Dean Raven

REMEMBER MY NAME

REMEMBER MY NAME

DEAN RAVEN

939
PUBLISHING

Copyright © 2025 Dean Raven
PDF Edition
ISBN: 978-0-6450995-4-6

Written by Dean Raven
Cover design and illustration by Driss Chaoui

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

An early version of this work was formerly circulated for beta reading.

Dean Raven is represented by 939 Publishing
www.deanraven.com

‘If you look the right way,
you can see that the whole world is a garden.’

– Frances Hodgson Burnett, author of *The Secret Garden*

For my parents,
who gave me the freedom to dream.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page

Copyright Page

Epigraph

Dedication

ONE | DARK END OF THE STREET

Get this party started

The strip

Descending

Sephryn House

Danny in the park

A Starling is born

Troublemaker

Reminiscing

Red light

No place like home

End of the century

TWO | CHANGES

Twenty-first century blues

Young love

One of those nights

Homeward bound

The saviour

Messages

Hero worship

A friendly smoke

The saviour, part two
Gay times
Last shift
Goodbye Sephryn House

THREE | DAY JOB
Ethiopia
Karaoke
On the job
The date
Shadow of the bridge
Movin' on up
Roommates
Differences
The visitors
Party of the century
The saviour, part three
Upstairs
Downstairs

FOUR | TO THE STARS AND BACK
Northbridge bound
The gift
Green room
Sammy Jo Hartman
Runaway
An old friend
Overtime
Girls' night out
Starmaker
Burnt
Finding Faith

Burnt again
Questions

FIVE | GRAVITY
Turning tricks
The trick is to survive
The priest
The lawyer
Cassandra
Ben
The shelter
Reunion
Drug
The dream ends
Going home
The call
The dream begins

SIX | FAME
At the altar
Let the games begin
Remember My Name

About the Author

ONE | DARK END OF THE STREET

Get this party started

SHERI STARLING NEVER considered herself a liar. When she wrote letters to her parents, she told herself she was describing her dreams. If they chose to think the letters were real – well then, that was probably for the best. The reality of her life was a thousand times worse than anything her poor parents could have imagined.

In tonight's letter Sheri is a singer at the Regency Hotel, taking requests for Carpenters songs from powdered ladies with Chanel on their breath. It's a bleak November night, but a new millennium is fast approaching and at the Regency there is a buzz of excitement at the prospect of throwing away twentieth century disappointments and embracing something new. Sheri knows her performance tonight has to capture that brittle anticipation. It has to remind everyone that the Y2K party to beat all parties is about to begin.

As the piano tinkles an introduction, she bursts on stage to rapturous applause. Gripping the microphone stand, she takes a breath and launches into a soaring, heart-wrenching ballad. Silver-haired men in tuxedos and younger women in glittering evening dresses twirl around the dance floor, while those who are seated gaze up at her, tapping their fingers and nodding their heads. The man who will soon be her husband sits close to the stage, twisting his diamond ring, never taking his eyes off his talented and celebrated fiancée. When the song ends, Sheri reaches a hand to him and says, 'This next number is dedicated to the only man in my life,' and he rises from his chair and blows her a dramatic, heartfelt kiss.

Outside Joe's Pizzas, dead leaves and people were blowing down the street in a steady stream. The moon hung in a fold of cheesecloth clouds, leaking to earth a cold greyish glow, while beneath its indifferent eye a line of cars lay trapped and angry on the road. Every so often a horn blared or a shout rang out as a driver grew impatient with the traffic and released his frustrations on a dodging pedestrian.

A man ran up and slammed his body against the window. He was thin and dirty, with matted hair and eyes so wide and red they seemed about to burst. He leered at Sheri, then flicked his tongue along the glass, leaving a trail of nicotine-stained saliva.

Sheri raised her head and gazed through him, her mind across town at the Regency where the hotel manager was approaching the stage with an armful of flowers. The audience was still applauding, some cheering, a few whistling. Her soon-to-be-husband was on his feet calling, 'Encore! Encore!'

The man banged his head on the glass, trying to catch her attention. He yelled something, probably obscene, then stuck his tongue out and waggled his fingers next to his ears. When none of this worked, he slapped the window and slithered on down the street.

Sheri returned to her letter. Writing was such a chore. Whenever she tried to think of something to say, the words escaped her, ducking and diving beneath her consciousness as if they wanted no part in this deception. But she plodded on regardless. A period of squinting and frowning was followed by a flurry of activity in which the words seemed to spill onto the page of their own accord; then the pen would come to a halt and she would sigh explosively, a noise that made the man at the next table turn his head and stare at her with piercing, lust-lit eyes.

Signing off the letter with a 'Love, Sheryl' and a lopsided heart, she shoved the notepad away and threw her pen at it. Her face melted back into shape. Sheri's face was like a painter's canvas, receptive to impressions and always ready to portray a new emotion. A frown never lasted long, but then again, neither did a smile. In the glare of the fluorescent lights her skin was pale and drawn, looking older than its twenty-two years. Her hair, on the other hand, was impeccable. In Sheri's mind her hair was her most striking feature. Thick and dark, it gleamed with health. But of late she'd begun to notice the odd strand of silver winking from amidst the black as if to remind her that youth and beauty were not meant to last forever.

'Hey gorgeous, how ya travellin'?' came a voice over her shoulder. 'Wan' I get you another cappuccino?'

She yawned, stretched her arms, let her hair cascade over the back of the chair. 'No thanks, Joe. I've had my eye on one of those cheesy sausages. And … I dunno …' She wrinkled her nose. 'Maybe a few fries?'

Joe gazed at her, words writhing beneath the surface of his tanned face. When she looked up to see why he hadn't responded, a shy smile flitted across his lips and he glanced down and wrote her order in a docket book.

'So, Sheri, when you goin' out with me? This is the third time I asked.'

She turned in her seat and looked at him, but he wouldn't meet her eye. 'I didn't think you were serious,' she said. 'You're having me on, right?'

'No way. You and me'd be good together. There's that *Fight Club* movie I been waitin' to see and nobody to see it with. 'Cept Mama, of course, but she gets scared too easy. I figure you ain't the type to get scared in a hurry.'

Sheri turned her eyes to the moon, moved by the offer, wishing she could do something about it. 'We'll see, Joe. It's like, I've got a full-on roster these days. Not to mention Danny.' Her eyes flashed back to him. 'I might have a roommate soon. Did I tell you that?'

She was expecting the remark to set off an avalanche of questions, but Joe only looked disappointed – the same look he wore the other times she made an excuse for not going out with him.

'Tell you what,' she said. 'Maybe we can go see your movie in the new year. If the world is still around then.'

His face brightened. 'That's great! Whenever you like!'

'Danny needs time to settle in. Assuming he agrees. I haven't asked him yet.'

'Just gimme the word and I'm there,' Joe said, returning to the counter, wiping his hands down his apron. 'My sister's boyfriend, he said he can fill in any time. Any time Donatella lets him, that is.' He lifted the fryer basket, made the fries dance, let the basket drop back into the sizzling oil. The slivers of potato hissed and spat at him like spiteful children. Above his head was a poster of Sicily, speckled with grease stains and warped and discoloured through years of heat and steam. Sicily was the land of Joe's birth.

'Grant's a good guy,' he continued as he turned over the pasta salad. 'Must have rocks in his head to wanna get hitched to that sister of mine. I warned him. I grew up with that snake. You think he'd listen? Nope. Just says, "Don-a-tella me 'bout it!" Fair enough. His grave. Know what I mean?'

The door bell tinkled and in stepped two uniformed police officers, bringing with them the hellish sounds of the street.

'Heya boys!' Joe cried, an Italian accent creeping around the edges of his words. 'Welcome to Joe's Pizzas! Take a load offa ya feet an' lemme get ya some good ol' Sicilian coffee!'

Sheri yawned and gazed into the night. Across the road a man in an oversized trenchcoat blinked in disbelief as he stooped and retrieved a partly eaten hamburger from the gutter. When the burger didn't go away, he lifted the bun and started picking out onions and dropping them on the road. A gang of young people with spiked hair and bright clothes approached, their laughter swelling the night, and he stashed the loot in the folds of his coat and shuffled around the corner. An older couple appeared from the same corner, huddled together for protection, too afraid to look around in case they drew unwanted attention. A man with tattoos on his face regarded them with narrowed eyes, as if they'd come here with malicious intent.

Joe slid a plate under Sheri's nose. The officers had gone. 'Just say the word, babe; say the word,' he said close to her ear.

His breath tickled. It carried the scent of olives, a warm, enveloping scent that reminded Sheri of a log fire. There was a fluttering in her belly. For a second – just one second – she'd recalled what it felt like to be young and innocent again, to be wooed by a handsome man with old-fashioned romance on his mind. Joe had that effect on her. There were no pressure tactics, no sullen looks, no aggressive machismo at the first hint of rejection. She wondered whether he'd figured out yet what she did for a living.

As he turned to leave, a golden blur caught her eye. Sweeping down King Albert Street, her gaze set on something far away, was an Asian woman wearing a yellow silk dress and gold-plated high heels. As she approached the window, Sheri sprang from her seat and rapped her knuckles on the glass. The woman reacted in a flash, throwing her hands up, staggering back, dropping her handbag. She turned to the window with teeth bared and fingers raised, her long blue nails ready to gouge and scratch.

Sheri mouthed, 'Oh shit!' and hid an involuntary smile behind her hand.

When the woman saw who the culprit was, she made a face and waggled her finger, as a teacher might do to a misbehaving student. Retrieving her handbag, she pushed through a group of partygoers and bustled into the shop.

'Doris, I am so sorry. You were light years away.'

Doris adjusted her beehive hair, which had tilted to one side. Her face was golden and the brocade on her dress shimmered like a gurgling brook on a sunny day. As her hands moved, the bracelets she wore on both wrists jangled and gleamed.

'You off to work?'

Doris slipped into a seat. 'Aha,' she said, glancing at the notepad.

'You're eager.'

'Sheri, I am telling you: my rooming house is driving me completely fucking crazy. I would rather start work early than sit there listening to people yell and scream all night.'

'Sounds awful.'

'I have been in this country only five weeks and my head is already a basket case.' Her face glazed over and became still and wax-like and astonishingly beautiful. 'Northbridge sucks,' she said. 'The people here, they have no heart.'

Sheri folded her arms on the table. 'It can be a tough place. When I first came here I had a best friend, Sophie. But now she's overseas and I haven't made any close friends since. Apart from Danny. He's a kid I know. A street kid.'

Doris lit a cigarette. 'When I feel lonely, I close my eyes and think of home.'

'Vietnam?'

Doris shot her a filthy look. 'Thailand,' she said dryly.

'Oh. Thailand. Of course. I've never been there.'

Doris accepted the excuse with a regal bow of the head. 'You will go there one day, Sheri,' she prophesied, 'and you will like it very much. There is a hill near my home where there are no people, only beauty of the kind that takes your breath away. My grandfather and my boys go there sometimes and climb the hill and look out across the water and I can see them in my dreams. Who you writing to?'

Sheri retrieved the notepad and flipped it over. 'Just some people I used to know.' She tucked the pad inside her bag. 'My parents, actually.'

'I write letters every day. My grandfather reads them to my sons.'

'How many do you have? Sons, I mean.'

'Two. Two boys.'

'How old?'

'They are three years each.'

'Wow, twins. That's incredible. And they're back in Thailand?'

'Aha. They are with my grandfather.'

'And you haven't seen them in five weeks? My God, you must miss them like crazy.'

'Sheri, you have no idea. My boys are always in my thoughts.'

Leaning back, Sheri gazed out at the ragged rooftops which lay flat and black against the leaden sky. She'd had a sudden flashback to her own childhood. She hadn't seen or heard from her parents for over three years, not since the day she packed her bag and walked out on them. Bill and Edna Starling were cold, mean, manipulative people who'd made her life insufferable – continued to make it insufferable by their refusal to respond to her letters – but she still felt an ache in her heart whenever she thought of them.

She said to Doris, 'I couldn't imagine leaving my family behind and moving to a foreign country. It must be a nightmare.'

Doris took a drag on her cigarette. 'It was the right thing to do,' she said, blowing smoke over her shoulder. 'My family is poor. And Thailand is changing. There is no simple life anymore. If my boys do not go to school, they will not get jobs, and that means they will be poor for all their lives.'

She stared out the window, the glow of the predator in her eyes. When a man in a business suit walked past, her eyes travelled up and down his body.

She tapped her cigarette on the ashtray. 'People say that foreigner investors will bring wealth and prosperity and life will get better. But the foreigners care nothing for my country. All they want is to make money – and have sex for the price of a few drinks.' Her eyes became round and hard like marbles. 'People say that Thailand is growing and we will soon be rich. But that's for the lucky few. For everyone else there is only dirt and hard work. That's why I had to leave. Here, I make twenty times more than I make in Pattaya and that's enough for a school for my boys and medicine for my grandfather. I hope they don't hate me for leaving them like this.'

Sheri went cold all over. The life Doris was describing reminded her of world aid commercials in which rich, well-fed celebrities held starving babies in their arms. Her understanding of Thailand came from glossy travel brochures which depicted a land of happy people, simple lifestyles and sun-drenched landscapes, and she'd never given a thought to the other side of the story. She recalled her recent trip to Bali, how time and again she'd bargained sandalled women out of a few Rupiah just for the fun of it, and a wave of guilt crashed over her. She had a sudden urge to offer Doris the contents of her purse as reparation for the atrocities she'd committed while travelling the world enjoying herself as others starved.

Instead, she offered words of comfort. 'I'm sure your family understands,' she said. 'It's an incredibly unselfish thing you're doing, Doris. I mean … I

don't think I'd be capable of making a sacrifice like that if I was in your situation.'

'It would be more wonderful if I was making more money.' Doris bent over the table and her amber eyes glowed and clouds of colour rose in her cheeks. 'If I tell you something, Sheri, do you promise not to laugh?' She glanced over both shoulders. 'When I return home, I would like to be a teacher, a teacher of children.' Shrugging, she sat back and set her gaze on something across the road. 'It is only a dream, something to keep me going.'

'That's an amazing plan, Doris. I'm sure you'd make a great teacher.'

Doris took a last drag on her cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray. 'Right now, all I can teach is how to fake an orgasm.'

She opened her handbag and out fell a shiny black cockroach. Recovering itself, it slipped and scrambled towards the edge of the table as if it understood it was in a flight for life. With lightning reflexes, Doris grabbed the salt shaker and slammed it down on the unfortunate insect. She raised the shaker and checked for signs of life, then, satisfied the cockroach was dead, batted it onto the floor, where it lay on its back twitching one of its remaining legs.

Covering the death scene with a napkin, she took out her compact and checked herself in the mirror. The stench of dead cockroach hung in the air as she patted her hair, rubbed lipstick from her teeth and dabbed at her blue eye shadow with a nub of cotton wool.

Meanwhile, the flow of humanity continued outside. An energetic young man with a blond beard was bouncing through the crowd like a ball in a pinball machine, begging passers-by for change. Mostly he was ignored, but every so often a well-meaning sucker would stop and listen to his sob story, then reach into a pocket or a purse and slip him a few coins.

When the man caught Sheri's eye, she glanced down at her plate, at the forgotten food. Lifting her fork, she stabbed the cheesy sausage and brought it to her mouth. As she'd expected, it tasted of nothing but fat (if indeed pure fat has a taste), but it felt good as it slid down her throat. Taking another bite, she tried to push aside the thoughts of starving children, tried to block out their cries of hunger, which she knew were just yells coming from the street.

Doris stole one of her fries and popped it in her mouth. She chewed quickly, like a chipmunk, then bent down to adjust her garter belt. While she was thus engaged, two men stopped and gawked at her through the window.

‘Hey!’ she cried, rising from her chair. ‘That’ll cost you twenty bucks! Add another twenty and I’ll throw in a blow job!’

But the men had moved on. A group of Japanese tourists took their place, congregating at the window with hands clasped behind their backs like Doris was part of their package tour. One man removed the cover from his camera and aimed the lens at her.

Doris pulled her chair around and sat with her back to them. She stole two more fries from Sheri’s plate. ‘These are cold,’ she said as she reached for another.

The strip

OUTSIDE, THE WIND whipped around them, raising their dresses and poking them with its frosty fingers. They stepped into the crowd and were almost bowled over by a pot-bellied policeman who was chasing a boy down the street. They watched his retreating back, oblivious to the people pushing past them.

'Let's walk,' said Sheri. 'No way we're scoring a cab tonight.'

King Albert Street was teeming with life. Cars revved and tooted, vying for attention with raised voices and pounding music, and all along the strip, lights flashed and threw gobs of colour across the faces and clothes of the passers-by. Sturdy men stood outside brightly lit doorways, maintaining a running dialogue with people in the street.

'Come inside and enjoy the most beautiful girls in the world …'

'Half price drinks for the next hour …'

'We got live sex shows; we got girls, girls, girls …'

'Come on fellas – do ya wanna party?'

On walked Sheri and Doris, past drunks and whores, pimps and policemen, nightclubbers, Hare Krishnas, born-again Christians, pornographic bookstores, strip joints, pinball parlours, restaurants and run-down hotels. The streets of Northbridge were grim and changeless, a bizarre amalgam of youth and antiquity, beauty and squalor, growth and decay, all bubbling together like slop in a witch's cauldron. Grizzled men stood suspended in the swirling stew of humanity, hawking newspapers and pornographic magazines from rickety sheds, shouting unintelligible messages in gruff voices. Past them sped adolescent skateboarders, occasionally colliding with an arm or a bag, occasionally overbalancing and falling, but each time bouncing right back up and skating on their way. In the flashiest, liveliest part of the strip, fierce-looking men and fiercer-looking women, dressed all in leather, sat on gleaming motorcycles surveying their domain. At a safe distance two policemen interrogated a frightened girl. Watching

everything pass by were the true owners of these streets: the beggars and the hookers, the winos and the street kids – some harmless, some dangerous, some insane. And at every turn people sat or slept or lay dead in doorways and dark alleys.

Sheri found herself preoccupied with thoughts of Thailand. 'Hey, Doris,' she said, 'how come you speak such good English?'

'My grandfather taught me.'

'Your grandfather? Interesting.' She thought a moment. 'Where did he learn it?'

'Before I was born, he lived near an American military base. My grandfather is a very wise man, Sheri. He knew our family's best chance of survival was to follow the ways of the West and so he helped the Americans and learned from them. Unlike many others in my country, he has no time for sentimental attachment to the past.'

'Right. So is that the reason … Like, is that why you're aiming to be a teacher?'

Doris nodded. 'When my grandfather passes away I will take his place as the head of our family. I have learned all I can from him, but he knows English only in speech, not in reading or writing. This I will need to learn for myself.'

'How will you do that?'

She shrugged. 'I will buy some books and tapes.'

They were wolf-whistled by a gang of boys smoking cigarettes on a street corner. None of them looked over ten. Presumably none of them knew how to read or write either.

'Hey Doris,' said Sheri, thinking out loud, 'maybe I can teach you. To read and write, I mean. You've probably guessed I'm no genius, but I do read a lot.'

Doris waved the suggestion away like it was a mosquito buzzing about her face. 'No, Sheri, that's too much to ask. I will be fine. I will buy some books and tapes.'

But Sheri was warming to the idea. 'We can fit it in between clients. I'll get some books and we can start tomorrow, hey? It'll be fun. It'll give us something to do when things are quiet.'

Doris began walking faster. Sheri almost had to run to catch up.

'Come on, Doris. Do it for me. You know how boring it gets waiting around. You can only read so much Jackie Collins in a night.'

'We will see,' Doris said, looking straight ahead. 'Thank you very much for the offer, Sheri. It shows you are a true friend. Thank you.'

Crossing the road at a set of traffic lights, they came upon a gaggle of men in black suits and white shirts clapping and singing 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. A lanky youth was sitting on an upended milk crate strumming a guitar, but the competition from the surrounding bars and nightclubs was proving too much for his inexperienced fingers and he kept hitting the wrong chords. Still, this didn't appear to bother the others. Their faces were alive, their eyes preternaturally bright, as if they were high on amphetamines and performing to a capacity crowd at the Concert Hall.

A bald middle-aged man came scuttling from behind the group. He was short and thick, with short, thick hairs protruding from his nostrils and ears. Hanging off his shoulders were sandwich boards that proclaimed in tall letters, 'Y2K is God's Plan', 'Repent!' and 'Christ Will Forgive Your Sins'. As the two women approached, he thrust a leaflet at them and cried out in a booming voice, 'God loves everybody, even the whores!'

At these words a well-dressed couple stopped and gawked, and other passers-by realised something was going down and gathered close too. Sheri, her face hot, her head heavy on her neck, kept walking. But Doris had come to a halt. She turned to the man in slow motion.

'Renounce your sinful ways and you will be saved,' he uttered now in a feeble voice.

Doris was tough and wiry and with the advantage of high heels and beehive hair towered over the little man. He shrank into his sandwich boards like a turtle.

'Ma'am, don't do anything you'll regret,' he warned, nodding at his companions.

But the black-suited men were oblivious to their friend's predicament. They were facing the biggest crowd they'd seen all night and had increased the pace of their clapping and singing.

Doris smiled savagely. 'Listen to me, mister,' she purred. 'I do not need to be saved. I am safe already. But *you* –' She shot out a hand, snatched the leaflets from him and launched them into the air.

The bundle exploded like fireworks. Leaflets separated and flew off into the night, flapping in people's faces and vanishing under parked cars. With a cry of dismay, the man broke away from Doris's shadow and shot after them, grabbing at them like they were twenty-dollar bills.

‘Now the man has something useful to do,’ Doris said, rejoining Sheri. She retrieved a leaflet from beneath her shoe, frowned at the unfamiliar words, then mashed the leaflet in her hands and tossed it over her shoulder.

Through all this, Sheri’s heart had been beating furiously. For the man’s abuse had struck a nerve. What would compel a complete stranger to treat her with such flagrant and pointless contempt? He knew nothing about her, about the tide of events that had lifted her from the innocence of childhood and deposited her at this point in her life. And knowing nothing, what right did he have to say she was sinful and needed saving? Saving from what? From making herself self-sufficient in the only way she knew how? From providing financial support to her poor, luck-starved parents? From bringing a little joy into the lives of lonely and unhappy men?

Of course the fool would respond that it didn’t need to be like this. She could always marry a repugnant little man like him and stay at home and raise his kids and cook his dinner and keep his house clean. She squinted at his back. Probably this was the very reason the existence of women like Sheri and Doris threatened men like that. The thought only made her angrier.

As they continued towards Sephryn House, she was surprised to find Doris grinning from ear to ear. She guessed she was replaying the confrontation in her head, memorising the details so she could repeat them to her grandfather, who would use the story to bring smiles to the faces of their family and friends. Why couldn’t she be more like Doris, venting her anger in a delectable burst of revenge? Sheri kept her frustrations bottled up inside, where they ate at her self-esteem like a weak but corrosive acid. She pictured a kindly old man on the other side of the world recounting the story of the turtle-man to giggling children and smiling women, and like a pot taken off the boil, her rage went flat. Soon it was just a hot sludge that festered and occasionally bubbled in the pit of her stomach.

Descending

FARTHER DOWN KING Albert Street the clubs thinned out and the streets became darker. Black Abbey Bridge loomed out of nowhere, its moss-covered stones brown and damp, crumbling with age, scarred with messages of love, hate and sex.

As Sheri and Doris followed the descending road, a rumble overhead heralded the approach of a train. The noise rose and swelled until it drowned out all other sounds of the night … then with a roar the train appeared at the eastern end of Black Abbey Bridge. They stopped and watched it fly across the sky. Behind the brightly lit windows sat scores of nameless people, some journeying home, some on their way to dinner or a movie, some embarking on a brand new life.

The train snaked out of sight, the sound rumbling away to nothing, and with its departure came a cold vacuum in the cradle of Sheri's chest. She felt curiously hollow, as if the pull of the retreating engine had sucked out her soul. In her head was the ridiculous notion that everyone on the train had a wonderful home and a loving family waiting for them at the end of the line, and she wished with all her might that she was there amongst them, reading a Jackie Collins novel, being rocked and soothed by the motion of the carriage, instead of shivering here in the shadow of this godforsaken bridge.

'Let's go, Sheri,' said Doris, pulling her on. 'It looks like rain.'

On the other side of the godforsaken bridge lay a sprawling oasis of nature in the wilderness of concrete, bitumen and bricks. The oasis, known as Squatter Park, comprised a series of grassy knolls, threadbare and invaded by clover, upon which ancient fig trees crouched and brooded like gnarly monsters. Clumps of bushes broke up the view and every so often you stumbled across a neglected flower bed where plants struggled to survive and sometimes even bloomed. Mixed odours of damp earth and rotting vegetable matter hung suspended in the air, and if you stood in the park for long

enough, you could almost make yourself forget that civilisation, with its despairs and dangers, lay all around you.

Tonight, as on most nights, Squatter Park was playing host to a horde of dark shapes: boys wearing T-shirts and jeans, some carrying backpacks. They perched on park benches and stood beside bushes and leaned against trees, reminding Sheri of the fish in an aquarium after the light has been turned off. Occasionally a larger shape would float between them, and sometimes two shadows merged for a few moments before vanishing into a nearby thicket or departing for a parked car.

At the entrance to the park, she veered from the road and went a little way up the bitumen path. Stopping by a flower bed, she pulled her shoes off and used a twig to check the soil for syringes. Satisfied it was safe, she rose and trod in the bare earth. The soil was cold and it squelched between her toes, and the sensation sparked a memory: a vision of herself as a schoolgirl frolicking through her parents' backyard, blithely plucking blossoms from her mother's prized dahlias. The memory dissolved as quickly as it had come, but it left a bittersweet taste in her mouth that was oddly satisfying on this dismal night.

Rising on tiptoes, she lifted her arms to the heavens. Above was the vast dome of cloud-filled sky; below, thousands of miles of sand, rocks and magma, followed by China. Gazing up at the churning sky, which stretched towards forever in every direction, she felt herself standing on the rim of the world, shooting through space and time at an unimaginable speed. Sheri was not a spiritual person – she had no time for the invisible or the unknowable – but she had a well-developed sense of infinity and the possibilities it contained, and she knew countless people around the world had dreams similar to hers, and many of those dreams were right now coming true. As she cast her eyes across the sky, the same sky that looked down on those fortunate people, she had all the faith she needed that the new century would carry with it a new and better life.

'What are you doing?'

The voice was like an explosion in her head. Her hands flew to her breast. 'Danny!' she gasped. 'You almost gave me a heart attack!'

Danny grinned as though he'd been given a compliment. He was sixteen years old, with brown collar-length hair and a face that possessed both the freshness of youth and the contours and lines of impending manhood. But his body was unquestionably that of a boy, slender and sinuous like the saplings

that forced their way from the hard earth of Squatter Park. He was wearing a Reebok jacket, white T-shirt and baggy black jeans. Slung over one shoulder was a canvas backpack scrawled with the names of hip-hop artists and metal bands.

Sheri returned the grin. It was hard to believe this slip of a boy, with his bright personality and ready smile, was her closest friend. It was one of those special friendships that appear like a gift from the gods when you're feeling low and worthless and wondering why the hell you were put on this earth. Three months ago, while walking this same path, she'd come to recognise some of the dark, searching faces that turned her way simply because it was something to do. Sometimes in her loneliness, in her desire to reach out to another lonely soul, she would call out, 'How's things?' or 'Nice night!' – but loud noises spooked the clientele, and at the sound of her voice the face would turn away and she would become invisible, a nobody, a tourist who has been insensitive to local customs. Danny was the only boy who responded to her greetings. In fact, he lapped up the attention. He began accompanying her to the park boundary, then to the next street corner, then to Sephryn House itself. His eagerness to please was vast and unreserved. Sheri suspected she was his only friend. It seemed to her a special honour and she did everything in her power to prove to him she was worthy of it.

A gust of wind threw leaves against her legs, reminding her that Danny was awaiting an explanation for her odd behaviour. Stepping out of the flower bed, she brushed the soil from between her toes, then one by one replaced her shoes. What exactly *was* she doing? She hardly knew herself. It had something to do with the past and the future, something to do with reality and dreams. When she turned again to Danny, an imprint of the endless sky remained in her eyes.

'You'll probably think I'm weird,' she said, 'but when I was really young I had this crazy idea I was adopted. It was like, I always felt different from everybody else. Then one day I saw *ET* and it was like: Yeah, that's who I am. I'm from another planet!'

She picked up a pebble from the grass and rolled it around in her palm. As she continued with her explanation, a tickling sensation spread to the tips of her fingers and all the way up her arm. 'Later on,' she said, 'when I was a bit older, I figured out this elaborate story about how I'd been left here as an experiment to see if my people could adapt to the earth's environment. I'd spend hours in the tray of my dad's truck, staring up at the stars, beaming

thought waves into deep space and willing my real parents to come and take me home. Of course they never did.'

She lifted her eyes to the sky, and the despair and isolation of childhood came streaming down through the years. In that moment it all made sense again. If a flying saucer had appeared above the trees, she wouldn't have been surprised.

'Now, this is next-level crazy,' she went on, 'but I even thought Lottie, my parakeet, was an alien. I was convinced she'd been left there to keep an eye on me. And sometimes … (Now this is *super* crazy.) Sometimes I'd … Like, I'd pretend to leave the room, then race back in, hoping I'd catch her whispering into a walkie-talkie or something.'

At this point in her narrative the howl of a police siren bored into her mind and hauled her back to the present, where Danny was frowning at her, his head bent to one side.

'Anyway,' she concluded hastily, 'I remembered all this and I suppose … I suppose I wondered whether I could make myself believe it again.'

Danny kept staring at her. He scratched his ear. 'That's really weird,' he said, breaking into a grin. 'They should make a movie about you. You've got some cool stories.'

'Come on, Sheri!' yelled Doris, who was prowling between the trees. 'It's fucking cold here!'

Danny glanced over and became aware of Doris for the first time. 'Oh,' he said, and took a step backward. 'Do you, um … Do you want me to come along?'

Sheri felt a rush of warmth. This was typical of Danny; always willing to sacrifice a potential client so he could accompany her to Sephryn House, yet he believed she was doing *him* a favour, not the other way round.

'Sure,' she said brightly. 'We could do with a big strong man to protect us.'

At this, he straightened his back and puffed out his skinny chest – gestures which, if anything, made him look younger, more vulnerable.

'Come on, champ,' she said, and together they trailed after Doris, who was glowing in the darkness like a golden beacon.

ON THE OTHER side of Squatter Park the road rose and civilisation began again. But this was a commercial district and at this time of night the shop

fronts were locked and barricaded as if in preparation for a siege. In the distance they could hear muffled shouts and the dull thump, thump, thump of drums. Cars cruised by like sleek, hungry sharks.

At a bend in the road they came across Scarlett, leaning against a parking meter and plucking the strap of her black lacy bra. Her red leather skirt was hitched up over her thigh; a matching jacket lay in a heap on the ground. She was staring at the passing traffic. Every so often a shiver would pass through her body and she would peer at the sky to see if rain was coming.

A car slowed down – a blue delivery van. Scarlett shoved herself upright, scooped up her jacket and staggered on the road to meet it. But as she went to lean on the door, the van sped up and moved on to the next girl in line, who even at this distance appeared younger, slimmer, better value for money.

'Hey, street slag!' yelled Doris, still high from her adventure with the born-again Christians. 'Stop stealing my men!'

Scarlett raised her head like a sleepy old dog that's been called by its master. Her mascara was smudged, her hair a wind-blown mess. One cheek was noticeably redder than the other. It took a while for her face to register anything, and then her body convulsed, her head quivered like a vibrator and she burst into life.

'What?' she shrieked. 'You talkin' to me?' She paused for a response, which wasn't forthcoming. 'I asked you a question, bitch! You talkin' to me?' When there was still no answer, she took a menacing step forward. 'You better get outta here 'fore I stick you! Fuckin' lazy cow! If you didn't spend the night flat on your back with your scrawny legs in the air, you'd be rich as me!'

Doris was keeping her distance. She stood with legs apart and arms akimbo like one of the unlikely heroes in a Japanese cartoon show. 'Rich?' she snorted. 'Honey, you are not getting rich out here. *I* am the one who is rich. And I have respect for myself!'

Scarlett spat on the ground as if recalling the taste of something unpleasant. 'You talkin' shit, you ugly slut! Go on back to your whorehouse! Don't tell *me* about respect! I got respect! I got more respect in my little finger! I got respect comin' outta my ass!'

She threw herself forward. Fortunately, at that instant a black sedan rolled up. Caught in its gravitational pull, Scarlett swerved away from the kerb. Waving her jacket in the air, she went up to the car and tapped on the window with her long red fingernails. 'Hey honey,' she purred as the window slid down, 'you in luck tonight. I got the sweetest lips on the strip.'

'I don't know how she can do that,' Sheri said as Scarlett disappeared into the bowels of the car. 'Doesn't she know how dangerous it is?'

'This is the only way Scarlett can get business,' Doris said. 'She looks like a baboon's backside. I bet she smells like one too.'

The car took off with a nasty screech. With another screech it turned into a one-way street.

Sheri glanced sideways at Danny. 'You don't get into strangers' cars, do you?' she asked, though it sounded more like a demand than a question.

Danny tightened his mouth. He hooked both thumbs behind his belt buckle, which was in the shape of an angry steer. 'I'm not scared of nobody,' he said.

'Yes, but –'

He silenced her by pulling up the leg of his jeans, exposing a thin, hairy calf and a dirty sock. 'Look. I got protection.'

Strapped to his leg was a brown leather holster, like the ones FBI agents concealed under their jackets in those old cops-and-robbers shows. In a deft, theatrical motion he whipped out a bone-handled knife and twirled it in the air.

Sheri stepped away. The blade winked at her in the streetlight, sending a long succession of shivers down her spine. 'Put it away, Danny. Please.' She watched him pull up his jeans leg. 'Those girls that were murdered probably had weapons too, but they never got the chance to use them.'

'It's different for girls,' he said as he replaced the knife in its holster. 'Girls aren't used to fighting. I am.' And since Sheri seemed prepared to debate the issue, he added bluntly, 'Just drop it, hey? I've been looking after myself all my life. I can handle things.'

She dropped it. For Danny was right. When you're a street kid, the only person you can depend on is yourself. And you have to be realistic. There's no point living in constant fear or pretending violence will never come your way. What happens, happens. And let's face it, most of us take risks every day: when we get behind the wheel of a car or board a plane or walk alone down a deserted street. In fact, those facing the greatest risks often have the best instincts for survival.

When they startled a trio of boys huddled in an alley shooting up drugs, she took advantage of the distraction to change the subject. 'I was at a drugstore the other night,' she said, 'and there was this girl who looked about twelve buying condoms. You should have seen her, guys. She had on so much

makeup she was like a fragile little doll. She was so pretty, but so … sad. I wanted to say, "Honey, you don't have to do this. You've got alternatives." But I was scared her pimp was watching. There's no point getting killed for messing in somebody else's business, is there?'

Doris said, 'I was working when I was twelve years old, Sheri. It's better than starving.'

She shut her mouth. Shit, she thought, I can't say anything right tonight!

As if to divert attention from her blunders, the night let loose a terrific scream. Up ahead, a Honda Civic had swerved to avoid a horse-faced woman in a flowery dress who was lumbering blindly across the road. A truck travelling in the opposite direction had run up the kerb to avoid a collision and was now disappearing into the night, its horn blaring.

The woman stared dully at the stalled Honda, a half-eaten hot dog held close to her mouth. A stream of red ketchup and pus-coloured mustard oozed over her fingers and dripped and splattered on the road.

'You almost killed me!' she screamed. 'I coulda been dead!'

She reached back and with a heavy grunt lobbed the hot dog at the car and its white-faced occupant. The bun sailed through the air like a stick of dynamite, fell short of its target, bounced on the road and rolled under the car.

For the next few seconds she stood with mouth open and arms hanging, as if waiting for the vehicle to burst into flames. When the explosion didn't happen, she galloped over and kicked a tyre. At this, the driver of the car (a boy with parted hair and black-rimmed glasses) started the engine and took off with a squeal of tyres. The woman, greeting his escape with a bellow of rage, took off after him as if she intended to throw herself Terminator-like onto the boot.

Meanwhile, a small crowd had appeared from the surrounding tenements: skinny, sickly-looking men, sad-faced women, mangy children, old-timers with frizzy white hair. Their presence created a groundswell of fear in Sheri. They reminded her of a movie she'd once seen, something about criminals and down-and-outs being imprisoned in a derelict New York of the future. Watching them, she thought: Why do society's misfits accumulate in inner-city ghettoes, the way rotting food scraps collect in the bends of water pipes? Why don't they escape to suburbia where there's beauty and fresh air and open spaces? Sheri (who lived not far from here) might well have asked herself the same question. She knew some of these people – some of the older

ones – had once been just like her. They'd had the same choices, the same aspirations, and never in their wildest dreams would they have envisioned ending up in such an impoverished and undignified situation. The thought terrified her and her plan to offer Danny a home suddenly took on cosmic proportions. She would rescue him from a dead-end life on the streets and in the process create a brighter future for herself.

'Why doesn't anything exciting ever happen around here?' she said, and led the others away from the mob and deeper into darkness.

There was a brittle, tremulous quality to her voice which Danny, ever sensitive to the moods of others, had picked up on. As they neared Sephryn House, he peered at her with the frankness of someone who has had little experience with personal relations. Sheri felt his gaze as a warmth in the chilly night. The more he stared, the more his concern for her permeated her thoughts. Pleasant feelings rose to the surface of her mind, displacing the bad, and before long she was humming softly, walking in rhythm, tapping her fingers against her leg in time to a song known only to herself.

Sephryn House

AT THE DARK end of King Albert Street lay a lonely strip populated mostly by junk shops, lunch bars and yellow brick office buildings. Tucked away amongst these motley buildings, out of sight of homes, churches, parks and schools, was Sephryn House. The parlour, which rose to two storeys, was set a little way back from the road on a block twice as deep as it was wide. To the building's right was a Sisters of Charity store, with faded frocks, misshapen knitted dolls and dead blowflies in the window. To its left was Rose's Pet Shop, where kittens meowed and pawed at the window all day and night in a bid to score themselves a home. Across the road a drugstore that never closed was defended by grim-faced security officers who patrolled the street throughout the night to ward off drug addicts, armed robbers and other denizens of the dark. The store did a roaring trade in condoms, lubricants and tissues, the remains of which could be seen each morning when weary traders opened their doors and swept the night's detritus into the drains.

Sephryn House looked as elaborate and absurd as a wedding cake. Almost everything about the building was a façade. The white Corinthian columns served no structural purpose. The blue bathroom tiles on the porch never felt the plash of water. The arched windows admitted no light. The block was fronted by a low whitewashed wall mounted with what appeared to be metal spears. Inside the wall was a small, neat garden, colonised by statues of Venus de Milo, Michelangelo's David and other lesser-known figures, which sometimes disappeared in the early hours of the morning as if spirited away by mischievous elves. By day the house had a quiet charm and people would occasionally stop and peer between the spears and wonder who lived there. Then every evening, just before dark, a red light came on to announce to the world the business within.

After the long walk through the windy night, Sephryn House appeared like a blessing. Orange light peeped between the blinds; smoke from a wood fire puffed out of a lone chimney; strings of fairy lights danced and swayed in

the trees. Doris waved to Danny and went inside, but Sheri lingered at the door with her hand on his backpack.

'Hold up, Danny,' she said. 'There's something I need to talk to you about.'

A line creased her brow. She'd intended to come right out and ask him – she'd even rehearsed her lines in front of a mirror – but now the timing seemed wrong. She knew from years of living among society's rejects that street kids (like prostitutes) often suffer from low self-esteem, and after Danny's less-than-favourable reaction to her remarks about strangers and knives, she was worried he would see this as yet another intrusion into his personal affairs. What she was about to propose seemed to her a great opportunity, but to Danny it might appear as a trap. King Albert Street is infested with do-gooders: youth workers, missionaries and social work students, many of whom want to control other people's lives. Her face hardened at the memory of the born-again Christians, and Danny, sensing something was wrong, looked suddenly worried.

'You trust me, don't you?'

He nodded slowly, like he was standing at the bottom of the ocean.

'And you like me, don't you? At least a little bit.'

He stopped nodding.

'Well, I think you're a great kid and I'd like to do something for you.'

He stiffened and pulled away, then stood glowering at her like she'd just insulted him.

Sheri was astounded. How could those simple statements be taken the wrong way? What she had no way of knowing was that Danny had already played this scene over and over in his head – at different times, in different places, but always with the same result. He knew Sheri would get sick of him. He just hadn't expected it to happen so soon.

'I don't need anything,' he said. 'I can buy whatever I like.'

She smiled at his childish bluster. 'That's not what I mean. You're so young. You're still a kid. You shouldn't be out on the streets like this. You deserve a proper home.'

He struggled to comprehend her meaning. What was she accusing him of? 'I am *not* a kid,' he returned in a deep-sounding voice. 'And if I wanted a proper home, I'd go out and buy one.'

Sheri frowned at the heat in his tone. Maybe she was wrong after all. Maybe any offer of help was a blow to Danny's ego. But despite his bravado,

she caught a glimpse of confusion in his eyes and figured she had a chance of turning this around if she chose her next words carefully.

'Danny,' she went on, 'I know you make a lot of money. But I work in a nice place with nice people and I thought you might want that too. Don't you want a proper job some day?'

This inflamed him even more. He wheeled from left to right, seeking witnesses to his outrage. 'A *proper* job? Who's gonna give *me* a proper job? I didn't even finish high school. The only thing I'm good at is sex.'

Disheartened, Sheri turned her face to the heavens. The wind had torn a hole in the clouds, revealing the universe in all its beauty and mystery, and as she gazed into the star-strewn sky, a meteor streaked across her line of vision. She gasped, thinking it a premonition. 'A shooting star,' she said, and made a wish.

'Where?' said Danny. 'Where?' He followed her pointed finger, his eyes darting this way and that.

'Danny, it's getting late,' Sheri said now. 'Danny? Listen. I need to go inside. I know I've stuffed this up, but will you think about something for me?'

He turned to her.

'I'd like you to come stay with me. In my spare room. Just for a while to see how it goes. I think it'll be good for you to have a regular place to stay, especially with winter on its way. And also,' she added craftily, 'I'd feel a whole lot safer having a man around the house.'

She looked at him in earnest, waiting for his answer. But his face remained blank, his body language unreadable. He stood before her with the wind lifting his hair and flapping his clothes.

'I promise I won't ask you to do anything you don't want to do. You can come and go as you please. Will you think about it?'

Danny glanced over his shoulder, as if someone behind them had called out his name. His eyes returned slowly to her, followed by the rest of his face. When it dawned on him she wasn't about to let him go without a response, he nodded.

She grinned and clapped her hands. 'Great!' she cried. 'Amazing! I will see you tomorrow then,' and she pulled open the door and stepped into Sephryn House.

THE DOOR OPENED into a dusky tunnel that led to the cheery glow of the lobby. Emerging into the light, Sheri sang out a greeting to the receptionist, Amber, who was standing behind the polished oak counter like a front desk clerk in a boutique hotel.

'Magda's looking for you!' Amber sang out in reply.

'Jesus Christ! I'm one foot in the door and she's after me already.'

'The price of fame, oh glorious one.'

Sheri's fame revolved around her standing as 'Head Repeat'. Newcomers were led to believe the title was associated with some kind of oral sex competition, but in truth it related to the number of times a woman was requested by clients by name. The title was formerly known as 'Whore of the Week', but Magda had taken pains to erase this unfortunate term from popular usage.

Magda, the manager, was on a mission to convert Sephryn House into a bona fide business, with health plans, workers' compensation and superannuation benefits. Part of her plan involved improving the women's self-image – a task that was proving harder than she'd expected. For instance, she wanted the women to call themselves 'sex workers'. (A simple enough request.) But what she didn't realise was that many of the old-timers revelled in their depravity. They were proud to be part of the world's oldest profession and went on gleefully calling each other whore, slut, slag and other, less tasteful terms. Although these women argued it was their right to embrace abusive words and wear them like a crown, Magda, as a businesswoman and traditional feminist, would have none of that. When her wishes were ignored, she began issuing fines for bad language, which included any disparaging remarks made about clients, fellow workers or oneself.

Sheri heaved a sigh. If Magda was looking for her, it most likely meant a rough (albeit profitable) night. She scanned the board above Amber's head as if she'd forgotten what kinds of services were on offer. The lobby was decorated in tones of cream and beige in imitation of a hotel. Like a hotel it contained a reception counter, a smattering of patterned chairs and a high-legged side table supporting an exuberant arrangement of flowers and leaves. Unlike a hotel the rooms were booked by the hour and the employees came as part of the fee.

Sheri rested an arm on the counter. 'So, Amber,' she said with a grin, 'how's old Jack?'

Amber made a face. 'Don't ask! You don't wanna know! He got behind the shed and ate Sam's dope.'

'Oh no!'

'Oh yes. He'd been moping around the house all day with these dopey red eyes, so dumb old me, not knowing what was going on, called the vet. And the second I put down the phone, up comes this yelling and carrying on from out back and in races Sam with a chewed-off stalk in his hand. I cracked up. He spent weeks looking after that stupid plant, poor thing. I felt a bit sorry for him, but, like I told him, it was his own stupid fault. He knows what Jack's like. They're not on speaking terms now. Wait till he finds out what happened to his golf shoes!'

Sheri shook with laughter. Amber's conversation was filled with amusing, sometimes eye-popping tales involving her husband and her dog, tales she delighted in recounting to the other women. The lucky ones knew intimate details about Sam, such as his favourite meals, what he liked to do in bed and the size of his penis. One or two, despite never having met Sam, thought they were a little in love with him.

The door opened a crack, opened further, and in sidled a long-limbed man with the head of a camel. He sniffed the air as if deciding whether or not to flee, then bent his body around and closed the door behind him.

'Better go,' whispered Sheri, and she took off into the girls' room leaving a trail of *Chanel No. 5* sparkling in her wake like fairy dust.

The man crossed to the reception desk where Amber was awaiting his order. 'She's beautiful,' he sighed, pointing to the spot where Sheri had been. 'I'll take that one, please.'

INSIDE THE GIRLS' room the air-conditioner was snoring softly. Curlicues of cigarette smoke drifted up to the ceiling and swirled around for a while before starting their journey towards the sucking vents. At the far end of the room a fleshy woman in bra and panties was leaning against a locker pinching skin folds under her arms, while beside her, on a low bench, a muscular woman with magenta fingernails grunted as she pumped a Thigh-Master between her legs. Other women sat at the table or milled about the room, some getting ready to begin their shift, some packing up. Some looked as if they had no idea what they were doing.

Doris waved to Sheri from the sink, where she stood stirring a cup of mud-coloured tea. Next to her, on a TV screen, a man in a business suit was hugging a little girl, an anxious housewife watching from inside an impossibly neat kitchen. The man lifted his head, the grown-ups exchanged sugary husband-and-wife smiles, and then with a roar the scene erupted in flames. Someone had switched over to a news channel. The culprit, a thick-boned woman with green eyes and reddish-brown hair, moved her gaze idly about the room.

'Sheri!' she cried, pushing the remote control into a nearby hand. 'What the hell you doing here? We laid bets you'd flown the coop! You cost me five bucks!'

Sheri approached the table. 'Flown the coop? Whatever gave you that idea?'

'Your date – duh!'

'Ah, no. Sorry, Lynne, can't get rid of me that easy. I've been running late all day. Jackie Collins' fault. And then I had to talk to Danny.'

'Who the fuck is Jackie Collins?'

'What do you mean, who's Jackie Collins? You never heard of Jackie Collins?' Lynne apparently hadn't. 'Jackie Collins is a world-famous author who also happens to be Joan Collins' sister. Or daughter. One of the two. She was doing a book signing. I had to line up for almost an hour.' She took a paperback from her bag and opened it to the first page. 'See?' she said, jabbing her finger at a scrawled signature.

'I never knew you was such an egghead, Sheri baby.'

'You learn something new every day.'

'I didn't even know you could read.' Lynne, grinning impishly, hugged the back of her chair. 'C'mon, sugar, enough of the stalling. Tell us about last night.'

'Last night …' mused Sheri, feigning innocence.

'Don't try that crap on me. C'mon, 'fess up.'

'Okay, you got me. You were right. The rich old bastard had a rich old wife. And turns out her family is the one with all the money. She's got him eating out of her hand.'

'And he wanted to eat out of something else for a change, huh?' Lynne laughed out loud at her own joke. 'Sweetie, men are all the same. They only want one thing. Lucky for us, we only want one thing back.'

'Not all of us want just *one* thing, Lynne,' countered a pale woman with platinum-blonde locks. She placed a manicured hand on Sheri's wrist. 'If you're after a husband, darling, take my advice: Don't go chasing after damaged goods. Or second-hand ones. The right guy'll turn up sooner or later. You just gotta be patient,' and she walked off hauling her dress over her head.

Sheri pulled out a chair and joined the women at the table. Everyone was smiling. They all sighed at the same time and then they all smiled some more. Next to Sheri was a thin girl with straight blonde hair and big anxious eyes who looked like she belonged in the 'sixties, with bells on her wrists and flowers in her hair. She looked like she should be dancing barefoot through a field of poppies. Her long fingers squirmed together as her eyes darted from Lynne to Sheri to the door, then back again.

Sheri pressed the girl's hands between her own. 'How are you doing, Faith?'

'I'm fine, thanks,' she said in a small voice. 'I'm glad you came back. I don't know what I'd do if you left.'

'Don't worry, Faith. I'm not going anywhere. I knew Mr Moneybags wouldn't leave his wife and take up with me. That kind of thing only happens in the movies.'

'Well, I'm glad,' Faith repeated with a shy smile. She shot a glance at the door. 'I got here early so I could ask Magda for an extra shift.'

'Why's that, honey?'

Faith looked down at their hands and gave out a little gasp. She seemed startled to see so many fingers there.

'Her old man's been working her over again,' said Lynne. 'Nice of him not to leave any marks, isn't it? He knows where his bread's buttered. What did he use this time, Faith? A rubber hose? The phone book?'

Faith shook her head from side to side. 'No, Lynne, no,' she said. 'It's not like that. I told you; we've got a few problems is all. Robert needs money for his new car.' She turned her big eyes on Sheri. 'You should see it, Sheri. It's metallic blue with thick black tyres and flames coming out of the wheels. Robert says it's the fastest racing car in the world. I know he's only kidding, but one day he swears he's gonna be rich and famous and then he's gonna … He said he'll … Then he said we'll retire and have six or seven kids. He wants to live in Monte Carlo or someplace like that, and he'll be so famous we'll be invited to the palace and have dinner with the king and queen. And I'll have

diamonds and servants and we'll have enough money to buy anything we like.' The small outburst sapped her energy and she slumped a little in the chair. 'He says he hates me working extra shifts, but I told him I want to do it. He's always helped me. Always.'

An awkward silence followed, ending when Lynne banged her fist on the table. 'You tell that shithead he'll have a few more problems if I hear about him hitting you again!' she snarled. 'I don't know why in hell you stay with that loser, Faith. You get enough abuse in this place without having to put up with it at home as well.'

Sheri frowned at her. 'Don't be so rough on her, Lynne. Faith's in love. She wants to work things out. I'd be the same if I was in her shoes. You can't expect a fairytale romance when you work in a place like this.' She stroked Faith's fingers and smiled into her watery blue eyes. 'Follow your heart, Faith. Only you know what's right for you.'

'Follow your heart?' jeered Lynne. 'That's real useful advice. Oh, yeah, that's what I call real useful.'

'Honey, at least you don't have three teenage kids,' piped in Candice, a thin, short-haired woman in her early forties. 'I don't get to see none of my money neither.'

'At least if you got kids you got a reason for being here,' said Lynne. 'If I didn't have Jamal I wouldn't be doing time in this dungeon.'

'Bullshit,' said Sheri. 'You love the money too much. And we all know the sex means nothing to you.'

She ducked as an empty cigarette packet went sailing over her head.

'Kiss my fanny,' crooned Lynne. When Sheri responded with a sultry pout, she added, 'If I say pretty please will you kiss my fanny?'

Invisible for the moment, Faith bowed her head. Her hair closed over her face and dangled in her eyes and she let it hang there like a curtain. She wished with all her might that people would stop criticising her boyfriend, whom she worshipped with a fervour that was almost religious. None of these women had met Robert, they didn't have the foggiest what went on between the two of them, so why did they feel the need to put him down all the time?

Faith was a few weeks short of eighteen when she met Robert. It happened at a train station late at night. She was on her way to buy a ticket when all at once a man stepped out of the shadows, frightening her, making her heart skip a beat. After apologising profusely, he gave her a winning smile, scuffed his shoe against the concrete and peered shyly at her from beneath lowered

brows, and she fell in love with him on the spot. When he told her he was a famous racing car driver and showed her his Maserati, she let him drive her home. And then the calls began. Of course she was thrilled; an older man with a real job and a flashy car was asking her out to dinner, treating her like an adult. What did it matter that her family thought he was a sleazebag? He said he was in love with her, showered her with presents, asked her to move in with him. How could she refuse? It wasn't his fault his car broke down and he had to find five thousand dollars for repairs. She owed it to him to help out in any way possible, even if it meant sleeping with his friends in return for cash. The idea had been Robert's. He told Faith the situation would only be temporary, that it wouldn't diminish the love they shared. On the contrary, it would demonstrate how very much she loved him, to what lengths she would go to make him happy. And where else were they to find five thousand dollars?

She could have kicked herself for talking about Robert in front of Lynne. He said the women at Sephryn House were only people she happened to work with, that you don't need friends when you have a lover, and like always he was right. They were probably jealous. She resolved to be more cautious from now on.

Meanwhile, the discussion about boyfriends and children had turned Sheri's mind to Danny. She was dying to share her news with the others.

'I asked Danny to move in,' she announced to the table.

Lynne asked, 'Who's Danny?'

'He's that boy that follows me here. Remember? The one who waits outside after work? He's really sweet. He's moving into the spare room.'

'The street kid?' Lynne lit a cigarette. 'Sheri, I know you want kids and everything, but babe, this seems a bit desperate!' Blowing out a stream of smoke, she waited for Sheri to admit it was a joke, something to get them going. But Sheri wasn't laughing. She sat there pale and serene and beautiful.

Lynne shook her head. 'I hope you know what you're doing. I've worked with street kids, y'know. They've all got problems of one kind or another. He's probably a street kid for a good reason.'

'Lynne!' Sheri gaped at her. 'I can't believe you of all people would say that! It's not Danny's fault he's homeless. His mother abandoned him before he'd even hit his teens.'

'That's the story he gave you, is it?'

Sheri was shocked that anyone could be so cynical. She looked to Doris for support, for a testimonial regarding Danny's good character, but Doris had her back to them. She was fussing with her hair in the glass of the microwave oven.

'I believe him. Why would he lie? People abandon kids all the time when they can't be bothered looking after them. There's a lot of selfish –'

'So you figure it's like taking in a stray animal?'

She was beginning to wish she'd never mentioned Danny. 'Of course not. Why would you say that? Look, Lynne. He's nice; he's not into drugs; he's got a sweet nature; he's sensitive, caring … and he's got noplace else to go. He's just a poor kid who's on the street through no fault of his own.'

'Sheri, there's a helluva difference between being friends with a street kid and asking one to move in. You're taking on a huge responsibility here. I hope you realise that. What made you decide you wanted this?'

'I dunno. A combination of things. Basically, I really, really like him. He reminds me of my brother. And I'm sick of living alone in that damned apartment –'

'Ah. The truth begins to emerge.'

'– and I'm always worrying about him. He doesn't deserve to be out there all alone.'

'Nobody does.'

'Especially not at his age.'

'You can't save everybody, Sheri.'

'What? So that means I shouldn't help one person? – a friend? Jesus, Lynne, in a few years that could be Jamal out there. I hate the thought of Danny hanging around Squatter Park, going off with strangers, mixing with drug addicts. He's just a kid.'

She understood now why she'd brought up the subject. She was seeking Lynne's approval. Before coming to Sephryn House, Lynne had worked for two years in a youth refuge, which meant she was well qualified to assure Sheri she was doing the right thing. But this wasn't what was happening. To her alarm, Lynne seemed bent on talking her out of it.

'I need to do this. It's the most important thing in the world to me.'

Lynne discerned the passion in her eyes and backed off. 'Okay, hon. I gotta admit it's a noble thing you're doing. I just wanna make sure you've considered all the angles.'

Sheri nodded. She wasn't about to admit it, but until recently she'd held her own misgivings about the idea to offer Danny a home. How would she cope with the extra responsibility? – the imposition on her life? What if he started bringing clients home? But when he told her he was staying with a drug dealer in the basement of a condemned building, her mind was made up in an instant. He was heading for trouble, she was sure of it, and she was the only person who cared enough to do something about it. Since then, she'd grown increasingly accustomed to the idea. She saw it as a way to contribute to society, to save a life, to help a friend, to buy herself a family. She sent cheques to her parents for similar reasons, but because she never heard from them, never once received a letter of thanks (though the cheques were always cashed) there remained in her life an unfulfilled need, an empty space that seemed to expand with each passing day.

To discourage Lynne from saying more, she took out the letter to her parents and scanned it for errors and inconsistencies.

The door flew open and in strode Magda. The manager of Sephryn House had grey, tightly knitted hair and wore enormous gold hoops in her ears which bounced as she walked. Her mother was Romanian and kept the books.

Faith sprang from her seat. She approached Magda with ill-disguised reluctance, then stood cowering before her, hands clasped behind her back. She said, 'Can I please do an extra shift tomorrow night?'

Magda consulted her clipboard. 'We're full tomorrow night, Faith. But I'll put you down for the afternoon shift.' She scribbled a notation and stepped around her.

'I don't make enough in the afternoon. I need a night shift.'

Magda scratched the back of her head with the pen. 'Faith, I've done the best I can. Everybody wants the night shift; you know that. Veronica's seeing the doctor in the morning, so if she's got thrush you can have her shift. Okay?'

'Okay.' Faith skipped back to her seat. Veronica seemed to get thrush every other week, so there was a good chance her shift would be vacant. Robert would be ecstatic. If she was as quiet as a mouse and he was in a good mood, he might even buy her flowers.

Magda read briskly from her clipboard. 'Sheri, there's an appointment for you in eight minutes and another at ten-thirty. And there's a heavy breather looking for you if you've got thirty seconds to spare.' She let out a series of snorts, her version of a laugh. 'Doris, your friend the Sergeant Major is booked in for nine-thirty. Candice, you've got one for ten. The rest of you

girls get ready for the line-up. Next week's roster is on the board. Let me know if there's any problems.' She stuck the pen behind her ear, scanned the room for signs of sloppiness or squabbling, and walked out.

'That old bastard again,' said Doris. 'Why does he always ask for me? It's been thirty years since the war.' She rinsed her cup under running water. 'Every time he shuts his eyes I think he's kicked the bucket' – and she stuck her tongue out and crossed her eyes in comic imitation of a corpse.

'Don't forget to grab his wallet before you call the morgue,' someone suggested.

'And look in his socks. That's where old farts always stash their dough.'

Candice said, 'I heard after a person croaks it, all the germs race to get out before it goes cold. So be careful, Doris. You never know what's gonna come gallopin' down that thing!'

'No need to worry about that,' said Doris. 'Next time he'll be stiff is when he's dead.'

With that, a discussion broke out amongst the women about necrophilia, inflatable implants and how impotency drugs would one day make them all rich.

'You're so lucky, Sheri,' Faith said as conversation roared around them. 'Guys always ask for you. Why do they like you so much?'

'I don't know, Faith. I just try to be nice to everybody.'

'If I was a man I'd ask for Sheri,' said Lynne. Being a lesbian, she had special insight into Sheri's charms.

'Don't be silly,' said Sheri, turning red.

'Nuh-uh. Not silly. You got it down like a fine art. You act like you're in love with every prick that walks through the door. No matter how ugly they are, you treat them like they're hot shit. I don't know how you can do that for hours on end. It takes all my strength not to retch over some of them.'

Sheri began brushing her hair, employing long, even strokes. 'Well,' she said, 'I look at it like any other business. Give the customer what they want and they come back for more. As for the ugly ones, I figure they come here because they're lonely, so I try to think of it as a community service.'

'Salvation Army's got nothing on you, babe.'

'But how can you be nice to the horrible ones?' Faith persisted, glancing at the clock on the wall. Until recently Faith had worked the streets and she was finding it difficult to adjust to the more rigorous environment of a parlour. She wanted to learn the tricks of the trade quickly so she could make as much

money here as she'd made on the streets – otherwise Robert might ask her to go back to the life she hated more than anything in the world. 'Sometimes,' she said, 'the guys are so rough it hurts and I'm scared I'll cry or something. I close my eyes and think about Robert or Monte Carlo. But even that doesn't work sometimes.'

Sheri returned her brush to the bag. 'Try this, Faith,' she said, taking out a tube of blood red lipstick. 'Pretend you're in a movie. Think about what a good actress you are and how you're giving an award-winning performance. That's what this is about. We're not having real sex; we're acting. Think about how a classy actress feels when she's doing a sex scene with one of those hairy old has-beens. She doesn't feel dirty. And it's not like she's cheating on her husband either. It's just a job, just acting.'

'If they gave Oscars to hookers I would win one every night,' Doris said as she smeared a sweet-smelling lotion on her breasts.

The door opened again and a thin-faced woman with masses of blonde hair poked her head into the room. After glancing around to make sure Magda wasn't there, she smiled disdainfully. 'Come on, you whores!' she barked. 'Time to line up on the meat rack!'

All eyes flew to the clock.

Danny in the park

IT WAS COLD in Squatter Park. The wind was whipping through the trees like a madman. Danny sat hunched on a picnic table, bobbing to a beat he'd picked up somewhere on his way back to the park, while at his feet Leslie chattered away like a caged parrot. Every so often Danny would nod or grunt or glance down or smile, but in his heart he wished Leslie would go away and bother someone else. There was an unspoken code here (a code as important as any applying in an office) that said you're here to work, not socialise, so stick to your turf and don't pester any of the other boys. The men who came to Squatter Park were often nervous and easily intimidated by hints of collusion, and talking to another boy was a sure way to end up alone and broke at the end of the night. Leslie, being new to the game, was as yet unfamiliar with the rules so Danny was giving him the benefit of the doubt and for the time being let him rattle on.

'… and the gangster put out a contract and had him rubbed out,' Leslie was saying. 'There were pieces of his body all over the park. But funnily enough, y'know, they never found his head. I've got a hunch one of these days that head's gonna crash down out of a tree. With the wind like this, it's bound to happen and – bang! ke-bash! – you better hope you're not standing under it when it does. This guy – you might know him; small, freckly, a bit dumb? Yeah? Well, this guy claimed he saw a headless ghost the other night. I don't believe in ghosts of course, but you gotta wonder what sort of things go on in this park …'

Danny knew a lot about what went on in Squatter Park. He'd been working here since he was fourteen years old. Every night for more than a year he'd relied on friends or strangers for a bed and a meal, each night loitering around the park benches and the ancient fig trees and the darkened toilet block, selling his body to nervous, hungry men. On sultry nights he sat on park benches swatting mosquitoes. On cold nights he circled the paths in an effort to stay warm. On rainy nights he stood shivering under Black Abbey

Bridge. No matter the season, the men always came. Some he took into the bushes, others to a nearby alley where things were a little more private. Some took him home and begged him to stay the night (which, more often than not, he did). It seems a horrible life, but Danny had adapted remarkably well and considered himself lucky to have freedom and his pockets full of money at such a young age. Nights were often boring and the police were occasionally a problem; but the sex was sometimes good and the men were sometimes nice and he could buy whatever he wanted. He believed he had nothing in common with the stoned boys who went anywhere with anyone, even less with the older ones who were passed over as a stream of younger, more desirable boys appeared from the shadows. For all his intuition, he had no inkling that those boys were once no different to him. Danny was not the first and will not be the last young man to place his faith in eternal youth.

Right now he was content to stare into the distance, his mind as empty as the night. Leslie's words rose to his ears, meandered through his head, then drifted away, having failed to connect with his conscious thoughts. The park seemed to move in time with the beat inside him and he felt peculiarly content, as if this was exactly where he was meant to be at this point in his life.

Earlier, on the walk back from Sephryn House, he'd struggled to comprehend Sheri's offer. Her words, though harmless enough on the surface, had stirred up a hive of questions and insecurities. Despite years of living on the streets (or possibly because of them), Danny had never had a real friend, and now he'd fallen in with Sheri he was desperate to maintain the status quo. Change terrified him. New things could be good or bad, but life had shown him that when an existing situation changed, it usually got worse. He was enlivened by Sheri's friendship, by their times together. To most people these might seem meagre: walks together to Sephryn House, laughs over strange or disgusting clients, the odd shared smile, chats about nothing much at all – but to Danny these trifles were treasures. They meant more than anyone, including Sheri, could guess.

Danny had always had trouble understanding other people's motives. His experiences had taught him that the world revolves around sex and money, and any time a person said or did something outside this restricted range of comprehension he would slam the shutters and raise the barricades. 'It's a dog-eat-dog world,' his mother once told him, thinking she owed him an explanation for her absence from his life, and he believed this was the single most important thing she ever said. Sheri's words threw him. Was this what

friends did? – gained your trust then tried to run your life? What did she expect from this? Did she want his money? Or (worse yet) sex?

But as he walked along, something warm and sweet spilled into his veins. He hadn't felt this close to another person since that weekend with Jon, deep in the woods, with only a two-person tent and an oil lamp to hold back the dangers of the night.

Jon. The only man Danny had ever loved. The only person who'd ever given a shit about him. He stopped dead in his tracks. Don't do this, he warned himself. You know what happens when you think about Jon. He's the reason you're here. A coldness crept into his limbs and he hugged himself and rubbed his arms. He'd not thought of Jon in a long time, and now here he was, a grim reminder of the consequences of getting too close to someone. He couldn't bear to go through all that again. This time he might not survive.

With that, the conversation with Sheri was ejected from his mind.

DANNY MILLS HAD only recently turned sixteen, but he told everyone he was eighteen. He certainly felt eighteen. Sometimes he even passed for eighteen, as long as he kept his back straight, deepened his voice and stayed away from bright lights. And if people still didn't believe it, he had a driver's licence to prove it. On the streets anything is possible – even skipping a wasted youth and becoming a man overnight.

Danny's memories were like the memories of someone else. They bore no relation to reality. The earliest of these memories stemmed from when he was four or five years old, when his life revolved around mama and dada and a treasure chest filled with toys and games. An orange, surprised-looking Tigger was his favourite toy of all; he'd had it since before he could walk. Even now he sometimes dreamed about it, wondered where it was, missed it as he would a lost friend.

Then one day his father vanished. There was no warning, no reason given, nothing to suggest anything was wrong. Only later, on reading his mother's letters, did he learn his father had run off with a warrant officer from the army base at which they were both stationed. In Danny's imagination the woman had a crew cut and ropy muscles and packed firepower like the commandos in those over-the-top action movies in their VHS tape collection. She was reassigned to a base in Germany and Danny's father followed hot on her heels. He told his wife he'd received a sudden transfer order, and ignorant

of the cracks in her marriage, she believed him. Like most army wives she'd been brainwashed into believing she could best serve her country by being a good mother and a dutiful, patient, unquestioning wife, and sudden transfer orders happened to be an occupational hazard in her husband's profession.

Before leaving, he promised to send for his family as soon as he was settled. There was a lot to do: organise a house, fill it with furniture, learn the language, make arrangements to pack and move their belongings. But all this was later forgotten, and in the letters they received irregularly over the next two years (which Danny studied in the minutest detail once he was able to read) his father's words grew vaguer and more impersonal with each passing month.

Danny, a friendly, happy child, became a buffer against his mother's loss. She would read aloud his father's letters, then point to a black dot on a globe of the world, and he would squint at the dot until his eyes hurt, trying to discern his father there smiling and waving up at him. From where he stood, this place called Germany didn't seem too far from where they themselves lived. They could jump on a bus and be there in an hour or two; he was sure of it. Whenever he told his mother this (which was often), she would press him to her breast and kiss his hair and tell him how smart he was, how grown-up he sounded.

But as the time between letters increased, his mother's mood darkened. She began drinking vodka. Every day after school, Danny would race home to find her lolling in the recliner rocker staring dully at the TV screen, a glass of funny-smelling orange juice in her hand. Soon the vodka bottle found its way to her bedside table and he would hear the tinkle of glass against glass as he sat watching the morning cartoons and eating his cornflakes. Some days his mother would still be in bed when he got home from school.

In time the letters stopped altogether. His mother's letters were returned unopened. And as reality came crashing through the house, she underwent an astonishing change. Within her alcoholic haze she'd accumulated resentments, becoming angrier and more miserable with each passing day, until early one morning she sat up with a cry and vomited and vomited until everything in her stomach lay strewn across the bed. And miraculously, the poison that had paralysed her for so long was purged from her body along with the rest of the sticky, smelly mess. She threw off the sheets with a fury that surprised even herself and that same day emerged screaming from her self-induced coma.

Rallying her defences, she began taking responsibility for her life. It was more than two years since her husband left, and during those bleak times, unbeknownst to herself, she'd grown accustomed to being alone. Without the letters (those constant reminders of loss) holding her down, she started dating.

But if Danny presumed this miracle would bring about a resurrection of the loving mother who for too long had lain like a drunken boarder in the master bedroom, he was wrong. It made perfect sense to him that, with half the world's population being male, he would have a new father in next to no time. But his eight-year-old brain had no conception of the complexities of the dating game, especially when it involves a woman well past her prime who is burdened with a difficult, attention-seeking child. If anything, her moods became worse, more unpredictable, and as a result so did his.

At this point in Danny's life, a typical day goes something like this:

On waking, he gets out of bed, tiptoes down the hall and presses his ear against the door to his mother's room. If he hears snoring, he gets dressed, raids the grocery jar for lunch money and heads off to school. If there's silence, he opens a packet of biscuits or heats up a can of spaghetti, then turns on the TV and watches cartoons. When he sees his mother's car pull into the drive, he shoots out the back door and jumps on his bike and heads to the mall to join a gang of miscreants who are also taking the day as an unofficial holiday. There they whistle at teenage girls, dodge the police and cruise the shops, hunting for anything that can be hidden in pockets or stashed under clothes. It's a game to see who at the end of the day has the greatest spoils: the most kick-ass toy, the coolest clothes and boots; who has been lucky enough to get it on with an 'older woman'.

In the late afternoon, he jumps on his bike and rides home to tell his mother about his fun day at school. As he babbles away, she sits in her rocker recliner, turning the pages of a magazine with one hand, stroking a glass of vodka and orange with the other. After the five o'clock news, she gets up and heats their dinner in the microwave, while Danny goes to feed his goldfish (whose name is Lightglobe because he's round and fat). If his mother is depressed or in an evil mood, he'll stay out of her way and play quietly in his room. He likes to spin the globe of the world and stop it with his finger and make up fantastic stories about the things boys are doing in whichever exotic place his finger has landed on. Sometimes he looks at Germany – but he no

longer expects his father to be waving up at him. He knows he's probably not even there anymore.

Later in the evening, once the dishes have been rinsed and put away, his mother embarks on a date or goes to clean offices or gets drunk, while Danny roams the streets or watches videos or plays Space Invaders on a clunky old machine his mother found in a Salvation Army thrift shop. By midnight he's almost always back home, fast asleep in bed, recharging his batteries so he can commence the routine all over again in the morning.

As Danny gets older, his mother becomes like a bit-part actor in his life. He spends more time on the streets, where he learns his most valuable lessons about the world. Shadowing older boys, staying clear of their fists and threats of violence, he persists until they grow accustomed to his presence and start including him in their dares and acts of vandalism. Although he's not a good fighter, Danny is renowned for his ability to evade capture, his gift for squeezing through the tightest hole or scrambling over the highest fence. For this skill he's earned the nickname Whippet, a tag he's sprayed all over Greenville in a bid to claim the streets and everything in them as his own.

Now, years later, Danny is convinced he knows everything he needs to know about survival and how to get on in life – much more than he could possibly have learned at school. Of this achievement he is supremely proud. So even though his birth certificate declares with all the authority bureaucracy can muster that he's only sixteen years old, he knows that in ways that count he's really a man.

WHILE HE WAS lost in thought, Leslie's talk had moved from gangsters to musical theatre. Danny stared down at him. Leslie was pale and angelic, with curly blond hair, pretty eyes and full red lips. He'd run away from home to escape an abusive father and until recently had been staying at a church shelter – an arrangement that ended when one of the older boys took exception to his effeminate mannerisms and began pushing him around. Leslie wasn't yet accustomed to life on the streets and he still had a hell of a lot to learn. Watching him prattle on about show tunes, Danny knew he would have to teach him a few things about survival and self-reliance, drawing from his own experiences. Without this help, Leslie was doomed. Squatter Park was no place for the weak.

From the corner of his eye he sensed movement. He stopped bobbing and turned his head. In the distance a shadow separated from darkness and floated towards a grove of trees on the edge of their circle of light.

'Shhh,' he hissed, holding up a hand.

Leslie stopped talking mid-sentence.

'Somebody's cruising us,' Danny said, nodding at the shadow.

Leslie squinted hard. All he could see was a clump of darkness inside another clump of darkness. He was short-sighted, but he hated for anyone to see him wearing his awful wire-rimmed glasses, which his mother had picked up at a church fete when he was twelve.

Danny jumped off the table. 'I'm going for a walk.' He stretched his back till it cracked, said, 'Cop ya later, alligator,' and headed off.

Leslie got up and slunk to the brighter end of the park. Danny drifted towards darkness. Before he got there, he stopped beside a thick, diseased-looking tree and presented the target with a view of his profile, allowing him an opportunity to check out the goods on offer.

At a nearby cluster of bushes a lighter flared, blew out, flared again. A cigarette glowed red and a man stepped out of the shadows. He was in his early thirties, with short dark hair, close-set eyes and a straight mouth. He was wearing a double-breasted suit which seemed blacker than the night itself. His white shirt was open at the neck. Twigs snapped underfoot as he approached.

He held out a packet of cigarettes. 'Hi there. Wanna smoke?'

'Sure.' Danny took the packet, extracted a cigarette, placed it between his lips and shoved the packet in his back pocket. His aim at this point in the proceedings was to take control of the situation and show the client he wasn't a person to be bossed around. By taking the upper hand, he could manoeuvre himself into the dominant bargaining position. Danny had a theory that the men who came to Squatter Park figured they could pick and choose, issue orders and set the price, whereas in reality most of them were ashamed of what they were doing or scared of being recognised or mugged, which meant they were in a hurry to make a deal and retreat to a place of safety. Danny, on the other hand, was at home here: confident, powerful, adored. He'd learned to gauge a man's needs through his words, body language and facial expressions and had evolved a range of strategies for proffering each man exactly what he desired. He could be anyone they wanted him to be. For the right price.

'Got a light?'

'Oh – yeah – sure,' stuttered the man, fumbling in his pocket for the lighter.

A smile pulled at Danny's lips. His plan was working. The man was flustered, desperate to maintain his interest. He was already like playdough in his hands.

'What's your name?' the man asked, attempting to return the smile. He cupped his hand around Danny's mouth and lit the cigarette. 'Mine's Jim.'

Danny said, 'Adam,' and sucked in smoke and heat. He felt it blossoming in his lungs. The night began to sparkle.

'Adam,' said the man like he was tasting the name. 'Adam.'

Danny released the smoke to the wind. 'What you up to?'

The man's eyes were small and bright and they locked onto him like twin missile launchers. 'Just walking around, getting some air.' He puffed on his cigarette. 'How about you, Adam?'

Danny shrugged. 'About the same.'

The man jigged on the spot and blew warm air into his hands. 'Shit, it's cold tonight. Brrr!' He reached over Danny's shoulder and picked a scab off the tree. After studying it back and front in the dim light, he tossed it to the ground in mock disgust. His eyes scaled Black Abbey Bridge. 'Phew, that's one creepy-looking son-of-a-bitch,' he said, shaking his head.

Shrugging off his own feeble attempts at conversation, he returned to Danny's earlier question. 'Yeah, I was at this wedding reception having a boring old time with my partner's dreary mail-order bride, and I thought: Fuck! I need to get the hell out of here! Maybe I'll go get myself some exercise, walk around a park, get some air. I'm not answerable to anyone. I'm not married or anything so I can do pretty much what I please. You know what I'm saying?'

Danny nodded once, puffed on his cigarette, glanced first over one shoulder, then the other, showing the man how bored he was with this line of conversation. 'Get on with it; time is money,' his actions seemed to say. The wind rattled the tree above them, adding weight to the gestures.

'You know, Adam, I bet you'd love my house. It's down the coast, right on the beach. And I've got a PlayStation. Maybe we could stop off for some McDonald's, then hop on over to my place and play a few games. Hey? How does that sound?'

Danny smiled. This was more like it. The men who came straight out and said, 'How much for a head job?' or 'Do you fuck?' were easier to deal with,

but he had a soft spot for the ones who treated the transaction like a date. They were nicer, and were apt to offer a little tenderness in addition to the sex. He saw desire leaking from the cuffs of the man's shirt, from his collar and his trouser legs, and he imagined a puddle forming at their feet, a puddle he might drink from or, if he was so inclined, stamp into oblivion.

'Sounds cool,' he said. 'Problem is, I'm broke.'

The man became excited over the sudden inroad. 'Hey look, Adam … Look … That's no problem. I've got plenty of money. Heaps. Maybe I can loan you some.' He dropped his cigarette and ground it into the dirt, then whipped out a wallet and withdrew a handful of notes. He waved them in the air as if preparing to release them to the wind. 'See?' he said.

Danny plucked the notes from his hand. 'Thanks, man,' he said, and did a quick count. Meanwhile, the man stood with his arm outstretched. Danny glanced up from the money. Afraid his actions might be misconstrued as rudeness or thievery, he said, 'I really appreciate this. Should be able to eat for a few days on this.' He smiled and stuffed the notes in his pocket.

Now the awkward part of the transaction was over, he could afford to relax and give something in return. He stepped closer, brushed his hand against the man's thigh, breathed warm air down his collar. He couldn't believe his luck: an attractive man with a wallet full of money and a house by the sea. It wasn't often like this. He was determined to make the most of it.

'Yeah,' he said, 'wouldn't mind having a Big Mac, playing a few games. But say I crash at your place; how'm I gonna get home?'

The man was grinning now, assuming the deal was in the bag. 'Well, Adam, as soon as you're ready to leave, I'll take you wherever you want to go.'

Danny rested his back against the tree and lifted a foot. 'Hmm, dunno. Maybe you'll feel different in the morning. I don't wanna get stuck in the middle of nowhere.'

'I'll drive you home. Cross my heart.'

'I'd feel better if I had a few bucks for transport.'

The man frowned, and in that instant the tables turned. Danny sensed the shift immediately. Maybe he was pushing things too far, being too difficult. There was a fine line between making the client beg and pissing him off.

'How much do you want?' There was a weariness in his voice – the tone of the defeated – and he'd taken to glancing at Leslie, who was standing in a beam of light gazing forlornly in their direction. The wallet remained in his pocket.

Danny sized up the situation. Having come this far, he wasn't prepared to compromise or back down. But at the same time he didn't want to miss out on a free meal and video games and a warm bed in a house by the sea. He set his mind on a new approach. In the suspended moment, as the man considered his options, he stretched his arms over his head and arched his back, and up rode his T-shirt and down dropped his jeans, exposing the top band of his underpants and a slice of stomach. 'I'd do anything for a hot shower,' he groaned, touching himself. He watched the man's eyes descend. That's right, he thought. Cast out the bait and reel him in.

Straightening his back, he pulled down his T-shirt and pulled up his jeans. The games were over. It was time to wrap up this deal. 'A twenty should do it,' he said.

The wallet reappeared. The deal being sealed, they left Squatter Park and crossed to the road, where the man headed towards a red Jaguar. When he stopped beside the car and pulled out a bunch of keys, Danny's eyes almost popped out of his head. The car was something out of every boy's dream, something you'd expect to see in a poster on a bedroom wall, not something you could run your hands over and climb inside. I should have held out for more, he thought. But he wasn't concerned. The night was still young. He would have plenty of opportunities as the evening progressed to negotiate on the finer details of the transaction. Once the man was caught up in the throes of passion it was simply a case of being inventive and withholding certain favours until additional cash was produced.

They climbed inside the red Jag. The man stretched his legs and stroked the steering wheel with both hands. After taking a moment to breathe in the rich scents of leather and vanilla and that inimitable new car smell, he bobbed down between Danny's legs and retrieved an *Auto* magazine from under the seat. 'Page thirteen,' he said, dropping it in his lap.

Danny thumbed through the magazine and opened it at page thirteen. His eye was drawn to a picture of the very same car they were sitting in.

'When I saw it I knew I had to have it,' the man said. 'A bit like you.'

Danny was flabbergasted. As he stared at the picture, reality blurred and he imagined he saw himself there in the magazine, inside the car. It was no more preposterous than believing he was sitting here in the real thing!

The man switched on the ignition and revved the engine. 'How's that?' he urged, his hands tightening on the wheel. 'Hey? Hey?'

When he looked over for approval, Danny nodded and grinned boyishly. In the glare from the dashboard the man's face was as smooth as plastic. He had the look of someone who used fruit acid scrubs and expensive moisturisers. He was likely a professional; a lawyer or successful businessman. There was plenty of his kind about, but mostly they were older, unattractive, married.

Strangely enough, the first glimpse of the Jag had gotten Danny's blood pumping, and now the burning in his groin turned into a rush of lust for its owner. As the car took off down the road, the acceleration pushing him deeper into the seat, he reached over and placed his hand on the man's crotch. Beneath the silky material was a jumble of warm flesh. His breath caught in his throat. He felt like he was about to explode. His whole body yearned for ejaculation. Through the fog of desire it struck him how incredible it was that men like this actually paid him to do something he loved so much.

But the man took hold of his wrist and lifted his hand back over the console. 'Hold on, Adam,' he said, his eyes fixed on the road. 'You're a really cute kid … but that's not what I had in mind.'

Danny leaned away, his mind on high alert, and studied the man's profile. Sitting there, still and serious, he seemed somehow mechanical, an extension of the car itself. So far he'd given Danny no great reason for concern, but Sheri had rattled him by her lecture on 'stranger danger' and he wasn't about to take any unnecessary chances. He was suddenly acutely aware of the knife holstered against his leg.

'Where are we going?'

The man grinned at him. 'South Beach!' he announced like a game show host revealing the grand prize. He leaned his head back. 'You'll fall in love with my house, Adam. Sometimes in the morning when you stand on the balcony you can see dolphins playing in the surf. If we're lucky, there'll be some there tomorrow. I can't wait to see the look on your face. Do you mind if I take a few photos? It's sort of a hobby of mine.'

Danny shrugged. 'Sure.'

So that was the deal. The man was looking for a companion, someone to share special moments with. Danny was vaguely disappointed. Maybe hot, bed-bouncing sex wasn't on the agenda. But regardless of what the man had in mind, there was one thing clear: he wanted Danny to stay the night. The thought of sleeping against a warm body and waking to the sounds of surf and seagulls made his eyes water. He imagined what the house would be like, what

the man would ask him to do; saw himself rising with the sun and running down to the beach, chasing birds and yelling at the frolicking dolphins, maybe joining them if the water wasn't too cold. It could end up being an experience to remember.

The car was getting warm. Danny settled in his seat. As they sped down the highway and forged into darkness, he closed his eyes and felt the power of the engine throbbing beneath him and the momentum of his body as it rocketed through the night. He tingled in the knowledge that this man desired him, considered him worthy enough to take home. The guy was even willing to pay for the privilege. Who could ask for more?

A Starling is born

THE SOUNDS OF night crept uninvited into Sheri's apartment. From nearby King Albert Street came the hum of humanity and the rumble of traffic, and every so often a loud noise would rap at the window or bang against the wall or stride across the ceiling. Every night was like this. It was impossible to exclude the outside world from her life. At first the constant noise had driven Sheri to the edge of insanity, but in time she'd grown to accept it, in the same way she accepted the indestructible cockroach, the rats behind the cupboards and the tireless, door-knocking Mormons.

Tonight, reclining on the sofa, engrossed in *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, she registered nothing but the black-and-white effusion of life that sprang at her from the TV set. The movie amused her, enlivened her, consumed her … but all too soon Shirley Temple grew tired of singing and dancing and fixing the problems of the world and the screen faded to black.

The credits appeared, accompanied by jaunty, addictive music. Swinging her feet in time with the beat, Sheri sucked a stream of Diet Coke through a chewed straw and read each of the names that rolled across the screen. What a wealth of life that succession of names suggested! What an honour roll of failure! For almost all those names represented an unknown, a real-life person who'd tried and failed to make their mark on the world. They'd raised a family, faced joy and heartbreak, grown old and (in most cases) died. How had those people coped with the unfairness of living in the shadows of less talented but hugely more successful actors? How did they deal with the erosion of their looks and day by day their fading prospects for fame? Sheri understood their plight, lived their dreams, felt their despair, for her fate was turning out to be the same.

Sometimes she sat at home with the lights off and tried to make sense of the bewildering chain of events that had led her to where she was today. She came from a religious family (fundamentalists nonetheless), and though history shows that growing up with deprivation and restriction can spawn

misery and rebellion, she placed the blame for her sins squarely upon her own shoulders, reasoning that like ought to beget like.

As a child Sheri was convinced she was adopted. At first she imagined her birth parents to be humanoid creatures who'd fled to earth to escape a doomed planet; then later on (when she was a little more mature) she changed this to the more likely notion that she was the daughter of a screen goddess who'd sacrificed her illegitimate child for the sake of her career. Of course, Sheri no longer believed she was adopted, but she did know that something must have happened in the womb or in early childhood to turn her into a being so different from the rest of the Starlings.

When the credits died, she let the remote control slip from her hand and fall to the floor. Lifting her face to the window, she cast off the blankets and arose from the sofa in the way she imagined a screen goddess would arise in a perfect take. Crossing the carpet, she pressed her forehead against the glass.

Its coldness shocked her, brought her back to reality.

'Where are you?' she whispered as her eyes rode the dirty rooftops.

The clouds were low tonight. A mist of rain was slowly descending. The city was like an apparition that could disappear at any time. A tangle of TV antennae clawed the sky, trapping electronic signals and feeding them into the homes below. Danny might be in any one of those rooms. But if that were so, he wouldn't be sitting cross-legged on the carpet like a normal teenager, laughing at repeats of *The Simpsons*. If Danny was in one of those rooms, he'd be acting out a stranger's fantasy, touching or being touched, making a living by making love.

But Sheri didn't believe Danny was in one of those rooms. Over the past week a tumorous thought had grown inside her, a malignant, nagging voice that accused her of driving him away. Her bungled attempt at philanthropy (the voice claimed) had made him believe she was planning to turn him over to social services, and so he'd fled to a new grid of streets where everyone was a stranger and thus, by definition, Danny was too.

She lashed out at herself for being so stupid. What was she thinking, playing amateur social worker with an impressionable street kid? She'd done the unconscionable; she'd interfered in another person's life without sufficient consideration of the consequences. And the most frustrating thing about it was that she couldn't fathom how her words had led to this. She'd replayed the scene outside Sephryn House countless times in her mind, but try as she

might, she was unable to comprehend why Danny had become offended or scared.

She turned from the window and stared at the blank TV screen as if expecting a message to appear in the long streaks of static. It's so easy to lose yourself in a movie, to believe life's problems can be neatly unravelled, sorted out, then woven back together to produce a happy ending. Unfortunately, when the credits end, you're left with reality, complex and ever-changing, and there are no happy endings unless you can somehow create them yourself. Some movies left Sheri on a high for hours, coaxing to the surface all those hopes and dreams that get buried beneath the detritus of daily living. But sometimes when the credits died, she felt an almost physical longing to crawl inside the TV set and play the role of Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm over and over again, the way Shirley Temple did. It would be so much easier to deal with life and its attendant pain if you knew happiness was forever waiting at the end of the script.

She switched off the TV and in the darkness went to the record player, lifted the needle and placed it on the record. A crackle burst from the speakers, the needle jumped, jumped again, and then the room came alive with the unmistakable opening bars of 'Fame'.

An electric charge sizzled through her body. She closed her eyes, twirled around, felt the music vibrating inside her … and suddenly she was Sheryl Starling again, the little girl who had only one wish, and that was to be a star.

She knew all the words, recalled every detail of that famous scene in which students from New York's High School of Performing Arts spill into the street and stop the traffic with their dancing and acrobatics. The movie fed Sheri's dreams; the music made her spirits soar. Throwing her hands in the air, she danced and leaped around the apartment, singing like her life depended on it, till a rush of exhilaration swept through her body, lifted her from the carpet and carried her through the ceiling and away from her failed life. Into the night sky she flew, away from her fears, away from her worries and cares, away from that cold, dark, depressing room.

FOR AS LONG as she could remember, Sheryl Starling had danced and sung and dreamed of fame. The first time she saw a Shirley Temple movie, she was transfixed by the images of that little girl who reminded her so much of herself, of whom she could aspire to be. Or maybe it was her father who

inspired her, by his whispered encouragements and the way he whirled her over his head, making her believe she could fly. 'Sheryl Starling,' he would murmur. 'That name is destined to be up there in lights,' and he would rub his bearded chin against her hair, kiss the side of her face and hug her to his chest.

As this was going on, her mother, a thin, dowdy, watchful woman, would loiter nearby pretending to do chores. In Sheri's memory her mother always had a tea towel or a duster in her hand, as if housework was the sole reason for her presence there. On occasion her father would spill over with enthusiasm and grab his wife and spin the three of them into a whirling-dervish kind of a dance. But Edna Starling was not a demonstrative woman and the moment her husband's hold relaxed, she would squirm cat-like from his embrace and go back to dusting the furniture or turning the pages of the family Bible.

Bill Starling had once had dreams of his own. At college, in the local gazette, he was described as 'a wizard on the football field' and 'a player of god-like perfection'. Commentators all agreed he was on his way to the big time. But one perfectly ordinary day, during an unimportant game at a small-time meet, he collided with a player from the opposing team and woke up in hospital. Bill was a massive man, the type who seemed to fill a room, and the accident broke his spirit as well as his neck. He remained in hospital for nearly two months, and on the day of his release the doctors said he would never play football again.

So the body that had once performed minor miracles on the sporting field now spent all day wedged in the seat of a forklift truck and all evening slumped before the TV. The shoulders stooped, the chest collapsed, the stomach ballooned, and everything sagged under the combined influence of gravity and sorrow.

Todd Starling was born into misery, into a marriage predicated on disappointment. But his appearance in the household had a profound effect on his shell-shocked father, who woke as if from a long sleep to find he had a wife and son. And for the first time since the accident, Bill Starling saw himself with a future, a mission, something greater than the life he'd built as a mindless automaton that moved boxes from one end of a factory to the other.

From the beginning, he moulded Todd into his little football superstar. He took him to home games, bought him teddies dressed in team colours, dissected the game-of-the-week as he fed him strained carrots, taught him

how to kick a ball before he could even walk. And his drive and energy were met with astonishing success. By the age of eight, Todd was a junior champion; strong, courageous and intensely competitive, as evidenced by his triumphs on the sporting field and the scrapes and bruises he wore from playground fights with other boys. His father could not have been prouder. 'The test of a man,' was his response to his wife's complaints about Todd's fighting, and he went out and enrolled his son in boxing classes.

No one was surprised when Bill Starling was appointed head coach of the Bulldogs, the local junior football team. And the club's faith in him was warranted. Under his leadership the Bulldogs rocketed to number one position in the district competition. These were heady days for Bill. His life was coming full circle.

News of a second child came as a surprise to both parents. After years of trying to create a brother for Todd, the Starlings had all but given up the game – had in fact abandoned all pretences of intimacy. Then one night Bill staggered home from a Bulldogs victory celebration to find his wife passed out on a combination of port wine and Valium, and following a heaving and thrusting act of intercourse – over almost before it began – a new life was conceived.

On the night Sheryl Estelle Starling was born, the hospital room was hushed. Edna, her face slimy with sweat, pushed aside the strands of hair that clung to her forehead and anxiously awaited her husband's verdict. She had no idea whether his reaction would be wild joy or bitter disappointment, and for a time neither did Bill. At the realisation his wife had given birth to a girl, he walked to the door, peered up and down the corridor and let his mind wander through the ramifications. He already had a spectacularly successful son and heir who was on his way to fulfilling his own unanswered prayers. The odds were that another son, raised in Todd's shadow, would not achieve the same results; would in all probability be destined to disappoint. On the other hand, a girl promised achievements in other fields: tennis or swimming, for example – endeavours that might also lead to fame and fortune. The balance struck him as appropriate and he hooted with pleasure. Edna's face relaxed and she turned tenderly to her daughter.

But Sheryl proved too clumsy for tennis; she had no endurance in the pool. Bill fought hard against failure (and Sheryl did her part too), but her enthusiasm was inversely proportional to her ability. Fortunately, before frustration and resentment could set in, her talent for singing and

improvisation was revealed and a bright new world of possibilities opened up in Bill's mind.

At the age of six, Sheryl was enrolled in Janet's Drama Academy. Janet's was a small agency that had recently transformed eight-year-old Mandy Stokes from spoilt brat to local megastar. For the past month Mandy had appeared on TV almost nightly – in commercials featuring talking insects, two-minute noodles and lifelike dolls that pooed and wet their pants – and Sheryl was desperate to follow in her footsteps. Every Tuesday evening and Saturday afternoon her father would drop her off at Janet's, then return later to collect her and drive her home, where she would perform for him what she'd learned. Each morning they scoured the papers in search of talent quests, and sometimes they went along and stood in the audience and her father would assure her in a proud, too-loud voice that when she made her debut on the local stage she would blow the competition sky high. Whenever he said this, Sheryl would bubble over with joy, for she believed every word he said.

Bill was the centre of Sheryl's world. She was grateful for every moment spent with him. Sometimes when she was supposed to be asleep in bed, she would instead stand in the shadows of the hallway and watch him as he watched the sports channel with her brother. It meant nothing to her that her father focused most of his time and interest on Todd. Her time would come; she was sure of it. She just had to be patient.

As Bill had predicted, life struck a balance. The pride he felt in his son and the joy he felt in his daughter were powerful enough to blast away the remnants of his own failures. They could even blot out the long-held feeling he'd married the wrong woman.

But life has a way of throwing a spanner in the works, of rewarding complacency with disaster. It's true that Bill lavished his attentions on Todd, but the boundary of the football field was also the extent of his interest. Todd, for all his vigour and popularity, was plagued by personal demons, troubles he'd learned to hide, to bury deep inside himself so his weaknesses weren't exposed to his enemies. So when the girl he thought he loved – the girl who'd seduced him and mounted him and ridden him in the long grass behind the school canteen – told everyone he was a boring lay and made cruel jokes about his 'boy-sized' penis, the only way he could deal with the pain was to jump in his father's car and head for the open country, where a bend in the road and a waiting tree conspired to take his life.

Bill Starling's world was torn from him again. But those who thought Todd's death would be the end of him were in for a surprise. They hadn't known Bill when his own dreams died. They weren't there when, ignoring doctors' orders to stay in bed until his neck was stronger, he locked himself in the basement and screamed abuse at himself and begged God for one more chance. When a divine response failed to appear, a seed of doom took root in his brain. And it had lain there ever since. In a sense Bill had been expecting this day, and on hearing the news felt a morbid release from the lingering expectation of tragedy. Of course, he was devastated, remained drunk for three days, was the subject of a missing persons alert, woke up piss-stained and jaundiced in a shelter for homeless men. But the important thing was that he would survive, would in time become more humble, more devout, more thankful for the things he had left.

Edna retreated into her own world of pain. Fundamentalists had established a chapter in their church and on learning of the tragedy began to dog her. Strange men rang the house at all times of the day and night. Women wearing Laura Ashley dresses dropped by with offerings of pound cakes and granary breads. Before long these people were running into her at the supermarket, outside Sheryl's school, at the bus stop … everywhere she went. They overwhelmed her with their divine revelations, impressed her with their calm certainty and won her over with their solemn pledge of salvation. Edna took their call to action literally and all but abandoned earthly pleasures. She'd never been much of a wife to Bill and now it seemed she never would.

Sheryl, being young and resilient, soon forgot that Todd had ever been anything but a ghost. But the fallout from her brother's death changed her life in other ways. Her father became doting, hugging her all the time. He hated to spend as much as one minute in the house without being near her. He encouraged her to greater heights, renting videos of classic musicals and pushing her into learning the songs and imitating the dance steps. He pestered Janet to assign homework and told Sheryl that Janet's was the only homework that mattered. Despite all the hard work and her father's manic enthusiasm, she could not have been happier.

And then came the phone call that changed things forever.

Troublemaker

IT WAS A sunny afternoon and Sheryl was choreographing a lavish production number starring GI Joe and Barbie as Fred and Ginger. She was trying to get it right so she could do a flawless performance for her father when he got home from work. The plastic lovers were prancing about the carpet, locked in each other's arms, when a cry from across the room sent her flying from the floor. She swung towards her mother, saw the colour drain from her face, saw the phone shaking in her hand like jelly. Though Sheryl had never understood her mother, she recognised her usual patterns of behaviour, and it didn't take a genius to see that something was wrong.

That night, tucked up in bed, on the brink of sleep, she heard voices creeping down the hallway. At first there was a hissing that sounded like angry snakes. Then came a jumble of words that tumbled all over each other. When Sheryl heard her own name, she bounced out of bed, crossed the carpet and placed an ear against the crack of the door.

'… think I could … like that?' her father was pleading. 'For Christ's sake, you make me sound like an animal!'

'Don't you dare blaspheme the name of our Lord in this house!' her mother warned in a dangerous voice. 'Don't you *dare*!'

There followed a throbbing silence, torn by the words, 'You deny it?'

'Of course I'm denying it! My God! How can you even think, for one second –?'

'Keep your voice down! She'll hear you! Now close your mouth and listen to me. There are many things on God's green earth we were not meant to know. But what I do know is that the Evil One preys on the weak. His words can be irresistible to those who are weak in mind and spirit.'

'Weak?'

'Open your eyes! Come out from the darkness and bask in the light of His goodness. See how you've strayed from the Truth. You've let greed corrupt you. *That's* why this has happened.'

'But … why?'

'In your lust for money, you have turned your back on the Faith. You covet worldly possessions, walk the long road to hell, without one minute's thought for your poor, suffering wife. Money, money, money; that's all you think about. And what about the girl? Sending her off a-whoring; corrupting her to satisfy your own disgusting needs. And look – just look. Look at where the road has taken you.'

'This is crazy talk. You're insane. It's those … those people from the church. Poisoning you against me.'

'Lord Jesus, heal us, change us, save us. Strengthen our family in body, soul and spirit. Cover us with your precious blood and fill us with your holy spirit. I love you; I praise you; I thank you.'

'Edna –'

'No!'

The word rang through the house, making Sheryl jump. She tiptoed back to bed, but halfway there changed her mind and crept back to the door.

'… leave Sheryl to me,' her mother was saying. 'She needs discipline. Don't look at me that way! Don't say another word! Don't look at me! I'm warning you one last time: stay away from the girl. I won't have you touching her.'

'What in … Stop saying that! You make it sound like something … something depraved, disgusting.'

'Some people see it that way. Some people are so disgusted they ring me in the middle of the afternoon and –'

'No, no, no! That's their own filthy minds. They're the ones who're sick. It's got nothing to do with me. I've done nothing wrong!'

'I won't have welfare involved. The police will come next. I won't have the police turning up and all the neighbours standing around. I'd never forgive you.'

'I don't believe this is happening. How can you talk to me like this?'

'Your refusal to open your eyes is proof the Evil One has taken root in your soul. He has made you blind to the Truth.'

'This is insane!' her father cried. 'She's my daughter, my only child, for Christ's sake …' His voice decomposed to a kind of whimpering. Then someone started to cry. The sobbing went on and on, until Sheryl thought it was never going to end. Who was it? It sounded like a child.

'Why is this happening?' came her father's voice again. 'Why did he have to take the keys? I shouldn't have left them there. I shouldn't have let him take the keys …'

'I'm going to bed,' said her mother. 'You need to stay out here. Don't come in; you hear me? Mary, Mother of Mercy, pray for him. Pray for us all.'

When footsteps sounded in the hall, Sheryl shot back into bed. The steps went past her door and faded away, leaving in their wake a humming silence. But every so often she thought she heard a wet noise that sounded curiously like water slapping against a pier.

Pulling the blankets over her ears, she tried to make sense of the odd exchange. She was too young to comprehend the dark thoughts that grow like mould inside some people's brains … but from what she could gather, her father had done something bad, something that involved herself. And this bad thing was so bad, so evil, that grown-ups couldn't even mention it by name. What could it be? Her father had never hurt her. He wouldn't even spank her when she did something naughty. On the contrary, he was always good to her: picking her up, hugging her, kissing her, stroking her hair.

She rolled over. Her teddy bear lay staring at her with wide brown eyes.

'Doesn't matter,' she muttered, pulling him close. Her father loved her, and nothing anybody said was going to change that. She closed her eyes and was soon fast asleep.

But by morning everything was different. Her father refused to touch her. Whenever she went near him, he cringed in fear. He clutched the Bible like a lifebuoy and spent most of his free time at the back of the yard reading passages from the Old Testament, while her mother watched from the kitchen window and Sheryl danced and played and sang by herself in the living room.

Janet's Drama Academy became like a half-remembered dream. With the exception of programs of a religious or educational nature, TV was also banned, which meant Sheryl no longer had any movie stars to emulate, no production numbers to replicate in play. Her mother became more attentive, attempting to fill the void; but Edna Starling had always believed that the purpose of a young girl is to acquire domestic skills in preparation for a future as a wife and mother, and so the spangled costumes and movie magazines vanished, to be replaced with cookery books and 'Baby Needs Me' dolls. And of the entire household, Edna was the only one who smiled with contentment, who believed that things were now as they ought to be.

AS THE WEEKS drifted by, Sheryl's dreams, her exuberance, faded like a plucked flower. A dark cloud had descended on the Starling household, the same household that had once been filled with laughter and light.

On commencing third grade, she met Sophie, an evil little girl who knew every dirty word in the dictionary and had figured out a way to fit them all into one sentence. Together they pinched brandy from her father's bar and sold it to their classmates for a few cents a glass. They got drunk together and took turns riding the merry-go-round till they vomited into the sand, and when they were sober enough to walk again, they went round to Jimmy Rinaldi's house and threw rocks on his roof because he'd snitched on them for smoking. Then Sophie, in a fit of excitement, lobbed a brick through his bedroom window.

For that little escapade, Sheryl was flogged. Looping the belt through his jeans, her father proclaimed her the Daughter of Sin, a term Sophie found hilarious. At school the next day she insisted Sheryl adopt the name and scrawl it all over her textbooks and files – which is precisely what she did.

One day Sophie stole a box of matches and the two girls passed a pleasant afternoon locked in Sheryl's basement testing the flammability of whatever they could lay their hands on. Barbie was the most fun. They singed her hair, torched her dresses, melted her backside onto GI Joe's face. They even managed to burn off one of her legs.

After Sophie went home, Sheryl continued the game. She jammed an empty paint can full of screwed-up newspaper and pieces of old wood, squirted in lighter fluid, then set it alight in preparation for the final conflict: a burning at the stake. How could she have known the fire would get out of hand? It seemed harmless enough at first. But when a bound and gagged Barbie was dropped into the conflagration, the flames leaped about ecstatically and burning bits of paper went fluttering into the air. Then Sheryl saw black smoke trailing towards the basement window.

She lost her head. Bounding to her feet, she gave the can a swift kick, which sent it rolling across the floor, spilling flames from one end of the basement to the other. Before she could say 'Jack Flash', the flames were devouring a stack of old newspapers, rejoicing in their freedom, setting their sights on a pile of collapsed cardboard boxes.

For what seemed an eternity, she stood rooted to the spot, mesmerised by the blaze, awed by its hunger and power. But when the flames started licking at the stairs, she let out an ear-piercing squeal and ran for help.

By the time her mother heard her screams, smoke was already laying claim to the kitchen. By the time her father arrived home from work, the house was well ablaze. Standing on the road, Sheryl watched in stunned amazement as the front door, the drapes, the walls, the roof – things she'd known all her life – were caressed and consumed by the voracious flames. Black smoke billowed from broken windows. The house hissed at her like she was a movie villain. All at once its innards popped and exploded, making her run for cover.

After the blaze died down, the police came, fat, towering men who scowled at her and poked fingers in her face and threatened to lock her up in a special institution for little girls who were capable of such despicable acts of destruction. After they were gone, her father moved towards her with embers in his eyes, and Sheryl, expecting fury, steeled herself to respond: to spit and scratch and run away. But her father disoriented her with his tenderness and concern. Bewildered, she sat shivering in his truck as they drove to his sister's house. In a daze she followed him to her cousin's bedroom and sat on the bed as he poured forth a terrifying sermon on hell and eternal damnation. Fearfully she watched as he pulled his belt from his trousers, then struggled and screamed as he bent her over, held her down and strapped her and strapped her and strapped her until pain and screaming seemed to be the only things she'd ever known.

Sheryl wouldn't see Sophie again for over a decade. The Starlings moved far away, to a town near the sea, where bleached houses lined the sandy streets, plants grew withered and grey and the smell of rotting seaweed formed a rank backdrop to their lonely lives. Without an evil influence to corrupt her mind and goad her into antisocial acts, she settled down at school and eventually started getting reasonable grades. She even received one or two achievement certificates, though her report cards always bore comments like, 'appears unhappy', 'does not participate' and 'needs to make friends'. Her parents were unable to see beyond these words and constantly nagged her to improve.

To make matters worse, Todd's ghost rose phoenix-like from the ashes of her sin. Each evening he sat amongst them, reminding everyone of just how perfect a child can be. When Sheryl went off to bed, he slipped into her room and taunted her with their father's love. In his more vindictive moments he peppered her dreams with fires and demons and nauseating visions of hell. Her father tried to assuage her sins by enrolling her in Sunday school classes

and renting videos based on Bible stories, but she was unable to connect religion with any part of her existence. In time she grew resistant to the Bible's messages, resorting instead to Enid Blyton and Dr Suess books to alleviate her loneliness.

But guilt, isolation and religious dogma can never subdue a free spirit for long. The school added drama studies to the curriculum and Sheryl woke one morning with a new reason for getting out of bed. Her teacher, Mr Testoni, recognised her talent at once. He took her under his wing, singling her out for praise and awarding her the lead in every play he staged. Her eyes once again blazed with light and a look of breathless wonder swept across her face. Her report cards now attested to her talent, drive and improved interpersonal skills, and on the day she carried home her best report card yet, the joy she felt was beyond description.

But once again disappointment was there to greet her. Sheryl knew as soon as she handed over the report that her rediscovered passion would not be a comfort to either parent, and right there and then she dropped any pretence of trying to please them. The time had come to jettison the past and contemplate the future *she* wanted. She threw herself into her drama classes, into singing lessons and school plays and little enactments in the playground, and though her other school work suffered, she reasoned that science, mathematics and English studies were superfluous in the world she was about to enter. Funnily enough, her drama teacher thought so too.

Eventually the time came (as it does for every young person) when Sheryl was faced with one of the most significant decisions of her young life: continue at school or venture into the big wide world. The day she told her parents she was leaving school, their reaction was predictable. 'Always knew you would amount to nothing' and 'Troublemaker' she could handle, but 'I wish Todd wasn't the one chosen by God' was sailing into dangerous waters. Flying into a rage, she grabbed the crystal photo frame – the one with Todd's picture in it – and hurled it at the fireplace. It exploded back at them, showering the furniture and carpet with glittering shards of glass.

This time she didn't hang around for the belt to be slipped off her father's trousers. Fleeing the house, pursued by a stream of curses and threats, she tried to ignore how her father's words sounded strangely rehearsed, almost purgative, as if they'd been building up inside him since the day she was born.

For nine weeks Sheryl stayed with her drama teacher in a small room above a pornographic bookstore. Warwick Testoni was a gaunt, middle-aged

hippie who dressed in rainbow-coloured rags and was culturing dreadlocks. He took Sheryl to sleazy bars, brackish rooms where roughnecks played pool or started fights or stared disconsolately into their beers, while a handful of painted women sat in strategic positions engaging in strange mating rituals. Warwick was a groupie from way back, with a penchant for all-girl heavy metal bands, and one night he managed to talk the lead singer of Plug into letting Sheryl sing a few songs before the main crowd arrived. Even though there were less than twenty men in the joint, and even though they were all impatient for the start of the mud wrestling, she considered this to be one of her finest hours.

Then early one morning a dry old woman appeared at the door and served notice that Sheryl was still a minor and must therefore return home to her family. By this time she was already pregnant and her decision to return home had as much to do with seeing the looks on her parents' faces as it did with the fact that she was broke. It shouldn't have come as a surprise that both were complacent about her news, but at the time she took their infuriating nodding as reverse psychology and hated them for it. Of course, the Starlings told her she was to have the child. They saw it as a divine wake-up call, a lifelong reminder of the consequences of refusing to abide by the Word of God.

To Sheryl's relief, she was not made to return to school. But emancipation was nothing like she'd imagined. She quickly settled into a life of chronic boredom, of occasional baby-sitting jobs and two nights a week of stacking supermarket shelves. She became addicted to the afternoon soapies and read countless romance novels (the only ones she could afford), hiding them from her mother's disapproving eyes, then burying them in the garbage as soon as she'd finished with them. She bought back-issues of *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue* and swooned over the beautiful fashions, home furnishings and luxury goods pictured inside – things she knew she would never own, things she didn't deserve to own. And she spent entire afternoons lying on the sofa stroking her bulging belly, singing duets with Barbra Streisand and Diana Ross, her face turned towards the window and the changing seasons outside.

Although she ate well and didn't exert herself unduly, the baby died inside her. By this time she'd come to expect tragedy in much the same way her parents did, and on the day the doctor told them he couldn't find a heartbeat, they received the news with a collective sigh of resignation. But whereas her parents had the Bible and their Christian fellowship to retreat to, Sheryl was

left stranded, imprisoned in a loveless house with an empty womb and the rest of her life laid out before her like a trail through the desert.

She began contemplating suicide. Several times a day she turned the notion over in her mind like a precious gem, examining its colours, its attractions, its faults. She drew up plans: techniques involving minimal pain; schemes whereby her body would never be found. Then one night, after a prolonged absence, Todd reappeared and revealed to her the wages of sin. His mangled body was burnt by the fires of hell, his flesh charred and smoking, an agonised scream melted into his face. After gazing into the empty sockets where his eyes used to be, she tore up her plans and never thought of suicide again.

The job at the supermarket became full-time. Five nights a week, Sheryl emptied cardboard boxes, checked off stock and arranged cornflakes, baked beans, toilet paper and panty liners on endless rows of shelves. She met Brent, a cousin of the dairy manager, and he said she was an angel sent from heaven and asked her to marry him. After searching inside herself for traces of love or affection, she decided there were more sensible reasons for agreeing to become Brent's wife, and on the day she accepted his proposal they celebrated by dressing in their finest clothes, hiring a limousine and driving to the country club, where Brent drank heavily, lost a small fortune at the poker table and finished the night by forcing himself on her in an unlit section of the parking lot.

Afterwards, as he tugged at his fly with one hand and helped her up with the other, Sheryl felt surprisingly calm. Facing Brent squarely, her cheeks stained with tears, she read her future in his downcast face. Had he called, she would have worked through the problem with him, probably forgiven him and gone ahead with the engagement. But guilt or shame or plain boredom held him back and she never heard from him again.

