

The time has come for Kate to
follow some of her own dreams ...



LISA HEIDKE

*What Kate
did Next*

Lisa Heidke studied journalism at Queensland University, fled Brisbane and settled in Sydney where she landed a job as an Acquisitions Editor in book publishing (HBJ). After a while there, she headed to ACP where she worked as a feature writer on several national magazines, including *Practical Parenting* and *Bride to Be*. (She once found herself getting chased around the desk by the art director of *Bride to Be*.) After many years living in Sydney's inner west, Lisa woke up one morning to find herself married with three children and living on the North Shore (much to her surprise and sometimes horror).

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HEIDKE

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did Next*

ARENA
ALLEN&UNWIN

First published in 2010

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Cataloguing-in-Publication details are available
from the National Library of Australia
www.librariesaustralia.nla.gov.au

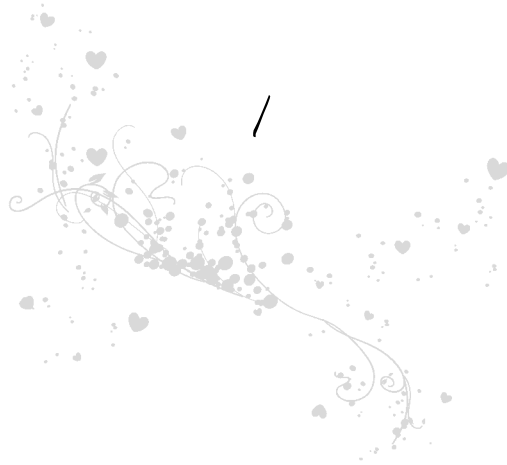
ISBN 978 1 74175 933 4

Set in 12.5/16.8 pt Granjon by Bookhouse, Sydney
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Heather, Dianne and Mia, with love.
And for mothers, sisters, and daughters everywhere.

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I never thought I'd be the sort of person to have a midlife crisis. I'm not even sure I ever believed in such a thing! And I certainly never thought I'd be the sort of person to give up on the dream of what I wanted for myself.

When I was twenty, in my final year of photography, I hoped that by the time I turned thirty-five, I'd have:

1. A gorgeous, happy husband and two sweet-natured daughters who I'd be like a big sister to;
2. A successful photography business that allowed me creative freedom and financial independence as well as time to lunch, shop and travel, and;
3. The confidence and desire to pursue my dreams.

Basically, whenever I daydreamed about my future, I was living the perfect life.

Well, I'm about to celebrate my thirty-sixth birthday and I'm not exactly what I'd hoped I'd be. I've got the husband and two kids part happening, but as far as the illustrious photography

career, well . . . in between running after my husband, Matthew, grocery shopping, and schlepping the kids to and from their social engagements, I don't have the energy for anything else.

There was a time when photography was my life's passion. My grandmother lit the spark when I was very young. She had a fabulous collection of black-and-white photos and I was struck by their significance, each print linked to a fascinating adventure in her life, be it camel racing in Egypt or marching for peace in Sydney during the Vietnam War.

'History, Katie,' she'd say, examining a beloved photo with a magnifying glass. 'The exact moment this image was captured will never come to pass again.'

When I was seven, she gave me her cherished Hasselblad. It fascinated me – learning the intricacies of the fixed-focus lens, discovering the dual positions for sun and cloud, and using the disposable flash for indoors. I still treasure it. After school, I turned my passion into a career I loved, attending Sydney College of the Arts. In my final year, I won a photography scholarship overseas.

Back then, I had ambition. It didn't seem unreasonable to want it all. After six months abroad and only a year at the *Australian*, I went out on my own and managed a hectic freelance schedule. I was one of those people who could cope (and produce amazing photographs) in unpredictable weather. My portfolio of natural-disaster photos was particularly impressive – bushfires in southern Victoria, drought in central New South Wales, cyclones and widespread flooding in Queensland – you name it, I was there, capturing images which revealed emotions that couldn't be put into words.

After Lexi, my now thirteen-year-old, was born, having it all became increasingly difficult. I retained my favourite clients and

still did my best work outdoors, although I cut back my hours drastically. But I soon realised that unless you keep accepting jobs and upping your profile, people forget about you. Someone with newer, fresher ideas and a sharper eye comes along . . . and whammo, they're the 'next big thing' and you're a distant memory. So when Lexi turned two, I went back to working full time, building up my portfolio again.

I must have been seven months pregnant with Angus when I drove out to western New South Wales to photograph rampaging grasshoppers threatening to take over the town of Moree. The photos I took won me several awards and led to a spate of commissions from *Australian Geographic*.

Not that I could fulfil them.

I assumed I'd keep working at the same frenetic pace after Angus was born. But it wasn't long before having it all proved impossible, what with a daughter starting school, a baby, breast-feeding, housework, life.

So, my photography career came to a standstill. I wasn't offered top assignments anymore because I couldn't dash off at a moment's notice to flood-ravaged plains and infernos threatening the bush. After a while, I settled for a two-day-a-week job at a portrait studio where I was stuck indoors all the time. I didn't last long.

Angus is eight now. Sadly, I have no career and, I have to admit, my confidence is at an all-time low. So much for living the perfect life.

So when I walked into my house this afternoon, laden with groceries I'd picked up on the way home from Angus's swimming class, to a phone message that went like this, *'Hi Katie, it's Fern. Great talking at swimming this afternoon. Listen, hoping you can help me out of a fix. Our assistant photographer is a no-show for a*

couple of weeks and I immediately thought of you. You'd be perfect. Give me a call,' I felt a rush of adrenaline.

The thought of getting back behind the camera professionally, was thrilling – and terrifying. I'd kept taking photos even though I was no longer being paid for them, but my skills haven't advanced since the late nineties. These days it was mostly digital – downloading CompactFlash cards and retouching on computer screens. Meanwhile, I worked out of a makeshift darkroom, an old laundry at the back of the garage.

I played Fern's message again. '*. . . you'd be perfect give me a call.*' She always ran her words together.

I hesitated, worried I couldn't live up to Fern's expectations. I regarded the mountain of groceries littering the kitchen floor. They'd probably last all of three days before I had to go out and do it all over again.

I decided calling Fern back and having a chat couldn't hurt. Besides, I couldn't remember the last time someone called me perfect.

Fern McLeod and I had met doing photography at college. But after our first year, she switched to a Bachelor of Commerce at Sydney University, deciding she was more suited to corporate life. We remained great friends though, even flatting together for six months.

These days she was a guru in the magazine world. I'd hardly seen her in the last ten years and then suddenly I'd seen her twice in as many days, the most recent being at Angus's final swimming lesson this afternoon. We stopped and chatted and she told me she had four kids, all under ten years old, one still in nappies. She was cheering her kids on as they were doing their strokes, phone in one ear. And she looked immaculate. *Immaculate*. Matching toe, nail and lip colours. Hair styled. (Great colour.

No split ends. No grey.) A size eight at most, she was wearing a pink Lisa Ho sundress – in the middle of winter. Meanwhile, I was wearing ancient jeans, a T-shirt and faded hoodie, sitting on *the* most uncomfortable plastic chair, slumped in a heap, with barely enough enthusiasm to nod as Angus swam past me. Seeing her made me want to crawl into a hole and die.


‘Fern, it’s Kate,’ I said, after negotiating my way past numerous assistants at the number she’d given me.

‘Kate, thankgoodnessyoucalled. I’m in a spot. Short story, our photographic assistant had an accident today. I need a fill-in for two, three weeks max. Minimal travel, flexible hours, great pay. You’d be doing me a huge favour and it’d be great if you could start tomorrow – today, really.’

‘Tomorrow?’ I said, fear and excitement pulsing through me. *I couldn’t possibly start a new job tomorrow.*

Clearly distracted, Fern took my question as a statement.

‘Great, Katie, you’re a doll. Tomorrow, here at the Bosanova building in Crows Nest, say eight o’clock. I’ll give you the lowdown then.’ Fern hung up before I could protest.



With Lexi at netball practice and Angus busy with his homework, I sifted through the day's mail and was momentarily delighted when I spied a parcel from my mother-in-law. Early birthday present. It was a book, imaginatively titled *Don'ts for Wives*, by Blanche Ebbutt, published in 1913 – 1913 for God's sake! Was this Carol's subtle way of commenting on the state of my marriage? I started flicking through the pages, sighing loudly as I read old-fashioned advice such as: *Don't think it beneath you to put out your husband's slippers*. Where? In the garbage bin?

But then, on the next page, Blanche wrote: *Don't think you can each go your own way . . . in important matters, you want to pull together*. I actually stopped and considered her words. Pulling together and walking the same path was what Matthew and I didn't do often enough, and really should.

A few sentences later, an ancient gem about not letting the sun go down on an argument appeared. Ha! That old chestnut. I flung the book down onto the kitchen bench where it landed with a thud, causing my cat to snuffle unattractively. Blanche,

you're not sucking me in. Matthew and I often end the night in silence . . . it's not the end of the world.

I was sitting at the same kitchen bench, surrounded by several ancient photography portfolios, when my mother appeared.

'Katie, I knocked, but . . .'

'Look at these, Mum,' I said, shoving an enormous folder of black-and-white prints of Central Park under her nose. 'Remember when I won that scholarship to New York?'

Mum looked through the folder and read the lecturer's comments aloud. *'Technical aspects outstanding; lighting and composition intuitively conquered . . . Looking forward to attending Kate's future exhibitions . . . Natural talent in abundance . . . A star in the making.'*

'How did I go from dreaming that one day my photos would be hanging in galleries around the world, to this?' I asked, gesturing at the messy kitchen.

'Birthday blues?'

'I always thought there'd be more to my life than . . .'

 I shook my head, unable to continue.

'More than what?' Mum asked.

'Remember Fern McLeod?'

Mum looked blank. 'No.'

'Yes, you do. I was at college with her. Anyway, she's asked if I'd like to do some photography for one of the magazines she publishes, just filling in for a couple of weeks. I said yes.'

'That's great,' said Mum, smiling.

'Yeah, but I'm worried about all the new technology,' I said, staring at my latest portfolio: several candid photos of my sister, Robyn, in full pregnant glory. 'I guess most of the manual setting-up work will be the same, but the closest I've come to working with digital is taking happy snaps with Angus's Canon.'

Mum made sympathetic clucking noises and started unpacking the groceries. ‘You worry too much. You’ve been offered an opportunity to do something you love. Enjoy the moment.’

‘Oh, and to top it off, Carol sends me this book for my birthday!’ I said, ignoring Mum and picking up the offending tome. *Don’ts for Wives*. Is this meant to be a joke?’

‘Carol’s just trying to help. She’s from the country –’

‘She lives in Adelaide!’ I threw the book back down on the bench.

‘Speaking of birthdays, is Matthew taking you out?’ Mum asked.

‘I wouldn’t have a clue. He’s so caught up with pressures at work, downsizing, retrenchments, he may not even remember.’

In the old days, Matt would never have forgotten. We always made a special effort for each other’s birthdays. One year he surprised me by taking me to see the musical *Mamma Mia*, knowing how much I loved ABBA. We stayed at the Hyatt in the city for a romantic evening and followed it up the next day with a full five-hour shopping spree. It was fantastic. For his birthday that year, I bought tickets to see *We Will Rock You*, in Melbourne. Queen was more his speed.

In recent years, romantic gestures like those had fallen by the wayside, along with a lot of other intimate stuff.

‘It’s important you and Matthew spend time together, Katie – and I don’t mean the time you spend sorting out the kids’ schedules for the week. You need couple time to keep a marriage happy.’ Her eyes strayed towards *Don’ts for Wives*. ‘Strangely compelling title, don’t you think?’

‘Mum!’ I didn’t need to have this conversation right now. Besides, what did my mother know about happy marriages?

My father had walked out on us years ago and she hadn't had a serious relationship since.

'I saw your dad today,' she said, uncannily reading my thoughts.

'Really?' I said, looking up. 'How could you when he lives in Canada?'

'I sort of ran into him,' Mum replied.

'Ran into him? How? Where?' I said, just as Angus walked in, then made his regular beeline for the kitchen cupboard to fill up.

'How's my little guy?' Mum said, reaching out to hug him.

'Good, Nanna. What's to eat?'

After making multiple cheese and Vegemite Jatz, I turned back to Mum. 'You were saying?'

'He was at the art gallery and we literally bumped into each other looking at the same Archibald entry.'

I pulled a half-empty bottle of riesling out of the fridge. 'Hang on,' I said, pouring two glasses and taking a large gulp before passing Mum hers. 'I don't know why you'd ever want to speak to him again.'

'Katie! We had a civilised conversation.'

'I bet.'

'Obviously I was surprised to see him but it wasn't as awkward as you might expect.'

'Awkward! How awkward should I expect it to be for you to bump into the man who walked out on us twenty years ago?'

If my memory's correct, just after Dad moved out, he happened to discover an *intellectual and spiritual connection* with another woman. Mum found out when, in an attempted reconciliation, she flew to Melbourne to surprise him. As it turned out, Mum was the one who was surprised. Walking into Dad's suite at the

Windsor Hotel, she found him and his intellectual and spiritual connection in bed together. It was three o'clock on a Thursday afternoon.

Dad later tried to explain to Robyn and me that he'd fallen under the spell of a *truly inspirational woman*. It didn't hurt that this truly inspirational woman was fifteen years his junior and had spectacular breasts and lovely legs. Soon after their divorce, Dad married Miss Inspirational. Since then, my contact with him had been practically nonexistent. It helped that his new wife was Canadian and they were living in Vancouver. These days I rarely thought about Dad, and I tried never to think about his second wife.

'Katie, I know that when your father left us I was very angry. But that was a long time ago. It was lovely to see him today. Of course, he wanted to know all about you and Robyn and the children.'

'Of course. That's why he's kept in touch so diligently.'

'He did try, and I understand why you and Robyn turned your back on him in support of me, but he is your father, after all.'

'Don't remind me.'

Mum looked out the window and smiled. 'You know, I'd played the scenario in my head so many times. What our first meeting would be like after all those years. In the early days, I hoped it would be at his funeral.'

'That's more like it.'

'But when I saw him today, I realised I'm glad Bob's alive. None of my anger for him exists anymore. I was happy to see him.'

Happy to see him? I couldn't quite comprehend what Mum was saying. Or why she was talking so fondly about the adulterer who had deserted her.



‘Great news,’ I said to Matthew when he phoned an hour later. ‘Remember Fern who manages Modular Magazines? I saw her at swimming today and she’s hired me to do some photography on one of her titles for the next couple of weeks.’

‘That’s fantastic! When?’ Matthew asked.

‘I start tomorrow, actually. So how about we go out tonight to celebrate? I could ask Mum to keep an eye on the kids.’

