

SWEET NOTHING

Belinda Nash

For Rin,
who reminded me that life is fleeting.

'In the arithmetic of love, one plus one equals everything, and two minus one equals nothing.'

Mignon McLaughlin

Chapter One

Lucy was a gay man trapped in a woman's body. Or so she told everyone. So was Big Al. Except he was straight. And in a man's body.

Big Al pulled up kerbside at the Gypsy Tearooms in his convertible 1967 Aston Martin. Sea green. One of only two of its vintage in Auckland. Apparently. Tonight he was accessorised with a chocolate nymphet called Nina who had blown in from India. A bit player in Bollywood living in Auckland; she wasn't sure for how long.

'Drinks anyone? CC 'n' dry? My round,' he said.

Sure, they all agreed.

And why not? It was summer after all.

The bar was hot and packed. Packed and hot. A single ceiling fan spiralled at a deathly pace circulating stuffy air, soothing no one. Glassy beads formed on foreheads, shades of damp darkened arm pits, patches of bare skin stuck to moistened vinyl chairs and people fanned themselves with flapping hands.

The flock of flimsy dresses and open shirts gave an air of something far more European than a suburban Auckland bar.

One by one, the patrons were melting.

Lucy's short vanilla silk dress clung like polyester; she needn't have bothered with natural fibre. The 90 per cent humidity ensured her curls would never fully dry, and that a steady trickle of sweat would keep her bra ever-so-slightly damp.

She'd text Will to join them. He knew Big Al from working on films together and such. They knew each other enough to talk about girls, sex and work. The important stuff.

Big Al leaned across the table with Lucy's drink. The ice chattered in its glass enclosure, condensation settling on the outside. The table shuddered as he plonked it down. A slow, steady drip formed a puddle on the table's surface.

Lucy scooped her iPhone into her lap but not before catching Big Al's notice.

He peered at her, a glint in his eye. 'Tell Willy to get his skinny Scottish arse down here,' he said.

She did tell him. Twice.

But he didn't join them, Will didn't come.

Lucy and Will had the kind of sex other people only read about and never actually believed existed. It was the stuff of movies. If she had bothered to keep a diary, it would be the stuff of legends. Will took Lucy whenever, wherever. Every surface: floor, door, wall, bench, stovetop, desktop, table. Against cars, trees, in parks, car parks, car ports, footpaths, against fences, driveways and doorways. But they didn't date,

they rarely hung out, only sometimes emailed and barely talked at all. They were friends with benefits. Minus the friendship.

Later that night, Lucy lay awake in the dark. Her body was hunched, her back to Will.

He'd returned her call.

Eventually.

He always did when he had an itch to scratch, seeds to sow, away from prying eyes. Their bottoms pressed lightly together, only a fine film of sticky sweat separating them. Two hours this time. *Two hours*. They'd finally made it to the bedroom sometime during the second hour. She hoped her neighbour Cat didn't think she was doing late-night DIY again.

Sometime around three or four a.m., Lucy roused. Another restless night. She rolled over and rested her head on Will's chest. It rose and fell as he breathed. She felt his tangy night breath hit her hair in a stilted rhythm. He slumbered towards her and wrapped his arms around her waist pulling her into him.

'You're not as pretty as a lot of girls,' he murmured in a husky burst of post-coital talk, lethargic with sleep.

Oh?

'But you have a thing.'

'A thing?'

'Yeah. A kind of sexual charisma, like you want it all the time.' Will traced a lazy finger up then down Lucy's arm.

The same yellow light that cut across Will's face pinned Lucy's shoulder to the bed. She eased her hip into him wrapping her legs over his.

'Well, I do, most of the time,' she replied. 'I told you, I'm a gay man trapped in a woman's body. Minus the tidiness. And library-sized music collection. Oh, and I totally can't cook.'

'Yeah, well, that's the thing, that's your sexual charisma. That's what makes you attractive, sometimes even beautiful. I see you across the

room and all I can think about is fucking you, right then and there.’ Will’s arm fell around Lucy’s body and he squeezed her.

‘Oh,’ Lucy croaked. ‘Thanks. I think.’

Will stayed the night. Rare. In the morning he joined Lucy in the shower as she was getting out. She’d left him dozing as he’d lain spread-eagled across the bed, his head pushed deep down into the pillow.

Will bumped past Lucy in the shower and collapsed under the vigorous flow, stretching face-down the length of the bath, his arms forming a pillow beneath him.

‘Thank God you have a shower bath. I love lying in a shower bath.’

Satin ribbons of water traced the thin trail of hair that rested at the top of his flat bottom, pale white where his shorts covered him in the sun. The rest of him was the colour of toffee.

‘Same!’ replied Lucy with too much enthusiasm as she reached down to grab a large pale blue bath sheet off the bath mat. She was due a bikini wax, and her dark brown crackled summer skin craved the overdue attention of moisturiser. ‘Especially when I’m drunk and get home really late, all I want to do is lie in the shower, well, bath. Yunno. I love the feeling of water pelting me. Makes me feel alive.’

‘Yeah...’ Will stretched a lazy hand over to the liquid soap and pumped out a generous handful. He rubbed it over his back, arms and face. The suds contoured over his slim frame and down into the bath, before popping out of sight down the drain.

‘Sometimes I just want to stay there and never get out.’

‘Mmm... so good,’ Will groaned. ‘Fuck though, you have it hot!’

‘What d’you expect, a cold shower?’

‘Colder than this, *fuck!*’ He rolled over and pulled his knees up to hoist himself backwards under the water. The sight of his inactive, wrinkled penis drooping towards the bath enamel caused Lucy to shudder.

‘You could turn it down. D’you wanna fresh towel or is mine OK?’

‘Fresh one thanks, yeah.’

Lucy pulled out a large melon pink bath sheet from the hot water cupboard and tossed it on the damp bathmat. As she turned to leave the bathroom Will hacked up the phlegm of a night of hard drinking.

‘Hey, I’m going up the road for coffee,’ Lucy called to Will through the bathroom door. ‘Want one?’

She caught a glimpse of him through a crack where the door met the wall and saw him rinsing the clogged toothpaste cap. *Ha! She knew it!* She knew it annoyed him: all that congealed toothpaste destroying the natural order. (Later that night she would find the toothpaste tube standing rigid in its holder, its contents forced to the top, its red cap pristine clean.)

‘Don’t you mean down the road?’ Will yelled out over the shower din. ‘Huh?’

‘Down the road, to Good One or whatever it’s called; your local.’

‘No, it’s Sunday, they’re closed on Sunday. No, up the road to Conch.’

‘Oh. OK then. Coffee, good. Thanks.’

The usual suspects were lined up in the summer shade at Conch keeping watch over their dominion. Manboys slouching off their seats in the way their mothers told them not to. If New Zealand had an über-culture, a street royalty, this was where it reigned. Huffer hoodies and ABC t-shirts, khaki trousers or skinny jeans, skater sneakers, Nikes or the regulation Ponsonby-wear, Converse.

Empty espresso cups and newspapers open to nearly-completed crossword puzzles cluttered the tiny tables. Mobile phones were pressed in like Tetras, plugging the gaps. It could have been LA, London or New York.

Or a branch of the Sicilian Mafioso overseeing order in their town.

The week-day barista, a DJ called Nggr, a coffee-coloured bloke with dreads to his waist from Jamaica, sat puffing on a rollie beside them. His long spider legs stretched out across the footpath catching an edge of sun and causing passersby file past like ants, giving way and apologising

to one another. Nggr nodded rather than spoke, peppering in the occasional 'Ya mon', more as punctuation than as actual words.

Nggr wasn't working today; the Salad Man was on. Salad Man made the best coffee in Auckland people reckoned.

His name was a badge of honour heralding his one-time bust and bash up by the cops. He'd had the hairy, deviant look of a weed dealer but at the time was as straight-edged as they came. They found nothing on him, of course. The same couldn't be said now though, easy to get a pick-up from the Salad Man if you knew where he lived, and that boy kept moving.

But he's still waiting for his apology from the police.

Anyone else would have been intimidated passing the scrutiny of this street cool elite, this hybrid of men; the cool boys who ruled the school. Lucy didn't care, today she was happy.

'Hey Salad, hey Nggr' she beamed. He was outside smoking a cigarette with Nggr. 'Howsit going?'

Nggr nodded his reply.

The Salad Man slapped the edge of the table with his elbow as he flicked ash into an over-flowing ash tray, causing cups to clatter. 'Great. Good, good. Beautiful day, beautiful day,' he replied gesturing over the street, up to the sky. With his free hand he rubbed his ragged beard with fingers like pipe cleaners. Lucy eyed the yellow stains and cracks eating into the thick skin's surface.

The Salad Man squinted smiling eyes towards her. 'Looking lovely today Lucy my Lady Luck, what can I get for you today? Flat white, double shot?' He stubbed out his cigarette, stood up and ambled inside ahead of Lucy, grabbing two empty espresso cups on the way, doing little to alter the outdoor jigsaw puzzle.

'Two flat whites, thanks Salad, and yeah, doubles, thanks. Cheers.' Lucy smiled.

'Two. Two today?' he grinned as he bashed steaming expired black coffee grounds from the portafilter.

‘Yeah. I’ve got mi boy in the shower at mine.’ Lucy sparkled. She ran a finger round a caramel brown curl above her ear still wet from the shower. People always assumed it was a nervous gesture, actually it was just Lucy curling her hair so her cropped curls dried in coils, not frizz.

‘Nice one,’ The Salad Man looked up at her and winked.

The Salad Man was why people went to Conch. It wasn’t just his coffee. ‘Two flat whites coming up. What’re you up to for the rest of the day then? Gonna get out and enjoy the sun?’ he asked as he went about the business of extracting God’s brown elixir. His peaked cap sat low over his eyes but Lucy still caught his joyful gleam.

‘Dunno, bit hungover, yunno? Might head to Cheltenham, or out West. Dunno yet. Something, yeah definitely something.’ Lucy sniffed and shifted on her feet. She realised then that her body ached. What she really needed was to sleep. But it was so sunny.

‘Nice. Nice one.’ The Salad Man gestured towards the window with his shoulder. ‘Gotta get out while you can. So, anything else I can get for you?’

‘Nah, I’ll pop back in a sec, I’ve just gonna grab some pastries up the road, if that’s OK?’

‘Sure thing, nice one. Your coffees will be ready for you; *two* flat whites extra shots.’

Back at her flat Will was out of the shower. Lucy looked in the bedroom, he wasn’t there. His discarded towel was draped across the spent bed. Lucy balanced the coffee and food on her piano, and walked over to open the blinds and wrenched across the sliding windows to let summer in. Light burst through the downstairs wall-length window, across the duvet diving onto the rimu floor. Midday already? *Bloody hell.*

Lucy grabbed Will’s towel and took it into the bathroom where she folded it precisely in half and tucked it over the rail side-by-side her own blue one.

She heard the TV mumbling upstairs.

He hadn’t left then.

Lucy carefully grabbed the coffees and pastries and headed upstairs.

Will was stretched out on Lucy's imitation Norman and Quaine Oliver retro leather couch watching a wildlife documentary. Carnivores chasing herbivores, an hypnotic voice reciting the tale of life and death, the usual.

'Coffee,' Lucy said by way of announcing her arrival. 'And I got pastries.'

She hauled two plates out of the high kitchen cupboards careful not to let any make the dangerous escape to the floor as she had done the week before. That pissed her off. Crown Lynn plates might be a dime a dozen but they were still a chore to find.

'Cool, pastries, yum, thanks.' Will was wearing only jeans, his shirt flung over the couch beside him. 'TV's shit, you don't get any channels.'

'Yeah. You'd have Sky wouldn't you?'

'Yep.'

'Boys. You boys are all the same.' Lucy passed Will his coffee and pastry.

'Huh?' Will rolled over to face her.

'It's a boy thing. Boys have Sky.'

'Thanks,' he nodded taking the plate and coffee and propping them on the couch beside him. 'Yeah, nah, it's for the sport; got to have Sky for the sport. Tennis. And racing. And Discovery Channel. I like the Discovery Channel.'

'Hmm... sure,' she replied, tucking into her pastry, watching the golden flakes fall to the floor.

'Do you want to be my girlfriend?' Will was lying on the couch face-down perusing the Sunday papers spread out on the floor in front of him. Lucy was lying on top of him reading over his shoulder. The hot January sun burnt into her right shoulder and she slapped at its ticklish singe.

She watched Will's arm muscles tense and flex with each turn of the page. His tone gave nothing away.

'Is that just a random question or are you actually asking me to be your girlfriend?'

Will turned scratched his head. His hair had almost dried and the tight black curls were snug around his head. His ears stuck out a little bit, enough so he bore the title of Jumbo as a kid, and as an adult still clung to his collections of beanies like a security blanket.

‘Dunno. A question I think. Would you want to be my girlfriend? If I was asking that is. Are you looking for a boyfriend?’

Lucy sniffed. ‘I don’t even know if we get on. We don’t exactly talk, or hang out, or whatever.’

‘Yeah, right.’ Will licked a finger and turned the page. ‘So that’s a no then?’

Lucy frowned. ‘Umm, I’m not sure you actually asked me anything?’



That night Lucy poured two glasses of tawny port. Her neighbour Cat stretched her long limbs the length of Lucy’s couch. Will had gone home at about two p.m. leaving Lucy enough time to catch a swim at Cheltenham with friends and bury herself in the latest Hollywood celeb goss in a plethora of brightly-coloured magazines. Love the trash.

Cat smelled of cigarettes from three hours of sitting outside SPQR in the fog of Ponsonby’s few remaining smokers, stalwarts that they were. Lucy stank of Cooper’s draught from some idiot who bumped into her at D.O.C. bar during happy hour. Some fucking happy hour.

The two neighbours often met for a nightcap. And more importantly, a debrief.

‘Someone should ban them!’ Cat exclaimed after her first heady sip. She flicked her long black silken hair with her free hand, a move she normally reserved for an audience.

‘What, men? Or losers who spill beer on you at bars? Can you believe that crap?’

‘What? Huh? No. What the hell are you on about, Luce?’

‘Nothing, nothing— just some twat split their beer on me at D.O.C. Carry on...’

‘Oh doll, that sucks. No, men, someone should ban them. Not all men, just the serial Mr. Floppies. They shouldn’t be allowed; they should be banned. Banned I tell you!’ Cat waved her port like a pantomime princess, her regal fingers dwarfing the fine crystal glass.

Lucy shook her head. ‘Oh God, not again, Cat. Another one?’

‘*Yes! Again!* Mr. Fucken Floppy. Is it me? It’s me isn’t it?’

‘No Cat, you’re hot. You’re totally hot. I’d do ya if I wasn’t so, yunno...’

‘So into cock?’

‘Yeah, right. ’Xactly.’

Cat kicked off her heels and slipped down into the couch. Her hair fell in glossy black folds over the cushions and her eyelids dropped, classic Cat seduction, except this time she was just drunk.

Lucy sunk back down into her chair. A wave of tiredness flushed through her.

‘So what happened this time?’ she asked. ‘Was it Mr. Metrosexual, the hot one? The man of beer, hair-gel and chest-thumping? The one who actually took you on *actual* dates like an *actual* real man?’

Cat snorted. ‘Real man? *Ha!* Oh sweets, you have *no* idea. More myth than man, I tell ya. So much for his modern metrosexuality, counted for nothing in the sack let me tell you.’

Lucy sipped gingerly at her port. This might take a while.

Cat’s dark hair shimmered in the glow of the dusky pink street light. She looked like an Eastern goddess.

A goddess who talked like a whore.

‘Yeah, it was Mr. Metrosexual, Mr. Easy-on-the-Eye Metrosexual. The man with moisturiser and who knew how to use it,’ Cat began. ‘He came round to mine and I cooked him dinner, whole flounder using a new recipe I found in *Taste*. Anyway, it was all going swimmingly well. Peachy, in fact and I was feeling as horny as the Devil on heat –on *heat* I tell ya, and you know how long it’s been– and I was *funny*. I was fucken *funny!* I’m funny with him, I really am; I’m fucken hilarious. Anyway, we were having a great time testing out my new leather chaise –oh, it’s good Luce, but more on that later– so, we were kissing, touching each other’s

rude bits and getting down to business. And God knows I was gonna blow –erupt like Mt. Vesuvius– he had no idea how *lucky* he was. Anyway, I just popped downstairs to the bathroom to get a condom, came back up, like two seconds later, and hello Mr. Floppy. A Mr. Fucken Floppy! I shoulda kept the rubber fuckers in the kitchen drawer but how was I to know Mr. Metrosexual was gonna pull a Mr. Fucken Floppy on me?’

‘Flaccid? Seriously? Mr Easy-on-the-Eye Metrosexual was *flaccid*? No!’

‘Flaccid, yes! Flaccid I tell you. A Mr. Fucken Floppy.’

Cat drained her port, and waved her glass at Lucy indicating for another. ‘What’s going on, Luce? It’s me isn’t it? I’m the problem, it’s me.’

‘No, no, it’s not you, it’s so not you Cat. Look at you. I’ve said it a thousand times, you’re hot! I’d, yunno, do ya if well, yunno– You sure you need another?’

‘Yes, of course I do, who are you, your mother? Just pour woman, *Christ!* I’m telling you my woes... Booze is the only answer. I’m highly sexually charged right now and unless you wanna put me out of my misery pour the Goddamned drink!’

‘Now that I do not want to do.’

‘Lights off, it’s all the same. Meh–’

‘Nooo!’ Lucy laughed as she poured Cat another port, topping up her own.

‘Bet you had hoochie knickers on too.’

‘Knickers? Nu-uh,’ Cat shook her head. ‘None at that stage, babe. Was as naked as the day I was born. Mind you, that was after removing *the* hottest matching cherry red French lace bra and knickers that this man had ever had the privilege to see without paying.’

‘Wowsa! Nice. Well, damned if I know what’s going on, hun.’ Lucy rubbed her eyes which had taken on that bruised tired feeling. ‘Willy’s *always* as hard as a rod. Appropriately named wouldn’t ya say? He reckons he just has to look at me and his cock’s stiff.’ Lucy fell back into her chair, tucking her cool bare feet up under her. Her head sank into the leather. ‘The other night he rested a Corona bottle on it. *Seriously!* A

Corona bottle, half full. Fuck me! *And* he did. He rested the bottle on my back too, which was bloody funny at the time. I said: “*You did not just do that*” and he said “*Yes, I did*”. Anyway—

‘Oh don’t tell me that. Really? A Corona bottle? On his cock? Willy rested a Corona bottle on his cock? For fuck’s sake, really? Man, I’m doing something seriously wrong. It’s totally me, I know it’s me.’ Cat slumped into the couch as she reached her hand to pick at the white sheepskin rug on the floor.

‘Yeah, seriously. A frickin Corona bottle.’ Lucy watched Cat pick white wisps with her long fingernails.

‘I can’t believe he put it on your back; a Corona bottle for fuck’s sake. And you let him! Naww, you kids, so romantic,’ she slurred.

‘Yeah, well. And no, it’s not you. And yeah, when the bottle was on his wotsit he held it then took his hands off it and it just stayed there.’ Lucy smirked. ‘And the time before that—’

‘Christ stop—’ Cat moaned

‘—the time before that in the morning he wanted to get up to pee and I played with his balls for just a second and whammo: stiff as. Frankly, I was just trying to warm my hands up.’

Cat rolled her head back laughing. ‘Genius! Warm your hands up, I love it.’

‘Willy said all I have to do is touch his balls –or blow on them and he’s hard.’

‘*No!* Don’t tell me that... no fair... what’s his number?’

‘Ha! No chance.’

Cat slurped back a bit of dribble threatening to fall away down her chin. ‘Shit. I need me some of that. Seriously... what’s his number?’

‘Ha! Not likely.’

Cat could get any man, she didn’t need Willy.

‘You’ve got a gaggle of men swarming around you, like all the time, ya greedy bitch. Just *pick* one of them for Christ’s sake and let me and your entourage swarm in for the rejects.’

‘Pff, you’re welcome to them. But you can do better than that—’

‘Have you *met* Will?’ Lucy interrupted.

‘Yeah, right. But frankly I’m scared to try another. *Fuck!*’

Cat gave up playing with the fluff and looked up at Lucy.

‘What’s wrong with me, Luce? Why do I keep attracting these guys, these fucking Mr. Metrosexual, Mr. Floppies? I must be the most teased, most sexually frustrated woman in Ponsonby. No scratch that, the whole of fucking Auckland. The whole *world*. Argh! It’s not fair.’

‘Nah, it sucks Cat. It totally sucks.’

‘Oh doll,’ she flicked her eyebrow, ‘chance’d be a fine thing.’

Lucy’s phone beeped. ‘Oh shit,’ she peered down at the bright screen, ‘another text. I think he’s drunk.’

‘Willy? Ya think? Drunk? Nooo. What’s he saying this time?’

‘That he smells nice.’

‘What the fuck? So fucking what? Get a life, Will! God he’s a loser sometimes.’

‘Oh, I know. But I lap it up don’t I?’

‘Oh hun, don’t we all, don’t we all?’

The phone beeped again.

‘Now what?’ asked a drunken Cat, her voice a teensy notch louder than was absolutely necessary.

‘He’s saying he’s nearby.’

‘So he’s saying he wants a shag then.’

‘Yep, for a change.’

‘Communication’s just not his M.O., is it?’

‘You’re not wrong there. He used to come right out and say “*Wanna fuck?*” or “*I want to fuck you right now*”, these days he’s just random. It’s really quite bizarre.’

‘Yeah, the guy seriously can’t communicate.’

‘Yeah. What should I reply, really? Oh shit, incoming. God, he’s miles away, he’s in Kingsland for fuck’s sake.’

‘Kingsland? Hardly nearby. Christ, he’s not gonna walk here is he? Seriously?’

‘Nah, he’s not into that. He’s drunk, but he hasn’t lost his mind. Once I was going to his place and was taking a while to get there, yunno, dolling myself up in that I-don’t-give-a-shit-and-totally-didn’t-make-an-effort way—which times time, babe, *time*— and he asked if I was being a gypsy and walking there. He calls hippies gypsies; hates them. Oh, I love this song, I met Jeff Buckley once.’

Lucy launched at her stereo and turned up the volume.

‘Really? No shit, you met him? The late, great, and if you don’t mind me saying and in no disrespect to the dead, the very, extraordinarily *hot* Jeff Buckley?’

‘Yeah, when I interned in TV. It was just the two of us in the room when I was putting his mic on for the interview.’ Lucy paused. ‘You know... It sounds stupid to say now, but he was pale and small and just looked little and lost. Like he was there but not there; like his mind was somewhere else. Oh God, I just sounded like a New Age jackass.’

‘Wow, you actually met him? Jeff Buckley. Wow. That’s like, super-cool.’

‘Yeah, isn’t it? I reckon he was one of those people who operates at a higher frequency than the rest of us, and that’s always going to end badly, isn’t it? He drowned, right?’

‘Yeah. And *now* you’re sounding like a New Age jackass!’ Cat snorted. ‘But did he really? Drown, I mean, by accident? Did he really? Was it *really* an accident? I think not.’

‘Suicide you reckon? Hmmm, yeah, maybe. Hard to say—’

‘Not so much suicide in a direct way, as in intentional, but well, yunno. Like he was letting fate take the lead; leading him into the water.’

Lucy pulled up a cream mohair blanket over her to protect her from the edge of the late night chill. ‘Says the New Ager.’

‘Yeah, well, whatever it was it was weird.’

‘Yeah, pretty weird. Kinda like whatischops, Nirvana guy—’

‘Kurt Cobain.’

‘Yeah, him. And Michael Hutchence, and, like, *all* of the Kennedys.’

‘Whoa, yeah, there’s a bad luck surname. And Heath Ledger, so sad,’ Lucy frowned.

Cat nodded. 'And Amy Winehouse. So sad,' she agreed, her eyes taking on the look of a kitten about to nod off to sleep. 'Too much talent just gone. *Whoosh!*'

Lucy sighed. 'Yeah. Ordinary people have ordinary deaths, well, for the most part. And those with their head above the parapet—'

'—get 'em lobbed off.'

'Yeah, right. Not worth being famous for, is it?'

Later, after Cat had stumbled her way home clambering down the stairs and over Lucy's threshold taking the one step home, Lucy opened the door to Will.

He stood on the stoop clutching his iPhone and charger. His white shirt was crinkled and he wore a five o'clock shadow. He smelt of cigarettes, booze and sweat.

'Can I plug this in?' he held his charger up to Lucy. 'I've been smoking again, it's not good.' He shook his head and walked in.

'Hi Will, sure,' replied Lucy, stepping aside.

Will kicked his shoes off and planted an efficient kiss on Lucy's lips. 'Oh yeah, hi. And I can't stay, sorry, early start.'

'Sure, yeah, whatever.' Lucy shrugged, reeling from his masculine stench. From him.

'Oh, and I need money for the taxi. That OK? I sent you a text.'

Lucy saw impatient car lights flickering in the driveway behind him. 'You sent me hundreds of texts.'

'Oh yeah. So is that OK?'

'Yeah, whatever. You're lucky I've got cash,' Lucy called as she ran up the stairs to get her wallet. 'How much?' she yelled down.

'Twenty will cover it.'

'Kay—'

'And thanks.'

As Lucy plugged Will's phone charger beside the hall table, he bent down behind her and gripped his arms around her waist nuzzling into her neck. He pulled her up into him. Into his crotch.

‘Mmm,’ he breathed into her. ‘I thought you said you were naked.’

‘I was, but I chucked on a dress; I wasn’t going to open the door to you getting out of a taxi wearing nothing at all, was I?’

‘Oooh, I’d have liked that,’ Will purred.

‘So would’ve the taxi driver.’

Will held Lucy in the silence swaying gently as he kissed her neck. Lucy felt electric.

‘Mmm, you smell nice.’ His stubble prickled and tickled Lucy’s cheek. His arms were warm. ‘You always smell nice. D’you have beer?’

‘No, I’ve run out. Cider?’

Will wasn’t much more than six inches taller than Lucy but as he held her she felt small.

‘Nah, beer. Don’t do cider. Ah, well. I probably don’t need anymore anyway.’

Will jerked Lucy’s dress up over her head and hoisted her naked body up against the glass front door. He pulled back her hair in one rough movement and fell into her neck, his lips sinking into her warm flesh. The cold of the glass shuddered through Lucy and a violent surge shot from her stomach up to her neck.

Upstairs, Lucy and Will lay on the couch, legs entwined, their hot bodies glistening with sticky sweat. Lucy’s head rested on Will’s shoulder, his left arm flung across her, his right arm propped up behind his head. Their naked bodies were dappled by the pinkish-orange hue of the streetlights censored as they were by nearby trees. Lucy’s knees hurt where she had spent too long on the rug-less rimu floor. The room smelled of sex. A cat squealed outside; a scuffle ensued.

‘Willy–?’ Lucy broke the silence. She slowly coiled a lock of hair around her finger, round and round and round. She became aware of her breathing.

‘–Yeah?’

‘Why do you hardly ever stay?’

‘Oh, yunno, work.’ Will replied patting Lucy’s shoulder with a limp hand.

‘Sure. But you could get ready here. I do have a shower, yunno.’

‘I know, I know. ’Course I know that.’ Will raised his hand to scratch his nose leaving Lucy’s shoulder exposed. A coil of breeze chilled the damp skin where his arm had vacated. ‘But I get picked up from my house. Yunno?’

‘You could get picked up from here; it’s not exactly off the beaten track.’

‘Yeah, yeah, I could. Sure I could. But there’s easier. It’s all sorted, yunno?’

‘Yeah...’ Lucy frowned.

But she didn’t. Lucy didn’t know.

Chapter Two

The hot evening sun seared through Lucy's large west-facing lounge windows. Lucy lay on her couch stripped to her bra and undies. It was too hot for anything else, anything as heavy as clothes.

She cast her eye down at her body, her mother's. Earned in her teens, envied in her 20s. Compact, athletic, shapely and home to a small pert bust and the deal-maker: her full rounded bottom. At five foot two, Lucy was the shortest of her friends by at least a five inch heel and then some. Twin brothers Kit and Bobby had the same build, although a tad taller, which they pushed to the limits through a regular diet of gym, protein shakes and copious amounts of anonymous sex. They were taut, buff and desirable. Or so they told her.

Their dad on the other hand was a jolly red apple.

Lucy's cleavage glittered with sweat. A clear solo drip formed and broke free ending its short journey in a nest of bright turquoise lace. She touched a perspiring cider bottle to each small breast. As she flicked off

the lid, the bottle emitted a satisfied sigh. Lucy put the cool glass to her lips and provoked an involuntary shudder as the shock of its amber sweet coolness poured through her into her belly.

When a gentle boozy haze had sufficiently fuzzied her brain, Lucy dialled her mother's cell phone number.

'Did you just ring me, Olive?' she greeted her mother.

'Hello Lucy, dear,' Olive answered full of chirp. 'No, your father and I are having a large gin and tonic on the deck at Dee Dee's in Tauranga. Why? Were you expecting us to?'

'No, no,' Lucy slurred ever-ever-ever-so-slightly. 'It's just I don't answer my home phone and it just rang and I thought it might be you.'

'Why ever do you not answer your phone, dear?'

'I'm on the phone half the day interviewing people and sorting stuff out, the last thing I want to do when I get home is talk on the phone some more.'

'Yes, well I suppose that's so. Oh, just a minute Lucy dear, Dee Dee's asking me something— *what's that Dee Dee?*' her mother spoke to the distance. 'Dee Dee just asked if Cat's there or if you've seen her lately. Says she never hears from her these days, she has no idea what she's up to.'

'Oh you know Cat. Always busy.'

'Yes, well she could make time to call her mother; after all, it's the only family each of them has.'

'Yes—'

'I mean, isn't it?'

'Well, I'll let Cat know.' *Not that it's any of our business.* Lucy heard a neighbour wheeling a rubbish bin across the shared deck outside. She looked out her window to see who it was. She waved as scruffy neighbour Billy looked up. She pointed at the phone to indicate she couldn't speak. He waved back and carried on his way weaving past a throng of cats sunning themselves in the sharp afternoon glare.

‘Well,’ her mother sighed, ‘that would be helpful. Now I probably shouldn’t stay on the phone, dear. We’re at Dee Dee’s. Did you want anything?’

‘No, no. Just saying hi, really. Is Dad there?’

‘Well, that was nice of you to call. And yes your father’s here. Where would you expect him to be? I’ll get him for you. Oh, he’s just disappeared somewhere. *Robert?*’ she called, *Robert dear? It’s Lucy on the phone.* Good bye darling. Nice of you to call, I’ll pass on your regards to Dee Dee; we’re just enjoying a large gin and tonic on the deck. And please don’t keep your father too long, I mean it when I say we can’t stay on the phone. We’re at Dee Dee’s.’

‘Mmm, yeah, thanks Mum, bye.’ Lucy heard the changing of the guard. Dee Dee and her mother were already thick in conversation when her father came on the line.

‘Lucky!’ he gushed. ‘How’s my Lucky Star?’

Lucy softened. ‘Hi Dad, I’m OK. It’s bloody hot huh?’

‘It is, it is that indeed. Bloody hot. Quite.’

‘How are you, Dad?’

‘Oh well, your mother and I are at Dee Dee’s on the deck having a very large gin and tonic. We’re watching a group kayakers paddle across the inlet and were talking about whether they belonged to a club of some sort. So on that basis you could say we can’t complain.’

Lucy giggled. ‘Yeah well, I s’pose not. Guess what?’

‘How many guesses do I get?’

Lucy loved their guessing game.

‘Three,’ she replied.

‘Just three?’

‘Just three.’

‘Only three?’

‘Only three.’

‘Well then.’ Lucy heard her dad take a sharp intake of breath before he began. ‘The stars are brighter in the northern hemisphere than they are in the southern hemisphere and therefore carrots will always grow larger in Wales than they will in Ohakune.’

Lucy sunk into the couch and rested the cold cider bottle on her belly. 'No,' she giggled. 'And that's number one. Two to go.'

'OK... cows eat the equivalent of a one-acre square field of grass per week and that's why the ratio of cow to field should always be 100 to one.'

'Da-ad! You're not even trying!' Lucy giggled. 'And I don't even know what that *means!* One left.'

'Just one? Not two?'

'Not two, but nice try. Just one, so make it count.'

'Last one then: you've shaved your head and you're joining the Krishna clan on a clapping, bell-ringing tour of New Zealand.'

'Shaved my head? Krishnas? No-o! Of course not. You didn't even *try*. Give up?'

'I give up, what is it dear?'

'I might be getting a pay rise.'

'Oh Lucky, that *is* good news. And well deserved I am sure. Goodness knows you work night and day for that man. Did you tell your mother?'

'No, you can tell her.'

'I will. Now make sure you put some of it aside for that elusive rainy day—'

'Yeees Da-ad.'

'Well, someone has to look out for you, Lucky Star. You never know when the rains might come and you haven't met Mr Moneybags yet.'

'Dad! I don't need a man to rescue me. That's so old-fashioned. And I'm happy just as I am.'

'Yes, well I've always thought of you as being independently happy and perfectly complete just as you are. But still, don't let any of those lads think they could be getting the milk for free.'

'Oh Dad! Really! Besides, they're the ones being milked, not me.'

'Yes, well, you could be right. Oop,' he wavered, 'looks like I'm needed; your mother's furiously waving at me. I'd better go and pay attention to my host, we're at Dee Dee's you know, in Tauranga. Your mother probably needs another gin. And I think I'm on barbecue duties. Actually I'm quite sure I'm on barbecue duties, we're still in favour of

dividing the chores about the sexes in the provinces. You look after yourself My Little Lucky Star and we'll talk to you soon.'

'OK Dad, will do. You too. Love you Dad.'

'Yes, quite— Bye bye Lucky Star.'

'Bye Dad.'

As her father rang off Lucy stretched back on the couch, the sun belting down on her, and tuned her ear to the crescendoing symphony of the dusk birdsong.



Saturday and the clouds had robbed the late summer's day of its sun. Lucy's used its cooler embers to duck into the Real Groovy sale. The über-music store was an Auckland institution. Its décor clung onto its awkward, enraged and scruffy punk grunge roots. And today it was home to many. Waifs, strays and musos of all vintages stood shoulder-to-shoulder fossicking for precious treasure.

Lucy entered the Aladdin's Cave in time to catch the last of singer-songwriter Anna Coddington's set. Her and a couple of others were crammed on a half-metre high small stage consigned to the farthest back corner of the vast high-ceilinged, many-cornered room.

Anna had it all, and then some. Big tits on a tiny frame and the best parts of what looked like a Polynesian-Pakeha melting pot ancestry. Throw in her understated street-cool style and a voice like the haunting kokako and yup, Anna had it all.

Lucy squeezed into the gathered crowd, cocooned behind some record shelves, in front of some record shelves. A couple of songs later Anna ended her set. The red stage light melted off her shoulder as she stepped off the stage and moved forward into the bustle of the store.

The Checks were up next. Lucy reckoned she had about ten minutes to look occupied until they came on. She turned away from the activity and wandered up the aisles of vinyl, making a faint effort to occasionally thumb through the random cardboard-encased stacks. She didn't even

have a record player. She could add to the list of what she didn't have, could have and might get. Eventually. One day.

Real Groovy had once all but shut its doors for good. The up-and-down global recession's tentacles had held the store in its determined grip. Much to the collective sigh of Auckland's alternative path-beaters, a last minute bail-out had saved the stalwart retailer.

No one knew the details; no one gave a shit.

The Checks jammed onto the small stage and started their earnest noise-making. Lucy returned to her perch.

A tall, cropped-haired Indie manboy wearing Raybans stood a breath away. His striped t-shirt sleeve tickled Lucy's shoulder. His elbow bumped her.

'Oop, sorry,' said he.

'S'alright,' replied she.

'Luce!' a voice came behind her as The Adults' set ended. Lucy spun around.

'*Spiro*, hi!' She hugged the six foot man with a tan. He wore black Raybans, a black Ramones t-shirt, black skinny jeans, a black Ramones belt, a black cardigan, all black leather Converse and a black woollen hat pulled low over his black hair. He carried a stack of records under his arm and he smelt like summer.

Spiro removed his sunglasses. A pair of matching blood-shot eyes peered back at Lucy; rubies in the rough. He looked like shit. Shit but hot. Shit hot.

'How're ya doing, Spiro? Good to see ya,' Lucy flushed.

'Hungover,' he grinned. '*So* hungover. I spewed this morning, then I made pancakes.'

'Pancakes? *You* made pancakes... after spewing?' She poked his stomach.

'Careful! And yeah, well I bought the stuff to make 'em, so yeah, whatever. Yunno.' He scratched his forehead where his hat met his skin.

'I can't believe you made pancakes with a hangover after you spewed.'

'Yeah, I know, sounds weird, huh?'

'Sure does. So what'd you get up to last night to spew?'

'Die! Die! Die!'

'Oh yeah, that'd do it. They were playing at Cross Street weren't they?'

'Yeah, nah. I mean, yeah, they played there earlier. But they were at Totos or whatever it's called.'

'The Montecristo Rooms? Bacco Rooms?'

'Yeah, one of them. Bacco, I think. Free bar. I got really drunk,' he added.

'Clearly. You spewed. I thought you might be going to their gig. I almost called you to tag along. I was Lucy-no-mates last night, actually had a night in. Feel good for it, though.'

'Lame,' he teased.

'Yeah, I know, truly... So where'd you end up after that, or was that it?'

'The Die! Die! Die! boys came back to mine, we ended up having a party. Half the audience came along too, mad fuckers. All hyped up on punk rock. We played pool, put on some albums, few bottles of whiskey got slammed, yunno. Didn't get to bed 'til after five. The boys trashed Roly's drum kit, though. The fat fuck's gonna be pissed off when he sees it; he was out all night with this new chick. The place is a fucken mess today. *Fuck!* Spiro tucked one hand into his jeans pocket. 'The place fucken stank too, stale beer, whiskey and cigarettes—'

'Nice—' Lucy laughed.

'Yeah, so I had to get out.'

'I see you're buying more vinyl?' Lucy eyed his stash of records.

'Yeah...'

'Mark Lanegan?'

'Yeah, he's got a new album out. And PJ Harvey. Her new shit rocks! You heard it?'

'Nah, not yet,' she replied.

Spiro scratched at his hat again. 'Fuck, I haven't spewed for ages.'

‘Well, no, you wouldn’t have, not being a teenager and all. Me neither, also not being a teen. But poor you really. How you feeling now? I can’t believe you’re standing.’

‘Shit. Real shit actually. I should be in bed. What am I even doing here?’ He laughed.

‘Yeah, you look like the Devil’s spawn.’

‘Thanks!’ Spiro slapped the top of Lucy’s head and smirked. He put his free arm around her shoulder and shunted her sideways with his hip, pulling her back into a hug.

‘Might go home and sleep after this,’ he continued, pressing into her. ‘Or go out and take some pics if I’m up for it, probably just crash though. But it’d be good to get up to Mt. Eden while the light’s good though.’

‘Oh yeah, how’s the photography going?’

‘Good, yeah, good, thanks,’ he replied releasing his arm but not before giving Lucy’s shoulder a light squeeze. ‘But I haven’t been doing it for a couple of weeks, been working, partying, yunno. The usual.’

‘Yeah, right, summer,’ she agreed, nodding. ‘Hey, I saw this really cute guy before, during The Checks, after Anna Coddington.’

‘Oooh, she’s hot; missed her. Bummer. Came to see my boys The Checks anyway. They were back at ours last night. Dunno how they can play today. That’s rock musos for you.’

‘Yeah, big tits.’ They both laughed. ‘Anyway,’ Lucy continued. ‘He was flicking through vinyl, going through it all one by one; he had a system. I tried to give him the glad eye but he didn’t notice. I mean, what’s a girl gotta do to get noticed round here?’

‘*You* should know,’ Spiro poked Lucy in the ribs and winking. When he grinned Lucy admired two perfect rows of white teeth.

‘Yeah, sure: in a bar, at night, drunk. But what d’you do in a record store in the middle of the day stone cold sober? Hump his leg? Can hardly buy him a drink, can I?’

‘You had no problems with me and we were sober.’ Spiro raised his eyebrows.

‘Yeah, well, that was different.’

‘Ha! No it wasn’t,’ he laughed, putting his arm around her neck and pulling her in and kissing her cheek. ‘You should’ve gone up beside him and looked through the vinyl. Talked to him, like a normal person.’

‘Yeah,’ she laughed. ‘Or humped his leg.’

‘Oh, shit! Bugger it,’ Lucy grabbed a record and lifted it high to cover her face.

‘What?’ Spiro looked around the room to see what prompted such a display of hide-and-don’t-see.

‘There’s a guy over there who asked me out the other day, offered to cook me dinner. He feels sorry for me ’cos I can’t cook. I don’t want to see him, not in the mood.’

‘Where? That guy in the Faith No More t-shirt with the bad hair. Oooh, that’s some wildly bad hair, man. That’s the worst haircut I’ve ever seen.’

Lucy looked to where Spiro was looking to a tall, skeletal Goth in his twenties. He was shrouded in a black leather coat which hung to the top of his 11-up purple Doc Martens. His thinning home-dyed lank black hair was shaved sharp above his ears and up under his ponytail, which hung in a matted clump halfway down his back. His claws, criss-crossed by fishnet gloves with pinches of fat oozing through, fingered through thick rows of vinyl.

‘Whoa yeah, that *is* bad,’ Lucy agreed, delighting from the shock of so clichéd a being. ‘It’s not even ironic or original. And check out the guy next to him with the runaway goatee growing wild all over his chin, like a big ol’ muff. Mr. Muff Face.’

‘Muff Face. Ha! Love it.’

‘Yeah, no, it’s neither of them. It’s the one with the purple velvet hat perched on his head like a Dr. Seuss character. *Cat in the Hat*, or whatever.’

‘The one who looks like he’s run away with the circus and smoked *waaaay* too much pot?’

Lucy turned to Spiro keeping the album held over her face, laughing. 'Well, that's not obvious covering your face with a record,' Spiro reached to pull it down. 'He won't see *that*.'

'*Don't!* I'm warning you... Seriously! I don't want him to see me. And I don't care if I look like a dick so long as he doesn't see me.'

'Yeah, right, OK. He's a little creepy.'

'You're telling me? That's why I don't wanna go out with him ya dick.'

After Cat in the Hat vacated to another dank corner of the store, Lucy held three NIN albums up to Spiro: *Broken*, *With Teeth* and *And All That Could Have Been NIN Live*. She'd gone to the concert at Vector Arena with him a few years ago.

'I can only afford two, which ones should I get?' she asked.

'The touring one's got all the hits, I s'pose. *With Teeth*'s one of my faves. Get all three.'

'Can't. Well I could, but I wouldn't be able to eat 'til Wednesday.'

'I'll get 'em for you.'

'No, you can't do that.'

'Yes, I can. When have I ever bought you a birthday present or whatever? And you paid for the concert all those years ago, and I'm pretty sure I never paid you back. My skint days.' He laughed.

True. Lucy was crap at calling in her loans.

'Really though', Lucy clutched the albums.'

'Yes. Really! *Get Broken* and *With Teeth*. And really, truly.'

After saying goodbye to Spiro, Lucy dipped down the wooden stairs off Queen Street to walk home through Myer's Park. An international mish-mash of parents and kids clambered and swung over the jungle gym with kids falling onto the rubber ground and squawking with delight. A soccer ball ricocheted towards Lucy as her phone rang in her bag. It was Will.

'Will, hi.' Lucy stopped in her tracks, from surprise more than anything.

'Lucy, hey, how are you?'

‘Fine, yeah good, thanks, yeah... you?’

‘Great, great. The sun’s just come out.’

‘Cloudy here, I’m in Myers Park. I’ve just been at Real Groovy’s sale, bought a couple of Nine Inch Nails albums. Yeah, so all good.’

‘Yeah so, I’m cooking up a bacchanalian feast for friends tonight and wondered if you might join us for the evening?’

‘Me?’

‘Yeah you.’ Will laughed. ‘Why wouldn’t it be you?’

The clouds finally completely parted and the full force of the sun’s heat streamed down on Lucy. The brightness hurt her eyes as they quickly adjusted to the bright light.

‘I mean... that sounds lovely but I’m at a gig tonight, have to review it. You know me, always working.’

‘Oh that’s a shame, you’ll miss my cooking.’

‘Yeah, work, yunno.’

‘Aaah, yeah. So there’s no way you can do both? Dinner and the gig?’

‘I could ask Beth my editor if she could do it but I think she’s got a date,’ Lucy sighed.

‘Well you do that and let me know. There’s a place at the table for you if you can do both, come at 8,’ he said.

‘The first band is on at 8.’

‘So that’s a no, then?’

‘Yeah, bugger, I guess so. Sorry. Next time?’

‘Sure, next time.’

Beth did have other plans. Damn Will for his too-late invitation.
And boo to work for ruining her chance with Will.

Chapter Three

Sunday night was another hot one. Bloody hot. Beanie had invited Lucy to join her for dinner. She lived in a Cox's Bay waterfront home which she shared with her husband Red, father to their one child Gracie, and French au pair, Sabine. Sabine was paid for by Beanie's father. As were the Audis, the house, Beanie's wedding and their rings. He took his fatherhood duties very seriously, all the way to the bank.

As the saying goes, there's no such thing as a free lunch and Lucy knew in exchange for being fed and watered she'd have to join Sabine in performing the role of buffer, of relationship shock absorber. Beanie and Red's perfect couple exterior masked a faulty, if not broken beyond all repair interior. Many saw the performance but few bore witness to the behind-the-scenes exclusive.

Lucy pinned it down to two perfectly nice, perfectly mis-matched people who got together when forever had no meaning and stayed together because it was the thing to do.

Red, a stumpy bloke, was a head honcho in construction, although the recession had knocked him sideways, something he'd never quite recovered from. Beanie, a streamlined ghostly gazelle, was Auckland's Grande Dame of events; if they were rich, famous, or Lady Gaga, Beanie had the gig.

Gracie was their glue.

Lucy would have preferred to have been spared the grisly reality of their marital woe, to bathe in the illusion of the perfect pair to which others were privy: the girl from Remuera, the boy from G.I., where good and bad sides of the tracks meet in the middle and lived happily ever after.

But fuck it, a meal was a meal and she was hungry.

The very spindly, very French and very surly Sabine was folding a mountain of clean washing when Lucy arrived, about a month's worth in Lucy World. Eau de Persil stung the hot, heavy air. Lucy plonked herself on Beanie's couch and sunk into the riches of plush velvety suede. It felt unnatural to watch someone else do the work. And Sabine was paid to help. Leave the sour cow to it.

Red was home for once. He sat perched on the edge of a suede pouf. His thick handyman's fingers tapped furiously on his iPad.

Beanie breezed into the lounge fresh out of the shower, carrying the waft of vanilla. After kissing Lucy hello on both cheeks she padded over to the fridge to get out a bottle of wine. 'Honey,' she addressed the air, 'you didn't even get a drink for our guest.'

'Sorry,' Red murmured, looking down.

'And did you tell Lucy our news,' she called back to the silent room. 'Pinot gris, Luce? Dad dropped off a case of it yesterday. Won it at golf.'

'Aaah, how the rich get richer,' she laughed. 'Your dad wins everything.'

'Yeah, he's a winner alright, and it's not like he needs anything,' Beanie called back. 'But as long as I am part of that food chain, who's complaining?'

'Right!' Lucy laughed.

Sabine skulked out of the room hefting a large pile of washing. Red hunkered over his iPad.

‘Well, in that case, I’ll have a bottle, thanks.’ Lucy grinned. ‘Yunno, I bought a bottle of wine full price the other day. Can’t remember the last time I paid full price for wine. For anything, for that matter. Everything’s on sale these days. I now “um and ah” if something’s only 50 per cent off,’ Lucy babbled. ‘So yeah... full price,’ she said into the silent hum of the room.

Beanie clinked and clattered in the adjoining room. ‘Honey, have you told Luce our news?’

‘What news?’ Red sighed, his eyes stayed fixed on his knees. The white of the iPad screen reflected onto his receding forehead. Cracks and crevices were etched into it like a parched desert floor.

‘From the other night,’ called Beanie.

‘What? Oh, yeah, right. You tell her,’ he replied. A scrunched paw wiped away a thin trail of sweat on Red’s stubble-flecked neck.

‘No, you, it’s your news too,’ she said returning to the lounge. She was carefully balancing three generous glasses of white wine.

‘Oh honey, turn off Facebook or Twitter or whatever the hell you’re on for Christ’s sake and tell Lucy our news. She didn’t come over to watch you with your face in a stupid machine all night.’

‘It’s your news, you tell her,’ he deadpanned. ‘And it’s not a machine; it’s an iPad.’

‘Oh grow up Red! It’s a fucken toy, get over it. Even Gracie can navigate it faster than you,’ barked Beanie. ‘Just tell her would you. You see what I have to put up with?’ Beanie peered at Lucy, raising an eyebrow.

‘If one of you doesn’t tell me soon, I’ll make something up, like, oh, I don’t know—’ Lucy’s voice petered out.

‘Yeah, go on, make something up,’ Red grinned as he swivelled to face her, shutting down his iPad and grabbing the remote control in one fluid movement. ‘The truth is never as good anyway.’

Red glanced up at the TV and turned it on, quickly lowering the volume as he flicked from channel to channel.

‘Oh, I don’t know, truth is stranger than fiction and all that,’ Lucy smiled back at Red before he turned away.

Lucy pondered at Red’s inability to kick back, have a drink and enjoy the simple pleasures of mono-tasking. And at why he railed so hard against the relationship he chose to be in.

‘No honey, *you* tell her. Come on, it’s good news, it’s our news,’ she whined, leaning across and playfully slapping Red’s shoulder.

‘No, you, honey.’

‘Oh, for goodness sake, Red,’ she snapped and turned to Lucy. ‘OK.’ She paused. ‘Well, the other night Dad offered to pay for us to renew our vows, next summer. *Yay!* Happy?’

Beanie glowed. Red glowered. His eyes flickered at Lucy, then back to his hands sitting on top of his iPad nestling on his knees. Lucy saw that his thumb had a clot of blood sitting just under the surface of his nail.

‘Oh. Crikey. Cool. Awesome. Congratulations and—’

‘Commiserations?’ Red grinned and pushed the home button on his iPad.

Red!

In the kitchen, Lucy perched on a stool at the wide milky white marble breakfast bar. She watched Beanie rip off the plastic wrapper off an organic, corn-fed, free range, sung-to-by-monks chicken. She pulled out the innards with the precision of a surgeon and roughly shoved in an orange, a handful of small red onions and some whole garlic cloves into its empty cavity and rubbed freshly picked, chopped sage Sabine brought in from the garden mixed with butter under its skin. Behind Beanie’s head, Lucy caught a glimpse of the dusk twilight twinkling on the outgoing harbour tide. She envied Beanie her waterside view. Oh for the riches that riches can buy.

She returned her gaze to her friend. Beanie’s tall, thin, pointyness had been the subject of female daggers everywhere. Her fine-ness could have looked witchy, but on Beanie it was regal, recalling her ballerina past. Her fine, long nose was dappled with tiny, blonde freckles sparsely

placed on pale unblemished skin. Her steely eyes were set awkwardly wide apart and gave her the much-envied alien-look of a Gucci model.

Today Beanie's ultra long white-blond hair was scooped into a messy ponytail, still damp from the shower. She was stylish in a way that Lucy, with her rag-doll mop of tight dark brown ringlets, could never achieve. Beanie's loose t-shirt hung off one shoulder on her bra-less body and she wore a pair of very short pale denim cut-offs. She was barefoot, long-legged and moved with poise around her kitchen stage, feet slapping on the sandstone tiled floors.

Lucy leaned forward into the cool bench-top, imported from Italy. Her hand clasped around her second glass of wine. She wanted to lean down and breathe into the marble's shiny surface and see condensation mottle its perfection, even if only for a second.

Beanie and Red's house reflected Beanie's effortless, simple, intelligent elegance. Lucy could barely see Red's footprint, aside from his insider's access to the best building materials all bought at a stonking discount. Expensive modern fittings melded with collectible retro "*pieces*", all infused with a prized collection of New Zealand modern art. Prim white bookshelves were peppered with carefully placed the best of the bestseller list, coloured glass vases and just-so Kiwiana knick-knackery bits and bobs collected from op-shops from up and down the country – all worth a bloody fortune, of course. Despite the obvious magazine-worthy charms of the vast seaside retreat, it was all far too precisely collated and placed for Lucy's left-of-field tastes.

Lucy picked at Beanie's freshly baked foccacia, dipping it into bright green olive oil, a gift from Lucy's mother ("*She's like the daughter I never had*").

'That's so awesome about you and Red. Your dad's always so generous.'

'I *know*! Isn't he? I love my dad, he rocks. And you're the first person we've told. Second-time-round doesn't actually have bridesmaids, but if it did, you'd be in the number one spot.'

'Oh don't, I couldn't bear being your bridesmaid *twice*, no offence—'

‘Oh, none taken. Oh *God*. There’s so much to do. Actually, in all likelihood, dad’s girlfriend Fifi will probably help, and she’s got awesome taste, luckily for dad –he can’t buy taste, so might as well marry it!’ Beanie laughed. Her fingers were sticky with fat as she grabbed her stemless Reidel wine glass and took a healthy swig.

‘Hey, Beanie... without sounding weird, can I ask, what exactly is renewing your vows? What does it mean exactly?’

‘Huh?’

‘Oh, just what’s second time around about? First time, I get, but second?’

‘Oh yeah. Really it was Fifi’s idea, all her friends are doing it, it’s all the rage in St Heliers, apparently. Actually, to be perfectly honest, I don’t know a whole lot about it, but it seemed like a good idea at the time. I mean, what the hell, right? But really, it’s just a thing, a ceremony to reaffirm our commitment to each other, and to Gracie. ’Cos she wasn’t at the wedding the first time. Obviously.’ Beanie smiled and her nose crinkled.

‘Ah, duh.’ Lucy smiled back.

‘Yeah, OK, It’s just we’re coming up married nearly ten years now – ten years, can you believe that? We must have been babies –and well, to be honest, things haven’t been all that great between us, so I thought this’d be something we can do together.’

‘What, a family outing’s just not enough anymore?’

‘Oh ha ha. Anyway, any excuse for a party, right?’ Beanie stopped what she was doing and looked up at Lucy. Her eyes glistened. ‘Luce, I’m doing the right thing, aren’t I?’

Lucy flushed. ‘Oh babe, of course you are. You love each other, right? And if things aren’t quite so peachy at the moment you have to do what you can, do whatever feels right to get it all back on track. You do love each other don’t you?’

‘Yeah, yeah. Yes, of course we do.’ Beanie shook her head. ‘Yeah we love each other. It’s just, I dunno... I just sometimes wonder, is love enough?’ Beanie took a sip of wine and rested her elbows on the bench leaning forward. ‘It’s just since Gracie was born a couple of years ago,

and then when Mum died last year, well, emotions have become strained and it's like we've never really got back on track, back to where we were. And work's been super full on for me and picking back up again for Red. And Sabine's always around, in the middle of everything, being all French and silent. Like *always* around. She's like living with an omnipresent shadow about the place. Yunno? And sometimes I look at Red and honestly, it's as if I am sharing my bed with a complete stranger and I don't even belong in my own home. I think: who is this man? What do I really know about him? And what does he know about me? And, well, I think if we don't do something soon, we'll lose each other.'

Lucy nodded.

'It's just he's so, I dunno, *angry*. Angry with me, with Gracie, with Sabine, with everything. He's just angry all of the time.'

'Yeah—' Lucy replied slowly. 'He does seem kinda tense.'

'It's work. Been a few tough years in construction.' Beanie turned to wash her hands. 'The big guns are getting all the contracts. It's been so many years of wait-and-see, least it feels it. I don't even know what he's been doing half the time in that office. He had to lay off a bunch of people, which took it out of him. It's pretty much been just skeleton staff now. Just Cribbs and Kylie their PA have been there long term now. Oh, anyway—' Beanie rolled her eyes and flicked her ponytail. 'Ignore me. I'm just worrying over nothing— ever the princess, me.' Beanie picked up her wine glass now opaque with chicken fat and raised it. 'Cheers to Red and me renewing our vows. And thanks Dad.'

'Thanks Beanie's Dad!' Lucy clinked her glass against Beanie's.

'So where'd you reckon we should do it?' Beanie perked up. 'We don't want anything lavish, yunno, sign of the times, but defo stylish. And it's not like Dad can't afford it.'

'Big ups for stylish. Cocktail party somewhere sexy and low key, I reckon. That's what I'd do. And any excuse to buy a new cocktail frock.'

'Cheers to that!' Beanie laughed and slugged back the last drop of her wine.

'Oh, I saw Spiro yesterday at Real Groovy,' Lucy announced.

‘Spiro? I haven’t seen him for ages, since, God, I dunno, before Christmas. How is he? Come outside with me for a ciggie.’ Beanie grabbed her not-so-secret stash of cigarettes hidden in a 1950s cream porcelain biscuit tin on the fridge, up and away from Gracie.

‘Yeah he said that.’ Lucy grabbed her wine and the bread platter and clambered off her perch to follow Beanie outside to the deck. They passed Red dozing on the couch. Silent Sabine had presumably had gone to rouse a late-napping Gracie before dinner.

‘He was hungover as all hell,’ Lucy continued out in the cool of the evening sea breeze. ‘Spewed this morning, then made pancakes.’

‘Pancakes? What the fuck?’ said Beanie, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it. ‘Spiro made pancakes? I don’t fucken believe it. He can’t even cook. I’d have to see that before I believed it. What’d he been up to then?’

‘Die! Die! Die! at Bacco Rooms.’

‘Oh, yeah, that’d be right, those boys know how to party. Which reminds me, I must get them in as a support band at Vector. So was he alone?’

‘Yeah. Looked hot too.’

‘Yeah, I bet he did. He’s so hot. Man, if I was single—’ Beanie sighed, inhaling deeply on her cigarette. ‘You should so bang him, if only for me. One of us has to,’ she continued, ‘and it can’t be me.’

Lucy blushed. Beanie didn’t know of Lucy and Spiro’s two-month hormonally-charged encounter the summer before. Nor would she ever know.

‘Hey check out that kayaker on the water,’ Lucy swayed Beanie’s attention across the water. Her friend turned and stole a brief, disinterested glance over her shoulder.

‘So what’s new with Spiro anyway?’ Beanie dabbed out her cigarette butt.

‘He told me his flatmate Roly’s girlfriend, Jessie, Jodi, Gypsy or whatever the hell she’s called has moved into their warehouse,’ Lucy replied.

‘Gypsy. It’s *actually* Gypsy,’ Beanie rolled her eyes. ‘I met her a few times, parties and stuff. Mother’s a rich bitch from out my way. Calling her daughter Gypsy was her way of pissing off her parents. Backfired of course, she underestimated her parents’ love of their granddaughter. Anyway, Gypsy’s a total brainless sprite like her mother. Only gets away with it ’cos she’s starved herself to within an inch of her privileged life, model thin. There’s thin, model thin and death, and she’s model thin and is *totally* gorgeous. Pains me.’ Beanie lit up another cigarette and inhaled slowly. ‘And is it just me or do those boys never let the sheets on their beds cool?’

‘That’s what Spiro said,’ Lucy nodded. ‘So what’s she like, Gypsy, as a person. I mean, will she be nice to Roly? He’s a prat sometimes but he deserves a decent chick.’

‘She’s mildly inoffensive generally but it would do her the world of good if she broke into a smile every now and again instead of looking like the world owes her a fucken favour. The wind will change one day, I tell you. When she gets old, the wrinkles will set her face into an evil frown, and she’ll be stuck like that forever.’

‘Right—’

‘—she tried to get a job with me once, but as if. I wouldn’t have her round all those musos. Can you imagine? They’re surly and depressed enough as it is, might just tip them right over the edge seeing her sour mug about the face, albeit a pretty sour mug. Actually, thinking about it, they’d probably be hot for that sort of thing, heroin chic marries emo, I dunno. Beggars belief really.’

