

In the Company of Saints

Creative Component of PhD Thesis, *Divine Madness: Identifying, Analysing and Developing the Campus Clique Crime Novel*

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And when he had placed his hand on mine, with a cheerful look from which I took
comfort, he led me among the secret things.
– Dante, *The Divine Comedy*

Prologue

I lied. It was just little things at first—small details heightened or erased—a smile imagined slightly brighter, a sour look deliberately forgotten. They were the kind of lies I imagine everybody tells themselves, but at some point they stopped being enough for me. The gap between who I was, who my friends were and who I wanted us to be could no longer be patched with slight misremembering and I told bigger and bigger lies to make reality match my fantasy. I kept telling myself that things were perfect and we were perfect. My life was a fairytale, a classic rags-to-riches story, until it wasn't.

Looking back I'm not sure which bits of my story are real and which bits I only want to be real. My closest friends have become strangers and I wonder if I ever knew them or if I simply cast them in the roles I wanted them to play: Meg, the stylish sophisticate and fairy godmother; Bastian, her witty, rakish beau; Peter, the troubled hero with a dark past; and me, the awkward, bookish girl who stumbled into their enchanted world to save him. There was a villain, too, and I wish I could blame him for robbing us of our happy ending, but the labels I applied to each of us have become unstuck.

What actually happened, what I believed, what I said to my friends and what we told the police have become confused, and at the fringes of my happiest memories are shadows I've long ignored. They narrate an alternate history, painful to acknowledge and so at odds with the one I convinced myself was true, that I'm no longer sure where or with whom the blame lies for what we did.

Semester One

I'd dreamed of leaving Cootbowie for as long as I could remember before finally, just after my eighteenth birthday, I boarded the bus to the city. For the entire four-hour trip anticipation held my attention at the window as wheat fields gave way to small towns and the towns to the factories that rose on the outskirts of the city. Admittedly, it wasn't the most impressive of destinations. It's not as glamorous as Paris or New York—or even Sydney—but when you've grown up in a place as small and unchanging as Cootbowie, anywhere with traffic lights becomes the stuff of fairytales. I'd spent so long imagining my life away from that small cluster of shacks by the water, I was almost afraid to leave. I couldn't bear to be disappointed by a reality that failed my expectations. I stared at the people moving in and out of shops and office buildings and felt a sudden envy that they seemed so at home. I wondered if they'd always lived here, or if they, too, had carried their hopes and fears into the thrilling strangeness of a new place.

The bus hissed and sighed as it pulled into the terminal. The other passengers shuffled out of their seats and I tucked the Mawson University brochure I'd intended to browse for the hundredth time into my backpack and gathered my luggage. Outside, I scanned the small huddle of people that made up our welcome party and panic pinched hard in the middle of my chest: Meg wasn't there. I checked my phone, but there were no missed calls. I'd definitely told her the right date and time. I stood stupidly by my bags, my panic intensifying, while everyone else made their way to waiting cars and taxis. Around me the buildings rose taller than I'd remembered, the late afternoon sun

parking off their windows. I caught my reflection in the glass of a nearby shopfront and carefully altered my expression so I didn't look quite so much the gaping tourist.

The street was crowded with the Friday post-work crush. People pushed past, bumping me with their laptop bags, absorbed in their phone conversations or whatever song was blaring through their headphones, and the peak hour traffic growled like a pack of impatient beasts. I barely heard my name being called over the din.

It took a moment to recognise Meg flitting through the suits towards me. The years since we'd seen each other had rubbed away at her, wearing down the edges of her quirks and glossing her into something magnificent. Her too-big glasses were gone (I assumed she'd swapped to contacts) and the simple cut of her vintage, flapper-style dress flattered her slim figure. I'd never known her to wear make-up, but now her eyelashes were dark and full and her mouth was a perfect bow of red. The long curtain of her hair had been dyed platinum blonde and cut short to fit her face like a helmet. She looked like the heroine in a *film noir*, and, just like an old time movie star, she was smoking; a little curl of grey snaked out of her right hand.

'Darling, hello! It's so good to see you again! How was the trip? I don't know how you could bear being squished in that tin can for so long.' As though I'd had a choice. 'You must be exhausted.' There was a brief change in her expression, almost too slight to detect, but I caught the subtle sweep of her gaze from my worn out sneakers to my schoolgirl bob, before her smile flashed, brighter than before. 'You haven't changed.' Her voice was different. Her rural drawl was gone and her diction perfect, as though she had rolled the words over pearls before letting them out.

When she reached me, she threw her arms around me and kissed the air beside my cheek. Awkwardly, I returned the gesture, wondering when she had become the hugging type. I wanted to impress this new, polished Meg and tried to think of something clever to say.

‘It’s great to see you, too. I feel like a “stranger in a strange land,” right now.’ My voice was clunky and slow in the wake of hers. I crossed my arms over my body, hiding what I now realised was a childish and tasteless choice of dress, and did my best to return her smile.

‘Poor bumpkin,’ she teased, placing her arm around my shoulder. ‘Trust me, you’re going to feel far more at home quoting dead writers here than you ever did back in Cootbowie. Just wait until you see the apartment; you’ll forget you ever knew the meaning of the word “homesick”.’

I gave her another small smile, and this time it was almost genuine.

The apartment was in the middle of the CBD. We could have walked from the bus stop, but Meg had brought her car—a sleek black Mercedes—so we wouldn’t have to lug my bags through the forty-degree heat. While she fiddled with the iPod she had tuned into the car stereo, I turned to study the objects strewn across the back seat, trying to piece together an understanding of who Meg had become: a dog-eared crime novel; a pair of sequined stilettos, worn at the heels; a Moleskine notebook; scattered pens, their ends chewed; and an empty vodka bottle.

Since Meg had left for boarding school five years ago we’d written to each other every week, not emails and Facebook messages, but real, handwritten letters. We always took great care with our correspondence, selecting the best stationery and drafting on scrap paper first. Over the years Meg’s writing style became more sophisticated, but the content of her letters was largely unchanged—lengthy and coldly opinionated reviews of everything she read and equally critical gossip about her classmates at St Augustines (the Saints she called them), punctuated by frequent and proud references to her boyfriend, Bastian, whom she started seeing in year eleven. Nothing in her letters had hinted at the scale of her transformation and I was

suddenly hurt that she'd kept so much from me, that the girl she'd made herself out to be was a fake—a dulled down version of herself she thought I'd be better able to relate to.

Meg turned down the music. 'I don't remember you being this quiet, Luce.'

'Sorry. Awed silence, I guess. I mean, this *car*, Meg! And you. Last time I saw you there was sand in your hair and you'd been wearing the same pair of shorts for a week straight.'

She smiled, remembering. 'God, I was beastly, wasn't I?'

I stared at her. *Beastly?* Apparently she'd acquired quasi-British heritage, too. I thought it sounded pretentious, but stored the word away and made note to drop it in a sentence when I got the chance.

'A lot's happened since then. I grew up.' She looked almost mournful, as though her coming of age had been a deeply unpleasant ordeal, but chased the memory away with a reassuring smile. 'But I'm still your best friend, Luce. And the car was Mum's idea, obviously. I mean really, Lucie,' she said in scarily accurate imitation of her mother. 'Do you honestly think I would have Meg seen driving anything else?' She poked me in the ribs. 'Come on, lighten up! Isn't this what we've been dreaming about since we were eight years old? I've been so excited all summer, the boys are sick of hearing about you. They'll think I've completely lost it if you mope about and don't say anything all evening.'

Fear jabbed a neat sucker-punch into my stomach. 'The boys?'

'Don't get mad, but Bastian has been dying to meet you, so I sort of invited him to dinner. His friend Peter is coming too. You don't mind, do you?' she added, in a way that told me she'd already decided I didn't.

I was exhausted from the weeks of pent up excitement and anxiety as I counted down the days until I left Cootbowie, forcing myself to return Mum's strained

cheerfulness over breakfast that morning and the long hours on the bus. I'd been looking forward to spending the night on the couch with Meg in our pyjamas and eating take away while we swapped stories, but I told myself to buck up and gave Meg an enthusiastic grin. 'Not at all. Can't wait.'

The apartment was on the penthouse level of a new building just off the main restaurant strip. Meg pointed it out as she swung the car into a park across the road. I stared up at the glassy stories while she chatted on.

'... Of course there's a proper underground car park, but the body corporate, or whoever's in charge of these things, is so stingy with the spaces and people get furious if you take theirs, so I always leave mine free for Bastian when I can. It's impossible to get a park on the street at night...'

Even though we only had a short distance to cross, the oppressive heat bore down on us, as though the air had been compressed as it squeezed between the buildings. Inside the apartment, however, it was cool; the air con blasted the flush from our cheeks as Meg led me into what she proudly called the library. The apartment was new, but Meg had made it look surprisingly old and lived in; the kind of place where I imagined writers might meet for secret salons. The air was sweet with incense and a hint of cannabis. There were overlapping rugs on the floor, sagging couches plump with cushions, mismatched side tables hidden under a tasteful mess of scarves and scattered books, and on one a vase of dusky roses catching the afternoon light. Two of the walls had floor to ceiling shelves, with various knick-knacks and photographs cluttered between rows of books.

I took a few steps closer to look at the pictures: a boy about our age with a wide grin in aviators and board shorts on the deck of a boat, the sea glittering behind him; the same boy and Meg in evening dress posing with their arms around each other at what

appeared to be their school formal; another, scruffy-looking boy seated at a piano, not looking at the camera and seeming out of place among the other snaps of boys and girls in polo shirts and rugby jumpers, with their arms carelessly thrown around each other's shoulders.

I studied the group shots and imagined myself as a subject in them, dressed in a St Augustines blazer, with other girls' arms linked through mine and the playing fields an endless green expanse behind us. Meg set down my bags with a thud. The sound made me start and the image was gone.

'God, those are so old,' she said, when she saw what I was looking at. 'We'll have to take some new shots to replace them. I don't want us to turn into the kind of sad people who spend their whole lives being nostalgic about their high school glory days.' She flung her handbag onto the couch. 'Life should be lived in the present, and right now that means checking on dinner. Make yourself at home. You're my guest tonight, which means you're forbidden to help with the cooking.' She disappeared into the kitchen.

I picked up a book left splayed on the coffee table: Dante's *The Divine Comedy* in the original Italian. 'Jesus,' I muttered, putting it back. The third wall of the room was made entirely of glass with a door opening onto a small balcony. I walked over and pressed my palm against the pane, feeling a rush of vertigo. I was really here.

As I stood watching the traffic inch along the street below the aroma of garlic and basil wound itself around me and I let it lead me towards the door Meg had gone through, which opened into a combination kitchen-dining room. Meg was standing by the stove, stirring a sauce. A large table covered with a yellowed lace cloth was set with linen napkins in holders and a bottle of wine stood airing beside saucers of melting candles.

'Smells amazing,' I said. 'I had no idea you'd learned to cook.'

‘Basic boarding house survival skill,’ she replied. ‘I’m pretty sure the slop they served us was poisoned; it certainly wasn’t edible. I think they did it on purpose. With the amount of time I spent in the kitchen and the laundry, I might have been a housewife-in-training. And now look at me; I’m fully domesticated.’ She gestured to the elaborate table settings.

I laughed. ‘Your mother will be thrilled.’

‘God, don’t tell her. You know what she said to me the other day? She wanted to know if Bastian has showed any signs of proposing. Apparently, she’s been talking to his mother and they’ve decided they’d like to be grandparents while they’re still young. Can you believe it?’ I couldn’t, but despite Meg’s outraged tone, there were roses blooming on her cheeks. ‘We’ve barely been out of school five minutes. Next she’ll be telling me not to bother with uni.’ She laughed, taking a bottle of champagne from the fridge and pouring two glasses. ‘I hope we don’t ever turn out like our parents. I don’t want to look back at forty and realise I’m just another botox bunny who rocks up to Parents and Friends meetings in pastel twin sets and drives her kids around in some flashy four-wheel drive that’s never gone off road, but that’s exactly what Mum has planned for me.’

Meg didn’t know how lucky she was. Not that I would have chosen that life for myself either, but at least it was an option for her. If I told my parents I wanted to get married, Dad would assume I’d been knocked up and probably disown me. In a way, though, I knew what Meg meant.

‘Coming here is the scariest thing I’ve done, but I don’t ever want to go back to Cootbowie,’ I said. ‘I’m not going to spend my life pulling beers and waiting tables in some backwater town nobody ever passes through. I couldn’t bear to be that ordinary.’

Meg raised her glass. ‘To being extraordinary.’

Our eyes met as the crystal clinked and for the first time that afternoon I recognised my old friend.

While we drank the champagne, Meg took me on what she announced with a flourish as *le grande tour*. Other than the rooms I'd already seen there was a bathroom and two bedrooms. I gathered up my bags and Meg showed me into the one that would be mine. It was much bigger than my bedroom at home. A floor-to-ceiling window with a view reaching to the river that snaked around the city fringe filled the room with light. There was a dressing table, small walk-in wardrobe, large desk, and double bed with crisp sheets and a towel placed neatly at the end. Unlike the rest of the apartment, everything was white, like a canvas waiting for me.

I dropped my bags and walked a slow circle of the room, trailing my fingers over the desk and quilt cover. To my surprised delight, from the window I could make out the Art Gallery, State Library and Museum crouched behind a line of trees.

'You can decorate it however you want, only don't use sticky tape on the walls. Mum will have a fit if we ruin the paint work.'

I nodded. 'It's perfect, Meg. Thank you.' It was better even than the cosy, slightly dingy room I'd pictured when I imagined my dream life in the city.

'I'm just glad you're finally here to share it with me. I've been so desperate to have another girl around.' She looked like she was about to add something else, but the smoke detector interrupted, bleeping like an insistent child from the kitchen. 'Shit. Feel free to have a shower and freshen up if you like. Bastian and Peter will be here at seven.' She disappeared to rescue dinner before I could offer to help.

I checked my phone. I still had an hour and decided to start unpacking, but my faded shirts looked like rags hanging in the clean white wardrobe. I stuffed them back

into my bag and picked up the towel from the end of the bed, carefully smoothing over the wrinkles it left in the quilt.

The water was warm against my back as I stepped under the shower and what little remained of my confidence gurgled down the drain. I felt like crying. I'd worked so hard to get here, but now that I'd finally made it, I wasn't sure I could fit in with Meg and her preppy, private school friends, or keep up with the other students at uni if their reading levels were as advanced as Meg's.

I remembered the day the letter from Mawson had come. It was hot, a real scorcher, and there was no wind. The air reeked of seaweed and rotting fish and the sun had sunk into everything, making steering wheels and garden taps too hot to touch. From my window I could see that the tide was out, the water lying flat and far away like a heat mirage in the middle of the bay. I'd just come from helping Dad with the lunch shift at the pub and picked up the mail on my way in. I smelt like stale beer, my skin felt greasy and I was desperate for a shower, but I stopped when I saw the envelope with the Mawson crest. My hands shook as I dropped the other letters and tore it open. I held my breath as I took out the paper and unfolded it. And then I screamed: I had won a scholarship to do English and creative writing at Mawson University.

I ran out to the back yard bursting with excitement. Mum was stooped among the tomato bushes, her hair had drifted loose from her plait and the hem of her faded sundress was grimed with dirt. She hummed a half-remembered tune and carefully placed the ripe tomatoes in a large metal bowl. I ran to her and threw my arms around her, trying to show her the letter at the same time. In my excitement, my foot kicked the bowl and shining red fruit tumbled across the dirt.

'I knew you'd get in.' She pulled away, her smile bright to match my own, though it didn't reach her eyes. My elation imploded as fast as it had risen and I found I couldn't look at her.

‘Mum, your tomatoes! I’m sorry, I’m so clumsy.’ I knelt to gather them up, brushing the dirt off and feeling the softness of bruised flesh against my fingers. ‘It’s just an offer. I don’t have to accept it.’

‘Of course you do. But you’ll come back, won’t you? In the holidays? You can bring the friends you’ll make in the city. Maybe you’ll meet a nice boy and the two of you will settle down here.’

I looked at my mother’s face, so full of hope for the life she had so carefully mapped out for me. I hated myself for wanting to leave, but I hated her, too, for not having the sense to get out herself. ‘You know I’ll come back, Mum. I’ll miss you too much to stay in the city.’ It broke my heart to lie to her, so I told myself it wasn’t really a lie; the future held infinite possibilities. But if I had my way, I’d never go back.

Many people down that end of the peninsula are wheat farmers who can afford to send their kids to boarding schools in the city, but Dad, being a publican in a town of less than three hundred people, didn’t have that kind of money, even if I’d had a scholarship. So I’d stuck it out at the Area School. It was bearable until year eight. Before that I’d had Meg.

We’d been inseparable since we fought over a copy of *Possum Magic* in kindergarten. When Dad didn’t come home and Mum wouldn’t get out of bed, I used to stay at Meg’s. Mrs Gilmore was from a wealthy family in the city and used to bring me packages of chocolate frogs when she returned with Meg from trips to visit family, once or twice she even let me tag along. She loved to read and their house was full of books. Ours had very few and I came to believe that reading was something that only the best kind of people did. I soon realised this wasn’t quite the case, but I became a voracious reader, nonetheless, and determined that one day I would not only own books, I would write them.

In year three I found the perfect hideout in the sand dunes near my house. I stumbled upon it by accident one afternoon when I heard Mum coming down to the beach, calling my name with a familiar waver in her voice that often preceded a breakdown. I'd crawled into the scrub to hide and discovered a clearing in the middle of the bushes, completely invisible from the outside. After I showed it to Meg we went there almost every day after school. Our favourite game that year was Pirates. We stuck sharpened sticks for cutlasses through our belt loops and climbed the few springy branches that made up the skeleton of the bushes, as though they were our ship's rigging, and peeped over the leaves in search of land and enemy ships. Meg was always the captain, steering the narrative of our play into ever deeper and more enchanting waters, and I her faithful first mate, only too eager to explore the exciting new territory where her flights of whimsy landed us.

Later, when the thin branches began to strain beneath our weight, we pretended we were grownups and the clearing was the house we shared in the city. We hatched our plan to become famous writers, and imagined staying up all night working on our masterpieces and hosting lavish dinner parties for our circle of arty friends. We filled the clearing with our most treasured possessions: rare seashells salvaged at low tide, bags of chocolate-coated liquorice and stolen library books. We spent a summer fashioning pieces of driftwood into makeshift furniture and made lanterns out of coloured paper. Then Meg's parents enrolled her at St Augustines and she left for the city without me. At first she came home for the holidays, but then she made new friends and started to stay with them during the breaks.

Meg came home for Christmas at the end of year ten. She was full of talk about a boy she'd kissed at a party a week before—Bastian, as it turned out—and kept checking her phone to see if he'd replied to her texts. On New Year's Eve we escaped to the clearing, but the winter tides had beaten us. There was nothing left of our hideout

but an old, waterlogged novel and a few pieces of driftwood scattered between the bushes. We sat in the clearing long after the fireworks across the bay had finished, but we couldn't make ourselves see anything but weatherworn scrub where the walls of our house had once been. Meg went back to boarding school and, though her letters continued to arrive faithfully each week, they were full of new adventures with someone else.

I didn't get on with the other kids at school. During lunch the boys mucked around on the oval while the girls watched, giggling every time some guy with a six-pack ran past. I preferred to stay in the library, or, if the weather was good, I'd sit on a low branch of the Morton Bay fig behind the gym with my notebook and write myself into imaginary lives lived far away from the heat and dusty winds of Cootbowie.

I stepped out of the shower and stared at my reflection in the mirror, reminding myself that now I was living just such a life and I owed it to those memories to make it everything I'd hoped it would be.

Back in my room I laid out several outfits on my bed, trying to decide what would be most appropriate. After some consideration, I selected a polo shirt and skirt. It was the kind of outfit students wear in preppy college films and had cost me nearly a week's pay. I hoped it would show the Saints that I, too, was smart and sophisticated. By the time I'd dressed and finished drying my hair I could hear Meg talking to someone in the kitchen. I tested my smile in the mirror and went to join her.

As well as cooking dinner, Meg had managed to change into a little white cocktail dress and a headband of beaded lace. She wore a string of pearls with matching earrings, and held a cigarette out the window. From a distance she might have been Zelda Fitzgerald. There was a boy with her, the one she'd posed with in the photographs, and he was pouring the contents of a cocktail mixer into three glasses. He

was handsome in a private school jock kind of way: buffed up and tanned as though he'd spent the summer on a yacht, with a sun-streaked fringe falling jauntily over one eye. He wore khakis and boat shoes and a sports coat over a blue and white striped shirt. Hearing me come in, he flashed me a dazzling Prince Charming smile. I very nearly blushed before remembering that this was the fairytale prince who'd swept Meg away from me.

'Ah, she emerges.'

'There you are, Lucie. Oh gosh, I should have said, we usually dress up for dinner, but never mind.' She gave me a quick smile that might as well have been a sniper's shot. 'I've been waiting to introduce you.' She took my hand and pulled me into the kitchen. 'This is Bastian.'

'Fancy a long, slow screw against the wall, Lucie?' His grin widened.

'Only if you make it hard and dirty,' I replied, not missing a beat—like I hadn't heard that one, and much worse, at the pub a hundred times before.

Bastian's smile faltered for a second, as though he'd been unexpectedly knocked off balance, and it returned slightly tight-lipped as he conceded the upper hand and presented my drink. 'My kind of girl.'

I took the glass and returned the smile. I'd never met a boy like Bastian. I'd thought Meg's descriptions had been coloured by romance, but in real life too he seemed more of an ideal than an actual person. It made me wonder what he was hiding.

'What's keeping Peter?' Meg asked, testing the pasta with a fork. 'He promised to be on time tonight.'

Bastian laughed, as though the idea of Peter showing up any time before midnight, or at all, was absurd. 'Didn't he tell you? He's started working on a new series of pieces, said he was inspired by *The Waste Land*, or something equally depressing. I don't know. I wasn't really listening. Can't we eat, darling?' He embraced

Meg from behind and kissed her neck. ‘I don’t see why the rest of us need to enter into his suffering.’

Meg glanced at the digital clock on the oven. ‘I guess so. He’ll just have to re-heat his pasta when he gets here.’ She bent down to get bowls from the cupboard. ‘When did you speak to him?’ Her voice was deliberately casual, hiding an accusation.

Bastian was unruffled. ‘This morning. He heard someone was selling old jazz records at a flea market in the hills. I went with him.’

Meg ladled vegetable ragu into the bowls, each scoop landing with a distinctive thud. ‘You should have told me. You know how much I love markets.’

‘Darling, I’m sorry. With Lucie coming this afternoon, I figured you’d want me out of your hair. We’ll go together another time if you like.’

She gave him a look that clearly indicated he’d missed the point, which he returned with the innocent smile of someone who knows his crime cannot be proven. It didn’t seem a big deal to me, but, I thought, here was evidence that the fairytale love of Meg’s letters was perhaps not as simple as she’d made out.

The doorbell buzzed. Meg brought the bowls to the table and went to answer it while Bastian poured the wine.

‘None for me,’ I said quickly, as he reached for my glass. ‘I’m still on my cocktail.’ In fact, I’d barely touched it. As a general rule I didn’t drink. I hated the way alcohol made everything slow and blurry, and I’d spent too much time around drunks.

He looked at me suspiciously, as though I were not to be trusted.

‘What was St Augustines like?’ I asked, eager to lighten the mood. ‘I used to envy Meg; boarding school sounds so romantic.’

‘Hardly.’ Bastian snorted, as we took our seats at the table. ‘We tried to make the best of it, though. I remember one night we broke into the gym and got drunk around the pool. The water polo team found us looking like beached fish the next

morning and we had to give them what was left of the alcohol to keep them quiet.’ I couldn’t fathom my classmates even having the imagination to dream up such a party, let alone the guts to carry it out. ‘We were always on the verge of trouble. There were so many funny little rules at Saints.’ He looked like he was going to give examples then, with a bright smile, reconsidered. ‘I bet you had loads more fun than we did.’

Bastian reminded me of the guys on the football team at home, the ones all the girls flocked to the oval to watch. Except Bastian was better dressed, better looking and gave the impression that he had better things to do with his time than participate in country football matches. I could guess what school had been like for him: his personal arcadia. I imagined the entire netball team making gooey eyes at him in the halls as he lorded it over the other boys, and I wagered he had just the right mix of smarts and sass to make teachers adore him. I wasn’t about to let on what high school had been like for me.

‘The only good thing about the Area School,’ I said, ‘is that once you finish, you never have to go back.’ I was smiling, but he caught the edge in my voice.

‘You don’t give much away, do you?’ he asked, leaning in a little across the table.

I was about to make another smart reply when the new arrival—Peter, I assumed—took the seat across from me. The words about to roll out of my mouth slammed on the brakes and crashed into each other. I looked up at him from the wreckage, Bastian’s question forgotten, and Peter, in turn, stared at me. He was the other boy from the photographs, the one who’d been playing piano. In the picture he’d looked merely scruffy, but in real life he was like the brooding hero in a Gothic romance. Beneath the bright chaos of his hair, his skin was chalky pale, and insomniac rings marked the hollows around his eyes. Oblivious to the heat, he wore a black velvet coat—patched in places—over a white shirt, the top button missing and the cuffs, where

they peeked beneath the coat, grubby with ink and cigarette ash. But it was his eyes that held me, their deep grey seeming almost black in the candlelight and striking such a contrast to his skin as to give him a disquieting, preternatural look.

I sensed Meg probably organised the whole evening to set us up and I had a sudden vision of how things might be in my new life: regular dinner parties, the four of us laughing and talking in earnest late into the night as though I'd always been part of their little group, and this strange and oddly beautiful boy placing his hand over mine beneath the table cloth. My exhaustion from the day's travel vanished, replaced by a sudden eagerness to make a good impression.

Bastian raised his glass, his words beginning to slur. 'Here he is, "the notion of some infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing," in the flesh.'

Meg took Bastian's glass away and Peter glared at him.

'What?' Bastian said defensively, but still grinning as he leaned back and placed a casual arm across the back of Peter's chair. 'It's from *The Wasteland*. Isn't that your latest obsession?'

'Actually it's from "Preludes,"' I corrected before Peter could say anything. 'I think,' I added, my certainty guttering beneath the mere force of his presence, but needing to share with him that I, too, had felt the seeping melancholy of those lines.

Peter turned from Bastian back to me. 'You're Lucie?' I nodded. 'Peter Sinclair.' He held out his hand across the table. His palm was warm as it closed around mine, but his expression remained cold. 'You like T. S. Eliot?' he asked. His voice was smooth and rich, like potent liquor, each syllable perfectly enunciated and dripping with condescension.

'I love him. His work is so, so...' I made a face to suggest a mix of emotions so complex I couldn't possibly express them in words. The truth was, I'd read very little Eliot, just two or three poems I'd found in my English reader while my teacher droned

on about Wilfred Owen, but they'd stuck with me. 'Bastian says you're working on something based on *The Waste Land*?'

'Actually Max Richter has already done that,' he said, as though it were a fact universally acknowledged. 'I'm writing a score playing with the notion that "Between the idea and the reality... Falls the Shadow".' I stared at him blankly and he smirked. 'It's from *The Hollow Men*. Perhaps you haven't read that far?'

'Oh, come off it, Peter. You're such a pretentious wanker sometimes.' Bastian took his glass back from Meg.

'So you're a musician?' I ventured, still focused on Peter.

'Composer,' he corrected.

'Peter's been accepted to the conservatorium at Mawson. We'll all be studying up there together,' Meg explained while Peter and I continued to size each other up across the table.

Later, when the candles had almost burned down and all the wine was gone, Bastian found a half-empty bottle of tequila in Meg's liquor cabinet and suggested we play a game.

Meg was leaning out the window, smoking another cigarette. 'Like what?'

'Mad Dogs.' Bastian eyed each of us. 'It's like doing regular tequila shots only instead of licking the salt, taking the shot and sucking the lemon, you snort the salt, take the shot and squeeze the lemon in your eye.'

It was the sort of game the guys back home played in the pub on Saturday nights. Sometimes they'd ask me, in slurred, belchy voices, if I wanted to join in. I always ignored them and was surprised Bastian had suggested it.

‘Why do I suddenly feel like we’re back in year ten?’ Meg sighed, stubbing out her cigarette on a half-filled saucer she kept on the window ledge. ‘Surely we could think of something slightly more dignified for Lucie’s first night?’

‘Drinking games are, by definition, undignified. When else do you have a legitimate excuse to make an idiot of yourself? You’re up for it, aren’t you, Lucie?’ Bastian asked.

‘Actually, I think I’ve had enough.’

‘Nonsense. You’ve hardly had a drop all evening. Don’t think I didn’t notice you switching wine glasses with Meg. You and Peter can go against each other. Consider it part of your initiation into our little group. What do you say, Peter?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ he replied, looking even less enthused than I felt. ‘And why me?’

‘Because you were late tonight and it was rude.’

‘Fine. Are you in?’ Peter glared at me, challenging me to accept.

For the first time since our introduction hours before I had his full attention and I would have snorted razor blades to keep it there.

‘How do you win?’ I asked.

‘Ah, that’s the tricky part.’ Bastian began to pour the shots. ‘You’ve got to try not to react. The last person to put their head under the tap wins.’

Meg was right: Mad Dogs would have to be one of the most immature games ever invented. But Bastian had made it a test and how I scored would weigh heavily on whether or not he and Peter thought I was a worthy addition to their little group. I imagined the acute pain of lemon juice stinging my eyes and salt grains sticking in my nose and measured it against the lasting ache I’d feel if the Saints decided to exclude me.

Peter was still watching me, waiting for my response. My blood quickened under his gaze. ‘I’m in.’

‘That’s my girl.’ Bastian placed a lemon wedge on each of our glasses and cut two lines of salt with a practised hand. On his signal, Peter and I snorted them up, the grains of salt ripping through my nose like sandpaper. We clinked glasses, downed the shots and squeezed the lemon into our eyes.

For a second I felt nothing. Peter and I locked watery gazes across the table, and I braced myself for the pain. Hellfire exploded through my head, raced down my throat, tore at my sinuses and leapt out of my eyes in salty flames. All I could make out was the dark plume of Peter’s jacket, his face distorting as the fire grew. I gritted my teeth, my legs straining to spring me from my chair, but I held my place. Carefully, I withdrew my mind from the inferno raging through my skull and instead tried to imagine how it would feel to be kissed by Peter—the gentle pressure of his hand at the small of my back as he pulled me close and the tickle of his hair against my forehead as his lips pressed warm against mine. The fire flared with new energy and before I realised what I was doing I was out of my chair and bent over the sink, where Meg had thoughtfully turned on the tap. I had barely lasted two minutes. Peter managed nearly three.

That night, after Peter left and Meg begged Bastian to stay then led him by the hand to her room, I crept into the library and scanned the bookshelves until I found a copy of T. S. Eliot’s poetry. I made myself a pot of tea, took it out onto the balcony and watched the city’s nightlights flicker below while it cooled. Down on the street taxis sped past, horns blaring as they spirited late-night partygoers back to the suburbs. Guys called after scantily clad girls as they tottered past in their stilettos. Beneath their laughter the

night pulsed with the menacing throb of techno beats from a nearby club and a sudden wind gusted burger wrappers and stomped-on chip packets along the footpath.

But where I sat the sounds were muffled and the night clear. The occasional star winked through the haze and the wind blew sweet and warm across my cheeks. I played the day over in my head. Already Cootbowie's stubble fields and shell grit seemed like the landscape of another life—someone else's life—but what they'd been replaced with didn't feel quite real yet either. Meg was so different and I wasn't sure how to behave around her. She and Bastian had such an affected manner, and their clothes, the apartment, the dinner party—it all felt like an elaborate game of make believe. Then there was Peter with his cruel mouth and warm hands. I wanted him to like me, partly because he clearly didn't and I was angry with him for judging me so quickly, and partly because I desperately wanted to be counted among the Saints and sensed I wouldn't be until he gave his approval. But there was something else, too. When Peter first looked at me a tiny firework had exploded in my chest and my whole body lit up. I would give anything to make it happen again. Smiling at the memory, I switched on the balcony light, took one last look out over the dark buildings, then opened the book in my lap and, with a grim determination, began to read.

I don't believe in fate, but I like to pretend there is poetic synchronicity in life the way there is in stories. That I arrived in the city on the heels of some of the world's greatest writers, who'd jetted in for the Festival of Arts and the Fringe Festival, seemed a sign that I had finally stepped onto the path that would lead to my happily ever after. My first morning I sat on the balcony with a plate of toast, watching the sun inch slowly up my bare legs while Meg and Bastian plied their hangovers with coffee and the three of us discussed how best to indulge in the festivities.

'Writers' Week starts at eleven, and Richard Berthum is doing his "Meet the Author" session at two.' Meg said, looking up from the program. She was draped over one of the chairs and wearing Bastian's shirt from the night before as a dressing gown.

'Richard Berthum? Seriously? Have you forgotten what he was like back when he taught at Saints? Besides, listening to writers is *boring*,' Bastian whined. 'We should do something fun with our last day of freedom before we have to start thinking about assignments and study again. Look,' he said, showing her the Fringe guide. 'Here's a standup act that took out a bunch of awards at the Edinburgh Fringe. Why don't we see that?'

Meg lowered her sunglasses. 'We've talked about this. I don't want to hear Berthum any more than you do, but I don't see Luce and I have a choice; he's teaching our workshop class this semester. What kind of marks do you think he'll give us if he finds out we weren't there?'

'You're not honestly thinking about your grades already?' Bastian groaned.

‘It’s a competitive program, Bastian. It won’t hurt to give ourselves a head start.’

‘What about you, Lucie?’ Bastian asked, turning to me. ‘You don’t really want to spend the afternoon wilting in the forty-three degree heat and listening to some glorified English teacher wax poetic on his latest novel, do you?’

I did, very much so. Richard Berthum was a big part of the reason I’d applied to Mawson. He’d come from a background almost as depressing as my own to produce an award-winning novel at just twenty-five. Now he was one of the country’s most successful authors. Reading one of his books was like getting a letter from a friend who knew me better than I knew myself. In Cootbowie, I kept a picture of him pinned above my desk, and in my high school journals I’d crowned his name with inky hearts. I’d be damned if I was going to miss his session.

‘I think Meg has a point, but you don’t have to come with us. You could see the other show with Peter and the four of us could meet up after?’ I offered, eager to draw Peter into the day’s plan.

Bastian started to agree, but Meg interrupted. ‘I’d really like you to come with us, darling. It won’t go for very long and we can see something fun tonight. We’ve hardly spent any time together this week,’ she added with a slight edge to her voice.

The last sentence appeared to sway him. ‘Fine, I’ll come, and I’ll be good. Just don’t expect me to lead the applause.’

The temperature had climbed considerably by the time we reached the parklands where Writers’ Week was held, and fellow booklovers, dazed with heat, milled slowly across the lawns. The sun dappled through the branches overhead and the air was sickly sweet with the smell of champagne and fresh-cut grass.

With no small effort we managed to stake our claim on a patch of shady lawn with a view of the East Stage where Richard Berthum would be speaking. The current session was wrapping up with question time and a woman with a scrunchie in her hair and a giant picture of a cat printed on her t-shirt was asking the author where she got her ideas. All around us women in floppy-brimmed hats were yoo-hooing to each other and fanning themselves with their programs. One of the women turned to look at us and I had a vision of the pleasing tableau we must have made for her: Meg and I in breezy summer dresses, diligently jotting notes in our Moleskines, with Bastian stretched out between us and a bottle of champagne sweating beside him. I felt like a subject in a painting, captured in my most favourable light and for several minutes I kept perfectly still, not wanting to spoil the image.

When I refocused on the stage question time had finished and Richard Berthum was being introduced. Butterflies fluttered beneath my ribs. Even at a distance he appeared larger than life—one of those rare charismatic people who are wired to give off a certain charge that infallibly draws in those around them like moths to light. He was very attractive, like Jeremy Irons in *Brideshead Revisited*, but that wasn't it. He had the roguish, rumpled look of a seasoned traveler and the confident smile of someone who has experienced things the rest of us couldn't even imagine, or wouldn't dare to.

He had, in fact, spent several years backpacking around South America, the US and Europe, gathering notes for his first novel. I imagined him conquering lonely mountain trails and brooding in smoky Parisian bars, and was awed he'd made it so far from a broken home in the northern suburbs, winning a scholarship to Saints and working odd jobs on weekends to pay for his uniforms and textbooks. Now he stood before us with a PhD and a stack of awards, sharing with the eager crowd the secret of his success.

His gaze slid over his audience, sharp and penetrating as he began to speak of his life and craft with the air of a magician laying down cards.

‘I loved books from an early age, but neither of my parents were readers, and both thought fiction, in particular, was a waste of time. I had to smuggle books into the house and read in the afternoons before my parents came home from work.

‘I knew that to become a good writer, I firstly needed to be a good reader. I read everything from airport novels to Proust. I made time to write, working two, sometimes three jobs and studying. I was always exhausted, but if you want to be a writer, the two things you need above all else are ambition and discipline. You can have all the other technical skills and creative genius, but if you haven’t got those, you’ll never get far in this industry.’

I nodded in vigorous agreement, wanting to imagine that he could distinguish me from the hundreds of fans gathered on the grass. In high school I’d used Berthum’s uncompromising work ethic as a blueprint for my own. I’d had nothing in the way of a social life. When I’d felt lonely I’d reminded myself that I’d have plenty of time for friends and boyfriends and parties after I got out of Cootbowie. The nights I didn’t work at the pub I spent reading. It made me a better writer and if I hadn’t pushed myself, I wouldn’t have earned my place at Mawson. Books had taught me other things, too: how words could transform simple, ugly moments into sites of wonder and art. I studied the characters in my favourite books—Charles Ryder, Tom Ripley, Jane Eyre—and recognised in myself their same sense of insatiable longing for a better life.

Berthum finished his talk by reading a scene from his latest novel in which a fifteen-year old girl loses her virginity to her twenty-two-year old step-brother. The group of women closest to us muttered their disgust. They didn’t get it. They weren’t really listening, or perhaps didn’t know how. Berthum’s books were an acquired taste

and I felt a little spark of pride at being able to look beyond the plot to the emotional narrative behind it. The scene wasn't about sex. It was about being needed and desired and how uncontrollably powerful those urges can be. Berthum understood that. His language was sensuous, playful, intimate and stirred a sweet, sharp feeling between my legs.

When the chair opened the floor to questions a troop of women in ankle-length skirts and floppy hats marched up to the microphone, indignant and demanding to know how their daughters could ever be expected to develop normal relationships after being exposed to his semi-incestuous, misogynistic, pedophilic filth.

Bored, Meg turned her attention from the stage to me. 'I take it you disagree with the Association of Disgruntled Bookclubbers? Just look at you!' She made her eyes wide and let her mouth hang open in slack-jawed awe, mocking me.

I pretended not to notice, still riding the high of finally having Berthum's existence confirmed as something more tangible than a picture on a dust jacket. 'What was he like when you knew him, Meg?'

Meg's early letters from St Augustines were full of gushy accounts of the handsome figure Berthum cut patrolling the grounds on lunch duty when he'd been on staff as an English teacher, and I'd got the impression she'd made herself his near-constant shadow. Then suddenly, towards the end of year nine, he vanished from her letters. I'd continued to ask questions about him, but Meg ignored them.

Now she shrugged. 'I never did. I wasn't in any of his classes, and I never got up the nerve to speak to him. Peter was the only one of us who had him as a teacher, and I wasn't friends with Peter then.'

'Where is Peter? Why didn't he come today?' I asked, momentarily distracted.

‘No doubt he could think of better things to do with the last day of summer holidays than be lectured by his old English teacher,’ Bastian replied. He’d been dozing with his hat over his face for the duration of Berthum’s talk, but now he sat up. ‘Besides, Peter wouldn’t be caught dead at a Berthum fan fest like this.’

‘Why not?’ I asked.

Meg and Bastian exchanged a look and Bastian started to say something before Meg cut him off. ‘They didn’t get on.’ Her sudden caginess piqued my curiosity. ‘It’s no big mystery,’ she assured me, seeing my frown. ‘Remember Mrs Menton, the music teacher who smelt like onions and gave us detention every time we forgot our recorders? Would you go out of your way to see her again?’ I looked back at Berthum and wondered how it could possibly be fair comparison.