It had been months since Matthew and I had gone to a restaurant by ourselves. And even longer since we’d made love. Matthew has a stressful job. At the end of a long hard day, all he’s up for is Rupert, our black labrador, licking his toes while he catches up with the emails on his BlackBerry, the ones he missed retrieving during his forty-minute drive home.

‘Tonight’s tricky, hon, with the Americans in town and all. I was hoping you might –’

‘Matthew!’

‘Just an informal dinner. Don’t go to any trouble . . . but they need to eat. I promise we’ll celebrate your new job another night.’

A simple dinner party for six. Sure, no trouble! Even better if it’s the night before I start work on the first paid photographic assignment I’ve had in years.

I bundled Angus into the car and drove to the local shops to pick up a few extras, like a main course. Then rushed back home and set about creating the perfect dinner for guests from overseas who were expecting a home-cooked Australian meal. I marinated a whole snapper in white wine with ginger and garlic, baked a pavlova with a Cointreau sauce and created a blender full of sublime mango cocktails. Perfect. With these organisational skills, maybe I’d be able to manage to return to a working life after all.

I was in control and on schedule. In fact, I was ahead of schedule so I picked up the day's newspaper to flick through. Just as I sat down, Lexi bowled into the kitchen.

'Lexi, your hair,' I started . . . then stood open-mouthed. Honey-blond since birth, Lexi's hair was now blue-black.

Lexi brushed past, ignoring my horror, and opened the fridge door. 'There's nothing to eat,' she moaned into the freezer section, despite yours truly having just spent several hundred dollars at the supermarket. She slammed the door and began rummaging through the groceries in the pantry.

'Lexi . . .' Again I started, then bit my tongue and busied myself studying the label on the dishwashing powder. Hmm. Lemon fresh. Fabulous.

Lexi ripped open a packet of double-coated Tim Tams. The top two buttons of her white school shirt were undone and I swear I could see her rapidly developing breasts swelling before my eyes. Though she has lovely cotton bras, today, for some reason, she was bra-less. And then there was her barely there skirt, which was up around her backside.

'Words fail me,' I said, trying to suppress a rant that was lurking just below the surface.

Lexi shrugged her shoulders. There was no explanation, no regard for me whatsoever.

I couldn't hold back any longer. 'What the hell do you think you're doing, dyeing your hair like that? I'm not even going to start about that uniform you are almost wearing. Did you even go to netball practice this afternoon?'

She rolled her eyes. 'Blonde hair is so yesterday. Have you seen Lily? Her hair's awesome.'

'I don't care about the other girls in your class . . .'

Lexi dismissed me with a laugh. 'Lily Allen's a singer!'

‘Lexi, I did not give you permission to colour your hair!’

‘It’s *my* hair. Anyway, it’s done now.’

‘Don’t you dare speak to me like that, young lady,’ I said, my voice growing louder with the enunciation of every word. ‘And why aren’t you wearing your retainer? I didn’t spend six thousand dollars on braces just to have you –’

‘Ahem.’

Matthew and the Americans had arrived. Immediately, I framed them, taking a mental snapshot: two fresh-faced women, one brunette, one flaxen, both wearing twin-sets and elegant jewellery and looking like they’d stepped out of *Ladies’ Home Journal*, circa 1955; and two overweight middle-aged men wearing stone-washed denim jeans, white sandals and matching Utah baseball caps. I was also wearing jeans, but at least they weren’t stone-washed.

‘Lovely to meet you,’ I said, quickly switching to hostess mode. Lexi disappeared upstairs without another word, but within seconds angry music (I’m guessing Lily) was blaring from her bedroom.

While Matthew settled everyone into the lounge room and calmly asked Lexi to turn her music down, I busied myself in the kitchen, pouring chilled mango cocktails. I sipped one to test it.

I’d really outdone myself. They were magnificent.

I walked in with the drinks and everyone took one. Smiling, one of the men asked what was in them.

‘Mangoes,’ I replied, ‘and champagne. Lots of champagne.’

They all put their glasses down in unison as if I’d said the drinks contained rat poison, and Matthew quickly ushered me into the kitchen.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ he demanded through gritted teeth. ‘They’re Mormons. They don’t drink alcohol.’

I gulped some mango mix. ‘Pardon?’

‘I said, They. Are. Mormons. No. Alcohol.’

‘Matthew, you said you were bringing home colleagues from America for an Australian home-cooked meal. To be *wined and dined*, you said. So naturally I thought we’d be *wining and dining*.’

The shock of Matthew telling me that our guests didn’t drink alcohol, at all, never ever – sent me into a spin. My wine-marinated fish, my Cointreau-soaked pav. Tia Maria Tim Tams!

Quietly, Matthew walked back into the lounge. I heard him apologise for my indiscretion and ask our guests what they’d like to drink instead. The women opted for mineral water – *club soda* – and the men – *diet Pepsi, if you have some*.

Great! So if this dinner party was a disaster, it’d be my fault. Cheers!

Pulling fifteen lamb cutlets from the fridge I threw them on a plate, then gave the appetisers the once-over. I crossed my fingers our guests wouldn’t be offended by Kangaroo Island brie and Kalamata olives.

I poured myself half a glass of wine and stared around the kitchen, desperate to find something to do – anything that would delay the inevitable. But given that I’d prepared the salads and the garlic and rosemary potatoes were baking in the oven, I could procrastinate no longer and walked back into the lounge room.

I hadn’t even sat down when Angus came barrelling in, followed by Lexi screaming, ‘You’re such a freak! I’m going to kill you.’

After dragging them out, all the while smiling at our guests, I threatened them with ongoing pain and torture for the rest of their lives if they didn’t behave.

‘Just the two children?’ Ruth, the brunette, asked minutes later when I’d rejoined the group.

‘Yes, thankfully. Any more and I’d kill myself.’

‘We have seven,’ Ruth chirped, before smiling at the cap-wearer seated to her left.

‘Seven!’ I spluttered.

‘We have eight,’ Sandi chimed in.

They both looked too neat to have given birth to that many children.

‘And you don’t drink alcohol? You don’t ever feel the urge to scoff liquor-filled chocolates?’

The evening remained a tragedy. While the men busied themselves at the barbecue cooking alcohol-free lamb cutlets and plain beef sausages (thin), I attempted to find some common ground with the ladies. But all of my standard conversation starters were stoppers at this particular dinner party. I asked if they skied. They lived in Utah after all. No. ‘Been to the Sundance Film Festival?’ Nada. New York? Los Angeles? San Francisco? Nope. Maybe scrapbooking and needlepoint were more their thing. Although with so many children between them, maybe all their energy went into keeping house, as Blanche, no doubt, would have recommended.

I had to keep pinching myself to stay awake and animated, especially after Matthew gave me the sly thumbs-up and took the men into the games room to play pool. I almost wished Lexi would have one of her meltdowns so I could be excused, but she remained curiously silent throughout the evening.

I contemplated bringing out the Family Conversation Starters cards. They’d been a Mother’s Day gift from Matthew – an implication that familial relations needed improvement? I don’t think the cards had had quite the effect on the family he’d been hoping for; whenever the cards surfaced, bickering ensued, resulting in food fights, and at least one of us stomping off to

bed. We'd had some terrific fights over those cards. As recently as two weeks ago, I'd pulled them out during a lacklustre Sunday evening roast.

I would love my family to . . . ? I asked Lexi. 'Fuck off,' she'd replied. Even Lexi was surprised when that answer popped out of her mouth. Her phone was promptly confiscated for the week. But I persevered. With half an eye on *60 Minutes*, Matthew pulled out the next card and groaned before reading it aloud. *The family member with the most annoying habit is . . .* Lexi jumped in quickly with, 'I actually know the answer to this one. Please! It's Angus because he's retarded and gay.' That night, she also lost her iPod and computer privileges for the week.

Okay, so maybe it was best not to drag them out tonight.

Over peppermint tea, I talked about how I used to be a mildly successful photographer. 'But about the only thing I've been taking photographs of lately is my pregnant sister's belly, which is getting more enormous every day,' I told them.

'I draw the line at taking snaps of the actual birth,' I soldiered on after Sandi showed a flicker of interest. 'Too much blood, and as for the greasy mucus and the placenta – well, you both know how gruesome *that* is.'

Somebody shoot me.

It was well past midnight by the time I'd finished clearing up after the disastrous dinner. Before heading to bed, I made the school lunches, put on a load of washing, fed the pets and put out the garbage. Then I wrote an extensive to-do list for Matthew for the following day. He'd offered to get the children off to school.

Upstairs, I peered in at Lexi. She looked almost angelic, curled up asleep. Normally, she hid her cuddly toys in the cupboard but tonight she'd surrounded herself with them. It was too dark to

see her hair colour, so I walked out of her room pretending she was still a honey-blonde.

I was greeted in my own room by a snoring husband. Several lights were on. Clothes were strewn over the floor and he'd left the drawers open. I climbed in next to him and flicked on the TV, turning the sound down low. There was nothing on . . . the shopping channel . . . the weather channel . . . news channel. I settled for the news. A young man with a huge smile on his face had been arrested for the murder of his mother. I wondered what her crime had been. Perhaps making him do his homework when he was a child or forcing him to eat carrots? I'd given up trying to make Angus and Lexi eat vegetables. I knew I wasn't going to win any Mother of the Year awards but hopefully my behaviour wasn't so appalling that years down the track my children would conspire to kill me.

When I finally switched off the light, I lay awake worrying that I'd forgotten an after-school activity, money for an excursion, cat food or something. Then I agonised over what to wear for my first day at the office.

I was scared that after years away from real photography work, I'd have lost the spark, the gift I once had for knowing when to click the shutter to capture the perfect poignant moment.

My grandma had the gift. I remember spending endless hours with her, poring over her favourite family photos. Back then, my dad was like a superhero to me and I'd imagine myself bounding into those pictures of him surfing or smiling happily at the beach, and joining him for that brief moment in time.

Back then, I knew I wanted to spend my life (or at least a significant chunk of it) taking photographs capturing the essence of character. Real life. I imagined being able to change the world,


or at least people's perception of their immediate vicinity, through the power of my lens.

But perhaps it was only ever a dream.

As much as I wanted to resurrect my photography career, I was frightened I wasn't up to the task.

I kept asking myself – if photography was my great passion, why didn't I fight harder for it after Angus was born? Why did I let it slip away?

Why? Because I was happy, in that delusional way new mothers often are. I suppressed my photographic aspirations in order to raise the perfect family . . . and despite the sometime drudgery of parenthood, I was fulfilled, making a nest, content to take Polaroids of my two babies and watch them grow. I still had my Polaroid camera somewhere in the garage, but these days you couldn't buy film for it. Polaroids were out-of-date and old-fashioned. Like me . . .

A decorative graphic consisting of a large, faint heart shape formed by a swirl of thin, grey lines. Scattered around and within the heart are numerous small, grey hearts and dots of varying sizes, creating a soft, ethereal effect.

I arrived at the Bosanova building at ten minutes to eight – no mean feat considering the chaos that had greeted me when I walked into the kitchen after showering and dressing in record time. Still, Matthew put on a brave face, kissing me goodbye and wishing me luck.

After spending twenty minutes finding a park, I turned off the car engine and swivelled the rear-vision mirror around so I could see my face. I rubbed off a layer of blush that had been overzealously applied in darkness, checked my lipstick, smiled and made sure that no colour had rubbed off onto my teeth.

My mobile rang. It was my sister, Robyn.

‘Katie, where are you?’ she said in a near-hysterical voice.

‘Here, talking to you. Just about to start my temp job.’

‘You’re never around when I need you. I’m about to have a baby. I’m going into labour for Christ’s sake. I’m – I’m –’

‘Robbie, you need to calm down,’ I soothed, climbing out of my car, phone to my ear.

After reassuring both of us Robyn was definitely not in labour, and promising I’d catch up with her soon, I hung up.

In an attempt to calm my nerves, I gave myself one last once-over – black sling-back shoes, long black skirt, black shirt and black jacket. A funeral director with fetching black heels was not exactly the impression I'd intended.

I took a deep breath and pushed open the door to the Bosanova building. I was anxious, but also excited, determined to observe the culture of the office, do my best to fit in, be professional at all times, enthusiastic, punctual, work hard and work fast. Sure. No pressure.

Several corridors sprang from the bright purple main foyer and I had no idea where to go. Fern had started as the editor of *Home Interiors* before being promoted to group editor in charge of all six of Modular's lifestyle magazines. Then, a couple of years ago, she was promoted big time and was now in charge of more than twenty titles ranging from health and beauty through to sports, parenting and gossip rags.

I didn't know which magazine I'd be working on, but it didn't bother me. I could find interest in most things, people, flowers, animals. I wasn't too keen on photographing food or cars but, other than that, I was open to snapping anything. Given that I'd spent the last eight months taking photos of Robyn's expanding girth, I was ready for a new challenge.

So I took a guess and followed several other people rushing down a hall. At the end of the walkway, a huge studio was in the process of being transformed into a Turkish bathhouse. People dashed around with clipboards, others talked into microphone headsets and several builders made a lot of noise with hammers and saws creating impressive faux marble baths and fountains.

'Katie,' Fern said loudly. She looked amazing, wearing a sixties-inspired navy satin shift, elegant peep-toe heels and minimal makeup. I self-consciously touched my thin mumsy

hair and regretted wearing Lexi's 'too pink to be true' lip gloss. 'You're here.'

'Yes, am I supposed to be?'

'Not likely. This is jock central, part of a huge advertorial campaign for *Action Sports*.' She took a breath and waved her hand. 'Deodorant,' she said by way of explanation. 'Sorry, I don't have a lot of time to brief you this morning. It's absolute chaos around here. Come with me.' Together, we walked out of the studio, back up the hallway and into the foyer. 'You'll be working upstairs with Graeme Grafton on *Delicious Bites*. He'll show you the ropes.'

My heart skipped a beat. 'The food magazine?' I knew Graeme by reputation – apparently a master photographer and sometime charmer, but an absolute nutter to boot. I'd also seen photos of him; not quite pretty boy, not quite handsome. Definitely not my type.

'That's right. Did I not tell you yesterday?'

'No, but that's okay,' I said, before being interrupted by my ringing mobile.

Matthew shouted to be heard over an incoherent Angus in the background.

'Angus's homework is in his backpack,' I said. 'Don't forget he has soccer after school.'

'Can't you handle that?'

'Yes. I'm just reminding you so that you can remind Angus to take his boots,' I said, trying hard to keep calm.

'Okay. Look, I'm already late for the office and Angus is going ballistic over his shoelaces now. Who knows where Lexi is. We'll have to work out something better for the morning routine,' said Matthew, sounding very uptight, verging on angry. Where had my lovely supportive husband of an hour and a half

ago disappeared to? Breakfast reality with the kids had set in, that's what. I wouldn't be able to keep up this charade for two days let alone two or three weeks.