Beanie flicked ash behind her over the side of the deck showering the nest of native scrubs that lined the deck. ‘But really, Lord only knows how that fat fuck Roly pulled her.’

‘Hey Beanie did I tell ya? Yesterday when I was walking home after seeing Spiro, Will phoned and invited me to dinner at his house, to an actual dinner party. He was cooking.’

'No shit? Will? Really? No way—' Beanie paused and stared at Lucy. 'Oh! My! God!' She rocked back in her chair.

'What?'

'Holy crap—'

'What?'

'He *likes* you. Will likes you. Oh my God. He so likes you.' Beanie had lit up a fresh cigarette. 'Willy and Lucy up a tree—'

'No he doesn't—'

'Yeah he does, he so does,' Beanie crackled. 'He invited you to *dinner* you idiot. One that *he* was cooking, and with all of his friends there. In front of his friends. Who *does* that if they're trying to hide you? He's totally into you. Oh my God. This is so cool. He fancies you. Willy totally fancies you.'

'Naah,' Lucy shook her head. 'No—'

'Yes he does. Listen to me Luce; men only invite someone they *like* to dinner, presumably to show you off to his friends. It'd be totally dicky to invite someone you didn't like. I mean, it's not like he can't shag you whenever he clicks his fingers, milk for free and all that—'

'I'm not that easy!'

'Oh honey, yes you are. You so are. You jump and run whenever he wants you. He totally has you where he wants you, but this is *all* new behaviour.' Beanie sat back in her chair satisfied.

Lucy felt chastened. Her eyes fell to childish lines of blue, yellow and pink chalk curling over the wooden deck. Gracie.

'Ah! This is so cool.' Beanie clapped like a seal. 'Lucy's got a boyfriend; Lucy's got a boyfriend— that's so cool, really. *Hey Red!*' she yelled, cocking her head towards the house. 'Guess what?' she winked at Lucy and took a drag on her cigarette.

'What?' he grunted back after a pause.

'Lucy's got a boyfriend,' she exhaled, smoke billowed from her nostrils.

'Oh yeah,' said the disembodied voice. 'Who's that then?'

'Will, the guy she's been shagging for like— how long's it been Luce?— like forever, ten years,' Cat yelled back.

'No shit,' Red slumbered out to the deck holding a beer and carrying a sleepy-looking Gracie. When she saw Lucy, the little white-blonde haired girl jerked her head away and rubbed a frowning face into her father's shirt.

'So you got a boyfriend then Luce? 'Bout time wouldn't you say; clock's ticking. Ten years shagging the same bloke? No shit? Ten years and no ring yet. Shiiit—'

'More like twelve actually, not that it matters—' Lucy's voice wavered. '*And* there's been men in between; it's not just been him. Actually—'

'Twelve? Twelve years? Fuuuck. Shouldn't you have reined him in by now? What's wrong with you girl?' Red sat down placing a doe-eyed Gracie on his lap. He leaned forward and ripped off a hunk of foccacia, dumped it in the oil and shoved it in his mouth. A viscous green trail dripped down his arm narrowly missing Gracie's pale pink arms.

'Bread,' Gracie said, a statement rather than a question.

'Yes Gracie,' her mother answered, 'but your dinner will be ready soon, honey. We're having chicken, your favourite.'

'Shhhicken,' Gracie echoed. Her face burst into a toothy smile. 'Shhhicken,' she said to Lucy. 'Oosie,' she smiled when she saw her curly-haired, dimple-cheeked Godmother smiling back at her. 'Oosie. Shhhicken.'

Lucy leaned forward and broke off a piece of bread and passed it to the little girl. Her chubby hands grabbed at it and the whole lump was pressed into her mouth. She chewed and smiled, then, as quickly as it had begun, she suddenly became stricken with fey shyness and pushed her face back into Red's plaid shirt.

'So Luce,' Red baited patting Gracie's soft curls. 'When you gonna corner this man for real? I mean, twelve years—'

'Oh Red you're such an arse. Go away,' Beanie waved her hand at Red. 'Sometimes,' she sighed heavily after he had gone, taking Gracie away, tubes of grey smoke funnelling out her nose, 'I really wonder why I bother with him at all.'



When she got home Lucy poured herself a generous bath. She lay in the hot water, perfumed bubbles crackling under her chin, candle-light strobing on the perspiring ceiling, and set her mind to still.

Then, like the shrill of seagulls, her mobile phone pierced the quiet calm. She let it ring on and on until she finally gave into its curt demands. It could be important.

She wiped the misted the screen with a prune-wrinkled finger: Cat.

‘Hey Cat.’

‘You’ll never guess who’s pulled herself a man?’ Cat burst out full throttle. *It was nearly midnight. This better be important.*

‘Who?’ Lucy drawled.

‘Only Jodie.’

‘Nooo!’ Lucy sat up, the flannel slipping down her body into the water. ‘Jodie-fell-down-the-ugly-tree-and-hit-every-branch-Jodie? Lumpy, bumpy Jodie? No, tell me it’s not so.’

‘Yes it is and no I won’t. Lumpy, bumpy Jodie has pulled herself a man,’ said Cat with finite verve.

‘Nooo!’ Stinging water dripped into Lucy’s eyes. ‘But she’s so... so badly put together. I shouldn’t really say that, I’m going straight to hell, but seriously? Really? Jodie? A man?’

‘Yep. It’s the end of the road doll, when the guys are going for Jodie and leaving us on the shelf. I tell ya, it’s not good, not good at all, my friend.’

‘Bad day in the Pons, Cat. Not good at all. So who’s the lucky man then?’

‘Lord only knows,’ Cat clattered around her kitchen. ‘But it must be love. I hear he’s not even half bad.’

‘Really? But she has lumps. Jodie has *lumps!*’ Lucy sunk into the depths of the water and replaced the steaming flannel over her forehead.

‘Oh I know doll, I *know!*’ agreed Cat. ‘Whatever happened to being gorgeous, fabulous *and* lump-free and pulling the men? Don’t men want hot anymore? Is it all lights off from now on? God knows she’s let

herself go. She used to put in such an effort. But now she's put herself out to pasture. I mean, *really!*' Cat sighed. 'Oh babe, I just don't get it.'

'It's not just the women putting themselves out to pasture. I went out with a guy once who got cellulite on his stomach.'

'No way!' Cat snorted.

'Yes way. He'd go home for the Christmas holidays and he and his family would trough out on custard squares, lamingtons and cream-filled doughnuts. Dinner at 5.30 p.m. with shop-bought coleslaw, ready-mash and saveloys watching TV from trays, not talking to each other. Oh Christ, I am *such* a snob,' Lucy laughed into the phone patting the bubbles around her. 'Ah, so shoot me.'

'Shop-bought coleslaw. Brilliant! Yes, you are indeed a horrible snob, and Beanie's the one from Remuera, *dahling*. But I draw the line at shop-bought coleslaw. It's not actually food you know; it's a Petri-dish experiment. More microbes on it than a sailor's penis following shore-leave.' Cat snorted. 'Mind you, we can't talk, we can't even cook. At least if we had a fridge full of shop-bought coleslaw we'd have a chance in hell of actually eating from time-to-time. Microbes or no.'

'Too true. And Beanie told me tonight about an ex of hers, someone I used to work with— she said she probably shouldn't tell me— but he had cellulite on his *arse*.'

'No, no, no. Beanie went out with a guy with cellulite on his arse? Tell me it's not so. That's just plain wrong! Guys don't get cellulite, least of all on their arse, that's just one just for us girls. I thought Beanie had better taste than that. Actually, what am I saying,' Cat paused, 'she's landed herself with Mr Sausage Fingers from construction, and that's hardly the man-coup of the year.'

'Oh Red's not so bad. And he's not fat he's just stocky. Oh OK, he's a bit of a dick from time to time, and getting a paunch. But I kid you not; Beanie said the cellulite was on this guy's *arse!* And he was slim, at least on the outside. Lazy as fuck, didn't move without a car attached to his cellulite arse. Some DJ-or-other. But yeah, true story; DJ-Cellulite-Arse.'

‘Euw, skinny cellulite. That’s the worst. That’s the absolute pits, Luce. What the hell: men with cellulite, and Jodie pulling a man. Really, what hope is there?’

‘On the surface Cat, no hope at all, none whatsoever.’



Monday at work as always was a rotten affair.

Grumpy was the dish of the day served in generous helpings; all-comers in the throes of the weekend comedown. The mountainous climb of the week ahead was shrouded in the fog of a collective goings through the motions. The weekend was too far away to even bother pining for. Even Wednesday– Humpday– was a mirage. And Tuesday had to be crawled through yet.

And everyone knows that whatever party favours you take on Saturday you pay for until Tuesday.

Lucy’s office was no different. Despite their collective reluctance to start the week, her small office, the one they shared with a couple of other on- and off-line magazines, buzzed with activity. Photographers delivered discs of photos from a weekend packed with events, expos, parties, plays, shows and gigs; designers uploaded imagery onto Macs and laid it out onscreen; Beth and Lucy posted on Facebook and Twitter, captioning the action and capturing the memories; and the group receptionist packed up and sent off a Santa sack of booty from their collective competitions to the winners.

And an ever-changing motley crew met around the espresso machine as the hours passed, relaying the weekend antics, pouring scorn on those who had failed to deliver to expectation.

At a little after 5, Lucy slumped down the hill towards home listening to the iPod beats of Chase and Status leaving the echo of the day’s hard graft behind her. Day One was put to bed and the wheels were oiled for the week ahead. A yellow diamond sun pierced her eyes with its pointed

lasers and blinded her path; R.I.P the cat or small child who dared to cut across her.

Lucy was jolted from her musings and music by the ‘*ping ping*’ of her phone. It was a text from Will.

‘I could come over with sausage and salad and sausage if you still found yourself at a loose end’, it said.

A loose end? What the...?

Chapter Four

It had been stinking hot walking home. The air was dense and humid, and everything hummed. No sooner than she'd crossed her threshold, Lucy ripped off her sweated through clothes and tore naked into her bedroom. The sharp afternoon sun flared through the wide windows. Lucy yanked their aluminium frames to their farthest stops but only the merest breeze bothered to puff through their vacant casings. A neighbour's cat leapt through the window onto the bed and began licking her privates, her lower leg held erect.

The evening had unleashed a bizarre cauldron of possibility.

After a quick shower, where drying off in the 98 per cent humidity took just as long, Lucy lay on her bed wearing a bikini. Stupid bloody thing to have to wear, but it would do for now. She picked up her iPhone and called Cat.

'I just had the bizarrest text from Will,' she blurted when Cat finally answered. 'I think he's coming round to cook me dinner.'

'What?' Cat replied. 'You got a text from Will offering to cook you dinner? What the fuck?' Lucy heard Cat drag on a cigarette.

'I know, that's what I thought. Cat, are you smoking again?'

'Oh yeah, just the one. Bad day, babe, you know how it is—'

'Yeah... better be. You're only one fag shy of a heart attack chick and worst of all, you're facing imminent wrinkles. It'll cost you a fortune in Botox.'

'Whatever—' Cat sighed. 'You and Dee Dee... I sometimes think you've got an anti-smoking military operation going on.'

'Well, your mother's right. And she only harps on at you 'cos she wants you to live a long and healthy life—'

'Yeah, yeah—'

'Without wrinkles.'

'She can talk, fuck! She smoked when she was pregnant with me. I blame her actually. Besides, I have perfect genes, I'll never wrinkle.'

Lucy laughed, this was probably true. Cat's tall blonde Swedish mother Dee Dee was a head-turner even at 62. And Cat was part Dee Dee and part a handsome-in-his-day Chinese Kiwi called Terry, who had died five years earlier in a light plane crash. After the funeral you could just about cut the air with a knife as the men of Tauranga calculated exactly what would be the polite length of time to wait before proposing courtship with Dee Dee. The tension was heightened knowing they would have to form an orderly queue.

'Anyway—,' Lucy continued, 'how weird's this: I got a text from Willy saying he'd come round with sausage, salad *and* sausage? It says: "*I could come over with sausage and salad and sausage if you still found yourself at a loose end*". I didn't even know I *was* in at a loose end. It's Monday for fuck's sake. No one's at a loose end on Monday!'

'Of course not, darling, nothing loose about our Lucy.'

'Oh ha ha. But yeah, what d'you reckon?'

'To Will cooking you dinner?'

'If that's what the text means, yeah—'

‘God, I don’t know,’ Cat dragged. ‘Wonders never cease I s’pose. Perhaps he’s realised you’re more than just a good lay, I don’t know.’

‘Well that’s assuming I’m reading it right. Maybe he’s just being ironic or something and he’s really just coming over for pre-dinner sex on his way out to a barbecue. Which would be an entirely Will thing to do.’ Lucy stretched out across the couch. She felt sticky all over.

‘Hmmm—’

‘Yeah well, it’s all a mystery to me. *And*, did I tell you, he invited me to dinner on Saturday night?’

‘Will? Invited you to dinner? Last Saturday night? No, you didn’t tell me that. How could you not tell me that? That changes things.’

‘Oh yeah. I told Beanie last night, I thought I told you as well. Anyway... she reckons he likes me.’

‘Well, you got me babe. Perhaps you have unleashed the beast, untamed his popsicle heart? I suppose he is of an age to settle down. Though never much struck me as the type to succumb to society’s rules.’

‘Yeah, I know. And he seems pretty attached to being an arsehole.’

Cat laughed, then sighed. ‘Well, he invited you dinner and now he’s going the whole hog and coming round to cook for you. If that indeed is what his text means—. On another note, Christ almighty it’s *hot!*’

‘Yeah, isn’t it? I’m dripping juices like a bitch on heat.’

‘Oh honey, I’m lying outside in a pool of my own sweat wearing just my bra and undies. I’m sure I’m giving my neighbours conniptions, but frankly, I’m too hot to care. I should get on my bike and head down the road for a swim but honestly, I may pass out with the effort.’

‘Oh God, a swim. Take me with you, please.’

‘You can’t. You have a dinner date. Besides, it’s so not gonna happen, babe, I can hardly hold my head up. Mind you, that’s thanks to my super-size-me martini du jour. And as for Will, he must fancy you, I s’pose, if he invited you for dinner on Saturday night and whatever the hell he’s up to now. And I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about Saturday. Poor form, Lucy. How did you not tell me such news? This is potentially huge!’

'Oh, I doubt that. And I haven't seen you to tell you. Where exactly *have* you been?'

'Oh, Big Al's boat for the weekend... I'm still on the come down.'

'Oo-ooh,' Lucy sang.

'And that's why I didn't tell you, 'cos I didn't want *that* reaction.'

'Oh come on! Big Al takes you out on his boat and I'm not allowed one "Oo-ooh"? There's no one offering to take me out so much as on the back of his ten-speed bike let alone his boat, so let me have my "Oo-ooh".'

'Fair call, I s'pose.'

'So what'd you do out there for two whole days out at sea?'

'Not so far out actually, just moored at Waiheke. Mostly we ogled all the gin palaces lined up round the bays. Someone has to be the poor cousins. But enough about me... Have you and Will actually ever *seen* each other in daylight?' Cat took another protracted drag to hide her snigger.

'Oh, hardy har.'

'Well really, have you? Might wanna plaster on the makeup, doll, I'm not sure he'll cope with all those crinkles in the daylight—'

'Says the smoker—'

'*Part-time* smoker. And I'm giving up darling, can't afford the Botox.'

Lucy rolled herself upright, propping herself against her pillows. She picked at an ingrown hair at the top of her thigh. The neighbour's cat rolled over, stretched, looked at her and started purring. 'So Will—?'

'Maybe he's on drugs,' Cat suggested.

'Possibly. Film-wankers; all about the drugs aren't they? Coffee, booze and drugs: the fuel of good films everywhere. Oh, and sex apparently.'

'Indeed. Best dealers in the trade I reckon. You could phone him?'

'What? Communicate? Hardly. I far prefer the long-distance miming situation we've got going on. Besides, one phone call in a week is plenty.'

'So true. Oh well, keep up the mime and keep me posted sweets,' Cat sucked on her cigarette in one last full inhalation. 'Oh, crap,' Cat said in

a tone lacking any urgency at all. 'I've gotta go, left some food on upstairs; I really ought not to attempt cooking.'

'Yeah, me neither. I'm on a first-name basis with my smoke alarm.'

Cat snorted. 'Yes darling, I know. I hear it every bloody night. Anyway, after tonight you might not have to cook again. Maybe Mr Willy-Won't-He's come to his senses and is gonna carry you off on his mighty man-chariot proposing a lifetime of love and security. With dibs on his stupendous art collection, of course, and a promissory note of fantabulous sex forever.'

'Yeah, that sounds about right.' Lucy laughed. 'Now that *would* be weird. Yeah, well I better hop to it too and have a tidy up before he gets here. I have a knicker-floor situation.'

'More knickers than floor? Oh holy! But sweets really, what's the point? We can laugh about it but we both know he won't stay. He'll make some excuse that he turns into a pumpkin at midnight or something and fly off into the night seeking fresh blood. Or, I dunno, that he's got "*work in the morning*". For a change. How do you put up with it, seriously?'

'Yeah, well, this is a first anyway and a girl's gotta take what she can get these days.'

'True that,' replied Cat.

'And it is only early evening, so surely he can't be drunk yet.'

'Will? Probably. Pours 42 Below on his cornflakes and soaks his sarnies in 1800, doesn't he? Probably been on it since midday. Oop, Luce, really must go this time. My pasta sauce has probably baked onto the bottom of the pot by now. Talk to you later, doll.'

'Yep, later.'

By the time Lucy had dashed around the house picking up crap, threw on a short dress, squirted on perfume and put on some slap, Will was at Lucy's doorstep. Despite the humidity he wore jeans, t-shirt and jandals. He held a jumbo wicker basket containing a thicket of leaves, plump red tomatoes, a clump of dark green basil, a bag of what looked like Dave-

the-Butcher's sausages and two super-sized sweating bottles of Tui beer. Hello Farmer Joe.

The scent of nature greeted Lucy.

Will gave Lucy a quick kiss on the lips. 'Hi,' he said.

She stepped backwards to let him in. 'You really meant dinner, then,' she said nodding towards his basket.

Will smiled. 'Yeah.' He stepped inside carrying his wares. 'What'd you think I meant?' he laughed as he followed Lucy up the stairs, catching a glimpse of her cheeky bikini bum as he walked behind.

'Your text said sausage, salad and sausage,' she called behind her, 'I hadn't the faintest idea what you meant.'

'Yeah, d'ya like that? I'm funny on Mondays, funny as all hell. But only on Mondays.' His voice crackled with good humour.

'Well, you're the only one who's conquered Mondays then. Your text had me deeply baffled actually. It's not exactly your usual M.O. Sausage, yes, but sausage *and* salad?'

'Yeah, right,' he slapped her bum. 'I was at a loose end, someone cancelled on me, and I had some sausages left over from my bacchanalian feast on Saturday, the one that you apparently couldn't come to, pleading some gig or other. So I thought if you were free I'd bring the mountain to Muhammad or whatever the appropriate cliché is in this circumstance. And I didn't want to waste a good sausage.'

Lucy turned to him.

'Pun intended,' he grinned and placed the basket down on the table.

'Oh, so *you* were the one at a loose end?' she teased. 'And don't take the charm out of it, Willy. You've been thinking about this all day, about seeing me and cooking for me. You'd got yourself so het up about inviting me on Saturday and when I couldn't come you were so devastated that you went and bought those sausages especially,' she winked at him. 'Woo her with sausages and such.'

Will laughed and cased his steely-eyed director's gaze around her flat. The daylight was unflattering. Lucy became conscious of a halo of dust captured in the bright sunlight. He walked over to her small stack of '60s *Playboys* sitting on a black Kartell cabinet and had a flick through. 'Cool, never noticed these before,' he said.

'Yeah. I can't afford the '70s ones, though. You pay per muff. That one on the cover is one of Hugh's former girlfriends, Barbi. She's cute as a button. But no muff in the mag in those days.'

'Yeah, she's kinda cute. But not what you'd call cute today.'

'Well, yeah. Not so saucy then. More just... well, cute. More come-hither than putting it all out there like today.' Lucy looked over Will's shoulder. 'And the boobs are real. How weird is that?'

'Yeah, weird.'

Lucy picked up the next *Playboy* in the stack and flicked through it. 'And check out all the articles, pages and pages of tiny writing. People probably actually did buy them for the articles – only \$10 for an annual subscription too. Oh how times have changed.'

'How do you know all this stuff?'

'Ah, yunno... And check out the ads for booze and cigarettes, there's almost one every page. I have to show you this...' she turned the pages in rapid-fire. 'Look. Check out the electronics, look at this eight-track. Talk about hi-fi.'

'Classic. This stuff would be awesome to have now.'

'I know. I'd love it now.'

Will put down the *Playboy* and turned to Lucy. She closed her magazine and stacked it on his.

'I thought you said you only wore a bikini at home, least that's what your Facebook status always says.'

Lucy felt Will's breath on her nose. It tickled. 'Yeah, well I put a dress on for you.'

Will move his hand up inside her dress. 'Well you needn't have bothered,' he said, leaning in and breathing on her lips, as her bikini

bottom started to come away. 'It's only going to come off. And very quickly.'

Lucy flung her arms loosely around Will's neck and inhaled his muskiness. His skin was warm and salty. He hoisted her onto her oak kitchen table and pushed himself up into her. His urgency pelted through her. The hot of the summer sun magnified through the large windows and burned into her shoulder.

Lucy chuckled to herself at the oddity of the evening scene. She wondered if the same was happening in households all across Auckland. (*"How was your day, darling? Tell me your news whilst I manfully thrust my manhood inside of you."*).

The wooden table edges rubbed against her, crude and raw, hotly pinching her skin, and Lucy was overwhelmed by a mixture of pleasure and pain.

And most overwhelming of all, sadness.

Will chucked Lucy the 1977 Australian tourism tea-towel hanging from her oven door. She wiped herself off with koalas, kangaroos and kookaburras leaving a faint sticky trail just above her belly-button. She lifted herself up off the table and reached out for her bikini and dress which had fallen from grace under a chair. Will pulled on his jeans and Lucy stood up against him, wrapping herself around his warm naked chest.

He kissed her forehead. 'Dinner?' he asked, turning towards the bench forcing Lucy's arms to drop away. 'Let me cook for you, my bikini girl.'

Meal preparation was a lesson in discovery. Lucy had no answers for questions like: *"Do you have mustard? Balsamic? A pepper grinder?"* She didn't know. Maybe. But probably not.

At the back of the fridge Lucy claimed a culinary victory: Dijon mustard. 'I found mustard!' she exclaimed. 'And there's lemons. And oil,' she listed. 'That'd make dressing, wouldn't it?'

'Yeah, sure,' sighed Will. 'It'll have to.'

‘Hey, I found Dijon, didn’t I?’

Will picked up a bone-handled knife, one that was supposed to be sharp, and turned it round in his hand before placing it back down alongside the small neatly stacked pile of unwashed breakfast dishes.

‘Yeah, and didn’t you do well,’ he replied. ‘D’you ever do your dishes?’

‘What? Yes, of course I do. I live alone, once a day is enough. I do them at night. I rinse and stack and do them later.’

‘Well you haven’t done these—’

‘It’s not later yet. Who are you, the dishes police? Chill. I’ll do them later. Besides, it saves water; I’m actually saving the planet.’

‘Not if you rinse them—’

‘Oh blah, blah. Who’d you pick on before I came along?’

‘I’m just saying.’ Will leaned across to the fruit bowl and grabbed a lemon and chucked it at her. Lucy only just caught it. ‘You squeeze the lemons,’ he said. ‘You do have a lemon squeezer don’t you?’

‘Yes—’ Lucy smiled. ‘Think so.’

‘And I’ll do the rest. And where’s your barbecue?’

‘Outside, but I don’t think it goes. Least, I haven’t tried it in a while. Not sure,’ she replied with a sinking feeling, knowing what was about to happen next.

‘You’ve got gas, right?’ replied Will, his tone parental.

‘Yeah, but not so much the barbecue. It’s more, aah, a place for the neighbour’s cats to sleep during the day, in the sun. They fight for the spot actually, it’s really quite popular.’

Lucy’s barbecue was not her summer entertainment focal point. It didn’t help that Lucy’s only outdoor area was off a door leading from her downstairs bedroom on a shared deck. And even if Will could pull a MacGyver and whip out a toothpick, a nail file and a hair tie and crank up the barbecue, she wasn’t sure that the smell of pork sausage fat wafting through into her bedroom –however good they were– was what she was going for.

Lucy followed Will downstairs. Once outside, he lifted the green canvas barbecue cover. Puffs of cat fur floated into the air like dandelion seeds catching the breeze.

The thick black steel round hotplate was layered with a delicate sheen of pinky-red rust and was dusted with the dwellings of long-vacated spiders. It sat low on a deep green bowl which had been dabbed with paint to cover rust blemishes that had cut into the frame, a task her DIY-loving father had undertaken with gleeful joy. It stood at a precarious gait on four black spindly legs that threatened to buckle if push came to shove.

'*Shit!*' Will exclaimed, stepping back. 'When in God's name was the last time you cooked on this relic? Have you ever? It's positively prehistoric! My ancestors cooked on something less archaic than this.'

Will quickly replaced the cover with pinched fingers, erasing the moment of his inadequate discovery. 'Christ girl! What the hell? Everyone has a working barbecue.'

'Yeah I've used it, 'course I've used it,' she replied, frowning. 'Last summer in my old place in Freemans Bay. I used to have people round for barbecues and cook fish and stuff, at night... but this spot doesn't feel right for it.'

Lucy looked around the small sectioned-off piece of deck she shared with her neighbours, flimsy trellises dividing the whole. Hairy pots of lavender gave it the hint of French romance and fat succulents lined up in rows sucking in Auckland's humidity. A round wooden table with four canvas chairs was jammed into a corner.

'It's only good for reading when I'm home during the day. Or working on my computer. Or drinks... whatever-' Lucy faltered. 'Not so much the barbecue though-' She knew this was not good: a Kiwi without a barbecue at the peak of summer.

'Yeah, I see what you mean,' said Will turning and all but running back inside.

Back upstairs in the safety of the kitchen cocoon, Will flicked on Lucy's oven. 'You do own an oven tray, don't you?'

‘Yes.’ Lucy’s voice rose. ‘Of course I do, I’m not a total muppet. I have that, I have an oven tray. Just not much of anything else.’

Lucy had never much bothered with the fineries and fripperies of being a domesticated lady. But now she felt what little she’d built was being picked apart.

‘I thought you’d have everything, girls usually have everything. You’ve got Crown Lynn.’

‘Yeah, I collect Crown Lynn,’ she replied, ‘And Kartell, and ’60s Playboys, but I’m not ‘girls’, I don’t *do* ‘girls’ stuff. I’m not normal; I’m not ‘girls’,’ she exhaled. ‘You men, you want it all. You want a whore in the bedroom and a chef in the kitchen.’

Will grinned. ‘And?’ he winked.

‘Well... I’ve mastered the whore part,’ she smiled back.

‘Yes you have,’ he said reaching to pat her bottom. ‘And you’re a beautiful whore; you’re my beautiful, darling whore.’

A little after eight Will and Lucy sat down to dinner. Will had prepared two plates of oven-cooked sausages and boiled new potatoes. He served generous portions of salad onto each plate and poured Lucy’s homemade lemon dressing on his food before passing it across the table to her. Will then poured them another frothy brew and they clinked their beer glasses. He caught Lucy’s gaze. ‘To sausage, salad and sausage,’ he smirked.

‘To sausage, salad and sausage,’ Lucy smiled back.

It was a peculiar scene at best. She wearing her bikini and he topless in jeans. One that filled Lucy with longing. In the silence, she recited grace in her head before they ate.

Lucy jabbed a piece of sausage onto her fork. ‘Hey, did you know that Cat, my neighbour, has copped off with Big Al?’ she said.

‘Big Al? Dirty, dirty boy,’ he sniggered. ‘She’s hot.’

‘Yeah, well, anyway, he’s been taking her to dinner and out on his boat.’

‘Oh yeah.’ Will put down his knife and fork and looked up at Lucy. ‘So is it true then?’ he asked.

Lucy rolled a piece of potato in dressing. ‘Is what true?’

‘Oh, I shouldn’t ask really, none of my business—’ Will cut a chunk of sausage and heft it into his mouth.

‘Ask what? Is what true?’

‘Nah—’

‘Go on, ask me.’ Lucy waved her beer at him and took a generous slug.

‘Well, there’s this rumour that Big Al’s not so much big as *huuuuuge*.’ Will’s mouth formed a tunnel as he emphasised the word and winked.

‘Huh?’

‘Down there, where it counts; Big Al’s got a huge cock. Or so the rumour goes?’ Will looked down to his plate and cut a piece of sausage.

‘Big Al’s got a big cock? Who’d you hear that from? Not that I know of, Cat would’ve said, I’d have thought. Or maybe not.’

‘Well, that’s the rumour anyway. Too big for most women, apparently,’ he said chewing.

‘No, nah, I doubt it. Nah... nah,’ Lucy pondered, placing her knife and fork on her plate.

‘So, will you ask her then? Cat?’

‘What?’ Lucy looked up at a grinning Will. He winked.

‘Ask Cat about Big Al’s huge penis?’

‘*Alleged* huge penis. And nooo—’ Lucy shook her head. ‘No, she would’ve told me if it was a talking point. Lord knows I hear about every other detail of her sex life. I even know her favourite position. Scratch that; positions, in order of preference. And I know that she let one out during her last Brazilian wax. See, I know stuff I don’t even wanna know!’

‘She farted during a wax? Oh good Lord! Genius!’ Will rolled backwards laughing. He put down his knife and forked and rubbed his eyes. Lucy already regretted telling him. ‘Oh, that’s brilliant. That’s a gem. Farted during a bikini wax. Aaah—’ He sighed rubbing his belly. ‘She’s still hot though. So what’s her favourite position then?’

‘Actually—’ Lucy ignored Will’s question, ‘come to think of it, she hasn’t said anything about Big Al in bed at all. That’s a good point actually. By now’d I’d normally know his undie-removal technique, of her I mean, not of how he removes *his* undies—’ she rambled.

‘You girls must’ve talked about it.’

‘Apparently not.’ Lucy shook her head.

‘So then,’ Will paused. ‘Do you talk about mine?’

Lucy laughed. ‘You wish! Well, I might have mentioned its stamina once or twice and its ability to hold large heavy objects—’

‘Oh yeah, I forgot about that, did you tell her about the bottle?’

‘—but not size I don’t think,’ Lucy continued as she sopped a piece of sausage in tomato sauce. ‘Size is a funny one,’ she continued. ‘It’s a sensitive area. If it’s not volunteered, well then, it’s just not asked.’

‘But you told her about the bottle?’

‘Yes, I told her about the bottle—’

‘—And what’d she say to that? Did it turn her on?’

‘No, it did not “*turn her on*”. I supposed she was a little way impressed at the athleticism of the task, but that’s all. And what’s your obsession with Cat all of a sudden?’

Will shrugged.

‘And yes, *hard*, we talk about, soft we *definitely* talk about —although that’s never happened to me, thank God— but size, well, it can just be so... *disappointing*.’ Lucy sighed and cut a bite-sized chunk of sausage. ‘And what if it’s small? I’d feel terrible asking.’

Will took a swig of beer. ‘Not as bad as she’d feel, or *not* feel as the case may be,’ he grinned.

‘Indeed.’

‘And Luce—’

‘Yeah?’

‘No man would be soft with you for long.’

Lucy laughed. ‘But to my mind, there’s nothing worse than average,’ Lucy continued. ‘*No one* wants to let on they’ve settled for average. So it’s best not to talk about it really. Seems safer somehow.’ Lucy took a large sip of beer.

'I'm average,' said Will.

'Hardly!' Lucy spluttered.

'Yeah, I am. It's OK, I know I'm average. I've always thought of myself as average. And I'm OK with that—'

'Will have you *seen* you?' Lucy furrowed.

'Yeah, it's average.'

'It is *not* average, Will, and that's all I'm saying.'

Will eyed Lucy's plate. Butter drips had hardened on her three remaining small boiled potatoes. 'You gonna eat those?' he asked.

'Nah,' replied Lucy. 'You have them.'

Will leaned across and stabbed at one with his fork and gobbled the potato in one. He reached across for the next one.

'What's your Dad like?' she asked.

'Dad? Oh, old, young but old,' he stuffed potato number two in his mouth and carried on talking. The potato moved around his mouth when he talked, ever decreasing in size. 'One foot in the grave. Yunno—'

'Really? Your Dad? Stink. That's so sad. I know people like that, seems such a waste of life.'

'Yeah, doesn't it?'

'It's like going through the motions of life but not really living. Get up, get dressed, eat, go to work, go home, collect the mail, eat, watch TV, read, go to bed. And do the same all over again the next day. Yunno? Such a waste. Especially when people who want to live are dying—'

'Yeah—'

'I don't plan to ever stop. I'm gonna live it up until I drop dead, assuming my body lets me that is.'

'Half the time I feel like I'm doing the living for both of us.' Will's voice dropped. 'Dad never really regained his mojo after Mum died. It was like he died with her or something. And for some bizarre reason now *I* feel guilty for wanting to live.'

'Yeah, I heard about your Mum when I was in the UK. Sorry 'bout that. And that's not weird at all. Death and guilt are common bedfellows.'

'Yeah, guess so. I'm Catholic so I should know that better than anyone, right?'

'Yeah—'

'You know, Dad's never really got me, never understood me; thinks I ought to get a real job.'

'But you do have a real job, you earn shitloads. You're a fucken star, aren't you?'

'Yeah, well, film doesn't count. He's a retired pilot, yunno, an air force man, a man's man. Even did a stint in the Territorials when he retired from the air.'

'The Terries? And he's *your* father?' Lucy laughed.

'Oh hardy ha.' Will placed his cutlery on his plate and leaned both his elbows on the table, resting his chin on his hands. Lucy's grandmother would be turning in her grave. 'He spent his whole life up in the air, or in another country, or out in some field down near Waionuru playing at being G.I. Joe, anywhere but home with us. He didn't *have* to get me. Actually, I think he was happy to be away where he could avoid having to see his only son turn out "*a bit artsy*". Mum organised us kids and he dipped in and out of our family as and when, probably having affairs all over the place.'

'Really? Affairs? You reckon?'

'Mmm, yeah. I reckon that's what's caused him to deflate so much now. Not 'cos Mum's not around to organise him but because he never got a chance to get her forgiveness. That's what I reckon anyway. Or maybe I'm being too Catholic—.'

'Yeah, maybe. Have you asked him about it?'

'Shit no. Fuck off. We don't really talk. Watch rugby maybe if there's a game on, or tennis, or Formula 1; anything to *not* have to talk.'

'Was he good looking, your Dad?'

'Dad? Sure, yeah, back in the day. Total charmer. He can still put it on now and again, the old charm comes back, but it's not the same, it's like

he no longer believes it. But yeah, in his old pilot photos he's pretty swarthy.' Will smiled.

Lucy looked at Will. The fading dusk light captured the glint in his eye. 'Swarthy,' she repeated. 'Ha! Like father, like son,' she winked.

'Yeah, right.' Will let out an unconvincing laugh and looked down at his empty beer glass. 'More?' he held up the dregs of the second Tui bottle.

'Nah, you have it.'

The night closed in and Peaches' song lyrics poured from the iPod filling the room with bitter poignancy (*"I don't wanna lose you..."*). If Will noticed, he didn't say anything. Lucy held onto their false domesticity. And by 10.30 p.m., Will was gone.



'Twas the night before Valentine's Day and it had been a week and a half since the sausage date. Lucy had seen Will on the Saturday night. He didn't stay because he had an early shoot out west.

Lucy tied a two-metre green satin ribbon around a dozen Heineken and a green box of Marquis condoms taped to the side. More St. Patrick's than St Valentine's but red roses and heart-shaped balloons were not really Will. She removed a card from its cellophane enclave. It read: *Beer isn't everything. Sex must also be involved.* Blank inside.

Lucy was pretty chuffed with this find. Humorous minus the gushing endearment.

She practiced her most casual handwriting on the edges of a newspaper before committing her words to the card. They were lyrics from one of her favourite loveGods songs: *"You turn me on and on and on and on, you turn me on and on and on"* she wrote. Lucy sealed the card in its envelop and wrote his name on the outside: *Willy Brodie*. She tucked her handiwork under the ribbon where it held tight, and smiled.

At five a.m. the next day, her alarm clock burst out into the darkness setting the wheels in motion. Lucy threw her leather jacket on over her

pyjamas and, heart pounding, picked up the beer left beside her front door the night before and crept outside into her car and drove to Willy's St Mary's Bay home. Cat had offered to do the deed for her but Lucy declined. Now she wasn't quite sure why.

She pulled up a few doors past Will's house on a steep slope, cranked on the handbrake and shut off the engine. As quietly as possible, she stepped out of the car, not shutting the car door, and tiptoed down the footpath through his open gates and up the short path to the wooden steps onto his front porch, and placed the beer very slowly on his doorstep. Then bolted.

Lucy heard nothing that day. Or the next. Or the next.

'He's a fucken cunt,' Lucy announced to Beanie, Cat and Lucy's BWF (Best Workmate Friend) Beth over pizza and wine at SPQR one week later. A spit-polished beige couple glared at her as the c-bomb echoed against the plate glass windows. 'A *cunt!*' she repeated. She glowered at the couple's tight ashen faces and shovelled a generous wad of folded pizza into her mouth. A chunk of cream cheese lingered on her lower lip for longer than was absolutely necessary. Lucy licked it away with a food painted tongue. 'How could he not know it was from me? He's such an *arsehole*.'

Beanie chugged back her last gulp of red wine and waved at the wine waiter for more. 'It could have been stolen,' she suggested.

'Yeah,' added Beth. 'Could it be seen from the road? It was beer after all.'

Beanie nodded. She lit up a fag and passed the pack across the table to Cat.

'It was St Mary's Bay! Who steals in St Mary's Bay?' Lucy moaned. But then it *could* have, she thought. It could have been stolen. Fuck. She hadn't thought of that in the planning. Who steals something on Valentine's Day? In St Mary's Bay?

The candle flame in front of her flickered out momentarily then chugged back to life. Lucy glanced into the bar at the well-to-do

Aucklanders going about the business of minding everyone else's. She loved SPQR and its trumped up pseudo-Romanesque bravado, heralding the age of orgies and brutal unforgiving. Total wank-fest of course, but where else could you rub shoulders with media-types, musos, artists, actors, patrons and swanky wannabe hangers-on? Everyone needed someone somehow. No one was immune.

A lithe shiny waiter shimmied over and topped up their water glasses from his pewter watering can.

'More wine, ladies?' he enquired of the four, voice half an octave higher than was absolutely necessary.

Beth flourished the empty wine bottle. 'Yeah, same again, ta,' she replied.

'Yeah, it *could* have been stolen,' continued Lucy as the waiter sashayed away leaving in his wake pungent waft cologne. 'But still, he didn't do anything for me and that pretty much says everything anyway. Any guy who's even remotely interested would have done *something*.'

'No, not so, not so,' replied Cat. 'They're not like us, they don't think like us, Luce. Menfolk dance to an entirely different tune, babe. You should know that by now. And even if they do something for Valentine's Day it might mean nothing at all. Remember my Valentine's Massacre last year?'

The three girls looked at each other. How could they forget?

'The two-dozen roses,' Cat sighed. 'The ferry to Devonport. The hamper of deli food. The champagne; *actual* champagne. Then getting back to my place and snuggling up on the couch,' Cat leaned towards her wide-eyed audience. 'You should've *seen* his face when I said: "*I think I am starting to have feelings for you*". I've never seen a face fall so fast, and witnessed a man run for dear life. It was absolutely fucken laughable how pathetic it was. All I said was I *think* I was *starting* to have feelings. *Starting!* I didn't even come close to declaring my undying love, or anything near it.' Cat thumped the table dramatically with one hand and reached for her glass with the other, nearly sending it careering across the table. She took a hearty swig. 'I mean, I was a sure thing, a shoo-in,'

she continued. 'He needn't have gone to so much bloody fuss if all he wanted was a shag, no strings. I was guaranteed. Up until his gallant display I was happy just to keep going as we were, to get my rocks off.' A blood red wine crust edged its way into the creases of her grimace. 'I now know what fear looks like. Trust me Luce, you do not want that.'

Lucy chewed her lower lip. 'S'pose,' she nodded, gagging herself with a chunk of aioli-dipped foccacia.



Sandpaper scraped Lucy's throat as she swallowed. A clamp tightened on her head and her eyeballs throbbed in her skull; she felt as if someone was trying to remove them with hot spoons. She fumbled in the dark reaching for her glass of water and hoisted herself up to sip.

Dammit, she realised: she was sick.

Lucy barely possessed the energy it required to text her boss to claim a sick-day in bed and turn her phone to silent. After near-crawling to the loo and returning, Lucy fell back into bed. There she wrenched up her feather duvet to cover her head and cocooned herself in the damp warmth of home.

At around midday, Lucy clambered out of bed to pee. She tossed off her sweat-soaked pyjamas and shivering, she wrapped herself in her pink fluffy bathrobe. She dragged herself to the bathroom and peered at herself in the mirror. Her face was white and puffy, and her neck visibly swollen. She looked inside her mouth and saw her tongue was thick and white, and her throat was angry red.

Lucy's stomach churned as she thumped up the stairs. In the kitchen she peered into the fridge; a futile act at best. Amid a raggedy skyline of half-empty jars of jam and chutney sat a clump of limp celery, a bag of watery, translucent mescaline and two wrinkled vine tomatoes with only themselves for company. Damn, damn and damn. The freezer fared no better with its two freezer-burned Vogel's crusts wrapped in Glad wrap, a lump of iced mince in a pink Tupperware container, a lone grey

sausage in a plastic bag and a container of heart-shaped ice cubes. And something grey and lumpy in a see-through takeaway container that she could no longer identify.

Lucy's hunger was intercepted by a beeping phone. It was a text from Will.

'I'm working in your neighbourhood.' It said. 'Should I stop by after work? At sausage o'clock, perhaps?'

Too tired. She only wanted juice. A tall glass of cool, sweet tropical liquid. Lucy sighed and sat on the edge of her couch. Her fingers shook.

'Well?' Will urged seconds later.

'I'm sick,' she responded when her fingers could finally craft the words.

'Is it contagious? Do you require liquid refreshments?'

Oh God, *yes!*

'Not contagious. And yes, please!'

Chapter Five

Less than half an hour later, Will stepped over Lucy's threshold.

He was greeted by a baby pink fluffy Lucy, dressed head to toe in a dressing gown. Her hair, which was normally coiled to a cropped, perfected mess, was '80s Jon Bon Jovi. Greasy with a halo of frizz. Her cheeks were flushed pink and a couple of tiny angry pink pimples dotted her cheeks. A light fever traced the surface of her skin.

Will grinned. 'I brought a Wes Anderson omnibus,' he said, '—and juice.' He held up a bag containing a stack of DVDs and Charlie's Orange Honest Juice. With bits. 'Oh, you poor baby,' he said leaning in to hold her and rub her back.

Lucy felt herself fall into him and almost cried as the weight of her aloneness fell away.

'Let's get you upstairs,' he said grabbing and holding her hand tight. 'Do you have bedding? Upstairs? Is there bedding?'

'Yes,' she nodded.

‘Well let’s get you up there.’ He rested his palm in the small of Lucy’s back and guided her up the staircase.

The bland grey of the day shed a muted light into the upstairs lounge-cum-kitchen. Will steered Lucy onto the couch, lifted the duvet and plumped it down over her as she stretched out. She let out a tiny sneeze when a tiny white feather tickled her nose.

‘How long have you been like this?’ Will asked stroking her hair.

‘I woke up this way. I get it sometimes. It’s just glands, probably a virus, nothing really.’ Her eyes were glassy.

Will kissed her forehead. ‘Aw baby. Do you need a doctor?’

‘No. No, I don’t really go to doctors, unless a limb’s falling off or gangrene or something. They’d just say it’s a virus and that I needed lots of water and sleep. So I figure, cut out the middle man and go straight for lots of water and sleep. It only lasts about a day, two max.’ Lucy smiled up at Will.

He ran a hand across her cheek. ‘Only if you’re sure? I can take you.’

‘Yeah, I’m sure.’

‘If you say so. But I might just stay here a bit until I am convinced.’

Lucy nodded.

Will turned to the supermarket bags and removed the orange juice. He reached for a glass out of the cupboard over the sink and poured Lucy a tumbler full and brought it back to her.

She gulped it down in one. ‘Bits!’ she exclaimed with a cough.

‘Huh?’

‘Bits. Juice with bits. You bought juice with bits, my favourite.’

‘Mine too,’ he smiled, his face softening. ‘Another?’

‘Yeah. Ta.’

Will topped her up. ‘Awww, baby. You really need looking after. You should have called.’

‘Aw, no, I don’t do that.’

‘What? Use the phone?’

‘Yeah. No. You know what I mean. Kinda used to going it alone, yunno? It’s just glands, nothing really, I’m alright really.’

Will fanned out the DVDs. 'Which one first? You like Wes Anderson, right?'

'Yeah, yes, my favourite. Umm, *The Royal Tenenbaums*?'

'Cool.' Will crouched down and inserted the DVD and grabbed the remote. 'Oooh, it's bloody cold today,' he looked out the window to the wool of deep grey clouds.

'Yeah,' Lucy shivered under her duvet. 'I wish there was such a thing as feet mittens.'

'Feet mittens? Mittens for feet? You mean like slippers?' Will laughed.

'Slippers? Oh, yeah. Of course.'

'Or socks...?'

'Oh yeah, socks.'

'Feet mittens. Funny.' Will grinned. 'You're a funny thing Lucy Darling, darling. He glanced towards Lucy's large pink duvet. 'There room in there for me?'

'Yeah.' Lucy lifted the covers and shuffled over as Will kicked off his shoes and climbed in close behind her, propping his head up on a stack of cushions. His chin rested on her shoulder as he wrapped his arms around her waist and nestled in close to her.

'Thanks Will, for all this, the orange juice and stuff, I appreciate it.'

'No problem.'

'No really, I mean it, thanks.'

'I mean it too; it's no problem at all. No one should be alone when they're sick.'

'Hey...' Lucy began when the credits rolled, having dozed more than once during the film, '—I've been meaning to ask you something...'

'What?' Will replied, half-distracted selecting the DVD extras.

Lucy rolled around to face Will. 'Well, did you ever get a dozen Heinies left on your doorstep?'

'What, beer? Heinekens left at mine? What? Why would I?'

'Huh? Really? On Valentine's Day? You didn't find a dozen beer on your doorstep?'

‘Oh, that was you.’

‘So you did get it?’ she asked.

‘No, no beer,’ he shook his head. ‘But I did get a card about beer and sex, and a packet of condoms, and I had no idea who it was from. Thought it was kind of weird. The condoms threw me.’

‘And no beer?’

Will shook his head. ‘Definitely no beer, I would have remembered beer. No, just condoms and the card, which was about beer, but no actual beer.’

‘Really? Just condoms?’

‘Yep, just condoms.’

‘Hmmm, I can see how that would be weird. And you would have completely missed the point of the card. Bugger.’ Lucy scratched her head.

‘Yeah... Kinda. Doesn’t matter though, does it?’

Lucy sighed. ‘And you didn’t know it was from me? Really?’

‘Yeah, I guess I didn’t think about it. I just forgot about it actually.’

‘And you *really* had no idea it was from me?’

‘Well, I thought it could be from you but I just didn’t really think much about it. And then I guess I completely forgot about it.’ Will’s voice dropped off.

‘I can’t believe someone would steal a Valentine’s present from someone’s front step. It was all wrapped up in green ribbons and everything—,’

‘Green?’

‘—yeah, green. I went for green,’ Lucy shrugged. ‘They *must* have known it was a gift or something. I mean, *really!*’

Will laughed. ‘Yeah, well, it was beer. I’d have stolen it when I was younger. Least they left the card I s’pose.’

‘Thieves with a conscience? Fuckwits more like.’



Two days later, a fully recovered Lucy met Cat over their shared stoop. Lucy was about to head out to Good One to read the paper. She reasoned reading the paper over a \$4 coffee beat paying for a subscription.

Lucy had her pins out in a high-waisted suede leather skirt, a tight white singlet and brown weathered suede brogue shoes.

‘Christ Cat!’ she exclaimed when she saw her best friend poke her head out the door in greeting. ‘You look like shit.’

‘Oh, don’t!’ Cat moaned. ‘This is what evil feels like.’

‘And smells like—,’

‘Oh stop, please. I know how bad it is, I just saw me—,’

‘I’m not sure you can quite appreciate the view from where I’m standing,’ Lucy laughed. In contrast to her neighbour’s fresh-faced cool, Cat was draped in an over-sized white-faded-to-grey, snagged and frayed t-shirt that hung off one shoulder. Last night’s make-up gave her face a ghoulish quality, and her normally slick dark hair was matted and clumpy.

And her breath could slay an army at 50 paces.

Cat sighed.

Lucy reeled. ‘And by the looks of you, even that’s an understatement. I have to say, you’ve looked better hun. So what’d you get up to last night anyway? Have you even slept?’

‘No, not really, sleeping’s for bears anyway. Oh... that’s hibernating. Whatever. I’ll sleep when I’m dead.’ She shrugged. ‘Saw The Checks at Cassette No. 9 last night. I spent the whole night rammed up against bored 20-somethings –all legs and cleavages– thrusting purposefully towards the lead singer. I ended up going home with the drummer of the support band.’

‘The support band? Who was that then?’

‘Fuck knows...’ she shrugged. ‘Oh, the band or the drummer?’

‘Either? Both?’

‘Oh, fuck knows. Names schnames.’

Lucy leaned against the door frame. ‘I thought you were hooking up with Big Al?’

‘Oh, sooo last week, darling,’ Cat croaked. ‘No, we’re just friends. We’ll hook up again, I’ve no doubt, but yunno— needs must and all that.’

‘He no good?’

‘Oh *hell* no, not that, far from it in fact,’ Cat smirked. Lucy caught a whiff of the slayer’s breath and was inclined to take a step back. ‘I just don’t need another commitment-phobe in my life, that’s all. He’s still seeing that Nina flounce from India on and off. On and off and in and out, probably. Whatever. And to be fair, she’s hot and the age gap is much more preferable don’t ya know.’

‘What? They’re closer in age?’ Lucy furrowed.

‘Good God *no!* Where have you been? Hell no. There’s about twenty years between them. But let’s face it, I think he prefers that.’ Cat combed fingers through her hair, and act slowed considerably by the clumped mass of knots. ‘He can impress her. She thinks he’s all worldly and wise. Sadly darling, I know better.’

‘So, what about last night? You couldn’t pull the lead singer then?’

Cat sighed and rolled her eyes. ‘Oh doll, it was all too competitive trying to get his attention; my days of lead singers are over. So I cut my losses and went for the drummer before one of those morose lacy-tights, short-shorts little minx wannabes noticed he was going unnoticed. Gave him a night to remember too,’ she laughed. ‘Something those waifish hangers-on wouldn’t have done. Tell me, when did girls get so skinny, anyway? And *tall?* They’re all so fucken tall these days.’

‘Says you.’ Lucy looked up at her friend who was only a few inches shy of the late five-foots. ‘So, the drummer huh?’ Lucy giggled. ‘How was his rhythm anyway?’

‘Oh darl, he was far too good looking to be any good in the sack. I had to throw *myself* around the room. Still, as I said, needs must; a girl’s got to satisfy herself some way and these days batteries just can’t recharge quick enough. Anyway, he might wake up soon, so I best crack on. I just opened my door ’cos I need some milk; got a skerrick for your neighbour?’

‘Oh good *God*, he’s still here? Cat! *Shiiiiit!*’ Lucy baulked. ‘You have to get yourself in front of a mirror and sort yourself out. Have you seen you today? He hasn’t seen you this morning has he?’

‘Yes, I’ve seen me. Really that bad?’

‘Yes that bad. And the *breath!* Come on, get in here. Really, what did you drink last night?’

‘Oh, this ’n’ that. Shots mostly.’

‘Yeah, that’ll do it. But yikes, you’ll damage the poor boy if he wakes up and sees you like this. How old is he anyway?’

‘Oh hush now. He’s old enough to get into a bar and hold drum sticks, that’s all I need to know. And you’re one to talk. How old is *Will* anyway?’

‘Will is plenty old enough. Safely in his 30s, thank *you* very much. And I went to bed alone.’

‘Just! He’s a couple of years younger than you if a day. And bully for you, like going to bed alone’s a good thing anyway.’

‘Yeah, well,’ Lucy sighed, ‘we’re not discussing me. And if that youngling wakes and sees you right now you’ll destroy him for women forever.’

Cat smirked as she followed Lucy to the bathroom. ‘And God knows we don’t need another man ruined.’

‘I’ll go grab the milk. And you get your hot little arse in there,’ Lucy pointed to the bathroom, ‘and do whatever the hell you can to sort *that*,’ she circled Cat’s face with her index finger, ‘out.’



Lucy’s heart was not into the evening’s art exhibition traipse and launch-of-something-special-that-she-had-never-seen-before mingling. Tuesday night every week meant a meander from Britomart, High Street, St. Paul Street, Symonds St, Queen St, K Road to Pitt St, Newton, Ponsonby and Herne Bay, if she made it that far. Each “*exclusive showing*” or “*cocktail evening*” (which never had cocktails, by the way) was punctuated with average wine and bread and dips, or the disappointing

array of oven cooked spring rolls, prawns in a spoon or some kind of salmon on something. No one bothered with the good stuff anymore. The luvvies and socialite set varied from place to place, although not by much.

So when her phone buzzed in her pocket early into the first event, Lucy was pleased for the diversion.

She didn't recognise the number. 'Hello?' she whispered as she walked out of the St. Paul Street Gallery passed punters hovering over tables stacked with food.

'Hey Luce, it's Will'

'Will hey, how are ya? What number are you calling from?'

'Good, yeah, good. Yeah, I'm on a job so using the producer's phone. My screen smashed, bloody iPhone's. Anyway, I was just wondering what you're up to on Saturday?'

'This Saturday?' She pushed her way out onto the forecourt. A chill wind whistled up the street causing her to shudder.

'Yeah, this one coming up,' he replied.

'Erm, nothing I can think of,' her mind raced. 'No work, which is a relief. A couple of parties, yunno, nothing special just the usual, why?'

'Yeah well I was wondering if you'd like to come to a wedding with me. I got a plus one and RSVPd plus one and it'd be rude not to bring someone. It's in Queenstown, so it's an overnigher, well two actually, Friday and Saturday, back Sunday afternoon if that's OK. So yeah... are you free? Can you come?'

'Umm, sure, yeah sure. Queenstown? I'll double check, but, umm, yeah, OK...'

'Cool, great. Well just let me know. I'll need to know. The flights leave Friday, in the afternoon, can you do that? I'll pick you up.'

Lucy shivered. 'Great, yeah, cool. OK, so I'll check my diary –but I'm sure it's fine– and let you know.' She cringed at the thought of giving her boss such late notice for time off. She'd accrued it, but it didn't make a difference to him. There were only one set of rules in his workplace, and they were the ones he felt like on the day.

'Cool. Talk soon, Luce. I look forward to it. Bye.'

Lucy might have even detected a smile in his voice. 'OK, bye.'

Weird.

Lucy took the bus home to avoid the sun shower that had started to sprinkle the city. Once off, she half-skipped, half-ran down Ponsonby Road and her street to Cat's door. 'Cat, Cat...' she knocked and called through the glass. '*Cat!*' She tapped manically.

At last her neighbour opened the door. She was wearing cut-off denim dangerously short, shorts, an '80s *Fruit of the Loom* tank top and a navy and white bandana coiled around her head. She was carrying a bucket of frothy water and a super-sized bright yellow sponge.

'Hey Luce,' she grinned, froth already on her cheek. 'I'm gonna wash my car. Come talk to me.'

Lucy trotted behind Cat the few steps across the carport to her 1974 teal blue Ford Capri.

'You'll never guess what just happened?' Lucy tumbled over her words.

Cat placed the bucket at her feet and began dabbing her sponge at some errant bird droppings on the bonnet. 'What?'

'Willy just phoned me and invited me to a wedding, *this* weekend, in Queenstown.'

'What, just now? Queenstown? What the fuck?'

'Yeah. I know. What the indeed.'

'Cutting it a bit fine isn't he? Queenstown? Really?' Cat rubbed her prized car surfaces with sweeping circular movements.

'Yeah, I know, completely weird, right? Late notice for sure, but still... he'd RSVPd a plus one, so he reckons he ought to take a plus one. Rude not to really.'

Cat stood and looked at her friend, squinting into the sun. 'They sent him an invitation to a wedding for a plus one? A notorious single? And he said yes, then didn't invite anyone 'til, what, four days out?'

'Yeah, I know, weird aye? I wouldn't invite unknowns to *my* wedding. Aren't weddings about \$200 a head these days?'

'If you're lucky. Could be even more than that. But still, cutting it a bit fine, you could have been out, or working.'

'Yeah, I know.'

Cat lurched across the bonnet to wash the windscreen. She yanked up the wipers which were sealed onto the glass surface. 'I'm not sure I like this, Luce. What's with the stall, I mean, four days out. Seriously?'

'Yeah, I know. But yunno, maybe he just forgot, can happen. And it's Willy we're talking about.'

'Maybe. Though I'm not convinced. You're OK for a dress? D'you have a dress to wear?'

'Do I have a dress? Of *course* I have a dress... a new dress I haven't bought yet,' Lucy grinned. 'That's the dress I'm wearing. The one you pick out for me.'

Cat laughed. 'Sure thing, babe.'

'Hey, you want a hand with that?' Lucy asked.

'Yeah, could you fill up this bucket with more water? And put some of this stuff in, thanks.' Cat handed Lucy a red bucket and dish wash liquid. 'It's chemical-free, so you can tip it down the drain if you want.'

'So yeah,' Lucy continued walking to the tap by their front door, 'weird or what?'

'The dude sure sounds like he's changed his tune. Although really, the late notice does imply he was waiting for something better to come along.'

'Oh thanks, Cat. Way to make a girl feel good.' Lucy frowned and kicked at a clump of grass growing through a hole in the concrete.

'Well it *does!* Really. And you know that's how Willy rolls. I'm not telling you anything you don't know. It's tough love, baby, suck it up.'

'Harsh...'

'Harsh but fair. Come *on* Luce. You know he's Mr. Grass-is-Greener if ever there was a person. He's a crap like that and you know it. I reckon one day he's gonna miss out on something good –like *you!*– and regret it forever. And sweets, I'm saying *you're* that something good.' Cat sighed, shrugged her shoulders and hunched down to attack the gunge in the hub caps. 'But maybe he did forget–'

‘Hmmm—’

‘I’ll give him the benefit of the doubt. But this once, only this once. Lucy frowned. ‘S’pose. Still pretty rough hearing it, though. Well,’ she perked up, ‘—it beats my usual wedding attendance, being consigned to the dreaded singles’ table.’

A cackle came from behind the car. ‘Oh God, the *singles*’ table. I *hate* those! You might as well be covered in neon pink paint and wearing a sign saying: “*Don’t feed the singles*”. Those tables are so bad. I can’t believe people still have those tables. Evil tables. I *hate* those people. That’s the place you dump the friends and ugly cousins you had to invite despite losing touch with them years ago when you entered the perfect world of couples-ville.’

‘Yeah...’

Cat stood up. ‘Those people can just fuck right off, frankly.’

‘I know, I know, right. And it’s always the most dire blokes on the singles’ table too. There’s premature bald guy now gone completely to seed; the retreads, fresh from the bitter divorce now back on the market and good for one spin only, if even that; and the weird cousin/uncle/sibling who suffers from overactive secretion glands.’

‘And he almost certainly has bodies under the floorboards or in compartments the freezer.’ Lucy shook her head. ‘The singles’ table is the ultimate badge of dishonour.’

Cat threw back her head and laughed. ‘Yep, that it is, it *sure* is.’

