

***Pathos: A Metaphoric Exploration of Cannibalistic,
Gluttonous and Consumptive Impulses in Fiction
Writing***

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Declaration

I, Nicole (Nikki) de Koning, declare that the PhD thesis *Pathos: a Metaphoric Exploration of Cannibalistic, Gluttonous and Consumptive Impulses in Fiction* Writing is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Full Name.....

Signed.....

Date.....

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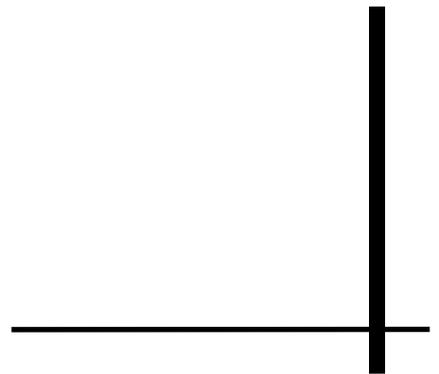
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Pathos



Dedicated to my brother, Darren.
(March 3 1962 — March 13 2007)

You lead me up the alley towards Devin's. Your hand is cold and soft in mine. The wind has blown your hair about and you're frowning slightly. Your make-up is light, all natural colours and warm tones. It highlights your cheekbones and the shape of your mouth. I want to kiss you, but I know you'll complain about me ruining your lipstick, so instead, I squeeze your hand.

'God, I hate these shoes,' you say as you march on. 'Why do I wear them?'

I shrug. We've had this argument before.

'But you look great,' you say and pump my hand.

I'm wearing the green shirt with its low bodice and a black skirt that you like me best in. Around my neck hangs the small amber heart you gave me at six months. My ears sparkle with the matching earrings — a twelve month present. In our three years, you've decorated me with hundreds of gifts, but it is these simple hearts in their simple setting I cherish the most. You don't understand that, and continue to lavish me with more and more expensive gifts — fine gold bracelets, jewelled hair clips, a solitaire diamond. But sometimes — like now — the curve of your mouth and the light in your eyes tells me you are touched by the value I put on into that little amber heart.

'I still don't know why he chose here,' you grumble, your head titling upwards, scanning the lights above.

'Maybe he just likes the view,' I say and lift my skirt to ascend the steps to Devin's loft.

He brought this place three years ago — this warehouse in this about-to-become-trendy part of Melbourne — its once factory foundations demolished, re-paved and renamed. Then he thought it fun, to buy such 'trash'. Now he basks in his 'find' and moves about the upper floor like a god. He's closed the lower levels off, and they're cluttered with folders, boxes, canvas, paints — remnants of Devin's past desire to create beauty from paint and brush. He hides them away from prying eyes, just like a dirty secret, and only you and I know what's beneath Devin's sparkling public surface.

You lead me, muttering, into Devin's sea of merriment. The air reeks of smoke and body heat, decadence and desires. I know most of the faces, but each body blends into the last, each greeting like the one before. This is Devin's hive — him like a Queen bee surrounded by drones. Their buzz echoes underfoot. I buzz too, feel my honey thick and sticky between my breasts and legs.

You run your finger over my palm, look over your shoulder at me once and head towards the bar. You say something that I don't catch and then on auto-pilot you order two glasses of Chardonnay and a shot of tequila from the mock barman. Randy? Raymond? I remember his face from a year ago, the small rings in his lips and eyebrows and the way he speaks with a slight lisp to every 'TH' word. I know he likes old punk bands and vintage port, but I don't remember his name.

You smile at him — Ryan, I think it's Ryan — and lick your hand, apply the salt. Without hesitation, you down the shot and thrust the lemon wedge between your lips. Then you peck my lips. You taste sour. You lean forward, slip a small clear package into the barman's hands, and pocket the green lighter left on the bar.

'Come,' you say, as I lift my glass off the bar top. 'We need to find Devin. He's going to love what I got him this year.'

You are giggly and relaxed. Your brown hair shines red under Devin's lights and your skin looks porcelain. You are stunning. Your beauty so divine I can almost imagine you as a limited edition doll — perfectly encased in glass, untouchable by others and totally mine. How proud I'd be to own you, to show you off, to have you love only me.

And then you shatter my image, dragging me to the old worn couch at the back of the room. I love this couch for the memories it holds. You find it tacky, an op-shop has-been from the 1970s. You distrust the memories locked into its hard back and sinking middle: in its gaudy colours, you deny the reflection of the life it's had before — the constant observer it's been, the pains and pleasure explored on top of its rusty springs. You trust only what you know, other people's memories are a foreign landscape to you and you choose to remain ignorant, leaving their wilderness unexplored.

You sit, pulling me into your lap. You adjust your position slightly and then cradle your arms around my hips. I turn slightly and nestle into your neck. My gaze drifts lazily down your shirtfront.

I run my eyes over the curve of your breasts, their medium to soft firmness and the hint of your darkened ruby nipples. You hate the way you look naked, the way your breasts sag and drop. You tell me that you feel they're not really yours, that their imperfection is alien to you, like a foreign object you're forced to own. Your failure to change them pierces you like a bullet.

But I love your breasts. I love to kiss them, to lift them with my hands and mouth. You moan when I do that and let me explore you more. I smile at the sudden image of my lips hovering over the scar on your left breast — the scar you say you got before your breasts swelled, the result of a fall from your Aunt's trampoline.

Devin tells me otherwise.

He relates a tale of an art class and an incident. How the teacher slapped your art piece out of your hand, how it resembled a vagina - 'You dirty girl!' – and how one sliver, one fragment hit you in the chest and created that scar. He tells me you never returned to that class, and how many years later, you forced an apology from Miss Ellse. He tells me you never forget what others do to you and your revenge is often perfectly timed and lavish.

I sigh. I run my hand down your side and kiss your neck. You look at me quizzically and light a cigarette. You started smoking again three months ago, blaming the pressures of your job as the catalyst. This time round, you chose to smoke Winfield Green, believing menthol cigarettes make you smell less smoky. I don't tell you that it's not the case, I just watch the way the glow of the cigarettes shadows your face.

Two of Devin's friends and a woman you work with mill around us. Their faces stained with Revlon and Maybelline. You only wear Aveda make-up, your tastes are expensive and organic. In your uni days, you protested the rights of animals and the needs of women. You wore blue stockings and held protests, you cooked vegetarian burgers and reclaimed the night. You still believe in it, but now you send cheques to those organisations to show your support. You know money means a little and means a lot, but your social politics are eased every time you lick a stamp.

'Where's Devin?' you say, your hand running up my thigh.

I slide next to you on the couch, having noticed you keep wiggling your toes, that your leg must be asleep. You smile at me and I cross my legs.

As you sip your wine, the dull ring of REM's *The End of the World As We Know It* echoes from your handbag. You reach inside, hold your finger up to the woman in front of you and breathe an annoyed 'Hello?' into the phone. You shoot 'Yes that's what I said' down the line and steam a few more yes's before abruptly hanging up, with no goodbye.

'Work,' you say and roll your eyes. You motion the woman, Kareen, to continue.

‘I’ve been slack with the diet, you know,’ she says, patting her slender stomach, everything about her is fake — her nails, her hair and especially her boobs. She may have been slack with the diet, but not with her credit card, it seems. ‘I really need to get these extra pounds off before the holidays. Otherwise it’s bathers for me and I just brought the cutest bikini . . .’

She rambles on.

No one tells you where Devin is.

I tune out, shifting in my seat, conscious of the extra weight around my hips and thighs, the outward curve of my stomach and the swell of my breasts. I look over at you, your slender lupine thighs and barely-there hips, your thin arms rippling with muscle. I sigh and you rub my arm, totally unaware of your opposition to me — your in-ness, propped against my outdated scorned-at curves.

Suddenly there is a loud bang, like crackers exploding, and Devin appears, his arms wide and red shirt hanging off his frame. He has a pair of red horns nestled in his dirty blonde hair and his jeans are the finest 501s — imported from the factory direct.

I think about my first introduction to Devin. He was stoned, giggly, splattered in paint, his hair in dreadlocks, dyed a myriad of colours like a kaleidoscope of his dreams. He was crass and offensive and right in everyone’s face. He didn’t care who he hurt and he was blunt in both his criticisms and his compliments. Often, he was an utter arsehole. But he was fun. I preferred him then — his easy, lazy voice, his languid movements. Now he jitters, juts, his movements tense, hard — every inch of him, every space he calls his own, a monument of white collar arrogance.

He lost the easy him the year his show ‘Tribute to Repugnance’ was ridiculed by ‘that pompous faggot from De’Mencos’ — the review shattering him so successfully only reinvention saved him. Over the year that followed, he returned to school, cleaned up, toned down and become the type of man he once fought against. Apart from his art supplies, the only other remnant he kept was his dreadlocks, braided together. He hangs them from his bedroom light now. I wonder if, sometimes, late at night, stoned and alone, he takes them down, puts them up against himself and feels regret.

He strides towards us and plants a kiss on your autumn brown lips. He flicks his tongue into your mouth and then turns, kisses me. He tastes of

whiskey, marijuana and something chemically bitter. But he smells amazing, like warm caramel and marshmallows.

'Darlings!' he slurs and plonks on the edge of the couch, a little awkward, a little clumsy. He readjusts his jeans and beams at us.

'I'm so pissed,' he says.

'Happy Birthday, Dev,' you say and you wrap your arms around him.

'You're next,' he says and makes a cock sucking gesture at you. You slap his thigh and he moans.

'Oooooo darling,' he says, 'Not in front of the Missus.' I smirk at him.

Everyone giggles, drinking in every word he says, clamouring for his glance, his affections. I lick my lips and taste him again. He slides on to your lap and whispers something into your ear. I hear half words and then you say 'whore' and my attention focuses on your lips. I forget about his taste.

'I saw that whore again, the one from the other day,' you say. 'It was close to the bank. You know, the overseas one. Good place for it, I suppose.'

'You ask how much?' he breathes, head stiff with intoxication. Eyes moist, glistening. Devin would be beautiful when he cries.

You grin at him, a sly smile that boasts of your hidden knowledge. You lean forward as if you're about to reveal something great, the meaning of life, the answer to love. You lick your lips. You know all.

'It's not my taste, darling,' you drool.

'Blonde?'

'No. Male.'

Male. The word drops into me like a metal rod. It hits me hard, a deep coldness rippling outward, raising the hair on my arms and neck. Male. How intriguing, how utterly naughty, how delightfully despicable. I shiver in delight.

You glance at me bewildered, eyes searching for an answer. I smile at you, shake my head and lean in to kiss your lips. You move in, ready — and kiss my nose instead, leaving me wanting and wet. A slight moan escapes my lips.

'Slut,' you croon, devilish pleasure dancing across your eyes and lips.

'All yours.'

'Don't you forget it.'

You grip my thigh hard. I tense my muscles under your palm, your building pressure. You squeeze me harshly, lean forward and kiss me again. You maintain pressure — my thigh, painful and thrilling. I return your kiss.

Behind my eyes, I see you naked, me between your legs, you moaning into the early morning.

And while I dream, the party around us goes on.

‘So you’re like a boss now?’ she says, her fingers curled around a joint and hand cupping her elbow.

She blinks down at you, moistens her lips. Her hair is pulled back from her face, in a style that reminds me of catholic school nuns. She’s awaiting your answer but scanning the view, the vast expanse of suburbia before us. Her face is helpfully blank, the face of sales assistants and funeral directors. I watch her slyly, my eyes raking in her body language, her mock confidence. She doesn’t know I’m scanning her and I covet the feeling overt voyeurism stirs inside me.

I stand still, making only small, passive movements as I cradle myself further into the corner, further into the background. I envision myself camouflaged, lulled; still and stagnant.

You’re sitting sideways on the top step, your back against the cold supports closest to the doorway. You’re smoking a joint and your wine glass spreads a circular stain into the wood underneath you.

‘Not boss,’ you say. ‘Just higher up than most.’

‘So, what do you do again?’ she says, body suddenly alive.

‘Lingerie and underwear buyer.’

‘Oh! How interesting,’ she sings, ‘I’ve always loved sexy knickers. Do you think I could get your advice on something? See, it’s Paul’s — my fiancé’s — birthday and I’d just love to surprise him with one of them all leather outfits.’

‘I don’t buy that sort of underwear,’ you say. ‘I work for a fashion house, not a sex store.’

‘Oh. Well, pity. But a fashion house. Wow. Talk about a nice middle class job. I suppose you’ll be driving a merc next.’

She titters.

You glare at her. Uncross your legs with flare, stand, take my hand and pull me inside.

‘Bitch,’ you spit. ‘What the fuck does she know?’

You're heated and red with fury. Your eyes boom electric and your body jitters with the energy of anger. I run my hands over you, down your sides and cup your face in my hands.

'Forget her,' I say. 'Do you really care what she thinks?'

You snarl.

'You're right, I don't. She's nothing.'

You put your head on my shoulder, kiss the bottom of my earlobe and down my neck.

'Let's go back to my place, get shit-faced,' you say and show me another crumpled joint in your cigarette packet. You slip the car keys into my hand.

'Just going to say bye to Dev,' you say, 'Go guard the Merc, will you?'

Your bitter laughter clings to the air a moment and then, like you, disappears. I turn, hold up one corner of my skirt, and make my way towards your car, thinking of your arms and your hatred of insipid women.

Under the blankets your body is warm and naked beside me. Curled into yourself like this, your face exposes your doubts, the stresses of your corporate days, the memories you deny me access too.

I watch you, absentmindedly rubbing my stomach. I often can't sleep — my mind making monsters from simple moonlight. Whenever I'm like this, you mock me, saying; 'you've read too many serial killer books. They've got to you'.

Some nights, when the wind howls outside my flat and you're not here, I think you're right. I meander about the flat, chainsmoking, waiting for daylight. I take a candle with me and watch my flickering shadow move along the walls. I don't speak, and any sound but my laboured breathing scares me. Often I'll wrap myself in my old elephant blanket, breathing in its scent of lavender and spice and wait for the light. Then I call you, anxious to hear it's all going to be okay, that you're still mine.

I turn on my side and run my hands over the back of my thighs. I discover a small raised blip of skin there — a rough crust with an often itchy centre. I leisurely start to dig at it with my nail, flicking the edge of the crust, raising it slightly. It starts to throb and sting. My fingers become warm and wet

as I dig. I burrow further, with two nails and then three, filling them with crust and blood, with the rough texture of my eczema. Tomorrow when you see what I've done, you'll click your tongue at me, take me wordlessly into the bathroom and wash down my bloody infected legs like a mother would a child. Then you'll apply the cream the specialist gave me, whack me on the arse and listen while I try to explain why — again.

You whimper in your sleep.

'Lee! Don't! Let go!'

You stir, close to waking. I quickly clean my bloody hands on my t-shirt and then snake my arm over your waist. You murmur my name.

'Yes, I'm here.'

'Mmm,' you say and cuddle in closer. I kiss you and with my thighs on fire, I let consciousness float away.

'Seanne! Get up!' At first your voice is a small pebble across my dream waters, skipping and disappearing and then it gets louder — your words like heavy stones.

'GET UP!' you spit.

I reluctantly wake.

'What?'

'Get up.'

'Why?'

Half asleep and on my belly, I watch you under my eye lashes.

'Work,' you hiss, grunting. 'Get up now.'

You strip the blankets from me and make your exit known with heavy steps and angry curses.

I roll over, goose-bumps up and down my legs. A strange dull thirst in my mouth. Without looking, I search the side of the bed with my hands, wrap my fingers around a plastic water bottle and turn my head to bring it to my lips. I drink deep, gulping down water, letting it dribble from the corner of my mouth and over my breasts. Then I reach down and pull the corner of the blanket up and over me, covering only part of my body with it.

You step into the room. You are dressed in thick rounded-toed shoes, black opaque stockings, mid-length pin-stripped navy skirt, a silver shimmering shirt and navy pin-stripe jacket. Around your throat hangs a

slender gold necklace with a drooping tear-drop ruby pendant. It glimmers blood-red against your slightly exposed skin.

‘Well?’

‘Well, what?’

‘You getting up or what?’

I whine and you sigh, angry.

‘Fine, then. Fuck you. You explain to work why you’re being a child.

And don’t think I’m covering your arse, Seanne, I’m sick of this shit.’

You storm out and a few seconds later, the front door slams. I hear you start your car and with a grinding gear change, you power down the street. I re-adjust the blanket, pulling it around me. I close my eyes but my mind is alive, creating movies as I dream.

I’m walking, a vial of teal coloured liquid in my hand. I instinctively know it’s a present for you, they’re your favourite colours. As I stroll, my free hand rubs the sweat from my palm against the thin dress I’m wearing. It’s shorter than usual and flimsy like a child’s excuse for misbehaving. This is your kind of dress.

I search for you, tuned to your movement and the hum of your breath.

Nothing.

Suddenly, I fall forward, landing on hands and knees. My back arches and my limbs begin to ache, my muscles to twinge and my joints grind against each other. I start to cry, my arched back beginning to split open, exposing my hot pink flesh underneath. The air is cool. The pain severe. My bones start to crack, splinter, forcing themselves into strange new shapes. My muscles rip from the pressure, reattaching themselves to my now shorter bones. I feel my back skin slide closed and a chill runs up my body as the two slides shut securely.

Wet with blood and tears, a sneaky, deep sorrow simmers inside me. I raise my head and howl your name. The vial rolls towards me. I snap it up in my jaws and lick its cool glass encasement. I pray I don’t break it. My ears prick as I hear a distant howl answer mine. I sprint towards the sound, bursting through a patch dark trees. Ah! There you are!

You’re bathed in sunlight, your coat a red auburn, deep golden hues, amber eyes. You’re licking your feet, preening your chest. I leap at you, I nuzzle into your warm soft coat. I look down at myself, I’m grey and white, my coat a matted mixture of stray breeds and grass seeds. I nudge the vial at

you, pushing it gently with my nose. You hold it in your paws and with the stopper in your teeth, uncap the lid. You lick along the rim and dip your tongue into the liquid. You shudder with pleasure. I watch the rhythmic darting of your tongue in and out the vial, the slow caress of your licks. You wag excitedly and nestle closer.

I look into your pure, open face. You stare at me.

'We are the same,' you say, pressed tight against me. 'Pulled by the same tide. We are halves of halves. Fitted like sheets.'

I lean in and lick your face, brushing my tongue against you so lightly it feels like a breeze between us. I nibble along your jaw and lap at your ears and chest.

I open my mouth to speak, feeling the need to say something profound.

I hear children scream and then I'm awake; listening to the sounds of the neighbour's kids fight. I check the bedside clock beside me. Twelve-forty pm. Shit.

I pack my simple red backpack, gather my bits and pieces and do your morning dishes. I make the bed and close the front door tightly after me.

As I head home, I begin to dread your rage.

I enter my cold, stale-smelling flat. My answering machine flashes at me from the corner of the room, its red eye beckoning, angry. I walk to the kitchen, flick the kettle on and put my back to the machine, ignoring its presence. Once I've drunk two cups of coffee, I walk over to the machine, my hand, hovering over it. I close my eyes and press play.

'Seanne . . . it's Chrissy from work, where are you? Give us a ring, okay? Um, well, bye.'

Beep.

'Still asleep huh? Your work rang here. Thanks for that.'

Beep.

Some music. A rattle of coins and what sounds like the flick of a lighter.

Beep.

'Miss Murry, this is the Footscray Private Consulting Rooms, returning your call concerning your pap smear results, please call our office between nine and five to schedule a follow up appointment. Thank you. Bye.'

Beep.

‘Seanne? Cooper’s gone! If he calls, let me know . . . please? You know what he’s like. I swear sometimes I think I brought the wrong kid home. Anyway Seanne, I better go, in case he rings. Oh, by the way, it’s Mum.’

Beep.

The machine rewinds. I walk into the lounge, flop down on my couch and stare at the blank TV screen.

I wait for your call.

Four days without your voice. I’m silent and vague without you, merely going about the motions of life. I return to work, to *Kimmy’s Cafe* with lies burning inside me. I eat little and sleep less. I feel like there’s an echo inside me, a stagnant hollowness that won’t go away.

On the way home from work, my hands reeking of the food I prepared in a daze, I buy a packet of cigarettes. I smoke the whole packet in less than twelve hours, then run to the 7-Eleven and buy two more packs. I smoke them until I can’t breathe, and then I smoke some more.

I watch the phone. Will it to ring.

At four am, I pick up the receiver. I dial your number. It rings twice, each sound a thud inside me.

‘Hmmm. Hello?’

I can’t speak. My voice is dead inside my throat.

‘Devin? Just buy the fucking thing and stop stressing.’ Pause. ‘Dev?’

I try to say that sorry, that I’m here and I miss you, but instead I say;

‘No.’

I hang up, fall to the floor, the ringing phone reverberating around my flat. I can’t answer you. I can’t trust my voice to explain myself in a way you’ll understand. I claw my nails into the flesh of my thighs, making small crescent indents, desiring bruises. I push my fingers in harder, imagining them poking through the sinew until I hit bone. I imagine this until I curl sideways and sleep — huddled in the corner, the chill from the concrete under the carpet creeping inside me.

That night I dream of ripping the skin off my body, ripping until there's nothing left but bloody bones — ripping until there's a new me unearthed underneath.

I'm bored and stiff. My body tense with anticipation as I pour orange liquid into the stream of steaming clear water. The scent of mango and Pina-Colada fills the bathroom, the mirror fogs and I remove my clothes. I listen to the steady rush of water, the air around me warm and sickly sweet with heat and scent. I breathe in deeply. This is your scent, your choice, your face glowing under the supermarket fluorescent lights when you whispered, 'This is sexy'. You winked at me, sultry and seductive and looked me up and down. Your eyes brightened as I placed the lotion into my basket and despite the supermarket crowd, you leaned in and brushed my lips with yours. You smelt delicious, like my childhood memories of a lolly shops.

Turning off the taps, I first dip one toe, then a foot, then my legs into the water. The rush of heat burns up my body and my face flushes. Before I retreat, I plunge my body into the water, sink into the bubbles and sweet-smelling liquid, engulfed in a liquid embrace.

I lean back, close my eyes, drape my arm over the side of the bath, my feet raised on the tiled edge. I notice my toenails need cutting and soon you'll remind me to get my legs waxed.

I lift the plug with my feet and let a little water out, wiggle my toes along the end of the bath and grip them around the tap, twisting to the left. Hot water pours into the bath, I let the tap run for as long as I can stand it, then turn it off. My skin twitches from this burst of new heat, smarting from this sudden assault. I do this repetitively, until my skin is close to blistering, then I lay back, dizzy, and allow the water to wrinkle and clog my skin.

Head under the water, I hear a dull, hollow sound; a sound like a chef's hands slapping against dough. I hear a muted voice. I lift my head, open my eyes.

You're standing above me, staring down at my naked red body.

'Hi,' you say.

You roll your head to the left, devour my nakedness with your eyes.

Without another word, you remove your suit jacket, fold it neatly on the side of

the sink. You untuck your camisole from your pants, undo the button holding your pants and drop them. You undress until you stand there in bra and knickers only. Your pubic hair is a shadowed triangle between your legs, your nipples primed against your bra.

I sit up, watching you move, the ripple of your skin, the rise and fall your chest, the glimmer in your hair. You reach between your breasts and rip off your bra. You drop your knickers — both movements so fast they seem one.

You pad towards the bath. I edge forward, my arse sticking on the bottom a moment. I let some water out and you step in behind me, the water rising as you sit down. You cradle me with your legs, capturing me between your long, muscular thighs.

I lean back against you, hot skin against cold. You breathe me in, long, tender breaths, a little sigh. I put my hands over yours, trace patterns into the back of them — figure eight's and labyrinthine swirls. My fingers slide over your skin like rain over glass. You kiss the back of my neck, running your tongue over the bones of my shoulders and spine. You suck my ear lobe into your mouth and bite down soft enough for pleasure, hard enough for pain. I close my eyes, your hand coils around my breast, tickles the tip of my nipple, the circle of my aureole. My nipples stiffen.

'Do you want it?' you say, tormenting.

'Yes.'

'Do you want me to touch you elsewhere?'

'Yes.'

'Further down?'

'Oh, yes.'

You walk your fingers down my side, over my tummy, my hip, my thigh, towards my cunt.

'About here?'

'More.'

You pat my pubic mound, trace the triangle of hair. Pat and trace.

Trace and pat.

'Here?'

'Yes.'

'Do you want me to fuck you?'

'Yes.'

'Soft, then hard?'

'Yes.'

I spread my legs. You dip the tip of your finger into the cleft of my cunt. The dimensions of the bath prohibit you from penetrating further, prevent probing and poking. I try to give you better access, but I can't, the bath locking me into this position. I grunt against the restraint.

'Get out. Grab a towel and get ready,' you say.

You release me, I thrust my hands in front of me and on my knees, raise myself from the bath. You slap my arse, a stinging slap on soaking flesh. I tense with excitement. I step out, puddles forming under my feet, water dripping from the ends of my hair, down my back and thighs. I look back at you. You lean back, your eyes closed, sucking the tip of the finger that touched me.

'Move,' you say, without looking.

I quickly grab my towel and dash into the bedroom. I dry quickly, my nipples still hard. I push backward on the bed, feel my arse and stomach bounce. I close my eyes and spread my legs. My cunt aches for touch.

I don't hear you enter the room, instead I feel your weight between my legs.

'Hmm, look at that. Beautiful pink pussy.'

You breathe over me, along my lips and over my clit. I hear you suck your fingers and then you thrust into me. I clench my muscles around your fingers. You let me adjust and then start a deep hard thrust, your thumb flicking over my clit. My legs begin to quiver and dark animal sounds escape my throat. You slow your thrusting and concentrate on my clit, move your face closer and circle your tongue around the throbbing bud. You lick and suck. I shudder and tense, my legs wrapped around you. I cum with a sound almost like screaming. You kiss my thigh and wriggle up beside me.

I snuggle into you.

'We need to talk,' you say.

I tense.

'Now?'

'Yes. You know we do.'

I shudder, electricity running along my skin and out the ends of my hair.

'Before I start, do you have anything to say?'

I make a strange non-committal response, a whispering hybrid of a moan and a grunt — the sound animals make when wounded and defensive, unable to move but not willing to die.

‘Okay,’ you say, ‘I want to know what’s going on inside you.’

‘Inside me?’

‘Yes, in that brain of yours.’

‘I don’t get what you mean . . . ’

‘Yes, you do.’

‘Is this about skipping work?’

‘Yes. And other things. Your moodiness. Lack of commitment. You yell in your sleep and you’ve been attacking yourself again.’

I cringe. Curl my insides into a knot inside my stomach, my nails plough into my skin.

‘So, what’s going on?’

‘Nothing. I don’t know. Nothing.’

‘Is it work? You’re better than that café anyway. Don’t you get bored?’

‘Yes. But that’s not it.’

‘Then what?’

‘I don’t know,’ I whine.

‘Then find out because I’m not putting up with this shit forever, Seanne. I’m tired of covering your arse, making it all better. I’m your girlfriend not your fucking fairy godmother.’

‘But I don’t know what’s wrong, I swear.’

You use your legs to propel yourself to the end of the bed and then stand. With fast, sleek movements, you pound into the other room. I hear you rustle about in there. You thump back into the room.

‘Try this, since you’re the only person in the world without the net!’

You throw a phone book at me. It hits me in the thigh, a loud smack and dull bite of pain.

‘I’m going now, Seanne. And when I come back, I hope you’ve done something. I mean it. I can’t do this anymore. It’s unfair.’

‘Please. Don’t. Go.’

‘I have to. I’m not doing this again. Not like last time.’

‘Last time . . . ’ I whisper, starting to sob.

‘Yes, last time. You remember that at all? Or were you so fucked up on those diet pills, you’ve conveniently forgotten?’

I pick up the phone book and throw it at you. It misses, falls short and hits the floor in front of you with a dead thud. You kick at it, glaring at me, your jaw taut and mouth closed.

'Fuck you,' I say.

'We already played that game, love.'

You grab the edge of the bedroom door slam it hard on your way out. It bounces against the frame, bottles of face cream on the dresser fall to the floor and the door swings back open.

I allow my body to fall backwards on the bed, the springs bouncing under me. I pull the sheet over my head and sob. Deep, hiccup-like sounds creep out of my throat and fill the room with their vibrations.

For the next few days, I ignore the phone, the door and the sound of people around me. Sometimes I drift in and out of sleep, but mostly, I lie on my bed and stare at the phone book lying on the floor, its happy yellow cover mocking and seducing me.

I don't open it, resenting what it could mean.

Pay day.

I groan, remembering the pile of bills behind the ceramic duck on my fridge, each one demanding payment. I calculate the total of the bills and subtract it from my pay. I'm left with about fourteen dollars. I need to work and I hope I still have a job. Deep down I know I don't deserve to but, my boss, a mid forties woman with an alcoholic ex-husband and two ungrateful kids, is a sucker for tales of woe. I look at the clock. Shit. Seven forty-one.

I groan again and kick the blankets off.

With sleepy steps, I walk towards the kitchen, fill the kettle, place a saucepan of water with two eggs in it on the stove. I walk to the bathroom, loosening my hair as I go. I pass the linen press, pull out an old large towel that was once a striking blue and take it with me into the bathroom.

I turn on the shower. The hot water tap spurts and splutters, water cold before it slowly becomes warm and then hot. I adjust the temperature, remove my clothes and get in.

The water is a soft burst, not a powerful jet stream like yours. Not for the first time I notice that everything here is a little less than at your place — less shiny, less new, less impressive. I wash quickly, shampoo, soap and shower gel running down my body. When I emerge I'm a perfume counter's cornucopia of smells — baby lotion, coconut, rose and lavender.

With the towel wrapped around me, I confront the mess of my bedroom. Dirty clothes cover the floor, pants inside-out, knickers still inside, mate-less socks and a bra I spilt coffee on. I step over the mess and frisk about in my wardrobe for a clean work uniform. I throw it on the bed, grab some underwear, a small pair of ankle socks and the black regulation stockings from my drawers. Then hunt for the mate of my one visible black work shoe.

I slide into my underwear, sit on the edge of the bed, scrunch the stockings in my hands and slip my left foot, then my right into them. I slowly inch them up my calves and over my thighs. I suck my breath in and pull them over my arse, hips and stomach. I readjust the crutch and then put my anklets on. Picking up my uniform by the hanger, I unzip the front and slide the crisp lilac cotton dress over my head. I push it over my hips. It's tight across my breasts and arse, loose in the middle. I smooth it down and poke my feet into the shoes. Next, I tie the small dark purple apron around my waist and create a firm bow behind me. I comb my hair, plait it into a braid and add the final touch — a dark purple baseball cap with *Kimmy's Café* written in white across the front.

Dressed, I pad back into the kitchen, make the coffee and remove the saucepan from the stove. I run cold water over the eggs. With a glass of juice, I place the eggs on the table, next to the salt and tomato sauce. I lop the top of the egg off, remove the yoke, pour sauce and salt into the hole and devour each egg. I down my vitamins with juice, and then grab my work-bag, my badge, a bottle of water and my keys. I close the front door behind me, pulling it hard to make the lock click and walk towards the train station.

The station is littered with uniforms: factory workers, school kids, labourers and cleaners, their faces blank, eyes bored. Occasionally people lean forward, look down the train tracks and then settle back into position.

Other than that, no one moves. The only speech is the rapid exchanges between school kids, their gossip a melody of heightened emotion and animated movements.

I tap my foot, check my watch and compare it to the time above me. It's late. I wish I had a cigarette. I contemplate the smokers around me; try to assess who would be the best target to ask. I'm still contemplating who to ask, when the train clicks along the tracks and grinds into the station. There's an anxious rush, people pushing and shoving against each other, and then the door closes. I take a seat next to an elderly woman reading *That's Life* and stare out the window. I wonder what you're doing right now.

I imagine you seated behind your desk, one foot tucked under you. You have the phone cradled on your shoulder as you causally browse through your latest catalogue, assessing the value of each item like diamond hunter appraising a rare find. You're on hold, softly humming the song that plays in your ear. Occasionally you circle the items that grab your attention, fold the pages down, marking your finds. You're slightly surprised when someone answers, embarrassed to be caught singing. You mentally adjust yourself out of laze mode and don your professional armour. You speak into the phone.

I try to imagine the rest of the conversation, but without the exact knowledge of your work, I'm left with only the image of you on the phone. I sigh and open my eyes, alarmed that the train has travelled so far, so fast. I prepare to stand.

Off the train, I rush towards the café, my soft shoes feeling every rise and dip underneath me. I bustle into work.

'Oh, she appears,' says Chrissy, her hair yet again another shade of red blonde and tucked behind her ears in a short, unhealthy looking bob.

'Yeah,' I say and walk into the staff area, dump my bag in one of the empty, door-less lockers and pin my name badge to my chest.

When I walk out, my boss Magda stares me, her arms crossed over her breasts.

'Well?'

'I'm sorry, it's just — '

'Last time Seanne. If I didn't need you . . . '

'I'm sorry.'

'Get to work and not a peep out of you.'

She walks off, huffy, her body electric with anger and unsaid words. She walks into the kitchen and disappears among the food and pots. For the rest of the day, I hardly see her, her mind and hands consumed with meat, eggs, dough and milk.

By four-thirty, my feet ache and I'm covered in the smells of other people's food choices, my hands dry from the constant washings, my hair now a loose plait, escaping its binding.

'Will we be seeing you tomorrow?' Madga says as I prepare to walk out the door.

I turn to her, my shoulders slumped, my eyes downcast. I'm too tired for this conversation, but part of me has been waiting for it all day.

'Yes. I'll be here.'

'Good.' She crosses her arms over her chest. 'But I'm serious, Seanne, if you weren't good at your job and somehow able to handle our most difficult customers, I'd fire you on the spot.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be sorry. Be here.' She leans in, lowers her voice. 'If you have something going on and need time off, let me know . . . but just leaving us in the lurch is unfair on all of us.'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

She makes a 'tsk-tsk' sound with her mouth.

'Again with the sorry! I've almost had enough of that too.'

'I'm —'

'Sorry. Yes, I know. You're always sorry, Seanne. Why don't you try to be responsible instead, then you wouldn't have to be sorry.' She looks me up and down — the annoyed, aggravated look of a mother. 'Now get out of here. Go be sorry somewhere else. Go.'

She extends her arms and points out the door.

I nod, turn silently and drag myself out the café, into the street. If only I had a disease, something serious but not fatal, that I could rely on to get me out of trouble, then I'd be able to avoid these conversations and just sleep instead.

If only

Back home, the place is a tomb of silence. I change my clothes and then inch towards the answering machine, hoping you've called.

Nothing.

I flop onto my sagging couch, its cushions curved and sunken in all the right places, like being in the arms of a velvet soft entity. I flick on the TV and drift in and out of the changing programs. At eleven, I cocoon myself in bed.

The next day is almost a carbon copy of the last and then the weekend comes and goes. In the silence of Sunday night, watching TV, I remember the phone book, its sunny happiness alluring me, pleading at me to open its pages and seek. I try to ignore it, but the following set of commercials are filled with ads for phone companies, help lines and the yellow and red of a fast food chain. These images blur together and all bring me back to that book — desperately needy like a puppy left alone in a cage too long.

'Shut up,' I whimper. 'Shut up shut up shut up.'

I throw my hands over my ears and squeeze my eyes shut, clenching my upper teeth brutally against my lower ones. Tiny dots burst behind my eyes. My jaw aches along the joint and bone.

'Enough!' I bleat.

I rush into the bedroom, pick up the phone book and flick to P. Sitting on the bed, I search down the list for a psychologist close to home, who bulk bills and doesn't believe in drug-only therapy. I circle a few possibilities and then rip the pages from the book. I dump the rest the book in the bin. I smooth the ripped pages out over the bedside table and fix them down with an empty coffee cup.

I vow to dial those numbers first thing in the morning.

Except I don't.

I ring you. Your machine picks up. Your even, emotion-controlled voice pronounces each word carefully.

'Hi, this is Lysandra St Clare. Leave a message or alternatively press hash after the tone, and your call will be re-directed to my mobile. Thank you.'

I breathe in.

'Hi,' I say, then I hang up.

I'm suddenly unable to think of what to say. My mind becomes a vast dry desert, empty of all thought and feeling. I stare down at the phone numbers in my hands, and redial your number. I listen to your message again and then say;

'I found some numbers. Um, some people. I just wanted you to know. I'm sorry.'

I'm about to hang up a second time, when you answer.

'So, when's your appointment?'

'I . . . um . . . '

'Haven't rung them yet, have you?'

'Um. No.'

You sigh loudly.

'Ring me back when you have. Then we'll talk.'

The phone clicks in my ear.

Without thinking, I dial the first name on the list. A woman answers after the fourth ring, her accent so thick I barely understand the words she says. I hang up. The next number is engaged. I contemplate giving up but instead force myself to dial the next number.

'Hello, West Women's Counselling Service. Raylene speaking, how can I help you?'

'Um, I need to talk to someone.'

'Sure, honey. We have several counsellors on staff, however, there's about a four week wait for the next available, unless you have a health care card.'

'No. No card.'

'Then it will be about four weeks, can you wait that long, honey? Or would you like the number of an emergency service?'

'No. I'm okay, it's just my girlfriend, she wants me to, you know, see someone. She says I'm kind of strange lately.'

'Well, we all need someone to talk to sometimes. Would you like me to book you in? Say the ninth of next month? Two pm?'

'But um, I work. Till four.'

'Well, I can fit you in with Yvonne, she works till seven, but she's got a six week wait.'

'Yeah . . . um . . . that's fine.'

'Okay, honey. Give us your name and we'll see you then.'

'Seanne. Seanne Murry. Miss. Do you need anything else?'

'No, that's all for now. So, we'll see you on the twenty second of next month, five thirty. Bye Seanne, thanks for calling.'

She hangs up before I say goodbye.

I ring you back, get re-directed to your mobile and then to your message bank. I leave a short message, reciting the details.

It dawns on me that all I know about this woman is her first name — Yvonne — and where she works. Bubbles gurgle in my stomach. I run to the bathroom and throw up in the sink.

What the hell am I going to say to her?

I grip a large carving knife in my right hand. I bring the knife up and slice through the soft flesh before me. The tomato splits open neatly. I slice in quick, even strokes and move on to the next. I watch the glint of the blade as it cuts the skin and pierces the flesh underneath. I become lost in the process, mesmerised by the juice that spurts from each cut. I consider what it would be like if I let the knife slip and penetrate me instead. I imagine that like the tomato, there would be a moment of resistance and then my skin would slice apart and blood would flow — the thought is almost orgasmic. I lift the knife and bring it to my wrist.

Magda calls my name. I turn, startled, caught with a guilty secret.

'Phone. What were you doing?'

'Nothing. Cutting tomatoes. Who is it?'

'Lysandra.'

I put the knife down and rush to the phone.

'Hello?'

'Hi, baby. So, the twenty-second, huh? Do you want me to take you?'

'Sure, but you work until — '

'I can get out early. Work in lieu. It's cool. Say . . . do you want me to come get you tonight? We'll go out, get some dinner, maybe snuggle.' Your voice is light and flirty. 'What do you say?'

'Um. Sure. My place?'

‘Great. Catch you then, about seven, seven-thirty. Wear red, okay, babe? I’m so proud of you. I know . . . ’ mid-sentence your phone begins to beep. ‘Hon, I have to go. Incoming call. See you tonight.’

You hang up. I replace the receiver and smile wide.

Later, at home, I dash about my flat, organise my clothes, run a bath, shave my legs, my pits, trim my pubic hair. I scrounge through my wardrobe for my black strappy sandals — your Christmas present to me. You made me follow clues littered about your house until I found them, under the lavender bush, a large silver ribbon wrapped around pale pink paper. When I opened the package, you drew in a breath and I kissed you quickly. I wore the sandals until my feet blistered and peeled, until blood stained the leather.

I dress, careful not to snag my stockings, to hide the size tag of my dress. I then apply a light blush of colour to my lips and along my eyelids, throw my purse, keys, a hair brush and some perfume into a small silky red hang-bag, and wander into the lounge. I sit for a fraction of a second and then rise, rummage through the bookcase for the cigarettes I stash there. I light one, pace back to the couch and sit. I flick the ash onto a dirty plate.

I turn the TV on with the remote and then turn it off again. I smooth down the lap of my dress and recheck the contents of my handbag.

Your car pulls into the driveway. I butt the cigarette out on the plate, grab my bag and I am up, the cigarette still smouldering when I close the door.

I slide into the passenger seat.

‘Hi babe,’ you say and lean forward, kiss me. You taste like mint and smell of French perfume. I return your kiss.

‘Hi,’ I say.

You reverse the car smoothly, pulling out into the street in one sleek movement. You straighten, press play on the CD player and rev down the street. Music from the Lilth music festival fills the car. This is your favourite CD and your third copy of the same album.

‘Where are we going?’

‘You’ll see.’

‘Will I like it?’

‘Especially their desserts. You’ll want them all. So now, tell me about the counsellor.’

‘I haven’t met her, I just made the appointment.’

‘Okay. I’ll look them up, see how good they are.’

‘You don’t have to do that.’

You reach over and stroke my thigh.

‘I know. I want to.’

You drive along a restaurant strip, in a suburb I have a vague memory of — of a man in a headless bear suit signing Christmas carols while a staggering angel vomited in the gutter — and pull into a side street. You park, lean over and kiss me passionately.

‘Come on,’ you say. ‘I have a table booked. A special one.’

You slip your arm through mine and I lean into you.

‘You’re beautiful tonight,’ you breathe at me, ‘And we’re here.’

You point to a gold shop-front with red Asian lettering.

‘It’s one of the best. Expensive. But the best Thai food you’ll ever taste.’

You let me go and stride to the door, swinging it open and gesturing me inside. As I pass, you pat me on the arse and then follow after me.

A slim Asian woman with hair down to her thighs greets you in English. You answer her swiftly — in Thai, I assume — your tongue clicking over the sharp Asian wording. She smiles at you and you both bow before she leads you to the table in the alcove, already lit by the slow burn of three white tea-light candles. The table is set with striking white linen, the napkins gold. Two wine glasses twinkle in the candle light, to their left sits two small white and gold lined bowls.

She speaks again and you answer, nodding. She places a napkin on your lap and then one on mine. She smiles and nods her head at me and then leaves. I watch her walk, the light pad of her feet on the bright red and gold carpet.

‘You know her?’

‘Yes. A little.’

‘And?’

You tilt your head to the right.

‘I know you better.’

She returns, menus and chopsticks in her hands. I notice how perfectly oval her fingernails are, how slim her gold bracelet makes her wrist appear, how petite her waist looks in her black and silver dress. She hands you the menu and sets the chopsticks before us. You speak to her and she blushes

slightly, answering you with a breathy giggle. You smile up at her and then watch her as she disappears.

‘What was that about?’ I snap.

‘Wine. Why? You jealous?’

‘No.’

You smirk.

‘You’re jealous.’

‘No, I’m not.’

‘Oh, yes, you are.’

‘I’m not.’

You run your finger over the rim of the glass.

‘Whatever you say, Seanne. But your claws are showing, honey. Better put them away before she comes back.’

I huff and glare at you over the table. You hold my stare. You hold it until I look down and fidget with the weave on the table cloth. We don’t speak.

She reappears with a decanter of water, two glasses and a bottle of white wine, chilling in a cooler. I watch her out the corner of my eye, noticing she caters to you, almost ignoring me. You open the menu, point to a few items and she jots something down on a small pad. She turns to leave and I reach for her, grab at her hand. I only just touch her, her movements faster than mine but when I make contact, she turns to me, eyes wide with alarm.

‘Who are you?’ I spit at her.

She looks over to you. You and her exchange a few words and then she scurries off, like a wounded mouse.

‘That wasn’t nice. She thinks she did something wrong.’

‘I only asked who she was.’

‘Bullshit. You hissed at her.’

‘So?’

‘So! So, nothing. You were nasty to her.’

‘And she was flirting with you.’

‘Oh, please. She was being respectful.’

‘She was being a whore.’

‘Fucking hell, Seanne, what’s with you? The girl was doing her job and you accuse her of being a whore. What the hell kind of customer service do *you* provide if you think that was sexual?’

‘Not that kind! I don’t verbally fuck my customers.’

You bring your hand down on the end of the table. The sound vibrates in the near empty restaurant.

‘Enough. This jealousy of yours is not pleasant, Seanne. It doesn’t suit you at all. And anyway, even IF she was flirting— and that’s a big if — what does it matter. I’m here with you, not here to see her.’

‘How do I know that?’

‘Because otherwise I’d be out the back with her, wouldn’t I? Not dealing with this shit.’

‘So, go then. Be with her.’

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake Seanne! I didn’t mean . . . Look forget it. I’m going to pee and when I come back, you’re going to be over this. Understand?’