Sometimes in the dead of night, or when a slob was heaving and grunting on top of her, Sheri thought about Brent and wondered where he was now. Was he married? Did he have children? Did he ever pay for sex? Now she'd learned the hard way that those flawless men who appear in movies and romance novels are the products of desperate imaginations, she often regretted not ringing him after that night. She wanted to apologise for upsetting him and beg his forgiveness for not being more compliant, more understanding of his needs. In her imagination Brent was now a successful businessman with a wonderful family, and she taunted herself sometimes with

the thought that that family, those children, might have been hers. Instead, another woman had all that and Sheri was alone.

Reminiscing

WHEN THE RECORD ended, Sheri flipped it over and drifted into the kitchen. As the funky tones of 'Red Light' began, she paused and ran her fingers down the cold white steel of the refrigerator door. She'd once believed she would only ever see state-of-the-art appliances like this in department stores, and yet here she was with the best of everything. It was a miracle, really, when you thought about it. But the old saying 'Be careful what you wish for' came to her, and the refrigerator seemed at that moment a gift from the Devil, offered to her in return for her soul.

Pulling open the door, she poured vodka into a glass, topped it up with tomato juice, then pushed the door closed with her hip and stood glancing about the kitchen as if searching for something she wasn't expecting to find.

A thought came to her and she put the glass on the counter, went to a drawer and pulled out a white photo album, the kind usually meant for weddings. She carried the album and glass to the table, guzzled down half the makeshift Bloody Mary, then dragged out a chair and took a seat. She opened the album to the first page.

This was taken up by a single picture, a studio photo taken at Janet's Drama Academy prior to an in-house production of 'Hansel and Gretel'. Six-year-old Sheryl was playing a rabbit and in the picture had long floppy ears and buck teeth. She was crouched before a floor-to-ceiling painting of a tangled forest, framed at the top and sides by lofty trees, with a carpet of grass, wildflowers and toadstools and a winding path leading to a gingerbread house. The picture was the sole survivor from her childhood. Her mother had destroyed all the others, hoping in this way to put an end to a young girl's incurable dreams of fame. But this one had been kept at school, part of a classroom display. As soon as Sheryl found out what her mother had done, she unpinned the photo from the wall and hid it in her desk, where it remained throughout her school years. And during these years she never told a single person about it.

Sheri stared down at her young self. She couldn't recall anything about the Hansel and Gretel production – in fact, most of what happened at Janet's was little more than a blur. This made her mother's act of vandalism all the more unforgivable. Nobody, not even a mother, has the right to obliterate the past. There was so much about herself Sheri didn't understand, yet she was convinced some of the answers lay buried deep within her memory, requiring only a photo or a favourite childhood toy to raise them to the surface. Of course, this was the reason her mother had embarked on her scourge. Edna Starling understood more than anyone had given her credit for. Despite appearances, she was no solemn observer; she was the architect of much of the chaos that rained down on the Starling household.

Finishing what remained of the Bloody Mary, Sheri turned the page.

Staring at her now is a poker-faced Sheryl Starling aged nineteen and a half. She is standing near a planter box at the local mall, dressed in sneakers and one of her mother's blue housecoats. Her face is devoid of makeup, her long hair held in check by an elastic band. The photo is a test shot for her father's new Polaroid camera and Sheryl hasn't bothered to smile or pose. She looks bored, which is perfectly understandable when you recall how she spends her days and nights. She's too poor to leave home, too shy to make any real friends, too tired to do anything except exist. And right now, at a time when most people are preparing to go home and collapse in front of the TV, she's about to commence a long night's work.

Her father, as excited as a child with a new toy, hurries off to take pictures of the ocean. With a few minutes to spare, Sheryl ducks into an upmarket fashion boutique to escape reality for a while. The outfits are outrageously expensive, but she likes to try them on anyway. She loves luxuriating in the feel of the designer fabrics and gasps in surprise when she sees herself in the full-length mirror dressed like a movie star. She has a fantasy that one day she'll save up really hard and buy one of these dresses (once she's achieved the impossible and chosen a favourite) and then she'll get her hair done and have a facial and go out on the town and make everybody notice her. All it needs is one of these magnificent dresses.

But right now, all she can afford to do is try them on.

Pulling open a fitting room door, in a hurry to try on the strapless evening gown slung over her arm, she collides with a woman coming out. The woman glares at her, draws her head back on her neck, and there's something familiar about the crumpled forehead, fiery eyes and angry set of the mouth. But it's

not till the woman snarls, 'Why the hell don't you watch where you're going?' that the memory clicks into place.

'Sophie?'

The woman looks her up and down. 'Do I know you?'

'It's Sheryl. Sheryl Starling. From school –'

'Fuck me! Oh, fuck!'

The two women hug and shriek and dance on the spot, and suddenly the whole shop is staring. A teenage girl and her boyfriend, inspired by the display of affection, hug too.

'You look fantastic!' Sheryl cries. 'I didn't even recognise you.'

The change is nothing short of miraculous. The tomboy Sheryl knew has matured into a stylish, elegant young woman. Sophie's ash-blonde hair would not be out of place in a shampoo commercial and her complexion is beauty-parlour perfect. She's wearing a figure-hugging red suit, a strawberries-and-cream scarf, chunks of gold and diamonds and the most exquisite shoes Sheryl has ever seen.

They leave the store and sit together on the wall of a gurgling fountain.

'Tell me all about yourself,' Sophie urges. 'I wanna know every single itsy-bitsy eeny-meeny thing that's happened since you left. Everything! Spill.'

Splashing water fills the silence. Sheryl stares down at her dirty sneakers, hoping Sophie won't notice the worn soles and frayed laces. She sneaks a glance at Sophie's beautiful red pumps and her heart sinks further. When she finally musters the nerve to lift her eyes, she sees in her friend's clear expression and faultless deportment a confirmation of her own failures. She tries to smile, but only succeeds in looking sad.

Sophie takes her hand. 'Had a rough time, huh?'

She shrugs helplessly. She wants to say something to make Sophie understand what her life has been like, but she knows there are no words to express the emptiness she feels inside, the pining for something she won't ever have. It's not that she's unhappy – lately she's grown comfortably numb, having drifted into a routine that promises neither happiness nor unhappiness. But Sophie's appearance has driven a sliver of discontent into her life and the tiny wedge is already threatening to break apart the protective cocoon she has constructed around herself.

'Let's do dinner,' says Sophie. She's unfailingly cheerful, depressingly so. 'I'm only in town for a day or two. Then it's back to the big smoke.'

An invitation to dinner is something Sheryl can pin a response on. She swallows the emotions frothing at the back of her throat and hope and hopelessness both disappear.

'I'd love to, Soph,' she says. 'I really would. But I need to work.'

'Work? At this hour? I thought I was the only one who worked nights.'

Shame spreads like a rash across Sheryl's face. She suddenly wishes Sophie had never come to Coral Springs, that their paths had never crossed. The contrast between them is too heartbreaking. It introduces too many possibilities into her pointless existence.

She juts out her jaw. 'I do night fill. At the supermarket.'

Sophie's look communicates nothing. The old Sophie would have laughed in her face and told her to get a life, but the new, improved model is more sensitive, more likeable – yet another reason to feel cowed in her presence.

Three teenage boys walk past, bumping shoulders. They whistle and call out, but when Sophie beckons them with a bend of her finger, they get scared and run away.

Laughing gaily, she turns back to Sheryl. 'Forgive me for saying this,' she says, 'but your job sounds like a steaming bucket of piss. Is this what you plan on doing for the rest of your miserable life?'

At last Sheryl manages a smile. This is more like the Sophie she remembers, the one who turned her world upside down and shook out all the bullshit. She finally sees in this elegant woman a reflection of that evil little girl who got her into so much trouble … and gave her some of the best times of her life.

'No,' she states. 'I hate it.'

The heat in her voice shocks her. Her words are blasphemous, an epitaph to a dead life. She feels like throwing up.

Sophie inches closer. 'Sheryl, hey, this isn't the holy terror I knew. Nothing could get us down. We were unstoppable. What happened?'

Sheryl stares grimly at the floor, at the scuff marks made by a million dirty shoes.

'You're not married, are you?'

'Nah.'

'Boyfriend?'

She shakes her head.

'Don't tell me you're still living with your folks.'

She says nothing.

'What happened to singing? What about being a big star?'

A sudden light blazes from Sheryl's face. The memory of performing before Sophie and an appreciative audience of dolls is still strong in her mind.

She smiles. 'I sang once in a pub. During my rebellious phase. But there's not much opportunity in a town like this.'

She tries to recall how it felt to hold her dreams in the palm of her hand and let them drip through her fingers. Her rebellious days already seem like a century ago. 'I don't know what happened, Soph. I suppose things just went downhill.'

She glances away, unable to bring herself to talk about the miscarriage, the marriage proposal, the devastation wrought by her parents.

'Sheryl, my love, there's a whole vibrant, exciting world out there, just waiting for you! You've got a great voice! You can't give up! Maybe you could find a partner, a piano player maybe, and you could sing in a restaurant or something. It's gotta be better than wasting your life in *this* shithole.' She flicks her wrist at the rioting children, their listless mothers, the stores selling mass-produced junk, the speakers releasing anaesthetising muzak into the air. 'I've always loathed suburbia. Couldn't wait to get the hell out. Look at these dreary people, all of them on the long hot road to nowhere.'

A thought pops into Sophie's head and she chuckles mischievously. 'Remember the time I pulled Glenn Boyd's shorts down? He loved the attention so much he spent every lunchtime chasing the girls with his pants around his knees. What a riot! He's probably a pervert by now, hiding in bushes, flashing at old ladies.' She sighs nostalgically. 'Do you see any of the kids from school?'

Sheryl's smile fades away. 'No. I never went back to the old place. You know, Soph, I didn't really make many friends at school.'

'Me neither. I was the type other parents warned their kids about.'

'Probably why I liked you so much.'

The shared memories tear away the curtain of time that dangles between them. Sheryl hasn't thought about their childhood exploits in many years – mostly because the fire was the climax of their partnership, and that in itself leads to flashbacks of pain and guilt and waking up screaming in the middle of the night. But the memory of Glenn Boyd chasing screaming girls around the playground brings back a yearning for those crazy, carefree days when no one knew the meaning of responsibility and the future didn't exist except in

the heads of your parents. She wants those days back. She wants them back so badly the taste is like rust in her mouth.

'What about you, Soph? What you been up to?'

Sophie crosses her legs. 'I'm self-employed. Do parties, sell designer clothes, perfumes, that kind of thing.'

'That's why you look so good.'

'Hey, chicken, money can make anybody look good. You should see some of the warthogs that buy my stuff. They think designer clothes and flashy jewellery's gonna take the focus off their faces; that everybody'll be so busy checking out their ten-carat diamonds they won't notice how pig-ugly they are …'

Sheryl gobbles down her words like some favourite dessert she hasn't tasted in a long time. Sophie's life sounds huge and glamorous, packed with good times and interesting people. But time is ticking away and she realises with a start that she's already late for work.

'You gotta go,' Sophie says, reading her mind.

She trails her hand in the water.

'Hold on, I've had a stroke of genius!' Sophie bounds to her feet. She pauses for dramatic effect. 'Why not leave all this crap behind?'

Sheryl narrows her eyes. Sophie's words fall on her like shadows. 'Leave all this … behind?'

'Yeah! You only live once. And you don't wanna spend the rest of your days in *this* hellhole, do you?' She throws up her hands. 'Sheryl, there's so much to see and do in the world! So much to experience! And you're missing out on it! It's passing you by! So how about this? You come and stay with me for a while. There's zillions of openings in the city for a talent like yours. You'll land a job in no time flat. And I work nights, so you'll have the place to yourself most of the time.'

Sheryl laughs a little. 'Oh no. No, I couldn't. Thanks for the offer, Soph, but there's –'

'Nuh-uh. Not gonna hear no buts.'

'But –'

'Nope!' She holds a hand in Sheryl's face. An elderly woman with a walking frame hobbles past and mutters curses at Sophie's sleek long legs, but she's too focused on her mission to notice. She lowers her hand and says, 'Look, Sheri, do me a favour and answer me two simple questions. Okay? Okay. Here we go. Question number one: Do you like your life right now?'

Sheryl glances at her watch. She has the not-unpleasant sensation of being led like a lamb to the slaughter. 'Not really,' she says. 'But, Soph –'

'Nuh-uh. The rules of the game are you answer yes or no. Which is it?'

'No.'

'Question number two: Do you still wanna be a singer?'

'Of course I do. But –'

'Nuh-uh.'

Sheryl stares at the splashing water. 'Yes, Sophie, I'd love to be a singer.'

'And the final question, for the grand first prize –'

'I thought you said two questions.'

'And the final question: If things don't work out for you in the big smoke, could you come back to this miserable, dead-end job?'

'I suppose so.'

Sophie folds her arms. 'Well then, my little treasure, there's nothing more to say. Gimme your number and I'll call you tomorrow. And before you say one more word, hear ye this: I won't take no for an answer. That's one thing that hasn't changed about me.'

Sheryl's doubts were crushed under the weight of Sophie's personality. She resigned herself to her care in much the same way she'd resigned herself to a life of mediocrity. How could things be worse in the city? she asked herself. If the worst came to the worst, her parents would always take her back in. She'd long ago come to the conclusion that her ungodliness was an engine that powered their religious fervour. They prayed for her morning, noon and night for the same reason the parents of the Antichrist would pray: to absolve themselves of the sins that had caused them to beget a monster.

But Sheryl had underestimated their reaction to the news she was leaving. She was careful not to mention Sophie's name in case they remembered the sweet-faced demon who'd corrupted their little lamb in the first place; but as it turned out, Bill and Edna Starling couldn't have cared less about the reasons behind her decision. All they knew was that their wayward daughter was venturing out into the big, nasty world; unmarried, unchaperoned even, without so much as a job or a stable home – and this struck at the core of their beliefs. It was the act of a feminist, of a person who would corrupt and destroy society for her own immoral ends. Far from being relieved that a problem was removing itself from their sight, they prayed she would stay and allow them to continue their labours to attain her salvation.

When Sheryl refused to change her mind, they reversed their position and disowned her as their daughter. In a symbolic gesture, they turned their backs to her.

By this time Sheryl was finding her parents rather comical, like the fools in a Charles Dickens novel. Their actions had lost the power to hurt. She smiled at them, continued smiling as she packed her meagre belongings. When everything was ready, she kissed their bowed heads and walked out of their lives.

Red light

SOPHIE LIVED IN a two-bedroom apartment in inner-city Northbridge, close to King Albert Street and the heart of the nightclub district. The five-storey red brick block was eighty years old and had retained many of its original fittings and features, though these days things were looking a little worse for wear. The kitchen was a certified disaster, the walls were cracked and the plumbing was in constant need of repair. But the bathroom was bright and airy, the landlord was accommodating enough and the apartment had large rooms, high ceilings and light-filled windows.

What Sheryl loved most about the place was its sense of history. She was convinced colourful people had lived and died there and events had taken place within those rooms that she couldn't even begin to imagine. The ghosts of the past, going through the motions of daily living, made the apartment seem less like a fortress and more like a home.

The rest of Northbridge she found terrifying. The decaying tenements and polluted side streets were reminiscent of scenes from *Cops* and current affairs exposés on crime and hard drugs. Her eyes were offended by the scrawled graffiti and ever-present filth. Her nose recoiled from the stench of exhaust fumes and rotting food. The dirty men who rifled through bins in back alleys; the thin boys with unwashed hair who loitered day and night on building steps; the frazzled women in short skirts and garish makeup; the scraggy, vicious cats that darted between her feet – all these things represented a danger she'd never known before: the danger of the unknown. Everyone was an enemy (a potential basher, rapist, thief or murderer) and she spent most evenings locked inside the apartment with the TV turned up to drown out the sounds of mayhem that bashed at the doors and walls and windows.

Despite Sophie's prediction, she wasn't able to find a job. The entertainment industry is a daunting enough place for seasoned professionals, let alone women with no experience to speak of. And other, more traditional jobs were reserved for those with a relevant work history or a strong academic

record, and Sheryl had neither. So she went back to watching the soapies and reading romance novels and lying on the sofa singing duets with Barbra and Diana. She went back to being bored. Sometimes she wondered why the hell she bothered.

Sophie was always on the go, most days leaving the apartment in the early evening and not returning till the small hours of the morning. She was highly secretive about her job and dodged Sheryl's questions like a prize boxer. All she would concede was that the venture paid extremely well and she was fortunate enough to mix with people from a variety of backgrounds and professions.

Sheryl pressed on with her questions because there were gaping holes in Sophie's story. For instance, the phone never rang with orders, there were no samples or accounts kept in the apartment and the hours were much too regular for a job that involved parties in the usual sense of the word. Whatever the facts, Sheryl was desperate to get in on the act. Though she tried hard not to show it, resentment began to set in over Sophie's reluctance to share her good fortune.

Whenever Sophie had the night off, they would spend the evening together, dining at a local restaurant or drinking in one of the upmarket bars that had sprung up in the neighbourhood in recent times. On these occasions Sophie was a different person. She wore plain cotton frocks or faded jeans. Her makeup was lighter and more natural. Even her hair was different, brushed back and pulled into a loose ponytail instead of being moussed, teased and blow-styled. Her face softened and she lost the sense of watching and waiting and became lively and girlish again. She became more like the old Sophie.

On one such night a drunken oaf dropped a heavy hand on her shoulder and slammed a hundred-dollar bill on the table. 'Hey, sweetheart, come join us,' he grunted, pulling her by the elbow. 'We'll have a private party, just you and me and the boys.'

As the waiter removed the offender from the restaurant, Sophie laughed and tossed her head and made a joke about the brains between a man's legs. But for Sheryl, the missing piece of the puzzle had clicked into place.

'Why didn't you tell me?' she asked as Sophie went on giggling at her own joke.

'Tell you what?'

Sheryl nodded at her. 'I know about your little game,' the nod said.

'You mean, why didn't I tell you I'm a hooker?' She cracked up laughing. But Sheryl went on nodding, and before long the mirth disappeared from her face. Snorting like a horse, she fell back in her chair.

The waiter returned with a heartfelt apology. 'It's the area,' he explained. 'Before long we'll be installing metal detectors and bouncers at the door.'

He ran his eyes over their bodies, then went off to serve another table.

Sophie stirred the leftover peas on her plate. 'I wasn't sure you were ready for it,' she said without looking up. She put the fork down. 'Are you ready for it? If I tell you the truth, will it gross you out?'

'Course not, Soph. I may have led a sheltered life, but I've had my fair share of sin.'

Sophie looked relieved, if a little dubious.

'It's all making sense now. I was tearing my hair out trying to figure out how you could make so much money from parties. I'm so dense.' She gazed at Sophie in wonderment. And yet prostitution seemed a natural end for that rude little girl who was drawn to anything bad. Was that how it had been for Sophie? Had she gone out to find the most immoral job possible?

When asked the question, Sophie's jaw bulged. She squinted, like she was trying to read the story through dense fog.

'It was more a question of survival,' she said at last. 'You know me; couldn't wait to get outta school; couldn't wait to get the hell away from my annoying-as-fuck oldies. My life was driving me wacko, and I thought if I came to the city I'd find a job – any job, anything to get me away from dullsville. But when I got here there was nothing. Even the checkout chicks have got university degrees these days. Then I saw an ad in the paper and thought: Why not give it a try?' She bent over the table and her face danced in the candlelight. 'It's not as bad as you think. I don't do the streets. I work in a house, a parlour. It's not for everybody. But hell, I was giving it away for free, so it's like the ideal solution for me.'

A wicked glint entered Sheryl's eyes. She bent over the table too. 'Tell me what it's like. Are the guys gross? Do they make you do kinky things?'

'Oh Sheryl, oh chicken, the stories I could tell.'

'I wanna hear 'em all.'

'Are you sure you're ready for every low-down sordid detail?'

'Soph, you act like I'm still a schoolgirl. I *have* had sex, you know. I'm no virgin.'

'Have you ever sucked a cock?'

Sheryl gave a sharp intake of breath. Grinning self-consciously, she glanced around the restaurant. 'Um, not actually sucked, no,' she admitted, and before Sophie could accuse her of undue virtue, she added in a low voice, 'but I hope to one day.'

Sophie sat up straight, placed her hands in a bracing position on the table, and said, 'Okay then. You asked for it. Here it comes. Don't say I didn't warn you.'

She opened her mouth, glanced at the ceiling, looked down at her plate, looked back at Sheryl. Relaxing her shoulders, she dropped her hands in her lap. 'Who am I fooling? Mostly the guys are boringly average.' She blinked a few times. 'Okay, it's like this. There's fat ones and thin ones and there's old ones and young ones. Some are cute. There's always a bitch-fight for those. And a few are really, really ugly … *really* ugly. But we make them take a shower before we do anything and we always check for VD.'

'You check them? What do you mean check them?' A vision bloomed in her mind and she gagged in disgust. 'They let you?'

'Hey, chicken, they don't have no choice. You don't know where those guys've been. If I'm expected to chow down on that thing, I'm gonna make damn sure I take a good close look at it first. The young ones can be shy about flopping it out, but we tell them how everybody's gotta go through the same routine and then they're usually okay about it.'

'Ugh! I couldn't do it. Men's … thingies. They're so ugly.'

'You get used to it. Dicks all look the same after a while. And taste the same,' she added with a wink. 'No, strike that; they don't. Definitely not. But it's funny, y'know; a lotta guys act like we should be impressed, like they've got something bigger and better than anybody else. Some guys … Like last night there was this jerk. I was sitting there checking him and he says to me, "Do you like it, babe? Does it turn you on?" Course I had to say, "Ooh yeah, baby, I'm so damn hot for this pathetic flap of meat I could just explode." Actually, those weren't my exact words, but he almost blew his load right there and then. If only the dense prick knew what I really thought.'

Sheryl had to laugh.

'There's some treat you like an animal. They don't deserve me, not at any price.'

'Are you allowed to say no?'

'Shit yeah! Sex work is like any other job. If a customer's rude, they can't expect to be served. People think just because my job involves fucking, things

must be different – like, I've got no morals so I shouldn't expect the same as other women. That's bullshit. I may be a whore, but I'm still a human being. I expect respect. I expect to get a good night's pay for a good night's work. And I expect to get married and have kids someday. What's the fucking hang-up about sex? I've never understood it.'

She stared at a young couple kissing at the next table. The man's hand was fondling the woman's leg and slowly but surely making its way under the hem of her skirt. Without interrupting the flow of the kiss, she reached down and returned his hand to her knee.

'Tell me more,' said Sheryl. 'What kind of things do you do?'

Sophie was smiling at the couple at the next table. 'What you'd expect, I suppose. Most guys wanna bit of sucking and a bit of fucking. Some only wanna kiss and make out. But we don't have to kiss if we don't want to. I usually hold out for more money if they wanna stick their tongue down my throat. I couldn't care less about kissing, really, but it's the principle of the thing. It'd be like giving it away for free. Lemme see, what else? Some guys want a massage or spa. The younger ones sometimes want kinkier stuff, but I don't do any of that.'

'Any of what?'

'B and D, fetishes, anal.'

'B and D?'

'Boy, you *have* been cloistered. Bondage and discipline. Whipping and stuff like that.'

Sheryl squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them wide. 'This is incredible,' she breathed. 'Little Sophie Waters: a prostitute,' and she smiled with tears in her eyes, as if her friend had confessed to an extraordinary act of bravery.

'We prefer "lady of the night", dahling.'

'I'm glad you told me, Soph. I still don't quite believe it, though. No offence, but I don't think I could ever do it. I suppose something my parents said must have gotten through to me.'

'Don't you worry, chicken. Stick with me a few weeks more and that goody-two-shoes attitude'll go flying out the window.'

In the weeks that followed, the life of a prostitute became as familiar to Sheryl as that of a forklift driver or shop assistant. Sophie had endless stories about funny clients and tragic clients and scary clients, and the common theme of the stories was that customer service in the sex industry can be as rewarding and as boring as in any other industry.

Now Sophie had come clean about her life, she introduced Sheryl to her friends and co-workers, and together they went to dinners, parties and nightclubs. The women were frivolous with their money, brash and competitive, generous with drinks and gifts, satisfied with nothing but the best. They all believed they were going places, only most of them hadn't yet decided where. One of Sophie's friends was a nurse who was saving for a round-the-world cruise; several were students; one woman had a doctorate in psychology and was so fascinated by the people she met through her work that she doubted she would leave until she was kicked out on her wrinkled old behind. Whatever motivated the women to choose this profession, most were convinced the situation was only temporary, that once they'd gotten out of it what they wanted, they would settle down and start a family or move to a more respectable profession. And because they all planned futures outside the sex industry, they'd grown adept at subterfuge, at lies and clever deceptions, at shielding the truth from friends, family members, landlords and bank managers.

During this period, Sheryl's bank balance (which was meagre to begin with) dwindled away to almost nothing. She continued searching for a job, helped along by Sophie's makeup tips and frequent borrowing of her clothes, but though employers asked probing questions about her education and experience, and though they smiled at her and wrote down her phone number, they never rang back.

When she could no longer afford to pay her way at restaurants and clubs, Sophie proposed a rendezvous with a client she saw on the side. Sheryl did everything she could to resist the proposal, but Sophie's powers of persuasion were nothing short of supernatural, and on a cold, rainy night she was shoved out the door with instructions to 'treat it like a blind date'. During intercourse she could sense the man's frustration, his strive to sustain passion as he laboured over her unresponsive body, but the important thing was that the fee was paid and afterwards the man was nice to her as he got back into his clothes.

This introduction to the game was well-timed. Less than two weeks later, Sephryn House played host to a contingent of Middle Eastern dignitaries, and the next morning Sophie entered the kitchen with the alarming news she was jetting off to Bahrain with an Arabian prince.

Before leaving, she sat Sheryl down and talked her into filling in for her at Sephryn House. Though Sheryl only agreed on condition they advertised for a

permanent replacement straight away, she settled into the job surprisingly easily. It seemed that her failed dreams, her dead baby, Brent, her parents – the many disappointments in her life thus far – had short-circuited her emotional wiring, enabling her to have sex without feelings or complications.

In the end, the job was never advertised. Sheri's combination of beauty, innocence and compassion proved highly popular with clients, and as the cash came rolling in, she grew increasingly dependent on her newfound wealth.

The days turned to weeks, the weeks to months. As in every other industry, the job became routine. On occasion she went shopping and drinking with the other women. Every few months they travelled overseas in small groups. They formed lotto syndicates, swapped recipes and gossiped about each other. And all this time Sheri was earning so much money she could begin paying her parents back for nineteen years' worth of board and lodging, plus the cost of a house and its contents, plus unspecified damages for pain and suffering, and still have plenty of money left over for herself.

As the years slipped by, she became restless. Her fascination with money and possessions flaked away and she began yearning for the simple things: a home, a husband, a family. But by this stage in life she'd acquired no real understanding of how to go about getting those things. Sheryl and Sheri had both tried, and both had failed. And what decent man would want her now?

SHE'D COME TO a picture of Sophie taken the day she left. Sophie's lover had bought her a new wardrobe and she looked as exotic and mysterious as an Arabian princess. The prince, a suave, handsome man with a thick black moustache, was standing at her side holding their luggage. They already looked like a married couple.

In the three years since the picture was taken, Sheri had heard from Sophie on perhaps six occasions. The last time was almost a year ago when she was holidaying in the Swiss Alps with an Italian count. Sophie had joked in her letter that she was planning to make her way through the entire European nobility … and from what Sheri could tell, she'd already made a damn good start.

Sheri, however, had hit another brick wall.

One day, on a shopping spree in the city, she froze with her hands buried in a rack of lingerie. 'What am I doing here?' she asked the sales assistant, a moon-faced girl with too many teeth.

The girl responded by dangling an overpriced bra before her eyes.

Sheri adored beautiful clothes, could never walk past a bargain, but she'd gotten to the point where there was no spare room in her closet and drawers. And most of the outfits she'd bought in recent years were doing nothing but attracting moths and silverfish. So she started leaving some of her cast-offs (last year's fashions, this year's mistakes) draped on the wall outside her apartment block, lined up like a row of lost souls. Sooner or later (usually within a few minutes) a needy person or thief would come along, glance around, then snatch them. Sometimes Sheri sat at the window with a glass of wine in her hand and chuckled softly at the antics of these petty crooks: their attempts to be furtive, their comical grab-and-run routines.

It occurred to her around this time that she had more money than she knew what to do with. She'd had enough of being frivolous. It was time to achieve something, time to do something worthwhile.

And then she met Danny. A few weeks into their friendship she was already treating him like her long-lost brother, and this started gears turning in her head. If Danny really was her brother, they'd be living together. They'd be a family. The notion thrilled her.

Still, it took her a while to come to a decision. She knew a boarder would interfere with her life and involve adjustments, and she wanted to be absolutely sure the benefits outweighed the inconvenience. Certainly her apartment was too big for one person. She usually felt lonely the minute she walked through the door. But it wasn't till Danny told her about his roommate, Drug – tales of wild parties, bad trips and roaming gangs – that she knew she had to do it for him as much as (if not more than) for herself.

The last picture in the album was a Polaroid of Danny. Sheri had taken it so she could hold it up in every room of the apartment and get a sense of what it would be like if he lived here. The strategy was remarkably successful; it was instrumental in confirming her decision to offer him a home. Even now, gazing down at the Polaroid, she could feel Danny's presence. He was sitting on the back of a park bench, his feet on the seat, Black Abbey Bridge looming in the background. He was smiling with all his teeth, a picture of trust and innocence. When the image first emerged, Danny had stared at it for a long time. 'Makes me look like a kid,' he said, and handed it back. It was true; he

did look young in the picture. But despite what he wanted people to think, that's what he was. A kid. All alone in the world. Even more alone than Sheri.

She closed the album and put it back in the drawer. The radiator was broken and it was cold in the apartment. Tomorrow was the first day of winter.

'Please, Danny,' she whispered. 'Please come back. I promise not to interfere again. Just give me one more chance.'

The whispered plea made her feel better. She'd offered up a prayer and now it was up to the universe to do its work and set things right. But even now, that nasty little voice was laughing away inside her, at her naivety and the ridiculous notion that the universe gave a damn about people like Sheri and Danny.

No place like home

THE SITTING ROOM at Sephryn House was a place of indirect lighting and muted colours, a place where prints of Rubenesque women adorned the walls in a not-so-subtle attempt to emphasise the youth and slimness of the real women there. A polished oak bar ran the length of one wall. Plush sofas lined the wall opposite. The day's newspapers and a selection of men's magazines were on display in a wall-mounted rack and a vending machine provided access to a range of snacks. There was even a full-sized pool table, should clients have time to kill while waiting for a friend to finish upstairs.

Right now the room contained only women, one slouched in a sofa reading *The Second Sex*, another two sitting in offended silence at either end of the bar. At the back of the room, lit by a green light, a wall-to-wall aquarium gurgled and hummed. Close to the glass a cluster of arrow-shaped fish stared about in wide-eyed outrage as if they too had just exchanged angry words.

When Sheri entered the room, all three women glanced up. One of them – a thin-faced woman with a shock of blonde hair – continued staring. As Sheri crossed the carpet, her body unfolded, her neck straightened, her eyes narrowed. Her name was Crystal and she was lean, tanned and fiercely competitive.

'You're late,' she hissed as Sheri took a seat at the bar.

Sheri adjusted the straps on her dress.

'You're lucky Magda didn't catch you.' Crystal regarded her with small, evil eyes. 'One of these days you're gonna be outta here,' she said with a smile.

Sheri returned the smile. She knew the best way to deal with Crystal was to give like for like. 'I don't think so, Crystal. Magda's not gonna fire me, not in a million years. I'm like the daughter she always wanted and never had.'

'No, honey, you're a slab of meat like the rest of us. And Magda's not stupid. She knows when she's being used.'

'I'm not using anyone, honey. Just running late.'

'You're always running late.'

'Am I? Why don't you let *me* worry about that? Let's not forget I'm still number one around here, and that won't change no matter how late I am.'

Crystal's smile buckled into a scowl. Turning in her seat, she fluffed her hair, adjusted her cleavage and smoothed the creases from her dress … each task attended to with the rigour of a soldier preparing herself for inspection or battle. Crystal's dress was an exquisite cobalt blue slip with a handful of gold sequins splashed across the front. But something was wrong; one of the sequins had moved out of sync and was showing as a dark spot in the stream of gold. Cursing under her breath, she fought with it, trying to force it back into place. Despite her best efforts, the sequin refused to cooperate.

While she was thus engaged, a man entered the room. He paused to consider each of the women in turn, then walked up to the bar and started whispering in Sheri's ear.

Crystal's head jerked up. Her face blanched in surprise. Almost immediately a dark cloud passed over it. Her eyebrows bunched together, her lips wrinkled, her hands closed into small, knotted fists. When the man placed a hand on Sheri's knee, she glowered at them like a spurned lover.

Slipping off the barstool, Sheri took the man's hand and led him out the door. Crystal watched them go. Once they'd turned the corner, she snarled at the errant sequin and gave it a nasty flick, and contrite now, it clicked into place. With a grunt of satisfaction, she lifted her chin and glared challengingly about the room.

Another worker came in, an Indian woman with a red dot between her eyes, and joined the woman sitting on the sofa. The other woman was tapping her fingernails on the bar as if trying to catch the attention of an invisible barman.

Slitting her eyes, Crystal sized up the competition, searching for faults, tips, that competitive edge. Having convinced herself the next man would be hers, she sat upright, her shoulders square, her legs trembling, and waited for the sound of an approaching male.

SHERI LED THE stranger into 'My Daughter's Best Friend's Bedroom'. Next door, in the 'Honeymoon Suite', Doris lay on her stomach, her face cupped in her hands, legs waving in the air. Her client, an elderly man with a droopy moustache, had spent fifteen minutes in the shower and was now wrapped in

an enormous pink towel. Drying between his toes, he was droning on about his life as a serviceman. He'd seen action in Southeast Asia, killed six of the enemy, was twice decorated for acts of bravery, and towards the end of the war caught a bullet in a spot he wasn't prepared to mention. At various points in his story Doris would murmur, 'Mmm' or 'Ahh,' but she wasn't listening to what he was saying. She just wanted to keep him talking for as long as possible.

'Have I told you you remind me of a young lady I knew in Saigon?' the man said as he fiddled with his false teeth. When he pulled his hand away, a bridge of saliva snapped and started trailing down his chin.

Doris rolled off the bed. 'No, mister,' she lied as she sponged away the spittle with a tissue. 'Tell me about this girl.'

Tossing the wet tissue over her shoulder, she sat on a bedside chair, her head thrust forward, her hands trapped between her knees. Every time she saw the Sergeant Major he told her about this girl (a prostitute with phenomenal control over her pelvic floor muscles), but his mind wasn't what it used to be, and if handled the right way he could be made to forget his real reason for coming here.

Unfortunately, tonight wasn't to be one of those nights.

'Maybe I'll tell you next time,' he said with a wrinkled grin. 'I've been looking forward to some hanky-panky all week.'

Doris shot him a look of pure malice, but he was too busy fussing with his teeth to notice.

'Before we get to the fun bit,' he said with a twinkle in his eye, 'there is something I wish to give you.'

Doris bounced up and down. This was more like it. She adored receiving gifts from her clients. But if it was something cheap or useless, she made a point of making the man suffer. Doris was an expert at sensual torture, at creating a knife-edge pleasure then pulling back, leaving the client gasping for more. She wanted men to remember her for the rest of their lives, the way this man remembered the woman in Vietnam.

The Sergeant Major was rummaging in his bag. He came back with a small brown box. 'A humble token of my gratitude,' he said, offering the box to Doris.

She whisked it from his hand and lifted the lid. Inside was a gold cross, elaborately sculptured and polished to a high gloss. Nailed to the tiny cross was a tiny Jesus.

‘Thank you, mister,’ she purred, feigning gratitude. She lifted out the chain, placed the box on the arm of the chair and dangled the cross before her eyes. She guessed she could get fifty dollars for it. Nothing to rave about, but certainly not something to throw back in his face.

‘I was hoping you would wear it whenever we are together. I bought the same gift for May, in Saigon, and she never took it off. I would venture to say my dear May is wearing it this very moment, God willing. Such a kind, loving girl. I wonder what became of her.’

‘I will treasure it forever.’ Doris fixed the chain around her neck. The metal was cold and it raised tiny goosebumps on her skin. Next time the old man came to see her she would tell him someone stole it from her locker and then he might buy her another.

The Sergeant Major smiled at her. ‘Lovely,’ he said. ‘Perfect.’

As he stood admiring his gift, Doris paraded back and forth, striking assorted poses, frittering away precious seconds. When he glanced towards the bed, she tried to throw him off by asking about other gifts he’d given May in Saigon, but once again the old fox was wise to her game. ‘How about a smooch?’ he said, whipping off his towel.

The man’s body had the appearance of weather-beaten rubber. When he lay on the mattress, the folds in his skin didn’t move; it was like they’d hardened into place over a period of eons.

With a sigh of resignation, Doris climbed on the bed, knelt beside him and began trailing her fingers up and down his body. She was careful to stay clear of his genitals, which were hidden in a dense bush of grey hairs. She stifled a yawn. Despite her ministrations, his penis refused to make an appearance, and the old man, whose eyes were closed, didn’t seem inclined to offer any assistance. After a while he began to snore.

Doris froze with her hands on his rib cage. She flashed her eyes to the clock and watched the second hand tick from one second to the next. Forty-five seconds, fifty, fifty-one … and then a door banged somewhere and the man’s eyes flew open.

‘Would you like me to make love to you now, young lady?’ he asked, sprightly after his little nap.

Doris fell back on her elbows. ‘Oh yes, baby,’ she crooned, baring her teeth. ‘I want your love deep inside me. But I want you hard, like when you were young man in Saigon. Can you do that? Can you make it hard?’

He nodded eagerly.

‘Play with yourself, baby,’ she urged. ‘That turn me on. Ooh, yeah. Make it hard, baby, make it hard.’

He did as he was told, and by a minor miracle her coaxing did the trick.

Doris gaped at him. She’d expected the process up to and including erection to take up most of his paid time – and from the look on the man’s face, so had he. Now she still had half an hour to go; half an hour of inhaling his steadily worsening body odour; half an hour of his scabrous skin rubbing against hers; half an hour of his knotted penis chafing away inside her.

‘You want spa?’ she asked in desperation.

He moved his head from side to side. ‘You know me, Doris; no frills love. What’s the point in getting all wet again?’

She crawled up the mattress. She pulled open a bedside drawer. Some might claim that taking her time opening the condom wrapper was the act of a desperate woman, but Doris owed it to her profession to claw back as much time as possible.

Tossing him the rubber disk, she placed her head on the pillow.

When everything was ready, the man clambered on her like a dry old crab. His knowledge of the sex act was limited to the missionary position, which even after decades of practice he was far from good at. He inched his way inside her, grunting softly as his skinny arms took the strain of his skinny body.

Doris meshed her fingers behind his back and closed her eyes. She was dying for a smoke. To take her mind off cigarettes, she pictured pages from the book she was studying. A is for Apple. B is for Ball. C is for Cat. Learning to read was harder than she’d imagined. There were so many words that made no sense, so many bizarre rules of spelling and grammar. And the tapes she’d bought were next to useless. Gritting her teeth, she decided then and there to accept Sheri’s offer to help. Senseless pride gets you nowhere, she told herself, and berated herself for declining her friend’s offer in the first place.

The old man was now panting heavily. Doris allowed her body to move in time with his. But her mind was back in Thailand, on the beach at Pattaya. The waves were lapping the shore, her sons were building castles in the sand, and instead of giving a massage, she was receiving one. The fantasy was so real she could almost smell the sickly-sweet odour of Pattaya and feel the probing fingers on her skin and hear the cries of her boys as they fought over a dead sea urchin …

For a fraction of a second she forgot herself and knew pure bliss. And then the illusion burst open and the full weight of homesickness came crashing down on her. It was a mistake to let her guard slip; she knew that now. The pain was so raw it was almost unbearable. She missed her family. She missed her sons. She wanted to go home.

DORIS MET THE agent at Pokie's Bar, an open-air hut at the southern end of Pattaya Beach Road. The tourist season had died, and apart from the occasional middle-aged, big-bellied man in shorts and hideous floral shirt, the street was devoid of foreigners. Flies buzzed incessantly, driven crazy by the stench wafting from a blocked drain, while mosquitoes hovered in the damp air, wondering what had happened to all the people. Business was terrible. Shopkeepers stepped outside their stores and glanced up and down the street, their faces creased with worry.

At Pokie's the barman was snoozing in a corner, a lit cigarette dangling between his fingers. Bored and tired, Doris was focussing her thoughts on the long stem of ash, willing it to drop. When someone tapped her shoulder, she screamed and the barman jerked awake and dropped the cigarette.

'Oh dear,' gasped an ugly man in a beige safari suit. 'Didn't mean to startle you, darling.'

Doris slipped into the role of slinky, feline seductress. 'That okay, mister,' she purred. 'You wanna buy me drink?'

The barman nodded encouragement and held up a bottle of Mekong Whiskey. He waved his hand over and around it like a hostess on *The Price is Right*.

The ugly man gave a quick nod, then returned his attention to Doris. He had brown wavy hair, irregular features and oily skin. His nose and chin both looked as though they belonged on a much larger face.

'Quiet tonight,' he observed in a British accent.

'Sure is, mister. Where you from, mister?'

'Liverpool originally. I'm sort of international now.'

The barman slid two glasses of amber liquid across the bar. After pocketing the man's money, he returned to his corner and started swiping at the counter with a dirty rag.

You're a very lovely young lady,' said the ugly man, running his eyes along Doris's legs and hips and breasts. 'I'm sure a lot of men tell you that.'

Doris smiled in agreement. She crossed her legs and tugged coyly at the edge of her skirt. When she let the hem go, the skirt rode up even higher on her thigh. 'You very handsome man,' she said. Opening her mouth, she licked her tongue along the rim of her glass. She was pulling out all her tricks. This season there had been so few tourists and so many scavenging women about that Doris had found the going tough. On too many occasions her family had gone hungry. And over coming months things were set to get even worse. If she marshalled all her abundant charms, this foreigner's generosity might prove an unexpected bonus.

The ugly man threw back his whiskey. 'You make much money here, darling?'

Doris followed his example. She placed her empty glass on the counter next to his. 'Oh no, mister. Not enough for family. You English are rich. You should give me some of your money.'

He laughed loudly, hurling the fluid sound from the depths of his belly. 'I'm not that rich, darling. But I do know where you can make a helluva lot of moolah. You've got the right look.'

Doris stroked his leg and scratched the base of his fly. In return he gave her a wry smile that suggested she'd proven his point. Then he told her how much money she could make if she went to the place where the foreigners lived instead of waiting for them to come to Pattaya. She almost fell off her stool. The figure was twenty times what she made here. No wonder the tourists were so rich! Her mind went into overdrive. She pictured her family in a year's time with that kind of money. They could open a shop and sell T-shirts. Her boys could go to school. (Might she herself go to school?) It was all too much to comprehend. She watched numbly as the man scribbled down the name of his hotel.

After the ugly man left, Doris jumped on her motor scooter and raced home. She lived a few miles outside Pattaya, in a barn-like structure that overflowed with attractive, ambitious, penniless women like herself, women who had sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles and grandparents to support. Her own boys were three years old, identical twins, the spitting image of their father who was killed by a hit-and-run driver a week before the boys were born. When Doris walked in the door they clung to her legs like leeches, screaming with delight, and she dragged herself around the house with the boys hanging onto her ankles.

Her grandfather was a gentle man who presided over their home with a wisdom that was all-pervading. It was to him she turned for advice. Throughout her tale of the ugly man and his amazing proposition, he nodded slowly and drew long breaths on his pipe, letting the smoke leak from his nose and from the corners of his mouth. When Doris was finished, he told her in a sure and tender voice that she must do whatever was best for her family. She knew in an instant what that meant.

Still, the decision wasn't an easy one. Doris had her heart to contend with, and her heart told her that the people close to her would suffer. Against this she had to weigh a vision she often had, a vision of her boys as grown men, dressed in rags, begging on the street, supporting a mother who by this time was too old and unmerchantable to provide for herself or her family. Doris's father was an opium addict in Chiang Mai, her mother and husband both in their graves, her grandfather too old and sick to work. If she let this opportunity pass her by, what other future could she possibly expect for her boys?

Next morning she hopped on her motor scooter and shot off down the broken road. Weaving between tuk tuks and belching cars, beeping her horn at yawning pedestrians, speeding past cluttered billboards, young men playing takraw, saffron-robed monks begging for food and roadside vendors preparing their stalls for the day's trading, she blinked away a torrent of tears.

Though she had no destination in mind, she eventually skidded to a halt on a hill overlooking the ocean. The sky was chalky brown, the sea an insipid grey, but the sun had draped the fishing boats with cloaks of gold and they lay motionless in the water as if revelling in this momentary glory.

Doris contemplated the horizon. She imagined herself arriving at her destination, going in search of the ocean, looking out over the waves and in her mind's eye seeing this very hill and the land that surrounded it. Behind her were furrowed fields and misty hills. It was from these hills that her ancestors had come, moving ever forward, searching for a better home. Only the sea had stopped their relentless journey. And now Doris was continuing their search, taking to the skies in a way her ancestors would have found magical. Like them, she was seeking a brighter future, a better life for her children and their children and all the children to come. The notion was like warm air and she swelled with pride and hope until she felt as big as the Buddha that presided over her family's home.

Before the month was out, Doris had signed the necessary papers and the ugly man had produced travel documents and a plane ticket. A week later, she touched down at a bustling airport in a strange country, a place where people never seemed to smile, a place where people seemed always in a hurry to get to someplace else. The days were cold and wet and she couldn't stop shivering, not even in a warm room. She was afraid to leave her tiny room except to catch a cab to and from Sephryn House, and it wasn't until her first earnings were presented that she realised she'd been duped. Part of the contract she'd unwittingly signed required her to pay twenty-five thousand dollars to the ugly man before the end of her visa. Was this right? It seemed like a fortune, an unimaginable sum of money, an amount she'd not expected to earn in her entire lifetime. She had no friends, nowhere to turn for help or advice, no idea what to do in case of an emergency. And the ugly man was holding her passport.

But Doris refused to cry. She would not admit defeat. She committed herself to working longer hours, seeing extra clients, doing whatever it took to make the most of this opportunity. After all, she came here to work, not enjoy herself. And her family was depending on her.

End of the century

When Sheri left Sephryn House at the end of her shift, she found Danny sitting on the wall outside.

She stopped dead. At first she thought she was seeing a ghost. But of course Sheri no longer believed in ghosts. They were a luxury reserved for the ignorant, for those who still believed the world to be a place of mystery and wonder.

Danny was jabbing his knife at the mortar between the bricks. When she coughed, he glanced up.

'Hiya!' he chirped, returning the knife to its sheath. 'Um, I asked that girl inside if you were there and she said yeah and you'd be out soon.'

She hardly registered his words. 'Danny! What a surprise! I haven't seen you in ages.'

'Nope,' he agreed, getting to his feet.

'It's good to see you.'

'Yeah.'

'How are you?'

'Well, um … Y'know … The park's pretty quiet tonight.'

'Quiet? You're lucky. My night was fucked.'

Grinning at the lame joke, he turned and unhooked his backpack from the metal spears. Sheri studied him. He seemed healthy and happy. He'd had a haircut and was wearing clean clothes and new shoes. He even appeared to have put on a little weight. Though she was determined to stick by her pledge not to interfere in his life again, she was dying to know where he'd been for the past week and couldn't think of anything else to say.

Danny was content with silence. While Sheri exchanged pleasantries with a stream of refugees emerging from Sephryn House, he stood at a distance smiling into the air. The smile widened when Sheri turned back to him, and when she remarked on how well he was looking, he shrugged a little and turned his smile to the ground.

The weeds at their feet stirred in the breeze. Across the road, outside the drugstore, a darkly handsome security guard was feeding something to a black Doberman. When he caught Sheri and Danny watching him, he straightened and stroked his gun as if daring them to cause trouble. The dog noticed them too and pricked up its ears, and for the next few moments the four stood facing each other like pieces on a chess board.

Then the door to Sephryn House opened and out strode Crystal.

Catching sight of Sheri and Danny, her eyes lit up and she leaned on her boyfriend's shoulder and whispered something that made him double over with laughter. When he took off across the road, she took advantage of his departure to bowl through them like the opposing player's queen.

Crystal's boyfriend, Karl, was short and muscled, a master at Taekwondo. A friendly, happy man, he loved Crystal with a passion that transcended her many faults. From the beginning she'd been open and honest about her life, and because of this Karl trusted her completely and took it as an indisputable truth when she swore that what went on within the walls of Sephryn House had no bearing on their relationship, involving as it did no kisses, no orgasms and no feelings. Of course, if anyone had dared suggest to Karl that his beloved princess was despised by virtually every other woman on the planet, he would have laughed it off as preposterous, an impossibility. Crystal was considerate and loving – a paragon of sweetness. There wasn't a nasty bone in her body.

Character flaws aside, Sheri had never understood how Crystal's lover could overlook the fact that countless men had entered that sacred body before him – sometimes only hours before. If she were Crystal, she would freeze up the instant Karl touched her. At the very thought of dating Joe, she felt like dirt. Maybe, she thought, it takes a self-centred bitch like Crystal to make a go of a relationship in this profession. Maybe nice girls *do* finish last.

Karl jogged back and handed Crystal a white paper bag. As the lovers walked off arm in arm, she turned her head and smiled at Sheri over his shoulder. It was a sneering, triumphant kind of smile, the smile of the victor. For Crystal knew it made no difference who was Sephryn House's Head Repeat or who was the biggest money-spinner or whom Magda liked or didn't like. The only true indicator of worth in this business was a handsome boyfriend who accepted you and loved you with no strings attached. And she knew Sheri knew this too.

The attack was well timed. The strain of days of worry over Danny was telling on Sheri and it only took this one small provocation to bring everything to a head.

'Where have you been?' she cried. 'I've been out of my mind with worry!'

Danny looked at her. For a moment she thought he was going to tell her to shut up and mind her own business. But then he grinned and cracked his knuckles and she realised that all this time he'd probably been as eager to tell his story as she was to hear it.

'I was living in this massive house on the beach,' he said, opening his arms to illustrate the enormity of the place. 'It was like this, man … like a mansion. A real-life fucking mansion! The guy must've been a millionaire or something.'

'Wow,' Sheri said, relief flooding her mind.

'Yeah, a mansion.' His eyes opened wide. 'And you should've seen the games! Everything you could ever think of, some even better than the arcades. And the TV … Man, the TV. It took up the whole of a wall.'

'Wow,' Sheri said again.

'It was wicked cool, man. It was … It was like, when there was an explosion, the whole house shook. There were speakers all over the place.'

'Sounds like heaven.'

'And there was every movie you could ever think of. Hundreds of DVDs and video tapes lined up on the shelves.'

'Hundreds, eh?'

'Yeah.' His hands flopped to his sides. 'It was pretty cool, I guess.'

'Sure sounds it to me. Are you still living there?'

'Nah.'

'No? Why not?

'Got bored.'

'Bored?'

'Yeah.'

'How could you get bored with all that?'

'Eh, y'know. You get sick of watching TV all day. The dude was always working and I was stuck in this house miles from nowhere. I waited around for a few days 'cos he said I might see dolphins. There was supposed to be dolphins there all the time. But he musta been lying 'cos I didn't see any fish at all. And he was a stingy bastard. So I thought: What the hell am I doing wasting my time here when I could be out making some real dough?'

'Money's not everything, Danny.'

He frowned at her, his head cocked. The look said: 'What's the point of staying in a nice house if you can't afford the coolest streetwear, cartons of cigarettes and bottles of tequila?' Money was the only thing that gave Danny choices, that enabled him to exercise control over his life. He'd always assumed Sheri thought the same.

'Was he a nice man?'

He pulled a face. 'I guess so. He was sorta weird at first. Like, he was a cool-looking dude and everything … but he wouldn't let me touch him. All he did was take photos. And sometimes he wanted me to jerk off in front of him.' Realising what he'd said, his face went red. 'Anyhow,' he continued, looking at his shoes, 'I thought he was kidding at first and I laughed at him, and then he got really pissed. But he made me sleep in my own bed and he never came in.'

'Never?'

'Nope. Except one time when I was asleep and he came in and tried to take photos. And I told him to get lost, because, like, that wasn't part of the deal. The dude didn't get it. Thought he owned me.'

'Let's walk.'

They turned towards Northbridge. There was no one else around. The security guard and his dog had gone inside the store, no doubt to escape the cold.

'So,' Sheri said, 'this guy was pretty cool but you got bored.'

'Yeah. All he ever talked about was his stupid friends and how they'd freak when they saw the photos. And he kept saying, "Clean up your mess" and "Put the dishes away" like he was my dad or something.'

At Rose's Pet Shop they were waved down by a kitten, a silver tabby with green, anxious eyes. Mewing soundlessly, it tapped a message on the other side of the glass. A pile of siblings was asleep at the back of the cage, but this little ball of fur was working overtime to score itself a home. Perhaps it understood the fate of unwanted kittens once they are no longer able to trade on their looks.

Sheri bent forward. 'Maybe I should get another pet.' She turned to Danny. 'I used to have a cat. His name was Bubbles.'

He laughed. 'Bubbles?'

'Yeah, Bubbles. He was a scrawny little thing, always meowing outside the door. Poor little guy. He had so many fleas you could see the fur moving

around on his back. He didn't seem to belong to anybody, so I gave him a bath and a flea collar and sort of adopted him. And you know what, Danny? Bubbles never grew an inch. He must have been neglected for so long his growth was permanently stunted. But he was so amazingly affectionate. Always hated being away from me. This was after Sophie left – Sophie, my roommate – so I was feeling pretty low.'

'What happened to it?' Danny asked, always eager to get to the punchline.

'He disappeared one day.'

Folding her arms, she stared glumly at the kitten in the window.

'Maybe it got run over.'

She looked at him. 'I wouldn't think so. He was pretty streetwise. I suppose he just moved onto the next free meal.'

'Funny he didn't come back, but.'

'Maybe I won't get another cat,' she said, turning away. 'I don't want to go through all that again.'

'You could keep it inside.'

'I suppose we could. But that wouldn't be fair. Cats are outdoor animals. They need to run around and catch mice and fight with other cats. Bubbles was like that. In the morning he couldn't wait to get out the door. And the minute he was outside, there'd be this terrific fighting and howling. There was another cat … Major Tom, I used to call him. He was Bubbles' sworn enemy.'

She tapped on the glass. The kitten looked cross-eyed at her finger, then launched itself at the window and banged with its paws like it was trying to break through. After this burst of activity, it sat back and stared up at her with its big green eyes, displaying the mellower side of its personality.

'This guy's an expert,' she said. 'We better get going before I change my mind.'

Moving off, she started humming. She was trying to push down the memory of Bubbles' disappearance, which was still strong in her mind. For a long time after he'd gone she'd had panic attacks, and even now her heart raced whenever she thought back to that awful time.

Danny said, 'There's a cat that hangs around the park. Lesley thinks it's a fox, but I'm pretty sure it's a cat. It jumps around in the bushes and scares the shit outta me every time. Lesley wants to catch it and train it to sit on his shoulder like a goddam parrot or something. He's such a freak.'

Sheri smiled at him. Like a man, Danny walked with a straight back and long strides. Like a boy, he blurted out stories in a tumble of words, then fell

into a state of bashful silence. Right now he was in that murky place called adolescence, a place where the treasures of the adult world are within sight and you can't wait to get your hands on them.

She wondered what her brother had been like at Danny's age. It was strange; she barely remembered Todd, couldn't recall a single thing they'd done together, but whenever she saw Danny or someone who resembled him, she always thought of Todd. In her mind he was the eternal teenager. Whereas she along with most others in the world were fated to grow old and be remembered (if at all) as a stooped, grey-haired, wrinkle-faced crone, Todd would always be a youngster, with fresh skin and supple limbs and stars in his eyes. Sheri longed to stay young forever, like Todd, but she didn't want to have to die to do it.

She frowned at herself. Her thoughts had crawled back to death, a subject that had lived with her since the night of Danny's disappearance. Now he was back, it was time to eradicate those morbid thoughts and direct her mind to the future, to her plans for Danny. For she *did* still have plans. Knowing now that his disappearance had nothing to do with her, she discarded her pledge to not interfere in his life and began plotting a way to guide the conversation back to his living arrangements.

'So, you said you didn't like this guy acting like your father.'

'No way.'

'What was your father like?'

The question was greeted by a yawning silence. To make her words appear more innocuous than they really were, she pretended to pull at a loose thread on her dress.

'I don't remember him too well,' Danny said after a while. 'I mean, I remember him, but I was, like, really young when he ran out.'

'How old?'

'Dunno. About five.'

'Do you know why he ran off?'

'Was in the army.'

She waited for further details, but Danny had lapsed into another silence.

'Went off on a peacekeeping mission or something, did he?' she offered.

'Nope. Ran off with a floozy.'

'Oh.' Time to change the subject. 'What about your mother?'

'What about her?'

'What was she like?'

'Dunno. She was hardly ever round.'

'Not even on weekends?'

'Nope. Was always out getting laid. And she didn't want me there anyway. Said I ruined her life. She said she'd be married by now if she didn't have me dragging along behind her.'

'That's a rotten thing to say.'

He shrugged and his clothes jiggled over his slender frame. 'Didn't worry me. She was okay when she was sober. Mostly she wasn't around, so I stayed up all night and played video games. I suppose I was luckier than most kids.'

'Sounds like you were. I used to love Donkey Kong.'

'Bet I could beat you.'

'I bet you could too.'

Sheri let the conversation drop for a while. This was the first time she'd pried into Danny's life and she was careful about pushing things too far. In the early days of their friendship he'd made a few off-the-cuff remarks about his mother and her criminal neglect of him, and this had been enough to warn her away from any deliberate references to his unhappy past. But now she had him talking, she was reluctant to let up.

She sneaked a sideways glance and was surprised to find him bouncing along happily, apparently without a care in the world. It looked like he'd come to terms with his mother's rejection. Or maybe he'd simply consigned his unfortunate childhood to the annals of history. Like a skater he'd skimmed over the surface of their words, not worrying about feelings or meanings at all.

He picked up the narrative of his own accord. 'When I was a kid, she met this guy she really liked and we moved in with him for a while. That was pretty cool. He had this daughter, Jenny. She was older than me and really, really tough. She liked playing this game where I was doctor and she was, like, the patient, and she'd pull up her dress and try and make me touch her. Puke madly! Her old man hated me. But it didn't last long with this guy. Beat her up really bad one time, so we moved to this shelter. That was cool too. Some of the older kids had booze and dope, so we'd have a great old time. But you're not supposed to stay in those places forever, so we moved out.'

'Did you say you've been in Northbridge about a year?'

'Prob'ly a bit more.'

'What made you come here?'

A change came over Danny's face. The spring died from his step. 'Just had to get away,' he muttered, and took off across the road.

Sheri followed. Guessing they'd strayed onto a painful subject, she decided to end the interrogation for the time being and for the next few minutes they walked along in silence. The street was empty, the gutters filled with water. Earlier tonight a rain cloud had come up from the south and dropped its load on Northbridge, and the air here was heavy with the sour odour of wet bitumen.

Danny seemed weighed down with thought. Happening upon an empty Sprite can, he began kicking it down the road. After a while he turned to Sheri and told her the story of his new shoes. The other day he'd been exploring some caves down at the beach when a king wave caught him unawares and drenched him from head to toe. Yesterday his boots started to stink and so this morning he donated them to a friendly wino and bought himself a pair of running shoes. Displaying the state-of-the-art footwear to Sheri, he pointed out various features … but it was clear his mind was elsewhere. Before long his voice petered out and silence once again fell upon the street.

'Danny, are you okay?'

He gave the can a swift kick and it rattled across the road. 'Yeah.' He glanced at her. 'I was thinking about that house … in South Beach. There was central heating. It was like a damn sauna in there. And there was everything you'd ever need; movies and food and stuff. Not like at Drug's. That place is such a dive.'

He looked up at the sky. Tonight the moon was shining down on some other part of the world. Smog had turned the air a dirty brown colour and the stars appeared as dim grey smudges on the dome of night. A black shape, possibly a bat, cut an arc across the tops of the buildings.

'It's nice having a place of your own,' Sheri said. 'Somewhere to call home. You've always got someplace to go, to get away from things and be yourself. Sometimes I look around my apartment and think: This is all mine. Nobody can take it away from me.' She smiled at him. 'You wanna see my place sometime?'

He shrugged.

'You going back to the park?'

'Nah, it's late. And I'm tired.'

This was the opening she'd been hoping for. 'Danny,' she said, 'do you wanna come see my place now? It's not far.'

He was checking out his shoes again, capturing light in the reflective panels on either side. 'Sure,' he said, in a tone that suggested it meant nothing to him whether he saw her place or not.

But for Sheri something momentous had occurred: one small step for Danny, one giant leap for Sheri.

'Let's catch a taxi,' she said, eager to press her advantage. 'My feet are killing me.'

Moving to the kerb, she flagged a passing cab. The driver wore a black turban and white coat. A picture of Lord Krishna being mobbed by peacocks dangled from the rear-vision mirror. Below the picture a stick of incense smouldered on the dashboard, filling the cab with the sweet scent of sandalwood.

'Memorial Street,' Sheri said. 'Number one thirty-six.'

The driver beamed at her, and before she knew it the cab was careening across the road, executing a hair-raising U-turn. A motorbike appeared from nowhere, looming dangerously close to her window, making her shriek with terror and lean against Danny's arm. By some miracle the rider avoided a collision and managed to stay on two wheels (though it was touch and go for a while there). After recovering his balance, he shot off towards Northbridge, shaking his fist in the air.

The cab driver smiled and waved back. Then he cut through a red light and took off down a side street.

With their departure, King Albert Street became deathly quiet. A long gust of wind swept down the road, peopling the scene with dead leaves, condom wrappers and scraps of newspaper. The noise attracted the attention of a rat, which scurried out of a drain and twitched its nose. Something moved in nearby weeds and the rat withdrew to the safety of its lair. Miles above the earth a bank of heavy, copper-coloured cloud drifted across the sky, consuming all the stars in its path.

The cab reappeared. The driver, who only recently emigrated from Mumbai, had misheard the address. (He thought Sheri said Memorial Lane, a street of thirty-room mansions in the bayside suburb of Ash Grove.) With a screech and a puff of black smoke, they roared back into King Albert Street.

A little way down the road, pressed into a dark doorway by the body of her lover, stood Crystal. On hearing the roar, she withdrew her tongue from Karl's ear and followed the cab with her eyes until it vanished around a bend. Silence flooded back into King Albert Street. The slum-lined canyon was as

cold and bleak and imposing as a tomb, but in this moment Crystal had regard for nothing but Karl. Smiling blissfully, she returned to her love-making, her chest heaving, her heart full, the light of victory still bright in her small, hard eyes.

TWO | CHANGES

Twenty-first century blues

WHENEVER SHERI CLEANED the apartment, she contemplated the worn patches in the carpet and poked a finger in the gouges in the walls and resolved to do something about them. It had taken a long time for it to stop being 'Sophie's place' and take on the semblance of a home, and now she felt she should complete the transformation and renovate. But something always held her back. Maybe she was the world's greatest procrastinator. Maybe she worried that once she fixed up the place there would be nothing left to aspire to. Or maybe she had a sense that this location, this life, was only transitory, and just as the new century was moving towards a better, brighter future, so would she and Danny. Whatever the reason, for the time being she kept herself occupied flicking through home-maker magazines, collecting paint samples and spending long hours travelling up and down the aisles of hardware stores debating with herself the pros and cons of different fixtures and fittings.

Today she stalked the rooms with a can of disinfectant spray, eliminating dust from every surface. She swept away floating cobwebs and shifted furniture around in her mind. She picked up Danny's books from the floor, dropped his dirty socks in the washing basket and scrubbed unsuccessfully at the dark rings his mug had made on her new coffee table. When everything was to her satisfaction, she went down to the corner shop and bought a bunch of bright yellow flowers, which she arranged in an orange vase. Sighing at a job well done, she grabbed a copy of *Moving Pictures*, collapsed on the sofa in a square of sunlight and put her feet up.

Meanwhile, Danny sat at the table poring over a mathematics book filled with squares, triangles and complicated equations. Every so often he would turn his head to the window, chew the end of his pen and gaze out at the blue sky and cottony clouds, which were conspiring to distract him from his work. At these times Sheri would lift her eyes and listen to his sighs. When the

scratching of pen on paper resumed, she would nod and return to her reading.

Almost seven months had passed since the night Danny entered her apartment for the first time. Initially he'd hesitated, like a rabbit suspecting a trap, and she'd waited nervously, hardly daring to breathe in case she scared him away with a sudden movement or noise. But after stepping over the threshold, he quickly grew accustomed to the alien environment. He poked his head in every room, examined the photo of Bubbles the cat, stooped to inspect the little trophy Sheri won a lifetime ago as second runner-up in an inter-school talentfest. In the spare room he bounced on the bed and peered in the closet and screwed his nose up at the musty air, and when Sheri said to him, 'Danny, now you're here you may as well stay the night,' he simply shrugged. When two days later he was still there, she gave him the spare key.

And so began a transformation so startling it felt like a dream. Years ago, as part of a school project, young Sheryl dropped a sweet potato into a jar of water and every morning shot out of bed to see how much the sprouts had grown, how many new roots had begun wending their way towards the bottom of the jar. Sometimes she stared at the sweet potato until everything else in the room disappeared, hoping to see the shoots and roots growing before her eyes. Now she was doing the same with Danny.

In the beginning he'd vanished every night, often not returning till late the next morning, and Sheri guessed where he was and grew as anxious as a mother. Lying stiff and alert in bed, unable to sleep, she would watch dawn poke its creamy fingers around the edges of the blinds and listen for the sound of his key in the door. But she kept repeating to herself, 'He's alright; it's his life; I can't interfere,' and the words became a mantra, and eventually she grew to believe them.

It was largely due to this restraint and consideration that Danny flourished in his new surroundings. He opened himself up more than Sheri could have hoped, in the process unearthing a shallow grave littered with the remains of his past: guilt, anger, self-contempt – emotions born of childhood rejection and nourished by an unfeeling society. He talked about his life as a street kid, regaling her with tales of male hustling and juvenile pranks and taking particular pleasure in recounting some of the gruesome, blood-curdling myths that chilled the hearts of Squatter Park's lost boys. Most disturbing of all, he gave her an insight into the nightmare world of his

former roommate, Drug. As the stories came out, it grew apparent Danny was starting to question the life that up till now he'd taken for granted.

Eventually his visits to Squatter Park tailed off. Though Sheri had made it her mission to end the hustling, she knew better than to nag or bribe him. But she made sure there was always food in the pantry, soda in the refrigerator and a few notes and coins in the grocery jar, and she stocked the apartment with every gadget imaginable: a big-screen TV, home theatre setup, computer, modem, video games … offerings Danny accepted without a word of surprise or thanks, as if riches like this magically appeared in every home.

When the time seemed right, she asked him about his plans for the future. Danny was silent. His notion of the future had never ventured much beyond the changing of the seasons. So Sheri painted a picture of what he had to look forward to: an afterlife as a spent whore, with withered looks and empty pockets, marooned in a career that was destined to be over before most other careers had taken off. The outlook was tangible and believable because for far too long Sheri had gazed upon it herself.

Sure enough, her scheming paid off. When it became clear Danny was spending more time at the apartment and less time at Squatter Park, she outlined everything he stood to gain if he studied for his high school diploma, and together they took the bus to a college for young people whose schooling has been interrupted and she helped him enrol. After that, for a time, the hustling stopped altogether. Occasionally Danny would come home with money in his pocket, but this was usually when he wanted to buy something special or make a token contribution towards a bill. It became the exception rather than the norm.

Even more dramatic was the change in his appearance. Introducing red meat and fruit and vegetables into his diet delivered an almost supernatural growth of height and weight, and he now looked like any other healthy teenager: bright-eyed, long-limbed and boiling over with energy. Dark hairs grew on his face and chest, a development that fascinated and delighted him, and though Sheri tried to explain how puberty was governed by hormones and genes, he refused to surrender the belief that his accelerated maturity was due to the years he'd spent growing up on the streets, years that had fast-tracked him from boy to man.

Then one night, against all odds, he found a lover. Ben was a twenty-one-year-old barman with a broad, attractive face and a clever mind. He was working long hours and saving every penny so he could enrol in a business

degree in a couple of years' time, and this foresight and purpose gave Danny a role model, something to aspire to, something Sheri had been unable to do. More importantly, Ben taught Danny the meaning of love and commitment. He gave him the best reason of all to stay away from the temptations of Squatter Park.

Ben was the final piece of the mosaic. Danny's future was secure. What more could he need? Like an artist who has crafted a masterpiece from a pile of junk, Sheri stood back and gazed in awe at the potential she'd helped to realise.

But through all this, there remained a gurgling undercurrent of discontent. It wasn't that Danny was chronically untidy and unreliable (though he was). It wasn't that he was sensitive to all kinds of criticism or perceived control (though he was). It wasn't that he cramped her lifestyle (though he did). No, the problem was more complex than that. Through Danny, Sheri had hoped to form a family. But he persistently resisted her attempts at affection, shrinking from her touch as deliberately as if she were making a pass at him. Though she cared for him and did everything she could think of to make him happy, she was always the one making the effort, and in return Danny acted like it was her vocation in life to look after him. They had fights and she was always the one to cave in, always the one tapping at his bedroom door or placating his surly face when he returned home after a night of prowling the streets. Together they drew up lists of chores and then Sheri ended up doing everything: cleaning up, taking out the garbage, picking Danny's things off the floor, washing his dirty dishes, often washing his clothes too. Sometimes she felt more like his maid than his best friend.

More than this, Danny's happiness reminded her of everything she didn't have. It felt like her prayers for the twenty-first century (for a new start in life, a course correction) had been answered by the universe handing all this to Danny. Envy took root in the folds of her brain, and on occasion it leaked out and made her say things to hurt him, subtle reminders that everything he'd gained could vanish as promptly and irrevocably as it had come. Afterwards she would berate herself and make silent vows never to say such things again, but then she would gaze into his face and see that her words had failed to penetrate the trustful, confident walls he'd built around his good fortune, and then she had to resist the urge to become more blatant, to cut deeper the next time.

To put it bluntly, Sheri had discovered that her attempt to buy happiness had failed. She'd turned around another person's life – and of course there was great pride and satisfaction in that – but she'd done nothing to advance her own dreams. Who was going to save *her*?

The more she peered into her future, the more despondent she became. Now Danny had found a lover it was inevitable he'd leave her, and then she'd be right back where she started. Whenever she dwelt on this inevitability, she grew terrified. And the more terrified she became, the less she was able to see her way out of the corner she'd backed herself into. Depression settled on her like a layer of dust and she grew lethargic, sluggish of mind, easily aroused.

A knock came at the door. Closing the magazine, glancing at Danny (who was staring out the window again), she got up to answer it.

The caller was Leslie. 'How are you today?' he asked in a polite voice.

She suppressed a groan. 'Good,' she said, and showed him her teeth. 'Hey Danny! It's Leslie!'

Leaving the door open, she returned to the sofa.

Leslie poked his head into the room. A cockroach darted up the wall and twitched its antennae at him before scuttling into a crack in the ceiling.

'Come in!' Danny yelled.

Leslie crept in like a nervous dog. He scurried to the table, slid into a seat and placed his hands in his lap, all the time making as little noise as possible. Sheri glanced up in annoyance. Everything Leslie did annoyed her.

'How's things?' Danny asked. 'Get much action last night?'

Leslie responded in a soft voice, the type of voice you might use in a church or a hospital. From the sofa Sheri could hear only sibilance, an irksome sound that scratched the inside of her head.

With a frustrated sigh she rattled the magazine, ripped over the page and glared at an advertisement featuring an impossibly gorgeous woman with emerald eyes and a post-coital flush. Was that flawless complexion truly the product of a rejuvenating anti-wrinkle cream? She doubted it, yet she was determined to get her hands on some of that exorbitantly priced cream. Where youth and beauty are concerned, it doesn't pay to take chances.

As Leslie's whispering continued, her mood (which hadn't been good to begin with) plummeted. Though Sheri had nothing in particular against Leslie, his pallid face, haunted eyes and wispy hair gave her the creeps. He floated through life like a ghost, leaving in his wake a stench of sadness and gloom. Occasionally he stayed the night, sharing Danny's double bed, often

sleeping in till late morning or early afternoon. If Sheri was around when he got up, he would hide in the bedroom till she was in the shower or taking out the garbage, and then he would slip away without a word of hello or goodbye. He went out of his way to be unobtrusive (and some would say this was to his credit), but Sheri would have preferred him to be friendly and chatty. Instead, he crept around behind her back like she was some kind of evil witch.

Flicking over the page, she tried to immerse herself in a story about an ageing movie star who'd been poisoned by his wife and buried in the back yard after he asked her for a divorce. But the noise from the table was driving her to distraction. She wondered what they were whispering about.

'What are you up to tonight?' she called out to Danny, laying aside the magazine.

He turned his head. 'Ben's coming over.'

'Going out?'

'Nope. Ben's working. We're watching TV or something.'

'How about you, Leslie?'

Leslie half turned in his seat. 'Erm … nothing,' he said, gazing at a spot partway up the wall.

'It'll be nice tonight,' Danny said to him. 'Should be lotsa guys out, lotsa work.'

Leslie shrugged like an effete nineteenth-century aristocrat. Danny mimicked him. Now he was in love, he stayed away from Squatter Park, but somewhere along the way he'd all but adopted Leslie, taking on the role of friend and protector. In return Leslie idolised Danny. He would talk with him for hours or watch him as he studied. Danny tried to persuade him to enrol at college like him, but though Leslie smiled and nodded at the suggestion, nothing ever came of it. He had no energy or motivation. He was incapable of doing anything but subsist. He had a fantasy that one day, like Danny, he would find a lover – except his lover would be a millionaire and he would live a leisured life in a lovely old house with rose bushes in the garden, a grand piano in the parlour and a butler to bring him breakfast in bed. Until that happened he was beating time, dreaming of that magical night when the man of his dreams would appear before him in flesh and blood.

Sheri, edged out of the conversation, got up to take a shower.

When she returned to the living room, Leslie was gone. Danny was hard at work, frowning over his book, ruling lines, measuring angles. He wanted to be a pilot so he could travel the world meeting people from all walks of life,

but it was more likely he would end up an airline steward or baggage clerk – less respectable, lower paid professions, but still attracting travel benefits. It was the dream of travel, the need to keep moving, that kept Danny going. He wanted to visit all the places he'd seen on TV, and he wanted to experience them with Ben. Their lives were going to be exciting, interesting and complete.

There was another knock at the door.

'That'll be Doris,' said Sheri, slipping on a shoe as she hopped along the carpet.

She was right. Doris was looking striking in white knee-high boots, a black mini-skirt and steel grey halter top.

'Hello Sheri!' she cried, stepping into the room. 'Hello Danny, my darling boy!'

'Hi Doris,' said Danny, dropping his pen.

Crossing to the table, she placed a painted hand on his shoulder. 'You working hard, baby?'

'Sure as eggs.'

'Good boy. Work hard and make lots of money. Then you can give it all to your Auntie Doris.'

Danny laughed. He adored Doris, couldn't get enough of her exotic mannerisms, her trashy style, her humour and certainty. He wanted to learn from her the secrets of life. He wanted to not give a fuck about anything. Doris stroked his hair and pinched his cheek, and though he loved the attention, he pushed her hand away like a petulant child.

While her two friends sparred, Sheri watched from across the room. A bolt of jealousy struck her. Why couldn't she let loose with Danny the way Doris did? Why were their relations so restrained? Maybe that kind of intimacy only came once you had children of your own.

'Let's go, Doris,' she called, trying hard not to sound like a dried-up old spoilsport. 'You're distracting the boy.'

Danny said, 'I don't mind. I'm finished for now.'

He closed the book, placed his hands on the edge of the table and pushed his chair back until it was balanced on two legs. Taking advantage of the situation, Doris seized him and kissed the side of his face. Danny's arms and legs flailed in panic.

'Bye-bye, sweetie-pie,' she sang as she returned the chair to four legs.

Danny rubbed the smudge of lipstick from his cheek. 'Cop ya later, alligator.'

Sheri waved her keys at him. 'Don't forget, Danny. If you're staying out all night, leave me a note or something so I don't worry.'

'Yes, mother.'

'And remember to take your keys. Next time you get locked out, I'm not getting up.'

'I never asked you to.'

'No, but you bang on the door and wake me up.'

'What am I supposed to do?'

'Easy. Take your keys.'

'Put a key under the mat.'

'I'm not putting a key under the mat. Any psycho could waltz in.'

'I'll do it then.'

'No, you won't. Just remember to take your key.'

'Jeez, Louise, take a chill pill.'

'All I'm saying is remember to take your key.'

'And all I'm saying is it's not the end of the world if I forget.'

He got up and walked around the table. Sheri stared at his back as he slouched to his room and shut the door.

'Come on, Sheri,' said Doris, taking her hand. 'You look like you need a girls' night out.'

Young love

DANNY STOOD OVER his sleeping lover. To him, Ben was the personification of beauty. His ivory limbs were spread along the sofa; his bare chest rose and fell in a smooth, steady rhythm; his black hair lay crushed against a gold-threaded cushion. Every so often his eyelids would flicker and Danny would smile at the thought he might be dreaming of him. It made him tingle inside.

They'd been lovers for fifty-four days, but it felt a lot longer than that. Danny still wasn't over the wonder of it all, the sense of unreality that struck him whenever he thought: Somebody loves me. Before Ben came along, he'd been starting to worry his friendship with Sheri was the extent of his good fortune, that luck was doled out in portions like slices of cake and he'd already eaten his share. And then this came along, and it was bigger and better and scarier than he could ever have imagined.

He knelt by the sofa. 'I love you, Ben,' he whispered. His body reverberated with the words. Ben was so much a part of who he was that the very mention of his name made him bloom like a desert flower after rain. He shook his head in amazement that another human being could mean so much to him. He felt delirious. He was terrified it was all going to end.

Ben stirred. He always took a long time to emerge from sleep, as if he had things to reconcile in that other world before he returned to this one. He opened his eyes, stretched his arms and legs, yawned, then reached out with both hands and pulled Danny onto him.

Danny choked back a cry.

'What's wrong, baby?' Ben asked, holding him at arms' length.

Danny blinked. His eyes welled with hot tears. 'I don't know,' he lied.

Ben frowned at him.

'You were asleep a long time,' he admitted at last, 'and I thought something might be wrong. I thought … I dunno. I'm being stupid.'

'What could be wrong?'

'Um …' Danny was scared to admit the truth. Maybe saying something out loud is the first step in making it happen. Maybe if he said what was on his mind, Ben would snap his fingers and cry, 'I knew it! I knew there was something wrong between us! I just couldn't put my finger on it! Thanks for telling me, Danny. Now get lost!'

Despite the risks, he couldn't hold himself back. If he kept the fear trapped inside for too much longer, it would grow huge and dangerous like a cancer. He heard himself say, 'Sometimes I think you're gonna get sick of me and – and – and look for somebody else' … and then there was a long, huge, awful silence.

'You're not sick of me yet, are you?' he asked, terrified of hearing the answer.

Ben brought their foreheads together. 'Of course I'm not sick of you. Don't be silly.' He swung his legs around and deposited Danny on the sofa next to him. 'Look, you shouldn't worry about things until they happen. You'll only upset yourself; spend all your time worrying. Everything's perfect. You know that, don't you?'

'Yes,' Danny said, though he didn't really know it, not for sure.

'I love you, baby. Don't I tell you that every day?'

Danny nodded. His eyes blurred and the room and Ben became a mess of colours and shapes. 'These are happy tears,' he said, parroting a phrase he'd heard that morning on Sesame Street. Lately he'd become addicted to children's television, to programs with colourful characters and rapid scene changes. They stimulated a segment of his brain that had lain fallow for most of his life, a field of neurons that was creating connections at the speed of light in a race to make up for lost time.

'Happy tears are the only ones you need.' Ben kissed his nose, leaving a wet imprint of his lips. He glanced at the clock. 'Shit! Look at the time! Why didn't you wake me?'

'I just did.'

'I gotta be going. Jock'll kill me if I'm late.'

But Danny wasn't prepared to let him go. He threw himself on Ben like a wrestler, pinning him down with all his might. A moist heat radiated from Ben's body, and for a moment Danny pretended they were a single entity fused together by the furnace inside his lover's body. He wanted to stay like this forever. Who needs work when you've got love? he thought, like a foolish child.

With a groan, Ben heaved himself up and dragged Danny to his feet. He was half a head taller than Danny and kept himself fit by lifting dumbbells for an hour every night. He'd once thrown Danny over his shoulder and carried him screaming around the apartment.

'You're a bad boy,' he said, picking Danny up and dumping him on the sofa. 'I might have to spank you when I get home.'

'Yeah?' bellowed Danny, bounding to his feet. 'Just you try!'

Ben spanked him just to show he could, and Danny responded by grabbing him in a bear hug and squeezing hard. His efforts were in vain. Eventually his arms grew tired and he gave up.

Becoming serious, they gazed into each other's eyes. As a street kid, Danny had always avoided eye contact. He'd stared past people as if there was always something more important or impressive to look at on the horizon. A social worker once explained that this had something to do with low self-esteem. Nowadays, though, things were different. When Danny gazed into Ben's eyes he grew hot and dizzy, as if he saw vast spaces there, spaces where priceless treasures lay waiting to be discovered, spaces it would take a lifetime to explore. Gazing into Ben's eyes, he was so turned on he thought he would go insane with desire.

'I don't want you to work tonight.'

Ben raised his eyebrows, which were thick and black. His dark eyes were framed by long, perfect lashes. 'Well, well, I wonder what else you've got in mind.' He glanced at the clock again. 'I've really gotta go, Danny. Staying at my place tonight?'

'Dunno,' Danny said, pulling away. 'Maybe I've got better things to do.'

'Yeah, sure. As if you could stay away.'

Danny's face broke into a grin. But inside he was seething with passion, an immense, throbbing animal that demanded an outlet. 'That's hours away,' he moaned. 'I'll be asleep when you get home.'

'I doubt it. Look, I really gotta go. I can't be late again. I'll get the sack.'

Ben worked in a gay hotel where he served drinks, cleaned the bar and fended off romantic advances from bare-chested musclemen, misguided teenage girls and older gents bleary with booze. At work he talked non-stop about Danny, praising his vigour, his beauty, his capacity to give and receive love, his drive for self-improvement – to the extent where customers now avoided him and flirted instead with other, more responsive barmen. Like all people in love, Ben looked down on others from the clouds and interpreted

their foibles and disappointments in terms of an unsatisfactory love life. In a word, he was happy. And what rankled most people was that it showed.

Danny watched him as he picked up his black jeans and pulled them on over his boxer shorts. He watched as he slipped on his boots and tied up the laces. He wanted to follow him to the Imperial Hotel and watch him work, but he'd been doing that a lot lately, and if he was worried about Ben getting sick of him … Well now, that was a sure-fire way of going about it!

'I wanna do something for you!' he cried as Ben made ready to leave. He hated times like this, when he was left to his own devices. He believed that doing something constructive for someone you love is the next best thing to being with them, but he wasn't an imaginative person and needed a nudge in the right direction. He didn't realise it was not in Ben's nature to ask for something, just as it wasn't in his own to give something that hasn't been asked for.

Ben took him by the shoulders. 'Danny, my man,' he said in a firm voice, 'the best thing you can do for me is study hard, get your diploma and get that dream job of yours. That'll make me the happiest.'

Danny studied his mouth. Was this a trick answer? Was Ben being sarcastic? Did he suspect the truth? – that Danny spent more time fantasising about him than doing his school work?

'O-kay,' he said warily. Then: 'I know! I'll bake a cake! A chocolate mud cake!'

Ben shook his head, kissed him on the lips and slipped out the door.

The room fell quiet. In an instant Danny was overcome with boredom. He went through the place closing the curtains and turning on every light. The room was getting cold, so he switched off the air-conditioner. Then he switched it on again when he realised the silence without the background noise was worse than the silence with it.

Taking a seat at the table, he picked up a book and stared at the cover. The book was called, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and tonight he was supposed to write an essay about prejudice (whatever the hell that was!) He hadn't even read the book. Opening it to the first page, he tried to concentrate. But as he pored over the words, they seeped from his head and dripped back onto the page.

He gave his wrist a flick and the book slid across the table and fell with a clatter to the floor. He didn't feel like picking it up. Why should he bother when there was no one here to tell him off? Danny hated being alone. Sheri

wouldn't be back till the early hours of the morning and by that time he'd be long gone. What was he to do in the meantime?

Returning to the living room, he switched on the TV and dropped into a seat. On the screen was a trio of cute kids, a black poodle and two stylish parents, all babbling and barking at each other. A white-haired woman came down the stairs and everyone stopped and stared as if they were seeing a ghost. Danny reached for the remote control. On the next channel a bevy of beautiful women wearing bathing suits and high heels was parading down a runway, displaying silken hair, impossible figures and faultless teeth to an audience of millions. Danny gaped at them, trying hard not to draw comparisons with his own loose-jointed, imperfect body. How much does it cost to buy such straight teeth and high cheekbones and flawless skin? he wondered. The women fascinated him. They were something to aspire to. If he could learn their secrets and attain that kind of perfection, Ben would never want to leave him. He'd never be alone again.

When the commercials came on, he jumped up and went to the kitchen. At the back of the pantry was a bottle of tequila, at the bottom of which lay a tiny, dead, shrivelled-up worm. Just a small drink, he told himself, jiggling the bottle to make the worm dance. Enough to help me relax so's I can concentrate on that stupid book.

He half filled a glass with tequila, added a splash more, then topped it up with ginger beer. He stirred the mixture with his finger, sucked his finger dry, then returned to the living room and brought the glass to his lips.

The first gulp seared the back of his throat and sent a fire spreading through his belly. The second gulp took the express route to his head. His gums began to hum. Suddenly he was no longer bored. On the TV screen was a Southern Fried Chicken commercial, bursting at the seams with fly girls and rambunctious guys, all wearing the coolest surf wear and skater gear and having an unbelievable amount of fun. The fun was infectious. Danny danced on the spot, jigging backwards and forwards, and tequila rode up the sides of the glass and splashed over the rim and dribbled down his fingers. He raised the glass and gazed at the brownish liquid like he sometimes gazed at Ben. Lights winked at him, so he swirled the liquid and watched the lights go insane. Then he took another gulp and the lights went screaming down his throat and exploded in the pit of his stomach.

When a boring bank commercial came on, he went for the remote control. But in his rush he tripped over a tear in the carpet and fell heavily to

the floor. Rising on one arm, he giggled at the mounting pain in his hip, at the wet flower that was blooming on the front of his shirt, at the tequila that had somehow managed to stay in the glass.

This was ridiculous! He was young and strong and alive! What was he doing cooped up in a boring old apartment, all by himself?

His stomach grumbled and he sat up. Yes! he thought, recalling a concept he'd learned in an English class. Ze motive!

Downing the last of the tequila, he got up, changed his shirt and emptied the grocery jar of its contents. Then he went out in search of Southern Fried Chicken.

One of those nights

'IT'S BEEN ONE of those nights!'

'You can say that again.'

'It's been one of those nights.'

No one laughed.

Lynne and Faith, sitting across from each other at the table, sucked on thin blue cigarettes Sheri had picked up in a remote Balinese village. When they exhaled, sweet, acrid smoke swirled between them, forming ghostly figures in the air. Sheri, her face cupped in her hands, stared dreamily at the figures, thinking how peaceful they looked, how nice it would be to be a ghost. There would be nothing to yearn for, nothing to lose; nobody could touch you …

Lynne drummed her fingers on the table. 'Come on,' she urged. 'Come on.'

On the TV screen a newsreader grimaced as he waited for a late cross. Lynne glowered at him from the edge of her seat. She was furious because the story she was expecting hadn't appeared and it was almost time to go back upstairs. Meanwhile, Faith was pretending to be interested in something over at the lockers. She took a nervous puff on her cigarette and a small sound escaped from her throat along with the smoke.

The next story appeared at last: a piece about quintuplets born today to a couple on a fertility program. The proud father appeared and boasted about his virility, which until now had apparently been under a cloud. When the five tiny babies were shown, Lynne huffed and swore under her breath.

The program returned to the studio, where the newsreader was staring at them, his face square and grim. A blood-stained knife hovered over his shoulder.

'Police have released a statement that another missing prostitute has been found dead.'

Faith gasped.

‘About fucking time,’ Lynne muttered, stubbing out her cigarette in an ashtray already full of butts.

The camera cut to file footage of a prostitute: a doped-up woman in hot pants and cowboy boots staggering across King Albert Street. A young man’s voice talked over the image. ‘Police have yet to positively identify the body, but it is believed to be that of Sarah Rodriguez, also known as Misty, who disappeared from Northbridge over a month ago.’ A mugshot took the place of the streetwalker. The murdered woman had been young and pretty, with dark brown hair and large, almond-shaped eyes. ‘The killing is thought to be the work of the Mallet Street Mauler, who authorities believe has struck three times in the past year. Police are appealing for witnesses. If anyone in the vicinity of Mallet Street has seen anyone acting suspiciously, they are asked to call Crimestoppers immediately.’

Back in the studio the newsreader was shuffling papers. He glanced up with a smile. ‘And now for our feature story. Conrad the baby elephant has at last come out of hiding …’

‘Is that it?’ Lynne cried, glaring at each of the women in turn. She shoved the remote control and it flew across the table and crashed into a cupboard. ‘A fucking story about test-tube babies is more important than one about women being killed? This is bullshit! If it was housewives getting killed, it’d be lead story. It’d be solved by now!’

Faith placed her burning cigarette on the rim of the ashtray and said, ‘We better get back to work.’ She stood and swayed a little over the table. When no one took her lead, she turned tail and fled the room.

‘Seen somebody acting suspicious?’ growled Lynne, reading from her notes. ‘It’d be news if there *wasn’t* somebody acting suspicious on Mallet Street. Don’t those fuckwits have any idea? Are they stupid or something?’

One by one the women drifted away, leaving Sheri and Lynne alone in the room. Lynne was massaging her temples, her head bowed so low her forehead was almost touching the table. Sheri stared worriedly at her. This wasn’t the never-say-die activist she’d come to regard with awe and a little fear. This woman looked defeated. She looked like she was ready to throw in the towel.

Four months ago, Magda invited a representative from the Sex Industry Support, Training, Education and Referral Service to come and talk with the women about empowerment and self-worth, and since then Lynne had been on a one-woman crusade on behalf of prostitutes everywhere. To her, sex work was more than a job; it was a revolution, an affirmation of the right of

every woman to participate in the free market as she sees fit, without fear of exploitation, ridicule or imprisonment. Last month the SISTERS committee appointed Lynne as secretary and in this capacity she sent letters and faxes to politicians, women's magazines, newspapers and TV stations, all with the aim of making sex workers more visible, their issues and needs more public. To date her efforts had achieved nothing. She was beginning to believe people were more interested in vilifying prostitutes than understanding them. She was beginning to get angry.

Pushing herself off the table, she went to the locker area and stood before the mirror. The woman who stared back was hearty and attractive, with a kindly face and laugh-lines around the eyes. She ate the right foods, did aerobics every day, dressed nicely and was polite to strangers. She had a woman who adored her and a baby son who depended on her. She was on excellent terms with her ex-husband. What made her so different from other women? Why was her life worth so little in the eyes of society?

She rubbed her eyes. Even in the lesbian community Lynne was stigmatised for working in the sex industry. 'How can you let men do that to you?' women would ask. 'What happened to the feminist we used to know?' Or worse: 'You can't be a real lesbian.' Though it was impossible to explain herself adequately to these competent, articulate, demanding women, Lynne had long ago reconciled her feminist beliefs with her profession. To her, sex work was about taking control of your life, seizing it from the hands of men who, for whatever reason, were intent on keeping women in a state of submission. Sex work was about securing independence and power. And at the end of it was money. Lots of it.

'Cheer up, Lynne,' said Sheri. 'They'll catch him. In the meantime, the girls out there just need to be careful who they get with.'

Lynne levelled an accusing finger at her. 'Can you hear yourself? "Put it all on the girls" is what you're saying! It's attitudes like that that keeps us in the dark ages! Well, listen here, babe. Someday things are gonna be different. Someday this job'll be as honest and respectable as any other, and those girls out there won't need to be putting their lives on the line just so's they can put bread on the table. Sure, it's an uphill battle and fucking hard work, but if more of you would grow a backbone and do something we'd be …'

When Sheri smothered a yawn, she threw up her hands in despair. 'Jesus Christ! What can I do to motivate you women to get involved? You're your own worst enemies. You know that, don't you?'

Sheri offered up a sheepish grin, but Lynne was already storming out of the room.

Finishing the yawn, she got up, collected the dirty cups and placed them in the sink. As far as Sheri was concerned, there was only one way to improve the lot of sex workers and that was to get out of the game altogether. But to do that you needed money – enough of a nest egg to ease you through the hard times. Why had she been such a wastrel over the years? Instead of saving and investing, she'd thrown away untold riches on clothes, jewellery and overseas trips. She'd sent thousands to her parents, and to cap it off she'd all but adopted Danny, a move that was costing her a small fortune. If she expected to create a better life for herself, she would have to start making some drastic changes.

But saving was so difficult. At Sheri's age it was the last thing you wanted to do. Only by splashing out could you feel the power of money and cope with the drudgery of what you had to go through to earn it.

Well, she thought as she left the girls' room, I'm not getting any younger. It's time to put some funds aside and start making plans to get out of this place. With willpower and a little luck, in a few months' time I could be in a normal, nine-to-five job – working behind a desk, going to office parties and meeting decent, respectable men … the marrying kind.

But at the door to the sitting room, as she watched a horde of slobbering men hop from woman to woman, she thought: A few months? It may as well be a lifetime.

THE MAN'S NAME was Trevor. His face was homely, his body nondescript. His shirt and pants were brown and wrinkled, like he'd put them on straight out of the dryer. He looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties, though Sheri guessed he could even be in his forties. He knew the routine and followed it like clockwork: undressing without a word, folding his clothes, placing them in a neat pile, taking a quick shower, then presenting himself for inspection. She was impressed. Now if only he would go through the rest of the motions as perfunctorily and leave her with some personal time.

'Can I ask you a favour?' he asked. He was standing close, his hands cupped over his genitals. His fingers were thick and they pinched and pulled in a not-so-subtle attempt to arouse himself.

'Sure.'

'Can we sit down? On the bed?'

'Course we can.'

They sat.

'Well, you see, it's like this …' He dropped his chin and winced in embarrassment. 'I'm perfectly clean, as you can see. And, well, the problem is … I hate condoms.' He glanced up, took her hand, kissed it like a lover. 'If I pay extra, can we, say, do it naturally?'

Sheri peered into his deep-set eyes. To her this was just a job, but she knew it could often be a momentous and intensely personal occasion for the client.

'I'm sorry, Trevor,' she said with feeling, 'but the Health Department says we can't do this without protection. You understand why, don't you?'

His eyes fell to the bedspread and for a time he stared at a dull yellow stain that had evaded the parlour's rigorous washing regime.

She touched his arm. 'Even if you were my boyfriend I'd still insist on a condom. Nobody's safe nowadays. It's not only HIV; there's other nasty stuff around. And a condom is our best line of defence.'

His face hardened. 'It's like you don't trust me,' he charged, forgetting for a time where they were. He squeezed her hand, hurting her. 'Come on, baby. Every time I try to roll on one of those things I go down. It's embarrassing. Don't do this to me. I swear I'm clean. You can see that for yourself.'

Sheri freed her hand. 'Let's give it a go,' she said, trying to stay sympathetic. 'If it goes down, I'll bring it back to life. I swear.'

He flew off the bed and stood over her, his eyes like knives. 'The last girl let me do it,' he snarled. 'What the fuck's wrong with you? Maybe *you're* the one with AIDS.'

Whatever compassion Sheri had felt for the man evaporated in the heat of his anger. She slid along the bed towards the panic button.

He followed her, staying dangerously close, his body slack and heavy. 'I'll pay extra,' he said.

'I can't, Trevor. Not for any amount. So, come on, tell me: What is it you want to do?'

'I wanna fuck you!'

He launched at her, forcing her back on the bed. Before she could cry out, he clamped a hand over her mouth. 'Shh, shh, shh. I said I'd pay more. You'll like it better this way, baby, I promise. It's more intimate. I wanna come

inside you, right deep inside you.' His penis, hard now, scorched her leg. 'Ooh, yeah. Can you feel me? Can you feel how hard I am for you?'

She nodded, trying to hold down her panic.

He squirmed until his legs were between her thighs. 'This is gonna be good,' he groaned. 'So, so, so good.'

Pretending to go along with the seduction, Sheri rocked her hips and groaned too, all the time fighting to keep his erection away from her. She could feel the coarse hair on his legs, his sweat trickling down the inside of her thigh.

'That's it,' he crooned. 'I knew you'd come around. You want me inside you, don't you? You want me to fill you with my love juice, don't you?'

When he lifted his hand to hear her response, she murmured, 'Oh yeah. You're right. This is a huge turnon.'

He nodded approvingly.

'Hey,' she whispered, 'Let's get on the bed properly, so you can get in deeper, right up where it counts.'

He grinned and helped her to shuffle up the bed. As soon as her head was on the pillow, she reached out and pressed the panic button.

In a flash the door was open and Mike, the security guard, was on them. He caught the man in a stranglehold, hauled him off her, dragged him away from the bed.

'Easy! Easy!' he croaked, his legs kicking. 'You're strangling me! I can't breathe! What the hell's wrong? What've I done?'

Mike threw him on the carpet. 'Get dressed,' he said, flexing his muscles. When the man opened his mouth, Mike pointed a finger at him. 'Not one word!' he barked. 'Shut that mouth and get dressed!'

The man massaged his throat. He got up and collected his clothes from the closet. As he was pulling on his underpants, he hazarded a glance at Sheri, who was describing the offence to Mike in a low voice.

'Don't look at the lady!'

His eyes snapped away. The second he finished tying his shoelaces, Mike took him by the collar and frog-marched him from the room.

Sheri closed the door on them. She went back to the bed. Now the attack was over, she felt adrenaline coursing through her veins. Her heart was racing, her limbs twitching, but underneath everything was an intense lethargy, a weariness akin to death. She didn't hate the man for what he'd done. Strangely enough, she empathised with the urgency of his need. But his actions had

reinforced her view that she was nothing but a commodity, a plaything for bored or horny men who had only a passing desire for her, a desire that was spent as soon as a few gobs of white fluid had spurted out of his body and into hers. It was a cruel trick for Nature to play.

As she lay on the bed trying to steady her breathing, her eye was caught by a stain on the ceiling near the light shade. She fixed her mind on it, screening out everything else, willing the stain to mutate into people and animals and flowers, the way clouds used to do when she was a girl. But it refused to be anything but a stain on the ceiling of a whorehouse.

Closing her eyes, she became conscious of a dull thump, thump, thump, a noise she mistook for the heart of Sephryn House, beating steadily. But once again the magic failed to materialise. It was the knocking of washing machines as they cleansed the sweat and semen and other bodily fluids from the lingerie and bedclothes.

She turned her face to the bedside clock and uttered a brief, demented laugh. She'd been granted her wish: some time to herself. It was almost an hour till her next appointment. Rolling onto her stomach, she grabbed the pillow and buried her face in its lemony softness. Her heartbeat was making the bed shake. It took a huge effort of will to stop the tears from flooding out and soaking the sheets.

'Sheri Starling,' she whispered to the pillow, 'this is your life.'

Homeward bound

AND THEN THE shift was over.

Lolling in the back of a cab, struggling to stay awake, it took Sheri a while to notice the driver's squinny face ogling her from the rear-vision mirror.

'Hey, darlin',' he said. 'Wanna trade over the fare?'

She stared at him. How did he know? Did she look that much like a prostitute? Then she remembered the cab had picked her up outside Sephryn House.

Leaning forward, she breathed peppermint in his rat-like face. 'No thanks, mister. But if you come by the parlour some time, I'll fix you up with someone nice.'

'Yah! Wouldn' get *me* payin' fer it,' he snarled. 'Don' know what I'd catch.' He gave her a yellow smile. 'No offence.'

She sat back, her face on fire. The seat was splashed with vomit-coloured stains, the floor awash with empty burger wrappers and polystyrene cups. There were probably cockroaches, maybe even rats, under the seat.

'You're wrong about catching something,' she said in a tight voice. 'There's more chance of catching something from a girl you meet in a bar. We've got strict health standards.'

'Yeah? Health stannards, y'say? Well, me dog's a healthy bitch, but ya wouldn' catch me stickin' me dick in *her* either.'

Sheri gasped. She had to sit on her hands to stop them from shaking. How should she respond to this provocation? What would Doris do? She pictured herself grabbing the fool in a headlock, crashing the car into a light pole, setting the cab alight with a casual flick of her cigarette. The images were gratifying, if a little unrealistic. Maybe Doris would do those things, but Sheri was more inclined to give him a lecture on the mechanics of the sex industry: the weekly medical checks, the compulsory use of condoms, the number of showers and washes she endured each day for the sake of cleanliness and

hygiene. But she knew the truth would make no impression on this ignoramus. In all probability it would only hand him a few more rounds of ammunition.

The cab stopped for a red light. As pedestrians started crossing the road, an altercation spilled into the intersection. The crowd surged and a scantily clad body fell heavily on the bonnet.

The driver rapped his knuckles on the windscreen. 'Hey there! Hey there!' he yelled, thumping his fist on the horn. 'Hey there! Get off the car, fuckin' bitch!'

The owner of the body, a drag queen named Tiffany, was a skinny young thing with long white fingernails, blue lips and a helmet of pink hair. As the driver yelled and pumped the horn, she lifted her head and gave him a look that seethed with loathing and disgust. Her friend stood shivering on the kerb, clutching her handbag against her chest, while the perpetrators of the attack – three hairy, obnoxious drunks – laughed and pointed and called out random insults.

'Didn't know the circus was in town!'

'Who the hell would fuck *that*!'

'Come and suck my cock, you ugly son-of-a-bitch!'

Her face a mask of hate, Tiffany picked herself off the bonnet and knelt on the road to retrieve her belongings. She placed them one by one inside her bag. When the lights changed, she sprang up and charged at the men with eyes blazing and bag raised.

'Fuckin' freak,' muttered the driver, pressing his foot on the accelerator.

Sheri studied his small, misshapen head, the straggly hairs protruding from his ears, his scraggy neck. When his eyes caught hers in the mirror, her mouth broke free from her common sense and she said, 'You need to be more tolerant.'

He glanced away. 'I don' need to be nuthin'. Whores and freaks. Wha's happenin' to the world?'

'You must come across all kinds of people, driving this cab.'

'Don' mean I havta like 'em.'

'You got kids?'

'Yeah. Two girls. And they ain't gonna grow up to be whores and freaks.'

'You never know.'

He glared at her as if she'd just denied the existence of God. 'No freak's ever come outta my family and none's ever gonna!' He twisted his neck to

flash her an angry look. 'If ya gonna insult me, ya c'n get the fuck out the cab an' walk!'

Sheri turned away from the pointless exchange. Staring at the passing wasteland of Northbridge, she did her best to screen out the man's muttered oaths, the occasional evil look he threw her way. When the cab pulled up outside her apartment building, she got out, slammed the door and threw the fare through the driver's open window. It wasn't till she was in the lobby with the door closed behind her that his curses stopped ringing in her ears.

INSIDE THE APARTMENT all the lights were on. The air-conditioner was grumbling like a crotchety old man and the room was freezing – a shock to the system after the heavy warmth of the night.

She closed the door. 'Danny? You here?'

There was no reply. On the coffee table were three crushed soft drink cans, an overturned glass and a trail of dark, sticky splotches. There were more wet spots on the carpet. Stalking the room, surveying the damage, Sheri accidentally stepped on the remote control. ('Shit!' she cried.) Danny's school books were spread across the table and sitting on and amongst them were more dirty glasses, chocolate wrappers and a plate dotted with cake crumbs and bits of icing. On the kitchen bench was a mug brimming with cold coffee and a plate piled high with chicken bones, gnawed wings and congealed fat, the smell of which made her stomach turn.

She swore under her breath. How could all this devastation occur within the space of a few hours? She picked up the plate of chicken bones and in a rare fit of anger carried it to Danny's room and upended it on the carpet. Then she returned to the kitchen. The icy air had charged her with a hectic energy, so she set about collecting the dirty dishes and placing them next to the sink. Once that was done, she stood looking at them, contemplating whether she had the energy to wash up. No, she thought; Danny can do it when he gets home.

The thought of Danny reminded her of the mess she'd made in his room. A tingling shame crept up her spine and she went back and stared at the pile of chicken bones on the carpet. Danny's goldfish, perhaps thinking she'd brought some food for it too, swam towards her and blew a bubble. She frowned at it. What would his reaction be if he came home and saw what she'd done? Would he be so upset he'd pack his bag and storm out? Or would

he close the bedroom door in her face and withdraw from her in a less immediate, more brutal way?

She sighed. Either way, what she'd done was pointless and juvenile. She went to the laundry, came back with the dustpan and brush and cleaned up the mess. Then she picked up Danny's dirty clothes, dumped them in the wash basket, made his bed and opened the window a little to get rid of the smell of fried chicken.

All this expended what little energy she had left. She barely made it back to the living room before sinking into an armchair with a heavy groan.

As expected, Danny had left no word regarding his whereabouts. But she knew where he was: asleep in Ben's bed, pressed against his lover's body, the smile of the blessed on his lips. Whereas here was poor Sheri, alone again in an empty apartment.

She stared at the framed photo of Bubbles and he returned her gaze with wide, trustful eyes. With his black face, white fluffy cheeks and big pointed ears he looked like some kind of lovable alien. All at once it occurred to her that Bubbles was the only true friend she'd ever had. He appreciated her, rewarded affection with affection, was always there for her. Bubbles had an instinct for sensing when she was down or upset, and on these occasions he would appear from nowhere and rub against her leg or nestle in her lap to remind her she wasn't alone. And his little body would vibrate and she'd stroke his soft fur and nothing would seem as bad as it was before.

Her eyes watered. Bubbles melted into a greyish blob. And then she was bawling, crying like she hadn't cried in years, gripping the arms of the chair like it was a life raft tossing and heaving on a stormy sea. She longed to have Bubbles back. For a brief time she was convinced a furry little animal was all she needed to fill the gaping hole in her life, and though the belief was only fleeting, she went on pretending she believed it because it seemed like such a simple solution to her loneliness.

The storm passed. Taking a tissue from her pocket, she blew her nose. Things had come to a head tonight, things that had been brewing for a long time – since even before Danny entered her life. The attempted rape had convinced her once and for all that Lynne was fooling herself when she claimed prostitution was a bona fide profession, akin to social work or physiotherapy. And let's face it: if tough-as-nails Lynne was buckling under the pressure, what hope was there for anyone else?

Suddenly she blamed herself for the assault. If you walk through a lion's den enough times, you're bound to get pounced on eventually, she reasoned. The world was becoming a more violent place, the clients more unpredictable. It was time to get out of this game. No one else was going to help her; she would have to do it herself.

'Tomorrow,' she said, surprising herself. The word evoked a mental image of Scarlett O'Hara kneeling in the dirt of Tara. The image inspired her. She thought: Tomorrow I'll start making plans. I'll sit down and work out what I want from the rest of my life, and then I'll do whatever it takes to get there. She dreamed of being a woman in a TV drama: ruthless, ambitious and successful, bouncing back from every setback and always ready to face the next one. Those women were never down for very long. They were never trapped in an unsatisfactory life. They were constantly on the move.

Satisfied with her plan to make a plan, she extended a toe and pressed the remote control. Leaping out at her from television land came a weird, wrinkle-faced man in a striped green golf shirt. His hair was like black nylon and he was sitting behind a desk in a home office that was all wood, leather and brass.

'… and I prayed and I prayed each and every morning and every single night and – hallelujah! – you will not believe this, folks – my kidneys started functioning!' He leaned forward. 'I was off dialysis in two days. Yessiree! That's right, kind viewers: one plus one equals two glorious days! My doctors proclaimed it was beyond their understanding, nothing short of a miracle. They brought in specialists. They did tests. They shook their heads in wonder, folks. Eventually they had to admit it was the work of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. All praise to thee!'

A woman of about the same age stepped into frame, laid a hand on his shoulder and said something the microphone didn't pick up. He smiled at her and placed his hand on hers, before returning his attention to the camera.

'Regrettably, friends,' he said, 'Betty is come to remind me we have run out of time. I trust my story has inspired you and shown to you the mighty power of prayer. We will leave you tonight with Melanie Appleby singing, 'You're Next in Line for a Miracle' from her upcoming CD, *Walking with Tears in My Eyes*. Goodnight, God bless, and we will see you again next time.'

Melanie Appleby appeared, a young woman with braided hair and a prosthetic arm. The music swelled, the camera swooped in for a close-up, Melanie Appleby opened her mouth to sing.

Sheri pressed the remote control.

News. An infomercial. Another religious program. She stopped on a channel airing a station promotion, an extravaganza featuring a swarm of gleeful people. There were young couples in love, pretty women kissing pretty babies, gentle seniors playing lawn bowls. Everybody was laughing. Nobody had a care in the world. Sheri lay slumped in the chair watching the happy procession. Where is that place? she wondered. I want to go there.

She closed her eyes and conjured up her own paradise. There were lofty trees, silvery skies and gorgeous flowers – and there, over the rise, the cobalt blue ocean, replete with smiling dolphins and wheeling seagulls. And rolling and frolicking and laughing and dancing through this paradise were people of every colour and persuasion. Yet none of the flowers were trampled and none of the grass was flattened and none of the people tripped or fell over.

Sheri had the feeling she knew where this magical place was. She remembered the dolphins particularly, and the giant trees reaching up from the turned earth. But she couldn't quite place her finger on it. The more she concentrated, the more the colours faded. Then shadows appeared, forerunners of a greater darkness.

'No!' she cried, unsure whether the cry was real or part of the dream.

But the word only hastened the end. As the paradise was consumed by an invisible fire, she tumbled down and down into a dark and dreamless sleep.

The saviour

AFTER A FALSE start, the day exploded into brilliance. The spent clouds scurried towards the horizon and liquid sunlight streamed down and splashed in roadside puddles and bounced off gleaming cars. The clock at City Hall gonged twice, and as if heeding its toll, people stepped into the street and turned smiling faces to the sky. Around their feet children jumped and screamed and kicked dirty water at each other.

Sheri emerged sweating from Grace Bellerose, her arms weighed down by shopping bags. She squinted into the glare of the day, dropped the load at her feet and flicked through her purse, muttering, 'Sunglasses, sunglasses,' like a madwoman. For a moment she thought she'd lost them (she had an annoying habit of leaving things on shop counters and cab seats) … but no, there they were, squashed under a can of pepper spray. She fished them out and wiggled the frames to make sure the hinges weren't bent, then took out a tissue and wiped off her fingerprints. The lenses were black, the darkest she could find, and when she set them on her nose a form of night descended on the world.