‘And I reckon people actually think they’re doing you a favour and everyone’s going to hook up at the end of the night, slow dancing to Bangles *Eternal Flame*.’

‘Yeah. Right, like that’d ever happen—’ Cat snorted.

‘—well... erm, it happens, oh, it happens.’

‘What? You? You dranketh from the singles’ table?’

‘Well to be fair, the die is cast before you’re even seated.’ Lucy sniffed. ‘Someone at the singles’ table *has* to hook up... and it may as well be you. Anything to lift the shame and elevate the evening to something other than a shameless lost cause. And he wasn’t actually at the singles’ table; just I was, with the other outcasts.’

'Bucket please.' Cat passed the now empty bucket back to Lucy who dutifully walked away to refill it. 'And tell me more. Who'd you hook up with?'

'-I went to a wedding on Hampstead Heath, at Kenwood House,' Lucy called from the tap, '-gorgeous! Seventeenth century I think- and I pulled the best man, brother of the groom. Definitely no bodies in the freezer. I checked.'

'What? No kidding. Go you. The best man.'

'I told you about this, didn't I?'

'No. Continue...'

'Yeah well, the singles' table was even more desperate than usual - London City types, all dungeon perverts for sure- so I went straight for the top table.' Lucy winked. 'The groom was taken -*clearly*- so I turned my attention to the best man -what was his name again?- Oh God, I dunno... anyway whatever-his-name-was grabbed a full bottle of Cristal and two glasses and we snuck off onto the Heath.'

'For real?' Cat grabbed the full bucket from Lucy but was glued to the tale.

'It was a new moon so it was pitch black -kinda scary actually- and he held my hand across all the lumps and bumps. And I was wearing no knickers -Mum'd told me once: "*Posh frock, no knickers*", and I think I got it wrong and took it literally,' Lucy snorted at the memory. '-anyway, so when he discovered that I was knicker-less, well, he was stoked and it was all on. Couldn't keep his mouth off it!-'

'What-?'

'-So I just kicked back and watched the panoramic twinkling lights of London below us.'

'Christ almighty! The best man gave you cunnilingus while you lay back and thought of England *in* England? You *slut*! Well, I never.'

'Ah, *hello*? Pot, kettle! But yeah, it all took a sour turn in the end...'

'What, why?'

'-Oh yunno... I went home with him, turns out he owned a seven-storey townhouse in Islington and collected plastic toys from the '30s and '40s...'

‘–weird...’

‘–yeah, I know. Worth a bloody fortune apparently. So I ran round his house butt naked hooting and hollering like a hillbilly on heat. I kept running up and down the stairs into his bedroom then running into his bedroom and leaping onto his super-doooper deluxe king-sized bed. It was a riot, half-cut on Cristal, and he pulled out some coke. But I don’t think he’d seen anything like me, actually.’ Lucy laughed at the memory. ‘He even had a bath with a view built into a conservatory on his roof. So we had a bubble bath and drank even more champagne and he hand-fed me chocolate truffles –*actual* chocolate truffles. Funny. I’d almost forgotten about that.’

‘Yeah, you definitely never told me about it. That I would’ve remembered. So what happened to him?’

‘I don’t think I told *anybody* about that one! Oh, he was Jewish and he thought I’d be deeply impressed with his circumcised willy. He kept standing up and flapping it about, saying: “*Have you ever seen a naked Jewish man before?*”’

‘Really? Like you haven’t seen *that* before.’ Cat laughed.

‘I *know*! What’d he think, that he’d pulled the Virgin Mary? Seriously...’

‘So?’

‘Oh yeah. Well, after we’d had what turned out to be very perfunctory sex –a bit of the old English in-out-in-out, turn her over, in-out-in-out and we’re done– he phoned me a taxi. A black cab at four a.m.’

‘Wo!’ Cat looked up into where Lucy was standing in the sun, holding up a dripping gloved hand up to shield her eyes. ‘No! He did not do that? He did not call you a taxi and ship you off into the night like a two-penny whore? No way! What a prick. *Fuck!* He makes Willy seem like a jolly nice bloke.’

‘I know. Ridiculous really, the whole thing; I whored myself out for the price of a cab fare from Islington to Brick Lane. How cheap am I?’

Despite initial resistance, Lucy joined Cat in car-cleaning. Her egg yolk-yellow shammy cloth captivated her eye as it rubbed against the metallic teal of the car.

‘Yeah so what do I wear to this wedding anyway?’ Lucy asked. ‘Can’t look too slutty at a wedding. But then, slutty *is* my thing.’

‘Like you said before babe, time for a new dress.’ Cat winked. ‘I’ll style ya. Oooh, really, can I style you? I’ll make you look so hot that Willy’ll be lucky if he can make it to the cake-cutting without ravishing you right there under the table.’ Cat put down her cloth. ‘No,’ she shook her head, ‘not slutty. You need class. Dita von Tesse inspired, of course. Red lipstick, long lashes. Yes, Willy will be tortured all night.’

‘Oh sweets,’ Lucy cackled, ‘I like your enthusiasm and hate to rain on your parade, but Willy cracks one when I am fresh out of the bath, bright red and sweating and wearing my pink bathrobe with my hair looking like a rancid old school mop. There’s *no* not pleasing that man.’

Just then a taxi pulled into the driveway. The back door popped open and Cat’s BBF –best boy friend– T popped out a shiny head.

‘*Ladies!*’ he bellowed, smiling.

‘*T!*’ Cat replied and rushed over to kiss him. Lucy waved hello with the yellow shammy.

‘Well look at *you*, Sadie the Cleaning Lady. So *butch!* I like it.’

Cat slapped T’s hand. ‘Oh shut up you. And where are you going all dressed up like a dandy and why am I not invited?’ Cat peered into the taxi. T was wearing a fitted ’60s inspired black suit with slim black tie themed all the way down to the black polished winkle-pickers. His pink shirt shimmered in the dusk light. Dark tattoos crept up his neck up to his ears.

T blinked and smiled. ‘But you *are* invited darling, that’s why I am here. I’ve come for my hot bitch entourage. Can you be ready in 15?’

‘Sure...’ Cat looked down at her sopping tank top and glistening cleavage.

‘Are you very sure?’ he stood up out of the taxi, looking her up and down, placing a hand on one hip. ‘I don’t think so.’ He wiggled a long finger.

‘Of course I’m sure. I’m a high precision fashion machine, from zero to fashion hero in 15 minutes. And I’m done here, just need to get my shit together. I can easily do that in 15; I’m a professional.’

‘Good, and that’s why I come to you darling, you’re so *pro-fessional*,’ T winked from kohl-drawn eyes.

Cat wrenched her hair out of her ponytail. ‘So where are we going, why the last minute notice, and can Luce come?’

T clapped his hands, the thick silver rings on each hand clattering together. ‘We’re going to Euro, I’m judging something-or-other, sponsored by Möet and we can’t be late. And we all go into the draw to win a trip for four to Tahiti. We absolutely *have* to win, it’d be a hoot! Tahiti wouldn’t know what was coming, and by coming, I don’t mean arriving,’ he pursed his lips and raised an eyebrow. A thin hint of moustache was carved into his upper lip. It suited his vampish-camp punk rockabilly style.

‘But you can’t win, you’re the judge,’ Lucy laughed.

‘Of course I can win, darling. If this bald man can judge a hair competition, frankly, anything’s possible.’ T rubbed a hand over his smooth head. ‘Right! Come on you two, no time for questions. You,’ he patted Cat’s hand which was resting on the window sill, ‘—get ready, and you,’ he waved at Lucy, ‘—of *course* can come. The more the merrier, and you of all people know that Cat. I’ll wear one of you gorgeous girls on each arm. You’ll be the perfect accessory to the new Prada.’ T glanced down at his suit. ‘Did you notice?’

Cat feigned a sigh. ‘I have a highly trained eye, of *course* I noticed. Another freebie?’

‘Darling, when you get to where I have in life, you pay for nothing. No-thing.’

Cat rolled her eyes smirking.

‘Oh come on, don’t give me that look. I’m a bald celebrity hair stylist; people love me when I wear their clothes. It’s not like they can do my hair for free.’

Cat laughed. She’d had a crush on T since they met modelling in matching white Y-fronts for a controversial magazine shoot in their very early teens. T was of Eastern European descent and peered out of wide-set blue eyes so pale they were almost translucent. He had gone on to tread the European catwalks, while Cat’s own melting pot exotic almond-eyed good looks had amounted to no more than a stack of Ozzie chain-store catalogues, so she’d called it quits in her early 20s.

Turns out T later found he preferred styling the models to being one and was now forging an equally successful new career as a hair stylist-cum-celeb-cum-TV-star, turning his talent, effervescent wit and sexually infused charisma to the small screen.

And while she’d imagined it many times, Cat and T had never managed to sleep together. Just snuggle.

Right? he slapped his thighs, a strand of grey-blue tattoo poked out from under his sleeve. ‘All this standing around and no one’s moving. Are you ladies joining me or just holding me up for no good reason?’

Lucy nodded towards Cat.

‘Yes,’ Cat answered. ‘We’re there.’

‘Right then, I’ll be at SPQR waiting over a passion fruit martini. It’s far too drab down here, and someone might actually see me.’

T sat back down in the cab and pulled the door shut. ‘Join me when you’re done,’ he called through the open window. ‘–but don’t take too long –and we’ll cab it from there. Oh, and ladies, it’s glam, glam, glam: dress to impress; *strictly* VIP, darling.’ He winked at Cat. ‘And do I look the part?’

Cat leaned her hip up against the taxi window and threw a cursory glance inside and shook her head. ‘Actually, I’m not even going to answer that. You always look alright *and* you know it. You’re just fishing for compliments.’

T eyes twinkled. He winked at Lucy. ‘Oooh, you are cruel. Isn’t she so Cruella De Ville, Lucy Liu? And no, I’m not fishing. I’ve been in bed all

day with a dreadful stomach ache and only just now managed to hold my head up. God only knows how I do it. I give and I give and I give...'

Cat laughed and rolled her eyes. 'Let it go, T.' She smiled at her charming friend. 'You get up the road and we'll be there by seven. We'll be your foxy Plus Two entourage.'

'OK, toodles,' he waved. 'I'll see you ladies soon.' The electric car window made its ascent and T blew his kiss goodbye.

'Crap!' said Cat when he'd gone. 'We'd better get our shit together'

Chapter Six

T entered the bar book-ended by two glamour pusses. Cat in a flowing strapless mango-orange silk dress that stopped just shy of the knee with nude patent leather shoes, and Lucy in a prim but very short midnight blue satin boned dress and black patent open-toed ankle boots.

A smiling parade of black and white waiting staff emerged from the plinkety plink sounds of jazz and bestowed bubbling Möet to arriving guests. But before the trio had time to cross the threshold a gushing shapely PR lass poured into a red dress pounced on T and attempted to cajole him to join the usual Sunday social pages photo roll call.

‘Not without my friends,’ he purred and patted her hand, followed by zealous introductions. (*“Cat is stylist to the stars and Lucy’s the best undiscovered writer in all the land.”*)

Euro was wall-to-wall crammed with New Zealand’s crème de la crème social set. Moneyed, Botoxed, filled and dressed by Italy. Lucy

had mixed with the British PM and Hollywood A-Listers before, yet it was in downtown Auckland that she felt more wallflower. But what always struck her most –and what she’d tell Beth the next day– was that everyone was “*so nice*”.

Endless rounds of tequila-oyster shots, teeny tiny canapés adorned with Caviar and Möet paraded past the punters, all peppered with hearty guffaws, loquaciousness and unsteady dancing.

A toilet stop proved the only respite for sore feet and tired jaws.

On her way back from the bathroom someone put their hand on Lucy’s elbow causing her to jump. A precarious activity in five inch heels.

‘Luce! Oh God sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.’

She spun around. ‘Oh my God, Spiro! What are *you* doing here?’ Lucy burst into a smile and kissed her friend.

Spiro laughed. ‘Oh you know, I know people who know people. I get along to these things from time to time... *Wow!*’ he exclaimed midsentence. ‘You look hot! Got the pins out, I see. Nice. You really should wear short more often.’ Spiro picked up Lucy’s hands and looked her up and down. ‘Wow, truly, wow!’

Lucy brushed him away with a hand. ‘Pfft,’ she blushed and shook her head. ‘I’m the most inexpensively dressed here.’

‘Are you saying you’re cheap, Lucy? ’Cos I beg to differ.’ He winked.

‘You charmer, you. And you’re OK, I suppose, if we’re complimenting each other that is.’ He was wearing a black slim-fitted suit, black shirt and slim black tie. He smelt like honey.

‘So how are you?’ she asked. ‘How’s the photography going?’

‘Yeah good, thanks. Half of why I am here actually, always best to woo the big spenders. But yeah, I’m great. Yeah. Off to Europe in a couple of months, to catch the summer festies over there. Been commissioned to contribute to some UK rock photography book. Apparently I’m getting a bit of a rep over there.’ He laughed. ‘I’ve become known as the guy that captures the backstage mood–’

‘Wow!’

‘–Nah, no biggie. Really I just know how to chill the fuck out back stage and not get up in anyone’s face. So the bands can relax around me, then when they least expect it, I snap ’em. Simple as that, really.’ Lucy joined in his contagious chuckle. ‘So yeah, pretty happy about that. Can’t be upset about a European summer.’

‘Wow! That’s awesome, Spiro. Finally your genius is being recognised.’

‘Oh ha ha,’ he laughed.

‘I’m serious! You’re brilliant. Remember those pictures you took of me that time...?’

‘The naked ones, while you were sleeping?’

‘Yeah, those.’ She flushed.

‘You were furious about me taking them if I recall.’

‘Well yeah, until I saw them and saw that they weren’t porn.’

Spiro put his hand around her little waist and kissed her on the cheek. ‘So sue me. You looked too beautiful sleeping all coiled up, how could I resist?’

Lucy twinkled. ‘So which festivals you going to then?’

‘Aaah, subject change,’ he smiled, tapping his nose with a finger.

‘Glastonbury, Reading, Bestival on the Isle of Wight, some in Spain, Belgium, France, Holland, Scandinavia, that sort of thing. I’ll be gone a couple of months, based in London and getting around from there. I’m still waiting for the tickets and itinerary to firm it up, but yeah, that’s the plan. They’ve sent me an advance, in pounds!’ Spiro’s blue eyes sparkled. ‘So yeah, peachy as.’

Lucy smiled. ‘Man, my mag won’t be able to afford you, soon.’

Spiro laughed and squeezed Lucy’s waist. ‘You can’t afford me now, baby. And now can I please escort a lady to the bar and buy her a drink?’

‘But it’s free isn’t it?’ Lucy asked.

‘No, that’s run out. Got to be in quick round here, these people are pros!’ he looked around the beautiful-peopled room. ‘But I’m rich – pounds rich – and can buy you anything your heart desires. Think of me as your knight in shining armour. Or boozy fairy Godmother.’

The next morning Lucy woke early with a parched throat and thumping head. The grog at Euro might be top drawer but the end result was always the same. Lucy gulped down her bedside glass of water and looked at her phone: not even six.

She listened to her own breathing as she recalled the night before.

T had been on hilarious form judging the amateur modelling competition. He incited waves of rising laughter as he mocked their chicken-neck walking and mall-girl good looks all with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

Cat had stared doe-eyed at him all night from the wings, giggling at his wry witticisms and cunning innuendo. She sipped a succession of drinks with beatific disinterest while girls in micro-minis formed an orderly queue launching themselves at him, no doubt hoping that like gold dust, his magnetic celebrity rubbed off.

Meanwhile Spiro and Lucy had propped up the bar arguing over who was the best bass player in the world (narrowed down to Bootsy Collins, Jaco Pastorius, Peter Hook, Nikki Sixx, Les Claypool and Mike Watt), followed by best gig outdoor venue (no argument: the Hollywood Bowl), best seminal bands (versus The Kinks, Creed, Yardbirds, Sex Pistols, Kraftwerk and Stooges. “*Aaah*,” said Lucy swigging back a pink-coloured cocktail, “*–but you’re forgetting Brian Eno’s infamous quote about Velvet Underground: ‘their first album only sold 10,000 copies, but everyone who bought it formed a band’.*”), best song ever (“*There’s only one*,” said Spiro slapping the bar, “*– ‘Fix’ by Mark Lanegan, and I’ll have no arguments.*”), ending with Spiro railing against Lucy’s protestations anointing best guitarist (Jimi Hendrix), best drummer (Zach Hill), best vocalist (Mike Patton), and the world’s best singer, Mark Lanegan.

Sometime around midnight, a taxi dispersed the swaggering, getting-more-fabulous-by-the-minute four at drop-off points all over Auckland. Much to the slurring protestations and disappointment of Cat.



A couple of days later, the night before she was due to leave for the wedding, Lucy tossed and turned in her bed. She flicked her light on to read again but couldn't make the words on the page stick. It had been four days since she'd heard from Will apart from a text about flights.

She'd taken about an hour to pack everything. A Lucy version of the capsule wardrobe. It included recent eBay purchase, vintage Dior diamante earrings, and clothes to fit any possible situation she might find herself in: smart, casual, smart-casual, resort-wear, beach-wear, hot tub-wear, sauna-wear, jandals, sneakers, UGG boots, flats, heels and a whole bag dedicated to cosmetics and toiletries, of course. All just in case.

Bang on midday, Willy rolled up in his '67 glossy black Chev Impala looking not unlike a Cuban pimp.

He gave Lucy a quick peck on the cheek by way of greeting.

'Shit! You need all that?' he said hefting her large suitcase and make-up bag into his vast boot. 'We're only going for two nights, we're not eloping, Luce.'

Lucy rolled her eyes. 'Careful with those. And Willy, I know we're not eloping. You couldn't possibly elope with a man who's not in touch with the basic principles of what it means to be a woman; and women travel prepared for any and everything,' she smiled. 'I'm just prepared, that's all.'

Will laughed. 'Any other female-related surprises I'm in for this weekend then?'

'Nope,' she shook her head, 'none that I can think of.' She opened the car door and slunk down into the warm leather seat beside him.

The pair arrived at The Novotel Queenstown just before gin o'clock. following an uneventful but pleasant journey. In the car to the airport they had listened to a random selection of songs on Will's iPod, singing to the bits they knew, humming to the bits they didn't. Lucy snuck in some of her perfect-pitch voice harmonies –if a bit rusty– along the way.

As Will's guest in the Koru Lounge, Lucy was able to get a little stupefied with a couple of Will's extra-strength Bloody Mary's made *for*

the road". On the plane, she'd hugged up against the window (Will gave up his window seat insisting he'd survive without the view) and enjoyed the spectacle of the Alps below before landing in a cool, crisp Queenstown. One chatty, if a little racist taxi driver later (*"Mark my words, Asians and Maoris are taking over our country. Time we lot reclaimed it before we're all speaking jibba jabba and praying to Buddha or Tane or some other made up God."*), and they entered the calm quiet of their warm, lakefront room.

Will flung Lucy onto the bed, grinning.

'Excellent,' he cooed breathily, 'there's plenty of time to ravage you before the pre-wedding hijinks. My evil plan has come to pass.'

'I knew that's what you were up to... why do you think I wore these?' Lucy hoisted up her summer dress, tossing off her Havaianas, revealing a cherry pink lace Calvin Klein bra and undies purchased new for the trip.

'Wowsa!' Will exclaimed launching at Lucy's feet and kissing slowly up her leg as he parted her thighs. 'This is why I RSVPd plus one.'

That evening, Lucy and Will joined some of the wedding party of about 40 family and friends at Winnies for gourmet pizza. Task one of being a plus one, she knew, was being likeable, so by night's end, Lucy's face hurt from smiling. Will had been in good humour and played his role of companion to the letter, ensuring Lucy was feed, watered and at ease. Later, when Lucy put her head to the pillow, she was feeling as close to content as she had in a long time.

The morning followed at pace. A continental breakfast with some of the guests, a walk around the idyllic destination town through throngs of happy backpackers, weekend travellers and tourists, and gondola ride to take in the view, ending with burgers on the beach for lunch.

The night before, Lucy had befriended Issy, a friend of Will's, so she was glad of her chatty company on the group outing.

‘It’s been really great to meet you, Lucy,’ she had said as they stood with their eyes cast out across the magnificent mountainous vista in front of them, high above a tiny distant Queenstown below.

Lucy breathed in the fresh air. ‘Thanks, and you too.’

‘It’s great to see Will with someone so normal, if you know what I mean. We thought he’d never grow up,’ Issy laughed.

‘How long have you known him?’

‘Oh, Will? Like, forever I think. I can’t remember when I met him, exactly, but he’s been around forever, since, like, primary school. Or kindy. Hate to say it, but I’m pretty sure we used to have baths together.’

The pair laughed.

‘Yeah,’ she continued, ‘but it’s only been since intermediate that we really got to know each other. We all started skiing together, my family have a batch near the mountains and their family used to come and stay, and you know, spin the bottle and strip poker occupied us on the days when the mountain was closed. Which was heaps, if I remember correctly. Yeah, so that long. Anyway,’ she giggled, ‘I think I even had a crush on him for some part of my tweens. But he was too cool for school even then, so didn’t pay me much attention, except when getting it would bolster his ego. He’s always had a high opinion of himself. Reckon it’s ’cos his Dad was such a sergeant major. Literally! So sad about his mum, aye?’ Issy looked at Lucy. ‘My mum was gutted; she was with her til the end. How’s Will about it now, do you know?’

‘Oh, not sure.’ Lucy looked across to the far end of the walkway where Will was laughing with Issy’s fiancé, Mike. ‘He doesn’t really talk much about her really, well not to me.’

‘No,’ Issy nodded, following Lucy’s gaze, ‘I don’t suppose he would. Not a very Will thing to do, is it?’

The ceremony was set amongst the elegant gardens of Chapel by the Lake. The heat of the blue-skied day had cooled in the light breeze to a balmy 25 degrees. The gathering of around 80 people encircled the sun-dappled bride and groom on their nuptial platform. There had been time

enough awaiting the bridal party's arrival for guests to quaff back a couple of champagnes, so the air was buzzing.

Two bridesmaids dressed in midnight blue clutching posies of old-fashioned pale roses had led a salt 'n' pepper handsome father and his fair daughter bride down a pebbled aisle. The bride had floated between white-ribboned pillars wearing a long flowing, cream chiffon gown with a satin bust layered with shimmering Swarovski crystals. She clasped a large round bouquet of dusky pink roses. At the platform, her father had planted a single kiss on her forehead and placed her hand in the open palm of her groom whose eyes were misted with the depth of the occasion. Until sight of his bride, he had stood rigid and quiet beside his two glowing-faced, grinning henchmen, the three wearing matching charcoal Prada suits.

Lucy had been moved by the ceremony. She was buoyed by love; in love with love. Will had squeezed her hand and caught her eye from time to time, a small smile passing between them.

The bridal party disappeared for the best part of an hour for photos leaving guests to fuel up on champagne and canapés. Conversation became vibrant, ties were loosened and jackets came off.

Will guided Lucy round the group with his hand placed in the small of her back, talking with friends and colleagues, and together they formed a united front making small talk with those they didn't know. She knew that he, in his dark brown Crane Brothers Suit and she, in a dusky yellow silk 50s style Miss Crabb dress, made a sleek pair.

After being seated for dinner at a table near the bridal party and laughing in all the right places during the speeches, Lucy managed to drag Will up to the dance floor. Despite his initial protestations, they found their rhythm and were among the last guests standing.

Will nuzzled into Lucy's neck during their fourth slow dance together.

'Shall we call it a night?' he asked, slurring his words. 'Move onto our own private party?'

Lucy smiled into his shoulder. 'Yes,' she murmured, 'lets.'

Back in their room Will removed his jacket and flung it on a chair. He wrapped his arms around Lucy and they swayed to the sound of the chattering trees outside their balcony doors, left open to let the cool breeze in. Will looked into Lucy's eyes and cupped her face. A shiver ran up her spine. Will leaned forward and kissed her. His taste was sweet with whiskey and tobacco.

Will removed her clothes, then his. Lucy stood naked, lit up by the bright of the full moon outside. His eyes suggested a mixture of hunger and patience.

'God I love your body,' he said leaning down to kiss her shoulders. He picked up her hands, and kissed her fingers one by one. His taut penis reached at her and tickled her stomach where it touched. 'I love being with you,' he purred, 'you're so beautiful, Lucy.'

Will led Lucy to the bed and laid her down. He tasted her sweetness and inhaled her desire. She rolled, arched, licked and sucked. He manoeuvred Lucy around the bed, thrusting and driving himself into her until they both fell into each other's arms, spent.

Will held Lucy in a sticky clench, his sweaty head tucked into her neck. Her stomach tightened at the closeness of his breath and at some point, she fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, Lucy woke to the sound of a shower. Moments later the sound stopped and Will emerged with a large white towel wrapped around his waist.

He dropped it to the floor, shook water out of one ear and reached for underpants out of his bag.

'You up for clayshooting after breakfast?' he asked as he began to dress.

'Erm, sure,' Lucy replied rolling in the sheets in a way she thought looked seductive.

Will slapped aftershave on his face and didn't look up. 'Cool. You better get moving then. We don't want to miss it.'

'Yep. OK.' She frowned.

The rest of the day felt busy and rushed. Lucy showered and joined Will and other worse-for-wear guests at a subdued breakfast, and then later a smaller group for clayshooting. After a late lunch, everyone said their farewells with promises to stay in touch and made their departure back to rooms or packed into airport shuttles.

Lucy shifted in the back seat of their shuttle van as it pulled out onto the road. 'Nice wedding,' she said glancing at Will.

'Yeah,' he replied and turned and looked out the window.

Their flight and ride back into Auckland was peppered with only functional conversation and, in the car, Will's choice of loud music from his iPod.

Will dropped Lucy off just as the sun fell low in the sky. She stood in the driveway beside her two bags as Will shut the boot. Her stomach surged. 'You wanna come in?' she looked up at him, squinting in the light.

Behind his Rayban's, he shook his head. 'Nah,' he replied. 'I'm knackered. I'm gonna get home for an early night. Thanks for coming,' he smiled and fiddled with the edges of his sunglasses. 'It was fun.'

'Yeah, thanks for asking me,' Lucy smiled back. 'Great weekend, thanks.'

Will gave her a quick hug and climbed into the Chev. 'Bye,' he waved turning his head backwards as he cranked the car into gear and pulled out onto the road.

Lucy chewed her lip and picked up her two bags. 'Yeah, bye, thanks,' she yelled above the din of the V8 engine.

Will looked back and nodded, and pulled off down the road.



Lucy couldn't help herself. She hadn't heard from Will since the wedding. She knew he was working on location out west at Karekare beach. Film prep or something or other. So, against all reasoned

thought, she clambered into her Mazda 323 –her Mazda Forgettable– and drove out to the west coast, stereo and adrenalin pumping.

There was a full crew there, blokes looking busy and serious. Hiluxes and vans were lined up in raggedy rows, scorching the black sand beach with trails of tyre tread.

When she saw him, even from a distance she knew it was Will, leaning against one of the vans sipping what was probably weak grey coffee looking down at a page of paper, fluorescent white in the bright sun. Lucy could tell from his lean, his stoic gait that it was him. Her heart thudded hard in her chest.

She snuck off into the dunes like a sniper, into the long reeded grass, and sat far enough away on a little hill so that none of the film crew ants could see her, even if they were bothered to do so.

It was then that she felt foolish. This was a fool's game, she told herself.

And I am a fool.



Eleven p.m. and the conversation was fully lubricated, the party was getting its groove on. The DJ had his whomp on, racking up back-to-back tunes on the decks, and the dance floor was packed.

A bunch of people dressed in black hung round the brazier rhubarb-rhubarbing in earnest conversation. Latecomers lurked around a stack of cold sausages and chicken wings piled onto trellis tables, picking at bread and the remains of salads and coleslaws. A tall bouncy guy passed around finger-burningly-hot spring rolls.

Lucy loved Saskia's parties. Always super chilled but upbeat affairs. Made sense really. Saskia had been the party scene queen since the '90s. And there was nothing stopping her a couple of decades later.

Lucy caught the tail-end of some chick's whining vegan soap-box mantra about how meat and cow farts destroying the planet and sent a sympathetic glance to the cornered bloke who "*burrump-humped*" his replies.

Lucy managed to peel herself away from a short, weasely, whiny bloke dressed in a polyester black ribbed jumper and too-tight black-faded-to-grey skinny jeans who smelt of wet dogs, to talk to Haz. Ethereal Haz.

As Lucy approached her, Haz sloshed a mini-tidal wave of bubbly over the rim of her tall-stemmed glass as she turned to face Lucy, wobbling forward slightly on her ultra-high heels. High heels at a house party? And Vivienne Westwood at that. Only Haz. Ethereal Haz.

Haz'd had a harsh month. Her Grannie G was fatally struck down by a car during her daily neighbourhood stroll. In the full summer sun at lunch time. The driver was an off-duty boy-racer. So cliché.

Lucy had attended Grannie G's funeral. Everyone had. There she heard that her whole life, Grannie G had been a spritely wee thing, tightly wound like a matchstick on a cotton reel. One of the first women in the country to graduate with a degree in the '20s giving Haz the honour –many years hence– of being able to be capped in her grandmother's gown at her own graduation, a gown that was about a foot shorter than she required. Ethereal Haz.

And like granddaughter Haz decades later, she'd fanned off a off a gaggle of suitors preferring instead to mourn her one time love and husband Carl Constantine who'd died aged 36 in the war. A bomblast at a communications hub, apparently. So sad.

In her graceful years, Grannie G dispensed baked goods with wild abandon, spring-boarding Haz into pre-puberty bulimia.

It was hard to believe she'd not ever again be waywardly zipping around the 'burbs in her MG, weaving in and out of pedestrians, pearls dripping deep into her décolletage, steaming sweet floury goods cosied in tea-towels on the seat beside her.

Poor Grannie G. Poor Haz. Ethereal Haz.

Haz brushed away an imaginary insect from her face. 'Luce, my celebrity friend.' They kissed hello. 'How are you?'

‘OK, good, good. I think. And celebrity? I don’t think so,’ Lucy returned her friend’s smile shaking her head. ‘And I’m so sorry about Grannie G.’

‘Yes, the old dear is missed. We’ve been drowning in condolence notes –thanks for yours, by the way. Such a terrible way for her to go. Not our glamorous Grannie G. We always thought she’d live forever.’ She sighed. ‘Not so, I suppose.’

‘No,’ Lucy shook her head. ‘Really not good.’

‘Anyway, Luce, what’s new? You seeing anyone at the moment?’ Haz slurred a little. ‘You were with that guy last time I saw you. Cyril or Hero or something or other? Unusual name. Out, I mean, when I saw you out that time in town after whatchops’ hen’s night. Oh God, that was forever ago. Laura’s hen’s night. Hideous night. I was so glad to bump into you so I could slip away from all that asinine clucking.’

Lucy laughed. ‘Ha ha. Yeah, you were totally over it when I saw you. Yeah, was that Spiro, the photographer.’

Haz nodded in reply. ‘Yeah, that’s him, that’s the one. The one with the tan and sexy forearms. Super hot.’

Lucy laughed. ‘Yeah, he does have sexy forearms, from lugging all the photography kit around I s’pose. And yes, hot, true. And no, Spiro’s just a friend, we hang out sometimes, but nah, nothing happening there.’

‘Really? Just friends? Luce, are you mad?’

‘Well, I shagged him of course,’ Lucy winked. ‘But only in a friendly sort of way. And to be fair, I had to really. A chap that handsome needs to be taken out for a spin, wouldn’t you say?’

Haz threw back her head in a raucous cackle.

The noise caught the attention of the bandy-legged, frizzy-haired spring roll guy causing him to make a beeline towards them. Lucy tried not to laugh at his uncanny resemblance to Beaker from the Muppets. He proffered his deep-fried wares, his bulging eyes feasting on Haz. ‘Spring roll, ladies?’ he asked.

Haz rubbed her hands together. ‘Oooh, soakers,’ she purred smiling, bearing an imperfect gap between her teeth that only she could make sexy. She dipped a slender hand into the basket and stuffed a spring roll

in her mouth. 'Got about a litre of fermented grape juice to soak up and I don't wake up tomorrow with a chainsaw running through my head.'

Lucy nodded and helped herself to a spring roll. 'But yeah, in answer to your question,' she continued after spring roll guy departed, 'no, I'm not seeing anyone at the moment. Well,' Lucy sipped her pineapple juice through a straw, 'actually, I've sort of been seeing someone. Sort of.' You might know him, actually. But we're not really 'seeing each other' seeing each other ... if you know what I mean.'

'Oh! FBs. Nice.' Haz twinkled.

'Huh? Facebook? What?'

'Facebook?' Haz laughed. 'No, not Facebook. Funny. No, FBs, Fuck Buddies. He's your fuck buddy.' Haz slipped backwards, recovering herself, an elfish hand catching the edge of a trellis table restoring her balance.

'Yeah, I guess you could call him that. FBs. Huh. Spot on really. Yeah. My neighbour calls them the 'um-friends'; when people ask who's such 'n' such you say "*Oh him? He's my, ummm, friend*". So yeah, he's my um-friend. Or fuck buddy. Oooh, that's kinda uncouth—'

Haz's face was devilish with delight. 'Yeah. FBs sounds better. You can say it in polite conversation *darling*. Everyone has them. Absolutely everybody. It's the new black. So who's your FB then?'

Lucy chewed her lower lip. 'Will. Umm, Willy Brodie. He's a director. You know him?'

Haz raised both her eyebrows. 'Willy? Willy Brodie? Christ, yeah, I know him. Fucken hell, girl. Willy Brodie? Really? You're seeing Willy Brodie? *Shit!* He's gotta movie coming out soon doesn't he? Hollywood or some shit or other. Hell yeah I know him, through work I mean. I've worked with him a few times. I bet he's no shirk in the sack either, not with his record.'

Lucy stiffened.

'Oh darling, you must know that about Willy Brodie. You know he's a player, don't you? You do know that, right? Always has been. Tries his hand with *all* the ladies on set. And off set. If he hasn't pulled on the job he gives it a good parting shot at the wrap party. Friends. Friends of

friends. You name it. Willy gives it a go. Not me though, of *course* not me. He strikes me as being far too impressed with himself for my liking.’ Haz took a gulp of her wine. ‘Not sure of his strike rate though, but he sure as hell gives it a thoroughly good crack. But still,’ she softened, ‘all the rogue men get reigned in eventually, don’t they? Tie the knot, set up house and start breeding. And who’s to say you’re not The One? I’ve heard of FBs turning into smug-marrieds. Just takes one special lady.’

Lucy shifted on her feet and slurped the last of her juice too loudly.

Haz continued. ‘Oh God, you two’d be *perfect* together! You’d look so *cute!*’

‘Yeah, I know; we’re both little. You tell *him* we’re cute together.’

‘Oh no...’ Haz frowned. ‘You want more and he doesn’t? You like him, actually like him, like him? Bummer. That sucks. ‘Specially with his record.’

‘Yes, I suffer for my sins.’ Lucy glanced around the party. *Shut up Haz, shut the fuck up. Annoying Haz.*

‘So how does Will feel about it? How often do you see each other? When did you last see him?’

‘It was notching up to about twice a week for a while there, but I haven’t seen him for about three weeks or so now, since we went to Queenstown together for a wedding.’

‘A wedding? You went away together for a wedding? See, he does like you.’ Haz touched Lucy’s shoulder. ‘See, it could work out.’

‘Yeah, but I haven’t seen him since then...’

‘Oh—.’

‘—But it’s been going for about seven months, but we’ve known each other for about nine years.’

‘That long? Christ. I had no idea.’

‘Yeah, I took him home from The Box and Squid back in the day a couple of times. It was fun. I quite fancied him even then.’

‘Shit...’

‘—And we’ve kinda slept with each other on and off for years ever since, every time we’ve seen each other pretty much.’ Lucy paused. ‘Attraction’s a brutal tool in the wrong hands.’

‘Oh babe...’

‘–Yeah. We even bumped into each other in LA one time and had the most amazing time. We had no idea the other was there and literally bumped into each other on Santa Monica Boulevard outside Victoria’s Secret of all places. I was flying back to New Zealand from the UK and he was on a stop-over on his way to New York to direct a music video. I mean what are the odds?’

‘Shit doll...’

‘–Yeah... so we got pissed on margaritas at some hideous seafront bar and hired rollerblades and caused tourist mayhem as we skated from Santa Monica to Venice Beach and back again, stopping to take in the sweaty sights of Muscle Beach.’

Haz laughed.

‘It was so surreal. It felt like it didn’t actually happen, apart from the hangover. And breaking normal patterns of behaviour, we didn’t even sleep together that time. Oh, actually...’ Lucy smiled at the memory, ‘Willy got me off in an alley way with his hand... yunno,’ she laughed.

Haz cackled. ‘Ha! Love it! Shit, you two do have a history, I had no idea.’

‘Yeah. But the writing’s on the wall really,’ Lucy frowned. ‘I just don’t wanna see it. In fact, I *know* the writing’s on the wall... but a girl’s gotta be ready for rejection, right? I don’t think I’m ready. Yunno?’

‘Hmm, tricky,’ Haz sighed as she placed her empty wine glass down on the table. ‘That’s a tricky one. Have you told him how you feel?’

‘That I *like* him?’

‘Yeah, sure, what’ve you got to lose?’

‘That’s the thing. I used to think I had something to lose, now... well... I just dunno. Probably not. Probably nothing to lose. I’m just hanging on to nothing.’

Haz waved away spring roll guy as he bounced past with another round of soakers. ‘Christ. Does he *want* me to be the size of a bus? Honestly... Well, you should tell him, then. Call him. Or write to him. You are a writer after all.’

‘Yeah, s’pose...’

‘–Well write him an email, or card, or whatever. Think about it before you write it of course, and don’t send it straight away. And when it feels like you have put down what you wanna say –not in a passive aggressive way, not wanting something from him– then send it.’ Haz voice grew louder. ‘But you have to be sure you don’t make ultimatums, or ask him for something he can’t give you. Don’t force him into a corner, into his man cave.’

Lucy smiled and shook her head. ‘Man cave? Yeah right, of course. And God knows Willy’s man cave would be fully decked out: 3-D screens, X-Box, a mini-bar... he’s lived there long enough.’

They laughed.

‘Nah,’ she continued. ‘I wouldn’t do that. I wouldn’t send Willy off back into his man cave. It’s not me really, not my style. But yeah, I could write a letter, I suppose. I could write him an email. Shit, nothing to lose right?’

‘Oh sweets. You have to do it,’ Haz nodded.

‘Yeah. I suppose. I can’t stay treading water forever. And this whole thing’s ripping me apart.’

‘Oh honey.’ Haz leaned in to hug her friend, then, just as quickly, she pulled away and turned her attention to the short, weasely whiny bloke nipping at her heels, moving in for round two.

A little after two a.m. on her way home on the motorway, guided by the SkyTower homecoming beacon, Lucy thought about what Haz had said. And about what she’d say to Will.

By the time she got home, she knew.

Chapter Seven

Lucy heard her neighbours laughing outside in the darkness.

She poured herself a large Bailey's on ice and slid open her lounge windows. The pungent scent of cannabis wafted in around her. She leaned out in greeting. Ponsonby's lone Juliet.

'Hey,' she yelled down to neighbours Billy and Captain Pants.

The pair looked up. They were luminous in the orange street light. Three cats sat on laps and near feet.

'Hey,' they replied in unison.

The cats looked up. One of them –a black girl called Millie– stretched and mewed her greeting.

Lucy blew her a noisy kiss in reply. 'Hey Millie,' she cooed as a startled Patches leapt up and ran briskly through his cat flap to safety.

Billy waved a fat glowing joint. 'Wanna smoke?'

Lucy shook her head. 'Nah. Thanks though. Nice night for it,' she smiled.

‘Isn’t it?’ Captain Pants grinned his large crooked-toothed grin. ‘What you been up to, Luce? Been out?’

‘Yeah, Saskia’s party out west. You know Saskia? Party Saskia. But yeah, I’m sober. Had to drive. Drank a gallon of pineapple juice though.’

‘Bummer,’ Billy replied, sipping his beer. ‘Pineapple’s good for your blood though. What blood type are ya?’

‘A positive.’

‘Same, the A Team. Yeah, nah, it’s good for that. We rock on pineapple juice. We haven’t moved from the spot for... what’s it been Captain? Like, five hours now?’ he chuckled, snorting a little.

‘Yeah, I reckon so. Five hours. Shit yeah. We meant to go out but Billy put on the mean as jams and we just got our dub-step vibe on here. You know how it is?’

‘Yeah... mean as dub-step, bro,’ Billy echoed.

Lucy smiled down at the jolly pair. ‘Some nights nothing better than doing nothing.’

‘Sure you don’t wanna join us?’ Captain Pants asked as fat cat Be-Dub stood up on his lap, circled twice and sat back down. ‘Bloody nice out here chillin’ with the chillum. From up north. Pure North Green. O for Oarsome,’ he cackled.

‘Nah,’ she shook her head. ‘Nah. Something I gotta do. But thanks, another time. Cat and I’ll come round with some wine, some time. You’re in charge of tunes, Billy.’

‘Mean as tunes for you, Luce, for sure. Mean as.’ Billy beamed.

‘For sure. He’s the man.’ Captain Pants nodded in agreement.

‘Sweet as Luce, you do what you gotta do. We’ll be here if you change your mind. We’re not going anywhere.’

‘Nah... not going nowhere,’ added Captain Pants. ‘Nowhere to go, nowhere to be, just here. Just be here.’

Lucy waved her goodbyes.

Billy and Captain Pants had been her neighbours for three years. Captain Pants was a painter by day and artist by night. He painted wearing only pants. Billy was a graphic designer by day and DJ by night. Mary Jane was their one true love.

‘Have a good one guys,’ she called back before moving back inside.

Lucy topped up her Bailey’s and opened her MacBook. And began:

Dear Will

With nothing left to lose I have this to say: I like you Will. I have always liked you and possibly always will.

I liked you as the teen-something who wore tight sequined shorts and a whistle at The Box, and came home with me and threatened to play naked mini-golf in my hallway.

I liked you years later when you told me I had been your first.

I liked you all those times we left in a taxi for your place or mine, sometimes before the night had even really begun.

I liked you five years ago when I bumped into you in LA and we had that crazy margarita-fuelled rollerblade from Santa Monica to Venice Beach, laughing hysterically at the steroid-tastic men getting pumped at Muscle Beach.

I liked you one year later when I came home to New Zealand for good.

I liked you three years ago after Beanie’s birthday when we all ended up back to your place and you grabbed me in your kitchen and kissed me and asked me to stay, but I didn’t.

I liked you seven months ago when I bumped into you at Big Al’s fancy dress party and you were Caesar and I was Snow White and you kissed me by the letterbox and held my hand to show all the boys I was with you.

I liked you so much watching the Wes Anderson omnibus when I was sick I couldn’t even concentrate on the movies. And I even forgot I was sick.

And I’ve liked you every single day since.

I liked you a little more when you showed up at my house with organic pork sausages, lettuce and basil from your garden and Tui beer in a basket, and you discovered how much of a homemaker I’m not.

...And I don’t even eat pork.

I liked you a little bit more when you flung me around the dance floor at your friend’s wedding when I know you don’t even like dancing.

I like who I am when I’m with you.

I like your smile.

I like your kisses.

I like your smell.

I like your laughter.

I love every inch of your body.

I like your sardonic wit.

I like your style.

It's you I like most of all.

This is just to let you know how I feel. You deserve to know someone likes you this much.

lxx

Lucy wiped away a runaway tear and clicked on *File, Save*.



The autumn Ponsonby Market Day heralded well-to-do Auckland urbanites, peppered with conspicuous visitors. Footpaths were jammed with sensible-shoed yummy mummies towing acquiescent khaki'd, floppy-hatted, leather-sandaled men pushing prams. Pursed-lipped dandies swaggered past striding Babyboomers, each sub-set sporting a dog of one size or other. Efficient women advanced efficiently up, then down the street to pre-determined destinations. The pinot luvvies were enjoying their second latté of the day. And tall, skinny, bored indie kids moped around looking stylish.

Then there was Lucy, Cat and Beth. The in-betweeners.

The trio sat outside Conch enveloped by the phat sounds of the outdoor DJ's soul funk, the backdrop for hungover Saturday conversation. Beth was technically Lucy's boss but they'd become friends united by shared frustration caused by one man, their Big Boss Steve-o.

'I wrote Will an email,' announced Lucy, clasping her coffee with both hands.

Cat stirred sugar into her flat white, her scarf hovering a dangerous inch away from dipping into the drink. 'You wrote Will an email? Shit. Saying what?' she replied licking her spoon.

'Go you. 'Bout fucken time.' Beth added, crossing her legs. She struggled with the tiny button holes as she did up her ruby red op-shop cardigan which she wore over a 1950s dress emblazoned with a large red poppy print. It cinched in at the waist and showed off her ample bust and fulsome hips. Her espresso cup bore the imprint of her trademark cherry red lipstick.

'Yeah...' she shrugged. 'I said that I like him.'

Cat's spoon clattered as it hit the saucer. 'Oh, Fuck!' Cat looked up at her friend.

'Shit.' Beth's mouth fell open. 'You like him, like him?'

Lucy nodded at the pair biting her lip. 'I know,' she sighed, as a curl fell across her eyes. 'I haven't sent it yet though.'

'You gonna?' Beth leaned back in her chair. 'When'd you write it?'

'Last night, after Saskia's party. Party Saskia, know her? And yeah. Yeah. Will do, I guess. Yeah, I will. Just letting it sit first, yunno? To see how it feels. But yeah, it all came out. Nine years of dalliances or whatever it is.'

Cat patted her hand. 'Oh doll, it would, wouldn't it? You actually like him, don't you?' A passerby bumped her shoulder. '*Fuck!*' she hissed in their direction. 'Fucken watch where you're going, idiot. Don't they know we're having a moment. *Fuck.*'

'Yeah, I do like him, I really do,' Lucy continued.

'Yeah, you do honey, I know you do.' Cat's face dropped into a frown. 'Oh babe...'

'—The stupid thing is I only just realised it. Can you believe it? After all this time; after how many years? After everything he's done and not done more's the point, I actually do like him. He's a rat, treats me like his personal call girl and sometimes he's just downright mean —*and* I let him— yet I *still* like him. Mum would slap me into next century if she knew the half of it.' Lucy sighed.

Cat smiled. Lucy's mother was like Cat's second Mum. 'Oh babe...'

‘I guess I see a future that doesn’t actually exist.’ Lucy looked at her friends. ‘And I know that, I do know that. But I still think it could work, in my heart of hearts, I really think we could make it work, if we actually bothered. I mean, it’s good on paper, we’re the perfect couple on paper. It’s all there.’

Cat frowned and looked across to Beth. ‘We know you do hun. But...’

‘But it’s not going to happen, is it? Not like this. *Fuck!*’ Lucy leaned both elbows into the table and rubbed her temples with her hands.

‘Well, it’s hard to say,’ Beth added. ‘He cooked you dinner that time. And took you to a wedding in Queenstown. That’s something isn’t it?’

‘Something more than nothing, I s’pose. But when all said and done, it’s footnotes to a feeling really.’

‘Huh?’ Beth raised an eyebrow.

‘Oh, something Armistead Maupin –the guy who wrote *Tales of the City*– said once about sweet nothings, that they really are just that: nothing, nothing at all. He said they were like footnotes to a feeling. That they were pretty much so small and insignificant as to be pointless. I sometimes feel those four words summarise my life: “footnotes to a feeling”.’ Lucy took a deep breath and let it out slowly. ‘A whole lot of sweet nothings that add up to nothing. Sweet nothing.’

‘Oh honey, don’t be like that,’ Cat attempted a smile. ‘Your life is far from pointless, far from it, in fact. Some days you are my only point. You’re my life line, my rock, and don’t you forget it. Footnotes to a feeling, my arse. And like Beth says, facts are facts: he did cook for you *and* took you to a wedding, and that’s not nothing, that’s something. So there’s a heart lurking in there somewhere despite Will’s better attempts to hide it.’

Lucy chewed on a thumbnail. ‘Yeah, he did, I s’pose. But then he left as usual, and I’ve hardly seen him since. It’s been the same old, same old: drunken texts and phone calls and late night sex at his or mine, wherever we land up. No more dinners or weddings, that’s for sure.’

‘Just bootie calls?’ asked Beth.

‘Yep, just bootie calls. And to be honest, even the sex –the one thing we’ve got going– is getting kind of dull.’

‘Really? No, it can’t be. Dull? Really? You are my last beacon of hope when it comes to sex,’ Cat chimed.

‘You ever thought about saying no, Luce?’ Beth asked. ‘I mean, this isn’t making you happy, is it?’

‘Yep. All the time. I think about saying no all the time. But then, I’m damned if I do, damned if I don’t, aren’t I?’

Beth shrugged. ‘I guess.’

‘And only one of those answers gets me laid,’ Lucy continued. ‘Not much satisfaction in claiming the moral ground is there?’

Cat finished her coffee. ‘Oh honey,’ she replied.

Lucy laughed. ‘Anyway, I think I scared him off when he discovered how domestically-challenged I was.’

‘Oh God! You really are a horror in the kitchen,’ said Beth, laughing.

‘Yeah. I know. You should have *seen* his face when he saw my barbecue?’

‘That crusty old thing on your deck? Oh God, do you blame him?’ Beth grinned as she bit into her biscotti. ‘The best you could get out of that situation is him thinking you were charming and helpless. When in God’s name are you going to replace that thing? To even call it a barbecue is an overstatement.’

Cat leaned back in her chair. ‘Oh, fucken *men!* They want a whore in the bedroom and a chef in the kitchen. They want Nigella Lawson.’

‘That’s what *I* said, well, not the Nigella part, the whore part. But we can’t all be Nigella can we?’ Lucy sighed.

‘And who’d wanna be? But really, men! They’re all the fucken same,’ Cat sat forward. ‘I despair sometimes. It’s little wonder men are happier in marriage than they were in single life and women are more miserable. It’s a frickin joke! T reckons the only way to stay happy is be fabulously single all of the time. Least, that’s his thing anyway.’

‘Yes, well, he does do fabulously single very well. Has men and women pining for him across the globe. And you, his professional stalker.’ Lucy chuckled.

'I am not his stalker!' Cat chirped. 'He's my friend and as friends we're quite within our rights to see each other talk on the phone whenever we want.'

'—And sleep together?'

'—Friends *should* snuggle, it's healthy...'

'Hmmm' Lucy raised her eyebrow.

'It's healthy. It's just sleeping, Lucy. Intimacy doesn't have to be all about sex, you know. Don't look at me like that, it's just *sleeping*. And we're not talking about me anyway we're lamenting your calamitous love life. T is a friend, that's all. End of.'

'Pfft. Whatever you tell yourself. Co-dependency springs to mind. As for me, unless a miracle happens with Willy, we're on the fast track to nowheresville.' Lucy sighed.

'Men! They don't know what they want,' Cat shook her head. 'We know what we want, but they have no fucken idea what they want, no clue at all. And they mess us round while they sort their shit out. I don't know how they ever settle down, I really don't.'

Beth agreed, nodding.

'And I fall into one trap after the other all set by me.' Lucy frowned. 'We write these crap scripts for ourselves then wonder why it doesn't end happily ever after. Oh well, we'll see what happens when I send my email to Will, I s'pose. I feel a bit sick about it actually, but I know I have to do it. Rewrite the script, perhaps?'

Beth nodded. 'Hmm, yeah, I guess so. Nothing to lose, right?'

Lucy shrugged. 'Yep, sweet nothing.'

The Salad Man brought three more coffees to the hapless trio. Cat began the all-consuming task of emptying packets of sugar into her brew. An autumn chill bristled past their exposed legs.

Beth shivered and checked the time on her iPhone. 'Cold much? Summer's gone, dammit. So when d'you last see Willy anyway?' she asked, placing her iPhone back on the table after a quick tweet.

Lucy wrapped her hands round her cup and sipped slowly from the warm drink. 'Not for about three weeks now. Yeah... lame.'

‘Three weeks? No shit? No DIY for three weeks?’ Cat sniggered.

‘Yes, no late-night DIY for three weeks.’ Lucy managed a weak smile. ‘I have my trusty rechargeable batteries though –actual DIY– but frankly it’s not quite the same.’ Lucy laughed.

Cat leaned over to her bag and pulled out a scarf and maroon beret. ‘Wo, it’s cold. You’re right, Beth, bye bye summer.’ She wrapped the thin cream wool scarf twice around her neck and placed the beret at a jaunty angle on her head. Her over-sized sweatshirt fell off one shoulder causing her to shiver.

‘Hey, did I tell ya, Will never did get the Valentine’s beer I left him. Someone stole it. Someone actually stole it, can you believe it?’

‘Really? Stole it? I know we considered it,’ Cat looked across to Beth, ‘but I didn’t actually think it’d actually happened. I just thought Will was being a cockhead as usual.’

Lucy sniggered. ‘Yeah I know, he *is* a cockhead. But –get this– they left the card.’

Beth picked at her red nail polish. Her hands were pretty and small. She looked up. ‘Weird. Really? The thieves left the card behind? Yeah, that’s weird.’

‘Yeah, it must have been was the thieves ’cos the envelope wasn’t addressed. It was left in the letterbox, he only found it a couple of days later. Weird for sure. Crooks who care. They obviously care more about beer, but a little about love after all.’ Lucy tucked a curl behind her ear. ‘But Will reckons he didn’t know it was from me. He had an inkling, but didn’t know for sure that it was me.’

‘Like fuck he didn’t know,’ Cat replied. ‘He’s hardly bachelor of the year. There’s hardly a queue of women banging down his door. Oh Luce, really, why do you bother with him? He’s such a prat. Really he is.’

Lucy sighed. ‘Yeah, I know, Cat, I know. But for now, sadly, he’s a prat I have fallen for.’

Cat checked her watch. ‘God, I’ll have to be going soon. When are you sending Will the email? It’ll be interesting to see what he says back.’

‘Yeah, if he replies at all.’ Lucy frowned.

‘Oh, he’ll reply all right, he has to,’ Cat played with the tasselled end of her scarf. Her tanned face glowed prettily in the low autumn light. ‘He’s a shithead, but that would be too off, even for him.’ She smiled.

Lucy zipped up her pale denim jacket. ‘Yeah, I s’pose. It’d mean he’s not even remotely the guy I think he is’.

Beth looked at her phone and gasped. ‘Shit, I’ve got to go too,’ she said. ‘I promised myself I’d get my warrant of fitness early this time. Those parking parasites stung me last time when I was late. *One* day! Not making that mistake again.’

Beth put on over-sized red-framed sunglasses and stood pecking the pair goodbye. ‘You two stay bad,’ she said in parting, and darted off down the street, weaving in and out of prams, dogs and people, turning round one last time to wave goodbye.

Cat leaned into the table when Beth had disappeared from view. ‘I meant to tell you, I met Jodie’s man the other day.’ Cat knocked back the last of her coffee. ‘Oooh, I love the froth’

‘Yuk, coffee foam makes me gag. You met him? And out of ten?’

‘Perfectly decent looking man-about-town kinda guy. It’s disturbing actually; I cannot put the two together. No, it’s just bizarre.’ Cat shook her head. ‘It’s like when perfectly normal men get with wildly obese women. I can’t get my head around it, I can’t fathom it. It gives me the chills.’

‘Oh, it’s just weird. Feeders. Grosse.’

‘Huh?’

‘Feeders. Skinny men who have an obsession with super-sized women and feed them and feed them so they’re virtually incapacitated... anyway...’ Lucy waved her hand.

‘Yeah, must be love. Or lust.’

‘Hmmm...’

‘I reckon people confuse the two: love and lust,’ Cat began. ‘I mean, they’re so different but maybe it all starts from the same place. There’s a

girl in my workroom, and she's obsessed with a guy she met at some booze-fest, and now she's hooked and they're moving in together. He's been in jail *twice* for burglary. Got over a P habit and can hardly string a sentence together. I can't think what she sees in him, he just has to be a spectacular lay. I mean, really, they can't have anything to talk about, I mean really? So she asked me what I thought.'

Lucy raised an eyebrow.

'I know! People should not ask me my opinion. So I said to her –you know me and my big mouth– I said no darling, you're not in love, you're dick-struck.'

Lucy burst out laughing. 'You didn't?'

Cat smiled as she crushed sugar crystals into the table with a teaspoon. 'Of did!' She laughed. 'And as you can imagine that went down like a bucket of cold sick, let me tell you. Anyway, they're getting a place together in Mt. Wellington of all places, so he can be close to the mall, apparently. I mean, *really*.'

'Yep, dick-struck,' Lucy laughed. 'But at least she's getting some *and* he's sticking around.'

Cat sighed. 'Yeah, that's something, I s'pose.'

'Oh darling, I can't handle it anymore,' Cat reached into her bag, 'I'm having a fag and you're not complaining.' Cat pulled out her cigarettes and drew one out.

At that moment The Salad Man popped around the corner.

'Ciggie, Salad?' Cat proffered her packet towards him.

'I don't mind if I do.' The Salad Man helped himself and sat down at their table. 'It's busy as all fuck here today,' he said over the music which had just cranked up a notch.

'No offence, Salad,' exclaimed Lucy, 'but it's altogether too busy for me now.'

'None taken,' The Salad Man shook his head. 'I wouldn't be here if I didn't have to be here.' He smiled and toked on his cigarette. 'I'll take my Ponsonby mellow any day.'

'Shall we walk and talk, Cat?' Lucy asked.

‘Yeah, suits me. I’m done here.’

The pair smiled and waved a silent goodbye to The Salad Man. He twinkled in reply.

‘Hey,’ said Lucy as they stopped past Glengarry and prepared to jaywalk across a busy Ponsonby Road. ‘I ran into Glengarry Guy the other day. Totally out of context too. Totally threw me.’

‘No shit? Glengarry Guy, where?’ Cat replied as the pair bolted across the road.

‘Art opening in town. *And* I thought I knew him.’

‘Oooh, hate that. Shame.’ Cat waved at someone.

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘So how did that go?’

‘I waltzed up to him –ever so casually– and gave him one of my shining big “*Hello!*” faces, then realised afterwards, when he barely responded, that he was Glengarry Guy.’

‘Bugger.’ Cat shook her head as the pair walked quickly down their street.

‘I know. Anyway, I felt like I was wearing an invisibility cloak for all the notice he paid me’

‘He’s hot.’

‘Isn’t he? He really is.’

‘I feel your pain, doll. I got totally dissed at the Foodhall the other night. This guy ordered straight after me, yunno, at the Thai place we always go to?’

‘Yeah....’ Lucy nodded.

‘–Well, he was right next to me in the queue and I recognised him, friend of a friend or something. So I said “*Hi, I know you from somewhere*”. And he just gave me a blank stare and said –really bluntly– “*No. I don’t think so*”. Totally dissed me.’

‘Total dis! Ha!’ Lucy laughed.

‘I know, he was cold. So cold, Luce.’

Lucy laughed.

‘Yeah, I know what a wanker. I mean, it’s not like I am totally uncool or whatever,’ Cat whined. ‘I was hot once, you know. I modelled for *Farmers!*’ she laughed. ‘I’m not so embarrassing to know, am I?’

‘Well, only mildly, but that’s why we love you.’



The lounged hummed with the *brrr* of the fridge. Lucy felt over-caffeinated. As she put her bag down, her ringing phone startled her out of her melee.

‘Hello?’ she answered.

‘Lucy, darling, your father and I were wondering if you’d be home for Christmas? Definitely, we mean.’ Olive sounded more chipper than ever. If that was possible.

‘Umm, yeah... where else would I go?’

‘Well, we’re just confirming numbers. You see, your brothers definitely aren’t coming back for it, they want to work to earn more money, so we thought we could merge with another family. Cat’s perhaps. We’re not sure, but it’s always good to plan these things in advance before it’s too late, before diaries fill up. And you could book your flights early this time.’

‘Yeah...’ Lucy lay on her couch, kicking off a cushion as she flopped down.

