

**BEYOND THE ‘ROTTEN APPLES’
ASSUMPTION:
Creative contributions to the issue
of men’s violence**

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Thesis

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed 

Date 27/09/2018

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The practitioners I interviewed were:

- Alan Jenkins, Psychologist, Nada
- David Tully, Practice Manager, Relationships Australia, Relationships Australia, SA
- Paula McLeod, Social Worker, Community Mental Health Service
- Chris Dolman, Service Manager, Specialised Family Violence Service, Uniting Communities
- Denise Richards, Counsellor, No to Violence, Victoria
- Ryan Greenwell, Counsellor, Relationships Australia, Western Australia.
- Dr. Rebecca Gray, Senior Researcher, Relationships Australia NSW
- Anonymous*, Men's Worker, Kornar Winmil Yunti

*Requested anonymity as he did not want his views to be seen as representative of Aboriginal community.

Summary

Domestic and family violence presents a seemingly intractable social problem. Our attitudes towards men who abuse women and children have traditionally been punitive, viewing them as ‘rotten apples’ rather than acknowledging the deeper socio-cultural issues which legitimise violence and privilege dominant male behaviour. Men who abuse are often seen as a homogenous group who need to be identified and confronted, to be controlled, until their behaviour is stopped through statutory or coercive therapeutic methods. These men are viewed as desirous only of power and control in their relationships with women and children, disqualifying the possibility of ethics of love, compassion, safety, empathy or respect (Jenkins, 2009). Popular and therapeutic approaches to these men have therefore focused only on the inventories of their violence, or the effects of their narcissism, and have disqualified more nuanced and holistic exploration of these men’s motivations in their relationships with women and children.

The three components of this thesis are designed to extend contemporary analysis of men who use violence as a heterogeneous group, driven by unique motivations and contexts, but influenced by hegemonic messages about masculinity. It moves beyond traditional individual deficit notions to examine how men become captured by the legitimisation of gendered violence in western society, and how they might strive for more connected and loving relationships.

The three components of the thesis are connected by the possibility of redemption for individual men and commits to an understanding of them that extends beyond only their use of violence. These components focus on individual examples where men have broken from the constraints of dominant male practice, to demonstrate difference. These components are connected by the advocacy of a more nuanced and compassionate approach to men who

abuse, using examples from contemporary MBCP practitioners and authors to support this position.

My thesis focuses on the attitudes of men's behaviour change program (MBCP) practitioners, Australian authors and the characters in my creative piece, *The Man in Her Head*. My approach to each of these components is influenced by what Australian psychologist, Alan Jenkins, calls 'A parallel political journey (2009).' Jenkins advocates for a political therapeutic response to men, acknowledging that therapists themselves are influenced by discourses that can have them acting in coercive and repressive ways. Jenkins is interested in ways that therapists could become interested in their own personal ethics in their work with men, and how both therapist and client could enter into processes which uncovered these ethics.

In my interviews with MBCP practitioners I explore the history of their approaches to men who abuse. In all eight interviews, participants describe their own political journeys in their work with men and how this had either reinforced or changed their practice position over time. I was also interested in how these practitioners had been influenced by popular ideas about men's violence, their own personal or professional experiences and their understandings of 'best practice' in work with men who abuse.

In my exploration of contemporary Australian authors, I am interested in their use of polyphonic dialogue to include the voices of all of their main protagonists in the creation of their novels. Particularly, I am interested in how the voices of men who use violence are included, as well as those women and children who are affected by their violence. I am also interested in how Australian authors describe the effects of political institutions and normative social messages on the legitimisation of violence on their male and female protagonists.

In my creative piece, *The Man in Her Head*, I have attempted to follow the lead of Australian authors by exploring how messages received through childhood about the legitimisation of gendered violence has affected each of the three main protagonists. In particular I am interested in how each of the three characters are contained by these messages, but also about how they are able to break from this containment to find different possibilities to connect and redeem.

Methodology

In Part One, *De-centred and influential practice in men's behaviour change programs: possibilities and challenges*, I examine the commitments and attitudes of eight practitioners through semi-structured interviews, comparing the results of this to contemporary literature regarding the evolution of Men's Behaviour Change Programs (MBCP).

My methodological approach to interviewing is influenced by the work of Lene Tanggaard who interviewed psychologists in Denmark regarding their approaches to working with children (Tanggard, 2009). Tanggaard describes her methodology as polyphonic research interviewing and is influenced by concepts of dialogue used by Russian philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin.

Tanggard argues that the research interview should be more than the recounting of a series event with the consequence of uncovering essential truths, given Bakhtin claimed that claims about truth were iterative, and continually on 'parole.' Rather, Tanggaard regards the interview as a negotiation of truths (2008). In her interviews with psychologists, Tannagard was interested in more than just their work with children, enquiring about the hierarchy of ideas in the field and their own identity as psychologists, as a major contributor to their therapeutic approaches.

Similarly, in my interviews with MBCP practitioners, I am less interested in truth claims about why men abuse or what works to prevent their recidivism. I am more interested in the

political journeys of MBCP practitioners and how this has affected their work with men. My interest in polyphonic research interviewing was motivated by the avoidance of research that adds to the certainty about the individual deficits of men who abuse. I wanted to avoid this dogmatism or certainty about why men abuse, while at the same time acknowledging the effects of hegemonic messages that are supported by patriarchal institutions. It was my experience in MBCP that this certainty could shut down ideas or disqualify new ways of practice, and for these reasons I was attracted to the works of Tanngard, and indeed, Bakhtin.

In my interviews with practitioners, I invited them to consider the evolution of therapeutic approaches to men who abuse and how contemporary discourses had influenced their own personal and professional attitudes. This offered rich and multi-dimensional insights into the practice journey of many practitioners, many of whom developed commitments to de-centred and influential therapeutic posture that challenges the rhetoric that men cannot or do not want to change their abusive behaviours.

Through the utilisation of polyphonic interviewing techniques, practitioners were dissuaded from making truth claims about either the effectiveness of their work or the men who they worked with. Instead, we focused more specifically on their own experiences in therapy with men, using what Michael White (2005) described as ‘therapeutic posture.’ White was influenced by post-structural therapy methods which examined the history of therapy as an instrument of coercion and social and economic control. His therapy emphasised the privileging of clients’ voices in therapy, rather than the traditional expertness of the therapist. He advocated for the use of ‘decentred and influential’ practice in therapy with all clients, including men who abuse, meaning that therapists were more likely to help affect change for the client if they viewed them as experts in their own lives.

White and Jenkins (2009) pioneered a new way of working with men in Australia which attended to fairness and avoided making meaning of men's lives only through the lens of the violence they perpetrated. As part of my interviews with practitioners I was interested in their therapeutic posture and how this had developed. Through these questions, the practitioners were able to describe the polyphonic messages that had shaped and influenced their practice. Many of the practitioners described how they were initially more punitive in their work with men, particularly where they were ambivalent about men's capacity to change. Some of the female practitioners talked about their feelings of responsibility towards the partners and children of men they worked with, and the effects of immediacy this had on them in 'making' men change. At the same time, they acknowledged that men were more likely to change if they used a less centred and more holistic therapeutic posture. The personal and professional challenges for practitioners came to the fore during these parts of the interviews and enabled for the description of rich and complicated professional journeys.

In using polyphonic qualitative research, influenced by Bakhtin, Tanngard connected fictional and creative theories through an emphasis of the many different voices that influence the individual. In a creative context, Bakhtin warned against the author standing against the author standing between the hero and the contradictions and ethical strivings of their lives (Steinby, 2013). In this same way, Tanngard actively avoids a reductive approach to the psychologists she interviewed, and this motivated my interest in multidimensional understandings of therapists' practice that moved beyond truisms of good and bad practice.

In Part Two, I provide a literary analysis of the work of leading Australian authors in their representations of male violence. Sofie Laguna, Zoe Morrison, Charlotte Wood, Richard Flanagan and Christos Tsiolkas are Australian social realist authors who portray gendered violence as the manifestation of individualism, competition and the lack of compassion to which we are all complicit. Their examination of the ingrained gender, economic and racial

inequality within neo-liberalism and its legitimisation of violence provide broader understandings of men's violence that extend beyond popular individual-deficit approaches. These authors portray flawed male characters who are both subjects and perpetrators of dominant practices of masculinity. Although their violence subjugates women and children through the misuse of power and control, they also demonstrate hope for connection, love and respect.

I was interested in the analysis of Australian authors that avoids separating men into categories of good or evil, or just and unjust, given that these dichotomies are central to the patriarchal and neo-liberal paradigms that view some individuals as less than people. From a creative aspect, these authors create nuanced, flawed and sympathetic characters whose behaviours and attitudes are contradictory and non-linear. They are not slaves to a one-dimensional appetite for power and control, but instead constrained by their ideas of what it means to be a man. Along with their desire for power and control, the men in these works also display hope for loving and caring relationships, and polyphonic dialogue is used to capture competing hopes and wants. In this way, the influence of Bakhtin can be found, as the authors reject neat or flat explanations of male characters as evidence of ideological theories about gendered violence. Bakhtin wrote:

A living human being cannot be turned into the voiceless object of some secondhand, finalising cognitive process. In a human being there is always something that only he himself can reveal, in a free act of self-consciousness and discourse, something that does not submit to an externalising secondhand definition (1989, 58).

Part Three constitutes the creative component of this thesis, being a literary realist novel, *The Man in Her Head*, set in the suburbs of Adelaide and exploring the issues of male

violence and how we treat and represent it. The novel builds on the research presented in the exegetical sections.

The protagonist of this story, Zoe Jamison, was pushed through a window by her dad when she was ten, trying to protect her mother from another beating on a Saturday night. Now in her thirties, Zoe is a psychologist working desperately to keep women and children safe. But when Doug Hillier returns home from her therapy session to find that she has arranged for his wife and child to move out, he hangs himself in protest. Doug's suicide brings into question the ethics of Zoe's practice and she desperately conceals a case note that will further condemn her.

Zoe's commitment to the safety of women and children is connected to many of the practitioners who I interviewed in my quantitative interviews. In Zoe's case, she developed this commitment from her experiences as a child living with a father who enacted domestic tyranny on his wife and daughters. Zoe's commitment means that she occasionally practices in punitive ways with men who abuse and is ambivalent about their motivation or capacity to change. Within this, it was important not to totalise Zoe through a one-dimensional commitment, and her character is able to take an empathetic and sophisticated approach to her relationships with Ben and Lincoln.

Zoe is able to learn from her challenging experiences throughout my creative piece, and ultimately reevaluates her approach to her work. Zoe's practice journey - although much more dramatic - mirrors the ethical journey of many of the practitioners I interviewed, who have continually changed and reinvented their approaches to men, and the theories that influence them.

Lincoln Simmons is everything that Zoe despises: misogynistic, materialistic and abusive. He is also the father of her six-year-old son. Zoe forgives Lincoln his abhorrent behaviour because of her need to believe in him. Lincoln makes foolhardy attempts to connect with Zoe

and his son, but he is constrained by the barometer of masculinity that he inherited from his old man.

Ben Eckermann has been gifted a job in his father's psychology practice, despite his obvious incompetence. Ben recognises that his father's faith in him is self-serving, and he has been employed to keep watch on Zoe. The seductive powers of paternal acceptance prove harder to resist than Ben had imagined. Ultimately, he must make a decision that will decide Zoe's future and the future of his own integrity.

The Man in Her Head explores the childhood messages of gender, individuality and competition that divide and separate us and confound our ability to connect. Zoe, Lincoln and Ben struggle with the men in their head that order and sort them according to hierarchies of good and evil, winners and losers and just and unjust. It examines the inherent complexities of gendered violence and the hypocrisies and contradictions of popular and therapeutic approaches.

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INTRODUCTION

Approaches to gendered violence within a creative writing research paradigm

A renowned Men's Behaviour Change Program (MBCP) practitioner once said to me 'my work in men's groups has never been about the men who attend. The protection of their female partners and children is my sole concern. They are all I care about.' This comment motivated me to reconsider the work I was doing in individual and group therapy with men who use violence. I started thinking about the ethics of providing therapy for one individual for the sole purpose or benefit of another. In every other aspect of my therapeutic practice I had been taught to focus on the strengths, potential and hopes of the person I was meeting with. Now it seemed that men who perpetrated violence against women and children were undeserving of this same consideration. The clear message was that I ought not to care about any aspect of the men's lives, other than how it affected the women and children who they had hurt. It occurred to me that this approach made it impossible for me to care about both the male perpetrator of violence and his female partner and children. It felt like my therapy was about choosing a side and that this had motivated a punitive and contemptuous aspect to my work with men.

At about this time I began to write. At first, I wrote of my hesitation about my approaches to therapy with men who abuse, but eventually this evolved into a more creative process. This creative process was initially formless and diverse, until I started to develop the characters who eventually became the central protagonists in my creative piece, *The Man in Her Head*. The first character who started to form was Zoe Jamison, after a conversation I had with my co-workers in our men's behaviour change program (MBCP). A colleague had suggested we

use the two-hours of the men's groups to help female partners and their children move out of their dangerous homes. She suggested that the groups be used as a 'front' to give the removalists two-hours on a Wednesday night to extricate female partners, children and their possessions. There was much debate regarding the ethics of this, and whether this duplicitousness could be justified for the sake of the safety of women and children. I was captivated by the single-minded conviction of my colleague who was a powerful and compelling advocate for her female clients. Eventually we decided against pursuing this action, but I began to wonder about the implications of this practice should it be pursued. Many of the men in our groups threatened to kill themselves if their partners left them. Although these threats were mainly used to threaten and control their female partners, I began to imagine a scenario where a man returned from a men's group to find his wife had left him and subsequently suicided. I began to write a scene in which Zoe had arranged for one of her clients – Sandra Hillier – to move out of her home with her daughter, while Douglas Hillier was at one of her group sessions. Douglas's suicide precipitated a series of events which analyses modern attitudes to men's violence and the role that patriarchy and neo-liberalism takes in defining these attitudes.

As I began to develop more characters, I found that they were all affected by the strong gendered messages they had received throughout their childhoods. I found that writing creatively was a much more intuitive way to think about of the issue of patriarchy and men's violence. As my characters began to form, they all became unpredictable and uncertain in ways which allowed a more generative and rich exploration of the issues. Creative writing provided me with an outlet that avoided essentialist truth claims about either men who abuse or the individuals who provide therapy. I was inspired in this process by Australian authors and their ability to portray men who abuse in such nuanced ways which made possible the

duel possibility of men's desire for safe and respectful relationships and their perpetration of abhorrent and destructive acts.

After one particularly problematic men's group, I would return home to read *The Slap* (2008) by Christos Tsiolkos. One of *The Slap's* eight narrators is the violent and misogynistic Harry who is motivated by competition and misogyny to perpetrate violence against his wife and to hurt a small child. Tsiolkos' ability to interweave Harry's intention to be a better father to his child and a more loving husband with his violence and contempt shows that this dualism is possible, and in fact inevitable, for men who abuse and for all men. In a 2009 interview, Tsiolkos said:

I really hope it's never totally cut and dried. I mean, Harry is probably the most despicable in terms of what he does in the book. And he, more than any other character, represents Howard's aspirational class. But Harry is, I think, a good father. I think that contradiction is possible. And real.

Tsiolkos' examination of Harry extends beyond a judgment of good and bad, and he is able to show how Harry's motivation to become a certain type of man constrains his more honourable intentions. In this way Tsiolkos explores a universal and performative aspect of masculinity which has all men contrasting and comparing themselves against the ideal that has been formed through neo-liberalism and patriarchy. Harry both adheres to this dominant male behaviour through the violence and dominance he perpetrates, but also hopes for difference through the compassion he demonstrates towards his son. As I read Tsiolkos' chapter about Harry, I became deeply interested in his conflicting motivations to act with care and respect, and to subjugate and abuse. I felt a strong sense of empathy towards him that was markedly different to how I often felt about the men in MBCPs. I began to wonder why literature moved me in ways that talking

directly to the men in MBCPs had not. This seemed to me a strange contradiction and one that made me feel uncomfortable.

During this time there was a man in the men's group who told me to 'fuck off' during a particularly heated exchange. I had become so consumed with rage that I could hardly sit still, and I developed a single-minded pursuit to make him apologise to me and confirm his status as a loser. I would use the information of what he had done to his partner to shame and torment him and to uncover the unquestionable truth that he was worthless. I never learned much about this man during our twelve weeks together, apart from the fact that I fervently disliked him. We circled each other like prize-fighters and avoided each other during break times.

Reading '*The Slap*' raised the inconvenient possibility that I had disqualified any possibility that this man had commitments towards safer or more equal relationships. I defined him only through his recalcitrance and defined my own identity as a man and a therapist by my ability to ensure he was compliant. I neglected to ask him about the kind of father he wanted to be or about his relationship with his own father, who I knew had been abusive. There became something distinctly competitive about my approach and I noticed that this had an isolating effect for me both in counselling and personally. I began to understand that the lack of kindness or understanding that Tsiolkos describes in *The Slap* had permeated my work with men who abuse. I also understood that I was defining my own masculine identity through my work in MBCPs: expert, authoritative and powerful. I began to explore other Australian authors such as Richard Flanagan, Charlotte Wood, Sofie Laguna and Zoe Morrison. These authors all take a more curious stance towards men who abuse than I had taken in my work with men, mainly because of their commitment to an understanding of flawed and contradictory male protagonists. Reading these authors both inspired my own

creative process, but also helped me to think much differently about the issues. It helped me fully comprehend the power of literature to both build upon and transcend theoretical discourse by exploring the humanity of its protagonists and the universality of issues such as gendered power, violence, competition and individualism. For this reason, I believed it was important to dedicate a section in my thesis to the works of these Australian authors.

As my approach to men who abuse became more influenced by post-structural ideas and Australian authors, I concerned myself less with trying to ‘fix’ these men, and more to understanding them and their motivations. I saw these men less through the ‘rotten apple’ dogma that had pervaded my early practice. As I became more convinced that post-structural and collaborative ideas were necessary in any effective MBCP, I began to have more robust debate with some of my colleagues. I was providing clinical supervision to a female colleague who observed that I risked becoming an apologist for the men in my groups and that my attitude towards her was shaped by patriarchy, and even misogyny. This was very difficult to hear, but it did make me realise that I was dismissive of some of her opinions and had taken to silently accusing her of being over-invested in the lives of her female clients. We debated our separate approaches for a time, and it became clearer to both of us that our attitudes had been indelibly shaped by our own intricate histories of gender, class and patriarchy. I found that writing about the experiences of Zoe was an effective way for me to explore the advocacy-based approaches to men’s violence that I had increasingly come to criticise. At first, I found that my writing about Zoe was constrained by my own judgments and prejudices and that I risked portraying her as only the sum of her hypocrisies and personal attachments. It took me a long time, during which I stopped practicing in MBCPs, to let go of some of the definite views which had proved major obstacles in the development of her character.

As I became more aware of my own challenges in understanding and developing the character of Zoe, I embarked on a research chapter which examined the personal and practice histories of experienced MBCP practitioners and how this had affected their approaches to men who abuse. As I interviewed eight experienced MBCP practitioners as part of my first chapter, it became clear that there were both comparisons and contrasts in the development of their approaches to men's violence. Some had become influenced – as I had – by post-structuralist ideas, while some maintained more traditional responsibility approaches to men's violence and warned of the dangers of over-theoretical therapies that assist men in minimising their abuse or blaming their partners.

Many of the practitioners I spoke to had thought deeply about the connection between hegemonic masculinity and men's use of violence, both as a way that men attempt to reinforce their own power in relations with women, and as an effect of the influence of hegemonic masculinity. Practitioners told me countless stories about men who had abused women and children because of their worry that they were not being treated with the reverence or respect that might be expected by a prototypical male. Raewyn Connell (2005, p. 832) describes this effect when she wrote:

Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.

Men's own personal agency in breaking from the messages they received about the legitimisation of coercion and control is a complex and multi-layered issue. As I spoke to these practitioners it became clear how carefully and diligently each professional had developed their practice approaches, and that many of these practitioners were still dedicated to evolving and re-thinking after every session. I began to realise just how complex the issue

is and how much there was to be gained in answering questions rather than rushing to answers. In my interview with renowned Australian psychologist, Alan Jenkins, he said ‘the longer I do this work, and the more I think I know, the more I realise I don’t know’ (A Jenkins 2015, interview, February 15). The constant re-evaluation of practitioners inspired me to add more nuance to Zoe’s character and as my narrative developed, she became much less certain and more questioning of her approaches. To assist this, I made her case note of her last interaction with Douglas Hillier a central focus of the narrative. Zoe deliberately conceals the case note from her employer, Arthur Eckermann. This deceit stands against everything that Zoe has ever believed and is pivotal in her reassessment of her professional and personal identity.

I found that once I became less certain about Zoe’s actions, she was emancipated to engage in situations which I had previously not contemplated. I began to understand more about her humanity and how her own experiences of patriarchy had shaped her practice. This character development would have been impossible without my research chapter. The importance of creative writing being informed by research as a means to understand our own biases and assumptions was discussed by Jeri Kroll (2013, p. 115):

This self-awareness, or self-reflexivity, is equally if not more critical to how and why we write: ergo, ‘no writer is innocent.’ Writers, like researchers in all disciplines, need to be conscious of the imperatives to be honest about their assumptions and to be clear about how they shape their methodologies.

As I started to think more about Zoe’s relationship with patriarchy, I developed the character of Arthur Eckermann who is a major benefactor of patriarchy; wealthy, successful and powerful. Arthur is Zoe’s boss and an inexorable threat to her career throughout *The Man in Her Head*, attempting to make her a scapegoat for the suicide that has damaged the reputation of his psychology practice. Arthur’s psychology practice symbolises the institutional support of the hegemony of patriarchy throughout the creative piece. He has built

a practice for twenty-seven years that exists to serve the status-quo and the maintenance of his own power. As Connell writes (2005, 832) ‘Hegemony did not mean violence, although it could be supported by force; it meant ascendancy supported through culture, institutions and persuasion.’

Arthur uses his experience, wealth and position to wield ultimate power within the microcosm of the psychology practice. Those who are his allies thrive, but Zoe has lost his trust, and despite his practiced rationality, Arthur will do whatever it takes to defeat her. Arthur uses the widow of her dead client as a pawn in his strategy to defeat Zoe. This was my way of showing that some approaches to keeping women and children safe are self-serving and, in their own way, used to reinforce and abuse power.

I developed the character of Ben – Arthur’s son – to examine how the approaches of therapists are so entwined with their personal histories. Ben benefits by being hand-picked to work in Arthur’s psychology practice, despite his obvious lack of skills or experience. But he is unable to attract his father’s approval or recognition which is reserved for his older brother who is more successful according to every worthwhile measure. Ben understands enough to know that his father’s motives in hiring him are self-interested, but he becomes seduced by the prestige offered by his newfound position. This has him acting in ways that are disloyal, selfish and sneaky. Despite his protestations he is seduced by the trappings of patriarchy that are offered by his father. Ben’s tenuous relationship with his father affects every aspect of his personal and professional life, just as Zoe’s experience of domestic violence perpetrated by her own father affect hers.

Writing about Ben helped me to understand more about my own journey as a young therapist starting in men’s groups. Like Ben, I felt completely incompetent during my initial experience in groups, but as I persisted became more confident. I worked with some men who were able to make small steps towards safer relationships and this increased my

confidence and gave me what I considered expertness. I found myself talking over the top of the men in the group or berating them when they minimised their violence or blamed their partners for ‘pushing their buttons.’ During team meetings I joined with my male colleagues in indulging descriptions of ourselves as crusaders for gendered rights. I would like to think that my approach in those groups – although misguided – was aimed at the increased safety of women and children, and to a certain degree that would be honest. But there was another part of me that was trying on a new kind of personality: bold, knowledgeable, masculine. This practice of identity politics takes hold of Ben as he comes to believe – for the first time – that he can compete according to the rules of masculinity that have been created by men like his father and his older brother.

The challenges and contradictions of therapists who work with men who abuse began to fascinate me after I attended a workshop facilitated by Australian psychologist, Alan Jenkins. Jenkins describes this parallel political journey that can occur between therapist and client when both parties acknowledged their complicity in the reproduction of dominant social norms that subjugates and marginalises others (2009). In a personal conversation with Jenkins (A Jenkins 2015, interview, February 15) he said:

There were lots of implications for me in the understanding of the neo-liberal project. That life is about the hierarchy of winners and losers. This idea that you could have a culture based on reifying men in all kinds of ways and yet attempting to respond to men’s violence seemed ridiculous to me. This idea that you could apply punitive practices to men in therapy and yet still have a society where violence is justified in the oppression of others in so many ways seems such a contradiction.

Much of what Jenkins believed was reinforced by the Australian novels that I read. The dehumanising approach to men who use violence and the social conventions of masculinity became more pronounced on each reading of Tsiolkos, Flanagan, Laguna, Stead or Garner. I began to think more about the

ways that I demonstrated dominant masculinity; in relationships, at work and in men's groups. I realised that my fascination with being a 'winner' influenced so much about my own motivations and ensured I was complicit in upholding many of the discourses that were essential to the judgment and disconnection of neo-liberalism.

At around this time I was introduced to the theories of post-structural philosopher, Michel Foucault and his critique of the exaltation of the individual that has been integral to the rise of capitalism, patriarchy and humanism since the industrial revolution. According to Foucault, neo-liberalism has preoccupied us with judging ourselves according to the successes and failures of others. I began to think about this in the context of the condemnation of men who abuse and the individual deficit approaches that ignore wider societal conditions in which violence manifests (Foucault, 1980, 1982). I began to think about the negative assumptions I had made about the men who I met, and how this prevented more productive conversations about their histories, past experiences of injustice and their hopes for safe and respectful relationships. I was forced to acknowledge that I had routinely made negative, essentialist assumptions about the men in MBCPs: as privileging power over safety, and as unworthy of positive regard. I had told myself that I was a different kind of man to the men in the groups (I was good/educated/authoritative) and this prevented a critical examination of my own ethical practice as a therapist.

The neo-liberal project demands the possibility of individual improvement and the assumption that success is attainable for all citizens. Self-help and modern psychological movements have told us all we can be happier, wealthier, wiser and more influential if only we try harder. People who are economically and socially

disadvantaged need only to make better choices in a capitalist system well served by mutual obligation which places the onus on the individual rather than community. It is through this lens that we comfortably view men who abuse as 'rotten apples' rather than symptomatic of the inequality and competition to which we all contribute. James Boyce (2014, p.140) described how modern capitalism:

Offered a smorgasbord of hope, in which wholeness, happiness and communal affirmation could be theirs if only this product was consumed or that piece of advice accepted. The goal of overcoming personal limitations, whether they be physical, emotional, sexual or relational, became a major driver of the economy, used to sell goods, services, people, places and ideas.

I wrote the character of Lincoln Simmons to explore my thoughts about the neo-liberal project and the messages received by the individual that they need to be a 'winner.' Lincoln is consumed by this message as he strives to be economically, sexually and socially elite. His messages about masculinity have been ingrained thanks to his dysfunctional relationship with his father, who he lives with after the separation of his parents. Lincoln is compared to the men in Zoe's groups throughout my creative piece. He is ostensibly superior thanks to his economic success, but he is also destructive, occasionally violent, and selfish. Despite all of this, Zoe supports him unconditionally because she understands his potential and his honourable intentions. This raises the question of our ability to see the potential of some in society, while dismissing others as beyond redemption.

Most of the men who I saw during my experience in MBCPs had been affected by poverty, homelessness, childhood sexual or physical abuse and mental illness. Many had known violence and injustice as a way of life since birth. My early

assumptions had been that these men who had known violence throughout their childhoods could themselves practice respect and safety in their domestic relationships as adults if only they were motivated to change. I realise now, that the lack of an understanding of how neo-liberalism had disadvantaged these men throughout their lives was a major obstacle to working with them in fair and ethical ways.

When Lincoln's burgeoning career stalls in London after he has a break-down after breaking up with his girlfriend, he returns home unsure of his place in the world. As he nears forty, he realises that he can no longer be the man that he was so determined to become. His lack of faith in what he has always believed is further complicated when his mother dies from cancer. Throughout this Lincoln hopes for an improbable relationship with his son, and even with Zoe, but this is constantly jeopardised by his adherence to dominant masculine ways of being. Through his relationship with his father, Kym, I began to trace the history of Lincoln's understandings of masculinity and the constraining effects this has had on his relationships, particularly with his son. The destructive effects of his misogyny are shown throughout the creative piece, yet he is repeatedly forgiven because he is economically prosperous, attractive and articulate. Lincoln is one of society's winners and is juxtaposed with the men in Zoe's groups, who she cannot empathise with as strongly. Zoe comes to realise that her approaches to men who use violence have been motivated by her own experiences of domestic violence perpetrated by her father. As the narrative unfolds, Zoe distances herself from the certainty that affected her earlier work.

The three chapters of my thesis are all designed to research the topic of men's violence from a position of curiosity, rather than certainty. This has motivated to

me to ask what we can learn about the contextual factors of individual men, and how we can join with them to better understand the causes of gendered violence. This is all underpinned by my firm belief that a punitive and contemptuous view of men who engage in violent acts will prove unsuccessful in making women and children safer.

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PART ONE

Contextual research

De-centred and influential practice in men's behaviour change programs: possibilities and challenges.¹

ABSTRACT:

Part One of my thesis was motivated by my decade-long involvement in men's behaviour change programs (MBCPs) through my career at Uniting Communities, an Adelaide-based non-government organisation. Many of the practitioners who I worked with changed their approaches to therapy during that time and began to practice in more collaborative and less punitive ways. These long-serving practitioners had been able to use post-structural thinking to move towards a more holistic and collaborative approach with men who abuse. In this way, they had developed a therapeutic posture which was less condemning and allowed for a position of genuine curiosity with men who have abused. This curiosity extended to all aspects of a man's life, not just the part that detailed his use of violence. This 'parallel political journey' had been significantly impactful for men who were involved in men's behaviour change programs, and for the therapists themselves.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

On a personal level, this chapter helped me to chronicle the effects of hopeful and holistic practice on the work that I had been involved in. To assist in this process, I interviewed eight practitioners, some of whom I knew and other who I had never met. This chapter was essential to my creative work because it gave me a rich description of the challenges and motivations for MBCP professionals. It also highlighted the social discourse that has affected approaches to men and how they have helped and challenged practitioners to work in fair and ethical ways with men who abuse. The polyphonic influences that practitioners described in their interviews with me connected with the work of contemporary Australian authors who extend beyond one-dimensional portrayals of men who abuse. Practitioner and authors are connected by a more nuanced and compassionate approach to men who abuse which attends to the effects of hegemonic understandings which constrain them, while holding on to the possibility of redemption and change. My interviews with MBCP practitioners was significantly influential in my creative artefact, as I learned so much about the professional and personal journeys of therapists who work with men who abuse.

¹ This paper was published as Moss, D. 'De-centred and influential practice in men's behaviour change programs: possibilities and challenges' *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2016, pp. 1–14.

Introduction: therapeutic approaches

In 2006 a group of Adelaide practitioners noticed that some men in their men's behaviour change programs (MBCP) were not responding positively to group exercises.² Men complained that the exercises were 'rubbing their noses in it,' while others remained silent during the group and appeared disengaged. The practitioners noticed how they were often thinking 'these men are just not getting it,' no doubt an observation that has been echoed by MBCP practitioners throughout the western world.

At the same time the practitioners accessed training from Michael White and Alan Jenkins and were influenced to think more critically about how their approaches fit within a hopeful and holistic framework. They began to discuss how traditional, dichotomous thinking about men who abuse had influenced their practice in unhelpful and non-preferred ways. They described strong invitations to practice in punitive and didactic ways in MBCP and the limiting effects this had on their ability to be able to engage proactively with men. The practitioners wanted to develop a practice framework that would simultaneously assist them to prioritise the safety of women and children and work holistically and generatively with men who abuse. These practitioners are typical of those who look to retain gendered understandings of violence and pro-feminist frameworks, but who want to work less punitively and more holistically with the men with who they met. This paper explores the ideas that support collaborative and restorative practice, while tracing the origins of MBCP and the challenges that practitioners face in overcoming popular and historical dogma regarding approaches to men who abuse. It examines the possibilities that new approaches to men's violence creates for practitioners and how these ideas are influencing more generative

² The practitioners mentioned worked in the Specialised Family Violence Service at Uniting Communities, Adelaide.

outcomes for men who abuse. It also examines the extent to which poststructuralist practitioners have been influenced by de-centred and influential practice and to what extent the challenges of working with men who abuse still affect collaborative practice.

Methodology

The methodology for part one of this thesis is influenced by the work of Lene Tannggard, who interviewed psychologists about their work with children, using a polyphonic qualitative research method. Tanggaard rejects the notion of truths about best practice, and instead embarks on meta-analyses of the professional and personal influences that affect psychologists in their practice with children (2008).

My adaptation of Tannggard's polyphonic research interviewing method allowed for a distancing from truth claims about men who abuse or 'best' practice in work with them. This was important because the history of MBCPs has been so influenced by the second wave of feminism and perogatives about men's need to take responsibility for their use of violence. While the necessity for men to change can not be debated, their motivations to use violence and the need for practitioners to demand contrition became the assumed standard for best practice during the proliferation of men's groups in the 1980s. The challenge for practitioners is balancing their commitment towards advocacy for women and children with the provision of effective therapy with individual men.

My interviews with MBCP practitioners sought to elicit stories of their personal and professional challenges in working in such a contentious field. Since 2006 I noticed how de-centred practice helped my colleagues to increase their commitment to optimistic and collaborative practice. I heard many of them describe pivotal episodes in their practice that provided opportunities for men to take responsibility for their use of violence. This culminated in the realisation that past practices had not been conducive in helping men to

take responsibility. My colleagues often came to describe previous practices as overly-punitive. They came to see that while pro-feminist frameworks were crucial to the work that they did in promoting accountability through a gendered understanding of power, they could also be problematic where they led to unhelpful assumptions about men who abuse. These reflections from my colleagues motivated my critical analysis of pro-feminist theories regarding men's use of violence and the development of more generative and post-structural work with men who abuse.

In the absence of comprehensive empirical research regarding the overall effectiveness of MBCP, let alone the comparative value of cognitive-behavioural therapy, feminist, narrative or motivational interviewing with men who abuse, I have selected a methodology that investigates the effects of practitioners' confidence and motivation, in furthering a de-centred and influential approach in their work with men. This is not an attempt to evidence the de-centred and influential counselling modality as empirically superior to others. Alternatively, I am interested in how this therapeutic approach effects practitioner confidence and whether it fits with their personal and professional views regarding ethical approaches to men who abuse, and their partners and children.

Current empirical research in MBCPs is seeking to develop an empirical evidence-base regarding the effects of de-centred and influential practice with men who abuse. Wendt, et al., for example (2018), found that practitioners at Unting Communities used de-centred methods to maintain a stance of curiosity when when domestic violence is noticed. Wendt et al., described curiosity as a way of opening up conversations to explore power differences and gender relations and as a method to balance women's and children's safety with engagement with male perpetrators.

There is currently a lack of empirical evidence regarding the use of de-centred or person-centred counselling modalities in gendered violence. This is despite evidence (Cortis et al. 2018) which shows that 62% of practitioners in non-government organisations use narrative therapy when working with the issue of gendered violence. This was the most used therapy by non-government practitioners, with the next most commonly used being cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), used by 50% of professionals.

I decided to interview eight experienced MBCP practitioners to add context to a contemporary literature analysis and extend upon limited empirical evidence that exists in the field of MBCP. I wanted to know if these practitioners had similar experiences to those of my colleagues, in developing more consultative and non-punitive practice. In recruiting these practitioners, I used five criteria that were designed to ensure that the study was rigorous, balanced and nuanced:

1. All practitioners had at least ten years' experience in MBCP facilitation. This was important because I wanted to enquire about the influences on practitioners during the past decade, and whether these influences had supported their practice to become more collaborative and less centred.
2. The recruitment of practitioners with a gendered and socio-political understanding of violence. This was important because I wanted to know how these understanding had affected their practice and whether post-structural ideas had influenced them. I was less interested in the debate around gendered versus non-gendered approaches to intimate partner violence. I wanted to recruit practitioners with different backgrounds and experiences. My own practice had been influenced by the narrative and post-structuralist models of Michael White and Alan Jenkins and while I recruited some practitioners with similar frameworks (including Jenkins himself) I also spoke with

practitioners who used practices more closely aligned to the responsibility models described in more traditional pro-feminist frameworks such as Duluth.

3. The recruitment of practitioners who work with men who are mandated to attend as part of a court order deriving from their use of violence and those who are voluntary. My interest in this was to explore the effects on practitioner's approach where men had perpetrated known serious harm to women and/or children.
4. The recruitment of female practitioners to explore whether gender plays a role in practitioner approach and specifically the experience of women in MBCPs.
5. The recruitment of a practitioner who works solely with Aboriginal men to explore the similarities and contrasts in their experiences and approaches to their work.

All interviews lasted between 60 and 100 minutes and varied significantly depending on the perspectives of the interviewees. The purpose of the interviews was not to judge the responses or to order them in terms of best-practice, rather to enquire about the development of their practices over the past decade to check what changes they had made and why. In particular, I wanted to know if their practices had become more de-centred and influential in response to their desire to work more collaboratively and less punitively with men who abuse.

The practitioners I interviewed were:

- Alan Jenkins, Psychologist, NADA
- David Tully, Practice Manager, Relationships Australia, Relationships Australia, SA
- Paula McLeod, Social Worker, Community Mental Health Service
- Chris Dolman, Service Manager, Specialised Family Violence Service, Uniting Communities
- Denise Richards, Counsellor, No To Violence, Victoria
- Ryan Greenwell, Counsellor, Relationships Australia, Western Australia.

- Dr. Rebecca Gray, Senior Researcher, Relationships Australia NSW
- Anonymous*, Men's Worker, Kornar Winmil Yunti

*Requested anonymity as he did not want his views to be seen as representative of Aboriginal community.

Post-structural approaches to men who abuse

Post-structuralism rejects the notion that individual men are the inventors of dominant male behaviour or that underlying explanatory structures are fixed within their essential identity (Jenkins, 2009; McLaughlin, 2013). Leading post-structuralist philosopher, Michel Foucault, criticised the humanistic belief in the power of individuals to act independently of the ideological and epistemological prisms that constrain them (Foucault, 1982). Foucault's theories on the subjectivity of man have influenced narrative and invitational approaches to men's violence (White, 2011). He believed that our preoccupation with individuality has increasingly influenced society and psychology to view some individuals through a deficit lens that is marginalising and dehumanising (Foucault, 1980, 1982). This same preoccupation can influence MBCP practitioners to interpret a man's reluctance to engage as proof of his fixed character deficits, and of his narcissism or recalcitrance. Within this context, practitioner judgment and condemnation can obfuscate genuine curiosity (Augusta-Scott, 2009).

The pioneer of narrative therapy practice, Michael White, examined non-totalizing ways of working with men who abuse, using assumptions that allow men to explore their ethical intentions not defined only by their acts of abuse (White, 1989, 2011). White contradicted traditional MBCPs, which contend that a facilitator's primary function is holding men accountable through a regimented and restrictive focus (Day, et al, 2009).

White used the Foucauldian concept of modern power to view men as accomplices and recruits in the continuation of patriarchal practices, not as the inventors of such practices.

This contradicts the assumption that men consciously create inequality in their relationships and privilege unequal and subjectifying relationships (White, 1989). White believed that men were influenced by prominent ideas in popular culture, media, educational, religious and political institutions and legislation that support the idea that they should expect compliance and assent from women and children. Foucault's theory of modern power criticises the modern emphasis on 'good versus evil' that misses the nuances or context of an individual's life and the institutional forces that subjugate and define him (Foucault, 1980, 1982). Using these ideas, White joined with men to identify ways that dominant male culture had recruited them, manipulated them, and influenced them to act in ways that diminished their hopes for safe, respectful or loving relationships (White, 1989). In this way he saw men not as deviant to structural gendered relationships, but as a product of them (White, 2011).

White externalised male power and abuse as a way of understanding a man's beliefs that stand against violence. He explained this initial step of finding these contradictions by writing (White, 2011, p.106):

If there are certain strategies or attitudes to which the man has not been an accomplice, these indicate to us certain values the man holds that contradict some aspects of a culture of control/domination. These are unique outcomes. These are entry points to other possibilities.

White approached men as partners in solving problems of gendered violence, rather than as perpetrators whose erroneous thoughts, attitudes and actions need to be corrected. Men became allies in helping to stand against coercive cultural practices of subjectification and unfairness (Berkowitz, 2004). This created an alternative to viewing men through a dichotomous lens of perpetrator or non-perpetrator, or good or bad and presented opportunities for turning points in their lives. It introduced the possibility of men becoming active participants in socio-cultural change, rather than disqualifying them as implicit inhibitors or obstacles (Augusta-Scott, 2001).

Australian psychologist, Alan Jenkins, described collaborative practice between therapists and men who have abused as a parallel political journey in which each party discovers more about their own ethical blueprint (2009). Jenkins promotes this ethical project as an alternative to men as passive participants in MBCP who need to be 'fixed.' It assumes that they have a history of their own ethical strivings that can become more influential in their relationships, given the ability of the MBCP to affect them (Jenkins, 1990, 2009).

Jenkins believes that when MBCP practitioners privilege their own knowledge and attitudes above those of their male client, they can unwittingly demonstrate the kind of behaviour they seek to prevent (Jenkins, 1990, 2009). Accordingly, a therapist cannot expect men to discuss fairness, connection or safety within MBCP if the practices that he or she utilises are in themselves unfair, unsafe or misuse power. If structural hierarchies support power differences between men and women, they also support a power difference between therapists and perpetrators. Jenkins describes the practice of colonisation when he writes (2009, p.14):

Colonisation involves processes of determining and labelling deficiencies in others, followed by correction, coercion and control. These practices are accompanied by sets of justifications and rationalisations, whereby the ends are seen to justify the means. Such practices can be seen to involve the same kind of rationale and action which constitute all forms of abuse.

Jenkins has been pivotal to the evolution of MBCP approaches both nationally and internationally. I interviewed him about the evolution of his practice in between his two important works, *Invitations to Responsibility* (1990) and *Becoming Ethical* (2009). During my interview with him I wanted to know if his practice had changed in this period and if so, how post-structuralist ideas had influenced this change. He replied (A Jenkins 2015, interview, February 15):

The aim of the work is similar but as I have gone along I have moved away from theories that are mired in moral imperatives about violence, to theories that are focussed on ethical journeys; to theories that trust and promote a striving for ethical ways of being. I am not looking for external ideas of right ways of being that are determined from a position of truth or authority. My work is influenced by an affective philosophy of connection. Whatever promotes that connection takes my interest, rather than what is right or wrong, or evil or bad. It has been that striving that has helped me become, well not clearer, the more I do this work the less clear I become. But, the striving has had me shifting from the days of Invitations to the days of Becoming Ethical.

Jenkins discussed his experience of becoming less certain about the neat theories he had promulgated in his earlier work. This lack of certainty meant that he was now able to work with men from a position of genuine curiosity without having to impart predetermined knowledge or epistemology. This lack of expertness in a therapeutic setting is what Michael White described as de-centred practice (2005). Jenkins describes letting go of the notion of a fixed and structured 'end-point' as the motivation behind his MBCP. He believes that this has helped him distance himself from the 'slightly sanctimonious' notion of the empathetic and sagacious therapist (A Jenkins 2015, interview, February 15):

Empathy can become a commodity and be defeminised and become a function of neo-liberal supremacy. This seeks to diminish difference because we understand. I am more searching for an empathetic unsettlement, that is how you can work towards an understanding of the other, how you maintain and privilege difference. It's this reaching out for singularity and difference that is transforming. There is a process that can be unsettling and that is what I strive for. It's tricky and difficult to understand in a way that is not appropriating, not to think yes I get that, I know that. That is part of my struggle. Sometimes something profound happens when you meet a friend and you know something beyond what you thought you already knew. That's kind of special. You can't just engineer that.

Therapeutic posture

White's work on 'therapeutic posture' underlined his commitment to working in de-centred and influential ways with clients in recognition that they are the experts in their own lives

(2005). Therapeutic posture provides post-structural therapists with a framework to ensure they remain open to curiosity and avoid privileging assumed epistemology. It privileges the experiences and knowledge of clients in solving the problems that confront their lives, and avoids traditional notions of practitioner expertness (White, 2011).

In describing the evolution of his therapy with men to a more de-centred and consultative position, Canadian practitioner Tod Augusta-Scott (2006, p.24) wrote:

Historically, I took up a position which men quickly identified was ‘disapproving’ of them. Men could see that I was thinking solely of the people they had hurt. This neglect of the painful experiences that men had experienced also came from an either/or framework – believing that I either had to prioritise the wellbeing of the person who had been subjected to violence or the person who had enacted it. Now I realise I can care for both.

Augusta-Scott’s work with men extends beyond an accountability mechanism for female partners and children. While safe and respectful relationships remain a primary aim he describes an authentic position of curiosity which emphasises care and hope as part of long-term outcomes which lead to men’s behaviour change (Augusta-Scott, 2006, 2009). This therapeutic position is important for practitioners in MBCPs if they wish to maintain a position of hope and optimism that the work they are doing can assist long-term change. Historically, a centred position in MBCP has influenced practitioners to treat men’s ability to change with suspicion (Day, et al, 2009; Laing, 2002).

A centred therapeutic posture is often reinforced in MBCPs due to the urgency that practitioners describe in creating safety for women and children. This can have them relegating the importance of men’s change as secondary behind the safety of women and children (Chung & Zannetino, 2006). This has combined with popular discourse about the lack of motivation for men to change and the need to resist colluding with men’s minimisation or deflection of blame (Augusta-Scott, 2006; Laing, 2002). Psycho-educational

and didactic therapeutic techniques have been preferred to collaborative practice given the priority that men take full responsibility for their use of violence (Paymer & Pence, 1993).

I interviewed David Tully who spoke about the change in his practice to a less centred and more respectful approach. He believes that early practice did not focus enough on respectful intervention. He said (D Tully 2016, interview, July 12):

Often we would make men feel really bad and think that would motivate them to change their behaviour. We could sometimes use quite disrespectful practices in the name of responsibility. Because they were bad men it was ok. We separated ourselves because we were good men. And this did not allow us to understand that we were affected by the same cultural conditions as men in the group. I think there was some moral terrorism that came out of that because of the idea that you are on the right side and you can say whatever you like.

MBCPs: background, success and limitation

In 1977, Ellen Pence and David Paymer developed the Minnesota based Duluth model which has been widely used by MBCP in the western world (Gondolf, 2014; Miller, 2010). The Duluth model's socio-cultural, pro-feminist position views male entitlement as an extension of entrenched patriarchal and unequal gendered relationships (Paymer & Pence, 1993). The Duluth power and control wheel has become standard issue in many MBCP and provides a theoretical framework to examine the messages that boys and men receive that justify their violent and abusive behaviours (Gondolf, 2014; Misso, 2013; Paymer & Pence, 1993). The Duluth model came to symbolise a commitment to the attribution of full responsibility of violence to the individual men who perpetrate it (Miller, 2010; Paymer & Pence, 1993).

The proliferation of Duluth-based programs in western countries was so significant because it challenged traditional criminological or individual-deficit theories of men's violence (Day, et al, 2009). Previously, within neo-liberal ideologies, men who committed gendered crime had been seen as aberrations to normal patriarchal relationships, rather than as their product (Salter 2012). This view is still supported by psychological and medical

discourses that associate violence with individual pathology that can be diagnosed by exact and precise measures. With the increased influence of aids such as Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Western psychology has never been more confident in locating defects or abnormalities in the human mind or body (Epstein, Duda & Weinstein, 2013). This supports the belief that rather than a societal or ideological issue of gendered inequality, domestic and family violence is perpetrated by those who are intrinsically faulty or deviant (Jenkins, 2009).

The Duluth socio-cultural framework moves past individually-based discourses of men who use violence; such as anger-management or personality disorders and examines intent; asserting that men's individual actions are a premeditated tactic designed to maintain privilege and power over women and children (Miller, 2010; Paymer & Pence). Ellen Pence described her work in assisting men to critically examine the benefits they receive from using violence towards female partners (Miller 2010, p.1010):

What is important is that all of the men think about the idea of him trying to accomplish something. When he grabs her, pushes her, or folds his arms in a certain way, he's doing it for a reason and he has intent. It is important that each man talks about what he is intending to do.

Attempts by MBCP practitioners to meld the Duluth model with other practices or therapeutic techniques has added confusion to program content and MBCP have been criticised for advertising themselves as pro-feminist but colluding with excuses made by men regarding their behaviour. Chung and Zannetino (2006, p.41) expressed this concern when they wrote:

A pro-feminist approach was used in conjunction with other explanations for men's use of violence and abuse such as men having poor impulse control, no positive role models in their childhood, or poor socialisation. Whilst these factors may well shape a man's construction of his own identity and the reasons for his behaviour, they are potentially contradictory with a feminist explanation.

The determination of pro-feminist MBCP practitioners not to allow men to draw direct causal links between their own disadvantage and their abuse of women and children has led to the disqualification of common assessment questions that are used regularly in other therapeutic spaces. In their desire to hold men to account, MBCP practitioners have avoided discussing with men details of their psychological distress, experiences of childhood trauma, alcohol and other drug issues and the effects of poverty.

The strong connection between the women's shelter movement and early MBCP practice often meant that therapy became a site for activism. Some practitioners believed they must strip men of the benefits they received in a patriarchal system and demand contrition. This approach risked viewing men as a homogenous class who use their entitlement to systematically repress women and therefore men needed to be educated. Augusta-Scott & Dankworth (2002, p.786) wrote:

The approach guiding the education model is partly the response to longstanding concerns over victim safety and men's responsibility that has granted it unprecedented acceptance by victims' advocates. It represents an important historical accommodation of social activists demanding accountability and legal sanction for men who have abused women, supplemented through the addition of compatible group intervention practice.

As part of their link with activism, many MBCPs used violence inventories early within group programs to establish the expectation that men face up to their violent and abusive transgressions (Eckhardt & Utschig, 2007). This expectation for men to name their violence in many ways replicated the twelve-step programs that became popular in drug and alcohol programs, where it was assumed to be critical to take ownership for past wrongdoing as the first foundational step in the process. The assumption that group processes are linear is criticised by McLaughlin (2013) who offers post-structural alternatives where all participants learn and participate in their own way. This de-emphasises the hierarchy of the facilitator and the assumption that learning takes place in a foundational or stepped way. Post-structural

theories have helped MBCP practitioners to negotiate group content with men and to allow for less didacticism or judgment.

Rebecca Gray explained how contemporary MBCP group processes allow for greater flexibility for different learning styles and a more dynamic exchange of ideas compared to the rigid structuralism of early practice. Gray said (R Gray 2015, interview, 15 June):

Men increasingly describe the relationships they have with peers and facilitators as positive factors in change, and in providing light-bulb moments and challenging negative attitudes. They talk about holding each other to account within groups and how this becomes increasingly accepted. Within this they are able to challenge their own and each other's negative attitudes in ways that generate a sense of identity and motivation.

The structured approaches and the authority of the group facilitators established a 'pass or fail' expectation in early MBCPs where men were judged by their ability to follow the linear steps spelt out in the program content. Whilst it was common in any therapeutic practice for clients to avoid disclosing details of their behaviours, men who were evasive or confrontational in MBCPs were quickly assessed as beyond redemption. Some practitioners reported a sense of cynicism regarding the effectiveness of MBCPs on hearing the dismissal and collusion that men demonstrate in MBCPs (Chung & O'Leary, 2009; Tyagi, 2006).

Paula McLeod discussed how her experiences in MBCPs had at times given her cause to contemplate program effectiveness. She said (P McLeod 2016, interview, February 26):

In some ways women of partners in our groups were more at risk and they continually told me how men used group content to manipulate them and shift responsibility. They would tell women 'I am doing the group so you should be doing something about your issues.' The idea of mutual responsibility was so powerful for men and women around violence and this is a huge barrier to overcome. Many of the men were quite articulate and would use their turn in group to describe their issues with women as mutual relationship issues or common couple violence. They would continue to say that the effects of the emotional abuse they sustained was just as debilitating as the physical or sexual abuse they had perpetrated.

Partner contact processes

The partner contact processes that were developed in the Duluth and other pro-feminist models have become commonplace in MBCPs. Men are obliged to provide contact details of current or former partners before they're accepted into group programs, ensuring accountability to women's and children's safety. Partner contact practices have illuminated the commonality of men underreporting their use of violence. Men's failure to fully disclose the devastating effects of their violence and abuse contributes to a view of scepticism regarding their motivation and commitment to change (Tyagi, 2006).

Partner contact processes can present a challenge for practitioners who work both with men who abuse and their partners and/or children. They can become compelled to apply quick and practical solutions to safeguard women and children and this can be at the expense of rigorous or collaborative practice. Practitioners can become captured by the differences between two accounts of the same story and begin to view themselves as arbiters of the truth. A man can only be seen as making progress when there is absolute consistency between his account of events and hers.

Many of the practitioners discussed their dilemmas within partner contact processes in early MBCPs, particularly when women provided details of continued abuse which men did not. This could have practitioners feeling less hopeful about the effectiveness of group processes. David Tully discussed conversations with his colleagues during early MBCPs (D Tully 2016, interview, July 12):

At times it felt like we were detectives who were forensically examining the differences between men's and women's stories. We became too focussed on catching men out in a lies. This attitude meant that we could often punish men during groups as we tripped them up with their own words and humiliated them in front of other men.

Denise Richards discussed the balance between working with men who abuse and their wives and children (D Richards 2015, interview, 27 March):

For me it's always been around her and her choices. She talks about the impact of the family violence on her and the children a lot more than the man does. I think that's the biggest disconnect for men in our programs, they're (men) not really aware of the impact of their behaviour on others. I am not sure the majority of men understand the degree to which they destroy self-confidence and self-esteem.

Rebecca Gray discussed the importance of understanding men are at different stages of their journey in recognising their abusive behaviours and the real effects they have on women and children. She said (R Gray 2015, interview, June 15):

The expectation that all men will come to therapy ready to name their abusive actions can emphasise confrontation and fails to acknowledge pre-compleitive or compleitive stages regarding their commitment to understanding what they have done. Through an understanding of what stage a man is at we can tailor our therapy to what it is that will help motivate a man to move forward. This prevents us from becoming frustrated or from rushing to judging him. In alcohol and drug treatment we absolutely understand that individuals present in different stages of change. It stands to reason that men with histories of violence will present at different stages too.

David Tully said that it should come as no surprise to practitioners that men come to therapy with different understandings of what is happening in their relationships than women and children. He said (D Tully 2016, interview, July 12):

We sometimes think we can't continue having exploratory conversations with men because things are so bad for his partner and kids. We can assume that because his account of events is so different from his partners that he is deliberately misleading us. At this point we need to ask questions of ourselves regarding what we can do to help him understand the effects of his behaviour. It is important to understand what is happening for his partner and kids but not so we can have stronger or faster conversations with him. We need to trust in the process.

The experience of female practitioners

It has been generally accepted that co-facilitation by both male and female therapists enhances accountability mechanisms in MBCP (Laing, 2002; Tyagi, 2006). Male and female

facilitators have become role-models for respectful behaviour within the group setting. The idea of role modelling has been criticised by post-structuralist therapists who cite the unhelpful ‘distinction between the ‘good’ and the ‘wise’ (therapists) and the ‘bad’ and the ‘uneducated’ (Jenkins, 2009; White, 2011). Role-modelling discourse can encourage practitioners to view themselves as educators and this can limit their responsiveness to the dilemmas and challenges of men’s presentations through MBCPs. Further, the role-modelling framework further emphasises the differences between practitioner and client and enhances the ‘loser’ identity often experienced by men in groups. This identity can often exacerbate uncooperative behaviour, manifesting in men engaging in confrontation or withdrawing.

The practice of mixed gendered facilitation has often led to dissatisfaction for female practitioners who have experienced dismissal and victimisation from male perpetrators or male co-facilitators in MBCP and decreasing levels of confidence (Tyagi, 2006). Researchers believe that it is much more difficult for women professionals in men’s groups given prevailing misogynistic attitudes of many participants (Apps and Gregory, 2011).

Tyagi (2006, p.13) wrote ‘if a co-gender team is unable to model the very behaviours it is trying to promote; it can create a poisonous environment for the female counsellor and become counterproductive to the goals of the group.’ Female practitioners can feel like the professional structures that inform MBCPs mirror patriarchal socio-cultural structures that privilege the voices of men and marginalise and minimise the voices of women (Apps and Gregory 2011; Tyagi 2006).