I don’t answer.

‘Understand?’

I shrug at you and you throw your napkin at me. You bound across the room and push open the door of the ladies. As it closes, I mutter, ‘fuck you’ in your direction and then down a glass of wine and pour another.

I run my finger through the flame of the candles, making my finger turn slightly black, filling the air with the acrid smell of slightly burnt flesh. I watch the flick and lick of the flame and think about nothing but fire.

I don’t notice your return until you sit back down.

‘I stayed with her family while I was in Thailand.’

‘You went to Thailand?’

‘Yes, I took a year off uni and spent it over there. I stayed with her Aunty and learnt the language.’

‘You never told me you were in Thailand.’

‘It was a long time ago. Long before I met you.’

‘And she just let you stay with her family?’

‘Yes. I paid my own way and worked on the side for her Aunty.’

‘And they just accepted that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

You don’t answer me. You look away and sip more wine, staring out the front windows.

‘You’re in love with her.’

‘Were. And it was a long time ago, Seanne.’

‘Even so, you brought me here? To what? Show her off?’

'No. Because it's the best damn food I could buy you. It has nothing to do with Tey-Lin. She doesn't mean anything to me anymore.'

'What kind of name is that? Tea-Light.'

'Tey-Lin. It's Tey-Lin. And it's over.'

'So, you say.'

'It's the truth. I've not . . . there's been no one but you, since — '

'Yes. Devin told me about Penny.'

'And you know I'm sorry. But I haven't, not since that party.'

'How do I know that?'

'Because I am telling you the truth. There's only been you and we weren't even together when I slept with Penny.'

I'm about to answer you when the Tea-Light arrives with the food. She arranges the plates before us in a circular pattern around the bowl of steaming rice. Several smells erupt at once — lemon, curry and pepper. Tea-Light bows and leaves without saying a word.

'Let's eat,' you say.

You dig your chop sticks in and out of several dishes, filling up one of the little bowls and placing it before you. You wink at me and begin to eat in precise, expert movements. I try to mimic the way you hold the chopsticks. I fail, flicking more food around the table than in the bowl.

'I'll get you a fork.'

You stand, walk to the kitchen and return with a fork. You hand it to me wordlessly.

For the rest of the meal, we don't speak much, but then, on the way back to my place, you suddenly pull the car over. You turn to me.

'I'm sorry,' you say. 'I should have told you about her. But it's the past. It's over. I only want you, okay?'

'Okay.'

'We good?'

I nod. You smile at me — a little smile that doesn't reach your eyes, doesn't make you light up. I reach out and run my fingers down the side of your face, feel the soft cool contours of your cheek. I trace your lips and then kiss you. You resist me a moment and your then lips part. I feel the wetness of your mouth against mine. I snake my tongue between your lips and flick the end of your tongue with mine. You open your mouth wider and I pull away.

‘Stay with me tonight?’ I say, my hand behind your head, rubbing your hair between my fingers.

‘You sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay, then.’

You nod, peace restored between us.

But that night as you sleep beside me, your leg entwined with mine, I think about all the other women you’ve slept with — do they know you better?

After work, with an old T-shirt over my uniform, I walk to the local library. As I enter, the man behind the desk glances up at me once and then returns to the computer, his fingers pounding the keyboard. I sit down at a computer and type in the word Thailand. I type with one finger only. The computer asks me to wait before it brings up a list of numbers and titles. Jotting them down, I stand, gather my things and head towards the numbers.

As I’m searching for *Thailand: its Land and Culture*, the front door opens. The man at the desk, looks up, his face hardens.

‘I told you not to come in here.’

‘Please. I need the loo. Bad.’

‘Out,’ he says, gesturing towards the door. His arm stiff and finger pointing.

‘Please?’

The boy shuffles his feet about, clutching his groin.

‘Out. Now.’

The boy shrugs. Swears. Then walks out the door. His red hair is messy, wild. His jeans are torn under his arse, mud around the cuffs and over his shoes.

The desk man catches my eye.

‘He never learns,’ he sighs, rolls his eyes and returns to his computer.

I stare at the space where the boy stood. Then return to my search, the one book I’ve already chosen tucked in the crook of my arm. I take two more off the shelf — *A Traveller’s Guide to Thailand* and *Thailand: a Culture Explained*. I inspect their covers, turning them over in my hands. They feel pregnant with knowledge.

I take them up to the desk. His name badge tells me he's Dennis: Junior Librarian. He asks me for my card and password and then scans my books without looking at me. I pack my bag and he hands me my card and a due date receipt.

'See you,' he says.

He turns away. I lift my bag over my shoulder and walk outside.

As I cross the main road, I see the boy Dennis kicked out lean in the window of a dark blue four-wheel-drive. I walk closer to them, my bag heavy. The boy steps back, runs around the car, sees me briefly and smiles. He gets into the passenger seat and turns to look at me.

His face is pale. His eyes are green.

As they drive off, the driver hands him money and then grabs the boy's head and pulls him towards his groin. Two thoughts hit me at once.

This boy's a whore.

You'd hate him for it.

Both thoughts stir desires inside me.

You park in the underground car park of Crown Casino. You pull your mobile from your pocket and SMS Devin.

'Him and his games,' you say and await his answer.

So far, all we know is that Devin wanted you here, at eight and that you're to SMS him when you arrive. Today is your birthday. You tap your fingers on the steering wheel.

I look you over, you smile weakly at me and grip my hand. Your hair is restrained, forced into a tight French roll. You're dressed in a shimmering peacock blue shirt, a black leather jacket and black pants. Your jewellery is all gold with sapphire stones. You have black pointy-toed shoes on your feet. To compliment you, I'm wearing a dark blue dress that strains across the bodice and falls in waves to my feet, the colour broken by panels of lighter blue lace. On my feet are soft dark blue slippers. In contrast, my jewellery is silver, my hair half pinned up and held firm with a large silver clip. A few tendrils fall on either side of my face.

Your phone beeps. You press a series of buttons and then tuck your phone back into your pocket.

'We have to head to *The Chocolate Box* and ask the girl behind the counter for a Dizzy Lizzy. This better be worth it.'

'I'm sure he has something in mind.'

'No doubt, that's what worries me. He's a nutcase about things like this.'

I don't answer you. I don't comment on Devin's behaviours. I haven't said a word since that argument a year ago.

You whirl me around.

'And what's your problem?' you spit at me.

'Devin. He's the problem. It's our only weekend off in weeks and he wants to drag you around the Vic Market just for a new plant. It's bullshit!'

'Well, he hasn't seen me much either, with work and all. He just misses me.'

I grunt.

'Anyone would think you're dating him! And it doesn't help that you drop everything and come running when the mighty Devin bellows!'

'Seanne, you have to understand, Dev's a major part of my life.'

'And I'm not?'

'Of course you are! This isn't about us.'

'Like hell it isn't! It's always about us. He wants to control everything — including our relationship and you're bloody letting him.'

'Oh, for Christ's sake, Seanne! Why does it always have to be so fucking dramatic with you? Everything has to be some big drama. You know, he warned me about that in you.'

'I bet he did, the fucking asshole.'

'Enough!' you roar. 'We're going to the Market and that's final. And I suggest you drop this bullshit about Devin right now. I'm not interested in your opinions on him.'

'But you listen to his about me.'

'And by the way you're acting, he's right.'

'Fuck you. Fuck you both.'

You glare at me, chin rigid.

'On second thought, don't come. I'd rather not have you around if you're going to act like a fucking toddler.'

You storm out before I can retort, my unsaid words like a noose around my throat — continuing to strangle me still.

I follow you into *The Chocolate Box*, remaining quiet as you speak to the woman behind the counter. She hands you an envelope and you open it, read the words inside and hand it back. Before you leave, you buy a large chocolate heart, wrapped in bright red foil.

‘Here,’ you say and place the heart in my hand. I smile and peck your lips, conscious of the other people streaming about us, the stares they throw our way.

‘We have to go to Strega. I think it’s an Italian restaurant,’ you say.

‘It is. Strega means witch in Italian.’

‘How do you know that?’

I shrug.

‘Watching SBS, I think.’

As we walk towards Strega, having asked three different people where it is and only getting a coherent answer from one, your phone beeps, making you jump.

‘Now what,’ you groan and roughly pound your fingers into the keypad. You huff and then tell me that when we get to the door, you have to ask for the end-of-youth party.

‘He’s in fine form tonight,’ you say.

‘You always say birthdays bring out his best.’

‘Unfortunately, it brings out his worst too. I remember when we were eighteen. There was this tennis coach and Devin decided he wanted a private lesson . . . and well . . . never mind,’ you giggle, lost in your memories. ‘Let’s just say he still can hit an ace. Hey look, Strega’s.’

You walk up to the maître-d’ and whisper to him that you’re here for the end-of-youth party. He smiles broadly.

‘Of course. Of course. This way, Miss.’ He notices me, ‘And you too, Miss.’

He leads us through the restaurant, to a table that overlooks the pier, darkened shapes hovering near the bank.

Devin has his back to us, alone at a table set for five. There’s an open bottle of wine before him and he’s leaning back in the chair, legs outstretched,

disappearing under the table. His jacket hangs from the right side of his chair. He throws his head back and sees us.

‘Sandy!’ he says, mimicking Travolta in *Grease*. Often he tells me you and he used to fight over who liked Rizo more.

You walk over to him, me in tow and punch him in the shoulder.

‘You dickhead,’ you say and lean down to kiss him.

He turns in his seat and wraps his arms about your waist, puts his head on your stomach. You bend down and say something into his hair. He pulls you to him and answers you, laughing a little at the end.

He turns to me.

‘And how’s my girl’s girl?’

He kisses my cheek.

‘I’m good.’

‘Have some of this and you’ll be great,’ he says, pouring the wine slowly.

He watches memorised as the pale yellow liquid streams into the cold, curved glass. His pupils widen and retract as he takes it in.

We sit. You cough. He looks over at you.

‘All this fuss just for us. Charming, Dev, real charming.’

‘Hey, not so fast pussycat. The fuss just hasn’t arrived yet.’

‘Oh, really? It better be worth it.’

‘You’ll love it. Way better than last year.’

‘And here I thought you couldn’t top that.’

‘Ah, ye of little faith.’

He grins at you.

He is slightly unshaven, his hair longer than usual. I take in the slight shift in his look, the way he carries a hint of his old self but discards that with the clothes that he wears, the cologne that wafts from him. If only he’d let go completely, I’d begin to respect him again — instead of this mere tolerance I wear around him now.

He reaches into his jacket and pulls out a small rectangular package, wrapped in dark green paper and gold ribbon.

‘Happy Birthday, Lys,’ he says, affection incarnate, all soft words and muted vowels.

You take the package and carefully pick at the sticky tape holding the edges together. You run your fingernail along the edge, lifting it slowly.

'For fuck's sake Lys, do you have to be so bloody careful? Rip it!'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because this pisses you off.'

He snorts but doesn't speak. Instead, he watches you carefully unfold the paper until you reveal a small box. You open it and peer inside. A smile starts in the corner of your mouth, and spreads across your lips and face. You dip your finger into the box, I lean forward and you gaze up at me, passing me the package at the same time.

'Where did you get that?' you say, your voice a whisper, filled with awe.

'I have my sources,' he says.

I too peer into the box. Inside is a small solid gold figurine of Wonder Woman — complete with whip and wrist cuffs. I lift it and place it in my palm. It's heavy and cold, but warms in my hand. I put it back in the box and replace the lid, trapping my warmth inside. I hand it back to you.

'It's gorgeous, Dev, thank you so much! And to think I only got you *the Clash* collection on vinyl.'

'You know I love them and anyway, you're welcome.'

Silence.

'So,' Devin says, glancing at me, 'Lys says you're seeing a shrink.'

I shoot a look at you.

'Relax, Seanne. We have no secrets.'

I don't answer, sulking.

'Dev, leave it, okay? We'll talk later.'

'Whatever,' he says, checking his watch. He stands. 'Back in a mo.'

'Where are you going?'

'Loo. I'll be back.' He chuckles and walks away. His step is arrogant and assertive, and as he strides, people turn to size him up.

I knock my hand against yours. You raise your eyebrows at me.

'You told him!'

'Yes. It's Dev.'

'I didn't want him to know.'

'Why not? He asked how you were. I told him.'

'But why'd you tell him that.' I try hard to keep the whine from my voice but I fail, speaking to you in the tone a child uses when Mummy's been mean.

'It's Dev,' you say as if that's the only explanation needed.

'I didn't want him to know.'

'He knew something was up with you and he asked. He was concerned.'

'Why didn't you just tell him it's none of his business?'

'Because it's Dev. What? You think he doesn't know you well enough to see what's wrong? He's known you as long as I have. Longer, if you consider that he saw you first.'

'I just didn't want him to know.'

'He won't think anything negative about you, if that's what's worrying you. He's got some history with this sort of stuff. You never met his father did you?'

'No. Only his mum and sister.'

'His dad died in a mental hospital. He cut his throat open with a coke can during one of his episodes.'

'What was wrong with him?'

'Paranoia, alcoholism, mood swings, violent episodes, you name it. Put the family through hell.'

'I didn't know.'

'And now you do. Hence, when he asked, I told him. He understands. In fact, he saw it before I did.'

'What?'

'Oh, you know, he recognised certain behaviours in you and — '

'Now he thinks I'm a psycho!'

'He does not! What would make you think that?'

I shrug.

'Look, I'm sorry if I overstepped the mark by telling him, but this affects me too and he can read me like a cheap mag. So, I told him. And yes, I know he's a shit, but to not tell him . . . well, I couldn't do that. I don't hide anything from Dev. He's been my best friend since kindergarten and I wouldn't change that for anything.'

'Aww, I love you too,' Dev says, suddenly. We both look up.

He is standing by the table with two people behind him — a man and a woman. I recognise them from photos, but their names are hazy, a blank in my memory.

You leap out of your seat.

'Addison! Dayton!'

You throw your arms around them and you squeal. For the next few moments there's a fast exchange of hellos and I missed you, then the man speaks;

'Sis,' says the man. 'You're looking good.'

'Here, sit,' you say and the man and woman take their seat, him next to you, her beside me. 'Dayton, Addison, this is Seanne, my girlfriend.'

And I suddenly remember your family photos — you sitting between an identical looking boy and a girl, beaming at the camera. I remember you telling me about your special sibling twins, born twenty minutes apart, on two different days — Dayton at eleven-forty-seven pm, a Libra and Addison at twelve-oh-six am, a Scorpio. You'd add how you loved their birthdays, how you, the baby sister, was required to attend both and would spend those days high on cupcakes and mixed lollies, being hostess to Dayton's friends and dishing out Chinese burns to Addison's. Devin always there with you, gorging himself on hotdogs and party pies, following you everywhere. He even followed you from Sydney to Melbourne, leaving behind an artist in residence scholarship, more concerned about living a life without you, than his own budding future. I wonder if he regrets that too.

'Oh, of course,' says Dayton. 'I remember from the photo you sent.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Addison says, his hand extended. I shake it and Dayton leans over and kisses my cheek.

'She's pretty,' says Addison. 'But you always had good taste. Of course, sometimes it was my taste as well.'

'You're still on about Melanie Brenner, Ad? What can I say? Power of the pussy, bro. Power of the pussy. Besides she only used you to get to me.'

'She's married now, popped out a few kids too,' Dayton says, 'She works as an at-home hairdresser, so she can look after the rug rats.' Her voice is controlled, but filled with distaste.

'So, you still see her?' Devin asks and I watch your body tense.

'Only when I'm slumming it,' Addison says and tips his glass at us.

Dayton sips her water slowly and I keep my hands in my lap and stroke the material of my dress, listening to the boys swap stories about women, the size and shape of breasts, the agility of the female body when aroused. You and Dayton talk family heirlooms, your aunt and uncle's chess set, your grandparent's silverware, a cousin who pawned a rare emerald pendant.

As you talk a dank mood settles the table — a mood that reminds me of the smell of basements and water logged cellars — and an undercurrent of veiled hostility seeps from all of you. I become aware that together, you all assume a level of amicability, but it's false, as if you're performing for an unseen audience and judged by your commitment to your respective roles. Chills run through my body and I feel trapped, enclosed.

I excuse myself from the table, muttering my order to you. Dayton barely moves to let me pass. I walk out the restaurant, looking behind me, registering the insincere hilarity at the table, all four of you wearing smiles that don't match your body language.

As I walk, I realise that I don't know where I'm going. Instead, I allow myself to move forward, looking into the shops I pass. The items I want most, I could never have — my wages tied up on simple things like food and rent, its strings so tight I have to plan when to buy pants. This is your world, where credit cards replace cash, where money is easily spent today as there'll be ample made tomorrow.

I stop outside a jewellery shop and bite my bottom lip, staring at a ring similar to the one Devin wears on his pinkie. The sharp glint of the diamond makes me squeeze my eyes shut and sniffle into the back of my hand. The price tag with four zeros mocking me.

On impulse, I run towards the bright red and yellow lights of the casino. I scrounge in the bottom of my handbag, amazed I remembered to grab it. I search for the change I throw in there.

I pull out an assortment of fives, tens and twenties. I slam correct change into the payphone. I ring home, the home I left at sixteen and only go back to for family emergencies.

It rings steady and hollow, the receiver like a dead baby in my hand.

'Hello?'

The coins drop through the phone.

'Hi Mum, it's me, Seanne.'

'Oh, hi love. What's wrong?'

'Nothing, I just wanted to say hi.'

'Have you done something? Are you in trouble?'

'No. No trouble, Mum. Just wanted to say hi.'

'Oh, okay.'

Silence.

'Are you still with that girl?'

'Yes.'

'Well, you know how I feel about that. And now Cooper's run away with some town girl,' she sighs, 'Both of you have left me — and just for some little strumpet. You I expected, but Cooper . . .'

'Well, he is twenty-three, Mum.'

'He's still a baby. And he still needs me, boys need their mums more than girls, and now he's gone,' she sighs again. 'At least he's not taking after you, I suppose.'

'Yeah. Good for him.'

Silence. She sneezes.

'How's Dad?'

'Oh, he's good. Been planting for next season. You should see the pumpkins. Big as watermelons and so orange! You should have seen his face when he brought the first one in. Proud as a peacock, he was.'

'And the dog?'

'Cindy died, love. Dad got a new pup, a cattle dog. He called it Daisy. Follows him everywhere. It's his company now you kids have deserted us.'

'I didn't desert you. You wanted me gone. I left.'

'You didn't have to. If only you just left girls alone . . . It was those hockey lessons that done it. They made you think it was okay to be around all those types of women. Dad warned me about you going. I wish I'd listened.'

She sobs for the drama of it. This woman, who squeezed me from her body, now squeezes me in other ways. But I don't want to entertain her, so I change topic.

'And grandma? How's she?'

'Oh, she's good. Got a problem with one of her cow's milk going sour, but she's nursing her along. Showing her what comes natural. I guess she hopes she'll come good one day.'

I wince, knowing she hopes the same for me — her abnormal offspring, her human mistake. Does she wonder why I went 'sour' too?

'Anyway, Mum,' I say, interrupting her. 'I have to go.'

'Oh okay, love. Bye.'

She hangs up without another word.

I replace the receiver and walk slowly back to the restaurant, suddenly appreciative that your love takes me away from the life I hung up on.

‘Where you been?’ you whisper when you see me.

‘I had to make a call.’

I avoid your eyes and sit next to you.

‘You okay?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Here, take a look at this.’ You slide the photo album in front of Dayton over to me. ‘It’s my eighteenth. Check out my hair.’

I look down at the photo. You’re standing by a pier, wearing only a blue bikini, your long legs brown and supple. Your breasts are higher than they are now, your pelvis pushed forward, showing off your cunt, a hint of flesh escaping along the rim. Your hair is dyed strawberry red, darker at the roots and paler towards the ends. It hangs loose around your shoulders, covering the top of your arms. Devin stands beside you, wearing only red board shorts. He’s thick around the middle, his thighs all solid meat, his chest a freckled mass of blond hair and flab. You’re both smiling, the sun striking the water behind you, creating a long, white streak in the right hand corner. Both your faces are open and soft, filled with expectation. You remind me of butterflies, your bodies a homage to the bliss inside, beautifully floating on the edge of your future. I glance over at you now and think . . . now you’re both spiders, strong and hard, your webs trapping more and more inside.

‘So, what do you think? Different, huh?’

‘Very.’

I want to say more than that. I want to say how amazing you look, how different, how strange and striking, but there are no words. Instead, I wrap my arm around your waist, pull you close. You snuggle into the curve of my arm and rub your head on my shoulder.

‘We were in Western Australia for a fortnight. Dev, the family and I. Nothing but seafood and water. We were all so brown, Mum and Dad thought they brought the wrong kids home.’

‘Damn, I forgot that summer,’ says Devin, Addison hanging over his shoulder. Their eyes are brighter than usual, pupils dilated.

'You boys have fun?' Dayton says.

'Oh yeah, Dev's the man.'

'Only the best for my big bro,' Devin says and winks, tapping his front jacket pocket. 'You want some, Toni?'

'Sure,' Dayton replies, suddenly animated.

She stands, pats your shoulder and walks off with Devin — the promise of drugs energising her in a way no amount of food could. She holds Devin's hand as they walk out of sight. I suddenly understand that she's not just his 'sister'.

'He looks good, Dev does,' Addison says, 'I hardly recognised him at the airport. Last time it was all long hair and pot. Corporate life suits him.'

'He does well, stocks, trades, all that sort of shit. Real estate mostly. He's got a few properties under him now. He keeps trying to talk me into investing.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know. I've never felt the need to.'

'It's worth thinking about, Lys. Surely you want out of that three bedroom thing you live in.'

'No, not really. I have what I want there.'

Addison snorts.

'And what's that? To pay someone else's mortgage? It doesn't make sense.'

'It's my decision Ad, besides, I don't feel like moving just yet.'

'So, you'd rather make some one else rich?'

'Ad, I don't want to, okay? Drop it.'

'Damn it Lys, do you have to be so . . . pig-headed all the time.'

'Compared to whom? You and Daddy? Or do you forget I spent almost six months negotiating my dating privileges with him thanks to you, all those tales you took back to him. Oooh, Lys was at a girlie bar. Lys has a hickie from a girl. Lys needs a "licker's license". What? You think I don't know what you said, I know Addison. I know everything you told him.'

'It wasn't a secret, Lys. Everyone knew. Natalie Dobson told everyone you tried to feel her up. Dad wasn't impressed. He asked. I told him.'

'Yes, for a car. You told him for a car.'

'You would have done the same thing.'

'No, I wouldn't, I knew better than to give him anything. You, on the other hand, were his little bitch, you'd lick his hand anytime.'

'Fuck you, Lys.'

'Oh, big tough man. Daddy's little pawn. Anything Daddy wants, you'll do, isn't that right, Addison?'

'Me? You're the one who does everything to embarrass him! That's always been your game plan hasn't it? So, don't act all innocent with me, Lys, I know you better than that.'

'Bullshit! You know fuck all about me, Ad. You've always known fuck all. So why don't you just shut the fuck up and go snort some more blow.'

Addison stands, knocks the bottle of wine over with the flick of his hand and storms out the room. You turn your body to me and nestle your head into my breast. I wrap my arms about you. You kiss my left breast and curl your hand over my hip, your fingers grip my flesh. You squeeze me tightly and then sit up, your back rigid and head straight.

'I'm okay,' you say, your voice tight, your words even.

'You sure?'

'Yes. It's normal . . . normal for Ad and me anyway. He's always been both friend and foe.'

I kiss you, unsure of what to say. I contemplate the gaps in the narrative of your childhood. I realise with a bitter taste, I know very little about you. The information I do have either gained from Devin, his stomach burning with alcohol, or from conversations I've heard from your end only. You're always so closed. Today is one of the few times time I've seen you open, seen you raw, stripped of your armour and status. Devin knows this you and I envy him for it. I'm on the verge of another thought, some big realisation, when you speak;

'So, now we wait. See what happens next.'

'What usually happens?'

'Well, Ad will throw a few more things and Toni will try to calm him down. Or she'll agree with him and they leave. Then in two weeks time I'll get a letter from Ad telling me how evil I am and one from Toni begging me to be nice. Dev will take my side and we'll all not see each other for another year.'

'That's messed up.'

'That's family,' you pause, bite your lip, 'Come on, let's go.'

'Where?'

'Home. Pub. Anywhere. Just out of here. I'll put it on my card.'

I gather my stuff, your presents and the little bits of us left around the table. You're already at the front desk, tapping a pen on the counter, impatient to sign your name.

When I walk up beside you, you rub my arm and slide your hand into mine. You silently lead me from the restaurant and into the car park. You take your phone from your pocket and send a message.

'I told Dev to meet us back at my place. That okay?'

'Of course.'

'So, who did you call?' you ask, suddenly.

'When?'

'When you left the table. You said you made a call. To whom?'

'Mum.'

Your face registers surprise.

'Really? How come?'

'I don't know. I just wanted to talk to her.'

'Because my family was around?'

'Probably. I guess, I wanted to — '

'Connect? You're such a softie. My beautiful tender-hearted babe.'

You push me against the car, kiss me passionately, your hands run over my body, over my breasts and arse, up my sides and over my stomach. My nipples harden at your touch and I feel a throb between my legs. I grab your arse and pull you to my body. I slide my hands down the back of your pants. Your knickers are soft and silky, against the back of my hands. I clasp your bare arse, running my thumbs along the cleft of your arse. You break away from me.

'Let's go home and fuck. But first, take your knickers off.'

'Here?'

'Yes. Now. Take them off, then get in the car, pull your dress up and spread your legs.'

Through my dress I yank my knickers off and let them drop. I step out of them. You bend, pick them up, sniff them and shove them in your jacket pocket.

'Get in.'

I hurry around the back of the car, slide into the seat, pulling my dress up over my hips. The seat is cold and hard under my bare arse and legs. I spread my legs. You get into the driver's seat, look me up and down.

'Open the glove box, there's a package in there in a navy blue bag. Take it out and use it.'

I squeeze the lock of the glove box together, it flicks open at me, your Melways and several empty packets of cigarettes spill out. In the middle of the mess is the package. I take it out. You turn the car on, making it hum and pulsate underneath me. It feels like a living thing around me. I open the package, pull out the small blue box inside.

'What is it?'

'Open it.'

I obey, flicking the top tab open, and slide a thin jelly covered tube with a black screw-on bottom. The material is sticky, soft and hard at the same time. I turn the bottom and the tube begins to vibrate.

'Is this a . . . ?'

'Vibrator. Yes. I want you to use it. Put it in and make yourself cum. I want to watch you cum as I drive. I want you to cry out in pleasure. I want to hear you and see you and smell you.'

'But I . . . '

'Just do it.'

You put the car in reverse, take your foot off the brake and let the car slide backwards, pulling the wheel to the right and then straightening it once you've cleared the park. You drive, sure and steady, one hand on my thigh.

'Give it to me a second,' you say and grab the vibe.

You place it in your mouth and suck along its length, and then you hand it back to me, holding it by the base only.

'Now it's ready. Use it.'

You merge onto the freeway. I move my hips forward, giving myself a better angle, more room to move.

I run the vibrator over the horseshoe of my lips. A shudder runs through me. My clitoris anticipates the shift from tease to touch. With the tip, I push the vibe against my clit. At first I feel nothing but a pleasant sensation, then I start to quiver. I moan a throaty sigh. I thrust my hips back and forth, the intensity of the orgasm building. I moan in short sharp bursts, my legs

pulled upwards. And I cum, releasing my tensed muscles, my feet back on the car mat.

‘That was beautiful, baby.’

I look over at you, notice that you’ve stopped. There are trees on one the side of the road, cars zipping passed on the other.

‘You pulled over?’ I say, half-statement, half-question.

‘I wanted a proper view.’

I smile shyly, my body slack in the aftermath of orgasm.

‘Now lick it.’

I run my tongue up and over the tip of the vibe. It tastes of orgasm and plastic. I swallow the taste in my mouth in one gulp. You pat my leg.

‘Good girl.’

You restart the car and merge back into the traffic. We don’t speak, but every now and again you turn to me and grin.

Back to your place, Devin’s lying on his back on your lawn. His ankles are crossed and his hands are behind his head. His jacket is off and his shirt open, held together by the bottom two buttons only. His chest is a light gold colour with a fine web of hair covering it. He’s toned, his abdominals beginning to define, his stomach flattening. He’s staring up at the sky, smiling.

You walk over to him and he rolls towards you, his head cradled in his hand. He fusses in his jacket and pulls out a joint, lights it and offers it to you. You shake your head and put your hands on your hips.

‘Aren’t you going to ask where they are?’ he says.

‘Airport, I assume.’

‘Yep. Toni is pissed with Ad for fucking up your birthday. Then he had a go at her for being Miss Coke-head and now they’re not speaking.’

‘It won’t last.’

‘I know.’

‘So, you coming inside?’

‘Yeah, cool. Mind if I crash? I’m a little too wired to go anywhere else.’

‘You’re a little more than wired, hon. You’re Space Cadet material.’

‘I know.’

He rolls onto his knees and stands. He hooks his foot into his jacket and throws it upwards, catching it in his hand. The joint hangs from his lips.

‘Sorry about Ad,’ he mutters, ‘I thought maybe . . .’

‘I know. You tried. I appreciate it. Really, I do.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Dev, it’s okay. Really.’

You put your arm around him and he nuzzles into you.

‘Come on, Dev, let’s go inside.’ You throw the keys at me. ‘Open up will you? And put the kettle on.’

You lead Devin into the lounge room. I watch from the kitchen. He puts his head on your lap, wrapping his arm around your knees. Without warning, Devin starts to cry. You rub his back and shoulders, telling him it’s okay. He sobs, moaning over and over that he is sorry. He begins to make shallow groaning sounds, snivelling and weeping. He cries deeper than I’ve ever heard a man cry. I watch his face, how beautiful his eyes are, how moist his lips. I realise I like Devin in tears and I feel the need to touch him, wanting to lick his tears . . . and then slap him afterwards, make him cry harder.

You catch my eye, and I nod at you, escaping to your bedroom. I close the door behind me, strip and throw a t-shirt on over my body. I climb into your cold, soft bed and cocoon myself in your blankets, the smell of you encasing me.

I drift in and out of sleep.

I don’t feel you come to bed, but you’re there in the morning when I wake. Your body is warm behind me and your arm drapes over my hip. I don’t ask you about Devin and you don’t mention him to me. Instead, we lazily fuck and you sigh my name into my ear as I make you cum.

Over the next few weeks, the days bleed into each other. Every night I read the books on Thailand and become disgruntled by their failure to give me answers. I go to sleep angry and wake up tired. This is my routine, yours a balance between office and meetings, with food eaten quickly in the middle. We’re kept busy, living from meal to meal, task to task, each one disappearing into memory.

But then the fissure opens.

I have to see Yvonne today.

After a series of stupid, novice mistakes, Magda turns to me;

'Are you drunk, Seanne?' she says.

'No.'

'Then what? What is it? That girlfriend of yours?'

'No. Sort of. No. I have to see someone after work. I'm a little nervous.'

'Who? A new girlfriend?'

'No. A counsellor.'

'Oh! Good for you! I saw one a while back about the kids. Changed my life. Just make sure he's a good one.'

'She.'

'She then. Make sure *she's* a good one. And don't get into any of that hypno stuff. My cousin did that once to lose weight. She lost weight alright but starting smoking two packets of cigarettes a day. Now she's got some bad chest problems. It was better when she was fat. She couldn't buy from K-Mart but she could breathe.'

She shakes her head and gives me her motherly 'what-a-shame' face.

'So, is this your first?'

'What? Counsellor or appointment?'

'Both.'

'Yes, first one. First session. I don't know what to say to her.'

'What about those . . . never mind, it's none of my business.'

'Those what?'

'Nothing forget it. I shouldn't have said.'

She looks down at my arms, at the raised, red blotches of eczema that travel up my forearm in a broken, random pattern. I pull my cardigan sleeves down.

'Those what? What are you trying to say?'

'Nothing, I'm sorry. Oh, look at that, the milk delivery is here. Excuse me, Seanne. And good luck tonight.'

I watch her plod away and speak to a man in a blue uniform, a clipboard in his hand. Beside him are two red crates, one filled with plain milk, the other with flavoured. I notice the way Magda talks to him, the way she touches her hair and turns her feet to him, shuffles them about as if she's dancing. She likes him, Marcel, the milk guy. She doesn't respond like this to

the bread man and she dislikes the meat people. She thinks they're criminals, con men who, she is sure, use their meat house to store dead bodies. But she likes their prices, so she deals with them sparingly and faxes them her orders.

I keep a tense eye on the clock.

And when four finally comes, I'm out the door, Magda waving me bye and Chrissy eyeing me off, knowledge burning in her eyes, face smouldering under the weight of new gossip.

I walk to the station, catch the train to the city. I get off at Melbourne Central and walk towards your work, towards the office that locks you away during daylight hours and call to you even when you're asleep.

I pass an alley and a voice floats out from inside.

'Yah got a light?'

I turn as a slender figure emerges from near a bin.

'Yah got a light?' he repeats.

It's him — the whore.

I frisk in the bottom my bag and hand him a lighter. He takes it quickly, lights the cigarette and drags it in deeply, letting the smoke billow out of his nose.

'Ta.'

He begins to walk off.

'Hey, what's your name?' I call.

'Why? Yah buyin?'

'Buying what?'

He gives me a look that tells me he thinks I'm stupid. I giggle. He grunts and spits phlegm onto the concrete.

'You ain't buyin'. I ain't interested.'

'I'm Seanne, by the way.'

'Whatever. I got shit to do. See yah.'

He strides past me and into the street, becomes lost in the current of people. I drink in his diminishing image.

Sighing, I walk towards you, *him* on my mind — a sudden eagerness surging through me.

I tap my foot. You put your hand on my knee and tell me to settle. I get up, walk about the waiting room, picking up pamphlets, touching the plastic plants, glancing at the paintings. Your mobile rings while we wait and you disappear out the front. The second time it rings, I notice, you've changed your ring tone, no longer REM, it's now 'Paint it Black'.

I flick through magazines, read and discard information about panic attacks, obsessive compulsive disorder and bulimia. I watch the line of doors, wondering which one will open, which one will lock me inside, which room will become the grave of my secrets.

I pace and tap. The receptionist eyes me over her desk. She spends most of her time, ear to the phone, phone on her shoulder, chewing on the end of a pen. Occasionally she taps away at the keyboard in front of her, but mostly she mumbles into the receiver and watches the waiting room.

Door three opens and a child and woman walk out. He holds her hand while and she sobs beside him. They walk to the counter and the woman hands a card to the receptionist. She takes it, writes on it and hands it back. No words are spoken. They head towards the door, the child glancing back three times before slamming the door behind him with an echoing thud.

Door four opens and a plump woman with black cropped hair and plastic-framed glasses calls my name. I stand, look out the window and follow her. As I pass the receptionist's desk, I ask her to tell you where I am, she nods and but says nothing, dismissing me instantly.

I sit, the chair already soften by other people's weight. The room smells of antiseptic and fake lavender.

'Hello, Seanne.'

'Hi,' I say, unsure of what else I'm meant to say, what else to do.

She swivels her chair closer to me and crosses her legs. I scan her. She is wearing olive pants and a white shirt with a red bra underneath. She has both an engagement and a wedding ring on her finger and a beaded bronze and sea shell bracelet around her wrist. Her watch band is pink, its face white and large. Around her neck is a long dark blue cord with her photo id and a set of keys, each one differently coloured. On her feet are cherry red strapless shoes, band-aids on the back of both heels. I add all these facts to my memory. I know you will ask me later.

'So, how about I ask some questions and you answer them? That way I will get to know you and you can see how I work. But first I will tell you a little

about myself. I'm Yvonne Bannerman. I've been a counsellor for nine years now, but I used to practice in West Australia. My husband and I moved here twelve months ago for business reasons — his, not mine — and I've been working with the Women's Centre ever since. I'm both a psychiatrist and psychologist which means I can counsel *and* prescribe medication. Now, how about yourself? What do you do?'

'Um, I'm a counter-hand. At a café. I've been there a while now. It's okay.'

As I speak she scrawls words and symbols down on a piece of paper. I watch her. Something is askew and it takes me a few seconds to realise that she is left handed. For a reason I can't quite grasp, her left-handedness reminds me of someone familiar and pleasant — but like a river fish, the answer swims away from me before I can grasp it, leaving me with an impression of a slender wrist, pen in hand, of a female presence and the smell of sweat.

'Okay. And you have a partner?'

'Yes.'

'Been together long?'

'Three, almost four years.'

Oh! Andrea. Miss Andrea Kerr. My year Nine sports teacher. Behind my eyes, I see her sweat glistened breasts, her muscular bare legs, her pink tongue lap at my breasts. She wasn't the first to probe my body with fingers and objects, wasn't the first to make my breath catch in my throat, but she was the only — until you — to make me want to bend and bow and cower before her almighty Goddess-like brilliance. Until her, I never realised how alluring subjugation can be.

I wonder what Andrea's doing now. I wonder if she's —

'Married?'

'Huh? What?'

'I asked are you married?'

'Oh. Me? Well, no, not married.'

'And you live with him?'

'No. And I'm not with a "him".'

'Oh, okay. Is this your first lesbian relationship?'

I shake my head but don't speak.

I think about the word 'lesbian'. I don't feel lesbian. I don't feel dyke, femme, butch, or any of the other words my mother threw at me like knives. Why is it that my label is more important, more defining than my love? Shouldn't it be that my love for you is the definer, rather than my preference? And as a trained professional, shouldn't she realise her need to compartmentalise merely highlights her own biases, her own lack of original thought?

I begin to feel a hardness enter my stomach, a stony reaction settles into my jaw. I consider asking Yvonne if her husband is her first hetero relationship and what psychologically impact that has on her. Has she always known she's a breeder? And could it just be a phase? Is she sure she's straight? Maybe if she just tried 'gay' for a while . . .

I sigh dramatically.

This is not the first time I have brooded over this. Not the first time I wish I would open my mouth and vomit out my thoughts.

Yvonne taps her pen on the table, I look up at her.

'What were you thinking of just then? The girlfriend?'

I lie. I tell her I was wondering who will win in the footy this weekend.

'Do you follow the AFL?'

'No.'

'Then why wonder about it?'

'Um . . . my boss, she follows North Melbourne and she's always happy when they win.'

'Does that make it better?'

'Make what better?'

'Work.'

'Sometimes.'

'Do you have problems at work with her when North Melbourne doesn't win?'

'No.'

'So, no problems at work at all then?'

'No, no more than usual.'

'So, then why do you think you need to see me?'

I gulp.

'You see my girlfriend . . . ' that sparks her interest.

She leans forward on her chair.

'Yes?'

'She thinks I'm a little moody.'

'Do you think you are, as she says, a little moody?'

'Yeah, sometimes. I get these ideas in my head and . . .'

'And?'

'And I want to do things, um, to myself and to . . . her.'

'Things like?'

'You know, like . . . fight with her.'

I look down at my feet, wiggle my toes in their shoes and twine my fingers around each other.

'And when you feel like that, what else do you feel? Angry? Sad?'

'Um . . . well, I get impatient and yell. And sometimes I burst into tears when she doesn't seem to listen.'

'And this happens often?'

'She says so.'

'How old is your girlfriend?'

'Twenty-nine.'

'And you?'

'Twenty-five.'

'Okay. So, how often do you feel moody?'

'I don't know. I don't count.'

'Okay, now listen to me, Seanne. I think you have some serious issues. I'd like you to buy a notebook and write down every time you feel moody.' She scribbles something down on one of her medical pads and hands it to me, 'And take one of these after your evening meal. I'd like to see you again in two weeks time. And please make sure you read the literature attached. Okay?'

She turns back to her desk. I'm dismissed.

I stand, my left foot asleep and hobble out.

In the car, I summarise the session to you, I pay careful attention to Yvonne's demeanour and skim over her questions. I tell you about the notebook and you agree with her methodology. I show you the script.

'What are they?'

'Anti-depressants,' I say.

I shift the little brown anti-depressants about in my hands and re-read the instructions, scanning through their list of side effects — disrupted sleep patterns, changes to appetite, changes to libido, headaches, nausea, itchiness — all of which I seem to suffer anyway.

You emerge from the shower. Your feet are bare, your hair wet. You're devoid of make-up and your hair is un-styled, left to dry on its own.

'Hi babe,' you say and snuggle up behind me. You smell of soap and moisturisers, oils and lotions, wood and musk. 'You've not taken your pills?'

'No, not yet.'

'Don't you want to take your pills?'

I shrug.

'Maybe just try them for a while. Please? For me?'

'Okay,' I say and swallow the pills in one fast movement. They stick in my throat a moment before sliding down.

You kiss my neck and whisper 'thank-you' in my ear.

'I brought you a note book,' you say. 'I figured you wouldn't have got one yet.'

I grin, feel a flush burn along my cheeks and spread over my neck.

You knew.

'It's in my bag.'

You pad off, move bundles of papers aside and pull out a hard backed blue note book, its spine a ring of iron circles, three sea-shells on the front. There is no price tag on it, just a bar code, long and zebra-stripped on the back. I open the book. Inside the front cover, you have scrawled a short message, your handwriting small and precise, each letter perfectly formed, almost like a computer font.

Seanne

Make your words count

Always Lys

'You like it?'

'Yes . . .'

'But?'

I shrug, trepidation gurgling inside me.

'Didn't you like her?'

'No, not much.'

'Well, why didn't you say? You don't have to stay with her. You could always see someone else, as long as you're serious about doing it.'

'Who would I see?'

'I could ask around at work. I know Marian sees someone in the city and I could always pick you up afterwards. Want me to get his card?'

'I don't know . . . Maybe I should stay with Yvonne.'

'What's the point? I know you Seanne, you'll avoid her questions and play your head games.'

'But what will she think if I don't go back?'

'Who cares? She's there to serve you, not for you to make *her* feel better. So, do you want me to get Dr Ados's details?'

'Hmmm.'

'Christ, Seanne. Make a decision, yes or no?'

'Maybe.'

'What is it now? Because he's a man?'

'No.'

'Because he's in the city?'

'No . . . '

'Then what?'

'What if I can't . . . '

I turn from you, put my hands on the edge of the sink and hunch my shoulders. I stare into the scratched silver bottom of the sink. You try and wait me out. I know this game. We've played it often. You always speak first, my silence like a mosquito, aggravating you.

'Seanne?'

Silence.

'SEANNE!'

'What?'

'What is it?'

Your voice is rigid with irritation, your anger not too far underneath.

You tap your foot.

'It's just what if I can't . . . ' my voice gets smaller, softer, begins to crack in my throat ' . . . can't afford him?'

I feel you come up behind me, stroking my shoulders with your hands.

'Is that all? You silly girl!' You kiss my neck, 'Don't worry about paying him. I'll take care of it.'

I lean back into you, rub my face against yours. You close your eyes. In the reflection in the window, we look like cats, purring against each other.

'What if it costs a lot?'

'So, what if it does? It's only money.'

'Money I don't have.'

'And I do. And if you need it, it's yours.'

'But . . .'

'But nothing, honey. I'll get his card and you'll go.'

'I feel weird doing that, making you pay.'

'It's nothing. You need it. We're in a relationship, that's what people do. End of discussion, okay?'

'Okay,' I reluctantly answer.

There's a pause, a hiccup in the conversation as you move your hands over my breasts, you tease my nipples, make them strain and poke against my bra.

'Thank you,' I say, my voice a sultry wail.

'Most anything for you. I love you, you know that?'

'I don't doubt that, Lys.'

You kiss me once more, then ransack inside my cupboards.

'You don't have rye crackers?'

'No, just plain saladas and I think they're stale.'

'Never mind, I'll get them on my way to work.'

You fill a bottle with water, cut a lemon into four sections and squeeze the juice into the bottle. You shake it and then lick the juice from your fingers. You run your tongue over your lips. You don't wince. You smile and kiss me with sour lips, the tip of your tongue bitter as it enters my mouth. I've seen you eat a lemon whole, your teeth ripping the flesh apart, devouring it like you would an apple. Devin teases you when you do it around him, commenting how appropriate it is that you like the taste of lemons. He thinks he's clever when he says that, but I know it annoys you.

'I better go babe, got reports due and meetings till three. My life is such a party right now!'

I listen for the sound of your car as it powers down the street, then begin to tidy the kitchen, the anti-depressants bubbling in my stomach, making an acidic taste rise in my throat.

I bow my head and vomit into the sink; my vomit mixture of coffee, toast and frothy white foam.

Two weeks later, I'm filling in the forms a different receptionist has handed me. Most of the questions are basic, medical and personal and then, 'Do you consent for session notes to be used in future academic research?' I tick 'yes' and then 'no' and then circle the 'no' with a dark black mark. I re-read the forms and hand them back to Clyde, the receptionist. He checks them over and nods, smiling.