‘You sound tired, Lucy.’

‘Probably quite the opposite, actually. I just had too much coffee.’

‘Oh, Lucy, you know that’s not good for you. You’ve been a night owl since you were a baby. We could never get you to sleep.’

‘Yeah, I know. I was out with Cat and Beth. It’s the Ponsonby Market Day.’

‘Oh, well, I hope you can sleep later.’

‘Mmmm,’ Lucy half-sighed.

‘You do sound rather less than your usual self, though. Is everything OK?’

Lucy felt her eyes fill up. ‘No, no, not really. Oh, you know. Boys.’

‘Not still having trouble with that boy, are you?’

‘Yeah, nah. Not really. I’ve decided to tell him how I feel.’

‘Lucy, really? Lay your heart on the line? Oh, no, I don’t think so.’ Lucy could almost see her mother shake her head. ‘I wouldn’t have thought that was a good idea at all. Not sure your father would think it was a good idea either.’

‘Well, I have to do something.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought so. Maybe it’s time to let it all go and move on. Surely if that boy reciprocated in any way, if he felt like you did, he’d have said something himself by now, wouldn’t he? I hardly think he’s mute, is he?’

‘No, Mum, he’s not mute.’ Lucy regretted confiding in her mother. It always ended the same way.

‘Well, I shouldn’t bother if I was you. Anyway, back to Christmas, I can count you as a yes, then?’

‘Yes Mum, I’m a yes. I’ll be there.’ Lucy exhaled. Where else would she be?

After Lucy hang up the phone, she opened her MacBook and re-read her email draft to Will. She was no Elizabeth Bennet, but her words would do. They would have to.

Her heart pounded. If she thought about it too hard, she was sure it could thump right out of her chest.

So without more thought, and ignoring her mother’s words completely, heart thumping, Lucy sent Will the email.

Click.

And it was gone.

Chapter Eight

Lucy stared out the grey-tinted office windows. The clouds had opened up and it was starting to spit.

Monday. Work was slow. Lucy had filed some stories. Photographers were commissioned and tickets procured. Beth was at a pie tasting, or was it cupcakes today? Only Steve-o was in his office staring soup-faced at his screen. Was he on TradeMe or eBay, she wondered.

Lucy had only the hum of her laptop and bFM live-stream for company. Even her Twitter and Facebook pages couldn't hold her attention. Time to dash out under cover of getting coffee.

'You want coffee, Steve-o?' she asked, coiled like a wound spring at the top of the stairs, knowing he only secretly dabbled when he was either hungover or a deadline beckoned.

'Nah,' he replied. Lucy noticed straining buttons when he puffed out his chest. 'Not good for ya, that stuff. Black tar. It'll all kill you in the

end, Lucy, mark my words, it'll kill ya. Still, it's your funeral...' He bared a yellowed tea-stained grin and shook his head. 'But off *you* go.'

'Right,' she nodded, 'back in five then.'

As she stepped into the cool air, Lucy passed a gaggle of the building's regular smokers as they grumbled their way back indoors, poo-pooing Auckland's "*unpredictable*" weather. (*Unpredictable? Lucy had to laugh. The one thing you can predict in Auckland is its weather: sunny one minute, drizzling the next. Oh, and you could predict the traffic: roads choked*).

Coffee in hand, Lucy found an unoccupied eave at the building's edge. The grey pavement was edged with the orange of cigarette butts. She dialled her iPhone. 'Beanie? Yay, you're home.' Lucy sighed.

'Yeah, I'm home. Hey Luce, how're you doing sweets, you sound flat?'

Lucy's voice wavered. 'I just had to talk to someone... you busy?' She heard a child chatter in the background. 'Can you talk?'

'Yeah, yeah, sweet as Luce, I just gave Gracie her bottle which she's proceeded to play with rather than drink, and Sabine's gone to her English class. I was about to have a ciggie outside until it bloody started raining. Does it ever stop?' Lucy heard a clunk in her ear. 'Dammit, sorry Luce, dropped the phone. Oh, it was such a nice day a moment ago. Luckily Sabine got the washing in. The tide's up and I was perving at the hot kayakers.'

'Is there such a thing?'

Beanie laughed. 'Ha! No idea... so what's up, doll?' Lucy heard Beanie clatter about, probably lighting a fag.

Lucy took a deep breath. 'Umm, I sent Willy an email... saying I like him. On Saturday.'

'Wo! Good girl. Very brave, that's so brave of you. Where are you now? You at work? D'you want me to come into town? I could bring you a hipflask of Tequila.'

'Nah, I'm OK. Yeah, I'm at work. Outside under a ledge hiding from the rain, knee deep in cigarette butts.'

Beanie laughed. 'Left by people like me... Oh poor Lucy, we're sorry. Anyway, I don't suppose you expect to hear from Willy anytime soon?'

‘No, not really.’

‘How’re you feeling? Generally, I mean?’

‘Oh, a bit drama-tastic. You know. The usual. The world never sits still in Lucy-land.’ Lucy choked back the inevitable tears.

‘Yes, darling, you’re wonderfully narcissistic. And that’s why we love you.’

‘Hmmm. Sadly true.’ Lucy smiled. ‘And the thing is I’m so narcissistic I couldn’t give a rats about what anyone else thinks of me. It’s a helpful place to be sometimes.’

Beanie cackled into the phone. ‘Abso-fucken-lutely! Hey, but really, will you be OK sweets? D’you wanna come over here later? Want me to cook you dins? We’re having pasta, the fancy stuff. I’m going to go all Masterchef on it. Sabine’s been growing some more fancy-schmancy herbs and is going to show me new tricks, apparently. She’s got an Italian grandmother don’t ya know? And here we were thinking she was a pure-breed.’

Lucy snorted. ‘Nah, I’ll be alright. I just wanted to hear a friendly voice. You ever thought of doing a phone helpline?’

‘Me? Volunteering?’ Beanie spluttered. ‘Oh darling, you must have me confused with Daddy’s wife. And frankly Fifi does plenty enough to get both of us into heaven. And probably you thrown in as a two-for-one deal. And honey, no offence, but you’re just a narcissist with training-wheels; I got my licence-to-ill millennia ago.’ Beanie giggled down the phone. ‘So you’ll be OK really?’

‘Yeah. I’m OK. Just work’s too quiet today and I felt a bit wobbly sitting there in the open plan office all on my own. Well Steve-o was there but that’s just another reason to escape. So I popped out to phone you. You drew the short straw ’cos I knew you weren’t working today. See, I remember. Not everything is about me. You’re not working are you?’

‘No, no, not ’til next week, an international circus thing at Vector, the usual.’ Beanie took a noisy drag on her cigarette. ‘Gracie’s here doing whatever it is Gracie does but it’s pretty chilled. I like it when Sabine’s not here. Feels like the place is actually mine. You know,’ she paused.

‘When she’s around I feel like my marriage has an audience. You know? And what’s worse, an audience paid for by my Dad.’

‘You don’t think she’s spying, do you? For your Dad?’

‘Oh God no! Nothing like that.’ Beanie laughed. ‘I mean, the poor girl’d die of boredom first. Spying on me would be so frickin dull, really. I mean, *really*. Our household is practically catatonic,’ she squawked. ‘If it wasn’t for her bustling around between scenes this place’d be a still life. No, no, God no... imagine spying on us? No, no....’

Lucy couldn’t help but laugh. It’s true, despite a house full of people, you could sometimes hear a pin drop in Beanie’s house. ‘So how’re you and Red doing, anyway?’

‘Oh you know, meh. To tell the truth, I haven’t really seen him. We’re both working odd hours and parenting Gracie in shifts. I see her when she wakes; he sees her all tucked up in bed. But we never seem to see each other anymore, unless you count snoring ourselves to a premature death every night as “*seeing*” each other. Oh hun, I’ve just got to check on Gracie. It’s gone all quiet and that’s never a good sign.’

Lucy heard Beanie’s gentle padding across the floor. “–*Darling, there you are, Mummy was worried,*” Beanie cooed, “*now you bring Bo-bo with you and come and play over here with me where I can see you.*”

Lucy heard the phone crackle.

‘Sorry ’bout that Luce, she moves so fast and I’m not used to it. Oh, where was I? Oh that’s right, Red. For the life of me though, I can’t think what he does all day in that office aside from shuffle papers from one side of the desk to the other –mind you, he’s got a secretary to even do that for him. Business is still slow, no new big builds happening. I guess they’re just pitching to anyone and everyone, but still. And he doesn’t want to move to Christchurch, and nor do I frankly. Oh, I don’t know.’

Lucy checked the time on her phone and pressed it back to her ear. ‘Oh Beanie, that doesn’t sound good. Have you talked about it with him?’

‘No sweets, you know Red, he’s never been much of a talker. Daddy offered to pay for couples counselling –hideous I know– but when I

told Red he just walked out the door. Didn't even say a thing. Didn't even respond. I thought he'd be happy, it wasn't going to cost him a penny, and Dad would have paid the best of the best. You know,' Beanie paused and dragged on a cigarette, 'you single gals strive to get a ring on your finger but I've been there and done that, and do I look like I've won?'

Lucy frowned. 'Oh honey... but you know, I'm not looking for a ring, I'm just looking to be happy. If that means going it alone, if I have to be single to be happy, to be content, then so be it. But I'm not looking for a ring, Beanie, it's not my goal in life.'

'Oh...'

'So you reckon this vow renewal will do the trick, Beanie? It's not just a whitewash for a much larger problem?'

'Fuck, I don't know anything anymore. A whitewash? Probably, maybe. You're probably right. You know, you follow all life's rules, tick all the boxes: meet someone, get engaged, get married, have a baby, get your career sorted and you think it's all gonna work out happily ever after. But I can tell ya, it doesn't. It fucken doesn't.' Beanie sucked on her cigarette and laboured over the exhalation. 'Yunno Luce, it's not all fluffy lambs and daffodils in couples-land, I can tell you. Most of the time you're better off without it. Believe me Lucy, enjoy what you've got while you got it. I'd give anything to have what you've got sometimes.'

'What I've got?' she exclaimed. 'I've got nothing. Nothing at all, babe.'

'Yeah, well, I've got something and it feels like nothing most of the time. 'And God's laughing somewhere, Luce, and it's not *with* us babe, it's not with us.'

Lucy got back to her desk feeling drained. She picked up the old takeaway coffee cup she kept permanently beside her computer and waved it at Steve-o and shrugged, mouthing: "*Sorry, long wait*".

He rolled his eyes in response.

Beth was still out.

Lucy flicked awake her MacBook. She hadn't expected to hear from Will so soon, but there it was in her Facebook inbox. Her hand trembled as she clicked on his reply.

Lucy

I like you. I always have. And I too probably always will. But, and this is the thing, I know that my heart is not in it. I wish it was, but it's just not.

So I could keep having the great sex we have, but I feel the need to back off. Not to flatter myself by implying you felt differently, but just because it seems futile.

I'm sorry if I hurt you. I'm a dropkick of a catch. Sorry, but I never feel myself as anything but a hopeless case. You on the other hand deserve someone better.

And someone who has as much energy in the morning!!

I'm off to the US on a job soon and to catch a bit of the northern hemisphere summer. I know you'll find someone else when I'm gone, someone better, someone worthy of you.

xxx

"Futile".

Crap.

Lucy went to the loo, shut the cubicle door and cried.



That evening nature put on a five-star display. A hundred knot winds, sheets of rain, thunder and lightning. The SkyTower took bolt after bolt in a dazzling display of electric brilliance.

Lucy lay on her couch in her dressing gown and UGGs. She'd sloshed back one martini, eaten half a packet of rice crackers and was downing her second drink when Cat phoned.

‘Luce!’ Cat yelled down the line. Lucy heard the distinct sounds of bar chatter and music in the background. ‘What ya doing? Come play with me and T. We’re at Sale Street, some TV thing, wall-to-wall beautiful faces.’

Lucy eyes stung. ‘Nah babe, you have fun. I’m being self-indulgently morose tonight. I’d be shit company.’

‘Aww doll, what’s up?’

‘Oh, just that Willy replied today. I sent the email and he replied.’

‘Crap! I’m guessing not good,’ Cat yelled over the din.

‘Yeah, not good. But to be expected. He said it was futile.’

‘Futile? Fuck! That’s not good, not good at all. Futile. Fuck. You should come out, we’ll cheer you up. It’s T’s thing, cheering people up.’

Lucy heard T in the background saying *“Tell Lucy to come out. There’s boys and booze, and both of them are free!”*. ‘Nah, it’s pissing with rain,’ Lucy sighed. ‘I’m in my dressing gown and I’m one large martini down.’

‘Shit! Oh I’m sorry. And sorry I can’t be there to give you a hug, babe. Will you be OK?’

Lucy stared down at the glowing bar heater. The smell of burnt dust hung in the air. It was the heater’s first outing for the year. Lucy had succumbed to the cool autumn ambush and hauled it out of the downstairs cupboard and clunked it up the stairs. ‘Yeah, I’m fine. Yunno...’

‘Oh sweets. Well I’ll definitely catch you tomorrow,’ she shouted. ‘We’ll talk then, yeah?’

‘Yeah, bye hun.’

‘I love you, Luce.’

‘Yeah, love you too.’



Sunday and Ponsonby Fresh Fish Company was packed full to bursting. It was standing room only. As was the way of the fickle seasonal changes, hot winds had enveloped Auckland and fooled its dwellers to believe in summer’s relapse.

Lucy and Cat had joined grinning Ponsonbyites returned from a day at the beach and had jammed themselves onto the pew where they had premium fish 'n' chip cooking viewing. Someone would leave soon enough and they could all breathe again.

'I was thinking for my birthday,' Cat began, 'that I'd get some poached salmon and dips and stuff and have margaritas with the girls and T at mine, then meet the others at SPQR. Whaddaya reckon?'

Lucy was flicking through a thumb-soiled *Ponsonby News*. She'd already read this one.

'Are you inviting me, or just telling me what you're up to for your birthday?'

'Oh, just telling you what I'm up to,' Cat laughed. 'Nah babe, you're coming.' She turned to her friend and raised her eyebrows. 'You can come can't you? You're not working?'

'Yeah, sure. When is it again?'

'The week after next, Wednesday. A school night, but what can you do? I blame Dee Dee. Poor planning.'

'Sure, yeah, whatever. I'll check my diary. Any cute boys?'

'Nah, they'll be all marrieds with sprogs. Or boys I want to bone and therefore you can't touch. Or gay of course, me being the well-practiced fag-hag that I am.'

'Fruit fly...'

'What?'

'Fruit fly is the new fag hag.'

'Ouch! I much prefer fag hag; I'm sticking with fag hag. Fruit fly? Oh no, that's altogether too ick for my liking.'

Lucy dropped the *Ponsonby News* and replaced it with a year old *House & Garden*. 'So no hot guys then?'

'I seriously doubt it. I'm a stylist darling, my circle of friends consists of insecure women, vacant models of both sexes –all aged 12 of course –bi-sexual metros and, well, you. If you can find yourself a straight, single man in that lot, well good luck to you. I know I haven't.'

Lucy put the magazine down. 'Lame.'

Cat drew in her feet so to not trip a matching tanned couple wearing skinny dark jeans, band t-shirts and Havaiana jandals as they squeezed past to leave. Lucy caught a glimpse of Cat's perfectly painted, manicured toes.

'Oh I know darling, totally lame,' Cat purred. 'But friendly types all. I'll try to reel in some young 'uns from the workroom but they might have something better to do. And thinking about it, half of them are gay *and* 12 anyway. Fashion darling, so cliché.'

'Is Al coming?'

'Dunno, I'll invite him, but, yeah, dunno. We'll see. That sexual yo-yo remains in a state of flux.' Cat's laugh was hollow.

'And the other love of your life, T?'

Cat sighed. 'T, hmmm. Yeah he'll be there, T is *always* there.'



The Wednesday after next rolled around too fast, and Lucy, Cat and Beanie were already half-chopped on margaritas when they got to SPQR. Only just gone eight. and Cat was swaying like a skyscraper in high winds on her super high heels. She propelled herself toward T and clung onto his arm like a limpid. He waved for cocktails and the intimate party of twelve sat at the long wooden table reserved for them.

'God, would you look at this display of foliage?' T indicated the fashionably over-large forest of white flowers plonked in the centre of the table. 'This won't do at all.' T shook his head. 'What do they think we are, giraffes? We can't see over these. Waiter?' he beckoned. 'Can you please remove *these*?' T indicated the display with an over show of hands. 'Thank you. We can't see our beautiful group with this over-zealous floral partition in the way.'

T directed the wee sprite of a waiter who dutifully removed the dazzling heavy obstruction.

'Now,' T continued, 'a toast to the star of this evening.' His eyes twinkled in the candle light. He looked across the table at Cat and placed a slender, manicured hand on hers.

‘Oh T...’ She wore a vintage satin LBD painstakingly hand sewn with tiny shimmering diamantés and a chunky faux pearl necklace fastened with beautifully crafted jewelled skull clasp. Her hair was bundled up into an Audrey Hepburn bun. A vintage fox fur draped across her shoulders.

‘Cat,’ he beamed, ‘–you are my rock. You are my lover without with the naked bits, my wife without the ball and chain, and partner in crime without Her Majesty’s sentence. You keep my Versace’d feet on the ground and remind me who I really am. You are luminous. You glow from the inside out and blaze with the jewels of goodness. I bless the day I met you. And I intend to end out our years joined at our broken hips in an old people’s home and riding mobility scooters up and down Queen Street with iPods at full throttle. I loved you the moment I met you Cat, and will love you from here into the afterlife and beyond. To my darling Cat!’ He raised his glass. ‘To Cat, we love you, the goddess among us!’

‘To Cat!’ the group chorused.

Just then, Big Al popped into the bar. ‘What’d I miss?’

Lucy clambered up onto a high stool at the bar and perched waiting to be noticed by the busy bar staff. She’d moved away from the din of the group to buy a bottle of Clicquot. She wasn’t sure her bank account could take the \$140 flexing so wanted to be out of eyesight when she tried. She peered down onto the polished copper bar top and looked up to find herself staring directly into Spiro’s eyes.

‘Spiro! Bloody hell! Hi!’ Lucy grinned and leaned into hug him.

‘Lovely Lucy.’ Spiro beamed kissing her firmly on the lips. His waist sat against her knee. ‘Well don’t we just bump into each other all over town these days? You here on your own or waiting for someone special?’ He cast his eye slowly down her strapless sequinned dress. Her diamanté necklace twinkled in the dim light and her cheeks glowed pink.

‘You just checked me out!’ She beamed back.

‘I did not,’ Spiro laughed raucously.

'You did too. You totally checked me out. But I'll forgive it this once. I'm here with Cat, it's her birthday.' Lucy swivelled on her stool and gestured towards the bustling throng at their right. The group had swelled and now enveloped the large, heaving table and surrounds. At that moment a burst of laughter punctuated the room.

'Can I help you?' a bar man interrupted.

'Oh, yes,' Lucy swivelled back to face him. So much for avoid anyone bearing witness to her potential poverty. '—a bottle of Clicquot, please, thanks.' She coughed. 'But you might want to put it through first,' she handed him her debit card.

The bar man's face held still as he took her card.

'It says "*Declined*",' he announced after a moment through tight lips.

Lucy flushed. 'Oh...'

'It's alright, I've got it,' Spiro leaned in and passed over his card. Off to Europe next week and blow me down if the UK publishers can't stop sending me money for this rock book,' he laughed.

'Really?'

'Yeah, so may as well chuck a bottle of bubbles on it.'

'No Spiro, you can't...'

'—I can and I am. What's \$140 in pounds anyway? Bugger all, Luce. I'm *rich*. Let's just enjoy it.'

Lucy laughed. 'You sure? Really?'

Spiro nodded. 'Of course. For you, anything.'

'Aww, thanks Spiro, I owe you.'

'No, don't even think about it.' He squeezed her shoulder.

'So who are you here with?' she asked. 'Can you at least join us for a drink, especially now you've paid for it? Oh, that sounds bad... even if you hadn't have paid for it...' she burbled.

Spiro laughed and reached his hand across to hers. 'I'd love to Luce, but I'm here on a date. A blind date actually.' He mock-grimaced and raised his eyebrows.

Lucy's face dropped. 'Oh. And how's that going? Who is she?'

‘OK for a blind date, I suppose, not having done this before it’s hard to say. Look over my shoulder, into the corner... can you see the cute blonde?’

Lucy looked. ‘Yeah... Wow!’

‘Well, it’s not her.’ Spiro laughed.

Lucy slapped his hand. ‘So which one is it?’

‘The one at the other table beside her. The drab brunette.’

‘*Hey!* I’m a drab brunette...’

‘–Lucy,’ Spiro interrupted, ‘–you’re *anything* but drab!’

‘You obviously don’t remember seeing me first thing in the morning.’ Lucy blushed as she said the words.

Spiro tilted his head. ‘Lucy...’ he kissed her cheek, ‘–how could I forget?’ He winked. ‘Well, I must get back to the *other* drab brunette.’

‘OK, bye then. And thanks heaps for the bubbles.’ She kissed him goodbye.

‘No problem. Have fun. Love to Cat. Tell her I’ll try and pop over in a bit and wish her happy birthday but might just slip away.’

‘OK, will do.’

‘And be sure to watch my travels on Facebook.’ He laughed. ‘I promise to make you green with envy!’

‘Oh Spiro, if you were taking photos of a pub band in Hamilton I’d still be green with envy. See you when you’re back.’

Lucy kissed his cheek again, leapt of her stool and returned to Cat’s party, generous bottle of Clicquot in hand.



It was the night before the Queen’s Birthday weekend and Lucy wasn’t in the mood for the Saints ’n’ Sinners party at Montecristo Room. The relentless rain didn’t help.

She’d been sent six tickets so she’d rallied her troops. Something she now regretted.

Will was flying off to LA in two days and it hung like a cloud in the air. A night of bath-robed moping was in order. Drinking herself into a

stupor. But despite trying on a bunch of excuses in her head, since she had badgered everyone else into joining her, Lucy knew she couldn't bow out now. Could she?

She leapt out of the bus one stop early to look in D.Vice, Ponsonby's 'tasteful' erotica shop. May as well, she reckoned.

She felt about as sexy as a haemorrhoid, with the rain having frizzed her hair like a pubic mound, but she may as well try to look hot. So long as the looking hot overrode the trying.

Lucy was met at the door by a male mannequin. He wore a red g-string that resembled a crotch-sized Swiss flag, designed to be unwrapped with a gentle tug of the criss-crossed white satin bow.

Looking at the mannequin's package Lucy recalled an American ex-boyfriend (who turned out to have an equally-adoring American girlfriend back in the US, but that's a whole other story...). On their last night together before he returned Stateside (presumably back to girlfriend no. 1) as a "*special surprise*" for her he'd worn a black leather studded g-string.

Lucy had been floored, and not in a good way. She couldn't actually imagine an outfit less sexy. She'd ripped off the offending object in such haste that it gave him the false belief that she was so turned on she couldn't possibly wait a second longer. How wrong, how terribly, terribly wrong it all was.

Anyhoo.

At D.Vice, Sass was working. Sass was about as plain a character as you'd ever expect to meet anywhere, let alone managing an erotic shop. She was tall and thin, and her jeans and t-shirt hung off making her look like a human coat hanger. Although, it was clear she was a perfect canvas, ready for the artistry of hair, wardrobe and make-up. In the witching hour perhaps she transformed into something else, something a whole lot more enchanting.

Sass' face lit up when Lucy entered the brightly-lit store. Her twinkling brown eyes were flanked by a thicket of long dark eyelashes. Lucy wasn't a regular, but she came in enough to be known.

'Hi Lucy, alright?' Sass greeted. Her face burst into a wide smile. 'How're you doing? Getting cold, huh? Winter's really here now, I can't believe it. Doing anything special for the long weekend? Looking for anything in particular?'

'Yeah,' Lucy nodded, 'I am actually. At least I think so. I'm going to the Saints 'n' Sinner's party tonight at Montecristo Rooms, you going?'

'No,' she replied. 'I haven't actually heard anything about it, actually. I usually do, but no, I guess not this time.' She smiled.

'Oh. Well I pretty much know what I'm gonna wear but I thought as I was going past I'd see if anything else took my fancy. I don't really feel up for it to be honest.' Lucy indicated the rain outside.

'Yeah, I hear you. Oh well, might as well take a look, aye? What is it you're planning to wear?'

'White lace bodice and 50s petticoat, that sort of thing,' Lucy shrugged.

'Sounds good.' Sass smiled. 'Well, you could look at these if you wanted something different.' She walked over to a selection of bodices and negligees. Lucy followed.

A baby pink boned bodice with a cupped bra and pink feather fringe caught Lucy's eye.

'You're size 8 right?' Sass asked searching through the racks.

'Yeah...'

'Boobs?' Sass stared down at Lucy's chest.

'B...'

'Right. I reckon you should try on these and see if anything takes your fancy or suits your mood. You never know. Can't hurt trying, can it?'

'Cool, thanks.' Sass walked Lucy to the changing room and swept open the curtain. She placed the collection of hangers onto the elegant hooks and left Lucy alone.

A moment later Lucy heard a little knock on the wall and a hand appeared through the curtain.

'Oh, and this one.' Sass passed her a black patent leather belted bodice with a shining silver zip slicing up the middle and a slim belt at the waist.

'Wow!' Lucy looked at it. 'I like this,' she called through the curtain.

'Yeah, I know, hot isn't it? I sold one of these a while back to Labretta Suede. It looks so amazing on. I have one and wear it with jeans,' Sass added.

Lucy had a hard time imagining that but she liked the idea of dressing like the hottest minx in town, Labretta Suede.

The pink negligee hugged in all the wrong places and none of the right ones. 'I totally don't have the boobs for this one,' Lucy called out to Sass peering down at her pancakes. 'It flattens them, look,' she flung open the curtain, '—they're all squished.'

'Oooh yeah, it does a bit,' Sass laughed. 'I see what you mean. Bugger. Try the white corset. It's really cute on, lifts the boobs, whatever size they are.'

'OK.'

The corset was a no go too. It was cute alright and did all the right things to her small waist. And her boobs were hoisted up under her chin. But Lucy felt one breath away from expiring right there on the shop floor.

'Cute!' Sass cooed when Lucy appeared. 'You not so keen?'

'Cute in a I-can't-breathe kind of way.'

'Oh yeah, the curse of the corset. Really, I don't know how all those women did it way back when. Well, that leaves the black...' Sass winked. 'Come on, let me get you out of this one.'

Sass was right. The patent leather was all that. And some.

'Wow!' Lucy gasped at her reflection. 'I look *hot!*'

'Shit yeah you do. Wow! You have a gorgeous figure, Lucy,' Sass exclaimed.

One strip of cow hide was all it took to perk her up. 'Thanks! Yeah, wow, this bodice makes me look like Jessica Rabbit.'

The belted, boned structure clinched in her slim waist. Her breasts became luscious and full, rising and falling with each breath.

Sass clapped her hands like a seal. ‘Omigod!’ she gushed. ‘You *have* to get this. And I’m not just saying that to get the sale. Lucy, you really have to get this.’

‘Yeah, I know, it’s awesome. I look amazing. It’d be stupid not to buy it.’

‘And half price too.’

‘What?’

‘Yeah, it’s the end of that line, they’re not making any more, it’s the last two left, that’s the only small too, so you’re lucky. The other one’s a 14.’

‘That’s awesome.’

‘Isn’t it? In retail we call it “*meant to be*”.’

As is always the way of planned nights out, the pre-party was better than the main act. Lucy has paired her new purchase with a sheer petticoat and cheeky lace underpants. More see-through than she was normally comfortable wearing but the leather gave her faux confidence. Cat was dressed appropriately as Cat Woman, swaddled in tight black shiny lycra with cheeky ears and whiskers. She and Lucy met the others at some random friend-of-friend’s flat in Grey Lynn: a naughty nurse, a gimp, the requisite red-painted Devil and an angel, and Little Bo Peepshow.

The group sank shots of Tequila and Jaegermeister. Lucy declined lines of MDMA, and painted on a smile ’til a real one took hold. Every now and then she checked her phone. Nothing.

At around eleven, the gang of misfits and misfires piled into a maxi-taxi van and headed for the city.

After signing her coat away in coat check, Lucy looked around the venue of guys wearing priest suits and girls wearing little black dresses and devil’s horns, and had the chilling realisation she was the only one with her arse hanging out.

At one a.m. Lucy received a text from Will: 'Where are you? Meet me at mine in half an hour,' it read.

'Can't,' she replied back. 'I'm out.'

'Leave,' came Will's response.

Chapter Nine

Will greeted Lucy on the street outside his house. He was topless, wearing only a pair of faded jeans. As he opened the door for her, she was more than aware that to the taxi driver, she looked like a Dial-a-Whore. She shook off his disapproval as he sped off down the road.

Will pulled Lucy to him and grabbed her bottom. 'Wow, look at you,' he breathed into her and peeled off her coat as he rubbed her bare shoulders. 'You're hot!' He kissed her slowly and led her inside. 'Quick, it's cold. You lot and your costume parties. I don't know how you do it every time,' he laughed. 'But this one I like.'

'Oh ha ha. We don't dress up *every* time.'

'Yes you do, I've seen it on Facebook. You and your friends have a costume party every other weekend.'

Lucy leaned up into him. He kissed her nose. 'No we don't and what? You're my stalker now?'

'Oh I look from time to time,' he winked. 'Just to see what you're up to.' He grinned and pulled her onto the bed.

Lucy caught sight of the ten or more white candles casting a dozy light across the room. His laptop purred with the quiet sounds of Jeff Buckley.

'What's all this then?' she asked after a moment.

He kissed her open palm. 'Our farewell.'

Birds had started their wake-up call, Jeff Buckley had serenaded them on a loop too many times and the candles had burnt themselves out. Will pulled his stark white duvet up over them and wound himself tightly around Lucy. Their bodies touched from top to toe. Lucy felt as if their skin was joined.

They stayed this way until morning.

By 10, Will had disappeared to the shower. Lucy lay in the trillion thread count sheets in his neat room staring at the ceiling.

When he returned, Will dressed quickly in a pair of long white football shorts. 'You'll be needing some clothes to go home in, I imagine.'

Lucy looked at the floor to her leather bustier, stockings and petticoat, and laughed. 'Yes, that'd be good.'

Will fossicked around in his drawers. 'T-shirt and jeans do?'

'Sure, yeah...'

Will lifted out a grey marl Huffer t-shirt and chucked it to her.

'Cool, Huffer...' Lucy sat up, about to put it on.

'Oh, not that one,' he replied. 'Chuck it back. Here...' he gestured. 'I have another one. I thought it was a different one. No, chuck me that one. If you take that I'll never see it again.' Will shook his head.

Lucy threw back the t-shirt and another one landed in front of her. Grey marl. Bonds.

'So, do you reckon you need a shower?' he asked as he scratched his ear and jostled with a lower drawer. He threw Lucy a pair of jeans.

Lucy got up out of bed, found her knickers in the pile of discarded clothes and pulled on the jeans.

‘Nah, no, all my stuff’s at home. I can shower there.’

‘Cool.’

The faded jeans were too big and the long legs fell down below her feet. She was tempted to skid around the wooden floors for a laugh but, guessing now was not the time, she instead rolled them up into fat cigars around her ankles.

‘I don’t suppose I’ll be seeing those again,’ he said.

‘I s’pose not,’ she shrugged.

Will whisked off the sheets and pillow cases and slopped in slippers feet out of the room. Lucy quickly ran a licked finger under her eyes. Still wearing last night’s vampish make-up, she knew she looked a fright. She folded her clothes from the night before, an arrangement of what was essentially underclothes, and put them on a chair.

She walked down the cold wooden-floored hall and found Will seated in his sunny lounge, laptop and windows open. She curled in beside him and rested her head against his thigh.

‘When do you fly out?’ she asked.

‘Tomorrow.’

‘Oh. Are you ready?’

Will sniffed as his fingers tapped on the keyboard. ‘Yeah, so ready. I need to get away. Need a break. Got a bunch of people to see in LA, a few interviews, might be some film work out there for me. I’d love to be based in LA for some parts of every year. I get itchy feet.’

Lucy’s stomach clenched.

‘And I have a film coming out soon,’ he continued, ‘in time for all the Oscar stuff, judging and things. It’ll probably slip in unnoticed, but the producers are putting it forward to the Academy. It’s showed at a couple of festivals, Cannes, Toronto, and got good reviews, and won a couple of People’s Choice awards and stuff. Umm, yeah, so they’re working it over there.’

He continued typing.

‘Cool. I heard a bit about that,’ Lucy shifted to get comfortable. ‘What’s it about? The movie, I mean.’

Will shifted in his seat and crossed an ankle over his knee, jostling Lucy’s head. ‘It’s something I wrote and shot a few years ago. Totally low budget. Whole thing cost about a mill to make, which is nothing in film money. People more or less worked for free. It’s a nothing really, about two best friends, guys, things go wrong, and, yeah... stuff like that. Pretty dark. Called *Teflon Alley*.’

‘Huh.’ Lucy sat up. She looked down at the ripped jeans and baggy t-shirt she was wearing and recalled a time in the ’90s she’d have preferred to forget.

Will closed his laptop and left it on the coffee table. ‘Yeah, hey, d’you wanna lift home? I should really crack on. Lots to do...’

‘–Sure, yeah, good. What... now?’

‘Yeah. I’ve got heaps to do.’ He shrugged.

‘Like pack?’

‘Nah, I’ve packed. But you know, there’s loads to do and I have a house sitter coming tomorrow. So...’

‘–Bugger. And here was me thinking I could come in and steal all your artwork.’

Will laughed and shook his head. ‘Yeah right. Come on then,’ he stood up and patted Lucy’s shoulder. ‘Let’s go.’

Lucy followed Will into his bedroom and gathered her stash of clothes and they walked barefoot into the garage.

As they arrived at her house, Will pulled into her drive with the engine running.

‘Cool. Hey, thanks for last night,’ he said glancing over and giving her a smile.

Lucy unclicked the seatbelt and sat for a moment listening to the engine hum. ‘Yeah, OK, right.’ She realised she actually had nothing to say. ‘OK, so yeah... bye, Will. Stay, umm, safe over there.’ She slid across the seat and kissed Will lightly on the lips. ‘And good luck with everything, the movie and stuff.’

‘Yeah, will do, safe, yeah, thanks. Bye Luce.’ He smiled at her. ‘And thanks. All luck helps, right?’

Lucy opened the car door and stepped out onto the hot concrete. Will leaned over the passenger seat and rolled down the window.

‘OK, bye Luce, take care.’ He shifted the car into gear.

Lucy shivered.

‘OK. Bye Will.’ She half-waved.

Then he was gone.

Lucy’s house was quiet apart from the cheap plastic skylight lifting and dropping in the wind. She threw her bundle of clothes on the floor and fell onto the bed where she stared up at the ceiling until her eyes blurred.

She would sleep, she thought, sleep the day away.

Lucy sighed realising she had lost a diamanté earring, probably at Will’s. It would be the excuse she needed to text him one more time. She would send it later:

If you find a diamante earring, pls put it aside & I’ll collect it from house sitter. Safe travels & have fun. lxx’

She sent the text when she woke up after 4. She never heard from him again.



Will had been gone a week. Lucy had stuffed a pillow into his t-shirt and allowed herself to cry on it at night. It smelt of Persil. The scent of him.

The first night after he left Lucy had sobbed, heaving and shuddering under the covers as she poured her insides out. Her nose blocked up with snot and her eyes become puffy and sore. By Friday her tears had dried up.

The following Saturday morning, late, Lucy prised herself out of bed. The sun was bright, perched low in the winter sky. She placed a careful foot out of the bed onto the floor, navigating the medley of clothes

strewn about her bedroom, and the colourful montage of high heels and sneakers scattered in and out of her bedroom. She tripped half-blind up the stairs.

Her espresso took too long to brew. She ran out of milk. And, of all mornings, that was the morning her mother decided to phone.

‘Hello dear, good morning,’ her mother chirruped down the line. ‘It’s a beautiful day here in Hawke’s Bay and your father and I are watching what we think is a pilot whale out in the bay. *It’s a pilot whale isn’t it darling?*’ she called off line.

‘Yes, *I should think so, yes,*’ came her father’s remote reply.

‘Yes dear, we think it’s a pilot whale,’ she continued. ‘Poor thing, it must have become separated from its pod; it can’t be much more than a baby. Not sure how long it’ll survive out there on its own, whales like company don’t they? *Whales like company, don’t they?*’ she called out. ‘Yes, he says they thrive on company. So how are you dear? Your father and I are well. We’re just back from an early morning round of golf at the club. Such a lovely day to get out early. Cool and crisp. No frost which is good for this time of year. I clobbered your father and he thinks he might not come out with me again, but he played a good round so I don’t know what all the fuss is about,’ she chattered on. ‘We were lucky to get out when we did. The car park was empty when we arrived but full when we left. Some people couldn’t get a park at all. Still, that’s what you’d expect for a sunny Saturday, wouldn’t you?’

Lucy stretched out on the couch, lowering her neck into the arm, and closed her eyes. ‘Yes, I expect so...’

‘–Well, Dee Dee is down from Tauranga staying with Barb,’ her mother tittered, ‘they both joined us and we popped out for lattes on the way home at that café you like in Napier, the one with the funny name that we can never remember, the one on Tennyson Street, African name or some such. Or Middle Eastern. I don’t know. Anyway, Dee Dee played a fabulous round of golf. She’s really been hitting her form lately. Does Cat play? You two really ought to consider giving it a go, it’s a hell of a lot of fun. You never know, you might actually enjoy yourselves.’

Dee Dee said that Cat and you have been having a wonderful time up there in Auckland. Are you well, dear?’ Her mother caught her breath.

‘Yes, we’re good I suppose.’ Lucy stifled a yawn and examined her fingernails. The nail polish was half off. Or half on, depending on how you considered it.

‘And how’s that lovely Beanie? She’s *such* a lovely girl,’ Olive chirped. ‘Is she really the only one of you with a child?’

‘Yep. Only one married too.’ Lucy’s morning voice croaked. ‘She’s renewing her wedding vows too.’

‘Oh for goodness sake!’ her mother exclaimed. ‘I suppose that’s all the rage these days; once is never enough. Why your generation has to make such a fuss, I’ll never know. One saying of marriage vows was perfectly fine for us. Still, I suppose that’s better than a second marriage, at least she’s not divorced. People seem to give up on marriage far too easily these days, they think it isn’t something they have to work on. You know,’ her mother’s voice quietened, ‘and you might think this is a cruel thing to say and it’s none of my business of course, but we never actually thought that one would last. Dee Dee thinks Red’s an oaf.’

Lucy sighed. ‘He’s not so bad,’ she replied. ‘He stuck by Beanie when she was sick a couple of years ago, when she burnt out and had to take nearly a year off to recover. He looked after her.’

‘Well yes, I suppose that’s so, she was lucky to have him then. And it’s none of my business is it, really?’

No, it’s not, Lucy thought.

Olive continued, ‘So what are you up to for the rest of the day, darling? We’ve got Dee Dee and Barb coming round for a barbecue for lunch.’ Lucy’s mother nattered on. ‘June, can you believe it? And we’re still barbecuing. Your father and I think it might be the last one of the year. Mind you we said that weeks ago. Aren’t we lucky to have had such a good run of fine weather?’ she asked.

‘Yes. It’s still warm up here too. Well, chilly wind. But sun shining most days. I’m getting my hair cut at midday.’

‘You don’t sound very happy about it,’ her mother pronounced.

Lucy sighed. 'Oh...' she took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. 'Will left a week ago.'

'That film chap?'

'Yes...'

'-Where on earth to? Can no one can sit still for five minutes these days?'

'LA. Doing film stuff. Promoting a movie out there and might get some work.'

'In LA?'

'Yes, that's where it all is. Where the money is. His star is starting to rise.'

'Oh well, if that's what he wants, I suppose. None of my business. Leaves you rather out of the picture though, doesn't it?'

'Yeah, he plans on living there part of each year if he can.'

'Sounds a bit nomadic to me. Still, suits some types. But no good for you is it? Better of out of it, I say. And plenty more fish in the sea dear so don't waste any more time on him. He's gone now and there's nothing you can do about it. Time to cast your net elsewhere. You need to find yourself a nice man with a proper job. Perhaps it's time to settle down, to find someone to look after you? This might be the jolt you need. There's always a bright side.'

Lucy's eyes well up. A tiny tear trickled down the side of her face and into her ear. It tickled. Her mother's no-nonsense candour was a blunt instrument.

'Yes, well I'd better go and get ready...' Lucy sniffed.

'Oh yes dear, you had, and so must I if I want to make the most of the day. I'm going to marinate some beef and get some potatoes on the boil for a potato salad. I'm trying out a new recipe with bacon. Oh, you don't like bacon. Anyway, it looks tasty for those of us who do. And don't you worry about that film chap, really, you should never have got your hopes up anyway. You do get your hopes up and look what happens every time.'

'Are you saying I can't get a boyfriend?' Lucy stuttered.

‘Well, look at the evidence?’ Her mother replied. ‘Really, you ought not get your hopes up. You need to just be happy as you are.’

Lucy’s gut clenched. Olive’s words stung. And today of all days.

‘But I *am* happy as I am.’

‘You don’t sound happy.’ Olive chortled.

‘Well I’m sad today, but that’s ’cos Will’s only just left. It’s only been a week.’

‘Yes, well. All I am saying is you shouldn’t get your hopes up. Anyway, I really must go and so must you if you don’t want to be late for your haircut. I’m going to pick the last of the lettuce and make a lovely salad from the vegetables out of the garden; the baby carrots are coming through already.’ Her mother delighted in her green thumbs.

‘Sounds yummy,’ Lucy deadpanned.

‘You have a lovely day dear. And do try to cheer up. And let me know how you get on at the hairdresser’s. Are you doing anything different this time?’

‘Oh, Jacques my hairdresser pretty much does what he wants. After all, he’s the expert. So, yeah.’

‘Yes, I suppose he is,’ he mother interrupted. ‘Nice that you trust him so much. Well let us know and I’ll see you in a few weeks when we come up for the opera.’

Lucy bit a thumbnail. ‘OK. Bye Mum. Love to Dad.’

‘Goodbye dear, lovely talking with you. And please pass on my regards to Beanie and Cat. And tell Cat to *please* call her mother.’

Lucy placed the phone on her belly and lay still in the silence.

Chapter Ten

The traffic along Ponsonby Road was backed up and crawling.

The sunshine had gone and a barely there shower had turned into angry sleet. Pedestrians dashed into doorways and under eaves. As usual, Lucy was running late for her hair appointment. And her windscreen wipers couldn't wipe fast enough for her to see.

She managed to not hit anyone or anything along the way, find a park nearby and was able to navigate impatient traffic and the bitter weather to cross the road.

The contrast once inside was palpable. The large modern salon was percolating busy-ness. It smelled of coffee and lilies with top notes of chemical spray. Lucy had barely perched on a waiting room chair a minute before her French hairdresser Jacques appeared.

'Loo-sie, 'ow are you?' He gave her two quick pecks on either cheek.

'I'm a bit meh, actually. I got dumped.' She shrugged.

'Dumped?' Jacques placed his hand lightly on Lucy's waist and led her down the three short steps to his cutting-station. A sudden spark of sunlight blinkered into the light airy space marking the end of the torrential downpour outside. Lucy sat down.

As Jacques raised her chair, he surveyed her through the mirror. 'So... this man?' he asked. 'The one who dumped you...'

Lucy shrugged. 'Simple really: I declared my undying love and he declared his undying lust, and now he's in the States.'

'USA? So far away?'

'Yes. Don't ask.' Lucy shook her head. 'But yeah, that's it really. Goneburger!'

'Goneburger.' He laughed. 'For good? Or just on 'oliday?'

'Holiday, gone, I don't know. But it's definitely over. That's if it even begun.' She exhaled. 'I don't know. So, yeah...'

'Aww, baby. That ees no good.' Jacques placed his hands on her shoulders. 'Poor Loo-sie. But be 'appy that at least you've had some lust lately, if not love. I've forgotten what it's like; I've been doing it for myself for so long.'

'Yeah well, needs must and all that,' Lucy half smiled at Jacques through the mirror.

'So how long were you with 'im? Or not with 'im, whichever it is,' he asked, frisking her hair, 'this man who flew away.'

'We weren't really "with" each other with each other, as such.' Lucy gestured the quotation marks. 'But we were *not* with each other with each other for the past nine, no, eight months, or something like that. But I've known him since he was a teenager. So about 12 years. I was his first.'

'His first? Très Bien! I bet you broke 'is young 'eart.'

Lucy burst into a laugh. 'Ha! Not even close. And do teenage boys even *have* hearts?'

'No, probably not. I am pretty sure I didn't.' He laughed. Lucy enjoyed how he enunciated every syllable when he spoke his French English. 'So what 'appened? Did 'e just want to sleep with you and you wanted more? Did you want to turn a booty call into a relationship?'

'Yeah, that about sums it up. I was his 'text-after-midnight' girl... and stupidly, I fell in love.' Lucy shrugged.

Jacques frowned. His hands fell down by his side. 'Oh. But it cannot 'ave been real love, can it? Not the depth of 'ow far real love can go. Lucy, you deserve more, you deserve 'appiness. Or you at least deserve a shot at 'appiness. And I don't think this was it.'

'Yeah, I know.'

Jacques resumed frisking. 'But you 'ave such 'istory together. It is puzzling. But I can see 'is problem. I have a friend I just want to fuck but I just can't see her 'cos I just want to fuck 'er but she wants more. N'est-ce pas bien. Not good, my friend, not good.' He shook his head.

Lucy couldn't help laughing. 'You boys, you're bad to us girls.' She observed Jacques untamed brown curls, strong French nose, unshaven face, full reddened lips and fine frame. How many hearts were in his net?

'Yes indeed. We are.' Jacques wrapped a cape around Lucy's neck. 'Same again, or shorter. Were you 'appy with it last time?'

'Same. Shorter. Whatever. This is my break-over so you can do whatever you want.'

'Break-over?'

'Yeah, the break-up make-over. It's your job to make me look hot, ready to go back into the world again, to get back on the horse.'

'Oh baby, I'll make you so 'ot you'll *wish* your phone would stop ringing and all the 'orses would all ride out of town.'

Hub?

Jacques walked with Lucy over to the washing station. 'But I miss her blow jobs, yunno?' he continued. 'She was good at blow jobs.'

Lucy sunk down to the chair. 'The girl you just wanna fuck but not be with?'

'Yes, 'er. She was good at blow jobs.'

'As well one should be,' replied Lucy laughing.

Jacques began massaging shampoo into Lucy's hair. 'But she was young, and young people, young ladies, aren't usually so confident, you

know? N'est-ce pas? Unless they are French, of course.' His eyes twinkled when Lucy looked up. 'But she was good at blow jobs.'

'Yeah,' Lucy returned her gaze to the ceiling. 'Oooh, that feels good.'

Jacques applied deep pressure as his hands moved in sweeping motions over Lucy's scalp. 'You like blow jobs? You like giving blow jobs?' he asked.

Lucy felt Jacques breath on her forehead and eyes watching her. Her face flamed. 'Actually, it's the spooning I'll miss most,' she replied. 'The cuddling and bits in between, not the sex.'

'Ah oui, the spooning. I forgot about that. The bits in between. I like that. There's a Facebook group on spooning, don't you know, you can become a fan.'

'Yeah, I know.' Lucy smiled. 'I am one.'

'Coffee?' Jacques asked as he finished towel-drying Lucy's hair. She thumbed her way through the first in a stack of magazines Jacques had plonked on her lap back at his cutting station.

'Yeah, thanks, coffee'd be good. Strong, thanks.'

Jacques winked. 'I only ever make strong,'

Lucy was flicking through French *Vogue* when Jacques returned with her flat white. 'Looks like the '90s are back,' she said. She pointed down to a model whose blonde hair was pulled into a high messy it-just-happened-this-way ponytail, boasting an inch of regrowth, wearing pale blue denim baggy jeans which were rolled up and secured tightly at the waist in a paper-bag clinch. The look was completed by an oversized white t-shirt and cropped black waistcoat.

The model looked prepubescent. Or as Cat would say: "*a twelve year-old-boy with a vagina*".

'You don't think you'd look alright in that?' asked the Frenchman running his fingers through her hair.

Lucy laughed. 'Nah, it'd just make me look wide. And stumpy. Wide and stumpy. Horrible. It'd make most people look wide and stumpy,

actually. Hard to carry off that look, it only looks good on six foot models, for sure.'

Jacques nodded as she started to cut. 'Yeah, it's hard to move on from skinny jeans when you like them and look good in them.'

'Yeah.'

'And you look good in them, by the way, Loo-sie. Very good.'

'Erm, thanks...' She liked the way he said "*very*", more like a breath than a word. 'Great coffee, by the way Jacques, thanks. Really good.'

'You like my coffee?' Jacques grinned.

'Yeah. What's not to like?'

'I'm very fussy with my coffees.'

'Same.'

'I like it when you like my coffee.' He smiled.

Jacques snipped at Lucy's curly-haired mop, his eyes near cross-eyed with concentration. 'After the blow job girl,' he continued. '—I was with someone I didn't even like, not at all. But the sex, it was amazing. Phenomenal, actually. It was the crazy sex, you know?' *Snip, snip, snip*. 'But I could 'ardly look at 'er between times, or even talk to 'er. We really didn't get on at all.'

'Really? Not at all? You really didn't get on at all?'

'No, not at all. Not one bit. We got on each other's nerves all of the time, except in bed where the frission was amazing.'

'Wow. That's so weird. But I sort of understand.'

'Yes,' he nodded. 'So strange. So, with the next one, the next girl, I was friends with her for a whole year before we slept together, before we became lovers.'

'A whole year?' Really? 'That's a long time to wait.'

'Oui, oui, I know, a very long time. But I thought it was love, we both did. Then we finally did do it for the first time, we made love. The setting was perfect, after a passionate night out until dawn in Paris, the birds were singing, it was love. And it was a disaster, a *total disaster*. Absolute. Awful.' Jacques raised his scissored hand dramatically shaking his head. 'We tried it again of course, but in the end we just had to let it

go, accept it was never going to work. But it was such a shame,' he mused. 'She was perfect in every way, we thought it was love, but the sex, well... the sex was just awful, truly awful. Very bad indeed.' He continued shaking his head.

Lucy shut her magazine. 'How *is* that? How can that be?'

'I don't know. It doesn't make sense.' Jacques continued cutting.

'Did you stay friends?'

'No, not really. She is married now. I hope she is 'appy.'

'I had a similar thing with a guy about ten years ago. I was totally in love with him, completely smitten. But for him, I was just his friend. I thought he was The One, which I now don't believe. I know now he wasn't. Or at least think there's lots of The One, it's all about timing. Anyway...' She watched as Jacques divided her hair into sections and continued cutting, '—when I moved to London from New Zealand, he moved there with me. And —get this— before we left he said *"Don't get excited, but I think I'm coming with you"*. Seriously! He *said* that! Anyway, we got horrendously drunk in a pub in London one rainy summer's afternoon when there was nothing else to do and we stumbled back to his place, got into bed and just kind of rolled into each other and started shagging. And it was truly horrific. Utterly, utterly hideous. We were far, far too drunk for any between the sheets behaviour. So, so wrong... I barely remembered it but I just knew waking up that it was terrible. Kind of grunty, thrusty sex. The worst kind of sex.'

'Oop, 'old still Loo-sie...' Jacques steadied Lucy's head.

'Sorry. Anyway, it totally put me off him, sexually I mean. We did it again, of course. Actually, I stayed in love with him for ages after that; I still thought he was The One.'

'Yes, of course. It doesn't go away quickly.'

'—the sex was terrible again, of course.'

'But of course...'

'—I'm such a fool in love.'

'Aren't we all? Aren't we all fools in love at one time or another? The things we do for love, or at least, what we think is love.'

‘Yes, we do. Strange really.’ Lucy put the *Vogue* on the bench in front of her and opened *No*. ‘I love this mag.’

‘I’m in it.’

‘Really?’

Jacques moved to Lucy’s other side. ‘Oui, I cut one of the girl’s hair. There’s a credit.’

‘Really, what page?’

‘I don’t know. When you get to it I’ll show you.’

‘That’s so cool.’

‘It’s what I do.’ He shrugged.

‘Anyway,’ Lucy sighed and looked up at Jacques through the mirror, ‘what’s with the sexual alchemy thing anyway? I don’t get it. I really don’t. I don’t understand why the perfect fusion, the meeting of two bodies –of two bodies that want the same thing– whose skin fits the other so perfectly, why it happens so rarely. Why is it so random? It’s like some kind of bizarre act of God. It makes me worried that I’ll never get it again, what I had with Willy. It was so utterly amazing, sexually, and I don’t want to let it go, I really don’t. I feel sick just thinking about it.’

‘Yes, that’s a real fear alright. When everything works, when everything fits perfectly, it’s so ‘ard to let it go. You know, you might never get it back,’ he added.

Lucy stared at Jacques. ‘What?’

‘Well you might not. You just might have to settle for average.’

‘Oh, don’t say that, Jacques! That makes it so much worse! I couldn’t go back to *average*. I just couldn’t! Oh God...’ she shook her head. ‘I’ve *had* average and it’s so... so, I dunno, pointless! There’s no point to it whatsoever. Bad sex... no, no, no!’

Jacques laughed. ‘Oui, it’s worse than no sex at all, and I should know.’

‘Isn’t it?’

‘Or is it?’

‘Actually, I don’t know.’ Lucy exhaled. ‘I’ve got a friend who’s kinda backed herself into a corner with her man. She can’t go without all the

extras –and I mean *all* the extras– handcuffs, hot wax, scarves, yunno. She’s into role playing and nothing else works for her anymore, and I mean, nothing. She hates normal sex now. If it’s not under blazing stadium lights being filmed by a three-camera film crew with a live audience of millions, a strap-on submarine and gimp zips hanging from her tits to her toes, she’s just not into it. I’m glad I’m OK with somewhat normal. A little bit of kink, sure, the odd smack, but all the time? No thank you.’ She burst into a smile.

Jacques grinned backed and shook his head in agreement. ‘Yes, that’s a dead end street, definitely. Good place to visit but I wouldn’t want to live there,’ he laughed, as he ran product through Lucy’s fresh cut hair and scrunched up the curls.

‘Yep. Ain’t that the truth.’



Friday night and Bronwyn’s play had been over nearly an hour. Only the cast, crew and a few hangers-on were left. Including Lucy.

The relentless July rains held them captive in a warm, dry huddle, edging closer and closer indoors. The Basement theatre’s tight-lipped barman swiped debit cards, handing over a conveyor belt supply of bottled beer. Some of the cast were taking turns at playing dare devil in the play’s main prop, a wheelchair, with one –a dancer– nearly hightailing off the slippery outside stair’s steep edge.

A tall gaggle of boys came wandering into the dark theatre bar, wet from the rain. The tallest of the group honed his attention on Lucy and Bron, the only women left in the bar.

He looked Bronwyn up and down and smiled. ‘Hey, I know you.’ His grin growing wider. ‘I know you. Don’t I know you?’ He looked. And looked again. ‘Hey! You’re– you’re... aren’t you...? You’re one of the *Go Girls!*’ he exclaimed jiggling on the spot.

Bronwyn grinned. The boy stepped back and rubbed his palms down the side of his trousers.

‘Can I shake your hand?’

'Yes, of course.' Bronwyn placed her hand in his and he gave it a vigorous shake.

'Wow. My sis will be so jealous. She's your biggest fan. Wow. I can't wait to tell her.'

'That's so cool. Thanks. Say hi to your sis from me. What's her name?' Bronwyn replied.

'Courtney. Man. Hey... nah..'. He shook his head and looked to Lucy.

'What?' Bronwyn's face beamed at him.

'Would you want to sign, like, a napkin for me? Or something?'

'Yeah, no worries. Go grab one and sweet as,' Bronwyn nodded. 'I have a pen. All good.'

As he passed his friends to get the napkin, Bronwyn and Lucy heard him say, *'Wow! That's Cody, Cody from Go Girls. Cody! From Go Girls!'*

His mates replied with wows and reallys?

Lucy didn't know how Bron did it. They had talked earlier about Bronwyn's quick rise to celebrity. The kind of small time, localised infamy where she could no longer face Facebook for fear of the daily trickle of interruptions from strangers (*"You're a friend of a friend of mine and I think I met you once"...*). And where people in supermarkets stopped and stared, or followed her round the aisles (*"I have to check myself in case they are looking at me 'cos maybe I have my fly undone."*), and the occasional sneaky photo taken on a phone camera (*"Well, that's just weird!"*).

But she was starting to get used to it. Starting to. She supposed.

'I'm in a band, Fist Full of Dollars,' the tall guy told Lucy later, the pair sitting on the couch, the wow and really-boys forming a scrum around Bronwyn at the centre of the bar. 'We've got a gig at the Kings Arms on July the 11th, you should come.'

'Cool, I love the Kings Arms,' she replied. 'The 11th?' she thumbed through her phone calendar. 'I'll put it in my diary. A Monday? Your gig's on a Monday? Really?'

'No, Wednesday.'

'There's no Wednesday the 11th in July, only 13th.'

'Yeah, there is'

‘No, there’s not,’ said Lucy, waving her iPhone calendar. ‘See?’

The guy tried to grab Lucy’s phone out of her hands and she wrenched it away. ‘Yeah there is, your phone must be wrong.’

‘Nah, your phone’s wrong. How can a phone be wrong?’

‘Well it’s your phone that’s wrong, so you tell me.’ He poked her in the ribs. Lucy grinned at him.

He pulled out his phone and flicked to his calendar and sighed. ‘Oh, well then, I dunno when it is. I thought it was the 11th. Hey Lax,’ he yelled across the room. ‘When’s our gig man?’

‘I dunno bro. July, the middle sometime,’ replied one of the wow and really boys.

‘Thanks man,’ he replied. ‘Well, maybe it’s the 13th.’ He turned back to Lucy. ‘I’ll find out and text you when I know. I’ll put you on the door list. What’s your number?’

‘You get a door list?’ She laughed.

‘No, not really. But I’ll put you on it anyway. I’ll find a list and put you on it.’

‘Cool, sure. I’m a reviewer, I could review it. Or preview it. Do you have a CD, or downloads?’

‘Nah, we’re way to slack for that. We just gig. You’re a reviewer? Really?’

Lucy shrugged.

‘Hey Lax’ he yelled across the room, over Lucy’s head. “*She’s a reviewer*”, he said pointing at Lucy nearly taking her eye out. ‘So what’s your number then? You’ll definitely be on the list. If there is one, that is. Fuck it, I’ll let you through the side door. But you’re definitely coming. Sweet.’

‘There’s a side door?’

‘No, I don’t think so...’

‘OK, so my number is 0-1-2-3-0-3-5-8-5.’

‘What’s your name?’ He ran a finger over the beginnings of a thin moustache.

‘Lucy. Lucy Darling.’

'Lucy. Lucy Darling. I like that.' He smiled, tucking a thick strand of his mid-length brown hair over an ear. 'Darling, really?' He laughed. 'May I call you darling, Darling?'

She hadn't heard *that* before. Lucy rolled her eyes. 'Oh funny ha ha!'

He giggled. 'It's cute: Lucy Darling. Nice. L... then what?' he tapped on his phone keypad, his paddle hands all fingers and thumbs.

'L-u-c-y-D-a-r-l-i-n-g,' she recited.

'Oh yeah.' He laughed. 'Mine's Monkey Boy.'

'Monkey Boy?' She spluttered. 'No shit?'

He curled his lip. 'Yeah, lame aye? But like dog-shit, it stuck. And it stinks.' He scratched the side of his head. 'It's Jamie really, but everyone calls me Monkey Boy, 'cept my mum, she still calls me Jamie. I think I got called it 'cos I was a dick in school; used to climb lots, mostly to show off to girls. Not that they gave a shit, thought I was a dick. Still do. Actually, I dunno. Whatever.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'Anyway, I'll phone you now so you've got my number and then you can save it.'