'Adjustment issues?' Fern asked as she led me upstairs and past the *Delicious Bites* offices into the white-on-white studio where presumably I would be spending most of my time. I was entering the frightening world of food photography, temperamental control-freak chefs, ambitious food stylists and zealous, precious photographers.

I recognised Graeme straight away. The former *Cleo* Bachelor of the Year was tall and slim, not weak-knee-inducing gorgeous, but interesting nonetheless. Fern and I watched for a few moments as he focused his lens on a plate of what looked like spaghetti marinara – I've been around long enough to know that it's near to impossible to get that to photograph well – while a woman hovered just outside the frame muttering and darting forward every now and then with tweezers to rearrange a prawn or lettuce leaf.

Seizing an opportunity while a crisp red napkin was being positioned for the fifth time, Fern introduced me to, 'Graeme Grafton, Creative Director.'

I was a little flustered. I'd never met a Bachelor before. He shook my hand briefly but spoke to Fern. 'We're on deadline here.'

'Graeme's just returned from Canberra,' said Fern, exuding calm authority. 'Last night he judged a national photography competition.'

'Crap! Total crap,' said Graeme, his mop of sandy-blond hair threatening to hijack his dark-rimmed glasses. 'I disqualified all of the contestants. None of their photos were good enough to win.'

Okay, so today Graeme wasn't in charm mode.

Unfazed, Fern indulged Graeme with a wide smile, then patted me on the shoulder and said, 'I'll leave you to it,' before quickly disappearing out the door.

'So? You up for it?' Graeme said, shooting me a piercing stare.

'Looking forward to it,' I stammered.

'Good. Do as I say, toe the line and humour me on the rare occasion I get precious and you and I will get along fine,' he said, flashing a mega-watt smile at me and laughing. 'I'm not as temperamental as people say, I just can't abide imbeciles. Hey, Mara?' He glanced across at a woman on the other side of the studio dressed in a black skivvy, black jeans and black ballet flats, who was busying herself with arranging lettuce leaves.

Graeme dismissed me with an extensive list of fruit and vegetables and other ingredients he needed *immediately* for the afternoon shoot. I hurried out of the studio, past a huge open-plan office and, once I'd asked the receptionist where one was, took myself off to the local fruit shop. I didn't want to disappoint Graeme. I wanted him to like me.

After loading up with green vegetables – peas, beans, broccoli, zucchini and chokos – I headed to the hardware shop for lacquer spray, and then on to the two-dollar shop where I bought exotic feathers, sequins and black satin. I was well qualified for this, given all the costumes I'd had to create for school and dance concerts over the years, not to mention my extensive knowledge of even the rarest vegetables in the known world.

Graeme thanked me by having me make him a cup of coffee. 'Strong, black, two cubes of sugar. None of that instant crap, either.'

I quickly found out that as Graeme's assistant my first job every morning would be to make him his plunger coffee, exactly

according to his written instructions, which he handed to me on a piece of white palm-sized cardboard with his initials embossed in silver in the top right-hand corner.

My elegant black shoes were going to be my downfall, among other things. I could feel the blisters growing on my toes. I'd thought they would get me through the day, the week, the month maybe. They were practical . . . enough. Though in fairness, I had only worn them once before and that was to dinner, where the furthest I'd walked was the ten metres from the taxi to the chair where I'd sat on my backside for five hours.

I was washing green beans when my mobile rang again. The alarm at home was going off. All seven sensors were beeping and security had called the police. I called Matthew but he was in a meeting and couldn't be disturbed. Of course. Next, I phoned Mum. No answer at home and she didn't have a mobile. Very convenient. I thought about calling Robyn but then came to my senses.

So much for good first impressions.

Thirty minutes later, I arrived home to find a security guard and two police officers hanging out on the front verandah.


'No apparent sign of a break-in,' one of the officers told me calmly as he took my keys and unlocked the front door. As the four of us walked inside, I made sure I was at the rear of the group in case the burglars were still there.

No burglars. Just three animals rampaging hysterically through the house. Why couldn't Matthew have put the animals outside before turning on the alarm? Surely, that wasn't too much to ask? This working gig was never going to be easy, but really! It's not as if my children were babies and my husband incapable of shooing all of the animals out of the house before the alarm was activated. Or was he?

I made my apologies to the police and to the gum-chewing security guy who said, 'No problem, fills in my day.'

After they departed, I took the opportunity to change shoes. My crippled feet thanked me as I rushed back to the car.

It was close to one thirty by the time I arrived back at the office. So far, I'd achieved little more than foot comfort and superfluous set decoration. I was no closer to picking up a camera than I'd been yesterday or the day before that.



‘Mum, why am I always the last to be picked up?’ Angus asked later that day, when he and his muddy-footed friends clambered into my car after soccer practice.

‘Sorry, Gus,’ I said, distracted by the coach, Arnaud, stretching his muscular legs barely three metres away from me. I waved to him when he saw me looking. He has amazing thighs; amazing everything really.

‘How was your day?’ I asked, returning my attention to my son.

No answer. Too busy making fart noises with the others in the rear of their personal taxi. How did I go from owning a cute Volkswagen Beetle to waking up one morning driving a people mover with a *Kids on Board* sticker on the back window?

I turned the radio up – easy listening – and sang along to ‘Copacabana’, smiling to myself. Had Lexi been in the car she’d be dry retching about now. But then, if Lexi was in the car there’d be no way I would get away with listening to this station.

Parking in the driveway after dropping Angus’s friends home, I suddenly felt exhausted. It had been a long day and all I wanted

to do was soak in a hot bath, then curl up with a good book, though that was as likely as snow falling in Darwin.

I walked into the kitchen to hear music blaring.

‘Lexi, could you turn it down a couple of decibels, please?’ I screeched, before noticing a handsome boy stuffing his face with chocolate biscuits. Lexi’s new friend – boyfriend perhaps? What had happened to Luke from last week? A never-ending parade of adolescent boys seemed to pass through my kitchen depleting our food supplies.

‘Wassup?’ he said.

Wassup! Great, just what Lexi needed – an *illiterate* new boyfriend. ‘Hello,’ I said, carefully enunciating my vowels. ‘I am Kate, Lexi’s mother.’

‘Hunter,’ he obliged.

‘Hunter?’ I repeated, before staring at his T-shirt which, I noticed, said, *Eat out more often*. Clearly not an advertisement for a restaurant chain, given the ink graphics of two bodies, a man and woman on top of each other, head to crotch.

Six months ago, Lexi barely acknowledged boys. Five months ago, Lexi turned thirteen. Now here she was, hanging out with a walking advertisement for oral sex. The hideous black dye job suddenly seemed less important than it had yesterday.

In my short experience as the mother of a teenage girl, I’ve learned the following:

1. They play very loud music;
2. If their mobile isn’t stuck to their ear, they’re using it to text their best friend, their second best friend or anyone else who’ll text them in return. Don’t get me started on Facebook, MSN, MySpace and Twitter because I have no idea what’s going on there!

3. They go from shunning boys to having boyfriends with names like Spike and Hunter;
4. Overnight, they go from asking lots of questions and expecting you to know all the answers, to accusing you of knowing nothing;
5. They hate their mothers and torture them by mutilating their hair;
6. They may or may not know the finer points of fellatio.

When I was thirteen, I had no breasts to speak of and I didn't even own a bra. 'What do you want a bra for?' my mother had said. 'To hold up your imagination?'

My male friends (!) amounted to two younger cousins whom I studiously avoided at family functions. Of course, there were boys on the school bus but they never took any notice of me, instead focusing entirely on my big-breasted classmates. On the rare occasion a person of the opposite sex paid me the slightest attention, I would crumple in an embarrassed, boobless heap. And I certainly didn't know what the hell fellatio was.

Lexi would have shunned me had she known me. Rather like she does now, I guess.

After Lexi and I decided it was a good idea for Hunter to go home (I threatened to ban her from Facebook and MSN for a week) so Lexi could at least pretend to start her homework, I tried engaging my children in conversation. 'I started my new job today.'

'But who'll pick me up from school tomorrow?' said Angus.

'Where at?' Lexi asked, as she fiddled with her mobile.

I gazed above her head, trying to ignore her hair. '*Delicious Bites*, it's a food magazine.'

'About time you got a life,' Lexi replied.

‘What? Other than the one I’ve been living for the last thirty-five years?’ I resisted the urge to say.

Little wonder some animals eat their young.

‘Hey, class mother, Tom tells me you started a new job today,’ my friend Diane said when she phoned.

Diane and I met when Angus and her son, Tom, started preschool together. In the beginning, we only talked about the kids, school and reality television. These days few topics were taboo. It’s comforting to know I’m not the only one who feels life isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.

The downside of our friendship? Diane’s a fitness fanatic – an eight-glasses-of-water-a-day girl who lives by the creed of no-carbs-after-midday. And drags me out of bed at the crack of dawn at least twice a week to go walking with her.

‘You kept that quiet. I’m looking forward to hearing all about it tonight at the class dinner. You haven’t forgotten, have you?’

‘Of course not,’ I said, lying through my teeth.

‘Good. I’ll pick you up in an hour.’

I hung up and mentally cursed myself for volunteering to be a class mum. It’s a duty I’d neglected even before I had a job to blame. Apart from organising the weekly reading roster, I hadn’t done much at all. Oh, we’d had a half-hearted morning tea at the beginning of term one, a ‘getting to know you’ affair. Six mothers turned up at the park, two with fertile dogs and noisy toddlers in tow.

It ended up being a screaming, crying, barking fest lasting two interminable hours before we all politely retreated to our own lives, exhausted and having learned very little about each other or the other children in year three. Rupert had a ball though. Got to sniff a few new dogs’ bottoms, wee on some recently

planted bottlebrushes and have me follow him around cleaning up after him.

Tonight's dinner couldn't be any worse. At least toddlers and dogs weren't invited.

Diane and I sat at one end of a very long table at the Indian Tea and Curry House drinking chardonnay.

'So, how did you feel after our little walk the other day?' Diane asked.

'Exhausted. Tired. Crabby.'

'Diddums! My heart bleeds. I work a full-time job, Kate, and I still make time to exercise. Better to go through the agony now than wake up one morning forty and flabby.'

'It's my destiny to be flabby. Why fight it?' I said, refilling our glasses.

'You know that's worth one whole point every time you fill that wine glass? And at Weight Watchers you're only allowed a maximum of eighteen points a day.'

'Good thing I'm not doing Weight Watchers. Besides, eighteen glasses of wine should do the trick. How's Brent? Over his little op?' Diane's husband Brent had just had a vasectomy.

'I'm never going to hear the end of it. One tiny snip. That's all it was. The poor baby's tender. And now he can't take the garbage out, can't drive the kids to school, can't cook the dinner – need I go on? He's a sook. That's all there is to it.' We clinked glasses and swigged our wine. 'We agreed when we got married that we had enough children between us.'

'How are all the kids?' I asked. Diane has five – three of her own and Brent's two.

'Feral. Fighting. Blended families, hey? Then there are the exes. I tell you, divorce is no walk in the park.'

‘Yeah, but now you’ve found the one person who can truly make you happy for the rest of your life.’

‘Are you kidding? I often have moments when I wonder whether Brent and I will last the distance. I felt so sure when I said *I do* again, but now I’m not so certain. Passion doesn’t last. Aptitude in the kitchen, however – now there’s a skill for life. But enough about me. Still admiring the soccer coach from afar?’

I laughed, thinking again about Arnaud’s thighs. He was fit, no doubt about it. Yes, Arnaud was my number-one fantasy guy. It probably had a lot to do with the fact that he’s French and ever since I was little I’ve had this dream of living in France . . . or at least visiting Paris. When I was fifteen, we even planned a European family holiday: me, Robyn, Mum and Dad. For months, I researched everything I could about Paris and immersed myself in French lessons. I couldn’t wait to climb the Eiffel Tower and explore the city’s art galleries and museums. But it didn’t work out. Our family never made it to Paris. Never even made it as far as the airport.

Gradually, the table filled with latecomers and their excuses, greetings were exchanged and we got down to the nitty-gritty of the night – one-upmanship in the parenting stakes. Diane and I played a little game whenever someone spoke about parenting duties. We’d add a silent ‘*Because I am a perfect mother*’ to the end of their sentences. It amused us no end. So just who was the best mother at the table?

‘I gave up my career to care for my boys full time. And I love it. I love being there for them whenever they need me,’ said Esther, a sad, mousy-haired woman with two boys at school and another at preschool. *Because I am a perfect mother.*

'I know what you mean,' agreed Karin. 'My whole life is spent ferrying the kids around making sure they're looked after and pursuing their dreams. Karate on Monday, piano Tuesday –'

'Sounds exhausting,' I said.

'With my Ben,' said Mardi, 'I make sure he gets at least two hours of Mummy time every day. That's two hours,' she said, holding up two fingers and waving them in the air, like the rest of us were imbeciles. 'Not the token ten minutes that some mothers spend with their children.' *Because I am a perfect mother.*

Mardi only has one child, plus a live-in maid, a full-time gardener and an accommodating husband who spends several months of the year overseas.

'Our only real hiccup this year has been the soccer,' Mardi continued. 'It's criminal the way Ben's being treated. That Arnaud isn't allowing him to shine the way he should be. Ben's a star. He's also brilliant academically . . .' I wondered whether she was going to mention the fact that Ben topped the class in maths. 'He should really be in a gifted program.'

And then I stopped listening.

'Let's talk about something interesting, like work,' Diane said. 'Outside the home, that is. Kate's just started at *Delicious Bites* magazine.'

'I love that mag,' said Karin, clapping her hands. 'Phwoar! That Graeme Grafton is something, isn't he? Just gorgeous. And that smile! He was a *Cleo* Bachelor of the Year, wasn't he? Have you met him?'

I nodded.

'Lucky you. Can you get me his autograph?' Karin was practically swooning.

Diane smiled. 'Another fantasy man to add to your list, hey, Kate?'

I kicked her under the table. ‘Mardi, what were you saying about Ben?’

Two hours later, I arrived home to a messy kitchen and Rupert lying on the good sofa chewing my half-read James Patterson novel. And though the kids and Matthew were sound asleep in their rooms, quite possibly every light in the house was still switched on. I couldn’t help but feel disappointed that Matthew hadn’t waited up to ask how my first day had gone. We’d barely nodded to each other earlier this evening. I was heading out as he walked through the front door.