When question time finished I left the others and joined the line to have Berthum sign my copies of his books. When I reached the front of the queue the shock of seeing him sitting before me after existing for all those years as my imaginary mentor left me so nervous that I could only stand there, dazed from the heat and his presence, gaping at him.

‘Sorry,’ he said with a smile. ‘I didn’t catch your name.’ He spoke with the same polished accent as the Saints. It gave his words a seductive lilt.

‘It’s Lucie. Lucie Dawson. But it’s spelt with an “ie,” not a “y,” the, um, Lucie bit, that is.’

‘Are you sure? You don’t sound certain.’ His eyes moved over me slowly and his smile widened, revealing a row of perfect teeth.

The look made me feel flushed and unsteady. I fumbled the little pile of books in my arms, dropping them on the grass. People behind me started to grumble

as I scabbled to pick them up. Berthum didn't take his eyes off me, oblivious to the impatience building in the queue.

'Lucie.' He pronounced the word carefully, drawing out the syllables. 'I've always loved that name. The sound of it rolls off the tongue like a sigh or a kiss.' No one had ever focused on me so intently. His gaze fixed me in place and I felt like a rabbit cornered by a wolf, but I didn't want to move; I wanted him to devour me.

I gave him a shy smile. 'I liked your reading.'

'Glad to hear someone did.' He leaned on his elbows across the table.

'What, in particular, did you enjoy?'

I tried to think of something to make me sound suave and literary-minded, but all that came out was: 'I liked that the characters aren't an ideal couple.'

He looked slightly disappointed. 'Well, that's just basic romance: the characters have to be somehow unsuited or the story won't work. Love is just finely balanced tension.'

The line was getting really restless behind me, but I had to do something to make him remember me. 'Your book isn't a romance.'

He startled, as though not used to being challenged. 'No?'

I felt his attention sharpen; it gave me courage. 'That scene you read doesn't romanticise anything. The sex is needy and selfish and has nothing to do with love. It's real. I think it's brave.'

'That's very mature.' He tilted his head to one side, and with the action Richard Berthum the author slipped away and the man underneath introduced himself with a wolfish grin. 'How old are you Lucie?'

'Eighteen. Why?'

In response he scribbled a number on a scrap of paper, folded it once and held it out to me. I stared at it fluttering in the breeze between his fingers and

everything else faded from focus. I saw myself drinking wine and talking books with him in the corner booth of a fancy bar. Later, walking back to the car park together, his jacket across my shoulders and his arm around my waist; me sitting tense on the edge of the couch in his living room nursing another glass of wine as he dimmed the lights, and then... What? I asked myself. Driving to uni together the next morning? I reminded myself that, as of tomorrow, he wasn't just my favourite author; he was my tutor. More than that, I couldn't help feeling a little disappointed, like I'd got full marks on a test I hadn't studied for. I wanted to believe Berthum had singled me out and that something about me had him mesmerised, but his offer seemed too casual, too self-assured of my reply, and I wondered how many other girls he'd sent away with similar scraps of paper clutched to their chest.

'I can't take that,' I said, backing away, then turned and stumbled through the trees, confused and unable to reconcile this Richard Berthum with the charming man I'd seen on stage and in my fantasies on those lonely nights in Cootbowie.

The next morning I was a buzzing mess of nerves, and not just from the prospect of having to face Richard Berthum after our encounter the previous afternoon. I hadn't had to start at a new school since reception. With so few students, the Area School went right through to year twelve, and there wasn't another school within an hour's drive of our house. But that hadn't stopped me thinking about what it would be like. God, did I ever think about it! I used to imagine my parents sitting me down at the kitchen table for our first and only family meeting. They would exchange a look and then Mum, suddenly the clear-eyed, practical woman I'd always wished her to be, would take a deep breath: 'Lucie, your father and I are getting a divorce. I'll have to get a job, so we're moving to...' The location didn't matter really. It could have been anywhere, usually somewhere cold where the dust and the heat couldn't follow: Tasmania, New Zealand, Banff. Theoretically, I liked the idea of being the new girl, of taking my seat in an unfamiliar classroom full of students who knew nothing about me. In that environment I could completely reinvent myself. However, now that I really was the new girl, the idea of fighting to find my place among thousands of strangers was more than a little daunting.

When Meg turned into University Drive and I got my first look at the campus, I wondered if she'd made a mistake. Mawson University isn't in the city. It sits on a hill above it, guarded by a fortress of trees and invisible from the main road. It seemed as though we were headed into an impenetrable wilderness of thick bush, ancient gums and pine trees. Then, as the road wound higher up the hill, the campus began to reveal itself, like something from a dream. First came the neat rectangles of the

sports' fields rolled out between the trees and glittering with morning dew. Then the gymnasium, full of energetic figures on treadmills and ergo machines overlooking the hockey pitches and lower car parks, which, despite the early hour, were already filling up. As we rounded the final bend, the trees suddenly cleared and the main buildings rose tall and white against the morning sky. My excitement muddled with apprehension; it was almost too perfect. From the map in the brochure I knew each school had its own grassy courtyard and the schools were arranged in a rough circle around the banks of Mawson's most striking feature, the campus lake.

Meg just managed to find a space in the crowded main car park and we joined the crush of students climbing the wide steps leading to the plaza. With Meg beside me my nerves quieted. There was something about the way she brandished her cigarette and how her eyes disappeared completely behind her Wayfarers that gave her a certain presence, a look that said: I'm important and possibly hung over; get the fuck out of my way. It made the crowds part around her and I kept close by her side trying to affect a similar look, feeding off her power until I was almost convinced that I appeared equally intimidating.

We were making our way over to the café to meet the boys when Meg suddenly stopped and riffled through her bag. 'Damn it. I've left my phone in the car. See if you can find Bastian. He said he was saving us a table outside.'

She hurried off, leaving me alone in the middle of the plaza. Around me hundreds of students were consulting timetables, calling out to friends and crowding around booths decorated with cardboard signs where you could sign up for Ultimate Frisbee, the Women's Support Group, various religious sects and numerous other clubs, societies and sports. My self-importance guttered as I took in the strange mix of preppies, stoner types and hipsters. The first classes hadn't even started yet, but everyone seemed so sure of themselves, already dividing into little groups. It was like

high school all over again. I smoothed my expression into an apathetic mask and scanned the tables for Bastian, stopping when I spotted another figure looking as out of place as I felt.

‘Peter!’ I called, making my way over to his table.

He was staring out over the balustrade and didn’t hear me, or else pretended not to. I took the seat across from him and followed his gaze down the grassy slope towards the lake and an unpleasant chill passed through me as my eyes met the water. The lake was far bigger than I’d imagined, its surface dark and unnaturally still, like the menacing eye of a storm amid the first day, pre-class chaos erupting on its banks.

‘It looked much bluer in the brochure.’

With seeming effort, as though waking from a trance, Peter turned to focus on me. ‘Reality is a perpetual disappointment.’

There was a tired note in his voice. I noticed he was wearing the same black coat I’d last seen him in, which seemed odd given how hot it was, and his hair was mussed as though he’d just rolled out of bed after a bad night’s sleep. His attention began to drift from me back to the lake and whatever he’d been contemplating before I arrived. The promise of seeing him again had been one of the few distractions from my first day jitters and I searched for something to hold his focus.

‘Speaking of disappointments, I met Richard Berthum at Writers’ Week yesterday.’

Peter startled at the mention of his former teacher and took a moment to compose himself. ‘Did he do something?’

‘Why would you think that?’ I asked, suddenly cagey.

He shook his head. ‘I don’t know. Forget it.’

I’m not sure whether it was the need to show Peter that I was desirable, a genuine urge to tell someone what had happened, or the simple fact that he asked, that

led me to confide in him. ‘He gave me his number. I guess I should be flattered—I practically worship him—but it felt wrong. Too easy. I haven’t told anyone, not even Meg.’

He grabbed my hand where it rested on the table, his fingers crushing mine. ‘You can’t see him, Lucie.’

Despite being only our second meeting, I hoped he might add something along the lines of ‘because I want you for myself,’ but instead he only gripped my hand tighter. I found his sudden panic more than a little disconcerting and tried to laugh him off.

‘I’m not stupid. I’m not going to get thrown out of uni because my tutor can’t keep his pants on.’

‘Richard Berthum is teaching at Mawson?’

‘He’s the writer in residence.’ That Peter didn’t know seemed an odd omission on Meg’s part. ‘What’s the deal with you and Berthum anyway? Meg said you don’t get on.’

‘She’s right.’ Peter seemed agitated, looking past me to the crowd as though afraid he might find Berthum strolling across the plaza towards us. ‘Lucie, you need to stay away from him.’

I wanted to repeat my question about why he hated Berthum, but he looked so distressed I thought better of it. ‘Peter, are you all right?’

It took him a moment to refocus on me. ‘It’s the heat. I get headaches. I don’t know what’s taking Bastian so long with the coffee.’ He took off his sunglasses to rub his eyes.

‘No wonder. You must be boiling in that coat.’ Without the cover of his sunglasses I saw what I hadn’t before: the aubergine blush blooming around his eye.

‘God, what happened?’

Peter quickly put his sunglasses back on and his expression went blank. 'It's nothing.'

I wondered if he was wearing the coat to hide more damage on his arms. 'Did you get in a fight with someone?'

Peter was nearly two metres tall, and strong; Meg had told me that he and Bastian had rowed for the first eight and that their crew had taken out the title at Head of the River last year. It was difficult to imagine anyone being reckless enough to take him on.

'Can't you just pretend you didn't see it, Lucie?'

'I'm not trying to pry and you don't have to tell me. It's just that I've never met anyone like you.' I dropped my eyes. 'You intrigue me, Peter.'

He said nothing for a moment and I was too scared to look up again, afraid I'd been too forward, but eventually he broke the silence. 'It was my father.'

I gaped at him. 'Your father *hit* you?'

'For God's sake, keep your voice down,' he hissed.

I was astonished. 'Why would he do that?'

Peter paused to light a cigarette, stalling. 'He didn't know I'd applied to the conservatorium here.' A smile, the first I'd seen from him, ghosted across his face. 'He seemed to be under the impression that I was enrolling in a double degree in commerce and economics at Baudin University in the city.'

I returned his smile. 'You were suffering for your art. That's very romantic, Peter.'

If he knew I was flirting, he didn't show it. 'It wasn't intentional. My father is away for work a lot, and when he is around we don't spend much time together. I probably would have graduated before he figured it out if my mother hadn't found my acceptance letter and showed him.'

I knew how that felt. The day I found out I'd been accepted to Mawson, I ran back to the pub with the letter to show Dad. He'd only half listened, with one eye fixed on the new waitress bending over the tables to lay the dinner cloths.

'I still can't believe your dad hit you,' I said, genuinely shocked.

Peter shrugged. 'My father has very set ideas about what I should be doing with my life, and unfortunately they're very different from my own. Worse still, we're both prepared to fight for what we believe in.'

I nodded and something like an understanding passed between us. Mum would never hit me—she hadn't even asked me to stay with her—but I knew she didn't want me at Mawson any more than Peter's dad wanted him here. Like Peter, though, nothing could have kept me away. I needed this place where I could learn to create and control entire worlds through my writing, or at least reimagine this one.

After Meg and Bastian found us, Peter retreated back into himself, saying little. His attention wandered to the stairs leading to the Creative Arts courtyard. I wondered if he was looking for Berthum. My fingers still ached from the crushing pressure of his grip and I told myself it was a sign that he cared. Neither Meg nor Bastian mentioned the bruise around his eye.

Later that morning Meg and I arrived at the assigned classroom for Berthum's workshop to find it still locked. I wasn't ready to see him again. I didn't want him to remember me and for us to spend two awkward hours avoiding each other's eyes every Monday for the entire semester. But I was even more afraid he'd have forgotten, that he was the kind of person who thought nothing of handing his number out to random girls and that I had been nothing more to him than the possibility of fun.

A few other students milled near the door with stiff, unscuffed satchels and backpacks slung over their shoulders. They were trying to look nonchalant—a few were even making fumbled attempts to roll their own cigarettes—while giving each other the once-over on the sly. A girl in black with thick eye make-up and too many piercings hid behind Poe’s collected works, while a boy with square-framed glasses and a t-shirt proclaiming, ‘Think outside the quadrilateral parallelogram,’ was looking pensive and making the occasional note in a well thumbed pocketbook.

I found their barely-veiled earnestness comforting, but Meg muttered ‘Lord, save us,’ and dragged me away to sit under a large tree in the opposite corner of the courtyard. The tree was old and must have been there for decades before the university was built. This was something I immediately liked about the campus—the way nature reached her fingers between the buildings and threatened to close her fist. I ran my hand through the grass and felt something cool and hard.

‘Meg, look at this,’ I said, pushing back the grass.

At the base of the tree was a small metal plaque bearing the inscription: ‘In memory of Ebony Blake,’ underneath which were printed the years of her birth and death, only two years before.

‘She must have been a student,’ Meg said, reading over my shoulder. ‘She was only nineteen when she died. ‘God, who do you think she screwed to score a memorial on campus?’

‘Don’t be filthy. Perhaps she died here,’ I said, realising with a shudder that it was probably true.

Meg tapped my arm and nodded across the courtyard where the other students were filing into the classroom. ‘We’ll investigate when we’re not running late.’

I let her lead me across the grass, but couldn't help glancing back at the shady patch beneath the tree and wondering who Ebony was and why her memory had been placed under the guard of those craggy old boughs.

A fresh wave of nerves flooded through me as we entered the classroom and took adjoining seats round the large table at its centre. The other students busied themselves arranging their notebooks and laptops, but my eyes went straight to Berthum. He was rocking back on his chair and looking bored as though he'd done this many times before. His gaze found mine and my heart gave a little stumble, then another couple of students entered, talking loudly, and his eyes slid away from me.

When the class was settled he let his chair fall back into its normal position. 'Congratulations,' he said, looking around the table. 'The university received over three hundred applications for the creative writing course this year and the twelve of you are here because the powers that be read your portfolios and decided your work showed potential. That, however, is likely to be the last compliment you receive this semester.' He made his expression serious. 'Talent is not the same as mastery. The former is a crude gift that I believe can only be refined through dedication and discipline. Writing is like committing the perfect crime: you have to know your reader—your victim, as it were—be clear in your motivations, be prepared to spend long periods plotting and pay meticulous attention to the details. In order to understand how to do these things you need to read. Read to learn how the masters work their tricks and to understand where lesser authors have failed. Most of all, read to discover the kind of writer you aspire to be.'

Beside me Meg muffled a noise that sounded halfway between a snigger and a cough, but looking around I saw that most of the students were gaping at Berthum with a mixture of awe and intimidation. One woman was fervently transcribing every

word he said. I looked down at my own page, blank save for the date printed in the corner, then took up my pen and wrote, ‘To write well is to commit a perfect crime.’ It wasn’t exactly what he’d said, but it flowed better. Glancing back at the woman who was still scrabbling to get down Berthum’s last sentence, I underlined the phrase.

‘Having said that,’ Berthum went on, ‘I want to start by getting to know the kind of writers you hope to be, so why don’t we go around the table and introduce ourselves. I want you to each tell the class who or what you like to read and why, and for God’s sake, don’t say someone like Joyce or Pynchon. I refuse to believe any of you read that stuff for kicks.’

The scribe started to protest this, but Berthum cut her off and indicated for the girl on his right to start. Finding herself singled out, the girl’s eyes grew impossibly wide behind her wire-rimmed glasses and she gripped her takeaway coffee as though she was drowning and it was a life ring. It took her a moment to collect herself and work up the courage to speak.

‘I’m Lindsay Adams? I like, um, epic fantasy?’ She phrased her sentences as tentative questions that might be willingly revoked at the first sign of disapproval from her audience.

The girl who’d been reading Poe scoffed.

Berthum turned on her. ‘Something funny?’

The girl threw an incredulous look at those of us on the other side of the table. Then, after a deep sigh, ‘Well, let’s be honest: fantasy isn’t real literature. It’s escapist fluff.’

Berthum raised an eyebrow. ‘You are of course aware that Tolkien—the father of epic fantasy—was a Professor of Literature at Cambridge? I doubt he’d appreciate your view.’ The girl shrank back. Berthum smiled, satisfied, and continued, ‘Lindsey,

why don't you enlighten your classmates as to why epic fantasy is indeed worth reading?'

Lindsay stared at the other girl as though the girl had just murdered a puppy. Her words came as a barely audible series of squeaks. 'Um, I guess I like that it, um, takes really basic emotions and themes and plays them out on a grander scale? Like, I'm not a hero or anything, but like, in *The Lord of the Rings* I sort of get what Frodo and Sam are going through?'

'To find our own rites of passage are the maps for the great heroes' journeys, that their monsters are our own figurative demons: what could be more reassuring or uplifting? I think you've chosen well, Lindsay,' Berthum said, and Lindsey flushed redder than Meg's lipstick. 'Who's next?'

The girl who'd been reading Poe was called Caris and she liked 'dark, subversive literature'. Berthum made sure to point out that the Gothic, like fantasy, was for a long time regarded as pulp fiction, and that even now many critics refused to take it seriously. Hayden, the boy with the square-framed glasses, claimed *American Psycho* as his favourite novel, but thought it was still 'way too straight edge'. A shy girl named Serena liked magic realism and the woman who'd been taking notes was Bev, a mature age student who read feminist crime and memoir. A guy named Josh was into graphic novels and another, Liam, liked zines and beat poetry. Meg picked F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, saying that she often felt her life and her writing was one big production. A vain attempt to regain a hold of something she'd never quite got a grasp on. I thought she was being deliberately wanky—her own private joke—but there was no hint of a smirk in her expression.

Then it was my turn. 'My name's—'

'Lucie,' Berthum finished for me. 'We met at my talk yesterday.'

So he did remember, and far from appearing abashed, he regarded me with that same barely disguised hunger I'd seen in him the day before. Embarrassed, I dropped my eyes and saw the half moons of Peter's nails still faintly visible on my hand—a warning cut into my skin—and my stomach gave a little twist. Caris shot me a look as though I'd just got down on my hands and knees to lick Berthum's shoes. I ignored her.

'What's your favourite novel, Lucie?' Perhaps I misread him, but for the first time since the start of the workshop he was beginning to look interested and I wondered what he'd make of my choice.

'Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*.' With its promise of a more exciting life, *Rebecca* had been one of the few comforts of my adolescence and the seed of many fantasies: the handsome figure of Maxim de Winter at the wheel of his sports car, the whirlwind romance, the overwhelming grandeur of Manderley, shipwrecks, scandal, murder.

'So you think a woman needs a man in order to be worth anything?' Bev glared at me.

'Excuse me?' I was utterly at a loss.

'Du Maurier doesn't even bother to give her heroine a name.'

'You can't be serious?' Meg asked, looking like she'd kill for a cigarette.

'She spends the whole novel trying to be the perfect wife for a murderer, who treats her like she's some kind of dim-witted pet,' Bev replied.

I glared at her. 'I think you missed the po—'

'No, you've missed the point,' Bev snapped. 'Romance novels are written to suppress working class women, to have them think that the only way they'll ever better themselves is through marriage. They encourage women to give up work to look after their husbands and to believe they're not worth anything unless they're

hanging off a man's arm. I can't believe any woman today would waste her time on that kind of rubbish. Do you have any idea how hard previous generations have fought for your right to be sitting here?'

When she stopped speaking there was a lengthy silence, like that which follows an explosion. The males in the class did their best to make themselves invisible and even the girls exchanged uncomfortable looks. I wasn't sure if I wanted to run crying from the room or snatch the pen from her hand and stab it through her palm. I turned to Berthum for help and discovered, to my annoyance, that he seemed to be enjoying himself. He gave me a look that said simply: prove yourself.

I pushed my anger down and refocused on Bev. 'I don't see du Maurier's heroine as submissive. I think *Rebecca* is a story of determination and ambition. The heroine is nameless to show the challenge she has in establishing her own identity against the overwhelming ideal of Rebecca and the imposing backdrop of Manderley. She comes from nothing: she's a working class girl from London, but at the start of the novel she's already in Monte Carlo, even if she is only a paid companion. It takes her less than a fortnight to enchant one of the richest men in England and she manages to become mistress of a large country estate when she's barely in her twenties, then stands by Max through a murder investigation knowing he's guilty. She might present herself as a naïve wallflower, but then she's the narrator; she could make herself out to be anything. I think the fact that she never becomes the woman everyone expects her to be makes her a strong character and her story one worth reading.'

I sat back, my cheeks burning, and realised everyone was staring at me. Meg nudged my foot under the table and slipped me a smile.

'You have a unique perspective and you argue well; I'm curious to see how that will translate in your work.' Berthum caught my eye and held it as he spoke, then turned to the rest of the class, 'I have high expectations of all of you.'

And with that he launched into what I quickly learnt was the standard first-tute explanation of assessment criteria and emergency evacuation procedures.

After the workshop Meg and I lingered in the courtyard so she could smoke a cigarette before our next class. Berthum was still talking with a few of the other students outside the classroom and when they left he made his way over.

‘Nicely handled back there,’ he said, addressing me. ‘There’s always blowups like that first semester. Everyone’s out to prove they’re the smartest monkey in the tree and there’s nothing better than watching the really pretentious ones get knocked down a branch or two.’

Despite Peter’s warning, I couldn’t help returning his flattery with a shy smile.

He took a closer look at Meg. ‘You look familiar. Where do I know you from?’

‘I was at Saints when you taught there. I’m a friend of Peter Sinclair’s. You’d remember him.’ It wasn’t a question. ‘He’s studying at Mawson, too.’

I wasn’t sure if I imagined it, but Berthum seemed to falter at the mention of Peter’s name. He recovered quickly, flashing a smile. ‘Small world.’ He turned back to me. ‘So, you like bad boys, Lucie?’

I thought he was still talking about Peter, or worse, referring to himself, and exchanged a confused look with Meg. ‘I’m not sure what you mean.’

‘Maxim de Winter—you called him Max.’

I started to protest, but he laughed. ‘I’m teasing Lucie. It’s not a crime to enjoy your reading.’

Berthum fixed me with a smile that made me feel vulnerable and powerful at the same time, as though I were naked, but my body were so perfect I almost wanted everyone in the courtyard to see it. I blushed and looked away as he excused himself.

Meg turned on me as soon as he was gone. ‘Did Richard Berthum just *flirt* with you?’

I didn’t know whether she expected me to be flattered or frightened by his attention—I wasn’t sure how I felt myself—so I laughed. ‘Don’t be ridiculous; he’s our tutor, Meg. How did you know he’d remember Peter?’ I asked, quickly changing the topic. ‘He must have taught hundreds of students.’

She took a deep drag of her cigarette. ‘Peter was memorable.’

‘How?’

Meg looked uneasy. ‘There were certain unspoken rules at Saints. They weren’t exactly fair, but you had to play by them. Peter didn’t and Berthum almost got him expelled for it.’ Meg paused to stub out her cigarette and looked at me directly. ‘I know you really respect Berthum as an author, but he’s not someone you want to get tangled up with.’

The more I knew about Berthum, or knew I didn’t know, the more intrigued I became, but something in Meg’s tone stopped me questioning her further. If I wanted to find out what happened at Saints, I would have to be patient.

While I had come to Mawson with the hope of Richard Berthum noticing me, the fact that he had, almost immediately, somehow cheapened the fantasy. It reminded me of the time Meg and I had flirted with the idea of religion. I'd imagined being embraced by some all-powerful and knowing force, kindly priests imparting sublime wisdom and shafts of light filtering through stained glass windows. But the Cootbowie Sacred Heart Church with its carpet worn from a thousand Sundays of pious knees and watered-down grape juice served in paper cups in place of communal wine was a sagging disappointment, and the little plastic Madonna the Sunday school teacher gave me and told me to pray over seemed more a tacky souvenir than a direct line to the Almighty.

I began to fear that, like the Madonna, Berthum may have been a false idol and so turned my attentions to a more worthy and far less attainable pursuit: Peter Sinclair. Not only was he possessed of those strange, enchanting looks that led me to dreaming when I should have been studying and often spoke in short, knife point sentences that left me asking inane questions just to hear more, he was also, like his namesake saint, a keeper of keys.

In my early days at Mawson I made a half-hearted effort to get to know some of the creative writing and English majors, but I found their opinions to be largely ill-informed, and it didn't take long to realise most of them were just watching the film adaptations of our set texts. Meg and I shared the same classes and she made even less effort to be sociable than I did. We met the boys in the plaza for coffee each morning and organised our tutes so we could have lunch together as well. We always sat at the

same table overlooking the lake, and soon the other students started leaving it free for us. Without realising it, I found myself associating almost exclusively with the Saints.

Meg and Bastian went out of their way to include me, inviting me into their discussions and punctuating their anecdotes with contextual asides. I began to pick up their mannerisms and little quirks, and to adopt their quick and oddly dated style of speech. Meg and I had similar figures, only I was a little taller and not so waif-like. When she saw how few clothes I'd brought with me, she happily let me help myself to hers. She dressed like the flapper girls described in F. Scott Fitzgerald and Evelyn Waugh novels and, after receiving my first scholarship payment, I hunted through our local op shops for dresses in a similar style. I only ever saw the boys in collared, button-down shirts and pants, or occasionally well-pressed shorts. I don't think either of them owned jeans. I was very aware of the impression the four of us made at Mawson, where most of the students slopped around in singlets and thongs or faded band shirts and leggings. Veiled by the smoke of Meg's and Peter's cigarettes, I imagined we must have appeared as apparitions from a lost era: bright young things with a taste for decadence and jazz.

Meg seemed relieved to finally have another girl around and we closed the distance that had come between us as easily as if we'd been separated only a few weeks. But while she and Bastian readily opened the borders of their private world to welcome me, Peter remained aloof, holding me off as though afraid what might happen if he allowed me to get too close. I'd hoped his telling me about the incident with his father had planted a seed of intimacy between us, but so far it had failed to grow. He was always polite, but in the way of waiters and shop assistants faced with a tiresome customer, presenting me with a vacant, smiling mask that completely obscured whoever was behind it. In a way, it was worse than if he'd been rude.

‘Have I done something?’ I asked Meg as we made our way to class one morning after Peter had been particularly evasive.

‘Don’t take it personally. He’s like that with everyone, except Bastian. Even I’ve got no idea what’s going on in his head most of the time. But I think you’re going to be good for him. In fact, I’m counting on it.’

‘Meaning what? You’re trying to set us up?’ I laughed as though the idea were absurd and not at all exactly what I wanted.

Meg raised an eyebrow. ‘Are you really going to pretend you’re not already half in love with him?’ I blushed. Had I been so obvious? ‘Besides, Bastian and I are together and it would create a nice balance if you two paired up as well, don’t you think?’

‘There’s just one tiny problem, Meg: Peter can barely tolerate being in the same room with me. I can’t imagine he’s secretly going moony for me.’

‘Well, no,’ Meg conceded, before flashing a conspiratorial smile. ‘Not yet.’

With Meg’s encouragement, I began set myself little challenges: flirt with Peter, provoke him, make him laugh. My thoughts about him began to eclipse all others and it didn’t seem fair that I should occupy so little space in his mind. I was determined to break through his barrier of cool detachment and make him notice me. I got my first chance in our fourth week of classes. On the Saturday night he was playing a gig at a pub called Indie Bar and he invited Bastian, Meg and (by default) me to come along.

Indie Bar, one of the favoured haunts of Mawson creative arts students, was only two blocks up from our apartment. Being a warm evening, the doors were thrown open to the heat and students in paint-flecked jeans and Wayfarers sat smoking and drinking pints of beer at the outdoor tables. Inside, there was an ambiance of slightly

subversive counter culture, the walls papered with posters advertising local bands and upcoming roller derby bouts.

I found it difficult to meet people's eyes, though I was sure I felt people staring at me as Meg, Bastian and I squeezed through the crowd to the table Peter had reserved for us. I didn't usually wear make-up, but Meg had declared tonight an Opportunity and spent half an hour fussing over me with her collection of powders and brushes, then looped a string of pearls around my neck and handed me a pair of spiky stilettos. I'd barely recognised myself when she'd presented me to the mirror, unable to believe that the smoky-eyed, pouting face looking back at me was my own. I felt as though I'd been recast in the role of someone slightly older who knew how to swing her hips and talk sassy, but I wasn't convinced I could manage the part.

Peter was already there when we arrived. I noticed him from the door as we came in, turning a guitar on a small stage in the corner of the front bar. He looked up at almost the exact moment I saw him. He stared right at me, and only me, for a second that seemed to last an hour, before quickly ducking his head. When we were seated Bastian waved him over and Peter signalled to the bartender for a round of drinks.

'You look different,' he said, taking the seat beside me.

'Different?' Meg practically spat. 'Honestly, Peter, is that the best you can come up with? How about stunning? Divine? Alluring?'

'This is your work then,' he said, with a wry look.

I drew up my courage. 'Actually, it was my idea. I wanted to make an impression.' He turned back to me, puzzled. Apparently I was going to have to spell it out for him. 'I want us to be friends, Peter. We've had coffee and lunch together every day for a month but I barely know anything about you, and you can't know anything about me. Half the time it's as though you don't even see me.'

Peter looked me over again, taking in my dress and make-up, the curls in my hair that had taken the better part of an hour, the utter defeat doubtlessly showing on my face. Judging by the horror creeping into his expression, I gathered he understood.

‘God, Lucie, I’m sorry. I’m not...’ His eyes slid across to Bastian as though searching for a life ring. ‘I’m not good with people, especially girls. I didn’t mean to ignore you. I didn’t realise you even cared what I thought. You look beautiful tonight, really,’ he added, too hastily.

‘You, on the other hand, look like you stole a bird’s nest,’ Meg said, gesturing to Peter’s hair, which was only a little more unkempt than usual. ‘Come to the bathroom with me and we’ll see if we can fix it before your set.’

When Peter resisted, Meg gave him a pointed look, took him by the hand and practically dragged him from the table, tossing me a wink over her shoulder as she went. Bastian slid into the empty place beside me and watched them go.

‘You like him.’ It wasn’t a question and there was something sour in his expression. The scent of alcohol was heavy on his breath. ‘You should know he’s no prince, if that’s what you’re looking for. He went through hell in high school and it’s left its mark. You saw that bruise around his eye our first day at Mawson? That’s nothing, compared to the rest of it. Not that he talks about it. Ever. I’m not sure he even knows how to get close to people anymore. You probably think you can change him,’ he shook his head, ‘But he’s not the fixable kind of broken.’

‘Are you telling me to stay away from him?’

‘You can do what you like. I’m just trying to look out for everybody’s best interests. You found us at a good time, brought us out of ourselves, evened us out. But that’s enough. I don’t want to see anybody get hurt.’ His eyes fixed on mine. ‘Or excluded.’

He excused himself to order us another round of drinks and returned his usual charismatic self, as though the whole evening so far hadn't happened. I did my best to counter his witty banter, but felt, not for the first time, that I'd walked in on a game with rules more complex than I could grasp.

Meg finally returned to our table wearing a giant grin and hushed us as Peter stepped into the stage's single spotlight and began to play. He drew out the notes with an easy, practised hand, and his voice rang strong through the now quiet bar. The song was blues and called up images of late-night walks down empty streets, blood and shadows, and weed-choked train tracks leading nowhere. I closed my eyes and listened. It sounded like the Peter I'd been trying to get to know was speaking directly to me, the scared, confused me locked deep inside my outer self that nobody else was supposed to see. His music filled me with the same overwhelming need I'd felt on several occasions to let him know I understood him in a way that couldn't be expressed in words. When I eventually opened my eyes at the end of the song I was surprised to find myself crying and knew, despite Bastian's warning, I wasn't ready to give him up.

Peter played four sets in all, during which the bar staff kept us supplied with drinks that we neither requested nor paid for. I drank little compared to the others, but by the time we left Indie the world appeared to have grown soft around the edges. We found ourselves swept up the euphoria of the festive crowds moving along the footpath. Even Peter seemed to have relaxed a little and none of us felt ready to go home, so we ventured down to the the Garden Party the Fringe Festival's pop up playground of rides, circus acts, bars, open dance floors and booths selling beer, hot chips and cinnamon doughnuts.

‘Look, there’s the Ferris wheel!’ Meg cried, grabbing my hand. ‘I haven’t been on one since the Peninsula fair when we were kids. Do you remember how much we loved it, Luce? Come on.’ She tugged me towards the end of the queue.

As the four of us stood waiting I noticed a couple of well-dressed guys by a doughnut stand watching us. The bulkier of the two whispered something to the other. His friend nodded, shoving himself off from where he’d been leaning against the vendor’s stall and made his way over.

‘Bastian, mate, how’ve you been?’ The boy’s eyes were slightly bloodshot and he was looking around as though he didn’t want to be seen with us, even though he’d initiated the conversation.

Bastian smiled, seemingly pleased at the intrusion. ‘I’m good, Dave. Can I help you with something?’

Dave licked his lips nervously. ‘I’m looking for Alice.’

‘You’re in luck. Follow me.’ Bastian gave Meg a quick kiss. ‘Don’t ride without me, *mon petite*.’

Without further explanation he led Dave off towards an unlit part of the garden thick with trees. Neither Meg nor Peter seemed to find anything odd in this exchange, but I was curious. None of them had previously mentioned this girl, Alice, and that Bastian should know exactly where to find her seemed strange. He rejoined us as we were boarding the Ferris wheel, and once we were moving I asked him about her.

‘Alice is my greatest triumph. Allow me to introduce you.’ He took something from his pocket and held out his hand. Resting in the middle of his palm was a small, blue pill.

I stared at it, astonished.

‘She’s a variation on the traditional MDMA compound,’ he explained. ‘It’s like ecstasy, but better.’

‘Where did you get it?’

‘I cooked it.’

‘You’re a drug lord?’ I could barely keep myself from laughing.

There was a ‘cook’ in Cootbowie. SteevO. He drove a beat up Commodore and slouched around in oversized hoodies with cigarette burns in the sleeves. I’d always found it difficult to believe he could remember the alphabet, let alone the recipe for meth. The idea that he and Bastian had anything so significant in common was absurd.

‘Bastian topped the school in chemistry,’ Meg explained a little defensively, as though it logically followed that the holder of this title would be some kind of mad-scientist-criminal-mastermind hybrid.

Sensing my utter incredulity, Bastian elaborated: ‘We went to school with a bunch of bored kids with too much pocket money. I used to deal dope, but when my suppliers found out I was selling to Saints, they upped their prices and I couldn’t generate enough profit to make it worth my while. By then the students I was dealing to were looking for something a little more hardcore anyway, so I went into manufacturing.’

Bastian, I realised, was either smart—much smarter than I’d initially given him credit for—or incredibly stupid.

‘You’re not worried about getting caught?’

He laughed. ‘Hardly. I doubt the police even know it’s on the market. I sell to a very select clientele: Saints students, past and present only. If I find they’ve on-sold, or even told anyone about it, I cut them off. You’re looking at the city’s most exclusive drug.’ He offered me the pill. ‘Would you like to try her?’

Not for the first time, I found myself thinking that there was a whole other person hidden under the charming aristocrat Bastian liked to play, and that person was someone to watch. I shook my head. ‘Thanks, but not tonight. I’ve already had too much to drink.’

‘That’s a lie and you know it. Go on, you’ll enjoy it,’ he urged.

‘It’s not really my thing.’ The idea of losing control, even for a little while, made me uneasy. Keeping up with the Saints took an incredible amount of focus and energy.

Bastian ignored me. ‘We’ll all do it.’

‘Look, it obviously scares her, so just leave it.’ Peter said.

‘I’m not afraid,’ I snapped.

Peter raised an eyebrow at me.

I glared back at him. ‘I’m not.’

‘It’s safe, Luce,’ Meg assured me. ‘We do it all the time.’

I was about to decline more firmly, but Peter spoke first. ‘Stop trying to make her like us.’

I was suddenly seven years old again, last to be picked for PE teams and left to keep score at the teacher’s side, only coming from Peter, the rejection hurt so much more. I turned back to Bastian. ‘You know, I think I will try it.’

Bastian looked pleased and produced extra pills for Meg and himself. Peter abstained with the excuse that someone had to make sure we didn’t do anything stupid. ‘Or more stupid,’ he added, looking at me. Without breaking eye contact with Peter, I took the tablet from Bastian and placed it on my tongue.

Bastian grinned. ‘And down the rabbit hole she goes.’

The world flickered. Dimmed. Returned in a fantastic burst of colour. Somewhere music—Peter’s music—slow and sad began to play. Faces warped, the crowd blurring to a single beast with many eyes and teeth and twisted smiles. Hands reached out to touch me, left electric prickles on my skin. The music grew louder, screamed at the night. I screamed too. And laughed. And laughed. The earth rose up to meet me, tasting of grit and ash. *Dead land.* I thought. *Mixing memory and desire.* The phrase rolled lazily over and over. I moved my lips around it and whispered out the words to make lyrics for the song.

Strong arms closed around me, pulled me up to see the stars. Fairy lights glowed and drifted. I gave chase, reached out and closed my fist around nothing. My fingers left bright trails in the air and I wrote my name across the sky. Across a wasteland of plastic cups and glitter a girl with dark bruises on her neck crooked her finger and beckoned, I walked away from the light towards her and the music followed. My footsteps crunched through the notes and they cried a hysterical symphony of pain. The moon came out and I saw myself standing in a field of broken glass. I knew the shards had cut my feet and I shut my eyes so as not to see the blood. The darkness swayed and I fell down, down, down to a place where I ceased to exist.

Someone threw my name into the dark and shook the life back into me. ‘God damn it, Lucie, open your eyes!’ Peter’s face just inches from mine. Music swelled around him. The air was dark smoke; all the stars were gone. Craggy branches scratched their twigs against the sky, tearing up the roof of the world and water leaked through, splattering my arms and legs and feet. Peter pulled me up, but my bones were gone and I slid back down and shivered in the mud. Shadows twined through his hair and drew him away from me.

‘Don’t leave me alone.’ The rain ran down my neck, soaking through my dress and the night closed cold around me. His eyes held the anger of the storm, but he came and sat beside me and tented his coat over our heads.

‘Tell me your secret,’ I said, moving close to feel his warmth.

‘Will you tell me yours?’ he asked.

For a long time I remained quiet, watching the shadows crawl away across the grass before I finally turned back to him. ‘This is the way the world ends.’ I said in a voice just loud enough for him to hear.

At coffee with the Saints at Mawson on Monday morning I wanted to go back to being invisible. The story I'd told myself was that Peter had found me swooned beneath the trees at the edge of the Garden in the early hours of Sunday morning, swept me up in his arms and carried me back to the apartment as though I were a feather-light maiden in a Victorian romance. However, since then I'd been plagued by sickening flashes of him half-carrying, half-dragging my drug-flopped body back to the apartment while I babbled half-remembered lines of T. S. Eliot poems. Now he sat across from me sipping his latte with a smirk twitching at the corners of his mouth, while Meg made jokes about him being my knight in shining armour. To make matters worse, it was my Judgement Day.

Each week two people in Berthum's workshop were required to submit a draft of their major creative piece for critiquing by the rest of the class. Berthum told us that this process was designed to make us better writers and editors, and to teach us to take criticism, but these sessions were cruel battlefields.

The two students whose work was being discussed were expected to offer up their stories and sit quietly while the rest of the class ripped into their work, only to return their pieces, crumpled and bleeding red ink, at the end of the workshop. Barely disguised personal attacks shot like arrows across the table, nearly always hitting their mark. Those who had sat mute and defenceless while their own work was dissected the week before took up their newly restored power like a weapon, hell-bent on revenge. I saw tears shed over mixed metaphors and screaming matches break out over misplaced semi-colons. After witnessing these breakdowns and eruptions week

after week, I looked upon my classmates as the horsemen coming to bring about the apocalypse of my short-lived writing career.

The pieces were due the week prior to the appointed Judgement Day and I'd spent the days before I handed up mine in a state of anxious productivity agonising, firstly, over the fleshing out of plot and character and, later, the phrasing of sentences and the crafting and revising of images. I hadn't made it to bed before midnight all that week; instead, I'd sat up with numberless cups of tea, working until my eyes ached from staring too long at my laptop screen, or else reading paragraphs aloud, over and over, until the words flowed.