Lucy's phone rang. 'OK, sure, thanks.' She laughed.

LAX and the wow and really boys were making a move towards the exit. Monkey Boy caught their eye and nodded. He picked up Lucy's hand. 'So, do I get a kiss before I go?' he asked.

'Sure.' Lucy leaned forward and gave Monkey Boy a quick kiss on the cheek.

'Awww...' he frowned. 'Is that it?'

'Yup.' Lucy grinned.

'So will you come to my gig?'

'If you text me I will.'

'Will you review it?'

'Will you let me in the side door?'

At around three a.m. Lucy was startled awake by the beep of an incoming text. It was Monkey Boy. 'We're in town,' it said. 'Where are you? Should I come over?'

Lucy sighed, switched off her phone, rolled over and went back to sleep.



The Salad Man's Raybans sat low on his peaked cap. A flock of lively curls sprung out the back. His quick black eyes smiled, frayed at the edges. 'Flat white, double shot?' he asked, all teeth. 'Have in or take away?'

'Yeah, thanks Salad Man. Have in. Thanks. Just gonna read the paper if that's alright.'

'That's what they're there for, to be read. They're like a tree falling in a forest, if there's no one there to read it did the events really happen?' The Salad Man reached over to the fridge and poured fresh milk into the stainless steel jug. 'And how are you this fine Saturday arvo?'

Lucy sat down opposite the counter at a small neatly varnished rimu table. Outside, the rain had stopped and the cool winter sun was going head to head with an icy wind. Neither was winning and, people were forced inside and out and back in again. She smiled. 'Yeah alright, you, you good?'

'Very fine, thank you for asking.' His snowboarding jacket crackled as he moved.

'Hey, check it out,' said Lucy waving her iPhone. 'I got a bootie call at three a.m. last night from a 19-year-old.'

'19-year-old? High five to you,' The Salad Man grinned. 'And the bonus is you get paid for babysitting. So what's that then, half your age?'

'No!' Lucy exclaimed. 'Not even. Jay-sus! How old do you think I am? No! ...But I didn't take him up on it.'

'And why would that be then?'

'It'd be cruel, too cruel indeed. I couldn't let him wake up with me; it'd ruin the poor boy forever. I'd have had to kick him out at dawn. to spare him the grisly reality.'

The Salad Man sniggered. 'Indeed. Besides, he'd have to get up before then anyway to get to his paper run.'

‘Probably. And his Mum would’ve worried herself sick.’

‘Wouldn’t she though?’

‘And the age gap is not so much a gap as the Grand Canyon. Here’s a tip for ya, Salad Man, and you can keep this: never boff someone technically young enough to be your offspring. Not that I did or anything.’

The Salad Man brought Lucy’s coffee over to her and put it down. ‘No danger of that right about now,’ he laughed, spinning the saucer so the cup handle was on her right. ‘Sugar?’

‘Nah, sweet enough already.’

‘Of course you are.’

‘His name is Monkey Boy,’ Lucy raised an eyebrow as she lifted her cup to her lips.

‘Of course it is.’

‘He’s in a band, the lead singer.’

‘Of course he is.’

‘Hey Salad,’ Lucy looked up from the paper as The Salad Man appeared from outside carrying with him the waft of tobacco. ‘I just got a text from my 19-year-old.’

‘What? The Monkey? Oh yeah, what’s he saying then?’

‘That he and his mates did some drunken marching around Auckland last night and ended up at some “*angsty teen rock bar*” –his words– where all the chicks wore lingerie and the guys sulked.’

‘–Sounds about right.’ The Salad Man snorted.

‘Yeah. Says they called it quits at around four. No mention of the bootie call though.’ She paused. ‘He doesn’t use text language though, thank God.’

The Salad Man lifted off his cap and gave his head a good rub before putting it back on. ‘Oh I hate that; it’s the bastardisation of language. I love language and I hate what texting does to it.’

‘Yeah, same. And my Mum’s the worst, and she’s in her 60s.’

He turned his back to Lucy to wash his hands. ‘What? Your Mum? You don’t say?’ he called over his shoulder.

'She once texted me and I had no frickin idea what she was saying, so I phoned her and she sounded really affronted and said she was in an op shop in Timaru and she'd just found some Crown Lynn and did I want it. How she ever expected me to get that from "*hsdg jflw yst oio jogjto*" I'll ever know.' Lucy laughed. 'She was taught to text by my aunt, her sister, and she's 58.'

'Well, there you go then.'

The Salad Man brought a piece of chocolate biscotti over to Lucy. 'Here, have this. So what happened to the man in the shower? The guy you bought coffee for once?' he asked.

'Aw thanks, you sure Salad?'

'Yeah, trying to sweeten you up.' He cackled. 'Not that you need it.'

'Thanks. As for the other...' Lucy winced, '-raw subject.'

'Too soon?'

'Yeah, he's gone. Got on a plane. I'm totally bitter.'

'We won't go there?'

'No,' she shook her head, 'we definitely won't go there.'

'Hey,' he patted his thighs, 'check out my new jeans: Nudie. I'm gutted though 'cos look,' he gestured down to below the crotch, '-they've gone all loose fitting. Look.' He bent his knees and concertinaed up and down on the spot like a bandy-legged cowboy. Lucy was peering at his crotch just as her friend and Conch regular, Silkie came in.

'You alright, mate?' Silkie asked nodding at The Salad Man and giving Lucy a peck on her cheek. 'What's happening, Luce?'

'Yeah, good thanks. We're just checking out Salad's new jeans. Sit down if you want.' Lucy indicated the seat beside her.

'Nudie,' said Salad, thrusting his crotch forward, bowing his legs and jutting his chin forward.

Silkie took a seat next to Lucy. Salad leapt back around the counter and held up a coffee cup to Silkie by way of a question. Silkie nodded his reply.

'Cool,' Silkie grinned. 'New jeans. Nice. Nudie, you reckon?' Silkie was a filmie, whatever that meant. He wrote, he acted, he directed. Bit of

everything and anything to pay a wage. Lucy'd last seen him in a short film he'd co-scripted from someone else short story. He was a good sort, in a hairy, slightly shiny way.

'Yeah, but they've gone baggy,' continued Salad only his peaked cap in view behind the whirring coffee machine. 'That's just what I was saying to Lucy. Bit fucked off actually.'

'Aren't you always s'posed to buy the pair that feels too tight so when you've walked half a block they fit right?' Lucy raised her voice above the din of the milk steamer.

'I did that,' Salad called back, '—but you shoulda seen the shop guys' faces. They were like: "*Oh God, put it away! Call the fashion police NOW!*". It wasn't so much camel toe as camel *hump!*' he said above the din. 'And I could hardly buy the smaller pair after their look of absolute horror and disgust, could I?'

Lucy snorted. 'Camel toe...? Moose head more like,' she giggled.

The Salad Man turned off the steamer. 'Yeah, and to top it off,' he continued, '—they have this low zip, see, look, like it's flying low.' He came out from behind the counter to show the pair, carrying Silkie's coffee. 'So it'd have been camel hump *and* flying low, and that's just too much, way, way too much. Talk about inventing a new way to encourage eye contact,' he cackled. 'So I've got these and now. And they're baggy. Gutted.' He placed Silkie's coffee on the table. 'Still like them though. They're Nudie.' He grinned, bearing his stained battered teeth.

Silkie and Lucy returned his smile and The Salad Man went back behind his counter.

Silkie stirred three sachets of sugar into his coffee. 'My parents reckoned they used to buy jeans in the '60s or '70s and wear 'em in a bath full of ice to shrink 'em.'

'Nooo,' said Lucy shaking her head. 'That doesn't make sense. Cold to shrink them? Musta been hot, surely?'

Silkie lifted the cup to his lips. 'Well they did. It was cold, definitely cold. I remember they said cold.'

'But don't you shrink jeans by putting them through a really hot wash? Doesn't hot equal shrinkage?' she asked.

'Yeah.' The Salad Man was stooped across the counter top. 'But not always. Cold can equal shrinkage.' He chuckled, winking.

'Seriously, that's what they said they did,' Silkie defended. 'They said it was cold, not hot, cold.'

'I wish I had a bath,' mused The Salad Man.

'Yeah...' replied Silkie. 'Same.'

Lucy folded her Sunday paper. 'We had this thing at a place I worked once, where the more senior the men were the higher their trouser waist lines went,' she added. 'It's like they got the new office, the new business cards and a new measurement for their waistlines all at the same time.'

Silkie cackled. 'I guess it's a good way of knowing who to suck up to at work: "*Oh, I'm not talking to you, your waistline's far too low*".'

'Promotion Pants,' The Salad Man tittered. 'Maybe they were waiting for them when they arrived in their new office, draped over a chair. All part of the package. Package, ha ha,' he coughed as he laughed. 'Package.'

'Yeah,' giggled Lucy. 'Promotion Pants.' Lucy slumped back on the bench seat. Her bum was getting numb. She picked up her phone to check the time. 'Hey, I got Facebooked by this guy yesterday,' said Lucy putting her phone back on the table. 'Friend of a friend who I've only met once at a barbecue or something or other. He asked to be my friend. I thought what the hell, whatever. Anyway, he works in booze and he offered to get me cheap alcohol. Delivered.'

'Peacocking,' said The Salad Man matter-of-factly, wiping the bench and nodding.

'Yep,' nodded Silkie, wearing a hint of a frothy coffee moustache.

'What... peacocking?' asked Lucy.

The Salad Man nodded. 'Yeah,' he said. 'He's displaying his plumage, showing you what he's got, that he's into you and he'll bring you gifts. Show you how he can be manly and provide for you. Peacocking.'

'Peacocking,' echoed Silkie, nodding.

Lucy grabbed her black beret from her bag and put it on. 'What... is that like a thing, or something?' she asked.

Salad wiped the bench in front of him. 'Not so much a thing, but that's what he's doing. Peacocking.'

'Yep, it's The Peacock Factor,' added Silkie matter-of-factly. 'You can rate it out of ten. 'Cos it was via email it's not very highly rated. If he'd got your address and actually *sent* you the booze, then that'd be a much higher Peacock Factor.'

'Yeah, higher,' parroted The Salad Man.

'Huh. I did not know that. Huh. The Peacock Factor.' Lucy nodded, her face frowning. 'So, I can't rate this very highly then, on the scale I mean. It's pretty low on The Peacock Factor. Can't fancy me much, then?'

Silkie leaned up against the wall and turned to face Lucy. His eyes were kind and he had smudges of dark brown on the creases at the side of his mouth. 'Yeah, nah. 'Bout a three or a four I reckon,' he grinned. 'See what happens next. He's playing his cards at the moment, I'd say. Men are scared of women these days, scared of rejection. He might not be ready for the full display in case he feels like a dick. I'm going outside for a fag. Coming?' he added, turning back to pick up his satchel.

'Yep.' Lucy followed Silkie, and The Salad Man joined them soon after. 'So if I get into work tomorrow,' Lucy continued as they sat outside, '—and there's a bottle of Clicquot on my desk —a *boxed* bottle of Clicquot — then that's a ten?'

Silkie shook his head. His beanie fell into his eyes. 'Yeah, nah, 'bout an eight or nine. Eight. Or seven I reckon. Ten's all in, the whole enchilada. You can expect a ferry ride to Waiheke with a ten. A trip to a vineyard at least. All expenses paid, all in.'

'Yep, all in for a ten for sure,' nodded Salad as he stirred sugar into his coffee.

Silkie went about tender task of rolling a cigarette. Lucy noticed a fleck of herbal in the mix. 'But it won't happen,' he added as he licked the paper. 'If it was gonna happen,' he licked, 'it would have happened by now. Nah, his next move will be a way to pass the booze to you, actually *to* you in person, a way to see you, casual like. Like you're going

to the same place and he'll just happen to be there too and by-the-way "*here's a bottle of 42 Below*".'

'Peacocking,' repeated Salad, cross-eyed, lighting his own tailor-made cigarette.

Lucy sniffed. 'Huh. I did not know that,' she replied. 'Well, I'll keep ya posted.'



Lucy's home phone ruptured the air with its shrill rhythmic repetition. It rang on and on. Finally, Lucy picked it up. 'Hello?' *What was the time?*

It kept ringing.

Lucy fell back in panic. Her heart whumped. The stars in her bedroom stung the back of her eyes and the blue trees moaned.

'Hello? Hello? Who's there?' Her voice was muffled and her legs couldn't move.

The path became a river and Lucy leaned over with her nylon fishing line and caught a fish as she leaned over the rocks between the kids, but she couldn't gut it so looked away as the skinny grey guy turned it into sushi. As he walked away, the moon turned into Beyoncé who started freestyle rapping with Angel Haze at Whammy Bar...

Lucy forced open her eyes.

It was still dark.

The phone beside her bed was ringing. Its violent bleating reverberated throughout the room liked a squalling a flock of bats.

Lucy picked up the phone; it was cold in her hand. 'Hello?'

'Luce, it's me, Cat. Sorry to phone you so late, but have you been on Facebook tonight?'

Lucy shivered. 'What? Facebook? Tonight? Cat, what time is it?'

'I'm so sorry doll, it's really late, but Big Al's here and we were worried about you. He told me the news.'

'Huh? The news?' Lucy rubbed her eyes and picked up her mobile phone. She squinted to look at its tiny digital clock: 02.44 a.m. Fuck. 'What news?'

Belinda Nash

Sweet Nothing

‘Luce, Will got married.’

Chapter Eleven

Lucy felt the bile rise in her throat. *Will, married?*

She blinked her eyes open. ‘What? Will’s married? But... How...?’

‘Yeah Luce, it’s true. I’m so sorry. But yes, it seems that he’s married. Well, insofar as Facebook is the bearer of truth, it’s true. You OK?’ Cat asked. ‘What am I saying? Of course you’re not OK. Put some clothes on darling, we’re coming over.’

‘No.’ Lucy sat up out of bed and rubbed her face. ‘No, no,’ she croaked. ‘I’ll come to you. Yeah... I’ll come to you. You’ve got booze, right?’

‘Yes of course, of course darling. Only the good stuff,’ Cat replied. ‘Darling, you know that’s all I’m good for.’ She paused. ‘Luce, I’m so sorry, you don’t deserve this.’

Lucy leaned all her weight onto the cold porcelain basin and stared up at herself in the mirror. Her shoulders were slumped and the creases in her brows furrowed together. The person looking back at her was pale and small, the oversized t-shirt making her pitiable. Her green eyes stared with each small, shallow breath.

Married? Will's married?

Oh God...

Lucy ran to the toilet and lifted the lid just in time to vomit into the bowl.

Big Al opened the door and Cat lunged forward at her friend.

‘Oh darling. *Darling!*’ she gushed and clenched Lucy into a hug mopping her tears on a shoulder of her brown cashmere cardigan. ‘Did you log on?’

‘No... no,’ Lucy snuffled, hiccupping.

‘Oh darling, you shouldn’t, he’s a rogue.’ Cat tucked a piece of hair behind Lucy’s ear then picked up her hands. She looked at her friend.

Lucy’s eyes searched Cat’s for an answer. ‘I can’t believe it, Cat.’ Her tiny voice trembled. ‘I just can’t believe it. I feel sick.’

Cat frowned. ‘We always knew he was no good, no good for our Lucy. Come on darling, let’s get you that drink.’ She clutched Lucy’s hand and led her to the stairs.

Big Al gently rubbed Lucy’s back as the funereal march proceeded upwards.

Lucy’s eyes brimmed with tears. Big Al passed her a Glenfiddich single malt. She clasped it with both hands, taking the occasional timid sip. ‘Cat...?’

‘I know,’ Cat shook her head. ‘How did we not know?’

‘So, what happened? What *do* we know?’ Lucy put her whiskey down and gnawed at a thumb nail.

‘Big Al saw it... on Facebook. Tonight.’

Lucy and Cat looked across to Big Al. He wiped away a tusock of black hair with his wide, workman hands. He was perched on the edge

of the black leather chaise, his weathered face draped in an uneasy gait. His lumberjack limbs were poured into Cat's over-sized white fluffy robe, which pulled tight across his body, and his hairy legs poked out wearing white fluffy socks.

He looked like a giant marshmallow.

Big Al scratched his nose and took a sip of his whiskey. 'I was on my way over in a taxi and was checking out Facebook on my iPad,' he began. 'And Will's relationship status had changed to married. From single to married. It didn't seem like Willy, I mean, it's *Willy*... so I took a gander at his profile and there's a whole lot of pictures posted of him, in Vegas, holding hands with a blonde chick dressed in white, and, well...' He stopped.

Lucy put her head into her hands. Her shoulders heaved and shuddered as she let out a slow quiet moan. Cat fell into her friend and rocked her slowly.

'That fucken *cunt!* Vegas?' Lucy wailed. 'Married? Married for fuck's sake? How can Will be *married* for fuck's fucken sake?' She shook herself away from Cat. Snot ran into her mouth. 'And in *Vegas*? Oh God Cat, it's happened,' she looked at her friend. 'It's official Cat, I am a cliché.'

Lucy's woke from a dream where she had been gulping can after can of Fanta but couldn't quench her unending thirst. She reached across in the dark for her glass of water and poured it into her throat. Her eyes were sticky and swollen.

Will's married.

Fuck.

Sometime around two in the afternoon. Lucy was woken by the beep of an incoming text from Cat: 'Oh honey, I've seen *Sunday* mag. You OK? In yer face or what? Call me if you need to. I love you xx'

The *Sunday Star-Times* magazine. *No. Oh God, no. Not today, of all days. Please not today.*

Lucy staggered out of bed. She half reached and half fell onto her bathrobe which hung off a hook in the open wardrobe in front of her.

She wrestled to get her Ugg boots on, settling for wearing just the one, and limped to the bathroom to pee.

Her head was groggy. She felt two sharp needle-points of pain at the back of her skull. The abruptness of her movements had caused her heart to race. Dappled sweat rose to the surface of her ruddy hot skin.

Please no. Not today. Of all days.

Lucy slunk out the side door, out through her bedroom. Still wearing only one Ugg boot, she walked across the slippery wooden deck past Billy and Captain Pants' pad, through the carport to her letterbox. A gust of wind swept up inside her bathrobe. Her jaw chattered, the sound reverberating in her skull.

The *Sunday Star-Times* lay sheathed in a plastic bag protected from rain and snails. Lucy swooped on the paper, tucking it under an arm, and hobbled back inside just before catching the eyes of a worthy couple pacing in matching Nike training outfits up her narrow street. She caught her reflection in Billy and Captain Pants' wide downstairs window. Her hair rain wild over her head, one side crushed flat, the other flying north for the winter. Her eyes were two tiny currants pressed into the dough of flesh that had replaced her face.

Back inside, Lucy ripped open the paper's plastic casing, and opened the broadsheet so the inserts could drop to the floor. She fell to her knees and picked off the colourful, glossy *Sunday* magazine and sat down on the edge of her unmade bed to read.

She turned it over. And there he was. On the front cover: Will staring at her, long, slender fingers folded with robotic precision around an old fashioned movie camera. His eyes chuckled. His lips curled up at the edges into a steadfast pout, his Cupid's bow defined by a sharp shadow. He looked pompous, satiated, intangible. Married.

Fucking married Mr. Willy-Won't-He on the fucking front cover of her fucking *Sunday* magazine. On *her* precious fucken Sunday.

Fuck!

Lucy's hand trembled as she turned to page 14. The feature.

It was a rave; a fucken wind-up: ‘*Hottest new Kiwi cinematographer in the frame*’, ‘*full of dark, mischievous surprises*’, ‘*Hollywood’s latest marked man*’, ‘*a filmmaking star*’, ‘*best black comedy of the decade*’, ‘*low budget opus poised for Academy success*’.

Just then, Lucy received another text from Cat: ‘Sweets, anything I can do?’

‘Sucks,’ she thumbed back. ‘Thank God for wine, hun, ’cos it’s all I’ve got.’

‘Enjoy the love of the bruised grape. I’ll knock later. xx’

Lucy moved upstairs where she dozed on the couch. She woke later to the sound of banging on her front door and a parched throat. Her eyes were gloopy. She lolled from her stupor, wiped her mouth, rolled off the couch and thumped down the stairs.

It was Cat. She threw herself at Lucy and flanked her with a hearty embrace. ‘I’ve come to take you to cheer-you-up-drinks. Big Al’s idea.’

‘Nooo...’ Lucy frowned, shaking her head. ‘No way.’

‘Yes way.’

‘I can’t,’ Lucy wiped a hand down her face. ‘I mean look at me Cat. I’m a wreck. Cat... he’s *married*!’

‘Yes, honey I know, I know he is. And he’s a fucken idiot worth no more of your time. Not one bit of it. And yes, you can. Of course you can. You’re like an old car, you run on the smell of an alcohol soaked rag. I wouldn’t be doing my duty not taking you. You’ll start to fizzle out.’ Cat pulled her fulsome lips down into a trout-pout. ‘Come on Luce,’ she whined, ‘—come out and play at cheer-you-up-drinks, or I’ll be weally, weally sad. There’ll be boys!’

‘Yay boys,’ Lucy deadpanned. ‘Cat... he’s *married*...’

‘Lucy, no!’ Cat put her hand up. ‘No more Will. None of it. I love you, Lucy, but no more talk of him.’

‘Will T be there? He’s the King of cheer up.’

Cat smirked. ‘Isn’t he though? But no, sadly, he’s away. Some fancy shindig overseas. He’s such a fucken star these days, I only follow him on Twitter like everyone else.’

‘What, no daily phone calls?’

Cat sighed. ‘No, none. A couple of airport and hotel texts, but otherwise nada. See, now I’m sad.’ Cat frowned. ‘You have to take *me* out to cheer-me-up drinks now.’

Despite herself, Lucy face flicked into a smile. She rubbed her hands through her hair and shook her head. ‘But oh God, not the Gypo,’ she squawked. ‘I won’t go to the Gypo.’

‘No, no, fuck that. Mondial in Grey Lynn. ‘Big Al knows the owner, so dastardly incorrigible rogues are most definitely not welcome. The owner’s always perched at the end of the bar so would happily ban any such fellows.’

‘It’s OK. I don’t suppose such rogues are back from their honeymoon anyway.’ Lucy’s stomach clenched. Saying it out loud –*honeymoon*– suddenly made it real.

‘I s’pose not...’

‘And is there anyone Big Al doesn’t know?’ Lucy smiled.

‘Ha! Probably not. He’s what you call “connected”.’ Cat grinned as she gestured the word. ‘And what the *fuck* was up with that article today in *Sunday*?’ she changed the subject. ‘Or are we not talking about that yet?’

Lucy’s face dropped. ‘We’re not talking about that. We’re *so* not talking about that. You were right the first time, no more Will. Actually, I burnt the fucker. I burnt my *Sunday* mag. Took great pleasure in it. Set the smoke alarm off and now my house smells of burnt hyperbole. But totally worth it.’ Lucy smiled, then sighed. ‘What the fuck *was* that anyway? Was the journalist *sleeping* with him or what? She sure as fuck wanted to. Grosse. It was positively naive with sycophantism. How in God’s name did the subs let that one ooze past them? I mean, really?’

‘In God’s name indeed. He’s a Kiwi-boy-done-good don’t ya know. The media can claim him as their own now, their own little undiscovered film boy, like he hasn’t been doing this forever. But don’t you worry, the mighty Kiwi Tall Poppy machine will kick in soon enough...’

Lucy laughed.

‘—one foot wrong and the media fraternity will club together, cut him down and slash him to pieces when the Oscar slips through those spindly little claws. But,’ Cat clapped her hands, ‘—we’re *not* talking about him. And Mondial’s full of hot young things so time to cast your net elsewhere my darling girl.’ Cat saw Lucy’s eyes twitch. ‘Oh darling, too soon? Yes, too soon.’ Cat shook her head. ‘Look, you go and pile on some slap and I’ll be back in five. Or ten. You might need ten. Actually sweets —and no offence— but go jump in the shower, we’ve got time.’

‘OK, whatever, sure.’ Lucy turned back inside her house, rubbing her face and patting her greasy, frazzled hair as she went.

When the girls arrived at Mondial, Big Al was already there, surrounded by blokes. Nice one. He knew when it was time to gather the troops, to rally the neighbourhood men folk. Their small square table clinked and chattered with bottles as he leapt up to hug Lucy. ‘Hey chicken. Looking foxy as ever,’ he said. ‘Wine?’

‘Yep. Wine not?’ Lucy managed a weak smile and sat down beside him.

He laughed and squeezed her shoulder. ‘At least you’ve got your sense of humour.’ He leaned into her and held her still.

Lucy sighed into him. ‘Yep, like me, it’s hanging on.’

As their group grew, tables melded together. Cat manoeuvred bar side to chat up some tall young blond thing, young enough to be tucked up in bed at this hour of a Sunday eve. Surely he has school tomorrow? Cat rested a long fine hand on young boy’s wrist. A familiar gesture, one not slipping Big Al’s notice.

A film mate of Big Al’s, Gazza, son-of-someone-famous, gripped his wine glass which he had placed on a neighbouring table. His body was turned to face Lucy and Big Al’s motley crew.

Lush with tippie, Lucy gleefully mocked him. ‘What, our table’s not good enough for your wine, Gazza?’

‘What? Oh yeah. Nah.’ Only half his faced smiled.

She wagged a finger at his wine glass. 'So what's that all about? What's with the reaching afar to take each sip?' she teased. 'It's a bizarrely territorial thing to do.'

Gazza looked at his wine glass then across to Lucy's table. 'Yeah, I do have a wide reach on, don't I? I dunno, I just feel like I am part of two groups and, well, yeah dunno. Can't commit.'

Gazza's wine stayed put, drained and refilled, and on the other table.

Lucy heard later from a mutual friend that Gazza had a long-term on-again-off-again girlfriend, Maz (yes, Maz and Gazza), to whom he couldn't commit. Figures, she thought. In their second year of dating, when they were on again, Maz got pregnant. They got rid of it. In their seventh year, when they were on again, Maz got pregnant again. She wanted to keep it and Gazza didn't want to know. So they became off again.

Maz moved to Sydney and hasn't been back since.

Apparently the one-year-old boy is now a 'monster child'. Bad genes?

As evening became night and tapas and much more wine was consumed, breath became garlicky, and the conversation turned the way of well-oiled conversation everywhere: to sex.

Lucy popped a squid ring in her mouth and washed it down with a gulp of wine. 'So bush or no bush?' she leaned into Big Al and new introduction, Ginga Boy. He was fidgety, with a laugh like a hyena. 'Cos mine's barely there and it costs a fortune in lawn mowing so I wanna know if it's all worth it? Do you chaps even notice?' She took a sip of wine and twinkled over the glass. 'Down there, I mean?'

'What? A landing strip?' Ginga Boy asked, his eyes wide.

Lucy winked her reply.

'Oh, we notice alright,' he stared at her, slurring his words, '—but if I get that far I'm just ecstatic I got that far. Yunno?'

They laughed.

Ginga Boy inhaled a risotto ball. 'Truly though,' he said churning the food and the words round his mouth, '—I love pussy and if a lady wants me to see hers, it can be baboon-esque or 12-year-old bald —well, not

actual 12-year-old— and it's all good by me. It's *all* good my friends.' His eyes flared and he bared his teeth like a rabid dog.

Lucy couldn't help but admire the man's lustful hunger.

'Actually,' he continued, '—do you know that a baboon's red bits swell when it's on heat? I s'pose on that basis they must be very visual critters, all that swelling you'd want the men-baboons to notice or it's just a waste of a whole lot of blood flow. Same with women: their lips swell and grow pink when they orgasm, both sets of lips.' He winked. 'That's why you lot wear lipstick.' Ginga Boy nodded at Lucy.

'Speaking of visual,' threw in Big Al, his shoulder nudging into Lucy, '—I was once with a Sicilian princess when I lived in the UK. She was beautiful, *so beautiful*,' he reminisced. 'But good *Lord* did she have it going on downstairs. The full fucken crop. Baboon-esque *and* some. It started at about her belly button with a thicket growing all the way down to major muff coverage, then continued half way up her back. Half way up her back! Can you imagine? *And* it spread down around to her mid thighs like knitted bike shorts. And sat out about here,' he gestured an inch away from his body. 'Oh, but she was beautiful, so beautiful,' he sighed and sank into his chair. 'I melted just looking at her.'

Lucy spluttered with laughter. 'Oh! My! *God!*' she snorted. 'So how *was* that?'

Ginga Boy sniggered. 'Could you even *breathe* down there?'

'Yeah, circular breathing, like playing a didgeridoo,' Big Al laughed. 'But I somehow always forgot about it, like I got muff amnesia. Muffnesia.'

'Good name for a band that,' Ginga Boy snorted. 'Muffnesia, Muffnesia.' He repeated the words, feeling them roll around his mouth. 'Muffnesia...'

'Yeah, I'd look at her over dinner and think: "*God, you're beautiful*", then we'd get home and there it was, staring at me, in all it's '70s porn star glory, egging me on.' Big Al gave a big hearty laugh. 'I think it had its own personality. I reckon if I lay there for long enough it probably would've talked to me. She even had little sideburns on her face. And dark, furry tendrils growing from her underarms, like Rapunzel's hair.'

Oh yeah, and she smelt, I forgot about that.' Big Al scratched his nose. 'Funny how I forgot about that,' he added. 'Quite rank really. Made me horny at the time though, all those pheromones or whatever girls have, but it's kind of gross thinking about it now.'

Lucy rested her hands on her aching stomach, still laughing. 'Now? Gross thinking about it *now*? Oh my God, I can hardly bear it.'

She'd needed to laugh.

The conversation was a keeper. Big Al poured a generous round of wine. Lucy took a swig. 'So do you boys manscape?'

Ginga Boy's eyes bulged, his pale orange eyelashes luminescent in the dim light. 'What? Trim our pubes?' he asked.

Lucy grinned. 'Yep,' she nodded. 'Trim your pubes.'

Ginga Boy shook his head, sweeping from side to side. 'I shaved once; they reckon it makes your cock look big. But nah, don't trim.'

'So did it?' Lucy asked.

'What?'

'Make your cock look big?' she asked.

Big Al smirked and poured the group more wine.

'Yeah, kind of,' he nodded, jutting his chin out. 'But a mate of mine cut his balls once doing it and man did they bleed, all day he reckons, all frickin day. Imagine that? So, it put me right off. So, it was just a oncer for me. I trim the hedge though, keep it neat.'

'Yeah, I trim,' Big Al nodded, sipping his wine and chewing the last squid ring. 'Man's gotta keep it nice down there in case of visitors.'

Lucy drained her wine glass. 'What about blow jobs?' she asked. 'Is it true that any blow job is a good blow job?'

'Hell *no*!' Big Al slapped the table causing the glasses to rattle. 'Not for me. Once I lay back and actually thought "*Please let this be over soon*".'

'Really?' Lucy asked. 'You thought that? I am surprised. Well, that blows a myth, pardon the pun.'

Big Al grinned. 'Yep, really.' As he looked at Lucy he had the urge to grab one of her curls and ping it.

‘See, I have to disagree there,’ threw in Ginga Boy. ‘I come from the any-blow-job-is-a-good-blow-job camp. As soon as someone’s lips get around the Little Ginga Boy then I am a happy camper. A very happy camper indeed.’ His eyes beamed. ‘Oh, and if its balls in the mouth then *bingo!*’ He lifted off out of his chair. ‘Then I am officially in heaven. Dirty, dirty heaven. It’s all good my brother,’ he nodded rocking back and forth.

Lucy wiped her mouth with a napkin. ‘Oh, I love that, balls in the mouth,’ she said. ‘They just squish around there like gobstoppers wrapped in marshmallow. Fan-*bloody*-tastic. Love it. You boys ever done it?’

‘What? Balls in the mouth?’ asked Big Al. ‘We’re not gay, Lucy.’

‘Oh come on, you were there in the ’90s. It was all about the threesomes. I was there. I *know*.’

‘Threesomes with *girls*,’ Big Al emphasised. ‘Girls, not boys. Girl threesomes, Luce, not boys.’

‘Oh come on! Don’t go all homophobe on me. I had threesomes with just boys and it was all on, baby. All on, they were all over each other. I could just about leave the room and make a snack and come back and they wouldn’t notice.’ Lucy snorted. ‘There were arms and legs flying everywhere. It was a bloody limb-fest. Actually,’ she paused. ‘—that’s mostly what I remember, a whole lot of arms and legs. I never thought about that beforehand, I mean, why would you? But limbs kind of dominate in a threesome. There are so *many* of them. You’d think it was be all about the bits. But proportionately, there are a lot more limbs than bits in a threesome.’

Ginga Boy cackled and stuffed an olive in his mouth. ‘Yeah, right. Oh, I’ve sucked cock, for sure,’ he said.

‘You have?’ squawked Big Al.

‘Yeah, sure, course. But balls, nah, sucking balls *is* gay.’

Big Al nodded. ‘Totally, that’s actually gay. Nothing wrong with gay it’s just I’m not. Gay, I mean. I’m not gay.’

Lucy brushed the pair of with a wave. ‘Pah! You boys haven’t lived. My tip is get ye to Les Mills and wrap your laughing gear around some

hot guy's ball sacks and just close your eyes and enjoy the sensation,' she grinned. 'Oh, but, tip from me: do it *after* he's showered!'

Ginga Boy stared at Lucy as if she was dipped in chocolate. 'What about you, Luce? You eaten pussy?'

Lucy wrapped both her hands around her glass and peered at him over the rim as she sipped. 'Yeah, sure, 'course...' her eyes narrowed as she smiled. 'Of course.'

Big Al took a swig of wine and waved at the bar man for another bottle. He grinned.

'Yeah?' Ginga Boy shifted in his seat and nudged closer to Lucy. 'Some have extra flaps you know,' he mused, '—but you can tuck them back in.'

Lucy nearly choked on a piece of bread.

'Yeah, still like them though,' Ginga Boy grinned. He had parsley stuck in his teeth.

Lucy laughed. 'Well you guys are not always so picturesque yourselves. I've seen anything from Shar-Peis to shiny helmet heads. I've heard of some who are as wide as they are long. Choads.' She snorted, 'And I had a noodle once too.'

'A noodle?' Big Al laughed.

'Yeah, almost a shoelace,' she giggled more loudly. 'Totally, frickin ridiculous.'

'How *was* that?' asked Big Al as he poured the new bottle of wine. 'For you, I mean?'

'Oh you know,' she grinned, '—kegals... I clenched.'

'Well, I'm most definitely straight, 'cos to me pussy's all beautiful,' added Ginga Boy. 'Definitely beautiful.' He nodded towards Lucy. 'And like I said, if a lovely lady lets me see hers, then it's all good by me. It's always an honour to be up close and personal to God's paradise.' He concluded with a hearty slug of his wine.

By 9.30 p.m., Mondial was heaving. People squeezed past one another and jostled for a patch to stand or sit. The bar staff had cranked into top

gear and tapas travelled around the room at lightning speed, leaving in their wake the heady smell of garlic and rich olive oil.

Conversation crescendoed in waves all around them. Lucy saw that Cat had disappeared, probably to the loo, and the tall gangly blonde was standing on his own. He looked bored. Or lost. Or ready for bed.

‘I once got with this girl and she actually sprayed when she came,’ Big Al added after a pause. ‘Not just a squirt that lots of girls do, but a full-on spray; it shot out like a water pistol. Like one of those pump action all bells-and-whistles ones from The Warehouse. Hit my face.’

Lucy shrieked. ‘Sprayed? She actually sprayed when she came? No *waaaay!* Actually, I saw that on *Sex and the City* once,’ she sniggered. ‘Men are goopy but I am yet to stumble upon a super-soaker. Actually, I’m discovering through this conversation that I’m deeply ordinary in the downstairs department, and that being ordinary’s actually no bad thing.’

Big Al smiled. ‘*And* she had multiple orgasms too, not just the one; I was soaked by the end of it. Yep, a super-soaker, she was a super-soaker alright.’

‘Show off,’ said Ginga Boy.

Big Al leaned back against the wall. ‘So not switching teams, Luce?’

‘Nah. I like women and am never one to say no to an opportunity,’ she winked, ‘—but I’m definitely a man fan. Besides I’ve got two small but perfectly formed gay brothers living in Brighton, and two’s enough in one family, let me tell you.’

‘In Brighton? UK, yeah?’ asked Big Al.

‘Yeah, not New Brighton, Christchurch. Probs couldn’t get two more opposite places.’

‘Both of them are gay?’ Ginga Boy asked.

‘Yeah, twins, identical. Both gay, screaming queens, and both living in Brighton, go figure: the Terrible Two. They’re bitching it up in the gay capital of Europe. They’ve been there six years now. Not sure we’ll ever see them back, actually. I mean, why would ya? Come back, I mean. Frankly, they’re far too confident for their own good, my bros.’

Lucy stopped, caught in a web of thought. Kit and Bobby had always had each other, egging each other on, supporting each other, she thought with a sigh. Together they could do no wrong.

She continued, 'They even slept cuddled up together 'til they were about five and discovered it was a kinda weird thing to do, once they hit school. They had separate beds, of course, but Mum always found them cuddled together in the morning in the same bed. So cute.' Lucy took a sip of wine. She watched as the red wine legs dripped down the inside of the glass.

When her sister, Jane, had died aged four months old of cot death her mother, to no one's surprise, ached for more children. Lucy was three-and-a-half at the time and everyone expected her to be in the firing line for more love and affection. Instead her mother busied herself in her garden, cooking, the local Meals on Wheels, doing the house up – anything– until Charles and Robert came along, known since they were born as Kit and Bobby.

Lucy always felt that just by being there she was somehow tainted with her sister's premature death. That she reminded her mother of death.

And that she knew her mother's secret.

But Lucy had been little more than a baby. All she craved was cuddles and a book at bedtime. Her father was left to look after Lucy, when he had time.

Lucy continued, 'Bobby, the younger one by half an hour, started to wet his bed after that. I think he missed the cuddles more than Kit. But yeah, they're total bitches now. I love to hate them, hate to love them. Yunno. Usual. I'm jealous of their love for each other though, their unconditional love, and of how much they believe in themselves and each other.' She stopped and looked at her glass. The legs had stopped.

'I lived in Brighty in Old Blighty for a bit,' added Ginga Boy. 'Around 2008, 2009.'

Lucy was snapped out of her melee. 'Ah, then you'd have been there when they were. But you'd have run in different crowds most likely. They're Kemptown lads. All clubbing, coke and pills. Mum'd freak if she

knew even the half of it. We're like yin and the two yangs me and my bros. They're salt 'n' pepper shakers, and I'm the vinegar jug. As for me turning gay –not that you *turn* gay, you are or you aren't– mum'd have a right spazz if she thought all hopes of her ever becoming a grandmother were dashed. My little bros would have to come down from their high before they bred, and find a willing donor, and that's not likely anytime this millennium.'

The boys laughed.

'Mind you,' Lucy added, 'there'd be great perks to being in a hot lesbian relationship. One, you'd actually be listened to. And two, you'd have twice the wardrobe.' She laughed. 'I had two girl friends once, a couple, and they gave each other the hottest lingerie for Christmas, suspenders and sexy bras, then dressed up for each other. Now that's not half bad. It'd be kinda hot.'

'No arguments here,' replied Ginga Boy licking his lips.

Lucy returned from the toilet. It was nearly half past ten and she felt a little queasy. She sat back down and knocked back a glass of water. The boys were talking about who wants it more: men or women.

'I reckon the media ought to be shot for the amount of myths it spreads about men's versus women's libido,' Lucy threw in, tummy gurgling. 'I reckon it becomes a self-perpetuating story. If women reckon it's OK not to feel like sexy time, that it's perfectly normal, then it could be reason enough to stop altogether. I reckon it's like anything, you've got to dip your toe in every now and again, test the waters, and you'd be surprised how much you enjoy it. My parents are in their 60s and they're still at it. Kit walked in on them once. *Oral* sex!'

'Baha, that's hilarious! Parents doing oral. That's something you wouldn't forget in a hurry.' Big Al laughed.

'Really, it's just like having a cold swim, like in Lake Taupo at Easter or something,' said Ginga Boy. 'Just do it and you'll probably feel better afterwards, that's if the shock doesn't kill ya.'

'Yeah, maybe. I guess. Sometimes I don't feel like masturbating but then I think, what the hell, and do it anyway. And it's always good even if I thought I wasn't in the mood.'

Big Al nodded. 'Yeah.'

'Actually, one of my colleagues reckons he's always up for it,' added Lucy. 'He even had the 'flu recently –*and* a chest infection– and was still up for it. He reckons he could perform on cue. He should have been a porn star, not a graphic designer.'

'Yeah...' Ginga Boy nodded.

'I mean, I'm an enthusiastic sort of gal, pretty much game on at any whistle, but, really!'

'Oh yeah, don't be fooled,' added Al, 'just 'cos a man's sick doesn't mean he's not up for it. He's a man; he's *always* up for it.'

Gazza, who had been out of the conversation until now caught the last of Big Al's sentence. He leaned in, breathing into Lucy's face. She sat backwards. 'So Lucy, tell me, why do women fake orgasms?' he paused. 'Because they think men care.' Gazza rolled his head back and cackled. 'See, the way I see it,' he continued, '–men use love to get sex and women use sex to get love. It's the fundamental difference between men and women. It's a lose-lose situation. Mind you, men still get the sex.'

Ginga Boy joined in. 'Yeah, just before sex, just before you're about to put it in is the worst time to be asked "*Do you love me?*". A man'll say anything at that point. *Anything*. Hell, ask him if he'll buy you a Lamborghini and a beachfront bach *and* book rocket to the moon and he'll say yes. It all comes tumbling down once the deed is done, of course.'

'You boys are hideous!' Lucy snapped. 'Really? You really think that? It's so... so frat boy movie. You can't really believe all that crap, can you?'

'Well, I'm just in it for the sex,' Gazza leaned across towards Lucy, exhaling red wine fumes. 'That's the only reason I talk to girls. I've been in love before and it's not what it's cracked up to be. The sex stops for one thing.'

'No, it does not,' Lucy scowled. 'Maybe you're just shit in the sack, Gazza.'

Big Al and Ginga Boy laughed. The smile fell from Gazza's face. He took a sip of wine and returned the glass to the neighbouring table.

'Had no complaints so far,' he snivelled. Then turned away.

Lucy turned to Big Al and Ginga Boy.

'You don't really believe all that bravado crap do you?'

The pair shifted in their seats and looked at each other.

'Well...' replied Big Al, 'Gazza has a point. The love-sex thing, however badly he told it, well it's kinda not too far off the mark. Sometimes you can smell the desperation on women.'

'Says you!' Lucy exclaimed. 'Do you have any idea just how pathetic a horny man in a bar is? Or worse still, a cluster of horny men lined up against the walls all wearing their ridiculous matching jeans-and-a-nice-shirt combo? How their collective glazed-over, mono-focussed eyes reveal a pathetically shallow cave man wanting to make cosy with his cave bitch? Try being a single female and going to the Ponsonby clubs on a Saturday night. It's like being fresh kill being watched by vultures. It's positively feral.' Lucy drained her wine. She gestured to Ginga Boy for a top up. 'Bars like that are just wall-to-wall desperados. Do you think any woman with half a brain would want to have *sex* with them much less fall in love with them? You boys are delusional. Either that, or you've seen far too many rom-coms and believe what happens in the last five minutes.'

The bar was starting to empty out. Ginga Boy refilled Lucy's glass, splattering droplets of wine on the table and wiping them away with his sleeve. He and Big Al fell silent, looking at each other.

'Sorry. It's been a bad day,' said Lucy. 'But my point remains. You're not all that, you men. You still have a lot to learn too. So don't be starting on the relationship blame-game. Just saying.'

'Point taken, Luce,' nodded Big Al.

'Yep,' agreed Ginga Boy. 'And here was I thinking sex was the last taboo topic, when really, talking about love is,' he laughed a little. 'And on taboo, either of you tried the back door?' he ventured.

‘From love to anal sex? Christ! We must be drunk,’ Lucy laughed. ‘We’re actually having this conversation? Well, I can tell you that I haven’t. Pretty much everything else –well sort of– but not that. I think I am actually the last person who hasn’t.’

Big Al propped his elbows on the table. His eyes had become hazy with each successive glass of wine. He looked as knackered as Lucy felt. ‘Yeah, I have no problem with it as a concept.’ His words slurred. ‘Not morally, that is, but it’s not for me. It’s not in my bag of tricks.’ He paused. ‘But yeah, I’ve done it but not for me. There’s plenty else to do beside that. Yeah... nah, not for me.’

Lucy’s head got caught in someone’s elbow. ‘*Careful!*’ she scowled in their direction as they left out the front door, leaving behind them a draft of cold air. ‘Yeah, I have no issue with it as a concept, either,’ she continued. ‘It’s kind of suburban really. Everyone’s at it, for sure. I mean, why the hell not?’ she added.

The boys nodded.

‘But I guess for me it just hasn’t happened yet.’ She smiled. ‘I clench.’

They all laughed.

Ginga Boy ran his fingers slowly up and down his wine glass stem. ‘I’ve done it a coupla times but really it’s not for me either. My little sister’s an anal sex fiend. She’s crazy about it. Actually, she’s crazy full stop.’

‘Oh my God! Your sister?’ Lucy burst out laughing. ‘And you know this, how?’

‘She’d be popular.’ Big Al grinned.

‘*And* she’s only 20,’ Ginga Boy added.

Lucy took a slug of wine. ‘Only 20? Yikes. Willy wanted to go there. He was all about getting an Access All Areas pass. But I reckon that’s something you save for the one you love.’

The men nodded.

‘It’s a love thing alright,’ agreed Big Al. ‘As Prince famously sang in Raspberry Beret: “*in through the out door*”.’

Ginga Boy emptied the wine bottle into his glass. 'Oh yeah, I never thought about that song like that. Another?' he gestured holding the bottle aloft.

Big Al and Lucy shook their heads.

'Not for me,' Lucy replied, as she looked to catch Cat's eye.

Cat sauntered over from the bar leading her handsome young beau. 'What are you lot talking about?' she asked. 'You're huddled together looking like you're plotting to overthrow the Empire. Oh, and this is G,' she indicated the tall blonde behind her.

'What's up?' said G cocking his head.

'Yo blondie, take a seat,' Big Al pulled up a chair. 'We're everyone and we're talking about anal.'

Cat sat down and nodded at G to sit next to her. 'As in sex?'

'Yep,' Big Al smirked.

Cat sighed. 'Well, it's whatever, really,' she shrugged. 'No biggie, I guess.'

Ginga Boy poured the last of the wine. 'What's "*Whatever*"?'

'Well,' she began, 'I reckon anal's like chilli in cooking: OK to have a little bit every now and then but you don't wanna overdo it. And you've got to get it just right. Too much and *Yeow!*'

G frowned. The rest of the group laughed.

'But just the right amount at just the right time and it can be utter perfection,' Cat purred.

'So Blondie, what d'you reckon? Like a bit of anal, do ya?' Big Al elbowed G.

'It's G, and we've just met,' G frowned, looking down. 'And I'm pretty sure I'm not ready to talk to you about anal sex.'

'So that's a no from you, then,' Big Al smirked.

'*Al!* Don't be an arse,' Lucy scolded.

'Arse...' he sniggered.

'Come on Big Al, there's more to talk about than anal sex,' Cat hissed across the table. 'What were you talking about before that?'

'Blow jobs,' Lucy smiled.

'Sucking balls,' added Ginga Boy.

‘Muffnesia,’ threw in Big Al, at which Ginga Boy and Lucy burst out laughing.

Cat tried to maintain a frown before joining in the giggle-fest.

Cat tipped a wine bottle towards her glass. A dribble trickled out. ‘Anyone for more? Oh bugger, the bar’s closing,’ Cat noticed. ‘Oh well. Don’t really need any more. So did Lucy tell you? She treats her fanny grooming like a military operation. Her beautician must sometimes wonder what to do down there. How often do you see her now Luce? Once a week?’

Lucy was suddenly overcome with nausea. ‘Oh ha ha,’ she grimaced, clutching her stomach. ‘Oh bugger it. I think I’ve got to get home...’

‘–You OK?’ Big Al put a hand on her shoulder.

Lucy winced. ‘Yeah, yeah, just drank too much. Or ate something that’s disagreed with me. It’s nothing, really.’

The bar man plonked an opened bottle of red wine on the table. ‘On the house,’ he nodded at Big Al.

‘–Thanks.’ Big Al smiled.

‘Yeah, I’m OK’ Lucy stood, ‘But I think I’ll just grab a taxi and leave you all to it.’

Just as Lucy was about to pull the taxi door shut she heard a voice.

Ginga Boy came up to the door. ‘Lucy! Lucy! Wait up!’

Her stomach gurgled as she caught a whiff of the taxi’s pine-scented air. ‘Yup?’ she looked up at Ginga Boy.

He held the door open, leaning in. ‘I was wondering,’ he stammered, ‘if you’d like to catch up for a drink some time... like later on this week?’

A chill breeze whipped up into the car and around her ankles. ‘Oh,’ she sighed. ‘Um... it’s just I don’t really do that sort of thing. Just I’m busy with work, yunno? Have to go out most nights even when I don’t want to, even when I’d rather stay at home, yunno? And I just sort of stopped seeing someone not that long ago. So I kinda don’t... Yeah,

so...' she half laughed shrugging. 'So maybe I'll see you round the traps, or something? You're a mate of Big Al's right?'

Ginga Boy's face dropped. 'Yeah,' he nodded, letting go of the car door. 'Yeah, yup, sure. OK then, see ya round, Lucy.'

Lucy grabbed the door handle. 'OK, great. Thanks for the laughs.'

Ginga stepped back onto the footpath. 'Yeah, OK, you too. And good luck with, um, all the stuff. Bye.'

'Yep. Bye.' Lucy pulled the taxi door shut, waving, and the car drove her the few blocks home. She didn't see Ginga Boy waving back to her on the street.

Later that night, Lucy woke up haunted. Will was married. She lay in bed in the dark and stared up at the ceiling. Tears poured down the side of her face onto the pillow, one after the other after the other.



The last thing Lucy had expected was to hear from Will.

So when she did, one mid-week wintry night after ten o'clock while sitting in her lounge, she was floored.

It began as a text: 'Lucy, is this still your number?'

Chapter Twelve

Lucy phoned Cat. ‘I just got a text from Willy?’ she announced as she walked to the fridge. She reached for her nearly-all-gone Bailey’s with a shaking hand.

She heard Cat’s muffled drag on a cigarette. ‘From Willy? What the fuck? Really?’

Lucy popped two ice cubes into a tall glass and poured the creamy drink over the top. ‘*Yes!* Can you believe it? I can’t believe it, I mean... fuck!’

‘What a dick! I mean, *really*. What’d he say?’

‘Nothing really, all it said was: “*Lucy, is this still your number?*”.’

'Really? Weird. He is such an asshole. Fuck. Don't reply.'

Lucy was quiet.

'Lucy, don't you dare reply, he's *married*.'

'Hmmm...'

'You're gonna reply, aren't you? You're so going to reply. I know you, Luce, you're gonna reply.' Cat inhaled loudly. 'OK hun...' she continued, exhaling, '-look, do whatever you want to do, what you *need* to do, I love you and support whatever you decide to do, but Luce...'

'Yeah?'

'Don't you *dare* reply!'

Soon after the first text, another followed: 'This is Lucy isn't it? iPhone broke overseas so using old phone,' it said.

Lucy paused, then thumbed her reply: 'Yes, it's Lucy,' and slowly she felt herself unravel.

Less than a minute later, Will phoned her. His name blazed across the small screen and Lucy's heart pounded.

'Hello?' she answered.

'Luce, it's Will.'

Hearing his voice suddenly made her feel angry. 'Yeah, I know.'

'I'm back.'

Lucy took a sip of Bailey's. 'Well yeah, I guessed as much,' she paused. 'And you're married, apparently.'

There was silence on the other end. 'Yeah... Luce,' he went quiet. 'Luce, don't hate me. I need you to not hate me. Please don't hate me.'

Lucy walked over to a chair and sat down. 'Luce, I had to do it,' Will continued. 'We were together for years, we were engaged, then Candy never came to New Zealand when she was supposed to. She broke my heart...'

'*Candy?*' Lucy mocked, taking a swig of her drink.

'Yeah. She's American. I went to LA to see if there was anything left, if we had anything... I had to, I had to do it Luce. And we did, more-or-less. So we got married on the spur, we were in Vegas so we thought

what the hell. It was her idea. And I owed to her and me to give it another shot. We'd been happy together once.'

'And was Elvis there too toasting the happy couple?'

'Luce, don't be bitter.'

Lucy nearly choked on her Bailey's. 'You're fucking kidding me! You are seriously fucking kidding me? "*Don't be bitter*", her voice raised. 'What the fuck would you recommend I was? Happy for the newlyweds? Would you rather I was *happy* for you, Will?'

'Yeah. Right. Sorry.' Will paused. 'She's moving here in a month. Candy... She's moving here.' He fell silent. 'Lucy?'

Lucy felt her stomach tighten at the mention of her, Candy –*Candy* for fuck's sake– the one who was good enough for Will. Her Will.

Her head whirled.

'Can I see you?' he asked.

'No.' Lucy shook her head and took the phone away from her ear for a second. 'No, you cannot fucken see me. Will. You can leave me alone, that's what you can do.'

'–But I need to see you, Luce.'

'Will, have you gone completely fucken mad? Are you off your rocker? What the fuck are you trying to do to me? *Seriously!*'

'I need to explain to you....'

'–Explain what, Will? Explain what exactly?' she interrupted. 'As far as I can see there's no explanation necessary. I wasn't The One, you told me that –you emailed me *that*– and I heard it loud and clear, and now you're married to *Candy*. I geddit. I'm not fucken stupid, Will, OK? So get *that* into your thick head.'

'I know that Luce. I just need to see you.'

'No, Will, you don't.'

And with that Lucy hung up.

Minutes later, Will sent Lucy a text: 'Please Lucy I have to see you.'

Minutes later, she replied: 'Will, I live in hope for women everywhere that deep down inside you there's a good man trying to get out. Now piss off and leave me the fuck alone!'

Lucy was washing her face when she heard the inevitable door knock less than half an hour later. Her eyes loomed large in the mirror, like a possum caught in the night.

She knew he'd come.

Will stood on her doormat. The hallway light beamed out at him striking at his forehead, causing him to squint. He'd aged, she noticed.

Lucy clenched her arms tight into her side as he leaned in to kiss her. His kiss hit the air as she stepped aside to let him in. This was not a conversation for neighbours' ears.

Will stood inside the door as Lucy pulled the hinge shut. 'Luce... please forgive me.' Will's voice reverberated around the tiny wooden-floored entrance way.

Lucy's lips could hardly form the words needed. 'Will, why exactly are you here?'

His shoulders slumped. 'I need you to forgive me, Luce. I need you to forgive me,' his eyes pleaded.

'And why's that, Will?'

'Cos I'm an arsehole, a cunt. And I just need to say I'm sorry, to say how sorry I am.'

'Well say it and just leave would you? You shouldn't have come here. You know you shouldn't have come here. I asked you for at least that, for Christ's sake.' Her voice started to waver.

'I know. I'm sorry Lucy, I'm really am. I had to. I'm sorry for what I did to you.'

'And what did you do to me, Will? What exactly was it that you did to me?' She wanted to sit on the bottom step, to curl up, to breathe, to cry, but she pulled herself tall.

Will looked over Lucy's shoulder to the wall, then back to her. She was impenetrable.

'I... I couldn't commit to you, I guess,' he faltered.

Lucy became tall. 'You guess? Seriously, you *guess*? Nice.' She shook her head. 'And why was that, Will?'

'Because I was still in love with someone else?'

‘This isn’t a quiz, Will. You’re not going to get marks out of ten. At least sound like you give a shit.’

‘OK,’ he snapped. ‘I was –am– in love with someone else.’

Lucy’s face flushed hearing the words. A shiver ran across the back of her head. ‘Yes...’ she bit her lower lip. ‘Well, that about sums it up. You were fucking me because it was convenient but all the while you were in love with someone else. And now you’re married to her.’

‘Luce...’

Her poisoned eyes darted. ‘What? There’s a different version? You weren’t fucking me while you were in love with someone else? You weren’t using me because it was easy and convenient, ’cos *I* was easy and convenient? Because I never said no to you? You *weren’t* hedging your bets until something –or rather, someone– better came along?’

‘Luce... it wasn’t like that...’ Will scratched his head as he shook it slowly from side to side. ‘It really wasn’t. It wasn’t that thought through. I just didn’t think about, at all, I guess.’

‘Yeah, well that’s fucken obvious. So Will, please tell me how it was, ’cos I sure as hell don’t know.’ Lucy backed up towards the stairs.

Will’s iPhone beeped in his pocket and he shifted his weight from one leg to the other. ‘Luce... I don’t know what to say, I really don’t...’

‘*Ha!*’ she snorted. ‘So you came here why? Why, tell me, why the fuck did you come here, in the first fucking place? Will you’re an absolute *shit* of a man!’ She felt her voice starting to hiccough.

‘...I did like you –*do* like you– that part is true. But... I just had to give this a shot. I had to give it another go. I owed it to Cands.’

Lucy snorted again. ‘And does *Cands* know you were fucking me? Fucking me while you took your own sweet time making your piss-arse mind up? Would you like me to let her in on “*our little secret*”,’ Lucy gestured the quotation marks, ‘–so you can start your marriage on an honest footing? Or is honesty just not your thing, Will? All just a little bit too hard? Are you simply just a lying little cunt?’ Lucy no longer cared that her soul was broken open and that the bitterness oozed out.

‘Luce...’ he whimpered. ‘I had no idea you were so hurt; that you were so angry.’

Lucy slapped the wall. ‘Oh for fuck’s sake Will, *grow the fuck up!*’ she belted. ‘You had it all. Me here waiting for you and *her* there waiting for you. You played us for fools. All you had to do was to make your fucking mind up, to take your pick. And now you have, so *leave me the fuck alone!*’

She lurched across him at the door and opened it wide.

Will shuffled backwards. ‘Luce it wasn’t like that...’

‘You know,’ Lucy held Will’s gaze, her face blazing, ‘—really, you have the aura of a much smaller man. You’re an appalling excuse of a human being. You’re truly pathetic. Now, can you please leave.’ Lucy stared, unflinching, holding the door. ‘Leave Will, please leave me the fuck alone. For good.’

And it occurred to Lucy, for just a moment, that seething became her.



Lucy sat on Cat’s chaise holding her whiskey tight. She let the clear, golden vice lead her into a mellow funk. She was shattered.

‘Well played, sista!’ Cat beamed after Lucy told her the story.

Lucy’s heart sunk as she sipped her hearty brew. There would be more tears before bedtime.



Lucy heard the rain pounding outside. And even closer, Monkey Boy breathing beside her. She looked at her clock; nearly midday. *Fuck. Couldn’t he just wake and leave already?*

Lucy rolled out of bed and grabbed at her bathrobe. If she leapt in the shower now she could make herself less painful to view before he woke up.

She’d seen Fist Full of Dollars play at the King’s Arms. They weren’t shit. Monkey Boy was a good lead, stood tall and pumped out the neo punk rock.

Lucy'd joined them after the free booze ran dry to crawl the K Road bars. The other four band members peeled off one by one leaving Monkey Boy and Lucy the last two standing, ending up dirty dancing to a Lady Gaga remix at Family in a sweaty mosh of mostly gay men, swathed in the scent of testosterone.

It was obvious where their clench was headed. The evening ended with Lucy passed out on the beanbag 'til six a.m., and Monkey Boy stretched out on the couch, half on half off, both of them snoring and dribbling.

Getting a DVD out at five a.m. had seemed funny at the time; running 'round Video Ezy like hyperactive teenagers before being politely asked if they needed any help. And so had dancing like Muppets at the Ponsonby Social Club and crashing out like E'd up teenagers on the couch, legs entwined, watching some DVD or other until they passed out.

Lucy tip-toed out of her bedroom and into the bathroom. She stepped over the empty gold condom packet on the floor sitting guilty beside her knickers.

Dammit.