I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep, given I felt so hyped up from work, though tonight’s conversation had been boring enough to put most people into a coma. So I pulled out a collection of prints I’d taken in New York the summer I won the scholarship. My favourite was a black-and-white photo of an elderly couple sitting on a park bench. I thought back to that day. Central Park had been frantic with activity. Roller bladers zigzagged between bike riders, kids played tag and dogs barked and chased squirrels. Through it all, that couple had sat together holding hands and smiling at each other, oblivious to the bustle around them. They were gorgeous. And content. Satisfied with each other.

I looked over at Matthew crashed out on the bed and wondered if we’d be like that in our old age – content with each other. I hoped so, but right now I didn’t think either of us was overly satisfied. We were like two icebergs slowly drifting apart.

When I first met Matthew, I didn’t need to indulge in fantasies about other men, like Arnaud. Matthew was my real-life fantasy man, my escape. And now? Well, he was still handsome, clever and hard-working. But he wasn’t the man I married. The man


I married was wild, gregarious and funny. These days, Matthew was too busy working to have fun.

But he was also thoughtful, kind and great with the kids. All things considered, Matthew was pretty terrific. So I didn't know why I lay awake at two in the morning most nights agonising over inconsequential stuff like the lack of sex and laughter. We had a great marriage, except that I was lonely. I guess as the years had sailed by, life had become predictable . . . busy but mundane. And there was never enough time just for us. Sometimes it occurred to me that Matthew might not be in love with me anymore, that he no longer desired me. Perhaps that part of our lives was over. If so, what were we? Flat-mates who share a bed? The thought was so depressing that some nights I could barely look at him. Often, it was easier falling asleep on Angus's bunk than lying in the marital bed, unwanted.

Finally asleep, I dreamed I was hosing the garden, lost in reverie, enjoying the sun, the water, the quiet. My hands moved along the rubbery hose, almost caressing it. I gave in to my imaginings . . . what it would be like if Arnaud suddenly appeared behind me, grasped my waist from behind, murmured in my ear in his so-sexy French accent that he couldn't wait to have me. He wanted me now, here. I protested, *The children! Matthew!* But my protests were weak and he laughed. He kissed me behind my ear, savouring the sweat that had collected there, told me I tasted of the sea, then he suddenly wrapped a blindfold around my eyes, warning me not to make a sound. He picked me up in his arms. I struggled, but didn't mean it, and he laughed again, low and throaty.

Into the house and up the stairs he carried me and lay me on the bed. *Don't move*, he warned, and began stripping off my clothes. I tried to turn away. He shouldn't be here! This was

wrong! What if the kids came home? What about Matthew? Arnaud held my arms above my head, pinning me to the bed, and lowered himself over me, kissing my neck, my nipples, my ribs. He smelled of the mountains, woodsy, fresh and more than a bit dangerous. His tongue left blazing trails of fire as he held me immobile. I gave myself over to wanting him, needing him, demanding him. I arched up to meet him and he came into me. I was deep within the throes of ecstasy when I woke up, exhausted, hot and sweaty in a mess of tangled sheets.



When I walked in to the studio on my second day, Graeme was in full flight with Mara, who, it turns out, was the editor and head food consultant on *Delicious Bites*. She's also been invited to appear on the next season of *Celebrity MasterChef*.

'I want green grapes and sparkling friggin' mineral water, Mara. Not green grapes and still friggin' mineral water. There is a difference, you know. The photos will be crap. I won't shoot until you get me the right water – and not friggin' tap water either.'

'Yes sirree, captain.' Mara saluted and Graeme stalked out of the room. 'You'll get used to working with Graeme,' she said, when she noticed me creeping around behind her.

'Will I?' I asked, hopeful.

'Probably not, but do as I do and ignore him . . . and when that fails, ignore him anyway. Don't let him bully you because he'll try to whenever he can. And a word of warning about napkin colours: always agree with him. It'll make your life so much easier. Graeme's great at what he does but he's also a complete obsessive.'

'Yeah, he's got a certain way about him,' I said.

‘Tell me about it. Thinks he can conquer the world.’

‘I don’t *think*, Mara, dear, I know,’ Graeme said, appearing out of nowhere. ‘Kate, where did you study?’

‘Sydney College of the Arts with Jacques Miller.’

‘Should have guessed. His methods don’t work at all in the magazine industry. Banging on about natural light – what a joke. Dead now, isn’t he?’

I couldn’t tell whether he was joking or serious. ‘I don’t think so,’ I said, though I couldn’t be sure; I’d been out of the loop for years.

‘Really?’ Graeme said, glaring at me. ‘Are you only interested in photographing in natural light too?’

‘When there’s a choice, yes. I’d prefer not to use artificial lighting, but in a studio you have to.’

‘And the work that comes out of a studio, Kate,’ Mara said, ‘would you agree that it’s not exceptional to see every shot well done?’

I hesitated. ‘I’m . . . I’m not sure.’

‘Technically at least,’ Mara continued, ‘once the lighting has been determined and the camera’s positioned on the tripod –’

‘So anyone can do it? A monkey, for example?’ Graeme seethed.

‘Oh, Graeme, you might need to train the monkey for a couple of hours,’ said Mara, smiling. ‘Maybe three.’

To be fair, when it came to food photography, lighting was everything, or almost. Making a two-dimensional image look as three-dimensional as humanly possible usually came down to lighting.

‘All getting along, are we?’ said Fern, as she whizzed into the studio, phone to ear, smiling.

'Great,' I sparkled, feeling anything but. However, I could take inspiration from her, a woman who had it all. The confidence. The enthusiasm for life. The clothes. Today, for example, she was wearing a simple blue sweater, black skirt and exotic high-heeled red shoes with a cream flower at the front. Her neck was full of funky costume jewellery and she wore a purple and green flower slide in her shoulder-length auburn hair. The slide added a touch of whimsy. Oh, to be whimsical.

She handed Graeme an invoice to sign and breezed out again.

'Don't go,' I wanted to shout. I felt safe when Fern was around because, truthfully, I wasn't sure I was cut out for this. Exhaling, I took in my surroundings. At one end of the studio, Mara arranged several dishes to be photographed. While the preparation and cooking took place in the kitchen down the corridor, the finishing touches were added here. At the other end, Graeme muttered as he set about hooking up the Hasselblad to a Mac – way beyond my experience, but I was trying not to let it show. Several other cameras lay nearby. Off to one side was a darkroom for monochrome printing and nearby sat a bank of computers and huge colour printers.

Then I spied the infamous wobbly ladder, the whole reason I was here in the first place. I happened to be at the right (or wrong) place – the swimming pool – at the right (or wrong) time, when Simone, the assistant photographer, fell off that exact wobbly ladder and broke her ankle.

Fern knew I had no experience with food photography – an ex-newspaper photographer taking mostly outdoor shots, filling shadows and dodging reflections, making the transition to stylised food photography? It was a huge leap. Not only was lighting an issue, it was bloody hard work. Regardless of how appetising the

cuisine looked on *MasterChef*, you barely had minutes before food (any food) looked like yesterday's garbage – fried food became greasy, ice-cream melted, sauces congealed. It was a nightmare.

But Fern was obviously desperate, and now that I was here, I was desperate too. I was desperate to prove I could photograph anything that was thrown at me. That is, when I was finally given a chance to pick up a camera, whenever that might be.

I wanted to be like Fern. She seemed to breeze through most things and I bet she didn't have to contend with her adolescent daughter's boyfriend wearing pornographic T-shirts. She wouldn't lie awake at night agonising over the spreading cellulite on her buttocks, the multiplying crow's feet, or her sagging breasts.

Did Fern worry about what to cook for dinner night after night, her children's homework, her daughter's secretive computer usage and her mother's illusions of a civilised friendship with her former husband? Would she be concerned, like I was right now, that her skirt was too tight and revealed far too much thigh bulge?

I hadn't had time for a backward glance as I left the house this morning. My 'Does this look okay?' at the breakfast table was greeted with a weak nod from Matthew, a bored eye roll from Lexi and a sleepy 'Whatever' from Angus. That's what I love. Familial support.

'So are you up for it, Mara?' asked Graeme.

'Up for what?'

'Some slap and tickle under the table. What the fuck do you think? It's Friday for Christ's sake. Let's shoot this friggin' shit so that I can get the hell outta here. You may not have a life, my dear, but I certainly do.'

'You have no idea how truly charming you are, Graeme,' said Mara before slamming several plates on the bench and walking

out of the room. Graeme threw back his head and laughed before following her. I stood in the middle of the stark silent room and considered whether their little show had been for my benefit.

‘Hey, I know you,’ came the voice of my dreams.

‘Arnaud? I didn’t recognise you without your soccer shorts on,’ I said, then blushed. With wild and curly black hair, and sporting a three-day growth, Arnaud was wearing a black polo neck with dark faded jeans and black work boots. He looked rather bohemian, and had a rugged sexuality about him . . . and he was young . . . younger than me, anyway. All things considered, today he looked nothing like a soccer coach. But he was definitely the man I went to bed with last night. My body shivered involuntarily at the memory.

‘Katie, great to see you. What are you doing here?’ he said in his sexy French accent.

‘Working. It’s my second day as a photography assistant on *Delicious Bites*. Just for a couple of weeks, helping out a friend.’

‘Not Graeme Grafton?’

‘No, Fern McLeod. And to tell you the truth, I have no idea what I’m supposed to be doing. Food photography is new to me. All I seem to be doing is running errands and putting out fires. There’s been no camera work so far.’

‘Ah, join the club. I write for *Action Sports*. I know how to play soccer but writing about it, in English? Well this is new for me too.’

This day was getting odder by the minute. Arnaud was working here, in this very building, as a writer and resident football pro? I hadn’t realised how privileged Angus’s team was

to have an international star coaching them. No wonder the parents took the club games so seriously.

Still, I wasn't sure if having Arnaud so close was such a good idea.



When I arrived home, I shook off my shoes and looked at the day's letters. Bills, every last one of them. Not wanting to run into the kitchen and pour myself a glass of wine in an unseemly way, I went in search of Angus. I found him playing chess with Mum, Bugs, the rabbit, draped around his neck. Rupert lounged in the corner on a cushion – an expensive cream damask cushion – and Gertrude, the cat, was swinging on the sheer chiffon curtains in search of an elusive fly. I glanced over at the fish swimming in their tank. At least they were behaving themselves.

'Mum,' I said, my tone weary, 'you know I don't like pets in the house.'

I shooed them all outside – the animals, not my mother and child – then bent over Angus and kissed the top of his head. 'How was your day, darling?'

'Good,' he replied vaguely, before taking Mum's queen with his bishop.

'More to the point, how was your day, darling?' said Mum, standing and giving me a hug. 'Was it everything you hoped?'

‘Yeah, but tiring. I’m still learning.’

‘Well, you certainly *look* glamorous.’

Glamorous? Only a mother would say it.

‘What’s for dinner?’ said Angus.

God knows! I glanced at my watch. Almost six o’clock. ‘Any sign of Lexi?’ She played netball Friday afternoons but was usually home by now.

Mum shook her head and peered back at the chess board. Poor woman. A king and three motley pawns were not going to win the game for her.

Of course, Lexi’s mobile was engaged when I tried it. I fumbled for a few minutes, texting her. *Wh>ereareu?* She’d know what I meant.

I opened a bottle of semillon and poured a couple of glasses.

‘Who feels like pizza?’ I asked, waving a takeaway menu in my hand.

‘I do,’ said Robyn, waddling through the kitchen door. ‘I’ll have one of those, too,’ she said, eyeing my wine. I shrugged and poured her half a glass. Who was I to be a pregnancy Nazi with my single, soon-to-be-a-mother sister?

As well as being ginormously pregnant, Robyn’s a tad neurotic. I guess I’d be anxious too if I was facing parenthood alone. But I’m there for her. I go to her antenatal classes, I’m her birth partner (God help us both), and I listen to her with true sisterly interest when she drones on about paint colours and lack of cupboard space for the new baby. I even take her shopping. At least, I try, but we have wildly different tastes.

Robyn’s rotund and unfortunately chooses to emphasise her girth by wearing huge flowing caftans (bell-shaped sleeves, the whole bit) in swirling tutti-frutti colours. After a few drinks,

just a glance in her direction is enough to make one heave. She says wearing the exotic creations (let's not mince words, they're muumuus) lets people, strangers mostly, know she's pregnant, not fat. I keep telling her she has a huge watermelon protruding from her stomach. No-one in their right mind would think she wasn't pregnant.

I remember when Robyn told me she was expecting. She was overwhelmed with happiness. After many false starts, she and Dan, her husband, would finally be parents. She didn't care whether it was a boy or a girl, just as long as she, Dan and the baby were healthy, happy and together.

I guess it's what most of us want. I remember feeling much the same way when I was first pregnant with Lexi. I fretted over the impact a child would have on my life but I went with the flow . . . much the same as Robyn had done in the beginning. She was happy and more grounded than I'd seen her in a long time – but then her dick of a husband got cold feet and ran off to Helsinki. To be fair to Robyn, I don't think she'd be sporting unflattering caftans if Dickless Dan was here with her now.

'Can I watch *The Simpsons*?' Angus asked, shooting off to the TV room before I could reply.

Mum's eyes were fixed on the chessboard. 'I don't know how Gus does it. My king did his best but he still ended up with no support.'

'How was your day, Robyn?' said Robyn loudly. 'Thanks for asking, family. I'll tell you: I was up painting the baby's shoebox until three o'clock this morning. Three o'clock! It's now fluorescent lime.'

'Lime! I thought you were going for canary yellow?' I said.

'Thank you, I was. But because you were so mean about it, I switched colours.'

‘To lime?’

‘I know. It’s awful.’ Robyn’s eyes welled with tears.

‘I’m sure it’s lovely,’ Mum said, getting up off the sofa and wrapping an arm around Robyn.

‘No it’s not. It’s bloody foul! A sickly apple green. All your fault, Katie.’

‘What did *I* do?’

‘Katie, why didn’t you like yellow? Robyn spent days choosing that particular shade,’ said Mum, raising a warning eyebrow at me.

‘I wasted all that time painting and now there are baby things all over the apartment.’ Robyn eased herself into an armchair. ‘I can’t breathe. The tabloids are saying Katie Holmes is pregnant – again! Another yummy mummy to compete with.’

Compete with? I almost choked on my semillon.

‘What I’m saying is that it’s hard enough being pregnant without seeing more celebrities strutting around in their third trimester wearing Jimmy Choos . . . let alone wearing bikinis two weeks after their baby’s birth.’

‘Scrummy mummies?’

‘Exactly. Why can’t there be more women like me who eat pizza and chocolate cake?’

‘Slummy mummies?’

‘Shut up,’ said Robyn, giving her stomach a rub and closing her eyes. ‘I think I’m having the baby.’

‘You’re not having the baby,’ I said.

