



*Janis Freegard*

The  
year  
of

falling

*m*  
FICTION

*The year of falling*

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falling

JANIS FREEGARD

*m*

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*Our books speak for themselves*

*To everyone who's ever fallen*

## Prologue

I was not expecting this. An unpreventable shriek escapes my mouth when I open the front door and see her. She's lying on my porch, pale and stiff in her cardboard coffin. Dew's formed on her cold, little face. I'm not Catholic, but have a sudden urge to make the sign of the cross. For several seconds I'm riveted to the doorstep. Eventually, I steel myself to lift her and take her inside. There's no real alternative.

I hold her at arm's length, still in her box. Her face is a baby's, but hard, ceramic. There's a heavy scratch on her right cheek. She's

wearing an old-fashioned nightdress. White cotton, a little grubby. The lace around the hem is torn. I don't want to touch her. 'Where have you come from?' I ask out loud, doing my best to control the tremor in my voice. 'Who brought you here?'

There's something sinister about dolls, their not-quite-human faces. All through my childhood, I refused to play with them. If anyone tried to hand me one, I'd shut my eyes tightly and pretend it wasn't there. Presents from well-meaning relatives who didn't know the score were discreetly removed, never to be seen again. Instead, my toys were building blocks and jigsaws: safe, square things that didn't have faces.

We went to stay with my Auntie Vi once, Dad's younger sister. She'd left a doll out on the bedside table for me. Meaning well, I'm sure. It was an antique porcelain thing, not unlike this one, but in better condition. They're the worst. I couldn't sleep, knowing its lifeless eyes were boring into me. Finally, I gathered the courage to throw my dressing gown over it, but its presence remained. Eventually exhaustion overtook me, but I woke in the night, screaming until Auntie Vi took it away.

A few years back, I went to a screening of that old *Barbarella* movie with Jane Fonda in it, and had to walk out. Dozens of dolls were biting into her bare legs with their vicious little teeth. Everyone else in the theatre was laughing but I just couldn't stand it. There's a word for it, apparently: pediophobia. Not to be confused with pedophobia which is the fear of children. Though if you listened to my stepmother, you'd think I had that too: *Me and your dad would love a grandchild*. One day. But for now, she's just going to have to wait.

## Selina

It starts with a cocktail. The night of my twenty-ninth birthday. Tim promised me he'd fly down from Auckland, but he's reneged. This long-distance relationship business isn't working out so well. I phone Bailey; she's always been a party girl. When we met in our first year of uni, she was standing in the bucket fountain drinking red wine from a bottle.

'Girls' night out?' I say.

'Bugger! I said I'd go out with my flatmates.'

'It's my birthday,' I tell her. Playing the sympathy card. I don't

want to spend the evening alone.

‘Oh, right. Happy birthday.’ She’s forgotten. I didn’t expect her to remember. ‘Well, look, why don’t you meet up with us in town. We’re going to – oh my god! You look gorgeous!’

This is not me she’s talking to. Who knows who she’s talking to. Bailey can never concentrate on one thing for long.

‘So, you’re going where?’ I ask.

‘Where are we going?’ she yells, presumably to whomever’s looking gorgeous. ‘You are rocking those boots, girl.’ Again, not me. ‘Hey – look, Selina, I’ll text you when we get there, okay?’

‘Yeah, okay.’ It’ll be good to see Bailey. She’s fun. Reminds people of a younger Cameron Diaz, the *Charlie’s Angels* version. Tim used to tell me I reminded him of Keira Knightley, but I don’t see it myself.

I zip myself into the Vivienne Westwood Union Jack dress I treated myself to – cost a packet but hey, I’m worth it – and open the bottle of bubbly I was hoping to share with Tim. A little pre-loading never hurts. Then, as soon as I get Bailey’s text, I order a cab for the party end of town.

I love the way this city buzzes. The crowds, the anticipation. The hope that something might happen. I love the way people throng through the streets, following the rush, pouring into bars and out again like a thick syrup. I love that feeling of being part of something bigger than myself, everyone coming together in some primal celebration of life. I’m running with the pack, simultaneously connected and free. It’s Saturday night, it’s summer and it’s my birthday, dammit. I’m not giving Tim a second thought.

There’s a pub to suit everyone on Courtenay Place: grand three-storey ones with pool tables, intimate retro ones. Street level, upstairs, underground. DJs, live Irish bands, the latest dance tracks, eighties nostalgia.

Bailey and her flatmates know how to enjoy themselves. Each bar blurs into the next until we find one playing music we can dance to. ‘Time for shooters,’ I yell, over the thumping beat.

‘What d’you fancy?’

‘Anything with tequila,’ Bailey shouts back. She’s chatting away to some people she’s just met. She’s always been like that; drunk or sober, she’ll talk to anyone.

I squeeze my way through the hordes. The most beautiful man in Wellington is standing at the bar. He makes a space so I can cut in front of him. ‘Celebrating?’ he asks. He looks like a film star. No. A god. Perfect face, perfect body, expensive clothes. A dark-haired Norse god. Like one of *The Almighty Johnsons*.

‘It’s my birthday.’

‘You should save me a birthday kiss,’ he says. And he winks. I’ve always been a sucker for men winking at me.

After that, it seems that every time I go up to the bar, he’s there too and we snatch a few moments of conversation. I notice he has a gold sleeper in one ear – pirate-style. I start to feel happy. Really happy. As though little bubbles of joy are surging through my veins and leading me to a state where nothing matters. I knock back another shooter and join the heaving mass on the dance floor. The music swallows me. I feel great; Tim doesn’t know what he’s missing.

Time bends and curves when you’re in a bar. I lose track of it until I hear someone yelling close to my ear.

‘Come on, birthday girl, the bar’s closing.’ It’s Bailey; she’s got her coat on. ‘Let’s share a cab.’

‘We’ve only just got here.’ I look around. ‘Where are your flatmates?’

‘They left ages ago. Home time, Selina. Yeah?’

I shake my head. ‘I’m staying.’

‘You can’t. They’re turfing everyone out.’

‘Don’t care.’

Bailey shrugs. ‘Suit yourself.’ I turn my back to her. The music stops, but I keep dancing.

Then he’s at my side, the man from the bar. ‘I know a place that does excellent cocktails,’ he says. ‘Birthday treat.’

‘Aren’t the bars all closed?’ I’m doing my best to enunciate clearly.

He taps the side of his nose. ‘I know people.’ I think about Tim for a second or two. Then I follow the beautiful stranger into the night.

Outside he puts his arm around me and I lean into his shoulder. I ask his name.

‘Guess.’

I try to focus on his face. ‘Thor,’ I decide.

He really is breathtakingly good-looking. Even more so when he smiles. ‘God of Thunder. Why not?’

‘And for tonight I’m Freya,’ I tell him. ‘I get to choose half the slain warriors from the battlefields.’ Why shouldn’t I be the Norse Goddess of Love?

Perhaps he’s a birthday gift. Someone the Fates have sent me, to celebrate with. One more year before I’m thirty. I’m still young. I still have – possibilities.

Thor takes Freya to a small, emptied bar at the end of a corridor where the bartender greets him enthusiastically and proceeds to make them a teapot cocktail that he pours into delicate china cups. It tastes of summer. Thor leans across the table to move a strand of Freya’s hair out of her eyes. Something starts to build inside her, some sort of need. When Thor’s friend finally tells them it’s time to go, god and goddess spill into the alleyway outside the bar. The first rays of dawn are pushing into the night. Freya invites Thor home, but he says something about cooking in the morning. ‘Besides,’ he tells her, ‘I can’t wait that long.’

Next thing she knows, her back’s against the concrete wall, her arms are wrapped around him tightly, his fingers are tangled in her hair. His mouth meets hers. She’s never wanted anything so fiercely Her hunger surprises her, as he finds her, lifts her.

When Freya wakes, late the next day, she can’t stop grinning.

A bunch of flowers arrives a couple of days after my birthday. For

one stupid second, I think Thor might have sent them. Then I remember I didn't tell him where I live, my real name. They're from Tim – of course they are. Eighteen months we've lasted. My longest relationship ever. I phone him that night. 'This isn't working. The whole long distance thing.' He sounds relieved.

I put on some of the Sufi music I've been listening to lately. Nusrat. Abida Parveen. It's the sort of sound that fills you with lightness, raising you from your seat. You have to dance. You have to twirl yourself around. Faster and faster, like a whirling dervish. At first you feel dizzy, then you get into the rhythm of it and you grow happier and happier until your heart feels as though it'll burst out of you and fly up to the ceiling. My grin expands as I turn, until it can't get any wider. Round and round and round I go.

That night, I dream about Thor. Maybe I'll bump into him again. Maybe I should try to find that cocktail bar.

The best part of my job at DD – Danielsen Design – is delighting the client. Taking the brief and presenting something that wildly exceeds their expectations. I get a real kick when their eyes light up. I like to surprise.

But today, it's dragging. I've spent the whole week preparing diagrams for Paine Engineering's annual report and at five o'clock – on a Friday afternoon, no less – they phone to say they want all the images changed from full-colour to two-colour. Oh and by the way could the text be cut and the font reduced – which will mean redoing the layout from scratch. 'We've decided to go for a more streamlined approach this year. Carbon footprints and all that.' I manage to resist the urge to scream. The customer is always right, etcetera. Liz Wong, my favourite colleague, sees my face when I get off the phone.

'Friday Frights,' she says. 'And no shirking.' Liz and I started around the same time. We bonded when we both sneaked out of some dire seminar on social media and spent the afternoon at

a wine bar instead. She's a copywriter. Kind of serious, but good for a laugh when she lets her hair down. My age, but way more settled. She and her boyfriend bought a house last year. Now they have matching golden retrievers. All I have is a student loan.

Friday Frights is our name for the company drinks the directors put on once a month. It's usually a slightly awkward affair, with much fake laughter at the directors' attempts at humour and everyone pretending to like each other. But I do feel like a drink and they usually break out a few bottles of something decent.

The boardroom's the best room in the office. The senior team has a thing for cream-coloured, moulded wood, which looks great against the sky-blue walls. Caroline's been adding to the art works: Seraphine Pick and Ronnie van Hout. Only been here a month, but already she's put her stamp on the place. The new assistant director. I have to concede the woman has taste.

If I want to make myself sick with jealousy, I compare myself to Caroline. Perfect hair, nails and teeth. Her own designer home with a Beemer in the garage. Younger than me and yet my senior. And to make it worse, she volunteers at the City Mission every Saturday. Tonight she's making a big show of flashing her diamond engagement ring about. 'Randall's the number one chef in Wellington right now,' she's telling anyone who'll listen. 'He's been given his own TV show, starting next week. You'll get to meet him tonight – he'll be here any minute.' But despite Caroline's compulsive checking of her cell phone, by 6.30, the mysterious Randall still hasn't shown. Carlton, the managing director, has already left and the wine bottles are almost empty. 'Shall we move on?' I say to Liz and she nods, draining her glass. She's pretty restrained during the week, but Fridays are Liz's night to let off steam.

Just as I'm putting on my jacket, though, Caroline squeals, 'He's here! Randall's here! Downstairs. I'll just go and let him in.' She seems to have regressed to being thirteen.

'Better stay for this,' says Liz, flicking her hair back. I've always

admired her hair. Shiny.

‘Can’t wait,’ I say.

Caroline’s back in seconds. If she had a tail, it’d be wagging fast enough to come loose. ‘Everyone, this is Randall Marshall, my fiancé.’

‘Yes, we know he’s your bloody fiancé,’ mutters Liz under her breath.

‘And this is Selina,’ Caroline’s saying.

I am too stunned to speak.

Randall reaches forward to shake my hand. ‘Lovely to meet you, Selina.’ Then he leans in and says, in a low voice only I can hear, ‘Though I could have sworn your name was Freya.’

My father is abandoning me. He and my stepmother are going to live on the Gold Coast, now they’ve both retired. ‘You don’t mind, Pikelet?’ he keeps saying when he phones. I’m Pikelet; my sister is Marshmallow. Our mother left when I was two. All I know of her is a wedding photo my sister managed to save, and two birthday cards that came later. One had a doll on the front.

I know from the wedding photo that I have my mother’s cheekbones and her thick, coffee-coloured hair. She’s twenty-two in the photo, seven years younger than I am now. If I saw her today, I doubt I’d recognise her. Not that I want to see her. We don’t even know if she’s still alive. Smith, my sister, looks more like Dad. Solid and sturdy. The same square face.

Dad drove buses for forty years. We ate well and I went on school trips. There were books on the bookshelves. But we didn’t spend every school holiday at the Chateau on Mount Ruapehu or in a holiday home in Queenstown. Like Caroline’s family.

My stepmother, Ngaire, is resolutely pious. Church every Sunday; helping the vicar with the flowers. She’d been on her own ten years when she met Dad. She was a widow, hadn’t been ‘blessed’ with children of her own. She means well. That’s what my sister and I always say to each other, when a bible arrives as

a birthday present or she tries to book us in for a religious family retreat. You can't fault her for trying.

'Come round for tea, Pikelet,' Dad says. 'We haven't seen you for ages.'

'Soon, Dad. Promise.'

The Monday after the Friday Frights, my phone rings at work.

'Hi, Freya.'

I don't know what to say, so I say nothing.

'Meet me after work. The cocktail bar we went to on your birthday.' It's good hearing his voice. It's like chocolate over sandpaper. I want him to keep talking.

'I can't do that.'

'Okay, I'll come to your place.'

'That's not a good idea.'

'Husband? Boyfriend?'

'Just me.'

'No excuses then.'

'I can't.' It takes all my willpower to hang up.

For the rest of the week, I can't stop thinking about him. How ... certain he was that night. Hitting all the right spots. Taking control. How he told me I was beautiful. How good it was to feel wanted. Really wanted.

The kids from next door are at the bus stop in the morning: the twin high-school girls, buttoned and serious, talking quietly ('Mum says we've got to do kapa haka but I really want to play hockey') and their little brother, who looks about six, with his feral hair and permanently grazed knees. He's my favourite, brimming with life. Some evenings, I come home from work to find him crashing through the undergrowth outside my flat, waving a stick. 'I saw a dinosaur!' he told me once.

I like the idea of there being dinosaurs at the bottom of the garden. They could protect me from the mystery doll. The girls,

with their dark plaits and watchful eyes, are too old for dolls. Otherwise, I might have passed her on. The little boy looks like more of a trucks and guns kid. I bet he climbs trees, like I did at his age.

The doll's sitting on a corner of the couch. I'm proud of that. She spent a week in her box in the hallway before I could bear to look at her. But I won't be beaten. Now I've named her Josephine and talk to her every morning. *Hi, doll-face.*

I like living in Brooklyn. It's hilly, but that means views. Not from my flat itself – all I can see is the back garden – but it's not far to find an outlook over the city. I like trekking up to the top of the hill where the wind turbine is and sitting underneath watching the blades. Once I walked right along the ridge to the radar dome that looks like a giant white soccer ball and met two ostriches on the way. One of them sank to the ground and waved its wings around in some hypnotic kind of dance. I don't know if it was being welcoming or warning me away.

People here are friendly but they keep to themselves. I live in a kind of 'granny flat' at the end of a long pathway behind my landlady's house. My flat is completely shielded by trees; all I share with the landlady is a letterbox. It's a good place; there's even a small sunroom with a fold-away bed for when my sister comes to stay. I start wondering what Randall would think of the place. Stop that, I tell myself. He's never going to see it.

Thursday afternoon, my cell phone rings. 'You know you want to.'

I feel naked just hearing him. I'm about to ask how he got my number, but then I remember the telephone tree Caroline set up in case of natural disasters. Everyone at DD carries a laminated card of contact numbers with them.

'I can't talk right now.' I say it really quietly. Some days I hate working in an open-plan office.

'I need to see you.'

I know I should end the call.

‘Text me your address. Come on, Freya.’

My secret name. This is madness. ‘I have to go now.’

‘We could just talk. Have a drink together.’

I push the ‘End Call’ button. And then I save his number to my contacts list. Thor.

That night, I dream about him. The decisiveness of his kisses. His lean hips. He feels so good, it’s a disappointment when I wake.

‘Fancy a drink after work?’ I ask Liz. ‘There’s a cool new bar just off Cuba Street.’

She shakes her head. ‘Jeremy’s taking me out to dinner.’

‘Lucky you.’

I feel so lonely. Even before Tim moved to Auckland, I was seeing less and less of him. There’s no point trying Bailey. I know from Facebook she’s gone to Queenstown for the weekend.

My phone beeps. There’s a text from Randall: ‘Can’t get you out of my mind.’

In a moment of weakness, I send him my address.

His reply comes back instantly: ‘I’ll be there at seven.’

What have I done?

The rest of the afternoon, I’m unable to concentrate. I know I should cancel, but my whole body is saying I have to see him again. He’s a need I can’t ignore. Just this once, I tell myself. Then I’ll never see him again.

I leave work as soon as I reasonably can without drawing attention to myself. It doesn’t take long to vacuum and take care of the dishes. I stuff some hydrangeas from the front garden into a vase. The landlady won’t mind; she’s always telling me to help myself. The place looks homely, welcoming.

I shower and put on the ivory basque Randall admired the night we met. I turn up the volume on my iPod – I’m playing the new Nusrat album – turn it back down. I go to the bathroom mirror, try a different shade of lipstick. This is silly, I tell myself. We’re just having a drink. I realise I’m pacing like a tigress. Changing my

clothes, flicking through tracks on my iPod, adjusting the angle of the chairs. Seven o'clock arrives and passes. Will he come?

When I finally hear his knock, my heart thuds so hard I worry it might rupture my chest. I stop thinking. My hand shakes as I turn the sneck on the front door. It's all I can do to say hello. He's so handsome I can hardly bear to look at him. Those eyes. I am molten. He winks, hands me a bottle of champagne. Proper stuff. I manage to pour it into two crystal glasses without dropping anything. All I can think about is how he felt inside me. Freya. Thor. 'You look great,' he murmurs. Caroline no longer exists.

When he reaches for me, it's as though I've waited for him an aeon. My skin comes to life. I burn. He imprints my body.

Something has started. Something momentous. I feel as though I've boarded a plane but I have no idea what my destination is. It's exhilarating.

I find myself buying lingerie. Scarlet teddies and lace French knickers. Embroidered corsets and classic silk stockings with seams up the back that I wear with garter belts. I feel like I'm on heat. All day, at my desk, I'm aware of the tops of my stockings, thinking about Randall, wondering if he'll call, ready for him if he does. It's difficult to concentrate on anything else. Tim never used to notice lingerie; it was wasted on him. But Randall plays the game. 'You're a very wicked girl,' he tells me. He undresses me slowly.

My skirts grow shorter and my heels higher. Men notice me more, in the lift, on the street, at work, at the gym. When you feel desirable, everyone can tell. I get more compliments from women too. 'Is that a Karen Walker top? Your hair's looking great – it suits you long.' I feel more attractive than I did at twenty. I'm nearing my sexual peak. Why shouldn't I enjoy it?

I sit through meetings with clients, unable to focus. All I can think of is Randall's hands on my body. Opening up for him like a flower.

When I do see him – in those rare, snatched moments – I want

him so badly, I can hardly stand. My need is desperate, intense. Everything else burns away in the flames. Forget my job, my family, the ambitions I used to have. There is only this.

Caroline comes over while I'm reading a text he's just sent: 'See you at 9. Wear red.'

'Good work on the Paine account,' she tells me. 'I've just had a call. The CEO took a particular shine to your financial graphs and they've asked us to do their monthly shareholder reports now too. This'll be good for DD. Well done.'

'Great. Thanks.' I am two people now. I have split. One of us will be seeing Caroline's fiancé later this evening. The other is smiling politely.

He is a square of dark chocolate, my morning espresso, a Kahlua cocktail on a Friday night. He is muscle, sinew, heart, blood. Pump and beat and flow. He makes me spin.

He pushes my skirt up, his hand's warm on my thigh. I melt. Oh, I'm lava now; I flow. He draws it out of me, this longing. I've felt desire before – of course I have. But this is something else. He's woken me.

One month bleeds into the next, and then another ... Daylight saving ends. There is Thor and there is Freya. I'm in a constant state of need.

Smith phones, as she does every fortnight or so. She lives in Golden Bay in a house truck, rings me from a friend's house. She doesn't do cell phones, my sister. There's no reception where she lives. Nor does she waste words. 'I'm coming over next week, arriving Tuesday. Okay to stay?'

'Of course, of course,' I tell her. 'It'll be great to see you. Are you flying? Do you want me to pick you up from the airport? What time are you arriving? If you're here in time for tea, I can cook us something nice. Or would you prefer takeaways? How long are

you staying?’

‘Ferry. I’ll get a bus from town and be at your place by seven in the evening. I’m going back Saturday. Dinner would be lovely.’ My sister is coming to visit. Maybe she’ll help me sort out this mess I’m in. Like she always does.

‘There’s something I want to tell you,’ she says.

‘Tell me now.’

‘It’ll keep.’ Really, she can be infuriating at times.

When my mother walked out, Smith stepped in – twelve years older than me and the essence of dependability. And of course there was Nana Teddy who minded me sometimes while Dad was out at work and Smith was at school. That was before everyone knew her as Smith. Her real name’s Sophronia, but it’s really not her. I mean, it’s right in the sense of being one who is wise and sensible, but it’s far too fussy. When she left school, she got into making jewellery and people started calling her Smith. Like goldsmith or silversmith. I still call her Sophronia sometimes if I want to piss her off, but it’s not often I want to piss Smith off. She’s a tower of patience.

I’ve always liked my name: it means the moon. Apart from the photo, it’s the one thing I’ve got of Jane. Our mother. She named both of us. Smith said Jane told her she’d always hated her own name and had vowed early on that if she had daughters, she’d make sure their names were interesting.

It must have been so hard for Smith when Jane left. I wonder whether, deep down, a part of her was thinking that if only she’d done something different, our mother wouldn’t have gone. Some days I feel angry with Jane for that. But never having known her, it’s anger at a photograph. A person who’s never been real.

Growing up without a mother, I didn’t really know what I was missing. Smith tied my hair in pigtails before I went to school. Bought me my first bra. And Nana Teddy was there – at least until I was thirteen.

Smith will have some thoughts about the doll, Josephine. She’ll

know what to do. Smith says we're made out of stars. Fragments of cosmic matter, millennia old. Sometimes our atoms call back to their intergalactic home, out there in the void.

I run my fingers over the rough surface of my new necklace, a piece of moldavite. I bought it the day after Josephine arrived. Moldavite's like glass – Steinlager green. It's formed from the heat of a shooting star falling to earth. It may contain cosmic material or it may not, but either way, it wouldn't be hanging round my neck if a meteorite hadn't hit Bohemia fifteen million years ago. For some reason it makes me feel safe.

Smith notices the doll the moment she walks through the front door. She's carrying her old blue backpack, wearing the same jeans she wore last time she visited. She doesn't say a word, just looks at Josephine with one eyebrow raised. I've never been able to lie to my sister; she can tell. We hug.

'I'm being punished,' I say.

'Oh?'

I'll have to tell her everything. She fishes a bottle of wine out of her pack and hands it to me. I fetch two long-stemmed glasses from the art deco sideboard I found in an antique shop. It's the first piece of furniture I've bought for my future apartment: the inner-city nest I'm going to save for. I could have the deposit in a few years, if I put my mind to it. Everything else in my flat is Dad's old stuff. Mismatched plates and half-threadbare rugs I've been dragging from place to place since I left home and went to uni.

I haven't mentioned Randall to Smith when she's phoned and it's been three months now. Then again, our phone calls are always short because she uses someone else's landline. 'You won't approve.'

Smith says nothing, just fills our glasses so they're exactly equal. I don't know how she does that. I bet, if I measured them, they'd be the same to within a hundredth of a millilitre.

I gulp down a mouthful of wine. Pinot noir, my favourite. 'I've been seeing this guy.' I don't think I'm ready to say the next bit

out loud.

Smith swirls her wine around in her glass and studies how it moves. She'll be looking at its 'legs'. She's a bit of a wine buff, tries to teach me things. I just like drinking it. But I guess some of what she says seeps in by osmosis. I turn the heater up; it's not a warm night.

Smith will wait patiently until I'm ready to start talking and she'll listen until I get to the end. Then she'll think about it for a bit and eventually have something to say. Or maybe she'll just give me one of her looks until I work it out for myself. I guess some people pay therapists for this.

'Nice wine,' I say.

Smith walks over to the couch and picks up Josephine. 'Two-faced.'

'Me?'

She lifts the doll's dress to pull a string in its abdomen. I haven't noticed it before, but then I've never really examined the doll. Its head swivels round and the face goes from smiling to angry. Frowning, almost vicious. I can feel my heart pounding in my chest. My mouth goes dry. I'm glad Smith's here. What if I'd discovered this on my own? She pulls the string again and the face swivels back. She holds it out to me but I shake my head. If the doll was creepy before, it's ten times worse now.

'Do you want me to get rid of it?' She knows only too well about my problem with dolls. It was Smith who took it upon herself to take me through a home-made programme of aversion therapy. I was eight or nine. We started with looking in toy shop windows and by the time she'd finished, I could hold a doll without screaming. I'll always be grateful to her for that, because it meant I could socialise with other little girls. I stopped short of playing with their dolls, but at least I could be in the same room as a Barbie.

I shake my head. 'No, I've been doing really well. Most of the time, I almost forget she's there.' She's a good sister.

Smith returns Josephine to her smiling face and places her carefully on the couch.

‘So you’ve been seeing this guy.’

‘His name’s Randall. He’s a chef.’ I drain my glass. ‘The thing is, he’s involved with someone else. Someone from work.’ It occurs to me for the first time that the fact I work with Caroline might make me more interesting to him.

Smith leans over and tops up my wine. She’s still on her first. She likes to savour it. I know I drink too fast. If I didn’t, maybe I wouldn’t be in my current mess.

‘We’ve been seeing each other for about three months. Just casually, just a fun thing. You know, Yolo.’

Smith raises an eyebrow.

‘You only live once.’

She says nothing. But then I wouldn’t expect otherwise.

‘It’s never just casual, though, is it? You go into something thinking it’s just a physical thing, just a lust thing, and then before you know it, your heart’s got involved. Why is that? Is it just women who do that, do you think?’

Actually, I’m not sure she’ll know the answer to that. Smith only ever went out with one guy, as far as I know, when she was in the seventh form. They used to play tennis together every Sunday and she took him to her high-school ball. It never seemed to be any big romance. I don’t think Smith’s a romantic kind of person. She’s always been on her own and she’s over forty now. I couldn’t do that. I like having someone to be close to, physically close.

‘So this Randall,’ she says. ‘You think there’s some kind of connection between him and the doll?’

‘Well, it can’t just be a coincidence, can it? I mean, everything happens for a reason. You know, synchronicity, Jung? Right around the time I start an affair with someone I shouldn’t be seeing, a weird doll shows up mysteriously on my porch.’

‘And you see this as a punishment?’

‘It’s a doll. You know? With two faces. I mean it’s not like

someone delivered me a fruit basket or a new dress. It's the one thing I dislike most in the world.'

'So it couldn't be a present? From Randall?'

'The doll arrived before I met him. Besides, he's not that sort of person.' No flowers, no meals out in fancy restaurants, no jewellery. He's never bought me more than a bottle of wine. Not that men have to buy things for women. We can get our flowers and dinners. But it would be nice, if just once ... it would make me feel cared for. 'Anyway, it would be a pretty strange gift, wouldn't it?'

'What happened to Tim?' asks Smith.

'He was offered a job in Auckland. Associate partner in some fancy law firm. He couldn't turn it down.' Of course he could have turned it down.

'We'll still see each other at weekends, he said. I'll fly down every other week, he said. Come up and stay, he said.'

'I'm sensing a Tui ad,' says Smith.

'The night of my birthday, the night I met Randall, Tim phoned. He said he wished he could've been here but he had too much on. Some kind of corporate takeover he was working on. Couldn't say too much.'

I can guess what Smith's thinking; she'll be thinking Tim was never right for me, that the sort of boyfriend who would rather spend time on corporate takeovers than celebrating his girlfriend's birthday is not worth having. She's right. I could never compete.

'So you broke up.'

Smith and I listen to some Abida Parveen without talking for a while. I need to give my sister plenty of thinking time.

'If seeing Randall's a problem,' says Smith, 'why don't you just stop?'

'You make it sound so simple.' He brought round a bottle of champagne the first night he came here. Proper stuff. I still have the empty bottle. Some nights, I take it off the window sill in my bedroom and hold it.

'Does he make you happy?'

My glass seems to be empty again. ‘He makes me feel alive. He makes nothing else matter.’

‘That’s not the same as being happy.’

‘Randall blows hot and cold. One minute, he’ll sound as though he can’t wait to see me, then there’ll be no word from him for a week. Or I’ll see him but he’ll be distant.’

Last time he dressed and left straight after we had sex without even kissing me goodbye. I wound up in a puddle of tears, thinking *never again*. But I know there’ll be a next time; there’s always a next time. He didn’t ask me to fall for him. It’s all my own fault. Randall is woven into my every thought. All I feel is craving. I’m not sure Smith really gets it.

Smith peers into her wine. Hers is still half full. ‘You need someone who makes you feel good about yourself,’ she says.

Suddenly I feel terribly sad. We need to talk about something else. I reach for the wine bottle, but it’s already empty. ‘So I’m guessing you’re here to see Dad before they go?’ I say. ‘I mean, it’s always lovely to have my big sister come to visit. And you said you had something to tell me?’

‘There’s someone else I need to catch up with in Wellington.’ Smith looks at her hands. She has long, square fingers and never wears rings. In fact, she never wears jewellery, full stop. Unusual, you might think, for a jeweller. But if someone buys Smith jewellery, she’ll pretend to like it and wear it until the giver’s gone, then she’ll take it straight off. ‘It makes me feel shackled,’ she told me once.

I love jewellery. I feel adorned. I wear seven rings, only keeping my wedding finger free. I never take them off. Two of my rings are ones that Smith made. A garland of kōwhai flowers in white and yellow gold, and a chunky, silver band with a hunk of citrine inlaid with a delicate gold giraffe. She designed it especially for me. I’ve always loved giraffes. When I was little, I kept persuading her to take me to the zoo to see them. I had a passing interest in red pandas and marmosets, but it was the giraffes that drew me. Their

elegance and calm. 'Can I be a giraffe when I grow up?' I asked her once. 'You can be anything you want,' she told me. A few weeks later, I decided to be a ballerina instead.

Smith looks up. 'I've decided to look for Mum.'

'Why? We're fine without her. It'll only stir up trouble. And why now? You've never wanted to find her before.' I've never really thought of Jane as Mum.

Smith doesn't answer.

'Have you told Dad?'

'Not yet.'

A year or so after Jane left, Dad burned everything she'd left behind: clothes, diaries, photographs. I don't think it occurred to him Smith might have wanted to keep a few things for herself. All she managed to save was that wedding photo.

'Didn't she leave another time? Before I was born? I could never forgive her for hurting you and Dad like that.'

'I've stopped being angry with her,' says Smith. 'I just want to understand.'

She used to talk to me about Jane when Dad wasn't around. *Mum was a dreamer. Wanted to be a movie star, but she couldn't stick at anything.*

'I don't want to meet her. I never have. She doesn't sound like someone I'd like.'

'You don't have to meet her. But I'm going to look up an old friend of hers. Find out what she knows.'

'Jane might be dead,' I say.

Smith nods. 'I need to know anyway.'

Once Smith's made her mind up about something, there's no budging her. She will have spent a long time thinking this through.

'Who's this friend?' I ask.

'Ginny.'

'Do you have an address? A last name?'

'She lived in Aro Valley. Holloway Road. I'm sure I'll recognise the house.'

‘What if she’s moved?’

Smith shrugs. ‘I have to try.’

‘If you’re serious about finding Jane,’ I tell her, ‘you’re going to have to get on the internet.’

Smith looks unimpressed. ‘I’ve managed this far without it.’

‘You are such a technophobe. Doesn’t your jewellery shop have a website?’

‘Jürgen made us one. One of the benefits of sharing a workshop with a fellow jeweller. His wife uses it to manage the orders.’

Smith’s not that easy to keep in touch with, unless you want to write a letter. Urgent messages can be delivered through the workshop, but in her house truck, there’s no phone, no laptop, not even a television. I don’t know how she copes.

‘Do you think Jane would’ve reverted to her maiden name?’ I ask Smith.

‘I doubt she’d still have our name. Dad’s name. She may well have gone back to being Jane Cavanagh.’

‘Couldn’t you just phone her parents?’ I don’t remember them at all. Dad broke off all contact after Jane left.

‘They died in a car crash,’ says Smith. ‘About ten years ago. I’m sure I told you.’

‘Oh. You probably sent me a letter I didn’t read properly. I was all caught up with studying and partying.’

‘More of the latter?’

‘You know how it is.’ Actually, she probably doesn’t. Smith didn’t really have her adolescence until I was having mine. When she was fifteen, sixteen and should have been smoking behind the bike sheds and climbing out of her bedroom window to go to parties, she was at home minding me. Dad used to work extra shifts on the buses, to keep us in chuck steak and pay off the house. But Smith’s always said she loved having a little sister to look after and I’ve always believed her.

Smith heads into the kitchen and opens my fridge. ‘Are you eating okay?’ She says it lightly, but it’s a loaded question. ‘You

look like you've lost weight.'

'I'm fine. It's just – with Randall ... It's a stressful situation. I haven't much felt like eating since I met him. It's a funny sort of love. If I haven't seen him for a few days, it fades and I start to think it's not love at all. Just some weird obsession. And then I'll see him again, or there'll be a photo of him on some news site, grinning next to his signature dish. And I'm helpless as a ... as a landed fish.'

'What is his signature dish?'

'Seared tuna on a broad bean purée.'

'Get him to cook it for you.'

'He doesn't – he never – I am trying, Smith.'

'You've got plenty of friends, haven't you?' says Smith. 'People you can talk to?'

'Yes, yes, of course. I've got Bailey. You met her once, didn't you? The one from the bucket fountain.'

'You see a lot of her?'

'We're not in each other's pockets.'

I haven't seen Bailey since my birthday, come to think of it. The night I met Randall. The night my life changed. She messaged me on Facebook the next day: 'What happened to you?' I didn't reply. I wanted to keep him all to myself, my secret birthday present. 'And there's Liz from DD,' I tell Smith. 'Always good for a laugh and an after-work wine.'

I follow Smith's eyes to the collection of empty wine bottles and instant noodle packets in my recycling bin, but she makes no comment. 'I'll try harder,' I say.

I look in the bathroom mirror wondering which part of me comes from my mother. I know I have Jane's hair and bone structure; I know that from the wedding photo. But my eyes must be hers, too. Smith's got Dad's eyes, the colour of a spring sky. Mine look as though a storm's gathering.

Lines are starting to form between my nose and mouth. Laugh

lines. There's a joke. Maybe I should moisturise more.

I'm not ready to turn thirty next year. It's coming around too soon. I know there's still a whole lot in front of me, but I thought I'd have everything sorted by now. Owning my own home. Starting a family.

What have I got instead? Another failed relationship, an affair with a man who's engaged to someone else, a rented flat and a creepy doll. Where on earth could it have come from anyway? I want a real baby.

I ought to love my life. I work hard; I party hard. I have the job I always wanted and I'm good at it. I'm successful. Buying Kate Sylvester clothes, eating at Charley Noble. But I should have been promoted by now. Caroline's a year younger than me. I haven't even made it to senior designer.

I'll cut down on my drinking. Definitely. And I'll cook a proper meal at least three nights a week.

It's good having Smith to stay. She gets up before me; there's coffee and toast waiting when I emerge from the bathroom.

She's always trying to feed me. In high school I started this stupid diet, a competition with some of the other girls. Trying to be perfect. Then we were skipping meals and taking laxatives and weighing ourselves at the back of the classroom every lunchtime. After a couple of months, the other girls had started eating normally again, but I kept going, seeing how far I could take it. Until I wasn't sure I could stop. Smith got me through.

The same thing happened again a few years later and Smith moved back home. She'd gone flatting with her friend, Rose, by then. They were meant to go overseas together.

Smith didn't leave home for good until she was twenty-eight. I hoped she'd finally go travelling: the trip she'd put off for me. But she only went as far as Nelson.

'Borrow the car if you want,' I tell her. 'I always bus to work. The cost of parking's shocking.'

A car pulls up while I'm on my way to the bus stop and I'm surprised to see Randall at the wheel. My heart tumbles, the way it always does when I see him. He leans over and opens the passenger door. 'Hey, sexy, wanna ride?' So corny. He winks and I melt. I walk over, aware of the twins from next door behind me, watching me climb into the car.

'I've just dropped Caroline at the airport,' he says. 'Thought I'd kidnap you on your way to work, take you back to my place.' He pushes a button on the dashboard and I realise he's calling someone. DD's number. 'Tell them you've got a doctor's appointment.'

Desire wrestles my conscience and wins.

I haven't been inside Randall and Caroline's house before. It can't be more than a few years old and looks out over the harbour. The garden is expertly landscaped, complete with a small waterfall, and there's an enormous double garage. The house is spacious and elegant; the ceilings are high, the rooms huge. I move from one to the next going 'wow' while Randall looks smug. No expense has been spared: underfloor heating, air conditioning, a state-of-the-art kitchen, a sunken bath. It's the sort of house where they'd eat wild venison osso buco for dinner, with tiramisu to follow. The wine cellar must be bulging.

I shouldn't be here. But I am.

When we get to the master bedroom, he picks me up and throws me on to the king-size bed. I'm giggling like a teenager. His hand slides up my shirt. I try not to look at the photograph of him and Caroline on the bedside table.

'Maybe we should go into one of the other rooms,' I say.

'No,' he says. Then he kisses me and that's the end of it.

I arrive home from work to find Smith in the kitchen with the little boy from next door, the dinosaur chaser. He's kneeling on my kitchen stool next to the bench, intent on crushing parsley with a mortar and pestle. 'Look at you two!' I say.

'Kahu's helping me make soup,' says Smith. So that's his name.

'I'm five and three quarters,' he offers.

'When will you be six?' I'm never quite sure how to talk to children.

Smith, on the other hand, is a natural. 'He's having a big, blue cake.'

'And Dad says I can have a car. A Lexus. And a real gun. Bang, bang, bang!'

Smith points the wooden spoon at him. 'Bang! Bang!' It's a shame she's never had kids of her own.

'Smith lives in a truck,' says Kahu.

'Yes.' I've never seen it. She often invites me to stay with her, but it sounds too quiet for me. I've always been a city girl. I've spent most of my life in Wellington – apart from a brief stint in Hawera that was, frankly, a mistake. You've got everything in Wellington: nightlife, beaches, fashion, music. I even like the weather, the wildness of it – bracing against the southerlies, listening to the hail striking the windows while I'm curled up inside in the warmth.

'How did you get on with Ginny?' I ask Smith.

'I didn't. Not today. I had business to see to. Possible outlets for my jewellery. I'll try Ginny tomorrow.'

My mother is a name and a creased photograph. Somewhere else, in some other dimension, she exists, in a way she's never existed for me.

Kahu's staring at me. 'Why haven't you got any children?'

I force a smile. 'I haven't met the right man.'

# Smith

Wellington's always got somewhere to get to. It's a city in a hurry. Workers flooding in from the suburbs. Buses, trains, cars, all streaming into the centre. I'm going against the flow.

Every time I come here, there are changes: new cafés, buildings closed for earthquake strengthening. And there's always some kind of festival on: jazz, film, arts, Divali. Wellington just won't sit still.

And yet there are pockets that stay the same. It's a good few years since I've walked up Holloway Road. I used to come up here with Mum to visit Ginny. I'm pleased to see it hasn't changed

much. It's still its own little world. Quiet and green, a step back into an older, more neighbourly time. There's more tūi song now, thanks to the Karori Wildlife Sanctuary – or whatever they call it now – and the regional council's pest control schemes. The houses look exactly the same, although one or two are sporting lively new paint jobs or attic extensions. Ginny's used to be a shop; it still has the awning. I knew I'd find it easily.

The Ginny who opens the door has the same long hair, but now it's been dipped in silver. I scan her face for traces of age, thinking: my mother will have lines around her eyes now, like this. Time will have softened her features. Her waist will have thickened, as mine has, as Ginny's has.

'Yes?' says Ginny. She's bundled up warmly in a thick red woollen dress and leopard-print slippers. Her voice is wheezy, harsh.

'I'm Sophronia,' I say. 'Jane Cavanagh's daughter.'

Her eyes widen in pleased recognition. 'Long time no see, Sophronia, love. Come on in.'

I follow her into her cosy home, noting the stained glass, the polished wood. 'Everyone calls me Smith these days. I'm a jeweller.'

'Good for you. Your mum always loved her jewellery. She'd be really proud.' She gestures to a squashy, faded armchair.

I sit myself down. 'It's Mum I've come to talk to you about.'

'She's not – you haven't had bad news?' Ginny's right hand goes to her chest. There's a ring on her wedding finger, in such thick gold it almost reaches her knuckle.

'No, no news at all.'

'Oh, thank goodness. I thought – well none of us is getting any younger, are we?'

I smell coffee. Freshly ground. A tall, slim man steps into the room holding two mugs. 'I didn't know we had company.' His face is African, his voice American. His hair is shot with the same silver as Ginny's. His teeth gleam in a smile.

'This is Tobias,' says Ginny. 'The love of my life. And this is Sophronia. Smith. She's the daughter of a dear, old friend of mine,

Jane.'

'Ah, you've talked about her. She left town and never came back.' Tobias passes one of the coffee mugs to Ginny and extends his hand to shake mine.

Ginny beams at him with that wrapped-upness that two people have when they're in love. Smug and happy and needing no one else. Their joy feels contagious.

'It's lovely to meet you, Tobias.'

'Let me get you a coffee,' he says. 'How do you have it?'

'Just black, thanks.' I wonder if I should have said 'without milk' instead.

'A little sugar?'

I shake my head and Tobias heads back into the kitchen. There's a serving hatch between there and the lounge and through it, I can hear him whistling.

'Tobias is lovely,' I tell Ginny.

'Isn't he a darling? We're celebrating ten years of being together next month.' She starts to cough then, a terrible rasping hack that doubles her over with its force.

'You okay?'

'Sorry, love. I've had to give up the fags. Bit of an emphysema scare.'

'That must have been hard.'

'Better than the alternative, though, ay?' She settles back into her armchair. 'So what's this about your mum? I haven't seen Jane in twenty years. No, closer to thirty. How is she?'

'The last time I heard from her was a birthday card she sent when I was sixteen.'

Not that I opened it.

Ginny shakes her head. 'All that time.'

'I've decided to look for her. I was hoping you might be able to help.'

'Oh, love, I would if I could. But when Jane left, that was it. She just sort of vanished. Overseas somewhere. To the best of my

knowledge, none of the old crowd heard from her again. I thought she would've stayed in touch with you and your sister, though. She loved you to bits, you know.'

Tobias is back with coffee and a plate of biscuits. Just what I need. Hot, strong coffee and something sweet.

'She was in a terrible state when your dad threw her out,' says Ginny.

'Threw her out?'

'When he found out she was – oh, sorry love, you wouldn't have known, would you? Well it was hard for both of them, I expect. Your poor dad must've been devastated.'

'And he found out she was ... ?'

'Pregnant. She was pregnant to that man she'd been seeing. What was his name now? No, it's gone. That was the final straw for your dad. He told her ... oh, this is hard. Sorry, love, I thought you knew already.'

'That's all right. I appreciate you telling me now.'

Tobias stands behind Ginny and rubs her shoulders. 'It can't have been an easy time for anyone,' he says.

Ginny's eyes fill with sympathy. 'You especially, Smith. We all felt for you. The thing is, your dad said – he told her she'd have to get rid of it, if she wanted to go back home.'

'The baby?'

'He said he wasn't bringing up another man's child. And she couldn't bear the thought of – you know.' Ginny looks anxious. 'Maybe I'm speaking out of turn.'

'I think Smith has a right to know why her mother left,' says Tobias.

'You're a wise man.' Ginny gives his hand a squeeze.

'I had a brother who disappeared for a time,' says Tobias. 'Took us three years to track him down, but we found him in the end.'

'I thought she'd come back at first,' I say. 'She'd been away before and come home.'

'You were just a little girl then, weren't you, love? The first time

your mum left? And your sister wasn't even born. Jane had gone off with that hippy guy. Living on some commune, I think.' Ginny grimaces. 'Never took to him, I have to say.'

'I remember her being away for ages. Months, I think. I kept asking Dad when she was coming back and finally he lost his temper and yelled at me never to ask him that question again.'