I asked Paula McLeod about her experience of being the sole woman in the room during her co-facilitation of MBCP. She said (P McLeod 2016, interview, February 26):

I think in some groups as far as co-facilitation went, I felt as though I was secondary because I was a woman. My sense was that men ran the show. I was always conscious that as the only woman it was my

job to advocate for the experiences of women. But this is challenging when you are the only woman with nine or ten men. And women are conditioned not to speak up. And even if there are more women in a group than men it is the men who usually do the talking.

McLeod provided examples of working with both men in MBCPs and their female partners and the associated ‘sense of rage’ in men’s inability to accept responsibility for the effects of their violence. She described how she moved away from the practice of working with both partners (P McLeod 2016, interview, February 26):

It was difficult which is why my team eventually decided that if we were going to do the groups with men we would not be the ones to do the partner contact with women. That way you could immerse yourself in the group and have the women partners make contact with the designated partner contact worker. So that made it easier. I found I wasn’t so incensed with the men’s slowness in adopting ideas if I had not heard first-hand accounts of the oppressive circumstances of his wife or child.

The experiences of women in men’s groups have led to a rejection of the value of MBCPs in many quarters, an attitude summarised by Di Lucas, (2009, p.36) when she wrote:

I am not sure when the “new hype” about working with perpetrators infiltrated and hijacked the agenda but the response validates my thoughts that this is still a patriarchal society that is still focussed on looking after males by trying to change them – when they don’t want to be part of the process.

Practitioner ambivalence

Early MBCPs advocated that interventions with men should be aimed primarily at the safety of women and children and claimed modest expectations for men’s change. In describing the evolution of the model, Paymer & Pence (1993, p.xiv) wrote ‘we have no illusions that most men will stop their violence and give up power.’ This has meant they have attracted criticism for tight, punitive foci and an emphasis on confrontation (Dutton & Corvo, 2007).

The MBCP alliance with the women's shelter movement has been an uneasy one; marked by suspicion and criticism for a lack of accountability to women and children, a lack of adherence to feminist approaches and for directly competing for scarce funding better invested directly on women and children (Laing, 2002). Researchers have expressed concern that contemporary MBCPs support men to justify their own actions and re-author events to serve their own needs (Laing, 2002; Pease & Fisher, 2001; Phillips, Kelly & Westmarland, 2013). Ambivalence regarding the function of their role has meant that some MBCP practitioners are constantly guarding against colluding with the tyrannising effects of men's violence on women and children (Augusta-Scott & Dankwort, 2002).

Practitioner ambivalence has been exacerbated by research that provides equivocal evidence of the role of MBCPs in the reduction of recidivism for men who use violence (Babcock, Green & Robie, 2004). For some, the research supports the position that men don't change and MBCPs are principally a mechanism for contacting women and children; a kind of 'holding pattern' for recalcitrant men while safety planning is conducted with women and children. The utilisation of this framework has not emphasised positive engagement strategies with men and assumed an obligation on the part of men to demonstrate contrition and honesty (Augusta-Scott & Dankwort, 2002; Laing, 2002).

Given their connection with the justice system, MBCPs often rely on facilitator ambivalence regarding men's motivation to change, particularly where men participate as an alternative to incarceration. Even where men attend MBCPs voluntarily, their primary motive is often seen as the avoidance of separation or impending family court matters. Men's attendance at MBCPs, therefore, can be seen as another tactic which allows them to maintain legal, financial or social control, rather than out of concern for the safety of women and children. Men who are talkative and demonstrative during MBCP can be seen as

manipulative or overpowering, while those who are silent or withdrawn can be accused of avoidance (Chung & O’Leary, 2009).

During his interview with me, Alan Jenkins discussed the possibility of multiple and co-existing motivations for men who attend MBCPs (A Jenkins 2015, interview, February 15):

There’s some truth to men attending groups because of their own needs. We participate in things for a whole lot of reasons. A man who reacts to the thought of losing his family has a reactive motivation. But generally, it’s not difficult to discover that there are other things that he is interested in. It doesn’t mean that the reaction is any less real. I don’t diminish the ethical possibilities because of some moral judgment. I sometimes think what it would mean for men if we didn’t attend to ideas that they could do things differently. What if we just had a police response? It’s not that a police response is meaningless, but what does it produce? Where is the possibility to produce something different?

In no other therapeutic process is a client more likely to be condemned because of his initial negative comments or reluctance to commit to the process. In many MBCPs, practitioners have little or no individual contact with men before the group program, depriving them of the ability to assess the specific needs of a man, to establish rapport, or to ensure that a man has the confidence or motivation to succeed in a group setting. Rebecca Gray believes that MBCP practice ambivalence has impeded strategies to improve men’s engagement. She said (R Gray 2015, interview, June 15):

It’s easy to say that men’s groups don’t work, but what is the alternative to keep trying? Do we throw all these men in jail; we know that doesn’t work. Our only alternative is to keep improving on practice and attempting to motivate change.

Ryan Greenwell discussed his belief that practitioner ambivalence had subsided in recent years as MBCPs became more aligned to collaborative practices. He said (R Greenwell 2015, interview, February 12):

I think we have just realised that if men are able to make some changes for themselves and see that there is some benefit for them

they will become more engaged. Half the battle is engaging men and to do that you need to be genuinely interested in their stories. This develops an understanding that as a practitioner you are there for the safety of women and children and because you want to make a difference in men's lives. Men will only think differently about what it is to be a man if we treat them respectfully and with genuine interest. When that happens, it becomes clear we (men and facilitators) are on the same side. When men stop putting fear into their partners it benefits all of us. There is no need for confrontation.

Contemporary explanations of domestic and family violence

Men's and father's rights groups have become a strident political voice in western countries and have accused pro-feminist MBCPs of a flawed and erroneous ideology (Price-Robertson, 2012). These movements claim that feminism and the women's shelter movement has gone too far, creating laws that support women to exaggerate or fabricate episodes of gendered violence to gain favourable custody outcomes. Some researchers assert that the fear of contravening social and legal taboos has ensured that men are more likely to exercise greater restraint in relationships than women (Richardson & Green, 2006; Cross, et al, 2011). Such assertions have placed pressure on the judicial system to justify suspicions of domestic and family violence and placed the onus on women and children to substantiate their experiences of domestic and family violence (Flood, 2010).

Men's rights movements claim that there is statistical symmetry in men's and women's experiences of domestic and family violence and that the feminist lobby purposefully exaggerate the differences between experiences of violence for men and women (One in Three, 2016). Many MBCP practitioners believe that the gender symmetry debate has confounded attempts by therapists and social workers to respond to disclosures of domestic and family violence and have led to inconsistencies in referral pathways or treatment options for men who abuse and has raised suspicion towards women who disclose details of the violence of male partners. Pro-feminist practitioners cite research that clearly shows the

imbalance in the number of homicides committed against women, the physical, social and economic power differences within patriarchal societies and accounts from children who are most often abused by men (Allen, 2011).

David Tully discussed the proliferation of diverse theories to explain the prevalence of domestic and family violence (D Tully 2016, interview, July 12):

There's competing currents in this work which at least show that we are thinking more about the issue of violence than we have at any other time in the past. But this brings with it competing claims about the truth. And these new truths often seek to dismiss what has happened in the past as irrelevant.

Dutton and Corvo (2007) typify the movement to disregard pro-feminist MBCPs as lacking empirical credibility, claiming that they're based on ideological mantra. Dutton and Corvo advocate for individualised psychological and environmental explanations of intimate partner violence, rather than structural or cultural ones. Some researchers have become more interested in ideas such as insecure attachment, past trauma and common couple violence as a leading cause of intimate partner violence for both men and women (Dutton & White 2012; Ehrensaft, 2008). This argument contends that early childhood experiences directly influence adult experiences of substance abuse, depression and the presence of personality disorders, all of which can be linked to the perpetration of violence.

This argument has drawn the ire of feminists who believe that these individually-based attachment arguments evaporate the responsibility of men, and perpetuate popular societal arguments while reinforcing mother-blame (Laing, 2002). Research claiming there is symmetry in men and women's experience of intimate partner violence often relies on common conflict tactic scales. These measurements have been criticised for an over-reliance on singular acts of violence without an understanding of the context in which the violence is used (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). Many women report to using violence as either protection or in protest in the face of systematic and terroristic physical, sexual, emotional, social and

financial violence from male partners. Dobash & Dobash undertook a gendered analysis of the type and effect that violence enacted by both men and women had and found that from their sample study only 6 out of 95 men hit their partner as a result of retaliation or self-defence while 75% of women who reported to using violence said this was always in self-defence and 54% of men agreed with these claims.

Towards a more optimistic evidence base

Four of the eight practitioners interviewed discussed the need for more optimistic research which supports holistic and collaborative practice. Much of the current research is equivocal in assessing the effectiveness of MBCPs in reducing recidivism and this has contributed to practitioner ambivalence and the call to divert money away from men's programs into direct work with women (Laing, 2002). Much of the research claims MBCP make no significant difference in the rates of recidivism for the men who attend (Dutton & Corvo, 2007; Day et al, 2009).

Westmarland, Kelly and Chalder-Mills (2010) argue that MBCP evaluations have been viewed too strictly through measures of recidivism. They believe that there are many outcomes within MBCP that can contribute to the safety of women and children, even in cases where men do continue to use some or all aspects of their past violence. They conducted a total of seventy-three interviews with men, their partners/ex-partners, MBCP staff, and funders to explore the different criteria that were used to evidence success. Findings revealed the necessity for a wider scope of what success can mean in MBCPs that is not only connected to a criminal justice outcome. Interestingly, female partners and ex-partners in the interviews emphasised their strong preference for MBCP content to focus on safe, positive and shared parenting as an important outcome of any intervention.

Evaluations that reach beyond problematic understandings of MBCPs will lead to richer and multi-layered understandings of what can be achieved in MBCP. Broady, Gray and

Gaffney (2014) conducted a study of 85 men attending MBCP across New South Wales. These men completed questionnaires that measured their attitudes towards gender equity, their self-esteem, their mastery or control of their lives and their current psychological distress. The men in the study recorded lower levels of support for gender equity, mastery, and self-esteem and higher levels of psychological distress. While these findings are not surprising, they do succeed in deconstructing common issues for men in MBCPs. By adapting outcome measurements to the specific issues of individual men, MBCP evaluations will be more effective in finding where group content is working, and where they require greater development.

Rebecca Gray, co-author and researcher in this project, spoke about the need to evaluate men's attitudes and sense of hope as well as their behaviour. She said that too often pro-feminist MBCPs establish criteria that reinforce the message that men don't change. She said (R Gray 2015, interview, June 15):

Previous models have relied heavily on confrontation and this is not useful in motivating men. By conducting thorough assessments with men, we are able to obtain a fuller picture of both his motivation for change and the issues that prevent him from making change. When we evaluate multiple aspects of a man's treatment we are more likely to view men's time with us more broadly than either a pass or fail.

Babcock, Green and Robie (2004) examined 22 programs in America that had rigorous evaluations. Although these findings showed only a modest 5% reduction in recidivism for men who attended MBCPs compared to those who didn't it recommended a continuation in the development of evidence-based practice which drew strengths from both individually based practice and the socio-cultural emphasis of the Duluth Model. Babcock, Green and Robie (2004, p.1048) wrote:

Policymakers should not accept the null hypothesis and dismiss the potential for batterers' intervention to have an impact on intimate partner abuse. Results showing a small effect of treatment on violence abstinence do not imply that we should abandon our current

batterer intervention programs. Similar small treatment effects are found in meta-analyses of abstinence abuse treatments when abstinence from alcohol is the outcome of interest. Yet, some people are able to dramatically transform their lives following substance abuse or battering interventions. Given what we know about the small effect size of batterers' treatment, the energies of treatment providers, advocates, and researchers alike may best be directed at ways to improve batterers' treatment.

Sheehan, Thakor and Stewart (2012) completed an exhaustive literature review of 2,729 articles on intimate partner violence and found that 2,547 of these articles explicitly excluded as irrelevant the topic of turning points in male perpetrators. As such, the authors argue that research and practice has largely overlooked the major life events which prove catalysts for ethical and behavioural changes in men who have been abusive to partners and children. This is congruent with other research which recommends that MBCPs increase effectiveness by improving motivational strategies for men to attend beyond a solely punitive consequence.

Salter (2012) suggests that treatment should be tailored to the needs of the individual and address barriers to change, such as socio-economic circumstances, past issues of trauma, mental health and substance abuse. Increasingly, research suggests that MBCPs are more likely to increase effectiveness where they view men holistically and attend to issues such as criminal justice, mental health, drug and alcohol and community connection (Saunders 2008).

Gondolf (2014) describes an emerging, but informal, trend to develop practitioner-led evaluations of perpetrator programs. Quantitative evaluations that rely on recidivism rates rarely take into account men's attitudes or whether the short or medium-term safety of women has been improved. Even where men do report improvement in their ability to act in more respectful and less abusive ways to women and children, this is rarely taken on face value given that MBCP evaluations are often conditioned to be wary of this change, and doubt its veracity. No other therapeutic program is so confined in its demonstration of outcome success in this way. The fundamental issue – of course – is the problem of relapse.

Men may change for a period of time before relapsing into familiar patterns of behaviour. Also, men may change the more severe aspects of their violence but continue more subtle acts of violence.

Collaborative practice with men who abuse

Collaborative practice with men who abuse relies on an understanding that men can change and that their reluctance to engage is not proof of a preference for unequal and unsafe relationships. A man may be simultaneously invested in a sense of entitlement, control and justification while desiring safer and more respectful relationships with women and children (Jenkins, 2009). If collaborative practice is to be developed practitioners require an understanding that multiple desires co-exist for men who abuse, and it is the responsibility of MBCP to strengthen their ethics that stand against violence and that honour safety and generosity.

Australian practitioner, Chris Dolman, describes his work in engaging men that allows him to become less concerned about ‘policing’ a man’s blame-shifting or minimisation of accountability. Dolman describes his commitment to a therapeutic posture that assumes all men have relationship ethics which promote fairness and safety. He uses a mixture of both individual and group sessions to help a man find the contradictions between his violent or abusive actions and his honourable ethics. He said (2012):

It stands in such contrast, there’s a gap there. It’s not my gap it’s one that he’s generated. He’s reinforcing that his violence is against his own ethics. And when he starts to think about the effects of his violence on his partner and kids, it bumps up against his own ethics in terms of what he hopes for them, or for the type of relationships he hopes to have with them.

Dolman has worked in MBCPs that have been intentionally called ‘groups for men who want to stop hurting those they care about.’ The naming of these groups is intentional, and part of a commitment to the assumption that men do genuinely care

for their female partners and children. Dolman describes his interest in the stories of hopes and intentions of men and the practitioner virtue of patience is emphasised; the importance of a robust and careful process that allows a man to explore the history of his own ethics and what gets in the way of those ethics.

In my interview with Dolman, he stressed the importance of collaborative practice and ensuring that the structural perimeters of group processes did not impede or disqualify these practices. He said (C Dolman 2016, interview, June 9):

Three men from one of our men's groups continued to meet with each other with a view to keep each other on track and this became a significant act of collaboration. This became a learning experience for all of us. And something separate to a facilitator led transferral of knowledge. This was an idea from men who wanted to come up with new ideas of respect and became a grassroots symbolism of community.

Dolman described the effect that the men's collaboration had on his practice and how this had formed a powerful contrast to structural and traditional discourse of facilitator as central. He said (C Dolman 2016, interview, June 9):

I can remember a conversation with a man in a group when I became aware of some of my newly developed skills in questioning. I positioned myself in a particular way during this conversation and I wonder how that was for the man. There became a point for me in which it became clear that I was manoeuvring the conversation in a certain direction. I think that practitioner cleverness can be an obstacle to genuine curiosity or genuine collaboration in groups, and become exclusive or dismissive of the experiences of men.

Ryan Greenwell described the use of 'troublemaker' cards in his MBCP which helped men explore unhelpful thoughts and attitudes in a collaborative and non-judgmental way. Greenwell said (R Greenwell 2015, interview, February 12):

The troublemaker cards keep the men's identities separate from the ideas that have influenced him to use violence. This opens up a way to talk about dangerous ideas in ways that don't shame him for being influenced by them. This is a common problem faced by men and our job in the group is to find ways around the problem or to make sure it

doesn't prevent the kinds of relationships we want with women and children.

In my interview with Alan Jenkins, he described the evolution of his own group practice. He described a process in which collaboration had become more important to him and his corrective or superior role in MBCP had necessarily diminished. He said (A Jenkins 2015, interview, February 15):

There was this idea that you needed to be some kind of moral example. There was the idea that you somehow have got it right and that you would teach another man the right way. This became a counter-productive exercise. I became more interested in the whole group becoming an assemblage of its different parts. It's not so much what they did or what they stood for, but their interactions and connectedness within the group.

Working holistically with men who abuse

An acknowledgement of the different experiences that men bring to MBCPs has motivated practitioners and researchers to avoid 'one-size-fits-all' models and have encouraged pro-feminist models to evolve to cater for the diverse circumstances and backgrounds of individual men (Perel & Peled, 2008).

The belief that violence is a choice, or a tactic can influence MBCP practitioners to make assumptions about the men they work with and take up a centred therapeutic position. While post-structural practitioners acknowledge that men make a choice in hurting women and children, they are actively committed to curiosity regarding the individual circumstances of every man. If a man discloses a story, for example, of his victimisation of violence by his own father, this could be viewed as an opportunity to explore a man's ethics about violence.

During my interview with Denise Richards, she described her belief that it was possible to discuss with a man his history of trauma without seeing individual history as a direct cause of his perpetration of violence. She said (D Richards 2015, interview, 27 March):

Some men have had shocking lives. They have grown up in homes where they have witnessed or experienced family violence. There is a whole lot of trauma experienced by men throughout their lives. My belief is that you can work with the trauma and his experiences of trauma, but it still doesn't excuse or mitigate his choice or his behaviour.

Other practitioners saw exploration of men's histories of child sexual abuse or trauma as critical to their practice. David Tully, for example, actively encourages men to speak with him about their histories (D Tully 2016, interview, 12 July):

It is not my experience that men discuss their experiences of violence or past child sexual abuse as an excuse or as an attempt to muddy the waters. My experience is that these conversations are essential to allow men to understand some context about what we are discussing. His own experiences of having someone act with injustice towards him ultimately help him to get clear about his stance on violence. And often these conversations are the first time anyone has ever taken the time to ask him what it was like to have these experiences as a kid.

In describing his practice with Aboriginal men who use violence an MBCP practitioner (who wished to remain unidentified) talked about the importance of allowing Aboriginal men to talk about their journeys. He said that his job as a facilitator had changed over the years and was now often quite peripheral in groups as Aboriginal men assisted each other to tell the stories of their pasts (Anonymous Aboriginal practitioner, interview, 19 July):

As a facilitator I can sit outside the program and be a silent observer. It's just something that happens sometimes, and they are always the best sessions. The men are sharing and holding each other accountable. It's their group, not mine. Facilitation doesn't mean you always have to be involved. If you allow men extra time they will go a little bit deeper. By taking control of the group the men will delve deeper and provide greater insights regarding what is going on for them. If you're always out the front talking you forget to listen and you miss things and cannot focus on the individuals in the group.

In describing his ethics, a man might begin to discuss the intentions he has for his own children and how he desires safety and respect for them. These conversations

begin possible when a therapist begins to view a man holistically rather than the sum of his violence. Jenkins said (A Jenkins 2015, interview, February 15):

When we isolate the safety of women and children as an end we lose something about interconnectedness. There is something about the capacity to affect and be affective that is present in an interconnected world. It's like saying, ok, if this guy stops hitting people, but continues a view of contempt, is that ok? There's an interesting dilemma. It's vital we keep thinking about how we act in ways that don't attend to one problem but create another.

An adherence to patient, careful and engaging practice in MBCPs has influenced a mixture of both individual and group therapy for men, to ensure adequate attention is given to their individual stories with an emphasis on ways that they can demonstrate their own ethics. Within this, it becomes possible to extend our practice beyond more traditional approaches which tended to sort men in to those who were 'getting it' and those who weren't and never would. Through a more nuanced practice, MBCPs are less likely to reinforce the 'loser' mentality that many men in group programs identify with (Augusta-Scott, 2009; Jenkins, 2009).

Woodhead (2009, p.128) described her experience of working with men who had developed negative and ruthless images of themselves which she attributes directly to childhood sexual abuse:

One of the most important things my clients have taught me over several years of therapeutic work with adults who as children have experienced overwhelming abuse and violence, is that it is often preferable, and safer, to experience yourself as bad rather than to see yourself as powerless.

Emphasis on individual and group sessions

Attention to all aspects of the man's life is sometimes difficult in group settings given some men's hesitation about disclosing childhood trauma, past injustice or their own perpetration of violence in front of other men. Many of the practitioners interviewed reported the belief

that group work should not be viewed as a panacea to stopping violence. They reported that some men find it useful to attend individual sessions before they attended a group.

Rebecca Gray reported that choice was necessary if men were to be active agents in their own change. She said (R Gray 2015, interview, June 15):

Men described a lot of distress when they realised that they had inflicted such pain, particularly on their children. This often requires one-on-one sessions to support them to deal with this. There was once a time when we might say that men ‘deserved’ to feel pain, or shame, but without providing them with support they often struggle to put these feelings into context or to see that the violence is not working for them.

Post-structuralist MBCPs have increasingly sought to de-emphasise a rule bound process in which men are viewed as a homogenous group who will all learn and change according to the same criteria. It has become increasingly important for practitioners to understand the context of men’s lives and in many cases, this has led to a practice of individual and group sessions. James McLaughlin described this process by writing (2009, p.4):

But post-structuralism also defies structuralist thinking by putting the primary emphasis on practical language use instead of on sets of static rules that are thought to distil the many down to the few. Applied to group theory and practice, this defiance means that group members’ practical language use—discourse—takes primacy over grand theories of group development. Merging this discursive notion into group theory and practice means honing in on the what and how of group members’ talk in a meticulous, nuanced manner.

In my interview with Alan Jenkins he described his intent in working individually with men as well as in a group session (A Jenkins 2015, interview, February 15):

It became important to understand what might be concerning a man in anticipation of coming to a group. This seemed like a fair thing to do to me. The alternative is to bring men together and potentially add to the sense for some men that they are a loser. A group can be just another way for a man to experience himself in that way.

Culturally competent practice

An examination of the context of women's experiences of violence has become an accepted part of feminism given the criticism that first arose in America in the 80s from African-American women, who felt they didn't fit within mainstream feminist discourse (McKibbin, et al, 2013). This has given rise to what feminists have labelled intersectionality, in recognition of the ways that gender, race, age, ability, sexual identity and class have marginalised many women from the empowerment and safety that feminism and the women's shelter movement has attempted to deliver. Similarly, in Australia, domestic and family violence advocates are increasingly mindful of the different interventions that are required for Aboriginal women. In 2012-2013, for example, the rate of hospitalisations for family violence related assaults for Aboriginal women was 34.2 more than the rate for non-Aboriginal women (Steering committee for the review of government service provision, 2014). As intersectionality has become accepted as a crucial part of feminism, researchers now also argue that men who perpetrate violence should no longer be viewed as a homogenous group, given the cultural, attitudinal, economic and social differences in men who use violence towards women and children (Perel & Peled, 2008).

The restrictions that a one-size-fits-all model of therapy can impose in MBCPs are particularly evident in their work with Aboriginal men or for men from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Those MBCPs that rely on education through the use of workbooks and whiteboard exercises are less accessible for men who have low literacy levels or speak English as a second language. The typologies argument has become increasingly popular in the past decade and argues that MBCP models should evolve to cater for the diverse circumstances and backgrounds of individual men (Perel & Peled, 2008). According to this theory it may be counter-productive to indiscriminately establish a group

that brings together such a broad cross-section of men from different cultural and socio-economic cohorts.

The overrepresentation of Aboriginal women and children who experience family violence is forcing a revision of the practice of referring Aboriginal perpetrators to mainstream MBCPs. Alford and Croucher (2011) believe that a more nuanced and specialised understanding of the needs of Aboriginal communities is necessary to support more effective practice in domestic and family violence. They write that this approach needs a developed understanding of the complexities of Aboriginal family violence and ‘requires recognition of the cumulative effects of ‘poor health, alcohol, drug abuse, gambling, pornography, unemployment, poor education and housing and general disempowerment [which] lead inexorably to family and other violence and then on to sexual abuse.’

Maggie Woodhead (2009) examined the demographics of 261 men in Perth who had been subjected to domestic violence intervention orders and were either enrolled in or awaiting entry to a MBCP. She found that 20.7% of these men were Aboriginal, 82.8% had previous criminal histories and 67.2% had experienced at least one form of childhood violence. Woodhead argues that MBCP need to maintain a consciousness of perpetrator typologies to ensure that MBCP cater for the unique circumstances of individual men.

Mainstream responses to Aboriginal men who use violence have typically occurred as part of the criminal justice system and geared more towards policing, punishment and prosecution than on long-term healing outcomes for Aboriginal men (Cripps & Davis, 2012).

During my interview with an unidentified MBCP practitioner from Kornar Winmil Yunti he discussed his beliefs regarding traditional and punitive approaches to Aboriginal men. In particular, he was interested in how workers acknowledge the raft of issues that continue to affect Aboriginal men and mean that they are more likely to engage in family violence (Anonymous Aboriginal practitioner, interview, 19 July):

I don't think Aboriginal men are born violent. Circumstances cause men to become violent. The men we see don't want to be violent. You can't leave these issues off the table. It's like telling people just to stop drinking. There is a reason people drink and reason people use violence. It's different to an excuse, it's a reason. This might be past trauma and we can't work effectively if we don't address the issues of trauma. Every man we see has trauma in their life. We can't say there is no connection.

The Kornar Winmil Yunti practitioner talked about coming up with new ways of talking with Aboriginal men which strayed from tight, punitive focus of traditional MBCPs and went beyond discussions of power and control (Anonymous Aboriginal practitioner, interview, 19 July):

If I ask our Aboriginal men do they think they are in control of their lives they will say 'I have no control.' Do I have any control over the police, Centrelink or even my partner? I have no control. I am just angry. When you try to talk about power and control with Aboriginal men you create a huge disconnection. There is no power or control in the lives of Aboriginal men. These are men who are disconnected from their culture. They are not connected to country. They are lost and they exhibit that loss through using violence. You start talking about power and control with an Aboriginal man and he is going to zone out. You're not going to get anything from him. Talking to people who are so disempowered about power and control is, I think, quite unhelpful.

All seven non-Aboriginal practitioners acknowledged that more work needed to be done to develop practice with Aboriginal men who abuse. In particular, they discussed how 'white privilege' could be used to discriminate against and make assumptions about Aboriginal men who attended mainstream MBCPs. All seven practitioners discussed the necessity to develop strategies that actively engage Aboriginal men so that they may explain their cultural values, experiences and local history in ways that demonstrate respect and foster collaboration. This has not always been possible in tight, punitive MBCPs where tight foci may diminish opportunities to demonstrate respect for diversity, genuine curiosity and continual learning. Without this understanding of the effects of marginalisation in the life of an Aboriginal man it

becomes increasingly difficult to trace his own ethics about family, community and culture and connect these to his intentions as a man, partner, father and member of family and culture.

Results

The results of the semi-structured interviews with eight practitioners found that:

- All eight had been informed by post-structural practices including the teaching and writing of Michael White and Alan Jenkins
- Six of the eight identified changes in their therapeutic posture that allowed for increased collaboration with men and reinforced more holistic and less punitive interventions
- Two of the eight described reservations about working too holistically with men for fear that this might minimise responsibility and collude with excuse making.
- Five of the eight described an evolving practice which viewed both women and children and men as the primary clients in their MBCPs.
- Seven of the eight practitioners said that they were now more likely to negotiate group content with men in MBCPs than they were when they first began practice.
- Five of the eight said that they had become less likely to use violence inventories the further they had progressed in their practice.
- All eight said they were more attuned to the effects of childhood trauma on men in the groups and had developed strategies to support men who had both been victimised by and perpetrators of domestic and family violence.
- Six of the eight said that they viewed the recounting of men's stories of disadvantage as important strategies in tracing and reinforcing their own ethical histories.

- All seven non-Aboriginal practitioners said that they had become aware of white, middle-class privilege in their work with Aboriginal men and men from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
- Six out of the eight said that they believed that they could help men to make long-term change in their lives.
- Four of the eight described the need for more hopeful research that supported practitioners to help men make changes in their lives.

Limitations

Given my interviewees were all Australian, and many of them South Australian, they were all likely to have been influenced in some ways by the prominent Australian works of Michael White and Alan Jenkins. Most of the respondents had attended their training and many described their work as directly influential in the evolution of their practice over the past decade. I suspect the same interviews in other parts of the western world would have elicited different responses. However, my sense is that many practitioners world-wide are investigating de-centred therapeutic responses and this has been shown by current literature, if not by the interview process.

It must also be acknowledged that there are a number of competing ideologies that approach men's violence and this research has not been of the scope – or the inclination – to include them all. Of the programs I researched in Australia, it is true to say that practice frameworks most often described a pro-feminist exploration of power, male responsibility, an examination of the messages received by men and boys and an acknowledgement of the importance of partner contact processes. Resultantly, I decided to interview practitioners with these basic understandings. Within this there was a broad scope of attitudes regarding

approaches to men's violence, but these generally did not include gendered symmetry or diverse psychodynamic theories.

The lack of empirical evidence regarding the commonality and effectiveness of de-centred or narrative therapeutic modalities with men who abuse adds a more systemic limitation to this study. Although some empirical evidence regarding narrative practices with men who abuse has started to emerge (Wendt, et al., 2018; Cortis, et al., 2018) there is a need for much more evidence regarding the effects of de-centred practice, both on men who abuse, their partners and children and practitioners themselves.

Case study: a framework for practice

In 2006, after accessing training with Michael White and Alan Jenkins, the group of Adelaide practitioners who I worked with began to develop a framework that could help them to practice collaboratively and respectfully with men who have abused. In naming their preference for de-centred and influential practice with men who abuse, they needed a strategy to help them avoid the dogmatism that could divert them from this practice. In thinking about a way of working, the practitioners were able to explicitly name the principles that would ensure they practiced according to their preferred ways. The results of the interviews with eight practitioners show that there are strong similarities between their experiences and those of my colleagues. The Adelaide practices named the following practices as useful in moving towards preferred practices with men who abuse:

Women and children and men as primary clients

The framework prioritised both the safety of women and children and holistic change in the lives of men. The practitioners decided that an 'either or' approach to MBCP was unhelpful for both their practice with men, and ultimately for the safety of women and children. They believed that the MBCP process could only provide increased safety and promote respect if

they operated from the assumption that men were attending because of their desire to make change. Viewing men as primary clients opened opportunities to talk with men to discuss prominent issues in their lives. Practitioners became less concerned about ‘sticking to the script’ when they began to take a post-structuralist view of MBCP, without the necessity of coercive and colonising outcomes for men.

Decentred and influential therapeutic posture

The practitioners noticed that doing a lot of talking or ‘teaching’ was a sign they had become too centred or had lost patience with the men’s ethical journeys. One practitioner recorded his group sessions with men to examine how many questions he asked compared to statements. He believed the most formative sessions occurred where he talked less and questioned more, and where the men in the group became curious about the lives of each other. He noticed the effects that his own curiosity had in groups and how the men’s confrontation and combativeness decreased to make way for more generative and consultative conversations. He noticed how it became less necessary for him to intervene or to gate-keep. He also noticed that the men began to make different sense of the conversations when they were given choice in how they proceeded.

Male practitioners also noted that a commitment to decentred practice allowed for greater accountability, particularly where they found themselves engaging in competitive or colonising ways or attempted to make men ‘succumb’ to particular ideas. Supervision and post-group meetings became important forums for these practitioners so that they could critically evaluate their practice and hold themselves and each other to account within a decentred and influential framework.

Negotiating group content

The practitioners began to ask permission before beginning group exercises and to help the men design their own programs. This increased the men's sense of collaboration and also allowed each participant to critically examine their own involvement in the group. When a practitioner felt that men were colluding with each other to minimise or excuse their use of violence they would ask a question like;

John, is it okay if I ask you a bit more about what you just said about your wife, Sue, being partly to blame for what happened? You asked us last week if we could interrupt you if you began to shift the focus of your violence on to Sue. I remember thinking that it was a significant step for you to ask us to help you stay true to your ethics around fairness. Would it be okay if I asked you some questions about why it was important for you to ask us to help you stay true?

The practitioners noticed how viewing the groups as a shared ethical project helped them to have collaborative conversations with men, even when they were minimising or deflecting blame. This helped them to stay de-centred and they noticed how they were more proactive in discussing issues, rather than staying silent and thinking 'this man is just not getting it.' Additionally, the men began to provide the practitioner's advice about what helped them, and they were able to add to the critical evaluation of group work. The practitioners noticed how this took them further away from the structural concept that they ought to act as *role models* to men in MBCP.

De-emphasising violence inventories

The practitioners decided that using violence inventories so early in the group process was not conducive to viewing men as separate to the abuse they had enacted. Additionally, they

noticed how violence inventories established an expectation of contrition, and that they could be drawn into judgment where a man's reaction to what he had done did not fit with what they expected. They noticed that men would more likely disclose the details of their violent practices where they saw this as part of an ethical project, as an alternative to coercion. The practitioners decided that it was unrealistic to expect that men will name every violent action that they had perpetrated during the early sessions and that more comprehensive disclosure depended on a sense of trust and security in the group process.

Noticing the effects of white, middle-class privilege

The practitioners took some care in wondering about the effects of white middle-class privilege in groups. Many of the men had experienced multiple disadvantages, spoke English as a second language and were unemployed. Some of the men had trouble reading or writing. The practitioners discussed how many of these men were disadvantaged by traditional MBCP which emphasised whiteboard activities and reading and writing exercises. Some of these men had experienced confusion in past MBCP programs and this confusion could be construed as disengagement. The practitioners decided that any group about fairness and safety needed to demonstrate inclusivity. They decided to spend some time thinking about their own middle-class privilege, and how this manifested in inaccessible questions and statements. They took care not to 'trick' men into admissions. They worked individually with disadvantaged men so that they could gain the confidence to become an active participant in the groups. The practitioners believed that this was part of the parallel political journey they were taking with their clients.

The practitioners noted that the effects of white, middle-class privilege could manifest most notably in their work with Aboriginal men and that many of the assumptions they made presented obstacles to effective cross-cultural practice. The practitioners believed it was important to become more curious with Aboriginal men regarding the history of their culture

and the effects of marginalisation, poverty, racism and the stolen generation. They believed that it was unrealistic to replicate white, mainstream practice with Aboriginal men and expect positive outcomes.

Past injustice as ethical history

The practitioners noted that men would often want to talk about past injustices they had experienced, either in childhood or adolescence and that they might draw a causal link between their victimisation and perpetration of violence. The practitioners noted that this could have them shutting down a conversation for fear it was colluding with men's blame-shifting. They found that when men were given permission to discuss their experiences of injustice, they would also begin to discuss the ethics that they had around fairness and the kind of fathers and partners they wished to be. The practitioners found that the more often they resisted the invitation to shut down men's stories of injustice, the more skilled they became in asking questions that facilitated ethical conversations.

Trusting that men understood their own ethical preferences formed the key to this practice. The practitioners wanted to shift away from their own impatience that often accompanied the thought that 'he is just not getting it.' Instead, they committed to more patient and collaborative practice which they believed would eventually allow men to generate their own ethical blueprints.

Discussion

Michel Foucault said 'I don't say the things I say because they are what I think. I say them so they are no longer what I think' (Claris, 2014). Post-structuralist practice frameworks provide a starting point for practitioners to notice the unhelpful beliefs that impede de-centred and influential practice with men who abuse. Practitioners who work in this way with men who abuse recognise the challenges and must be open to feedback from colleagues and group members to help them avoid dichotomous or expert thinking.

There are many essentialist ways that MBCP practitioners can be described. These can include brave, dedicated and selfless. These essentialist claims can be seductive and have practitioners believing they are doing their male clients a favour by working with them. This can contribute to a hierarchy of individuality that is not new for men who abuse.

The practitioners who I describe wanted to resist contributing to dominant cultural norms and for this reason they challenged themselves to critically examine their own actions and thinking. This was a challenging project as no practitioner can act independently from the socio-cultural structures they work in.

There is much work to be done in the effective facilitation and engagement of men who hurt those they care about and there is to date no strong evidence which links collaborative practice to more effective long-term change. But what is evident is the effect that post-structural practice had on this group of practitioners in their energy, optimism and longevity in the work. My guess is that a MBCP is an unpleasant place to be for the practitioner who believes that men cannot change.

A fundamental and shared belief that men can and do change is essential in the development of therapeutic processes that are ethical, collaborative and accountable. It is not the role of the practitioner to become an arbiter of who can and cannot change. A committed to a fair and just society and the eradication of socio-cultural injustice means we must work with everyone in fair, just and hopeful ways.

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PART TWO

Critical Research Analysis

Beyond individual deficit understandings of men's violence: an exploration of the nuanced approaches of Australian authors.³

ABSTRACT:

Sofie Laguna, Zoe Morrison, Charlotte Wood, Richard Flanagan and Christos Tsiolkas portray gendered violence as the manifestation of individualism, competition and the lack of compassion in which we are all complicit. The task of presenting nuanced and sympathetic portrayals of men who abuse is challenging, particularly when describing the effects of this violence on women and children. The ability to apply a curious and humanising lens to the individual men who abuse is critical and Australian authors make a significant contribution to the issue of gendered violence by moving past individual deficit character examinations to describe nuanced and contradictory male characters. Laguna, Morrison, Wood, Flanagan and Tsiolkas achieve this because they resist descriptions of men who are only concerned about power and control. The men in their literature commit abhorrent acts, but they also desire love, respect and safety. These men are constrained by their hegemonic understandings of masculinity and the subjectification of women by men, but they also break from these understandings to display intentions of love, safety and respect. The polyphonic influences of Mikhail Bakhtin can be seen in this literature, as male protagonists become living, breathing creatures who are unpredictable and inconsistent. Ultimately, however, they are not defined only by their use of violence and this enables the hope for redemption.

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

My interest in Australian social realist authors has inspired my creative artefact and my examination of modern approaches to men's violence. I was attracted to these authors' works because they examine the history of patriarchy, competition and inequality rather than only presenting psychological or individual-deficit portrayals of their male characters who abuse.⁴ The understanding that multiple realities are possible ensures that these authors present characters that are flawed, complex, but ultimately redeemable. Their approach connected to the approaches of therapists working with men who abuse, because they both open the possibility that men who abuse are not 'monstrous' or 'evil', but instead constricted and constrained by dangerous and accessible ideas about masculinity as part of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity.

³ This paper is currently under consideration for publication at Journal for the Association for the Study of Australian Literature.

⁴ This approach to men's violence in literature is also reflected in Paul Mitchell's *We.Are.Family*. My published review for this novel can be found below in Appendix 1: Domestic Violence pervades family's troubled past and present, The Weekend Australian 21 January 2017.

Introduction

During my time as a therapist in men's behaviour change programs, I often wondered why Australian literature made me empathise so strongly with men who perpetrate violence. This fiction powerfully expressed the disconnected local male voice in ways that my clients seldom could, even though they were sitting in front of me. Eventually I noticed how Australian authors were liberated in creating rich and intricate portrayals of their male characters that offered so much more than only an inventory of their violence. This provided humanity and depth to even characters who perpetrated the most abhorrent acts. My therapy at the time was influenced by an ideology that sought to move past the traditional anger management explanations of men's violence that had for so long excused and minimised the effects on women and children. The challenge in the application of these feminist approaches was to focus on hegemonic socio-cultural norms that reinforced patriarchy and violence while allowing for a contextual analysis of men's personal histories, socio-economic circumstances or own experiences of childhood physical or sexual abuse. Australian fiction shows us that each man who perpetrates violence has a unique relationship with the socio-cultural and economic circumstances that constrain and manipulate him. These explorations offer nuanced understandings of both the individual and society and make an important contribution to the feminist approaches that seek to prevent the scourge of systemic and endemic violence towards women and children.

In my work with men who abused, it often felt like they recounted their stories of violence without comprehending the full extent of the effects that they had on their female partners. When men were unable to demonstrate what I considered commensurate contrition, I assumed they were afflicted with irreversible and essential character defects that left them unable to feel compassion or demonstrate respect. If my primary role was to care for the safety of women and children, it followed that I should doggedly ask these men the same

questions while expecting a different result. All this seemed to do was reinforce an adversarial relationship while disqualifying the retelling of any part of their history that was not directly connected to their perpetration of violence. Without the ability to tell their stories, there was little opportunity for the men to describe ethics or values that contradicted their use of violence. I sometimes found myself consumed with judgment in my work with these men, leading to competitive conversations where my questions became thinly-veiled as authoritarian reproach. As I became more skilled, I found that I could 'catch' these men in their lies, as if proving to them that they were unsatisfying adversaries. In my own way I was reproducing dominant male behaviour, and this did little to make women and children any safer or to further the feminist principles on which my therapy was supposedly based.

Contemporary Australian authors believe that a position of understanding and compassion with men is essential in understanding each account of gendered violence. They warn that our assumptions about male perpetrators being essentially 'monstrous' or 'evil' diminishes our ability to understand the ethics of men that stand in opposition or resistance to their violent acts (Jenkins, 2009). Personally, the contribution of Australian authors helped me to realise that I could not expect men to commit to fairness or tolerance during therapy, if I maintained a view of contempt. It also helped me to understand that the assumptions I made about men who abused prevented me from genuinely listening to them and had me believing that my own accounts of their violence were more important. This hierarchy of individual thought and rationality has been a powerful reinforcement of neo-liberalism and patriarchy and the legitimisation of violence.

I have selected *The Eye of the Sheep* (2014) by Sofie Laguna, *Music and Freedom* (2016) by Zoe Morrison, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997) by Richard Flanagan, *The Natural Way of Things* (2015) by Charlotte Wood and *Merciless Gods* (2014) by Christos Tsiolkas as examples of contemporary Australian fiction that complicate the punitive

assumptions that inform popular and therapeutic approaches to men who abuse. These works focus on the contradictions and complexities of flawed male protagonists and open the possibility for understanding and redemption during the most reprehensible actions. They explore the history of patriarchy in Australian society and the universality of our subjugation to dominant practices of gender, competition and individualism. These authors ponder the impossibility of a violence-free society given that the sustainability of our political, social and economic institutions depends on hierarchical inequality and the belief that some people's lives are more important than others.

Popular approaches to men's violence

In describing Christina Stead's treatment of Sam Pollit in his seminal Australian novel, *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) Jonathon Franzen (2010) wrote:

Though monstrous, he isn't a monster. It's Stead's genius to make palpable on page after page the childlike need and weakness at the core of his overbearing masculinity, and to make the reader pity him and like him.

Stead examines the inextricable link between patriarchy and industrialisation and men's violence, and the inevitable inability of men like Sam Pollit to transcend the prevailing political and economic conditions of their time. Australian authors have consciously rejected the popular psychologised descriptions of men who abuse as 'monsters.' Modern sophistication in diagnosing individual deficits means psychology is now more equipped than any time in history to connect violence with individual psychological deficits such as narcissism, oppositional defiance or sociopathy (Epstein, Duda & Weinstein, 2013). The implication has been that men who perpetrate violence sit outside the bounds of 'normal' humanity, or that they lack the necessary ingredient to pursue safe or respectful relationships. Modern society comforts itself with the belief that intimate terrorism occurs as the product of a deviant mind rather than as an outcome of an unjust society or the messages that men

receive about masculinity and dominance. Renowned Australian psychologist and author, Alan Jenkins (2009), considers the propensity to describe men who use violence in psychologised or individual-deficit ways when he writes:

The traditional focus upon the psychological nature of the perpetrator or offender assumed fixed and static ideas about identity in which a focus upon violence and what it says about the person's character generally takes primacy and overshadows possibilities for the discovery of ethics and respectful preferences with the man. (ix)

The women's shelter movement of the 70s and 80s in Australia drew attention to the systematic socio-cultural origins of intimate partner violence and the connection between gendered inequity and violence. The movement recognised the many thousands of women and children in Australia who were forced to endure daily human rights infringements because they lacked economic, political or legislative power. In viewing violence as the outcome of patriarchy, women's advocates recognised the need to change individual men's behaviour, given their experience with women who lacked the resources to remove themselves or their children from violent relationships. Greater accountability mechanisms developed in criminal and therapeutic processes that sought to attribute full culpability to the individual male perpetrator.

The socio-cultural view of men's behaviour change that has been popularised throughout western society has focused on redressing the power imbalance that had led to the entitlement and privilege of men's voices at the expense of women's and children's. This ideology has connected men's violence with faulty gendered attitudes, along with the assumption that all men benefit systemically from their subjectification of women and children (Brown, 2016).

Advocacy-based interventions have necessarily centred the experiences of women and children and often proclaimed to low expectations regarding men's reformation, given that they reinforce inequality as a means to support their privilege. On a global scale, the *me too movement* has intensified scrutiny on individual men who abuse their positions of power to

subjugate women for their own gratification. While the place for individual responsibility and culpability can not be dismissed, individual paradigms can dismiss questions regarding how men have been recruited and manipulated them into dominant practices of masculinity (White, 2011).

The challenge for popular approaches to men who use violence has increased over the past decades as social, cultural and economic marginalisation has exacerbated the lack of choice or power for many Australian families who experience homelessness, unemployment, drug and alcohol use, cultural isolation and intergenerational trauma. There are significant implications for popular assumptions regarding all men benefitting equally from gendered inequality. This is particularly relevant for men who live on the social, cultural and economic margins of an increasingly unequal and unjust society. Australian fiction has extended and complicated discourse of men's choice, while at the same time maintaining a feminist focus on the effect of gendered violence on women and children and succeeding in exploring the individuality and the humanity of men who commit atrocious acts. The violence perpetrated by men within this fiction is more nuanced than only their disregard for women and the context of intergenerational trauma, disadvantage and poverty is critically examined. Within this, the effects of male domestic tyranny on women and children are never minimalised or excused.

Australian authors have been influenced in their rich descriptions of men who use violence by Russian philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin used the concept of polyphonic discourse to describe how the individual could operate outside of the realms of the institutions that constrain (Owen, 2011). Bakhtin's use of polyphonic discourse opened the possibility for characters to break free from a set of rules applied by the author to reinforce structural and absolute truths. In this way, men might be recruited into dominant ways of being through control, coercion or violence, and yet display a hunger for love,

understanding and the unknown. Bakhtin's approach treats certainty and uncertainty equally, so that characters are influenced in one way by hegemony, but in others are attracted to difference, thus demonstrating inconsistency (dePeuter, 1998).

Bakhtin avoided essentialist truths or 'fatalistic theory,' believing truth to be only ever on parole, depending on the institutions and ideology of the time (1981). Bakhtin described the iterative consideration of truths by writing (1981, p. 280):

The word wants to be heard, understood, responded to again and again to respond to the response *ad infinitum*. It enters into a dialogue that does not have a semantic end.

Bakhtin's use of relativism and his disregard for essential truths was influenced by French philosopher Michel Foucault, who criticised the humanistic tradition of judging essentialist male character independently to the ideological, epistemological and ontological prisms that constrain him (1982). Popular approaches to men's violence have sought to quarantine violence discourse to the singular abusive power relationship experienced between the man and his female partner. Post-structuralism involves a broader and more nuanced understanding of power that acknowledges the socio-cultural, political and economic conditions which teach us that the needs of one type of people are more important than others.

Understandings of intersubjectivity of men's violence within contextual economic factors have been the subject of interrogation from academics such as Connell (1987, 1995), Grosz (1994) and Butler (1990, 1993). These authors move beyond structural and essentialist notions of men as essentially desirous of power and complicate traditional, binary notions of gender and sexuality. This allows for non-hegemonic understandings of individual men and women. Australian authors have adapted these concepts to move beyond men's essential and universal characteristics as a causal explanation for gendered violence. Rather, gendered

relationships are seen as dynamic and iterative, changing and adapting to contemporary economic and social institutions and influences.

Judith Butler uses Foucauldian concepts to complicate humanist understandings of men who perpetrate gendered violence. She writes (1990, p.48):

Humanist conceptions of the subject tend to assume a substantive person who is the bearer of various essential and non-essential attributes. A humanist feminist position might understand gender as an attribute of a person who is characterised essentially as a pre-gendered substance or 'core,' called the person, denoting a universal capacity for reason, moral deliberation, language. The universal conception of the person, however, is displaced as a point of departure for a social theory of gender by those historical and anthropological positions that understand gender as a relation among socially constructed subjects in specifiable contexts.

An understanding of specifiable contexts, as advocated by Butler, allows authors to view men who abuse as both repressors and repressed by social and economic institutions. The repression of men who use violence via punitive therapeutic, social or criminal consequences risks a reproduction of the injustices that they seek to eradicate. The inability of institutions to take a stand against gendered violence while maintaining a position of fairness to men who abuse creates one problem while attempting to solve another. Australian author and philosopher, Raimond Gaita, discusses his belief that a just society must ensure fairness is accessible to all of its citizens, not only those which it deems deserving when he writes (1999, p.10):

Those who believe that justice should belong only to 'human beings who behave like human beings' would not be moved by arguments of fairness which presuppose exactly what such people deny, namely that radical evil-doers still belong to the constituency in which considerations of fairness are relevant.

Men's violence and socio-economic status

Laguna's *The Eye of the Sheep* and Morrison's *Music and Freedom* explore the connection between men's use of intimate partner violence and their socio-economic and

political status. Laguna's Gav Flick brutalises his wife during drunken fits of rage, attempting to stave off the ghosts of his traumatic childhood and the inexorable threat of unemployment. As soon as Gav reaches for his favourite brand of whisky, his son, Jimmy, knows that violence is inevitable and there is certainly a pre-meditated aspect to this violence. But Gav's violence is more nuanced than a conscious choice to exercise power over his family and Laguna intricately traces its roots through his own experiences of childhood abuse and poverty. Gav is manipulated by his sense of masculinity which measures him according to his ability to be strong, employed and resilient. He is pushed around and bullied both by his economic marginalisation and the only understanding of manhood that he has ever known. This is contrasted to Jimmy's pressing need for his father to be present, patient and caring.

In contrast, Morrison's Edward Hayward uses violence and control in a more measured and linear way to uphold his privileged existence as a husband and a 1950s Oxford academic. Morrison's experience as a researcher in the field of intimate partner violence meant that she heard firsthand the experiences of women whose choices had been eroded by the systemic violence of male partners. 'These stories affected me deeply, they got inside me', Morrison said in describing her motivation to write a novel about a woman who loses physical, sexual, emotional and social freedom at the hands of her callous husband (retrieved from ABC Radio, 2016). *Music and Freedom* spans the life of the Australian-born Alice Murray, who reluctantly agrees to marry Edward after being stranded in London following the sudden death of her parents.

Edward comes to view his wife as a possession manipulated to further his professional ambitions. His ruthless disregard for Alice's wellbeing and his determination to dominate her is shown when he provides her a meagre weekly allowance in his will, despite their significant shared wealth. He demonstrates brief kindnesses only after he has beaten Alice, which aligns to Lenore Walker's popular feminist theory, 'the cycle of abuse', where men

claim remorse and promise to change in the ‘honeymoon period’ following physical or sexual assault (Walker, 1979). Edward’s kindnesses are motivated by self-interest rather than genuine empathy, such as when he intercepts her at the train station while she is contemplating her escape. Walker’s ‘cycle of abuse’ has been central to the feminist analysis of men’s abuse that follows a similar trajectory and tactically manipulates women so that they feel confused and responsible.

Edward’s conservatism has been ingrained in him from an early age where he was taught to distrust intimacy or emotions. He is initially captivated by Alice when he sees her piano performance, but her music soon becomes synonymous with the expression of her emotional freedom which threatens and confounds him. As their domestic relationship develops, Edward increasingly privileges his work over Alice’s creativity until he forbids her from playing while he is in the house. Through the proliferation of his economic rationalist theories, Edward is able to make sense of a world that has otherwise remained a mystery to him. As his theories become widely proliferated and exalted his treatment of Alice grows less humane and more authoritarian, as if he is vindicated. In discussing the themes of the novel, Morrison (2016) said:

What Edward represents through his neo-liberal economics is a certain view of the world that is very individualistic and based on competition and success. Whereas Alice is trying to suggest a different way to live; one based in co-operation, kindness and love.

Morrison provides only rare insights into Edward’s motivations or history, preferring to focus on the effects of his behaviour on Alice. However, the insights she does provide show a man with limited emotional confidence who contributes to dominant patriarchal traditions, while also being enslaved and contained by them.

He had spoken only a little of his childhood before. He told me about never really knowing his parents except as two tall, handsome figures in a grand drawing room; being paraded in front of them by different

nannies when he was young, and being asked questions by them. He did not seem to remember a single act of kindness from them. (p.99)

Intersectionality was first developed in America as an acknowledgement of the influences of race and class on women's experiences of intimate partner abuse and their access to mainstream supports (Benhabib, 2002). Similarly, most men who abuse do not benefit materially from neo-liberalism in the same ways as Morrison's Edward. Laguna shows how socio-economic factors are irrefutably linked with the prevalence of gendered violence in Australia. While gendered violence is the ultimate expression of disrespect, the violence used by Laguna's working-class Gav Flick is inextricably linked to the desperation of his own economic and personal hardships. Laguna is successful in identifying this link while still maintaining a focus on the tragic consequences of Gav's violence.

Laguna's hope for difference in Gav's life and his desire for connection, particularly with his children, contrast markedly from Morrison's treatment of Edward. Laguna described her attachment and hope for Gav as a father when she said 'I cared for and loved Dad. I wanted to make sure he was redeemable. I thought he had all the potential in the world to be a good and present dad' (Bugg, 2014). Gav's violence is an inexorable obstacle to connection with his children, rather than only a tactic to maintain privilege. Gav is estranged from his oldest son because of his violence and desperate to hold on to his relationship with Jimmy, his youngest son, but doesn't know how to express his affections. Gav's own father was brutal, particularly singling out his younger brother Ray, breaking several of his ribs in one frenzied attack. Ray is in prison in Queensland for rape and one of Gav's other brothers, Stephen, tragically drives his car into a tree after a history of alcohol and drug misuse. In this way, both Gav and Edward share the common lack of childhood love or attachment that can support their connection with their own children.

Laguna challenges us to contemplate the obstacles faced by Gav in reaching his ultimate goal of acting with love and compassion, given that violence and economic hardship are all he has ever known.

Pop Flick the old bastard who hit them on Saturday nights and sometimes during the week until their feelings inverted, shot backwards and stole their language and drove them apart, drove them to jail, drove them into trees, drove them to Cutty Sark, split them, divided them and took them from Mother Beloved. (p.124)

Gav uses violence towards Jimmy for the first time directly after he loses his job at the Altona Oil Refinery: that so much of his identity is enmeshed in manual labour represents for Laguna the widening economic gap of Australia in the 80s and the effects of marginalisation on working class families. Laguna bemoans the loss of place for men like Gav, who is at the mercy of a diminishing manual workforce in Australia. And yet Gav show us that co-existing realities are possible: men can simultaneously desire loving and safe relationships while acting in coercive and abusive ways. Gav certainly displays negative attitudes and behaviours towards his wife and children, but Laguna moves past a single ideological focus on power and control in her nuanced understanding of how wider societal unfairness and injustice contributes in complex ways to the problem. Laguna ponders the fairness of a society that condemns men like Gav for his violence but does so little to address the scourge of intergenerational under-employment that has become an inevitable part of the changing workforce in Australia, and the widening chasm between those who have and those who have not.

Gav's potential as a father is displayed intermittently throughout *The Eye of the Sheep* when he takes Jimmy on a trip to the town of his youth in Queensland, or he makes him a go-cart. But the looming threat of violence is omnipresent, indistinguishable from his economically marginalised, working class history and symbolised by his green reflector jacket that hangs inexorably from the back door. Gav's intention to connect with his sons

contrasts with Edward who demands that their son, Richard, is sent to boarding school because he is jealous of Alice's relationship with him. Morrison uses the fracturing of Alice's relationship with Richard to show the effects of maternal alienation, which are described commonly by women whose male partners use social and political coercion to implement abusive household gender regimes which divide women and children in order to maintain male privilege (Morris, 2009, p. 414).