'You have beautiful handwriting. Just beautiful,' he says, his voice cultured, clipped, betraying allocution training.

'Thank you.'

'Won't be long now, darl. There's a water cooler down the hall if you're thirsty and the toilet is the first door on the right.'

'I'm fine, thanks.'

'Okay then, just take a seat and Elliot will be with you soon.'

'Thank you.'

'You're welcome darl, just doing my job.'

I return to my seat, lean back, the smell of lime and lemon drifting lazily over me. I close my eyes and feel my muscles release the tension they've held all day.

A door opens and closes and a young man with a broken arm, walks up to Clyde. They chat a moment before he leaves, a bounce in his step.

'You can go in now, darl. White door on the left.'

I stand and walk inside the room. I have no hesitation, no fear.

'Hello, Seanne, I'm Doctor Ados, but I prefer Elliot. So, how are you?'

'Okay, I guess,' I say, nodding as he asks me to take a seat.

Compared to Yvonne's, this room is open, the walls ivory and decorated with black and white photos of bridges and wishing wells. There are two black couches in the room, double-seaters. He sits on one, I on the

other. Spot lights point towards the photos on the walls, highlighting the glossy sheen of the prints. I think I like this room.

'You don't have a desk?' I say, alarmed, unaware I was going to speak.

'No, not in here. I have another room with my desk and reference books. I prefer this room to remain free of that stuff.'

'Is that where you do research?'

'What makes you say that?'

'The forms said something about research.'

'Oh yes,' he chuckles, 'that tends to worry a lot of people. I think they're worried old Aunt Marge will someday pick it up and read about how they used to wear her bras or eat her shampoo. Is that what worries you about that clause?'

'No, I don't have an Aunt Marge and besides, I'm not that close to anyone in my family.'

'Are you close to anyone?'

'My girlfriend, I suppose.'

'Is that girlfriend as in friend or girlfriend as in partner?'

'Partner.'

He doesn't bat an eye. I like that.

'And how long have you been together?'

'Three almost four years. I told this to the last shrink.'

'You saw someone else before me?'

'Yes.'

'How did it work out?'

'I only saw her once.'

He chuckles again.

'Worked out well, then, didn't it? That tells me — ' There's a knock at his door and he stops, mid sentence. 'Excuse me a moment?'

I nod and eye him as he hovers in the doorway, talking to Clyde in hushed, hurried tones. His hair is curly and milk chocolate brown, resting just under his collar. He's wearing black jeans, a peacock blue shirt and boots on his feet. In his right ear is a small silver stud, its green stone flashing under the lights. Personal, still remaining himself. Devin could learn a lot from Elliot.

I'm still scrutinising Elliot when he closes the door and returns to his seat.

‘Sorry about that, I’ll give you extra time next session, provided you come back, that is. So, tell me, what did the other psychiatrist do for you?’

‘Um, she wanted me to write in a notebook and prescribed some anti-depressants.’

‘And?’

‘And that was it.’

He snorts.

‘You’re cured then! Go forth and be healthy!’ He laughs to himself and shakes his head. ‘If that’s what you’re looking for here, then you better leave now. I tend to take a different approach and I expect a lot more from you than scribbles in a notebook and promise to take your meds. Counselling is hard at time — in fact I’ve been there myself — but in the end it might be the best thing you’ve done.’

‘I hope so.’

‘Ah, hope is good — but sometimes so is pain. Pain got you where you are today and you need to understand that it’s not going to be easy to unpack that. It’s going to be hard and messy and sometimes you’re going to hate me, but that’s all part of it. So, what I want right now is a promise that you won’t flake out when it gets hard. Agreed?’

‘Agreed,’ I say, continuing to warm to him.

‘Good. Now whatever pills she gave you, throw them away. Over the next few sessions if you need medication, I’ll prescribe them, but only when I have an idea what you need. As for the notebook — that’s not a bad idea. Between now and next session, I’d like you to write down five things you’d like to work on, then we’ll work outwards from there.’

‘Okay . . . You’re not what I expected.’

‘Often I find my patients aren’t what they expected either . . . once they figure out how they got where they are.’

‘Do they ever surprise you?’

‘Of course! People surprise me in all sorts of ways. Some of them not always good. But that’s life, isn’t it? Good and bad at the same time.’

‘It seems that way a lot of time.’

‘And it is . . . But before we wax philosophical, I just want to run through a few of those boring questions with you. Get an idea of where you fit — so to speak. Okay?’

‘Yeah.’

'So, what do you do for a living?'

'Counter hand.'

'Is that what you wanted to do?'

'No, I just wandered into it.'

'So, what did you want then?'

'I don't know. When I left home, I did an admin course, but that didn't go anywhere. I tried a few places, but found that after a few weeks, I couldn't get along with the other girls very well, so I left.'

'Office politics can be rough, especially when you're the new girl.'

'Not just that, they were all so . . . vain. And totally obsessed with make-up and men. And . . . well I'm not like that — on both counts — so we had nothing in common and they made it hard. Playing practical jokes and leaving me nasty little notes on the back of toilet doors. It was like some sort of secret women's club that I could never be part of.'

'Did you want to be?'

'No . . . yes . . . I don't know. I mean I wouldn't want to be if I had to be like them, but,' I shrug, 'everyone wants to fit in.'

'Do you often feel like you don't?'

'Yeah. But it's got better . . . and it doesn't seem so important anymore. I mean, I don't really get along with the girl I work with now, but it doesn't worry me as much as it did when I was doing admin. I guess because I'm not alone anymore.'

'So, you weren't with your girlfriend when you moved away from admin?'

'No. But I met her best friend, Devin, at one of those jobs. He was seeing one of the other girls and we spoke a few times while he waited for her. About three months later, he and a different girl came into the café I worked at — just randomly, you know? — and anyway, at first I thought Lys was *his* date, but then she started flirting with me, and, well . . . she was cute, so I flirted back. We got together about two months after that. Lys pursued me.'

'And you've been with Liz since?'

'Lys. Lysandra.'

'Unusual name, do you know what it means?'

'No. I don't think she does either. We've never spoke about it. Do you know what yours means?'

'Yes. The Lord is My God.'

'Do you agree with it?'

'No, not really. I'm not very religious.' He pauses, 'So, you have family?'

'Yes. A younger brother. Cooper.'

'Do you see him often?'

'No, maybe once or twice since I left home.'

'And when was that?'

'Sixteen. I come from Nhill. It's past Horsham.'

'Ah, a country girl.'

'Yeah.'

'Did you like it?'

I pause.

'No. Not really. I think prefer the city.'

'And Lys? She's a city girl, from Melbourne?'

'No, Sydney originally.'

'Ah, polar opposites, creates some interesting dynamics that does.'

'Meaning?'

'Well, on a basic level, there's often a difference in morals, beliefs, social status, that sort of stuff. Have you noticed any of that with Lys?'

'Yeah,' I swallow. 'Like sometimes, she seems to think I was born the moment we met. It's like she forgets I had a whole life before I met her. It wasn't much of one compared to her experiences, but I went through things too — and I'm not naïve either. I know things. I've done things. But she doesn't seem to want to know that stuff about me. And I want to know everything about her, especially the bad stuff, because . . . I don't know . . . maybe it will help me love her more if I know what she's made of.'

I shut up, my cheeks flushing.

'Go on, Seanne.' I shake my head. 'Okay, then tell me why you stopped?'

'I don't know . . . I guess I didn't want you to think I was crazy.'

He chuckles.

'Crazy is such a loaded word. What's crazy to one is sane to another. But if it helps, I don't think you're crazy at all. I'd rather you get all these so called crazy thoughts out so we can deal with them, get to their source.'

Besides, people who wonder if they're crazy, usually aren't. The truly insane usually have no bloody idea they're nutty.'

'Really?'

He nods.

'And to tell you the truth, it's crazy — for lack of better word — to lock these thoughts up inside you.'

'But what if I sound really crazy?'

'Then you do,' he shrugs, nonchalantly. 'We'll talk and we'll get through it. No big deal. How else do you think we can get to the truth, if we don't get all the crazy bullshit out of the way first?'

I stare at him, dumbfounded.

'I get that,' I say, 'I really do.'

'Good. Because I think I'm going to enjoy our sessions.' He smiles at me warmly, 'But I think I might leave this here for today. I try not to get into anything too deep the first sessions. So, now the million dollar question is; will you be back?'

'I think so.'

'Great! Now unfortunately, I will be away for a while, I've got a seminar in Auckland and then I'm bungee jumping in Christchurch, so it may be a while before we meet again. Is that okay?'

'Bungee jumping?'

'Oh yeah! And here you were worried about your sanity! Clyde has a heart attack just about every time I mention it.'

He stands and I follow him out.

'Now if you see the lovely man here, he'll try and fit you in as soon as possible, maybe before I go, won't you Clyde?'

'Sure Doc, as soon as I figure out how to create an extra week in the month,' he grins, 'So, um . . . how about in about . . .um, ' he flicks through the diary in front of him, 'say five weeks, at the same, would that suit you?'

'Yes, it should be okay. Thanks.'

'Here's our card and if you need to cancel, please ring. Elliot hates last minute cancellations. I'm surprised he hasn't had that rule tattooed to his forehead yet. Oh, how he loves his rules.'

'Rules make the world go around,' Elliot says. 'Just like your coffee does.'

'Always the slave master! I suppose you want a scone too?'

'Only if you have them, of course,' he smirks, playfully, 'I'd hate to put you out.'

Elliot winks and bids me goodbye before disappearing behind yet another door.

'His afternoon constitutional. I'd vacate if I were you, Elliot pigged out on chilli last night. And he'll be less than pleasant.'

'Oh, okay,' I say with a titter in my voice. 'Nice to meet you.'

'You too, darl, take care.'

I walk out into the late afternoon and I search for your car. I find it parked under a tree, cigarette smoke wafting lazily out the driver's side window.

When I get in you greet me wearily, but brighten when I tell you how I responded to Elliot.

I open the notebook. I press the pages back and smooth my hands over the paper. I lift a pen and tap it against the page. The blank paper with its blue lines mocks me — empty. I'm empty too, my mind vacant.

While I wait for inspiration, I draw flowers and snails along the edges of the page. The flowers I draw are large, their petals overshadowing the tiny snails, peeping out underneath. I draw faces on the snails, thought bubbles above their heads. Then I rip the page from the notebook, screw it up in my hand and throw it. It lands in one of my chairs. I stare at the new clean page, the indents of my doodles a faint imprint along the edges.

The phone rings and I jump. I wait for the answering machine to take it. I stand and head over to the phone, my hand poised over the receiver.

'Hi See-See, it's Coop. Um, you there? No? Okay. Look, I'm low on cash. Ring me, okay? I only need two hundred. Come on, sis, be a gem. Um . . . so ring the Kensington Rooming House and they'll put you through. Bye.'

He hangs up.

I return to the notebook and pick up the pen. I write the word 'family' and then close the book. I grab my handbag and keys and walk out of the flat, leaving thoughts of Cooper behind me.

I turn left at the end of my street and head towards the strip of shops just past the round-about. The post office and hairdressers' are closed, their

windows barred in heavy silver shutters. The supermarket's doors open when I approach, clang and then shut behind me. I push my way through a turnstile and I stroll towards the back of the store, to the alcove with its security gates and into the liquor department.

I scan the shelves, reading labels as I pass — Chardonnay, Riesling, Shiraz, Merlot. Your taste. I head towards the spirits. I wonder if labelling them 'spirits' has anything to do with the part of the self that alcoholism destroys or is this just a mere coincidence?

I enclose my fingers around a bottle of Jim Beam and wrench it forward, it scrapes against the shelf before I hold it firmly in my hand. I take it to the counter, where a girl barely old enough to drink herself scans the bottles, taps a few buttons and tells me the total. I pay and walk back into the main supermarket, purchase a bottle of Pepsi Max, two packets of cigarettes and a large block of peppermint chocolate.

Back home, I fish the largest glass I can from my cupboard, mix half pepsi with half beam and I down the glass fast. I resist the urge to vomit and pour another. I grab the bottle, the Pepsi, the cigarettes, the chocolate and a saucer for an ashtray and take them all into lounge. I eye the answering machine as I pass. I sigh and drink, knowing Mum would never believe this Cooper, the Cooper I know, the Cooper who emptied Nan's account of all but thirteen cents. Then staged a mugging to hide the fact he pushed seven and half thousands dollars into his veins.

I drink.

Memories of Cooper flood over me.

As a child he was scared of the dark, was playful and trustworthy, always pleading for endless for kisses and cuddles. He got good grades at school and was captain of the under eleven's basketball team. But then, at thirteen, he met Chucky Jefferson. It was Chucky who first saw in Cooper the man he is now and slowly pulled it from him, like a thread from a jacket. Deal by deal, needle by needle, the Copper I loved unravelled and this new Cooper formed in the old one's place — a second-rate product of who he could have been. The last time I saw Chucky, he had de-evolved too; he was serving time — again — and gone was the goofy waif boy we knew. In its place stood a man, forty kilos heavier, hardened and bitter, his eyes empty of emotion.

I drink.

I think about Mum. Her entire life revolving around a series of washing clothes, planting vegetables, staring at soap operas and fattening us up — our waistlines expanding as each year passed. I think about how she first broached the subject of boys with me, how she thought my lack of interest in boys was a lack of interest in sex. She blessed herself for not raising a whore, like Marjory Fleming down the road. But then . . . she discovered the truth . . . For days, she asked me what went wrong, desperate to lay blame. She even went so far as to suggest I see to a priest, just in case it was an evil spirit who'd corrupted me. When that failed, she made it her life's mission to introduce me to boys — never realising I'd already fucked a few of them, their hard cocks no match for the taste of a girl. Even now, she thinks of my love of women as a phase and that you are an evil enchantress, tricking me in maintaining my 'lie'.

I drink.

But mostly, I think about you.

When you first approached me, after your second lunch at *Kimmy's Café*, you stood before me, bold and brazen and asked if I'd like a drink after work and if not, your phone number. I waited two days before I called you, worried what you saw in me.

Our first date, you took me to a restaurant in Williamstown. You fed me entrée prawns and aggressively flirted with me. You insisted you had to have me — and I let you an hour into our date, before the mains. You fucked me in the last stall of the ladies toilet, your fingers and mouth greedily persistent as they ventured inside me. Later, back at your place, as you spread your thighs for me and I first tasted your cunt, I knew I'd love you.

I drink.

And suddenly, I start to cry, no real reason. I angrily wipe away my tears and pour another drink. And then another. And another and another — until I fall over sideways.

I dream I'm standing under a street light. A woman is beside me wearing only a faded black mini skirt, her bare chest covered in soft downy hair. I can clearly see her Adam's apple, the shape of her cock under her skirt. I know she was born a man but I don't care. I smile at her warmly.

A group of young guys saunter towards us and begin to throw bottles at my companion. They scream 'Freak', as they pitch them. She stands still,

tears streaming down her face, her make-up running. Bottles hit her — beer and glass shards pool around her bare bleeding feet.

I face her, put my head on her chest and wrap my arms around her waist. She is rigid with hurt. Her shoulders stiff, her body quivering. She whimpers as their bottles and insults continue to pelt us.

And suddenly I burn with anger, my hatred making me come alive.

I open mouth.

I scream words I don't generally use. I scream them so fast and so loud that they blend into one long sentence.

'YOUFUCKINGMAGGOTCUNTSFGOFUCKYOURSELF!'

She collapses next to me, her head an open cavernous wound. Half a broken bottle protrudes from it. Bugs spew out her flesh. They fly up at me and into my face and mouth.

I wake up screaming — my hands clawing at my throat.

I'm washing dishes when you ring me at work, my mood morose and sullen, images of my dreams still fresh in my mind.

'Hon, I have to go to Brisbane for a week,' you say, 'a new distributor is launching their range. Great stuff, a little pricey, but the quality far outweighs what we have so far. Anyway it's all expenses paid and I have to be the face of the business. I just wish you could come.'

'I can't,' I stammer.

'I know, babe. Work and all. But I leave Thursday. A car is picking me up at five for the seven am flight. Do you want to get together the night before? Have dinner?'

'Yeah . . . '

'Honey, it's only a week.'

'But we've never been apart that long before. Ever.'

'I know . . . but I'll be back before you know it. And I'll bring you something special, I promise, just to make it up to you. So, can we meet in the city after work?'

'Okay, what time?'

'Eight?'

'Where?'

Out the corner of my eye, I spy Magda watching me, her face set stern as she looks from me to the dishes, the rubbish bin overflowing.

‘Just come up to the office.’

‘I’ll have to get changed first.’

‘So, catch a taxi and I’ll fix you up for it. Deal?’

‘Okay, I gotta go.’

‘Yeah, me too.’

‘Bye.’

‘Bye babe.’

I hang up and turn towards Magda.

‘Sorry.’

She clicks her tongue at me and motions towards the dishes, I nod and pick up a tea towel. I throw it over my shoulder and head back to the sink.

When all the dishes are clean, I wipe them dry and stack them back into their cupboards. I’m wiping down the sink, bringing back its bright shiny gleam, when I hear Chrissy scream, her voice breaking through the dull hum of the radio in the background.

Magda rushes out to her. I follow.

‘What’s happened?’

‘Mouse! I saw a mouse!’

‘What?! Where?’

‘Over there!’ Chrissy says, pointing.

Magda pounces, shoving things about, muttering.

‘There better be no mice in my kitchen,’ she says, glaring.

Chrissy stands behind me, her hands shaking.

‘It’s only a mouse,’ I say.

‘How can you say that! They’re disgusting. And they carry disease. They started the plague, you know.’

‘That was rumoured to be rats,’ I say. ‘Not mice.’

‘Same thing, only smaller. What if it got into something we ate? We could all have rabies or something.’

‘Australia doesn’t have rabies.’

‘How do you know? It could be hidden, waiting to strike.’

I roll my eyes. She catches me, mutters something under her breath. I glare at her while Magda continues to search. All of a sudden, something black scurries across the floor. Chrissy squeals, darting about. She reminds

me of one of the games I used to play as a child, where I'd provoke a bull-ants nest with a stick and then sit back to watch them pile out the tiny hole, furious at the disruption. She scuttles about just like those ants, only larger.

'It's a cricket,' Magda says, 'just a cricket, not a mouse.'

'It looked like a mouse.'

I bend down, corner the skittish cricket and trap it in my hand.

'There are no mice in my kitchen. And next time you see a cricket and think it's a mouse, keep your voice down. Customers do not want to hear about mice near food.'

Chrissy pouts, chastised.

'But, I thought . . . '

'We know what you thought, now get back to work, Chrissy and you, Seanne, get rid of that. I saw you catch it.'

Chrissy grimaces at me and shakes her head. She walks to the sink and obsessively washes her hands, before walking outside, mobile glued to her ear.

As I release the cricket outside, I hear her conversation, telling the person on the other end how horrid her job is and how bitchy her co-worker was about it all.

'She must be the butch one,' she says.

She listens a moment and then sniggers.

When she returns inside, she is toffee apple sweet to me. I mimic her sugariness and pretend all is okay, but before she leaves for home that night, I drop the two snails I found on the bin's lid into her handbag. I imagine them slithering over her face creams and tampons, leaving slimy silver trails over everything inside.

I hope they make her scream all night.

I stand outside your office building. I'm early and edgy, the vastness of Melbourne still fascinating to me. And suddenly I remember the first morning I arrived in Melbourne, my memory so clear I can almost taste it . . . and even though it's not Spencer Street Station anymore, I can still almost hear . . .

The loudspeaker announcement:

'Spencer Street Station, next stop.'

I gather my things, my tatty old suitcase, my plastic bag with orange peels, the book I'll never finish and wiggle my toes in their shoes.

I stand, peer around me, making sure I don't leave anything behind — I've left enough already. I wait patiently as the train rolls in, the grinding of the gears vibrating under my feet.

I step off the carriage, onto the hard cracked cement of the station, pigeons and rats are the first living things to greet me.

I descend down the ramp, passed already opened fast food kiosks, vending machines, public toilets. At the underground news-agency, I buy a bottle of water and the Herald-Sun, wanting to cement the date in my memory — April 6. I want to keep the paper in memorial.

I drag my feet up another ramp, my body weary, aching from being on trains for so long. I deliberately caught a train to Adelaide and then another from Adelaide to Melbourne, not wanting my parents to know where I land.

I step out of the fluoro brightness of the station and into the morning sun of Melbourne. I stop and stare, setting my suitcase down. Workers walk past me, schoolkids, elderly people with jeeps, cars buzz in all directions and no-one pays me any attention. It's superb.

I hoist my handbag over my shoulder and lift my case off the ground and head towards a backpackers' hostel. A new life unfurls before me.

I sigh, so many promises I made then, so many I've broken now.

I walk up and down in front of your work, making the glass doors open and close. I play with them a while, trying to make them open again just before they're fully closed but I soon tire of this game. I light a cigarette and lean up against the side of the building. I watch the continual littering of people around me, each one seeming like the one before, just darker, fatter, longer. I get the impression that I could come here every day, at the same time for weeks on end and rarely see the same people. I love this anonymity.

Out the corner of my eye, I spot a man exit an alley, his face bright red. He's moving in a smug, satisfied way and rubbing his hands down his pants, a black and red back pack slipping off his shoulder. As he strides past me, I'm hit with the smell of him. Sweat, men's cologne, garlic and sex. I watch the entrance of the alley, waiting to see if anyone will follow him out.

When no one appears, I check my watch — six twenty-seven — and slowly enter the alley. I notice first the smell — mouldy paper, urine, rotting fruit. I roam further down, past green bins and blue dumpsters, red milk crates and yellow bread trays. No-one.

Before I know it, the adjoining street opens up before me. More unrecognisable people. I turn and move towards your work.

‘Yah lookin’ for someone?’

I jump, swivel my head in the direction of the voice.

‘You . . . I think.’

‘Oh?’ he says, tilting his head to the left.

He’s cleaner this time, his jeans new, his T-shirt black, his runners only slightly scuffed at the toes. His hair is plaited and his face and hands are clean. The only ‘dirty’ part of him is the swollen purple mess of his thumb, poking out the top of a grubby bandage.

‘How’d you do that?’

He looks down at his thumb.

‘Door.’

‘Hurt?’

‘Like fuck.’ He shrugs. ‘So, did yah want somethin’?’

‘Yes. To talk.’

‘With me?’

‘Yes.’

‘You kinky or somethin’?’

I giggle.

‘It ain’t that funny,’ he says, huffy. ‘City’s full of kinksters. Yah want somethin’ kinky?’

‘No, just to talk. Can I buy you a coffee?’

‘Just coffee?’ he says, dubious and defensive.

‘Yes.’

‘And yah buyin’?’

‘Yes.’

‘Come on then.’

We exit the alley.

‘I can’t go too far,’ I say, ‘I’m meeting someone at eight.’

‘Boyfriend?’

‘No. A friend.’

I glance sideways and gauge him for a reaction. Nothing. He doesn't register my lie. I'm disappointed in this.

'Yah okay with here?' he says.

He points to a small café tucked away between an amusement parlour and a mobile phone distributor. I nod and we walk inside.

The café is long, its chairs cherry red and décor dark. It smells of grease and old food, but the woman behind the counter is pleasant enough and tells us she'll bring out our order as soon as it's ready — mine a flat white, his a hot chocolate. I hand over a ten dollar note, blue and plastic. I'm surprised when I get five dollars change.

He leads me to the back of the café, near the sign that says 'toilets this way' and we sit in red booth, him across from me. We don't speak until the aging waitress puts our drinks in front of us. He picks it up, cradles his hands around the cup and sips slowly, eyes closed. He licks his lips. I sip at my white coffee and add another spoon of sugar. I stir and watch him.

He looks up.

'So why yah wanna talk to me?'

'I've seen you around before. You look . . . interesting.'

'Cause yah figured out I'm a whore?'

'I don't know. Something like that. I'm not sure, I just know wanted to talk to you.'

'So, talk.'

I pause, a hundred different questions running through my mind, each one more personal than that last. But I decide to start with something easy.

'What's your name?'

'Kit.'

'That's your real name?'

'No. I don't like people knowin' me real name. Makes 'em think they know me.'

'You gave it to yourself then?'

'No. I was at this home as a kid and this chick . . . ' he shrugs as if to say, you-know-how-it-is. I nod, even though I don't. 'So anyway, I'm Kit.'

'Hi Kit, I'm — '

'Deanne, I 'member.'

'Seanne. Close.'

He shrugs again and smiles, a small dimple forming in his left cheek.

'So, how old are you, Kit?'

'Why?'

'Sorry, I just trying to get to know you.'

'Maybe yah shouldn't.'

'Isn't that up to me to decide?'

He doesn't answer. He downs the rest of his hot chocolate and then runs his finger around the bottom of the cup, scooping up the dregs onto the pads of his fingers. He dips his fingers into his mouth and sucks them clean.

'Another?' I ask.

He nods and I catch the eye of the waitress. We order another drink each and I leave the money on the end of the table. She grabs it as she puts our order down. I tell her to keep the change and she smiles at me, nodding. She returns behind the counter and begins to wipe down the benches in long, practiced strokes. Her eyes are vacant. I empathise with her, knowing I sport the same look by the end of the day.

'So,' I say, 'how long have you been in Melbourne?'

'How'd yah know I wasn't from here?'

'I didn't. I just . . . guessed.'

'Oh,' he grins again, 'Well, yah right. Been here coupla years, but.'

'I'm not from here either.'

'No?'

'No, from the country. Nhill. Past Horsham.'

'Dunno it. But it's past Ballarat, yeah?'

'Yeah, couple hours out.'

'How come yah here then, if yah're a country girl?'

'I hated it. The country is fine if you want to marry and have kids. But I didn't, so I left.'

'Most people wanna leave the city. Says it eats them up, but I dunno, the city's better than some places.'

'Like home, perhaps?'

He nods.

'Yeah, some homes anyway. Been in a lotta different ones.'

'So, where is your home, then, Kit?'

'Originally? Corowa in New South, yah know it?'

'No, but it seems we're both a long way from home.'

'Yeah. Here's to Melbourne!'

I tip my coffee at him and drink. The coffee is only luke-warm, but less bitter and milkier than the last. I drink it down in one gulp and put my cup back on the table. Kit follows my lead, drinking fast, grinning at me.

A tall greying man, with dark blue jeans and a flannel shirt enters the café. I see him reflected — smudged and grimy — in the mirror behind Kit. Kit tenses on seeing him, begins to fidget in his seat. The man orders a strawberry milkshake and looks about the café. He notices us and a sly, smirking grin swells over his face. He waits for his shake and then approaches us. He puts his empty hand on the edge of the table and stares into Kit's face.

'You owe me,' he says.

'I already said I'd — '

'I know what you said, you stupid cunt. But you owe me. So, pay up or I'll take it out of your fucking arse.'

'k.'

Kit slides out of the seat, he doesn't look at me, just mumbles a 'see yah' and walks out the café. The man picks up his shake, sucks loudly and winks at me.

'Looks like your time is up, lovey. He's mine now.'

He follows Kit out. Kit looks at me once before he leaves. I wave to Kit in the mirror and he nods, before disappearing with the man. I sigh, slide out from the booth and place our cups on the counter. The woman turns and smiles at me.

'He's a strange one, that one.'

'The man?'

'No, the boy. Nice enough but so many men,' she says, shaking her head.

'He comes here often?'

'Yes and no. Sometimes not for weeks, then he's back again. Always the same table.'

I nod and glance the clock behind her. Seven fifty-nine! I gasp, mutter a quick goodbye and I run towards your work, my feet beating the footpath. People barely just move out of my way, looking behind me to see what the fuss is. I imagine they expect to see police chasing behind, hands poised over the holsters around their waists.

I run through the doors of your work and into the lift. I press five on the panel on the left hand side and hold my hips, breathing deeply as the lift begins to move me upward. I brush my hair out of my face and wipe the sweat from my temples. I concentrate on breathing until the door opens. I step out and walk down a narrow passage. I stand in front of the door with your name painted on the front. I knock and wait for your response. I hear footsteps and you open the door wide, the phone cradled on your shoulder. You bring your finger to your lips and indicate for me to be quiet. You invite me in and walk back behind your desk. I sit, heaving.

‘Yes, I’ll hold,’ you say into the phone. You look over at me, ‘You’ve been running?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘The taxi got stuck in — ’

‘Yes, I’m here. No, no, I need it by tomorrow morning. Yes, then bill my account. You only have the blue? Shit. Well, I’ll have to take it. Yes, by tomorrow . . . that’s not my problem, you guys promised me this days ago. Work it out!’

You slam the phone down.

‘Let’s get the fuck out of here,’ you say, gathering your stuff. ‘Now, what you were saying?’

‘Oh . . . we got stuck on the Westgate. They only had one lane open.’

‘Shit. If we go back to your place, remind me to go the back way. So, how much do I owe you?’

I quickly recall the actual fare and add another twenty to it. You open your wallet and hand me the money without question.

I bite my lip and take your hand, watching you slyly. You smile at me and snuggle close. I feel my heart beat savagely in my chest.

Yet another lie to add to my building tally.

After an uneventful dinner, you drive back to my place, your car lighting up the dark shadows out the front of my block flats.

When we walk into the room, it smells faintly of curry and cooking oil — a smell I’ve never been able to get rid of. You dump your stuff on the

couch and stroll into the kitchen. You move about with ease, as if it's an extension of your own place.

I head to the toilet. The bathroom is cold, I shiver and pull my pants and knickers down. I pee in short sharp bursts, trying to stop the flow. I've been doing this ever since I read it helps build stronger muscle tone. I pull squares of toilet paper from the roll and wipe myself. I notice I'm wetter than usual and look down. I call your name and hear you sprint towards me.

'What is it?'

'Can you get me a pad?'

'Oh, okay.'

I listen to you walk away and rustle in my bedroom. I count the spider webs hanging in the crooks around me until you open the bathroom door, hand me a pad and a clean pair of knickers.

'You're four days early,' you say.

I nod and plucking off the old bloody knickers, wrench up the clean pair. You pick the old ones from off the floor and fill the sink with cold water as I secure the pad, dress, flush and stand.

'I'll do that,' I say, muscling in next to you.

You move aside and watch as I scrub my knickers and rinse the blood off under the running tap. I wash my hands and leave my knickers to soak before I throw them into the wash.

'You really should use tampons,' you say, 'they're so much easier.'

'I don't trust them.'

'Why not? They won't get stuck you know.'

'I know, they're just so little and I bleed so much, I'm worried they'll leak.'

You wrap your arms around me and whisper 'worry wart' into my ear.

'Come,' you say, 'I've made coffee. Go into the lounge and I'll bring it in.'

You slap my arse, telling me to go.

I sit on the couch, flicking through the TV channels. I'm bored by all the shows that flash before me. I stand and go over to my growing DVD collection, I pick a movie we'd both watch — your taste more bloody than mine — and settle back on the couch as you walk in, cup in each hand.

'You're running low on milk, hon. And there's a message on your machine.'

'It's probably Cooper again,' I say as you settle down next to me.
I hand you the remote and you select 'play movie' from the menu options.

'Have you heard it already?'

'No, but he's been ringing lately. I told you, remember?'

You're silent a moment, thinking.

'Oh yes, for money, right?'

'Yeah.'

'Are you going to give him any?'

'No.'

'Good girl,' you say and pat my leg.

I snuggle up against you and fall asleep watching the movie.

I dream I'm spooning soup into large bowls and placing them on a never-ending conveyer belt. The soup is thick and red, littered with vegetables and body parts. Every now and again, I stop, add a handful of severed fingers and toes to the pot and stir. Next to me a woman in a werewolf mask cuts fresh cadavers into smaller parts and refills my meat bowls.

When I reach the bottom of the pot, I mop up the remaining soup with a slice of bread. I gobble it, greedily. Then I grab a crate and climb into the pot. I climb through the bottom and come out standing in a large field, the ground covered in white daises, all in half bloom.

'I know what you did,' you say and then begin to sing 'Another One Bites the Dust' by Queen. I shake my head and suddenly I become aware I can hear this song outside my dream as well.

I flitter awake, still on the couch, radio bleating in the background. I uncurl myself wander into my bedroom to turn off the alarm. I look for you.

You're gone, the smell of your perfume still lingering in the air, your favourite towel hanging wet over a rail. In the kitchen, sitting up against the salt shaker on the table, I find a note and a dew-glistened rose. I unfold the note and sniff the rose.

Morning Hon,

Didn't want to wake you. I had to go in early. Will ring you later.

Lys.

I fold the note over, throw it back on the table and put the rose in water. I prepare for work, my uniform un-ironed and apron still slightly grotty. I walk out the door before I give myself a chance to call in sick.

Just before I get to *Kimmy's Café*, I visit a florist and send you a large bunch of white roses. I ask them to be wrapped in blue paper and tied with a white ribbon. I pick a heart shaped card from the selection and it with one word 'Always'. I ask the florist to make sure they're delivered before two, and then open my purse and empty it onto the counter. She scowls at me when I pay in coins and complains under her breath about having to count it into the till.

As I leave, I deliberately kick over her display of yellow and red tulips, apologise insincerely and leave the florist to mop up the water spreading over the floor. Then I walk the remaining half a block to work.

When Magda tells me to create the base for her tomato and basil soup, I gag, tasting vomit in my mouth. I walk off without any answer and I spend the rest of the morning in a queasy, venomous mood.

Thursday rushes up and you leave.

Despite your protests, I see you off at the airport, fussing about you as you go through your pre-flight rituals. You appear calm, but your words are clipped, slightly aggressive, attempting to hide your fear of flying. I wonder if you're stoned, your eyes hardly focusing on one thing for too long.

I watch your plane as it becomes nothing, your lipstick drying on my cheek. Reluctantly, I cab it home and curl up on the couch, sulking.

Every night after work, I catch the tram into the city. Lonely, bored and restless, I search for Kit, but I don't find him. I kill time by wandering through the streets. I find covert entrances to adult shops, cheap out of the way restaurants, and exclusive gift shops offering the glittering and the grotesque. I idle away hours doing this, just exploring Melbourne but never see Kit and each night, I go home, disappointed and lonely.

But on the third night, he finds me. I'm sitting at a table outside a fast food restaurant, drinking warm, watery lemonade and he takes a seat in front of me.

'Hey,' he says, cigarette in one hand and can of Pepsi Max in the other. 'Yah lookin' for a date?'

I look up, smile and begin a protest.

'Relax,' he says, 'Joke.'

'Oh.'

He laughs and then butts his cigarette out on the bottom of his shoe. I notice the soles are worn, thin and lacking in grip.

'Yah hungry?' he says suddenly, making me jump.

'A little.'

'Cool.'

He swings his body out of the chair and stands.

'Let's go. I'm buyin', 'k?'

'Kit, you don't . . .'

'I'm buyin',' he insists, pointing his thumb at himself.

'Okay.'

'Good.'

'Where are we going?'

'Surprise. Yah don't mind walkin'?'

'No.'

'Sweet.'

I follow him, watching the movement of his body — the rhythmic sway of his hips, the jiggle of his arse, the flex of his muscles under his jeans. His body hypnotises me. I resist the urge to touch him, to run my hand along the curve of his arse and grip his cheeks, to cup them in each hand and squeeze. I feel a spark of sexual heat fire through me. The charge ricochets, triggering shivers and hot flushes underneath my skin. My clit begins to throb. I tilt my head and watch him ravenously.

By the time Kit opens the door to a pub, I want to mount him, to throw him to the floor, rip at his clothes, pull his cock from his pants and fuck him. I want to hold him down, rough him up and bite him as I climax. I want him in ways that I've never wanted cock and I'm both excited and disturbed by my intensity.

I take a few moments to re-collect myself, before I step inside the pub. Once inside, I focus on the décor, the sights and sounds around me, anything but the whore in front of me and the fever inside me. I force my eyes forward, even though I feel them drift back towards him.

Directly across the doorway is the bar, a plump dark haired man leans on the bar, back to us, watching a large TV screen above him. He nods at us merrily as I follow Kit past the bar and into a larger room off to the side. Four tables with four chairs each occupy the centre of the room. Dozens of matching tables and chairs are stacked along two of the walls. The room is decorated in snake skins, wagon wheels, leather saddles and horse shoes. To the left of the doorway hangs a huge chalkboard menu. Some of the items are smudged but still readable, the writing rounded and large, childish.

‘Yah wanna drink?’

I nod, not trusting my voice. He disappears a moment and then comes back with a jug of brownish black liquid and two large glasses. He hands me a glass and fills it. He pours and then sits. I drink the coke and replenish the glass.

Kit sits back in his chair, arm resting over the back of an empty chair beside him. He squints at the board. I decide on nachos without sour cream with a side of chips. I try not to look at him, but my eyes wander over his body, over the way his t-shirt hugs his chest.

Neither of us speak. I’m struck mute with desires I don’t understand and he, he watches me out the corner of his eye, pretending he doesn’t notice my sudden silence, my intense attention. The portly man comes to us, note pad in hand. Kit orders the burger and I the nachos.

‘How’s yah horse?’ Kit says to him.

‘Ah, stubborn bitch, still holding on. Damn thing’s gonna pop soon.’

Kit turns to me.

‘Frank’s racehorse is preggies. They’re hopin’ for another champ.’

I nod.

‘Had the vet to her twice this week . . . but still, nothing,’ Frank shakes his head. ‘Women, eh? Never know what they’re gonna do next.’

‘Maybe she’s scared,’ Kit says.

Frank huffs.

‘Maybe she’s doing it to shit me. Probably have it while we’re at race-meet. Damn horse.’ He pauses, ‘Anyway . . .’

He wanders off, head still shaking and disappears behind a swinging door, I catch a quick glimpse of a woman and a cramped kitchen and then the door swings closed again.

'That's Frank.'

Again, I nod.

'We use to fuck, but not since his op.'

'Yeah, okay,' I say, trying not to think of Kit, naked, pinned underneath this sweating man, having his eager asshole fucked.

I shudder and cross my legs, tense my muscles, pressure building. I grin wickedly, imagining Kit on all fours, pushing cum out of his arse and onto a plate, a sly slutty grin on his face. I see him forced to plant his face in the plate and lick it clean, his arse cheeks pulled open to expose his red, gaping hole. I breathe in through my nose deeply, blissful at the thought of this whore's debasement. I cross my arms over my chest and covertly pinch my nipples through my top. I want to fuck.

And then he speaks;

'Um, did I do somethin' wrong?'

'No.'

'Yah sure? Yah been real quiet since we got here. Yah wanna go?'

'No.'

'Then what? Yah don't wanna be seen with me no more?'

And with that, my lust for him dissipates, and I begin to see him for his age, for his insecurity, for his loneliness. I feel a jolt of guilt smack inside my stomach and I dig one of my fingernails into my palm to remind myself to remember this.

'No, nothing like that.'

'Then what?'

'It's just . . .'

'Just what?' he sits forward, suspicious, defensive. He stares at me stonily, all hard eyes and set jaw. 'Yah got a problem?'

'No.'

He glares at me — he reminds me of you, of your anger and impatience when I won't answer your questions, when my mouth won't form the words fast enough to satisfy your inquisitions. I sigh and Kit raises an eyebrow at me.

'I'm not good with words,' I say.

'Whatever.'

I run my hand under the table, feeling the hardened lump of chewing gum underneath. I dig my nail into it, the centre caves and a sticky substance creeps underneath my nail. While I do this, Kit fingers the grooves cut into the table's top, staring, his eyes pounding at me, hitting me hard like stones on a roof.

I speak without knowing what I'm going to say.

At first I speak in stops and starts, my words awkward, like a thick lumpy paste in my throat.

'I'm sorry,' I finally say.

'Yeah?'

'Yes, Kit, I'm sorry, I've been . . . ' I pause, feel the heat in my face, the chill of his stare, 'I've been . . . um . . . '

'What?'

Near my foot, I feel his leg shake and knock against the table. I realise his confidence is part facade, that underneath he is nervous, unsure if I'm friend or foe.

'It's hard, okay.'

'Just fuckin' say it,' he says, weary. 'Yah don't have to be gentle with me. I don't mind it rough,' he tilts his head and grins.

He's impish and irritated, the combination of anger and allure as tantalizing as drizzling hot chocolate over cold ice cream.

'Okay,' I say, taking deep breaths, slow inhale, slower exhale. 'I need to apologise because I've been thinking inappropriate things about you.'

He tips his chin at me.

'Sex things, huh?' I blush, wildly. He leans forward, 'What kinda sex things?'

I look down, fidget.

He chuckles and his hand slides over mine.

'Yah think I'm sexy?'

No sound but my guilty breathing.

'Yah do. Yah think I'm sexy.'

I hear his chair scrape backwards and he slides in next to me, his body like liquid, moulding to me. I remain stiff, avoid eye contact, willing myself to be hard like mussel shells.

'Yah don't have to be shy with me,' he croons, his fingers drifting up and down my thigh, 'Yah wanna go now? Go fuck?'

Suddenly, I am alert.

'No, no, I didn't mean that.'

'No?' he stares at me, bewildered, 'Yah don't wanna fuck? It'll cost yah.'

'No, not like that!'

'Like like what? Free?'

I huff, feel the first stirrings of frustration inside me.

'No, look just forget it, all right?'

'Yeah, whatever, but I don't do freebies, 'k?'

And then the food arrives, leaving the idea of paying him, having him heavy in the air.

He doesn't say a word, just moves back to his side of the table. But as we eat and discuss simple, everyday things, I feel his foot find my leg and travel along the curve of my calf. Whenever I 'catch' him, he winks at me. I giggle and he licks his lips, blowing kisses. He teases, seamlessly, his flirtations pouring from him like champagne, intoxicating me. I'm drunk on the taste of whore.

But we don't mention any of it. Instead, we stuff ourselves with food, dipping into each other's plate, him running his chips through my salsa, me pulling onions and beetroot from his hamburger bun. We order ice cream and he makes a show of licking along the spoon, lapping up the ice cream and then swallowing with a moan.

'Slut,' I say.

He looks at me wide-eyed, puts his hand to his chest.

'Me?' he says.

'Yes, you!'

Before he answers me, Frank moves towards us and gathers up plates, eager to be in Kit's presence. I watch him jealously, suddenly protective of Kit and annoyed at this man's predatory lust.

'Can've a Beam?' Kit says and looks up at him with child eyes.

At first Frank's face remains impartial and then I see a crack, a small fissure that will let Kit weasel inside and have his way, no matter what the cost.

'Alright, but if anyone asks, it's hers and I dunno how you got it.'

'Ta,' Kit grins and I watch him run his hand over Frank's hip.

'Ah, Kit, you know I can't, but I get your drink. Don't tease an old man who wants what he can't have.'

Kit shrugs and thanks him for the drink. They whisper random words to each other and laugh like high-school friends.

I sigh. I wonder what I'm doing here — with him — while you're probably hammering away at your laptop, preparing yourself to dazzle the hierarchy the following day. I imagine you'd be muttering to yourself and chain smoking, a cold cup of coffee beside you, your dinner left to dry out, your fork still stuck in the middle. You'd be absentmindedly swinging your foot, just touching the carpet underneath. Occasionally you'd check your phone, your email, your pager, you'd read the message and pace around the room. But mostly you would stare into the abyss of your computer screen. I see you so clearly, I ache with a sudden need to touch you, to kiss your cheeks and hear your voice murmur to me, creating a lullaby in my head.

Kit calls my name.

'Yeah?'

'Yah with me?'

'Huh?'

'I was talkin' to yah and yah didn't answer.'

'I'm sorry. I do that sometimes. Zone out.'

'Yeah, me too. 'specially when fuckin'.'

'You don't enjoy it?'

'Sometimes, but not much.'

'But I thought . . . '

'Yah watch too much TV. I ain't Pretty Woman, yah know,' he says, amused.

'Then why do it?'

'What else am I gonna do?'

'School?'

'Yeah, right. Gotta work lots as is, can't afford school too.'

'What about other jobs?'

'Like what? Ain't no one gonna hire a whore.'

'I would.'

'Yeah, till somethin' goes missin' then yah'll blame me. Easy target, I must've took it.'

'I wouldn't do that.'

'Yeah, yah say that now, but later . . . '

'It's happened before?'

'Yah think I wanted to be a whore forever?'

'No, I didn't — '

'Then course I tried. I tried lots. Got no proper skill, got no reference, got no birth certificate. Got nothing they want. But I know how to fuck.'

'Don't say that!'

'Why not? I know what I am. Don't care what no one thinks.'

'It doesn't hurt? Calling yourself a whore?'

'Been called worse.'

'And you don't care?'

'Nah. '

'I wish I didn't care about the things people have said to me,' I say.

'Take practice,' he says, 'so yah wanna get outta here?'

'Okay.'