It wasn't the work itself that drove me, but the need to prove myself. I knew it was impossible; if Berthum himself submitted a piece, the class would find fault with it, and they wouldn't be shy in telling him either. Despite that, I still wanted to produce something that would set me apart and put my writing beyond their reproach. More than that, I wanted to prove to Berthum that I was more than a silly girl in a short dress for him to make eyes at.

My story was about the girl who had died. Seeing her plaque under the tree had shaken me. I'd gone to the library one afternoon and searched through back issues of *Soap Box*, Mawson's student newspaper, for information. Like me, Ebony Blake had been from the country, but that and the fact that she would be 'sadly missed' was all the information the report gave. It was through searching student blogs that I was able to piece together the narrative of her death, but even then the details were sketchy. She'd killed herself partway through her second semester at Mawson. One of the maintenance men had found her body hanging from the tree in the Creative Arts courtyard. She'd lived on campus at Mawson Hall, where I, too, would have stayed if not for Meg. But there were no shocked or gushing testimonials from her friends and

there was nothing personal in the posts I read. It was as though Ebony Blake had not existed before her suicide.

In death, however, she was something of a minor celebrity—our campus ghost. The tree where she died, the one Meg and I sat under our first morning of classes, was known as the Hanging Tree. The story passed down from Honours students to undergrads was that every night, at the hour of her death, the tree bough creaked with the weight of her body. Some even insisted you could see her swing.

I didn't believe in ghosts, and in those first enchanted weeks, when the world seemed bathed in new light, death was nothing more than an abstract shadow. However, Ebony's story niggled at me, so that I often found myself pausing beneath the Hanging Tree, considering how different life at Mawson might have been had the Saints not welcomed me into their circle.

So I gave Ebony a voice. I tried to find the words for how she must have felt sitting unnoticed or ignored in lectures and tutorials, and what it must have been like on those nights when she'd hunched over assignments in her room, listening to the other students' laughter through the thin walls. I thought about those long, quiet hours after their cheerful voices had faded away, and imagined how, in that silence, she had finally heard another voice, speaking only to her, telling her how to make the loneliness go away.

'God, Luce, you look like you're about to face execution,' Meg said, pulling me into the conversation. 'Buck up, it's not like our classmates are master critics. Most of them are far too preoccupied with their own genius to bother with anything that's actually worth reading. Besides, they're not the ones giving out the final marks; Berthum's comments are the only ones you need to bother about, and if you bat your eyelids and pout a little he'll probably give you a high distinction without reading a word.'

Apparently Meg hadn't forgotten the way Berthum had flirted with me after our first class—and, despite my ignoring him, the way he'd looked at me in every class since.

All traces of smugness vanished from Peter's face. 'Is he still bothering you?'

I saw a potential opportunity to see if I could make Peter jealous, but he looked so earnest I thought better of it. 'No, Meg's just stirring the pot.'

'If Berthum tried something with Lucie, she wouldn't be stupid enough to let him get away with it, would you?' Bastian said in a tone that told me I damn well better not. 'Besides, I bet your story's brilliant. Can we read it?'

'I don't know. It's just a draft.' To this point my writing had been one of the few wild cards I had to play. For all Bastian and Peter knew, I might have been in line to win the Vogel, and I wasn't in any hurry to give them reason to think otherwise.

'You've heard me play, and tried Alice. *Quid pro quo*.' Peter reasoned.

'Fine.' I said, mostly glad that Peter had exchanged the holier-than-thou act for a glimmer of genuine interest. 'But, if it's terrible, I don't want to know. I'm nervous enough as it is.'

I handed Bastian my story and jiggled my leg under the table while I awaited his verdict. As he read, his expression became hard and when he finished he set the pages back on the table and pushed them away. 'Why would you write something like this?'

I laughed, thinking he was just trying to stir me up. 'Come on, it can't be that bad.'

He shook his head. 'What do you know about this girl and why she chose to die?' Peter took up the pages and Bastian made to stop him. 'Don't, Peter, it's upsetting.'

Peter ignored him and began reading, while Meg rose to my defence. ‘You’re overreacting, Bastian.’

I recovered from my initial shock. ‘Ebony Blake’s death was a tragedy. She deserves to have her story told.’

‘It’s not yours to tell,’ Bastian snapped. ‘Her death isn’t a convenient premise, something you can pretty up with fancy words so everyone can see how clever you are.’

‘Bastian!’ Meg cried.

It was as if he’d slapped me.

Peter looked up from the page he was reading. ‘I don’t think that’s what Lucie intended. It’s admirable that you want to tell her side of it,’ he offered. ‘But Bastian’s right; how could you possibly know what this girl was going through?’

My mouth fell open. Dozens of hours of work dismissed with a few unfair comments! How dare they presume what I did and did not know about death, or Ebony, or anything else for that matter? I snatched the pages from Peter’s hands and opened my mouth to tell him what an insensitive prig he was, but Meg put her hand on my arm. ‘Leave it, Luce. Your real critics await.’

Before I could protest, she dragged me off across the plaza.

‘What the hell, Meg? You of all people know how hard I worked on that story and you expect me to just walk away when they insult me like that?’

‘Calm down, okay? It wasn’t your writing. Ebony’s story is a sensitive topic for the boys.’

‘Why? Did they know her?’ It hadn’t even occurred to me that they might have, and now that it did, I felt sick.

Meg shook her head. ‘Not her, but someone like her.’

‘God, I feel awful.’ Like my day could get any worse.

She put her arm around me. ‘It’s not your fault; you just caught them off guard. It’s not something we talk about.’

‘Who was it, Meg?’

‘Just someone at Saints. It’s Peter’s story really, but he doesn’t like to be reminded. He’ll tell you when he’s ready, or he won’t, but wait for him to bring it up, okay?’ I nodded.

‘Good. Now we really do need to get to workshop,’ she added with a too-bright smile that made me wish there was time to ask more questions.

Still shaken by the boys’ reaction to my story, I worried the hem of my dress under the table while my morning coffee curdled in my stomach. Copies of my story peeked out from the other students’ folders. Red gashes ripped through the phrases I’d spent hours agonising over, and the comments in the margins appeared denser than the original text. When Berthum turned my classmates loose, they showed no mercy.

‘I think it’s trite,’ Caris drawled. ‘The whole thing reads like a drawn out, emorant. This girl—Emily?’

‘Ebony.’

‘Whatever. I mean, she just doesn’t have any real problems. As someone who actually suffered a traumatic childhood, I was offended.’

‘Oh please,’ Meg muttered under her breath.

‘I didn’t find it very realistic,’ Bev interjected. ‘If this girl is feeling depressed and marginalised, why doesn’t she go to the Women’s Support Group? They have counsellors. But the bigger issue is that I can’t understand why you’d write a story like this to begin with. If we write about disempowered women being defeated by patriarchal institutions, how will we ever reshape the dominant hegemony? On that

note, on page three you use the term “man-made”. You should use the non-gendered “artificially created”.’

‘My problem is that it’s just so *linear*,’ Hayden said, launching himself into the fray. ‘How can you buy into the whole cookie-cutter, seven-plots conspiracy when there are so many avenues for experimental writing, like post-post-nine-eleven-neo-absurdism? It’s like you’re trapped and you don’t even know it.’

He looked to Berthum to back him up. The others did the same. Berthum regarded them all for a minute, seeming to enjoy the power he held. ‘Your classmates raise some...’ he paused, searching for the right word ‘...interesting points, Lucie. I think your story has a very strong, dark aesthetic. But I don’t feel for Ebony; I feel only afraid of becoming like her. It lacks empathy.’

It was a stab in the back. After all his suggestive looks, he might have at least taken my side. Gratified, the others slid their copies of my story across the table, like smug winners of a chess game returning the loser’s pieces at the end. I took my time gathering the pages so I wouldn’t have to walk with the rest of the class to our English lecture and deal with any further criticism. When they’d gone I, too, made to leave, but Berthum still had my draft and asked me to stay a minute. Meg said she’d save me a seat. Berthum closed the door behind her and I felt a prickle of unease.

‘I hope I didn’t upset you, Lucie. There’s real potential here,’ he said, tapping his copy of my story. ‘I’d like to see it developed further.’ His eyes moved slowly over me as they’d done when I’d introduced myself at Writers’ Week. ‘You’re a good writer, Lucie, much better than most of your classmates, from what I’ve seen so far. More importantly, you’re dedicated. Your story is overworked; you obviously spent a long time on it.’

A small spark of pride flared in my chest, then he took a step towards me and I caught the slightly sour smell of his skin beneath his cologne. I should have stepped

back, but didn't. We were just talking, after all, and he'd never asked any of the other students to stay behind, or praised their work as he had just done mine. No one had ever singled me out like this, especially not someone I admired as much as Berthum. It still felt cheap and cliché, but also daring and exciting. I hadn't forgotten the Saints' warnings, or the way Peter looked at me after Meg's comment about my only needing to flirt with Berthum to get a high mark, but at that moment their concern only added a certain thrill.

'If you put the same effort into the second draft as you did the first, it'll be worth a credit,' Berthum continued. 'That's not a bad mark for a first assignment. Would you be happy with that, or do you want to aim for something higher?'

I remembered the countless nights I'd spent in Cootbowie methodically reading page after page as I began my trudging pilgrimage through the English canon. I thought about the shelf of neatly stacked notebooks above my desk, filled with observations about plot, character, form and style, and the folders on my laptop bursting with story drafts and novel outlines. My work deserved better. I wasn't going to let Berthum compromise that for the sake of his own interests. I held my ground. 'A credit isn't good enough.'

'Then perhaps we could come to some kind of arrangement.' His eyes travelled slowly down to my chest.

My heart beat heavily against my breast and a small voice in my head, quiet but firm, said: leave. If it had been any other tutor, I would have. But this was *Richard Berthum*. No doubt he had a legion of students and fans who would give anything for an opportunity like this, yet I was the one he had singled out. I didn't particularly want anything to happen between us, but I thought of all those long nights in Cootbowie when Berthum's picture had been the only thing holding me at my desk, the only promise that I could get out and make something of myself and later, when

I'd put my books away, the only fantasy I'd carried to my bed. I remembered the sudden flare of Peter's concern when I'd told him Berthum had given me his number, realising it was the one time he'd showed any real sign of caring for me. I imagined him now, bursting in to find us and fighting Berthum off before taking my hand and asking if I was okay.

'What did you have in mind?' I replied, keeping my voice steady.

Berthum reached up his fingers to touch my cheek and I froze. I'd thought perhaps he'd tell me to meet him late that evening at some obscure, shadowy location. That's how it always seems to happen in books. I didn't even consider that he might try anything in the classroom with so many students passing by on the other side of the door. My breath came in shaky, shallow gasps—so loud in my ears they drowned out all other sound. The situation suddenly felt very real and I didn't want to be alone with him anymore, but I couldn't seem to make myself step back from his touch.

When I didn't shy away, Berthum pushed his hand into my hair and held me in place. His other hand circled my waist and I fought the urge to pull away, with panic rising in my chest, like mercury on a hot day. I closed my eyes and thought how moments like this would seem worth it when I delivered the thank you speech at my first book launch. Berthum's lips, then tongue pressed warm against my neck. My blood tingled as his mouth travelled up my throat, to settle on my lips.

There was a sharp knock at the door. My eyes opened. My body seized. Berthum let go, just as Meg walked in. 'Sorry for interrupting, but we're going to miss our lecture, Luce.'

'No problem.' I hoped she hadn't seen us kiss or noticed my hands shaking. 'We're done here,' I said, with a pointed look at Berthum. I'd thought he was someone exceptional, driven by his work and the need to create something purer and greater than himself. Even when he'd held out his number to me and given me those

almost predatory looks, I couldn't bring myself to believe he'd really act on them, or expected me to. Now that he had I couldn't keep pretending he was the same person I'd always imagined him to be. I felt like I'd just discovered some fatal glitch in the order of the universe and now nothing would ever be quite the same.

'I thought you'd gone. You said you'd save me a seat,' I said to Meg when we were outside.

'Aren't you glad I didn't? God, what would have happened if I hadn't barged in?' Meg tried to light a cigarette, but her hands were shaking as badly as mine. 'I thought you liked Peter? He'll go nuts if he finds out you've been messing around with Berthum.'

'I don't know what you're talking about. Berthum just had some extra feedback for my story,' I replied, calmly as I could manage. 'Besides, Peter needs constant reminding that I even exist.'

'Are you telling me this was a cry for attention? Come on, Lucie, you're smarter than that. If Berthum has done something he shouldn't, we need to report him to the Head of Humanities.'

'We were just talking about my work,' I insisted. 'Nothing happened.'

'I'm your friend, Luce. Don't lie to me.'

She had a point; I didn't want to lie to her, so I said nothing, only stared at Berthum's copy of my story, still clutched in my hand, and eventually she shook her head. 'Make sure you fix your hair before you see the boys at lunch.' With that she turned on her heel and left, struggling with her lighter as she went.

I walked in the other direction until I was out of the courtyard and away from the buildings. Then I slid down against a tree and covered my face with my hands.

My head was a mess of questions: Why hadn't I stopped Berthum? Yes, I admired him, and yes, I'd fantasised about him, but that didn't mean I actually wanted anything to happen between us. But if I hadn't wanted it, then what had I hoped to gain? To answer these questions truthfully meant acknowledging a deeply unattractive side of myself that I didn't want to admit was there. And then there was Meg. I was sure she hadn't seen anything. She'd noticed my hair was mussed, but was that really evidence? What if she told the boys? Bastian was already mad at me and Peter had warned me to stay away from Berthum. But why? I lingered over this question. Meg's suspicion and the boys' warnings didn't make sense, not unless the Saints knew something about Berthum that I didn't.

I grabbed Meg coming out of our English lecture on her way to lunch and dragged her into one of the private study rooms in the library.

‘Why are you so convinced something happened between me and Berthum this morning?’

The question threw her off balance. ‘I’ve seen the way he looks at you.’

I raised an eyebrow. We both knew it was a weak argument. ‘And you think he just pounced on me the minute we were alone? There were hundreds of people around, anyone could have walked in on us—you did. You and the boys can’t stand him, and when Peter found out he was teaching at Mawson he almost had a panic attack. What aren’t you telling me?’

She chewed her fingernail for a minute, deciding whether or not to reveal whatever it was she knew. She looked into the corridor to check no one was listening and shut the door. ‘Berthum has a reputation for this sort of thing.’

It explained why the Saints hated him so much, but what did that make me—the latest in a long line of starry-eyed girls, willing to go above and beyond to prove themselves his biggest fan? I shook my head, not wanting to believe it. ‘Saints would have fired him. He wouldn’t be teaching at Mawson.’

‘Not if he’d been charged, no, but he was never openly accused of anything. Everyone knew about it though.’

I thought of Peter’s particular dislike for him, how Meg had said Berthum almost got him expelled. ‘Peter had proof, didn’t he? He tried to expose him?’

Meg looked wary. ‘Yes, but it didn’t work. Things got very out of hand.’ Her vision fixed in the mid-distance, as though watching the memory play out, and her eyes glassed with tears. ‘God, Luce, it was awful. I still don’t know how he managed to pull through it.’

I gathered her up in my arms, unable to remember the last time I’d seen her cry. ‘Did it have something to do with the boys’ friend, the one who—the one like Ebony?’

Meg nodded against my shoulder and I wondered who it had been—a girlfriend, perhaps? It would explain why Peter was so wary of getting close to people. I imagined Berthum flattering her into empty classrooms after school, pushing her further and further until there was nowhere left to go, and Peter stumbling upon them, or discovering their secret scrawled in her diary when she’d unthinkingly left him alone in her room. Or perhaps not. Maybe they were really in love and told each other everything, and he’d done what he could to stop Berthum, but she’d been too scared to come forward. Maybe he’d only pieced it together after she’d died.

‘Lucie, you have to tell me what happened today,’ Meg said, stepping back from my arms.

I realised she wasn’t angry, only concerned, and that her demand to know the truth was an offer to help me navigate what I now realised was a highly volatile situation. ‘He kissed me.’

I felt like I’d been holding my breath all morning and finally exhaled.

Meg touched my hand. ‘Do you want to report him?’

I shook my head. ‘I let him. God, I feel like such an idiot.’

‘It’s still his fault, Luce. He could lose his job over this.’

‘And I’d lose Peter. Or whatever slim chance I have with him.’

Meg bit her lip, thinking it through. ‘Then we don’t tell him. We don’t tell anyone. But you need to promise me right now that you won’t let Berthum near you again. I told you that stuff about what happened at Saints because I need you to understand how serious this is. If the boys found out that we’d kept this from them, Bastian would leave me. Peter’s barely holding it together just knowing we’re in Berthum’s class. I can’t even imagine what he’d do if he knew what happened today.’

I spent the rest of the week actively avoiding Berthum, afraid he’d try to pull me into the nearest classroom and kiss me again, or worse. I knew I should have reported him, several times I actually started making my way to the Head of Humanities office, but I never made it past the Hanging Tree. I imagined Ebony scrabbling for a foothold, the rope weighing heavy on her shoulder as she climbed, perhaps even then holding out hope that someone would find her, beg her to stop. Peter had been wrong when he said I didn’t understand her; I’d known that same all-consuming loneliness and there was nothing I wouldn’t do to keep my friends close.

That Sunday, with Bastian having taken Meg out at dinner, I found myself alone. I’d planned to work on an essay due the following week, but after everything that had happened with Berthum, I was distracted. I got up to make tea and while the water boiled I wandered through the apartment, taking inventory of everything I stood to lose. There were new photos on the bookshelves now: Meg and I eating hot doughnuts with our arms around each other in the Garden of Unearthly Delights; with the boys on the grass by the lake at Mawson, books spread around us, their pages lifted in the breeze; Meg and Bastian having coffee in the plaza. I picked up this last one. I was half-visible, seated at Meg’s side and looking like her kid sister, grinning manically and proud to be included in the big kids’ fun.

It made me feel slightly sick to see myself captured like that. I slipped the photo out of the frame and folded down the edge to hide myself from view. It was that same awful neediness that drove me to do things like allow my tutor to kiss me and I hated that I was forced to stoop to that. I wanted to be the girl with the bright, easy smile who got the marks and had nothing to hide.

I drifted to the door of Meg's room and turned on the light, my tea forgotten. Paperbacks peeked beneath the dresses strewn across the floor, scarves and strands of pearls looped carelessly over the bed head and mirror, forgotten tea cups and a half-eaten box of chocolates cluttered the bedside table. The wardrobe was open, showing off dozens of dresses in pale silks and pastel prints hanging above a muddle of vintage boots and shiny stilettos. It was the room of someone with so many beautiful things that nothing needed to be hidden away or else placed where someone might see it—they all just melted into the glittering milieu—unlike my own room, in which even the haphazard pile of books on my desk had, in fact, been arranged, spines facing out, so someone walking past the door could read the carefully-selected titles.

I crossed the room and took a dress from the wardrobe, a white flapper number with a bow at the hip. I fingered the silky material and held the dress against my body. Meg never minded me borrowing her clothes and she wouldn't be home for hours. I pulled off my trackies and jumper and shimmied the dress over my head. I put on Meg's favourite black pumps and turned a slow circle before the mirror. It wasn't enough. I still felt like me. I sat at her dressing table before the confusion of lotions and powders and carefully applied her make-up the way she'd taught me. My hair was much darker and longer than Meg's, so I pinned it up and sprayed her perfume on my wrists and neck. There was a pack of cigarettes by the mirror. I pretended to smoke one and smiled at my reflection. The resemblance was uncanny; I was her dark twin. I felt different—elegant and breezy, as though I were the kind of

girl who swanned through rooms and draped herself across chaise longues with a martini glass balanced between her fingers. The kind of girl who had men lining up to light her cigarettes. The kind of girl people noticed.

I lay on Meg's bed, eating her chocolates and skimming an Agatha Christie novel before it occurred to me that, given the effort I'd put in, I should make more of the evening. I selected a cardigan and one of Meg's purses and made my way down to the restaurant strip.

The streetlamps cast soft circles of light on the footpath and bathed the strolling crowds in a dreamlike glow. I wandered among them, pausing to admire the boutique windows in which mannequins showed off the autumn fashions, and wondered what I should do. Up ahead, an art house cinema was advertising a week-long Hitchcock marathon and *Rope* was due to start in fifteen minutes.

My favourite thing to do in Cootbowie, once I got my driver's licence in year eleven, was to borrow Dad's ute and drive to the cinema in the next town over. On Friday nights you could see a double feature for eight dollars. I went almost every week. Most of the films were already out on DVD, but it didn't matter. I'd buy a frozen Coke, choc top and popcorn, find a seat up the back and let the story carry me away.

I made my way to the cinema and bought my ticket. Turning from the counter, I noticed Peter leaning against the wall, reading a book. My first instinct was to go over and say hello, but then I remembered what I was wearing and the awkward conversation we'd had at Indie the last time he saw me in Meg's clothes, and instead I busied myself studying the coming attractions posters while willing the cinema to open so I could slip inside unnoticed. With Meg and Bastian at the theatre I wondered what Peter was doing here and realised with a sudden pang of jealousy, that he was most likely waiting for a date. I remembered the girls who'd fought for tables near the

front of the stage at Indie when he played: girls in vintage, floral-print dresses with dyed black hair and thick-framed glasses, who drank beer and quoted from John Hughes films in overly loud voices. I hoped he at least had better taste than that.

‘Who are you out to impress tonight?’

I startled to hear Peter’s voice so close to my ear and whirled around to find him looking me over with one eyebrow slightly raised.

I prayed for a convenient tear in the fabric of the universe that I could slip through. When it didn’t appear I cursed divine injustice and forced myself to make eye contact with Peter. ‘This is going to sound really stupid, but I was feeling very stuck in my own head and thought it might help to pretend I was someone else. I wasn’t expecting to see anyone.’

I assumed he’d leave me to my little dress up game and go find his date, but instead he gestured for me to follow him into the cinema, which the usher was just opening. ‘I think I understand. I like to come to the movies to forget myself for a little while and slip into someone else’s story.’

‘You come here alone?’ I asked as we settled on seats in the back row. Where the couples sit, I thought.

He shrugged. ‘It’s hard to really lose yourself when there’s someone whispering to you every five minutes.’

‘You don’t have to sit with me,’ I said thinking he probably felt obligated and that the next ninety minutes would undoubtedly be the most awkward of my life.

‘Do you mind if I do? You’re about the only person I can think of who I’d want to be here with. Meg likes to give a running analysis of the film’s deeper meaning and Bastian can never sit still. He’s always upsetting the popcorn or rustling bags of lollies. But I’ve seen you read. The minute your eyes touch down on the page,

you're completely immersed. Sometimes I can almost see the world fading away from you. We have that in common, I think.'

I thought he'd hardly noticed me, and the correction made me shy. 'So what has you enthralled now?' I said, nodding at the book in his lap. My heart gave a little thump when he held it up and I saw it was *Rebecca*.

'Do you know it? They screened the film here the other night.'

'It's my favourite. You remind me a bit of Maxim de Winter, actually.'

'How so?'

'You often look as though you're hiding some terrible secret.'

I expected him to laugh me off, but he became serious. 'How would you feel if I was?'

I started to make a smart reply, but there was something unnerving in his look that made me swallow my words and his eyes held mine as the lights went down.

I tried to imagine what Peter could possibly be hiding and felt the familiar tingle of excitement that I associated with that part in my favourite romances when the heroine discovers that her broody beau has a crazed wife hidden in an upstairs room, was nearly driven mad himself and forced to commit a terrible murder or else leads her out into the woods to confess he is a vampire with an undeniable longing for her blood, only this time I was the girl and, like all those heroines before me, I had every intention of taming my monster.

I was glad I'd seen the film before because my attention quickly wandered from the screen to focus on the small gap between Peter and me. By the second half of the film he was leaning a little more on the armrest so that our shoulders were only centimetres apart. I wondered if it was an invitation. It took me nearly twenty minutes to work up the courage to find out. Moving with glacial slowness I shifted my weight

towards him so that by the time the credits rolled, my arm pressed lightly against his. The lights came up. The cinema emptied. Neither of us moved.

Eventually Peter cleared his throat. ‘Coffee?’

We found a table upstairs at Moose, a small, dimly lit café near the cinema, and had the place almost to ourselves. While Peter ordered downstairs, I looked through the window and listened to the fragments of conversation drifting upwards from the footpath below.

‘...a dollar for some ciggies? Them bastards at Centre Link said they paid me, but they’s lying. I been down their office today and I told ‘em, I said “Youse guys are cheating me and I’m gonna get one of them free lawyer people and then you’ll be...”’

‘...overcooked? Really? Mine was practically still mooing. I would have sent it back if I wasn’t sure that cocky little water would spit on it. Did you notice how he...?’

‘...must have had like nine beers, mate. Faaaaaarrk I’m pissed. Did you see them chicks though? Totally creaming for me, bro...?’

They were the same conversations I felt I’d been listening to and trying to excuse myself from my whole life. I wondered: is this how trivial the Saints sounded to outsiders? Would I look back at our earnest discussions about books and music at some point in the future with a patronising little smile? Would I shake my head when I thought about sitting in the dark cinema and feeling like I were reaching out to touch a dragon when I pressed my arm against Peter’s? Would I remember this evening, now all but visibly sparking with potential, as just another cup of coffee? The idea that it would gradually fade and fall into a growing pile of half remembered things was unbearable. I thought of Meg’s toast the night I’d arrived in the city: *To being extraordinary*. I carried it with me like a motto, etched in curling script across my

heart, which is why Peter's hinting at a dark and terrible past made me want to draw closer when perhaps I should have pulled away. Discovering his secret, whatever it was, would open a different conversation. One I suspected would not be forgotten.

However, I was learning fast enough that the Saints kept their secrets under heavy guard and a direct attack was not the best strategy. 'Do you think some people are superior to others?' I asked when Peter returned with our coffees.

He wrinkled his nose. 'Is this about my family?'

'Your family?' I asked, confused. 'No. I was thinking about the students in *Rope*, how they thought they had the right to kill people they deemed inferior. You should listen to some of the conversations people are having out there tonight,' I said, nodding at the window.

He smiled as he stirred his coffee. 'My father taught me that you're only worth as much as what's in your bank account.'

'But you don't believe that,' I prompted.

'The idea that we're all equal is bullshit, but our worth has got nothing to do with money. It probably sounds stupid, but I think of it in terms of a brightness scale.'

I leaned forward with my elbows on the table. 'Explain.'

He took a sip of his coffee, buying time to gather his thoughts. 'Every time we contribute something meaningful we emit a bit of light that corresponds to the significance of what we've done: if you do something small, like tell someone you love them, you get a candle flame, like this one,' he gestured to the tea light candle flickering on the table between us. 'If you cure cancer, you get a sun. And all these lights accumulate. But it also works the other way; every time you hurt someone you gather darkness. The people who never do anything are just invisible, but so are the ones who are too perfectly balanced.'

'So what are you, dark, light or invisible?'

He reached out and passed his finger through the flame. ‘Searching for a supernova.’

I wasn’t sure if he meant that he wanted to do good, or that he needed to. I had a sudden vision of a black hole sucking stars into its vortex, but pushed the thought away and instead considered that in a room full of light, the things that stand out are the shadows.

‘While we’re on the subject of accounting for our sins, I’ve felt awful since I showed you and Bastian that story on Monday. Meg said you knew someone like Ebony. I didn’t know.’

Peter pulled at the cuffs of his sleeves—something I noticed he did whenever he seemed uncomfortable—and his mood cooled. ‘Did she tell you who that somebody was?’

I shook my head. ‘She said it’s your story to tell, and I want to know you, Peter.’

In the dim light his eyes shone as though he were holding back tears. He closed them and after he opened them again his expression was blank. ‘I can’t talk about that with you, Lucie.’

I let my gaze fall to my mug so I wouldn’t have to see that disturbing absence in his eyes and wondered how he could open up one minute, yet become totally impenetrable the next. ‘Do you have any idea how upsetting it is when you shut me out like that?’ I asked. He registered my hurt and started to give a knee-jerk-reaction apology, but I cut him off. ‘I thought moving to the city would be liberating, and mostly it has been, but I’ve been lucky. Sometimes I feel I’ve bypassed the city all together and ended up in this fantastic world that you, Bastian and Meg created. You’re not like the other students at Mawson. I mean, the dinner parties and the way you all dress and speak—sometimes I feel like I’m living in an F. Scott Fitzgerald

novel. But I keep wondering: what if I hadn't known Meg and I'd never met you all? What if I'd been like Ebony Blake and hadn't been able to find a place for myself here? Even now, I don't always feel I belong with the three of you, and it seems like you take every opportunity to remind me that I'm an outsider.'

'If you knew what we were really like, you might not want anything to do with us.' Peter reached across the table and took my hand. 'Perhaps I don't want you getting too close in case I scare you off completely.'

He seemed to be sizing up the way our hands fit together, as if trying to work out if it could be something he might get used to, so I reached out with my other hand and placed it firmly over his. 'Try me. You'd be surprised at what I can handle.'

He drew back, but the ghosts of his fingers remained warm against my palm and my heart beat heavily through the silence. Eventually I asked: 'Peter, do you like me?'

He leaned in again, his face catching the candle's light. 'I think I might be starting to.'

Not willing to let him retreat again, I closed the distance between us with a kiss. His lips were warm, tasting of smoke and coffee. But instead of kissing me back, Peter jerked away as if I'd bitten him. It was like marching onstage to receive a prize and realising, too late, my name wasn't the one called.

'I'm sorry. You asked me to coffee, you held my hand—I thought this is what you wanted. God, I'm an idiot.' I buried my face in my hands to hide the shame burning through my cheeks and wished I could teleport to a place where I'd never have to see Peter again.

'No, you're not,' he said. 'I shouldn't have done those things.'

'So why did you?' I asked, my hurt cooling to anger.

‘You fascinate me, Lucie. You come from a town too small for a bookshop or even a library, yet you’ve read more than most English Honours students, and the way you write—I know I was rude about your story, but it was *good*, Lucie. The way you’ve fought to be here, it’s like there’s this fire within you, emitting the most incredible light.’

‘But it’s not so incredible that you want to kiss me.’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘You don’t find me attractive.’ The realisation came as a sudden stab as I realised Peter had commented, critically, on my clothes, but he’d never said anything about how I looked, except for that night at Indie when Meg prompted him and it had been obvious he didn’t mean it.

‘I think you’re beautiful, Lucie. Anyone would be lucky to have you.’ For a moment he looked as though he might change his mind. He leant in a little more so that our foreheads were almost touching, and I could smell his cologne, so much sweeter than Berthum’s. Then he seemed to remember himself and drew back. ‘I just don’t want you to end up getting hurt.’

‘I’m not scared of you, Peter, or whatever it is that you’re hiding.’

He sighed. ‘It wouldn’t work, Lucie. I’ve told you before, I’m not good with people. I wouldn’t live up to your expectations of a boyfriend. You deserve better.’

‘You have no idea what I want in a boyfriend. If you like me, then I don’t see why we can’t at least try.’

‘You don’t understand. There’s something wrong with me, Lucie. There’s a part of myself I can’t always control.’

My inner romantic was thrilled—he really was just like Maxim de Winter, but my more rational side had to stifle a giggle.

He pushed his chair back, suddenly furious. ‘You think this is a joke?’

‘No. Look, I’m sorry, okay? In the cinema you asked what I’d do if you turned out to be hiding some terrible secret. Well, I’m still here.’

He shook his head. ‘I’m sorry, Lucie. I’m just not ready for this.’

From the vacant look that had crept back into his eyes, I could see it was pointless to argue further, so I left, licking my lips for traces of the coffee-and-ash taste of him. Halfway down the street I turned back and saw Peter was still sitting at the table, staring down at his upturned hands as the little tea light candle before him slowly burnt itself out.

The next morning, Meg's phone kept dinging all through breakfast sending her into minor fits of excitement that she refused to explain, and I had no doubt Peter was filling her in on all the details of our non-date. When we arrived in the plaza for coffee I took the chair across from him and tried to catch his eye to show him things needn't be awkward between us, but he looked away and only said good morning after Meg nudged him in the ribs.

'You're looking far too pleased with yourself, Meg. What's going on?'

Bastian swooped down to deliver a quick kiss before taking the seat beside her and she transferred herself to his lap 'I was just telling Peter about my very romantic plan to take you to dinner down at the marina tonight. It's been ages since we went to the beach and the sunsets are always magnificent this time of year, but we'll have to go straight from our last class to make it in time.'

'That sounds lovely, darling, but what about Lucie? How's she supposed to get home?' Bastian gave her a you-haven't-really-thought-this-through-have-you? look.

'I'm sure Peter can drive her. Am I right?'

'Of course,' Peter replied. He turned to me. 'If you'd like, that is.'

The two of them sounded like bad actors proud to have remembered their lines, but I wasn't going to say no to another chance to get Peter alone.

It was my turn to buy our coffees and Peter offered to help me carry them. 'I feel terrible about last night, Luce,' he said, giving the cashier a twenty before I could.

‘I thought, seeing as I’m already taking you home, that you might like to have dinner with me at my house.’

I almost spilled scalding coffee over us both, but managed to steady my hands and slip him a smile. ‘Hence Meg strategically stranding me at Mawson? You could have just asked me to dinner, Peter; I would have said yes.’

‘That was for Bastian’s benefit, actually. I’d rather he didn’t know I’d invited you over.’

‘Right. Lure the naïve young girl up to your castle and leave no witnesses.’

‘Something like that,’ he smiled.

‘Seriously, why can’t Bastian know?’

‘He’s not keen on us being together.’

I wondered what on earth Meg had said to convince Peter to change his mind after last night and made a mental note to thank her later. ‘So this is a date?’

‘No,’ he said, a little too definitely. ‘But I was thinking about what you said last night—that I should tell you my story and let you decide if you still want to hang around with me. Meg thinks you can handle it, in fact, she’s not really giving me a choice about telling you, but Bastian doesn’t want me opening old wounds as it were. So if you want to hear the story, dinner needs to remain our secret, for now.’

‘I’ll take it to my grave,’ I said, giving him my best conspiratorial smile.

‘I have a late rehearsal. I’ll meet you in front of the library at six-thirty.’

I didn’t absorb anything in my lectures that day. Tutorials were hazy, the largely textbook-informed opinions of my peers for once failing to infuriate me. Not even the thought of workshop with Berthum could disturb the fantastic cocoon I’d spun around myself. In my mind I was already in Peter’s car. I imagined all his coolness melting away and the two of us laughing together as we drove. In my fantasy he would pull

over and turn to me with those fearsome, storm-cloud eyes, and the light banter would give way to shy smiles and an awkward silence in which he would lift his hand to my cheek and kiss me.

When we reached the car that evening he opened the door for me, just like men always do in old films, and as he drove us off campus I dared to let my hand creep to the edge of the seat, so that when he shifted gears his fingers might brush against mine. Whatever Peter had to tell me could not be so terrible as to outweigh the thrill of the fact that we were alone together, that *he* had asked *me* to dinner. But Peter looked agitated and said little. As we turned onto the freeway that would take us out of the city into the hills, he finally cleared his throat.

‘I don’t have a lot of people up to the house; it tends to give the wrong impression of me. But I want you to see it. I’m hoping it might help you understand why things happened as they did. Just keep in mind, it’s never felt like home.’

The sky darkened as we left the city lights behind. High fences and petrol stations gave way to thickets of gums, grassy dells and sheer rock faces where the hills had been blasted to make room for the freeway. We exited onto a winding side road where the trees closed in on both sides and there were no more streetlights. Everything was utterly black save for the small stretch of road before us. Eventually, Peter slowed and used a remote to open a tall pair of gates hidden between the trees.

The drive twisted sharply and the night pressed against the car windows. The city suddenly seemed far away, though we’d left it barely twenty minutes ago. Just as I started to feel uneasy, wondering where Peter was taking me, the trees parted and the house rose up before us in the headlights, like something out of a Gothic fairytale. Ivy crept across the greying sandstone walls that stretched away into the shadows so that I couldn’t tell the house’s true size. Dozens of windows stared at us from beneath the eaves. I got out of the car and stared back.

‘It’s Manderley, the house in *Rebecca*,’ I said, gazing in awe at the steps leading up to the wide double doors and the iron-lace balconies on the first floor, just visible through the shadows. ‘God, Peter, I’d guessed your parents had money, but this?’

He looked down and fiddled with his keys. ‘I didn’t want to say anything. My family is well-known and when I introduce myself to people it often seems like they only hear my surname. I found it refreshing when you didn’t.’

‘Speaking of impressions, are your parents home?’ I glanced at my dress, rumpled after a day sitting in lecture theatres.

Peter shook his head ‘They’re on business in Dubai. I have no idea when they’ll be back.’

We walked beyond the house, across a wide lawn. ‘We’re not going inside?’ I asked, disappointed.

‘The main house gives me the creeps. It’s like a museum to my family’s greatness. I moved out to the coach house when I was fifteen.’

The coach house was larger than Meg’s apartment and overlooked a swimming pool. In the centre of the main room was a grand piano, its lacquered surface shining under the down lights. I imagined sitting beside Peter while he played, my head resting on his shoulder as I watched his hands move across the keys. On an old fashioned writing desk, notebooks and pads of stave paper were piled high around the latest Apple computer. A beautifully restored record player was surrounded by piles of records that had spilled over from the shelves, and, at the far end of the room in a sunken alcove surrounded by bookshelves, was a king size bed.

I saw how it might be for us: driving up from the city in the evenings, Peter working at his computer, and me lying on the bed reading a novel with an old jazz record playing in the background. His mother, or perhaps the housekeeper, would

bring us a pot of tea. When it got late, I'd put my book aside, take off my clothes and throw them at his feet, piece by piece, until I tempted him to join me and we'd learn the secrets of each other's bodies beneath the blankets.

I shook myself out of my reverie and knelt beside one of the haphazard piles of records to peer at the titles. Most I hadn't heard of, but some looked very old. 'This is quite a collection.'

'I have a weakness for jazz. It's taken years of trawling garage sales and eBay to find all these,' he said with a hint of pride.

'Seems like a lot of effort when you could download them.'

'It's not just the music, it's the whole era.' He slipped a record—Sidney Bechet's 'Si Tu Vois Ma Mère'—from its sleeve, placed it on the turnstile and set the needle into the groove. A scattering of crackly notes filled the air. 'You can't download an era.'

'Jazz became famous in the 1920s, right? Why then?'

'Women cut their hair and skirts short, men wore eyeliner—the whole decade was one big party and jazz was the soundtrack. After the oppression that had gone before, it was revolutionary.'

'Men wore eyeliner?' I asked, looking up from the record sleeve in my hands.

He misread my tone. 'Can you imagine how liberating that must have been? All those pointless restrictions of the Victorian period were finally breaking down.' Peter crossed to the piano and began to play a soft, dark harmony to accompany the record's tinkling notes. 'The world belonged to the underground—artists, writers, gangsters—and the underdog was king.'

I closed my eyes and listened. The record's burbling, scatty tune flowed like laughter in a speakeasy, where the dance floor was a thriving hub of bare legs, swishing hems and curling smoke. But Peter's music hinted at things not spoken

about, even there: gunshots fired in the night, young men with made-up eyes and heart-shaped lips leaning on each other as they slipped into the shadows, ghosts of a lost generation consoling themselves with drugs and liquor.

The song faded out and we both sat listening to the whispering static. ‘What is it you wanted to tell me Peter?’

He played a few distracted notes, seeming not to hear me. After a moment he stopped and stared at his hands resting on the keys. ‘I tried to kill someone.’

I wanted to believe I’d misheard him. Though he’d spoken softly, the words were clear. ‘Who?’

‘Richard Berthum.’

The room and everything stable in it that I might hold onto seemed to rush away from me. ‘Was it an accident? Self defence?’

He still wouldn’t look at me. ‘No.’

I gaped at him, horrified, slightly thrilled, imagining myself a helpless damsel at the mercy of a darkly alluring monster, but I couldn’t bring myself to fully believe it. After all, Meg had been pushing us together. Why would my best friend want me to date a would-be murderer? Why was she even friends with him? ‘Meg and Bastian, were they...?’ My voice gave out.

‘Involved?’ Peter finished for me. ‘No.’