I should have left then, of course, and taken Richard with me. But I worried, I doubted. I worried about Richard's future, son of a single mother, a cripple, a woman who has not got on in the world. I knew Edward would try to stop me. I worried about paying for Richard's music lessons, his books, his shoes. I worried that Edward would prevent me from seeing his son at all. I had no belief in my capacity to survive. (p.203)

As an older woman, Alice bemoans her disconnection with Richard, who rarely visits and treats her like she is an imposition when he does. Richard is a successful musician who thinks his father was an 'arsehole,' but who has also inherited many of his traits, particularly in his self-serving attitude to Alice, who he treats with respect only when he becomes interested in her next-door neighbour, or when he wants to sell Edward's papers.

But I was too frightened to tell him. Even though it was just Richard, my son, he had picked up some of Edwards' verbal style, and the similarity now unnerved me. He got more frustrated with my obfuscation and insisted I tell him what had happened, or else he would assume I was not competent, which enraged me. (pp. 264-265)

Although familiar gendered patterns emerge as Richard and Alice tentatively forge a new relationship, there are important symbolic contrasts. Alice is considerably more assertive in her dealings with Richard, enabled by a growing entitlement that is in part connected to the return of her creativity. Morrison shows the differences between Richard and Edward, and in the capacity for Richard to demonstrate compassion and connection through his music, cooking and burgeoning relationship with Emily. Ultimately, this demonstrates hopefulness

for a new way of being for Richard in his relationships with women, reinforced by his new understandings of his mother.

Patriarchy and violence

Modern political and economic structures rely on the judgment of the individual in comparison to others. Our success is measured by our ability to impose our individual will and strength to further ideological, financial or social interests at the expense of others within a competitive marketplace. The legitimisation of violence as a tool to increase and maintain power within western society is common throughout politics, diplomacy, business and sport (Jenkins, 2009). A focus on the history of patriarchy and neo-liberalism has assisted Australian authors in their portrayal of characters who are constrained by their preordained economic and socio-cultural roles within a society that orders and sorts its citizens into hierarchies of importance. Wood's *The Natural Way of Things*, Flanagan's *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* and Tsiolkos' *Merciless Gods* explore the effects on the individual of the legitimisation of violence within systems that rely on colonisation. This includes an examination of the development of masculine culture, corporatisation and ecological degradation and their inextricable link with gendered violence.

Violence as a necessary product of western ideology has been a theme used by Flanagan throughout his career. In a 2015 article, he lamented the government's maligning of Gillian Trigg's report on children in detention showed both the government's rationality in both its misogyny and its determination to remain blinkered to the plight of refugees, given their inferior place in the social pecking order. Flanagan wrote:

Writing my novel *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* I came to conclude that great crimes like the Death Railway did not begin with the first beating or murder on that grim line of horror in 1943. They begin decades before with politicians, public figures, and journalists promoting the idea of some people being less than people.

In *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* Flanagan traces the effects of early industrialisation on the Tasmanian landscape and the prioritisation of commerce over the environment. The health of the migrant workers, who become physically and mentally broken through hard labour and drink, and the Tasmanian landscape become sacrificed in order to serve Australia's burgeoning corporatisation. One of these migrant workers is Bojan Buolah, a man who has emigrated from Poland after his family were slain, to work on a construction camp in Tasmania in 1954. When Bojan's wife deserts him he is left to care for Sonja, his young daughter, while making his way working in the camps. Bojan is eventually estranged from Sonja, who moves to Sydney as a teenager because he puts her life at risk. He is unable to care for Sonja and sends her to a series of boarding houses while he moves from one camp to the next. Sonja faces the harsh reality faced by women and children in an environment that privileges the survival of the fittest and favours economic prosperity at the cost of humanity.

By such alchemy the dull fear of the past was transformed into electrical power, the coveted gold of the new age, and at the bottom of the alchemists' distilling flask all that remained were the pestilential by-products of that magical process for which nobody cared: the cracked natural world and the broken human lives, both dregs easily accounted when their insignificant cost was tallied against the growing treasure of the hydro-electricity grid. (p.22)

Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* is set on a merciless and remote inland, enclosed by electrical wire to imprison a group of women guilty of embarrassing the patriarchal status quo. As with *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, there are winners and losers on Wood's island which becomes a microcosm of neo-liberal society. While it is true that her male characters are entitled by their political and economic privilege, this is ultimately not enough to ensure their safety or prosperity. Like Flanagan, Wood questions the cost of political and economic ideology that privileges the lives of some at the expense of other and views some people as less than people. She compares the plight of the women on the island with the prey that Yolanda catches, both at the mercy of people and systems with greater power and

resources. Through this comparison, Wood shows the large corporations who make the rules of patriarchy at the top of the food-chain, with women who don't conform to dominant gendered norms at the bottom.

Wood's anti-hero, Boncer, guards a group of female political prisoners including a victim of gang rape from high profile footballers and a politician's mistress. Boncer uses misogynistic insults and his whip to punish the women who have embarrassed the gendered status-quo. But despite his maliciousness, Boncer is a hapless servant of patriarchy, not its creator, and this important difference allows for understanding and even compassion. He is the everyman of modern Australia: forgotten, uneducated, and with unfulfillable aspirations that condemn him to isolation and confusion. Wood asks the critical question: are men like Boncer inevitable given the economic and political climate in which we live? When the large corporation who employ him leave him trapped without food, he becomes just as dispensable as the female captives, less than human by virtue of his lack of social or economic status. The more pronounced Boncer's disenfranchisement, the more determined he becomes to behave in traditionally masculine, dominant ways. Boncer's plight is contrasted with Yolanda, who gains strength by hunting for prey in the wild, becoming stronger and less dependent on the rules that have been decided for her.

She tensed, prepared to hurl herself away, took a deep breath with which to scream or vomit or roar or bite. Then she saw Boncer's white-knuckled hold on the leash strap. Saw his skinny pale mosquito-bitten wrists. She saw, finally, what Boncer was: a stupid, ugly child, underfed, afraid. She saw his pocked old acne scars.
(p.142)

Wood said of her female characters, 'As well as the place judging them, the girls are judging each other a lot of the time. They are not unified victims fighting the oppression of

men.’⁵ Wood complicates gendered power by presenting the patriarchal forces that oppress women and shackle their choice, while at the same time describing how individual women perpetuate the competition and misogyny of socially dominant norms. Nancy works alongside Boncer to inhumanely guard the other women, eventually descending into madness as she is ostracised by the male guards and the female prisoners and left marginalised and friendless. Nancy uses the same hateful insults as Boncer, but she is unable to wield the same authority by virtue of her gender. Her steadfast devotion to Boncer is left unrequited. ‘Boncer began rations, keeping the storeroom key around his neck and fetching each day’s meal packages day by day, with extra portions for Teddy and himself, but not for Nancy. (140)’ Nancy has limited positional power as a guard on the island but eventually pays the ultimate price as one of patriarchy’s biggest losers. Similarly, Hetty becomes an expendable commodity to her fellow female prisoners who describe her as stumpy, ugly and fat. In the same way that Boncer is seen as less than human by the employers who betray him, the women offer Hetty to Boncer as a tactical sacrifice. She becomes disconnected and condemned to playing her new role of triumphant queen, while suffering the incursions on her body from Boncer. Inequality occurs according to physical, economic and political strength at all levels within the island and is more complex than only gendered inequity; despite the lack of choices faced by the women on the island.

Tsiolkas’ *Merciless Gods* examines a group of upwardly mobile, left-wing university students in the 90s who, unlike Wood’s political prisoners, enjoy the social, economic and political advantages of inequity. When Marie’s friends organise a dinner party to celebrate her new job in San Francisco, they invite Vince, who she has beaten to the job. Vince is a

⁵ Charlotte Wood at Adelaide Writer’s Week, 3 March 2016.

brilliant and intellectually aggressive young man who is smarting from his defeat. ‘He did mind. He was proud and arrogant and hated being beaten. He minded deeply. (4)’ During a dinner party game the guests take turns in retelling their stories involving revenge. Vince retells the shocking story of his mutilation of a child who had robbed him during his holiday in Turkey. Vince mutilates the young boy because he reminds him of Nazim; a Turkish girl from his high-school who spurns his invitation to dinner and humiliates him with a sly grin. Tsiolkos juxtaposes the savageness of Vince’s story with the intellectualism and bourgeois elegance of the dinner party, alluding to the violence that hides behind our polite social conventions and identity politics. Although his is a markedly different setting than Flanagan’s or Wood’s, Tsiolkos examines similar themes in the competitiveness of modern society and the inclination of the individual to sacrifice others to ensure victory. Vince tells his terrible story to exact retribution for losing to Marie and to brutally dismantle their friendships. The reader – like the other guests – is never sure which parts of his story are true.

It was clear that Vince would have loved nothing more than for Anthony to punch him, that it would have been the fitting antediluvian response to the night. Vince was already victorious, I doubt he would have even felt the need to return the punch. But we were not such men. (p.43)

Tsiolkos has previously examined the effects of patriarchy and neo-liberal competition in *The Slap* (2008) and *Barracuda* (2013). In *Merciless Gods*, he considers the repercussions of this competition when other people become seen as dispensable to the single-minded pursuit of victory. To Vince, the friendships he has made at university become secondary to his need to win and to exact revenge, just as the young boy’s basic human rights became secondary to his need to exact revenge in his story. Vince’s revenge is multi-layered and misogynistic; his attitudes towards both Marie and Nazim show that he cannot contemplate being beaten by a woman despite them both being shown to be his intellectual equals. But like Wood, Tsiolkos complicates gendered relationships and moves beyond a static description of power. Vince

was subjected to classist and racist taunts throughout high-school because of his Greek heritage and the fact that he was raised by a single working-class mother. The boy that he allegedly maimed was Turkish, as was Nazim and the group of schoolyard bullies who tormented him. The male propensity for violence based on 'eye for an eye' ideology is shown throughout *Merciless Gods* and perpetuated through a male culture which doesn't tolerate losing or being second best. Tsiolkos explores these issues through the promotion of nuanced questions concerning masculinity, class and race. He wrote (2012, p.57):

The historic tragedies and outrages of Left totalitarianism are enough reason for any of us who still identify as socialist to choose inquiry over conviction, to favour the nuances of contradiction and doubt.

Just as Wood and Flanagan show that patriarchy is not invented by those men who perpetuate its abuses, Tsiolkos shows that the same rage and competitive vanity consuming Vince as the perpetrator of male violence, is pervasive within the group of friends through their ambition, materialism and condemnation. One of the guests tells the story about how he followed the son of a man who bashed a gay man to death; following the young boy to his school while contemplating abducting or hurting him to punish his father. Tsiolkos criticises the politics of intolerance that he believes has 'straight-jacketed' modern socialist and feminist thought and rendered us unable to understand the context of other people's lives. (2012, p.61) It is through the politics of intolerance we are all complicit in the constant forming and reforming of neo-liberalism. Vince is repeatedly described by the dinner party guests as 'an evil man.' These guests can only see themselves as different to Vince rather than acknowledging their own contribution to internal competition for money, status and sexual power. It seems likely that Tsiolkos attended similar dinners himself as a self-proclaimed former idealistic left-wing university student. *Merciless Gods* provides him an avenue to satirise some of the fervent identity politics that he criticises as pious and hypocritical. Like Wood's island, Tsiolkos's dinner party presents a microcosm of the

competitiveness and disconnection that he criticises. The group's members are disconnected from each other by their own sense of gendered, cultural, class or racial victimisation, which obfuscates their ability to recognise their own contribution to the politics of rage and individualism that pervades. In this way, *Merciless Gods* comments on the problem of our approaches to male violence in modern neo-liberal Australia and the impulse of the individual to look outwardly to the deficits of the 'other.'

The possibility of redemption

Much of Tsiolkos' work wrestles with this idea of restitution, including the question of forgiveness for men that perpetrate atrocious acts towards women and children. The lead character in *Barracuda*, for example, Danny Kelly, finds redemption in his work as a care-worker, after spending time in prison following his perpetration of violence. Danny is able to metaphorically swim against the tide of male competition and individualism that consumed him as a teenager, when he believed that winning was the only thing that could legitimise his existence. Tsiolkos applies a decidedly less optimistic lens to his male characters in *Merciless Gods*, as they are soon disconnected after the night of the dinner party. The estrangement of this group of friends underlines Tsiolkos' belief about the rise of individualism at the expense of community.

Marriage, children, divorce, affairs, travel, work. It was inevitable that we would all drift apart. I once thought our group unshakeable but that was a delusion of youth. We were far more ordinary than we believed ourselves to be.' (p.45)

Moralistic discourse regarding the possibility of redemption for men who have abused became an obstacle in work with men who abuse, during my time as a therapist. The question was repeatedly asked about how men who have exercised such brutality and self-interest could ever hope to make restoration for what they had done? Jenkins (2009) discusses the politics of the work of therapy with men who abuse:

As intervention workers, we inevitably become part of the network of the power relations in the man's life. We operate within community agencies and institutions and within a broader social context which reflects dominant cultural interests and practices of power. We occupy positions of privilege and power relative to our clients and will inevitably reproduce inequalities of power and privilege in our work. (p.14)

It is this understanding of our own personal contributions to the institutions of power relations that have motivated contemporary Australian authors. In this way they caution against any approach to gendered violence that contributes to the institutions of unequal power relations that neo-liberalism has come to rely on. They believe that when we purposefully dehumanise men who abuse, or assume they have nothing to contribute as an individual because of their crimes, we contribute to the politics of intolerance that is such a powerful precursor to individual acts of violence. At first glance, Bojan might easily fit into the category so espoused in popular culture; a monster, an evil man, a man who should never be absolved merely because of his alcoholism. But nuanced exploration allows us to simultaneously recognise Bojan's acts of violence as destructive and empathise with his own experiences of cruelty and suffering; and his sense of being an 'outsider' and a 'wog': a man living on the margins in a strange and harsh land. Flanagan avoids moral judgment of Bojan and is careful to avoid essentialist claims about the worth of his character. This ultimately allows for a story about what Flanagan describes as the 'redemptive power of love' (1998). There are comparisons in Flanagan's treatment of Bojan with Laguna's treatment of Gav Flick as both men try to escape the violence they have known all their lives and work towards safe and respectful relationships with their children, despite their previous violence. Through the grizzly description of Bojan's disconnection and violence, Flanagan makes room for Bojan's hopes for himself as a father and a man and returns to the motif of woodwork as the one place where he can demonstrate his care, honour and love. Bojan's connection with woodwork stands against the Tasmanian deforestation and the lack of respect for history that is

a destructive cost of the power plants. It represents Bojan's hope for a different life and relationship with his Sonja, based on the man that he would like to become.

And in the dance of the hammer and the sweet rhythm of the saw
Sonja saw that there was another man inside him, a good man, the
man she loved as her father. Which was perhaps why she liked
working with Bojan in the makeshift workshop he would invariably
set up wherever they lived, sometimes temporarily on a verandah,
sometimes a little more permanently in a borrowed shed. (p.190)

In his improbable relationship with Hetty, Boncer shows his desire to provide care and compassion for another human being. This contradicts the reader's early assumption that he is a man who cares only about imposing his will through intimidation. This raises the possibility that he is merely playing the role that is expected of him both in their isolated society and in patriarchy more generally, and that as a man he also pays a high price for the current inequalities of patriarchy and neo-liberalism.

But Boncer is the surprise. Boncer is altered. He blushes as he nears
the veranda. There is an air of triumph about him, but also something
else: surrender. (pp. 214-215)

Advocacy for women and children's safety, greater penalties for the perpetration of violence and an increased understanding of the effects of patriarchy have all been crucial developments in our understandings of gendered violence in Australia. To be labelled as someone who hurts women or children is the ultimate insult, and in many cases this fits with the 'loser' identities of men who abuse. As a therapist with men who abused, I guarded against compassion for these men for fear that it exonerated them from their crimes. Australian authors do not seek to exonerate the crimes of gendered violence, nor do they make excuses or minimisations. They do, however, provide an analysis of the pre-existing conditions that produce violence, and this complicates our assumptions that the men who abuse have nothing to offer.

Discussion

I can remember meeting with men like Laguna's Gav Flick, Wood's Boncer or Flanagan's Bojan, in the men's behaviour change programs that I facilitated; men who reluctantly came in to therapy, wearing high visibility jackets, during their lunch break or after work, or men who hadn't worked in a long time. These men were often quiet and unresponsive, and I interpreted this as recalcitrance when, in retrospect, it was most likely embarrassment, fear and shame. I expected these men to perform according to my preconceptions and this accentuated my position of moral authority. So much of the therapeutic and criminal mobilisation against individual acts of violence relies on judgment, with atonement only being won by men who can articulate their shame at causing harm to women and children. There is a performative aspect to this that itself is subject to institutionalised norms of restitution and forgiveness.

The tyrannising, controlling and abusive actions of men have deprived too many women and children of their basic social, economic and sexual rights. It is a comforting and enticing thought that better policing of these individual men would resolve the issue. But the works of Wood, Tsiolkas, Flanagan, Morrison and Laguna show us that the structural pillars of patriarchy are reliant on individualism, violence and gender inequality, and the issue of gendered violence is much broader and insidious than we may care to imagine. These authors transcend traditional dichotomous notions of good versus evil to allow for genuine exploration of their characters that are torn between their preferred self, and their compulsion to fit the mould of modern masculinity. These Australian authors use post-structural analyses that are not constricted by singular or exact ideology. In this way their characters are contradictions and as such are not the quantifiable sum of their actions. They need neither to be excused nor condemned; merely understood. These authors all espouse, in their own way, that a just and respectful society needs to find ways for just and respectful approaches to even

those men who commit the most abhorrent acts. They believe that it is only through these genuine approaches that we can hope for difference and for increased connectedness and kindness.

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PART THREE

Creative piece

Contextual Analysis

The first two parts of this thesis use the concepts of polyphonic discourse to explore the origins of the different voices that contribute to popular and therapeutic approaches to men's violence. My creative piece, 'The Man in Her Head' extends upon these ideas to explore how the polyphonic influences of Zoe Jamison and Ben Eckermann, have affected their therapeutic posture in their work with men who abuse. At the centre of this narrative is the death of Doug Hillier, who hangs himself after returning from one of Zoe's men's groups to find she has organised for his wife and child to move to safer accommodation. The fairness of the treatment of Doug – and Zoe's culpability – is an issue that occupies the central protagonists. Importantly, the professional and personal journey of these protagonists is uncertain and inconsistent. Zoe attempts to reconcile her lifelong commitment to the safety of women and children, with her increasing lack of certainty in the choices she has made. Ben attempts to make sense of the effects of his father's institutional power that benefits and persecutes him, and makes his ambitions conflicted. Lincoln Simmons is the father of Zoe's child and inexorably drawn to the masculinity that his father has always demonstrated. But Lincoln also desires connection and his capacity to demonstrate empathy and care is shown inconsistently and with chaotic results.

'The Man in Her Head'

Prologue

Client: Doug Hillier (#32408DH)

Therapist: Zoe Jamison MPsych

Venue: Eckermann Psychology Practice

Date 03/06/2017

Session number: 11

Doug was talkative during our men's behaviour change program this evening which is unusual. For the first time he acknowledged the effects of violence on his daughter, Tayla. At one point he became teary as he spoke about noticing the fear in Tayla's eyes when he and Sandra were 'bluing.'

Doug is still unwilling to take one-hundred percent ownership for his violence and continues to describe it as the outcome of 'garden variety couple issues.' Doug has failed, during the six men's group sessions he has attended, to take any responsibility for his past and present violence. His focus has been strictly external, and I believe that he is devoid of any sense of his own accountability or basic fairness as a father or partner.

I arranged to meet Doug individually after the night group session. I knew that Sandra was moving Tayla to safety while Doug was at the group. According to Sandra, Doug often arrives home on a Wednesday night in a dangerous mood and it would be very risky if he found out about Sandra's plan to separate before the appropriate safety mechanisms are in place.

When we met post-group, I asked him what it was that he noticed about Tayla when he and Sandra were 'bluing.' Doug became very upset during our conversation and told me that his wife and daughter were the only reason he had never 'strung himself from the rafters.'

Doug's expression of suicidal ideation is unusual. I asked him what it would mean to him if the two people he lived for were scared for their safety because of him, expecting the usual minimisation and blame-shifting. Doug changed the subject and began talking about the violence that he had experienced at the hands of his step-father between the ages of four and twelve. I suspect he was on the verge of disclosing sexual abuse but I reminded him that we needed to focus on Tayla and her safety. Doug acknowledged that he had let his daughter down. This is the first time he has taken personal ownership and not fully or partly blamed Sandra.

I expect that Doug will forget all of this and become enraged and dangerous when he finds out that Sandra and Tayla have left. He may also become vengeful as I have no doubt that he is a dangerous man.

Doug asked me if I could make a time with him specifically to discuss the nightmares he was having about his step-father. These nightmares have apparently been intrusive since he saw him by chance at a pub some months ago. I provided the details of my colleague, Ryan Trentham, who specialises in individual work with men.

I spoke with Doug for forty-five minutes, only ending the session after checking my phone and seeing that Sandra had messaged me that she was safe. Doug asked if there was any way he could get a prescription for sleep medication. I told him he should speak to his GP.

Zoe Jamison.

Chapter 1

Arthur Eckermann removes a cleanly pressed white handkerchief from his trousers and, with a wearied expression, wipes his spectacles. He places thumb and forefinger between his venetian blinds to reveal the immaculate garden outside his office. Zoe Jamison watches the familiar action from the doorway, anticipating the puff of air expelled from ruddy cheeks in admiration of the lovingly manicured rows of gardenias and succulents.

The spacious office is adorned with silver frames---hunting trophies---from Arthur's famed orating masterclasses. Each photo reveals the same startled look, as if he can't quite believe what all the fuss is about. He is often described, in many rousing toasts, as a humble man. After twenty-eight-years in psychology practice, the memories of therapeutic triumphs echo from every room. He is fond of saying that the Eckermann Practice is a family, but he would never be so vulgar as to call himself its patriarch.

Zoe clicks her tongue to announce her entrance. Arthur turns reluctantly from his precious garden to face her for the first time in weeks, and looks everywhere but at her face.

Zoe breathes in, willing herself to keep her shit together. She is dressed in blue jeans and a light blue sweater, her blonde bob a little longer and less prim than it was three and a half months ago, the day the news of Doug's suicide sprung up like a vile northerly wind. Before then she might have yanked her hair into a severe part and trotted militantly into his office, but now she is grateful just to keep one foot in front of the other. Her deep blue eyes, the same ones that would once evoked a twinkle of pride in the older man's eye, search for a sign of forgiveness. In the absence of an alternative she decides to attack, knowing that she is succumbing to what he wants.

'I've decided that I'll return to work,' she says. 'The sooner the better.'

Arthur hardly moves, save for a barely detectable movement of his right eyebrow.

Arthur's eyebrows are a phenomenon, thick, grey, wiry, and climbing at gravity-defying right

angles up his forehead, like the creepers in his garden. His familiar smell of butter menthols reaches her, and she is reminded of better times.

‘Anything you say will be held against you,’ she thinks to herself, picturing the slick detective in one of those cop series that her mum is forever watching. Zoe can feel her temples throb and she turns her back on Arthur to distract herself with a photo on his wall. In the photo, Arthur smiles jubilantly as he uncorks a bottle of champagne, celebrating a successful tender to work with traumatised children. Zoe is surprised to see that she is in the photo; fresh-faced and straight out of university; Arthur’s latest grateful protégé.

Zoe takes a step forward and looks closely at the frozen moment in time when things had been so different. She hasn’t looked at this photo for so long, and she notices that Tariza Osmond has her hand on Arthur’s shoulder with her other hand raised victoriously. Zoe tries to do the maths in her head, working backwards to deduce the year that Tariza left to establish her own practice and write her books on feminist practice that sold so well.

Zoe’s absorption in the photo helps to calm her for a moment, but then she starts to wonder if her continued friendship with Tariza indirectly cost Doug his life. She takes another breath and reluctantly turns towards Arthur who is clutching his white handkerchief and absently dabs at an ink stain on his long, curved teak desk.

‘What does your doctor have to say about you returning?’

‘Fuck my doctor. Unless you’re telling me I’m incapable of judging my own emotional state.’

Arthur exhales audibly through his bottom teeth. He uses his handkerchief to wipe his right eye, which has grown incessantly weepy as he grows older. Zoe wonders if she should tone her language down.

‘Clearly it would be unwise of me to comment on your current emotional state,’ says Arthur and the hurt catches the back of Zoe’s throat.

‘Oh, Arthur, it must be lovely to be so frightfully deliberate with words,’ Zoe finally manages to mutter in response.

Arthur peers over the top of his half-rimmed spectacles with an expression that she remembers him using in the men’s groups they briefly co-facilitated.

‘My words are neither here nor there, Zoe. I’m concerned about your readiness to return to work. And, of course, I’m guided by what Sandra wants. After all, it’s her wellbeing that must be honoured in all of this.’

Arthur’s mention of Sandra Hillier, as a move in their ethical chess game, momentarily robs the air from Zoe’s lungs. Arthur checks the knot in his blue bow-tie, blissfully oblivious to her despair.

Zoe had worked with Sandra for over a year before her husband, Doug, hanged himself in his shed after arriving home from one of her men’s behaviour change sessions. The question of Zoe’s role in Doug’s final act of bloody-minded protest has kept her awake every one of the last 106 nights. Her list of crimes is compelling: she had gone out of her way to convince Sandra to separate from Doug and had arranged for removalists to clean out their family home while he was at her men’s group on that fateful Wednesday night. She callously listened to his story of childhood sexual abuse knowing that he would return to that empty house to the realisation that he had been duped. She still hasn’t found a tranquiliser strong enough to prevent Doug’s ghost’s nocturnal visitations.

As if to add the exclamation to Doug’s final act he had left a suicide note that read, simply, ‘I am so sorry, Tayla, my beautiful daughter. It’s her fault.’ Zoe never thought of Doug as particularly clever, but that ambiguous note has really fucked with her head and if that was his intention she must give him kudos. *It is her fault* – but who was *she*? Was it Sandra, because she had the temerity to leave him that night, or Zoe, for orchestrating the betrayal? It makes her feel weak and stupid that it matters to her so much, but she wants more

than anything not to be blamed for what happened. She has never had the chance to talk to Sandra since Doug's suicide. Arthur and the psychology board made it clear that any contact would be judged unfavourably. Besides, according to Arthur, Sandra is apparently considering her legal options.

When Doug's suicide note had been leaked to the press there had been vitriolic commentary on Zoe's supposed brainwashing of a devoted wife and mother. A foul-mouthed, right-winged radio jock had derived a fortnight's worth of late night material out of it; encouraging every father who had ever been 'abused' by reverse sexism to ring in and share their sob-story. Zoe even received some nasty hate mail from members of a local men's rights group.

'You know that I care only about Sandra's wellbeing, Arthur.'

Arthur looks down at his beautiful desk and purses his thin lips so tightly that Zoe can see them turning white. Zoe wonders if he will mention the case note but they are interrupted by two emphatic knocks on Arthur's office door and Glenda Sorrenson, Arthur's loyal secretary, pokes her head in the door. Glenda ignores Zoe's smile and looks determinedly at Arthur.

'Your two-thirty is waiting outside,' she says brusquely, in the slight Scandinavian accent that she never quite managed to lose, despite twenty-eight years in Australia, at Arthur's beck-and-call.

Zoe is reminded of the terse visit Glenda had made to her home during her time convalescence after Doug's suicide. Zoe was initially touched that a colleague had made the effort but Glenda drank half a cup of black tea before standing abruptly and making an excuse about her sick grandson. Since then, Zoe has relied solely on visits from her mother and Lincoln, of all people, to stop her from becoming completely barking mad.

Arthur and Glenda negotiate wordlessly as if Zoe is not in the room, but Zoe suspects this interaction was designed entirely for her benefit. As Glenda finally removes her head from the doorway, Zoe tries not to think about Sandra, because she can't afford to right now.

It's not that Sandra was vulnerable; all of Zoe's female clients had been deprived of their basic rights to safety. Their tragic stories followed her home and haunted her while she played with Billy or absently read a book. But Sandra was different. She had originally made an appointment because of Doug's confession to a five-year affair. She had found the earring of her husband's lover under her pillow and was vexed by her inability to get past such self-indulgent grief. Zoe recognised in a heartbeat that Sandra had absorbed systemic social, physical, sexual and emotional abuse throughout her entire life and particularly during the eight years of her relationship with Doug. At first Sandra steadfastly refused any suggestion of an unequal power relationship. Zoe remembers how Sandra's emerald eyes would flash with disgust as she repeated her belief that 'it takes two to tango.' Zoe had become immersed in the history of Sandra's selfless devotion to those around her, at such great personal cost. It was a devotion that began as a six-year-old when she would deliberately put herself in harm's way so that her step-father might spare her sisters. Sandra had been the strong one in her family and Zoe knew from bitter experience what a soul-destroying task that was. Zoe has never been a fan of Freudian therapy, but she supposes it was something about her own childhood that made her fight so hard for Sandra and Tayla. She acknowledges that this drifted into dysfunction at some point, but she needs to believe that her motivation was pure.

Eventually Zoe's belligerence won out and she convinced Sandra to do something to protect her Tayla from the warzone that her house had become. Against all odds she finally told her tyrannical husband to seek help or leave. Zoe had painstakingly coached her into the ultimatum during role play sessions where she would pretend to be Doug. This never failed to make Sandra laugh, but eventually she delivered a speech that scared Doug enough to enrol

in Zoe's Wednesday night men's behaviour change group. This put Zoe and Doug on a collision course: he was forced to spend two hours a week with the very bitch who filled his wife's head with such man-hating crap in the first place and she had to endure Doug's constant manipulation of the truth and refusal to take any responsibility for his despicable behaviour.

Zoe's memories of Sandra causes her heart to beat faster and she is sure that Arthur can hear it from all the way behind his desk.

'You do know, Arthur, you can't stop me from returning,' she blurts, in a voice she immediately condemns for its shrillness. Arthur's thin bottom lip drops exactly as it had when she had told him she had engaged Tariza as her supervisor. She wonders if Arthur has trained the blood to drain from his face in a way that makes her feel like a psychotic bitch.

'It's still my name on the door,' says Arthur, fatuously.

Zoe smiles, enjoying her small victory.

'Suppose it stops you from having to piss on it.'

'You'll no longer run the men's groups alone,' he announces, louder than necessary. 'I allowed the practice against my better judgment and it will never happen again. I have hired my son, Ben. He's a bit green but a bright enough young psychologist. It's all been arranged.'

'You can invite a troupe of circus performers for all I care.'

Zoe hasn't seen Ben for the best part of a decade. The last time she saw him he had a school tie and blazer and a face full of pimples. Ben had always seemed a bit insipid; she has rarely heard Arthur talk about him. It was the older boy, Charles, who was the subject of Arthur's boasting. Zoe didn't even know Ben was a psychologist. Seconding his son to make sure she behaves herself in groups makes her feel even more like a naughty schoolgirl, but she is secretly relieved not to have to return alone to the hateful gaze of the men in the group: the same men who will blame her for Doug's suicide.

Zoe takes a moment to objectively evaluate the man by whose standards she has judged herself for so long. Arthur is pushing sixty-five now, and a little portly; hanging stubbornly to once foppish white hair but balding badly in the wrong light. Blue veins traverse his cheeks like a sprawling metropolis. If it weren't for his positional power, he might pass for an innocuous uncle. If she is honest, she expected more of an argument regarding her return to work; it's not as though he doesn't have leverage.

'Ben starts on Monday,' says Arthur. 'I'll schedule a meeting for the two of you.' Arthur returns to his desk and picks up his heavy, gold ballpoint pen. He peers ostentatiously at the door.

As Zoe walks out the door, pleased by the outcome but dissatisfied all the same, she pivots.

'I guess I will see you Monday, then. Oh, and thanks for your support.'

Arthur peers from his work, as if he had forgotten she was there.

'Dear girl, we both know you rejected my support some time ago. It was about the time you decided you couldn't possibly allow a man to supervise you.'

Zoe knows the conversation had been more nuanced, but has to acknowledge that the way Arthur retells it, it does sound a little melodramatic.

'Arthur, I was very sad that our professional relationship died.'

He smiles sadly.

'Clearly.'

As much as she hates to let Arthur have the last word she is running late to pick up Billy, from primary school. She walks out of Arthur's office and notices that everyone of her colleagues has their office door closed. The usual hum of the practice is absent and its so quiet that she half expects tumbleweeds to roll through the waiting room.

As she backs her car out of the practice carpark, Zoe can't escape the sense that she has let them all down. And that fucking casenote nags at the back of her skull, teasing her and calling her a fraud. She drives to Billy's school listening to her favourite *Oasis* tunes; fortuitously finding the last carpark in the church next to Billy's school, moments before the bell.

Zoe sits at the vacant end of the old, fallen log outside Billy's classroom, trying to regain her composure, but Alice Lexington catches her eye; such is her current run of luck.

'I have arranged an appointment with the school principal,' spits Alice, 'Henry is still being bullied and it's unacceptable.'

There is no such thing as polite conversation with Alice and for no obvious reason she is determined to include Zoe on each of her theories. The possibility of Alice's chubby faced son being bullied by anything less resilient than a bull-elephant seems far-fetched, but she nods sympathetically.

While Zoe pauses, Alice harps on.

'I have a list of names of boys in the schoolyard who have called him names. Some of them have been teasing Billy too, from what Henry tells me. I'm happy for you to have a look at the names before I submit them.'

'They all look alike to me, Alice. Golding had it right: boys are animals.'

Shaking her head slowly Alice forages through Henry's school bag as an excuse to go search for a lost hat or drink bottle. Zoe watches her home in on Judith Cox, a likeminded parent who will be more easily seduced by the possibility of demonising a group of six-year olds.

Zoe assumes each one of the Year-One Beaumont Hill Primary School parents are more capable than her. For a start, as far as she can tell, she is the only single mother. In the leafy Inner Easter suburbs of Billy's school, divorce is not an option given the million-dollar

mortgages. At the last sports day the other mothers had watched her like a hawk in case she hunted their men; as if her train crash of a life would be perfected with the acquisition of a middle-aged tax accountant with a pot belly and weekend visitation from his three kids.

‘Matilda came out my womb clicking her fingers,’ says the mother next to Zoe, a dowdy woman in her forties with a cheery round face and shapeless purple cardigan. ‘It would’ve been criminal not to support her talent; she’s just got to practice with her left hand on the keyboard.’

Alice nods curtly as she passes Zoe on her way to the gate. Henry is nestled under her arm and is singing some *Bieber* song or another at the top of his voice. He pokes his tongue out as Zoe catches his eye.

Billy eventually emerges awkward and tentative from the classroom, inducing that familiar ache in the pit of Zoe’s stomach.

‘How was school, tiger?’

She collects his bag that drapes precariously over his shoulder, noticing the queue of mothers ready to receive their daily commentary on their little angel’s progress, as if Malcolm, their teacher, can differentiate one kid from the other twenty-eight in the class.

‘I think I’m a bit too tired to tell you, Mum.’

‘Far be it for me to exhaust you, handsome.’

‘Are we going to McDonald’s for dinner?’ Such questions force Zoe to acknowledge the shortcomings in her parenting. She remembers Alice telling her that Friday night is pasta night at the Lexington household and that her husband picks what sauce he’d like at the beginning of the week.

‘No babe, your dad’s coming to pick you up for the weekend.’

‘Oh, I forgot.’ The lack of affect in her son’s voice is consistent with the chasm between Billy and Lincoln. When Billy was a toddler and Lincoln first started having weekend

custody she had paced her apartment for 48-hours feeling certain that she would become redundant. But as the years have rolled by Zoe has become secure with her place in her son's heart. And as much as she loves him it's no doddle raising the child, who is high maintenance in a way that she never expected.

Zoe packs Billy into the backseat of her car and as she drives she begins to dread returning to the scene of the crime on Wednesday night, where each man in the group will defer to Arthur's son, and they will know that he has been carefully deposited to stop her from organising the mass suicide of half the violent men in town.

She turns into her narrow driveway to see that Lincoln's shiny, black and leased BMW is in her spot. A pang of annoyance passes, and she drives recklessly close to his bumper just to see the trepidation in his eyes. She gets out of the car and notices that Lincoln is wearing a fitted charcoal suit she hasn't seen before; it is perhaps a little snug. She knows he has a personal tailor, but they clearly haven't had the heart to tell him he needs a refit. While he's become a bit jowly now he's nearing forty, she has to admit he is still a striking man. She wonders if he might stay and have a drink with her. He has been making a concerted effort to maintain boundaries since that night a few months ago. She secretly wishes he'd morph back into the opportunistic sleazebag she has always known him to be. He has taken to looking at her with concern in his eyes, and when that happens she knows she's got a problem.

'G'day Zo, hi ya, champ,' says Lincoln as he tentatively ruffles the top of Billy's head. 'You ready for a weekend of popcorn and fun?'

Billy struggles into the front door with his oversized blue school bag. He sheepishly looks up at his father in that way that breaks Zoe's heart.

'Dad, do you think it'd be cool to live inside a bath bubble?'

'Can't say I've given that much thought,' says Lincoln with hands outstretched, demonstrably appealing to Zoe, as if she has any greater lucidity when it comes to the weird

and wonderful psyche of their son. She sends Billy off to get changed and wonders if she can talk Lincoln into sharing a bottle of wine. She puts on her *Sara Blasko* CD and Lincoln gives her a rueful look.

‘How’s Miss Saigon?’ she asks, eager for some insight into his rock-star life.

‘It’s Ho Chi Minh City and Vanessa left me.’

‘You will date beauty queens.’

‘I don’t have much choice these days; all the girls with brains are taken by men either younger or richer. I find myself in dating purgatory.’

Zoe raises her right eyebrow, ‘You’re killing me.’

‘How’s Bill been?’

‘A total fucking mystery, you want vino?’

‘Yeah, quick one, we’re due for dinner at the old man’s.’

‘Tell Stella not to give him too many lollies.’

Lincoln looks around Zoe’s apartment, and scratches the top of his head as he eyes the pile of empty wine bottles in the recycling and the frayed edges of the lounge-room throw-rug.

She can tell he’s about to say something patronising, so she changes the subject.

‘So, get this. Billy tells me they’ve been singing the Lord’s Prayer in music.’

‘You cause a ruckus?’

‘No’

‘Growing circumspect in your old age?’

‘I’m two years your junior and look every day of it.’

‘Don’t attack me; I’m not the one forcing evangelicalism on unsuspecting juveniles.’

‘I haven’t got the energy to argue. Besides, you know what Billy’s like, not exactly boring me with the intimate details.’

‘It’s a pretty conservative school. Not too many Muslims I’d wager.’

‘Fucking Stepford wives, except none of them pretty. When did we all get so old and boring?’ Lincoln puts his hand over his wineglass. She notices the lines on his forehead and wonders what it is that he worries about, late at night when he is struck by malaise and insomnia. His infuriating habit of secrecy is just about the only discernible commonality between him and his son.

‘What happened with Vanessa, I didn’t think she was the type to dump you?’

‘Left me for Jimmy Connell, had been fucking the both of us for weeks’

‘Jesus. Not that arsehole that used to date Megan Bellini?’

‘The one and only.’ She catches Lincoln stealing a second surreptitious look at his watch, and she wonders why he’s so eager to visit his father. Billy’s in his room talking to his Lego and Lincoln has that look on his face as if Mother Nature has made a hash of it, obstinate in her refusal to deliver him a son with a gift for footy and fart jokes.

‘I’ve always thought the natural course of events is for women to go from you to an artist, or a writer, maybe even a history teacher if the break up was rough. But to dump you for Jimmy, why would she bother?’

Zoe notices a yellow stain on the right breast of Lincoln’s white shirt. It looks like he might have spilled his coffee. She hasn’t seen him wear this shirt before and it looks almost unironed, lacking the crispness of his usual workwear.

‘Vanessa told me Jimmy is more carefree. Apparently, he’s got more spunk.’

‘Eww,’ says Zoe, making a show of screwing her nose, ‘there’s an image I hadn’t bargained on.’

Lincoln doesn’t laugh and she can tell her casual reaction to his break-up has pissed him off. He stands abruptly and runs his flat palms over both trouser legs. She has seen him do this so many times and she knows that there is nothing to be done but watch him leave.

‘Come on, Bill,’ he cries impatiently. ‘Stella’s wanting you,’

Billy comes out of his room with his new Lego Movie backpack on. The mention of his doting grandmother is obviously more appealing to him than a night with his father.

‘Will Stella have lollies?’ he asks and Zoe shoots Lincoln a look which he ignores.

Zoe is reminded of their first blistering row during the first throes of their strange little love affair. Lincoln had seemed an almost mythical creature; immune to the self-doubt that plagued those around him and so she erred by spending an hour at his work-party smoking cigarettes with his libidinous rival, Nick Solomon. She remembers the perverse pleasure of arguing with Lincoln in the cab on the way home and the sense of accomplishment in finding his kryptonite, his intense masculine rivalry and insecurity, all the while knowing that this knowledge would spell the death of their relationship.

‘Don’t leave in a huff,’ she implores. ‘I’m only teasing; I think you’re worth a thousand Jimmy Connells.’

He softens in an instant. ‘Thanks, gorgeous. I appreciate it.’

‘Then stay, have another drink with me. I could use the company.’

‘So could I. And that’s why I’m going to go.’

‘Go then but fuck you for choosing now to be a paragon of virtue.’ He gives her the pitying look she knew was coming. She asks him to have one drink and now he’s treating her like she’s Glen Close in *Fatal Attraction*. She kisses Billy and waves goodbye. She closes the door and the silence is a prelude to a weekend that stretches impossibly before her. Just as she closes the door behind her, the doorbell rings. She entertains the possibility that he has changed his mind.

She opens the door and he looks at her impatiently. ‘You’ve boxed me in, Zo.’

Chapter 2

Lincoln steals a glance at his son's pale face in the rear-view mirror. He would rather be dropping him off at the babysitters, if he were honest. The reality of having nothing better to do than visit his family on a Friday night turns his son into just the scapegoat his vile mood requires. He reluctantly admits to himself that it is not the boy's fault his old man has nowhere else to go; that he is so shit out of luck that he is spending the night with his moon-faced step-brother.

He could have stayed with Zoe he supposes, but as much as he appreciates the offer she is even more fucked up than he thought if she thinks he is good for her right now. Zoe's been his only real mate for as long as he can remember but for one of the smartest chicks he knows, she can be really fucking stupid.

The traffic light turns green and he considers a U-turn and going home, but there is nothing awaiting him and his son except for long, awkward and TV dinners. He thinks about the weekend a fortnight ago when Bill had left his *Guardians of the Galaxy* figurines at Zoe's and he had sooked all week, making Lincoln all the more stubborn not to go and get them. He sure as shit didn't rely on that flimsy plastic shit when he was Bill's age, and he worries that Zoe is turning him into a poof.

He notices Troy's shiny yellow Monaro as he pulls into the curb next to his old man's house and mumbles 'cashed up bogan' under his breath. Billy stares at him peculiarly, always fucking watching.

Lincoln's father's bizarre bungalow presents itself as a mismatch of kitsch pottery and half-started gardening projects. He almost slips on the loose bark as he walks up the steep gradient of their front yard and he curses openly in front of his kid: nothing Billy hasn't heard before. The doorbell is broken, and Lincoln raps the security door louder than is necessary;

disturbing the plastic holly that hangs from the front door and signals Christmas 365 days a year.

Lincoln is greeted limply at the door by Troy's wife, Kaz. She gives Billy a warm embrace and glances too quickly at him.

'The prodigal son,' she mumbles. He walks down the short, narrow hallway and finds his step-family sitting on top of each other in the ugliest fucking lounge-room you would ever have the misfortune to witness. He stares into the dull eyes of Troy Shepard, sitting on a cracked vinyl recliner with his skinny legs spread while nursing a cheap beer in his nicotine stained fingers. The ugly prick has a cheek being married to Kaz who is at least an eight out of ten while he'd be lucky to score a two.

Kaz is just about the perfect chick, if such a thing weren't like the Loch Ness Monster. Besides, she grew up on the wrong side of the tracks, meaning she wears cheap jeans and has a streaked perm which makes her look as if she could be a lost Minogue sister. But she does have sexuality and wisdom that is almost certainly lost on her dead-shit husband. As if that's not a big enough travesty of justice, Lincoln had once stolen a look at Troy's tax return on Stella's computer, and saw that he earns more than him courtesy of his booming plumbing business.

Kaz looks tired and withdrawn and is minus the heavy white foundation that is usually plastered to her face. She retreats quickly to lie on the couch opposite her husband, pulling a white rug over her legs. Billy is immediately swallowed by the tuck-shop arms of Stella—Lincoln's step-mother—and she marches him out to the spare room to survey the latest plastic crap she has bought him with the money he knows for a fact that she doesn't have.

It goes without saying that the house is fucking shambolic. Stella's two Dalmatians leave a thick trail of coarse hair along the dusty floorboards and Stella's collection of stuffed toys and bric-a-brac make him feel like he's trapped in a Tim Burton movie. Lincoln makes a

show of wiping away the dog fur, before sitting on the sofa to talk absently to Troy about footy. He watches his Dad through the hole in the flywire back-screen door. Kym Simmons is cleaning the barbeque on his patio with mountains of scrunched newspaper while chatting amiably to Troy's sons, Jai and Axel. The two boys, both older than Bill, are replicas of their old man with thin sandy flat-tops and dry, serious mouths.

'Boys are growing up,' Lincoln says to Troy, mustering his warmest smile which he supposes is not really that warm.

'Yes, they're a good age' replies Troy, in that moronic tone that Lincoln parodies to Zoe when he is trying to make her laugh. 'Handy little crewmen.'

'Still a yachty then, mate?' Lincoln wishes he could stop being an asshole.

'Not exactly a yacht – as you know – mate. But we enjoy it.'

'And how are you, Kaz?' Lincoln knows his question is redundant, and she doesn't bother responding. Stella pushes Billy outside and Lincoln watches his son fretfully joins Troy's bigger and more resilient children. Lincoln has never known Stella to be anything but sunny, but she fixes her face in a frown as she lowers her arthritic knees to sit on the couch to cradle Kaz's legs. Kym pokes his head in the door and with a tilt of his head ushers Lincoln outside for a beer and a fag. Lincoln is only too happy to flee the heavy atmosphere of the lounge-room and he follows his father outside and they light up silently, watching the kids negotiate the rules of their game.

'It's a bit chilly in there,' Lincoln says, attempting to extrapolate the detail without betraying his anxiety. He might be in a bad place, but he will put a bullet in his head the day he can't outmanoeuvre his old man.

'Yes. Best manners, mate. Kaz had a miscarriage this morning,' says his father. This is not the first time Lincoln has heard such news, but practice doesn't make it easier. No wonder

Kaz spoke to him through gritted teeth. There was a time when his instincts would have saved him from this pitiable scene and he begins to make plans to leave.

‘Miscarriage? Didn’t know they were trying,’ he says with a passable breeziness.

‘Accident as far as I know.’

‘Thought she’d have quit rooting him years ago. Fucking less for murder.’

Kym shoots his son a chiding look, ‘There’s a whole species of monogamists walking among us, mate. Some of them even like to screw occasionally.’

Kym talks to Lincoln out of the corner of his mouth, the way he does when he thinks he’s being clever. Zoe once told Lincoln that he had the exact same mannerism and he had avoided her for a week by way of punishment.

Kym lifts the top off a couple of beers; the old-style brown stubbies synonymous with Lincoln’s earliest memories. The act of sharing a beer with the silly old bastard still gives him a shiver of pleasure, despite the fraught nature of their conversation. The two men sit and listen to the blaring music and cackles of laughter from a party over the fence. They can hear an Elvis Presley tune being butchered by Kym’s perpetually pissed Greek neighbour; Lincoln can never remember his name. He settles into his beer hoping that it might soothe his jangling nerves and is content to listen quietly to the neighbours, but Kym nudges him with a smile on his face, and it is clear from his dancing pupils that he has a grubby little anecdote burning a hole in his pea-brain. It’s always been this way; his old man would tell anyone who cared to listen when Lincoln was as young as ten, that they were more mates than father and son. Lincoln remembers when he was sixteen and Kym bought him his first beer at a pub. Kym had befriended a couple of old pissheads and spent the night telling stories of his past fucks, using the corner of the bar as a prop.

‘You will never guess who I ran into at the pub last week. Christine fucking Nugent, no less.’

Lincoln can't place the name, but he has a feeling his father is about to elucidate with usual theatrical extravagance. 'Who?'

'The bird I was rooting for a while just after your mum.'

Lincoln understands at once and is surprised he didn't remember the name. It was Christine Nugent's breasts that his virgin eyes had seen squeezed between Kym's groping fingers that horrible night by the swimming pool. In many ways, that was the night that ended Lincoln's childhood and he considers the error in his father's maths because he knows for a fact that it happened six months before his parents separated.

'Oh, right. She was tidy if my memory serves,' he says, pandering to his old man's egotism out of habit.

'As trim as a cricket. But crazy as a meataxe. Hands down the best root I've had. I couldn't even tell you the things I did to her, mate.'

'Years been kind?' Lincoln's question is all but drowned out by the roar of the three boys running past. He is relieved to see that Billy has been included in their game of chase, though this is tempered when Jai tags him by swiping his arm and making a loud slap on Billy's arm. He supposes Zoe would act pre-emptively but Billy's got to learn to be a man. They boys run to the trampoline and Axel, the younger, chubbier brother lifts himself on by using Billy's face as a ladder. Lincoln waits for a pang of acute hatred to settle in his stomach: such thoughts about an eight-year-old are beneath even him.

'She was a bit ragged to tell you the truth,' continues Kym. 'But I wouldn't have minded a return bout. Lucky Stella was with me. I couldn't keep up these days.'

Lincoln takes in the swell of Kym's stomach in his faded yellow polo which billows generously over his green shorts, and he can think of nothing more repulsive than his old man on the job. They finish their smoke and beer and take another from the Esky before walking inside. Stella is massaging the foot of a moist eyed Kaz as Lincoln slides the back door shut

and sinks into a dog-haired chair. He wishes that Kaz would count her fucking blessings rather than making a public spectacle of herself. She could have at least given a man some warning.

‘Sorry to hear about your misfortune,’ Lincoln says. His Dad shoots him a look which tells him he is not meant to know.

‘Don’t say anything to the boys,’ warns Kaz, looking at him for the first time with her petite nose scrunched. ‘We’re not telling them.’

‘Oh, because I was gagging to discuss their mother’s plumbing with them,’ he snaps and she glowers, but she fucking had it coming.

‘I forget the great financial mind of our times doesn’t need reminding of a fucking thing,’ she says and she lets fat tears roll unashamedly down her cheeks. Its all a bit melodramatic, Lincoln thinks.

‘Maybe you should stop being a smart arse, mate,’ says Troy, coldly. Stella’s dog is on Troy’s lap, and he furiously massaging its ears. Lincoln hates the moulting bitch, but for some reason wishes it was his lap that the dog had chosen. He raises apologetic palms. He can stand Troy’s sour, dumb-fuck face no longer.

‘Kaz, I’m sorry about your news,’ Lincoln says, rising from his chair and brushing the dog hair from his suit pants. ‘I’ll leave you in peace. Stella, I promised Billy a sleepover, so I will pick him up in the morning. Troy, mind your kids don’t make soup out of him.’

Lincoln can feel the eyes of his family piercing a hole in the back of his head as he strides towards the sweet relief of solitude. His progress is stalled by Stella who sneaks up behind him and tugs at his sleeve. She hugs him warmly.

‘Sorry, love, we really ought to have told you.’ Stella’s heavily lined face is twisted with regret and he longs to hug her for the first time in his life.

‘Stella, you need a medal for putting up with us arseholes,’ he says, as close to an apology that he is capable to the woman who does so much for his father and his son.

She smiles wanly. ‘I wouldn’t be without any of you.’

Stella scurries back to the lounge room and Lincoln notes her generosity in saving them further embarrassment. Lincoln briefly considers calling her back and at least telling her he appreciates what she does for his father and his son, but the thought vanishes as he fishes his car keys from his suit-pants and wonders just what the fuck he will do with the rest of his night.

He walks down the steep gradient of the front yard, cursing his father for his half-arsed paving attempt. His sleek BMW drives him aimlessly through backstreets until he finds himself in the parking lot of a pub he has never frequented. He leans his head on the steering wheel and wonders how to take control of this wayward night. He takes out his phone and checks his messages one more time, but his empty inbox continues to mock his fortune. With a lack of alternatives, he steps from his car and wanders in to find a cookie-cutter bar that’s had its individuality robbed by the standard issue laminate and stainless steel. He longs for the smell of stale cigarettes and dank bar mats from his youth. He sits on a tall white bar stool and orders a double-bourbon. He can’t stop thinking about Christine Nugent’s tits as he watches a man in his thirties – too old to be wearing dreadlocks – sing a *John Butler Trio* cover to an inattentive crowd.

As he thinks of Christine Nugent and that summer night he can still smell the chlorine from the hair of Stacey Jenner, as they huddled together and took turns in sculling the brandy liberated from her dad’s liquor cabinet. Stacey was his best mate’s older sister and she had finally succumbed to his clumsy overtures by surreptitiously holding his hand under the cover of her quilt. There was a group of them, all pretending to be more pissed than they were, as their parents smoked weed and watched pornos in her father’s study.

‘About time,’ he had whispered, filled to the brim with the exhilaration that can only thrive inside the ribcage of a teen.

‘Don’t count your chickens,’ whispered Stacey, wanting to keep their hand-holding clandestine, given she was eighteen-months older than her brother’s persistent best friend.

‘I have a feeling you’d like to kiss me,’ he slurred.

‘Cocky little shit, if I do it’s only because I’m pissed.’

Lincoln knew their first kiss would be the first perfect moment of his young life and he sits happily in his nostalgia, trying not to stare at the group of twenty-something women playing pool in the corner of the spacious bar. He is visited by a mental vision of his mother, not much older than he is now. He remembers her vivid red hair and those ugly fucking animal earrings she plumped for. His mind fast forwards to those final, cruel days of her life. But he takes charge of his memory and instead concentrates on the devastation of her intrusion on that night. She had chosen the exact wrong moment to barge in on Stacey and him.

‘Come on, Linc,’ she had demanded, ‘were going home, mate.’ He reluctantly withdrew his hand from Stacey’s sweaty clasp.

‘Dad staying?’

‘Yes, your father’s here somewhere.’

‘Then I’ll catch a ride with him.’

‘I’m not fucking around, child, get in the car.’

His mother very rarely cursed in company and he knew he had no choice but to follow her. Six-months later he would have ignored her happily, but he was not yet at the point of completely dismissing her relevance. He remembers the callow certainty that she had just ruined his life and he followed her chastened and furious, into their brown Falcon. He screamed until the earth was whirling, and his mum had broken down in tears, convulsing

and defeated at the wheel. He had got out of the car and slammed the front door and went to fetch the old man.

Assuming his old man could fix his mother's unhinged state, Lincoln rounded the back of the house, building the courage to knock on Stacey's father's locked study door. But as he was poised to knock, he noticed a lurking shadow by the swimming pool. At first, he thought it might be Stacey's Kelpie, so he crept closer to make sure everything was okay. But the distant light of the crescent moon illuminated his old man, whispering loudly in the way he does when he thinks he's being subtle. Kym Simmons was with Christine Nugent, a recent divorcee who had been married to his mate. Lincoln's memory can just about make out one of his Dad's hands lurching greedily at Christine's exposed tits while the other groped at his cock through the zip of his jeans. By the time Lincoln returned, dazed and confused to the car, his Mum had regained composure and they drove home in silence.

Six months later his parents separated. He never spoke a word of what he had seen. As his mother drove him home in silence, he couldn't shake the feeling that it was his fault. He didn't have a way of making sense of how he felt but if he had to describe it today he'd use words like murky and brown and predatory.

After the separation Lincoln lived full-time with his dad and started to bring girls home. He remembers how Kym would punch his shoulder the next morning and say something about apples and trees. But Lincoln had decided that night by the swimming pool that he would be nothing like his old man. Lincoln Simmons would never push his cock through a half unopened zip the way he had seen his demonic old man had. His liaisons would take place under crisp white sheets with champagne resting by an open window, with the soothing sounds of jazz music permeating from another room. He would be patient and commanding and leave them wanting more; he would distance himself from the murkiness and the stench of that horrible night.

As Lincoln squints at the bar menu he notices one of the twenty-something women to his right. He supposes she's pretty, with wiry, brown arms and small pert tits nestled snugly against a tight red t-shirt. He can just about make out the outline of her nipples which look slightly too big for her body, so he searches her face in the hope of something more appealing. Her lustrous wavy hair is just about getting the better of a solitary red hairband tied at the back and he just knows it's the bane of her existence. But without it she'd be hardly worth the effort and Lincoln fantasises about pulling hard on handfuls of that mane of hair as she arches her back and cries loudly, stuck in that vortex between pleasure and pain.