I stand, he walks into the other room. I slide up behind him, staring at his arse and thighs as he leans over the bar. He whispers to Frank, money ready to honour the bill. Frank waves Kit's money away and Kit shrugs, stuffs his fifty back into his pocket. I watch as Frank's resolve wavers in and out, his eyes greedily drinking in Kit's every change in tone, every movement of his body. Frank's eyes burn with desire, making his face flush with lust.

Without warning, Kit jumps forward and places a quick kiss on Frank's rough lips, leaving behind a glisten of moisture. Frank licks it up, closes his eyes.

'See yah,' Kit says and faces me, 'Let's go.'

'Where to?'

'Anywhere,' he says and spreads his arms out wide.

He winks at Frank before he leaves and leads me back out into the darkness. The night is filled with sounds — the fractured buzz of traffic, the rattle of cargo train, the scratching of animals out on the prowl. The only other person around is an old man, who reads the back of a Vitabrix packet while he nibbles on the biscuit. He gnaws like a rat and crumbs fall into his stained, yellow beard. He nods while he reads. Beside him in a box filled with shredded newspaper is a small white kitten, missing an ear.

'That's Joe,' Kit says, 'He used to be a pilot with some big plane company. But the cops busted him with lots tapes filmed in the plane's loo, people fuckin', shittin', pissin' that sort of stuff. Had some kids on 'em too. He ain't worked since.'

'And, he's one of your . . . ?'

Kit pulls a face.

'Nah. Well, once maybe. But he got stranger tastes than just that tape stuff, and I just ain't into that weird shit. Besides, he likes girls. He was just lonely that one time. We don't talk no more though, not since. He thinks I make him dirty.'

I'm about ask another question when he turns me.

'Yah workin' tomorrow?' he says.

'Yes.'

'So, yah need some sleep, huh? 'Cause I can take yah back to the city. Or I can come with yah.'

'To work?'

'Nah, on the train.'

'Oh, okay, thanks.'

'No probs.'

When we board the train, he sits beside me, takes my hand in his. His hands are rough, the skin toughened, nails chewed, skin splitting around the cuticle. His grip, however, is delicate as if my hands are made of spun glass and he's scared of shattering them. I pump his hand a few times and he puts his head on the top of my arm, just under my shoulder. He sighs contentedly and I relax into him. We sit like that — in comfortable silence — until we stop at Flinders Street.

Between trains, we smoke and chat, comment on dinner, on coffee, on Frank and on Joe. When we approach my stop, I ask him if he wants to come home with me, no strings attached and he nods slowly, commenting on sleeping indoors. He asks to have shower.

'Of course,' I say and hope I haven't left anything embarrassing lying around.

He sits on the floor, clean and cross-legged, shovelling his second bowl of ice cream into his mouth. He is watching *The Simpsons* and giggling at the dirtier jokes. He smells of kiwi and passion fruit and his hair shines like rubies under the lounge's lights. He is wearing an old T-shirt of mine and a pair of your bike shorts I found in the back of my linen press. He wears no underwear and no jewellery. His damp clothes hang about my flat, some on hangers, others draped over the chairs.

I'm sitting on the couch, memorising his every feature and jump, startled as the phone rings. Kit turns to me. I bring my finger to my lips and 'shh' him before I pick it up.

'Hi baby,' you say, husky and hoarse.

'Hi, you okay?'

'Yeah, I'm just getting a cold, I think. Anyway, how are you? Been busy?'

'A little. And you?'

'Flat out! It's been nuts here. The earliest I've gone to bed is like two and we're up at six. I'm fucked, babe. Totally fucked and I miss you like mad. I can't wait to get home.'

'You're still back on Saturday morning, yeah?'

'Yes, I land at ten-thirty. Dev's picking me up, then we'll come grab you and get some lunch. Your choice. I promise not to whine about it.'

I grin.

'Okay. And we can go anywhere?'

'Anywhere.'

'Really? Anywhere, even if you hate it.'

'Yes. Especially if I'd hate it.' You pause. 'I'm sorry I had to go away.'

'It's okay. It's work.'

'I know,' you sigh, 'Work. Sometimes, I wish I had your job.'

'You'd hate it.'

You're quiet a moment.

'Yes, I would. I don't know how you do it most of the time.'

'We've had this discussion before. A hundred times. I do it because I like it. It pays okay and I like making sandwiches.'

'You could do so much more though, I know you can. And yet . . .'

'And yet I like what I do. I don't like your job either, but I don't complain about it.'

And then you explode.

'That's your fucking problem, you never say anything! You just sit there like a fucking mute, watching TV and stuffing your face with crap. And if you ever became proactive about anything, you'd fucking explode.'

You slam the phone down.

I replace the receiver and then take it off the hook.

Kit stares at me.

'Yah okay?' he says.

'Yeah.'

'That yah girlfriend?'

'Yes.' I pause. 'You know I'm with a girl? How?'

He grins.

'Easy. Yah don't talk about men. Yah don't check out men. There ain't no man stuff around, tells me yah got a girl lover.'

'Oh. Sorry.'

'Like I care. Yah are what yah are. Important thing is she makes yah happy. Does she make yah happy?'

'Most of the time.'

'Not always?'

I hesitate.

'No, not always but that's the way relationships are, true?'

'Fuck, I dunno. Not big on a whole commitment thing meself, but seems a common problem from what I've been told.'

'But not normal.'

'Who the fucks knows what normal is?'

'Maybe that's why I'm seeing a counsellor. To find out.'

'Yah like him?'

'Yeah, he's good. Very . . . normal.'

We cackle a moment and then he says, 'I saw one too, once.'

He falls silent.

'Do you want to talk about it?'

'Nah, was ages go, it's over now.'

'Sure?'

'Yeah. Hey, yah got any more ice cream?'

'Sure, I'll get it.'

'Nah, sit, I can get it.'

'Okay, while you do, I'm going to have a shower.'

'k, I'll make sure run the hot water when I hear yah in there.'

I giggle and hear the freezer door stick before pulling open.

Inside the bathroom, the air is thick with the smells of clean flesh and body lotions. There are soap suds in the shower basin and toothpaste in the bottom of the sink. I strip, inspecting my body as I do. I run my eyes over the shape of my breasts, the padding of my arse, the thickness around the top of my thighs. What on earth does anyone want with this?

I pull open the cupboard and search for a razor. I pull one disposable from the packet and test the sharpness long my finger. It nicks me and I bleed. I stick my finger in my mouth, sucking at my blood. I lift my arm. Dip the razor into the water and stroke downward. My hair comes away easily. I tap the razor against the sink and repeat. I shave my legs and cunt as well, until I'm as hairless as a baby rabbit. Then I turn the taps on. I stand under the flow of water and let the soap run off my body and down the drain.

I emerge, dry myself and redress, without underwear. I spray my body with raspberry scented deodorant and rub the matching moisturiser into my skin. I open the door.

I stride back into the lounge, silky and sleek, fruity and feline.

I stop in my tracks. Kit is curled on the couch, his arm tucked under his head, his top leg entwined with his bottom one. His is snoring softly, eyelids twitching. I leave him briefly, grab a blanket and throw it over him. A hand snakes out underneath the blanket and he pulls it around him. He murmurs something and I smile down at him before heading to my room.

I leave the door open ajar and twist the blankets around me.

I slip my hands between my legs and masturbate slowly, imagining Kit hovering in the doorway, eyeing me as I cum.

I doze, listening for Kit. But sometime around three am, I succumb, fall hard into a deep heady sleep. When I wake, alarm screaming, I'm drowsy and heavy headed, my head thumping, my eyes gritty. I feel hung over without having a single drop to drink and know I'm just overtired. I tuck my head under the pillow and groan. I start to drift asleep but force myself out of bed. I count the amount of time I've had off so far and realise I'll need to work all

week for the next four months to get back into Magda's good books. I grunt, throwing myself forward.

I open my door, suddenly remembering I left it ajar and now it's firmly closed. I creep along the hall. The smell of burnt toast drifts up to me, tickling my nose. I sneeze and hold my head, my brain feels spongy and loose. I look for around.

Kit is gone. I sniff, fighting the urge to cry. I sit on the floor, back up against the sink and put my head between my knees. I breathe in long and deep, hold and exhale. I do this until I my head begins to settle, my stomach to relax. Then I stand, swallow three Nurofen and I dress for work. I grab my handbag, the Nurofen, my cigarettes, my keys and rush out the door.

It's only when I go to buy a train ticket, I realise the notes are missing from my purse and I only have enough gold and silver to buy a train ticket. I stamp onto the station, angry. I stand, arms crossed over my breasts, muttering and cursing. I vow to find him, to get my money back, to get my revenge.

By the time I walk into *Kimmy's Café* and greet the vixen-hag Chrissy, I'm smiling, envisioning my body painted in his whore blood.

Magda yells at me to wash up and come here. I obey.

'Look what you got,' she says, pointing to a huge rose arrangement.

I walk over to it, pluck the card from the soft, white teddy bear nestled among the roses and read the words *Forgive me?*. I pick up the bear, hold it to my breast. It smells of roses and perfume, a hint of cigarette smoke. I decide to call the bear Erinna. I name every soft toy you give and when I'm bored, I cross stitch their names on their arses.

'You two been fighting again?' Magda says, her mouth a puckered 'O' shape.

'No. Yes. A little.'

'You girls are always fighting lately. What's the matter with you both?'

'She's under a lot of pressure.'

'And what about you? What's your excuse?'

I glare at her. Pick up my bear and roses and stomp back into the kitchen. I tuck the bear away in one of the spare storage cupboards, and pull

the gloves back on. I plunge my hands into the dough. I work the dough into small firm balls, force them into shape and jab my finger roughly in the middle, then fill the hole with blood red, homemade jam. I do this over and over, until there is no dough left and three dozen scone-like creations sit tightly on trays. I crack my neck, notice my headache is almost gone.

Chrissy bounds up to me, her make-up refreshed and darker than usual, hiding her pimple scars, the greyness of her skin. Her haggard appearance tells me she's been drugging again. Her boyfriend must be back in town. She only looks this horrid when he's about. Last time he was away for months. Chrissy said he was in Queensland but Magda and I know different, we know where he really goes on these 'vacations'.

I turn to her without speaking, give her my 'yes-can-I help-you?' look.

'Your brother is here,' she says.

'Cooper?'

'I don't know his name, he just said he was your brother.'

'How did Cooper — '

'I don't know,' she whines, impatient, 'But he's here and he's waiting. Magda said you can take lunch now if you want to talk to him.'

I nod, confirm Chrissy's message with Magda herself — Chrissy has fucked me over before — and walk into the dining area.

Kit sits at a table, once again playing with the salt and pepper shakers. He smiles when he sees me

'What are you doing here?' I spit, my words harsh.

'Got somethin' for yah.'

'I don't want anything from you.'

'Not even this?' he says, pulling a bundle of cash out of his pocket and holding it out to me. I pick up the money, count it out.

'There's almost two hundred dollars here,' I gush.

'I know. It's for you. 'Cause I took some this morning.'

'I didn't have that much — '

'Yeah I know, but . . .' he shrugs, I sigh and Chrissy begins to hover closer to the table, ears pricked.

'Come on,' I say to him, 'outside.'

'Yah kickin' me out?'

'No, but I don't want to talk about this in front of others,' I say, firing a look at Chrissy. She pokes her tongue at me, and skips away.

He stands. I gather up the money, haphazardly shoving the notes into my bra. I plan on taking every cent — and anything else he offers.

As I walk, I feel the hard plastic edges dig into my breasts. I squirm and itch but don't give them up. Kit says nothing, just watches me, pensively, as I lead him into Magda's up-and-coming summer beer garden.

I sit on one of the hard concrete benches and motion for Kit to join me. I burrow into the moss around the bottom of a large potted tree. I pull out a packet of crumpled cigarettes wrapped in a plastic zip lock bag. I light one and pass the pack to Kit. He lights up uneasily, his eyes never leaving me. I'm turned on by his suspicion.

'Yah still pissed with me, aren't yah?'

'Yes. You stole from me!'

'I was gonna give it back.'

'And how'd I know that? The note you left? Oh wait, there was no fucking note. You just took it. Without asking, without saying a word.'

'Yeah, but I gave it back. 'n double.'

'And you think that makes up for it?'

'Yeah, why not? Yah got more this way.'

'How was I to know you wouldn't just take off with it?'

He shrugs his shoulders, mumbles something and flicks his cigarette butt across the concrete. It falls into a crack and burns slowly. I watch the smoke waft upwards.

'What else did you take?' I hurl at him.

'Nothin'. Didn't need anythin' else.'

'What else did you take?'

'Nothin'. I told yah already.'

'Yes, you did. But you said, you didn't need anything else, so if you did . . . you'd have taken that too, yeah?'

'I'd return it.'

'Like you did the money.'

'Exactly. I took it, I returned it.'

I huff.

'Yes, but without asking.'

'Yah were sleepin'. Didn't wanna wake yah.'

'Oh, how considerate! You've got a heart of gold, you do. So, you took nothing else?'

'No, I told yah three times now. I took nothin' else.'

'Why should I believe you?'

'Cause I'm tellin' the truth.'

'How do I know that?'

He makes a noise and shakes his head.

'See what I mean? Somethin' goes missin', it's the whore who took it.'

'But you did! You did fucking take it.'

'Yeah . . . and I paid yah back and yah still on about it.'

'Because I trusted you and you stole from me.'

'Only 'cause I needed it. Bad. And I paid yah back.'

'And what was so important you had to steal in the first place?'

He says nothing. He shuffles his feet, looking down between his ankles. He digs his toes into a crack in the ground and bites skin from his bottom lip.

'I just needed it, 'k.'

'No, not okay. Maybe I just needed it this morning too.'

I watch him squirm, watch the shifting emotions that flicker across his face. He seems smaller now, not the confident, devious thief anymore. Right now, instead of a Serengeti lion, he's a domesticated house cat.

I note his discomfort, but don't let him off the hook — the need to make him suffer hot inside me, as if I've eaten chilli and there's no water to cool the burning.

'Well?'

'I owe someone. Owe them big.'

'What for?'

He looks up at me, green eyes dull.

'It's just a debt, 'k? And I didn't whore last night to get it so I had to take it.'

'So, that's why you came home with me? To try and score?'

'No. I came 'cause I wanted to. I forgot what the date was till I woke up.'

'And if you hadn't paid him?'

'I don't wanna talk about that. I don't ever wanna talk about that.'

He looks away and shivers. His eyes glaze with tears. He squeezes them together tightly, trapping the tears underneath. He cups his hands around his ears and breathes in deeply, sitting up straight, sucking his

stomach in. He exhales loudly. When he looks at me again, his eyes are still dull, hurt-filled, but clear of tears.

I flick my lighter on and off, wasting gas, keeping my hands busy and off him. I feel the need to mother him, to nurture him, to pull him to me, against my flesh, to soothe him softly and tell him lies about there being a better tomorrow.

‘I wasn’t gonna rip yah off, I just owed — ’

‘Do you still owe him?’

‘Yeah, two more months, then I’m clear.’

‘How much do you owe?’

‘Not much now. Three, four hundred.’

Silence. Half of that amount crinkles between my breasts. I resist the urge to offer them to him. In the back of my mind, I hear your voice, telling me to leave it, he owes *me* and he can obviously make more, just look at what he’s made already. You’d say; it’s his problem, he got himself into this mess and I’m not his saviour, his angel in the house. You’d set up a compelling argument and, in the end, I’d agree you’re right.

I’ve almost made up my mind, to tell him to fuck off, and then I look over to him again and think . . . maybe he needs to be rescued this once . . .

I sigh, indecision curdling inside me, soar and acidic. I light another cigarette and my hands shake, making the flame dance and die, a mini swan lake before me. Kit doesn’t notice, consumed with biting the skin around his nails, making himself bleed.

‘So, we cool?’ he says, jerking me out of my thoughts.

‘I don’t know. I’m still pissed with you.’

‘I know. Maybe I can make it up to yah. Tomorrow?’

‘I don’t know . . . ’

‘Please?’ I don’t answer. ‘Please?’ Still no answer. ‘Double please.’

Nothing. ‘Look, I’m sorry ‘k? I won’t do nothin’ like that again. Promise. I’ll ask next time, ‘k?’

‘Who says I’m going to let you back into my flat?’

‘Oh, com’on, how can yah resist this face?’ he says, roguish.

He rubs his head up against my arm and purrs like a kitten. I ignore him. He shuffles in closer, and before I know it, I snake my arm around his shoulders. He nuzzles, snuggles in closer, wraps his arms about my waist as far as they’ll go and kisses my side.

'Yah smell foody,' he says.

'That's because I work with food.'

'So, then I smell like . . . ?'

I snigger, but don't answer, the smell noticeable but not obvious until he pointed it out. His reeks of sweat and cum and men — like a delicious treat, ready to be feasted on. I want to kiss him, to taste his profession on his lips. I lick my own lips, inching my face closer to his.

And then Magda hovers in the doorway, clicking her tongue, her order pad in hand.

'Lunch is almost up, Seanne. And brother or not, he can't stay here. We're not a crèche.'

'Okay,' I say standing. I turn to him, 'Coming?'

We walk back into the café, he gives me a quick hug and we say bye. Magda wanders off into the backroom and I notice Kit pinch a pre-made sandwich and a mars bar before he leaves. He winks at me — he knows I saw him — and then bounces out the door.

I gather the dishes off the tables and take them into the kitchen. As I wash them, I think about is the money between my breasts and what he did to get it.

The night before you're due home, I walk up to my flat and find Kit sitting on the concrete letterbox block, legs crossed, flicking through junk mail. He squints at me and smiles. I motion for him to follow and he comes up behind me. I open the front door and let him go in first. I dump my bag on the couch, flick the kettle on, tell him I'll be back in a moment and disappear into my bedroom. I change my clothes — dragging on tracksuit pants and an old jumper. I don't bother to dress to impress.

When I emerge, he is leaning against the kitchen sink, legs crossed at the ankle, hips thrust forward.

'Hi yah,' he says, pushing himself off.

'Hi.'

I begin to make coffee. He comes up behind me, runs his hand over my back. I shiver, turn to him. I look into his face. His wide green eyes dominate his face, making him seem owl like and ready to swoop. He leans

forward and kisses me lightly on the cheek, then my lips. I pull back, stare into his eyes. He leans in and kisses me again. I keep my lips closed, not letting his tongue enter my mouth, but I respond to him. This time he pulls away. He winks at me, then ducks and he's on his knees. He pulls down my pants and blows his hot breath between my legs. I push my pelvis forward and move my legs further apart. He licks along the gusset of my knickers, flicking his tongue up and down the seams. My nipples harden, my clit throbs. He hooks a finger inside my knickers and strokes my clit. I clench my stomach muscles. He rubs at me consistently, rhythmically. I'm about to cum when he stands, takes my hand and he asks me to step out of my pants.

He says one word.

'Bedroom?'

And I nod.

Once inside, he removes his clothes quickly, standing there in only red boxer shorts, his cock straining against the front. His body is slight, not a pocket of fat on him anywhere and his ribs and collar bones jut out under his skin. He reminds me of an old saying, from back home — he's built like a drover's dog; all cock and ribs. I start to wonder if he know how skeletal he is, when he saunters over to me, lifts the edge of my jumper and kisses my skin. I leave my thoughts alone and smile as he strips me slowly — drinking me in as he does.

'Fuckin' beautiful,' he says.

He plunges his face between my breasts, cupping them in each hand. He puts his mouth to my nipples, kisses, licks, sucks, nibbles.

'Lie down,' he says.

I obey, lie back on the bed, spread my legs wide. I raise myself up on my elbows and watch him as he begins to lap at my cunt. As I start to cum, he slips his fingers into me, thrusting and twisting expertly.

'Come here,' I say.

He scrambles up my body, kissing my face, grinding his covered cock against me. I kiss him as he slips out of his boxers, his naked cock against my thigh. I touch him, run my hands over his slender stomach. I cup his balls in one hand and wrap the other around his shaft. I start to tug. I look up and he closes his eyes. I take a deep breath, try to settle my nervous stomach, and place my lips over the head of his cock. I begin to suck.

He squirms, looks down at me.

'Slower,' he says.

'Sorry. I haven't done this for a while.'

'It's okay. Just go slower, yah know. It's like fuckin', gotta go soft and steady so yah can take more cock in. It'll stop yah gaggin'.'

Silence. Sex tips from a boy.

'Trust me,' he says.

I try again. As I suck, he trickles suggestions over me — lick around the head, tongue my cock eye, that's it, got lube? squirt it on me, oh yeah, finger my arse, oh yeah, more, another finger, that's it, more, fist me, oh fuck yeah, fuckme harderharderharder — until he tells me to stop, he's about to cum. I take my lips off him. He grabs his cock, pulling at himself and I watch, mesmerised. He shudders and cum trickles from him.

I slowly pull my hand out of his open, slippery arse hole. He grins at me with sleepy stoned eyes and pink cheeks.

'Now that was good . . . both ways.'

I stare at him confused and then it dawns on me.

'Oh,' I say.

He grins again and rolls sideways. I move up next to him. He traces the curve of my hip. He hardens again. Bless his youth. I push him onto his back, sit on him and rub my wet cunt against his stomach. I slide my body down his until his cock rests between my outer lips, cocooned but not inside me yet.

'Wait,' he says, 'there's some in me jeans.'

'Some what?'

'Condoms.'

'Oh,' I say, blushing, suddenly embarrassed that condoms are not part of my everyday life.

'Yah have to get off me if yah want me to get 'em.'

I lean sideways and off him. He slithers out from under me and off the bed. He digs about in his jeans, pulling out several condom packets. He pounces back on the bed.

'Yah sure yah want to?'

'I think so.'

'Yah've done this before, yeah?'

Again I blush.

'Yeah.'

'Sweet, 'cause I didn't wanna, yah know . . . be the first or somethin'.
I say nothing, memories of back home flooding through me . . .

Justin Winters drapes over me, firing his large, thick cock into me like a missile, fucking me with fierceness, dragging me towards him, shoving his entire length into me. I moan against him, loving the pain, the smarting of my muscles, imagining them bruising, my cervix red. I've fucked Justin before this and before him Malcolm Karnas, losing my virginity to Malcolm in a cow paddock — but my cunt aches from the intrusion of Justin's cock as if he was the first, the only. I love it.

. . . and then the door opens, his sister, Joanne, pokes her head inside.

I gasp, attempt to close my legs against him. He looks behind him and smirks, his eyes decadent. He motions her towards us. She strips off her cotton nightie and sits on the bed, naked. She hooks her legs over my face and plants herself against my lips. I breathe in deeply, euphoric at my first sight of another girl's cunt. My tongue slides out and I taste her.

We fuck together a lot after that, sometimes just him and me, sometimes him and her — and often my reward for good behaviour is her and I, girl on girl, while he flogs off the corner.

We fuck like this for six months or more, until Jo's belly swells with Justin's baby and she's sent away; he forced to join the services. I never see either of them again . . . and I never let on that I know who the father is, I just smile knowingly as rumours circulate around town.

Kit taps me. I jump, dragging myself out of my head and positing myself back into the bedroom, with him. He tilts his head at me, questioning.

'Sorry,' I say, 'I was thinking.'

'Of yah first time?'

'Something like that.'

'How old were yah?'

'Thirteen. You?'

He avoids my eyes.

'Younger.'

Before I say another word, he kisses me, his hands running over my body like insects across my flesh. Heat implodes inside me and I stop thinking about the past and start enjoying the present.

I let him flip me over and lick up and down my body, over my legs, around the shape of my arse and into the crevasse. He flips his tongue around my arsehole and licks from hole to hole in long precise strokes. I arch my back upwards until I'm on hands and knees, my arse tingling.

He stops and I turn my head to look behind me. I watch him fit the condom. He winks and I rub myself against his pelvis. He enters me.

At first I'm a little resistant and then, I take all of him, backing myself onto his cock. And like mating dogs — like the first time with Malcolm — he fucks me, maintaining a deep, steady rhythm.

We fuck until daylight, only stopping to replace the condom and change positions. He fucks me until I'm sore, until he's drenched in sweat.

And sometime around six, I tuck myself under the blankets and he snuggles up close, both of us craving sleep.

It's then, lying next to him, both of us anaesthetized and trapped by exhaustion, I ask him how old he is.

'Fifteen,' he says groggily and drifts to sleep.

I feel my eyes widen, my brain racing, contemplating the consequences of fucking him. But then my heart slows, and my stomach releases its tension. I realise I don't care.

I'm nurtured by this new found deviancy.

I hear the front door bang and I wake, startled, my heart beating in my throat. I'm alone, Kit no longer beside me. I rise, unsteadily — a dull ache in my cunt, stiffness in my thighs, threatening to spasm. I wander through my flat zombie-like, hopeful, even though I know he's gone. Absentmindedly, I glance at the time. Eleven am. Saturday morning. Shit!

I run towards the shower — curse the pain in my body — and throw myself under the water, scrubbing Kit's smell off my body. I rush into my room, throw on your favourite pair of knickers and matching bra, my red velvet dress, my black leather boots. I storm back into my room, rip the sheets off the bed and throw them — along with yesterday's clothes — into

the wash. I set it on maxi wash, soil level high and listen as the machine kick into cycle.

Sore, I turn the TV on and throw myself on the couch, attempt to mentally banish the pains from my body. Inside me, is a nagging feeling I'm forgetting something, but I dismiss it, unable to think. I focus on the memory of Kit, images of our fucking alive inside me.

At one, I hear car doors slam and Devin's voice, followed by your excited laugh. I quickly inspect myself in the mirror, tie my hair back in a lazy ponytail and hope that the previous twenty-four hours don't show on my face or in my eyes.

I hear you knock and I swing the door open wide.

'Hello beautiful,' you say and sweep me into your embrace. 'Fuck I've missed you. You miss me?'

'Of course,' I say.

I breathe you in deeply and return your embrace, squeezing you slightly. I realise I really did miss you, despite my Kit distraction, despite the naughty wickedness fluttering inside me.

'I've got some much to tell you but first, Dev wants to take us to lunch and then . . . ' you shrug and smile widely, 'who knows!'

I catch your mood and giggle like a child who just spied an ice cream stand. I kiss you again and again. You grab my hand and spin me around.

'I'm so glad to be home,' you say.

Devin takes us to an overcrowded café on the Dockland Quay, where his most recent fuck works as a waitress. So much for my choice.

'I met her at the Casino,' he tells us, 'playing black jack. She liked my style.'

'She liked your money, more like it,' you say.

I remain silent, let you and Devin play tag with words.

'Well, whatever it was, I got her attention. And her number.'

'And into her knickers, I bet.'

'Of course, why else would I take her number?'

'Sometimes I think you've only just fallen out of a tree, Dev.'

'Ah, but I landed on you my dear, before any of them.'

'Hmm, a *landing* I regret every day.'

You playfully punch him. He pokes out his tongue and picks up the menu, studying it as if it's a bible. His intense concentration does not fool you and you throw your napkin at him. He grins and motions behind you. You twist, slightly.

'That's her, with the plait.'

I turn to look. Plait girl is about twenty, with long dyed blonde hair and a slender dancer's body. She's wearing black pants and a t-shirt that advertises the name of the café. She has small breasts and a flat stomach. Her face is decorated with make-up and her feet are tiny. She's just his type — vapid and unoriginal — and almost a carbon copy of the girl before her, and the one before her too. So like the others, I feel like I've already met her. I'm already bored by her.

She says something to the two girls near her and heads to our table, notepad in hand, a wide smile stretching her mocha-stained lips.

'Hello,' she breathes over us in a peppermint scented giggle.

'Hannah, this is Lys and Seanne.'

'Oh, pleased to met you! Do you want drinks? Coffee? Wine?'

She inches towards Devin and nudges her hip against him. His hand moves up and down her thigh.

'Two lattès,' you say, 'Dev?'

'Flat white,' he says, visually fucking Hannah.

She scribbles on her pad, caresses Devin's shoulder and glides away, afloat with Devin's attention.

'Boring,' you say, 'totally dull.'

'But open to suggestion,' he says, 'very open to suggestion.'

'Of course, I'd expect nothing less from you, Dev.'

'Then you should know what I'm going to say next . . . '

'You really want her best friend, roommate, sister?'

Devin laughs.

'No! Well, yes, but no. I'm having a party for Halloween. She's this year's trick or treat. My own fuckable piece of candy. Yummy, huh?'

'You're such a prick, Dev.'

'I know, but you love me.'

'Yeah, that's the problem.'

'Awww, I love you too my little ball of sunshine,' he pauses, taps the menu, 'so what are we having?'

You shrug and pick up the menu, move closer to me so that we can both glance over it. Confused by the wide selection, I settle on the first thing I recognise — chicken parmagina — and dip in and out of the conversation between you and Devin. You talk about work, he talks about real estate and you both talk about his string of women.

I think back to the night before, basking in the memory of my fist ramming into Kit. I replay this memory over and over again, in wide screen, high definition clarity. I savour the warm soft feeling of his muscles around my fist as I moved in and out of him; covet the hardness of his cock as he laid on his back, cum dripping over the head. I clench my stomach muscles in anticipation of the next time — of what he will let me to do next, of how far he'll let me go.

I moan loudly, lustfully, forgetting where I am.

'You okay, honey?' you say, running your hand down my cheek and looking into my eyes. I recover quickly, formulate a lie.

'Yes, just a little stomach achy.'

'How long's that been going on?'

'Couple of days. It's nothing. Maybe I was just missing you.'

I cringe from my own the sugary sweetness. You don't notice, snuggle in closer and whisper 'I love you' in my ear. You melt into my body and I cling to you like a leaf on a tree.

Hannah returns to us, takes orders and fusses about Devin. She thinks she's sleek, but her need for his approval pours from her, soaking her in desperation. He draws her in easily, each comment seducing her further. I tune out, fiddle with my coffee cup and revert back to my own dark fantasies.

And then Devin says something that gets my attention.

'I'm thinking of doing a fetish theme this year, bondage and stuff,' he says, 'last year was a little tame so I wanted to spice it up.'

'You want to see more tits and arse, you mean,' you say.

'Well, that too, but you got to admit, last year was flat.'

'Until Amanda started.'

'Now that was fun. Glad it wasn't my bottle she used!' he says.

You and Devin giggle, the memory of Amanda's very drunken, very public insertion glowing in your eyes.

‘Maybe you should invite her this year too. Imagine what she could do with a bullwhip.’

Devin smirks, his imagination loud enough to wake a person from a coma. You grin back at him, your collective desires flashing across your faces like lighting strikes. You talk about other antics at other parties — some I’ve never been a part of — and I listen intently. I find myself twisting these ideas about, moulding them to Kit. I take into consideration his gender, his weight and height and make the appropriate accommodations. My imagination soars, heavenly high, making me long for Kit’s body, for the deviant bliss he brings with him. Bless that whore.

‘So, what do you think? Bondage is go?’ Devin says to you, nodding in my direction, attempting to include me.

‘Sounds good.’

‘So, All Hallow’s Eve, you’re booked. No excuses!’

‘Oh, we’ll be there. Wouldn’t miss it for the world.’

‘But what will I wear?’ I say, suddenly alarmed at what fetish entails, remembering the images I’ve seen before — the slender bodies clad in latex, the thin pinched waists, the abnormally high boots.

‘Don’t worry about that, hon,’ you say, ‘I’ll get us something. In fact, I’ve already got something in mind.’

‘What if I look stupid?’

‘Trust me, Sea, you’ll look delicious. Everyone will want to eat you up.’

‘I don’t care about that.’

‘Well, I’ll want to eat you up . . . is that better?’

‘No.’

I cross my arms over my chest.

‘Then what?’

Devin leans forward and you tilt your head at me.

‘You won’t look stupid, baby, you’ll look amazing. I’ve got so many ideas for you, just you wait. You’ll wonder why you haven’t gone there earlier.’

You look to Devin. He nods enthusiastically.

‘Black and . . . pink maybe?’ you say.

‘Defiantly. But shaped.’

‘Of course,’ you sweep your eyes over my seductively, ‘my girl’s got many hidden . . . assets I plan on highlighting.’

I feel myself blush. They both stare at me, like hungry lions eyeing a lost gazelle.

'So, come on, Seanne,' says Devin, 'be a sport and let her play. She won;'t disappoint.'

I sigh.

'Okay,' I say, with a slight nod, my thoughts consumed with panic.

Later back at my flat, my stomach uncomfortably full, everything still smarting, you turn to me, a hard look on your face. I groan inwardly, all I want to do is having a bath, but you want to know something. And as always, I give you my full attention.

'Have you had a guy here?' you ask.

I swallow, my stomach drops.

'No, why?'

'The toilet seat was up. Were you sick?'

'No . . . Oh, wait, maybe it was the landlord. He was here yesterday, fixing the hot water service. I think he used it.'

'What was wrong with the system?'

'Um . . . I don't know. The water wasn't getting hot so he fiddled with something and hey pesto, it's hot.'

'Ah, okay.' Pause. 'And what about the cold coffee cups on the bench?'

'I made him coffee.'

'And you both didn't drink it?'

'No.'

Silence. Tension.

I count the seconds until you speak again, and it feels like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff, just waiting for the next strong wind to blow me off.

'You sure it was just that?'

'Yes, why?'

The look you give me is clouded, unreadable.

'Okay then,' you say and walk off without a backward glance.

A week after your return, I go to see Elliot.

'I don't get it, Seanne,' he says, 'last time we spoke you were so keen to work through your issues, what's happened to that enthusiasm? Is it because it's been so long since we spoke? I'm sorry about that but I'm here now, ready to tackle your issues. So, how about you tell me what's been going on?'

I open my mouth but my words trap themselves inside my throat, blocking all sounds. I stare at the back of my hands, the soft skin marred with scars and marks — a legacy of masochism. I finger these memories and wait for Elliot's next attempt to talk to me.

'Seanne? Has something happened? You know you can talk about anything here. No matter how bad you think it might be, we'll work it out.'

Silence. The need to cry surges inside me, not from sorrow, but from frustration. I'm suddenly angered by him — by his sloppy attempt to open me up, by his false caring but most of all, by his obvious humanness. With diamond point clarity, I realise that Elliot is not the essence of understanding I believed him to be, he is just another dullard, filled with an illusionist's trick of university education, forged sympathy and persuasive linguistic skills.

I take this realisation and plant it inside me. I make myself a promise. I promise to stand at the end of hour, shake his hand and never see him again, to take a leaf from one of your books and to walk away and never looking back. I sigh with the relief this decision brings and meet Elliot's eyes, holding them steady in my stare. I feel like laughing hysterically, but distract this desire by pinching my own skin until it hurts.

'Well, if you'd rather not talk, I can't force you, so how about tonight, at home, you write me a letter and when we next meet, we'll discuss whatever you want inside? Sound good?'

I nod. No fluctuation to my plan.

'Great! Just see Clyde and he'll book you in. I look forward to it, Seanne.'

I stand, shake his hand and walk out. I walk pass Clyde without stopping. He calls my name but I ignore him. I open the door and walk out into the pre-downpour drizzle, smiling, feeling light and free.

I don't need Elliot's therapy anymore — all I need is Kit, a better mind fuck than all of them.

When the phone rings, I pounce on it.

'Hello?' I say, excitedly.

'Sea-Sea! It's me. How are you, sis?'

I groan, impatient — even though the conversation hasn't started.

'I'm okay.'

Silence. I know the answer to the next question, but I ask anyway.

'And how are you?'

'I'm in trouble, Sea.'

'Uh huh.'

'I just need a couple bucks, till dole day.'

“Just a couple of bucks”, huh?'

'Yeah, a hundred or so.'

'I haven't got it.'

'You always have money.'

'No, I don't.'

'Yeah, you do. You always had money at home.'

'I didn't have rent and bills at home, Cooper.'

'You didn't have a sugar dyke either.'

I wince.

'Cooper, I don't want to fight with you.'

'Then give me the fucking money.'

'I can't. I've got to go, I've — '

'Don't you fucking hang up on me, you fat cunt. I'll ruin your fucking life. I swear to God I'll fuc — '

I hang up.

I curl up on the couch and cry, unsure of what I'm crying about.

You hand me several large paper bags. The bags jiggle as they pass between us.

'What's in them?' I ask.

'Open them and find out, nosey. The purple ones are yours.'

I tear open the first bag. Inside is an assortment of materials and textures. I pull one of the pieces out. I stare at it, quizzically, holding it up in front of me.

It's leather and soft, large breast cups and little straps. Black with pink laces, from waist to bust. I hold the corset against me, feel my tummy pull in and my breasts pull up even without wearing it. I raise my eyes at you, you wink at me and push your chin towards the rest of the bags. I dig in further, pull out a short leather skirt, large spilt up the back, more pink lacing along the front. The last bag contains stockings — pink fishnets, with no arse and no crutch — and a pair of black, high heeled shoes.

'W-what are these for?'

'Devin's party.'

'What? You want me to wear *these*?'

My stomach feels like a stone inside me.

'No. I want you to eat them. Of course, I want you to wear them! You'll look amazing.'

I open my mouth to protest and you put your hand up to silence me.

'Just go with it, okay?'

'But I'll look like a whore.'

'That's the idea, hon. Get you out of your comfort zone. Besides, you'll be the best looking girl there, trust me.'

I bite my bottom lip.

'I don't know . . . '

'Trust me, okay?'

'And what about you? What are you wearing?'

You reach into one of the blue bags closest to you, show me a see-through mesh top and a top hat. In the second bag, you pull out shiny knee high boots.

'You like?'

I nod.

'I just can't believe you really want us to wear those . . . I don't think I can do it.'

'Sure you can. I'll get us some pills and you'll forget all your concerns. You'll look gorgeous honey, seriously, better than any of Dev's girls.'

'I don't care about Devin's girls. I care about me.'

You shoot me an irritated look.

'So, you don't want to go?'

'Of course I do, but what if I look stupid? Or fall over? Or bust out of that thing?' I say, waving my hand over the packages.

You slide next to me.

'Oh, baby, none of that will happen, I promise,' you pause. 'What if we forget the shoes? If I get you some sexy flat ones, will you wear the rest?'

You stare at me, beseeching me to agree. I think about what it would mean to you, the expense and trouble you went to.

'Okay,' I say, reluctantly.

You pat me on the leg.

'Great! So, how about Chinese? You want honey or lemon chicken?'

Three am Saturday morning and my phone rings.

You stir beside me, but don't wake. I creep through the flat and pick up the phone cautiously. Cooper's words ring in my ears.

'Hello?' I whisper into the receiver, nervous.

'Hi yah.'

'Kit?'

'Yeah, who else?'

'It's three am.'

He giggles.

'I know, I got yah number from that dopey chick yah work with — '

I'm instantly awake.

'Chrissy? Shit! You didn't tell her — '

'Relax, Sea. I ain't dumb. I just said I must've writ it down wrong or somethin'.'

'Oh.'

'Yeah, so anyway, I thought I'd call.'

'I'm glad you did . . . but it's three in the morning.'

He titters again.

'Yeah, well, I been busy . . . and I figured yah girl wouldn't answer if I rang yah now.'

'You know she's here?'

'Well, not till right now . . . but kind figured she might be. Hey, yah know I seen yah with her, comin' outta a café along the Docklands. Some guy was with yah too.'

'Blondish?'

'Yeah, kinda up himself.'

'Devin. Her best friend.'

'Ah, okay . . . he seems like a shit, but she's really into yah, yah know that?'

Before I answer, I hear you call my name, questioning where I am. I lower my voice.

'When can I see you next?' I breathe into the phone.

'I thought yah just wanted me while yah girl was gone.'

'No . . . so, can I see you again?'

'When?'

'Um . . . Tuesday? I could meet you somewhere after work.'

'k. See outside yah work. Tuesday. Bye.'

He hangs up without another word.

When I get back into bed, you turn towards me.

'Who was that?' you ask, sleepily.

Without thinking, I answer;

'Cooper.'

You grunt.

'And he wants money. Again.'

'Yes.'

'And you said no?'

'Yes.'

'Next time he rings, I want to talk to him.'

'What will you say?'

'I don't know, depends on what he says first.'

'Just be careful, Lys, Cooper is unpredictable when he's craving.'

'I will. I'll be careful, honey. Don't worry, I can hold my own.'

You kiss me — more out of habit than desire.

'Now I'm going back to sleep, Sea, before the birds make it impossible with their twittering.'

'Goodnight Lys.'

'Goodnight, beautiful. I love you.'

'I love you too.'

'Mmmmm,' you say and nestle into the blankets.

I stay awake, listening to you sleep, thinking of what I might be doing to Kit on Tuesday.

The hotel he takes me to smells of stale beer, old cigarettes and hospital grade bleach. The décor is all yellow and brown, the room claustrophobic; the carpet stained a greyish off white. The windows are covered with bars and the toilet rattles when it's flushed. Everywhere there are signs warning that any theft from the room will result in police prosecution. On the bedside table is a laminated note that reads 'light blubs are available at the front desk for three dollars each'. Fantastic place.

Kit showers while I wait. I pace the room, then sit on the bed — it creaks under my weight. I push myself back against the bed head, the mattress lumpy underneath me. The yellowy-brown bedspread gathers in places as I shift position. The pipes clatter behind me as Kit turns the water off.

He emerges from the bathroom, with only a towel wrapped around his slender hips. His wet hair hangs heavy around his freckled shoulders and his skin glows white under the bad fluorescent lighting, accentuating his scars. I scan him. He has fresh bruises on his shoulders and a fading bruise on along his ribs.

I pull him to me, kiss his cool, freshly bathed skin and slip my hand under the towel. I feel the prickle of his pubic hair before I put my hand around his cock. He moves back, slaps my hand away and begins a slow, erotic writhing of his body.

He gyrates in front of me, humming, running his hands over his body as he moves. He rubs his finger over his nipples, making lusty 'mmmmm' noises. Then he starts to pull the towel away from his hips. He teases me with glimpses of his arse, his cock, his hips. He turns around, drops the towel and bends over. He shakes his arse and then faces me, begins to tug at his cock. He masturbates skilfully, staring at me the whole time. I see a flush raise up his cheeks and he begins to grunt, thrust his hips forward. I watch his face

and his cock, watch his cum shoot from him and spill over his hand. He brings his hand to his mouth, sucking the cum off his hands. Then he licks his lips. He grins.

'Yah like that?' he says, playfully.

Again I pull him to me and this time, he submits, allowing me to drag him between my legs and over my body. In this position, he runs his hands along my arms and curls his fingers around my wrists. He pins them down, bites along my neck. I start to giggle, squirming underneath him. I use my hips as leverage and flip him over. I slap my hands down over on his shoulders, covering his bruises.

'Got you,' I say.

'For now. But if yah really wanna play, yah gonna have to let me up.'

I obey.

'Yah always do what yah told?'

'Yes, why?'

'Yah girlfriend tells yah what to do?'

'Yes.'

'And when yah fuck, she's the boss?'

'She's always "the boss" as you say.'

'And yah like it like that?'

'Yes . . . Kit, where's this going?'

He ignores me.

'Does she know yah like it?'

'I guess so. We've never spoken about it.'

'Well, maybe yah should. Seems yah both missing out on heaps more fun cause yah don't.'

'What do you mean?'

He grins at me, maliciously.

'This,' he says.

He swings his leg over me and holds me down again, digging his knee into my ribs. I squirm.

'Get off me.'

'No,' he says, 'yah stay down, girl. Yah do what yah told and yah listen. I'm gonna let yah go a little and I'm gonna take yah clothes off. Yah move and I'll walk out the room. Yah won't see me again.'

I stop struggling, lie perfectly still, let him remove my top and pants, undo the clasp on my bra and yank my knickers off.

Once I'm naked, he leans over and digs into the pockets of his jeans, retrieving two plastic strips — an arrow point on one end, a square latch on the other.

'Put yah wrists together, palms facing, lock yah fingers together.'

'I don't get it.'

'Yah don't havta. Just do it.'

I press my wrists against each other and weave my fingers in between each other. Kit flicks the plastic strip across the back of my hands and then ties the strip around my wrist, letting the plastic dig into the flesh. I feel it bite and a warm sexual heat kindles inside me. He shoves my tied hands above my head.

'Now open yah legs, show me yah cunt.'

I comply.

'Wider.'

I open my legs further, feel the strain of the muscles along my thighs and hips, feel my back arch, my shoulders dip.

'Wider.'

'I can't.'

'Yah can, now do it.'

I stretch further than I thought I could, my muscles quivering against this extra strain. I start to feel the beginnings of pain, the warning that tells me to stop what I'm doing or suffer. I don't stop. I love this, my cunt moistening under Kit's gaze.

'Good girl,' he says and kneels between my legs.

He flicks his middle finger against my clit, softly at first, then harder. He pinches my clit between his fingers and tugs it roughly. Then he slaps my cunt — harshly. Instinctively, I pull my legs together and Kit pushes them back.