Amazingly, everything which earlier had appeared so drab and grimy was now washed clean by the summer shower. The dingy shops sparkled under the caress of the sun; the wet road shone like blackbirds' wings; drops of water fell like diamonds from the overhead powerlines. Pretty women in floral dresses stood kissing their boyfriends on street corners, while older couples with faces of crushed velvet strolled past hand in hand, perhaps recalling a time when their own love had been as fresh and new.

Sheri turned towards Muffy's, where pumpkin ravioli, strawberry thickshakes and luscious mud cake were beckoning. Her stomach kicked and grumbled in anticipation and she smiled and patted the curve of her belly like a mother-to-be. The smile attracted the attention of a portly businessman, who straightened his tie and grinned back. Then a boy with coffee-coloured hair slowed his walk and checked her out from head to foot. A few seconds later a tall, leggy woman did the same. Sheri tried her hardest to ignore the

looks, to concentrate on the delights awaiting her at Muffy's, but something inside was inciting her to grab each of them by the scruff of the neck and yell, 'What the hell are you staring at?'

Sensibly, she resisted the impulse. Recently Sheri had become engulfed by an irrational fear (almost a phobia) that she dressed like a prostitute and walked like a prostitute and acted like a prostitute, and the merest glance from a passer-by would make her burn with shame. Today she was wearing worn denim jeans, scuffed sneakers and a plain, light-weight jacket, but still she felt like an alien, a sham, a whore in disguise.

Crossing the road, she stopped at the window of Beadle's Books. Sheri was addicted to bookstores. Her mind boggled at the idea of all the fantasies and lives that dwelt upon the rows of shelves, waiting for a reader to come along and turn the pages and set them free. During quiet times at work she read avidly – usually blockbuster novels and biographies of famous movie stars. When a client came along and interrupted her reading, she would sometimes prolong the fantasy by adopting the persona of the book's protagonist. If the book was a particularly steamy one, she could create for her client a love scene to boil the blood and blow the mind.

Stacked in the window today were copies of Gloria Meadows' autobiography, *When You Wish on a Star*. A host of miniature Glorias smiled out at the world with that unique blend of sincerity and scorn that had long been her trademark, while a life-sized cardboard cut-out of Gloria (bearing the same impossible smile) formed a backdrop to the display. Behind the backdrop, signing books for her fans, sat Gloria herself.

Sheri stared in amazement. Here was one of the country's most revered and respected women, close enough for her to see every blemish and liver spot. She pressed her nose against the window. In real life Gloria appeared older and plumper than her pictures suggested. Her ivory hair was shellacked and immutable like an enormous conch shell. The lines of her wrinkles were staging a valiant fight against the combined effects of chemical peels, facelifts and a new generation of cosmetics. Her back was bent, her eyes tired … but despite the ravages of time, this woman was undoubtedly the legendary Miss Gloria Meadows, that heavyweight of stage, vinyl and screen who had captivated audiences with her talents and charisma for over half a century.

Sheri, a fame junkie from way back, dropped her eyes to Gloria's book. She licked her lips. What treasures might that wad of pages contain? She already knew a little of Gloria's charmed life from what TV and magazines

had told her. The daughter of silent movie actors, Gloria Frances Meadows began her career in musical theatre as a young and precocious child, wowing audiences with her distinctive singing voice. ('Loud and gutsy,' said the trade papers. 'Remarkably versatile for one so young.') Though she lacked the Thespian talents of her parents, Gloria had a commanding stage presence and dreams that reached all the way to the stars. There was never any doubt she would be famous; it was simply a question of when.

That day came when Sal Sebastian happened to catch her show. Afterwards, in her dressing room, the self-professed 'Starmaker' offered her a place in his new singing trio, the Melody Sisters. Gloria was over the moon. Only days before, she'd been told by a major recording company that her sound was too brash on tape, that theatre was where she belonged and where she should stay. Now here was the great Sal Sebastian telling her he would make her a star. And he wasn't kidding. Through this stroke of good fortune, Gloria Meadows, at seventeen, became part of one of the biggest recording acts in history. In their first year together the Melody Sisters scored a string of hits, topping the charts with five consecutive records. They played to packed concert halls, travelled the globe, dined with royalty and heads of state, drove teenyboppers (and their parents) insane.

But all too soon the fame and adulation took its toll on the three girls. What young mind can withstand the pressure of living up to a million expectations? Two years after their sensational debut, the group blew apart and Gloria found herself jobless, a has-been at the age of nineteen.

Determined not to return to the microcosm of the stage, she took tentative steps into the world of television. There, her career blossomed beyond anyone's expectations. Gloria had a knack for understanding what made people laugh, what made their ears prick up and their eyes widen, and during the 'fifties and 'sixties she became hugely successful in a string of variety shows and comedy programs, culminating in the classic sitcom, *Where's Lennie?* This was followed by *The Midday Show with Gloria Meadows*, a weekday program she opened with cabaret versions of rock and roll classics.

Midday did much to cement Gloria Meadows' fame as a media legend. But television, like the stage, eventually became too small for the aging superstar. By this time Gloria was the wife of a real estate tycoon and she would not be satisfied till she owned the world. So with money in her pockets

and a résumé as long as her arm, she moved to the big time of Hollywood to orchestrate a well-publicised flop in movies.

For the next year or so, Gloria drifted in and out of alcohol and drug rehabilitation clinics. She was no longer seen in restaurants or clubs. Her name disappeared from the gossip columns and trade magazines. Then one day, from out of the blue, came the announcement that Miss Meadows was retiring from the public arena to found a charity for poor and underprivileged children. These days she could be seen in the small hours of the morning in infomercials for face creams, one of her many corporate interests. And her face was never far from the social pages, courtesy of her penchant for charity balls and an insatiable thirst for publicity and the public's attention.

INSIDE BEADLE'S BOOKS Gloria was wrapping up her book-signing session. Arising from the chair, she presented the last of her fans with a radiant smile. She shook Mr Beadle's hand. They exchanged pleasantries. But as she bent over to retrieve her handbag, her cheeks sagged and her mouth turned down at the corners, and instead of appearing majestic and revered, she appeared to Sheri like any other tired and irritable old woman.

A little boy came into view, rolling his body around the table, bouncing a red rubber ball on the tabletop. 'Stop that,' Gloria said. When the child ignored the command, she confiscated his ball and dropped it in her bag. Collecting the rest of her things, she passed behind a bookshelf.

But now the boy was on the floor, his legs kicking in the air, his eyes streaming with tears.

Gloria reappeared and for a time she and Mr Beadle stood over him, unsure of what to do. When the tantrum showed no signs of abating, Gloria put her bag on the table and bent her head towards the boy like a cow preparing to feast. Presented with a view of Gloria's ample rear, Sheri looked respectfully away.

There followed a period of cajoling and placating, during which the boy's legs continued to kick in the air. Mr Beadle glanced up and caught Sheri's eye, and with a look of alarm he straightened his body and stepped out of view (probably remembering he needed to herd onlookers away from the embarrassing spectacle). Sheri checked her watch. She was about to give up and walk away when the little boy climbed to his feet and wiped his eyes with

the backs of his hands. A minute later he emerged from the shop hand in hand with Gloria, the red rubber ball clenched in his tiny fist.

Sheri rushed towards them to say something ingratiating and was elbowed out of the way by an angular woman with permed hair and a triangle of warts on her face.

'Miss Meadows! Miss Meadows!' the woman squawked. 'I'm Francine! Your biggest fan! I've loved you all my life!' She blocked Gloria's escape with her body. 'Can I please, please have your autograph? Monica and Felicia Mae will just die!' She pulled a shopper's docket from her pocket. 'Here you go. Write something like: "Dearest Francine. Thank you for being my most loyalest and loving fan." Got a pen?' She dropped her hand. 'Where have you been hiding? I hear you might be coming back to *Midday*. Please, God, tell me it's true. It would make my day … my year even.'

Gloria waggled her fingers at the bookstore window. 'I have been writing my memoirs,' she said. 'See? There in the window. *When You Wish on a Star*. You will find the answers to all your questions and more there. Would you like me to autograph a copy?'

'You mean buy it?'

'Mr Beadle can assist. Mr Beadle!'

The wart-faced woman frowned at the shop, frowned at Mr Beadle, shook her head. 'I'll get it out the library. Here.' She shoved the strip of paper into Gloria's breasts. 'Monica and Felicia Mae will just die!'

Raising her eyes to the heavens, Gloria released the boy's hand and accepted a pen from Mr Beadle.

Set free, the little terror skipped towards a nearby parking meter. He stood on tiptoes to peer into the display window, then took hold of the pole and pulled it and pushed it in an effort to wrest it from the ground. When it refused to yield, he shook it with all his might. When this didn't work either, he took careful aim with his foot and kicked it.

'Ow!' he cried, hopping in a circle.

Limping back to Gloria, he tugged at her dress. But Gloria had more important things on her mind. A crowd had gathered and she was gesturing at the bookstore window like a huckster.

A look of unadulterated evil fell upon the little boy's face. He searched for something else to destroy, then remembered the red rubber ball in his pocket. Taking it out, he lifted his arm above his head, slammed the ball down and watched it shoot into the air. The red dot vanished into outer space. He

craned his neck skyward, twisted in a circle. When he caught sight of the ball falling back to earth, he darted onto the road to catch it.

Sheri, who by this time was walking away, saw this from the corner of her eye. The shopping bags dropped and her legs sprang into action before her brain had even realised what was happening.

As she dashed onto the road, time slowed and events started happening frame by frame. There was the little boy standing on the road, both hands reaching for the descending red blur. And here was a mighty Volvo skidding towards him, brakes shrieking, tyres whooshing across the wet surface of the road. Reaching out, she grabbed the boy's shirt and hurled him into the space between two parked cars, and at the same instant the Volvo's bumper bar made contact with her shin. She launched herself into the air. But the manoeuvre was too late. Her shoulder connected with the bonnet, the wet car slid under her, the windscreen slammed into her head. For a frozen second she stared into the horrified eyes of the driver – and then the Volvo swerved and she rolled off the bonnet and dropped to the road. A huge truck bore down on her. This is the end, she thought through the pain and confusion, and braced herself for the impact.

But fortunately, the truck driver had braked at the first glimpse of trouble. The vehicle's undercarriage passed over her in slow motion, like the battleship in the opening minutes of *Star Wars*. It came to a rest parked on her hair.

For a long while, all Sheri could hear was the creaking of the truck's joints, the metallic knocking of the exhaust pipe, the drip, drip, drip of something above her head. The sounds had a musical quality. They reminded her of lazy afternoons many years ago when she would watch her father work on his pickup truck on their front lawn. The sounds were soothing.

But soon more alarming sounds reached her ears: people screaming, doors slamming, frantic voices crying, 'Oh my God!' and 'Call an ambulance!' A coarse breathing appeared at her ear and a voice shouted, 'She's alive! I can see her moving!'

Sheri kept her eyes shut. Ignoring the commotion, she breathed in the mixed odours of wet bitumen, burning oil and hot metal, listened to the sighing and creaking as the vehicle relaxed on its joints, saw in her mind's eye her father's battered truck. Whatever happened to that truck? One day it vanished and its place was taken by a brown wagon. Sheri never liked that boring old wagon. Her father had never worked on it.

Then something nudged her shoulder and her eyes flew open. A man (not much more than a boy) jerked his arm away as if he'd been caught doing something dirty. 'Are you alright?' he asked in a frightened voice. Sheri didn't know, so she didn't reply. The head went away. Dimly she heard someone say, 'I think she's in shock.'

A different head appeared. 'There's an ambulance coming, miss,' this one said. Its eyes moved to Sheri's hair, which was still trapped under the wheel of the truck. 'First we better get this thing off you.'

Alone again. Muffled voices. More car doors.

The head reappeared. 'Okay, miss,' it said, 'we're about to roll the truck forward a little so we can get you free. Please remain absolutely still.'

Sheri had no intention of moving. The surrounding commotion might have been coming from another room. It felt like someone had closed a door on her memory, and all she knew was that a lot of people were worried about her and trying their hardest to make her feel safe and comfortable. Despite the pain and confusion, she smiled.

Then the truck moved and she yelped in fear and scrambled into daylight.

In an instant she was caught and pinned down. Hands slipped under her arms and she was dragged to the kerb like a piece of road kill. Her purse was placed under her head. Someone sat her broken sunglasses on her face.

'Lie still,' a voice ordered.

'You might have broken bones,' another said.

'Or internal bleeding,' added a third.

But the dash to freedom had convinced Sheri her injuries were not serious. Ignoring the pleas to keep still, she gritted her teeth, took hold of the nearest arm and levered herself upright. The world turned with her, continued turning, until her stomach threatened to go off to Muffy's all by itself – but then things fell into balance, reality trickled into her brain and she raised her head and looked fearfully at the sea of faces. Voices were coming at her from all directions, but none of the mouths seemed to be moving.

'I'm okay,' she said to her hands. 'It's only scrapes and bruises.'

'You never know about internal injuries,' warned a red-faced businessman.

'My cousin said "Don't worry" and the next minute – wham! – dead!' said someone at her feet.

'Your neck could be broken. You might never walk again.'

A siren heralded the approach of an ambulance. Sitting on the kerb, the centre of attention, Sheri felt like some kind of crazed lone protester. She was beginning to feel ridiculous. Taking hold of the arm again, she pulled herself to her feet. The owner of the arm, the red-faced businessman, collected her purse, and with the crowd in tow escorted her back to Beadle's Books, where Gloria Meadows was holding court, the boy's hand now firmly ensconced in hers.

'Young lady,' Gloria began, and then the ambulance rounded the corner, its siren blaring. Gloria glared at it and it fell silent. 'Young lady,' she resumed, 'you saved my grandson's life. How can I ever seek to repay you?'

Though the line came straight from a corny period drama, to Sheri it was sincere and impressive. She was struck dumb at the realisation that Gloria Meadows – *the* Gloria Meadows! – had professed herself to be in Sheri Starling's debt. She was lost for words. All she could do was smile like an idiot.

Fortunately, Gloria didn't require a response. Releasing her grandson's hand, she took a leather-bound chequebook from her handbag. 'Do not move, Alastair!' she warned when she saw the boy's attention drift back to the road.

She regarded Sheri with half-closed eyes. 'Young lady, I wish to present you with a reward. Let us say … five hundred dollars? Said amount shall incorporate medical treatment, pain and suffering, and compensation for your damaged clothing.' She raised an eyebrow, seeking confirmation, as though Sheri were a blackmailer and they were negotiating a ransom. When Sheri went on smiling, Gloria took her silence as acceptance and started writing in the amount.

'Oh, no!' Sheri cried, finding her voice at last. She waved her hands in the air. 'Please, Miss Meadows, no reward!'

Gloria frowned at her. 'What?' she snapped. 'No reward, did you say? Alastair, come here at once! Are you certain, my dear?'

She shook her head. 'Yes, Miss Meadows. Really, I don't … don't … I don't want your money. I'm just glad the boy's okay, is all.'

Gloria harrumphed, leaving Sheri with the feeling she'd committed a gross social blunder. 'Very well,' she said, and closed the chequebook. She returned it to her handbag.

Her head jerked up. 'Are you certain about this, young lady?'

'Yes. Of course.'

'I have very good lawyers, you realise.'

'I'm sorry?'

Gloria glanced down at Sheri's torn jeans, her ruined jacket, the bloody scrapes on her hands. 'I am simply stating for the public record that I have no culpability in this matter whatsoever.'

'Oh,' said Sheri, not understanding. She felt dizzy. Maybe she was suffering from concussion or delayed shock.

'Can we go home now, Grandma?' wailed Alastair, tugging at his grandmother's dress.

'Not yet, dearest. We must await the media. They will certainly require a statement.'

Sheri smiled at the boy. He looked down and around her, stubbornly refusing to meet her eye. His face was demonic. When a woman came up and handed him the red rubber ball, he bounced it in a spate of anger and it sailed off again towards the road.

A paramedic approached, a surly-looking man, small and hard like a walnut. 'What happened here?' he asked in a blunt, unsympathetic voice.

Gloria took command of the situation. 'This young lady saved my grandson's life,' she announced to the world at large. 'She is a heroine in the classic sense of the word.'

The paramedic turned his attention to Sheri. 'Are you injured, miss?'

'Oh, no.' She put on a brave face. 'My shoulder hurts and my hip's a bit sore … But no, everything seems fine.'

'Well, miss, if you're up to it, please make your way to the ambulance and my partner will take a good look at you.'

Sheri nodded. Through all this the red-faced businessman had remained attached to her side, and now he steered her towards the ambulance and deposited her in a waiting chair.

The second paramedic said, 'Please remove your jacket,' then, 'Hmm, you've got some nasty bruises there.' He took hold of her arm. This paramedic was blond, with an attractive, masculine face and the greyest eyes Sheri had ever seen. As he performed tests on her shoulder, she watched the motion of his biceps, felt the heat flowing through his fingertips, breathed in the musky smell of his after-shave. His efficiency and control impressed her. He made her feel wanted. She willed him to fall in love with her, to clasp her in his capable arms, bundle her into the back of the ambulance and drive them both towards a brighter tomorrow. Instead, he prodded her shoulder and twisted her arm as casually as if he were adjusting a TV antenna.

The other paramedic came jogging back. 'Guess who the old woman is,' he said, jerking his thumb at the growing crowd.

'Who?'

'She don't look familiar?'

'Um … no.'

'You're too young to remember, I suppose.'

'It's not …' said the businessman, edging away.

'Gloria Meadows.'

'Gloria Meadows?' The grey eyes widened, turned silver. 'Sure I know her, you moron. I used to watch her on TV when I was a kid.' He glanced down at Sheri. 'I need to get an autograph. My mother-in-law will kill me if I don't.'

Returning her arm to her lap, he patted her sore shoulder. 'Rest here awhile,' he said, and took off towards Gloria, hot on the heels of the other two men.

Left alone in the sunshine, Sheri watched the proceedings with a growing sense of detachment. She might have been sitting in an open-air theatre viewing a performance of a tragi-comic farce.

Then a horn blared behind her, sending her flying out of her seat. The Channel Four news van had arrived – with greater urgency, it seemed, than the ambulance. Leaping the kerb, it pulled up on the sidewalk and two men and a woman came bursting out like Navy Seals attacking a terrorist stronghold. Cameras were hauled from the vehicle, shouts flew between them, a passage was bored through the crowd. Gloria Meadows, that seasoned professional, took up position on the steps beside the bookstore window.

Sheri squeezed her eyes shut. Everything was blurred and unreal, and her mind returned to the possibility she was suffering from post-trauma shock. Was this all a crazy hallucination? But then a finger poked her shoulder and the touch was like the proverbial pinch. She opened her eyes to find a police officer standing over her.

'Bit of a commotion,' he observed in a tone that seemed to accuse her of creating it. 'I better get some details.'

He barked out questions and wrote down her responses. Meanwhile, laughter rippled from the direction of the bookstore.

'What's going on over there?' he asked, tossing his head at the crowd.

Sheri sighed. 'Don't you recognise her?'

'Who?'

'The old woman.'

He stood on tiptoes. 'No. Who is it?'

'Gloria Meadows.'

'Gloria Meadows?'

'Yes. She's –'

But there was no need for an explanation; he was already off. Sheri watched as he moved into the breach created by the news crew. He was promptly relocated to the back of the crowd.

She folded her arms and waited. The interview with Gloria Meadows began and a hush fell upon the crowd. A light breeze carried the voices away, but Sheri could guess what was being said from the expression on Gloria's face and the occasional gestures she was making towards the bookstore window. At a break in filming, Mr Beadle crept up and slipped a copy of her autobiography into her waiting hands. The crowd murmured and pressed closer.

Several minutes passed. The interview showed no signs of ending. The paramedics showed no signs of returning. The sun was hot and Sheri was beginning to sweat. When she got up and scanned the crowd and spotted the silver-eyed paramedic, she was forced to face facts: he wasn't about to race back and whisk her away from all this. In fact, he seemed to have forgotten her altogether.

The situation pressed down on her. She was the one who'd put her life in danger to save a child's life; she was the one suffering the painful consequences. But it was Gloria Meadows who'd captured all the attention. Sheri Starling had been cast aside as carelessly as a fast-food wrapper.

She glared indignantly at the crowd, before realising no one cared what she thought, how much pain she was in, or whether she stayed, left or existed at all. With a sigh of resignation, she collected her purse and torn jacket and limped back up the sidewalk. She looked around for her shopping. It took a while for it to sink in that the bags were gone, stolen by an opportunistic scumbag as she lay injured, possibly dying, on the road.

It was all too much to bear. Without so much as a sideways glance at Gloria Meadows, she hobbled back in the direction she'd come.

Messages

JOURNALISTS ARE LIKE rats. In times of quiet they hide away with eyes wide and noses twitching, hungry for the next story, the next big break. Then someone gets wind of a scoop – a story of despair or degradation, hope or happiness – and suddenly every other journalist knows of the story too. Out they fly from their fluoro-lit cubicles, desperate to be first on the scene, frantic for a taste of the spoils. The greater the story, the bigger the commotion, the more savage the fighting. Even when there's enough of a story for everyone, they can't help but get caught up in the feeding frenzy, the thrill of the chase, and in the blink of an eye the scene is awash with reporters and their crews, tramping over everything, grabbing what they can, oblivious to the rights of everyone else. In their vast numbers they become fearless, daring anyone to oppose their collective might, their right to be there, and it's only when the story has been exhausted, the facts picked clean, that they pack up their cases and slink back to their cubicles, to lie in wait for the next big scoop.

The phone was ringing when Sheri got home. Pushing through the door, she stopped and stared. There were so many messages on the answering machine it had fallen into a frenetic flickering, as if sending out a beacon of distress. Her first thought was that some kind of disaster had occurred, and she moved towards the phone in the grip of a cold, sick dread.

'Hello?' she said down a noisy line.

'Oh, hi. Is Shirley Starling there please?' asked a distracted voice.

'Shirley? No, no, it's not Shirley. It's Sheri. Sheri Starling.'

'What's that?' yelled the voice, which was struggling to compete with a background of chattering and clattering. 'Hey you guys, keep it down!'

'It's Sheri.'

'Great … Oh great! You're home! I'm Pete Manson from The Northern Gazette. Miss Starling … Can I call you Shirley? Hey, look, I heard what happened today and I was hoping I could ask you a few questions.'

'How did you get my number?'

'Have you got a few minutes? This won't take long.'

'I, uh, just walked in.'

'Fine, that's cool. Give me a second, will you? I need to close the door. You won't go away now, will you?'

'No, but –'

The line went dead. A talkback program took the place of the man's voice. '… blatant contempt for every standard of decency,' a tinny, asexual voice was saying. 'Our society is built on laws that were put there for a good reason. And if some lowlife decides they aren't prepared to live by those laws, they forfeit the right to live in society.'

'Do you think,' interrupted a sardonic voice that made Sheri think of a schoolteacher who'd once terrorised her; 'do you think the crime wave is a result of the drugs – the heroin, amphetamines and the like – on our streets?'

'Oh, of course. No doubt. But that's not the point I'm trying to make.'

'What is the point, sir?'

'The point is we have these kids living on our streets who go around attacking and robbing old people – people who fought and died for us in the war – and they don't give a damn about working for a living like the rest of us. I don't care how deprived these kids are or whether they've got drug problems. They deserve nothing but contempt, and we should treat them like the adults they are and lock them away for as long as it takes, so decent people like us can rest in peace.'

'I certainly agree with you on that point, sir. These hoodlums are precisely the kind of scum that give our own children a bad name.'

'If they worked hard and studied hard, like my kids do, they'd easily get jobs, no worries. I'm sick of hearing excuses.'

'Never a truer word was spoken. Thanks for your call, sir. Maybe we can get another response. Hello, caller. This is … Let me see here … We have Glenys from Alfred Cove.'

'Hello, John,' Glenys crowed. 'I love your program. I listen to the wireless every day.'

'Thank you, Glenys. Now tell me; what do you think should be done with the hoodlums who snatch bags from poor old grandmothers?'

'Well, John, we need to go back to Christian values. We should bring back the cane –'

The line clicked again. The reporter's voice returned. 'Sorry about that, Shirley. You won't believe what I just heard.'

'It's Sheri … I mean, Sheryl.'

'Yes. Of course. Listen. This won't take long. Can you tell me in your own words what happened?'

Sheri sat on the arm of the sofa. What happened? That was a good question! She recalled the spectacle of Gloria Meadows sitting in Beadle's Books, the bulge of her rear end as she bent over to placate her grandson, the red rubber ball that had been the cause of the mayhem that followed. 'Well,' she said, 'I was passing by Beadle's bookstore when I saw Gloria Meadows doing a book signing …'

As her tale unfolded, she couldn't help but feel it was all no big deal. A child ran onto a road and a bystander pulled him to safety. What was so special about that? Anyone in Sheri's position would have done the same. As the anticlimax loomed, her face grew warm and tingly and her words streamed out like water from a burst faucet. She kept expecting the reporter to pull her up and tell her what a load of bullshit this was, that she was nothing but an attention-seeking nobody who should go out and get herself a life. He did interrupt, but only to ask what passed through her mind after it came to light whose life she'd saved.

She tried to think. It was obvious from the start that the boy was related to Gloria Meadows, but if she admitted this, the reporter might misconstrue her motives and suggest she only saved him because he was the grandson of a celebrity. Even worse, he might accuse her of pushing the boy onto the road herself so she could engineer a fake rescue. Opting on the side of caution, she simply said she was surprised and honoured to be of service to the incredible Gloria Meadows.

The journalist's next question floored her. 'Tell me something about yourself. What do you do for a living?'

Her throat tightened. 'I, uh, I'm n-not working right n-now,' she stammered.

'Housewife?'

'No.' Her eyes flew to the little trophy on the TV set. 'I do singing. In clubs.'

'Cool! Which clubs?'

'Oh, um, none you'd know. I mean, I've been working – singing – overseas. I only recently got back.'

'So you're a professional singer?'

'Well … not exactly.'

'Let's say "unemployed", hey? Simpler that way.'

After that he seemed to lose interest in her. When the ruckus in the background started again, he yelled his thanks and hung up.

Sheri remained seated on the arm of the sofa, cradling the receiver in her lap, staring into the perfect blue on the other side of the window. When she replaced the receiver the phone rang immediately and she almost jumped out of her skin. This time she held herself back from answering it. She breathed deeply – in, out, in, out – trying by an effort of will to clear her mind. The phone rang out, was silent for two seconds, then started ringing again. With an impatient grunt, she reached behind the sofa and yanked the connection from the wall.

So Doctor Pasternak was right when he predicted the story would blow up. Lying on his examination bed, recounting her adventure, Sheri had tried to identify the precise moment when today changed from an average, normal day into something miraculous. She no longer cared that everyone had forgotten about her; it was worth all the pain and suffering to have had the great Gloria Meadows pay homage to her, if only for a few seconds. 'I don't know how I can ever repay you,' Gloria had said. She'd called Sheri a hero.

The doctor, though, knew something about the currency of fame. In his calm, unsurprised way he predicted a media frenzy. After all, Gloria was a major celebrity, socialite, humanitarian and litigator whose name appeared in almost every issue of every mass-market magazine, and any story involving a famous person, near tragedy and an act of bravery was guaranteed to make front page news. Sheri saw his point; she just hadn't envisioned the media running to hear *her* side of the story.

She started going through the messages. Most were calls from the press, seeking her version of 'the Gloria Meadows incident'. There was also a request for a shopping centre appearance, an order for a pizza and a heavy breather.

After the heavy breather, she switched the machine off and took a few deep breaths herself. She got up and paced the room. Her head was in a whirl, her body trembling with excitement. All these people wanted her. They wanted to talk to her. They might even ask her to pose for some photos or appear on TV. But which ones should she ring back? It was impossible to respond to them all.

Rewinding the tape, she replayed the messages, wrote down details and underlined the programs, papers and magazines whose names she recognised.

Then she circled the ones her parents were likely to see, intending to contact those first.

This done, she paced the room again, thinking hard about what to say. If she played her cards right, she could let it be known she was a professional singer looking for a contract, and maybe a music producer, inspired by her good deed, would give her a break in reward for her services to humanity. The thought sent tingles through her body.

In her excitement she gave no regard to the cold, hard reality that ordinary people feature on news and current affairs programs all the time, and almost all go straight back to their dull existence once the story has run its course. Sheri recalled the things her father had said to her as a child: that she was destined to be famous; that the world would sit up and take notice – and even though his promises were now like ancient artefacts buried deep in the shifting sands of her psyche, they remained as sharp and piercing as flints. She had a quiet certainty that, given the right opportunity, she could succeed at anything.

Taking out a writing pad, she tore off a half-written letter to her parents and started composing a careful account of the rescue, incorporating drama, heroism and a near-death experience (which she later crossed out). Then she penned a flowery statement describing her love and respect for Gloria Meadows. Satisfied with these efforts, she set her mind to the hardest task of all: rewriting her life story.

Only after finishing these tasks did she reconnect the phone and punch out the first of the circled numbers.

Hero worship

'C'MON, YOU GUYS, hurry up!' Sheri yelled from the living room floor.

Danny was in the kitchen shaking cheese puffs into a salad bowl. Leslie stood close at hand, blinking at the tumbling hoops of yellow. 'Here, have one,' Danny said, popping a cheese puff into Leslie's mouth. Leslie held it between his teeth, then bit into it with a loud crunch. Danny did the same.

A cloud of perfume came rolling into the kitchen, bearing odours of rice and oyster sauce. Two golden arms snaked around Danny's waist. 'Enough here to feed the whole of Africa,' said Doris, nuzzling his shoulder.

'It's starting!' came a shriek from the living room.

Grabbing what they could, they raced each other to the sofa and laughed and whooped as they jostled for the best spot. They were still high from watching videotapes of the news. Danny, for one, couldn't get that embarrassing mugshot out of his head – the one all the channels were using, the one that made Sheri look like the wife of a Baptist minister.

'Quiet! Quiet!' she cried, pressing the VCR's record button. Being a hero, her words were law. The room fell silent.

The current affairs program, *Behind the News*, began and the room erupted again when they saw Sheri's story had top billing, eclipsing stories about a humanitarian crisis in Colombia and preparations for the upcoming Sydney Olympics. They stared at the TV as if hypnotised. Sheri could not have been happier had she been asked to recreate the rescue as a song-and-dance number.

The piece opened with a retrospective on the show business career of Gloria Meadows. The voiceover was accompanied by a succession of publicity shots: Gloria as a fresh-faced singer shaking hands with Tyrone Power; Gloria as the hen-pecking wife of a mobster in the ground-breaking 'sixties sitcom, *Where's Lennie?*; Gloria looking rounded and glamorous on *The Midday Show with Gloria Meadows*; an older Gloria on the cover of her book, *When You Wish on a Star*. ('Is that the same woman?' whispered Danny. When

Sheri shushed him, he pulled a face at Leslie and they fell apart in quiet laughter.)

The history lesson over, the story shifted to the rescue. Footage was shown from yesterday's news. The embarrassing mugshot of Sheri flashed across the screen. Finally the camera returned to the studio, where Cary Bridges was sitting behind a desk looking more like a movie star than a current affairs presenter.

'Tonight,' he said into the camera, 'we are honoured to have in the studio the incomparable Miss Gloria Meadows, along with the woman responsible for her grandson being here with us today, Sheryl Starling.'

With her conch-shell hair, platinum gown and blazing smile, Gloria dominated the screen. Beside her sat a subdued Alastair, dressed in a grey double-breasted suit and paisley tie. Further along was Sheri, looking pale and chaste in a pastel blue frock. Her hair, normally so thick and lustrous, was brushed flat and pinned behind her ears.

She'd chosen the look after hours of deliberation. Her initial thought was to appear as stylish and glamorous as Gloria, but everything she tried on made her feel more like a hooker than a hero, and that was the last thing she wanted. Danny and Leslie had sat in judgment on her bed, appraising every costume change, nodding encouragingly at every entrance. But they were attracted mostly to the low-cut and gaudy and were eventually dismissed as being of marginal use. Exasperated, running out of time, she ended up following Sophie's lead and going with a look of girlish chastity. Studying herself now on the screen, she was confident it was the right decision. Sherlock Holmes himself would have had a hard time recognising the vampish, tarted-up Sheri in this shy, modest, bright-eyed hero.

But something was wrong with her makeup. Danny noticed it first. 'Hey, you got a black eye!' he cried.

They quickly guessed what had transpired. The producers, concerned Sheri didn't look traumatised enough, had instructed the show's cosmetician to adjust her appearance. They'd made her up to look almost cadaverous, with one eye a touch darker than the other. They were probably upset she hadn't rolled up to the studio in a wheelchair and neck brace.

After exchanging pleasantries, Cary said to Gloria, 'Well now, you must be mighty relieved Sheryl ventured along yesterday. Otherwise we could be sitting here telling a very different story.'

Gloria's teeth made the screen flare. 'I shall be eternally grateful to the young lady,' she said with a nod. 'Yesterday began as one of the proudest days of my life, and it very near ended the unhappiest. There was I, promoting my autobiography, *When You Wish on a Star*, surrounded by all my dear fans who love me and whom I love with all my heart, whilst unbeknownst to me, tragedy lurked in the wings like a crazed stalker. You are no doubt aware, Cary, I have had more than my fair share of ill-fortune and tragedy. It's all there in black and white in my book.'

'You've lived a most remarkable life. And this is the beginning of the next chapter.'

'The next chapter, yes. These days, as you well know, Cary, almost every minute of my waking hours is devoted to helping the children of the world. I have little time for anything else. But I believed I owed it to my fans to tell my story, warts and all, so to speak. It was a labour of love, I can tell you; the product of half a century of blood, sweat and tears.'

'It's a great read. I can highly recommend it. Now, going back to the events of yesterday, what were your thoughts when you saw young Alastair running onto the road? Did your heart leap into your mouth?'

'Oh, Cary. Oh, my. The boy broke away from my grasp. I tried to go after him, but I was mobbed, literally mobbed, by fans. It was horrific, utterly horrific.'

'Fortunately, Sheryl was on the scene.'

'Miss Starling happened to be close by and pulled the boy out of harm's way.'

'My producers tell me Sheryl refused to accept a reward.'

'That is completely correct. Miss Starling declined any monetary compensation for her actions, which to my mind shows a remarkable strength of character. She should be put on a pedestal as a role model for other young people in the community.'

'Hear, hear. Now Sheryl,' said Cary, fixing her with a smile, 'let me begin by offering my congratulations on your act of bravery. You must be very proud of yourself.'

The camera cut to Sheri. 'Well, Cary, I only did what any other person in the same situation would have done,' she said in a shaky, rehearsed voice.

'When you were running onto the road, did you have any inkling the child whose life you were about to save was the grandson of Gloria Meadows?'

'Oh no, no. I mean, yes. I mean, I saw Miss Meadows in the bookstore, but no, I had no idea Alastair was her grandson.'

During this exchange, her face turned beet red. Cary and Gloria studied her like a fascinating new species of beetle. She glanced at her hands, at Cary, at Gloria, then turned to the camera and said, 'I feel extremely honoured to have provided this service to the incredible Miss Meadows, who has been an inspiration to me for as long as I can remember.'

'I've been told you're lucky to be alive,' said Cary. 'What ran through your mind as the truck bore down on you? Did you think you might end up a cripple … or even dead?'

'Oh, no. Th-there wasn't time to think. When I saw the boy run out, it was obvious he was in danger. I knew I had to do something. I'm just thankful everything ended up safe and well.'

'It was a courageous act. I'm sure there are countless people watching tonight who would want to thank you for what you did. Alastair, is there something you would like to say to Miss Starling?'

The boy licked his lips. He frowned up at his grandmother. 'Thank you for saving my life,' he drawled.

Cary smiled at the boy's charm and self-possession. 'Miss Meadows, what now for the future? Any new projects on the horizon?'

'Well, Cary, I take pleasure in announcing I have commenced work on part two of my autobiography … much earlier than planned, I might add. I am considering calling it *When You Wish on a Starling*'. Her soft laughter rippled out of the TV and into the apartment.

'Thank you once again, Miss Gloria Meadows. And thank you also to Alastair and Sheryl. Coming up after the break …'

'Whoa!' Danny cried. 'That was way cool!'

'Cool,' Leslie agreed.

'Sheri, we are very proud of you,' said Doris. 'You're a big star, girl. What's next? Hollywood?'

'Come on, you guys,' said Sheri, embarrassed by the attention. 'They cut out most of what I said. I looked like an idiot.'

Danny shook his head. 'No! No you didn't! You looked wicked! Everybody could see what a hero you are!'

'They didn't ask me anything about being a singer. That was the most important part.'

'Doesn't matter. You looked more like a movie star than the old bag did.'

'Danny! Don't be rude.'

'It's true! You watch; there'll be guys ringing you up *begging* you to be in their stupid movies.'

Danny and Leslie gazed at their hero. They watched her hands as she picked up empty bowls and carried them into the kitchen. They followed her with their eyes as she went down the passage. It was like someone famous had wandered into the apartment and was yet to realise her mistake. Only when Sheri was out of sight did a sense of normalcy return to the room.

Leslie got to his feet.

'You off?'

'Yeah.'

'Already?'

He shrugged.

Danny studied his friend's face. Over recent months Leslie had grown increasingly morose, beaten down by the dank reality of living and working on the streets. Danny had a suspicion he was taking downers to help him cope with his miserable life. But instead of bringing relief, the drugs left him perpetually drowsy, easy pickings for unscrupulous men.

'Off to the park?'

'Yeah … s'pose.' Leslie glanced guiltily at Doris, who smiled and nodded as if the boys were talking about playing ball.

'Hold on a second,' said Danny, springing to his feet. 'I'm coming with you. Sheri!' he yelled. 'We're off out for a while!'

He accompanied Leslie to the door.

'Where you going?' asked Sheri from the other side of the room.

Danny spun around. 'Oh … um. Just keeping Leslie company,' he said in a matter-of-fact voice.

'They are going to the park,' snitched Doris.

Sheri crossed her arms. 'Squatter Park?' When Danny responded with half a shrug, she said, 'What if Ben calls?'

He blushed. He knew what she meant and grew indignant at the veiled accusation. 'He won't ring,' he said. 'He's at some stupid political meeting.'

Her eyes drilled into his skull and it struck him that she had doubts about him and Ben. Her concern moved him, but he also saw it as a betrayal, an indictment on his ability to sustain a mature relationship. He wanted to reassure her he was smart enough to appreciate the difference between right and wrong, that he could peer into the bowels of depravity and walk away

unaffected … but he knew if they got into a discussion about the perils and pitfalls of Squatter Park it would only hurt Leslie, who looked depressed enough already.

Going up to her, he said quietly, 'Don't worry about me and Ben. We're going great. I'm worried about Leslie is all. I wanna do something to help.'

Sheri seemed surprised by his explanation, as if she'd never before considered the possibility he had an unselfish side.

'Danny …' she began in a voice thick with pleasure; then she checked herself and said, 'Just don't be late, huh? You've still got homework to finish … And don't forget your keys!'

Grinning, he loped back to Leslie and clapped him on the shoulder. 'Come on, fella,' he said, 'let's go,' and they bundled out the door.

A friendly smoke

THE HUSTLE AND noise of the street was a welcome change from the stuffiness of the apartment. Danny loved the outdoors. He loved feeling the ground beneath his feet, the sky overhead, the exhilarating sense of space and freedom and adventure. Throwing back his shoulders, expanding his chest, he sucked in odours of exhaust fumes, rotting garbage and burnt rubber, which he mistook for fresh air.

Leslie too was mildly energised. 'Saw my dad this morning,' he said out of nowhere.

'What?' cried Danny, stumbling to a stop. 'Where?'

'On, um, Barclay Street. He was coming out of a shop. Almost bowled me over.'

'Did he say anything?'

'Nup. Didn't even see me. Kept walking.'

'Oh.' Danny scratched his head. 'I s'pose after how he beat on you, you wouldn't wanna talk to him again.'

Leslie's face turned spiteful. 'I don't care what he did to me. Not really. But when he hit my ma, that made me so angry I wanted to kill him. Almost did one time.'

'What? You never told me that before.'

'I don't like talking about it. Makes me too angry.'

'Did you hurt him?'

'Oh, no. Nothing like that. It's like … They were having a screaming match. And then he punched her in the face. That's when I went downstairs to get the shotgun.'

'The what? Shotgun?'

'I couldn't find it, but. So I rang Auntie Ellen and she came over and took my mother home with her. You should've seen it, Danny. Uncle Jeremy threatened to bash my dad with a piece of wood. He was so pissed he almost lost it. Wasn't long after that she ran off.'

'Oh,' said Danny. He was disappointed the story didn't have a more dramatic ending. The idea of Leslie shooting his dad in the stomach and becoming a fugitive from the law was both romantic and exciting. Danny would have sheltered the vicious criminal and together they would have dodged the police, on the run for their lives – for Leslie's life anyway. As things stood, Leslie was just another abused boy who'd run away from home.

'It's funny,' said Leslie. 'Seeing my dad like that was über-weird. I mean, he was a bastard to me and I hated his guts, but when I saw him come out of that shop I wanted to run after him and beg him to let me go home. Dunno why. Maybe I thought it'd be better this time around, like if I did my share of chores and was really quiet. And I could go back to school. And sleep in a real bed again. Nobody gives you a break out here. Not unless you're lucky, like you. The rest of us can drop dead on the spot and nobody'd care.'

'I'd care!'

Leslie conceded a smile. 'I suppose I must be a bit lucky, hey?'

'You betcha!' And the conversation turned back to Sheri, who was the luckiest one of all, having appeared on TV.

They walked on through familiar streets. Day was turning to night without a sunset, just a yellowing of the horizon and a deepening blue-grey in the sky overhead. The moon was dazzling. Rising from a mountain of garbage bags, it cast long shadows across the silvery grass of Squatter Park.

At the entrance to the park, Danny halted. He hadn't been here in a long time, and now he was back everything seemed different: darker, wilder, lonelier. And his conscience had begun to prick. For he'd lied to Sheri. He'd withheld the fact that his return to Squatter Park was in part an act of defiance against Ben, who'd gotten involved with a Gay Pride group and had chosen to spend the evening with a bunch of bearded, balding old men instead of with him. The revenge was small and inconsequential – but why then was his blood stirring? Why was his heart slamming against the inside of his chest? He knew why. Wrapped up snug and warm in the blankets of his new life, he sometimes missed those balmy nights spent in the shadow of Black Abbey Bridge. He missed the tingle of nerve endings that signalled something new and entirely mind-blowing might happen at any time. He craved adventure. Of course, he had no intention of doing anything wrong tonight, but being here could be as real and exhilarating as playing a video game, except here you were smack-bang in the centre of the action.

Leslie pointed at the sky. 'Look.'

Danny followed the line of his finger. High atop Black Abbey Bridge stood a crow, jet black against the indigo sky like an opening to another dimension. For a while it regarded the world with a weary disdain; then, rising to its full height, it released a raucous, anguished cry, flapped its mighty wings and launched itself into the night. After plunging for a second, it caught an updraft and sailed away to the west, in search of the sun.

Leslie dropped his head back. 'Wouldn't it be great to be a bird? You could fly away from all this.' His wan face absorbed moonbeams and became almost translucent. 'Sometimes when I'm with somebody really nice, I feel like I can do anything. It's like … this incredible …' He looked in turn at the bridge, the ground, the trees, the sky. 'Danny, why do guys pay me for sex then treat me like shit? It doesn't make sense. Like, this guy last night told me I was perfect. Said he was gonna take care of me. And he was really nice when we were, y'know, in bed … and then, soon as it was over, he said he couldn't give me his phone number but he'd come looking for me next time he was horny. It's always the same. What's wrong with me? Am I ugly or something?'

Danny rubbed his back. 'Don't be silly. Of course you're not ugly. You can get any guy you want. But you shouldn't expect to find a boyfriend in this place. Nobody's here looking for love. They're after a fuck and they'll say whatever it takes to get it.' To Danny, hustling had only ever been about money and sex, and he couldn't comprehend why Leslie should think otherwise. 'Y'know, when I first got here it was like: Whoa! These guys are giving me money for *this*? It was a fucking trip. Here I was, just a kid, making more money than I'd seen in my entire fucking life! It was great!'

Leslie sat on a park bench. 'I don't care about money. If I found a rich boyfriend tomorrow, I'd be outta here.'

Danny laughed. 'A rich boyfriend? What about a poor one?'

'Hmm.' Leslie stared at the bridge, at the spot where the crow had been. 'Depends on the guy, I suppose. But Danny, if he's poor and I'm poor, we wouldn't have much fun, would we?'

Danny had to agree. He took a seat next to him. 'I'm lucky, I think. Ben's got a good job, and in a hundred years or so I'll have one as well. Y'know, Leslie, when you've got a boyfriend it's like you don't need heaps of dough. Just enough to be happy. You'll find out soon enough.'

Leslie listened intently, his eyes on Danny's mouth. Danny had achieved the impossible; he'd begun a brand new life, complete with a home, a

boyfriend and an education. His words were soothing, hopefully prophetic. He said, 'Do you think I can find a guy like Ben?'

'Sure as eggs. No doubt about it. Not here, though. I didn't meet Ben here. It was in a gay bar where, y'know, you'd expect to find boyfriend material.' He placed a hand on Leslie's knee. 'Me and Ben are living proof you're gonna find somebody, man. You just gotta keep trying.'

An idea popped into his head. 'I know!' he cried. 'I'll take you to the bar where me and Ben met! There's heaps of cute guys there! Why didn't I think of it before?'

But Leslie was immune to Danny's enthusiasm. His face was crossed by shadows; he seemed to be dissolving into the darkness. 'I'm not old enough to go to a bar,' he said.

'No, wait. That's no problem. I know a guy that can fake a licence so it says you're eighteen. Like mine. Then they gotta let you in.'

But Leslie was right. Though he was a few months older than Danny, he looked like a child. No one would believe he was eighteen, not even with a driver's licence to back him up. 'It won't work,' he said.

Danny knew now why he hadn't come up with the idea earlier. 'Okey-dokey, how about this: We'll hang around outside the joint and grab the guys when they come out. We could ask them for a smoke or something and then we'll get talking to them. You could find a guy that way.'

Leslie was smiling sadly. 'Danny, nobody wants to shack up with a scrawny kid like me. I s'pose I better keep on doing what I'm doing and worry about a boyfriend when I get older. I s'pose there's no rush. Not really.'

Danny's enthusiasm, having flared like a supernova, burned itself out, leaving only a dry, clenched feeling in the middle of his chest. He hated Leslie's episodes of depression. They stirred up a sludge of despair and helplessness that contaminated his own happy existence. Tonight, while his mind was bursting with ideas, he was determined to find a solution to Leslie's problems once and for all. But what were they to do? Danny had never consciously searched for love. Throughout his days and nights at Squatter Park he'd always been happy as long as men desired him and he had money in his pockets, and so he was perplexed by the depth of Leslie's yearnings. One thing he did know: there was more to fixing Leslie's problems than simply finding him another Ben. He would need a place to stay, a supportive friend, a life far away from this soul-destroying park …

A light flashed on in his brain. His jaw dropped. How could he be so dense? The answer had been there all along. He could be to Leslie what Sheri had been to him!

He swung his head from left to right, seeking witnesses to this stroke of genius. It was simple. Leslie had slept in Danny's room so many times he'd lost count, and now he was almost always at Ben's place, there was no reason they couldn't replace the double bed with two singles and let Leslie stay on a more regular basis. After all, he was polite, considerate and well-behaved – even more so than Danny. Sheri would hardly even know he was there. Later on, when Leslie was settled, Danny would help him enrol in college and then they would study together, even do their exams together.

He turned to tell Leslie of his brainwave, but was interrupted by a noise behind them. The bushes shook and out popped a gnome.

The kid was small and grubby, dressed in knee-length cargo shorts and a yellow sleeveless shirt. A blue-striped woollen cap came down over his ears and to the line of his eyebrows. 'Hey, dude!' he cried, pointing at Leslie. 'I know you! Wanna joint?'

Leslie nodded eagerly and a grey reefer was passed to him. He took a drag, held his breath for what seemed like an eternity, then blew the smoke at his feet. After taking another quick puff, he handed the joint back.

'Want some?' the boy asked Danny, holding out the joint.

Danny was spellbound by it. An illicit thrill went through him. How would Ben react if he found out he was hanging around Squatter Park at night, associating with hustlers and smoking dope? The answer was simple; he'd be furious. But hold on, wasn't Danny furious that Ben had chosen a bunch of boring old men over him? Fucking right he was! In other words, if Danny smoked the joint it would be Ben's fault.

He accepted the reefer from the boy's fingers and took a drag. The smoke burnt the back of his throat and he almost choked, but a sense of pride made him hold it down even longer than Leslie had.

'Thanks, dude,' the boy said as he handed it back. He smiled like a halfwit, revealing a mouthful of broken teeth. His face was dark and blotchy like the trees that stood sentinel behind them, and it occurred to Danny that this might not be a boy at all, but a tree spirit masquerading as a boy. The idea impressed him. He tried to remember which TV program it had come from.

The joint did the rounds and came again to his fingers. This time he handled it like a pro. As the smoke swirled in his lungs, he felt it seeping into his blood stream, filtering through to his brain, changing his body chemistry.

'Hey dudes,' piped the boy, regarding Danny with bleary eyes, 'there's a jerk over there says he wants two boys at once and he's offered to pay real good. How 'bout it?'

Leslie squinted into the darkness. 'Is it okay if I go?' he asked Danny.

Danny smiled and waved him on. 'Sure. No problemo. Look, I'll catch up with you later.'

Leslie raised a limp hand and went off with the tree spirit. Danny followed them with his eyes, straining to catch the boy's fading words.

'… said he'd give me a thousand bucks if I let him do me without a rubber. Almost ripped me fuckin' insides out, it was so big. You shoulda seen the size of it, dude. Like a fucking horse …'

When the two shapes passed behind a tree, Danny got up and strolled away. He was feeling incredibly pleased with himself. Sneaking out to Squatter Park, mixing with prostitutes, smoking dope; they were small but satisfying acts of rebellion. For a brief time (too brief) he'd reverted to the old Danny, the free agent who could go wherever he pleased and do whatever the hell he felt like. Without the burden of constraints, he walked taller and lighter. Tonight nobody could tell him what to do or what not to do; nobody could criticise his decisions; nobody had any expectations about him. In short, he was his own man. And as his own man he was free to make his own decisions. And he chose … Now what should he choose? Yeah, he chose to turn up unexpectedly at Ben's place and give him a big surprise. He pictured the look on Ben's face when he opened the door and saw him standing there. He'd hug him as if he never wanted to let him go, and the balding old men would stare enviously at them and get so pissed off, so frustrated with their own boring old lives, they'd storm out of the room and never come back.

But the thought of the balding old men sobered him a little. Their lewd stares would sicken him; make him feel cheap and dirty. And if they didn't take the hint – if they had the nerve to hang around in the hope of watching him and Ben make love – well, it would wreck this whole amazing night. On second thoughts, maybe he should go home, ring Ben from there and ask him to call back when the balding old men were gone. After that he could ask Sheri about Leslie moving in, and then they could replay the tapes of the news and current affairs programs and she could tell him the story of the rescue all

over again. Yeah, that was better than spending the evening being stared at by a bunch of balding old men.

As he marched down the street, his head emptied of all thoughts. The dope was making him feel sluggish and a little spaced out, but his eyeballs had been gripped by a curious energy. They flashed this way and that, alighting on cars, rubbish, buildings, people, streetlights, stars … taking in everything, retaining nothing. Right now Danny felt as if he owned the night, as if everything around him had spawned from his lungs, from the very air he exhaled.

He turned a corner and came across two men, the spitting image of Bert and Ernie, having a heated argument over a garden fence. He stopped and fell apart laughing. Passing them, he started singing the theme to *Sesame Street*, and when the men stopped their bickering and stared at him, he responded by laughing so hard he almost choked.

Impatient now to get home, he broke into a run. Turning his face to the sky, he shot down the street, his arms flailing, his shoes slapping against the sidewalk, his voice trailing behind him like steam from an old locomotive.

The saviour, part two

THE RINGING PHONE woke Sheri from an afternoon nap. Groggily she put the receiver to her ear.

'Miss Starling, please,' came the voice of Gloria Meadows.

'Oh my God!' Sheri cried, and shot out of the sofa. And the cry wasn't far from the truth. Gloria had appeared in her life like a deity. She'd performed miracles, and now she was ringing to invite her to tea.

'Meet me at the Café Rouen,' was the order. 'I have left your name at the door.'

The Café Rouen was the Grand Hotel's most exclusive restaurant. With prices only a fool or a snob would pay, and a dress code designed to prevent riffraff from getting past the front desk, they were guaranteed as much privacy as a person of Gloria's standing could expect.

Sheri dressed in a panic, rang three times for a cab, was trapped for an eternity in downtown traffic, and finally arrived ten minutes early. On handing over Gloria's name, she was escorted through the restaurant to a table set for two, where the waiter pulled out a chair upholstered in white and beige striped linen and stood in attendance while she sat down. Before departing, he presented her with an icy glare, which she took to be a mute challenge to spill anything on the spotless white tablecloth. Smiling meekly, she placed her hands in her lap. It was only when he passed out of sight behind a screen that she dared raise her eyes.

It was late afternoon and the clientele consisted mostly of clean-shaven men in expensive suits and doll-like women with styled hair and perfect complexions. Some were drinking coffee; others sipped cocktails or threw back spirits. The restaurant itself was decorated in French provincial, with cream walls, curved mouldings and heavy, floral-patterned curtains. A resident pianist played something light and familiar on a white baby grand.

Sheri was as nervous as a rabbit. Sitting hunched in the chair, resisting the urge to bite her nails, she appreciated how Doris must have felt on arriving

from Thailand. How alien everything must have seemed. How terrified she must have been at the prospect of making a mistake, of drawing attention to herself and being asked to leave. The situation reminded her of one of those dreams in which you find yourself naked in a public place and don't know how you can possibly escape unnoticed. A man at an adjoining table smiled at her and she lowered her face in embarrassment.

Twenty minutes later, a disturbance at the front desk heralded the arrival of Gloria Meadows. A hush fell on the room, eyes were upturned, the pianist stopped playing. As Gloria paraded through the restaurant, preceded by the stiff-necked maître d', people beamed up at her or mouthed hello in the hope of engaging her attention. If she chose to acknowledge someone, she would glide to a halt, murmur a few words, laugh gaily at the response, then pet them as she would a faithful dog and continue on her way. Most of her suitors she ignored.

At the end of this odd procession sat Sheri. With each approaching step her face grew hotter, her breathing more laboured.

The maître d' assisted Gloria into a chair. 'Will you be dining this afternoon, Miss Meadows?'

'No, Lance. Iced teas, I think.'

After fussing with her handbag, adjusting the fall of her dress and taking a series of swift, mind-clearing breaths, Gloria appeared to notice she wasn't alone. 'My dear Miss Starling,' she cried, reaching across the table, touching Sheri's hand, 'thank you so much for coming. You look absolutely charming.'

'Thank you for inviting me, Miss Meadows.'

'Please, dear, call me Gloria. Everyone does.'

Sheri smiled and awaited further instructions. A waitress came, filled their goblets with water, stroked the table rose, moved the candle a fraction to the right, then stepped back to view the revised arrangement. Satisfied with her achievement, she curtsied the table and moved away.

Gloria too appeared satisfied. 'The Café Rouen is a wonder,' she declared. 'The service is exquisite; simply exceptional. All my friends come here.' She leaned forward, as if about to impart a state secret. 'You see, my dear, in this venerable establishment one is not interrupted by the paparazzi or the GP … general public, that is. Yes, one is free to dine in perfect peace. It is simply too glamorous for words.' She waggled her fingers coquettishly at a handsome older man at the next table, the one who'd smiled at Sheri earlier. 'That, my

dear, is Jonathan Barlowe, of *the* Barlowes,' she whispered, and Sheri nodded and went, 'Ahh,' as if she understood what Gloria was going on about.

'You are such a lovely young thing,' Gloria continued, sighing softly. 'I envy your youth and looks immensely. But trust me, dear, youth is but fleeting. It will not last. Before you realise it, the years have slipped away and you stand before the mirror and behold a wrinkled old thing like me. That is why we all crave more enduring qualities, like fame and financial security. Tell me, dear, what is your profession?'

The question stung like an accusation. Sheri's thoughts ran and hid, and she glanced around in desperation as if the answer lay somewhere within the bounds of the Café Rouen. In the rush and excitement of getting ready, she'd forgotten Gloria was well versed in the minutiae of the entertainment industry and would likely press her for details of her bogus singing career. What if she asked for the name of her manager? – where she'd played? – dates? She was sure to be proved a charlatan.

While she was fighting to contain her panic, Gloria sat watching her with a bemused smile on her face.

'Um, I'm … sort of … between jobs right now,' Sheri got out at last. She glanced down at her hands and a vision sprang into her head of the last penis they'd held. It was a monster, so big she could hardly get her fingers around it (which is probably why it came to mind at this most inopportune of moments). She squeezed her eyes shut, but it was in there as well, mocking her, reminding her she didn't belong here.

'I'm just back from Hong Kong,' she blurted out, hoping to crush the image under a cascade of lies. 'I was … working in a band … singing … in a band … and now I'm back to … to do the same.'

In the silence that followed, she waited for Gloria to interrogate her, to rise above the table and point an accusing finger at her. When nothing happened, she glanced up. Gloria's eyes were fixed on Jonathon Barlowe. She appeared to be eavesdropping on his conversation.

She didn't hear a word of that! Sheri thought, amazed by her own misplaced sense of self-importance. She's not interested in a nobody like me. She was just being polite.

Relieved and somewhat more relaxed, she went on. 'It's really tough breaking into show business, as I'm sure you appreciate, Miss Meadows. When you're in another country it's like you've got nothing to lose and so you take more chances. Or maybe there's more opportunities overseas. But I've

wanted to be a singer ever since I was six years old. I've had singing lessons, dancing lessons …'

Something in her monologue reached Gloria's ears. 'You are in the industry?' She lifted her hands in delight. 'What an extraordinary coincidence! Oh, my dear, I am so happy to hear that. It makes everything so much easier.'

The maître d' approached with their iced teas. As he set the glasses on the table, Gloria sat motionless, her pearls held protectively against her bosom.

'Miss Starling,' she said once the man had gone, 'you are no doubt wondering why I asked you here today. By the way, may I call you Sheryl?'

'Oh, yes. Sheryl … please.'

'Miss Starling, as you are no doubt aware, I possess an enduring passion for poor, sick and underprivileged children. I believe in the deepest recesses of my heart that young people across the globe require the patronage and protection of public figures such as I if they are to prosper. So many little ones have unsatisfactory lives. It is all highly distressing. Poverty, starvation, uncaring parents, sick paedophiles. The list, I am afraid, goes on and on. And if those of us whom dame fortune has smiled upon do not do our part, then I am terrified that the world will become an even more unsavoury place for our own children and grandchildren.' She paused to draw breath. 'I have the honour of being both president and CEO of the Gloria Meadows Foundation, a charity I established to provide aid and assistance to children in Third World countries. No doubt you have heard of my organisation. It is one of the finest in the world.'

'Oh yes,' said Sheri, recalling scenes from the organisation's world aid commercials. She frowned a little. Though the commercials featured regularly on TV, it was hard to reconcile the images of starving, wide-eyed children with this plump, opulent, commanding woman.

'My board and I have been discussing your part in my grandson's rescue,' Gloria continued, 'and we all agree that you have handled the media attention extremely well for one so young. We are most impressed. The story has taken off beyond our expectations, and much of the credit for that, my dear, must go to you. As a consequence, a motion has been passed to engage you as our national spokeswoman in the upcoming advertising campaign.'

Gloria paused to observe the effect of her words. She wasn't to be disappointed. Sheri's face drained of colour; her eyes turned black; her lips parted.

'I am pleased to see the offer interests you, as it would any intelligent young woman. My foundation has a reputation for staging world-class appeals which attract many millions of dollars in donations. Your role will be to lead the TV campaign, appear on current affairs programs and radio, attend the occasional luncheon, and generally be seen. Of course, the post must be on a strictly voluntary basis, but we *will* cover costs. And I am sure you will view this as an opportunity to advance your career in other areas. What say you, my dear?'

Sheri felt giddy. A thousand thoughts mobbed her brain, each one demanding to be heard. Naturally the loudest voice was the pessimistic one, the one guaranteed to shoot her hopes down in flames. 'What makes you think you can appear on national TV every night and work at Sephryn House at the same time?' it sneered. 'How long will your luck hold before a client recognises you and tips off the press?'

The voice was right. It was one thing to throw on a disguise and appear on TV for a one-off event; it was another thing altogether to attempt to pull off the deception night after night. To accept the offer would be madness. It would involve putting the charity's reputation on the line, not to mention her own hopes of ever becoming famous (unless she saw infamy as a desired end). If the position paid a salary (even a small one) she would have accepted gladly. But to resign from Sephryn House would leave her with no income, no means of supporting herself and Danny – not even if they cut their living expenses to the bone.

'I'm sorry, Miss Meadows,' she said, shaking her head, feeling hot tears running down her cheeks. 'I'd love to accept your offer. It's the most generous offer I've ever had. But it's not a good time right now.'

Gloria was dumbfounded. She arched one eyebrow, lowered her chin, scowled at her. 'Not a good time?' she snorted. Her body seemed to inflate, an intimidatory gesture that had the intended effect. 'My dear, you have this irritating habit of refusing each and every offer I make to you. It is bound in the end to lead you nowhere. Do you realise this? I am giving you an opportunity which comes but once in a lifetime. Millions of young girls would give their eye teeth to be sitting in your place at this moment, being offered such an opportunity. Not the right time? Are you mad? Please explain.'

By now Sheri was shaking all over. To be chastised by someone as imposing as Gloria Meadows was outside her realm of experience. Not even her mother had frightened her this much. Suddenly everyone in the

restaurant was staring at her, awaiting an excuse or apology for her maltreatment of a national treasure.

She said, 'I really … I really haven't been back for long … in town, that is, and … and it's been … it's been tougher than I thought … to get work. Everybody wants to be a star.' When she recalled her failed attempts to find work as a singer – the closed doors, the unsympathetic agents, the long queues at auditions – the realisation of what she was turning down struck her like a blow to the stomach. She could hardly breathe. 'I'm sorry, Miss Meadows, but the truth is I need a job. I can't afford to do charity work right now.'

Gloria sat very still for a very long time – so long that Sheri began to think she was being snubbed. The maître d' approached and asked Gloria if everything was to her satisfaction, and when she made no reply he bowed awkwardly and hurried away. Now Sheri was sure she was angry. It was only a matter of time before a barrage of words came shooting out of her mouth, accusing Sheri of being ungrateful, difficult, indifferent to the needs of starving children.

But she was mistaken. 'Leave it with me,' Gloria said suddenly. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. 'I may have the ideal solution. You see, my eldest son, Franklin, manages a very successful family business, and if you are agreeable, I may be able to exert some influence and convince him to employ you in his office … until you find an appropriate engagement in your chosen profession, that is. Have you any office experience?'

Sheri coughed out a laugh. She brushed away her tears. 'No, Miss Meadows. I'm afraid I don't.'

'Not a problem.' She lifted a powdered hand and swept the obstacle off the table. 'My foundation will see to your training costs. After all, office skills, interpersonal skills; these are qualities which will come in very handy in your capacity as our national spokeswoman. You see, my dear, we are very interested in your involvement in our charity. The GP has taken a particular liking to you – and I can understand why. I am determined to do everything within my power to ensure we both make the most of this golden opportunity.' She sighed, impressed by her own enormous capacity for giving, her willingness to help the little people.

But for Sheri the proposal had come too quickly, too easily. The magnitude of the offer, the risks involved, were mind-boggling, and her impulse was to leap from the seat and flee the room.

'I don't … I d-don't know,' she stammered. 'I don't know if I can do this.'

Gloria fixed her with the eyes of a cobra. 'Listen to me, young lady. I have a motto which has guaranteed my success in this profession, and I shall now pass this on to you. My motto is: Move forward; never look back. You see, my dear, a very long time ago, when I made it known I was progressing from a very successful singing career into television, people would say to me, "Gloria, television will never last. Why will the public want to stare at a little box when they can be out watching real actors in a real theatre?" But I followed my instincts and the rest is history.' She swept a hand across the room, as if the Café Rouen were a product of her fame. 'And when I felt a stagnation on the small screen, when I had done everything there was to do in television, I made the move to Hollywood. And even though the motion picture industry was a tremendous disappointment and failed to bring me the satisfaction I so much desired, I did not return to television; I progressed to more philanthropic pursuits, which have been, I can honestly say, the most satisfying of my life.' She reached over the table and patted Sheri's hand. 'Move forward; never look back. Do you understand what I am saying to you?'

Her words lifted Sheri's spirits. Hearing Gloria talk about her own incredible career made it all sound so believable, so achievable. Still, there was a nagging inconsistency in Gloria's story. 'Aren't you back on TV?' she asked.

Gloria retrieved her hand, dragging it slowly across the tablecloth. 'That is an entirely different matter,' she said icily.

'Oh, of course.' Sheri nodded to show she appreciated the difference between TV shows and infomercials. The nod turned to a shake, a mute tribute to the wonder that was Gloria Meadows.

Gloria's temper responded to her tact. 'Tell me, dear,' she said. 'How badly do you wish to be famous in this fair city of ours?'

Of this, Sheri had no doubt. 'More than anything else in this world. I've had the dream since I was –'

'And you must appreciate that an involvement with the Gloria Meadows Foundation will help you to realise this dream.'

'Oh yes, of course.'

'Then what, my dear, could possibly bring you to reject my generous offer? Come now, let us drink up and discuss our plans for your future.'

They took sips from their glasses, then clinked them down on their saucers. Though Sheri didn't realise it, a verbal contract had been made and

the details were simply a formality. She smiled across the table, dazed by the miraculous turn of events.

'You will adore working for my organisation,' Gloria said, feeling for her pearls again. 'One gets so much satisfaction from knowing one is doing good in this grim old world of ours. And of course the children are my number one priority. I have received literally thousands of thank-you letters from people all over the globe, and for every person who sends me a note there are likely a hundred or more less grateful souls who do not. But I know in my heart how happy they are to have food in their stomachs, and that, in the end, is all the thanks I need. Have you worked with children before?'

'No, not really. But I love kids. I want to have lots of children when I get married.'

'An admirable aim, admirable. You may not be aware of this, but the birth rate is contracting in First World countries whilst simultaneously expanding like wildfire in the Third World. We are relying on young people like yourself to make enough of us so that in the future we can help all of them. You see, my dear, I believe that humanitarian measures serve the very special purpose of averting wars and acts of terrorism. This is a fact which many people overlook when they make a donation or become involved with a charity. They see only the immediate effect: the smile which lights up a little child's face – whereas I see the global implications. My son, Richard, taught me this. Here I was, establishing a wonderful charity because of my love for children, and all along I was changing the fabric of the world. I am afraid Richard tends to go a little overboard in his passion for the little people, but as a mother I can only be proud of his work in developing countries. Have you been involved in charity work before?'

'No, not yet. But I've always wanted to help children and now … Well, here's my chance.' Joy rose in her breast and popped like a bubble. 'This is an amazing opportunity, Miss Meadows. I hope I don't disappoint you.'

'Yes, yes, a wonderful opportunity. You will soon see, my dear, that in the goodwill business everyone benefits. Charity is a two-way street. The media attention alone is worth its weight in gold. I sensed from your recent interviews that you have not had formal media training.'

'Yes. I mean, no.'

'Not to worry. Our vaults are flush with funds at the moment. And you know the old adage: You have to spend money to make money. We will arrange training on how to handle the media, presentation skills, Internet

skills … Let me see, what else? Oh, it's not my place to bother over trivialities. Suffice to say that once we have finished with you, your future will be as secure as money in the bank. Believe you me.'

She sat back, signalling the end of her speech. 'Have you any questions?'

There were so many questions leaping about in Sheri's head that she had no idea where to begin. She chose one at random. 'You said your son runs a business. Can I ask what kind of business?'

'Certainly, my dear. I am glad you asked. My son, Franklin, is a dealer in fine arts and antiques. His business is one of the largest and most prestigious in the world. Franklin has inherited from his mother an eye for excellence, the ability to distinguish the classic and timeless from the dull and ordinary, and this talent has allowed him to build a veritable empire with very little assistance from myself. I am immeasurably proud of him. He is responsible for every item of art and furniture in my mansion, and he allows me to exchange my paintings with those in his gallery, which means that my home is a constantly changing delight. My second son, Richard, unfortunately inherited his temperament from Richard Senior. He leans towards philosophical pursuits, which is all well and good, but it does not pay the bills. I simply hope and pray that one day he too will settle down and become successful in his own right. But I digress …'

'Oh, I don't mind. I love hearing about your family. So Alastair is Franklin's son?'

'Yes. Franklin's former wife, Prudence, is the daughter of one of my oldest and dearest friends. I was bitterly disappointed when they separated. I considered theirs a match made in heaven. I still do. We did everything in our power to keep them together. But alas, youngsters these days have no conception about family loyalty. You no doubt read about the divorce in the press. It was much, much worse than was reported. I almost suffered a complete and utter breakdown.'

Gloria was beginning to look gloomy. The bags under her eyes had swollen and were throwing crescent-shaped shadows across her cheeks.

Sheri steered the conversation to another topic. 'You have a daughter as well,' she said.

'Oh, yes. And Felicity has granted me two beautiful granddaughters and another grandson. They live in a tiny village in the Swiss Alps, which means I hardly ever see them. One thing you will learn about children, my dear, is that they grow up very quickly and then they desert you. Which is why it is

imperative to have other interests – friends, parties, investments and the like – to tide you over in your old age.'

Sheri smiled clumsily, trying to shake the feeling that, despite all the trappings of wealth and fame, Gloria was just another lonely old woman. 'That's all the questions, I think.'

'Wonderful,' cried Gloria, promptly shaking off the blues. 'Oh, it almost slipped my mind. My team is planning the television campaign and for this we shall need you in Ethiopia so we can shoot footage of you in poverty-stricken villages, holding up starving babies, that kind of thing.'

The immediacy of everything was staggering. Ethiopia? Gloria may as well have said Pluto. Sheri gave a short, nervous laugh. 'Sounds amazing!'

'Good, good. Parts of Ethiopia are lovely at this time of the year. I am sure you will thoroughly enjoy the experience. We are expecting a major drought and hopefully the calamity will coincide with the release of our campaign so we can generate maximum media exposure. Everything appears to be panning out very nicely. I believe our competitors are leaning towards Afghanistan or Venezuela this year, attempting to be trendy. If we can score a record drought in Ethiopia, we shall walk all over them.' Her eyes glazed over and a faraway look came into them, as if she were imagining a disaster of Biblical proportions, with scourged lands and starving millions.

Sheri asked, 'Will you be coming too?'

'Oh no, no. Been there, done that. My next official engagement is a conference in Rio. An International Summit on Indigenous Peoples. I am looking forward to the event immensely. Rio is such fun. Come, come, dear, drink up. I have another engagement to get to, a cocktail party with some excruciatingly boring politicians. All for my son's benefit. He has political aspirations, you see.' She sighed theatrically. 'The things I do for my dear family.'

She blinked slowly, like a sleepy cow. Then her eyes opened wide. 'Oh, another thing,' she cried. 'Dearie me, I almost forgot. Sometimes I cannot fathom where my mind goes. It of course takes time to orchestrate a television campaign and in the meantime we have arranged to run a few radio spots. My personal secretary will ring you about this in the morning. And what's more (I was sworn to secrecy on this, but I am absolutely hopeless with secrets, as you shall discover in due course) … What's more, I have managed to pull some strings with people in high places, and you, my dear – are you ready for this? – you are to be presented, in a glittering ceremony at the Concert Hall,

with the Governor's highest award for bravery.' Her hands exploded in the air like fireworks; her words popped and sparkled in Sheri's head. 'I shall of course be leaking the news to the press at an appropriate time. But if anyone queries you on this matter, you must deny all knowledge. And, dear, do remember to act surprised when the Governor's office calls. Maxie will be furious if he finds out I let slip his little secret. How does it all sound to you?'

Sheri couldn't stop shaking. 'I'm … speechless. I don't know how to thank you.'

'Just keep on being the person you are. The camera loves you. You have cheekbones I would die for. And now, my dear, I really must be off. I can see my chauffeur waving at me from the door. Sometimes he can be so gauche.'

They finished their drinks and left the restaurant. Sweeping across the Grand Hotel's lobby, Gloria had a near-collision with a pramful of twins.

'Oh my, what darling children!' she exclaimed, bending down to stroke a rosy cheek. Sheri followed suit with the other baby. The twins gurgled happily, waving their tiny arms in the air, kicking their tiny legs, while their mother looked on with unabashed pride.

After a few moments of tickling and cooing, the two women straightened and glanced around, smiling from ear to ear, as though someone had called their names and they were expecting to find the lobby awash with flashbulbs, fans and photographers.

Gay times

SOMETIMES WHEN HE'S bored, Danny goes to the Imperial Hotel to watch Ben work.

The Imperial is an architectural dinosaur, tall and turreted, built in the nineteen-twenties (it was rumoured) by an exiled Russian prince who later met with a sudden and mysterious death. Until recently the building was condemned, boarded up, home to rats, cockroaches and drug addicts. Then one day a fat brown entrepreneur with a fat brown cigar happened to walk past and something in the building's appearance made him stop dead in his tracks. He looked the building up and down. He puffed on his cigar. And as people pushed past, grandiose plans flashed through his mind. He imagined the Imperial as it had been in its heyday, with music and laughter pouring from the windows. He saw ladies in lavish ball gowns and men with slicked-back hair dancing on the balconies, and judging the time was ripe to recreate that bygone era, he decided on the spot to rescue the building from death row. The renovations cost a small fortune, the project ran overtime, the investors threatened to pull out every second day – but eventually the building was restored to its former glory. Unfortunately, the glory proved fleeting. The Imperial was too far from the bright lights of King Albert Street to compete with the trendy bars and book cafés that had sprung up in the main part of the strip, and very quickly the life was sapped from the brightly lit rooms and from the fevered, disbelieving eyes of the entrepreneur. The hotel sat empty for the best part of a year, majestic and haughty, soulless and sad. But its location at the dark end of the street was to prove its saving grace. Before the rats, cockroaches and drug addicts had a chance to move back in, it was snapped up by a rich old bachelor, who slapped a fresh coat of paint on the walls, staffed the bars with hunky young musclemen and relaunched the Imperial as a gay mecca. These days, its popularity can be gauged by the vast number of teenage girls that pass through the doors each evening to whistle at the drag shows and ogle the cute, unavailable boys.

The Imperial is the place where Danny met Ben. Whenever he pushes through the glass doors (which is often) this is his first thought. Even now, chatting to Ben between customers, the memory of that first glimpse of his lover sears his brain and releases a warm, gooey feeling in his chest. Ben is telling him the story of Josh, the disk jockey, who tomorrow will exchange vows with the son of a prominent right-wing politician, but Danny is too caught up in the motion of his lips to listen. Behind Ben, Josh spins records, twirling the black disks with deft fingers, listening into a pair of chrome and red headphones. The songs are low and funky, but once the sun sets, Josh will play dance and trance music and he'll turn the volume higher with each passing hour until conversation is all but impossible.

Right now there are only six customers in the bar, Danny included, so Ben has plenty of time to spend with his lover. When Danny notices someone pull out a wallet or raise a hand, he taps Ben on the elbow and points down the bar, and Ben kisses him and darts over to do his job. As he pulls drinks, Danny's eyes follow his every move. But if the customer is an attractive male and Ben smiles too much, he turns his gaze to the cigarette burns in the carpet, the scuffed and scratched plaster, the half-empty bottles of liquor that line the exposed brick wall. In this curious late-afternoon twilight the bar looks garish and shabby, as if the blight that infected the building during the 'eighties and 'nineties has once again managed to seep through the walls. But that doesn't worry Danny. To him, the trashy, slightly worn look is one of the Imperial's most endearing features. It makes the hotel feel like a second home.

A *second* home? How his life has changed! Looking back, it's hard to recollect what it was like living on the streets, sleeping outside in all kinds of weather, constantly on the prowl for money and sex. Harder still is to recollect how he could possibly have contented himself with that aimless existence. But content he was. Living every day from hand to mouth, he'd never felt the need to question what he was going to do with the rest of his life. Time had no meaning. One day was pretty much like the next. As far as Danny was concerned, he would always be young and desirable and Squatter Park would always be his home.

Before meeting Ben, he hadn't been aware there were places where men met men and women met women for purely social reasons, and it had shocked him to learn that, for the most part, people with same-sex attractions are no different from everyone else. Experience had taught him that sex between men was something shameful, something that occurred in the

shadows, something that usually involved money – not something you could build a home around. This was nothing to grumble about, it was the way things were, and you just had to plunge right in and make the best of it.

It's hard for most of us to comprehend what it was like for a young person with same-sex attractions to grow up in a world that despised or ignored them, with no support systems, no recognised codes of conduct and no positive role models. Nowadays it's common for gay men and lesbians to star in movies and TV programs, to pose before the cameras with their same-sex partner, but when Danny was in his formative years most gay male characters in sitcoms, soapies and dramas were depraved, sterile, self-pitying or flamboyant – and he identified with none of those stereotypes. And the manipulations of the media were complex. For every positive image of homosexuality there were ten negative ones. Newspapers and magazines invariably connected gay men with paedophilia, depravity, AIDS and other diseases; radio announcers delighted in telling homophobic jokes; church leaders preached that homosexuality was a sin and warned gay people they were stumbling down the rocky road to hell. These messages confused Danny. They contrived to make him ashamed of his emotions and himself, and he was herded away from happiness and deeper into that dark underworld of sex-for-money where it didn't matter what the rest of the world thought of you.

Then along came Sheri. She gave him a new way of viewing things, a new way of thinking. She impressed on him that, unlike women, who often work until they are well into their forties or even older, most boys will only have a fleeting pass at prostitution, and before they know it (sometimes even before they are out of their teens) they are too old to make a living. Then what? What kind of future can a former prostitute realistically expect? The media corroborated her claims. How often do you see prostitutes portrayed positively on TV? Joy, it appears, is found only in homes blessed with a loving, supportive family, with children who go to school and adults who work in professions that can be talked about over the dinner table. Danny wanted a slice of this joy. He yearned for the life that had been denied him because no one had shown him how to go about getting it.

And so he enrolled in college. But once he gave up hustling, other problems presented. He'd never realised how much his happiness depended on his pockets being full of money, how an impromptu purchase could eradicate boredom and most bad moods. Sheri helped by stocking the

apartment with everything he could ever want, but sometimes that seemed more like a trap than a blessing. TV didn't help. Why does virtually everyone on TV have a nice home, a flash car, the latest technology and cool clothes? Why do they look so happy, when people with very little appear sad, frustrated and tired? Danny grew crazy trying to work out how poor people stayed sane if they didn't hustle, lie or steal.

Boredom forced his feet from the apartment at every opportunity, especially at night when like a predator he responded to the call of the unknown. On one such night he was wandering down a lane he didn't recognise when he stumbled unexpectedly onto King Albert Street. Above him towered the Imperial Hotel. From inside came clapping, cheering and thumping disco music, and attracted by the commotion, he pressed his nose against the glass door and peeked in. Someone pushed through the adjoining door, and before he knew it he was inside, edging along the wall, seeking refuge amongst the branches of a potted tree.

It was a Thursday night and the bar was half empty. He glanced around. A woman who appeared more than seven feet tall was prancing about on a wooden stage pretending to sing a song. Her lips moved in time with the words, her sequins flashed, and as she stalked the stage on impossibly high stilettos a pink feather boa fluttered about her as if the birds were still attached.

All eyes in the room were on the extraordinary woman and Danny felt safely invisible. But then the barman turned his head and saw him hiding there. And suddenly here he was, leaping over the bar, heading straight towards him.

'Hey!' he bellowed. 'You old enough to be in here?'

Nervous to begin with, Danny was now terrified. The barman had black hair and black eyes. He was dressed in a black T-shirt, black jeans and black boots. To Danny he was as awesome and beautiful as a wild stallion.

'I'm not drinking,' he asserted, hitting his belt buckle with the palm of his hand. 'Just watching the singer.'

The barman's eyes crinkled at the corners. 'You know you're not supposed to say that. The show's only for paying customers. How old are you anyway?'

Danny straightened his back. 'Eighteen,' he lied.

'Eighteen, hey? You're a scrawny-looking eighteen.' He gazed into Danny's eyes, spun around and sauntered back to the bar. 'Cute though,' he added over his shoulder.

Danny felt his face go hot. His head throbbed with pleasure. Though plenty of men had moaned endearments to him in bushes, dark alleys and cheap hotels, no one had ever flirted with him out in the open like this, in front of so many people.

Drawn to the bar by an irresistible force, he sat on a stool and ordered a lemonade. While he waited, he pretended to play with the rings of water on the bar. The show came to an end and a few people clapped. Danny drew a smiley face with his finger. The barman came up with his glass, glanced down at the watery mess he'd made and smiled at him. Danny wanted to smile back, but the muscles in this mouth had stopped working and so he just drew more smiley faces. He didn't know what he was doing here or how long he was planning to sit at the bar drawing smiley faces, but he did know his skin was tingling and he couldn't keep his eyes off the barman and there was nowhere else he wanted to be.

After the show, the crowd thinned out. And now the barman stopped in front of him and rested his elbows on the bar. Danny, too frightened to look up, erased the smiley faces with one long sweep of his fist.

'What's your name, handsome?'

He fought the urge to laugh. 'Adam,' he said, drying his fist on his jeans. 'No, wait … Danny.'

The barman raised his eyebrows. 'So which is it: Adam or Danny?'

Danny's eyes were stuck on the bar. With a shaky finger he joined up all the tiny lakes of water until they made a tiny ocean. 'It's Danny,' he said. 'Adam's my middle name.'

'Pleased to meet you, Danny. I'm Ben.' He reached out a big warm hand and Danny took it and held on as if his life depended on it. When a bear-like man waved a twenty-dollar bill between them, Ben extricated himself from Danny's grip and went on with his job.

The rest of the tale reads like any other involving love at first sight. Danny remained at the bar till closing time, went dancing with Ben at an all-night club, then walked with him through the empty streets till the night air washed the stench of cigarettes and beer from their clothes. When the approaching sun began throwing streaks of grey against the night sky, they stopped outside

a high-rise apartment block and Ben kissed him under a jacaranda tree and invited him inside.

The following afternoon, on arriving home, Danny was confronted by an angry Sheri. She scolded him and said he couldn't care less about her feelings. For all she knew, he was lying dead somewhere in a gutter. All through her lecture he smiled blissfully, not listening to a word she said. He spent every night of the next week at Ben's place, and he'd been there almost every night since.

'DREAMING, BABY?'

Danny wakes up. Ben is back, and it takes all his willpower to stop himself from diving over the bar and ripping his clothes off right here and now.

'No, I wasn't dreaming. I was thinking about –'

'Benji! How are you, babes?'

Danny's skin crawls. The interloper is Eric, one of the balding old men.

'Oh, hi Danny,' pipes Eric, feigning surprise. 'Didn't see you there, you quiet young thing.'

Eric is in his late twenties, but a pot belly and receding hairline make him look about fifty according to Danny. His thin blond hair covers a scaly scalp (a legacy of chronic eczema), and as if this isn't unsightly enough, his face is dotted with acne scars, brown craters he attempts to hide under a straggly beard. Today he's wearing tight white jeans and a crinkled canary yellow shirt.

Danny ignores him.

'Hey, Eric,' Ben says, wiping the bar with a wet rag, 'you never told me you were coming out tonight.' He's clearly delighted by the surprise. 'The others coming too?'

'Jason' – Eric taps his watch – 'is late again. Typical queen. As for Cam and Priscilla … Who knows? Who cares? I get the strangest feeling those two are giving me the cold shoulder. It must be that dinner party I didn't invite them to. But you know, Benji darling – God's honest truth! – I thought Priscilla was allergic to seafood. She's always complaining about crabs, the poor dear.'

''Scuse me,' Danny murmurs, getting to his feet. His hands are twitching, so he thrusts them in his pockets so Ben won't notice. 'Need to go toilet.'

He can feel Eric's eyes burning into his back as he makes his way to the restroom. He knows exactly what the freak is thinking, what he'll do now

Danny is out of the way. He can see him leaning on the bar, saying to Ben, 'Why do you put up with such a boring little nobody?' He pictures Ben standing there with his hands on his hips, smiling sweetly at what he takes to be a harmless joke. But each time Eric says something like that, it will chip away at Ben's feelings for Danny until one day the bridge between them will collapse and there will be nothing left to hold them together.

Danny is prone to fits of rage. On such occasions it feels like a hive of angry bees has been let loose in his chest. His hands clench and unclench. He shakes all over and looks around for something to throw. This is how he feels right now. In the absence of a handy projectile, he takes a running leap and hurls himself against the side of a cubicle. Then he falls to his knees and attempts to rip a urinal off the wall, all the while grunting like a stuck pig.

To his surprise a toilet flushes, the cubicle door opens, and out steps an elderly man. Pretending not to notice Danny hugging the urinal, he crosses to the sink, turns on the tap and begins washing his hands.

Danny is so furious he's ready to explode. 'Fuck off!' he screams, and the old man leaps in fright and scuttles from the room.

Danny takes his place at the mirror. Why can't people leave him and Ben alone? Their relationship is perfect. They're young and happy together and they don't need a bunch of losers interfering in their lives. He wants to impress this on Ben, wants to suggest he tell those so-called friends of his to stick to their own kind. But he knows it isn't in Ben's nature to be nasty. Even outside of work, Ben is the perennial barman, amiable to the hilt.

Well then, thinks Danny, trying to calm himself down, it's up to me to let those balding old men know what they can do with their sick gossip and political bullshit. Subtly, of course, so Ben doesn't get upset.

He hitches up his trousers, preparing himself for war. Leaning forward, he studies himself in the mirror. His skin is clean and smooth; his eyes are burning with vitality; his hair has a marvellous sheen. And he's going places. In that moment Danny feels confident, all-powerful, heir to the world. Ben belongs to him. And he isn't prepared to share.

Last shift

SHERI STOOD AT the door to Sephryn House, her heart beating fast. She tried to steady her breathing. If she emptied her mind she could almost fool herself into believing tonight was a normal, average night (and there was a certain warped pleasure in doing that), but in reality this was to be her last shift, the closing of the book, the end. This was the last time she would pass through this doorway, the last time she would suffer the indignity of posturing and preening herself in the accursed sitting room, the last time she would let a stranger maul her and leave his sweat and semen all over her clothes and skin. She felt giddy with relief. She couldn't wait till it was over.

Still, a mist of melancholy descended on her at the thought of leaving her friends behind. She sighed nostalgically (she already thought of her life here in the past) and went back to the street to take in Sephryn House for one last time. She hadn't really looked at the parlour in a long time and she'd forgotten how welcoming it appeared, how much it resembled a home. Sure, the average home doesn't have fairy lights in the trees, a red light on the porch and statues in the front garden, but these accoutrements only made the place appear more idealised, like a home from a fairytale or one in a warm and distant memory.

The illusion was soon shattered. Inside, Sephryn House was in an uproar.

When she emerged in the reception area, Amber shot out from behind the counter. 'Thank Christ you're here!' she cried, pressing Sheri's hand between hers.

'Amber, what's wrong?'

'It's Faith. She's in an awful state. Got raped.'

Sheri felt her stomach drop. 'No.'

'She's in the girls' room. You better go in.'

'Where's Magda?'

'With Faith.'

She pushed into the girls' room where a wall of bodies formed a blockade around the table. Everyone seemed to be talking at the same time. Through the din Sheri could make out Magda's brusque, masculine voice. 'Get some foundation on it and you'll be fine. If you're not up to working tonight, I can call Veronica.'

She slipped between the bodies. 'Faith, are you okay?'

Faith was the only one sitting down. She was fiddling with a disposable lighter, flicking it on and off, on and off. At the sound of Sheri's voice, she lifted her head and a large bruise near her eye grew darker, like a thundercloud. 'Sheri!' she cried. 'I thought you wouldn't come!'

She struggled to her feet and the wall of bodies parted. The two women hugged.

'Come on, Faith, sit down and tell me what happened.' Sheri forced a smile, trying to ignore how Faith's joints had creaked as she hugged her.

'Don't take much to guess,' Lynne growled, storming away. She tossed her cup into the sink and the clatter made Faith flinch as if she'd been struck.

'I don't wanna cause no trouble,' she murmured. 'I shouldn't've said nothing.'

'Love, you didn't need to say nothing,' said Candice. 'You don't get bruises like that sitting around the house.'

Sheri asked, 'Was it Robert?'

'No! Robert would never do nothing like this!' Rounding her shoulders, Faith peered up at all the worried faces. She hated their sympathy and wished they'd go away. 'It was one of Robert's friends. We were on a date. It just got out of hand, I suppose.'

'Out of hand?' Lynne had returned to the table. Her eyes were emerald green, her face the colour of ripe tomatoes. 'Why don't you stop apologising for that scumbag? He's done nothing but fuck you around!'

Faith started crying. 'It wasn't Robert's fault, Sheri.'

Lynne leaned closer. 'Not his fault he's got rapists as friends?'

Sheri threw her an angry look. 'Hey, Lynne, don't be so rough on her. She's upset enough already.'

Faith muttered something under her breath.

'What's that, sweetie?'

'He didn't rape me,' Faith said, louder this time. 'He just scared me.'

Lynne took a seat on the other side of the table. 'Listen here, Faith,' she said, softening her voice. 'If you didn't wanna do it and the guy went ahead and did it, it was rape. And if he hit you, it was assault as well.'

Now Faith was shaking, but the reason was bottled-up rage, not shock. 'You can't rape a whore!' she spat out in someone else's voice.

'What?' Lynne cried, recoiling from the words. 'I don't believe you said that, Faith. You're telling me you don't have the right to say no to a guy? You think you can't be hurt like any other woman? That's a crock of shit! If a guy pays for something and forces you to do something else, then that's rape. And if he fucks you and doesn't pay you, then that's rape as well.'

'No it's not!' screamed Faith. Her words echoed around the room. In the silence that followed, her face went deathly pale. She let her hair close over her eyes. Picking up the lighter again, she flicked it on and off, on and off, then said in a small voice, 'Robert says if a guy doesn't pay a whore, then it's robbery, not rape.'

Someone sniggered, someone else said, 'Breaking and entering,' and as others followed suit with laughter and bad jokes, the tension broke. The women dispersed, to prepare themselves for the long night ahead or (for the lucky ones) to pack away cosmetics, books, snacks, cigarettes and condoms and escape this madhouse. As they went about their business, their tactless words filled the room.

'It's happened to me God knows how many times. No use crying over spilt milk. Just move on, I say.'

'Could've been that murderer. You never know, she could be dead by now.'

'The sports guy from Channel Seven News can jump me any time he damn well pleases. Ooh la la, baby!'

Pushing out her chair, Sheri went up to Magda, who was leaning against the wall writing out the roster for the week. 'Is it okay if we take a few minutes?'

Magda was scribbling furiously, her earrings jangling with the effort. 'Sure,' she said without looking up. 'Take all the time you want.' And with a quick nod of appreciation, she hurried from the room.

Sheri watched her go. Magda was an expert at business administration, but when it came to dealing with conflict or personal issues she was out of her depth. Lately there'd been some serious flare-ups amongst the women and Magda had asked Sheri what she thought she should do. Sheri's suggestion

was to hire a consultant or life coach to help improve the way the women interacted with clients and with each other. Now she was leaving, a professional intervention seemed even more important.

Before returning to Faith, she helped herself to a can of Diet Coke from the dispensing machine, then went to the medicine cabinet and swallowed two headache pills.

Back at the table she picked up the dropped conversation. 'I get what you're saying, Lynne, and I'm not denying this was a horrible thing to happen. But if Faith doesn't call it rape, we shouldn't either. No point blowing this up into something it isn't.'

'C'mon Sheri,' Lynne said, leaning her elbows on the table, 'don't marginalise this. Faith doesn't think it's rape 'cos she's been brainwashed by that sleazebag boyfriend of hers. Besides, this is a symptom of something a lot bigger. The guy beats up on her all the time. He takes all her money. Doesn't that worry you?'

Sheri smiled at Faith. 'Of course. But it's Faith's life and she's entitled to live it the way she wants. All we can do is be here to support her. I think she's brave to put up with so much adversity for the sake of love.'

'Gimme a break,' Lynne groaned, getting to her feet. She made to move off, then changed her mind and rested her knuckles on the table. 'Believe me, Sheri, this chick is headed for trouble. You won't be around to see, but it'll only get worse. How're you gonna feel then? – when Faith's back on the street being bashed every day by that sick motherfucker of a pimp? How're you gonna feel when you get a call to say Faith's in hospital with a broken jaw, or something worse?'

As Lynne ranted and accused, Sheri's headache grew steadily worse. She couldn't afford to dwell on the grim scenario Lynne was painting – not tonight, not when she needed to make a clean break of things. Closing her eyes, she rubbed the back of her neck.

Lynne realised that, as usual, she was talking to herself. 'You okay?' she asked.

'Just a bit tight.'

'Here, let me.' She moved behind Sheri and massaged her shoulders. 'Better?'

She nodded.

'Look, babe, sorry for coming down on you. You know me: sensitive as a bulldozer. Take things easy tonight, won't you? You deserve it. And don't

forget to say goodbye. We should arrange dinner or something before you fly out.'

'Sure,' said Sheri, and then the hands lifted from her shoulders, the door creaked, and Lynne was gone.

She pulled her chair closer to Faith's. 'You wanna sit outside for a while, hon? Get some fresh air?'

Faith nodded, and together they got up and left the room. In all the years Sheri had worked at Sephryn House she'd never gone through the front door (before tonight she hadn't even been sure the door was real), and so outside she was surprised to find, in a hidden corner of the garden, a lion's head spitting water into a terracotta pot. Under the blue-white streetlight the water was the colour of mercury.

'How lovely!' she cried.

'Mm,' agreed Faith.

After meandering down the side of the building and back, they sat on the steps and listened to the passing cars, the call of the lovesick crickets, the odd croak from a lone frog. Michelangelo's David gazed serenely at them, unfazed by his nudity, unaroused by their presence.

Faith said, 'Are you really moving to Spain?'

Sheri glanced down. 'That's the plan.'

'That's near Monte Carlo, isn't it?'

'Uh-huh. I think so.'

'When Robert and me move to Monte Carlo I could come and visit you, couldn't I?'

'Of course. I'd like that. I'll leave my address with Magda.'

'You'll get to meet Robert then.'

Sheri lifted her eyebrows. 'I guess I will.'

'And you'll see what I've been saying about him. How good he is to me. I don't know what Lynne's got against him.' She sighed and stared out at the street. 'Don't worry about me, Sheri. I'm okay, I promise. I wish the others wouldn't interfere.'

Sheri squeezed her bony hand. 'I know you're okay. I remember when you first arrived here. You wouldn't say boo to a mouse. You'd never have stood up for yourself like you did tonight. That proves you're a lot stronger.'

The compliment brought a smile to Faith's bruised face. But Sheri didn't believe a word of what she'd said. The statement was designed for comfort, not truth. She glanced around the garden, feeling shallow and treacherous.

Fortunately, David's expression hadn't changed, and this somehow made her feel better, as if the statue, by its stony indifference, was endorsing her white lie. She knew Faith was sinking deeper into Robert's power, but what could anyone do about it except provide comfort and moral support?

They sat in silence for a time, both contemplating the statue of David, each thinking different thoughts. Then Faith said, 'I'm okay now. I need to get to work,' and they got up and went inside.

Back in reception, Amber was explaining to a Japanese businessman that the menu didn't include herself. The man was trying hard to seduce her: waving his wallet in her face, winking suggestively, patting his bulging stomach. On catching sight of Sheri and Faith, she came out from behind the desk and herded her suitor into the sitting room.

'You okay, sweetheart?' she asked Faith in a voice usually reserved for babies and small animals.

Faith nodded.

'Listen, sweetie. Ignore all that talk in the girls' room. This is about you, not what anybody else thinks. Okay?'

Faith nodded.

'I've got some pamphlets and at next break we'll go through them and see if there's anything you want to do. Okay?'

Faith nodded.

'No pressure. It's totally up to you.'

Sheri said, 'Thank you so much, Amber. You're a treasure. I'm so glad you're here for the girls. I don't think we thank you enough.'

'Flowers would be nice. Or a raise. Or both. Nah, just kidding.' She pointed a finger at her. 'Don't you go without saying goodbye. I know what you're like.'

Sheri smiled. 'I won't.'

'And don't forget you can ring me anytime. Reverse the charges if you need to. You know how bored I get sitting out here all on my lonesome. At least you girls've got each other to talk to. And, er, things to keep you busy.'

'Speaking of which, we'd better get to it.'

Goodbye Sephryn House

As Sheri had hoped, the shift passed quickly. Twice during the night she met Faith in the sitting room, and on both occasions she made small talk and studied Faith's face until she was satisfied she was none the worse for the beating she'd received at the hands of Robert's friend. On the contrary, Faith's mood brightened as the night progressed.

Towards the end of the shift, they met in the stairwell. As Sheri made to go on, Faith barred her way with a trembling hand. 'There's something I didn't tell you,' she said in a conspiratorial voice, glancing over her shoulder.

Sheri felt her insides melt and go trickling down the stairs. A jackhammer started slamming nails into the back of her skull. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! For a fleeting moment she hated Faith – hated her ongoing problems at least. She wanted to grab her shoulders and scream, 'I don't wanna hear about it! Stop ruining my last night!'

But Faith wasn't about to confess a terrible secret or plague her with yet another problem. Her hands were trembling with excitement, not fear. 'We-ell,' she began. 'Robert … Well, Robert … He said … He said he's gonna buy me a ring. A ring with real diamonds in it. He said … He wants to make an honest woman of me.' She touched her bruise. In the darkness of the stairwell it was almost invisible. 'He said this pesky thing will go away before we know it. And he said he's not gonna let Gary touch me again. Isn't that great? I suppose it means I'm engaged. I didn't wanna tell none of the other girls because they wouldn't understand. But I knew you'd be happy for me.'

Sheri was more than happy; she was ecstatic. With these few words Faith had granted her permission to leave, an honourable discharge from this most dishonourable of professions. Of all the women at Sephryn House only Faith really needed her, and now she was figuring to get married. Despite her own good fortune, Sheri felt a pang of jealousy. She had a naive, MGM-inspired faith in the power of love and believed that, with marriage, Faith's life would

turn around and she would indeed end up in Monte Carlo, a lady of leisure, with every luxury at her fingertips, as Robert had promised.

'You have no idea how happy that makes me!' she cried, and took Faith in a warm, grateful embrace. They exchanged a few excited words and then Faith went on her way, jittery with joy now she'd shared her secret.

Sheri continued to the second floor. Though the jackhammer hadn't relaxed its incessant banging, she was now able to defy it, mock it, dare it to upset her soaring mood. She'd braved the stormiest part of her life and clear skies were finally in sight. The past was almost over. The future was bright. A headache was nothing.

HER LAST CLIENT was a large, soft, pimply man in his late teens. He trembled when she took his hand and trembled some more when she led him into the room. The man's name was Howie and his voice cracked as he told her of his desires.

'Is this your first time?' she asked as she unbuttoned his shirt.

'No!' he cried, then added in a hurt voice, 'Of course it's not. Why would you think that?'

She tugged his shirt out of his trousers. 'You look a bit nervous is all. Not that there's anything wrong with that,' she hastened to add. 'It's always scary when you're with a person for the first time.'

'I've had girlfriends,' he said. 'Two of them.'

Despite his denials, it suited Sheri to believe he was a virgin. It was somehow fitting. Here were two people on the brink of something immense, a change as big as life itself. The young man drew out her maternal instincts, made her feel kind and protective. And he didn't look the type who would aggravate her headache by pounding away at her for an hour. If she was lucky, he would finish within a few minutes and then she could go home early.

But when she slipped the shirt from his freckled shoulders and saw the pimples on his face had also taken up residence on his chest, a shudder of revulsion passed through her. The white-capped peaks made her think of the Himalayas. She could feel them already, scraping against her breasts, some of them breaking off and leaving red zigzags on her skin. The jackhammer returned with a vengeance and suddenly she wanted the hour to be over more than she'd wanted anything in her life.

After the man had showered and dried himself, she sat on the edge of the bed regarding him from the other side of the miniature Himalayas. 'What is it you'd like to do?' she asked him.

'Um,' he said, beginning to sweat, 'I dunno.'

'Okay. That's fine. Let's take things one step at a time.'

She took hold of his penis and with the peculiar power of youth it sprang erect. The next instant a shot of hot liquid hit her in the face. Before she could pull away, the man's hands had gripped her head, his hips were ramming against her face and he was screaming and groaning as if someone was stabbing him in the back with a knife.

'Ugh-ugh,' grunted Sheri, struggling to breathe. But the man's cries were louder. Consumed by ecstasy, he was oblivious to anything but his own pleasure.

The attack abated and he opened his eyes. Looking down, he noticed Sheri's face in his crotch and gave out a little gasp. He released her head.

'You imbecile!' she cried. She scrubbed her face with the bedsheets. 'What the hell do you think you're doing? How could you be so stupid? Jesus Christ!'

He looked mortified. Fat tears ran down his pimply cheeks. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' he blubbered. 'That's never happened before. I couldn't stop myself.'

Sheri tried to hold down her anger. If the young man was indeed a virgin, there was no harm done, no diseases to worry about. Maybe she should let this one pass. She didn't want to go down in history as the woman who turned a man off sex forever after one nervous mistake.

Shaking her head, she went to the en suite and washed her face.

Back in the bedroom the man was lying face down on the mattress, a pillow clamped over his head. Sheri went up to him, unsure of what to say or do next. She gazed at the pimples on his back, and after a while they broke loose from their moorings and came together in the shape of a house, an oblong house with a peaked roof, crooked chimney and something big and round in the garden.

Sensing her presence, the man lifted his head. The house and garden dissolved.

'I split with my girlfriend,' he said. 'That's why I was crying.'

'Oh. I'm sorry.' She glanced at the clock. Looking back at him, she tried to summon compassion, but her pounding headache and the stress of dealing with Faith had sapped her emotions. She just wanted this to be over.

‘Her name is Anna. She started smoking dope and then she moved onto pills. And now she’s hanging around with these … freaks. And I think she’s sleeping with one of them. But I’m not sure. It’s just that she’s always with him. Why else would she be spending so much time with him? When I asked her about it she went off her brain; called me a worthless moron.’

Sheri nodded, as if agreeing with the girl’s assessment of him.

‘Then she said it wasn’t working out. But it was. It was those freaks getting her into drugs and who knows what else. That’s what got in the way.’

Sheri massaged the back of her neck. She sneaked another look at the house on his back, but all she could see now was a pile of rubble.

‘I feel rotten. I don’t know what to do about it. I’ve known Anna since high school. I thought we’d get married.’

Despite her best efforts, the house refused to reappear.

‘I don’t know what to do about it,’ he said again.

He went quiet, and Sheri realised he must be waiting for her to offer some advice. ‘Ring a counselling line,’ she wanted to say, but she uttered another ‘I’m sorry’ instead.

He rolled onto his back and motioned her towards the bed. ‘Can we please start again?’ he begged, dismissing his grief in a surge of lust. ‘Please?’

She opened a bedside drawer and tossed him a condom.

After watching to make sure he did it properly, she got on the bed and they began making love. Or more correctly, the man began making love. Sheri lay on her back with her eyes shut, wondering what to pack for her trip to Ethiopia. Is it hot all year round or is that only true in the desert? Does it get very cold at night? So far she’d received contradictory advice and it seemed she would have to pack for every contingency. One of the problems with owning a large wardrobe is that it’s so much harder to choose what to take on an overseas trip.

‘Is something wrong?’

She opened her eyes. ‘Uh? What? I’m sorry, did you say something?’

‘I asked if anything was wrong. You were biting your nails.’

She glanced at her hands. ‘Was I? No, I can’t have been. I never bite my nails.’

He pulled away from her.

‘You’ve gone down,’ she observed.

‘That’s your fault. You made me lose concentration.’

The accusation stung. After years of being the star of Sephryn House, of being buoyed by the knowledge there was at least one thing she was good at, was this to be the final verdict on her performance as a sex worker?

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'but you shouldn't blame *me* if you can't keep it up. I don't get paid to raise the dead.'

He started crying again. The naked emotion in his face was so intense it made her want to run from the room.

'I needed this to be right,' he whined. 'I … I needed to forget about Anna so's I could sleep tonight. I was hoping you'd make me feel better.'

'That's what I've been trying to do.'

'No it's not!' His voice was shrill, his face a curious shade of purple. 'All you've done is make me feel like shit! If I can't even do it properly with a … with a … I may as well give up. Maybe Anna was right about me all along.'

Sheri was frustrated by his unrealistic expectations. 'Listen … Hogie, is it? If you want my advice, you'll find another girlfriend and forget about coming to a place like this. We're not here to be a lover or a friend; we're here to help you get your rocks off. And then you go back to your life. Miracles don't happen here. If you've got a problem, ring a counselling line. If you need to forget somebody, find somebody else. If you want sex with no feelings and no complications, then come here. It's as simple as that.'

He jumped off the bed and began pulling on clothes.

She softened her tone. 'Hey, Hogie, come back. Don't take any notice of me. I've got this splitting headache. It's nothing to do with you. I'll take a couple more pills and then we can do this properly. How does that sound?'

He fled the room with shoes in hand.

Sheri sat on the bed with her eyes on the door. After a while she got up, went to the en suite and swallowed two more headache pills. Then she filled the spa bath and lay in it for a while. The combination of remedies helped to improve her mood … but then she had to grapple with her conscience, which was trying to make her feel guilty for the young man's pain. It's not me, she told herself. It's this place. It's prostitution. He expected too much. If he takes my advice, he'll be fine.

The blame shifting worked. By the time she was ready to leave, she'd convinced herself she'd performed for the man an invaluable service – that his escape from Sephryn House would prove as fortuitous as her own – and she left with her conscience clear.

In the passage she stopped and turned back for one last look. All she saw was a small room containing a bed, bedside drawers and a closet. But of course the room was more than that. It was a symbol of her past life; a mausoleum; a repository for all her frustrations and lost dreams. She imagined herself stripping away the things that had made her a prostitute and leaving them strewn across the bed. Standing on the outside looking in, it seemed for the first time in almost four years that she was wearing her own skin.

Closing the door, she hurried down the stairs.

In the girls' room all was quiet. Crystal was rummaging through someone's locker, while another woman, a beautiful stranger, wept silently in a corner. As neither took any notice of her, Sheri took a seat at the table. But almost immediately she got up. No point waiting around, she told herself, and instead scribbled a short note of goodbye to everyone. She taped it to the door of the microwave oven, collected her belongings and left the room.

A minute later she was outside.

The night was cool and still, as if Mother Nature was holding her breath, deciding what kind of weather to unleash on humanity. A rumble came from the nightclub strip, along with the occasional car. Two spotlights cut long arcs across the sky, every so often lighting up a lone bird.

As she turned towards the distant glow, trying to grapple with the reality that it was over, that she'd made it, she almost tripped over a pile of clothes. On closer inspection, the clothes were found to be attached to a wino. The man was slumped against the wall, his eyes closed, his legs blocking her way.

She squinted down at him. His matted hair and beard were so thick and grizzled he might have been part werewolf. Wrinkling her nose, she made to step around him, and at that instant his eyes flicked open and they were a surprising blue against the dirty brown of his skin. He grabbed a handful of weeds and pushed himself to a sitting position, blinking rapidly as he struggled to kick-start his brain. While this was going on, his other hand groped for a cask of cheap wine, which was eventually found and pulled to safety.

'Can ya spare somethin' for a starvin' ol' gen'leman?' he croaked, having registered that someone was standing over him.

Ordinarily Sheri would have ignored the plea and walked on. But since her encounter with Gloria Meadows, a love for humanity had been brewing in her soul, and in place of a loathsome, evil-smelling bum – a blot on the

sidewalk – she saw a pitiful creature who'd simply run out of luck and was no more responsible for his plight than an abandoned kitten or a starving Ethiopian child. A rush of pity lifted her as she contemplated the extent of his degradation.

'You poor man,' she said, shaking her head. 'Whatever happened to you?'

His chin lolled on his chest. He hiccupped violently. In place of an answer, he lifted the wine cask and hugged it as he would a baby.

Sheri took out her purse. 'I've only got fifties,' she said. 'I don't suppose you've got change?'

As she waited for his response, she followed the lights of an airplane as they made their way across the night sky. Her mind alive with joy and anticipation, she marvelled at how much beauty there is in the universe. It was like she was seeing existence in all its glory for the first time, feeling herself part of something after years of feeling nothing but weariness and frustrated hopes. Glittering stars filled the void of space and it came to her that each tiny speck of light was a gigantic sun, some of them billions of miles away, some orbited by planets upon which there were undoubtedly other forms of life. It was almost enough to make her believe in the existence of God, that same God who was right now leading her parents up the yellow brick road to paradise.

But at the thought of how far away her parents were from any kind of paradise, her eyes fell back to earth.

'It's not money you need,' she said, shutting her purse. 'You need to get your life back on track.'

The wino rocked back and forth. He seemed to have forgotten she was there. With the precision of a surgeon he inserted a dirty finger into his nose, rolled it around, inspected it in the streetlight, wiped it on the sidewalk.

Sheri turned away in disgust. But with compassion burning inside her like a star, a mere vulgarity wasn't about to distract her from her mission. 'You've hit hard times,' she told the man. 'I know what that's like. I've been there myself. What you need is to take the first step. Down the road … See where those lights are? Down there, there's a church. They can arrange a shelter, somewhere to sleep. I think they've got a soup kitchen as well. No, wait a minute, that's the Salvation Army.' She looked right and left. 'Or is it? It's been so long since I've been that way …'

As she babbled on, the man lifted the cask to his lips. Red wine streamed out, splashing over his beard, dribbling onto his filthy coat. Some of it even

went down his throat. Returning the cask to his lap, he rested his head against the wall with a contented sigh.

'… on a talkback show. They can help you get a job. Wouldn't you like a job?' She paused. When the man made no reply, she said, 'You know, mister; I did it. I'm living proof of what you can do if you put your mind to it. I got out of a rut just as bad as yours, and now I've got a real job and I'm moving up in the world. Don't you have dreams too?'

When he responded with a burp, Sheri shook her head. 'You know, there's millions of people in Africa who are starving and dying through no fault of their own. They don't live in a land of opportunity like you do. We're all trying to make a difference, but you have to want to help yourself.'

Taking notice of her at last, the wino held out a grubby hand.

Sheri replaced her purse in her bag. 'Don't forget what I said, will you? The church is thataway. It's not far. And good luck.'

With that, she strolled away, humming the theme to *Fame*, her mind alive with visions of plump Ethiopian babies. Behind her, the man tore weeds from between the concrete slabs and threw them at her back.

THREE | DAY JOB

Ethiopia

THE BAR CAME highly recommended by the hotel's porter, who professed to know the best eating places in all of Ethiopia. He told Sheryl in a breathless voice that the food was prepared by angels, that the chef had once served Emperor Haile Selassie. But on walking through the doors they realised they'd been duped. It looked more like a stable than a restaurant.

'What the fuck?' cried Angelo, a large man in a Nike baseball jacket.