‘How would you know? I might. At least then I wouldn’t have women in shopping centres coming up and touching my stomach. It’s freaking me out.’

‘It’s okay,’ Mum said, stroking her hair.

‘I almost lost it today,’ said Robyn.

Nothing new there. Robyn almost loses it every day.

‘I was walking through the cosmetics department and three women started attacking me, spraying me with perfume, patting my stomach. Touching me. Invading my personal space. Why can’t they leave me alone? I was so overcome with fumes and panic, I almost fainted.’

‘Poor love,’ Mum sympathised.

‘But I couldn’t faint. I had to pull myself together and head to the baby department to buy more coat-hangers. I don’t have enough baby coat-hangers.’

Robyn’s apartment is full of baby coat-hangers.

I left the conversation for a moment to read a note that had been pushed under our front door by our insane neighbours, Margaret and Peter. They have tree issues. More specifically, they have hedge-height issues. Apparently, our conifer hedge is growing too tall and blocking their ‘right to light’.

I read in a magazine recently that the top five things that aggravate neighbours – in no particular order – are:

1. Pet noise and pets fouling neighbours’ gardens;
2. Noisy, late-night parties;
3. Boundary disputes;
4. Garden trespass;
5. High hedges.

Yes, high hedges.

The note requested an urgent (urgent) meeting (meeting followed by several exclamation marks; four, to be precise) to resolve the aforementioned hedge concerns.

I crumpled up this latest communiqué and chucked it towards the bin. Maybe we could have a meeting about their festering work shed, decrepit clothesline and the growing pile of bricks in

the middle of the junk depot they call a backyard – an eyesore if ever there was one.

The whole reason why we let the conifers grow untrimmed is so we wouldn't have to look at them or hear them and their two yappy rat dogs, Muffy and Midget. Highland terriers, they fling themselves at our fence whenever we step outside. Woof, woof, scurry, scurry, thud – over and over again. It was funny at first. But now? Plain tiresome.

'How are *you*, Mum?' I asked, hoping she'd forgotten about running into Dad earlier in the week.

'Your dad and I had a lovely time last night. There was champagne, music. Just like old times.'

'Last night? You went out with him? What old times precisely? I don't remember them.'

'I thought I'd be a lot more nervous but it felt so right. So easy.'

'Okay. You're scaring me now.' What was she thinking, having dinner with him? Was she a masochist, setting herself up for further pain and heartbreak? What was Dad playing at, anyway? We hadn't heard from him in years and suddenly he's hanging around, taking Mum out to dinner?

'Robyn!' I said, glancing at her. 'What do you have to say about this?'

'Yeah, I missed him for a long time . . .'

I shook my head.

'What? He's my dad. Then I got used to him not being around anymore. That's what men do. They impregnate you, then run off and leave as soon as the going gets tough.' She patted her stomach. 'Sometimes even before. At least Dad hung around till I was thirteen. Dan's not even going to be in the same country for the birth of his baby.'

As if Robyn would agree with me. Too busy thinking about herself. Every conversation always had to come back to her. She couldn't help it.

'Dad suggested the family get together for dinner tomorrow night,' said Mum, after taking a large sip of wine.

'Excuse me? What family exactly?' I asked.

'Don't be like that, please. We can eat at my house – Robbie, you, Matthew, Angus and Lexi . . .'

'Are you mad? I don't think so. Not in this lifetime. Tubby, get up and make yourself useful,' I said, flicking a tea towel in Robyn's direction. I'd given up the idea of ordering pizza in; I needed something to occupy my hands so I didn't drink too much and strangle someone.

Robyn glared at me but heaved herself out of the lounge chair.

From the fridge I took out assorted meats, tomatoes, capers and olives and handed a block of cheddar to Robyn. 'Grate this.'

As kids, Robyn and I would spend whole Sundays in the kitchen making coconut ice, rocky road . . . always sweet and sugary treats . . . leaving messy trails of flour, coconut and sugar on the floor. The afternoons usually ended in tears for one of us but it was still fun. Warm and comforting.

'You're going to have to meet Dad sooner or later,' said Mum, as she chopped tomatoes. 'He's very keen to see you both.'

Robyn shrugged her shoulders. 'I'm not doing anything with my life. I'll go out to dinner as long as it's seafood and he pays. Woolloomooloo Wharf would be good. I might even see Rusty chowing down. Russell Crowe lives there, you know.'

'We'll see,' Mum said, not entirely dismissing her.

I noticed a text message from Lexi: *c u soon*. That was it. It didn't tell me much except that she was alive.

Not so long ago, Lex was playing with Barbies and making up funny rhyming songs in front of her bedroom mirror. Now she was colouring her hair, wearing too much makeup and completely shutting me out of her Facebook world. Tattoos and belly rings couldn't be far off.

'*The Simpsons* is almost finished. What are we having for dinner? When's Dad coming home?'

'Dad's gone to the football, remember? Why don't you play the Wii for half an hour and then dinner will be ready. How about Wii Fitness?'

Angus sidled up and hugged me. 'DS?'

He was banned from it a week ago for two weeks, but . . . I reached up on top of the fridge for the Nintendo and handed it to him. He couldn't believe his luck.

'Cool. Love you, Mum.' And then he vanished.

'I wish you'd change your mind, Kate,' Mum said.

'Dad abandoned us . . . destroyed our lives.'

'You're exaggerating.'

'He left us twenty years ago and you want to welcome him back with open arms?'

'Water under the bridge,' said Mum matter-of-factly, as if it was as simple as a spilt cup of tea that could be mopped up and forgotten. 'Life goes on.'

'Yes, but not with him. Why his sudden interest in you, anyway?'

'You can ask him yourself at dinner.'

'I'd rather drink mud. You tell me. What happened to Lovely Legs?'

'Wasn't so lovely it turns out. They divorced –'

'Surprise. Surprise.'

‘A few years ago. Dad moved back to Australia and has been living in Melbourne until recently.’

‘Don’t tell me – now he’s back in Sydney?’

Mum nodded. ‘So we went out to dinner, then returned to my home for a nightcap. The attention was very flattering, I must say.’

‘Mum, don’t!’

‘Why shouldn’t I? It was like old times. He was sweet . . .’

‘What do you mean, old times?’

‘Don’t be such a prude. Most men my age aren’t looking my way. They’re looking at women twenty years younger.’

‘Perverts,’ Robyn chimed in.

‘I don’t want to see you get hurt again,’ I said.

‘I know you don’t, but I’m a big girl. I can look after myself. It’s not as if I’m going to do anything silly. We were catching up, that’s all.’

Catching up? Was Mum completely missing the point? The point being that Dad walked out on her without so much as a backward glance. But Mum was blind to it. Locked in a fantasy world. God knows, I wasn’t opposed to a spot of escapism now and then. Arnaud flashed before my eyes. I shook my head. Now wasn’t the time.

I truly believe that Mum’s fantasies and dreams are what kept her going after the divorce and through the dark months and years after Dad left. At the time of the divorce, she kept saying that she wouldn’t cope and couldn’t live through the trauma. But she did. It was Mum’s hopes for a brighter future and her inner strength that kept her going. She survived and thrived. Why did she want to go and ruin it all now?



Outside, the early morning crows squawked. Beside me, Matthew's heavy breathing was regular and steady. Apart from that? Silence. It was six forty-five on Saturday morning and I was savouring snuggling under the doona before attending to the daily routine.

A hundred years ago, before Lexi and Angus were born, Matthew and I could stay in bed all weekend, making love, reading the papers and drinking champagne. Okay, it didn't happen often, but when it did, it was amazing.

Banishing erotic Arnaud daydreams from my mind, I rolled over and wrapped my arms around Matthew's stomach, then decided a back massage might be a more direct way to gain his attention. He rolled over to face me and wrapped his arms around me. I thought about suggesting I blindfold him or tie him up with scarves like I used to do in the old days. When Matthew and I first started dating, I owned an amazing Celtic wrought-iron bed. That bed was now languishing in our garage, covered in a mountain of grime and dust, but I couldn't bring

myself to part with it. Just the thought of Matt being tied up in that bed excited me.

‘I’ve missed this,’ he murmured, then kissed me. I could feel him pressing into my thigh as his kissing became more urgent.

‘Me too,’ I whispered when we took a break. All right. We might get to see some action after all. But Matthew had barely put his hand on my right breast before I heard Angus, stomping down the corridor to our room.

‘Mum,’ he yelled. ‘Where are my soccer boots?’

It was time to get up. ‘Don’t go,’ Matthew said as he rolled over. ‘Stay with me, pretend you didn’t hear him.’

It was very tempting.

‘Mum, are you *ever* getting out of bed?’ This time, the cry from just outside our door was more insistent.

Maybe we could borrow Angus’s handcuffs tonight, and take up from where we left off, I thought as I slipped out of our queen-sized ensemble. It’d be a challenge tying Matt to the Sealy Posturepedic.

‘You’re a good mother,’ Matthew muttered. That would be the hangover talking and his not-so-subtle way of asking if I could take Angus to his soccer game this morning.

Matthew knows this about me: I’m a control freak – most of the time, except after a couple of glasses of wine. He also knows I hate vanilla ice-cream. In fact, I hate all ice-cream. On my ninth birthday, soon after consuming an enormous tub of it, I vomited all over myself. Onset of German measles. Since then, no ice-cream. Even walking past it in the freezer section of Coles can induce waves of nausea. Matthew thinks I’m weird but I don’t care.

Matthew also knows I hate injections. Just the thought of having a needle stuck in me is enough to make me faint.

But there are a few things Matthew doesn't know about me. For instance:

1. I miss my daughter. I mean I *really* miss her, miss the love she felt for me when she was a little girl and idolised me and my clothing choices. I'd love to watch teen movies like *Mean Girls* and *Twilight* with her, but she won't. She pretends not to like them at all; that she's way too cool for me and silly teenage flicks. So I watch them by myself.
2. I would love to try Botox. I hate my frown lines. One day, I'll be brave enough to have the injections – when I can stand the pain of having twenty needles prick the skin of my forehead.
3. When I'm mopping, gardening or showering I often have intense erotic fantasies about men – men who aren't my husband. Sometimes they're guys I know, like Arnaud. Other times, they're faceless, nameless strangers with incredible physiques who take me back to their hotel rooms for long hot nights of wild, no-strings-attached sex. And then I feel sad and trapped. And guilty – because I should be happy. I have an adequate life. I have a husband, two healthy, almost well-adjusted children and a menagerie of pets. It should be enough.
4. When I cheer for Angus at soccer, I secretly hope that he'll score the winning goal. I secretly hope he'll score all the goals.

I left Matthew to sleep in and, on auto-pilot, swept through the household chores. I threw Coco Pops at Angus (what would the perfect school mums say about that?), biscuits to the pets, put on a load of washing, took the clean clothes out of the dryer, unloaded the dishwasher and swept the floors, all while Angus

followed me around, telling me to hurry up because we were going to be late for soccer. (And I found his boots. They were in the laundry cupboard where I'd put them two days ago after soccer training.)

'About tonight,' Mum started when I answered my mobile in the car.

'Not a chance.'

'Your dad really wants to see you, Katie.'

'He can have a viewing at my funeral,' I said and snapped the phone shut as I parked at the Dragons home ground.

It was freezing. White mist covered the field. (Why hadn't I brought my camera? The light was perfect.) I should have worn my overcoat. It wasn't as if I was ignorant. I knew the drill. After all, I'd taken Angus to most of his games last year. And, let me say, it's a very long soccer season. This year, I swore it would be different – that Matthew would put in an appearance at least fifty percent of the time. It's not so much that I dislike the game; I mean, there is Arnaud to ogle. Certainly, watching Angus's soccer game is no longer a hardship for me. It's just that some of the parents get caught up in the win-at-all-costs frenzy. The soccer mafioso.

Yes, I want Angus to play well and kick *all* of his team's goals and win (goes without saying), but sometimes it's excruciating – the frivolous chatter with other parents, the heckling and the booing. *Tackle him! Get him! Kill him!*

At an under-nines game last year, a mother from Angus's school (normally a sane, level-headed woman, I've been told) ran onto the field screaming abuse at the ref. She ended up chasing him into the car park with her umbrella. Needless to say, she didn't show her face at tuckshop for several weeks after *that* incident.

When I saw Arnaud, I briefly wondered what it would be like to wake up to his French face in the morning, his dark hair, tanned skin, wide green eyes . . . Then I shook myself and walked over to him. Fantasies aside, my natural instinct was to dump Angus and take off, but seeing Arnaud with eleven swarming boys, soccer shirts in one arm, juggling balls, oranges and a mountain of papers in the other hand, I stayed.

‘Give me those,’ I said, taking the oranges from him and regretting my ill-fitting hipster jeans and threadbare blue sweater. Meanwhile, Angus and the other boys chased a soccer ball around the misty field. How these kids could run around in skimpy shorts, get knocked down, eat a mouthful of dirt, get up smiling and do it all again, staggered me.

‘How is the *Delicious Bites* girl today?’

I blushed.

‘Here we go.’ Arnaud leaned in and nudged me. Mardi, mother of Benjamin, was marching towards us.

‘Arnaud, I’m not happy.’ Mardi was, in fact, scowling.

‘Mardi,’ Arnaud said in a big bright voice. ‘You know Katie?’

‘We’re old friends,’ I said quickly. Yes, I knew Mardi, the milestone monitor, well. Whether it was about soccer, reading groups, maths groups or class groups in general, Mardi had an opinion. A loud one. I remember one time last year when a few of us were discussing our children’s lack of reading progress, she proudly announced that brilliant Benjamin had been reading the *Australian* since he was four.

‘No offence, but Benjamin shouldn’t be playing in your team,’ Mardi said, clearly meaning to offend. ‘He played for the As last year and I assumed he would automatically be put in the same team again this year.’ Arnaud coaches the B team.

Oui, but I have no control over the teams. They were chosen according to how the boys performed on grading day.'

'That's not fair. In netball, once you're put in a team, you stay there.'

'Hang on,' I said. 'This isn't netball. Soccer grading is supposed to be fair and the teams fluid.'

'But Benjamin had a cold, he wasn't kicking his best. He should be in the As.' She huffed some more. 'It's embarrassing. I won't have him playing in your team.' Meanwhile, Ben was running around and laughing with Gus and the others. He didn't look the slightest bit embarrassed. 'If he's not moved up, I'll take him to another club.'

'You need to talk to him, the one wearing the red jumper,' Arnaud said, pointing to a small gesticulating man surrounded by several irate parents, all posturing and puffing themselves up, no doubt demanding to know why their sons had not been selected for the A team. Meanwhile, the A team parents were looking mightily pleased with themselves as they smiled into their morning lattes.