And on a school night, too.

Monkey Boy pulled up his jeans. 'Can I see you again?' He grinned.

Lucy sighed. 'Monkey Boy, as enjoyable as this trip down Cougar Lane has been, I am 100 years old and this was a oncer. Now, can I drop you anywhere? Home, perhaps? Your Mum must be beside herself with worry.'



The *Herald* newspaper was hidden by a pendulous-breasted, loud-voiced woman sporting a serious sausage of back-fat. She had dark reddish brown hair of the seriously frizzy variety and her face was caked in waxy make-up three degrees shy of melting clean off. Two tables

over, Lucy was privy to the woman's phone conversation –whether she liked it or not– and had discovered she worked in “*AD-vertising*”.

A puff of perfumed wind announced Cat's arrival in the cafe. She threw her bag on the seat beside Lucy and plonked herself down, emitting a noisy fart of air out from a tiny hole in the vinyl seat. ‘You already ordered?’ she panted.

‘Yup. Panini. They look pretty average though.’ Lucy grimaced.

‘Hmmm, yeah, I got one from here the other day. They pack it all in at the front for the display cabinet, so they look stuffed full but really there's nothing going on inside.’

‘So I've just paid for expensive toast?’ Lucy sighed. ‘Figures.’ She flicked a runaway curl over her ear.

‘Pretty much.’ Cat sat back in her chair and ripped out the *Herald* from under the “*AD-vertising*” woman's elbow mouthing “*Sorry*” as she did so. ‘Like half the guys we date, really. Givin' it all up front, but when you bite in, there's nothing there.’

Lucy sighed and started folding the corners of a napkin she'd grabbed from the table next to her. She attempted to craft an origami swan, duck, or in this case, an hexagonal blob. ‘New girl started at work this week and she's awesome,’ she said folding.

‘And?’ said Cat, turning a page in the newspaper only half listening.

‘That's it really. Just that she's awesome.’

‘Oh. Cool. Your work expanding then?’

‘Nah, no, she's the new designer. Adam left, gone to Sydney.’

‘Good, he was a brat...’

‘Well you didn't *have* to sleep with him, Cat!’

‘I *did*! He asked so nicely.’ She grinned.

‘So fare-thee-unwell and good riddance. Good luck to him across the ditch is all I'll say, 'cos he won't be welcome back here.’

‘Oh, he'll get on swimmingly with all those hot Sydney sheilas, they love a bit of rough over there,’ Cat chortled. ‘So, your boss, Steve-o, how is the darling man?’

Lucy popped her origami blob down and reached for another napkin. ‘Oh, fat, furry, beakish, and more than a little rapey. He's starting to look

like a caricature, or a young Muldoon, and he's still a complete arse. You didn't have to sleep with *him* either.'

'Well *that* doesn't count!' Cat rolled her eyes. 'That was a million years ago when I was still a teen model. I thought it would be good for my career. I thought he'd talk to people who would talk to people and catapult my career to dizzy heights. I thought I was doing myself a *favour*. How wrong I was.'

'A favour? With Steve-o? It may well have been a million years ago but he was still a million years older than you even then. What were you thinking?'

'I wasn't paid to think, sweetie,' she fluttered her eyelashes.

'But how'd you do it? Actually? Really, I mean? How?'

'With the lights off, of course, and very quickly. Not that that was a problem for him, fortunately.'

Lucy put her hand up. 'No more. Please! Stop! I'm sorry I asked. I do not want to imagine my boss in any state of undress even if his bedroom activity was more a sprint than a marathon.'

Cat laughed a deep, gravel smoker's laugh. 'Nor me. I'd quite forgotten about that, actually.' She looked Lucy square in the eyes. 'And may I remind you, that *you* brought it up.'

'And I'm sorry I did now...' Lucy smiled and stop fussing with the second napkin.

'So what about this new person then, at work?' Cat asked.

Lucy paused and scratched her neck. 'Well, isn't it funny how awesome people make you feel less-than, somehow? Like their very existence is like holding a mirror up to all your kinks and flaws. Kinda sucks, really.'

'Yep,' Cat nodded and looked back down at her newspaper, '—that it does.'

'But she's still awesome though.'

Cat turned a page. 'Oh sure, of that I've no doubt.'

A scowling waitress placed Lucy's wilted panini down in front of her. The plate clattered on the tiny formica table.

'Napkins are there,' she mumbled indicating the neighbouring table, looking at Lucy's pile of napkin detritus, and skulked away.

Lucy gave Cat a bewildered stare then looked down at her four origami napkin swan-duck-hexagon-blobs. 'How could she not know I know where the napkins are? Or was she just trying to make some kind of bizarre point.'

Cat laughed and stared at Lucy's panini. 'So how's your expensive toast, then?'

Lucy leaned over her meal and frowned. 'Like you said doll, all the filling's at the front,' she replied. 'But I can make this a positive experience and think of it like a scratchy?'

'Huh? Like a what? You're weird, Luce.' Cat shook her head and feigned reading the paper.

'Like a scratch 'n' win card?' Lucy replied.

'How's that then?' Cat cast the newspaper aside when her pale beige coffee arrived. An advertising insert skidded off onto the floor.

'As I eat the bready bit I can think: "*Oh well, I didn't expect filling anyway*", and when I get filling it'll be like an unexpected bonus, and I can leap out of my chair with glee and surprise. Oooh, there you go,' said Lucy as she chomped on a chunk of chicken, '-filling. Woohoo!' she said sarcastically.

'By the look in your face it's only just a \$2 scratchy?'

'Yeah, but I'm hopeful of a \$5 so I'll at least break even.'

'Yeah, right.'

Lucy sat upright. 'I've just had an epiphany!' she exclaimed. 'That's our whole problem right there. That panini, that represents us, well not us exactly...'

'What? Luce, you're actually really weird.' Cat smirked.

'Well, that's how we think of men. This panini is how we approach men. We keep expecting no filling, but if we get filling we think it's a bonus. It shouldn't be a bonus, Cat,' she signed, '-filling should be *part* of the complete package. Filling should be part of the panini, after all, it's what we pay for. But you and me, we expect too little, we expect

hardly any filling at all, only what we see up front before it's heated and brought to the table. So what happens?'

'Are you asking me a question?'

'Yes! What happens?'

Cat shook her head. 'I dunno Luce... could this get any weirder? I dunno, what happens?'

'*Whammo!* We're rewarded with *exactly* what we expect: no filling! We get no filling with our men, only shells, only what we see on the shelf. We *see* the good bits but don't really expect they exist.' Lucy sat back into her chair and grinned. 'Like me with Will. He *looked* the part, acted the part, but really, there was nothing there. He was empty.'

Cat stared at her. 'Luce, are using your lunch as an analogy for our bad relationships? Is your epiphany a panini? Is that where we are now?'

'Yep. Sadly. But it kinda works, huh?'

'Yep,' Cat sighed and took a sip of coffee, 'sadly I think it does.'

Lucy wiped the edges of her mouth with an origami napkin. 'Glengarry Girl introduced herself to me the other day,' she said.

'Oh.' Cat sounded disappointed.

'Yeah, I know. It means she's real. Actually a real person.'

Cat took a sip of coffee and grimaced. '*Eugh!* This coffee's shit. Tastes like it's been strained through sweaty man undies. Gross! Why do we come here, Luce?'

'It's close to work and I'm in a hurry. '

'Oh, that's right. You're always in a hurry. You know, you really need to change jobs. So what's her name then?'

'What? Who? Oh, Glengarry Girl. It's really pretty actually: Hermione.'

'That is pretty,' Cat nodded.

'Hermione Jane.'

Cat stared at her friend. 'What? You talked middle names?'

'I always talk middle names, you know that about me,' Lucy added, leaning back into her chair, pushing her plate away. 'Mine's so hideous, I

always have to ask others what theirs is to see if anyone's is near as awful.'

'Silvia's not so bad; you're such a drama queen.'

'It is! It's *ghastly*! Just because you don't have one, you've no right to sit in judgement on those of us who do. And for all its awfulness it only means: '*girl from the woods*', I mean...' Lucy exhaled, '-how dull.' She paused. 'It's a family name, so I suppose that's something.'

'You're too hard on yourself...'

'Not me, my parents! *They* did this to me. And it's Lucy Silvia Darling, *darling*: L. S. D. My initials are L. S. D. for crying out loud. What were my parents on?' Lucy sighed. 'So I guess I can't call her Glengarry Girl anymore.'

'No, probably not, not to her face anyway.'

'She's doing third year law.'

'Cool. Brainy Hermione.'

Beanie breezed into the café, a whirlwind of fabric, floral scent and blonde hair carrying a large bunch of lillies. 'Bloody couldn't get a car park, could I? Sorry I'm so late,' she growled, launching herself across the tiny table kissing both of the girls, rattling the plates and cups on the way. 'Fuck you Lucy, you had to choose the city to meet...'

'-I work in the city, Beanie,' Lucy replied. 'We meet here or we don't meet at all.'

Beanie waved her hands about as if at an imaginary fly and plonked herself down. 'Ignore me, I'm just in a flap after driving round in ever-decreasing circles. I thought I was going to end up parking up my own arse. And how about all the fucken road works? What's up with that? Auckland. It's like a permanent building site.' She sighed. 'Well, I only paid for an hour—I feel a moral obligation *not* to pay for parking—so you have my quality attention for one hour only.' She placed her iPhone onto the table and passed Lucy the flowers. 'These are for you.'

'What for?'

'For being fucking marvellous, that's what for. Telling that plonker Willy once and for all where to bloody go. 'Bout time, but good on ya all the same. Better late than never.'

'Yeah,' Lucy laughed. 'I really did too. Won't be hearing from him again.'

'Better not,' Beanie smiled at Lucy. 'Beth not joining us?' she looked around.

'Nah,' Lucy shook her head. 'She had to go to some press launch thingie down at Wynyard Quarter, a food show or something. Meh,' she shrugged, 'I forgot to listen.'

Cat clutched at her handbag. 'Can we go outside for a fag?' she interrupted, '-I'm gasping.'

'Yeah sure, but only if you get the heaters switched on out there. I'm not sitting outside with you two in the freezing bloody cold. I'm not catching a cold again like I did last year sitting outside with you.' Lucy looked at each smoker in turn. 'Being friends with you two gives me chill blains.'

'Pfft,' Cat waved her hand. 'If you wanna hear what we have to say, you just need to rug up and get over it.' She picked up her bag and peered at the girls. 'Coming?'

'And remember, I only have one hour,' Beanie added. '55 minutes to be precise.'

The three sat outside under the twisted brown ropes of what in summer would be a leafy vine canopy but in winter was a contorted skeleton stripped of its lush life force. They pulled their coats in tight and drew in closely to the gas heater Cat had asked the grumpy waitress to light.

Cat lit up a cigarette and slid her pack across the metal table to Beanie. 'So what happened to Glengarry Guy then, haven't seen him for ages?' she asked.

'Fired.' Lucy shook her head.

'No shit, really?'

‘Yeah, really. He was a bit generous on the discounts with the *lay-dees* apparently. Or so I heard from Hermione.’

‘Really? Bugger,’ added Beanie.

‘I know,’ Lucy replied. ‘I didn’t get any of them.’

Cat hoisted her leg up over her other knee and yanked at a silvery thread she caught hanging of her hem. ‘So, did you hear, Jodie is pregnant,’ she said, tugging at the thread.

‘No way!’ Lucy’s jaw dropped.

‘Fuck. That was quick,’ added Beanie.

‘Yeah, I reckon. Let’s hope the wee one gets *his* looks not *hers*. So you gonna have another baby, Beanie?’ Cat asked, biting off the offending thread.

‘Yeah, I s’pose. It’s not something we’ve discussed lately, what with everything that’s going on –boomerang recession, wedding vow renewal and such– but yeah, probably. Never planned to have just one kid, yunno? I was an only child and I don’t rate it.’ Beanie stubbed out her cigarette butt and flicked it onto the ground where it hit a table leg.

Lucy wrapped her scarf tight around her and patted her hands together for warmth. ‘*Beanie!* Come on. Pick that up,’ she scolded.

‘And what am *I* supposed to do with it?’ Beanie scowled.

‘I don’t care, go find a bin or something, it’s gross.’

Beanie sighed and bent down to collect the orange butt. She twirled it round in her fingers looking at it. ‘You’re so uptight these days, Lucy. What happened to the girl who used to shag in Albert Park and stuff the condom in the knot of a tree? She was *waaaaay* more fun than Knit-Your-Own-Hemp-Sandals Lucy.’

‘Whatever. You’ve got a child who shall inherit this earth,’ Lucy waggled her fingers and grinned. ‘And I’m not so proud of the Albert park incident actually.’

‘*Incidents,*’ Beanie laughed.

Lucy smiled. ‘*Anyway...* I can never understand how women want more babies when they’ve lived through the mechanics of baby number one. I mean *Ow!*’ Lucy winced.

'Well it'd be easier this time,' Beanie replied.

'Why's that?' asked Lucy.

'Cos it'd be all stretched,' Beanie replied, no hint of a smile.

Lucy fell back in her chair and laughed. '*What?* I can't believe you just said that!'

'Well it *is*! I pee like a sprinkler these days. Oh,' Beanie wrinkled her freckled nose, '-that's a different area. Oh well, it's never been the same since.' She tapped her cigarette on the ashtray.

'It is not!' Lucy laughed.

'It is.' Beanie said with a shrug

'You're such a liar, Beanie. I've seen you at the sauna and you're perfectly intact.'

'What? You look?'

'Well last time you sat above me. Just seemed easier to talk to your twat than your face. Anyway, you just expect it to be the same as when you were 16.'

Cat snorted. 'And I can assure you, it was no vestal Virgin's box then either. And come on, women give birth all the time and you don't hear them talking about being wrecked.' Cat laughed. 'Surely it all springs back?'

'Says you,' Beanie humped. 'And just exactly how many kids have you had? Anyway, after Red saw Gracie's birth he immediately swore off sex.'

'Forever?' Lucy snorted. 'And I bet that lasted all of what? 24-hours? Red denying himself of sex forever? Like that'd ever happen.'

'Yeah, pretty much,' Beanie laughed. 'After two weeks he was like: "*gimme, gimme, gimme*" as if *I* was holding out on *him*.'

'*Two weeks?*' Cat squawked.

'Yeah, but he didn't get it then.' Beanie leaned in, flicking a lock of dead-straight blonde hair behind her ear. 'I told him not to stand at the party end of things, but he wouldn't listen: he knew best. I reckon I'd have given up sex for life if *I'd* have seen that. Birth is beautiful? My arse. Birth is leave-your-dignity-at-the-door-and-collect-it-on-your-way-out!' She picked up her dying cigarette and inhaled slowly, going ever so

slightly cross-eyed with the effort. 'I'll probably still have another one, though.'

Lucy shivered. She'd been in Melbourne when Gracie was born two-weeks earlier than her due date. 'Did you have painkillers?' Lucy asked basting her lips with toffee-flavoured Juicy Tubes.

'Yeah.' Beanie nodded, 'I had arnica rubbed on my back.'

Lucy and Cat laughed.

'What?' asked Beanie frowning.

'Arnica?' asked Cat. 'Just arnica? Your "*painkillers*",' she gestured the quotation marks, '—was arnica?'

'Yeah...'

Cat dabbed out her cigarette, keeping hold of it under Lucy's gaze. 'Oh honey,' she shook her head. 'That's not painkillers, that's, well, that's just arnica. You had the chance of gas and you chose *arnica*? Lucy, we're never leaving Beanie alone during the birth of a child again. What was Red up to? Chatting up the nurses? Arnica... really!'

'No! He was not. I told you, he was there the whole time. He just let me do what I wanted. And Cat, you really have to get over disliking Red so much.'

Cat wrapped her two cigarette butts in a chewing gum wrapper and put the package in her bag.

'You were giving *birth* for God's sake! You didn't know what you wanted, that's why you ended up with arnica when you could have had gas.'

Beanie's iPhone started playing Jeff Buckley. She picked it up to check an incoming text and sighed. 'Sabine... You know, the weirdest thing,' she continued, '—and I don't think I've told anyone this, but Gracie was born with a tiny heart-shaped birthmark on her pudgy little thigh. Rose pink little thing. Disappeared when she was about six months, I think.'

'Awww...' said Lucy.

'Really?' Cat asked while checking her own phone.

‘Yeah, cool aye? I always figured that was a good omen. Whenever I saw it, when I was changing her nappies or bathing her, that no matter what, Gracie would always be alright, safe. That we’d always be alright.’

Lucy’s nose started to drip. ‘Can we go inside now? I’m freezing my balls off.’

‘Yeah,’ replied Cat standing up putting her phone in her bag. The girls followed her back inside. A waft of hot air enveloped them as they plonked themselves onto the now vacant couch. Beanie picked up a tatty *Australian Vogue* lying on the coffee table.

‘Oh, did I tell you? I slept with that 19-year-old,’ Lucy declared, wiping her nose with her sleeve. ‘We had a short-term romance.’

‘What, a one-night stand, Luce?’ Beanie grinned, flicking through the magazine from back to front.

‘Yeah,’ Lucy grinned back, flushing a little. ‘That.’

‘The one from the band? Monkey Man?’ Cat asked.

‘–Boy. Monkey *Boy*. And yeah. Him.’

‘*Ha!*’ Cat snorted and punched Lucy lightly on the arm. ‘I knew you would, I *so* knew you would. Didn’t I tell you, Beanie, that she would? Ha! I knew it.’

‘What guy’s this?’ asked Beanie, sitting back in the couch closing the magazine and tossing it on the table, then adjusting the cushions behind her.

‘I told you about him,’ Cat replied. ‘Some guy Luce met when she was out with Bron. Plays in a band, lead singer.’

‘Oooh, taking your work home now, Luce?’ Beanie threw a small red cushion at Lucy.

‘He’s hot,’ Cat continued, ‘–you *should’ve* slept with him. You owed it to yourself. You seeing him again?’

‘Duh! He’s 19. No!’

‘Oh!’ Beanie wailed. ‘It’s so not fair! You girls can sleep with anyone. I have to sleep with the same person for the rest of my life. Bollocks to you two. So how was he, anyway? Go on, make me *really* jealous.’

‘Oh, you know, he was 19. Enthusiasm couldn’t be matched but performance was, well... he was 19, what can I say?’ Lucy grinned. ‘There’s no accounting for experience and compatibility is there, really? At one point I wanted to stop him and say he could stop drilling, there was no oil down there.’

‘Pah!’ Beanie snorted. ‘Count yourself lucky; I miss all that. The not knowing what you’re gonna get. The anticipation. The flirting. The wanton lust. Red and I are so routine. Routine rooting. We’re routine rooters. It’s all a bit no surprises really. We don’t even leave the bedroom anymore. In fact, some nights we don’t even bother to open our eyes. He just sort of rolls into me when we’re spooning and yeah...’

‘What? Lights off?’ Cat asked.

‘Yes lights off. We’re *married*, Cat. Welcome to the boudoir of the marrieds. The lights have been off since the honeymoon. We’re lucky if we break into a sweat. Or if we even pass the five-minute mark.’

‘Your lights have *not* been off since you got married,’ Lucy scoffed. ‘How could you forget? You and Red used to be all over each other as honeymooners. It was positively gross; I couldn’t stand to be around you. He was all paws. So, what’s happened since then?’

‘Oh you know, it’s been ten years. Things change.’ Beanie scratched her nose. ‘These days there’s so much to think about. Red’s always worried about the business, there’s Gracie, and Sabine, and work’s so full-on. It’s just hard to fit everything in *and* feel sexy on top of it all. And my boobs droop.’

‘Your boobs do not droop,’ Lucy replied. ‘*Lies!* You still have the hottest fucken body in a bikini of anyone I know, even of those who haven’t had a baby...’

‘Ah-hem!’ Cat coughed.

‘OK, both of you have hot bodies; I would be friends with two former models. But you, Beanie, have perfectly formed, small, pert boobs to boot. Cat, your implants don’t count! So Beanie, you’re dreaming, doll. Red should be so lucky to have such a M.I.L.F. sharing his bed.’

‘And I’ll drink to that.’ Cat raised an imaginary glass in a toast. ‘God, where’s the champagne when you need it? I’m feeling my blood-booze ratio level out. I’ll be exactly sober soon.’

The girls laughed.

‘And for what it’s worth,’ added Lucy, ‘I wish I was as fussy with my men as I am about my coffee,’ she said taking her last cold gulp of coffee and grimacing. ‘I really didn’t mean to sleep with the 19-year-old. It’s just, well, he was there. It just happened. What’s a girl to do?’

‘Oh, you’ve got to Luce, just so you can say you slept with a 19-year-old,’ Beanie smirked.

‘Oh, I *have* slept with 19-year-olds before,’ Lucy replied. ‘It’s just I was 19 at the time.’



As she applied new make-up over old, Lucy realised the fresh paint job took just as long as starting from scratch. Her iPhone alarm clock chirruped reminding her that Cat would soon be hammering down her front door.

It was Saturday night. All-day drizzle had continued into the evening and Lucy had woken from her nap later than intended. Regardless, they were going to Haz’s party. That’s what friends do. Winter or not.

Whump, whump. ‘Ready Luce?’ Cat called through the door.

‘Yep, nearly,’ Lucy lied as she dusted on blusher.

‘K, I’ll be in the car. It’s frickin cold out here.’

‘OK. Won’t be a sec.’ Christ, thought Lucy, Cat was in one of *those* moods.

A few minutes later and Lucy opened the car door to Cat who immediately started the car engine.

‘Right, let’s get there before dawn, shall we? Haz’ll be expecting us.’ Cat said as she put the car into gear, leaned over her left shoulder and reversed out of the carport.

Lucy resigned herself to the silence. Ever since they were kids, Cat had an all-consuming need to control time. She knew Cat'd get over it as soon as she saw Haz and got her party on. The night would turn out just fine.

Haz's party was cranking. The thumping baseline could be heard from up the hill where Cat parked her car. A group of people dressed in black passed round a spliff on the front deck. The sensor light flicked on and off as they moved. Inside, the wide villa hallway was bathed in a dull red light, dousing party people in a devilish flame. Cat and Lucy squeezed through into party central, the lounge.

Retro couches were shoved up against walls and already the dance floor was a frenzied mosh with Haz at its epicentre, a dazzle of colour and light. Eighties tracks remixed with phat basses were pumping out of two six-foot towering speaker stacks.

Cat's icy air had warmed at Haz's gushed greeting, and Lucy was awash with the good feeling of having a Saturday night off. She mouthed to Cat and Haz that she was heading to the kitchen. Cat, who had found her mate Dave, nodded and gestured she'd stay on the dance floor. Haz had disappeared back into her own sphere.

In the kitchen, someone with lots of hair passed Lucy a tequila shot. After necking it, she offered round her wine to a group of tall people after pouring herself a generous glass, and made her way back into the lounge.

By midnight she'd talked to a bunch of people and then joined Cat on the dance floor. And that was when she saw him.

Will stepped into the room with a towering string-bean of a bloke sporting a 1960s rocker 'do.

Fuck!

Lucy felt her breathing speed up. She braced herself for Candy's entrance –*Cands*– but no one who matched her bleached blonde photos on Facebook sidled up beside Will. Well, that's something, she supposed.

Lucy looked across to where Cat had been just one Madonna dub step remixed track before. She wasn't there. Haz had gone too.

Oh fuck!

Lucy's hand shook as she knocked back the last of her wine. She made a swift "*excuse me, excuse me*" exit into the kitchen and helped herself to a large –very large– tequila. This was a tequila emergency.

Lucy phoned Cat on her mobile. No answer. She pushed through guests and tapped at Haz's bedroom door. Nothing.

Back in the kitchen, pressed between strangers, Lucy phoned Cat on redial again and again and again. Still no answer. Where are you, Cat? *Where the fuck are you?*

Fuck!

She left a message: 'Cat, call me as *soon* as you get this message.' Her voice wobbled as she slurred into the phone. 'I need you.'

Lucy fumbled as she slugged back another hastily poured tequila shot. She slumped against the bench. There she proceeded to scare off a progression of kitchen visitors with a voice that wouldn't shut up and words that made no sense.

And that was the last thing she remembered.

Lucy shivered herself awake. She was naked with only a sheet covering her. She pulled it up to her neck and shuddered with the cold. Her mouth was claggy and dry. Her brain throbbed in her skull. Every strand of her hair ached.

She heard his breathing before she saw him.

Oh God, no.

Lucy turned. Will lay with his back to her. His diaphragm moved up and down as he breathed.

Oh God, no. What have I done?

Lucy looked around the room, at the way the light fell around her. It was his house, his bedroom.

Fuck no.

She managed to heave herself up out of Will's king-sized bed, goose-bumps covering her from head to toe. She slunk down the hallway first to the kitchen for water, then to toilet to relieve herself and finally to the bathroom to assess the damage. She peered at herself through pig-like raspberries for eyes and saw for herself what she had caused. This was too much, a bridge too far.

This time, Lucy had gone too far.

She crawled back into Will's bed. Her body was limp and dappled in a toxic sweat. She'd deal with this in the morning. She'd have to.

Chapter Thirteen

The taxi driver dropped Lucy down the street so she could skulk in through her side door unnoticed. He was used to odd instructions. (*“Whatever you want ma’am, so long as I get my fare. I’ll drive you to the moon and back if that’s what you want, so long as I get paid.”*).

She’d got Cat’s text reply earlier: ‘Sorry I missed your calls. You sounded panicked. Hope all’s OK!! Fancy brunch at Landreth? You can tell all then. xx’

Lucy wanted to avoid an awkward door step meeting. She fumbled with her key as it turned stiffly in the lock. *Come on!* She felt the panic rise. Or was it bile?

Inside, Lucy face-planted onto her duvet. She was home, safe. Her head pulsated. After dozing for what was probably only a minute, she startled herself awake. She rolled over and rummaged in her bag for her iPhone. She could never find the bloody thing.

Sweat stippled her forehead. Her hand shook. She sent Cat a text: 'Hey, sorry, just woke up,' she lied. 'Brunch good. When?'

'Cool,' came Cat's immediate reply. 'I'm out and about so I'll meet you there. 10.30 a.m.? Hope all's good.'

Lucy looked at the time: 9.45 a.m. *Shit balls*. 'OK,' she replied. 'See you then. Yep, all good lxx ☺'

She fell into her stuffed Orange Bear and snuggled into her bedding.

Why? Oh, why? Oh, why?

Lucy knew 10.30 a.m. was too early to be at Landreth & Co., the brats were out. And Cat wasn't there yet.

She sat down and gulped down the glass of water one of the café staff had brought over.

Lucy had left Will sleeping. She didn't expect he'd care. That's if he noticed at all.

She stared out the window. Grey clouds hooded the city, ghosting the SkyTower. Rain goaded pedestrians and road users. Umbrellas hid faces and car wipers hurried.

A burst of damp, chill air, announced Cat's arrival. She appeared through the door, grinning.

'Hi darling girl,' she kissed Lucy. 'Thank goodness, I just missed most of the rain,' she said brightly, shaking out her umbrella and leaving it propped up against the table leg. 'Got some good shopping done too, a bunch of presents. Too many birthdays as usual. I must know too many Cancers and Leos.' She regarded her friend as she sat down to face her. 'Cripes! You look like you did some damage last night. You OK, Luce?' she put a hand on Lucy's. 'You're kinda green.'

'Yeah, yeah, I'm fine,' Lucy shook her head using as small a movement as she could manage. 'I'm just a little queasy, you know? Tequila,' she added by way of explanation.

'Oooh tequila?' Cat raised her eyebrows. 'Yep, that'd do it. Maybe we should be at SPQR getting a Bloody Mary down you?'

Lucy's felt what little colour she had left drain from her.

‘No?’ Cat laughed patting Lucy’s hand. ‘Oh doll, we’ve all been there. Anyway, I thought you swore off tequila after we carried you to your tent through Rhythm and Vines that New Year? Well, the New Year you missed. God you missed a good night.’

Lucy humped. ‘Yeah, yeah, whatever.’

‘Have you ordered yet?’ Cat ignored her friend.

‘Yeah, coffee and eggs bene.’

‘Oh good, I’m about to gnaw my hand off I’m that hungry. I better go order.’ Cat replied. ‘And sorry I’m late, hun, got chatting to some ex-client of mine outside Mei Mei, and what can you do? She was going in. You know, I really should get her back on the books, she’s obviously still as spendy as ever despite the triple whammy recession –or is it quadruple now? Anyway, one doesn’t *browse* in Mei Mei, after all, does one?’

Lucy shrugged weakly.

‘Christ. You are in a bad way. Won’t be a sec,’ Cat said as she stood up to order at the counter. ‘Just don’t pass out while I’m gone.’

When Cat returned, she leaned across to an empty table and grabbed the lone section of the *Herald on Sunday* not yet mauled by the Ponsonby über-kids. The Real Estate section. She began perusing the over-priced do-ups and “*cosy*” dwellings while Lucy stared blankly around the bustling room.

A dark-haired slip of a waitress brought over their coffees. As she left, Cat sighed. ‘Have you ever noticed how real estate agents have mastered smart-casual dressing with an almost institutional expertise?’ she said as she poured sugar after sugar into her steaming dark brew. ‘As a stylist, it kills me, doll, kills me.’

Lucy watched sugar being poured into Cat’s coffee. She could never understand why people masked coffee’s rich spicy bitterness with the syrupy sweetness of sugar, destroying the dark bean’s raw intensity. ‘Huh?’ she replied, blinking back a sudden wave of nausea.

‘That real estate agents are the only group that have turned what should remain an oxymoron, smart-casual, into a dress code?’ Cat

mused. 'How they've blended the open-collar blouse with beige wide-collared safari jackets to create a look that's supposed to say "*Trust me, I'm honest, really I am*". It's ghastly. So far as I can see all it's saying is: "*Sponsored by K Mart with a side-order of Farmers*". Hideous.' Cat turned the page.

Lucy's head started to throb. She patted at her chest where sweat rose up to the surface of her skin under her clothes. 'What?' she replied, her voice barely audible.

'And why is it they're all called Val, Karyn or Dianna –with two 'n's– or Brett, Kel and Rae? Did their parents know they'd grow up to be real estate agents?' Cat snorted. 'Ugh! I hate them, I hate them all,' Cat slapped the paper closed.

Lucy stared out the window. A miniature blonde was attempting to parallel park a shiny black four-wheel drive tank. Lucy's mouth dropped into a wide yawn. Any minute now her eyes would start bleeding. 'What *are* you going on about, Cat?'

Cat looked up. 'You still drunk, Luce? Or did you get out of the wrong side of the bed this morning?'

'It's not even 11 a.m. on a *Sunday*, Cat. I shouldn't even be *up* yet.' Lucy's eyes started to sting with inevitable tears.

Cat's diamanté drop skull earrings twinkled as they caught the light. 'Wow! Someone did *not* get their beauty sleep last night. Tequila will do that to ya, doll. How many times do you need to be reminded?' She reached over and patted Lucy's hand, shaking her head, smiling. 'What time'd you get in anyway?' she continued. 'I mustn't have heard you. And sorry I had to leave. I suddenly hit a wall, was pooped, couldn't go on. I looked for you but couldn't see you, and I'd stupidly left my phone at home so I couldn't ring ya. I figured you'd be alright anyway, after all you're a big girl now. I had six missed calls from you. What'd you want me for? Did something happen?'

Lucy frowned.

Cat's eyes glinted. 'You *didn't!*' Her face burst into a smile. 'You did! You did, didn't you? Lucy, you *pulled!* No wonder you look like shit. Up all night, aye? First the 19-year-old and now... who's it this time? Christ,

you're on a roll, aren't you? Making hay while the sun shines.' Cat clapped her hands in delight and sat back into her chair. A waft of Jo Malone perfume smacked its way over the Lucy who nearly retched at its almond sweetness. 'You dirty hot bitch. I'm so *jealous!* I leave you for a minute and look what happens. God, you shouldn't be a brunch with me. Although, you've probably worked up quite the appetite.' Cat laughed.

Lucy stared down at her coffee. Her ears rushed.

Cat frowned. 'Lucy...? Is there something you're not telling me?' Her voice dropped.

Lucy looked her friend in the eye. She suddenly felt the oxygen leave her body. The poison inside her wanted to get out. Her body shuddered involuntarily.

'Lucy *no!*' Cat burst out. 'Will? *No! Tell me you didn't sleep with Will!*' Cat's eyes pleaded.

Lucy shook her head.

'*No!* Lucy, fuck *no!* Tell me, for God's sake. That. You. Did. Not. Sleep. With. Will.' Cat hissed through her teeth.

A silver fox wearing a tan coat peered over his glasses at Cat. He murmured something to a woollen-haired, beady-eyed woman sitting adjacent. She turned to look over her shoulder and tutted.

'After all we've been through,' Cat continued. 'After all he's put you though –*us* through!– how *could* you? Lucy, no, no *no!*' she shook her head, 'I can't believe you, you slept with him, you actually *slept* with him. Fuck no, Lucy, *no!*' She banged her hand down on the table sending her spoon careering off its saucer ending with a bumpy clatter on the table.

Lucy felt her scarf pull tighter. 'Cat, don't...'

Cat glared. This was not over, not by a long shot. 'Lucy! Will's *married!* You're kidding me? You're fucken kidding me? You're fucking a married man? You're actually fucking him, Mr Will-He-Won't-He? *Christ* Lucy! What the hell, seriously, *what the hell?!*' Cat slapped the table again. 'I mean, seriously, what the hell's going on? Tell me what is going on in your head, because I just do not understand. I don't understand you,

Lucy. I really do not understand. Oh God...' she rubbed her head, 'you *slept* with him, actually slept with that *fool*? For fuck's fucken sake!'

Ponsonby mums at the neighbouring table all but leapt from their café mocha lattés to protect the ears of the innocents.

Lucy eyed welled up. 'Cat...'

'—No, no and no,' Cat went on, pointing a ringed finger as steely as her gaze. 'He's an arsehole, Lucy, and you know it. And this is not news, Lucy. You deserve so much better. I know I said I'd support whatever you decided but I only said that 'cos I thought there was a grain of hope—one tiny speck—that you'd actually grow a pair and *not* sleep with him. After all he's done to you. *To me!* I'm the one who has to pick you up and put you back together every time he dumps and runs. And he dumps and runs every single fucken time. Oh God Lucy, what *have* you done? He's a horrible, horrible little man, Luce, and you know it. *Fuck!*' Cat rested head in her hands.

Tears started to pour one by one down Lucy's face. 'I know...' she whimpered.

Cat scratched the back of her head. 'And now you're *lying* to me? You hadn't just woken up when I text you this morning, had you? You'd been with him. Because he sure as shit wouldn't have been at your place.' Cat shook her head again. 'You can't lie to me, Luce, I'm not your enemy. I am not the enemy here.'

A waitress placed their brunch on the table and departed quickly. The eggs wobbled on their plate.

'OK,' Cat took a breath and looked at her friend. 'OK,' she sighed, 'you better tell me what happened.'

Lucy stared at her food as Cat tucked in. The eggs looked perfect. Creamy yellow hollandaise sauce fell thickly in pools into the crevices and a rich mustardy smell drifted upwards.

'Honestly Cat, I don't really know...'

Cat shook her head, chewing. A dribble of golden yellow yoke eased its way into the edge of her lips. 'Luce, I'm sorry honey, but you're

gonna have to do better than that. This is me, and I'm telling you now, you're gonna have to do a whole lot better than that.'

Lucy exhaled. 'I'm not making excuses, Cat, really I'm not. I feel like a grade A shit, I really do. And not because I have a hangover, although that's not exactly helping. But I feel just terrible.' Her heart thumped heavily in her chest. 'I just really don't know how it happened. Or why. I was dancing and having a good time; I thought you were behind me –I was trying to impress some hottie, but he wasn't paying me the slightest bit of attention– anyway, I looked up and Will was standing in the doorway. Right in the doorway. I was expecting Candy to come in behind him. But thankfully she didn't. I freaked –I totally freaked– and you weren't around, so I went into the kitchen and self-medicated with tequila. And honestly, that's the last thing I remember.' Lucy shrugged. She smarted as she bit the insides of her cheek. The acrid taste of blood started to fill her mouth.

Cat stared open-mouthed.

'And the next thing I know,' Lucy went on, '–is I woke up at Will's house. And now I just feel... really ashamed.' Tears blocked Lucy's eyes and snot dripped from her nose into her mouth. Her shoulders shuddered and her chest heaved.

'Ashamed is right,' Cat replied, her voice gentle.

'Fuck Cat, what the... fuck? I hate... myself, I really do...' she hiccupped. 'I don't even remember... I don't even remember how it happened. What have I done? I can't fix this.'

'–No babe,' Cat interrupted Lucy's snorts and placed a hand on her shoulder. 'You can't fix what happened. But hate the behaviour not the person. For all we fucken know, Willy manipulated the situation and got to you. I wouldn't put it past him. He should've seen you were too drunk. He should not be taking women home in that state. Especially women who are not his wife! And where's she while all this is going on?'

Lucy shrugged. 'We didn't, erm, talk. I left him sleeping.'

Cat sighed and gave Lucy a weak smile as she passed her a napkin. 'But Luce, there's one thing I have to do and you're not going to like it

but I have to do this. I wouldn't be being a good friend if I didn't do this. Now pass me your phone.'

Lucy's eyes flared. Mascara smudged her flushed cheeks. 'You're not... going to... phone him... are you?' she hiccupped.

Cat had a sip of water. 'No,' she laughed, 'nothing like that. The opposite in fact. I'm deleting his number...'

'-No!' Lucy spasmed.

Cat raised an eyebrow and wiped her mouth with her napkin. 'Luce, it's for your own good. *You're* not going to do it, are you?'

Lucy shook her head. She was beaten and she knew it.

Cat reached over and picked up Lucy's phone which sat on the table. 'It's tough love, baby,' Cat smiled and winked. 'Deal with it.'

Lucy watched frowning as Cat scrolled down to 'B' in the address book.

'B...' she said. 'Brodie... aaah, there he is, Willy Bastard Brodie.' Cat smiled as she pressed the buttons, 'and now there he isn't.' She looked up at Lucy. Her face softened into a tender smile.

Lucy reached out to reclaim her phone but Cat jerked it back and continued pressing buttons.

'Nu-uh, darling girl,' she said, shaking her head.

'What are you doing now?' Lucy squawked.

'Deleting all his text messages.'

Lucy shoulders slumped and her head throbbed. She folded herself down. 'You have to?' she whimpered.

'Yep. Have to. Lucy, just think of me as your sponsor,' Cat smiled as Lucy pushed her cold eggs away from her. 'I'm your Don't-Let-Men-Be-Fuckwits sponsor and I'm not letting men be fuckwits, so I have to do this. You won't, so I am. I don't want you to pine over his ridiculous text messages and find meaning where there is none. And with any luck he won't be in touch for a while and then when he does you can impress him with the emasculating phrase: "*Who is this?*" It'll work a treat. See, win-win,' Cat beamed. 'And later today I'll be around to do the same to your email and Facebook...'

‘Nooo! Not Facebook.’ Lucy rose up. ‘How can I stalk him if you delete him from Facebook?’

Cat held Lucy’s gaze. She shook her head.

‘Oh darling,’ she smiled. ‘My point exactly. Now come on, let’s get out of this place. You’re too ill to eat and if I hear one more child squawk I won’t be responsible for my actions.’

The pair were greeted by a crisp wind as they stepped out of the café. The rain had eased to a fine drizzle and brooding dark clouds curtained the city. Impatient cars filed up the street vying for vacant parks.

Cat placed a light hand in the small of Lucy’s back as they ambled back up Ponsonby Road towards home.

As they turned into their street, as quickly as it had slowed, the drizzle became pelting rain.

Lucy pulled her woollen hat down tight over her head and fought to get her umbrella up. She was so very tired.

Cat stopped on their doorstep watching Lucy fumbling with her house key as she dropped her sodden umbrella on her sneakers.

‘Damn it all to hell.’ Lucy started to cry.

‘Luce,’ Cat stood eye-to-eye with her friend. ‘Stop, honey, just stop.’

Lucy gasped in some air.

‘Luce, you know I love you, right?’

‘Yes.’ Lucy shivered, nodding.

Cat smirked. ‘Good, so you know then if you ever go anywhere near Will again, I’ll take your head off. You got me?’

Lucy nodded and burst into a tear-stained, blotchy-faced smile. ‘Yep,’ she snorted, ‘I got you.’



The northbound motorway traffic was trapped in its usual Saturday congested stop-start mode.

And Lucy was late. Again.

Lucy's Mazda Forgettable did not engage with her heavy-footed effort as say, the convertible '68 Mustang she imagined herself driving, red (everyone knows red goes faster). Heading into the Harbour Bridge she was forced to clobber the breaks so not to high-tail into a Previa's ample steel behind.

Her beautician, Cookie, was based in Albany, in the north of the north of Auckland's North Shore. She worked out of her own purpose-built home studio, she was her own boss. Lucy reasoned the \$35 she saved on each monthly Brazilian wax more than enough covered the petrol to get there.

But bugged if she could ever get there on time.

At the Albany off-ramp, Lucy found herself wedged into a suburban crawl of bumper-to-bumper mall-bound 4-wheel drives, people carriers and tiny little shopping carts on wheels that bad drivers so love to buy.

Albany was Auckland's real-life nod to *The Truman Show*. Matching domiciles lined neatly trimmed streets on what a decade ago were lifestyle blocks and two decades ago, a farm. At any moment, a lighting rig could fall. It would land to the left of, but not hit, a two-storied, four-bedroomed, two-bathroomed-with-one-ensuited, one-office-cum-guest-roomed, open-plan-kitchen-lounge-dining-roomed and TV-with-potential-games-roomed mushroom or cream-coloured, rendered house.

Lucy eventually carved her way through speed zones and urban sprawl taking out roundabouts and the occasional billowing supermarket bag, and managed to get to Cookie's just a little after her allocated time slot.

'I did a bad thing,' Lucy announced as she passed under a sparkling chandelier and entered the low-ceilinged, sandalwood oil-infused, softly lit room.

She didn't look up at Cookie as she placed her bag on the floor by the door and unzipped and removed her jeans.

Cookie pulled her lips into a thin line. 'Oh no!' she squawked. 'Don't tell me, you shaved?'

'Oh *hell* no!' Lucy baulked. 'Oh God no, nothing that bad, I wouldn't do that.' Lucy smiled as she peeled off her boy-cut lacy knickers and

tossed them on top of her bag. She loved Cookie's idea of what constituted a bad thing. 'And if I did *that*, I sure as hell wouldn't tell you. No, no, God no...' Lucy shook her head. 'No, almost as bad though. Actually, probably worse... I slept with Will.'

'Oh, that's alright then,' Cookie sighed and turned away, stirring hot wax on its heated element. 'I thought you'd shaved.'

Lucy managed a small laugh.

'Just don't you ever shave,' Cookie cast a stern look over her shoulder at Lucy, '—because I'll know and mark my words young lady, you'll be getting the telling off your life.'

Cookie, like many of her neighbours, had emigrated from South Africa. She was a reformed hippy and a practicing vegan and was very attached to her hemp woven clothes and any kind of jewellery, so long as it tinkled.

Her voice had three tones: whisper, trill and squawk.

As she climbed up on the beautician's table and laid spread-eagled, she recalled when she'd first had her bum-hole waxed. It had begun as a Cookie's simple trilled "*Rrr-roll over*", ending with Lucy having to participate in the process by holding her butt cheeks apart so the hot wax could be applied at the centre.

Resistance had proved futile, of course, with Cookie stating matter-of-factly that it would be far more comfortable wearing g-strings (they pull the tiny hairs, apparently) and with only the front done, she was only half done.

And no one wants to be half done.

Cookie started to apply the creamy-coloured hot wax in generous toffee-like lashing. 'So, you slept with Will, aye?' she squawked.

'Yes...'

'Now why, after all he's done to you, would you go and do a stupid thing like that, aye?' Cookie stopped and stared at her young customer. So bright, she thought, yet so stupid.

'I was drunk.'

Cookie continued pasting and shook her head. 'You know that's no excuse, don't you?' She squawked.

'Yeah, I know. Cat hauled me over the coals last week after it happened.'

'As well she should. She's a good friend your girl Cat.'

'Mmmm.' Lucy nodded.

'You're lucky to have her,' Cookie trilled.

'Yeah, I know, she totally busted my balls...'

'Ahhh, right, she's a good girl. Now relax.'

Lucy winced as the first of the hot wax was ripped from her skin.

'Shiiii...!' Lucy hissed through gritted teeth. 'Farrrrr...! That hurt!'

'Breathe, breathe...' Cookie whispered. 'OK? Ready to go again?' she trilled.

Lucy put her shoulders back down on the table and gave Cookie a feeble nod.

The tiny woman grabbed hold of the next piece of demon-possessed fabric. 'And Will, have you heard from him?' she ripped.

'What do you think?' Lucy exhaled as the hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention.

'I suppose he has that wife to look after now,' she ripped in one grand final sweeping motion. 'He's a very bad man. He doesn't deserve you *or* her.'

Cookie cocked her tweezers, pinching them tight, and leaned into the freshly waxed surface.

Lucy stiffened as each remaining stray hair was pincerred out one by one. 'Honestly Cookie, if he's feeling half of what I'm feeling, he'd probably agree with you on that one.'



Lucy had agreed to meet Vince at Dizengoff in Ponsonby mid-week. Vince was a friend of Lucy's brothers Kit and Bobby. She'd known him since he was a kid, since the days of bulrush, Tangy Fruits and Soda

Stream (the original). He was all grown up now, same as her bros, having reached the grand old age of 26.

Lucy always thought Vince was a bit of a twat.

As she hugged him hello, Lucy didn't know why after all these years she still felt the need to meet up with him. And yet here she was.

She always reckoned Vince fancied one of her brothers but he insisted he wasn't gay. *Insisted.*

Looking up at him all Lucy could think about was taking giant clippers to his nose hairs. 'Hi Vince, good to see you,' she lied.

Vince puckered his lips and leaned into Lucy, missing her lips and instead planting a smacker on her nose. 'Likewise. Oop, sorry about that,' he grinned.

'Sweet, don't worry about it...' Lucy smiled.

Vince went up to grab some water and Lucy picked out a table by the window.

She watched as Vince lumbered back. He was a six-foot, five-inch beefcake of a bloke with legs like milled logs. He had the look of a rugby prop, but Vince was a pussy.

'You good?' Vince asked after he took an age to adjust himself and sit down. He then proceeded to pick up the napkins, the salt and the pepper shakers and the sugar, looking at them each in turn.

Lucy placed her elbows on the table and propped her head up. 'Yeah, yeah, yep,' she nodded. 'You?'

'Yeah. Aw, nah. Not really.' Vince shrugged.

Lucy slumped into her seat as Vince began to describe his most recent break-up. 'We were together two years,' he began. 'Then she finally had an affair with a woman –with a *woman!* And a much, *much* older woman at that. An older woman –can you believe it?' he slurped. 'So I could finally get out of it, the relationship, I mean. It meant finding a new flat but I was sick of all the whinging. Whinging and moaning, constant whinging: "*Why can't you do this, Vince? Why can't you do that? You're not good enough, Vince. Why can't you please me, Vince?*" Two years of constant moaning. Moan, moan, moan.' He sniffed and wiped his nose with a

finger. 'And tidying obsessively, and hiding my stuff. She hid my stuff. Totally passive aggressive.'

'Oh...'

'-Yeah, I know. She said my stuff got in the way. But it was my *stuff*. My things. Part of me. You know?' Vince nodded as if Lucy was co-conspirator in the story.

'Uh-huh.'

'Yeah... she had issues.' He shrugged.

Vince's love life was like a series of rope swings lurching from one bad relationship to another. It was never Vince's fault.

He cut his lemon and poppy seed cake into quarters and picked up a portion and inspected it before taking a cautious, mealy-mouthed bite. Poppy seeds showered onto the plate with a few finding their way to lodge between Vince's teeth. '*Now* I realise the root of her unhappiness was that she was gay,' he drawled. 'I should have known.' He sighed.

'Uh-huh,' Lucy replied as she watched Vince lick his index finger, using it to pick up poppy seeds from his plate.

'Yeah. It was just years of moaning,' he continued. 'But when I finally got away it was still sad, yunno? But it was just such a load off, yunno? A man is not s'posed to take that kind of treatment, I don't reckon. We're not built for that.'

'Yup, uh-huh.' Lucy glanced down at her phone hoping it would ring.

Vince bit into another wedge of cake. 'Did you know,' he talked as he chewed, 'when she was 25, Mona -that was her name, Mona, gotta laugh at that if nothing else: Mona-the-moaner,' Vince sniggered, '-anyway, Mona spent about \$30,000 on plastic surgery? Thirty grand! Actually! On a nose job, face lift, boobs, some of that collagen shit and she was a regular at that Botox business. Thirty grand. At 25!' He snorted. 'I mean, what the hell was that all about? Used up all her inheritance too. What a waste.'

'That's crazy,' Lucy agreed. It was.

'Yeah, stupid is what that was. Stoopid is as stoopid does,' he chortled. 'Sure was stoopid. I was gonna marry that inheritance.' He shook his head and shovelled the last triangle of cake into his mouth

and, smacking his lips, peered at Lucy. 'Yum, you really ought to get one of those. It's lemon. So good.'

Lucy's stomach groaned. 'Yeah, they look good...'

'Yep. She was a mess, that Mona, a proper mess,' he continued. 'How was I supposed to keep propping that up, anyway? Especially after she spent all the money.'

Lucy stifled a yawn behind her hand. 'Yeah, it's a toughie alright...'

Vince stopped and looked at Lucy as if they were sharing in some special secret. He leaned down into the table. 'She's still with that woman, yunno?' His nostrils flared. 'As far as I know anyway. So it must be working for her, right?'

Lucy stretched her neck and rotated her shoulders one after the other. 'Yeah, must be. That's a good thing. Better to be left for something real, than a passing fancy.'

'Yep.' Vince sat back in his chair and lifted an eyebrow. 'So... I guess that means I'm single again.'

'Yep. I guess it does.'

Later that night when she got home from work, Lucy had a screaming headache. Three coffees, nil water and a big ol' sack of frustration will do that to a girl.

Vince had copped the café bill so Lucy owed him a thank you text.

'Thanks for coffee today, Vince,' she wrote. 'Great to catch up. Enjoy being a man about town again. ☺'

Vince's reply was immediate: 'Yep. Great to hang out, Luce. You looked hot. Seriously! Just back from gym. Lots of curls for the girls. Let's do it again soon. Or better still, we can both get ripped on a glass of...'

Lucy stared at the screen waiting for the rest of the text.

'-wine and wake up next to each other naked and feeling uncomfortable ☺' he finished.

What the?

'Now that **WOULD** be uncomfortable,' she replied. No smiley face.



The night closed in and the clocks chimed winter. Lucy braced herself for the fresh round of chilly nights. She wrenched her unenvironmentally friendly, 1970s Conray heater from a cupboard and lugged it upstairs. She pressed the plastic buttons to turn it on and shuffled as close to the glowing red bars as possible without catching herself alight. The room filled with the stench of burnt dust.

Once she'd warmed to above sub-zero, Lucy sank into the cocoon of her beanbag pulling her mohair blanket up over her head and dozed. She had about an hour of mooching before she was due out. Tonight was girls' night. Wednesday cocktails at Mea Culpa.

A little after eight, Lucy prised herself up off the beanbag, freshened up and faced the elements to join Beth and Cat for the bi-weekly bitch and beverage. Beanie had sent a last minute text snub saying she was at home babysitting because Red had to work late and it was Sabine's night off (*"But it's girls' night!"* Cat had text Lucy. *"What does Red have to work late for anyway? Not like construction is booming in the Auckland winter."*).

The trio set up camp at the outdoor table closest to the gas heater.

Lucy took a sip of her specially made hot cocktail and balanced the glass on the metal weave table. 'I'm gonna do a detox,' she announced to the pair, pulling her cashmere cape in close around her ears. 'It's called the Herbal Detox. I've looked it up online. It clears the colon, gets rid of parasites, that sort of thing. Gotta swallow a hell of a lot of herbs though, 40 capsules a day or something. And eat a tonne of raw veges.'

'Forty capsules a day?' exclaimed Beth.

'A detox? What the hell for?' bellowed Cat gulping down her cocktail. 'Sound hideous, not to mention utterly pointless. You'll be off the wagon in no time.'

'I drink too much,' Lucy answered.

'No you don't, you drink as much as me,' Cat replied.

Lucy snorted. '*You* drink too much.'

'Yeah, fair point,' Cat nodded, finishing her drink. 'Another, ladies?'

'Yeah, why not. I might as well go out with a bang,' Lucy laughed. 'So yeah, I hid all my booze.'

'What, *all* of it?' Beth grinned.

'Oh funny ha ha, yes, I have a lot of alcohol. Only problem is, even though I've hidden it, I still know where it is.'

'I could come in and hide it for you, or hide it at mine,' suggested Cat.

Lucy shook her head and took another sip of her drink. 'Nah, I'd only lie awake at night and think of all the places it could be.'

'She bloody would too,' added Beth. 'She'd sneak over to yours and scrummage round and scare the living daylights out of you. Make you call the cops for fear of a cat burglar.'

The pair looked at Beth and laughed.

'Well, she would be,' Beth continued, 'wouldn't she? She'd be a Cat burglar.'

'Beth, you kill me,' Cat smiled and shook her head. 'Well ladies, *I'm* not on a detox, I'm going to the bar. Same again? Or shall I get Sam to create us the next exotic masterpiece?' Cat mewed.

'Up to you, babe,' Beth replied. Lucy nodded.

'Luce,' Cat laughed. 'You so know you won't do this detox.'

'I might...'

'—You won't, Lucy. I'll stake my life on it. Our lifestyles are just too good. Even if you go so far as to buy those million over-priced pills, they'll sit in your cupboard until you face up to your failings and chuck it out once its past its "best by" date.' Cat stood up out of her seat and looked at Beth. 'When I go, she'll tell you all about her bowel movements.'

Lucy look mock-horrified. 'Well, it's important! If you don't shit, you die.'

Cat plonked back down on her chair after ordering another round of cocktails from Sam the Hot Barman. Her pungent Vivienne Westwood perfume hovered around them. 'Sam's going to magic something special for us,' she purred, winking at Sam.

Lucy rolled her eyes. 'Anyway... My 19-year-old turned 20 in the weekend.'

'That must be heartbreaking for you,' Cat replied.

'Yeah, it is.'

Cat sighed. 'What a waste.'

'Isn't it?' Lucy agreed, laughing.

Beth fidgeted and looked at the pair one after the other. 'You know,' she paused, 'have you two ever thought of going for someone, um, your own age?'

Cat rolled her eyes, flung her head back and laughed. 'Oh sweets,' she said patting Beth's hand, 'how wonderfully naive of you. I don't *limit* myself. I go for anyone of any age. Big Al is... what? Oh, I don't even know anymore,' she slurred, 'but hun, no matter what their age, young *or* old, so far none have worked out for me. And darling,' she paused and looked Beth directly in the eye, 'that's just the way it is.'

Lucy laughed and Beth frowned.

Cat continued. 'I'm just hoping with all the advances in medical science that someone invents a whole new gender altogether. I've tried men *and* women and it seems I'm suited to neither. Luce, what d'you reckon?'

'Bah! I'm over it all, frankly.' Lucy waved her hand. 'Some people say it's the circles I hang out in, but that's just crap. I hang out in so many circles it's a wonder I'm not dizzy. I go to the opening of every envelope in town. Christ, I'm out so much my flat is just an expensive locker with a shower.' She paused. 'And yet, here I am, single.'

'Huh,' Beth replied.

'And what's "*Hub*"?' Cat asked.

'Just huh, meaning yeah, I guess you've both covered all your bases.'

'Oh honey, first base, second base, third base and home base,' Cat replied, nodding her thanks to Sam the Hot Barman as he placed their hot winter cocktails on the table. 'Sweets, we've got a few year's head-start on you, don't get even get us started.'

‘Did I tell you both, I have nubs?’ Lucy moaned after her first sip of the next round of cocktails. ‘My boobs have shrunk to nubs. They look like cotton balls stuffed in the end of kids’ ankle socks. And I’m not happy about it.’

‘Nubs? Bugger. Why d’you reckon you have nubs?’ Cat asked.

‘No sex. That’s what does it,’ added Beth, flicking her thick glossy fringe to the side. ‘Hormone holiday. Your boobs have buggered off on a hormone hiatus. They’ve given up on you.’

‘Hibernating until mating season begins again, you think?’ grinned Cat.

‘Yep,’ nodded Beth as red-taloned fingers gripped her cocktail. ‘Definitely.’

‘What? That can’t be true, can it?’ Lucy asked.

‘Tis true, Luce. Take it from me,’ Beth continued, patting her ample chest. ‘Boobs, they’re just fat and hormones. And if you don’t have the hormones or the fat, well, they’re just nubs, aren’t they?’

‘Tell me it’s not true?’ Lucy sighed, and took a swig of her drink.

‘Well, that’s such a catch 22,’ Cat added.

Lucy looked at her friend. ‘Huh?’

‘Well, how are you gonna pull if you have nubs? And how are you gonna get your boobs back if you don’t pull?’

‘My dazzling smile, my beguiling good looks and my intoxicating personality?’ Lucy fluttered her eye lashes.

‘Oh yeah,’ Cat laughed. ‘That ought to do it.’

‘So how was your interview today, with Ali?’ Beth leaned her fulsome breasts into the table, looking at Lucy.

‘Ali Ikram?’ Lucy snorted staring at Beth over her straw, envious that Beth’s cleavage reached to her neck. ‘I can’t believe you let that happen.’

Beth shrugged. ‘What choice did I have? You know what Steve-o’s like when he makes a decision. I’m no more than his glorified Girl Friday. I’m powerless to even change a lunch order let alone any other decision he makes.’

‘If you’re that then what the hell am I?’

‘What are you two talking about?’ Cat looked bored.

'I had to interview Ali Ikram today for a TV special we're doing?'

'Didn't you go to journalism school with him? Cat asked.

'Exactly.' Lucy rolled her eyes.

'He's doing quite well now, huh?' Cat sat up in her chair. 'Cute too. Nice lips. T thinks he has nice lips. I have to agree with him on that. Didn't you have a crush on him at uni?'

'You had a crush on Ali Ikram?' Beth asked cocking a perfect eyebrow. 'Really? Ha! No wonder you didn't want to interview him,' she grinned.

Lucy sighed. 'Yeah, well, how much of a loser did I feel? He's got a gorgeous, talented wife, cute kid and a great job –and nice lips, apparently– and look at me? I'm in a dead end job writing for a freebie mag. Loser much?'

'Pfft. You're fab,' Beth gushed, laughing. Her cocktail straws were coated in vampish red lipstick 'You won't be getting any sympathy out of me. And remember, I'm only one ladder up the rung from you at that freebie mag.'

'Don't get me started. I'm...'

'No!' Cat interrupted putting her hand up in the universal 'STOP!' position. 'Nu-uh. I will not let you get started. I'm stopping you right there. You can leave the: Boo-hoo-I'm-in-my-30s-and-still-single rant to the pages of chick lit and saddo blogs, thanks very much. I'm here trying to enjoy my what-turned-out-to-be-free cocktails,' Cat turned and winked at Sam the Hot Barman, '–and I am not going to be sent off in need of a Prozac prescription by you, thanks very much, Lucy. Besides,' she paused and clenched her cocktail straw through her lips, 'if you start on your life then I might bloody well have to take a look at mine.'



'I was peacocked today?' Lucy smiled after putting in her coffee order.

'Oh yeah,' replied Salad Man.

‘Yeah. I was talking to this hot builder on my street, and he lifted his shirt three times –three times– and he made jolly sure I got a darn good look at his abs.’

‘Nice.’ He grinned. ‘Peacocked.’

‘I know. Hot ’n’ sweaty. Good abs too, being a builder ’n’ all. I had to be careful, yunno, not to peer. But yeah... nice set.’

The Salad Man laughed.

‘It was so obvious though, I mean, I *invented* that move. I have a trademark on that move, baby.’