The occupants of the room, a crowd of around thirty men, women and children, turned their heads and stared. Ignoring them, the crew fell into a discussion about why the porter would direct tourists to this dive. Bruce, a government official from New Zealand, suggested the bar was owned by the porter's family. Stefan, an experimental filmmaker from Sweden, argued that the man was offended by his refusal to tip and had sent them here as an act of revenge. Marcus, a promoter from Texas, observed that the girls in colourful dresses who swayed their hips and smiled at them from the walls of the bar were undoubtedly prostitutes – a suggestion that made Sheryl blanch and hide behind Angelo. When conversation continued along these lines, she fled in search of the ladies' room.

At an unmarked door she was stopped by a woman with braided hair and heavy-lidded eyes who looked her up and down before pushing the door open with her foot and motioning her inside. With a smile of thanks, Sheryl stepped into the room.

She froze. The door opened into a wooden box tacked onto the back of the bar. Light peeked from between cracks in the walls, the floor looked like it had never been swept, and the toilet (a grey, cracked thing) was at present being used as a makeup table. The room bustled with women. They were all young and beautiful and they smoked and chattered and argued as they jostled for a turn at the tiny, cracked mirror.

The commotion came to a halt when Sheryl entered the room. Faces turned her way, lips were pouted. The next moment she was surrounded by warm bodies.

'You … Your name,' they said. 'Where you from? You have smokes?'

She reacted to their questions with an enthusiasm that felt oddly like gratitude. 'I am with the Gloria Meadows Foundation,' she explained to them. 'Our charity provides food and aid to needy children.' She nodded at the eager faces. 'I arrived in your country yesterday. I am very happy to be here. Very happy to be of service.'

The women grinned and fell into scattered conversations with each other, some translating her words for others who couldn't speak English.

'How you like our city?' asked a woman with heavy mascara and purple lipstick.

'I haven't had the chance to see much of it yet.'

When the women quizzed her about why she'd come to Ethiopia, she described for them her experiences over the past twenty-four hours.

AFTER ARRIVING AT Bole International Airport, Sheryl and the crew transferred to a connecting flight, a decommissioned Russian army plane. To compensate for a lack of mod cons, the plane was fitted with cushy brown sofas, bolted to the metal floor and rigged with safety belts. There was a plentiful supply of alcohol, which was passed around in plastic drinking bottles to compensate for the plane's inability to hold its own against the vagaries of the African winds.

From Addis Ababa they flew southeast. As they soared over highland plateaus and rocky gorges, Sheryl pressed her forehead against the window and drank in the beauty of the Ethiopian countryside. Until today she'd only ever seen Ethiopia through the lens of world aid commercials, where it was portrayed as a land of ramshackle huts, dusty fields and thin-limbed children with haunted eyes. But this depiction could not have been further from the truth. Of course it made sense that drought and disease are not likely to beset the entire length and breadth of a country at the same time, but Sheryl had never felt the need to question the media's representations, trusting that when reporters talked about 'an Ethiopia in crisis' they were referring to the whole country, not only to certain drought-stricken or war-torn regions.

She repeated this thought to the person next to her, a fifty-something woman with short grey hair and her nose stuck in a book (a romance novel with the title, *The Blade of Tomorrow*). At Sheryl's interruption, the woman closed the book and pushed her glasses up her nose. 'Things may well look rosy from up here, young lady,' she huffed, 'but don't be fooled. Hard times are on their way.' She leaned over Sheryl to sneer at the view. 'Take my word for it. I've been coming to this godforsaken country for the past twenty years, so I ought to know. The Ethiopians are lost without us. You wouldn't think so – would you? – seeing all that greenery down there. But this country is a time bomb and time is ticking.'

'Oh,' said Sheryl, looking once more at the countryside below. Try as she might, she couldn't imagine it as a dead, brown wasteland. But who was she to doubt twenty years of experience? 'So it isn't only the people in the north who are facing starvation?'

The woman raised her eyes to the roof like a teacher who has failed to explain a straightforward concept to a dumb child. 'The Ethiopian people have no idea how to run this country,' she lectured, her head wobbling on her neck. 'No idea. For centuries they've overgrazed and overcropped and cut down all the trees, and now they complain the land's no good. Can you believe it? They're hopeless; as helpless as infants when it comes to looking after themselves.' She opened her book and found her place. 'And they have no conception of the future. If a drought's coming, they don't make any preparations; just wait for the West to come running to their rescue. And luckily for them, we always do.'

The lecture over, she returned to her reading, leaving Sheryl to reflect on the wisdom of her words. Always one to trust in the sincerity of strangers, her view of the Ethiopian people changed in an instant. The woman had implied that it was thanks to the West that Ethiopia had any crops at all, and it warmed her to contemplate her contribution to this cause, a cause that was making a difference to millions of lives. She returned to the view with a renewed regard for the Gloria Meadows Foundation and its founder and patron, Gloria Meadows.

As the plane approached its destination, the pilot advised them to make sure their safety belts were securely fastened. A change came to the hum of the engines; they felt a drag; the plane began to descend. The land rose to meet them – quickly – so quickly Sheryl had to look away and hold her breath, but soon enough the wheels were on the ground and everyone was

chatting about tomorrow's shoot and what they were planning on doing once the business part of the trip was over.

As the plane taxied towards the arrivals shed, Sheryl peered through the window, half expecting to see starving children lining the strip. There were plenty of slender-bodied people about, but everyone seemed alert and cheerful and no one looked like they were dying.

Somewhat relieved, she turned from the window, fished out her compact and began touching up her makeup. Thanks to a strict diet of only grapefruit and bran flakes, her face had grown lean and radiant. To complement this transformation, she'd had her hair cut short and bleached to a golden brown colour. She told everyone the new look was to help her cope with the hot and dusty conditions in Ethiopia, but in truth she'd been planning this change since the day she accepted Gloria Meadows' offer. She was set to star in a national TV campaign, and unless she wanted the whole deal to blow up in her face, she had to become as different from the old Sheri as possible. She had to become a new person.

In the arrivals shed they were greeted by their guide.

'Welcome!' he cried, all smiles. 'Welcome to my beloved country! Welcome!'

The man was short and brawny, with a shiny face and bloodshot eyes. He was wearing a green field jacket, pith helmet and brown military-style boots. He led them to a waiting bus, staggering under the weight of too many suitcases, then watched merrily as everyone clambered aboard. As the bus trundled down the airport road and into the bustling town, he waved and yelled at people in the street, interrupting this periodically to point out landmarks of interest. Sheryl, fascinated by everything she saw, followed his commentary with the interest of a visiting anthropologist.

That night they slept at a small villa-style hotel with colourful rugs on the walls and a blue-lit fountain in the lobby. In what seemed the middle of the night, they were woken by a furious hammering on the doors and exhortations to shower and shave quickly so they could get going before sunrise. Following a breakfast of bacon, fried eggs and something yellow and creamy, they were herded onto a battered flatbed truck and driven out of town.

The sun appeared and rose slowly through the eucalyptus trees. There wasn't a cloud around to impede its ascent. As the truck rumbled along rocky

tracks, through oceans of green and yellow, people in the fields waved and sang out, their faces streaming with sweat.

After a while the fields gave way to rocky hillocks and people became less common. A lone goat chewed on a grey-leafed bush. A flock of birds squeaked and squawked overhead. A shimmering whitewashed church appeared atop a ridge like a stepping-stone to heaven itself. And all this time the sun was ascending the cerulean sky, a glorious fiery god, bringer of light and heat, arbiter of life and death in this ancient land.

A little way past the shimmering church lay their destination: a huddle of stone huts in the middle of a flat plain. When the truck rolled to a stop, a cloud of dust overtook them, floated into the air, then settled on houses, trees, donkeys, goats and people. No one seemed to mind. The villagers rabbled around them, noisy, friendly and gracious. When Sheryl disembarked, they mobbed her, stroking her clothes, shaking her hand, chattering to her in a language she longed to understand. Wrinkled women held out offerings of food; barefoot children jumped up and down in excitement; smiling men unloaded the truck. At a distance a mob of scrawny dogs sat and barked lazily at them. Sheryl felt like a princess or a hero, just as Gloria had promised.

The equipment was laid out on the ground and checked for breakages. A tense moment followed when someone wrongly accused Angelo of leaving a generator back at the hotel, but once this was resolved, they transported everything to a place where the huts were broken and empty, and there – lo and behold! – what should they find but a TV crew from Sweden already at work assembling a band of ragamuffin children. The two crews embraced like long-lost relations, delighted to find fellow filmmakers in this remote corner of the world. They made plans to meet up in Addis Ababa that evening, after filming, then each crew went back to work.

Gloria's crew were hard workers and they knew their job. The set was created in a flash. Skinny children were procured (children who would never look healthy, not even in times of plenty) and after screen tests and lengthy debates, a delicate, hollow-cheeked girl was selected to be the child star of the new campaign. Once everything was ready, Sheryl was positioned on a flat rock, the girl ordered to sit on her knee and look hungry, the other children arranged artistically in the background and given instructions to poke at the ground with dry sticks and gaze into a distant, unfathomable future.

'Hi there, sweetie. What's your name?' Sheryl asked the sad little girl.

Sharp words came from behind, making her jump. It was the guide, who she'd last seen back at the truck. The girl hid her face and mumbled something into Sheryl's blouse.

'She say her name is Araya,' the guide said with an obsequious smile.

At the sound of her name, the little girl squirmed in her arms and reached her hands towards home, the collection of stone huts.

The guide barked at her and she went limp.

By this time the sun was merciless. The crew buzzed about the set, red-faced and irritable, eager to get the shooting over and done with as soon as possible. Sheryl, stroking the girl's hair, turned to smile at the villagers, who were standing at a distance, very aware that if they got in the way, these strangers might take their business elsewhere. She waved at them and some grinned and waved back.

'Ready on set!' yelled the director, a bullish man with no tolerance for laziness or stupidity.

Sheryl, feeling the flutter of butterflies in her stomach, went over her lines in her mind one last time. Some bright spark in marketing had come up with the slogan, 'You don't have to be Sheryl Starling to save a child's life', and almost every item of promotional material now featured her face and name. It was scary being the centrepiece of such an important campaign. It seemed to her, sitting on a rock in the middle of nowhere, that the fate of an entire nation was resting in her hands. It was a huge responsibility and she was terrified of blowing her lines or delivering a lacklustre performance.

When the cameras began rolling, she licked her lips and tried to appear cool and composed. 'Hello,' she began on cue. 'My name is Sheryl Starling and I am here in Ethiopia to ask for your help – your help in saving the life of a child.' She smiled down at Araya. 'In Ethiopia, one in four children is at risk from starvation or deadly disease. Without your help, chances are that little Araya here will be dead within three months …'

Little Araya chose that moment to squirm out of her arms and go running towards her mother.

'Cut!' bellowed the director. Slamming down his clipboard, he stormed onto the set like a rampaging elephant. The expletives that issued from his mouth were enough to send the villagers scampering back to their homes – and yet this was only the beginning. He was a man without tact or sensitivity. It took almost nothing to set him off, and his ranting and raving, far from

abating as filming moved ahead of schedule, was to continue throughout the morning, all through lunch, and into the hot, dry afternoon.

Karaoke

IT WAS GETTING dark by the time they got back to Addis Ababa and all Sheryl wanted to do was sleep. But the crew would have none of that. In the past twenty-four hours they'd been through an incredible bonding process. Everyone had held in their arms an undernourished child, a life that might be saved through their efforts, and they were high on emotion.

'You can't go to bed,' they said. 'There's too much to see and do.'

A cup was procured of the blackest coffee Sheryl had ever seen and she was made to down it all in one hit. Then someone declared that social obligations were part of her official duties. Others joined in with similar arguments. The crew from Sweden had been tracked down, piped in Angelo, and dinner arrangements were confirmed. As leading lady of the Gloria Meadows Foundation, Sheryl's absence would be viewed as something akin to an international incident.

Buckling under the pressure, she accepted a second cup of coffee. She could understand their enthusiasm. Tomorrow they were to go their separate ways: some to Egypt to see the pyramids, some to the Serengeti National Park to catch a glimpse of some of the world's most endangered animals, some to more far-flung corners of the globe. It was highly unlikely the crew would ever be together like this again. Sheryl herself had originally planned to extend her trip, but two nights before her departure a stranger rang to tell her she was booked into a secretarial course beginning the minute she arrived home. This might be her one and only chance to experience Addis Ababa.

'So,' said Marcus, his nose close to hers, 'are you coming along or do we ring Gloria M and tell her you're letting the side down?'

With a red face (for she was embarrassed by all the attention) she caved in to their demands.

So here she was, an hour later, surrounded by women she suspected were sex workers and who were treating her as if she were one of their own. And alarming as the situation might seem, she was thoroughly enjoying herself.

The questions kept coming. In the middle of a description of her favourite restaurant in Northbridge, she heard her name being called. Then came a tapping at the door and a muffled enquiry about her welfare. She glanced at her watch and was surprised to find she'd been chatting in this tiny room for almost fifteen minutes. Apologising to the women, firing off a few last answers to their questions, she backed out of the room and returned to the relative peace of the bar.

In her absence the proprietor had brought out jugs of wine. Sheryl took a seat at an hourglass-shaped table and a basket of pancakes appeared in front of her. This was followed by dishes of vegetable stew, yellow eggs and curdled milk.

'What's this?' she asked Andrew, an attractive blond in his late twenties.

Andrew's girlfriend, an older woman named Kelly, responded on his behalf. 'It's called injera,' she said. 'You break it apart and dunk it in the wet stuff.' During her demonstration the movement of the basket disturbed a cockroach, which shot out from under the pile of injera and vanished under the table. 'It's delicious,' Kelly said, popping the mixture in her mouth.

Everyone began attacking the injera – everyone, that is, except Sheryl. She was convinced the dark spots in the bread were dead insects or rat droppings. If that wasn't off-putting enough, there were those long black fibres which, if not disembodied antennae, were no doubt something equally gross. Gloria had warned her against drinking the water, eating unwashed vegetables and touching any form of meat, and now a cockroach had turned her off the bread. It was a good thing she was on a diet.

As they were getting into the meal, a Korean computer salesman they'd met at the hotel came bursting through the door. Incredibly he'd stumbled across a karaoke bar right here in Addis Ababa! The announcement was greeted by hoots of laughter. How could they resist the chance to have a real party on their last night here? Everyone stood up and made ready to leave. Someone called out to Marcus, who was drinking at the bar with his body pressed against one of the alleged prostitutes, and he raised his hand and waved at them to go on without him.

But as they threw down money and moved towards the exit, an unpleasant incident occurred. The proprietor, alerted to their intent, had raced from the kitchen and was now blocking the door with his body and yelling to the waiters to call the police. 'You stay! You stay!' he cried, pointing at the uneaten food. After a protracted argument, someone managed to force

the door open and they broke out into the street, giggling and roaring in triumph.

The evening was rich and earthy, the street filled with cars, buses, bicycles and people. A slice of yellow moon lay cradled in the branches of a dead tree. The proprietor stood yelling from the door of the bar as, laughing and joking, the visitors stumbled down the boulevard. This part of the city was a melting pot. Squalid shacks stood in the shadows of modern office blocks and towering skeletons of yet-to-be-completed skyscrapers; hutches built of wood and corrugated iron sold fruit, vegetables and fried pastries beside shops trading in luxury goods, high fashion and gold; men in business suits strode past others in traditional dress; beggars knelt in doorways next to young men shining shoes and others waiting to pounce on passers-by with the offer of a taxi service. As the group advanced down the sidewalk, people stared or nodded at them, but this only served to make them louder, more obnoxious, more conscious of their special status in this land of changing fortunes.

The Zemed Café was a square building with flaky white-washed walls and an elaborate gilded door. One window was taken up by a faded headshot photo of a beautiful woman singing into a microphone, her head back, her eyes closed in ecstasy. In the other window, dozens of snapshots were taped haphazardly to the glass, showing customers having an amazing time, their smiles wide, their arms around each other's shoulders, some shovelling food into their mouth, some at a microphone.

At their approach, the door burst open and they were greeted by the owner, a heavy, hairy man with Elvis-style sideburns and a white apron tied around his abundant waist, who informed them in an effusive voice and with matching hand gestures that though he'd lived in Ethiopia most of his life, his birthplace was Italy, and they should therefore consider him a fellow Westerner. After describing in detail his wish to deliver to his guests a night to remember for 'all of life to come', he sought from each of them an undertaking that they would mention his humble café to their families and friends back home, and on exacting the desired promises escorted them to a long white table.

Five minutes later they were presented with injera – smaller pieces this time, served on white stoneware. As this injera had no black spots or antennae-like fibres, Sheryl conceded to eat a little.

Meanwhile, conversation raged around her, helped along by a generous supply of the local beer, which kept appearing by the jugful. The jugs were

refilled by an elegant Ethiopian boy who might have descended from kings. Working diligently, he was oblivious to the surrounding din.

'… and they love us over here. Last time I met a different one every night. I'll take you to this place later …'

'… I asked for whiskey soda and the dolt brought ginger beer. Couldn't tell the difference. No wonder they're starving …'

'… glad that part's over. Now we can relax and see the sights. You been to Giza yet? I tell you, next trip …'

'… and they still can't make a go of it. If I was in government, I'd ask the Italians to come back … or maybe the Russkies …'

'This disgusts me,' said a voice at Sheryl's ear.

She turned to find Andrew in the chair next to her. Kelly was engaged in a lively conversation at the other end of the table.

'Sorry? I don't …'

'These gorillas.' He glanced around the table. 'You'd think they'd have more respect.'

She tuned into a conversation across the table. It seemed pretty harmless. 'It was a tough day,' she said with a shrug. 'Maybe this is how they unwind.'

Gazing into Andrew's sky blue eyes, something ignited a spark of recognition, a feeling almost of déjà vu. Sheryl had the uncanny feeling she'd seen him before. High forehead, spiky blond hair, generous mouth … What was it about him that seemed so familiar? It was only when her eyes trickled down to his open shirt and took in the smooth curve of his chest that a tingle in her loins made her look away in horror.

'It's a tough day every day for those people in the village … and the women in that other bar. Don't you think we could've had more respect for the people back there?'

She glanced back at him. 'Sorry? What?'

'We needn't have run out like that. If we'd had an ounce of decency, we would have finished the meal and left like civilised human beings. But we were plain rude. There was no rush to get here. And now … can you hear what some of these guys are talking about?'

'Sounds to me like typical tourist talk. I've heard worse.'

'But that's the point. We're not tourists. We came here to work, not act like animals and treat the women like prostitutes.'

The word rang around the room. Sheryl, stunned into silence, wrung her hands together under the table. Was Andrew dropping a hint? Had he seen

her at Sephryn House? Surely he wouldn't recognise her after all the trouble she'd taken to change her appearance?

Thankfully Kelly, who'd been smiling at them from the other end of the table, got up and came to her rescue.

'Andrew!' she scolded. 'Let the poor woman eat in peace!' She pulled up a chair between them. 'I have to apologise for Andrew,' she said. 'Sometimes he's too humanitarian for his own good. Now, baby, maybe we should cut out the serious stuff and let Sheryl enjoy herself, huh?'

Andrew and Kelly fell into conversation, a happy banter that admitted no intervention. The air between them seemed to glitter, but this was probably because they were sitting under a low-hanging light. Sheryl, left to her own devices, sat contemplating the plate of injera.

Andrew startled her by touching her elbow.

'How have you liked Ethiopia so far?'

She smiled at him. During her little reverie she'd convinced herself she was imagining things. What would Andrew have to gain by toying with her like a cat with a mouse? All indications pointed to the fact that he was one of those rarities: a truly nice guy.

She said, 'It's been a real eye-opener.'

'I thought it might.'

'I didn't realise it was such hard work.'

'You get used to that. I've been here five times now. This'll be my last, I'm afraid.'

'Oh no. Why's that?'

'Clashes too much with my studies. I come here, work day and night, and slip further and further behind.'

'What are you studying?'

'The enthralling world of political science.'

'Politics? Wow! Does that mean you got to meet the president?'

'I'm not that influential, I'm afraid. Everything I do is purely theoretical. Except my writing.'

Kelly said, 'Tell Sheryl about your novel.'

'I wrote a novel once.'

'Really? What was it called? I might have read it.'

Kelly answered for him. 'Andrew isn't about to compromise his artistic integrity by having his work published,' she said.

‘I write about the human condition,’ Andrew said, nudging Kelly with his elbow. She nudged him back and he reacted by taking her face in his hands and planting a big, wet kiss on her mouth, a move she didn’t seem inclined to resist.

‘Excuse me for the dumb question,’ said Sheryl, ‘but what’s the human condition?’

He sat back. ‘The human condition is … Let me give you an example. My story’s about an Ethiopian farmer who loses his livelihood in a drought. But instead of sitting around waiting for food relief (which I guess is what most people would expect him to do), he gets the local farmers together and they come up with a list of long-term solutions to the problem. Basically, it’s an attempt to look at drought management from the Ethiopian perspective.’

‘Andrew wants to be the next Dostoevsky,’ said Kelly, whose expression suggested she’d heard the plot-line a thousand times before. ‘Or at least the next Steinbeck.’

He opened his hands. ‘But who wants to read about the human condition these days, when all they have to do is turn on the TV or open a newspaper to see the dismal state of the world? Besides, people these days are only interested in the stuff of dreams, like wealth and fame … and sex, of course.’

Kelly said, ‘By the way, we saw you on TV. We thought you handled the interviews really well.’

Sheryl beamed at her. ‘You did? Thanks. I was terrified.’

‘It didn’t show. Have you done public speaking before?’

‘No. Not since school. But that was more acting.’

‘What do you do for a crust?’

‘Nothing at the moment. But there’s something lined up when I get back. In an office. I’ve never done that kind of thing before, but I’m really looking forward to it. You’ve got no idea. How about you?’

Kelly said, ‘I lecture. Political science.’

‘Oh.’ Political science again. She glanced at Andrew, who was scratching at a white spot on his thumbnail. A story formed in her mind. The two met in one of Kelly’s classes and their romance had blossomed from an illicit student-teacher affair. As neither seemed inclined to confirm or deny the story, she moved the conversation to another topic. ‘Does it upset you to see so much poverty in Ethiopia?’

‘It used to,’ said Andrew. ‘The first time I came here was after a massive drought and the situation was indescribable. I’d never seen starving people

before. When they showed aid commercials on TV I used to look away.' He dropped his head, embarrassed by the person he used to be. 'So, you know, it really hit me hard when I got to see starvation firsthand. But it becomes a fact of life after a while. You get used to it. Right now the situation here is better than in some other countries.'

'I've seen a lot worse,' said Kelly. 'Last month I was in Cambodia and there's children there who can barely walk and they're scrounging in garbage dumps searching for rotten food to take home to their families. There's a truck-load of inequity and injustice in the world … too much for people like us to ever make a real difference.'

Andrew said, 'When I see children in the poorer villages or those women in that other bar, it's hard not to feel sorry for them. But I've come to learn it's condescending for us to sit here and make judgements on other cultures. It's easy to assume people here won't be happy until they've got double-brick houses and computers and new cars, but in truth, in some ways they're better off than a lot of people in wealthier societies. I mean, so many people I know are stressed out or their kids have got drug problems or they've got huge debts. Contrast that with the people we saw in the fields this morning. They mightn't have much in Western terms, but they're still happy … happy in a way we won't ever understand. I suppose what I'm trying to say is that it's an oversimplification to equate happiness with material wealth. Happiness is made up of small things, like hearing a bird sing outside your window or seeing a smile on a baby's face. In our hankering for more and more possessions, we often overlook that fact.'

Sheryl recalled the remarks the woman had made yesterday on the plane, her assertion that the Ethiopian people were their own worst enemy. She repeated the words to Andrew and Kelly.

Andrew snorted. 'That's plain ignorance. Martha likes to project the welfare mentality onto a whole nation. Makes her feel better. No, Sheryl, the Ethiopians are very capable people. They're an ancient civilisation. It's true we've introduced crisis care and medicines, but we do the same for any country in similar circumstances. For Chrissake, we provide aid to our own farmers when there's a drought. To claim that aid by its very nature creates dependence is pure ignorance.'

'Some aid workers like to think of themselves as saviours,' said Kelly, keeping her voice down. 'It makes them feel more important, more holier-than-thou. As long as they contribute in a meaningful way, it doesn't really

matter what their motivation is. You learn to put up with the attitudes.' She elbowed Andrew. 'Well, some of us do.'

Andrew smirked at her.

'Is there really a disaster coming to Ethiopia?' Sheryl asked, confused now.

They both shrugged.

'It doesn't really matter,' said Andrew. 'The truth of it all is that world aid is a means of redistributing money from richer to poorer societies. The benefit may not always get to the people who need it the most, but you can be sure it usually gets to someone who needs it.'

'If you worried about all the problems in the world,' added Kelly, 'you'd end up going mad. Which is why we like the Gloria Meadows Foundation. It doesn't pretend to cure world poverty and it doesn't force religion on people who just want something to fill their empty bellies. It simply provides relief to areas of the world where people are starving. The macro stuff – problems involving globalisation and the World Bank, for example – we need to tackle at a different level. And believe me, there are people doing just that.'

The proprietor approached the table and spoke in Angelo's ear.

'Who's for karaoke?' Angelo bellowed, half standing.

Suddenly the table was in an uproar. Sheryl kept her attention on Kelly's face, on her warm brown eyes, but inside she was seething with anticipation at the prospect of singing in this obscure little bar. She knew the table was crammed with filmmakers and media figures, any one of whom might go back and spread the word that Sheryl Starling's talents extended further than rescuing children and looking good on camera.

Kelly was warming up in her field of expertise. Ignoring the ruckus around them, she picked up the threads of their conversation. 'It's important to understand, Sheryl, that for capitalism to work there have to be both rich people and poor people. No two ways about it. There have to be greedy people and there have to be people with hardly anything to their name. There has to be a small proportion of the population which owns everything and makes all the rules, and the rest of us who have to work for a living and follow orders. It's pure propaganda when politicians claim everyone can get a job and everyone benefits from economic growth. Capitalism doesn't work that way, especially not in developing countries where the people are so vulnerable to the ravages of corporate greed. But (and on this I differ from Andrew) I don't think there's any realistic alternative right now. Certainly not socialism,' she added, throwing a telling look at Andrew.

'Socialism has a lot to offer,' Andrew countered.

'Socialism is a breeding ground for apathy. Nobody works hard if their efforts get spread amongst the masses for the common good. That's why all socialist regimes need to be backed up by repressive laws and secret police.'

'I'm not saying I agree with that sweeping generalisation, Kelly my love, but is capitalism any different? I think it was Helen Keller who said capitalism relies on the military for its survival. The bourgeoisie need a show of strength to stop the proletariat from rising up. You can see that in the rise in global terrorism. It's a proven fact: when the gap between rich and poor becomes too wide, the poor will take up arms … or drugs and crime. Destruction and self-destruction are flip sides of the same coin.'

A microphone screamed. 'Testing, testing; one, two, three,' came a voice through the wall-mounted speakers. Then the voice started singing 'Stayin' Alive' in an ear-piercing falsetto.

Andrew went on. 'Take the US military as a case in point. How many times has it been used to protect American corporate interests overseas?'

'Ah right, Andrew, that old chestnut.'

'Well, Kelly, if you don't agree, what other reason can you give for US intervention in Central and South America and the Middle East?'

'How about the defence of democracy? Or plain and simple neighbourly concern?'

'Don't give me that …'

It was clear that Kelly and Andrew had had this argument before and were enjoying the rematch. Invisible for the moment, Sheryl turned her head to the stage. An unfamiliar tune was playing through the speakers, a TV screen joining in with footage of fallen leaves being kicked along by two Japanese lovers. Angelo, Jean-Pierre and Bruce were crowded around the microphone trying unsuccessfully to match words with music. She longed to get up there and show them how it was done.

'You realise, Sheryl,' said Andrew, touching her hand, 'that aid programs essentially prop up capitalism by placating the victims of corporate greed. We dole out charity to people whose countries we're ravaging or to the lower classes who spend all day working their fingers to the bone for minimum wages, and then we expect them to bow down and kiss our feet.'

Kelly sighed. 'A tad extreme, don't you think, Andrew?'

He looked annoyed. 'Call it semantics. But capitalism without a social conscience is evil, and capitalists don't have enough of a conscience. Every

day the world's wealth moves more into the hands of the very few and they don't seem to care much how tough it is for the rest of humanity. All they're worried about is having their servants and the rest of their creature comforts.'

'I agree with you on that, Andrew. You know I do.'

He turned to Sheryl. 'Sorry about all this. I'm on a crusade on behalf of the poor and oppressed of the world. One of the many reasons I'm only barely scraping through my degree.'

Sheryl was tempted to suggest he sleep with the teacher for a higher grade, but thought better of it. She had a bad habit of bringing everything back to sex. 'Do you come from a poor family?' she asked instead.

'No,' he laughed. 'Quite the opposite. So maybe I feel guilty for living off the fat of capitalism. But back home I get sick of the media saying it's their own fault if people can't find a job or can't survive on minimum wages. And the government's solution to social problems is always more police and more prisons. The world is on this spiral of corporate downsizing, falling real incomes and high unemployment, yet the blame always gets laid on the victims. Those of us who reap the benefits from capitalism pretend how everyone can be just like us, if only they'd try harder. It's all such bullshit.' He looked frustrated. 'Like Kelly said, the good thing about the Gloria foundation is that we just focus on feeding the hungry, so I don't have to worry so much about righting the wrongs of society.'

Kelly leaned over and hugged him. 'We agree on the problems,' she said to Sheryl. 'We just have differing views on the solutions … if there *are* any.'

'Ah, the sweet sound of pessimism,' said Andrew, pulling away. 'One of my old lecturers told me trying to stop wars and exploitation is like trying to stop lions from eating gazelles. It's the nature of the beast. He said we should follow Mother Nature's number one rule: survival of the fittest. That helps put it into perspective – but not in a very comforting way.'

The conversation had gone completely over Sheryl's head, but she nodded and gazed through the window as if musing on the inarguable connection between capitalism and Darwinism.

Someone burped in her ear. 'Hey, Sheryl!' Bruce cried, breathing beer fumes all over her. 'These guys tell me you're a pro! Come and sing, before these jerk-offs bust me fuckin' eardrums!'

She barely had time to pull an apologetic face at the lovers before Bruce tugged her from her chair and escorted her to the stage. The air up here was thick and rank, the temperature at least ten degrees higher than the rest of the

room. Stale sweat battled with the sickly-sweet odours of knock-off colognes, and wafting in from the kitchen was the smell of something burning.

'Whadaya gonna shing?' slurred Angelo, pressing his shoulder against hers. He'd ordered the spiciest meal on the menu and his face was as red as a hot chilli pepper. Pulling out a handkerchief, he dabbed at his sopping forehead.

'Hmm, not sure.' She thumbed through the file of songs. Her eyes trailed down a list. She was about to turn the page when a finger shot past her and jabbed at a song title.

''Singin' in the Rain'!' someone cried. ''Singin' in the Rain'!'

'Hey, that's one of my favourites,' she said. 'I love that movie.'

'Hey, 'smy favourite too,' said Angelo, crossing to the console. He pressed some buttons and a bubble-gum disco beat started playing, a frenzy of tapping drums and rolling congas.

As words came dancing across the screen, Sheryl took a deep breath and launched into song.

Her voice, strong and clear, silenced the room. Waiters stopped working, mouths stopped chewing, faces turned towards the stage. People began tapping their feet and nodding their heads.

She kept singing. Her heart swelled inside her chest. To stop herself from breaking into tears, she kept her eyes on the screen, on the bouncing yellow words superimposed over grey thunderclouds and streaming rain. This was the reaction she'd always dreamed of, the reaction her father had promised her, the one she'd described to her parents in so many letters. Her body sizzled. If she could halt conversation here, in a second-rate karaoke bar in far-off Ethiopia, she could do the same at the Regency Hotel, she was sure of it. All she needed was someone to believe in her, someone with the right connections … someone named Gloria Meadows.

As the song progressed, the others joined her at the microphone.

'I'm singin' in the rain,
Just singin' in the rain.
What a glorious feeling!
I'm happy again!'

They laughed loudly and sang badly, not caring about key or pace or rhythm. And as the rest of the restaurant joined in, the multitude of voices

twined together, filled the room, burst through the window and flew out over the rooftops and high into the pristine sky.

Down below, at a place where the markets and store fronts gave way to tin-roofed shanties, a young woman, drawn by the noise, stepped outside and frowned at the starry sky. She pulled her shawl around her shoulders, placed her hands together, closed her eyes and mouthed a prayer.

'What a glorious feeling!
I'm happy again!'

At the end of the prayer she glanced in the direction of the voices, then went back inside to join her grandmother, who lay dying. The old woman's eyes were wide and afraid, her mouth thin and dry, her skin stretched tight across her bones. Taking a seat beside her, the young woman held her hand and dabbed at her brow with a damp cloth. Placing the cloth down by her side, ignoring the voices outside, she then began her own song, a song about a time when Ethiopia was a land of plenty, when the earth and the rivers were bountiful and there was food enough for everyone.

On the job

OF ALL THE office equipment Sheryl had used, the fax machine was by far the most frustrating. The whereabouts of the instruction booklet was an office myth, with explanations ranging from 'never arrived' to 'stolen by a disgruntled employee' and buttons that hinted at timesaving efficiencies had such incomprehensible labels that everyone who used the machine ignored them and did things the long way. To Sheryl, even the long way was annoying. The papers would feed (slowly, slowly) into the machine, and then they might or might not get sent. Even when the machine told her the document was transmitting across the electronic ether, she was never quite sure it was going anywhere. Knowing her actions could mean the difference between a major sale and a lost client, she grew crazy with worry over the prospect of making a mistake and losing her job before she'd really had a chance to get started in it.

Faxing aside, her job at DiMaggio Fine Antiques was exceeding all her expectations. Though she was mostly responsible for menial tasks like filing, photocopying, faxing, answering the phone and making coffee, she also helped with more demanding tasks like stock control, which involved spending hours on end in the adjoining warehouse cataloguing a dazzling collection of antiques and works of art.

To date Sheryl had spent two weeks in training and two weeks on the job, and during this period she'd come to a startling realisation: she wasn't as dumb as she thought she was. She had a particular knack for technology. She remembered complex tasks, understood the means by which computers processed information behind those prettily-coloured windows, and was usually able to figure out what to do when things went wrong. For someone accustomed to stacking supermarket shelves and making love for a living, these newfound skills were a source of unending pride.

It was also gratifying to see her talents had not gone unnoticed. Frank DiMaggio, the proprietor, was taking a personal interest in her progress. He seemed to be always at the door when she walked past his office, and he often

had special tasks to allocate, such as arranging a business luncheon or ringing an important client. Frank was a busy man with little time for smiling or making idle chatter, but he gave Sheryl regular encouragement and she was one of the few employees he made sure he greeted every morning.

'He's on the make,' was Doris's verdict, uttered with the certainty of a born seductress.

Sheryl had nodded in agreement. She was familiar with that look in Frank's eyes. She'd seen it many times. It was a look of hunger from a man used to getting whatever he wants, and getting it fast. Far from being offended, she was flattered. At Sephryn House she'd always been bored by the predictable male response to her body. It was carnal, involving none of the finer emotions, and as soon as a man's erection went down, his interest in her died too. But Frank was different. He saw through her skin to the person inside and responded to what he found there. He was drawn to her personality, to her quiet competence and work ethic, not just her looks, and this was exactly what she'd always wanted from a man.

Franklin DiMaggio stood a shade over six feet tall and was blessed with strong shoulders and good legs. From his father, he'd inherited coarse, dark, Italian good looks; from his mother, a stubbornness counterbalanced by a winning smile. Though in his forties, he had an undeniable sexiness, a sexiness that lay in his self-possession, in knowing that his kind ruled the earth, owned the lion's share of the world's wealth, told presidents what to do. When Gloria Meadows died, Frank would inherit a share in an empire worth untold millions and then his power and influence would really come into being.

'How's it all going?' murmured a voice at her ear.

Sheryl barely moved. The door sighed shut and a puff of air wafted her dress against her legs. When she spun around, her nose was almost touching Frank's chin.

'It's going,' she laughed, stepping away from him, shuffling papers, pretending he was just the boss. 'We've come to a kind of understanding. The machine won't make things easy for me and I won't give it the satisfaction of seeing me go stark raving mad.'

Frank chuckled, a deep rumble that rolled along the walls of the photocopy room. It was the laugh of a current affairs presenter, designed to humour important guests and make middle-aged women swoon. Frank often laughed at Sheryl's responses, even when she wasn't meaning to be funny.

'Listen here, Sheryl,' he said, never one to mince words. 'It's time we went on a real date, somewhere classy. Let's say, dinner tonight?'

She dropped the papers. 'Dinner?'

'Yes, dinner. You know, eating at night-time, after dark?'

'Well, yes. Of course, Mr DiMaggio … I mean, Frank. Of course I'll have dinner with you.'

'Of course.' He smiled at her unease. 'I'll pick you up at seven-thirty.'

'Great.'

'Great. I'll get the address from your personnel file.' He opened the door. 'Okay, Miss Starling,' he announced in a mock officious voice, 'that's enough chit-chat. Best get back to work. I wouldn't want to fire you for loafing around.' And turning on his heel, he walked off.

Sheryl returned to the fax machine. She inserted a document into the feeder tray and punched out a number. She focused all her attention on the task at hand. But once the fax machine commenced its beeping and whirring, she leaned her back against the wall and replayed the conversation in her head. Three times now Frank had taken her to lunch. Each time he claimed it was to discuss her role and clarify his expectations about her performance, but once out of the office they'd talked of nothing but travel, favourite movies and the bitchiness of his ex-wife Prue. And now he was asking her to dinner. Though the offer itself came as no surprise, its swiftness did. The thought that she'd be on a date with Frank in only a few short hours made her quiver with anticipation and terror.

Once the fax machine had confirmed the document's transmission, she headed off for a well-deserved break.

In the staff room three women were sitting with heads bunched together across the table. They were glancing at one another as if something shocking had just been said.

'You must have seen how he runs after her,' Phyllis was saying, having not noticed Sheryl's approach. 'I've seen bulls on heat with more restraint.'

Irene cradled her coffee mug in both hands as if protecting it from the dangers of an immoral world. 'Disgusting if you ask me –'

'Sh! Sh!'

The three heads turned and in the roaring silence Sheryl entered the room, strode to the counter and started making a cup of tea.

Nancy said, 'Rodney took me to see the *Gladiator* movie on the weekend. You seen it? The movie?'

'No,' said Phyllis. 'What's it about?'

'Muscle men. In old Rome.'

'Say no more. Where's it showing?'

'Come with me. I asked Rod to take me again and he grilled me like a pork sausage. Couldn't get his head around what I liked about it.'

'Can't take a hint?'

'He's not the brightest spark. He *has* finally gone and chopped down that tree though.'

'No! The one you thought might fall on the house?'

'The very same.'

'How long's it been?'

'Six years if it's a day.'

Phyllis shook her head. 'You send him on over to my place, Nance. There's a tree interfering with the power lines and Con will not do a thing about it. Soon it'll be too late, and I said to him, I said, "Constantine, if a branch falls on the power lines there'll be no TV and no hot meals." And you know what he said? He said, "If that happens, Pookie-bear, we'll stay in bed all day and eat pizza." The cheeky bastard!'

With that, the women fell into conversation about domestic matters, comparing the indolence of their husbands, the recalcitrance of their kids and the size of their credit card debts.

Stirring sugar in her tea, Sheryl smiled to herself. Now she was off the game, she no longer worried that she dressed or acted like a prostitute. But she did understand why women like this would be threatened by her looks, her sensuality and her prospects for fame. She'd had enough run-ins with Crystal to know that quiet envy can quickly escalate to open conflict. But what did this matter to her? Sheryl was the charmed one, the one with all the breaks, the one being asked out by the boss. With a little practice she'd figure out how to hold onto a man after the initial attraction had dimmed, and then her life would be complete. And once that happened, she wouldn't be caught dead sitting in a stuffy staff room whining about her husband and kids!

The sugar having dissolved as much as it was going to, she pondered what to do next. Should she breeze from the room and drink her tea back at her desk? Or brazenly join the women at the table? A part of her (the newly empowered part) wanted to whirl around and confront the women – tell them she didn't give a damn what they thought, that she was proud of her ability to attract a man like Frank, that they were making fools of themselves

by their gossip. But the old Sheryl was afraid of releasing conflict into the room. What if one of the women harboured a grudge and sought revenge by nosing around in her past and bringing to light her secret? That kind of thing happened all the time on TV and it wasn't as hard to do as you might imagine.

So instead of confronting the women, she adopted a dignified expression, collected a *TV Times* magazine and took a seat near the window.

As the cup met her lips, an alarming thought came to her. Frank said he would get her address from her personnel file. It was a logical enough suggestion … except the address on file wasn't hers. It was Magda's. As a parting gift, Magda had erased all traces of Sheryl's employment at Sephryn House and replaced this with a cover: fake references from one of her employer's more reputable concerns and a false address in a quiet, leafy suburb. Sheryl had been touched by the offer and accepted gladly. She hadn't wanted to take any unnecessary chances.

Her mind flew around the room. If Frank picked her up at Magda's place, he would insist on going in and looking around. And once inside he was bound to notice something was amiss, that nothing in the townhouse spoke of Sheryl. What's more, she would have to go to Sephryn House after work and pick up a key. Since leaving Sephryn House she'd developed an inordinate fear of the place, imbuing it with a power and influence that verged on superstition. To go back now would be tempting fate. Not to mention that as far as the women knew, she was living the high life in Spain!

There was no getting around it; she would have to change their plans. She would have to tell Frank a lie.

The other women rose with a clatter and made moves to leave. Sheryl emptied her cup in the sink and followed them out. There was an obvious solution to the problem. She could give Frank her real address and tell him she'd moved house. But then he'd have to go to Northbridge, and this ran the risk that he would take one look at Danny and their neighbourhood and figure out the truth about her … or at least rethink his involvement with a woman from such a seedy side of town. With so much at stake, she couldn't bring herself to take that chance. But what else was she to do?

Back at her desk a ghost of an idea stole into her mind. She saw a sick mother, an invalid not allowed any visitors. Like a Polaroid photo the story began developing of its own accord, becoming clearer and more believable

with each passing minute. By the time the morning was over she almost believed it herself.

During her lunch break she knocked at the door to Frank's office. It was opened by a powerfully built young man with close-cropped ginger hair and a goatee, wearing a dark blue suit with gold buttons. An older man, dressed the same but with no hair at all, was seated before Frank's desk. The three men stared at her.

Frank rose from his chair. 'Come in, Sheryl, come in. We're about finished here.' He gestured at the two men. 'These fellows are fire officers. They tell me we're breaking some kind of regulation by not having proper sprinklers and alarm systems. I think maybe it's something you could look into.'

The older man was scribbling something on a form. Tearing it off the pad, he got up and passed it to Frank. 'There's the order,' he said. 'You've got thirty days to comply.'

'Certainly, gentlemen, certainly. Miss Starling will get right onto it.' He handed the form to Sheryl, then ushered the men to the door. 'Always eager to be of service. Good job, boys. Good job.' He closed the door on them.

'Jerks,' he snapped, snatching the sheet of paper from Sheryl's fingers. 'Rules and regulations will be the death of me.' He frowned at the form, then mashed it between both hands and handed it back. 'My friend the mayor will have something to say about this.' He returned to his seat. 'Now, Sheryl, what is it? A problem with the Grantham account? I swear one day I will shoot that motherfucker. I'm not kidding.'

Squeezing the ball of paper, Sheryl outlined her problem. A call had come from home. Her invalid mother had taken a turn for the worst. Heart disease. Only had a few months to live, said the specialists, though they were hoping to try her on a new drug derived from a plant found only in the highlands of Scotland. In the meantime, poor Magda was hanging on by the skin of her teeth and any excitement or sudden shocks might send her over the edge.

Frank stared up at her.

If that wasn't bad enough, Magda suffered from senile dementia and was apt to scream the house down and attack anyone she didn't recognise. In short, given the circumstances, it was best if they met up at the restaurant.

Frank squinted at her, a ghost of a smile on his lips. 'Don't you worry about your mother,' he said, leaning back, spreading his arms, knitting his fingers behind his head. 'Oldies take to me like dogs to mutton. You'll see.'

Her heart crawled into her mouth. True to form, Frank wasn't going to take no for an answer. But with so much to lose, Sheryl had the wits of the desperate. As he went on to placate her fears and insist it was his right as a gentleman to pick her up, she shot down his arguments one by one, till eventually, when he gave no sign of giving in, she was forced to fake the beginnings of a migraine. 'Maybe we should do this another night,' she said with a wince of pain.

Only then did Frank relent and accept her suggestion that they rendezvous at the Café Rouen.

The date

SINCE RETURNING FROM Ethiopia, Sheryl had gone to great lengths to enhance her new image. She'd slimmed down to skin and bone, reshaped her eyebrows and lightened her hair even further. (It was now almost blonde.) She threw out her garish cosmetics and replaced them with paler versions, brands with names like 'Naturelle' and 'Classique'. She weeded out the short skirts and skimpy tops from her wardrobe and took to wearing only pastel colours and dresses that went past the knees. Danny couldn't get over how different she looked. He said she was like one of those fashion models that sell face creams on TV, the ones who are supposed to be wearing no makeup when it's their cosmetics and strategically placed lights that are creating the illusion of faultless skin.

Gloria had deemed her new look 'perfect', 'glamorous without pretension', 'exactly the message we want to put across'. But Gloria had no inkling of the stakes Sheryl was playing, and with the Gloria Meadows Foundation campaign gathering momentum, the stakes were set to go even higher. Radio commercials were airing throughout the day, Sheryl was appearing at club luncheons and charity dinners, the TV campaign had begun, and Gloria, true to her word, had let slip to the media that Sheryl Starling was to be presented with the Governor's award for bravery. Most importantly, the slogan 'You don't have to be Sheryl Starling to save a child's life' had been embraced by the media and public alike. It fired the imagination of every battler, saying to common people that you too can do something brave and selfless; you too can rise above anonymity and adversity; you too can find yourself sitting in the Café Rouen awaiting the arrival of a millionaire.

Sheryl's millionaire arrived more than half an hour late. Dressed in black slacks and a brown angora sweater, he passed quickly through the restaurant, his eyes on Sheryl the entire way.

He pecked her on the cheek. 'Sorry I'm late, sweetheart. An order came in. Big one.' He snapped his fingers and the maître d' appeared. 'Martini. The usual. And one here for the lady,' he said, waving a hand at Sheryl as if to confirm the identity of the alleged lady. 'We'll have the menu in three minutes. Tell the kitchen we're in a rush.' Returning his attention to Sheryl, he smiled with Gloria's square white teeth. 'See what you get for not letting me pick you up? Time runs away and I end up being late. Well, we'll make sure *that* doesn't happen again, won't we?'

Sheryl smiled at him, uncertain how to respond to such a strange accusation. 'I don't mind you being late,' she said. 'This is such a lovely place. Time doesn't matter.'

'Time doesn't matter.' He swirled the phrase in his mouth like a fine wine. 'Hmm. You been here before?'

'I have. A few weeks ago. With your mother.'

'With Gloria? Stands to reason. She flat refuses to go anywhere else. Got agoraphobia when it comes to restaurants. Too scared to go anyplace she might get mobbed. I wonder if there's a special name for that. They've got a name for just about everything else these days. By the way, you look adorable tonight.'

'Thank you, Frank. You look smart too.'

'Smart? Ha! Never been called that before!'

Sheryl cringed in embarrassment. She suddenly felt so … suburban. She was reminded of those days (they seemed an eternity ago) when she would roam the Coral Springs shopping mall trying on beautiful frocks, frocks she thought she would never be able to afford. Back then she'd believed that improving one's station in life was as easy as buying an expensive gown and hanging around the cocktail bar of a five-star hotel until a well-groomed man came up and offered you a drink. Nowadays she knew it took a lot more than that to deny your roots. How long would it be before Frank figured her out? How long before he looked for something more?

'Don't worry,' he said, reading her mind. 'Your turns of phrase are a breath of fresh air. I'm sick to death of stuck-up bimbos going all out to impress me with their perfect manners and posh accents. I'm looking for a woman who's open and honest about herself. That's what attracted me to you. I'm so over places like this, where you're supposed to act in a so-called civilised manner. Like, if I wanted to kiss you (and of course I do), there's no way on hell's earth I could risk it. The scandal would get back to Gloria and

my ex-wife and her family before the date was even over. It's fine to have dinner with a beautiful woman; that's expected from a man who's recently divorced. But once you step over the line, you're kaput! Finished! Ostracised! My mother too. Ruined in a day. It's all such bullshit. Did I tell you my father was a builder? He built sets on one of Gloria's productions. Gloria of course couldn't get all schmoozy with a common labourer so she got him a job in the office, where he sat all day doing word puzzles when all he wanted was to be out with the real men sawing wood and drilling holes. Nope, Gloria had to cut his balls off so he wouldn't drag her social status down. You know, Sheryl, I believe things like that are passed down from generation to generation … working class values, I mean. Sure I've got stacks of money from my mother's side, but my allegiances are always with the workers. That's where real life is, not in a stuck-up joint like this.'

The martinis arrived, interrupting his monologue. 'Great stuff,' he said after throwing back half the drink. 'Mm-hm, they make the best martinis in the world here. You like martinis?'

Sheryl, who'd never before tasted a martini, followed Frank's example and almost choked on it. 'Strong,' she gasped.

He laughed in delight. 'Best antidote to first date nerves: get a lady plied with drinks and she's relaxed as a pig in mud. Oops! Working class genes breaking through again!'

Downing the last of his martini, he turned in his seat. The prescribed three minutes being up, the maître d' was on his way over with two menus and a fresh martini for Frank.

'See what happens when they get to know you?' he said with a smile. 'They treat you like royalty. I fucking love this place!'

AFTER DINNER THEY climbed aboard Frank's black Land Cruiser.

'What now?' he said, looking down on all the other cars.

Sheryl was smart enough to know the question was rhetorical.

He pulled on his seat belt. 'We'll go to your place for a quiet drink or two.'

She gripped the edges of the leather seat. 'That's no good, Frank. Remember? My mother isn't well.'

He shook his head at her. 'I still can't believe you're playing nursemaid to your sick old mother. You're amazing, Sheryl Starling. It's like you came straight out of a 'fifties movie.'

He contemplated the street ahead, ignoring a boy wearing a backwards baseball cap who was inspecting the Land Cruiser with the interest of a potential buyer. The boy ran his hand over one of the tyres, then straightened and stepped back to take in the rest of the car. He reminded Sheryl of Danny early in their acquaintance. He had the same lack of social proprieties, the same sense of having nowhere to go and nothing better to do.

'Got it,' said Frank, and he slammed the car into gear and took off, leaving the boy staring after them.

Sheryl tried to get her bearings. Where were they headed? Once she was clear it wasn't Magda's place, she relaxed a little and watched the city lights go streaming by. Dinner had gone exceptionally well. Frank had shown himself to be remarkably engaging. It's true he was super-confident, talked about himself a lot, was a tad chauvinistic and a bit of a bully … but Sheryl found it refreshing to be divested of responsibility for the evening. She liked letting a man take the reins. She liked not having to anticipate his every move, as she'd had to do every night at Sephryn House. As long as Frank stayed away from Magda's place, she was happy to let him make all the decisions.

'Where are we going?' she asked as the Land Cruiser shot through the suburbs.

'You'll have to wait and see.'

She looked at him. 'Is it a bar?'

'Maybe. Maybe not.'

'Are we going back to your place?'

'No. Not there.'

She felt a pang of disappointment. 'I'd love to see your place,' she said.

'You will. Some day. Once Gloria gets used to the idea of you and me.'

Sheryl was enjoying this game. It showed Frank's playful side. More importantly, his words implied they had a future together. Grinning, she said, 'You live with your mother as well?'

'Of course.'

'And you made fun of *me*!'

He gave a mock sigh of exasperation. 'I live in one wing of the mansion and my mother lives in the other. It's not quite the same as sleeping in the next room.'

'So we could sneak in and Gloria will never know I've been there.'

'Oh yes she will! All the housemaids are in her power. The slightest crease on the wrong side of the bed and the news would be with her in seconds.

Believe me, it happened when I was at school. I smuggled this girl, Sandra, in. We didn't do anything; just fooled around like teenagers do. And even though Sandy left before midnight and I was careful to make the bed, that bitch of a housemaid knew what I'd done. You should've seen the sour look on her face! She thought I was the most evil, disgusting thing alive.' He blew his horn at a slow-moving motorcycle. 'Come on! Move it! Move it! They're all Catholics, the housemaids. Gloria thinks they're more trustworthy because they need to confess if they do anything wrong.' He leaned out the window. 'Get off the road, you fuckwit! Anyhow, by the time I got down to breakfast Gloria knew all about my secret guest. I've never dared do it again.' He jerked the wheel and the Land Cruiser swerved into the next lane and sped past the annoying motorcyclist.

'But Frank, that was years ago. You're all grown up now.'

'Doesn't mean a thing in Gloria's mind. If she thinks a girl's wrong for me, she'll say so. And if I don't do what she says … Well, I've never pushed her that far. But she can be a downright bitch when she gets a wasp up her dress. That's why my sister lives as far away from her as humanly possible and my brother hardly ever sees her.'

He pressed a button on the CD player and Frank Sinatra's voice boomed from the speakers, claiming he did it his way, putting an end to further conversation.

They left civilisation behind. The road became a long dark blur, curving through fields, leading deeper into night. To the left and right were ghostly trees, rocky outcrops, black shapes (probably cows) and an occasional lonely-looking farmhouse. They were slowly ascending. Up ahead was the moon, its mountains and seas showing in high relief. As they drove towards it, Sheryl let go of reality and made herself believe the Land Cruiser was a spaceship, the moon their destination. What was it like up there? she wondered. Probably very quiet. But something altogether magical. The earth would be indescribably beautiful, the stars so clear and bright you could almost reach out and touch them.

But they weren't going to the moon. Frank had somewhere else in mind. Three or four Sinatra songs later, the Land Cruiser turned off the road and rumbled down a gravel track. Before long the lights of the city were winking at them through a grove of blackened trees. When the trees parted to reveal the city in all its glory, the spectacle took Sheryl's breath away. She wound her window down and leaned her face into the breeze. It was hard to conceive that

there were millions of people down there; even harder to accept that the part of the city where the lights were brightest was Northbridge, with its dismal streets and shady denizens. From this distance everything appeared clean and beautiful, like a scene from a children's movie.

The Land Cruiser rolled to a stop in a gravel parking area. Frank switched off the ignition. In the silence he turned to Sheryl and watched her watching the view.

'What do you think?'

Her gaze swept across the glittering panorama. 'It's beautiful.'

'It's not the only thing that's beautiful.'

She looked at him. He was studying her lips, his chest rising and falling, his breath emerging through his nose in soft wheezes. She felt like a schoolgirl on her first date, except in this case her suitor wasn't a scared, fumbling boy … and of course she was nothing like your average virgin.

Frank's eyes, misty with desire, rose to meet hers. 'How about we go for a walk?'

She looked past him at the surrounding darkness. Black clumps of night hung like rags from every bush, providing cover for all sorts of hidden creatures. And who was to say a homicidal maniac wasn't lying in wait inside the shadowy, dilapidated, yellow-lit ablution block? A shiver ran through her body. She could walk fearlessly down a dark Northbridge street, yet here in the wilderness she was gripped by a primordial terror.

'I don't know …' she muttered, feeling silly and squeamish.

Frank laughed at her, clearly enjoying this display of weakness. 'You're scared! Come on, Sheryl. Big strong Frank'll protect you. There's an extra-special place I'm burning to introduce you to.'

Reluctantly Sheryl opened the door and climbed down from the Land Cruiser. Following a few words of reassurance, she allowed Frank to take her hand and lead her through the cool night towards a moonlit path. Crickets stopped chirping at their approach, then started again once they were a safe distance away. Larger creatures went scurrying through the undergrowth (rats? foxes? snakes?) and at one stage a flock of black shapes took to the sky, making her shriek in fear. She couldn't remember when she'd last been this afraid. It wasn't long before she was clinging to Frank like a frightened child.

The path wound downwards. As they descended, the bushes on either side grew denser and wilder, sending forth jagged branches to block their way. Sometimes the vegetation was so bad they had to disengage and walk single

file, and sometimes tree roots broke free from the packed earth and tried to trip them up. But at last the path opened out and they found themselves in a grassy clearing, at the end of which was an open-air gazebo painted green and red. The gazebo stood on the edge of a cliff, affording them an uninterrupted outlook on the city and the overarching sky.

As Sheryl moved to take in the view, Frank pulled her to him and plastered her neck with wet kisses.

'I've had an amazing evening,' he whispered in her ear. 'Thank you.'

The words meant more than Frank could have known, and she rewarded him with a long, searching kiss. All evening she'd felt awkward, inadequate, but at last they were in familiar territory and she knew how to handle things from here. Only don't be too forward, she reminded herself. Don't come across as a sex-starved trollop. Frank is the type of man who respects virtue, a woman who plays hard to get, a woman who needs to be conquered.

But she'd underestimated the enormity of his need. Almost immediately his hand was fondling her breast, his fingers were squirming inside the elastic of her pants, his tongue was doing amazing things in her mouth. When he started unzipping the back of her dress, she gasped and looked around, expecting to see families emerging from the bushes with picnic baskets.

He pulled the zip all the way down. 'The parking lot's empty,' he reminded her. 'There's no one around for miles.'

But Sheryl had other reasons for her modesty. She tried resisting his efforts to peel off her dress, murmuring, 'No,' into his mouth. When this didn't work, she pressed a hand against his chest and wrenched her mouth away from his.

'Frank, stop.' His heart was thumping beneath her hand, making her arm tremble. She could feel the air entering and leaving his lungs. 'I don't think we should be doing this.'

He regarded her with unfocused eyes. 'Why not? You're not a virgin, are you?'

'That's not what I mean.'

'Come on, babe. We're both adults. Do you mean to tell me you've never made love on the – what is it? – fourth date? We're turned on by each other. There's no reason to put it off.'

She turned her head to the faraway lights of the city. The gazebo's railing was digging into her back. 'I don't want you to get the wrong idea about me,'

she said. 'I wouldn't do this if it wasn't … if I didn't feel … we had some kind of future.'

'Then why wait, sweetheart?'

It was such a dilemma. Since leaving Sephryn House, Sheryl had adopted a new moral code, a higher set of values, yet here she was, about to have sex with her boss on what was their first real date. Then again, Frank was right. What was the point in waiting? If she refused to go all the way (especially now she'd let things get this far), he might blow up and dump her on the spot. By letting him make love to her, she would be exposing him to her strongest talents, and this might be her best chance of maintaining his interest in the long term.

'Look, Sheryl,' he said, his voice hardened by the sudden turnaround, 'I can't promise you we'll get married and have kids. But we're both adults, we both know this thing has a future, so denying ourselves this expression of intimacy seems … unnecessary. For the record, I've made a mental note of your resistance, so don't think for one minute I'll hold it against you later. Quite the opposite. I want to hold it against you right now. I'm aching for you, baby. I've never felt this way before. If you say no, I'll kill myself. I'll throw myself off the cliff.'

She giggled at his boyish outburst. 'How can I resist a charmer like you?'

'You can't. If you try, I'll order you to do it. I'm your boss, remember?'

'Thanks for reminding me. Now kiss me.'

He helped her remove her dress, then lowered her onto the cold wooden bench and leaned down and kissed the hollow at the base of her neck. In the cool night air his mouth felt as hot as a poker. His breath blew like warm silk against her exposed skin. When his lips continued down her body, she cried out in pleasure.

'Oh baby, your body is like a dream.' His tongue moved to her belly. 'I could lick you all night.'

But no sooner were the words out of his mouth than he peeled off her pants, tore off his own clothes, took his erection in hand and guided it inside her.

'Wait! Wait!' Sheryl cried, squirming out from under him.

'What is it? What's the matter?'

For a few awkward moments she sat breathing through her mouth. She tried to make out the details on his darkened face. How should she phrase this? It had always been so easy at the parlour.

'What about protection?'

'Protection? Oh, shit! Aren't you on the pill?'

'I don't mean that. I'm talking about safe sex.'

He grabbed her elbow and pulled her back to him, laughing in her face. She could smell garlic on his breath, the sour taste of gin. 'No worries in that department. I've been married, remember? Safe as bricks and mortar.'

'Don't you use condoms?'

'Hate the things. If I wanted to fuck plastic I'd buy a blow-up doll. Like I said, sweetheart, I've recently escaped from a very long marriage. You're my first. There's absolutely nothing to worry about. I'm clean as they come. But if we don't hurry up and start this thing, I am going to lose it.'

Sheryl wasn't convinced. 'Maybe we should take things slowly, Frank. Save the serious stuff for later.'

'No way, babe. Not now you've got me all hot and horny.' He moved his body back into position. 'This is what I want. You can't turn around and stop a freight train just because you change your mind. Now be a good little girl and do what your boss tells you.'

The remark touched a raw nerve. Sheryl pulled away again.

Frank laughed. 'Just joking. Seriously though, babe, I'm head over heels. If we don't go ahead with this, I'll be a nervous wreck and I'll lose the business for sure. And then we'll both be out of a job. You wouldn't want the responsibility of all that, now, would you?'

Before she could answer, he planted his mouth over hers and started worming his way between her thighs.

Sheryl was torn between obeying her common sense and keeping Frank happy. She'd always maintained strict rules about safe sex … and yet Frank's argument was valid. As her mind grappled with concepts like 'negotiated safety' and 'setting your own level of risk', he inched his way inside her, and then it was too late to back out.

Convincing herself she'd made a considered decision, she set aside her fears and concentrated on Frank, on matching his rhythm. But as the thrusts of his hips became smooth and regular, her thoughts began to stray. Sex at Sephryn House had always been a time to resolve problems, make plans and indulge in extravagant dreams, and it was surprisingly hard to let go of all that and focus on the sensations that were surging through her body. Thoughts of Danny popped into her head. Had he finished his homework? Did he take out the garbage as she'd asked? Suddenly she remembered a phone message she'd

forgotten to give Frank. Should she tell him about it now? Then she started fretting about what would happen later when he insisted on taking her home.

Each time one of these thoughts appeared, she mentally booted it from her mind and forced herself to focus on their bodies. Frank helped as he was a masterful lover. He knew how to create jolts of electricity with a well-placed finger or tongue, where to position his hips to maximise her pleasure, when to go fast, when to go slow. On her part, Sheryl soon found the places on Frank's body that made him groan in ecstasy and cover her with frenzied kisses. Before long her body was rising, reaching towards the moon, freezing and burning at the same time. The trees, the bats, the creatures rustling in the undergrowth – they all became one with the feelings burgeoning inside her. When her eyes flashed open she saw a billion stars and galaxies exploding across the universe. And the sky was drawing her into its eternal embrace and her body was hurtling through space at the speed of light, blazing with euphoria, careering towards a world she'd only ever known in dreams …

Before she got there, Frank began grunting and gasping. His hips picked up speed, battering her like a piston. Then his back arched, his body froze. For a second Sheryl panicked, thinking he was having a heart attack … but thankfully, following a final, prolonged, shuddering groan, he collapsed on top of her, puffing like a marathon runner. Her own orgasm faded away to a dull ache in her loins.

The crickets, which had given up trying to compete with Frank's cries, resumed their own search for love. Sheryl turned her face to the moon, felt the full weight of Frank's body, gently stroked the nape of his neck with her fingernails. Despite the disappointing end to their lovemaking, she was boiling over with excitement. She knew she'd delivered a memorable performance. She knew Frank would be back for more.

With a huge effort, he lifted his head. 'Amazing,' he said. To make it more so, she reached between his legs and caressed the soft skin there, teasing it gently between finger and thumb. When her arm grew heavy, she joined her hands behind his back and relaxed her body on the bench.

They lay like this for an eternity, neither wanting to be the one to end this perfect evening. Soon enough, though, the outside world began impinging on their bliss. Mosquitoes came to feast; the bench dug into Sheryl's back and Frank's knees; an icy breeze rolled across the turf, raising goosebumps on their naked skin. Rising with a mutual, unspoken consent, they dressed and trudged wearily up the path.

On the drive down the hill, both were too exhausted to speak. Even Sinatra was silent, his role in the seduction over. When Sheryl gave Magda's address, Frank smiled and said, 'I know.'

For most of the drive her mind refused to leave the gazebo, refused to let go of the bliss and the calm and acknowledge a crisis was coming. But when she began seeing familiar streets, panic set in. What would she say if Frank insisted on accompanying her inside? How could she explain not having a key? What should she suggest he do besides leave her by the side of the road and drive off? By the time the Land Cruiser pulled up outside Magda's townhouse, she was panting with the stress of it all.

'This is a beautiful neighbourhood,' Frank said, looking impressed. 'Can I come in?'

Although Sheryl was expecting it, the question hit her like a bucket of iced water. 'If you do that, do you think I'm letting you go before sunup?' she said, trying to make it sound like jest.

'And that's bad … why?'

'No, it's my mother. Remember? She'll scream the house down.'

'Won't she be asleep by now?'

'She won't be asleep.'

'I'll be quiet as a mouse.'

'No Frank. Makes no difference. It takes almost nothing to start her off. You wouldn't want to see that. It's awful … the dementia. Does horrible things to people. Have you ever known anyone with dementia? You can't know what it's like unless you've seen it. She's delusional, my mother. She thinks … thinks I'm still a girl … thinks I'm still at school –'

'A virgin?'

She closed her eyes, drained by the volley of lies. 'Probably. I don't know.'

'Sheryl, Sheryl, Sheryl. You're a woman of mystery. Believe me, I will get inside your house one of these days, and when I meet this mysterious mother of yours, the two of us will have a nice long chat about this sweet, sexy daughter she's raised. But the way I'm feeling right now, I doubt I could even make it up those steps, so I shall let you have your way tonight. But take this as a warning; there are very few people who can get away with saying no to Frank DiMaggio. And it only ever happens once.'

They kissed one last time. Then Sheryl opened the door and dismounted from the Land Cruiser. She climbed the steps to Magda's townhouse. When she turned on the landing, Frank was still there. He waved at her. For a

moment she thought he was going to wait until she went inside, but then the car roared into life and he was gone.

Sighing softly, she took out her phone. After ordering a cab, she sat on the stoop and looked around. Frank was right; this was a beautiful neighbourhood, the ideal place to settle down and raise a family. Across the road was a park dominated by an ancient oak tree. During the day the park probably played host to gentle women with well-behaved babies, who sat in the shade of the lovely tree and chatted about their favourite recipes, their husbands' jobs and their children's grades. Sheryl hoped to have that kind of life one day, possibly with Frank. Was that asking too much? She replayed the evening in her head, recalling everything she'd said, every blunder, every remark she should have made if only she'd thought it at the time. Although the date could be termed a great success, it also felt false, at least on her part, and a heavy gloom weighed on her. She couldn't keep up this masquerade for much longer. The time for lies was well and truly over.

The cab arrived, interrupting her train of thought. Dragging herself to her feet, she gave Magda's townhouse one last hungry look, then turned and trudged down the steps. After giving the driver her address, she settled in the seat and stared at her hands. She couldn't bring herself to look back.

Shadow of the bridge

ON A PASTEL blue afternoon, Danny and Leslie sat cross-legged eating Big Macs and fries in the shadow of Black Abbey Bridge. Sometimes a car would stop and sometimes a lone man would pop his head out from behind a tree and stare at them, but on the whole the hunters and the hunted were otherwise engaged, living out their daylight lives, leaving the park free for couples with prams, kids kicking balls and groups of friends sitting around chatting in the sun.

Leslie had barely touched his food. He had a sweet tooth and mostly ate chocolate, iced buns and cake, washed down with soda.

'Eat more,' Danny urged. 'You're too skinny. If you were fatter, you'd look older.'

Leslie reclined on the grass, placing his rolled-up jacket under his head. 'I'm not hungry. Eating too much makes me tired.'

'Sheri says you look like one of those kids she saw in Ethiopia.'

He yawned. 'How many blond kids are there in Ethiopia, do you suppose?'

Danny gave him a playful shove and he almost went rolling down the slope. 'You know what I mean,' he said, moving the carton of fries closer.

'Well, Danny, everything Sheri says isn't necessarily true.'

'Yes it is.'

Leslie gave an old man's smile and said, 'Yeah, I guess you're right. She still on TV?'

'Yep. It's awesome. I'm living with a fucking celebrity.'

'Awesome.'

'Yep. Random dudes keep ringing and sending her letters, wanting to marry her and stuff. There's some real wackos out there. This guy rang the other day. When it was me that answered, he got shitty and asked who I was. And then he yelled at me for, y'know, being her boyfriend.'

Leslie didn't follow.

'The moron had this crazy idea Sheri was my girlfriend. He wouldn't stop ringing, so we had to change numbers. Nobody rings now, but the damn letters keep on coming. You should see them. There's stupid poems and invitations to parties … and tons of Bible-basher crap. And fuckheads say they're in love with her and they'll kill themselves if she doesn't go out with them. Some of them send photos and they're fugly as hell. You wouldn't believe! As if somebody as stunning and talented as Sheri would even wanna be in the same room as those creeps.' He smiled proudly, feeling the full honour of being Sheri's best friend. 'She's gotta wear a disguise when she goes out or else people come up and bug her for an autograph.'

'That is so cool.'

'Yes, it is.' He watched a gull pretending not to be eyeing off the fries. 'Not that she's around much these days. She works all day and night and then when she gets home she mostly just goes to bed. And guess what, Leslie? She's got a boyfriend. And guess what else? It's her boss!'

'Her boss?'

'He must be at least fifty.'

'What's he look like?'

'I only seen a picture. He's about ten feet tall. And he's rich!'

'Fucking hell, Danny. Why can't something like that happen to *me*?'

'It will, Leslie. You're still a kid.'

'I'm older than you.'

'Not really.' He took three quick bites of his burger. 'She won't bring him home, but. Says he's used to living in a mansion with servants and a swimming pool and if he sees our place the rats'll scare him off. I said to her, "What's he got against pets?" but she didn't even laugh. She's been a bit of a drag lately. I used to hate her acting like she was my mother and everything, but now it's like I'm not even there, like I'm the invisible man or something. Oh, and I have to call her Sheryl now, not Sheri. But I keep forgetting. I figure maybe that's why she's different. Doesn't wanna be reminded she used to be a hooker.'

He threw a chunk of bread on the grass and two gulls swooped in and screamed and pecked at each other until one grabbed it and flew off. The fight attracted other birds, which appeared from thin air and alighted on the grass and a nearby picnic table.

Leslie placed an arm over his eyes.

'She hardly even talks to me anymore,' Danny said, frowning at him.

Leslie didn't appear to hear him.

'A bit like you.'

'Huh?'

'I said, a bit like you.'

He moved his arm. 'Whadaya mean?'

Danny leaned back on his elbows. 'You've changed. You're all quiet and boring now. Are you on downers or something?'

'You asked me that before.'

'You didn't answer.'

'What does it matter?'

'I'm your friend.'

'Yeah, well, you're my only friend.'

'What's wrong with that?' Danny shot back, pretending to be offended. 'Why do you need other friends? Aren't I good enough?'

'You've got your own life. You've got Ben.'

'Yeah, but it's not like I spend all my time with Ben. I'm here now, aren't I?'

'But you're probably thinking about Ben.'

'No I'm not. Not really. I'm pissed off with Ben; that's what I'm thinking.'

Seeing Leslie's ears prick up, he continued with this line of conversation. 'He's doing some stupid gay pride stuff with those fugly friends of his. He spends more time with them than he does with me. They make me so fucking angry! They hate me.'

Leslie pushed himself up. 'Is he sleeping with them?' he asked in earnest.

'Oh, fuck no! If you saw them, there's no way you'd think that. They're so fucking ugly. And they act like they're twelve years old. All they talk about is who's fucking who – when they're not talking about how miserable and oppressed they are. And Ben sits there soaking up all that crap.'

'What does he like about them?'

'Fuck knows. They're so up themselves. They're trying to change some laws or something. Ben explained it to me but I can't be fagged listening to that bullshit.'

'Does Ben know you don't like them?'

'Yeah. He must. He doesn't say nothing about it, but. Probably thinks it's funny.'

'Ben hates me.'

'What?' Danny sat up. 'No, he doesn't. What makes you think that?' Aside from the fact that Ben didn't hate anyone (he didn't seem to have the capacity to hate), Danny believed hatred to be an active emotion, that it had to originate from conflict or something huge and unpleasant. Leslie had never said a word in front of Ben; ipso facto, he'd done nothing to make Ben hate him.

But Leslie thought otherwise. 'I can tell by the way he looks at me.'

'How does he look at you, Leslie?'

'Like he hates me.'

'That's bullshit. I mean, Ben asks about you all the time,' he lied.

'Does he?'

'Yep. You finished with these?'

Leslie nodded and Danny picked up the carton of fries and scattered the contents across the grass. Leaving the gulls squabbling over the bonanza, he gathered up their rubbish and shoved it in his backpack.

'You didn't answer me,' he said, turning back to Leslie. 'You taking downers?'

Leslie looked evasive. 'Nope,' he said. But when Danny stood over him with arms crossed, he admitted to smoking dope every now and then. 'It's nothing. All the guys do it.'

Danny dropped his arms. 'Yeah, that's nothing.'

They were interrupted by a scruffy, pot-bellied man with two day's growth of beard. Dressed in grey cotton track pants and a white golf shirt, he came waddling across the grass like a goose. 'Either you fellas got a light?' he asked in a lisping voice.

Leslie got up and handed over his lighter. As a family strode by wheeling their bicycles, the man stood with legs apart and stomach protruding, nodding his whole body, looking everywhere except at the two boys. 'What's happening, fellas?' he asked once the family had passed over the rise.

'Nothing much,' said Danny, thrusting out his stomach in imitation of the pot-bellied man.

'Know where I can find some action?'

'Depends on what kind of action you're looking for.'

The man's eyes dropped to his crotch. 'Well,' he said, putting his hand under his shirt and stroking his hairy belly, 'maybe you and me can go someplace private and I can show you what I mean.'

'If the price is right.'

'And what would that be?'

Danny was having fun. He'd slipped into contract negotiations as easily as if he'd never been away, and the feeling of power and confidence was crushing a week of frustrations. He was in complete control now, like he never was at Sheryl's place or with Ben. He wanted this man to fall at his feet and beg him to spit on him. He wanted to grind him into the dirt for daring to presume Danny was for sale.

'I'll see you later,' said Leslie, walking off.

'Hey, wait!' Danny cried, running after him. 'Where are you going?' He turned back to the pot-bellied man. 'Fuck off,' he said pleasantly enough.

The man was confused. His eyes flicked from Danny to Leslie. 'Hey, kid, what's the deal?' He tossed his cigarette into a bush. 'I thought you and me had something going here.'

Danny glowered at him. 'I don't like repeating myself. Me and my friend didn't come here to get hassled by a dirty fucker like you.'

His face turning sour, the man stuck his stomach out even further. He opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it, and instead waddled away muttering under his breath whatever he'd been too chicken to say to Danny's face.

'You didn't think I'd go off with that creep, did you?'

Leslie looked sheepish. 'I dunno. Looked like you were.'

'I don't do that kinda thing no more. You should know that by now.'

'Oh,' said Leslie, not quite understanding. He sat at the picnic table. 'It proves my point,' he said gloomily.

'What?'

'About men.'

'About men?'

'Nobody likes me.'

Danny, exasperated, threw his hands about. 'Look, Leslie, just because some ugly fucker tries to pick me up, you think …' He sat at the table. 'You know he only talked to me because I said something first.' When Leslie sighed and stared glumly at the ground, he changed tack and said, 'One thing I've learned from the gay scene is that different men like different things. Some guys – like that one – prefer straight-acting guys like me. Others prefer guys who act more like women. I said piss off!' he yelled, for the pot-bellied man was loitering behind a nearby bush, a hand stuck down the front of his track pants.

‘Oh yeah,’ he said, turning back to Leslie, ‘and some guys like dark-haired guys and some like blonds, like you. And some like old guys and some like young and some like skinny and some like muscles. It’s a fucked-up world, I tell ya.’

‘Have you asked Sheri yet?’

‘Asked …? Oh.’ Danny gazed into the distance. ‘Like I said, I’ve hardly seen her. But you know you can stay over whenever you like.’

‘Yeah, but I thought we’d be roommates. I’d have my own bed.’

Danny frowned. Leslie was right; he *had* promised to ask Sheryl if he could move in. He just hadn’t found the right time to bring it up. Every time he mentioned Leslie’s name, her eyes glazed over and she changed the subject. Danny was no good at asking for favours. No good at all.

But Leslie was sinking deeper into depression. He needed a place to live and Danny was the only person in a position to give him one.

Taking Leslie’s arm, he pulled him to his feet. ‘C’mon, buddy. Let’s go. We’re asking Sheri right now.’

‘You mean it?’

‘Didn’t I just say it?’

He bounced a little on his toes. ‘Cool, man. This’ll be so great.’

Danny put an arm around his shoulder and gave him a brotherly hug. Leslie felt like a tree, cold and hard. Leaving the park, they looked not so much like friends as like patient and nurse, taking a therapeutic walk in the dying embers of a glorious day.

Movin' on up

BACK AT THE apartment they found Sheryl bent over a newspaper, chewing the end of a pen and tracing her finger down a column of print. When Danny and Leslie entered the room, she dropped the pen and closed the newspaper over it.

'Hey, guys,' she chirped. 'What's up?'

'Nothing,' said Danny. 'What you doing?'

'Reading the paper.'

'The paper?'

'Yeah. Newspaper.'

'Oh, right.'

He opened the freezer door. 'Any ice-cream left?'

'Sorry, Danny. Got peckish. Try the frozen yogurt.'

'Yuk.'

Screwing up his face, he sneaked a glance at Leslie, who was standing behind Sheryl shivering like a wet dog. Sheryl too seemed edgy. In fact, the whole atmosphere was tense. Perhaps they should save this conversation for another time.

Before he could bail out, she reopened the newspaper and said, 'Danny, I need to talk to you about something. Something important.'

'You getting married?'

She coughed out a laugh. 'No, no. Not yet anyway. But it *is* about Frank and me. And Ben and you.'

At the mention of Ben's name, Danny relaxed his shoulders. He knew what was coming. She was about to lecture him again about the foolishness of hanging out at Squatter Park.

'Ben and me are fine,' he said, pulling open the pantry door, searching for something with chocolate in it.

'I know you are. That's why I can say this.'

He came out of the pantry. 'Say what?'

She glanced over her shoulder. Leslie had drifted into the living room where he was pretending to be interested in the photo of Bubbles the cat. 'Well, Danny,' she began, 'you spend a lot of time at Ben's place, don't you?'

He nodded slowly. Why was she asking a question she already knew the answer to?

'And you love him, don't you?'

'Mmn.' Embarrassed by the admission, he stuck his head back in the pantry.

'Have you ever thought about moving in with Ben? I mean, you want to spend as much time with him as you can, don't you? I know I do with Frank. I'm not ready to move in with him yet … Well, maybe *I* am, but he's definitely not. But after we've been together as long as you and Ben, I expect we'll live together. It's what all couples do.'

The cadence in her voice reminded Danny of that night last year when, standing at the door to Sephryn House, she asked him to move into her apartment. Her words at the time had thrown him, and a similar dread – the fear of the unknown – was creeping over him now. He wished with all his might she would go back to the stupid newspaper and stop scaring him.

Closing the pantry door, he went back to the refrigerator.

'Danny,' she said, 'I've done something I hope you won't be angry about. I've asked Ben if you can move in with him.'

He slammed the refrigerator door so hard it bounced back open. Elbowing it shut, he spun around and glared at her. So that was it; she wanted to get rid of him. He'd suspected this for weeks, but he'd managed to convince himself he was being silly, that Sheryl was simply preoccupied with her job and her charity work and her boyfriend. He tried not to take her neglect of him personally.

But hold on, didn't she say something about moving in with Ben?

Suddenly he was dizzy with joy. How incredible would it be to live with Ben? – to wake up wrapped in his arms every morning, make love all day long, mix their clothes up and do everything as a couple? It was what he'd been dreaming of.

His joy was short-lived. The notion of something so wonderful was beyond his comprehension and he fully expected Sheryl's next move would be to stand up, put a consoling hand on his shoulder and give him the bad news: that Ben didn't want to live with him; that when he stopped and thought about it, he didn't even want to see Danny anymore. Then she would twist the

knife by telling him she didn't want him living here either. In one fell swoop his life would be over.

All this time she was sitting before the open newspaper watching his reaction. Her cruelty infuriated him. 'So?' he yelled. 'What did he say?'

'He said yes.' She smiled at the unexpected outburst. 'What did you expect him to say?'

Tears burst out in a flood of relief and happiness. Danny felt like he'd won the lottery, with the grand prize of a life in which he would never be miserable or lonely again. The apartment dissolved in a bath of watery light and he had to bury his face in his hands to stop himself sobbing like a child.

He heard a chair scrape. Sheryl's voice came to him as if from a great distance. 'Danny … Danny …' Her hand, warm and gentle, stroked his back. 'I thought you'd be pleased.'

'I *am*. I *am* pleased.' Sniffing, he turned his wet face away from her. 'I just … I don't believe it.'

'You don't believe it? But you said you and Ben were doing fine.'

'I was scared he might wanna break up.'

There was a pause. 'You thought you were doing fine but you were worried Ben might want to break up?'

'Yeah. He might of found somebody better.'

She shook her head in disbelief. 'Danny, when you're in love with a person you don't look around for somebody better. You dedicate yourself to the man you love. I certainly have with Frank.'

He wiped the tears from his eyes. 'Is that why you want me to go?'

Her hand fell from his back. 'I don't want you to go. Not at all. You're like a brother to me and I love you.' She went back to the table. 'The thing is, I need to move away from here … away from Northbridge. And I thought you'd be better off living with Ben. You can come with me if you really want, but I can't afford to pay full rent anymore, so we'd need to share with somebody else. Wouldn't you rather live with Ben?'

'Of course.' The idea sent a bolt of desire through his body. 'Why do you need to move? Is it Frank?'

She glanced around the room. 'I wasn't kidding when I said I'd be embarrassed if he saw this place. He'd have a fit.' As if to prove her point, there was a scratching behind the cupboard and something small and quick scampered along the skirting board. 'He keeps on dropping hints. Says he wants to meet my poor old mother before it's too late.'

'I didn't know you had a mother.'

'It's a long story. Frank's got this weird idea Magda's my mother.'

'Is Magda sick?'

She laughed. 'No, no, she's fine. See, I told Frank I live with Magda. And I made him think she's too sick to meet him … to stop him coming here.'

'There's nothing wrong with this place.'

'I know. But Frank lives in a mansion – a real, honest-to-goodness mansion. He's never seen anything like this place in his life. Could you imagine inviting a man like that over for dinner? What if Buck's hanging around out front and tries to sell him drugs? Or Doris drops by in a miniskirt and fishnet stockings? He's likely to think I'm some kind of … weirdo to have people like that as friends and neighbours.'

Danny pulled out a chair and fell into it. He didn't like it when Sheryl talked like this, insulting their friends, claiming she was embarrassed by their life here. He wondered if he was part of her embarrassment. No, that was ridiculous. Having a partner like Ben, a man so attractive and intelligent, was surely proof of his own worth as a person.

And now Ben wanted to live with him.

'I can't believe Ben and me will be living together,' he said to stop her criticising their life. 'It'll be like being married. You sure he's okay about it?'

'He thought it was a great idea. He's crazy about you. I wish Frank talked about *me* like that. I'm sure he will when he sees my new house.'

'Where are you moving to?'

'Not sure yet. I've been looking in the real estate pages. I want to go up in the world – you know, live in a proper house, somewhere with tons of fresh air and a garden. I've wasted too much of my life in this stuffy old place.'

'I like it here.'

'I do as well. But you haven't lived here as long as me. Northbridge is too fast and dangerous. I need somewhere peaceful for a change.'

'Tell me about it, grandma.'

With a wry smile Sheryl got up and passed out of the room, leaving Danny to dream about his future with Ben. The reality of living every day with his lover was still beyond his comprehension. It would be some time yet before it sank in. But he did know one thing: with Danny in the picture every night and day, Ben would have little time left over for the balding old men. He'd make sure of that.

'This will be so cool!' he cried, writhing with anticipation.

Then he remembered Leslie. ‘Hey Leslie –’ he began, spinning around in his seat. But the living room was empty, the front door wide open. The picture of Bubbles lay face down on the TV set.

‘Oh shit!’ He scrunched up his face. Now he was leaving the apartment he would have to come up with a new plan to help Leslie, something that didn’t involve Sheryl. He thought hard, but nothing came to mind. His head was too full of Ben. Eventually he gave up trying and let the Ben thoughts come on.

Smiling from ear to ear, he got up, pushed the door close and fell into the sofa. Stretching out his legs, putting his hands behind his head, he closed his eyes and lost himself in contemplation of his life with the man he loved, the man who loved him, the man who would soon belong to him and him alone.

Roommates

THE STORY OF Sheryl's search for a new home need not be told here. Suffice to say that following two weeks of jerks, perverts, dead-ends and dumps (during which she began to wonder whether there *was* a better place than the Northbridge apartment), she happened upon a delightful room in the seaside suburb of Golden Bay.

The day after signing the lease papers, she sold most of her possessions to a dealer in second-hand furniture and trucked the rest to Golden Bay. Then she and Danny got to work scrubbing the apartment. It took a full two days of effort and by the end they were so exhausted they could barely move, but the place was now cleaner than she'd ever seen it. Throwing open the windows, she stared in awe at the sun-drenched rooms, almost unrecognisable in their emptiness, bright and spacious now there was no clutter to soak up the light.

Finally the hour came to surrender her key. Though Sheryl had been almost frantic in her eagerness to move, when the moment of departure came she was overcome by an urge to lock herself in the bathroom and refuse to leave, so strong was her association with this place.

But leave she did.

On the journey out of Northbridge, her heart was unaccountably heavy. The train rumbled along Black Abbey Bridge, slowing a little to allow another train to clear the track, and as she gazed down on Squatter Park and out at the jumble of buildings that comprised Northbridge, her eyes brimmed with tears. She knew she was leaving those familiar streets forever, and surprisingly enough the realisation made the tears stream faster. These weren't 'happy tears' (to use Danny's words), they were tears of loss, mourning the people and things she was leaving behind, people and things she wasn't able to value until they were no longer part of her life.

By the time the train pulled into Golden Bay Station, the tears had dried. During the trip she'd convinced herself it was madness to harbour memories of a misspent past, especially with such a bright future awaiting her, and the

morbid thoughts were ejected from her mind as promptly as passengers from the train.

Sheryl was one of the last to disembark. In the washroom she took her time fixing her makeup and brushing her hair; then she bought a packet of lifesavers and a newspaper at the kiosk and strolled the short distance to Monet Close. The streets here were wide and clean, lined with lofty elm trees whose branches met above the road as if in greeting. Leaves crunched underfoot. Children yelled playfully. As she turned into Monet Close, a cat leaped out from behind a fence and meowed at her, making her smile.

And then she was home.

The townhouse rose to two storeys, its bricks the colour of sandstone, its tiled roof a warm, inviting terracotta orange. A neat green lawn fronted the property, dissected by parallel lines of stately roses, cream and cinnamon in colour, which accompanied a central brick-paved path to the door. Following the path, Sheryl felt like a bride-to-be rehearsing her walk down the aisle. All she needed to complete the picture was a white lacy dress … and of course, a man to put a ring on her finger.

Inside the house, Cassandra was singing 'Material Girl'. She was stretched out on a curved purple sofa, a yellow cushion beneath her head, a stack of fashion magazines beside her on the carpet. 'This is the look I'm going for' were her first words to Sheryl, and she held up a magazine and jabbed her finger at a gaunt, prepubescent model.

Cassandra Bibby was thirty-one years old, skinny and freckled, with an upturned nose and masses of curly red hair. She looked like a grown-up version of a Cabbage Patch doll, except (unlike the dolls) she wore spandex tops and figure-hugging bicycle shorts most of the time. She worked as personal secretary to her father, a respected architect who'd gifted her the house on her thirtieth birthday. He told her he'd designed the place to reflect her personality, and Sheryl didn't doubt this; they both had an abundance of character.

Sheryl had taken an instant liking to Cassandra. She was fast and funny, full of amusing stories, not easily shocked. But she did have one self-professed weakness: she was addicted to men. She needed a man's affections to validate her worth and was constantly on the prowl for love and attention, spending most evenings at singles bars or wild parties or poring over the personal columns. Fortunately for Cassandra, she was pretty enough to attract a constant stream of dates and this kept her self-esteem at a relatively high level.

But her obsessive behaviour scared men away. And funnily enough, her ex-dates were always hard to contact. They didn't return her calls; they started going to different clubs; they were never home when she went banging at their door. After each failed affair Cassandra would return to the singles circuit, laying careful traps for her next victim, vowing that next time round she wouldn't let her date slip through her fingers so easily.

'Did I tell you I was a model?' she said as Sheryl sank into an armchair.

'You did.'

The story went like this: A few months ago Cassandra's friend, Lana, arranged for them both to do a shoot for a sales catalogue for a chain of mid-market fashion stores. During the shoot Cassandra gave it everything she had, but her constant complaints about the cheap makeup, ill-fitting dresses and unflattering lighting so infuriated the photographer and crew that they tore up her contract and threw her out of the studio. She turned up every day for the next week to plead for another chance, but the door was always locked, and when she peered through the windows she never saw anyone inside.

To Cassandra the rejection came down to one thing: she was too fat. Once she'd fixed this in her head, there was no turning back. She became obsessed with working out, walking around the house with weights attached to her wrists and ankles, doing pinch tests and studying herself in the mirror. Lately she'd taken to eating only cabbages, boiled and pickled and reduced to a revolting green juice. Her dates became litmus tests of her appearance. An invitation for sex or a return date were proof her diet was working. Two unanswered calls was reason enough to restrict herself to the juice until the next man invited her into his bed.

She dropped the magazine on the carpet. 'Sheryl, can I ask your opinion on something?'

'Of course.'

'You need to be honest with me … If you were a prime hunk of sportsman, would you be disappointed when you saw this body?'

Sheryl was a little taken aback by the question. Tonight Cassandra had a blind date with a professional football player, a man whose bare buttocks had recently featured in a beefcake calendar, and for the past three days her sole interests had been the size of his muscles, the consistency of his tan and what it would feel like to run her fingers along those twin mountains of flesh. The date had been arranged by one of her friends, the manager of an introduction

agency, and all Patty would say was that the football player was turned on by petite women with long legs.

'I'm sure he'll be impressed,' Sheryl said.

Cassandra wasn't so sure. 'There's a lot resting on this. I'll just die if he's, like, my perfect match and then he turns around and says I'm too fat.'

'I can't see any fat from where I'm sitting.'

'It's not the fat you can see I'm worried about, girlfriend. I don't want him feeling anything loose, if you get the drift.' She rolled off the sofa and pinched the flesh on her waist. 'Jesus Christ Almighty! I better go do some crunches.' Face stricken, she shot upstairs.

Sheryl moved to the edge of her seat and looked around. The living room was a riot of colour. The walls were painted in the palest of yellows, providing contrast to the purple sofa and blue armchairs. Throw-rugs, cushions, knick-knacks, pot plants and vases of flowers brought colour and interest to every surface. Through the French doors was the back yard: a formal tiled patio, a long stretch of lawn, an array of garden beds exploding with plants and, down the back, a shrubbery.

She fell back and stared up at the pink crystal chandelier. It was hard to accept the absurdity that this place was now home. Slumped there in a daze, exhaustion tugging gently at her brain, she had the strangely real conviction she was a tourist on a house-to-house tour who'd gotten herself separated from the rest of the group.

Pushing herself out of the chair, she went upstairs to unpack. Her room was at the end of a long corridor – not a large room, but it did have an en suite, built-in robes, mood lighting and a window overlooking the garden. Through the open window she caught a glimpse of the palm-fringed beach, and beyond that the ocean, azure blue, with white-capped waves breaking over a submerged reef.

The room was in disarray. There were boxes everywhere. A chair lay overturned with its legs sticking in the air and someone had knocked over her potted palm, spilling soil across the carpet. She lifted the pot and placed the palm near the window, then turned and surveyed the room. Realising she would have to start somewhere, she ripped masking tape from the nearest box and began unpacking clothes, tossing them on the bed in vaguely related piles. On reaching the bottom, she straightened and stood with hands on hips examining the results of her labours. She seemed to have created even more of a mess than what she'd started with.

'Stuff it,' she said, and surrendering the room to the gods of chaos, went downstairs and out through the French doors.

After years of living in weedy, grimy, smog-filled Northbridge, the back yard was as lush and welcoming as the Garden of Eden. The lawn had been mown that same morning, the soil in the beds turned, and the garden was showing its pleasure by releasing a heady aroma. Planting her fingers in the damp earth, Sheryl scooped out a handful of soil and lifted it to her nose. The compost brought on a rush of exhilaration. It might have been a powerful food that nourished simply by its scent. Dropping the clump back in the bed, she brushed the dirt from her hands and meandered to the bottom of the garden, where the shrubbery awaited.

To her delight the shrubbery concealed a leafy, horseshoe-shaped enclosure peopled by weather-worn pots of ivy, a statue of Pan and a rustic wooden bench. It was absolutely enchanting, like something from *The Secret Garden*. Taking a seat on the bench, she listened to the whispering wind, inhaled the fresh sea air and made mental notes of every leaf, every insect, every scent and anything else that caught her attention.

Once her senses were well and truly gorged, she slipped down to the grass and lay watching the clouds as they scudded across the firmament. She felt drained physically, mentally and emotionally. Her mind floated along with the clouds. How could tiny drops of water look so white and fluffy? she wondered. Every cloud took on a shape, something recognisable, something from her bank of memories, and the associations dragged her mind idly from one thought to another. No wonder clouds were associated with dreams.

'Frank,' she whispered, taking hold of the most wondrous thought of all. 'Allow me to introduce my husband, Mr Franklin J. DiMaggio.'

She pictured herself as she opened her door to Frank, presented him with a platter of oysters, stuffed tomatoes and smoked salmon, then showed him around her lovely home. Afterwards they would lean on her windowsill and watch the sunset together, then fall into bed and spend the whole night making love. After weeks of excuses and lies, of lurking in Magda's foyer until Frank drove away, it was almost impossible to conceive of life as a normal couple.

She opened her arms as if she wanted to hug the universe. 'Take me!' she cried.

Though her words were directed at Frank, she might just as well have been talking to the sky. But the clouds rolled on, impervious to her plea. They

were rushing towards the ocean, impatient to join a rapidly swelling mass that brooded grey and immense on the horizon.

A puff of wind swept across her body, and with that the heavy weight of deception, the festering remains of her former life, seemed to evaporate. She was experiencing a defining moment in her life. Once Frank was informed that Magda was on her way to a private clinic in Scotland, their townhouse in Clairemont swapped for this beautiful house in Golden Bay, the way would be cleared for a relationship based on truth. And there would never again be a need for lies.

She closed her eyes. She didn't want to dwell on the mechanics of that conversation right now. She wanted to enjoy the moment. Sighing with pleasure, she imagined herself floating in the heavens, gazing down on the beauty of Golden Bay in the same way she'd gazed upon the lights of the city that first night she and Frank made love. She would see the house and the garden, drenched in sunshine, and there – half hidden in the shrubbery – her corporeal self, experiencing the greatest joy it had ever known.

A grey cloud appeared out of nowhere and passed in front of the sun, and in that instant the sun's warmth was dispelled by a cold breath of wind. Sheryl sat up and looked about. Though summer had lingered, autumn was settling in, and the ravages of winter would be here before she knew it. These next few days were like the last blooms on a rose bush, blooms that are all the more exquisite because they remind us of everything we will miss during the coming months of bleakness.

Suddenly she couldn't wait any longer to begin her new life. Jumping to her feet, she ran inside to find the phone.

'Hey, Sheryl,' said Cassandra, who'd resumed her position on the sofa, 'do you think it's wrong to sleep with a guy on the first date?'

Sheryl released a secret smile. 'I wouldn't say it's wrong,' she said. 'But it can give a guy the wrong impression. If you want respect, it's probably better to wait.'

Her answer didn't seem to be the one Cassandra was wanting to hear. 'I think it'll be a real eye-opener you living here,' she said, going back to her magazine.

But she didn't say for whom.

Differences

DANNY WAS GOING out of his brain. Closing his textbook, he leaned his chair back and groaned in frustration, collecting the noise in his throat until it spilled over and burst from his mouth. He had a test tomorrow on calculus, a subject he knew little about, and he was finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate. The weather was beckoning. It was a perfect day, the first in a long, cold, depressing week, and yellow sunlight was trickling down the roof of the building opposite and splashing on the floor of the tiny apartment. How could anyone stay inside on a day like this? The only reason he was here at all was that Ben was due home any minute.

The thrill of moving in with his lover had lasted about three days. In that time Danny was like a blind man whose sight has been restored. Everything in the apartment had a story to tell, a history and a purpose, and he was determined to learn each one, thereby learning more about Ben. For instance, when Ben told him about the day he found the couch (a blue, low-backed thing speckled with yellow sunflowers), Danny decorated the story with minute details, picturing the cluttered furniture store, the bored, unattractive salesman, Ben's smile of delight when he spotted his prize. It was almost as if he'd been there at his side participating in the purchase.

And the crystal glasses – now *there* was a story! He left the table and went to the kitchenette. There, high on a shelf, safe from fumbling hands, stood the sacred glasses. They were a gift to Ben from his mother, who would later discover she had lung cancer and wouldn't live to see another Christmas. When Ben first told him the story, Danny cried in sympathy, and ever since then he'd viewed the glasses with a kind of funereal reverence, as if they'd once contained Ben's mother's ashes.

With a steady hand he reached up and lifted one of the goblets from the shelf. He pretended to drink from it, then, worried Ben would walk in, replaced the glass and began to breathe again.

Danny couldn't get enough of Ben. There weren't enough hours in the day to accommodate his love, or his lust, for that matter. Waking up next to Ben, clinging to his back as he brushed his teeth, throwing open the shower curtain to watch him wash, helping him cook meals … all these things took on a hallowed, erotic cast which was far removed from the mundane reality.

But reality was slowly and surely taking over. Unseen, unheard, it crept into their lives like an invisible, mood-altering gas. Danny was baffled. His experience of relationships was based on the sitcoms he watched on TV, where people always had funny and interesting things to say to one another. The people on TV were never bored or lonely for long; a laugh was always waiting around the corner; arguments were neatly resolved by the end of the episode. Danny had foolishly expected life with Ben to mirror this, that they'd have a million things to talk about and do together, that they wouldn't need to make an effort to get along. He had yet to learn the lesson most of humanity faces at one time or another: there's a world of difference between loving someone and living with them.

One of the problems was that Ben's apartment was a lot smaller than Sheryl's. It had a single bedroom, a closet-sized bathroom and a combined kitchenette/living room. When Ben was home the place felt cosy and intimate, but when he was out, or they were arguing, the walls seemed like a prison and Danny felt trapped.

And Ben had his faults. He was often involved in political issues or immersed in the personal problems of his friends. He was highly independent, rarely romantic. Danny, on the other hand, was easily bored, demanding of attention, sensitive to any perceived criticisms. Because they were both young, neither was able to step back and look at the situation objectively. They couldn't see that their needs were at odds, that the harmony they both yearned for would not come until they accepted their differences, or one of them changed to become more like the other. Instead, they saw the irritations: the arguments over friends and unwashed dishes, the flare-ups arising from nothing at all. It wouldn't be until the end, when a glimmer of the truth shone through the cracks in their life together, that they would begin to see that their differences were bigger than either of them had realised. And even then, after they'd gone their separate ways, they would continue to make the same mistakes, having failed to appreciate the important things, the things that really matter.

Right now Danny just knew he was bored and he couldn't wait for Ben to get home. He went to the window, pressed his nose against the glass and peered at the tangle of life below. He wondered what he looked like from the street. Maybe a passer-by would glance up and think he was some kind of hideously deformed creature, locked away from the world. The thought made him giggle and he boggled his eyes and poked out his tongue, hoping someone would look up and see him like that and go screaming down the road.

Then he caught sight of Ben. His face returned to normal. Ben was striding along the sidewalk like the star in an old musical, swinging his arms, glancing around, smiling at everyone he passed. Dressed in charcoal and navy blue, his face friendly, his body thick and well-proportioned, people couldn't help but notice him and smile back.

To Danny, Ben was something rare and precious, something that might be stolen from him at any time. 'He's mine,' he said to the people below. 'Keep your fucking hands off him.'

He bounced on his toes. Soon Ben would be in his arms and out of danger. In a flash the apartment would transform from a prison cell to a haven, and then the rest of the world could blast off into space for all he cared.

But when Ben came through the door, it was clear something was wrong.

'Hi Ben,' said Danny.

'Hiya.'

Ben pulled off his baseball cap and raked his fingers through his hair. He tossed the cap into the bedroom like a Frisbee, then threw himself on the couch.

Danny came and sat on the arm. 'How was your meeting?'

'The meeting was good.' He peered up at Danny with coal-black eyes. His hair was sticking up at the front, so Danny reached out a hand and smoothed it down.

'Did you tell Eric not to come around here anymore?'

He pulled his hand away. He couldn't believe it! The bastard had blabbed on him! He'd foolishly assumed Eric would simply do as he was told and vanish from their lives, never to be seen again. He knew he shouldn't have trusted him.

'I didn't say that,' he said, getting up from the couch.

'What did you say then?'

He studied his nails. 'I told him this place wasn't big enough for … for …'

‘Eric said you called him a boring old queen and then you said he needed to stick to his own kind. Is that true?’

Danny went to the table and opened his calculus book. He could feel his face burning. He knew Ben was staring at him, no doubt wondering how in hell he’d gotten himself involved with such a troublemaker.

‘Danny, come back here, please.’

He obeyed like a robot.

‘Look, I don’t expect you to get on with my friends. But I do expect you to respect them … and me.’

‘I hate them.’

Ben sighed through his teeth, a hissing sound that seemed to go on forever. ‘There’s no reason to hate them. They’re just different from you. They’re older. And they’re working at things that’ll one day benefit all gay people, including you and me. When you get to their age you might understand where they’re coming from.’

The comment bit like an accusation. The bees began stirring in Danny’s chest. ‘You’re saying it’s my fault?’

‘I’m not saying it’s your fault. I’m only asking you to try to understand them and make an effort to get along.’

‘They don’t make any effort.’

His legs were shaking, so he sat on the couch and tried to hold them still with his hands. When that failed, he jumped up. ‘They’re always talking about me behind my back!’ he cried. ‘And when they’re talking to you it’s like I’m not even there! I know what they think. They want me gone so they can have you all to themselves.’

Ben looked pained. ‘You’re wrong about that, Danny. I’ve never heard my friends say one bad thing about you. Anyway, like I said, you don’t need to like them. It’s not like we have to have the same friends.’ He untied his shoelaces. ‘Take Leslie, for example. He gives me the creeps.’

‘Leslie?’ The change of subject threw him. He stared at Ben, awaiting an explanation. ‘Leslie hasn’t done anything to you.’

‘I never said he did. I just gave him as an example of … of someone I don’t particularly like. But I don’t tell you not to see him, do I?’

‘I didn’t know you hated Leslie.’

Ben pulled off his shoes. ‘I don’t hate Leslie. Just because I don’t like him, doesn’t mean I have to hate him.’

‘Leslie told me you hated him and I thought he was just being stupid.’

'I said I don't hate him.'

Now Danny was even more confused. What did Leslie have to do with the balding old men? Was Ben's friendship with them a retaliatory move for him being friends with Leslie? 'I haven't seen Leslie in ages,' he said.

'Yeah, I noticed that. What happened?'

He shrugged. 'Must've met somebody.' Suddenly his mind seized on an important point. 'But if you told me not to see him anymore, I wouldn't.'

Ben laughed, a noise that to Danny sounded cruel. 'Good one, Danny. But not relevant to the argument. If you choose not to see Leslie, that's your own choice. I wouldn't order you not to see him.'

'But it's your fault I don't see Leslie, so maybe you shouldn't spend so much time with your friends either.'

Ben laughed again. The tension over, he went off to take a shower.

Danny, however, stood trembling with rage. Ben made it sound like it was all his fault, that the balding old men were working for a cause that was noble and selfless, whereas he was running around like a spoilt child. If those guys were so smart and mature, why did they treat him like shit? And why should he make an effort when the balding old men went out of their way to cause trouble?

He began pacing the floor like a caged animal, trying to burn off his rage. But the movement only generated further heat. From the bathroom came the splashing of water and snatches of Ben's voice as he sang along to a song on the radio. Danny stopped and pressed his ear against the door. If it wasn't for balding old Eric he'd be in there right now with Ben; he wouldn't be out here feeling as if he'd been slugged in the guts.

'You're gonna pay,' he whispered to the absent enemy.

He returned to the arm of the couch. In retrospect he knew it was a bad move to tell Eric to stay away from Ben. (The demand had flown from his mouth before he could stop it.) But his feelings on the matter were stronger than ever and he knew that what he had to do was think of more subtle ways to tackle the problem of the balding old men. He would also need to pay close attention to his relationship with Ben, for this was war and in war you had to plan your offences and defences carefully, and take especial care to protect your rear.

The noise of skidding tyres came screeching through the apartment. Danny shot to the window. He was half-hoping to see chaos outside, a car in

flames or blood splattered across the road – something horrible happening to someone else. But down on the street, life went on as before.

Behind him, Ben emerged from the bathroom, a towel held around his hips. 'What was that?' he asked.

'Nothing,' said Danny, spinning around.

At the sight of Ben's bare chest a lewd smile played across his lips. He lunged for the towel, but Ben stepped deftly out of reach, blocking his hand with his forearm. 'Don't,' he said. 'I need to shave,' and he went back in the bathroom and closed the door.

Danny was dumbstruck. Ben never rejected his advances. Had things gone too far this time? He was suddenly reminded of Jon, of that night in the woods, and this served to depress him further. That final unpleasant episode with Jon had almost destroyed his life and he had the awful, gut-wrenching feeling that history was getting ready to repeat itself.

Returning to the window, he gazed towards the distant hills. They weren't visible from here, but he could feel them. They were in his blood. They were the reason he was here. He glanced over his shoulder at the closed bathroom door. Was there something to be learned from that ancient mistake? Was there a flaw in his personality that invited rejection whenever things appeared to be going well?

Jon was the latest in a long line of his mother's boyfriends. He was a rocket scientist, sweet-natured, clever and sensitive, with shaggy brown hair and a passion for all kinds of sports. Danny's mother loved to brag to the neighbours about Jon's work on a project to send manned spaceships to Mars, and Danny (fourteen years old by then and wild as a tiger) was enthralled by his physical prowess and knowledge of sports trivia. Like an answered prayer, domestic life clicked back into gear. Jon enjoyed treating Danny like his son, and Danny's mother liked anything that pleased Jon. They did things together as a family: went to the movies, ate meals at the dinner table, spent time down at the beach – and Danny quickly responded to the positive influence in his life.

One long weekend Jon and Danny went camping. After driving for hours, they came to a forest full of giant trees, where the air was icy blue and a white-water river sliced a ravine through the steep and stony hills. The first thing they did was climb one of the giant trees. At the top was a ranger's station, a wooden platform that afforded a view of the entire forest. As the platform swayed dangerously under their feet, Danny watched the wind rippling from

treetop to treetop, the fluffy white clouds scudding across the endless blue, the birds sailing through the pristine air, and tried in vain to describe his awe to Jon, who smiled and put his hand on the back of his neck.

The trip was meant as an opportunity for Jon and Danny to bond, but to Danny it had a deeper meaning. It showed him Jon preferred his company to his mother's. Why else would he choose to spend three whole days with him, leaving his mother home alone? For some time now, Danny had found himself sneaking glances at Jon's chiselled chest and hairy legs. And his feelings went much further than childish admiration. Jon had been on the rowing team in college and he needed only the flimsiest of excuses to rip off his shirt and flex his muscles. Each time this happened, Danny viewed it as further proof he was flirting with him. It drove him crazy. He longed for Jon to hug him in the same way he hugged his mother. He wanted him to crush him against his chest and never let go. But of course he was only a boy and he knew Jon was far too sensible to make a move on a minor, even one as plainly mature as Danny.

Deep in the forest was a rough clearing that served as a camping ground. It was here they stopped for the night. As the sun fell behind the hills, they opened cans of Irish stew and heated the contents over a small fire. When it got dark, they lit an oil lamp, changed into their tracksuits and huddled together in the two-person tent making plans for the next day. Danny wanted to go fishing. Jon wanted to hike to the ridge where there was a rock pool and a waterfall. They had time enough for both.

They turned off the lamp at around nine and lay side by side with blankets pulled over them to keep them warm. The darkness was absolute. Outside, a bitter wind rattled the tent and shook the branches of the trees. Something (probably a dog) released a long, plaintive howl. Danny wasn't in the least bit tired. Lying wide-awake, he listened to the rasp of Jon's breathing and warmed himself in the heat of his body. After what seemed like hours, he managed to fall asleep – but it was a restless, tortured kind of sleep, alive with the sights and smells of Jon, punctured by dreams in which they'd pulled down their track pants and were touching each other in places Danny had always thought were private, places no one else was supposed to touch.

In the cold early hours of the morning he was woken by the sound of thunder. As the fog of dreams cleared, he became aware he was pressed against Jon's back. And then, to his horror, he realised his hand was in Jon's crotch.

His veins filled with ice. Lightning crackled, lighting up the tent. A crick formed in his neck, but he was too petrified to move, too scared even to breathe. Jon was snoring and he seemed to be fast asleep, but he had an erection and it felt like burning steel in Danny's hand. Was he really asleep? Maybe he was only pretending to be asleep so Danny would go further.

Thunder shook his body. The erection in his hand was the first besides his own that he'd ever touched, and it felt immeasurably different from his. Unable to resist the temptation, he gently moved his hand upwards, felt the flesh crinkle, the blood surging beneath the taut skin. Then he pulled the other way, astounded by how incredible it felt when the flesh in your hand wasn't your own.

He was about to let go when he sensed a change in Jon's breathing.

'What are you doing?' he groaned in a voice groggy with sleep.

Danny almost jumped out of his skin. He tried to let go, but the shock had thrown his wits off balance and his grip grew tighter.

'Ow!' yelled Jon, grabbing hold of his wrist. He tried to pull his hand away, but Danny held on, his mind stunned by terror. When at last Jon broke his grip, he threw his hand away like a venomous snake.

'I – uh – sleep – wake,' Danny stammered, backing into a corner of the tent. The canvas flapped against his head. Cold rocks dug into the bones of his backside. In the suffocating darkness it was impossible to see a thing, but he could imagine Jon cringing in the opposite corner of the tent, only for a very different reason.

'You were touching my –! You were –! This is unbelievable!'

Jon's voice was hoarse and ugly, as chilling and unreal as a voice from a horror movie. What had occurred was the most appalling thing Danny could ever imagine happening; worse than waking up naked in your classroom or burning down your parents' home. Lightning flashed again, but he was too scared to look up. As thunder echoed between the hills, he had a sense things would never be right again.

Jon's next words confirmed this. 'What were you thinking, Danny? I'm a grown man, for Christ's sake! Your mother's boyfriend! What would she say if she found out?'

The voice seemed part of the darkness itself, the universe uttering a threat to a hopeless deviant. Of course it would be impossible to keep his mother out of this. Jon would tell her what he did, and then she would hate him forever for trying to steal away the best man she'd ever known. And Jon would never

be able to look him in the face again. He shook uncontrollably. His life was ruined in the blink of an eye.

