluctant to give voice to the crazy conclusion she had come to. But nobody else was ever going to believe her. Nobody except, perhaps, this old man. She was never going to mention it to anyone ... but it was a secret that might just drive her crazy if nobody else ever acknowledged it.

'Am I mad?' she asked, 'or did this create the storm that seemed to ...'

that followed me around for the last few weeks?’

He smiled. ‘You’re not crazy.’

She looked down at the umbrella, drew in a deep breath, and sighed. ‘Rain. We needed the rain. But not where it fell.’

‘Would you be willing to take it where it would do some good?’

She looked up at him. Fear warred with something else. Something that tugged at her, promising glory and satisfaction. Could she end the drought?

Thunder boomed outside. The glass in the windows rattled. A warning.

Slowly she shook her head. ‘Yes, but I think it’s gone too far for that. I don’t think I’d make it to anywhere the rain would do good.’ Picking up the umbrella, she turned away and walked to the wooden door. The old man said nothing as she twisted the handle, opened the door and stepped into the room beyond.

It was pitch black inside. She groped her way forward, wondering how she would tell when she had reached the aisle the umbrellas were stored in. After passing several shelves, she paused to reach up and feel for the letters.

The room flickered into existence around her. Looking back, she saw the old man standing by the door, one hand over a light switch. He smiled crookedly, then disappeared back into his office.

Striding down the room, Trinity found the right shelves and moved to where the umbrellas were stacked. Taking out a few tissues, she wiped the duck-handled umbrella dry, buttoned it closed and placed it among the other collapsible models.

Turning away, she made her way back to the door

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Back on the train, she took out her knitting and began work on the cuff of a sock.

If only she’d grasped the magical qualities of the umbrella sooner,

she could have taken a trip out to a dam or two, or toured the places where crops were failing and livestock starving.

But then it wouldn't have been a punishment for her theft. And then she realised something else: her ruined carpet and car were not the penalty. Knowing she'd missed such a great opportunity was.

As the carriage turned to cross a bridge she looked out of the window. A bank of clouds stretched over the city, spreading as far as she could see. Sheets of rain fell like lazy grey curtains. Despite herself, she felt her heart lift with hope.

'Now that,' she whispered to herself, 'is more like it.'

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AFTERWORD

'The Lost Property Room' was inspired by the experience of a friend, years ago, who lost an umbrella on a train and discovered there was a lost property room at Flinders Street Station, full of an amazing range of mislaid items. She didn't find her umbrella, but the person in charge said she could just take any umbrella she wanted, so she took one with a carved handle in the shape of a duck's head. I loved the idea of this room, full of lost treasures, and of people seeking something they'd lost but coming away with something different. I wonder if it still exists.

— *Trudi Canavan*