He quickly surveys the spacious, green bar and is pleased to note she is standing closer to him than is practically necessary. There is something about her mouth that tells him she's had a hard life. She's wearing her history like a fucking badge as she looks at a future that promises nothing but more of the same. Join the fucking club, he thinks.

Lincoln thinks of being home with Billy on the couch watching Star Wars, with his son's clean hair filling his nostrils as he dozes off jabbering about light sabres and the dark-side. He wonders what it is like to be one of those dads truly contented in the company of their son. It's not that he doesn't love Bill; it's just that the kid's vulnerability continually rips out his beating heart and makes demands of him that he can't address. Lincoln always assumed that fatherhood would subdue his hedonistic yearnings, but his overwhelming sense that life is futile has only been confirmed by his incompetent love for his son.

'You're overdressed,' says the woman in the red t-shirt, tilting her chin toward Lincoln in a dare. She slurs her speech encouragingly. He looks down slow-wittedly at his charcoal suit and blue and yellow striped tie. He waives his glass in her direction; and she tells him she'd like vodka lime for her and two friends.

'Overdressed?' he asks with what he had always considered a winning smile, 'Friday's not collar and tie night?'

She smiles with her mouth, but Lincoln can't see the sparklr in her eyes that he looks for. 'You've sat on enough barstools to know.'

'What gives me away?'

She giggles. 'You've the look of somebody that would stick their knife in the toaster if they stayed still for too long.'

Lincoln knows she is drunk, but he likes her attitude if only because he finds polite chatter abhorrent. 'I'd probably hang myself if I had the rope.'

She laughs with the gasping rattle of a smoker, like she had expected him to say anything but that. 'World should be your oyster in that suit.'

He's busy thinking of something exotic to say when one of her friends walks over. The friend has jet black hair and ice cool blue eyes and is possibly more attractive than the red t-shirt, but he's experienced enough to know she's exactly the type who has cock-blocked him more times than he cares to remember. He looks at her ring-finger and his hunch is right: it sports a fuck-off diamond ring, as if proof of her quantifiable worth. He knows immediately that she is the kind of morally superior woman who has never laughed at his jokes or considered fucking him. She is the kind of woman who only feels complete when she has a husband at home washing their car and a baby in her arms that she will raise to follow the same nonsensical conventions that she does. She's most likely the kind of woman who practices yoga and uploads pictures of herself in improbable poses on *Facebook*. She probably genuinely still fucking believes that everything happens for a reason.

The two women negotiate in hushed tones. He has seen it all before and he contemplates walking away, if only he doesn't know how much he would regret it. His anxiety is pricked by the possibility of the long insomniac hours that will inevitably torment him if left to his own devices. It's disproportionately crucial that the red t-shirt blows off her disapproving friend and chooses him. The friend finally walks back to the pool table but not before

mumbling something under her breath. He wants to tell her to go fuck herself but that won't help his cause.

'So,' says red T-shirt, suggestively 'are you going to tell me your name or has the cat got your tongue?'

'I can talk all night, babe; just give me the chance.'

She stares at him for the longest moment, the hint of a smile playing across her lips.

'Just talk? Had you pegged for a man of action.'

But just when things seem positive, she takes her eyes off Lincoln and glances back to her friend. If she leaves now he will spend all night worrying that his charm has finally dissolved, and he feels the vein in his neck swell like a peach.

'The name's Lincoln' he says hurriedly, standing up to form a barrier between her eye line and her friend. He has closed enough business deals under adversity to have learned to keep the dialogue alive and distractions at bay.

'Listen, Lincoln,' she says, patting his tie. 'It has been lovely meeting you. I've got to go now, but I will be here next Friday night.'

He fights a rage that comes with being fucked about by a chick that he considers so far beneath him. He doesn't need this, not tonight of all nights.

'You should at least give me your number,' he says through gritted teeth.

'You'll have to come back next Friday.' He feels his ears burn as he wonders what she is getting out of this. Maybe she will be back next Friday night – who the fuck cares – by that time she will be as relevant to him as the horse and cart.

'I can guarantee I won't be back. This is a once only deal, lovely.'

She considers him fully for the first time. He can't tell if his flash of irritability has pleased or disconcerted her. He supposes neither.

‘Let’s leave it to fate to decide, shall we?’ she says as she dodges her petite frame around the girth of his hips which he had been using to block her exit. He muscled his way further into her personal space and grips her wrist with enough force to make her wince.

‘I would never, ever fuck a fatalist,’ he whispers menacingly into her ear. ‘Do you honestly think that if there was a higher force, that it would waste its time on someone as ordinary as you?’

Her mouth twists into a tight smile and he finally recognises the sparkle in her eyes that he has been watching for. She turns on her heels and walks past the pool table to re-join her stuck-up friend who is looking back at him through narrowed eyes. The friend flicks him the finger but he turns his back on her. He drains his bourbon and walks next door to the bottle shop, purchasing a bottle black enough to obliterate his consciousness.

Lincoln gets lost on his way home and he has to resort to the assistance of his GPS. By the time he parks in his driveway he is in a ferocious mood, cursing like a lunatic. He is surprised to see a familiar figure sitting outside his front door. She is hugging her knees on the brown panelled park bench on his long, narrow porch. An oversized white jumper is pulled all the way down to her blue sneakers and she hardly notices when he parks a couple of metres from her.

She doesn’t look up as he makes his way towards her and simply asks, ‘Can I come in?’

He takes hold of her cold fingers and leads her into his spacious living room. She has only ever spent time in his bed and she is incongruous, sitting vulnerable and broken on his black leather sofa amongst the boldness of his framed Monet’s and crystal candleholders.

‘What did you tell Troy?’ he asks, and she rolls her eyes, and he supposes the question is tragically indicative. Her presence here can only mean trouble but it’s somehow reassuring that someone still wants him. He can see the tracks of her tears down her cheeks.

‘What did I tell Troy about what? Where I was going tonight or how I got pregnant after months of sleeping in the spare bedroom?’

‘So, it was mine?’ Kaz breathes loudly through her nose. She has a little bubble of clear snot under her right nostril but Lincoln decides this is not the time to draw attention to it.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says, though he can hardly be blamed for her contraceptive fuck-up. They had never used anything, and he had never asked, but she’s a big girl and if she’s going to play away from home she should take responsibility. Lincoln sinks next to her on the sofa and puts his hand on her jumper. He can feel her bony knees and begins to get hard as he knows she is here to fuck away the pain. Her entire body is like a tightly wound coil and he thinks it’s too bad for her that he is only capable of the one kind of comfort that will ultimately make things worse.

‘Don’t be sorry. I knew what I was signing up for, and that Karma would bite me on the arse.’

He slips out to the kitchen of his double storied apartment and places two glasses under his ice dispenser before pouring them a whisky from the bottle that he had planned to consume himself.

He peers for a moment at the picture on his fridge that Billy painted for him at school. Billy is no artistict boy wonder, but from what Lincoln can decipher, he has painted the three members of his family, with the addition of the little brother he has always pined for.

‘You’re too smart to believe in Karma, Kaz. The pregnancy was bad luck, nothing more,’ Lincoln says, wondering why he is forced to explain versions of the same thing to everyone he knows.

Troy and Kaz met in high school. They were married at twenty-one. Kaz had made many an excruciating family occasion tolerable, and she had always been gracious in making small-talk with Lincoln’s myriad of air-headed dates. When he bumped into her at the footy

one night when she was enjoying a rare girl's night he invited her into his company's corporate box without thinking twice. It was harmless enough, except he knew that her fraternisation with another man in the absence of her husband was no small detail.

Over free drinks and cocktail quiches, Kaz mentioned that she was unsuccessfully attempting some interior renovations in the family home. She and Troy have a property that would be impressive if it not for its unfavourable location. Lincoln mentioned that he had a client who was an interior designer, though he knew that his tastes would not agree with Kaz. They swapped numbers and met for coffee the following week, to perform the simple task of giving her the email address. Their coffee dates became regular, but the interior designer was never mentioned. Coffee turned into drinks one night, a good night peck on the cheek turned to lingering kisses and after three months she became physically and emotionally fixated on him. Lincoln enjoyed their tryst very much, much more than he enjoyed the company of Vanessa, who he was also dating at the time. And with Vanessa's every rebuke he found consolation in Kaz's ferocious commitment.

They have tacitly agreed that she never mention the feelings she had for him. The pact has allowed him to enjoy the trimmings of her love, without the burden of reciprocation. Given she has just lost his child he suspects the deal has been revoked and her expectant look confirms it.

'Fuck it, Kaz. We both knew this was a dead-end deal,' he says, more to break the piercing silence than anything. She winces and takes a deep sip from her glass. She looks at him with the same intense look in her eyes is what drew him to her, but he is forced to look away. He is always surprised when it comes to this. Surely the women in his life don't believe he has what it takes to commit? He doesn't hide his shortcomings. She has known him for long enough to know he is an asshole.

‘I never would have started this if I thought that,’ Kaz says as she turns her head away and looks out his front window. Lincoln remembers as a teenager his mother telling him she had visited a psychic. The psychic told her that Lincoln would spend a lifetime weaving in and out of failed relationships. For whatever reason, the prophecy had worried him for days. He wonders if it became self-fulfilling. He curses himself for beginning another relationship that was only ever going to end one way. He feels every bit the murky, brown, desperate predator that he has always known he is.

Lincoln didn’t cry when his Mum died and that was all the confirmation he needed that he had one of those pathologies that Zoe likes to bullshit on about. Her personal favourite is narcissistic personality disorder. People kept supplying him with fucked up advice at her funeral, like ‘you have to give yourself permission to grieve,’ and he wanted to punch their goofy faces. Giving himself permission had nothing to do with it, he was just incapable of tears; a being born without the genetic disposition for empathy. He knew then – as he knows now – he is missing a small fraction of whatever it is that would make him a complete man, and invariably other people pay for it.

‘Maybe we should’ve talked more before we started this?’ Lincoln hears the words tumble from his mouth and acknowledges them as glib, even by his own shit-eating standards. He can see that she is trembling, so he fetches a white throw rug from the single black lounge opposite and wraps it tightly around her. He kisses her face, because that is the best he can do. She sits before him defeated, begging for a love that he has no idea how to give.

‘I think maybe we should have done less talking and less fucking,’ she says, in barely a whisper. ‘But you should know I wouldn’t be doing this with anyone else, Lincoln. It was always you. For years it was you.’ Her confession doesn’t t surprise him. They have always shared a connection and she had fallen so compliantly.

‘You fucking knew what I was like,’ he pleads.

‘I did. I saw you with one woman after another and I cursed them for their stupidity. But when my turn came I was dumb enough to think I was different.’ She looks down at her hollow stomach. ‘And now, I get what I fucking deserve.’

Lincoln is momentarily blinded by the high beams of a car that slowly passes his lounge-room window. He is startled for a moment, but the lights eventually pass. He stands and bolts the deadlock of his front door and she looks at him quizzically. He sits back down and sips ruefully at his whisky, which tastes sour and regretful and familiar. Kaz’s emerald eyes are more vivid than usual because of her tears and it strikes him that she is stunning. But he doesn’t like her kids and doesn’t like her taste in clothes. She says *youse* when addressing multiple people and sometimes smells of stale tobacco. And then there’s the family conflict their union would stir. He’s not cut out for any of that. He likes her a lot but doesn’t understand love, and he suspects if he did, he would lose all of his charm.

He dares to glance at her one more time. He should say something awful to put her out of her misery but hasn’t got the energy to be that callous; though it would be kinder than forcing his tongue inside her unsuspecting mouth. Her mouth is rigid, and he thinks she will slap him hard and he welcomes the rebuke, but her mouth relaxes into the kiss as she drops her empty whisky glass onto his cowskin rug.

‘Fuck me like you mean it,’ she whispers.

He scoops her up with one arm and lays her down on his five-thousand-dollar lounge-suite which he purchased to impress Bianca, his girlfriend at the time. He rips off Kaz’s tracksuit pants and underwear in one flamboyant, angry motion and he is on top of her and she scratches furiously at him, eventually composing herself enough to undo his belt and trousers. He can’t remember feeling this horny, but he has only ever really cared for self-sabotaging sex.

‘Can you fuck me so soon after?’ he quickly asks, but he knows the question is moot.

‘Stop talking,’ she replies, and he is already inside her, paying no regard to how this will feel when he comes, which will be too soon. He wraps his hand hard around her throat and she gags as his grip tightens as he closes his eyes to block her from his mind and he fucks her with all the violence that he can muster. He closes his eyes and loses himself in the murkiness and the desperation. She might as well be a slab of lifeless meat, and he is only vaguely aware of her constricted windpipe in the palm of his hand. Just as he thinks he might finally be doing her a favour, he is startled by an upended coffee table lamp, disturbed by his foot, as it lands with a thud on the floor.

He can feel her upper thighs start to shake, and he falls into her, letting himself come indulgently, holding on to for a handful of final moments, before rolling off the couch and landing with a dramatic thud on his back onto his polished wooden floorboards.

Now all he can do is to hope she fucks off quickly, only vaguely conscious of her as she sits up on his lounge and silently puts her track pants back on over her sneakers. He hears the patter of her footsteps as she uses his toilet and pisses his poisonous muck out of her system. She pours herself a glass of water. He can’t move, or at least, really doesn’t want to and he thinks how ridiculous he must look with his pants around his ankles lying on the floor.

She uses the key in the door to release the deadlock.

‘How funny if you’ve made me pregnant again,’ she says. ‘Nothing like learning from your mistakes.’

She slams the door behind her. He lies with his eyes closed for what might be a very long time. The urge to end it all is somehow stronger this time, but maybe it always feels that way.

Chapter 3

It's not unusual for Ben Eckermann to meet his mother for coffee alone. If Eve Eckermann forbids her son to discuss his troublesome relationship with his father, at least Arthur's exclusion from their coffee dates serves as vague, if unsatisfying, acknowledgement.

Ben had texted his mother last night as he sat at home fretting about his men's group debut. He had eventually given up on sleep and driven past the community centre where he is to meet Zoe Jamison and ten men later tonight. The community centre was nestled ingloriously amongst a row of housing trust units in North Western backstreets. He would not have believed it was the right place if it hadn't been for the dusty 'Franklyn Morris Memorial Hall' sign that hung crookedly from the crumbling red brick wall.

Ben tells his mum that he can hardly believe what he is about to do. Just one short week ago he was a twenty-eight-year-old loser with a thin resume wallpapered with the odd stint of retail work. He had cobbled together the grades to narrowly acquire his masters in psychology a year ago but was lukewarm about pursuing it as a career. He had no desire to put himself in a position to be compared unfavourably to his father or brother, Charles. That was until Arthur had demanded a meeting which briefed him on his new role: his father's rueful face making no effort to hide the fact that this was a desperate measure. Even as they shook hands to seal his contract, Ben could see the derision in his old man's eyes, his despair at having to resort to hiring his own incompetent flesh and blood to keep an eye on the rogue Zoe Jamison. Arthur might have offered the job to his ceiling fan if it served his purposes, but this was as close to paternal affirmation as Ben was going to get, so he accepted the job.

He can usually count on his mother for positive affirmation, but she is disappointingly ambivalent today. She has taken to long distracted silences just as he finally has some news to satisfy her unquenchable curiosity. In preparation for tonight's group, he had changed his trousers three times as though he was attending his school formal, all the while tantalising

himself with images of Zoe's approval. He wears a newly purchased, crisp blue and white striped shirt but his mother, who is constantly chiding him for his slovenly appearance, has failed to notice.

'You've heard Charles will be coming home for the long weekend?' she announces, changing the subject before he is ready. How typical, he thinks, that his one moment of prominence has been usurped by his older brother's visit. Charles is living in the bosom of Sydney academia and although Ben enjoys his visits, he resents the cringe-worthy pomp that is so strictly reserved for chips off old blocks.

'I assume there will be an event?' he asks and she shoots him the usual reproachful look.

'Yes, a lunch on the Saturday. Naturally you'll come.'

'Naturally.'

She sighs as she mechanically stirs her latte, and Ben feels the aching petulance in his shoulders. He examines the puckered wrinkles at the corners of his mother's mouth. He would pity her but knows she would resent him for it.

'Have I done something wrong, Mum?'

'Sweetheart, I'm just a bit flat. Why would you think it's something you've done?'

An elderly couple take their seats at the table next to them. Ben wonders why they have chosen to sit so close when there are so many other seats they could have selected. The old man has a Band-Aid on top of his bald pate which fails to cover the corners of a festering wound. He lays out the paper he had tucked under his right arm and begins to read while his wife stares listlessly at the menu. Ben fancies that she smells of stale milk. He wonders what it is like to live with somebody for so long that there is nothing left to say.

'Your father's very pleased you have decided to work with him,' says Eve Eckermann, after a long silence. Ben should've known it was Arthur who has stolen her verve.

‘His enthusiasm has been overwhelming.’

‘Don’t be droll, Benjamin. It doesn’t suit.’

Eve looks suspiciously around the room as though her husband’s psychology practice has made him a household name and her neck reddens to blend with her blouse. She creases her forehead as though pricked by a pin.

‘You could be kinder to your father given the year he has endured thanks to that horrid woman.’

There is a thrilling aspect – Ben must admit – to his father’s name being sullied by the suicide of Doug Hillier. Arthur may have adroitly shifted most of the focus to Zoe Jamison but watching him squirm has been a guilty pleasure. Ben thinks of a particularly nasty newspaper column that criticised Arthur for allowing men’s groups to be facilitated by a sole practitioner and he stifles a smile, for he knows his mum would never forgive him.

A stodgy waitress with a mop of black hair and a dirty green polo takes the order from the old couple opposite. The old man orders a weak tea and a toasted cheese sandwich while his wife enquires about the freshness of the scones, before eventually deciding on raison toast and a cappuccino. Ben is pricked by a shard of irrational hatred for her and he thinks back to two years of weekly therapy sessions as a teenager, with Arthur’s colleague; Ryan Trentham. Ryan had badgered and harangued Ben about his need to communicate his ‘repressed anger’ after a clumsy attempt at self-harm had led to a trip to the emergency ward with his panicked mother. After that, Ben had developed a stammer which returns like a vengeful ex-lover, whenever he is nervous.

The wound in Ben’s fifteen-year old arm had hardly required a stitch, but ever since that day his mother has never quite believed he hadn’t attempted to end it all. During forty-three miserable sessions, Ben was forced to sit in the world’s most uncomfortable chair and submit to every one of Ryan’s unpalatable pathologies regarding his mental dysfunction. If he hadn’t

previously considered himself suicidal, Ryan's garlicky sermons made him wonder if it wasn't such a bad option. He said less than a dozen sentences to Ryan in the whole time they spent together, so scared was he that his inner secrets would be parried across the corridor to his father's sanctimonious ears. Assuming Arthur cared to listen.

'Do you ever miss it, Mum? Psychology,' Ben asks by way of changing the subject from his father. Eve looks surprised by the question, but she brightens nonetheless, and he can tell she is pleased he would ask.

'That was thirty years ago, Honey. Why would you ask?'

'Just seems that you gave up a lot.'

Eve peers over her skinny latte with suspicion, before letting her face relax into an indulgent smile as if her son is an incorrigible rogue. 'What's your angle, young man? Are you trying to make me reassess my entire life? As if I don't already have enough on my plate.'

Ben remembers his teenage refusal to indulge his mother in anything but monosyllabic conversation. Eve had turned to him as her last bastion of connection when Charles made it clear he no longer needed her and Arthur was off sprinkling gold-dust. Eve's intense determination that Ben should overcome his social phobias only sharpened his resolve to exclude her. Standard teenage behaviour it may have been, but he wishes he hadn't been such a dick.

Ben reaches across the table and places a hand on the top of her gnarled fingers. He gives her what he hopes is a reassuring smile, but he feels a dislocation beneath his chest. His mother's life of servitude seems to him such a wretched waste: such avoidable subordination. Ben looks to the next table as the old woman's cappuccino arrives and the world which seemed oddly full of possibility an hour ago seems so futile and sad.

Ben drives absently towards his destination in his green '98 Camry. A young man in a white Ute and overalls overtakes him while waving his fist. He had hoped for a confidence inducing pep-talk from his mother, propelling him towards a night of meritorious contribution. But he feels sweaty and inconsequential. A quick check of his pallid reflection in his rear-view mirror proves as much. He was foolish to imagine this is not beyond him.

Ben was not reassured by his initial meeting with Zoe Jamison on Monday. It had not gone well. After hearing her described as the devil incarnate by his mother, he expected Zoe to be a nervous, flighty woman whose core had been rocked by the suicide of her client. His father had employed a look of benevolent condescension whenever her name was mentioned. It was the same look Ben's vet had given him when his childhood dog was put down. Arthur had stopped short of blaming Zoe for Doug's suicide, but such profanities would never escape his lips.

In place of the unstable creature that his parents had painstakingly painted, Ben found a brisk woman whose speech was clipped and necessary. If it occurred to Zoe that Ben was her penance she wasn't the least bit interested in contrition. She had been prickly during their meeting and his questions were left unanswered. She dealt only in clichés such as 'keep your elbows up and you'll be fine.' If she suspected nepotism – and she most certainly did – she didn't mention it.

The music blaring from his crackling car stereo exacerbates his nervousness so he turns to the drive time sports show. Bluey and Chook are discussing the ten-week penalty handed down to Kane Jones, the All-Australian centreman, who sent an opposition player to hospital with bleeding on the brain

'I'm the first to admit Kane did the wrong thing,' says Bluey, an AFL hall of famer. 'But ten-weeks is a blight on the game. We are ending the year of one of our game's best players for a mistake he made in a split-second.'

‘His victim will be in hospital for a fortnight,’ replies Chook.

‘Yes, and nobody is more apologetic than Kane. He has handled himself with absolute dignity. Sent the bloke a text straight after the game and apologised on national television. What more can a man do?’

‘He could have probably not king-hit him in the first place,’ says, Bluey.

‘No offence, Bluey,’ says Chook, who is working his voice up into his trademark high-pitched squeal, ‘But you have never played the game at the highest level. You don’t know what its like to walk across that white line. I can tell you, if we had’ve had this tribunal crap when I played in the seventies, I would have hardly played a game.’

‘I think we can all agree that things have changed since the seventies,’ says, Bluey.

‘And aren’t we all poorer for the fact,’ Chook roars, close to tears. ‘In my day we could acknowledge the fact that good blokes make the odd mistake; that the odd brain-fade is no hanging offence.’

Ben turns the radio off and drives in silence before arriving fifteen minutes early to the secluded car park of the community centre. He hears his phone vibrate in his pocket and knows it is his mother. He retrieves her message which predictably reads *Sorry about my inexcusable mood. Good luck tonight, sweetheart. We are extremely proud of you x*. Ben smiles wryly, and mutters ‘we my arse’ as he walks nervously towards his destination.

He walks into the entrance of a dusty hallway expecting to find Zoe, but there is no sound, and so he wanders into the kitchen which is a mess of cupboards that don’t quite close, leaking taps and a pie warmer sitting precariously on top of a narrow wooden bench. The hall doubles as a makeshift basketball court that is missing a ring at the Southern end. In its place sits a portable stage that had two microphone stands and an acoustic guitar leaning against a wooden lectern. Children’s art work hangs haphazardly from the walls, extolling the virtues of the Lord.

Ben feels like he is being watched and is conscious of providing his non-existent voyeur with a confident image, so he moves to the side of the hall and stares at a decoupage of congregation members pinned on a noticeboard on the Eastern wing of the hall. He fixes his face with an interested look, a slight grin indicating his approval of community.

He is still wearing his forced grin as the first man arrives at 5:54pm and fetches a bag of nametags from a cupboard by the entrance. The man fixes a nametag to his faded blue t-shirt that reads, *Ash*. He lifts his chin slightly towards Ben by way of greeting. Ash is much younger than the men Ben had imagined in his prognostications. With his mousy brown hair swept thinly over his forehead and an amateurish tattoo of Bugs Bunny on his calf, he seems too vulnerable to qualify for this group, like a lost lamb that has mistakenly come to feed with a pack of lions. Ash laconically fetches the faded red plastic chairs from the perimeter of the hall and arranges them in a tight circle where the western wing of the basketball court would be.

‘Hi, I’m Ben,’ he finally says.

‘Ash,’ says the young man and he briefly sticks his hand inside of Ben’s like it’s a dead fish.

Three new men walk into the room confidently; the tallest of them seemingly in slow-motion as he pulls the butt of his cigarette from his lips and throws it on the faded wooden floorboard. He has a thick mop of black curls and a long black goatee, and Ben can’t stop looking at him. Ash hands the man a name badge that reads *Brent*.

‘Thanks, Ash,’ Brent says with a quick wink, ‘Madam not graced us with her presence yet?’

Ben clears his throat to make his introductions, but Brent doesn’t look at him.

‘I better go shake hands with the unemployed before the fun starts,’ says Brent.

Men begin to walk through the community hall entrance brandishing sheepish grins and varying looks of malice. It is 5:59 and Zoe is yet to materialise. Ben can feel the hives colonise his back, before she finally wanders through the door without a second to spare. Her blonde curly hair sits under the collar of a pristine, long sleeved white shirt. The top button of her shirt is unbuttoned, and Ben considers the politic of coming to a men's group looking so breath-taking, but he guesses only a man would think that.

Zoe focuses on placing handouts on each of the red plastic chairs. Ben notices Brent return from the toilet, moving like a circling shark around Zoe. He sits down next to Ash, slapping him on the shoulders and leaving his hand on the back of the younger man's neck for longer than is socially acceptable. Brent's eyes dance as his stare remains on Zoe.

At five-past-six Zoe walks to the bulky double doors at the entrance by the kitchen and closes them, using her shoulder to manoeuvre them into place. Ben is thankful for a barrier to the unseasonal draft that has left him feeling damp. With Zoe's back turned the men exchange conspiratorial glances that pay Ben no mind and he wonders how even in a room full of social pariahs he is the weakest link. Zoe begins to speak, and an invisible thick claw descends from the roof to clutch him by the throat.

She explains that the session is focussed on 'men taking responsibility.' She details what is meant by taking one-hundred percent responsibility for the domestic tyranny they have executed, as the men stare vehemently at the floor in front of their feet. It is not until she has finished that she looks at him for the first time, if only momentarily.

'Oh, almost forgot,' she says. 'I have a new co-facilitator. Everyone, please meet Ben. Ben, I forgot to organise a name tag for you. So, if everyone could remember, B-E-N, I'd be grateful.'

‘It’s a pleasure to be here,’ says Ben, in a high-pitched voice that raises an eyebrow or two. ‘It’s my first group, and I appreciate you letting me sit in. I look forward to getting to know you all and hope’

‘That’s great, Ben,’ says Zoe, interrupting him midsentence, while adjusting the height of the projector, ‘glad you can be here. Chris, perhaps you’d like to begin our round.’

Chris begins detailing his progress in the three-and-a-half months since the group has last met – since Doug hanged himself – though the mention of Doug is clearly taboo. Chris is a dumpy, fifty-something man with thick black glasses that make his eyes seem cartoonish. He answers Zoe’s questions in a mechanical English accent while digging around in his ear with an index finger. Ben can tell that Zoe is attempting to evoke remorse for past actions, but Chris’s answers are so full of wind that she’s trying to fly a kite in a hurricane. He talks mainly about his sixteen-year-old step-daughter, Elsie, who treats his house like a motel and is interested only in sneaking out to parties with her twenty-two-year-old boyfriend, who Chris suspects is smoking dope.

‘That sounds serious,’ says Ben, having spent ten minutes developing the courage to ask a question. ‘What do you think Elsie can do to keep herself safe?’

‘She’s got her mother wrapped around her little finger, mate,’ says Chris, fixing his stare on Ben like someone finally understands his pain. ‘I’m the fucking enemy, in my own house, mate.’

The lumpy red vein that runs vertically down the front of Chris’s head threatens to explode as injustice turns to outrage.

‘Chris, can I remind you that you are here to focus on your own actions,’ says, Zoe, raising her voice slightly to prevent Chris from continuing. ‘It’s not helpful to start thinking of yourself as the victim.’

Chris shrinks in his chair and his eyes return to his boots. Zoe's eyes meet Ben's for the first time.

'Ben, the golden rule of this group is that we don't ask what women or children can do to keep themselves safe. That's what we call deflection.'

'I didn't know,' says Ben, tripping over his words this time and feeling the blood burn at the tips of his ears.

'Well,' says Zoe, using her eyes for daggers. 'Now you do.'

Ben consigns himself to a long night of redundancy and decides he won't make the mistake of speaking again. After an hour, Zoe mercifully suggests they have their break and instructs Ben to retrieve the party pies from the warmer. Most of the men disappear into the breezy evening to have their durries and talk in private. Ben busies himself in the kitchen preparing the pies and organising the biscuits and dips. He carefully pours the tomato sauce into a shallow plastic dish with a shaking hand but when he looks up he is met by Brent's smiling eyes fixed upon him.

During his turn in the group round Brent had talked in cryptic riddles about his two teenage daughters. Ben had noticed that he was unburdened by the shame that seemed to afflict the other men. Even Zoe treated him differently; asking him only a couple of perfunctory questions before moving on to the next man.

'Careful she doesn't put an apron on you,' Brent says, his pupils barely discernible in the blackest of eyes. He stands closer than Ben would like, and the smell of cheap cologne fills his nostrils. Brent offers him a conspiratorial wink and cups his mouth with his curbed, meaty fingers, 'always pays to let them think they're in charge.'

Ben is startled by the comment and knows it ought to be rebuked.

'See what happens when the training wheels come off,' he replies, hoping that his response is suitably noncommittal, though he suspects Zoe wouldn't see it that way.

‘Something tells me you’re about to learn quick,’ says Brent with a smile that Ben finds both elusive and threatening.

Brent changes the subject and talks amiably about the *Guns n’ Roses* concert he attended on the weekend. Brent is the kind of man who assumes he is the most interesting person in the conversation and so it’s easy enough for him to hold forth while they take furtive bites at overcooked party pies and pretend this is not the mother of all socially awkward situations.

Zoe finally calls the group to order and Ben feels somehow authenticated as he prepares for his vow of silence. She has a list of questions for group discussion, but her progress is stalled by Jake who has taken umbrage at his wife’s interference in the kitchen. Ben didn’t know what to expect, but hearing a man recite his recipe for Mornay did not cross his mind as he bore his insomnia last night with a lump in his throat.

‘If you pour the milk too fast you make the fucking thing lumpy,’ says Jake, a small man with heavy creases etched into his forehead. ‘I’ve told her a million times to let me pour. She has a memory like an elephant when it comes to every fuck up I’ve ever made but she won’t remember to keep her fat fingers out of the sauce.’

Apparently, Jake’s sense of entitlement manifests most vividly in the kitchen. He seems to be a man not proud of much, but his culinary expertise would appear the exception.

‘Jake, I am wondering if you might have lived with an imperfect Mornay for the sake of preventing the pain you caused.’ Zoe talks to him through pursed lips as though he is the class clown, and then lifts her eyes above his head and to the right, searching for the red wall clock hanging just to the left of a cross sprayed inconsistently with gold paint. It occurs to Ben that she might be saying a quiet prayer for the session to end.

With his whiney voice and a nervous blink, Jake is not such a presence in their group dynamic. He isn’t physically imposing, intellectually commanding or economically

successful. It makes it a little easier for Zoe to cut him off without compunction and Ben wonders if she is being slightly ruthless.

‘I would rather she listened to my instructions rather than being so fucking pig headed,’ he replies, and Zoe’s mouth widens just for a moment. She places her index finger on the top of her elegant nose.

‘So that’s it?’ she asks, maybe a little theatrically. ‘The reason Suzanne came so close to suffocating at your hands that night? The reason the police had to prize your hands from her throat as she slowly lost consciousness? All because of a lumpy sauce? Excessive, you think?’

Jake looks at her blankly and it seems to Ben that she has not the first ken of what she is on about. Some of the men in the group do, most just hope they won’t be called upon to pick a side. With some of them it it’s hard to tell, the same ones who are doubtlessly counting down the two hours it takes until they can forget about this severe woman for another week. Jake thinks for a moment and looks around the room with his face cracking into a beaming smile that accentuates the heavy creases on his face.

‘All I know is that the woman can’t cook for shit.’

There is a burst of violent laughter, acoustically assisted by the timber floorboards and high ceiling. The gruesome cacophony vibrates in Ben’s ribcage until he can hardly stand it any longer.

Zoe’s face is like stone, as ten sets of eyes focus on her, anticipating her next move. Ben wonders if he should defend her honour, but she’s hardly a damsel in distress. She stands up and breaks their circle to look through the course book on a table to their right. Maybe she’s just chasing leverage from which to stare with intent as these men collectively challenge her authority. She flicks through the dog-eared course book like she is selecting a tune for a patiently waiting kid’s choir and Ben feels fraudulent for his inept tourism.

Brent gives Jake a mischievous wink and Ben wonders if this has been rehearsed. Zoe's icy blue eyes move from the course book and meander along the faces of the men in the room as if time is of no consequence.

'I wonder what it would mean for Suzanne to know that Jake is coming to this group and laughing at her. That you're all laughing as though her near suffocation is a joke. What would have happened if Jake had killed her? Would you still be laughing? What would it say about you if you were?'

Ben listens only partially to Zoe's rebuke: he can't take his eyes off Brent who is edging forward in his seat and puffing his chest like a peacock. He is about to speak and it's clear that every moment of the night has led to this crescendo.

'Look, lady,' says Brent. 'Maybe you're right. We probably shouldn't be laughing. But you're a fucking hypocrite.' The outburst is no less startling for its inevitability. A gust of wind disturbs a plate from the makeshift table at the entrance of the hall and it falls on the floor along with an empty chip packet.

Brent basks in a long, indulgent pause as he rubs at his forehead with a thick thumb. For a thankful moment it seems there will be no extrapolation of his theory on Zoe's hypocrisy but then he opens his mouth again.

'You stand there and lecture us like you've never taken a stinky shit. But Doug was only trying to improve his relationship and all along you were fucking him behind his back. Take responsibility for that, bitch.'

Brent sits back deliberately in his chair, legs spread wide to increase his girth while he grinds his teeth, creating a knuckle at the apex of his jaw.

'I agree with you, Brent,' says Ash, who has hardly spoken all night. But his short soliloquy makes no impact, as Brent and Zoe stare at each other as though in the final scene of *High Noon*.

‘We should address this, Brent. You are right. Look, what happened with Doug was obviously a tragedy,’ says Zoe as she steps back into the circle, holding Brent’s stare all the while. ‘There hasn’t been a day since where I haven’t regretted it. But Doug was not here to work on his relationship. He was here to keep Sandra and Tayla safe and they weren’t safe in that house. My job was to make them safe and if I had to do the same thing again, I wouldn’t hesitate.’

Zoe takes her seat as though the matter is closed and Ben fights to keep his mouth from gaping open. He can see how it transpired that Zoe was left to run this group without a male co-facilitator. Doubtlessly, there was a long line of male practitioners, none of them capable of matching her clarity or determination. Ben imagines them, one by one, relinquishing their role. It occurs to Ben that his father might have even taken his turn.

‘And what was best for Doug?’ Brent whispers in a grave tone. ‘Or does human fucking decency not apply to the likes of us?’ He rises menacingly from his chair, a very worrying turn of events. Ben wonders if their earlier conversation about a rock concert will save him from a punch in the nose.

‘Brent, sit down,’ orders Zoe. If she feels any fear at all she is one hell of an actress, but Brent is now towering over her using extravagant hand movements to emphasise his points.

‘I’m not listening to one more of your orders, bitch. We all know you’ve blood on your hands.’ Ben knows that this is his cue, but when he tries to stand up his feet suction themselves to the floor and demand to know exactly what the fuck he thinks he’s doing. He sits in his chair arguing with his obstinate feet while a hulking, violent man stands over a slight – if ballsy – woman and he does nothing to intervene. His paralysis chalks up another crushing victory.

Brent’s face is now only inches from Zoe’s and he continues to yell.

‘You fucking killed him.’

The men sit in their chairs with an array of expressions on their face. Ben looks at Jake who is repeating, ‘take that, bitch.’

Zoe wears a slight smirk as it becomes clear that that this can only end in physical violence. If anything, she looks almost pleased, as if Brent is playing right into her trap, as if this is all part of her plan. Ben finally negotiates with his obstinate feet and they take a stilted step towards the conflict. He is too late though as Brent’s right fist clenches behind his back. But just as he is poised to strike he stops suddenly and his fist unclenches. The men lean forward in their chair and Ben hears them collectively gasp.

His view of Zoe is obscured by Brent’s right shoulder, so Ben takes a step to his right, being met by a view of the horrible site: a half masticated, chunky missile, the size of a fifty-cent-piece, has flown from Brent’s mouth and landed flush on the end of Zoe’s nose. The men now stare at Zoe who continues to sit defiantly, with a renegade flake of party pie stuck to the end of her nose.

Brent continues to stare menacingly but his shoulders have loosened just a little and his hands now hang loosely by his sides. Ben takes a belated step to stand in between Zoe and Brent, but he can see that the fire has been extinguished from Brent’s eyes, and he wears an expression that Ben saw on the faces of the other men when they told their stories.

Brent shakes his sizeable head ruefully and for a moment Ben thinks he might even tell Zoe he’s sorry. The two of them share the briefest of looks that Ben cannot decipher, and Brent turns to walk back to snatch at his black denim jacket with its white furry collar that has spent the night slung over the back of his chair.

‘I won’t fucking be back,’ he says, but his swagger lacks the purposefulness that it had when Ben first saw him walk into the hall tonight.

‘Time’s up, people,’ says Zoe, as if addressing a group of year-eights at the end of a math test, glutinous nasty still plastered to her nose. The men take their time to disappear from the

room, like movie-goers who have been denied the final scene because of a faulty projector. Ben watches as the men trudge out of sight and he takes his first breath in two hours. He begins making himself useful by packing away the plastic chairs and figures he should at least contribute something to the night to justify his pay.

Zoe scribbles some case notes as Ben does the dishes. Ben pretends to straighten tea towels when he finishes, because Zoe continues to write in her notebook. He wonders what she could possibly be writing; just how she might translate such a night into words.

Finally, she puts her notebook in her bag and picks up her keys. As she walks towards the doors, Ben thinks she will walk straight past him without saying goodnight. But she holds the door open and it takes him a moment to understand she is waiting for him.

‘On the off-chance of a lynch mob, will you walk me to my car?’

She turns off the lights and they leave the eerie black hall to reacquaint itself with its ghosts, walking in silence towards the car park. Zoe hugs herself to keep warm and Ben would give anything to have a jacket to drape over her shoulders. He searches for something to say, anything will suffice.

‘Tough night at the office,’ he eventually manages. Zoe stops to light a cigarette using his back as a shield against the wind. She manages to light it on her third attempt and her intense blue eyes meet his. Ben can hear a persistent dog barking in the neighbouring house, enlivened by the smell of roasting meat.

‘I’ve had easier,’ she says, her face breaking into a half-smile and Ben notices her dimples, slightly more pronounced on her left cheek. She raises her cigarette as if evidence.

‘Suppose there was bound to be some issues given all that’s happened.’

‘Trust me Benjamin; it doesn’t take a suicide for there to be issues.’

‘Still,’ Ben stammers, scurrying to ingratiate himself and thrilled by her use of his name. ‘Not all of the men joined with Brent. You have obviously forged some good connections with some of them.’

‘Any connection’, she says, making air quotes around the word connection, ‘is purely incidental. It’s all about the safety of women and children for me. It should be for you too.’

Feeling unjustly chastised, he decides that he will keep his mouth shut. They walk in silence towards her car and Ben can immediately see the long nail protruding from the tyre on the rear right-hand side of Zoe’s vehicle. Ben kneels to inspect the damage.

‘Fucking brilliant,’ says Zoe.

‘It’s okay,’ says Ben, making a plan in his head which should just about help him to competently change her tyre. ‘We will have you on the road in no time.’

‘Why don’t you just drop me home?’ she says. ‘I can’t deal with this tonight.’

They wordlessly walk to the other side of the carpark and as they get into Ben’s car she tells him her address and Ben realises it will add forty minutes to his journey. The trip is endured in silence as Zoe stares morosely out the window, occasionally winding it down so she can smoke a cigarette. He wonders how she would react if he told her he’d prefer if she didn’t.

Ben finally pulls up outside Zoe’s long, narrow driveway and starts the business of orientation for the unfamiliar journey home.

‘Come on in,’ says, Zoe. ‘You could no doubt use a drink.’

Ben is shocked to be lurking behind Zoe as she sorts through her keys to unlock her front door. Her apartment is not large, but its polished pine floorboards and minimalist interior design give it a bright, crisp quality. The library of DVD’s on her TV shelf and the stacked CDs remind Ben of another time. He sees the tattered cover of *The Reader* standing sheepishly on the shelf alongside *American Pie 2*. He is reminded of a theoretical debate he

had with his father when he had just finished Bernard Schlink's novel *The Reader* at University. He remembers stuttering through a pre-rehearsed speech at the dinner table about how ignorance or fear can make ordinary people do bad things.

His dad merely raised his eyebrows, as if it were cute that his unremarkable child would try his hand at cerebral conversation.

'She didn't do a bad thing, Ben,' he said in that gentle, reasonable, soul-destroying tone, 'she didn't forget to buckle her seat belt on the way to the local shop or call someone an unpleasant name. She locked 300 people in a building and did nothing as they all died the most painful of deaths. Destructive obedience is hardly an excuse for mass murder.'

'It just seemed like an interesting idea,' Ben had mumbled, by way of rebuttal.

'No such thing as an uninteresting one,' said Arthur, not looking at his son as he excused himself to write something profound in his den while his wife scurried behind to take his tea and biscuit order.

Ben shakes off the cumbersome memory and searches desperately for something to say.

'I really admire the way you stood up to Brent tonight. It was such a good lesson for me.'

'Really, Benjamin.' she says, the mocking lilt in her voice alluding to a playfulness he wasn't aware that she indulged. 'I'm glad that my being spat in the face by such a dangerous projectile proved so enriching.'

'The way you choose your questions, it's such a skill,' Ben continues.

'Please. I'm throwing darts at a slippery board. It's a miracle if anything sticks.'

Ben wonders if Zoe noticed how useless he was in saving her from Brent's tirade, but she has paid him such scant regard that he wonders if she could pick him out of a line up, She pours him a glass of Shiraz and he takes an indulgent sip. A litany of photographs forms a shrine to a young boy in her lounge room, presumably her son. It had never occurred to him that she was maternal.

She presses a button on her computer which plays a tune Ben only vaguely recognises. She turns off her hallway light and lights a candle on her coffee table and then disappears for a minute or two, returning in grey track pants and sitting with her legs crossed on the sofa opposite him.

‘Have you thought about what to tell Arthur tomorrow?’ Zoe asks with a smile that Ben hasn’t seen before and it makes the hairs stand on the back of his neck. ‘I’m sure he’ll want a full report on my ineptitude.’

‘Actually, Dad was really complementary,’ he says.

She continues to flash that breath-taking smile and leans forward in her chair to touch the top of his forearm. ‘Bullshit, Benjamin. But I appreciate you making the effort.’ He takes a greedy sip of wine and it feels like forbidden fruit, more delicious for the fact.

‘Ok,’ he says bashfully, ‘maybe complimentary is a bit of a stretch.’

‘Well, Benjamin,’ she says looking at him with a slightly goofy expression. ‘Whatever the motivation behind your recruitment, you and I need to be a team. We’re outnumbered by ten to two for a start.’

‘Technically, we outnumber you eleven to one.’

‘Touché,’ she says, saluting him with a wave of her wineglass and filling him with a disproportionate sense of accomplishment. ‘Tell me something about you. You’ve so far proved quite the enigma.’

Ben smiles at her self-serving assessment of him. But he doesn’t care. She can say whatever she likes when she smiles like that.

Without much of a story to share, Ben tentatively describes his latest overseas backpacking trip; the only topic he can talk about knowledgeably with no connection back to Arthur. At first, he stabs thick words into turbulent skies, but she makes all the right noises of

encouragement and he becomes the most articulate and commanding he has been in her company, which is to say not very.

Ben tells her about how he tore the ligaments in his ankle while diving for safety during the running with the bulls and Zoe laughs generously. He should be pleased that he has finally made her laugh but he has always struggled with whimsy: irreverence is strictly forbidden in his family. He remembers Duncan, his year-five friend, inviting him for a sleepover. Duncan's Dad had farted at the dinner table and their family had taken it with good humour. Ben had become so overawed that he started to cry at the table, making Duncan's very nice family feel ashamed and announcing an abrupt end to the friendship.

Ben asks Zoe about her motivation to enter psychology and she smirks, displaying neat rows of impeccable, white teeth.

'Same reason anyone does, says Zoe. 'Trying to make sense of my own shit.'

'Your childhood not exactly white picket fences?' Ben asks, hoping his questions are not invasive. She laughs and gets up to refill his glass of wine. Goose bumps bloom like orchids all over his body.

'We actually did have a white picket fence,' she says, 'It's just we were all fucking miserable.'

'Well, they say the best therapists come from adversity.'

She raises her right eyebrow.

'How glib.'

One of the two candles on Zoe's dining table fizzles and she gets back up and tries unsuccessfully to relight it. Ben pretends to be interested in her bookcase so that he can count to ten and avoid one of his freak-outs. He settles his eyes on a picture on her with her with her new born son in the hospital. There is a man in the photo, leaning in tentatively. The same man appears in other photos; always with the same cocksure smile. Ben assumes he is

the father of Zoe's child. Ben wonders how a woman like Zoe could ever allowed herself to fall for a man with that smile.

Finally, Zoe screws her nose into a ball and gives up on the candle, turning on the bright central lounge-room lights. She is prone to using her face to make ostentatious expressions, but this is the first time he has found it unattractive. Zoe returns to her chair opposite him but the bright lights seem to illuminate Ben's blankness and her eyes dart around the room, as if looking for somewhere to hide.

'I should go,' Ben finally says as his voice cracks pitiably.

'Oh, for fuck sake, don't go,' she says. 'At least let me make you a coffee. I haven't even asked if you've far to drive, and here's me plying you with wine.'

Some of the colour returns to her cheeks. After a long, sad silence she looks at him seriously.

'At least now you'll be able to tell our work mates I'm just as difficult as everyone had warned.'

The truth is that he hasn't heard much. His colleagues have viewed him from afar. There was the obligatory welcome card where everyone promised coffee and co-work, but he has been mainly left to himself.

Zoe rattles around the kitchen while she makes the coffee and Ben tries not to judge her because she only has instant. She avoids his eyes when she passes over his steaming coffee and he suggests he should really let her get to bed.

Ben drinks half his coffee until he can stand the bitter taste no longer and he gets to his feet and thanks her for her hospitality. Her response is non-committal and he dawdles towards her door. She walks briskly towards him and reaches in like a sniper behind enemy lines to smack him on the cheek with full lips, an emphatic exclamation to a confusing evening.

Chapter 4

Zoe opens the white picket fence and walks on the cracked pavement around the side of the red brick home that held her until her emancipation at sixteen, when she moved in with Darren Bradford; eight years her senior and with a habit of punching holes in the door whenever she refused to fuck him.

She opens the back gate to see a solitary white blouse twisting melancholically in the breeze on the Hill's Hoist, pride of place in a suburban backyard that has become a caricature of itself.

Zoe walks through the back door and is met by the vision of her mum drinking from a discoloured mug with a picture of Father Christmas on it. She can't remember if it was her or her sister who gave it to their mum as a present all those years ago. She guesses it was probably her given that present giving was never Kat's strong suit. Her mum sits staring at the black and white wall clock, ticking incongruously against floral yellow wallpaper. It's typical of her mum to organise herself into these poses just to make Zoe feel horrid.

She pushes Billy into her mother's line of sight and walks to the lounge room wordlessly, plonking herself onto the brown vinyl sofa. She scowls at her old man's recliner that remains empty in front of the fatback television. She wonders if the daily site of that ugly fucking chair is every bit as destructive to her mum's self-worth as her father ever was. She closes her eyes and can just about make out her Dad's wilful ghost sitting with a beer in one hand, while the other nurses his precious wooden TV tray. A decade underground has done little to dilute the old bastard's sense of entitlement.

Zoe hears her son's laughter from her mother's tiny kitchen as the house wakes from the purgatory to which it will inevitably return when Billy leaves.

'Nan, I've been thinking about my birthday present and I think I'd like a Lego Batman set.'

‘Nan might already have something planned for you, young man.’

‘Can we go feed the chooks?’

For a long time, Zoe’s relationship with her Mum was confined to Christmas and birthday pleasantries. Her mother would make noises about catching up but in Zoe’s experience the idea of family time was vastly more attractive than the reality. But when she mistakenly fell pregnant with Billy in the impending shadows of her thirties she had less use for friends who went to Italian film festivals and argued about Kafka. And her Mum was delighted when Zoe pushed out a boy, given the family had been previously cursed by pesky X chromosomes. In the six-years of Billy’s life, she and her mother have forged a tenuous relationship which just about accommodates their shared love of the boy.

Zoe wonders about the possibilities of her night out with Ben, and the reckless chance she took in inviting him out on a Friday night, even if just to thank him for giving him a lift home after the men’s group mutiny. She even managed to get Lincoln to agree to come, as if this will make it seem all the more casual. She has caught herself in cute little fantasies all day, before reminding herself she is undeserving of any sort of a life. Sandra Hillier doesn’t enjoy such privileges. Neither does Doug.

Zoe’s torment is interrupted by her sister, Kat, whose canary yellow Commodore pulls into the garage. Kat is staying with their mum in a misguided bid to conjure contrition from Bruce; her wayward husband, who fucked a barely legal attendant at the petrol station he manages. Kat is estranged from her only daughter, a young woman who is busy repeating the mistakes of her mother. She comes bounding in the front door, contemplating Zoe only briefly and not bothering to fix her determined frown.

‘Where’s Mum?’ she asks.

‘Feeding the chooks with Bill. And hello to you too, big sister.’ Kat only shrugs as she impatiently pulls the ice cream from the freezer and shovels a heaped spoonful straight from the tub. Zoe notices with guilty pleasure that her arse is not exactly shrinking.

‘Mum told me about Bruce. Good on you for making the bastard sweat.’

‘Who the fuck are you to give me advice?’ Kat puts the tub on the coffee table, making a thudding noise. ‘Not like you could keep Lincoln from fucking anything that moved. At least I’ve kept my man happy for twenty-two years.’

Zoe takes a stab at guessing the amount of times Bruce has cheated on her, the times he has been caught anyway. She remembers the chill that ran down her spine when she was fifteen and Kat brought him home for the first time; those grubby petrol and nicotine stained fingers always landing in the most opportunistic spot.

‘Yep, you win, Kat, it’s quite the life you’ve carved,’ she says with a smirk, letting her eyes follow the trajectory of Kat’s spoon as it reaches her mouth.

Zoe had ditched work during the afternoon to go shopping for clothes. She couldn’t remember the last time she went shopping for a night out, but she still spent the day criticising her own audacity. She hopes that Ben appreciates the mental demons that she had to fight just to purchase the modest black dress that she finally decided on, in such contrast to the dour grey jackets and earthy tones that dominate her work ensemble.

A smear of chocolate ice-cream has formed grotesquely around her sister’s fleshy mouth and Zoe does her best not to stare.

‘Don’t you dare look down your nose at me,’ Kat spits angrily. ‘Stuck up cow. Not much good being glamorous when no man can stand the sight of you.’

Kat’s self-perception has always depended on what men think of her and invariably that hasn’t been much. It has always been that way for Kat, who takes malevolent solace in her younger, prettier sister spending much of the past six years with child and alone.

‘You know my choice to be single has been for Billy,’ Zoe argues.

‘Whatever gets you through the night,’ scoffs Kat.

‘Maybe just once we could try a pleasant conversation,’ Zoe pleads, knowing she doesn’t have the energy to get into one of their sisterly fights.

Kat clicks her tongue which is still pierced by a silver ball which she use to boast had perfected her blowjob technique.

‘Fine,’ says Kat haughtily and passes Zoe the tub of ice-cream with the spoon standing erect like a flag at the top of Everest. It’s about as touching gesture as Zoe’s going to get in her fucked-up family, so she takes a mouthful, despite her every instinct resisting the slobbery spoon anywhere near her mouth.

‘I really am sorry about Bruce,’ she says, attempting to be heartfelt, but sounding like a dickhead and Kat looks at her and laughs, not unkindly. Soon the two sisters are in hysterics with great chugs of merriment breaking the tension of years of battle. They have always been able to laugh. You don’t grow up in the middle of this freak-show without honing an appreciation of the absurd.

Through a stream of tears Kat adds,

‘And I’m sorry that cocky prick left for London while Bill was still warm in the incubator.’

They double over, convulsing helplessly and Zoe remembers when Kat used to sneak her out to nightclubs when she was only fourteen. Kat would always end up drunk and maudlin and they wouldn’t be on speaking terms by the time they walked home. But it was all worth it, just for that rare moment of camaraderie when they would tiptoe past their father who would be passed out on the recliner, knowing that one false move would poke the ferocious bear. Zoe remembers how they would run in high heels down their moonlit suburban street in

fits of raucous laughter and Zoe would appreciate the moment all the more for the certainty that it would all turn to shit.

Their Mum walks in the back door with Billy, who is listing his favourite Disney characters.

‘Nice to hear you girls getting along,’ she says, standing over her giggling daughters with an expression at odds with the sentiment.

‘Just comparing our brilliant love lives,’ says Kat, still laughing.

‘The Jamison women have always known how to pick them,’ says Zoe, but no sooner have the words tumbled from her mouth that her mother removes Billy from under her ample bosom and Zoe’s shoulders clench.

‘If you’re talking about your father, I don’t remember you complaining about the piano lessons that your sister never got.’ The laughter dissolves in Kat’s eye as she eyes her sister suspiciously.

Zoe has to admire her mother’s cunning. She conveniently forgets that Zoe was there for every one of those awful fucking Saturday nights, when her dad would drink until his eyes went crooked and dare her mum to speak. And she was most definitely there the night he almost strangled her mum. Zoe still has the scar on her arm as proof, from when he pushed her through the front door after she had hit him over the back of his head with his TV tray when he had his hands clamped around her mum’s neck.

Zoe admits that there were the piano lessons he paid for over two years in primary school, but if she had known the price to be paid to her mother and sister, she most certainly would not have accepted. And of course, there was the dubious honour of being selected as the old man’s footy companion that neverending season, where she would sit in the rain-drenched outer, nursing a warm lemonade while the old man got pissed and brandished the umpires with such witticisms as ‘white maggot.’

Zoe can see Billy is watching her and that he knows enough to understand there is tension. Her mother's behaviour stirs Zoe's sense of injustice with demonic zest, but her desire to preserve her son's innocence wins out.

'We were talking about us, Mum. Not Dad,' she says with all the placating verve she can manage.

Kat tickles at Billy, her way of avoidance, and once again Zoe is Robinson fucking Crusoe. Like half a brain and a pretty face was any inoculate to being just as fucked up as they are. Zoe stares at the decaying front tooth that her mother has never got fixed and feels every bit the stuck-up moll that her family would have her believe. She was just hoping to tell someone about her night out with a nice man from work, even if her Mum would only list the reasons why it could never work. She kisses Billy and makes her excuses to leave. She gives the old nasty recliner one last look and acknowledges that its power did not die with her father.

She drives herself home listening to *Girls and Boys* by *Blur* at full volume. Brit-pop has long been her only reliable ally. She mooches around her house mourning the loss of the delicious anticipation that was obliterated by her ill-conceived decision to hang out with her family for a second longer than was necessary. She tries to cajole some positive feelings back out from hiding but she can't escape the sheer folly of contemplating being with another man, particularly the son of the boss who holds her professional fate in his hands. She rearranges the photographs in her lounge-room to create a distraction. She has wanted to add more recent photos of Billy for ages. Just to rebel against her every instinct that tells her she deserves to be miserable forever, Zoe finds a photo of herself in a tattered photo album. She is in her twenties wearing a pink dress and a look of arrogant assuredness that she recognises all too often in young women. She quickly places it in her favourite frame and hangs it in the first place Ben will look when he comes through her front door.

She eventually showers and dresses and looks at herself in the mirror, wondering how she didn't see that this dress makes her look like a cheap whore. She opens a bottle of Riesling and steals two glasses while waiting for him to trudge up to her front door with that bewildered look in his eyes, which reminds her of Hugh Grant in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. The wine takes the edge off her blinding self-consciousness and provides temporary reprieve from the shackles of her mother's judgment. She burns a candle which infuses the house with pungent vanilla scent. She lies on her couch and looks at that photo and is briefly visited by the excitement of her youth.