‘I don’t understand. If it’s true, why aren’t you in gaol?’

‘I wasn’t old enough, for one thing. It happened at the end of year nine.’

‘You were *fourteen*?’

‘Fifteen, just. I spent most of year ten in a psychiatric ward. I still have to take medication and meet with a psychiatrist once a month.’

‘What happened?’

‘It’s hazy. I don’t remember much. My doctor tells me that it’s not unusual. He says there’s only so much our minds can take. If something’s too traumatic we repress it until we’re better able to deal with it, or until something triggers it. Most of what I know has come from what other people have told me.

‘It happened in one of the biology labs at Saints. I don’t know why we were there. Someone had left a scalpel out on one of the benches and I used it to stab him in the leg and stomach. But I was a lot smaller, weaker, then and I didn’t do much damage.’

‘Why?’ My voice was barely a whisper.

‘The overwhelming question.’

‘This isn’t the time to be poetic.’

He sighed. ‘I honestly don’t know. All I remember was this sudden anger rushing on me, so strong I couldn’t control it. It was terrifying. Everything before that is just fragments.’

‘But surely Berthum did something to provoke you. I mean, you must have had a motive, Peter.’

‘What I remember happening, what everybody says happened, and the nightmares—they all got tangled up. I don’t know which bits are real anymore.’

‘This is how you almost got expelled, isn’t it? I don’t understand how you were allowed to stay.’

He looked ashamed. ‘There were extenuating circumstances. Berthum never pressed charges and he’d taken the job at Mawson by the time I got out of the hospital. I’m sure the school organised that job to keep him quiet. My doctors wrote letters, said I wasn’t dangerous.’ He dropped his eyes. ‘My family is very influential. My father can make these things happen, Lucie.’

I stared at him. ‘Your father made it go away, just like that?’

‘I know,’ Peter said, ruefully. ‘So much for my talk about money not meaning anything.’

‘That’s it? That’s everything?’ What Peter had done was terrible, but given what I knew about Berthum, probably not wholly undeserved. I didn’t see how it prevented us from having a relationship. In fact, it was just like a Gothic romance. Here was a tormented hero with a dark-but-not-so-devastatingly-awful-that-I-couldn’t-look-past-it secret, practically begging for a bookish but feisty heroine to help him reconcile with his demons. Meg was right: this was nothing I couldn’t handle.

‘There is something else.’ Slowly, not taking his eyes from mine, Peter began to roll up his sleeves. The scars on his wrists were almost ten centimetres long, and from their mottled texture, I could tell the cuts had been deep. The song he’d just performed for me played over in my head. All those striking chords and mournful arcs that I might never have heard; I might never have seen these beautiful night eyes he now held to mine. I stared back at him in horror. Perhaps I didn’t care as much as I should have about Peter’s attack on Berthum, but his attack on himself was criminal. ‘Why would you do that?’

‘I was walking across one of the playing fields after I left Berthum and it felt as though my blood had been poisoned. Everything was messy and fucked up, and it had been going on for too long. I couldn’t conceive a future where things got better. There was no “perhaps”, “maybe” or “what if,” just a long descent into worse and worse places.’

I couldn’t stop staring at his scars. I didn’t understand what he meant; there were always possibilities. Peter misinterpreted my silence as a cue to continue his unsettling monologue.

‘I did it behind the sports shed. It didn’t hurt much and I remember thinking how easy it was, and how good it felt to feel all that poison flowing out of me.’

That was your life, Peter! I wanted to shout. *How could you just watch it pour away?*

‘I began to feel cold and grew light-headed. It was as though the switches in my brain were clicking off one by one. It was almost like falling asleep. Bastian found me. It was our place, you see, and he’d cut class to sneak a joint. I can’t imagine what it must have been like for him, thinking his biggest problem would be getting caught with weed and instead finding me like that. I was barely conscious. He reacted fast, though: tearing off his shirt, ripping it up and tying the pieces tight around my wrists to stem the flow. I blacked out before any of the teachers or paramedics arrived. He still thinks of himself as my protector.’

I inspected Peter closely as he spoke, trying to gather up all the details that might have been lost. Like Bastian, he might have passed for one of the beatific heroes in a Fitzgerald novel with the hard lines and sharp angles of his features, his golden hair just long enough to brush his collar and that brilliant, wide smile that could make my pulse kick against my throat. Only, he hardly ever smiled. He let his hair matt in wild knots and left his meals unfinished, surviving mostly on a diet of black coffee and cigarettes. I’d always thought he did it to be bohemian. Now it struck me that, unlike so many of the creative arts students at Mawson who affected similar behaviour, Peter wasn’t trying to appear like he’d just crawled from some Parisian garret. He. Simply. Didn’t. Care. In fact, it almost seemed like he was bent on a slow and determined self-destruction.

‘You resent Bastian for saving you, don’t you?’ I asked.

‘It wasn’t a cry for help, if that’s what you mean,’ he replied.

There followed an awful silence, broken only by the needle still scraping over the vinyl record, until I couldn't stand it any more and pulled it off. 'I can't do this, Peter.'

'I know. I'll drive you home,' he said, dropping his eyes as though he'd expected as much. But as he patted his pockets searching for his keys, I saw—or thought I saw—something else in his expression, something almost like relief.

‘What the hell did you do?’ Bastian stormed up to Meg and my table in the plaza the next morning, interrupting my rehashing of the night before.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ I stammered.

‘Don’t give me that. Peter called me after he dropped you home and drunk himself into a stupor. I’ve been up all night with him.’

We’d barely spoken on the drive home and Peter wouldn’t look at me. Even if he had, I would have been too wound up in my own tangle of feelings to notice if he was hurt by my reaction. ‘Is he okay?’

‘No, Lucie, he’s unconscious.’

‘Don’t be an arse,’ Meg scolded.

‘I haven’t even started with you. Apparently, you orchestrated the whole thing. What the hell were you thinking, setting them up?’

‘Bastian, go get a coffee or something and give us a minute, would you? Peter’s not the only one upset.’ Meg shoed him off and squeezed my hand. ‘I’m so sorry. I wanted to tell you ages ago, before you arrived, so it wouldn’t come as such a shock, but Peter made me swear I wouldn’t. I’m surprised he told you at all. Even I only heard the story through Bastian.’

‘Why did you set us up, Meg?’ I demanded.

‘You’re mad at me? I just handed you a Brontë novel waiting to happen, Lucie! Besides, you’re the one person I think Peter could stand to be with. This was a huge deal to him. Granted, he’s made some mistakes, but they were isolated incidents that happened a long time ago. I thought you’d be able to see past them, but

apparently I was wrong.’ She fixed with an I’m-not-mad-just-disappointed look, as though I wasn’t messed up enough over everything that had happened.

I shook my head to clear it. ‘The whole thing just sounds completely implausible. Why did Peter go back to Saints after it happened? Even if the school let him, why would he want to?’

‘I’m sure he didn’t,’ she replied. ‘If you ever have the misfortune of meeting his father, you’ll understand. There have been Sinclairs at Saints since the school opened. The family practically owns the place; there are buildings named after them. The idea that Peter wouldn’t matriculate there was inconceivable to his parents.’

‘And no one considered why Berthum didn’t press charges? That’s very strange, Meg.’

She gave me a pointed look. ‘Isn’t it just?’

‘A student stabs a teacher then tries to kill himself on campus. A school can’t ignore that. There’s got to be more to it.’

‘Of course there is, Lucie,’ she said a little sharply. ‘But Saints isn’t the place to play Nancy Drew.’ Then seeing I was completely failing to process the enormity of what I’d been told, she softened. ‘I know it’s a lot to ask, but please, Luce, give Peter a chance.’

‘You’re kidding?’

‘Who are you to hold him accountable for something he did when he was fifteen? You aren’t the only one who came to Mawson looking for a fresh start.’

‘It’s not like he failed a Maths test, Meg. He stabbed a teacher and tried to kill himself.’

‘He stabbed *Richard Berthum*, Lucie. You can’t honestly believe Peter is the bad guy?’

‘I don’t know what to think.’ I wanted to return to when Peter had been a beautiful stranger, Berthum a talented writer and I enchanted by them both.

After I turned him down, Peter stopped joining us for coffee and lunch and he didn’t try to call. In my nightmares I found myself drowning in a river of his blood and felt a mounting sense of guilt every time I looked over at his empty chair. Without him I came unstuck from our little group. Both Bastian and Meg stopped making an effort to include me, he out of anger that I’d gone after Peter and she because I’d rejected him. I couldn’t win. They invented excuses not to see me: romantic dinners and late night coffees—even a weekend away wine tasting—and increasingly, I found myself alone.

The library was open until ten and I got into a routine of staying late after classes, holing myself up in one of the study corrals, doggedly revising my lecture notes, drafting essay plans for assignments not due for weeks and looking out across the campus to where the uppermost branches of the Hanging Tree waved above the roof of the creative arts building. At lunch I sat by myself, nibbling my sandwiches and watching the other groups of students enjoying their breaks in the plaza. Some of the workshop students had drifted into a clique, sitting together and quoting dead writers in overly loud voices, while holding aloft copies of well-thumbed classics. At first I scorned their display, but as the days piled into weeks and I grew more distanced from the Saints, I found myself almost eager to join in, if only to feel like I belonged somewhere.

When I saw Caris wildly gesticulating with a copy of *Dracula*, I borrowed it from the library and took note of the band logos on Hayden’s t-shirts to download their albums. Then one day, when Meg was being particularly dismissive, I took my lunch and asked if I could join them. Caris shot me a death ray, clearly miffed that

she'd momentarily lost the group's undivided attention, but Hayden smiled and offered me the empty chair beside him. Caris dominated the conversation, belittling and contradicting the few comments I offered, and the other girls pretty much ignored me, but the boys were polite enough. Liam sided with me when I explained to Caris that *Dracula* was more rape allegory than romance (turns out she'd got bored halfway through and watched the film), and Hayden slipped me the occasional friendly look and invited me to join them again the next day.

'What were you *thinking*, Luce?' Meg demanded when I found her smoking and waiting for me in the Creative Arts courtyard before our next lecture. 'I almost organised a rescue mission.'

I shrugged. 'They're nice.'

Meg raised an eyebrow.

'At least they're inclusive, which is more than I can say for you right now.'

Meg seemed almost as surprised by my boldness as I was, but quickly composed herself. 'You're the one who can't accept what Peter did.'

I remembered Meg, aged eight, showing up at our hideout on a Saturday morning ready for a day of make believe with a rolled sheet of butcher's paper beneath her arm on which she'd already drawn our characters and mapped out the plot for the day's fantasy. When I asked if I could change my character's name from Pirate Annie to Peg Leg Pattie, she told me I was ruining everything and sulked for half an hour until I let her have her way.

'I've been here almost three months and I hardly know anyone aside from you, Bastian and Peter. Perhaps it's time I made other friends.'

I'd been having lunch with Caris & Co for a week and still hadn't seen Peter since the night he'd taken me to his house, when Hayden asked me on a date. I might have seen

it coming. The other girls had grown even more territorial, while Hayden's friendly looks had become increasingly flirtatious. He'd even blushed when my fingers grazed his knee as I reached between our seats for my bag. I said yes, partly because I was lonely, partly because I knew how much it would annoy Caris, but mostly because it felt good to be desired.

I didn't tell Meg. I knew she'd be furious and I wasn't going to let her make me feel guilty for going on a date, just because it wasn't with Peter. She and Bastian had theatre tickets, and they always hung around for a drink after the show so I knew they'd be late. As long as I was home before them, she'd never have to know. I tried to look forward to the date; after all, I was single and Hayden was attractive. Ish. He styled himself after a computer camp geek who'd just made it back to civilisation after a decade lost in the bush, but I convinced myself that under the scraggly beard and jeans made to fit a twelve-year old girl, he was an intelligent, worthwhile person. Even so, I couldn't shake the feeling that seeing him was a bad idea.

He met me outside the apartment building at seven, wearing an ill-fitting suit coat over a Tetris t-shirt and wheeling a bike painted a lurid green—wasabi, he informed me.

'I didn't pick you for a cyclist,' I said, noticing that the tyres were still surprisingly white and there wasn't a scratch on the frame.

'Burn fat, not fuel,' he replied with a wink. 'So, uh, I thought we could maybe get some food then head down to Indie. A few friends from screen studies are going for beers and there's some chill local bands playing that I think you'd really dig.'

'Sounds great,' I said with a smile as fixed as his bike's gear.

'Yeah, some of these gigs can be pretty underground. It can be hard to find out what's going on. I figured with you just moving here and all, you probably haven't seen much of the real city yet,' he drawled. 'My family moved here a couple of years

back and for ages I thought this place was deadsville. But then I met some people and they introduced me to some other people and I got into the fixie scene. I started finding out about all these places and gigs that never seemed to be advertised. This city is weird like that. It's boring as bat shit, then you say the magic password and suddenly it's like you're Alice in fucking Wonderland.'

'Until you find yourself back on the wrong side of the looking glass,' I muttered, more to myself than him.

Hayden shrugged. 'It's cliquish. You find the group you want in on and you do your best not to piss them off. But I don't need to tell you that. I mean, you turn up out of nowhere and two minutes later you're hanging out with the Bright Young Things. I'm surprised they let you sit with us, or spend the night with me.'

'The Bright Young Things? You mean the Saints?' I asked.

'Is that what you call yourselves? I guess we came up with the other name because of the way you all dress like jazz babies.'

'But people know who we are?' I asked, intrigued.

He gave me a funny look. 'You really don't know anything. The other three have been hanging out at Indie for years. Rumour has it they used to pay the bouncers not to card them, and not with cash either.' He leaned a little closer, as though afraid of being overheard. 'With drugs.'

I smiled, imagining a much younger Bastian slipping the bouncer a little packet of pills so that he and Meg could hear Peter play. 'What else?'

'They don't talk to anyone. Meg's obviously with the athletic looking guy, Bastian, is it?' I nodded. 'But the musician, Peter, he's a mystery. I've never met him, but I hear he always wears the same black coat, even in summer. All the screen girls are convinced he's hiding some terrible secret. They were all mad with jealousy when

you showed up. I think Caris would actually be nice to you if she thought you might introduce her, but legend has it he doesn't date.'

It was strange to hear the Saints talked about this way, and I had a sudden vision of how they must appear to Hayden and his friends: sophisticated and unapproachable in their corner table at Indie, drinking vodka on the rocks and bottle after bottle of champagne while everyone around them sank pitchers of beer and cider, and I felt a sudden pang of longing. 'And what do they say about me?' I asked.

'Nothing, yet. You're the mystery at the heart of the enigma.'

I smiled, pleased, but had the uneasy feeling I'd walked into a trap.

We ate at a cheap Thai place, and Hayden insisted we sit outdoors even though the weather had turned chilly. He left his helmet on the table, attracting other guys who were also wheeling too-shiny bikes, and made a point of introducing me, showing me off as though I were a rare butterfly, long pursued and finally caught. He kept running a hand through his hair and subtly checking his reflection in the restaurant window to make sure his fringe was mussed right. His eagerness made me uncomfortable, reminding me of my own desperate need to impress the Saints when I'd first arrived. Hayden wanted to know more about the Bright Young Things, as he kept calling us. I gave him vague, one-word answers and pushed my plate away having barely eaten anything, keen to get to Indie where I hoped it would be too noisy to talk.

As soon as Hayden spotted his friends at the bar, he took my hand in a small, slippery grip that tightened when I tried to pull away. He offered to buy me a drink, which I declined, and we found a place near the stage to watch the bands. It wasn't crowded, but Hayden pressed his body against mine and leant in when he spoke, so that his lips brushed my ear and I could smell the Pad Thai on his breath through the beery fug.

The first band called themselves Ionesco and played long, whiny pieces with angsty lyrics that gave me a headache. At the end of their set I excused myself to get some water. As I was coming back I saw one of Hayden's friends give him a not-so-subtle thumbs up, and when I rejoined them Hayden slipped his arm around my waist and leaned in as if to whisper something. Somewhere in the background a song began to play. It made me think of crossroads and bloodstains in a grassy field. Hayden's lips touched my ear, my cheek, my mouth. He tasted of cider and soy sauce, and his friends silently egged him on with their leering smiles. My headache throbbed, my mind clenching in a tight fist of pain. I pushed Hayden away and turned to find Peter in the spotlight, staring down at me from the stage.

Time slowed. His fingers fell from the strings of his guitar as his eyes met mine. His expression was that of someone unexpectedly shot at point blank range. My heart stumbled. Stopped. I wanted him to pull me out of the drunken crowd and up on stage with him where I could breathe. I wished I could wind back the weeks, unlive this awful night and all the lonely days that led to it and tell him: *I still want you*. Despite what he'd done, I realised it was true. I wanted the life he offered: nights together at Manderley, sun-drenched weekends strolling through vineyards, envious stares following us through Mawson's courtyards. More than that, I wanted to feel his arms close around me, to look at his beautiful, haunted face and know it was mine. But time was speeding up again. The moment passed. Peter looked away and picked up the dropped notes of his song.

'Lucie, what the hell? I thought we were having fun.' Hayden curled his hand around my hip and tried to kiss me again, but I pulled back.

'This is all wrong.'

Ignoring Hayden's protests, I fought my way through the groups of willowy girls and hipster nerds towards the door. It had been hot and stuffy inside the bar and I

pulled my coat close around me as the chill of the autumn night set in. I started to run towards the apartment, wanting nothing more than to crawl into bed and pretend the evening never happened, but then I stopped. My thoughts were racing, tripping over one another. Boys on the prowl ambled past, tailing stumbling groups of girls. The air reeked of alcohol, cigarette ash and burger grease. I needed to talk to Peter, I realised; I might not get another chance. But Hayden and his friends would still be at Indie and I didn't want to deal with them. I found Peter's car in the alley behind the bar and sat on the bonnet to wait.

It was an hour before he came out. He was chatting with one of the barmen on a cigarette break, and didn't see me at first.

'Peter,' I called, climbing off his car.

'God, they really love you, don't they? I'll leave you to it.' The barman clapped him on the shoulder and went back inside.

Peter ignored me and started loading his gear into the boot.

'I'm not with that guy. He's just a friend—not even that.'

'You can see who you like. You don't need my permission.' His voice was hard and he still hadn't looked at me.

'I didn't know you were performing tonight. I wouldn't have come if I had.' I realised how bad it sounded the second the words were out of my mouth.

'No. Of course not,' he replied tersely, opening the driver's door and climbing in.

'I mean, I wouldn't have come with him.'

Finally he looked at me. 'Meg convinced me you were like us, but you're not. I was stupid to take the chance.'

He drove off, leaving me standing alone by the garbage bins with take-away bags gusting at my feet on the dank night breeze. I'd been used and made a fool of. I

was furious with Hayden and Peter and most of all myself. With all my strength I hurtled an empty bottle against the wall then sank, exhausted, onto the pavement.

Meg turned from indifferent to openly hostile after she heard what had happened at Indie, demanding ‘How could you have been so cruel, Lucie? And with someone like Hayden, of all people?’ Hayden hadn’t spoken to me, but from the looks I got in workshop I gathered he’d discussed our date with everybody else in our class.

The weather grew steadily colder. With the Saints barely speaking to me, I spent my breaks between classes hunched over my assignments in the library carrels and my evenings in my bedroom, with only the occasional tap of rain against the windows to break the tense silence that fell over the apartment. I began going to the movies, two, three times a week, ostensibly to get away from the awful quiet that followed me like a shadow, but really I was hoping to see Peter. After that night at Indie, I’d determined to make it up with him. I’d linger in the lobby until the previews ended and then scan the darkened rows for the familiar tangle of his hair.

I often thought I saw him around Mawson, making his way between the buildings. I’d be on the verge of calling out when I’d realise it wasn’t him, that, in fact, the person looked nothing like him. His features were imprinted on every stranger’s face. He was everywhere and nowhere.

Like Peter, my past was full of things I wasn’t proud of, and I knew I hadn’t been fair to him. I’d be mortified if he knew what things were really like in Cootbowie. Since arriving in the city I’d largely ignored my mother’s soft-spoken voice messages. I couldn’t conceive inviting Peter to the apartment for the express purpose of telling him the truth, and my screwed up family was nothing compared to

what he'd confessed to me. Peter had taken a huge risk in sharing his secrets and I'd reacted like a self-righteous prig.

I talked to some of the other music students and discovered the practise room Peter liked to use in the evenings after classes. It was locked the first few times I went, but on the fourth or fifth I heard his music as I made my way down the hall. He'd left the door ajar and I leant against the frame to watch him play. The music seemed to move through his entire body—his head dipping towards the keys to draw out the softer notes, and his back arching with the major lifts. In his dark, formal coat he was like a figure from a painting, recast in art as something simpler and yet infinitely superior: 'The Composer at Work'.

'Sometimes I feel like I'm in the presence of the sublime when I watch you play,' I said when he finished.

He turned, startled, and his expression went cold. 'What are you doing here, Lucie?'

'I came to apologise.'

'If Meg put you up to it, don't feel obligated.'

I shook my head. 'Peter, I was upset and I screwed up and I need to make this right. Like you, I find it difficult to get close to people, but when you look at me, it's as though a light switches on inside me. I've never felt anything like it. I freaked out because I couldn't handle the idea that I might never have met you, which now seems completely ridiculous. I should be making the most of the fact that you are here.'

He looked at me carefully. 'You want to be with me, even knowing what I did?'

'If you'll still have me.'

He opened his mouth to say something, then abruptly turned away and began gathering up his sheet music and packing folders into his bag. He was at it so long I wondered if I'd been dismissed, but finally without looking up from his task, he said: 'I don't deserve you. I'm not like that guy you were with at Indie. I don't know how to be like that.'

'I didn't even like him, Peter.' I took a step into the room. 'I like you.'

'I'm still sick, Luce. I don't think you understand quite how bad it is. A relationship would be hard for me. Hard for us both.'

'You're saying no.'

He played a few experimental notes—thinking music. 'I'm saying I want you to be aware what this would be. I don't want to mislead you.'

'But we can try?' I asked, suddenly hopeful.

'I really like you, Lucie, but you'll have to be patient with me. I'm not good with affection.'

To my mind it was as good as a resounding YES. It took all my will power not to throw my arms around him and bury my face in his neck, but I managed to limit my outward excitement to a flirtatious smile. 'Well, I'd hoped you'd pin me down and ravish me right here, but I guess we could start with dinner. Meg's cooking beetroot and fetta risotto, and I know she'd be pleased to see you.'

He finally turned back to me. 'You're really sure about this, about us?'

In answer I took his hand, forcing myself not to flinch when my thumb grazed the hard ridge of scar tissue at his wrist, and let him navigate us through the dark maze of hallways and out into the night.

The campus was shrouded in an unnatural stillness, broken only by the slow creep of shadows inching out from the buildings as we made our way out of the

conservatorium, and I was glad I had Peter with me. As we approached the Creative Arts courtyard I saw the craggy branches of the Hanging Tree lit up in the eerie blue of the security lights and I thought of Ebony Blake's fingers twisting a length of rope into a hangman's knot.

'I don't want to go this way,' I said, gripping Peter's hand tighter.

I led him down to the path by the lake, imagining moonlight shimmering on the surface, the myriad lights of the city glowing at the bottom of the hill and a chance for what I hoped would be the first of many romantic strolls. But the ring of buildings hid the glitter of the city's lights and only the path itself was lit, the water lying black and still beyond.

I pressed closer against Peter's side. 'I don't like it here at night. A campus should be full of noise and people. It's too quiet.'

'Someone seems to like it,' Peter said, nodding to a figure approaching from the far side of the lake.

I squinted, trying to see who it was. 'It looks like Richard Berthum.'

As he got closer I saw it was Berthum, and that he was wearing running gear. My first thought was to turn back before he recognised us, but he already had and raised a hand in greeting as he jogged around to meet us. Peter stopped and his hold on my hand grew painfully tight. I remembered Berthum's breath hot against my neck and imagined his blood, bright and slick on Peter's hands, and I stopped, too, my heart beating in time with Berthum's steps. He was panting and there was a sweat-stained 'V' on the front of his shirt. Sometimes on weekends I'd run the track around the bay. After a certain point adrenaline took over and released me back to a primal state: all muscle and strength, as though I were an animal in pursuit of prey. I recognised that same wildness in Berthum now. It filled me with a strong desire to run.

‘I thought I was the only one haunting this place. What are you still doing here, Lucie?’ he asked, throwing a curious glance towards Peter.

My mouth was too dry to speak.

‘She was waiting for me,’ Peter answered when I didn’t. His hand shook, but his voice was level and cold.

‘Peter Sinclair. I almost didn’t recognise you.’ Berthum regarded him with open interest. ‘You two are an item?’

‘That’s none of your business.’ Peter let go of my hand to circle his arm protectively around my waist. ‘Let’s go.’

We started to leave, but Berthum wasn’t finished. ‘Perhaps it’s not so surprising you’ve ended up together. Lucie’s one of my star students, just as you were.’

His words seemed to fix Peter in place and he turned back to Berthum, bristling. The two of them reminded me of a pair of dogs circling before a fight.

Berthum turned to me. ‘Speaking of dedicated scholarship, I may have something for you. Have you read *Dangerous Liaisons*? It popped into my head when I saw the two of you walking together.’

I narrowed my eyes at him. ‘Is it a romance?’

‘No, but it’s got enough sex, lies and power games to hold your interest. Plus it’s an excellent example of the epistolary form, which we’ll cover next semester. Why don’t you come by my office sometime and I’ll lend it to you?’ Berthum’s eyes travelled slowly over me and I crossed my arms protectively over my chest.

‘Thanks, but I’ve got so much going on at the moment, I can barely keep up with our set texts.’

Berthum’s eyes flicked to Peter then back to me. ‘I can imagine. But if you want to be a writer, you need to take advantage of the opportunities given to you.’

‘If it’s that important, you can have my copy, Luce.’ Peter’s words were knives and he didn’t take his eyes off Berthum. ‘I’ll get it out for you tonight.’

Berthum gave us a slow smile. ‘Well, my offer stands. Good to see you both. You especially, Peter. It’s been a long time.’ With another little wave he continued on his run and Peter steered me away up the plaza steps, not loosening his hold around my waist.

‘Peter, you’re hurting me!’ I cried, pulling free of his grip.

‘What was that?’ he demanded when we were out of Berthum’s earshot.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘You think I didn’t notice how Berthum looked at you? He was practically salivating. Does he often invite you to his office to lend you books?’ Anger sparked of his consonants.

‘That was the first time. Why?’

Peter didn’t seem to hear me. He grabbed me hard by the shoulders, looking me directly in the eyes. ‘What does he mean you’re one of his star students? Has he hurt you? Touched you? Tell me!’ His expression was terrifying, his features so distorted with rage, I barely recognised him. He shook me so hard I bit my tongue.

‘Peter, don’t! You’re scaring me!’

He stopped shaking me, but his grip remained tight. I tasted metal and salt and when I touched my fingers to my tongue, they came away bright with blood. Peter’s face slackened at the sight, as though released from an enchantment. He immediately dropped his hands and I stumbled back into one of the plaza tables, terrified by his anger.

‘I’m so sorry, Luce.’ He reached out to touch my cheek, but I flinched away.

‘I lost control. I didn’t mean to hurt you.’

My arms ached with the beginnings of bruises where he'd grabbed me and I was still shaking. 'Why do you think Berthum did something to me, Peter?'

He faltered. 'I don't know. It was just the way he spoke to you, and the way he looked. I hate that you're in his class and that he knows we're together.'

'Did he hurt you?' My voice was barely a whisper. 'Is that why you attacked him?'

The questions seemed to drown him. He looked like he couldn't get enough air.

'Peter?'

He looked away, blinking hard as though something were caught in his eye and he was trying to get rid of it. 'I... I don't remember.'

I knew I should press him harder. If Berthum had done something to Peter at Saints, then I needed to know about it. We needed to tell someone—his parents, the university, the police. I couldn't possibly stay in Berthum's class. There'd be a trial and I might have to give evidence—tell a court full of strangers what I'd allowed Berthum to do to me. What kind of girl would willingly offer herself to a child molester in exchange for a high mark on an assignment? Worse, if Berthum had done something to Peter, how would Peter feel about me if he knew I'd let Berthum kiss me?

I reached tentatively for his hand and noticed how perfectly it fit with mine, the warmth of his skin thawing the numb tips of my fingers. 'I don't know why I asked that. Berthum hasn't done anything to me, and I wouldn't let him if he tried.' I took my hand back. 'But if you ever grab me like that again, it's over. Understand?'

Peter nodded and when he spoke his voice was quiet and strange. 'I want this to work as much as you do, Lucie.'

When we reached the car park, I called Meg to tell her Peter was joining us for dinner. Upon hearing the news, her clipped responses turned to questions about what had changed, and her voice grew warm with relief. Bastian was also at the apartment when we arrived. He downed a double whisky and poured another for himself and Peter while I helped Meg set the table.

As we sat down to eat I smiled to think back to my first night with the Saints and the shock of longing I felt when Peter shook my hand across the table. Now that he sat beside me, I reached for his hand and drew little circles on his palm with my fingertip.

He gave my hand a little squeeze and let it go to pick up his knife. 'My parents are back,' he announced.

Bastian put his glass down. 'When did that happen?' He seemed surprised, offended even, that this was the first he'd heard of it.

'A few days ago. They're not staying long. I overheard them talking about renting a place with friends in Corfu for the European summer. They'll be here for Old Collegians though and I'd been hoping to get out of it.'

Bastian shrugged. 'I was planning to go anyway. It's the one night of the year when practically my whole client base gathers in one room, though I'm sure it'll be about as enjoyable as gouging my eyes out with a butter knife.'

'Don't be so gloomy. It'll be fun,' Meg said, pouring herself more wine. 'It's a rare chance to observe the vultures in their natural environment and congratulate ourselves on escaping their clutches. I'll probably get a story out of it. Plus, it's the perfect excuse for Luce and me to buy fabulous new dresses.'

'As though you need one,' Bastian quipped.

'I'm not taking Lucie,' Peter said quietly.

Meg's smile fell. 'Why not? I thought you were on the one way train to Happily Ever After.'

'Exactly,' he replied. 'I wouldn't want to scare her off.'

'Hang on,' I cut in. 'What is it I'm not invited to?'

'It's a ball the St Augustines Old Collegians' Association puts on at the school every year,' Peter explained. 'My father is their chairperson and it will reflect badly on him if I don't go.'

I pictured the balls in BBC period dramas (my only experience with such events) and imagined a great hall with chandeliers and myself on Peter's arm in a floor-length gown, making witty conversation with all the other glittering couples. I could definitely think of worse ways to spend an evening. 'I've always wanted to go to a ball. I didn't realise they still happened.'

'I'm trying to protect you, Lucie,' Peter said with a pleading look.

Protect me from what? I wondered. It was a school function, not a medieval battle. 'Exclude me is more like it,' I said. 'Do you have any idea how hard it is for me sometimes? You, Bastian and Meg all know each other so well. You have this whole collective history binding you together. Don't I get to share in that now?'

'The whole thing is bound to be a disaster. I don't want to drag you into it.'

'Lucie has to meet your parents sometime, Peter.' Meg said gently, getting up to hunt for her cigarettes. 'We'll stay for dinner, have a bit of a dance and leave before everyone starts getting messy with the drinks. Speaking of, Bastian, you've had enough.' She picked up the wine bottle he'd been reaching for and set it down on the other side of the table without taking her eyes off Peter. 'So long as you make a point of being visible and charming when everyone arrives, your parents will be too busy schmoozing to bother with us. Besides, it'll look much better if you show up with a date.'

‘Fine.’ Peter looked me over. ‘Meg’s right; you’ll need a new dress.’

Though we moved onto easier topics, the conversation was forced and stilted and Peter wouldn’t take my hand again. Before the rest of us had finished our risotto he thanked Meg for dinner and started putting on his coat.

‘Where are you going?’ I asked, feeling like a scalded child.

‘Home.’

I followed him out into the library. ‘I was hoping you might stay.’

‘Not tonight.’

‘Are you angry with me? I won’t go to the ball if it’s going to put you in a grump.’

His expression softened and with gentle fingers he reached out to brush a stray lock of hair from my face. ‘I’m sorry, Luce. I know this isn’t how you wanted the night to end when you came searching for me in the Con. I won’t hold it against you if you change your mind about us.’

I took both his hands in mine and touched my forehead to his. ‘You need to stop asking me to end this, Peter; we haven’t even had a proper kiss yet.’

He leaned in further and kissed me on the cheek. ‘Let’s save the real thing for a happier night. I’ll call you later.’

I watched him leave, wishing I could go back to the moment I’d taken his hand in the practise room and rewrite the evening from there. Surely we were entitled to some kind of honeymoon period before the real world crashed back in?

‘You mustn’t mind him,’ Meg said, coming out of the kitchen to join me. He thinks he has to suffer everything by himself. It’s nonsense and he needs to get over it.’

‘If attending this ball is really going to be that hard for him, I don’t want to make things worse,’ I said.

‘He’s not worried about himself,’ Bastian interjected from where he leant against the doorframe. ‘He was trying to do you a favour. His parents can be nasty and they’ve got very particular ideas about who Peter should date.’ Meg shot him a withering look. ‘I didn’t say I agreed with them,’ he added defensively.

‘Ignore him. They’ll love you, Luce,’ Meg assured me, though her attempt at a smile left me more concerned than anything Peter or Bastian had said.

The following Saturday Meg and I woke early to go dress shopping for the Old Collegians' Ball. I'd been dreading it all week. Peter still wasn't enthusiastic about my going as his partner and Meg hadn't said anything else to reassure me about meeting his parents. The more I thought about the ball the more apprehensive I became, on top of which I knew I couldn't afford a new evening dress. My scholarship barely paid enough to cover the basics: tuition, textbooks, food and coffee. When I'd arrived in Adelaide, I'd had some money saved from working at the pub, but now even that was mostly gone.

Normally, Meg was sensitive to my situation, quietly paying more than her share of our joint expenses than she should and offering to cook when the boys would have rather eaten out. That morning, however, she refused to even look in any of the chain stores, insisting, 'Peter's mother will know if you're wearing something cheap and she'll be awful about it.' She tugged me from one boutique to the next, picking out dresses I knew not even she could afford. I must have tried on more than a dozen, with Meg explaining how to choose fabrics and styles to complement my figure. I'd only ever seen such brilliant gauzes and silks, complicated pleats and drapery in magazines, and I was awed by the way each dress transformed my appearance. The shop assistants fawned over us, rushing from the dressing rooms to the display floor to find us more gowns in different styles and sizes. According to them, every dress looked stunning, but Meg was critical, insisting a hem wasn't straight or a neckline gaped. I felt like Cinderella out on the town with her fairy godmother.

I knew we'd found the dress before I even tried it on. It was a deep, seductive red with a plunging neckline and a skirt that hugged my hips and fell in satiny folds to the floor. It was displayed in a small, upstairs boutique down a side street off the main strip. Meg had already bought her dress, a sparkly flapper-inspired halter neck with a dangerously low back.

I looked at my self in the mirror, admiring the way the dress showed off my cleavage and made me look older, more sophisticated, while Meg piled my hair on top of my head to suggest the up-do she planned to create for me on the night.

She flashed a smile at my reflection. 'Just wait until Peter sees this. He won't be able to keep his hands off you.'

I imagined Peter in a well-cut tuxedo leading me around a dance floor, the generous length of the dress covering my uncertain steps while an admiring crowd we were too wound up in each other to notice looked on. I checked the price tag and suffered a minor heart attack. 'I can't afford this, Meg.'

'Well, obviously. It's monstrously over-priced. However, you, my darling, now happen to be dating a *Sinclair*.' Meg took a credit card from her purse and I saw Peter's name on it. 'You didn't think he'd make you pay for your dress, did you?'

I thought about Peter's own clothes: unbranded with the occasional scar of stitching visible where he'd mended a shirt rather than replacing it. I could hardly spend his money on such an extravagant dress when he chose to be so thrifty.

'Put that away, Meg.'

Her smile faded. 'Luce, this isn't the sort of function where you can get away with wearing anything less, not if you're going as Peter's partner.'

'He hates that attitude,' I reminded her.

'True, but everyone else there will have certain expectations of you, especially his parents.'

I looked in the mirror again and held my hair up the way Meg had shown me. The girl staring back lifted her chin. She was the kind of girl Peter's parents would undoubtedly approve of, one who made witty small talk, and was studying law or medicine at the more prestigious Baudin University. She was a girl who stood with her shoulders back and spoke with a bright staccato lilt, but also a girl who tutted over Peter's unkempt hair and pen-scarred hands and belittled his love of music. I let my hair fall in a messy tumble and smiled at the more familiar reflection. Peter would never date that type of girl.

'I don't want the dress, Meg.'

'Don't be silly, Luce. Is it the money? You mustn't worry about it. Really, this is nothing to him.'

'But it's too much for me,' I said. 'I know him. He won't like it.'

Meg fixed me with a look. 'Well, what exactly do you plan to wear?'

The dress Meg had worn to her Year Twelve Formal hung forgotten in a garment bag at the back of her wardrobe. I'd remembered it from the photo in the library: a long black gown of pleated silk, cinched at the waist and backless, like something an early talkies star might have worn to a première. If Meg had thought it suitable for her formal, surely it would be enough to impress Peter's parents and their friends. More importantly, I knew Peter would love it.

The night of the ball I curled my hair and Meg helped me with my make-up. She rouged my lips into a shining heart and painted flicks of liquid eyeliner at the corners of my eyes to make them smoulder. We'd invited the boys for pre-drinks and when the doorbell rang I took a moment to check my reflection one last time—thrilled to hardly recognise the smoky sophisticate blinking back at me—and sprayed some of Meg's Dior Addict on my wrists and neck before making my entrance into the library.

Peter leant against one of the bookcases, distracted. He didn't notice me standing in the doorway and for a few seconds I watched him unobserved. His dark suit looked expensive and perfectly tailored to his figure, the sharp lines emphasising his broad shoulders and slim waist. He'd had his hair trimmed and wore it neatly combed back from his face. It made him look older, more serious and, to my way of thinking, very handsome. Bastian, in a 1920s-style tuxedo, was already pulling bottles out of the liquor cabinet. As I entered the room he let out a low whistle and Peter's melancholy expression softened as he looked up at the sound and saw me.

'This is not the dress I was expecting,' he said, coming to greet me. He circled his arms around my waist, pulling me close. 'You look stunning.' There was a smile in his voice, but I could smell alcohol on his breath and Bastian was still pouring the first round of drinks.

'We'll have fun, I promise.' I squeezed him tighter and made to kiss him, but Meg interrupted. 'God, stop it, you two! You'll smudge your lipstick, Luce!'

I glared at her. 'You're kidding?' But Peter, ever the diplomat, only rolled his eyes and kissed my forehead before letting me go.

Our taxi arrived when I was on my second lemonade and the boys were finishing their third martinis. With the alcohol Peter had assumed his usual aloofness, but there was a slight tremor in his hand when I took it in mine. I was determined to keep it from him, but I, too, was beginning to feel nervous. I kept thinking about the bruise Peter's father had given him at the start of semester, and how he'd made Peter return to Saints despite everything that happened there. I wasn't sure I could be polite to someone who treated Peter like that.

I held Peter's hand tighter as our taxi turned off the main road and slowed to a crawl as it passed beneath the iron archway bearing the St Augustines crest.

Manicured playing fields rolled into the darkness on either side of the road, while ahead, fringed by the shadows of the lesser classroom buildings, the sandstone walls of the Sinclair Hall glowed gold through the autumn night. Peter took one look at his family name carved in large letters above the doors and drew a hip flask from his inside pocket, but I was enchanted. Saints was a world away from the balding, muddied oval and cinderblock classrooms of my own school.

We got out of the taxi and music from an unseen orchestra wafted out of Sinclair Hall. A small crowd milled before the doors. Men in finely cut suits clapped each other on the back and chatted in groups while women fluttered around them exchanging air kisses and admiring each other's dresses. It was like a contemporary television adaptation of an Austen novel.

'Your jaw will fall off if you keep gaping like that, Luce,' Meg laughed.

'Yes, best to play it nonchalant,' Bastian said. 'Their fangs will come out if they smell new blood, and there won't be anything we can do to save you.'