But as shock and despair combined to form something sour and corrosive, his brain went on the offensive. Before he knew it, his reaction had changed from terror to outrage. Why had Jon led him on in the first place? Why the hell had he bought such a small tent? And how could he lay all the blame on Danny when he was the one with the erection?

The voice came again, coarse and spiteful. 'Danny, goddammit, I'm talking to you! What have you got to say for yourself?'

The savagery in his voice spurred Danny into action. His world was flying away from him and he did the only thing he could think of: he took off after it. Snatching up his backpack, he fled into the night.

'Danny! Danny!'

Tearing through the scrub, swiping away branches that whipped back in his face, he tried to block out Jon's voice. The threat of pursuit pushed him on, driving him faster and faster. Suddenly he tripped on a fallen branch, twisted his ankle in a depression in the ground, fell flat on his face. Picking himself up, he limped on.

When he was certain he'd put enough distance between himself and Jon, he rested his back against a tree and tried to catch his breath. His lungs were burning, screaming for air, and it took a while for them to quieten down and allow him to listen for footfalls or the crackle of breaking twigs. He strained his ears. Wind rustled through a thousand trees. Insects chirped and clicked. An owl hooted somewhere nearby. But there were no signs of human life. At that moment Danny might have been the only person on earth.

Pushing away from the tree, he headed in the direction he believed the road to be. Unfortunately, he misjudged, and it wasn't until the woods were beginning to turn from a murky black to a cold, hazy, dismal grey that he happened across the interstate highway, where he was picked up by a passing truck. The truck was on its way to deliver frozen beef to the Northbridge markets, and this is where Danny was off-loaded too.

So that was it. The worst night of his life. The end of his childhood. Until today he'd always fled from this memory, afraid it would carry too much pain and guilt, but reflecting on it from the safety of his new home, it seemed a simple story of innocent mistakes and misread messages. Danny had done nothing wrong. If he'd calmly explained to Jon that the location of his hand

was as much a surprise to him as it was to Jon, then Jon might have been reassured and life might have gone on as before.

But in that case, where would Danny be now? Likely still in Greenville, still lusting after his mother's boyfriend, still alone. He wouldn't have gained his freedom and independence. He wouldn't have met Ben. So, the bottom line was this: after a period of misfortune and hardship, everything had worked out for the best. It struck him that the misunderstanding with Jon, devastating as it had been at the time, had led by degrees to his current happiness, and the conclusion he drew was that rejection is not always a bad thing. It can sometimes be a stepping-stone to something better.

But if he didn't do something to secure his relationship with Ben, if (God forbid) they split up, then who's to say he would ever be this happy again? His brain hurt with the implications. He only knew he didn't want to face the prospect of separation. That would surely signal the end of his run of good luck.

Ben appeared from the bathroom in his boxer briefs and the solution came to him in a flash. It was simple. A mature adult facing relationship difficulties would sit down with his partner and calmly and rationally lay their problems on the table for discussion. Of course, once Ben saw things from his perspective he would apologise for being so cold-blooded, disloyal and inconsiderate and then he would take him in his arms and promise never to take him for granted again.

But though this was the mature and sensible thing to do, Danny found himself unable to speak. He'd already figured out in watching *The Bold and the Beautiful* that many of the conflicts in the lives of the Forresters and their friends and antagonists arose when people withheld their true feelings or kept secrets. If they were open and honest about everything, many of their conflicts could be avoided or worked through, and things could move on. But his difficulty was this: if he asked Ben to be open and honest about their relationship, the response he received might not be the one he wanted. For instance, Ben might say, 'Danny, I'm glad you brought that up. My feelings for you have changed' or 'I've met somebody else, somebody older and more sensible.' By withholding this opportunity, things could go on as before and he would have time to make Ben fall in love with him all over again.

So how to handle the present crisis?

'You going to be nicer to my friends, Danny?' Ben asked.

'Yep,' he said without a thought.

‘Then you’ve earned a kiss.’

Ben pounced on him and they lost balance and fell laughing to the carpet. In the end the reward went a lot further than a kiss, and by the time Ben went off to work, Danny was left with a renewed hope that everything would be alright.

Now all he had to do was get rid of those balding old men.

The visitors

WHEN SHERYL OPENED the door, she was expecting to see Frank or Mormons on the porch. Instead, it was Doris and Danny.

'Surprise!' they cried, all smiles.

Her jaw dropped. Her first thought was to slam the door in their faces.

'Danny … Doris,' she said, turning from one to the other. 'What are you doing here?'

They looked at each other as if stuck for an answer. Sheryl frowned at them, her hand gripping the door. And in that awkward moment, as a biting wind blew down from the low grey sky, old Mrs Gustafson from next door appeared on her driveway, her dog, Dolly, trotting along behind. At the letterbox she turned and waved, and then, to Sheryl's horror, picked up the Pekingese and stood smiling in their direction.

She pulled the door open wider. 'Come in, come in,' she urged, making way for them. 'It's, ah … It's great to see you.'

Danny entered first, walking on tiptoes. He had on green sneakers, a khaki military-style top and copper-coloured jeans with black stitching. Doris was close behind, her hair standing up on her head like an exclamation mark. She was dressed in a fluffy pink sweater, purple leather pants and pointy black boots. Slung over one shoulder was an enormous floppy bag constructed of some kind of parachute material. Drawing level with Sheryl, she leaned close and pecked her on the cheek, then went to join Danny in the living room.

Sheryl uttered a nervous little laugh. They looked like a gay boy and a hooker.

'I don't believe this!' she cried, waving her hands in the air as if she'd pulled them out of a hat. 'Why didn't you call?'

They stood there looking ill at ease.

'I might have been out. As a matter of fact, I'm going out very soon.'

'We wanted to surprise you,' said Doris, placing a protective arm around Danny's waist. 'We miss you, Sheri.'

'Yeah,' said Danny, shaking with excitement or fear.

'I missed you guys as well. It's just that … To be honest, it's a bad time. You should have called first and saved yourself a wasted trip.' She showed them her hands to prove she had nothing to hide. 'You see, Frank's due any minute. We've got this meeting with important buyers, and after that we're off to a really exclusive party.'

Doris stepped around the coffee table and took a seat on the sofa. 'That's okay, Sheri. We can help you get ready.'

Danny went to the French doors, saying, 'This place is way cool. There's, like, so much room here.'

Sheryl glanced anxiously at her watch. Frank was due in forty-five minutes, an hour at most; barely enough time to get rid of her guests and finish getting ready. But Doris was pulling off her pointy black boots and seemed intent on making herself at home.

'Hey guys!' she cried, attempting a diversion. 'Let's go outside. It's something else out there.'

Striding across the room, she threw open the French doors. As she stepped onto the patio, Danny slipped past her like a dog granted its freedom and took off for the shrubbery. Near the bottom of the garden he jerked to a stop and squinted at the cloudy sky. A second later he was off again, disappearing into the bank of leaves.

'What's back here?' came his voice, carried away by the wind.

'Just bushes!' yelled Sheryl.

She peered into the living room, trying to see past the reflections in the glass. A pink and purple shape drifted towards her. Then Doris appeared in the doorway, shorter now in her bare feet.

'Sheri, this is beautiful,' she said, folding her arms against the cold. 'You are very lucky.'

The words brought Sheryl a hot flush of pleasure and she was able to give Doris a look of real affection. With the passing of time the novelty of living in Golden Bay had begun to wane, but seeing her old friends called to mind the hopeless situation she'd left behind. Surveying the immaculate garden, she thought: It won't hurt to be hospitable for a while, smile at their kind words, listen to their news. After sitting out here for a few minutes they'll get so cold they'll be forced back inside, and then I'll keep them moving to the front door.

Danny came bounding back up the lawn. His eyes were bright, his lips full and red. A thin white cloud burst from his mouth with each breath. 'I wish I had a garden like this,' he said.

'The garden is my favourite part of the house.'

'Are you happy here?' asked Doris.

Sheryl turned to her. 'Of course! Of course I'm happy! How could I not be happy here?'

Doris smiled in a way that suggested she knew exactly why people who lived in places like this might not be happy. She moved her gaze to the shrubbery and the smile turned to ice. Sheryl had a maddening feeling Doris knew things, that her silence spoke of an understanding of life she herself was yet to achieve. But what could Doris possibly have seen in her short time here that would cause her to ask such a question?

She looked at Danny. 'How about you, Danny? How are you getting on?'

'Great.'

'Great?'

'Yeah.'

'Aren't you cold?'

'Nup.'

'You should be wearing a jacket.'

A shrug.

'Studying hard?'

'Yep.'

'And how's Ben?'

'He's cool.'

'That's nice to know.'

She smiled at him. Danny was as uncommunicative as ever. He seemed taller, but he'd also lost weight since she last saw him. He was returning to the build he had when they first met, before she fattened him up. But at least things were fine with Ben. It took a load off her mind. A couple of days ago he'd rung out of the blue. At the time she'd been too busy to speak with him (she seemed eternally busy these days) and so she promised to ring back later that evening. Only now did she remember this broken promise.

'Come on, you guys,' she sighed, motioning towards the outdoor setting. 'Let's sit for a few minutes. Then I really must go and get ready.'

They sat. Sheryl unfastened her watch and placed it on the table.

'How are things at the parlour, Doris?'

Doris stared at the watch, her hands pressed into her lap. Her silence alarmed Sheryl, who'd never known her friend to hold back on an insult or opinion. Thoughts flashed through her mind of a fire or a psychotic client with a shotgun.

Doris lifted her eyes. 'Don't ask. Everything is changed. Magda is gone.'

'Gone?' She frowned at Danny. 'What do you mean by gone?'

Doris took a deep breath and recounted the story of Magda's demise.

Not long after Sheryl's departure, Lynne resigned to take a job at a women's refuge, a shelter for victims of rape and domestic violence. Since Sheryl and Lynne had been two of Sephryn House's top earners, their resignations left a gaping hole in the takings, a fact that quickly came to the notice of the owner, Mr Bronson. Magda, instructed to do something about it, responded by importing two women from a rival parlour, Melody's Massages, hoping by this measure to poach some of Melody's A-list clients.

But her plan backfired.

Eve and Tina were experienced and ambitious women who, as it turned out, had long been on the lookout for a small parlour they could raze to the ground and rebuild in their own image. Sephryn House, with its petty rivalries and unresolved conflicts, was ripe for the razing. And so began a clash of titanic proportions, with Eve and Tina waging a treacherous dirty-tricks campaign and Crystal taking on the role of commander-in-chief of the Sephryn House brigade.

Things came to a head one evening when a fight erupted over a claim that Eve and Tina were spreading lies to clients about the poor health and unsafe sexual practices of the other women. The volley of verbal assaults quickly progressed to an all-out brawl – punching, kicking and hair pulling – which sent Magda scurrying to her office. As luck would have it, the owner chose that moment to walk in. Mr Bronson was a fair man, but when all was said and done he was also a businessman and he'd been concerned for some time that the returns from Sephryn House were not matching those of his other enterprises. At this clear proof of Magda's incompetence, he fired her on the spot and employed in her place his sister-in-law, Monique, a slab of a woman whose sole focus was profits. Monique cared nothing for the women or their problems and demanded strict obedience. Lately she'd fired women on the flimsiest of excuses.

'That's terrible!' Sheryl gasped at the end of the story. 'How are you coping?'

Doris shrugged. ‘A job is a job. I do my work and stay away from everything else.’

‘Magda was so nice. It doesn’t seem fair.’

‘Aha. Magda *is* nice. But she is too nice sometimes. She lets girls get away with things. Mr Bronson was unhappy when Sephryn House started losing money. I understand his position.’

Danny, to whom the story was as gripping as a soap opera, nodded in agreement. He glanced around the table. While Doris shivered and Sheryl meditated on her luck in escaping Sephryn House when she did, he dug in his pocket and withdrew a crumpled, folded envelope. ‘A letter came,’ he said, smoothing out the creases.

Sheryl took it from him. She recognised the handwriting straight away. ‘When did you get this?’

‘The other day. When I rang.’ He smiled vacantly. Guessing she expected more of an answer, he added, ‘I’ve been checking the letterbox. I threw away the bills, but this one looked important.’

‘Danny, you shouldn’t throw away bills.’ She frowned at him, trying to focus on bills, on normal, everyday concerns. She wanted to make this letter seem unimportant, a letter she might receive any day. ‘They don’t go away, you know. They always find you in the end.’

‘Yeah,’ he said, not listening. ‘Who’s the letter from?’

‘My … father.’

Doris and Danny exchanged glances. They both knew Sheryl had not heard a word from her parents since the day she walked out on them.

‘Open it,’ said Danny.

She felt sick. The implications of the letter were enormous. She’d long ago abandoned any hope of re-establishing a relationship with her parents, but after all the things that had flowed to her from that single act of bravery, was it possible a family reconciliation might also ensue? Might her good fortune extend this far?

In her haste to open the envelope she tore it down the middle. Pulling out the letter, she tossed the severed envelope on the table, where it did a queer little dance before blowing to the ground and skittering off down the patio.

There were only a few lines, she noticed, but the letter started positively enough.

Dear Sheryl (it read), Your mother and me saw you on TV and we are very proud of you. We have told every one at Church and they are very proud also. Your mother sends Love and wants to know if you are still doing singing? It is a very Christian thing you are doing. Your mother and me are door knocking for the Red Cross so we are doing the same as you for under privleged in the world. Do you still make good money? We thank you for the money. Much of it went towards building our new Church and it looks very beautiful now. If you can see your way to send more then your mother can have her operation for she is in a lot of pain. The Doctor says she will be better when she has certain organs removed. May God bless you and keep you well. Love from your loving parents.

'Is it good news?' asked Doris.

Sheryl held the letter in her lap. From here the tiny, cramped words made no sense. It didn't even look like her father's handwriting. She had the creepy feeling that if she read it again it would say something entirely different, something mean and accusatory. But right now it shone like a beacon of hope.

'They say they're proud of me,' she said, hardly daring to believe her own words.

She folded the letter in two, concealing its contents from view. She couldn't bring herself to mention her father had also asked for money. It cast a shadow over the whole letter. But, she argued, what did it matter if he only wrote once the money stopped? It was perfectly natural that in a letter of congratulations he would inquire about this, especially with her mother needing an operation. Her parents couldn't lie, for lying was a sin, and this meant their pride was real. That was all that mattered.

She unfolded the letter and read it again, fixing her attention on the part about her mother's illness. She needs certain organs removed. Did this mean her condition was serious? Sheryl didn't have a lot of money in the bank (her spending hadn't declined in proportion to her earnings), but she decided she would send whatever she could, and try to send more later.

Doris's teeth were beginning to chatter. 'Sheri, let me help you to get ready,' she said.

'Oh shit!' She snatched the watch from the table. 'Look at the time! Thanks, Doris, but you'd better go.'

Doris glanced at Danny, and together they got up and followed her inside.

‘Sheri, Danny and I will keep you company while you get ready. We have not seen you in a long time.’

‘We’ve only been here a few minutes,’ Danny added.

Despite Sheryl’s protests, they refused to budge, and in the end she was forced to leave them sitting in the living room while she went upstairs and threw herself in the shower.

On emerging from the bathroom she was alarmed to find Doris in her bedroom, sitting at the dressing table, her shoulder bag open on the floor. She’d lined up an array of brightly-coloured bottles and tubes.

‘I have everything ready, Sheri. I will make you beautiful for your Frank.’

Ripping open a dresser drawer, Sheryl pulled out flesh-coloured panties and a pair of stockings and threw them at the bed. ‘I can do it myself, Doris.’ Recalling the letter, she slipped it from her pocket and buried it in the drawer, covering it with underwear.

‘Look,’ she said, folding her arms, trying to sound casual, ‘there’s no point you and Danny hanging around. You’ll only slow me down.’

Doris showed her a tube of mauve lipstick. ‘This is my favourite colour,’ she said. She leaned close to the mirror and applied a thick coat, then sat back and gave herself a wide, cheesy smile.

Once again Sheryl was forced to retreat. Pulling a hanger from the closet, she dressed in a hurry, all the while psyching herself up for what she was going to say next.

‘Look, Doris,’ she began, watching her approach in the dressing table mirror. ‘I’m sorry, but I need to ask you and Danny to leave.’

Doris gazed at her friend’s reflection. After a few moments, she turned to face the real Sheryl. She’d known all along the reason for her rude behaviour. She understood the shame Sheryl felt about her past, the fear she had of being found out, her need to protect herself. Her obstinacy had been a test, designed to push Sheryl to the wall and squeeze out her true feelings. Doris wasn’t acting in spite; she just had a strong sense of right and wrong and her character didn’t allow her to abet evil or unpleasantness in any form.

‘Sheri,’ she said, ‘I know you are only trying to do what is right for yourself. But you are forgetting that Danny and I are your friends and we care for you. When my time here is over, I will go back to my family. But Danny has no family. He is only a boy. You are not being fair to him.’

Sheryl felt her lungs clench. This had the potential to become a long and bitter scene, and she had no time for explanations and recriminations.

Turning her back on her accuser, she searched under the bed for her shoes. 'All I'm saying is Frank will be here soon and I need to get ready. That's all.'

But Doris would not be fobbed off by trite excuses. 'Sheri, this goes beyond today. You have not been to see Danny. And now, when he comes to bring you your letter, you make him feel like a stranger.'

Her shoes weren't under the bed. Getting more frustrated by the second, she grabbed a hair brush and used it to punctuate her words. 'Doris, Danny isn't a child anymore. He's been by himself most of his life, and now he's got Ben to build a life around. That's more than I've got. My situation here is extremely fragile. I could lose everything in an instant.' She began brushing her hair, using savage, punishing strokes, scowling as the bristles dug into her scalp.

'Ben is Danny's lover. He is not Danny's family. What will happen if they break up?'

The question stopped Sheryl in her tracks. 'Are they having problems?'

'No. They are happy. But Danny is young. He has much to learn about relationships and he has only you to turn to if things don't go well with Ben. He feels your rejection already. He doesn't understand your problem as I do. You must remember that. You must stay a part of Danny's life.'

Sheryl pulled out the stray hairs trapped in the brush and dropped them on the carpet. 'Alright, alright. I get the message. I'll keep in touch.'

But even as the words emerged, she knew they were only a ploy to get rid of her unwelcome visitors. Her mind was churning with anxiety over Frank's arrival and she would have said anything to convince Doris to leave.

'You will visit Danny?'

'I will.'

'Soon?'

'Of course.'

'And you will tell him to come to you if he is in trouble?'

'I wouldn't have it any other way.'

'In that case, Sheri, we will leave you in peace.'

'Thank you.' Grabbing Doris's wrist, she pulled her off the chair, out of the bedroom and down the stairs. Doris struggled to keep up, almost tripping over her feet.

'Danny?'

He was nowhere to be seen. On further investigation she found him in the kitchen, his head in the refrigerator.

'What are you doing?' she asked, looking at his pockets for signs of pilfering.

'So many cabbages.'

Cold air crept across her feet. 'Oh … yes.' She stared at the cabbages lined up on the shelves. 'Cassandra has … a special diet.' A tingle of shame stole along the back of her neck. Cassandra's eating habits were an embarrassment to her, a blight on the otherwise perfect household. It wasn't only cabbages either; the refrigerator was crammed with bags of carrots, bottles of prune juice and tins of sauerkraut.

Pulling him away, she pushed the door shut and steered him from the kitchen. 'Doris is going now,' she said loudly.

'Yes, Danny,' said Doris, who'd slipped back into her boots. 'We must leave Sheri to prepare for her date.' She fixed Sheryl with a stare. 'Goodbye, Sheri. Do not forget to ring. Soon.'

Sheryl nodded all the way to the door. 'I will. And speaking of ringing, please do it next time before you come calling.'

Doris left the comment unanswered. But once Danny was on the porch, he stopped and gave her a long, disapproving look, a look that was also filled with sadness. Too embarrassed to meet his gaze, she grinned at the concrete, pretended to squash a bug, kicked a dead leaf onto the garden. After a while the green sneakers moved away, and only then did she have the nerve to look up.

Passing down the rose-lined path, turning towards the station, neither Doris nor Danny waved or looked back. They were both walking quickly, Danny taking long, heavy steps, Doris trotting beside him in her high-heeled boots.

Sheryl stood watching them. She breathed steadily through her nose. As they neared the corner, she began to feel bad. Had she been too rude? She was so preoccupied with Frank's impending arrival she couldn't concentrate on anything else. But Danny's final look played on her conscience.

She stepped forward and cried, 'Look after yourself, Danny!' But by this time he was too far away to hear. He didn't turn around.

She went inside, closed the door and leaned her back against it. Later, when Danny went missing, her thoughts would return to this moment and she would agonise over what went wrong and wonder whether a few kind

words might have made all the difference. But right now all she felt was relief that a disaster had been averted.

She was about to move away when a knock came at the door, startling her. Dammit! she thought. What now? Throwing open the door, she readied herself for an all-out fight.

'Frank!' She glanced down the street. Doris and Danny were nowhere in sight. 'I, er … Come in.'

He pecked her on the cheek. 'Who were those characters who just left?'

'You saw them?'

'I was on the phone.'

She looked behind him and saw parked on the road a white Ford Falcon, one of the company cars. 'They … They're … Cassandra's friends.'

He nodded. 'Of course. She's a strange one, that Cassandra. A bit too slutty for my taste. Is she here?'

'No, she's … visiting her folks.'

The lie came easily. It wouldn't have done any harm for Frank to know Cassandra was on a date, but Sheryl preferred to keep him in the dark about her roommate's steady stream of boyfriends. The truth was too close to her own.

She shut the door. 'I'm running late, Frank. Those people took a long time to get rid of. Fix yourself a drink.'

'Hey, wait!' He held her shoulders, impeding her escape. 'Is this any way to greet the man of your dreams?'

She melted into his arms and held on for dear life. Meeting his lips, she kissed him hungrily, and he responded by pulling her hard against his body.

'Frank, you're –' He pressed his mouth against hers, cutting off her words. 'Frank, you're … going to be … late … for your meeting.' With a reluctant effort, she broke free and stepped out of reach. He made a half-hearted attempt to recapture her, then changed his mind and went off to the bar.

Smiling, Sheryl headed for the staircase. Before she reached it, another knock came at the door.

The noise hit her like a shove in the back. Cold fear washed over her. Frank was at the bar, a long black smudge in the corner of her eye – judge, jury and executioner if this meant what she thought it meant.

With weak legs she crossed the field of carpet and pulled open the door.

Standing on the porch were Doris and Danny.

Doris said, 'I'm sorry, Sheri. I left my bag in your room.'

Sheryl implored her with her eyes to turn around and walk away, but the plea was to no avail. With a small shrug, Doris slipped past her and stepped into the room. Danny was close behind.

'Hello, sir,' she said, holding out a many-ringed hand. 'You must be Frank. Sheri has told me all about you.'

'Hello,' said Frank, taking her small hand in his large one. 'And you must be …?'

'My name is Doris. And behind me is my friend, Danny.'

'Pleased to meet you. You too, Danny.' He looked Danny up and down, smiled at the copper-coloured jeans and green sneakers, returned his attention to Doris.

'I left my bag upstairs,' Doris explained, crossing to the staircase. She took her time going up, trailing her fingers along the balustrade. Frank followed her with his eyes, a grin fixed on his face – a man's grin. He didn't turn away until her purple leather pants and tiny black boots had disappeared from view, and then his gaze passed to Sheryl and the grin became an inquisition.

Sheryl was mortified. The game was lost. When Doris returned, Frank would grill her until the truth came out, and then she'd be left with no job, no lover and no life. To avenge his wounded honour he might even vow to use his considerable wealth and influence to destroy her. Was it too late to change her lie and align it more closely with the truth? She could claim Danny was her cousin, concede he was gay, offer up this half-truth on the altar of their love. She could say Doris was his fag hag – a term she loathed but one that might provide an acceptable response to Frank's inevitable questions about her connection to this colourful couple.

Doris was gone less than two minutes. Her parachute bag slung over her shoulder, she waved goodbye to Frank, stepped past Sheryl and breezed out the door, once again followed by Danny.

Sheryl shut the door behind them. Turning around, she half expected to be confronted by total devastation, a room full of broken furniture and smashed glass, the aftermath of Hurricane Doris. But everything was strangely calm.

Frank splashed whiskey into a tumbler and downed it all in one hit. He looked like he needed the drink to recover from what he'd just seen.

'Shouldn't you be getting ready?' he asked, turning to her.

Sheryl fled up the stairs. Safe behind the bedroom door, she wrung her hands together, paced the carpet from bed to window, tried to expel the all-consuming fear from her mind.

Peeling off her dress, she selected another, a white one this time, with a longer hemline. How should she handle this disaster? How closely should she skirt the truth? Maybe Frank had accepted her lie that Doris and Danny were Cassandra's friends. Maybe he hadn't heard Doris say she'd left her bag in her room.

Once she'd calmed down a little, she decided it was safest to play things by ear. The worst thing she could do was jump in with too many explanations. Right now she was simply thankful that Frank – wonderful, understanding Frank – had chosen not to make an issue of these strange visitors. For the time being, at least.

Fifteen minutes later, Frank was onto his third glass. He was lounging in an armchair, smiling at some private thought. When Sheryl reappeared in her white dress and high heels, his eyes bulged.

'You are going to knock 'em dead!' he said, referring to the group of buyers they were out to woo. 'If this doesn't sell a few paintings, I don't know what will!'

Party of the century

IN THE FIRST year of the twenty-first century it was common for events to be billed 'Party of the Century'. But when Gloria Meadows deemed it so, it meant precisely what she said.

Tonight's 'Party of the Century' was to celebrate the success of the Gloria Meadows Foundation campaign, and every celebrity who appreciated the value of publicity was there to capitalise on the media's thirst for the megastar philanthropist. The limousines were arriving at Gloria's mansion at a steady pace, each one seemingly longer than the one before, and the occupants who emerged into the drizzling rain did so with smiles and grace, nodding at their favourite reporters, posing for photos, proudly carrying the mantle of society's elite.

Sheryl and Frank were among the last to arrive. Sheryl, as yet unaccustomed to this kind of attention, was nervous as hell. Gloria had issued strict orders that she dress in a certain way, turn up in a Rolls-Royce Phantom, smile through any glitches and make a number of rehearsed asides to the waiting press; but as she stepped from the vehicle, gigantic spotlights turned night to day, cameras flashed in her eyes, and her brain emptied of everything but light.

A valet ran from the porch with a sprawling white umbrella and under its cover Frank half pushed, half carried her through the gauntlet of media. Garbled questions attacked her from all sides. Microphones and cameras were thrust in her face. Just when she thought she would faint from sensory overload, Frank muttered something in her ear and steered her through the pandemonium and into the house.

'I forgot what I was supposed to say!' she cried from the quiet of the entry hall. 'What will Gloria say?'

Frank removed his overcoat and handed it to an attendant. 'Gloria can go get fucked,' he said matter-of-factly. 'Figuratively speaking, of course.'

Sheryl saw the attendant wince and a vision flashed through her mind of the prune-faced man running off and whispering the disloyalty in Gloria's ear. From what Frank had told her, all the servants doubled as spies, and so it puzzled her why he wasn't more discreet.

'The press would eat you like a pack of lions if you let them,' he went on. 'That's all they're here for. They don't want some sugary rehearsed speech. All they're after is gossip and sleaze.' He helped her off with her coat. 'You watch, they'll give two lines to the campaign and the rest of the copy will be about that sexy dress you're wearing and whether or not we're an item. You're better off ignoring them and hoping they'll ignore you. Of course, that's not Gloria's view. Every time her name appears in print it's an extra hundred grand in her coffers.'

They'd progressed to the reception desk where a pretty redhead with the poise and delicacy of a ballerina was there to welcome them. As she checked off their names against a typed list, Sheryl read the page upside down. She could make out the names of a major rock star, several famous actors, two supermodels and a corrupt politician, arranged alphabetically by surname. She went to impart this intelligence to Frank, then remembered he'd grown up in this kind of company and would probably find her excitement childish. This prompted her to remember he actually lived in this house. She closed her mouth and glanced over her shoulder. Guarding the doors were security officers wearing tuxedos and radio headsets, muscles bulging, faces grim. They made her uneasy. She'd never been to a party that required armed security guards. In her state of nervous excitement she half expected a band of masked terrorists to come bursting through the door with automatic weapons blazing.

But it seemed the terrorists had their sights on some other target tonight. After completing their registration, the receptionist handed them over to a stiff old woman in a turquoise silk taffeta ball gown, who led them down a hall towards a burble of conversation, laughter and music.

Gloria's mansion was an architectural masterpiece, renowned the world over for its pink marble walls, gold trimmings and use of natural light. In size and opulence it was as impressive as any palace. As their footsteps click-clacked down the high, wide hall, Sheryl gazed in awe at the intricate gilded mouldings lining the ceiling, the classical paintings and rich tapestries hanging on the walls and piece after piece of the most incredible antiques she had ever seen.

‘This place is amazing!’ she gushed. ‘It’s even more amazing than I imagined!’

‘Gloria married money,’ said Frank. ‘None of it’s hers.’

She thought for a moment. ‘Didn’t her second husband build this mansion? – the one who died in a plane crash?’

‘Sure did. It was a stroke of luck for miserable old Gloria. She inherited everything.’

‘He wasn’t your father, was he?’

‘No. You know, the thing I hate most about being Gloria Meadows’ son is that the whole world knows your business. Maybe Gloria likes it that way, but I don’t.’

She took the hint. ‘So, Frank, this is where you live.’

‘Sure is. Did you see the staircase in the lobby? You go up there and turn left and then you’re in my part of the world. The north wing. It’s as far away from Gloria as possible.’

‘Does Alastair live here?’

‘Yep.’

‘With you?’

‘His room is in the south wing.’

‘Is he here tonight? I’d love to see him.’

Frank stopped beside a golden statue of the goddess Demeter. Their escort continued down the hall, unaware she’d lost her charges.

‘I’m sorry, sweetheart. That’s not a good idea. He’ll be asleep by now. If you disturb him, Mrs Campbell will raise living hell. She’s a Gorgon, trust me.’

Sheryl gazed into his eyes. She hadn’t seen Alastair since the day they appeared on *Behind the News* together. Despite repeated inquiries about the boy’s welfare (which she’d hoped Frank would take as hints), there were no suggestions a reunion would ever take place.

‘You know, Frank,’ she said, brushing lint from the lapel of his tuxedo, ‘I meant it when I said I’d like to get to know Alastair. We should arrange a picnic or a day at the movies or something. Do you think he’d like that?’

He smiled. ‘Sure.’

‘Maybe next weekend?’

‘Maybe.’

Their escort returned and hurried them along.

Nearing the end of the hall, Sheryl realised why the sounds of conversation and music were strangely muffled. The ballroom was an entire storey below the rest of the mansion. Approaching the crest of a broad, gently curving staircase, feeling hot and giddy, she struggled to take in the extraordinary sights: the glamorous crowd, the glittering chandeliers, the magnificent frescoes adorning the walls, the overall grandeur of the space. People started noticing them and light applause broke out. Sheryl stared down at them. She was trembling so much she was certain everyone in the room could see her dress shaking.

Frank took it all in his stride. With a nod and a smile to the crowd, he held her elbow and escorted her down the stairs and into the crush of tuxedos and ball gowns. Frank was an expert at entrances, having attended star-studded parties since he was a child. Even so, Sheryl noticed a stiffness to his frame and a synthetic quality to his smile, which she ascribed to his aversion to many of the people here – or at least to their affected greetings and sometimes foolish attempts at conversation. It appeared that even at this level of society there were social hierarchies. Some people had to work hard to maintain a conversation, whereas others (those richer or more famous) expected people to court *them*.

'How are you, Frank?' asked a bald man standing next to another bald man.

'Fine, fine. Sheryl Starling, this is Roger Harden and Stanley Jankowski. Roger and Stanley are movie producers.'

'How interesting,' said Sheryl. She was dying to know which movies the pair had produced, but was afraid the question would show ill-breeding.

Frank asked, 'Where are your lovely wives?'

'They went to freshen up,' said Roger or Stanley.

'One rides shotgun while the other one craps,' explained the other. 'A regular Thelma and Louise.'

'We can only hope they take the car and drive it off a cliff.'

The three men exploded with laughter.

'By the way,' said Roger or Stanley, 'did you know Miranda Lovehill's going around saying she's carrying a certain ageing rock star's baby? Boy, did she sit on the wrong end of the stick. Hasn't she heard? – the guy's as queer as a five-legged dog.'

'That woman is a disgusting little slut,' said Frank.

Sheryl was shocked by the heat in his voice. It made her wonder whether there might once have been a romantic connection between Frank and this Miranda Lovehill. She knew she was unlikely to find out. There was no point asking Frank, and it certainly wasn't something that would feature in any of Gloria's autobiographies.

'Hey Frank, Roger just told me this great joke,' said the man who was apparently Stanley. 'What's the difference between a slut and a bitch?'

His joke was interrupted by the appearance of two women, both in their early forties, both dressed immaculately. They glared at Sheryl with undisguised hostility and took up defensive positions beside their respective husbands.

One of the women rubbed her nose. The other gave a series of delicate sniffs.

Roger's eyes opened wide. 'What the –?' He lowered his voice. 'What did I tell you about sticking that trash up your nose?'

'Oh, darling,' his wife crooned, 'it's a fucking party. Let it all hang out for once, why don't you?'

'Yes, Roger,' said the other woman. 'It's an appetite suppressant. You want your dear wife to look trim, don't you? You don't want her turning into a gigantic cow, like … Well, like half the women here.'

'You better not embarrass me,' Roger hissed, grabbing hold of his wife's arm.

'Hey!' she cried. 'You're hurting me!'

He turned to Frank and Sheryl. 'Would you please excuse us?'

Frank gave them a condescending smile. 'Of course. Gentlemen. Ladies.'

He led Sheryl on a shortcut across the dance floor. 'Those women are as common as rat's farts,' he said once they were out of earshot. 'Can you blame Rog and Stan for screwing every bimbo starlet in town? I tell you, if they weren't such – Oh hell! There's Gloria.' He ducked. 'We've been spotted, worst luck.'

Sure enough, Gloria was staring in their direction, looking resplendent in a red velvet gown with fur trim. Dripping with gold, glittering with diamonds, the grande dame of stage and screen was crowned by a magnificent tiara, which sat at a rakish angle atop her lacquered hair. Sheryl was the type of person who couldn't enter a room without straightening the pictures, and as they approached she felt compelled to reach out and fix the crooked

arrangement. To hold herself back, she squeezed Frank's hand and nodded at Gloria's guests.

'Franklin!' Gloria cried. 'I was worried you were going to renege on me.' She turned to address her followers. 'My son believes in being fashionably late. He gets that from his father, no doubt.' She smiled at Sheryl, then followed the line of her arm to the place where her hand was joined to Frank's. 'Sheryl, my dear, Franklin never mentioned he would be escorting you tonight. What a marvellous media opportunity!' She turned again to her guests. 'My son has a natural instinct for publicity. That, he gets from me.'

There was a smattering of laughter.

She said to Frank, 'We have been discussing the conference in Rio.'

'The International Summit on Indigenous Peoples,' amended an elderly man with a handlebar moustache, his vest glinting with buttons and medals.

Gloria sighed. 'Conference, summit; it's all the same to me. We are simply going there to get things done. Rio is the perfect destination. It has a pressing poverty problem, a large number of indigenous folk, and some of the best stores and hotels I have seen in all my years.'

A frail woman bent almost double with gold chains leaned in. 'I had my heart set on doing Rio last summer,' she said. 'But my Dorothea told me the criminals are getting out of hand.' She turned her rheumy eyes to Sheryl. 'Apparently there is a murder every thirty-nine seconds, or something to that effect. Needless to say, I did Brussels instead. My dear friend the Duchess has a personal bodyguard whom she was kind enough to loan to me for the duration of the trip. A wonderful, wonderful man. Wonderful.'

'Oh, the organisers have factored the crime problem into their preparations,' Gloria replied, bending down to address the frail woman. 'They are rounding up all the banditos and homeless people and bussing them out to the border. By the time the criminals find their way back to Rio, the conference will be over. Isn't that a marvellously creative idea?'

As the entourage murmured its assent, Sheryl tried to imagine how many criminals and homeless people lived in and around Northbridge. What a logistical nightmare it would be trying to empty *that* neighbourhood! It was probably easier in South America, where they could pack them into trucks and buses like sardines without having to worry too much about outcries from human rights activists. Still, it seemed rather a cruel thing to do.

After a word of dismissal from Gloria, the group broke apart and dissolved into the party. Frank went off to find a drinks waiter and Sheryl found herself arm in arm with Gloria.

'Your home is so beautiful,' she said. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

Gloria accepted the compliment with a modest bow. 'Thank you, dear. It was a gift from my late husband. Richard Senior knew my tastes down to the tiniest detail.'

Sheryl recalled the picture of Richard Beaumont from Gloria's autobiography. A forty-something blond, he'd been blessed with a good body and a sensitive, youthful face. In the picture he was standing on an oceanside boulevard with his arm around a much younger and slimmer Gloria. 'He was into property, wasn't he?'

'Richard Senior had his finger in many enterprises. A most intelligent and engaging man.'

'He was very handsome, too.'

'Yes,' sighed Gloria. 'My late husband was a marvel. He supervised the construction of this house himself, you realise. He chose all the colours, all the trimmings. I am addicted to gold, so virtually everything is either solid gold or gold leaf. You will find no silver here.'

'My father was a very generous man,' came a familiar voice behind them.

Sheryl whirled around. 'Andrew!' she cried. 'What a surprise!'

Andrew was golden himself, having spent time on an island in the South Pacific. His hair was the colour of wheat, his eyelashes like finely strung copper. Sheryl took his arm, turned to Gloria, said, 'Have you met –?' and then stopped with her mouth open. Andrew's words had arrived at the cognitive part of her brain. 'My father …' he'd said. But according to Gloria's autobiography she had only two sons and the younger one was named Richard. So who was Andrew?

'You know my youngest son as well,' Gloria observed, arching an eyebrow.

'Yes, Mother,' said Andrew. 'Remember? We were in Ethiopia together.'

'Of course. The fact slipped my mind.' She dipped her chin. 'It appears the two of you had a good time over there.'

Andrew was smiling brightly. 'Hey, Sheryl, it's great to see you again. We had some interesting talks in Ethiopia, didn't we? All about world aid and the plight of the poor.'

‘Richard is not content with simply helping hungry children,’ Gloria explained. ‘He must solve all of the world’s woes. I tell him we little people must be humble in our aims. After all, it’s the small acts which count in the minds of the poor children. One day you will see that, my darling. One day you will inherit a share of my estate, and then you will appreciate the responsibilities which come with wealth.’

‘Mother and I agree to disagree on this point. But how have you been, Sheryl? That dress is very becoming.’

‘I had my personal stylist choose it for tonight,’ said Gloria. ‘Zhandra has exceptional taste.’

‘I’m, well, a little overwhelmed by everything,’ said Sheryl. ‘I think I’m slowly getting used to it.’

‘I saw the commercials. They’re very good. You look great.’

‘Thank you.’

‘My son is such a gentleman,’ said Gloria. ‘A kind word for everyone.’

‘I hear you’re appearing on Sammy Jo Hartman. When Sammy Jo invites you on her show it’s a sure sign you’ve made it.’

She nodded at Gloria. ‘Well, the show’s about the Gloria Meadows Foundation. But I’ll be there doing my part.’

‘Ah, you’re too modest.’

Modesty required a change of subject. ‘How’s the study going?’

‘Comme ci, comme ça. But I’ve started writing a new book and I’m really excited about it.’

‘A novel? That’s wonderful! What’s it about?’

He looked evasive. ‘I’m afraid if I told you, I’d have to kill you. Seriously, though, it’s bad luck to discuss a story before it’s written. Especially in a place like this, full of vultures ready to swoop down and gobble up your idea.’

‘Oh, Richard,’ laughed Gloria, ‘you have such a way with words. You are truly your father’s son.’

‘I can’t wait to read it.’

‘It’ll be a while yet.’

Sheryl looked around. ‘Is Kelly with you? I really must thank you guys for taking me under your wing.’

At the mention of Kelly’s name, the sun vanished from Andrew’s face. He shot a worried glance at his mother – and in that instant Sheryl realised her mistake. It appeared Gloria wasn’t aware Kelly had been with them in Ethiopia. Did she even know who Kelly was? And why did Andrew call

himself Andrew and not Richard? It eased her mind to know she wasn't the only one here with secrets.

Luckily for Andrew, Gloria was too busy scolding a drinks waiter to have noticed her blunder. ('I will not tolerate this kind of fraternising,' she was saying, having spotted him chatting to one of the guests. 'You are here to do a job. That is the extent of your role in my house …')

Sheryl mouthed an apology and Andrew grinned and shrugged, but it was clear the incident had given him a fright. When an attractive brunette placed a hand on his shoulder, he took advantage of the interruption to escape to the dance floor.

Gloria dismissed the waiter and turned back to Sheryl. 'Oh,' she said. 'Whatever happened to Richard?'

'He was spirited away. By a lovely woman. Big hair. Nice dress.'

Gloria laughed soundlessly. 'That's my sons. Lady-killers both.' Placing a hand on Sheryl's forearm, she murmured, 'This way, dear,' and nodded towards a closed door. 'I have something I wish to say before Franklin returns.'

The door opened into a dark room with a ceiling as high as that in the ballroom. Three of the walls were taken up by rosewood shelves packed with books of every size and colour, while the fourth was dominated by a black marble fireplace in which burned a raging inferno. In the flickering light of the fire the books appeared to dance, an energetic, insane dance that made the room seem alive.

Gloria released Sheryl's arm and continued to the mantelpiece. As she stood there contemplating the flames, it almost seemed that her dress was part of the inferno … or rather, that Gloria and the fire were a single luminous entity that brought light and warmth to everything in the room.

'Such a lot of books,' Sheryl said to break the silence.

Gloria smiled fondly at the contents of the room. 'They belonged to my late husband. This was Richard Senior's retreat. He was never one for parties, God rest his soul. On a night such as this, he would be locked away in here with his cigar – always a cigar! – reading, reading, reading! Myself, I am more of a visual person. I abhor books. They are so … flat. I prefer motion pictures, which are three-dimensional.'

'Three-dimensional?'

'Yes, dear: sight, sound and colour. But of course I prefer living company most of all. People are what fascinate me. Take you, for instance.'

‘Me? There’s nothing very fascinating about me.’

‘Oh, my dear, you underestimate yourself. You are very charming, very ambitious. You remind me of myself when I was your age. But of course by then I was already a star in my own right.’ She turned back to the fire.

Sheryl twirled her gold ring, trying to hold down an eruption of molten joy. She’d already guessed the reason for this little chat. Gloria, her patron, her guardian angel, was about to offer her a salaried position at the Gloria Meadows Foundation in reward for her central role in the spectacularly successful campaign. Or (dare she think it?) perhaps Gloria had something more substantial in mind: her own TV show or a shot at recording a CD. The suspense was almost too great to bear.

But when Gloria turned from the flames, her face was dour and immense. Her brow was dark, the sockets of her eyes as black as coal.

‘This is not an easy thing for me to say,’ she said. ‘In my defence I declare that I am only raising it because I have been forced into a corner.’

Sheryl took an involuntary step backwards. The room fell away and she was once again in a bedroom at Sephryn House where a would-be rapist was stepping out of his trousers. Through the nightmarish vision she could make out Gloria’s voice. ‘You see, young lady, when I offered you a position at Franklin’s office, my son was not part of the package.’

The blood drained from her head, the floor heaved beneath her feet, and with a sickening lurch she was hurled back to the present. It took a while to process what Gloria had said. Franklin? Package? What did this have to do with Sephryn House?

Gloria was eyeing her warily, awaiting a reaction. When Sheryl didn’t run at her or fling books or scream insults, she relaxed her stance and returned her gaze to the fire. ‘You see, my dear, I am very close to the family of Franklin’s wife, Prudence, and … Well, frankly, we all have high hopes that our children will one day reconcile. There are advantages for all concerned; for Franklin and Prudence, who love each other dearly and simply have a few problems to work through; for little Alastair, who requires the love of both of his parents; and of course for our respective families, who are connected by important business interests as well as by a deep and abiding affection. We cannot let a person of dubious motives appear from out of nowhere and undo all of our hard work.’

At this last phrase Sheryl uttered a shocked gasp. Through all the wonderful things that had happened to her, there remained lodged in her

heart a nugget of pessimism, a tiny, frozen reminder of all she had to lose. Gloria, with a few carefully phrased words, had shattered this nugget, sending icy fragments careering through every nerve and fibre of her body. Despite the raging fire she shivered and drew her arms across her chest.

'I have already queried Franklin on this matter,' Gloria continued, warming her hands in the flames, touching them to her face. 'Twice, in fact. You are entitled to know that Franklin has denied on each of these occasions that there is anything serious between you and he. Now I see you arrive together hand in hand and I have to wonder about the game he is playing. Franklin is a stubborn man – he inherits that trait from me – and he will have his fun regardless of what I advise is right and proper. So the time has come to make my appeal to you.' She clasped her hands together and gazed at Sheryl from beneath lowered brows. 'Have you anything to say in your defence?'

From the ballroom came laughter and the tremulous strains of a string quartet. Sheryl yearned to be out there, putting on airs, making Gloria's stuck-up cronies shut their mouths and take notice of her. Instead, everything seemed to be slipping away.

Returning Gloria's stare, she contemplated standing up for herself and announcing proudly and defiantly that what Frank and she did together was none of her business. But the more practical side of her knew Gloria held all the cards. She controlled Sheryl's contract. She controlled the family fortune. She told the media what to say. She was one of the most powerful women in the country. Sheryl knew she had only two options and they were mutually exclusive: stay with Frank and make an enemy of Gloria, or sacrifice him and continue riding that ever-ascending escalator to fame. She'd grown closer to Frank over recent weeks, but how could he compete with the dreams she'd entertained all her life?

Gloria stepped closer. She was still too far away for Sheryl to strike out with her fist, but she'd come close enough to permit her to fall at her feet and beg for mercy. 'You are very quiet, my dear. Please, you should not take this personally. Franklin comes from a very different world to you. You must surely understand that nothing would be gained from this union. Oh, a correction. Nothing would be gained for Franklin. You, of course, have much to gain, socially and financially speaking. I am sure this fact has not failed to enter your mind.'

Behind Gloria the fire roared and crackled and spat out a burning cinder. Sheryl imagined the flames leaping out and engulfing her. Wasn't that the fate of all witches in days gone by?

'Miss Meadows,' she began, and then forgot what she was about to say. But things were getting desperate. If she didn't blurt out something soon, Gloria would latch onto her silence and interpret it as guilt.

She tried again. 'Gloria, I'm truly … I mean, I appreciate everything you've done for me. You – you've given me a huge break and without your help this might not have happened for – for months. But you of all people must understand that … must understand how far my career can go … where it can lead. I can make it big in show business. You said so yourself. And I *will* make it. I've … I've got no doubts about that. I don't need Frank's money – or his social position. I'll be up there myself soon enough, I'm sure of it.'

Gloria laughed savagely, having captured Sheryl's queen. 'Young lady,' she hissed, 'do you honestly believe I was captivated by your talents? Do you think *that* is the reason I offered you the position at my foundation? No, no, no. In that you are gravely mistaken. You see, my dear, your present fifteen minutes of fame has nothing to do with your own meagre talents. It has nothing to do with you at all. If you had rescued the child of a common bricklayer, your story would never have seen the light of day. You would be yet another would-be singer on the unemployment line. There are thousands of such women in this town, many of them lovely, many of them considerably more talented than yourself. It was only in response to my own intervention – the fact that I recognised a unique media opportunity – that the story received any coverage at all. Therefore I own the story, to do with as I wish. Everything I have done is for the foundation. Nothing else matters to me. Do you understand what I am saying?'

Her shadows shook the room. Sheryl felt herself losing control. 'What you're saying is you used me.'

Gloria's face softened into a mass of folds. 'Nothing as nasty as that, dear. We shall all benefit from this special time. It is simply that you have expected too much. You have let things go to your head. The important thing has always been the foundation, not your own personal shot at fame. Your current celebrity is simply a by-product, a flash-in-the-pan so to speak. Oh, and in case you hold any remaining doubts, allow me to set you straight. It was not my idea to offer you a part in the campaign in the first place – or for that matter in Franklin's office. The idea came from my lawyers. They argued

– quite convincingly, I might add – that by declining a reward at the time of the accident, you left the situation open to a messy legal wrangle. To avoid a lawsuit based on the injuries and emotional turmoil you may have sustained, they suggested I recompense you in some way. And that I have done; you would have to agree. I have given you the opportunity you so desperately desired, and now I am saying to you that once your contract with the Gloria Meadows Foundation is over, you are on your own. That is only fair.'

Sheryl's dreams were on the verge of collapse. She'd feared all along that her charmed life was too wonderful to last, but she'd had no idea it was built on such shaky ground, such a flimsy premise. Fearing a threat from the past, she'd been blind to the perils of the present. And far from being an ally, a springboard to her dreams, Gloria was looming as her greatest foe.

'Oh dear,' said Gloria, leaning towards her, 'your eyes are so red and puffy. The circulation in this room is atrocious.' She smoothed the material on her bosom, eliminating every wrinkle, every speck of dust. 'Come now, Miss Starling, the unpleasantness is over. We can enjoy the party.'

She brushed past her. But as her hand touched the door, she turned for one last stab. 'By the way, dear, please let Franklin down gently. He has such a sensitive nature. I'd like you to be finished with him by the time I return from Rio.'

With that, she opened the door and Sheryl flew like a bird into the happy crowd.

The saviour, part three

ANDREW STOOD AT the buffet table discussing the masses of untouched food with the carver. After an hour of making polite conversation with actors, producers, supermodels, board members and plain old rich people, he was glad to be talking with someone real.

'Nobody ever eats much at these shindigs,' the carver was saying, unaware of Andrew's connection with his employer. 'There's so much waste.'

'What gets me,' said Andrew, loosening his bow tie, 'is the ones who gorge themselves on caviar and lobster then spend half the night locked in the bathroom sticking their fingers down their throats. And all the while they're going on about world hunger.'

'I remember my dad telling me I had to finish my peas and carrots because of the starving Africans. I never knew what he meant, but I ate them anyways.'

'My mother would argue it makes no difference to the poor whether this food gets eaten or not. What makes the difference, she'd say, is the people who've come here for the sake of charity and donated squillions of dollars. You can't really argue with that. Still …'

The carver laughed. 'Still, it's an awful waste.'

Smiling, Andrew stood on tiptoes and scanned the crowd. When he couldn't see his mother, he frowned and shook his head. He had a horrible suspicion she was pumping Sheryl for information about Kelly.

'Lost the wife?' asked the carver.

'No. The mother.'

The carver laughed again and went off to serve a guest. Andrew turned back to the party. He loathed his mother's snobbery. Even now, at the age of twenty-nine, he lived under a mountain of limitations imposed by the need to maintain a spotless family image. Gloria had spawned a media monster, huge and voracious, and it lurked in every shadow, waiting to engulf anyone who strayed from the well-lit path of respectability. If snared, the monster would

suck the marrow from their indiscretions and conflicts, then spit out the bare bones for all the world to see. Personally, Andrew couldn't care less what rubbish appeared in the press, but he understood his mother's desire for dignity and respect in her autumn years and therefore did what she asked. Well, usually.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sight of Gloria emerging from the library. What had she been up to in there? Casting his eyes across the room, he spied Sheryl making a beeline for the stairs.

'Oh shit,' he said, and took off in pursuit.

'Andrew darling, why don't we –'

'Hey, man, guess what?'

'Andrew, you're just the person –'

He politely sidestepped all attempts to detain him. But the interruptions slowed him down, and by the time he caught up with Sheryl she'd already made it to the entry hall, where she was rifling through a rack of coats and furs.

'Sheryl?'

She appeared not to hear him.

'Sheryl. Are you okay?'

She refused to abandon her frantic search. When he turned her around, he saw why. Her face was a mess. Mascara had dribbled down both cheeks and her eyes were red and wet.

'Don't tell me. My mother's been up to her old tricks.'

'No. No. It's me.' Her eyes seemed unable to move past his chin. After sneaking a glance at the security guards, she returned to the coats and furs. He realised then that she probably associated him with the enemy. Maybe she suspected his mother had sent him to Ethiopia to spy on her, that he was here now to finish her dirty work.

'I've been selfish,' she muttered, finding her coat, pulling it off the hanger, handing her ticket to the waiting attendant. 'I don't belong here.'

'What are you talking about? This party is all *about* you. You're the star.'

'I think … I just …' She swallowed heavily. Her shoulders sagged. 'I think I took things for granted.'

'Took things for granted? Sheryl, stop. What exactly did my mother say?'

'Please. I can't. I just … I need to go home. Would you call me a cab?' Her eyes flashed to his. 'Please?'

'No. I'm not letting you go like this.' He took her hand. 'Come with me.'

'What's the problem here?' demanded a surly security guard who'd crept up unnoticed.

Andrew brushed past him without replying. He dragged a reluctant Sheryl through a side exit, down a long corridor and towards a glass door. After glancing over his shoulder to make sure the guard wasn't following them, he pushed the door open and herded her into the conservatory.

The conservatory was a hexagonal room comprised almost entirely of glass. The room was dark and humid, home to tree ferns, leafy palms, flowering camellias and rare tropical plants with large shiny leaves and weirdly shaped flower pods. Outside were picturesque parklands, a floodlit lake and, in the distance, a mist-shrouded forest. Despite the beauty all around, Sheryl seemed only to notice the tiled floor.

Andrew sat her down in a white wicker chair and took one himself. 'Rightio. I can see my mother's read you the riot act. It's not the first time this type of thing has happened. It's kind of a habit for her. Am I warm?'

Sheryl sniffed and shook her head. She'd lost her nervous energy and looked tired and glum. While she searched her pockets for a tissue, Andrew lifted his eyes and contemplated the black, leafless trees on the other side of the lake. As a child he'd always been scared of those trees. They suggested something supernatural: gnarled arms reaching out of disturbed graves; the living dead clawing frenetically at the sky. Sometimes in his nightmares the trees pulled their roots free and stomped up to the house and grabbed him in a scabrous embrace. The nightmares haunted him to this day.

He returned his gaze to Sheryl, who was staring miserably at the tissue in her hands. Half an hour ago she'd been bubbling over with excitement. What did his mother say to bring on such a turnaround?

'Let me tell you a story,' he said after a moment's reflection. 'It's a story that took place a long time ago in a land far, far away … Actually, no, it wasn't that far away. And not that long ago either. Ahem, let me start again. Okay. Once upon a time there was an evil mother who was upset that her son, the handsome blond prince, was seeing a lowly commoner – the daughter of a union organiser, if you can believe it – a woman who lectured at the young prince's university. So the evil mother pulled out her bag of magic tricks and tried to fool the handsome prince into believing the lowly commoner only wanted him for his money and his youthful, movie-star looks. When the prince laughed in her face and intoned a spell to make her vanish, she went off in pursuit of the lowly commoner. And this time she almost succeeded, the

lowly commoner being a most wondrous and sensitive human being. But the handsome prince had anticipated this move, and with a kiss to beat all kisses broke the magic spell the evil mother had cast on the lowly yet beautiful (did I mention she was beautiful as well as wonderful?) … the spell on the lowly and beautiful commoner. After that, the handsome prince and the lowly commoner stayed far, far away from the evil mother and they all lived happily (well, the handsome prince and the lowly commoner anyway) lived happily ever after.'

By the end of the story Sheryl was smiling, though the ruined makeup and drab shadows made her appear more like a flesh-eating zombie than the national spokesperson for a world charity. During the course of Andrew's tale she'd torn strips off the tissue and lined them up in rows on her lap.

'Sound familiar?'

'Mmn. Scarily so.'

After a few beats of silence, she heaved a sigh and recounted her own story.

'Your mother's right about how I've acted like everything's about me,' she admitted at the end. 'But she can't be more wrong about me and Frank. I don't give a damn about position or wealth. It wouldn't make any difference to me if Frank was poor.'

'I know that. Down inside I'm sure my mother knows it too.'

'That wasn't exactly the impression she gave me.'

'She's got this idea everyone's out to rip her off … which really isn't far from the truth. When she saw you and Frank together the first thing she thought was: She's after the family fortune!'

'But … I'm getting all these offers. I could get a break any day; she knows that. Why would I care about her money?'

'You don't know the kind of –'

'And why would she turn on me when all I've ever done is be nice to her? I did everything she asked. And the campaign's been a huge success. She couldn't ask for more on that front.'

'I think –'

'Why did this have to happen now? Why can't she just leave us alone?'

Andrew looked at her. Realising she'd been ranting, she closed her mouth and went back to tearing strips off the tissue. 'What am I supposed to do?'

Somewhere in the conservatory dripping water tapped out a hollow, monotonous rhythm. Andrew rested his forearms on his knees. 'If you don't

mind me sounding like Barbara Cartland on a bad day, my advice is to stay true to your heart. And try not to worry too much about my mother's threats. When I first met Kelly, she took an instant dislike to her. Thought she was the gold-digging hussy from hell. I found out later she'd set a private investigator on her and – surprise, surprise – he found out Kelly's father was a former member of the Socialist Party. And that was that. Forget that Kelly's more of a die-hard capitalist than me. As far as my mother's concerned she might as well be the daughter of Stalin himself. She made life impossible for us; Kelly in particular. If I hadn't stood up to her, Kelly and I wouldn't be together, and I can't imagine what that would be like.'

Conscious he was being a little self-absorbed, a little too heroic, he grinned sheepishly. 'I know you're probably thinking I didn't stand up to her, that Kelly and I just ran away and hid. But that's the moral of the story, I suppose. You do what you must to ensure your happiness, even if it means giving up something that's of lesser importance.'

Sheryl took out a clean tissue and wiped the mascara from her eyes. 'You make it sound so easy. But you're her son. She wouldn't do anything really horrible to you. Me, I'm a nobody, as your mother clearly pointed out. She controls my life. She could crush me like an ant.'

'I'm not saying it'll be a walk in the park. But you do have choices. You need to decide what's most important to you and then go after it – with all your heart – and accept there might be some unpleasant aftershocks. Important thing to keep in mind is that you're the one in control. It might not seem like it, but the decision's entirely in your hands, not my mother's. All she can do is influence you. What you have to do is try to figure out how to deal with that influence.'

She looked dubious. 'I don't know, Andrew. Trouble is, Gloria's influence is too strong. If I stay with Frank, she'll bury me; it's as simple as that.' She collected the torn strips of tissue and rolled them into a tight little ball.

'You're assuming my mother's got complete and utter control over you. I wouldn't take that as a given. Don't forget you had a career before you ever met her.'

When her face fell, he leaned closer and said, 'Hey, look, you said earlier you don't belong here. That's what's called the Impostor Syndrome. If you're not careful it'll turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. You need to have faith in yourself. You need to start believing you deserve to be happy. And you've

got to stop thinking my mother's some kind of all-powerful god. She's not, you know. Her powers are very limited.'

His words had no effect. They seemed to have gone back to square one.

'Come on, now, I've had a whole lifetime to study the bizarre rites and strange behaviours of The Beast, otherwise known as Gloria Meadows. I'm telling you, this isn't the end of the world.'

'I don't know. You're probably right.' She rolled the ball of tissue around in her palm, then shook her head. 'I can't think straight. My brain feels like it's been fried.'

'You don't need to decide anything right now. The Rio thing's weeks away. Sleep on it for a while. See how you feel once you get over the shock. But Sheryl, you can't let my mother intimidate you. Think carefully about what her threats really, really mean. And make sure that in the end you make the decision that's right for you, not the one you think my mother or anyone else will accept. And before you tell me to shut up, I've got one last piece of advice. You mustn't show fear in front of Gloria. She smells fear and goes in for the kill.'

She gave him a tense smile. 'You know, you're right about that last thing. I'm sick and tired of being scared. I've been scared all my life. It seems like I'm always running away.'

'You have to stop running sooner or later. Seems to me this is a good time to start … or stop. You know what I mean.'

'I do.' She caught his eye. 'Thanks for the friendly shoulder, Andrew. You've helped put things in perspective.'

'Glad to be of service, ma'am.'

'At least I don't feel like the whole world's against me anymore.'

'When you think about it, there's only one person who's against you and that's my mother. And who knows? Maybe in time she'll come around.' But even as he said it, he knew the possibility was so remote as to be almost ludicrous.

He watched her tip the ball of tissue from hand to hand. He knew his advice hadn't provided an answer to her dilemma, but he'd given her hope, the next best thing.

He was about to say more when she said, 'Andrew, I hope I'm not being out of line here, but … I was wondering why your mother calls you Richard. I mean, it's obviously because of your father. But why do other people call you Andrew?'

'Just a mild case of split personality,' he joked. 'With Gloria Meadows as my mother, would you expect anything less? Seriously, though, my full name is Richard Andrew Beaumont Junior. My mother knows I prefer Andrew, but she thinks it's trashing my father's memory if I don't use his name. Not that she cared much what he thought when he was alive, but I suppose it's her way of reminding me about my roots.'

'Don't you like the name Richard?'

He shrugged. 'It's an okay name. But back in school I had a really tough time. Got called Richie Rich, and then – urgh! – Dick and all its lovely permutations. I like Andrew. It's a nice, sunny name, which I think suits my personality. Richard is too stuffed-shirt.'

'I can't really see you as a Richard.'

'Glad to hear it. Now, what's your full name?'

'Sheryl Estelle Starling.'

'Estelle?'

'It was my great-grandmother's name.'

'Sheryl Estelle Starling. I like it. Has a certain consonance. Did you ever have any nicknames?'

'No,' she said quickly.

Andrew arched an eyebrow Gloria-style. He guessed the kids at school had called her something nasty, something too upsetting to admit. But what could be worse than Richie Rich and Dick Blowjob?

'You know, Andrew,' she said; 'when we were in Ethiopia I had this funny feeling I recognised you. And now I know why. You look a lot like your father.'

'So they tell me.'

'Are you much like him?'

'People say I inherited his philanthropy.'

'I thought you got that from your mother.'

'Uh-uh. Hers is the money-grabbing side of the family.'

He could tell Sheryl was trying to hide the pleasure she took in the jibe. She said, 'Your father was involved in charities before your mother?'

'Not really. Not in a formal sense. He was just very generous to his employees and the people around him. My father came from an average, suburban background. My grandfather was a real estate agent. After he made his millions, he never forgot that. Not many people know this, but he practically rebuilt his old school, which was falling to bits at the time … not to

mention rescuing the local public library, which hadn't bought a new book since about nineteen fifty-three. He was a strong advocate of a good education and that was where he tended to invest his money. He also loved a good party, the kind where there's stacks of beer and singing around the piano. Used to go back to the old neighbourhood all the time and throw these big bashes that'd cost a fortune and be talked about for the next six months. His friends loved that. Some of those guys drained him dry; borrowed money, never paid it back, etc, etc. My dad knew what was up, and they knew he knew, but it suited everyone to pretend he was the local credit house. Thing I remember most about my father was that he was happiest when someone close to him was happy. That was the type of investment he valued the most.'

'I can see where you get most of your genes from.'

'I don't want to make him out like some kind of saint. He was certainly rich enough to be generous … more so than he was, if I'm being honest.'

'How exactly did he make all that money?'

'It's not a complicated story. Mostly he was lucky. When he was young he saved like mad, borrowed heavily, then invested in property – against his father's wishes, I might add. He took some real chances and I suppose he was in the right place at the right time. He could just as easily have ended up in the poor house, in which case li'l ol' me wouldn't be sitting here talking to you.'

'Don't even joke about that. You saved my life.'

'Don't say that. I just helped you understand my mother a bit better. But let's not talk about that anymore. I'm determined to make you enjoy tonight, even if it kills me. Let me see; where was I? Oh, yeah, money. Funny thing about money: once you make your first million, the rest seem to follow without much effort. But if you're not careful, you can lose it all just as easily. Best thing to do about money is not care about it too much.'

'That's easy to say when you're rich.' She glanced up at him. 'Oh! I'm sorry! That must have sounded awful!'

'Don't worry about it,' he laughed. 'Never a truer word was spoken. What I was trying to say was that people who let greed get the best of them end up getting burnt. If you're content with what you've got and stick to safe, sensible investments, you stand a much better chance of being happy. Let money rule your life and you're in for a hard time guaranteed.'

'Doesn't sound like that was your father's philosophy.'

'No. He was addicted to making money. And loved the luxury life, especially after his wives taught him the art of spending without guilt.'

'He had two wives, didn't he?'

'Three. By all reports the first two were even more pretentious than my mother.'

'Is that physically possible?'

He laughed, then realised from Sheryl's expression that the question was serious. 'Actually, I believe she wasn't half the snob she is now before she met him.'

'Really? His money changed her?'

'I'd say it confused her. Wealth, fame, power; she didn't know how to cope with it all. Deep down inside she's pretty insecure.'

'Must be very deep down inside.'

'Don't be too sure. I've this pet theory that people who are always on the attack must have a fragile sense of self-worth. Otherwise they wouldn't keep feeling the need to strike out. Seems to me the reason my mother is so protective of Frank and me is that she knows wealth and fame can come and go in a flash. You probably know her career almost bombed three times: once in the 'fifties when the Melody Sisters broke up, then again when *Where's Lennie?* was canned, and a third time when she made her move on Hollywood. That last time almost destroyed her. So now she thinks if we don't learn how to manage money (or women, for that matter) we'll end up destitute; homeless or something. I'm serious! Some of her friends have lost everything over bad investments and gold-digging ex-wives.'

'If only I had that much money to lose.'

'Don't wish too hard.'

From the ballroom came an explosion of cheers and applause.

Andrew glanced over his shoulder. 'We should get back to the party. People will start to notice we're not there.'

But Sheryl seemed in no hurry to move. She was staring at a curiously shaped fruit that hung dark and ponderous from the trunk of a leafy palm. 'Andrew,' she said, 'can I ask you sort of a sensitive question?'

'Fire away.'

'What was Frank like as a child?'

He squinted at her. 'Shouldn't you be asking him that question?'

'Your brother … He's sort of tight-lipped about his past. He'd probably deny ever having been a child.'

'I dunno. He's more than a decade older than me, so I missed out on most of his childhood. By the time I was old enough to really know him, he was already driving and he was hardly ever home.'

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked you that.'

'No, no. If it cheers you up, I'll tell you anything.' His eyes softened. 'I know you feel like the odds are against you, so if I can counter my mother's influence in any way, I'm only too happy to do it. Now, what can Uncle Andrew tell you about his delightfully dysfunctional family?'

Her mood seemed to brighten a fraction. 'I was wondering: was Frank always this … driven? It's like his work is his whole life.'

'Driven? No, no. Quite the opposite. When he was a teenager he was only interested in motorbikes, gambling and fast women. Fancied himself as some kind of hotshot playboy. I got the impression he had this gigantic chip on his shoulder … probably because Gloria was always reminding him of where half his genes came from. It was her standard put-down whenever he did anything wrong. Did you know his father was some kind of carpenter?'

She did. 'That's sad, that your mother would make him ashamed of his roots.'

'Would you expect anything less?'

'Hmm, good point.'

'After he failed his business degree, she laid down the law. Said he was doomed to fail for the rest of his life if he thought he'd always have her money to fall back on. Then told him he wouldn't see any of it until he proved himself worthy. After that, she set him up in the antiques business and told him he had to take it from there.'

'Frank didn't tell me any of this. I thought he built the company himself.'

'Technically that's correct. Gloria just gave him the start-up capital. She isn't a witch, but she'll be damned before she hands over her precious fortune on a silver platter. We need to prove ourselves. Which is why *I'm* always in the bad books. She thinks I'm too laid back. Ripe for a conning, she says.'

'But honestly, what could she do if you or Frank didn't do what she asked?'

'The threat she always holds over us is that she'll change her will and leave everything to the foundation. Usually I take that with a grain of salt, but sometimes I think I wouldn't put it past her. It'd be a great way to go down in history as one of the great philanthropists of our age. In reality? I think she'd go for the happy medium: leave us kids enough to see us through and give the

rest to charity. Which is fine by me. But Frank doesn't see it that way. He wants the lot.'

'He does like his creature comforts.'

'Oh yes!'

'I hope you don't mind me asking this, but I need to get something clear in my mind. What's the story with Alastair and Frank's ex-wife?'

'Prudence? She's the daughter of some old family friends. Descended from Scandinavian royalty or some such crap. When her first marriage ended in divorce, my mother and the Halvorsons had this jolly idea to bind our families by getting Prue and Frank together. He fell right into their trap. Started dating her. It was the only relationship my mother ever approved of, so I think he let his guard down and dated her for longer than he otherwise might have done. And then they got pregnant. To be honest, I've always considered those two a match made in hell. Prue's quite a nice person, but your typical cold fish. Whereas Frank can be very passionate and spur-of-the-moment. When the divorce came through, Prue was devastated and took to the bottle … the pill bottle, I mean. For the past few months she's been leaching it out of her system, and in the meantime Alastair's staying with his grandmother. A messy story.'

'Not really. Over the years I've heard stories just like that from dozens of men –'

She started a little at this admission and withdrew into the foliage of an overhanging plant. Meanwhile, Andrew stared outside, watching the denuded trees clawing at the sky. He was thinking about Frank, about his playboy past and the trail of women he'd left in his wake. He'd never really known Prue and so was largely unmoved by his brother's divorce, but now, faced with another of his family's potential casualties, he felt all the guilt of a co-conspirator. He'd dropped a hint about his brother's playboy past … Should he give Sheryl a more direct warning?

'How's Frank handling the divorce?' she asked. 'Is it true he might get back with Prue?'

'Oh, no. Like I said, those two are like fire and ice.' He gave her a reassuring smile. 'To be completely honest, since the divorce Frank has fallen into a habit of getting involved with women then running away. It's like he panics about getting close to anyone. I'm not saying this'll happen in your case,' he rushed to add, 'but it's worth keeping your eyes open.'

He could see her turning his words over in her mind. 'I suppose … I suppose that's a natural reaction when you're going through a divorce. You want to move on with your life, but you're worried about getting hurt again.' She looked at him. 'But when the right person comes along, you know it, don't you?'

'I think so. I certainly did with Kelly.'

'That's how I feel with Frank as well. I can sense something real between us, something strong … like a real chemistry. It's all so natural. I don't think I can give it up.'

'As I said, you may not need to. My mother can't force you to do anything you don't want to. If you decide on staying with Frank, you'll just have to think of a way to keep your career going without her help. And if you stay out of her way, she might even forget about you. She's always got a lot on her plate. Which can be a real godsend at times, I can tell you!'

'I only wish.' She glanced at the floor. 'Thanks for telling me all this, Andrew. At least I don't need to worry about an ex-wife plotting against me as well.'

'Uh-uh. You're safe there.'

'And I *will* keep my eyes open. I've been so stupid for taking things for granted –'

'Nuh-uh.' He waved a finger in her face. 'Those are the devil-woman's words again.'

She nodded towards the curiously shaped flower pod she'd been staring at earlier. 'Isn't that the most amazing thing you've ever seen?'

He glanced over his shoulder. 'Positively phallic. I'm surprised my mother hasn't chopped it off by now.'

'Andrew,' she said, taking his hand, 'I don't know how I would have handled this if it wasn't for you. I only wish we'd had this talk before Gloria got to me.'

'You'd have worked things out. Does help to have insider information, though.'

'I hope I haven't made you feel like a traitor, asking all those questions. I promise I won't mention this conversation to anyone, not even Frank.'

'Hey, don't worry about it. Gloria's got a hide like an elephant. Frank too, for that matter. They can take care of themselves. It's you I'm worried about. You need an ally, and I'm just the man for the job.'

They smiled at each other.

Another roar came from the ballroom and they turned their heads towards it.

'Wanna fix your face? The guestroom's specially set up for visiting celebrities. It's got everything.'

'That'll be a lifesaver. I can't go back to the party looking like this.'

'I dunno … Could start a new trend!'

Upstairs

TO AVOID RUNNING into Frank or Gloria or (God forbid!) a reporter, Andrew led the way up the backstairs, the ones used by the house staff. The lights on the second floor were softer than those downstairs. The carpets were plush, the walls a deep salmon-pink. The scent of roses floated down from the ceiling.

Leaving Sheryl to fix her face in a guestroom mirror, Andrew stepped across the hall and rang Kelly, who was spending the night grading papers.

'Having fun?' she asked, knowing full well what kind of time he would be having.

'About as much as you.'

'I doubt that. Listen to this … Where is it?' He heard the rustling of papers, a bang as the phone was dropped. Then came the whisper of Kelly's breath. 'Okay, here it is. The assignment was: Compare and contrast the socio-economic systems of capitalism and socialism, drawing on blah, blah, blah. And I quote: "Catipal …" (Sorry.) "Capitalism is the only practical and moral economic system available to humankind. The simple, hard-working businessman is the engine by which the world runs today. Greed, you say. I reply: If it were not for the businessman's so-called greed, the world would have no medicines, no cars and no food. In a nutshell, civilisation would cease to exist. People would live in caves or in slavery … possibly both." Oh God!' she cried. 'I can't go on. I'm about to have a conniption fit!'

'Sounds like you're ready for a break. Do you mind being interrupted?'

'Do I mind? Oh, baby, if you only knew exactly how much I don't mind.'

'I'll take that as a come on over.'

'And I'll resist the urge to make a tacky, absolutely disgusting joke.'

Laughing, Andrew hung up. But when he crossed the hall and looked in on Sheryl, the smile died on his lips. For he had a fair idea what the future had in store for her. He'd never been close to his brother (in many ways they were

hardly more than acquaintances) but he knew what kind of man Frank was and found much in his character to dislike.

Sheryl, fumbling in her purse, had yet to see him. Leaning against the jamb, he folded his arms. He knew all too well why his brother would be attracted to such a woman. Frank had an eye for beauty, for uniqueness, for that junk shop trinket that reveals itself to be a priceless antique. But like many men with too much money and too little sense, he soon tired of his favourites and went in search of something new (or old, as the case may be). Then again, Andrew told himself, Frank had never before gone out with such a good-natured, open-hearted woman as Sheryl. Was she to be the exception? They certainly made an attractive couple. What's more, up till now Frank had never dared flaunt a date in public without being absolutely sure their mother would approve. Did this brazenness demonstrate some kind of commitment? He shook his head. Maybe he was worrying about nothing. Maybe this time things would be different.

Five minutes later found them once again plodding down the plushly carpeted hall.

'Have you seen Alastair?' Andrew asked, stopping outside an unmarked door.

Sheryl looked at him. 'Alastair?'

'Yes, Alastair. You remember? Frank's son? The boy whose life you saved?'

He spoke in jest, but Sheryl was frowning at him in earnest.

'Of course,' she said, appearing to get the joke at last. 'I mean, no, I haven't.'

'You *have* seen him since the accident, haven't you?'

After a moment's hesitation, she shook her head and said, 'Only in a TV studio … with your mother. Whenever I ask about him, Frank changes the subject. And it's not my place to push. I mean, I don't have any rights over him just because I saved his life.'

'No, that kind of thing only happens on *Gilligan's Island*.' He laughed. 'Isn't it funny how *Gilligan's Island* can pop into your head at the weirdest times?'

'*Gilligan's Island*?'

'Surely you remember *Gilligan's Island*?'

'Oh, yes. Of course. Sorry, I didn't mean to look dumb. It's just, I wasn't allowed to watch commercial TV when I was a kid. Sometimes when people

talk about shows like *Gilligan's Island* and *The Brady Bunch* I feel like I just beamed down from another planet.'

'That's something kids these days never have to worry about. Alastair would watch TV twenty-three hours a day if we let him.'

'Frank said he'd be in bed by now.'

'In bed? Alastair? He must have been talking about a different Alastair. The one I know never goes to bed before ten. Sets his own bedtimes. He's learning at a young age how to get his own way. And I'm pretty sure his grandmother relishes that.'

'He won't be asleep then?'

'No way. If you listen carefully, you'll hear him. This is his room.'

He raised a hand and rapped lightly on the door. After a few seconds a voice called out, 'Who is it?"

When Andrew gave his name, a lock turned and the door opened a crack.

'Mr Beaumont, I'm so glad you're here.' The door opened wider, revealing a middle-aged woman wearing pink rompers. Perched on her head was a pair of furry donkey ears. 'Alastair has been asking for you,' she whispered, appraising Sheryl with the eye of a trained detective. 'He wanted me to go find you. But Miss Meadows issued strict orders not to bring him downstairs. And of course I couldn't leave him here alone.'

'Uncle Andrew!' Alastair sprang from the carpet and raced over. But on seeing Sheryl, he came to a halt. Trapping her with beady eyes and pouted lips, he took a step backward. 'Who's she?' he demanded, pointing a finger at her.

Andrew went up to him and ruffled his hair. 'Hey, Bumpkin, don't you remember Sheryl?'

The boy shook his head and retreated to the other end of the room where a board game lay open on the floor.

'Sheryl was the one who saved you from being run over by that nasty car. Remember?'

Alastair tossed the dice on the carpet. He leaned over to check the result, then counted out loud as he moved a red plastic dinosaur five spaces along the game board.

'That looks like a fun game,' said Sheryl. She went up and settled down on the carpet next to him.

'It's his favourite,' said the nanny, who'd taken advantage of the intrusion to relax in a plump blue sofa. 'He plays it all the time.'

Alastair held up the dice. 'Come here, Mrs Campbell! It's your turn!'

But when the nanny went to get up, Andrew waved her down. 'That's okay, Mrs Campbell. Sheryl and I will play for a few minutes.' Dropping to all fours, he crawled over to where Alastair and Sheryl were sitting.

'No!' cried Alastair, his eyes blazing. 'I want Mrs Campbell to play!'

Andrew looked at Sheryl and shrugged an apology. 'No point arguing with the kid. He won't change his mind. Mrs Campbell, you'd better come and finish the game.'

Mrs Campbell pushed herself out of the sofa and ambled over. But as her shadow fell on them, Alastair upended the board and threw it across the room. Bounding to his feet, he ran and dived onto the bed.

Mrs Campbell followed him with the patience of a saint. 'You ready for bye-byes now, Alastair?'

'No!' he cried. But the next moment a yawn bubbled from his mouth. He wriggled up to the pillow. 'I want a story,' he demanded, tugging up the pants of his cowboy pyjamas.

Sheryl leaned towards Andrew. 'Maybe we should go,' she whispered. 'We're probably disturbing his routine.'

'What routine?' grunted Andrew. But he acknowledged the wisdom of her words and helped her to her feet.

Brushing the creases from her dress, she went up to the bed. Alastair was now slamming his arms against the mattress, his eyes squeezed shut. Mrs Campbell, ignoring the tantrum, had selected a CD and was inserting it into the player.

Sheryl opened her mouth. 'Surely …' she said, and then the nanny pressed a button and the story of 'Little Red Riding Hood' began. She looked at Alastair. 'Wouldn't he prefer if you *read* him a story?'

'Oh, no.' Mrs Campbell snorted, highly offended by the slur on her professional competence. She adjusted her donkey ears. 'Alastair prefers CDs. They're recorded by early childhood experts.'

Sheryl looked again at the product of all this early childhood expertise. Alastair, spent by his temper tantrum, lay on his back staring at the ceiling, which was decorated in a childish imitation of the Sistine Chapel. In this version the biblical figures were replaced with barnyard animals dressed in people's clothing.

'You know, Alastair,' said Sheryl, 'when I was your age, my daddy used to read me bedtime stories every night. He'd make these funny voices that made

me laugh, but then my eyelids would grow really, really heavy and I'd close my eyes and dream I was a princess who lived in a magical castle at the bottom of the garden. I had some wonderful adventures with dragons and giants and a fluffy bunny called Mr Woolly.'

Alastair turned his face to her. At that moment he looked like any other sleepy little boy: eyes large and luminous, lips ruby red, skin as smooth and clear as a porcelain doll. 'Mr Woolly?'

'Yes. Mr Woolly has long floppy ears and a white fluffy tail. And he can talk. He's lots of fun.'

'Rabbits don't talk. Except when they've got batteries in their bum.'

'Young man!' cried Mrs Campbell. She turned to Andrew. 'I don't know where he gets these words.'

'Mr Woolly is my dream friend.'

'Dream friend?'

'Yes, he's my special dream friend. He stays in my head until I go to sleep, and then he comes out and takes me to magical places where we have all kinds of adventures.'

'I've got a book about rabbits.' Alastair rolled off the bed and switched off the CD player. Racing to the bookcase, he pulled books out and dropped them on the floor one by one until he found what he was after. He came running back with it in his hand. 'See? There's a really big rabbit. I don't know his name. And there's a baby one. Baby ones don't have names.'

He handed it to her and climbed back onto the bed.

'Would you like me to read it to you?'

'Yeah! Yeah!'

Mrs Campbell stepped forward. 'I don't think …'

'Hold on a minute, Mrs Campbell,' said Andrew. 'Why don't we leave them alone a while?'

When the nanny started to protest, he silenced her with a telling frown. 'We'll go get a cup of tea,' he said. 'I'm sure you're dying for a break. And don't worry, I'll take full responsibility for the next five minutes.'

As Sheryl stood waiting for permission, Alastair jumped up and down on the bed, whimpering like a puppy.

'Go ahead,' said Andrew.

She gave him a smile of thanks. Flushed with excitement, Alastair scrambled under the covers and pulled them up to his chin. Sheryl tucked him in, pulled up a chair and made herself comfortable. Then came a dramatic

pause, during which no one in the room moved or uttered a sound. At last Sheryl opened the book … slowly, carefully, like it was an ancient tome filled with long-forgotten wisdom.

'One bright day, deep in the forest …'

Andrew ushered Mrs Campbell into the hall. He paused to take a final look at the charming scene. Frank doesn't deserve her, he thought. And as for mother, she needs her head read.

Downstairs

WHEN SHERYL REAPPEARED at the head of the ballroom stairs, Frank swept up to her like Nelson Eddy about to burst into song. Taking her hand, he pulled her out of sight of the guests.

'Where have you been? I was looking all over for you. Don't you like the party?'

She straightened his bow tie. 'Oh no, it's not that. I was talking to your brother. We met in Ethiopia; did I tell you?'

'No.' He gave her a mock frown. 'Sounds cosy.'

'I only found out tonight. I mean, I didn't realise he was your brother till tonight.' She squeezed his hand, still high from her time with Alastair. The boy's response to her, coming on top of Andrew's support, had done much to neutralise the poison of Gloria's ultimatum. 'Your brother's a great guy.'

'He's an arty-farty academic liberal. And he's my *half* brother.'

'I think it's great you're so different. Your mother did something right to bring up two such incredible sons.'

'You can say that again, sweetheart.'

He beamed at her and she was reminded of Andrew's words about his brother's insecurities. It was hard to believe someone so rich and powerful could be insecure, but perhaps Andrew was right; perhaps deep inside Frank harboured feelings of worthlessness, a fear he was no better than his father. That would explain why he was having problems with women. Maybe he dumped them before they got in first and dumped *him*. Well, Sheryl thought, this time things are different. She truly believed this. Contrary to Gloria's accusation, she didn't view Frank as a conquest or a shortcut to riches and fame. She had a certainty they were right for each other in ways that surpassed social and financial boundaries.

Yet something Gloria had said troubled her. 'Frank,' she ventured, 'has your mother asked about us?'

His hand twitched. 'She did mention something. Once or twice.'

'And you said?'

'I said we were dating. Casually.'

'Oh.'

He pulled her against him. 'Sweetheart, it's not the right time to get all formal. Gloria needs time to get used to the idea I'm a free agent. I told you before, she's hoping me and the ex-wife will get back together.'

'That's okay. You don't need to explain.'

'I'm sick of this party. Let's get the hell out of here.'

Sheryl was happy to comply. But as she turned towards the hall, Frank jerked her back to his side. 'What –?' she grunted, but he silenced her with a kiss.

'There's something I want to show you,' he murmured into her mouth. 'Or more to the point, do to you.'

Anticipation buoying her steps, she accompanied him down the staircase, along the edge of the dance floor and through a door that led to an outside paved area. The wind had picked up and dead leaves were scurrying past them, leaping onto the lawn and disappearing into darkness. The rain had stopped, but a wet mist was blowing in Sheryl's face, blinding her, ruining her makeup again.

They descended through a terraced garden, past tennis courts, life-sized statues, a summerhouse and a silent fountain. At the bottom of the steps was a kidney-shaped swimming pool with twin diving boards and an adjacent spa. Servicing the pool and spa was an expansive barbecue area that included a 'fifties-style surf-themed bar.

Their destination was a small clay-brick building. Unlocking the door, Frank backed into the darkness and pulled Sheryl inside.

Before the door was even closed, his tongue was in her mouth, his hips were grinding against hers, his fingers were tugging the zip at the back of her dress.

'Oh, baby,' he murmured. 'Oh God!'

With a groan of lust, he swept her off her feet, staggered across the room and deposited her onto a pile of cushions, where they made love like two horny schoolkids. It was all Sheryl could do to keep up. It was all she could do to stop herself bursting into tears of joy. As they went about their frenzied lovemaking, a lonely wind howled through the eaves, a tap drip-drip-dripped into a metal basin and something banged and scraped against the outhouse wall. But to Sheryl it could not have been any more romantic.

When it was over, Frank buzzed with post-coital energy. 'Did you come?' he asked, nodding at her. 'Of course you came. That was the most amazing fucking orgasm I've ever had. Some workout! You wouldn't believe I'm forty-two, hey? More like a teenager. And you're my teenage dream, baby.'

But the flare of energy didn't last long. Two minutes later he was yawning. He smiled dreamily into the air.

Sheryl whispered, 'What are you thinking?'

He released a long sigh. 'I was thinking about when I was a kid. I used to come in here and … fantasise I was with one of the girls in the pool. It never happened. Not till now, that is.'

He said nothing for a while, and Sheryl, assuming that to be the extent of his thoughts, nestled in his warmth. She closed her eyes and tried to enjoy the moment – a difficult thing, what with all the howling, dripping and banging and the stench of chlorine in her nose.

'One thing I've learned from you,' Frank said, 'is how much I get off on making love in risky places. Like, that door isn't locked. Anybody could've wandered down here … Maybe two other people with the same thing on their minds.' He chuckled. 'We could've had an orgy.'

Sheryl squirmed a little. She didn't like him talking that way. He sounded too much like the men at Sephryn House. She said, 'Are we really dating casually, Frank?'

'What?' he cried. 'No! Where did that come from? This is totally serious! Best sex I've ever had!'

Though it wasn't exactly the response Sheryl wanted, she shook with delight. If this was the best sex he'd had, he was in for a surprise. She still had a vast repertoire of tricks and treats up her sleeve, a trove of new and exciting ways to please and excite him. The thought thrilled her. She knew as long as she kept Frank happy and hungry, he would never have reason to leave her.

But how to handle Gloria's ultimatum? Was it possible to hide their relationship until her career was beyond the point where Gloria could realistically interfere? How long was that likely to take? One thing was clear: she could no longer afford the luxury of sitting around waiting for an agent or producer to approach her with an offer. She would have to take control of the situation herself – grab hold of the reins of her fame, spur the beast on, prove to the world that she was more than just a talking head of Gloria's making.

But for this she needed an event. Something classy; something with a big enough audience. And it had to be something that would attract the attention of the media.

An idea began taking shape in her head, a way to keep both her lover and her budding career. As Frank dozed beside her, his body rising and falling in time with hers, she gazed at the ceiling and sketched out a battle plan. It was ironic; the idea had been lazing in the back of her mind all this time, waiting for something to come along and prod and push it into action. And Gloria had ungraciously obliged. Wouldn't it be funny if the spiteful witch ended up doing her a favour by her interference? Maybe Gloria would be a springboard to her dreams after all.

Still, for the plan to have any chance of succeeding, she would have to keep a low profile for a while. She would have to avoid being seen with Frank, lie like crazy, and hope in this way to convince Gloria her orders had been followed. It wouldn't be easy; that much was clear. But if Andrew could do it, so could she.

FOUR | TO THE STARS AND BACK

Northbridge bound

On the trip back to Northbridge, Danny pressed his face against the carriage window and peered out at the sunless afternoon. A drizzling rain had begun to fall and rivers of grime were trickling down the outside of the glass. When his breath obscured his view, he wiped the fog away with the sleeve of his shirt. He was staring hard at the scenery outside, searching for the place where suburbia ended and the city began. At some point along the track, the tidy houses with their landscaped gardens and children's clothes hanging on the line would give way to dirty, broken-down tenements, followed by Northbridge, and he was trying to see if this transition happened by degrees or if there were distinct and separable strata, with Golden Bay at one end and Northbridge at the other. He needed to know more about those foreign lands between the two extremes, for how else was he to follow Sheryl's lead and leave Northbridge behind? He certainly didn't have her talent, or her luck.

He sighed. Who was he fooling? It would take a miracle for him to escape the rut of Northbridge. The realisation frightened him. Lately his motivation to study had all but leaked away. To overcome the fatigue that kept him huddled in bed for twelve or more hours a day, he'd struggled to maintain a belief that all his effort would make a difference, that by buckling down and studying hard he would find his own way to Golden Bay. But optimism was getting harder to sustain. And he was always so tired.

He turned from the view and smiled at Doris. She was engrossed in a children's book, her brow furrowed, her mouth moving as she tried to bring sense to unfamiliar words. Danny stared down at the brightly-coloured picture of a boy and his dog. 'Run, Jack, run!' cried the boy in the picture. 'Find Sally and bring her to the fort!'

When Doris turned the page, he leaned back and closed his eyes. Earlier that day, on the journey to Golden Bay, he'd imagined Sheryl as she made the same journey, having left their apartment for the last time. It was easy enough

to conjure up her image, but he found it almost impossible to conceive of her emotions as Northbridge receded into the distance. He'd been keen to accompany her on this momentous trip, but she refused his offer, saying, 'I'm sure you've got better things to do.' Danny reacted badly. He took her refusal to mean she wanted to leave everything behind, himself included. Her behaviour today confirmed this belief. She barely said anything to him. She was rude to Doris. The visit was a disaster.

He said so to Doris.

'Not a disaster,' returned Doris. 'A disappointment. We followed our hearts and that's only wrong when we hurt the other person.' She closed her book. 'We showed Sheri we love her and in time that will become very important to her.'

'You think so?' He turned back to the window. It was getting dark quickly. The colours of the world were fading, leaving behind a million shades of grey. The glass threw back a dim image of his face, childlike and bewildered. 'Why was she so unfriendly?' he asked his reflection. 'Why didn't she want us coming around?'

Doris's face appeared next to his. 'Danny, Sheri believes that the only way she can hold onto what she has at Golden Bay is to turn her back to the past and look only at the future. But there are too many special people in Sheri's past. In time she will see this.'

'She's ashamed of us, hey?'

'Not ashamed. She is scared her boyfriend will find out about Sephryn House.'

He squeezed his hands into fists. 'I can't stand that prick! He looked at me like I was some kind of freak!'

'Men like Frank are everywhere in my country. They spend a few baht on a girl and then they act like superstuds. And all this time the girl is trying hard to swallow her vomit. Of course, Sheri's boyfriend is handsome and rich, but that only means he has more pretty girls to play with. Sheri will have to work her ass off to keep him happy.'

'That's why she doesn't want us around, hey?'

'You should try not to blame Sheri. She is confused by all the changes in her life. It will pass.'

When he screwed up his face, she squeezed his shoulder. 'Think about yourself, Danny. On the nights that you were with Ben, did you worry that Sheri was alone? It's natural for people to care more for their own happiness

than the happiness of others. Over time our thoughts return to the ones we love. But first we must take care of our own lives.'

'I suppose you're right,' said Danny, though he felt a twinge of annoyance at what he perceived was a personal criticism. No one had ever told him that by moving into Sheryl's apartment he was taking on responsibility for her happiness.

The train rattled and shook. They were passing over Black Abbey Bridge. Danny pressed his forehead against the window. Down below, drowning in shadows, was Squatter Park and everything he was fighting to escape. As they rumbled across the sky a sense of doom gripped him by the throat and he had a sudden urge to kick out the window and throw himself from the airless carriage. He had a foreboding that no matter how hard he tried to escape, he would always end up returning to those dingy streets. The blind alleys, the neon lights, the bars and cafés, the quirky, crazy characters – all those things defined him. They were the soil beneath his feet, and he had a conviction he would wither and die if uprooted and transplanted somewhere else. That was why the visit to Golden Bay failed. Sheryl had made the leap to a place that was beyond his reach.

'What are you doing now?' he asked Doris.

Doris was yawning and stretching like a cat, but as it turned out, she was working tonight. Danny tried to hide his disappointment. He'd hoped she would have the night off and they would do something cool together, like hang out in some sleazy downtown bar and poke fun at the drunks that buzzed around Doris like flies at a barbeque. He needed something like that to take his mind off things at home.

That morning, he and Ben had an enormous fight. The argument started because Ben was more interested in watching a program about black holes than talking to him. From there, things escalated. Voices were raised. Unrelated matters were pulled in with the force of gravity. At the height of the conflict Danny threw a glass at the wall and ran out the door. He hadn't been home since. His plan was to wait till Ben left for work, then sneak in and scrub the apartment till it smelled like lemons, then take a hot bath and go to bed. By the time Ben finished work, he'd be out like a light, sleeping like an angel. If things went according to plan, there would be no need to revisit the morning's argument or apologise or explain. It was a stupid argument anyway. He could see that now, and Ben would too.

Following their disagreement over Eric, the situation had gotten worse. Danny had every intention of being civil to the balding old men (at least in front of Ben), but several minutes into their next encounter Eric ridiculed something he said and he exploded and stormed out of the bar. This time Ben wasn't so tolerant. They argued and Danny flew into a rage, threatened to move out, even started stuffing clothes into his backpack. Only then had Ben apologised.

Following that episode, he tried to avoid Eric. The strategy was well-meaning, but as Ben was the focus of both their lives it was doomed to fail. The next time they met, he lost his temper again. Though Ben didn't say anything this time, things changed in other ways. He began ordering him around, telling him to clean the kitchen, vacuum the carpet, make the bed, take out the garbage. Danny took pains to oblige, but an ugly resentment was spreading its tentacles inside him. Relationships aren't supposed to be like this, he told himself. There wasn't supposed to be tension and never-ending chores. One partner wasn't supposed to order the other one around.

Lately, possibly in response to his troubles, he'd taken to staring through the wall and daydreaming about his days and nights as a free agent. As with all such musings, the thoughts were mostly pleasant ones. His mind conveniently sidestepped the memories of dismal nights and hideous men and recalled instead the joys of ready cash, multiple orgasms and a life in which he had no cares and no one could tell him what to do. It wasn't that he'd stopped loving Ben and it wasn't that he wanted to break out of the relationship and return to his old life. But a part of him – the wild, untamed part – yearned for adventure, loathed being tied down.

Things would have been different had the balding old men not come along. Ben would be all his, and they would be happy. But he had to face facts. He was losing the fight. The balding old men were winning.

The gift

THE TRAIN GROUND to a stop at Lantern Street Station. After a quick hug, Doris rushed off to get ready for work, while Danny, hands in pockets, descended to the street. Men and women were loitering in the vacant block across the road, standing in pairs and small groups, some rubbing their hands over barrels of fire. Most other people seemed in a hurry to be someplace else. Danny wished he too had somewhere to go. Luckily it had stopped raining, but with the approach of night the air had turned frosty and he realised he would freeze unless he found somewhere warm to hole up in for a couple of hours.

It isn't hard to understand why his feet would take him to Squatter Park. He'd spent nights far worse than this under the shelter of Black Abbey Bridge, and he had an almost supernatural hunch Leslie was at the park at this very moment, on the hunt for a lover, or at least a warm bed for the night. The hunch was so strong he took it as a premonition and ran most of the way. It would be great to see Leslie again. They had a ton of catching up to do.

But Squatter Park was empty. It was one of those nights when hookers and street kids lurk outside strip clubs warming themselves in the flashing lights or sit in the windows of cheap coffee houses nursing steaming cups and hoping for a lonely soul with a warm bed at home to walk by and catch their eye. It certainly wasn't a night to be standing about in a cold, wet park.

With nowhere to go and nothing to do, he continued on towards Sephryn House. He'd walked this route so many times with Sheri that it gave him a kind of comfort to be retracing his steps. Of course, Sheri was no longer working at Sephryn House and he was no longer a street kid, but walking at a brisk pace, his eyes settling on familiar landmarks, he could almost taste how fearless he'd been back then, how nothing could get him down. Now, all these months later, it almost seemed he was weaker, not stronger. How had that happened?

As he was traipsing down an unlit section of King Albert Street, not far from the spot where Doris had crossed swords with Scarlett, a white Toyota Camry raced up and squealed to a stop. The driver's door flew open and a man of about seventy sprang out and stood on the road with arms outstretched. He had bushy eyebrows and a speckled, egg-shaped head. Tufts of white hair grew like fungus around his ears. He was wearing a maroon woollen scarf and a chocolate brown overcoat, the kind with wide lapels, big pockets and fat, shiny buttons.

'Adam!' he cried. 'I am so very glad to see you! I was worried you were gone for good!'

Danny turned his nose up. The old man was one of his former clients. Every couple of months, while visiting the city on business, he would seek Danny out at Squatter Park and put him up for the night. He usually rented a room at the Ace of Spades Hotel, where he would take Danny and for several hours shower him with affection, gifts and (of course) money. When morning came, the old man would rise with the sun and depart for home, a small town a few hours away, leaving Danny to be woken by the surly, scary cleaning lady. Once or twice he'd told him his name, but Danny, having no use for names, hadn't bothered to listen. Tonight this detail seemed even more irrelevant.

'Hey,' he said, and walked on.

'Horrible night to be out,' said the man, intercepting him and blocking his way.

Danny raised his face to the low, angry sky. He stretched his arms and pulled back his shoulders. He tried hard not to appear cold, damp and miserable.

The man gathered his scarf around his neck. 'Hey, Adam, look here. How about we go somewhere warm? My hotel. Remember my hotel? The Ace of Spades?'

'Sorry, man,' said Danny. 'Don't do that no more.'

'Oh.' The old man smiled. His teeth were so pearly white he might have stolen them from a supermodel. 'That is heartening to know. You are respectable now. Good. Good.' He nodded in agreement with himself. 'Well, we don't have to … do anything. Like, ahh, sex. Sex is not what's important. Not at my age. It would be an honour just to talk, to talk with you. And we could watch the television. Young boys always like the television.' He blushed

and the speckles on his head grew darker. 'I like you very much, Adam. Did I ever tell you that?'

Danny glanced over his shoulder. 'I've got somewhere to be,' he said, and jogged across the road.

The man followed him. 'That's a shame. A real darn shame. Can we meet up some other time? Just for a chat, of course. I respect you more than you realise, Adam. You are not like the other boys. You are much more mature. A man can talk to you. I like that.'

Rain began to fall, fat, heavy drops that plopped on the ground, drummed on parked cars and rapidly became a downpour. Danny took off for the nearest cover. The old man shuffled up behind him and together they stood shivering under the awning of a men's clothing store. Rain beat down around them. Danny, soaked to the skin, peered through the store window at the jackets, shirts and trousers lined up on rack after rack. He tried the door on the off chance it was open. It wasn't.

The man felt his sleeve. 'You're all wet. I hope you're on your way to somewhere nice and dry.'

He shrugged.

'Otherwise, Adam, you could come back to my room and hang your top over the radiator until it's dry. Then you can go off to wherever it is you need to be. You don't want to catch pneumonia, do you?'

Danny was getting tired of the old man's lines. But his offer did make sense. He checked his watch. Almost two hours to go until it was safe to return home. What other options did he have?

'If I come,' he said, 'it's only till I get dry.'

'Oh, naturally, naturally. And we can talk and watch the television.'

'No funny stuff.'

'Oh, no.'

'You swear?'

The man nodded, though his eyes told a different story.

Oh well, Danny thought, it's not like he's strong enough to force me into anything I don't want to do. And there'll be booze there.

'Go get the car,' he said.

THE ACE OF Spades was much as Danny remembered it: down-market, badly lit, smelling of dust and dead cockroaches, lorded over by a hulking, unshaven

concierge who might have been the brother of the wino sleeping outside on the steps. The orange carpets were worn to the thread in high-traffic areas. The dark blue walls were chipped and scratched. The only trimmings of any note were an overgrown monstera beside the reception desk and two faded prints on the walls, both featuring African women with elongated necks and multi-coloured beads draped strategically over their breasts.

The old man's room was on the second floor. Though spacious, it was sparsely furnished, and the furniture all looked like it was made of cheap wood veneer. A TV set was attached to the wall by a chain the thickness of Danny's wrist. The bed linen was stained from years of use. It was the kind of room you'd expect to be rented by the hour.

He took off his overcoat. 'How about a hot shower, my boy?'

Danny turned on him. 'Hey, I said none of that.'

'No, Adam, no. You misunderstand.' He chuckled. 'I meant by yourself, with the door locked. Otherwise you stand to catch your death of cold. I will change into something dry and do a few accounts, and then we can have a gin and tonic together and a nice long chat. Come along now …'

While Danny showered, the man took his wet clothes and draped them over the radiator. When he heard the water shut off, he passed a pair of brown trousers and a white business shirt through a crack in the bathroom door. Though the clothes were too big and they reeked of mothballs, at least they were dry and Danny was warm again for the first time since fleeing the apartment that morning.

Emerging from the bathroom, he switched on the TV, took a seat in a vinyl-covered chair and started watching an old episode of *M*A*S*H*. Spotting the gin and tonic, he picked up the glass.

'So, Adam, you are behaving yourself now,' the man said from the bed. 'Might I ask what brought on the change?'

Danny told him the truth (as much of it as a former client needed to know), then turned his attention back to the TV. From the corner of his eye he could see the lecher staring at him, and that old sense of power charged through his veins. He smiled to himself. If only Ben knew how much he was desired. If Ben knew how many men had paid for the privilege of touching his boyfriend's body, he'd be certain to do anything in his power to make Danny happy. Even if that meant giving up his stupid, ugly friends.

Thoughts of Ben brought on a flash of panic. Would he forgive him this time? Throwing the glass was an idiotic thing to do. Maybe Ben had already

decided enough was enough and the time had come to ask him to leave. The visit to Golden Bay had dealt a savage blow to Danny's ego. It was another in a long line of rejections. Would Ben be next? The prospect was too devastating to contemplate.

'Adam, forgive me for saying so, but I find you incredibly beautiful. I always have done. Whenever I went home to Wilton, your memory would burn in my mind for weeks afterward.'

Danny's eyes hardly flickered. He tried to screen out the man's words and focus his attention on the joke Hawkeye was making, but inside he yearned for more compliments, more affirmations about his beauty and desirability. They helped to convince him Ben would never want to leave him.

'Would you agree to a hug? Just one. Nothing more.'

He snorted. 'No way. Ben wouldn't like it.'

'Ben. What a delightful name! It conjures up an image of a husky lumberjack fighting off a grizzly bear. I would like to meet this Ben. Is he handsome?'

Danny whirled around, suspecting blackmail. 'Don't even think about it!'

The man pulled back, fending off an imaginary attack with his hands. 'I didn't mean anything, Adam. I simply meant he must be very handsome to have attracted a boy as beautiful as you.'

Despite himself, Danny smiled. 'Sorry, man,' he said. 'Just in a freaky mood.'

Regaining his composure, the old man sat studying his hands. He cleared his throat. 'Excuse me, Adam, but I've been thinking. A young man like you must find it very difficult to get along, what with not … working. Am I correct?'

'I get an allowance. It's enough for now. I'll get a job when I finish college.'

'College? I'm proud of you, my boy.' A pause. 'But right now you must find it hard to get by.' When Danny didn't respond, he went on. 'I am about to present something to you, an offer I would like you to consider very carefully. You mustn't get upset – I certainly won't if your answer is no – but I feel compelled to lay my cards on the table so we can both consider the proposal on its merits.'

Danny's ears pricked up.

'So, Adam, it's like this. I have money and you don't. And I would dearly love to see you naked, whereas you have a desire to retain your modesty. Now,

as you know, I am a businessman, with a businessman's mind. Approaching this dilemma as one would any other commercial transaction, it strikes me that you have a value which far exceeds what I have to date offered as recompense. Which means the asking price must rise.'

Danny was lost. 'What the hell are you talking about?'

'I will give you one hundred dollars if you remove your – uh, my – my clothes and let me see you naked.'

Danny, smirking at the offer, returned to the TV. 'Look, man, I said no dice.'

'That's not all. I will give you five hundred if you … play with yourself. And a thousand if you … if you make love to me.'

His mouth fell open. 'What?'

'It's a very good offer. Many times what the average boy makes in a night.'

'You gotta be kidding!'

'No. No kidding. You cannot imagine how painfully boring my life is in Wilton. I work long hours to make my business successful, and then … nothing. You have been the sole light in my life in – I cannot say how many years. The last time I saw you I had no idea it would be the last time ever, and now that fate has seen fit to set our paths to cross once again, I would like one final, indelible memory of you. And I am willing to pay dearly for that privilege. I realise how strongly you feel about your lover, but this has nothing to do with him. He won't ever know. And the two of us have been intimate any number of times in the past, so this time will be meaningless to you. I realise it would be different if I were a perfect stranger, but I am not, and so you can simply do this, pocket the cash, and then forget it ever happened. Me, I will remember it forever. I will be grateful to you for the remainder of my days. You can rest assured that every single day and night I will be thinking of you, thanking you.'

The old man was making a fuck sound like a humanitarian measure. And yet Danny was intrigued. Five minutes of effort and he would be five hundred dollars richer. And five minutes were easy to forget. What had bowled into his mind at the mention of money was an appreciation of its power. It would enable him to buy a gift for Ben, something to make amends for the way he'd been behaving lately. The more he seized on this notion, the more the gift became an integral part of his plan for reconciliation. The odds of Ben forgiving him without it became remote, too tiny to contemplate.

He shook the ridiculous notion from his head. 'No way,' he said. 'Not happening.' The man was disgusting. And how could he face Ben after betraying him like that?

But down inside he wanted the man to keep on pushing. He wanted to know how far he was prepared to go, how much he thought Danny was worth.

'Come now, Adam. Think on it for a while. There's no hurry.'

Danny forced himself to concentrate on the TV. In the course of their conversation *M*A*S*H* had turned into *World's Hottest Police Videos*. On screen a dump truck was running a rampage through a city street, side-swiping cars and knocking down parking meters. A line of police cars was in hot pursuit. Through the hotel window came the scream of real police sirens.

He couldn't get the man's offer out of his head. One hundred dollars just for taking his clothes off? Had he heard correctly? He needed to change once his own clothes were dry. What difference would it make if he did it with an audience?

'I'll take my clothes off,' he said. 'Before I go.'

The old man rubbed his hands together in glee. 'You don't know how happy that makes me, Adam!'

Scrambling to the bottom of the bed, he got up and poured another two gin and tonics. Then he sat on the edge of the bed and joined Danny in watching *World's Hottest Police Videos*. He was rubbing his hands together again. Danny wished he would stop.

'When I was growing up, my dream job was a police officer,' the old man said as a cop on the TV show took a bullet in the leg. He waggled his bushy eyebrows. 'Of course, that was a hundred years ago. But they did have policemen in those days … only they drove a horse and buggy.' A pause. 'What are you planning to do after you finish college, Adam?'

'Dunno. Maybe a pilot.'

'A pilot? In the air force?'

'Nah. Jumbo jet.'

'A jumbo? That would be a very exotic profession. Seeing the world, making international friends.' He nodded. 'It takes a lot of money to become a pilot.'

'Yeah?'

'Not that that should put you off. I am simply suggesting you begin saving now.'

Danny sipped from his glass and went back to watching TV.

After that, the man made several more attempts to resume the conversation, but each time Danny thwarted him by grunting or half nodding, till eventually his host got the message and stayed quiet.

At a commercial break, the old man stretched his legs and started nodding at him. 'A young man like you must have a very strong sex drive,' he said. 'Do you mind me asking how many times a day you play with yourself?'

Danny burst out laughing. The man laughed too.

'Have you done it already today?'

'No,' he said, feeling the reply might discourage the old lecher.

'Really? No? Then you must be dying for it right now.'

'Nup.'

'Come, come, Adam. I was young once, remember. I know how things get. If you would like to do it right now, right here, be my guest.'

With that, he relaunched his offer, this time taking pains to trivialise the sex part and inflate the monetary. 'When you think about it,' he pointed out, 'if you choose the second option, sex will not be involved at all, just a normal, healthy orgasm – something a boy of your age should be doing at least three times a day anyway.'

At a gap in the old man's spiel Danny heard himself say, 'Six hundred or nothing,' and with that, the deal was made.

The man looked ecstatic and disappointed at the same time. He increased the third option to twelve hundred, but Danny would only compromise his principles so much. In his mind there was a vast difference between masturbation, involving no physical contact, and full-on sex. The more he thought along these lines, the more convinced he became that what he was agreeing to was the most sensible course of action, something that Ben (in the unlikely event he found out) would understand and possibly even support.

'Show us the money first.'

'I don't carry around that much cash, Adam.'

'No money, no deal.'

The man got up off the bed, his joints cracking like snapping twigs. 'I'll run and find an ATM and be back as soon as I possibly can. Is that alright? You won't leave?'

Danny gave him a smug smile.

'Please, Adam. Please don't leave. Remember how much money you stand to lose if you run out on me now. Six – hundred – dollars.'

Scooping up his wallet and keys, he flashed a final beseeching look at Danny, then flew out the door.

Danny pushed himself up in the chair and downed the rest of his gin and tonic. Returning the glass to the table, he got up and went to the radiator, felt his clothes, found they were still a little damp, turned them over. He poured himself another drink, then glanced around the seedy room. The man's suitcase was open on a bench. Having nothing better to do, he went over and rummaged through it. He wasn't searching for something to steal and he wasn't particularly interested in the old man's life; it was just something to do while he waited. The suitcase, which reeked of mothballs and cheap cologne, was neatly packed with white shirts, stripy ties, two pairs of brown trousers and a stack of business documents: a diary, account books and the like, all stamped with the label, 'Harry Drake's Fodder and Supplies'.

Sticking out from one of the books was a photograph. Danny pulled it out and held it under the light. The picture was a couple of decades old, taken in a studio from the look of it. It showed Harry Drake (middle-aged and almost handsome) standing behind a sweet, round-faced woman and three grinning, smartly dressed children. They were happy, you could see that, and their happiness seemed impenetrable. Yet all this time, while the wife and kids were living their dull, uncomplicated lives, Harry Drake was struggling with his sexuality, fighting to conceal his desire for other men. If his family had ever discovered his secret it would have ripped their world apart, would have blasted the smiles off those round, happy faces, probably forever. But they hadn't found out. Harry Drake's secret had remained hidden for almost an entire lifetime.

Replacing the photograph in the book, he shut the suitcase and promptly forgot about the happy family. He had as much interest in Harry Drake's life as he did in the life of the concierge downstairs.

But now he was getting anxious. Flames of guilt flickered inside him. And his mind was all over the place. Had he made the right decision? Or was he on the verge of making the worst mistake of his life?

Furious at himself for questioning the soundness of his judgment, he threw himself on the bed and bashed his head against the mattress. Listen here, he told himself. This is nothing. You haven't jacked off all day and you're gonna go crazy if you don't do it soon. So you can either get it over with now, while the old man's away, or you can do it in fifteen minutes time and score six hundred bucks. Either way the jack-off's the same. The only

difference is the money. And what it can buy. His argument was highly convincing.