'Oh, you poor wee thing. When it happened the second time, I guess it was just too much for both of them. Your mum was adamant she was having that baby and your dad was equally adamant she wasn't coming back if she did. I said to her once, she should have just lied about her dates and your dad would never've known. There's plenty that do.'

'I finally realised she wasn't coming back the second time because she'd taken all her jewellery with her.'

Ginny reaches over and pats my hand with cold, bony fingers. 'Sorry. It must be difficult hearing all this.'

'Well, it's to Jane's credit that she told the truth,' says Tobias.

I feel grateful to him for that.

'She didn't make the decision lightly, love. She genuinely wanted to go back for you and Selina. But ... you know ... you can't ask a woman to choose between her kiddies. I guess she chose the one who needed her most, and she knew you and your sister would be fine with your dad.'

'Selina was only two,' I say.

Ginny goes silent for a while. I listen to the riroriro warbling in her front garden. Such a big, joyous sound from such a tiny bird.

'Things were never that great with your mum and dad,' Ginny says finally. 'She chose to take a chance on a new life. It really wasn't easy for her.'

I thought I'd made my peace with this years ago, but I'm finding it still hurts. I can see I'll have to forgive my mother all over again. If you can't forgive, you end up trapped in bitterness. Although I read somewhere that you can only forgive where there is contrition. 'Thanks for telling me, Ginny. It means a lot.'

'You were always a quiet one. "Still waters run deep," your mum used to say. She knew you'd be all right. And she knew you'd look after your sister. How is Selina anyway?'

Drinking too much, eating too little and stuffing up her life over a man who doesn't deserve her.

'She's fine,' I tell Ginny. 'Graphic designer here in Wellington.'

'Oh that's good. I'm pleased everything turned out okay. And yourself? Shacked up with someone special? Any kiddies?'

I can't help smiling. 'No one special, no. But I've got a part-time son these days. Not mine, but I look after him when his mum's having chemo.'

'That's sad. Always a hard time, ay?'

I nod. 'I love spending time with Ragnar.'

I'd like to adopt him, if the worst happens. But that doesn't bear thinking about.

'How old is he?' Tobias asks.

'Coming up for ten. I've really grown to love him. The weeks Katie's in hospital, I stay at their house. Keep his routine regular. Mind the dog.'

'I wish I could tell you where your mum went, love.' Ginny sighs. 'I assumed she'd gone to stay with her parents for a bit.'

'They both died. Some time ago. Car crash.'

'Oh, I'm sorry.'

'I never knew them very well.'

I need to be somewhere quiet. To process everything Ginny's told me. I stand to leave. 'You make a great coffee,' I tell Tobias.

'You're welcome.' Those teeth again.

'I'll tell you who might be worth talking to,' says Ginny, following me out. 'And that's Nobby.'

'Nobby the pig hunter?'

'Bit old for hunting these days,' says Ginny. 'But he still gets a bit of fishing in. I see him at the Aro Café some mornings. Round ten. Might be worth looking in on him, if you're passing. And leave me your address, if you want. In case I hear anything.'

‘Thanks, Ginny. Thanks for all you’ve told me.’ All these things I never knew. I hand her a business card for the jewellery workshop I share with Jürgen. His wife, Aroha, made them for us by hand.

Ginny leaves a lipstick kiss on my cheek. ‘If you find your mum, make sure you give her my love.’

On the way back along Aro Street, I stop to sit for a while at one of the new picnic tables in Polhill Reserve. I’m pleased it’s still here; it’s a good place to think.

Two cabbage white butterflies circle round the daisies. I watch a young man walk past. Thin, bearded, singing. I have someone else to look for next. Another sister, or a brother. Someone who looks like me, like Mum. But not like Dad. A tūi calls and I look up to find it. The old stand of pines and macrocarpas I remember from my teenage years has given way to a new crop of ngaio and māhoe. Taking their place in the sun.

Dad and Ngaire live in Tīhahi Bay. I take Selina’s car. I don’t much like driving on the Wellington motorway, but it’s the only way to get out there. Why is everyone in such a rush? The city seems enormous after Tākaka.

It’s always good to be by the sea. My earliest memory of Mum is the two of us running together on the beach, chasing seagulls. I don’t know where the beach was, and I don’t remember Dad being there. If I do find her, I’ll have to ask her.

‘Marshmallow!’ says Dad when he opens the door. ‘Come and give your old dad a hug.’ Behind him, Kiri Te Kanawa’s voice wafts out from the kitchen radio. Concert programme, no doubt.

The hallway is strewn with clothes, books and ornaments. ‘Me and Ngaire are having a bit of a clear-out before we put the house on the market.’

‘Let me give you a hand.’

‘I’ll make us a cuppa first. It’s not every day I get to see my eldest daughter. Come and tell me what you’ve been up to.’ He’s moving more stiffly than the last time I saw him. In the spotless kitchen,

he puts the jug on and takes two brown mugs from the kitchen cupboard. I was with Mum and Dad when we bought those mugs. Woolworths.

‘Ngaire’s at some church ladies’ meeting,’ Dad tells me.

I reach into my jacket pocket and pull out a pair of earrings. Tiny gold angels. Not my usual sort of thing. ‘I made her these.’

Dad holds them out at arm’s length and squints. Still refusing to wear the glasses Ngaire got him last year. ‘Beauty! She’s going to love them.’ He lays them carefully on top of the tissue box on the bench. ‘What a clever daughter I’ve got.’

‘How are you, Dad?’

‘Fit as a rooster.’

‘I’ve been to see Ginny,’ I tell him. ‘Mum’s old friend.’

‘Is that right?’ There’s a pause. ‘How’s old Ginny?’

‘Good. Still in the same house. Married to a lovely guy. Tobias. African American.’

‘Goodoh. Goodoh.’

‘I’ve decided to look for Mum.’

He lifts the teabags carefully out of the mugs and drops them into the pedal rubbish bin. ‘Well, you’ve a right.’

‘Ginny said you kicked Mum out.’

He pushes a mug in front of me and sits down heavily on the vinyl kitchen chair. ‘Did she now.’

It’s not a question. I wait.

‘He was a rotten bugger,’ Dad says finally. ‘That guy she went off with. Drugs.’ He shakes his head. ‘I couldn’t let her take you and your sister and risk you getting dragged into all that.’

‘Ginny said you told Mum to have an abortion.’

I listen to the second hand ticking its way around the square, orange face of the kitchen clock. Dad takes a gulp of his tea, his sausage fingers solid around the mug. His thumbnail has turned black and there’s a long cut in the back of his hand.

‘Well, I was wrong to do that. Heat of the moment. I was that bloody angry, pardon my French. I hated the thought of bringing

up that guy's kid, carrying on like nothing was wrong. She said she'd finished with him, but I'd stopped believing her by then.'

'It must have been difficult.'

Dad sighs and puts down his mug. 'Things hadn't been good with me and your mum for a long time.'

'I know.'

I remember the rows, the shouting. Now and then a flying plate smashing against a kitchen wall. Always Mum doing the throwing. I used to lie in bed with a pillow over my head and will them to stop. At least when Mum left, the house was quieter.

A black cat appears at the partially open window and eases itself inside.

'Next door's,' says Dad. 'Come here, you little fleabag.' The cat strolls over and permits a chin rub. 'We should never've got married, really. Too young. Barely knew ourselves. Your mum wanted excitement and adventure in her life. You know me, I'm just a bus driver. Man of simple pleasures.'

Some of Dad's simple pleasures include a great love of opera and a library that includes every slim volume James K Baxter ever published. I expect they're in one of the piles I passed in the hallway.

'But I don't regret marrying your mum for a minute. Otherwise I wouldn't have my two girls.' The cat hops onto his lap, purring. 'I shouldn't have stopped her seeing you. It wasn't just about the drugs. I wanted to punish her.'

'It wasn't easy for you, Dad. I remember.'

He reaches over and gives my hand a squeeze. 'You're a good girl. I hope you find your mum, if you've set your heart on it. I hope she's as happy as me and Ngaire.'

'You don't have any idea where she went?'

'Auckland to start with, I think. Then she went down south to stay with her mum and dad. That's where I posted the divorce papers anyway. She sent you the odd card, didn't she? Birthdays and that.'

'I didn't open them, Dad. I threw them out.'

'There was one for your sister once, came from somewhere odd. Thailand or Poland or some bloody place.'

'That narrows it down.'

Dad drains his mug and takes it to the sink. 'While you're here, you should go through those old boxes. The ones that were in the garage at our old place in Kilbirnie. See if anything wants keeping.'

Our conversation about Mum is clearly over, but I'm pleased. This is the most I've got out of him on that subject in almost thirty years.

'I think it's mostly Selina's stuff. Toys, school books.' Then I remember. 'There might be some old letters of mine. You can just bin them.'

'Rightoh. How's your sister?'

'Bit ... stressed, I think.'

'She works too hard.'

'She always wanted to be a graphic designer.'

'You'll come and see us on the Gold Coast, won't you, Marshmallow?'

'Can't wait.'

Dad looks happy. 'Bring the little fella you've been looking after. What's his name again?'

'Ragnar.'

'How's his mum doing?'

'Not too flash.'

'Bring them both. Bit of sunshine'll do them good.'

I can't help but smile. 'We get sunshine in Tākaka.'

'Bet young Ragnar'd love a trip to Oz.'

'Maybe we'll all come over next summer.'

If I can get the cash together. If Katie can travel. If she's still with us. I try not to think about that.

I stay another hour or so, helping with the clear-out as much as Dad lets me. Then I notice the time. 'I should be getting back. I promised Selina I'd cook tea.'

He walks me to the car. 'You're happy, aren't you, Marshmallow?'

'I love where I live. I love what I do. I have good friends, a great family. And spending time with Ragnar – that's been a whole new level of happiness.'

'Good girl,' says Dad. 'Make sure you visit.' He waves me away. In the rear vision mirror, I see him standing there like a tree. Like 'Pinetree' Meads. Strong and constant.

On the drive back into town, I find myself wondering how Katie and Ragnar are getting on. Katie has plenty of friends and I know people will be helping her out if she needs it. And Ragnar's great. Even Chapman, the dog, seems to be a help. A gangly, silly thing with a tail that never stops. Part red setter.

Katie gets so tired with the chemo. Some days she just can't face seeing anyone. She broke up with the share-milker guy she'd been seeing as soon as she found out she had cancer. 'It was nothing serious with him,' she told me. 'Just a bit of fun. But the last thing I need right now is having to deal with someone else's emotions about me being sick.' Instead, she's settled for a picture of Johnny Depp she keeps on her mantelpiece. 'The perfect man,' she says. 'Sits there looking adorable and never tells me what to do.'

Sickness and death are part of the cycle of things; I know that. But it doesn't make it any easier to watch. I think Katie finds me comforting. People often do.

She told me once about the strange religious community she'd been brought up in. She'd left in her late teens, after a series of run-ins with the elders over her wanting to wear make-up and socialise with people outside the community. Once she left, she was on her own; her family refused to see her again. She has amazing strength of character.

When Katie and Ragnar moved to Tākaka a couple of years ago, it was Ragnar I met first. He looked like a little pixie. Curious eyes in a face framed with dark curls. He wandered into the workshop while his mum was talking to Jürgen in the shop. He watched me

intently for a while before he spoke. 'What are you doing?'

'Making a ring to match this one.' I showed him the first of the pair.

'What for?'

'A wedding.'

He stared in wonder at the half-finished ring. 'Why?'

'So two people can remember the promises they made to each other.'

He thought about this for a while. 'My mum isn't married.'

'Is that your mum in the shop?'

'Her name's Katie.'

And then young Katie herself was there, with the same curls as her son. I was struck by her liveliness. She has the energy of a wood sprite. I still see flashes of it, on a good day. 'Is he getting in your way?'

'He's good company,' I told her.

'We've just moved in up the road,' she said. 'I'm calling at all the local businesses, looking for a job.'

'Try the café on the corner.'

The next time I went into the café, there she was behind the counter. 'You're the jeweller, aren't you?'

'Smith. Bring your boy back sometime, if he wants.'

'Thanks, Ragnar'll love that.'

I don't remember exactly when I started going round to their house for dinner once a week, or when Ragnar started staying over in the house truck on the nights Katie was out with her share milker. But before long, Katie started to feel like another little sister, Ragnar like a nephew. It feels good to be a sort-of part of their family. But it's also good to get home to my house truck. And while I've loved catching up with my real family these past few days, I'm looking forward to being back in Tākaka.

I pick up a bok choy and some carrots on the way back to Selina's and start sautéing when I get them home. Cooking gives me

something to do with my hands. I miss my workshop, the process of creating, when I'm away from home.

I hear Selina's key in the lock. 'Something smells good,' she says.

'Stir fry. It was going to be a pie but your flour expired a year ago. How was your day?'

'Busy. Too busy.' She wrinkles her nose. 'How's Dad?'

'Packing. He's got some old boxes he wants you to go through.'

'Shame you're not here for the weekend. We could have gone out together.'

'I've got to get back for Ragnar.'

Selina looks blank.

'The little boy I look after. His mum has cancer.'

'Oh yeah. You said. Shame.' She takes off her jacket and throws it over the back of the couch. She seems distracted.

'Everything okay?'

'It's just ... you know.'

'You sound really keen on Randall.'

'I wasn't even expecting to see him again after that first night, but he was good for my self-esteem. He made me feel desirable again.'

'Yolo.'

'Exactly. I realised I didn't want to settle for Tim. A relationship that barely existed.'

'And this is better?'

She doesn't answer me.

'Do you miss Tim?'

'Sometimes.' She slides her giraffe ring over her knuckle and back again. 'It's not fair, Smith.'

'No. Life's not fair.' I open the oven to check our dinner.

The next morning, I head back to Aro Street the long way. I love the view of the harbour from Central Park – the sun glinting off the sea, the curve of the wharves. I don't miss living here, though. Too much dashing about. It's unhealthy.

I think about Ginny, and how easily my parents' friends divided into two discrete groups when Mum left. They seemed not to have any friends in common. Dad had his bus-driving mates and a couple of blokes he'd known from school and still went to the odd rugby game with. Mum had her arty, hippy friends – people who went on protests and had copies of the *I Ching* and *Our Bodies Ourselves* on their kitchen tables. As soon as Mum left, her friends disappeared from our lives as well.

The café's in a row of old wooden houses and it feels like sitting in a friend's kitchen – the smell of coffee, the hum of breakfast conversation. Wooden tables and art on the walls. There's a picture of a green horse with a red rider that I know Ragnar would love. I'm not familiar with the music they're playing, but it's cruisy and funky and I like it. I settle myself in with a coffee, a muffin and a copy of the *Dominion Post*. The news is all about politicians and public servants.

Nobby used to bring us wild pork sometimes, when I was a kid. Always wore a red-and black-checked bush shirt. I wonder if he still does.

Through the long window next to me, I watch people walk past the video store, a gallery, a hairdresser's, two more café's. When Mum used to bring me along here to Ginny's, we'd stop at Patel's dairy on the way home for coconut-covered rum balls in a little, white paper bag. It's a full-blown superette now.

Ginny had flatmates in those days – a guy who played double bass in a swing band and a woman with long hair and a ring through her nose who always seemed to be cooking curries. She'd travelled around India and I loved hearing her stories. I forget her name, but I remember she had a crystal ball that she looked into for me once. She said she could see me on a lake surrounded by ice. She saw a child with me. Mum was pregnant with Selina at that time, so I imagined the child would be my new little brother or sister. The lake would be in Antarctica – we were studying it at school.

Then she seemed to see something else in the glass and said, 'Oh!' She put the crystal away quickly, covering it in silk scarves. I had the sense she'd seen something important. 'Is someone going to die?' I asked.

'Death's a part of life,' she said. 'It's nothing to be afraid of.'

Mum had just walked into the room and heard her. 'Don't be so morbid,' she said. 'Sophronia doesn't need her head filled with all that.' We went straight home afterwards. Walked down to Willis Street; caught the bus to Kilbirnie. I've always wondered what she saw. Perhaps it was Mum leaving.

Mum used to drop me off at Ginny's for the afternoon sometimes, during the school holidays. She always came back flushed and happy. If I asked where she'd been, she said not to be nosy and not to tell Dad. I never did.

Katie asked me once if I'd hated my mum for leaving.

'There wasn't time,' I told her.

After a leisurely morning at the café, there's still no sign of Nobby. When the waitress comes to wipe the table clean, I ask if she knows him.

'Hasn't been in for a couple of weeks,' she tells me. 'Probably gone bush for a bit.'

'Thanks.' There's no guarantee he'll be able to help me find Mum anyway.

When I think back to the time I spent with Mum, it doesn't seem quite real. It's like watching a movie of someone's life. Only it's mine, and now I get to write the next scene.

I spend the afternoon visiting Wellington's galleries and enjoying a stroll around the sea front. It's brisk and breezy, but in a good way. The harbour was always one of the best things about living here. Sometime I'll bring Ragnar, take him on the ferry to Matiu/Somes, the island in the harbour. Dad says there are tuatara there now.

I stop to watch Len Lye's *Water Whirler* gyrating on the

waterfront like a demented drinking straw. As it dances, jets of water spout from it in what I can only think of as joy. Can a sculpture be happy? This is the happiest sculpture I've ever seen.

When dusk falls, I listen out for little blue penguins among the rocks, but all I see is a rat. It's dark when I catch the bus back to Selina's.

I'm hardly through the front door when Selina says abruptly, 'I don't want to meet Jane.' Her face is flushed. I glance at the wine bottle on the kitchen bench. Half-empty. 'I don't want to know anything about her and I don't know how you could want her back in your life again. What about Dad anyway?' She's almost shouting.

'Dad's fine with it. You seemed fine with it too.'

'You've told him then? Well don't involve me in this, Smith. I don't want to know.'

'But if I find her –'

'I don't want to hear about it. I don't care if she's dead or alive. Don't tell me.'

I put up my hands in resignation.

'I mean it,' she says. Her voice is quite shrill.

'If you change your mind –'

'I won't.' She stomps into the lounge and puts on some music. One of her Sufi albums. Hopefully it'll calm her down a bit.

I watch her pour herself another glass of wine. This is not the time to tell her I'm concerned about her drinking.

I call in one more time to the café in Aro Street, but there's still no Nobby. I'm not sure when I'll be able to get over next. It depends on how Katie's chemo goes and how my finances shape up. It's a variable business, making jewellery. I have to watch the pennies. Still, I've made some useful contacts while I've been here, and left a few pieces with some of the local shops.

Selina insists on carrying my pack out to her car and driving me to the ferry terminal. I think she wants to make up for last night's

outburst.

An elderly woman with a wooden mallet is coming through the front gate as we approach it. 'Hello, Selina.' She must be the landlady, who lives in the property at the front.

Selina stops short and waves a hand in my direction. 'This is my sister, Smith.'

The landlady extends an elegant hand. 'Quilla. Lovely to meet you, Smith. I'm just back from the croquet club. I was on fire.' She has a simple gold chain around her neck. It suits her well.

Ferries are my favourite way to travel. You're free to wander around. There's no rushing, no concentrating. I love being on deck, watching the foam frosting the waves, looking for gannets and jellyfish. I like the motion, the gentle rolling. And the land getting smaller as we move away. I love that feeling, that I'm headed home.

When Mum left the second time, to start with I kept telling myself she was just on holiday. At any minute, she'd walk through the door and it would be like she'd never left. Part of me kept on hoping that. Even though she'd taken all her jewellery; even though I knew she'd gone for good. I kept remembering how it had felt the last time she'd walked out on us.

It was Selina who got me through. Having to focus on her meant I didn't have time to worry about Mum or feel sorry for myself. Instead, there was a little girl to feed and clothes to wash. I just had to get on with it.

I didn't feel up to the task to start with. When she was crying and crying and I had no idea how to stop her and Dad was at the other end of a whiskey bottle ... Sometimes I'd phone Nana Teddy in desperation and she'd tell me it was probably the baby's last few molars coming through. 'Give her a carrot to chew on and she'll come good. I used to do that with your dad.' Then she'd turn up the next day with an overnight bag and take over for a while. She'd have moved in with us permanently but Granddad was in

a nursing home and she didn't want to be away from him for too long. 'He might not remember me,' she'd say, 'but I sure as hell remember him, and as long as we're both still breathing we're still married. Til death us do part.'

There are any number of possibilities. I could fail to find her, ever. Search for years, with clues that lead nowhere. Or I could track down where she ended up only to find she's dead. But if I don't at least try, I'll spend the rest of my life wondering.

And the brother or sister I never knew I had – will they want to meet me? What if Mum decided to have an abortion after all? Or gave the baby up for adoption. What if there were more brothers and sisters after that? She was only thirty-five when she left. She might have a whole new family.

I try to think about it from my unknown sibling's point of view. How would I feel if a sister I'd never known about knocked on my door? Delighted. I'd be thrilled. But I know I'm not everyone.

I haven't told Selina about this yet. She was in such a state about me looking for mum. I'll pick my moment.

I can't wait to get back to my workshop tomorrow. The whole time I was in Wellington, my hands were itching to make something. It'll feel so good bashing a hammer against silver. I wish all things could be beaten into submission.

The first time I picked up a gas torch and annealed a strip of silver, heating it to a dull red to make it more malleable, I knew I was meant to be a jeweller. I love everything about it – hammering a texture on to copper, drilling holes for earring hooks, shaping a ring with a mallet and a mandrel. It's enormously satisfying – both the process and the end result. It doesn't feel like work: there's never been anything else I've wanted to do.

Ragnar likes to watch me. He hands me round-nosed pliers solemnly and knows to wear covered shoes in the workshop because of the hot metal. He's careful not to touch anything without asking first. I helped him make a copper brooch for Katie's birthday and he was so proud. He designed it himself – a fantail shape, her

favourite kind of bird. She wears it every day.

The first place I go is the house truck, to drop off my pack. The second place, even before I've unpacked, is Katie's. She's a thirty minute bike ride away from the field where I park my home.

When I arrive, she's resting in the living room. Chapman's lying at her feet, but he leaps up to say hello when he sees me, tail wagging furiously. Ragnar's at a friend's. I show her the 'build your own robot' kit I've brought back for him from Te Papa.

Katie looks exhausted. Her fingers have grown so thin, her rings have started slipping off. I'll have to make her a chain so she can wear them around her neck. A long chain she can lift easily over her head without having to fiddle with a catch. 'Any leads on your mum?' she asks.

'Yes and no. How are you?'

She smiles weakly. 'Box of birds. At least I had a stunner of a male nurse looking after me this time.'

'Maybe romance will blossom over the bedpans.'

'Or maybe I've just been watching too much *Shortland Street*.' At least she's still joking. 'All kidding aside, this last bout of chemo's really taken it out of me. I'm not having any more.' She says it with such finality, I don't try to argue with her.

'You know, Ragnar will always have me,' I say carefully. 'I'll be there for him. I could make a home for him.'

'Be a substitute mum?'

'I'd love that. I really would. If that's what you want.'

'You know, what I really want right now is a cup of green tea,' says Katie. 'Would you mind? It's about the only thing I can keep down today.'

When I come back from her kitchen, she says, 'I'm always impressed with the way you take everything in your stride, Smith. Nothing fazes you. If oil suddenly started gushing from the middle of the kitchen floor, you'd just think "how interesting", and go and fetch a bucket.'

‘What’s brought this on?’

‘Or if an alien spacecraft landed in the garden, you’d just set an extra place for dinner and wonder whether they liked chickpeas.’

I can’t help but laugh. ‘Is this a bad thing? Do you think I’m under-reacting?’

She smiles. ‘It’s just who you are.’

‘What would you do if an alien spacecraft landed in the garden?’

She thinks for a moment. ‘Ask them to take Ragnar to Iceland.’

‘Iceland?’

‘Just for a visit.’

‘I can take Ragnar to Iceland.’

‘You never go anywhere, Smith.’

‘I’ve just come back from Wellington.’

‘You know what I mean.’ She studies me carefully, head on one side like a quizzical cat. ‘Ragnar’s father was from Iceland.’

‘Ah.’ She’s never spoken to me about Ragnar’s father before. I asked her once, but she said, ‘Not now, Smith,’ and I didn’t ask again. Another time, Ragnar mentioned that his dad was a guitarist, but he didn’t volunteer more than that and I didn’t enquire further.

‘How did you meet?’

‘At a party, after a gig. His band was over here, touring. We had a wonderful week together and then he was gone.’

‘Does he know about Ragnar?’

‘He didn’t exactly leave a forwarding address.’

‘And does Ragnar know about him?’

‘When he started kindy, he asked why he didn’t have a father, and I said his dad played guitar in a band and lived overseas. He’s never asked since.’

‘He will one day. When he’s ready.’

Katie gestures towards her box of photos, and I fetch it for her. She rummages through until she finds what she wants, and passes it to me. She looks so happy in the photo. Full of life. The man with his arms around her has Ragnar’s dark hair and a goatee.

‘What was his name, Katie?’

‘Gunnar. I never knew his last name. Ragnar looks more like him every day.’ She sighs.

‘He sounds special.’

‘He gave me Ragnar.’

It’s dark when I cycle home. The moreporks are out. It’s a good time to think. What if I do find Mum and she refuses to see me? That would be the hardest, I think. After the devastation of losing her all those years ago, to have to face it again. And while I’ve made my peace with the first loss, could I really handle a second? It’s a risk. Or is that still preferable to finding out she’s dead? Is it better to be able to picture her with a new life and some happiness somewhere, even if it means never being any part of that? How would I feel then? Or is it better not to try? No, it’s always better to try.

And it could all go well. She could tell me how sorry she is for all the hurt she caused and we could find some new way to be – not mother and daughter exactly, because it’s way too late for that. But we could find a way to be in each other’s lives. She could be like a distant aunt and we could keep in touch from time to time. That’s my best-case scenario.

It concerns me what effect this might have on Selina. She’s so set against it. But I need to know what’s happened to Mum. And Selina will just have to live with that. Or ignore it as best she can. I won’t tell her what I find out if she doesn’t want me to. I’ll wait until she asks me. But if I do find Mum and she’s happy to be found, she’ll want to see Selina. I guess I’ll just have to deal with that when it happens.

When I visit a few weeks later, Katie gestures towards an envelope on the sideboard. ‘Open it.’ Inside are power of attorney papers the Public Trust Office has drawn up for her, so I can handle her affairs if she’s unable to. Clearly she’s been doing a lot of thinking.

All I can do for Katie now is try to make things easier for her.  
And Ragnar. Another set of papers makes me his legal guardian.

‘Are you sure about this?’ she asks me. ‘It’s a lot to take on.’

‘I love Ragnar. It will be a pleasure and a privilege.’

We’re starting to talk about the end and I don’t think I’m ready  
for that yet. I keep remembering what I went through with Rose.

## Selina

I started missing Smith the moment I dropped her off at the ferry terminal. I keep thinking about what she said, ‘The best way to be happy is for your actions to match your values. If what you’re doing doesn’t line up with what you believe, you’ll be miserable.’ I expect she’s right. Smith’s always right. She’s like some sort of Buddhist oracle.

‘Be kind to yourself,’ she told me, between the goodbye hug and disappearing down the walkway to the ferry. She made it sound simple.

I don't like sneaking around and even though I'm no great fan of Caroline's, I don't want to go on deceiving her. I know this thing with Randall can't continue. But whenever I try to imagine a life without him in it, I feel like crying. I'm so stupid, so weak.

This is love, but it's not the right sort of love – where you're caught in each other's gaze, where you have plans, where you meet each other's friends. This is a different love. A furtive, underground love. Concealed. And that's not good for love. Love needs daylight; it needs to be celebrated. This love is half a scallop, one part of a duet.

He has the softest hair. Child's hair. He is my first thought on waking. I conjure up his smooth back, his perfect hips, put my own hands where his should be.

If only he'd stay longer. Hold me. Tell me again that I'm beautiful.

My kitchen tap is leaking. I find myself ringing the landlady's doorbell for the very first time. When we signed the tenancy agreement months ago, we did it in my flat, and every interaction since has been an occasional exchange of pleasantries at the letterbox. Hers is a huge old place, two-storeyed. It must have at least four bedrooms. She told me to let her know straight away if there were any problems, but this is the first time there've been any. She once offered to take in my mail if I were to go away, but I hardly ever get any and I wasted all my annual leave visiting Tim in Auckland.

I get the impression she leads a busy life. I feel strangely nervous on the doorstep, as though I've been summoned to the headmistress' office. I know she's home because Django Reinhardt's playing. She's generally very quiet, but on Sunday afternoons, she plays jazz loudly enough that it drifts down to my flat through the trees. It's always gypsy jazz. Now I open my windows on Sundays to listen.

When she answers the door, it's almost as though she were

expecting me. ‘Come in, dear,’ she says. ‘I’m just having a little absinthe.’

I follow her up the stairs to her living room. Her house isn’t what I expected. There’s none of that old lady clutter. It’s clean, stark, minimalist. And spotless. Everything upstairs is white: walls, carpet, lounge suite. Even the oblong, goatskin rug in front of the couch – it makes me think of pavlova: stiffened egg whites, refined sugar.

‘Sorry to bother you,’ I begin.

‘It’s no bother.’

‘I’ve come about the kitchen tap. It’s leaking.’

It’s probably just a washer, but I have no idea how to replace them and I don’t want to bother Dad while he’s busy getting ready for their big move. He keeps phoning and inviting me out there, but if I’m honest, I’m avoiding it. Maybe I don’t want to face the fact he’s leaving and I’ll be well and truly on my own.

The only thing on Quilla’s walls is a large painting of a goldfish. Not in a bowl or a pond, just kind of suspended in space. Because everything else is white, the goldfish draws my eyes instantly. It’s mesmerising. I imagine Quilla sitting on her white couch in the evenings, staring at the goldfish on the wall and going into some kind of trance.

The only other splash of colour is a huge turquoise feather headdress – the sort of thing Lady Gaga might wear – on her white dining room table. Next to it, there’s a fine paintbrush; maybe she was using it to clean the headdress when I knocked. She notices me looking. ‘I used to be a magician’s assistant.’

I’m impressed. ‘What did that involve?’

‘Getting sawn in half, looking glamorous in skimpy sequin numbers, trying to balance that ridiculous thing on my head.’ Quilla laughs. ‘I was twenty-one; I thought it was all terribly exciting. His name was the “Great Ricardo” – Richard, really, from Upper Hutt, but he put on a fake Spanish accent and no one knew any better. He used to make me disappear.’

She hands me a small glass, mossy green and decorated with swirling gold spirals. 'So, you're leaking,' she says. 'We can't have that.'

Quilla doesn't seem old, though she must be in her seventies. She'd still run a marathon. Or sing torch songs in a late-night bar.

'I like your goldfish,' I say.

She has a throaty laugh, like a smoker's laugh, though the house doesn't smell of cigarettes but of lemons. 'Present from an old admirer,' she says.

'The artist?'

She nods. 'A man I was in love with long ago. But – it didn't work out.'

I have a sudden impulse to confess. I get the feeling she wouldn't judge me over Randall. But Quilla's my landlady and we barely ever speak, so I take a sip of my absinthe instead. It tastes herby, with a subtle flavour of aniseed. I imagine I'm in Paris. The Left Bank. 'You've had an interesting life.'

'That's the best kind. The only kind worth living. You wouldn't want to get to my age and be full of unfulfilled longings.'

No, that's my life. These days, my only longings involve Randall.

'Tell me about being a magician's assistant. It sounds fantastic.'

'It was hard work, but fun. Travelling around to different towns. My mother didn't want me to go, of course, and my father was dead by then, but the Great Ricardo and his wife came around and persuaded her, promised they'd take excellent care of me. And I'd made up my mind to go anyway, with or without her blessing.' She swirls the absinthe in her glass. I get the sense there's more to the story than she wants to let on. 'I needed to put some distance between myself and my surroundings.'

'Why wasn't his wife the assistant?'

'She was pregnant and already had two toddlers to look after. She taught me the whole routine, though. Lent me her costumes. We were exactly the same size – I think that's why they chose me.'

'Was it disappointing? Finding out how the magic tricks

worked?’

‘Oh, the magic was always there. You just had to look into the children’s faces. Every time a rabbit vanished or a dove appeared, they lit up like lanterns. It was a treat to see, every time. I never got tired of the children.’

I want to know if she has children of her own, but I feel I’ve asked her enough already. I only came about the tap, after all. I tip the last of my absinthe into my mouth and enjoy the warmth of it slipping down my throat. ‘Thanks for the drink, Quilla.’

‘Most welcome. I’ll get that plumber as soon as I can.’

Work is dragging today. The office is too quiet. That should make it easier to get things done, but I like a bit of a buzz around me. It fires me up. I fill my glass at the water cooler, looking down at my seven rings, my ring finger waiting.

Nothing’s going smoothly. This morning, Andy from Paine Engineering called to say the CEO’s rejected all the images in the file I presented for their latest marketing campaign. Either I’ve completely misunderstood what they want or Andy – who briefed me in the first place, who looks like he should still be at school, who is probably only an account manager because his mum works there – is way out of tune with the CEO.

I put together a great range of natural images in greens and blues, a bit of a forest theme because Andy led me to believe they wanted to amp up their green credentials. But no, it’s not progressive enough. The CEO wants them to look like a company on the move. He’s expecting tall buildings, according to Andy, maybe a few clouds. Seriously? What’s that all about? The customer in this case is quite clearly wrong, but even so, it’s back to the Mac.

I check my phone. Nothing from Randall. Nothing to look forward to.

She arrives in a closed casket – an old plywood box. Waiting for me on the porch, just like Josephine. I can feel my palms grow

clammy. Part of me doesn't want to open the lid, but I know I have to. I promise myself not to scream, but when I see her, I let out an involuntary noise and slam the lid back down. And then I take her inside.

It's hours before I can lift her from the box. I keep repeating to myself, 'I can do this.' And then I do. I will not be a slave to my fears. I seat her next to Josephine. Equally pale, they could be sisters. Though the new doll has such cold, little eyes. Glass eyes. The name Jemima pops into my head. Old-fashioned. It suits her.

I have two strange porcelain dolls sitting on my couch. I've come so far. I make myself a pot of jasmine tea and tip my cup to the pair of them, in triumph. Bottoms up. They are motionless, gaping. Hollow babies. Why would anyone make such a thing?

When I feel able, I check Jemima carefully. There's no turning mechanism, which is a relief. One face is plenty. There's a crack in the back of her head, though, and most of her painted-on hair has worn off. Like Josephine, she's seen better days. I sit her back on the couch.

I tell Smith about her when she phones.

'The Weird Sisters,' she says. 'Maybe you've got one more coming.'

Smith thinks differently from other people; she looks for patterns. Maybe that's what makes her a good jeweller.

I do what I do at work when I'm puzzling over how to start a new project: I make a mind map. A brainstorm of all the possible sources for Josephine and Jemima. After half an hour, the three main contenders are:

*1. Delivered to the wrong address.*

But if that were the case, wouldn't someone have come looking for them by now? There was no courier label, no sender's name, no packaging. And one wrong delivery might be understandable but two? Besides, they're not exactly in top condition, more like

someone's cast-offs.

2. *Practical joke.*

Someone who knows about my doll phobia has left them there as a prank. Or maybe it's someone who hates me. The only person I can think of who might hate me is Caroline, but Josephine landed before I hooked up with Randall. Anyway, Caroline doesn't know about us and she's just not the sneaky, vindictive type.

3. *A manifestation from another dimension.*

Okay, I'm clutching at straws here.

Right, that's it. Today is a walking day. Sometimes, at the weekend, I step outside and start walking. I'm never sure where I'll end up. One foot in front of the other until I feel the need to stop. I haven't done it for months – work's been so busy, I've been going in on Saturdays and the rest of the time I've just felt too worn out to go anywhere further than the bottle store.

One suburb merges into the next – Brooklyn, Vogeltown, Berhampore, Newtown. I take the back streets. Each with their higgledy-piggledy rows of wooden houses and ubiquitous cats, punctuated by the occasional corner dairy. I walk for what must be two hours before I find myself back to where I grew up. Kilbirnie. Me, Smith, Dad. A simpler, happier life.

A building stops me in my tracks. The mosque looks as though it's just flown in from somewhere much warmer, a desert perhaps. Meringue white and sea turquoise. The decorated turrets are almost glowing in today's sun. It seems like a place where someone might find peace. Some of the walls are painted such a beautiful blue, I feel I should be able to dive into them. A song from Abida Parveen fills my mind. I wish I understood the words. I want to go inside, put on a long white skirt and spin and spin. Would they do

that in there? Are there Sufis in Wellington?

I am suddenly exhausted. I start looking for a bus stop.

I should be happy to have a week off, but I just feel ashamed. I think of all the times lately I've sat at my desk at DD wishing I was off doing something else, looking through the window and thinking about the beach or the Bot Gardens. I've told Carlton I have this 'flu that's going around and I'm highly infectious and have to stay away from people for a week. No one's going to be coming round to check up on me.

I keep looking at my reflection in the mirror. There's a huge, purple bruise on my forehead and I still can't remember how it got there. I have a vague recollection of falling down some concrete steps. How I got home is a mystery.

There's nothing left in the house to eat, but I can't even face going to the dairy. Maybe tomorrow, when the swelling's gone down a bit. I could try to cover it up with make-up. Otherwise, people will think I'm a victim and feel sorry for me. I can't have that.

Randall was supposed to be coming round tonight but I text to tell him not to. I don't want him to see me like this.

Another day indoors. I can't stop twisting my rings around my fingers. I need to walk. I have nothing else to do. I pull a hat down as far over my forehead as I can to hide the bruise.

The streets are quiet around Brooklyn on weekdays. I love looking at the houses. I imagine myself walking up the concrete paths and turning my key in the locks, being admitted into the secret inner space each conceals. Which one could be mine? This Victorian villa with jasmine cascading from hanging baskets on the porch? Inside it will have a woodburner and polished wooden floors. I will live there with my husband – a teacher, perhaps, or a lecturer. Someone who loves his job but puts his family first. We'll share childcare, each working part-time so one of us is always

home with the children, at least until they start school.

That tiny cottage, tucked away behind the trees, that's my 'starter home', the place I'll buy while I'm still single. I'll have a cat – a tortoiseshell, maybe, from the Cats Protection League – to rub against my legs and welcome me home. Then, when I'm completely over Randall and I meet Mr Right – a builder perhaps, or an electrician, someone useful – we'll sell it and buy a doer-upper together. It will be in ship-shape by the time our first baby arrives. While she's a toddler, I'll do some contract work from home. Maybe I'll learn to play the clarinet.

When I get back to the flat, I have the weirdest sensation that someone else has been there. Not inside, I don't think. Nothing is missing; nothing's been moved. But it feels as though there's been a caller. Not a dangerous person, but not a welcome one either.

I can't suppress a shiver. I expect it's the dolls.

By Monday morning, the bruise has faded enough that I can hide it with concealer and face powder.

I suppose I should feel remorseful when I see Caroline at work, but all I feel is envy. She gets to see Randall every day. She gets to feel his breath on her cheek, watch his eyes opening each morning, touch his chest. She doesn't know how lucky she is.

Every day, I sit at my desk, wanting him so much I can't concentrate. Digging my fingernails into my palms, to try to fix the longing. I'm in the desert, dying of thirst. Randall is my water hole, my oasis.

We can't ever meet in public – being on television, his face is too recognisable. I only see him when he comes to the flat. I try to make sure I'm always looking good in case he does come – I get my eyebrows done, my legs waxed. Is that wrong? To want to look your best for someone?

When I do see him, oh, I drink him down. It's all about the surge, the wave, dissolving, breaking the boundaries. The thrust, the slip, the grasp. He brings out some buried, animal part of me.

It's all about the sigh, the pleased cry. My need is urgent, all-consuming.

I'm meeting Bailey in one of those repurposed buildings that have become common in Wellington. Butchers' shops have turned into hairdressers, laundromats into bars. This one used to be two separate houses but now they're joined together.

They do a good cocktail in here and it's a fun, lively sort of place. There's a band, a tiny dance floor. And a mix of ages – it's the sort of place I'd bring my sister, if she ever went to pubs. But Smith's just not that sort of person. The only time I ever remember her dancing was at my twenty-first and that was only because I insisted. She didn't even dance, really, just kind of swayed a bit from side to side, awkwardly, the way a middle-aged farmer might dance.

Bailey bounces in with one of her flatmates in tow. A fluffy blonde whose name escapes me, but I've been introduced to her so many times before, it would be rude if I asked. They stop to say hello to a couple of guys by the doorway before they make it to the table I've saved. Bailey seems to know half of Wellington. Once we're settled in with our cocktails, I start to tell her about the dolls. 'Just lying there on my doorstep – no note or anything. I've got no idea –'

'Oh my god, it's him!' says Bailey. 'See that guy on the dance floor with Gandalf all down his arm? He's my ex-boyfriend's cousin. Just got out of prison last month. Some kind of drugs charge.'

'So anyway, I've had these two dolls sitting in my lounge –'

'*Gandalf*. Who'd get a Gandalf tattoo?'

Randall has a tattoo. A tiny heart on his right hip, just by the bone. It's my favourite part of his body. I like to run my fingers over it and think: I'm touching his heart. I get him. I *know* him.

Bailey's showing her flatmate a video of a cat. I go up to get another round in. When I get back, they've moved to another

table, full of women I don't know. I hand Bailey her drink and find myself a chair. It seems we've joined a hen party. I won't get to talk to her about the dolls tonight. I won't get to talk about Randall.

## Quilla

Daisy's sitting in the day room when I arrive, looking through the window at the roses. 'How are things with you today?' I ask her.

'Very well thank you, doctor.' She calls everyone doctor now.

I pull up a chair next to her. 'I had to see the doctor myself this morning. I've been having a few dizzy spells.'

Daisy's face brightens. 'Ah, Dizzy Gillespie.'

'I thought it might be some inner ear thing, but when I fell in the shower last week, I realised it was time to see the quack. First

time in years. He put me through every test under the sun and today I got the verdict.'

Daisy's a welcome distraction. She and I were formidable opponents on the croquet circuit until dementia robbed her of the ability to compete. I try to get out to her rest home every couple of weeks. Always a pleasure, never a chore. 'I've brought the mallets, Daisy. Let's play a few rounds.' She can still beat me.

'Thank you, doctor, that would be lovely.' The world is lovelier to Daisy now than it ever was. She remembers many things: wearing flour-bag dresses during the Depression (she's older than I am), her wedding day, snatches of poetry she learned at school. But people are lost to her.

I see her daughter in here occasionally. Clearly the woman's finding it hard. 'Your mum's happy,' I tell her. Surely that's more important than knowing her daughter's face? The staff often remark on Daisy's enjoyment of every day. 'She brings a smile to us all.'

"Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness ..." says Daisy as we head outside.

"Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun ..." I reply and she beams. 'I kept staring at the doctor's keyboard,' I tell her. 'A shaft of sunlight was lighting up the letters "a", "s" and "d". It was as though they held a secret message. As though they could somehow change what I'd just heard. Heart valve disease.'

Daisy picks up a mallet and swings it thoughtfully back and forth.

'He has a lovely Scottish accent, my doctor. Edinburgh, I think. If you're going to receive bad news, I do think it's best to hear it in a gentle Scottish burr. I asked if I'd get better and he shook his head. "We can prevent any further deterioration," he told me, "but I'm afraid that's all we can do." I wasn't expecting that at all. I was expecting a prescription and an order to exercise more. The thing I'm most disappointed about is that I can't fly.'

Daisy looks at me sharply. 'You're not a bird.'

‘I was planning an overseas trip. It’s the cabin pressure, apparently. I wouldn’t get enough oxygen. Now I shall have to rethink my plans entirely. Trains and ferries and so forth are fine, but I really mustn’t fly.’

I knew old age would bring its challenges eventually, of course I did. I just hoped it would be nothing limiting. At the croquet club, there’s an endless litany of hip replacements and glaucoma surgery. Bring on the stem cell research, I say. I don’t want to be immortal, but a couple more decades of good health would be nice. I’m enjoying this stage of my life.

I start hammering the hoops into the lawn. ‘No one really wants to be twenty again, do they, Daisy?’

She shakes her head solemnly. ‘No, doctor.’

‘There’s so much you can’t know then, even if people try to tell you. You have to find out about life the hard way. You have to fall, over and over again, and learn to pick yourself up even if you think you can’t possibly bear to do it one more time. You have to get up and let life knock you over, and you have to keep doing it, because one day you’ll look back and know it was all worthwhile.’

It was curiosity, really, that always kept me going. Wanting to know what would happen next. The only part about dying that really worries me is that there are some things I’ll never find out.

‘There, that’s the rover hoop in. Why don’t you start us off?’