I sensed he was right. As we made our way between the groups I caught several women flicking critical eyes over my outfit. I remembered Hayden calling us the Bright Young Things. At Mawson, wearing Meg's vintage dresses made me feel sophisticated and mysterious, but when these women looked at me I felt like a child in a gaudy costume.

'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here,' said Bastian in an ominous undertone as we passed beneath a wide archway into the foyer.

Meg slapped him on the arm. 'He means "smile and think of the free bar".'

Looking ahead, I saw what she meant. An imposing reception line waited to greet the arriving guests. I took a deep breath and a strong hold on Peter's arm and let him escort me to meet the first of the dignitaries, a tall, balding man in academic robes.

‘Ah, Sinclair! Good evening,’ he greeted Peter, clasping his hand.

‘Good evening, Sir. Allow me to introduce my partner, Lucie Dawson. Lucie, meet Dr Thorpe, Headmaster of St Augustines.’ All of Peter’s apprehension appeared to vanish. He sounded confident, respectful. I cast him a sidelong glance to assure myself I was with the same Peter who had been nervously swigging from a hip flask not five minutes before.

Dr Thorpe looked me over and raised an eyebrow at Peter before extending his hand. ‘Miss Dawson, a pleasure.’

I gave him a weak smile, shocked to find myself judged before I’d been given a chance to speak. I was offended, too, that this man either didn’t care if I caught his slight, or worse, thought I wasn’t canny enough to pick up on it.

We progressed down the line, which included several prominent figures and their wives: an Archbishop, the Sate Governor (an Old Boy), and, finally, the Chair of the Old Collegians’ Association, Everett Sinclair. Peter and his father greeted each other formally, but though their words were polite they were like magnets repelling.

Everett Sinclair was a good head shorter than Peter, but cut a more intimidating figure. With his stockier frame he reminded me a little of Winston Churchill. When Peter introduced us he looked at me squarely with the same frank disapproval Peter had shown me the first night we met. Despite his smaller size, Everett Sinclair’s posture was erect, his stance solid and controlled, as though confident in his superiority over everyone in the room. He was the kind of man that could make you feel the size of an insect just by looking at you. It was one of the few qualities he seemed to share with his son.

‘Lucie, is it? Peter, you should have told us you were bringing a partner. Your mother made plans for you.’

‘I’m sorry Peter didn’t mention me,’ I smiled. ‘He’s certainly told me a lot about *you*, Mr Sinclair.’

He didn’t return my smile. ‘Are you someone Peter met at Mawson?’ He pronounced ‘Mawson’ as though it were a plague-ridden gypsy campsite rather than one of the country’s leading universities for creative arts.

‘Actually we met through Meg Gilmore. She and I share an apartment.’ I’m not totally without connections, you pompous arse, I thought.

Peter’s mother had been speaking with Bastian and Meg, but now turned her attention to us. ‘Ah, that explains why your dress looks so familiar. Meg looked lovely in it at the Formal.’

‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘It’s vintage.’

Lydia Sinclair was a tall, thin woman with the same sharp features and smooth complexion as Peter. Clearly she didn’t have much to occupy herself with if she could still recall what her son’s friends wore to their school formal twelve months ago. She regarded me the way a jeweller might examine a flawed gemstone.

‘What is it that you do, Lucie?’

‘I’m a writer.’

I prepared myself for a snide comment, but instead she gave me a cold smile, as if to say: of course you are. ‘It’s such a shame Peter didn’t tell us about you.’ She turned to him. ‘I arranged for Clementine and her parents to sit at our table.’

‘That was unnecessary,’ Peter replied through gritted teeth. ‘I’m making an effort. You could at least try to do the same.’ He put a protective arm around my waist and steered me away from his parents and over to the bar where Meg and Bastian were ordering drinks.

‘Survived, did we?’ Bastian asked.

‘Barely,’ I replied, and for once I was glad for the flute of champagne he placed in my hand.

‘It’s not over yet.’ Peter nodded at the tables slowly filling with guests. ‘My parents are working on Project Clementine again.’

I followed his gaze, hoping to catch a glimpse of the girl his parents wanted at his side.

‘You didn’t tell them about Lucie? That was childish, Peter.’ Meg chided.

‘I’m sorry, Luce. Can you see why I wanted to keep you away from all this?’ Peter asked, pleading.

I raised an eyebrow. ‘So you could flirt with some girl you’ve conveniently neglected to mention until now? Actually, I think my coming was a very good idea.’

The Ellises, as it turned out, were reasonably down-to-earth: polite, charming and easy to talk to. Their daughter, Clementine, was not.

‘Omigod, Peter! It’s been *ages!*’ she exclaimed, jumping up to kiss his cheek as we reached our table. ‘How *are* you? Sit here, next to me, and tell me everything that’s been happening! I still can’t believe you’re all the way out at Mawson. You should transfer to Baudin so we can do lunch. Oh and Meg, Bastian, hi! Isn’t this great? It’s the whole gang back together again.’

‘Gang?’ I mouthed to Meg. She rolled her eyes. Later, she explained that, despite Peter’s clear lack of interest, Clementine knew what Peter was worth and was determined to Make an Effort.

‘And who’s this?’ Clementine flashed me a Colgate smile.

‘This is Lucie,’ Peter replied, and pacing an arm around my shoulders: ‘My girlfriend.’

Her eyes narrowed and she performed what I termed the Augustine Autopsy: a look that dissects its subject from top to bottom in one fatal slice before extracting the

subject's soul and weighing it against a set of impossible expectations for the mere purpose of finding it wanting. I thought about scratching my nails across her perfectly made-up face, but reminded myself that this was a battle I'd already won.

Bewildered to have lost Peter to a girl who couldn't even afford a new dress, she turned back to him. 'We *missed* you at the Easter races. I couldn't believe the three of you didn't make it; *everyone* was there. I went with some of the other law girls—Hilary Eagan, Missy Astor, Chelsea Dempster, Bea and Eddie Clampet—you know, that lot. It was so much *fun*, Peter. We drank an *entire case* of Moët. Then it rained and the heels of our shoes kept sinking into the ground so we had to go barefoot in the mud, but Johanna Harvey said that apparently it's really good for your skin...'

It was just *too* awful. I couldn't believe Peter's parents would prefer this girl to me. I tuned out. The tables around us were almost full now, the swell of conversation drowning the orchestra. I'd expected more from these people. I thought they would talk about politics, literature and galleries they had visited in Europe, but all I heard were names—endless lists of them, many repeated over and over, and none of them familiar. People didn't say: 'We went out to dinner last week.' They said: 'David Marbrook and I went out to dinner with Elise Cudmore and James Vickory-Gilbert at that new restaurant Pips last week—'

Then someone else would interrupt: 'Elise Cudmore, as in Mandy Burgess' cousin who went to Woolford?'

'No, I think you're confusing her with Elsie Clandor. *Elise Cudmore* is an ex-Wilsley girl.'

'Oh. I heard she was going out with Lachy Shaw.'

'She was, but apparently he's dating Chloe Bell now and Chloe and Elise can't stand each other, but they're both invited to Will Longhue's twenty-first next

month and they both have to go because Chloe is Will's cousin and Elise's father and Will's father are both equity partners at Egan Dempster, so you can imagine how it would look if one of them didn't turn up...'

To me it was a foreign language, a language Meg, Bastian and Peter spoke fluently, if reluctantly. On and on they chatted, all through dinner, while I sat dumb at Peter's side like the little mermaid under the seawitch's spell.

After several lengthy speeches—including one given by Peter's father to welcome the recent graduates to the Old Collegians' community—when the dessert dishes had been cleared away, couples began to make their way to the dance floor. Meg and Bastian were among the first up; Bastian claimed that he needed to take care of business.

'Should we join them?' Peter asked, turning to me.

The orchestra was playing a fast swing number and everyone on the floor seemed to know the steps. It didn't look like the sort of thing I could improvise. 'I don't know how,' I confessed.

'Dance with *me*, Peter,' Clementine demanded, with a superior smirk in my direction. 'Lucie can watch and see how it's done.'

Peter's narrowed his eyes. 'Thank you, but I'd prefer to stay with Lucie.'

His father glared at him across the table. 'Peter, don't be rude.'

'To whom? Lucie is the one I'm here with.'

'You'll dance with Clementine.' There was a threat in Everett Sinclair's voice and a prickly silence fell over the table.

Father and son stared each other down. Peter looked as though he'd strike his father before he did as he were told, but after a moment he regained control of himself and turned to me with an apologetic look. 'Do you mind, Luce?'

I would rather have blinded myself than watch him dance with an uppity gold digger like Clementine, but with his father glaring at me I managed a smile and muttered, ‘Of course not.’

Peter offered Clementine his hand and led her onto the dance floor. I watched as he made her a little bow, then took one of her hands in his and placed his other arm around her waist, the way they do in old films. As he led her around the floor I could tell this wasn’t the first time they’d danced together. Each step flowed so seamlessly into the next that they appeared to be floating an inch above the floor. I imagined myself in Clementine’s place, able to dance as she did and the whole room watching on with approving eyes.

Lydia Sinclair moved into the now vacant seat beside me and sighed. ‘They look wonderful together, don’t they?’

It was true. In his suit with his hair slicked, Peter did seem a perfect match for Clementine in her couture dress and Tiffany jewellery. ‘From the Fifth Avenue store,’ she’d informed me, adding, ‘That’s in New York.’

I ignored Mrs Sinclair’s question. ‘Peter didn’t tell me he could dance.’

She smiled. ‘I’m sure there’s a lot you don’t know about Peter.’

I screwed up my courage. ‘I’m doing my best to change that. I know we haven’t been together very long, but I’m serious about him, Mrs Sinclair.’

‘You’re too young to talk like that.’ She touched me lightly on the hand. ‘Lucie, we don’t mind Peter having a bit of fun while he’s studying, but you should understand that he has responsibilities.’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

Mrs Sinclair let her pretence of a smile fall. ‘You’re very pretty, Lucie—smart, too, it seems—I can see why Peter likes you—but this won’t work.’

‘You think I’m unsuitable.’

Mrs Sinclair pursed her lips and said nothing and eventually turned back to talk to Clementine's parents.

My eyes grew hot with tears, and when I could no longer hold them back, I rose to find the bathroom, but a strong hand on my shoulder stayed me.

'What happened?' Peter's expression was full of concern.

I shook my head. 'Nothing.'

'Mum, what did you say to Lucie?'

Mrs Sinclair turned back to us, full of innocent surprise.

'She's crying. What did you say?' Peter repeated slowly, his voice hard and even.

'I don't know what you mean.'

Peter ignored her and turned to me. 'Tell me, Luce.' I sensed his anger taking on a physical presence inside him: a dark, untameable creature spoiling for a fight.

To prevent the argument from escalating I should have apologised and excused myself, but no one had ever stood up for me like Peter just had. He was my very own vengeful hero who made me feel protected and special and I didn't want that feeling to go away. 'She doesn't think I'm good enough for you.'

Mrs Sinclair's mouth fell open in protest, but Peter stopped her. 'Apologise.'

'I beg your pardon?' She looked nervously at her husband, who wisely sought to distract the Ellises with a question about renovations to their beach house.

'You've insulted my guest. Apologise,' Peter repeated, each word bearing the heft of an unspoken threat.

'Tonight is important for your father,' she warned. 'You've already pushed him too far, embarrassing him by not telling us you were bringing someone. He won't tolerate any more of your insolence, do you understand?'

‘You think this is some kind of stunt I pulled to make you look bad? Are you honestly that self-centred? My feelings for Lucie have nothing to do with you!’

‘You will not speak to your mother like that, Peter, especially not here,’ Mr Sinclair hissed across the table.

Peter raised his voice. ‘God forbid someone might overhear. You think there’s anybody left in this room who doesn’t know how much of a fuck-up I am?’

Glancing around at the surrounding tables I saw people were, in fact, beginning to stare and twitter behind their hands. I threw a desperate look to Meg, who pulled Bastian away from a group of customers at the bar and came hurrying back to the table.

‘Peter, that’s enough.’ Mr Sinclair stood up.

Bastian touched Peter’s shoulder. ‘Why don’t we get a drink and take it outside?’

Peter shrugged him off. ‘No. I’m sick of being tactful and polite and pretending we’re a happy family.’ He addressed the room. ‘My father’s idea of a conversation is beating the shit out of me whenever I do something he doesn’t like. He’s a fucking monster!’

‘Peter, what are you doing?’ Clementine looked horrified, as though he’d just pulled a knife.

I was afraid to look, but I was sure that every person in the room must be staring, their appetites whetted with the smell of a scandal brewing.

Mr Sinclair strode around the table towards us. ‘Peter, it’s time for you and your friends to leave.’ His voice was stiff with controlled rage. He leaned in so only those nearest could hear. ‘We will deal with this at home when you’ve sobered up.’ He flashed a broad, apologetic smile to the rest of the room and gave Peter a there’s-a-good-boy pat on the arm.

Peter looked at his father's hand on his sleeve. I could see the violence waking in him. Meg saw it too and pulled me out of my chair, away from the table.

'I'm not even finished and already you're trying to gloss things over? I came here tonight so the two of you wouldn't have to explain to your friends that we haven't spoken in months, or spin some crap about my wayward adolescent rebellion to cover for the fact that you couldn't give a shit about me so long as I don't do anything to make you look bad. And how do you repay me? You tell Lucie she isn't good enough to date a Sinclair—as though it's a privilege.'

Mr Sinclair beamed another reassuring smile and spoke out of the corner of his mouth. 'Your mother was looking out for your best interests—'

Peter's face changed as something inside him snapped. There was a violent arc of movement as his fist connected with his father's nose. I watched the blood drip in seeming slow motion onto Everett Sinclair's shirtfront. Throughout the hall there were cries of alarm and a scraping of chairs as people at the outer tables stood up for a better look. The orchestra stopped playing. Someone—Bastian, I think—dragged Peter away as people from nearby tables moved to restrain him. Hips and elbows jostled me backwards, leaving me standing on the outer. I felt the first hot tears on my cheeks and hugged my arms around myself, wishing that I could disappear, or better yet, that I hadn't bullied Peter into bringing me to the ball in the first place. I glanced around hopelessly for Meg, my breath coming in short, shallow gasps that I recognised as the beginning of a panic attack. I couldn't see her anywhere, but familiarity sharpened another face into focus. On the far side of the hall, Richard Berthum stood talking in earnest with the headmaster. At the moment I recognised him, almost as if my glance had been a gentle tap on his shoulder, he looked up and saw me, raising an eyebrow as if to convey I'd somehow disappointed him in a way he found wholly predictable.

Next thing I knew, Meg had her hand on my wrist and was pulling me out of a chair I didn't remember having sat down in and hurrying me out into the grounds. The cold air bit into my bare arms, but without the crush of people it became easier to breathe.

She called Bastian. 'Where are you?... We'll meet you there.' I was surprised and impressed by how calm she sounded.

I couldn't stop shaking with shock, but hurriedly rubbed away my tears, not wanting Peter to see me crying, especially when Meg had remained so cool. Meg led the way around the back of the hall and along a path into a little stone courtyard surrounded by classrooms. Bastian slouched on one of the benches, watching Peter wash the blood from his hand under a water fountain.

'Peter, what happened in there?' Meg asked.

'I don't know,' he said quietly. 'I just lost control.'

'Personally, I think he had it coming, but tonight? Christ, Peter.' Bastian ran a hand through his hair. 'Did you get a look at the damage, Meg?'

'I'm fairly certain his nose was broken, though I suspect his pride suffered the worst of it. Peter, you should stay with us until your parents leave for Europe. When is that?'

'Monday, thank God. I appreciate the offer, but it'll be easier if I go home and face them,' he replied, wearily.

'Do you want me to come with you?' Bastian asked.

Peter shook his head. 'I fucked up, Bastian. This is my mess and I'll deal with it.'

I thought about what Peter's father might do to him and hated myself for having provoked the whole drama. I shouldn't have repeated what his mother said, even if she deserved it. I shouldn't have been at the ball in the first place.

Peter had avoided looking at me since Meg and I entered the courtyard, but now as he made to leave, I stopped him. ‘You shouldn’t have done that for me.’

He looked defiant. ‘My parents can punish me for not being the son they wanted, but they’ve got no right to humiliate you like that.’

I wanted to tell him that I didn’t deserve him and that I didn’t want to be responsible for pulling him further from his family or for our relationship to impose another complication on his already too-complicated world. But the fact that he was willing to stand up for me and take whatever punishment his father had in store without complaint was the most selfless thing anyone had ever done for me and I couldn’t bear to give him up. So instead I took hold of his lapels and kissed his cheek. ‘You’re my hero.’

I didn't hear from Peter for three days. On the third night, worried sick, I took his car—left at the apartment before the ball—and drove to Manderley. The house loomed larger than I remembered, its emptiness seeming more pronounced. When I switched off the car headlights, the night rushed in cold and close and I used my phone to light the way across the grounds. My footsteps crunched over the gravel and echoed through the trees, returning to my ears as sinister whispers that made me stop and whirl around. I made my way to the coach house, but there was no sign of Peter. Pressing my face against one of the windowpanes, I saw the room was in disarray, the floor littered with what looked like shards of black glass. I tried the door and the knob turned under my hand. Switching on the light, I saw Peter's records had been pulled from the shelves; it was their remains, not glass, on the floor. A metal rubbish bin sat in the middle of the room. Stepping closer, I saw that the inside had been charred black and the bottom was full of ash and bits of partly incinerated paper. In places, the stave lines and notes were still visible.

I found Peter's mobile on the desk, the battery flat. I stared at the black screen and the creeping dread I'd felt since I left the car became suddenly overwhelming. Peter wouldn't have left without his phone, not unless something had happened. I turned and ran for the house. I found an unlocked back door that opened into a large kitchen, and called Peter's name. There was no reply, just the rising tempo of my pulse in my ears. Then, from somewhere deep in the house, I heard music.

I called Peter's name again and listened. The notes came in halting, garbled bursts, crashing against each other, like lunatics laughing in chorus. I made my way

out of the kitchen and down a wide corridor towards the music, which grew steadily louder. I tried each door I passed, only to find most of them locked. In the rooms still open dust covers and darkness obscured the furnishings and made me think of bodies under sheets. Occasionally something dazzling shone out through the gloom: a chandelier left uncovered, its crystals glinting beneath a layer of dust; two forgotten whiskey tumblers on a side board, the amber dregs congealed; my face, small and frightened, reflected in a wall mirror. At last I found a door ajar. I pushed it further open and stepped into what appeared to be a ballroom, with space for a band and at least twenty dancing couples. In the far corner, beneath a single lamp, Peter was seated at a piano, his head bent low over the keys. The floor around his feet was peppered with butts and cigarette ash and on the piano lid there were several empty wine bottles and a half-empty decanter of scotch. He was still wore his suit from the ball.

‘Peter,’ I said softly.

He glanced up and I took a half-step back. What little colour was left in his face had pooled beneath his eyes and his lips were stained with wine, giving him a ghoulish, vampiric look.

‘He burned everything.’ His voice rasped like paper tearing.

‘I know. I saw.’ I recovered myself and moved a little closer.

He didn’t seem to hear me. ‘He wiped my hard drive, destroyed my backups, my Mp3s. He smashed my records. Everything’s gone.’

The piano no longer partially blocked my view and I stopped.

‘Peter,’ I said, fighting to keep the horror out of my voice. ‘What happened to your hands?’

Like someone in a daze he looked from me to his fingers resting on the keys. They had been clumsily bandaged, and I guessed he’d dressed them himself. Swollen

patches of skin, mottled purple and yellow, and knuckles crusted with blood showed between the strips of gauze.

‘He doesn’t want me to play anymore.’

I remembered his fingers moving gracefully over the keys, coaxing out the melancholy chords, and had to will myself not to cry. ‘I’m so sorry.’ I knelt beside the piano stool so we were almost at the same height and put my arms around him.

‘They’re not broken,’ he said, gazing at his mutilated fingers. ‘I can still move them a bit. I’ll miss my performance exams this semester, but they’ll heal. It’s my work, and my records, Lucie. I’ve lost *everything*.’

My thoughts moved from his hands to the scars on his wrists. ‘You shouldn’t be alone here like this. Meg, Bastian and I have been trying to call you.’

‘I didn’t want to see anyone.’

‘We’re your friends—I’m your *girlfriend*, Peter. You can’t just shut us out. We didn’t know what happened. We were worried sick. Have you slept? Eaten?’

He gave a non-committal shrug and looked away.

‘I’m taking you back to the apartment. You can’t look after yourself here with your hands like that, and you need to see a doctor.’

He nodded vaguely. I glanced again at the empty bottles.

‘Peter, you can’t drink like this if you’re on anti-depressants,’ I said, gently.

‘I stopped taking them,’ he replied. ‘Medication makes me feel like my head has been stuffed with cotton wool. I can’t work when I’m on it.’

I glanced around at the mess, considering that this was something that would likely happen again: Peter slipping away somewhere unreachable, unknowable. ‘You have to start taking it again, or I can’t see you.’

I managed to get him out to the car, then went back to the coach house to pack some clothes and the meds he said I'd find in his top desk drawer. He didn't say anything on the drive back into the city, just stared absently out the window watching the lights of the city grow larger.

'Jesus,' Meg said, looking up from her laptop and startling at Peter's dishevelled state as we came in.

'He needs food, Meg,' I said, ushering Peter into the kitchen. 'And I think we should call his doctor,' I added in a low voice.

'We can't,' she hissed, 'Not unless you want to see him committed. God, I'm surprised his father didn't think of it.'

She made eggs and toast for Peter, and tea for all of us while I got out the first aid kit to re-dress his hands. Meg cut up his food so he could manage, but Peter didn't get halfway through before he pushed the plate away and asked for a cigarette.

'He's smoked enough,' I said, stopping Meg as she reached for her pack. Then I turned to Peter. 'If you're finished eating, you need to get some sleep. You can have my bed.'

I left him to change while I got him a glass of water and sleeping tablets, and hurriedly explained to Meg as much of the story as I knew. He was sitting up in bed when I returned. He reached for my arm as I set the glass on the bedside table. 'Will you stay?'

I wasn't sure if he meant that night or always. 'I'm not going anywhere, Peter.'

'When this is over, promise you'll forget you saw me like this,' he said as I switched off the main light and joined him in bed.

I nodded and ran a hand through his hair, still sticky with the gel he'd put in for the ball. 'Peter, does your father often do things like this?'

‘It’s not usually this bad.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘You saw what he did at the start of semester and I told you we don’t get on.’

‘That doesn’t really cover it though, does it?’

He rolled onto his back so he was no longer facing me. ‘Luce, I appreciate what you’re doing for me; God knows, you probably saved my life coming to get me, but I really don’t want to talk about it.’

‘If we’re going to make this work, you can’t just mete out bits of your past on a need-to-know basis.’

He sighed. ‘I wanted to keep you away from all that, Luce. I don’t want to be that person—that victim. I love that you see me as something different. You’re all freshness and light to me. When I’m with you I feel like I’ve been given a chance to become someone better than this and I don’t want to ruin it.’

I laughed. ‘You make me sound so naïve.’

‘I know it’s not really like that, but can’t we just pretend for a while?’

He turned to look at me. His eyes were pleading, his skin warm against mine, and it was almost too much that Peter, strange and unreachable as he had once seemed, should be lying here so near to me, wanting me to be that sunny, simple girl from some quaint seaside town. I put my arm around him, pressing my cheek against his chest to hear his heartbeat and whispered: ‘Yes, let’s pretend.’

End of first semester was fast approaching and the weather grew steadily colder. At Mawson the wind howled through the courtyards, and the constant drizzle made everything appear blurred and distant. The Saints and I found ourselves flooded in the end-of-semester downpour of essays and exams. Between classes we trawled the library stacks and stared at our laptop screens until it hurt to blink. I'd taken Peter to the doctor to have his hands examined. As he'd predicted, his fingers weren't broken but they were too badly bruised for him to sit his exams and he couldn't drive. He stayed with us at the apartment, forced to depend on Meg, Bastian and me for a hundred little things. We didn't mind, but he became frustrated and self-conscious about his injuries. He was reluctant to go out and sank into an irritable melancholy. Bastian also moved in to the apartment and the four of us spent our evenings curled up on the couches with our books and tea. Even then the outside world seemed too close; the blare of taxi horns and drunken caterwauling broke our studious hush and upset our half-made thoughts.

Peter suggested we relocate to Manderley, where there was quiet and plenty of room to spread out our books. We set up SWAT camp in the formal dining room and worked into the early hours with half-drunk mugs of coffee cooling at our elbows and our faces growing wan behind our laptops.

The Saints detested television. They didn't read newspapers or magazines and they had no Facebook or Twitter accounts. Our classes at Mawson and occasional trips to the local supermarket soon became our only points of contact with the outside

world. Life beyond the gates of Manderley began to slip into the abstract, while the world we built within its walls took on new and heightened meaning.

Up to this point, my relationship with Peter had sputtered in a series of false starts, but now, in the privacy of our retreat, we began to lay our patterns of affection, each learning how the other liked to be kissed and touched, or not touched, as was more often the case with Peter. In the mornings he wrapped his arms around me and pressed a soft kiss to my neck as I poured our coffee, and when the afternoons began to yawn, I traced teasing swirls up his leg beneath the table, letting my fingers climb higher and higher until he grew uncomfortable and pushed them away. At night, when no amount of caffeine could prevent our eyes drooping, I gave Peter a sultry look, bid Meg and Bastian goodnight, and led him out to the coach house. Before exhaustion overwhelmed us I ran my fingers through his hair and tried to endear myself to him with lingering kisses. In time I worked up the nerve to creep my hands beneath his shirt, hoping he would respond in kind. When he didn't, I took his hand in mine and guided his fingers into the warm, wet spot between my legs. He winced and drew them back.

'I'm sorry, I can't, Luce. Not yet.'

'They still hurt too much?' I asked, kissing the tips of his fingers.

He nodded. I tried to slide my hand beneath the waist of his pyjama pants, but again he told me no. He said it wouldn't be fair; he'd rather wait.

'God, are you human?' I muttered, rolling onto my back.

He laughed. 'Unfortunately. But we'll get there, Luce. I just need time, okay?'

'I hate that he did this to you.'

Peter looked suddenly wary. 'Who?'

'Your father,' I replied, confused. 'How could he let himself lash out like that? You're his *son*.'

Peter looked almost relieved. 'I'm a disappointment, Luce. He wants me under his control and I'm not. He doesn't know how else to deal with me.'

I shook my head. 'But to take your music away? Doesn't he know how talented you are?'

Peter resettled himself, folding his arms behind his head and staring grimly up at the ceiling, back into the past. 'He saw my time at Saints as a networking opportunity. How would *music* help that? The other kids were always picking on me, even before the incident with Berthum. The fact that I spent all my spare time hunched over a piano instead of playing football or video games certainly didn't earn me any extra popularity points. My father thought I did it on purpose, that it was some kind of rebellion on my part, as though I'd chosen to focus on music purely to ostracise myself. He wants me to be like him, and by choosing music I proved that I'm not. I used to wish I were. I idolised him when I was a kid; I would have done anything to make him proud of me. I grew up on stories about his time at Saints. He made it sound like he was a God there: captain of boats, legend on the rugby pitch. My mother was his school sweetheart, if you'll believe it. When they're home they still have dinner parties and barbeques with their Saints friends. It's like they never bloody graduated.'

'I never had a hope of being like that. I didn't even have a proper growth spurt until year eleven. Before that I was this awkward, skinny kid, barely as tall as you are now, and utterly useless at sport.'

I understood what he meant. One of the photos in the apartment showed him and Bastian on the river in a two-man scull. Bastian looked much as he did now, only a little chubbier in his face, but Peter was almost unrecognisable. When I'd first seen the photo I'd asked Meg if Bastian had a younger brother. He was a good head shorter than Bastian and his now-strong features were still small and sharp. His hair was

longer, too, falling nearly to his shoulders in loose blond waves that made him look almost girlish. He had been nearly sixteen when the picture was taken, but seemed no older than twelve.

‘You’re still his kid, Peter.’

‘No, I’m a bad investment.’

We lay in silence for a long time, and I thought Peter had fallen asleep, until he asked, ‘Why don’t you ever talk about home, Luce?’

I thought about the sound of my mother crying behind her bedroom door; the vacant, methodical way she moved through the chores that made up her day; how she managed to turn my father’s absence into an oppressive phantom presence; the monolithic guilt that threatened to crush me whenever I thought too hard about my decision to leave her. ‘I don’t want it to be part of my story.’

‘It can’t have been as bad as growing up here.’

‘No. It’s not a bad place, but I didn’t fit in. I was never bullied or anything, it was more like I didn’t exist, and if I hadn’t left when I did, I feel as though I would have been stuck there living this weird non-life.’ I tried to think how to explain what home was like without going into the gritty details. ‘My parents have this intense, destructive relationship. They’re completely wrong for each other, but they’re caught in this strange orbit that neither can break free of. Sometimes I think they only love me because I remind them of each other. School wasn’t much better. I didn’t get on with most of the girls and the boys were only interested if they thought there was a chance I’d sleep with them. No one’s ever really noticed *me*.’

Peter took my face between my hands. ‘I noticed you. Sometimes being with you scares me, Luce. I never wanted a girlfriend. I still don’t know if we’ll be able to make this work, but for the first time I feel I need to try.’

‘What do you mean it might not work?’ I asked, pushing myself up on one elbow. ‘I thought we were past that.’

‘I’m not sure I’m going to be enough for you.’

I looked at him, confused.

He sighed. ‘I know you wish I was more affectionate, but I need you to be patient with me.’

‘Is this about earlier tonight? I don’t mind waiting; I just thought you might want to. It means the world to me just to be here with you. You have no idea how much I’ve wanted this and what it means to me.’ I snuggled closer to him and drew his arms around me. ‘I’ll do what whatever it takes to make this relationship work.’

I dreaded the end of exams. For me, the semester break meant going home. I'd promised Mum I would at the start of the year, and every email she'd sent since had ended with a postscript numbering the weeks until my return. I'd also agreed to help Dad at the pub. He was always short staffed during the holidays and I was broke. As the date of my departure drew closer, I began to fantasise about the Saints staying on at Manderley indefinitely, spending our days reading on the terrace and moseying down to the croquet lawn or the pool when the mood took us. In my daydreams the Sinclairs would inexplicably fail to return from Corfu and Bastian's, Meg's and my parents would mysteriously forget us.

But, of course, exams ended and I found myself on the bus to Cootbowie with the semester break stretching as a desert of Saints-less, Peter-less days before me. I watched as the densely packed buildings thinned and disappeared, replaced by highway signs and road kill. After the peninsula turnoff the sea began to peep between the low hills. Small beach towns, with their peeling welcome boards and general stores advertising bait and hot chips, broke the monotony of wheat fields and sheep paddocks.

In a mad rush of last minute packing and bright farewells, Meg and Bastian had left the city that morning for a weeklong trip to the snow with Bastian's parents. Peter had hinted that he'd have liked to join me, asking: 'What am I supposed to do in here alone?'

'There's no point in you coming,' I'd said. 'I'll be at work most of the time, and the weather is awful there in winter. You'd be stuck inside doing crossword

puzzles with Mum.’ Part of me wished he could have come. I hated the thought of spending nearly an entire month apart, but not so much as I hated the thought of him meeting Mum, seeing the sagging shacks of our little town and realising just how different my life really was from his.

After a semester with the Saints, Cootbowie was more stifling than ever. People moved slowly through the soup of hours, their routines dictated by the tides and rains, and my life was attuned to different rhythms now.

Mum looked good, and when I arrived there was a vase of fresh flowers from the garden on the hall table, but through the window I saw the tomato plants were still in from summer and the sheets on the line were spotted with mildew, and I knew Dad must have a new girlfriend. As Mum fussed over me, making tea and setting out a plate of biscuits, I realised that I’d missed her far more than I’d allowed myself to realise. She asked vague, tentative questions about my life in the city and I still didn’t know how to tell her that it was a life I had no intention of giving up. She kept pointing out that I only had three-and-a-half years left at uni before I could come home. She’d already started making plans for my life after graduation and was trying to bring Dad around to the idea of building me a granny flat in the back yard where I could live and write to save me the hassle of renting until I found someone to settle down with. I let my tea go cold and stared at the table so she wouldn’t see the tears glaze my eyes as she talked on.

Our house smelt, as it always did, of Mum’s Avon Timeless perfume, unwashed clothes and damp. It was the scent I linked with every bad memory and dark thought of my childhood, and it stirred a physical ache in my chest: part love, part resentment and part claustrophobic fear. I kept my bedroom door shut and my window open, even when it rained, and took long showers before leaving the house, trying to scrub the smell from my skin.

I spent as much time out as I could, working double shifts at the pub. Wrapped in a thick coat, I took my breaks at the beach and got a head start on next semester's reading list while the wind blew cold and briny off the water, numbing my hands and cheeks. I felt guiltier than I did when I was in the city, knowing I should be spending time with Mum, but unable to rally my nerves to the task.

Dad was vague as ever, distracted by constant texts from his new girlfriend, Louise, who ran the Cootbowie General Store. Every time I laughed at one of his jokes or exaggerated a story in a brash grab for his attention, I thought of Mum back at the house, still in her nightie and sitting on the couch, waiting for the sound of the front door opening. I used to want to hate Dad for not leaving us and going after whatever or whoever it was that he really wanted, but now I wondered if it was really that simple. Maybe he'd tried to leave, but found he couldn't give the knife that final twist. Perhaps he suspected what would happen to Mum if he did. If that was the case, he was a better than I was.

I came home one afternoon after managing a lunch shift, tired as hell and desperate for a shower, but voices in the backyard piqued my curiosity. Heading around to the veggie patch I saw my mother kneeling in newly turned earth, her weed bucket overflowing beside her and the wind tugging at loose wisps of her hair. Behind her, silhouetted against the sun, my father had stripped to his shirtsleeves and pushed the old mower through the tall grass. I started to call out, but stopped and retreated into the shadow of the house where I could watch without being seen. Dad bent down and said something in a low voice that I didn't quite catch and the wind carried my mother's laughter across the yard—stirring up a vague memory of a happier, half-forgotten afternoon I'd been too young to get a proper hold on.

I hardly dared to breathe lest my presence somehow break the enchantment, until suddenly the sun passed behind a cloud and my father's silhouette morphed into another familiar figure. 'Peter?' They both looked up and I took a step closer. 'What are you doing here?'

'I came down with Meg and Bastian this afternoon. We decided to surprise you.' The warmth of the conversation I'd interrupted still lingered in his smile, but quickly faded as he moved closer and saw my expression. 'Luce, what's the matter?'

Everything felt confused. I couldn't shake the image of my parents sharing a joke, or come to terms with the idea of Peter being in my backyard, gardening with Mum. Their immediate friendliness made me uneasy. I saw the stick figure Prince Charming of Mum's fantasy life fleshed out with Peter's face; he and I returning as graduates to this windblown bay, me with a ring on my finger and him with seeds for a veggie garden of our own; the two of us growing steadily apart from each other to become my parents.

'You didn't tell me you'd met someone, love.' I closed my eyes against the betrayal in Mum's voice.

'Because I knew you'd get worked up over it and make it into something that it's not. Yet,' I added, glancing at Peter. 'We've only been seeing each other for a few months.'

My words failed to have the desired dimming effect on the starry-eyed way Mum was looking at Peter. 'You must be something pretty special to Peter for him to come all this way. He was going to stay with Meg, but I told him that was silly. We've set up the folding couch as a bed in the lounge room.'

The humiliation of separate beds in the same house was too much. I turned and walked inside.

Alone in my room, I sank on to my bed, my head spinning, seeing again the image of Peter and Mum working the garden together. I felt like my whole life, even the parts that hadn't happened yet, were rushing at me, and I buried my head in my pillow, crying for the past I'd been denied and a future I didn't want. Then Peter was sitting beside me, placing a tentative hand on my shoulder. I wished he would just gather me up and kiss me.

'I thought you'd be pleased to see me.'

I shrugged him off. 'You don't belong here.'

'I'm not so sure. I like what I've seen so far. It's so secluded—such a change from the city.'

I turned to face him, wiping away my tears with the heel of my hand. 'This is the kind of life you'd want?'

He thought it over for a minute. 'I don't think people generally get what they want. I think you take what you can live with.'

'Well, I can't live here, Peter. While you were scratching around in the dirt with Mum, Dad was with his new girlfriend. She works at the general store and sells Mum her groceries. Mum just puts up with it, pretends she doesn't know. And that's on good days when she manages to leave the house. You have no fucking idea about this place.'

'Because my home life is such a paradise,' he said, holding up his hand, still faintly marked with bruises. 'Sometimes I need to get away, too. Being by myself in that house for more than a week without the three of you... I wasn't coping, Luce. It was Meg's idea to come down here. She thought it would be good for all of us.'

Meg was in a world of trouble.

‘If you were so eager to see me, then why haven’t you kissed me yet?’ I asked, realising, too late, that he had not actually said anything about missing me, only not wanting to stay at Manderley alone.

‘You haven’t given me the chance.’ He circled his arms around me and drew me to him, pressing his lips gently against mine until I stopped caring that it hadn’t happened sooner.

When he broke away something in my expression must have told him I wasn’t going to send him home because he seemed to relax and looked around as if to get his bearings. I looked too, trying to see my room as it must have appeared to him. Other than a week’s worth of dirty clothes piled at the foot of the bed and the absence of books that now lived at the apartment, everything was exactly as it had been before I moved to the city. The narrow bed, wardrobe, desk and bookshelf were mismatched and crammed together, like pieces at a garage sale. I realised I hadn’t really looked at any of it properly in years, if ever. It had always felt temporary. After I started high school I didn’t see the point in marking it as my own with posters and trinkets as my classmates did, and the only marks of my personality had been made when I was too young to worry about what my future boyfriend might think. The bedspread was the same one I’d picked out when I was seven—pink with a faded scene of fairies flitting between flowers. There were glittery stickers peeling down the side of the wardrobe door and a framed Anne Geddes picture above the bed. It was the absolute antithesis of the sultry boudoir I would have liked to present to Peter, in fact, the childish memorabilia only made it clear how desperately unpopular I had been in high school: no teenager with any self-respect would show her friends a room like this. I glanced at Peter and saw that he was hiding a teasing smile.

‘Am I the first boy that’s been to your house?’

‘No, this is my love nest. Sparkles are sexy,’ I said, gesturing to my sticker collection.

‘Don’t be embarrassed, Luce,’ he said, pulling me into his arms. ‘It’s better than knowing I’m competing with a string of ex-boyfriends.’

I probably should have corrected him on that point. True, there had been no boyfriends—no handholding in the back row of the local cinema, no awkward introductions to parents, no whispered declarations of love. But there had been guys and sweaty fumbblings under blankets in ute trays and behind the public loos in the playground at night. I never wanted Peter to know about those meetings or that, out of loneliness and an overwhelming need to feel wanted, I had once been the kind of girl that took guys’ numbers in the pub and met them in the car park after my shift.

Fortunately, Peter had moved on to examine the neat line of Moleskines on the shelf above my desk, and the pin-up board cluttered with ‘To Read’ lists, inspirational quotes, story ideas, fragments of poems and headshots of my favourite authors. It occurred to me that the chaos of notes somewhat resembled a serial killer’s think tank in a thriller film, but Peter was too preoccupied to notice. He was peering at a single picture—the one I’d scanned and printed from a Richard Berthum book jacket.

‘Why do you have this?’

‘It’s from ages ago,’ I said, trying to keep my tone casual. ‘I loved his books when I was at school. It sounds stupid now, but I thought of him as a mentor.’

‘That was then.’ He narrowed his eyes slightly. ‘You’ve been home for over a week, and his picture is still here.’

He was right; a better sort of person would have taken it down. ‘My Barbie collection is still in that box there on top of the wardrobe, too. In case you hadn’t noticed, Peter, the things in this room are from another life. See?’ I took the picture from the board and tore it into pieces.

Peter watched them fall into the bin beside my desk. ‘I wish it really was that simple to get rid of him.’