'The Bs,' Mardi sighed. 'Playing with the likes of Billy with the wandering eye and Marcus with the learning disorder.'

'Pardon?' I said.

Mardi rolled her eyes. 'You can tell when a child's not up to speed. Have you met his father? And his mother? Don't get me started. She should have been playing Mozart while Marcus was in the womb. Instead, she was probably gobbling white bread and drinking cask wine by the litre.' I hated to think what Mardi said about me when I wasn't around.

'Have you thought about offering Red Jumper a gift?' I said.

‘Ha. Don’t think I haven’t considered it. I’m sure that’s how half of them got in the top team. It certainly wasn’t through talent, that’s for sure.’

I stood and watched as the game began. Lots of little legs running in a pack after a ball. *Chase the ball, you’ve got to want it! Well in. Attack! Tom, what the hell are you doing, you big girl?*

‘It’s humiliating,’ said Mardi again at half-time after her brief and fruitless conversation with the under-nines administrator. Evidently, she was talking about her personal humiliation. Perhaps Mardi thought that playing in the Bs would jeopardise her son’s chances of getting into one of the several private boys schools in the area, or that it diminished her social standing in the community.

To be fair to Mardi, Benjamin did stand out. He scored the team’s first and only goal and blocked the opposition from scoring countless times.

‘Benjamin can finish this game but we’ll have to see about next week’s. I’m not going to let the matter rest.’ Mardi watched enviously as on an adjacent field Ben’s mates from the A team triumphantly kicked two successive goals, then ran around in circles, shirts off, squealing and high-fiving each other.

At the end of the game, I caught up with Arnaud again.

‘We should get together for a drink so I can fill you in on the office gossip,’ he said.

A drink? Yes please. ‘Sure, that’d be great.’ Harmless flirting, I told myself. Harmless.

I hummed all the way home, not even the parched landscape keeping the smile from my face. The once-leafy vistas were now little more than shrivelled and dying trees. Brown and desolate. But the humming stopped when I arrived home and fell straight

into a crisis meeting with Matthew and the neighbours who were standing in our backyard.

Matthew appeared dazed, silently appealing for help. I could have pretended I didn't see him with Margaret and Peter and snuck up the stairs. Actually, what I really wanted to do was give him the forks and tell him, 'That's what you get for not going to your son's soccer game – where they were soundly beaten, incidentally, four goals to one.' But this was my life, I had to get used to it – a flaccid suburban existence. A life that involved squabbling with neighbours over petty plant issues.

I remember once, a long time ago, being a hip inner-city dweller living on the edge. Well, perhaps not on the edge exactly, but I had better things to do with my time than bicker with the neighbours.

'You see, it's the roots, Kate,' Margaret wailed as I approached them. 'Your hedges are encroaching on to our property and I think you'll agree our back garden is suffering from lack of sunlight.'

'It's winter, Margaret,' I said as we all peered over the fence and inspected the conifers from her perspective. 'In summer, sun streams into your yard.'

'We may need to consult an arborculturist,' she continued, ignoring my comment. 'I've checked. With roots, anything that extends into a neighbour's garden is considered trespass.'

'Not that we are saying that you and Matthew are trespassing, Kate,' Peter said.

No, of course not.

'But if falling branches waving around in the wind cause damage to our property, it could be considered negligence for which you might be liable.' Margaret's smile was saccharine.

Despite his hangover, and under the watchful eye of Margaret and her stream of instructions – *Careful of my zinnias. Watch out for Muffy.* – Matthew, defeated, dutifully began trimming the hedges.

‘Mum, I’ve got nothing to wear,’ Lexi shouted to me from the back door.

‘Coming.’ I was glad for an opportunity to escape, even if it was to sort out Lexi’s latest emergency.

I followed her up the stairs to her room. It was a mess. Clothes littered the floor, her bed, in fact every square inch of her room.

‘Goodness, Lex, what are you doing?’

‘Throwing everything out.’

‘I can see that. Your clothes are everywhere.’

‘I’ve only got two wearable outfits and the rest are so gay only a ten-year-old would wear them.’

I watched as she took a pair of scissors to her favourite black T-shirt. ‘If I just rip the sleeves off, then cut the bottom to make it a midriff singlet, maybe I can get away with it.’

‘Hey! Stop tearing your clothes to pieces.’

‘I told you. I’ve got nothing to wear. Everything sucks.’

‘So you’re hacking the clothes you do have?’

‘You don’t understand,’ Lexi said after she finished cutting her new singlet in half. A singlet that would barely fit a five-year-old.

‘Try me. I’m surprised you can find anything in this mess.’ I thought girls were supposed to be neat and tidy, not feral piglets happy to wallow in squalor. ‘Anyway, why do you need something to wear? Where are you going?’

‘To the movies with Jazz and Izzie. You promised.’

‘That was well before the hair incident, Lexi. Which movie?’

‘*Zack and Miri Make a Porno.*’

I turned to walk out. It seemed like every conversation Lexi and I had, Lexi pushed my buttons, trying to pick fights. In the space of a couple of months, we’d gone from being best friends to strangers who shared a kitchen and, occasionally, a television. It was a horrible way to live.

‘Joking! We’re going to see *Fame.*’

‘It’s not funny, Lexi.’ I started picking clothes up off the carpet. ‘What about this?’ I said over and over as I held up dresses, skirts, jeans and shirts for Lexi’s inspection. And each suggestion? Dismissed with an eye roll and insolent head shake.

‘You’re kidding me, right?’ she said at least half a dozen times.

It was ridiculous but I’d heard Lexi and her friends talk. Clothes (and boys) were inexhaustible topics of conversation – picking on the kids who didn’t cut it, the girls who wore no-name, Best & Less brands and friends who wore the same outfit more than once.

‘It’s not that bad,’ I said.

‘It is. You don’t get it. If I get caught wearing the same top twice, it’ll be social suicide. The cyber bullying that goes on . . .’

‘For goodness’ sake.’ I couldn’t get my head around the notion that bullies had moved from the playground to online chat rooms and beyond. I vaguely recall reading a letter from Lexi’s school, advising us to collect our children’s mobiles before they went to bed and to monitor their computer usage. I’d also overheard snippets of teenage conversation suggesting they rated ugly clothes and their wearers on MySpace, but I didn’t want to believe that thirteen-year-old girls could be involved.

‘Mum! You don’t understand. Besides, you’re not the one wearing it.’

I briefly remembered my own angst regarding a flouncy pink gingham peasant skirt and frilled halter-neck top. I must have been about fifteen at the time. Mum thought the combo was the prettiest thing this side of Kansas. It was hideous. I shuddered at the memory.

Out in the hallway cupboard I removed a brown paper carry bag from the top shelf. ‘I was saving this,’ I said over my shoulder. I walked back into Lexi’s room and handed her the bag. On a generous whim a few weeks back, I’d bought a jacket on sale to give to her on a special occasion. I guessed this was special enough.

‘Mum,’ she squealed and looked inside to find a black cropped leather jacket. ‘Thanks heaps.’

Bribery. I had nothing left but bribery. Best not to dwell on the fact that I was buying my daughter’s affection.

Lexi settled on wearing a pair of low-rider jeans – slightly too tight – and her new jacket worn over the mutilated black singlet which exposed her flat winter-tanned midriff. She completed the outfit with oversized blue sunglasses.

‘Now then, do you think you could stop using so much makeup? You wear more mascara and eyeliner than I do. You have beautiful eyes. You don’t need that black gunk covering them.’

‘Mum, I wasn’t asking for your opinion.’

‘Lexi . . .’

She hugged me, possibly because she knew I was close to exploding. ‘Come on, Mum, you’ve got to admit, you’re too old to know. But if you really want me to, I’ll take some off.’

I knew Lexi was desperate to grow up and, in my calmer moments, I sympathised. She wasn't a bad kid, if you ignored the defiant hair colour, but she was maturing much faster than I could cope with. Thirteen going on twenty-three.

As I drove Lexi and her friends to the movies, I was pleased I'd remained firm on not allowing her to buy a push-up bra like the one her friend Izzie was wearing under her white crop top. Lexi's other two friends resembled adolescent racoons – all black eyeliner and heavy mascara. Their conversations – littered with words like 'Hunter', 'sucks', 'random' and 'totally hot' – were worrying, mostly because I couldn't get a clear fix on what they were talking about. The radio was too loud. But I had an uneasy feeling. I needed to pay more attention to what my daughter was doing in her spare time.

'She. Is. So. Gay. Who wears *that* anymore?' This coming from a girl who was wearing a pink sequined boob tube over a singlet in the middle of winter, a denim mini skirt and knee-high platform boots.

'I so know what you're saying, Jazz. She's such a freak.'

'Like, pure psycho skank. Whatever! Sewing sequins on her no-name jeans. Can you believe it? And she slashed her no-name T-shirt as well, as if we couldn't tell.'

I glanced over at Lexi. Her own T-shirt was nowhere to be seen. She had zipped up her jacket.



‘I wish you’d change your mind,’ Mum said to me later as we walked around the garden enjoying the late-afternoon sun. She was trying unsuccessfully to convince me to have dinner with Dad. Either that or she was trying to offload Robyn onto me. She wasn’t having much luck with either plan.

It was unusually quiet. Izzie’s mum was dropping Lexi home later – a big tick for car pooling. Matthew was inside, working on his laptop, exhausted from a football-induced hangover and excessive hedge trimming. Though in all probability, he was doing it to avoid Robyn. And Angus was lying on the outdoor day bed, playing his DS and muttering, surrounded by Rupert, Gertrude and Bugs. His little empire. Sure, he should have been practising the piano or building his science project (the water cycle in 3D?!). But he was happy and wasn’t asking for food. And I knew if I said anything to disturb him, the food issue would rear its ravenous head within seconds.

Besides discovering kids may want pets but will accept no responsibility beyond rolling around on the floor with them,

during my seven months' experience as the mother of an eight-year-old boy, I have learned:

1. It's all about food – and Roll-Ups are a sound nutritional meal;
2. When it's not about food, it's about the Nintendo DS, PSP, PS2 or the Wii (but life is definitely not worth living without a DS);
3. Life's about fun – and getting filthy – and refusing to bathe or shower;
4. Homework? What's homework?

'Lexi's pulling away from me, she's not my little girl anymore,' I said to Mum. 'She's more interested in hanging out with her friends. I don't think she's telling me everything that's going on in her life.'

Robyn snorted. 'Of course she's not telling you! She's a teenager.'

'Just a teenager. She's not sixteen.'

'She looks it.'

I felt helpless. Even when I got the chance to eavesdrop, I couldn't understand most of Lexi's conversations. The other day when Lexi walked away from the computer long enough for me to snoop at her MSN page, I was dumbfounded. It was all smiley icons and incomprehensible abbreviations. Whether it was talking or texting, Lexi and her friends had their own vernacular. Add in Twittering – or was the verb 'tweeting'? – and uploading photos to Facebook and MySpace, and it seemed Lexi was in constant contact with her friends.

'I remember not so long ago when Lexi always wanted to be with me, shop with me, hug me –'

'How many years are you going back?' Robyn interrupted.

‘She did. She was hugging and cuddling me up until . . .’
I dead-headed a gardenia.

‘She discovered boys?’

‘I guess. Now she wants to do things on her own or with her friends. She has secrets. I’m a know-nothing nuisance, a source of aggravation. Her posters of cute kittens have disappeared from the wall and been replaced by Pink and the cast from *Home and Away*. Not to mention Zac Efron and other grown men in suggestive poses.’

‘It’s like that modern-day philosopher sang,’ Robyn said. ‘I’m Not A Girl, Not Yet A Woman.’

‘Who was that?’

‘Britney Spears.’

‘God help us.’ I looked around. The garden was dry, very dry. There had been no rain for months. No grass to speak of. Most of the leaves had fallen from the trees. The only plants still thriving were the conifers. It seemed cruel to slash them. I looked over at the mountain of cut branches piled against the fence.

‘Welcome to my world,’ Mum said. ‘I know what it’s like to be considered an irritation. I was in the supermarket checkout line this morning and the cashier, who was all of fifteen, asked through her bubble gum if I was carrying my senior citizen’s discount card! The whole store heard. I was mortified. I said, “Certainly not!” She assumed I was sixty-five. *Me!* And then she snapped a bubble under my nose.

‘As if it’s not humiliating enough going to the supermarket these days. There are cereals pitched exclusively at women like me who are over a certain age. The cereal makers have decided that Weet-Bix isn’t good enough for me anymore. It’s outrageous. I know what I need, thank you very much, and it’s definitely not a lecture from a cereal company or a pimply youth.’

‘God, Mum, do you ever think about me and what I’m going through?’ said Robyn.

‘All the time, darling,’ Mum replied.

‘More than is healthy,’ I added.

‘It’s all right for you, Katie. You have the perfect home, the perfect husband, and two great kids. I’ve got no-one. I’m pregnant and about to give birth. A fat little butterball . . .’

‘I’d hardly call you little,’ I said, quickly ducking out of the way before Mum could whack me on the arm.

‘I did *have* a husband but *he* walked out on me. Remember? Never mind the fact that we’d been trying to get pregnant for five years! Then, when miracle of miracles I do conceive, he ups and leaves because he can’t handle the responsibility.’ Robyn wiped her eyes. ‘I just don’t get it.’

Robyn’s always been high maintenance, but to be fair, she hasn’t always been frantic and tortured. It’s really only been since she got pregnant. And in her early stages, she was elated. Overjoyed that she and Dan were finally going to have a baby of their own.

Then, two months ago, while Robyn was teaching her year eleven class the finer points of macro-economics, Dan sent her a text: *Sorry, I’m leaving*. Robyn thought he was talking about leaving work or the supermarket. But by the time she arrived home, Dan had cleared out. Taken his clothes, his CDs and manoeuvred his Jason recliner rocker down three flights of stairs.

It was only after Dan left that Robyn went off the rails. Up until then, she’d been normal. Normalish, anyway.

‘He’ll be back. He just needs a holiday,’ Robyn said.

Mum and I glanced at each other.

‘What? He will be. I’m sure of it.’

I got to thinking how lucky I was to have Matthew. He might be a tad annoying on Saturdays with his football hangovers after a night out with mates, but I could live with that. Everyone's entitled to a bit of downtime with friends. And at least he's stuck it out with me, even if he's not here physically much of the time.

When I was pregnant with Lexi, Matthew showered me with love and attention. He looked after me the way the romance novels told me he would. Foot massages, back rubs – Matthew indulged me and gazed at me adoringly, as if I was the prettiest girl he'd ever laid eyes on. When I was pregnant with Angus, he was still attentive – but not so keen on the foot rubs . . .