‘Peacocked, for sure. Lemme know what happens next,’ he laughed handing Lucy her take away coffee.

‘Probably nothing,’ she sighed.



Lucy had run out of smile. She dropped her dripping umbrella against the front door and removed her gumboots and soaked-through raincoat, tossing it to the floor.

Everything was wet. Her face, her shoes, her legs, her mind. She was damp to her bones. And now her nose had started to drip.

She tore off the sodden clothes, stepped over the damp, seeping pile and walked naked and shivering to the bathroom towards the shower.

Fifteen minutes later, a warmer but no less glum Lucy wrapped herself tightly in her pink bathrobe and fell onto her unmade bed.

Same shit, different day.

Lucy was startled awake by the incessant *brrring brrring* of her phone. She must have dozed off. Her mouth was parched.

‘*Lucky!*’ It was her brothers. ‘Lucky, what are you doing?’ the pair chirruped.

Great. Pissed again. Or other. Lucy looked at her bedside clock. Just after 7 pm. What was it over there? Six, seven, eight a.m.? The boys must have been up all night. For a change.

'I was sleeping...' Lucy stifled a yawn and rolled deeper into her pillow pulling her knees up close against her chest and pulling her Orange Bear close.

'Get up, get up ya slut, you're coming to Brighton!' slurred what was probably Kit. Although if Lucy was honest, she couldn't always tell them apart on the phone.

'Oh piss off, Kit,' she groaned, dragging her duvet up over her head. 'I can't afford a trip to Hamilton let alone Brighton. You know that,' she yawned again. This time minus the stifle.

'Oh don't be a nana,' it was Bobby, just as hammered as his younger twin. 'We're paying. We know you can't afford to drive down to the end of the motorway let alone come and see your only brothers. You still writing for that pamphlet?'

'It's not a pamphlet, Bobby, it's a magazine,' she sighed.

'Whatevs. Like I actually care,' Bobby replied. 'What are they paying you in now, cashews, or still just regular old peanuts?'

'Fuck off, Bobby. Anyway, you boys are such clichés, so don't even think I am jealous of your pathetic trolley dolly lifestyles. You're glorified maids, so get over yourselves.'

'Oo-oo-oh,' Bobby sang. 'Someone dranketh too much from the bitterness cup today.'

'And we don't care that we're glorified maids,' added Kit. 'We're rich and people love us. *They* suck up to *us* for drinks they've already *paid* for. So we're paying for you and your enormous arse to come play with us in Blighty. Come play in the great British summer with us, Lucky... all one week of it,' Kit crackled with good humour.

'We can drink pints on the beach all day and get totally drug-fucked at night,' added Bobby chuckling. 'And we'll take the piss of the fugly white Essex boys down from London for the weekend who spend one day on the beach and end up like cooked lobsters come evening time,' he giggled down the phone.

'Then Bobby will sleep with one of them while his pork chop of a girlfriend watches on. Hilar!'

'Kit, gross!' Lucy smiled as she coiled a chocolate-coloured curl around her finger. Her 26-year-old brothers were masters in wasting the best years of their lives in the most glorious way possible. 'You wouldn't, would you Bobby?'

'Yes he bloody well would, and does. He is *such* a slut, Lucky. We need you here to look after your baby brothers. Promise? Will you come?'

'Sure, whatever...' she sighed.

'-So you'll come? That's a yes?' asked Kit with a squawk.

'Yeah, yeah, I'll come. You're paying, right?'

'Oh yes *dahling*, we wouldn't dream of forcing you to dip into your \$150 nest egg,' said Bobby. 'You'll never be able to retire if we did that. Tick tock, tick tock...'

'Oh fuck off, Bobby. Your looks will be gone soon and you'll be pissed off you were such an outrageous bitch to everyone. Because no one likes an ugly face *and* an ugly personality.'

'Ha! No they won't, I'm already in damage control darling, I'll be beautiful forever...'

'-Yeah,' added Kit, 'he's discovered the joys of the needle.'

'What? Botox? Fillers?' Lucy couldn't hide her surprise.

'Or both...' Bobby laughed.

'What the fuck, Bobby? You're, like, 12!'

'Yes darling, that I am, and perhaps you should give it a go Lucky, I mean you're, what, 40 now?' Bobby bitched.

'Not even close to that. Bobby you're such a horrible little man. And at least *my* face can move.'

'Ha! What do I care? My face moved for 26 years and I can't say I miss it. And if the old hag look is keeping you so very happy, *dahling*, who's to say it's any of my business. So how *is* being single anyway?'

'Bobby!' Kit scolded. 'So we'll see ya soon then, Lucky? I'll Facebook ya to get the dates sorted, come for Gay Pride, see us in the parade...'

'We'll be gorgeous,' Bobby butted in. 'But that's hardly shocking.'

'-So go sleep with ya boss or something to get the time off,' Kit added. 'We want you all to ourselves for a two-week minimum. Might squeeze in a jolly to Europe too...'

‘Oh...’ Lucy started.

‘–We’re paying!’ Kit interrupted.

‘Yeah OK, Kit. And no I won’t sleep with my boss, Cat already did that, but yeah, I’ll get the time off. Two weeks off for good behaviour.’

‘Good. We’ll shake out some sacks and clean up the attic for you,’ Bobby added, slurring.

‘Oh and Kit...?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Happy if you push Bobby off Brighton Pier before I get there.’



Lucy had a restless sleep, dreading the conversation with Steve-o. She waited until she’d downed her second Monday morning coffee before lightly tapping on his closed door.

Nothing.

She knocked again, this time with a firm hand.

‘Yes!’ the voice behind it bellowed.

‘Umm,’ she ventured as she opened the door and forced her head through the crack. ‘Umm, may I please interrupt for a sec, Steve-o? Won’t take long.’

‘Well, you may as well now, given that you already have.’ His fat lips pursed into a tight purple cat’s bum.

‘Yes, umm, sorry. It’s just, well, I wouldn’t except that it’s important.’

‘Well?’ He continued typing on his keyboard, his dull, watery grey eyes fixed on the screen. His old-not-in-a-good-way Stone Temple Pilots t-shirt was pulled tight around his paunch. Lucy could see his tiny, pointy nipples.

She stayed fixed with her hand squeezing the door handle. ‘Well, it’s just I’ve been invited to Brighton in the UK, by my brothers. They live there, they’re twins, and I haven’t seen them for ages.’

‘Oh yes,’ Steve-o turned his gaze to Lucy. She felt herself diminish under his thick eye-browed glare.

‘Yeah, and well, anyway, they’ve invited me to stay in two weeks time, for a couple of weeks for the Gay Pride festival, they’re in it, and I said yes. So I wondered if I could please take leave. It can be unpaid if you want, if you need, that is.’

‘Well,’ he sighed. ‘You haven’t given me much notice, Lucy.’ His hands rubbed at a stubbly, pock-marked chin. ‘I’ll have to think about it and get back to you. I assume that’s alright with you? Few things to sort out. You understand?’

‘Yeah, yep, sure, that’d be OK. I understand. It’s not much notice, sorry. I wouldn’t ask but I haven’t had a break since Christmas.’

‘Nature of the business, Lucy. It’s journalism. Newspapers and magazines don’t write themselves, Lucy. We still have a magazine to fill, you know, whether you’re here or not. Don’t write themselves, magazines.’

‘I know, I know. I already thought of that.’ Lucy dropped her shoulders back. ‘I could write as much as I could before I go, in the evenings and stuff when I’m not at gigs, and write up some bands when I’m away.’

‘Well, yes to getting your columns filed before you go. Do you think you could at least do that?’

Lucy nodded.

‘But I’m not sure about writing about what you see in Brighton,’ he continued in his clipped Kiwiana drawl. ‘Hardly relevant to an Auckland audience, is it, Lucy?’ He shook his head. The matted grey-mouse overgrown nest ruffled from side to side out of sync with the motion of his head. ‘Well, You’ve given me a lot to think about, Lucy. I’ll have to get back to you.’

‘Yes, yes, of course.’ Lucy gripped the door as she backed out of the room. ‘Thanks, Steve-o.’

‘Righto. I’ll let you know.’



The endless days of night ran into each other. Lucy's dehumidifier was clocking up overtime and her beanbag suffered from over-use syndrome. She worked hard to concertina her work into two weeks instead of four, and Beth was happy to pick up the slack (*"You go, girl. Someone's got to have some fun around here and that someone appears not to be me."*). Steve-o strung out his approval of Lucy's leave, reluctantly giving her the nod a week before take-off, after which the week became a blur.

Finally, Lucy shut her flat door just as the incessant Auckland rains poured down with a violent fervour. She took one last look at her ticket print-out before she put them in her bag and got into the back seat of the taxi. They were there, in her hands: August 3 AKL: LAX: GAT and back again two weeks later.

Escape.

Chapter Fourteen

Two screaming queens greeted a shattered Lucy at Gatwick

Airport after she'd convinced the pursed-lipped airport controller that no, she wasn't emigrating and she yes, had somewhere to stay. Breaking into the light, airy UK summer was a stark contrast to the stuffy tin tube in the sky she had been stuck in for nearly 24 hours.

Her orange-tinted twin brothers were packed tight into far-too-similar Dolce & Gabbana jeans and even tighter D&G t-shirts. Bobby had a pale denim jean jacket flung over his shoulder.

Kit was holding a sign: *Miss L. S. D.*, which he dropped along with his cool when he saw his big sister. He picked her up and twirled her round, managing to kick over a bright pink One Direction tweenie suitcase on the way. *'Lucky!'* he screamed. *'My Lucky Star!'*

Bobby came up beside them and cast an eye over her non-designer luggage. He harrumphed and elbowed his big brother. *'My turn...'* Bobby nudged, leaning in for what turned out to be the tighter hug of

the two. 'Lucky, you old bitch, you look like utter shit! 'Turbulence in cattle class?' He burst into a smile despite himself.

'I love you too, Bobby,' Lucy grinned and patted his fussy hair in a way she knew he'd hate. 'Now get my bags and get me the hell out of here. To the beach!' she exclaimed, already tasting her first pint.

'To the beach!' the tanned two chorused, all three parading out to the grey train platform, bumping into weary travellers and waving and winking to uniformed trolley-dollies that the twins knew (and apparently they knew a lot of them).

The trio bundled into the tired train carriage bar and ordered nasty white wine in sharp plastic cups and three packets of salt and vinegar Walker's crisps. During the half-hour trip to Brighton they bumped and rattled past dark brick abodes and sunlit English wild flowers waving their welcomes in the light summer breeze.

The wine enveloped Lucy and she relaxed into her sticky velvet seat. She smiled at her clacking brothers as they wittered on about Jonah, Jao, Rowan and Perdu, known collectively as "*The Gays*". They talked about various summer bed-hopping, which kept to a strict revolving door policy.

Of course.

Oh, that's right, Lucy thought as she supped on her second wine, it was Thursday today: weekend's eve.

Lucy was allotted time enough to shower, no nap, a change of clothes and walk with her brothers the few short blocks to their Kemptown local, the Queen's Arms. There she met The Gays, minus Jao, who was running a titch late. The outdoor table was loaded with pints of Sussex Best Bitter where the six lads huddled round screeching about their most recent summer dalliances.

Rainbow flags flapped in the warm breeze and the bar buzzed inside and out. Lucy soaked in the bustling Brighton town as it was readying itself for a week of antics and influx of out-of-towners leading up to the annual Gay Pride event the following weekend.

Later that night at Revenge, following several bottles of Cristal, a few rounds of amyl nitrate and a few lines of the good stuff, Lucy was officially anointed fag-hag by The Gays for the duration of her stay.

The next morning, Lucy was pelted awake by the double whammy wallop of jet-lag combined with an alcohol and drug hangover. The hairs on her toes hurt. She rolled over and fainted back into aching slumber.

By midday she could hear the unwelcome noise of her brothers banging about the place.

'Lucky! Get up! We want to play; we want to play with you,' Kit trilled through Lucy's door killing any chance of further sleep. '—you alone in there?'

She could barely separate her lips to speak. 'Of course I'm alone,' she groaned, her head pounding. 'We were at a gay bar for fuck's sake. And has hot as some of those lipstick lesbians were, they could smell my-hetero-self from 50 paces.'

'Oh darling, boo-hoo... first night in a foreign country and you still can't get laid,' called Bobby.

'Bobby, you're such a vile creature. However did you and Kit once share an egg? Now get me a coffee before I set your better half on you. I'm dying in here.'

'Ooo, I'm *so* scared,' he replied opening the door and poking his tongue out. 'Oh God!' he stepped back in mock surprise. 'Oh, the horror! The horror! Kit...' he called to his twin behind him, '—come and look at this. A jealous drag queen on a war path's attacked our sister. Oh, the horror of it!'

Bobby lifted his hand to his forehead in theatrical fashion. Lucy gathered what little energy she had and launched herself out of bed at Bobby, patting and rubbing his hair with playful fury.

'*No!*' Bobby recoiled, stepping back against the wall. 'Don't! *Aaarrgh!*' he screeched and patted his head. 'Kit... help me. It's touching The Hair. Not The Hair, Lucy, not *The Hair!*' he gasped. 'It took me an absolute age to get this right this morning... Oh God, I'll have to shower and start all over again. All over again! Lucy. *Really!*' he humped.

‘Not The Hair, Lucy,’ Kit mimicked, leaning against the doorway grinning, a white singlet pulled taut across his buff bod. ‘Anything but The Hair,’ he laughed and leapt forwards to join in, tickling his twin brother until all three were rolling around on the floor and laughing.

‘But I’m serious; I will actually have to shower now,’ Bobby huffed, feeling around his damaged ’do and glaring at his siblings. They were sitting on Lucy’s bed, their breath slowing down to normal.

‘I’ll have to start all over again. Every last strand, because *you* two ruined it.’ Bobby looked down his nose and sniffed down his nose, wagging his finger at Lucy and Kit in turn.

‘And *you*, you do look ridiculous Lucy,’ he added with a huff. ‘Actually. No one’s ever going to want to wake up to this situation.’ He gestured circles around Lucy’s face. ‘Seriously, have you thought about having work?’

Kit leaned across Lucy and punched Bobby in the arm.

‘Bobby...’ he cautioned, ‘—we talked about this...’

‘—what?’ Bobby pursed his lips and arched an eyebrow, tilting his head towards his twin. ‘I’m being *serious*! What? Really, she looks a fright; she should *do* something about it while she still can. I’m serious.’

Lucy looked from one brother to the other. ‘What? You talked about what exactly?’ she furrowed.

‘Bobby promised to be nice,’ Kit replied, glaring at his twin. ‘Bobby, you promised... Lucy is not “*This situation*”, she’s our sister.’

‘He what?’ Lucy asked looking at Bobby.

Her younger brother pouted and looked down at the floor and shrugged. ‘Yes, well, *despite* the obvious, I thought I’d *try* to be at least civil. On occasion. If not provoked.’ A smirk spread across his face. ‘But really? Seriously?’ he looked up at Lucy then to Kit. ‘Look at her? Just *look* at her? How can I possibly be nice to *that*?’

Bobby then pulled Lucy into a headlock and roll backwards with her onto the bed laughing and reaching down to give her a sharp Chinese burn.

When Bobby left for the shower, Lucy joined Kit in the kitchen. She climbed up on a stool at the breakfast bar and watched her brother grind coffee beans for the stove-top espresso, while the first round was already brewing.

She sighed.

‘He doesn’t have to do it, you know,’ she said of her absent sibling, breathing in the Arabica bean scent. ‘He doesn’t have to be so mean. Actually, he doesn’t.’

Kit looked up at Lucy. ‘I know Lucky, but he does, he does do it—he thrives on it— that’s how it is with him and you know it. He’s like mum in that way, they’re both our bitches,’ he smiled. ‘You can’t change him—or her for that matter— so you just have to deal with it, Lucky. For me baby, deal with it for me.’

Kit rubbed Lucy’s back. His hands were paddles like their dad’s. Her eyes welled up and first one, then another tear trickled down each of her flushed cheeks. She rubbed them away with a tatty pyjama sleeve.

‘You sound like dad...’ she sniffed.

‘You know it’s just his way of showing he loves you. You know he’s always trying to prove himself to you, he’s just got a fucked up way of doing it. He’s hurtful at times, but he’s not trying to be, not really. Really, truly, he’s not.’

Lucy lowered her head as another tear swam down her cheek.

‘He’s not, Lucky! You’re just going to have to harden up, my Lucky Star. And that’s all there is to it.’ Kit nudged the tearful Lucy and placed his head on her shoulder.

‘I’m soft, Kit,’ Lucy sighed and leaned into him. ‘You know I’m soft. Even if I harden up I’ll still be soft. Think of me like spreadable butter... Ooo... that came out wrong.’

The pair laughed and Kit poured Lucy’s coffee as Bobby emerged in a waft of perfumed man-scent.



The afternoon of wandering around The Lanes, poking around like tourists enabled Lucy to find her bearings. Then the twins took Lucy for an early dinner at The Office pub which served “*the best Thai food in town*”, apparently. In their travels, Lucy had stumbled upon a flyer for Indie band Lunar Lock which she planned to see after dinner. Lucy’s brothers were already committed to an early poker session with The Gays.

‘You can come,’ Kit urged. Bobby scowled.

‘No, no, I’m keen to see Lunar Lock at The Hydrant –I can’t believe they’re playing actually– and you boys should stick to the plans you made with The Gays.’

So, the three departed ways.

Lucy walked through a wall of smoke and excited chatter at the entrance to The Hydrant, and crammed into the stuffy pub. She paid a fiver for a wrist stamp that said ‘Party whore’ (“*yeah, sorry 'bout that*” drawled the door girl without so much as a flicker of emotion showing on her pale, over-made-up face), and squeezed her way to the bar to line up for a pint.

‘God, you get all sorts in this place,’ came a distinctly Kiwi voice to her right.

‘Huh?’ she replied, turning and looking up. ‘Spiro!’ she exclaimed. ‘What the hell? You’re *here*?’

Spiro grinned and grabbed her into a tight hug, lifting her off the ground just as a pierced surly bar girl came for her order.

‘Two pints of Sussex thanks,’ Spiro nodded, ‘–on Noddy’s tab.’

The girl skulked off wearing a face like a cat’s bum.

‘Oh thanks,’ Lucy grinned.

‘And yes, I’m here,’ he continued, his own grin reaching from ear to ear. ‘I told you I was here. You being here is the surprise. What are *you* doing in Blighty?’

‘Oh you know, heard this gig was on and couldn’t resist. A fiver for a gig these days is a bargain,’ Lucy giggled.

‘Oh yes, a bargain,’ he laughed. ‘And if I’d known I’d have got you on the door list, then it would’ve just cost the two grand airfare and the twenty quid to get down here on the train. Bargain!’ He patted Lucy on the back laughing.

After the cat’s bum bar girl returned with their pints, they jostled their way to the side of the stage juggling and spilling their drinks along the way, adding their bit to the sticky floor.

Spiro put his pint down at the side of the low stage and pulled out his camera from the bag hidden behind his back.

‘You enjoy the gig, I’m actually here to do some work,’ he smiled with kind eyes. ‘Gotta earn these pints,’ he winked.

Despite the oversized drummer near-melting at the back of the stage, Lunar Lock fed the frenzied crowd with two encores. Spiro captured the act as discretely as a photographer can while dominating the best spaces at the front of the stage. Then as soon as they downed tools, the bar cleared out leaving a small motley crew to sup off promoter Noddy’s tab.

At around one, Lucy’s yawns overtook her words. ‘I really had better go,’ she attempted to stifle a yawn. ‘I’m pooped, can hardly keep my eyes open.’

‘So soon?’

‘Yeah, only flew in yesterday and the boys took me out for a big night last night with all the trimmings. And a big night with them is a *big* night.’

‘Ha! Cool,’ he nodded. ‘I’m off to catch the last train back to London soon anyway, so I suppose you’re off the hook. But what are the odds of catching you here. Awesome,’ he smiled. ‘You made my night, Lucy.’

‘Oh you flatterer. But yeah, cool to hang with you too, Spiro.’

‘Any chance you can get up to London? I’ve got a friend’s spare room in their pad in Shoreditch. Come up. I can actually get you on door lists up there. I have power in London doncha know.’

‘I’m sure you do,’ Lucy smiled. ‘Dunno yet, but here,’ she scribbled the boys’ landline number on the back of a moistened cardboard drinks

coaster; the pen carved into the spongy surface, ‘–you can get me here. And my New Zealand mobile’s working, but that costs lots to call me. So, umm, yeah.’

‘Great,’ he smiled and winked, and folded the coaster into his jacket pocket. ‘I’ll definitely be calling this number.’



Lucy put her key through her brothers’ door half an hour later. She smelled of cigarettes and beer, and was bursting for the loo. The hallway was dark except for a halo of light streaming out from the closed lounge door. She heard the thump-thump-thump of house music in the distance. She untied her sneakers and tip-toed down the wooden hall to the bathroom.

‘Lucky ya slapper, get out here,’ Lucy heard her brother Bobby yell through the toilet door a few moments later almost making her leap from her perch.

‘The phone’s for you and sounds local. Who’d *you* give *our* number out to tonight?’

Lucy pressed the flush button. ‘For fuck’s sake Bobby, I’m on the loo!’ she shouted over the noisy gush of water. Her heart rushed; it must be Spiro. She hadn’t given the boys number out to anyone else, least not that she could remember.

‘Lucy!’ Bobby yelled again, as if it would help to speed things up.

‘Alright, alright, keep your receding-hair on,’ she groaned as she ran her hands under the hot water nearly scalding herself in the process. They really ought to get the water heating turned down, she thought, save a fortune on gas.

She emerged from the bathroom and Bobby handed her the portable phone. His face was at once disapproving and mischievous. He winked.

‘Hello?’ she answered.

‘Luce, thank God, it’s Spiro.’

‘Yeah, hey.’ Lucy sighed with relief. ‘You alright? What’s up? You on the train?’

Lucy walked to her bedroom and plopped onto the bed. She rolled onto her back and stared up at the yellow smoke-stained ceiling. Only in England, she sighed.

‘Yeah well I would be,’ Spiro let out a heavy breath, ‘—if I hadn’t downed one more shot at Noddy’s request and walked to the station from The Lanes instead of catching a taxi. Long story short, I missed the last train.’

‘Oh bugger...’

The ceiling could definitely do with a good clean, she thought. Or a lick of paint. Maybe she could get up a ladder as a thank you for having her to stay. Perhaps she’d suggest it.

‘Yeah, bugger’s right.’

‘Oh...’ Lucy’s brain sparked into gear. ‘Oh, so you have nowhere to stay? Umm, you could come here then,’ she sounded unconvinced, ‘—yeah, come and stay here. I’m in the spare room but there’s room in here for two. I mean, there’s a double bed, so yeah, um, there’s room for you. If you want, that is. Not very private, but yunno...’

‘Really? Oh that’d be a God send,’ he replied. ‘And I’d get to meet your bros finally.’

‘Bonus!’ she replied sarcastically. ‘May I apologise in advance for them. The more vicious they are the more they like you. Really.’

Spiro laughed.

‘Well, we’ll see about that. Maybe I can win them over with my charm, my personality. I’ve done it before, you know. Some people actually like me of their own free will.’

‘I doubt that very much. They’re total bitches. They hate me and they hate people like you even more: hot straight men who like rock music. You haven’t a chance. You can’t even name drop to impress them. Although that kiss a few years ago with Kate Moss just might get a flicker of respect. You haven’t kissed Lady Gaga by chance have you?’

Spiro snorted. 'No, not likely. She's not really lurking back stage at any rock gigs I go to. Didn't you go to her after party in Auckland a couple of years ago?'

'Yeah, but that *"was so last year"* according to my bros. And they were deeply unimpressed that I didn't even say hello to her. Danced to *Telephone* a metre away from her, though.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, go figure.'

'Anyway, so can I come to your bro's? D'you reckon it'd be OK?'

'Yeah, sure. Get in a taxi and I'll prime the ground before you get here. And Spiro?' Lucy sat up.

'Yeah?'

'I'm *really* sorry!'

Fifteen minutes later Lucy welcomed Spiro with a kiss as he entered her brother's low-ceilinged Kemptown flat. Half a second later Kit and Bobby had clambered in behind her and hijacked him.

'Oh, so *you're* the mystery man Lucy didn't want us to meet,' Kit gushed giving Spiro the slow once-over before leaning into him for a European triple kiss. 'Double-oh-dial-one-for heaven,' he purred winking at Lucy.

Spiro laughed and looked at Lucy then back to Kit.

'Hi,' he said. 'Thanks for having me to stay at such short notice. Got caught out. My own fault, but yunno, thanks. I'm back to London tomorrow so, yeah, won't get in your way.'

Kit nodded, grinning. 'Oh no, please do get in our way. Always happy to up the man-quota at Chez Nous-a-Deux. And if Lucy kicks you out for farting, there's always room in my boudoir.' He pursed his lips and flicked his eyebrows up and down.

'Kit! You're rotten. Ignore him,' she smiled at Spiro.

He was wearing his usual fitted black jeans, black Ramones t-shirt and worn black leather converse and black leather biker jacket. She found herself peering at his Ramones belt buckle.

Kit followed her gaze. 'What's this,' he said grabbing at the metal plate, his fingers purposefully grazing Spiro's crotch. 'No doubt one of those rock bands you photograph.'

Spiro laughed. 'I wish,' he said smiling. 'Nah, the Ramones called it quits after about twenty years in the mid-90s and the original line-up's all dead now. But yeah, that'd have been awesome, a dream.' His smile lit up the tiny entrance way.

Bobby, silent until now, leaned against the wall and humped. He looked Spiro up and down scowling and thrust out a limp hand.

'Pleased, I'm sure.' He quickly spirited his blue-eyed glare to Kit. 'Hadn't we better get out of here,' he said putting one hand on his hip. 'Our fans will be expecting us. Oh,' he stopped, looking at Lucy and Spiro in turn, 'and don't be "*double-oh-heavening*" all over our flat thank *you* very much. This place thumps to the beat of fag only!'

Kit smacked him affectionately, 'Bobby!'

'What?' Bobby gaped. 'It's *true!* The last time this place saw any boy-on-girl action was when Diamond-Ken stuck that stick on v-jay-jay on his butt and all The Gays had a crack –pun intended. It was just like a rugby league after-party only with more balls.'

Bobby pursed his lips and blinked at the three sets of eyes peering at him. '*What?*'

'Bobby!' Kit and Lucy cried in unison.

'Well it's true!' he sighed dramatically turning on his heels and mincing noisily down the wooden hallway.

'Really, you're such a whore, Bobby,' Kit called out. 'Don't mind him, Spiro,' he said as he turned back, 'the only cock he's had lately was a Sunday roast two weeks ago, and it's starting to make him tetchy.'

'Oh my God, I am so sorry about them.' Lucy collapsed on her bed laughing as soon as her brothers had left to meet The Gays in a sweet haze of Dolce & Gabbana and Gucci for Men.

Spiro grabbed a flannel long-sleeved top out of his camera case, putting it over his t-shirt and couldn't stop laughing. 'I wouldn't worry about them,' he smiled down at her. 'They're not so bad and they clearly

adore you Lucy, or they wouldn't feel the need to be so protective of you, or so flirtatious in Kit's case.'

'Yeah right,' Lucy shook her head.

'They do!' Spiro laughed. 'It's written all over their faces. They're just not comfortable in their own skin yet, Bobby especially. They're young, Luce. They'll grow into it.' He sat down on the bed beside her. He smelled musky, in contrast to the overpowering acidic floral pong of her brothers.

Lucy lay back down on the bed, grabbing at pillows to prop her head up. 'Yeah, maybe you're right.'

But she doubted it.

'So, come on Cinderella, what are we going to do?' Spiro slapped Lucy's arm. 'We're on the other side of the world, it's summer and my train mishap has opened up a whole night of possibility.'

She rolled over to face him and yawned. 'What, now?' she asked. 'But we just got home. Aren't you tired?'

'Hell no, and yes now, it's barely two a.m. nana...' Spiro jumped up and down on the bed beside Lucy grinning.

'Oh shut up you.' Lucy said sitting up and running fingers through her hair teasing more life into it. 'Yeah, I suppose you're right... God, you're as bad as my brothers. Why is sleep so out of favour these days? I'm so frickin *tired*.'

'Yes I'm right, and I'll sleep when I'm dead and so should you. We're a stone's throw from some of the craziest clubs in the country. Let's go get rip-snortingly drunk and dance like Muppets 'til we do actually drop dead in a heap of happiness.' Spiro rolled into Lucy and rubbed her hair.

'Don't! Don't!' she screeched taken by surprise. 'Not the hair! Not my hair!' she wailed, pleased he didn't know how like Bobby she sounded.

'Nana, nana!' he teased frisking her until they fell about in fits of giggles.

'OK, OK, you win,' she panted. 'I'll come, I'll come. *Christ!* You and my brothers, between you three all my free will is sucked entirely away.'

When they stepped outside, the summer's evening was still a temperate 18 degrees. They giggled breathily as they clattered down misshapen, cracked steep concrete steps to the beachfront. At the base, as they stepped onto the pebbled beach, they inhaled the sharp sea salt air.

'Look,' said Spiro, pointing at the full moon.

'Wow!' Lucy's breath started to slow. 'That's awesome. It's full, right?'

'Yeah, or near enough to. Let's call it full.'

'Yeah,' she laughed. 'Lets.'

Revellers were coming and going in all directions and a smattering of orange glowing bonfires lit up the long bay in both directions. Lucy heard the din of chatter and echo of sporadic laughter and burst into a smile. A lone fire poi dancer whirred and whirled as they passed by.

Lucy caught the pungent fishy stench of cuttlefish—at least, she hoped it was cuttlefish—and sighed happily. 'How can people can live in London when this crazy place is on their doorstep?' she asked kicking a few large pebbles underfoot and grabbing Spiro's hipflask from his back pocket and taking a swig of whiskey.

'I would have pegged you for a London girl over a Brighton lass any day,' Spiro took the flask out of Lucy's hand and gulped back a shot.

'Yeah, well, I would have thought that too, but nah, the sea's in my blood now. I reckon if I'm away from it for too long I'm likely to go postal.'

Lucy smiled up at Spiro. He turned to face her, his smile glowed in the bright moon light.

'Yeah, right,' he laughed. 'Shall we sit, earth girl?'

The pair walked towards the sea and sat down on the bumpy cool stones. Lucy shuffled to get comfortable, the pebbles clanking into place under her. She took another heady sip of whiskey, wincing just as she did every time, and placed the bottle down beside her, jammed upright into the pebbles.

A few remaining punters standing near a glimmering fire kicked it out, one pouring water over it. It steamed and hissed as the group crunched noisily away laughing and yelling to someone ahead in the distance.

To their right, the night lights on Brighton Pier twinkled in the quiet breeze. The large bright moon cast a shimmering yellow-white triangle of light on the sea stretching far out into the black horizon. The sound of the slow waves, risen high up onto the beach, hypnotised the pair into a tranquil, whiskey stupor.

Spiro was the first to speak. 'So Luce, tell me,' he paused in the near-silence, '—whatever happened to that bloke you were seeing? Willy?'

Lucy coughed. 'Willy? That man of whom we shouldn't speak,' she laughed, her head woozy with booze.

'Oh, woops...' Spiro lay back onto his elbows and turned his head to face her, '—my bad?'

Lucy stared at a place in the distance past Spiro's shoulder. 'No, no.' Lucy shook her head, and brought her eyes to Spiro's. She lay down onto the pebbles, placing one arm under her neck moving her gaze to the indigo sky above her. 'No, not like that, he, umm, got married actually.'

'Married?' Spiro dropped down beside her, one arm resting against hers, and stared at Lucy's sky. 'What the hell? But you were...'

'—yeah, dating. Nah, he got married. In love apparently. Not with me. Yep... yeah, so...' Lucy exhaled slowly with a tiny shake of her head, '—so... how 'bout them All Blacks, aye?'

Spiro laughed and placed a hand on Lucy's. 'Yep, how 'bout them All Blacks,' he smiled and tossing away the pebble he held in his other hand.

As the moon approached its most lofty perch high in the sky, Lucy and Spiro had reached a happy stupor thanks to the metamorphic powers of whiskey. The black and golden tide had drawn high up on the pebbles and was lapping close at their feet. Lucy sat up breathing in the crisp summer's night.

A group drew from behind them, the sweet smell of marijuana and excited crackle of stones preceding their arrival.

‘Wanna spliff, yeah?’ said a husky North London public school voice at odds with its forced South London intonations.

Lucy and Spiro turned their heads to greet the sudden visitors. A pale elfin girl emerged from the middle of the bunch, a tiny hand holding out a glowing joint. She was adorned in a rainbow tasselled cardigan with room enough for two. It hung off a fine bare shoulder and was worn over pastel stripped leggings. She was barefoot, naked-footed but for a solo twinkling toe-ring.

‘Sure, thanks.’ Lucy reached for it smiling.

She sucked on the tobacco and hash medley and passed it to Spiro. Pungent smoke billowed around them and the group of four or five sat down beside them in a silent cluster.

After what could have been an hour but was probably ten minutes, one of them stood up and produced a fire poi and accelerant from what appeared to be from nowhere. At this, the elphine girl –whose name was apparently India, changed from her given name of Alexandria (*“I changed it to reflect the new spiritually in tune me, yeah?”*)– sat up and clapped like a trained seal.

She nudged Lucy who was starting to fade. ‘You’ve got to watch Indigo, yeah, best at fire poi anywhere in the world, yeah.’

‘Did you know that fire poi came from New Zealand, from the Maori?’ Lucy said sitting up to watch.

In the moonlight Lucy saw India’s face drop. ‘Huh?’ replied India, who couldn’t have been older than 17.

‘In New Zealand. By the Maori,’ Lucy added, ‘–fire poi was invented.’

‘Yeah, well I don’t know about that,’ she shrugged, ‘–but Indigo is the best in, like, the world, yeah.’

A didgeridoo was magicked out of a patterned cloth bag by one of the male members of the group and the show began.

The rhythmic lilting waves and guttural didgeridoo were punctuated by the gentle sound of percussive circling flames. Lucy lay down into the crook of Spiro’s shoulder and promptly drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

Lucy shivered awake. Spiro's arm rested heavily on her waist with his other arm serving as her pillow. Their bodies had rolled to face each other and their knees touched. Spiro's breath tickled Lucy's nose.

She eased herself out of Spiro's embrace. He woke from his slumber and looked at her, smiling. She was running a licked finger under each of her eyes.

'Morning,' he squinted up at her. The cool sun had long-started its ascent and pierced his tired eyes. The beach had drawn its usual dotted crowd of early morning hopefuls who were scanning the beach with metal detectors.

Lucy swallowed and looked around. The group had gone. The dawn was pink and breezy. 'Cripes, what time is it?' she shivered.

Spiro took his iPhone out of his pocket and tapped at the screen, peering through reddened eyes. 'Early. Six.'

‘God, I can’t believe we slept out here. I’m so cold,’ she wrapped her arms around herself, drawing up her knees. She swallowed. ‘Any whiskey left? I’m gasping.’

‘That won’t help.’

‘I know, but anything’s better than nothing,’ she shrugged and thrust out her hand, wiggling her fingers. ‘Gimme’

Spiro passed Lucy the flask as he sat up and she gulped hungrily. ‘That,’ she scrunched up her face, ‘–was disgusting.’

Spiro laughed. ‘Hate to say I told you so...’

‘Pfft. What time’s your train?’

‘Whenever really, so long as I’m in London sometime later today, but yeah, I’ll be pretty much fucked all day,’ he laughed, ‘–for a change.’

He grabbed the flask out of Lucy’s hand and waved it. ‘May as well start as I mean to go on.’

When Lucy got to her brothers’ pad after saying goodbye to Spiro, the house was silent. A dark-haired, olive-skinned Jao was asleep on the couch. Or was it Perdu? One of The Gays anyway, and whoever it was, was stark-bollock naked. Facing down, thank goodness. The sheet that had covered him had long ago fallen to the ground beside him.

Lucy slipped off her shoes and slunk down the hallway to the bathroom. The house was littered with half-emptied champagne bottles, cigarette butts and there it was, a used condom. Nice.

In the mirror Lucy peered at the dark make-up scars below her eyes and her grey sallow skin. She peeled off her clothes and leapt shivering into a slowly heating shower. Lucy drank in the hot streams and thought about Spiro. Actually thought about him. Had last night meant anything? Her thoughts melted into tiredness. Tinged with slight nausea.

After her warming shower Lucy scuttled down the hall loosely wrapped in a plush white bath sheet clutching her clothes. Jao (or was it Perdu?) stirred and rolled over onto his back exposing a semi-erect penis. Turns out it was Perdu.

Her room was warm and muggy and carried the faint whiff of sex. The early sunlight filtered through the thin cream-coloured curtains.

Lucy dropped onto the bed heavy with sleep and fell into a deep slumber.

This time the boys let Lucy sleep in. At 2 o'clock she emerged into a silent spotless sunny kitchen. Windows left ajar let in the fresh, warm air. Lucy picked up a note off the bench written in Kit's hand. It was sitting on top of a golden croissant and had become translucent with fat.

'Lucky Star,' it began, 'we're on the beach with The Gays. Head down the steps and go to the right a little, before the Pier. We have champagne and food. Bring nothing but a bikini and a smile, K & B xx'

And so this was how the days continued. Playing at night, sleeping into the day and enjoying the balmy summer afternoons on the beach amidst a gathering of tanned, buff boys. With her sunglasses on, they all looked pretty much the same. And Lucy soon realised she was the only vegetarian at a sausage fest.

Half-hearted promised trips to Europe washed out with the tide and Lucy and the gang were content to bask in the hazy English seaside summer.

Five days into her stay, after a few sporadic texts with Spiro, the pair finally made concrete plans for Lucy to head to London on Spiro's days off.

Spiro greeted Lucy at London Bridge on a late Wednesday morning. Lucy breathed in the stench of the old train station. At 27 degrees, by London's stuffy standards, the day was very hot indeed. The air congealed. For a moment Lucy pined for her place among lazy boys stretched out in drowsy rows beside the sea, taking refreshing dips when the urge took her.

'I grabbed a picnic from Harrods,' Spiro began, '—salmon terrine and other stuff that I can hardly pronounce,' he grinned. 'We can eat in front of the Tate, if you want. I thought you might wanna take a look in. Oh, and I have us on a door for a gig at the Scala tonight, if that's cool, and I'm not actually working this one.'

‘Cool. Wow, you’re sorted. Thanks. Who’s playing?’

‘Clackers. A total no-name at the moment, you won’t have heard of them, but awesome apparently, and rumoured to be in with a chance of the Mercury Prize. So we can count ourselves amongst the in-the-know crowd after this,’ he grinned goofily causing Lucy to laugh.

Half-naked bodies were packed onto plush, sweet-smelling grass in front of the Tate Modern. The dirty brown Thames scurried past transporting various water vehicles on its busy wake. The towering industrial brick building blocked any chance there may have been of a breeze coming from the south.

Some teenage girls in barely-there bikinis lay sandwiched on towels talking loudly beside the only gap Lucy and Spiro could find. Their middle class accents shouted out all manner of sexual perversion and Lucy was transported to a real life episode of *Skins*. Not long after, their favourite subject, the boys, turned up to squeeze in beside them. Unabashed fondling diverted Lucy and Spiro’s attention further.

‘Shall we take a look inside,’ Spiro said to break the trance, after they had devoured their posh picnic.

Lucy took her eyes off a teenaged male hand rubbing a pale flat teenage female stomach and looked up at Spiro. He had some food on his chin.

‘Your chin,’ she indicated with her hand.

‘Huh?’ he wiped in the general area missing the tiny lump of what appeared to be salmon mousse.

‘Here,’ she said leaning over to wipe his chin with a napkin.

‘God, thanks,’ he said seeing that he’d attracted the bored attention of two teens who had, a minute earlier, been deep in the act of noisy snogging. ‘Cripes, now they think you’re my mother.’

At which Lucy flicked him with her cardigan.

‘They do *not* think that,’ she screeched. ‘I’m not even older than you, am I?’

Spiro laughed, his eyes squinting into the midday haze. ‘Oh I can’t tell you that. A gentleman never reveals his age.’

‘Pfft. Come on, let’s go in.’

The cool air inside the Tate was at once pleasant and shocking. Goose pimples appeared and disappeared from Lucy’s skin. Spiro grabbed Lucy’s hand and lead her to his favourite permanent collection of Picasso works where they sat on a wide flat backless stool leaning into each other.

Lucy breathed in the moment.

After a few hours walking from floor to floor people-watching and both admiring and laughing at the pieces that purported to be contemporary art, they left to amble along the Queen’s Walk along the southern embankment of the Thames. There they explored silent, unpopulated nooks and crannies, and Lucy marvelled at the grey stone ruins of a 16th century castle, in disrepair but no less mesmerising. It spirited her back to her childhood when she’d always harboured a fantasy that she was a downtrodden orphaned medieval princess.

As they approached the London Eye, Lucy’s turned to Spiro, clutching at his arm. ‘Oooh, can we, can we?’

‘Ha ha,’ he laughed. ‘Sure. Why not?’

It was nudging five p.m. in the peak of a perfect summer day. The queue was bumper-to-bumper but moved quickly, and soon Lucy and Spiro stepped single file onto Europe’s tallest Ferris Wheel as it continued its slumbering rotation.

When the cool interior air of the capsule hit Lucy’s skin it sent a rippling shudder through her body. While some of her fellow passengers leapt to the seating, most, like Lucy, rushed at the edges to watch London grow smaller and spread farther until some parts disappeared out of sight altogether.

Spiro stood close beside her. ‘Amazing, aye?’

‘Yeah. So cool. Makes London look so much leafier and greener than it does at ground level.’

Spiro chuckled. ‘And way less dirty and littered.’

Lucy laughed.

‘I’ve been coming up here to think,’ he continued. ‘Getting high up reminds me I’m so little, so nothing.’

‘You’re not nothing.’

‘Oh, I don’t mean nothing in a bad way. I mean, like, fleeting. That in the scheme of all of life, I’m just a speck captured in a moment of time. Just means I have to get on with it, yunno?’

‘Yeah,’ Lucy looked at him and smiled. ‘Yeah. I know what you mean. I go up to Mt Eden for the same thing. Though,’ she turned her gaze to the sparkling view of a tiny London below, ‘it’s not quite like this.’

Spiro laughed shaking his head. ‘No, nothing’s quite like this. This is its very own magical spectacle.’ He put his hand on Lucy’s shoulder and they stood in silence.

After the half hour ride –which felt more like five minutes– they disembarked and walked slowly in the same contented silence towards the bridge that would take them across the Thames to the Tube.

Midway along the bridge’s traverse, Lucy and Spiro came to a halt as their attention drifted to the busy brown waterway below. An elderly couple behind them tisked their disapproval and sidestepped the pair as they passed them by.

Spiro turned to catch Lucy’s eyes. For a moment she thought he was going to kiss her.

‘This is nice, Lucy. Really nice.’ He smiled

She smiled back at him.

‘Thanks heaps for coming up,’ he continued. ‘I’ve been so bloody mad busy; having you up on my day off is awesome. More than awesome, actually.’ He burst into a wide smile.

Lucy felt a trickle of sweat descend from her armpit and journey down her left side. ‘Yeah, I’m glad I came up. It’s good to see something a little more inspiring than a whole lot of meat and two vege packed into teeny tiny Speedos.’ Lucy meant it. She leaned forward into the side rails. Her bare arm touched Spiro’s.

‘Mind you, those kids back there were not exactly shy,’ he grinned. ‘Were we like that? Our generation?’

‘As teenagers? No, I don’t think so.’ Lucy shook her head. ‘Good to be so free though, I suppose. But cripes what’s with the hurry to grow up? I’d do anything to be a teenager again but knowing what I know now. Like knowing that I was amazing just as I was, and that sex would come in its own sweet time. That I didn’t need to rush it all and I could stay being young for a little while longer.’

‘Yeah,’ Spiro nodded. ‘I sure do. Relationships, aye? They bring a whole truck load of baggage with them, huh?’ he sighed.

‘Oh shit, I completely forgot,’ Lucy stepped back and looked at her friend, ‘–weren’t you seeing someone? I’m so rude. I can’t believe I never asked you. I get so consumed with me sometimes.’

Spiro laughed and turned to watch a ferry pass underneath the rumbling bridge. A toddler joined him at his side to peer down at the water.

‘Yeah, you’re a terrible person, Lucy.’ He laughed. ‘But I’ve seen you since then anyway.’

‘When?’

‘When I was on that atrocious blind date at SPQR and you were there for Cat’s birthday’.

‘Oh yeah. And you bought champagne. Thanks so much for that.’

‘No problem. But yeah, before *that* I had been seeing Imogen. You know Imogen? The model. Breathtaking in photos, terrible in the flesh. As a girlfriend, I mean. She was deeply paranoid and extremely jealous. She’d die if she knew I was here with you.’

‘Really? With me?’

‘Yeah, you. Especially with you.’

‘Why me?’

‘Because she knows you’re special to me,’ he smiled looking to the water as the toddler toddled away. ‘But anybody, really. She’d seethe with jealousy when I was anyone that wasn’t her. Even spending time with my own mother ended up with me getting the third degree. I could hardly do a thing without having to stop and answer her texts all the time. Got up to about 20 in half an hour sometimes. I was scared to give her the flick though ’cos she has this thing where she cuts herself. It’s a

model things. Heaps of them do it. But yeah, she'd give herself tiny little nicks with a razor in places no one could see, like between her toes. But still, I felt responsible.'

'Between her toes? Ow! Really?'

'Yeah. She had them when I first met her. I found it endearing but then I realised that I was just caught up in her whole weird co-dependence thing.' He shrugged. 'The curses of the rich, huh?'

'Shit...'

'-nah, she's OK. She's fine. She ended it actually, whatever 'it' was. Said she couldn't trust me and she couldn't keep seeing someone she didn't trust. I still have a lot of time for her actually, but just not as a girlfriend.'

'Cripes.'

'Oh she's fine, really. It's a private school thing, those girls are way too high maintenance and intense for us normal folk. You sorta think they have it all. Actually they don't. All they want is love and approval like the rest of us but they've spent a life where their parents are too busy to notice them, so they look for it elsewhere. It's not for me, that's all. I need someone more grounded, someone who knows where they're at and where they're going. Well, to a degree.' Spiro shrugged.

'Yeah... So what did happen with that blind date?'

'Oh God, let's not talk about that, at least not sober. I'm gasping for a pint. Shall we?' he indicated the rest of the footbridge north.'

Lucy nodded. 'Ditto that,' she laughed. 'As Cat's says, I'm nearly exactly sober.'

Every space on the pavement outside the Bricklayers Arms in Shoreditch contained another elite member of London's übercool. The day's sun caused a pungent tar scent to leach from the road. Shoes were off, pale English hands held cigarettes high, bums and pints took up residence on every vacant concrete gap and laughter echoed through the narrow cobbled streets.

Lucy was conscious that she probably didn't measure up on the cool-o-metre, but was relieved to see that no one so much as glanced her way, deep as they were in zealous haze-hidden conversation.

Spiro emerged out of the pub carrying two pints and some Walker's crisps as Lucy scored a spare square of curb with room enough for two. Just.

'I forgot about this place,' she said huddling in with Spiro, happily grabbing one of the pints. 'I used to come here when I lived off Brick Lane a few years ago. When did everyone get so *cool*?'

Spiro looked around sipping his beer. He followed Lucy's gaze to a lanky, sickly looking female who resembled a lollipop. On her head she wore a yellow satin bow so large as to swamp her entire platinum white angle-cut, micro-bob, and wore a cream satin jumpsuit covered head to toe in a large red ladybird print, all finished with gleaming Kermit Frog green patent leather platform Mary Janes.

Spiro threw back his head in laughter. 'I see what you mean. But, what? And you're not cool?'

'Well...' she raised an eyebrow and indicated the group around them.

'Luce you do just fine...'

'-Fine?' she laughed. 'Fucked-up, Insecure, Neurotic and Emotional?'

'What? Oh, no. You know what I mean.' He flicked her shoulder. 'You're a babe, and you know it.'

One pint turned into three followed by a hazy short giggled walk to Spiro's mate's flat off Hoxton Square. No one was home.

'Shit. I gotta eat,' Lucy slurred. 'I'm fucked.'

'Yeah, you are too.'

'Shussh up. Ooo, is shussh up, like, a phrase or whatever? It should be.' She plonked on the couch in the steaming hot flat. 'I'm totally fucked. Fuck.'

'I'm not surprised,' he chortled. 'We haven't eaten since lunch apart from those crisps. And you've got nowhere for the alcohol to go, you're *tiny*!'

Lucy kicked off her shoes and stretched out across the couch. She looked over her shoulder at Spiro who had opened the fridge. 'What's in there? Can we eat, pleassss?'

'Cold spag bog?'

'Oh my God yessss.' Lucy's head wobbled a fervent yes. 'Cold mince hasss never sounded so good.'

Spiro threw together two large spaghetti bolognaise sandwiches on thick white bread and passed one to Lucy. He brought his own sandwich over and lifted Lucy's legs to join her on the couch, placing them back down on his lap.

'Where'sh the others?' Lucy asked stuffing down the sandwich, talking as she chowed down.

'Away. Monty –he owns this place– is in Spain, coming back sometime this week, I think, and Jemima, his flatmate, pretty much lives at her boyfriend's so I haven't actually seen her on this trip yet. Monty calls her the perfect flatmate. He pretty much has the place to himself. So, yeah.'

'Kiwis?'

'Nah, well Monty is, but Jemima's from here. Trustafarian.'

'A *what* now?'

'Trust fund kid. She's an artist apparently, that's one of hers,' Spiro nodded upwards at a very large, vibrant red and black acrylic painting of what appeared at first, second and third glance to be a very large vagina.

'Oh...' Lucy wobbled her head back to face Spiro and spluttered with laughter spitting out a speck of mince. 'Oh God sorry...' she laughed.

'Yes,' Spiro caught her eye and burst into a glinting smile, '–yes, it's a vagina.'

'Oh God...' she snorted and wiped her mouth. 'It's a vagina. Actually?'

'Yeah, it actually is. Funny, right?'

'That's an understatement,' she hiccoughed lurching forward holding her stomach with her free hand. 'It's terrible. And she's a what? Rastafarian?'

'*Trustafarian*. Rich kid. She's trying to find herself, apparently?'

‘By painting very big vaginas?’ Lucy continued, hiccupping. ‘So,’ she snorted, ‘—umm, does it help?’

Spiro fell into Lucy’s laughter. ‘Oh God, stop it. You’ve got me started now. It really is terrible isn’t it?’

Lucy’s legs shuddered up and down as Spiro laughed. She lost her breath. ‘I’m just... just so happy she’s not here —she’s not here is she?— ’cos I really don’t think I could look her in the eye. Like actually. Jemima the Vagina Painter.’

Spiro let out a raucous laugh.

‘Oh God, you don’t think...’ Lucy said amid the chortles.

‘—What?’ he replied.

‘—that it’s a self-portrait, do you?’

Lucy wasn’t sure if it was the fanny art, the laughter or the food but at last she felt more sober than when she’d first entered the flat.

She downed the pint of water Spiro passed her. ‘Oh God I so needed that.’ She leaned over and picked up a stack of records in a box beside some turntables. ‘Monty’s?’

‘Yeah,’ Spiro nodded as he collected the plates and rinsed them in the sink.

‘Good collection,’ she said thumbing through the records.

‘Yeah,’ Spiro agreed nodding and wiping his forehead with a damp hand. ‘That’s how we became friends actually. At uni, we kept seeing each other at the same gigs and a few beers later, without even thinking about it, we were mates.’

‘Cool. Ah! Nine Inch Nails, The Ramones, Mark Lanegan. Nice. Yeah, I can see how you two would get along. Music, the universal language huh?’ Lucy sat back on the couch facing Spiro. ‘So, umm, where shall I sleep?’

‘I guess you can take your pick, but I’m in there,’ Spiro indicated with his head a door off the lounge. ‘You can crash with me in Jemima’s or just use Monty’s.’

‘OK, cool. Umm, what time’s the gig? I wouldn’t mind crashing out for a bit before we go.’

It was just gone eight.
'I reckon we oughta leave bout half nine.'
'Cool, heaps of time to chill.'

At nine Spiro went into Monty's room to rouse a snoring Lucy. Her mouth gaped and her head rested on a dribbled patch of damp pillow.

'Luce,' he whispered, rolling her shoulder with a gentle touch. 'Luce, it's time to get up.'

She forced open heavy eyes. Spiro held out another pint of water. Lucy grabbed it and drank it down.

She was bursting for the loo and leapt out of bed. 'Crap! What's the time? I haven't made us late, have I? We haven't missed it?'

'It's nine,' he said patting her shoulder. 'Heaps of time. Don't stress.'
And there was.

Lucy was up, dressed and the pair were out the door before half nine. heading towards Old Street to catch the tube.

The Scala was a hot mosh of, in all likelihood, the same crowd as had swamped the Charlotte Road pub earlier; fashionistas, art students and Indie kids. Lucy spied a girl with a fluorescent green fascinator she knew she had definitely seen earlier.

Spiro and Lucy, well-practiced gig hands that they were, seamlessly worked their way through the throng, collecting tequila shots and pints along the way, and getting a stage view close to the front.

The Clackers, Lucy reckoned, were a kind of electronic punk Arctic Monkeys crossed with Black Keys and dash of Prince on the vocals. And the keyboardist was not bad either. They played four encores much to the satisfaction of the bouncing, sweaty cool crowd.

After The Clackers had downed tools for the final time, Lucy rushed to the loo. When she returned, Spiro was lined up at the bar with the tall skinny band members each holding a round of tequila shots in long-fingered hands.

'Luce,' Spiro held out a small glass, and together the group salted, drank, lemoned and winced.

‘Another?’ said Clacker One.
‘Yeah,’ nodded Clacker Two. ‘Keep ’em comin’ gov.’
And that was the last Lucy remembered.

Lucy woke to the scattergun memory of frenzied sex. With Spiro.
At least it was Spiro, she thought.
But bugger. That hadn’t been on the cards.

She peeled herself out of bed to go to the toilet. She was naked, and in the spare room. The spare room Spiro was staying in, not the room Lucy was supposed to be staying in, not Monty’s room.

Spiro was sound asleep. He looked peaceful as his slowly breathed in and slowly breathed out.

They’d definitely had sex. Oh God, she thought, please let me have used a condom. *I can’t even bloody remember.*

Oh.

Bugger.

Not again.

Lucy had to get out of there; she had to leave. She snuck back into Spiro’s room which took all the energy of her aching, shivering body.

She couldn’t believe she had done it again. The same recipe: tequila leading to sex she couldn’t remember. This time with Spiro. Guts. She couldn’t ruin it with Spiro. Not with Spiro.

She was careful not to bump the bed and wake a softly breathing Spiro. A quick recce told her it would take stealth and speed to collect her scattered clothing. *Jeans first, t-shirt next, knickers... oh hell, where are the knickers?* ... And there she plotted her escape.

‘–Hello you.’ Spiro leaned over and pulled Lucy into a breathy nuzzle.
Fuck.

‘Hey...’ she replied, a little raspy.

‘–Come back to bed; you’re freezing.’ His face smiled. He clasped at her weakened body.

Lucy flopped in beside him pulling her knees up against her chest facing away from him. Spiro started kissing her shoulder and moved up to her neck. She closed her eyes and rolled over into his musty masculine warmth. *Oh well, what the hell...*

By the time they woke from dozing, the pair was ravenous. And Lucy would have drunk from the dirty ol' Thames if it was put in front of her.

'Come on,' said an over-eager Spiro. 'Let's go to the caf and get a full English.'

'Oh God, you are joking, aren't you? Have I woken up in an episode of East Enders, have I?' The thought made Lucy feel more than just a little bit queasy.

'Gah!' Spiro laughed, patting her stomach. 'You could do with some meat on these bones.'

'Yeah, but that? Does it have to be *that*? Deep fried bread isn't exactly my idea of hangover recovery food? That and weak tea. Yuk!' She poked out her tongue.

'You're such a princess. Come on Princess Lucy, let's at least start with a shower,' he winked.

As they stumbled wet-haired out of the house they bumped smack bang into Monty.

'Monty mate,' Spiro gasped, relieved they were not still in the shower giving each other oral sex. Or still having sex over the arm of the couch.

'Yeah, I'm back.' Monty threw himself into a tight hug with Spiro, then turned to his companion. 'Lucy?' he grinned.

'Yeah, yes. Monty, this is Lucy.' Spiro put a light arm around her, giving her shoulder a tiny squeeze.

A bleary-eyed Lucy smiled back. 'Hey.'

Monty leapt forward and hugged her.

He was string bean tall, and looked as if he could snap in two like a dry twig. His black skinny jeans served only to emphasise his height and slender frame. Lucy coveted his black and white striped t-shirt. He was as pale as a leek and almost as translucent. His white-yellow hair was

pulled forward in thin tufts protecting a barely disguised receding hairline. The breeze caught the front-most tuft and lifted it hither and fro. His glass blue-green eyes flickered with a knowing twinkle much older than his youthful years.

‘Where you two off to, then?’ He grinned.

‘Well I want to go to the caf on Bethnal Green Road but Miss Princess wants something more like food.’

Monty laughed. ‘You two been on it then?’

Lucy detected a touch of the Cockney in his London-Kiwi dialect.

‘Yeah, The Clackers at Scala, then mucho tequila.’ Spiro grinned.

‘Ah, gad, awful stuff,’ Monty sniggered. ‘Yeah, caf food’ll make you barf for sure if you haven’t already lined your stomach with an upbringing of nasty English food. Even catching a waft of the deep fat friers has sent me flying to the loos on occasion. Have you tried deep fried bread? Oh God, awful stuff,’ he shook his head. ‘Nah, you want Café 1001 off Brick Lane. Look, I’ll come with you, I’m frickin starving. Just let me put my bags down.’

A gauntlet of pavement dwellers greeted their arrival. Lucy had struggled to speak on the ambling walk there so was pleased Monty and Spiro plugged the silence.

After all the anti-English breakfast talk earlier, that’s exactly what Lucy felt like and chose when the bouncing waitress came to take their order.

As Spiro and Monty talked about people she didn’t know, Lucy relieved her aching neck by sinking into a tower of cushions and scoffing her weak, milky coffee as soon as it arrived.

Nearby, a short-haired pixie girl held the very fixed attention of a too-cool-for-school Indie Boy who slunk back into his chair, retro workingman’s hat pulled low over his 60s ’do. Her sheer white blouse, on which hung a huge glimmering green pendant, covered a flat chest and tiny frame. Her Scarlett Johansson lips were covered in a matt cherry red lipstick.

Something the Pixie said caused Indie Boy to burst into a wide smile.

Lucy sunk further into the scene soaking in the vibe of the darkened orange room.

‘So when are you headed back to New Zealand, Lucy?’ Monty asked just as all three of their meals arrived carried by a spirited and capable Spanish waiter.

‘Oh, Sunday.’ Lucy sat up and turned to face him.

‘So soon? Can’t we convince you to stay?’ Monty looked to Spiro who had started pronging baked beans and bacon onto his fork.

‘Nah.’ She shook her head. ‘Got to get back to work.’

‘What is it you do?’ Monty enquired shoving the best part of an HP sauce-soaked sausage in his mouth.

‘Nothing special really. I write for a kind of gig guide thing. It’s a job,’ she shrugged and chewed on a piece of cold toast.

‘She’s selling herself short,’ Spiro interrupted putting his cutlery down and resting a light hand on Lucy’s forearm. ‘Without her talent, it would be the most boring read ever. Luce makes every gig she reviews either hilarious for having so eloquently described someone’s piteous on-stage efforts, or seem like the gig of the century and if you missed it you’re an utter twat.’

‘Really?’ Monty looked at Lucy gleaming.

‘No, no, he’s exaggerating,’ she shook her head and smiled back at Spiro. ‘What about you, what’s it you do?’