When she thinks she can't stand it anymore Ben finally rings the doorbell. His face is stony, and he is wearing the same blue and white striped shirt that she has seen him wear so many times at work. She looks for a moment at his face and knows it's not one her old self would have ever spent much time daydreaming about. She begins to suspect that the best part of the evening is over, if indeed it ever began. Ben walks into Zoe's narrow hallway and she kisses his cheek, noticing that he has applied too much cologne. He avoids eye contact and she hands him a glass of wine which he eagerly accepts.

'Listen,' says Zoe, by way of introduction, giving him the school mistress look she promised herself would be locked in the cupboard for the night. 'No need to mention tonight to our colleagues. I was thinking they might read more into it than me thanking you for driving me home the other night.'

She knows Ben does not enjoy the fruits of office small talk, which makes this conversation redundant. Her cheeks glow with humiliation while waiting for Ben to say something. He's usually incapable of stringing two words together, let alone grabbing her ass.

There is heaviness in the room that she knows Ben is not equipped to handle and she excuses herself to go to the bathroom to fix her make-up which is already fixed. Zoe looks at her reflection in the mirror of her shaving cabinet and pleads with herself to morph back into

the flinty woman who bosses Ben around and gently chides his inadequacy. It seems to have worked so far. She gives up on her reflection and storms down the passageway, flinging her handbag over her shoulder and opening the front door, ignoring the fact that Ben has not finished his wine.

‘We’re late,’ she says to Ben and he nods his head a beat too quickly.

They drive in silence to their dinner destination. Ben’s car has a funny smell and she winds her window down in the hope that her zeitgeist will blow in with the wind. She pulls out a cigarette despite promising herself she wouldn’t smoke tonight and notices Ben watching her with his eyes narrowed.

Zoe had vaguely noticed how appalling Ben’s driving was when he took her home after group, but it really is fucking terrible. He veers into lanes absently while other drivers slam on their brakes and make angry faces. Ben is just the type to glide through life without noticing, with his dreamy brown eyes a disarming shield to his general incompetence. At one point he stays in park for no reason after the light turns green. A red-faced man in a four-wheel drive behind them leans heavily on his horn.

‘Waiting for a different shade of green?’ she says, trying to make it sound like she is joking.

Ben holds up traffic while looking for a rockstar park and she tells him she will pay for a carpark. She imagines this is what it will be like when she teaches Billy to drive but sincerely hopes he is not this fucking useless.

They walk wordlessly to the restaurant and Zoe inhales greedily, appreciating an atmosphere that reeks of opportunity and adrenaline. It’s a balmy night and they are seated outside, picking at a tentative conversation while watching young people with optimistic gaits head towards their next adventure. Ben tells her a convoluted story about his shellfish allergy, but she can hardly hear him over the noise of the music and her own internal catastrophes, but

what she can decipher sounds beige and she wonders just what she was thinking when she asked him out.

Just as Zoe starts to silently curse Lincoln for his customary tardiness he arrives with Cris Panotta, who he had never mentioned when he pleaded with him to come tonight. Zoe wonders if Lincoln has deliberately brought a work colleague to punish her for dating another man. Lincoln, of course, acts as though this is nothing out of the ordinary, clapping a proprietary paw on Zoe's shoulder and wasting no time filling the space. She notices Ben grimace when Lincoln enthusiastically shakes his hand.

Lincoln wears a purple polo-shirt with the number 3 on opposite breasts and arms. His collar stands up straight at the back. His face is a little puffy and his sandy hair is swept across his face to hide the onset of baldness. His pale hazel eyes survey the room to ensure there is no one more interesting to be with.

'Okay, peeps,' Lincoln says after administering introductions. 'Let's get some drinks on the go. The boys will start with a pilsner and Zoe; white? I'll order a bottle.' Without pausing for assent, he waves the waiter over while engaging Ben in small talk about the cricket. Ben mutters something about the death of the long form of the game but Zoe can see the light fade in Lincoln's eyes when he speaks.

The flurry of activity begins to churn in Zoe's stomach and she excuses herself abruptly, feeling the onset of one of the panic attacks that Doug Hillier left as his calling card. She walks to the ladies' and sits on a toilet seat, attempting to remember the breathing techniques she learned from the inane grief therapist she met with, but she is interrupted by the shrill gossip of two young women applying lipstick outside her cubicle; a jack-hammer in her skull.

'Why should I have to give up my night because she thinks she's depressed,' says the voice of one of the women.

'It's like she wants to miserable,' says the other.

Zoe thinks back to the night of three months ago when she had sex with Lincoln for the first time since Billy was conceived, long after she had stopped thinking of him as anything but a mate. She had called him from her office in the middle of an anxiety attack. It was a week after Doug had hanged himself and Arthur had just given his first indication that he would cut her loose to save his reputation. Alone and in shock and with the bitter realisation that not one of her colleagues supported her, she rang Lincoln. He was in the middle of one of his deals – business or pleasure, she could never tell – but his irritated tone subsided once he could hear her hyperventilating. It was the first time he had been to her work and Kelly, the receptionist, showed him through. Zoe shoved Doug’s case file in his face by way of a greeting.

‘Arthur wants to see this file, and this is his smoking gun,’ she declared, before lying prostrate and stony faced on the floor

‘Zoe, what the fuck are you’re on about,’ Lincoln had snapped, hardly about to break protocol by offering unconditional sympathy to an irrational woman.

‘Read the final entry, dated the 3rd of June,’ she said, trying to compose herself, and describing the end of her career in detached detail. ‘My own fucking case note admits that I thought he might top himself and made absolutely no effort to help him.’

The creases widened at the corner of Lincoln’s eyes as if to confirm that she was fucked. He glanced down at her and placed his hand on her knee, appreciating at once that Zoe’s career was the cornerstone of her identity. Lincoln is not a man who is easily moved, but she could tell that the thought of this one-page case note ending it all was a tragedy too profound for him to contemplate.

Lincoln read through every entry in Doug’s case file without moving a muscle. His powers of concentration had always impressed her. He liked to pretend that his professional accomplishments were due to nothing but panache, but she knew it was mainly hard work.

Lincoln studied the file for thirty-minutes as he delicately placed the top right hand corner of every page between his thumb and index finger, scanning every detail. She had turned her face to watch him like he was a one man show. Not until he had devoured every detail did he turn his attention to her.

‘These case notes describe how you arranged the rental property for Sandra and her daughter to move to the new property when Doug was at your group. I have never asked, is that ethical?’

It was Lincoln’s stepfather, Bob, a real estate agent, who had arranged for the property for Sandra to move on the night Doug had hung himself. The idea had materialised shortly after Lincoln’s mother’s death, when Bob had made a throw away comment about ‘anything you need.’ Zoe had suggested asking him for some cheap housing, and Lincoln had made it happen. They had enlisted Bob’s services to find safe and cheap accommodation for two of Zoe’s clients before Sandra.

‘A grey area, I’d say,’ she said.

‘But it wouldn’t cost you your job?’

‘Arthur knew I’d arranged the accommodation. He would be just as culpable.’

‘So, it’s only the one case note from the 3rd of June that will get you fired?’

‘Bingo,’ said Zoe, emphatically. ‘It will be enough for the psychology board to confirm that I neglected my duty of care to Doug.’

‘And nobody besides me has seen this case note before?’

Zoe was confused by his questions but shook her head all the same. He stared fiercely at her for the longest time, until he was finally satisfied. He looked down accusingly at the June 3rd case note. He took a firm grip on the top right hand of the page and with a flick of the wrist he tore it from the file, folded it in half, and handed it to her.

‘I want you to listen to me, Zo. I never saw this and you sure-as-shit never wrote it. You didn’t make him hang himself, Zo. If you didn’t intervene it could have easily been Sandra who died that night. Or worse: Tayla. Don’t let the fuckers pin this on you.’

In hindsight, she wonders if there was something exhilarating for Lincoln about recruiting her to the dark side, the same shady chasm where he lurked for much of his life. He waved the piece of paper in the air, holding it up to the light, exacerbating its flimsiness.

‘This is my integrity, Lincoln. It’s everything that I’ve ever believed.’

‘It’s a fucking piece of paper, Zo. It’s some throw away lines written at the end of a long night.’

She took the paper from him and read every word, though she had already committed it to memory. He had once told her that if he could cajole a client into reading the fine print, it meant that he had his man. She figured the same rules applied.

‘Look, Zo,’ Lincoln said, statesmanlike, holding his hands in a conciliatory manner. ‘Take it home and sleep on it. Bring it back tomorrow if you like and nobody will ever know. At least, think about it. For me?’

As Lincoln drove her home that afternoon she knew she would never return the note. He had taken her to his house, arranging for Stella to look after Billy for the night. The enormity of the situation billowed into his affluent lounge-room like the asphyxiating black smoke from a diabolical fire. She had spent her whole professional career deluding herself that what she did stood for something, and now she was going to hide from the truth just to save her own arse. All she could do was drink the expensive booze that Lincoln gave her and acknowledge her audacity in ever believing she could make a difference.

Lincoln and Zoe had enjoyed many of their best times getting drunk together. On this night he produced the cocaine like a rabbit out of his hat and she hoovered it with self-destructive flair. Zoe hadn’t touched the stuff in years and they both knew she lacked the

constitution to handle hard drugs, but they drank and snorted and sealed her worries in a bubble which would pop soon enough, but not soon enough to spoil their night. They spoke feverishly about beliefs that neither of them shared and at some point she knew he would try to fuck her.

The sex was more intense than she remembered; she clung to Lincoln like a life raft which they both knew was leaking. But the coke had helped her romanticise their union and he played his part by pretending that she had always been the one. She had woken in the morning with an unrealistic and forlorn hope that he might comfort her as the horrors of the path she had chosen emphatically dawned. But Lincoln had been short with her. She had wondered if he was contrite given his hand in ruining her morality but more likely he just had a sore head and was a complete prick and was no longer interested in her.

Zoe hears another pair of girls talking excitedly outside her toilet cubicle and she realises with a start that she has been missing in action for some time and has visions of men in white suits coming to drag her off to an asylum. She forces herself from the sanctity of the toilet seat and splashes some water on her face. ‘Pull yourself the fuck together,’ she whispers harshly to the bathroom mirror.

As Zoe returns to her seat she starts a conversation with Cris, who she has met a couple of times previously. Cris doesn’t have quite the same swagger as most of Lincoln’s revolting colleagues, but for reasons she can’t decide she is short with him. Lincoln shoots her a look and she shrugs her shoulders with as much nonchalance as she can manage.

Ben asks Lincoln and Cris about their work and Lincoln starts moving pieces of cutlery and wine glasses around the table to demonstrate how he trades arbitrary products for no particular reason except to confuse people and make money.

Ben and Cris both look at Lincoln who juggles a couple of spoons as the encore to his performance. Zoe notices that both spectators wear slightly bemused looks and she wonders if Lincoln is deliberately pulling rank.

Zoe once again fights the overwhelming sense that the damage she has caused disqualifies her from her place at this table. But if her calamitous fuck-up of a life has taught her anything it's that people rarely get what they deserve.

Cris has the decency to ask Ben about his work and Lincoln turns away to wordlessly question Zoe about the progress of her date. She pretends to pick out an eyelash from her wine glass and dissatisfied, Lincoln turns to Ben to poke him in the ribs with his elbow.

'So, what's the story with you and Zoe?' he asks loudly with a grin playing at the corners of his mouth. 'A lift home last week and now dinner. Working on a difficult client, or is this the beginning of an office romance?'

Zoe exchanges a furtive glance with Ben while trying unsuccessfully to assess his reaction. There is no doubt that she finds Ben attractive, but she wonders if that is only because she's a thirty-five-year-old, desperate woman, who is down on her luck and who so rarely ever has sex. Or maybe the thought of fucking Arthur's progeny and stool pigeon appeals to her sick mind. She knows she should put a halt to Lincoln's social inappropriateness, but it does have its uses.

'Lincoln,' Cris protests. 'I'm sure that is none of your business.'

He is right of course, they all agree, but it deflates the air from the conversation and robs it of a building crescendo.

'Good for you, Cris' says Zoe, because she knows it's expected of her. 'Nice to see someone keeping him in check.'

Cris sighs demonstratively.

'Now that would be a thankless task.'

‘He still thoroughly revolting in the office?’

‘Actually, he has been pretty decent,’ he says, and Lincoln shifts uncomfortably in his chair. With his shock of curly, black hair, Cris strikes Zoe as a rather strange nocturnal companion for Lincoln, and she has rarely heard him mentioned. She has to admit – as much as she has a moral obligation to detest all of Lincoln’s colleagues – that he is not unpleasant company. He seems content to be bullied by Lincoln and Zoe wonders whether this has always been the way, or if he put up a fight before finally surrendering.

As she rewards Cris with a reassuring smile, Zoe’s attention is diverted by a young woman standing on the opposite side of the narrow street. The young woman is standing outside a club, wearing a white tank top and short black skirt. She leans on a street sign beside two muscle-bound men, one with a tight fitting ribbed black shirt and the other with a red muscle top and a tattoo on his neck; a job-stopper, as Lincoln would call it. The two men talk casually while mostly ignoring her, except when the tattooed man grasps her from behind and thrusts his greedy hands higher inside her top than decency would allow. The girl emits a high pitch squeal, which could be distress or delight, or perhaps both.

‘Yes’ says Zoe, shifting her weight to change the angle of her chair. ‘He does have that gift of decency just when you least expect it. My advice to you, Cris, is to regard it with scientific scepticism.’

Lincoln winks at Cris and then places a proprietary claw on Ben’s shoulder, as if all men are born with the innate understanding of the craziness of women. Ben’s smile is only slightly warmer than neutral and Zoe wonders if he wonders what the fuck he has got himself in to.

‘Decency is a dangerous commodity in our line of work, Zoe,’ says Cris, staring at her with an intensity incommensurate with the lightness of their discussion. ‘But Lincoln is like an aging rock star; he mainly gets by on reputation.’

Zoe reaches across the table and punches Lincoln lightly on the number 3 on his arm.

‘He’s always reminded me a bit of Keith Richards.’

Lincoln doesn’t smile. But she is having fun, and it’s good for Lincoln to be the object of ridicule, and she knows him to be incapable of holding a grudge.

A bright yellow car squeals its breaks to stop suddenly across from them and Zoe turns to see the young girl with the short skirt throw herself in the back seat of the car with the two men. Catastrophic prophecies regarding the girl’s future bounce haphazardly around Zoe’s skull and she takes a couple of measured breaths to expel the visions from her mind.

Lincoln excuses himself and walks to the bar, and Zoe looks from Cris to Ben and wonders how they might keep the conversation alive. Lincoln motions to Ben with one eye from the bar and Zoe is disappointed to watch Ben follow like an obedient puppy. She watches as Lincoln gesticulates to the bartender, no doubt ordering some kind of licorice tasting shots to christen his friendship with Ben.

‘I really worry about him sometimes,’ Zoe says, knowing that Lincoln would never approve.

‘I have enough of my own problems,’ says, Cris, and his sharp tone assures her that he can play their game when he needs to.

‘We all have problems,’ she replies, not really sure what she is trying to say. She admires the pink plaid shirt that Cris wears, which accentuate his toned, olive arms and she wishes her date had a similar sense of style. Zoe asks him about his fiancée, whose name she can’t remember, but he stares off into the distance and she doesn’t catch his reply.

‘So, how long were you and Lincoln together?’ asks Cris.

‘We have never really been together,’ says Zoe, considering all that time in his company with so little of it as his girlfriend. A groovy young waiter with dark brooding eyes and a perfectly manicured beard saunters over to ask if they’d like more wine. Zoe is disappointed to see Cris hold a pretend steering wheel, but she orders another bottle for herself, though she

knows she will pay handsomely for every drop. The waiter stares blatantly as he takes Zoe's order, assuming that because he is a young and cute it doesn't make it uncomfortable. Zoe finishes her order, but the young, handsome waiter is going nowhere.

'Fridge is that way, dude,' she says, gesturing with her head towards the bar and exchanging a look with Cris, who smiles knowingly.

The waiter makes a face as he walks back to the bar and Zoe worries briefly that she has overreacted.

'I actually used to date Lincoln's best friend while Lincoln was busy sleeping with all of mine and striking me as a rather deplorable. After my Dad died I made as many self-destructive choices as I could, and he was on top of the list.'

Cris smiles ruefully. 'I can see he might have that appeal.'

'Quite. But it was more than that. He took charge of my life at a time where I couldn't even dress myself. I knew he wasn't faithful; why would I be any different, but it seemed a small price to pay at the time.'

Cris folds the corners of her napkin, working his long fingers nervously, and Zoe lets the conversation drop. There is something about this man that Zoe can't quite work out, and with nothing left to do, she casts her eye about the rich, wooden panels of the recently renovated restaurant, noticing that Ben is finding Lincoln's attention a precarious beast. He and Lincoln have been joined by a younger woman, who has thick black glasses that match her short cocktail dress. Her tightly coiled copper hair spirals across her shoulders and Lincoln rests his hand on her forearm, regaling her with a story which he emphasises with a pointed finger. Ben catches Zoe's eye and smiles, returning defeated to the table to rejoin them.

Zoe has seen Lincoln justify the unjustifiable often enough to know that he has wronged the girl with the copper curls. He fixes the poor girl with a fierce gaze and his face develops that slight beetroot hue that it always does when he pretends to be indignant. Zoe, Ben and

Cris become consumed by the sight of him and Zoe secretly hopes he returns to their table soon; she is not sure she is up to making more small talk. Lincoln seems to read her mind because - satisfied that he has brow-beaten the poor girl into submission - he pats her on the bottom before walking back to the table jauntily; fully aware of the three sets of eyes drinking in his every move. He performs a small bow as he comes over the table and they all smile.

Lincoln winks at Zoe.

‘Can Keith Richards do that?’

‘I’m relieved,’ she replies, dryly. ‘I was worried for a moment that you might be evolving.’

‘Never heard of Chrles Darwin.’

Zoe looks at Cris, who finally releases his tight grip on his napkin. ‘Poor sweet Lincoln likes to think he is beyond redemption.’

‘Isn’t he?’ asks Cris, with a splendidly sly smile. ‘Is there anything redemptive you can tell me that I can blackmail him with? A secret love of orphaned kittens or a volunteering job in a soup kitchen?’

‘I could tell you about the amazing relationship he had with his mother,’ Zoe says and Lincoln snaps his head violently towards her and exhales loudly.

‘Don’t fucking start with these stories, Zoe. Nobody cares about that shit.’

‘Zoe tells me your mum died recently,’ says Ben, and Lincoln runs his fingers roughly through his hair.

‘Fuck’s sake Ben. How’s your small talk? One fucking drink and you think we’re Thelma and Louise.’

‘Sorry,’ says Ben, and Zoe instinctively reaches under the table and takes his hand. It’s the first time they’ve touched, and she is relieved when Ben wraps his damp fingers around hers.

Lincoln seems satisfied that Ben counts himself chastised and he softens; maybe because he's drawn to the novelty and naivety of him.

'Almost twelve months ago, mate. Cancer. Fucker of a thing.'

'You should have seen him caring for during her final months; your narcissistic workmates would have been appalled,' says Zoe, enthusiastically appealing to Cris.

'I think you're rewriting history, Zo,' says Lincoln, his top lip curling slightly the way it does whenever she discusses his mother. 'You forget that I hadn't spoken to her for a year before she finally told me she was dying.'

Zoe raises an eyebrow towards Cris as if Lincoln's protestations only emphasise her point. She feels the wine doing its work. She enjoys a good argument with Lincoln when they've had a few. She and Lincoln had debated the essence of morality as foreplay during the night of the stolen case note. He had argued that morality was just something that people invent so that they could judge themselves according to the foibles of others. She had countered that the ability to disregard morality was something men were born with, like a strong golf swing or the instant recall of lines from *Monty Python*.

'You were there when it mattered, and that's all that counts,' Zoe says, knowing that she is trying too hard to humanise Lincoln, in the same way the women in her counselling sessions proffer haphazard evidence to prove that their man is no monster.

'The two of you are like an old married couple,' says Cris who is looking at Zoe with that familiar, condescending expression that her family and friends have used over the years; the one that mocks her for her delusional fucking loyalty. She remembers how an old friend had likened Zoe's relationship with Lincoln to a pair of Italian high heels that promised romance and excitement but delivered blisters and sore feet. She steals a quick glance at Ben who has got the same thin film of perspiration on his top lip that he wore during the night of that first men's group. He lets go of her hand.

‘Can we change the subject to something a bit less fucking depressing?’ demands Lincoln, with enough force in his voice that a table of chic twenty-somethings turn to look at him disapprovingly. His requests are almost always observed, and this is no different. Zoe silently curses herself for imagining this evening would be different and recedes deeper into her own mental fog, no longer caring that she has ceased contributing to the flagging conversation.

Their meals arrive, and as usual Lincoln is oblivious to Zoe’s pain. In between wolfing bites of his T-bone he entertains himself by teasing Ben who has opted for the Caesar’s salad, asking him puerile questions like ‘What does your husband eat?’ Ben laughter is a different tone than she has heard before. But levity has not been common in their relationship.

Cris stifles a yawn as soon as their plates are cleared and makes an excuse about picking up a relative from the airport in the morning. Lincoln nonchalantly unleashes ten crisp fifty-dollar-bills from his moneyclip and tosses them absent-mindedly on the table. Zoe has come to expect this whenever she dines with him and admires his generosity, but she knows that others take him for a wanker. Lincoln walks back into the recesses of the bar and she can just about make out his hand on the shoulder of the girl with the copper curls.

‘So young Benjamin, what’s next?’ says Zoe, with a grin that she hopes hides her embarrassment. She doesn’t know if she can handle another stuttering conversation about his allergies and a bead of sweat make its way down her back.

‘We could order coffee?’ Ben says politely but the thought exhausts her. She can’t take another second of the tension, or the embarrassment, or the self-hate. She needs this dinner to be over, and she is more than happy to surrender victory to Doug Hiller.

‘Maybe you could just take me home?’ Zoe smiles quickly and although Ben’s expression doesn’t change, she can tell he has gone red, despite the lack of light on his face.

They finish their drinks in silence and she wonders if Ben is sober enough to drive her home. Strangely, his driving seems to be more decisive after a couple of beers, but he does

not say a word and is looking a pale imitation of the man in her guilty fantasies, who has been shy yet masterful.

She fixes him with a quizzical look, 'Nervous?'

'I am a bit.'

She smiles and puts her hand on his knee. 'Trick is not to think too much about it, I have so little male company these days, so it will be a lovely novelty.'

'I'm glad of your low expectations,' he says with a gulp and Zoe knows she is making a huge mistake.

Chapter 5

Cris sits with pained expression in Lincoln's spacious office. His lips are moving as he concentrates on his mental arithmetic. His considered sigh confirms Lincoln's suspicion that his figures are fucked. He may have misjudged his decision to ask him to dinner on Friday night; if Chris thinks that's going to save him from getting fired, he's even dumber than his arithmetic would suggest.

To make matters worse he had ended up spending the night with Charlotte Mohr; taking her back to the expensive city hotel room he had rented on the off chance Zoe's date with Ben didn't work. He immediately regretted choosing Charlotte as his consolation prize. He would have just as soon spent the night alone in his robe, having a melancholic wank while watching porn and draining the mini-bar. The fucked thing is that he doesn't even want Zoe – not in that way - but renting that expensive room distracted him from the fact that the best part of his life is over.

He and Cris are preparing a presentation for Barry Waterman, one of the firm's most loyal benefactors: a more slippery son-of-a-bitch you wouldn't meet. It's something he's done more times than he cares to remember and recognising the perfunctory nature of the meeting, he had hastily emailed the relics of past presentations to Cris so that he could tie up the loose ends. Lincoln has been busy trying to land a new investor from the US, and so he had left Cris to himself. He can now see that he should have paid more attention.

'For fucks sake,' snaps Lincoln, snatching the document from his junior colleague's hands. Lincoln takes one look and his fears are confirmed.

'You are familiar with calculators? These figures look like they've been carved out of rock. And we have to meet with Wartermen tomorrow. He's already going to be pissed that

you're not blonde with big tits, now he's got your complete fucking retardation to deal with too.'

Lincoln throws the paper in Cris's face, but it floats slowly to the ground and he is temporarily embarrassed. Cris had been shifted into Lincoln's team a month ago after being with the firm for eight months. Lincoln had complained to Mal, his manager, that he didn't have the time to hand-hold another incompetent lush, but apparently the order had come direct from Mitch Coburn, their chief executive. Ever since Lincoln returned from London, there have been regular underlings sent to him. He has had to fire some of them and the few that do prosper end up ascending to more important positions. But he longs for the days when he was considered too potent a weapon to be burdened by the supervision of staff.

Cris bends down laconically to pick up the offending document and Lincoln wonders for a second if this is slightly amusing to him. He has never had a staff member pull this kind of shit before and he wishes he could raise the energy to care. Cris takes another look at his faulty arithmetic, but his lips have stopped moving.

Lincoln rises from his place at the foot of his mahogany desk and moves to the chair across from her at his conference desk. He adjusts his venetians to shut out the morning sun which plays havoc in his eleventh-floor office. The refraction of light causes the illusion of prison bars on his blue feature wall. Lincoln has spent much of his adult life in this office. It was the cocoon from which his personality grew wings. He tries, for a passing second, to pinpoint the moment when it stopped being fun.

'You're making me look like an asshole,' he finally says. 'Coburn and Waterman are old boarding school mates and when they get together to discuss the monumental fuck up, it's not you who they will point the finger at.'

Cris taps his foot frenetically at the edge of his table but his eyes are devoid of fear. The idea of spending the night correcting every one of his young colleague's mistakes should

make Lincoln crazy with fury, but an almost overwhelming exhaustion seeps into every one of his bones.

Cris has never fit in. Lincoln remembers the raised eyebrows on his first day, the sideways smirked when Mal showed Cris around the office. Lincoln had not given it much thought at the time, but when he was inevitably told that the young man with the questionable skills would be his responsibility, it all started to make sense. Lincoln finally understood Coburn's uncharacteristic decision to hire a man without the trademark pedigree or swagger of his usual handpicked hirings.

The most annoying thing about this whole deplorable sting is that Lincoln can't help but like Cris, for the very reason that he is so incongruous in his world. He takes a deep breath and pats Cris on the shoulder. He can't help thinking of the adversarial nature of the relationship he shared with Bianca, the exhilarating brutality of competing with her in the bedroom and the boardroom. She was the first woman he met with less empathy than him and so naturally he couldn't get enough of her.

'I really thought my numbers were good, Lincoln?' Cris looks at Lincoln in the eyes for the first time as he continues kicking at his table. He supposes he should say something castigating and longs for the time when every word dripped from his tongue like honey. He used to talk in clipped, crisp sentences that left them wanting more. Now his words fall from his mouth like great globs of soggy oatmeal, no form nor reason.

'You're not even fucking close, Cris,' he says, sounding harsher than he had intended. He should have realised Cris would need more support and he knows he has no right to be short-tempered. Lincoln considers how distracted he's been lately, with Vanessa dumping him and Zoe starting up her relationship with Ben.

Cris allows a barely audible laugh to escape his lips.

'I really fucking suck at this job.'

Six years ago, he and Bianca had stayed up all night before their Waterman presentation, drinking tequila and snorting cocaine off each other as foreplay to the sex that always left him brittle and anxious. The only kind he liked. In between he had overlooked none of the detail and had turned up the next day with his head filled with the fine print. But it hadn't mattered. Waterman wasn't really a details guy. He had scarcely heard their presentation, too engrossed in Bianca; plying her with wine and asking her provocative personal questions which she answered with just the right hint of encouragement. Waterman had doubled their account. Soon after, Lincoln and Bianca were on a plane to London, ready to start their new relationship and new careers; Lincoln ignoring the small matter of his new-born son. He grimaces at the memory.

'You really fucking do,' Lincoln says, looking at the Waterman file sitting sloppily in front of him. He longs to unfurl his long, loose limbs onto his new white couch. He recently gave his old red couch to charity because all those years later he could still smell Bianca's perfume when he got within a few feet.

'I suppose I should just quit?' Cris gets to her feet and stalks the room before moving to Lincoln's new couch and sinking dejectedly, the leather making a farting sound as he sits.

Lincoln sighs, wishing he could do this meeting over. He makes a triangle on the desk with his arms and lays his sorry forehead on it. 'This is not about you, Cris.'

'Of course it's about me. We wouldn't be happening this conversation if I was vaguely competent,' says Cris, his voice is a whisper which cracks with smallest hint of exasperation.

Lincoln laughs at his young colleague's naivety but his thoughts are distracted by the heavy thud of Sam Winton's size thirteens walking past his glazed double doors. He always knows it's Sam because he crunches the ground with malevolent strides, concentrating the full weight of his volcanic fury into each step. Lincoln envies Sam and his single-minded cannibalistic focus. He wishes it were still his.

‘What in the fuck could you possibly be laughing at?’ Cris asks, his brown eyes flashing for a brief moment.

‘One too many Waterman presentations,’ Lincoln offers, trying forlornly to paint himself as jaded rather than just sad.

‘At least your first won’t be your last,’ says, Cris, and Lincoln winces slightly at his self-pity, which he abhors in anyone, but particularly from the source of his current predicament.

‘Look,’ says, Lincoln, wiping his face with his right hand and wishing this conversation would come to an end. ‘You will have a long and successful career. It just won’t be here, which is not a bad thing, at all.’

Cris pushes the Waterman folder to the centre of Lincoln’s meeting table.

‘That’s not that reassuring. Fuck knows what I am going to do.’

‘You can start by spending some time with your cute little fiancée.’

‘For Christ’s sake,’ says, Cris, the most animated Lincoln has ever seen him. ‘I’ve told you five times that Bridget and I broke up.’

Lincoln fills two glasses with water from his pewter jug in the middle of his meeting table. He hands Cris a glass who takes it without looking at him.

‘Maybe we can salvage something from this presentation after all,’ says Lincoln.

Cris turns his eyes back to Lincoln and looks at him with an expression that is impossible to read.

‘It’s going to take a shitload of coffee,’ says Cris, and Lincoln feels as though he is being ordered to fetch the coffees. He wonders how he is at a consistent disadvantage in his conversations with Cris.

‘You’ll have the usual,’ says, Lincoln. ‘Flat white.’

Cris laughs, and Lincoln is once again confused.

‘You might not be able to remember that I have lost the love of my life, but at least you can recall my coffee order,’ says Cris.

‘Priorities, mate,’ says Lincoln and he chuckles as he rides the lift and thinks back to how Bianca never laughed. She used to constantly tell him he was hilarious, as though she was the arbiter of humour, but she only ever actually laughed at her own jokes and it still shits him. Bianca had no idea that she lacked any appreciation for comedy, often announcing at parties ‘I am just too zany for my own good.’ The reality was that she was cruel and self-important, there would’ve been POWs working the Burmese railway with sunnier dispositions. Even when Lincoln was deeply in unrequited love with her, her long dry raves about the economic threats posed by the Chinese bored and offended him. But at every party there would always be a line of men listening to her fucked-up theories; he couldn’t fault her ability to attract a crowd.

The familiar taste of bitterness drips down his throat as he remembers that he became one of the throng of losers who hung on Bianca’s every hateful word at those pretentious parties. All those old private school boys forming a tight circle and arguing about which one of them got the most blowjobs from the best-looking girls during high school. Lincoln remembers thinking that he was somehow better than them because he got to take Bianca home. As if that somehow saved his integrity or made his betrayal of his newborn son any less real. But he wasn’t too handsome or charming or rich to be irreplaceable and he never fucking saw it coming.

The lift slides gently to the ground-floor cafeteria and he orders his coffee, almost forgetting Cris’s flat white. He sits on the red bucket seats and is glad for the wait. He’d like nothing better to sit listlessly watching the crowds flock all day. Anything but Cris’s unnerving mix of incompetence and integrity.

A middle-aged man walks into the café wearing a green football polo that reminds Lincoln of the season his old man coached the *Westside Warriors* third-eighteen in a shit-eating suburban league. He won them the flag, the way Kym tells it, and the ungrateful pricks sacked him the next year. As always with his father, there is a sleazy undercurrent that is murky and sweaty and brown. It was just after his parents split and Lincoln played in the under-eighteens with kids who were much older. He had always been a natural at footy, but never really enjoyed it. When he finally blew a knee playing for his university the nurses couldn't believe what a cheerful reconstruction patient he was.

The older players in the under-eighteens hated him because he was already better than them and he would sit alone at their Saturday afternoon parties in their backyard while his old man coached. He'd sit on the edge of the lawn, not quite part of it, and watch them do beer bongs and smoke weed.

Occasionally one of the nicer kids would chuck him a beer and he would enjoy his own private buzz. On one of these afternoons he got talking to Lisa Morris, the sister of the team's wingman. At nineteen, Lisa was something of a mythical creature, with her long blonde hair, rakish brown limbs and casual confidence. On this majestic day, perhaps still his favourite, he was enjoying his third beer while watching Kevin McCann groping at Sabina Joy in the front seat of his red Cortina. He was much more content in his own company in those days, so when Lisa snuck up behind him he was initially uncertain.

'Saw you play today,' she said, following the movement of his eyes, which shifted to avoid her. 'You should practice kicking on your left foot, make you more dangerous in traffic.'

'Footy shits me,' he said, because even before Lincoln Simmons became Lincoln Simmons, he wasn't about to take advice from a chick, no matter how sublime. Lisa smiled her sweet smile that engraved itself in his brain and became the impossible barometer which

has measured every other woman since. The fundamental problem is that no woman could ever measure up to that smile. Except for maybe Bianca.

The winter sun gently tunnelled beneath the golden strands of Lisa's long hair and he was calmed by an inexplicable certainty. The sweet smell of dope wafted pleasingly towards him: the same smell which, even today, reminds him of her.

'A renaissance man, hey?' Lisa had a collection of pimples on the bridge of her nose, just to prove she was human.

'Just don't like footy is all.' He wasn't about to admit he had no idea what renaissance meant.

'What do you like then?' she asked with a sheepish grin and he recognised the loaded question. The three beers washed through his burgeoning reptilian brain and told him that this was the very situation he was born to exploit.

'Do you want to know if I like you?' She turned her head away, the slightest of grins telling him he was right. He gently reached out and held her chin with his hand and shifted her face so that he could see into her eyes.

'I think you're the prettiest girl I've ever seen.'

And then he casually lent forward and kissed Lisa fucking Morris. He remembers thinking for sure that this was finally his indisputable proof that he was better than his old man. Jesus, no wonder he is a complete fuck up. It was too much, too soon and even then, he thought of his dad. The kiss lasted maybe 30 seconds. Lincoln's memory tells him his finger traced the lace of a pink bra, but he knows enough about his own recollections to know that they are usually full of shit.

Inevitably the kiss drew a crowd and Andrew Craig's black Rottweiler strained from its leash to join a chorus of protests. Lisa's best friend Kathy, a chubby brunette with brown permed hair and braces pulled at the back of her hair.

‘Lisa what the fuck are you doing, he’s only a child.’

And that was the end for him and Lisa Morris. He ran into her in a bar a few years later but she had grown heavy around the thighs. He remembers pointing her out to his old man at the club one night soon after the kiss. Lincoln had told Kym she wanted to fuck him, but the old man had just shaken his head and said ‘pig’s arse,’ out of the corner of his mouth.

Lincoln’s nostalgia is interrupted by Sebastian, the young barista with a tongue-tie. He calls ‘order for *Yinc*’ and Lincoln smiles politely but is pissed at him for disturbing his nostalgia. He is only happy when thinking about better times. He takes the coffees and walks up the stairs. It’s against their work health and safety policy but office rules have never applied to him. He walks past his boss’s office and Mal Stevens catches his attention, motioning him inside. Mal scratches the back of his ear, the way he sometimes does before addressing his staff. Mal might be a genius when it comes to numbers, but he is a pear-shaped man in his sixties with wiry grey strands of hair plastered indiscriminately across his bald pate. He wears beige short sleeved shirts and paisley ties and married a woman with a huge arse. He bides his time as head of the local office until the day he can retire. Actually, he has cut Lincoln more slack than he deserves, particularly given his arrogance back when he was the boy most likely.

‘How’s the Waterman presentation?’ Mal asks. He continues to scratch away at the patch of skin behind his ear and white flakes of skin snow through the brilliant beams of office sunlight.

‘Sure to warm the cockles of Waterman’s stone cold heart.’

‘You helping Cris with his figures?’ Mal looks over the top of his glasses, the cheap steel rimmed type that they sell for nine-ninety-nine in chemists. It’s the look that his high school geography teacher used to give him when he had caused another disruption in the back of the class.

Mal is wearing a mushroom brown tie with red stripes that have faded with time. His mass of flab is hidden behind his messy desk and Lincoln can only guess at the crimes of fashion that lurk down below. A decade ago, he and his colleagues held office sweeps predicting Mal's ensemble for the day. The sweeps probably still happen; it's just that Lincoln is no longer invited. In his more pessimistic moments he wonders when he will become the subject of office sweeps.

'Had my foot up his arse for weeks, mate. You know me.'

'I'm afraid I do,' says Mal dryly and Lincoln holds the two coffees in the air by way of his excuse to leave. He returns to his office and sees that Cris is still staring glumly at his mathematics. Lincoln flashes an indulgent smile, as though he is a new born puppy that knows no better than pissing on the rug. He thrusts his coffee towards Cris like it is some grand gesture of a more collaborative attitude.

'Why don't you fuck off for a while and let me go over your presentation with some more care. We can touch base later this afternoon.'

Cris considers this for a moment and he grimly hopes he will leave him to try forlornly to fix this mess, but he makes no move to leave. He has never co-presented with a man before for a Waterman presentation and he's grown accustomed to working with direct, no nonsense women. At least with Bianca he always knew where he stood. He returns to his seat and looks at his computer while sipping his coffee: he is drinking far too much of it lately, but it balances his morning hangover, leaving him sweaty and anxious by the afternoon and counting the minutes to his first beer.

'What happened to you in London?' Cris eventually enquires: the same fucking question he has been asked a million times and he feels jilted by his lack of originality. To give him credit he is not asking the question as a dare, the way most of his colleagues do: the same smarmy young bastards who have heard one perverted version or another of the truth. He

looks at the dog-eared corners of the folders protruding from his filing cabinet as he hears himself recite the same lie he has pedalled so many times.

‘I was in London for six-months, five-years ago. But my son was born and I had to return.’

Cris considers his lie and allows his head to drop from a limp neck. He clearly wants something from him and he decides the only way to get him the fuck out of his office is to tell her the truth.

‘Actually, truth is I got fired. I went to London with Bianca, my girlfriend: another Waterman graduate. I found out she was fucking our boss. I kind of lost the plot for a bit.’

Cris concentrates on his version of the story, checking it to see if it fits with the versions he has obviously been told. He reinvigorates his habit of moving his lips along with the story when he listens intently and Lincoln notices again just what a square peg this odd young man really is. He has never told anyone in the office the true version before, despite the almost continual harassment for details ever since he returned home.

‘Way I heard it you punched him in the nose,’ he says, showing his big toothy grin.

‘I wish,’ he laughs, ‘not content with being younger, richer and more handsome, son-of-a-bitch was a black-belt. I was in hospital with tissue up my snoz by the time I’d finished swinging.’

‘So, you came back?’

‘Luckily, I had taken leave without pay, mainly to provide Zo with the illusion that I wasn’t abandoning Bill. Coburn had no choice industrially but to take me back. He wasn’t happy, you know Coburn.’

With the mention of Coburn, Cris stiffens.

‘Can we not talk about Coburn,’ he snaps, and Lincoln feels like he has finally been handed a flashlight, after toiling for so long in the dark. Cris tilts the right side of his jaw defiantly towards him, as though craving his best shot. Lincoln is a reluctant detective and

thinks about how nice it would be to sit at his favourite pubstool, drinking dark ale while absently watching the races. He breathes loudly through reverberating lips; an action that Zoe says makes him resemble a horse.

‘Coburn giving you a hard time,’ Lincoln says with resignation.

‘Just the opposite,’ says Cris, picking up the Waterman presentation and making a cylinder with the bulky document, before Lincoln looks at him pointedly. ‘He took a real interest in me from the moment he hired me. He rings me every other day and has flown me to meetings to be his wingman.’

Lincoln thinks about Coburn’s craggy face and realises that the toady old prick has once again got the better of him.

‘Too bad he hasn’t found time to give you some advice about presentations,’ Lincoln says, just to check out the reaction of his young colleague’s face. But Cris remains typically impassive.

‘That’s the thing,’ Cris says. ‘He has told me not to waste my time on the Waterman presentation, that he likes to leave that part of the business to you and Mal.’

‘At the start he told me he saw something in me,’ continues Cris, picking up on Lincoln’s confusion. ‘I knew he was full of shit, but he was so convincing that I started to wonder. It was flattering I guess. Then there was an awful dinner where he got me drunk and convinced me to fuck a high-priced escort. That was the end for me and Bridget.’

Lincoln laughs at Coburn’s sheer obviousness but wonders if he is just jealous that Coburn can still pull it off. Cris turns her head downwards and his mop of curly black hair blankets the mortification on his face. Lincoln wants to explain something to him about how life works.

‘With me it was dinner and a strip club,’ he says. ‘We sat in our chairs smoking expensive cigars as I recounted explicit details of my sex with Bianca, for his personal amusement. He insisted that I take a lap-dance, and he sat watching me with a demented grin.’

Cris takes a sip from his water with a trembling hand. He has stopped listening.

Lincoln fights the sense that Cris is being offered a salvation that he will appreciate in time. But he knows a philosophical outlook is hard when you’re losing your income. He thinks again about Bianca, who married her boss from London. Last Lincoln heard she’d quit work and had two of his kids. He stares at Cris with what he hopes is sympathy and is thankful for his long nights of poker with ambitious young men all pretending to be stars in a Scorsese movie.

As he wonders what he can possibly say to this sweet, stupid man, Mal walks in the door with his horrid green shirt protruding from his grey trousers, which are every bit as dreadful as Lincoln had imagined. Mal looks at neither of them, preferring instead to look at the vase of fresh poppies standing on Lincoln’s coffee table. He seems nervous, even by his own idiosyncratic standards.

‘I just got a call from Waterman’s girl. Something’s come up and the presentation has been postponed.’

‘For when?’ says Lincoln, fighting a sinking realisation.

‘Indefinitely,’ grumbles Mal, and he leaves them to their silence.

‘Suppose I’m finally fucked,’ says Cris, as he bows her head, but still she won’t leave. Lincoln knows he should be supportive, but he what is he meant to say to him now? He’s not hypocritical enough to condemn the culture he helped create. But then, maybe he is kidding himself by thinking he’s been the least bit influential. Maybe it’s a culture that predates even Coburn.

‘You should quit,’ says, Lincoln. ‘Why give him the satisfaction?’

‘I want him to look me in the eyes and tell me what he was playing at,’ says Cris, his jaw jutted defiantly towards Lincoln, as though inviting his best shot.

Lincoln snorts, unable to believe Cris’s naivety. It occurs to him why Cris has always seemed so out of place here; because he is a nice guy. And nice guys are terrible judges of character.

Cris finally wanders out of his office and Lincoln locks the door behind him so he can slouch on his white couch. He wonders how Cris is going to live with that terrible decision to fuck Coburn’s hooker. He worries that this thought will preoccupy him for the rest of the day. With the Waterman presentation off the agenda he has nothing to do and it’s only 11am. He can’t cope with one more conversation today. He rests his head in his hands and decides he will go home and drink. He walks to his computer to activate his out of office reply and notices a message from Sam Winton, his ginger haired younger colleague. *Wouldn’t waste your time mentoring Cris, mate. I hear he’s a dead man walking.* Lincoln begins to craft a curt reply before realising that is precisely what the prick wants.

He opens an email from Charlotte Mohr. *Hey babe, Horny as f*ck. I could squeeze you in at 2pm (so to speak).*’ It was a rookie error to get involved with Charlotte again, and one he never would’ve made it hadn’t been for all that sexual tension between Zo and Ben. Honestly, he doesn’t know what she sees in the kid; he knows Zoe is going through a rough trot but she can do so much better.

Lincoln is more capable of climbing Everest than seeing Charlotte today. He doesn’t care that she is the last brown leaf on a tree that he has never watered. He replies hurriedly.

Troubles with the Waterman presentation. I will call you later in the week.

He tries unsuccessfully to concoct an excuse to leave; but he is sure Mal has heard them all a million times before. Lincoln walks gingerly into Mal’s office to find him staring

intently at a spreadsheet, yawning expansively with his arms raised showing the spreading sweat stains under his armpits. There is a jam donut on Mal's desk and Lincoln can only hope he is not going to eat in front of him.

Mal's conference desk is panelled in off white and is circled with the yellow scars made by years of coffee mugs and late nights. His chairs don't match and there are piles of lever arch files crammed into every corner of the room, which has always made Lincoln feel claustrophobic. Mal has never concerned himself with ambiance or style, or image, and for that he has Lincoln's grudging respect.

'Permission to speak frankly,' he says to Lincoln, in his usual respectful manner that is so unusual from a man with positional power.

'You're the boss,' Lincoln says, wishing he didn't need to remind him.

'Coburn is a piece of shit.' Lincoln can feel his mouth gape, he has waited fifteen years to hear Mal speak ill of someone. He never thought it would be Coburn.

'You won't get an argument from me.'

'Then why would you give that piece of shit the satisfaction of firing you?'

'I don't think I follow.'

'Do you think it's a coincidence that he hired the most incompetent staff member we've ever had, and gave him to you to supervise.' Mal's words confirm everything he already knew, but Lincoln feels his heart rate elevate, as though he's only now considering the ramifications.

'Maybe it's time to move on,' says Lincoln, trying to sound stoic but his quivering voice gives him away. He is forced to contemplate his employment mortality and he wonders how it all went so wrong. It's not that Lincoln enjoys the work. Not anymore. But it does pay for a glossy facade of a life which saves him the trouble of thinking too hard. Mal shrugs non-committedly; taking a greedy bite of his jam donut. It's a relatively clean entry; Lincoln's

seen him do worse and doesn't have to fight too hard to keep the smudge of disgust from his lips.

'The last time any of your staff met their KPI's I had a full head of hair,' says Mal.

'Is your hair thinning, Mal? I hadn't noticed,' quips Lincoln, not able to help himself. Mal smiles knowingly, before returning to his spreadsheet.

The purity of numbers has been Mal's salvation for thirty years in a business that has never welcomed him. Once he tucks himself into his blanket of arithmetic there is nothing left to be said and Lincoln feels like a naughty child being dismissed from the principal's office. He is not ready for their conversation to be over. It is engrained in him to never leave a room without having asserted himself. His eyes settle on a cheap gold frame that cases a photo of Mal and his son, over a decade ago. Both men wear embarrassed smiles and sweaty basketball singlets, posing for an unknown photographer, most likely Gail, Mal's fat wife. Lincoln imagines her flabby arms flailing as she choreographs the two men closer together, so she can capture their understated mutual affection. Lincoln loses himself in the photo until he can feel a lump in his throat that warns him to look away.

The kid staring back at him, beneath a small mountain of dust, has his old man's unfortunate figure, and round, childlike cheeks. He wonders if he has the first inclination that it's all about to end because of one senseless punch from a stranger. What motivates a man to carry on after burying his teenage son? He wonders if this is the last photo Mal has of his son before he died. It all happened before Lincoln was recruited, but according to office legend, Mal took five days of leave to grieve his son and returned at eight am the next Monday morning to wave away condolences. His distrust of sympathy was fortunate because he wouldn't have got much.

‘How did you find the strength to go on, Mal?’ The question escapes Lincoln’s lips before he can consider the repercussions. But Mal considers Lincoln for a moment when he sees he is examining the photo of his son.

‘You take one day at a time. For me, work helped.’

‘Fucking brave, mate.’

Mal ponders the last quarter of a donut that lies temptingly on the plate.

‘Spending more time with my wife and daughter would have been brave.’

‘You know there’s nothing I can do to prevent Coburn from firing me.’

‘Maybe. Maybe not. But you should hurry up and fire Cris, if it’s not already too late.’

Lincoln’s relationship with Coburn has always been hard to explain. Even during those horrible nights at the strip clubs, they always played a slippery game. He remembers Coburn’s craggy face; predatory but vulnerable, as he coerced Lincoln into violating another of the lap dancers who were drawn inexorably to the sweaty fistfuls of cash that he offered like confetti.

When Lincoln returned from London, broken and humiliated; he knew enough not to admit defeat to Coburn. But his defiance has only bought him time, men like Coburn don’t lose these kinds of battles. And Lincoln is sure as fuck not going to shaft poor, stupid Cris just to save himself for a couple of months. He’s not about to play that game; he’s fired enough suckers in the cause of self-preservation and he hasn’t the stomach for more blood.

Lincoln feels the dirty taste of last night’s bourbon on his teeth.

‘Remember what an obnoxious little shit I was to you when I first started?’

Mal allows himself a small chuckle.

‘You were not unhappy with yourself.’ He returns to his figures and Lincoln walks out the door, no longer having the heart to lie to Mal about why he is leaving.

As he presses the elevator button to make his escape, his mobile buzzes. Troy's name appears on his screen. He shakes his head and smiles ruefully.

'Hell of a day,' he says ruefully to himself. 'Hello, Troy.'

'You at work?'

He knows he should lie but if this phone call is what he knows it is, then he may as well get it over with.

'I wondered when you'd pay me a visit.'

'I'm in the loading zone outside your building. You'd better get down here.'

The feeling that he has been caught is strangely pleasant. Lincoln is a 38-year-old man who has never been punched, although he has been in skirmishes before and even started some. But he has always managed to extricate himself before punches are thrown. With Troy there will be no hiding. Lincoln steps out of his building and sees Troy's yellow Monaro; the passenger door is open, and Troy is sitting in the driver's seat on his phone. He knows that this is Troy's way of cutting a deal, of getting this whole sordid business over and done with without fuss; like men.

'Can you give me half an hour, mate?' says Troy into his phone. Troy has an old checked shirt on, over a white t-shirt, with tufts of brown hair spilling from his chest over his collar and meeting the stubble that has risen inexorably since his morning shave. He wears a faded blue Holden hat and Lincoln notices that the lines around his eyes are etching themselves more markedly into his skin, as he supposes, are his.

'No, that will give me plenty of time,' Troy says to whoever it is on the other end of the phone. Satisfied, he puts his phone in his console and reverses out of the car park, simultaneously pulling a cigarette out with the other hand.

'Smoke?' he says to Lincoln.

Troy flicks the bottom of his package in one swift motion and two cigarettes stand an inch higher than their cellmates. Lincoln takes one and Troy lights them both with his eyes fixed on the road. They drive in silence as the mild spring sun pleasantly bakes Lincoln's arm through the opened window. Cruising past the river as they make their way out of the city, Lincoln feels a strange intimacy with the step-brother he has never accepted. They may not have been each other's first choice, but they have been witnesses to each other's weddings, housewarmings and babies. It motivates him to talk.

'How are the boys?'

'They're staying at Mum's for a few days. I've got jobs coming out of my arse and I don't need to tell you the state that Kaz is in.' The mention of Kaz jolts Lincoln back into reality.

'Stella's a champion, Troy.'

They stop at a set of lights and Troy looks at him for the first time. His coffee and cigarette breath is objectionable, but now is not the time to mention it.

'She thinks you resent her for coming between you and your old man.'

Lincoln smirks automatically and Troy shoots him a look.

'Without Stella my Dad would be a desperate sixty-four-year old living upstairs in some cheap pub. Trust me; she has nothing but my sincerest gratitude.'

Troy is hardly listening, concentrating on removing stubborn bird shit from his front window with his wipers. Lincoln has noticed people's attention wandering lately when he talks. He doesn't know if this is a new thing or if he has only started noticing.

He thinks about the time when, in his early twenties, he bumped into Troy and Kaz at a night club. They ashared a decent night. Lincoln had put the hard word on Kaz's best friend but she had fought him off. He knows that sharing the memory would come across as disingenuous. Troy proffers another cigarette and Lincoln is content to sit back in the black leather seat and smoke and try not to think about what he has coming.

‘On top of everything, Axel was diagnosed with fucking Asperger’s on Wednesday,’ says, Troy. It is the last thing Lincoln expected him to say.

‘Shit’ says Lincoln, trying to remember if Axel is the oldest or youngest. Neither kid has ever seemed quite right to him.

‘Not been much of a week for you.’

‘No,’ Troy smiles ruefully and Lincoln has to remind himself that he has played a starring role in all this misery. ‘I just always thought that because he was the youngest, he was a bit of a sook.’

‘Can they fix him?’

‘It’s not a broken arm, mate. He’ll never be totally normal, but he can get extra support at his school and there’s some kind of weekly therapy he can get.’

‘Sounds expensive,’ Lincoln muses.

The yellow Monaro drifts into the North Eastern suburbs, towards Troy’s next plumbing job. Lincoln wonders if there is some kind of diagnosis that can explain to him why Billy is the way he is. An anxious kid since the day he was born, Lincoln can’t quite forgive him for his lack of certainty. But there’s nothing wrong with Billy, on the contrary, he’s a smart enough kid to realise that there is plenty to be anxious about.

The two men contemplate their sons in silence. Lincoln finds himself envying the simplicity of Troy’s love for his family. He knows that Troy would never contemplate infidelity and is probably blaming himself for driving Kaz to fuck his arrogant step-brother. Lincoln has to admit, he is taking it remarkably well.

‘Suppose you don’t have much choice when it comes to your kids,’ Troy finally says, and Lincoln’s hand involuntarily leaves his lap to pat Troy’s shoulder in support, before realising what an inappropriate gesture that would be. The Monaro steers casually into a suburban football oval car-park. Lincoln can remember playing a game of school football on

the oval and that his opponent, who had a fully-grown beard, threatened him with a punch in the mouth every time he got near the ball. It had been his quietest game for the year and his old man had told him he played like a sheila during the drive home.

Troy stops the car by the coaches' box on the wing of the oval. As the two men get out of the car a group of seagulls gather curiously.

'Walk with me' says Troy, his demeanour suddenly harder. Lincoln's stomach starts to spin as he trudges reluctantly behind his step brother and allows the fear to reach him at last. As they walk onto the oval the sun is hidden by a lonely cloud and the hairs on his neck stand erect.

Troy stops suddenly and raises the corner of his mouth to form an apologetic dimple in his right cheek. He tucks his sinewy right hand into a ball and throws it at Lincoln's jaw. The impact is a dull roar and the ground rushes to crash into his head. He is still for a few moments – maybe more – slowly regaining his sense of himself. He is assaulted by the smell of Troy's rancid breath and realises he is screaming into his ear.

'If you cared about her you would have let her be. But Lincoln Simmons only cares about Lincoln fucking Simmons.'

He cannot argue with any of it and figures the right thing to do is get up on his haunches so that Troy can finish him off. The least he can do is provide a decent target. He slowly gets back to his feet. The air is a thick, befuddled cloud. He tries to make out Troy's menacing image, but he can't see him in his discombobulated state. It takes him over a minute to realise that Troy is walking back to his car. It is all over. All the pain he has caused two decent people and he has been let off so easily. He never would have picked Troy's class and fat tears fall from his eyes. The tears that refused to come when his son was born, or Bianca dumped him, or his mum died, fall to the ground like stones. Lincoln cries not for the people

he has lost from his life; people have always been expendable. He cries for the knowledge that he is always on the wrong end of the generosity of others and that's no way to live a life.

Chapter 6

Ben's office had been a store room before his employment. Adding order to the mess of old journals and client filing cabinets had been his initiation into the role and he has approached it with gusto, fashioning a snug cocoon from which to hone his therapeutic practice. He doesn't mind in the slightest that his small window looks directly onto the faded white brick of the veterinary clinic next door.

On the few occasions his colleagues have visited they have expressed concern that he should spend so much time in such a confined space and though their words are supportive he discerns an edge of satisfaction. The prime real estate belongs to those on the northern wing of the nineteenth century property, rewarded for their loyalty with a full view of his father's garden. Zoe's office stands incongruously alongside Arthur's as an historic reminder of the status she once enjoyed.

In his bid to build a presentable façade, Ben purchased a groovy little computer desk, and toted a couple of his Mum's wide bottomed green lounge chairs from her shed. He has hung his university degree on his wall, and desperately assures himself he is not trying too hard. His noticeboard is adorned by painstakingly selected articles about gendered violence that he hopes will convince female clients of his sensitivity and male perpetrators of his intelligence.