The subject of Berthum was one we’d carefully avoided since that night we’d run into him by the lake. I’d stopped by Berthum’s pigeon hole the following morning to deliver the latest draft of my Ebony Blake story, with a sticky note stuck to the second page that read simply: ‘This ends now, or I’ll report you.’ I couldn’t, of course—not without Peter finding out—but Berthum must have believed me because since then, aside from that brief, disappointed look he’d given me at the Old Collegians’ ball, he’d made me feel like a stranger in his presence. However, he was still the elephant in our relationship, and, because of my being in his workshop, a constant, if fringe, presence in our lives that we dealt with by ignoring to the greatest extent possible. Peter remembered this now and flashed me a sudden bright smile. ‘I almost forgot, I brought you a present.’

He disappeared into the living room and returned with a book. ‘I promised to lend it to you ages ago and only remembered while you were away.’

It was a copy of *Dangerous Liaisons*, the book Berthum had suggested I read, which I’d since put out of my mind. *At least now I have something to keep me company in bed tonight*, I thought, but to Peter I said only ‘Thank you,’ and pulled him close for another kiss.

That night we met Meg and Bastian on the beach for a bonfire. I instructed the boys how to arrange the wood before grabbing Meg by the wrist and leading her into the sand dunes.

‘What the hell were you thinking bringing Peter here?’ I hissed as soon as we were out of earshot.

‘It was a surprise. God, Luce, you should be thanking me. This place sends you crazy. I thought you’d be desperate for company.’

‘You knew I didn’t want Peter in Cootbowie.’

Meg’s expression darkened. ‘What was I supposed to say? Sorry, Peter, I can’t take you. Lucie’s scared you’ll find out Cootbowie isn’t a resort town?’

‘You kept secrets for him,’ I reminded her. ‘You dangled him in front of me, never breathing a word about his past.’

‘I hid things for you, too, Lucie. How do you think Peter would feel if he knew you’d let Richard Berthum kiss you? The two of you put me in a terrible and completely unfair position.’ I knew she had a point, but she was also the person I trusted most. Now I realised with an uneasy feeling in my gut that perhaps she wasn’t entirely on my side. ‘Besides, Luce, this trip wasn’t just about you.’ She glanced quickly back to the beach where the boys were struggling to light the kindling.

‘You’ve never seen what it’s like when it’s just the three of us. Peter and Bastian are so close, and you know how it feels to be left out of things.’

For some reason I remembered how Meg had begged Bastian to stay after the dinner party the night I arrived in the city and how she’d made a show of wearing his shirt over her nightie the next morning. Even now, she was wearing one of his jumpers, as if to pair herself with him.

Back on the beach, the night was cold and clear, and the four of us huddled around the fire in our coats, passing a bottle of whisky for warmth. At Bastian’s suggestion we played Truth or Dare. I grew dizzy on drink, waded neck deep into the freezing water and burnt my mouth eating marshmallows still smoking from the fire. I would’ve eaten the sandy carcass of a cuttlefish or done anything else they dared me to rather than face a ‘truth’, but on my third turn Bastian declared that I was being a bore and

made a new rule that we couldn't pick either truth or dare more than twice in a row.

Then he fixed me with a wicked grin. 'Who was your first kiss, Luce?'

'What's the forfeit?' I asked.

'You have to match me drink for drink for the rest of the night,' he said with a smug little smile.

I glanced at Meg. She was watching me expectantly, and I tried to laugh as though recalling some innocent, half-remembered incident. 'It was some boy at our year seven disco. I'm not sure I even remember his name.'

'Sam Kelly,' Meg said, and I dropped my eyes.

'Well, that doesn't tell us anything, does it? Come on, Luce, we need details, otherwise you forfeit.'

I cursed Bastian inwardly, and Peter shifted uncomfortably beside me.

'There's not much to tell. He said he'd stolen some cigarettes from his dad, so we snuck out behind the gym to smoke them and while we were there he kissed me. It was gross and I pushed him off.'

Meg gave a dry laugh. 'Not until you saw me watching.'

I glared at her.

Bastian raised an eyebrow. 'The plot thickens.'

'I'd been mooning over him all term,' Meg started, before I could stop her. 'I must have driven Luce half crazy the way I jabbered on about him, and of course he was completely oblivious to my existence,' she said, making light of the story, but after all these years there remained a tinge of bitterness in her telling. 'I was so jealous the way he noticed you that night, Luce, and I was furious when you went off with him. I swore I'd never speak to either of you again.'

‘That was when I took up smoking,’ she explained to the boys. ‘I was so desperate for Sam to like me. When I die of lung cancer I’m coming back to haunt him.’

I hadn’t thought about Sam Kelly in years, now I remembered Meg’s fascination with him, passing me notes in class when he did something she found funny or endearing, making me sit with her in the Morton Bay fig tree, watching him kick a footy around with the other boys, and discussing him endlessly in a hushed, giggling tone in our hideout after school. I’d joined in, finding some boy of my own to fawn over so I could whisper and blush with her, but I hadn’t felt anything. To me, the boys in our class were still just kids we’d known our whole lives. Their freckles and smiles were as familiar to me as the boats anchored at their buoys and the swings rusting in the playground.

The night of the disco I’d been surprised to see Sam smile at me. He’d been with his friends, and quickly glanced away when he saw me looking. He was one of the popular kids and we’d never had much to do with each other. The next time he looked over at me, I smiled back, and his friends started nudging and goading him. Eventually he came over, and for the first time something Meg desperately wanted was offered to me instead. When he asked if I wanted to go outside with him, I should have said no, but went out of curiosity and the desire to have something Meg couldn’t.

The bark of the Morton Bay fig scratched against my back and his kiss was clumsy. When I didn’t resist he pushed a fumbling hand under my shirt and groped beneath my bra with his sweaty fingers. I stared up at the bright expanse of stars and wondered if there was something I should be doing and if I was supposed to be enjoying it. I let him go on until I saw Meg’s small, startled face appear around the corner of the gym, then I pushed him roughly away and wiped my mouth.

‘I’m sorry. I was a crap friend that night, Meg.’

The truth was I had continued to see Sam that summer. By choosing me over Meg—over all the other girls in our class—he’d made me feel special. We spent hours locked in his bedroom, learning each other’s bodies while the fan turned lazy circles overhead. I fell in love with being desired and by the time school went back I’d tired of Sam and was seeking pleasure elsewhere.

‘I’m only kidding, Luce. We were what? Twelve? I fell madly in love with Ben Sparlow about three seconds later, and making you listen while I droned on about making out with him for the whole summer was more than punishment enough. Besides, look how perfectly things have turned out.’ She cuddled closer to Bastian and kissed his cheek.

‘Well, now you know about us, what about the two of you?’ I asked, annoyed at Peter’s shifting away from me over a kiss that happened more than half a decade before I knew him, and at Bastian for bringing it up in the first place. ‘Who were your first kisses?’

Peter and Bastian glanced at each other, and Bastian stifled a smile. ‘Chelsea Beaumont. We were thirteen and she used to send me these cringe worthy little love poems in Geography. We’d been together two months when she went down on me and ended up vomiting all over my stomach. She’s dated girls ever since.’

‘And you? You’re being awfully quiet, Peter,’ I said, giving him a nudge.

‘This is a stupid conversation. It doesn’t matter who we were with before.’

His tone sobered me up enough to realise that perhaps there were relationships in his past that he’d rather not discuss.

‘God, Peter, you’re so bloody repressed,’ Bastian slurred. ‘We’re just having a bit of fun. A kiss isn’t such a big fucking deal.’ As if to prove his point, Bastian suddenly leaned over and pressed his lips to Peter’s.

Peter shoved him off with enough force to send him sprawling on the sand, and wiped his mouth as though afraid he'd been poisoned. 'What the fuck are you thinking, Bastian?'

Bastian struggled up and reached out as if to placate Peter, but Peter knocked him down again.

I glanced at Meg, who looked as shocked as I felt, though by Peter's sudden violence or Bastian's kissing him I couldn't say. She scrambled over to Bastian and pulled him up, roughly.

'He's dead drunk, Peter, he didn't mean anything by it. I'm taking him home now to sleep it off.'

This struck me as an odd thing to say. If Bastian had just assaulted Peter, I would not be apologising to him.

Peter nodded, but his jaw remained tense and he looked as though he'd like to hit Bastian again. I touched his arm to calm him and he flinched away.

Meg bid us goodnight and started to lead Bastian back towards the houses, but halfway up the beach he struggled against her and stumbled back towards the fire with an accusatory finger raised at Peter. 'You're a fucking coward.'

'Go home, Bastian.' Peter's words carried the threat of a weapon and this time when Meg tugged at Bastian's sleeve, he let her guide him away.

'Peter, what the hell was that?' I asked when they'd gone.

In reply Peter took my face in his hands and kissed me so hard he left me startled and gasping for breath.

We remained on the beach watching the smoke from the fire curl around the stars and disappear. I navigated Peter through the map of constellations I knew by heart, but which had been largely hidden from him in the city. Hour by hour the water crept up

as if to join us, and the sparse glitter of lights across the bay extinguished one by one. The wind picked up, ruffling our hair with its icy fingers, while out in the bay the waves raised their silver caps to the moon and I snuggled close against Peter's side.

He tucked a stray lock of hair behind my ear. 'I'm glad you're sharing Cootbowie with me, Luce. I already feel different here. This place is so, so...'

'Cold?' I offered. 'Windy? Isolated?'

'*Wild*. I could just...'. He opened his arms wide and screamed into the wind.

Then he pulled me to my feet with him and soon we were both running and yelling, with shell grit cutting into our feet and the wind clawing at our cheeks. My restlessness at being home, the pent-up stress of exams and a semester of constant self-assessment and angst rushed out of me. I tripped on a bit of driftwood and brought Peter down with me as I fell. We wrestled on the shore, laughing and rubbing sand into each other's clothes and hair. Then we lay tangled up in each other, gasping and listening to the rasp of our breath over the waves.

I shifted so that my ear rested on his chest above his heart and looked out across the water to where the bay fed into the open sea. Just for that moment everything was perfect.

'I love you, Peter.'

I felt the breath catch in his chest and raised my head to see his reaction. He was looking at me as though my words had knocked the wind out of him. That awful tumbling-down sensation I remembered from the first time I kissed him at Moose came rushing on me and I searched his face for a sign that he wasn't about to reject me again. 'God, please say something.'

He reached up and brushed his fingers slowly across my cheek, as though experimenting with the feel of the gesture, seeing if it was something he could get used to in the long term.

‘I love you, too’ he said finally, his face breaking into a smile. ‘Of course I love you.’

It felt as though a spring that had been slowly tightening inside me was suddenly released. I laughed and leant to kiss him and he hugged his arms tight around me. I wanted to stay wrapped up with him on the beach forever, but I’d worked every day since I’d been home and now the first blush of dawn was visible on the horizon. I fell asleep in Peter’s arms and woke in my own bed, still in my clothes and an hour late for work. I realised Peter must have carried me from the beach and allowed myself a moment as I ran to the pub to imagine him cradling me over the sand dunes with the sun rising at his back.

Dad gave me hell when I finally made it to the pub, but I didn’t care because Peter Sinclair loved me. He *loved* me. Before now we had loved in parts—hair, eyes, lips, chests, tummies, necks, arms, elbows and toes—gradually gathering the courage to count the ways: I love the way you...

Always read the last page of a book first.

Still get nervous before gigs.

Smile like that.

Hold me like this.

Kiss me.

Touch me.

And now that we had admitted to loving the whole of each other, we were like two little kids discovering their first swear word. In the beginning we whispered it cautiously to one another, careful that no one around us should hear, then we were all conspiratorial smiles as we dared to say it louder, wanting everyone to know. We let the phrase trip carelessly off our tongues and it became the full stop to our sentences.

Peter got on surprisingly well with both my parents and offered to work with me at the pub, helping Dad run the front bar during the lunch shift and playing cover songs for the night crowd. At first I was embarrassed. I didn't want him to see me waitressing, or for him to spend his holidays working for free, when he could have been playing paid gigs at Indie. But he seemed more at home pulling beers and chatting with truckies and farm hands than he did among his fans at Indie.

What little free time we had we spent with Meg and Bastian, carefully avoiding the subject of the boys' kiss. They met us for lunch and we shared parcels of hot chips atop the monkey bars in the playground and watched the seagulls fight over the leftovers. When the tide was out we took hand lines down to the sinkholes and went night fishing off the jetty. We drove down the coast, stopping at the lighthouses and lookouts Meg and I had visited on school excursions. When it rained we withdrew to Meg's house for Scrabble and Monopoly, then told ghost stories late into the night. It was easy to invent excuses to keep us away from my house, and Peter and I only returned there, exhausted, to sleep.

After nearly two weeks of making eyes at Peter across the bar and sneaking kisses in the cold room at the pub, I decided it was time to break Mum's separate beds rule and see if he was ready to make ours a more adult relationship. On the chosen night, with my parents long since in bed, I put on my best nightie and my big coat and crept along the hall to the lounge room, feeling strangely nervous.

Peter was still up reading by the dim light of a table lamp, but put his book aside when he saw me striking what I hoped was a seductive, yet casual, pose in the doorway. Before he could say anything I put a finger to my lips and signalled for him to get a jacket and follow me.

I led him out the back door and along the beach to what the kids at school affectionately referred to as Cupid's Playground, a sheltered little cove down a grassy

slope from the actual playground. The night was so still we might have been walking through a painting, or else the world had fallen under a sleeping spell, giving us an hour alone. Neither of us spoke, afraid of breaking the enchantment. It was freezing—the kind of cold where the air feels like glass ready to shatter and everything looks a little sharper—the sky a perfect sheet of the deepest navy blue, shot through with hard points of light. I took Peter’s hand, inviting him down to the sand with me, and felt the warm pocket of heat between our palms spread through our bodies as I drew him to me.

He sprinkled butterfly kisses over my face and I felt them take flight, beating their shivering wings over my body. I rolled on top of him and started to remove my coat, kissing his neck as I struggled with the buttons.

‘Luce, you’ll freeze.’

I finished taking it off, but kept it around my shoulders like a blanket as I began undoing his. ‘I don’t care. I want you, Peter.’

I coaxed his arms out of the sleeves to use his coat to protect us against the damp sand, then pulled his t-shirt over his head and fanned my hands over the goose bumps rising on his chest while he ran his hands over my shivering ribs and kissed my neck, following my pulse from jaw to collarbone. I slid the straps of my nightie from my shoulders and he hesitated for a moment as if to ask: are you sure? I took his hand in mine and placed it firmly on my breast. He kissed me as his fingers traced the contours of this new territory, carefully mapping every part. Then he rolled me beneath him in one fluid movement and, with a nervous smile, touched his lips to my collarbone, shoulder and chest, setting off fireworks in my tummy, before moving down to kiss my nipple. The heat of his mouth after the night’s chill made me gasp; it was like swallowing an entire Whiz Fizz in one go. I rolled back on top of him and

marked a line of kisses down his chest while my fingers loosened the drawstring of his pants.

His body tensed beneath me. 'Luce.'

I ignored him and slid my hand slowly along his body and beneath the waistband of his pyjamas. 'Did you bring condoms?'

He closed his hand over mine and gently pulled it away. 'I'm not sure we're ready for this.'

I stopped. 'You said you loved me. Isn't this what you wanted?'

'I want us to take our time.' My coat had fallen on the sand and he gently placed it back around my shoulders. 'When we started going out, I asked you to be patient. Sex is a big deal for me.'

'You said you struggled with affection. I thought you were afraid I'd start knitting us matching jumpers and calling you Snookums. Don't you want me, Peter?' His bare chest was just centimetres from my hand and my fingers tingled with the need to reach out to him, but I suddenly felt I couldn't.

'Of course I do; I can barely keep my hands off you.' On the contrary, they still held the lapels of my coat, keeping me covered. 'But there's no rush, Luce.'

I rolled off him and the dampness of the sand seeped through my undies. In my early teenage years I'd fallen hardest for those romantic heroes who took great pains to set aside their carnal desires in favour of sitting, doe-eyed, at their beloved's feet to discuss, in earnest (sometimes over several lengthy volumes), the many facets of their love. However, now that I found myself with one of these oh-so-virtuous pillars of restraint, I felt the reality left a lot to be desired.

'Are you a virgin?' I asked.

He hesitated then shook his head. 'But I would have loved for my first time to have been with you.'

‘Then I don’t understand the problem. Are you gay?’ I had a vision of him and Bastian in dinner suits and eyeliner exchanging a secret look over near-empty glasses of scotch.

He flinched as though I’d slapped him. ‘Don’t be ridiculous! Why would you ask that?’

‘Because I’m practically throwing myself at you and you barely seem to notice. What am I supposed to think?’

‘Maybe I want our first time to be something special.’ The way he said it reminded me of the apprehensive young girls in teen films who try to beg off their hormonal boyfriends until graduation, their eighteenth birthday, a distant anniversary—anything to buy themselves a little time.

‘A secluded beach in the middle of the night isn’t romantic enough for you?’

He looked out at the silvery surface of the water and our two sets of footprints marking the otherwise untouched sand, but something in his expression told me he wasn’t seeing it. Instead, I sensed he’d caught the smell of rot beneath the salt and, though he tried, he struggled to look beyond the drifting knots of seaweed and broken crab shells.

‘You don’t want this.’ I’d meant it to come out as a question, but my voice wouldn’t rise to give the inflection. I waited for him to reassure me, until his silence became a physical presence: a hefty, undeniable mass between us. A sob rose in my throat and I bit my lip and drew up my shoulders, cradling myself around it to hold it in. ‘Whenever you’re in the room, I’m so aware of you. I could have my eyes closed and still know exactly where you are. The need to put my arms around you, hold your hand, kiss you—just be physically connected to you—is like a magnetic force. But I can feel you pulling away, even as you reach for me. And it guts me every time. What I don’t understand is why you even bother to pretend.’

‘Perhaps that’s the problem, Luce. I thought you did.’ He sat up and reached for his t-shirt. I’d expected him to tell me I was overreacting; of course he loved me and wanted me. He’d strayed off script.

‘Peter, I didn’t mean that. I’m just frustrated and confused. It’s not meant to be like this. I should be fighting you off, not begging you to have me.’

‘Why is it such a big deal to you that we do this tonight?’ A storm was gathering behind his eyes and I felt like a small boat at sea, helplessly stranded in its midst.

‘Because sex is normal, Peter. It’s what normal people in normal relationships do.’

‘You want to be banal and ordinary?’ he spat. ‘Then, go ahead, be my guest. The pub’s still open for another hour, I’m sure you’ll find someone.’

His words punched all the air from my lungs. ‘I meant I want a normal relationship with *you*! I want us to work, Peter.’

‘I shouldn’t have said that.’ His expression softened as he offered me a tentative smile. ‘I just need some time. Can’t what we have be enough for now?’

I shook my head. ‘No. Because if you can’t sleep with the person you’re supposedly in love with and won’t explain why, then you must be hiding something. And, to be honest, I’m not sure I’m ready to deal with whatever that is.’

‘Then perhaps we should end this.’

His words pricked my indignation and I sagged, deflated. ‘What?’

‘I can’t change, Lucie, and you clearly need things I can’t give you.’ He stared down at his hands. ‘It might be better for us both if we don’t see each other.’

‘You don’t mean that. This is just a fight; we can fix it.’ I reached for him and balled my fists around handfuls of his t-shirt.

He pulled away. ‘No, it’s bigger than tonight. I’ve been thinking about this—about us—and you’re right. It’s not fair. You deserve someone who can show you how much he loves you.’

Tears blurred my vision as he shook the sand from his jacket and rose to leave. I wrapped my own coat around myself and followed him a little way up the grass into the playground.

‘Fuck you, Peter! Don’t do this.’

He stopped, glancing back by the swings. ‘I really am sorry, Luce.’ It was too dark to read his expression, but his voice was heavy with regret and all the things he should have explained but didn’t have the words, or perhaps the courage, for. He turned from me and I watched him vanish along the road.

I’d never felt so alone. It was as though Peter had drawn all the enchantment out of the air and carried it off with him, leaving only the cold stinging my skin and the dark shapes of the play equipment still and lifeless around me.

Meg found me the following morning, curled up on my bed with Peter’s pillow clutched close to my chest, and more than a box worth of tissues littering the floor. I still wore only my coat and sandy knickers, and though my legs were freezing, it hadn’t occurred to me to change.

‘God, what happened?’ Meg pulled my sodden nightie from her bag and tossed it on my dirty clothes pile. ‘I found that half buried in sand at Cupid’s Playground this morning. I know you’re still enjoying the first flush of love or whatever, but, saucy as it might seem to you, the rest of us would rather not be confronted with the evidence of your lovemaking. Where is Prince Charming anyway? Have he and Bastian run off together?’

‘Why would you think that?’

‘I woke up to find a note from Bastian saying something had happened and he was going back to the city. He took my car and he’s not answering my calls. What is going on, Luce?’

I managed to deliver a soggy, snot-choked review of the break-up. When I’d eventually snuck back into the house, being careful not to wake my parents, Peter and his luggage were gone. Presumably, he’d driven back to the city with Bastian. The only thing left was the fast-fading smell of his hair on the pillow he’d used and I’d taken it to the bedroom with me and curled myself around it, determined to hold on to this one small part of him for as long as I could. Through the long, sleepless night I’d cried myself through sorrow and rejection and now, as I recounted everything that had happened the night before, I began to feel the first empowering sparks of anger. Peter had turned up in Cootbowie uninvited. He’d forced himself into parts of my life he had no right to, prying and poking around until I was completely vulnerable. I’d opened myself up to him as I’d never opened myself to anyone, and he had taken a good look then walked away.

Meg was surprisingly supportive. ‘God, he’s so bloody impulsive; it’s like dealing with a child.’ She put her arm around my shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze. ‘He’ll come back eventually, Luce. He needs you too much. The question is, will you have him?’ She picked up a book from my nightstand and a sly smile flickered at the corner of her mouth as she leafed through the pages. ‘In the meantime, if you’re looking for revenge, this will definitely give you some ideas.’

It was Peter’s copy of *Dangerous Liaisons*. Watching Meg place it back on the nightstand, I thought about the hungry look on Berthum’s face the night Peter and I met him by the lake and Peter’s painful grip on my waist—he’d never held me so close again. My anger focused and flared with new purpose.

‘I don’t know about revenge,’ I said quietly. ‘But it’s certainly giving me ideas.’

Semester Two

Youth is cruel, and has no remorse,
And smiles at situations which it cannot see.
- T. S. Eliot, 'Portrait of a Lady'

My plan to get over Peter was driven by spite and grossly ill conceived. Any sensible person would have foreseen its dire flaws and consequences, but I was so distraught, so desperate to feel desired, I lost all sense of rationality. On the first Friday of the new semester I wore a short dress and lipstick, drew up my courage and went to see Richard Berthum.

I'd told Meg I had a late appointment to go over a draft of my first assignment. She'd offered to wait, growing uneasy when I said I was meeting with Berthum, and only reluctantly agreed to let me catch a late bus back to the apartment. Being August, it was already growing dark as we parted ways in the plaza. Everything was still and quiet in the Creative Arts courtyard. Security lights lit the path to the door on the other side of the building and the only sound was the quickening clock-clock of my boots against the bricks. I slowed and felt the dusk press in. Deep down I knew Richard Berthum couldn't make me feel better about losing Peter, and that seeing him could only cause trouble, especially if the Saints found out. I almost convinced myself to go home, but then I heard, or thought I heard, a low creaking coming from the Hanging Tree behind me. It wasn't possible, I reasoned; there was no wind. I stood listening and the sound came again: the deep groan of a branch straining under a sudden, swinging weight. I imagined Ebony Blake stopping in this same dark courtyard on a night cold and still as this. The strange emptiness of a place usually so full must have seemed a fitting stage for her task as she looped the rope over the bough. I wondered if she'd felt the scratch of bark beneath her hands as she secured the knot, or if she was straining for a voice, any voice, to break the silence and tell her

to stop, or if, like Peter slowly blacking out with the knife falling from his wrist, she had already turned her back on the world. The branch moaned again, louder than before. *Don't turn back*, I thought. *Whatever you do, don't turn back*. So I went forwards, hurrying inside the building.

The corridor was dark. Sensors were supposed to trigger the lights as people walked under them, but they were out of sync, flickering on just as I stepped into the next patch of black. No lights showed under the doors that I passed, the lecturers having presumably got away quickly for the weekend. I kept walking, my palm sweating against the cover of the book in my hand. Somewhere in the roof the heating system switched itself off, and I found myself facing a deeper quiet. Again, I hesitated. Any other Friday I would have been with Peter, stopping on our way back to the apartment to pick up a wine to complement whatever Meg was cooking. *But Peter doesn't want you*, I reminded myself. *Richard Berthum does*. Richard Berthum with the fancy prose style, the string of best sellers and the Jeremy-Irons-in-*Brideshead* looks. I made my way up the stairs, saw the thin strip of light under his office door and tried to remember what my high school self had seen in him.

He looked up from his laptop as I knocked and entered, closing the door behind me.

'Ah, the girl with the urgent and mysterious issue that couldn't wait until Monday. You've got me intrigued, Lucie; your first assignment isn't due for weeks.'

I was suddenly afraid my voice would fail me and I looked slightly to the side of him at the collection of dusty coffee mugs on the window ledge rather than meeting his gaze directly.

'It took me longer than I thought, but I finished it.' Fumbling, I placed *Dangerous Liaisons* on his desk. The outline of my fingers slowly faded where I'd gripped it.

Berthum picked up the book, carefully examining the cover before turning to the publication page where Peter had pencilled his name. ‘This is Peter’s.’

I shook my head. ‘He doesn’t want it.’

‘Really?’ Berthum looked incredulous. ‘It’s a beautiful edition.’

‘You can have it, if you like,’ I said, taking a half step closer.

He leaned back in his chair and returned the book to the desk. ‘What is it that you’re doing—or trying to do—here?’

The humiliation of having to explain myself was almost too much, but I wasn’t ready to walk back through the empty courtyard, or sit through another dinner with Meg and Bastian paying more attention to each other than the food as though I weren’t even there, or to try and fall asleep with my arms wrapped tight around a pillow pretending it was Peter.

‘I was thinking about that time you kissed me. I wondered if you still... If maybe you wanted to...’ He raised a bemused eyebrow and my confidence failed me. In what alternate reality had I convinced myself I could sashay my way into Richard Berthum’s office and seduce him with a few poorly conceived, heavy-handed euphemisms? ‘Fuck, I don’t know what I’m doing.’

I sank into the chair reserved for visitors.

‘You and Peter broke up?’

I nodded.

‘I can’t say I’m surprised. Of course, I don’t know him now, but he had a certain charm when I taught him. It’s easy to fall too much in love with someone like that. You’re not the first person he’s hurt.’

‘I know. He told me what he did to you,’ I said.

‘Is this about revenge, Lucie?’ I couldn’t answer. ‘You’re smarter than that. If you want to come here and play dirty with me and see where it gets you, you do it for

yourself.’ He rose and came around to my side of the desk and leaned against it.

‘Your time at Mawson is a free pass. It’s the one time in your grown-up life when you’re allowed to be selfish. People expect you to stay out all night, experiment with drugs, cut your hair off, become a vegan, join a radical political party, try new religions, sleep with men *and* women and generally have fun finding yourself. Once you leave uni, you can’t get away with that stuff so easily. You don’t want to look back and find you wasted that opportunity pining over someone who didn’t want you.’

‘But I still love him.’ The words tasted salty and I found myself crying.

Berthum shook his head. ‘I don’t like you like this.’

‘I’m sorry. I know I’m being stupid.’ I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. Of course Berthum don’t want to hear about my boy problems. ‘I just didn’t know where else to go or what to do. I can’t talk to my friends.’

His expression softened. ‘You misunderstand me, Lucie. I don’t like to see you dressed up like you’re going to a nightclub, mincing in here with all that false bravado. Do you know why you stood out that afternoon at Writers’ Week?’

I shrugged, wishing I could just leave.

‘It was because you looked so completely natural. Awkward and uncertain, yes, still a girl. I remember you were wearing a pretty floral sundress and sandals. Your arms were bare and sun-browned and you weren’t wearing any make-up. You came stumbling up to me all wide-eyed like an eager schoolgirl and, my God, Lucie—’ He paused to lift his thumb to my mouth and wipe away a smudge of lipstick, then trailed his fingers lightly down my neck and leaned in until his lips just brushed my ear. ‘—I’ve never been so utterly enchanted.’

When he drew away, he wore that same predatory look he’d had the night we’d met him by the lake, only this time Peter wasn’t protecting me. Empty or not,

Berthum's words restored the confidence Peter had taken from me, and with his eyes on me I felt like a goddess—but I hesitated, thinking of Meg and Bastian. They would be horrified if they ever found out my reason for coming here. They'd never forgive me. I'd have to leave Mawson; they'd make it impossible for me to stay. But, I reasoned, Meg had known about my appointment with Berthum and hadn't stopped me, and as far as I knew, she'd never breathed a word about the kiss. Besides, no one would find out. It would be my secret.

I tilted my head to Berthum's and pressed my lips to his mouth. In response, he reached one hand up to cup my face and the other behind my back, pulling me from my chair. He wasn't strong like Peter, but whereas Peter always held back, touching me almost gingerly, Berthum grasped and grabbed, as though eager to tear away my skin and close his fingers around some deeper part of me. Holding me in place, he marked my face with rough kisses before his lips crushed hot against my neck and sent goose bumps tingling down my arms. A small voice at the back of my mind warned me to stop him, but the little shivers of pleasure running through me caught my words before they could reach my mouth, as though I were the victim of a charming vampire. His kiss drained the last of my sensible thoughts, leaving me with only base, animal impulses. Berthum pushed me to my knees and I imagined myself as Mina Harker kneeling at the mercy of Count Dracula.

With one hand he gripped both of mine and pinned my arms behind my back, while his free hand fumbled with his belt. Then, digging his fingers into the back of my neck, forced my mouth onto his cock, so that my nose was buried in the dark tangle of hair around his groin and I tasted the first dribble of salt-sick discharge at the back of my throat. I choked and gagged as he forced my head back and forth in a rough, sickening rhythm. With some effort I managed to look up and found his hungry look had intensified. His face twisted in a grimace of pleasure; his nostrils

flared, snorting gusts of air like the big bad wolf in a fairytale. I tried to wrench my head from his grip only to feel his fingers tighten at the base of my skull.

It seemed forever that he held me, my eyes watering with every thrust, so that it was almost a relief when my mouth suddenly filled with the briny mess of his cum. It trickled down my chin as he finally released his grip on my hands and neck. I crumpled to the floor feeling as though I had fallen from a great height.

I tucked myself into a ball, with my arms tight around my legs, trying to hold myself together. Berthum knelt beside me and ran his fingers lightly over my hair. I flinched.

‘What’s wrong?’ His voice was gentle, but carried a hint of warning.

I felt unclean, my blood still singing with the touch of his lips on my skin.

‘I didn’t want this.’

His expression visibly darkened. ‘You practically begged for it.’

I recoiled from his touch. ‘I thought you would be gentler. I just wanted to feel special.’

Berthum nodded, as if he understood. ‘Should I touch you, Lucie? Would you like that?’

I shook my head, disgusted. ‘I want to go home. This was a mistake.’

‘That’s okay. Remember what I said about this being a time for experimenting? That’s all this was, Lucie. You were trying me out to see how it felt being with someone more experienced. We don’t have to do this again, and no one has to know. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

I did. The best-selling author was slipping away and in his place stood a sad, uncaring man who’d missed some vital part of growing up. Things I’d previously made an effort to gloss over—the slight sag of skin beneath his eyes and jaw, the sour

smell of sweat seeping beneath his cologne and the way he regarded me as a challenge easily conquered—were suddenly repulsive.

‘I’m not going to report you, if that’s what you’re worried about. I don’t want anyone knowing about this anymore than you do. Just leave me alone.’

I scrambled up from the floor and ran from his office, down the hallway, before he could stop me. He called my name once, twice, but didn’t follow, and as I reached the top of the stairs, the light spilling from his office narrowed and disappeared with the soft click of the door handle, leaving me in darkness.

The chill of the night air was a slap across the face as I stepped out of the building into the courtyard. A deeper darkness had settled over the campus while I'd been inside. I switched my phone back on to check the time and realised I'd been in Berthum's office less than forty-five minutes. I stared at my phone in dismay. It seemed like hours since I'd said goodbye to Meg in the plaza. I had three missed calls from her, but clicked 'ignore'. Whatever it was could wait until I got back to the apartment. I dreaded facing her, certain she'd take one look at me and divine what had happened. But I didn't have anywhere else to go. Reluctantly, I took the first stumbling steps in the direction of the bus stop, but my legs gave way and my knees sank into the grass as panic churned up a terrible nausea in my gut. Before I knew what was happening, I'd vomited. I sat back on my heels, my body feeling loose like a jumble of broken parts held together by skin.

Get up, I instructed myself. *Nothing happened*. Shaking, I wiped a hand across my mouth and forced myself to stand. I moved mechanically to the drink fountain. Washed out my mouth. Spat. It didn't help; the taste of sweat and sperm lingered. I cupped water in my hands and splashed it over my face to erase any smudges of make-up. Then I spent a moment practising my smile for Meg, feeling the rot of what I'd done take root and begin to spread through the core of my being.

The shelter was empty when I reached the bus stop below the plaza. Rain began to fall as I waited, blurring the distant lights. As I stood looking out at the drizzle, for the first time being at Mawson didn't make me feel above the city, only apart from it. The

bus arrived and I chose a seat at the back. I hugged my arms tight around my chest as though I could hold myself together that way and willed my thoughts away from what had taken place in Berthum's office. It was still raining when I got off at my stop. I hoped the downpour might cleanse me, but by the time I reached the apartment, I still felt unclean, Berthum's pollution spreading deep beneath my skin.

As I opened the door I heard laughter and voices within. Meg. Bastian.

'Peter?'

Their chatter stopped. He was standing by the window, looking nervous in a new shirt, with his hair, for once, neatly combed. The sight of him made me feel faint, as though the world were lurching on its axis.

'What are you doing here?' I asked.

They all stared at me. The rain had weighted my dress so the material stuck slick against my skin, and I crossed my arms to cover my body.

'I tried to call you, Luce. Your phone was off,' Meg said. 'Did Berthum make you write the whole assignment during the meeting?'

Peter moved towards me and I took an involuntary half step back. His hand shook as he reached out and touched the place on my neck where Berthum had pressed his mouth. 'How did you get this mark?' I felt Berthum's lips against my skin and cursed myself for not checking a mirror before I reached the apartment. Water dripped from my hair while Peter waited for my answer. 'Luce, who did this?' A high note crept into his voice that I recognised not as anger or jealousy, but fear.

I forced myself to look at him. A few hours ago, I wouldn't have cared about hurting his feelings, but seeing him again after what had just happened made me realise just how much I missed him. *This is your fault!* I wanted to scream. *I loved you, Peter. I needed you, and you left.* But with the three of them watching me I was sharply aware just how much I had to lose. Peter would withdraw his hand, Meg

would throw me out, and none of them would ever speak to me again. I couldn't allow that to happen. Even before I spoke I knew I was taking a huge risk, but Meg had already told the boys I'd been with Berthum. As I saw it, I only had one option. I took the truth in hand and twisted.

'Berthum. It was Richard Berthum.' I dropped my eyes from Peter's and my words fell on the rug between us. 'At first he just kissed me, but then he... He made me touch him.'

I didn't have to say any more. Peter's arms closed around me like a shield and I buried my face in his shirt. His chest was warm beneath my cheek as I breathed in the familiar scent of his cologne and hugged him with all my strength. It felt like coming home.

'We have to call the police,' Bastian said.

'No!' I cried.

'What do you mean, "no"?' This is serious, Luce. What if he's done this before, or tries it again?' Bastian reasoned. 'This is our chance to stop him.' I looked up and saw this last sentence was directed more towards Peter than me.

Meg, I noticed, remained unmoved. 'You've gone pale, Luce. Sit down and get warm while I make us all some tea, then you can tell us *exactly* what happened and we can discuss our options from there.' There was no cry of shock, no tearful, sympathetic hug a girl in my situation might expect from her best friend. There was just her hand on my arm as she passed on her way to put the kettle on, her nails digging into my skin.

Peter sat me down on the couch and held me close against his side. Meg brought us tea and I let my mug go cold in my hands while I narrated *Earlier this Evening: The Revised Edition*, omitting the part where I offered Berthum the book and the fact that it was me, not him, who had given the initial kiss. I wanted to

swallow my words as soon as I'd pushed them out, but they were already having the desired effect, pulling Peter and Bastian's mouths down in 'O's of horror.

'Lucie, we have to tell someone. We can't let Berthum get away with this,' Bastian said gently when I finished.

'And you think going to the police and having Lucie spend months, maybe even years, being dragged through the ordeal of a trial is the best way to see that Berthum pays for what he's done?' Peter demanded. 'Don't you think she's been traumatised enough? We can't even be sure they'll convict him.'

'Well, what do you suggest?' Bastian shot back.

'I think we should teach him a lesson.' Meg and Bastian exchanged a wary look and I had a sudden vision of Peter at fifteen, walking across a playing field with a bloodied scalpel in his hand.

'Can't we just forget it?' I asked, panicked. 'It happened. Revenge won't change that.'

Meg fixed me with a look. 'If what you've told us is true, you have a responsibility to report him, Lucie.'

I shook my head. 'It'll be my word against his. I could lose my scholarship.' I knew how weak it sounded.

'If the evidence supports your story I don't see how they could let him get away with it,' Meg assured me.

I stared at her, bewildered. 'Evidence?'

'We'll take you to the hospital, Luce. Presuming Berthum, ah—' Bastian looked uncomfortable— 'satisfied himself, they'll be able to collect DNA samples to support your story. Even if he argued that it was consensual—'

'It wasn't,' I cut him off.

‘I know, but my point is, it wouldn’t matter if it was. You might be eighteen, but he’s your teacher, that puts him in *loco parentis*. He’s not allowed to have any form of sexual relationship with you. It’s an abuse of his power. At the very least, he’d lose his job.’

I shook my head. ‘It was disgusting, Bastian. The first thing I did was wash my mouth out.’

He looked disappointed. ‘That wasn’t smart. Didn’t you think, Luce?’

‘Jesus, Bastian, she’s not a fucking specimen!’ Peter cried.

‘And you’re not her goddamned knight,’ Bastian threw back. ‘I’m trying to explain to Lucie the best way to handle this situation.’

‘How would you know what’s best for her? You have no idea what she’s been through!’ Peter countered.

‘And I suppose you do?’ Bastian’s voice was almost a shout, but his anger vanished the instant the words were out.

I felt Peter’s body tense beside me, and the whole room went still. I didn’t want to think about what that terrible hush implied and so I took aim and launched a sharpened spear of pure hatred at Bastian. ‘We can’t go to the police. Berthum knows about Alice.’

From Bastian’s expression I knew I’d made a direct hit.

Meg narrowed her eyes at me. ‘Are you sure?’

It was the ugliest kind of lie, but though I was already beginning to regret it, it was perfect. I nodded. ‘He saw Bastian dealing at Old Collegians. He said if I told anyone what happened, he’d report him.’ I couldn’t look at any of them as I spoke, and fervently wished I’d come up with a different story before I reached the apartment. ‘Look, I don’t want to turn this into a big deal. It happened, and it was

horrible, but it's done. I don't want to think about it anymore tonight. I'm going to get cleaned up.'

Meg was still watching me and I saw something shift in her expression. 'I'll give you a hand.'

She followed me to the bathroom and locked the door behind us. When she turned to me her expression was cold.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' I asked.

'You've already kissed him once that I know of, Lucie,' she said darkly. 'And now this, not two weeks after Peter broke up with you? You've got to admit, it's a hell of a coincidence.'

'You think I'm lying?'

'You've made it sound black and white. I'm suggesting there's a grey area.'

'If you believe that, why didn't you tell the boys?' I asked, trying to work out where Meg stood.

'Because I'm your best friend, for God's sake. Peter broke your heart and the one person he really hates, who you've been half in love with for years, offers to make it all better. It's the perfect revenge, and I can understand how, being angry and hurt, you'd want to take it. But I won't help you if you're going to lie to me, especially after what you just did to Bastian out there. That was a filthy trick, Luce.'