‘I’m a DJ. Keeps me off the streets,’ he winked and threw back a fork full of egg while simultaneously slugging back his coffee.

‘Hence the records,’ Lucy nodded.

‘Yeah,’ Monty nodded back, chewing, ‘—though that lot at home is just my personal collection, more rock and stuff. Keep my other stuff at my office down the road. I play my own music mostly, remixed tracks, and whatever I come across that I like. Bring the New Zealand sound to the UK, mix it up and such.’

‘Christ Monty! Now you’re the one being way too modest,’ Spiro butted in. ‘Luce, he’s a bloody phenomenon, DJ Skat, you’ve probably heard of him. He’s on the BBC Radio 1 and is pretty much the guy who goes to gigs and discovers the next big thing, like The Clackers last

night. 'They probably wouldn't be anywhere if you hadn't played them on your show, Monty.'

'Yeah well...' He shrugged.

'That's so cool,' Lucy smiled. 'Oh my God,' she pulled herself upright, '—did you play the Big Day Out a few years ago? In the boiler room when it was still a tent.'

Monty laughed. 'Ha ha, yeah, I did, that was me. DJ Skat in the house, ye-ah,' he sat back in his chair and sniggered. 'I just wanted to come home for Christmas and one of the organisers I know put me on the bill, they're awesome like that. Yeah, that was a huge sweaty mosh up. One of the best gigs I've played, actually. Great homecoming. And flights home for free. No complaints there. Jemima came with me but she so didn't get New Zealand. It wasn't for her at *all*.'

'Was that when you were dating?' asked Spiro wiping his mouth with a napkin.

'Yeah, ha. I forgot about that too.' Monty shook his head. 'Yeah, we were too. Yeah, then we were.'

'You dated Jemima?' Lucy laughed. 'Jemima the Vagina Painter. The plot thickens,' she grinned.

'Jemima the what now?' Monty cocked his head.

'Vagina Painter.' Lucy looked at Spiro to see that she hadn't gone too far. He winked in reply.

'Ha ha, yeah. Jemima the Vagina Painter. Yeah, she paints vaginas. That's nothing, you should have been there during her intercourse phase,' laughed Monty as the trio clambered into the sweating barn-like cafe. 'It was dicks *in* vaginas. And I know some of them were inspired by actual D.I.Y photos. My mum came to stay, and Jemima refused to take them down citing being censored in her own home and it being "*not really on, Monty*".'

'Really?' said Lucy as she placed another coarse woven cushion between her and the concrete behind her.

'Yeah. She had a point I s'pose. But my mum's a practicing catholic; one metre cocks on the wall inserted into huge red vaginas was not

exactly her pick of decorative art. Mum's more a bowl of fruit beside a tasteful jug, or meadow picnic scene kind of art appreciator.'

'Oh God,' Lucy sniggered. 'I'm not sure what's worse.'

'Oh, definitely the cock in vaginas, I can assure you,' Monty grinned
The group laughed.

'Though she didn't always paint,' Monty continued, flicking a piece of blonde hair that threatened his view. 'That's her latest thing. When I first met her she was a poet. She'd "rap" them at open mic nights.' Monty smirked.

'And how was that?' asked Spiro, half-breaking into laughter.

'Oh God. She paints vaginas for fuck's sake. How do you *think* it was? Bless her, she's a talentless mite, but well-intended.'

'Yeah, how did you two ever go out?' Spiro wondered.

'Ha ha, yeah, good point. I was just her colonial fantasy, used to tell all her Sloaney mates about me. Wore me like a badge of honour. Didn't last past New Zealand though. I think the trip to my home town took the shine of it all, that and mum not approving of her art and "*stifling her creativity*". She might pretend to be all boho but actually, if she's too far away from her Cristal and the celeb-packed Knightsbridge meeting of the N.A. she gets homesick real fast. My catholic mum and her pink carnation, lifestyle plot life was a massive fail in Jemima's eyes too. She kept calling my mum "*dreadfully quaint*" and it all got boring pretty quickly. So I ended it with her when we were on a camping trip with my mates that she positively hated. When we got back, and she'd showered, she pretty much packed her Louis Vuitton and went home in a public school girl huff. Bit lame on my part, thinking back.'

'And you still live together?'

'Oh, we never *didn't* get on; we just made a shit couple. She was totally porn star though,' he grinned, and flicked his eyebrows towards Spiro. 'I miss that. But we were from two different planets, and the trip to little ol' New Zealand revealed that and the damage couldn't be undone; she couldn't get her colonial fantasy back. But she doesn't mind faking the boho lifestyle in London and living in Hoxton, "*which is so very now*", so long as she can spirit away on a Ferrari trip across Europe on a whim, or

have high tea on Park Lane, then she's sweet as. She's a nice girl actually, just a terrible snob and demanding as all hell as a girlfriend. I can't afford to impress her in the lifestyle to which she is very much accustomed.'

'Yeah buddy,' Spiro chimed in. 'Ain't nothing like the laid-back Kiwi girl.'

Monty looked across at Lucy and broke into a wide smile. 'Ain't that the truth.'

After they'd scraped their plates clean of food, the Spaniard removed them with a deft hand.

'Can I get you anything else,' he said in lilting Mediterranean tones.

'Nah,' Monty replied. 'Time for a pint, I reckon.'

'Yeah, I reckon so,' nodded Spiro.

'What, *now*?' Lucy looked at the pair. 'But it's only...' she reached out her phone and clocked the screen, '-2 o'clock. It's only just gone 2.'

'Xactly Miss Lucy,' cackled Monty, '-we're about three hours behind that Brighton lot. They've been supping pints on the beach since the pubs opened. Come on,' he grabbed both their hands, his face overcome with a mischievous twinkle, 'I'm gonna take you two somewhere *really* special.'

Chapter Sixteen

The black cab pulled up in front of a non-descript four-storey townhouse in South Kensington. Monty paid the fare and the trio stepped out into the bright white, neatly laid out street. European cars lined each side like a gleaming steel hedgerow and neat people paced past.

Monty led Lucy and Spiro down a cracked concrete staircase. It was framed by black-painted Victorian wrought-iron railings and took them into a shadowed gothic basement doorway replete with menacing gargoyles. Monty pushed his hand under a mess of bright green ivy and pushed what Lucy presumed to be a buzzer. The door sprung open and swung wide. There they were greeted by a tall-as-he-was-wide block of a man who nodded with strained silence.

“Right Rodg?” Monty raised his head up to face the giant.

Rodg was wedged into a charcoal grey woollen coat that looked like it had been cut from an ex-army blanket and fitted over a house. He

nodded in precise movements as his hooded pig-eyes regarded the trio. Lucy held her breath and her gaze fell in and out of focus on his gold ring-covered, black-tattooed knuckles. Although it seemed impossible given the tiny doorframe, and even smaller entranceway, Rodg stepped aside and let them pass.

Headed by Monty, the group of three moved forward into a silent, dark hallway. They weaved through plush red velvet roped curtains and passed by a mirror, which reached up to a ceiling they couldn't quite see. Monty felt for a door on the right wall and turned the glinting brass door handle. It was less than six foot high and opened to an even more dimly lit stairwell. They ducked under and started on the descending path, which curled downwards and downwards. A sharp breeze whistled past Lucy's ear causing her to shiver.

They descended in silence.

At the base of what seemed like countless dizzying turns, the group came smack against another door. By now Lucy was cold but no one had yet been the first to break the silence, so she held her mouth tight. Monty opened the door which revealed a small tunnel wide enough for two. Lucy's heart raced. *Where in God's name were they going?*

Monty reached for her hand and pulled her forward into the dim space. In what little light there was, Lucy managed to catch his smile. Spiro placed a warm hand on the small of her back.

Soon the popcorn sound of laughter and music dappled the tunnel walls. As they approached the noise, Lucy's anticipation crescendoed.

Without so much as a knock, a door to the side of the tunnel flung open, gripped as it was by the hand of a knotted nugget of a man. He glared at Monty, then Lucy, then Spiro.

'Welcome,' he snarled, baring his yellowed teeth. 'Will you be wanting to greet the White Lady today?'

'Yes, yes Chav, we would like to greet the White Lady today.' Monty echoed, smiling back at the others who had packed in tight beside him.

Chav reached past the group and pulled the door shut, briefly looking out before he did so.

'Please,' he growled looking anything but pleased, '—follow me.'

Lucy's eyes had adjusted to the darkness. She allowed them to pass over the lush, low-ceilinged bordello room. Oh-so-casually dressed people hung off every surface of the warm room. Women were draped over men, men over men, and women over women, each cluster deep in conversation. It was a collage of red lipstick, blonde underdone hair, breasts, twinkling jewellery and accidental tailoring.

She knew these people. Lucy knew every one of them.

They were the Western world's magazine still-lives, breathing in there with Lucy. In real life.

She dropped her eyes. She wouldn't stare.

Chav led them through the din of chatter and jazz music, past a series of thick concrete pillars towards a large empty red leather Victorian couch. Monty drew Lucy forward and dropped her into the centre of the deep seat taking the pew to her right as Spiro bookended her left. The answer to Lucy's silent "*What is this place?*" question fell into place when Chav drew up a mahogany table towards her knees. It had laid upon it, on a silver tray in neat rows, six white lines of finest cut cocaine.

Lucy took hold of the hundred pound note handed to her by a nose-breathing Chav.

'Mademoiselle,' he said, his thin lips parting in a sneer, which was possibly meant as a smile.

And here we go, she exhaled and bent down to inhale.

The self-conscious bout of silence was replaced by free-flowing conversation served with tall-stemmed flutes of Cristal. Lucy fobbed off the desire to update her Facebook status and tweet "*O.M.G! Having the BEST time in London!*".

Instead, Monty, Lucy and Spiro shared their most intimate fantasies, desires, plans to save the planet and the all-encompassing what was wrong with humankind.

'...modern medicine is the demise of Darwinism.' Monty was on a rant. 'We've lost nature's ability to cull.'

‘But then we wouldn’t be here now, would we?’ replied Lucy.

‘You mean, alive?’ Monty rubbed his nostrils.

‘No, I mean here. Here in this place. Now.’

‘How’s that then?’ Spiro chipped in.

‘Well, cocaine,’ she continued. ‘It follows the path of the least enlightened. We might pay big bucks for cocaine in the Western world, but it’s the lowest of the low who get it to us in the first place. Drug lords, barons, gangs, whatever, all ensure its cultivation and passage to get it to us here on the other side of the world. And we snort it by the tank load not paying a second thought about its destructive path to get here.’

‘Aww Luce, don’t be a downer,’ Monty nudged her with his shoulder as he descended towards his next fine serving.

‘Nah, no, I’m not,’ she shook her head and tucked her legs up under her, taking care not to bump the table and scatter its precious cargo.

‘Really I’m not. All I’m saying is this shouldn’t be a guilt-free trip. We shouldn’t think ourselves in any way superior.’ Not that she felt in the least bit empathetic to anyone’s plight at that precise moment, other than intellectually. ‘People in all likelihood died getting this to us.’

‘And how’s that not a downer?’ Spiro laughed rubbing her arm.

‘No, no, listen,’ she continued, poking her tongue out in reply, ‘–I mean, I hate to think how many people suffer every day, God, each year, for us, just so we can get high. It’s those so-called low-lives that fuel our desires. I’m just saying it shouldn’t be guilt-free.’

‘Nah,’ Monty shook his head. ‘I’m not sure I buy your argument. Modern medicine probably couldn’t be further away from the people at the coal face of getting this cocaine cultivated and shipped to us.’

Lucy shrugged. ‘Maybe. But I worked with a girl once here in the UK who’s brother owed her money –hardly anything in the scheme of things– but anyway, he owed her money, so he shoved a condom of cocaine up his bum and caught a train across from Amsterdam to London and he died.’

‘He died? What the hell?’ Monty sat back as his next hit liquefied and seeped down the back of his throat.

‘Died. Yeah, actually died en route, on the train. All for a couple of thousand pounds or whatever it was.’

‘Really? That’s terrible,’ added Spiro.

‘Yeah,’ Lucy agreed. ‘The condom burst and he died of a massive instant cocaine overdose,’ Lucy said waving her champagne in exaggerated gestures.

‘Fuck,’ Spiro replied leaning back into the couch just noticing a ceiling fan rotating above them.

‘Yeah, fuck’s right,’ she replied taking a sip from her glass.

‘Fuck,’ Monty agreed, ‘–bet she feels bad, the sister,’ he added, passing Lucy the hundred pound note.

‘And that’s the thing,’ Lucy put her glass down by the silver tray and rolled the note back and forwards in her fingers, ‘–it’s not even like it’s her fault. It all comes down to personal responsibility. He borrowed her money in the first place, probably knowing he couldn’t pay it back in any hurry, then when she asked for the money back, he was still looking for the quick fix, the easy way out, the path of less responsibility...’

‘–and greatest consequence...’

‘–and yeah, as it turns out,’ she nodded staring at the rack of three remaining lines, ‘–the greatest consequence of all.’

‘Yeah well, there’s your Darwinism right there.’ Monty blinked at the pair. ‘Maybe Darwinism is still as active as ever but reveals itself in other ways, like boy racers crashing, or taking too many pills, or getting in a punch fight and someone knocks you down, or shoving a condom of cocaine up your arse.’

‘Yes,’ Lucy nodded as she leaned in towards the fresh powder, ‘–or like shoving a condom of cocaine up your arse.’

A steady trail of minor and major celebs, landed gentry and well-todos filled the now over-heating club. Lucy figured by the vibe, that this was their local. Lucy reckoned it held about a hundred people but hard to tell with the extra secret nooks and crannies, and pillars sectioning off the bar.

She also reckoned this was where the real shit happened, where people could be themselves out of the limelight. It was the other world, the one above ground, that was the false one.

‘So what’s the dealio here, then?’ Lucy nodded towards Monty as Spiro disappeared to the loo.

‘What, with this place?’ he replied.

‘Yeah.’ She wiped away a drip coming from her nose.

‘Its history is the most interesting part actually.’ Monty turned to face her, leaned back and placed a foot over his knee.

‘–Which was?’

‘Well, it used to be one of the many rooms connected to a series of tunnels that all the royal Princes used to meet in to have their alliances with their mistresses. Or courtesans, whores and boys, whatever took their fancy.’

‘Fetishes?’ Lucy’s eyes grew round.

‘Yeah, most likely,’ Monty laughed. ‘Or escaping getting their head taken off. Who really knows?’

‘Probably hiding jewellery too. Imagine the amount of secrecy that was needed to keep people from revealing it.’

‘Oh, there’s so many entrances from all sorts of places leading to interlocking tunnels that they probably just blocked them off or something.’

‘–Really?’

‘Yeah. The door we came in is the only one I know of, but there are at least five other entrances, and even now they keep changing them, apparently. But if you think about it, it’s the same today, really. If you look around you, it’s pretty obvious that this place needs to remain a secret.’

‘Yep,’ Lucy agreed. ‘Definitely.’

‘Yeah, and apparently the tunnels are not even mapped, even to this day, despite technology, like infrared, and whatever.’

‘What’s the deal with the owners, then?’

‘Of here? Pretty much what you think.’

‘Like gangs?’ Lucy stared at Monty’s pale flickering eyes.

‘Yeah, exactly like gangs.’

‘Actual gangs?’

‘You saw Rodg and Chav, what do you think? How else do the media keep their nose out? The paps might be prepared to fuck with the celebs but they’re not gonna fuck with London’s gangs. They’d end up on a body bag down the Thames. Those cats take no shit from no one.’

‘Really? That really happens? That’s so cliché.’

‘Cliché or not, that really happens.’ He nodded.

Spiro bounded round the corner into view just as a very familiar collection of famous faces took up residence at the couches nearest the three.

‘What really happens?’ he asked shoving in close to Lucy and moving a lock of hair off her eyes and kissing her on the cheek.

‘Gangs,’ he said looking up at Spiro raising his eyebrows. ‘Getting all up in their business and ending up in body bags in the Thames.’

‘Gangs? Like the people who operate this joint?’

‘Yeah, exactly like that. And shhhh.’

A loud snort of laughter came from the famously occupied neighbouring table.

‘Holy crap.’ Spiro leaned in whispering this time. ‘Is that who I think it is?’

Lucy and Monty nodded having both clocked the group as they entered the room in a hail of chatter.

‘What’s that then, the Britpop meets football meets Victoria’s Secret alumni meeting?’ he laughed.

‘See,’ Monty added looking at Lucy, ‘—that’s why you’ve got your gangs, right there. A pap getting into this place would destroy pop, fashion and sporting culture in one snap.’

Just then, Chav rounded the corner ahead of two surly micro waitresses carrying equal measures of champagne and cocaine for the seated party.

Lucy had never felt so sure of herself.

She looked at Spiro, who was talking to Monty, and felt a surge of affection that ran so deep it frightened her only to think of the present.

She picked up Spiro's hand as he spoke and gave it a gentle squeeze. He looked over to her, smiled and planted a kiss on her forehead then picked up her hand and kissed the top while still talking to Monty.

Lucy sunk into the couch and leaned her head into Spiro's chest. The rhythm of his heart and patter of his conversation made her feel more content than she ever had felt before.

The three had lost all sense of time. They dissolved into seamless conversation, occasionally eating, drinking and snorting.

Much like its casino cousin, the bar had no clocks. Spiro pulled out his phone and looked at the screen.

'What's the time?' Lucy rolled into him and looked down.

'Just gone two a.m.'

'What? Already?' she sat up. 'We've been here nearly 12 hours?' Lucy's jaw was chattering. 'But I feel fine.'

Spiro pulled Lucy into him, wrapping his arms around her small frame.

'Aww honey,' he kissed her hair. 'You're so fucked you don't even know you're fucked.'

At that moment, it dawned on Lucy that someone had to pay for this outing. She had a beer and chips budget, not a champagne and cocaine one. *Oh shit.*

Monty caught her face.

'Luce, doll, what's up?'

'Oh...' she bit her lower lip, '—it's just, well, I don't really have much money, but I can, umm, pay someone back later.'

Monty laughed and patted Lucy's hand. 'Don't worry about that. You're my guest here. I wouldn't dream of not taking care of the bill. Besides it's not as expensive as you might think. This place is more about keeping its regulars than stiffing them.'

'Keeping them addicted, more like,' she giggled, accidentally snorting.

‘Well yes, that too, definitely that,’ he winked. ‘No business without snow business. So yeah, better to keep the punters coming and going all the time than depending on the peaks and troughs of their wallets.

Anyhoo, I’m beat. Wanna blow?’

‘Yeah,’ Spiro nodded.

Lucy yawned. ‘Yeah, I’m done.’

One black cab and chatty driver later and the three were seated on Monty’s couch sipping chamomile tea. As host, Monty had put on some mellow sounds and rolled up a couple of spliffs which were currently doing the rounds. Lucy was settled into Spiro’s chest listening to the boys chatter about this and that.

Spiro placed a hand on Lucy’s head as he held the end of a joint to her mouth and she inhaled. ‘Think I’m gonna call it a night,’ he yawned. ‘Monty, you crazy fuck, you did it again. We’ve notched up another for the history books. I bloody hope we’re at the same old people’s home one day so we can have a chuckle about days like these.’

‘Too right’ Monty nodded. ‘You two don’t want another in your party tonight do you?’

‘Nah mate.’ Spiro shook his head, wiped his eyes, and gently stood easing Lucy up off the couch with him. ‘Nah, those days are over.’

‘A guy can only ask.’ Monty winked.

The bedroom glowed in the moonlight. It caught the swaying crystals of the chandelier casting diamonds on the bed. Despite a large vagina painting dominating one wall, Jemima’s room was lean of possessions and starkly minimalist. Expensive white, velvet soft Egyptian cotton linen graced the large luxurious bed and plush red cushions punctuated the covers. Six tired white lilies stood in a tall white vase beside the bed, their rich, mature scent engulfing the room.

‘So was Monty for real?’ Lucy leaned into Spiro.

‘Huh?’

‘About joining us in here, now. Are you boys into that?’

Spiro held a swaying Lucy. 'What, threesomes? Yeah, a little bit. Well him, not me. He's partial to a spot of bedroom fun. He's half German with a touch of Pom aristocrat. It's bound to happen.'

Lucy laughed. 'You hooked up with him before?'

'Yeah, once, a long time ago. But no one special. Just some random chick.'

'You make her sound so lovely.' Lucy fell into Spiro's shoulder, exhaling the long day.

'Oh you know what I mean. Heat of the moment, some bar in Barcelona.' Spiro stroked Lucy's hair. 'She was a hot Brazilian girl. Her friend was supposed to hook up with Monty, but she bailed at the last minute, so after too many shots, one thing lead to another and all those clichés.'

Lucy laughed and looked up at him.

'Heck,' he added sniffing, his face bursting into a smile at Lucy's gaze '—we must have only been about 20. It's almost compulsory when two Kiwi mates go on holiday to Europe. Young, dumb and full of it.'

'Yeah,' Lucy shrugged. 'I suppose. Yeah, yeah it is...' she nodded.

'Why? What are you thinking?' He pulled Lucy to the bed and fell with her on top of him.

'My friend Cat and I did the same thing.'

'You and Cat, yeah?' Spiro stroked a lock of Lucy's hair which was stubborn in its desire to fall across her eye. His hand rubbed down the back of her neck as he stared into her eyes.

'Yeah, a few times actually. Once when we were 17 after our school ball, I hooked up with an ex. And Cat and another friend were asleep in my bedroom. Well at least one of them was asleep. Cat wasn't and she jumped out of her bed into mine and well, you can guess the rest,' she winked.

'At 17? You hot little minxes.' Spiro twinkled.

'Yeah, I reckon he must have thought all his Christmases had come at once,' Lucy giggled. 'He was such a vile person too, I can't believe we gave him such a good time. Actually, he's dead now, brain tumour.'

'Really? Huh. Sad.'

‘Yeah,’ Lucy shrugged.

‘And the other time?’

‘Times, actually,’ Lucy winked and relaxed into Spiro’s body, feeling his erection growing underneath her, ‘—you know.’ She laughed.

‘Anyway,’ she leant down and kissed Spiro, ‘—that’s all very boring.’

‘Oh, it’s far from boring,’ he purred kissing her ear. ‘Tell me more.’

‘Nu-uh, why talk about my lust-filled past when we could be creating a *very* lust-filled present.’

Spiro rolled Lucy over and looked into her eyes. ‘OK, you’ve got me there, why not indeed,’ he grinned.

Spiro was swift and hungry in his lovemaking. His fervour surprised an already tender Lucy. Spiro tasted and consumed her. He pressed himself inside of her and a fountain of lust rose within her. She matched his rhythmic pulse with an unexpected level of aerobic prowess. The spent pair then fell asleep as the Hoxton birds commenced their dawn chorus.

Chapter Seventeen

Lucy was awoken by repetitive sharp pointed daggers stabbing behind her eyeballs. *Oh crap.* The come down.

Spiro shuffled beside her, sensing she was awake. 'I'm wrecked,' he murmured.

'Yeah,' was all she could muster. Her muscles throbbed and her joints ached as the chemicals leached their way out of her body

'You gotta get back to Brighton today?'

'Uh-huh.' Lucy stuffed her face in her pillow and kicked her feet out of the bedding.

'I think it's colder outside today so you won't melt at least.'

'Humph.' She caught the sounds of what she could only assume was Monty rustling in the kitchen. She needed to pee. She always needed to pee.

'Monty's probably making breakfast,' Spiro sensed Lucy's thoughts. 'He always does that after the big nights, ever since I've known him.'

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. Eggs bene’s his specialty. If he wasn’t so bloody talented he could’ve been a chef.’

‘Huh.’

Minutes later the knock came.

‘Sleeping beauties,’ Monty’s voice called behind the door, ‘breakfast?’

Lucy wasn’t sure she’d be able to stomach eggs but she supposed if all else failed, she could vomit to release the burden.

With barely a freckle of time for Lucy and Spiro to partially clad themselves, Monty burst in bearing trays of juice and, as promised, the famous eggs Benedict.

‘Monty, you’re too much,’ Spiro passed a tray over to Lucy and placed his own on his lap.

Monty laughed disappearing only to reappear and join them on the bed with his own tray. ‘I’m munted,’ he smirked. ‘Where’s my “No” button?’

Spiro laughed. ‘You wouldn’t be you with a “No” button. There’s far too many people who have their hand hovering over that button, like your bro Bas for one.’

‘Yeah, Sebastian’s always had one hand on his cock and the other on the “No” button. He’s such a wanker.’

They laughed.

‘Luce, my bro’s one of a kind. Cap of pubic hair on his head and eyes so close together he’s more Cyclops than man. Hedge fund manager now, of course. Where else do you work when you have no soul?’

Lucy winced a smile as she cut into her English muffin and salmon bathed in shiny yellow hollandaise sauce.

‘Who’s he take after then?’ she replied chewing with her mouth open.

‘No one human. Definitely part Rottweiler with the face of a badger though. Pretty sure I saw a rat’s tail once too, and not of the hair variety.’ He winked. ‘He dates supermodels. Figure that out?’

‘The money?’ Lucy half-asked.

‘Yeah, likely so,’ Monty nodded. ‘Dump him when they discover he’s as tight as he is rich.’

‘Cripes bro, you’ll make someone a great wife one day, this food’s mean,’ Spiro burst in.

Monty sniggered. ‘Don’t I know it.’

Sometime around when most people tuck into their lunch, Lucy picked herself out of the shower, draped clothes over her sorry body, stepped into her jandals and knelt on the floor to zip up a straining travel bag.

Spiro sat on the edge of Jemima’s bed watching her, smiling. ‘When will I see you again?’ he asked.

Lucy shrugged as a lone thread caught in the zip and she tugged it free. Having kept her bag in Jemima’s room seemed redundant somehow. She had spent so little time in there after all. ‘Why do I always pack too much?’ she sighed and gritted her teeth as she finally closed the bag shut. ‘And I hardly even went shopping while I was here.’

‘Luce,’ he paused, ‘–I’ll miss you. This has been... seeing you... Well, this has been awesome.’

Lucy stood up and flung her bag over her shoulder offering a tired smile. ‘Yeah, yeah it has. Thanks for the fun. Crazy shit yesterday, huh?’

‘Yeah, it was. And I’m really sorry I can’t come with you to the station, but I’ve gotta do the post-prod on these photos and get them off.’

‘Yeah,’ she nodded. ‘It’s OK, it’s not like I haven’t done it before. I lived here, right?’

‘Yeah, right.’ He walked Lucy to the door. Monty had left earlier in a hail of goodbyes and come back soon.

‘I don’t want this to be it, Luce,’ Spiro pressed. ‘I’ll see you in Auckland when I get back in a month or so. October I think.’

‘Yeah,’ she smiled up at him, nodding. ‘I’ll call you when I get to Brighton, OK?’

Spiro clenched her into a hug, his hands rubbing up and down her back. ‘You’re quite something Lucy Darling, you know that?’

She laughed shaking her head and hefted her falling bag back high on her shoulder. 'Something a bit barmy,' she laughed. 'I'm one notch shy of being stitched up in a strait jacket for good.'

'Well, I think you're something, Luce.'

'You're too kind, Spiro. Look, thanks for everything.' She smiled. 'I've had such a great time, even if I can only remember half of it.'

He laughed and reached up to hug her.

'I'll call you when I get there, OK?' Lucy returned Spiro's hug.

'OK, I'll be waiting.'

As the train clattered past ye olde London bricks and mortar, Lucy slunk back into the stained fabric-covered seats. She felt deboned. The epic euphoria of the previous night fell further and further away from her as the train continued its bumpy ride away from London.

Against better judgement, Lucy dialled home.

'Hello?' a voice answered after just one ring.

'Cat?' Tears started streaming down Lucy's face. 'Cat.'

'Lucy, honey? Are you OK?'

Lucy gulped, choking back the threatening flood.

'Luce, sweets? Speak to me. Are you alright?'

'Ye... ye... yes,' Lucy hiccupped. 'I ju... ju... just ne... ne... needed to hear your voice?'

'Oh honey. What's up?'

'Nothing, it's all good. I'm having a great time just, yunno, missing you. Missing my bed. Missing the neighbour's cats. Yunno...'

'Oh sweets...'

'-Oh, ignore me,' Lucy sniffed. 'I'm just having a moment.'

'Well, I can tell you, you're not missing a thing here. Forty-five degree angle rain, hail and actual snow in Queen Street...'

'-Snow? In Queen Street?'

'Yes! I know, right? Snow! Snow, I tell you. Twitter was all a twitter with it. It was like Aucklanders had never seen actual weather before. Kind of cute really.'

Lucy giggled.

‘*And* there’s been a trillion knot winds, it’s negative a billion degrees and, get this, there was a frickin tornado in Avondale. It’s not just hideous, ’cos that’s not enough apparently. Now it’s actually *dangerous!*’

Lucy laughed.

‘Oh, you can laugh all you want, Lucy, but don’t come crying to me if our roof comes off. I was s’posed to met T up the road tonight but it’s blowing such a gale, I ended up having a bath and watching a DVD. Sad sacks me. You’re all the way over in the UK being glamorous and I’m here, having *baths.*’

A wave of nostalgia hit Lucy. Despite herself she burst out in a snotty laugh. ‘I’ll be home soon anyway.’

‘Yeah, well, you better be. And bloody well bring some of that sun back with you, it’s truly dire here and I’m gonna go postal if it doesn’t right itself soon.’

Lucy laughed. The thought of a pyjama clad Cat going postal was not cause for concern. What was she going to do, throw her Ugg boots and a snow storm of cotton balls?

‘Yeah, OK, will do. Sleep well babes.’

‘Yes, and save all your exciting tales for when you get back. I want good gossip, OK?’

‘Oh, I’m not gonna be short of that, that’s for sure.’

‘Good. I love you Luce, come back to me soon. I’m nothing without you.’

Lucy laughed. ‘OK bath bitch, love you too.’

A chill wind greeted Lucy as she disembarked at Brighton’s looming steel Victorian station. The bright sun glared at her as she walked out from under cover. On the walk back to Kemptown, Lucy was forced to weave herself through the tourist mass winding its way through the North Laines slowing to buy all manner of tat. Lucy figured the wind had sent people fleeing from the beaches and instead reaching for their wallets.

After what felt like a lifetime of walking, Lucy fell into her brothers’ flat, turned into her room and flung herself on the bed.

Seconds later Kit bounded onto the bed beside her. 'Where have *you* been?' He bounced with youthful excitement.

'Hello Kit.' She didn't look up, instead yawned into her pillow, pulling her arm over her head.

'Oh dear Lucky Star, ratted again are we?'

'Yes Kit, we are indeed ratted again,' she mumbled. 'Seems to be the theme of this holiday. I'm gonna need a holiday after this holiday.' She rolled over taking great pains to do so. 'Fuck, you wouldn't believe where we went though. Bobby would die,' she grinned.

'Oooh, do tell.'

'Actually, not sure I am suppose to, could end up in a body bag down the Thames. Apparently.'

'Oooh, mysterious. Well,' he patted her thigh, 'your secret's safe with me.'

Lucy laughed, feeling her second wind. 'I'm not even sure my secret's safe with *me*. Oh, what the hell.' She grabbed a spare pillow and shoved it under her neck. 'We went to this mad place, somewhere underground, like really underground, not *The* Underground,' she clarified, 'run by some kind of East End drug lords or gangs, or whatever, and snorted a cocaine-dune of drugs. Like, for real.'

'Oooh, I likey. And?' Kit slapped his hands on his thighs.

'Well, it was pretty much wall to wall celebs.'

'Jackpot!' he cackled slapping her leg. 'Name and shame, name and shame.'

'I'm not sure I can...'

'Lucky! My place is not *bugged*. Tell!' he commanded.

'Oh OK then.' Lucy reeled off all the names her short term memory had not yet siphoned.

'Oh. My. God. It must have been like flicking through the pages of *heat*. I am so jealous. Oh, I'm so jealous right now. How did you not get star struck and start trying to make BFFs with *all* of them? I would have.'

'Oh, you would have, for sure. But, yunno, didn't seem like the done thing. Those gang bods kept a pretty tight rein on things anyway. Not

sure upsetting the balance would have netted me any friends. Swift removal more likely.'

'And what *else* Lucky Star? You were there a whole day longer than you planned and you've come back more flushed than a de-virgined bride. Something happened with Spiro, didn't it?'

'Hmmm, Spiro,' she pondered, chewing her lip and sighing.

'I knew it!' Kit sat bolt upright and peered at Lucy. 'Uh-oh. What? What's happened?' he shook his head. 'Lucky?'

Lucy shrugged and fought back the hot tears that threaten to spring out. 'No...' She shook her head.

'—Lucky, no, not no. Tell me. What is it?' He placed a hand on hers and squeezed. Lucy noticed how manicured it was, how shiny it was, especially when placed on her own gnawed digits.

'I don't know...' she shook her head looking at the clasped hands, avoiding Kit's gaze.

'You don't know *what*? What happened?' Kit picked up Lucy's hand and rubbed its upper surface. 'Lucky?'

'Spiro. Umm, I think he wants a thing.'

'And? And what do you want? Do you want a thing?'

'I don't think I want a thing. I don't know. It's too soon.'

'Too soon?'

'Too soon after my previous thing. Or non-thing. I don't know. My heart was totally broken after Willy. He was a cad, a completely horrible man as it turned out. But I fell for him anyway. I shouldn't have, but I did. But I see now, it wasn't even real. It wasn't anything near close to love. And now I don't trust myself. I can't be trusted going into any kind of love situation. Kit, I don't even know what love *is*.' A tear streamed down her cheek and into her ear. 'Spiro is so *nice*. He's so good to me. He acts like he really cares, yunno? And I just don't know how to respond, and what does it all mean? It's just...'

'—Just what?'

'I felt so certain last night.'

'Oh Lucky.' He lent down and hooked a coil of hair around her ear placing his hands on both her shoulders. 'You were high. Of *course* you

were certain *last* night. Look, just chill. You're back in Brighton, you don't have to make any decisions now.'

Lucy sighed.

'In the nicest possible way, you're a shipwreck,' Kit continued. 'Now just tuck yourself into bed and sleep it off. The day's entirely missable. It's windy for Christ's sake. Get up and play with us later, it's the start of Pride and we're meeting The Gays, and we all together –the whole gang together– will make the most of your last couple of days in Blighty. I promise you. I love you big sis,' he added as he kissed her forehead, stood and drew the curtains closed and left the room with a tiny finger wave. 'Now you rest up, 'cos we are going to parr-ty later. And Lucy?'

'Yep?'

'You deserve to be loved. And maybe, just maybe, Spiro's actually good enough for you. Maybe you should ignore the past and let him in.'

Lucy smiled as Kit closed the door behind him and pulled across the duvet and fell promptly to sleep.

At some point in what she assumed to be early evening, the desert in her mouth and throbbing bladder yanked Lucy from sleep in the most primal of ways. Her iPhone was dead so was no use as a time keeper. She eased herself out of bed and was near snapped in two by the power of a sudden pelting headache. She'd downed Panadol earlier but it was time for another dose.

Fixing a chemical spill with more chemicals.

Genius.

Bobby was perched at the breakfast bar mixing cocktails with a methodical fixation.

He looked up. 'Well, well, well,' he greeted a staggering Lucy who plumped up on the stool beside him.

She picked up a piece of ice and plopped in her mouth, then picked at the fresh mint, chewing a piece in her front teeth. 'Mmmm,' was all she could manage as she swallowed.

‘It’s OK, I’ve heard,’ he flicked an eyebrow. ‘Kit wanted you to tell me but I’m persistent. So, Spiro, aye?’

‘Oh please don’t start Bobby...’

‘—*What?* Who says I’m going to start anything? All I want to say is, Lucky, you are your own person and you don’t need any man to make you complete. You’re small but perfectly formed just as you are. So there. See, I’m not just an arse you know?’

Lucy smiled. ‘You really mean that, Bobby?’

‘Yes,’ he nodded and swivelled to face her, looking her dead in the eye. ‘Yes, I do,’ he enunciated. ‘I’ve always thought of you as being perfectly independent without needing any man to prop you up. You’re an inspiration, actually. I can’t do it, I always need a man.’ He shook his head.

‘But you’re single.’

‘Yes, but am I happy? No, the answer to that is a firm no. I am always seeking and the very act of seeking renders me incomplete. Lucky, much of what you see is a front. I want a husband; I want to settle down. And as much as I secretly loathe the little tykes –and Lucky, you know I do– I want a family. Lucky, I want to fall, deeply, madly and profoundly in love and without it, I am empty.’ He sighed as he passed her a drink, a mojito by the looks. ‘But you, you need to pause for breath, let go of the hurt from Willy –who is frankly not worth another second thought– and see if this Spiro thing has any legs. So here’s to you Lucky,’ he smiled, his eyes creasing at the edges. ‘My one true Lucky Star.’

A tear fell from her eye and her nose started to drip.

‘No, no, no,’ he shook his head and placed a hand under her glass to raise it up. ‘Oh no you don’t. Hold your glass up and toast me, dammit. No tears or you’ll get me started.’

Lucy wiped her nose with her sleeve. ‘OK,’ she sniffed. ‘A toast, to being Lucky, lucky old me,’ she smiled at her youngest twin, the flood gates heaving at the seams.

As they toasted, Kit wandered into the room chattering on the phone. ‘She’s right here actually, talking to Bobby. I’ll put her on,’ he passed the phone across mouthing “*Mum*” to his big sister.

Lucy put the receiver to her ear and glared at Kit. 'Mum, hi.' It must have been early in the morning in New Zealand. Her mother was perky as ever.

'Darling!' Olive gushed. 'Are you having a wonderful time? At your brother's expense, I hear. Lucky old you.'

Lucy sighed and shook her head at Kit, her mouth pulling into a tight frown. 'Yes, lucky old me, the boys are very generous.'

'So what have you been doing then? Has the weather been good for you?'

'Yes, lovely, thanks. Lots of beach outings, mostly, hanging out. I was in London for a couple of days seeing my friend Spiro, you remember Spiro? Got back today.'

'Tall boy, wears black? The photographer?'

'Yes, that's him.'

'What brings him to London?'

Lucy plonked on the couch supping on her cool drink. 'He's taking photos of bands for a book. On commission.'

'Well, that's lovely, dear. *Paid* work, I assume?'

'Yes, paid work. Lots actually. He's highly sought after, they only wanted him. Flew him across from New Zealand specially.' Lucy said between sips.

'You're not getting fancy ideas about him are you, Lucy?'

'We had fun, that's all.'

'After that other boy hurt you I'm surprised you want to leap into something else.'

'Well, seems silly to let one bad experience dictate how I go into the future. And Spiro's a good guy, not like Will.'

'Yes, well, I suppose you're right. No point moping. And you tend to mope, so I suppose this is a turn around.'

'Mmm... Anyway, how are you and dad?'

At which her mother launched into a overture of gardening, brunches, lunches and dinners and a voluminous number of good acts she had bestowed on others until Lucy could safely hand the phone over to a tipsy Bobby, with a hurried, thrown-in "*Give my love to Dad*".

She stared at Kit as Bobby disappeared down the hallway chuckling into the phone. 'Was it you or Bobby who told Mum about you paying for everything?'

'What?'

'I said, was it you or Bobby who said you paid for my trip?'

'Oh, I don't know? Is it important?' Kit picked out the mint from his drink and chewed it before swallowing.

'Kit, you know how Mum feels about me, my job, my total lack of income and success. It makes it worse that my 26-year-old brothers are supporting me now too.'

'It's not like that Lucky, and you know it...'

'-Mum just thinks I am such a loser.'

'No she doesn't. Reality check, Lucky Star, you're pretty much the only one who thinks you're a loser. No one else does. And you've gotta give that shit up sooner or later 'cos frankly, it's damaging for your health.'

'What?' Lucy jostled with a curl on the back of her neck that had become entangled in her necklace.

'You'll give yourself cancer getting all worked up about nothing all the time. Worrying about shit that's not important. There's no one watching you to see if and when you'll measure up to some false barometer in the sky. You've gotta give yourself a break and see the cup half full for a bit,' Kit sipped his drink. 'Life's peachy, Lucky. You're in the UK for fuck's sake. You might be here on someone else's ticket, but so what? You're here and I can tell you, we wouldn't be having half the summer without you enjoying it here with us. So suck it up, bitch, and live a little.' At which, he raised his glass, clinked it with Lucy's and knocked back his mojito just as Bobby re-entered the room.

Two Panadols, two mojitos, a hot shower and a Facebook status update brought Lucy back into the land of the living, or at least, the upright. It was Friday and she had three nights left, including two nights of Gay Pride, before she was headed back into Life As She Knew It.

Fuck it, she thought, I can do this. I'm not dead yet.

The cool wind from the south had been replaced a balmy evening with a slow setting sun. Rainbow flags hung still and Lucy joined what seemed like all of Europe's gays on George Street in Kemptown for the buzzing Gay Pride pre-party.

It was standing room only and barely that. People poured in and out of bars taking care not to spill pints on one another. Men wore tight and short; women wore baggy and long. Or corsets.

Yet again, here on the other side of the world, Lucy was an inbetweener.

She joined The Gays outside the Queen's Arms and as she drained her first pint, Lucy was handed her second by an over-tanned Perdu.

'For you, Miss Lucy,' he grinned a white-toothed smile.

'Thank you,' she mouthed, smiling back.

Her body wouldn't thank her, but two days of playtime had well and truly began.

The evening wound into night and The Gays were all a chatter about the parade and party the next day. The raucous start began to mellow and the crowds thinned. People had dissipated to make naughty, or to iron their hot pants for the next day.

Gay Pride Saturday dawned bright. Even Lucy was summoned out of bed early by the hum of Too Much Fun ahead. The Gays were brunching at theirs. Then the plan was for the whole body-oiled troupe was to mince at a jaunty pace to meet the rest of the Queen's Arms posse.

As Lucy emerged from the bathroom wearing just a towel, Bobby greeted her holding out a Buck's Fizz and her phone.

'You got a text,' he grinned.

Lucy's heart pounded. She grabbed the phone from Bobby. She didn't recognise the number.

'Luce, is that you?' she read. 'It's Will. I need you.'

Oh seriously, Will. Fuck off already!

‘Your boyfriend?’

‘No,’ Lucy shook her head, ‘It’s no one. It’s absolutely no one. Come on, let’s drink.’ Lucy raised her glass to Bobby’s as Kit tottered around behind him grinning, and the hot-panted pair raised their glasses just as The Gays burst through the door barely dressed and giggling.

Bacon and eggs and more Buck’s Fizz did the rounds and with hardly a minute to spare, the happy gang were ready to go.

As they approached the front door to leave, Bobby touched Lucy on the elbow, pushing ahead of her and turning around. She stopped, startled.

‘Lucy Darling, Darling Lucy,’ he grinned, ‘I apologise in advance for, well, everything.’ At which he put his palm out towards her. On it he held a pale yellow pill. ‘You will join us, won’t you?’

‘What, now?’ she stared at the ecstasy tablet in his hand.

‘I can’t think of a better time than now, can you? Tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift, that’s why it’s called the present, or some such other cliché that’s appropriate for this moment. Live in the *now*, Lucky.’

‘Not sure that’s the intended use of that particular phrase but, umm, yeah, OK,’ she nodded. Lucy took a sip from her water bottle and threw the pill in her mouth and swallowed, wincing at its acidic bite.

Bobby nodded his head and pulled his face into a daffy grin.

Kit bundled down the hallway behind them. His eyes twinkled. ‘I just took mine, it’s mild, don’t worry Lucky.’

‘We’ll look after you like you’re family,’ added Bobby.

At which, the trio walked out into the sunny street.

Half an hour later Lucy fizzed with the sort of euphoric calm where epiphanies are born. The day continued in the happy place it began, taking the jolly gang in a glittered path of parade, party, pints and more pills.

By nightfall, Lucy was spent.

She sat perched on the couch like a ragdoll watching her brothers and The Gays knocking back Jaegermeister shots. An outfit change later, and

the group we were on the path to an all-nighter leaving Lucy alone with only the hum in her head for company. She didn't know how they did it.

Left in the silence, Lucy looked down at her iPhone and saw she had six missed calls and new text messages. She opened the first text. It was from Spiro. They all were.

'Hope Gay Pride was gayer than gay. London misses you already xx,' it said.

She sighed, rolled over and fought her way to sleep.

In her dream, Lucy's legs were heavy and sore. She tried to run but couldn't.

Lucy awoke to the sound of chirruping of men. It was just after eight. Her last full day in England.

She wrenched herself from under the covers to decamp to the couch to snuggle under more covers. Jao handed her a herbal tea. There she was updated on stories about random stranger blow jobs (tally: three given, two received), bum sex (tally: two; no details on who gave or received) and phone numbers exchanged (tally: 10 given, one false; 12 received, all real). According to all measures, while not a record-breaking Pride, this was a satisfactory tally, in more ways than one.

'And yet, still we dine alone,' Bobby sighed (recipient only of a blow job, no swallowing, and handing out a false phone number).

Lucy cuddled up to Kit in his bed relinquishing her own to a sleepy Jao and Perdu. Jonah crashed with Bobby. And Rowan, the Irish Catholic gay –and red-head to boot– got the couch.

As she dozed in and out of slumber, Lucy pondered that the evening ahead was her last, and tomorrow was the long haul home. The farewell Sunday roast debrief would be bittersweet.

The whole sorry gang hit the beach mid-afternoon, littered as it was with weary post-party-goers baking in the windless sunny day. The weekend's hijinks were on a decided mellow down-buzz. Texts were

flowing with details on who pulled whom, followed swiftly by a running commentary on that particular pairing's (or group's) suitability. Each incoming beep was met with excited anticipation.

That evening, a much quieter group decamped to the Queen's Head for Lucy's farewell roast.

'Please stay, Lucy,' pleaded Perdu. 'You don't have to go home.'

She laughed. 'Oh Perdu, if only. You'll just have to visit me in New Zealand.'

'Unlikely,' scoffed Bobby. 'No one's going *there* any time soon.'

'What, why? What's wrong with New Zealand?' Lucy asked.

'Backwards much?' came Bobby's retort.

'You are such a snob,' Lucy laughed, shaking her head. 'For a boy from the Hawke's Bay, you sure do reckon you've come along way.'

He waved his hand to brush her off and pursed his lips. 'Yeah well, we'll see about that.'

Back at the boys' flat, full of roast beef and a couple of shandies, Lucy packed her bags as Kit and Bobby lay across her bed.

'Thanks for coming, Luce. You made our summer,' Kit smiled.

'Yes,' Bobby nodded and arched an eyebrow, 'what he said.'

'Aww, I love you two...'

'—Oh hey, let's not overplay our hands,' Bobby interrupted. 'Save the love chatter for the airport.'

The next morning, three tired siblings boarded a taxi then train to Gatwick. After queuing and a late check in, Lucy had time only for a fleeting tearful farewell.

A weary Lucy took her seat by the aisle. One Bloody Mary, a creamy pasta and half a chick flick later, she was sound asleep.

Chapter Eighteen

As the plane idled into the docking bay at Auckland International Airport rain splattered against the tiny oval plane windows, people hurried to empty their overhead lockers and Lucy collided headfirst with her world.

“Wulcum toi Noi Zulund, hev a noice daaay.”

The cocktail of jetlag, lack of sleep and post-holiday blues created in Lucy a new level of toxic exhaustion. Her body laboured. Her eyelids barely bothered to stay open, and her life took on a pointlessness she never thought possible.

And she couldn't care less.

After a near 24-hour sleep, a couple of days of work minus her ally Beth –who had scored an interview with the cast of *Glee* in Sydney– Lucy's pendulum had nearly swung back to normal. She was the same but different. She was Lucy with a tan.

But was she was Lucy with a man?

Much to her annoyance, Spiro had become her mind's constant companion. She regretted leaving the UK and not saying goodbye to him, aside from a couple of short texts, the last from the passenger lounge at Gatwick. Guilt grew inside her like a budding seed.

As Saturday dawned crisp and bright, she was comforted by knowing that whatever feelings she had would blow away on the fresh spring breeze soon enough.

Smack in the middle of the afternoon, as Lucy dozed stretched out across her couch with warm black cat Millie lying across her chest, her iPhone buzzed at her side.

It was a text from Cat: 'Come over! I have pretty things for you,' it began. 'And I need to hear all about your fab hol. Knock! xx'

Lucy hadn't seen Cat since getting back to Auckland. 'OK,' she replied. 'Give me 5 xx.'

In the bathroom, Lucy washed her face with a hot steaming cloth. The northern hemisphere summer, much milder than its brassy southern cousin, had dappled her face with a smattering of tiny freckles and coloured her like freshly baked biscuits.

She'd made time after getting back to visit Jacques, who had relished the chance to cut great chunks of Lucy's sun and sea kissed hair. She now had a closely cropped chestnut bob reminiscent of 1920s glamour days. Spritely curls snuggled above her ears and framed her pixie face, drawing the eye to pink rosebud lips.

Lucy grabbed her keys, shut her front door and knocked on Cat's.

'My Lucky Star! I've missed you,' Cat leapt to hug her. 'I missed you so much. But more importantly,' she stepped back and glanced down at the lopsided bag held in Lucy's left hand, 'did you bring me gifts?'

Lucy grinned. She always had presents. It was their thing.

She passed the duty free bag to her friend who clapped with glee.

'For me?' she squeaked. 'Oh, you shouldn't have.'

‘Whiskey times one,’ Lucy recited, ‘perfume times one and a Juicy Tubes five-pack. And you *know* my life’s not worth living if I forget you.’ She kissed Cat on the cheek and stepped into her friend’s flat.

‘Oh darling, I love you!’ Cat gushed. ‘And what’s this?’

‘Oh, I forgot about that, it’s the compulsory Brighton Rock and miniature London bus to prove I actually went away.’

‘As if I could forget. I was lost without you. And look at you. You’re as pretty as a picture. Jacques?’

‘Yeah,’ Lucy laughed. ‘My longest term relationship. I’m ever-faithful to my hairdresser. You like?’

‘I love, I *love!* Now come,’ said beckoning as she turned to walk up the stairs. ‘My jet-setting friend,’ she turned grinning as they reached the lounge, ‘for once, I have a gift for *you*. Let’s call it a welcome home pressie. But I won’t be making a habit of it, so enjoy.’

Laid out on Cat’s leather chaise was a full length sheer cream-coloured dress printed with tiny, delicate flowers. The sleeves were like petals and from the waist down fanned waves of neat pleats.

‘Oh my God, wow!’ Lucy lurched towards it, mouth agog. ‘Oh my God! Where did you get it?’

‘Aaah...’ Cat tapped her nose in the faux secret way of knowing. Lucy gawped at her friend. ‘Oh, OK, hardly shocking,’ Cat laughed rolling her eyes, ‘I styled Juliette Hogan’s new collection and on top of being paid cold hard cash, she gave me a couple of pieces ’cos I loved them so much. Yay me!’

Lucy skipped towards the dress. ‘Can I... can I touch it?’ she asked.

Cat laughed. ‘I know it looks precious, Luce, but it’s only a dress at the end of the day. A beautiful dress, but still, just a dress. I love this one, but it totally screamed Lucy, more’s the pity. So, yeah, well, it’s yours if you want it.’

‘Oh, I want, I *want*.’

Cat laughed. ‘Well, so long as the Heathrow Injection didn’t beef you up to much, it should fit,’ she winked. ‘And you need something to show off that new fab hair.’

‘Oh ha, ha,’ Lucy grinned. ‘Now gimme!’

Once she'd pulled on the dress and Cat had zipped it up, Lucy stared at her bare-footed full length reflection in Cat's wall mirror. She was a rosy-cheeked urban princess.

'Wow!' Lucy was breathless. 'I'm adorable!'

'Oh my God yes, you are!' Cat nodded as Lucy turned to face her. Cat walked over to Lucy and fussed with her hair. 'Wow, wow, wow! You are stunning in this.' She paused and furrowed her brow, 'Luce...' she stared, 'what's *up* with you?'

'What? Huh? What do you mean? I've got a tan if that's what you mean.' Lucy cocked her head.

'You look like... like you're in love or something. That's way more than a tan you've got going on.'

Lucy flushed red. '*What?* Hardly. Hell no.' she shook her head. 'Confused maybe. But in love? No.'

'Oh no...

'-What?'

'You're not pregnant, are you?' Cat asked, only half-joking.

'Pregnant? No, God no, I am not *pregnant*. What the hell, Cat?'

'Well, I can read you like a book and something's up. You're not the same Lucy who left for England a few weeks ago.'

Lucy sighed. 'Well, I ran into Spiro in the UK.'

'Spiro? Oh, yes...'

'-Yeah, he was over there. He's got a massive photography gig going on, and festivals to shoot. Yunno?'

'Aaah, yeah. And...?'

'Well, we kind of hung out for a bit, in Brighton and London and stuff.'

'-And?'

'And, well, I kind of ended up sleeping with him.'

'Ha! I *knew* it. I knew something was up. Of course you did.' Cat paused. 'Oh my God!'

'What?'

'You're perfect together. You two are perfect together. Of course. Spiro. Yeah. Of course. I don't know why I didn't think of it before.'

'Well, I don't know about that. It was just a summer holiday thing. Those things never work out. Do they?'

'Nothing says it can't. Besides, he's been after you for ages.'

'What? Spiro? No he hasn't.'

'Yes he has. I've seen the look in his eyes. He's dazzled by you, Luce. And oh my God, have you heard about Willy?'

'Willy?' Lucy croaked. 'What about Willy?'

'Well that chick never showed up again. Candy. The one he married. She ditched him again. How funny is that?'

'Shit!'

'I know, right? Big Al told me. He's devastated, apparently. Serves him right. He doesn't deserve love.'

'Didn't see that coming.' Lucy reached for the zip to remove the dress.

'No! Don't take it off!' Cat jumped at her friend. 'Keep it on a little longer. You're so *pretty*,' she clapped.

At that moment the pair was startled by an insistent knock at the front door.

'Cripes, that's not her, is it?' Lucy panicked. She couldn't be standing in a designer's next season collection in the stylist's lounge. Totally not cool.

'Who, Juliette? No, no, she doesn't even know where I live, I don't think. I doubt it.'

'Well you'd better go and get it then.'

'Yeah, I s'pose.'

The thumping came again.

'Christ!' Cat called out. 'Don't break it! What's so important, anyway?' she said to Lucy before turning and disappearing down the stairs. A moment later she yelled up. 'Luce, it's *your* door not mine. It's someone at your door.'

Just then Cat's mobile phone rang. Lucy grabbed her jacket, picked up Cat's vibrating phone and lifted the hem of the dress and ran barefoot down Cat's stairs taking care not to trip.

'Cat, your phone,' she said handing her friend the impatient device, the screen registering a blocked number.

'Jeez! It's like Victoria bloody station around here,' Cat laughed, grabbing the phone and answering. 'Hello? Oh T,' Cat cooed, her face breaking into a smile. '*Hellooo!* Lucy's here and she looks divine in next season's Juliette Hogan. Huh? What? Yeah, the one at the end of her runway show.' Cat jabbered into the receiver and stared into the middle distance with the twinkle-eyed look reserved only for T.

Lucy squeezed past her friend in the small hallway and opened the front door. She looked across to her own doorstep.

'Spiro!' she said, surprised. 'You're back?'

'-Um, yeah,' he held an uncomfortable smile. 'Yeah, I guess you could say that. Yes, I am back. Well, I'm here anyway.'

Spiro looked crumpled. Lucy caught the waft of fear about him.

Cat appeared behind Lucy's shoulder still chattering into her phone. 'Spiro!' she exclaimed waving and blowing a kiss, still holding the phone to her ear and relaying everything to T. 'What are you doing here? I thought you were still in the UK.' She looked from Spiro to Lucy and back to Spiro again. 'Oh...' she pointed at her phone. 'Um, I'm going back upstairs, um, to talk to T. Nice to see you Spiro,' she nodded and waved. 'Talk soon, Luce, thanks for the pressies. Mwah.'

Lucy's face flushed. She stepped out onto the doormat and pulled Cat's door behind her, shutting her friend away. She heard Cat's muffled squawks disappearing up the stairs. The sharp mat bristles poked into her bare feet and Lucy became suddenly aware of her body swaddled in sheer silk.

Spiro leaned down and hugged her in a clumsy clench. He stepped back. A breeze gusted through the entrance way and Lucy caught the sharp smell of day-old sweat.

She shivered. 'So, umm...?' Lucy began. 'You're back...'

Spiro slumped against the doorway. 'Yeah...' He fell silent and took in what Lucy was wearing. It was no match for his staple black jeans, black t-shirt, black leather jacket look. 'Wow!' he said looking her up and down. 'Shit. Have I interrupted you? Are you on your way out? Oh, crap, sorry...'

'-No, no,' Lucy interrupted shaking her head. 'Cat just gave it to me, the dress, I mean. Jacques did the hair last week. Cut it off. So, um, yeah.'

'Wow!' he gazed. 'It's just... you're... just it makes you look otherworldly. Oh, sorry,' he looked down and shook his head, 'that sounded ridiculous. I'm sorry, I'm just really tired. I came straight here from the airport. Came via LA so had that hellish 10-hour stop-over in LAX. So, sorry, I'm not operating at 100 per cent. It's just you look really good, that's all.'

Lucy suddenly felt the need to sit down. 'Good's all good,' she smiled. 'Come on, let's go in. I'm not dressed for outside.' She laughed and reached for her key and opened the front door. 'Come,' she beckoned.

Upstairs, Lucy wittered on asking Spiro if he wanted a drink, to use the loo, have a shower. 'Or I could make you something to eat? Pancakes. Do you want pancakes? I could make you pancakes. I've got maple syrup, the real stuff, from Canada...'

'-Lucy, stop. You can't even cook!' he laughed, sitting perched at the edge of her couch.

'I can,' she pouted. 'I can make pancakes. It's about all I can make. I make a mean pancake, actually.' Lucy opened the fridge and peered in. 'Oh bugger, I'm out of milk. I could run up the road and get some? It would only take five minutes. Seriously, I can make you pancakes, you must be starving. Or do you want a shower? Have a shower.'

'Lucy, *seriously*, stop! Come and sit down,' he patted the space beside him. 'You haven't even asked me why I am back early.'

Lucy turned and faced Spiro. 'Um, so, yeah,' she started to gnaw at a nail. 'Why are you back early? I thought you had a few weeks to go.'

'A month, actually. Well, five weeks. And yeah, I do. I'm heading straight back in a couple of days. I just came to see you. I didn't hear from you, you didn't return my messages, you haven't even updated your Facebook status, and, well... yeah, so I flew over.'

'Yeah, I'm so sorry about that. I don't know. I was tired. Confused.'

'Confused?'

'Um, yeah, sorry.' Lucy leant up against the kitchen bench.

'And are you confused now?'

Lucy's heart lurched. 'Yes. A bit. Or, no. I don't know.' She laughed. 'I've been, um, thinking about you, and how much fun we had, and... Spiro, I'm really sorry. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have left you in the lurch. I should have said something. Then you wouldn't have had to come all this way. In this, like, grand gesture.'

Spiro laughed. 'Yeah. A few grand gesture actually...'

'—Oh Spiro, I'm so sorry.' Lucy shook her head. 'I just...'

Spiro stood up off the couch and walked over to her. His knee bumped the corner of the couch causing him to trip forward and nearly fall head-first into Lucy's breasts.

'Oh God, this is not how I imagined this moment,' he laughed when he recovered himself. 'I smell like a hobo, and all you wanna do is make pancakes and apologise.' He shook his head. 'I'll try this again.' Spiro moved himself close enough to Lucy that she could feel his breath against her cheek. She felt delicate beside him.

He didn't really smell so bad, she thought. A little bit sexy, actually.

'Lucy, I came back for you, to see you,' he looked down at her. 'I might have come whether I heard from you or not, I'm kinda rash like that. I just wanted to see you, to see your face, and, well, to say hi. So, hi, I guess,' he smiled.

Lucy blushed red. 'Really? You came all this way just to say hi, to me? Just hi?'

'Yep.' Spiro nodded. 'Just to say hi.'

'Well, hi back, I guess,' she grinned.