Daisy takes the blue and black balls – as she always does. I don’t mind the red and yellow. Her first shot is enviable; she still has her strength.

‘There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about,’ I tell her. Because she has no idea who I am, I feel free to speak to her openly in a way I’d never confide in anyone else.

‘That’s marvellous, doctor.’ She whacks her ball again. She really is a fine player.

‘I’ve been thinking about how I can put something right that I did wrong many years ago. It’s been at the back of my mind most of my life, but recently I’ve been brooding on it.’

“And all at once, I saw a crowd, a host of golden daffodils ...”

‘People do strange things when they’re in love, Daisy, don’t you think?’

‘I was so in love with William. I couldn’t wait to be married. I wore my aunt’s white dress and my mother borrowed a pearl necklace from the woman she cleaned for.’

‘I bet you looked beautiful, Daisy.’

‘William said I was a picture. He’s coming to get me soon.’ She delivers another excellent shot, running the hoop.

‘That’s lovely.’ It must be ten years ago that I went to William’s funeral.

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” She makes a second roquet on her continuation stroke, damn her. I’m not getting a look-in.

‘I took something that didn’t belong to me,’ I tell her. By the next time I come, she will have forgotten it completely. She’s better than a confessional.

Daisy waves a stern finger at me. ‘That’s stealing, doctor. You must put it back at once.’

‘Yes, I must. Just as soon as I figure out how.’

The ring will be where I’ve always kept it, wrapped in a scrap of blue velvet in a corner of my jewellery box. None of my husbands ever noticed it, which is just as well, because I’d have had no explanation to give them. I haven’t been able to look at the ring since the day I put it there, because I haven’t been able to face what I did. I check for the feel of the velvet with my fingers from time to time, but I haven’t dared unwrap its contents. Today is the day.

I lift my jewellery box from the bedside table where I keep it and sit on the side of the bed with the box on my lap. My mother gave it to me as a twenty-first present. It’s fussier than anything I would have bought for myself – ornately carved in some dark hardwood – but I love it because it reminds me of her. It has three drawers, each with a copper handle. The scarlet lining has faded a

little and one corner is fraying, but it still does its job.

I can't go straight to the ring; I need to build up to it. I start by pulling open the top drawer. This is where I keep my earrings and necklaces. The pearl drops my first husband gave me. Gold sleepers. Amethyst studs. Most of my earrings are quite plain. The necklaces too. Simple gold chains, or sterling silver with a discreet pendant. One boasts the modest diamond I bought many years ago. For my sixtieth, in fact. A commitment to myself. Five years a widow and I knew I wouldn't marry again. I rarely wear it – far too ostentatious for the croquet club or the film society. But I like to know it's there.

The middle drawer has my brooches – an old gold pin of my aunt's in the shape of a swan; a classic cameo an old lover gave me, I forget which one. There's costume jewellery, too – trinkets I've picked up at garage sales or gifts from friends.

I close the drawer. I'm ready for the third.

This is my drawer of treasures. A lock of my niece's baby hair. The ornament that sat on top of my second wedding cake: a little white dove. Things that are worthless to anyone but me. Except for this: tucked right at the back, a ring in a piece of blue velvet.

My heart beats faster. Ridiculous, after such a long time. I unwrap the parcel with trembling hands and look at it again, for the first time in fifty-odd years.

It's as beautiful as I remember. Breathtaking. Special.

The gold has dulled over time; it needs a polish. But the amber is still remarkable. A huge, round gem, over an inch in diameter. A special type of amber – opaque and a most unusual colour, like egg yolk. Looking at it is like gazing into a fire: it's full of swirling patterns.

I have to return it to its rightful owner. It's been a thorn in my side all this time. I have to make amends.

## Selina

I feel like death today. I'm barely going through the motions at work. And I got a pointed 'Nice of you to join us,' from Carlton when I arrived this morning. I'd slept through my phone alarm and missed the weekly staff meeting.

Randall was supposed to come round last night and then at the last minute, he cancelled – no, after the last minute. After I'd had a shower and dressed up for him. After I'd opened a good bottle of merlot to let it breathe, because merlot's his favourite. After I'd listened to three albums while I waited for his knock on the door,

running to the window every time I thought I heard a noise. It was almost ten and the wine bottle half empty when I got his text: 'Sorry, can't make it. Later.' What the hell? Later when?

I finished off the bottle.

There are some moments, some scenes, that are so beautiful and perfect, you just want to suck them up inside yourself and preserve them forever. Even if, at some later point, you can't see the picture in your mind, it still has its effect on you. It's become part of the core of your being, somewhere deep that sustains you. I have an image of Mount Cook there, on a crisp sunny morning, cloaked in snow. And the love from Dad and Smith that always wraps me up like a soft blanket. And our old cat, Blackie, that I'd had since he was a kitten. I can still feel him in my arms – the weight and the purring.

My recollections of the first night Randall came to my flat are already fading, even though I've rerun that reel through my head so many times. I'm no longer sure of the order things happened.

It started with the champagne. At some point he drew me towards him and touched my lips. I took his fingers in my mouth, tasting them. At some point I moved my face to his and our mouths found each other. He pushed my bra up as though he couldn't wait a second longer, moving his mouth to my breasts. At some point, I slipped my fingers under his waistband.

There was a moment when I came to my senses. I said we couldn't, he knew we couldn't. I told him how I could think of ten reasons why not. I told him he shouldn't risk his relationship; I shouldn't risk my job.

But I didn't ask him to leave.

At some point Randall told me I felt 'so soft'. And afterwards he asked me to rest my head against his chest. These are the sweetest memories.

'Going to the gym at lunchtime?' I ask Liz.

She runs her fingers through her hair and waves at her laptop. 'Maybe tomorrow.'

'You work too hard.'

'Got to keep the dogs in gravy beef.' There's a photo of the four of them on her desk. The happy, smiling couple; the happy, smiling retrievers. One day, there'll be two happy, smiling children as well.

I'm spending too much time at the gym. I know I shouldn't exercise more than four hours a week, but at the moment it's the only thing that makes me feel better. I'm unravelling. I did a spin class before work so I shouldn't really be doing CrossFit in the same day, but I have to do something with all this tension.

Halfway through the class, I start to feel better again. Randall fades a little and I just focus on the moves. The good thing about CrossFit is the variety. Weights, skipping, lunges, running. You can't think about other things while you're focusing on precisely what your body needs to do next.

I had a mild relapse of anorexia in my early twenties. Not a bad one, but enough for Smith to drop her life again and come straight back to Wellington for the months it took me to recover. My first serious boyfriend had left me for someone else. I had a whole future planned but instead I was lost. Uncomprehending. I couldn't eat and the only thing that made me feel better was running. Soon I was running two or three hours a day and people went from telling me how well I was looking to asking me if I was okay, was there anything they could do?

Smith phones that night. 'How are things with Randall?'

'I hate lying to people. I feel ... furtive.'

'You've got two options,' she says. 'Decide you're doing the right thing and keep doing it, or decide you're not and stop.'

'Do you think I'm doing the right thing?'

'It's not for me to say.'

'I don't know how this ends,' I say. 'It's like I boarded a bus, the wheels won't stop turning, and now I don't know how to get off.'

I want her to condemn me or exonerate me, but she'll do neither. Listening. That's what Smith does. Just hearing her breathing on the other end of the phone is a comfort.

'How's your search going?' I ask. I feel bad about my outburst on that subject while she was staying here.

'I haven't had much time to think about it.'

'What about asking Aunty Vi?'

'Worth a try,' says Smith.

She's a good sort, Aunty Vi, the type of person who gets called 'the salt of the earth'. She can replace a washer, fix a tractor and whip up a decent pav in the space of a morning. Uncle Vern broke his back in a farm accident early on in their marriage and he's spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair. He still works as a picture framer in a customised shed at the back of their property, but most of the home maintenance falls to Aunty Vi. They've got three boys and three girls, all living overseas now. We didn't see them often when we were growing up. Every few years we'd have Christmas together, taking turns at hosting. I loved those big family Christmasses – ham on the table, presents under the tree. As the youngest, I always got spoilt.

I didn't realise how sparse and fragmented our family was until I went to stay with a school friend for a weekend, Hine. I think it was short for something much longer, but I forget now. She taught me how to pronounce the Māori vowels: 'Just remember the sounds in: *Are there three or two? A E I O U.*' Hine's dad ran a construction company. Our house would have fitted in their living room. When I visited, her four brothers were there, her grandfather who lived with them, and two cousins who were staying while their mum was in hospital. It was a noisy household full of food and hugs and children playing. I loved it. 'Is it always like this?' I asked Hine.

'Like what?' When she came to stay with me for a weekend, she realised what I meant. 'Where is everybody?' she asked.

'Good luck with finding her,' I tell Smith. I'm not sure if I mean it. If she finds Jane, I'll have to seriously consider whether I want

to meet her. It's more than I can cope with right now.

Just before she hangs up I remember to ask, 'How's your friend? The one with cancer?'

'Not good,' says Smith. She sounds weary. 'Not good.'

Some days, I feel like I'm waiting to be caught. Waiting for someone to appear beside me and say: it's over now, the game's up. They'll take me away and read out my crime. It'll be a relief not to pretend any more. No more hiding; everyone will know. Randall texts to say he's recording a show in Hamilton next weekend; how about meeting up? A whole weekend together – of course I tell him yes. He sends the name of the hotel he'll be staying at and I agree to meet him there on Friday night.

I spend the rest of the week counting down the hours. I can barely eat or sleep. The Paine shareholder report languishes while I take extended lunch breaks to visit my hairdresser and shop for the perfect new outfit in case Randall takes me somewhere nice for dinner. I settle on a sunflower-yellow Karen Walker dress and invest in a red lace-up bustier for the evenings. I'm ridiculous, I know.

'Friday Frights?' says Liz, when the longest week of my life finally comes to an end.

I shake my head. 'Got a plane to catch.' My bag is packed and under my desk. I take a taxi straight to the airport.

I'm not expecting Randall to pick me up, but I still feel a tiny glimmer of hope when I step off the plane around 7pm. I text him from the taxi on the way to the hotel. Plenty of time for a romantic evening. But when his reply finally comes, it's to say he'll be back around ten.

I leave my luggage with the concierge and wait in the hotel bar. It's not until eleven that I finally get a message with his room number and head up in the lift. But when he pulls me towards him, the waiting feels worth it.

At least we'll have Saturday and Sunday, I tell myself. But

Randall wakes me at some ungodly hour on Saturday morning. It's barely light. 'Sorry, babe. Best you leave before someone from the TV crew spots you.'

'Can we meet for lunch?' I ask. My mouth is as dry as Central Otago in summer.

Randall shakes his head. 'I'll be filming all day. Tomorrow as well. Might be a late one.' He hands me a plastic card for getting into the hotel room. 'I'll meet you back here around nine tonight. Make sure no one sees you.'

Half an hour later, I'm walking down the Hamilton streets alone, trying to get my bearings. It's cold and my head hurts. Nothing's open yet. I can't even get a cup of coffee. I amuse myself by window shopping.

I'd been stupid enough to imagine the two of us strolling through Hamilton Gardens hand in hand or going down the Waikato River in a paddle steamer. Instead I spend the day wandering aimlessly around the city on my own. This is turning out to be the saddest weekend I've ever had. I find myself feeling closer to a duck in Hamilton Gardens than I do to Randall. By mid-afternoon, my feet are tired and I need to sit. I find a cinema complex and buy a ticket for the next screening. Some romcom. I can't seem to concentrate, can't quite follow the plot, but when the hero takes the heroine in his arms, my cheeks are wet.

That night Randall and I don't even have sex. I wait in his room on the king-size bed, channel surfing in my new dress. It's well after midnight by the time he shows up, reeking of whiskey. 'Had to go out with the boys, babe. You know how it is.' Within minutes, he's snoring. I feel like storming out, but I have nowhere to go. It's far too late to start looking for another hotel.

Sunday's wet. I trail around the Waikato Museum, trying to focus on something other than Randall, hating myself for not being able to. I have to end it, I tell myself. It's not worth it any more.

But late in the afternoon, he phones. 'Meet me in town next to

the Riff Raff statue.’

‘Why should I? You’ve practically ignored me all weekend.’

‘Don’t be like this. I get enough of this at home.’

I want to be fun, a breath of fresh air. I want him to see how understanding and forgiving I am, how much better than Caroline. I’m secretly pleased to hear they argue. Is that pathetic? ‘I’ll see you soon.’

He’s waiting for me in a taxi. He takes me to a café in an outlying suburb, a quiet place where we talk and laugh and I feel myself falling for him all over again. By the time I get back to Wellington on Sunday night, I’m missing him like crazy. He’s been a drug for me from the start.

Dad phones. ‘Now about these boxes of yours, Pikelet. We’re nearly packed up for Coolangatta. If there’s anything you want, you’ll need to come and get it this weekend.’

I can’t even remember what’s in those boxes. Old paintings I did at school, I guess. Childhood jigsaw puzzles with pieces missing. I’m tempted to tell him just to chuck the lot. But I’m curious. And I want to see Dad before they leave. ‘I’ll drive out on Saturday afternoon.’

Tītahi Bay’s not far from Wellington at all, but I don’t seem to get out there as often as I’d like. Most weekends, by the time I’ve crawled out of bed in the early afternoon, I just want to sit quietly in front of the heater with a cup of tea.

Dad remarried the year after I left home. He and Jane must have divorced at some point, but Smith and I didn’t ask. We’d both learnt early on not to speak about Jane in front of Dad. Smith found it awkward talking to me about her, I could tell, but she’d always answer my questions as best she could. Other girls had mums; I had Smith.

Smith’s told me what Dad was like when Jane left. At only two, I was too young to remember. She said he’d start drinking when he

got home from work and he'd still be at it when she went to bed. 'Just staring at the wall, knocking back the whiskey,' according to Smith. She was learning the violin then. She'd saved for months from her Saturday job in the local dairy and bought herself a second-hand one. One night, Dad was so drunk, he fell over, right on to the chair where Smith had left her violin and snapped its neck clean off.

Nana Teddy came to stay for a couple of weeks after that and things got back into a routine. Dad's never touched whiskey since. He has the odd beer now and then, but nothing stronger.

Dad and Ngaire's house overlooks the bay with its brightly painted boatsheds and rolling waves. As I drive past the little café near the waterfront, I notice a lone surfer swimming out. Mana Island sits in the waves, a big slab of un-iced Christmas cake.

Dad greets me with his usual bear hug and Ngaire turns her cheek for a polite peck. 'How's work?' she asks. This is the safe question, before she starts enquiring after my love life. 'Such a shame you and Tim broke up,' she'll say, not for the first time. 'He was a lovely young man.' He was. A lovely young man with no time for me.

This is Ngaire's house. Dad sold up and moved in with her right after I left home and went to Hawera. I guess he'd been waiting for me to go. Hawera didn't last long. I followed a guy there and it didn't work out. But when I got back to Wellington, home had moved, so I went flatting.

Most of the furniture here is Ngaire's, though there are a few things of Dad's: our old seventies orange lounge suite, the small side table he likes to rest his beer on. I wonder if he'll take them all to Queensland. I imagine Ngaire's rimu dinner table will be going, her pride and joy. I know how much it pains Smith to sit at that table. More than once we've been here at Christmas, waiting for Ngaire to produce a ridiculously large turkey that Smith won't eat and I'll only pick at, while Smith mutters to me about the immorality of destroying virgin forests for furniture. Poor Ngaire;

she does her best. She served Smith some hideous nut cutlet out of a tin the first time we all had Christmas together. I was tempted to recommend my old trick of stuffing food into a napkin while no one was looking and flushing it down the toilet, but Smith politely battled through. Ever since, she's insisted on cooking a couple of vegetarian dishes at my place beforehand and bringing them with her.

I sit at the kitchen table drinking vile instant coffee because I forgot that's all they have. Usually I avoid it by asking for tea, but I'm not quite with it today.

It's a relief to get away from Ngairé's discreet yet determined prying and into the spare room. Dad's hauled the boxes down from the loft and left them for me to sort out. 'I'll leave you to it, Pikelet. If you find anything of your sister's, she said she doesn't want it.' Not much room for mementoes in a house truck, I guess.

There are six boxes, firmly taped up in Dad's typically thorough fashion. The sight of them makes me feel like crying. This is my childhood, ready for disposal. I slit the tape of the first one with the scissors Ngairé's left out for me. The contents are as I expected: old school books, primary school paintings. I have to giggle when I start to read through my old stories. *Once upon a time there was a princess called Selina ... Once upon a time there was a giraffe called Selina ... Once upon a time there was a girl called Sophronia who had a little sister called Selina ...* I place them back in the box, to keep.

The second box is dressing-up clothes: fairy wings, bent out of shape and torn; a nurse's outfit I used to wear to every birthday party I was invited to, whether they were fancy dress or not; a sparkly pink cowgirl hat. None of them's in good enough shape to donate to an op shop, but it's with a twinge of sadness I consign them to the rubbish bag.

The third box is a surprise. Things I don't recognise. Books, and a few plastic bags full of letters. Each in a plain, white envelope, unaddressed and without stamps but dated neatly with a black felt

tip. The handwriting is Smith's. I open the one on top and start to read.

*I will remember you every waking second. This next year I will devote to you. I will think every moment of your smile, the flecks of grey in your blue, blue eyes, the way strands of your hair catch the wind ...*

I stuff it back in its plastic bag and put them all in the rubbish bag, but moments later, take them out again. I tuck them into the 'keep' box, under my old stories.

I pull out some of the books: *Understanding your Anorexic Teen*, *When Someone you Love has an Eating Disorder*, *What To Do When They Just Won't Eat*. I can't imagine Dad buying these; it must have been Smith. She was totally dedicated to my recovery. I remember all the times she said, 'We love you just as you are, you know. Even if you fail all your exams, we'll love you the same.' And she'd glance at Dad and he'd say, 'Just do your best, Pikelet. I'm proud of you anyway.' They said it over and over. Until I finally heard it.

The fourth box contains several jigsaw puzzles – scenes from other countries, mostly. Dinkelsbühl in Germany, with its fairytale medieval buildings; Japanese pagodas; the Eiffel Tower. Dad used to bring them home for me as an occasional treat. We'd lay them out on the kitchen table and all pitch in. I used to argue to be allowed to stay up late and finish them, but Dad would insist on bedtime being observed and threaten to put the whole lot in the bin if I didn't go. One night I sneaked out and tried to finish a jigsaw by torchlight, but Dad caught me. I don't think I'd ever heard him bellow so loudly. One word: 'Bed!' I scampered back to my room with my heart thumping.

Under the puzzle boxes is a pillow case, wrapped around something lumpy and hard. I can't imagine what it is. I lift it out and scream.

For a second, I could have sworn she was alive. But then I

see her blue eyes are made of glass and realise it must just have been the way they caught the light. Her body is porcelain, just like Josephine and Jemima. But unlike them, she's still in good condition. Except for the christening gown she wears, yellowed with age.

Dad comes running up the hallway and appears in the doorway. 'You right, love? You've gone all pale.' He comes over and crouches down next to me, taking the doll from my hands. 'Huh! That old thing. I thought we chucked it out years ago.' He puts an arm around my shoulders and I'm a child again. A little girl whose father's always kept her safe. What will I do now he's leaving?

Ngaire comes into the room. 'Everything okay?'

'Selina's found her old doll,' says Dad.

'You never liked dolls, did you? Your dad told me.'

'She used to scream blue murder,' says Dad. He stands up and hands the doll to Ngaire. 'This is the one – she – the girls' mum gave Selina the day she left.'

Ngaire shakes her head. 'And you were how old, love?'

'Two,' I say.

Ngaire looks as though she's swallowed curdled milk. 'Unbelievable.' She peers at the doll.

'I think it was one of Selina's mum's old ones from when she was little,' says Dad. 'Sophronia was never interested; she was always busy building things – Lego and all that.'

'Very practical girl,' says Ngaire.

'Anyway, Pikelet, after your mum'd gone you were crying and crying for her and I told your sister to get you a doll, and she put that one in your arms to cheer you up and you just bellowed even louder. Threw it at me as hard as you could and cried yourself to sleep.'

'How anyone could –' Ngaire begins, then stops, shaking her head. 'I mean, a *mother*.' She's not a bad old duck, really.

'I told your sister to get rid of it,' says Dad. 'She must've hidden it in a box instead. There's no telling her sometimes.' He gives a

chuckle. ‘Fancy it being in here all this time. Shall we biff it out?’

‘No, no I’d like to keep it, I think.’ I consider telling them about Josephine and Jemima, but decide against it. I’m amazed Dad has talked so much about my mother. Maybe, after all this time, he’s finally forgiven her. ‘I don’t remember Jane at all.’

Dad sighs. ‘You’re better off, I reckon. Still, water under the bridge now, ay? You didn’t miss out too much, did you – only having your poor old dad to bring you up?’

‘Oh, Dad. I always had everything I needed.’

‘Good girl.’

‘I’ve made scones,’ says Ngairé. ‘If you’re just about done.’

My hands haven’t stopped trembling. I lie the doll on top of the box with Smith’s letters and my old school books. ‘I’ll just take this one box. The rest can go to the tip.’

‘Goodoh. You’ll come visit, won’t you, Pikelet? You’ll come see your old dad in Coolangatta?’

‘You’ll always be welcome,’ says Ngairé. ‘There’ll be a spare room waiting.’

‘I’ll come when Smith comes.’

My voice is wavery all through tea and scones, and I still feel shaky when Dad carries the box to the car for me and I wave goodbye. I drive a few blocks to the beach and stop. Maybe some fresh air will do me good.

I pass the solid wooden seat that looks out to sea, with ‘Love Never Fails’ etched into its russet-coloured back. I wish it were true. The waves are gentle. The tide’s out. I’ll go along to the fossil forest at the far end. A car drives past me onto the beach.

I walk past the rows of painted boatsheds with the sun in my eyes. Some combination of the tint in the lenses of my sunglasses and the brightness of the winter sun combine to deliver an optical illusion where every stone and every footprint on the beach look like they’re soaked with blood.

## Smith

I paint flux over the surface of the square silver base I've cut and heated, and more over the slender bezel that will hold the stone. Then I heat them both and watch the flux turn white and fluffy. They're ready to solder. Stone setting's one of the trickiest jobs in making jewellery – there are so many things that can go wrong. Sometimes, after soldering, the bezel no longer fits around the gem. But I have a good feeling about this morning's project.

It's a superb stone – moss agate. I picked it up from a gemstone merchant in Wellington while I was staying with Selina. My

favourites are the ones that look like pictures. You'll see a scene in them, or a whole story. This one has a peacock and a weeping willow. I imagine them in the palace grounds of an ancient Chinese empress.

Jürgen works more with faceted gems – cut emeralds and sapphires. He does a nice range of engagement rings. I like stones that look as though they've just been dug out of the earth and washed in a stream.

This will be a brooch. I have the feeling I'm making it for someone important, but I don't know who yet. I think I'll be giving this one away. Or exchanging it for something. It won't be going in the shop.

With tweezers, I pick up seven little squares of hard solder and set them around the inside of the bezel, where it meets the surface of the heated base. I never get tired of soldering. I love that moment when the solder liquefies and melds the two surfaces it's joining. The moment of union. Every piece of jewellery is about union.

I try phoning Selina from the workshop, but there's no reply. Maybe she's out with Randall. Dad's move to Australia will affect her more than she expects. It'll be the first time in her life she's really been alone. Maybe that's a good thing.

Sawing out shapes from metal is one of my favourite things to do. When I'm done with the brooch, I start carving circles out of copper to make little spaceships. An experiment. After years of practice, my circles are almost perfect, without having to trace them in pencil first. I enjoy watching the shower of copper dust that sparks from my saw. Makes me think of fireworks.

'Have you googled your mum?' Katie asks, after dinner. I often cook for the three of us now, but tonight it's just me and her. Ragnar was going off to a friend's after soccer practice.

'I don't know how.'

'Honestly, Smith! What will it take to get you into the twenty-

first century?’ Her eyes are twinkling. It’s good to see her sufficiently animated to tease me.

‘I’m not sure I want it to be that easy. Just plugging in her name and finding an address.’

‘She might be on Facebook,’ says Katie. ‘A lot of older people are.’

‘She could have changed her name. She never liked being Jane.’

‘If you bring the laptop over, we could look for her now.’

‘Another time.’

I’m not ready to see Mum’s face on a computer screen. I’d imagined sending a letter and waiting for a reply. I don’t want her right there, suddenly. Living her life without us.

‘Ragnar could show you sometime.’

‘Maybe.’

I realise I don’t want to share Mum with Katie and Ragnar just yet. Maybe Selina could help me on the computer. When she’s ready. If. After all, she asked me how the search was going. Maybe she’s coming round.

‘Dagdraumur!’ says Katie suddenly.

I wait for her to explain.

‘Ragnar’s father’s band. In case he ever asks.’

In case he ever asks and she’s not here to tell him. One day, it will be important and I don’t want to let Ragnar down. I pull out the notebook I’ve started carrying in my back pocket. To capture Katie’s memories. For the day Ragnar needs them.

‘But Smith – wait until he asks.’

‘I understand.’

Katie smiles. ‘I know you do.’

I’ve taken out a book on Norse mythology from the library. I want to be able to tell Ragnar the legends from that side of his heritage. As a way of knowing himself.

‘How would you like Ragnar brought up?’ I ask.

‘Buggered if I know.’

‘I want to respect your values.’

‘Do what you think’s right. You practically raised your sister, didn’t you? And she turned out okay.’

Did she? Last time I saw Selina, she was looking gaunt and miserable. There’s been no answer the last few times I’ve tried to phone her. I hope she’s all right.

‘There’s always room for improvement,’ I say.

‘Just love him. That’s all I’m asking. Ragnar just needs someone to give him a cuddle the first time he gets his heart broken. Someone to feed him hot lemon and honey drinks when he has a cold. Someone to teach him to drive.’

I can do those things. ‘I’ll always be there for him.’ Like you would be, if you could.

‘I know you will. You’re a goddamned rock.’

It’s not the first time I’ve been told this.

‘Solid amethyst, Smith. That’s what you are.’

Now that’s something I haven’t been told before. I feel ridiculously pleased.

Katie fusses around in her handbag, then hands me another pile of legal documents. ‘The house is Ragnar’s.’

‘Oh?’ I hadn’t realised she owned the house outright. I assumed she was renting.

‘I inherited some money from my great-aunt Bethany. I tracked her down when I left the community and she took me in, taught me how to get by in the outside world.’

‘Had she lived in the community herself?’

‘Not for long. A few months when it was first established, but she didn’t like the way things were headed and got out. My mother wasn’t supposed to talk about her, but I knew enough to be able to find her when I left.’

‘What was she like?’

Katie closes her eyes. ‘Kind. Strong-willed. Wicked sense of humour. She missed her husband terribly though. They’d obviously been in love all through their marriage. He died a few years before I turned up on her doorstep. I got the sense she was just filling in

time until she could join him.’

‘No children?’

‘They didn’t meet until they were both in their fifties, and neither’d been married before. I guess that’s why she left her house to me.’

‘This house?’

‘No, she lived in Blenheim. I rented it out for a long time. Couldn’t bear to part with it but I couldn’t live there either. I need to be by the sea. So eventually I sold it and came back to Tākaka. My favourite place in the world.’

‘And where you met Gunnar.’

Katie smiles. There’s a definite glint in her eyes.

‘Did Ragnar ever meet his great-great-aunt Bethany?’

‘He was still a baby when she died. But she came to his naming ceremony. There’s an old baby dish and a cup in the cupboard, with rabbits on them. They were hers and she passed them on to Ragnar. Look after them, would you?’

I jot it down in the notebook. ‘Does Ragnar know? About the house?’

‘I’ve explained it. It’s in a family trust until he’s twenty. Jürgen and Aroha will act as trustees.’

Aroha’s one of the sweetest human beings I’ve ever met and Jürgen’s solid. ‘They’re good people.’

‘But this will be your home too. Until Ragnar’s old enough. Treat it like your own.’

I nod. We’ve already decided I’ll park the house truck in the garden and that way I’ll have my own space still. If Ragnar’s staying at a friend’s, say. But as long as he’s home, I’ll be in the house with him. It’s going to be strange. I’ve lived on my own so long. Rose and I’d just got a flat together before Selina got sick again.

‘Do you have any photos of Bethany? In case Ragnar ever asks?’

Katie waves towards an album at the bottom of the bookshelf and I fetch it for her. Her fingers look as thin as herons’ legs as she turns the pages. She points to some photos of a white-haired

woman. Arm-in-arm with a handsome white-haired man. Holding Ragnar. Standing in a garden in a pair of green gumboots.

‘You should write the names on the back of all your photos,’ I tell her. ‘What if I forget who people are?’ There are things only Katie can give her son.

She sighs. ‘Pass me a pen, would you? I’ll do it now.’

I empty my post office box on my way home from work. A wombat grins at me from the front of a postcard. Dad and Ngaire are having a ball. There’s a letter too, from Mum’s friend Ginny.

*Just wanted to let you know I saw Nobby at a party yesterday. He saw your mum in Melbourne about ten years ago. She was living in a halfway house. I know your mum struggled a bit with her demons at different times of her life. She was a sensitive soul. Anyway, she’d met some guy in the halfway house, someone with a bit of money, and she was talking about going back to London with him. Good luck with finding her.*

I guess Mum was sensitive. There were times in my childhood when she wouldn’t get out of bed for days at a stretch. I used to make myself a sandwich when I got home from school, then play cowboys and Indians with the boys next door until Dad finished his shift. Other days she’d suddenly fill with energy and stay up most of the night drinking coffee and working on one of her decorating projects – sticking glitter all over the window sills, or papering the kitchen walls with collages of cactus pictures cut from Dad’s gardening books. As a child, I thought it was desperately fun, but maybe she just wasn’t well.

The manicurist from the cancer charity’s been to visit Katie today. When I drop around to make dinner, Katie’s sitting up on the couch, bright and perky. Ragnar’s excited by her transformation. ‘Have you seen Mum’s nails?’ Katie spreads out her fingers, each nail a different colour – electric blue, postbox red, vivid purple –

and each with a sparkly star in the centre.

‘Cool,’ I say.

‘You could do yours like that. Couldn’t she, Mum?’

‘You won’t find many jewellers wearing nail polish,’ I tell him.

Ragnar looks puzzled.

‘It’s all the filing and sandpapering. I’d just scrape the colours straight off.’ I show him my own hands, my short practical nails. ‘What do you fancy for dinner?’ I know his answer: every day it’s the same.

‘Ice cream!’

‘Maybe for pudding.’

It’s one of the little routines we’ve started to develop. I’m hoping there’ll be enough stability and continuity in his life that not everything will be overwhelmingly strange when Katie goes. I’ve offered to move in now, take care of them both, but Katie’s not ready for that. ‘I just want as much time with him as I can manage,’ she tells me. ‘Just the two of us.’

People are more honest when they’re dying. They have nothing to lose, so they dispense with some of the unnecessary social niceties. They risk your feelings. If Katie’s tired, she’ll just tell me, ‘Time for you to go home.’ If only we could all communicate like that. If we could stop being so sensitive. I know it’s not that she doesn’t enjoy seeing me; I know I haven’t offended her. She’s simply tired.

Last week she told me, ‘I’m jealous of you and Ragnar.’

‘That I’ll see him grow up?’

‘Not just that. The time you have now. Playing catch. Chasing each other round the garden.’

‘Do you want me to stop?’

‘He needs you. I can see that. I just wish he didn’t.’ She closed her eyes. ‘I wish I didn’t.’

I try to leave them alone as much as I can. Some nights I prepare their dinner at home and just drop it off. But it’s easier to cook for three in Katie’s kitchen and she has an enviable range

of spices. I even make meat dishes for them, something I haven't done for years and which I would never do in the house truck. But it's hardly fair to expect Ragnar to suddenly become a vegetarian. I keep realising how different my life is going to be with him becoming a permanent fixture. I've been so blissfully selfish for so long, and now there's always another to think of. It'll be good for me. I also know I won't be alone. Katie has other friends. An elderly neighbour takes Ragnar fishing some weekends and he occasionally stays overnight with a school friend. And I'll have Jürgen and Aroha to go to for advice. Both their boys have grown and flown: Franz is discovering his German roots in Bremen and Hans is a merchant banker in London. Jürgen keeps shaking his head and saying, 'Where did we go wrong?' but you can see the pride in his eyes.

I light the gas torch and pass it over the strip of silver until it glows a dark red, annealing it to a more malleable softness. I lift it with the steel pliers and dip it into the bowl of cold water, then drop it into the warm 'pickle' in the crockpot. In a few minutes, I'll remove it from there and place it in the bicarbonate solution, followed by a second water bowl. At this point, it'll be ready for shaping. In the meantime, I make myself a cup of wild vanilla tea.

I'm treating myself this morning. Instead of commissioned wedding rings or the fuchsia-shaped earrings I keep turning out because they sell well, I'm allowing myself the indulgence of making jewellery for my own pleasure. There's a joint exhibition coming up in a couple of months that Jürgen and I are contributing to. If I'm happy with what I produce today, I'll include it.

At the end of another day, I tuck Ragnar in and read him his bedtime story – the Norse legend about Balder the Bright and Beautiful. When I go back to the lounge, Katie pulls a shoebox full of envelopes out from under the couch. 'Birthday cards,' she says. 'For Ragnar. I've written him a letter for every year until his

twenty-first. The ages are on the front.'

'I'll keep them safe.' I've learned, over these past few months, how to save my tears for when I'm away from her. I've learned how to smile while I'm breaking inside. I will need this later, to be strong for Ragnar.

'Smith?'

'Yes?'

'You don't think ... will it upset him? To be reminded of me?'

I can't answer her straight away. 'Every birthday, I thought of my mother. Every day, in fact. If she'd left me a box of birthday cards, I might have refused to read them at all or I might have read them over and over and they might have made me cry. But knowing they were there would have made me feel loved.'

I wish I'd kept them now, the few cards she did send. The ones I wouldn't even open.

'Thanks, Smith. Thanks for everything. I know I don't say it enough.'

'You don't have to.'

I take Katie's advice and ask Ragnar to show me how to 'google'. He brings Katie's laptop out to the house truck.

'Who's Jane Cavanagh?' he asks.

'My mother. She left when I was a teenager and I'd like to find her.'

There are thousands of results, from all over the world. Images, snippets of news. Ragnar shows me how to scroll through, but none of these Jane Cavanaghs is my mother. Besides, she may have changed her name. Remarried or just chosen something new for a fresh start. She might not even be Jane any more. Finding her seems impossible.

'Mum's going to die,' says Ragnar.

'I know. I know.'

He buries his head in my shoulder. I close the laptop. Nothing else is as important as this.

## Selina

It's a week before I shift the box out of the car. I haven't stopped thinking about the doll for a moment, but I haven't been able to face her. Somehow she's worse than the other two. Maybe because of some visceral memory of the first time I saw her all those years ago. Maybe because she's Jane's.

I love that my flat is a whole little house, but it does lack storage space. Quilla kindly shares her basement with me and we each have a key. She's got a pile of old suitcases down there, padlocked shut. I've got boxes of books and china, that I still haven't unpacked. A

bag of clothes I can't quite bear to part with.

I like the basement. It's roomy and there's a window at one side which makes it quite light. Quilla could make it into another bedroom if she wanted. But it's good having the storage space.

I carry the box down the basement steps, past Quilla's suitcases. There's something about them sitting there, something about memories perhaps, that makes me turn around and carry the box back upstairs. I don't know why, but I feel almost protective towards the doll. I don't like the thought of her languishing alone in the basement.

A sister for Jemima and Josephine. The same vacant stare. Smith said there'd be one more. I name her Jasmine and settle her on the couch next to the others. I make myself a cup of jasmine tea to celebrate.

The three of them sit there, their lifeless eyes watching. Judging. What did Smith call them? The Weird Sisters? Like in *Macbeth*. I wonder if they're the same as the Moirae: Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. Spin the thread, measure the thread, cut the thread.

'What are you doing here?' I ask them.

I google 'Weird Sisters' and find that weird is related to *wyrd*, an old term for fate, or destiny. How have these three become tangled in my fate?

We make our own fate. We weave it like spiders and get trapped in our webs. Everything we do connects us to our destiny and the destinies of others. We make choices and each choice we make cuts off another option. There are always consequences. The trick is to choose the best ones.

I never meant to fall for Randall. It's hard loving him. It hurts. Sometimes, it's as though there's no one inside him; he's just a shell. Once, after we'd made love here at my flat, he went straight into the lounge and sat with his head in his hands, saying 'What am I doing?' He wouldn't talk to me, just called a taxi and left. I have to keep reminding myself of that first time, the very first

time he came to my house, the sweetest time. How he held me afterwards. I keep thinking, one day it will be like that again. If I just love him enough, I'll have that again.

I record his cooking programmes and watch them when I'm missing him. Basking in the close-ups: his eyes, his mouth, the little gold sleeper he wears in one ear that puts me in mind of pirates. Seeing him flash the smile that makes me weak. Remembering how his body feels against mine, how we move together.

There's a postcard from Dad in the letterbox with a giant pineapple on the front.

*Dear Pikelet*

*How's my favourite younger daughter? Ngairé and me have bought a beaut little house in Coolangatta, but the owners don't want to move out for another two months, so guess what? We've bought ourselves a motor home and we're doing a bit of a tiki tour. We've started with Queensland, then I reckon we'll head for Sydney. Promise to send you a postcard from every state.*

*Love, Dad and Ngairé xxx*

Why aren't I having adventures? I should be travelling. Trying new things.

I always thought I'd make a difference in the world. At school, I read a biography of Elizabeth Fry, the Quaker prison reformer, and I thought I'd do something like that. Making people's lives better. Then, because I was good at art, and a teacher suggested a degree in design, that's what I drifted into. I enjoy it, most days. There's a lot of satisfaction in giving the clients something that's even better than the design they thought they wanted. But is it really making a difference? That someone has a better marketing product?

I work, I drink, I sleep. On increasingly rare occasions, I see

Randall. I am devoid of purpose.

Sometimes I think my function in life might be to make someone happy. To find a man to love and have a family. What job's more important than bringing up children with the best start possible? I can imagine joining the school board and impressing the other parents by designing stunning posters for the annual fair.

Sometimes I let myself daydream about being married to Randall. I'd invite other mothers around for coffee mornings and they'd be envious. We'd have a cleaner, so the place would always be spotless. But I'd do the cooking myself. To give him a break from it. I'd take classes and learn to make my own pasta, Vietnamese dumplings, Szechuan stir fry, millefeuilles. I'd make everything from scratch.

Who am I kidding? The last meal I made was chicken-flavoured instant noodles and I ended up throwing half of it out.

I wake to find myself in a sitting position with my cheek against something cold. I ache all over. It's dark and I'm outside, sitting on an uncomfortably hard surface. It's a while before I work out it's my front doorstep. I'm bursting to go to the toilet. I fumble through my handbag for my key and then I remember. I lost my purse last night – left it in a bar or a taxi, perhaps – and my key is in it. I don't remember getting home but I do remember standing on the doorstep and realising I couldn't get in. And I remember feeling overwhelmed by that and crying, crying into my front door until sleep overcame me.

I was out with Bailey. It was supposed to be a couple of drinks and dinner, but I don't think we ever made it to a restaurant. I remember sitting at the bar on my own for what seemed like ages, while Bailey was off chatting away to people she didn't even know. She'd strike up a conversation with a statue.

At some point, she came back and we moved on to another place where we ended up talking about relationships, about Randall. I've been needing someone to talk to. Someone my own age. I

mean Smith's Smith, but we really feel like different generations. Bailey and I must have been in a cocktail bar by then. There were little umbrellas in our drinks. Very retro.

'Oh my god! How could you not have recognised him the first time you saw him?' she asked. 'He's on telly every bloody week.'

'We met before he got his own show. On my birthday, remember?'

'It sounds like real fireworks between you two.'

Finally, I had her undivided attention. I started saying things I've never told anyone. It must have been a mix of desperation to talk about Randall, and the cocktails. 'I don't think I really knew what sex was until I met him,' I told her. 'I just wish there was more of it. I hardly ever get to see him these days.'

'It's the start of sex I like most,' said Bailey. 'The moment before it actually begins, yeah, when there's all that anticipation and no turning back, and then the next twenty seconds where it's really exciting. After that I lose interest and start wishing he'd hurry up. The best sex I ever had was when I was seventeen. All that premature ejaculation.'

'Give me the marathon any day,' I found myself saying. Once I'd started talking about him, I didn't seem able to stop. 'It's like Randall's on steroids or something. He just keeps on keeping on. For hours. There's not much we haven't done together.'

'Wow, Randall Marshall, ay? He sounds like quite the athlete.'

'I don't know where he gets his energy from. But hey, I'm not complaining.'

Bailey played with the umbrella in her glass. 'Same again?'

'Don't mind if I do.' I remember thinking: what the hell, I'm young and single (sort of), the world's at my feet. While Bailey was at the bar, I reapplied my lipstick, watching my reflection carefully in my compact mirror so I didn't smudge it. Irresistible, I decided. If Randall had been there, he wouldn't have been able to keep his hands off me.

Then Bailey was back and I was drinking more cocktails and

telling her how I loved him and how miserable I was. I remember her saying, ‘God, he sounds like a right wanker.’ At that point, I stormed out of the pub on my own.

My face feels slack; my brain is like soup. It’s freezing on the doorstep, but I’ll just have to wait until daylight and ask Quilla to let me in. In the meantime, I’ll pee in the garden behind the trees. It’s times like this I’m just not sure I want to go on.

‘Everything all right?’ Quilla asks as she hands me the spare key.

‘Fine, thanks.’ My voice is wrecked and I know I look a mess. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the kitchen window and gave myself quite a fright. Before knocking on Quilla’s door, I tried to comb my hair with my fingers and wiped off most of my mascara with a tissue I found in my pocket. But if she realises I’ve spent the night on the doorstep, she’s not letting on.

‘Look after yourself,’ she says.

I run a bubble bath and give myself a stern telling-off. I can’t keep losing things and having blackouts like this. For the next month – no, the next *three* months – I’m not going to drink at all. And I’m going to eat healthily and stop seeing Randall altogether. I imagine my troubles dissolving into the bath water. It’s all going to be okay.

I remember hearing Dad and Smith talking about me one night, when I was off sick from high school. I was missing a lot of school that year. It was after Smith had given up her flat and moved back home to take care of me.

She was supposed to be going overseas with her friend Rose – the trip they’d spent years saving and planning for. Rose’d been round earlier, practically begging Smith to go with her. Smith asked her to wait a year, saying maybe I’d be better by then. But Rose said she was going, with or without her, she didn’t care. They rowed and Rose left. I crept down the passageway to listen to Dad and Smith talking.

‘You’ve got your own life, Marshmallow,’ I heard Dad say. ‘Go away with Rose and have adventures. I’ll look after Selina. We’ll be fine.’

But Smith said, ‘I can’t go, Dad. Not with Selina like this. I could never forgive myself –’ Then she went quiet for a moment. ‘If I was overseas and she died, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.’

Dying. I hadn’t thought that far ahead.

‘She’ll come right soon enough,’ said Dad. ‘And then you can meet up with Rose in Paris or some fancy place and you won’t have missed too much at all.’

I remember going back to bed and turning it around and around in my mind. If I tried my best to get well, Smith would be able to join Rose overseas. But what if she never came back? What if I never saw my sister again?

Maybe I’ll just stop drinking for one month, rather than three. See how it goes. Start small. It’s been three days already. That’s good, isn’t it? Waking up with a clear head, not feeling tired all the time. But I’m dying for a glass of wine.

I’m definitely going to stop seeing Randall. It can’t go on. It won’t go on. I’ll tell him so and that will be the end of it. Then I can start a new phase of my life. A happier and healthier one. I just need to see him once more. To tell him face to face.

I pull the plastic bag of letters out of Jasmine’s box. Maybe it will comfort me, reading what my sister wrote all those years ago. I open an envelope.

*I know how the world began: it began with a kiss.*

*The world before I met you was all in grey. Afterwards, there was colour, and, oh, such colour! Galaxies of colours, a richness and texture I never knew existed. You changed everything.*

Who knew? I always thought Smith was incapable of falling in love. I thought she didn't need it the way we lesser mortals do. I shouldn't be reading her letters; she said she wanted them destroyed. I push the bag under the couch. I can put them out with the rubbish next week.

All morning I've been putting the finishing touches on a rebranding job for Bellingham Wines. Something that'll help them break into the Chinese market. I spent the entire weekend on it and I'm really hoping I've nailed it. The client's coming in this afternoon – some mate of Carlton's I haven't actually met yet. Stuart. Fingers crossed he loves it.