To date, he hasn't fired one word in anger in his tiny office. He has been referred no individual clients and Zoe has reluctantly allowed him to sit in on the sessions in her office, but he is more gold-fish bowling than participating.

It's late on a Friday afternoon and while Ben prints a new article for his noticeboard a straggly-haired stranger swaggers in to his office unannounced.

'You're a counsellor?' the man asks; more statement of fact than a question. The man favours a heavy left leg as he gingerly closes the door behind him. Ben fingers the duress

button underneath his chair, hoping it works since he still hasn't had the induction he was promised.

'Who are you looking for?'

The man laughs heartily before heaving his stocky, six-foot- three frame into Ben's Mum's lounge chair.

'Bit fucking rude isn't it? Answering a question with a question.'

Ben is immediately struck by the man's ease. He had hoped his first individual client would sneak into his office subserviently, like a faulty clock waiting to be fixed. He makes a show of looking at his watch as though he has something he needs to do.

'Kelly is on reception, you must have walked straight past her,' he says, 'She will make an appointment for you.'

The man looks confused as he scratches at his ginger and grey beard which makes the sound of coarse sandpaper. Ben notices the man's shirt, under a faded denim jacket, which says *for dickhead add beer*.

'No time like the present,' he roars and Ben feels the side of his face burn.

'The waiting list is three weeks,' Ben says, but the man shrugs his shoulders as if the rules of convention don't apply to him. Admitting defeat, Ben takes an assessment pack from his top drawer. One of the forms slides from his clipboard and he gets down on both knees to retrieve it from underneath the man's meaty legs.

'While you're down there,' the man says with a laugh and Ben can hardly imagine this going worse. He climbs back on to his chair with an indelicate manoeuvre and the man looks at him critically as if kicking the tyre of a car before taking it for a test run.

'Names Matt Schmidt,' he eventually says. Matt throws a large paw in Ben's direction and consummates their professional relationship. Ben wonders how Matt has made it seem like he is the one extending the favour.

‘I need to explain our confidentiality and payment processes before we begin,’ says Ben, who picks up his new ball point pen which he has been saving for just this occasion.

‘Yeah that’s all well and good,’ replies Matt, ‘but I need to tell you I’ve got myself into one hell of a fucking pickle.’ Ben sighs. This confident and brash man fires his words like bullets, and he is ill prepared for such intensity. He remembers a seminar he took in his honours year on respectful interruption; it had seemed so plausible at the time but five minutes into his first actual case and he understands the perfect futility of every second of his therapeutic training.

‘I’ve just met this chick, right? I met her in the library of all places. I won’t bore you with the details but let’s just say we are enjoying each other’s company.’ Matt makes a circle with the fingers and thumb of his right hand and pushes his left finger through it until he’s satisfied that Ben gets the point.

‘That’s great,’ says Ben, just to have something to say, because the mention of sex still reminds him of that awful night in Zoe’s bed and her half-hearted effort in ensuring him that it could happen to anyone.

‘It is and it isn’t. See, I have done some vile shit in my time and she doesn’t know any of it.’ Matt stops midsentence, contemplating his novice therapist with a terse expression. His eyes bore intrusively into Ben’s psyche, compelling him to give himself over to the story he is determined to tell.

Ben remembers all those comments on his school report cards; *Ben has ability, if only he could stop his constant daydreaming*. He wills himself to stare into Matt’s blood-stained eyes so that if he can’t quite listen intently, he can at least pretend.

‘Let me ask you a question,’ Matt asks Ben, moving forward in his chair and patting him on the knee. Ben knows that he should remind Matt that touching the therapist is strictly

contraband, that it's like touching an umpire in a footy match. But Matt's hands return to his lap and Ben decides he can let it slide.

'How much misery can one man inflict before he is disqualified from ever being happy again.'

Ben has never considered such a question and he starts to deliver a half-baked answer before Matt flicks his hand as though swatting a mildly annoying mosquito.

'Because I have done some terrible shit, mate. And it bothers me. It really fucking does. I mean, how can I cherish my relationship with Brianna, my new girlfriend, when my ex is still fucked in the head because of all the torment I put her through?

Matt looks at Ben with an intensity that dares him to say something provocative, but Ben surrenders the pretence of asking anything. He already knows this will hardly be the stuff of the psychological journals that so regularly feature his father and Ben feels so lacking in substance that he is at risk of oozing from his chair.

Matt shifts his hefty frame forward in his seat to demand Ben looks him in the eyes.

'I should probably give you some fucking context, I suppose. But then maybe that's just my way of letting myself off the hook for what I did. I don't know, what do you think? See, I had a pretty rough childhood. Step-father was drunk and mean, I don't need to bore you with the details, it was all a long time ago.'

Ben looks at the plain black wallclock that he has been meaning to change with something more contemporary and tries to estimate how long Ben has been here, or how many words he might unleash, like bullets, if he stays here for an entire hour.

'Long story, short,' says Matt, who starts to cough from the very bottom of his chest, before purging himself a water from the jug on Ben's coffee table. 'I fell in with a tough crowd and got myself into some rough situations. There was once a time when I'd act like a crazy

arsehole just to survive, you know? But then I acted for so long that I couldn't tell the difference anymore.'

Matt takes another swig of water before coughing deeply. Ben busies himself by refilling Matt's water. He decides he needs a drink too but only a small splash covers the bottom of his glass as he realises his jug has been emptied. Ben takes a second too long to consider his next question, and as he opens his mouth to ask what Matt had to do to survive, his vociferous new client steamrolls ahead.

'So, long story, short, I was with Jackie for about six years and far as I know she's still a fucking mess. I'm not here to lie to you. You name it, I did it. Physical, sexual, emotional. The trifecta of fucking terrorism.'

Matt sits back in Ben's mother's chair, which is slightly too narrow for his husky frame, and Ben wonders if he needs to replace them. The big man scratches at his beard again and Ben thinks he might finally have his chance to interject. Just as he opens his dormant mouth, he is startled by a noise behind him. Ben jumps in his chair, before realising it's just a bird that has hit his window, attracted by the sight of its own reflection.

'How long ago was this,' Ben says hurriedly, while Matt shrugs nonchalantly.

'Haven't seen her for a couple of years. Last time I saw her I beat her so badly that the fucking neighbours called an ambulance. That little wake-up call earned me a suspended six-month jail term.'

'Jail must be tough,' Ben says, and he can immediately picture Zoe's disapproval for failing to sharpen his focus on the effects on Jackie.

'I've done time before and never bothered me. Got my mates in there, you get your three squares, and they've even got half decent librarites. To be honest, it was the sight of Jackie being wheeled out of the house in a gurney that finally knocked some sense in me. I cried like a baby for months. But I suppose the tears were mainly selfish.'

Ben tries to stop himself from being impressed that Matt would know his tears were selfish. But he still wonders if a loving relationship is more than he deserves, particularly given the likelihood that Jackie will never recover. Ben chances a good look at the man who has broken his therapeutic duck, and although he is a dangerous thug, he is not without his charm. Matt uses words like ‘enriching’ to describe his relationship with Brianna and his words are far too floral: such words should be reserved for men who wash their cars on the weekend and read their kids *Dr. Seuss*. But – Ben has to admit – none of Zoe’s clients ask such searching philosophical questions about restoration and retribution during their Wednesday night group and Ben is relieved they are all rhetorical.

Matt finally takes his leave fifty-six minutes after he made his unwanted appearance, and Ben remains seated for the longest of times, unable to move. His first individual session with a male perpetrator of violence has pitchforked so many unanswerable questions into his scrambled brain and he knows will never be able to answer them. He knows his father has promulgated a lifetime of neat theories that could have guided his session with Matt, and that Zoe’s theories are just as definitive, if contradictory. He sits in his chair with that familiar knot in his stomach and considers his lack of wisdom. He orders and sorts himself according to Arthur and once again returns to the only possible conclusion.

Ben wonders around the hallways of the Eckermann practice as if he is sleepwalking and his inertia leads him outside of Zoe’s open office door wondering if he should enter. He wants to tell someone that he is no longer a maiden and if Zoe won’t exactly perform cartwheels, she is the most receptive audience he’s going to get.

Things between he and Zoe have cooled after his humiliation in her bedroom and they’ve made tacit agreement to let their relationship, which had never quite got started, marinate in its own ambiguity. Zoe has quarantined their conversations to the local café after work, without the pressure of the possibility of intimacy. The men’s groups have been considerably

less eventful after the first. Six of the men – including Brent – have stopped coming, and the new recruits have facilitated a slightly less militant vibe. Zoe has been less intense during the sessions and more inclined to let Ben take charge for increasing segments of the evenings. Inevitably, he talks himself into a corner and she saves them all from his confusion. Zoe is still magnificent when in full flight, but she often seems distracted during the sessions and has taken to doodling distractedly in her notebook when the men speak.

During their conversations at the café, Zoe is mainly intent on seeking his counsel about Arthur's refusal to let Doug's death rest. Ben gently tries to change the subject but is no match for her single-mindedness. It reminds him of when – after his self-harming debacle – his mother would take him out for dinner and ask him questions about his mental state. He would try to sway her from the subject with pre-rehearsed anecdotes about the kids in his class, but she was like a boxer with a relentless left jab that was too precise for his meagre defences.

Ben fixes his face in its most confident pose and prepares to walk through Zoe's open door when he sees Ryan Trentham walking towards him grinning like a weasel. Ryan has never mentioned the therapy he provided for Ben as an adolescent, but he knows that his smile is designed to tell him: *you haven't changed a bit, my boy*. For a moment Ben is convinced that Ryan can read his thoughts and that he knows all about his schoolboy crush on Zoe, and his inability to be a man when it counted most. He wonders if Ryan might diagnose his erectile dysfunction as a consequence of repressed rage. As Ryan approaches, Ben panics and walks straight past Zoe's office and is left with no choice but to walk straight into Arthur's office next door. His father peers from his work and Ben marches guilelessly towards him. It takes Arthur a fraction too long to rearrange his look of alarm.

'Ah, Benjamin. I've been meaning to drop by to see how you're settling in?' he says, and he just about manages to look inscrutable.

‘I just met with an interesting man,’ Ben says, watching his father’s blank expression and waiting for the pretence of interest. Arthur is silent for a long time as if considering Ben’s words.

‘How does Zoe seem to you?’ he asks, and Ben wishes his father wasn’t quite so predictable.

‘Hard for me to know, given I didn’t know her before the suicide,’ he replies, and his father’s eyes return to his work. Ben waits for his father to look up again but the seconds tick slowly.

‘To be honest, she seems a bit distracted,’ Ben finally says, and Arthur looks up from his work. ‘She doesn’t seem present in our groups, but she doesn’t want to admit it.’

‘Our Zoe is good at many things, statements of admission not being amongst them,’ says Arthur, and as the two men chuckle Ben hopes he is not turning red. Their laughter is slightly forced, and silence quickly takes hold. They’re both faced with a new version of their same question: what to say next?

‘It’s nice to have you as part of the practice,’ says Arthur eventually and a lump rises in Ben’s throat. Satisfied, he turns to leave but before he can take a stride, Zoe storms in from the opposite direction and Ben can barely look at her.

‘What the fuck is this?’ she screams indignantly, with a document raised high in the air, being crumpled and dog-eared by her clenched right fist. ‘You’ve set your fucking dogs on me.’

Ben has no interest in being caught in the fight that has been raging long before he came to the practice.

‘I will leave you to it,’ he says and edges his way past Zoe’s rigid body.

‘Actually, it’s probably best you stay,’ says Arthur, and Ben is reminded of the fact that his father is paying him for precisely this kind of occasion. Ben makes tight balls with his

fists and grinds his molars; his preferences are redundant, and it occurs to him to feel patronised, but he does as he is told, which is to pull up a chair to watch the show.

Arthur removes his glasses in one swift motion and makes a deep guttural noise from the back of his throat, as if he is about to deliver the Sermon on the Mount. Zoe starts to talk over the top of his pompous warbling, but she can't concentrate on what she is saying and gives in.

'The bottom line, Zoe,' says Arthur before lapsing into silence again for several seconds, as if it took him all that time to come up with four words, 'is that I have no say in the machinations of the psychology board. They have every right to investigate the missing case note and as much as you might like to demonise me, that's on you. And we still need to abide by what Sandra wants.'

Zoe's head tilts back on the axis of her neck, as if being punched by an imaginary fist. She scrunches her face in a tight ball which – Ben knows from men's group – is designed to convey frustration but only succeeds in making her look old.

'Sandra wouldn't know what she wants,' she cries. 'She's too busy being pushed around by the corpse in her garage.'

Arthur peers over the top of his glasses in one of his own favourite expressions: the one that tells her she is letting her emotions get in the way of his scholarly rationality.

'Forgive me, Zoe, if I find that ironic.'

Arthur's voice is soft and gravely, and Ben has to fight his instinct to assume every one of his words is true. He is surprised, however, that Arthur would be so blatantly accusatory towards Zoe, and he wonders if the old boy is slightly rattled.

'Has Sandra asked explicitly to see the case note, Arthur?' asks Zoe, and Arthur shoots Ben an almost imperceptible look from the corner of her eye. Ben is beginning to suspect that there is something vaguely pleasurable for Zoe and his dad in their constant duels, as if they

are engaged in a cognitive title-fight. Surely neither of them honestly thinks that Sandra gives a shit about their endless bickering.

Arthur sits on the corner of his large mahogany desk, running his hand through the last strands of the thinning hairline that Ben's mother is constantly pleading for him to cut short.

'Zoe, do you think I enjoy having my practice of twenty-seven years dragged through the mud? Believe it or not, we are on the same side.'

Arthur must be rattled if he expects Zoe to believe he has her best interests at heart and she is left with no alternative but to gape at him, as if he is some anthropological exhibition of ancient misogyny. Ben shifts in his uncomfortable chair; a narrow, steel rimmed antique with faded brown fabric. He wonders if this chair has been here during every one of his father's precious twenty-seven fucking years. The uncomfortable piece of furniture creaks and groans and he is conscious not to break their concentration, like he is an extra in a movie whose only task is to pretend to be dead.

Zoe stands and peers outside the window. She puts her two thumbs in the small of her back and stretches backwards producing an undisguised groan. She turns to face Ben and he instinctively looks down at his black leather boots that are too heavy for his brown corduroy pants.

Arthur moves from his perch on the corner of his desk and returns to his seat behind his desk. He sinks into his leather chair and looks so old and tired that Ben can't help but feel sorry for him. Arthur has always had the happy knack of inducing feelings of resentment and pity from Ben in equal, conflicting measures.

Zoe stares more squarely at Ben this time in an appeal that lasts for too long. She silently asks of him something she has no right to expect and he can feel that familiar knot in his stomach. He feels himself starting to sweat heavily and struggles to breathe in a room with two people who leave no oxygen for him. He rises from his seat and whispers an inaudible

apology. He scurries into the toilet and turns on the tap to throw water on his face. He looks closely into the bathroom mirror; peering at close range and hoping his reflection might guide his path if only he can get a good enough look at his quantifiable worth. As usual, his reflection is unresponsive, and he takes a step back to examine himself from mid-range. He is normally ambivalent about his face. Aesthetically, he considers himself to be innocuous at best, but secretly hopes others are more generous. He determinedly stares at his face looking for an answer that refuses to budge.

He thinks about Zoe and Arthur and their certainty that they are right. He wonders if the pursuit of prosecuting their cases has rendered them incapable of considering alternative views. He thinks about his father's motivation in all of this. He would like to ask him one day but knows that he will receive the pre-rehearsed speech of a skilled politician. Ben supposes the art of self-perception is a luxury for those with nothing to lose.

He continues to search his face in the mirror before finally he thinks he finds a distinguished aspect to his sharp jaw that goes some way to soothing his nerves. He is in no rush to return to his role as mute mediator or to meet with the urgency of Zoe's pleading eyes and he walks back to his office to sit in his mother's lounge chair. He can't quite believe that a violent monster sat in this very spot less than an hour ago. Ben looks at his noticeboard and realises he hasn't even had time to pin that last article.

It's past five and the vast building has been vacated by the therapists who have scurried home for their Friday night bottle of wine. He attempts to find comfort in the silence, but his ticking clock only reminds him that he is expected to reappear. He trudges down the hallway and opens the door, immediately surprised to see Arthur and Zoe chatting in hushed tones, despite – or maybe because of – his absence. Zoe shoots him one of her brightest smiles, and he immediately regrets the unkind thoughts he has been entertaining.

‘We were beginning to think we had scared you off,’ she says, and she and Arthur share a brief smirk, in common understanding of his timidity.

‘Why would I be scared? Psych board has never heard of me,’ he says and her smile flat-lines.

Arthur is the picture of virtuous neutrality, as he looks at his watch and clicks his tongue.

‘Goodness me’ he says, as if time is playing a practical joke. ‘I have a speaking engagement in ten minutes. Can the last one out turn on the alarm?’

Arthur scurries off, just as he always has. As a boy Ben had dreamed he would grow to be the kind of man constantly harried by the limitations of time, each tick of the clock a wasted opportunity. But in Ben’s adulthood the minutes and the hours have only served as creaking reminders of his irrelevance.

Arthur’s departure eliminates the tension from the room, but Ben is now acutely aware of Zoe next to him in the empty, dark building. Zoe sits opposite him and raises the high heel of her black stiletto to lightly stab his thigh.

‘Sometimes I think you’re too convincing when you pretend you don’t think much of me,’ she says.

He smiles, thrilled with her initiation of their first physical contact in weeks, but wondering exactly what he does think of her.

‘You must feel special, so indispensable to Arthur and all,’ she continues with a grin, and if he didn’t know better he would think that he has finally impressed her.

‘Trust me, I have never considered myself special,’ he says, with a grin that he cannot suppress. ‘I’m in the unfortunate position of neither being smart enough to be special, nor dumb enough not to know it.’

‘Poor, sweet, Ben,’ Zoe replies, patting his hand, ‘the dual affliction of mediocrity and self-perspective,’ and he wonders if even he could fuck this up from here.

‘Much on tonight?’ he asks, and she arches an eyebrow.

‘Lincoln has Bill, and I have no place to be.’

‘Sounds lonely,’ he says, making a show of sadly shaking his head. They rise to their feet because there is no reason not to, but he has no intention of going anywhere. They loiter inside Arthur’s doorway for the longest of time, his light the only one left in the building. She stands so close that he can make out the faintest hint of her black lacy bra beneath her crisp white shirt. She is wearing the same perfume that has become synonymous with his abysmal failure in her bed, but he feels blissfully disconnected from the bumbling fool that flailed between her bed sheets that night, trying forlornly to procrastinate and compensate.

He begins to wonder if he is becoming overconfident and a burst of anxiety threatens to explode his optimism, before he sees that she is leaning as close to him as possible without touching and that the black stockings on her thigh are protruding from the split in her tight grey skirt. She turns and switches off the light but makes no motion to leave. The old building is silent, refusing to relax into its nightly creaks and groans until he has decided on his next move. He takes her hand and with the last of the light he can just about make out the dare in her eye. With the faintest of pull of his hand she is even closer to him and he can taste the urgency in her breath.

‘Are we going to do this here in his office?’ she asks and with no small relief he realises that is exactly what they will do. He leads her behind Arthur’s desk, kicking his orthopaedic chair out of the way and pulling at her fingers until they are both kneeling behind his desk.

‘Fucking hell’, she whispers urgently. ‘It smells like butter menthols down here. Kiss me quickly before he kills the mood.’

As they begin to kiss Zoe is pinned, flat on the floor under the heft of Ben’s gyrating pelvis. She makes a noise, like she is having trouble breathing, but he assumes that his lack of assertiveness was what got him into such a mess last time so he closes his eyes and soldiers

on. Ben starts to dwell on the debacle of their previous date and he hopes it is only paranoia that convinces him that his erection is deserting him. Zoe squeezes out from underneath him and props herself on one elbow. She places a hand over his leg to hold him in the one spot.

‘You know, I would totally understand if this is too weird for you, in your dad’s office and all,’ she whispers, and he is surprised to see that she is still clutching the threatening letter from the psychology board.

‘What do you think?’ he asks, disappointed by her lack of resolve.

‘Well,’ she says, ‘we could go back to my house and I could light some candles and we could take our time. I really like you, Ben. Let’s do this properly.’

Zoe bites the corner of her lip and it occurs to Ben that she might be nervous. Lying here, with the probable end of her career in her hand, Ben takes a deep breath and wonders if he might not have been exaggerating the whole Zoe Jamison phenomenon.

‘I’d just as soon fuck you now,’ says Ben and he is soon inside her; not for long, and probably not even pleurably, but his triumph is no less astounding for the fact. He falls onto the floor next to her and they continue to kiss. Her tongue moves inside of his but he breaks the kiss, so he can pull his trousers up and take in the sight of her. He can hardly see her in the light, but he senses something different in her expression.

‘Hope it was worth the wait,’ he says, which he knows it certainly wasn’t.

‘Definitely, babe.’

They dress quickly; suddenly conscious of the consequences of being caught and Zoe drives them to her empty apartment where they spend the night in her bed, where he thinks he finally satisfies her. They fall asleep sometime after midnight and Ben is awoken by his hunger at four in the morning. He drives to a fast food joint and buys burgers and fries and two thick shakes. When he returns she is in her dressing gown watching *Rage*, and he can tell his unexplained exit has startled her. He brandishes the steaming paper bag and she smiles.

‘I suppose we have earned these,’ she says, and he sits on Zoe’s twin-seat, cotton lounge and eats his burger. He rests a hand on the nape of her neck as she sits in front of him on the floor. He lets his tongue savour the saltiness as he watches *Bon Iver* singing *Skinny Love* on the television; his favourite song.

He looks at Zoe’s long, elegant neck and contemplates loosening her dressing gown and running his tongue down the small of her back, just because he can. But the food is heavy in his stomach and he happily lies on the couch with sleep snatching at him.

Ben closes his eyes and falls into a vivid dream. Zoe wears a barrister’s wig while addressing Matt Schmidt in the witness box; on trial for his new relationship with Brianna. Zoe reads from a long scroll of paper which rolls ten feet across the floor and details each of the violent acts he perpetrated in his relationship with Jackie. Ben is startled to find that he is Matt’s lead attorney. He waits until Zoe has condemned Matt to a lifetime of loneliness and raises himself to speak. He begins to speak but the judge, Arthur, ignores him and begins his own cross-examination of Zoe.

When he wakes, he feels the mid-morning sun pleasantly warming his cheeks and he notices a white cotton blanket has been draped over him. He can distantly hear Zoe on the phone using the reedy voice she uses in men’s groups. As she walks into her lounge-room Ben can see she has showered and applied a minimal layer of makeup; her morning routine already accommodating a sleeping man in her house. She wears a grey cardigan with a zip and plain blue jeans and runners. Ben has never seen her looking so casual and he is disappointed, for reasons he can’t fathom. She smiles indulgently and kisses his cheek, the way she might treat her son when he oversleeps.

‘Lincoln has begrudgingly agreed to have Billy for one more night,’ she says. ‘Anyone would think I’m Joan Crawford. You don’t have to rush off?’ Her invitation is welcomed as

he can think of nothing he needs to do, besides the food shopping that can wait until tomorrow. But then he remembers it is the long weekend and Charles is home.

‘Shit,’ he says. ‘I have lunch at my folks.’

She mumbles something lugubriously and tidies her coffee table books into perfect piles. Trust his family to botch this opportunity. He pictures the smugness of Charles and his beautiful wife, Jess, at lunch. They will make their in-jokes and adroitly avoid any topic of conversation to which he can meaningfully contribute. He wonders why he plays his dutiful part in maintaining the status quo that serves him boiled lollies while the men in his family dine on caviar. He is gripped by a profound dissatisfaction with the role that has been bestowed upon him and in protest he spontaneously phones his mum in an act of rebelliousness he knows is ill-conceived.

‘Hi, Mum,’ he says without pausing for the onslaught of pleasantries. ‘Something has come up. I can’t make lunch.’ His mum’s silence deflates his buoyancy and he fumbles his words while feeling a prickle of sweat at the back of his neck.

‘I’ve met someone,’ he says. ‘And we are spending the weekend together.’

‘Well that’s fantastic,’ says Eve. ‘About time you had some female company, you’re far too old for all that moping about on your own. I’ll set an extra place.’ Ben wipes the sweat that has appeared at his temples as a playful smile finds its way to Zoe’s lips. Her eyes carry the same questions that she asked of him yesterday in his father’s office. He remembers how pissed off he felt yesterday and lets a wave of indignation wash over him.

‘I don’t think you’d approve, Mum.’

‘Nonsense, Benjamin,’ says his mother as Zoe sits beside him, moving her ear closer to his phone. He has never taken a date to meet his family and there was a long period where his mother suspected that he was gay. The truth is that his girlfriends have all been so plain and uninteresting that he hasn’t had the heart to introduce them to his father or brother; as if they

need any more proof that he is the buckled wheel in the family. The prospect of Zoe Jamison on his arm would bring with it nefarious status that is not without appeal. His father would be furious, but at least it would force his monocular gaze from his first born.

‘I’m pretty sure I’m right, Mum,’ he continues, leaning back in his seat to give himself some space.

‘I don’t care if you met her in a crack den, Benjamin,’ says his mother emphatically. ‘You will both be here at noon.’ He tries to interject but she hangs up the phone, practicing the obdurate mothering she would never dream of trying with his brother.

‘What was all that about?’ asks Zoe, with a cheeky smile, as if she doesn’t fucking know.

‘Mother has demanded that my new girlfriend attend lunch,’ Ben replies, laughing at the irony with deranged mania.

‘Arthur will be livid,’ she says, and her use of the word *will* sets off a flashing red light in his brain. Surely, she is joking with those puppy dog eyes? True to form, he has played this poorly and the nervous jiggling of Zoe’s knee tells him he will almost certainly lose her if he rejects her now. He feels the excruciating pull of that special knot in his guts as the hangover from his one glorious night. He might have known there’d be a price to pay.

‘It’s okay,’ Ben says, patting her stiffly on the leg, ‘I wouldn’t expect you to endure lunch with the old bugger, bad enough you should suffer him all week at work.’

Zoe furrows her brow as if trying to solve a riddle and he prays that she will not say what he knows she will.

‘He will need to know eventually,’ she says. ‘Unless I’m getting the wrong end of the stick?’ Ben feels Zoe’s excess baggage tug at his feet like concrete shoes.

She takes his silence as assent and walks wordlessly into her bedroom to begin her preparations. Ben sits condemned on the same couch which brought him so much happiness last night and listens to Zoe painstakingly choose an outfit for his family lunch like a teenager

before a big dance as she. Her nervousness confounds him: the Zoe Jamison he thought he knew would've rocked up in her runners and tracksuit pants and spoiling for a fight.

Ben works himself up into a frenzy as he gets himself ready and is deliberately aloof as she chauffers him to his family home, agonising over his old man's ability to commandeer a situation without having to appear. Zoe asks him twice if everything is okay, and he tells her that he's fine but refuses to look at her. He marvels at the depths of his passivity in not being firmer with her. Such is his lack of gumption that he will deliberately and knowingly plunge his family into crisis rather than risk offence. He silently condemns Zoe for her stupidity and hopes she might come to her senses and save them both.

Zoe finds the Eckermann manor without the need for Ben's navigation and this only reinforces Ben's annoyance. She parks the car next to the curb and they walk gingerly through the gap in Arthur's perfectly trimmed hedges towards the catastrophe that so surely awaits them. Zoe takes Ben's hand as they walk through the open front door inside his parents' red brick cottage and they are welcomed by the familiar roar of activity coming from Arthur's study. Arthur refuses to entertain anywhere but his study, despite its vast distance to the kitchen and Ben's mother traipses up and down the long, narrow hallway with heaped trays of food whenever there is an occasion. As they approach the study, the smell of the rich, brown leather couches, dusty antique books and chestnut book cases reminds Ben of his childhood, of a time when his Dad's world was a magnificent enigma, one he was destined to inherit. He thinks back to the times when his dad would read him *Tom Sawyer* in this very room and hates himself for the irreparable damage he is about to inflict.

Ben shakes off Zoe's hand just in time as they enter the study to watch Arthur making a show of filling champagne glasses as the family prepares to toast Charles; the prodigal son. Arthur makes it halfway round the table with the bubbly before muttering to himself that the bottle is empty. As he heads off on his task to find more champagne, his path is blocked by

Zoe Jamison who smiles bashfully next to his youngest son. For an awful moment the noise stops, and the guests look from Arthur's ashen face, to Zoe, and then back again.

'We are out of champagne, Zoe,' Arthur just about manages to say, and he brandishes an empty bottle of his best bubbly as if proof of his need to scurry down the hallway to extricate himself from the shock of it all.

Arthur marches off to find a new bottle and Ben is seized by his mother's deep-set eyes which burn even more devastatingly than he could have imagined.

'Eve, where's that other bottle of champers?' cries Arthur from the kitchen. Eve turns her gaze towards Zoe; the portrait of a gracious host.

'It appears we are out of champagne, Zoe,' says Eve, with evenness that Ben finds chilling. 'My husband would lose his head if it weren't screwed on.' She turns to Ben languidly and if he didn't know her he might think she was not furious.

'Perhaps you could pop to the bottle shop, Benjamin, while Zoe helps me in the kitchen.'

Arthur returns to the study and, on his wife's advice, takes a crumpled fifty-dollar note from his trousers and throws it on the table. Ben makes a show of refusing Arthur's money and heads for the door. Zoe throws Ben her keys before she's led to the kitchen so that his mother can politely ask just what the fuck she thinks she's playing at, while tossing the salad. Charles's wife, Jess, invites herself along for the ride, which Ben finds both unexpected and unwelcome, but he has no chance to refuse before they are sitting in Zoe's car ready to pull from the curb.

'Can we just sit here for a minute while I have a cigarette?' asks Jess, who Ben has never known to smoke, and he sits in Zoe's car with the doors open and watches her take an indulgent drag before passing it to him. Ben seldom smokes, save for the odd joint at the parties he rarely attends, but he takes a half-hearted puff and exhales too quickly. He tries to think of a time when he and Jess have been alone, despite her ten-year relationship with

Charles. The distance between them has allowed Ben to judge her for her part in the valorisation of his brother and old man. She has always seemed to him the type of woman who eagerly swapped her right to an opinion for a wedding ring, and never thought to consider she's been duped. It has always annoyed him that she is permanently attached to her daughters with a tissue, as if their juvenile snot might upset his brother's high-brow sensibilities.

'I only smoke when I'm stressed,' she announces, by way of an explanation that Ben has not sought. 'But when those two men get together it's like a thousand pinpricks right between my eyes.'

Jess has never been anything but polite towards Ben, even when he has been purposefully aloof in passive-aggressive protest of her girl-next-door demeanour, perfect white teeth and impeccable pedigree. She pinches the skin between her eyebrows and sweeps a hand over her forehead to remove strands of her blonde hair from her eyes.

'Should have tried living with them in the same house for the first fifteen-years of your life,' he says, handing her back the cigarette. She purses her lips in sympathy.

'God knows how you ended up so normal.'

Ben laughs, and her face becomes a question.

'I never considered myself normal,' he says as she draws the last life from the shrunken butt and lights another. She takes an indulgent drag and passes it to Ben with an extravagant flourish of her elegant fingers. He feels like she is finally introducing herself.

'I've always envied your ability to detach yourself from your father's crap,' she says. It had never occurred to him that he might be observed as anything other than a vague disappointment and her re-authoring flirts with an idea of himself which is altogether more interesting. He wonders if she chastises Charles across the breakfast table for not having his brother's sense of perspective. But he is probably getting carried away.

‘I’m not sure it was me who detached first, Jess.’ Ben takes a drag from their shared cigarette in a bid to seem profound but forgets not to inhale and coughs up a bead of phlegm that glistens on Zoe’s steering wheel. Jess has the decency to pretend not to notice and shields an eye to protect it from the vivid spring sun as she looks at him through her peripheral vision, as if deciphering his sincerity.

‘Don’t you dare play the scorned black sheep,’ she says nudging his shoulder gently with her beautiful fingers, ‘I fucking know you’re contemptuous of the lot of us.’

Ben tries to think of a time where he has heard her swear. One of Charles’s friends once told him that she had been a heavy coke user before she met Charles, but he had never believed it. They are both laughing now, although he is not exactly sure why. But he likes this new woman with the sun shining on her face and a proclivity for profanity.

‘So, who’s the mystery date?’ she asks, introducing a more formal vibe to the conversation. ‘I always considered your single status a genius move. And now you rock up with a glamorous blonde.’

‘Zoe’s a work colleague.’

Jess nods half-heartedly, before a look of shocked realisation cracks her face.

‘Wait a fucking second,’ she screams, clenching a hand around his wrist, ‘Not, Zoe Jamison? No wonder Arthur looked like he’d seen a ghost.’

He nods like a mute clown, caught between a sense of pride and trepidation as she looks at him with exaggerated horror.

‘You’re telling me that you’ve shown up at a family lunch with Arthur’s sworn enemy.’ Jess attempts a half decent impression of Arthur. ‘Zoe is not my enemy; her behaviour is the enemy.’

They laugh for a long time and Ben feels genuinely good, but he understands that profound anxiety is in the post.

‘I’m not sure you’ve made the right move this time, Ben,’ she says, patting him lightly on the shoulder. ‘And it’ll break her heart when she realises you are only using her to make a point.’

Ben can feel his pulse quicken; he is both hurt and delighted that Jess could believe him capable of using Zoe so ruthlessly. He wants to explain to her that he had no choice in bringing her today; that his mother made him do it. But it sounds pathetic when he rehearses it in his head.

‘I have never broken a heart in my life,’ he eventually says, without conviction. ‘Why would I start now?’

Jess leans down to stub her cigarette in the crack between the concrete and grass on the curb. ‘I have opinions, Ben. I’m not as vapid as you think. Now drive me to the bottle shop. If we’re to survive this wretched day, we are going to need to get drunk.’

The breeziness of their early conversation disappears with the revving of the engine and Ben fights the suspicion that Jess is annoyed with him. He stalls Zoe’s car three times on the way to the bottle shop because he is unaccustomed to driving a manual. He asks polite questions about his nieces but ignores Jess’s answers; too busy fretting about the repercussions with his parents.

They finally make their way back to his parents’ house and walk from the car in silence as Ben lugs the bounty of alcohol into the kitchen, half expecting to find Zoe holed up in the cellar, with his mother shining a torch in her eyes. Instead, he finds Zoe stirring the gravy, and she raises an ironic eyebrow as he enters. Eve is on her knees, mumbling into the oven, giving the disobedient chicken a jolly good talking to. She furiously turns knobs until she notices Ben.

‘Zoe has been telling me all about her son,’ she dryly announces.

Ben shoots Zoe an enquiring glance, but she remains fixated on the gravy, so he sets off down the passage with the fresh bottle of champagne. Ben refills the champagne flutes while Arthur sits in his favourite chair at the head of the table, reading Charles's latest paper, on the link between childhood trauma and bi-polar disorder. While Charles waits he talks distractedly to Hannah, the eldest of his two daughters, who tells him about her friend's pony. Hannah is halfway through her anecdote when Arthur whips the glasses from his face, and she stops mid-sentence.

'Not without its merits, if a tad reductive,' remarks Arthur. Ben looks sideways at Jess – hoping to share a smirk – but she is drinking sternly from her champagne flute, while placing a conciliatory hand on Hannah's head, and waiting for her father-in-law to continue. 'Remind me to make some notes in your margins. It rather runs the risk of seeming a one-trick pony. You know, there are one or two bi-polar sufferers who enjoyed perfectly pleasant childhoods.'

The self-congratulatory tears dissolve from the corners of Charles's eyes and he looks at his wife with that characteristic look of determination on his face.

'My publishers have been stern. I mustn't change a word,' he says with unusual churlishness.

'Then you should find the publishers you need, rather than want,' replies Arthur, a slight inflection in his voice threatening to blow the frost from the emotions he so seldom exhibits.

'Charles has done a fine job, honey,' says Eve, who has charged down the long passageway in recognition of the precariousness of the situation. 'We are very proud of you, dear.'

Arthur cedes his wife's implicit warning but it's not in his nature to allow a stalemate, so he takes a long, troubled sip from his fresh glass of champagne. Charles continues to stare at his father, his mouth slightly downturned as if he has more to say.

‘I’d encourage you to have another read, Dad,’ he finally says, and given the circumstances, Ben is happy to take up his usual role as a spectator. ‘I am confident you’ll find that my exploration helps provide some nuance.’

‘Nuance?’ asks Arthur rhetorically, his mouth like a frog. ‘Just remember you have the family reputation to uphold.’

Just as Ben thinks the tension has reached its zenith, Zoe brings out the roast chicken on a large white china platter. She places it in the middle of the table and smiles uneasily at Ben.

‘Leave it, dear,’ says Eve, tersely. ‘The potatoes aren’t even ready.’ Zoe sits down compliantly and pours herself a glass of champagne before taking small sips and staring at the offending poultry.

‘Why don’t we ask Zoe about your famous reputation, Father,’ says Charles, whose voice has raised an octave and Ben is reminded of walking home with him after school; when he would recite dirty limericks in a strange voice to make him laugh. ‘You don’t practice hubris for as long as you have and not make enemies. Why else do you think Doug Hillier’s suicide has become so celebrated?’ Charles points his finger squarely at Zoe, and Ben can see she has turned white. ‘You think it’s because of her that people are lining up to dance on your grave?’

‘Please don’t argue on my account,’ says Zoe, barely audible.

‘You might have thought of that before you set foot in this house without the whisper of a warning,’ says Eve, carefully placing her hands flat on the table.

Jess takes Hannah and Charlotte out into the lounge room, ostensibly to find a DVD for them. They are reluctant to leave, drawn to the sight of the drama unfolding before them. Ben catches Zoe’s eye and offers her a quick wink, but her eyes return to her glass.

‘I can understand how you feel, Eve,’ says Zoe. ‘I can see now that some advanced notice might have been wise. I hope you’ll forgive me.’

‘Forgive you for what?’ bellows Arthur. ‘The way you tell it nothing that’s happened over the past months is in the least bit connected to you.’

Zoe slumps in her chair as Ben wonders how it all came to this. He knows how hard this must be for Zoe and he thinks he should finally defend her honour.

‘It’s a bit more complicated than that, as we all know, Dad,’ Ben says, and he thinks he hears his mother’s gasp.

‘You should probably take some responsibility for what people have been saying about your practice, Dad,’ says Charles, who is now standing on his feet.

‘Same old Charles,’ says Arthur, who has lost the accustomed rational timbre in his voice. ‘A slave to the popular fucking majority. The difference between you and me is I don’t judge myself by other people’s opinions. You think you’ve made it because they publish your mediocre bullshit? The truth is that there is nothing in your papers that I couldn’t have read thirty years ago. You’ve stopped growing, my lad, and blaming me does us both a disservice.’ Eve takes hold of Arthur’s arm, stroking his shoulder and whispering something reassuring.

‘I’m pretty fucking sure you do care about the opinion of others,’ screams Charles. ‘It’s all you’ve ever cared about. It’s exactly why you can’t look her in the eye.’ Charles walks over to Zoe and points his finger a few centimetres from her temple. Zoe raises her eyes to examine his finger for a moment before looking at Ben with pursed lips.

Charles storms out of the study, his tirade of footprints following him down the long hallway. They all listen to the echo of his feet as they march out of the front door, before the door slams dramatically. In Charles’s rage he forgets his wife and children, leaving Jess to scurry about packing her children’s belongings. Jess walks into the study sheepishly and thanks Arthur and Eve for their hospitality, urging her daughters do the same, despite their obvious distress. They kiss their grandma on the cheek, but she ignores them, as if they are all

complicit in their father's impertinent outburst. Jess kisses Ben quickly and provides Zoe with a perfunctory handshake. Ben whispers to Zoe that they should leave too.

'Eve, can we at least help clear up?' Zoe asks, unwisely.

'Don't you think you've done enough,' cries Eve, and Ben takes Zoe by the hand to walk her briskly to the car before she can say another silly thing. As soon as they are inside Zoe starts the car and Ben is relieved to hear her laugh.

'Fuck's sake, Benjamin.'

He starts laughing too and reaches out to take her hand. He silently curses his mother for her icy treatment of Zoe, and for her ridiculous appeasement of the old man. He makes up his mind that he will never speak to his family again, he will choose Zoe and they can all rot.

'That whole thing with Charles has been a long time coming,' he says. 'I just never thought it would be today.'

She breaks from her laughter too seamlessly.

'You do know we are going to pay for that, don't you?'

'I'm so sorry, Zoe,' he says, and it briefly occurs to him that he might get fired. 'In hindsight, we might have kept our relationship in the closet a little longer.'

She fixes him with one of those brilliant smiles, and it still takes him by surprise.

'Do you really want this to be a relationship?' she finally asks, employing that hopeful look that landed them in this mess in the first place.

'Of course,' he replies, but he wishes he could have this day over, to at least plan a strategy. She moves a hand off the steering wheel onto the nape of his neck and he wonders if she notices him flinching.

'When we get home, I need to show you something,' she says. 'If this is to be a relationship, then I need to be completely honest with you. You've been honest with your dad about me, and that can't have been easy. It's my turn now.'

Chapter 7

Zoe examines the mothers with smiles plastered to their faces as they push their children on swings: surely, they can't really be enjoying this? Billy views their Saturday morning visits to the park as an unnecessary imposition to his weekend respite from school. He pleads with her to be left in his pyjamas with his Star Wars figurines and video games. She stubbornly perseveres with their ritual, cursing her need to be both mother and father. She sits on a soggy park bench and distractedly attempts the Saturday paper's morning quiz, while Billy furtively negotiates the slippery dip.

This time last week Ben was asleep on her couch as she momentarily considered a future with another man. Alas, their halcyon era had lasted only a few hours, brutally scuppered by a harebrained trip to his parents and her misguided honesty. It isn't telling him about the case note that bothers her; it's the fact that she let herself believe he could make her happy. She had no right carrying on like an oversexed teenager. She's glad she told him and she's glad he freaked out. At least when she is jobless, old and lonely she'll know she got exactly what she deserved. At least then Doug's ghost might finally give her some peace. Her phone rings and on seeing Lincoln's name she considers rejecting it but taking her misery out on him is the best option available so she answers in her most irritated tone.

'Thought you'd been abducted by aliens,' she says, referring to the fact he stood Billy up on Wednesday night without explanation. She has learned to curb the edges of her existence to accommodate Lincoln's whims, but it would be nice if their son was not destined to a similar fate.

'Ask not what I can do for you,' he replies, and she can tell he has that smart-arsed smile on his face. It is not unusual for him to greet her with a perversion of some iconic saying or another and she is sure there are women who find this intolerably cute. He knows full well she is not one of them, but she figures he is trying to be ironic.

‘How’s things?’ he says, when she doesn’t respond.

‘Shit. But I’m guessing that’s irrelevant.’

‘Can you drop Bill at your mum’s, for a few hours?’

‘You buying me lunch?’

‘If you’re happy with a counter meal at the Portland Arms.’

With the mention of the Portland Arms, she knows Lincoln is recruiting her to help him deal with his troublesome step-father, Bob, who drifted off in a sea of amber when his wife – Lincoln’s mother – died. Zoe makes a point of telling him that she needs to spend some time with their son, but they both know she will change her mind and she can’t decide if she’s the world’s biggest martyr or just a terrible mum.

Zoe’s mother is short with her when she arrives with Billy, but soon perks up when she tells her she is meeting Lincoln, who can do no wrong as far as she is concerned. To this day her mother blames Zoe for Lincoln’s affair with Bianca. Her mum tells her that Kat is back in Bendigo where she belongs, and Zoe catches herself wondering if her sister gets exactly what she deserves.

Zoe eventually makes her excuses and drives across town to The Portland Arms, parking by the sandwich board that advertises nine-dollar roasts and pokies. She enters the grizzly establishment and sees Bob perched on his usual barstool next to Lincoln, who has at least had the decency to be punctual for once in his miserable life.

She attempts to peck Bob’s cheek casually but the threadbare look of him gives her a shock, and he raises his eyebrows. When Lincoln first introduced her to Bob, he looked like a short, puffy version of Liam Neeson: surprisingly dapper in a suit. She remembers a mischievous twinkle in his eye, and the kindness he had shown to her and to Billy, who he couldn’t have shown more affection if he was his biological grandfather. But that was before Ali got sick. He disappeared literally and figuratively when Ali was diagnosed, and all that is

left is a sad impersonation sitting on a bar stool with a butcher of stout, greasy grey hair and a disturbing white hair clinging like a stalactite from his right nostril.

Bob has never explained why he went missing during his wife's dying months. Zoe can remember trying to talk with Ali about his absence, but she merely looked at her as if she was making a fuss about nothing, patted her on the knee and said, 'Let's just have a nice cup of tea, shall we, love?'

Lincoln's sister, Julia, has never forgiven Bob and Zoe had found her vitriol so fierce the last time they caught up that she made an excuse to cut their engagement short. But if Bob's elusiveness has offended Lincoln, he has never let on. Perhaps Lincoln was secretly grateful for the chance to be the star of the show during his mum's final days.

Bob looks pleadingly at his step-son with a red face that is bloated with alcohol and regret and Lincoln pretends to examine a photo of a premiership winning footy team behind the bar. Ali met Bob a year after her split with Kym. From the little Zoe knew, Bob had been good to her. His waking hours had always been divided evenly between his real estate business and The Portland Arms, which meant Ali developed a serious pokies addiction just so they could spend some quality time together. But there was little evidence of harsh words or ill-will, not that she ever gets much of a story out of Lincoln, who changes the subject whenever his mother's name is mentioned.

'How's work, Bob?' she asks, clearly overly-optimistic.

'I'm selling it, mate. If you know anyone?'

'Fuck,' says Lincoln, with a furrowed brow. 'Thought you'd die in the joint, mate.'

Bob looks up from his beer and Zoe knows with dreadful certainty what his next words will be. The deep intricacies of the red veins that have long adorned his face have turned deathly purple and he looks like her father just before he died. At least her father died

quickly, administered more mercy than he fucking deserved. All she can do is hope that Bob is afforded the same fortune.

‘I’m sick,’ Bob finally says, but his words are redundant.

Lincoln holds up his hands and scrunches his face in disgust.

‘If you’re going to give us bad news, mate, at least have the decency to buy us a fucking drink.’ Bob nods solemnly, as if he has trespassed some elementary rule of etiquette. He orders another stout and a pint of beer for Lincoln and Zoe. She is not normally a beer drinker but knows from experience to avoid the house red. Bob empties most of his stout in one swift motion. Zoe can see the muscles of his oesophagus working, every bit as highly tuned as a cyclist’s calves.

‘It’s the worst news, mate,’ says Bob, wiping the froth from his mouth. ‘The kind they measure in months rather than years. Liver. No prizes.’

Zoe places her hand lightly on the shoulder of Bob’s red and green striped polo jumper, noticing the white balls of lint as big as beanbag balls. A bulbous tear falls from Bob’s crusty eye and lands on his beer-coaster. For a moment she is mesmerised by its stubborn refusal to dissolve.

‘I don’t expect cartwheels, mate,’ says Bob, staring solemnly at Lincoln. ‘But I do have a favour to ask. Your mum and I purchased adjoining plots. We were going to spend eternity together and I plan to do exactly that with your permission.’

‘You don’t believe in that shit do you, Bob?’ says Lincoln with a frown.

‘Got any better options?’

A middle-aged man with a fine black moustache finishes a steak sandwich at the bar and moves around behind the bar to talk to the young bartender who is mopping the floor. He points at the white linoleum floor and loudly claims, ‘This is still fucking filthy.’ The young man looks at the floor with pensive expression and mumbles an inaudible apology. Zoe

notices Lincoln staring incredulously at the man who is pointing at the spots on the floor which need more attention.

‘Ease up, tiger’ Lincoln says to the man.

‘Hard to get good help these days,’ says the man, with outstretched hands as if to prove that he wishes he didn’t have to be an arsehole.

‘Fucking wonder why,’ says Lincoln, shaking his head contemptuously but the elegantly-moustachioed man makes a show of ignoring him, yanking the mop from his employee and ordering him out back to stock the shelves.

‘So, do you think you can you live with it?’ asks Bob, keen to return to the purpose of the meeting.

‘You can jump right in with her and spoon her rotting bones if it makes you happy, mate,’ says Lincoln who makes a show of looking at his watch. Zoe leans backward to shoot Lincoln a look, but he ignores her.

Bob takes out a pale pink handkerchief from his grey bus driver’s shorts and blows his nose, making a sound like a foghorn. Zoe notices, for the first time, just how much weight he has lost. She thinks about how lonely his nights must be, in that airy, lonely house where he stayed when Ali finally moved in to live with Lincoln. She knows what it’s like to be visited by vengeful ghosts, and she doesn’t envy him his final desperate months.

The tears start to leak more liberally from Bob’s eyes and he begins to sway precariously on his barstool. Lincoln looks at Zoe and they both put an arm around his withering frame and lead him out the front door. They walk to the carpark, past the moustachioed manager who is now fussing over the opened freezer in the bottle shop.

‘Fuck you, mate,’ says Lincoln, and Zoe immediately forgives him for going AWOL last Wednesday.

Lincoln fishes for Bob's keys in his shorts and they find his sedan which is in its usual parking spot, loading him into the back. Zoe hops in the front seat reasoning that they will pick their cars up later.

'Could've driven myself,' grizzles Bob as Lincoln impatiently eases Bob's vehicle onto the main road.

'You couldn't drive your finger up your arse, mate,' says Lincoln impatiently.

As they drive, Bob starts telling Lincoln he is like the son he has never had. He lists the things that Lincoln did for his dying wife and bemoans his own cowardice. Lincoln's top lip curls slightly upwards the way it does when she tries to talk to him about his mother.

'Don't talk shit, Bob,' Lincoln eventually says. 'You know that Mum was so ashamed of how she looked that she didn't want you around.'

'I could have done more to convince her, mate. Ignoring that fact makes an arsehole of us both.'

Lincoln softens, perhaps acknowledging the futility of his tough guy routine.

'Maybe you did fuck up, Bob. We all make mistakes. Fuck, I left Zoe in London when Billy was just born. She forgave me. Mum wouldn't want you worrying about this shit. It doesn't matter now.' Zoe watches Lincoln pleading his case as if he is a three-dimensional puzzle whose hidden form will eventually appear if only she stares long enough.

They make their way to Bob's house and park in his driveway, leading him into his white brick house. It takes Lincoln a couple of attempts to find the right key but when he finally succeeds their senses are assaulted by the stench of overflowing ash trays and dirty dishes. The odour is so overwhelming that Zoe gladly accepts when Lincoln offers her a beer from a mouldy fridge. Lincoln searches the dark recesses of his mother's old house, no doubt to survey the extent of the damage. Bob turns on his giant plasma to watch the sports channel on his sofa. An Australian cricketer is being asked about sledging and reminds the interviewer

that ‘Being Australian means playing hard, aggressive cricket and never taking a backwards step. What happens in the heat of battle stays out there. Having said that there is a line that should never be crossed, and we all know where that line is.’

Bob turns to her and flashes a smile. For a moment she glimpses the man she first met, who used to gently flirt with her, while asking exactly the right questions.

‘Did Lincoln tell you it took him and Jules 12-hours to get hold of me after she died? I woke up with a beer in my hand and with fourteen missed calls. I’m as bad as those arseholes you work with who wallop their women.’

Zoe is no stranger to such analogy. She has been baled up by countless feminists who claim that all men’s shoddy behaviour derives from their sense of entitlement. She has always disagreed with the assertion that Bob’s cowardice or Lincoln’s womanising come from the same place as Doug’s violence. To her, the act of a man hurting a woman has always been a unique brand of evil. She can excuse Lincoln and Bob their limitations and loves them both, as far as either is capable of being loved. But Doug Hillier was different; he needed to be stopped and she will never admit otherwise even if he shows up in her nightmares every night for the rest of her life.

‘I remember Ali once told me that she had never felt safe with a man until she met you, Bob,’ says Zoe, not completely sure if she is embellishing, but wanting to make him feel better regardless. But she only succeeds in making him look away in disgust.

Lincoln’s movements are harried and necessary as he returns from the bathtub with plastic gloves and a scrubbing brush. He orders Bob to follow by waving his finger with the impatience he practices so often on Billy. Zoe puts a load of Bob’s festering clothes in the washing machine while Lincoln leaves Bob to the tub, before ordering pizza. She finds some air freshener and clean linen from the long-forgotten corners of Bob’s cupboards and they do what they can to make his room conducive to sleep.

There are pictures of Ali placed like booby-traps all around the house but Zoe notices how Lincoln glides impenetrably past them, focussing on the next task. She wonders if this is a good sign, she has given up guessing when it comes to him.

Bob soaks in the bath tub long enough for them to remove the dense smoky cloud from his house. Lincoln opens every door and window and sets Bob's TV to the music video station. They work together in silence, occasionally belting out a line from the pervading music. They sing in harmony to Silverchair's *Tomorrow* and think about their lives twenty-years ago. She catches herself having a good time and is reminded yet again what a cold-hearted bitch she essentially is.

Bob finally reappears in a tattered green robe with some of the colour returned to his face. He leans against the wall and laughs like he has not a care in the world.

'Why the two of you never made a go of it has got me fucked. Lincoln, you're a good boy, but you've got rocks in your skull.'

'Not exactly Dr Phil, are you, mate?' replies Lincoln with a broad smile, looking pointedly at the moth-eaten holes in Bob's robe. Shame spreads across Bob's sorrowful, craggy face and Zoe shoots Lincoln another look. He doesn't ignore her this time but returns her gaze obstinately.

'You two should know better than to talk about a lady like she's not in the room,' Zoe says, still staring at Lincoln while hearing Bob stumbling towards his freshly made bed.

They set to work cleaning the lounge-room before the pizza is delivered. Lincoln pays the delivery man while Zoe dries two plates from the kitchen where she has been fruitlessly attempting to resuscitate a frying pan that is every bit as terminal as its owner. They sit together on the couch as Lincoln idly clicks through the stations while she burns the roof of her mouth with the ham and pineapple pizza that has always been his favourite. Finally, Lincoln settles on a rerun of *Rain Man*.

‘Ugh, Tom Cruise’, she protests, but they settle back to watch as they eat their pizza. The house reminds Zoe of Lincoln’s mother, and she guesses he is thinking the same thing. The sense of each other’s memories induces an unexpected coyness between them. She thinks about the intimacy they shared during those last months of Ali’s life when Lincoln was vulnerable and gentle in a way he’d never been. She watches Dustin Hoffmann count cards and is somehow sickly nostalgic for those long nights where Lincoln’s mother would snatch at sleep in the early hours of the morning and she would comfort him, bringing him wine and takeaway and stroking his hair as they listened to *Oasis* as the soundtrack to his grief.

Zoe fetches two napkins from Bob’s pantry and drops one in Lincoln’s lap.

‘You knew I’d end up helping you clean Bob’s house, didn’t you?’

Lincoln smiles; his face still affected by unfamiliar shyness.

‘Am I that transparent?’

‘Your transparency I can handle. It’s your lack of effort to disguise it which pisses me off.’

It has always been like this with Lincoln. He refuses to accede to social convention or to pretend to be something he’s not. She remembers the callow belief that she would change him during their brief, unsatisfying relationship. She had insisted that he accompany her to independent movies and tried to make him read her books. He’d taken a stab at a book by Helen Garner, but it stayed for months opened to page 54 on his bed side table and for reasons beyond his ken, this infuriated her.

‘I had no idea he was in this kind of state,’ Lincoln finally says and she smirks at his half-baked effort which goes nowhere near meeting her halfway. Lincoln pours himself some water from the kitchen tap, taking a long sip before finding a bottle of whisky in Bob’s pantry. He holds the bottle in the air but Zoe waves him away.

‘Hot date with Mr. Wonderful?’ Lincoln asks as he empties the kitchen sink and begins to fill it with hot water. There is still a mountain of dishes to be done. Zoe finds a fresh tea towel in one of the cupboards and they begin silently making plans to finish the cleaning.

‘If you’d bothered to pick up Bill on Wednesday night, I could’ve told you that things are not so wonderful,’ replies Zoe.

Lincoln concentrates on removing the stubborn scum from another of Bob’s pans and for a moment it seems he hasn’t heard her.

‘That’s a shame,’ he finally says neutrally, removing the last bit of baked on foulness from the pan and handing it to her. He searches for something every bit as challenging to de-mould.

‘Yes, it is a shame,’ she says. ‘Thank you for your touching empathy. But if it were merely a case of being dumped by a younger lover I’d probably survive. The fact is that now he’s now got me snookered.’