To cool his mind, he concentrated on the type of gift he should buy for Ben. For the first time in months he could afford practically anything he wanted. The thought brought tears to his eyes. Danny had found it difficult adjusting to a life of poverty, especially with Sheryl no longer in the picture. The youth allowance was barely enough to survive on and his chances of getting a job within the next two or three years were slim. So for him this six hundred dollars was a blessing he could ill afford to pass up. He shook his head, annoyed at himself for being so selfish. Ben deserved the best, and this was one small way Danny could give it to him.

Harry Drake didn't waste any time. Falling through the door, he sighed with relief and counted out six hundred-dollar notes on the bedside table.

Danny got up and started unbuttoning his shirt.

Harry Drake went over and switched off the TV, his eyes not leaving Danny's body. 'Please,' he begged. 'Please let me do that.'

Danny shook his head and moved to the other side of the bed.

'Oh, Adam!' Harry Drake said as his body was unveiled. 'You are exactly as I remember. Better, even. You are such a beautiful boy. Look at the hair darkening your –'

'Get on the bed.'

Without another word, Harry Drake slithered onto the mattress.

'And don't touch me.'

Once the man had grunted his agreement, Danny closed his eyes, lifted his chin and began jerking off. After a few moments, the bedsprings started squeaking. It took a superhuman effort of will to ignore what was causing it. If I concentrate on Ben, he thought, it'll be like it's him lying there and not some disgusting sleazebag. He pictured Ben in the shower, recalled their lovemaking yesterday morning when Ben soaped up his body and made love to him on the bathroom tiles. The water had cascaded over them, stimulating every nerve, driving him to an explosion of joy … and all the time, the water was splashing on their bodies and eddying at their feet and Ben was crying out in that special voice he saved for Danny and Danny alone …

Something hot and wet engulfed him.

'Hey!' he bellowed, his eyes flashing open.

Harry Drake's head dropped back to the pillow. His teeth grinned at Danny from the bedside table.

‘Do that again and I’ll kill you,’ Danny threatened. He looked at the door, considered briefly whether to leave, then spied the six notes fanned out on the bedside table. ‘I mean it,’ he warned, and went back to work.

Two minutes later, in an unsatisfying climax, he came all over Harry Drake’s face. As Harry Drake bucked and jerked and panted towards his own noisy climax, Danny smiled at the money and congratulated himself on how simple this had been. All he’d done was jack off, and now here he was, six hundred dollars richer. If only he received six hundred dollars every time he masturbated, he’d be a millionaire by now.

The thought was interrupted by a demented grunting, followed by deathly silence. But Harry Drake wasn’t dead. There was a rosiness to his cheeks that hadn’t been there before. A sheen of sweat lent to his face a deceptively healthy glow. Extracting a napkin-sized handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped Danny’s sperm from his face and neck, murmured something under his breath, then fell asleep.

Danny dressed in his own clothes. While Harry Drake lay snoring, he switched on the TV, turned down the volume and watched the end of *World’s Hottest Police Videos*. At eight-thirty he collected his earnings and left the room without giving Harry Drake another thought.

By this time he’d settled on a gift. It was something Ben could wear, something he’d look at all the time so he’d be reminded of Danny and his generosity throughout the day. And it was something that would last forever, like their love.

On King Albert Street he pushed through the door of a jewellery supermart and began poring over the display cases. The proprietor, a Chinese man with small ears and suspicious eyes, kept vigil from behind the pay counter, probably holding a shotgun against his leg, ready to fire should Danny attempt to grab something and run. To show he meant business, Danny pulled out the six hundred-dollar notes and placed them on the counter. The proprietor fell off his stool and came rushing over.

‘Does that one have an alarm?’ he asked, pointing at a watch with a platinum band and sapphire blue face.

The proprietor nodded eagerly and brought out the watch. As well as telling the time it showed the date and the phases of the moon, and it cost four hundred and ninety-eight dollars. It was the most beautiful watch Danny had ever seen.

‘I’ll take it!’ he announced. ‘Can you wrap it up, please?’

The proprietor pulled a drawer open and took out a sheet of blue wrapping paper. As he glanced about for his scissors, Danny wandered off, trailing his hand along the edge of the display cabinets. At the end, near the back of the store, was a section for novelty watches, and one of them had Bart Simpson on it and the price tag of one hundred and fifty dollars.

'Whoa!' he cried, bending down for a closer look.

Bart waved up at him, urging him to buy. He seemed to be saying, 'Dude, how can you call yourself cool if you don't have me sittin' on your wrist?'

Danny didn't have enough money for both watches. But the Bart watch was a guaranteed bargain (the price tag said so) and it would almost certainly be snapped up by someone else if he didn't buy it straight away.

'Hold on!' he cried.

The proprietor looked at him.

He thought a moment. If he bought a gift that was too expensive, Ben might ask where he got the money from, and he'd have a hard time coming up with an explanation. On the other hand, if he bought something that was cheap but still special, he could say he'd been saving up for a long time. Then Ben would be all the more grateful for such a thoughtful, selfless act of love.

Congratulating himself on this last-minute enhancement to his plan, he chose a cheaper watch for Ben (one with a black leather strap) and bought the Bart watch for himself.

Ecstatic now, he ran home through the rain. Boy, was Ben in for a surprise! After tearing off the wrapping paper, opening the black box and seeing the cool watch, there was no way he could doubt the depth of Danny's feelings, the lengths he would go to to please him. The gift was a symbol of undying devotion, and Danny could think of nothing that said 'I love you' better.

Green room

THE DAY AFTER receiving the Governor's award for bravery, Sheryl appeared on Sammy Jo Hartman. Sammy Jo was a bubbly twenty-eight-year-old with an on-again, off-again weight problem whose afternoon talk show featured freaks, celebrities, everyday heroes and authors promoting their latest self-help books. The focus of today's program was the runaway success of the Gloria Meadows Foundation campaign, but Gloria had been assured that along the way she would have plenty of opportunities to promote her book, *When You Wish on a Star*. Sheryl's brief, delivered to her in writing on Gloria's corporate letterhead, was to advocate on behalf of starving children, talk a little about the Governor's award, smile a lot, and generally let the viewers know that Miss Meadows had a heart so expansive it had the power to change the lives of ordinary people.

In addition to these worthy aims, Sheryl had another, quite separate mission. She was planning on turning Sammy Jo Hartman into a launchpad for her own career. This was to be the day she soared out of reach of the powdered talons of Gloria Meadows.

After thinking about it, she'd realised Andrew was right. She'd been taking it as a given that Gloria controlled her career and her life, whereas the woman's power extended only as far as her contract with the Gloria Meadows Foundation. Once Sheryl was famous in her own right, there was little Gloria could do to sabotage things. And success came with a bonus. Instead of being a pawn that Gloria and the other board members could play or sacrifice at will, she would become the player-in-control, the one in charge of the moves. She would be able to pick and choose her engagements. She might even be able to wrangle a seat on the board. The idea of turning the tables on the puffed-up, interfering Gloria Meadows gave her goosebumps.

The Monday after the party, she rang Sammy Jo's producers and talked them into ending the show with a musical number featuring Gloria and herself in an historic duet. On being approached with the idea, Gloria had

laughed it away, not even bothering to refuse, but the producers were sufficiently impressed by Sheryl's voice to allow her to perform solo – on condition the song was about starving children. She went home and pulled out her Michael Jackson albums.

And now, at last, the moment was upon her. Sitting in the green room awaiting her call, she had the peculiar sensation of hovering in a twilight zone between her past and her future. For the first time since Gloria made her incredible offer – possibly for the first time ever – she was in control of her own destiny, in control of her life. It was an invigorating feeling. It felt right.

She studied her reflection in the mirror. After tonight, that person would cease to exist. She imagined herself rising from the chair and seeing her reflection – the old Sheryl Starling – still sitting there, fading slowly away as the new Sheryl Starling went off to conquer the world.

'Hold still,' Cassandra said behind her. 'There's another one.'

The show's cosmeticians and hairdressers had long ago woven their magic, but Cassandra (who'd taken a sick day to be here) was busy fixing Sheryl's makeup and rearranging her hair. Every so often she would tug out a stray grey and Sheryl would start and release a surprised little cry.

Cassandra stopped her fussing to make a face in the mirror. 'Boy oh boy, do I got those need-a-man blues,' she groaned.

'What happened to Denzil?' Sheryl asked, referring to the polite young sailor who'd shared Cassandra's bed for the past three nights.

'Oh, him. That little affair is over. Kaput!' She punctuated the remark by yanking out a hair. After inspecting it in the light, she placed it on the counter alongside the others. 'He tells me he's off to sea and … Get this: I ring the base this morning and they tell me he doesn't even have a ship.'

'Aw, that's too bad.'

Sheryl frowned at herself in the mirror. Cassandra had been overgenerous with the blush and she was contemplating wiping it off and starting over. She thought: I can't go out there looking like a hussy. She glanced nervously at the closed-circuit TV. Many of the studio seats were occupied, which meant it wouldn't be long before the show was underway.

Seeing the audience pushed her headlong into panic. What if someone out there recognised her? What if she said something stupid or inappropriate? What if Gloria announced to the world that Sheryl Starling was selfish, greedy and insincere? What if her voice broke in the middle of her song? The

possibilities for disaster were endless. Her heart sped up each time a new scenario erupted in her mind.

Cassandra placed both hands on her shoulders. 'Wanna know the truth? The honest truth? I don't much care. He was too … Let's call it "inexperienced". I had to show him everything – where to put it, where not to put it – and the silly boy still couldn't get it right.' She lifted her hands. 'Then again, as they say in the classics, a boy in the hand is worth two in the bush.'

Her words went in one ear and out the other. On the monitor Sammy Jo was deep in conversation with a producer, who pointed at something off-screen. What was the problem? Why was Sammy Jo frowning so much?

Turning away, determined to get on top of her nerves, she said to Cassandra, 'Got any plans for tonight?'

'Does the Pope have wet dreams? Yes, my darling, Beverly and Lana and me are off to the casino, where hopefully I shall find myself a high roller with a body to die for and cash to burn. Speaking of high rollers, how's things with big bad Frankie?'

'Not bad.'

Cassandra shook her shoulders. 'Put more oomph into it, girl. How's the sex?'

Sheryl grinned despite herself. 'The sex is great. He's really –'

'Does he go down on you? The mark of a truly great man is whether he goes down on you or not. When a man does oral sex, it shows he really cares.'

'Cassandra! That doesn't make sense!'

'So he doesn't go down on you. What a shame!'

'I didn't say that.'

'So he *does* go down on you.' She released a wicked smile. 'I knew I'd get it out of you.'

Sheryl compressed her lips like a prudish spinster. 'Frank does everything I'd expect a man of his age and experience to do.'

Cassandra leaned her arms on the back of the chair. 'What a catch! I can only hope I meet a man like him, fabulous in bed *and* rich. What more could a girl ask for?'

Sheryl smiled. Though she was tempted to leave her friend with this vision of perfection, she was getting sick of pretending to herself and everyone else that everything was okay. The morning after the party, she'd told a stunned Cassandra about Gloria's ultimatum, but since then she'd kept the situation close to her chest, hoping to convince herself it was no big deal.

Except it *was* a big deal. It occupied her thoughts almost every waking minute of every day.

'To be perfectly honest,' she admitted, 'I don't spend nearly enough time with him.'

'Ah! Ah!' Cassandra straightened her back. 'Trouble in paradise!' She scurried to the counter, jumped up and crossed her legs. 'Tell me more, girlfriend.'

Sheryl hesitated. Maybe she'd said too much already. But Cassandra seemed eager to help, and she did know a thing or two about men. And Frank didn't even like her, so it was unlikely this conversation would ever get back to him.

She said, 'This thing with his mother … You know, I'm not one to whine, but this thing with his mother has thrown a bucket of cold water over everything. I've hardly seen him since the party.'

'You can't be serious! That long?'

'That long. I mean, he's busy with … whatever. And, yeah, I've got parties and dinners coming out of my ears –'

'I thought you were with him all those times.'

'No. That was the foundation.'

'What's he been doing all this time then?'

'Work … stuff.'

'Did you end up telling him what that puffed-up old frog said?'

'I started to, but he changed the subject. He already knows she's got it in for me. She hasn't exactly kept it a secret how she wants him and his ex-wife back together. And you know, Cassandra, the stakes are a lot bigger than him and Prue. Her father is vice-president and the two families have a web of business interests in common. If I was a tad more cynical I'd say the marriage was more about Gloria and the Halvorsons than it was about Frank and Prue.'

'Has she said anything else to you?'

'I haven't seen her. But get this: she warned Frank he'll get sued for sexual harassment if he keeps on dating girls from the office. As if I'm just one of the girls!'

'She thinks you're not good enough for him. I've known mothers like that. It's the Oedipus complex in reverse. I don't understand why he doesn't stand up to her – a big, hunky, manly man like that.'

Sheryl was silent. She didn't want Cassandra to know the embarrassing truth: that Gloria had Frank firmly under her thumb; that he refused to

discuss the problem of his mother's interference – refused even to acknowledge it *was* a problem. It was easier to place all the blame in Gloria's worthy hands. She said, 'He's convinced that Gloria – Prue's family as well – will eventually drop this reconciliation idea if we lay low for long enough. Oh, that's right,' she added, remembering a flyaway comment Frank had made, 'Gloria told him it looks bad getting hitched to another woman so soon after the divorce, especially with poor old Prue in detox. There's this sympathy factor attached to the wronged ex-wife.'

'That sounds exactly like a problem I once had. There was this guy I was seeing, Jerome, and he told me he was divorced and – can you guess? – he was shacked up with his wife. She had terminal cancer and he was scared of leaving her. But seeing as how she was too sick to have sex with, he lied and said he'd got this job as a security guard. And then he'd spend all his nights with other women. I only found out 'cos I followed him home one night.'

'You followed him?'

Cassandra bent towards the mirror and fluffed her orange ringlets. 'Girlfriend, if a man don't take you to his pad, you gotta assume he got somethin' ta hide. I'm not a girl who likes being kept in the dark … unless of course I'm tied to a bed and a gorgeous hunk is licking whipped cream off my naked body.'

Cassandra's story started gears turning in Sheryl's head. Was Frank hiding something? She understood why he couldn't take her home to meet his mother. She understood his reluctance to upset Prue and her family by splashing their affair across the social columns. She appreciated the disruption it would cause at the office if people found out the boss was dating an employee. But did she really understand his flat refusal to let her see his son? Was it conceivable Alastair was such a sensitive and impressionable child that his life would be thrown into turmoil if he was introduced to his father's new 'friend'? She had to believe this was so – but all the same she resolved to turn up the pressure on Frank. It was time to find out how deeply his feelings for her ran.

'… imagine my surprise when a woman answered the door,' Cassandra was saying. 'I asked her who she was, and she asked me who I was, and then Jerome came to the door and asked me who I was as well. Pretended he didn't know me, the bastard! Till next day of course, when he came round begging me to keep on seeing him.'

'Did you?'

'No way! I've got more self-respect than that! I told him to come back when the wife was gone. He never did, so maybe she got better.' She slipped off the counter. 'So you see, girl, sometimes you gotta make a stand.'

'I wish I could, Cassandra. I wish I could. But right now Gloria's holding my entire future in her hands. If I stand up to her, I just know I'll end up the loser. She'll find some way of sticking a knife between my shoulder blades. That's the sort of person she is. And Prue's family will be right there, standing in line.'

'More likely they'll send the servants to do the job.'

Sheryl laughed. 'You got that right! They wouldn't want my peasant blood all over their dainty little hands. Mmn, sure,' she said, for a technician had come into the green room to pinch a piece of fruit.

Cassandra said, 'Can you believe those people? I thought arranged marriages only happened in India.'

'The filthy rich live in an entirely different universe from the rest of us mere mortals.'

'At least you get to see Frank at work.' Cassandra's face turned lewd. 'Does he buzz you into his office and lock the door and wantonly take you across his desk?'

Sheryl glanced at the technician who, not content with a slice of cantaloupe, seemed intent on devouring the whole table. She waited until he'd left the room, then said, 'He hardly even looks at me at work. He's worried about office gossip.'

Cassandra looked aghast. 'Jesus, Sheryl! How do you put up with it?'

That was a good question. Was it because most men she'd known had used and abused her? Was this the kind of treatment she'd learned to expect from men? Or (perish the thought) was she clinging to Frank in desperation? Certainly she had a deep-seated conviction that if she lost him it would be a long time before she could hope to meet another man of his calibre. But all that aside, Sheryl was convinced Frank harboured a hidden reservoir of finer qualities and with the right kind of woman by his side would shuck off his coarse, impenetrable husk and become more like his brother. Wasn't that enough of a reason to hold on?

'I keep telling myself it's only temporary. Soon as I've scored a recording contract, I can tell Gloria exactly what to do with her ridiculous threats.'

Cassandra rose to her full height and with eyes blazing said, 'Sheryl Starling, you are going out there and showing all those people what a huge

talent you are. The minute they hear you sing, they'll know you're a winner. You're on your way to the big time, girl. I can feel it in me bones.'

'Thanks, Cassandra. Your confidence means the world to me.'

She glanced at the monitor and was shocked to find that during their conversation the show had gotten underway. Sammy Jo was talking into the camera, possibly paving the way for her introduction. Then again, maybe she was preparing to hand the microphone to Gloria so she could tell the world what a social-climbing, man-hungry opportunist Sheryl was.

A knot formed in her throat. She said to Cassandra, 'I'm so nervous I feel like throwing up.'

'You should be used to this sort of thing by now.'

'It's getting easier. But today is so important it's like I've never been in front of an audience before. It's weird. My heart's going a million miles a second.'

'You'll do great. You're a natural. It's like you were born on a stage. Just promise me one thing.'

'What's that?'

'Promise me when you're a megastar you won't forget your friends.'

'Of course I won't! I'm not that shallow! I won't turn into a Gloria Meadows; you can be sure of that!'

'Glad to hear it. Now, hold on. I've spied a couple more greys. This might hurt.'

'Ouch! Maybe that's enough, Cassandra. I don't want to end up with bald patches.'

'You don't have that much grey.' She yanked out another. 'But believe me, girl, the camera's gonna pick out every one of 'em!'

Sammy Jo Hartman

FOOTSTEPS SOUNDED AND Sammy Jo's personal assistant came striding into the room, a model of efficiency and style in her tailored grey suit and frameless glasses.

'Ms Starling, we're ready for you.' She brushed aside a fashionably loose strand of hair. 'Would you follow me, please?'

She didn't wait around for an answer. Sheryl got up, did a quick check of her hair and makeup in the mirror, then went tearing after her.

'Good luck!' Cassandra cried, chasing them down the corridor. 'What is it they say? Break a leg!'

Sheryl stumbled and almost fell flat on her face. This was the first time anyone had said this to her, and the well-worn phrase sounded more like a threat than an encouragement. The corridor was square, grey and airless. The studio lights bore down on her. Ushered into the wings, she had the suffocating sensation things were about to go horribly wrong.

Up on stage Gloria was chatting with Sammy Jo, smiling for the cameras, making practised asides to the audience. Sheryl tried to pick up on the anecdote she was telling, something about a boy in Africa who'd sent her a live snake as a token of gratitude. The story sounded familiar … and then she recalled Frank telling her his mother had read it in some B-grade celebrity's biography and considered it charming and exotic enough to adopt as her own. Knowing Gloria embellished her accomplishments and took liberties with the truth always made Sheryl feel a little better. She could almost see herself and Gloria as co-conspirators, partners in deception, striving to protect their respective reputations from the marauding eye of truth. It was a shame they'd turned out to be adversaries.

A polite chuckle ran through the crowd. Today's audience was mostly made up of smiling middle-class women dressed in their finest clothes and wearing a department store worth of makeup, perfumes and hairspray. While Gloria paused to acknowledge their response to her story, Sheryl glanced from

row to row. Was there an assassin out there waiting for the right moment to strike her down with a bullet from the past? Might she recognise this person by the sheen of sweat on her face, the deranged smile, the exhilarated look of someone about to receive her own fifteen minutes of fame? She tried to imagine the sequence of events once this person stood up and accused her of the sin of prostitution. Would Sammy Jo ask her to refute the accusation? Or would the security guards fly in and drag her accuser kicking and screaming from the studio like some kind of crazed urban guerrilla?

A tap on the arm jolted her back to reality. The assistant directed her attention to the stage, where Sammy Jo was introducing the story of Alastair's rescue. With a gentle shove she was propelled onto the set, and to her surprise and delight the audience rose to its feet in a spontaneous ovation. Some cheered. A few whistled. Everyone was smiling. She took a seat beside Gloria feeling scared, self-conscious and elated.

'Sheryl Starling, welcome!' cried Sammy Jo, rubbing her hands down the arms of her chair. 'What a thrill! The Governor's award! Was it a very big surprise?'

Sheryl peered out at all the faces. No one was pointing an accusing finger at her. Not yet anyway.

'The biggest,' she said.

Sammy Jo was smaller than she looked on TV. Her complexion was perfect, her grooming beyond fault, but she suffered from a form of alopecia and up close you could see patches of scalp through her thin hair. She was wearing buckled shoes and a royal blue dress which successfully concealed a roll of flab around her waist.

'I spied Governor Bradley whispering something in your ear as you left the podium,' Sammy Jo said with a twinkle in her eye. 'Can I ask what that was about?'

Governor Bradley was renowned for his escapades with attractive young women and so it wasn't surprising that Sammy Jo would ask this question. But boringly enough, he'd simply asked Sheryl for an autographed picture of her for his fifteen-year-old son.

'He wanted to make a donation,' she said, following the script provided by the producers.

'Oh, yes, I've heard he does that a lot. A great philanderer – Oops, I meant philanthropist!'

The audience chuckled at the harmless joke. Had Governor Bradley been there, Sammy Jo would have made the same joke and the Governor would have chuckled too. His penchant for scandal was part of his charm.

'So, Sheryl,' continued Sammy Jo, 'we've read all the magazines. We know how your life's changed since the accident. But tell me: what were things like before that? A little birdie told me yours is a veritable rags-to-riches story.'

Acquiring a look of hardened suffering, Sheryl turned to the audience and gave them a rehearsed account of her inauspicious roots. When she reached the part about her miscarriage after a nasty car accident, the audience gasped at the tragic coincidence. Some began to cry. Encouraged by the reaction, she went on to relate a sad story of abandonment by the baby's brutish father, followed by her discovery by a promoter as she sang in a suburban talent contest. The promoter arranged a string of singing engagements across Southeast Asia, and at the end of this tour she returned home in the nick of time to save Alastair's life.

At this point in the story Gloria interjected to say how fortunate it was for the Gloria Meadows Foundation that Alastair's rescue had captured the imagination of the nation and led to a record year for the charity. A murmur of agreement rose from the audience.

'Mm, mm,' Sammy Jo murmured back at them. She squeezed her hands together between her legs. 'Sheryl Starling, your life is a fairytale come true! To become famous overnight! To possibly become the next Gloria Meadows!'

At this unexpected blasphemy, Sheryl hazarded a glance at Gloria and was gratified to see the famous smile slip.

Sammy Jo, however, wasn't one for noticing small slips. 'Has anyone approached you for the rights to your story?' she asked. 'No? Truly? I have to say that surprises me. It's got everything people clamour for: excitement, danger, fame, tragedy.'

Sheryl smothered a smile. She was thinking: If she only knew the truth!

From here the program followed the usual talk show format: a few more questions from Sammy Jo, throws to commercials, plugs for Gloria's foundation, a few audience questions … and as things started winding down, Sheryl dared to breathe a sigh of relief. When Sammy Jo paused and smiled sweetly at her, she took this as her cue and moved to the edge of her seat, preparing to accept a microphone and cross to the other stage to begin her song.

But the climax of the show was not to be the one she'd planned.

‘We’ve arranged a special surprise for you,’ Sammy Jo said, gripping her wrist. ‘My producers have located some people from your past who were eager to come on the show and reacquaint themselves with you.’

Sheryl’s heart popped in her chest and something hot and slimy oozed into her lungs. She fired a glance at Gloria, who was looking a little tired, a little bored, now her part in the show was over. But for Sheryl the surprise could not have been more complete. Here it was at last, the revelation she’d feared all along. And worst of all, the story was to break on national TV before an audience of millions. It wasn’t hard to guess what had happened. The show’s researchers had tracked down some of her former clients or co-workers and Sammy Jo was paying them to come on air and spill the beans on Sephryn House and its star employee. The thought made her burn with shame. This was sure to make great TV. The news would hit the front page of all the papers. Sammy Jo’s ratings would shoot through the roof.

Her shame quickly boiled into rage. Ignoring the cameras zooming in to capture her reaction, she imagined herself flying over the arm of the chair and wringing that chubby little neck until the smug smile disappeared from Sammy Jo’s face. Now *that* would make great TV! To hold herself back, she gripped the arms of the chair, stared into the studio lights and braced herself for the end.

‘Without your knowledge,’ said Sammy Jo, ‘we did a bit of investigating, and we have invited, all the way from Coral Springs, your parents, Bill and Edna Starling!’

A burst of thunder shook the studio. Sheryl’s body launched itself from the chair. For a long moment she teetered at the edge of the stage, shocked and numb, facing a congregation of painted faces and colliding hands. This was all wrong. She must be going mad. Sammy Jo had said something about her parents.

She whirled to the left, whirled to the right, caught a glimpse of two familiar figures walking towards the stage. Her hands flew to her mouth. The shock was too great, her eyes too full of tears, her parents too old and grey … This couldn’t be happening!

But as the figures drew close, she was forced to accept the impossibility that what she’d dreamed of and desired for so long had come to pass, and in the most spectacular and unexpected way imaginable. She forgot she was in a TV studio with an audience watching and cameras trained on her from every angle; she forgot there was a place called Sephryn House that had almost been

her ruin; she forgot how her parents had abused her and disowned her and ignored her letters. All she could think was how happy she was.

She threw herself at them and they hugged her back. When the trio finally broke apart, she drew back and looked her parents up and down through wet eyes. Bill and Edna glanced nervously about the studio.

'Wow!' cried Sammy Jo. 'That was some surprise! How do you feel, Sheryl?'

She shook her head, unable to speak.

'Take a seat. All of you. Please. I've been told you haven't seen each other for three years.'

'Four. Four years. I've been away a lot.'

She accepted a tissue from Sammy Jo and dabbed at her eyes, then peered bashfully at her parents. Her mother was thin and frail, her father larger than she remembered and now sporting salt-and-pepper hair. Both looked petrified, out of their depth, intimidated by the bright lights, cameras and ogling faces. Watching them, Sheryl realised with a jolt that they could, if they chose, blow her cover. Was that why they were here? Had they come to reveal how the darling of the media had burned their house to the ground, run away from home, become pregnant at the age of sixteen and lost her unborn baby as punishment for her wickedness?

Sammy Jo opened the way for an explanation. 'Sheryl, your folks have come all this way to say something they've been eager to tell you for a very long time. Mr Starling?'

Bill Starling took hold of his wife's hand. He cleared his throat. 'Well, Sammy Jo, we came here to say how proud we are of our daughter, Sheryl. Most folk don't realise it, but Sheryl's been providing for us for near on four years, and recently when my dear wife here needed an operation, our precious daughter again came to the rescue. We wanted to say thank you, Sheryl, with all our hearts, on national TV. And thank you, God, for delivering us this gift and watching over our family.'

He opened his arms and Sheryl rose from her chair and fell into them. Trapped in his embrace, she breathed in fabric softener, powdery deodorant and something else: the bare essence of her father – a salty, musky scent that carried her all the way back to her childhood, to a time when he would whirl her over his head and tell her she would be a star. She wanted the hug to go on forever. She couldn't bring herself to let go.

Sammy Jo brushed away an invisible tear. 'Let me get this straight, everyone. Sheryl Starling is not only a heroine who has sacrificed her career to work for underprivileged children … Oh no, as if that's not enough, she has also been supporting her parents in their time of crisis. I would say that deserves a round of applause.'

The requested applause filled the studio, fluttered to the ceiling, fell like rain to the floor. Gloria smiled and nodded this way and that as if the acclaim were directed at herself.

Sammy Jo clapped her hands. 'Now people, people, we have yet another surprise. We have convinced Sheryl to end the show with a song. Coming up after this short break …'

IN THE GREEN room, high on her father's praise and her personal triumph at the microphone, Sheryl caught up with her parents. Her father was still a forklift driver, her mother still a housewife. The only thing they'd done of any note since she left was to help build a church, and all they would say about that was that the new church was more beautiful than the old one. Even her mother's operation remained a mystery, the phrase 'women's trouble' being the stock response to her probing. As for Sheryl's news … Well, they'd read it all in the magazines, and being incurious people they didn't need to know more.

Sheryl had always figured her parents as strong people with strong beliefs, authority figures who wielded a formidable power over her young life, and yet here they were, barely able to look her in the eye. Could these shy, shuffling people be the same ones she'd done battle with all those years ago? Maybe it was Sheryl who was a different person? (She certainly felt stronger, more in control.) She was unable to figure out who'd changed more and unfortunately had no more time to find out. Before the hour was up, her parents were whisked to the station to catch the train home.

Only when they were gone did Cassandra divulge her intelligence. The Starlings had been paid to appear on the show.

The news meant nothing to Sheryl. The reunion was proof her parents were, in their own humble way, proud of her, and nothing anyone could say would dampen her mood. She knew through long experience that it was their church that held them back from revealing their deeper feelings. Religion will tolerate forgiveness but not acceptance. There was no fighting this influence;

its hold was too strong. But thanks to Sammy Jo, she'd had a glimpse into her parents' hearts, and what she'd seen there would sustain her for some time to come.

As for Gloria, she disappeared without a word.

Runaway

IT TURNED OUT Danny had no need to present his gift that night. When Ben slipped between the sheets, he hugged him with a violence that suggested he hadn't expected to find him there, and Danny was swamped by such a wave of relief that he lay awake and alert for much of the night, too scared to move in case it roused Ben from the spell he was under.

When darkness did seep into his mind, it churned with nightmares: dim, terrifying visions of hoary old men with slobbery gums and grasping hands. After an eternity the old men melted away and he found himself alone in Squatter Park, altered now as places always are in nightmares. Leslie appeared, floating ghostlike across the misty turf. But as Danny moved towards him, he raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, released a defeated sigh, then drifted off into the night.

He woke fully aware of the meaning of these dreams. He'd made a terrible mistake. And though the dreams were over, he had a tangible reminder of his guilt, a gift-wrapped bundle of radioactivity discharging insidious, mind-altering rays from its hiding place in the closet.

Fortunately, Danny was well versed in the ways of guilt. He knew the emotion is fleeting, that it would fade in time, becoming slightly more ridiculous with each passing day. If he could weather the next week or so, he was certain he would be able to present his gift to Ben without recalling the shame of what he'd done to pay for it.

That occasion came sooner than expected. Three nights after his encounter with the lecherous old man, he stood in the kitchenette holding an empty bottle of tequila before his heavy-lidded eyes. He hadn't intended to get drunk; he only wanted to raze the edges from his boredom. But now he'd started, he ached for oblivion, an oblivion that was suddenly out of reach and receding fast.

Flinging open cupboards, pushing aside cartons and bottles and pots and pans, he searched for something – anything – alcoholic. What he found,

under the sink behind the dishwashing liquid and half-empty bottles of spray cleaners, was a cask of red wine.

'Thank you,' he mouthed to the ceiling as he dragged out the sloshing box.

Elated by his find (not stopping to question what the wine was doing in such an unlikely place), he felt compelled to raise a toast to the gods of good fortune. His eyes travelled to Ben's crystal glasses. High on a shelf, they sparkled with tiny bursts of light as if rejoicing in the knowledge that they were the most precious things in the apartment. To sip wine from such lovely crystal seemed to Danny the most elegant thing in the world. If he was careful, if he rinsed and polished and replaced the glass afterwards, Ben would never know.

But in his haste he didn't even get a chance to taste the wine. As he reached for a goblet, his finger hit another; it toppled; he tried to grab it; both went crashing to the floor.

The world came to a halt. Danny gaped at the fragments of crystal around his feet. The crash had sobered him immediately, but it was a foggy kind of sobriety, comprised of grief, disbelief and a cold, nauseous panic. His brain stumbled across words like 'glue' and 'buy' and 'hide', but none of the words made sense or brought him the slightest peace of mind.

And then the dustpan and brush were in his hand. Working like an automaton, he swept up the broken pieces and emptied them in the trash. Then he switched on the vacuum cleaner and erased the remaining traces of his crime. All this time he was sick with fear. This was one act Ben might find unforgivable. The crystal was his most treasured possession, its elegance and craftsmanship a tribute to his dead mother, the former beauty queen who reportedly had never had a bad word to say about anyone. Now Danny had obliterated half that memory. He felt like a murderer.

Repositioning the two surviving glasses on the shelf, he stepped to the door and tried to convince himself Ben wouldn't notice the difference. The glasses looked lonely up there, as if they mourned the loss of their siblings. Loss. That summed up the whole catastrophe. With fear gurgling in his stomach, he clung to the hope that Ben would see the bright side and appreciate that there were still two glasses left.

An hour passed. An hour and a half. When a key scraped in the lock, he sprang from the table and threw himself into Ben's arms. When Ben opened his mouth to speak, he filled it with his tongue.

'Hey, baby, what's all this?' Ben laughed, gasping for air.

'Nothing,' Danny said with the face of an angel.

Ben pulled away. Danny's eyes flew to the shelf.

'Ben, I've got some good news and some bad news.'

'What've you done this time?'

'Nothing serious.'

'Are you drunk again?'

'No. Only had one drink.'

'What is it then?'

'I had a bit of an accident.'

He squirmed on the spot and cast meaningful glances at the place where the goblets had fallen. He was hoping Ben would read his mind, turn his face to the shelf and dismiss the incident with a carefree flick of his wrist. But when Ben didn't get the hint, he was forced to fill the silence with his news.

He said, 'I accidentally broke one of your glasses.'

'Oh,' said Ben, brushing past him. 'That's not news.'

'Two glasses, really.'

'Two? That's an achievement, even for you!'

'It's your good ones. I didn't use them,' he rushed to add. 'I was after something else and … they sorta fell.'

He watched Ben's eyes move to the shelf and braced himself for the explosion.

'For fuck's sake! How in hell did that happen?'

He shrugged.

'I told you never to touch them! Where's the other two glasses?'

'They broke. I threw them away.'

Ben went to the bin, opened it, peered inside. With face drawn and shoulders hunched, he looked like someone who's been called to the morgue to identify a body. 'My mother gave me these,' he said quietly.

'I know.'

'How could you be so stupid?'

The insult slashed at Danny like a knife. 'It was an accident,' he shot back, gritting his teeth.

'Do you think I can ever replace them?'

'They're only stupid glasses. I'll buy you two more.'

'That's not the point!' Ben walked towards him. 'My mother gave me them!' Unexpectedly, he began to cry.

Danny was rooted to the spot. 'It was an accident,' he repeated in a small voice.

'It's always an accident.'

'I bought you something to say I'm sorry.'

Ben shook his head. Danny left him standing there and went to get the gift-wrapped box from the table. He'd removed the blue paper and rewrapped the box in gold, hoping the gaudier look might divert Ben's mind from the broken crystal.

'You shouldn't have done this,' Ben said, accepting the gift. 'It won't replace the crystal.'

'I was planning on giving it you anyway.'

Ben tore off the wrapping paper and opened the box. He stared at the watch.

'Where did you get this?'

Danny smiled. 'A jewellery shop.'

'Did you steal it?'

'What? No!'

'You bought it?'

'Course I did.'

Ben looked at him. 'This is an expensive watch. Where did you get the money?'

'I, ah …'

'You don't have any money, Danny. How can you afford something like this?'

'I, um …'

'Please don't tell me you stole it.'

'I didn't steal it! I'm not a thief!'

He was angry now. Ben's response to his generosity was like a slap across the face. What's more, he suspected something.

'If you didn't steal it, where'd you get the money?'

'I saved up. From my allowance.'

'No, you didn't. This is an expensive watch. There's no way you could've saved this much.'

'It wasn't expensive.'

'Danny, I'm not stupid. I know how much things cost.'

Danny felt cold slugs crawling down the back of his neck. He knew he'd made a disastrous error of judgment.

'Tell me where you got the money.'

'I saved up.'

'No, you didn't! You don't have any savings! Stop lying to me!'

He widened his stance. 'I'm not lying. I had money in the bank.'

'Show me the statement.'

'Why would I have a statement?'

'You don't have money in the bank, Danny. All you have there is your allowance.'

'How do you know that? You don't know everything about me. You think you do, but you're wrong.'

'I know more than you think.'

Danny walked off, determined to end the confrontation before it got out of hand.

'I know you used to be a street kid.'

'Big deal.'

'And a hustler.'

He stopped dead. He's bluffing, he thought. He didn't know me then. Only Sheryl, Doris and Leslie knew about his past, and even under torture they would never have said anything to Ben.

'That's bullshit!' he cried, too late for the denial to be convincing. 'How could you say that?'

Ben closed the box and put it on the coffee table. He sat on the couch and dropped his face in his hands. At first Danny thought he was crying again, but when he looked up his eyes were dry.

'You left home when you were sixteen. You were living with a prostitute. Your best friend is a street kid. It wasn't hard to figure out. I knew you weren't doing it when we met, so it didn't matter to me. But now … Is that how you made all that money? Did you … do tricks?'

'Don't be stupid!' Danny could feel the bees gathering in his chest, getting ready to defend their nest against this unprovoked attack. 'You don't know nothing about me!'

Ben was strangely calm. 'You're right there. I don't know much about you. But that's because I respected your right to put the past behind you. I thought you'd changed. I suppose though …' His eyes shone. 'I need you to tell me what you did. I know you're not a bad person. I know you can't have done anything … really bad. But I need to know. I need you to tell me the truth.'

Danny was cornered. Should he go on protesting his innocence? Or admit to something small and inconsequential?

'If you're thinking of lying, don't. Either tell me the truth or we're over.'

'I stole it,' Danny said, admitting to the lesser of two evils.

'You just swore you didn't.'

'I was scared.'

'Where did you steal it from?'

'Choy's Gold Mart.'

'Tell me how you did it.'

His mind went blank. He shrugged.

'You didn't steal it, Danny. Now tell me how you made all that money.'

Danny was finding it hard to breathe. His mind flew back to the Ace of Spades where a disgusting old man had tricked him into doing something he hadn't wanted to do. Viewed through the coarse veil of memory, the act seemed as meaningless as it had felt at the time. He gulped. 'It was nothing,' he said. 'A guy I knew a long time ago said he'd give me money to … see me naked.' He considered leaving it there. But Ben wasn't stupid. He knew how much watches were worth, how much Danny was worth. 'And he said he'd give me more if I … if I played with myself. That's all that happened, Ben! I swear! I wanted to buy you something to show how much I love you. He didn't touch me. He just watched.'

'How much did he give you?'

'Six hundred dollars.' His voice quavered with pride as he disclosed the amount. Now things were out in the open, he wanted Ben to be blown away by how much a stranger thought his boyfriend was worth.

'Six hundred dollars? To play with yourself? I don't believe you.'

Bounding to his feet, he crossed the floor and peered again in the trash. He shook his head at the broken crystal.

'No, Ben. It's the God-honest truth. It was a really old man. He was rich.'

'That's bullshit. He never touched you? Not once?'

He hesitated a second too long.

'Yeah. As I thought.'

Danny went after him. He wanted to wrestle Ben to the floor and straddle his chest and keep him pinned there until he conceded that the incident with the old man meant nothing. But when Ben turned on him with fists raised, he backed away and began to cry.

'He tried to touch me and I said no,' he sobbed.

But for Ben the confession was already complete. 'I don't believe you did this. Things weren't that bad between us, were they?'

'I did it for you.'

He spat out a poisoned laugh. 'I loved you, Danny. I loved you because you were sweet and affectionate and … you were always so … open with your emotions. I wanted to trust you, even though a part of me kept saying, "No, he used to be a street kid; he's got problems." I –'

'I don't got problems! I wasn't a street kid! Stop saying that!'

'I'm not angry anymore. I suppose I should've expected this. Maybe I should have asked you to stay away from Leslie. I knew that guy was trouble. I knew he'd drag you down with him.'

'I haven't seen Leslie.'

Ben spotted the cask and went over and poured wine into a tumbler. As he gulped it down, Danny stared anxiously at him, searching for a sign that things were going to be alright. He craved wine too, wanted to finish off the whole damn cask, but he was scared that if he asked for a glass, Ben would have something else to add to his long list of crimes.

'Things haven't been working out for us,' said Ben, his eyes fixed on the counter. 'We need to face facts, Danny. This – episode – only goes to show how wide the gulf is between us.'

'I wanted to buy you a present. I didn't have sex. I swear it. I … made the money for you.'

Ben finished the wine and banged the tumbler down on the counter. 'Don't explain anymore. I'm beginning to feel sick.'

There followed a long silence. Then Ben said under his breath, 'I think we need some time apart.'

'No!'

'Maybe you should move in with Sheri for a while so we can think about this and … decide what to do next.'

Danny, sickened by the suggestion, approached Ben with arms raised. 'No, Ben, no!' he cried, tears gushing down his cheeks. He was expecting Ben to push him away, to lash out with his fists and punish him like he deserved, but to his surprise he was pulled close and held in a warm embrace, as if Ben didn't want him to leave at all. He felt light-headed, disoriented.

'We need some space. We've been getting on top of each other.'

Danny was listening to Ben's heartbeat. 'I'll give you space,' he said, ready to promise anything.

'You won't let me have any friends.'

'I'll be nice to your friends.'

'You've tried that, Danny. Besides, it's not only that. We fight all the time. It's not good for either of us. We'll end up hating each other.'

'I won't fight anymore.'

Ben held him at arms' length. His eyes were black, blacker than Danny had ever seen them. 'I've been thinking about this a lot,' he said. 'There's huge differences between us. And I don't think they're mendable.'

'But can't –'

'No, Danny. Let me finish. I'm not saying it's your fault – and it's not mine either. Sometimes people love each other but they can't be together because they're too different. And sometimes they only find this out when they live together. You need someone who's with you all the time, someone whose world revolves around you, whereas I don't like being held down. I can't be thinking about you all the time because I've got other things on my mind. And I can't give up my friends because we're involved in things that are too important to me. But you won't be happy until I spend every waking moment either thinking about you or being with you.'

'No, Ben,' he sobbed. 'You're wrong. I don't need you around all the time.'

'How can you say that? You get drunk every time I'm out. And you don't make any effort to make new friends. You expect me to be everything for you. That's what I'm trying to say. I can't be everything – not to anyone.'

So this is what their relationship had boiled down to: Danny was dependent and demanding, so Ben wanted out. He jerked away from him. His life – the apartment and everything in it – fell away, and beyond the broken walls was a cold, uncompromising place inhabited by strangers and misery. He knew Ben was right; he knew they weren't compatible. He also knew Ben would never change, would not wake up one morning with the realisation he'd been neglecting him all this time. Once they separated, all contact, all hope for reconciliation, would be gone. It had happened with Sheryl. It would happen with Ben.

'Look, Danny, I'm not throwing you out or anything. But I want you to ask Sheri if you can stay with her for a while. Can you do that?'

His mind snapped shut. Ignoring the question, he tramped into the bedroom, pulled his backpack from the closet and started stuffing clothes into it.

Ben came up behind him and placed his hands on his shoulders. 'Don't go now. It's late. Ring Sheri in the morning.'

Danny shook off his hands. After packing whatever he could find, he slung the backpack over his shoulder, brushed past Ben and stomped out of their bedroom. Head held high, he marched to the door. There was a roaring in his ears as he pulled it open; a slab of icy air hit him in the face. And then he was outside, tripping down the stairs, bursting into the street.

He heard his name called, heard Sheri's name – and then he was running as fast as he could, putting as much distance as possible between himself and Ben before grief overtook him and threw him to the ground and stuck its rotting fingers down his throat. But running wasn't nearly fast enough. He needed to shoot down the street like a rocket. He needed to take to the air and soar away to a new city, a place where the people were caring and friendly and didn't reject you at the first hint of trouble.

Abandoning the sidewalk, he bolted down the centre of the road. The exertion of running helped fight off the cold and made him feel like he was doing something positive: running towards something good instead of away from something horrible. For the time being, Danny was the one in control. He was the one who'd made the decision to run, to escape the wreckage of their shattered relationship, while Ben was the one at home feeling guilty and upset. Well, he thought, serves him right. Why did he ask me to move in if he knew things weren't likely to work out? Right now Danny hated Ben, would continue to hate him until he'd had time to rest, when the realisation of his loss would make it feel like all the bones in his body had turned to jelly.

The sky was the colour of bruised plums, the blazing streetlights demolishing all but the boldest stars. As he flew down the road, people stopped and pointed, cars honked, drivers yelled abuse. He reacted by laughing insanely. They were right. He was stupid; he deserved to get run over. A self-destructive urge took hold of him, inciting him to hurl his body against the road and mangle himself beyond recognition. How would Ben feel *then*? Would it make him sorry for treating him this way?

But when his lungs started to burn, the urge for self-mutilation passed. Turning a corner, he slowed to a walk. He was now in a narrow laneway that ran between dark buildings, so there was less chance of Ben finding him. Still, once he'd gotten his breath back, he took off again. He needed his heart to beat hard and fast, his lungs to hurt; he needed to feel the wind in his face and

the jolt in his legs as his feet hit the ground … anything to divert his mind from the awful reality of his situation.

And so it was for what seemed like an hour, until he came upon the bright lights of King Albert Street. Stopping short of the strip, he threw his back against a wall and slid to the ground.

An old friend

As Danny sat catching his breath, people walked over and around him. He watched the legs go by, trying hard to ignore that there were people attached to them, people who would hurt him and abuse him if he was stupid enough to let them. Beyond the legs, on the other side of King Albert Street, was Joe's Pizzas. As he gazed at the familiar shop front, a woman came out. He clambered to his feet. But of course it wasn't Sheryl. She was famous now, too famous to be caught slumming in a joint like that. She was living the good life, going to exclusive parties, dining with movie stars. The woman didn't even look like Sheryl.

The leap of hope had, however, left Danny with a yearning for those carefree nights when he and Sheri would sit in Joe's Pizzas sipping hot coffee and eating fatty sausages, stale pizza and cold fries. Drawn by the memory, he slung his backpack over his shoulder and jogged across the road.

'Hey, boy!' yelled Joe as he pushed through the door. 'Great to see you again! You ain't been here in a while, eh? What can I get ya?'

Danny felt around in his pockets. He had a few notes and coins, enough to last a week or so if he watched himself. 'Coke,' he said, and pulled open the cooler door.

Dropping money on the counter, he took a seat near the window. Warm, moist odours of frying floated across the room, making his stomach grumble, but he knew he'd vomit if he ate anything right now. To take his mind off his hunger, he stared out the window and tried to pretend that this was a normal night, that in a short while he would mosey on back to the apartment and slip between those familiar sheets and fall asleep in the arms of his lover. The fantasy was surprisingly easy to sustain. And yet there was a pressure building in his skull, a torrent of emotion that, if released, would wash away what little restraint remained and send him hurtling onto the road and into the path of an oncoming car. As long as he kept on pretending everything was fine, the urge for self-harm was suppressed.

The evening was unusually busy given the chill in the air. People huddled against each other for warmth. Gloves, overcoats and scarves were out in abundance. And yet mouths were smiling and chattering as if no one had a care in the world. The stores were doing a roaring trade, there wasn't a parking spot to be found, and King Albert Street blazed with light. But despite the best efforts of humanity, darkness remained, hiding under parked cars, skulking in unlit doorways and clinging to the eaves of buildings. In each of these places Danny saw horror, snickering phantoms that after months of neglect had come to reclaim him.

The chair beside him scraped. 'You're Sheri's friend,' Joe said, dropping into it. 'You two used to come in here all the time.' He followed Danny's gaze to two people hugging on the other side of the glass. 'What happened to Sheri? She ain't been here in ages.'

'Moved away.'

'Moved away? Where?'

'Golden Bay.'

'Golden Bay?' Joe whistled. 'She's sure gone up in the world. She still a hooker?'

Danny was so surprised he laughed. 'How did you know she was a hooker?'

'I just knew.'

'You asked her out.'

'Sure did. She's one pretty lady. And a great personality, y'know? She must be one helluva hooker.'

'She's not a hooker anymore. She's got a boyfriend.'

'She's … Oh. That's a shame.' He turned his face to a framed print of Sicily on the wall. 'She shoulda come to me. I'da been her boyfriend.'

Danny was fascinated by Joe's interest in Sheri. Most prostitutes kept their profession a secret for fear of it ruining their chances of ever having a normal life – and yet here was Joe claiming it didn't matter. Was he a freak? Or had Danny and Sheri underestimated the tolerance of the average man?

'Didn't it worry you Sheri was a prostitute?'

'Worry me? Nah. I wouldn't want her doing it while she was with me; but it's none of my business what a person does for a crust.'

Danny screwed the top off the Coke bottle. 'This isn't any old job. Most people won't go anywhere near a whore.'

'That's what's wrong with most people, kid. Too fuckin' blind, if you ask me. Got their priorities wrong.' He rubbed his thumb along a crescent-shaped scar on the back of his hand. 'What makes a good whore, do you think?'

'I dunno,' snapped Danny, pulling the bottle from his mouth. 'What the hell you asking *me* for?'

'You're a guy. You know what you like in a woman.'

Danny studied Joe's face. He was sexy in a tough, older kind of way. His skin was tanned, his hair thick, black and wavy. A stubble darkened his jaw. Danny longed to tell him what happened tonight … and then maybe Joe would surprise him by saying, 'Hey, kid, if that jerk won't love you, then I will!' and he would take Danny in his arms and rub his stubbled chin against his cheek.

Then again …

'She should be nice looking, I suppose,' he said.

Joe gave a single large nod. 'Right on, kid. She's gotta be beautiful and she's gotta know how to treat a man right. You gotta have a great personality if you gonna be a good whore, 'cos that's how you get the big bucks. And that's what I'm looking for in a wife.' He shrugged, as if the answer was common sense.

'Do you think there's many guys like you? – guys that don't care whether a person's a hooker?'

'Prob'ly not. But looks like Sheri found one.'

'No, she didn't. The guy doesn't know anything about her.'

'Yeah? I suppose I'd keep things secret if I was her.'

'She could lose everything if it came out, so don't tell anybody.'

'Course I won't. Who'd I tell?'

'Anybody.'

'Ain't nobody's business.'

'Especially not reporters.'

'What do you mean, reporters?'

'Don't you watch TV?'

'TV? Nah. Got no time, not with this place on me hands.'

Danny glanced around the shop. The place was in the middle of a makeover. The fluorescent tubes were gone, replaced with tasteful wall-mounted lights that burned with a gentler, more flattering light. The once-grimy walls had been stripped back, plastered and painted a fresh olive green.

'You own this place?'

'Almost. Still got some to pay off, but, yeah, it's almost mine.'

'You must make a lot of dough.'

'Well, kid, I work eighteen hours a day, seven days a week. And before that I worked in a kitchen every night for three years to save up the deposit. It was hard going, but worth it.'

'Sounds crazy to me.'

Joe smiled. 'Crazy? Yeah, s'pose it was. But you want some advice?'

'Sure.'

'You wanna get anywhere, you gotta work hard. You gotta make a plan and then you gotta stick to that plan. You're young. You got a lotta living to do. But make sure you plan yourself a future, kid. That's the only way you gonna get anywhere in this world. Nobody else is gonna help you.'

'You can say that again.'

'Soon's this place is paid off, I'm gonna buy me a real restaurant with a full-time manager. And then I plan on having me some fun.'

The extent of Joe's fortune depressed Danny. He knew it took a certain kind of person to make a go of things, and he knew he wasn't that kind of person.

'Something wrong, kid?'

He tried to look cheerful. 'Nah. Just tired, I suppose.'

'What were you saying about Sheri?'

'She got a big break.' He sighed. 'She's famous now. I better get going.'

'No, kid. Tell me more about Sheri.'

The door bell tinkled and a leather-clad man with bushy orange sideburns entered the shop and crossed to the counter.

'Sure is cold outside!' yelled Joe, pushing his chair back. 'Hey, kid, rest here for a spell. It's not like you take up a whole lotta space.'

With Joe's departure, loneliness came thundering back. Danny stared out the window. There was no skirting the truth; he was homeless. He couldn't stay here all night, much as he relished the thought of sleeping amidst the warm, heavy odours. But what else was he to do? He couldn't stomach the idea of spending the night under a bridge. He consulted his Bart Simpson watch and made a few calculations. If he caught the next train, he could be at Golden Bay by eleven.

But the thought of knocking at Sheryl's door terrified him. He imagined the look on her face when she saw him standing on her porch with all his worldly possessions stuffed in his backpack. If she reacted the way she did

when he and Doris visited, it would break his spirit. He would probably run away and throw himself off a pier. Two rejections in one night are too much for anyone to bear, especially a person with Danny's track record.

Doris would take him in; he was sure of that. But Doris lived in a one-room bed-sitter where there was barely enough room to inhale. If they were forced to live together in that tiny box, it might ruin their friendship. He might make her hate him too. At least Doris was one small comfort on this cold, depressing night. At least he had somewhere to go if all else failed.

Now Joe was busy with customers, Danny grew fidgety. He was settling nothing by sitting here. Getting up, he grabbed his backpack and the bottle of Coke and headed for the door.

'Hey, kid!' Joe cried from across the counter. 'Say hi to Sheri, will ya? Tell her I'm still waitin' for that date she promised. You'll tell her that, won't you?'

'Sure thing,' and he pulled open the door and threw himself into the crowd.

It was cold outside. All around him people were laughing and arguing, holding hands, hugging each other. One guy was having a heated discussion with an invisible friend. It wasn't a night to be alone. Maybe I should phone Sheryl, he thought, just to let her know what's happened. But the more he thought about it, the more it seemed like a bad idea. She would be furious at him for ruining his best chance at happiness. She would feel obligated to help. And if he grabbed at her like a drowning man, he might end up dragging her down with him, and that wasn't fair to either of them.

He shook the idea from his head. Why was he acting like such a wimp? Was he a baby or something? Before meeting Sheryl he'd been perfectly happy living on the streets. He'd survived many a wintry night, and could easily do it again, at least until he found something better.

He was now passing a vacant lot, lit up as bright as day, where car bodies, chunks of concrete and rusted appliances lay strewn across the ground as if they'd been dropped by a careless giant. Fat pigeons wandered the lot scrounging for food. Two of them were scrapping over a piece of stale bread. Their antics made Danny smile. He walked towards them and they waddled away, but when he knelt on the stony ground they meandered back, until before long he was surrounded by pigeons. On seeing he had no food, the birds ignored him and pecked at the ground, making warbling sounds in their throats. Danny imitated them. He wondered what it was like being a pigeon, with everything stacked against you: the weather, the barren streets, the gangs

of sadistic boys, the signs in the parks that said, Please Don't Feed the Pigeons. He scratched at the dirt. How in hell did they find anything to eat amongst the sand and rubble? And yet the pigeons survived astonishingly well. They were as fat and healthy as any caged bird.

He sprang to his feet and the sudden motion sent the birds fluttering into the air. 'If you can do it,' he yelled at them, 'so can I!'

For the next hour he tracked aimlessly around the streets of Northbridge. The frosty air penetrated his jacket, laying frigid hands on his shirt and undershirt, and at times he shivered so hard his joints cracked. If that wasn't bad enough, memories of Ben came storming through his defences, setting off charges in his head, making him wince with pain. How could he have been so stupid? No amount of conflict with the balding old men could be worth the blow he'd taken, the things he'd lost. For perhaps the first time in his life, Danny faced the possibility he was his own worst enemy. The thought brought tears to his eyes and he swiped at them and smacked himself in the face to bring his mind back to the matter at hand.

He still hadn't found a bed for the night (never would at this rate), but his wanderings had carried him to Lantern Street Station, where the trains departed for Golden Bay every half hour till past midnight. Wearily he climbed the stairs and checked the timetable. The next train left in ten minutes. Danny still wasn't planning on running to Sheryl, but during the course of his wanderings he'd recalled the house at South Beach and this had brought on an irresistible urge to see the ocean and listen to the surf and dig his toes in the cold white sand and scan the waves for dolphins. And how much nicer would it be to sleep in a clean garage in Golden Bay instead of a damp, smelly alley here in Northbridge?

He looked up and down the tracks.

Danny didn't end up catching the train to Golden Bay. Circling the station house in an effort to stay warm, he came upon his old friend, Drug, slouched on a worm-eaten bench. Drug was a professional masseur and drug dealer, an ex-porn actor whose career hadn't survived the end of his teens. A scraggy man in his mid-twenties, he had dirty blond hair, a long face, beaked nose, crinkled skin and eyes that seemed impossibly large and bloodshot. His real name was Doug, but his addict friends tended to slur a lot, and over time the new version stuck. Now he carried the name with pride, convinced in his drug-addled brain that he was the Messiah of drug-users everywhere, the

saviour of those needing something tiny yet powerful to twist their consciousness and wring out the drudgery and pain of reality.

Overjoyed at the chance encounter, Danny rushed over and greeted him like a long-lost relation.

Drug was peeling paint off the ancient bench. At Danny's words, he raised his eyes and gave him a look usually directed at Jehovah's Witnesses. 'Who are you, dude?' he asked, his lips as dry and cracked as old wood.

'Danny,' said Danny, his hopes plummeting. 'Don't you remember me, Drug? I used to stay at your place … on Granary Road … last year.'

'Nup,' said Drug. And then his head wobbled as if an earthquake was passing through it. The tremor rode down to his mouth and emerged in a burbling laugh. 'Dan the man!' he shouted, startling a little old lady. 'Course I remember ya, dude! How's it hangin'?'

Danny smiled at the woman as she tottered away with her handbag clutched against her chest. Drawing a deep breath, he blew a grey mist of air at her. 'Not great, man,' he said. 'Not great.'

'Yeah? Uncle Drug can fix that. What's your problem, dude?'

'Got no money, nowhere to stay. Thought I'd hang around here, see what happens.'

'Yeah,' said Drug, nodding. 'Me too. Nothin' happenin' here, dude. 'Bout to go back to the pad and take another hit. You wanna come? You left some shit there, y'know.'

In Danny's deranged mind it seemed like the past few months had never happened. He might have slept at Drug's place last night. Sheryl and Ben became spectres in a crazy dope dream.

'Sounds cool.'

Drug lived on the east side of Northbridge in an abandoned building that had once housed newly arrived immigrants. The site had been marked for redevelopment for years, but an economic slump and high vacancy rates had left the developers' plans for a multi-storey office block in limbo. Though the water supply was shut off long ago, someone had found a way to reconnect it; and though there was no electricity, the building was heated and lit by home-made candles and roaring fires in huge metal barrels. Every year the fire department condemned the building as a fire trap, and every year the local council threatened to evict the squatters, but each time the forces of society tried to do something about this blot on the city they were forced to back off,

being no match for the addicts, winos and homeless people who banded together to defend their treasured citadel.

Drug lived in the basement. The room was low-ceilinged and oddly shaped, home to an assortment of furniture and bric-a-brac, most of it stolen from nearby homes, warehouses and antique stores. Ratty curtains covered the small, high windows. Orange embers glowed and smoked in a makeshift fireplace.

Drug flicked a syringe off the Queen Anne sofa. 'Wanna a hit, dude?'

'Nah. Thanks. Still not into that stuff.'

'Cool, man. Takes time. When you get into the hard stuff it'll be mind-blowing, man, fuckin' mind-blowing. Like it never is for me now. S'why it costs me a freakin' fortune.'

The phone rang. Drug shot out a hand and snatched it up. 'Yeah? … Yeah, this is Blond Surfie Hunk … Yeah … No way, man. Not into that scene … What? Rape me? … Oh, rape *you*! … With a what? … Hey look, dude, you better find some other jerk, okay?' He tossed the phone away. 'Business line,' he explained. 'Some real fucked-up sickos out there. And I've seen 'em all. You wanna crash here, dude? Cold out there.'

'Thanks, man,' said Danny.

He watched with an empty mind as his friend fumbled about in a khaki gym bag and extracted a syringe and a bag of white powder. But when Drug started searching for a vein in his leg, Danny left him to his own devices and went and sat on a stained mattress.

'You want somethin', dude? Like, you wanna blow some coke or somethin'?'

'No thanks, Drug.'

'I've got uppers, downers, benzos, speed, Es, Ts. You name it, I got it. Best shit around.'

'No thanks. I might try get some shuteye.'

The instant his head hit the pillow, thoughts of Ben came stampeding into his mind. He tried to fight them off, but they came regardless. What was Ben doing now? Was he cruising the bars for his next boyfriend? Was he on the phone with the balding old men, laughing about his newfound freedom? Danny tried to turn his thoughts to Doris, to Sheryl, to Leslie, but it was Ben's face and voice that tore through all other memories. His body started throbbing with pain, as if he'd just fallen from the floor above.

After a few minutes, he got up and crawled to where Drug was sitting, his big eyes glued to the torn curtains.

'Drug? You got something to help me sleep?'

Drug was shivering with excitement. His eyes refused to leave the curtains. Danny looked at them too, half expecting to see fairies dancing through the jagged lights.

'Drug?'

'Sure, dude.' He reached into his bag. 'Here, take this,' he said, placing a pink pill in Danny's hand.

'What is it?'

'Dunno.' He dangled a small plastic bag before his eyes and went cross-eyed trying to focus on it. 'Forgot to label. It's in the downer section, so some kinda trank.'

Danny shrugged and tossed the pill in his mouth. He didn't care what was in it. No one gave a damn if he died during the night, least of all himself.

Crawling back to the mattress, he lay on his back and for a while followed the progress of a long, brown cockroach that was roaming the ceiling as if in a daze. It was cold in the basement, but nowhere near as cold as it was outside. Glancing about the murky room, he spied a pile of blankets, jumped up, grabbed a couple, then returned to the bed and huddled beneath them.

Before long, the pill started weaving its magic and a delicious warmth entered the blankets. Danny stretched out his legs and one by one let his muscles relax. And as the warmth soaked his limbs and spilled into his mind, waves of tranquillity came washing over him, waves that were teeming with sea creatures as bright and cheerful as those in a kid's cartoon. Floating amongst them, Danny felt removed from all earthly thoughts and memories, as carefree and beautiful as a mermaid frolicking near the shore before heading for the open sea.

When finally he went under, it was into a cool blue sleep, not a black one as he'd feared. To Danny, black was synonymous with doom, and his last conscious thought was one of relief that his dreams, at least, were to be filled with colour and light.

Overtime

FROM HER VANTAGE point on Frank's lap, Sheryl watched a man in an office across the road as he dealt with a crisis. He would yell things down the phone, rest the receiver in the crook of his shoulder, type something on a keyboard, then resume the angry shouting. To Sheryl, who was naked and serene, drifting on a post-coital cloud of bliss, the poor man seemed a million miles away.

On the floor below, a haggard cleaning lady plodded up to the window and pressed her forehead against the glass.

'Do you think she can see us?' Sheryl asked, laying an arm across her breasts.

Frank (partially dressed; he was still wearing his socks) was idly squeezing a stress ball. He glanced down at the woman. 'I wouldn't think so from the look on her face.'

'You're right. It's pretty dark in here.'

'If she saw us, she'd be jumping up and down screaming, "More! More!"'

'Frank!' She plucked at the hair on his chest. 'Don't be crude!'

He closed his eyes.

'Tired?'

He nodded.

'You've been burning the candle at both ends.'

'That's me.'

'You need to get out of the office more.'

Frank yawned. This evening he was uncommonly subdued. Even their lovemaking had been sweet and unhurried, as if they were making love in a real bed instead of over Frank's desk and on the carpet and up against the wall.

'How's your mother? I haven't heard from her in a while.'

'The usual. She's off manipulating someone, making a shitload of money.'

'She's very good at it. Making money, I mean.'

'A right society whore.'

For once the word didn't make Sheryl flinch. She smiled to herself. It was like she'd emerged from a long, dark tunnel and the dangers of the night were finally behind her. The past already seemed like a false memory, like something that might never have been. As for the future: well, the episode of Sammy Jo Hartman had aired yesterday and soon a fresh crop of requests for appearances and endorsements would reach her. And hopefully, among those would be a proposal from a music producer or an agent. If not, Sheryl had determined to go knocking on doors. With all the publicity she was getting through the foundation, she was confident the doors that were slammed in her face four years ago would now swing open at a mere tap.

While she was meditating on this, Frank said, 'It doesn't take brains or talent to marry a millionaire.'

She looked at him. 'You know I'm not your mother's biggest fan, Frank, but I do give her credit for all the amazing things she did when things weren't easy for women.'

'Like I said, a society whore.'

'I mean her talent. Her singing and acting and all the money she made from investments.'

'Where did you get that idea?'

'What?'

'All the money from investments.'

'From her book.'

'That figures. Don't believe everything you read, sweetheart. Most of that book is a certified heap of bullshit.'

'But –'

'Gloria the Great did not become rich until she married Richard Andrew Beaumont the First.'

Sheryl frowned in confusion. 'Are you sure about that? Your grandparents were big stars. And Gloria was successful in her own right for decades. She must have been rich.'

He raised his eyes. 'Do you want the real story?'

She took a mental leap backwards. 'Actually, no, I don't want to pry.'

'Well, darling, you asked me, so now I'm telling you. One: my grandparents were small-time actors who starred in a thousand cheap flicks. The only reason they're famous today is because Gloria made them that way. Two: that woman has no business sense whatsoever. She's been ripped off left,

right and centre all her life. She was flat broke after the Melody Sisters. And how much do you think a woman earned in TV-land in the 'fifties and 'sixties?'

Sheryl had no idea, so she said nothing.

'She married the Beaumont millions in – let's see – 'sixty-eight, if I remember correctly. She was still doing *Where's Lennie?* at the time. That folded a year or two later.' He squirmed in his seat and shifted her weight from one leg to the other. 'What most people don't realise is that by the time Gloria was approached to do *Midday*, she was already a washed-up has-been. Can you imagine what an embarrassment it is for someone to go from pop superstar and world-famous actress to variety show host? She obviously pissed somebody off. Most likely the whole industry.'

'But …' She coughed out an awkward laugh. What Frank was saying ran counter to everything she'd ever read or heard about Gloria Meadows. It was like being told you were adopted, that the photos in your family album were all carefully prepared fakes.

'But nothing. You're as dense as the rest of Gloria's fans if you think that just because she says it, it has to be true.'

Sheryl swallowed her indignation. Across the road the man slammed the phone down, grimaced and yanked his hair with both hands. Then something came to him and he bent over and started typing on the keyboard.

'If she was so washed up, why did she go to Hollywood?'

He stared past her. 'I thought you knew Gloria better than that. Picture this. She's sitting there on the set of *Midday* when one of her cronies sidles up and says, "Hey, Glorious One, why the hell are you wasting your time slumming it in this two-bit circus? You're a gazillionaire! Surely you can buy yourself something bigger than this?" If you were the great Gloria Meadows, would you flash him a polite little smile and promptly forget about it? I don't think so. Unhappily, by this time she was over the hill and not even a mountain of money could make people want her. She starred in one movie and then nobody'd touch her. Hardly surprising. Did you catch it? *Murderous Love* it was called.'

She nodded.

'What did you think of it?'

All Sheryl recalled of the film were cheap sets, underdeveloped characters and overacting. 'It was a bit slow in parts,' she said diplomatically.

‘That movie is so fucking bad it’s become a cult classic. Remember the part where her son, the psycho, pushes her off the balcony?’

‘And she comes back in a wheelchair and shoots him –’

‘– and goes wacko herself –’

‘– and serves roast psycho to the mayor –’

‘– with mashed potatoes and beans.’

They both burst out laughing.

‘I’m surprised Gloria agreed to do that kind of movie.’

‘There was a lot of that crap made in the ’seventies. I suppose she thought it’d be hip or cool or something. Truth be told, she was desperate by that time. Plenty of people wanted her money, but no one wanted the old bag that came with it.’

‘I don’t mean to sound disrespectful, Frank, but your mother must be an awfully good actress. I mean, looking at her now, it’s hard to believe she was once a comedy star. And she was always so smiley and friendly on *The Midday Show*. She isn’t like that these days.’

‘Are you trying to say she’s a pompous cow?’

‘Was it Richard Beaumont’s money that made her that way?’

Frank sighed, whether from fatigue or frustration it was impossible to tell. ‘As far as I remember,’ he said, ‘she was already a pain in the neck when she married Beaumont. I suppose her marriage just gave her several million more reasons to be high and mighty. But y’know, the time she really changed was when she got back from Hollywood. I remember that day like it was yesterday. The critics panned her so badly she wouldn’t leave the house. That was when Beaumont flattened the old mansion and built her a new one in its place, hoping to cheer her up. But she hid inside that one as well, like it was some kind of fortress. When she finally had the nerve to show her face, she was a changed person; putting everyone down, attacking them before they could get to her. That was around the time she set up the foundation – which was a pretty canny move, I must say. She knew people were less likely to call her a has-been or failure if she became this great philanthropist.’

‘That’s so sad. I’d like to have known Gloria when she was younger.’

He snorted. ‘She wouldn’t have given you the time of day, sweetheart. She was an arch prima donna. For instance, if a woman like you had saved my life when I was Alastair’s age, she’d have walked off and left you bleeding on the road. She’d have thought you rescued me just to get a reward.’

‘That’s what she thinks now.’

He laughed. ‘I suppose you’re right, you conniving little wench!’

She slapped him playfully, then clasped her hands around his neck. ‘What was Gloria like when she was with your father?’

For a second it looked like she’d gone too far. His face closed down, his eyes turned inwards, his hand stopped squeezing the stress ball. Just when she thought he’d chosen to ignore the question, he said, ‘Who the hell knows? I was only seven when he died.’

Judging the time had come to shut her mouth, she sat on her curiosity and gazed across the road. The ill-tempered man was gone, but the cleaning lady was hard at work opening and closing drawers, presumably looking for something to steal. Sheryl watched her with the smile of the voyeur on her lips. Somewhere in the empty building a telephone started ringing.

‘All I remember is what Gloria’s told me,’ Frank said suddenly. ‘And who knows how much of that’s true?’ He arched his back. ‘According to her, dying was the best thing my father ever did for her. It freed her from a yokel around her neck … and gave her some priceless public sympathy to boot.’ His mouth turned up at the corners. ‘One of my favourite snaps has me and Gloria at the funeral. I’m standing there in this little duffel coat and she’s all solid and tragic in a pillbox hat and black veil like Jackie Kennedy after JFK got shot. My mother milked that thing for all it was worth.’

Listening to him talking to the air, an undercurrent of bitterness tugging at his words, Sheryl felt a raw hole of sympathy open inside her. She said, ‘It can’t all have been a show, Frank. She must have felt something for your father.’

‘Who knows? She’s rewritten history so much, no one knows anymore what was real and what was made up … Least of all her.’

‘I couldn’t imagine marrying a man I didn’t love.’

Realising what she’d said, she tingled all over. She hadn’t meant to turn the conversation to herself, but now she’d broached the subject of marriage, she was desperate to hear Frank’s response. Perhaps he might give her an inkling, however small, of his intentions towards her.

She should have known better.

‘Things were different in the ’sixties,’ he said, nudging the conversation back to the impersonal. ‘Gloria married my father because he was handsome and she had a fetish for working-class men. And of course she was pregnant with me. But my father was an idiot. No personality. I don’t remember much about him, but I do know my mother tried to make something out of him and

he flat-out refused to change. He must have been a real slob. I've got a shitload of genes to work against.'

'Looks to me like most of your genes came from your mother. You're a lot like her.'

He smiled proudly. 'Thanks, babe. That's more of a compliment than you think.'

'I thought you might take it as an insult.'

'Why's that?'

'You're always saying horrible things about her.'

'That's the way we say "I love you" in my family.'

'Hmm. Maybe my parents loved me a lot more than I gave them credit for. I can't remember a single nice thing they ever said to me when I was growing up.'

Frank stifled a yawn. 'I admire Gloria. I like how she knows exactly what she wants and then she goes out and gets it. But she's hardly the motherly type. We have to go through hell and high water to get the smallest favour out of her.'

Sheryl recalled Andrew saying much the same thing. A picture flashed in her mind of Gloria perched on the roof of her mansion, her arms full of cash, while Frank did song-and-dance numbers on the grass below. For a strong, independent man, that kind of treatment was akin to psychological emasculation.

'Was she around much when you were growing up?'

'I didn't even realise she *was* my mother until I was eighteen,' he joked. 'I thought I belonged to the old woman in the maid's outfit. Seriously, though, Gloria hates kids. Got no patience for them. She expected her babies to come out fully formed. Plop! "Oh, there you are! Now get to work!" Sure she wanted heirs, but she didn't want the trouble of raising them. She was too wrapped up in her career.'

'I can understand that. It's a tough business we're in. Sometimes you need to focus on the fame itself and look beyond what you're doing to get there.'

'You don't know the half of it. Did you know she slept with the station owner to get her big break on TV?'

She gaped at him.

'I read it in a letter my father wrote when they were separated. He wanted custody of me, but Gloria would have died before she'd let that happen. When he was diagnosed with MS she took him back. It was great publicity. Her life is

chock-full of cute little stories like that. It's a shame more of them didn't come out in her book. It would have made a much better read. Have you heard how Beaumont died?'

'A plane crash, wasn't it?'

'Sure was. But that's not the whole story. The jet was on its way to the Caribbean and Beaumont was with an eighteen-year-old floozy. There was a rumour going round that Gloria herself engineered the crash to avoid a messy divorce.'

'No way!'

'It's the truth. I saw the accident report. The girl's parents tried to get their hands on some of the Beaumont money, so Gloria paid them off.'

Sheryl shook her head in disbelief. Though she longed to hear more, she was conscious of the hypocrisy of salivating over Gloria's secrets when she had so many of her own.

'From what you're saying,' she said, 'it doesn't sound like your mother has had a very happy life.'

He shrugged. 'Who cares? She's wealthy, famous and powerful, and that's what she always wanted. If she's not happy … Well, she made her own bed.'

He closed his eyes. Sheryl watched his hand as it squeezed the stress ball.

'Frank?'

'What?'

She ran her fingers over the stubble on the back of his neck. 'Why are you telling me all this?'

His eyes opened. 'What do you mean?'

'Don't get me wrong. I like hearing about your family. But why tonight?'

He dropped his head back. 'Who knows? Maybe I'm tired. My mouth operates on autopilot when I'm tired.'

'Has Gloria done something to upset you?'

He craned his neck to look at the clock on the wall. 'Listen, sweetheart. If it's okay with you, I might call it a night. I've still got a ton of work to do.'

'Hey, Frank, I'm sorry if I seem to be prying. It's just that if there's anything bothering you, you can always talk to me about it. You know that, don't you?'

'I'm fine. I can handle my own problems.' He sounded a little annoyed, as if her offer of assistance was a slur on his manhood.

'Maybe you need to slow down a bit. How about I give you a massage?'

‘No thanks. I need to get going.’ Reaching across the desk, he retrieved his watch and snapped it on his wrist. Then he heaved her from his lap and dumped her on the desk. ‘Thanks for staying back.’

She glared at him. ‘Should I put in an overtime request?’ she said in a sharper voice than she’d intended.

Frank was busy collecting his clothes, which were strewn from one end of the office to the other. ‘Hey, sweetheart, I’m sorry we haven’t spent much time together lately. I’ve got a lot going on.’

The desktop felt cold and hard against her bare buttocks. In a dark corner of the office, a fax machine beeped, whirred, squealed and hissed and started spewing out a message.

‘I know you’re busy,’ she said, trying to sound sympathetic, ‘and I’m sorry if I seem pushy. But I get frustrated not being able to see you.’ She was about to say something about Gloria’s ultimatum and its effect on their love life when Frank surprised her by agreeing that things were indeed frustrating right now.

‘Well, then,’ she said, ‘how about we find some time and do something with Alastair? We could go to the circus or something. I’m sure he’d like that.’

Frank presented his back to her. He slipped on his business shirt and started doing up the buttons.

‘Or a movie.’ She pushed herself off the desk. ‘I’m sure Alastair would love to spend more time with his father.’

‘He’s being a holy terror at the moment. His psychiatrist thinks he’s missing his mother and he says we shouldn’t confuse him any more than we have to.’

Sheryl bit her lip. She wanted to come clean and tell Frank she’d seen his son on the night of the party, but too much time had elapsed since then, and she knew she had no real excuse for keeping her visit a secret. She hadn’t wanted to keep it a secret; it’s just that Frank had told her she couldn’t see Alastair and she’d gone and done it anyway. Here at work the punishment for insubordination was instant dismissal, so it was obviously a crime he didn’t take lightly.

She pulled on her briefs, then stepped into her skirt. ‘Well, Frank, how about us? You wanna sneak out to the Café Rouen sometime? We could throw on disguises so nobody recognises us. I’ve got some of those funny glasses with fake moustaches. We could wear those.’

Frank was knotting his tie. He stood before the mirror naked from the waist down, the tail of his business shirt hanging over his hairy thighs. Watching him, it occurred to Sheryl that they got dressed in opposite directions.

'I've been meaning to talk to you about that,' he said. 'There's some big deals in the wings … overseas consortiums, important clients. They're the type of people that need plenty of lubrication before they commit.'

'Great!' she said, slipping her arms into her blouse. 'So that means wining and dining in fancy restaurants.'

'That's the way we do business in this industry.'

'Sounds good to me!'

'So I'm afraid I can't see you for a while.'

Sheryl froze, her arms in the air, the blouse dangling over her face. A second or two passed. Then she shimmied her body and the blouse slipped over her shoulders and fell into place.

'What are you saying?' she asked in a hoarse voice.

He turned from the mirror. 'What am I saying? I thought I made myself clear. I won't be around for a couple of weeks. Three at max. So we'll have to cool things down for a while.'

Sheryl was cooling down already. She could hardly believe her ears. 'Don't you want me there?'

'Sorry, sweetheart, it's an all male thing. The clients wanna do some business then see some of the night-life. A little business, a little night-life. It wouldn't be right if I had a date when they were single, would it?'

In the dim light of the office she tried to read the truth on his face. Was this the beginning of the end? Wasn't a request for a temporary separation the precursor to a more permanent break? Then she recalled office gossip about an upcoming megadeal involving a consortium of German investors – men renowned for the record prices they were prepared to pay for quality works of art – and that one small memory was enough to satisfy her that Frank was on the level. After all, he was an important businessman with a great many demands on his time. She was just being paranoid. (Wasn't she?) Sure! He wasn't about to throw away the best sex he'd ever had!

Going up to him, she placed a hand between his legs. It was hot and wet down there. There was a corresponding wetness between her own legs. When she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine she was cradling the fruit of some exotic tropical plant.

‘How about we fit a couple of these sessions into your schedule?’ she crooned, stroking the skin of his inner thigh.

‘We’ll see,’ Frank said with a smile. ‘We’ll see.’

Girls' night out

BACK HOME, CASSANDRA was in the kitchen tapping her cheek with a celery stalk.

'There you are!' she cried as Sheryl walked through the door. 'What time do you call this? I was about to send out the dogs!' She crunched on the celery. 'Working late?'

'You could say that.'

'Well, (crunch, crunch) Lana rang. We're on for a girls' night out. Me and Lana and Beverly, plus you. Nathan's gone to a wild stag party and we're getting revenge by sneaking out and having our own fun.'

'I don't think so, Cassandra. I'm bushed.'

'Stay right there.' She came out of the kitchen and poked Sheryl's arm with the celery stalk. 'I will get you a diet pill. That'll keep you going for three to five hours or so.'

It was impossible to say no to Cassandra when she was in this kind of mood. She was like a neutron star, vibrating with energy, drawing everyone into her orbit. But if things didn't go the way she planned, her mood would plummet and she would lapse into a state of lethargy and depression. And no one wanted that.

When she came back with the pill, Sheryl accepted it from her fingers and swallowed it with a gulp of cabbage juice.

NINETY MINUTES LATER they were in their third bar of the night. The owners of this one had gone for the rustic look: exposed beams, heavy furniture, bronze lampshades and pictures of game animals on the walls. The only thing missing was a moth-eaten moose head over the door.

They sat at the bar.

'Which one should I go for?' asked Beverly, a short, pretty woman with dark hair and a fetish for black eyeliner.

‘That beast over there is divine,’ said Lana, pointing a manicured finger at a man laughing and drinking with two older women. The man in question lifted his eyes and flashed her a smile that wouldn’t have looked out of place in an *International Male* catalogue.

Lana dropped her finger and turned back to the bar. She was recently engaged and considered herself beyond flirting … unless, of course, it was on behalf of her friends.

Beverly quivered with delight. ‘Oh my, yes.’

‘I saw him first!’ cried Cassandra, high on diet pills and three vodka spritzers. ‘He’s already smiled at me twice.’

‘But Cassandra, I haven’t had sex in months.’

‘Yes, Cassandra,’ Lana said with a twist of her long, elegant neck. ‘It’s time you left a few foxes for the rest of the hounds. What do you think, Sheryl?’

‘Huh?’ grunted Sheryl, whose thoughts were elsewhere.

Cassandra slipped off her barstool. ‘All’s fair in love and war,’ she sang, and with a toss of her head steered a course for the man’s table.

‘Goddammit!’ cried Beverly, swaying a little on her barstool. ‘Why does she have to be such a slut?’

Lana turned to observe her friend’s manoeuvres. Taking a seat indecently close to the man, she launched a full-scale assault with her personality, one hand resting on his knee, the other making gestures in the air to emphasise whatever it was she was saying. The man’s companions looked on with mouths ajar. When Cassandra gave no signs of acknowledging them, they shrugged at each other and left to check out the jukebox.

‘She won’t get anywhere,’ said Lana. ‘That guy could snap his fingers and get any woman he likes. I’d say one of those two is his girlfriend, or at least wants to be. And if that’s the case, we’re in for a little entertainment.’ She bent towards Beverly. ‘To tell you the truth, Beverly, I only pointed out that man because I knew Cassandra would go after him, leaving the rest of the talent for you. How’s that for a plan?’

Beverly was ecstatic. She looked around enthusiastically, as if they were in a male brothel and Lana had offered her the pick of the house.

‘Don’t think me mean,’ Lana said to Sheryl, crossing her legs. ‘We love Cassandra to bits – don’t we Beverly? But we do have to be realistic. The lady must be handled in the correct manner.’

Sheryl nodded in Cassandra’s direction. ‘I think she’s doing pretty well regardless.’

She was right. Cassandra's fingers were now toying with the man's collar, her knee pressed against his thigh. And far from being put off by her audacity, he was giving her his undivided attention. His two friends had moved to the tiny dance floor where they were shuffling their feet to 'Walk Like an Egyptian'.

'That woman amazes me,' breathed Lana. 'She's a goddess. You'd think with all her insecurities she'd be shy. But no, goes straight for the kill. I'm tempted to teach her about subtlety, but that would be like taming the wild boar. Instead, we shall study her and learn her techniques. Shan't we, Beverly?'

Beverly didn't answer. Swilling the last of her cocktail, she urged Lana and Sheryl to finish their drinks so she could order another round.

'Count me out of this one,' said Sheryl, pushing her glass across the bar. The diet pill was making her head spin – and the rapid succession of drinks wasn't helping matters either. On top of that, she'd been hit by an anxiety attack over Frank and the two weeks separation he'd imposed. She wanted desperately to believe his excuse. She longed to feel secure in their relationship. But her experience with men had taught her they weren't to be trusted. How did she know he wasn't growing tired of her? And that being the case, what's to say he wasn't seeing other women … frequenting prostitutes even? She shook her head, trying to dislodge the poisonous lessons from Sephryn House.

Glancing about the room, she saw at the cigarette vending machine a man with a build similar to Frank's. He had his back to her and was tapping his foot in time to the music as he tried to decide on a brand of cigarettes. As she watched, a woman charged up behind him, arms swinging, yellow hair bouncing on the back of her head. Stooping down, she pressed buttons at random and handed the man the packet that dropped into the tray. They laughed together, then ambled from the bar arm in arm. Sheryl shuddered with envy. Why couldn't things be that natural and easy with Frank?

She excused herself and went to the restroom. After washing and drying her hands, she straightened her back and looked at herself in the mirror. There were no longer any remnants of the prostitute Sheri in her appearance. The woman in the mirror was slim, sophisticated and self-assured, glamorous in an understated kind of way. It astounded Sheryl to think she'd managed to achieve what she'd once thought impossible; she'd altered the very fabric of her existence and become the kind of woman a man like Frank would want. A

tingle ran through her body, courtesy of the diet pill. Standing there, she was surer than ever that an offer of a recording contract would come and break Gloria's chokehold on her once and for all.

She dared allow herself a tiny shiver of triumph. After so many years of disappointments and dead ends, the stage was set for a lifetime of dreams to become reality. And who knows what further marvels the future might bring? Another charge crackled through her body. It was time to forget about Frank and Gloria for the night. It was time to go out there and have some fun.

When she returned to the bar, Cassandra was alone.

'What happened to Lana and Beverly?'

Cassandra was staring at the empty glass in her hand. 'Beverly fell off her stool. Lana's taking her home. She said she'd be back later.'

'What about the guy you were talking to?'

'Oh. Him. He had to go home. To his boyfriend.'

Sheryl took the seat next to her. 'Don't worry, Cassandra. There's plenty more guys around. And if you don't like the ones here, we can move to another bar. We won't rest till we find you a tall, hunky footballer. That's the type you like, isn't it?'

Cassandra lifted her eyes. They were the colour of dead wood. 'Sheryl,' she said, 'I know you haven't had much experience with the male gender, so I respect your opinion. Can I ask you a question?'

'Sure,' she said, smiling.

'Do you think I'm a two-faced slut?'

'Cassandra!' She drew back. 'What brought this on?'

'I won't be upset by the truth. Beverly said I was a two-faced slut for going after that guy. She said everybody in the room was laughing at me.'

'You are not a two-faced slut, Cassandra.'

'I know I'm not a slut. I know it because I'm getting married the minute I find the right guy. It's just that right now I'm still looking.'

'Hey, there's nothing wrong or sleazy about that. You need to be sure. I understand that completely.'

'You don't think it's wrong to date a lot of men?'

'No! Like you say, you're searching for Mister Right. That doesn't make you a slut.'

'Not even if I sleep with them?'

This question was slightly more problematic. But who was Sheryl to take the high moral ground given her less-than-spotless past and the fact she'd succumbed to Frank's advances on their first date?

'Sex is an important part of a relationship,' she said. 'You need to find out if you're compatible with a guy, and sex can be the best way of doing that. Personally, I don't believe there's anything wrong with casual sex. So long as you're careful about it and nobody gets hurt, where's the harm?'

Cassandra's eyes were coming back to life. Hopefully, this meant the mood-crash had been averted. 'That's very enlightened of you, Sheryl,' she said, squaring her shoulders. 'And here was I, thinking you were a bit of a prude. A one-man woman.'

'Well, we live and learn, don't we? I have. I used to be more like you than you realise. But as you said, eventually you find the right man and then your principles change. I can look back and judge myself and say it was bad what I was doing … but it only seems that way from where I am today. Back then it was the only choice I had, given the circumstances.' She glanced up in horror, realising that under the influence of too much alcohol and a breathtaking confidence in her future, she'd revealed more about her past than she'd intended.

Fortunately, her words went over Cassandra's head. Her eyes were once again roaming the bar. 'There's a serious lack of talent here, you know. I vote that as soon as Lana comes back, we go someplace else.'

She snapped her fingers and the muscle-bound barman came sauntering over. He rested his elbows on the bar.

'More drinks, ladies?' he asked in a thrilling baritone.

Cassandra leaned towards him, her gaze travelling from his mahogany eyes to his dimpled chin to his tight black T-shirt. 'I bet you work out,' she said, reaching out a hand and running a finger along the vein in his biceps. 'Doing anything after work?'

Starmaker

SHERYL SCREAMED UNTIL her throat hurt. Throwing away the phone, she karate-kicked the laundry basket, then whirled around and set upon a defenceless teddy bear – throttling it, tearing it with her teeth, slamming it against the mattress. When this didn't calm her rage, she threw it across the room, dived on the bed and tried to smother herself with a pillow.

Yesterday she'd been on top of the world. For her prayer had been answered: an agent had rung to offer his services. Saying he loved her performance on Sammy Jo Hartman, claiming he had hundreds of contacts in the music industry, he went on to say he could arrange a contract with a recording company within days.

Sheryl, understandably, had jumped at the offer. She took a cab to a prestigious downtown address, rode a golden elevator, entered a bright, stylish office and over coffee and iced cakes discussed terms, conditions and expectations with the pleasant, confident, impressive Mr Vanderburg. Finding they desired the same things, they previewed a few songs and even made tentative plans for rehearsals, studio time and promotional tours. After weeks of wishing and waiting for something like this to happen, the suddenness and scale of everything was mind-boggling.

Straight after the meeting, Sheryl went to her lawyer's office and handed over a copy of the agency's model contract. And now Mrs Santelli had rung with the dreadful news. Under the terms of Sheryl's contract with the Gloria Meadows Foundation, unauthorised public performances were strictly forbidden – and this included any singing outside of the shower.

'What?' Sheryl cried. 'How can they do that?'

Apparently such clauses were common in contracts of this nature. They allowed boards of management to veto any public appearances and commercial endorsements that were seen to conflict with the values of their organisation. Sheryl's contract allowed no grounds for appeal. In other words, the board's decision was final.

Once the rage had burnt itself out, she lay shell-shocked. She knew what this meant. It meant Gloria had her up against a wall. If she refused to give up Frank, his mother would almost certainly retaliate by burying her for the duration of her contract. And in nine months' time, when the contract finally ran its course, she would be a nobody again, last year's news. Even if she complied with the current ultimatum, Gloria had nine long months in which to batter her about the head with the contract if the fancy took her. So what was she to do? Put all her trust in a future with Frank? Or surrender herself to Gloria's bloodied hands? She realised with a sinking feeling that she was no nearer a decision than when the ultimatum was first made.

The ultimatum. It hung over her head like an anvil. Since the night of Gloria's party, all her hopes and plans had rested on the belief that her big break was just around the corner, and now the break had come she was barred from taking advantage of it. 'Finish with Frank by the time I return from Rio,' Gloria had told her. When was that? It must be soon. Maybe Gloria was back from Rio already. The thought threw her into a panic.

The phone started ringing. Sheryl stared at it. Surely that couldn't be Gloria? Was she ringing to gloat over the lost opportunity? Were her spies that good?

Please don't let it be her, she implored the room. Please let it be another marketing manager ringing to offer me a small fortune for drinking a diet soda or eating a chocolate bar. Furious at the bind she was in, she grabbed handfuls of hair and pulled until tears bloomed in her eyes. Why did she sign that damn contract without talking to a lawyer first? How could she have been so stupid? The answer was simple. Gloria's offer had come at a low point in her life and she'd looked upon it as a gift from the gods – or rather, a gift from a goddess. She'd been terrified the opportunity would slip through her fingers if she didn't commit right away. And anyhow, what reason did she have to suspect Gloria Meadows of being anything less than the generous, kindly soul the media made her out to be?

Meanwhile, the phone went on ringing. In frustration, she scrambled off the bed, swiped it off the carpet and pressed it to her ear. 'What?' she barked.

'Oh,' sniffed someone from far away. 'May I please speak with Sheryl Starling?'

'You are.'

'Oh, my dear, thank goodness.'

It was Gloria. Sheryl shuddered with terror and rage. Her hand tightened on the phone until the casing gave out a small crack of protest. Before she could think of anything to say, Gloria sniffed again (an uncharacteristic grossness) and said, 'I must see you. Most urgently. The Café Rouen. My secretary has made the booking for twelve noon and I shall be there on the dot. Please, Miss Starling, do not be late.'

As the line went dead, Sheryl screamed, 'No!' and flung the phone the way of the teddy bear. She glared about the room in fury. 'I'm not going,' she said to the potted palm. 'She can go to hell!'

But when she sat down and thought about it, she realised there was really no way of avoiding the moment of truth. When presented with an obstacle, Gloria approached it like a military operation, with guns blasting and casualties acceptable. Maybe she stood a chance if she took the offensive.

'Should I go?'

The potted palm trembled a little under its own electrical impulses, but in truth it couldn't care less what she did.

'I'm not going,' she said again as she went to choose an outfit.

AS USUAL, GLORIA was late. Fiddling with a knife, her eyes flicking to and from the door, Sheryl fought to stem the rising tide of outrage and anxiety that was inciting her to run from the room. She tried to focus on Andrew's advice: 'Don't show fear in front of Gloria. She smells fear and goes in for the kill.' But in some ways that made things worse. It made Gloria seem more formidable than ever.

On the way here she'd racked her brain for the best way of handling this crisis. Initially she'd settled on coming clean about the agent's offer. Perhaps news of her impending stardom would override Gloria's objections to her relationship with Frank. But she knew there was more to this than Prudence Halvorson or simple money matters. Gloria's objections extended to immutable traits like breeding, social position and family history – and after encountering the dowdy Starlings on Sammy Jo Hartman, what chance was there that the illustrious Miss Meadows would allow the daughter of such rabble to contaminate her gene pool?

Next came a more unscrupulous idea. If she could somehow trick Gloria into cancelling her contract, she would not only liberate herself from the

woman's sphere of influence, she would free herself from the shackles of a contract that placed onerous demands on her time yet paid expenses only.

Right now she was fixed on the latter option. She'd even begun devising inventive ideas for civil disobedience, public faux pas and the like. But with each passing second, she grew more convinced that Gloria's reaction to any kind of offensive would be to hold her to the terms of the contract and bury her for the next nine months – the threat she'd held over her all along.

A family entered the restaurant and was herded to a nearby table. Accompanying the mother and father were three fashionably dressed children: a baby in designer diapers, a girl aged about five and a boy a little older. As they fussed about with seating arrangements, Sheryl made a face at the baby and it responded by staring stupidly and dribbling a bubbly white fluid from the corner of its mouth.

Then Gloria entered the room. Sheryl, caught off guard, stiffened. Dressed in black, Gloria looked as majestic and imposing as Queen Victoria, as fearsome and unwelcome as the Grim Reaper. As she surged through the restaurant, she left in her wake a trail of stares and whispers. This time she didn't stop to smile at anyone or make idle chatter. In fact, she didn't look around at all. After allowing the maître d' to seat her, she dismissed him with a flick of her wrist and turned her attention to Sheryl.

'Thank you so much for coming,' she said, reaching for her hand, not quite making the distance. 'This is such an embarrassing situation.'

Sheryl frowned at her. This was a different Gloria from the one she'd grown to loathe and mistrust. This Gloria was white and out of breath. The skin on her neck was hanging in loose folds. Her eyes were edged with grey. Something was wrong … terribly wrong. The realisation brought a sliver of a smile to her lips.

As Gloria opened her mouth to begin her explanation, the boy at the next table knocked over a glass. It crashed onto a plate and the clang sent Gloria leaping out of her seat. Twisting her neck, she glared at the boy, glared at his mother, then turned her glare on Sheryl.

'I cannot believe this,' she hissed, her body quivering. 'I have told management time and again that I expect standards at the Café Rouen. And that means no children, no cigars, no short skirts, no press.' She counted off the felonies on her bejewelled fingers. 'Why else do we pay these ridiculous prices, I ask you? Certainly not for the food.'

She scanned the restaurant for a waiter, but they'd all chosen this time to congregate at the front desk where a teenage singing sensation and her band of hangers-on were creating a commotion.

With a huff, Gloria settled in her seat and again fixed her eyes on Sheryl. 'I am so glad you could make it,' she said, her mood changing in an instant. 'I had no other recourse. You were absolutely the last person on my list.' She forced her mouth into a smile. 'You have no idea how unfortunate it is that someone like me is reduced to coming to someone like you on such a matter.'

Sheryl pushed her chair out and flung her napkin on the table. 'That does it,' she said, and made ready to leave.

Gloria raised both hands. 'No, no, no, Miss Starling! You misunderstand! Come, sit down. Please.' She became contrite, clasping her hands together and resting them against her chin. 'You should know me by now. I don't mean half of what I say. Things always come out muddled.'

Something in Gloria's appeal intrigued her. Against her better judgment, she resumed her seat and said, 'What exactly *did* you mean?'

Gloria's eyes widened. 'My dear, I had no idea you had such fire in you! Very few people have the nerve to address me in that tone of voice. Many believe (quite mistakenly, I might add) that I am some kind of dragon lady. It is simply not true. I only do what is right and just to protect my business, my family and the people I love. You do understand that, don't you?'

'No, I don't!'

Gloria narrowed her eyes.

'Okay, I understand to a certain degree. But unlike yourself I don't go around hurting people.'

'Admirable, my dear. Admirable.'

Gloria's lips quivered. Unfastening her purse, she withdrew a white silk handkerchief and dabbed it against the corners of each eye. A waiter approached and she pressed the handkerchief in her lap while he set out the teapot and cups. When he asked if there was anything else he could do for them, she announced in a voice that must have carried all the way to the other end of the Grand Hotel: 'Kindly inform Monsieur LaConte that I wish to have an audience with him directly after tea.' She gazed imperiously at the errant family, and the waiter, after a glance over his shoulder, bowed and walked stiffly to the kitchen.

The handkerchief reappeared. 'Oh, Miss Starling, the world is filled with pain. I myself have already experienced a fair share of grief and heartache and

yet still the pain comes. I know, I know. You think: Here sits the beloved Gloria Meadows who has the world at her feet. Believe me, dear, that picture could not be farther from the truth.'

Sheryl watched the performance in silence. It appeared her first impression of Gloria might have been correct: she was a lonely old woman, estranged from her family, with few real friends. Was this what today's meeting was about? Was Gloria so lonely she craved companionship at any cost? It seemed inconceivable, a turnabout of supernatural proportions. And yet stranger things had happened. Of course, it was possible this was a ruse, a fresh attempt to sabotage her relationship with Frank. Was Gloria about to inform her the family fortune had been wiped out, that Frank was set to inherit nothing?

Folding her arms on the table, she said somewhat maliciously, 'You've got problems?'

'Problems, you say. My dear, if you only knew.' She lifted her teacup and brought it to her mouth. Before it got there, her face broke into a mesh of velvety wrinkles. She seemed unable to go on.

'Is it about your family?'

Gloria shook her head.

'A business deal?'

'No, not really.'

'Is it about … Have you been to Rio?'

The question had a cataclysmic effect on Gloria. Her hand shook, her cup crashed down on the saucer, her eyes opened wide.

'Did something happen in Rio?'

Recovering herself, Gloria placed her hands palms down on the tablecloth and assumed a dignified expression. 'I have not been to Rio and never shall,' she announced like a player in a Shakespearean production. Her expression soured. 'I have been relieved of my presidency.'

'Presidency?' Sheryl had to stop herself from laughing. Was Gloria delusional? Did she think she was the president of Brazil?

'Correct. I am no longer president of the Gloria Meadows Foundation!'

The clarification did little to relieve Sheryl's confusion. 'What? That can't be right. You *own* the foundation.'

'I birthed it. I nurtured it like a precious child. And this is the gratitude I receive.'

'How can they do this to you?'

‘Well you might ask, my dear. Well you might ask. You see, for reasons which are now utterly beyond my comprehension, I established the foundation with a board of management, and now the board has turned their fangs on me and lifted control from these very hands. The board; my friends! I expected loyalty from those people! I selected them myself!’ She brought the handkerchief to her mouth. ‘I still cannot believe this. I invested my own money in that organisation. Did they think I was giving it away?’

She appealed to Sheryl for assistance, for a means of comprehending this disaster. Sheryl, who knew nothing about boards of management or people who turned on their friends, could only stick to facts. ‘What brought this on?’

‘You will not believe it. Truly. I mean, I am Gloria Meadows – *the* Gloria Meadows, for heaven’s sake! Did they expect me to travel economy class? In the baggage compartment?’

When Sheryl blinked in confusion, Gloria began the long-awaited explanation.

‘The board alleges I have been frivolous with money, simply because I choose to travel by private jet and take rooms at one of Rio’s finest hotels. It is where I always stay. I would fear for my life if I were to stay anywhere else. I explained this to the board, but … they believe I should sleep under a bridge and take my chances with the rats and hobos. Well, now, the issue has been blown out of all proportion by a spiteful old – ugh! – and the board has informed me that the cost is extravagant, that I am roaming South America for twenty long, unpleasant days for my own edification. They claim this – this – incident, as they call it – will seriously discredit the foundation. Hence they have cut me loose. Afloat without a life jacket. Hurtling through the sky without wings. Crashing to the barren earth like famed, hapless Icarus.’

Sheryl, always a sucker for a sob story, found herself swept along on the tide of Gloria’s sorrow. All thoughts of proud, malicious, self-centred Gloria melted away and she no longer took pleasure in the idea of leaning on the knife that stuck so prominently from her antagonist’s breast. ‘That doesn’t sound extravagant to me,’ she said.

‘As it would not to the majority of the populace!’

‘Three weeks is a long time for a conference.’

‘The conference was for three days, dear. The remainder of the time was devoted to a tour of the continent to view child poverty at first-hand. There are world-class hotels near poor villages. Do they expect me to sleep with the cows?’

The image of Gloria sleeping with cows brought an irreverent smile to Sheryl's lips. To give her mouth something else to do, she said, 'And the foundation was paying for all this?'

Gloria stared at her in horror, as if she'd just admitted to being in cahoots with the blackguards on the board of management. Her reaction reminded Sheryl that right now she was her only ally … and then it hit her that this was the opportunity she'd been waiting for, the chance to get in Gloria's good books.

'You need to spend money to make money,' she said.

'My sentiments exactly.'

'Anyhow, Rio's a dangerous place to be these days.'

But Gloria was more concerned about her social status than the lost trip to Rio. 'What will my friends say? No more exclusive parties. No dinner invitations. I'll be marked like Cain. Ostracised!'

'Surely it'll blow over. People can't hold something like this against you forever.'

The remark made Gloria cackle. 'Are you insane? You have no conception of the circles in which I move. Those people are ruthless! Hyenas encircling the dying gazelle!'

Sheryl couldn't understand why Gloria placed so much importance on backstabbing, unforgiving friends. Surely she would be better off without them? 'Maybe you should look on the bright side. You've still got a rewarding, interesting life – an amazing life. Just because you're no longer involved in the foundation doesn't mean –'

'I was not *involved* in the Gloria Meadows Foundation, young lady. I created it. It is the source of my greatest pleasure, my finest publicity. Do you understand the enormity of the difference between taking up a charity – like so many ordinary celebrities do –and creating one from one's own blood, sweat and tears? The difference is immeasurable.'

Sheryl recognised in that moment that the best way to win over Gloria was to present herself as a loyal handmaiden, a bulwark against the treacherous world. Folding her arms, she declared, 'I agree totally. The whole thing's criminal. It's your charity and they shouldn't be allowed to get away with it.'

Gloria stretched out a hand and petted the tablecloth. 'Thank you, my dear. It is heartening to know we are on the same wavelength at last. Now,

you must help me forget this tragedy. The details have been handed over to my lawyers.'

They talked of other things: Gloria's family, Gloria's infomercials, gossip about Gloria's friends – and during this exchange there arose an intimacy that family pride and social barriers had previously made impossible. Banished to the social wilderness, Gloria was reaching out to the only person who might lead her back to civilisation, the only person who, in the eyes of the board and its high-flying patrons, could do no wrong.

The baby at the next table started crying, a choking sob that quickly became an ear-piercing shriek, and its mother, no doubt fearing another censure from Gloria, lifted it from the high chair, clamped a hand over its mouth and disappeared into the restroom. This time, though, Gloria barely blinked. For she'd chosen this moment to drop her bombshell.

'How are you and Franklin getting along?' she asked.

Sheryl felt the blood drain from her face. She'd dared to hope that Gloria's troubles would override her determination to interfere in her son's love life – and yet she ought to have known Gloria wasn't a woman who gave in easily. It struck her again that this might all have been a calculated game. Had Gloria invented the story of her dismissal from the board to give Sheryl a false sense of security? Was she that good an actress?

She decided to be evasive. 'I haven't seen him in a while,' she said – which was, in fact, the truth.

'Oh? Why is that, dear?'

'I … don't … know.' She tried in vain to peer behind Gloria's furrowed brows, to catch a glimpse of that fiendish nasty streak before it came screaming out with guns blazing. Gloria appeared to be waiting for a more substantial explanation, so she added, 'He's been working on a big deal.'

Gloria sighed the sigh of the overprotective mother. 'It would be a shame if you let your careers interfere with your personal lives, my dear. That is my own humble advice.'

The response baffled her. Was that Gloria's intention? – to throw her off guard so she could draw out the truth? If so, the ruse worked. 'I … thought you weren't happy about my seeing Frank,' she said warily.

'Where on earth did you get that idea?' Gloria lifted her cup to her mouth. 'Oh, I know. I told you we had hopes Franklin and Prue would reconcile. Well, my dear, that eventuality just ain't gonna happen. Prue's father is vice-president of the foundation … Actually, no; now he's …' Here her voice broke

into a strangled sob. She put the cup down. 'Suffice it to say, it is highly unlikely that Victor will agree to a reconciliation now. In fact, he may never even speak to me again.'

She leaned back in her seat, blinked several times in rapid succession, then bent forward again. 'Speaking off the record, if I may, I was highly suspicious of Prue's motives in snaring my son in the first place. That woman can be such a harridan. Franklin needs someone sweet and gentle, like yourself. Yes, dear, like yourself. You have proven yourself a woman of great talent and integrity, a woman with a golden future. A little rough around the edges, true. But once I transform you into a star, that will all change. And in time you will hold aloft the torch which I have carried for near on … Well, let us say for many, many years.' She grinned mischievously. 'I know how to make you a star, my dear. I always have.'

Sheryl gasped. 'A star?'

'As luminous as Venus, as vast as Jupiter. Hollywood will clamour for the dazzle of your smile, as it once clamoured for mine. With you as my protégée, our fame will become legend. We will be a new kind of royalty. People will bow as we enter the room.'

Sheryl felt the room spin. This was all too much to take in. Fame; wealth; marriage; the bearing of Gloria Meadows' grandchildren – was it conceivable all these things would spring from that one stroke of luck, those few magical seconds in which she pulled a child from the path of an oncoming car? Surely there must be more to it than that?

'You are very quiet, my dear. I presume you accept my offer.'

'Of course! I mean … Of course! I was just … I was thinking … I was about to tell you something. I've been offered a recording contract.'

'A recording contract? Oh, poof! Don't bother with trifles. I am referring to fame of cosmic proportions, the kind I have enjoyed for my entire life.'

In the midst of her all-pervading joy, Sheryl remembered the thing that was set to turn this whole miraculous day on its head. 'But … my contract prevents me doing anything without permission from the board.'

Gloria peered down her nose at her jewel-encrusted watch. 'I am well aware of that. I supervised the contract myself. I shall speak to my lawyers about your release and then we can begin making plans. Speaking of which, I have an appointment in approximately one hour's time. The board's reign of terror may soon be over. Thank you once again, my dear. This will be a new beginning for both of us.'

But Sheryl was too charged with emotion to let Gloria get away. She wanted to throw Frank back on the table. She wanted to hear Gloria heap blessings on their relationship. She wanted to return with her to the mansion, take tea with Frank in the drawing room, tell him the astounding news, saunter hand in hand through the stately gardens, stay overnight in his bedroom … all under Gloria's approving eye.

'Is Frank home?' she asked excitedly.

'No, dear. I have seen neither hide nor hair of him in recent days. He must have taken up some new hobby. That boy's mind is so easily diverted by new pleasures.'

Burnt

FRANK WASN'T THE sort of man you questioned about whereabouts or what he was up to. But Sheryl found out about his 'hobby' another way.

Her discovery came on a crisp, clear Sunday, a day in which the blue cone of sky seemed frozen in place, and time along with it. Inside Montpellier, Sheryl and Gloria were scouring row upon row of display cases, hunting for a broach for Sheryl to wear at an upcoming Dynasty Ladies Society luncheon. Bypassing scores of ordinary pieces, turning their noses up at gem-studded constructions that could feed a poor family for a year, they searched for that elusive something that would mark Sheryl as a woman of taste and make her the most envied woman in the room. Now Gloria was no longer president of the Gloria Meadows Foundation, cost was not a consideration. The aim was to make the Dynasty ladies accept Sheryl as one of their own; otherwise they would listen politely to her address, applaud lightly at the end, then pledge almost nothing. They were involved in far too many charities to be impressed by a simple appeal on behalf of starving children.

Sheryl didn't realise it, but she was being worn like a fabulous gem herself. A troupe of lawyers had investigated the coup at the Gloria Meadows Foundation and following a week of meetings and group calls had stumbled towards an unwelcome conclusion: Gloria stood no chance of being reinstated on the board. Frustrated as she was by this news, Gloria was not a woman who readily accepted defeat. She knew that as far as the public is concerned, what's important is not what goes on in the boardroom, it's what can be seen. As long as she was photographed at Sheryl's side, as long as it appeared she was representing Sheryl, as long as Sheryl did as she was told, then she knew she was pulling the strings in a different and probably more effective way than when she'd performed the invisible and largely thankless role of president. With time on her hands and a craving for publicity, Gloria was eager to involve herself in something new, an endeavour that would

thrust her back into the spotlight where she rightly belonged. 'Starmaker' was the crown she wanted to wear. And Sheryl was to be the jewel in her sceptre.

Of course, her plans for Sheryl had little to do with Sheryl as a person. Gloria believed she could drag any moderately talented girl off the streets and mould her into a star. Her choice of Sheryl was based on the simple fact that the Gloria Meadows Foundation had already invested a small fortune in the girl, and Gloria was nothing if not opportunistic.

Examining a diamond as big as her eye, she was entangled in the tale of a dear old friend (one of the richest men in the world, she claimed) who'd entertained her on his private yacht the other night. 'Monty paid twenty-seven dollars thirty-one cents in tax last year,' she told Sheryl, 'and he has kindly agreed to lend me his accountants, at no cost whatsoever, so that I too may benefit from their miracles. Such a generous man. You would not expect so important and influential a man to be so selfless.'

Sheryl agreed. 'Maybe they could fit in my tax return,' she said.

Gloria laughed the suggestion away. 'Oh yes, Monty has a most remarkable mind. Listen to this. He attended a gallery opening the other week – a fund-raising event for a local hospice or something – and when his lady-friend went to drop five hundred dollars into the collection box, dearest Monty stopped her and ordered her to put her money back inside her purse. And then he dropped a single coin into the box himself. Can you guess the reason?'

Sheryl thought for a while. Nothing came to mind.

Gloria said, 'He wanted to see how it would feel. Can you believe that? One of the richest men in the world donates a brass farthing, just to see how it feels. How priceless. I laughed till my sides ached.'

Sheryl offered a polite smile. But something in the story disturbed her. She couldn't help thinking about the five hundred dollars the hospice had been cheated out of, money that might have made the difference between a life and a death. Denying a charity its donation, minimising taxes – is this what constituted a 'generous man' in Gloria's world?

Something tugged at her dress.

'Sheryl?' piped Alastair, his face grey with boredom. 'Sheryl? Can we get ice-cream now? I'm hungry.'

Kneeling beside him, she brushed the hair from his eyes. 'Course we can, sweetheart. And what say we go to Toy City after that? It's your birthday soon. Maybe you can give me some ideas for a present.'

‘Yee-ha!’ He punched the air with his fist. ‘Toy City!’