I couldn't argue that, but I didn't know what else to do. I couldn't take back my story, explain that I'd seen Peter and panicked, not if there was a chance he wanted to get back together. I told myself I wasn't to blame, not really. Bastian was right; as a teacher Berthum should have known better. It was his responsibility to make sure these kinds of things didn't happen—that was part of his job. He blackmailed me into that kiss last semester. He started it. He was the monster and I was his victim.

I looked directly at Meg. 'I'm telling the truth.'

She sat down on the rim of the bath and put her head in her hands. 'Lucie, this is serious,' she said through her fingers.

'I'm aware of that.'

'I'm not sure that you are, actually. This isn't the way to go about getting Peter back if that's what you're trying to do. What do you think will happen if he finds out you've lied to him? Or worse, if we can't talk him out of confronting Berthum?' She fixed me with a pleading look. 'How do you think this is going to end?'

I had no idea. I'd walled myself inside a house of cards and all I could do was keep adding to it and hope it didn't fall. 'I can handle Peter.'

'I don't think so. Peter was a child when he attacked Berthum with that scalpel. What do you think he'll do this time? Have you even considered why he lashed out in the first place?'

'He said he doesn't remember,' I said, weakly.

'Bullshit he doesn't! Even if that were true, you're smart enough to have figured it out. Do you honestly think you're the only one Berthum ever went after? What you've told Peter tonight is the worst possible thing for him to hear!'

'Stop it, Meg!' I wanted to cover my ears and drown her out.

She grabbed me by the shoulders. 'Tell him you lied.'

I shoved her off. 'I said I could handle it. You don't know what I went through tonight.'

Meg looked sad, almost as though she pitied me, as she put her hand on the doorknob. 'Even if you didn't intend for this to happen, you knew better than to be alone with Berthum.'

‘And what about you? You knew about that kiss and you lied to Peter about it. You told *me* to lie.’

‘I also told you not to see him again. You were asking for it.’

After she left I turned on the shower and let the water run hot so that the mirror steamed up and beads of condensation dribbled down the tiles. I made myself stand under the showerhead, biting back a scream until my skin was scalded red. Even then I could feel the places on my wrists and the nape of my neck where Berthum had gripped me. I turned the water off, and, stepping out of the shower, used my palm to clear the mirror. There it was: the imperfect ‘O’ of Berthum’s lips marking my shame.

When I emerged from the bathroom I found the library empty. I could hear Meg and Bastian talking earnestly in the kitchen, but the door was closed against me and there was no sign of Peter. I went to my room, put on my baggiest flannel pyjamas and crawled under the covers. In the dark, the scene in Berthum’s office played itself out over and over and I couldn’t make it stop; the memory was locked in an infinite loop. I struggled against it, twisting beneath the sheets, and pulled the pillows over my head, trying to block it out.

Eventually, there was a soft knock and the door opened, letting a little of the light back in. Peter stood awkwardly just in the doorway with a glass of water in his hand.

‘I got you some sleeping tablets. I thought they might help.’ He held the pills out to me like a peace offering.

They tasted bitter on my tongue, but I forced myself to swallow them while Peter sat on the edge of the bed, watching me.

‘Can I do anything else?’ he asked. In the light filtering through from the library I could just make out the worry lines creasing his forehead.

I shook my head. 'I just want to sleep.'

'Is it... Is it okay that I'm here? If you'd rather I left, I understand.'

'Why are you here, Peter?'

'To apologise. I shouldn't have walked out on you the way I did. It was a shitty thing to do. I thought I needed some time to myself, but it's been awful, Luce. I still need you.' He grabbed my hand as he spoke, but then let go, as if he'd been following an impulse and suddenly remembered himself. His eyes, which had been searching my face, dropped away with his touch. 'It sounds selfish, I know, but please let me stay, as a friend if nothing else. You shouldn't have to go through this alone.'

The phantoms of Berthum's fingers still lingered on my skin and I hated him for it. I hated what he'd done to me. More than that, I hated myself. I wrapped my arms around Peter and held him close to feel his heart beat against my chest.

'Promise you won't leave me again,' I murmured.

'I'm not going anywhere.' He hugged me tighter and kissed my hair. 'I never should have left. God, I love you, Lucie, and I'll get us through this, I promise.'

He lay down with me, curving his body in a protective arc around my own. I closed my eyes and cuddled closer into his embrace, wishing that I could freeze time so there would always be just me and him cocooned in blankets and sleepy warmth.

Berthum found me in the dark. The rhythmic rasp of his breath filled my head as he pushed himself deeper and deeper into my mouth. This time I struggled, twisting against his hold, gagging and choking until I fought my way to consciousness.

Peter was seated at the foot of my bed when I woke, his eyes fixed on me. He'd removed his jacket and jumper and in the weak moonlight streaming through the window I could just make out the mottled lines of scar tissue on the insides of his wrists. His skin glowed pale in the strange light, and his eyes, half-hidden beneath the

shadow of his hair, seemed unnaturally dark. There was something chilling, almost inhuman in his expression as he watched me stir. It was the same look he'd had the night of the ball as he lifted his arm to strike his father. I instinctively drew my feet away from him.

'Peter?'

He blinked and the look was gone. I realised he hadn't been seeing me at all.

'How long have you been sitting there? Aren't you cold?' I asked, noticing the goose bumps on his arms.

He shook his head. 'Luce, I have to tell you something.' He was looking away from me now, running his thumb along the puckered ridge of one scar. 'I should have told you before, but I was too much of a coward to even admit it to myself. What Berthum did to you is my fault.'

I felt suddenly dizzy and sick. 'Peter, what are you talking about?'

He kept staring at his scars as though he'd rather they open up than have to answer me. 'What Berthum did to you tonight he also did to me, but worse.'

I shook my head, refusing to understand.

Peter was shaking badly and each word seemed to cost him huge effort. 'I told you I wasn't a virgin, but there haven't been any other girls, Luce. Just him. It went on for weeks. He kept finding ways to get me alone.'

I stared at him in disbelief. 'Why didn't you tell someone? Fuck, why didn't you tell *me*?'

'I tried. It was too shameful.' He stumbled over the word.

'Shameful?'

'He was so much stronger and I hated myself for being so helpless, for not putting a stop to it. You're the first person I've told.'

'But Bastian, Meg—'

‘They figured it out,’ he cut me off. ‘Bastian wanted to go to the police, but I wouldn’t admit it, so he couldn’t. I thought I’d done something wrong.’

‘Didn’t anyone at Saints think to question why you attacked Berthum?’

‘They were very careful not to ask questions they didn’t want to hear the answers to.’

‘But they knew?’ I asked, horrified.

‘Unofficially, yes.’

‘I don’t understand. How could they ignore something that serious?’

Peter raised an eyebrow, as if to say ‘You knew what I did to him, and you never pushed for my motive.’ But out loud he explained, ‘Saints is the most prestigious school in the state. Can you imagine how devastating it would be if it were discovered that a teacher was molesting students, or that one of the students attacked that teacher with a stolen scalpel before trying to kill himself on school grounds? They had a duty of care, Luce, and they fucked up, big time.’

‘What about your parents?’ I asked. ‘I know you don’t get on, but surely they could have done something if you’d told them.’

Peter looked at me like I didn’t quite get it. ‘They knew, Lucie.’

‘But if you never said anything, perhaps they—’

He cut me off with a dark look. ‘They knew.’

I let the weight of that sink in. I knew how easy it was to leave out certain details when I told a story and to shy away from asking the obvious question when I was afraid to hear the answer, but it hadn’t occurred to me that people at a place like Saints, or with as much power as the Sinclairs, would play these games with one of their own.

‘Peter, are you sure? I mean, you said you didn’t remember what happened.’

I wished he really had lost his memory and this was just the story he'd made up to fill the gap, a tall tale to justify his crime and make him the victim instead of the monster, just as I had done earlier that evening.

'I wasn't lying. When I woke up in the hospital I had no idea how I came to be there. Bastian told me the rumour he'd heard: that I'd stabbed a teacher and no one knew why. I was horrified. At first I wouldn't believe him. I was so mixed up from all the meds they had me on, my thoughts didn't feel like my own and I couldn't process much. Then I started having nightmares, like the one I gather you just had, from the way you were thrashing around. At that point, though, they were so fragmented, I didn't recognise them as memories. I suppose I always knew, but it wasn't until I saw Berthum again that night at the lake that I was forced to confront it.'

Bewildered, I buried my face in my hands. 'This can't be happening.'

'I know it looks bad, Luce, but we're in this together.' He gently pulled my hands from my face and tilted my chin up, forcing me to look at him. 'I promise he'll never hurt you again. I'm going to make sure of it.'

'I'm going to be sick,' I muttered.

I broke away from him and stumbled to the bathroom, clutching my sides as if to hold myself together. I shut the door, locking Peter out, and slid down against the frame. Why did he have to tell me what Berthum had done to him? If he hadn't said anything I could have kept telling myself I hadn't figured it out, that I'd guessed wrong. Now I couldn't ignore the fact that I was no better than Peter's parents and the people at Saints who'd known and done nothing. Worse, I was the person Peter trusted most, and I'd betrayed him. I'd been so angry and hurt when I went to Berthum's office, and now I didn't know if I'd gone to him because I needed to feel desired, or because I'd wanted to hurt Peter as much as he'd hurt me. Guilt squeezed

my chest until I couldn't get enough air. My breath came in short, shallow gasps and my whole body seemed to seize up, leaving me choking, sobbing.

'Luce, are you okay?' Peter tried to force the door.

'I'm fine.' I called.

Now that I was forced to face it, the horror of what I'd done was all consuming. I couldn't move. The bathroom and Peter's voice grew distant. A crippling nausea rose in my stomach and I crumpled over the toilet bowl, heaving up everything inside me. Afterwards, I lay on the floor for a long time, with my cheek against the cool tiles.

It felt like hours passed before I finally pressed my eyes with the heels of my hands to staunch the flow of tears. Awful as I might feel, I hadn't hurt Peter yet. Telling him would be the real crime. I felt a tiny bit better. My breathing slowly returned to normal. I started to see that there was no reason this had to ruin both our lives. Peter had been denying Berthum abused him for four years and Meg and Bastian had, for the most part, played along. Why should this be any different? I just had to convince the others that ignoring what happened tonight was the best thing to do. I took another moment to collect myself and opened the door.

Peter was slumped against the wall on the other side, exhausted and red-eyed from his own tears. I sat beside him and snuggled my cheek against his shoulder.

'Let's pretend tonight didn't happen. We can go back to how things were. It'll be like we never broke up.'

Peter put his arm around me and kissed my hair. 'I can't this time, Luce. But I'll make it better, I promise.'

‘We need a plan,’ Meg announced.

None of us had felt like spending the weekend in the city after what had happened and now we were sitting on the chesterfields in the library at Manderley, sipping strong coffee and debating what to do. Peter was determined to make Berthum answer for what he’d done and Meg and Bastian wouldn’t hear of letting the matter drop. I poured myself more coffee and tried to think of a way to convince them otherwise.

‘What about the Mawson Women’s Support Group?’ Bastian was still in favour of reporting Berthum, even if he thought it meant risking his drug operation.

‘Why? So they can Make an Example of Lucie? Bastian, the last thing we need is a group of fuzzy-legged women climbing up on their soapboxes. We are perfectly capable of handling this ourselves,’ Meg said firmly.

‘And how exactly do you propose we do that?’ he shot back.

‘We blackmail him.’ Meg gave a little smile and lit a cigarette with the air of one who’d just revealed the formula for alchemy. Angry as she was with me, I suspected she found the whole ordeal secretly thrilling, as though this latest turn of events were a shocking twist out of one of the suspense novels she was always pretending not to read.

‘Berthum talks about his work as though he’s just been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. If we want to get back at him, we need to target his writing. I’ll go to his office and get him to admit he’s been taking advantage of his students. My phone will be in my pocket recording the whole thing. We’ll send the recording

anonymously to his publishers and threaten to go public with it unless they terminate his contracts, and we'll make it a condition that they don't tell him why. His career will be over.'

'That's your worst idea yet.' Bastian scoffed. 'You're talking about coercing a multinational corporation! They're not going to just give into our demands.'

Meg shrugged. 'Then we'll put the tape on YouTube. Either way, Berthum still ends up in the shit.'

I didn't like this plan. Any scheme that involved Berthum telling his side of the story to the Saints seemed like a terrible idea. 'Why can't we just forget this? He's not going to confess. Even if he did, I don't want our names mentioned on the tape.'

'I've already thought of that. I won't mention you or Peter, and if Berthum happens to, we'll blank it out. I'll tell him I heard he's offering High Distinctions in return for sexual favours and make him an offer.'

'The hell you will!' Bastian cried.

'Relax, darling. I won't actually let him touch me.' She gave a little shudder. 'I just need him to agree to it, and then I'll leave. If things turn nasty, you'll be waiting outside the door to rescue me.'

'That's it?' Peter asked.

Meg narrowed her eyes at him, clearly miffed we were questioning the closest thing we had to a workable plan. 'If we pull this off, we'll ruin his writing career, Peter. Do you remember how distraught you were when your father injured your hands? What we're doing is the equivalent of cutting them off. He'll never publish another book.'

I think we all knew, even then, that wouldn't be the case. Meg's plan was a token blackmail. Even if we succeeded, there was little chance Berthum's publishers, the media or anyone else would pay serious attention to an anonymous tape

suggesting that Berthum may be willing to accept sexual favours from his students. I suspect Meg and Bastian felt we had to do something, but like me, they didn't want this to fully interrupt our lives. Peter was the only one who felt differently.

'Even if it works, we won't stop him from doing this again.'

'Well, what do you suggest?' Meg demanded. 'We're not vigilantes. Monsters like Berthum exist, and they always will. What he did to you and Lucie is terrible, but if we can't report him, there are limits to what we can do. Berthum's not exactly an A-list celebrity, but right now he's got a lot more power than we do. If we fuck this up there are going to be consequences.'

'I don't care,' Peter replied coldly. 'He needs to pay for what he did.'

'And that attitude is exactly why Bastian and I will take care of this. No offence, but given your history, how can I trust you won't do something erratic?'

Bastian shook his head. 'I won't agree to it unless Peter comes. If Berthum tries anything with you, we'll have a much better chance of fighting him off if he and I are both there.'

'Berthum's not going to attack me, and even if he did, he's hardly a heavy weight. You could take him easily, and having Peter there would be a huge liability. Sorry Peter.'

'I won't go without him, Meg,' Bastian repeated. 'I'll take responsibility for him.'

'For God's sake, I'm not a child!' Peter turned to Meg. 'I'll follow the plan. You have my word. I need to see this done.'

'What about me? I'm not going to wait here while you all go off to confront him.' There was no way I was going to give the Saints a chance to talk to Berthum without me there to keep an eye on things.

‘You’ve been through enough, Luce,’ Peter said, taking my hand. ‘If something went wrong—’

‘Nothing is going to go wrong, Peter.’ Meg stubbed out her cigarette and fixed him with a pointed look. ‘I’ll only agree to you coming on the condition that Lucie comes too. You’re more likely to control yourself if she’s watching. Besides, if Berthum won’t confess to me, perhaps Lucie can get the truth out of him.’ She gave me a smug little smile that made me want to slap her.

‘So this is it then?’ Bastian asked. ‘We’re not even going to consider taking this to the university, or some kind of support group, or even just, I don’t know, an adult?’

‘*We* are adults,’ Meg reminded him.

‘Really? You’re behaving like Veronica Mars. This isn’t a game, Meg.’

‘I’m keenly aware of that, Bastian.’

‘And you’re happy to go along with this?’ he asked, turning his attention to Peter and me.

‘No,’ Peter replied. ‘If it were up to me Berthum’s corpse, or what was left of it, would be rotting in a storm drain by now.’ There was nothing in his manner to suggest he was joking.

Bastian sighed. ‘Fine. When do we do this?’

‘Monday,’ Meg said. ‘So we can get back to the way things were.’

I would have liked more time to talk her out of it, but in the end I agreed. If we were going to do this, it had to be before Peter had a chance to track down Berthum and before Meg decided to direct the boys’ attention to the plot holes in my story. We knew, from the time Peter and I met him by the lake and my visit to his office Friday evening, that Berthum often worked late. We planned to wait until a little after eight

p.m. when we were sure everyone else would have gone home, before heading up to his office.

Despite fearing how Berthum might respond to our ploy, that weekend remains one of the best in my memory. Peter, no doubt recalling his own morbid thoughts after what Berthum had done to him, didn't leave my side. It was almost as though our break-up never happened.

On Sunday, Peter reached for me the moment he woke and I spent the morning cuddled in the warm circle of his arms. The garden was shrouded with thick fog that didn't lift until lunchtime. Beyond the windows everything was blank, as though the rest of the world had simply been cancelled while we slept. The weather was bitterly cold, too cold to venture outside, and Peter and I spent most of the day in the coach house huddled under piles of blankets watching old films.

We silently agreed not to discuss Berthum, and, as the day wore on, I found I could make a whole half-hour pass without thinking of him and what he might say when Meg confronted him. By midafternoon I'd almost convinced myself everything that had happened since our exams had been a strange dream, and that Peter and I were really just like any other new couple making the time to sneak away from our real lives to enjoy each other.

But he didn't touch me like a lover. His hands never ventured beneath my clothes, and while he kissed my hair, my cheeks and eyelids, his lips did not seek mine. Instead, he held me in a tender, yet fiercely protective grip, the way a child clings to a beloved toy, as if to say: *Mine*.

In the evening we roused ourselves and went up to the main house, where Peter and Meg improvised dinner from cans in the pantry. The four of us sat around the dining table, our food untouched before us, while we argued over the details of the

blackmail. It didn't seem real and all of us, even Bastian, now that he'd agreed to it, approached Meg's plan like a child's game of make-believe. Berthum was the evil vampire stalking the hallways of Casa de Mawson, and we were the golden heroes banded together in our quest to destroy him. We discussed our strategy in hushed, excited voices while the wind screamed around the house and darkness breathed against the windowpanes. I found that, so long as I continued to think of our plan as something abstract, I could almost relax. I even congratulated myself. My encounter with Berthum had the effect of tightening a drawstring around our little group. We were in the process of creating a secret that would bind us together for the rest of our lives.

However, on Sunday night, my nightmares returned. I slept in fitful bursts, kicking and clawing at the blankets until I woke in a panic, sweating despite the cold. On Monday, not wanting to brave Berthum's workshop, I skipped my classes and convinced Peter to stay home with me, hoping to enjoy another day alone together. But the nightmares bled into my waking hours. One minute I was warm and safe in Peter's arms, and the next, gripped by a nauseating terror as I imagined Meg questioning Berthum about the circumstances of what had happened between us, and the Saints believing his version of events. We planned to leave for Mawson at seven thirty p.m. and I watched the clock count down the hours with deepening dread.

Peter and I met Meg and Bastian in the Creative Arts courtyard at eight p.m. All afternoon clouds had been gathering, their vaporous white thickening to an angry grey. Now they blocked the sky completely, nudging against each other and giving the night a static charge that caused the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck to stand on end. When I saw the light in Berthum's window, I felt sick yet strangely disconnected from the scene.

The way we'd planned it, I would wait in the corridor with Peter and Bastian, keeping watch, while Meg propositioned Berthum. If all went well, the four of us would be back at Manderley within an hour, celebrating. However, if Berthum tried to take Meg up on her offer—and it seemed more than likely that he would—we'd have to intervene. If any of the Saints accused him outright of sexually assaulting me, he would undoubtedly deny it, and with Meg already suspecting I'd lied about the whole thing, Berthum could easily turn them against me. By the time we reached the far side of the courtyard my heart was pounding a manic rhythm. A sudden wind gusted across the grass and I felt the first spots of rain on my face; the storm was close.

I grabbed Peter's hand. 'I want to go back.'

He looked relieved and handed me his keys. 'Go wait in the car and put some music on. We won't be long.'

I gripped him more fiercely, forcing him to stop. 'No, Peter, we all need to leave. I don't know what Meg was thinking.'

'I know it's scary to see him again,' he said gently, squeezing my hand. 'But, Luce, I need to see him answer for what he did to us.'

I nodded and tried to smile, willing the building to collapse, or for a freak bolt of lightning to strike Berthum through his window before we reached him, but if there was such a thing as divine intervention, it wasn't coming to my rescue.

We caught up with Meg and Bastian in the stairwell and the four of us crept along the hall towards the thin band of light beneath Berthum's door. Peter, Bastian and I stopped a few steps shy of the door where we wouldn't be seen, while Meg went ahead and knocked. Seconds passed. I held my breath. Meg knocked again and tried the handle; it didn't move.

She cleared her throat. 'Richard?'

Silence.

I exhaled. 'Well, we tried.' I turned and started back towards the stairs.

'Wait, Luce.' Peter reached out to stop me. 'We can't just give up. His light is on. He's probably just in the toilet. Let's wait around the corner and see if he comes back.'

He looked so determined, I knew there was nothing I could say to convince him to leave.

Like me, Bastian was beginning to look dubious, but he and Meg agreed and the four of us made our way to the end of the corridor and crouched behind the wall. The minutes crawled. My legs began to cramp and my heart beat a furious tattoo.

Though it felt infinitely longer, it must have only been about five minutes before Bastian spoke. 'This is ridiculous. He probably just forgot to turn the light off before he left.'

'Maybe, but we should check the staff and photocopy rooms. If we can't find him tonight, we're only going to have to come back,' Meg argued.

'Or come up with something more reasonable. I feel like a criminal sneaking around like this,' Bastian complained.

He and I trailed Meg and Peter back down the hallway and around the other corner to the admin hub. Everything was quiet, but Meg tried the doors to the photocopy and mail rooms anyway and found them locked. I felt increasingly uneasy. The shadows further along the hall formed figures at the edges of my vision, and I kept expecting a security guard to appear and demanding to know what business four students had sneaking around the building at night. Meg pushed the handle on the staff room door and it gave way under her hand. The boys and I stepped back as she slowly opened the door. It was dark inside, but even from where I stood I could see a figure hunched over the table. Meg took a tentative step into the room and fumbled for the light switch.

‘Hello?’

The fluros flickered on and the figure appeared to move. Meg took a half step back then let out a winded yelp of a laugh.

‘Some dodderly old prof’s left his coat on the chair! God, I thought—’ she laughed again. ‘Never mind. Let’s go home.’

Even Peter had to admit we’d searched everywhere plausible, but as we made our way back across the courtyard I looked up at the light in Berthum’s window and felt a niggling sense of unease.

Fat drops of rain began to fall and as we made our way down to the lake, where it was less likely we’d be seen than if we passed by the library, and the wind lashed cold against us. We walked quickly, holding our coats over our heads to keep dry. I lagged a little behind, appalled by the idea of going through the whole thing again the following night. With my coat blinkering my vision and my thoughts wandering I didn’t notice the others had stopped until Peter grabbed my hand. I squinted through

the rain to see what had caught their attention and froze when I saw the figure in running gear approaching.

Meg lowered her hood.

‘Hello Richard.’

Berthum stopped before us, breathing heavily. ‘Meg, *Lucie*? What on earth are you doing here this late?’ He smiled, but his eyes darted warily over the four of us staggered across his path.

Meg slipped her hand in her pocket to start her phone recording. ‘We were looking for you, actually.’

His tongue darted nervously over his lips. ‘You should have emailed me and made a time during my consultation hours. It would have been much easier than running around in the dark getting soaked.’

I wanted to slap the smug look off Meg’s face. The original plan obviously wasn’t going to work and she could get us all in trouble by winging it. Bastian must have been thinking the same thing because he shot her a warning look.

Meg ignored him and took a step closer to Berthum. ‘I was hoping for one of your after-hours appointments.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’ His eyes flicked to me then back to Meg.

‘I’ve heard you’re giving High Distinctions in exchange for,’ she paused, ‘certain favours.’

She sounded so confident, she clearly expected Berthum to turn pale and start stammering his excuses.

He, however, seemed merely bemused. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Oh, come on, you can’t deny it! Bastian burst in. ‘Lucie’s still got the mark you left on her neck.’

Berthum laughed. ‘She could have got that from anyone. If you’re so sure it was me, why haven’t you reported me?’

Bastian gave him a dark look. ‘You’re a fucking paedophile and a pervert. Everyone knows what you did to Peter.’

‘What *I* did? *He* attacked *me*. The school paid me off so I wouldn’t press charges and tell the media that one of their little princelings had behaved like a feral animal.’

‘Are you *denying* what you did?’ Peter growled.

Berthum turned to him. ‘What did I do, Peter? You never accused me of anything.’

Peter dropped his arm from my waist and took a step towards Berthum. ‘Because you made me believe it was my fault for attracting you, that I wanted you and everything you did to me, you sick, perverted fuck.’

Berthum also took a step closer. ‘Come on, Peter, you were hardly an innocent by the time I found you. What did I do that was so terrible?’

I looked from Berthum to Peter, wondering what he meant by ‘hardly an innocent’. Peter’s whole body tensed. His fingers curled into fists and his legs bent to a slight crouch, like those of an animal poised to attack.

‘Don’t.’ Bastian laid a hand on his shoulder. ‘He’s not worth it.’

Berthum almost looked like he was having fun. ‘I never did anything you didn’t consent to.’

‘I was a *child*; I wasn’t old enough to give my consent,’ Peter spat.

Berthum faltered, looking lost for a second until his eyes landed on me. ‘Lucie isn’t a child. And that’s what you’re really here about.’

The creeping dread I’d felt throughout the conversation bloomed into suffocating terror and I could hardly breathe, let alone speak.

Still looking at me, Berthum continued. ‘She isn’t stupid either, or half as naïve as she looks.’ He turned back to Peter. ‘You should call off this little witch hunt before you start finding out more than you want to know about your ex-girlfriend.’

Confusion momentarily quelled Peter’s anger. ‘Ex-girlfriend?’

Berthum took another step closer, looking Peter directly in the eye and spoke with a voice as smooth and precise as a sniper’s shot. ‘Lucie came to me because I suspect you weren’t man enough to fuck her.’

‘Oh God,’ Meg swore under her breath.

I stared, horrified, at Berthum and Peter, my mind scrabbling for some way to convince the Saints Berthum was lying.

Thunder cracked overhead—a single, deafening *boom* to herald the arrival of the storm. Wind screamed through the trees and the sagging clouds dropped their load; the rain became a downpour.

Lightning illuminated Peter’s face and his expression was truly terrible; his features distorted in animalistic fury, his fists clenched tight and half raised at his sides. I needed him to act on his anger before he had a chance to think about what Berthum had said.

I stepped forward and struck Berthum across the face. ‘*Liar!*’ I had to shout to make myself heard above the storm.

My action had the desired effect. Berthum grabbed me by the hair and pulled hard enough to make me scream. ‘Who do you think you’re dealing with?’ he growled.

‘No, Peter!’ I heard Bastian cry out, but too late. Berthum lost his grip on my hair as Peter lunged at him, knocking him to the ground. I heard bone crack as Berthum’s head hit the cement. Meg shrieked. Berthum’s arms grasped wildly, flailing to get a hold on Peter, but Peter was too strong, too quick. With his knee

pinning Berthum's chest to the ground, and holding his shoulder down with one hand, Peter drew his other arm back and slammed his fist into Berthum's jaw, again and again, spraying blood and spittle across the path.

'Stop it, Peter! *Stop!*' Meg begged, her voice rising to a screech.

Bastian struggled to get hold of Peter, finally managing to grip his shoulders and pull him off, but not before Peter got in several more punches aimed at Berthum's temples.

Bastian shoved Peter hard against a tree. 'What the hell were you thinking?'

Peter was breathing hard, his body still tense and his eyes wild, ready to lunge again if Bastian slackened his hold. I followed his stare to where Berthum lay on the path. His eyes had rolled back into his head. Blood and mucus covered his face and his jaw hung slack, tilted at an unnatural angle. He didn't move.

Meg clutched my arm for support, her coldness towards me momentarily forgotten. 'Is he...?' She couldn't seem to push the final word out to complete the sentence.

I gently freed my arm from her grip and knelt beside Berthum, pressing my fingers to his wrist.

'His pulse is faint, but it's there,' I felt numb, as though I were watching a scene from a film rather than actually kneeling beside a dying man.

'We need to call an ambulance.' Bastian took his phone from his pocket and started to punch the keys. 'Wait,' I said, reaching for the phone. 'Let's think about this.'

Bastian snatched his hand away. 'He's dying, Lucie; he needs help.'

I took a deep breath and looked at each of them in turn. 'If an ambulance comes, the paramedics are going to want to know how this happened and it's pretty

obvious it wasn't an accident.' I focused on Bastian. 'They'll get the police involved. We need to consider what's at stake here.'

'We can't just leave him, Luce!' Bastian said, horrified.

'You're right, we can't,' I replied, surprised at how calm I sounded. 'Someone will find him sooner or later. If anyone's seen us or sees us leave, or worse, if Berthum ever recovers enough to explain what happened here, we're all going to be facing serious charges, regardless of what Berthum did to us.'

Bastian fixed me with a cold look. 'Not to mention that leaving him would also be *wrong*, Lucie.'

'Rape is wrong, Bastian. Molesting children is wrong. Berthum brought this on himself,' I returned.

'So what then?' he asked.

I backed down; I wasn't going to be the one to say it.

'We have to make a choice.' Peter's voice was flat. Dead. The animal I'd seen in him a few moments ago had fled, leaving him looking worn out and strangely vulnerable.

Bastian stared at him. 'You're talking about murder.'

We were all silent for a moment while it sunk in. I looked back down at Berthum. He still wasn't moving, but I could hear him breathing now: horrible, sucking gargles, barely audible above the rain.

'I can't. We can't. This isn't some abstract moral problem. We're talking about a man's life,' Bastian said. 'Lucie was right; we never should have come here.'

'But we did,' Meg pointed out. 'And now we need to make a decision. I for one, choose freedom.'

He turned to her, bewildered. 'You don't even want to discuss it?'

‘Look at him, Bastian! Even if we got him to a hospital, he’s not going to make it. I won’t go to gaol for fighting back against a monster like him, and the longer we stand here arguing the more likely someone’s going to see us.’

I knew Meg was only trying to protect herself, but I was impressed by how quickly she got over the shock of what Peter had done to re-establish control.

‘Lucie?’ Bastian asked.

‘I’m with Meg.’

‘You all agree then?’

‘Bastian, you don’t have to stay. You haven’t done anything wrong yet.’ Peter glanced over at Meg and me. ‘None of you have. You should all go. I’ll finish this.’

Bastian thought for a moment. Tiny rivulets of rain ran down his face and he eventually gave up trying to blink them away. ‘What kind of friend would I be if I left now? Meg’s right. We all agreed to come here; we’re all equally involved.’

Despite what he said, Bastian looked pale and sank onto the wet grass with his head in his hands.

‘How do we do this?’ Meg whispered.

She and I turned to Peter. If he felt anything about the task we were silently charging him with, he didn’t show it. He knelt beside Berthum. ‘All of you look away.’

None of us did. He leaned over him gently now, like a lover bending for a goodnight kiss, and pressed his hands over Berthum’s mouth and nose. Berthum’s limbs flailed weakly, but he was barely conscious and the fight quickly went out of him. Peter kept his hands firmly clamped over Berthum’s face until he was still, then stood up shakily and stepped back. I touched his arm, but he shook me off. ‘We can put him in the lake and use rocks to weight him down.’ His voice was mechanical, but his words pulled us from our shocked daze and stirred us to action.

From a pocket in Berthum's running shorts Meg extracted his keys. 'Someone will need to go back to his office and find his wallet, and we'll need to take his car home. We don't want the police looking for him on campus.' The boys and I stared at her. 'When was the last time any of you read a crime novel? If we're going to get away with this, we need to think like detectives.'

We tore up Berthum's t-shirt and used the strips to tie rocks to his arms, legs, feet and hands. Then Bastian and Peter dragged the body along the short pier that led to the middle of the lake and rolled it into the water. The whole thing couldn't have taken more than ten minutes. It hardly seemed possible that a life could be destroyed and discarded so quickly, with so little ceremony. I kept thinking: *it can't be this easy*. But there were no shouts of discovery, no torch beams freezing us in place and no sirens blaring through the night. There was just us: four dark-clad figures standing solemn at the end of the pier with the rain soaking through our clothes.

As our grim convoy drove off campus the rain became so heavy it seemed the sky was falling apart. Thunder roared and Peter, startled, almost swerved into the headlights of an oncoming truck. I saw lightning fell a tree as we passed the parklands. The next day we would learn how other trees, bullied by the wind, collapsed onto roofs and grasped at traffic lights and telephone poles as they tilted towards the road. Hail stones as big as golf balls smashed windscreens and glasshouses and entire suburbs were flooded.

Peter had offered to go back to Berthum's office for his wallet. His licence gave us his home address and Bastian eased Berthum's car into the driveway while the rest of us kept watch from the end of the street. Then we drove slowly up the freeway, through the storm, to Manderley. Peter was silent throughout the trip. He hadn't said a word since returning with Berthum's wallet. I couldn't tell what he was thinking and I didn't know what to say. Even with him beside me, I felt alone.

All our excitement was now spent, and we found ourselves exhausted, facing the long downward crawl through the dénouement. We slumped on the chesterfields in the library, barely able to look at one another. Bastian found a bottle of Scotch in the liquor cabinet and poured a glass for each of us, downing two drinks to our every one. Meg chain-smoked, shooting me and Peter foul looks as though she could barely stand to be in the same room as us, and Peter sank into a dark stupor. I doubted he even registered our presence. Since leaving Mawson I'd expected to undergo some kind of transformation. But felt nothing. I couldn't convince myself Berthum was really dead and Peter had killed him. It didn't seem possible—a reality too

devastating to comprehend. The only way I could cope was to pretend it was a morbid game of make-believe.

‘What are we going to do?’ I asked.

‘Nothing. Wait,’ Meg replied shortly. ‘If we’re lucky, the police will write him off as a missing person. People disappear all the time.’

I glared at her. ‘He’s one of Australia’s best-selling authors. People are going to notice.’

‘So we’re going to be hunted by a pack of librarians brandishing paperbacks? Maybe we could write for him.’

For a moment I actually considered it. Berthum’s disappearance would cause a scandal, his book sales would triple and manuscripts mysteriously turning up on his publisher’s desk would be worth a mint. My work appearing under his name would debut at the top of the bestseller lists. I shook my head. The idea was utterly ridiculous and I gave Meg a look that told her so.

‘I’m joking, obviously. God, you think I don’t know how serious this is? I’m just trying to lighten the mood a little,’ she said. Then in a softer tone, ‘I don’t know how else to deal with this.’

‘Well, we have to think of something,’ I said, still too shocked to offer comfort or comprehend in any real terms how the events of one evening could have a ripple effect through our whole lives. All I could focus on was the first step: to not get caught. ‘When Berthum doesn’t show up at Mawson tomorrow, people are going to start asking questions. We need to make sure no one has any reason to think we might be connected with his disappearance. At most, we have twenty-four hours to come up with a plan.’

‘Because that worked so brilliantly for us last time. What the hell has got into you?’ Bastian demanded. ‘This isn’t some How to Host a Murder party, Lucie. We just *killed* someone.’

‘I’m aware of that, Bastian,’ I replied.

‘Are you? Because you’re all acting pretty fucking calm about it.’

Meg put a hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged her off.

She sighed. ‘Lucie has a point. If we act normally, there’s less chance we’ll get caught. Bastian, I’m scared. I don’t want to go to gaol.’

Bastian rounded on her. ‘Is that all you care about? Whether or not we get found out? *A man is dead because of us!* Doesn’t that make you feel anything? Christ, what were you thinking, confronting him like that? You just couldn’t resist, could you? You couldn’t keep your smart mouth shut.’

Meg looked stunned, as though he’d slapped her and her eyes glistened with tears. ‘Don’t make this my fault, Bastian. You were the one who insisted Peter come along. If we’d done things my way, everything would have been fine.’

‘Bullshit. The plan was never going to work. And you,’ Bastian said, turning to Peter. ‘You wanted this to happen. You’ve been waiting for an opportunity to finish what you failed to do four years ago, haven’t you? And after everything we’ve done for you, how could you drag us into this? Did you give any thought to the consequences and the position you were putting the rest of us in, or are you really that fucking selfish?’

Peter stared at his hands and said nothing.

‘Answer me, Peter,’ Bastian demanded.

Peter still didn’t look up and when he spoke his words were slow and deliberate. ‘I couldn’t let him get away with it again.’

‘Well, maybe if you’d been honest with Lucie from the beginning she would have known better than to go to Berthum’s office by herself and we could have avoided this whole situation.’

‘You think I don’t know that, Bastian?’ Peter asked quietly.

‘Berthum was right, Peter; Lucie is an adult. You’re not responsible for her.’ Meg turned to me with an expression of pure venom. ‘I don’t care what you say happened, you’re not an innocent victim. You knew enough about Berthum to stay away from him.’

I returned her glare. ‘I never asked for what he did to me.’ I placed my hand over Peter’s to make him look at me. ‘This isn’t your fault. You gave Berthum what he deserved.’

Meg stood. ‘That’s it. I’m going to bed before I say something I regret. Bastian, you’ve had enough to drink, come on.’

‘I’d rather sleep alone tonight,’ he replied.

Hurt flashed across her face before anger chased it away. ‘Fine.’ She turned on her heel and left, her quick, furious steps echoing back to us as she disappeared down the hall.

‘To be honest, I’d rather not be with any of you right now.’ Bastian drained his glass and also left.

Peter watched him go. ‘I never meant to make any of you witnesses, but I’m not sorry for what I did. Perhaps you should sleep up at the house tonight, too.’

‘Why?’ I asked, panicked. Now that Berthum was gone, everything was meant to go back to normal, but already our little group was breaking apart. A man had died so I could stay with Peter; the realisation that I might lose him was unfathomable, devastating.

Peter looked at me, bewildered. ‘I just murdered somebody. You shouldn’t want me anywhere near you.’

I shook my head. ‘He destroyed our lives Peter, he didn’t deserve to live.’

‘Neither do I, by that reasoning. I’ve made myself a monster, Luce.’

I felt a sharp pain in my chest, as though my heart were being torn open. How could I have driven him to this? I wished I could take back every lie and half-truth I’d ever told. I reached out my hand to touch his cheek, searching his face for some hint that he was being facetious, but found only morbid resignation. ‘You don’t—you can’t mean that. I *need* you, Peter. Don’t you understand? I still love you.’ A burst of anger exploded inside me. ‘This is so fucking unfair! Why can’t we just be together and be happy? If it wasn’t for Richard Berthum, everything would have been perfect. Our whole lives have been ruined because of what he did. I work so hard, but it’s just one fucking thing after another. I’m not letting you leave me now, not after everything I’ve gone through to be with you.’ I remembered, only yesterday, waking in his fierce, childlike grip. ‘You’re *mine*, Peter.’

I looked up at him through all of my fury and frustration. He met my gaze and I saw that he understood. His fingers twisted through my hair and his lips crushed against mine. I pulled him down to me and we fell in a tangle to the floor, grabbing at each other’s clothes.

Afterwards we lay on the rug, too exhausted to speak. My limbs ached with the dull pain that comes before bruising and Peter’s shoulder bled where my nails had dug too deep. He pulled a throw rug from the couch to cover us and, still clutching each other, we fell into restless dreams.

The next day we woke to the gravity of our situation. We saw that we had been careless in our panic, too eager to get away from the scene of the crime, and now,

with morning's unforgiving clarity, we realised just how many things we'd left to chance. There was no way of knowing if anyone had seen us, and it was very likely someone had. A security guard patrolling the plaza might have looked down to see the four of us gathered at the edge of the pier, rolling something heavy into the lake, or one of Berthum's neighbours could have peeked out a window to see Bastian sneaking back down the driveway into Peter's car and recorded his licence plate number. Even if we hadn't been seen, there was any number of things that might lead the police to discover the body. There'd been blood on the path and the pier. We'd assumed the rain, which still hadn't let up, would wash the stains away, but we hadn't stayed long enough to see it done. If it was still there, we'd left a trail leading right to the corpse, and the knots securing the stone weights to Berthum's body were tied in a panic and might easily be loosened by the undulating water or picked apart by yabbies.