'Bad girl,' he hisses at me. 'Yah keep 'em apart.'

He backhands me across the face. I look down at him, unsure, surprised, delighted. He lunges at me, thrusts his fingers into me. He finger fucks me angrily, his free hand snaking around my throat. I struggle against his hand, try to buck him off . . . but he stays on, three fingers inside me, thumb on my clit, hand around my throat. He grunts and groans as I squirm,

applying more pressure to my throat. Choke, thrust, choke, thrust. Then three things start to happen at once; I cough, feel unconsciousness closing in and I orgasm — harder than ever before. As I shudder and buck, he lets go of my throat, removing his hand at the same time. I roll on to my side, gasping from lack of oxygen, from aftershocks of orgasm. He strokes my back, running his hand up and down my spine, in gentle, careful strokes.

‘Next time, don’t resist so much,’ he says. ‘Makes it less scary.’

I glare at him.

‘You . . . think . . . I’d . . . let . . . you . . . again,’ I splutter, throat sore, swallowing made difficult.

‘Course yah would. Yah liked that lots.’

I say nothing, concentrate on breathing — softly, deeply. I feel him rustle behind me, snuggle close . . . and then his cock enters me. He fucks me slowly, kissing me gently.

And I descend into nothingness.

When I wake, I’m on top of the blankets, naked, my throat raw, my body sore. It’s dark outside and there’s no sign of Kit. I groggily get out of bed, stumble into the bathroom and pee. I stare at my wrists — thin red marks circle each one, a long scratch where he must have cut the bindings off. I touch my wrists and they’re tender, starting to bruise. I pee, aching slightly. I stand, wipe and stare at myself in the mirror.

My throat is covered with bruises. Four small ones on the right side, one large thumb mark on the left. I turn my attention to my left shoulder — another bruise forming where he dug his elbows into me. I stare at myself — my eyes dull, hair messy, face pale. I look like a rape victim in a trashy midday movie.

I wander back into the bedroom and dress slowly, notice my handbag is strewn across the table top, purse open. I pick it up, already knowing it will be empty and it is — except for ten dollars and a train ticket. I rummage through my handbag — the ring and necklace I hide in there are also gone. I sigh, not surprised, not even angry. I shove everything back into my bag — lip balm, hair ties, pins, lighter, panadol, house keys. I take one more look around the bedroom before I close the door.

Then I walk towards the station and home.

I'm barely to the front door, when you open it.

'Where the fuck have you been?'

I don't say a word, fall into your arms and cry. You hold me tightly and walk me into the flat. I catch a glimpse of Devin — mobile phone to his ear, still in his work attire — before you lead me into the bedroom. You remove my clothes, lie me down on the bed. I sob like a child and you lie next to me, cuddle me close. I cling to you.

'What happened, baby?'

The events of the day fast forward through my mind.

'Robbed,' I say and fall asleep, listening to your thudding heart beat and your voice, soft in my ear.

I wake to voices coming from the kitchen. I throw some clothes on and head towards the sound. When I walk inside, you and Devin turn to me.

'Hi, honey, how you feeling?' you say, your voice nurturing, concerned.

'Okay,' I say. 'Sore.'

'My poor baby.'

You come to me, push the hair out of my face and kiss my cheek.

'So, what happened?' Devin asks, anger undercutting his voice.

'Dev, give her little time, she just woke up.'

'Fuck that! That bastard's still out there. You want to give him more time?'

'No, not him Dev, Seanne. Give her some time.'

Devin opens his mouth to speak, but you shoot him a dangerous look and he silences himself.

'Want a coffee, honey?' I nod. 'Sit. I'll make it.'

While you fuss about the kitchen and Devin sits across from me — silent and smouldering — it occurs to me that it's Wednesday and I should be at work. I stand.

'Where you going, Sea?'

'I've got to get ready for work.'

'I've already rang Magda, told her what I knew. She said to let her know what's going on and to take the rest of the week off. Recover and come back Monday.'

'Oh.'

I sit.

'Dev and I took the day off too.'

'Oh.'

You put coffee before us and then sit yourself, light a cigarette. You blow smoke up into the over head light. You offer me the packet and I take one, light it and wait for Devin to follow suit.

Silent and smoking, I drink my coffee, swallowing painfully as if I'm trying to ingest glass and nails. I know you both want me to speak but I take a few more moments, my lie almost complete.

'I was on my way to the train,' I say. 'And this guy approached me. He wanted money. I said no. He kept asking, hassling me and I tried to get pass him. He blocked my path and grabbed me. He pulled me behind a bin and starting choking me. I must have passed out because I woke up in the alley, my handbag tipped out.'

I keep my eyes averted during my 'tale' and you run your hand up and down my arm, soothing me, mistaking my lack of eye contact for shame.

'Did you get a good look at him?' Devin says.

'No . . . Not really. Young, with a hat. No, a beanie. White. I think he had dark hair.'

'Damn it, that could be half the fuckers in the city,' Devin says, face contorted by his scowl.

You and he exchange looks and then you say, gently;

'Was your underwear still on?'

'Yes. Why?'

Neither of you look at me and it dawns on me what you mean.

'I don't think that happened,' I say.

'Maybe we should take you to doctor, just in case.'

'No,' I say alarmed, knowing that if I'm tested, they will find evidence of sex and assume I was raped. Dread crashes through me, bringing with it butterflies inside my heart, tension in my stomach.

'I'm fine. I'm not sore there. Please no doctors . . . and no police, either.'

You look at me with wide, moist eyes.

'You sure?'

'Yes.'

You wrap your arms around me again.

'When I couldn't find you, I thought — '

You let your 'thought' drift off with the cigarette smoke, disappearing into the atmosphere.

'I'm okay, Lys, really.'

'I don't know what I'd do without you.'

'Yeah, even I've got used to you,' Devin says, a boyish grin on his face. 'So what did he take?'

'Um . . . about forty dollars, my eternity necklace, the ring Lys gave me. That's about it, I think. I didn't really look that carefully.'

'Arsehole, leaving you for dead, just for that. Are you sure you don't want to go to the police?'

'Yes. I'm fine. We don't need to get them involved. I'm fine, really.'

No response from you.

'Really, I'm okay. Just sore. I'll heal.'

You screw your lips up.

'Okay, then. I don't like this, but okay.'

'Wow. I don't believe it,' says Devin, amused grin on his face, 'Lys actually gave up an argument without resorting to swearing and bullying. This must be what growing up is all about.'

'Not now, Dev,' you say.

'Just trying to cheer you two up.'

'Well, don't. For once, just don't.'

Unsure of what to do, I stand and say;

'I'm going to have a shower.'

'Of course,' you say, staring at Devin

I'm half way up the hall when I hear Devin.

'I'm sorry.'

'It's okay,' you say.

I hover inside along the hallway, inching closer to the door, a spidery feeling creeping along my neck.

'I didn't think.'

'It's okay.'

'Stop being so tough, I know, remember?'

'I know you know,' you snap at him.

'Well, quit the tough act around me. You don't need to do that with me.' He pauses. 'Does Seanne know about Lee?'

'No.'

'Don't you think she should?'

'No. It's over. *I'm* over it.'

'Bullshit, Lys! You may have survived but you're not over it. I don't think anyone gets over something like that.'

'Well, you're wrong. I did. I have. I'm fine.'

'Have you ever told anyone? Besides me that is?'

I don't hear your answer.

'And you know why? Because you're not over it. You've just hidden it away. Tried to forget about it ever happening. Brave soul you are.'

'This conversation is over, Dev.'

'For fuck's sake, Lys, he raped you and you can't even tell your girlfriend about it. Don't bullshit me and tell me you're fine. I know you better than that.'

'Then listen to me now, Dev, listen really good.' I hear Devin gasp. 'If you mention this again, or tell Seanne, I'll rip them off and shove them down your throat. Understand?'

'Just tell her.'

'I mean it, Dev, not a word.'

Devin whimpers.

'All right. Okay. Let go.'

I hear him wheeze in relief. You swear and you walk off. I slink off towards the shower and close the door lightly behind me.

At least I know why you cry out 'Lee' in your sleep but why won't you tell me your tale?

Later that night, you run me a bath, pouring sweet smelling oils into the water. You strip me slowly, kissing my skin all over, your lips soft like feathers. Sarah

McLaughlin's 'Fumbling Towards Ecstasy' plays softly in the background. You lift my hand and escort me into the water.

Using a jug, you bathe me with delicate, soothing fingers. I purr under your touch. You shampoo and cleanse and massage me. I'm lulled by your tenderness. Then, purified, you help me out the bath. You grab a soft blue towel and pat my skin dry. You're careful around my bruises, touching them so lightly I barely feel it.

'I love you,' you say and put your finger to my lips. 'I want you to know that. Without hearing it back. I really love you, Seanne.'

I smile at you, a grateful, warming smile. You pick up my hand and kiss my fingertips. You bring my hand to your face and nuzzle into it. I run my hand down your cheek, over your throat, your collar bones, between your breasts and over your stomach. You close your eyes and I lean forward and kiss you. You respond, your tongue licking the tip of mine, flicking my bottom lip.

I pull back and take your hand, led you into the bedroom.

Sitting you on the bed, I kneel before you, the air chilling my exposed skin. I run my hands over your hips and undo the zip on your pants.

'Stop,' you say, 'I'm bleeding.'

'It's okay.'

'You sure?'

'Yes. I want to. Please.'

You flick your eyes over me and then say;

'Okay, then. Let me clean up.'

You stand, walk a couple of steps and turn to me.

'You sure?'

'Yes.'

You leave the room and when you return, you're wearing a tiny white bra and hi-cut dark purple knickers.

You resume your position on the bed and I part your legs, nibbling and licking along your inner thighs. I rub my thumb along the gusset of your knickers. I remove them slowly, spying the tiny red string of the tampon nestled between your lips. I run my eyes over the bud of your clit. I lean forward and suckle you, swirling my tongue around your clit. Your breathing changes, your clit swells in my mouth and I taste the musk of your cunt, the

iron of your blood. I drink you in, devouring your tastes, savouring the idea that your blood is now inside me.

I eat you till you cum. You sit up, wipe my lips with your finger and kiss me. You slide forward and kneeling, we face each other, our breasts touching. We kiss for a long time and then you make love to me, leisurely and passionately.

Deep inside me, I feel my desire for you reignite.

You go back to work. I spend the day at home, you ringing me every hour or to see how I am. At about three pm, someone knocks at my door. I peer through the gap at a delivery man.

'Sign here,' he says, thrusting a small electronic device at me, pointing at the screen.

He hands me a video-sized package in an express courier bag and walks off. I close the door and walk back inside. I rip open the bag and tip the contents out on the coffee table. I check the return address, your name, your work address.

Apart from a handwritten note from you, the package contains a mobile phone in a box. I open the box, untangle the phone from its packaging and follow the instructions until it allows me to call. Then I plug it in to the wall to charge. Amid phone calls from you, I check the phone every half hour to see if I can play with it yet.

When it's ready, I ring your work number and gush down the phone.

'You're welcome,' you say, 'I'm glad you like it.'

I spend the afternoon playing with its functions, taking bad photos of myself and sending them to you. You send me your responses in video format and I play them over and over, watching a tiny you giggle at me from inside my phone.

I realise, despite the stiffness in my throat, I'm content.

This feeling lasts until Friday afternoon, when I open my front door and find Kit on the other side.

'What are you doing here?'

'Can I come in?'

'Why?'

'Cause I gotta talk to yah.'

'You can say it here.'

'k then.'

He fishes inside his jacket and pulls out my stolen necklace and ring. He dangles them in front of me like the proverbial carrot and I resist the urge to grab. He motions them towards me and I take a step back, moving away for fear of accidental contact.

'Yah gonna take 'em?'

'No.'

'Why not? They're yours.'

'I don't want them.'

His face registers surprise, confusion, scepticism.

'Why not?'

I say nothing, put my hand on the edge of the door and begin to close it. He jams his foot in between, keeping the door open. I kick at his foot. He doesn't move. I kick his shin. His face grimaces, but he still doesn't move his foot. Instead, slips his leg in between the door and its frame, opening it wider. He slips through the gap and closes the door behind him, leaning against it. He stares at me, silent. I slap his face. He cringes as I hit him. He re-faces me and says nothing. I backhand him, follow it with a punch to his stomach. He doubles over, rubbing his check. My necklace and ring drop to the floor. He glances up at me with algae green eyes. His silence begins to irritate me and I grab his head and slam it into my raised knee. He drops to the floor. I kick at him. He curls into a foetal position and protects his face and cock as I kick and kick and kick, vaguely aware that I'm screaming, 'you fucking whore, you filthy slut,' over and over again.

Then, suddenly, fury gone, I stop. I put my hand out to help him up. He takes it, timidly, and raises himself off the floor. He stands, a little blood sneaking out his lip. He doesn't meet my eyes, tongues his lip.

'Want a drink?' I say.

He nods and I walk off. I open the fridge, pull out the water jug and pour a glass for both of us. He takes his, brings it to his lips and drinks. He doesn't look at me, and I stare at him.

'I'm sorry,' I say.

'It's okay,' he says, pronouncing each word deliberately.

He puts his glass down and hugs himself, childlike.

'Did I hurt you?'

'I'm 'k.'

'Kit, I'm so sorry.'

'Lockie. My name is Lockie.'

I walk over to him, put my arms around him. He tenses, shudders. I hold him until he relaxes.

'I'm sorry, Lockie,' I whisper in his ear.

He buries his face in me. I continue to apologise to him and he starts to cry. He tells me it's okay, that he deserved it, that he was expecting a beating for it. He tells me he's sorry he pocketed my stuff, that he took them as collateral, then pawned his arse to buy them back. He tells he'll pay me back the money when he has it. I tell him to forget it, to keep the jewellery — they're his and anyway how would I explain their reappearance? I tell him no one ever needs to know but us.

'I forgive you,' I murmur to him.

He burrows his body into me. He feels slight and fragile in my arms, brittle like pie crusts. I soothe him as he cries. Then he lifts his head, tears in his eyes. He kisses me. I respond to him, kissing him affectionately, tenderly. I kiss him as if I love him, with no thought of the length of time we kiss, only of the feel of the split in his lip, the succulence of his tongue. I kiss him as if you never existed.

I run my hand over his back, he flinches and tenses. I lean back and searching his face for an answer. He cuddles back into me.

'Ignore it,' he says. 'Bad fuck. I'm just bein' stupid.'

I take his hand, lead him over to the couch and kiss him all over, my mouth tasting all flavours of his life on his skin, on the head of his cock, on the skin between his cock and arse. I lap it all up. I taste sex and dirt and aftershave and sweat. Then I spread my cunt for him and guide him inside. And we fuck — without condoms. My insides warm as he cums inside me.

I run my hands over him, eager to have him again. He shakes his head.

'Gotta have condoms this time, Sea.'

'I don't have any.'

He puts his hand on his hips and shakes his head, red hair shifting across his face and shoulders.

‘Didn’t yah mother tell yah no glove no love?’ he winks at me.

‘My mother never talked about sex that much.’

‘So, how’d yah learn?’

‘I figured it out on my own.’ I pause. ‘What about you? Who gave you “the talk”?’

‘I learnt in foster care.’

I let that sit with me for a moment, then ask;

‘Where were your parents?’

‘Dead. They died in crash when I was six.’

‘And you went into foster care after that?’

‘Yeah. Stayed with one a while, then a couple different families . . . till they left me at this one place.’

He shudders again.

‘And you ran away from there . . . ?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Did something happen there?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What?’

‘Just stuff.’

‘What kind of stuff?’

‘Sea, I don’t wanna talk about that, ‘k? I’d rather cuddle some more.’

And as if on cue, he snuggles back into me, stroking my stomach and drawing patterns on my flesh with his finger. I rub my hand up and down his slender back, caressing his sleek, scarred skin. He makes barely audible, humming sounds, as if singing to himself. His body goes limp beside me, still, as if in a coma.

‘You still with me?’

‘Hmmm.’

‘You’re not going to sleep, are you?’

‘Hmmm.’

I rouse him a little. He looks at me with dopey, drowsy eyes, a mischievous smile on his face.

‘Thank you,’ he says.

I notice his pronunciation of “you” instead of his usual “yah”, his deliberate attempt to speak properly, as if to give his words impact.

‘What for?’

‘The snugs.’

‘You’re most welcome,’ I pause. ‘Do you want to stay here tonight?’

He twists and looks up at me. His face tells me he’s trying gauge my intention. Right now he’s open, like a doorway, inviting me to walk through. I wonder what it would be like to permanently explore him, to lie next to him on the same bed he got fucked on hour before and have the scent of men still cling to the sheets, to his body. Would he whisper all his dirty deeds to me . . . or would he let me watch him, perhaps from inside a wardrobe as he took on his many men, each one rougher than the last . . .

“k. Ta,” he says.

His voice pulls me out of my wicked thoughts . . . and implants a vastly different question in my mind . . . if he knows proper speech, then why doesn’t he use it?

Before I can ask him, he speaks again;

‘Isn’t yah girlfriend coming over?’

‘I don’t know. She’s out with Devin, at some banquet at his work.

She’s his date.’

‘Devin her boyfriend?’ he raises his eyebrow at me.

‘No, not like that. They’re friends.’

‘They fuck?’

‘No.’

‘Yah sure?’

I nod.

‘She’s not into guys.’

‘You ain’t either, but yah fuckin’ me.’

I register that hit and don’t respond to his comment. I can’t deny my attraction to him — and I can’t explain it either.

‘She’s not fucking Devin. I don’t think she’s ever fucked Devin.’

‘Yah don’t think? Have yah ever asked?’

‘No.’

‘You don’t ask her much, do yah?’

‘No, not really.’

‘Why not? Yah scared of her?’

'No.'

'Then why not?'

'I don't know. Just don't.'

'But yah ask me lots. Lots more if I let yah.'

'It's different with you. You're easy to talk to. And you answer me . . . well mostly anyway.'

'That's 'cause sometimes yah ask stuff I don't wanna talk about.'

'Maybe it's the same with Lys. She don't, I mean she doesn't like to talk about things either.'

The memory of your conversation with Devin hits me like a wet towel, leaving me stinging. I'd love to ask you a million questions about 'Lee' but I don't. You wouldn't answer them anyway — you'd offer me some lame excuse, change the topic, and then become you'll enraged by my nagging, each second we argue further cementing your stubbornness.

'Do yah think yah really know her then?'

'No, I guess not. Not really.'

'And yah feel she don't know yah either?'

'I don't know. Maybe she doesn't . . . But when I try to talk to her, she doesn't answer me. Just like you don't.'

'Ah, but I do. I just don't answer yah in the way yah want. I tell yah plenty. Drop clues, but yah don't pick 'em up, or yah don't ease into it. Yah go straight for the bad stuff, get the defences up and then yah sulk cause I shutdown. I bet it's the same with her. If yah ask her different questions, I reckon she'll answer yah. Ain't no one gonna answer yah when yah get 'em all suspicious.'

'That easy, huh?'

'Yup.'

'And you know everything, do you?'

'Fuck no, but I know people. I fucked a whole bunch of 'em and I learnt from 'em. Some of it's shit, but not this. I'm telling yah the truth here.'

'And how many is a bunch?'

'See? Yah go straight for the bad shit. I said lots in that sentence, but yah ignored it. Yah go in too quick, Sea. Yah make people defensive. Yah gotta get people comfortable, open 'em up more, get 'em relaxed, then ask. 'Cause — like with me — when yah go straight for the personal stuff, yah

make me wonder why yah wanna know, as if yah up to something nasty, like yah tryin' to make me feel dirty or somethin'.'

I'm quiet, thinking.

I review my deeper conversations with you, the times I've asked and you answered. I think about the circumstances surrounding those moments, the mood you were in, the atmosphere around us. I realise Kit is right, those moments when I got the most out of you, you were at ease, receptive, your defences lowered and you answered me without resistance.

'You're right,' I say.

He nods his head at me as if to say 'I know' and looks at me blank-faced.

'So, what now?' I say.

'I dunno. Yah teach me somethin'?'

'Like what?'

'I dunno. Yah know any card games?'

And that's how we spend the evening. We sit in the lounge, TV playing in the background, while I teach him the intricacies of 500. I beat him every hand we play. During the breaks, we kiss, cuddle and fuck, his cock, his voice becoming an anchor, grounding me.

I wake the next day, surprised.

He's still beside me.

He makes small whimpering noises in his sleep and jerks his legs about. I call his name until he wakes, gradually focusing his attention on me.

'Hello,' he says.

'Bad dreams?'

'Yeah. Often.'

A million questions run through my mind and I discard all of them, instead settle on the very basic, very generic, chat show query;

'Do you want to talk about them?'

'Not really, it's all fucked up in me head. Just random shit,' he pauses, 'But yah seem to be gettin' what I was sayin' before. About getting' pass the barriers.'

'I'm a fast learner.'

I grin at him, attempting to mock his impish, rascal grin.

'Yeah, yah are. So, how about show me how good yah learnt yah other lessons, and yah suck me?' he says.

He coils his hand around the base of my head and guides me towards his cock. I roll between his legs, open my lips and seize him in my mouth. I suck him deep. He pushes me further down, forcing me to take more into my mouth.

'Breathe through yah nose,' he says.

I feel the need to gag but follow his instructions. I feel my jaws open wider, my tongue slip under his shaft as his cock plunges down my throat. He pins my head there, I begin to choke and he lets me up. I breathe in short sharp gasps, spittle dribbling down my chin. Before I recover fully, he wedges my head back onto his cock, but does not push me as down as far. I abide by his new instructions, incorporating what he's taught me so far.

He grunts and groans, shuddering underneath me. And then I taste his cum. I lean sideways to spit and he pulls me back. He clamps one hand over my mouth, pegging my nose shut with the other. Retching, I swallow the sticky, salty mess. He releases his hold on me and kisses my mouth.

I shove him off.

'It ain't so bad,' he says, amused.

'How can you swallow that shit? It's putrid.'

I try to create more saliva in my mouth, to rid myself of the tang, of that noxious whey smell coating my nose.

'Yah get used to it.'

'No thanks.'

'Do yah swallow yah girl's juices?'

'Yes.'

'Always?'

'Yes.'

'Do yah gag on that?'

'No. Of course not.'

He starts to chuckle.

'No doubt about it, girl, yah love pussy.'

'I figured that out long ago.'

'Yah want me to get yah some water?'

'Please.'

He bounds off the bed, naked, and springs through the flat, returning with a glass. He hands it to me without words. I guzzle it, greedily.

'Better?'

'Much.'

'It ain't so bad after a while.'

'That is nasty stuff. Nasty.'

He giggles again.

'I taste good compared to some, yah know.'

I'm about to answer him when the phone rings. I rush through the flat, picking it up, swiftly.

'Hello?'

'Still in bed, hon?' you say.

'Lys! Hi!'

'Well, hello. You okay?'

'Yes. Why?'

'You sound surprised to hear from me.'

I fashion another lie in my head, Kit wandering into the room as I do.

'I was reading. I didn't realise it was so late.'

'Well, sexy, get dressed, Dev and I will be over in about twenty mins. We're going to the Daylesford market. Dev's driving. He's just picked up his new car and he's killing himself to get it on the highway.'

'Oh, okay, see you then,' I say, panic clanging about inside me like marbles in a kid's pocket. I hang up and turn to Kit. 'She'll be here soon.'

I approach him, bustling him towards the bathroom, to hasten him to get dressed, to leave; so I can clean the house and rid my flat of his presence before you arrive.

I shove him lightly. He glares me.

'Relax. Ease the fuck up. I'm goin'.'

'Well, hurry. You can't be here — '

'Yeah. I know. Fuck. Yah don't have to push.'

'It's just — '

'Yeah, I know.'

He walks off.

'Kit?'

He doesn't stop.

'Kit!'

Nothing.

'Lockie!'

Now he stops.

'What?' he says, insolent, impatient.

'Please don't be angry.'

'At what? Yah treatin' me like a dirty secret? Fuck, why'd I be pissed at that?'

'You're not a dirty secret.'

'So, yah think I'm stupid then?'

'No.'

'Then why yah shovin' me away like yah think I am. I know she's comin'. I'm gonna go. So, fuckin' relax.'

'I just don't want Lys to see you here.'

'Cause yah know yah shouldn't be doin' this with me, huh? Or is it something else? Like yah ashamed maybe?'

'No, nothing like that.'

'Yeah, right.'

'No! Not right! It's because I know what *she's* like. It's got nothing to do with you. I know she'll overreact, do something.'

'Like what? What she gonna do?'

'I don't know.'

He looks at me, mournfully.

'There ain't nothin' she can do that ain't been done before.'

He turns and closes the bathroom door behind him.

'Lockie . . . '

I get no answer and he doesn't re-open the door.

I'm in my bedroom when he leaves, slamming my front door. I wonder out. The jewellery's gone off the floor, his cigarettes missing off the table.

Before I head back to the bedroom to strip the sheets, to purge my room of him, I casually check my purse.

He didn't take a thing.

Devin hollers as we cruise down the highway. From the back seat, I see his speedometer climb over one-ten, rise towards one-twenty. His car glides, shifting through the gears with ease, the tyres humming against the asphalt.

‘Has Hannah seen it yet?’ you ask from the passenger seat.

‘Not yet, but I’m sure she’ll be impressed when she does. Very, very impressed.’

‘You’re a pig, Dev.’

‘You know it.’

Partially ignored, I watch the scenery whirl past us, read the road signs before they disappear and count down the numbers on the distance signs. I’m bored and restless, irritated by the insipid conversation between you and Devin, my treatment of Kit, my inability to get out of the car and apologise to him.

My mind starts to drift and suddenly, I find myself swimming in a deep pool of pale blue water. I see you sitting on the diving board, your body wrapped in black bathers. I swim towards you.

I’m close to you when I feel myself being yanked under. I sink further and further down, but I don’t panic. I find I’m able to breathe freely, as if on land. I disappear through the tiled floor beneath me. I fall onto a wide, spongy bed, covered with fluffy quilts and goose feather pillows. My weight bounces at little and then I settle into place. I spread myself out and I notice a lump in the bed. I pull the top layers back. Kit lies beside me, his skin bluish-white, his eyes absent of life.

You walk into the room, dressed in a chef’s uniform.

‘Delivery was fast,’ you say, ‘Only the freshest meat for you.’

You lift a large cleaver above your head, bringing it down slowly. You let it hover over Kit’s midriff before slicing.

‘Time to eat,’ you say. ‘You hungry?’

I jolt, open my eyes, unaware for the first few moments I was asleep.

‘I said, are you hungry?’ you say to me, beaming at me through the open window of Devin’s car. I nod. ‘Good. We’re at Macca’s, Dev’s paying.’

You open the door and help me out, Devin behind you.

‘You okay, babe?’

‘Yes. Just sleepy.’

‘Your bruises are fading,’ you say, touching my throat with your finger tips. ‘Are you feeling any better?’

'Yes. I try not to think about it.'

'Ah repression, Lysandra's favourite mode of coping.'

You throw him a stony look and he smirks back at you, giving you his best 'go-fuck-yourself' face before excusing himself. He strolls to the men's room.

We sit at a table and wait.

When Devin emerges, he's sniffing, his body twitching. He puts his palms on the table and asks what we want. I stare up at him, watching as his blue eyes become brighter until they sparkle like sugar granules. He's hardly ever straight anymore.

We tell him our order and he walks off.

I turn to you.

'Do you think that's true?' I say.

'What's true?'

'That you repress things?'

'Don't we all? I bet you have things in your life you don't talk about either. I know Dev has.'

'But he knows about yours and you about his.'

'Are you jealous of that?'

'Of course! He knows you better than I do.'

'No, he doesn't. He just knows different parts of me.'

'But what if I want to know those parts too?'

You sigh.

'Seanne, it's not stuff I want you to know.'

'But maybe I need to.'

'You don't understand, babe, these parts of me you want to know about, they're not things I'm proud of.'

'So?'

'So, you think I want my girl to know how despicable I really am?'

'I know you're not all sweetness and light, Lys, but I'm still here, still wanting to know.'

You stare into my eyes, brush my hair back and caress my face.

'Soon, Seanne.'

'You've said that before.'

'Well, this time I mean it . . . It takes me a long time to open up to — '

'We've been together almost four years, Lys! And I still don't know you any better than I did when we first starting dating.'

'Oh, bullshit. Of course you do. Besides, you don't let me in either.'

'And that makes it okay?'

'No. It makes us as bad as each other,' you pause, 'But know this, I love you very much and I want to tell you, just not yet, Okay?'

'Okay,' I say and kiss you.

'For fuck's sake, break it up,' Devin says, placing the tray on the table. 'I'm about to eat.'

After the market, shopping tucked safely away in the car, Devin suggests we see a psychic. You offer the usual objections — that you don't believe in them, that they're a scam, that you make your own future — but soon concede, giving in to Devin's badgering.

You and he have already gone in, your psychic a tall man with long grey hair and goatee, his a woman with short red hair, dressed in emerald green.

I wait, left behind, seated on purple padded chairs, casting my eyes over the crystal display that twinkles in front of me. I stand and go over to it, the woman behind the counter smiling as I do. I reach my hand out and touch some of the stones, feel their cold, smooth surfaces, their jagged edges, their dips and groves. I pick one up, a small pink stone, shaped like an owl. I hold it in my palm.

Behind me, I hear footsteps and a plump woman of about forty walks into the room. She jingles as she moves and brings with her a smell of frankincense and lime. She wears sandals on her feet and her skirts shimmer and twist with the roll of her hips.

'Sarah?' she says to me, using the fake name I gave her. 'Are you ready?' I put the stone back and walk towards her, 'I'm Angela, I'll be your reader today.'

'Okay.'

I follow her down a small corridor and into a room. As I walk, I hear hushed voices behind the doors I pass.

'Have you had a reading before, Sarah?'

'Yes. A long time ago.'

'Oh, good, so you know it's not an exact science but more of a guide.'

'Yes.'

'Okay, so can you shuffle the cards and think about what you want know and we'll see what comes up.'

I shuffle. I don't think about anything in particular, just let the past few weeks create a montage in my mind. I wait until the cards feel warm and then I hand them back to her. She taps the top of the deck and places seven cards face down on a vibrant blue cloth, covered with bone white symbols.

'Okay, let's see what they say.'

She flips the cards over one at a time and stares at them steadily before speaking.

'Can I be blunt?' she says.

'Yes.'

She sizes me up and down.

'I see a relationship that's stale,' she says.

'Go on.'

'The other party, I get the impression it's a . . . female presence.'

'Yes.'

Angela nods.

'She's a fiery person. Dedicated. Driven. She's exceptionally good at what she does for a living but she's closed, shut off, hard to understand.'

'Yes.'

'You know, she cares for you deeply.'

'I know.'

'But you're not happy.'

'No.'

'Even though you love her.'

'Yes.'

'Because of another presence pressing on the relationship. This one's a free spirited, not someone who can be contained. You shouldn't bother trying.'

'I know all this,' I say, huffy, desperate for her to move off this topic and tell me fanciful things like when I'll win tattslotto and how successful I'll be in the future.

'Then you know that it won't end well, everyone's going to get hurt. This current path you're on . . . it's full of pain, deception, heartache. But not if you end it now.'

'I don't know if I can.'

'Then consider this: are your wants the same as his needs?'

'I think so.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah. I mean, he's pretty sure of what he is, self reliant and what-not. So what else would he need?'

'What about love? Does he have that?'

I stand, back away from her. I rush out of the room and back into the waiting room. Devin and you are already there, your faces flushed.

'How did you go?' you say.

I look behind me, to where I left Angela and her insights.

'It's all bullshit,' I say, suddenly unsteady on my feet, a powerful panic surging through me.

By Thursday, Angela's weight words have waned and life has reverted to normal. When I first returned to work, Madga fussed about me — making me milkshakes, giving me longer lunches, lightening my work load — but that soon dissipated too — almost at the same time as my bruises.

I've hardly seen you. Your work has kept you back every night this week, our phone calls cut short, constantly interrupted by call waiting.

Left to entertain myself, I once again wander around Melbourne, looking for Kit — my need for him as powerful as a junkie's cravings.

As I turn a corner, I spy an adult store in the distance. I head towards it. I've never been in one on my own before, but after walking past the entrance several times, I finally pluck up the courage to walk inside.

The man behind the counter greets me jovially, phone on his shoulder. He tells me if I need help, to ask and then resumes his conversation, ignoring me as I walk around.

I stand in front of a wall of DVDs, my eyes scanning the covers. I'm tantalised by the sight of explicit nakedness before me. I admire firm breasts,

round arses, glistening cunts. But after a while, all the faces, all the names blend into one — becoming a large writhing mass of panting, fucking bodies.

I move on, walk down to the gay section. I flick through the covers, pick up one called ‘Cum for Daddy’ and flip it over. On the back, large hairy men fuck young eager arseholes. One of the young guys — even though this guy’s hair is short and dark — reminds me of Kit, of his enticing body, of his hard cock and I feel that deep down twinge. I make an instant decision to buy it.

I turn away from the DVDs and make my way toward the rows of toys. Their plastic packaging twinkles under the lights. I flick my eyes over every packet, toys of all colours, all shapes, all sizes hang from shirt steel hooks. Every now and again, I take one off, turn the packet over in my hand, press my fingers into the material, read its functions, memorised by its features. I feel no embarrassment, no awkwardness and no shame as I sashay about, feeling my way along the rows. Instead, I feel something akin to belonging.

By the time I leave the store, I have the DVD, an eight inch bendy vibrator made of something called cyber-flesh, a clit tickler and two packets of batteries concealed in a blue paper bag and tucked into my work bag. I can barely wait to get them home.

As I walk towards the station, a voice behind me calls my name. I turn, Devin waving at me, strutting towards me with carefree steps.

‘Hey, Seanne, what are you doing here?’

‘I work near the city, remember?’

‘Oh, yeah.’ He grins at me devilishly. ‘So, do I keep this a secret?’

‘What? That I’m in the city?’

‘No, where you just came out of.’

I glance behind me and blush. Now I’m embarrassed.

‘Aww, you’ve gone all pink,’ Devin says. ‘You’re quite cute when you’re embarrassed.’

He leans towards me and he smells of alcohol.

‘So, what’cha buy?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Oww, come on, sweet-thing, we’re friends.’

He starts to grapple at my bag and I pull it away from him.

‘Just a girl thing, okay.’

‘Tickler, vibe or dildo?’

I say nothing.

'A butt plug, maybe?'

'No.'

'Something kinkier? A pussy whip?'

'No.'

'You're not going to tell, are you?'

'No.'

'You're no fun, Seanne. Anyone would think you're a virgin.'

'Well I'm not.'

He chuckles.

'I know that! So, show me. I promise I won't judge.'

His eyes twinkle at me, inviting.

'I don't care if you do. It's just . . . it's private.'

He grunts.

'Nothing is private from me,' he says. 'You should've learnt that by now.'

He turns on his heels and meanders off, weaving his way across the road and into the cavernous mouth of one of a multilevel car-park. I watch him shove a ticket into an autopay machine, pay and then enter a lift. He doesn't look back.

It's times like these, I see the influence you've had on each other, the connections between you two, your similarities so obvious it's as if you and he are the twins instead.

I stand sentinel, waiting for Devin to emerge. I watch him speed off into the distance. I sigh and turn towards the station.

I feel Kit beside me before I see him, smell his erotic animal scent before I hear him.

'Devin?' he says.

'Yeah.'

'And here I thought yah were replacin' me already.'

I turn to him and he smirks.

'Not at all, Devin does nothing for me.'

'I bet yah girl's glad to hear that too.'

'Look, Kit, about the other day . . . '

He waves his hand at me, as if to say 'forget it' but I apologise anyway. He leans forward and presses his chilly lips to my cheek. I turn my face swiftly and peck his mouth. He pulls back and grins at me.

'Yah don't wanna start that here, do yah?'

'Do you have somewhere else in mind?'

'Of course,' he says and curls his finger at me, enticing me to follow.

He takes me to an old train yard, holding open a gap in the wire fence to let me through. I squeeze through, snagging my jumper, but not quite ripping it. He slips through easily, his slender body not even toughing the ragged edges of the fence.

He walks up to an old cargo carriage and hauls the door open.

'Welcome to my place,' he says and leaps inside.

He turns and on his hunches, offers me a hand. I scramble inside, my uniform hitching upwards and exposing my knickers. He giggles and helps me inside.

I look around the carriage. It contains an old sagging double bed mattress, a few blankets, a pile of clothes, empty food containers, condom packets and little else.

'You live here?'

'Yeah.'

'How long?'

'Couple of months.'

'And no one's tried to kick you out?'

'Yeah, once or twice, but I gotta deal with the yard owner. He lets me stay 'cause I give him free blow jobs. So, we're sweet.'

I nod, unsure of what comment to make.

'So . . .' he says, raising his eyebrows at me. 'How long till yah girl goes postal?'

'Goes postal?'

'Yeah, yah know, starts ringin' yah and shit.'

'Oh.'

I scrounge in my back for my phone and flip it open. It tells me I have two messages — I check them quickly — one from the service provider and

one from you telling me you love me. I guiltily ignore *that* message and dial your work number.

You answer on the third ring.

'Hi hon, what's up?' you say.

'Nothing, I'm just calling to let you know I'm having dinner with . . .

Chrissy in the city.'

'Oh, okay,' you say, surprised. 'I thought you hated her.'

'Yeah. Well, I'm not fond of her, but she needs someone to talk to and she asked so . . . '

'Oh, okay, let me know when you're done. I'll pick you up. I'll be here awhile yet.'

'Okay, I'll ring you when we're done.'

'Look, I've got to go, hon, talk to you later.'

'Bye, Lys.'

'Oh and Sea, where are you calling from? The ladies loo?'

'No. Why?'

'You're all echoy.'

'Oh, sorry.'

In the background, I hear Damien's voice and you answer him with 'all right, I'll be there' then you hang up. I close the phone, throw it into my bag and turn to Kit.

'Postal problem solved,' I say and he comes to me, placing his hands on my breasts and pinching my nipples — hard.

In the car, on the way home, you ask me if I've been running.

'No, why?'

'You smell sweaty.'

I swallow hard.

'Chrissy showed me the gym she goes to, maybe it's that?'

You laugh.

'Sweat doesn't leap on people, Sea.'

'Well, I did try the bike,' I say.

'And . . . ?'

'It's harder than it looks.'

'Most everything is . . . So, what was her drama anyway?'

I make-up a lie about Chrissy being late for her period and her boyfriend running off. I entertain you with this tale all the way home and you grin at me, believing every word.

I lie next to you, me on my side, you on your back. I slip my hand under your top and grope your breasts through your bra. You close your eyes. I swing myself on top of you and paw you with hands and lips. You grab my upper arms, hold me back and look into my eyes. I strain against your hold and struggle for my lips to make contact. You grip me tighter. I buck against you, excited by your clutch.

'Seanne?' you say, confused, your grip slackening.

'No, don't let go!' I plead and force my lips on yours.

I re-devour you, attacking you and you wrestle with me, flipping me over and pinning me down. I burn with desire.

'What are you doing?' you say.

'Fuck me,' I answer. 'Fuck me hard.'

You stare at me and then thrust a hand between my legs. You rub my cunt through my clothes and I grind against you, shoving myself at you. You pull my pyjama bottoms and knickers down together, then return your hand to my cunt, your other hand cupping my breasts, squeezing.

'You're so wet,' you say.

'Harder,' I moan.

You pump my breast and cunt, licking your lips as you fuck me. I cum fast, grunting your name. You fall on top of me, kissing my neck. I wrap my arms around you, panting, breathless. I grab your hips, your arse, your breasts. I roll you over until you're back on your back and I position my face between your legs. Your cunt glistens at me, hot, wet and ready. I lick you, push your legs towards your tummy a little and lick around your arse hole. You shiver, moan softly.

As I rim you, I inch my fingers closer to your arsehole. I spit on your arse and insert one finger. You tense, but let me in, your sphincter relaxing around my flesh. With one finger in your arse, I lick your clit until you cum,

then plunge my tongue into your hole. I eat you with the gluttony of a bulimic on a binge. I eat you over and over again until you tell me no more.

Then I kiss your feet, your calves, your thighs, your stomach, your breasts, your mouth.

'Wow,' you say, 'that was amazing.' I smile, snuggle into you, feel you curl my hair around your fingers. 'Where'd you learn to fuck like that?'

'Chrissy,' I say, more lies wrapping around me.

'Pardon?'

'Chrissy was telling me what she gets into, I thought I'd try it.'

'Oh, for a moment . . . anyway never mind . . . but if you ever want to try that again, just let me know. I'd leave work early for another session like that.'

'Sure,' I say, giggling, 'But next time . . . ?'

'Yes?'

'Can you hurt me more? Mark me even?'

You stare at me, blank faced at first, and then a small evil grin spreads across your face.

'Whatever you want, my love,' you say.

I'm drifting in and out of sleep when there's a pounding at my door. I leap off the couch, expectant, Kit promising to drop by. I open the door, swing it wide. My heart sinks.

'Cooper,' I say.

'Hi, sis,' he says.

'Hello.'

Silence.

'So, are you going to invite me in?'

'No.'

'Come on, Seanne, let me in.'

'No.'

'Just for a moment.'

'No. What are you doing here?'

He shuffles his feet, fidgeting.

'Just wanted to see you.'

'For money?'

'Jesus, Seanne, when'd you turn into such a suspicious bitch?' he
leers at me.

'About the same time you turned into an addict.'

I smirk at him and his face changes, moves from his 'I'm-so-easy-to-
get-along-with' look, to his fierce stony hatred of me — reminiscent of when I
used to bury his favourite toys in the vegetable garden and drive him crazy
not telling him where.

'Bitch,' he spits at me.

'Original Cooper, really original.'

'Let me in!'

'No.'

'Then give me a hundred bucks and I'll go.'

'No.'

'Fifty then.'

'No.'

I watch his hands curl into fists.

'Fuck, Seanne, you're meant to be my sister but you've never given a
flying fuck about anyone but yourself and your fucking dyke shit. Did you ever
think what that did to me?'

'Did to you? What the fuck?'

'Well, you got to leave, didn't you? You didn't have to stay behind and
deal with the shit. / did. I had to go to the same school you fucking destroyed
and listen to all that shit about you, day after day, for months! I couldn't even
go into town without being called names, you selfish bitch! Did you ever think
of that? Of course you didn't, you were too obsessed with your pussy!'

His hands uncurl and he sighs.

'You never even asked if I wanted to go with you.'

'Would you have come?'

'I'm out now, aren't I?'

'Not without help, I bet.'

He glares at me.

'If you treated them better, they'd have helped you too.'

'What a crock,' I spit. 'Dad has never helped me. As for Mum — '

'Don't you start on her! If it wasn't for you, she wouldn't have to marry
him in the first place — '

'And if she didn't, you wouldn't be here either, Cooper. Or did that slip your mind?'

He opens his mouth to answer and then closes it again. His lips twist into a scowl.

'Fuck you,' he hisses.

I rub my hands over my face, pinching my nose. I sigh.

'This is going nowhere. So, get out of here, Cooper. Leave. Go back to the gutter you crawled out of.'

'No. I want my money. You owe me.'

'I owe you nothing.'

I go to shut the door and he jams his boot in it. The door juts against him, bouncing open.

'Just give me what I want and I'll go.'

'No.'

'Fine then,' he says. 'Be a bitch.'

He hacks and spits a ball of phlegm into my face.

'This time I mean it, Seanne. You're fucked. I'm gonna ruin your fucking life! Just you wait. It's going to be grand!'

He storms off and I close the door quietly behind him, sighing.

Life may sweep by swiftly, but some things never change.

Between fucking you, fucking Kit, avoiding Cooper and working, Devin's party comes up quicker than expected.

During the three weeks in between, I've emerged from our latest fuckings with bruises and bites marks, begging for more. As the days passed, you'd dress me up, slap me down and 'invent' new ways hurt me— each session pushing my boundaries further. Then sore, I'd collapse into Kit's arms. He'd add to the sting, deepening my marks, making me grovel at his feet, training me to bow before him. He'd hurl insults at me, force me to my knees and degrade me with his cock and his hands. Later, as a reward for my servitude, he'd allow me to fuck him with fists, strap-ons and objects galore — all of which he'd turn back on me, stretching my cunt wider each time.

Sometimes, you and Kit would only 'miss' each other by mere moments, other times, there'd be hours in between. Whenever I didn't see

either of them, I'd sleep walk through hours, hankering to get back underneath one of them — it didn't matter who, just that they hurt me. And the longer they made me wait, the more I craved them, the rougher I encouraged them to be — all sense of caution abandoned. And they'd come to me, with fierce fists and surprising anger, daring me to go that little bit further.