‘Snookered, how so?’ Lincoln sneaks a look at her from his peripheral vision, and stops his scrubbing, if only for an instant. A pleasant spring breeze filters through the open windows, and it reminds her of a time she can’t quite place. She gazes more openly at him and decides she is going to tell him the whole story. He looks tired and for the first time seems like a man approaching his middle age. She wonders how she can spend so much time with him and not have noticed.

‘Linc, you’re going to think me a twit.’

‘What have you done, Zo?’

This time he turns around and looks at her squarely.

‘I showed him the case note.’

For a moment it’s like he hasn’t heard her and he infuriatingly turns to pick up a glass placing three fingers of his left hand inside to reach the wine sediment that has formed at the

bottom. He continues to ignore her, and she stands in silence like a convicted felon awaiting the length of her sentence. As Lincoln pushes his fingers deeper inside the glass with one vigorous motion the glass shatters and explodes and Zoe immediately looks from Lincoln's white face, down to his fingers. There's a small red line on the outside of his index finger which stretches from its tip to just below the knuckle. At first, she is surprised that there is not more blood, but then the line on his finger expands to reveal a deep mess of blood and bone. She instinctively wraps her tea towel around his finger and makes him hold it above his head while she stands on tippy toes to apply pressure to the haemorrhaging digit. She looks at him with a grimace.

'Something I said?'

She can't help but laugh and he is soon laughing too, despite himself.

'I can't believe you told him, you crazy bitch,' he finally says, laughing and shaking his head.

'I fucking know,' she shouts, slapping herself theatrically on her forehead with her free hand.

'Is he going to tell his old man? You know you've put your career in the little fucker's hands.'

Zoe raises her hands in the air triumphantly.

'I fucking knew you don't like him.'

'What the fuck has that got to with anything,' he screams incredulously, but his mouth remains curled. She can tell that the cut on his finger needs a stitch, but he there is no way she'll convince him to loiter in an overcrowded emergency room on a Saturday afternoon. She manoeuvres him on to a chair in the lounge room in the hope that he will at least sit still long enough to allow her to properly attend to the wound. She can hear Bob's buzz-saw snoring from his bedroom as she unsuccessfully attempts to stem the bleeding.

‘I just want to know what it is you don’t like about him,’ she eventually says, a little more urgently than she’d intended.

‘I guess that maybe we’ve come to the part in our relationship where nobody is good enough for you.’ It’s the last thing she had expected him to say, and she takes a second to compose herself: he is still a charming little shit when the mood strikes.

‘Don’t be so fucking stupid, Lincoln,’ she says, and he withdraws his finger from her. He holds it the finger to the light, necessitating he turn his back to Zoe. As he takes the pressure from his finger it falls open like an overstuffed chicken. Even from her vantage, she can see this is outside the bounds of her nursing expertise. She rummages through Bob’s medicine cabinet and finds an old first aid kit which is another reminder of Ali. She ushers Lincoln into the bathroom and begins to unwrap some gauze.

‘I guess I don’t really trust him,’ he finally says, mainly to himself, possibly to break the monotony of his treatment.

‘That’s rich.’

‘Yeah, but I’ve always thought there’s an integrity to my unscrupulousness.’ Zoe carefully bandages his finger and she knows that he is trying not to show his pain.

‘I’m sure your mother would be proud,’ she quips and immediately curses herself.

‘I will always make special dispensation where you’re concerned, Lincoln Simmons,’ she says and pats him on the side of his face to signal that she has done all she can do to dress the wound. They walk back to the lounge room and Zoe notices a photo of Bob and Ali on their wedding day, wearing matching contented expressions, and she is reminded of how quickly it all goes to shit.

‘I do wonder sometimes, if any of us have much of a say in the stupid fucking things we do next,’ says Lincoln, with unusual wistfulness. The breeze that was so pleasant previously has turned cool and the light blonde hairs on Zoe’s arm stand up straight.

‘Oh, to be a man and have the luxury of such philosophical thought.’

‘Do you think Ben will betray you?’

‘I don’t have the will to care one way or the other,’ says Zoe, and for the first time she understands that the bastards have finally defeated her. She thinks back to the look on Ben’s face after she showed him the case note, and the numbing realisation that she had sabotaged her relationship and career. She had tried to coax him into watching television and pretend she had shared a cute little anecdote about her past life, but Ben’s jittery legs became too much to ignore. Eventually she took things into her own hands and seduced him, but he may as well have not been there and made an excuse to leave the moment he came.

Zoe had lain still in her bed for the longest time after Ben left in such a hurry. Sleep proved elusive for many hours and when she did drift into a fitful slumber she dreamt of Doug, as always. The dream started as it did every night, with her knocking on Doug’s door. Doug had opened the door with the rope still tied tightly around his neck. But this time he was gentle and instead of dragging her kicking and screaming, he took her hand lightly and she followed him to his bed. Doug had lain down next to her and stroked her hair and reassured her that she had done the right thing. At some point, without Zoe even noticing, Doug had turned into her father who lay beside her and told her that she had finally made him proud.

Zoe shakes off the memories of her nightmares, knowing that they will return soon enough. She gathers some more bandages and repacks Lincoln’s wound for the fourth time and thinks maybe this time it will hold. ‘I suppose you think your finger excuses you from helping me clean this shit hole,’ she says.

‘I will just pay someone.’

‘No, let me do this for him.’ She turns to walk back to the kitchen but Lincoln grabs her wrist and takes her in his arms, holding her wordlessly for the longest of times.

‘You know I don’t deserve you, Zo,’ he whispers into her ear, and she wishes he was right.

Chapter 8

There was a moment during his mother's funeral when Lincoln suffered from the glorious delusion that her death would change him. But his promises were as short-lived as the ones he made when Billy was born. He is still embarrassed by his hyperbolic epiphany during his mother's wake and the fact that he had bashed Zoe's ears for an hour about becoming a better man and a better father. Luckily, a woman he had been seeing at the time messaged him in the middle of his rave and he had convinced him to go to her place to fuck the stupidity out of his system. It is hard to believe that was twelve-months ago.

Mal updates his senior staff on recruitment, as the six blokes sit around the oval chestnut table in the boardroom. As Mal discusses the vacancy created by the unceremonious boning of Cris, Lincoln can sense that all eyes are on him, searching his vulnerabilities. Sam Winton squirms in his chair and a predatory smile cracks through his dry, freckled lips.

If Lincoln believed in God, he'd swear he was being punished on the anniversary of his mother's death. He remembers how contemptuous of her he was as a teenager. The more she and Bob treated him like the prodigal son the crueller he had become. On her death bed, Lincoln's mum had suggested he'd never gotten over her split from his dad, and she had never forgiven herself for hurting him. Lincoln still can't believe she would blame herself when he had behaved so appallingly; he was the one who chose to ignore her for so long in his quest to follow his father into the brown mire of predatory sweat and murkiness.

Lincoln sits in the meeting knowing that they want a reaction and on any other day he might acquiesce. But he has a horrible hangover and it's been an awful twelve months which has seen him achieve nothing except for one-hundred hangovers, the impregnation of his sister-in-law, a one-night stand with the mother of his child, an infected scar on his finger and a punch in his jaw.

‘For Christ’s sake, Mal, can we hire someone with a three-figure IQ?’ says Sam, and they all laugh as though they’ve never heard such biting satire. Sam’s been a laugh-a-minute since he started dating the tidy blonde he parades around the office on Friday nights like a trick-pony. Their orchestrated laughter strikes a painful note inside Lincoln’s chest, if only because he used to be its conductor. He prays for the gumption to slam his clenched knuckles against Sam’s pasty pockmarked face until his smug smile is a mess of bloodied pulp.

The meeting has now dragged on for the best part of an hour and they haven’t even got to the agenda yet. At this rate he’ll miss his lunch-date with Zoe. He wonders what it is that keeps him here, like a prisoner shackled to his over-priced chair. He is so exhausted. Fuck it; he thinks, and before he knows it he is watching their surprised expressions as he stands up, collects his laptop under his elbow, and makes for the exit. It doesn’t occur to him that his leaving will be viewed as a political statement: he’s hardly Rosa Parks, but they’re waiting to plunge just the same.

‘Something you’d rather be doing?’ spits Sam just as Lincoln’s fingers are clutched around the silver doorknob. He would be better just to leave but he turns to face the menacing pack while belatedly recognising his mistake. Sam Winton is like a young lion looking for his first kill, in those docos that Bill makes him watch. A young lion, just as Lincoln had once been. For him it had been Anthony Pannozzo who he convinced Coburn to fire. Lincoln can’t help admiring the perfect symmetry of it all. He has been only vaguely aware of the oncoming conflict for the past months and not nearly nimble enough to take evasive action. And now the lion is set to pounce. He knows Sam to be foolish and slow-witted and lacking in talent: but he is still a lion.

‘Apologies, lads,’ says, Lincoln, raising conciliatory hands. ‘I’ve a meeting with a client.’

‘Thought you’d forgotten what one looks like?’ Sam’s colleagues laugh harder than necessary, displaying questionable acting skills. Lincoln wonders whatever happened to

Anthony Panozzo. It was a long time ago, but he supposes Anthony still reserves a special place of hatred for him in his heart. Anthony wasn't the only one either; he has hurt so many people in the act of business and it's only now that he regrets any of it. He supposes he finally knows what it's like to be on the wrong end of the game he has always played for keeps. He had always been so philosophical about the fact that there were always winners and losers, but it's suddenly not so simple.

He looks again at the doorknob; if he eats their shit sandwich and leaves, he may just save himself for another month or two. But he is now so far down the pecking order that his survival depends on the sick whim of Mitch Coburn. He looks into Sam's watery, soulless eyes and wills his temper to eclipse his better judgment.

'Sam, I remember when your dad frogmarched you in to beg Coburn to give you a shot. I had never seen a kid with so much fucking acne. Whatever you've achieved, it's because of your old man. I bet your pretty little girlfriend is dry retching every time she has to touch your shrivelled pink body. It's all on the old boy's credit my friend.'

His small speech reminds him of the sheer exhilaration of reducing another person's life to meaningless with his withering, hateful tongue. He savours the secretive looks from Sam's colleagues. Mal blows air from his ruddy cheeks. Sam smiles as if enjoying the banter, but his face has turned an unfortunate shade of beetroot.

'Funny you should mention Coburn,' says Sam, glowering intensely at his colleagues. 'I have a meeting scheduled with him on Monday. I want to discuss some ideas I have about a restructure. I will be discussing our weakness in personnel management, You know it's funny. I once looked up to you. And now I am going to have to let you go.'

'You do what makes you happy, Sammy,' says Lincoln, with weariness that is both forced and genuine. 'But you'll always be that kid with acne.'

Lincoln drives light-headedly to his lunch date with Zoe and arrives early. He knows that his new habit of punctuality is a direct result of his reduced economic and social status and that he is transforming from one kind of life to another. His run-in with Sam will almost certainly accelerate the change.

He orders a coffee from the sexy waitress with neat black bangs and milky complexion but lets her pass without any of his usual suggestion. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat and surveys the usual one o'clock professional crowd who order quickly and answer emails on their phones. He notices an attractive, professional young couple sitting directly opposite him. The young man stares contentedly at his gorgeous girlfriend and a life filled with possibility. Lincoln looks at the oversized, post-modern grapefruit clock on the feature wall, which tells him that Zoe is five minutes late; she knows it's taking all his strength not to spend the day in bed with a bottle of bourbon and now she's going to make him fucking wait.

As his fury grows so too does the memory of his dead mother; that same vision of her in her final days that's always looking for a way to fuck with his precarious mentality. Everyone described her as brave, but she would have hated that ridiculous cliché. What the fuck is so brave about wasting away while being administered enough morphine to keep barely lucid? What was remarkable – as far as he was concerned – was her acceptance. If it was him he would have gone down foul mouthed and swinging, full of hatred for a God who doled out luck like a drunken sailor. But she forgave the God she had believed in without reservation, forgave Bob his absence and forgave Lincoln his arrogance. She pretended like it was an act of uncommon grace for him to let her move into his house in those final months. She never once mentioned the obvious: Lincoln was only trying to absolve himself.

He finds himself staring out of the large window in the direction from which Zoe will approach. He fears that he is unravelling a little more each day and that he is depending on Zoe far too much. There will inevitably come a time when he asks what she is not prepared to

give. Zoe walks into the cafe from the opposite direction like she is the Queen of fucking Sheba and he takes a large gulp from his double shot latte. She looks around the crowded café, putting her oversized glasses on the top of her messy blonde curls, searching with those piercing blue eyes before they find her target and she approaches. Lincoln offers her his cheek and she pecks it, sliding a small green envelope into his hand.

‘What the fuck is this?’ he asks. She grimaces, showing the early signs of crow’s feet that he hasn’t noticed before.

‘Sorry babe, I had to get you something small.’

He studies the envelope morosely while she orders a flat white, and he opens the package, hoping that she doesn’t notice his hands shaking. A one-hundred-dollar voucher to the pretentious menswear store she teases him about slides out from a card with a picturesque sunset in Thailand. Inside the card, in her tight scrawl, reads *Dear Linc, I was so proud of what you did for her. It meant everything. Never forget that you are a good man. I love you, Zo xx.*

He looks at the card for a long time, and for an excruciating minute he thinks he will cry. He eventually looks at her with the dullest expression he can manage.

‘This is bullshit,’ he says. ‘But thanks.’

‘Any time,’ she mumbles while looking desperately around the café. He decides he will let her stew for as long as it takes for him to get his shit together.

‘How’s work?’ Zoe asks but Lincoln ignores her question and they both sit glumly. He knows it’s wrong to be taking things out on her, but she should have known that celebrating the 12-month anniversary of a merciless death was a fucking stupid idea. If he can’t rely on Zoe to keep their relationship even, they’re both screwed.

‘Work is work,’ he finally says. She presses her fingers against her temples. The waiter comes to take their order and she orders a salad. He’s warned her that she is not eating

enough, and that starving herself won't bring her old client back. He remembers the shock of her bony hips on the night they'd had sex. He starts to feel like an arse-hole for being so grumpy.

'You remember Cris?' he asks, and Zoe nods her head obediently. 'He got fired, and there's a pretty good chance I'm next.'

'Have you done something?' Zoe asks her question out of the corner of her mouth, hinting at a possible sexual indiscretion. He feels instinctively hurt before acknowledging it as a fair assumption.

'I haven't done anything. That's kind of the problem.'

'Why didn't you tell me this, Lincoln? You never even talk to me about work. I assumed you were fine. Why do you always leave it until the last fucking minute to talk to me?' Zoe scrunches her mess of blonde curls into a fist and Lincoln watches as her anger turns into concern. 'What're you going to do?'

'I have enough money to keep me going for a while. And if it comes to it, I can always downsize. Child support might take a bit of a hit.'

She frowns.

'You know, there are other ways of providing support that doesn't involve money.'

Lincoln has known Zoe for most of his adult life, but he still can't reconcile her lack of concern for money. Not once has he she ever reached for a calculator to work out what she is owed; she has never once so much as asked him how much he earns. In his world that's the only question that matters. He catches himself staring at her and Zoe pokes her tongue at him. For whatever reason her silly gesture induces a lump in his throat and he thinks for a horrible moment he might cry.

His knee taps furiously, and he looks around the cafe hoping to find something to distract him before he makes a complete asshole of himself.

‘How is Cris?’ she asks, smart enough to know to change the subject.

‘I wouldn’t know,’ he says. ‘Do I look like I’m in social services?’

Zoe excuses herself to go to the toilet and Lincoln stares at the card she gave him before noticing the serendipitous image of his occasional bed mate, Charlotte Mohr, who is four tables away, talking excitedly to a man with thick white hair and a shiny black suit. The sight of Charlotte is a sure sign – if he believed in such bullshit – that he should stick to the women and conversations within his comfort zone. He makes a pact to forever banish the over-sentimental, delusional fantasies he has been entertaining about Zoe. So what if Zoe is the one person who is there whenever he needs her; in her own fucked-up way she’s getting some dysfunctional satisfaction from it all too.

He stares at Charlotte, as though he has telekinetic power over her. Zoe returns from the toilet and says something cheerful, but realises she is talking to herself, as he keeps his eyes firmly on Charlotte. Charlotte finally looks in his direction and smiles, before blowing him a kiss. She lays a placating hand on the arm of the man she is with and makes her way over. Lincoln rises to his feet a little too early and he can see that Zoe is confused, but it all makes sense when Charlotte arrives to smack his lips with an emphatic, open-mouthed kiss. Lincoln tolerates her embrace for much longer than usual as he savours Zoe’s discomfort. Charlotte eventually breaks from the embrace and turns to Zoe as if an afterthought.

‘Hi, I’m Charlotte,’ she announces, thrusting out her hand stridently.

Zoe rises to her feet to shake Charlotte’s hand.

‘Hi Charlotte, I’m Zoe.’

‘So Zoe, Is this business or pleasure?’ Charlotte asks, briskly.

Zoe raises her right eyebrow; a signature move he has seen all too often.

‘Can’t say it’s much of either, Charlotte.’

Lincoln knows that Zoe can look after herself, but he feels a twinge of protectiveness, albeit too late.

‘Zoe is Billy’s mother,’ he says. Charlotte looks at him as though he is speaking Pig Latin.

‘Billy is my son,’ he reminds her.

‘He’s quite the doting dad, Charlotte,’ says Zoe, and her phone rings as if in sympathy, she walks outside to take the call while waving at Lincoln and mouthing *see you next time*. Now he is stuck with Charlotte. As soon as Zoe leaves the café he wishes she would return and realises how much he has been looking forward to her company all day. To say he is fucked up would be a serious understatement. Charlotte launches into a long story about a mutual friend, some girl who he can’t quite place, and he is resigned to his penance.

Lincoln returns his stare to the card that Zoe gave him throughout the bends and the twists of Charlotte’s convoluted story. He stares out of the large window and sees that Zoe is still outside talking on the phone. She seems to be screaming into her phone and a panic rises in him as he watches her barge back through the café door.

‘Billy has been in an accident at school and has been taken to hospital,’ she screams, barely inside the door and the heads of the diners turn to her in unison. For a moment the news reverberates around his head and he stands outside of it, an objective interest in how he will respond. He doesn’t acknowledge Charlotte as he follows Zoe out to her car.

‘Is he okay?’ Lincoln manages to murmur but Zoe is crying silently and doesn’t notice him talking. He takes her keys and starts her car and catches every red light. He puts his hand on the back of Zoe’s neck but she flinches, so he removes it quickly. He wonders if she blames him for this; if she believes that accidents like this are reserved for the children of unavailable men.

Lincoln thinks of the pride he took in telling Kym that he was going to be a father: his old man had seized the front of his pants and said, ‘The Simmons balls are a weapon, son. Could

shoot a jack-rabbit from a hundred yards.’ He can still remember the revulsion he’d felt for his old man as he made jokes about the joys of fucking a pregnant woman, while the froth from his beer clung to the severe points of his bushy black moustache. Lincoln had promised himself he was going to give his child all the things that he had never had from his own father. Six months later he was on a plane to Heathrow with Bianca. And now he is driving to the hospital in the hope that he will find in one piece the son he has never quite accepted. He silently prays to the God he doesn’t believe in for one more chance to be a dad, despite his absolute faith that he’d fuck it up.

Lincoln parks illegally outside of the hospital and Zoe runs ahead of him, directed by a stern receptionist to the emergency department. They negotiate some wrong turns and just when he is sure that Zoe cannot handle the tension a moment longer, they see the large red emergency department sign. Zoe crashes through the swinging double doors and they find Billy lying in bed, with his eyes closed and a drip connected to his tiny arm. Billy’s leg is suspended in mid-air by sandbag weights which are hanging from his bed. Zoe rushes to her son, searching the room for somebody with a stethoscope to tell her something comforting. As she frantically examines Billy’s head for bumps or holes his big, sad brown eyes open and Lincoln, still not yet game to move from the entrance, puts his head in his hands and breathes for the first time.

‘Are you okay, little one?’ Zoe asks in between peppering his face with frantic kisses.

‘I got to ride in the ambulance, Mummy. I fell down and went to sleep. And my leg is broken, and I will have to stay home from school.’

‘What happened?’

‘Henry pushed me off the monkey bars.’

‘Why?’ Zoe is screaming with concern and relief and injustice as tears drench her sweet face.

‘I was too slow.’

A young man in blue scrubs walks nonchalantly towards Zoe and introduces himself as a physiotherapist. He talks to her softly so that Lincoln has to take a step forward to hear that Billy has sustained a fractured femur. The femur, says the young man, with incongruous authority, is the largest bone in the body and the fracture will immobilise him for eight weeks, the first of which will be spent in traction in hospital, and the remainder in a cast from toe to chest. He reassures her that Billy’s injury is a short-term obstacle: that he will be running with the best of them in twelve-months when this will be all but a distant memory. He tells her that this is the perfect time to break a leg because kids bounce back so quickly.

Lincoln’s initial wave of relief and gratitude subsides quickly and now he wants retribution for his son. He stares coldly at this juvenile physio who is adjusting the height of his son’s leg and making it sound like breaking the biggest bone in your body is akin to chicken pox: a rite of passage best ticked off at an early age. Zoe listens compliantly but Lincoln can’t help thinking that she is being force fed acceptance when a broken leg can only be construed as miserable fucking luck.

After the reassurances of well-wishing nurses and a tutorial regarding the pain killers being fed intravenously, Billy is finally wheeled into a crowded hospital ward with three other children. A boy a few years older than Billy lies in the opposite bed; he has a bald pate and pale skin. The boy watches *SpongeBob Square Pants* from a television fixed to the corner of the ceiling. His mother sits patiently next to him, wearing a burka and a concentrated expression; knitting a blue jumper. This is probably just another day for her, a short step in a never-ending journey. Her stoicism just about tips Lincoln over the edge and he feels himself staring at her too long; eventually she raises her face from her knitting to give him a timid smile. Lincoln needs to be alone and drunk before the tears come. He knows they won’t stop once they arrive and he prepares to make some version of the same excuse Zoe has learned to

expect. He ruffles Billy's hair and makes empty promises while avoiding all eye contact with him. Zoe squeezes his hand absently and he can tell she is preparing to do this alone. He turns to leave but his exit is blocked by a woman he thinks he recognises. She makes no introduction but looks squarely at Zoe.

'I heard what happened,' says the woman. 'My poor Henry is a mess.'

The mention of Henry confirms for Lincoln that he has met this stern woman with the shock of silver hair. He remembers that she had made herself known to him one day at Billy's junior footy clinic. She had demanded that he take his turn on the BBQ, oblivious to the fact that he was not that kind of dad. He remembers her son, Henry, as a precocious football talent who kicked all the goals and called the other kids names. They had played a practice match and Henry and Billy had been on the same team. Henry had deliberately knocked the ball from Billy's hands and kicked a goal. Lincoln remembers Billy's woeful face as they had driven home, and how he had secretly wished he had been Henry's dad instead.

'Anyway,' says the woman, who Lincoln now remembers is called Alice, 'Is he ok?'

'His femur is broken,' says Zoe, 'which means he will be incapacitated for eight weeks.'

'Oh,' she replies as if there has been an unnecessary fuss over nothing. 'I heard all sorts of nonsense from Megan Childs about head trauma. Apparently, Billy gets scared on the equipment and holds up the line. Henry was only trying to help.'

Alice has not once looked at Billy and Lincoln steals a look at his son who is watching Alice with a furrowed brow. Lincoln thinks again about those awful football clinics and his disgust at Billy's timidity. He remembers how one of the parents would hand out Snakes at the end of the sessions and Billy would refuse to take one unless he was sure every other kid had been given theirs. It occurs to Lincoln that his son deserves so much more than he has been given. He is filled with the desperate urgency to make up for every scornful look he has ever directed at his son; every not so subtle little hint that tells Billy he needs to change.

‘Actually, Alice,’ Lincoln interrupts, ‘Billy is booked for a cat-scan. His vision is still blurred and there is still the question of long-term cognitive repercussions.’ He doesn’t know how these fictions occur to him, but they’ve got to be some pay-off for living his life in the margins of morality. Alice looks him up and down like he is some kind of interloper: disqualified from such conversations because he is only a bit-player, which he supposes is fair.

‘I have just come to convey my concern,’ says Alice, with a little less certainty.

Lincoln gives her what he hopes is his most profound stare.

‘Well, Alice, I’m sure you’ll appreciate my family needs their privacy.’

Alice looks at him for the longest of moments as if he must be joking. For a second he frets that she will produce from her bag a requisition of his absences from sports days and school concerts. Mercifully, she turns around and flounces out of the ward and Zoe immediately convulses into laughter.

‘God, I hate you,’ she says. ‘Why do you always get the best lines?’

‘Perks of having no conscience,’ he says allowing a smile to crease his face. He grasps her hand and is pleased to note that she takes it tenderly. Tears are still falling, more gently, from her eyes as she watches her son lying helplessly in his bed.

‘I’m sorry about our lunch date,’ he offers, always too late.

She raises her eyebrow at the memory. ‘Is she really your girlfriend?’

‘She may have the impression.’

‘I never know what you want from me,’ she finally says. ‘I was there when she died and I loved her too. You invite me out for lunch on the anniversary of her death and then act as if I’m an overly-dramatic lunatic for mentioning it.’

He doesn’t know what to say because there is no excuse for his behaviour. He looks at Billy who, in his usual way, is consumed with worry.

‘What’s with you?’ he asks.

‘Dad, what’s a cat-scan?’ he asks and Lincoln and Zoe look at each other like they’ve once again forgotten to include their son in their in-jokes.

‘It’s nothing, sweetheart,’ says Zoe, once again kissing his face. ‘Daddy was just telling a little white lie to make the nasty lady go away.’

This only marginally placates him and he looks at Lincoln for the first time with those big, brown, heartbreaking eyes.

‘Are you disappointed in me, Dad?’

Lincoln studies the trepidation etched across the face of his beautiful baby boy: the irrefutable certainty that he will never be good enough for the one person who should give him unconditional love.

‘No mate, far from it. I’m bloody relieved that you’re alive.’

He longs to emphasise his point but doesn’t know how and envies Zoe her demonstrative love.

Billy contemplates this for too long.

‘I’m a bit crap at the monkey bars,’ he finally says. Lincoln chuckles softly and takes a step towards his son and tentatively kisses his cheek.

‘It’s ok, mate, your old man’s crap at a lot of things.’

Chapter 9

Ben sits in another uncomfortable chair outside his father's office and marvels at how every stick of furniture in Arthur's practice makes his arse fall to sleep. He wonders if his old man has done this deliberately to maximise his advantage, but he has never known his father to contemplate something as banal as interior design.

Ben is reminded of sitting outside the principal's office – in year six – with a couple of boys he was trying to impress, but whose names he can no longer remember. They had been caught harassing a new boy who wore an earring in both ears and tie-dye shirts. Ben had taken his turn in calling the kid 'poofter' and making thrusting motions with his pelvis. The thought of his old man's logical, calm and linear rebuke had been too much, and he had sobbed uncontrollably at the principal's feet while the other kids watched him with bemusement. The principal had felt so sorry for him that he sent him back to the class with a lukewarm reprimand and his father was never informed. Ben had assumed the threat of his father's disapproval would diminish in adulthood but it had obdurately followed him while he travelled to the most remote corners of the globe and even in the backpacker's hostels of Istanbul and Denpasar, Ben was stammering and impotent, invisible and uninteresting.

His father's bushy right eyebrow appears from his doorway and ushers Ben inside. Ben bypasses his least favourite chair to sit on the double seated grey couch at the far corner of Arthur's office. If he is going to be pilloried, he will at least suffer in comfort.

'I suppose I've forfeited my father of the year nomination,' says Arthur with a weak smile that hardly disturbs his thin lips. A fortnight has passed since their ill-fated lunch and his mother has still not returned Ben's calls. He checks his phone constantly awaiting absolution, but she remains unusually merciless. He has not seen Arthur since, something about a keynote address in Beijing; another serendipitous engagement to protect him from an

uncomfortable conversation. Ben called Charles last night who told him Eve had been on the phone daily, furiously brokering a peace deal between father and son.

‘I’m sorry, Dad,’ says, Ben, assuming the submissive position too early. ‘I shouldn’t have brought Zoe. It had to be a shock.’

Arthur nods his head slowly, as if it had never occurred to him to take offence. The bags under his eyes are swollen and dark. Ben supposes that Charles has finally managed to upset the impervious old bastard.

‘Perhaps you did take your mother’s invitation a little literally,’ he says. ‘But I don’t blame you for being caught in Zoe Jamison’s web. She can be quite the charmer when she puts her mind to it.’

As a kid Ben longed for a father who administered quick and decisive punishment, like a swift kick up the backside: the kind of retribution that would sting for a moment but wouldn’t stick in his guts for days until he was finally forgiven with scant recognition. As his waits on his father’s elongated pause he curses his decision to sit on the sofa; too far away to interpret the facial tics that provide small clues to the Arthur Eckermann enigma.

‘We were just friends, Dad. There is no web.’ Surrendering, Ben gets up and plonks himself on that rickety steel framed antique chair nearest to Arthur’s desk.

Arthur rises from his seat and walks towards Ben. For a horrible second Ben fears physical intimacy, but danger is averted when Arthur walks to his window to place thumb and forefinger between his venetian blinds.

‘Your mother has been seeing someone about her anxiety,’ says Arthur, flatly. ‘I’m afraid your mild impertinence came at rather a bad time. You weren’t to know, of course.’

Ben closes his eyes and covers his face with his hands.

‘No wonder she won’t return my calls,’ he mumbles, as Arthur walks to him and this time he does touch his cheek with the back of his hand, which is liver-spotted and cold, but Ben is disappointed when it is removed.

‘This whole business has taken its toll on her, Benjamin. She will need some time.’ Ben’s face prickles as he thinks back that look of despair on his mother’s face when she saw Zoe Jamison in her house. How quickly and seamlessly Zoe was able to seduce him. Arthur may not be perfect, but he has given Ben a privileged life with his private-school education and overseas jaunts, and the subsidising of his never-ending university career with its fits and starts. It might be time for Ben to stop blaming him for his inadequacies and take some individual responsibility.

‘It was all her idea, Dad,’ Ben says, wanting to storm into Zoe’s office and thump his fist on her desk or flirt with her playfully and then laugh at her gullibility.

‘Let’s not judge her,’ says Arthur, with a look in his eye that Ben has not seen before. ‘Zoe’s had a tough life. You should ask her about her father some time.’

‘She’s mentioned him vaguely a couple of times,’ says Ben and Arthur turns from the window and sits down on his sofa. Arthur considers his son more carefully than Ben can remember and he seems to be deliberating on whether to tell him what’s really on his mind. Usually, this is the moment when Arthur’s phone rings or there is a knock on the door and Ben feels his shoulders tense.

‘I had no idea of how damaged she is when I first hired her, son,’ says Arthur, earnestly. ‘I’m afraid her father damaged her in ways that she has never admitted. I’m not convinced she should be practicing.’ The dimness in Arthur’s eyes is something Ben hasn’t seen before.

He knows that his father’s observations should motivate him to pity Zoe, but he feels nothing but contempt. Clearly, she has a whole history of trauma to deal with which is sad enough, but this is his family’s life she is messing with, and now she has embroiled him in

her dysfunction. Ben is not used to feeling such malevolence and the release of the inexorable knot in the pit of his stomach is almost euphoric.

‘I’m sorry I’ve been so unavailable, Ben,’ says Arthur, still looking at him. It is everything Ben has wanted to hear and almost too much all at once. ‘I rather think the stress has gotten to me, too.’

‘How’re things with you and Charles?’ Ben asks.

Arthur chuckles softly and throws off his glasses.

‘I’m afraid that our Charles is rather sensitive, like his mother.’

His father’s comment, however pragmatic, pleases Ben so extravagantly that he becomes light-headed, and begins to see dark spots in his vision. Arthur springs from the sofa and perches himself on the corner of his desk, so his face is inches from Ben’s.

‘Do you remember when you and Charles went through your chess craze?’

Ben vaguely remembers bothering Charles with his chess set after he had joined the chess club at the start of high school. By that time Charles very rarely had time for his annoying younger brother but he did indulge him in a game when he was in his more generous moods.

‘The two of you would play for hours and Charles was relentless, beating you every time,’ says Arthur, staring at something on his wall. Ben is not sure if he is studying the boomerang he received as a gift from a trip to the APY lands, or if he is lost in a vision of unfamiliar sentimentality.

‘At first Charles would draw you into his trap until you were within a move or two of victory, before he would have you checkmate in one move.’

Ben remembers the games and that feeling of frustration returns, just as he was starting to feel so good.

‘You would just reset the pieces and ask him for a rematch. You never so much as uttered a curse. And then somehow you improved.’ Arthur starts to chuckle, and Ben has no idea where his old man is going with this.

‘You improved so much that your mother started to worry you might actually beat him,’ says Arthur now laughing with his belly jiggling and he wipes the tears from his right eye. ‘In the end the stress was too much for her and she hid the chess board while you were at school. Winning has always been everything to Charles. Your mother and me were always so glad of your sense of perspective, Benjamin.’

Arthur returns to his chair behind his desk as if his admission is entirely inconsequential. Ben looks at where his father sits and thinks back to Zoe’s seduction of him in that exact spot. He becomes intoxicated with the injustice of it all, and decides, folly or not, it’s time he made amends. As he forms the words to tell his father about the missing case note he fights the innate certainty that he is committing a tactical error. He has learned enough from his old man to understand knowledge is power and this is perhaps the only ace up his sleeve he will ever have. It would just be like him to plonk it on the table at entirely the wrong moment.

‘Dad, there’s something that you ought to know,’ he says.

When Ben exits his father’s office twenty-minutes later he can still trace the exhilaration of Arthur’s memory of him as a child. The relief of finally choosing a side adds lightness to his steps and he decides to go for a walk. He walks for a couple of blocks in a dreamy state and considers the possibility of walking home. It’s past three pm and he has no appointments, as usual. His phone vibrates in his pocket and he sees that it his mother who will finally take pity on him.

‘You hurt me a great deal, Benjamin,’ says his mother by way of a greeting. ‘Bringing that woman in to my house was inexcusable.’ Ben remains silent, knowing that he has no excuse to offer. ‘I know you’re young, Benjamin, but I would have expected more from you. She

rather saw you coming, I'm afraid.' Her mother's description of his gullibility threatens to deflate his buoyancy, but it's a small price to pay for absolution.

'I'm sorry I hurt you, Mum,' says Ben, with perfunctory execution and he makes his plans to cut this conversation short.

'I forgive you, Ben. And I am glad that you and your father are getting along. The two of you are more alike than you think.'

Ben tells his mother he is late for an appointment. He wants to think that Arthur's story about his children's chess games was genuine, but he can't be sure. He decides he will not dwell on his father's motivations; whatever they were he had no choice but to divulge Zoe's subterfuge. As Arthur rightfully points out, the most important person in all of this is Sandra Hillier and she deserves to know the truth that Zoe has inexcusably hidden from her.

Without knowing why, he walks through the big yellow doors of a local bar and orders a pint of beer. He sits on a wooden bench in the empty beer garden and drinks his celebratory beer. If it is not exactly clear what he is celebrating at least he is less anxious than he can remember, and the alcohol feels good as it slides down the back of his throat. He half-heartedly watches the replay of last week's footy final and takes out his phone to pretend to answer work emails. There is an old man a couple of tables away drinking a glass of red wine and he looks over so hopefully that Ben phones his brothers as an excuse not to engage in friendly banter.

'Benny boy,' answers Charles, on the fifth ring, just as Ben was resigned to leaving a voice message.

'How are you, Charles?'

'Flat out,' says Charles before providing his younger brother with a long and not so interesting itinerary of the demands from university students, publishers and his doting family. Charles drones on about being time-poor and Ben wonders if busyness has become

the new socially acceptable way to brag about the relevance of one's life. Charles talks for such a long time that Ben starts to worry that the lonely man at the bar will think he is only pretending to be on the phone, given he hasn't said a word for the past ten-minutes.

'How are you and Dad?' Ben manages to ask when Charles is momentarily distracted by someone asking him a question in the background.

'It's all good. He finally called and apologised. Told me he was out of sorts because you rocked up with Zoe, which was kind of a dick move, by the way.'

Ben ignores his brother's barb, not wanting their conversation to become mired in the ethics of his dating habits.

'Mum probably made him call you,' he offers.

'Who knows,' replies Charles but he is again distracted by a voice in the background which is growing more incessant.

'Do you remember when we used to play chess as kids?' asks Ben in desperation, with reddening cheeks, realising he has no hope of manufacturing an appropriate segue.

'Vaguely,' says Charles.

'You used to kick my arse.'

'I had a few years on you,' says Charles, a little more brightly.

'I remember not winning a single game. I always wanted to win just one. Did I ever come close, do you think?'

'How the fuck would I remember that, Ben.' Charles turns to speak to whoever it is that is demanding his attention. His voice is directive and as soon as he finishes talking the person's voice stops. 'Ben is everything alright with you?'

'I just wondered about it.'

Charles sighs demonstrably and Ben can picture him looking at his watch. Whenever Ben visualises his brother he is wearing the same black tuxedo which features in his Facebook profile.

‘Ben, I’m sorry but I don’t have time to reminisce about our childhood. You were such a dreamy kid; I’d be surprised if you knew which side of the board was up.’

Charles hangs up the phone and Ben wonders how two grown men who shared an upbringing have never had one honest conversation about their childhood experiences, or their true feelings about either parent. When they were kids, Charles had seemed impenetrable to the frustrations and the hurts which dogged Ben’s delicate psyche. Charles’s single-minded and unfettered ambition had been a constant reminder of Ben’s lack of mettle. He wonders for the first time if Charles is every bit as scarred by growing up with Arthur as he is. He thinks that maybe Arthur had a point when he said that winning was too important for Charles. But he knows that there is always an element of rationality in everything Arthur says; which is why he is always so convincing. Ben considers the possibility of Charles’s vulnerability and he knows it makes him happier than it ought to.

Ben decides to have a second beer and stands at the bar next to a man with a perfectly manicured black beard and a *Flaming Lips* T-Shirt, who orders craft beers that Ben has never heard of. ‘Did you see them when they were here last month?’ Ben asks, pointing to his shirt.

‘Nah, caught them years ago in Amsterdam,’ says the man, who turns towards his equally hip looking friends with four pints of exotic lager expertly nestled in his fingers. Ben walks glumly back to his table with his beer and considers purchasing a six-pack to drink alone at home, when he looks at his phone and notices that he has received a message from Zoe.

Thanks so much for taking the men’s group last night. Billy is out of hospital, so I will be back next week x.

Ben and Zoe have not spoken much since she showed him the case note and he was forced to take charge of the men's group alone last night in her absence. The strange thing was that he had felt more confident in her absence. Without the threat of Zoe's judgment, Ben had felt free to ask the men the questions that he wanted to ask, rather than the ones she expected of him.

There had been a small incident where one of the men had gotten himself worked up because he had an argument with his ex on the way to group, but eventually he had run out of steam and Ben had considered the night an overwhelming success. Davey, one of the newer men in the group, had even stopped him as they exited to tell him how much he had changed. Davey had told him that as much as he admired Zoe, it was good to speak to blokes like Ben about what was going on for him.

Ben hasn't eaten since breakfast and thinks about ordering food, but he decides not to sacrifice the light-headed, reckless elation that comes from drinking on an empty stomach. He hears the distant noise of the drive-time traffic beginning to build and, on a whim, he returns Zoe's message. *I heard about Billy's broken leg, poor little guy. I'm actually at the pub. Why don't you come and join me for a drink?*

He turns his phone off because he cannot abide the excruciating wait. He makes himself contemplate other things for five minutes, before he can stand it no longer and turns it back on. Zoe's message reads, simply, *where are you?* Ben gives her a call and she says she will come and meet him in half-an-hour. He finishes his third beer in that time and sits at the pub marvelling at how easy his life suddenly seems. He can feel no trace of the knot in his stomach and he dares to imagine the possibility of a life lived less anxiously.

Ben is dangerously tipsy by the time Zoe walks through the big yellow door to sit next to him in the pub, which has slowly filled without Ben even noticing. She gives him a tentative hug and he wonders if he should kiss her cheek, but eventually just plants his mouth

awkwardly into the back of her hair. She smiles broadly and seems younger in the lights that have taken their effect in the beer garden, accentuating the gentle mist of light freckles on the bridge of her nose.

‘You’ve never struck me as the wagging school type,’ she says with a playful grin and he considers saying something ironically cheesy, but he can’t think of anything, so he just smiles as they walk wordlessly towards the bar. He is pleased when she orders vodka.

‘I should only have one,’ she says. ‘I’m taking a risk leaving Billy with Lincoln in the first place. But I do appreciate the offer to clear the air.’

Zoe looks better than last time he saw her. Actually she looks amazing. She stands close enough to him that he can smell her vanilla scent and he notices – with satisfaction – that even the dude in the *Flaming Lips* T-Shirt is staring at her.

‘You look amazing,’ Ben says, taken by his lack of self-consciousness. She wears a faint necklace with a small gold cross and Ben is temporarily distracted by the thought of her religion, it was not a topic that had arisen in their short-lived hours of intimacy.

‘Must be all those nights sleeping in a hospital bed,’ she says with a wink that is comfortably the most glorious thing he has ever seen, and he turns around to see if anyone else caught it.

Ben raises his glass and makes a toast to better fortune.

‘I am pleased you could meet me,’ he says, noticing that her black dress hangs a little loosely around her shoulders.

‘I was a bit surprised to get your message, to be honest. I wasn’t sure I was still on your Christmas list.’

Ben smiles wryly.

‘I was a bit surprised by your admission,’

‘It was unfair of me to share that with you,’ she says and Ben temporarily forgets she is now her enemy. ‘I got carried away and put you in a really tough position.’

‘It’s fine,’ says Ben, making a show of wiping her concerns away with his hand. ‘It really is a matter for you and my father.’ Ben makes a tent with his fingers which momentarily reminds him of Arthur, so he quickly drops them to his lap.

‘That’s really generous of you,’ she says with a tight smile and Ben concentrates fiercely on a way to change the subject.

‘How is Billy?’ he says, easing his chin inside his thumb and forefinger and resting his elbow on the table. He miscalculates and knocks his beer glass on its side. Fortunately, it is already empty, but it does make a disconcerting noise and Zoe looks at him for a second with a pinched expression.

‘He’s been a trooper, actually,’ she says, and Ben looks at her for a long moment, forgetting to fix his face with an expression of sympathy.

‘Broken leg can’t be easy to deal with as a single mum,’ he says, suddenly aware of his tongue that feels heavier in his mouth.

‘Lincoln has been surprisingly helpful,’ she says, smiling at him hopefully while her foot taps frenetically at the corner of the table.

Ben thinks back to his men’s group last night and how proud he had been of himself, how surprised by the knowledge that he no longer needed Zoe Jamison. The men had seemed so much more relaxed without her and Ben had been shocked to look at the clock to see the two hours had vanished so suddenly. The thought had occurred to him as he received Davey’s encouragement, that he was not looking forward to Zoe’s return next week. But now Arthur knows about the case note, he supposes her return is no longer inevitable.

‘Shall we have one more drink?’ Zoe asks as she gets up abruptly to walk to the bar. Ben walks to the toilet and mumbles to himself something about Lincoln as he stands at the urinal,

a little unsteady on his feet and when he is finished he washes his hands and looks at himself in the mirror for a long time. A man walks out of the cubicle and washes his hands next to Ben, who continues to stare at his reflection

‘You’re fucking gorgeous, mate,’ the man quips, with a thick Scottish accent before flicking water off his hands and walking out. Ben returns to their table to find Zoe attempting to preserve what’s left of her personal space as a man in his late thirties with luxurious salt and pepper locks leans into her with his hand on the top of her wrist. Ben can see that Zoe has positioned her elbow between them like a navy vessel guarding against foreign invasion.

When Ben takes his seat the man doesn’t bother to acknowledge him; too busy regaling Zoe with a long story about his theory on climate change. Ben sits and sips at his drink but this time the amber liquid sticks in his throat. Zoe’s new friend continues to bang on about the hole in the fucking ozone layer and she continues to politely ask him questions. If Ben didn’t know better he would think she was egging him on and it occurs to him that maybe she is. He wonders if this is how it started with Lincoln; if she’s the kind of woman who can’t say no or enjoys the attention. He thinks about his father’s description of her as damaged and wonders if he is more perceptive than he has given him credit for.

‘Listen, mate,’ Ben hears himself saying to the man in a tone he doesn’t recognise. ‘About time you fucked off, I reckon. I need to talk to Zoe about something personal.’

The man looks at him for the first time and Ben is happy to notice his right eye is drooped in a way that throws his face out of kilter.

‘I’m sorry, mate,’ the man says. ‘I will leave you to it.’ He gets up and joins a group of three men at the other side of the beer garden. He doesn’t look back and Ben is forced to admit that his intentions may have only been friendly.

Zoe looks at him with her mouth twisted and Ben knows that her expression will haunt him for the days and weeks to come.

‘That was really fucking rude, Ben,’ she says, and he feels the knot in his stomach make its triumphant return.

‘I was only trying to help,’ he says, pitifully and Zoe looks at her watch and yawns. Ben wonders just how it all unravelled so quickly. Zoe’s phone chimes and she reads her message while chewing her bottom lip.

‘I think I might like to go home now, Ben,’ she says, pushing her glass of vodka in the middle of the table as if it’s the deadliest of poison. She looks at her watch and looks again at her phone and Ben cannot bear to think of the destitution that awaits him when she leaves. He wants to make her feel his pain but how would she ever know what it’s like to be rejected. He stares at her and shakes his head slowly and she clutches her handbag to her chest.

‘Why did you even come?’

‘I came because I want us to be friends, Ben,’ she says as he hears her phone chime again as if too mock his plight. ‘I really liked you and although I know we rushed into things, I would never have told you about the note if I didn’t like and trust you.’

Ben knows that Zoe is trying to be magnanimous, but he refuses to let her make him feel guilty about telling Arthur.

‘You do know I will lose everything if my dad thinks I’m disloyal?’ he says.

‘It depends on your definition of everything,’ she says, and he feels every bit the daddy’s boy that she has always pegged him for.

‘What about Doug Hillier’s definition of everything?’

‘I am not sure alcohol becomes you, Ben.’

‘It’s a fair question.’

Zoe removes her bag from her lap and places it on the table. She reaches out to the middle of the table and grasps her half-full glass of vodka. She contemplates him fully and arches an eyebrow.

‘You blaming me for his death?’

‘It’s not my place to attribute blame,’ he says, leaning back in his chair and taking a deep sip of his beer.

‘I’m asking for your opinion, Ben,’ she says, and he feels the spring breeze cool his bare arms.

He marvels at Zoe’s habit of asking him the questions she has no right asking him. The truth is that he thinks she did fuck up, that she became so fixated on the safety of Sandra, that it didn’t occur to her to care about the safety of Doug. But if she can’t see the evidence of that from her own case note then he’s hardly about to explain it to her.

‘Why don’t you ask Lincoln his opinion?’ he says, petulantly. ‘Seeing he’s being so helpful.’

Zoe smiles sadly and gets up from the table and Ben is not sure why he has a lump like a peach stuck in his throat. She moves towards the exit but something makes her stop and she turns around and places her hand gently on the side of her face. She gives him a quick kiss on his forehead and it just about breaks his heart.

As he watches her leave, he sits in the beer garden and orders another drink paid for by his daddy’s handouts. He has chosen a side and shown his true colours: he is a snivelling little snitch and a waste of fucking space.

Chapter 10

It is nine o'clock on a Wednesday morning and Lincoln breezes into Zoe's office for only the second time in his life. She remembers the first time he had come to liberate the case note from its file and she can't help but admire the symmetry of his being here today. Lincoln closes the door and kisses her so hard on the lips that it hurts her front teeth. He looks like shit and she knows already that it was a mistake to ask him here. He might be the only person left on earth prepared to fight for her but her inexorable appetite for the fight has finally left her. She makes her preparations to let him down gently.

Zoe has been forced to make a habit of letting the men in her life down gently. After Lincoln had rescued her from Ben's drunken tantrum last Thursday, she was awoken in the middle of the night by Ben's incessant knocking. He had stormed into her house stinking of alcohol and pledging his newfound commitment; talking brazenly about their future together and threatening to bring the L-word into the equation. He had refused to leave and eventually she had held his hand and steered him into her son's bed. Moving Billy into her bed had been quite the task given his current immobility and Ben had watched her passively as she struggled with her sleeping son, while prattling on about his feelings as though he was the answer to her prayers. Her failure to throw her naked body at him has caused him great personal affront and he has made a point of ignoring her in the days since. She walked into the practice kitchen on Monday morning to say hello to him, but he had immediately left the room, with his porridge still steaming in its bowl.

'You ready for them, tiger?' says Lincoln, determined to push ahead with the laconic façade he practices in dire circumstances. He prances around her office studying her book collection with that quizzical, smug grin plastered across his face. He takes out her copy of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and his smile widens.

'How's this working out for you?'

She feels herself redden, not because he is fucking with her, but because she was once so callow to think that self-help books would guard her against the catastrophes of life.

‘How’s work?’ she asks, just to retaliate. Lincoln shakes his head at her and chuckles softly.

‘I need to do this alone, Linc,’ she says, knowing that subtlety will only make things worse.

His eyes shoot to the floor for a second and Zoe fears the worse, but he collects himself just in time and smiles brightly.

‘Good. If I had to be in the same room as that little prick I’d have to break his fucking nose.’

‘We both know you’re a lover, not a fighter,’ she says and he laughs again. He moves over to kiss the top of her head, but she withdraws quickly knowing that he will make her cry if he doesn’t get the fuck out of here.

‘I’ll call you later,’ he says, wandering out of her office towards his next misadventure. Zoe makes herself sit down and practice her deep breathing. She hasn’t seen Sandra since before Doug’s death and although she has practiced for this moment every day since, she is not confident she will be able to do Sandra the justice of holding it together. She sits for the longest of times thinking about the father of her child and hoping that he will be alright.

Ben interrupts Zoe’s thoughts when he sticks his head in to her room.

‘We are ready for you,’ he says without meeting her eyes.

Ben is wearing a perfectly fitted blue suit and navy silk tie; it is the first time she has seen him dressed so formally. She begrudgingly acknowledges that it’s a good look for him. She walks behind him into Arthur’s office and Sandra is the first person she sees.

Sandra wears a faded blue Holden polo jumper that is way too large; Zoe assumes it belonged to Doug. She has curled her hands inside the ends of the frayed sleeves so that she

appears childlike and insubstantial. Zoe is heartened when Sandra nods her head slightly in recognition. The absence of malice in Sandra's face confirms immediately that Arthur has been making rather too much of her litigious threats. The realisation should comfort Zoe, but she knows she is just as culpable as Arthur for making Sandra come here today. As she takes her seat at the table with the two Eckermann men she knows she is every bit as responsible as they are for this sordid, sorry mess.

Ben engages Sandra in a moronic conversation about the unseasonably warm weather and the rounded vowels of his private school education are like fingernails down a blackboard for Zoe's tender nerves. She makes herself take another deep breath and count to five and reminds herself again that Ben is not the inventor of his behaviour; he is merely performing a role that he has inherited courtesy of his breeding and gender.

'I really appreciate you coming, Sandra,' says Zoe, cutting Ben off in mid-sentence and cursing her voice which is bottled in grave huskiness. 'The last thing I want to do is make things harder for you.'

Sandra shrugs slightly as if her own wellbeing should be the least of anybody's concerns. Her hair colour has changed; she has given up on the bottled blonde look, returning to her mousy brown origins. She still has those striking green eyes that project the unmistakable kindness that Doug depended on.

'That's fine, Zoe,' she whispers, almost inaudibly. 'It's not your fault.'

Zoe stares at Sandra a little too incredulously and a renegade tear wells in her right eye as she holds it in place with every inch of gumption she can muster. She senses Ben and Arthur fixating on her precarious teardrop, willing it to drop, like a championship winning putt. Eventually Zoe feels it make its slow, shameful track down the side of her face and she hates herself for proving to them that she is every bit the emotional fucking wreck that they have manufactured. Ben leans back in his chair and hands her a box of tissues from Arthur's

desk. She looks at his dumb smile and his expensive suit and throws the box on the floor, doing her best to eliminate him from her vision before she says something cruel, or tells him that his brown shirt is altogether the wrong colour for his blue suit.

‘I’m so sorry, Sandra,’ Zoe says. ‘There’s not a day that goes by where I don’t wonder what would have happened if I had have done things differently.’ Sandra nods and for the first time smiles, if wanly.

‘You know what they say about if, Zoe. If Auntie had balls she’d be your uncle.’ Sandra’s comment reminds Zoe that she is incapable of holding a grudge.

‘So, how are you?’ Zoe asks, trying to conceal her immense relief.

‘Numb. Mostly I get by, but I still can’t look in the mirror without wanting to scratch my own eyes out.’

‘Sandra, you’ve been through so much,’ says Ben, leaning forward in his chair. ‘I can only imagine the courage it’s taken.’ Sandra contemplates Ben for a short moment before looking at Zoe and raising her eyebrows just enough to remind Zoe why she is indisputably her all-time favourite client.

Seeing Sandra reminds Zoe of her once impenetrable commitment to safety of women and children. She had forgotten that feeling ever since the night she thieved her own case note. Her deluge of self-recrimination has highlighted the many mistakes she made, but seeing Sandra at least allows her to vaguely acknowledge that her efforts were genuine.

Zoe dreamt last night that she went to Doug’s house and had not been able to find him. She searched through every room, growing increasingly frantic, until she ran out of the back of the house and noticed that his noose lay on the doorstep without him. She woke with an aching emptiness as she realised that the malicious grip that her nightmares had over her were beginning to relent. She fixes Sandra with a look that she hopes will convey something of what this woman has done for her. It would be much easier if they were alone and she tries to

think of the men in the room as cardboard cut-outs. But Sandra averts her eyes from the depths of Zoe's sentiment and there is nothing that Zoe can do to convince her not to hate herself. Zoe remembers Arthur had once accused her of 'piece of string' counselling because she didn't understand when she had seen a client for too long. Maybe the old bastard had a point. Whatever her own future in the provision of therapy – doubtful as it is that she still has one – she will be much less certain of anything.

She looks for a moment at Arthur who has been at his desk collating some paperwork. He clears his throat impatiently and they all look at him. Zoe feels an improbable calm wash over her as Arthur comes to join them at his meeting table. The outcome of this meeting suddenly seems so much less important to Zoe. She can no longer keep judging herself through the eyes of Doug Hillier, or Arthur Eckermann. After all, she still has to deal with the memories of her own dead father, chief resident as the man in her head. She can't keep trying to cram Doug and Arthur in too, not if she wants to keep sane for Billy or Lincoln.

'He really did a number on us, didn't he?' Zoe eventually says to Sandra, hoping that she is not trying to colonise her grief.

Sandra looks at the table for the longest of times.

'Doug always said that if a job is worth doing, it's worth doing right.'

Arthur shuffles paper with a trembling hand and clears his throat to speak. The four of them sit around his circular table and Zoe focuses on Ben's strange expression.

'Are we waiting for your support person?' Arthur asks Zoe impatiently.

'No, I decided there was no need for that,' says Zoe, as if this really is no witch hunt after all.

'I've been saying that all along,' snips Arthur. 'Sandra, for your benefit this meeting has been arranged at my request as the last attempt to manage some quality assurance issues without the psychology board's involvement. As I have explained to Zoe, the board have

taken the view that the absence of a case note from Zoe's final meeting with Doug needs to be investigated. They've given Zoe until close of business today to provide an explanation. If there is no explanation, I am afraid we, or rather they, will have no choice but to intervene.'

Arthur looks from Zoe to Ben and then back to Zoe, making a tent with his fingers. Zoe once again looks at Ben in a final attempt to interpret whether he has sold her out. Ben returns her stare, but his face gives nothing away. She wants to believe that he has honoured her secret, but she knows it is more than she can realistically hope for and his neutral features confirm everything she needs to know: she is a dead woman walking.

'Sandra, I know it's tough, but we will need to revisit the last day of Doug's life once again,' says Arthur, pressing his pursed lips with his finger as though he genuinely wishes there was an alternative option. Sandra turns her glass of water in her hands; she is shaking noticeably and some of the water escapes over the edge and on to the table.

'I would really rather not,' Sandra says, but Arthur is looking at Ben solemnly and Zoe knows he will do whatever it takes. Sandra won't be spared.

'Don't do this, Arthur,' Zoe cries, rising from her chair and making a decision in an instant that she should have made months ago. Arthur's face becomes a dare.