I feel like I've got to the stage where if I keep on playing I'll start to make it worse. 'Come on,' I say to Liz. 'Let's go to the Dining Room.' It's my favourite lunch restaurant and they have a great wine list. She's looking hesitant. It's much harder to get her away from her desk these days.

'You work far too hard,' I tell her. 'And we haven't had lunch together for ages.'

She smiles. 'Go on then. We deserve a treat.'

I'm tired and cross and strung out. I haven't had time to go to the gym in ages. And I've put in so much time trying to get this job right. They're one of DD's more difficult clients.

I haven't seen Randall for nine whole days. I need to see him so I can tell him it's over, but I can't phone him in case Caroline finds out. I have to wait until he contacts me. Why hasn't he?

I know I decided not to drink for a month, but this is just not the time. It would be more stressful not to drink now. It would probably damage my health. I need something to help me chill. After I've finished with Randall, then I'll stop for a month.

The *maitre d'* gives us a cheery hello when we arrive. 'You two ladies are looking fabulous today.' He leads us to my favourite table by the window. I feel better already.

I order the salmon and a Marlborough pinot noir. Liz has a

Moroccan lamb salad and a shiraz. The wine disappears quickly and I order another while I'm waiting for Liz to finish hers. The stress begins to recede. I feel more myself after a couple of drinks. This is the real me. Wine sandpapers the hard edges off the world. It slows me down. I have a little more confidence; I can talk to people more easily.

'Actually, I've got something to tell you,' says Liz. 'But keep it to yourself for now. I don't want to go making a big announcement just yet.'

'I'm all ears.'

'Jeremy and I are engaged.'

'Congratulations! That's fantastic.' I take hold of her hand to look for a ring.

'The ring's being altered. The one he got was a little too big for me. That's why I don't want everyone at work to know yet. Just you.'

'That's really – that's so exciting. I'm very happy for you.' I'm trying hard to believe my own words. How mean-spirited of me to do otherwise.

'We're going to have our honeymoon in Tuscany.'

'Brilliant.'

The rest of lunch is nothing but wedding plans: the gold lettering she's having on the invitations, the smoked eel canapés. Cousins she's never met who are coming over from Beijing.

'Do you speak Chinese?' I ask. Her family's been here since the gold rush, I know that.

'A few words of Cantonese. Very little, really. I'm hoping my cousins speak English. Here, let me show you the reception venue – I've got some pictures on my phone.'

I do my best to smile and look interested. When the waiter takes Liz's coffee order, I ask for another glass of wine.

'Are you sure you should?' asks Liz. 'I'd be asleep at my desk if I drank three glasses of wine over lunch.'

'I'll be fine.' They only ever seem to put a splash in the glass; it's

not like it's full. And I'm feeling so much better, as though I could manage anything.

When the drinks arrive, Liz glances at her watch. 'Didn't you say you had a meeting this afternoon?'

'Shit, you're right!' It's already five past two. The wine guy will be waiting. I knock back the third glass quickly and hurry to our building.

'Carlton's office,' the receptionist tells me when I arrive. Shit, bugger and damn. I need the toilet, but I'll just have to cross my legs.

I'm aware I'm a little breathless as I walk through the door. Carlton's old friend Stuart looks like a walrus. Overstuffed and with a moustache that should be outlawed. 'Ever so sorry I'm late,' I say, taking care to make my words as clear and clipped as I can manage. When I shake his hand, I notice Stuart giving me an odd look. Probably just a perve, I decide. I sit down at Carlton's cream-coloured wooden meeting table, as far away from Mr Walrus as possible, and drop my handbag to the floor beside me.

Damn. I should have stopped off at my desk to fetch the branding portfolio. I also realise I haven't touched up my lipstick since lunch. I smile my widest smile, hoping that will make up for it. Across the table, Carlton is gesturing pointedly at the side of his mouth. I touch my own and find I have a piece of parsley attached to my lip. I can't exactly flick it on to Carlton's floor, so I reach down to slip it into my handbag. But in doing so, I lose my balance and end up half on and half off the chair. The Bellingham walrus starts laughing, a barking guffaw. Carlton stands to help me up. He picks up my handbag. 'Could I see you outside for a moment please, Selina,' he says.

Outside his office, he closes the door and leads me by the elbow towards the lifts. He keeps his voice low and hands me my bag. 'Go home now. Get in a taxi, go straight home, do not pass "Go". You will stay late tomorrow to make up the time.' There's disgust in his tone. 'And I expect you to be sober.'

The landline rings. It'll be Smith. Since Dad and Ngairé left, the only people who ring me on it are telemarketers and my sister. I let the answer phone get it. It's not the first time lately I've pretended not to be home. I never used to. Not with Smith. She leaves a message. Maybe she knows I'm really here. 'I'll call again soon,' she says. 'Just checking everything's okay.'

Everything is emphatically not okay. Not with those three watching me from the couch. Not with the whole Randall and Caroline situation. Not with the possibility of losing my job.

*The day I met you, the world shifted on its axis. Everything was more vivid, time moved in a different way. There was no more sadness in the world; there was only hope. Anything was possible. The day I met you, I knew nothing would ever be the same again. Something had altered. I had arrived at a better place.*

I can't tell Smith I've been reading her letters. She's kept this private so long for a reason and I ought to respect that. I should never have opened them. But how is it that my sister once loved someone so deeply? How is it possible I've never known?

Bailey texts: 'You okay? Call me.'

I call her.

'Sorry I said the famous Randall Marshall's a wanker,' she says.

'Sorry I overreacted.'

She hesitates for a moment. 'You know, it sounds like you're really smitten. But he's just –'

'Just what?'

'It's like he just wants a fuck buddy. You can be that or not be that. None of my business. But don't imagine he's going to leave ... what's her name?'

'Caroline.'

'If he was going to leave her and run off with you, don't you think he'd have done it by now?'

'You don't understand.'

I can feel myself getting teary. What Randall and I have is a rare and precious thing. Had. What we had. I really am going to end it.

'I'm just worried about you, yeah? You don't sound happy.'

'I'm all right.' But as soon as I say it, I feel a tear escape.

'There's such a thing as loving someone too much,' she says.

I can't agree. There's no such thing as too much love. How can there be? There's never enough.

# Quilla

I'm just getting ready for croquet when the retirement village calls. They've misplaced Daisy. Can't locate the daughter.

'This really isn't good enough,' I say. They know Daisy's inclined to do a runner whenever she gets a chance. Still, time to tear strips off them later, when we've tracked her down.

She went missing once last year and was found walking down the motorway by a Samoan family on their way to church. They took her with them and, by all accounts, she had a lovely time. They collect her every Sunday now.

I try Daisy's old street. Shops she would have gone to, parks she may have sat in, churches she could have wandered into. I don't usually set foot inside a church unless it's for a funeral. Which is all too often these days.

I pull over periodically to check in with the retirement village. 'No sign of her yet. I'm just heading towards the zoo.' I'm so angry with them, I could spit.

It's another hour before I find her. Eating an ice cream on a bench in Newtown. Goodness knows how she got it; she hasn't any money on her. I park the car a little way off so as not to alarm her and approach quietly. 'Hello, Daisy. Lovely day, isn't it?'

Her skirt's covered in mud and one of her shoes is missing. Physically, she seems fine, at least, if a little anxious. 'I'm ready to go home now.'

I guess we'll never know what adventures she's had today. 'You gave us a fright. We didn't know where you were.'

'I'm here, doctor.'

'Of course you are.'

I've come to rely on Daisy. Being there when I need someone to talk to. I don't know what I'd do without her.

One of the good things about being old is having more time to think. Not that I'm not busy. There's the film society on Mondays, croquet on Thursdays, delivering meals on wheels twice a week, and one or two wonderful friends to catch up with. But Sundays are just for me. My treat. I sit here, in this room I love, and look at Pierce's magnificent painting of the goldfish while I sip at a glass of kir or absinthe. And I think.

When you're old, the 'known' of your life is so much greater than the 'unknown'. There's still time to do some of the things you always wanted to do and maybe time to undo some of the damage you've wrought along the way. I have only that one regret.

This room. I think I always longed for it. A quiet space that's mine alone. To decorate as I see fit. No husbands or children or

flatmates to consider. No cats or dogs to shed hair and scratch the furniture. Mine.

I've had seven husbands, four of them my own. I could never really settle after meeting Pierce. No one could match him. No one ever will. After we went our separate ways, everyone else seemed dull and grey.

Oh, I've had fun in my day. I went a bit wild at times. Too many smoky jazz clubs, too much rock 'n' roll.

I remember when I was a child and the American soldiers were in town. My mother's younger sister, Maggie, was staying with us, working in a bank, and every week she'd go out dancing. I loved watching her getting ready, pinching her cheeks to make them red, drawing a stripe on the back of her legs to make it look as though she was wearing seamed stockings. I couldn't wait to be old enough to have my turn. And the American boys she brought home for dinner were so polite. Calling Mum 'Ma'am' and bringing bunches of flowers. They were so handsome, I wanted to be grown up instantly and marry them all. War is a terrible evil, but people will always find small comforts where they can.

She never felt like an aunt; there were only ten years between us. Poor Maggie. That was probably the happiest time of her life. After that it was a bully of a husband and an endless series of miscarriages.

I lost them both in the same year: Maggie, then Mum. And five years later, my last husband, Harry, went too.

Is Pierce still alive? Oh, I do hope so.

I never slept with Pierce. I wish I had; I wish he'd been my first. I often wonder what that would have been like. But because it never happened, it will always be perfect in my imagination.

Real live sex, ultimately, was something of a let-down. I always imagined a mystical kind of merging, two souls entwining, reaching a higher plane together. What it turned out to be was a whole lot of fun and passion and pleasure. But I always had a sense that it could have been more. Maybe I should have taken up

meditation. Maybe I was looking in the wrong place for nirvana.

I haven't always been a good person. But I'm trying to make up for it where I can. It's never too late, after all.

## Selina

I've tried every way I know to get Randall out of my head. I even went on a blind date with one of Liz's friends, thinking at least it would take my mind off Randall for one evening. But it didn't. I just kept wishing it was Randall sitting opposite me in the café. Liz's friend was a perfectly nice guy, everything I should have wanted – funny, considerate, attractive. Partner in a software company. The only thing wrong with him was that he wasn't Randall. At the end of the evening, when he asked if I'd like to go to a movie the following week, I told him I wasn't ready, that I was

still getting over a break-up. It was almost true.

I do silly, schoolgirl things. I write my name out as Mrs Selina Marshall. I pick out engagement rings in jewellers' windows. And worse. I've done worse things. Things I'd rather not think about in the cold, sober light of day.

*Let me tell you about this love. This is not safe, secure love. This is wild love. Instinct. Urge. Passion, yes. The love a falcon has for flying. Love that pays no heed to consequence, that flows where it must, regardless of whether it may. We belonged together; you were a part of myself I had somehow become separated from, that I needed to reabsorb. Not having you in my life was not an option.*

I can't ignore my sister forever. When the landline rings, I know it's her. Perhaps I won't have to mention her letters.

'How are things?' Smith asks.

'There's been another doll. In one of the boxes at Dad's.'

She goes quiet for a moment. 'That old porcelain one of Mum's? I thought we gave that away. To one of Aunty Vi's kids.'

'Well, it was in the box. What's happening, Smith? Where are they coming from?'

I can almost hear her thinking. Wheels turning slowly in her brain. My sister doesn't do anything fast. 'And you met Randall just after the first doll came?' she asks finally.

'A couple of weeks later. On my birthday. He was being Thor.'

'Thor.'

It sounds ridiculous when Smith says it.

'I was Freya.'

'Od,' she says, eventually.

'You think I'm odd?'

'The god who was Freya's real love. His name was Od.'

'What are you saying? That I shouldn't be with Randall because Freya shouldn't be with Thor?'

‘She had a number of lovers. Thor could have been one of them.’

What if Smith’s right? What if my own ‘Od’ is still out there and Thor is just a distraction? Oh, this is silly.

‘Anyway, what’s that got to do with the dolls? You haven’t said where you think they’re coming from. You were right about there being more. Do you think that’s it now?’

‘I have no idea who could have left the first two,’ says Smith, ‘but I have a hunch there won’t be any more.’ I hope she’s right. Smith’s not one of those New-Agey types, but sometimes she knows things other people don’t. Like who’s on the other end of the phone before anyone picks it up. Maybe she’s just more observant than most people.

There’s a moment of silence. I have my fingers crossed, literally, that she doesn’t say anything about the letters.

‘How’s work?’ she asks.

It’s Randall’s fault. He showed up unexpectedly last night, just as I was about to go to bed. I was so surprised and pleased. I’d been fully intending to finish with him, but I just couldn’t resist. Besides, we hadn’t had sex for weeks.

I run to the bus stop only to see the bus pulling away. Shit. I slept right through my alarm and didn’t wake until after nine.

I feel sick when Carlton calls me into his office. It crosses my mind that he’s heard about me and Randall. But how? The personnel adviser’s already in there, looking smug under her fake, sympathetic smile.

‘Look, there’s no easy way to say this,’ Carlton begins. ‘This is the second time this week you haven’t shown up until almost ten. And after that – that incident in my office ...’ He almost spits. ‘I don’t care what you do in your own time, but when it starts to interfere with your job, it becomes my business.’

My stomach lurches.

‘I expect you at work by 8.30 every morning. I expect you to be sober all through the day and I don’t ever want to see you see

falling down drunk at work again. No more drinking at lunchtime. No more drinking on the premises. And that includes Friday night work drinks. You can consider this your first official warning, Selina. If anything like this happens again, you're out the door.'

To start with, all I can think is, thank god. No one knows about Randall, after all. I'm safe. Then I start to feel ashamed. 'I'm sorry, Carlton. No more drinking at lunchtime, I promise.'

The personnel adviser leans forward in her chair to hand me a letter. 'If you have a *problem*, Selina, we'd be happy to refer you to some suitable *professional help* through our employee assistance programme.' Her voice is dripping with sympathy.

'Thank you so much,' I say. 'I'll give that some thought.'  
Condescending bitch.

I'm going to do it. This is my wake-up call. I'm going to finish with Randall once and for all. Caroline's welcome to him. I'm going to be the model employee. I'll be the first one at work every day. I'll wow Carlton with my commitment and professionalism.

And I'm going to be celibate for the rest of the year. Give myself time to get over Randall and then move on. I was so close to doing it, but when he showed up at my door saying he'd had a bad day and he just wanted to see me, I thought, well, I can't turn him away when he needs me.

I'll just have to wait for a better time. I'll do it regardless. Then I'll go out and find myself a nice, unattached man and settle down. Maybe I could give Liz's friend a call. Or try Tinder. I just need to get myself sorted.

I almost like the dolls now, in a perverse kind of way. They're watching me, sure, but I can accept their scrutiny. And it's a bit like having company. Takes some of the loneliness away.

I haven't heard from Randall in nearly a fortnight. I need to speak to him, so I can finish this – whatever it is between us. I know that's the right thing to do. I know, in the long run, I'll be happier for it.

I'm soft proofing a brochure I designed for Paine Engineering's coastal protection services. I think I must have used the wrong colour mode – the images look desaturated. But it's more than the colour that's weak. This is no better than a rehash of work I've done before.

Design usually comes so easily to me ... I get in the zone, the rest of the world disappears, some kind of alchemy happens and the next thing I know, there's a finished product that the client loves. It seems to have nothing to do with me; it's as though I channel something from another dimension. Today the channel is blocked. I can't seem to concentrate properly.

When I finish with Randall, maybe my creativity will come back.

Some days the thought of not seeing him is barely tolerable. But I'll just have to ride it out.

I read on some website you're supposed to have at least two nights a week where you don't drink at all. I'm going to adopt that from now on. Liz and I went to a movie after work and got a cheap-and-cheerful afterwards at a Malaysian place off Cuba Street. No wine. It's the start of my new life and I feel great.

Maybe I'll just drink on Friday and Saturday nights and that way I'll be going to work with a clear head every day. I won't be so tired all the time. I won't be sitting in the toilet cubicle with my head on the cistern and my feet propped up on the sanitary disposal unit trying to catch a few zeds.

And I'll go to the gym before work every morning. But never more than once a day. By the end of the year, I'm going to be in perfect shape, inside and out.

*My love for you is a chandelier. It glitters and sparkles, oh so fine in the dim light of the café, sparkling to a backdrop of Cuban music, the mural with its old cars and buildings. Oh, you catch the light, catch my eye, I catch fire, just at the thought of you.*

*My love is a chandelier.*

The boy from next door's running through the back garden when I get home, his hair wild as ever. What did Smith say his name was? Kahu?

'Where's the other lady?' he asks, head to one side, considering me like a curious fantail.

'She went home,' I tell him.

'She was nice,' he says.

And I'm not. I'm just a disappointment to everyone. 'She lives in Tākaka.'

He's still standing there, looking puzzled.

'In the South Island.' I try to think what I could say to him next. 'Would you like a biscuit?' I think I've got a packet from when the girl guides came around.

He shakes his head. 'I hope the other lady comes back soon.'

So do I.

## Smith

It's ages since I've spoken to Aunty Vi. She sounds pleased to hear from me and I make a mental note to ring more often. 'Can't complain,' she says, when I ask how everyone is. It's what she'd say in the middle of a tornado. I tell her I'm fine. I don't feel like talking about Katie right now.

'I'm looking for Mum,' I say.

'Oh yes?' If she thinks it's a bad idea, she keeps that thought to herself.

'I wondered if you'd ever heard from her.'

There's a pause. 'A long time ago. She wrote me a letter, but I'm sorry, Sophronia, I never even opened it. I was that angry with her. Leaving you and your sister like that.'

'You don't remember where she sent it from? The town on the sender's address?'

'Somewhere overseas, I think. Sorry, I can't remember more than that. It was a long time ago.'

'Dad knows I'm looking. He's okay with it.'

'We got a postcard of a koala the other day. Here, let me get it. "Me and Ngaire bought ourselves matching Akubra hats yesterday and now we look like fair dinkum Aussies." Fair dinkum Aussies! They must be having a ball.'

'They deserve it,' I say.

'You're not wrong there. He's worked hard all his life.'

After I hang up, I feel oddly comforted.

'Don't worry about Ragnar,' I tell Katie. 'He'll be okay.' We're dealing with all the difficult things now. We both know her time's short. She's finally accepted she needs a hospice, proper care. Aroha's driving her there tomorrow. I packed her suitcases this morning while the nurse was helping her shower. It was a struggle keeping the tears from making everything damp.

'Just be there for him,' says Katie. Her voice seems weaker each day. 'The way I'd be if I could. Make him banana bread. Help him be the very best Ragnar he could possibly be. I don't care if he turns out to be an astronaut, a politician or a beach bum. I just want him to be happy and know he's loved.'

Just loving him. That's the easiest thing.

## Selina

I wake on Tuesday morning feeling like death on toast. I reach over to my alarm clock to find it's already after nine. Shit. I can't show up late after last time; I'll have to call in sick. I doubt I could make it to the bus stop without throwing up anyway. This is the worst hangover I've had in weeks. I haven't seen my cell phone since Saturday night. I've rung the police station and every bar I remember going into but no one's handed it in. I can't get a new one until I've paid off some of my credit card. I shouldn't have bought those Christian Louboutin stilettos on Trade Me. I

could've flown to New York for what I forked out for them.

I call work on the landline and speak to the receptionist. 'I think I'm coming down with some kind of tummy bug.'

'You take care now,' she says. 'You sound dreadful.' Is that genuine concern in her voice or sarcasm? Right now, I don't care.

My head hurts and so does the side of my face. I drag myself to the bathroom mirror. My reflection shocks me. On the right-hand side, my face is grazed from hairline to chin. What did I do last night? Was I spinning to Sufi music? So fast I fell over into the furniture? I'm lucky I missed the gas heater.

Then suddenly, I feel terribly ill and find myself on my knees being violently sick into the toilet bowl.

I spend the day lying in bed with the curtains drawn, trying to piece together the events of last night. I remember Randall coming around and drinking wine with me. I remember the sex and afterwards thinking it was perfunctory, hardly worth bothering. I remember telling him we had to stop seeing each other and him not arguing.

I take the following day off work as well and spend most of it on the couch with the dolls, curled up under the duvet, reading Smith's letters. I don't feel up to anything else; I can't even face the TV. And I'm not missing my smartphone. It would just be an intrusion right now.

I still don't feel right. The graze on my face is no better; it actually looks worse.

Is it really over with me and Randall? It should be a relief, but all I feel is a terrible ache for him. If he contacts me again, what will I do?

I don't think I'm strong enough for this.

Drinking is such a dichotomy. At the time I feel so happy, so assured, more like myself. The next day there's just this sense of shame and dread. Even when I've done nothing wrong.

Carlton phones me in the evening, the last voice I want to

hear. 'You're already on a warning, Selina. And your sick leave has well and truly run out. Unless you have a life-threatening disease and a doctor's certificate to prove it, I expect to see you at work tomorrow. On time.' His tone is just short of contempt.

'Of course,' I say. I'll just have to tell people I've had a fall. It's probably true.

Caroline's not around, which is a relief. Maybe she's up in Auckland again, wooing more corporate clients. I keep my head down, try to focus on the endless stream of emails. My inbox is drowning. It's amazing how many you get in two days.

'Did you get my text yesterday?' says Liz at afternoon tea, when she's finished grilling me about my grazed face. I've been telling people I tripped over someone's cat.

'I've lost my phone. What did it say?'

'It's Caroline's fiancé. The TV chef. Randall Marshall.'

My heart tumbles. 'What about him?'

'No one's seen him since Monday. Caroline's beside herself.'

'Maybe he just needed some time out.' Maybe he's upset that I told him it was over. Maybe he realised I meant more to him than he thought. Maybe he'll come round tonight and say it's me he loves. No, of course he won't. I shouldn't be so silly.

'Funny time to wander off,' says Liz. 'He's supposed to start filming a new series next week. Caroline told us at the Friday Frights, said he was really looking forward to it.'

This stings. He hasn't mentioned any new series to me. 'I'm sure he'll turn up.'

'Caroline's reported him missing. She's taken time off to look for him.'

The rest of the day, I have a chant running through my head: *Please let Randall be all right. Please let Randall be all right.* As though that will ward off anything more sinister.

The next day I notice Caroline's back in her office, deep in con-

versation with Carlton. I hear her say, 'I think he might have been having an affair. There've been signs.' And I hear her start to cry.

I am the worst person in New Zealand.

There's an item about him on the evening news. I guess that's an advantage of being a TV personality – ordinary people probably disappear all the time and no one notices. I'm starting to get really worried now. It seems none of his friends or family has heard from him. His cell phone hasn't been used and nor have his Eftpos and credit cards. Not since the night he went missing. The night he was at my flat. The night I can barely remember.

From the television, Caroline's voice cracks when she begs for anyone who has any information to please contact the police.

I have to put my lipstick on three times the next morning before I get it right. I do my best to cover up the graze on my face with thick make-up, but it's still visible. I wish I could remember what happened.

I spend so long on my face that I almost miss my bus. It's worth it, though. If I don't feel good about myself as I leave the house, it affects me all day and I can't focus properly. One morning I forgot to put my earrings in and I had to dash out to the nearest jeweller's to buy myself an emergency pair. Now I keep them in my desk drawer at work, just in case. Small gold sleepers – they match anything.

The weekend drags. I spin to Nusrat; I take myself for walks; nothing stops the worry. I call Randall's phone. Straight to voicemail. I think about going to his Facebook page but his profile picture is of him and Caroline. The same photo they keep on their bedside table. I can't face it.

Mid-morning on Monday, two police officers arrive at reception. One woman, one man. Everyone stops work and turns to watch –

a rare excitement, the sniff of a story.

Maybe they've found Randall. Maybe they're here to tell Caroline he's safe and well. But if he was all right, why would they be here? I daren't think the worst.

Carlton comes out of his office and speaks to them. They show him a piece of paper. He looks serious, examining it, then surprised. He walks straight past Caroline's office, the police at his heels. Office eyes track them. Carlton stops when he gets to my cubicle. 'These two officers would like a word with you, Selina,' he says. 'About Randall Marshall. You can use my office.'

I can barely follow them; my legs are shaking. Every face is on me as I walk past Caroline's office and into Carlton's. The female officer closes the door behind us. She's tall, with a blonde ponytail. Young. They both sit down at Carlton's cream table, opposite me. I feel sick.

'How do you know Mr Marshall?' the woman asks.

'I – well, I ...' My voice is barely more than a whisper. 'He's engaged to Caroline. One of the deputy directors.'

'I'll ask you again,' she says. 'How do you know him?'

'He came to the office for a drink once. On a Friday.' My heart's thumping so hard, it scares me. My mouth has lost all moisture.

The other cop's about my age, looks like a rugby player. He points to the same piece of paper he showed Carlton. 'This is a print-out of Mr Marshall's cell phone calls the day he went missing.' He shows me a number on the sheet. 'Is this your work number? Your direct dial?'

They already know it is. 'Yes.' Randall phoned me at work three times last Monday. The last day anyone saw him.

'Why was he phoning you, Selina?'

'Have you found him?'

'Where do you think we'd find him?' says the male cop.

'How should I know?'

He looks over at the woman.

'When did you last see Mr Marshall?' she asks.

'I haven't seen him.' I can feel the panic rising.

'We know you've been talking to him on the phone,' she says. 'One of these calls lasted six minutes. Don't make things more difficult for yourself.'

I can't speak. But I know she's right. It's pointless lying to the police. It's only going to make everything worse.

'You saw him that night, didn't you? The night he disappeared.'

I nod.

She's waiting for more. 'Where was this?'

I have to tell them. My heart's pounding and everything suddenly seems surreal. It's as though I'm floating above myself, watching it all happen from a distance. 'He came round to my flat.'

There's a gleam of something in her eye. Triumph, perhaps. 'What time?'

'He arrived in the evening, after work. Six-thirty, maybe.'

She writes in her notebook. 'Did he stay the night?'

I shake my head. 'I'm not sure what time he left.'

'You're aware we've been asking for people to come forward if they saw him that day?' the male cop says.

'Yes,' I whisper. I feel like I'm about to throw up.

'But you didn't come forward – did you, Selina? Why was that?'

'He wasn't supposed to ... no one was supposed to know he was there. He didn't want Caroline to know.' It sounds so sordid saying it out loud.

'That's a nasty graze you've got on your face there, Selina,' the female cop says. 'How did you get that?'

'I can't remember.'

'Looks like you've been in a fight,' she says.

'No, of course not. I don't think so. I mean –' Randall and me fighting? It's not possible. He's never been violent. 'I must have tripped or something.'

'Tripped?' She raises her eyebrows.

I can't be sure of anything. 'I'm sorry. I don't remember.'

‘You don’t remember.’ The male cop leans forward on his elbows. ‘When did it happen – this graze?’

I’ll have to tell them. I’m in enough trouble as it is. ‘That night. Last Monday.’

‘This isn’t looking very good, is it, Selina?’ he says. ‘You seem to be the last person to have seen Mr Marshall before he “disappeared”. He wasn’t supposed to be at your flat and you have a facial injury you can’t explain. I think perhaps you’d better come down to the station and make a statement.’

‘A statement? Do I need a lawyer?’

This can’t be happening.

‘Do you think you need a lawyer?’ he asks.

‘Am I under arrest?’

‘What do you think we’d be arresting you for, Selina?’

I have no answer. The female cop says, ‘We’d just like to ask you a few questions. To help us work out what happened to Mr Marshall. You do want to help us, don’t you?’

I nod. Of course I do. Of course I want him found. ‘Can I get my bag?’

She follows me to my desk and everyone watches as they escort me to the lift. I just want to be dead. I want to be dead and for this not to be real. I try to avoid catching Caroline’s eye as we pass her office, but she’s waiting in the doorway and she touches my shoulder to stop me. ‘Do you know something about Randall?’ she asks, clearly puzzled.

Words won’t form. I can only look at my shoes. As I step into the lift with the cops, I hear her saying, ‘Oh my god. *Selina?*’

The interview at the police station feels like it’s never going to end. ‘Tell me again, Selina, about that night. You haven’t told us everything that happened, have you? We think you’ve missed a few things out.’

‘I have told you everything. Everything I can remember.’

‘You were the last one to see Randall, weren’t you?’

‘Have you found something? He’s all right, isn’t he? Tell me he’s okay.’

Someone brings me a cup of tea. My hands are shaking so much, I spill some on the dull, grey carpet.

‘You seem very agitated Selina, why is that?’

The world has stopped making sense.

‘How did he leave your house that night? Did he drive? Did he leave on foot?’

‘I can’t remember.’ They look annoyed with me. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Well, how did he usually arrive at your house?’

At least I know the answer to this. ‘By taxi. He always comes by taxi. He doesn’t drive because we usually have a drink together.’

The female cop makes a note. ‘I’ll check the taxi companies.’

I hope this is useful. I hope this will help them find him.

‘And approximately what time did he leave, Selina?’

I shake my head.

‘You can’t remember? That’s very convenient, isn’t it? There’s a lot you can’t remember.’

I want this to be over. I don’t know how to deal with it.

‘You know what happened that night, don’t you, Selina? Did you kill Randall Marshall?’

No.

‘You were angry with Randall, weren’t you, Selina? He wanted to finish with you and you couldn’t let him go.’

No. How could they even think this?

‘He treated you badly, like a doormat. He expected you to come running when he called but he was never available when you wanted him. I’ve got every sympathy with you, Selina. He chipped away at your self-esteem until you just snapped, isn’t that right?’

No.

‘You couldn’t bear the thought of him getting married – could you, Selina? Of Caroline having him all to herself. You couldn’t take it any more.’

No.

I can't get the words out. I just keep shaking my head.  
No, no, no, no, no.

I sit staring at the three dolls on the couch, their accusing faces. I don't think I've moved since I got home from the police station and in the meantime, a bright afternoon has faded to the dullness of evening.

Could Randall have hurt me in some way? Could I have hurt him? I can't believe I ever would, but I have hardly any memory of that night. I was already drunk by the time he got here. If I could just piece it together in my mind ...

How could I live with myself if I've hurt him? How could I live?

I just want him to be found, to know he's safe. I don't care if I never see him again or if he and Caroline wind up living happily ever after. He can't just be gone.

Nothing makes sense. One minute he's a warm body in my bed; the next, he's vanished. My fingers remember the feel of his chest. I keep thinking of his scent – always so fresh and clean. I don't know the name of the aftershave he wears. I don't even know that.

Carlton phones me at home. A disembodied voice from what seems like miles away. 'Under the circumstances, I'm putting you on special leave, effective immediately, while we work out the next steps.' He says it as though the next steps will be crushing me under his shoe. 'I won't put Caroline through the trauma of having to look at you every day.'

I look at the postcard of the giant pineapple stuck to my fridge. I want my dad. I want to be a little girl again. I don't even know where he is right now. They could be anywhere in the whole of Oz.

If you remember something a particular way, then that memory has its own truth. It doesn't matter whether that's exactly what happened; it becomes something else which is just as real. Sometimes I believe that. And other times I think the opposite:

that truth is absolute, that the only thing that matters is fact. *The suspect proceeded towards the victim in a northerly fashion. Her demeanour was purposeful. She raised the knife ...*

When there's a knock at my door and I open it to find the police there brandishing a search warrant, I wish I hadn't been drinking. I can only imagine how I look. And the dishes haven't been done for a week. When they find Randall's earring under my bed and deposit it with tweezers into a plastic bag, I know there's more trouble to come.

It's the not knowing. If I'll ever hear his voice again, feel the warmth of his hands, touch his cheek. I know we broke up, but still ...

It's not knowing if Randall has a tomorrow, or even a today. It's not knowing if he'll always be part of yesterday.

My mind won't shut down. The possibilities keep churning through. Did he snap from the stress? Did he just think: Bigger it, I need time out? He could be in a hut in the Tararuas or at a mate's place in some remote country town with no cell phone reception. Just chilling. Working out what to do next.

Or maybe he's hit his head and has amnesia. Can't remember his name or where he's from yet, but is lying in hospital ... and one day soon, he'll start remembering.

Or, god forbid, he's been in an accident and is in a coma. Or he's just come out of the coma and is going to recover fully but he can't speak properly yet.

Maybe Randall feels trapped by his impending marriage to Caroline and he's realised he needs something different. Someone different. But isn't ready to face up to it all – Caroline's disappointment, her family's anger, the scrutiny of the press.

The other scenarios, the ones that wake me in the middle of the night, I just can't bear to think about.

Everyone at work knows now. What must they think of me? I'm glad Carlton told me to stay home. How can I ever go back?

Please, Randall, don't be dead. Please, please Randall, don't be

dead, don't be dead, don't be dead.

*You kissed me and our kiss was so soft and so tender. It lasted a year. One wonderful, sun-filled year when everything was better and my whole being filled up with so much joy, I thought I might float away. You were my first real love. You were why I finally understood what it meant to love.*

Until I found the letters, it had never occurred to me that Smith would understand completely how it is to love someone. It's a comfort. Knowing she's felt what I've felt. I'm not so alone.

Not working is the most terrible shock. I thought it would feel like a holiday, a welcome break. But instead I feel useless and guilty. I walk towards the Brooklyn shops for something to do. Maybe I'll go for a coffee at the picture theatre. The other people out on the streets are too old, too sick or too busy with children to work. I've failed. I no longer matter.

I look up at the wind turbine at the top of the hill. All that churning. At least it's got a purpose.

A man passes me in the street, a man wearing Randall's aftershave. It hits me in the face; I reel. I have the urge to stop him and ask him what brand it is, so I can buy a bottle. Tears well up, blinding me. I have to sit down. I stumble to a low wall and sit on it while my sorrow falls like a fountain. A woman with white hair asks if I'm okay and I say yes. Of course I say yes. What else can I say?

It's just not fair. Not fair that some random guy can walk around the streets of Wellington smelling like Randall. Not fair that he isn't here, that I might never see him again. It's not just him that's gone, it's all my daydreams. That one day he'd leave Caroline and realise it was me he wanted all along. It's as though a relationship is a person too. I lost Randall and I lost what we made together.

What I want most in the world, more than anything else I can

imagine, is to have him in my bed. I think of the little things, the way his eyelashes curl, the shape of his fingers. I can't bear to think he could be lying cold somewhere, that he could have fallen and hurt himself, that he could be crawling to get help, that he could have lost consciousness.

Somehow I stumble home and close the door behind me. I pick up Jasmine and hold her tightly in my arms. I don't know how to stop sobbing. It's as though my whole body has become the pain of loss. I don't know anything else.

I've decided to take myself out for a drink this evening. An escape. It's the first time I've been out of the house in days. The only people I've spoken to lately have been cops. I pair a black NOM\*D dress with a lamb-leather Kate Sylvester jacket I bought online and paint on as happy a face as I can manage.

It's only a half-hour walk into town through Central Park. It's raining a little but I don't care; it suits my mood. I go barefoot, carrying my stilettos until I get to my favourite Cuba Street bar.

I order a wine from the friendly barman – they know me in here – and find myself a table. The tablecloths always remind me of glitter balls and I love how there's red velvet everywhere. It's a cross between a David Lynch movie and an old-fashioned nightclub. Maybe there'll be a band on later.

Before long, I'm sipping on my third pinot noir and waiting for a toasted sandwich, the first thing I'll have eaten all day. They do the best fillings. Peppered mackerel, spaghetti and ricotta is my current favourite. I wonder what Randall would think of that. I wonder what he's eating.

There aren't many bars I feel comfortable coming to on my own, but this place is very cruisy. I still feel as though everyone's looking at me, but a couple more glasses and I'll stop caring. Already it's the best I've felt in ages.

The bar's filling, livening up. I always feel safe here. Outside too, even at night. Even if people are weaving around the street

or passing out in the gutter. Everyone on Cuba Street could be a new friend. After all, this is where I met Bailey all those years ago.

The DJ's good tonight. Maybe I'll dance. I can't help wishing that Randall were here and we were dancing. That he'd take me in his arms and twirl me around until the world blurred and there was only the two of us, lost in each other. I've always had a secret hope that one day we'd dance together. Go out in public holding hands.

I'm pleased when I spot a familiar face – it's Liz with her fiancé, Jeremy. I catch her eye and wave. She's a little awkward when she comes over. Maybe she feels bad for not being in touch.

'How are you doing?' Her smile seems forced.

'Oh, you know. Can't complain.' I gesture to the vacant chairs at my table. 'Join me.'

She looks trapped. 'Just for a moment, then. We're just having a quick one on our way to dinner.' She turns to Jeremy. 'I'd love a sauvignon blanc, sweetie.' He wanders off to the bar, but not before placing a kiss on the top of her head. I'm overcome by such a surge of unexpected jealousy, I could tip the contents of my glass over her. But I'm not going to waste a good pinot noir.

'So, how's work?' I feel reckless.

'Same old,' she says.

'Missing me?'

'Look, Selina –' She's struggling with something. 'I don't condone – I mean, I'm engaged myself and I'd hate it if ... Caroline's Caroline, but, you know –?'

She's making a pig's ear of this.

Liz runs her fingers through her hair. 'Look, you can't turn back the clock, what's happened's happened. And I know you must be going through hell.' This is remarkably inarticulate for Liz. She's one of our best copywriters. I've never heard this many clichés in one breath. She glances round the bar. 'Oh god, Selina, I'm so sorry about Randall. I can't imagine – I mean, I know you must be incredibly worried for him.' She looks really, genuinely

sympathetic. In spite of myself, the tears come again, and I'm washed away in a great drunken waterfall of misery.

I need air. I grab my jacket, push past Liz and start walking. I pause to listen to a busker singing a song I used to love: 'Creep'. I sing along with him. When the song ends, I put twenty bucks in his guitar case as though it's a wishing well.

If Randall's alive, I'll just be happy with that. It'll be enough to know that he exists somewhere. With Caroline, if that's what he wants.

If Randall's alive, I'll stop drinking.

If Randall's alive, I'll never try to contact him again. If Randall's alive, I'll just bow out of his life gracefully.

If Randall's alive, I'll be a better person. I'll donate to the Foodbank every time I go grocery shopping. I'll sponsor a child. I'll join Sea Shepherd and save whales.

Why don't I do these things anyway? Why does my life mean nothing? What is the point of me?

It was probably a mistake turning on my laptop and reading the news, but at least I learn something. A taxi company has a record of dropping him off at my flat – *the home of an associate* – but there's no trace of him leaving. They're appealing for people to check in their sheds and back gardens.

There's a thick patch of bush right at the far end of the property that I never go into and, as far as I know, Quilla never does either. What if Randall missed his footing in the dark and tripped over and he's been lying there, unable to call for help. It's a long shot, I know, but I'm feeling desperate. Now the idea's in my head, I feel compelled to go and check.

The scrub is so dense I have to fight my way through it. But even though it's thick, it's only a narrow patch. No one could get lost or stuck in here. What was I thinking? The cops have been all over the garden anyway.

A scrap of paper hooked on a twig catches my eye. For a second,

I wonder if it's a message from Randall. What if he's gone away somewhere and he's waiting for me to join him? I try to read it but the paper's torn and the ink's run. I can only make out a couple of words: 'my dear ... sorry I ... please can we ... love'. I know it's not from Randall. He would never call me 'my dear', and it must have been in the garden for ages. But silly as it sounds, it was a comfort to imagine for a moment that the note could be from him. To imagine him waiting.

My landline wakes me. My head's throbbing but I answer it, in case it's Randall. It's Bailey. 'Selina, I've been trying you for days, but –'

'I lost my cell phone. I haven't replaced it yet.'

'Anyway, um, I just saw the latest *Goss* magazine. Oh my god. I'm really sorry.'

'The what?'

'There's an article. About you and Randall Marshall. Look, I think it might be my fault.'

'Have they found Randall?'

'I didn't realise she was a journalist, Selina, I swear. I was just talking to her at a friend's engagement party, and ... I honestly had no idea where she worked, yeah, or I would never have told her. I didn't find out until today.'

'I don't understand.'

'You'd better have a look. I think they've got a website. And, um, you might want to delete your Facebook page as well. People can be really cruel. I'm so sorry, Selina. Look, I have to go.'

I open my laptop, find the magazine site. There it is:

IS THIS THE LAST WOMAN  
TO SEE RANDALL MARSHALL?

The photo of me is not the most flattering. Bailey posted it on my Facebook page last year, after a big night out. I've got a large blue

cocktail in one hand and my mascara's smeared. The camera flash is unforgiving: my skin looks blotchy, my lipstick's too bright and you can see where I spilled my drink down my Noa Noa top. I try to read the article, but I can't seem to take it in. There's something in there about how I work with Caroline and something about helping police with their enquiries.

I make the mistake of scrolling down to the comments. 'Home-wrecker' is the kindest. A number of people want to see me die of a terrible disease.

I go back to bed and pull the pillow over my head. It doesn't make anything better.

## Quilla

I've had the police around all morning, searching the property and asking questions about Selina. 'She's a good tenant,' I tell them, when they've finished blundering through my pelargoniums. 'Quiet, no trouble. Always pays her rent on time.'

They show me a photograph of the chef, the young man who's gone missing. 'Have you ever seen Mr Marshall on your property?' the policewoman asks. She can't be more than fifteen.

'I don't spy on my tenants.'

'A man is missing, Ms Phillips. It would really help us.'

I take pity on her. She's doing her best. 'I saw him walking down the pathway towards the flat once. And another time, getting into a taxi as I was coming home from the film society.'

'Did you ever speak to him?'

'No.' He had the air of someone who didn't want to be seen, I remember that.

'Do you know what the relationship was between Mr Marshall and your tenant?'

'No.'

'She never spoke about him?'

'Selina rents a flat from me, that's all. Occasionally we chat, but not about her private life.'

'How has she seemed to you lately?'

'I haven't seen her for a while.'

I let them look around the garden again and open up the basement. It occurs to me to make a joke about having a few dead husbands buried under the floorboards, but fortunately, I manage to refrain.

Poor Selina. Her photograph's been splashed all over the place. I get my news from the internet these days; it's more up to date. I haven't had a television in years. Someone found a photograph of Selina on her Facebook page apparently, and now she must be one of the most familiar faces in New Zealand. WHAT DOES SHE KNOW ABOUT RANDALL'S DISAPPEARANCE? the headlines say. SECRET AFFAIR GONE HORRIBLY WRONG. Gossip and speculation.

After the police come the reporters. 'Can you tell us about Selina?' some idiot boy asks when I answer the door. There's a veritable infestation of them all over my property. I push past and head down the path towards Selina's flat. A beardy photographer is snapping away outside her kitchen window and some ghastly woman with helmet hair is banging on her door. This is insufferable. 'Get off my property right now,' I tell them, 'or I'm calling the police.'

'We'd like to put Selina's side of the story.'

I hold up my cell phone and start dialling. They disappear back up the path. By this afternoon, no doubt, there'll be a photo of Selina's flat on the internet captioned 'Randall's love nest'. No wonder I haven't seen the poor girl all week.

One of Selina's friends must have been talking to reporters. It's all coming out. RANDY RANDALL'S SECRET MISTRESS. CHEF'S SAUCY LOVE LIFE. I try not to read it, but it's difficult to avoid. Poor girl. I don't judge; how can I? It was only in my final marriage that I learnt to be faithful. He was a good man, Harry, and it just wasn't worth the trouble any more.

When I was younger, I didn't see any reason to deprive myself. And I loved them, the men. All of them, in my way. What I had with one seemed to be totally independent of what I had with another. I told myself I was devoted to the pursuit of pleasure. But it wasn't all pleasure; it was rows and deceit and guilt. When my husbands found out, as they inevitably did, and complained, as they inevitably did, I'd divorce them and start up fresh with someone new. It took me a long time to learn not to be so selfish.

My mother always shook her head over the failed marriages, not that I ever told her why they'd failed. 'You expect too much,' she used to say. 'Marriages are a lot of give and take.'

I only fell pregnant once, and I lost the baby five months in. Maybe it was a hereditary thing, the same as Maggie, but to begin with I blamed myself. When I first realised I was pregnant, I was ambivalent. I knew I should be happy: that was what it was supposed to be all about. And I knew Derek, my first husband, would be delighted. Later, I wondered if my own lack of enthusiasm had somehow caused the baby to decide not to stay, but I soon realised that was ridiculous. Plenty of reluctant parents in the world. Nature has the final say on such matters and that's all there is to it. I would have liked a child with Harry, I think, but by then my childbearing years were over.

I still have a suitcase full of little white cotton dresses and knitted bonnets for the baby I lost. I was convinced she was a girl.

I've never quite been able to part with them.