I totter behind you into Devin's party. You're holding my leash, towing me roughly. I'm watching your arse, your legs as you stride, the leather of your pants so tight, I see every movement. We're late — having stopped twice along the way to fuck — and the party's already in full swing.

I see Devin before you and tug at my leash to show you where he is.

He's seated on a high-backed red chair, Hannah on his lap, her legs on either side of his. She's wearing a short, shiny white dress and white thigh-high fishnets. She has white stilettos on her feet and her blonde hair is tied back in a pony tail, streaked with ribbons.

You drag me towards him, I wobble on my heels a moment and then follow, the collar biting into my throat, my corset digging into my flesh. I'm in heaven.

You catch Devin's eye and indicate you're getting a drink. You slap my arse and tell me to move.

You lead me to the bar, where you order for both of us. You doesn't ask what I want, telling me I'm to drink whatever *you* please. The barman places the drinks on the counter. Yours is a tequila slammer, mine a brown-milky substance. I go to pick it up. You slaps my hand.

'No,' you say, picking it up. You place it in your hand. 'Put your arms behind your back . . . good girl . . . now lean forward, don't touch me, don't touch anything but the glass. Now, drink.'

I obey.

'Slower,' you growl, 'or I'll take it away.'

'Yes, Mistress,' I answer swiftly, aware your threat is part promise.

I put my lips to the glass and sip as slowly as I can. Normally, I'd disobey — wanting your punishment — but right now, my thirst drives me, my throat dry from screaming your name while you fisted me earlier — your hands only slightly smaller than Kit's, but smoother, fist tighter.

'Good little slut,' you coo and pinch my cheek.

You takes the drink away, place the empty glass on the make-shift bar. You pinch me again.

'Good slut indeed,' you say. 'Now sit, watch the crowd while I have mine. And not a peep out of you.'

'Yes, Mistress.'

I look around.

Beside us a male couple dressed in arse-less leather chaps kiss fanatically, slipping small pills into each other's mouths. In front of us, a woman in a short red vinyl dress, sways to the music, taking long drags from a hash pipe while her partner — a man in a maid's outfit — crouches on all fours, licking her boots as she moves. All around us, people play, and through the breaks in the music, I hear whips being cracked and arses being flogged.

Devin comes to us, alone, Hannah left behind with two other women — similarly dressed, their whiteness in striking contrast to the black and red around us. They look absurd; almost alien compared to Devin's other guests. They remind me of children playing at dress ups; completely out of depth in this adult world.

'Hello gorgeous girls,' Devin says, his eyes alive with drug induced bliss.

He kisses us both on the lips, tweaking your exposed nipples and slapping my arse.

'Good evening, Dev,' you say, tipping your hat at him.

'You two look amazing. And Seanne! Fuck me dead, where have you been hiding those tits?'

He leers down my top and I giggle.

'You're quite the hottie yourself,' you say, admiring his outfit.

He's dressed in black leather pants so snug they stick to his body, showing off his curved hips, his muscular thighs. Around his waist, acting like a belt, he's linked several handcuffs together and they hang off him like a metal bridle. He's topless, his skin shiny with oil.

'So, I see you're liquored up . . .' he says, eyes still on my breasts. As unwanted as his attention is, I find myself leaning forward, letting him see more. He looks up at me suddenly and winks. I smile at him.

'Lys, let me touch 'em?'

You nod and his hand reaches out, slides over the exposed part of my breast and dips into the crevasse in between. I feel him flick his finger over my nipple, making it hard. He groans.

'Fucking amazing,' he says, still fingering my nipple. 'One of these days, you're going to have to show me them — naked. Tits like that have to be viewed.'

He removes his hand, grinning at me like a mental patient. You kiss him, whisper something I don't catch in his ear and he hugs you. Over his head, I see Hannah in the background, her face scowling, arms folded over her chest. She glares hatred at me and I smile at her, innocently. She won't be around much longer.

'Anyway,' he says. 'As I was saying, I see you have drinks, did you want something . . . stronger?'

'No, we're good,' you say.

You pluck your 'happy' pills from your belt and show them to him.

'They what I think?' You nod. 'Well done, Lys, I'm impressed.'

'You should be, they're from your guy.'

'Baxter? Really?'

You nod again, eyes twinkling. You lean forward, pop a pill inside my mouth and the other into yours. You take a sip of your drink, offer it to me. I follow your lead.

'What will they do?' I ask.

'Not sure, but if I know Baxter, it'll be insane.'

'Count on it,' Devin says.

He kisses my breast through my corset, hugs you passionately and then whirls off, back into the jealous, angry arms of Hannah. I wonder how many of her friends he's fucked. There's no way he's hasn't been there; the challenge to have them all — and behind her back — too alluring for him to bypass.

You lead me to the centre of the room and start a slow, erotic dance with me, tightening my leash tight as you move up against me. I writhe against you and all of a sudden, the lights explode before my eyes, the figures around me move in slow motion, all their actions glossy and multi coloured, like a bowl of M&Ms. I look into your face, your eyes are wide open, vivid, your iris huge. You kiss me and it feels like a thousand kisses in one. I bask in the intensity. I realise I'm 'stoned'.

We dance for what feels like forever.

Suddenly, there's a loud noise and the stereo whirs to a stop. I stare in the direction of the noise. I take a while to focus on the two men and two women — dressed like horses, complete with bridles and harnesses — pulling Devin into the room on a small red platform. He's changed into a white cape and tight gold shorts. On his head is a shiny plastic crown and his chest glitters gold under the lights. He must think he's Caligula.

His 'horses' pull up before us and he majestically steps off his carriage, flicking his cape back as he does.

'Good evening, Ladies, Gentlemen and those undecided.'

The room titters. I remain still, watching the glitter explode off his chest, sending light beams across the room.

'Welcome this year's Halloween Party. I hope you're all having a good time. And now for the entertainment . . . '

He claps, the music starts and his 'horses' begin to leap about around him, neighing. They weave around him, mouthing and caressing each other, creating an elaborate production of stimulated sex centred around Devin — their golden master. They pay homage to his cock and arse, nipping and fondling him; his wanton, horny slaves. I watch, vaguely aroused, suddenly imagining Devin kneeling, his face stuffed with cock. You lick my ear and, between my imagination, the scene before me and the feel of you behind me, I could almost cum from just that touch.

And almost, as if you read my mind, you hike up my skirt. You roughly jab your fingers into me, calling me a slut as I watch. You yank my hair and expose my cunt to the audience. I'm drenched with joy, your fingers sliding in and out of me faster and faster.

I love Halloween.

I love this.

I love you.

And I cum hard.

Then suddenly, surfacing out of nowhere, comes the need to pee.

I bow before you, kissing your feet, pleading for you to let me go — you've prevented me before, blissfully sadistic as I wet myself, your laughter cruel and exciting. You answer with a slight nod and then haul me up by the collar.

‘Don’t be long. I want you to eat me — on all fours, while I encourage others to fuck you.’

‘Yes, Mistress,’ I croon and then wander off in the direction of the toilet — your ‘threat’ already filling me with excitement.

I wonder towards Devin’s bedroom, open the door, and head towards his private bathroom. When I get inside, I wiggle about, trying to free myself of my lacings. I cross and uncross my legs, will myself not to wet my pants. It seems to take forever until I’m free, but then I sit and pee in a long, powerful stream. I pee for what seems like years and spend even longer trying to redress, fumbling my way. When I think I’m reassembled, I exit the toilet.

I roam into Devin’s bedroom. His décor is all black and red, black four poster bed, with red silk canopy, red cushions with black quilt, red and black prints on the walls. I pull open his black bedside drawers, snooping through his belongings — condoms, lubricants, cock rings, batteries, three vibrators of various sizes and a packet of anti depressants. I open the next drawer, find more bits and pieces of Devin’s life — his old identification cards, a parking fine, a list of the DVDs he’s ordered online, a referral to an orthodontist, his gym membership renewal form, his old drivers license. I stare at the Devin I used to like and bring his photo up to my face. I kiss his fatter, younger face. I lay back on his bed, my hand snaking between my legs.

I masturbate — images of Devin . . . and then of Kit . . . surfacing in my mind. Devin crying, Kit cumming. The time I saw Devin in the shower, soap running down his legs. Kit leaning over Frank’s bar, his jeans tight over his arse. I begin to merge them together — force them into imaginary sex acts. Kit on his knees, gagging on Devin’s cock. Devin on all fours, screaming as Kit splits his virgin arse. I see Kit lick his hand, lapping at the blood and lube covering his fingers, Devin curled into a foetal position, tears in his eyes.

I cum, howling their names. A musky pee-like substance drips out of me. I lay like that, in my cum for a few moments and then return the photo to Devin’s drawer. I stand. I throw a pillow over the wet patch and. I exit the room.

You rush up to me.

‘Where have you been? You’ve been missing for hours!’

‘Hours?’

‘Yes, hours. Where have you been?’

‘The toilet.’

'The toilet? For three hours. What the hell where you doing in there?'

I stare at you dumbfounded. Three hours?

'Peeing.'

'For that long?'

'Yes . . . '

'I've been looking for you. I even asked that weird guy with the flippers if he's seen you. He said he thought you left with Misha.'

'Who's Misha?'

'Hannah's friend.'

'Why would I leave with her?'

'I don't know. Why would you spend three hours on the loo?'

'I didn't think I was in there that long.'

'Well, you were.'

'I'm . . . sorry,' I say, confused.

'Well, now you're back — from whatever it was you were doing — shall we go?'

'Go? Go where?'

'Home.'

'What about the party?'

'It's over.'

'What? Over?'

'Yes. Over. Everyone's either gone or crashed out.' You pause. 'They must have been some pills, huh?'

'Yeah.'

'Next time, I'm not letting you out of my sight.'

'Next time?'

You snuggle into me.

'Yeah, next time. You owe me a show.'

Kit has just rolled off me, when someone pounds on my front door. I yell out 'coming' and quickly throw on a T-shirt and track pants. I tell Kit to wait for me and answer the door.

You push it open forcefully and stride in.

'Hi,' you say, looking around the room, dumping your hand bag on the couch.

'Hi, what are y — '

'Have a good day?'

'Yes, I — '

'Because I had a really interesting day. Very interesting in fact. Want to know why?'

'Oka — '

'I had a visitor today. At work. While I was working, Seanne. And you know how busy I am lately, don't you?'

I nod, waiting for the bomb to hit. Your tone, your stance, the flash in your eyes all indicate impending doom.

'I mean it's getting into our busiest season and it's not as though I've had to work every weekend for past few weeks and sometimes till ten at night . . . especially since I've been taking time off to play with you . . . now, is it?'

Fear bubbles inside my stomach, making me feel queasy and gaseous.

'So, I'm sitting there, going through my paperwork, making sure we're all ready for Christmas and Damien tells me I have a guest. You'll never guess who it was? Go on, take a guess.'

Silence.

'Oh, go on, guess . . . '

I think of the furthest person it could be.

'Addison?'

'No . . . but so close. It wasn't my brother, it was yours.'

I cringe, my insides feeling like they're being sucked through an underground tunnel. And Cooper's words coming flooding into my mind 'this time I mean it'.

'And he told me the most interesting story. You'll never guess who it was about.' You pause, waiting a few seconds. I answer with a shake of my head. 'What no guesses? Damn and it's such a good story. Such an interesting little tale.'

I don't look at you.

'Well, then let me indulge you. Apparently Cooper went to your work — only to discover you'd already left with your other brother. You know, the

one you've been seeing a lot of lately. A real lot of. And of course, Cooper being Cooper decided to follow you and — '

'He followed me?'

You look at me like you swallowed a bug.

'Oh, you're offended by that? Gee, I'm sorry Seanne, did that hurt your precious feelings? How disrespectful of me.'

Your voice wraps me in barbed wire, constricting and suffocating me.

'So, is it true . . . you're fucking someone else? And don't play any of your stupid little games either. Just answer me. You're fucking around, aren't you?'

I think about what I could say, all the lies I could come up with.

'The truth, Seanne.'

I lift my head.

'Fucking say something, Seanne! Is it true?'

I start to shiver, feel the pressure of being caught burst inside me. I fall on my knees and vomit. You stare down at me, frustration and fury oozing from you.

'Get up.'

I don't move, my body feeling concreted to the floor.

'Get up, Seanne! GET THE FUCK UP, NOW!'

You grab me under the armpits and haul me up.

'Speak to me. Tell me, is it true? I need to hear you say it. You owe me that.'

I swallow, force a tiny sound out of my throat.

'Yes,' I squeak.

'It's true,' you say and sit on the edge of the couch, looking deflated and small. I hear you breathe in deeply, hold your breath and pull your shoulders up. I walk over to you, reach out.

'Don't touch me,' you say. 'Don't you dare!'

I retract my hand.

'So, how long has it been going on?'

'I don't know. Not long.'

You glare at me.

'Estimate,' you snap.

'Two, maybe three months.'

You nod, sucking your cheeks into your mouth.

'What's his name?'

'Lockie.'

You stand.

'I can't do this,' you say, 'I can't talk to you at the moment. Hell, I can't even look at you right now.'

You begin to walk off.

'Lys, wait . . . '

You stop in your tracks.

'What?'

'I'm sorry.'

You whirl around.

'You're sorry? SORRY?' Your voice booms, resonating through the flat, through my head. 'You know what I am? I'm disgusted and hurt and fucking hell Seanne, you're fucking someone else and worse than that, I believed all your stupid lies about Cooper and Chrissy and being stuck at work. And don't look at me like that Seanne, I know about some of your bullshit. So, you might as well come clean. What else have you lied about? Because Cooper and I had a nice little chat and he filed me in on a few truths.'

'I thought you couldn't stand him.'

'I can't . . . but at least he tells me the *truth*.'

'He only told you that to hurt me.'

You pick up the TV remote and hurl at me.

'He shouldn't have had to,' you scream. '*You* should have told me.'

And at that moment, there's a crash in my bedroom.

'Oh my god,' you say, 'he's HERE?'

You leap up and are off, bolting through the flat, flinging open my bedroom door. You stand still a moment, me coming up behind you, and then you lunge towards Kit. He dashes out of your reach — he's dressed, thankfully — and skirts over the bed, across the room. You go after him again and I grab your arm, pulling you back.

'Lys, don't,' I wail.

'Get your fucking hands off me!' you hiss, wrenching free.

Kit shifts from foot to foot, trapped between the bed and the window. His eyes dart around, gauging your reaction, the distance between you and the door.

He doesn't say a word.

'Go on, try it,' you hurl at him.

'Lys, please don't,' I plead.

You turn on me, eye flashing.

'You're protecting him?' you say through clenched teeth. 'That's fucking rich! First you fuck him, now you protect him.'

'I'm not! I'm just — '

Your hands come up out of nowhere and you shove me backwards. I hit the door frame. The wood cracks with impact.

'You want to save him, well try it now, you lying, cheating bitch.'

You launch yourself at me — a whirlwind of anger and strength. You grab my upper arms, dig your fingers into me. You jostle me through the open door, slamming it shut in my face. I stagger back, lose balance and fall to the floor.

I crawl to the door, knees burning on the carpet. I use the knob to pull me up. I twist at it, pulling on it but it doesn't budge. I pound on the door.

'Lys! Please! Let me in!'

'Fuck you!'

'Let me in. Lys, please! Let me in!'

'NO!'

You punctuate your answer by banging on your side of the door. And then I hear Kit's voice, clear as plastic wrap.

'Fuck off,' he says.

'Not going to happen,' you retort, 'but you are going to tell me what I want to know — even if you bleed, you fucking asshole.'

I continue to pelt the door, my hands reddening, stinging, the sound echoing through the hall. I hear muffled sounds, objects crashing and then Kit.

'Get the fuck off me,' he whines.

More sounds, and he cries out in pain, followed by a hard slap.

'You're not so pretty now!' you snarl.

I hear another slap and you gasp.

I hear rustling, like someone being dragged across the floor.

I hear your vicious laughter.

I hear Kit beg for help.

I . . . can't . . . do . . . this.

I step away from the door. My insides strain and constrict. I back myself down the hall, I hit a wall. I slide down, legs splaying in front of me.

I bring my hands to my ears.

I block it all out.

I don't know how long you and Kit are in there, but some time later, he runs out of the room, sniffing, his hair dishevelled, his T-shirt torn, blood running down his face. He sails past me, slamming the front door. You appear in the doorway, tugging at your shirt. I look up at you.

'Don't say a word,' you say, 'I'm not interested in anything you say. But you listen to me and you listen good. I'm never going to touch you again, Seanne. Ever. Not only did you break my trust by cheating, you cheated with a whore — yes, I got that out of him. And he's only fifteen to boot. Fifteen, Seanne! He's not even legal! That's beyond disgusting. There's nothing you can ever do . . . ever say . . . that will erase how repulsive that is.' You pause, stare down at me, your anger like thunder. 'And If you ever come near me again, Seanne, I'll make sure you regret it.'

I watch you pick your handbag up and walk out the door, out my life.

I bring my legs to my chest and I cry.

I leave you alone for two days, then I call your office. You answer on the second ring.

'Hello, Lysandra St Clare speaking.'

'Hi, Lys, it's — '

You hang up in my ear. I redial your number and you hang up on me again. I keep trying, until your phone is constantly engaged and your mobile is turned off.

I mope about work. Magda watches me like a bird hunting a mouse. She makes me coffee continuously, one cup hardly going cold before replacing it

with another. She gives me long lunches and whispers to Chrissy when she doesn't think I hear. Whenever I enter the room, they turn to me, coy looks on their face and they change the topic. I'm glad to get out of there.

After work, I hunt for Kit. I go to the red café, the pub he took me to, to his whore spots and to his railway car. I don't see him. I leave notes for him to call me, to contact me, to meet me. But he doesn't and no-one claims to have seen him.

Alone and cold, I curl up in his railway car and try to sleep. I drift in and out, listening for the sound of the fence whining as it's pulled back, the sound of feet crunching on gravel. Several times I get up, look out and squint into the distance. I see nothing but darkness — just like the way I feel inside — and I let myself cry silent, fast flowing tears. I go there three mornings in a row, but he doesn't come home.

On the fourth morning, I reluctantly leave his 'home', and head towards work, yesterday's work clothes crumpled and clammy around me.

I walk into work, wash my hands and take my position at my bench, knife in hand, wanting the courage to plunge it into me. When Magda sees me, she sends me home, telling me to get myself together and to come back tomorrow, showered and in a clean uniform, not one that looks and smells like I've wrestled an alligator.

I walk out without a word, Chrissy grinning at me smugly.

I want to scream.

A week later — and with no contact from either of you — I come home to find a silver BMW parked outside my flat. Dayton stands on my doorstep, blinking at me with long blackened eyelashes, light blue eyelids and red-brown lips.

'Hi,' she says, 'Can we talk?'

'Um . . . okay.'

'Inside preferably.'

'Oh, okay.'

I open up and invite Dayton in. She stands in the centre of the room, waiting, like a bellhop at a hotel.

'Oh . . . please take a seat,' I say, dredging up my best hostess behaviour, drummed into me as child. 'So . . . how's Sydney?'

'Fine. So, Lys told me what happened.'

'Oh.' I pause. 'You've seen her?'

'Yes.'

'Is she okay?'

'What do you think?' she stares at me until I lower my eyes and then she speaks again; 'Look, I'm not here to appease your guilt or give you sneaky updates on her. I'm here to find out why you cheated and then I'm gone.'

'But you're her sister.'

'I'm aware of that, Seanne,' she spits.

'Then why would you . . .?'

'It's as simple as this; she wants to know why . . . she *deserves* to know why but she's not willing to talk to you and I am, so make a choice.'

I twinge, her tone, her blunt wording so close to yours, I can almost feel you in the room. A deep longing escalates inside me and I feel the need to have your skin close to mine, to smell your scent and touch your hair.

'Okay,' I say.

'Wow,' Dayton says, 'Lys is right — you're a horrid conversationalist.'

'She said that?'

'Among other things.'

'Like what?'

'Well, she told me about *that*.'

She accentuates the word *that* — letting me know she's just as disgusted.

'What did she say?'

'That when she confronted you, your lover was here.'

'He's not my lover.'

'Then what is he? A sideline?'

'No. I don't know. He was just . . . different.'

'Different,' she chuffs, 'that's an interesting choice of words that. I would have went with gutter-trash, but I'm honest like that.'

I avert my eyes — registering the double jibe; I lie, I play in the gutter.

'He wasn't the first guy you've . . . was he?'

'No, I mean yes.'

She throws me a confused look.

'I mean . . . the first, the only, since I've been with Lys, but not the first ever.'

She shakes her head.

'I don't get it. I thought you were gay.'

'I am.'

'Your indiscretion says otherwise. Are you sure it's not a phase?'

My mother's words out of Dayton's mouth. I feel like I'm fifteen again, trapped at the kitchen table while my parents interrogate me.

'No. It's not a phase.'

'Do you love him then?'

'No.'

'Then why? I'm trying to understand.'

'I don't know,' I whine and she gives me her best 'oh-come-off-it' face. 'I don't. It just happened.'

'Rubbish. Cheating never "just happens". Somewhere along the way you made the choice to lay down with him. And that's unforgivable.'

'To you or to her?'

'Both. And you made it worse by not just cheating once with some bi-curious girl. You indulged in an affair — with a guy. That's even harder for Lys to understand. She's never been with a guy. I mean, / get it. I like men myself, but Lys . . .' she shakes her head, 'and it's not that she couldn't have. Plenty of guys tried, but she never took any notice. At first I thought it was because she wanted a career. But then she came out. That took us all by surprise.'

'How?'

'How were we surprised?'

'No, how did she come out? I get why you were surprised.'

'Oh, well . . . Daddy was having one of his extended family luncheons; us four and two of our parent's closest friends and their children. Of course, Lys was meant to be there too, but somehow she got out of it — again. So, mid lunch, in she waltzes, hair dyed bright red, wearing ripped jeans and says she's in love. At first my parents were excited. After all, Lys never brought anyone home before and we didn't even know she was dating. So, Daddy quietens the table and Lys stands up straight, glaring at us all and declares; yes she's in love and they're going to move in together at the end of the semester. Mum actually clapped her hands, can you believe that? She was always worried Lys would be an old maid. Anyway . . . so Lys pauses, looks

at all of us in turn and then drops the bomb — she's in love with a girl! You should have seen the look on everyone's face. She might as well of told them she was terminally ill and had only a week to live. She did always like making a scene.'

'She said that? . . . That she was in love?'

'Yes, some girl she met in Melbourne at a woman's rally. Apparently they'd been seeing each other for months and she's moving to Melbourne to be with her. Then she added she wasn't the first girl, she'd had several others before her so we might as well accept it.'

'Several others?'

'Oh, yes. Only she fell in love with this one. Some Asian girl whose parents own a restaurant down here.'

Something clicks inside me. The image of Tey-Lin — Tea-Light — bobs about my memory like a buoy. I remember her slender hands and your causal dismissal of your relationship with her, the easy way you spoke to her, the way her lips crinkled in the corners when you smiled at her. I should have realised your causal dismissal of your relationship with her was merely the wrapping — that a bigger surprise hid underneath. How is it that I never noticed? That I just accepted these 'clues' to your life as incidental, rather than significant. Kit is right, I never ask the right questions.

'Um . . . Did you ever meet her?' I ask.

'No. Lys kept her away from us. But that last semester at home was insane. Lys bouncing about, constantly on the phone, on the computer, talking to her. Daddy in a funk; all his dreams of her getting married and having babies shattered. Mum shifting the focus on to me; constantly asking if my boyfriend was special, if we were serious. Suddenly, my life, my choices were under the radar and I was expected to resurrect Daddy's shattered dreams. And I didn't even know if I *wanted* all that marriage and children stuff. After all, Addison had his career to think of and Lys might as well have sterilized . . . so it was all up to me to pass on the family name. It was so selfish of her!'

'You thought she was gay on purpose?'

'At the time . . . But, now . . . now I think maybe she's the lucky one. She got away. Hell, I'm sure Addison and I would both be gay if we could get away too. Daddy doesn't even speak her name anymore. He used to, but not since . . .'

'Since?'

'Since that Christmas. And that's all I'm saying about that. You lost the right to know that story when you cheated, Seanne.' She throws me a sly look. 'But I'm sure you'd have related to it to. Filled with betrayal and confessions and tears galore. Lys has bigger secrets than just being gay, you know.'

I swallow hard. I could probe, drop the name Lee and watch her reaction, but I doubt she'll give me what I want — not wanting to be reminded, yet again, of how little I know you, how little I paid attention.

'Um . . . Dayton . . . ?'

'Yes?'

'Do you think if I went to see Lys, she'd talk to me?'

'Honestly?'

'Yes.'

'No. Lys doesn't handle rejection well.'

'I didn't reject her.'

'No? Sleeping with someone else sounds like rejection to me.'

'It wasn't meant to be . . . '

'But it is! You threw her away for someone else. And more than that, what she really wants to know is why you did it, Seanne.'

'I already said . . . I don't know.'

'Then I suggest you find out before you speak to her. She has the right to know and she'll expect an honest answer.'

'Do you think she'll talk to me then?'

'Maybe. But she'll take a long time to come around. It would have been easier if it was once and it was a girl, but this . . . this whatever you had with that whore . . . well . . . that's just twisted.'

'I know.'

'You know,' she chuckles humourlessly. 'I think that's the first honest, respectable thing you've said Seanne.'

I ignore Dayton's comment, a barrel full of replies floating through my mind; some of them contemptuous, but she has a right to spit her poison at me — so I take it, letting her know I've heard by nodding my head but not satisfying her with an answer.

'So, how long are you here for?'

'Oh, a couple more days. I took annual leave.'

'And Lys just rang you, out of the blue?'

'No,' she says, slightly snorting. 'We talk to each other all the time — every Tuesday and Friday in fact.'

'Really?'

'Yes. She never told you?'

'No. She doesn't talk about you guys much.'

'Well, her and Ad, they don't really get along. But we speak all the time. And whenever I'm in Melbourne, we always catch up. Devin usually comes too. He's got some amazing contacts.'

'Oh.'

Suddenly, I hear *The Muppets* theme song. She opens the flap of her soft leather bag and pulls out her phone. She glimpses at the screen and then takes the call. She glances at me, a warning look on her face.

'Oh, hi Lys, how are you?'

I feel my eyes widen, my stomach clench.

'No, no,' Dayton says, 'Wednesday . . . sure dinner's a great idea. . . no nothing I want to see in particular . . . okay dinner it is. Where do you want to meet? . . . and where's that? . . . hang on, let me get a pen . . .' She clicks her fingers at me and I hand her a pen and the back of an envelope. 'Okay . . . go . . . sure, I'll there at eight. See you then, Lys. What? Yes . . . okay I will. Bye.'

She flips closed her phone and tucks it away inside her hand bag. She loops her bag over her shoulder and stands.

'Look Seanne, I have to go. I need to freshen up before dinner . . .'

'Yeah, I heard,' I stand. 'Well, thanks for coming.'

'I wouldn't be here if you didn't hurt her, but you're welcome.'

She holds her hand out and I shake it softly. She turns and heads out the door, her legs muscular in her stockings, her ankles slender and her arse taut under her skirt. Her figure so much like yours, I want to reach out and touch her, to run my hand down the back of her stockings, to kiss in between her prominent shoulder blades. Most of all, I want to pretend that it's you, that somehow she'll morph and you'll forgive me and we'll kiss and everything will be normal again.

'Maybe if you write her a letter, she might read it,' she says before she encloses herself in her car and drives off.

I watch her leave, then rush inside and throw up violently. My vomit is thick and yellow brown, and I wonder; is this the colour of guilt?

I tap the pen on the paper, stuck after 'Dear Lys'. I stare at the words, my mind dissecting the word dear. I begin to play with the word, turn it over in my mind and repeat it under my breath. I extend its vowels and roll the R. I say it fast and then slow, making the word lose all meaning.

I stop. Pinch myself on the inner thighs, register the pain and tell myself to quit it, to concentrate on the letter.

I bite the end of the pen, absentmindedly reach down to my calf and begin to scratch along the bone near my ankle. I rake at myself in deep, long strokes, taking thin layers of skin off as I do. I bleed, but continue to scrape, further opening the graze. Blood runs down my leg, over my foot and begins to pool on the floor. My skin tickles as the blood dribbles downwards and I dip my finger into it, sucking it off my fingers.

I begin to write, let my thoughts pour out of me, just like my blood. I scribble things out as I go, but I can't find the words I want to, the words I've already written taunting me like a child, telling me I'm stupid.

I pick up the note-pad and pen and hurl them across the room. I follow them with the coffee cup and the ashtray. I smile when I hear the crash they make. I stand, walk into the bathroom, blood streaking over my foot and fill the bath with water. I undress and I step into the tub, the water deliberately scalding. I raise my knees and drop my head between my arms. I place my lips against the surface of the water and scream.

And scream.

And scream.

The following day, I clean my flat from top to bottom. I find bits and pieces of you everywhere — your missing diamond earring, your favourite silver lighter engraved with your initials, your bookmark, several of your pens, your brown tortoise shell hair clip. I put these in a box on top of the clothes you've left here and shove the box in the bottom of my wardrobe.

Then I scourge for evidence of Kit. I find long red strands of hair in my brushes, entwined in my pillows, embedded in the sheets. I find a bottle of his black nail polish, two ribbed condoms, a lone sock and the vibrator I fuck him with. I kiss the vibrator, envisioning some of his scent still clinging to it and then I stash it and his other belongings in an old pillow case. I dump the whole lot in the outside bin, rush inside and suck up his hair with my vacuum.

Flat clean, devoid of you, of Kit, I go into the bathroom and pick up a pair of my sharpest scissors. I bring them to my face.

I hack off all my hair from the nape downwards and then sit on the floor.

I press the scissors to my skin and carve the letters L Y S into my thigh.

I smile as the blood runs out of me, as the scissors become red.

I trace the letters over and over, then rub dust and dirt into the wound.

I hope my scars never fades.

Sunday night and the phone rings. I pick it up on the second ring, heart beating in hope. I pant a swift hello into the phone and hold my breath.

'Why hello,' comes the response and I feel tears of disappointment well in my eyes.

'Oh, hello Mum, how are you?'

'I'm good. I've been getting into that scrapbooking craze lately. Alice Hammond got me into it. She did one for Brendan's graduation. You remember, Brendan, don't you, Seanne? You know he always liked you. Maybe now — '

I squirm, her tactic so obvious, I'm irritated.

'When did you speak to Cooper?'

'Why yesterday, dear. He rings his mother . . . unlike some.'

'So he told you about Lys and I then?' I say, skipping over her barb.

'He mentioned it.'

'Did he also mention he helped cause the fight?'

'Now why would he do that, Seanne? All he said was he came to see you and you told him that Lysandra's got all jealous about some work friend of yours.'

'That's so not true!'

'So, you're not fighting then?'

'Yes . . . but not because of that reason.'

'Then what, dear? What did that woman do?'

'Nothing. It wasn't her, it was me.'

'You?'

'Yes. Not her. Me.'

'Are you jealous, dear?'

'No. There are no bloody jealousies. I . . . slept with someone else.

Cooper told her about it. That's the reason we're fighting, I fucked up.'

'Seanne. Language.'

Silence. She waits for me to apologise. I refrain from doing so, my anger starting to boil.

'Seanne?'

'What?'

'Oh, I thought you'd hung up.'

'No.'

'Are you still seeing this person?'

'No.'

'Then why don't you come home for a little while. I'm sure that job of yours can survive without you for a week or so. It would be nice to see you, dear. It's been a while since you've visited and now that you're . . . free maybe we could — '

'Whoa . . . Mum, no thanks. Besides, I want to stay here in case she rings. I don't want to miss her call.'

'Oh, are you sure? Brendan was asking after you.'

'Brendan can fuck off. I'm not — '

'Sea-anne,' she says, splitting my name in half like she always does when she's exasperated or when I'm trouble. 'That's enough, you were raised better than that.'

I still don't apologise.

'Ever since you've been with that girl, your manners have got worse and worse.'

'My manners have nothing to do with Lys.'

'Maybe you don't see it, but your Dad and I were just saying the other day just how different you've become since you've been with that . . . woman.'

And now you're saying "F" this and "F" that. What next Seanne? All night orgies?'

I snarl and she clicks her tongue at me.

'So, how much did he ask for?' I say.

'Pardon?'

'How much money did Cooper ask for?'

'Oh, just a fifty until pay day. You know he's got a job at a pub now.'

I laugh.

'Like hell he has. Cooper hasn't worked at anything but getting stoned for a long time.'

'Oh, here we go again,' she says, 'you and your accusations about Cooper. Your father and I both think you only do it to get the focus off yourself and let me tell you now, young lady, it's wearing thin.'

'You would think that.'

'Now what does that mean, Miss? I don't like your tone.'

'Well, you're going to like this even less,' I say and hang up.

Wow. I'm on a roll!

You betrayed.

Kit abandoned.

Family severed.

Could I be any more dramatic?

A week before Christmas, I'm idly flicking through checkout magazine, when someone taps me on the shoulder.

I spin around, startled.

'Hello Seanne,' Devin says, a tight, closed expression on his face.

'Oh . . . Hi Devin,' I say. 'How are you?'

Without a word, he slaps my face. I don't move. I bring my eyes level with his. He holds my gaze and I look away first. He smirks and then dramatically twists around and walks off, whistling to himself.

For Christmas, Magda gives Chrissy and I a paid fortnight off — mostly so she can finish her beer garden in the quiet of the holiday season.

I travel towards your office, sit myself outside your building's front doors and wait. One by one, I see lights go off in your building, but you don't emerge. I wait until ten, then I head towards the station, my eyes scanning the crowd for Kit. Nothing.

I stand on the platform, the summer heat still heavy in the air, the smell of heated bitumen and diesel fumes engulfing me. I move towards the edge. I look up, the train due in four minutes. I step back a little, hover just behind the yellow line. I think about how easy it would be to take leap in front of the next train — to let it collect me and shred my blood and sinew all over the tracks.

I smile at the thought of my mangled body on the news. I wonder what they'd say about me and whether you'd even care.

For most of the holidays, I hide, like a rabbit deep in my warren, moping about the flat but eventually, I force myself to wander out.

On impulse, I head to the hairdressers, consumed by the smells of perm solution and hair dye. I sit on a green couch and flick through magazines while I wait. I watch the hairdressers as they flit about and speak in a language I don't recognise.

When the shortest of the three calls my name, I stand nervously. I sit in the chair she motions to and I look at myself for the first time since before you left. My short hair shocks me at first, its ragged ends and lopsided cut, but then I focus on my skin — I'm pale, with deep dark the rings under my eyes, and my face is littered with pimples. I resist the urge to squeeze them and make myself a mental promise to buy a cleanser on my way home.

I tell the hairdresser I don't care what she does, just make me different and she nods to me in the mirror. She holds my hair between her fingers and snips gently, the scissors seeming to float through the air. She cuts my hair into a short bob that whispers about my face, and then she applies a brownish paste to entire lot.

'It'll be deep red-brown,' she says. 'Good for your face.'

'Thank you.'

She pats me on the shoulder, whispering 'welcome'.

'Twenty minutes, I'll be back,' she says and toddles off, towards another woman, whose long hair sweeps over her back, in soft thick curls.

I wait, staring into the mirror on the wall. The tallest of the three women offers me coffee, I accept and she scurries off to make it. I close my eyes, bring images of you into my mind. I imagine you dancing alone in a field of wheat, the slight rain glistening on your naked skin, your bare feet digging holes into the ground below you. I imagine you swaying, your muscles rippling under your skin, your nipples erect, rain running over your breasts and arse and down your feline sleek legs.

God, I miss you.

Suddenly something touches my arm and I jump. The hairdresser apologises and checks my hair, telling me I'm ready. She leads me over to the sink and gently sprays water over my head, massaging my scalp as she does. She applies a sweet smelling conditioner to my hair and rinses. She asks me to stand, takes me back to the chair and blow dries my hair into a glossy, sexy style.

I stare at this new look framing my same old face and smile gently. I don't feel like a swan, but on the outside, there's a hint that one day I could be.

'Thank you, again,' I say.

'Welcome. You're very good to work on. Quiet. No argument. You sit still. If you come back, I want to do your hair again.'

I smile at her and pay, leaving her a twenty dollar tip.

I wander into the chemist, buy a cleanser, moisturiser and a colour enhancing conditioner. I spray it into my hair the moment I exit the chemist and flick my hair about, basking in the smells of dye, apples and conditioner.

I allow myself to look at my reflection — and for the first time in over year, I feel I could almost like myself again.

Without realising it, I find myself back in the city, the streets crowded with holiday shoppers. I step out of their way, hug the edges of the pavement, press myself up against shop front windows. I beam at them stupidly as they past by me — a tiny spark of a better mood starting to ignite inside.

I walk past yet another amusement parlour and idly glance inside. I stop dead in my tracks. My eyes fix on Kit.

He leans casually against a shoot 'em up game, lights exploding across his face. He's changed too. I notice his shaved head, the scar on his face, running from his right cheek bone down to his jaw, the low off-his-hips way he wears his jeans. Right now, he looks more his age than ever. My stomach flips — not just from seeing him but from realising he's a kid. I watch as he laughs wickedly and slaps the shoulder of his overweight companion — just like any other teenager on school holidays. I squirm — this is the 'him' he should be, not the cunning, sexy street whore I know.

I look around, spy a bench and sit, waiting for him, wanting to nurture him, to offer him more than sex. I don't know how long I wait, but eventually he appears, a small private smile on his face. The moment he sees me, the smile disappears and he stands still, face unreadable. I stand and walk over to him. He doesn't move, no change to his expression.

'Hello, Lockie,' I say.

He sidesteps me and begins to walk off. I scamper after him, touch the back of his arm, near the elbow. He shrugs me off, keeps walking.

'Wait,' I say. 'Please.'

He stops.

'Please? Yah askin' me please?' He huffs, doesn't turn around. 'I didn't think yah knew the meanin' to that word.'

I cringe.

'I'm sorry, I didn't — '

'Yeah, yah did. Yah knew exactly what yah were doin'.' He pauses, runs his finger over the scar on his cheek, 'Yah see what yah did? A little present from yah girl, to remind me I ain't so pretty.'

I reach out to touch him, he moves away.

'I'm sorry.'

'Sorry ain't gonna undo anythin'. Sorry ain't gonna make me forget.'

'Really, Lockie I am.'

'Quit callin' me that. I ain't Lockie to yah anymore. I ain't anythin' to yah anymore.'

He starts to walk off again, I grab him, pull him to me. He struggles to break free, shoving me backwards. I stumble but regain my balance. Passers-by glare at us, but none interfere. He stares at me, laughing, ridicule

underpinning his voice. I accept his condemnation, his surfacing sadism, pleased that at least while he's occupied with this, he's stopped walking off.

'Please can't we talk?'

''bout what? I got nothin' to say.'

'I want to explain.'

'And I want a condo in Paris, so we both got shit.'

He lights a cigarette, his hands quivering a little. He doesn't offer me one. He blows smoke into my face and sneers.

'So, tell me, yah two kiss 'n make up after? Have a good laugh 'bout it all?'

'No. She hasn't spoken to me since.'

'Ha! Serves yah right. I hope she never does.' He pauses. 'Yah know, I understand why she did what she did. I ain't got no grudge with her. But you, I thought we were mates.'

'We were. We are.'

'Then why didn't yah help? Didn't want yah girl to know yah actually kinda liked a whore, huh?'

'No.'

'Then what? . . . 'cause from my point of view, yah didn't fight much.'

'I did so! But the door was blocked.'

'So? Yah tellin' me yah fat arse couldn't push that open. Fuck off, Seanne. Yah ain't no delicate flower. Yah stronger than that. Yah could've moved it if yah wanted to.'

'It was blocked.'

'Yeah, by her. For fuck's sake, yah don't even have a lock. Once she moved, yah could've got in. But yah didn't even try. Yah just gave up.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't know. I thought she jammed it. I didn't know it was her.'

'Didn't want to know either.'

'That's not fair. I tried!'

'Not enough.'

'I didn't know what to do, she was yelling, you were pleading and I'm not good at handling things like and I thought the door was jammed . . . What could I do?'

'Help.'

'I couldn't.'

'Yah wouldn't, yah mean. Yah could've broke a window even, but yah didn't. Yah're a fuckin' coward.'

I look away — Kit once again hitting a truth.

'So, what happened in there?' I whisper.

'Don't matter. It's between me and her.'

'Lockie — '

'I told yah, quit callin' me that. I ain't gonna forget just 'cause yah know me real name. I've been fucked over before, yah know, and I should've known better than lettin' someone get to me, but I did and I gotta deal with that. It's just, I never thought yah'd be like that. Yah made me think yah gave a shit, and I gotta say, I believed yah too . . . Yah fuckin' played it well, Sea . . . and yah know it. That makes yah worse than any of 'em.'

'Worse?'

'Yeah, fuckin' worse, Seanne. Least none of them pretended to like me when they fucked me.'

'I never pretended. I do like you.'

'Bullshit. Yah like what I do to yah, what I let yah do to me.' I go to speak but his puts his hand over my mouth. 'I don't wanna hear it. I know what yah gonna say and it's bullshit. Let's face it, yah weren't fuckin' me 'cause yah liked me, yah fucked me 'cause I let yah be as dirty as yah like and I never judged yah for it.'

'You can't really think — '

'Yeah, I do. I was yah fuck toy and I let yah play with me any way yah wanted. But now I'm gone, yah want me back. Well, too fucking bad, yah little whore doll is wise to yah now.'

'No, Lo-Kit, I never — '

'Yeah, yah did. Yah knew exactly what yah were doin' with me. Yah can pretend yah not what yah are with the girl — or any of them other fuckers yah know — but yah can't fake it with me. I've always seen what's under yah pretty face,' he pauses, stares at me fiercely. 'Yah played me, Seanne and yah gonna pay for it.'

'Is that what you want? Money?'

He glares at me, fuming. He hacks deeply. He spits in my face.

'You fucking cunt,' he says with careful pronunciation.

He turns on his heel and storms off.

He walks a few steps then breaks into a run, disappearing around a corner and out of sight. I wipe the spit from my face and head towards *Hungry Jack's* to scrub my cheek. I feel the texture of his spit sink within my skin, my cheek becoming stiff as the hot summer wind dries all traces of moisture.

I don't realise I'm crying until I taste my tears.

I lie on the floor, thinking about Kit, about you, about love (need) and lust (greed). I think about my own stupid choices — my black desires undoing me again.

And suddenly, a memory hits me like grenade.

'I can't believe you, Seanne. After everything we've done for you, you'd go and do this. What were you thinking?' Dad says, eyes like smouldering coals.

'Were you even thinking at all?' Mum whines.

I shrug, arms folded over my chest, the smell of my lover still on my skin, in my hair.

'Answer your mother, girl!'

'I don't know,' I say, my voice like a squeak, their gazes asphyxiating.

'Do you even realise what you've done?'

'Yes,' I say and stupidly smirk.

Mum's jaw drops. Dad's temper explodes.

'You ungrateful little bitch,' he spits, his always ready fists coming at my face.

I slap at his hand. He loses balance — half drunk again — and knocks into Mum, sends her sailing into the cupboard. And suddenly Cooper is rushing in from the yard, his football still in his hand. He drops it as Dad's rage peaks, his fists pummelling my body wherever they can. Cooper jumps at him, swinging himself onto Dad's broad back. Mum screams, scrambles to her feet, begging Dad to stop — to not hurt her boy.

She drags Cooper off him, cuddles into him as if he's wounded. Dad wheels back in my direction, backhands me and I topple to the floor. He begins to kick at me, wrapping his vice hands around one of my ankles. He drags me through the house — chaffing my skin on the carpet.

He throws me into my bedroom, tells me to pack.

'Get out!' he bellows, 'You're not welcome here anymore. I won't have your kind polluting this family with your filth.'

I nod, heaving through tears — anger growing inside me, growing like a cancerous tumour, silent and swiftly, making me feverish with my own fury.

'Fuck you,' I leer and he springs forward.

He clenches his hardened stubby fingers around my throat and screams insults into my face — each one worse than the last.

Blissfully, I pass out.

Later on my way out, my tartan suitcase beside me, my body already bruising and one eye black, I glance at my mother. Her face is blotchy with tears.

'You've ruined that woman's career too,' she says. 'I hope you're happy. Andrea will never teach again. No one's going to trust her around kids anymore.'

'I'm not a kid.'

'Well, the next few weeks will test that, won't they? And you'll soon realise how terribly lonely the life you've chosen is. I just hope it not too late for you; not too late to be normal.'

I pick up my suitcase and without another word, I twist on my heel and walk to the station.

I deliberately don't say goodbye to any of them, just in case they think I'll miss them.