I was feeling all sweet and lightness when I walked into the kitchen on Sunday morning, mainly because Matthew and the kids had let me have a sleep-in. They were laughing. It was great to see everyone happy and smiling.

'What's the joke?' I asked.

'Nothing,' Matthew replied. 'Lexi and I are just remembering the mix-up with the Americans the other night.'

'I worked very hard to make that evening a success, and Lexi's theatrics didn't help the situation,' I said, feeling my good mood evaporate. 'Yet I'm the person who ruined the dinner party!'

'I didn't say that,' said Matthew. 'You always work hard to manage tough situations and you always pull through. You must admit, though, you are a bit of a control freak.' Matthew winked at Lexi and Lexi nodded her head in agreement.

'I hate it when you call me that, Matthew.' Even though it was true. 'And anyway, why am I a freak to want to be in control of my life?'

The more they giggled, the more I fumed.

I didn't make a fuss though. My family didn't need more fodder upon which to graze. Instead, I made myself a strong cup of Earl Grey and retreated to my darkroom, determined to let the incident wash over me.

Besides, it was only a few days till my birthday. I didn't want to argue with Matthew. In fact, I wanted to rekindle some semblance of romance with him before then, with or without handcuffs, because if he hadn't yet bought me a present, I wanted to make sure he was in a generous mood when the time came.

I limped through the day without any more blow-ups (mostly because I hid in the darkroom) and late Sunday night, after the kids had gone to bed, I whipped on my sheer black negligee and gave myself a once-over in the bathroom mirror. Passable, passable.

'Matt,' I purred, when he finally closed the Sunday papers. 'Let's go to bed.'

He looked at me, then hesitated a split second before saying, 'Sounds like a plan, but I just have to pack first.'

We were walking upstairs towards our bedroom. 'Pack?'

'Didn't I tell you? I'm going to Melbourne for the week.'

'Ah, no you didn't,' I said, any desire quickly draining from my blood. 'But the kids? My work? How will I manage?'

'Your mum will help,' he said, kissing me on the forehead and opening the cupboard door. 'Have you seen my new brown pants? They're here somewhere.'

'There,' I said, pointing to the brown trousers directly in front of him.

'I know you're disappointed. I promise to take you out for your birthday when I get back.'

My birthday. Reality dawned. 'So you're away for my birthday?'

‘All week, hon. I’m sorry. I thought I told you.’

No you didn’t. But no point arguing about it now. Since Angus was born, I’d been happy to be at home with the kids, supporting Matthew while he went out to work. Travel was part of the deal. He was used to me having nothing more to do than manage the household. It had only been in the last couple of years that I’d felt stifled, bored. Hence the reason why I jumped at the opportunity to prove myself again, professionally.

But Matthew’s mind wasn’t focused on my new job. His own work hassles occupied his brain space. Still, if I was ever to return to regular work, we’d need to renegotiate the whole parenting pact.

‘I’ll just have takeaway with the kids, I guess,’ I said, after I’d changed out of my cold negligee into comfy flannel pyjamas, and slipped into bed. Matthew didn’t answer. He was asleep before I turned out the light.



It wasn't until I heard tapping at my bedroom window on Monday morning that I remembered Diane. It was five fifteen and freezing cold.

'What kept you?' she asked when I finally emerged from the house.

'Shut up and walk.' I hated walking but I did it, though not with great enthusiasm. Perhaps because, despite getting up when it was still pitch black and walking briskly for sixty minutes, the exercise wasn't having the desired effect. My butt was huge. I could barely look at myself in the mirror.

'Come on, Katie, it's all about fitness; the weight will fall off, trust me,' Diane said as we pounded the pavement and nodded to other idiotic early morning walkers and joggers.

'Ha! This coming from you, a svelte size ten,' I moaned. 'It's so depressing.'

But Di kept me motivated – to a point. She was a very fast walker and intimate with all the hills in the neighbourhood. Just when I'd get used to a new one she'd say, 'Guess what?', positively

delighted with herself. 'I found a more interesting route. If we just turn up here . . .' And sure enough there would be another Mount Everest staring at me.

'It's either this or swimming,' Di threatened when I shied away from yet another mountain.

'No way. Last time I swam laps, people grabbed at my feet because I was going too slow.'

'Pool rage. It's getting worse.'

'Bloody lap Nazis. People passing me with swimming paddles . . .'

'Exactly,' Diane said, dragging me forward. 'So keep walking. It's only a slight hill for God's sake. Distract yourself by telling me about Arnaud.'

Diane snapped her fingers in front of my face. 'Hel-lo!'

'Yes, sorry. You could have knocked me over when I ran into him at the magazine,' I said, suddenly finding a spring in my step.

'That could be dangerous.'

'But he's gorgeous – Ar-naud. I've always loved the name Arnaud.'

'Since when? Besides, Arnie's a pet's name, suitable only for dogs and muscle-men actors parading as politicians.'

'Get out. Di, he's driving me crazy.'

'You're already crazy.'

'A good crazy? Anyway, it's only harmless flirting. Although he did invite me out for a drink.'

'For God's sake, don't have drinks with him. I don't need to remind you what happened to me when I embarked on an office affair. Disaster. An absolute disaster right from the word go.'

'What are you talking about? You married Brent.'

‘Yes, but I was married to Paul before Brent came along, if you remember. And really, I don’t think Nina’ (Nina, being Di’s fifteen-year-old daughter) ‘is handling the situation well at all. She fights with Brent all the time. He’s strict, but lets Sam’ (Brent’s sixteen-year-old son) ‘come and go as he pleases. I keep telling Brent and Nina to back off from each other. They’re like two rabid dogs at each other’s throats.’

‘Okay, you’ve convinced me.’

‘Good. Besides, you only want Arnaud because he’s French and handsome.’

‘You’re supposed to be convincing me an affair’s wrong, right?’

‘Let me tell you, real life is no *Brady Bunch*. I’m not keen on the whole stepmum thing either. But at least Nina and Sam get on well. I like Sam. He’s a good influence on her.’

‘Great, can you send him over to Lexi at some stage?’ This ignited a twenty-minute conversation about teenagers, breaking a promise I’d made to myself that I wouldn’t moan to Diane about Lexi, her hair or Hunter.

After venting all my frustrations on my walk, I arrived home with leg cramps but feeling surprisingly unburdened. I definitely needed to keep a closer eye on Lexi. Oh, and I had promised Di I would give up on my Arnaud fantasy.

I was determined to have a good day. That was until Lexi locked herself in the bathroom and refused to come out.

She’d been normal at breakfast. Sullen. Rude. Then, when I was dressed and ready to leave the house, she wouldn’t come out of the bathroom. She’d been in there for over half an hour. Lexi was going to be late for school and I was already running late for the magazine.

'Is everything okay?' I asked, thinking she might be attempting to recolour her hair.

'Go away.'

I took that as a no.

In the meantime, Matthew's taxi arrived, he kissed me on my forehead and left with a 'Have a great week. I'll call.'

'Dear Lord, no,' I screeched minutes later when I walked past Lexi's bedroom. 'What possessed you?'

'The devil, Mum. The devil.'

'It's that Hunter boy.'

'No, it's not that Hunter boy. I couldn't get the black out, so it was way easier just to cut off all my hair. It'll grow back.'

Lexi had cut all her hair off. And I'm not talking pixie chic, à la Victoria Beckham. It looked horrible. Worse than horrible. It was ugly.

'Grow back? Ha!' I shouted in Graeme Grafton's surprised face as we went through the set-up sheets together.

'Pardon?'

'Sorry, Graeme, I was thinking about something else.'

'Could have fooled me.'

I was sure Graeme assumed I got the job because Fern couldn't find anyone else, which is probably true. No time to interview and hire someone more qualified and suited to the job.

'Mara wants this revolting chicken breast shot,' he bellowed for the benefit of Mara, who was on the other side of the studio.

I looked at the chicken on the white plate. Even though it was cooked, it was a bland, pale cream colour.

'Maybe we could photograph it on a blue plate,' I suggested. 'To add colour.'

‘Blue?’ Graeme looked at me benevolently, smiled and shook his head. ‘Kate, I don’t know how much food experience you have, but here at *Delicious Bites* we only use white plates for photo shoots. Colour comes from the napkins and the food. But the plates, my dear, are always white.’

‘What about that blue plate right there by your shoulder?’ I asked. I shouldn’t have.

Without a word, Graeme picked up the blue plate and hurled it across the room. It shattered on the floor just millimetres from where Mara was standing.

‘We only use white plates. It’s our signature. White. Plates. White. Background.’

Stepping away from the broken crockery, Mara looked across at us before going back to her mixing bowl. Not a word.

‘Yes, of course,’ I said. ‘Baby rocket leaves, maybe?’ Graeme looked as if he might punch me at any moment. Photographing food was hell. Who could take a good shot of capsicum? Turnips? Chicken breasts?

Graeme said nothing, his eyes clearly focused on Mara, who was silently preparing several desserts. ‘Mara,’ he shouted. ‘My notes say chicken – nothing else. I’m not shooting a lump of dead fowl by itself.’ He looked directly at me and then at my vibrating phone on the table. ‘Either answer that thing or turn it off.’

‘Sorry,’ I whispered and picked up the phone.

‘How could you let her do this?’ Matthew was shouting down the line.

‘Do what?’

‘Her goddamn hair. She’s practically bald, Kate.’

‘Aren’t you supposed to be on a flight to Melbourne?’

‘I forgot my briefcase. What’s Lexi doing at home at eleven o’clock on a Monday morning anyway?’

‘I don’t know. I dropped her at school hours ago.’ I really needed to invest in one of those bracelet tracking devices with GPS technology – one that could be securely welded to her wrist.

‘How could you let her do it? Lexi said you thought it was a good idea.’

‘To cut her hair off? Yeah. Just like I gave her permission to punch three holes in each ear.’ Graeme looked up from his schedule and shook his head. ‘Can I call you back? I’m in a meeting. There is nothing I can do about it now. Lexi cut her hair. It’s hideous. We just have to wait for it to grow back.’ That is, of course, if she wants her hair to grow back.

I clicked my phone off.

Back to the chicken.

‘Graeme, you should have told me you were ready to unleash your brilliance,’ said Mara with ease. She picked up cooked spinach fettuccine strands with kitchen tongs and began lowering them on to a white plate she was spinning with her spare hand. ‘There now.’ Mara smiled at the neat nest-like structure sitting perfectly beside the chicken. Graeme tapped his fingers silently on the table and watched.

‘Now for the basil leaves and cherry tomatoes,’ Mara said, expertly retrieving the ingredients from an adjacent bowl. ‘A drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil, and we’re ready to fly.’

‘What is this before me?’ Graeme screamed. He had moved to the table where cutlery had been laid out for the photograph. Talk about dramatic. This guy had really missed his calling. He should have been on the stage.

‘Forks, a couple of spoons,’ Mara said matter-of-factly. I admired her patience, to be working with Graeme full time without having stabbed a bread knife into his back or at least his lower leg made her a saint in my eyes.

'Ugly gold cutlery. So crass.' With one quick sweep of his arm, the utensils crashed to the floor.

'I'm not picking them up,' Mara said calmly, and walked past him out the door.

'Well?' Graeme said to me before he, too, skulked out.

Alone in the studio, I bent down and picked up the crass cutlery. I busied myself wiping down bench tops and stacking the dishwasher, rather like I did at home. All I needed was a broom and I'd really be on familiar ground.

After ten minutes, Mara walked back into the room. 'Sorry you had to see that, Kate,' she said, 'but I won't put up with him treating me like a child. He belongs in an asylum, heavily sedated.'

'So why do you stay?'

'Because it's my magazine. I'm the editor, the public face. Before this, I was the editor of *Fabulous Foods*. I'm used to working with lunatics. When Fern poached me, she made it very clear that Graeme Grafton was part of the package, especially after he won that ridiculous bachelor competition. He's a fat head, no doubt about it. But I can handle him. My aim is to make *Delicious Bites* the number-one food magazine in the country and I'm going to, despite Graeme's theatrics. Besides, I'm not about to walk out on three hundred thousand a year.'

Three hundred thousand dollars? No wonder Mara oozed confidence.

When Graeme walked in minutes later, his face was devoid of expression.

It was early afternoon and I was tired. Graeme wasn't happy with the napkin colour one of the assistants had chosen. So I was dispatched to the props department in search of the perfect green napkin.

I rummaged through the endless drawers of rags searching – forest green, bottle green, lime green – but nothing matched the green texta I was holding. No point putting off the inevitable, I decided after I had gathered every green napkin I could find. I left the props room and started the long walk back up the stairs to hell.

‘Graeme put on quite a performance earlier, *non?*’ It was Arnaud. To think that today was the day I had decided to surrender my infatuation.

‘Mmm,’ I giggled foolishly. Stupid, juvenile woman with a handful of green napkins! He was waiting for something more than *Mmm* and I didn’t have an intelligent word to say. All I could think about was he and I on a desert island somewhere, gazing into each other’s eyes, kind of like I was doing now.

‘With all the knives and blunt objects, you’d think there would be more violence in the studio,’ he said.

I laughed. Again.

‘Kate, you laugh, but I am deadly serious. I ’ve seen Graeme in fury, leap across a kitchen table, clamp his teeth onto a stylist’s ear and shake her like a fluffy poodle. His charming way of saying he didn’t like her choice of napkin colour.’

I believed him for a split second. ‘Oh, ha ha,’ I said, looking down at my full hands.

‘*Oui*. You must take it easy.’ He smiled and continued on his way.

Strangely, the idea of Graeme biting an underling didn’t surprise me.

Back in the studio, I showed Graeme the napkins. Eventually, after much huffing, he settled on a green that matched the green of the basil leaves on the plate. Relief.

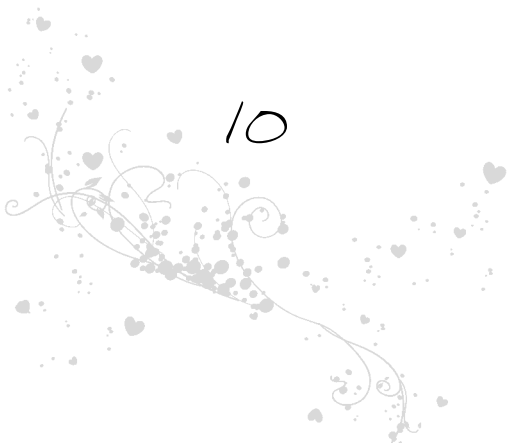
It took just over two hours but Graeme finally got the look he was after. Chicken and fettuccine on a white plate with silver cutlery and a basil-green napkin.

‘What do you think?’ Graeme asked after we’d finished taking several hundred digital shots and were sitting at the computer scrutinising images.