The police came by again, but they didn't call in to see me this time. They were knocking on Selina's door for an age before she let them in. I turned up Kim Hill. National Radio's the only station worth listening to.

A few minutes later, while I was watering the parsley on the kitchen window sill, I saw Selina following them down the path. I've never seen her look so pale and drawn. She was like a wraith.

I remember the first time I met Pierce. I was staying with my friend Alice, at her family farm. I'd known her since school, where she was a boarder. But in our final year Alice's mother had a bad fall from a horse, paralysing her legs, and Alice moved back to the farm to take care of her, and to cook and clean for her father and eldest brother. We hadn't seen each other for months, and I took a week's leave from the newspaper where I worked and travelled by train to the farm. While her brother worked the farm, her other brother was at university. At the time I went to stay, he was home on holiday, with a friend. That friend was Pierce.

I saw him from a distance to start with and noticed the gold of his hair and how straight and upright his stance was. When he shook my hand, his grip was firm. I fell for him right then.

I've never loved anyone the way I loved Pierce. My heart rose every time I saw him.

I don't like to get involved in tenants' lives, but I don't think the girl's been out for days. There's been a postcard sitting in the letterbox all week and something from Inland Revenue. I doubt she's gone away. I try to think what my grandmother would have done in a situation like this. She was a neighbourly woman, never turned away a person in need. It's funny how I still look to her for advice, so many years after her death.

I pull out the remains of last night's lamb casserole – I always make enough for three nights, one of the tricks of living alone –

and spoon some into a plastic container. I take it to Selina's door and knock.

Silence.

'Selina? It's Quilla.'

Nothing. It's possible she's gone out, but I have a strong feeling she's in there.

'I've brought you some dinner.'

Silence.

I wait on the doorstep a while longer, then I put down the casserole and turn for home. Hopefully she'll find it. I'll check back later. I expect the girl just needs to be on her own for a while. I understand that.

Marge and Judy are talking about Selina at the croquet club when I walk in. 'They think that girl did it,' Marge says, fussing over the hoops like a demented hen. 'The mistress.'

'No respect for marriage these days, that's what,' Judy adds. I think of her and Marge as the ugly sisters. Ugly-natured. Silly old biddies with nothing better to do than gossip. They always play together. I'll pair up with Eunice when she gets here. Reliably late, but she's a good sort.

'I feel sorry for the girl,' I say. 'Her picture's all over the internet. I read online that someone's even made an 'I hate Selina' Facebook page with some dreadful bleary-eyed photo of her and a caption saying, "Is this the face of a murderess?" Surely that's illegal.'

Marge and Judy exchange glances. It's the sort of thing they'd set up themselves if they knew how. I haven't told them she's my tenant; I'd never hear the end of it.

'Innocent until proven guilty,' I tell them. We walk out on to the lush, green lawn. I'm relieved there've been enough fine days for it to dry out after last week's rain.

As long as Selina keeps paying her rent, I don't care what she does. Murderess indeed. That chap Randall was twice her size. Assuming she managed to do him in, how would she possibly

move a body that big? There's been no enormous hole springing up in the back garden, no strange smells emanating from the basement. The police have already searched the entire property.

'Seen Daisy lately?' Judy asks.

'Why don't you go and see her yourself?' I snap. I can almost hear their feathers ruffling. I know why they don't go; they don't want to see what might lie ahead of them. Oh, to hell with it. It's going to be a dreadful game if I don't manage to be a bit more civil.

'She's still Daisy,' I say. 'She's just a different Daisy from the one we used to know. Time changes us all – it's just changed her more.'

Judy fiddles with her mallet. 'Where's that Eunice?' she says.

I'll have to put my affairs in order. The doctor says if I'm careful, I'll be around for a good few years yet, but I feel the need to tidy loose ends. Especially that one rather major loose end that's been on my conscience for far too long. It's time to put right what I did wrong. If I were to write a bucket list – which seems to be all the rage at the croquet club – it would have just one thing on it: give back the ring. Very Middle Earth, I'm sure.

'Shall we walk in the garden, doctor?'

'That's a lovely idea.'

Daisy links her arm with mine and beams. The gardens here are delightful. Indoors, in the day room, it can feel a bit chaotic at times. But among the flowers, there's a great sense of serenity. Best Daisy has a minder with her now, when she walks around outside.

Talking to her is almost a form of meditation. I don't have to explain anything. I can just start talking, at any part of the story, and it won't matter because she won't be trying to follow. Mostly, she's lost somewhere in her own reflections and it gives me a chance to sort out my thoughts. Out loud. It's quite therapeutic.

'There was a dance on at the local hall,' I say.

Daisy's silent. Sometimes she'll get quite animated at talk of dancing, but perhaps today isn't to be one of those days. 'It didn't take much persuading for Alice, her brother, Pierce and me to

make up a foursome. There was a passable local jazz band playing. Pierce and I got chatting about music. We were both Duke Ellington fans. "I have a great collection of jazz records," Pierce told me. "I'd love you to come and listen sometime."

'He had this wonderful, crisp British accent. And he always wore a hat. "Come on," he said at one point and reached for my hand. Dancing with Pierce was a dream. He whirled me around the polished wooden floors as though we were Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. I wanted that night to last forever.'

Daisy's found a ladybird on top of a bright yellow dahlia. She's looking at it intently, as though it's the most marvellous thing she's ever seen.

"I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –"

Emily Dickinson, I believe.

'When Pierce phoned a few days later to ask me out to the pictures, I was thrilled. I counted down the hours, so excited, I could barely sleep.'

The ladybird finally leaves its flower and Daisy heads off after it. I follow her.

'At the end of the evening, he leaned in and kissed me. Such a sweet and tender kiss. I wanted it to go on forever. There was another movie after that, and then a dance. Each evening ending in a kiss that quite took my breath away. But then – oh, Daisy ...'

She stops in her tracks, looking concerned. 'What happened, doctor?'

'I became very ill. I had a terrible dose of influenza. I was contagious and couldn't leave the house for weeks.'

'Lemon and honey,' says Daisy solicitously.

'While I was ill, an enormous parcel arrived from Pierce. The goldfish painting that's hanging on my living room wall.' Daisy's seen it many times but I doubt she remembers. 'It was the loveliest thing I'd ever seen. The note with it said simply, "Please have this and think of me."

'But that was the last I heard from him. I waited and waited for

him to call, but there was nothing. Then I found out he'd returned to England. A family illness. I was heartbroken.

'Shortly after that, I started touring with the Great Ricardo and his wife. Sequinned and spangled. Being sawn in half every night. I loved being on the road. Getting to know all those little towns, hearing the applause night after night. The men could be a nuisance, some of them, but I gave them short shrift and the Great Ricardo was a good protector. It was tiring, but that was exactly what I needed: to be too tired to think.

'But when I got back, I found out what had really happened. My sister told me. Pierce had written to me from England but my mother hadn't passed on the letters. And when he returned and came to find me, she told him I'd left town with another man.'

Daisy looks shocked. She's quite with it today. 'How awful for you!'

'She was worried Pierce would go back to England permanently and take me with him. She didn't want me emigrating.'

'Dear, dear!' Daisy really is a comfort.

'I moved in with my sister after that. I didn't speak to my mother for months. I never completely forgave her. And then I got a letter from Alice. I'd been away a whole year. So much had changed.'

"I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores; I change, but I cannot die ..." says Daisy.

I recognise that one: Shelley. "I am the daughter of Earth and Water"; I say and Daisy claps her hands. 'I hadn't been in contact with Alice since I left town. Her letter was a shock. She and Pierce had started seeing each other after he came back, while I was on tour. They'd become engaged.

'Alice said she hoped I'd be her bridesmaid. Can you imagine that? And she was coming to Wellington and wanted to stay. She had no idea, of course, how much I cared for him. I'd spent a year on the road, stuffing rabbits into hats and disappearing down trap doors and none of it had lessened the pain. When you're young, you imagine you could die from it.'

‘Perhaps you needed a paracetamol.’ Daisy pats my hand.

I hear myself sigh. ‘Even if there’d been medication strong enough, I wouldn’t have taken it. Our hard times come for a reason. If you can be knocked to the ground and find a way to stand up again, you’ll end up wiser and stronger than before. No, paracetamol’s not the way to mend a broken heart.’

‘I’m sure you know best, doctor.’

‘What could I do? Alice’s letter was so full of joy. There was no way I could tell her I was still in love with him. And how could I turn down her visit? She’d often stayed before – it would have been odd if I’d said no.’

One of the nurses walks past us, the Irish one with the lovely smile. ‘All right, Daisy?’

‘Yes indeed, doctor. Aren’t the roses marvellous this time of the year?’

‘Not half as marvellous as yourself,’ she laughs.

The staff here are good: competent, courteous. Kind, even. If the day ever arrives ... well, I could do worse than come here.

But who would visit me? It’s a poor, selfish reason to have children, but for a fleeting moment I wonder if I should have adopted. The closest thing I have to a child is my niece, but she lives in Canada. I’d hoped to visit one day. I’ve left it too long.

‘Didn’t you want to see her?’ Daisy asks me, when the nurse is out of earshot.

I’m confused for a moment. ‘See who?’

‘Your friend. Alice in Wonderland.’

Sometimes she follows more than I give her credit for. ‘I did, yes. That’s the thing. She was still my best friend. I’d missed her terribly while I’d been on the road. I’d sent her postcards from all over and promised I’d see her as soon as I got back. But she hadn’t been able to write to me because she didn’t know where I’d be from one week to the next. And it didn’t occur to me to phone. The only person I phoned was my mother, once a fortnight, to reassure her I was well. Toll calls were expensive.’

“Two roads diverged in a wood ...” says Daisy.

‘Quite. So instead of looking forward to her visit, I was rather dreading it.’

We come to a wooden seat in front of a camellia bush and sit down. I doubt there’s anyone else I could tell this to. I do enjoy talking to Daisy; there’s no judgement. For her part, I think she likes the company.

‘I worked hard to hide my feelings when Alice came. I had to tell her how happy I was for her and I made up a story about how I’d met someone – a man at work. She knew Pierce and I had dated a few times, but I said he wasn’t really my type anyway, much better suited to her. I lied, Daisy. I’d never lied to Alice before, but once I started, the lies just kept coming. I said the man from work had turned out to be married and that was why I’d gone away. I made up quite a tale.’

“A gentle story of two lovers young, who met in innocence and died in sorrow ...”

‘Is that more Shelley? Well, at least no one died in my story. I thought I was doing quite well until Alice showed me her engagement ring.’

‘My William said I was a picture on our wedding day. My mother borrowed a pearl necklace and I wore my aunt’s white dress.’

‘I’m sure you looked very lovely, Daisy.’

‘William’s coming for me soon.’

‘Of course he is. He loves you to bits.’ I wonder if I’m tiring her, but her eyes seem bright, as they always do when she speaks of William. Which she does, every time I see her. And how much better for her to imagine she’ll be seeing him any moment, than to know he’s gone forever.

I miss my husbands, of course I do. But I never had with them what Daisy had with William. I never had with them what I had in that brief time with Pierce.

‘William saved all his money for a month to buy me a ring.’

Daisy stretches out her hand, showing the slim band of gold with its single ruby. 'I've never taken it off. Not once, in all our married life.'

'Very special. Alice's was special, too. It had belonged to Pierce's great-grandmother. So elegant, so unusual. I'd never seen anything like it. Amber. Like liquid sun. The spirit of the tree, dripping into globules. Solidified, collected, polished to perfection. The moment Alice held out her hand to show me, I was stricken with an all-consuming jealousy. It should have been mine.

'I'm terribly ashamed of what I did, Daisy. There's not much in my life I'm ashamed of, but I regret this deeply. It was towards the end of Alice's visit. I took the ring on a whim, but there were all the moments afterwards when I could have put it right but chose not to. Alice had left the ring on the window sill while she was washing the dishes after dinner. I was drying. When she'd finished, she made a pot of tea and took a cup to my sister. I saw the ring sitting there. It was almost glowing. All I could think of was that it was Pierce's and my finger was the one it should have been wrapped around. I slipped it into the breast pocket of my blouse, and straight away took it upstairs where I shoved it inside my evening bag at the back of my wardrobe.

'It wasn't until the following morning that Alice asked, "Have you seen my ring?"'

'What did you tell her, doctor? Did you tell her it was in your evening bag?'

I almost forget she's listening and then she startles me with something like that.

'I should have, but I didn't. She was holding up her bare finger and I said, "Maybe it's under your pillow, or caught up in the sheets?" And she said she'd already looked. She spent all morning hunting for it.

'I had so many opportunities to come clean but I took none of them. I even helped her search, pretending to look in the garden in case it had fallen off the window sill, watching her growing

distress with a horrible kind of fascination and smugness. Oh, it was a terrible way to treat her. She'd always been good to me and that was how I repaid her.'

"I shall be telling this with a sigh, somewhere ages and ages hence ..."

'I could have returned that ring at any time. I could have planted it in the house for her to find or pretended to have found it myself. There would have been no great harm done. She cried, Daisy, the night before she went back. The last time I ever saw her. "It's been in their family so long," she kept saying. "Pierce will never forgive me." Part of me hoped that was true, I'm sorry to say. Why should Alice find happiness with Pierce when my own happiness had been so cruelly cut short?'

'William's never once made me cry. Not in all our married life.'

'He's a remarkable man.'

'Yes.' Daisy beams.

'Even after Alice had left to go home to the farm, I could have parcelled up the ring and told her I'd found it. But I didn't. To start with, I told myself I was only borrowing it, that eventually I would send it back. But weeks slid by and I didn't. I kept taking it out of the evening bag and holding it. Gazing into it. It really is a most remarkable stone. It made me happy. I'd try it on and imagine everything was all right again and I was marrying Pierce.'

'Eventually, the envelope I'd been dreading arrived in the post. Alice's wedding invitation.'

'My William said I looked a picture on our wedding day.'

'I'll bet he was right. I couldn't go to Alice and Pierce's wedding. Not after what I'd done. It was too late then; there was no way to explain it to her.'

'What did you do?'

'The only thing I could think of. I went back on the road with the Great Ricardo and his wife and wrote Alice an apologetic letter saying I couldn't make it to the wedding. I sent them a silver photo frame as a present and said I hoped they'd be very happy. I never

saw her again. I heard they went to live in England.'

'What happened to the ring?'

'I wrapped it in a scrap of velvet and put it right at the back of my jewellery box. I tried to leave my sorrow behind, but I failed, Daisy, I failed.'

Daisy shakes her head. 'You can't outrun grief, doctor.'

'No, indeed. Why don't you come to my place next time? I could make you some lunch. I could show you the ring.'

## Selina

Sleep eludes me, as it has for over a week now. I doze instead. Restless, half awake dozing. Snatched fragments that are more disturbing than restful. Half-dreams where Randall's face floats towards me, distorted and grotesque. Some nights, I wake in a state of paralysis, unable to open my eyes, trying desperately to wake myself by moving an arm or making a sound. Failing. When I finally struggle to the surface, I'm exhausted by the effort.

This morning, I'm dragged from a dream by the sound of banging and someone calling my name. It's not a voice I recognise.

I feel disoriented as I pull on my dressing-gown and head to the front door.

A woman with big, blonde hair and too much lipstick presses a business card into my hand that I can't seem to focus on. Behind her, a man with a camera starts snapping.

'Christine Denning from *Kiwi Woman* magazine,' she says. Her eyes are like a scavenging seagull's. 'How would you like to tell New Zealand *your* side of the story, Selina?'

My brain feels like soup.

'Tell us about Randall Marshall, Selina.'

I try to close the door, but she's got her hand against it.

'Can we come in, Selina? It won't take a minute.'

Maybe they know something about Randall. Maybe he's been found. 'Has there been some news?'

'Just let us in for a chat, Selina.'

I'm starting to wake up properly. More than anything, I don't want to be talking to these people. 'Go away.'

She doesn't budge and the photographer is still clicking.

'Just piss off and leave me alone.' I notice her ominous smile as I manage to push the door closed. I can imagine the headlines. FOUL-MOUTHED SELINA REFUSES TO ANSWER QUESTIONS. SUSPECT IN CHEF'S DISAPPEARANCE PUSHES US FROM DOORSTEP.

Vultures. I lie on my bed and stare at the ceiling until the knocking and yelling stop and I hear her heels clacking up the concrete path. There's a fine crack in the corner of my ceiling I've never noticed before. I should tell Quilla. What if it gets bigger? What if it gets wide enough for a whole roof-full of malevolence to come crashing in?

The phone rings and stops, rings and stops. Eventually, I get up and check my emails. Most of them are from people I don't even know. Nasty, hateful things. Threatening violence. I stop reading them. How did they even get my address? But I open the one from Bailey: Don't look at Twitter. You're trending.

I look at Twitter. I wish I hadn't.

I think about the whirling dervishes, turning in circles, their skirts spreading out. I rummage through my wardrobe for a circular skirt I've hardly ever worn. It feels a little loose around the waist. I start spinning. Like a record, I think. Round like a record. I whisper it to myself until the words become sounds without meaning.

It's a couple more days before I manage to venture outside. I haven't even dared open the curtains. I've lost track of time, but it feels like early afternoon. I need a drink.

I put on dark glasses and pull a hat firmly on to my head, hoping no one will recognise me. I leave through the laundry door and jump the neighbour's fence to take the back way to the shops.

It's a drab, colourless day. The tūi calling from next door's tree sounds unnaturally loud. I was hoping the streets would be quiet, but it feels like everyone is out and about. Each time a man passes, my heart races in case it's Randall. Why does everyone look like him today?

At a dairy I don't usually go to, I choose a bottle of pinot noir from the shelf before I catch a glimpse of the magazine rack. Randall. On two different covers. My heart starts thumping and my eyes blur. I can't read the headlines. I grab copies of the trashy mags and pay the woman in the pink sari without meeting her eyes. I almost run back home.

My hands are shaking as I open the first one. The photo of me is on page five. It's even worse than the Facebook photo. I remember the party it was taken at – Bailey's house-warming. But I don't remember half the evening and I don't remember anyone taking a photo. It must have been towards the end of the night. My lipstick's all gone and my eyeliner's smudged. My face is a mottled red, my eyes half-shut. My hair's an absolute fright. Bailey told me I threw up in her shower that night. Maybe the photo was taken after that. I don't remember getting home. Someone must have poured me into a taxi.

If the photo's bad, the article's worse. RANDY RANDALL'S SEX MARATHONS. I am 'Selina, 29, the graphic designer and party girl who worked in the same office as Randall's unsuspecting fiancée'. This is what my life amounts to. I want to rip the pages to shreds, but I can't tear my eyes away.

'Selina told me about her sordid all-night sessions with celebrity TV love-rat Randall Marshall,' says a close friend of the woman exposed as Randall's mistress.

'Nothing was too kinky or bizarre,' said Selina, who liked to ride the famous chef during nights of wild abandon in her secret love nest in a quiet Wellington suburb.

They've spun our love into something shameful. I feel sick. I open the second magazine. A double-page spread of Randall and Caroline's 'luxury mansion', followed by stills from his television show. There's the bed we'd made love on – his and Caroline's bed. Seeing Randall's photo is like being stabbed. I reach out to touch his cheek. Then I start to read.

### RANDALL'S OTHER WOMEN!

Wine-soaked Selina wasn't the only one. We bring you an exclusive interview with attractive brunette, Hayley, who says she often visited Randall in posh hotels while he was touring for his TV show.

My heart is hammering so hard it scares me.

Meet Bryony, 23, the pretty blonde fitness instructor. Sources say she and Randall had a torrid two-year affair that continued after his engagement. And here's Angela, 28, the buxom redhead who entertained Randall on a friend's luxury yacht after they met at a nightclub earlier this year.

I turn the page.

Now we bring you an exclusive interview with Bianca, 26, the Italian beauty who says she was Randall's true love all along. 'He was planning to leave Caroline and marry me,' she told us, flashing the diamond bracelet Randall bought her.

'We enjoyed nights of unbridled passion at the home he shared with his fiancée. And while he was filming his TV series in Hamilton, I travelled there to be with him. We shared carnal delights together in the spa bath of his hotel room.'

Bianca continued, 'I knew all about the others. I was his soulmate, so he told me everything. We used to laugh about it. I had nothing to be jealous about. Angela and Bryony were just playthings to him and Selina was fun at first, but she was too much of a pisshead.'

Randall preferred women with a bit more class. He'd been planning to ditch her for ages.'

Could any of it be true? At least we always used condoms. No, the gossip mags must have made it all up. Peddlers of trash. Maybe they paid Bianca to pretend, if that's even her real name. There's a photograph of her looking stylish and beautiful, next to a similar one of Caroline at her most glamorous. Underneath is a picture of me at my front door in my dressing gown. My eyes are red from crying and I look anxious and scared. The caption reads: 'The woman Randall spent his final hours with?' There are quotes through the article from a supposed psychologist: 'Women who become jealous of their love rivals may resort to violent means to deal with their insane rage.' 'Feelings of inadequacy and despair can result if a woman is rejected by the man she is obsessed with, and this may lead to bizarre and irrational behaviour.' They fall short of actually accusing me of anything, but the implication is

clear.

I can feel the dolls silently laughing at me. It's what you deserve, they seem to be saying. I close the magazine and there's Randall on the front cover again. It's like a slap. Just call me, Randall. Just come home. Just be safe.

I take the wine bottle and crawl back into bed.

I love wine. I love the taste. I love the feel of it in my mouth. I love how it smells, how it slides down the sides of a glass, how the alcohol slips into my bloodstream and warms me. I love how it makes its way to my brain. There's something about wine that makes the sun shine, that fills me with the expectations of summer. Wine makes things possible. It takes the edge off the world, blunts the sharp bits, blurs the things that are difficult. Wine makes everything manageable.

The first few sips, nothing much happens. But about halfway through the glass, I start to feel something, a spreading sort of warmth, the start of a journey, an anticipation of good things to come. By the end of the first glass, though, that promise hasn't quite been realised and starts to recede. I need a top-up to bring it home.

With the second glass, I'm in business. There's no mistaking it; the effects linger. The world is suddenly more fun. Strangers seem almost approachable – but not quite yet. That takes the third glass. By the fourth or fifth, I feel totally normal. Until I try to talk to someone I don't know too well. Or walk to the bar. Then I'm very conscious of how I sound, how I look. Doing my best not to slur or sway. Not to stumble or weave. My best imitation of normal.

Beyond that, I'm just trying to maintain the buzz. If I still feel regular inside, I'm disappointed, drink more quickly. I want that hit. Sometimes I have to move on to something stronger – like liqueurs. They work faster. They bring me straight to the front door.

# Smith

Chapman keeps trying to lick my face, silly dog. He alternates between standing vigil at the door to Katie's old bedroom and whimpering around my feet.

I wasn't with her at the very end.

'I've got to do this on my own, Smith.'

Ragnar and I were visiting her at the hospice, as we had been every afternoon.

'I'm getting too tired.' Her eyes were closed. She didn't seem to have the energy to open them.

‘Shall we leave you?’ I asked her. The nurse had told me she was as comfortable as they could make her, but I still got the sense she was in pain.

‘Too tired for everything,’ she said. It was barely a whisper.

Then I understood. ‘I’ll take good care of him.’

She managed a faint nod.

‘Give your mum a goodnight kiss,’ I told Ragnar. Somehow I kept my voice from breaking.

He didn’t want to leave the hospice that day. But I’d promised Katie he wouldn’t be there. At the end. He grabbed my hand as we walked out to the car I’d borrowed from Aroha and Jürgen, and held on to it as though he’d never let go.

# Selina

I can't leave the house again. I know they're out there waiting for me, ready to pounce. It's not paranoia when they're really after you. The most horrible part is that I honestly don't remember what happened that night and no amount of dwelling on it can bring any memories back.

I heated up a frozen dinner last night, but I only managed half of it. I've drunk everything in the house, but I can't go out for more. I don't know what to do. There's nothing I can do. How will I ever face anyone again?

I listen to the messages on my phone. Someone from a Sunday paper. A radio station. That *Kiwi Woman* reporter again. A *Goss* reporter: \$5,000 for an exclusive. Aunty Vi: she's seen me on the news and wants to check everything's all right. I delete them all, except for an old message from Dad, from when he and Ngaire first arrived in Australia: 'Just ringing to let you know we've arrived, Pikelet. Hope everything's all good. Ngaire sends her love.'

Hearing his voice makes me cry. All I'd have to do is phone and Dad would be on the next plane over, making everything all right. But I've got no idea where he is now and even if I did, I couldn't do it. He'd be so disappointed in me. All I can do is keep my fingers crossed that a New Zealand chef going missing won't be big news across the Tasman.

There must be something very wrong with me that I can't sustain a relationship. Every time I fall in love, it ends in disaster. Why doesn't anyone ever love me enough? Why don't men want to marry me?

My longest relationship was with Tim and that only lasted eighteen months. I thought we'd have a family, grow old together. Maybe I just dive in too soon. But how can I help how I feel?

He was a good man, Tim. I hunt out my digital camera and start flicking through the images I've saved. There are none of Randall because he would never let me photograph him. But there are plenty of Tim.

Tim at his father's fiftieth. Tim next to a giraffe at the Wellington Zoo. Tim and I together looking windswept at Makara, where we went for a windy picnic one day. I can almost smell the seaweed, taste the salt in the air. I can't remember what it feels like to be happy, but in the photo I'm smiling.

On impulse, I pick up the landline. I still have Tim's number on the list I stuck to the fridge in case I ever lost people's contact details. I'm glad I did it now.

'Selina?'

‘Tim, hi.’ The sound of his voice makes me feel weepy. Now I’ve got through, I’ve got no idea what to say.

‘Is everything okay?’ There’s a pause. ‘I saw the news.’

‘It wasn’t my fault, Tim. And now everyone thinks ... I haven’t done anything.’ If only I could be sure of that.

‘Of course not.’ He sounds distracted. ‘Look, Selina, you have people you can talk to, right? Friends? It’s just – this isn’t a good time. We’re off to the airport shortly. Waiting for the taxi.’

‘Oh.’ Of course. Other people have lives. Things to look forward to. ‘Going somewhere nice?’

‘Rarotonga. I promised Rowena I’d take her there for a couple of weeks. Graduation present. She’s always wanted to go.’

You never took me to Rarotonga, I can’t help thinking. You never took me further than Makara, the whole time we were together. ‘Have a great time.’

‘Yeah, thanks. Hey, you take care, Selina.’

Care. Take care. It’s too late for that. I hang up.

Why is it that men don’t take me on exotic holidays? I get picnics, the odd dinner out, a sordid weekend in a Hamilton hotel. Rowena gets a fortnight in Rarotonga. Liz gets a honeymoon in Tuscany.

I imagine asking Smith and her looking puzzled and saying, ‘If you want to go to Rarotonga, why don’t you just go?’ She’d be trying to work out why on earth I’d want a man to take me when I could arrange it myself. Smith doesn’t need people the way I do. She’s self-contained.

I told her once how helpless I felt on my own and she said, ‘But you’re a successful woman. You have a great career, you’re independent, you live alone.’

The point is, I don’t want to live alone. But if I said that to Smith, she’d just say, ‘Why don’t you go flapping again?’

I don’t think I could bear that now. Watching other people’s happy lives when mine’s such a disaster. I don’t want to live with a bunch of other people; I want to live with a man. With Randall.

I want to marry Randall and spend the rest of my life with him. I want my happy-ever-after. Who am I kidding? He was happy to break up.

I open the box of Smith's old letters, looking for comfort. Even her handwriting is steady and sure.

*Every day, I'm grateful for having known you. For knowing what it's like to love and be loved. It wells up in me.*

*I remember the day you gave me your love, handing it to me as though it were a fantail's egg, placing it on my palm and curling my fingers around it, curling your fingers around mine. 'This is for you,' you said. 'you can keep it in your hand until the end of time.'*

*Some days, when I miss you, I open my hand and there it is. Always and forever. It's all I need.*

Who was she writing to?

The whole world hates me. I keep saying this inside my head and then I hear Smith saying, 'What, really? The *whole* world?' And so I think, the whole of New Zealand hates me. And somehow that's not so bad, because there's somewhere I could go where no one hates me because no one knows me. Like Mexico or Estonia. I can't go to Australia because Dad's there and one day he'll find out about all this and he'll never forgive me for embarrassing him and Ngairi. For ruining the family name. What if he phones one of his friends and they've seen the photos of me in those dreadful magazines and they tell him? Or Smith could tell him. Does she even know? She doesn't have TV and she wouldn't read a women's mag. Maybe she hasn't heard yet. But she'll hear one day. And then she'll hate me too.

No. Smith will never hate me. I know that.

But she'll be sad. She'll say, 'Oh, Selina', and it will be my fault she's sad. Just like it was my fault she couldn't go overseas with

Rose all those years ago.

Oh.

Rose.

Smith and Rose. How could I not have seen that?

If I could just be certain that I didn't hurt him in some way. I mean, it's not possible, is it? That Randall and I could have fought or that I might have accidentally hit him with something. Surely I wouldn't do something like that. Would I? If only I could remember.

I hear knocking and cover my head with the pillow. Eventually I realise it's Quilla calling my name, but I just can't face her. I can't face anyone. Later I find she's stuffed something through the cat door. I didn't even know it was open. I've never seen a cat come through it. Even the neighbourhood strays don't want me.

It's my mail. A couple of tedious-looking letters from Inland Revenue. And a postcard of a giraffe at Taronga Park Zoo.

*Dear Pikelet*

*We went to Rigoletto last night at the Sydney Opera House. Absolute magic. Now I can cross that off the bucket list. Next stop is Adelaide, then I reckon we'll head for the Northern Territory. Ngaire wants to see Uluru (Ayers Rock). You look after yourself.*

*Love, Dad and Ngaire xxx*

I feel better, just for seeing Dad's handwriting, hearing his voice in my head. And he doesn't know. Not yet. I'm safe for just a bit longer. It's times like this I'm glad I come from a family of Luddites who refuse to use cell phones or laptops and think a notebook is made of paper. But he will find out, and maybe he won't love me any more. Like Jane. I have no idea what I'll tell him.

Another night without sleep. Finally I give up trying and go into the lounge, without turning on the light. Everything's a little otherworldly at night. Two of the dolls are turned away, but Jemima seems to be staring at me from the couch. Her eyes are eerie and glowing, from the moonlight striking them through the lounge window. I can't help feeling she might know something. 'Did you see?' I ask her. 'That night? Did you see what happened with Randall?'

She's silent. Of course she is. I know she's only a doll. Still, there's something about her eyes. I can't let her get the better of me. 'Do you know where he is? If you know, you have to tell me.' I try to listen for the answers in another dimension, to see with different senses. I try to conjure up a vision of Randall in front of my eyes. There's nothing. Of course there isn't.

Jemima looks self-satisfied. Full of herself. I close my eyes, concentrate. Finally, Randall's brown eyes look back at me. 'Were you with Bianca that night?' I ask him. 'In Hamilton, when we were supposed to be together. Our special weekend away. Is that why you didn't come to your room until after midnight while I was waiting there for you?'

Would he really have done that? Surely it's all just lies. Women trying to cash in on his celebrity. But what if it's true? What if he told me about it on that night he was here, the night he went missing? What if I got angry and pushed him? What if he hit his head on something hard and died?

But there'd have been blood. What if I cleaned it up and I don't remember? But how could I have shifted him? I wouldn't have the strength. I couldn't have moved him on my own and I can't think of anyone who would have helped me. Maybe the police have already figured that out. Maybe that's why they've never charged me. I open my eyes and Randall disappears.

'If you know something, Jemima, you have to tell me.'

She looks like she's grinning.

'Are you happy he's gone? Do you think I deserve it? Because of Caroline? Do you think I've got what's coming to me?'

I grab her then, and part of me wants to fling her across the room. I imagine her frail body shattering, her head breaking in two.

Instead, I find myself cradling her, rocking her. 'It's all right, Jemima. Everything's going to be okay. I'd never hurt you. I'd never hurt anyone.' I know, with absolute certainty, that it's true.

Yet another empty day. I think about the magazine stories again. I thought Bailey was my friend. The best friend I've got. How sad am I? Should I believe she told that journalist all those things about me and Randall by accident? What sort of person betrays a confidence like that anyway?

She's not much of a friend at all. Bailey's just someone I've known a long time. And even though I might have called her a close friend, I doubt she'd say the same about me.

And Liz, Liz is just a workmate, really. I thought we were close, but she obviously doesn't even care. Maybe she's relieved I'm not at work any more, embarrassing everyone. Pleased she'll never have to see me again.

All the friends I have are superficial friends. I don't know how it all works, really, the whole female friendship thing – like in *Girls* or *Desperate Housewives*. Why don't I have friends like that?

The only intimacy I know is the one you have when you get drunk with someone. And by the time you've sobered up, it's gone again. I don't have anything real.

*If I'd been there with you, I couldn't have changed anything. The plane crashed at take-off: there were no survivors. We'd both be dead. And maybe Selina too. So.*

*I press my love into the gold, draw it out into delicate strands. I roll it and polish it. My love shines through.*

# Smith

Each day, my heart grows a little less heavy. Katie's death was hard. But not so hard, I think, as Rose's all those years ago. Maybe because I'm older; maybe because, although I felt love for Katie, it was a very different love from what I felt for Rose. Maybe because I had time to prepare for it, while Rose's death was so sudden, so unexpected. Maybe because there was a body at Katie's funeral to say goodbye to. Maybe because Ragnar's here. Bright and alive and needing me. Maybe because we both talk about Katie all the time – "Mum would have loved that movie" or "Let's

make Katie's favourite meal tonight."

Maybe because all her things are still here. Clothes, books, toiletries. One day, we might have a clean-out, but not yet. We're not ready. I've put a framed photo of Katie in her favourite chair, so no one else can sit there, and we set an empty place for her every meal time. We're trying to carry on as normally as possible, though what is normal now? Normal has changed forever.

It was a good funeral. As funerals go. Most of Ragnar's classmates came, and sang 'Don't Dream It's Over', one of Katie's favourite songs. I think that really helped Ragnar. It was odd having people back to the house afterwards. I wanted to shoo them all away, but later, when everyone had left, it felt so empty.

Jürgen and Aroha have Ragnar to stay on Saturday nights, to give me a break. 'It's a treat for us,' Aroha always says. 'Like having one of our own back home.' I've been reading up on children's experiences of grief. It's how I tried to deal with Selina's anorexia all those years ago. Through books. Arming myself with knowledge.

I'm spending tonight in my house truck, which feels good. I cleared my post office box on the way over, for the first time in a couple of weeks. Amongst the usual pile of bills and bank statements were two surprises. The first was a postcard from Dad and Ngaire, with a hairy echidna on the front. They're having the time of their lives, by the sound of things. Dad asked after Katie and Ragnar. I'll have to write and tell him, but there's no point until they're back in Coolangatta.

The second surprise was a letter from Aunty Vi. I make myself a cup of spearmint tea with the fresh leaves from the plant at the bottom of my steps and read it again.

*You remember I told you there'd been a letter from your mum that I never opened because I was too angry? I thought I'd thrown it out, but I was going through my old writing desk the other day and I found it jammed at the back of a drawer. Must have been there all these years. Anyway, I've opened the letter now and*

*there's a bit I thought you should know about.*

*Your mum wrote, 'If you ever see my girls, Vi, tell them I think about them every day. Tell them I miss them something terrible, but I know they'll have a better life with their dad than I could give them. I wish I could settle, and I've tried, but maybe I never will. I'm in London at the moment with the baby (a boy – I've called him Salvador) but a friend's heading off to Reykjavik soon to work in the fish factories and I think I might go with him. Earn myself a bit of money and see somewhere new. I hear they have the northern lights there and I've always wanted to see them. Your brother said he saw the aurora australis once. Maybe he'll bring the girls out to visit me one day. I don't know if I can go to back to New Zealand, Vi. I feel like I've burned my bridges there. But I can't bear the thought of never seeing my girls again. Please tell Sophronia and Selina I love them.'*

I sit reading that last line over and over until the light's gone and I can't see the words any more.

'Where do you think Mum is now?' Ragnar asks, over dinner. We've come to a compromise over diet. It's not fair to expect him to eat vegetarian meals every night and I want to keep his life as much as possible like it was before. He gets meat when he goes to Jürgen and Aroha's, and a couple of times a week I cook freshly caught fish for him or wild pork chops we get from the local butcher. And he's a good kid. He tries my lentil salad and tofu stir fries and always declares everything 'yummy'.

'She's in our hearts,' I tell him. 'Your mum will always be there.'

He pushes a piece of butterfish around his plate. 'Olivia at school said Mum's gone to heaven.'

'Well, some people believe in heaven. They might be right.'

'Do you believe in heaven, Smith?'

I have to think about that for a moment. 'I think heaven might be a form of inner peace. I believe in trying to make our lives as

much like heaven as we can.'

'Olivia goes to Sunday school.'

'Do you want to go?'

He shrugs.

'There are lots of different religions and there are good things about all of them. If you want to learn more, you could go along with Olivia and find out.'

He's playing with the parsnip and potato mash now. 'If there's a heaven and Mum didn't believe in it, does that mean she wouldn't be allowed in?'

'It means she'd get a lovely surprise to find herself there. And she'd be looking down at you through the clouds and thinking how proud she was.'

A smile creeps over his face, a rare thing these days.

'Try to finish your vegetables, sport.'

I keep thinking about Aunty Vi's letter. I wonder if Mum did go to Reykjavik. Before she wound up in a halfway house in Melbourne. And what happened to Salvador? The little brother I never knew I had. He might have a different surname from me. Mum's maiden name or his father's name. There could have been a stepfather. I could try the library, or Citizens Advice, see if they have any ideas about how to trace them. In a few months, maybe, when Ragnar and I are over the hardest part of grieving.

I fish out Ginny's letter about Nobby seeing Mum in Melbourne. There's no mention of Salvador. What would have happened to him when Mum was in hospital? He would only have been a teenager. I feel a rush of concern for my little brother. I hope things have turned out okay for him. I hope he hasn't had the kind of problems Selina had. One day, I'll look for him. Right now, I have other things to worry about.

I want to tell Selina about Salvador, about Mum. I haven't been able to reach her for ages. I try her number again. It's a novelty being in a house with a phone. Ragnar likes to call his friends

sometimes. I expect he's getting to that age where he'll want a cell phone. I leave a message on Selina's phone, read out my phone number. It always feels strange talking into machine silence.

'Telephone for you,' says Jürgen. 'Frances Stevens.' Ragnar's teacher. I put down the bracelet I'm sanding.

'Is Ragnar okay?' Frances asks. 'We haven't seen him for a couple of days. I was wondering if he had a cold.'

'He's fine.' I had no idea. 'Physically fine.'

'I realise this is a terribly difficult time for him. We're doing everything we can to support him.' She's a good sort. Went to school with Aroha. Loves all the kids like they're her own.

'I'll talk to him, Frances.'

I spend the afternoon searching, but there's no sign of him. I make sure I'm back at my workbench before school gets out. He always comes here after school and we walk home together.

Sure enough, he shows up at the usual time, schoolbag slung over his shoulder. He lets me kiss his cheek. 'So, where've you been today, sport? Miss Stevens said you weren't at school.'

He lets the schoolbag drop to the floor. His lunchbox tumbles out. 'I hate school.'

'Oh?'

He kicks the leg of the workbench. 'Everyone's all happy.'

'And that makes you feel even sadder?'

He keeps on kicking. Not hard, but over and over.

'Your teacher worries about you when you're not there. And I worry about you too. If you need a day off sometimes, because you're feeling too sad to go to school, that's okay, but you need to tell me first and I'll let Miss Stevens know.'

For a second or two, the kicking stops.

'You know, I promised your mum I'd make sure you went to school every day. So we should try to do that for her.'

The kicking resumes. It's a good solid workbench. It can take a little pain.

‘Where did you go today, Ragnar?’

‘I don’t have to tell you! You’re not my mum!’ It’s the first time he’s yelled at me, though I’ve been expecting it. He runs out of the workshop. Poor little bugger.

Jürgen comes in. ‘I will clear up for you, Smith.’

‘You’re a good man, Jürgen.’

‘You would do this for me.’ He claps a hand on my shoulder. ‘It’s not easy being a parent.’

‘No. It’s not.’ I phone Frances at home that evening. ‘He’s been going to his mum’s grave,’ I tell her. It breaks my heart to think of him there, a small boy alone in a cemetery, talking to a plot that doesn’t even have a headstone yet. ‘I don’t know what to do.’

There’s a brief silence on the other end of the phone. ‘He might find it helpful to bring something of Katie’s with him to school. A photo or a keepsake. Something he can put in his pencil case or his pocket, so he can feel close to her.’ She pauses again. ‘I can’t imagine what it’s like to lose your mother when you’re young.’

I can. But then again, it’s different for everyone. I still had Dad, but really, it was Selina who helped me through. Having her to focus on. Being needed.

In the morning, I say to Ragnar, ‘How would you like to be responsible for giving Chapman his breakfast and dinner every day? It would be a big help to me.’

Ragnar nods. I show him how many biscuits, how much water. He looks pleased.

I deliver him to school myself, and collect him at the end of the day. We go to Katie’s grave together and I listen to him talk about how much he’s missing her.

Later in the week, I give him some money to keep the dog food supplies stocked.

The phone calls from Frances stop coming.

## Selina

I'm not sure what time it is, but it must be early evening. I can't remember the last time I ate. My head aches and my throat is dry. I stumble into the kitchen to see what's in the cupboards. There's a packet of miso soup. That will do. As I reach for the jug, I'm surprised to see my neighbour at the door just about to knock. The Māori lady. Her twin teenage daughters hang back behind her; I forget their names. I can't pretend I'm not there – they've seen me. I open the door.

'Tell her,' she says to the twins. The girls study their shoes.

‘We’ve just come from the police station,’ their mother continues. There’s a note of triumph in her voice. ‘Tell the lady what you saw.’

‘Would you like to come in?’ I ask, but she ignores me and glares at the twins.

‘We saw him,’ one volunteers, finally.

‘Who?’ I ask.

‘That man off the TV.’

‘The cook.’ They speak in turn.

‘The night he went missing,’ the mother says. ‘Go on.’

‘We saw him coming out of your house and going off down the street.’ One of the girls points towards the shops.

‘We were on the roof,’ says her sister.

‘And what were you doing on the roof?’ says the mother. ‘Tell her what you were doing.’

The twins exchange glances. ‘Smoking,’ says one.

‘We’re not allowed,’ the other adds.

‘Smoking,’ says the mother. ‘When you were supposed to be at kapa haka!’ She looks at me. ‘That’s why they didn’t come forward before.’

‘And you’re sure it was – that night?’ I ask. This is too good to be true. Proof that Randall left my house alive. It’s the next best thing to him being found.

‘Tell the lady what else you’ve been doing.’

The girls stare intently at my front step.

‘Sorry,’ one of them offers, without looking up.

‘You’ve been spying on her, haven’t you?’ says the mother. ‘Watching from the roof and giggling behind her back while you’re up there smoking cigarettes.’ There’s a gleam in her eye. ‘Tell the lady you’re sorry for what you’ve been calling her.’

‘Sorry we said you were a skank,’ one of them says, with a sly smirk.

‘And sorry we called you slutty,’ adds her sister. They’re trying not to laugh.

‘And we shouldn’t have called that man dick-face.’

‘Disgusting,’ says the mother. I suspect she really means me.

I’m mortified, but I still want to hug them all. ‘And you’ve told the police what you saw?’

‘It was definitely him,’ says one of the girls. ‘He was wearing that cap he always wears on TV.’

‘And it was definitely that night?’

‘It was just before the final of *The Voice*.’

‘We wrote about it in our diary. We’ve got an app. The cops said we’d make good detectives one day.’

‘Thank you so much,’ I say. ‘I really can’t tell you how grateful I am.’ I make a mental note to buy the girls a packet of cigarettes some day when their mum’s not looking. I didn’t kill Randall. I didn’t kill Randall. I didn’t kill Randall. As soon as they’re gone, I pick up Jasmine and dance around the room with her.

Today’s one of those rare winter days where fingers of sun have prised the clouds apart and made their way into Wellington’s backyards. Today my life feels almost manageable. Randall will be found soon, I can feel it. And I’ve been cleared. Soon I’ll be back at work with people apologising to me for ever thinking I could have had anything to do with his disappearance. Randall will beg my forgiveness and I’ll give it. Together we’ll start a new life. Buy a vineyard, maybe. Marlborough, somewhere warm. It’s a good day.

People on the street are smiling. The air is so still, even the wind turbine isn’t moving. An old man with a walking stick, making slow progress from the Brooklyn shops, says, ‘Nice day.’

I think of the celebratory bottles of bubbly in my shopping bag. ‘Yes it is,’ I reply. ‘A lovely, lovely day.’