Gloria accepted another piece from the jeweller. ‘Alastair, dear, you should not be troubling Miss Starling. We have important work to do. Please go back to your chair and sit quietly. We shall be finished here shortly.’

Alastair trudged dutifully back to his seat.

‘Is it alright if I take him to Toy City after this?’ asked Sheryl. ‘If you’re not up to it, we could catch a cab home.’

Gloria placed a tepid hand on her forearm. ‘Certainly, dear. Thank you for the offer. Alastair can be so trying.’ She smiled wearily. ‘You are such a marvel with the little ones. I am certain you shall have a dozen or more.’

Sheryl imagined herself surrounded by twelve screaming, red-faced infants, all wearing diapers. Fortunately, Mrs Campbell entered the vision in her donkey ears and pink rompers and carted them off to bed.

‘Try this one,’ said Gloria, holding a fist-sized diamond- and ruby-studded rosette against her breast. She considered the effect. ‘Nice,’ was the lukewarm verdict. ‘But much too ordinary. We want something which will stand out without appearing to stand out.’

The jeweller nodded gravely. Mid-nod his face lit up. Unlocking a drawer, he pulled out a tray and presented Gloria with a diamond-encrusted fur seal.

‘Oh, my goodness, how lovely!’ she cried, raising her hands. ‘What a darling little creature! You could wear it with my ermine coat. The effect will be sensational.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ said Sheryl. ‘But won’t people get upset if I wear fur?’

‘Oh, dearie me, no. Quite the contrary. The only people who abhor fur are the ones who cannot afford it. Believe you me, the Dynasty ladies will be thrilled to bits by the statement you will be making.’

‘Statement?’

‘Yes, dear. That fur is back! That it should never have gone away!’

The broach was indeed lovely. But Sheryl would never agree to wearing the ermine coat. She would take the broach if Gloria insisted, but if anyone commented on it, she would say she was wearing it as a statement *against* the fur trade.

‘Bother!’ puffed Gloria. ‘My chauffeur has arrived already. Did I say one hour?’

‘I think you did.’

‘Would you be a dear and ask him to park nearby and await my call? I cannot have him rushing me like this.’ She addressed the jeweller. ‘Servants

these days; they think they own you. Whatever has happened to society? Things have turned all topsy-turvy.'

The jeweller shook his head in agreement, and Sheryl put on her sunglasses and left them tut-tutting over the state of a world in which poor people could tell rich people what to do.

The chauffeur had parked the limousine in a clearway and was leaning against the No Standing sign awaiting orders. On receiving them, he slid behind the wheel and steered the car into the traffic. Sheryl watched him go. Almost immediately the car was captured by a red light and boxed in by other vehicles. A group of bystanders (tourists by the look of them) rushed up to the tinted windows and squinted through them, moving their heads from side to side and up and down like strange birds. One of them knocked on the glass. They must have recognised the personalised number plates and were trying to see if Gloria was inside. Once upon a time Sheryl might have done the same thing, and it was hard to digest the reality that soon *she* would be the famous one, the one who had to hide behind tinted glass.

She returned to Montpellier. As her hand touched the plate-glass door, she happened to glance over her shoulder … and who should she see but Frank, emerging from the doors of the Parkside Luxury Apartments. Pleasure rose in her chest. She'd last seen him about a week ago when he'd slipped into the office to pick up an armful of books, and he'd barely had time to wink at her. Today by contrast he looked relaxed, cheerful, flushed and confident – the look he usually wore after wrapping up a business deal. Perhaps they had something to celebrate. She began walking towards him … but then the doors reopened and a tall, elegant woman strode out and stepped into his embrace.

Sheryl threw herself behind a power pole. She poked her head out. The woman was clearly not Prue (whom Frank had described as a shortish, baboon-faced woman with a Laura Ashley fetish) and she wasn't anyone Sheryl had seen at the office either. Perhaps she was one of Frank's lawyers. After all, the women in TV legal dramas often wore short dresses, high heels and a slab of makeup.

When his hand began tracing the curve of the woman's spine, her confusion turned to cold, gut-wrenching dread. The woman closed her eyes and arched her back, and with a roguish smile, Frank bent and kissed her exposed neck. He was still kissing it an eternity later when a valet approached and handed him the keys to his car.

The first few moments after they drove off were a blur. Cars flew by like leaves in a stream. Traffic lights changed. Shadows grew longer. It was like the incident had never occurred. But then a teenage girl ran up and screamed in Sheryl's face, jerking her back to reality. As the fan pleaded and whined for an autograph, she turned and went back inside the store.

'I have taken the liberty of ordering the broach,' Gloria said. 'And the diamond earrings Mr Irving is holding in his hands are simply exquisite, so I have ordered those too. See? They are like tiny icebergs, though I'm certain if the Titanic were to crash into one of those, it would sink nonetheless.'

Pausing to draw breath, she became conscious of Sheryl's slumped shoulders and ghastly pallor. 'Don't worry, dear,' she said, petting her arm; 'the pieces are well within our budget. I have been keeping a close eye on you and I am well aware of how conservative you have been with your spending. All the more reason to splash out. We cannot have you looking dowdy when associating with the moneyed gentry. That is no way to earn their patronage.'

Sheryl frowned at Gloria's lips, which appeared to be moving independently of her words. They were also Frank's lips, she saw that now, and this led her to wonder: Did Gloria spawn Frank in her own devilish image? Was her plan from the start to turn him into a bigger, tougher version of herself? It certainly seemed that way. Both disregarded other people's feelings; both turned everything to their advantage; both believed the world was there to serve them. She felt sick to the stomach. Since getting drawn into their world, she'd seen more insincerity, more treachery and more greed than she'd seen in her entire lifetime. And so far she'd only scratched the surface.

The walls of the jewellery store closed in on her. Its glittering gems were the eyes of demons, luring her to the outer limits of conspicuous consumption, to a place where morality and self-restraint mean nothing. Like time and space, consumerism has no bounds. Even when you claw your way to the lofty heights of society, there is always something more to yearn for, something else to covet. Gloria was ample proof of this, and now Frank had unveiled his own brand of greed.

What just happened brought everything into sharp relief. Frank, the love of her life, was gone, and what was left besides a blind, voracious, self-serving ambition? Sheryl had a vague idea (her conscience, though idle, wasn't completely asleep), but in her present state of mind, the question of her personal treacheries was not something she was willing to confront.

Turning from Gloria, she gazed out the window at the passing world. Things need to change, she told herself. I need to take a good long look at myself and decide what I really want from life. She knew one thing for certain: she wanted to be the kind of person who cared about people as much as she cared about dreams and her station in life. She'd once been that kind of person. In moving to Golden Bay she hadn't meant to change the core of her personality; she'd only wanted to improve her lot in life. But in the process, without realising it, she'd grown colder, greedier, more selfish.

'I think I'm getting a migraine,' she said, laying a hand over her eyes. 'If you don't mind, I might go home.'

'Here,' said Gloria, reaching into her purse, 'take one of my Valium.'

'No. Thank you. I need to rest, I think.' She glanced over at Alastair, who was on the floor playing with an assortment of crystal animals. 'I'm sorry about Alastair. I'll take him to Toy City some other day. Would you please let him know I had to leave?'

'Of course, dear. The boy appears to have forgotten you already.' She took out her phone. 'I shall call for Barney.'

'No … please. Don't do that. I'll catch a cab.'

'Are you certain? Well, listen to me. I will finalise things here and in a few days' time we can organise the fur and the remainder of your wardrobe. I shall call Zhandra this evening and make an appointment for the end of the week.' She shivered with delight. 'I am so excited about this. I would venture to suggest that overstimulation is the reason behind your headache. I should think carefully about a personal supply of Valium if I were you. They do not call it a woman's best friend for nothing.'

'I'll wait to hear from you,' said Sheryl.

Gloria smiled and returned to the gems.

Finding Faith

OUTSIDE, NOTHING HAD changed. The devastation was all on the inside, and Sheryl realised with a burst of pain that this meant there was no escaping it. The last thing she wanted to do was skulk back to Golden Bay and sit alone in an empty house dwelling on her loss. No, she needed to be out amongst living, breathing people. She needed to walk and think and digest all this until Frank's betrayal made some kind of sense.

But after hours of wandering and sitting and thinking and moping, she was no nearer an understanding. Not so long ago she would have put Frank's infidelity down to a form of surrender, a way to comply with his mother's wishes while appearing to retain his free will. But with Gloria sanctioning their relationship, what possible excuse could he have? Was it conceivable he had a subconscious urge to do the opposite of what his mother wanted? No, that didn't make sense. Frank only rebelled when he had something to gain from it.

She hated to admit it, but Andrew had foretold this betrayal on the night of Gloria's party. He described his brother as a playboy who'd gone from woman to woman since his divorce, and advised her to keep her eyes open. And like a fool she ignored him. She assumed she was special. To put it bluntly, she believed her talents as a hooker had hooked Frank for good.

Descending into Northbridge, she pulled her collar up and hunched her shoulders. It was approaching dusk and skeins of flesh-coloured cloud were scarring the darkening sky. Birds flew about haphazardly, nudged this way and that by the same wind that was rattling the treetops and sending scraps of paper scurrying up the sides of buildings. Northbridge seemed colder and dirtier than ever. When she lived here she knew all the regulars – the bums, the streetwalkers, the bouncers, the homeless kids – knew which ones to trust, which to avoid. But now it was like a new shift had come on duty. The streets were filled with strangers. Everyone was a potential basher, rapist, thief or murderer. And night was coming.

Turning into Lantern Street, in a hurry to catch the next train home, she almost ran into Faith.

'Oh my God!' she cried, ripping off her sunglasses. 'Faith, it's you!'

Faith was standing on the corner dressed in leopard-skin tights, cowboy boots and a ludicrous frilled jacket the colour of rotten meat. She seemed unsurprised by Sheryl's appearance and went back to staring at something across road.

Sheryl stepped into her line of vision. 'What are you doing?'

'Jus' standing.'

'Faith, it's Sheryl. You haven't forgotten me, have you?'

Faith moved her centre of gravity from one hip to the other. 'No.'

'How have you been?'

'Good.'

'That's good. How's, um, things at Sephryn House?'

'Okay, I s'pose. Dunno.' Leaving Sheryl, she crossed to the road, rested her hand on a parked car and peered from left to right. When a passing motorist blew his horn and yelled something abusive, she pushed herself off the car and tottered back to the sidewalk. 'It got shitty there,' she said. 'Everybody so unfriendly. People always fighting. Robert said I should leave.'

'Robert? You still with Robert?'

'Yeah. He's around somewheres.' Her face lit up. 'You know Robert?'

'No.' Sheryl glanced over her shoulder, half expecting to see a burly, bejewelled pimp standing over them. But there was no one. A man came out of an X-rated bookstore carrying a brown paper bag, but he looked too puny and nervous to be Robert. She wondered briefly what was in the bag.

Sighing, she turned back to her friend. 'Don't tell me you're working the streets again.'

Faith frowned at her. 'Why not?'

'You know why not. It's dangerous. It's … dirty.'

'It's no dirtier than Sephryn House. An' I make more money out here.' She reached inside her jacket, rummaged around a little, took out a bent cigarette.

'Faith, money isn't everything. Sephryn House is like paradise compared to this.'

'I couldn't make it, Sheri.' She lit the cigarette and took a series of short, trembling puffs. 'I couldn't stand having to be nice to all those men. It was too hard.'

'Oh, honey, this doesn't sound like you. You were doing great at the parlour. We were like a family.'

'A family?' said Faith, releasing the words on a cloud of smoke.

'Yes. We looked after each other.'

'If it was so great, why'd you leave?'

Shery's heart sank. 'You know why. Something better came along.'

'Yeah? Well, that's what happened with me as well.'

'How can you say this is better? Look around, Faith. It's cold and it's dirty.'

'It's easier. An' I make more money. I wasn't making enough before.'

'If you didn't give all your money to Robert, you'd have enough to buy whatever you liked.'

Faith turned her back on the blasphemy and resumed her search for a client. As she toddled up and down the broken sidewalk, swaying her hips in a lewd, almost comical fashion, Sheryl studied in turn her damp yellow hair, her bloodshot eyes, her ghoulish makeup, her painfully thin legs, the shaking of her hand as she brought the bent cigarette to her mouth. It wasn't hard to guess what had happened. Knowing his brand of love wasn't enough, Robert had strengthened his hand by getting Faith hooked on drugs – probably cocaine or heroin, something addictive and expensive. He'd taken away everything that meant anything to her, leaving a shell of a person, a zoned-out, compliant, devoted slave.

Sheryl went after her. 'Come with me,' she said, taking her hand. 'We'll go somewhere and talk.'

'No!' Faith cried, jerking her arm away. 'I gotta work!'

'Please, Faith. We won't be long. It's not even dark yet.'

'Doesn't matter!'

'But Faith …'

'Leave me alone!'

Behind them boots clopped on concrete, someone coughed and spat, and then a small, dark-haired man emerged from the space between two buildings. He was wearing snakeskin boots and a purple pinstriped suit with padded shoulders. Cracking his knuckles, rolling his shoulders, he came ambling towards them like a gunslinger preparing to draw.

'Wha's happenin', baby?' he drawled.

'Nothing,' said Faith. 'This is somebody I know.'

A hand shot out and seized her arm. ‘Are you hasslin’ my chick?’ he said to Sheryl, running his mean yellow eyes all over her body.

Something curdled in her stomach. ‘We were talking.’

‘Then why’s she yellin’ and screamin’?’

She stared down at him, trying hard to swallow her contempt for this sour, offensive little man. She knew very well what would happen to Faith later if she created a scene.

‘What was you talkin’ ’bout?’

‘I asked her why she left Sephryn House.’

‘That’s none of your business, lady. Faith does what she likes, don’t you, babe?’

Faith nodded, her eyes not moving from Robert’s snakeskin boots.

‘But she was happy there. Going back on the street is a step backwards. It’s –’

‘Look, lady, what Faith does is her own business. If she wants to work on the streets, she’ll work on the streets. If she wants to work at town hall, she’ll work at town hall. You got no say in it.’

‘She’s my friend. I’m worried about her.’

Dropping Faith’s arm, he faced her with hands opening and closing. ‘I suggest you walk away now, lady, while you still can. Faith ain’t got no friends. Only me.’

Sheryl, who was half a head taller than Robert, refused to budge. She couldn’t help but smile at the pathetic little man.

‘Don’t, Robert,’ said Faith, pulling at his sleeve. ‘Sheri, please go away.’

His hand flew up and clipped the side of her face – not hard enough to bruise, but enough to make her recoil in shock. ‘Don’t ever touch me like that again!’ he warned, pointing a crooked, nicotine-stained finger in her face. ‘I told you before ’bout interferin’.’

The blow ignited a powder keg of anger in Sheryl’s brain. But before she could do anything about it, a police car came cruising around the bend. It rolled into an empty parking bay, the engine died, a radio buzzed. As they watched, two officers emerged and stood looking at them.

Robert and Faith shrank away. Sheryl put her sunglasses on.

The officers sauntered over. ‘What’s going on here?’ asked the older of the two. ‘There a problem, ma’am?’

Sheryl gaped at him, her heart thumping. She imagined what would happen if the papers got wind of the fact that the face of the Gloria Meadows

Foundation was found roaming the streets of Northbridge bickering with hookers and pimps. It would be a public relations nightmare, to say the least. Best to tell the officer a lie and walk away.

But one glance at Faith convinced her otherwise. She was over being the type of person who could cast her friends aside at the first hint of trouble. She had to do something to help. But what? Should she ask the officers to move Robert along so she would have a chance to talk with Faith alone? The idea was tempting, but she knew it would create more problems than it solved.

'Everything's fine, officer,' she said at last. 'I was only asking for directions to the station.'

The officer clearly didn't believe her. But it was also clear he had no real interest in her involvement in this unholy trinity. He was on the hunt for criminals, and this well-dressed, well-spoken woman was obviously not of that ilk. He said to her, 'Did you know there's been women abducted and murdered from this area, ma'am? It's not safe for you to be mixing with people like this.'

Without waiting for her reply, he turned to Robert. 'Sir, we're under orders to detain and question any unsavoury characters located in or around Mallet Street. And I'm sorry to say you fit the bill. Can I see some identification, please?'

Robert made a dash for freedom and slammed into the chest of the other policeman, who'd taken up position behind him. As he struggled to escape the unwanted embrace, the two officers smiled and nodded at each other over his head. When he refused to comply with their directions, they wrestled him to the ground, handcuffed his wrists behind his back and dragged him struggling and cursing to the patrol car, where they searched him for weapons and identification. Finding his wallet, they pulled out a driver's licence.

'Robert Peter MacFarlane. Is that you, sir?'

Robert hissed at them through clenched teeth. He bucked his body and twisted and turned in a futile attempt to free himself. When he tried to bite the restraining officer's arm, his face was pushed against the patrol car window.

'The man asked if that was you, sir.'

'Go fuck yourself!'

'I'll check him out,' said the senior officer, leaning into the car.

As this was going on, Sheryl stood at a distance holding Faith against her body. She could feel her heart fluttering like the wings of a trapped bird and

had the oddly real conviction that were she to let go, Faith would go flapping into the sky. But she wasn't about to let go. She was going to protect Faith the way she should have done when they were working together at Sephryn House.

The officer emerged from the car. 'As I suspected,' he said, regarding Robert with ill-disguised loathing. 'There's outstanding warrants on this clown: narcotics, breaking and entering, aggravated assault. Such a long rap sheet for such a little man. How about we take a ride to the station in the big bad car-car?'

'No!' cried Faith.

Breaking away from Sheryl, she staggered to the car and threw herself on Robert. The senior officer prised her off and hauled her back screaming and crying.

'Ma'am, I don't know what interest you have in this girl,' he said as Sheryl took possession of Faith, 'and I really don't wanna know. But I suggest you get her out of here pronto before we drag her off to the station as well.' He lifted Faith's chin and his face crumpled in anguish. 'How did you get like this?' he asked her. 'You're just a kid.'

'Come on, honey,' said Sheryl, pulling her away. 'We'd better do as the officer says. We can't do anything here. Sounds like Robert is off to jail.'

'For a long time, if those warrants hold,' said the officer. 'Best thing that could happen to you in my opinion, little miss. Now get the hell outta here and don't let me see you in these parts again.'

He returned to the patrol car, helped bundle Robert into the back seat, then turned back to the women. 'This scum ain't worth crying over!' he called out.

Sheryl had no argument there. She watched the officer squeeze his body into the patrol car and close the door. The vehicle stayed where it was for a few seconds; then it started up, indicated, pulled away from the kerb and moved off down the road. When the tail lights vanished around the corner, her mood changed from fear to jubilation. If she hadn't been holding onto Faith, she would have jumped on the spot and screamed with glee. For the unthinkable had happened. After all the abuse and violence and manipulation, Faith was free from Robert's influence. Now she could start thinking for herself, start making her own decisions. And getting off the streets and becoming clean were two of her priorities.

But when Sheryl gazed down at her charge (who was crying soundlessly, hardly able to hold herself upright after that last desperate lunge), she was faced with the awful reality. How was Faith to begin this journey? And who would guide her through it?

There was only one thing to do, and she did it without a second thought.

'I'm hailing a cab,' she said to Faith. 'We're going to Golden Bay.'

Burnt again

'CASSANDRA,' SAID SHERYL when they got home, 'this here's Faith. Faith, Cassandra.'

Cassandra was watching TV, something involving a man and a woman drinking champagne on the French Riviera. She seemed riveted by what was happening on the screen and didn't immediately respond. But when she glanced up and saw what Sheryl had dragged home, she did a double take and almost spilled her glass of mineral water all over herself.

'Faith's a friend of the family. She's hit some hard times.' Sheryl herded the bizarre-looking cowgirl towards the stairs. 'I hope you don't mind, but I said she could stay here a few days.'

Cassandra shot off the sofa and intercepted them. 'Of course she can. No problem at all.' She stroked the frills on Faith's jacket, smiling like a delighted child. 'What happened, sweetie?'

Faith looked down and away.

Sheryl said, 'She had a bust-up with her boyfriend.'

'Oh no! Your poor thing! I sympathise with you entirely. Believe me; all men are bastards. They're not worth crying over.' She looked pained. 'Was it really bad? Did he hit you or anything?'

'He threw her out on the street,' said Sheryl.

'Oh, shoot!'

'C'mon Faith, let's get you into something more … comfortable.'

Smiling an apology at Cassandra, she pushed Faith upstairs, then helped her undress and deposited her in the bathroom.

While Faith showered, she sat at the dressing table and stared at her reflection in the mirror. She looked pale and tired. Faith's tears and smudges of her makeup had stained the front of her dress. 'What should I do?' she asked herself. Her mind refused to answer. Strangely enough, at the conscious level everything felt fine. She didn't feel troubled at all. But how long would it

be before the shock of the day's events settled and a host of malignant feelings broke free and came wriggling to the surface?

In the bathroom the splashing of water went on. Tendrils of steam crept under the door and made a quiet bid for freedom.

After a quick glance at the clock, Sheryl pushed herself to her feet and tapped on the door. 'You okay, honey?'

A few seconds passed. Then a hollow voice said, 'Yeah.'

'Okay. Take as much time as you need. And let me know if I can get you anything.' Going to the window, she stared down at the garden. 'What should I do?' she asked herself again. Obviously Faith couldn't stay here forever. This was no half-way house for abused women and former prostitutes. But what alternatives did she have? Robert had decimated her life, leaving her friendless and broke. It would take a huge effort to get her life back on track, and during that time she would need constant love and support.

The water shut off. Faith made a series of noises as she moved about. Then the door opened and she emerged wrapped in a white bathrobe. Sheryl, who'd never seen Faith without makeup, was struck by how young she looked, how much like a schoolgirl, and this got her thinking. Had she lied about her age to get the job at Sephryn House? Was it conceivable Faith was a teenage runaway whose family had scoured the city and taped photos of their missing daughter to utility poles and grocery store windows?

She joined her at the bathroom door. 'How are you feeling?'

'Good.' She sniffed and peered timidly around the room. 'This is really nice. You've always been lucky, Sheri.'

'No, I haven't. Not always. If it wasn't for that one little thing, I'd still be … Well, it doesn't matter. Here, come and put on some warm clothes.'

Once Faith was dressed, Sheryl sat her on the bed and asked about her family. She was unresponsive at first, her mind seething with worry about Robert, but after a little prompting she opened up and told a sad tale of first love, family fights, tears, flight and eventual silence … a silence made bearable by the presence of her beloved Robert.

'I'm sure your family still cares about you,' Sheryl said after she'd finished. 'I bet they think about you all the time.'

'Mm.' Faith gave a helpless shrug. 'What do you think'll happen to Robert?'

Sheryl nursed her hand. 'Well, honey, it's like the cop said. Robert's a wanted man. If it's a drugs or burglary thing, he might be in jail for maybe five years.'

'Five years!' The news sent her into a fit of sobbing.

'Faith, look at me. Come on. Look here. I need to tell you something important.'

Faith glanced at her.

'I know you love Robert, but he was not good for you. Sometimes we love men who are not good for us. I've done it. You've done it. Everybody does it at one point or another in their lives. Do you understand what I'm saying?'

Faith shook her head, her lips pressed tightly together.

'That doesn't mean he didn't love you or care for you. But sometimes two people are better off apart than they are together. If you hadn't met Robert, you'd still be with your family – at college or something. And if Robert was arrested while you were at Sephryn House, you'd still be there; you'd still have your job. You wouldn't be out on the streets like this. Do you see what I'm saying?'

Faith didn't answer. But she'd stopped her sobbing and that was probably the most Sheryl could expect.

'You need to face reality, honey. He's not coming back. It's out of your hands. You've got to decide what you want to do.'

Faith brushed the tears away with the back of her hand. Pressing her hands between her knees, she stared bleakly at the carpet.

'Have you got any friends? People you might want to contact?'

A shake of the head.

'A neighbour? Somebody who might worry about where you've gone?'

Another shake.

'When was the last time you spoke to your family?'

Faith sighed. 'Last year I phoned Riley. He's my brother. It was his birthday.'

'Really? Your brother? How did he sound?'

'He was good. He thought I was dead or something. I told him I wasn't.'

'Were you close to your brother?'

'Yeah.' The tears welled again, silent this time.

'But you never went to see him?'

'Robert wouldn't let me.'

'Maybe he thought you wouldn't come back.'

'I would've. He knew that.'

'I used to have a brother. He died when I was little, but I still miss him. If he was alive now, I'd ring him every chance I got. Brothers are special people. They're even more important than parents in my opinion. You can always depend on them to look after your best interests.'

Faith released her trapped hands. 'Yeah. Riley was good at fixing things. He could pull a radio to pieces, then put it back together and it'd still work. He fixed my chatterbox doll once. And he made a kennel for Boris, our dog. My dad used to say he looked a lot like the TV repairman … but he was only joking of course.'

'Sounds like a useful kinda guy to have around.'

They talked for a time of Faith's family, of Sunday roasts and picnics in the park, family councils to agree on which brand of breakfast cereal to buy, days at the beach and all-night video sessions involving popcorn and blow-up mattresses. Sheryl, who was raised in a house with no affection and little love, found it inconceivable that anyone could abandon such a close-knit family for a person as sleazy and manipulative as Robert.

She asked Faith whether she thought she should ring her brother again. 'Tell him Robert's gone away and you miss them all,' she suggested. 'See if you can go see them. How would you like that?'

Faith considered the question. 'I'd like it,' she said, her eyes a watery blue. 'But I'm worried.'

'Worried about what?'

'Just … scared.'

'Everything important is a bit scary. Just imagine the looks on their faces when they see you again.'

'I suppose I could ring him.'

'He'll love to hear from you.'

'You really think so?'

'I'm positive.'

But a few minutes later, Faith was having second thoughts. 'I can't just ring out of the blue,' she said. 'Can I stay here with you?'

An hour ago the question would have alarmed Sheryl to the point of nervous anxiety. But now she only smiled. 'Course you can. There's no rush. C'mon, let's go downstairs. Cassandra's probably wondering what's happened to us.'

They got up. At the door Faith stopped and said, 'I think I *will* ring Riley.'

'You don't have to.'

'I know. Do you think he'd let me stay with him for a while?'

'Of course,' Sheryl said, trying to shake the feeling she was manipulating Faith as much as her boyfriend had. 'Probably the only reason you haven't heard from your family is because they weren't keen on Robert.'

'When he gets out of jail and they get to know him, I'm sure they'll like him.'

'That's right,' said Sheryl. 'They will absolutely adore him.'

ONCE THE KITCHEN was clean and tidy and dinner was bubbling away on the stove, Sheryl went to watch TV and Faith rang her brother.

Sheryl tried hard not to eavesdrop on the conversation, but with so much at stake a short distance away it was like trying to ignore a unicorn grazing on the other side of the French doors. Whenever Faith frowned, she gripped the chair. Whenever she smiled, Sheryl smiled too. After an uneasy few minutes, frowns were outnumbered by smiles and Sheryl felt able to relax.

It was then that the memory of Frank and that woman blasted into her mind. She became snagged on the details: Frank's hand on the small of the woman's back; his lips touching her neck; his loosened tie. But when she put everything together, she felt curiously unmoved. Was this the legacy of Sephryn House? Did she expect all men to be unfaithful, to be ruled by their lust? The notion pained her. If true, it meant Sephryn House had cauterised a part of her soul, the part that could trust a man to have integrity and respect her needs and put the interests of their relationship before his own self-interests. Sheryl didn't want to be the type of woman who anticipated disappointment in every love affair. She preferred to believe Andrew's warning had prepared her for today – that she was simply numb with shock – that the problem lay with Frank, not with her.

Faith hung up and came dancing over.

'He was happy to hear from me!' she cried, jigging on the spot. 'He's got a girlfriend and they might be getting married soon. Her name's Josie.'

Sheryl rose from the sofa and gave her a warm, elderly hug. Faith's return to innocence stood in stark contrast to her own disquieting thoughts, yet at the same time it was empowering. It placed her crisis into perspective, making it seem small and surmountable.

'I'm so happy for you, Faith. What else did Riley say?'

'He's coming over!'

'What? Now?'

'Uh-huh.'

'That was quick.'

'He said he didn't want me changing my mind.'

'That's a good sign. Did you tell him about Robert?'

'I said he went away. That's when Riley said he wanted to come over.'

'Faith, that's wonderful! Do you think you'll be able to stay with him?'

'He said I can move back home. He said my room's still there. Nothing's changed.'

As she went on about her family and her room and the things she'd left behind, Sheryl beamed at her. It was amazing how someone else's good fortune could feel so uplifting. One of the things she'd missed since leaving Sephryn House was the simple pleasure of being in the company of good friends – people who like you for the person you are, not the one you're trying to be. The women at Sephryn House depended on her; she could depend on them; she could talk with them about almost anything. Her heart ached at the thought of everything she'd given up to pursue a childhood fantasy.

She'd realised by this time that there's more to happiness than the fulfilment of your own hopes and dreams. Happiness is made up of a thousand everyday things, many of them surprisingly small and mundane. It's not someone who arrives on your doorstep one night and decides to stay. It's not something that's handed over in a gift-wrapped package. It's not even a ring on your finger from a man who appears to own the world. Those things came and went – no doubt would continue to come and go – but true happiness, happiness based on the simple appreciation of being alive, was eternal. It could be found in almost anything. She would survive Frank and she would be happy, she knew that now.

'News time,' said Cassandra, bouncing down the stairs. She wiped under both arms with a hand towel, did a pinch test on her waist, went 'Arrgh!' at the result. When she saw Faith's changed appearance, she frowned and said, 'Everything okay?'

'Everything's great,' said Sheryl. 'Faith's going home.'

'Already?' She sounded disappointed. 'Listen, honey. Don't give in too easy. If he thinks you're a pushover, he will keep walking all over you. Trust me, I'm an expert in these matters.' She picked up the remote control and switched on the TV. 'We'll have a nice long chat after the news. Maybe I can

convince you to make him sweat a while longer. It's the only way they learn, you know.'

The news was starting as she spoke. The lead story was about a warehouse fire somewhere downtown. On the screen, leaping flames danced in smashed windows, taunting the fire officers below, who were powerless to do anything except shoot water at the growling orange monster.

'Some guys've got no idea how to treat a woman,' Cassandra said. 'Just look at you. You're gorgeous! That guy should worship the ground you walk on. But oh no, he wants you to dress up like a hussy and then he goes running after some other innocent young babe.'

Sheryl, dog-tired after the day's events, curled up in an armchair and let the flames penetrate her mind. Cassandra's chatter poured through her like water through the building's broken roof. It wasn't until the camera pulled back to reveal the site of the fire that the reporter's words registered in her mind.

'Oh, Christ!' she cried, shooting to her feet. 'It's Frank's warehouse! It's on fire!' Falling to her knees, she turned the volume to an almost unbearable level, hissing, 'Shh! Shh!' even though she was the only one making any noise.

But she was too late. The newsreader was back, telling them about another predicted rise in interest rates.

Cassandra said, 'Are you sure it was Frank's?'

'It's right next to the office! Was the office on fire? Did you see? Oh, Christ, what'll happen if the office burnt down?'

The newsreader had no answers, only more bad news about the economy.

'I need to find out.' She hurried to the phone to dial a cab.

Faith, her eyes following Sheryl's every move, sat nervously pulling her fingers.

Cassandra lifted the remote control and turned down the volume. 'You just never know,' she said. 'One minute it's there; the next – wham! – all gone.' She placed a hand on Faith's leg. 'I had this friend. He spent two years building his dream house, a gorgeous palazzo in the hills. You should've seen the thing! Oh, my goodness! A veritable castle! I would've married him if only he wasn't so ugly. And short. And you won't believe it, a month after he moved in –'

'Poor Frank!' Sheryl wailed, replacing the phone. 'I'd never wish anything like this on him. What will he do now? That business was his life!'

Cassandra watched her as she walked from the phone to the wall, then back to the phone. She turned again to Faith. 'Yeah, he was there for a month –'

'All those antiques and works of art! They're irreplaceable! Lost forever! How could this have happened?'

Cassandra and Faith sat exchanging glances.

'I wish they'd hurry with that cab. I need to get out there.'

Cassandra glanced over her shoulder. 'What about your dinner?'

Sheryl stared at her like she was a madwoman. 'Dinner?'

'Oh. I suppose it'll keep.' She uttered an embarrassed laugh. 'Sorry, Sher, I wasn't thinking. You want me to come along?'

'No, no, stay here in case Faith's brother arrives while I'm gone. If I'm not back, tape the late news for me.'

She rushed upstairs and threw on a coat.

Twenty minutes later, when the cab pulled up at the site, her worst fears were confirmed. The place was in ruins. Both the warehouse and the office complex had burned to the ground, leaving a huge black exoskeleton of bricks that smouldered and smoked under the fire brigade's watchful gaze. The property next door was heavily smoke-damaged, though the fire brigade, to their credit, had stopped the flames spreading further.

Sheryl watched numbly from behind a crowd of onlookers as fire officers combed the ashes, on the hunt for hot spots and clues. The top floor of the complex (which once housed her desk, computer and bookcase) was no longer there. She imagined herself walking through that part of the sky, making coffee in the non-existent staff room, doing battle with an invisible fax machine. Further along was Frank's office, where they'd talked and made love and held innumerable meetings with clients and co-workers. All that was gone. Her life seemed to be falling away piece by piece, and the day wasn't even over yet.

As her eyes roamed the scene of devastation, she spotted Frank. The elegant woman from the Parkside Apartments had him in a tight, almost pornographic embrace and was rocking him back and forth, every so often kissing his cheek or murmuring in his ear.

Sheryl stared blankly at them. A feeling of dislocation had hit her. She was a little girl again, standing before the ruins of her family home, the home she'd set on fire, and her father was slipping off his belt, getting ready to

punish her in the most excruciating, humiliating, life-altering way he knew how.

She couldn't bear seeing Frank like that, standing before the ruins of his life, being comforted by a beautiful stranger. Before he could look up and see her, she slipped away from the crowd and hailed another cab.

Questions

THE NEXT MORNING, when Sheryl rang the mansion, the maid refused to connect her. 'They are in shocks,' she whispered, and hung up.

Replacing the phone, she wondered why no one had bothered to ring and let her know about the fire. Had her co-workers been rung? Or were they expected to arrive at the office as usual, to find their livelihood in ashes? She tried Gloria's number, but it went straight to an answering service.

Late that afternoon a knock came at the door. On opening it, Sheryl was confronted by two men in dark suits.

'Are you Sheryl Starling?' asked the one in front, a heavyset man with wavy hair and a bristly red beard.

'Yes.'

He flipped open an identification badge. 'I'm Detective-Sergeant Patterson and this is Detective Wheeler.'

She stared at his identification, thinking: Thank God Faith is home with her family. But how had they tracked her here? And what did they want with her? If they intended on implicating Faith in Robert's crimes, she would tell them the girl took off straight after the incident, leaving no forwarding address and no clues regarding her whereabouts. She would say Faith was a stranger, that she'd simply been doing a stranger a good turn.

But the detectives had another crime on their minds.

'We'd like to talk with you about what happened at DiMaggio Antiques,' Detective-Sergeant Patterson told her. 'Are you aware there's been a fire?'

She glanced at the other detective, an older man with tired eyes and sunken cheeks. His face was giving nothing away. 'Yes. It was … It was on the news.'

'May we come inside?'

'Of course.'

She stood aside and let them pass. Something didn't feel right. Surely the police wouldn't come here to let her know her job was gone. And they didn't

seem at all sympathetic to her plight. She couldn't help thinking she was somehow implicated in the blaze, that the flames of the fire she'd lit as a girl were reaching out to engulf her even now.

She watched as they walked into the living room, surveying their surroundings, exchanging nods. The lead detective motioned her towards an armchair, then took a seat on the sofa. The other man remained standing.

'We're checking out anyone who may have information about the cause of the fire,' he said, a fist resting on either knee.

'Does that mean it was deliberately lit?'

'There's reason to believe it was arson, made to appear like an accident. The warehouse was an old wooden structure with outdated alarm systems, so it didn't take much for it to go off like a tinderbox. Miss Starling, were you aware the building was recently visited by fire safety inspectors who assessed it a fire risk?'

'No.'

'We have reason to believe you were.'

She thought hard. 'No,' she said again.

'Were you aware that the defects identified during said inspection were never rectified?'

'No. I didn't even know there *was* an inspection.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'Miss Starling, can you please tell me your whereabouts yesterday afternoon? That's Sunday afternoon.'

'My whereabouts?' A knot formed in her throat. 'Are you suggesting I had something to do with this?'

'It wasn't a suggestion; only a question. Would you please answer?'

'I was with Gloria Meadows. Frank's mother. We were shopping. And then I went for a walk.'

'What time were you with Miss Meadows?'

'Um … around midday, I think.'

'And after that?'

'I went for a walk.'

'And then?'

'I went to a park. Then … the museum. Then … Really, I just walked a lot.'

'Did anyone accompany you on this alleged walk?'

'Alleged walk?' She laughed nervously. 'No. Gloria and Alastair went home.'

'Alastair?'

'Gloria Meadows' grandson.'

The detective-sergeant inhaled sharply. 'Miss Starling, is there anyone who can verify your whereabouts between the hours of noon and six yesterday afternoon?'

She looked up at the detective standing over her. A prickly sweat was forming on her forehead. During the time in question she was pacing the city, wandering the halls of the museum, sitting in parks … and then came the encounter with Robert and Faith. But if she admitted this, there would be other, more serious questions asked. The detectives would want to know the nature of her relationship with Faith. They would ask what she was doing in Northbridge doing battle with sleazy pimps who had warrants out for their arrest. Even if she made up a story, they would gather from talking to the attending officers that Faith was a prostitute, and then by association …

She went cold inside. It was too dangerous a risk. 'No, sir,' she said. 'I was walking alone.'

She could have sworn she saw the detective-sergeant's face light up. 'Miss Starling,' he stated, 'is it true that until recently you were involved in a casual relationship with Frank DiMaggio?'

'I was seeing Frank, but it wasn't casual.'

'Mr DiMaggio claims it was, quote, an office fling, unquote. He further claims you became obsessed with him. Is this true?'

She dug her fingernails into the chair. 'No. That's not true. It's not. Why would he say that?'

'That's what we're trying to establish.' He bent closer. 'Miss Starling, I will be completely honest with you. Mr DiMaggio has stated that you were involved casually, but are no longer together. Miss Meadows has further stated that you appeared agitated on the day in question and then disappeared in mysterious circumstances with the excuse you were going home with a headache. And now you tell me you went walking – alone – for several hours. Do you concur with these facts?'

'No. I mean, yes. To some of them. But it's not what you think.'

'Miss Starling, I don't think anything. My job is to piece together facts, locate suspects and identify motives. And frankly, at this time your explanations seem rather questionable.'

She felt her face throb.

'You have motive: the break-up with Mr DiMaggio.'

‘We never broke up.’

‘Please don’t interrupt. You had motive. You had opportunity. You were acting strangely on the afternoon of the fire. You have no alibi. And last but not least, you have a prior history of this kind of thing.’

‘A history?’

‘When you were eight years old you set fire to your family home. Is this correct?’

‘It’s … It was an accident. I was eight.’

‘Do you have a healthy relationship with your parents, Miss Starling?’

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’

The detective-sergeant rose from the sofa. ‘Miss Starling, with your permission we would like to continue this conversation down at the station.’

She stood on shaky legs. ‘Are you … arresting me?’

He smiled. ‘No. Not at all. This is standard procedure.’

But Sheryl wasn’t stupid. A tension began building in her head, a tension echoed by waves of nausea that were passing through her body. Her lips started babbling, trying to explain about her parents and Gloria Meadows and Sammy Jo Hartman and Frank, but somehow the words came out all jumbled. Then the room grew dim, the ceiling crashed down, and she collapsed in the detective’s arms.

FIVE | GRAVITY

Turning tricks

WHEN THE MONEY ran out, Danny returned to Squatter Park. This time, he told himself, things would be different. He was older now, wiser, and he'd read his future in the fate of Drug and countless other street kids who'd ended up destitute or dead. This time he was determined to squirrel away his earnings until he'd saved enough for a bond on his own apartment – a small place, like the one Doris had – and then he'd do only enough tricks to pay the rent, buy food and attend to the other necessities of life. He'd continue like this until he'd earned his high school certificate, and then he'd get a real job, maybe even do more study at night school.

It was a good plan, but far beyond the reach of an aimless young man like Danny. He understood the importance of saving money and investing in an education, but wherever he turned, billboards and magazines and shop windows screamed, 'Consume! Consume! Consume!' Indeed, no sooner had he earned his first two hundred dollars than the notes started burning a hole in his pants pocket. Every few minutes he would pull them out and count them and grin at his good fortune. And then counting the money ceased to be enough. He needed a greater thrill. The next day, wandering through an army surplus store, he came across an awesome Swiss army pocketknife and spent the lot in one fell swoop. It was to be the same with future earnings. The lure of the buy was simply too strong for him to resist.

After fleeing Ben, he'd lived in a stupor. He had no sense of the future, could not bring himself to admit the slightest trace of hope into his life now that hope had led to such disappointments and anguish. As the days went by, he began engaging in a subtle form of self-abuse: letting himself go hungry, walking the streets at night without proper clothing, neglecting his health and hygiene – all because he blamed himself for ruining things with Ben. Ben's conclusion that they were incompatible meant nothing to Danny. All he knew was that he'd smashed two of his lover's most treasured possessions and turned a stupid trick to buy an unnecessary present. If he wanted further

proof of his culpability, his lack of redeeming qualities, all he had to do was recall how he'd lost Sheri's friendship, how she'd turned against him without him even realising what he'd done. And before that was Jon. And before that, his mother. Probably he'd even forced his father away. It was all too painful to contemplate.

Inevitably, though, as the immediacy of his loss faded, he started noticing things: the cooing pigeons, the scampering rats, the biting wind, the hole in the ground where once stood a ramshackle housing development, the vast rain-soaked posters advertising running shoes, McDonald's and Quit Smoking programs. It was at this time that his depression developed form and substance and became an overwhelming ache in his chest. He burned with jealousy at the thought that Ben had found another boy, someone sweet and uncomplaining this time, someone even the balding old men liked. Whenever he imagined Ben, he pictured him in bed with this faceless boy, tangled up together in the sheets, playing pillow fights, and then it felt like he was going out of his mind. He knew he'd ruined his only chance at happiness, and he had no one to blame but himself.

Surprisingly enough, it was Leslie who snapped him out of his corpse-like existence.

Danny's nightly walks carried him from one end of the city to the other, but invariably he would find himself at Squatter Park, where memories of companionship, desire and cash combined to form a soothing distraction from reality. With his shabby appearance and the crazed, haunted look in his eyes he was rarely approached, and for this he was grateful, for more than anything he wanted to be left alone.

In his absence Squatter Park had undergone a conversion. Where before the park had been home to a loose band of boys who looked out for one another, there were now only small, cruising groups of tough boys – mostly heterosexual it seemed – who would just as soon knife a man as go down on him. Some of these boys would bring their girlfriends (tomboys with sharp faces and bad attitudes) and the girls would natter on park benches or sometimes pull tricks themselves while their boyfriends were off in the bushes making a few bucks for food or drugs. Danny at the time hardly noticed the change, but his mind came awake when a familiar face poked out from behind a tree.

'Hey dude!' cried the face. 'Wanna smoke?'

It was the tree spirit, the boy who'd shared his joint with Danny and Leslie in a previous lifetime. His eyes came into focus. He'd almost forgotten he once had a friend named Leslie, and the unexpected reminder cracked the ice in his soul and infused the spaces with a pleasant, if momentary, warmth. Maybe this boy knew something of Leslie's whereabouts.

'Thanks,' he said in a gravelly voice as he accepted the fat joint from the boy's fingers. He coughed phlegm from his throat, spat it on the grass, placed the joint between his lips and sucked in hot, bitter smoke.

The boy was standing close, his tongue stuck between the gap in his teeth. 'Ain't seen you here before,' he said as he took back the joint. 'You lookin' for action?'

Danny blew out the smoke. 'Nope. Used to be.'

Staring at the boy's mouth, he was hit by a sudden desire to lean down and slip his tongue between those full, wide lips. It wasn't that the boy was attractive, and Danny wasn't itching with lust either; he just longed to connect with another human being, someone warm, someone who understood what he was going through. On top of that, the boy reminded him of a time in his life when everything was going his way, when he had so much good luck he could dole some out to a needy friend.

'You know a buddy of mine,' he said suddenly.

'Yeah?' yapped the boy, nursing a lungful of smoke. He handed over the reefer. 'You have the rest.'

Danny finished the joint and flicked it away. By now the rustling of leaves around them was playing with the insides of his ears and tiny sparks of electricity were firing in his fingers and toes.

'His name's Leslie,' he heard himself say, and laughed at how weird the name sounded. 'Les-er-leeeee,' he drawled, extending the last syllable until his breath ran out.

The boy laughed too. 'Don't know a Leserlie,' he said, and with that, he lost interest and wandered off.

'Hey, wait!' Danny cried, hurrying after him. 'He's about so tall. Skinny. Curly yellow hair. Sorta girly-looking.'

The boy jerked to a halt. 'Oh yeah,' he said, regaining interest in the conversation. He spun around, a dopey grin on his face. 'I know him. The dude flew away.'

Danny burst out laughing again. The boy joined in.

'So you haven't seen him around?'

'Nup. Like I said: flew away.'

He frowned, trying to figure out what the kid was trying to say.

'He was up there,' the boy said, pointing to the top of Black Abbey Bridge.

Danny followed the line of his finger. A horrible sickness moved through his stomach. 'What was he doing up there?'

'Dunno, man. Saw him standin' there and yelled out to the others. Never seen nobody up there before. It was a fuckin' trip.'

'What … happened?'

'He was smokin' da ganja and then he pissed off. Dunno why. Funny dude.'

Danny realised he'd stopped breathing. 'Oh, right. He came down and had a smoke,' he interpreted with a sigh of relief.

'No, dude. Smokin' before. He was freakin' high.' He rubbed his hands together and blew into them to get them warm. Suddenly he flung his arms apart and ran in circles, whistling through the gap in his teeth. After three or four circuits he landed at Danny's feet. 'He was like that, man; like a fucking plane. Thought he could fly.' He got up. 'None of us thought he'd do it. We figured, like, he was showin' off or somethin'. But some of the guys started yellin', "Jump! Jump! Jump!" and that's when I figured he was gonna come down. He looked shit-scared.'

'Did he … come down?'

'Oh yeah,' said the boy. 'He came down. Woo-hoo did he come down! Thought he was fuckin' Superman! The Man of Steel! Jumping gi-normous buildings in one great fuckin' leap –' He coughed and choked and at the end of the spasm became deadly serious. 'At first, y'know, we thought he was gonna make it. We was yellin' and screamin' like crazy, man … Really thought the dude was flying. But then he drops like a fuckin' brick.'

A pain shot through Danny's forehead, the kind you get when you eat ice-cream too quickly. 'No way,' he said, taking a step away. 'Leslie's a chicken. He wouldn't do something like that.'

The boy was gazing at a patch of grass at the foot of Black Abbey Bridge, his face so pale his freckles stood out like specks of dirt. 'I didn't think he was gonna jump, man. Nobody did. It was a fucking mess. There was pieces of him all over the park.'

'No way,' Danny said again. He'd never been personally affected by death – it was something that happened to old people or unlucky souls who got in the way of speeding cars or violent gangs – and he was unable to conceive of a

world in which there was no longer a Leslie. The boy was obviously mistaken. He must be a chronic liar. Or perhaps he was relating a dope-induced hallucination.

His eyes drifted back to the bridge. Black Abbey Bridge had never seemed so high, the tracks so far away. Imagining himself up there, gazing out over Northbridge, the dark wind pushing and pulling at him like a malevolent spirit, he felt all the terror of a person on the brink of death.

Suddenly his brain flopped over and the earth surged beneath his feet. He bent over and closed his eyes, trying to stop his stomach squelching like a jellyfish. After what seemed an eternity, he lost the struggle and began retching violently, though all that came out was a white frothy gunk that splattered on the grass like ghostly blood.

By the time he regained control of his stomach, the tree spirit was gone. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. The vomiting had cleared his head and all that remained of the dope was a feeling of unreality and a wooziness that, as he made his way to the foot of the bridge, caused him to slip and stumble over the smallest bump in the ground.

Searching the grass, he found nothing to suggest a fall had taken place: no Leslie-shaped dent, no makeshift cross, no bloodied pieces of flesh the paramedics had neglected to collect … and this fed his hope that the boy's story was a lie. He was about to head off when he noticed a scrap of yellow tape tacked to a tree, the kind police use to rope off the scene of a crime. His stomach began squelching again. He needed no greater proof. Of course Leslie was dead. How else could that dumb kid have come up with such an elaborate story? And what better explanation could there be for Leslie's disappearance?

He whirled around and ran. Squatter Park was the enemy and he needed to get as far away from it as possible before it did to him what it had done to Leslie. He cursed the park and everything in it and it responded by pulling the ground out from under his feet and flinging mosquitoes and other, larger bugs at him. He put his head down and ran on. Only when he was safe on the sidewalk did he stop and turn back to the darkness.

Squatter Park lay there aloof and unchanged. Danny realised then that he was wrong. Squatter Park was not the enemy. It wished harm on no one. Its only crime was an absolute indifference to suffering and the dissolution of human life. It was no more responsible for Leslie's death than he was.

He took off across the road. Behind his eyes was an unbearable ache, so intense it blurred his vision, but try as he might, the tears refused to come. He'd carried the burden of his own grief for many days and maybe his reservoir of tears was dry. Or maybe he understood that his friend's death was no more tragic than his short life had been, that death had delivered the release from loneliness and misery that Leslie had yearned for all along. But no matter how much Danny tried to rationalise it or explain his grief away, nothing could stem the rage he felt, a rage at himself for the part he'd played in the tragedy.

It was this rage that blasted him out of his stupor. Later, when he was strong enough to think things through, he realised the end had come because Leslie had reached the lowest point imaginable in his life and from this deep, dark, lonely place couldn't see any way of getting out and rejoining the world. All he had to look forward to was more of the same. The frightening thing was that Danny was headed for this very same place.

Over succeeding days Leslie haunted his thoughts. Whenever he visualised that final, terrifying fall, he was warned against a similar end. This is when he realised he would never evade this fate without money in his pockets and that meant going back to hustling, at least until something (or someone) better came along.

The trick is to survive

THE MAN WAS tall and thickset, with large hands, coarse black hair, bad skin and a raspy voice that sent shivers down Danny's spine. He was wearing blue jeans and a black leather jacket and had arrived at the park in an old green Datsun. When he told Danny he reminded him of his son, a junior champion sprinter, Danny swung his arms and bounced on the balls of his feet and tried overall to appear fitter and more energetic. If that was what the client wanted, that was what he got.

They drove from Squatter Park to a burnt-out warehouse. The building was padlocked and barricaded, with boarded-up doors and windows and a barbed-wire fence out back, but a few days ago Danny smashed a window and squeezed his body through, and in a stroke of luck, while looking for things to steal, he found a rusted key in one of the side doors. Now here he was, proud owner of his very own property.

When the Datsun pulled up in the adjoining laneway, he jumped out and led the way to the warehouse door. He inserted the key, wiggled it a few times and turned the handle. The door needed a bit of coaxing, but when it finally creaked open, Danny felt all the rights of ownership. It didn't matter to him that half the warehouse was fire-damaged, that the place reeked of ash, that you could see stars through the holes in the roof. The building was his, and if anyone tried to take it away, they were up for the fight of their life.

Waving the man inside, he re-locked the door, took out his pocket torch and pointed the beam towards the stairs. He'd set up camp in a first-floor room that once served as the foreman's office. The room overlooked the warehouse floor, which stretched from a pile of rubble and rusted girders near the door to a bare wall scaled by a metal ladder that led nowhere.

As they crossed the floor and ascended to the room, Danny played his torch against the broken ceiling and smoke-blackened walls and gazed with pride upon his dark domain. He was conscious of the man behind him and wondered what he made of all this. Was he impressed? Did it raise Danny

above the run-of-the-mill street kids in his estimation? The man stayed silent, though his lungs wheezed, his leather jacket squeaked and his workman boots clanged on the metal stairs. As they ascended, the sounds whispered through the gutted building like unhappy ghosts.

Inside the room, Danny fell to his knees, struck a match and lit a kerosene heater. When the flames took hold, the room turned a sickly yellow colour and revealed its contents: a dirty mattress, two mismatched chairs, a fold-up table, a pile of crumpled clothes, a stack of cardboard boxes and scattered odds and ends – porno magazines, packets of condoms, a box of tissues and the like.

'This okay?'

The man closed the door. 'Nice. You've got everything worked out, hey?'

Danny grinned. 'Beats doing it in the bushes.'

The man's black leather jacket strained against his shoulders. When he handed over the fee, his sleeve rode up exposing a thick, hairy wrist. 'Mind if I call you Tom?' he asked in that chilling voice.

'Tom? Hey, that's my middle name! Coincidence, huh?'

'Take your clothes off and get on the bed.'

Danny did as he was told. Once he was down to his underwear, he moved the heater closer and sat shivering on the mattress.

The man was standing at a distance kneading himself through his jeans. 'And the rest of it.'

He pulled off his underpants and dropped them next to the bed.

'Good. Good. Now lay back and play with yourself. Real slow, like I'm not here. Like there's nobody else in the room. That's it … Real slow.'

Following a period of watching and kneading, the man unbuckled his belt, unbuttoned his jeans, pulled off his leather jacket and hung it on the back of a chair. Then he went to the mattress and straddled Danny's body. After running his calloused hands all over Danny's chest, he seized his arms and turned him over. A second later his tongue burned into the back of his neck.

'Ahh-ahh!'

The tongue lingered awhile on his shoulder blades, then traced a path down to his buttocks, where it sent shivers of a different kind through his body.

'Oh, Tom, oh, Tom,' the man moaned. 'You're my beautiful boy. You'll always be my beautiful boy.'

Danny presumed Tom was the champion sprinter, but he really couldn't care less who he was or whether it was the illicit thrill of incest that was making the man pant like a thirsty dog. He just wanted him to keep on doing what he was doing.

But the man had other plans. Pulling Danny onto his knees, he wrapped his arms around him – and in that instant, with the warmth of the heater on his chest and the warmth of the man on his back, Danny remembered a day long ago when his father had hugged him so hard and for so long he'd almost cut off his circulation. He tried to recall the details. It must have happened around the time his father left for Germany. Was it conceivable he was trying to let Danny know by this single monumental gesture that he regretted having to leave him behind? His mouth fell open. Had his mother lied when she accused him of being the reason his father never sent for them?

He was never to know. He was still trying to decipher the extraordinary memory when the heat departed from his back. Before he had a chance to turn and see what was going on, a hand grabbed his head and shoved his face into the mattress. He opened his mouth and sucked in air and dust. When he cried out and twisted his body and tried to push himself up, the man responded by pressing a knee into his back and leaning all his weight on his head. Now the mattress was blocking his mouth and nose. He couldn't breathe. His lungs screamed for air.

The man put his mouth close to his ear. 'You're a stinking whore,' he said. 'Disgusting, dirty scum of a whore. What makes you think I'd want to do anything with a stinking whore like *you*?'

Danny turned his face to the side. 'Please,' he gasped, sucking in air. 'I can't breathe. Please.'

'You're a filthy pig. Look at you. Living in a pig sty. And you're proud of all this?'

'You're hurting me,' said Danny, tears streaming from his eyes.

'No, a rat is what you are. A diseased rat, spreading its filth and disease to anyone unlucky enough to get close to that disgusting body of yours. Think you can infect *me* with your stinking disease, rat?'

'Please stop.'

'Shut your mouth, rat.'

'Please. Stop.'

Unexpectedly, the man released his head and clambered to his feet. Stepping off the mattress, he kicked Danny's clothes and shoes away, then stood with legs apart while he stuffed himself back inside his jeans.

Danny rolled onto his back and lay gasping and wheezing.

'Shut that racket and get up.'

Despite the pain in his neck and the burning in his lungs, he did as he was told, rolling on his side, getting up on his knees and retrieving his jacket, shirt and underwear. His cargo pants were out of reach, lying mangled across the room. He could see the bulge of his Swiss army pocketknife in them.

The man started pacing the room.

Danny rose on wobbly legs and pulled on his underpants. He slipped into his shirt, put his jacket on. He was feeling dizzy with pain and fear. He'd spoken to plenty of kids who'd had knives placed at their throats or bones broken by sadistic clients – men who wanted to inflict pain more than they wanted to fuck – and he knew the danger was far from over. Glancing again at his pants, he tried to muster the courage to launch himself at them and retrieve his weapon.

The man stopped pacing. 'Why do you do this to me?'

At first Danny thought he was talking to himself. But then he loomed close, his mouth twisted in contempt.

'Why do you do this? Why?'

Danny shook his head.

'You know you can't be undressing near me, showing off like that. But you do it. Time and again. You like tormenting me, don't you? Making me sweat. I can't take that shit anymore. It's too much.'

'I don't …'

'Why do you keep on, when you know what it does to me?'

He glanced at his pants again.

'You're evil; that's why. You know what you are?'

A feeling of dread crept like ants across Danny's skin. What was he supposed to say? Apologise? Promise it won't ever happen again?

He was about to make a grab for the knife when a fist came hurtling through the air. It slammed into his cheek and sent him flying against the wall. He dropped to his knees, fell forward, and for a terrifying moment his lungs refused to draw air. Then his assailant stepped towards him and he scrambled into a corner.

The man came after him. He dragged him out, threw him across the floor, kicked him savagely, then fell on him and began punching him in the face and under the ribs. His body was crushed beneath the man's weight; his head was bashed against the concrete. Danny had no strength to resist. When he stopped fighting back, his throat was gripped in hands of steel. He could taste the man's breath, the breath of an old dog, could hear himself gasping for air as he stared into the eyes of a psychopath.

'You did this,' the man said in that horrible raspy voice. 'It's your fault this is happening.'

Danny surrendered and went limp. His hands stopped pulling at the man's wrists. His lungs gave up trying to draw breath. This is the end, he thought with an eerie calmness of spirit. He closed his eyes and waited for the final darkness.

But the man chose that moment to release his grip. Puffing from the exertion of his attack, he lumbered to his feet and stood peering down at his handiwork, at Danny's battered body.

'That enough for you?' he taunted. 'You want more?' He put his fists on his hips and glanced around at the smears and splashes of blood that stained the dusty floor. When Danny gave no signs of responding, he said, 'Wait here. I'll be right back.'

His footsteps receded. The door clicked and creaked. And then his boots were clanging down the stairs.

Danny squirmed in pain. Throughout the attack the kerosene heater had continued releasing heat and the room was now like a sauna. Or was it the furnace inside him that was making sweat trickle from his every pore? He longed to get up and push the window up and lean into the night and feel cold air against his skin. But could he be bothered? What the hell was the point? He knew he had a choice to make: give himself over to the madman or fight for life. The decision was a tough one. Danny had no compelling reason to choose life, and the idea of death was almost welcome. When he closed his eyes he saw angels opening their wings to receive him, and Leslie was right there amongst them, looking more like an angel than the angels themselves. The vision brought him comfort. Had Leslie felt this calm before the end, standing atop Black Abbey Bridge with his arms outstretched, gazing into the fathomless night, Squatter Park's lost boys urging him down? Was death always this warm, this welcoming?

But death was not to claim Danny today. He'd delayed the decision for too long and the angels had gotten impatient and fluttered back to their clouds – but not before handing back his flesh-burning, mind-numbing pain. Now he had two new choices: deal with the present pain or wait around for a future, inconceivable kind of pain. This time the decision was easier.

Opening his eyes, he drew a ragged breath. He heard the air bubbling in his lungs, saw the cracks and water stains in the ceiling come into sharp focus, felt his head spinning as clarity returned.

With clarity came fear. Gut-churning, all-consuming fear. Aware he was now in a race against the clock, he rolled over, pushed himself to his knees, and by degrees made it all the way to his feet. As the floor lurched beneath him, he launched himself across the room, fell on his pants and fumbled for the pocket. But no, this couldn't be happening. His hands were refusing to obey his brain. And the pocketknife seemed determined to evade his grasp. When it finally emerged, all shiny and silver and red, he clasped it to his breast and cried. The blade was so small. And his grip was so weak. He was no match for a bigger, fitter man.

Crunching footfalls crossed the warehouse floor.

Swiping up his pants, Danny scrambled to his feet. For a few precious seconds he struggled to find the leg hole, hopped along the floor, almost tripped and fell, and the thought crackled through his mind that he was going to die like that, with his pants around his ankles. But then they were up and he was limping to the window, trying to keep a firm hold on the pocketknife, trying to ignore the steps on the warehouse stairs.

He ripped off the curtain, unlatched the window, tried to push it up. The window was stuck; his arms felt like lead; the steps had come to a halt; he wasn't going to make it. He was still fighting with the window when the door creaked open and out of the shadows came a madman.

'What the –?'

Danny froze, like a rabbit caught in headlights. For an infinite moment their eyes locked.

'No you don't,' growled the man, and he dropped the bag he was carrying and stepped across the room.

It was at this moment the window gave. But it was too late. Before Danny could get more than his head out, the man grabbed his collar and jerked him back inside. The knife flew from his hand and went skidding across the floor. He struck out with his fists and kicked the man's legs, but his attacker was

impervious to his pathetic blows. Hauling him to the mattress, he brought his face so close that Danny could see the dark hairs sprouting from his nose, the open pores on his cheeks, the mixture of confusion and hatred that glinted in his eyes.

'You can't go yet,' he rasped. 'We've still got things to do.'

The words released a flood of adrenaline and this brought on a clarity of mind Danny had never known before. Stopping his useless struggling, staring boldly into the depths of hell, he extended a leg and knocked the heater over.

Flames poured out and spilled across the mattress. A lick of liquid fire splashed on the man's jeans and now they were alight too. Howling in fear, he threw Danny to the side and slapped at the flames.

Danny got to his feet, went behind him, and shoved him onto the burning mattress.

Without waiting around to see the result, he limped to the window and climbed through. A drainpipe stretched all the way from the roof to the ground. Taking hold with both hands, he eased his legs off the windowsill, twisted his body around and began inching his way down. But though he'd practised this a few times, anticipating a time he'd need an escape route from security guards, gangs or fires, that had been when he was fit and well. He hadn't descended far when his grip gave way and he fell screaming through space, bounced against the roof of a lean-to, rolled off the edge and landed with a grunt on a drift of wild daisies.

Once again he fought to kick-start his lungs. Dragging in air, he rolled onto his back and stared up the cliff of bricks. Smoke was leaking from the open window, but there was neither sight nor sound of his attacker. Had he escaped the burning room? Would he come looking for Danny with an axe or a scalpel or a length of wire to twist around his neck? He pictured the enraged monster charging across the warehouse floor, kicking out the door and storming around the corner of the building with his bag of hellish tools in hand, and the image brought on a sick panic.

With some difficulty, he climbed to his feet and stumbled across the stony lot. At the boundary fence he pushed aside some loose pickets, squeezed through the opening, re-closed the pickets, crossed a stretch of exposed ground and scrambled inside a clump of bushes.

The seconds thudded by. Danny slowed his breathing and listened hard. Apart from the moan of the wind and the steady rumble of traffic, all was quiet. The absence of sirens or cries of alarm suggested the man had

succeeded in dousing the flames, and this meant he would have plenty of time to hunt Danny down and complete his unfinished business. As he squinted through a gap in the leaves, the moon found a thin patch of cloud and dirty light spilled onto the ground.

Very gently, he let the leaves close over him. Backing deeper into the bushes, he lowered himself to the ground and pulled his knees into his chest. He was shivering uncontrollably and the pain was beyond description. The thought of the damage that had been done to his body filled him with terror. He knew he should get to a hospital, but now he'd found a place to hide, he lacked the courage or the will to move.

His mind grew sluggish, his eyes heavy. After a while his consciousness seemed to detach from his body and hover in the branches overhead, as if awaiting permission to escape into the night. Danny murmured his assent, but nothing happened. He was still here. The pain and fear were still here.

Closing his eyes, trying to stay as still and quiet as possible, he hugged his knees and prayed for dawn.

The priest

DANNY WOKE WITH weeds in his mouth. A pain rumbled deep inside his body, then faded away like a receding train. He was surrounded by leaves, green-black in the early morning light. A solitary yellow flower dangled before his eyes like a tiny sun.

An ant went scurrying across his forearm and for a while he watched as it negotiated a landscape of goosebumps and risen hairs. Then his mind dropped into gear and he realised the goosebumps were there for a reason, that the air was icy, that he was, in fact, freezing. Pulling himself into a ball, he screamed as a knife carved a path through his stomach.

For a long time after that he lay motionless, petrified by what had just happened, unwilling to do anything that might cause the knife to come back. But his body was turning to ice. And something told him he had to get the blood circulating through his frozen limbs before the numbness turned into something worse.

Gritting his teeth, he pushed himself up and sat hugging his knees and rocking on the bones of his buttocks, his head draped with a crown of dew-laden leaves. Though the knife hadn't returned, he felt sore and sick and dizzy. His neck ached and his head throbbed with every breath. All of a sudden he began to cry.

Meanwhile, the earth was turning to greet the sun. As milky light seeped into the city, life crept back to the grimy streets of Northbridge. Inside the bushes Danny flexed his fingers, flexed his arms, carefully extended his legs. So far, so good. When a machine started up in the factory next door, he made the painful decision to move.

Crawling out from his hiding place, he glanced nervously about. He couldn't escape the thought his attacker was out there somewhere, still hunting him. Though the lot appeared deserted, he wasn't taking any chances. Pumping himself up with a few quick breaths, he limped towards the nearest fence, threw his back against the pickets, looked left, looked right, then

slipped through a rusty gate. He was now in a laneway that opened onto a row of squat, ugly houses and a red brick church. Conscious he was covered in blood and dirt, a target for unwanted attention from do-gooders or the police, he shambled towards the church.

The steepled building was clad in ivy, its gardens overgrown with weeds and populated by scraggly bushes and misshapen fruit trees. As Danny limped towards it, he caught a glimpse of lushness inside. He paused with his hand on the gate, sneaked a look up and down the street, then stole down the path and peeked through the partly open door. It looked warm and cosy in there, the ideal place to sit for a while and figure out what to do next. Feeling like a criminal, he slipped through the door and into the nave.

Despite outward appearances the church was spacious and airy, with a high, vaulted ceiling and varnished pine pews. Feeble light shone through a dozen coloured-glass windows, each depicting a saint, an angel or some other, less familiar figure. As Danny made his way past the rows of empty pews, a succession of painted statues smiled down on him as if to assure him he was mistaken, that he was indeed loved. He ignored them and approached a bank of candles. The heat radiating from the tiny, flickering flames was intense, and when he spread his frozen hands over them and lowered his face, he almost burned himself.

A priest emerged from an adjoining chamber.

'Good heavens!' he cried at the sight of Danny spreadeagled over the candles. 'What on earth happened to you?'

Danny bared his teeth and flashed him a look that said, 'Leave me alone,' then returned his face to the candles.

'Where are your shoes? Your feet must be frozen solid.'

Danny ignored him.

'Son, you look a mess. Are you in pain?'

He breathed steadily, drawing hot air into his lungs, expelling cold.

'If you prefer, there's a heater in my office,' the priest persisted, stepping closer. 'And I can get you something hot to drink. Would you like that?'

A hole opened in Danny's stomach, demanding to be filled. Now the man had offered something real, something he could use, he condescended to reply. 'Got anything to eat?' he asked.

The priest relaxed his shoulders. He looked about a hundred years old, the human equivalent of dried fruit. Only his eyes had escaped the ravages of

time. 'I shall have my housekeeper fix some breakfast for you,' he said, lifting his arms, herding Danny into his chamber.

Danny let himself be herded. The room was a brown, chaotic mess, packed with bookshelves, leather chairs, over-stuffed drawers and an ancient panelled desk. There were books and candles and crosses all over the place. The air reeked of cloves. Above the desk the Virgin Mary regarded everything in the room and beyond with a contented gaze, the Baby Jesus sitting naked and serene in her alabaster arms.

'Sit down, son, sit down. So, your name is …?'

Danny sat. He closed his eyes. All the pain in his body seemed to be massing in his head, which felt like a block of stone.

'I'm Father Honeywell. And your name is …?'

'Adam.'

'Pleased to meet you, Adam.' Squeezing behind the desk, the priest stood with hands clasped, wondering what to make of his unsociable guest. 'You seem rather messed up there, Adam. What say we get you cleaned up and then I drive you down to the hospital?'

'No hospital.'

'Come now, son, don't be foolish. You look like murder. Were you attacked?'

'Wanna eat.'

The priest placed his hands on his hips and tapped his shoe against the brown linoleum. Danny got up from the chair. If the old man was intending to just stand there and tell him what to do, he was going back to the candles.

'Very well!' cried the priest, hurrying out from behind the desk. 'How does eggs on toast sound? And muffins. Mrs Dickinson makes the most glorious apricot muffins I have ever had the pleasure of tasting.' The reference to muffins sent him into raptures. 'Oh, Adam, oh my boy, those muffins are a gift from the Divine, so light and fluffy you will feel as though you are eating apricot-scented air. A batch has come out of the oven this very moment, which means they will be as fresh as the day is young. Mrs Dickinson is up before the sun. Has been that way every day for her entire life – a life spent in service of our Lord.' He bowed his head. 'She is a wonder, bless her soul. Such a wonder. And those muffins …'

Danny nodded impatiently, wishing the old man would stop dribbling and go get his breakfast. When his brain threatened to come loose in his skull, he grimaced and went back to the chair.

'Why don't I call you a doctor, Adam?'

Danny brushed dried blood from the back of his hand and watched it fall to the floor.

'Do you mind me asking what happened to you?'

'Food first,' he grunted, frustrated by the delay, by the unspoken suggestion that breakfast came at a price. He had no intention of discussing his personal life with this doddering old fool. All he wanted to do was rest awhile, fill his stomach, get cleaned up, then go on his way.

The priest gave him a practised smile. 'Point taken. Let's talk about doctors and so forth later.' He stepped to the door. 'Don't you move now. I will return in a flash.'

He returned in under a minute, worried perhaps that Danny would spray graffiti on the walls or make off with the silverware. Handing over two aspirin and a glass of orange juice, he took a seat behind the desk, pushed aside a pile of books and watched as Danny swallowed the pills.

'Adam, have you been in some kind of trouble?'

The last thing Danny wanted right now was to recall events from last night. But the memory swelled in his head, carrying with it a murderous anger. He wanted to do to his attacker what the maniac had done to him. When he imagined the damage he could inflict with his Swiss army pocketknife, a savage smile pulled at his bloodied lips.

'You can trust me, son. I'm here to help, not judge.'

Danny wasn't listening. He craved vengeance. He wanted his enemy to suffer. But how was he to achieve this? It was futile to report the crime to the police. What would he say? 'Hi there. I'm homeless street trash. I hustled a lunatic and he tried to kill me.' The police wouldn't believe him. Even if they followed up his report and questioned the man, he would only have to claim Danny attacked him first, that he tried to slit his throat and steal his wallet, and the madman would almost certainly be given the benefit of the doubt. After all, he was married. He had a family, a champion son. In the final equation Danny would be the one to suffer. He'd be charged with vagrancy, breaking and entering, attempted robbery, aggravated assault or prostitution (probably all five crimes) and they would throw him in jail or sentence him to a juvenile boot camp for social reconditioning and rehabilitation.

But inaction was no less risky. If he didn't do something, the man might come looking for him with a knife or a gun. Or he could attack another boy and this time the result might be fatal. It was a no-win situation. The most

Danny could do was spread the word amongst the other street kids, maybe rustle up a vigilante squad, a gang of boys charged with exacting quick and merciless revenge on his attacker and all the other animals that preyed on society's outcasts. He liked this idea. When he got back to Drug's place he would draw a picture of the psycho's face, and then he'd go to the library and make photocopies and tape them to lampposts and the trees in Squatter Park.

'Adam? Are you hearing me?'

'I got mugged.'

The priest lowered his chin. 'As I had guessed. Society grows ever more morally dissolute, even as we speak. When young boys and old folk like myself are attacked in broad daylight we must ask ourselves, "Where is God?" He certainly is not in the hearts of the politicians, whose self-centred aim is always to slash welfare programs and cut the benefits that the poor and the needy depend upon for their very existence. And He is not in the hearts of those foul men who peddle drugs and pornography and hide behind the excuse of democracy and freedom of choice. I say to those men, "Freedom comes at a price. If you are not willing to pay the price, then you reap the harvest of chaos." Sadly, there are few receptive minds these days. And then people wonder why decent, honest folk are afraid to leave their homes, too scared to take Rover or Spot for a walk lest they become yet another victim of this out-of-control society we live in.' He closed his eyes and muttered a quick prayer, then remembered Danny. 'We really must get you to a hospital, Adam. They will give you something for those cuts and bruises and check to make sure all the internal dooziwhatsits are working.'

Danny said, 'I don't have money,' and then he remembered that his earnings from last night were in his pocket. He felt the bills through his pants. Had he really sold himself to a madman for a measly fifty bucks? Was that the value he placed on his life?

'Don't concern yourself with money,' said Father Honeywell. 'St Luke's has a free clinic.'

'I don't need no doctor.'

The priest bent over the desk. 'Perhaps your family can talk some sense into you. Do you live close by?'

'None of your business,' flashed Danny. But he swallowed his anger when a grey-haired hunchbacked woman presented in the doorway. Dressed in a mustard yellow housecoat and thick brown stockings, she came bearing fried eggs on toast, golden brown muffins and a steaming cup of coffee.

'Thanks,' Danny said to his hands.

She set the tray down, removed the items to the desktop one by one, then stepped back and regarded him with a look of distaste on her timeworn face.

'Thanks,' Danny said again, this time to the priest.

The old man's eyes lit up at the unexpected courtesy. 'Let's say we wash our hands first,' he said. 'Come along, son,' and he got out of his chair.

Danny stared at the food. The odour of greasy eggs drifted to his nose, making his stomach throb and growl. Leaning forward, he picked up the toast and took a large bite, hardly noticing when the yolk broke and dribbled down his bloodied fingers.

Father Honeywell was standing in the doorway. 'Does your family know you're hurt?' he asked as his charge devoured the meal.

Danny peered up at the housekeeper. She blinked at him.

The priest returned to his chair. 'Mrs Dickinson, I will let you know if Adam needs anything else.' He waved his hand in dismissal and the old woman collected the tray and hobbled from the room.

He waited till Danny finished the eggs on toast, then said, 'Let's say we call your parents, hm? I am sure they are both very worried about you.'

'Don't live with parents.'

'You don't? Where do you live?'

Danny grabbed a muffin. He was getting sick and tired of all the badgering. If only you knew, he thought, and dredged up an image of Drug sitting on the Queen Anne sofa injecting a cocktail of drugs into his ankle. He smiled sadistically. He had a sudden urge to fling his life in the priest's face – to beat him with it until the old codger understood how hard life can be out there in the real world, how clever Danny was to have survived for this long, how it felt to outwit a murderer. He wanted to shock him out of his cloistered existence.

'I live where I please,' he boasted.

But the priest was used to dealing with flippant responses. 'If you don't have a place to stay, the church has a shelter for young people like yourself,' he said. 'Nothing flash, but it does provide the chance for a young man who has fallen on hard times to get back on his feet. We have many wonderful success stories. You might like to give it a try.'

Danny finished off the muffin, then fell back in his seat with a small groan of satisfaction. The coffee was bitter to the point of being undrinkable, but the

muffin was every bit as delectable as the priest had promised. He was beginning to feel better now, more grateful for his help.

'Why don't you give the shelter a try, Adam? It won't cost you anything, not even for meals. And there are plenty of other young people there, so you might make some new friends.'

He glanced around at all the books. There were books on the shelves, books on the table, books stacked on the floor … even a book propping open the door. Was it possible the priest had read them all? He was certainly old enough. That being so, maybe he knew more than Danny had given him credit for.

'I can take you there later this morning, after we get you into a bath and give you something clean to wear. My word, Mrs Dickinson will have her work cut out for her removing the stains from *those* clothes! But before we get to that, perhaps you might tell me a little about your life. No details, of course, just generally how you came to be so alone.'

As the priest spoke, Danny was entranced by the motion of the wrinkles on his face. How many years of sob-stories were etched into those lines? Was his own story really any different? Anguish and pain are eternal. There will always be broken families and crushing poverty and lost children. Only the names and faces change. Imagining the faces as a vast mosaic covering the walls and ceiling of the church, he felt compelled to fix his own piece of the tableau into place. He wanted the priest to see he was a special case, a person with a truly unique story, a person worth saving.

In a guarded voice he described the beating, the strangulation, the bag with its cargo of unseen horrors. Father Honeywell responded with a series of friendly, understanding nods, as if torture and death were the fate of all wayward youth. Frustrated, Danny turned to his nights at Squatter Park, providing the salacious details, leaving nothing to the imagination. Still the priest nodded, as if those kinds of things happened to his parishioners all the time. Finally, swept along by the flow of his words, he talked about his childhood: the neglect and abandonment; his mother's search for a man to replace his father; his flight to Northbridge.

As his story drew to a close, the priest went on nodding, encouraging the last droplets of fact to emerge. When Danny fell silent, he slapped his palms on the table, got up and said, 'How would you like to see my pets?'

The question made Danny smile. In movies it was usually asked by mad scientists whose pets were anacondas or giant spiders.

'Sure,' he laughed, and followed Father Honeywell out of the room and down a gloomy hallway.

Behind the church, in the corner of a dank, mossy, high-walled courtyard, stood a weather-beaten hutch. The hutch was alive with pigeons. Some were sitting on perches with their heads pulled into their bodies; some looked up and cooed a welcome at Danny; others ignored him and went on pecking at the ground.

'Voilà!' cried the priest.

Danny was confused. 'Pigeons? What the fuck –? I mean, what are you doing with all those pigeons?'

'Well you might ask, Adam. Well you might ask.' He paused. 'I race them.'

'Race? Pigeons?'

'That's right. Pigeon racing is a sport. It's very big in England.'

'Don't they just fly away?'

'Interesting you should ask that.' He moved closer. 'You see, Adam, God has granted the humble homing pigeon an in-built radar system. When we race them, we take them far out into the country and release them, and then we clock how long it takes them to fly back. You see this door?' He flapped a wire contraption at the end of a wooden platform caked with white droppings. 'The door only opens inwards, which means that once the pigeons arrive back, they can get into the cage but they can't get out. It's an ingenious sport; I've always thought. It relies on one of the glories of Creation: how creatures will always find their way home.'

At the word 'home' he clamped a liver-spotted claw on Danny's shoulder. Repulsed by the touch, Danny pulled away.

'I believe people are a lot like pigeons,' Father Honeywell went on, ignoring the rebuff. 'We all yearn for a home. We all belong somewhere. Adam, I don't pretend to understand what happened between yourself and your mother. Only you can know that. But we all of us make mistakes. No one is perfect. I put it to you that your mother is extremely worried about you and wonders every day whether you are living or dead.' He turned to the pigeons and made a series of cooing sounds. The noise made some of the birds stretch their necks and regard him with startled eyes. 'If we can locate your mother,' he said without turning around, 'would you like us to attempt a reunion?'

Danny's muscles tensed. 'That's a stupid idea,' he said. 'She never wanted me around, not for my whole life. Why should it be any different now?'

‘Because, Adam, you are both very different people now. You said you were a burden to your mother. Well, you are a burden no longer. You are all grown up. You are not wanting to be dependent on her, are you? You simply would like to set the world right. I say we give it a try.’

The suggestion lodged in Danny’s brain. Before running away he’d been getting on well with his mother, mostly thanks to Jon’s influence. His flight through the woods was based on the fear that Jon would tell her what happened that night in the tent, and then she’d hate him. But what if that assumption were wrong? What if (as the priest was suggesting) she’d spent all this time worrying about his whereabouts, crying herself to sleep at night, praying for his return? It was a miniscule hope, but it was all he had to cling to right now, a solitary lifebuoy in the flat, grey sea of his life. And really, what did he have to lose? If it turned out that Jon told her what happened, what Danny did, all it would do was confirm what he’d always feared. He might even get a chance to present his own version of events, the version in which everything that occurred was a ridiculous mistake, the result of a stupid, long-forgotten dream.

‘Okay,’ he said as carelessly as he could.

Father Honeywell clapped his hands. ‘Wonderful! Excellent! In the meantime, we will arrange a bed for you at the shelter. Believe me, Adam, you will not regret this. Everything is about to turn around for you. You have my word on it.’

He poked his finger through the wire and waggled it at his favourite bird. ‘Missy was my favourite,’ he said, ‘but one day she didn’t come back. I’d say she was taken by a cat. Sometimes that happens.’

The lawyer

SILVERWOOD WOMEN'S CENTRE looks nothing like a prison. A product of late-twentieth-century reformist attitudes towards crime, punishment and rehabilitation, its well-appointed rooms, comprehensive library, gymnasium, chatty guards and landscaped gardens are each part of a clever design to distract the inmates from their troubles. And the strategy works. There's rarely any trouble within the walls of Silverwood, rarely even a grumble or a raised voice.

This afternoon, as Sheryl contemplates the world from the window of her room, not even the splendour of the flowering camellias or the sunlight glinting off the surface of the artificial lake or the bittersweet calls of birds in the sycamore trees can turn her mind from what she knows is coming.

She has just returned from a phone call with her lawyer and the world outside could not look more like a facade, an elaborate cosmic lie. This is it, she keeps thinking; the end of beauty; the end of my life. It was bad enough yesterday when the five o'clock news showed footage of her being escorted into the station by Detective-Sergeant Patterson. The situation at that time was recoverable. After all, she didn't light the fire, she had a career that was going places, and Frank's claim she was a stalker had no basis in fact and didn't prove motive. Her lawyer had also assured her that the statements from Frank and two fire officers that she was responsible for upgrading fire security at the warehouse were circumstantial evidence at best, and the eyewitness accounts of seeing her in or near the office around the time the fire started weren't likely to stand up in court either (not the least because they weren't true). She'd even been able to smile to herself on reflecting that the free publicity, once the facts came out, would be worth its weight in gold.

But the bright side has flared and died and her life is about to crumble into a million stinking pieces. She turns from the window. Her room feels like a coffin and in that moment she wonders whether she will ever escape its filtered air and painted brick walls. Now she knows what today's news will

bring, she doesn't even think she wants to leave. Her heart tells her it would be simpler to live out the rest of her days right here amidst the seclusion and landscaped gardens, meditating night and day like a cloistered monk in preparation for reincarnation as someone lucky.

She returns to her bunk, perches on the edge and stares at the clock on the wall. As the second hand jerks from one second to the next, she squints and slows her breathing and wills it to slow down, to grind to a halt, to start moving backwards. But it thwarts her by speeding up. And then the news adds to her torment by starting twelve seconds early.

She wrings her hands between her legs and blows out short puffs of air in an effort to calm her nerves. In a replay of yesterday, she silently begs the media to take pity on her and bury this story – if for no other reason, for the sake of the children in developing countries whose lives depend on the Gloria Meadows Foundation.

Of course, her wish is in vain. How could the media ignore the story of the century? Doesn't the public have a right to know? Not surprisingly, Sheryl's name is one of the first things mentioned, and then come the details: something about prostitution and charity work and arson, lies and deception. She barely registers the words. She, more than anyone, is familiar with the sad, sordid tale of dreams turned sour. Images flash across the screen. Streetwalkers. Neon lights. A shot inside an exotic dance club. Even though Sheryl has never worked the streets, even though she has nothing in common with the flouncing, scantily clad girls the media choose to represent as prostitutes, this is now reality as far as the world is concerned. These are the images the public will recall whenever they hear her name or see her face, and this is the reason her short-lived career in the public spotlight is over.

As the story winds down, she lumbers over and switches off the TV. Tears rolling down her cheeks, she returns to the bunk and lies face down on the mattress, numbed by the realisation that what she has dreaded and expected all these months has at last come to pass. Just when she was starting to believe everything would work out. And all because of a stroke of misfortune as sudden and inexplicable as the stroke of fortune that had launched her on this adventure in the first place.

A small brown bird flutters down to the windowsill, peers in at Sheryl and begins to sing. It sparks a thought in her mind. 'I'm moving to the country,' it says. 'I will live in a remote hamlet, serve fried eggs and coffee at a roadside

diner, listen to the birds singing outside my window every morning and live a simple life, the exact opposite of the life I've always dreamed of.'

As the bird continues its song of love or loss, she fills in the details of this life and begins yearning for it the way she once yearned for fame.

THE LAWYER CAME to tell her she was being released. Mrs Santelli was a well-groomed woman in her late thirties who'd probably never been surprised by anything in her life. When she'd rung to inform Sheryl her secret was out, she hadn't made a single disparaging remark, not one rebuke that she should have been apprised of this material fact. Her sole concern was the effect of the news on her client's wellbeing.

Mrs Santelli couldn't shed any light on the source of the leak. It was clear, though, that while working at Sephryn House Sheryl had never paid much attention to covering her tracks (never thought there would be a need) and it really made no difference whether the media found out from the police, her bank records, her doctor, a former client or a co-worker. What mattered was that the damage was done. The honeymoon with fame was over and she was set to move straight into a long and messy divorce.

'Why am I being released?' she asked sharply, as if she disagreed with the decision.

They were sitting in one of Silverwood's interview rooms, facing each other across an oval-shaped table. The room was windowless, but through a pane of glass in the door Sheryl could see two guards chuckling over something. Though she knew one of the guards and liked her, she couldn't help but think they were laughing at *her*.

Mrs Santelli placed her stylish leather briefcase on the table, unfastened it, withdrew a burgundy folder. 'You may not believe this,' she said, 'but the police have arrested Franklin DiMaggio.'

Sheryl gasped. 'No!' she cried. 'That's insane! Frank wouldn't burn down his own business!'

'It's alleged he paid someone else to do it, a professional at this kind of thing.'

'No … No! He loved those antiques!'

But Mrs Santelli knew better. As a civil attorney she was renowned for taking on crooked landlords and stopping boards of directors from turning children's playgrounds into parking lots. To her there was no greater pleasure

than hacking away at the greed and corruption that underpin the higher echelons of society.

'Appearances often belie the truth,' she said as she flicked through the papers in her folder. 'It's come to light Mr DiMaggio had considerable debts. He was a risk taker, according to his associates, and in recent times he made a number of extravagant purchases on the expectation of large profits. Unfortunately for him, the profits did not eventuate, due in part to a downturn in the value of the pieces he favoured. Which left him with substantial cash flow problems. However, that in itself was not the cause of his downfall. It's true, Mr DiMaggio did live an extravagant lifestyle, but it appears likely he could have traded his way out of his difficulty by liquidating stock or asking his mother to bail him out. But he had another, far more serious addiction. Did you know he was a gambler?'

Sheryl tightened her lips. Surprisingly, the news came as no surprise. 'I heard rumours. But I never once saw him gambling. We never went near a casino.'

'Mr DiMaggio preferred exclusive clubs, the kind where the stakes are high and few questions are asked. He ran up considerable debts and his creditors are not what you might call patient people. Still, I'm surprised he went on gambling when he hit what must have been such a major losing streak.'

'Poor Frank.' Sheryl traced her finger along a series of words that were scored into the table. ('Help! I'm being held prisoner!' the graffiti said.) Certain things were falling into place: Frank's distance; his changing moods; his attitude towards his mother. She wondered how long all this had been going on. Had Frank known he was in financial trouble the night of their first date, when they made love in a gazebo against a backdrop of stars and city lights? Were his plans for arson already in train that last night they made love, the night in his office when he told her he couldn't see her for a while? She blinked the questions away. This line of thought was getting her nowhere. She had enough of her own problems to think about, without dwelling on Frank's too.

'He never mentioned any of this,' she said as the lawyer sat watching her with the empathy and detachment of a true professional. 'Frank's very strong-minded. I don't suppose he ever really believed he'd fail. As for his mother, I think he was as intimidated by Gloria as I was. She wasn't what you'd call a model mother.'

‘That doesn’t surprise me. Miss Meadows has a formidable reputation in legal circles. She’ll litigate the moment someone looks at her the wrong way. And when she feels she’s been taken advantage of, she goes straight for the throat. In short, she’s a bitch. So, Sheryl, that’s the story.’ She closed the folder and slipped it back inside her briefcase.

But for Sheryl it wasn’t enough. It wasn’t even the part of the fiasco that mattered most to her. ‘Mrs Santelli, did Frank say why he tried to frame me?’

‘No, he didn’t. But Sheryl, you mustn’t take it personally. The original intent was clearly to claim the fire was an accident. When the investigators started building a case for arson, it appears Mr DiMaggio panicked and saw a chance to take the heat off himself by pointing the finger at someone else. As you know, the police had no real proof you were responsible. Despite the circumstantial evidence, it was clearly out of character for you. I suspect one of the reasons they moved on you so quickly was to throw the other suspects off guard – give them enough rope to hang themselves, so to speak. When Mr DiMaggio kept pointing his finger at you, they realised perhaps he had something to hide.’

‘Oh.’ So her arrest had been a stunt. Because of the authorities’ disregard for her, they’d ruined her life. In a way it made the catastrophe easier to bear as it lifted the responsibility for failure from her hands. She saw unseen forces working her over, the gods on Mount Olympus playing board games with her life. And the final result was check-mate, end of game.

‘Is he in custody?’

‘He’s out on bail.’

That figured.

‘Will he go to jail?’

‘If convicted, it’s likely he will do time, yes.’

‘How could he destroy all those beautiful works of art?’

‘The business was insured for a substantial sum of money. The police allege Mr DiMaggio had been planning this for some time, at least since the day he was served notice the warehouse was a fire risk. They think this may have planted the idea in his mind. Arson must have seemed the ideal solution to his problems. The stock was flammable and there were accelerants all over the place. And the fire department had all but told him the warehouse was an inferno waiting to happen. He knew he could inflate the value of his stock and end up with a hefty insurance payout, giving him instant liquidity.’

'Frank's no criminal. He must have been at wit's end to do something like this. He loved that business.'

'The people he's in debt to can be very persuasive. It might have come down to a choice between his business or his knee caps. Besides, he was pretty crafty about things. The police reportedly found a stash of paintings and antiques at Miss Meadows' mansion. It's alleged he removed his favourites before arranging the fire – likely substituted them with imitations. Once they were cinders, no one could tell which were real and which were rubbish.'

Sheryl smiled. 'You're right. That's exactly what Frank would do. I'm kidding myself pretending he's some kind of saint. He never gave me any reason to believe he had morals and yet here's me standing up for him. I must have "sucker" written all over me.'

'Sheryl, you mustn't blame yourself for any of this. You're a victim as much as anyone else.'

'But I lied too. I should have come clean about my past, at least to the board. They didn't deserve to lose out in this mess.'

'We all have secrets. If you had disclosed upfront how you once worked in the sex industry, where would you be now?'

'Probably still in the sex industry.'

'And Mr DiMaggio would still have gambling debts and the warehouse would still be a hole in the ground.'

'But the foundation doesn't deserve to get dragged through the mud.'

'My personal view is that what people choose to do with their lives, as long as it doesn't impinge materially on the rights of others, is nobody else's business. You have as much right as anyone else on God's green earth to put the past behind you. Can you honestly tell me you think it's right to be held back forever because of something you used to do?'

She shook her head.

'I believe you did the right thing, the thing that was best for *you*. If the foundation misses out on a few donations, it's not your fault.'

'I wish I could believe that.'

'Look at it this way. Think of a family watching TV in the suburbs, watching the news. They see your story and say to each other, "That woman used to be bad, so let's deprive needy children of our thirty dollars a month." Who's the villain here? Who's to blame for that lost donation? And don't forget all the money you attracted while essentially working for peanuts. Think of all the good that's done.'

‘You’re very persuasive, Mrs Santelli. If I was on a jury, I’d believe everything you said.’

The lawyer adjusted her scarf. ‘That can be a bad thing or a good thing, depending on who it is you’re defending.’ She bent closer. ‘But don’t tell anyone I said that. I’d get disbarred for heresy.’ She took out her car keys and clipped her briefcase shut. ‘Come on, then, let’s get you out of here.’

But Sheryl had one more question. ‘Why did Frank cheat on me?’ she asked, believing at that moment that Mrs Santelli had the answers to all life’s mysteries.

‘Why does any man cheat on a woman?’ Realising how callous the remark must have sounded, she gave an apologetic smile and said, ‘My theory is that when something traumatic happens in a person’s life, they often react by severing links to everything that reminds them of the past. Mr DiMaggio no doubt realised he’d burnt his bridges, so to speak, and the best way for him to get on with his life was to cut you loose. It had nothing to do with you as a person. It was all about him.’

‘Oh.’ The explanation rang true, but it brought Sheryl no solace. ‘I’m ready to go now,’ she said.

‘I need to warn you; the media are waiting outside. This morning Miss Meadows’ lawyers released a statement in which it was claimed you deceived her and attempted to use her foundation for personal gain. It’s a nasty piece of work, but of course the media have lapped it up. They’re ready to mob you.’

‘I’m used to that.’ She put on a brave face, even though she didn’t feel it, and said, ‘I don’t care what they print anymore. They can’t take anything else away from me.’

‘That’s the spirit. This will only get you down if you let it.’

They stood up together. Mrs Santelli picked up her briefcase and came around to Sheryl’s side of the table.

‘You are going to get through this,’ she said, gently squeezing her hand. ‘And you will end up all the stronger for it. You’ll come out on top; I’m sure of it.’

‘From where I’m standing,’ said Sheryl, ‘the only way is up.’

Cassandra

BUT SHERYL WAS soon to learn there were lower depths to her degradation. On returning to Golden Bay she discovered her key wouldn't fit in the lock. Exhausted, cranky, longing for a hot bath and a change of clothes, she banged her open palm on the door. 'Cassandra!' she yelled. 'Cassandra!'

A white face appeared at the window, before quickly retreating behind the curtain. A disembodied hand floated up and waved her towards the garage.

Rubbing her arms, Sheryl obeyed the ghostly command.

Shortly a motor whirred and the garage door started to rise. Two feet appeared, a pair of calves, two knobbly knees, the hem of a skirt – and then a clunk sounded, followed by an angry whining as the door caught on Cassandra's hips. A second later up it sped, exposing the rest of her skinny body.

'Hey, what's going on?'

Cassandra's eyes had retreated into their sockets. Her cheeks were pale, her mouth a dull slash of rust. 'I'm sorry,' she said, 'I can't do this anymore.'

'Can't do what?'

Cassandra glanced up and down the street. Her eyes flew to the dark clouds rolling in from the ocean. 'There's been no peace since you … There's reporters and police here all the time, asking questions, making insinuations, saying horrible things. I've had no sleep. There's been …'

Behind Cassandra, pushed against the back wall, Sheryl spied her furniture, a stack of boxes and her potted palm. The meaning was clear. When she realised that what occupied maybe a quarter of the small garage represented her entire life, she felt ill.

'Are you saying …?'

'Graham's changed the locks. And he's packed your things. I'm sorry but you can't stay here anymore.'

Her knees went weak. I should have expected this, she thought. But in truth, she'd been taken completely by surprise.

‘Cassandra,’ she said, smiling at the absurdity of it all, ‘this’ll pass. Give it a few days.’

Cassandra thrust out her jaw.

‘You can’t just throw me out!’

‘I’m sorry. It’s not just the reporters. People will … get the wrong idea. I don’t want them thinking …’ Billows of blood rose in her cheeks and she looked away.

‘Thinking you’re a hooker, hey? I don’t do that anymore. You know that. I haven’t done it in forever.’

‘What does that matter? People will still think …’ She couldn’t even bring herself to say the word. ‘I’m sorry. People are already talking. Graham asked me if that’s how I met you.’

‘That’s ridiculous. He was joking. He’s always saying stupid things like that. Come on. Please. I’ve got nowhere else to go. You’ve got to let me stay for a few days until I find somewhere else.’

Cassandra’s head shook wildly, her orange ringlets whipping her about the face. ‘No, I couldn’t do that. I’m sorry. No. The reporters. And my dad … He said … No. No. I’m sorry.’

‘Stop saying you’re sorry!’

Shocked at the outburst, Cassandra stepped back. Her hand sought the control panel.

‘Wait!’

Sheryl wiped her hand across her forehead. She couldn’t think of anything to say.

Cassandra wrapped her arms around herself. ‘Don’t you see what people will think if they see you living here? At least now I can prove … by saying I didn’t know. And if you don’t live here anymore, if you …’

A car engine sounded and Sheryl whirled around, expecting to see reporters converging on them from all directions. But it was only Mrs Gustafson from next door, pulling into her driveway. The engine shut off, the door opened and out she stepped with her Pekingese in her arms. She murmured a few words into the dog’s ear, then glanced up and saw Cassandra and Sheryl standing there watching her. ‘Oh!’ she piped, and scurried down the driveway and into the house. The door banged close.

Sheryl was trying her hardest to keep a lid on her rising frustration. ‘Look, Cassandra,’ she said. ‘Forgive me for pointing this out, but you don’t have the

purest morals yourself. How many different men have you slept with since I've lived here?'

The question hit Cassandra like a pie in the face. 'That's a horrible thing to say!' she cried. 'My situation is completely different!'

'Yes it is,' Sheryl said, realising now that the battle was lost. She looked at Cassandra's quivering hands and anguished face and her frustration streamed away. Cassandra was the one person she thought would sympathise, given the similarity of their experience, and yet maybe that was the reason she was so afraid.

'How could you possibly think … even for one minute?'

She looked like she was about to faint. Despite her own predicament, Sheryl felt herself feeling sorry for her.

'No, you're right,' she said, gazing past Cassandra at her possessions. 'It *is* different. You have sex with strangers because you want to, because it feels good, whereas I did it to make a living. So why is my reason worse than yours? The sex part is the same. Actually, no, it's not the same. I never considered what I was doing was sex, not the way you do. It seems to me what you're saying is that lust is okay but making a living isn't. That sounds like a man's way of thinking. Men can sleep around and make money any greedy, sleazy way they like, but as soon as a woman tries to take control of her life, she's done for.' She looked back at Cassandra. 'Why am I even bothering? You've got society on your side. I'll never make you see sense.'

Cassandra wouldn't meet her eye. 'You lied to me,' she said. 'If I'd have known …'

'If you'd have known, you'd never have let me past the doorstep. It's the same everywhere. When you do what I did, no one gives you a chance to do anything else. Can't you see how unfair that is? – how stupid?'

'It's not fair on me either.' She fingered the control panel. 'Like I said, I can't afford to be seen with you.'

'That's sad. Really sad.' Sheryl glanced at the neighbour's house and caught a glimpse of the old woman at the window. The face was quickly withdrawn. An instant later the dog appeared, a grotesque little mutt with a squashed face, bug eyes and pink-and-yellow ribbons in its hair. 'Where's the compassion?' she asked, as if she was speaking to the dog. 'Where's the justice in all this?'

Following an awkward silence, during which another two cars drove past, she said to Cassandra, 'It's funny, y'know. I used to be a lot like you. Always

scared of …' and then her words fell away as she recalled how she'd treated Danny and Doris on their one and only visit to Golden Bay. She'd been ashamed of them, frantic in her desperation to get rid of them before Frank turned up and suspected her of being less than the person she was trying to be. Was Cassandra's behaviour any worse? The analogy helped her to understand what was passing through Cassandra's mind – and to realise the futility of trying to convince her to see things differently.

'Can I at least leave my stuff here for a few days till I find somewhere else?'

'Of course,' said Cassandra, clearly relieved the encounter was drawing to an end.

'Can I get some stuff now?'

'Sure.'

She stepped aside and waited by the garage door while Sheryl packed a small suitcase with clothes and toiletries.

'If I've forgotten anything, can I come by tomorrow?'

'If you need to. But could you, like, use the back gate?'

'The back …?'

'Just knock on the French doors.' She gave her an apologetic smile. 'I'm sorry it has to be this way.'

'So am I.' Sheryl left the garage. 'Well, Cassandra, what can I say?' She shrugged. 'I hope you find that guy you're looking for.'

Cassandra smiled her thanks and pressed a button on the control panel. The garage door slid down faster than it had risen.

Ben

On the train to Northbridge, Sheryl reflected on what she'd said to Cassandra in defence of prostitution. Was this something she'd picked up from Lynne? It was funny; every time Lynne had lectured her on the politics of sex work, she'd mentally plugged her ears and nodded indulgently and dismissed the talk as a courageous attempt at self-justification. But now, with the benefit of distance from the game and everyone involved in it, she was beginning to grasp the wisdom in Lynne's words. It now made sense that, as with buying a loaf of bread or hiring a plumber to unclog a blocked drain, sex work involves the exchange of goods and services for cash. What makes it so different from other transactions is that the goods and services revolve around sex. And anything involving the genitals is a sure-fire recipe for controversy, criticism, humiliation and hypocrisy.

She'd also figured out (somewhat depressingly) that her failed relationship with Frank could be boiled down to a simple imbalance in supply and demand. Her thinking went like this: In addition to the sex, Sheryl had offered Frank love and commitment (two highly prized commodities in her mind), and though he'd led her to believe he would give her love and commitment in return, those were not things he desired or valued. So he never paid up. The most he'd done was offer empty promises. As a sex worker Sheryl would never have performed with a man time and time again on the promise of an unsecured IOU, yet that's precisely what she did with Frank. She knew now how she should have handled things. She should have insisted he be open about their relationship, both with his mother and at the office. She should have waited for this proof of commitment before giving herself to him. And if he hadn't paid up, she should have zipped up her dress and walked away. Instead, she'd compromised her principles, expected too much, turned a blind eye to Frank's evasions and gotten herself caught up in his bungled insurance fraud. It was a tough lesson, that's for sure – one that had cost her almost everything.

When the doors whooshed open at Lantern Street Station, Sheryl and her suitcase emerged into the chilly grey afternoon. She adjusted her sunglasses, hunched her shoulders and started towards the exit. As her eyes scanned the platform, they took in the tattered girls staring miserably at the tracks, the grubby boys spinning lies to strangers for a few coins, the homeless men huddled on benches covered in newspapers, and she murmured, 'Welcome to the down-and-outs club.'

But no, she chided herself; that was being self-indulgent. Even now, at what seemed the lowest point in her life, she had more than those people would probably ever have. She had friends, possessions, a little money in the bank, even a job waiting for her if she really needed it. Her eyes bloomed with tears for the men and women, the boys and girls, who would never come close to having what she had.

But tears were unproductive. They meant nothing to the destitute, who detested pity and only wanted a fair go. Brushing the water from her eyes, she made her way along the platform and mingled with the crowd filing down the station steps. At the bottom was one of the tattered girls, holding out a hand, asking for money to buy a sandwich. Everyone else brushed past her (they would have walked right through her if they'd had the power), but Sheryl dug into a pocket, pulled out a ten-dollar note and pressed it into the young beggar's hand. When one of the grubby boys accosted her a few steps further along, she gave him a handful of change.

Breaking away from the crowd, skipping across the road, she walked purposefully towards her destination. She wanted more than anything to run to Doris and bask in the glow of her empathy and common sense … but she knew Doris well enough to anticipate her reaction. Doris would say, 'Go see Danny; he needs you,' and as usual, she would be right. Danny needed Sheryl in the same way he needed a mother or big sister or best friend. Once upon a time she'd been all those things to him. She had to remind herself he was still only … Here her mind drew a blank. And then an alarming thought hit her. 'You've missed Danny's birthday,' it said.

'Dammit!' she cried, and rushed to the nearest newsstand. No, she was wrong. A newspaper confirmed Danny's birthday was tomorrow. She blew out her cheeks. One less thing to apologise for. Replacing the paper on the pile, she went in search of a card shop.

Twenty minutes later, standing outside Ben and Danny's place, she felt her heart fill to bursting. When the door opened, she was prepared to drop to

her knees, clasp her hands in the air and beg Danny for forgiveness. But she knew a grand gesture like that would be a waste of time and effort. After listening to her excuses and apologies, he would give an indifferent shrug, invite her inside and act like the past few weeks had never happened. That was one thing you could always count on with Danny: he never held a grudge.

A roar of laughter almost rattled the door off its hinges, and this provided the catalyst for her knock. Dropping the suitcase, she brushed her hair behind her ears and waited. Footsteps sounded inside. More laughter. She steadied herself for the sight of Danny's face and was surprised when the door was opened by a youngish man with thinning blond hair.

'Oh, hi,' he chirped. He glanced down at her suitcase. 'Don't tell me: encyclopaedias? vacuum cleaners? eternal salvation? I'll take them all.'

She smiled wearily and pulled off her sunglasses. 'I'm Sheryl,' she said. 'I was hoping Danny would be here.'

The man collapsed in mock shock. 'Mercy me, I am *so* sorry!' he effused. 'It's not often gorgeous women knock on *this* door! My name's Eric.'

Behind him something banged. Ben appeared.

'Sheri!' he cried. 'Long time, no see!' He took Eric's place. 'Come on in.'

The apartment was tiny; much smaller than she'd imagined. Four steps into a grease-spattered kitchenette and they were already in the living room.

'I heard about your problems,' Ben said in a confidential voice, as if her problems were still a secret.

She smiled at him. His hair was cropped short and he was bigger in the shoulders than she remembered. His face radiated health and self-confidence.

'Yes,' she said. 'Problems. What is it they say? It never rains but it pours.'

'Don't worry, Sheri. Things'll blow over. Hey, another weather reference!' He peered over her shoulder. 'Danny with you?'

'Danny?'

'Yeah.'

'He's not here?'

He frowned at her. 'He's not with you?'

'Oh no! Don't tell me he went to Golden Bay!'

Ben glanced at Eric, who shrugged. 'Yeah,' he said slowly. 'But … he left a month ago.'

'A month?'

It took a moment for the meaning to sink in. Her eyes fell to the birthday card in her hand.

Ben closed his eyes. 'We had a fight. I suggested he stay with you for a while so we could think things over. Then he took off and he hasn't been back. You haven't seen him?'

All the air seemed to have left the room. Sheryl felt the creeping horror of déjà vu, the sense that, of everything that had happened of late, this would turn out to be the worst.

She turned away from him and went to the window. 'He showed up once with Doris. But that was more than a month ago.'

'Did he say anything was wrong?'

'No. He was fine.' At least until I was rude to him, she added to herself.

'Uh-uh. That must have been before. He was really upset. I'm sure you would have noticed.'

She gazed out at the grim, ugly day. A fat ginger cat, stretched out on a nearby balcony, lifted its head and looked around as if it sensed it was being watched. Seeing nothing of interest, it bent its neck and started licking itself with long, indulgent strokes. The cat's lethargy drove Sheryl frantic. How could it lie there licking itself when the world was coming apart at the seams?

She turned back to Ben. 'This is a catastrophe. He doesn't have anywhere else to go. He doesn't know anybody. Unless he's with Doris. But surely they would have let me know.' She walked to the kitchenette and back, trying to think, trying to fit this latest calamity into the disaster that was her life. 'I'd better get over there. If he's not with Doris I'll ask around at –' She was about to say 'Squatter Park' but caught herself at the last moment.

Ben came up to her. 'I'm sorry,' he said, his face pale and afraid. 'I had no idea this would happen. I told him to stay here till he'd worked something out, but he wouldn't listen. He ran out. I couldn't stop him.'

'He was a very impetuous boy,' Eric said from the kitchenette.

Sheryl glared at him. Who was this Eric? Was he Ben's new boyfriend? Was he the reason Danny ran away?

'Did you know Danny?' she asked, like a lawyer cross-examining a witness.

'You could say that.' He joined them in the living room. 'Nice enough guy, but a little … Shall we say: clingy? When Ben broke it off, he went haywire. Then again, he was always flying off the handle over nothing. He despised me for absolutely no reason, no reason at all.'

Sheryl felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck. She could see already what Danny disliked about this pompous, sanctimonious man.

'What do you expect at his age?' she retorted. 'He's only sixteen.'

She realised her error too late. Ben and Eric exchanged glances.

'Sixteen?' they exclaimed in unison.

Eric laughed in delight. Ben stared at her open-mouthed. 'But – but –'

She squirmed.

'That can't be right. He's eighteen. He told me! He's got a driver's licence!'

She squirmed again.

'You're saying … You're saying I was living with a sixteen-year-old boy?'

'He's seventeen tomorrow,' she said, hoping this would make a difference.

'No, he's nineteen tomorrow! Or at least … Jesus Christ! Why didn't I know any of this?'

'He probably just forgot.'

'Forgot? No, no, you don't forget you're only sixteen years old!'

'He always thought he was older. That's why he got the licence.'

'That's beside the point.' He looked up. 'What's the age of consent?' He glanced about wildly. 'I could've been thrown in jail, for God's sake! Didn't anybody ever think of that?'

She stepped up and took his hand in both of hers. 'Ben, try and understand. Danny's had a tough life. If you were in his situation – alone all your life – and you met a person you really liked and you could pass for older, wouldn't you do the same?' She decided not to give him a chance to answer. 'Anyhow, it doesn't matter he's not really eighteen. What matters is he's been looking after himself since … Well, all his life, for the most part. And he's old enough to know what he wants. And all he ever wanted was you.'

Ben's eyes were glazed with shock. He retrieved his hand. 'That was the problem.'

'You cradle-snatcher!' Eric taunted, beaming at him. 'Wait till I tell the girls about this!'

'You need to stay out of this,' Sheryl snapped, surprising herself.

Eric too was taken aback by the reprimand. He gazed penitently at the carpet, though the smirk never quite left his face.

'How will we find him?' asked Ben. 'Sixteen? Jesus Christ!'

'I'll go see Doris. If he's not there, there's a few other places I can look.' She collected her suitcase and made for the door. 'I'll call when I find him.'

'Should I come?'

'Best if you don't. He might get upset if he sees you.'

She took one last look around the apartment, as if she expected to find Danny bound and gagged in a corner.

'I'm sorry,' Ben said again. 'This is all my fault. If only I'd known how young he was. I should have checked with you after he ran off. I … I didn't have your phone number. I didn't think. I just hope nothing's happened to him. I wouldn't forgive myself.'

'Don't worry,' said Sheryl, trying to smile. She opened the door. 'Danny's used to looking after himself. I'm sure he's fine.'

But once the door closed behind her, she had to put the suitcase down and close her eyes and take a series of trembling breaths. She hadn't forgotten the last time Danny disappeared, the night she offered him a room in her apartment. On that occasion he'd turned up a few days later, but this time she might not be so lucky. This time he might have run away for good. Or he might be floating face down in the river. She couldn't bear to think of that eventuality, at least not yet. But before long she would have no choice. The terrible thoughts would come on regardless. As the days and weeks slipped by without word, as the likelihood of finding Danny became more remote, his fate would haunt her like a vengeful ghost, clawing at her peace of mind, sabotaging any hopes she had of finding her own happiness. Because as on that first occasion she took full responsibility for his flight, and if anything happened to him it would be her fault and hers alone.

The shelter

ON HEARING FROM the chaplain that a Father Honeypot was waiting to speak with him, Danny crept to the phone like a mouse approaching a trap. When he placed his ear to the receiver and the priest uttered those magic words, 'Your mother has agreed to see you,' he was so stunned he almost dropped the phone. 'I'll pick you up at three,' said Father Honeywell, and hung up.

He replaced the receiver and spun slowly around. Across the room two boys were fighting over a pool cue, their voices low and angry, their eyes flashing to the door in case the manager walked in and took it in his mind to punish them for unruly behaviour. Danny smiled dumbly at them. He reached up and pressed the bruise on his cheek. 'She wants to see me. She wants to see me,' he chanted, and with each repetition his mind surged with joy and his excitement grew.