I roll on my back, arch my knees, palms facing the carpet. I slam my hands up and down on the floor, particles of dust and lint exploding around me as I do. I begin a mantra in my head, a vow to fix my life, to learn this time. I slam my hands down and repeat my 'fix me' dirge over and over again, until the pain in my wrists acts as a throbbing souvenir of my vow.

Then I stand, walk into my bedroom and smash my hand into my mirror. My knuckles split open and blood bubbles over my hand. I lick at the blood, staring at myself in the shattered, spider-webbed mirror.

'No more,' I say.

I return to work and while I cut fruit I continue to think about the person I could be — the one that you tell me you see inside. I think about how Kit tells me I only do what's in front of me and never think of consequences. I think about quitting this job, moving to Ballarat and starting again. But Kit's words surface in my mind; 'yah're a fuckin' coward' and I rethink my idea. I constant twisting it about in my mind, working through all the possibilities, half formed plans ripe inside me.

By the time I catch the train home, I find myself striding towards my flat, humming the last song I heard on the radio. Everything around me seems brighter, clearer, pristine. I have a focus — however vague it may be.

But as I walk up to my front door, a strange 'being-watched' feeling sweeps through me. I look around swiftly and put the key in the lock nervously. My door squeaks open on its own. I stare into the flat, timid, my nerves on edge. I search for any movement, any speck of light. I thread my keys through my fingers, remembering from a true crime novel how one victim survived using her keys as a weapon.

I peer into the flat, nothing moves, everything is still and strange. I take a deep breath, tiptoeing inside, alert, hair raised on my goose pimpled arms. The air around me feels cold, as if I've walked into a tomb.

I step inside the lounge room, my feet padding lightly on the floor. I look around and put my hand over my mouth.

The place is a shambles, some of my stuff broken, other bits strewn about, and then the acrid smell of urine hits my nose. I sniff about until I find where the scent is the strongest and stare down into the large puddle — right in the entrance to the bedroom.

I run through the flat, pulling open drawers, rushing about, trying to find a single thing of value left — but everything small, moveable, sellable is gone and everything else is ripped, broken, stained, smashed.

And then I see it, high on the lounge room wall, a message from my thief scrawled in red: 'PAY BACK CUNT' — the excess paint from the letters bleeding down the wall.

I sigh, search for where he gained access and I find the bathroom window open, a smudgy footprint on the basin. I shut the window and twist the latch. I walk back into the lounge, pick up the phone and call the landlord and then the police. Both tell me to wait until they arrive. I don't tell either of them I know who did it.

While I wait, I dial your home number. I get your machine.

'Um . . . hi Lys, it's me. I've been broken into . . . so, if you, um, left stuff here, it might've been stolen. Let me know what you had. So, yeah, I just wanted to let you know in case you want to make a claim.' I pause. 'I miss you.'

I hang up.

I shift my weight back further back on the couch and wait.

And even though I stare at the phone, I don't expect it to ring.

After the annoyance of police and landlords, I re-assess my decision to move.

I hunt the real estate offices around Glenroy, figuring it's far enough away from Footscray to be different but still close enough to the city to be familiar. I hound the real estate offices and I'm in my third week of looking when I find a place in Jacana I like.

The real estate agent — Evan — opens the front door and ushers me in. The house is painted ivory inside, with a red rose borders near the floor and ceiling. Every room is the same, except the kitchen — yellow — and bathroom; painted aqua blue with large triangle fish swimming across the walls. I look out the kitchen window, the garden is overgrown with weeds, littered with dead plants. I'm about to walk away when I notice a half-hearted attempt at a fernery, gnomes peeking out from underneath the unkempt ferns. This fernery reinforces my decision; after all, I'm half complete too, in need of an overhaul. I tell Evan I'll take it.

I get the landlady's bank details and tell Evan I will direct deposit her fortnightly. We shake hands and he drives me back to his office, where I fill in more forms and arrange for a condition report to be done Saturday afternoon.

I walk out the office feeling giddy, bad real estate coffee swirling in my stomach, making me burp. On the train and all the way back to the flat, I find I can't sit still.

When I push the flat's front door open, I realise I no longer call this place home, the mess Kit left behind stripping me of my sense of belonging.

I guess we're even.

When Magda hears I'm moving, she organises to borrow a truck from an old friend of hers. He and I settle on a price and early one Saturday morning, the three of us pile boxes into his truck and speed off towards the new place.

We unpack slowly, him reassembling my bed, Magda cleaning the house, me shoving couches and bookshelves into their new positions. Hours later, exhausted and sore, I thank them for their help and invite them over for dinner once I'm settled. I'm surprised to find I'm delighted when they both accept and we make a dinner date for two Saturdays from now. I glance around at my new surroundings and smile.

That night, I sleep so thoroughly I don't wake until the following afternoon, bladder tender, ready to burst. I wake unable to recall my dreams, body stiff and aching, but otherwise fully rested, a vague sensual feeling trickling through me. I pee, masturbate, shower, dress, eat and then leave my new home.

I go back to the old flat that one last time — cleaning it from top to bottom. I scrub so hard the smell of sugar soap and oven cleaner sinks into my pores, and my fingers crinkle, turn red under the constant pressure.

Then I sit in the deserted flat, smoking a cigarette and flicking the ash into an empty coke can. I look about the empty walls, the barren floors and think about you. I see you standing by the sink, coffee cup in hand, your legs crossed at the ankles as you laugh at one of my antics. I see you run naked from the bathroom and leap on the bed, tackling me. I see you smile in your sleep and murmur my name. I see you clearly — probably for the first time ever. I realise you loved me deeper than I thought and that my obsession with your past meant I failed to see you in the present.

I finish my cigarette, pick up the can and lock up for the last time. I let a tear run down my face. I walk down the driveway and take one last look over my shoulder.

I start to bawl, my tears a tsunami, flooding me with sadness.

Alone at the red café, I sit and write you a letter.

Dear Lys, (I write)

I know you have no desire to speak to me, nevertheless I wanted to let you know I've moved. If you ever wish to drop by, maybe for coffee, my new address is at the bottom of the page.

I understand no words are ever going to undo what I did, but I wanted you to know that I'm deeply sorry. If one day, you can ever forgive me, I'll do whatever necessary to make amends. I will always love you and I always wait for you to come back. Until then, take care of yourself, Lys.

There's no one else in the world like you.

Always

Seanne.

I fold the letter in thirds and slide it into an envelope. I address to your home address and seal the back with a kiss. Then I head to the 7-eleven, buy a stamp and post your letter. The moment it's gone, I wish I ripped it to shreds, wish I said more.

Desperate to change my life — and to prove both you and Kit wrong — I decide to enrol in a mixed media course. I spend arduous hours on the phone, gathering documents, filling in forms and begging welfare organisations for money for fees.

Madga beams at me, motherly proud, when I show her my acceptance letter.

'You got in!' she squeals, her arms around my waist, burying me in her shoulder. 'Congratulations!'

I pull back, look at her earnestly.

'I wouldn't have got in without your help.'

She waves her hand at me.

'It's nothing.'

'No, it's not,' I say, a crisp, determined edge to my voice, 'You've always gone out of your way to help me and honestly, most of the time, I haven't deserved it. I've not been very fair to you, Madga. I'm sorry.'

She smiles at me, shyly, a slight moisture in her eyes.

'We all need help sometimes, Seanne.'

'Thank you for continuing to help me.'

'You're welcome . . . But we need to talk about your hours, you can't work Monday to Friday here anymore.'

I stare at her.

'You're firing me?'

She giggles.

'No. Of course not, but we'll need to arrange something around this course now, won't we? I've been thinking about it ever since you mentioned this and I think I can give you almost the same hours. You'll have to do some long hours, and give up your weekends, but it's workable. I can even teach you to cook on Sundays when you're here. If you like, that is.'

She winks at me and I lean forward and kiss her cheek.

'You really are amazing, Madga. Thank you.'

'Again, you're welcome. Now go, those dishes aren't going to wash themselves.' She swats me on the arse, motioning me to go. 'It will be nice to see you have some direction,' she adds, quietly.

I turn to look at her, but she's gone, leaving me basking in my admiration for her. I feel eyes on me and I look up. Chrissy scowls at me.

'And how long before you ruin this too?' she says.

I'm standing in line at the bookshop, students around me everywhere, most of them in pairs. I re-read my required texts and click my fingers over the spines, searching for the correct editions. Consumed with my search, I bump into the woman next to me; her long blue black hair is piled high on her head, her long lacy dress swishes around her ankles.

She jumps, startled.

'Oh, sorry,' she says, apologising for my clumsiness.

'No, it was me.'

She smiles and glances at the reading list in my hand.

'Mixed media?' she inquires. I nod. 'Me too! Hi, I'm Sonja.'

'Seanne,' I say and shake her hand.

We wander around, gathering our texts, chatting idly as we wait to pay.

'Say, did you want to have a coffee?' she says as the bookshop's doors close behind me.

'Um . . . I don't know.'

She titters.

'It's coffee, I'm not proposing marriage. So, how do you have it? White?'

I find myself smiling at her.

'Okay, then. But I'll buy.'

From that moment on, every Thursday, Sonja and I head into the city and watch a movie, go to a different restaurant for dinner and giggle and gossip like high school girls. Sometimes we talk about the budding relationship of two of our class mates, sometimes we talk about class, about photos, about our latest assignment — but we rarely talk about anything personal, our talk of ourselves, all surface stuff; our favourite colours, our pet peeves.

This continues for a few weeks, until late one night, slightly drunk after taking stupid photos of our feet, our noses, our belly buttons, she asks if she can kiss me.

'I've never kissed a girl,' she explains, slightly embarrassed, but bold, demanding. 'And I feel comfortable with you, so can I?'

I nod and let her.

She pecks me shyly, her lips barely touching mine, then she gains confidence and begins to kiss me properly. We kiss for maybe a minute and then I pull back; her kisses purely a physical pleasure — her lips no substitute for yours. I begin to lose myself in the memories of your kisses, your touch, the feel of your skin against mine . . . but I drag myself out of them, refocus on the gorgeous woman before me, who unfortunately fails to make my heart skip.

'Um . . . I'm sorry Sonja, but I can't . . . with you,' I say, my voice flat, insecure, apprehensive.

'That's okay,' she says, lightly. 'I don't really like women. I just wanted to try it.' She pauses. 'Pity though, we'd make a cute couple.'

I stare at her and say nothing, my heart pounding from the undertones of this conversation. And just when I think she isn't going to ask, she does;

'But you're into women, aren't you?'

Those old feelings rise inside me — making me want to scratch my legs raw, to stuff my face with food, to smoke until I vomit, to hurt myself in new and ingenious ways. I push them down, take a deep breath.

‘Yes,’ I say, quietly. ‘Yes, I am.’

‘That’s cool,’ she says, ‘I don’t care either way. I just wanted to know. At least now, I can pick out the right eye candy for you!’

I stare at her incredulously and she smiles at me, pats my leg.

‘Another wine,’ she says, holding the bottle up before me.

With everything aligning — work, home, school — I have one thing left to do and so one Wednesday, I nervously sit across from Elliot, my stomach feeling inside out, my nerves spiked.

‘It’s nice to see you again,’ he says.

I nod, attempting to dredge courage from every pore in my body, from wherever it might be hiding. I know if I’m going to do this, then I have to do it right.

I start with the most basic statement.

‘I think I need your help,’ I mumble, ‘I’ve done something . . . well, a few things actually and I don’t know why. I don’t know how to deal with it.’

I give Elliot a quick rundown of what happened — the only lie I tell him is about Kit’s age. I tell him he’s nineteen; your words — ‘That’s beyond disgusting’ — ringing in my ears, preventing me from admitting all. The rest, I lay out before him, presenting him with the red carpet of my deceit.

‘Hmm,’ says Elliot. ‘So, how about we start with why you were attracted to Lockie in the first place. Perhaps then, we can unravel the rest. You knew he was a prostitute, yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘And that appealed to you?’

‘Somewhat. Yes, quite a bit actually.’

‘But there was more to it than that.’

‘Yes. I mean, that was . . . alluring at first, but afterwards . . .’

‘It was more about him?’

‘Yes.’

‘So, Seanne — why? Why not someone else? Why him specifically?’

'I don't know.'

'I think you do. Deep inside, you know. You've just never admitted it to yourself before.'

I'm silent, contemplative. I bring up a mental picture of Kit, standing alone in my kitchen . . . I see him smile . . . but then my mind quickly morphs his image into depravity and I see him red-faced and naked, crawling on all fours.

It hits me —the allure, the truth.

'Because I could be whatever I wanted with him and he'd take it— encourage me to push a little further, to hurt a little more. He'd even kiss me afterwards, despite what I did to him, what he did to me. He made me feel like a god and I've never felt like that before, with anyone . . . not even with Lys. And it wouldn't matter what we did to each other, he would make me feel . . . um . . .'

'Powerful?'

'Well, maybe not powerful, but free. And I could treat him anyway I liked without consequence. Who would he tell anyway? He isn't part of my worlds, so he couldn't have told tales on me. It meant whatever I did to him, didn't really matter.'

'And what made you think he'd go along with that?'

'Because . . . because . . . um . . .'

'Because?'

'Because he's a whore — and he's used to it anyway,' I say, suddenly ashamed at my own sadism, my inner desires to hurt another in similar, but deeper ways.

'And, so at that moment, when he pleaded for your help?'

'I saw his humanness.' Tears well in my eyes and I wipe them away angrily. 'I think he showed me his real self before that . . . when he cried in my arms . . . but then he let me do things to him, did things to me; and I ignored it, I overlooked the fact that he was a real person.'

'He always was real, Seanne. It's your expectations of him that are unreal. You saw him as merely a function for your pleasures. Did you ever wonder why he'd let you treat him like that?'

'No.'

'Why do you think he would?'

'I don't know. He never asked for anything.'

'Really? I think he did. I think he had a very obvious agenda.'

A flash of clarity and suddenly I'm chilled all over.

'Oh, my God,' I say, 'Love. He wanted love.'

I slide a knife under the steel lid, prying it off. The can-opener failing to cut properly — again. Suddenly, I'm reminded of you . . .

'Jesus, Seanne, does anything work in this place!' you say. You throw the can-opener and a tin of tuna on to the bench. 'All it did was hack at it!'

I muscle in next to you, grab a butter knife and poke along the rim of the tin, encouraging the small indents to open wider.

You watch me silently, tapping your foot.

'No wonder you've got no bloody cans in your cupboards, Sea. By the time you get them open, there's nothing left but fucking air.'

I keep working, smiling slightly as you ramble on. Your muttering about my lack of adequate tools merges into a rant about manufacturing standards and quality control. You ramble seamlessly, hardly taking a breath, your sentences precise.

You're mid-sentence when I interrupt you.

'Here,' I say, handing you the open tin; its edges jagged, tuna seeping over the sides. You take it wordlessly, carefully not to get any on your fingers. You raise your eyebrow at me.

I shrug.

'At least it's open.'

'Just,' you say smirking, fussing with paper towels, fastidiously cleaning the can before digging your fork into the contents.

I watch as you finish off the sandwiches. You obsessively spread tuna into every corner, match crust with crust perfectly and then you cut the bread into small triangles. You arrange your perfect triangles on a plate and then hand the plate to me. I run my index finger over yours.

'Yuck,' you say, 'You've still got fish hands!'

I quickly put the plate down and then grab your hand, pressing my fishy fingers into your flesh. You squeal and I pull you to me, place my lips on yours. You struggle, giggling and I run my hands over your face.

'Fuck off!' you cry; your voice high, pregnant with mirth.

I pick up a sandwich, flipping its lid off and expose the tuna underneath.

'Don't you dare!' you warn without malice.

'Oh, I dare!'

I back you into a corner, squishing my fingers into the tuna, flicking the bread into the sink. I wriggle my fingers at you and you lean backwards, arse up against the bench, arching your back.

I bring my fingers closer, poised over your cheek. I grin at you evilly. You open your mouth to speak, to protest and I jam my fingers into your mouth.

You surprise me by sucking on them, drawing me close to you, your hands grabbing my hips. You kiss me, inching me backwards.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spy the plate. I walk my fingers over another sandwich, my lips not leaving yours, my eyes half closed, watching you under my lashes. I pry a triangle away from the herd.

'Oh, no you don't,' you say, your eyes suddenly open, your face alert.

You grapple with me, giggling, the sandwich hovering over your head, crumbs falling into our hair. You shake your head and I squish the sandwich into your cheek.

'You're going to get it now!' you say, laughing.

You grab a sandwich and throw it at me. It opens mid-air and sprays tuna and mayo over me, over the floor. I hoot, my hands armed with my own attack.

You open a cupboard door, blocking my attack. The sandwich hits the door. You peek your face out from behind the cupboard and launch a handful of flour at me. I retaliate with coffee, with sugar, with teabags. You throw more and more ingredients at me, my sides starting to hurt from laughter, my breath coming in short bursts.

And then, then most surprising thing happens, you attempt to move towards me, your foot slides across the floor and you skid, landing awkwardly on your arse, one leg stuck out before you, the other tucked under you.

'Whoa!' you exclaim and stare up at me. I rush to you, putting out my hand. You scramble, grab at me and pull me down on top of you. You kiss me.

'You okay?' I ask, concerned — your grace undone.

You nod and then burst into laughter.

'Maybe you're rubbing off on me more than I realise!' you say.

I sigh. Not enough it seems; I still can't open a can.

I dig, curling the metal, making sharp, dangerous edges to cut myself on. I resist the urge to drag my skin over them, focusing instead on the task at hand, repeating to myself I've no time to indulge. When I've opened a wide enough gap, I tip the tin up-side-down and shake it. Money falls out; my 'savings' from my tips from work.

I separate the notes from the coins and count each out, bagging the coins, wrapping elastic bands around the notes. There's almost two-ninety in total. I gather it all up, shove the collated notes, the bagged coins back into the tin and head out.

After changing it all over at the bank, I proceed to a florist. I buy you a single red gerbera and ask for it to be wrapped with a teal coloured bow. I don't attach a card, I just send it to you as is and hope you don't burn it on sight. I ask the florist to then send you one every week, paying for six weeks in advance, stating to never leave my name.

Next I go to the supermarket. I wander along the aisles of tin foods, non-perishables and utensils, filling my basket up as I go. I buy two can-openers, six bottles of water and two jars of peanut butter. Lastly, I purchase two cartons of cigarettes and a packet of ultra thin condoms.

I haul all my purchases to Kit's rail-car, neatly arranging the food inside. I unwrap the knives, forks and spoons, laying them next to the cans. I place one carton of smokes in front of the arrangement and then begin to fold his clothes. I put the condoms on top of the pile. Then, I tidy his 'home', sweeping out cigarette butts, condom packets, empty lube sachets, food wrappers as best I can.

I sit back and smoke one of my own cigarettes, the carton clanking against my new can-opener as I throw it in my bag. Then, on hands and knees, I back myself out of the rail car, dragging the door closed behind me.

As I walk to the fence, I feel eyes on me. I look around. In the distance, I see a slim silhouette. I wave. The silhouette shifts positions but doesn't respond to me. I stand still a moment, waiting, in case he changes his mind. He doesn't. I pull the fence back and slip through.

Some things are better left alone.

I tuck my latest photography project into a large black folder, proud I got the second highest mark in the class, my teacher raving about the ingenuity of it. I created a storyboard, called it *Domestic Bliss*, shot in four frames; woman holding a pink bundle to her chest, fawning over it; woman bringing the bundle to her face, kissing it; woman kneeling, shot from behind, the blanket open, woman shot from above, her face beaming as she worships the contents of the bundle — hundred of packets of diet pills.

I'm almost to my gate when my neighbour's dog sprints towards me, her pink tongue poised, ready to lick. Mrs Hindelburg dawdles after her, calling her name — Zoe. Zoe ignores her, her nose wedged between the gaps in the fence, sniffing at me eagerly.

'Why hello, love,' Mrs Hindelburg coos, sauntering towards me. 'Sorry about Zoe, she's just keen to get out, but she's too strong for me lately.'

I look them up and down; at Mrs Hindelburg's small frame, her arthritic hands, at Zoe's muscular shoulders, her large paws.

'I could take her,' I offer, suddenly keen to for a neighbourly connection, for someone — or something — to come home to.

'Oh, that would be lovely . . . but I don't want to put you out any, dear.'

'You're not. Besides, I think she likes me,' I say, bending down, Zoe's nose nuzzled against my hand.

'Well, if you're sure. . . '

'Yes. How often do you want me to take her?'

'Well, once a week is fine, unless you want to take her more often . . . I know she won't mind. I'll pay you of course, say five dollars a walk?'

'I don't want your money.'

She screws her mouth up and argues with me, almost pleading with me to take the money. In the end, we settle on payment in the form of her home-cooked roasts. We make a permanent date for Sundays.

As the weeks pass, I spend more and more time with Mrs Hindelburg and Zoe. Mrs Hindelburg tells me stories about her life as a fire-fighter's wife, trying to maintain her own career as a hairdresser while he ventured out most nights, and sometimes never returned for days. She tells me he died during

the Ash Wednesday fires, leaving her with a mortgage and thousands in gambling debts she had no idea he incurred.

It's during this 'honeymoon' stage that my hair slowly grows to under my shoulders, silently marking the passing of time. I consider buying a home dye kit, but Mrs Hindleburg forces me to sit at her kitchen table, unimpressed with my apathy.

She dyes my hair a deep chocolate brown, close to my natural colour. She plucks my eyebrows, manicures my nails and washes my face with fruity scented cleansers.

'Every six weeks I want you back in this chair,' she says, 'I have many plans for you. I'll make you turn heads.'

'I don't want to turn heads.'

'Twaddle. All girls want to feel pretty . . . now look, see what I've done.'

I stare into the mirror, transfixed by the woman staring back at me.

'Wow, I love it,' I gush.

'It's not done, yet. Next time, I'll add some highlights, give you some depth.'

'You're very good.'

'I know,' she says, without false modesty. 'Now tell me, what dress size are you? I'd like to knit you a new cardigan; that thing you wear to work is not fit for padding a bird's nest.'

'You don't —'

'Nonsense! It's nice to have a woman to fuss over. It's been a long time since I've had anyone to care for. And I always wanted a daughter . . . but it wasn't meant to be.'

I reach up and place my hand over hers. Her skin feels brittle, her knuckles hard knobs under my soft palms. I squeeze her gently.

'Thank you,' I say.

She nods at me.

'You're quite an attractive woman when you're not scowling and hiding under your lack of care.' I blush — embarrassed by both the compliment and the comment. 'Hasn't anyone told you that before?'

'Yes, my ex . . .'

'Well, he obviously didn't tell you often enough, or you didn't listen.'

'She,' I whisper.

'Pardon?'

'She. My ex is a she.'

I met her eyes in the mirror, watching her face for a reaction, for a hint of rejection, a form of distaste. Her face remains impartial, her hand still on my shoulder. She shuffles sideways and lowers herself into the chair beside me. The cushion 'pffs' as her weight settles into the seat.

'Oh, well, that's news,' she says. 'I didn't think you were that way. But it's more common nowadays, isn't it?'

'I suppose so,' I mumble.

'I mean . . . In my day, if you were like that, you never told anyone and got married and had kids anyway.'

I shuffle in my seat, envisioning saying goodbye to her, to home-cooked meals, to afternoon teas, to walking the lady of the house.

'So, do you want a cuppa?' she says, peering at me over the table.

'Of tea?'

'Yes,' she cackles, 'what did you think I meant?'

'I don't know.'

'Daft child!' she says, playfully.

She stands, makes her slow way over to her stove-top kettle. As she lifts it out of the sink, she cringes, her gnarled hands only just able to grasp the wet, slippery handle. I rush beside her, take the kettle and place it on the stove. She offers no objections and I smile at her tenderly as I light the gas and position the kettle.

I turn to her.

'Um . . . so, does it worry you?'

'The kettle? A little. And, yes, I know I should get an electric one, but I like my tea the old way.'

'No, not the kettle. The other thing . . . about my ex?'

She pats my shoulder.

'Of course not, dear. I'm a little too old to worry about that stuff. That's only good thing about being so old, things like that cease to matter.'

'Oh.'

'Besides, I knew plenty of boys like you as a hairdresser. If I cared before now, I would have chosen a different career . . . Mechanic maybe, but then they'd think I were one too!'

She cackles again, her laughter like bells jingling around me.

My mobile rings and I answer it, huffing down the phone, swinging the shopping on the counter.

'Hello?' I say, not recognising the number, a distant part of me hoping it's you and you're calling from a new phone to say thanks for the flowers and to ask me for coffee.

But it's not you and instead a languid girlie voice pips at me.

'Seanne?'

'Yes. Who is this?'

'Hang on a sec.'

She drops the phone and I hear muttering in the background. After a little more clattering, a familiar voice greets me, his voice deceptively happy, breezy.

'Hello there!' Cooper says.

'Hi,' I say, curt. 'Who was that?'

'Amy,' he says as if I should know who that is and what piece she occupies on his chessboard of drug addicts, dealers, part-time whores and Centrelink cheats.

'Okay then,' I say, wondering how she got my number and how many others have it. 'So . . . ?'

'Um . . . can I ask you a favour?'

'I'm not giving you any money.'

He grunts.

'It's not for drugs.'

'I don't care.'

'Please Sea-Sea, Amy needs it. She's in trouble.'

'I don't care.'

'But — '

'No.'

'Please?'

'No.'

'Can't I at least tell you what it's for?'

'You can – but I don't care.'

In the background, I hear Amy hiss 'Make her', and Cooper tells her to shut up, he's handling it. There's another brief exchange I don't quite hear, and then Cooper hisses, 'All right, I'll tell her.'

'She's pregnant,' he says, 'We want to keep it.'

'Then see a doctor.'

'We got no money for that.'

'That's not my problem.'

'Fucking hell, Seanne, I'm asking you for help — '

'You don't deserve my help,' I say.

He growls.

'This is about that dyke bitch of yours, isn't it?'

'A little. But mostly because I don't want to.'

'Fine then,' he says. 'Maybe I'll just have to tell Mum *everything*.'

'Go on, then. I don't care, Cooper. Tell her. Tell her *everything*. Tell her all the dirty little deeds I've done. In fact, I have a better idea, tell her there were thirty of us and we had a Roman orgy and I LOVED it. That'll get her going. And then when she's reeling from that, it's your perfect chance to attack. Bleed her for all she's got. Or better yet, make her beg — '

'What the fuck's a matter with you?' he says, astonished. 'You're talking about our mother. Are you stoned or something?'

'That's rich, coming from you, the fake concern. And anyway, no, I'm not stoned. I'm me.'

'What's that mean?'

'It means you and Mum and Dad and all those hypocrites back home can fuck off. I'm sick of you all, especially you, Cooper. You with your big pity stories, making everyone believe you're just having some really bad luck. Well, not me Cooper, I know what you are and I couldn't care less if that shit burns you alive.'

'I'm going to fuck you up so bad,' he hisses at me.

I start to laugh, sadistic hysteria pouring out my mouth, a strange fluttery feeling bubbling inside me.

'Go for it. There's nothing left to fuck, Cooper. You fucked it all already. So, go on, do your worst, you junkie cockroach.'

He explodes in a fury of insults and threats, each one blending into the next, until he's breathless from the effort. I wait for him to finish, half

interested, amused at getting under his skin and making him itch like his drugs do.

‘You done?’ I say, my tone impatient, mimicking you.

‘I haven’t even BEGUN TO — ’

‘Don’t call me again, Cooper. I mean it.’

‘DON’T YOU FU — ’

‘I mean it. You don’t exist to me anymore.’

‘YOU CAN’T JUST — ’

‘Watch me,’ I say and hang up.

I fiddle with the buttons on the mobile and switch it to silent. Then I throw it on the couch, spin on my heel and start to unpack the groceries, singing to myself.

Giggling, Sonja and I try on tacky op shop clothes, the colours so gaudy they wash out our complexions completely, making us look like cadavers.

‘Oh, now that is stunning,’ she says, commenting on the green and yellow dress I’m wearing, white flowers splattered all over it. ‘The ladies will go mad over that. You should wear it on date — there’s no way anyone could resist that!’

‘Really? I think yours is sexier by far. Re-ow!’ I purr, pointing to the dusty pink velour jumpsuit she has on.

We burst into laughter, parading around the shop, gathering jewellery to ‘complement’ our look. We push hats onto our heads and jam our feet into hideously high shoes. The saleswoman watches us with disgust, her desire for us to grow up plain on her face.

‘Seriously, Sea, we should get these. Do a shoot.’

I laugh.

‘And call it what? Ode to distaste?’

‘Yeah! You know it could work. We’re meant to do some external shots anyway and Michael didn’t say it had to be pretty.’

I think about this a moment.

‘I could ask Mrs Hindelburg to do our make-up. She could make us hideous!’

‘And we can shoot at the cemetery near me, make the whole shoot very dark, very disturbed.’

‘Like the mind of a mental patient.’

‘Yeah! That’s it Sea! We’ll make it about the ugliness inside coming out. Fuck, you’re brilliant!’

She wraps her arms around me and hugs me excitedly.

‘Come on, let’s do it!’

We change, loop our purchases over our arms and pay, our faces flushed and pink.

All the way back to the station, we brainstorm ideas, deciding to use each other as the model, to present twelve photos each. When I kiss Sonja goodbye, I realise I’m alive with an energy I rarely feel.

I venture home, my mind occupied with ideas, inspiration flying at me from all directions. I drink in the advert and billboards as the train click-clacks towards Broadmeadows. I begin to mentally manipulate them, adapting them to my purpose, dissecting their simple ingenuity. Every idea I scribble down in the notebook you gave me — it finally becomes a crucial tool in my life.

At Jacana station, I get off the train and I see him right away. He’s leaning against the wall, smoking, reading Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. He’s about half-way through and I ponder his sophisticated choice of literature — surely he doesn’t really understand it, does he?

‘Hi,’ he says.

I look him over. He’s changed too. His hair is longer again, tied in a small plait and his scar is just a thin faded line. He’s put on weight, his face not so gaunt, his jeans tighter across his crutch. He looks good — clean, sturdy and healthy. My old urges for him surfaces and I avert my eyes.

‘What are you doing here?’

He flicks his cigarette away, closes his book.

‘I knew you lived around here. I followed yah . . . you . . . a couple of times.’

‘Oh,’ I say, noting the swift self-correction of his speech, the less skittish look in his eyes. ‘Did you want something, Kit?’

‘Lachlan, please.’

‘Oh, okay – Lachlan.’

‘It was my birthday a while ago. In March,’ he says. ‘I’m sixteen now.’

‘Oh, well – happy birthday.’

'Ta,' he shifts his feet about. 'Um . . . so, Seanne, can we, like, go somewhere and talk?'

'Okay. . . ' And then despite my previous experiences with him, I add, 'want to come back to my place?'

He raises his eyebrow at me, a disbelieving, wary look on his face.

'You'd let me . . .? Even after . . .?'

I nod and begin to walk off, letting him decide if he wants to follow.

At my door, I invite him in. He glances around and stands still, procrastinating near the entrance.

'Oh, take a seat,' I say, 'Do you want a drink?'

'Just water. Taa.'

I busy myself with water, coffee, keeping a firm eye on him. I needn't have worried, he doesn't move, keeping his hands folded neatly in his lap.

I hand him the water and sit opposite him, cagey about being too close to him — my passions already too near the surface. I drink my coffee, allowing it to singe my tongue.

'Can I smoke?' he says, motioning to the ashtray, his fingernails once again painted black.

I nod.

As he moves, the sleeve of his black T-shirt rides up a little, exposing the bottom of a tattoo.

'You've got a tattoo?' I ask.

'Oh, yeah,' he says, pushing his sleeve up higher, showing me the entire image — a Celtic symbol of knots surrounding a spiral.

'What's it mean?'

He looks over it.

'It's called an Atras — it means transformation,' he says and smiles, his beautiful dimple forming in his cheek.

'Oh. Had it long?'

'Month or so. The tattooist I draw for — Zak — he put it on me. Figured I can't expect others to get inked if I'm not, you know?'

'Yeah . . . hey wait, you draw? For a tattooist?'

'Yeah.'

He blushes.

'You draw well then?'

'Yeah, I guess. Zak thinks I'm amazing; he keeps giving me different things to do. Ads for the shop and stuff. He's teaching me to ink too — identifying needle sizes, mixing colours — but I gotta be eighteen before I can work on anyone. It pays shit, but it's honest, you know?' he pauses. 'I don't do that other stuff anymore.'

He avoids my eyes, lights up.

'How come?'

He shrugs.

'Don't matter . . . I just don't. And about that shit . . . look, I'm sorry I messed up your flat. I expected you to get the cops on me but you didn't. That was decent of you.'

'It's okay, Kit . . . um . . . Lachlan. I kind of deserved it.'

'Yeah, you did.'

Silence.

'And I don't live at the rail-car no more, so you might want to stop dropping shit off.'

'Oh, okay.'

He looks me up and down, those green eyes settling on me intensely.

'You know, that thing with you fucked with my head a while, but I wanted you to know I'm cool with you now.'

I meet his gaze, smile at him.

'Thank you,' I say, 'and I'm sorry I —'

'Forget it,' he grins at me, his old impish grin. 'Water. Bridge. All that shit . . . but I oughta go. I only wanted to tell you that 'cause I thought maybe you needed to hear it or something.'

He stands, butts out his cigarette and walks to the door. I follow him, engulfed by his scent of soap and men's deodorant.

'Um . . . Lachlan?'

'Yeah?'

'Can I hug you?'

He smiles widely.

'Sure.'

I reach toward him, wrap my arms under his and rub my chin on his shoulder. I squeeze him gently. He sighs — and then I feel it, his lips against my neck. I kiss his shoulder and he breaks the cuddle. He kisses my mouth — gentle, sensual. I respond to his kisses and he to me; his cock stiffens

against me. I run my hands down his back, stopping before his arse, resisting the urge to go further. I let him make the moves.

His hand inches up my side, over my spare tire and onto my breast. He cups it in his hand. His lips never leave mine. I feel his tongue explore my mouth, softly probing, no sense of urgency, merely experiencing my mouth against his. He tickles my breast with his fingers. I run my hand across his groin.

He stops, steps back, stares at me — gone is that usual hard defiance, that steeling look he carried in his eyes, as if bracing himself for the next stage.

‘You want to?’ he says and I nod, flicking my eyes towards the bedroom.

I sit on the bed and positions himself next to me. He kisses me, stroking my face and we fall backwards. He lets me undress him. I kiss his new scars, his tattoo, the freckles across his shoulders. He returns my kisses, stripping me slowly, his eyes scanning my body. We spend seconds, minutes, hours kissing each other — exploring, tickling, massaging, caressing. We touch, kiss and lick until we’re both ready to explode.

I spread my legs for him.

‘I ain’t got . . . I mean I don’t carry them anymore.’

‘Them?’

‘Condoms.’

‘Oh,’ I say, my body hot with need, ‘Well, I’m okay with it, if you are.’

He nods.

‘I’m clean, you know,’ he says.

‘I know.’

He moves between my legs and enters me. I allow myself to sink into the mattress, tingling from the sensation of him inside me again. He thrusts in and out deeply, slowly, kissing me continuously.

‘Lachlan,’ I breathe against his shoulder, into his skin and he sighs my name in response, entwines his fingers with mine.

He penetrates me leisurely, making sure I cum before he allows himself relief.

Afterwards, I turn to him, wrap my legs around him and bring his body close. He smiles at me, meets my eye. Previously, he would shun direct eye

contact, busy himself with post-sex clean up and wouldn't look at me again until the sex demanded it.

I lean forward and kiss him, his body flushed and beautiful beside me. I trace his scars with my fingers. He lifts up one of my hands and brings it to his mouth, kissing my finger tips, staring at me the entire time.

'That was new for us, huh?' he says.

'Yeah. It was almost like . . . '

'Making love?'

I nod, now unable to look at *him*.

He places his hand under my chin and lifts my head.

'That's because I wasn't being your whore and you a john. We were just us, Seanne. You know, I'm trying hard to be just me. It's kinda weird after being "Kit" for so long and I adopted so many of his habits — stealing, talking slack, lying, you name it. But I guess that's the trouble with pretending to be someone else; after a while you forget who you are and the fake you becomes real.' He sighs, 'It's been hard, but I'm starting to getting used to being Lachlan again. It's like I'm getting to know me all over again, you know?'

'Yeah, I understand. But I like you either way.'

He chuckles.

'Of course you do, we both know how to make you glow.' He winks at me. 'But seriously, Seanne, Kit's behind me now and if you want to get to know me, you have to forget that part of my life. You have to realise I'm Lachlan, not Kit. I'm no-one's whore anymore and I won't — I can't — go back there again.'

'What the hell happened to you?' I whisper.

His eyes cloud, that haunted look reappears.

'I'm not going to tell you about that, Seanne — but let's just say it woke me up. Hard. A lot of it's still raw and hard to talk about, so, no more questions about that, okay?'

'Okay.'

'I got one for you, though.'

'Yeah?'

'And I want you to be honest . . . don't just say what you think I want to hear. Promise?'

'Okay. Promise.'

'Do you think you can let Kit go?'

Silence. I let the seconds tick while I think and then I answer him;

'I don't know. I kind of like him — like you — as Kit.'

He smiles at me sadly.

'I didn't think you could,' he says, quietly.

He frees himself from my embrace and swings himself out of bed. He dresses silently. I watch him for the last time. What else is there to say? I'm not interested in loving him and my passion is for Kit, not Lachlan. Without the perversity he can bring, what's the point?

I sigh and he glances down at me.

'It's been . . . well . . . interesting knowing you, Seanne. You take care, okay?'

'You too. Bye . . . Lachlan.'

He kisses me again, then waves at me over his shoulder as he leaves.

I roll onto my back and close my eyes.

I don't even shed a tear.

For a little while, after the big goodbye, life goes on as usual. I go work, I go to class, I snap photos and I go to bed alone, the sheets cold against my skin.

I often dream of you.

In these dreams, I see you in the distance, your finger curled, beckoning me and I run to you. I run hard and fast, my legs like pistons, surging me forwards. I run through streets and paddocks and buildings and along never-ending streets. But I always wake up before I get to you, the bed cold beside me and not even my pillow smells of your perfume anymore.

I'm poring over my photos, deciding which one to scrap, when I hear a knock at my door. I stand, legs stiff from sitting in the one position for so long, bum numb. I hobble to the door and open it, stop dead. Everything inside me slows, until I can almost feel my blood clogging my veins. And I stare, my mouth a gaping 'O'.

You stand on my doorstep, dressed in a short tartan skirt, sheer black stockings and a black short sleeved shirt. On your feet are black boots with large square buckles and your hair is tied back in a tiny taut ponytail. Your eyes are lined with black and your lips red.

It's been almost a year since I last saw you and I stand still, hypnotised, unable to shift my gaze. I feel like I'm locked in a coma, unable to move, but aware of every sound, every movement around me.

And then you speak, your voice a personal resurrection.

'Hi,' you say. 'You going to invite me in?'

'S-Sure.' I step back and wave you inside.

You walk past me and you smell like vanilla and frankincense, like the possibility of redemption.

'You look great,' you say, scanning me hungrily.

'Oh thanks, you too,' I say, touching my hair. 'So, do you want a coffee?'

'Sure. I like your hair like that.'

'Thanks.' Pause. 'You still drink it black?'

'Yes. Do you want a hand?'

'No, I've got it.' Another pause, 'Shall I show you around while the kettle boils?'

'Okay.'

I walk you around the house and you stop at *Domestic Bliss*, raising your eyebrows at me.

'Oh, I took those.'

'Really?' you say, curious, genuine.

'Yeah, I took them as part of my TAFE course.'

'You're doing a course?'

'Yeah, a diploma in mixed media photography. I enrolled after I moved.'

'Wow.' This time you pause. Your 'wow' reminds me of Dayton and for the first time, I see family connections, something you share other than blood and a last name. 'What made you pick photography?'

'I don't know, it's just something I thought I could do and I love it.' I feel myself starting to babble but I can't halt my words, they course like an avalanche, covering us both. 'And even though we're doing mixed stuff, I really love the stills. I'm thinking of saving up some money to build my own

darkroom even. Then I wouldn't have to use the TAFE one all the time. Other students can be so nasty, getting shitty about the stupidest things but if I had my own, I could work whenever I couldn't sleep. You know how I can't sleep sometimes.'

You nod.

'And what do you need for a darkroom?' you say, subtle conspiracy igniting behind your eyes.

'Oh, um . . . solutions, trays, black light, that sort of stuff. But what I really want is this camera I saw, but it's like four thousand bucks. It has all these amazing functions — zoom and streaming video, red eye reduction and so many other functions, I can't even begin to imagine what I could do with them all. Oh! And it's fully computer compatible, so I could even — ' I stop suddenly, aware of the stretch on your lips, the sparkle in your eyes. 'Are you laughing at me?'

'No, no. Not at all. It's just great to see you so happy. It's been a while since I've seen that in you.'

'Oh. Want to see what I'm working on now?'

'Okay.'

I take you into the spare room and open my folio of photos. You flick through them slowly, asking me where I took them, where I found the models, how many photos I take, how often I take them. I answer all your questions, and you smile at me, a look of budding pride on your face.

Then, you touch my arm and ask me where the toilet is. I feel a lighting bolt of emotion flash through me, curling my toes in their shoes. I show you which door it is and you gently close it behind you. I exhale nosily, trying to recompose myself before I walk back into the kitchen and pour us coffee. Inside, I'm jittery, surging with nerves.

When you re-enter the room, I'm seated at the kitchen table, coffee mug in front of me, cigarette behind my fingers, sitting in my best 'I'm-together' pose.

'I like those fish,' you say, 'did you do that?'

'No, they were here when I moved in.'

'Oh,' you say and take a seat. 'I like them, they're unusual. So, what's your latest creation?'

'Oh. A house being demolished. I've been taking photos of it everyday, tracking the progress. I'm developing them in sepia to get that older

look. But I'm not sure what I'll call it yet even though I've got the backing already. I've been nicking bits and pieces from the site so I can implant them in the photo, mix it up a little. I've developed some pre-shots and I'm just fucking around with how to integrate the two.'

I stop, realising I'm talking at record speed, as if I've been let loose in the coffee jar and its effects are just taking hold. I take a deep breath, breathe slowly, try to calm my racing mind.

'Can I see them when you're done?'

'Sure, if you want.'

'I really like that other piece, the domestic one. It's stunning, Seanne. Really. You're very good.'

'You really think so?'

'I do,' you pause, 'And it's great to see you so . . . enthralled with something. It makes you glow.' I notice your use of the word 'glow'; two lovers, same word, I think – how interesting.

'Thanks,' I say, a grin spreading over my lips.

Silence. I gulp down my coffee. You flick your eyes around the kitchen.

'What happened to your other stuff?'

'Stolen.'

'Oh, yes, I remember. You left me a message.'

You look slightly embarrassed, and I scramble for something to say, to ease your discomfort.

'So, Lys, what have you been up to? You look . . . amazing.'

'Oh, I've started swimming every morning . . . um . . . And I got a promotion, that keeps me fairly busy. Damien was livid, especially since I got the office down the hall from the CEO. Oh, and I go to this women's group every second Sunday. But other than that, not much. I'm still boring.'

'You were never boring, Lys.'

You smile slightly, but don't respond, instead you say:

'I got your flowers, by the way. They were lovely.'

'You really like them?'

'Of course, I love gerberas.'

'I thought you might've thrown them out.'

'Well, at first. But then they kept coming, so now they're in a vase on my desk.'

'I'm glad you like them.'

'Oh, speaking of flowers – Addison's getting married.'

'What? When? How?'

'My thoughts exactly. Even Dayton didn't know. Apparently Ad and this chick have been on and off for years. Of course, none of us are allowed to meet her until the wedding, so that's going to be a load of fun.'

'And when's that?'

'September. Cynthia wants a spring wedding,' you roll your eyes, 'the *unknown* blushing bride. What a blast.'

'So, you're going?'

'No. Ad wants a small wedding. Mum and Dad only. Toni is devastated. *She's* not even involved in it.'

'That's rough.'

'That's Addison. He's always been a selfish shit.'

'Did you want to go?'

'Oh, hell no! I hate weddings, especially family weddings. They're so dull. Everyone on their best behaviour, whispering behind their hands. None of them brave enough to say it out loud. Everyone's learnt to shut up and not say anything directly to anyone. It's all perfectly respectable.'

'You don't miss it?'

'The bitchiness? No.'

'No, I meant your family.'

'Dayton, yes, but the rest, not really,' you pause. 'What are you grinning at?'

'That's the first time you've really spoken to me about your family.'

'No, it's not.'

'Yes, it is.'

You open your mouth to say something, then close it again. Your expression changes from belligerence to realisation. You say nothing, picking pale blue nail polish off your fingers, creating a small pile of discarded nail polish in front of you.