Carlton phones the next morning to let me know my employment has been ‘terminated’.

‘But I’ve been cleared now. I’ve done nothing wrong.’

‘That’s not how Caroline sees it. If he hadn’t been at your place that night, who knows? Maybe he wouldn’t still be missing.’

But it's not about that, Selina. It's about an ongoing pattern of unacceptable behaviour. It's about your drinking. It's about all this so-called sick leave you've been taking these past few months.'

I don't even think this is legal. He put me on special leave.

'You'll get two weeks' severance pay, and I think you'll agree that's more than generous. Under the circumstances.'

I don't know what to say. There's nothing I can say.

Carlton pauses. 'You need to get help, Selina.' He hangs up.

I go to the bathroom to splash some cold water on my face, then knock back a couple of painkillers.

I find myself pacing. The more I think about it, the angrier I get. Those bastards. How can Carlton do this to me after everything I've done for that company? They don't realise how valuable I am. I'm the best graphic designer they've got. I'll fight this. I'll go to a lawyer, to the Employment Tribunal. I'll sue. They'll be sorry then.

I pick up my coffee mug, the one with DD on it that everyone in the company got for Christmas last year, and hurl it across the lounge. It smashes against the wall and the handle flies off and hits Josephine on the face. She falls to her side and I am instantly sorry. Just because she scares me doesn't mean I want to injure her. I pick her up, then drop her with a start. It's her angry face that looks back at me. For a moment she's come to life.

I must have accidentally triggered the mechanism that changes her faces. When the colour returns to my own face, I pick her up again and turn her happy face back into place. There's a new scratch on her cheek. 'I'm so sorry, so sorry, so sorry,' I tell her. I keep saying it, over and over, as though it might somehow make everything okay.

I won't be going to a lawyer. I won't be going to the Employment Tribunal to listen to Carlton talking about me almost falling over in his office. I'll be going quietly with my tail between my legs. Anyway, do I really want to go back there and face Caroline every day?

What the hell am I going to do though? I'm in no state to

start job-hunting. Besides, everyone will have seen me in those magazines. On Facebook. On Twitter. I'm probably a meme. I daren't open my browser. Who'd employ me now? It's hopeless.

Maybe Randall will show up today. Maybe he'll just walk out of the bush, or his friend's bach or wherever it is he's been hiding and knock on my door. He'll have had time to think. He'll have decided he wants to be with me; it's always been me.

There was a Bob Dylan song he used to sing to me sometimes: 'Lay Lady Lay', but he'd change the words to make me laugh. Something about the mind being dirty but the teeth clean. And then he'd say I was the best thing he'd ever seen. And I always thought he meant it.

We could go overseas, a place where no one knows me. Begin a new life together. No more Caroline, no more gossip mags. Just me and Randall, making a fresh start.

But what if the magazines are right? What if there really were other women all the time? I don't think he ever loved Caroline, not really. But what if he loves someone else? I couldn't bear that. Although maybe, if you love someone enough, you can understand how they have other needs that don't involve you, and you can tolerate it somehow. Maybe I just need to love him more. If I could show him I loved him more than anyone else could, that he could truly be himself with me and wouldn't have to hide, maybe then we could be together. That's all that matters really.

All I have is hope. If I don't have hope, I have nothing.

I decide to go for a drive. I'll head up to the Kapiti coast and go for a nice, long walk on the beach. Sea air. Shells. It'll do me good.

But when I turn the key in the ignition, nothing happens. No noise, nothing. My engine's dead. It's too much. Insurmountable. It's as much as I can manage to go back indoors and lie on the floor. I can't even get up to put on music and spin.

It's afternoon before I gather the energy to call the AA. 'It's probably just a flat battery,' I say on the phone. But half an hour

later, when the AA man re-emerges from under the bonnet, he shakes his head. 'The whole engine's seized up, I'm afraid. And you need a new radiator. If I were you, I wouldn't throw any more money at it. You're better off getting a new one.'

'Thanks,' I tell him. I creep back inside. Instead of being a means of escape, my car's become a millstone around my neck. I expect I'll have to get it towed away. Right now, it's all too hard.

I wake to a drizzly morning, the city slumped under a fog blanket. There's a knock at the door. Firmer and more insistent than reporters. I see two blue uniforms through the kitchen window. I let them in.

The police don't tell me anything at first. They just start asking questions. 'Tell us again about that night. Did you argue?' But this time, something's different. Something in their tone, the line of questioning. 'What time did he leave? Did he say where he was going?'

'Am I under arrest?' I ask.

'No.' They look at each other and then they tell me.

The words don't make any sense. They're speaking, but my brain can't quite process the information.

'You've found him?' I ask.

They say it again. 'We've found his body, Selina.'

I'm struggling to understand this. It can't be right. 'I want to see him.'

'That won't be possible, I'm afraid.'

Why not, I want to scream. Why can't I see him for myself? How can they be telling me he's dead? What if he's not really dead at all and this is some terrible mistake. They could have mixed him up with someone else.

'Are you sure it's him?' I ask.

The female cop says, 'It's definitely him. Caroline came down with his parents last night to identify the body.'

Randall's body. The chest I laid my head on. The hands that

tangled themselves in my hair. 'How? What happened?' I can barely get the words out.

'I'm sorry, we can't tell you any more at this stage.'

'But ... I need to know. Did he ... suffer at all? Did someone hurt him?'

The male cop says, 'There'll be an inquest. You can expect to be called as a witness. You need to keep us apprised of your whereabouts.'

I nod. I can feel myself starting to shake. 'Do you have someone you can call?' asks the female cop. 'A friend, or a family member?'

I lie. 'Yes, thank you. I'll phone someone.'

They let themselves out. I slump to the floor.

I sit in the middle of my living room and cry myself sick. I keep replaying everything the police said. Everything they asked me. I don't know how he died or where he was found. I don't know whether it was quick or painful. I don't know if it was murder or an accident.

I can't go to the funeral. I wouldn't be welcome. Caroline would cause a scene. I love him. Loved him. But I can't say goodbye.

No Randall. It's not real.

Josephine, Jemima and Jasmine stare at me from the couch with their doll eyes. Reproachful. Josephine still hasn't forgiven me for the incident with the mug. I can't face them. I can almost hear them mocking me. I run back to bed and bury my head. My cave. Perhaps I'll just stay here forever.

I replay everything. The first time I saw him at the bar. The first time we made love. The time we spent together in Hamilton.

If I close my eyes, I can almost smell him. I could phone Caroline and ask the name of the aftershave he wore. She has all his clothes, all his smell. Caroline lives in a house permeated with Randall's essence. He belongs to her in death in a way he never did in life.

Sleep is no respite. When I dream, it's always of him. He'll be coming towards me, with that look on his face, that look he has just when we're about to make love, wanting me. But just before he touches me, the flesh falls off his bones. I try to scream but no sound comes.

God knows I need a drink, but I can't get past the dolls to the last bottle in the wine rack.

The phone keeps ringing. On and on until finally I unplug it from the wall. There's knocking at the door. And footsteps retreating. I don't know how many days this goes on.

I dream a mountain is coming towards me. Towering, relentless. I'm afraid of being crushed. I wake to find myself bolt upright in bed, pulse racing. There is no way I can sleep again now. The clock by the bed tells me it's almost four. Several hours before the reprieve of daylight.

I recognise that mountain. It was from a train trip I went on with Dad and Smith when I was four or five. From Christchurch to Greymouth across the Southern Alps. We were off to the West Coast to visit my cousins. I don't recall much of the trip, but I remember we were allowed outside briefly when the train stopped in Arthur's Pass. I fell over in the snow. It gave me such a fright – the sudden cold, the wetness. And then I looked up and everything seemed huge. I was so small and powerless. The landscape was coming for me. Back in our seats, I hid my face in Dad's coat until he was able to persuade me to look out of the window because I was missing the spring lambs. I risked a peek.

If I close my eyes now, the mountain will be waiting. I walk straight past the dolls in the lounge, put on Abida Parveen and start to spin.

# Smith

‘Smith, look!’ Ragnar comes racing into the workshop as I’m polishing a bracelet I finished this morning. I set it on the bench and take the piece of paper he’s thrusting at me.

‘Achievement certificate for maths! That’s fantastic, sport.’ I hold out my arms and he lets me hug him. I wonder if there’s a day coming when he’ll be too cool to do that. I know nothing about teenage boys. At least I have Jürgen and Aroha for advice.

When he pulls back, I notice his face looks troubled. ‘I wish I could tell Mum,’ he says.

I think about this. 'Why don't you write her a letter?'

He looks doubtful.

'You can tell her what's happening at school, how things are going for you, tell her about the certificate.' He's looking at the floor. He's not convinced. 'And then we can tie it to a helium balloon and take it to her grave and let it go. It'll be a special message.'

'Not her grave,' he says finally. 'We should go to Pōhara, her favourite beach. We should do the balloon there.'

'Pōhara it is, then, sport. If the weather's nice, we can take a picnic on Sunday.'

His shoulders have slumped back down again and the joy of the certificate is gone.

There's only one other family when we get to the beach. I know this will be bittersweet for Ragnar, but it's where he wants to be. A special place for him and Katie. He's been writing his letter to her every night after school. Tucked away in his bedroom. Occasionally he's asked, 'Do you think Mum would like me to draw her a picture?' or 'Should I tell her about Jason and Helmut getting into a fight?'

'Tell her what you'd normally tell her when you come home from school,' I say, and he starts writing again.

I think about the letter I tried to write to my mother once, when I was about seventeen. I sat in my bedroom for hours in front of a sheet of paper with 'Dear Mum' at the top. In the end I gave up. I couldn't think what to say, where to start.

'Picnic first or letter first?' I ask Ragnar.

'I think we should do the letter first,' he says solemnly. 'Because that's the sad part, and then we can have the picnic and that will be the happy part, and it will be like Mum's at the picnic with us.'

'Let's fly that letter balloon,' I say.

Ragnar chose the one in the shop that says *I love you*. I put my arm around his shoulder as he lets it go. I swear he's getting taller every day.

‘Can I go to father and son night at Sea Scouts?’ Ragnar asks after school one day. ‘Everyone’s going. It’s next Wednesday.’

‘Sure you can. Do you need to take someone with you?’ I hate the thought of him being the only one there without a father. But I guess there’ll be other boys in the same boat. ‘Jürgen maybe?’

‘I wish Jürgen was my dad.’

It’s the first time he’s said anything like this. But it’s hardly a surprise. Jürgen can always be relied on for a play fight or kicking a ball around. I try to do those things too, but I know it’s not the same. ‘He’d be a great dad to have.’

‘My real dad’s overseas,’ he says.

‘Yeah, your mum told me.’

‘Smith, do you think I’ll ever meet him?’

‘Maybe one day, sport.’

‘Do you reckon I look like him?’

This is the time. I give him the photo of Katie with Gunnar. He can’t tear his eyes away.

No more questions come, but when I go to kiss him goodnight, I notice the photo is on his bedside table, next to the one of Katie and Ragnar.

## Selina

I open my eyes one morning and Quilla's there. In my room. Standing over the bed. I hadn't even heard her come in. 'I've been worried about you, dear,' she tells me.

I can't reply.

'You weren't answering your door. I hope you don't mind my letting myself in like this, but I had to come and check you're okay.' She walks to the window and opens the curtains. 'That's better.'

The sunlight's harsh. I shield my eyes.

‘I heard that your friend died. The chef. I’m sorry for your loss, dear. You must be devastated.’

I nod dumbly.

‘I know you’re having an impossibly difficult time. But this is not the way. I’m going to make you a cup of tea and then I want you to get up and have a shower – how long is it since you’ve had a shower, Selina? It’ll make you feel better; it always does. And while you’re doing that, I’ll make you some toast. You look like you haven’t eaten for a week.’

I hear her in my kitchen and have just enough energy to feel guilty. I can’t remember when I last did the dishes. Not that I’ve used many lately.

Within minutes, she’s back with a steaming cup. ‘English breakfast. There wasn’t any milk. I can get some, if you like.’

‘Black’s fine. Thank you.’ It feels strange to talk. I sit back against the pillows.

‘Your bread’s expired. I’ll go and fetch some of mine.’

‘There’s no need.’

She smiles. ‘There is.’

How can she be so nice to me?

I drag myself into the shower. She’s right; I need this. Pinpricks of water. A thousand tiny darts hitting my back.

When I come out of the bathroom in clean clothes with hair dripping down my back, she hands me a plate of toast and honey. ‘Get this down you, while I sort your kitchen out. No argument.’

I start to cry.

Quilla waits. She doesn’t shush me or tell me everything’s going to be all right. She just sits there. It’s the most comforting thing.

When I’ve cried myself out of tears, she hands me a hanky. Clean and white, soft against my cheek. I pat my face dry.

‘You need to get outside, dear,’ says Quilla, ‘get some fresh air. A walk is the best cure for anything.’

‘I will,’ I tell her.

She looks sceptical.

‘Promise.’

I see Quilla’s brought me a loaf of bread and a bowl of apples. She’s even filled a vase with dahlias from her garden and left it on my mantelpiece. Her kindness is almost too much to bear. She doesn’t know I’ve lost my job yet. At some point the rent payments will stop. Maybe they already have. How many weeks’ severance pay did Carlton say?

Quilla shuts the door behind her with a soft click. For a moment, I feel bereft.

She’s left my mail on the kitchen table. A postcard with a picture of Uluru.

*Dear Pikelet*

*Reckon you’d love Australia. Ngairé dragged me round an art gallery today. Some of it was a bit way out for your old dad but I reckon it would be just your sort of thing, with your artistic talent. You’ve done me proud, love. How’s that great job of yours going anyway? Made you director yet?*

*Next week, we’re heading for Western Australia. Ngairé’s got a cousin in Fremantle, so we’ll probably stop there for a few days. Look after yourself.*

*Love, Dad and Ngairé xxx*

This is my only consolation, that Dad doesn’t know of my shame. I couldn’t face him right now, the disappointment I’d see in his eyes.

Maybe I’m just like my mother. Maybe that’s what he’d see. Someone who can’t be trusted.

The last thing I ever wanted was to upset Dad. I don’t know what to do. Is there any way out of this mess? I can’t think.

I stuff things into my daypack – a water bottle, a raincoat, a couple of Quilla’s apples. Stepping out on to the doorstep, there’s a moment when I just want to go straight back into the sanctuary of my flat. It’s weird to be outside again. Everything’s too bright. I

feel shaky and strange. But Quilla is right: I need fresh air. I need to walk.

The recycling bins are out. The cover of a magazine in next door's bin catches my eye. My stomach lurches. Randall's dark hair. That look in his eyes that made me melt. Then I see the words.

### TRAGIC RANDALL'S LAST MOMENTS

What? My hands are shaking as I pick up the magazine and turn the pages.

After leaving Selina's house, perhaps following one of their wild nights of illicit passion, celebrity chef Randall headed further up the slopes of Brooklyn, to the new subdivision. Who knows what was going through his mind in his last heartbreaking moments?

Was he thinking of Bianca, who claims she was his true love, perhaps planning to buy a new home for the two of them there? Did Selina's drinking problem finally prove too much for him? Or was he dreaming of his impending marriage to wealthy, successful Caroline?

I scan the pages, catching phrases, words that don't make sense. 'Slipped down a steep bank in the dark ... tumbled through the trees ... broken neck ... found weeks later by someone walking their dog ...'

Oh, oh, oh. Did he suffer? Did he lie there in the dark, unable to move, hoping someone would find him?

I feel the magazine slip between my fingers and land back in the green bin. My legs start moving of their own accord. As though I can walk away from this. As though I can leave it behind.

When you first start walking, you're just moving your body, putting one foot in front of the other. You might notice how your

arms swing or how deeply you're breathing. Or you might focus on things outside yourself – the air temperature, tūi calling from the trees.

But after a while, your mind goes inside itself, you go deeper. Your feet keep moving, one in front of the other, but you're elsewhere. Deep in the past or in some imagined future. You're back with that boyfriend from high school who wanted to tour Italy on a motorbike. Or wondering what topic you'd pick if you ever did a PhD.

After an hour or so, the walk drives itself. Your legs want to keep moving. You get that energy burst. The start of a walk is like trying to escape, walking away from something, but by the end of the walk, you're hurrying to reach somewhere. A place of realisation, maybe. Or respite. You get a sense you could just walk and walk forever, buoyed by the energy of it all.

You forget about the destination, and then suddenly, there it is. You've arrived at a place without knowing quite how you came to be there. It's a surprise and a joy.

I started out shaky and got stronger as I went. Now the air is flowing through me and my head's somewhere in the clouds.

This is a street I've never been down before, and it ends in a park I didn't know existed. There are a few swings, a see-saw, a toilet block. I'm not even sure which suburb I'm in, I've taken so many twists and turns. I must have walked for hours. I plonk myself on a swing for a while, take a swig from my water bottle. It's almost empty. I head for the toilet block. There'll be a sink.

There's no one else here. Except for a few blackbirds, I have the place to myself. I start thinking about the park Smith used to take me to when I was a kid. She'd push me on the swing for a while, then open one of her school books and start studying. Sometimes she'd read Shakespeare to me, plays they were studying for UE.

I think Smith struggled with English. I don't mean it was beyond her intellectually. She loved reading the plays and the novels, she

told me once, but she didn't like taking a scalpel to them to see how they ticked.

While she was reading, I'd climb trees. I was good at it – Smith and Dad used to say I was a little spider monkey. It felt natural to be kicking off my shoes and feeling for toeholds in the bark. Sometimes I'd sit and watch Smith from a high branch. I'd stay quiet for as long as I could until she started scouting around for me. She'd always make a show of looking, putting her hand against her eyebrows like the peak of a cap and calling, 'Where's my little sister gone? I can't see her anywhere' until I'd finally giggle and squeal, 'I'm up here!' And she'd wait at the bottom of the tree for me to climb down, then scoop me up for a hug.

There's a huge, dense tree shaped like an upturned bucket at the far end of the park behind the swings. Before I can think about what I'm doing, I'm pushing my way through its tightly packed branches to the well-hidden trunk. Then I'm grasping at knots in the wood, finding footholds, hauling myself up from one branch to the next. The bark's surprisingly smooth. Comforting. It's welcoming me, showing me how to get inside. I feel a thrill run through me, as though I'm doing something a bit naughty, a bit dangerous. Yet it's safe and familiar at the same time.

It's a puzzle, tree-climbing. You have to watch where your hands go, work out where your feet can gain purchase, decide which branch to tackle next. This is one of the most unusual trees I've climbed: I'm right inside it.

The leaves are small and cling closely to the stems as though they can't bear to let go. What kind of tree is this? Its leaves remind me of a macrocarpa, but it's hugging the branches close to itself rather than letting them spread. A cypress maybe? Smith would know.

I peer through the densely packed foliage. I can see the tops of houses, a ginger cat stalking sparrows in someone's backyard. I feel like a queen.

I find my way right to the top, and poke my head out into

the light. There's a surprising amount of room up here. I haul myself up. I find I can crawl around the top quite easily. There's a sizeable depression in the centre. If I stand, I risk being seen from below, but if I sit in the hollow, the surrounding branches are high enough to hide me.

I find a spot where I can wedge myself between two thick branches growing close together and rest my head against the trunk. It feels like a cradle. I don't want to leave.

I pull my raincoat out of my daypack and drape it over myself. I suddenly feel enormously tired.

When I wake, it's dark. There are lights in some of the houses, so it can't be too late. I'm hungry and remember the two apples in my pack. I eat one and save the other for breakfast.

I should go home. But that seems too difficult right now. Fatigue overcomes me again, a great soothing blanket, blocking out all that's happened.

In the morning I hear voices – a man and a woman walking their dogs. I move my head so I can see them through the foliage. The dogs are white poodles, the large kind. Standard – is that what they're called? One of them comes over to the tree and starts barking. I try to hiss like a cat, but it's unperturbed.

'Odie!' the man shouts. 'Get away from there.'

Odie backs off, with some reluctance.

When they leave, I clamber down to use the toilet and fill my water bottle. Then I climb back up and sit inside my tree.

I wonder where it comes from. I think it must be from some warm and faraway place. Bolivia, maybe. Or Portugal. I wonder how often an arborist comes to trim it to its bucket shape. I feel grateful for the shelter it provides, for the density of its leaves, for its fresh smell.

A tree is a place of solace. A tree is a sympathetic ear. A tree is a home.

Late morning, it starts to rain a little. I relish the feel of it on my face, washing me clean, rinsing the world away. A truck comes from the council and a man empties the rubbish bin and takes a mop and bucket into the toilet block.

Later, three high-school girls sit on the swings eating pies. Their voices drift up.

‘So I’m like, “Why didn’t you text me last night?” And he’s like, “I was at footy practice.” But I know he wasn’t because Lisa’s brother was there and he said Damian never showed up.’

‘You should go out with Ben to make him jealous.’

‘He’s seeing that bitch, Shania, I know he is.’

‘That’s, like, not even her real name.’

After a while, they leave and it’s just me and the blackbirds again.

A scattering of children come and go in the afternoon, and in the evening, two middle-aged men sit down on the wooden bench to share a parcel of fish and chips. When they leave, I clamber down and pull the leftover chips out of the rubbish bin. It’s the best meal I’ve had in years.

You can see everything more clearly from a tree. You’re observing the world at a distance. I amaze myself with what I’m remembering.

The first piece of jewellery Smith made me – before the kōwhai ring and the citrine giraffe ring – was a turquoise pendant. I was recovering from anorexia, starting to eat normally again. I no longer had that layer of hair that had started to grow all over my body, as though it were trying to protect itself from the cold. I still couldn’t look at myself in a mirror because I seemed so huge, but I was eating three regular meals a day and I’d stopped taking laxatives.

Smith had moved back home to look after me. It was years before I realised what a sacrifice that was – coming back so soon after she’d finally found some freedom. She was meeting me after school every day and taking me there every morning. Checking I

actually went. Checking I didn't bunk off and spend all day doing star jumps in the garden until I collapsed – which is what she'd caught me doing one day. It didn't occur to me at the time she'd had to cut her hours to part-time to do it. If you knew how much Smith loves her work, you'd know how hard that must have been.

She brought the turquoise necklace with her when she picked me up from school one day and handed it to me in a polished wooden box.

'It's gorgeous,' I said. It was the most exquisite stone – like the sea on a summer's day – set in the centre of a silver star. Like a medal.

I can still hear her words. 'You deserve it. I'm so proud of you.'

I could see in her eyes she meant it. Smith never says anything she doesn't mean.

'I'm better now,' I said. 'You'll be able to go and join Rose on your trip.'

She smiled. 'Soon.'

'How is Rose?' I asked her. 'Have you had any more postcards?' Smith was still going round to her old flat to collect her mail every week. Her last tiny hold on a life away from me.

'I got one from Porto yesterday. A picture of the Church of St Francis.' I still remember how a ray of light crossed her face. 'Next month she's going to London to look for a job.'

'You could join her there,' I said.

'We'll see.' The light died.

But before then ... *Before* was the nightmare. As my body grew ever thinner, I kept dreaming of food. Every night I'd face pavlova mountains, ice cream glaciers, rivers of chocolate sauce. In the mornings I expected to find my lips coated with icing sugar, biscuit crumbs on the duvet. I always woke feeling overwhelmed with guilt, and that made me redouble my efforts. I went for a whole year without eating chocolate. I started telling people I was allergic to it, to stop them offering it to me.

I used to get such terrible cravings. Not just for sweet things,

though I've always had a sweet tooth. I spent weeks longing for roast chicken and gravy – my favourite meal. My mouth would water at the thought. I could taste it, the succulent flesh. I could feel the thickness and texture of the gravy, how it would slide down my throat. The crispiness of the browned chicken skin between my teeth. The potatoes, carrots and peas that Dad had grown himself. 'What d'you reckon, Pikelet?' he'd say. 'As good as Mr Wattie's?'

But when those meals were real, when Dad really did cook us a Sunday roast, I'd force myself to eat a few of the peas and carrots, and maybe a sliver of chicken that I chewed a hundred times before swallowing, then I'd hide the rest in a handkerchief I kept up my sleeve and flush it down the toilet as soon as I was able.

It was like a game. Deceiving Dad and Smith, seeing how far I could go with it, how far I could push my body. A successful day was one where I ate nothing at all. But if I had anything resembling a proper meal, I saw it as a weakness and punished myself by running laps of the park near our house until I couldn't run any more.

I wake up smelling Dad's roast chicken dinner. It's been a long time now since I've felt I deserve one.

I look down through the leaves to see a very small boy looking up at me and pointing. Thank goodness he's too little to try to climb up and join me.

I try to tell him 'Shh!', but he runs off towards his mother, who is talking to a friend on the bench. 'Mummy, there's a lady in the tree!'

I try to disappear against the tree trunk. I should have worn brown.

I needn't have worried. 'He's got such a good imagination,' his mother tells her friend. 'This morning it was an elephant in his wardrobe.'

No one can see me.

I must have been a nightmare to live with, but Smith never complained. She just sat patiently with me every mealtime, making sure I ate, making sure I didn't hide food up my sleeve or in my pockets or tuck it in my cheek until I could go and spit it out somewhere. Sometimes it would take over an hour for me to finish a meal, but she waited. Unbudging. Once she'd instituted a set of rules about how much I had to eat every day, that was that. 'We're going to get you well,' she said. 'And no argument.' I'd try to bargain – telling her I'd eat twice as much tomorrow, or trying to swap a potato for a small carrot. I knew exactly how many calories there were in everything. But she'd never give in to my attempts to reassert control over my eating. She simply took over until she could rely on me to eat sensibly again.

It was a couple of years before I completely recovered, but at least I didn't have to go into hospital, like another girl from school. To start with I felt quite envious of how thin she'd got, but then I heard about how much they make you eat in hospital and how they force you to stop exercising, so you can put on weight. Nurses follow you to the toilets to make sure you're not throwing up and search your pockets for hidden food. I knew I didn't want that, so I tried really hard. Smith kept telling me about osteoporosis and other conditions that can result if you don't eat properly. Part of it, if I'm honest, was about all the attention. I had Dad and Smith constantly concerned about me, cajoling me to eat and worrying when I didn't. I think I wanted to stay a child for a bit longer. But in the end, I decided I wanted to live.

Randall comes to me in my dreams. I can taste his mouth, the salt on his skin. His scent surrounds me. I can feel his lips on my neck, feel him parting my legs, that sense of the inevitability of what we're about to do. I can feel his strength as he enters me, the way he's overcome by that instant of need. No man has ever matched him for passion and power.

When I wake, I'm wet. For a moment, I can't believe he's not

there, beside me. Randall. How can I go on living?

Is there a difference between love and obsession? I used to drive to his house some nights. After that one time he took me there. I used to sit outside in my car and hope I'd catch a glimpse of him, through the window. His shadow behind the blinds. Cooking dinner for Caroline. Or taking out the rubbish. If he'd seen me, if *Caroline* had seen me, what would I have said?

Then there was the night I called their house over and over, hanging up before anyone could answer. I called from a phone box, just in case Caroline got to the phone first, just in case she asked the police to trace the call. I stood there, dialling and redialling, tears running down my face. Trying to make contact.

My rings feel like a burden. All that silver, weighing me down. This must be how Smith feels when she wears jewellery. Heavy. Tethered. One by one, I slide them off my fingers and push them down over the twigs around me, over their tiny, tight leaves. The citrine giraffe, the kōwhai. My seven rings are baubles now, decorating my tree. Now it is Christmas. Now I am liberated.

How long is it since I took those chips out of the rubbish bin?

As a teenager, I used to spend hours poring over recipe books. There was a stack on a shelf in the kitchen. *One Hundred Ways with Spices. Adventures in Szechuan Cooking*. My favourite was an old scrapbook of pieces clipped out of the *Woman's Weekly*. Quiche Lorraine, beef bourguignon, baked Alaska.

It all seemed so exotic, promising flavours and excitement worlds away from our Kilbirnie home. I persuaded Smith to buy tins of bamboo shoots and packets of dried lemongrass and I'd set to preparing the evening meal. I was meticulous about weighing and sieving and simmering for exactly the right amount of time, and I'd watch Dad's and Smith's faces anxiously for signs of approval. Dad always said, 'Absolutely delicious, Pikelet', however it tasted. Though no doubt he was longing for a plate of chops

and potatoes. Smith would say, 'Very tasty', and ask why I wasn't having any myself. I'd always pat my stomach and say I'd eaten so much while I was cooking that I couldn't fit in another bite. Or I'd spread out a fine layer of rice around my plate with a teaspoonful of sauce and play with it until I could whisk it away with the other plates and start the washing up.

I loved all the smells that wafted through the kitchen when I cooked. I'd allow myself a tiny taste of the sauces, just to check I'd got them as close to perfection as I could manage. They were never quite right, of course. I always thought I could do better. 'You're a useless cook,' I'd tell myself. 'No one will ever want to eat this rubbish. You'll never make it as a chef.'

Ironic really, when I think about Randall, but being a chef was my big dream for a while. And then I found out about the recipe books.

'You know, those are Mum's old books,' Smith said one day. 'I remember her cutting all those recipes out of the magazines and sticking them in that scrapbook. She'd be so excited when she brought home a new recipe book to try out. I think she looked on them as the next best thing to travelling to all the places the dishes came from.' It's a wonder Dad hadn't burned them with everything else of hers.

After that, I put all the books in a cupboard and stopped cooking, as abruptly as I'd started. I didn't want to be anything like Jane. I wanted nothing to do with her. I haven't opened a recipe book since. If I have something I've particularly enjoyed in a restaurant or at a friend's place, I work out for myself how to make it. Mind you, the past couple of years, I haven't bothered with that. I've been mostly living off toast and microwave dinners.

'You're not looking after yourself,' I can hear Smith say.

And Dad, always solicitous. 'Take good care now, Pikelet.'

Once, in the middle of the battle with anorexia, Smith told me, 'Do it for us. If you can't eat for yourself, eat for me and Dad. Because we couldn't bear to lose you.'

It's when life is at its most unpredictable and frightening that I need to find something I can control. When I look back to when it started, it's easy to see the links – Smith moved out, my favourite art teacher left suddenly, a girl in my class died in a car crash. All this happened in the space of six months and while they were all separate incidents, they obviously worked some cumulative effect on me. Layers of life at its most alarming. It was simply too much.

And if Jane had been there, would it all have been different? Maybe. At least for Smith. It wouldn't have all landed on her; she would've had someone to share the burden. Not that Dad didn't do his best, but it was beyond the realms of what he knew how to fix. Building me a tree hut, bandaging a sprained ankle, teaching me to drive – those were the things he was good at.

Bailey said to me once, 'Women always go for men who are like their fathers.' But I don't. I go for men who don't have enough time for me. Distant men. Men who aren't there when I need them.

If Smith ever finds Jane, should I meet her? Maybe there are a few things I need to say to her.

Today, I am a bird. Free and feathered. Today, I am the Queen of Wellington. From the regal nest, I view my subjects below: the old man wheezing towards the bench, the teenage boy with the black puppy, the tired mother with the pushchair and the paperback. Where's the old man's wife? He seems like a man who would have been married. Dead; she must be dead. In the end, everybody dies. There's nothing to be done about this endless cycle of death and sorrow. How can anyone bear it?

I'm not a bird. I'm not a queen. I'm a sad, sad person in a tree. And I have no idea what to do about that.

I have a whole heart bursting with love and no one to take it from me.

Randall's spirit is near. I can feel his presence.

Why didn't you love me, Randall? At times, I almost thought

you did. I thought I felt something emanating from you, but maybe it was just my own love, strong enough for two, reflected back to me. Was I so deluded? Or was there some little chink in your heart for me?

I daren't do more than whisper to him, so my voice can be covered by the rustling leaves of the tree next door. My tree doesn't rustle. My tree is stoic, silent.

Everyone I love leaves me. All the important people. Randall. Tim. Dad. The mother I don't even remember. Why am I not worth sticking around for? Smith has her own life now, looking after that little boy. Dad has Ngairé. Tim has Rowena. Everyone's made a new start. Who have I got? No one.

I thought I had you, Randall, and now you're gone. None of it was ever real. None of what I thought we had actually existed. All the time I thought I was special, that we shared a rare bond. But I was just one more woman, another warm body in the queue.

I thought I understood you. I 'got' you in a way others didn't, certainly not Caroline. I thought we had a special connection. But you betrayed me, Randall. How can I trust my own judgement any more? How can I rely on my intuition? Everything I knew for sure turned out to be false.

It's raining again. Or still. It feels as though it's been raining forever. As though I've been shivering forever. As though I'll never be warm and dry again.

I wake in the night, my heart thumping. I can feel someone's eyes boring into me. I hardly dare look. It's Jemima. Staring right at me from the opposite branch. I can't stop shaking. Those cold, little eyes. Accusing. 'You're a waste of space,' she tells me. How did she follow me here? I need to get away from her.

I notice my face is wet. My clothes are wet. My whole body's wet. Wet and shaking. She's making it rain. It goes on and on and it'll never stop. She's trying to drown me.

Jemima's eyes grow larger and larger. Glowing. She's coming for

me. A scream rips from my throat. *Get away!* I scabble backwards along the branch as fast as I can. *No, leave me alone.* She is relentless. I edge further away.

There is a screeching, crunching kind of noise. My whole world teeters. I hear a sort of screaming. I'm clutching at branches, but everything comes away in my hand. I can feel myself falling. Jemima has made me fall. I am sinking to earth surrounded by pieces of tree. There is a thud.

A thick, dark blanket falls over me.

## Quilla

The little boy from next door, Kahu, is in my garden when I bring Daisy back for lunch. He points a stick at us: ‘Bang! Bang!’

Daisy clutches her chest and closes her eyes. ‘I’ve been shot!’ she cries. I’m momentarily worried she thinks it’s real, but then I see her smile.

‘This is my friend, Daisy,’ I tell Kahu.

‘Do you want to see my new Transformer?’ he asks her.

‘That would be delightful,’ she says. ‘Why don’t you join us for

lunch?’

Well, why not? He really seems to have brightened Daisy up. Though I’m not entirely sure she knows where she is. ‘Make sure your mum knows,’ I tell him. ‘And no guns in the house.’ He drops his stick on the doorstep and runs off.

I’ll leave showing Daisy the ring for another visit. When the boy’s not here.

‘I’m a little concerned about my tenant, Daisy,’ I tell her, while we wait for Kahu.

“Within your house will strangers sit, and wonder how first it came ...” says Daisy. Thomas Hardy, I believe. The Tenant-for-Life. It’s amazing what’s still tucked away inside her brain.

‘I haven’t seen hide nor hair of the girl since I went around that day and virtually hauled her out of bed. I told her to go out and get some fresh air and now it’s as though she’s vanished off the face of the earth. I’ve popped around a few times, to see how she’s getting on but there’s just no sign of her. I hope I’m not turning into one of those interfering old chooks who spend all their time prying into other people’s lives because there’s nothing going on in their own.’

Daisy pats my hand. “They’ll talk of their schemes for improving it, and will not mention your name ...”

‘I wonder if she’s gone away, to stay with her sister perhaps – nice girl. Funny name. Jones or Brown or something. It’ll come to me.’

‘It’ll come to us all in the end, doctor,’ says Daisy.

‘Quite.’

‘Shall we order some tea?’

Ah, she thinks she’s in a café. I’ll put the kettle on. ‘What a splendid idea’.

‘You must come to dinner with me and William sometime.’

‘How kind.’ I should bring her round here more often. The daughter’s not much use. If it wasn’t for the Samoan family taking her to church, I don’t believe Daisy would get out at all. No

wonder she runs away.

Kahu bursts in, clutching a cucumber, a bag of tomatoes and some sort of robot-like toy which I presume to be the Transformer. Really, I'm out of touch with what children play with these days. He brandishes the vegetables towards us. 'Mum says to give you these out of her garden.'

'How very kind,' says Daisy. She takes them from him solemnly and begins nibbling at the end of the cucumber. Well, it won't do her any harm, I'm sure.

There's no response to my knocking. I'll have to let myself into the flat again. If that's in breach of the Tenancy Act, it's just too bad. Normally, I leave my tenants to their privacy. The one before Selina was a photographer. A dark-skinned man with an accent I couldn't quite place. Slim, tall, flecks of grey in his dark hair. Very quiet, very polite. Never missed a rent payment. We only spoke twice: the day he moved in and the day he moved out. He handed me a framed photograph wrapped in tissue paper and asked me to accept it as a token of his gratitude. *For the wonderful solitude I appreciated so much.* When I looked later, I saw it was a study of a nude. Himself, in front of a mirror. His body was beautiful. Sleek, toned, firm. I still have the photograph in my bedroom. Sometimes I wonder what might have happened if I'd knocked on his door with a bottle of absinthe one evening.

Selina's the first tenant I've had who's been any trouble really. And even she's been fine until the chaos of the last couple of months. But her latest rent payment hasn't gone through. I'm starting to wonder if she's done a runner, what with all that's been going on in her life lately.

The place smells musty and stale. The first thing I do is open the kitchen window to let in some air.

Everything's exactly the same as when I was here last, over a week ago. Although the loaf of bread I brought around for her is somewhat greener than when I last saw it. This reminds me of

the first time I walked into my mother's house after she'd died. An empty shell of a house. Not a home any more. Just wood and nails and paint, with the soul gone.

I check the bedroom. I feel like a trespasser, looking through her things. But if I don't, and something's happened to her, how would I feel then?

The wardrobe is full of clothes. At least she hasn't moved out without telling me. There's a large suitcase and a backpack in there too. This doesn't necessarily mean she hasn't gone away. Maybe she has several suitcases.

I look in the bathroom: toothbrush and toothpaste sitting neatly on top of the sink. Shampoo and soap in the shower rack.

Where have you gone, Selina? Three shabby porcelain dolls are sitting in a row on the living room couch. One of them's fallen onto its side. I set it upright. They must have been quite remarkable in their day. Their faces are rather lifelike. Although I have to say, they don't strike me as being Selina's taste at all; they must have sentimental value. I wish they could tell me where she is.

I find a list of phone numbers stuck to Selina's fridge by means of a magnet shaped like a wine bottle. I try the number for 'Dad and Ngairé' but it's been disconnected. The next one on the list says 'Smith'. Ah yes, that's the sister. A South Island number.

A man with a German accent answers the phone. 'Hallo, Jürgen speaking. How may I help you?'

'I'd like to speak to Smith please.'

'She is busy right now. In the workshop. Perhaps she can call you back?'

'It's rather urgent.'

He sounds hesitant. 'She very much doesn't like to be interrupted.'

'I must insist, I'm afraid. I need to speak with her about her sister.'

'Okay. I will get her for you. Please hold the line.'

I hear footsteps. 'Hello?' comes the voice.

'Am I speaking with Selina's sister?'

'Yes, this is Smith'

'Sorry to trouble you, dear. It's Quilla, Selina's landlady. We met once. I was wondering if Selina was with you by any chance.'

'No. Is she not at home?'

'That's the thing. I haven't seen her in days. Normally I wouldn't be worried, but with everything that's happened lately –'

'I've been phoning her, but she hasn't been answering. I thought she might have gone on holiday.'

'I think she'd have let me know. It's as though she's just disappeared.'

'What did you mean about everything that's happened lately?'

'The chef, dear. Randall Marshall. Had you not heard that he died?'

There's a pause. Surely she knows about Randall. 'Poor Selina,' she says. 'She must be in shock.'

'I believe so, yes. And what with all the suspicion around his disappearance. The press and so forth.'

'I'm sorry, Quilla, I'm not following you.'

Where on earth has she been? I would have thought the whole country would know by now. 'There was some speculation Selina may have been involved in some way. But once his body was found, it became clear she wasn't.'

'She's been going through all this on her own.' Smith's voice is heavy.

I should have done more for the girl. But it's easy to say that in hindsight. I can see I'm going to have to start phoning around the hospitals. I do hope it won't be bad news.

'How did she seem, the last time you saw her?' Smith asks.

'Not quite herself. I took the liberty of letting myself into her flat. I was worried about her. Reporters had been calling. She'd become a bit of a recluse. I told her to get some fresh air, go for a walk.'

'Maybe she did.'

‘It’s been more than a week, dear. Has she done this sort of thing before?’

I wasn’t sure I’d recognise Smith, having only met her briefly, that one time. But it’s clear she remembers me. She heads straight for where I’m standing at the airport arrival gate. ‘I appreciate this,’ she says. She looks tired.

Smith is very unlike her sister. She’s what you’d call solid, both physically and emotionally, I think. She looks like she’s built to last. I get the sense she’s used to having people depend on her. She seems reluctant to accept help. I had a job persuading her to let me collect her from the airport and take her to the hospital. I only managed to convince her when I said it would be a treat for me, an excuse to visit the viewing platform and watch the planes, something I haven’t done in ages.

I do feel regret that I won’t fly again. But if it’s not to be, it’s not to be. I’m still alive, and that’s not something I take for granted. I’ll just have to find some other way to get the ring back to Alice.

Smith insists on paying the airport parking fee, but otherwise says little on the way to the hospital. I imagine she only speaks when she has something to say. I told her everything she needed to know on the phone. That Selina’s condition hasn’t changed. That she’s restless, unaware of her surroundings. But that the doctors are hopeful this will pass before too much longer.

I turn down the Hot Club CD in my new car stereo to a respectable level. Smith seems happy enough to listen to it without talking. That suits me. I don’t like chatter while I’m driving.

The traffic lights are with us today. We arrive within four songs. Smith hesitates a moment at the hospital entrance.

‘Not many people like these places,’ I say.

‘I lost a dear friend recently.’

‘I’m sorry. That must have been hard.’

‘I’m bringing up her son, Ragnar. That makes everything easier.’

Poor Smith. The last thing she’ll be needing right now is a sick

sister. But isn't this so often how life pans out? All the challenges coming at once? You've barely recovered from one blow, when you're struck by the next. We walk towards the stairs.

'How old is Ragnar?' I ask.

'Ten.' She smiles, the first smile I've seen since she arrived. 'I don't like to leave him for long, so soon after his mother's death. He's staying with friends.'

'You did the right thing, not bringing him,' I tell her.

'He's had enough of hospitals.'

'Selina's just down this corridor. Visiting hours aren't until later, but I phoned ahead to say we were coming.'

'You've been very kind.'

'I'll leave you with her for a while, dear. Get myself a coffee. Would you like one?'

She shakes her head.

'I'll be in the café downstairs when you're ready.'

She's still not moving. I pull my iPad out of my handbag. 'There are a few things I need to do. It suits me just as well to do them here as at home. Take your time.'

I watch her walk towards the visitors' desk. The way she moves is very unlike her sister. Selina has a quickness, a nervousness about her, as though she'd always rather be somewhere else. Smith looks like she's exactly where she ought to be, fully present wherever she might end up.

I'm pleased the café's quiet. No restless children, just a handful of adults sipping at coffees and texting.

A google search fails to reveal Pierce and Alice's whereabouts. I've been assuming they're still in England, but that may no longer be the case. There's no sign of them on any of the social networks I can think of, or indeed anywhere in the online white pages. I even try Sydney, since Alice had a cousin there, but to no avail.

Anything could have happened after all this time. They could have died; they might be divorced. What if Alice has remarried? The ring would be irrelevant to her. If that's the case, I'll have to

return it to Pierce. I shouldn't have left this so long.

Eunice from croquet is an amateur genealogist. I've never thought much of granny-hunting, but perhaps it's time I reviewed my opinions. She may be able to help. And there's always the Salvation Army. As a last resort. Can't stand all that tambourine bashing.

I look up one of my favourite music sites instead. There's a new jazz album I've been meaning to download.

'I need to talk to you about where Selina will go when she gets out of hospital,' I say on the drive home.

'I'll take her back with me,' says Smith.

'Oh, good. I don't think it's wise for her to be in the flat on her own. You know, I'm not sure if she has an income at the moment. Her rent payments have stopped and I noticed she had a 'final demand' from the power company in the letterbox.'

'I'll sort it out,' says Smith.

'There's no hurry. I'm happy to waive the rent.' She looks as though she's about to protest. 'I insist.'

But I can't afford to leave the property empty indefinitely. I have other commitments to honour. I pay half of Daisy's fees for her residential home and her daughter forks out for the other half. I live comfortably, and there's enough put by in case I ever end up in Daisy's situation myself. That doesn't bear thinking about, happy though she undoubtedly is.

'Is it okay for me to stay in Selina's flat tonight?'

'Absolutely. As long as you like.'

'I'll pick up a few things for her.'

'Will you have dinner with me this evening, Smith? If you don't have other plans.'

I can see her hesitating, not wanting to impose.