The call could not have come at a better time. He'd been at the shelter for two nights and already the rules and regulations were driving him insane. There seemed to be a rule for everything. The manager, Mr Hall, was a tall, withered, unattractive man with liver-coloured hair, prominent cheek bones, a grey beard and the mannerisms of a dotty professor. He was highly orthodox and held an unwavering belief that hard work, daily prayer and abstinence from anything remotely pleasurable were the only sure paths to a worthwhile and contented life.

On entering the shelter, each boy was made to sign a contract in which he agreed to abide by a code of conduct and undertake a roster of chores in return for board and lodging. The contract stipulated (in capital letters) that three written warnings (underlined for emphasis) were all that were needed for immediate expulsion. So far Danny had two. The first came when he was engrossed in *The Young and the Restless* and ignored an order to clean the toilets. The second came when he was caught smoking and drinking vodka with Flash, one of the longer-term residents. Now every time he saw Mr Hall

he wanted to slam his back against the wall and force him to admit it got him hard to make life miserable for these boys, many of whom had never experienced joy and were now being told that this is what they should continue to expect. Sure, there was talk about vocational training and work experience, but funds were limited and the only jobs on offer were menial and low-pay. There was never any suggestion the boys could rise to become lawyers and doctors – that would be giving them unrealistic expectations.

On his way back to the TV room, Danny stopped outside Mr Hall's office. Now his time here was almost at an end, an urge came over him to barge through the door and tell the tyrant exactly what he thought about this place and its stupid rules. But he held himself back. If Hall snitched on him and told Father Honeywell what a troublemaker he was, the priest might decide he didn't deserve to be reunited with his mother, and then he would have burnt both his bridges. There would be plenty of time for revenge later, once he was free of this place and no longer forced to beg for food and a place to sleep. For the time being he contented himself with cursing the closed door with his middle finger.

In the TV room two boys were playing snakes and ladders. A third lay sprawled in an armchair watching TV. Entering the room, Danny wandered from the board game to the noticeboard to the TV, where he flung himself down in a vacant chair. On the screen a lioness was holding a young gnu in its big paws, licking it like a mother. When it sunk its fangs into the gnu's neck, the gorge rose in his throat and he turned away.

He prodded his bruised cheek, then pressed with increasing force until the pain grew so intense he had to stop. He did this several times a day as a test of endurance and was oddly disappointed to find the pain was diminishing as his wounds healed. Soon he would revert to the old Danny, the one with boring, everyday problems like the other kids here. Soon his tale of torture and attempted murder would become indistinguishable from the lies and exaggerations told by every other street kid and hustler on the planet. It was an unsettling thought.

Twisting his neck, he stared at the boy next to him, a freckly blond with lazy eyes and a half-open mouth. The boy's stomach rose and fell with each shallow breath. He seemed to be asleep with his eyes open.

'Whatya staring at?' he snarled, making Danny jump.

'Nothing,' said Danny, glancing away. 'Just being friendly.'

'Well don't.'

‘It’s my birthday today.’

‘Big fucking deal.’

Danny laughed. ‘Yeah. Big fucking deal.’

The boy sniggered, his eyes never leaving the TV screen. Vultures and hyenas were now fighting for scraps of the dead gnu, while behind them the lioness padded away to relax in the shade. Danny pitied the poor gnus, in constant danger from carnivores. Were they aware of their plight? Did they experience panic and fear as they fled from a pack of ferocious lions? The survivors didn’t seem too concerned about the fate of the hapless victim. Most had returned to their grazing and it almost seemed as though the life and death struggle had never happened.

When the time neared three o’clock, he went to wait in the foyer. Standing by the glass doors, so anxious he could hardly keep still, he didn’t notice the approach of Mr Hall.

‘What are you doing here?’

Danny whirled around. High on emotion, he forgot how much he hated the man and told him excitedly that Father Honeywell would be here soon to take him to visit his mother, whom he hadn’t seen for over two years.

‘Well, Mills,’ said the manager, ‘remember you’ve got just one warning left, so don’t abuse it.’ With a jab of his finger, he spun on his heel and disappeared into his office.

Anger raged through Danny’s body. Hall seemed to believe the reconciliation attempt was doomed to fail, that Danny wasn’t worthy of being loved, that he was certain to be back here by the end of the day. His words were an evil omen. Danny glared at the office door, his breathing getting faster and faster.

Luckily, before his rage could erupt, Father Honeywell came bustling into the foyer.

‘What a glorious day for a reunion!’ he cried, then hurried Danny along. ‘I have others to help,’ he said. ‘This is one of my busiest days ever.’

They got to the car and got in. But the next instant Danny opened his door and got out. ‘Forgot something!’ he yelled back at the priest.

Stomping down the path, he pushed through the glass doors and hurried across the foyer.

‘Hey, Hall!’ he yelled as he burst through the office door.

Mr Hall was in the middle of frightening a small boy in shorts. As Danny barged in, the boy turned his head, clearly grateful for the interruption.

‘I’m outta here,’ Danny said, before the manager could react. ‘Just wanted to say you are one enormous fucking prick. This place is like a prison. You treat the kids worse than fucking animals. That’s your first, second *and* third warnings!’

‘Excuse me!’ Mr Hall sputtered, getting to his feet. But Danny was already off, slamming the door behind him with all his might.

Racing across the foyer, he heard the manager calling his name, ordering him to stop. He shot outside and ran for his life. By the time Mr Hall made the front doors, he was already climbing into the priest’s beat-up old Chrysler.

‘Let’s go,’ he said.

Father Honeywell released the hand brake and the car sputtered off, leaving in its wake a grey cloud of exhaust. Mr Hall came chasing after them, tie flapping, face red, arms wafting away the smoke.

Oh no you don’t, thought Danny, and he turned to engage the priest in conversation.

‘It’s my birthday today,’ he said.

Father Honeywell gaped at him. ‘Your birthday!’ He lifted his hands from the wheel and brought them to his wrinkled face. ‘What an excellent gift! What a perfect day!’

With that, he began an outpouring on God’s gifts to humanity, while Danny held his breath and Mr Hall stood on the road yelling and jumping and waving his arms.

A few heart-stopping seconds later, the car turned a corner and Mr Hall disappeared from Danny’s life forever.

Reunion

ON THE EXPRESSWAY the old Chrysler struggled to pick up speed. Car after car overtook them, their drivers and passengers shooting through space and time towards an unknowable future. You need to be confident to drive that fast, Danny thought. You need to follow the line of the road exactly and not deviate or else you might start a pile-up that would cause untold destruction and misery.

Turning in his seat, he watched the cityscape slide away. With each passing second he felt more and more like an astronaut escaping the pull of the earth's gravity. There was the same sense of weightlessness, the same nervous anticipation about where he was going, the same fear that at any moment the vehicle might falter and lose momentum and crash back to earth. 'She wants to see me. She wants to see me,' he whispered, a mantra designed to give him courage and hope.

Father Honeywell was caught up in his own concerns. Every so often he would murmur some nonsense, as if he'd lost the ability to distinguish between thoughts and words. He obviously had a lot of lives to worry about – not to mention the car, which kept drifting dangerously close to the vehicles in the adjoining lane.

After a while they began to lose speed.

'We're here,' said the priest.

He edged the car onto an off-ramp and Danny looked left and right as they continued down a slight incline, turned at a green light and entered a street filled with ancient trees and three-storey terrace houses. Not bad, he thought with a nod of appreciation. This looks like the type of area a man like Jon would live in. It has the right kind of dignity.

But the old Chrysler kept going, rattling along, hugging the kerb, spewing smoke. Soon the lovely terrace houses gave way to semidetached hovels and broken fences and potholes in the road. The further they drove, the more the neighbourhood deteriorated. In his head Danny begged the priest to stop, to

admit he'd made a mistake and turn the car around and go back to one of the lovely terrace houses – but of course the plea was futile. His mother's destiny was set. There was no changing it now.

They eventually pulled up alongside a lop-sided letterbox. Beyond the letterbox was a brown lawn and a leafless tree; beyond that, a grubby, off-white, fibroid house. Fragments of furniture cluttered the porch, along with pots bearing the remains of long-dead plants. A gaping hole near the door might have been the lair of a giant rat.

'We're here,' the priest said again, squinting at the address in his hand.

Danny felt ill. This wasn't the sort of house he'd expected to find his mother and Jon living in. It was worse than where he grew up. Something was wrong.

Leaving the car, they made their way across the dead lawn. Behind the house a dog barked and a voice from inside – a man's voice – shouted something unintelligible.

They climbed the steps and Father Honeywell stooped down to peer into the hole in the wall, as if he thought Danny's mother might be living in there. Finding it empty, he straightened and rapped on the door.

From inside came cheering. (A TV, by the sounds of it.) Footsteps clattered across wooden floorboards; a lock turned; the door swung open.

'Mrs Mills, I presume,' said Father Honeywell.

Danny hid in the priest's shadow. Now he was here – now things weren't at all as he'd imagined – he wanted desperately to be somewhere else.

'You must be the priest,' came a familiar, frightening voice. The voice was flat and parched. It lacked warmth. Danny peered over his shoulder at the car.

'Indeed. Father Honeywell. Indeed. And what a great pleasure it is to meet you at last.' He stepped aside. 'Mrs Mills, I have brought home your son.'

Danny cringed at the sudden exposure. His mother was likewise surprised, and for a time they stood gaping at each other. She appeared older, shorter, dumpier. Her hair had been ravaged by a bad perm and her once pretty face now looked lined and puffy. She was dressed in sandals and an ill-fitting green frock.

She said, 'Danny? Is that really you?'

He stood paralysed. Tears bloomed in his eyes and trickled down his cheeks. He made no attempt to wipe them away. His mother's next words would determine his fate, and he wasn't sure he was ready to hear them.

'Come inside,' she said, compressing her lips into a smile.

Though her eyes remained fixed on him as he slid past, she seemed unable to bring herself to touch him. Closing the door, she edged past them and led the way to a brown living room, where a middle-aged man was slouched in a recliner-rocker watching a boxing match. A beer can was leaving his mouth.

'Oi, Gabe, this here's Danny. And the priest, Father …'

'Honeywell,' said the priest, reaching out a hand.

Gabe had a square jaw, a straight nose and thick, sensuous lips. He might have been a heart-breaker in his younger days, before time, idleness, fast food and beer exacted their dues. He gave a nod each to Danny and the priest, scratched the stubble on his chin, then got distracted by a burst of applause from the TV. 'Yeah!' he yelled, pushing himself half out of the chair. 'Go for it, Bossman! Hit 'im wid a right-han' slammer!'

Danny pretended Gabe didn't exist. Glancing about the room, he tried in vain to find something to remind him of his past, something that would connect him with this woman the priest had called his mother. When he was a boy they'd never had plaster ducks flying up the wall or photos of schoolgirls on the cabinet or a framed picture of dogs playing pool taking pride of place above the gas heater. He felt like a stranger in a stranger's house, a criminal come to steal something or vandalise the place.

'We'll sit out back,' his mother said, walking past them.

In the kitchen a portable radio was playing 'Stand By Your Man'. Dishes lay drying beside the sink. A black plastic bag, bulging with trash, sat near the back door like a dog begging to be taken out for a walk. Something smelled rotten.

'Sit down,' said Mrs Mills, retrieving a beer can from the counter.

They took seats on three different sides of the table, the priest at the head, Danny and his mother facing each other. Tammy sang her plaintive song. Gabe yelled abuse at the TV. The garbage bag just sat there. Danny was too scared to look up, but he could sense his mother staring at him, probably wondering about the marks on his face. She was cracking her can in time with the song on the radio.

'What happened to your face?' she asked.

He raised his shoulders. 'Accident.'

'Car accident?'

'Yeah,' he said, not caring what the priest thought of the lie.

'It looks bad,' she said. But there was no sympathy behind the words. She might have been commenting on the weather.

Following the brief exchange, the table lapsed into silence. When 'Copacabana' came on the radio, a cry of dismay from the living room sent the dog into another fit of barking.

'Mrs Mills, Danny was very eager to see you,' said Father Honeywell, opting at last to fill the vacuum. 'I can't say how delighted I was when you invited us to your home. It was most generous of you.'

'It was a surprise, that phone call, coming out of the blue.'

'A pleasant one, I trust.' The old man paused for a reply, but neither Danny nor his mother seemed inclined to add to the conversation.

Sighing benevolently, he joined his hands on the table. 'From what I understand, a substantial period of time has elapsed since you were both last together … and I am aware much has happened within that span of time. But Mrs Mills, Danny, you are connected by blood and family, and that bond will always be with you. I pray you can find it in your hearts to forgive past mistakes and make today a new beginning.' He paused to check their reactions, then went on. 'The love between a mother and her son is one of the most precious in all Creation. Most precious. Danny, is there something you wish to say to your mother?'

Danny winced at the surprise question. He'd been staring at the black plastic bag, wondering what was causing the awful smell.

'Who's the guy?' he asked, jerking his head at the living room.

A twinge of annoyance crossed his mother's face. 'Gabe lives here,' was her reply.

'And what does Gabe do for a living?' asked the priest.

'Sits around all day and gets drunk.'

'Oh. So he is … unemployed?'

'Laid off two months ago.'

'That is a shame. The jobs market at this moment in time is shaky to say the least. What is Gabe's profession, may I ask?'

Danny couldn't hold himself back any longer. 'What happened to Jon?'

His mother glared at him, and in that instant he was dragged back to the burnt-out warehouse, to that yellow, sweltering room where he'd suffered an almost identical look from eyes filled with confusion and hate.

She said, 'Maybe you should answer that one.'

His mouth went dry. Her response meant the situation was even worse than he'd imagined. After Jon told her about the assault, he must have taken off himself, possibly terrified Danny would return and repeat his attack. So

Danny had ruined his mother's life. He'd cut her loose from her lover, she'd drifted into this backwater, and now she was marooned in a broken-down house with a lazy piece of scum – a man who wasn't a patch on Jon. He nodded to himself. It was fitting his own life should likewise be ruined. In fact, he deserved a punishment far greater than that of his victim; he deserved to have nothing at all – which is pretty much what he had.

Despite all that, he felt the need to tell his own side of the story. After listening to his explanation, his mother might yet be filled with understanding and turn to him for comfort. 'I di-di-didn't mean it,' he stammered. 'I was asleep. It was a mi-mi-mistake.'

'What are you talking about? What happened between you two?'

'I … uh …' Danny stared helplessly at her. Then it hit him. She didn't know.

'Did you have a fight? Jon never lost his temper with anybody. What happened?'

'Nothing,' said Danny, backtracking at high speed. 'Nothing happened.'

'You went camping and he came back all by himself. Tell me what happened!' When he stared blankly at her, she raised the can to her mouth and drank greedily, no doubt to dull the pain of recollection. But the alcohol only increased her agitation. 'Answer me, goddamn you!' she screamed, spraying beer at him. 'I deserve to know!'

Danny felt his insides shrink. Though he'd seen his mother drunk more times than he could remember, he'd never seen her like this. 'Nothing happened. I wanted to … get away. That's all. I swear. There was … a truck. And I went … I went …'

She leaned over the table and it screamed across the linoleum and hit him in the stomach. 'You're lying! You're a liar! Something happened!'

'Pardon me for interrupting,' said Father Honeywell, 'but may I suggest we calm ourselves a little? The past is the past. You are both very different people now, with different lives, and I find it hard to see how anything positive will come from reopening old wounds. Mrs Mills, Danny is your son and he needs your love and support. I had high hopes today would mark the beginning of a new relationship for you both …'

'Butt out!' she yelled in his face.

The priest was shocked into silence. Mrs Mills, remembering he was a man of the cloth, resumed her seat. 'I'm sorry, Father,' she said, dragging the table back. 'It's just … I need to know why Jon left.'

‘I appreciate your confusion, Mrs Mills. But why would you assume it was your son’s fault?’

‘I’m not assuming anything! After he ran off, Jon changed. He was hell-bent on finding him, and when it looked like Danny wasn’t coming back, he went all depressed. It was like I wasn’t even there.’ She got up, plucked a paper towel from a dispenser and stood over the sink. ‘Jon was the most amazing man I ever met,’ she said, then blew her nose into the paper towel. ‘He made me feel like … like a queen. But when Danny took off, everything changed. He couldn’t stand touching me, or even looking at me. I felt like nothing. Less than nothing. And then he left and I haven’t heard from him since. It’s got something to do with Danny. I know it does. They went camping and only Jon came back. And I need to know why.’ She spun around, trapping Danny with her eyes. ‘That’s why you gotta tell me what happened. Why did he leave? I need to know. Maybe if I knew, I could patch things up. Don’t you see what that would mean to me, Father?’

The dog started barking again. This time Gabe’s shout made the house shudder. The priest bowed his head.

‘I suppose you’re wondering why I stay with him … when I’ve got the hots for another man.’

Father Honeywell looked up. ‘With whom? Oh. Oh no, I –’

‘I’m not getting any younger. And you can’t stay alone forever. Well, maybe people like you can.’

The priest nodded his head in sympathy. For the moment Danny was forgotten. Picking at a chip in the laminate, he tried to come to terms with the mess he’d created. The discovery it was his running away that caused the break-up, not Jon’s disgust over what he did to him in the forest, made no difference to him. He was still responsible for ruining the lives of three people. Nothing anybody could say would change that.

His mother thought so too. ‘Make him tell me, Father. I need to get away from this dump. I’ve been in hospital. Fatty liver disease. And I’m on antidepressants. You wanna see the bottle? I can prove it. For God’s sake, Father, you’ve got an obligation to help me! You’re a priest, goddammit!’

‘Mrs Mills,’ said Father Honeywell, ‘I sympathise with you entirely. Believe me, I do. But my purpose here is to help your good self and your son effect a reconciliation. That must be my number one concern. Now, Danny, please tell your mother what happened and then we can all move forward.’

Danny stared at her, trying to recall a time when she'd been nice to him. She in turn was searching the priest's face, glancing desperately from wrinkle to wrinkle. In Danny's mind there was no truth about that night, only mistakes and misunderstandings. Any attempt to explain would only complicate things. Whichever way you looked at it, it was his fault: his fault for being gay; his fault for assaulting Jon; his fault for running off and leaving Jon to carry the burden of guilt. To his mother, the truth would be worse than not knowing.

'I just left,' he said quietly. 'Jon musta thought it was his fault. But it wasn't.'

'No! He wasn't just upset! It devastated him! What else happened? What did you talk about before you ran off?' Her eyes narrowed. 'I know, you little runt. You can't fool me. You told him about my other boyfriends. What other lies did you make up about me?'

Danny jerked his head up. 'No! I wouldn't do nothing like that! I thought Jon was cool. You were happy.'

'Fucking right I was happy! And you spoiled everything, you little bastard! Do you hear me? Everything!'

He stared down at the table.

'He never returned my calls. You know what that means? He hates me. You made him hate me! And now I'm stuck in this place with two girls who've made it their mission to drive me stark raving mad and a useless drunk who can't even get it up most nights, when I should be married to the most amazing man in the world!'

'Now, now, Mrs Mills,' said Father Honeywell. 'I think we're overreacting here. Jon had his own reasons for moving on. Danny cannot be held responsible for another person's decisions.'

'No, mister, it's you that don't understand. You live in a fucking ivory tower and you sit there looking out at people like me and you think you've got all the answers. You're bullshit, Father! Bullshit! You don't know what the hell you're talking about!' She turned away and buried her face in her hands.

Leaning close to Danny, the priest said, 'Perhaps that's enough for today, son. We should give your mother time to compose herself. Mrs Mills? Mrs Mills? We'll be off now. I will give you a call in a couple of days' time and we can discuss where to go from here.'

'No,' she said, the word muffled by her hands. 'Get out. Leave me the hell alone. Both of you.'

Danny leaped from his seat and flew from the foul-smelling kitchen.

In the living room Gabe was still conversing with the TV, oblivious to the sobs and words of comfort coming from the next room. He glanced up as Danny raced past. 'Go, man, go, man,' he chanted – but he was talking to one of the boxers, not Danny. At least that's how it seemed.

The bees were now throwing themselves against the inside of Danny's chest. As he launched himself off the porch and sailed through the air, he contemplated dashing his body to the ground and rolling around on the dead grass until he'd squashed every single one of them, until the emotions buzzing inside him were extinguished for good. But the bees were there to stay; he knew that. He would have to learn to live with them or die. There was no other choice.

The flight ended when his body collided with the Chrysler. Panting, he stared at the scratched, faded paintwork, trying to stop himself thinking about what all this meant, where the priest's meddling had taken him. He wanted to believe nothing had changed. Didn't his mother's behaviour simply confirm what he already knew? Yes, he told himself. So in that case, why did it feel like the world just ended?

It wasn't long before footsteps came crunching across the lawn. When a hand touched his back, he sprang away.

'Danny, I am so sorry,' said the priest, his face creased with concern. 'You must appreciate it was a shock for your mother, seeing you after all this time. I venture to say she is carrying a world of issues at the present moment. We can try again another time.'

'No,' said Danny, his face hardening. 'That's it. She don't wanna know me. I'm moving on.'

The priest sighed. He raised his eyes to the heavens. 'Perhaps you are right, son. Perhaps you are right.' He glanced at his watch. 'Oh Lord, just look at the time. Hop in, Adam … Sorry: Danny. I am due to attend at an emergency counselling session in one half-hour. A young girl, with child, about to make the most disastrous decision of her life.'

But once they were inside the car, he cried, 'You silly billy!' and struck his forehead with the heel of his hand. Turning his smiling face to Danny, he said, 'We forgot to remind your mother it's your birthday. What an oversight! Come on, son, let's go back.'

'No way. I don't wanna see her again.'

Now the priest looked cross. ‘Danny,’ he said firmly, ‘I have made a very considerable effort to help you here. You must make an effort too. If we remind your mother of the special significance of today, she may well do a complete about-face.’

Danny braced himself on the dashboard with both hands and stared at the road ahead. ‘It’s over,’ he said in a toneless voice.

At the time he didn’t realise the import of those words, could not have known that they foretold a greater doom. All he knew was that a chapter of his life that had closed a long time ago should never have been reopened. As the car started up and began rolling along the kerb, he bit down hard on his lip and dug his fingers into the bruise on his cheek until the pain became unbearable.

Drug

THE PRIEST DROPPED Danny off at the shelter and promised to come by in a day or two to discuss next steps. On the way back he'd rattled on about his next errand, an all-out assault on a young woman's decision to 'murder an innocent child', and it struck Danny that the man's interest in the poor and the wicked was generic. Failure to save one lost soul was mitigated by success with another. In his case the old priest hadn't only failed, he'd obliterated what little had survived of Danny's hopes.

After the car drove off, he stared at the shelter for a long time. There was movement on the other side of the glass, vague shapes floating back and forth in the dimness. When one of the shapes pushed through the door, he burst into life and took off down the street.

Once he was a safe distance away, he slowed to a walk. His backpack, containing almost everything he owned, was in a locker back at the shelter, and it came to him that the bag was now a hostage that Mr Hall would almost certainly use to exact his revenge. He shrugged and walked on. Maybe he'd come back later and ask one of the boys to sneak it out for him; maybe he wouldn't. The shedding of possessions was strangely liberating. He felt lighter, almost ethereal, as if his recent traumas had punched holes through him, leaving him as insubstantial as an old washcloth. Now he was more alone than ever. He had only one friend, one home, and he would cling to those treasures like never before.

Back at the squat, Drug greeted his return with a raised hand. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor counting plastic bags, each one containing a small quantity of dirty white powder.

Danny went to his corner of the room and flopped down on the mattress, disturbing a bottle of tequila that was lodged between the pillow and the wall. He snatched it up with a groan of desire, screwed off the top and gulped down a burning mouthful. After the fire in his throat subsided, he gulped down

another. The warmth of the tequila spread quickly through his numb body. He watched Drug arranging bags on the floor.

'Ninety! Right on, man! This is gonna net me an almighty freakin' fortune!'

'Whatcha got there?' asked Danny, already slurring his words.

'Man oh man, did I score! The big H, Es, Ts, assorted cocktails – each one designed to thrill, drill and kill! What do you think of *them* bananas?' He scooped up a handful of bags and spilled them on his face. 'This is God, man! This is better than God! Next time I see God I'm gonna tell him to get his fucking act together! I'm gonna tell him he needs to make us dudes feel high all the freakin' time! He's been cheatin' on us, man! Holdin' out! It's time some dude told him he better hand over the rest of the goods or else someone like me's gonna come along and take his freakin' place!'

The outburst made Danny fall about laughing. Once he started he couldn't stop. Hot tears tumbled down his cheeks and dripped on his shirt.

Drug went on hooting and whistling. 'This is life, man! This is life!' he yelled.

Someone on the floor above them stamped on the ceiling.

'Yes, God, I hear you! I hear you, man! I'm coming! Watch out, man, here I come!'

After a while the humour leaked away and Danny fell back on his elbows. The stamping on the ceiling continued. I wish I could believe it was a message from God, he thought, and took another swig of tequila.

'Whatcha been up to, man?' Drug asked, suddenly serious. 'You been in a fight?'

He was sitting with a hand on either knee, regarding Danny with genuine concern. In the beshadowed room he looked as wasted as a zombie. His face was grey, his blond hair limp and tangled.

'Got beat up,' said Danny, and he burst out laughing again.

Cloistered there in that dim, squalid basement with his only friend, it felt like everything else in the world had ceased to exist. If it wasn't for Drug he'd be alone now, with no one to turn to and nowhere to go. In the absence of anything with meaning or value, a very little can seem like an awful lot. He wanted to confess more. 'It's my birthday,' he said.

'Yeah? Your birthday? How old are ya, man?'

He lifted the bottle to his lips. 'Seventeen.'

'Seventeen, hey? Ahh, to be that young again. I'm livin' my life a whole lot different the next time round, I tell ya. Make the most of it, Dan. When you get to my age, everything goes whoomp.'

'How olda you, Drug?'

He squinted at the ceiling. 'Dunno, man. Someplace between seventeen and hell, I guess.'

Danny gave him a crooked smile. 'What'd y'do diff'rent?'

Drug was groping around inside his gym bag. 'Dunno. Prob'ly nothin'. It's always easy to say you fucked things up, but changin' things is another matter. You just gotta do what you think's right at the time.' He held up a plastic bag containing six or seven small white pills. 'Don't get me wrong. I don't regret what I done. I had fun. It's just, like, there's nothin' left that turns me on. I've seen everything there is to see. I've spoke to God. What more can you want than that?' He sighed. 'There's not enough joy in the world to fill another thirty years. That's the scary thing.' He offered the bag of pills to Danny. 'Happy birthday, man. This is for you. Enjoy.'

Danny went to refuse it, but Drug's gap-toothed smile touched his heart. He knew rejection of the gift would hurt his friend. Crawling across the dusty floor, he allowed Drug to place the bag in his palm.

'Thanks, man. You don' havta do this.'

'That's the best of the best. The dude gave me them pills said they'll blow your mind.'

'Wha's in 'em?'

'Fuck knows. But don't worry, man. They're good. I been dealing with this dude for eons. If he says they're cool, they're cool.' He retrieved a plastic bag from his lap and held it up against the light. 'Hey there, darlin'. You wanna have a party tonight?' He grinned at Danny. 'This here is Druggy-boy's best friend; his sweetheart. This babe's gonna blow the old mind like … like one fuckin' amazing orgasm. You should try it someday, Dan.'

Danny smiled and held up his own bag of goodies. The pills looked like aspirin: round, hard and white. He marvelled that such tiny things could be such a big deal, that they could lead people to lose their lives or get thrown in jail or become rich beyond their wildest dreams.

'Take one,' Drug urged. 'It'll take a while to come on. If that's not enough, you can throw in another one later. Man, you better start enjoying your birthday, 'cos there ain't much of it left,' and he nodded at the tattered curtains.

Danny peered up at the windows. Through the tears in the curtains he could see splinters of cloud-filled sky, heavy with rain. As he watched, the curtains darkened, and he was gripped by a sense of foreboding, the feeling he imagined would accompany the end of the world. Glancing away, he opened the plastic bag, took out a pill and weighed it in his palm.

'Don't take it,' a voice warned from deep inside his head. But another part of his brain was having none of that. 'Don't listen to that fuckwit,' it sneered. 'He's the one got you in all this trouble in the first place. It's time you had yourself some fun.'

He turned the pill over. It looked harmless enough, not like the stuff Drug pumped into his veins. Was it conceivable that by swallowing this pill he might enjoy his birthday? What the heck, he thought, and tossed it in his mouth. He chased it down with a guzzle of tequila.

'That's the spirit,' said Drug. 'Now my turn.'

While Drug assembled his shooting implements on an open newspaper, Danny crawled back to his mattress and lay with his face to the wall. He couldn't stomach seeing people shoot up, not even in his peripheral vision.

The scraping and tapping as his friend went about his business seemed to be taking place inside his head. Is this the effects of the pill? he wondered, then thought: No, it's too early for that. I'm just dog-tired. And a little bit drunk. He giggled.

A truck zoomed past and at the same moment a red Jaguar came rolling into Danny's mind. It parked behind his eyes and stood with engine running and door open, as if waiting for him to get in. Danny stared at it. Does the man from South Beach still think about me? he wondered. Does he gaze at the photos he took and wish I was his boyfriend? 'Of course he doesn't, you moron,' said the sneering voice, and with that the door slammed shut, the Jaguar drove off and he surrendered himself to sleep.

HE WOKE IN darkness. But it was an insane kind of darkness, filled with miniature fireworks that popped and flared and sparkled before his eyes. All he could discern in the room was a series of dim grey rectangles where the windows were supposed to be, but as he stared, the air hissed and pipes clanged and things started to take on form and texture.

Pushing himself off the mattress, he went to start a fire. His hands were shaking and it took him a few tries to get the match to light, but then the fire

caught and flames surged into the air, splattering him with heat and light. He sprang back in alarm and shook his hands and blew on his fingers, convinced for a moment they were alight. But of course they weren't. His hands were as cold as ice.

Giggling at his mistake, he took out the pills and felt them through the plastic. They were mind-blowing, just as Drug had promised. He was flying high, trembling with excitement, joyful in a way he hadn't been in a long time. He wanted to feel more. He wanted to see God, or at least hear him stamping on the ceiling. Opening the bag, he downed another pill.

'Not too much,' that annoying voice said.

'When he sees God he'll stop,' taunted the other voice, louder now.

'Hey!' cried Danny. 'Shut up, both of you!' He smiled until the muscles in his jaw hurt. Today was his birthday. A new year had begun, the old one was dead and gone, and he decided right there and then that it was time to stop worrying about the past and start living for the now. And oh what a now it was! He wanted to share it with his friend.

Drug was lying on the floor, a long black lump that writhed and pulsated like the Blob. Danny stood spellbound, hardly able to believe his eyes. But then he grew a little scared and went up to him. 'Drug,' he said, nudging him with his foot. 'Hey, dude. Wake up.'

As he nudged and prodded, a shadow moved in the corner of his eye and he leaped away in fright. He could have sworn someone was creeping up on him, stalking him. Glancing around the dark basement, his blood squishing and squirting through his heart, he wondered whether he'd just seen God. 'Don't be stupid,' he told himself. 'I'm not gonna see God.' But he knew he was wrong. He was on the verge of something totally awesome. Of course he was gonna see God!

'Drug!' he shouted, kicking him. 'Wake up, for fuck's sake! You're missing it!'

But Drug wouldn't wake up. Danny bent over him, chuckling when he almost overbalanced, and with a grunting effort heaved him onto his back. His friend stared at him with wide, sightless eyes.

Danny hit his arm. 'Stop fucking around!'

'I'm not fucking around,' said Drug without moving his lips.

He hit him again, harder this time. 'You fucker! Why are you doing this? It's my birthday!'

Suddenly he felt queasy. He grasped his belly with both hands. Something's wrong, he thought. Why won't he wake up?

But then he saw Drug's chest move and heard the hissing of air as it entered and left his lungs. He dropped his chin. 'Okay, man, I get the message. I'll let you sleep it off.' He flicked his wrist at him. 'Pleasant dreams. I'm off out. I'll catch you when I get back.'

He staggered to the door, stopped, turned and frowned back at his friend. 'You gonna be okay, man?'

Drug didn't answer. But at least he was moving around now. It looked like he was starting to wake up.

'Course you're okay,' Danny said, going out the door. 'You're the mighty Drug!'

At the foot of the stairs he stopped and emptied his bladder. Then he took out the bag of pills. He was feeling a little sick in the stomach and worried the drug's effects might be wearing off. Forgetting he'd already taken a second pill, he downed another.

With a self-satisfied smirk, he stumbled up the stairs, across the crumbling, foul-smelling foyer and out to the street. There his nausea fell away, along with every thought in his head. For the world was a spectacle, a carnival, a parade. He stood there reeling with shock as sights and sounds and smells and tastes came hurtling towards him, slamming into his senses, knocking him about. With eyes and mouth open, he looked around in awe, trying to drink it all in. He felt delirious. He wanted to see more.

Placing his feet very deliberately, he started walking. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right …

As he made his way jerkily down the street, people caught his eye and smiled. They wanted to stop and talk to him. Well, of course they did! He was young and attractive and men had paid squillions of dollars just to touch him. Right then, Danny felt as though he could snap his fingers and whichever guy he pointed to would come racing over and fall at his feet and beg him to be his boyfriend. All he had to do was stop and choose. It was a shame he couldn't see clearly enough to take advantage of this remarkable new power. Oh well, those poor guys would just have to wait!

On he walked. After continuing in this jerky, half-blind fashion for God knows how long, he caught a glimpse of a nightclub strip twinkling in the distance. The lights and noises were like a lure and his feet started heading towards them before his mind had even had a chance to make a decision. He

laughed at himself. This was a trip! Though he'd given up his search for God, he was beginning to see the world as a truly beautiful and vibrant place. He had a sense that from this point on, nothing would ever be mundane or disappointing again.

The darkness was soon behind him. Wading through a zone of neon lights, his mind began to inflate. 'Whoa!' he gasped. 'Awesome!'

But no sooner had the words left his mouth than something in his head didn't feel right. There was too much pressure. And the pressure was growing. It was like there were too many brains in his skull and they were heating up fast. The street started exploding with energy. Lights were solid. Faces were colours. Faces flashed. Lights flashed. The street was like a Technicolour soup, bubbling with colours and faces.

And then the lights melted away and he was stumbling down a dimly lit stretch of road. This was better. Without the lights to distract him it was easier to concentrate, easier to walk in a straight line and pretend to be sober and hold his stomach back from spewing its contents into the thick brown sky …

There came a break in time, a glitch in reality. Now he was feeling his way along a wall, falling on his hands and knees in a black alley, propping himself against cold bricks. He heard the wail of a distant siren; laughter; a meow; music from a car radio; more laughter. How long had he been sitting here? It could be ten seconds; it could be an hour.

He squeezed his eyes shut, pressed his fists against them, and suddenly Ben's smiling face emerged from the blackness. Danny sat up. The vision was so intense, so real, he felt like he could reach inside his skull and touch it. But when he closed his eyes again, fangs protruded from Ben's mouth and blood dripped from his eyes and curved talons grew from his fingertips.

His eyes flew open. 'Fuck! What the hell was that?'

He glanced around. Things were starting to get freaky. In the parking lot at the end of the alley was a huge puddle of water, a black lake that looked like oil. It's not oil; it's water, Danny told himself. But now the oil was rippling and parked cars were starting to sink. 'It's not happening,' he muttered. 'It's not real.' And then a scrawny cat jumped off a garbage can, rose on two legs and roared at him, and he sprang to his feet and ran screaming from the alley.

By the time he reached the next corner, he'd recovered his wits. Despite the effects of the pills, he understood the importance of not making a scene by screaming at the top of his lungs and running like an ostrich. To maintain the

illusion of normality he slowed down and concentrated once again on the movement of his feet. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right …

People seemed to be coming towards him, but they were just as likely to be visions, for the visions were stronger now. Every time he blinked he saw wondrous sights: pink and yellow trees; faces that morphed into monsters or mutilated corpses; ropes of colour that twisted into fantastical shapes. Some of the visions were beautiful; all were terrifying. Staggering down the sidewalk, he lost grip on what was real and what was make-believe …

And then he was in Squatter Park, stumbling across the grass, fighting to stay in control of his leaden legs. Sweat was trickling down his back. His clothes were plastered to his skin. Stopping under a light, he ripped his shirt off and flung it over a bush, then swayed for a moment and staggered on. The night air was cold and gooey; it felt like he was moving through a vomitous soup – and it wasn't until he stopped and raised a trembling hand and wiped it across his mouth that he realised the stench really was vomit. When had that happened? He had no idea.

And then came the sound. It was a dull, repetitive pounding, like the noise a factory might make, except in this case the vibrations seemed to emanate from the air itself. One minute the sound was in front of him, the next behind. Danny peered up at the sky. Was this the universe revealing itself to him, beating out time, reminding him his life was a stinking mass of hardship and despair? Or was it God, stamping on the ceiling of the world? Maybe it was a flying saucer, like the one flown by Sheri's parents, those alien colonists from another planet.

As far as he could tell, the sound was coming from Black Abbey Bridge. He tried to steady his eyes, to focus them on the moss-covered stones, and though his efforts were in vain, after a while the sound started to make sense.

'Drug is dead,' it said. 'Drug is dead.'

'No!' he cried, covering his ears. 'That's not true!'

'Drug is dead. Drug is dead.'

'Shut the fuck up!' he screamed at the bridge. 'It's not true!' It couldn't be true! Surely God wouldn't take away the only friend he had left?

'Oh yes he would!' came the voice in his head. 'It's what you deserve. And now you're alone. No one will ever like you again. Drug was the last, and Drug is dead.'

He dropped his hands and stared in terror at Black Abbey Bridge. Above the tracks lay a whirlpool of clouds, thick black whorls that permitted no

glimpse of the universe, God or UFOs. Watching the sky twist and turn and fold in upon itself, Danny felt himself getting sucked into the void. He could feel his hair standing on end, his body lifting, his feet rising to tiptoes. When the world stopped spinning, his legs gave way and he staggered and fell.

The collision between his head and the ground sent a savage jolt through his brain, knocking him senseless. Lying face down, unable to move, he breathed in grass and mud and rotting vegetation, and the odours sparked a memory that transported him to another place and time. In this universe, Danny and his father were rolling about on their overgrown lawn. Giant grasshoppers lived in the grass, and when one of the monsters flew up near Danny's face it scared him half to death and he ran off shrieking in terror. But his father was there to save him and scare the monster away. Lifting his son in his powerful arms, he carried him into their house, sat him on the sofa and promised him that everything would be fine, that he would never ever let anyone or anything hurt him. And just when Danny was beginning to believe it, his father swelled like a week-old corpse, his eyes dripped with blood, the skin sloughed off his face, and Danny whimpered and opened his eyes.

He was back at Squatter Park. Next to his nose was a tuft of grass, the blades green and spiky, jutting from the earth like knives. There were knives under his body too; he could feel them. They'd pierced his chest and belly and blood was leaking from the wounds and seeping into the ground. The pounding noise was fainter now, though it jolted his body with every beat, and in a burst of clarity it came to Danny where the sound was coming from. It was inside him. It was his heartbeat. He willed it to stop, and surprisingly it obeyed.

Now the visions were breaking up. Stars exploded. A horrible pain crackled through his head. And then a switch was flicked and everything collapsed to a single point of light, which fizzled out like a busted TV set.

Rain fell from the bloated sky. Coming at first in single, heavy drops, the grenades of ice exploded on Danny's back and ran in cold rivulets down the curves and crevices of his bruised body. But he felt nothing. As the rain increased, waterfalls formed and streamed down his sides. Seeping into the soil, the water stirred the tiny seeds that were lying in wait for spring. When the earth warmed, the seeds would awaken, pushing blind roots deep into the ground, sending straggly shoots towards the sun, commencing their own life and death struggle on the uncompromising playing field of Squatter Park.

The dream ends

INTO DARKNESS CAME light. It flashed like a torch, white and blinding. Behind the light was a face. When Danny reached towards it, the light flickered and died, bringing a return to darkness.

Next came a dream. The dream too had a light, but this light was warm and yellow and it glowed from an oil lamp. Behind the lamp was Jon. Seeing him there, so handsome and strong, Danny felt such a blaze of love and joy he knew he must be in heaven. Jon was smiling and holding out his hand like a groom greeting his bride on their wedding day, and his shoulders were square and his gaze was tender and he said to Danny, 'I am your father.'

His eyes flashed open. Light came flooding into his brain, hurting him, and he squeezed his eyes shut again. But the light was inside now, swirling in tones of orange and red. Thunder rumbled. Something soft and warm brushed against his cheek. One eye was forcibly opened.

'Danny? Danny? Can you hear me?'

'Go away,' he tried to say, but his lips refused to obey his brain. He knew what the voice was trying to do. It wanted to lure him back to Squatter Park, to that cold, wet, lonely patch of ground where death prowled the grassy knolls, endlessly patient, biding its time till misery and pain had exacted their tolls. The voice was the pounding sound he'd heard on the other side of the blackness and it was back to finish the job it had started.

He mentally plugged his ears. He'd escaped the voice before and he could do it again. He willed the voice away, willed Jon to come back and sit with him forever in that cramped little tent, talking through the night and smiling at him in the light of the lamp. He knew if he opened his eyes he would lose Jon forever. He would be alone again, this time for good.

Another voice came, softer this time, feminine. 'Please, Danny,' it said. 'Please.'

Its effect was similar to the light; Danny reached towards it. 'Sheri,' he whispered. Warm tears squeezed between his closed lids and formed little pools on his face.

'Yes!' came the voice, getting excited. 'It's me! Wake up, Danny! Please! Wake up!'

Reality jabbed at his senses, and reality was cold and hard. The dream of Jon was lost; he would never see it again. Slowly, reluctantly, he opened his eyes.

The face before him wasn't Sheri's. It was the face of a man, a chubby, bald man with round glasses and a wrinkled forehead.

He'd been tricked.

You're a stupid kid, he told himself. What made you think Sheri would be here after the way she's treated you? A machine blipped, a woman coughed, and it dawned on him that he wasn't in heaven – he was lying in a hospital bed. The man leaning over him was a doctor, and the minute Danny regained consciousness he would be patched up and sent back to Squatter Park to begin the game of survival all over again. He felt queasy, as though someone had stuck their hand down his throat and scraped the inside of his stomach.

'Hello there,' said the doctor, revealing a row of pointed teeth.

The room behind him writhed like a wounded animal and Danny's eyes went in and out of focus. A disturbing thought came to him. Maybe this wasn't a doctor. Maybe they were in hell and this was a demon playing tricks on him. He regarded the man with narrowed eyes, half expecting him to grow fangs and drip blood like the people in his drug-induced visions.

The doctor frowned at him. 'How are you feeling? Can you say something for me?'

When Danny stayed silent, he lifted his wrist and stared for a while at his watch. Then he replaced the arm on the bed, pulled Danny's gown open and pressed a stethoscope against the bones of his chest. The stethoscope was cold and it went through him like a knife, but he refused to flinch or cry out. Lying mute and unresponsive, he waited for the doctor to finish his examination and deliver the bad news: that he had a permanent disability and would have to remain in hospital for the rest of his life. He yearned for this verdict. He wanted to be fed by intravenous drip. He wanted to be bathed by a hunky male nurse who would rub a sponge lovingly over every inch of his wasted body. He wanted people to care for him twenty-four hours a day, to feel sorry for him, to bring him flowers and video games and boxes of chocolate.

‘Everything seems in working order,’ said the doctor. He folded his arms and peered at Danny over the rim of his glasses. ‘You did a very stupid thing, son.’

Danny turned his head away. ‘Who cares what you think?’ he wanted to say. But he was worried the doctor would kick him out right there and then if he caused any trouble. Anger blurred his vision. How dare this idiot call him stupid! What did *he* know about hardship and loss and pain? If their fortunes were somehow reversed, the doctor would be dead within a week. He had no instincts for survival. He was weak. At this realisation Danny’s anger subsided and he felt only contempt and pity for the man.

The doctor sighed. ‘You’ve got visitors,’ he said, giving up on his uncooperative patient.

A nurse had been blocking the door, and now she stepped aside and Sheryl rushed into the room. Her eyelashes were wet, her face ashen. She wasn’t wearing any makeup. ‘Danny!’ she cried. She took his hand and squeezed it. ‘Are you alright?’

Doris appeared beside her and together they stared down at him. Danny’s eyes flicked from one to the other. The only thing that felt real to him was the motion of his blood as it churned in his heart and pumped through his body. Everything else had been stripped away, layer by layer, until there was nothing left but flesh, bone and instinct. He was a wild animal, a savage. The notion brought him strength.

‘We were very worried about you,’ said Doris, shaking a finger at him. ‘Why didn’t you tell me you were breaking up from Ben?’

‘It’s my fault,’ said Sheryl. ‘I take all the blame. I shouldn’t have gone away like that. I should have been around.’

When he still didn’t respond, she pulled up a bedside chair. ‘Danny, aren’t you going to say anything?’

He was barely breathing. He wished they would go away and let him go back to sleep.

Doris dragged a chair over. ‘Maybe Danny is tranquilised,’ she said.

Sheryl stroked his hand with her thumb. ‘You’ve got good reason to be upset with me. God knows, I’ve treated you badly.’

He tried to screen out their words, to disappear, to be anywhere but here.

‘I’ll never forgive myself for running out on you like that. I don’t have any excuses. I just got caught up.’

She paused. Danny stared past her. She glanced at Doris. 'You were too young to be left on your own. I mean, you're just a child –'

'I am *not* a child!' Danny cried, half rising from the bed.

The spell was broken. He snatched his hand back.

'Course you're not,' said Sheryl. 'I just wanted –'

'I was fine before you came along. Never needed help from nobody.'

'I know.'

'This was a stupid fuck-up –'

'Yes, I –'

'– so why don't you get the hell out of here and leave me alone?'

She reached out to touch his bruised cheek and he growled at her like a wild animal.

'What happened, Danny?'

'Somebody tried to kill me,' he said coldly, hoping to shock her.

But she barely blinked. 'The doctor said you've been taking drugs.'

'That's a lie! It was my birthday present. The only one I got.'

The comment hit its mark. 'I'm sorry, Danny. I don't know what else to say. Things turned crazy and I fell to pieces.'

'I don't need you,' he said, looking away. 'Why don't you go back to Golden fucking Bay? I can take care of myself. Always have, always will do.'

He studied the man in the next bed, an old fellow with sunken cheeks and plastic tubes sticking out of his nostrils. The bed was surrounded by machines that blipped and sighed in a parody of life. At that moment Danny would have given anything to be that man. He looked so peaceful, so free from worry and pain.

'I don't live at Golden Bay anymore.'

'Yeah?' he said, turning back to her. 'Not good enough for you, hey? Where do you live now? In a castle?'

'Try a beat-up old apartment in Northbridge.'

Danny laughed. The idea was ludicrous. Sheryl had a one-way ticket to the stars.

'You're lying.'

'Afraid not. They found out about Sephryn House and I lost everything. House, job, boyfriend … everything. I was even in jail for a while.' She shrugged as if none of that mattered, but Danny saw a shadow of pain flit across her face. 'Easy come, easy go,' she said.

He watched her closely, searching for a sign that this was a joke.

'No way. Jail? You're a big star. A hero.'

'That doesn't mean a thing when you're a scarlet woman.'

'What's a scarlet woman?'

'A prostitute.'

'But you don't do that anymore.'

'No. But I used to.'

'That was ages ago.'

'That's not how the media sees it. Or Gloria and her cronies. Or … just about the whole planet.'

'They can't sack you for that.'

'If only everybody thought like you.'

'The world is fucked,' said Doris, who was sitting back filing her nails.

A tiny thrill of joy inched its way along Danny's spine. He propped himself up in the bed. 'You're living in Northbridge again?'

'I'm staying with Doris for the time being.'

He shot Doris an accusing look. 'I thought your place was too small for two people,' he said … and then he remembered how that was *his* conclusion, not hers. That was one of the stupid things about this fiasco: he'd made assumptions about people that had no basis in logic. What had made him think Doris would baulk at taking him in? He knew (had always known) that if he'd turned to Doris instead of Drug, she would have done everything in her power to help him get his life back on track.

'Sheri sleeps in the same bed as me,' said Doris. 'She doesn't snore or cut her toenails, so everything is working out A-OK.'

Danny plucked at the bedspread. The world was turned upside down. He wanted desperately for things to go back to the way they were when he lived with Sheri in the old Northbridge apartment and they were happy together. Back then there were no complications. He had a boyfriend; he was studying. Sheri had a job; she was making a heap of money. But even as the thought played itself out, he knew he was wrong in assuming Sheri was happy back then.

He looked at her. She was right to have tried, he thought. Just as he was right to have attempted the reunion with his mother. It was just a fucking shame that everyone had lost, that everyone – with the possible exception of Doris – was worse off now than they'd been this time last year.

'What are you gonna do?' he asked.

She drew a long breath. 'I don't know. Right now I'm in hiding.'

'You could work in an office again.'

'I wouldn't mind that. But I can't see any firms hiring me now, not with my picture splashed all over the papers and the press chasing me down the street.' She glanced over her shoulder as if suddenly remembering the paparazzi might be massing at the door. 'Maybe I should go away, someplace I won't get recognised.'

'No!' Danny cried, panicking at the thought.

'Sheri, something good will come from this,' said Doris. 'You had an adventure and now you need to rest and give yourself time to think.'

'I wish I could be that positive, Doris.' She slid down in the chair. 'It's like I'm trapped. Other women can go straight and put their past behind them. But I've been in the news so much … People won't forget me in a hurry.'

'You could go back to Sephryn House,' Danny suggested. 'You'd get even more clients now, being famous and everything.'

She smiled at him. 'I guess that's an option if nothing else pans out. But one thing I learned from this whole depressing saga is that you need to keep moving forward. So let's wait and see.'

'No need to rush,' said Doris. 'My tiny home is your tiny home.'

'Thanks Doris. Whatever would I do without you?'

A mist rolled into Danny's mind and his head lolled on the pillow. He felt like throwing up. Sheryl was jobless and homeless, virtually broke. The press were hounding her. People were mobbing her in the street. She wasn't in any position to help him. In fact, she was possibly in a worse situation than he was.

'We better go,' said Sheryl. 'You look like you need some rest.'

'Yeah.'

She reached out and stroked the bruise on his cheek. This time he let her.

'How did you know I was here?'

'You know how things are on the strip. There must have been a dozen people saw you staggering down King Albert Street. I followed your trail to the park and one of the kids there told me you were carted off in an ambulance.'

'I fucked up, didn't I?'

'No, Danny. I did. I built your hopes up, then cut you loose. Don't be hard on yourself.'

'No, it was my fault. I'm just a stupid kid.'

'You're not, Danny. Not at all. If I hadn't given you a false sense of security …'

'I'm a fucking idiot.'

'Excuse me, people,' said Doris. 'If we are looking for guilt, why don't we let the night take the blame? That's as good an explanation as any.'

Danny grinned at the inane suggestion. 'The night,' he breathed in a bad impersonation of Vincent Price.

'We better go,' said Sheryl, pushing herself out of the chair. 'They said only five minutes.'

'How long they keeping me here?'

'The doctor said you should stay at least another night. I'll come by later today and see how you're doing.'

'Me too,' said Doris.

'Bye,' said Danny.

They left. A nurse poked his head into the room and was about to say something when he was called away by an emergency down the corridor. Danny stared again at the man in the next bed. Apart from the movements created by the machines, there were no signs of life. Sure he looked peaceful and comfortable, but he may as well have been dead.

He turned his gaze to the window. He'd changed his mind about wanting to stay here forever. He was already bored with the place. And now he had something new and exciting to occupy his thoughts – for the unthinkable had happened and Sheryl had become as destitute as he was. And that meant she needed him. He was now in a position to help her in much the same way she'd once helped him. This time it wouldn't be a case of Danny being saved by Sheryl; this time *he* was the strong one, the one with no baggage weighing him down. He imagined how things might be in another twelve months' time. He would pick up his studies and go back to hustling, maybe even find work in an escort agency, somewhere clean and respectable. And Sheryl would return to Sephryn House and make a stack of money. Together they would save and save until they had enough of a deposit for a luxury apartment (one with security gates and a pool) and maybe they'd have enough left over for a big red sports car. It would be like the past few months had never happened. It would be better than ever.

He closed his eyes and summoned a pleasant dream. Sleep came quickly, bringing with it a vision of a light-filled house with flowers on the table and lace curtains billowing into the room. In the dream was the scent of roses, the

squawking of gulls, the glint of sunlight on crystal. There was the suggestion of a lover, a sense of being loved.

But as he slipped further into unconsciousness, the dream was replaced by a vision of cars sinking into a vast pit of oil, leaving in their wake a froth of black, viscous bubbles. In each of the cars was someone Danny knew: Sheryl, Ben, Doris, his mother. As the oil claimed the cars, the captives clawed at the windows, their eyes boggling with fear, their fingertips torn and bloody. The scariest thing about the dream was that Danny was in it too, trapped in a sinking car. Staring out at the nightmare vista, oil leaking through the air-conditioning vents and window seals, he opened his mouth and released a long, mute, terrified scream.

Going home

DORIS LIVED IN a tiny one-room apartment on the fifth floor of a gargantuan block. The elevator was out of order, so they trudged up the concrete stairs, past kicked-in doors and blaring TV sets, past graffiti scrawled in red and black paint on the grubby walls, past empty pot plants and dirty ashtrays and used syringes and old Vietnamese men who sat contemplating the jagged horizon.

On the third floor a baby girl in a soiled nappy stood clutching the railings, peering at the muddy ground below. Without breaking her stride, Doris swept her up, deposited her in a nearby doorway and called out for the mother. The baby was not happy. A thumb jammed in her mouth, she watched until the two strangers rounded the corner, then crawled out and sat defiantly at the top of the stairs.

Inside the apartment the women threw their bags on the bed and kicked off their shoes. Aside from the double bed, the furniture consisted of two wooden chairs, a fold-down table, a white laminate closet and an old pine dresser. An adjoining recess housed a sink, cupboards, a small refrigerator and a portable gas cooker. A half-closed door led to the tiny bathroom.

Sheryl said, 'Doris, this place wasn't made for three people. What will we do with Danny?'

Doris leaned against the wall. 'We can lay a mattress at the end of the bed.'

'No, that won't work. Not for more than a night or two.' She scuffed the carpet with her toe, as if the answer was hidden somewhere in the orange shag pile. 'I need to start thinking about something more permanent, somewhere Danny and me can start over.' She glanced up. 'Hey, and you can live with us too! Yeah, that's a great idea! We'll get a three-bedroom place and be like a crazy, mixed-up family!'

Doris pushed herself off the wall and went to the dresser. She picked up a framed photo of her two boys and stood staring down at it. The picture shook a little in her hand.

'It'll be like the old days. Except this time you'll be there to make sure me and Danny don't make any stupid mistakes.'

When Doris didn't reply, she took off her earrings and watch and placed them in her suitcase, which lay open on the floor. As the wall clock ticked off the seconds, she fell back on the bed and set her mind on Danny. She recalled his sallow skin and skinny arms, the cuts and bruises on his arms and face, the black rings around his eyes. Last night he'd almost died. Today, at first, he wouldn't even acknowledge her. He was a shell of his former self.

'I won't be able to live with you, Sheri.'

She just hoped she hadn't ruined their relationship. What if Danny never wanted to see her again, never mind live with her? How could she prove she wouldn't hurt him all over again?

'Sorry, Doris, what was that?'

'I am going home.'

She sat up. 'Home?' she croaked, as if this tiny apartment was the only home Doris had ever known.

'Aha. Home. To my family.'

Sheryl stared at her, a succession of emotions seething inside her, vying for attention. Most were selfish. She couldn't help but view this as yet another crisis, the latest in a string of cosmic conspiracies against her.

'That's great, Doris,' she said, getting off the bed, trying to look pleased.

'I have missed too much of my boys' lives. If I stay here for any longer, they will forget me. Or hate me. No amount of money is worth losing my family.'

'Oh, I know, I know. To be honest, I'm surprised you stuck it out this long. Impressed, I mean.'

The silence that followed burst with sounds: doors slamming, children screaming, pots clanging, pipes banging. Sheryl wanted to say something encouraging, something to let Doris know she and Danny would be alright, but she was scared she'd fall apart if she opened her mouth right now.

'I'm really happy for you,' she said at last.

'Thank you, Sheri.'

She looked at the photo in Doris's hand. The twins, dressed in grey shorts and white short-sleeved shirts, were standing arm in arm, competing with each other to produce the widest smile. Tears welled in her eyes. She couldn't begin to imagine the boys' reaction when they saw their mother again – or Doris's reaction, for that matter.

‘What about being a teacher? Will you follow through with that when you get back?’

Doris smiled at her. ‘That was a crazy idea,’ she said, replacing the picture on the dresser. ‘I would not make a good teacher.’

‘What? That’s bullshit, Doris! You’re the wisest person I know! And your English is better than mine! No, Doris, please! You’ve got to keep on trying! You can’t throw everything away! Not after all the work you’ve done!’ Aware she was becoming a little hysterical, she dropped her hands and said, ‘You’ll keep on studying, won’t you?’

‘Of course. I will take my books and tapes with me.’

‘You can’t go to college or something?’

‘College is expensive, Sheri.’ Her eyes returned to the photo of her boys. It was clear there was only one thing on her mind.

‘Doris, you’ve got to promise me you’ll keep up with your reading.’

‘I will try.’

‘No, I need more than that. I need a promise.’

‘Okay then, I promise.’

Sheryl was trying her hardest to hold back her tears and focus on the positives, but the news of the upcoming family reunion was tainted by the realisation that Doris’s own dream would be lost. It was a bitter disappointment, a blow she felt personally.

‘Doris,’ she said, ‘are you sure you can’t stay a bit longer? Now I’m back, I can help with the money situation.’

‘Thank you for the offer, Sheri. But no.’

‘Maybe fly back for a visit?’

She knew without Doris saying anything what a stupid idea that was. She stared down at the bed. ‘I suppose this mean you’ll go back to the bars?’

‘It’s what I do best. Things will not be so terrible now that my boys have their school.’

‘But it’ll be a struggle, won’t it?’

‘No more than it was before.’

‘You can’t stay maybe a few weeks longer?’

‘My boys need me.’

‘What about *me*, Doris? I need you too. I’ll miss you.’

Doris walked around the bed and sat on one of the wooden chairs. ‘You will not miss me. You are only saying that to be polite.’

When Sheryl went to protest, Doris held up a hand. 'Sheri,' she said, 'you believe that you will miss me. You even convince yourself you will be sad after I'm gone. But I can tell you; your feelings will not last. Did you miss me when you were living in Golden Bay? Did you miss Danny?'

'Please don't bring that up. I made a mistake.'

'A mistake, yes. But your mistake shows it is not people you miss, it's affection. When you find a new friend, or a lover, you forget about the other people who care for you.'

The criticism cut deeply. 'That's unfair, Doris. You make me sound like a heartless fiend.' She flopped on the bed and stared miserably at the yellow light shade, which was filled with dead and dying insects. 'I've learned my lesson,' she said. 'I'm not like that anymore.'

But had she really learned her lesson? Certainly Doris didn't think so. Her thoughts returned to the day she told Danny she wanted to leave Northbridge and then persuaded him to move in with Ben. But no, her selfishness started well before that day, even before the day Gloria presented her with the opportunity of a lifetime. It began the day she first offered Danny a home. For though she'd convinced herself she was doing it for his benefit, her prime consideration at the time had been her own happiness. She'd proven that by her subsequent behaviour, when the happiness failed to appear. But what did that matter? she asked herself. She'd turned Danny's life around, and in the end wasn't that all that counted? Some would argue yes. But Sheryl wasn't convinced. Charity is an elusive thing. We all do unselfish things because it makes us feel better than if we didn't do them. Would Mother Teresa have devoted her life to helping the poor had she not gained spiritual satisfaction from the duty? Would Andrew have spent all that time in Ethiopia if he didn't suffer the guilt of living off the fat of capitalism?

She was unable to take the thought further. Sheryl was no theorist or philosopher. The events of recent months had taught her not so much how to think as how to act, and because of this she knew what she was going to do, if not exactly why.

She said to Doris, 'Don't worry about Danny. We'll find an apartment like the old one. And we'll get jobs and save up till we can afford something better. Things will be as different as night and day this time round; I can promise you that.'

Doris got up from the chair and joined her on the bed. 'Thank you, Sheri. You don't –'

‘And next time I meet a guy, there’s no way he’s coming between us. Danny and me are a package. You get one, you get the other.’

‘Thank you, Sheri. I –’

‘Why would I want a man in my life who can’t accept my friends as much as I accept his?’

‘I –’

‘Danny’s my family. He’s more family than my real family.’

Doris grabbed a pillow and smothered her with it. Lifting it a little, she said, ‘I am very glad to hear your promise.’ She tossed the pillow away. ‘And Sheri, I apologise for my rudeness. It was a test, to see how much you have learned from the past year. Let me see …’ She pretended to do mental arithmetic. ‘Yes, I will give you ten out of ten. A perfect score! Congratulations! Go to the top of the class!’

Sheryl sat up and regarded her friend with glistening eyes. She could always count on Doris to bring out the best in her. How the hell would she manage without her?

‘What did I tell you?’ she said with an unhappy smile. ‘You were born to be a teacher.’

The call

THE DAY AFTER Doris left, the phone rang. Very few people had this number, and one of them was Gloria, so it wasn't surprising Sheryl would pull her hands from the sink so quickly that suds splashed all over her shirt front. She snatched up the phone.

'Oh, hi,' said a man's voice. 'Is this Sheryl?'

It wasn't Gloria. It wasn't anyone she recognised. Her temples throbbed. She wiped first one hand, then the other on her shirt.

'Hello? You there?'

'How the hell did you get this number? Don't you know it's unlisted for a reason?'

There was silence on the other end. She tapped her foot on the tiles, awaiting an explanation or apology.

'I'm sorry,' came the voice. 'I thought you wouldn't mind.'

She stopped tapping. The man's tone intrigued her. He didn't sound at all like a reporter. Most launched into their questions without even bothering to verify her identity, and then they acted like she owed them a favour. They were invariably brash and intrusive. Very few, if any, knew the meaning of sorry.

'Who is this?'

'Andrew. Sorry, I thought you'd recognise my voice.'

Sheryl placed a damp hand on her forehead. Andrew was the last person she wanted to talk to. He was the only one from that other life whose opinions she valued and whose respect she would have done anything to maintain. Just the sound of his voice made her feel dirty.

'Andrew, this is a bad idea. I feel awful about what's happened. I've sent letters to the board, but they won't –'

'You don't need to apologise.'

'Maybe not. But maybe you could let your mother know I never wanted to –'

'Sheryl, you don't need to apologise to my mother either. As far as I'm concerned, you did nothing wrong.'

She closed her mouth, thinking: He's just saying that.

'I'm not just saying that either.'

She pinched the flesh between her eyes. Andrew's pity was something she couldn't deal with right now. She stared at the suds in the sink, yearning to put the phone down and go back to them. 'Andrew …'

'You were the best thing to ever happen to the foundation … and Frank, for that matter. The fact all this stuff has come out doesn't alter a thing … or it shouldn't. The way people have treated you is disgusting. I'd apologise on behalf of my mother and my brother and the whole board if I thought it'd mean anything to you.'

'Thank you, Andrew. I really appreciate you calling.'

'Don't hang up! That's, um … You still there? That's not what I rang about.'

Sheryl held her breath. From the second she left jail, she'd been worried Gloria was up to something – pressing the police to arrest her for fraud or mustering an army of lawyers to sue her for bringing the charity into disrepute. Was this what Andrew was ringing about?

'Can we meet?' he asked. 'We need to talk. About something important.'

'Important?' She felt sick. 'Look, I'm sorry. I don't get out much these days.'

'This is special. Worth going out for. Just give me a chance to explain.'

'Okay. Explain now.'

'I could, but it's too big to discuss over the phone.'

'Good big or bad big?'

'Good big.'

She moved the phone to her other ear. 'You better tell me what this is about.'

'Let's just say I've got a proposal that could make you the biggest star on the globe.'

'Oh no,' she groaned. 'Not again.'

He went silent. 'Isn't that what you wanted? – to be a star?'

'Of course. It *was*. But not now; not anymore. Being famous doesn't figure in my plans anymore.'

'Surely it won't hurt to hear me out?'

She went to the sink and flicked her fingers through the bubbles. 'Andrew, I'm tired. I just need to be left alone.'

'Is that really how you feel? Or is all this craziness getting inside your head?'

The question stumped her. Andrew's tone reminded her of that night at Gloria's party when with a few words of wisdom he'd turned around a seemingly unsalvageable situation. Was it wise to push away the only person who might add some sense to this new, far bigger predicament?

A tiny ray of hope warmed her face. 'Okay, Andrew,' she said, closing her eyes, 'I know I'll live to regret this, but … tell me what you have in mind.'

'Not over the phone. Can we meet somewhere?'

The door opened and Danny came in carrying a plate of sausages. He'd been at a barbecue at the Rainbow Meeting Place (a drop-in centre for gay and lesbian youth) and was bringing the leftovers home so Sheryl wouldn't have to spend her precious savings on dinner. He put the plate on the table, glanced at the dirty dishes in the sink, then stood watching her.

She said to Andrew, 'Do you know Northbridge at all? King Albert Street?'

Andrew did.

'There's a place called Joe's Pizzas, on the main stretch, almost opposite the fountain. How about we meet there in half an hour?'

'Half an hour's fine.'

'Okay, then. If you get lost, you'll see me sitting in the window, like they do in Amsterdam.'

She heard an uneasy laugh on the other end of the call, which made her wonder how accepting of her past Andrew really was. Well, she was about to find out.

'The place is nothing upmarket,' she said, 'not like what you're used to. You might even say it's a bit of a dive. But I feel comfortable there. I used to know the owner.'

'Anywhere is fine with me.' His voice became deeper, firmer, and at the same time warmer and more sincere. 'I'm not like my brother, Sheryl. Or my mother. I think you already know that. At least, I hope you do. I'd meet you in a food court if that's where you felt most comfortable.'

'Half an hour then.'

'Half an hour.'

She hung up.

Danny asked, 'Who was that?'

'Andrew.'

'Who's that?'

'My ex's brother.'

'Is he ringing to make an appointment?'

'Danny!'

'Is he cute?'

'Very. A tanned, blond hunk. But he's in love with somebody else.'

He shrugged. 'Aren't they all?'

She stepped around his mattress and opened the closet door. 'Andrew's different,' she said, taking out a dark blue sweater. 'He's nothing like his brother. He said he's got an offer I can't refuse.'

Danny thumped the wall. 'You be careful, Sheri! Don't let yourself get sucked in again!'

She smiled at him. Nine days after his brush with death, he no longer resembled a boxer after a gruelling fight. And as his wounds healed, he was changing in other, more fundamental ways. He was growing up. For the first time in their acquaintance, Sheryl could accept Danny as her protector and not simply as a dependant or a victim. As she gazed into his passion-filled eyes, it came to her that he no longer needed her. They were becoming equals … which is the foundation of true friendship. They'd never been closer. She'd never been more scared of losing him.

'Thanks for the warning, Danny,' she said, throwing the sweater on the bed. 'It's nice to know there's somebody looking out for me. You'd think I wouldn't need a reminder after all that's happened; but to be honest I trust Andrew completely. Which means I'm probably setting myself up for another fall.'

Danny frowned at her phone. He seemed to be listening to a message only he could hear. 'You know, Sheri,' he said, the frown leaving his face. 'This time I don't think so.'

The dream begins

'SHERI!' JOE CRIED, pulling off his apron. 'This is unbelievable! Where the hell you been? Why didn't you come and see me?'

The worry Sheryl had felt on the walk here evaporated in an instant. Joe's welcome made her return feel like a homecoming.

'Hi Joe,' she said. 'I've been away. Living in suburbia.'

He came out from behind the counter. 'So I heard. So I heard. I was told you fixed up now.'

Smiling back at him, she ran an appreciative eye over his trendy hairstyle, his open, honest face, the solid, familiar curves of his body. 'Well, I'm back now. And the boyfriend's gone.'

'Aw, that's too bad,' he said, not bothering to hide his delight at the news. 'I'll get you something. On the house. You want coffee? Pizza maybe?'

'Just a coffee, thanks. I'm meeting somebody.'

'A man?' His face dropped. 'Course it's a man. Gee, they move fast, don't they? Can't blame 'em. You're more gorgeous than ever, if that's even possible.'

He went back behind the counter and retied his apron.

Sheryl found a seat near the window, adjusted her scarf and sat staring into the sombre afternoon. Across the road, in the window of a kebab shop, a thin woman in tights was sipping from a polystyrene cup. The woman was part of the early shift, a heroin addict who worked King Albert Street during the afternoon rush hour, preying on the bored businessmen who gravitated to the bars of Northbridge after a tough day at the office. Sheryl watched her for a while, thinking about the future. Women turned and returned to sex work for all sorts of reasons, and most of them, if questioned, would claim they were doing it for a valid reason – whether that reason be drugs, children, nymphomania, power or simply to carve out the slice of the economy that TV and the print media tell them they're entitled to. The important thing is not the reason, it's the plain fact that women have the right to make these kinds of

decisions; the right to use their bodies as they see fit; the right to haul themselves and their loved ones out of the poverty trap and create a brighter future for the generations to come. Surely poverty, condemnation and abuse are greater evils than prostitution? Surely they destroy more lives?

From the corner of her eye she saw Andrew dashing across the road. Dressed in beige loafers, cream slacks and a white cashmere sweater, he made everything else on King Albert Street look vulgar and unclean. Oh yes, it was fine for Andrew to rail against greed and oppression, but how much of this was propaganda? – empty words from a directionless rich boy? Seeing him again, she thought: Why did I agree to this? and ducked her head in the hope he would jog on past.

But he'd already seen her. He waved at her from the other side of the glass, then came pushing into the shop.

'I'm so happy you came,' he cried, puffing as he slid into a seat. 'I was betting fifty-fifty you wouldn't show.'

Blowing warm air into his hands, he checked out his surroundings (which included Joe, who stood watching them with a fist on either hip). Sheryl looked around too and noticed that changes had been made since she was last here. The dog-eared poster of Sicily was replaced by a print of a white-washed house overlooking the bluest ocean she'd ever seen. And the walls had been repaired and repainted, obliterating all traces of the scratches, dents and grease stains that had accumulated over countless decades. The sign over the counter now read Joe's Pizzeria, the letters embellished with painted vines and plump, brightly-coloured vegetables.

Andrew said, 'I love Northbridge. The place has so much character, so much life. In my teens I used to hang here – over there, near the fountain – with this gang of tough guys. I think I did it to piss off my poor mother. Every time my friends came over, she'd have a pink fit. She was terrified they'd steal the Van Goghs or something. I'm sure she had the maids check everything afterwards.'

Sheryl stared at him.

'I know that sounds fatuous; the rich kid pretending he's a friend to the poor. I'm not saying it to give you the impression I know what it's like to be disenfranchised. I –'

'You don't need to explain yourself,' interrupted Sheryl, who for a time had lost herself in his dreamy blue eyes. 'I don't think those things at all. I

believe you're a truly nice person who would make the world a better place if he had it in his power. I've always thought that.'

He grinned sheepishly. 'Why, thank you, ma'am. True as that may be, I'm still a member of the privileged class and it's a lot easier for *me* to be a philanthropist than it is for some poor soul who needs to work sixty hours a week to pay the rent and put food on the table. But we're not here to talk about me. We're here to talk about changing the world.'

'Changing the world? Is that what this is about?'

'It's about a lot of things.'

Joe came up with a cup of coffee. 'There you go, sweetheart,' he said, placing it on the table. 'Still the best on the strip. What can I get you, mister?'

'The same thanks.'

Joe paused to take stock of Andrew's leather shoes, linen pants and cashmere sweater. When he saw he was being watched, a red flush crept up from his collar. Wiping his hands down his own greasy trousers, he went back behind the counter.

'Joe's a nice guy,' said Sheryl, smiling at his back. 'I used to come here before work.'

The unintended reference to Sephryn House threw her. She lifted her cup to her mouth and blew on it – perhaps attempting to create a fog she might hide behind. After a small sip, she lowered the cup and said, 'How's Alastair? I hope he's not confused about what happened to me.'

'I haven't seen him since all this started. His grandmother probably told him you died or went to Africa or something, knowing the way her mind operates.'

'He's not a bad kid. At first I thought he was spoiled – and I guess he is – but really he's just like any other little boy. He needs somebody to love him. That's probably why he acts up all the time. Like his father.'

The words were out before she could stop them. She hadn't wanted to talk about Frank; these days she couldn't even bring herself to say his name. But since her release from prison she hadn't read a paper, listened to the radio or watched the news, and so she knew nothing about his fate. Till this afternoon this was the way she wanted things, but Andrew's call had uncoiled a curiosity that for the past half hour had been tightening its noose around her neck.

'How *is* your brother?' she asked suddenly. 'Still on the outside?'

He sat back. 'Yeah. I doubt the case will go any further.'

'What? I thought they had proof.'

'Everything's circumstantial. He has an alibi.'

'I know. I saw her.'

'You did? A stylish-looking woman? Lots of jewellery? Black hair?'

'That's the one.'

'She's the Countess Maria something-or-other. Italian nobility, so I'm told.'

But Sheryl had no interest in 'the other woman'. 'What difference does it make if he's got an alibi? I thought he paid somebody else to start the fire?'

'That was the angle they were working. But turns out this woman signed a deal with Frank two days before the fire – something worth a helluva lot of money. So the theory he was in dire straits has gone out the window. Which means: no motive.'

She sighed, wearied by all the shenanigans. 'You buying this?'

'Not for one minute. It's part of the scam.'

'He's very smart –'

'– and he's got friends in high places –'

'– so I'm not surprised he covered his tracks.' She stared into her coffee. 'I only wish I'd done the same.'

Andrew looked grave. 'Before we go on,' he said, 'I need to state clearly and unambiguously that there's absolutely nothing wrong with working in the adult industry. I could be trite and say I know tons of people in the industry, but really, the only woman I ever met who worked as a prostitute – before you, that is … I mean, before –' He glanced at the ceiling, then down at the table. 'Anyhow, there was a woman in one of my classes who turned tricks to pay for her education. One day she stood up in a Women's Issues lecture and outed herself as a sex worker. She said (and I've always remembered this) … She said that as a feminist she needed to make a stand for other women who didn't have the same advantages as her. By keeping her job a secret, she was perpetuating the myth that sex work is something to be ashamed of.'

'I'll never understand how people can be open about it like that,' said Sheryl. 'I mean, it'd be easy for me to stand up now and say it was my choice and it doesn't make me a bad person, but that's only because virtually everybody on the planet already knows about me. It's different owning up to something when you've got everything to lose.'

'Which is why I don't blame you for what happened. The pressure on you must have been enormous. All those times you saw yourself on TV …'

‘Andrew, please. If you don’t mind, I’d rather not talk about that. I’m trying to put it all behind me.’

He pressed his hands together and placed them against his lips. ‘That’s the opposite of what I think you should do.’

She stared at him.

‘Listen, Sheryl. You can’t deny you’ve had some incredible experiences lately. But all along it’s been other people pulling the strings. You worked like mad to make a go of it, and all that time the hangers-on were there prowling on the sidelines, taking advantage and waiting for the chance to pull the rug out from under you. That’s the way my mother’s world works. They don’t take kindly to outsiders infiltrating their ranks. By the way, on a completely related subject, have you heard she’s back on the board?’

Sheryl hadn’t. Not that it surprised her. It took a lot to surprise her these days.

‘Back as president, no less. Yes … president. She convinced them one scandal was one too many, and if the media found out how they’d stuck the knife in their founder and patron saint, it’d be curtains for them. She was probably right, too. Though I can’t help but suspect there was a touch of blackmail thrown in for good measure.’

She had to laugh. ‘Good old Gloria. She and Frank are quite a pair.’

‘I thought you’d get a laugh out of it.’

‘You either have to laugh or cry.’

‘As I was saying, people have been using you from the start, wringing everything they can out of the foundation’s success and not giving a damn about you. Well, they’ve used you, they’ve gotten their pound of flesh and now you’ve been tossed aside. It’s time you turned things around.’

She guessed where he was heading and shook her head. ‘No, Andrew. If you’re talking about suing the board for breach of contract or something, I’m not interested. That’s not me.’

‘I’m not talking about suing them.’

‘Blackmailing them, then.’

‘Not that either.’

Turning her face to the window, she studied the dense, angry sky. Rain was on its way and she’d forgotten to bring her umbrella. If she didn’t leave soon, she ran the risk of walking home in the wet.

‘I’m not talking about any kind of revenge. Thanks,’ he said to Joe, who’d appeared with his coffee. ‘So, Joe, you expecting a busy night?’

Joe seemed surprised that Andrew knew his name. 'Yessir,' he said. 'Rain or shine, they're always hungry in these parts.' He glanced from Andrew to Sheryl. 'You two know each other long?'

Sheryl said, 'Not really. Andrew's the brother of my ex.'

'I'm the nice one.'

'Ahh,' said Joe with a huge smile. 'Brother of the ex. I better leave you guys alone then,' and off he went humming a tune.

Sheryl watched Andrew sipping his coffee. When he lowered his cup, she said, 'Come on, Andrew, stop prancing around. What's all this about?'

He leaned over the table. 'In a nutshell, I think you should tell your story.'

'My story's already been told.'

'Well, yes and no. The media's told one version of the story. My mother's told several others. But none of those versions are the truth.'

'Nobody wants to hear the truth. The press have made me out to be as disgusting and deceitful as they possibly can.'

'That's what I'm talking about. Can you honestly say what's been reported is anywhere near what really happened? – how it felt?'

'Of course not.'

'When I switch on the news, all I see are shots of strip joints and girls running down cars. That's what the public is seeing and that's what ends up defining you. If you let it.'

'I don't have a choice.'

'You do.'

'Are you're saying I should sell my story to the magazines?'

'That would be playing into their hands. They'd still twist your words around if they thought it'd sell more copies.'

'Andrew, this is frustrating. You better tell me what you've got in mind.'

'Sorry, Sheryl. I thought I'd ease you into the idea. I know I'm making a mess of it. Okay, remember when we were in Ethiopia and I told you I'm a frustrated writer? Well, Kelly's right. I'm a writer in search of a cause. I can't write any old book. It's got to be something I'm passionate about, a story that'll give the average person an inkling of what it's like to be poor or oppressed. Trouble is, the public mostly wants to read about sex and drugs and the rich and famous. Can you see where I'm heading?'

'You want to write a book about me?'

He smiled his reply.

She frowned at him. Is this where all her hopes and dreams had led? – to another exposé on prostitution? They could call it *The Unhappy Hooker*. Or *Pretty Woman II – Judgment Day*.

'So. What do you think?'

She rubbed her eyes. 'It's been done before.'

'No!' he cried, shuffling in his seat. 'You misunderstand. I haven't explained it right. Of course there's hundreds of books about prostitutes, but they're all about sex and the things people do behind closed doors. What I'm proposing is something completely different; something about you as a person; about your life. And along the way I'll pepper it with philosophies around morality and poverty and freedom of choice and Third World politics and … free-market capitalism in the twenty-first century. It'll be a biography with a message.'

'A biography? About me? Who the hell would buy that?'

'Millions of people! Sheryl, yours has not been your average, run-of-the-mill life. Not by a long shot. Your story's got all the elements of a blockbuster. And it's real! Not only that, you've got charisma. And your face is more famous than my mother's right now. I'm telling you, with me as your ghost writer, your book will be a guaranteed bestseller. It'll blow the Gloria Meadows story right out of the water!'

Sheryl couldn't help but be drawn by the notion of booting Gloria's book off the shelves and into the discount bins. But to expose her life like that, for all to read? What would her parents think? More importantly, how would Gloria react?

'Your mother would have an absolute fit. How could you do that to her?'

'Come on. Don't tell me you're worried about my mother's feelings?'

'No. Not particularly. But you must be. What would it do to your relationship?'

'I'm not talking about writing something trashy or unkind. We'd have to tread lightly around Gloria's evil side. That's the only condition.'

'I wouldn't think of crossing swords with that …' She shook the word out of her head. 'With your mother. But Andrew, that's not the point. Just the fact you're siding with the enemy would be enough to send her into a spin.'

'I've already planned for that. I'll make sure it doesn't come back on you.'

'I don't understand why you'd want to do this. Is it because of Frank?'

'It's got nothing to do with him. No, that's wrong. It's got everything to do with him. And my mother. Look, I don't pretend to understand why I feel the

need to clean up after my family. I just do. I'm not doing this to go against them; I'm doing it to help *you*. And because it's the right thing to do. And because it's in my power to do it.'

Sheryl could feel herself getting close to tears. Knowing this amazing, compassionate man cared enough about her to risk alienating his family made the world seem a little brighter. It was just a shame his proposal was out of the question.

'Thanks for thinking about me, Andrew. You don't know how much it means. I really … I don't know what to say.'

'Say yes.'

'I can't.'

'But … What?'

'As I said before, I want this nightmare to end.'

His face softened. He pulled his chair around the table. 'I know things are hard for you,' he said in a voice overflowing with empathy. 'But I'm not talking about perpetuating the nightmare. I'm talking about creating a dream.'

'A dream,' she mused, gazing into his eyes.

'Look at it this way. You can either let your fame destroy you or you can use it to get where you want to be. And along the way make things better for other women in your situation. They might not be able to stand up and affirm that they're normal, everyday people, but *you* can. The talk shows will lap it up.'

'No, no, no!' Sheryl cried, pulling away from him. 'I will not be a spokesperson for prostitution!'

He opened his palms. 'I'm not suggesting that. I'm not. I'm only saying that when people read your book, they'll hopefully see the world in a different light. And I hate to point this out, but what alternatives do you have? The media won't let this die. They think you pulled a fast one on them and they're out to tell the world that no one does that and gets away with it. Your story will continue to be told. You can either take control of it or you can stand back and let others do it for you. I can tell you which will get you further.'

'I see where you're coming from. I do. But … I don't think I'm up to it. I think I should hide out, disappear for a while. And maybe things will blow over. My life might get back to normal.'

'Do you really think that will happen?' Before she could respond, he appeared to have a change of heart. 'Okay,' he said. 'Look, I don't want to

push you into anything you don't want to do. But let me tell you a story. Yeah, yeah, she says: another story!' He flashed her the most enchanting smile she'd ever seen, then said, 'Many moons ago – in my last year of school – my mother packed me off to a guidance counsellor to help me decide what I wanted to be when I grew up. This guy talked to me for an hour about my academic record and likes and dislikes and then he used a grid to work out what line of work I was best suited for.'

'What was it?'

'A lawyer or corporate executive. I think my mother got to him. Anyhow, despite the dubious outcome, I've always thought that's an extremely sensible way of making a decision about your future. Do you feel like trying it? Can't hurt.'

She peered again at the darkening sky, which seemed to be scowling at her. Well, let it scowl, she thought. The most it can do is wet me. Having thumbed her nose at Mother Nature, she turned and gave Andrew a complacent shrug.

'Okay then, let's take a look at your experience and skills. One: you know a lot about the escort business, and I'd guess you've got a million stories below your belt … Uh, I mean … plenty of stories to tell.' The blood rushed to his cheeks. 'Okay. Sorry. Moving on. Two: you know what it's like to be poor and you've also dipped your toes into the world of the rich and famous. Three: you went to Ethiopia and starred in a hugely successful world aid campaign. Four: you've appeared on TV, including as a guest of Sammy Jo Hartman, no less. What else? You came close to getting killed in a car crash. You've worked in an office. You burnt down your parents' house. You've been arrested and thrown in jail for a crime you didn't commit.' He lifted his shoulders. 'I'm sure there's more I don't even know about. Oh yeah, and of course you're a singer and you've done public speaking and you've worked with the media.'

'I've been busy, haven't I?'

'I'm surprised you're still standing.'

When Andrew realised he'd let slip another double entendre, he went even redder. But Sheryl only laughed. It felt good to laugh about things that had caused her so much distress and depression. She only wished she could keep on laughing until the hurts and disappointments had withered and died, until someone tapped her on the shoulder and told her the nightmare was over and she could wake up and rejoin the world of the living.

'The question,' Andrew said, growing serious, 'is this: What should you do with all this experience? Look for another underpaid job in an office and pray your story doesn't pop up again and ruin everything? That would employ maybe one of the things on your list. Or hope against hope to get that elusive recording contract, maybe? Or should you write this book and make use of everything that's in you? I can help you write a great book, Sheryl; one that'll be a guaranteed bestseller. After that, I can assure you, there'll be the lecture circuit, if that's what you want. You'll earn a bundle travelling around the country speaking to university students and community groups about women's issues. It's money in the bank. I wasn't kidding when I said you could be the biggest star around. And you can do it simply by being yourself.'

Sheryl stared at him. The prospect terrified her. If she accepted his offer, it would mean laying open her entire life and being stuck with the label 'prostitute' forever. Did she really want that? But even if she declined, if she said a final goodbye to Andrew, went back to that dreary one-room apartment and continued the heartbreaking task of piecing together the rubble of her life, she would never break free from the stigma of her past. No matter how far she ran, no matter what she did to alter her appearance and hide the truth, she would forever live in fear that someone would uncover her secret and use it against her. Wasn't it better to be open and honest? And rich?

Andrew took that opportunity to play his trump card. 'You may not have heard this,' he said, 'but the first thing my mother did when she got back on the board was cancel your contract. You know what that means?'

She did.

'You're free. You can do anything you want. You can take up that recording contract.'

'Recording contract?' She shook the stars from her eyes. 'Get real, Andrew. Who'd want to sign me up now?'

He looked at her in astonishment. 'You still don't understand the bizarre nature of fame, do you? These days it doesn't matter how good or bad you are. What matters is how interesting you are. And you are interesting. You put out a CD now and it'll sell twice as many as it would have before.'

'But …'

'Do you realise that since all this started, donations to the foundation have skyrocketed?'

She frowned at him. 'How?

‘It’s you, m’dear. Sure, some of the so-called Moral Majority have pulled out their patronage, but that’s been more than compensated for by all the horny guys who’ve suddenly noticed the foundation exists. And who’s responsible for that? No matter how much you might hate it, sex sells.’

Sheryl struggled to breathe. As Andrew went on about the place of sex and fame and scandal in today’s gossip-hungry world, she listened with eyes wide, her heart racing as fast as it had during her first audience with Gloria Meadows. How could she have believed her life was over? You can’t experience everything she’d experienced without emerging stronger.

‘Do you think we can pull it off?’ she asked, her eyes glistening.

‘Are you prepared to put your life on show, for everyone to see?’

‘Like you said, it’s a bit late to say no.’

‘Then, Sheryl, the rest is up to you. If you believe you can do it – if you believe you won’t crack under the pressure – because there *will* be pressure – then the sky’s the limit.’

Her hands were shaking so much she was scared to pick up her cup in case coffee went flying all over the table. After months of deceptions and lies, of covering her tracks and glancing nervously over her shoulder, what would it be like to live out in the open, with no secrets and no fear? What would it be like to be famous because of who she was, not who she was pretending to be?

She gazed out at the scarlet sunset which was battling to be seen amidst the crush of angry clouds and thrusting buildings. In most novels sunsets signify death or the end of something, but at this moment Sheryl could only see the approaching darkness as the start of something new, something big and real and full of life.

She turned back to Andrew, whose face was glowing in the last rays of the day.

‘If we’re to do this,’ she said, ‘I need to insist on one thing.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Please … call me Sheri.’

SIX | FAME

At the altar

SHERI LEFT JOE'S arms and danced out of the banquet hall and into the tropical night. Joe, of course, followed hot on her heels. Behind them the rest of the wedding party laughed and cheered and sang along with the clever little band, which was playing something fast and Italian.

'What a perfect night for a wedding!' Sheri cried, leaning over the railing and reaching her hands towards the far-off lights of the city.

Joe stood behind her. The lights were pretty, but he knew from long experience the kind of filth and degeneracy they harboured. He would rather look at Sheri.

'Donatella is a lucky girl,' he said, referring to his sister, the bride. 'And Grant is a lucky man.'

Sheri spun around. 'Joe, you hypocrite! Yesterday you said Donatella was a black widow spider!'

'She's my sister,' he said, as if that explained everything.

Sheri smiled past him at the room of revellers. Despite regular quarrels with his sisters (usually over minor matters such as dress lengths and boyfriends) Joe had an unfaltering loyalty towards his family and adjusted reality to fit his mood. Tonight was Donatella's night, and tonight she was an angel, incapable of doing anything wrong.

Joe followed her gaze. 'One day,' he said, 'l will have a place just like this, except mine will be bigger and even more beautiful.'

She took his hand. 'You've worked really hard to make Joe's a success, haven't you?'

'You gotta work hard to get anywhere these days,' he said, squeezing her hand, worried she would take it back. 'Nobody's gonna give you anything on a silver platter.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' she said with a smile.

Turning again to the view, she breathed in deeply like she was trying to inhale the city. It certainly felt as if it was hers for the taking. Tomorrow

would see the long-awaited release of her book, *Remember My Name*, and then there was a mind-numbing schedule of interviews, dinner engagements and a national book-signing tour, followed by … Who knows what? Andrew was right, fame came in many colours, and the crowds who thronged at her every appearance didn't give a damn that she'd once sold her body to make a living. In fact, the media commentators, in trying to explain her popularity, were fond of saying that her shady past was part and parcel of her fame. It made her fallible, human, and therefore accessible.

What surprised Sheri even more than the public adoration was the way Joe's family treated her. They were as accepting as they would have been of any potential in-law. Fame: it was a strange and wondrous thing.

'One thing I've learned about money,' she said, 'is that it comes easy to some people and not at all to others. There's no justice or sense in any of it. Horrible people become billionaires; nice people starve. And no matter how much money somebody has, they always want more.'

'I only wanna be comfortable,' said Joe, worried she might be referring to him.

Sheri let go of his hand and dug in her pocket. 'I want you to have this,' she said, handing him a slip of paper.

He unfolded it. 'A cheque? What's this for?'

'It's your share. Of my book.'

'My share? I didn't do nothing for your book. I don't want your money.'

He went to hand it back, but Sheri turned to the view and held onto the railing with both hands. She said, 'Joe, the book is made up of lots of people's stories, not just mine. It wouldn't be right for me and Andrew to pocket all the profits, would it? You're part of the story, so you're entitled to part of the proceeds.'

'No, Sheri,' he said, shaking his head like a stubborn boy. 'This ain't right.'

'Keep it, Joe. Please. Everybody who appears in the book gets part of the proceeds. Except the rich ones, of course. They've made enough out of me already.'

'But Sheri …'

'That's only a tiny fraction of the advance the publishers gave me.'

'But –'

'Just think: it can go towards that restaurant you've always wanted.'

'I don't want your money. You keep it. You deserve it.'

She refused to take the cheque back. 'I've got plenty of money,' she said, 'and a lot more's on the way. It would make me really, really happy if you'd take it. Come on, Joe, do it for me.'

Their bickering was interrupted by Joe's mother, a tiny woman whose hair, piled high on her head in rich, dark curls, seemed to comprise half her height. She emerged from the gaiety of the reception with her hands clasped before her and a serene expression on her lovely face.

'There you are, Joe,' she cried in a rich, musical voice. 'And Sheri, cara, the band is asking for you. You promised to sing for my daughter and her new husband and they wait with bait on their breaths.'

'We've finished out here, Mrs Vitale,' Sheri said, smiling at Joe.

Mrs Vitale noticed the smile and instantly misinterpreted it. Tonight romance was in the air and she could think of only one reason a man and a woman would sneak out to a balcony and smile at each other in the moonlight. 'Is there something I am not being told?' she asked with an impish grin.

'Mama,' said Joe, 'I told you before. We're just friends, is all. Sheri's a big star. She's too busy for dates and romantic stuff like that.'

Having failed to extract the truth from her son, Mrs Vitale turned her attention to Sheri. 'Is my Joe not handsome?'

Sheri agreed.

'When you are away travelling around the world, promoting your book, you will think of my handsome son?'

'Certainly.'

'And you will sleep with his picture under your pillow?'

'If he ever gives me one I will,' she said. And with a wink at Joe, she accompanied Mrs Vitale inside.

Joe remained on the balcony, gasping for breath. He stared at the cheque in his hand for a long time, then offered a silent prayer to the city and the moon and the twinkling stars. As Sheri's voice rose in song, bringing a hush to the noisy room, he tore the cheque into tiny pieces and let the fragments flutter out of his hand and into the perfect night.

Let the games begin

'YOU READY YET, Danny?'

Danny was studying a history text, headphones covering his ears, a pen lodged between his teeth. As he read, his head bobbed and his fingers tapped in time to the song on his portable CD player.

Sheri's face moved into his line of vision. 'Mars to Danny. You reading me?'

He spat out the pen and yanked the headphones from his ears. 'Whatsat?'

'I said are you ready yet? They'll be here soon.'

'Yeah, I'm ready.'

She looked him up and down. 'You're not going like that, are you?'

He glanced down at his clothes, thinking from the tone of her voice that they must have magically changed themselves. Nope: blue jeans, black hiking boots, white T-shirt – the same clothes he'd put on this morning. 'What's wrong with this?' he asked, tugging at his shirt.

'Nothing. But there'll be reporters there. They might want a shot of you.'

'Why would they want a shot of me?'

Sheri was fiddling with one of her earrings. 'Because you're a big part of the book; that's why. You're one of the stars. Come on, Dan, put on something cool. We want the world to know how darling cute you are, you beautiful boy you.'

She pinched his cheek and he swatted her hand away, crying, 'Get out of it! You're acting like my mother!'

She ruffled his hair. 'I'm too young to be your mother. Try big sister.'

'Try grandma.'

'Hey, sonny! Do as you're told or I'll put you over my knee!'

He gripped the table with both hands, preparing to dig his heels in. He still didn't like being bossed around and sometimes refused to do something simply to assert his independence. But Sheri, having said her piece, disappeared up the stairs.

Danny sniffed his armpit. Pushing the textbook away, he folded his arms on the table and rested his forehead on them. Close to his nose was a jagged piece of lint, clinging to his T-shirt like a flat white insect. In fact, the whole shirt was covered in lint, thanks to the tissues he'd forgotten to take out of his pocket the last time he did the laundry. Maybe I should change into something else, he thought, as if the idea had just occurred to him. Yeah, good idea, Dan, good idea. Why don't you wear something cool, something that shows off those new muscles of yours?

Getting up, he reached his hands to the ceiling, as if he wanted to stretch himself another inch or two. The ceiling was well out of reach. He was still finding it hard coming to terms with the amount of space in their new home. His bedroom was almost as big as Ben's whole apartment. They sure had come up in the world, thanks to Sheri's book. It amazed him that even before its release, a book could make so much money and create so much interest and controversy. After today, Danny Mills would be famous. People would recognise his name. They might even stop him in the street and ask for his autograph. The thought excited and scared him.

Sheri came back down the stairs. 'You're going like that, are you?'

'Nope. Decided to change into something cool.'

They smiled at the same time. Sheri stepped up to him and plucked out a piece of lint that had found its way into his hair, and then the phone rang, making them both jump. She made a face at Danny and picked it up.

'Hello? Yes … Yes, two o'clock … No, my manager deals with that. Do you have his number? … No, no. Like I said: that has to go through Andrew …'

While Sheri talked business, Danny went upstairs to get changed. Opening his closet, he pulled out a bright pink shirt and held it at arm's length. He screwed up his nose. What in the name of bad taste had convinced him to buy that? It was more like what Preston would wear. Preston was Danny's best friend, a Nigerian boy who dabbled in cross-dressing and talked at the speed of sound. They'd met at the Rainbow Meeting Place, at a 'sexuality express' course in which young men learned how to be gay (a subject not found in the school curriculum and almost never learned in the playground). There was nothing romantic between them (they both preferred older men with square jaws and gym-toned bodies), but the two friends shared a suite of interests and did almost everything together. I'll give this to Preston, Danny thought with a nod, and tossed the pink shirt on the bed.

He'd just gone back to rifling through his shirts when the doorbell rang. Jerking his head from the closet, he shot out the door and almost tripped down the stairs. Sheri, who was still on the phone, beat him to it.

'Hello, Sheri,' said Doris, stepping into the room. 'Hello, Danny.'

Doris was dressed in a chic white suit, with matching handbag and shoes. Her complexion was glowing and her black hair now framed her face instead of towering above it. Standing there with a big grin on her face, she appeared uncharacteristically conventional, almost chaste.

The twins emerged from behind their mother. 'Dann-ee!' they cried, and collided with his legs. He struggled to keep his balance, then gave in to the greater force and toppled over.

The boys were on him in an instant, clambering over his chest and face, poking fingers in his ears and mouth.

'Arrgh!' he roared, a belligerent giant, and with a herculean effort pushed himself to a sitting position. At this show of strength, the boys sprang to their feet and shot upstairs.

'Danny, be careful with them,' said Sheri, removing the phone from her ear. 'Remember they're only little.'

'Danny is not the one you need to warn,' said Doris.

After allowing his attackers a few moments to hide, he scrambled after them on all fours. 'I'm coming to get you!' he yelled.

The cry was echoed by two shrieks of terror from the top of the stairs. The twins idolised Danny. Whenever they came over, they would chatter to him in Thai and offer him gifts of flowers and pebbles, and he would accept the offerings and pretend to understand what they were saying. Sheri told him they came from a slum, a place where life was a daily struggle to survive, and he wanted to help give them a brighter future.

'Come out, come out, wherever you are!' he sang.

Sheri made tea. 'How are the boys going at pre-school?' she asked Doris as they waited for the kettle to boil.

'Like gangbusters. Soon they will be teaching *me*.'

'Kids are like that. I'm sure you'll catch up.'

'Now that I'm taking proper classes, you might just be right.'

'Your classes are going okay?' Sheri asked, resisting the urge to apologise yet again for her broken promise to teach Doris to read.

'They are going more than okay. I will have my teacher's certificate in no time.'

‘And then you’ll go home.’

‘Aha.’

‘I wish you’d consider staying, Doris. The twins love it here.’

‘They do. But they need to be with their aunties and uncles and cousins.’

‘It’ll be quiet here without you.’

As if on cue, Danny tramped down the stairs with the twins attached to his back, the three of them chanting a silly nursery rhyme.

‘Danny, you are looking so handsome,’ called Doris, batting her eyelashes at him. ‘Who would have thought that my Danny would grow up to be such a heart-throb?’

He greeted the comment with an embarrassed grin. Now he was mixing with people his own age, he’d ditched the fake driver’s licence and it had been a long time since he’d felt the urge to lie about his age. He’d come to realise it was a mistake to want to grow up too fast. There was still so much he had to learn about being a kid.

‘Air-ee-plane!’ screamed one of the twins, and the other, after a savage intake of breath, joined in. ‘Air-ee-plane! Air-ee-plane!’ they cried.

‘Come on then,’ said Danny, releasing his hold on their legs.

The twins slipped off his back and raced each other to the living room, where there really was enough room to swing a cat. Danny pushed a sofa and a coffee table out of the way, moved a floor lamp, then took up position in the centre of the room. He raised his hands and turned in a circle like a circus ringmaster.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ he announced, ‘let the games begin,’ and the twins jumped up and down and screamed with glee.

Remember My Name

THE DECISION TO hold the official release of *Remember My Name* at Beadle's Books had not been a difficult one. After all, the bookstore was the scene of Sheri's famous rescue, the defining event that had made everything else possible.

Today, not much had changed since that fateful day. The same sun shone from a dappled sky. The same string of cars and trucks streamed down the road. The people emerging from shops and strolling along the sidewalk might be the same people who were there last summer. And maybe before the afternoon was over, another lonesome soul would press their nose against the bookstore window and peer at Sheri like she'd peered at Gloria Meadows all those months ago. Maybe today would mark the beginning of an adventure for somebody else.

The outward calm belied the pandemonium inside. A stage had been set up at the rear of the store, hosting a lectern, a desk and two chairs, and in front of this, what looked like a hundred or more people bustled and chattered and stretched their necks to get a better view. In a roped-off area to the left, reporters and camera operators were busy setting up equipment. The room buzzed with anticipation, and if the rows upon rows of books appeared to stand forgotten, it was only that the people here today were not interested in dry facts or invented stories; they'd come to see a real-life star.

Sheri peeped out from the back office. Danny and Doris, who'd wanted to experience the excitement firsthand by mingling with the fans, had by this time surrendered this desire and had taken refuge behind the counter, where harried shop assistants were attempting to sell books. They were looking about the room in awe, unaware they were being watched. Sheri could only imagine what was going through their minds. Until today they'd never experienced for themselves the public attention she now accepted as a matter of course. It must be terrifying for them. It still was a little for her.

She cast her eyes across the store. Who would have predicted her own book launch would be bigger and brighter than Gloria's? Well, Andrew for one. He'd cooked up a marketing strategy to rival any of Gloria's efforts. Rather craftily, he reimagined Sheri as 'champion of the underdog', a tag that appealed to poor, disillusioned and exploited women everywhere, while at the same time drawing men into the phenomenon by playing on the aura of sensuality and mystique that Sheri emitted like some fabulous pheromone. His marketing plan was intelligent and far-reaching. As far as Andrew was concerned, upsetting outraged right-wingers and prudish moralists was just as important as roping in red-blooded men and providing a role model for women of all ages.

Of all the miracles Andrew had performed, what mattered most to Sheri were the requests flooding in for her to sing in theatres and clubs, before capacity crowds who would likely have cheered even if she sounded like a howler monkey. As Andrew had predicted, her infamy had made her more famous than she ever could imagine. And the dream showed no signs of ending.

Mr Beadle was enjoying his own part of the dream. 'This place will never be the same again,' he sighed, peering over her shoulder at the lively crowd. 'My dear, you are making me a very happy man.'

'You can thank Andrew for that, Mr Beadle. He's the brains behind this operation.'

'Don't listen to her,' Andrew called out from the back of the room. 'I'm riding on some extraordinary coattails.'

'We agree to disagree on that one,' said Sheri as she felt her face go warm.

'Your propensity to blush is one of your many charms,' said Mr Beadle, pulling out his pocket watch. He was wearing an old-fashioned three-piece suit, tight in all the wrong places. His pencil-thin moustache was as straight as an arrow, his hair slicked down with California Poppy. Unable to write a publishable book himself, he'd taken to looking like the character in one. Putting away the watch, he sighed again. 'Miss Starling, your good self and Mr Beaumont are a partnership made in heaven. If I'd had you for inspiration in my younger days, who knows? I might have been the next Dickens.'

'Ah, Mr Beadle,' said Andrew, joining them at the door, 'if only you knew how little I had to do with all this.'

While the two men dished out praise, Sheri went to talk with Kelly, who was at the rear of the office watching everything with a bemused smile. 'How

do you cope, having such a humble boyfriend?' she asked, to take the attention off herself.

'It's sickening. And lovable, I have to admit. I'm sure he didn't inherit that from Gloria.'

'She talking to you yet?' Sheri called out.

Andrew left Mr Beadle speaking to one of his assistants through the partly open door. 'Barely,' he said, jumping up to take a seat on the desk. 'Now everything's inevitable, she's acting like it's not happening. She subscribes to the theory that if you ignore something, it means it's not really there.'

'I'm aware of that one. Used it myself on the odd occasion.'

'There's something else she won't be able to ignore for much longer,' he said, pulling Kelly between his legs. 'We're coming clean, me and Kelly. I'm telling her tomorrow.'

'Oh, wow. Good for you. How do you think she'll take it?'

'As well as you might expect. But like you taught me: we should live our lives freely and openly, not based on what anyone else thinks.'

'I thought that's what you taught *me*.'

He chuckled. 'Maybe I needed to see it in action before I took my own advice.'

'Oh, heavens!' cried Mr Beadle. 'The crowd is now spilling out the door!'

'You better wait and see how she reacts before you thank me,' Sheri said. 'You might end up regretting it.'

'Nah, that'll never happen. We're ready whenever you are, Mr Beadle! The most she can do is disown me. Five minutes?' he called in response to another aside from Mr Beadle. 'Okay, just give the word.' He released Kelly and hopped off the desk. 'I suspect she won't make much of a fuss. She seems a bit beaten lately, especially since Frank left. I think a lifetime of scheming and double-dealing is starting to show.'

Sheri's thoughts went back to that day at the Café Rouen when Gloria told her about being booted from the board. It was one of the rare times she'd seen the façade slip and reveal the true Gloria. She said, 'I can't help but feel sorry for her. With Frank in Italy and you aligning yourself with the enemy, she must be pretty lonely.'

'Well, fingers crossed she'll take the leap and accept Kelly this time around.'

Kelly said, 'I've been ordered to behave like an absolute angel.'

'It'll be a breeze. Compared to my mother, you're already an angel.'

‘Compared to your mother, Saddam Hussein is an angel … Sorry, darling, slight exaggeration there.’

‘Hey,’ said Sheri, ‘when she sees the two of you together, I’m sure she’ll come around. You were made for each other. Besides, she’s got more important things to worry about. Like little old me.’

‘Hey, get this,’ said Andrew. ‘The other day she accused you of corrupting me. She said you’ve turned me into a ruthless capitalist who puts his business interests before the family reputation. Kind of ironic, hey?’

‘If that’s all she’s accused me of, I got off lightly.’

‘She still doesn’t think we stayed far enough away from her horrible side. She’s reading all kinds of stuff into it. But that’s not all she’s worried about. I found this out from Frank, of all people. Apparently, in her mind, she made a fatal mistake when she didn’t have you checked out before she offered you the job. And she thinks the book shows her up as a fool for having the wool pulled over her eyes. Appearances are everything to her. She hates anyone getting the better of her.’

Sheri shook her head, but couldn’t help smiling. There was one thing you could always guarantee with Gloria: her antics were never boring. ‘It’s weird, you know. I keep worrying about how she’s feeling about all this, even though she never gave a second thought to *my* feelings when she was humiliating me left, right and centre.’

‘That says as much about *your* character as it does about hers.’

‘The scariest thing is I keep feeling the need to thank her for making all this possible.’

‘Even scarier is that she’d probably expect it!’

The door opened and Mr Beadle appeared. ‘We’re ready for you, Miss Starling.’

Sheri nodded at him, her face radiant with anticipation.

‘The piranhas are snapping,’ said Kelly. ‘Go out and throw ’em some blood and guts.’

She tugged down the hem of her dress, adjusted her sleeves, patted her hair. ‘Do I look okay?’ she asked the room, and did a little dance to the murmurs of assent. Emotions were welling in her breast. She felt the way she’d imagined she would feel all those years ago when she practised her award acceptance speech in front of the bathroom mirror.

‘Okay,’ she said, and took a few quick breaths. ‘Let’s do it.’

DANNY WAS THINKING: I wish Preston was here. He was flabbergasted by the crush of people in the store, the impatient looks on their faces, the books in their hands waiting to be signed, and he knew Preston would be impressed too. He tried to store away every detail so he could do justice to the event when he described it to his friends at the Rainbow Meeting Place later that afternoon. But the more he rehearsed descriptions in his head, the more frustrated he became at his inability to capture the moment. It was lucky the media were there. He could tape all the news and current affairs programs and play the tapes to his friends tomorrow. Maybe there would even be a shot of him and Doris, so he could point himself out and prove he wasn't just spinning them some fantastical fairytale.

Doris placed an arm around his waist. He looked at her, expecting her to make some wise or witty comment, but she seemed even more dazzled than he was. Since returning from Thailand, Doris had lost the exoticism she'd had at the beginning of their friendship. In a subtle, almost intangible way, she was becoming westernised. The thought made Danny sad. All three of them had become less impulsive, more serious since their lives had turned around, and though they'd gained so much in recent months, they'd also lost something: a wildness, an edge, the sense they were unencumbered by conventions and therefore free. He wondered if Sheri and Doris felt the loss of those qualities, the way he did. Danny had always supposed that with riches would come unimaginable happiness, but he knew now that wealth brings its own set of concerns and responsibilities. Of course he didn't want to return to his days as a street kid, but he also didn't want to lose sight of how it had felt, how much he'd gained from the experience. And though he never wanted to forget what happened to Leslie – what was happening right now to others in the community with no home or hope in their lives – he also didn't want to travel through life feeling guilty for feeling happy. What would be the point in that?

He decided on the spot to buy a pool table for the Meeting Place and instantly felt better – so much better that he made another decision, this time to fund a new pergola and barbecue area out back. More decisions followed, until he'd all but exhausted his share of Sheri's advance. The thoughts sprang from noble intentions, but only time would tell how long this streak of philanthropy would last and how many of his hastily conceived plans would come to fruition. After all, Danny was still only seventeen.

He checked his watch. It was almost time. The bookshop was packed and people were spilling out onto the sidewalk. Some were craning their necks, eager to catch a first glimpse of their idol. Some had hands and noses pressed against the windows. Some were even staring at *him*.

As his eyes travelled the room, he caught the attention of a square-jawed young man in a powder blue suit and yellow tie. The man whispered something to the woman next to him, then came squeezing through the crowd.

'Hello there,' he said, leaning his hip against the counter. 'I would take a guess and say you're Danny and you're Doris. Am I right?'

Doris said, 'And who the hell are you? Albert Einstein?'

The man cackled. 'That's great! You're just like in the book! I loved your character. Yours too, Danny. Loved the pathos.' He pulled a notepad and pen from his jacket pocket. 'Name's Lukas Hadley, intern with the Daily News. Can I get a statement from you both?'

Doris frowned at him. 'A statement? Why don't you read the book?'

'I have. I thought I'd get another angle. Focus my piece on some of the minor characters.'

'Oh,' said Doris, her interest aroused. She rested her forearms on the counter, allowing the reporter a flattering view of her cleavage. 'I think Sheri has written a fabulous book, Mister Hadley. It is a true and accurate account of the events that took place. And Sheri is the most beautiful person I know.'

'Yep … Yep,' he grunted, scribbling down notes. 'Fabulous book. Beautiful person. What about you, Danny?'

'Um,' said Danny, stumped by the question, 'I'd say the same as Doris.'

'You went through all hell when Sheri left, didn't you?'

He shrugged.

'And now you're back in school?'

'Yep.'

'How's it going?'

'Fine.'

'You think you'll finish your high school certificate this time?'

'Yep.'

'It's a hard slog, I know. It's not that long since I did mine.'

Another shrug.

'And what do you want to be when you graduate?'

Danny stared at him. Every time someone asked this question, he came up with a different answer. Right now he was tossing up between the airline industry, oceanography and computer science, but on a magical day like this, when anything seemed possible, those career choices sounded like something a lame person would say.

He scanned the room for inspiration, something wise to tell the man. Before he could think of anything, someone wolf-whistled and all heads turned to the office, where Sheri was emerging from the shadows. With a book under her arm and her head held high, she looked beautiful, stylish, graceful and self-assured. She turned and gave them a warm, exuberant smile. She meant the world to him.

As the room erupted in applause, he turned back to the reporter, his face fierce with pride, and said, 'I wanna be just like Sheri.'

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dean Raven is a writer of social satire and fantasy. He is author of *Remember My Name*, the *Bringer of the Dark* fantasy series and award-winning short fiction.

Dean is a lay physicist and philosopher who incorporates big themes in his works – from evolutionary psychology to culture and morality to the history of the universe … and where it's heading.

Dean writes stories in which extraordinary things happen to ordinary people. Whether it's fantasy or an urban fairytale, you are sure to find the kinds of people you know and care about in Dean's works.