'Unless you have something more you can tell us, I'm afraid we have no choice but to interrogate Sandra a little further,' he whispers and the look that passes between father and son finally confirms to Zoe that this meeting is a sham. Zoe lets her knees fold and sinks back into her seat. She counts to five and as calmly as she can possibly manage picks up her pen and writes a note in the middle of her pad in barely legible scrawl. *You told him*. She passes the pad over to Ben who pretends not to read it.

Ben pours himself a glass of water but can hardly keep his hand still enough to get the water into his mouth. His face has turned a strange colour that is stuck somewhere between yellow and green and she fights an instinct to slide her hand across the table and comfort him.

He has been a very naughty boy and he should feel bad for ratting on her, but she has no interest in watching him squirm, so she looks at Arthur purposefully. This ruse has gone on long enough.

‘I give up, Arthur.’ she says, and his head swivels towards her. Zoe blocks Arthur and Ben from his view and looks at Sandra. ‘Sandra, I regret not telling you this at the start, it was a terrible thing to do and I hate myself for it. The night of Doug’s death he disclosed his suicidal thoughts to me. I was much more worried about you and Tayla moving out of the house safely. I should have done more to ensure his safety. And if that wasn’t bad enough, I hid the case note which proved my lack of care.’

Zoe’s defeat is now complete and it’s no small relief to release the build-up of tears that trickle brazenly down the side of her face. She watches Sandra for a long-time; they all do. Zoe resigns herself to some harsh words, but the longer Sandra sits in silence, the less sure she becomes of what form her retribution will take, or if it will come at all.

Arthur leans back in his chair and makes his neck crick. She notices his blue shirt is a size too tight and accentuates his old man’s belly. In all the commotion of the past months he seems to have given up the waistcoats and bow ties which were the staple of his wardrobe for so long. She feels vaguely empathetic towards him, which is why she offers him a small smile as a concession to his victory. It’s a smile left unacknowledged. She gets a whiff of his strong butter menthol fragrance and it makes her feel strangely nostalgic for their old duels and the lilting pomposity of his questions which she had once found so reassuring.

‘This is a very serious confession, Zoe,’ Arthur says sombrely. ‘I am afraid the board will need to be informed. It would be better for your sake if they heard it from you.’

‘I will tell them,’ says Zoe, wondering how the fuck she is going to explain this to them.

‘Wait,’ says Sandra loudly and Zoe jumps slightly in her seat. ‘I don’t understand the relevance of any of this.’

‘The relevance,’ says Ben, ‘is that Zoe could’ve kept Doug alive and she failed in her duty of care to do so.’

‘There’s nothing Zoe could have done to keep him alive,’ says Sandra and the fire returns to her emerald green eyes. ‘But I could have stopped him when he rang me five minutes before he killed himself.’

Arthur and Ben stare at Sandra for the longest of times, with their mouths slightly ajar and for the first time Zoe thinks she can see the family resemblance. Sandra attempts to elaborate her story, but each time she opens her mouth, the emotion snatches at her throat and prevents the words from escaping. Zoe tells her to take her time and watches as Arthur surreptitiously looks at his watch.

‘He rang me in a fit of rage when he realised I had moved out with Tayla,’ Sandra finally manages to say. ‘Zoe had warned me against answering his call, but he kept ringing, over and over again, until I didn’t have the strength to resist. He screamed and threatened me until finally I managed to calm him down. He told me that Zoe had given him the number of a doctor, but he would only agree to call him if I told him where I’d taken Tayla. But I refused him. I told him I’d call him again in the morning and that he needed to get some sleep and I hung up,’ she says, and she wipes at the corner of her eyes with the bunched sleeves of Doug’s jumper. ‘He had threatened to do it so many times, but I never actually believed he’d go through with it.’

‘Why have you never thought to mention this,’ says Arthur, barely trying to conceal his frustration.

‘Nobody ever asked me,’ Sandra replies desperately. ‘I wanted to tell Zoe, but you banned me from talking to her.’ Zoe sits for a moment with the stunning realisation that Arthur is a lying sack of shit: all that talk about respecting Sandra’s wishes was a fabrication designed to condemn her. The knowledge that she could have helped Sandra through the brutal onslaught

of the last months – and vice versa – lights a fire inside Zoe’s stomach and she wants to reach across the table and smack the smug look from Arthur’s face. Even during their torrid interactions over the past weeks, she had always believed in Arthur’s professionalism. She can barely contain her fury, but this is not the time to attack him.

‘Perhaps you boys might give us a moment,’ Zoe says, refusing to look at either Eckermann and clenching her fist to her mouth to fight back the vile words that threaten to explode like vomit.

‘Are you suggesting I leave my own office,’ says Arthur, high-pitched and ever so slightly desperate.

‘If you’d be so kind.’

Zoe keeps her eyes firmly fixed on Sandra, but she can sense the silent negotiations between Arthur and Ben. She knows that Arthur will be searching his brain for a way to regain the upper-hand. The tension in the room reaches the point where Zoe senses the inevitable unfurling of her white flag, but then she hears their footsteps on Arthur’s polished hallway floorboards.

Zoe supposes she has won. Arthur has overplayed his hand by allowing this meeting and he will be chastising himself for underestimating Sandra’s loyalty. He had assumed that Zoe’s confession would drive a wedge between them and allow him a mandate to ensure she never practiced again. It occurs to Zoe that she should feel like she’s had a victory over adversity, or that good has triumphed over evil. But she looks at the broken woman opposite her and no longer has the energy to contemplate the difference between good and evil. And she knows she deserves to feel anything but sanctimony.

A dry smile cracks Sandra’s face as Zoe pats her hand.

‘What the fuck was that all about, Zoe?’

Zoe smiles gently.

‘You might have saved my career.’

Sandra looks at her quizzically. ‘You’re going to stay here?’

‘Fuck no.’

‘What’re you going to do?’

‘I have no idea, Sandra. But I’d like to keep on working. I’d just like to do it better. And I’d like for us to keep in touch.’

‘Arthur said you’d be in trouble with the psychology board if you kept counselling me’

‘Arthur doesn’t get to make the rules anymore.’ As the words tumble from her mouth, Zoe feels that they just might be true. She wonders what Doug Hillier will have to say to her in her dreams tonight or if maybe he really has finally lost interest in her. She wonders what form Doug takes in Sandra’s dreams and if he will show her the same mercy.

‘I’m sorry for putting you through this, Zoe,’ Sandra finally says, and Zoe feels a sense of fatigue wash over her. She would give anything not to have to return to these familiar conversations with Sandra.

‘You didn’t put me through anything, Sandra. You didn’t make me hide that case note and you didn’t kill Doug. And you didn’t make me treat him with contempt when he told me he’d considered killing himself. You had no say in any of that.’

Zoe thinks back again to that last conversation with Doug. Lincoln told her that her case note was unnecessarily self-critical. But she knows that to be untrue; if anything, the case note lets her off easy. She can remember clearly thinking *do us all a favour* as Doug told her about his suicidal intentions. She wonders how she ever convinced herself that such a position of contempt was reasonable, no matter how atrocious she found Doug’s actions to be.

Sandra begins to fidget with the sleeves of Doug’s jumper again and Zoe knows that she doesn’t believe a word of what she says.

‘Zoe, do you think it’s possible that we both let him down that night?’

Sandra’s emerald green eyes look up at her with a small sense of hope and Zoe knows that she cannot possibly let her down yet again. Zoe knows that if she is to keep talking with Sandra – in whatever form that takes – she will be most useful if she admits that she has no fucking clue what she’s doing.

‘I think that’s possible,’ Zoe says, because she can no longer be certain of anything.

Chapter 11

Lincoln pulls into the steep gradient of his father's driveway. Stella's car is absent, and he assumes she's taken Billy on an outing given she wouldn't leave his son alone with his old man. He gets out of the car in the clothes he had on yesterday and his white shirt sticks sourly to his skin. Lincoln is surprised to find the front door locked and he rattles the screen door impatiently. Kym answers the door and looks out at the driveway.

'What happened to the Beemer?' asks Kym, observing Lincoln's secondhand Holden in his driveway.

'Downsizing,' he grunts, 'I'm in between jobs.'

Kym's top lip curls and he turns his back on Lincoln.

'Root the boss's missus?' asks Kym, out of the corner of his mouth. Lincoln follows his father down the hallway into the lounge and is surprised to see Billy on the couch in front of a replay of last night's footy final. He kisses the top of his son's head, but Billy doesn't raise his eyes from his *Pokemon* album. Lincoln sits down next to Kym whose eyes are now fixed on his oversized screen watching the pay TV that he can't afford.

Lincoln tries to relax into the game and is momentarily mesmerised by a graceful footballer who takes three bounces down the wing and kicks a goal from the half-forward line to put the Giants two-points in front.

'That kid can play,' Lincoln says but his father is not listening.

Lincoln goes to the kitchen and searches the bottom of the fridge but has no luck until he disturbs a bunch of limp celery from the crisper and finds a solitary stubby.

'Want to split this beer, Dad?'

'Bit early for me.'

'Since when?' says Lincoln as he rips the top off and takes the first fortifying gulp of what he hopes will make his first day of unemployment bearable. 'Where's Stella?'

Kym takes his television remote control and turns up the volume. Lincoln sits down next to him but suddenly feels silly and childlike drinking a beer in front of his son so early in the morning. He puts it down on the coffee table and promises himself that this is the first day of a new life.

‘Now you’re unemployed you might want to stop splashing your money about. I’ve told you we don’t bloody need it,’ Kym says, interrupting Lincoln’s silent promises. It takes him a moment to remember that \$800 is automatically debited from his pay into Stella’s account every month. He had started the practice when the old man had nearly gone bankrupt and Stella couldn’t afford petrol to take Billy to the playground. Three years later and their finances are still a fucking mess. Kym had been driving a courier van for a while, but it played havoc with what he calls *shaggers back*.

‘That is for you to spend on Billy,’ he says and the old man turns his face away like he has been slapped in the face.

‘More money than sense.’ Kym’s thick fingers disappear in and out of each other and the constant flickering exacerbates Lincoln’s anxiety.

‘Why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind, Dad.’

‘I’m tired of it, mate,’ says Kym who springs to his feet like a cat and drags Lincoln by the arm to the kitchen, out of Billy’s earshot. ‘When you were a kid and rooting anything that walked I was probably proud of you, if I’m honest,’

Kym looks around at Billy to ensure the agitation in his voice is not carrying.

‘But you’re as good as forty and you still can’t keep your dick in your pants. And now you’ve taken a magnificent great fucking turd in your own nest.’

Lincoln breaks free of his father’s grip and walks back to the lounge to collect Billy’s toys and then walks to the spare bedroom to pick up his clothes which Stella has folded neatly into his *Batman* backpack. He walks to his second-hand crap-box of a car and opens the door, so

he can sit down and think. He wonders if it was Troy or Kaz who squealed but he knows it wouldn't have been Troy. He sits and listens to his crackling car stereo and starts to cry again. He knows that his tears are self-indulgent and pathetic and that they are motivated by the mess that his life has become, rather than the pain he has caused to Kaz or Stella.

Lincoln sits in his crappy used car and weeps and silently hopes that his father will come out to put an arm on his shoulder and tell him that everything will be ok. But he knows that's not Kym's style and even it was, he has relinquished his rights to compassion. He takes his time to collect himself and walks back into his father's house and picks up his son gruffly, and carries him into his car, hoping that Bill can't smell the alcohol on his skin. It takes an age to complete the arduous task of fitting him into the special car seat they have had to use while he is in his cast. He tries to loop the seatbelt through the legs of Billy's cast and the task is made more difficult by his shaking hands. Billy doesn't breathe a word during the whole procedure and Lincoln is at least thankful for that small mercy.

Lincoln starts the engine which sounds tinny and unsatisfying and already he pines for the smooth sounds of his old life. He backs to the top of the driveway but he pumps the brakes, knowing there is too much left unsaid, as usual. He tells his son to wait for a second: a ridiculous thing to say given he can't move a muscle. He storms back into his father's house finding his father on the couch, drinking the beer he had left and watching as the Cats wrestle back the lead.

'You mentioned running into Christine Nugent a while back,' announces Lincoln and his voice is cracking; fighting tears, but his dad remains impervious to his intrusion. 'I never told you about the night I found you with her at the Jenner's, fishing your cock out of your pants. Mum saw it too.'

Kym refuses to look at him but he swivels the beer in his hands and Lincoln know this is hurting him.

‘I suppose that excuses you for rooting your sister-in-law?’ says Kym, quietly.

‘No. Of course not, mate. What I did to Kaz was despicable. I’m just saying that I had a fucking good role model.’

Kym’s hands finally stop fidgeting and he sits like a statue for the longest of times. Lincoln is waiting for something, but he doesn’t know what. Just as he is about to give up and go to his son, Kym leaps from his chair like a viper snake and throws the beer bottle inches past Lincoln’s head. The bottle crashes ferociously into the lounge room wall. A volcanic explosion of glass and froth sprays Lincoln’s shirt.

‘Do you ever think just to say sorry, you arrogant little cunt,’ screams Kym and if it wasn’t for the energy lost on the hurling of the beer, he supposes his old man might hit him. The two men look at each other as the reality of what has just happened sinks in. Kym shrugs his shoulders and Lincoln fights an urge to slap him on the back and say something blokey.

‘Suppose I should fuck off then,’ says Lincoln. Kym nods his head slowly but without conviction. Lincoln sits down on the beer-soaked sofa and his dad sits down next to him for a long time, both looking blankly at the footy. Lincoln walks to the closet to find a broom and starts to mop up the glass, but tiny shards are embedded in the sofa and he has no chance of picking them out with his trembling hands. Kym finds the vacuum cleaner and they wordlessly set about their task with utter incompetence until Lincoln remembers he has left Billy in the car.

‘I really am sorry,’ Lincoln just about manages to say as he puts his hand on Kym’s shoulder.

‘Me too, son. Me too,’ says, Kym, but Lincoln is unsure if he is sorry because of Christine Nugent, or because he has fathered such a fuck-up.

Lincoln gets into his car and is relieved that Billy is still furiously studying his *Pokemon* cards. He drives his son in silence and spends a long time retrieving him from the back seat

before getting them both clean and dressed. Billy is unable to get his cast wet, so Lincoln goes about the business of washing him by the laundry basin with a warm flannel. Lincoln has inexplicably enjoyed the task of caring for Billy in the days since his release from hospital. Finding practical solutions to the logistical transport and hygiene issues that Billy's temporary disability have posed has given him something to focus on and distracted him from other issues such as the end of his career. At first Billy was too embarrassed, at the mature age of six, to surrender his independence to his dad. But he has eased into his incapacity and father and son have found a surprising level of ease since the accident. Without the encumbrance of arguments about Billy's involvement in sports, they are free to watch movies starring *Muppets* or *Smurfs* or work on *Lego* projects while chatting easily about the kids in his classroom. It's hard to knock the kid's dignified acceptance of a truly shitful situation.

Billy is quiet for a long while as Lincoln settles into the silent rhythm of washing his son without damaging his cast. As he ruminates on strategies for patching things up with Stella he is eventually interrupted by one of his son's ubiquitous questions.

'Dad, did you and Grandpa have a fight?'

'Of course not, mate. Just a difference of opinion.' The silence that ensues tells him his son is not so gullible.

'Did you do something mean to Auntie Kaz?' Lincoln wonders how to explain to a six-year-old that his dad has screwed the wife of his grandfather's partner's son. He decides to shoot for honesty, for want of a more prudent strategy.

'Your dad hurt Auntie Kaz's feelings very badly. Your grandpa is disappointed in me. Just like I would be disappointed in you if you hurt someone's feelings.' Silence ensues and Billy is giving nothing away, recommencing sucking on the straw of the juice that Lincoln had given him to stop him from complaining about being washed.

‘Dad,’ says Billy, just as Lincoln begins to think he is willing to let the discussion rest. ‘Will you spend as much time with me when I get out of my plaster?’

Lincoln’s initial instinct is to provide a diplomatic answer, but his attention is diverted when he looks at his watch and sees that they are running late to meet Zoe.

They arrive at the beach just in time as they see Zoe walking out of the seaside café where she was having her meeting. Lincoln allows himself the faintest hint of a tired smile as he fits Billy into the stroller that Kym had manufactured for him. Zoe walks towards them; piercing the morning sun with that sexy smile which has refused to fade with ravages of time. They make their way along the beach to meet her and Zoe assaults her son with wet kisses and questions about his sleepover at his grandparents’. Lincoln is thankful for the presence of the kid as a circuit breaker to the conversation she is going to want to have with him. He has no idea what to tell her. He still can’t describe how he felt this morning when he woke up next to her fully clothed. I suppose she knows he was just pissed and down on his luck.

He should have known he was fucked the second he saw Coburn’s orange Lamborghini in the car park as he arrived for work yesterday, late as usual. Sam Winton was regaling Coburn with some long-winded story about his weekend yachting expedition and caught Lincoln’s eye as he got out of the lift. Winton made a gun with his finger and thumb and puffed his cheeks as he pretended to fire the fateful shot.

Lincoln closed his office door and kept busy by packing some personal belongings. He had spent so much of his adult life in that office constructing the image of a successful life, but he couldn’t think of a single thing he wanted to take with him. He perfunctorily jammed random items into a cardboard box and the task of arbitrarily deciding which of his pretentious shit to take with him partly assuaged his anxiety. Soon enough though, Coburn swaggered in as if it were a scene from the OK Corral. This was of course ridiculous, given

only one of them was armed. Lincoln tried to think of the last time he and Coburn had shared a conversation.

‘Old Mal has just been trying to save your sorry arse, bless his cotton socks,’ said Mitch, a smile pasted all over his toad-like face.

‘Don’t suppose he had any luck?’

Mitch put his hand over the loose skin that hung distastefully from his neck.

‘Actually, I haven’t seen the son of a bitch so animated in years. Who knew you ladies were taking romantic walks in the rain. But no, he’s shit out of luck.’

As Coburn laconically sat himself down at the conference table that would soon belong to someone else, it occurred to Lincoln to be surprised that the old prick wasn’t enjoying this more given it was the culmination of his careful manoeuvring over a long time. Mitch looked at the cardboard box that was packed with vases and silver picture frames and exhaled air nosily through his nostrils, before leaning back with his head in his hands.

‘Fuck me, Simmons. You really lit a fire under Winton’s arse. Red headed little cunt won’t let up until you’re gone.’

One of the first lessons Lincoln had learned from Coburn was that you should never admit you don’t have choice. That’s the very nature of power: infinitesimal choice. He was surprised that Coburn would admit to being influenced by Sam, or the generations of Winton wealth.

‘Funny,’ Lincoln said, doing his thinking aloud, ‘you always struck me as immune to such pressure.’

‘I thought I taught you better than that,’ said Mitch, with the ugly, leering grin that he used on those late nights in strip clubs where Lincoln had sat spellbound listening to him as if he were Confucius. ‘The further up the food chain you go, the more often you need to eat shit.’

It's nature's cruel irony. Trick is to pretend you believe in every decision you're ever forced to make.'

'I'm sure you will have no trouble selling this one, Mitch.'

Mitch had looked at him with eyes that were almost menacing, but not quite.

'You've let me down, mate. I've been more than patient. But you've made me look like an arsehole and nobody makes Mitch Coburn look like an arsehole. This gives me no joy.'

Mitch patted at his blue tie and stared solemnly ahead, as if paying his final respects to a deceased friend. He removed a business card from his wallet and wrote in trademark extravagant scrawl with his gold fountain-pen. He thumped the table with an open palm and slid the card over to the edge of the table. Lincoln seized it too quickly, knowing he was breaking the golden rule of making your adversary wait. A six-digit figure stared at him greedily and made his pulse do cartwheels.

'What's this?'

Coburn turned his hands in the air and shrugged, as if his enigmatic ways were way beyond the grasp of a mortal. Lincoln was at the old bastard's mercy one last time. If this was not a joke, and who would know with the sick son of a bitch, then he was being gifted the luxury of time. He had run from time his entire adult life, treating dormancy like an affliction, to be viewed as the enclave to death. But the thought of competing for jobs with men ten years younger and with much less baggage had been keeping him awake at nights. He should have spat in the old bastard's face, but he is nothing if not pragmatic.

'This is very generous,' he said, trying to appear like he could take or leave the beautiful bounty.

'Think yourself lucky. Mal is retiring in three months and I'll probably not bother with this branch after that. The next set of redundancies won't be so generous.'

Lincoln couldn't help but wonder why Coburn was doing this. The string of incompetent employees and the secret meetings with Winton had all been carefully designed to prove Lincoln's incompetence so that he could be fired without compensation. And now this? Is it possible Lincoln has misjudged Coburn, or is this just how he proves superiority with one hand, and offers mercy with the other?

'Why are you doing this for me?' Lincoln asked, knowing that you should never ask a question when you don't want the answer.

'You were like a son to me, mate. You are the one cunt in this business who wasn't born with a silver spoon up his arse, and I always admired that. You reminded me of me when I was your age. A self-made man, until you pissed it all against the wall because of some chick who fucked you over.'

For one excruciating second, it seemed some warmth would crack from the old boy's stone-cold heart. But Coburn collected himself quickly, stood and aggressively put his arms around his failed protégé, slapping him so hard on the back that Lincoln silently winced. He cocked his wrist to examine his watch, as though in a pantomime, and left. Workplace custom told Lincoln that he had exactly five minutes to get the fuck out if he didn't want an unhappy escort from a couple of angry security guards. As much as the old boy might like him for some perverted reason, he would make no exceptions.

Lincoln looked around his office for one last time. For the first time it struck him that there was not one picture of Billy anywhere in the one place he had spent most of his waking hours. He had wasted the last six years worrying about entirely the wrong kind of shit. He tossed the cardboard box on its side, causing a violent crash and left his office with nothing. As he walked from his office door for the last time he could feel the collective eyes savour his walk of shame. He thought of scurrying to the stairs, but avoidance was futile. He held

Sam Winton's stare as he slung his jacket over his shoulder and walked into say farewell to Mal.

'Mal, I just wanted to say thanks for being so decent,' he said, but he felt all of a sudden claustrophobic. Mal nodded his head in recognition. Lincoln lingered for a moment and waved goodbye but Mal had already returned to his sums.

Lincoln could hear Winton making jokes designed for his ears as he walked as casually as possible to the lift. He considered retaliating but what could he possibly say? He was the loser no matter how you looked at it and he could at least take what he had coming like a man, even though he no longer felt like one. He made a show of defiantly tapping his shirt pocket where his redundancy offer rested, but it was a gesture so obtuse as to be pointless. As the elevator closed for the final time he turned to face them. The last thing he saw was Winton's middle finger saluting his exit.

He walked to the free inner-city park that he was about to lose and drove his recently purchased second-hand crap-box to his favourite pub. He spent the afternoon drinking pints and betting on horses. He called Stella who agreed to have Billy for the night, but she was unusually short with him.

By six-pm he had spent a worrying portion of Coburn's redundancy on beer and slow horses and so he rang Zoe, figuring she would be at home wrestling with her own problems.

'This is becoming a habit,' she said.

'Just got the sack. And a golden handshake. Feel like celebrating with me?' The silence accentuated his nervousness: if she rejected him now he would be left without a plan B and Christ knows what he might do.

'Last time you and I ... *celebrated*,' she said emphatically, 'you fucked me and made me feel like a cheap whore. And you didn't even pay me.'

'That's bullshit,' he said, grinning to himself. 'Who do you think bought the coke?'

She laughs. 'You sound pissed.'

'I may've had one or two.'

'Reassuring,' she said, and he breathed air through his bottom teeth as he awaited the only answer he would accept.

'Would it make a difference if I promised not to try and fuck you?'

'Let's not get carried away,' she said.

'Look, Zo. I've just been fired. I could really use your company and I have burned every other bridge.'

'Jesus,' she snorted in exasperation. 'I think I like it better when you lie.'

By the time he had arrived at Zoe's house the initial euphoria of Coburn's severance offer had worn off and his anxiety had risen. He lay with his head on her lap and bemoaned the waste of his life. She sat still and stroked his hair and listened to it all, only tensing momentarily when he told her the story of his affair with Kaz. He had forgotten it corresponded with his one-night stand with Zoe the night she told him about the case note. He fell to sleep on her lap and things had been awkward when they woke. She had talked to him about a job interview, but he had not been up to listening.

Zoe and Billy continue their conversation about his night with his grandparents and Lincoln stares for a while at Zoe, admiring her resilience, wondering how she can just get on with life after all that those Eckermann pricks have put her through.

'What's up with you?' Zoe says, considering the sight of Lincoln for the first time.

'The old man knows about Kaz.'

The sun pokes its head through the clouds and he pats his empty pocket where his sunglasses should be. He can just about make out her look of derision through his squinting right eye.

'Would've thought he'd be proud.'

‘Not exactly.’ There is a long silence and he realises that as generous as Zoe is, she is not about to counsel him through the ramifications of fucking the sister-in-law he two-timed her with.

‘So, what’s happening with work?’ he asks, more to change the subject than because of belated curiosity.

‘I had a call from the psych board this morning,’ she says pumping her fist in a small circle in the air. ‘They told me that the matter is closed,’ she blows air from her cheeks in an exaggerated manner.

‘So, you get to keep practicing?’

‘It would appear so; just not under Arthur’s roof.’

‘How fucking convenient for Arthur’ he says, the spite in his voice catching him by surprise and inducing a castigating look from Zoe who motions with her eyes towards a smiling Billy.

Her tranquillity pisses him off and he wonders if she has finally let the bastards win. He is taking this far too personally but there is something about Ben Eckermann that he has taken as a personal affront and he doesn’t know why she’s turned all Zen. He forces himself to breathe in the sea air. A shirtless, sweat soaked young man jogs past them. He is tall and broad, and Lincoln wonders if he would go back and do it all again, if he had the chance. The sense of an ending rattles in his skull until he decides he needs to stop thinking.

Zoe makes a clucking noise with her tongue.

‘I appreciate your chivalry, dear Lincoln, but it wasn’t Arthur who convinced me to hide the case note.’

‘This is my fault? He holds his hands to the sky in dismay. ‘The missing case note, global warming and the murder of JFK.’

His voice is high and whiny, and he can feel the salty air prickle his back. Billy is looking at him sceptically, so he administers a wink, presenting himself as a reasonable man under siege from a lunatic woman in a trick he learned early from his old man.

‘Of course it’s not your fault. I’m just saying that it hasn’t been all one-sided.’ Her voice is shrill, and he knows his mood is infectious.

‘Sounds like you’ve been lobotomised,’

‘What is your fucking problem, Lincoln,’ she finally snaps, and he and Billy immediately look at each other with exuberant grins.

‘Mum, you said the F-word,’ Billy cries triumphantly and Zoe laughs despite her very best efforts.

‘I’m sorry, honey, but sometimes that is the only word that will fetch your daddy from his high horse.’

Lincoln shakes his head sadly.

‘And I try so hard to raise the kid right,’ he says, and she punches him on the arm. An elderly couple walks past and smiles at them indulgently, and Lincoln feels an overwhelming sense of satisfaction.

Zoe looks at her son.

‘I know whose side you’re on, Mister. You boys should be nicer to me, you know. I’ve just been offered a job by Tariza Osmond, which makes me the only one here with an actual job.’

‘The crazy feminist?’ asks Lincoln, remembering meeting Tariza when he and Zoe went to the movies. Tariza had invited herself along to coffee afterwards and interrogated him about his gender politics.

‘The crazy feminist offering me gainful employment,’ says Zoe, licking her finger and touching her jeans while making a silly hissing noise.

‘You going to accept?’ he asks, indulging his lifelong habit of getting down to business.

‘I don’t know. I told Tariza that anything I ever thought I knew about therapy has become unclear, and she told me that just proves I have become wiser. To be honest, I think she just wants to recruit me to annoy Arthur.’

‘Would it?’

‘Arthur will just be pleased to see the back of me.’

Lincoln stops at the top of a sharp incline that is playing havoc with his hangover. A newly opened beachside pub appears across the road which seems entirely serendipitous.

‘I suppose we should go and toast to new beginnings, then,’ he says, motioning with his head to the pub.

‘Okay,’ she says, again with that smile. ‘A new beginning for all of us.’

‘I want to go to McDonalds for lunch,’ whines Billy.

‘Given your current predicament, Bill,’ says Lincoln, winking at Zoe, ‘you’ll go wherever you’re f-word wheeled.’ Billy groans playfully as they negotiate their way through the double glass doors of the pub to a table by the esplanade. Lincoln visits the bar to fetch himself a tall glass of beer, but a thought occurs to him on the way, and he buys a bottle of champagne, a couple of steak sandwiches, and a bowl of chips and lemonade for his son. He returns to their table brandishing the champagne.

‘Cripes,’ she says, ‘you planning on wheeling me home in Billy’s stroller?’

As Lincoln pours the champagne another family enters the pub in silence. The two boys sit down with their Mum. The dad goes to the bar and puts some tickets through the pub betting machine. He collects his winnings and returns to the family as they stare into nothingness.

Lincoln pours the champagne and Zoe lightly touches her glass with his before taking a long sip.

‘Well,’ Zoe says, ‘here’s to better chapters.’ Lincoln shakes his head and gently chuckles.

‘You’re a pathological optimist,’ he says, and Zoe takes a defiant sip.

‘What do you think, Bill? Mum goes to work, and Dad stays home to pack your lunch and do school pick up, Lincoln says to Billy, who makes an upside-down U with his mouth as though he is awaiting the punch line to a bad joke.

‘I am actually thinking I might take a bit of time,’ continues Lincoln, and now Zoe and Billy are both looking at him as if he is speaking in tongues. ‘So I can probably help out a bit more. Sound scary, Bill?’ Billy shakes his head enthusiastically enough, but what else can he do?

Zoe stiffens, placing her hand on the top of her son’s head.

‘Let not make any rash promises we might live to regret,’ she says, fixing Lincoln with a stern expression.’ Lincoln considers himself warned.

He looks back to the family sitting a couple of tables away. The mother rests her hand lightly on the back of the father’s neck and traces his hair line with her finger.

Lincoln feels like he’s said too much and is once again a burden to Zoe, so he stands and walks to the bayside window and looks out to watch a man and his son pushing a small boat out into the water. He remembers when he was twelve and Kym had talked one of his mates into taking them fishing on his boat. The two men had sat with their lines fruitlessly dangling while grasping tinnies from a seemingly bottomless Esky. Lincoln had just about died of boredom.

On the way to shore, he had been so eager to get out that he had jumped out of the boat and swam the last few hundred metres back to shore. When he got within fifty metres of the shoreline he could hear his Dad’s mate furiously yelling, ‘You could have been chopped to buggery by the motor, you idiot.’ His dad had waded out to meet him about twenty metres from the shore and put his hand on his shoulder, whispering, ‘You’re a gutsy little bastard, you are.’

Lincoln walks back to Zoe, who is sipping her champagne. He fixes her with what he knows is a stern expression.

‘I really want to try, Zo.’

‘I know you do, hon,’ she says, but looks away quickly.

Chapter 12

Ben waits patiently at the checkout as a woman in her late thirties and clad in active wear punches in her pin. She uses her left hand as a shield to deny his prying eyes. Given Ben is the only one in the queue he can only imagine her trust of him is so low that she would rather risk negligible chance of credit card fraud than offence. If he were a different kind of person, Ben might give her a look. His turn comes and he pays for his groceries in cash, as if this somehow makes him the bigger person. He turns to collect his shopping and thuds into the burly chest of a man approaching from the opposite direction.

‘You blind, idiot?’ says the scary looking stranger, but Ben realises with a start, that this man is no stranger. Matt is wearing grey track suit pants and a *Jack Daniels* top and carries a powerful force-field of body odour. He takes a moment to register their coincidence but is not amused, which is unusual, because Ben assumed this was the exact kind of coincidence that would appeal to him.

‘G’day mate,’ says Matt, his eyes sad and bloodshot. ‘I’ve been meaning to pop in, but since you’re here let me buy you a coffee.’ Ben knows that Matt is lying: he never *means* to do anything; he either does or doesn’t. A Saturday morning coffee impinges on so many professional boundaries, but a mixture of curiosity and trepidation gets the better of him and he knows Matt well enough to know he has no choice but to comply.

They haven’t spoken for a month. In Matt’s third and final visit he had been escorted by Brianna, his on-again- off-again partner; a woman who was straight-forward to the point of rudeness. Her unapologetic flint had rankled with Ben’s idea of Matt’s new girlfriend as vulnerable and in need of protection. Brianna had come to see him because she was determined to persevere with Matt despite his confession of his former violence, and she was not taking no for an answer. Ben repeatedly told her that he had no mandate to prevent their relationship, and that she could do whatever she pleased. But Matt had refused to continue in

their relationship without Ben's approval. By the end of the session Ben would have happily endorsed her jumping from a cliff and so he administered his blessing half-heartedly. If the session was not what Brianna had hoped for it did at least get her the fuck out of his office, with Matt limping behind like a timid school boy.

Matt turns his back on Ben and heads toward a small bakery just to the right of the supermarket. At first it seems to Ben that he has been dismissed, but then Matt turns his head and gestures for Ben to follow him. Matt seems less impressive in the real world, to the point of appearing almost pathetic; the kind of vagrant you might cross the street to avoid in case he asks you for money or a cigarette.

As they head into the bakery Matt starts a conversation with an old woman at the opposite table who appears caught between the allure of his company and the unkempt sight of him. Matt orders a couple of flat whites without bothering to ask, and Ben supposes his preference for soy milk is moot.

'Bit far from your neck of the woods,' Ben says, sitting down on the narrow stool next to Matt.

'Staying at a mate's place,' Matt grunts, suddenly not as forthcoming. Ben makes a swirling motion with his hand, but Matt ignores him.

'I thought you and Brianna were going well,' says, Ben, as the waitress brings their coffees and Matt flashes a big, goofy smile.

'I might have fucked that up,' Matt says ruefully, and Ben would give anything not to have the conversation that will inevitably confirm what he has been trying to deny: that any of his claims to professional competence are based on lies.

'Maybe we'd best be having this discussion in my office,' he says but Matt's eyes have a steely look and there is nothing to be done but hear him speak.

‘I was barbecuing a couple of steaks in Bianca’s backyard and everything was sweet. Had a killer hangover, but that’s nothing new. For some reason we started to talk politics and she said something about work for the dole and it was like a red rag to a bull. I was pretty fucking shocked that she would have such bigoted opinions and I couldn’t let it go. I kept thinking about my lad, Tyson, and how he’s out of work. All I could think was that I haven’t been the best father but fucked if I was going to sit there and listen to some bitch hanging shit on my son.’

The old lady next to them leaves her vanilla-slice uneaten and exits the bakery with a measure of urgency. A better therapist would have never let it get to this.

‘Has Brianna met your son?’ Ben asks in the vain hope that the question will de-escalate him.

‘The fuck has that to do with anything?’ roars Matt. ‘She wasn’t even referring to Tyson. That’s the fucking point.’

Matt’s voice has lost all restraint and Ben pines to be at home unpacking his groceries with his book lying open on his sofa. His Saturday morning ritual seems so far away right now. A man appears at the bakery counter, having been summoned by the furtive glances of the waitresses.

‘Matt, if you keep yelling at me, we’re both going to get kicked out of here,’ Ben finally says, and Matt’s accusatory stare shows some signs of softening.

‘I’m just angry that I let one little disagreement wreck it all. I just couldn’t let it rest.’

‘Did you hurt her?’

Matt takes a greedy sip of coffee and the foam sticks to end of his bushy brandy coloured beard. He chuckles for a moment, and although laughter seems inappropriate, Ben can only welcome the change in Matt’s mood.

‘I didn’t hit her, if that’s what you’re getting at, you cheeky cunt.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Yelled and screamed and told her I was going to kill her; that she’d end up just like that last no good cunt. Grabbed a handful of her shirt and held her against the wall until she admitted she was wrong. Made her apologise for her attack on my son, even though she hadn’t mentioned him. I made her stare at me with wide, crazy eyes just like all the rest of them. And now she needs space, she tells me.’

Matt starts laughing maniacally and slaps the table between them, making a startlingly loud noise.

‘Don’t need to be Albert Einstein to know what space means.’

Matt drains his coffee in one emphatic sip and pats his filthy tracksuit pants, locating a wallet shaped bulge.

‘Right,’ he says, ‘they serve their coffees out of fucking thimbles. I’ll go get us a refill.’ Ben knows that Matt has nowhere else to be and that he is desperate. If he doesn’t make a move soon he will be stuck here all day, waiting for the next flash of Matt’s temper. He knows that none of this is Matt’s fault. Another therapist would never have let him waltz into his office to make the rules up as he goes along. Another therapist would have known what they were doing. Another therapist wouldn’t have been given the job courtesy of his father’s pragmatism. Ben acknowledges to himself for the first time that he is no therapist. He doesn’t know what he wants to do with his life, but he knows it is not this. He doesn’t have what it takes to help men like Matt. He is not even sure that therapy is helpful for anyone and half suspects it’s a profession invented by men like his father to maintain a position of dominance.

Ben needs to leave but knows that he doesn’t have the therapeutic dexterity to cut this conversation short. A wave of panic rises in him and makes him spring to his feet quickly and he bounces up and down like he’s returning serve at Wimbledon.

‘I have to be somewhere, Matt. Pop in this week and we’ll have a chat.’

Matt looks at him disbelievingly and without any other option Ben turns on his heels and walks out of the bakery.

‘This is my life, asshole,’ booms Matt. ‘What plans do you have that are more important than that?’

There is nothing left to do but make a run for it. Ben walks briskly through the plaza, carrying his shopping bags as fast as his legs will carry him. With every step he is certain that his furious client will apprehend him, and he can hardly tolerate the suspense. Finally, he makes his way to the car park and clutches clumsily for his keys. He finally clasps them like they are a school of uncooperative trout and unlocks the boot of his car. He affords himself his first panoramic view, and Matt is nowhere to be seen.

He gets into his car but in his panic, he jams the wrong key in the ignition and almost gets it stuck. He takes a deep breath and counts to ten: the only useful thing that Ryan Trentham ever taught him in all their time together. He sees something move in his side window and he knows at once it is Matt. He thinks about driving away, but he doesn’t have the time. He winds down his window and breathes in the stench and the chaos.

‘You’ll take me to Brianna’s,’ he shouts, ‘you’ll convince her to take me back. She’ll listen to you.’

‘Where does she live?’ Ben asks, but he knows this is madness: driving his possibly psychotic client to his estranged girlfriend’s house is career suicide, no matter what his last name. He is sure he no longer wants to work for his dad, but he’d at least like to go out on his own terms.

‘Move the fuck over,’ Matt demands, as he manoeuvres his bulky frame into Ben’s front door, ‘easier if I just drive.’

At a considerable disadvantage given he is still seated, Ben places a placating hand on Matt’s arm and looks him in the eyes.

‘You know I can’t, Matt.’ Matt smiles and Ben thinks he detects the craziness disappear from his eyes, allowing for the return of the jovial, over-assertive and sometimes soulful character he met in his office.

‘Don’t ever fucking touch me,’ Matt says, and rolls his sausage-like fingers into a ball just before Ben feels them crunch into his right eye.

Stars explode in and out of Ben’s vision as he shakes his head from side to side, trying to wake himself from this nightmare. He gets out of the car in case Matt decides to hit him again but stands up too quickly and feels himself fall. Matt takes Ben under the armpits and in one motion lifts him off his feet and sits him on the boot of his car. Ben presses his palm into his eye which doesn’t hurt as much as he’d have suspected and he knows that Matt at least pulled his punch.

‘Wait there,’ says Matt as he hops from one foot to the next, looking frantic. Matt jogs across the car park back into the entrance of the supermarket. Ben sits on the bonnet of his car with his hand gripping the windshield wiper for balance. He can’t help think that this is the perfect exclamation to the events of the past month and that he had it coming. He thinks about all those Wednesday nights where Zoe has asked men to recite their misdemeanours. He contemplates his own misdemeanours: his lack of care for Matt, his betrayal of Zoe and his deluded faith in his father. He longs to sit in that circle on a Wednesday night and take his turn, and for Zoe to tell him how to make it right. But Zoe has left the Eckermann practice and a new woman will start next month in her place. Ben has been conscripted to provide her induction, as if he has any knowledge worth passing on.

Something achingly cold is pressed too forcefully against Ben’s eye and distracts him from his self-pity.

‘Probably won’t even be a shiner,’ says Matt, holding a bag of frozen peas to Ben’s face. Something about Matt making a mercy dash to the supermarket to purchase a bag of peas

strikes Ben as simultaneously hilarious and poignant and he wants to laugh and cry at the same time.

‘Impressive right hook,’ he says to Matt while taking the peas from his clutches and disembarking the car’s bonnet.

‘Only a love pat, mate,’ Matt says, with that raspy, conciliatory voice he knows so well. ‘A bit of a mongrel act, I acknowledge.’

As Ben stands on his own feet he begins to feel dizzy again and Matt gently wraps his huge frame around him and walks him to the passenger side of the car. The act of being pressed up against the big man’s pungent black t-shirt – soaked in sweat and despair – is strangely comforting and he doesn’t bother to argue when Matt slides into the driver’s seat and asks where he lives.

As Matt makes the short drive to his house, Ben navigates while pressing peas to his eye and imagining what his father might make of all of this. He thinks about making a clever observation about Matt being in the driver’s seat, but nobody ever appreciates his witticisms and he feels anything but clever.

Matt is silent during the drive and Ben tries to think of something consoling to say. He thinks for a long time, but the appropriate approach refuses to form in his head. Matt parks in his driveway and Ben is too exhausted not to ask him in. They enter his house like they’re a couple of old school chums; Matt gripping Ben’s shoulder to make sure he doesn’t stumble.

Ben walks into his house and collapses on his sofa. Matt scurries to the kitchen to make them both a cup of tea, poking his head around the corner regularly to ask where the tea and the sugar is, or to check he is still lucid. When he returns with two steaming mugs he sits on the couch next to him, and Ben would give anything to know what to say in such a situation.

Ben puts the peas down and fingers his swollen eye. The pain has subsided enough for him to be worried that Matt will never leave. The big, broken man sits with his tea and asks for the absolution Ben is no position to grant.

‘You do know that I’m a terrible counsellor?’ he finally says to Matt, the first thing he can think of.

Matt laughs heartily in his way that fills the room.

‘Remember our first meeting? You could hardly get a fucking word out.’

‘Then why the fuck did you come back,’ Ben asks, genuinely curious for the first time in their relationship.

‘There’s something about you I like, mate.’ he says. ‘You might be a bit green but fuck me if you don’t take a punch in the face with good grace.’

They laugh at this for a while, before silence returns and Matt stares at Ben’s blank TV screen.

‘I really do love her mate,’ he says, ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do.’

Ben exhales air from his cheeks.

‘I can’t tell you what to do. You know that, right?’

Matt looks down at the polished floor-boards of the new apartment that Ben has rented with his father’s wages.

‘Suppose I’m a lost cause,’ he mumbles softly.

‘It’s not that,’ says Ben. ‘I just don’t know how to help you.’

‘I never needed you to be a fucking expert,’ says, Matt, sadly. ‘I just wanted you to hear me out.’

Ben smirks.

‘I think you made your point,’ he says, once again with his finger touching his tender eye. He walks gingerly to his kitchen to find a notepad and writes *Zoe Jamison at Osmond Therapy*.

‘Zoe is an old colleague of mine,’ he says, ‘She will know how to help you.’

‘Will you tell her about today?’ asks Matt, with his lips pursed.

‘No. But if you try this shit on her she will kick your ass.’

Matt takes the piece of paper in acknowledgement that his relationship with Ben is all but over.

‘I’ll call a taxi and get out of your hair,’ he says, as if reading Ben’s thoughts. Matt produces his phone from his pocket and calls a taxi. Ben uses what energy he has left to will its quick arrival.

Matt walks outside to light a cigarette lugubriously. He has barely taken a drag when the taxi arrives, and he stubs it into the door step with his boot and walks back in to offer Ben an awkward handshake. Ben feels foolish as he offers a limp hand while still sitting on his couch. Ben watches Matt walk out the door and knows that he has let another relationship dissolve in his passivity.

‘Matt, I’d like to give you a call in a few months to see how you’re going,’ he says.

‘You don’t need to do that mate,’ Matt replies and his rueful look induces in Ben a deep sense of shame.

‘You’re much more than the violence you’ve used,’ Ben eventually manages. ‘I want for you to know that.’

Matt looks at him solemnly as the taxi driver leans on his horn in the driveway. Finally, his broad face breaks into his cheeky grin and he allows himself a chuckle.

‘Longest fucking speech I’ve ever heard you give,’ he says.

Matt favours his left leg as he limps down the driveway to catch a cab with nowhere to go and despite everything Ben feels a strong sense of fondness. He heads straight to his bathroom and inspects the damage. His eye is red and marked with the outline of a bluish bruise, but Matt was right when he said it will hardly be noticed. He leans into the mirror to see what his reflection is telling him, but that old bland face stares back obstinately. He decides that nobody else needs to know about his client's right hook: his family doesn't need one more piece of corroborating evidence to confirm their disappointment.

Ben's phone chimes and he assumes it's his mother. Her attitude towards him is slowly thawing as the Eckermans try to put their disconcerting few weeks behind them. Charles is coming to visit again next week and there is another lunch. He looks at the message on his phone but is surprised to see it is from Zoe.

Hi Ben, any chance we can talk on Monday? I'm coming in to clear my desk.

Zoe's text tightens the knot in the pit of Ben's stomach until he fears he won't be able to stand it. He assumed he would never have to see her again. A carefully written missive had been sent by Arthur thanking Zoe for her years of service but stopping short of offering platitudes. There had been no mention of where she was going but Ben had overheard Ryan Trentham holding forth in the office kitchen: outraged that Tariza Osmond had the audacity to head-hunt her.

Ben had followed his father's email with a perfunctory message of his own to Zoe. Zoe hadn't responded which he acknowledged was only fair. And that had been where he had been content to leave it: an unsavoury chapter in his life with Zoe Jamison as collateral damage. It's not like he wasn't deeply ashamed: he was mortified. It was not that his father had lied about Sandra's wishes that upset him most. He has always known what Arthur Eckermann is capable of in the name of self-interest, but he had always clung to the belief

that he was above such behaviour. Now he knows that the only difference between him and his father is their ability to play the game. Although it would appear he is improving.

Ben wanders his apartment like a zombie for the weekend; listless and damned. His anxiety precludes him from reading his book or watching anything on television and he finds himself pacing his lounge room just as he had seen Matt do. In the early hours of Sunday morning Ben convinces himself that Zoe is pregnant: there can be no other reason she would want to see him. The idea ticks over in his head and he rehearses his response. He thinks again about that case note and he imagines an alternative reality where she hadn't told him, or he'd reacted with compassion.

Monday morning finally arrives, and Ben is too exhausted to rise from his bed before nine. He has no clients for the day and considers staying under his quilt for the day, avoiding the need to face the inevitable wrath of Zoe Jamison. He uses every bit of self-persuasion he can muster to shower and dress. He puts on the blue and white shirt he had purchased for his first men's group; so eager at the time to impress her. He looks at himself in the mirror and laughs at the irony.

He drives to work and notices that her car is in the carpark. He had hoped for a last-minute reprieve to save himself the embarrassment of looking her in the eye. But he walks into his tiny office and there she is in that infamous white shirt he remembers from his first men's group, top button defiantly unfastened. He sits down next to her in his mother's tub chair. She is so close to him in his tiny office that he can smell her morning coffee on her breath.

'You know, Benjamin. You never officially dumped me.'

Her words are ominous, but her signature smile shows she means no malice. He still can't believe she ever deigned to sleep with him, or that he had the audacity not to bask in his extraordinary fortune.

‘No need to look so horrified,’ she finally says, putting her hand briefly on his knee. ‘I just didn’t want to leave without saying goodbye.’

The weight of her personality is too much for him and he gives up on the power of speech, sitting defeated in his chair and hoping that she quickly arrives at the motivation for her visit.

Zoe squints at him in concern making her forehead bunch into tight wrinkles.

‘Are you alright, Ben? You look as though you have seen a ghost.’

‘Yes, the ghost of my professional credibility,’ he blurts, submitting to the power of her curiosity. ‘I’m afraid my inadequacy has been shown for what it is.’

‘Inadequacy?’ she asks, arching a severe right eyebrow, and he has no idea how to answer her. He fights his instincts to offer an apology because he doesn’t know where to start and so he touches the fading bruise by his eye.

‘There’s been a setback with Matt.’

‘Not golden boy Matt?’ She slaps her forehead theatrically.

‘Yes, golden boy Matt.’

The physical intimacy of sitting so close to her is too much for Ben and he stands to look out of his window, which reminds them both of Arthur and they share a brief smirk, which decreases the tension just enough to convince him to return to his seat. They sit in silence and he can’t decide if he wants her to leave.

‘I felt certain he had changed,’ says Ben, surrendering to the inevitably that he will speak first. She smiles, not one of her devastating numbers, but a milder, understanding smile, as though she knows exactly what he means.

‘Change takes time, Ben. You will do well to practice patience.’ He senses she is making an admission of her own but as usual feels a few pages behind in the chapter of their story.

‘I’ve given him your number,’ he says, and she is silent for too long.

‘You are a nice boy, Ben,’ she eventually says, patting his knee with her palm, ‘and smarter than you think. You and Matt will find your feet.’ If she didn’t seem so relaxed, Ben would assume she’s being facetious.

‘I’m really sorry if I hurt you, Zoe,’ he says, feeling foolish for mentioning it. He can tell that she thinks about laughing it off, but instead she looks at him with that no-nonsense demeanour that so defined their first encounters.

‘Your father and I put you in a tight spot. But just to be clear, me being with you had nothing to do with Arthur.’

Ben believes her completely and realises he always has. Even back when his mother was concocting conspiracy theories about her he knew that Zoe was not the kind of woman who could fake the kind of affection she had given him. It just suited him to believe that she was.

‘Must have been nice to piss-off the old man, though,’ he says with a smirk.

She doesn’t smile and stares at him a little too intensely.

‘Maybe it’s time we both stop worrying about what your father thinks.’

‘Is that why you’re leaving?’ he asks, the question so obvious that he looks at his blank computer screen so he doesn’t have to meet her eyes.

‘It’s best for everyone if I leave, including me.’

‘Is it true you’re going to work at Osmond?’ he asks, feeling his cheeks burn at the injustice of it all, as if he played no part in helping his father force her out.

She smiles broadly.

‘A girl has got to eat.’

‘How is Billy?’ he asks, less interested in the boy than in changing a conversation in which his betrayal is the elephant in his already overcrowded room. She waves three fingers in the air in that exaggerated way of hers that still unsettles him.

‘Three weeks and he is out of his plaster, thank God, it’s like lifting a fucking truck. I’ve had to resort to moving in with Lincoln just for some respite.’

The mention of Lincoln makes Ben feel he has been duped and the feeling is no less powerful for its lack of logic. He can’t help but hate Lincoln for seizing the opportunity that he botched. He was meant to be the nice guy, not Lincoln. She had asked Ben to support her through a difficult time and he betrayed her like a rat bastard. And now she comes to him, with all the class, wisdom and beauty that he had somehow failed to fully comprehend, telling him that she is living with his natural enemy; Lincoln with the designer jeans and the money clip, the hundred-dollar bottles of wine and the neo-liberal proclivities. It would have been kinder for her just to punch his bruised eye.

‘Are you sure that’s wise, Zoe,’ he says, fixing his face with a look of concern.

‘Don’t go getting territorial on me, Benjamin,’ she says with a wink that is once comical and reproachful, ‘you had your chance.’

Her gentle rebuke seems a fitting way to end their relationship, but she takes a manila envelope from her briefcase. She hands it to him with a sardonic pursing of her lips and he takes it gingerly, hoping it is not a scathing farewell letter.

‘For reasons beyond my control, Benjamin, I can’t bring myself to shred this fucking thing.’ Ben opens the envelope sensing what is inside but hoping forlornly that he is wrong. He reads the top line of the document which reads, *Client: Doug Hillier (#32408DH)*.

‘I thought you would have learned your lesson from the last time you showed me this,’ he says, sitting hunched in his chair, wondering what the fuck he is meant to do with the note.

‘If the last months have taught me anything, Ben, it’s that everyone deserves a second chance. I hope to get better at remembering that.’

Zoe gets to her feet and reaches in to give him a kiss on his cheek and walks out of his life forever. Ben sits on his mother's chair in silence and loses all track of time as he tries to untangle the wheelbarrow of spaghetti that his relationship with Zoe has been.

Ben's confusion is interrupted by a knock on the door and Arthur's beaming smile. Ben picks up the case note just in time to hide it quickly in his back pocket. It is not exactly a deft manoeuvre, but his father doesn't notice. Arthur invites a woman about Ben's age into his office, with jet black straight hair and deep brown eyes. She smiles at him nervously and shakes his hand.

'This is Melissa Bradley, Ben,' says, Arthur, as the young woman looks up at his father with that look of admiration that he has seen all too often. 'Melissa will be helping you run the men's groups.' Ben sneaks a look at Melissa just as she dares to look at him, and they both look away automatically.

'This will be your new office, Melissa,' says Arthur. 'It's a little bit snug but you will initially be co-working most of your clients with Ben in his office.' Ben looks quizzically at his father, but Arthur gives him nothing in return. But then Ben realises that he will of course be moving into Zoe's office.

Zoe's office. Of course. Her removal, and his ascendance, was complete. What kind of victory was that?

Ben turns to Melisa and smiles smoothly.

'I'm really looking forward to working with you, Melissa.'

Appendix 1: Published Book Review, ‘Domestic violence pervades family’s troubled past and present’, *The Weekend Australian* 21 January 2017.

Gender and domestic violence is an issue prone to heated debate as competing ideological approaches tussle in the public arena. In his debut novel, *We.Are.Family*, Melbourne writer Paul Mitchell explores intergenerational violence and disconnection, focusing on the hapless Stevenson family: ordinary people attempting to overcome the hegemonic patriarchal messages that constrain and divide them.

This novel is far from a case of beating up on men. Mitchell puts a nuanced lens to his male characters, even as they hurt their partners, family members and children. He shows how dominant understandings of what it is to be a man repress and torment the Stevenson men.

The movement to discredit gender as the leading cause of family violence is gathering momentum. In a recent article, Bettina Arndt mentioned an anti-feminist chorus that argues women’s liberation has gone too far and turned men into “the guilty sex”. “Men’s rights” proponents brandish research that supposedly proves women use just as much violence as men, without examining the effects or the context of this violence.

This either/or approach assumes the only way to support men is to maintain the status quo. But such arguments rarely offer useful alternatives for preventing family violence and always ignore the fact cultural messages about masculinity prevent some men from being the kinds of partners or fathers they want to be.

Mitchell provides a more revealing and balanced insight into the male psyche and the pressures on it. His background in short stories is evident as he uses a series of vignettes to demonstrate the tribulations of the Stevenson clan, spread far and wide across the country. Some make brief, tangential appearances while others are more central and ultimately fulfilling.

By moving forward and backward through time he shows the impervious nature of gendered stereotyping amid a dynamic Australian landscape. Ron Stevenson dismisses the influence of his father, Bernie, because he disappeared so long ago. But Bernie's brutality proves an inexorable force for all characters. Ron unwittingly passes on his blueprint about manhood to his kids, despite its tragic and self-limiting consequences in his own life.

Mitchell uses motifs such as men's belief in UFOs to demonstrate their hope for a connection to a foreign being. Their hope for difference is contrasted to the realities of their unsatisfactory relationships with their partners, friends and children. Ron wants to reach out and touch his sons but thinks that is his wife's job. He is a tyrannising figure for his sons as he moves the family from town to town, desperate to make it in the trucking business.

But despite his use of violence, Ron is a character like someone we may know: a neighbour, a footy dad or a work colleague. He tries to fit into the male culture that has never accepted him. From being the runt of the family and hopeless at footy, to turning up at important meetings in long white socks, short sleeves and a tie, he has never been one of the boys. His violence does not come from a place of difference, but from a longing to be the same.

Rather than seeing men like Ron as monsters, Mitchell shows how social expectations thwart their more honourable intentions. These expectations suffocate male and female character alike. Ron's wife, Jules, excuses and minimises the effects of his violence on their sons, "because the three boys could have all done with a bit more sorting out from their father if you asked her". Jules is captured by traditional gendered notions and is dedicated only to the care of others. She desperately hangs photos of siblings' weddings in her children's homes to promote the facade of family values among their dysfunction. When her daughter-in-law strives to make her way in the art world, Jules is offended by her creative expression and judges her for failing to prioritise her absent husband.

Mitchell asks us if it is possible to escape the subjectivity of our pasts, or do the male voices in our heads sentence us to a lifetime of judgment by their standards? Ultimately, *We.Are.Family* might be read as a tale of redemption and hope.