'I could use the company. And it would give us a chance to talk about Selina's situation.'

'Thanks. That would be good.'

‘Anything you don’t eat, dear?’

‘Animals.’

‘I think I can rustle up a vegetable curry of some description. It’ll make an interesting change from the sardines on toast I’ve got into the habit of having for dinner, at the risk of morphing into a cat. You can get lazy, living alone.’

‘Thanks, Quilla.’

I like this taciturn woman. There’s something eminently trustworthy about her.

Smith rings the doorbell exactly on time and hands me an expertly wrapped bottle of lavender room spray. Still had time to be thoughtful in spite of all she must have on her mind.

‘How lovely. Thank you, dear.’

‘A friend has a lavender farm.’ She’s freshly showered, her hair still damp.

‘I hope there’s still hot water in the flat. I didn’t think to check.’

‘I’ll talk to the power company tomorrow. I’m sorry for all the trouble Selina’s put you to.’

That wasn’t what I meant. ‘It’s hard, isn’t it. To watch a loved one suffer.’

‘She’ll be safe in Tākaka,’ says Smith.

‘I bet you’re a great foster mother to that little boy.’

‘How is she today?’ I ask at the front door. Smith has arrived for dinner again, her hands full of cloth grocery bags stuffed with organic vegetables. She would only agree to come if I promised to let her cook.

‘Still delirious, but the fever should subside soon. The doctor said the best thing for her is rest. They still need to keep her in for observation.’

‘You’ve had a lot on your plate, dear.’

‘There are others worse off.’

‘Smith, I’d like you to meet my dear friend Daisy.’ I warned her

Daisy would be here as well.

‘Delighted to meet you, Dr Smith,’ says Daisy, shaking hands earnestly.

I pour us each a glass of a rather nice pinot gris I’ve been saving. Smith swirls it around the glass and closes her eyes while she inhales the aroma. ‘Apricot with a hint of honeysuckle,’ she says with approval, before taking a sip.

Then her eyes light on the ring. Alice’s ring. I brought it out to show Daisy and it’s still sitting on the table. ‘What a superb piece of amber!’

I hand it to her.

She examines it closely. ‘Baltic. A very fine example. I love the colours. Like fossilised sunshine. Does it have a story?’

‘Not one in which I acquit myself particularly well.’

She hands it back to me. ‘I didn’t mean to pry.’

‘Not at all. I’ve been boring Daisy with my tale of wrongdoing. I took the ring from a friend, many years ago. It wasn’t mine to take. I’ve been trying to trace her so I can return it.’

‘Amber is quite remarkable,’ says Smith. ‘Millions of years old.’

‘I’ve found an address,’ I say. ‘It appears my friend and her husband are alive and well and living in the UK. Northumberland.’ Eunice’s granny-hunting came through. I must remember to take her a bag of lemons next time I go to croquet.

‘My granny’s name is Mary,’ says Daisy. ‘Mary Victoria Smith. On my mother’s side. She lives in Carterton and she makes the best toffee apples.’

‘Lovely.’ I’ve thought about writing to Alice, and I will write. But the letter needs to go with the ring and the ring needs to be delivered personally. There’s no rush. It’s been sitting in my jewellery box for so many years.

Daisy reaches over to my vase to pull a handful of petals from a poor pink rose. This is a new development. ‘Are you going to Northumberland, doctor?’

‘I can’t, Daisy. I can’t travel that distance. I’ll have to find

another way.’

‘My William went to Northumberland once. During the war.’

This seems unlikely.

‘He got a medal.’

‘Marvellous.’ Her stories seem a little muddled today and we haven’t had any poetry yet. I do hope she’s all right. Maybe it’s disorienting for her, being here with Smith – someone she doesn’t know.

‘William’s coming to get me soon. We’re going for cake.’ She hands me the rose petals solemnly.

‘Excellent,’ says Smith. ‘Why don’t I make a start on dinner while we wait for him.’

If I had a daughter, I’d want her to be just like Smith. There’s a profound level of serenity about her, despite how worried she must be about Selina. I show her where the knife block is, and the mortar and pestle for crushing herbs. Daisy and I settle ourselves at the kitchen bench and watch Smith crushing and grinding. The kitchen falls silent except for Smith’s chopping. ‘Smith is caring for a little boy,’ I tell Daisy. ‘After his mother died. Ragnar.’

Smith’s face lights up instantly. ‘His favourite thing at the moment is fishing. He’s had the most terrible loss, but he’s doing so well. He’s strong.’

“As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame ...” says Daisy.

Ah, the poetry’s still there. I’m relieved.

‘We learnt that one at school,’ says Smith. ‘Hopkins. Though I was never much good at English. The dissection aspect of it.’

I risk an impertinent question. ‘Is Ragnar’s father still on the scene?’

Smith shakes her head. She doesn’t seem offended. ‘He was from Iceland. A musician. Ragnar’s never met him. I promised Katie I’d take him there one day.’

‘My father’s away at sea,’ Daisy offers.

‘I’ll bet he’s having a great time,’ says Smith.

‘Have you travelled much, Smith? I ask. ‘Overseas?’

She doesn’t answer at first, but looks into middle distance. Staring into the face of some old memory, perhaps. Then she remembers she’s in my kitchen. ‘I was supposed to go to Europe a long time ago,’ she says. ‘With someone I cared deeply about. A soulmate.’

‘What happened?’

‘I couldn’t go. Rose went anyway. But she died, sadly. On the trip. After that, I couldn’t face it. Going to all the places we should have gone to together.’

‘Where were you planning to go?’

‘Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin. All the great cities. We were going to have adventures.’

‘There are other adventures besides the great cities,’ I say.

‘Yes.’ She fills a saucepan with water and lights the element.

An idea starts to form. This could work out well for everyone.

‘I’d like to talk to you about the amber ring, Smith.’ Apart from Daisy, she’s the only person I’ve ever told. We’re having afternoon tea. I lent her my car to visit Selina and she brought back the keys along with a selection of French pastries. ‘I’ve held onto it far too long. It needs to be returned.’

‘Oh?’

‘I should have done it years ago.’

‘Never too late.’

‘It belongs with Alice in England. I’d like to take it in person, but I’m unable to travel overseas any longer. My health’s not what it was.’

Smith doesn’t enquire further and I don’t elaborate.

‘I have a proposition. Please say no if it doesn’t appeal.’

She waits for me to continue.

‘I need someone to go to England on my behalf. To take back what isn’t mine. I’ll cover all expenses.’

‘You can’t courier it?’

‘I don’t want to take the risk.’

She nods thoughtfully. ‘England.’

‘You could take a side trip to Iceland. Take the boy. Go for as long as you like. Spend some time looking around the UK too, if you wish, since you’ll have to stop off on the way. No point travelling all that distance and coming straight home again.’

‘There’s Selina. She’ll need me to look after her when she gets out of hospital.’

‘There’s no rush. You could wait until she’s stronger.’

‘It’s too much, Quilla. I couldn’t accept.’

‘It’s not charity I’m offering you, Smith. I don’t do charity. I only give if I’m getting something in return. I’m offering you a job, a contract.’

‘Why me?’

‘You seem the sort of person who doesn’t let people down.’

She picks up the cups and side plates from the table and takes them to the kitchen.

‘Sleep on it, Smith. You don’t have to give me an answer right away. But you’d be doing me a great favour.’

‘It’s a very generous offer. I’ll think about it.’

# Selina

I'm lying in a bed. I know that much. The light is dim. I have a sense of everything being overwhelmingly huge, too enormous to deal with in any meaningful way. My arms feel like skyscrapers; my head is a mountain. It's all too much. I daren't look. I try to speak and hear myself say, 'No, no, no! Not that way; the other way!' I don't even know what I mean.

I start to see things, but I'm not sure they're real. Like a snow-topped mountain. I find myself saying, 'To the top! To the top!' And then I'm shouting it, 'To the top!' I feel someone put a damp

cloth on my forehead. I hadn't realised I was so hot. 'Thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you.' I have no idea where I am.

Days and nights blend into each other. I inhabit a world where nothing is quite right, where I can't get a grip on it all. Voices slide in and out and I can't catch what's being said or who is saying it. I know that sometimes I shout, but my words aren't the right ones. I can't work out how to say what I mean.

Until finally I wake and feel still. Breathing hurts, but I can feel a calmness inside that hasn't been there for a long while. The world seems more possible. I risk opening my eyes. I'm in a small, plain room, with a window to my left. Through it, I can see sky. A beautiful wedge of blue that makes me well up with happiness.

I'm in hospital. I'm safe. I feel I could sleep properly now. Not that broken, half-awake, half-dreaming sleep I've been lost in for too long. I can just sleep.

Something's different today. I haven't opened my eyes yet, but I'm pretty sure it's morning. I dreamt I was swimming underwater in a clear, blue lake and when I surfaced, I could see a cottage ahead of me. It felt like home. I woke thinking: the worst's over. I can breathe again.

For a while, I do just that. In. Out. Noticing my chest rise and fall. Noticing the air entering and leaving my lungs. It seems like a miracle.

After a little while, I sense I'm not alone. I wonder if it's one of the nurses. But they're always busy. Arranging the pillows, taking my temperature, giving me things to swallow. This is someone who has time to sit quietly.

I don't want to see who it is just yet. I want to enjoy this feeling of serenity and safety. It's like being in a convent. How I imagine a convent to be, anyway. A place of sanctuary. Where nothing can disturb me. I want to have just a few more moments of being right

here, in this space, before I have to start facing the world again.

When I finally open my eyes, it's my sister I see. Joy radiates through me like sunshine. She's sitting at my bedside, reading. I watch her for a few seconds before I try to speak. Something in her face makes me think of that Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, Kuan Yin. There's something intrinsically good about her. You'd never know we were sisters. 'Smith,' I say. My voice comes out as a crackly whisper. I'm not sure how long it's been since I properly spoke to someone.

She looks up and smiles. 'Welcome back.'

When I dream now, sometimes I'm back in the tree. They're not bad dreams. Other times, I see Randall, but there's always something wrong: some part of his body is broken or bloodied or his eyes are wide open, staring, but he's seeing nothing. When I have these dreams, I wake with my chest thumping. To calm myself, I've taken to mentally reciting Shakespearean soliloquies I remember from school. It was Smith's suggestion. You wouldn't think 'O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt' would be a comfort, but somehow it is. I wish I could get up and spin myself into a safe place, but I'm not up to that yet.

Often, when I open my eyes, my sister's there. Just sitting. 'Is there anyone you want me to phone?' she asks today. 'To tell them how you are?'

I think through the list of people I know. I couldn't face seeing Bailey or Liz. Tim's got his new life in Auckland. The only person I want to see is Dad. But I don't think I could bear it. I shake my head.

This morning I have news when my sister arrives. 'The doctor says I can go home soon. I feel so much better. I ate almost half my breakfast and I can walk to the shower on my own.'

'I'm taking you back to Tākaka,' says Smith. 'As soon as you're ready. You'll live with me and Ragnar.'

‘But I live in Wellington. What about my flat? My car?’

Smith sighs. ‘You can sell your car to a wrecker’s yard. It might cover your power bill. As for the flat, you haven’t paid rent for some time. Quilla needs to redecorate and find new tenants. I’ve packed up all your things. Your furniture and other stuff are under Quilla’s house for now. We’ll take down what we can on the ferry and she’ll send anything else you need later.’

‘So I’m homeless?’ To tell the truth, I’ve been dreading returning to the flat. I don’t want to be dragged back to that terrible spiral I fell into. I don’t want to be constantly thinking about Randall. I don’t want to see the dolls.

‘No, of course not. You’ll have a home with me.’

‘I don’t need babysitting.’

‘I’m not leaving you in Wellington,’ Smith says.

‘I don’t want you keeping me under surveillance. I need space.’

‘You don’t know what you need right now. Look what happened.’

‘I know, I know. I totally lost it. But, Smith, I’m so much better now. I really am. But I need “me” time. I need to sort myself out without my big sister looking over my shoulder every second.’

‘I can’t leave you. Where would you go?’

‘I don’t know. I’ll find somewhere. A friend.’ We both know it’s not going to happen. But I feel trapped. ‘You’re not responsible for me, Smith.’ I feel my voice wavering.

‘But I’m –’

‘My sister. Not my mum. You don’t have to step in and try to fill the space she left. Anyway, I need to tell the police where I am in case – you know – there’s a ... the coroner –’

Smith folds me into a hug and I let her. ‘We’ll talk about this later,’ she says. ‘You just concentrate on getting better.’

I didn’t mean to get this upset. I feel so helpless. Part of me wants her to just leave me be. I’ll be fine on my own, I tell myself, everything’s different now. I’m not sure I’m convinced.

I feel so tired. When I close my eyes, I’m in Antarctica, a vast

expanse of white in every direction. A cool nothingness. It's restful. I imagine falling gently backwards, sinking into the snow, my face kissed by soft flakes. I imagine becoming very still.

Everything's too difficult. If I go to Tākaka, it'll mean I'm a miserable failure. But really, how can I stay in Wellington? Everyone thinks I'm evil. What if I walk down Lambton Quay and bump into Caroline?

I need a glass of wine. Why don't they serve wine in hospital?

'How are you feeling, dear?' Quilla's voice is surprisingly soft. It makes me want to cry. My feelings are so close to the surface these days. I don't really feel ready to face anyone other than Smith. Quilla knows everything about me now. She knows what a weak, pathetic creature I've become. But she's here and apart from Smith, she's the only visitor I've had. When the nurse told me my grandmother had come and sat with me for a couple of hours soon after I was brought here, it took me a while to figure out who she meant. Quilla must have lied to be let in. I don't remember her being here before now. I don't really remember anything between being in the tree and Smith turning up.

'Much better,' I say, trying to make my eyes look brighter.

She pats my hand.

'Thanks,' I tell her. 'For coming to visit. And for getting Smith.'

'She's a good sister.'

'I'm very lucky.'

Quilla pulls a bunch of grapes out of her shopping bag. 'Not very original, I know.'

'I love grapes.' I can feel the tears welling up again; she's being so nice. I don't deserve it.

'I'll have to find a new tenant for the flat, I'm afraid.'

'Smith told me. I couldn't have gone back there anyway. I'm sorry about the rent. I'll pay you back. I've got an art deco sideboard I could sell. And a Vivienne Westwood dress.'

Quilla holds up her hand to stop me. 'Absolutely not. And you can store your things with me as long as you like. I'll send them down when you're ready.'

'Thanks.' There's no way I could go back to that property. Ever.

She rifles through her handbag and hands me a postcard. 'This arrived yesterday.'

Kangaroos and eucalypts on the front.

*Me and Ngairé are having a great time in Perth. Took a ferry over to Rottnest Island. You'd love it, Pikelet.*

I want my dad. I want to bury my face in his thick jersey and feel the world and its troubles melt away.

'Looking forward to Tākaka?' Quilla asks. 'It's lovely there.'

I've been thinking about this and I'm not going to Tākaka. No way. But I don't want to tell Quilla that, or she'll just tell Smith and I'm not strong enough for another argument. Not yet. 'It's so unfair,' I say. 'On Smith, I mean. Her friend died and she's got a new son and in the middle of it all, there's me. She should be having a nice break somewhere. With the little boy. Getting away from it all.'

'Has she mentioned Iceland at all?'

I shake my head.

'I asked her if she'd go over to the UK on my behalf, to return something to an old friend of mine. Something too precious to send through the mail. I thought it could be a holiday for her and Ragnar, with a trip to Iceland along the way.'

It sounds perfect. 'Smith wanted to go overseas years ago, but because of me, she had to change her plans.'

'I'm sure she doesn't regret it.'

'Still. This would be great.' I start to feel quite excited about the idea. As though it would somehow make up for her not being able to go before.

'Maybe you could go with her.'

She needs to get away from me for a while. I'm nothing but trouble. 'I'm really not up to it.'

'She hasn't given me her decision yet,' says Quilla.

'I'll talk to her.'

'You take care now, dear.'

I listen to Quilla's steps clipping down the hospital corridor. She sounds very sprightly. I've never been sure what age she is – she could be anywhere between seventy and a well-preserved eighty. I hope I'm like that one day. Purposeful, self-assured, knowing my own mind.

I have to get Smith to accept Quilla's request to return the ring. And I'll have to find myself a new home. Just the thought of that makes me cry. Maybe I'm not quite ready yet.

'I am not, repeat not, going to Tākaka.' I'm sounding shrill, I know.

'If you're not with me, I'll worry,' says Smith. She deals the cards, for what feels like the thousandth time this afternoon. My life is reduced to endless rounds of Five Hundred.

'You know you can't stay in Wellington, Selina. We've talked about this. When you're ready to leave hospital, we'll go round to Quilla's –'

'I can't go back ... That's where –' I feel the tears bubbling up again. I've just been this big patch of dampness for weeks, it seems. A big marshy mess. I can't continue.

Smith hands me a hospital tissue. 'Too many memories.'

I wipe my eyes. 'I know I can't stay in Wellington.'

'Tākaka's lovely. It'll be a breath of fresh air after all you've been through. It's what you need.'

'You're not listening! Why won't you listen to me?' I sweep the cards off the bedside table and watch while Smith patiently gathers them from the floor.

Why is she always so bloody reasonable? It's not fair. The idea of moving in with my sister feels like a huge step backwards. I need

to be moving into a new future.

‘You’ve got nowhere to live and no source of income,’ she says.

This is true. I expect I could get a benefit, but I’d rather exhaust every other avenue before I turn down that path. And I really do want to get out of the city. I take a deep breath and try to calm myself to something approaching my sister’s level of tranquillity. I fail, but at least I’m not shouting. ‘Quilla told me about Iceland. I couldn’t bear to be responsible for you missing out on another overseas trip.’

‘You wouldn’t be. I could go later. When you’re properly better.’

‘Quilla might ask someone else if you turn her down. I got the sense she wanted whatever-it-is returned to her friend quite soon.’

‘If she does, that’s fine.’

‘No it’s not. Anyway, Smith, I’m not under arrest. I’m free to go where I please.’ But the sad fact is, I have nowhere to go. In the past, I might have asked Bailey if I could stay for a while, until I got back on my feet, but I can never trust her again.

I can almost hear the cogs turning over in Smith’s mind. She’s a careful thinker. She knows I’ve painted myself into a corner and don’t know how to get out. ‘What if you house-sat for me and Ragnar?’ she says, finally. ‘If we did go to Iceland, and I’m not saying we’re definitely going, we’d need someone to feed Chapman. The dog.’

She’s trying to throw me a lifeline. ‘That could work.’

‘In the meantime, you can stay in my house truck. You’ll have your own space.’

A house truck. Six months ago I would have laughed at the idea; now it sounds like my own special retreat. A halfway house between the tree and the real world. ‘Maybe that would be okay.’

The relief on Smith’s face makes me wish I’d said yes straight away. She’s been through so much lately and I’m being a pain in the arse. Again.

I will try to make Smith’s life easier. I will try to be reasonable. I am becoming a better person. ‘Thanks, Smith. It’s great.’

She puts an arm round my shoulders and gives me something between a shake and a squeeze.

The sun seems unduly harsh, the traffic noise deafening. How long is it since I've stepped outside the hospital? I feel as fragile as a porcelain doll.

'All right?' asks Smith.

I paste a smile on my face and try to look better than I feel. The clothes Smith's brought me feel baggy. My hair's limp and badly in need of a trim. 'Great,' I manage.

'Quilla's taking us to the ferry terminal.'

I'll have to talk to people soon, in Tākaka. The boy, Ragnar. Smith's friends. It all seems very difficult. Despite my best efforts, I stumble on the concrete. Smith grabs my arm and I brush her away. 'I'm *fine*.'

Quilla is business-like and organised. She doesn't fuss, which I'm grateful for, and says little on the drive. She sits with me at the ferry terminal, while Smith checks in our bags. I half wonder what she's packed for me, but I don't really care.

'The dolls!' I'd almost forgotten them. I feel myself rising from my seat. Suddenly, even though I don't want to see them, it's enormously important that they're okay.

'They're fine,' says Quilla, as though my panic is perfectly normal. 'They're sitting in my living room, making themselves at home. I've cleaned them up a little, given them new dresses; I hope you don't mind.' She flicks at her phone, then hands it to me. There they are: Josephine, Jemima, Jasmine. Clean and dressed in white, like three porcelain angels. She's even put bonnets on them. They look benign. 'I can send them down to Tākaka if you like?'

'No!' I'm not ready to have them with me. I try to compose myself. 'They seem ... happy where they are. I just wanted to be sure they're all right.' I don't quite understand why.

'Your other things are safe in the basement,' says Quilla.

'Thanks.'

‘Everything’s going to be fine, dear.’ She sounds so certain, I almost believe her.

The house truck is lovely, full of wood panelling and stained glass windows. I know I’ll feel safe here; it’s a sort of log-cabin cocoon. The smell of incense wafts through the air – patchouli perhaps. Why haven’t I visited my sister here before? She was always inviting me.

Smith grins. ‘I knew you’d like it. Get yourself settled while I go and pick up Ragnar. Tea’s at seven.’

‘I’m looking forward to meeting him.’ Actually I’m dreading it, but I have to get it over with sometime. What should I say to him? That I’m sorry his mum’s dead? It must be ages ago now. I should have asked Smith about it. She’s had all this – a house of death and grief to deal with – and I’ve just been piling more on her plate. The useless little sister who can’t look after herself.

I’ll just ask him about school or something. Poor little bugger. I wonder if he cries all the time, like I’ve been doing. Maybe I’ll ask Smith if she can tell him not to bother me in the house truck.

I unzip my suitcases with interest, wondering what Smith has packed for me. My clothes don’t seem to belong to me any more. They’re the clothes of a woman who worked in the city and had an affair with a man she shouldn’t have. I’ll get new clothes. There’s bound to be an op shop in town. Maybe I could trade these. I make a pile of skirts and blouses I won’t be needing any more. I’ll keep my old jeans and T-shirts.

Smith’s packed Dad’s postcards. I tuck them into the wood panelling above the narrow bed. It’s already starting to feel like home.

There’s a tentative knock on the door. I open it. A black-haired boy is standing there with a serious look on his face.

‘Are you Ragnar?’

He nods. ‘I brought you a picture.’ He hands me a sheet of paper with a painting of a fish on it. It’s orange, like the one in

Quilla's house, the giant goldfish. Maybe I won't hang it up yet. Maybe I don't need reminding of that place.

'It's lovely,' I tell him. 'Did you do this at school?'

'It represents new beginnings.'

'Oh.' I should get to know him. When I'm feeling up to it. After all, he's a sort of little brother. No, a nephew. I should act like an aunty. Maybe I could take him to the pictures one day. If they have those here.

'Smith says dinner will be ready in ten minutes.'

'Thanks.'

It doesn't take long to settle into a new routine. I find I'm needing so much sleep. Twelve hours at a stretch most nights. Smith and Ragnar are usually gone by the time I wake up. I can use their shower and kitchen if I want, but mostly I just make breakfast in the house truck and stay in there, reading and thinking until midday. After lunch, I go for a walk along the beach.

What is it about the sea that's so healing? Every salt-edged breath of air, every oystercatcher call, gifts me with a smidge more peace of mind.

Some days I smile without even trying.

Smith's great with Ragnar. But then, she was great with me. He takes up so much of her time, though. It must be tiring. I should offer to babysit sometime. When I feel less awkward with him. Part of me can't wait for them to leave, to set off for Iceland. But the other part's grateful Smith's here. Maybe I've just been on my own too long.

I wake to Smith banging on the truck door. I've been getting up around eleven each day; I still need the extra sleep.

'Dad's on the phone. They're back in Coolangatta.' I pull on a pair of jeans and hurriedly follow Smith into the house.

'You haven't told him?' I ask.

'I said you've had a fall and you're staying with me to recover.'

‘Thanks Smith.’ I reach for the phone. One day, I might tell him the rest of it.

‘What’s all this about a fall, Pikelet? Do you want me to come over?’

‘I’m fine, Dad. Honestly, everything’s okay now. Smith’s looking after me. Tell me about your trip.’ I sit on the floor, against the wall, Dad’s voice washing over me. Even from Australia, even without knowing what’s wrong, he’s making everything all right.

‘Are you still looking for Jane?’ I ask Smith after dinner. Ragnar’s in his room, playing on his Xbox or whatever boys do. After my first night here, I told Smith I’d prefer to eat all my meals on my own in the house truck, but she insisted I join them inside. Now I’m glad she did. It’s cosy. I’m part of a family again.

‘It hasn’t seemed so important lately,’ she says.

‘Because of me?’

‘Because of a lot of things. But I’ve got a better idea of what’s been happening in her life. Auntie Vi had a letter from Mum a year or two after she left. She was living in London. But then Mum’s friend Ginny heard she’d been in a halfway house in Melbourne. About ten years ago. Apparently she was talking about returning to London. Of course there’s no guarantee she did, or that she’ll still be there.’

‘I still don’t understand why you’d even want to find her in the first place.’

‘Because she’s Mum.’

‘She was never a proper mother, Smith. Not to me.’

‘There’s no point expecting her to be anything other than what she was. No amount of wishing is ever going to change her. It took me a long time to accept that.’

‘I could never forgive her. For hurting you and Dad like that. For leaving me. It’s not right.’

I keep pulling at my fingers where my rings should be. I wonder if they’re still there, on the tree. I don’t want them back. I’m

enjoying being unfettered.

Smith looks up from the brooch she's polishing with a cloth. 'You don't have to forgive her. You don't have to think that what she did was justified. You don't have to try to understand her.'

'But you do?'

'No. I've never understood and I doubt any explanation would help. Maybe there's still a damaged place inside that will never properly heal. But I moved on with my life anyway. Somehow you have to keep living despite your grief. Otherwise it just gets in the way your whole life. Keeps you from the next stage of your journey.'

'You're insufferably wise, Smith. How do you live with yourself?'

My sister smiles. 'Years of hard work.'

Smith warned me someone was coming today to fix a leaking water pipe, but I still feel startled when I hear male voices. I watch them through the window, lugging spades and lengths of pipe through the garden. The older one's a southern-man type, barking out orders, focused on the job. He's in good shape for a man of what, fifty? Sixty? The younger guy seems like a bit of a character, making faces and breaking into occasional bursts of tuneless song. He's wearing a green beanie and a black singlet, the sort of clothes Randall would never have worn.

He catches my eye through the window and gives a wave. I instantly pull back and hide my face, but then I realise how silly that is. He's seen me; I can't pretend I'm not there.

I feel the colour rising in my face as I push open the door.

'Giddyay,' he says, grinning widely.

I should say something. What should I say? 'How's the job coming along?' Oh no, now he'll think I'm spying on them, making sure they're not slacking off.

'Good as gold,' he says, still grinning.

There's something about him, just standing there – his strong shoulders, the tuft of dark hair peeking over the top of his singlet.

‘That’s good,’ is all I can manage and I quickly go back inside.

‘Catch you later’, I hear. I lie face down on the bed and cover my head with the pillow.

Ragnar seems to be doing okay, despite all he’s been through. Smith’s gone to great pains to keep memories of his mum alive for him. There are photos of her all over the house and Smith talks to him about Katie all the time. Last weekend, they sat down at the kitchen table together to cut out pictures of Katie’s favourite things from old magazines and make them into a collage. It’s pinned to the wall over the fridge: sandy beaches, chocolate cake, a tūi.

I wonder briefly what a Randall collage would look like. Tapas, hotels, cocktails, women. Maybe I’ve shed more tears than he deserves. ‘What sort of things did Jane like?’ I ask Smith when Ragnar’s gone to bed. She’s washing; I’m drying. There’s no dishwasher here. ‘I mean I know she liked cooking because there were those cookbooks of hers we had at home, and she must have liked dolls, to have kept Jasmine all that time.’

I wait while Smith thinks. ‘The cooking thing was just a bit of a phase she went through. Like so many other phases – yoga, macramé, badminton, playing the flute. It was as though she couldn’t find anything she really liked.’

‘She sounds flighty.’

Smith sets another plate in the dish rack. ‘She always liked jewellery. She used to go around the second-hand shops, looking for old beaded necklaces. Bit of a magpie. She had quite a collection.’

‘Is that why you became a jeweller?’

‘I never use beads.’ It’s not really an answer.

‘I had a call from Mum’s friend Ginny last night,’ Smith tells me over breakfast.

‘From Holloway Road?’

‘One of her friends saw Jane in London a couple of years ago. It

sounds like she did go back after all.'

'Maybe you could find her there.'

Smith goes quiet for a bit. Quieter than usual. 'There's something I need to tell you.'

'Jane's not dead, is she?' Though I'm not sure I'd care if she was.

'Mum had a baby after she left us. We have a brother. Half-brother. Salvador. He'd be in his mid-twenties. I don't know anything else about him.'

'Salvador.' A brother. This is different. This isn't someone who chose to leave. 'I wonder if he knows about us.'

Smith sighs. 'Mum may have wanted a completely clean break.'

'Are you going to look for him too?'

'I have other things to worry about right now.'

Like me. Like Ragnar. 'You're still going to Iceland, aren't you?' I really want her to say yes. It's entirely selfish, I know, but I want time to myself. And I don't want to have scuppered her dream holiday yet again.

'Ragnar's got his heart set on it.'

That's all right then.

The workmen are back. For the first time in weeks, I check my reflection in my hand mirror and apply a layer of lipstick. Nothing too showy, just a soft shade of pink.

And then I sit there, all morning, trapped in the house truck, too afraid to go out. I'm so stupid.

I wipe off the soft pink lipstick and pull Smith's duvet over my head.

Someone's banging on the door. I must have fallen asleep. I feel disorientated, groggy. The light's changed; it's almost dark. I push open the door. 'Yes?'

It's him. Green-beanie man. That smile. He hands me a key. 'Smith said to give you this when we'd finished.'

'Oh. Thanks.' I must look dreadful. He's still standing there. 'All done then?'

‘Done, dusted and put to bed.’

I wish I wasn’t blushing.

‘I’m just off to the Tākaka Inn. Quick drink to celebrate a job well done. Fancy it?’

‘Oh, I shouldn’t.’

‘Go on.’ What is it about him? He puts out his hand again.

‘Where are my manners? Kyle.’

His hand is warm and strong. ‘Selina.’ I remember to smile.

‘Sure I can’t tempt you?’

Smith and Ragnar are out this evening, some school thing. What harm would it do? ‘I’m broke.’

‘My shout.’

It’s so long since I’ve had a night out. I’ve been so good. One little drink won’t hurt. I could have an orange juice. ‘Go on then. Just a quick one. I’ll get changed.’

‘You’re gorgeous as you are, Selina.’

How long is it since a man’s said my name? I hear myself giggling. ‘Two minutes.’

‘I’ll be waiting in the van.’

It’s silly to feel so excited. But just the fact of sitting in a van next to this good-looking man makes me feel like I’m waking up properly. Finally.

I’m nervous about walking into the pub, being around strangers. But standing next to Kyle, it feels so easy.

‘Lager?’ he offers.

One won’t do any harm. ‘Thanks.’ It’s so cold, so good. I feel better than I have in weeks.

‘You know he’s married,’ says Smith. She sounds as though she doesn’t know whether to be amused or angry.

‘Who?’ My head is pounding. It’s almost four in the afternoon. It’s taken this long for me to manage to crawl out of bed and stagger into the house.

‘Kyle.’ She hands me a glass of water.

‘How did you know –?’

‘The whole of Takaka knows. The pub was full when you threw up on Kyle’s shoes and he and the manager had to carry you out.’

I wonder if Smith’s got any painkillers or if she’s too much of a hippy for that.

‘You’re barred, apparently.’

I sift through the bits I can remember. I was crying a lot, about Randall. A middle-aged woman in a bright pink jacket gave me her hanky. And I tried to sit on Kyle’s knee but I lost balance and ended up on the floor. ‘I hadn’t had any lunch.’

‘You’re still barred.’

Smith’s busy welding something when I walk in. I’ve been trying to leave the house every day. Calling into the workshop for a change of scene.

She turns off her torch. ‘I’ve decided not to go.’ She doesn’t even look at me.

‘But you have to.’ This is unthinkable. ‘You’re leaving next month. What about Ragnar? He’ll be devastated. You can’t disappoint him like that. And you’d be letting Quilla down.’

‘I can’t leave you alone.’

‘I know I’ve been an idiot, but honestly, Smith, never again. I really have stopped drinking this time.’

‘I can’t go away and be worrying about you every minute of the day.’

I’m so stupid. Why do I keep sabotaging everything like this?

Aroha walks over. I hadn’t even realised she’d come into the workshop. She asks Smith quietly, ‘What would help you not to worry about Selina?’

Smith considers this for a while. ‘Knowing she’s getting help for her drinking. Knowing there’s someone I trust keeping an eye on her. Hearing from her every day.’

‘That’s ridiculous!’ I say. ‘I’m not on home detention. Do you

want me to wear a bloody ankle bracelet as well?’

‘There’s an AA group,’ says Aroha. ‘I’ve got a cousin who goes. I can ask her to take you along.’

‘But I’m not –’

Smith just looks at me.

‘All right. But I’m not ringing you every day.’

‘Twice a week?’ Aroha suggests.

‘Go on then.’ Whatever it takes to get Smith to Iceland. ‘You’ll have to get a cell phone, you know.’

‘I’m sure Ragnar can show me how they work.’

‘Jürgen and I can check Selina’s okay,’ says Aroha.

‘There’s no need,’ I say.

Smith looks sceptical.

Aroha puts a hand on my shoulder. ‘You could come round on Tuesday nights, while Jürgen’s at his pottery club. We can have a girls’ night. Do you play cards?’

It doesn’t sound so bad. I like Aroha. She’s trying to help. I need to stop sounding like a spoilt brat. ‘Five Hundred and Canasta.’

‘What will you do all day?’ asks Smith. ‘I don’t want you moping about.’

‘I could use some help with the lavender farm,’ says Aroha. She’s got a few acres a little way out of town. She’s been distilling the oil and gradually building up a little business. ‘I need some time to sort out the accounts and process the orders. And I want to experiment with making soap. What d’you reckon, Selina? You could look after weeding and pruning. The lavender needs to be completely weed-free before harvest and I can’t afford weed mats just yet. Say three days a week? The pay’s not much.’

It sounds so unlike what the rest of my life has been. So different, it must be the right thing to do. I need to find a better way to live. A better way to be. This will be the start of my new life. If I just keep doing everything differently, I’ll avoid all my usual mistakes. ‘Thank you,’ I say.

## Smith

I know Ragnar can't wait to get to Iceland, but I want to complete Quilla's mission first. The ring weighs heavily in its box in the inside pocket of my windfleece vest; I'll feel freer when it's delivered. And spending these first few days in England will give us time to catch up on sleep and acclimatise. We'll be fully rested and ready when we get to Reykjavik.

It's early afternoon when we arrive in Newcastle. Finally, after more than thirty hours of travel. We're staying in a B&B the first couple of nights, a little way out of the city centre. Quilla's friends

live in a Northumberland town called Alnwick. We'll take the train up in a couple of days.

The man from the B&B is waiting for us in a van in the airport carpark. Our rooms are cosy and homely. There's a painting of bridges in Ragnar's room and an enormous television in mine. The shower's good. Hot and high-pressured. It feels so good to be clean again after the long flight.

Ragnar's excited about the B&B's free biscuits and teabags. I've taken him out of school for an extra week, tacked on to the end of his school holidays. This way, he'll get close to a fortnight in Iceland and we can comfortably fit in a little sightseeing around northern England as well. After Iceland, we'll go to London for a few days and I'll see if I can find out any more about Mum.

We head out for a curry, our first English meal. The man behind the counter asks whether I want rice or chips with it. We eat it on chips (when in Rome) in the little café, on a red-checked tablecloth. Afterwards I buy Ragnar an ice cream and we find a bench to sit on overlooking the River Tyne.

'Look at all the bridges, Smith. They're the same as the ones in the painting in my room.'

'We can go exploring properly tomorrow, sport.' We are both so tired. By five o'clock we're each tucked up between crisp, clean sheets.

We both wake far too early and are the first to arrive at breakfast. The owner of the B&B points us towards the Metro station, the light rail into the city, but Ragnar and I are happy just pottering around the streets on foot: remarking on all the brick buildings and old cobbled lanes, the extraordinary number of closed circuit TV cameras. We're starting to tune in to the music of the Geordie accents around us: 'Howay man. Y'aal reet?'

It's an ideal day. Warm and sunny without being too hot. 'Good to be missing the tail end of winter, ay sport?'

Ragnar grins. Our bodies are still adjusting to the time zone. We're hungry at the wrong times. We eat an early lunch in a local

pub. Ragnar tries a Cumberland sausage with chips. It's not like a New Zealand pub; most of the people in here are elderly and have come for a meal, not to drink.

I check my pocket for the hundredth time. Alice's ring is still there, safe and snug. Quilla's letter is back at the B&B, but I'm taking no risks with the ring.

We stroll along the river and over the newest of the bridges, the white Millennium Bridge, that tilts to let ships through. Ragnar spends a happy afternoon taking dozens of photos on the smartphone I bought at the duty-free shop, showing me each one after he's taken it. 'I'm going to send these to Aroha and Jürgen,' he says. Apparently the phone can also do emails.

When Rose was in Europe, she would have been saving up the rolls of film, waiting until she got back to New Zealand to have them developed. All those photographs lost with her.

'Can we go to St James' Park, Smith?'

Ah, the football ground. Home of Newcastle United. I check the leaflet I picked up at the information centre. It's a couple of stops on the Metro. 'Of course we can.'

While Ragnar's in the bedroom playing with his Xbox, I pick up the smartphone. A big step for me, but Selina was right. It makes sense. It's amazing all the things one little gadget can do, from showing us where we are on a map to acting as a torch or playing videos.

Fortunately, Quilla tracked down Pierce and Alice's phone number before we left. But she didn't feel she could phone them herself. This whole thing with the ring is clearly very important to her.

It's a woman's voice that answers. Warm and friendly.

'Alice? I'm a friend of someone you knew many years ago in New Zealand. Quilla Phillips.'

'Goodness, I haven't heard that name in a very long time!'

'I have something she's asked me to bring you.'

'How is she?'

‘She’s well,’ I say. ‘But unable to fly these days.’

‘So you’re her envoy. How mysterious! I’ve often wondered what became of Quilla. We used to be the best of friends. But then, quite abruptly, she broke off all contact.’

‘I have a letter from her. Perhaps it will explain.’

‘It was such a long time ago. So much water under the bridge.’

‘It seemed of great importance to Quilla. My boy and I are taking the train to Alnwick tomorrow. Is there a café somewhere in town where we could meet?’

‘The bookshop has a café,’ she says. ‘Barter Books. Shall we say eleven?’

I love travelling by train. Such a soothing motion, rocking us along. The English countryside is like a picture. Fields of wheat and poppies, castles on the hills. I’m half-expecting the Famous Five to come galloping across the fields with potted meat sandwiches and lashings of ginger beer. And it’s true what people say about the light in Britain being softer.

I keep thinking of Rose, how I’d always thought my first overseas trip would be with her. We’d imagined travelling by train like this, seeing the poppies and castles together. Strange how life turns out.

Barter Books in Alnwick is housed in a disused Victorian railway station. It’s the most wonderful second-hand bookshop I’ve ever been in. ‘Look, Mum!’ says Ragnar. ‘I mean, Smith.’ He often does this. I wonder if he’ll want to call me Mum for real one day. For now, I’m happy to be Smith. He’s pointing at a model train trundling its way around the walls above the shelves.

‘Fantastic!’ I play spot-the-writer in the grand mural that adorns the walls. There’s Jane Austen, chatting to Virginia Woolf and someone who must be George Eliot. Above them is Oscar Wilde; Dorothy Parker smiles nearby. And is that Angela Carter in the bright green trousers? Magnificent.

There are shelves upon shelves of children’s books. ‘You can pick

one,' I tell Ragnar. 'Just one. I don't want to be lugging vast piles of books back on the plane with us. Come and join me in the café when you've chosen.' I've promised him a visit to Alnwick Castle this afternoon, so he can see where the Harry Potter films were made.

When a couple in their seventies come into the bookshop café and start looking around, I rise from my seat. 'Alice?' I've already ordered us a pot of tea and a round of tea cakes. It seemed like the right thing to do in England.

'You must be Smith,' she says. She's a cuddly-looking, grandmotherly type of woman, with shoulder-length silver hair. There's a butterscotch amber pendant on a rose gold chain around her neck. The same egg-yolk colouring as the ring. The man I assume to be Pierce is tall, slim and carries himself in an almost military manner. His handshake is warm and his eyes twinkle.

'This is all very intriguing,' says Alice. 'We were talking about Quilla last night after you rang. I worked out I hadn't heard from her since shortly before Pierce and I got married. I was quite disappointed. We'd been close since our school days. Then she went off travelling and we completely lost touch. Something to do with a circus?'

'The Great Ricardo,' I say.

'And how do you fit in?' Pierce asks. 'Are you a relative?'

'Just a friend.' While we wait for our tea, I pull out the box I've carried with me so carefully from New Zealand. Alice opens it. She looks confused to start with, but then her face lights up in recognition. 'The engagement ring!' she says. 'Goodness! I felt so bad at the time, for Pierce's mother. The ring had been in the family for generations and then I went and lost it.' She shows it to Pierce. 'But your mum was so gracious. She said it would show up again one day, find its way back to the family. I thought she was just trying to make me feel better, but she was right.'

Pierce takes the ring from his wife and examines it. 'I think one of my ancestors put a homing spell on it.'

'I wouldn't be surprised,' says Alice. She undoes the necklace she's wearing and passes it to me. It's clearly antique. 'The sister piece for the ring. Pierce's mother gave it to me, so I'd still have something of his great-grandmother's. So generous.'

'It's an exceptional piece,' I say. 'And now the set is reunited.'

Alice smiles. 'Thank you for bringing it. But how did Quilla find my ring?'

I hand back the necklace to Alice and give her Quilla's letter. Pierce and I drink our tea quietly while she puts on a pair of glasses and reads. She looks surprised when she finishes. 'Quilla took the ring!' she tells Pierce. 'While I was staying with her. She's kept it all this time.'

'Why would on earth would she do such a thing?' asks Pierce.

Alice looks down at the letter again. 'She says she was jealous.'

Pierce's eyebrows rise.

'Of you and me, Pierce.'

'Oh. Well, Quilla and I went to the pictures together a few times. Before Dad became ill and I had to come back here,' says Pierce. 'I wrote to her but she didn't write back. And when I got back to New Zealand, she'd met someone else. It was never anything serious between us. We were both young.'

'Quilla didn't get your letters,' says Alice. 'Her mother was worried you'd whisk her off to England. She wanted to keep you two apart.' She laughs. 'How differently it could have turned out. You could be married to her!'

Pierce smiles. 'It was a brief infatuation. It would never have lasted.' He takes his wife's hand. 'Besides, it all worked out for the best.' He turns to me. 'Do you believe in destiny, Smith?'

'I've no reason not to.'

'Alice is my destiny. I've never doubted that for a moment.'

'Oh, you're a silly, old sausage,' says Alice. 'We've always been able to count on each other, though, haven't we?'

'I can't imagine how life would have been if I hadn't married you,' says Pierce.

‘Would you give me Quilla’s address?’ Alice asks. ‘I’d like to write to her. To thank her for returning the ring and to tell her it never really mattered. A ring is just a token. Love is what’s inside.’ She slides the ring on to her finger, but it goes no further than her second knuckle. She laughs. ‘See, I would have had to stop wearing it years ago. It’s a long time since I’ve been as thin as I was at twenty!’

Pierce kisses her on the cheek. ‘There’s more of you to love.’

‘I can give this to our granddaughter,’ she says. ‘She’s getting married soon – to a lovely young woman from Dublin. My daughter was never much of a one for old jewellery, but I think our granddaughter’s fiancée will love this.’

‘I hope they’ll be as happy as you two,’ I say.

In the afternoon, Alnwick Castle works its magic. Ragnar runs about happily in a medieval knight costume and gets to meet the Dragon Master. After a walk around the Duchess of Northumberland’s garden of poisonous plants, I buy us a scoop of chips which we eat the English way – with salt and vinegar instead of tomato sauce.

‘Not long until Iceland, ay sport?’

Ragnar’s grin’s a delight.

## Selina

All through the first week, I hate it. The dirt under my fingernails, the physicality of the work. I feel like I'm doing penance.

But then I start to get into it. Now I like going home with my body aching from hard work. I like feeling the sun and the breeze on my face. There's something about having your hands in the earth. Observing the slow cycle of life. Watching things change and grow.

A soft rain starts to fall. I stand in the middle of the lavender

bushes with my eyes closed and my mouth open, catching the drops. I feel more alive than I have in months.