I take a deep breath, swallow silently. I'm apprehensive about the next topic, but I tire of this skirting around — of the obvious ignorance of the one topic of most importance between us.

'Lys, do you think we should talk about what happened?'

'Probably.'

'But. . . ?'

'But I don't know if I want to hear it. It's taken me a long time to get to this point; to be able to see you.'

'So, do you want to forget about it then?'

'I can't do that either.'

'Then what?'

'I don't know, Seanne,' you say, standing up, hands on hips. You lean against the sink. 'I really don't know. I don't even know what I'm doing here.'

'I'm glad you came. I've missed you.'

'Maybe that's the problem, I've missed you too. I don't think I've forgiven you, but I've missed you.'

'So, where do we go from here?'

You shrug.

'I don't know if could ever trust you again. Do you still . . . see him?'

'No. Not anymore . . .'

You look down and when you look up at me, your eyes are dull.

'You were seen with him, in the city, outside a pinnie parlour.'

'By who?'

'Does it matter?'

'It does to me.'

You sigh.

'Damien saw you. He described who you were with and I knew it was *him*.'

I stare at you, surprised.

'Damien saw us?'

'Yes . . . You sound surprised.'

'Well . . . I am. It's usually Devin. He seems to do a lot of spying on me.'

'He doesn't spy.'

'Yes, he does,' I say, forcefully, sure of myself, burning with indignation. 'And he reports it all back to you. Sometimes I think he does it so he can have to you all to himself.'

'Don't be stupid, Seanne. Dev and I are not like that.'

'You may not be, but he is. He's got a major hard-on for you.'

'Bullshit.'

'Then why does he take so much glee in reporting back to you? And what's his favourite saying? Manipulate, separate, conquer. That doesn't just relate to others, you know, he uses it against us too. In fact, he's always deliberately highlighted my failures to try and split us up — just so he can have you all to himself, like he always has, like he did when you were kids. He's done it all through our relationship and given the chance, he'll do it to the next girl you date too.'

'That's a little dramatic, don't you think, Seanne?'

'No.'

'You're saying he's . . . What? . . . Played us?'

'Yes.'

'Because he wants me.'

'Yes,' I say, exasperated; now that I've started this, I can't stop the flow of thoughts. 'But mostly because he's jealous. He's always been your number one. Even with your other women, he was first. But then we got together and suddenly he had to take a backseat. He doesn't like that, Lys, you know that. Devin has to be the centre of everything or he sulks like a child. All his tales about me had nothing to do with loyalty but jealousy.' I pause. 'Like all the times we've gone out, we go to places I don't know and you and Devin muck around while I sit quiet in the corner and wait for it to be over. He does it to put me at a disadvantage and that way he's got your full attention. He doesn't have to share you then. And he's been busting his arse to make it happen — permanently. Only Cooper fucked it up first. But every other time, it's him.'

'Wow,' you say, and retake your seat. You light another cigarette and blow it up towards the ceiling. 'Maybe you're right. But that still doesn't excuse the fact you're still seeing that whore.'

'Yes, I saw him. I had to. I had to see him, to talk to him.'

'You just talked?'

'Yes. He walked off on me. Nothing else happened.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'And you've not seen him since?'

I consider lying, but dismiss it, Kit's words 'the trouble with pretending. . . ' echoing in my mind.

'Yes. Once.'

'And?'

'And we said goodbye. He's gone from my life now, Lys. I promise.'

You cross your arms over your chest.

'Did you fuck him?'

'Yes.'

'And you used condoms?'

'Then or the last time?'

'Both.'

'Well . . . mostly.'

'Mostly?'

'Well, a couple of times, we didn't — '

'Seanne! Are you mad? Do you know what you could have gotten?'

'Yes and I don't . . . I mean I didn't, get anything.'

'How do you know that?'

'I've been tested since.'

'Oh,' pause. 'Well, I suppose that's something.' Another pause. 'And you haven't seen him since?'

'No.'

'I really want to believe you, Seanne. . . '

'And I don't blame you for not, but it's the truth. I don't even like him anymore.'

You look at me with hopeful, hurtful eyes, your stance slumped as if expecting another bombshell.

I open my mouth and you shake your head.

'Coffee first,' you say. 'Something tells me I'm going to need a shitload of it before this is over.'

I stand and you motion for me to remain seated, telling me you've got it. I watch you lift the kettle, shove the spout under the tap and run water into the kettle's open mouth. You body moves like the water itself — flowing, wafting, fluid. You plug it back in and flick the switch. Then you walk to the table, pluck two cigarettes from your packet and out of habit, light both and hand me one. I smile as I take it, put the filter softly between my lips — the slight moisture from your lips mixing with mine. I drag in deeply, imagining I'm breathing in you and when I exhale, I shudder with the thought of being that close to you again.

You make coffee and put one before me. You take a quick sip of yours — quick enough to taste it, not big enough to burn your tongue. You sit, lean forward, arms crossed on the top of the table, still and mystifying.

‘So . . . ?’ you say.

‘Um . . . Before I start, I have to tell you something — ’

‘You’re pregnant,’ you say, your voice flat like paper.

‘No!’ I say, astonished. ‘Who told you that?’

‘No-one.’

‘Then what makes you think that?’

You shrug, cross your arms over your chest, say nothing.

‘Well, I’m not pregnant.’

‘Okay, then what?’ you stare at me, your head slightly titled.

You have that look on your face like you’re hardening yourself against a major onslaught. I realise that despite not knowing your past, I can still read your present. The thought warms me inside.

‘Dayton came and saw one once.’

‘Dayton? My Dayton?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know really. She asked why I cheated, and talked about when you left Sydney. Then you rang and she left not long after.’

You make a pffting sound in your throat and then you say:

‘What a fun year “coming out” was. Anyone would think I died or something, the way they carried on.’

‘I think that’s how she felt.’

‘I know. She told me. At first she wanted me to apologise for being gay but over the past few years, she’s been apologising to me. Once she severed Daddy’s control and saw more of the world, she started to change. She started to realise Daddy way was not the world’s way. Addison, however . . . ’

‘I noticed.’

Silence, I think about my own brother, with a baby on the way while yours is still Daddy’s boy and forever a child in his own way. I shake my head, thoughts of the males around us swirling through my mind. They flash like slides, one after the other, Damien, Addison, Cooper, my Dad, Devin and lastly, painfully, Kit — all of them making a pastiche of disappointment,

obscurity, humiliation, jealousy and contempt. I realise that these men are single flashing lights around us, while you, you are a steady beam.

'I'm sorry for what I did with him, Lys. Really I am.'

You sigh.

'Are you sorry you got caught or sorry for doing it?'

'Well, at first, I was sorry I got caught, but now I'm sorry for all of it. I never really thought about what I was doing and what it meant. I just did it because it felt good and it was daring and different and sexy and because it was so secret. I didn't think about how it would hurt you or what it would do to us.'

'You know, out of everything you could have done, that surprised me. I never picked you for cheating. Some people you can just tell are players but you . . . well you never gave me that impression. You hid it so well. I guess that's why I was so pissed for so long, part of me felt stupid for not seeing it earlier. I mean, I've watched Daddy do it for years, I should've known.' You pause. 'I think deep down I knew anyway.'

'You *knew*?'

'Yes, I've thought a lot about this and I think I knew. And you two getting it on — in a way — it was my fault too. I knew I wasn't "there" for you — not in a real sense anyway. I figured, if I could just get through this next month at work, then I'll work on it. But then the next thing came up and the next and the next — and slowly I saw that light die in your eyes. But then when I came back from Queensland, that light was there, bright as a button. I didn't question why it was there, I was just content to have you stare at me like that again, like you used to.'

'I don't look at you like that anymore?'

'No, not for a long time. We weren't always . . . bad. We used to be so good together.'

'I think maybe it started when we began to shut each other out.'

'Yeah, when we stopped putting each other first.'

'Lys, this wasn't your fault, you didn't do it. I did.'

'I know and you have to deal with that. But I contributed, if I hadn't stopped paying attention, then maybe you wouldn't have gone there. You never would have had to.'

'Maybe . . .'

'You don't seem sure?'

'I don't know if I believe that. I mean, somewhere along the line, I made a choice to cheat, I don't think that had anything to do with you. It had to do with me feeling like I needed more — '

'More than what I was giving you,' you say forcefully, your voice coarse like sand. 'We're both so stupid.'

'Yeah, we are. So, now what?'

'I don't know, Seanne. I really don't.'

'Well, I know I want you in my life. I want you around me and I'll accept however much involvement you'll give me. I'll do whatever I can to make you see that because, I know, really *know*, that I'll love you. And even though we may never date again, I want to be friends with you.'

'I don't know if I can do that, Seanne. The friends, the relationship or any of it. I don't know if I can ever trust you again.'

'Well, if you decide you can, I'll be waiting.'

'Shit, Seanne, that sounds final.'

'It is. I'm finally aware of what I want and where I am. I'm not hiding from any of this anymore, Lys. I'm tackling it head on and fuck worrying about what ifs.'

'Whatever Elliot is doing to you, it must be good.'

'We're not fucking.'

'I didn't think you were.'

'Oh. It's just your tone — '

'See what I mean, Seanne? We're still too suspicious of each other. I don't know if it'll ever work again between us.'

'So, that's it? This is the end?'

'It appears that way.'

'But before you said. . . '

'Yeah, I know. But now. . . '

You stand and hold your hand out to me. I take it and step closer to you. You enclose my hand inside yours and you stare straight into my eyes. You brush a strand of hair out of my face and then — with eyes open — you lean forward and brush your lips gently against mine. I'm about to respond when you take your lips away, leaving behind the memory of other, more passionate kisses. You step back, lick your lips and gather your stuff.

'Goodbye Seanne,' you say. 'I love you, but goodbye.'

I nod, gulp, unable to speak.

You walk away from me and close the door behind you. I stare in hope of it reopening but it doesn't. And when I hear your car speed off, I allow myself to fall to the floor, my knees buckling under me. I cry.

I cry until my chest hurts and I can hardly breathe. I cry until I can't shed anymore tears and I feel dead inside. Then I sit in silence and chainsmoke.

I take the next day off uni, my eyes red rimmed and sore. I arrange with Sonja to get the class notes and with several garbage bags in hand, I head into the garden and begin to yank weeds — roots and all — from the earth.

As I yank, I spray dirt over the place, like a digging dog, tossing long stalks over my shoulder, in the direction of the lopsided opening of a garbage bag. I work steadily and obsessively until the sun slips behind the horizon and I can no longer separate the weeds from the plants. My hands are red, blistered, covered in wounds.

In the semi-darkness, I peer at my handiwork, seven bags of weeds and debris piled up against the side of the house. The yard appears bare — the remaining plants fragile and sparse. My stomach and upper arms seize and cramp, cuts and scratches plague my arms, my legs, my face — I hurt and ache and sting all over.

With the last of my energy, I fill buckets of water and pour them around the base of each remaining vine, shrub, bush. I touch each one gently, apologising for the disruption and hoping them the best.

When I return inside, my machine flashes at me. I press 'play' and Mrs Hindleburg's concerned voice filters out, asking me if I'm okay as she hasn't seen me all day.

I call her.

'No, nothing's wrong . . . I just lost track of time. I was gardening.'

'You didn't go to school today?'

'No . . . I took the day off . . . I, um, saw my ex yesterday — '

'Ah, say no more. Physical therapy is always good for the soul.'

'Not for the body though,' I say, chuckling.

'That's easy enough fixed. You go draw a bath and soak, and tomorrow, you come over for dinner and I'll refuel your body.'

'I'd love to,' I say, smiling down the phone.

'Now go and I'll see you tomorrow, six o' clock.'

'Okay, thank you Mrs Hindelburg.'

'Elizabeth, please. Mrs Hindelburg sounds so formal and I think we're a little beyond that now, don't you, Seanne?'

'Yeah . . . Thank you . . . Elizabeth.'

'Goodnight, Seanne.'

'Night, Mrs . . . Elizabeth.'

I hang up. I think about a bath and decide against it. Instead, weary, I throw myself on my bed and fully clothed, sleep, exhausted but dreaming.

I dream I'm back home, wandering about the local fair, looking for lavender boiled lollies. I search every stall, asking vaguely familiar people where the lavender guy is. They all point me towards a large yellow tent, smoke billowing from the top of it. I walk towards it slowly, people moving out of my way as I do, their faces locked in fear.

I stand before the tent, drag back the heavy yellow material. A greasy, sticky substance covers on my fingers and I wipe my hands against my pants, leaving a dull white stain down my leg. I try to rub the stain away but it doesn't move, instead, it seeps deeper into the material. My leg begins to ache, my flesh to burn. I hear the sizzle of my flesh as it sears.

And suddenly, I'm in my parent's kitchen, Mum bustling about the stove, Dad with feet up on the table, reading, a toddler-sized Cooper wheeling a truck back and forth on the lino. Mum turns to me.

'Oh hi, honey. How was your day? What happened to your leg?'

I look down, my leg a mess of burnt flesh and exposed muscle.

'Here,' she says, 'Put this on it.'

She hands me a tea towel, motioning for me to wrap it around my leg. I obey, tying a make-shift tourniquet.

'Dinner will be ready soon. Is your friend coming?'

'My friend?' I say, confusion cloaking me.

'Yes. That girl you told me about, the one from the cemetery.'

'Cemetery?'

'Yes, Seanne, the cemetery.'

'Why did I meet a girl at a cemetery?'

'Oh, I don't know, honey. You said she liked the flowers.'

'Flowers?'

Mum huffs.

'Oh, really Seanne. She's *your* friend. Do I have to explain everything?'

'Let me,' says Cooper, standing, hitching up his Scooby Doo pants with his chubby toddler fingers. 'You killed her inside. But she's still coming to dinner. Now we're all going to see, we're all going to know.'

With child hands, he reaches behind himself and pulls out a small burgundy make-up bag. He unzips it carefully and giggles, his face full of glee. He pulls out a small plastic packet with white powder, a spoon, a syringe. He prepares his heroin, pumping his arm and feeling for a vein. Mum claps her hands as he plunges the needle into his baby flesh, blood drawing up into the syringe. Dad stands, gives him a standing ovation and I watch as his pupils dilate and he slumps back against the wall. Mum and Dad cheer and beam proud smiles at each other.

'What a good boy!'

'What are you all doing?' I say, my voice a tiny pip inside my throat.

'Celebrating!'

'But he just shot up!'

'Oh, we know,' says Dad, 'we've always known. You didn't have to tell us. It's just he never killed anyone.'

'I never — '

'Yes, you did.'

I turn and look across the table. You sit there, your body a seeping wound of decomposition, decaying slowly before my eyes.

'See what you did?' Mum says.

Cooper points his finger at me, laughing.

You look up at me, one eyeball hanging out its socket, your face falling apart before me. I begin to scream, my voice shattering the crockery, the windows, Mum's tacky figurines. A sliver of window pane shoots towards me and hits me in the shoulder, I recoil and the wound opens. A hand with black painted nails begins to protrude from the gash, pushing itself out of the wound.

I scream again, my throat constricting, lungs emptying.

I scream and scream and scream

And then I wake, my sheets a mess, the sweat off my body staining the mattress underneath, one shoulder pinned underneath me. I stare into the

darkness, then flick on the bedside lamp and I write everything down in my dream journal for Elliot. I record just the images, without analysis and close the book.

Then I wait for sunrise to filter through the blinds and hope that the light not only evaporates the darkness outside.

I spend next the few weeks in a state of constant longing, persistent obsession.

I go to the library and borrow every book I can on covert surveillance and read them cover to cover, jotting down hints as I go. I scrounge around op-shops and discount stores, buying wigs, hats, clothes I'd normally never wear and assemble a wardrobe in direct contrast to my usual look. I drift in and out of clearance centres, buying a diary, photo albums, large pieces of cardboard, disposable cameras.

At home, I dedicate a wall to you. I rummage through all my belongings, pinning everything I find that reminds me of you to the large cardboard squares. I surround them all with photos of you, photos of our better days — the western theme we posed for at Sovereign Hill, the professional photos you had done for work, the endless poses you moulded you body into at Devin's parties.

After two weeks of preparation, my head aching from all the information I've absorbed, I decide it's time to get proactive.

I dress slowly, squeezing my body into the girdle I brought, changing the shape of my hips, the swell of my belly. I tape my breasts down, giving myself a C cup, instead of my ample double Ds. I drag jeans on, slide a bright pink shirt over my torso and 'finish' the look with a brown suede jacket. Then I wander into the bathroom. I tuck my hair under a dirty blond wig and hold it down with pink bandana. I slip my feet into flat brown loafers and apply foundation to my face, changing my skin tone. I drag pink eye-shadow over my eyes and brown lipstick over my lips.

I look at myself in the mirror, turning my body about. A stranger stares back at me — almost a perfect opposite to my usual self. I admire this strange me a little longer, adding small touches here and there; jewellery around the wrists, a scarf around the neck, further disguising myself.

Satisfied, I venture out — a small backpack tucked over my shoulder.

I head to your work. I lurk around your building, peering at you from behind bins, A-frames, crowds. I watch you walk in and out of your building, smoke cigarettes, go for lunch and pace up and down the street, barking orders down the phone. Every time you appear, I use a disposable camera to snap photos of you, trying to capture you from every angle.

I watch as you farewell your work for the day. I hail a taxi and follow you home.

I conceal myself near your house, watching as you open the mail, read the letters, a slight sad smile on your face. I take more photos. I watch you cook — sometimes your head turning in my direction as if aware of being watched, but you don't see me. I watch, camera clicking, until you turn the lights off at night.

I creep away from your place, plant my arse on a bench and I write my observations down in my diary. I tuck the camera into a large envelope and label it 'Day one'. I pack everything back into my backpack and return to my own home.

The following day, once I'm free of uni, I repeat my surveillance. I do it again the day after, and the day after that — my photo collection building; my notebook a quarter filled with scribbles. Whenever I'm free, I watch.

One Friday night, after work, I watch you venture to a restaurant with Devin and a woman I dimly remember from Devin's parties. I peer at you from the restaurant across the road, your table firmly in my sight. I observe you laugh, touch Devin's hand and then I see her — Tea-Light — as she floats up to your table and sits down.

You laugh and peck her lips. I glower with jealousy, my eyes absorbing every detail. Devin hands you a menu and you and Tea-Light snuggle close. You run your fingers down the items. A waitress appears and you smile up at her, your arm slipping around Tea-Light. I gulp down a glass of water, almost choking on the liquid. Bitch.

Orders taken, the waitress wanders off and you four talk. I can't read your lips, but whatever Devin is saying makes you smile widely, then playfully throw a napkin at him. He pokes his tongue at you and winks. The woman beside him — her back to me — leans towards him, whispers something in his ear and she disappears from view. Devin speaks and you nod. He follows her, leaving you and Tea-Light alone.

You turn towards her, your face close to hers. You run your hand over her face and she smiles at you, your lips moving. She shakes her head and you grin, kissing her cheek. She takes your hand and holds it on top of the table. You talk. I sip more water, watching, eyes focused hard on Tea-Light's body language. Whatever you're saying, she's lapping it up, her body open and inviting — wanting you to explore it.

My own waiter appears, placing my pasta dish on the table. He lifts the empty jug without a word and replaces it with a full one. I thank him and he smiles, ambles off.

I turn my attention back to you — Devin and his date now back at the table. You fumble beside you and you hand him a box. He stands, grabbing it over the table. I open my diary, check the date. Devin's birthday. I'm surprised you're not at his place, unless, of course, it's tomorrow night and tonight is just for you and him.

He opens the box, all beaming radiant smiles. He passes the package around the table. He stands, moves over to you and leans down, kissing your lips. I can't see what you gave him, but whatever it is, everyone smiles, nodding at you, impressed expressions on their faces.

Your food arrives and I watch you and Tea-Light eat off each other's plates. And suddenly, I feel the need to pee. I look about quickly, cross my legs, but the need becomes urgent. I stand abruptly, gather my stuff and rush to the toilet, the other patrons staring at me as I flee.

Inside the cubicle, I fumble with the jeans, the girdle, their construction not made for quick removal. I'm reminded of similar fumbblings in Devin's bathroom, the two of us still a couple, Kit still my playmate. I wish I was there now. I jiggle about, reaching between my legs to unclip the girdle's hooks.

I sit — at last — and pee.

Spend just as much time redressing — anxious to get back to my watch, to resume my post — impatient with the time it takes. I swear and curse and slam my hand against the wall before I'm dressed.

I exit the cubicle, quickly re-fix my make-up and hair in the mirror, wash my hands and scurry back to my table.

I peer across the road.

You're still there, drinking wine, face pink with alcohol. Tea-Light is beside you, your hand on her thigh, her upper arms touching yours.

I watch you all through dessert and while you indulge in after dinner drinks. I watch you present Devin with a cake and lick the icing off your fingers. I watch until you all stand and disappear from view. I assume you're going to pay.

I follow cue, paying my bill with crinkled, faded notes, leaving a small five dollar tip.

I walk out into the street mere moments after you. You hold Tea-Light's hand in yours, Devin and his date behind you. I follow you, dropping behind two Asian women, straining to hear the conversation.

' . . . he was impressed,' Devin says.

'So, he sold a bit?' you ask.

'Yeah, more than expected actually. He even got a commission from it. Four paintings for some wog's new offices.'

'Ah, good for him,' you touch his arm. 'It's not too late for you, Dev.'

He baulks at the idea.

'Oh! You paint?' says the Date.

Devin mumbles something in response.

'Oh, don't be coy, Dev. Yes, he paints. He's even got some talent.'

'That depends who you ask,' he scowls.

'For fuck's sake, Dev, you're still not bitter about that, are you?'

He doesn't answer, firing a dark look in your direction.

'So, what kind of things do you paint?' Tea-Light asks, gently.

'Did paint. And people mostly.'

'Especially nudes . . . whenever he got the chance!' you say.

You titter. Devin wraps his arms around the Date's waist.

'So, want to pose for me?' he leers at her.

'Depends.'

'On what?'

'What's in it for me?'

'The best night of your life!'

'You said that last time,' she smirks, 'and I have to say, I'm still waiting.'

She chuckles.

'Oh!' Devin says, pounding his chest with his hand, 'you wound me.'

He drops to his knees, in the middle of the street, the Asian women I'm hiding behind stepping around him. I quickly duck into an alley, peeking around the corner.

'I'm a broken man,' Devin says.

'You're an idiot man,' you say and offer him your hand. He takes it. He stands, dusting his knees off.

'So, where to now? My place?' he asks. 'That is, if my ego can handle the drive home. I'm shattered, I tell you.'

You start to move forward again, towards the car parks.

'Hardly. Your ego could handle a drive to Queensland, Dev.'

He turns to Tea-Light.

'See how she treats me? Like some idiot step-child.'

'Well, if you didn't act like one . . . ' says the Date.

'Oi!'

Laughter all around.

'So, my place? More wine, more food . . . maybe some herbal relief?'

'Sounds good.'

'Um . . . I can't,' says Tea-Light. 'I have to have an early night. I have family commitments tomorrow.'

'You sure?' you say to her, your eyes wide.

'Yes. But I'll come tomorrow night.'

'Okay then,' you say.

You kiss her. I count the seconds, three, five, ten. Not a friend kiss. Toothpick bitch.

Devin and the Date say their goodbyes and at the corner, you, Devin and the Date go left, Tea-Light right.

I decide to follow her. I follow her half a block until she heads into the 7-Eleven. I watch her grab a bottle of water, a packet of chewing gum and pay.

As she walks out, I deliberately bump into her, sticking my foot out as she loses balance. She trips, falls hard, face first; her purse and purchases skidding out in front of her.

I stare down at her. Her slender, slightly grazed face peers up at me. She's confused, alarmed, surprised . . . and she's trying to place if she knows me. Time to move on.

'Fucking slut,' I hiss and step around her, leaving her on her knees, gathering her stuff alone.

I hope whatever Devin has planned this year, she's too wounded to attend – even if it's just her pride.

A week later, Sonja drags me away from my surveillance and forces me out. She has a date and wants a 'wing-woman' in case it goes badly.

Sonja babbles as we walk down Little Bourke Street, towards the place her date has chosen. She tells me how nervous she is, how she couldn't believe he liked her. She tells me all the things she's already told me — that she met him in the bank queue, him behind her and he dropped his wallet and she turned as he bent to pick it up. She tells me how his eyes smiled as he did and that they spoke about old literature and new music. They exchanged email addresses and they've mailed each other every day for three weeks since. She tells me all of this without taking a breath and grins at me self-consciously when I smile back at her.

'Do I look okay?' Sonja says.

I nod, having answered this already and a flashback powers through my mind, me telling you you're gorgeous, as we walked into restaurants, parties, halls and Devin's loft. I remember your need to be reassured you that no matter who Devin had on his arm, you were — still are — the most beautiful woman in the room. I think about how carefully you chose your clothes, as if dressing for him rather than for yourself. I remember your nervousness before he saw you, before he nodded his approval and threw his sweeping glance over you — me forgotten as he drank you in and murmured in your ears.

I sigh.

'You with me?' Sonja says, suddenly.

'Yes. Sorry.'

'Where were you?'

'Thinking about Lys, sorry.'

'So, what happened between you two anyway? I've been meaning to ask, but it hasn't come up for a while.'

‘Um . . . that’s a long story. And it’s complicated.’ I pause. ‘It’s just, well, I cheated. She caught us. She left.’

‘Oh.’

‘Yeah,’ I say.

I register the shift in Sonja’s demeanour, the change to the way she looks at me — a hint of cloudy distrust floating around her, when before there was none. I ignore this swing in her perceptions and instead pretend to rat through my handbag, searching for imaginary things.

Sonja breaks the silence, betraying her need for banter, for music, for voices to keep the silence at bay.

‘So, you excited?’ she says.

‘About?’

‘Your date.’

‘No, not really.’

‘Well, Ryan said he’d do his best to get a girl.’ I shrug. ‘And it might be fun. I know it’s a lot to ask, but can you give it a go? Please?’

‘Okay.’

‘You’re the best,’ she says, hugging me. ‘Oh! There he is!’

She saunters inside the restaurant. I follow — rarely the leader.

She stands before a table set for four, a man in his early thirties, already seated there, a black jacket strung over the chair across from him. My heart sinks, as I realise that unless this girl is extremely butch, this date of mine is male, the jacket cut entirely too wide for the shoulders of a woman.

I drag my feet towards Sonja and Ryan — who from this angle, is only an ear and hairline. I walk around them, not looking, not caring and sit beside the jacketed chair. I cross my arms across my chest and take my first look at Ryan.

And it hits me.

I know this guy. He turns his attention to me and we stare across the table at each other, silently, mouths open. And then I smell my date before I see him, his Hugo Boss cologne drifting over me, his smoky breath hot behind me, the familiar sound of his footfalls.

I take a deep breath as he touches my shoulder. I turn my head, stare at the hand, the ring, the familiar watch attached to the wrist and slowly look upwards.

‘Hello, Devin,’ I say.

'Hello, Seanne.'

Sonja looks from Ryan, to Devin, to me as Devin takes his seat, puts his elbows on the table and glares at me.

'Well, isn't this comfy?' he says, sneering.

'You know each other?' Sonja says.

I nod and Ryan and Devin answer a firm 'yes'.

'We've known each other a long time, haven't we, Sea?'

'Wh-what are you doing here?'

'Well, when my man Ryan here told me he met this incredible girl with a friend named Seanne and he needed to find date for her — a female date — I couldn't resist. How many other Seannes, who like girls, could there be? I figure it had to be you. I guess you should have avoided us arty types if you never wanted to bump into me again.'

'And you just had to find out if it was me, I suppose?'

He grins.

'Believe me, I saved you. The girl he had picked out was all wrong. Not your taste at all.'

Out the corner of my eye, I see Ryan lean towards Sonja and whisper in her ear. She nods and makes a small sound of recognition before saying she needs the ladies. She asks if I want to join her. I excuse myself and Devin's eyes blaze with brutality.

Once inside the ladies, Sonja turns to me.

'You okay?'

'Yes.'

'You sure? We can go if you want. I swear I didn't know.'

'No, it's okay.'

'I didn't realise. Ryan said Devin knows your ex . . . '

'Yes. They're best friends.'

'Oh, Jesus, Seanne, I'm sorry. Do you want to go?'

'No.' I pause, adjust my hair in the mirror, 'It's okay. I can handle Devin for a few hours. I don't want to ruin your date with Ryan.'

'So, you know Ryan then too?'

'A little. Not much. He and Devin went to art school together. I haven't seen him for ages though; not since one of Devin's parties. We never spoke much.'

'So, you can't tell me anything about Ryan at all?'

‘Um. . . ’ I say, my mind reaching for titbits on him. ‘Um, I know he likes port. Oh, and he has a pet snake named Rufus. He makes a wicked cocktail and I think he paints abstracts.’ I pause, ‘I’m sorry, I’m not much help. I never really knew him. He was always a background figure. Sorry.’

Sonja leans forward and hugs me, whispering in my ear.

‘It’s okay. Being here is enough for me.’

She lets me go, then walks into a cubicle, locking the door behind her. I hear her pee and I stare at myself in the mirror, attempting to steel myself against Devin’s ambush. I know it’s coming and Devin’s probably been waiting for this chance ever since the break-up, his presence here too much of a coincidence to not be planned. Did he ask Ryan to hit on Sonja, just so he could be here now?

Sonja walks out of the loo and washes her hands.

‘Ready?’ she says, looking at me in the mirror.

I nod and we return to the table.

‘Welcome back,’ Devin croons, ‘I missed you.’

I sit next to him, careful not to let any part of myself touch him. Sonja sits next to Ryan and he holds her hand on top of the table.

‘Shall we order?’ Ryan says, grabbing a menu.

Before Devin can move, I snatch the other menu from the centre of the table and stare into it. Devin snuggles close to me. I move away from him.

‘I’m not poisonous,’ he says.

‘Really? You’re not?’ I say, giving him my best ‘don’t-bullshit-me’ face.

‘Well, not physically anyway.’ He winks, turns to Sonja and Ryan.

‘So . . . you love birds ready to order?’

‘Look, Dev, maybe we should — ’

‘Oh, don’t be ridiculous! Seanne and I are having a great time, aren’t we, sweet-thing?’

Underneath the table, away from the eyes of all, Devin puts his hand on my knee and squeezes it hard. I tense my leg and attempt to indicate no pain on my face. Just when I think my resolve is going to crack, Devin lets go — all smiles on his face. He pats my leg once more and returns his hands to the tabletop.

‘So, we’re ready?’

They nod and I scan over the menu again. Devin gets the attention of the waiter and she ambles over, devoid of notepad.

Sonja and Ryan order and she turns to Devin.

'Oh, we'll have the duck, won't we, darling?' he says, knowing I hate duck.

He slips an arm behind my back and drags me close. Something inside me snaps and I elbow him in the ribs. He gasps and holds his sides, Sonja and Ryan flashing concerned looks at us. I stand — abruptly — and the waitress takes a step backwards, her face conveying confusion.

'I gotta go,' I say, 'I'm sorry. Nice to see you again, Ryan.' I turn to Sonja. 'I'll talk to you later.'

I rush off, hearing Devin excuse himself and follow me. I get about half a block before he grabs my arm, spins me towards him.

'And where are you going? Running off to your whore?'

I shake him off.

'No.'

'Got a new one already? Man, you work fast. I'd be impressed if you were anyone else.'

Anger burns inside me.

'What's your fucking problem, Devin?'

'You're not too quick, are you? You're my problem, Seanne. You and your whoring about is my problem.'

'Oh, fuck off,' I say, 'You make it sound like I cheated on you.'

'You did. You hurt her and therefore you hurt me. And we don't like being hurt.'

'Well, did-ums, Devin.'

'Did-ums? You fuck her over and that's your response? Did-ums?'

'And why are you so pissed? Because I had her and you never can?'

He stares at me, mouth open, astonished.

'That's beside the point.'

'No, that's exactly the point. You want her and she's never wanted you; will never want you.'

'And you threw it away for some fast teenage fuck.'

'Who I never would have paid attention to if you hadn't poisoned our relationship to start with! You set us up to fail, Devin, just so you could be there to pick up the pieces. Tell me . . . did it come off as you planned?'

He grins, evil, cunning.

'You're smarter than I thought.'

'And you're more transparent than she realises.'

'Well, she always fails to see the faults in the ones she loves.'

He looks me up and down and then fumbles in his jacket pocket for a cigarette. He lights one and offers it to me. I take it and he lights another. He sighs.

'So, now what? We fight it out for love and honour?'

'No.'

'Then what?'

'You help me get her back.'

'And why would I do that?'

'Because you owe me. And you owe her. And if you love her — '

'Don't even go there, Seanne.'

'Well, then help me.'

'What's in it for me?'

'It's the right thing to do.'

He chuckles.

'Have you forgotten who you're talking to? I'm not the noble type.'

'No, you're like a poisonous plant posing as house fern.'

'Descriptive. Poetic even. Maybe you should write that down in one of those little notebooks of yours.'

'And what does that mean?'

'You know what that means. I've seen you hanging about her work, taking photos.'

'So? I'm doing a photography course.'

'Yeah, that's what she said when I told her. But you and I,' he says, motioning between us, 'you and I know different, don't we?'

'And what makes you so sure it's not for class?'

'Because, dear Seanne, despite everything, you love her and it's not in your nature to leave it alone.'

I snigger.

'Since when do you know so much about me? You never paid any attention before.'

'Oh, you're wrong. I *a*lways paid attention. Especially once you got Lys's attention.'

'And you hate anyone who does that, don't you?'

'No, not anyone. Just you.'

'Just me? Why am I so special?'

'You're not anymore.'

I glare at him.

'You must hate that Cooper blew it open first.'

'I admit the idea burns me, but it was a means to an end, so . . .'

'And you say you love her — '

'I told you not to question that!'

' — and yet you do this to her.'

'I didn't do it. You did. I just . . . helped it along.'

'She's never going to choose you, Devin.'

'And she'll never want you again either.'

'I didn't realise you were so . . . twisted, not until just now,' I say, resignation dominating my voice.

'Really? Now that's surprising. I would have thought you'd have seen it before anyone. After all, you've got the same . . . eccentricities inside you.'

I open my mouth to answer and he talks over me.

'Work, you, Lys, everyone, you all think I'm just this goofy, egocentric asshole. But I see more than you realise and I pegged you from the start. I knew she'd love you — you're so similar to me, how could she not? But if I can't have her, why should you?'

'Because I make her happy.'

He tilts his head.

'For a little while.'

'Yeah, before you started.'

'I didn't start it, Seanne. You did it yourself. You did it without your own self-involvement, your own insecure jealousy. I just sat back and let you hang yourself.'

'Like you didn't encourage it!'

'Hmmm, maybe I did. But once that ball was rolling — it was all you, sweet-thing. Had I known you had a taste for debasement and paid flesh, I would have introduced you to the whore earlier.'

Panic crashes through me.

'You know Kit?'

'Kit?'

'The guy I . . .'

'Oh, him. Hell, no,' he pauses, 'But I've seen him since. After all, I had to see what you saw in him, what he does that's so addictive.'

Vomit rises in my throat.

'You didn't . . . did you?'

'Didn't what?'

He grins. He's loving this.

'You know . . . hire him?'

He crosses his arms across his chest and raises his eyebrows at me, staring directly into my eyes.

'What do you think?'

'I don't know.'

'Have you ever known me to like men?'

'Well, there was your stage show at Halloween.'

'That's a little different to fucking some grubby street whore, Seanne.'

'So, did you?'

He licks his lips, flicks his cigarette way.

'No. I didn't *hire* him,' he says, his tone of voice making me realise he's not telling me the entire truth.

'What did you do to him?'

'Nothing.'

'Bullshit. You did something. Devin, what did you do?'

'Ask him if you don't believe me. Oh, wait, I hear he doesn't speak to you anymore either. Pity. Seems you'll have to believe me after all.'

'You're an asshole.'

'You know it. You're an asshole too.'

I glare at him.

'Well, if we're so much alike, then you know what I'm going to say next.'

'You're pregnant?'

'No! Fuck! Why doesn't everyone keep asking me that?'

'Well, you have got beefier.'

'Gee, thanks.'

'You're welcome,' he grins again, 'So, what do you want?'

'I already told you, I want you to help me get her back.'

'And I already said, what's in it for me, remember?'

'Devin, I need her.'

'She doesn't need you.'

'Isn't that her choice?'

He sighs.

'Okay. Fine.' he says, 'But let me state, right here, right now, I'm not doing to this to help you, I'm doing it because I want to see you crash and burn — just like you burnt her.'

'That's fine. Whatever your reasons, just help me.'

He grins, his pure evil grin.

'Whatever you wish, sweet-thing.'

'This is it, this is the one,' I say, pointing to a long leather coat, the price tag of three hundred and forty swinging lazily from its cuff.

I ignore the price and finger the material, the heady smell of leather clinging to the coat, sinking into my nostrils. Devin stands next to me, his attention flitting about, focused only on the women walking by, the pretty ones getting a wink from him, the plainer ones dismissed without a second thought. He hums under his breath but says nothing, just occasionally grunts as I drag him from shop to shop, counter to counter.

I loop the coat over my arm and drag him towards the perfume section. He comes along willingly, allowing himself to be dragged about like an old security blanket.

'It's too big,' he says, nodding at the coat.

'It's not for Lys, it's for me.'

'I thought this little adventure was about her.'

'It is.'

'Then why . . . ?' he pauses. 'Forget it.'

He pretends he's zipping his mouth shut and walks over to the men's fragrances, grinning as the salesperson rushes over to him and gives him puppy eyes. I watch Devin flirt for a few seconds then stroll along the glass cases of the women's section, running my finger along the top of the cases, leaving long finger smudges behind me. I get to the second case, when a brunette woman — all tight skin stretched over her bony frame and legs like fence posts under her blue skirt — greets me lazily and asks if I need help. I

steal a look at Devin and then ask for her most popular, most expensive perfumes.

She rats insides the cases, her keys jangling against the glass as she twists the lock. She places several different coloured, different shaped bottles on the counter and stands, patting her skirt down as she does. To the left of me, I hear Devin laugh and promise to never say a word. I bite my lip and stare at the bottles before me.

‘Okay, shall we start with this one?’ the salesperson says, grabbing a white card, spraying the perfume on it and fanning it before handing it to me. ‘This is *Opium*.’

I take it slowly and inhale the scent off the card.

Suddenly, Devin is beside me.

‘She’ll hate it,’ he says, ‘Too overpowering.’

I turn to look at him and he stares at the salesperson, as if daring her to disagree.

‘Try this one,’ he says, picking up a different bottle.

He repeats her spray-fan process and hands me the card.

‘It’s subtle, fresher,’ he says, ‘more her.’

I sniff the card, a citrus, spring water scent drifts up to me.

‘Okay,’ I say, ‘this one.’

The woman says nothing, grabs a wrapped bottle from under the counter and places it before me.

‘Can you hold that a moment?’ I say, ‘I want to look around.’

‘Sure, but you’ll have to pay for that here,’ she says.

‘Okay. Can I leave this too?’ I motion the coat towards her and she takes it, folds it swiftly and places it behind the counter.

I thank her and walk towards the body lotions, the soaps, the moisturising butters.

‘What exactly do you have in mind?’ Devin asks, falling in beside me, his steps in perfect unison with mine.

‘I just want to do something special.’

‘And you think smelling pretty is enough?’

‘No, but . . .’

‘But what? You ran out of ideas?’

‘No.’

‘Then what?’

'Nothing.'

'Fuck, Seanne, if you tell me what you're doing, I might be able to, you know, help. Like you wanted me to.'

'It's private.'

'Not private enough for you to fund it. It's my card you're using, remember?' I shrug my shoulders. He huffs, 'All right, don't tell me. I don't fucking care. Just get what you have to. I've got somewhere to be.'

'So, you got her number, then?' I say, motioning my chin towards where his perfume salesperson stood.

He smirks.

'Of course.'

I shake my head at him and walk off. He laughs behind me.

'I know what women want. I make 'em happy.'

'Whatever,' I say.

He comes up behind me, wraps his arms around my midriff and stomach and pulls me to him. He growls into my ear;

'Jealous?'

I make my body go stiff, don't struggle against him, don't acknowledge my discomfort. I shake my head and he grunts the word 'bullshit' into my ear, nips my neck with his teeth and lets me go. He steps around me and walks off, leaving me there, stiff and still, a shiver coursing up my spine. I take a deep breath, gather my thoughts and walk towards the body section.

I pick up several sweet-smelling lotions, some matching bath oil, and decide after several sniffs of each, that milk and honey won't overpower the perfume, but will silken my skin. I take my bottles up to the counter, grab an armful of various sized candles and motion for Devin to join me, to pay.

He saunters over, hands in his pocket, pelvis thrust forward and drops his card on the counter. I watch the light reflect off the gold card and read *American Express*, a series of numbers and then his name, *Devin O. Alessandro*.

A memory hits me, him calling you Sandy and you, in response, making mockery of his initials — DOA — remarking that he chose the wrong profession, after all embalming is more his style. I think about his face, him yelling at you that Oscar is a family name and that yours — Virginia — is not much better. I remember you laughing with his colleagues, you drunk on

cheap champagne, Devin scowling, refusing to speak to you until you apologised.

Suddenly, a jittery panic rises inside me and I realise, I have to do more, to prove my sincerity and my devotion better.

'Here,' Devin says, shoving the parcels at me.

He walks off, folding his wallet shut and tucking it into his back pocket. I hurry to catch up to him and he turns to look at me.

'So, now where? The sex shop?' he winks again and grins a calculated grin at me.

'No.'

'Then where?'

'Florist. I need to get some flowers.'

'And you really think all this is going to get her back?'

'It's a start.'

He laughs.

'You don't stand a chance. She's not stupid, she'll see straight through you — again.'

'But I have to try. I have to have her.'

'Why? Suddenly realise what you had?'

'Because I love her and I need her in my life. I need to show her what I'm willing to do to have her again. I need her, Devin.' I pause. 'You don't understand.'

'You're right. I don't. I don't understand a lot of things about you Seanne. Like I don't understand what that little cocksucker did for you that she couldn't.'

'He doesn't do anything for me anymore . . . And I haven't lost Lys — '

'Yes, you have. You fucked up. Bad. You need to realise that. You threw it away for a taste of whore arse. She'll probably never trust you again. Ever. I wouldn't.'

'Well, you're not her, are you?'

Devin shrugs, shakes his head.

'Your funeral,' he says, and walks into the nearest florist.

I follow reluctantly, giggling a little, thinking of his initials and his last statement.

Devin opens the door to your place, pops the boot and lets the car idle as I haul the parcels out the boot and gather the flowers. I place the flowers — three dozen roses, a native bouquet, marshmallow white lilies, deep blue irises — gently inside the door and I walk around to the driver's side of Devin's car.

'Um . . . thanks for today,' I say, 'and letting me in.'

He glares up at me over his sunglasses.

'You better not ever tell her who funded this little expedition, or I'll be in as much shit as you. Conspiracy won't sit well with Lys,' he says.

He throws the car into drive and lurches off. I watch him go, spin on my heel and walk into your house, deeply inhaling the scents you left behind.

Later, I'm perched on your couch, wearing only the long black jacket — awaiting the sound of your car. The room smells faintly of vanilla and the candles cast flickering reflections across the floor and wall, highlighting the depth of the petals I scattered from door to bedroom. While in there, I made the bed, placed a white teddy in the centre of it and sprayed the room with perfume.

After bathing, I sat naked at your kitchen table and wrote you a letter, telling you I'm never going to let you go. I end by telling you all the things I want to let you do to me, all the desires I've been holding inside.

I smooth my hair down and run my hands over my silky thighs. I look around the room. I wonder if I could have done more, if I had time, could I have cooked, taken photos of myself, framed them above your bed, tattooed your name on my breast, brought you lingerie, got us tickets to a Deviants' Ball? I move the candles about the room, testing to see where the light falls and un-scatter the petals, instead use them to write 'I love you' along the hall. I rush into the bathroom and tousle my hair in that just-had-sex way that you like. I apply a deep blood red lipstick and spray more perfume around my neck, wrists, knees and cunt.

While I'm still prepping, I hear your car pull up. I rush into the lounge, stand perfectly still among the mass of flowers and wait for the lock to turn. I take deep breaths, anxious.

Finally the door opens.

You walk inside, stop still, stare at me.

I step forward, open my coat. I show you I'm naked, my nipples erect, my legs slightly crossed. I let the coat drop to the floor behind me and pull my breasts up, suck my stomach in, then part my legs, showing you the meat of my cunt.

Your shoulders slump, your work bag slips off, hitting the floor with a hard thud. Your face begins to register expression, from stunned silence to something darker, something defiant. I ignore it.

'So what do you think?' I say and hold my breath.

I wait silently for your answer.