None of us had slept well. I passed the night in a fitful doze and woke, stiff and sore, to find the floor beside me cold—Peter having already roused himself. I found him pacing the ballroom like a restless spirit. At breakfast, Meg and Bastian slumped bleary-eyed over their coffee. We knew it was too early for the media to know anything, but we Googled news sites while we waited for our toast and turned on the television for the first time since I'd arrived.

Watching the news updates I began to realise the extent of our isolation. A man accused of breaking into homes and butchering family pets had been apprehended after a search lasting several weeks; large sections of the east coast had been flooded for over a month; a federal election had been called; we'd had no idea. The others didn't seem particularly concerned, and honestly, given our current situation, I wasn't either, but I continued to watch the television, fascinated; not even the ads were familiar anymore. I saw shaky footage of alleged firebugs and corporate

embezzlers with bowed heads and dark glasses leaving court, and imagined what people would think of the four of us if we appeared on their screens. I wondered how it would feel, being led silently through the gaggle of jostling reporters, and what our headline would be.

Meg suddenly switched off the television, pulling me out of my daze. 'We're going to miss our first class if we don't get moving.'

Bastian choked on his coffee. 'You've got to be kidding?'

'It will look suspicious if two of Berthum's students and their boyfriends are mysteriously absent the day he is found missing.'

I wasn't any more enthusiastic than Bastian, but Meg was right; we couldn't afford to draw attention to ourselves.

I passed the day in a state of nervous anxiety. It was like waiting for a bomb to go off. If not for the storm, Mawson would have been intolerably normal. Students swaddled in layers of jumpers, coats and scarves ran the rainy gauntlets of the courtyards, only to sit bored and half-asleep through tutorials. I failed to hear a word my lecturers said and tried not to think of Berthum's body sunk not two hundred metres from where I sat. The door opened partway through our Australian literature lecture, and my heart raced for fear of turning to find a burly policeman pointing an accusatory finger at me, but it was only a scraggly latecomer trying to slip unnoticed into his seat. I'd half expected people to recognise something different about us. Surely we must bear some mark of what we'd done? But no one paid us any more attention than usual. It was terrifying, maddening to learn that we could still pass as normal. If this was the price of our freedom, I'd almost rather be caught.

That evening, Bastian drove off in Meg's car, returning to Manderley several hours later with wild eyes and an angry puncture mark in the crook of his arm. He

brought back several bottles of his favourite Scotch and enough powders and pills to keep him in a narcotic wonderland for weeks. Meg holed up in the study with a stack of Patricia Highsmith novels and a notebook, as though hoping they might inspire her with a plan to help us avoid suspicion. Peter said he wanted to be by himself and disappeared into the coach house, leaving me alone.

The sound of rain rattling incessantly on the roof made the rest of the world feel distant and inaccessible and turned our hideout into a prison. I sat on the window seat in the library, watching the water run down the glass and thinking that there was no way beyond this. No matter what happened, we would live the rest of our lives in this storm. I wished Peter would come and wrap his arms around me. I'd made it through the day with the small hope that tonight we could lose ourselves again in the hot tangle of our bodies. But he'd acted as though we hadn't slept together at all. He hadn't kissed me, or even held my hand since. In fact, he'd barely spoken to me, and what little he had said had been short and cold. It was almost as though he was avoiding me. We should have been huddled together in earnest discussion, planning our next move. I wanted him to kiss my hair and tell me everything would be okay, and I wanted to hug him back and reassure him he wasn't a monster. My thoughts kept returning to our conversation the night before and his fatalistic expression when he said he didn't deserve to live.

That night I lay awake for hours and when I finally slept, I dreamed of blood. I gagged on the sick sweet smell of it. The sheets of our bed were wet and my pyjamas stained dark. Its sticky mess was on my hands and the side of my face where I'd lain in it. I turned to wake Peter, but his eyes were already open, staring without seeing, and there were new cuts in his upturned wrists.

I woke with a start, alone in one of the guest bedrooms. Crossing to the window I saw the lights were still on in the coach house, where Peter had made it

clear I was no longer welcome. Through the rain I could just make him out, still in his uni clothes, seated at his desk. He held what appeared to be a book and, with the mechanical rhythm of someone deep in thought, he turned it slowly in his hands.

Richard Berthum was officially declared missing on Wednesday evening, forty-eight hours after Peter had murdered him. By Thursday morning the students in my English lecture were abuzz with wild speculations about his disappearance: he'd had a nervous breakdown, eloped with one of his postgrads, or been kidnapped as part of a literary conspiracy. They were hyped up on the possibility of a scandal, like kids who'd had too much red cordial. I was, by turns, relieved and irritated that Berthum's disappearance was nothing more to them than juicy gossip.

On Friday morning a severe-looking woman in jeans and a blazer, accompanied by a uniformed police officer, was seen in the halls, visiting each lecturer's office in turn. That afternoon she interrupted our cultural theory lecture (the only lecture Meg and I shared with Peter) to address the first year students.

'I'm Detective Senior Sergeant Lang. I'm leading the investigation into Dr Berthum's disappearance. As part of that investigation, I'm interviewing all Mawson staff and students believed to have had recent or regular contact with Dr Berthum. If I call your name, please come with me.'

She read out the names of the students in our workshop class, including Meg's and mine. Benjamin Ward was the last on our roll, but the detective had one more name on her list: Peter Sinclair. My heart stopped as she announced Peter's name and I forced myself not to look at him as we gathered our books and filed out of the lecture theatre. We were instructed to wait in one of the tute rooms under the supervision of the uniformed officer until, one by one, we were called into another classroom to be interviewed.

The Saints and I had known there was a good chance some or all of us would be questioned during the investigation and we'd spent the last few evenings coming up with various stories to use, depending on how much the police knew. However, waiting for my turn, I couldn't keep the fictions straight in my head. I was desperate for a moment alone with Meg and Peter to confirm what we were going to say, but we could only exchange anxious looks behind the officer's back. My hands shook so much, I had to sit on them. To make things worse, the rest of the class kept sneaking glances at me and Peter, no doubt already concocting their own theories about why the police had an interest in my boyfriend. When my turn came, I couldn't hide my terror and greeted the detective with a look of wary apprehension.

'No need to be frightened, Lucie.' Detective Lang smiled. 'I just have a couple of questions. Have a seat.'

I did my best to smile back. She had shrewd, hawkish features and the omniscient gaze particular to police, school principals and canny parents. Philip Marlowe would have been less intimidating.

'Tell me about your relationship with Dr Berthum.'

The question hit me like a cricket ball through a glass window. 'My what?' I stammered. 'We don't have one.'

'I mean, how well do you know him?'

I took a deep, shaky breath and reminded myself to refer to Berthum in present tense. 'Not well. I love his books and he's a good tutor, but I don't know much about *him*, if that makes sense. I don't hang around with him outside of workshop or anything.'

'Have you noticed anything different about him lately? Has he seemed withdrawn or anxious?'

I was certain I'd seen those symptoms on a suicide awareness poster in the girls' loos. Perhaps the police didn't know anything after all, and in this question I saw a chance to clear my name.

'He seemed pretty much his usual self last time I saw him, but that was—' I chewed my lip, pretending to do the calculations. '—nearly two weeks ago. I was sick the day of his last class.'

Detective Lang consulted her notes. 'One of Dr Berthum's former students from St Augustines also missed his classes that day. His name is Peter Sinclair. Do you know each other?'

My mind raced. I wanted to say no. If she knew Peter had attacked Berthum at Saints (and I couldn't imagine another reason why she'd want to interview him), it wouldn't look favourable for him to be dating a girl in Berthum's class. But from the looks directed at Peter and myself while we'd waited to be interviewed, I knew our relationship was widely gossiped about; I could hardly deny it existed. 'He's my boyfriend. He stayed home to look after me.'

I caught the shock of her surprise before it vanished behind a business-like nod, as though a vital piece of the mystery had just fallen into place for her. She ignored me for a moment to make some notes. 'How long have you and Peter been dating?'

'Since about April, why? What has our relationship got to do with Dr Berthum going missing?' I couldn't help a defensive note creeping into my voice.

She raised an eyebrow. 'You tell me.'

My hands were sweating and I wiped them quickly on my skirt, feeling certain she could read my thoughts. 'I don't know. Nothing.'

'Lucie,' she said softly, 'We've already spoken to the school. We know Peter attacked Dr Berthum at St Augustines.'

A dull buzzing began in my ears, as though my head were filling up with static, and I was suddenly too hot.

‘Can you tell me why he did it?’ Her voice was still gentle, but the noise in my mind was interfering with my thoughts, like overlapping radio frequencies.

I shook my head, trying to clear it. ‘He doesn’t remember. I think it’s some kind of post traumatic stress thing.’ We had agreed to stay quiet about what Berthum did to Peter and me. Until they knew, they police couldn’t pin us with a motive.

The detective narrowed her eyes slightly, ‘He stabbed your tutor, Lucie. If I wanted to be a writer and the boy I liked had stabbed one of my favourite authors, I probably wouldn’t want to date him. Not unless I knew something about that incident that I wasn’t telling anyone.’

I closed my eyes against the accusation. Of course I’d known why he Peter attacked Berthum. Not consciously, perhaps, but I’d known and kept that dark little glimmer of truth firmly submerged beneath the surface of my thoughts. If I hadn’t been so determined to bend reality to the arc of my idealised narrative I could have helped Peter. Or, at the very least, I could have not fucked things up so badly for all of us. Every time I thought about it, I hated myself a little bit more.

‘When Peter said he didn’t remember, I didn’t push it. I don’t know what high school was like for you, Detective, but for me it was shit. When I came to Mawson I made a decision not to look back. My official history, the one I tell people about, begins the day I left my hometown. It didn’t seem fair to make Peter account for the things he’d done as a kid when I’d rubbed so much out.’

Detective Lang remained unmoved by my answer. ‘Has Peter ever become violent around you, or anyone else? Have you heard him threaten anyone?’

I crossed my arms and beneath my jumper felt the tender bruises—fading reminders of our lovemaking. ‘Look, Peter screwed up, but he’s not a bad person. He just did a bad thing a long time ago and he’s trying to put it behind him.’

‘Does he have any interaction with Dr Berthum at Mawson?’

‘He goes out of his way to avoid him. Peter doesn’t have anything to do with Dr Berthum going missing. He was at home with me the last time Dr Berthum was seen.’

‘I heard you, Lucie. I’m just trying to understand where everyone fits in all this. How does Peter feel about you taking Dr Berthum’s workshop?’

‘I guess he doesn’t like it. I think everything would fall apart if we actually tried to talk about it.’

Detective Lang looked up from her notebook wearing an expression that bordered on pity and I held myself a little tighter, suppressing a sudden urge to cry.

‘Does Dr Berthum know you’re Peter’s girlfriend?’

I shrugged, giving myself time to steady my voice again. ‘It’s possible he’s seen us together.’

Detective Lang raised an eyebrow. ‘I need you to tell me what’s really going on here, Lucie. Because you’re smart, yet it would seem you’ve ignored the obvious questions and landed yourself in a very tricky position.’

‘Are you charging me with something?’

‘You took Dr Berthum’s workshop knowing your boyfriend previously stabbed him—an incident which was never reported, by the way—and then Dr Berthum disappears. That’s some coincidence.’

I repeated my question. My nerves were shot and if she knew something I’d rather she just say and get it over with, but I was beginning to suspect she was just plucking at loose threads and hoping they’d give.

She sighed. ‘At this stage? No. I’m just trying to figure out what happened. Final question, I’m obliged to ask: are you aware of Dr Berthum’s whereabouts?’

Through the window behind her I saw the dark water of the lake churning beneath the rain and had to force myself to look away before I answered. ‘No. No idea.’

‘Depending on what we find, there’s a good chance I will need to speak with you again. I’ll need your contact details.’

I wrote out my mobile number. ‘Do you think you’ll find him?’

‘Ninety-five percent of missing persons turn up within a week of disappearing. I’m confident we’ll track him down,’ she replied with a pointed look. ‘In the meantime, I have to ask that you don’t go back to the room you waited in. It’s important that you don’t speak to Peter before I’ve had a chance to interview him. I’ll be keeping in touch, Lucie.’

As we’d arranged, I waited for the others by Meg’s car and thought through Detective Lang’s questions. She knew I was guilty, she just wasn’t sure if my crime was merely wilful ignorance or something much worse. Before the murder, I would have done anything to keep Peter. I thought I’d been lying because I loved him, but these last few days I’d started to wonder if that was true. If I really cared about him as much as I claimed to, how could I have been so utterly selfish? I saw myself kneeling before Berthum, and I heard myself telling Peter I hadn’t wanted it. Shame was a cancer riddling my body—more painful than anything I’d ever known and not killing me fast enough. It would have been a relief to confess to Detective Lang and be made to answer for what I’d done. But I couldn’t turn myself in without incriminating Peter. I might have been the real monster, but Berthum’s blood was on his hands.

I looked up to see Meg storming across the car park. She got in the driver's side without acknowledging me and stared straight ahead, her hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel. I slid into the passenger seat and wanted to put my hand on her shoulder, but thought better of it. Just when I was sure she was going to turn and give me the castigation I deserved, her anger seemed to reach its limit and expire. Her body wilted, crumpling in on itself as though her fury had been the only thing holding her up. Her shoulders shook and I realised she was crying.

'I can't do this,' she sobbed.

'You can. You have to. The police don't know Berthum is dead. They can't prove we did anything wrong until they find his body, even then, we might still get away with it.' I sounded more desperate than comforting.

She shook her head. 'That detective knows what Peter did to Berthum at Saints and she knows Peter's girlfriend and her best friend are in Berthum's class. How long do you think it'll take her to figure out what we did? She wants to interview Bastian now, too. What are we supposed to do about that?'

Bastian hadn't been back to Mawson since Tuesday. When we left Manderley that morning, he'd been strung out in one of the reading chairs in the library, a half-filled whisky glass on the floor beside him. Oily strings of hair clung to his clammy forehead and he reeked of alcohol and body odour. His eyes were open, but glassy—gazing into a private oblivion. We couldn't let him face the detective in that state.

'We'll think of something.'

'No, Lucie. You need to figure this out. Now. If you hadn't lied about what Berthum did, none of this would have happened.'

'I didn't kill him, Meg.'

'You might as well have, and now you're going to let Peter take the fall for you.'

‘If you believe that, then why didn’t you tell him and Bastian I was lying before we went after Berthum? If you’d said something rather than coming up with that ridiculous plan, we wouldn’t be murderers. Peter wouldn’t feel like he was the one that dragged us into this and Bastian wouldn’t be floating off in another dimension. Withholding the truth is the same as lying. You’re no better than me.’ It felt good to throw some of my guilt onto Meg.

Her anger flared and she drew herself up. ‘Don’t you dare make this my fault, Lucie! I was trying to protect you.’

Ahead of us I saw Peter making his way towards the car. He walked slowly, the rain flattening his hair to his scalp.

Meg nodded at him. ‘He deserves to know.’

‘No, he doesn’t. He already hates himself for what he did and for dragging us into it. I can’t tell him it was for nothing.’

‘You’re a coward, Lucie. When this is over I want you out of the apartment. I don’t want to see you again.’

I sank down in my seat, too ashamed to respond. Peter got in the car and slammed the door. I studied his face in the rear-view mirror. He looked ashen, exhausted. I remembered him sitting at the foot of my bed, examining his scars in the pale light and all the half-truths he’d told me about his past and the months it had taken him to find the courage to voice the full story. Having Detective Lang interrogate him must have been unbearable. I reached my hand between the seats, but he wouldn’t take it.

‘Can we go, Meg?’ he asked. ‘I want to be home.’

I understood his need to be alone, but the dismissal still hurt and I sank a little further into my deepening well of self-loathing.

The weekend passed in a slow drip of hours. The murder had turned us into strangers. I wanted to see my friends as I used to: Meg, laughing with a cigarette in her hand; Bastian, charming and tipsy with his fringe falling in his eyes; Peter, aloof in his dark suit coat, his fingers tracing a song on the air.

We only came together to watch the news updates. The media took an interest in Berthum's disappearance. Reporters narrated his story over shots of his books and slow, eerie pans across the empty Mawson campus, making it look as though the uni couldn't function without him, when really there were just no classes Saturdays. Berthum's publishers issued a statement expressing their concern and Mawson students posted gushy, attention-seeking pieces on their blogs claiming he was the greatest teacher they'd ever had. Caris even dedicated an angsty poem to him, and other students from workshop left comments saying how beautiful and heart-felt it was, when they would normally have made snarky remarks about its gross sentimentality. Detective Lang gave vague statements. The four of us read and watched it all, looking for signs that the police were closing in on us.

When she wasn't Googling news sites, Meg tried to get Bastian sober enough to face his interview on Monday, bringing him water and strong coffee and searching in vain for his stash of pills. She rebuked my attempts to help and I watched from the library door as Bastian made half-hearted attempts to push Meg's offerings aside before falling limply back in his chair. I could hardly believe it was him I was seeing. Clever Bastian, who'd once held out a light blue pill to me with a wink, as though

offering me the key to a secret world. I hoped that was where he was and that he was happy there, though I doubted it.

Meg rarely left his side, tending to him in a firm, matronly manner, but late at night, after he'd passed out from pills smuggled when she wasn't looking, I saw her sitting in the window seat with her knees drawn up to her chest, sobbing. She was wearing one of Bastian's jumpers. It was far too big for her and with her usually styled hair still wet and tangled from her bath, she looked like a small child crying for her mother.

I flipped through Mrs Sinclair's collection of romance novels, wishing that by sheer force of imagination I could will myself into their fantastic plots where, no matter what, the hero and heroine were guaranteed a happy ending. But I couldn't make sense of the stories. It was as though they were written in a foreign language.

Peter slipped into a silence none of us could pull him out of. He spent most of his time in the coach house, pacing the length of the large room or sitting at his piano, his fingers ghosting over the keys without a sound. He continued to ignore me. I understood that less than a week had passed since he'd killed Berthum and that scheduling snuggle time with his girlfriend wasn't at the fore of his thoughts. But while he was still amicable towards Meg and Bastian, he acted as though I wasn't there when the four of us were together and made sure the two of us were never alone. He hadn't been so cold since my first weeks at Mawson. Early Sunday evening I saw him sitting by the pool and decided to confront him.

It had stopped raining for the first time since the murder. The air was cold and still. I shivered beneath the shadows of the trees as I made my way across the lawn and wished I'd brought a jacket. When I reached the pool, I saw a notebook open in Peter's lap. His breath bloomed white over the page.

'What are you writing?'

He looked up, startled. ‘Just notes. I’m trying to figure out where to go from here.’

‘We can do that together. You’ve still got me, Peter.’

‘I’d rather you stayed away.’

I watched the pool’s dark surface and imagined how the lake looked at this time of night—a black hole at the centre of my world, slowly sucking everything in. I told myself this was Peter’s way of protecting me, like when he broke from our first kiss.

‘Berthum deserved what happened to him, Peter.’

Peter swivelled to look at me properly. His eyes were dark as bottomless wells. ‘Did he?’

‘After what he did to us? Of course.’

‘Providing what we both said happened is true.’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘You’re a writer. Making up stories is what you do.’

‘Peter! Lucie!’ Meg was at the back door. She sounded frantic.

He ignored Meg and dipped his hand into the pool, disturbing the smooth surface. ‘The funny thing is, I always felt you were the victim in all this. I hated myself for what I put you through. And now it turns out I’m the idiot.’

I watched the ripples circling out from his hand, wider and wider, and wondered if Meg had said something. ‘Peter, what are you talking about?’

‘You need to come *now!*’ Meg urged.

‘You should go, Lucie.’

‘Not until I know we’re okay.’

‘It’s too late for that, but for what it’s worth, I really did try to love you.’

I stared at him, frozen by his use of past tense until he screamed at me: ‘Don’t you get it? We’re done here,’ and the force of his voice sent me stumbling across the lawn.

I ran for the house, too furious at the idea that Meg might have ratted me out and too caught up in untangling what Peter had said to give a damn about what she wanted me to see. I heard the television in the library and stormed in. She and Bastian were on the couch, fully absorbed in the image on the screen.

‘What did you say to Peter?’ I demanded.

‘Quiet,’ Bastian snapped, sounding almost sober.

Startled, I turned to the television to see what was so captivating and stopped. The camera cut from a wide shot of Mawson to a close-up of the lake. Four police divers were hoisting something large and heavy-looking onto the pier. I wanted to believe it was an uncanny coincidence—that it wasn’t him—but even though the station had tactfully blurred the image, I could still make out the dark shape of Berthum’s body. I felt my insides melting, and hugged myself, afraid I’d fall apart if I let go. The camera panned out. The whole area was cordoned off. Black and yellow tape fluttered in the breeze. Uniformed officers milled by the bank, their faces flashing blue and red in the squad car lights. The primary colours looked stagy and wrong—a child’s game transformed into a garish nightmare.

‘A security guard found him,’ Meg explained, her voice mechanical. ‘He saw something floating near the pier.’

I knew it was inevitable. We were lucky the body stayed submerged so long, but it was still a shock. I’d been so overwhelmed by the consequences of our actions, the murder itself had sunk into the abstract. Now it unexpectedly resurfaced: Berthum’s skull cracking on the cement, his sucking struggle for breath and his pulse faint as the beating of moth’s wings beneath my fingers.

I sank onto the couch, unable to hold myself up. On screen the news crew had cut to footage of Berthum's talk at Writers' Week while a grim voiceover recounted his literary achievements. I tried to spot us in the crowd, but we were invisible, an unknown threat amid the champagne and dappled light. On the stage Berthum paused for laughter, flashing the camera a broad, confident smile. The image froze and the camera zoomed in so that Berthum's face filled the frame, his wide leer beaming down on us. I shook badly, overwhelmed with a childish need to run and hide in some forgotten corner of the giant house until this horrible game was over and it was safe to come out. I snatched the remote from Bastian and switched off the television.

'What do we do?' Bastian asked.

I shrugged. 'Forge alibis? Run away and start new lives with new identities? Meg's the Highsmith fan.' I turned to her, near hysterical. 'What do you suggest?'

She was pale with shock, but managed to pull herself together. 'Running away is the worst thing we could do. The police can't charge us without evidence or probable cause. They'll be able to figure out roughly when and how Berthum died, but they'll have to prove we were there—or plausibly could have been there—and had strong motive. So yes, we'll need alibis. Obviously no one can vouch for us, but if the detective does her research, she'll know that's not unusual; we're not known for our sociability. The four of us were here having a movie night. We'll have to agree on what we watched, what we ate, what time we arrived and left...'

I listened in awe. I'd watched Meg fall apart over the last few days and I thought the discovery of Berthum's body would lead to her complete collapse, but, as on the night of the murder, she was calmer than any of us. This was still a game to her and we'd just reached a new, more challenging level. Before the murder I would have joined in. Now, it made me sick. She went on.

‘It will be difficult for the police to place us at Mawson that evening, unless we left something behind—which I’m sure we didn’t—or else we muddle our stories. They could prove Peter, at least, had motive. They know he previously attacked Berthum, and that could be enough to charge him, but I doubt it would hold in court. It happened nearly four years ago and Berthum’s a public figure, Peter could easily have tracked him down before now. My guess is they’ll have to prove Peter was recently provoked. We need to make sure no one finds out about what Berthum did to Lucie.’

‘What if we did decide to run? We could take dad’s yacht to avoid the airports. We’d be safe once we were out of the country, wouldn’t we?’ Bastian asked.

‘Theoretically,’ Meg agreed. ‘But we couldn’t ever come back. It’d be as good as admitting we were guilty and I don’t know how we’d survive. We wouldn’t be able to use our credit cards or passports and we’d never see our families again.’

‘But if we don’t do anything, there’s a good chance Peter, at least, will be caught anyway?’ Bastian asked.

‘Yes, but at this stage there’s nothing tying us to the scene. If we’re going to be smart about it, we stay.’

‘Peter should decide,’ I said. ‘He’s the one who’ll have to face the worst of it. I’ll get him.’ With the news of Berthum’s body being recovered, I’d almost forgotten our conversation by the pool. I wished he’d come inside with me. I didn’t want to be the one to tell him.

I left the house and started across the lawn towards the pool, but stopped halfway. His notebook was still open on the pavers, weighted by another book, but he wasn’t there. I made my way to the coach house instead. The lights were off. I tried the handle anyway and found it locked. ‘Peter?’ I called, knocking. Nothing. I turned to the garden, calling his name louder. The only reply was a light wind breathing

through the trees. I figured he must have ventured up to the house, perhaps before I'd even gone outside, and we'd missed each other in the maze of rooms.

'He's not outside,' I said, back in the library. 'He hasn't come in?'

Meg shook her head and Bastian looked up in alarm, his eyes suddenly clear.

'He's missing?'

'I haven't searched far, but he's not where I left him.'

Bastian was on his feet. 'Meg, check inside. We might not have heard him.

Luce, you come with me and we'll go over the grounds.'

'I'm sure he's fine, Bastian. We've got other things to worry about right now,' Meg said.

But I read Bastian's panic and remembered how Peter said he was trying to figure out where to go from here. I'd thought he'd meant a plan to avoid being caught, now I wondered if I'd been wrong. 'We need to find him, Meg.'

Outside, Bastian looked wildly around. 'Do a loop of the gardens, I'll check the garage.'

'I'd rather stay with you.' Beyond the lawn, the trees and bushes were clumped close together along the narrow paths. During the day they formed a vibrant bouquet, but at night they were a dark and eerie mass. I was already jumpy and I hated to think what my mind might see creeping from the undergrowth.

'If he's in the garage, you won't want to see him,' Bastian said, then reading my horror, tried to smile. 'I'm sure I'm wrong, Luce. He's probably just wandered off in the garden and didn't hear you calling.'

I couldn't face the possibility of Peter slumped as though sleeping inside his car, so I ventured down one of the paths between the trees, calling his name. My cries hung small in the air and were quickly swallowed by the dark. The clouds hung low and menacing, promising more rain. I thought about the books Peter had left by the

pool. He was always so guarded, it didn't make sense for him to leave them there, not unless he'd wanted us to find them.

When I reached the pool the water was still and dark, but something had changed since I left Peter at its edge. It took me a moment to realise what. The deep end was usually flanked by two large Grecian urns, but now one was missing and water glittered on the pavers in its place. With my muscles seizing in dread, I forced myself to move close enough to the edge to see beneath the surface. The pool was tiled with slate, making the water appear almost black. It took my eyes a moment to focus before I recognised the dark shape of Peter's clothes and the pale shimmer of his hands and hair.

'Bastian! Bastian!' I pulled off my shoes and jumper before I'd really registered what I was seeing. The water was like a thousand icy knives stabbing me all at once, but I didn't care. Chlorine stung my eyes and I groped blindly, unable to see clearly in the dark water. My scrabbling hands found Peter's chest. I didn't allow the possibility that I might be too late. I got a firm hold on him and kicked up as hard as I could. He didn't move. It didn't make sense. The water should have made him buoyant. My lungs began to burn and I let go, breaking the surface for air. *'Bastian! Help!'* He was sprinting across the lawn. I took a breath and dived again. This time I felt along Peter's limbs, searching for what held him, and found a heavy chain padlocked to his ankle, the other end secured to the missing urn, which lay at the bottom of the pool. Even if we'd found him in time, we wouldn't have been able to save him.

I looked up, struggling to make out the blurred outline of his face and read whatever message he might have left there. But it didn't even look like him anymore. His knee bumped lifeless against my cheek and I flinched and kicked towards the surface. His hand brushed the length of my calf as I rose and I screamed, water filling

my lungs. I thrashed wildly, unable to breathe until a pair of strong arms closed across my chest and dragged me up. I choked and splashed, struggling to free myself.

‘Lucie, it’s me. You’re okay.’ Bastian kept his hold on me, wrestling me to the side of the pool, and boosted me onto the pavers, screaming, crying, hysterical. The night air was far colder than the water and the wind bit through my wet clothes. I shivered violently.

Bastian hauled himself up beside me and called to Meg who must have heard my shouts and come out to discover what happened. ‘Get blankets and call an ambulance,’ he called, then drew a great shuddering sob. ‘I should have been with him. I looked out for him for four fucking years. How could he do this? *You selfish bastard!*’ he screamed at the water.

Bastian’s sobs tore up the night. I wanted to comfort him, but I was locked in my own grief. I saw Peter’s smile flash bright before me and felt the warmth of his bare chest against my shaking fingers. Fragments of his music filled the air and I added my tears to their chorus.

Meg brought us blankets and huddled at Bastian’s side, crying softly. Bastian kept muttering about calling an ambulance, but we knew that also meant the police and difficult questions about why Peter’s suicide directly followed the discovery of Berthum’s body. None of us were quite ready to let outsiders in to examine the ruins of our little world or to narrate the story of its destruction.

A pale flutter of pages caught my eye on the far side of the pool. ‘I think Peter left a note.’

I was eager to salvage any trace of Peter that he had left behind, but I stopped when I saw the book he’d used to hold the notebook open. *Dangerous Liaisons*. The copy he lent me so I wouldn’t have to borrow Berthum’s. The one I’d taken with me

to Berthum's office and left there. Despite the blanket around my shoulders, my skin prickled with a new and deeper chill. I remembered Peter returning to Berthum's office for his wallet after the murder and his grim look when he met us at the car. He must have found it then. I imagined him seeing it on Berthum's desk and remembering his words: *Lucie isn't a child. She isn't stupid either, or half as naïve as she looks... Lucie came to me because I suspect you weren't man enough to fuck her.*

I felt winded, sick. I couldn't get any air. Meg stood behind me reading over my shoulder. 'It's a confession.'

I barely heard her. I sank in slow motion, as though my legs were dissolving beneath me. My ears filled with deep, wracking sobs I dimly recognised as my own.

'Don't cry, Luce. It's good, look.' Meg handed me the notebook, the page filled with Peter's spiky script.

I killed Richard Berthum.

There was a gap of several lines as though he wanted the reader to feel the weight of that one sentence.

I do not regret my actions, but I cannot live with them.

Berthum sexually abused me and (I believe) several other students, including my girlfriend, Lucie Dawson. She, rightfully, wanted to report him, but was afraid. Unbeknown to Lucie or our other friends, I confronted Berthum by the lake at Mawson University on Monday, August 3rd. We fought and I knocked him down, cracking his skull before suffocating him. I then weighted his body and rolled it off the pier. I drove his car back to his house and caught the bus back to Mawson to collect my own.

My friends believe I was at a film Monday evening. They are not aware that Berthum abused me and will, I imagine, be horrified to learn of my crime.

To my parents and teachers, it may not come as such a shock. Berthum and I are not the only monsters in this story.

This little game of make-believe has gone on far too long.

- Peter Sinclair

‘God, he would make his death a political statement, wouldn’t he?’ Meg smiled through her tears.

I stared at the note in disbelief. Peter had made himself a martyr, but in taking the fall, he’d denied me my redemption. I could still pour out the full story to Detective Lang, throw myself on the mercy of a jury and accept whatever punishment they meted out. I could do my time and when I was released perhaps I would have worked off some small fraction of my guilt, though I doubted it. Besides, it would be difficult to do without implicating Meg and Bastian, and if Peter really wanted me to go free, he wouldn’t have left the book.

In life, Peter had been private and taciturn. By contrast, the probing inquest into his death and the publicity that surrounded it seemed obscene. After reading his note, Bastian called an ambulance and Detective Lang and flushed the last of his pills before they arrived. Peter had given us the skeleton of an alibi and we worked quickly to flesh out the details.

Police swarmed Manderley within fifteen minutes of Bastian's call and we were quickly ushered away from the pool. The forensics team set up glaring lights and began dissecting the scene, adding markers, dusting for prints, checking for blood and hair samples, and bagging evidence—making certain there were no signs of a struggle. It was almost unrecognisable as the place where Peter and I held our final conversation only an hour before. Squad cars parked on the lawn, leaving muddy tracks in the grass and the house burned with light as the police began their search, as though they expected to find more bodies in the lesser-used rooms. I was thankful we'd had the foresight to get rid of Bastian's stash.

We were taken to the police station closest to Mawson and interviewed by Detective Lang. She served me instant coffee in a mug stained from overuse and asked hundreds of questions: How did I find Peter? When did we last speak? What else had we done that day? Where were his parents? Why were the four of us staying at the house? What was I doing while Peter was at Mawson on Monday evening? What film did he say he was seeing? How would he know Berthum would still be on campus? Was it true Berthum had sexually abused me? How? Why had I lied about it? Detective Lang fired them off so quickly I didn't have time to think. Every answer

prompted another question. She quizzed me on the details and kept coming back to certain points from different angles, searching for inconsistencies. At first, she threatened to have me arrested for hindering an investigation, given I'd lied about what Berthum did to me. I think she would have liked an excuse to hold me until she'd tied up all the loose ends, but she had statements from both Peter and myself that Berthum had threatened me against going to the police, and, given Peter's note, she couldn't prove I even knew where Berthum was at the time, let alone that I was deliberately withholding information that would prevent the police from finding him. By the time she eventually let me go, I was exhausted. I wanted to crawl into bed and sleep through tomorrow—through all of my tomorrows.

It was almost dawn by the time the police dropped us back at Manderley to collect our cars. Meg drove me back to the apartment, remaining silent until she pulled up in front of the building, when she turned to me. Her eyes were red and weary from crying and lack of sleep, but her mouth was hard. 'I'm going to stay with Bastian at his parents'. I don't want you to be here when I get back tomorrow.'

'Meg, please don't do this. I've lost everything. I don't have anywhere else to go,' I pleaded.

Her expression remained fixed. 'That's why I'm giving you the day to find somewhere. Peter stood up for you and you completely fucked him over. What's worse is that I helped you. I invited you in and pushed the two of you together to satisfy my own stupid, selfish needs and now I'm going to have to live with that for the rest of my life, Lucie. Do you have any idea how that feels?'

I nodded. 'I'm sorry, Meg. I know that doesn't begin to cover it, but I don't know what else to say.'

'I don't want an apology. Just go.'

After our conversation in the car on Friday I'd known this was coming, and I couldn't blame her. My remorse was a physical weight making my limbs almost impossibly heavy as I got out of the car and watched her drive away.

We hadn't been back to the apartment since the morning after I told the Saints Berthum had abused me, over a week ago. The air still carried the faint perfume of scented candles, books and cigarettes—a smell so familiar, my eyes blurred with fresh tears. Everything was exactly as we'd left it: half-empty cocktail glasses stood on top of the liquor cabinet and coffee table, abandoned when I'd walked in, bedraggled and dripping, to announce my news. There was a novel, open on the couch and a framed photograph of the four of us on the grass by the lake at Mawson. Bastian held the camera with an outstretched arm while Meg lay draped and smiling dreamily across his lap. Peter kissed my cheek and I grinned like I'd just won the lottery. Now I wondered if that smile was for him or for the idea of him—that dark, melancholy figure I'd met in so many novels and finally imagined into being. I picked up the photograph and carefully wiped away the thin layer of dust coating the frame, tracing Peter's face with my thumb, trying to see him more clearly before setting it back down.

In my room I found one of Peter's jumpers crumpled on my bed. I fell on it and pressed my face into the weave, seeking his soap-and-rain smell. The apartment was a tableau of a life interrupted, a life I could never go back to. I curled myself around the jumper and mourned amid the wreckage for the world I had destroyed.

For the media, Berthum's murder had all the elements of a tantalising drama: youthful protagonists, long-buried secrets, a touch of uncertainty (were Peter Sinclair's friends really innocent, or silent accomplices?) and the opportunity to scandalise a respected family and a prestigious school.

I went back to Mawson, thinking the familiar routine of lectures and tutorials would give me some stability. Really, I just wanted an excuse not to be alone. I was half hoping I'd arrive and find everything returned to normal—Berthum alive and holding court in workshop, the Saints meeting for lunch at our usual table and Peter waiting for me after my last class, ready to whisk me off to Manderley. But I didn't see Meg and Bastian at all and the other students avoided me, pointing me out to their friends from a distance, as though scandal were catching. I knew they were imagining me on my knees: Berthum's willing little slut. It was like walking through the campus naked and deformed. Worse, someone must have pointed me out to the reporters that still loitered in the plaza. They followed me like a swarm of mosquitoes, buzzing with irritating questions and blocking my path with cameras and digital recorders. I understood why Meg and Bastian stayed away. A security guard had to escort me out of my first lecture. He suggested I go home. I didn't go back.

At least the glare of media attention gave me a plausible excuse for staying at a dingy backpackers where no one could find me. It also meant the Sinclairs were met with public outrage upon their return from Europe. There was an inquest at St Augustines and the headmaster and several school board members resigned. I wished Peter could have seen it. He became an icon, though opinions regarding his actions were polarised. One of the local news sites asked people to vote: villain or victim? It was a seventy-thirty split. I wanted to tell them they were all wrong. He was both, and a thousand other things besides.

I resented the anti-rape protestors who were all over the news, championing his cause. Every time I saw them, I thought: these people didn't even know him. He wasn't real to them, yet they were the ones standing up for him. It should have been me waving signs and throwing myself in front of news crews to give my opinion. I'd

known him better than anyone. But it was as though he'd passed on his inability to talk about what Berthum did to him. All I could offer was a weak 'no comment'.

His funeral was restricted to close family and friends, though I wasn't invited and the evening news footage showed hundreds of black-clad mourners following the coffin out of the church. Among them, I spotted a daintily-sniffling Clementine Ellis and was glad I wasn't there.

The hype died down after the funeral. Detective Lang brought us in for a final round of questioning and issued me an official warning for withholding information early in the investigation. She didn't find any evidence to contradict Peter's suicide note. However, the inquest continued at St Augustines, as Peter's story gave several former students the courage to speak out. My parents called a few times. Detective Lang had been in touch with them. They both tried to convince me to come home, but I couldn't face them.

I found a room in a share house in a suburb just out of the CBD with four other tenants: three students from Baudin University and a stoner who worked nights at a servo in the city. At first I tried to write, but after a while I spent most of my time getting high in the back yard with the stoner on a set of mouldy couches he salvaged from hard rubbish. I followed Bastian's example and tried not to come down long enough to think too hard. I didn't hear from him or Meg, though through the Indie gossip vine I learned they'd broken up and that Bastian was rumoured to have been seen spending time with one of the boys from Mawson's drama program. When the university revoked my scholarship after I failed to turn in any assignments for the semester, I found work at a local pub, afternoon shifts mostly. The spring flowers were wilting in the summer heat before I realised winter was over. I missed Christmas and my birthday.

The temperature rose and the world drained of colour. The grass in the backyard turned brown and crackled underfoot and my afternoons were soaked in amber ale. Hot winds covered the roads in a fine dust and the hills outside the city burned with the worst bushfires in twenty years. If I climbed onto the roof I could see them, a horizon of flame. I thought of Manderley and the last reminders of Peter—his clothes, his piano—licked to ashes by a thousand fiery tongues.

The nights were too hot for sleeping. The house wasn't air-conditioned and the best fan I could afford gave out with a high-pitched whir the week after I bought it. The heat and dope made me stupid. Late one night I dragged my mattress into the back yard hoping to feel a breeze and find the sky alive with stars, but there were only dun coloured clouds and more dust.

* * *

I should be starting my second year of uni in a few weeks. I could still go back and retake the courses I gave up last semester. If I could imagine myself there, I'd probably do it. But when I think of the future, I can't see myself writing essays and offering opinions in tutes. I can't picture my name embossed on the covers of books or writing in a cramped studio apartment in years to come. I can't even envisage what I'll be doing beyond my next roster. When I look ahead there's nothing, not even a pencil outline of possibility. I think of Peter and the Saints and everything I've lost and I feel the future as an absence.

The past is more frightening still. There's nothing that can be rubbed out and rewritten. It waits for me in quiet moments. In the gap between sleeping and waking I feel the warmth of Peter's arms holding me. Where there should be silence, I hear Bastian sobbing by the pool at Manderley and I see Meg every time I look in the mirror, fussing over my reflection as though I'm trying on a dress for the Old

Collegians' ball. I can't make the memories go away and there's nothing I can do to prove how sorry I am. But I owe it to the Saints—to Peter—to figure out which parts were real in the stories I told myself. I prop the photo of us taken by the lake on my desk against a cup of tea and open a new Word document on my laptop. My fingers hover over the keyboard and I force myself to punch one key, then another, filling that sparse brightness with the dark letters of my tale.

Word count: 71 680