After work, I call in to a local café, without first putting on lipstick and rearranging my hair a dozen times in the mirror like the old Selina would've done. I'm still in lavender-farm clothes and probably have dirt on my face, but I don't care. I just am who I am, and it actually feels okay. I sit outside at my little wooden table, reading the paper, sipping on peppermint tea, nibbling my way through an enormous piece of carrot cake, thinking: this is the way to live. Simply being.

I don't want to go back to living in a city. The city was chewing me up. I was trying to be a certain type of person and failing at it. I wanted to be the successful career woman who also had a devoted husband and family. And I was going about it all the wrong way.

I have nothing to show for all those years. No home, no relationship, no memories of overseas trips. I don't even have a car any more.

The table and chairs here have weathered the way outdoor furniture's supposed to weather. They've gone from what must have been red cedar to a silvery grey. If these were mine, they would have just rotted. How is it that I make things go bad?

Then I catch myself. I'm doing it again, what Smith said I mustn't. 'You're the author of your own happiness,' she told me before she left for the UK. 'You need to start writing a better script.'

I must have been looking particularly sorry for myself that day because she kept going, a long speech for Smith. 'Would you talk to someone else the way you talk to yourself inside your head?' she asked.

I tried to imagine it, telling Dad or Smith, or Quilla maybe, how useless they were, how they continually ruined their lives.

'It's easy for you,' I said.

Smith gave me a look that asked: is it? But what she said was, 'You have to start talking to yourself the way you'd talk to someone you care about. What if you saw someone crying on the street. A

woman your age. Think what you'd say to her.' My sister's a one-woman self-help book.

I've been giving it a try. Thinking of myself objectively. A twenty-nine-year-old woman who's made some mistakes. But who's not a fundamentally bad person. I struggle to summon up a little compassion.

'Think about the person you want to be,' Smith told me. 'And then act like that. Fake it till you make it. But go easy on yourself. It won't happen overnight.'

'But it will happen,' I said in my best Rachel Hunter voice, and failed to stifle a giggle. But I didn't feel convinced. Could I be a better person? Could I be someone I actually liked?

'I wish I'd never –'

Smith held up her hand in a stop sign.

She was right. She's always been right. 'I know, I know. No regrets.'

'You can always learn from your mistakes. Regrets are pointless.'

'Yeah, yeah. Better to focus on putting things right.'

'There's something I realised a long time ago,' Smith told me. 'I'm going to be stuck with being me for a very long time.' She's so kind and so patient. Sometimes I want to slap her. 'You've got to make friends with yourself.'

I'm trying, I really am. I'm trying to make friends with myself. I'm trying to look at myself through someone else's eyes. Someone who is kind.

I almost bought a bottle of wine today. I stood in the aisle at the supermarket for about half an hour, picking up all the bottles, reading the labels, longing for the taste of it. At one stage I put a bottle of pinot noir in my basket, but then I got to the fruit and veges section and changed my mind. I'm not saying I'll never drink again, but I'm not ready to drink yet. My new life is too fragile for me to risk it.

'You beat me again!' says Aroha. 'Second time in a row. That's not fair. I'm putting my cards away now.'

She's so lovely. I know she's keeping an eye on me for Smith, but she's starting to feel like my friend too. A proper friend, not like Bailey. Aroha feels like someone who'd always be there for me. Someone I'd want to be there for too. It must feel good to be needed.

'I phoned Smith today,' I say. 'They're both loving England, but Ragnar's getting very excited about Iceland.'

'I'm so pleased they got there.' Aroha glances at the old grandfather clock in the corner of the living room. 'Shoot, got to get a wriggle on. I'm going to a meeting. I can drop you home if you like.'

'What's your meeting about?'

'Trying to save a patch of native bush. Come along if you want.'

I hesitate, wondering if she means it, if I'll be in the way.

'We need all the help we can get.'

I think about the night I disgraced myself at the pub, the night I barely remember. 'Who'll be there?'

Aroha grins. 'Everyone gets a second chance. Come on, hon, let's get this show on the road.'

I sit at the kitchen table with Chapman asleep on my feet and flip open my laptop. Salvador. I wish I knew my little brother's last name. Adding Mum's maiden name, Cavanagh, fails to yield any results. How many Salvadors can there be? I try Google Images, but all I get is photos of El Salvador and Salvador Dali paintings. Facebook is no more help. Besides, he might call himself Sal. I try the births, deaths and marriages records at the Department of Internal Affairs. If Jane had him in New Zealand, that might at least give me his full name. Smith will be so pleased if I find him. I owe her this.

I'm writing a letter I'll never send. *Dear Caroline*, it starts, *I'm so very, very sorry.*

# Smith

The clouds from the plane window are like tufts of wool, caught on a crêpe-paper landscape. We really are here, me and Ragnar, in the airspace over Europe. In just two hours, we'll be arriving in Keflavik airport.

'This is a good one, Smith,' says Ragnar, handing me his in-flight headphones.

I listen in. 'Very cool, sport. Who's playing this time?'

'Sigur Rós.'

He's been listening to everything Icelandic on the airline's

music channel. I look down the playlist in the in-flight magazine, but there's nothing here by Dagdraumur, his father's band. I haven't told Ragnar their name. I'm concerned about him being disappointed, with Katie's death still too raw. But he knows we'll be unlikely to see his father while we're here.

It's after midnight when the airport bus drops us off at our hotel. So far, it seems everyone speaks excellent English, which is a relief. The receptionist is efficient. She hands us the keys to our room with a smile. I can't wait for a shower and clean sheets.

The room is light and airy, with a wooden floor. Except for the television, everything is beige and cream. Ragnar exclaims at the smell when he turns on the bathroom tap to brush his teeth. 'It's weird,' he says. 'Sort of rotten!'

'Sulphur,' I tell him. 'Have you ever been to Rotorua?'

'Once, when I was little. We saw a geyser.'

'Rotorua smells like this. Iceland's full of geothermal areas. We can go and see some geysers while we're here.'

'Is the water poisonous?'

'It's fine to drink and definitely fine to brush your teeth with. But if you like, we can buy some bottled water tomorrow.'

'It's okay, Smith. I suppose you get used to it, if you're an Icelander.'

He wants to belong. This was right and necessary, bringing him here. He needs to know who he is. Especially with Katie gone.

We wake just in time for the hotel breakfast. There are two other tables of guests in the dining room, speaking quietly. In German, I think. I don't speak the language, but I recognise the sounds from hearing Jürgen speak to German visitors in the shop. A tall man says good morning to us at the buffet breakfast table. I feel at home here.

Ragnar is excited by everything: the little pottles of flavoured *skyr*, like yoghurt, the bilingual labels on the butter and marmalade, the fact that we can eat as many pieces of toast as we want, and have cereal and fruit.

‘What are these funny “ds” in the writing?’ he asks, pointing to the letter *ð* on the back of the *skyr* container.

‘It’s pronounced like the first sound in the word “that” or “then”,’ I tell him, pleased I read the guidebook. ‘Finish up your breakfast, sport, and we’ll go for a walk into town.’

The streets are at once strange and familiar. I’m struck by the number of apparently abandoned building sites. Presumably this is the result of the banking crisis. The next thing I notice, as we draw closer to the centre of town and the streets become more populated, is how many people look like Ragnar. Half of the Icelanders seem to have his dark hair and pixie face – like Björk, the singer; the other half match the Scandinavian stereotype – tall and blonde. Some of these people could be his relatives. Soon we must start looking for his family, but for now I just want to get the feel of the place, get my bearings.

Town seems to be mostly one street: Laugavegur. ‘Look, Smith!’ says Ragnar, pointing to a sign outside a restaurant that proudly advertises its puffin and whale menu.

For all we know, Ragnar could be descended from a long line of whalers and puffin-catchers. ‘I thought there was an international ban on whaling.’

He frowns at the menu. ‘That’s disgusting. Mum loved whales. We went whale-watching in Kaikōura one time.’ I know he’s keen to try the local delicacies, but I needn’t worry about this one.

I wonder if my mum ever did come here. If she worked in the fish factories like she told Aunty Vi she was planning to. I wonder if I’ll ever get a chance to ask her.

‘What’s that music?’ Ragnar asks.

It sounds live. Coming from close by. Thrashy guitars. Not my taste, but it seems to be Ragnar’s.

‘Can we go and listen?’

‘Sure.’ We follow the sounds down an alleyway behind some buildings. There’s a small open area outside a gallery. A tree, murals, people sitting on the grass.

I'm half hoping it's Dagdraumur, but this band's name is something totally different that I couldn't begin to repeat. Anyhow, bands come and go. Dagdraumur could have broken up years ago. In the meantime, it's great to see Ragnar so happy, tapping his foot in the sun.

When the band finishes, we stroll back to Laugavegur, looking for a café for lunch. I stop at a roadside stall to admire some jewellery for sale. It's a mix of gold wire and a porous black stone I'm not familiar with.

The stallholder notices my interest, a woman my age with glossy black hair to her waist and a small gold stud in her nose. 'Lava,' she tells me. 'I make these myself.'

'I'm also a jeweller,' I say. 'But I've never worked with lava.'

'Where are you from?'

'New Zealand.'

'You've come very far.' She has a warm smile. 'You can buy lava beads, you know. There is a bead shop. Also, there is a man here who heats lava to 1700 degrees and cools it again. His jewellery has a much different look. She scribbles his name and the name of the bead shop on the back of a business card. I turn it over to read her name.

'Rùn. Thank you. I'm Smith.' We shake hands, swap a few jewellery stories. I feel I could talk to her all day, but she has customers waiting and Ragnar's looking restless. I choose one of Rùn's necklaces for Selina, and a bracelet for Aroha. But when I take the notes out of my wallet, she refuses.

'A gift,' she says. 'For my sister jeweller from New Zealand.' I'm about to insist, but then I remember the brooch I crafted months ago. I brought it with me, still not knowing who I'd give it to. Now I feel sure it's for Rùn. I retrieve it from its hiding place in my daypack.

'But this is such a fine piece!' says Rùn. 'Are you sure?'

I nod.

She pins it to her denim jacket. 'I will think of you when I wear it.'

I can't seem to stop smiling in this place. Reykjavik feels like somewhere I could live.

The next day, Ragnar can't wait to leave the hotel. Everything's so exciting for him. He's in a constant state of wonder – noticing unfamiliar birds, new insects.

'What do you say to a boat trip, sport? We could go to Viðey island on the ferry.'

'Cool! Can I take pictures again?'

I hand him the smartphone. We walk to the ferry terminal and wait on the docks for the next sailing. It's good to be breathing sea air. Ragnar photographs the seabirds, the fish, the island getting closer.

'Hungry?' I ask, after we dock. There's a restaurant on the island I like the look of. A handsome white mansion.

'Can we go for a walk first?'

'Sure.' We stroll around, peeping inside the tiny wooden church and stopping to admire Yoko Ono's 'Imagine Peace' tower, with its multilingual pacifist messages. I read about this at the hotel.

'How does it work?' he asks.

'Geothermal power. But the light's only on between October and early December and certain special occasions. Not while we're here, unfortunately.'

'I'll take your photo next to the tower,' he says. I'm starting to get used to posing. Perhaps he'll be a photographer someday.

In the restaurant, Ragnar tries the lamb soup, a local specialty; I settle on a grilled cheese sandwich. It feels so restful here. There are several rooms to the restaurant and we have one all to ourselves. There's such a stillness about it: the white walls, the art works. A true luxury. I treat myself to a glass of Brennivin, the herby Icelandic schnapps.

'Can I go and play?' asks Ragnar.

'Make sure you're back at two for the ferry. Otherwise we'll have to swim back. I'll wait on the lawn outside the restaurant.'

I find a spot in the sun and take the Halldór Laxness novel I'm reading out of my daypack. I started it on the plane and I plan to take a few more back with me. But in the end, the book sits on my lap unopened. I find I just want to sit. Soak up the view.

Shortly before two, Ragnar comes racing up with a boy his age. 'This is Karl. He's from Germany, like Jürgen. And guess what! He's staying in the same hotel as us!'

'That's great, sport.'

Karl's mother comes over. I recognise her from breakfast. 'Our sons have found some common interests.'

I'm about to say he's not my son, but then I catch myself. I have a child now. I never thought I would.

'Karl's going to the Blue Lagoon this afternoon,' says Ragnar. 'Can we go?'

'The geothermal spa?'

'It will be good for the boys to have each other's company,' says Karl's mother. 'If you don't have other arrangements.'

'We'll have to go back to the hotel first, Ragnar. To pick up your togs.'

'We have rented a car,' says Karl's mother. 'Would you like to drive back with us?'

I look at Ragnar's expectant face. Karl's mother's right. It'll do him good to spend some time with another kid. 'Thank you. That would be very kind.'

At the Blue Lagoon, Karl's father is too busy on his laptop to make much conversation and the mother seems mostly interested in restaurants and shopping. But they seem like good people and the boys have hit it off. We are all polite for their sakes.

'I'm taking Ragnar to the Settlement Museum tomorrow,' I say, when we arrive back at the hotel. 'Would you like to join us? Or I'd be happy to take Karl if you want some time to yourselves.'

'That would be wonderful,' says Karl's father. 'It will be our wedding anniversary. I would like to take my wife to a restaurant and try some whale meat.'

Barbarians.

‘Perhaps after the museum, we could take Ragnar with us to go for another swim,’ says Karl’s mother. ‘The boys are getting on so well.’

‘If that suits you, sport?’

I spend several hours at the Settlement Museum with Karl and Ragnar, where one of the main features is an ancient excavated longhouse, one of the earliest houses in Iceland. ‘This was built around the same time Māori settled New Zealand,’ I tell Ragnar. The boys are loving it. There are interactive digital displays all around the walls and holograms representing early settlers.

‘The people who lived in this house could be your ancestors, sport.’

‘Cool!’

I buy him a T-shirt at the museum shop, a big size so it’ll last him a couple of years, and a matching one for Karl. How tall will Ragnar get? Katie wasn’t tall, but his father could be. Ragnar insists on changing into his T-shirt straight away. He looks so proud. Iceland can give him something I can’t. His heritage.

It’s a luxury to have a couple of free hours in the afternoon, while Ragnar’s off swimming. It gives me a chance to look for Gunnar. I still haven’t said anything to Ragnar about trying to find his father and I’m grateful he hasn’t brought it up.

The Icelandic phone book lists everyone by their first names, rather than last names, and includes occupations to help distinguish between people with the same name. Without a last name, it’s hopeless. And who’s to say Gunnar is even still a musician?

I head back to the main shopping area, where I notice Rùn is out with her jewellery stall again. She has no customers, so I wander over. She’s wearing the brooch I gave her and flashes me that lovely smile. ‘Hi, Smith.’

I feel ridiculously pleased that she’s remembered my name. ‘I

wonder if I could ask you something’.

‘Sure.’

‘I’m looking for someone who used to be in a band. Dagdraumur.’

She wrinkles her nose. ‘Oh, I have heard of them, but they were never really my taste. There is a good record shop up in Skólavörðustígur.’ She points to a nearby street. ‘They might be able to help you.’

‘Thank you.’ I briefly consider asking if she’d like to have coffee with me sometime, but it’s impractical with Ragnar. In any case, a couple of tourists are looking at her jewellery now. She needs to give them her attention. I wave goodbye and head up the street Rún indicated.

The shop looks well stocked. Flicking through the CDs, I’m impressed with the range of Icelandic music – gypsy jazz, disco, death metal, punk. I find three CDs by Ragnar’s father’s band, which is a pleasing start. But band members come and go. Who’s to say the band’s still playing or that Gunnar is still with them? I turn over the CDs to look at the line-up. Two of the musicians are called Gunnar. This is not going to be as straightforward as I’d hoped. One of the CDs has a photo of the band from a few years ago. I look into the faces. There is one man who could be an older version of Ragnar. He has the same eyes. I pull out the photo of Katie and Gunnar to compare. I had a copy made before we came. Yes, this must be the one. Gunnar Hallbjornsson.

According to the guidebook, there are only 320,000 Icelanders in Iceland and most live in Reykjavik. The chances of people knowing each other are good. I take the three CDs to the Gothic-looking young man behind the counter. ‘Do you know anyone in this band?’ I ask. ‘I’m trying to contact Gunnar Hallbjornsson.’

‘Why do you want to contact Gunnar?’ he asks.

It’s a reasonable question. ‘I’m looking for him on behalf of a relative of his. Someone who would like to meet him. We’ve come over from New Zealand.’

‘That’s a long way.’ He calls out to another man, an older

colleague, and says something in Icelandic. The second man comes over. 'They are on tour right now.'

'Oh. That's disappointing.'

The older man nods. 'You have come so far. But maybe I can help you. My wife knows Gunnar's sister, Liliya. I can ask her.'

'Thank you. I'd really appreciate it.' I write my name and cell phone number on the back of a little card with our hotel name on it. I picked up a handful from reception this morning. I still haven't fully got used to this cell phone business. I'll have to remember to charge it up tonight.

'I'll see what I can do,' the man says. 'But many people are on holiday right now.'

'I understand. Thanks.' He rings up my purchase on the till and I slip the CDs into my daypack. One of them has a DVD on it. I should be able to get some sort of machine to play it on so I can show Ragnar later. An iPod or something, I don't know.

My thoughts keep returning to Rùn. She has the most stunning eyes. I've been alone so long – there was only ever Rose – and I've been happy on my own. Aroha's given up on me, after several subtle attempts at matchmaking. First it was a mate of her brother's, a nice, down-to-earth whitebaiting chap; then it was a lonely, local farmer whose wife had died. Then, perhaps because the men on offer didn't seem to be interesting me, she invited me round for dinner with a Danish woman who'd come over to work on the organic farms. 'She's a lovely woman,' I told Aroha the next day, 'but when I say I don't need romance in my life, I mean it.'

'Everyone needs love,' Aroha said. She's incurable.

'Ah, love, yes,' I told her. 'I have plenty of love in my life. Now go find something else to meddle in.'

But these last few days, I've been starting to wonder if one day there might be room in my life for something more.

I'm pleased Ragnar's in the shower when the phone rings. I don't want to tell him about this until I'm sure I've found the right

family. ‘Hi, this is Lilija Hallbjornsdottir,’ a woman says. ‘You are looking for my brother, Gunnar, I think.’

‘Thank you for ringing. Do you know how I can contact your brother?’

‘What is this about, please?’

‘Could we meet, perhaps?’

She hesitates. This, in all probability, is Ragnar’s aunty. I need to reassure her. ‘It’s about someone who I think is related to your family. I’d like to show you a photograph.’

‘Okay. We can meet tomorrow after work, if you like. You are staying in Reykjavik?’

‘For two weeks. We’re at the Hotel Vik.’ I try my best to say it the way the woman at the reception desk does, somewhere between Veek and Week. It must be a good enough attempt. Lilija seems to understand.

‘I know it. I can meet you at reception at 18:00 tomorrow.’

I do the mental calculation. Six o’clock at night. ‘Thank you. See you then.’ An aunty for Ragnar. But I don’t want to get his hopes up. The family may want nothing to do with him. I’ll tell him it’s a business meeting and he can play with his Xbox or watch Icelandic television for a while.

After breakfast, Ragnar says goodbye to his friend Karl, who’s heading back to Germany. ‘I’ll send you a postcard from Tākaka,’ he promises him solemnly. ‘Auf Wiedersehen.’

‘E noho ra,’ says Karl. ‘I’ll send a postcard from Frankfurt.’

This reminds me to buy a few of my own from reception. There’s a post office not far from the hotel. Selina, Aroha and Jürgen, Quilla. On Quilla’s I write that I’ve delivered the ring and that everything went very well. I’ll call her when I’m back to explain it properly. Hopefully it’ll be a weight off her mind.

Today’s our trip to the ice lagoon. It means a long ride in a tourist coach, but Ragnar’s been really looking forward to it. He takes what must be a hundred photos through the coach window: waterfalls, glaciers, even Icelandic sheep – far more colourful than

the Romneys back home. I love the sense of space here. Miles and miles of lava fields with strangely shaped rocks that make me think of trolls. The tour guide tells us many Icelanders believe in trolls and elves, and that sometimes highway routes or building plans are changed to accommodate them. Seeing the eeriness of the landscape, that doesn't surprise me. If I spent any amount of time here, I've no doubt I'd start believing in trolls. Maybe they're a bit like taniwha.

The coach finally stops at the ice lagoon. It's a welcome opportunity to stretch our legs while we wait our turn for one of the little boats that will take us out into the lagoon itself. This is the Iceland I was expecting – myriad bluish-white icebergs in a cold mountain lake.

The geologist on the boat is clearly a man who loves his job. He cradles a large slab of ice in his arms like a puppy while he tells us how it's a thousand years old, and how its purity and lack of air bubbles mean it's highly prized for dropping into glasses of whiskey. He chips a little off for everyone on the boat to try. 'Wish we could take some back to New Zealand,' says Ragnar, his mouth full of ice.

Back on dry land, we stand at the side of the lagoon to wait for the bus. 'Look at the seals!' says Ragnar. Sure enough, the shallow edge of the lagoon is full of them. 'They're playing!'

Our tour guide overhears him. 'The lagoon is full of fish. The seals are having a picnic today – they just stick their necks out and there it is. Another herring for lunch.'

It's a bright sunny day and anything seems possible. I wish I could capture this moment and keep it forever.

I can see a family resemblance as soon as Lilija steps into the hotel. Something about the shape of her nose and mouth. Her hair is dark, too, the same as Ragnar's. He's upstairs, watching television. She's thirty, maybe, slim and beautiful. Her eyes are an extraordinary shade of green. If her brother looks like this in real

life, I can see why Katie fancied him. ‘Lilija?’

She nods.

We go through to the little café area just off reception and I buy us each a coffee. ‘Thank you for coming.’

‘You are not English, I think.’ She wears a striking gold brooch shaped like a tree, pinned to her black top. ‘I’m from New Zealand,’ I say.

‘Very far away.’

‘It’s worth it. Iceland’s a remarkable place.’

She smiles. ‘You said you know a relative of mine?’

‘The son of my dear friend, Katie. She died a few months ago.’

‘That is sad.’

‘I’m bringing up her son, Ragnar. I believe his father may be your brother, Gunnar.’

‘I wondered. After you phoned. My brother meets many women while he travels the world with his band. I’ve often thought there may be a niece or nephew I’ve never met.’

I show her the photo of Gunnar and Katie at Pōhara.

‘Oh yes, this is my brother. Maybe from ten years ago, I think?’

I pull out a couple of recent photos of Ragnar from my pocket and hand them to her. ‘This is Ragnar. He’s ten now.’

Lilija looks at them carefully. ‘Yes, I can see he looks like Gunnar.’ She still seems a little guarded.

‘Katie wanted Ragnar to know his father, to understand where he comes from. She was estranged from her own family. Ragnar doesn’t know anyone now who looks like him. I’m not asking for an ongoing commitment. Just to see if he could meet your brother. Meet you?’

‘It’s true that Gunnar was travelling in Australia and New Zealand ten or eleven years ago. But I will need to talk to him, ask him if he remembers this woman called Katie. Do you know where they met?’

‘In Nelson. In the South Island. Katie said it was a holiday romance. She spoke of him very fondly, but they didn’t keep in

touch. Katie would have been about twenty-five. She was full of life and fun.' There's a lump in my throat.

Lilija nods. 'Gunnar is on tour at present. In Norway. But I will try to skype him tonight and let you know what he says. If Ragnar is my nephew, I would love to meet him. But I must also talk to my mother.'

'I understand.'

'I will call you tomorrow.'

We have a day when we're not being tourists. We stroll into town and spend our time eating sandwiches in the park and reading. 'Mum would have loved this holiday,' says Ragnar, as he finishes off a packet of dried fish flakes. 'Especially the seals we saw yesterday.' He looks bereft suddenly. 'It's not fair, Smith.'

'No it's not, sport. Come here and give me a fishy hug.'

We have dinner in a vegetarian café in town, one of three. This has been a nice surprise about Reykjavik, in among the whale and puffin offerings. When we get back to the hotel, I check my phone and find a message waiting from Lilija. 'Gunnar is pleased and my mother, Frida, is very excited to meet her grandson. Please would you come to lunch tomorrow. I will collect you at 13:00.' I decide to tell Ragnar first thing tomorrow morning. If I tell him now, he'll be too excited to sleep and he'll be tired and crotchety all through lunch.

I phone Selina, checking the time so it's before she goes to work but not so early that she'll yell at me. 'How are things?'

She sounds bright and cheery. 'Box of fluffy ducks.' She doesn't even tell me off for checking in on her.

'How's Chapman?' I ask.

'He got his nose stuck in a milk carton yesterday. Funniest thing I've seen in weeks.'

'You're getting on all right then.'

'We're doing fine.'

This is good. It means I'll sleep well tonight.

I recognise Lilija through her car window. ‘That’s your aunty,’ I tell Ragnar. He’s been practically turning cartwheels since I told him we’d be meeting them today. We wait for Lilija to park the car. A woman in her sixties with greying hair emerges and comes straight over. We shake hands. Lilija follows.

‘This is your grandmother, Frida,’ I tell Ragnar. ‘And this is your aunty Lilija.’

Ragnar suddenly looks a little shy. ‘Hi.’

‘You look very much like Gunnar,’ says Lilija.

Frida has tears in her eyes. She says something in Icelandic.

‘My mother doesn’t speak English so well,’ says Lilija. ‘But she understands most of it. She is very happy to meet Ragnar. To have a grandson. He is the first in the family.’

‘Does that mean I haven’t got any cousins?’ asks Ragnar. I know he was hoping for relatives his own age.

‘Not yet,’ says Lilija. Her mother says something and Lilija laughs. ‘My mother says I should make you some cousins soon. We’ll see.’ She opens the back door for us. ‘Please.’

Ragnar is quiet on the short journey to Frida’s house. Lilija and I make polite conversation about the places we’ve visited so far. Frida keeps turning round in the passenger seat to look at Ragnar and he’s clearly just as curious about her. I realise he’s never had grandparents before. No uncles or aunts.

Frida’s house feels like a tree house, cosy and safe. Sloping wooden ceilings, wooden walls covered with floral tapestries. Net curtains. I was expecting something more Nordic, a sleek, modern feel, like our hotel. This is like the cottage Little Red Riding Hood’s grandmother might have lived in.

‘Gunnar has a break between tour dates next week,’ Lilija tells me. ‘Will you still be here? He will try to come home for a day before he travels to Berlin with the band.’

We could stay another week. I don’t have to go to London on this trip, to look for Mum. In any case, I’ve really no idea where to start. And Ragnar needs a father much more than I need a mother.

Besides, who knows how soon we'll be able to afford to come back. 'We'll be here.'

'Gunnar is really looking forward to meeting you,' Lilija tells Ragnar.

Frida brings Ragnar a glass of fruit juice and puts a plate of cinnamon rolls on the table. She says something to Lilija.

'They are *snúðar*,' her daughter tells us. 'She made these this morning.'

I try one. 'Delicious,' I tell Frida. She beams. I can see Ragnar in her eyes, in the way she holds her hands. It's funny to see him as part of a clan. There's only ever been him and Katie. Frida is clearly fascinated with her grandson. Every so often she reaches out to pat his hand and says, 'Good boy, good boy.' I get the sense there's much more she'd like to tell him. In the meantime, Lilija and I carry the conversation, talking about the school system in New Zealand and how Ragnar likes to go fishing.

At one point Frida stands from the table and leaves the room. She returns with a photo album and opens the heavy cover. She turns to a page of faded colour photos of a little boy. 'Gunnar,' she says, pointing. There he is, like a little Ragnar. Gunnar with his tricycle. Gunnar on his first day of school. Gunnar and Lilija outside a little wooden church like the one we saw on Viðey. Ragnar is transfixed.

When we reach the end of the photos, it feels like time to leave. 'We need to be getting back to the hotel, sport,' I tell him. He doesn't argue. It must all be overwhelming for him.

'I will drive you,' says Lilija. I consider ordering a cab, but this way, Ragnar gets to spend more time with his aunty. She and Frida are heading off on holiday tomorrow, so this is our last chance to be with them. We've been seeing the Icelanders' little wooden holiday homes dotted all around the countryside; one of them must belong to Ragnar's family.

Frida disappears again and comes back with a little toy dog, made of wood.

‘This is Gunnar’s’ Lilija explains. ‘From when he was a little boy. When we spoke with him on the phone, he said he would like Ragnar to have this.’

Ragnar holds it like a precious jewel. He can’t believe his luck. ‘*Takk,*’ he says. He’s picked up the Icelandic word for thank you. He lets Frida fold him into a hug. I start to wonder if she’ll ever let him go.

Back at the hotel, Ragnar plays Gunnar’s CDs non-stop on the portable CD player I found in a shop in town. I’m glad I got him headphones. The wooden dog never leaves his sight.

Stepping through the front door of Prikið – the bright red café right in the centre of Reykjavik – I feel instantly at home. Maybe it’s all the wood: floor, walls, ceiling, even the counter. It reminds me of my house truck. And of Frida’s house. Black and white photographs line the walls. Customers through the years, perhaps.

We’ve arranged to meet Gunnar here at ten. We’re early, mainly because Ragnar’s been raring to go since seven this morning. I find a table on the ground floor where we can watch people coming in, and order coffee and juice while we wait.

Ragnar’s looking at his watch again. I hope Gunnar shows up. I hope he’s everything Ragnar wants. Musicians aren’t always the most reliable of people. But then again, if he’s stuck with the same band all these years and can get himself to gigs all over the world, he’s probably more dependable than I’m giving him credit for.

The man who walks into the café at five to ten is as good-looking as every other Icelander I’ve met. He has Ragnar’s eyes and nose and a thatch of jet-black hair under a baseball cap. I stand to greet him. ‘Smith,’ I say. ‘Thank you for coming.’

His handshake is firm, but there’s an ease and warmth to him. He turns to Ragnar. ‘My son,’ he says, enveloping him in a bear hug. I needn’t have worried about awkward moments. Father and son are clearly delighted with each other.

‘Frida gave me your dog,’ Ragnar tells him.

Gunnar laughs. 'His name is Snúðar.'

'Like the cinnamon rolls?' says Ragnar.

'My mother makes the best cinnamon rolls in the whole of Iceland.'

'My mother makes the best banana bread!' says Ragnar. 'I mean made.'

Gunnar's face grows serious. 'Your mother was a beautiful person. I am very sad to hear of her death.'

I'd wondered if he'd even remember Katie. Musicians like him must have lovers all over the world. But his memories are sharply drawn.

'We went for a picnic together,' he says. 'On a marvellous beach called – Puhari? Something like that?'

'Pōhara,' says Ragnar. 'That's Mum's favourite beach.'

'We ate bread and cheese and some muffins that Katie made. We drank a little wine. Your mother made me laugh. I thought she was the prettiest woman in New Zealand.'

I am so grateful to him at this moment, I could almost cry. The light is shining out of Ragnar in a way I haven't seen for a long time. I wish I could tell Katie I've found him some family. She'd rest easy.

'Lilija said I haven't got any brothers and sisters,' says Ragnar.

'Not yet. I've been too busy playing guitar to find a wife.'

Somewhere in this world, I have a brother – a half-brother – who must be around Gunnar's age. One day, I'll look for him. But this is Ragnar's time.

Ragnar tells his father about the sights we've seen in Iceland: the Peace Tower on Viðey Island, the geysers, the little shark museum in a shed on someone's farm. Gunnar manages to look amazed, as though he's hearing about it all for the first time.

'Shall we go for a walk?' he asks, when our drinks are finished. 'We can stroll around the park for a while.'

Outside on the street, people keep saying hello to him. He's clearly a popular guy. I can see why he suggested the park; it's

quieter.

‘How long are you in town?’ I ask him.

‘I fly out again this afternoon.’ He looks regretful. ‘It’s a long tour. I’m already looking forward to the end.’

‘Will your band come to New Zealand?’ Ragnar asks.

‘We have no plans right now. But I will come and visit you in New Zealand. We can go for a picnic at Pōhara.’ He looks at me. ‘Is that all right?’

‘More than all right. We’d be delighted to have you come to stay.’

‘You could marry Smith,’ offers Ragnar, ‘and then you could live with us.’

‘I don’t think so, sport.’ I ruffle his hair. ‘But Gunnar is welcome to visit any time he likes.’

‘I would like that.’ Gunnar smiles. ‘Next year, I think there will be less touring. Maybe I can come then.’

This is better than I could have hoped for. He pulls a small card out of his pocket and hands it to Ragnar. ‘You can email to me any time. Or not. Whichever you like to do. And Dagdraumur has a page on Bandcamp. You can find where I am touring.’

He gives Ragnar another hug. ‘*Góða ferð*,’ he says. ‘That means “Have a good journey”.’

Ragnar does his best to repeat Gunnar’s words. ‘Go tha ferth.’

‘That’s great,’ says Gunnar. He takes off the cap he’s wearing and pulls it down over Ragnar’s ears.

‘Thanks,’ says Ragnar. ‘Dad.’ It must be the first time he’s said that. He waves and waves until Gunnar’s a dot in the distance. I expect he’ll sleep in that cap tonight.

‘My dad’s really cool,’ he says on the leisurely walk back to Hotel Vik.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘The coolest.’ I know I’ll be hearing about nothing else for weeks. I hope Gunnar does keep in touch. I wonder about preparing Ragnar for the possibility that he won’t, but looking at the boy’s face, that seems cruel. I’ll let him keep believing, while I

do the hoping for both of us.

‘Smith, if only Mum was here, this would have been the best day of my life.’

‘That’s great, sport.’

It seems strange that, in less than a week, we’ll be back in Tākaka. I’ll see Selina. I haven’t heard from her this last week. Maybe I should try calling her again. No, she sounded fine when we last spoke. And Aroha promised to tell me if anything went wrong.

The day before we leave Iceland, I get my wish for a coffee with Rùn – not quite the way I would have planned things, but it’s still good. Ragnar and I are strolling down Laugavegur when I notice someone waving from the window of Prikið, gesturing for us to go inside. I feel stupidly pleased. ‘Who’s that?’ asks Ragnar.

‘The jeweller. You remember the necklace I bought for Selina? And the bracelet for Aroha? Rùn’s the one who made them.’

Rùn is at a table with a dark-haired man and two blonde women, all impossibly beautiful.

‘This is her,’ she says, pointing to the brooch I’m pleased to see is still pinned to her jacket. ‘Smith, from New Zealand. A very talented jeweller.’ She insists on buying us something to drink. We chat about the Icelandic art scene, which her three friends are all involved with in some way.

‘My dad’s Icelandic,’ says Ragnar.

‘Then you’re Icelandic too,’ says Rùn.

If we didn’t have packing to do, I could stay here all afternoon.

As we get up to leave, Rùn writes something on the corner of a paper napkin and hands it to me. ‘Skype me,’ she says. ‘When you’re back in New Zealand.’

‘I’d like that.’ Ragnar can show me how.

I get the feeling this is not the last time Ragnar will see his family. We’ve seen and done so much, but it feels like Iceland and I have only just been introduced. Another month would have been

good.

‘Can we come back?’ Ragnar asks.

‘One day, sport. For sure.’

Tonight we’ll stay at the same B&B in Newcastle. Tomorrow we’ll start the long journey home.

It’s evening when we arrive in Newcastle. I’m relieved when Ragnar goes to bed early. All this travel must have tired him out.

There’s a guest computer in the hallway, and while Ragnar sleeps, I check the email account he set up for me. Such a bright boy. I go through all the steps I wrote down when he explained it and which I still have to refer to every time. Username. Password. I know I can do this on the smartphone but I find it easier on a bigger machine. The first message is from Aroha: ‘Everything’s kapai. Selina’s fine. Chapman’s fine. You and Ragnar just concentrate on enjoying yourselves.’ I tap out a reply in my two-fingered typing, saying we’re well and having a lovely time. I’ll leave the details for when I see her. I’d hoped for an email from Selina, but Aroha’s will have to do

There’s also a message from Gunnar with some photos from his tour. I’ll show Ragnar in the morning.

The third message is from Auntie Vi: ‘Thanks for the postcard. I sent you a letter last week but you won’t have got it. I bumped into an old friend of your mum’s recently. She saw Jane in London last year. She was living in some sort of community and had changed her name to Spring. No surname. Just Spring. She kept asking about New Zealand, and her friend got the impression she was thinking of coming home.’

Home. Spring. I close the internet connection. So Mum might no longer be in London after all. And if she’s going by just ‘Spring’, chances are she’s not going to be in the phone book. And she could even be back in New Zealand. It’s just as well I didn’t try to find her on this trip. It would have been a wasted effort. Maybe later, when life with Ragnar’s more settled and I have more time on my

hands. If I ever do.

Finding Mum's no longer a priority. Besides, if I do manage to track her down, it could be difficult for Selina. I know she's on the mend, but I don't want anything to set her back. She's more fragile than she likes to think.

I sit up long after Ragnar's fallen asleep, watching the sky turn from blue to apricot to black.

Aroha's waiting for us at Nelson airport with hugs and her usual bright smile. I'm about to tell her she didn't need to come, but I catch myself in time. If there's one thing I've learned with parenting Ragnar it's that I have to let people help. 'Thanks for driving over. You're good to us.'

'It's lovely to have you both back,' says Aroha. 'Long trip, ay? You think you're home when you land in New Zealand, but there's still that last flight to Nelson, then the drive over the hill.'

'I met my dad!' says Ragnar. He holds out the smartphone to show Aroha a photo of him with Gunnar.

'Very handsome,' says Aroha. 'Both of you.'

'And he gave me this cap.'

'Excellent!'

'How's Selina?' I ask.

'She's doing great,' says Aroha. 'Really. She's really good.'

'I sense a "but".'

'Now, I promise you this is nothing to worry about, Smith. But she's up a tree again. It's fine really. It's totally different this time.'

'How's Chapman?' asks Ragnar.

'He's one happy dog, hon. He's been staying with us this past week. Jürgen's been taking him to the beach every day when he goes jogging. Chapman's loving it.'

'About this tree,' I say.

'It's a fundraising thing,' says Aroha. 'For a greenies group I belong to. We want to buy up a tract of native bush and turn it into a reserve. Your sister's got sponsorship from all sorts of people – local

businesses, tourists, random people who've seen the crowdfunding site she set up.'

'And she's been up there a week?'

'She's got things really well set up, Smith. She's got a nice, warm sleeping bag and a hammock slung between a couple of branches. She's aiming to stay up there for a month.'

I try to picture her. This sounds more like the Selina I knew when she was a little girl, not the unhappy, lovelorn corporate Selina she became. 'Is she eating properly?'

Aroha laughs. 'Everyone's feeding her. She's got people from all over town showing up with pots of venison stew and home-made cupcakes. She's rigged up a pulley system with a little basket on the end.'

'Smith, can I go and stay with her?' Ragnar asks.

'Maybe you can visit,' I say. 'If Selina wants visitors.'

'That's another thing I need to tell you,' says Aroha. 'She's changed her name.'

I didn't see that coming. 'Who is she now?'

'The day she went up the tree, she started calling herself Rata. I think she's trying to re-invent herself.'

'I can understand that.' My mother is Spring. My sister is Rata.

'Especially with the TV cameras that have been around. After ... you know ... that incident in Wellington.'

'What incident?' Ragnar pipes up.

'Her boyfriend died,' I tell him.

'Has anyone recognised her?' I ask Aroha.

'You'd hardly recognise her yourself. She's been working out in the sun every day and now she's almost as brown as me. Her face has filled out a bit and she's had a haircut. She's a different girl.'

We collect our bags from outside the airport and load them into the car. I can't seem to stop yawning. Maybe later I'll tell Aroha about Rùn. But for now, I want to keep that to myself. My eyes are closing. Tomorrow, I'll meet Rata. Phone Quilla. Walk Chapman. Right now, I need sleep.

## Selina

This is an altogether different sort of tree. Where the last one held its tiny leaves close this one offers them more generously. They are leathery, durable; each is indented at the tip. The song it sings as the breeze rustles its branches tells quite a different story. One of simply being. It mixes with birdsong: tūi, bellbird, riroriro.

The trunk is thick and twisted. Hollow inside, from where it grew around its host, but still strong. This is a more spacious tree. Taller too. I am twenty metres high. When you make space in your life, something good comes along to fill it.

I wake with the sun and sleep with the stars. I clamber from branch to branch like a marmoset. I watch the forest life around me from a range of vantage points.

People have been bringing me books. Mysteries, romances, biographies, even poetry. Each day, I live in a different world. Settled in my nest, I am an epiphyte, like the huge tufted astelias that surround me. It's a welcoming sort of tree, but one that affords space. Lets me just 'be'.

I'm filling my life with what matters. Friendship. Books. Trees. I have a new feeling these days. It took me a while to recognise it. Hope.

## Epilogue

‘We saw that lady,’ Mere informs me from her perch on the roof. They look so similar, Mere and Rena, especially in their school uniforms, but their eyes are a little different.

I’ve just been checking on the flat. The decorators have done a fine job. New bathroom, new kitchen. Everything repainted inside and out. ‘Which lady?’ I ask.

The girls exchange glances. ‘The doll lady,’ says Rena.

Mere points to the porch of the flat.

‘The person who left the dolls for Selina?’ They’re a bit cryptic

sometimes, those two.

They nod.

‘What did she look like?’ I’m curious.

Mere shrugs. ‘I dunno. Like an old Pākehā lady.’

‘Real old,’ says Rena.

‘As old as me?’ I must seem ancient to them.

They shake their heads. ‘Not that old,’ says Mere.

‘Way older than mum, though,’ says Rena. ‘Fifty, maybe.’

‘Or sixty,’ says Mere. ‘How old are you?’

‘Seventy-eight,’ I tell them.

‘Nah, not that old,’ says Rena.

‘She had grey hair,’ says Mere.

‘And she was here again?’

‘Nah.’ Mere shakes her head. ‘She was at the tip shop.’

‘The tip shop?’

‘The shop up at the tip,’ says Rena. ‘Other people’s junk. She was scrabbling through the scungy old toys.’

‘Mum took us,’ says Mere. ‘She was looking for an old guitar for Kahu to learn on.’

‘If he sticks at it, he’ll get a new one for Christmas,’ says Mere.

‘And it was definitely the same woman who left the dolls on the doorstep?’

Rena takes a mobile phone out of her pocket and flicks her finger against the screen. Then she holds up what I assume is a photo, but from the roof, it’s too far away for me to see. ‘Definite,’ she says.

Mere nods in agreement.

‘And you saw her here the other times. Did you talk to her at all?’

The twins shake their heads. ‘We just watched her,’ says Rena.

‘Read out the notes,’ says Mere.

Rena flicks through her phone again. ‘Thirteenth of April, 5.47pm. Old lady knocks on door at skank ... at Selina’s place. Looks through kitchen window and knocks some more. Sits on

doorstep with her head in her hands. Puts envelope on doorstep. Leaves at 5.53pm.'

'We're going to be detectives,' says Mere. 'Like on CSI.'

Presumably that is some sort of crime show on television. 'You're very thorough,' I say.

The girls smile shyly. 'She looked sad,' says Mere. 'Like she really wanted to talk to Selina.'

'Not like the other times,' says Rena. 'The other times she didn't even knock. She held up her hand like she was going to, but then —'

'She chickened out,' says Mere. 'She's always crying.'

'And the letter she left?'

'She wrote a note the first time as well,' says Rena. 'But it blew away.' She waves a hand towards the back garden.

Mere starts to say, 'Only because you —' Then stops, realising she's about to drop her sister in it, no doubt. Rena's glaring at her.

'You said she left a letter. The last time.' They'd try the patience of a saint.

The girls look at each other as though they're trying to make a decision. 'It was evidence,' offers Mere.

'Does that mean you have it?'

Another silent consultation. Finally, Rena reaches into the inside pocket of her puffer jacket and, somewhat reluctantly, hands me a folded envelope, slightly the worse for wear.

Selina's name is on the front in wavery writing. There's an address on the back. 'This could be very important to Selina and her sister,' I say. 'I'll make sure it gets to them.'

'Is Selina ever coming back?' asks Mere.

'No. She hasn't been well and she's gone to stay with her sister.'

'Hope she gets better,' says Rena, not altogether convincingly.

'Hope you get someone nice for the flat,' says Mere.

Someone interesting for them to spy on, I expect she means. Still, they're a very effective Neighbourhood Watch team.

'You should get someone who looks like Justin Bieber,' says

Rena. 'For Mere to perve at.'

'As if,' says Mere.

I hear them giggling on the roof behind me, as I head back down the path. Then the sound of cellophane being torn off a packet. The flick of a cigarette lighter.

I can post the letter to Smith on my way to croquet.

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