Panic set in but I steadied myself, and with close and steady eyes picked out several I particularly liked. In real life, the food looked absolutely disgusting, totally inedible, but on screen, it looked simple, fresh and appetising.

He peered over his glasses at me. ‘Good picks, K girl.’

I’d passed a test. One of them at least.



*Y*ou'll need to rub that out and start again,' I said to Angus absent-mindedly as he scrawled his maths homework at the kitchen table. I was thinking about Mum, who was staying for a few days to help out while Matthew was interstate. She was upstairs preparing for her meeting with Dad. That's how I chose to see it, anyway. It certainly couldn't be a date. My palms were sweaty. My head ached. And I felt somewhat delirious. Sick with worry.

'But I don't have a rubber.'

'Find one then.' I continued chopping tomatoes and contemplated a glass of wine. A very large glass. I was chopping cucumbers by the time he came back.

'Mum, do you ever think about cutting your fingers off?'

'What? By accident?'

'No, just because.'

'No, Gus. Why would I?'

'Dunno. Some nights I wake up with a knife in my face and I know it's coming to chop off all my fingers.'

‘Angus, the way your mind works . . .’ I shook my head. Then I remembered the note that his teacher sent home last week, requesting an interview with me. I’d forgotten all about it. Maybe Angus had been telling friends about his knife nightmare. I continued slicing tomatoes, paying close attention to the position of my fingers.

‘So did you find a rubber?’

‘Yeah,’ said Angus, rubbing a hole in his *Maths Mentals* book. ‘But it’s not working.’

I sighed. ‘Show me.’ I picked up the eraser. ‘What the –’ It was a condom. ‘Angus, where did you get this?’

‘Lexi’s pencil case. It fell out yesterday and she said it was a rubber, so I went up to her room just now and borrowed it.’

‘Lexi!’ I screamed up the stairs. ‘Get down here now!’

Mum came rushing into the kitchen. I held out my open hand. ‘Don’t ask, just take Angus away.’ She took Angus by the hand and moments later, I heard ‘Twinkle Twinkle’ playing on the piano in the lounge room.

Lexi sauntered in.

‘What the hell is this?’

Lexi looked at me and then at the condom I clenched tightly in my fingers.

‘It’s a joke, Mum.’

‘Really? I’m not laughing.’

‘Susie put it in my pencil case.’

‘Who the hell is Susie and how did she get a condom?’

‘Susie’s got two older brothers. Maybe she got it from one of them.’

‘Do you think it’s funny to carry a condom in your pencil case? Does it make you feel grown-up? Clever?’ Lexi looked at me, her expression unforgiving. Defiant. ‘Well? Does it? When

are you going to wake up to yourself, Lexi? Your hair. Your piercings. Now this.’ I stared at her long and hard. I chose not to see the small purplish bruise on her neck that looked suspiciously like a love bite.

‘You know, Mum, some of my friends have competitions to see who can get a condom on a banana the fastest . . . with their lips.’

‘What is that supposed to mean? Which friends exactly? Lexi, come back here now,’ I ordered as she walked out of the kitchen. Who was this Susie character? Where had she come from? Had my daughter fallen in with the bad crowd at school? As far as I knew, she still had the same girlfriends she’d had since she was six or seven. My mind went into overdrive as a grainy video of Lexi messing around with boys played in my head. I didn’t want my daughter to be the type of girl boys treated badly and whispered about in school halls . . . My daughter, Lexi, the subject of toilet walls – make that cyber – discussions about bananas and God knows what other fruits.

I marched upstairs and banged on her locked bedroom door. ‘Lexi, open the door. Now!’ She didn’t answer. Music blared from inside her bedroom. I waited outside. Eventually, she’d have to come out and when she did . . . well, the first thing I’d do was take the stupid bloody lock off her door. As I walked down the stairs I passed Angus who was singing along to her music, then I heard Lexi bellow, ‘Can you tell retardo that the song line is about *single ladies* not *Wanna see my legs?*’

‘Mum, I don’t want you to see him again,’ I said unreasonably as I poured us a white wine. I had promised myself I wouldn’t drink alcohol from Sunday to Wednesday, but I couldn’t manage it, not this week at least – Mum and Dad; Lexi and the condom

(not to mention her neck); Graeme and the blue plate; Arnaud and those green eyes . . .

I handed Mum a glass. ‘You look very nice by the way.’ And she did. Mum looked at least ten years younger. I dreaded to think that her flushed cheeks were because of the sex she was anticipating having with Dad at some stage. I shuddered at the thought.

‘Katie, I can take care of myself. Stop worrying about me.’

‘I can’t, it’s all too much. I can’t get my head around the fact that you’re’ – I dared not say dating – ‘seeing Dad again.’ There was a time, after the blackness, a good time – a time that lasted many years – when Mum had hated Dad. I missed those years.

‘But it’s not just that. It’s Lexi and her hair, the condom. She’s locked herself in her room. I don’t know what to do anymore.’

‘You were like that once.’

‘I never cut my hair and I didn’t have condoms in my pencil case. She’s thirteen.’

‘True, but it’s only hair, sweetheart. It will grow back.’

‘And the condom?’

‘A silly joke, that’s all.’

‘Jesus, Mum. If I’d done that . . .’

‘Different times, different standards. Times have changed. She’s testing the boundaries.’

‘Understatement.’ I rolled my eyes and swigged my wine. I couldn’t believe that fourteen years ago I had looked into Matthew’s loving eyes (as they were at the time) and said, ‘Let’s make a baby’ in that optimistic naive voice that women in love use. Bingo! Nine months later I was in labour. Fool! A couple of minutes thinking about the consequences of such a rash decision would have made all the difference.

'You said you were meeting *him* at the restaurant,' I barked at Mum when the doorbell rang.

'I thought we were,' Mum said, quickly putting her glass down on the table. She picked up her coat and handbag and we stood for a moment listening to the sound of the front door being opened. Then voices and laughter. Bloody Lexi!

'Hurry up then,' I said, pushing her into the hallway. I had seen Dad infrequently over the last twenty years, the most recent occasion being three years ago, by accident, at a relative's funeral. I'd only agreed to go as the family representative because he was living overseas. For the excruciating five and a half minutes I spent talking to him at the wake, my stomach had been in knots. I felt so disloyal to Mum.

When Dad left all those years ago, I blamed myself for the break-up. Mum was a mess and because I was the eldest child, I took it upon myself to remove every photo in the house that Dad was in. I no longer considered him part of our family. It took me hours – we were a very snap-happy clan. I thought I was doing the right thing but it backfired on me.

Mum flew in to a rage when she finally managed to crawl out of bed. '*What did you do that for?*' she demanded. '*Where are all the family photos?*' I remember the scene like it was yesterday. '*I put them away to protect you, us,*' I told her. '*Well, put them back exactly where they were,*' she said. '*He's still your father.*' After everything he'd done, she still wanted photos of him on mantelpieces, sideboards and hanging in the entrance hall. It took a good two years before his pictures were permanently removed from sight.

Who'd have thought that twenty years after he'd left Dad would be in my home calling to take Mum out to dinner? My

stomach was in knots again. I could see my father standing in the doorway with Lexi. They were still laughing.

I really wanted him to be wearing a gaudy garish shirt with white cuffs and white collar. He wasn't. I desperately wanted to see thinning hair and a bad comb-over – or worse: him trying to disguise his baldness with a cheap wig. But again, no. Tasselled white loafers? No such luck.

'Grandpa says I look exactly like you when you were my age,' Lexi said to me as I walked up behind Mum. I was trying to hide behind her and not doing a very good job of it.

Dad walked over and held out his arms. 'Darling, it's been too long.'

'Mmmm,' I said, looking at him but refusing to relax. Maybe his hair was thinner. It was definitely greyer. Yet he still looked like my father – tall, fit and strong. The deserter. I pulled away.

When he embraced Mum, I couldn't decide whether I was more repulsed or embarrassed. I was definitely horrified. Lexi giggled.

'I see you've met Lexi.'

'Last time I saw you, you were barely walking,' said Dad.

'Whose fault is that?'

'Katie!' Mum said, glaring at me.

'Please join us for dinner,' Dad said, as if we were one big happy family who saw each other twice a week. 'We'd like that, wouldn't we, Pip?'

Pip!

It was too much.

'We can't,' I said quickly. 'Lexi has homework.'

'Mu-u-m,' Lexi whined.

'Not to mention she's grounded for life. Besides, Angus is already asleep.'

‘No, I’m not,’ Angus said from the top of the stairs.

‘Gussy, come down and meet Grandpa,’ Mum said.

Angus bounded down the stairs.

‘Let me take a good look at you,’ Dad said, arms outstretched.

‘How come I haven’t seen you before?’ Angus said as Dad engulfed him in a bear hug. ‘Mum said that we’ve only got one grandpa and he lives in Adelaide.’

‘Later, Gus,’ I said, waving him away.

‘Katie, I tried to stay in your life . . .’

‘Now’s not the time,’ I said as Mum took hold of Dad’s hand. I needed a Scotch. A large one. And I don’t drink Scotch.

Suddenly I was twelve years old again, watching as Mum and Dad prepared to leave for a neighbour’s dinner party.

‘Have a good night,’ Mum said, and kissed me on the forehead.

I didn’t like the way Dad touched the small of her back to guide her through the front door as they were leaving. I shut the door and watched them through the window as I had done many years earlier. In those days, Mum was always immaculately dressed, never without her pearls and high heels. Dad was always charming.

I watched as he opened the car door for Mum and held her hand as she climbed in. They were laughing. Tears streamed down my cheeks until long after they’d driven away.

‘I think Butch is dead,’ Angus said, tapping me on the shoulder. He took my hand and we walked over to the fish tank together.

He was right. Butch was floating on his back, quite dead. I scooped him out of the water and Angus and I carried him to the laundry toilet where I conducted a quick but heartfelt funeral.

After Angus played a few off notes on his trumpet, we flushed the toilet together. Before leaving the room, I double-checked to make sure that Butch really had flushed away.

‘Come on, Angus, let’s change the fish tank water together.’ A longer activity than anticipated. For the next two hours, Angus and I changed fishy water, adjusted filters and cleaned seaweed. It kept my mind off Mum and Dad and Lexi. Almost. By the time we’d finished, the remaining five fish looked happy. At least there were no visible signs of disease or despair.

At bedtime, I resisted the urge to correct Angus’s pronunciations as he read aloud from a book on dinosaurs and then, when I could resist no more, we listened to the audio CD of the thirteenth chapter of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

‘Mum, do you think there is a fish heaven?’

‘Probably.’ I kissed him and turned out his light.

Then I knocked on Lexi’s door. ‘Lexi, you’re going to have to come out and talk to me sooner or later.’

‘Yeah . . .’

‘So when will you?’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘Lex, I do love you – I’m just sad about your hair and the condom. You know you can talk to me about anything. Don’t you?’ Silence. ‘Lexi?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Anything at all – sex, drugs, Facebook . . .’ But it was no use. There was no way Lexi was stepping out of her room. Even though I was furious with her, part of me envied Lexi. She was free. Unburdened by responsibilities and worries about the future. She was free to express herself, regardless of whom she offended. How quickly it all disintegrated and turned to mud. Complicated by obligations and meaningless, everyday chores.

I walked into the bathroom, picked up the wet towels, wiped down the water from the walls and flushed the toilet. Downstairs, I took out a load of white washing and put on a load of dark washing. Hung up the wet clothes in the laundry and ironed Angus's school shirts. In the kitchen, I made the lunches, stacked the dishwasher and turned it on. I was still awake when Mum arrived home just after midnight.

I ambushed her as she walked out of the bathroom in her dressing gown.

Mum jumped. 'Katie, you frightened me.'

'How was your night?'

'Lovely. And yours?' Mum was grinning like a love-struck teenager. It was as if the last twenty years had been wiped away.

I ignored the question. 'Why now, Mum? Why? You're happy. Why do you need *him* back in your life?'

'That's the whole point – I don't need him. He makes me laugh.'

'Watch the Comedy Channel.'

'It's more than that. Bob makes me feel young again. Sexy.'

'Mum!'

'What? He does. He makes me feel like a woman – not just a mother or a grandmother or a friend. He makes me feel like a desirable, attractive woman. Think about it.'

That was something I really didn't want to do.

'Apart from a few short-lived friendships here and there, I've been alone for twenty years. Night after night, by myself. I want more for myself than that. I want to share my life with someone again.'

'With someone, yes, but surely not with him?'

‘What happened between your dad and I happened a long time ago,’ she snapped. ‘It’s time to move on. Put the past behind us. Right now, he makes me happy. End of story.’

I gave her a hug, kissed her goodnight and walked into my bedroom. Blanche’s bloody book was lying on the dressing table, so I picked it up. I wonder if she wrote a companion title, *Don’ts for Husbands and Fathers*, as well?

I climbed into bed and curled myself into a ball before pulling the doona up over my head. Dad was going to break Mum’s heart all over again and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I knew he would because I’d been there the first time. I’d lived through it.

I was the fifteen-year-old who’d helped Mum through the dark months of her breakdown. Made sure there was food in the house because she couldn’t get out of bed to go to the shops herself. I was the one who made sure Robyn had clean uniforms to wear to school. I was the one who insisted Mum see a doctor. I made her take the prescribed sedatives so that she could sleep through the night for the first excruciating six months after he left. Sometimes, I didn’t know how to keep myself going, but I did. I had to look after Mum and Robyn.

No. I didn’t want to see Dad again and I certainly didn’t want Mum seeing him either – let alone dating the man! I didn’t want her world to fall apart again.

When I became too tired to analyse that looming disaster, my panicked mind latched on to Lexi. She was frantically trying to discard her childhood and pushing me away in the process. Can’t say I was happy about that either.

Then there was Matthew. It wasn’t that I had fallen out of love with him. I was in love with Matthew, or at least I could be again if we could manage to revive the romance. I read an

article advising that the way to keep a marriage alive was to treat your spouse like a lover. Easier said than done when you had two children and one of those was a teenage girl.

Besides, lovers were just that, weren't they? People with whom you scoffed champagne and had amazing sex but who were removed from the everyday nitty-gritty reality and fights over whose turn it was to clean up the dog turds in the backyard.

It got me thinking back to how Matthew and I met – at Fern's twenty-first birthday party. I was living with her at the time and our apartment was full of Annie Leibovitz prints. I was holding court, explaining to anybody who would listen why her portraits were amateurish.

Matthew walked up to me and tried to introduce himself. I pushed him out of the way and kept talking but he persisted and hung around. He especially liked the idea that I was on the verge of becoming *the next hot young thing who was going to turn the photography world on its proverbial ear*. My words, not his.

When Matthew finally did manage to get a word in and introduce himself, he said that Annie Leibovitz was *so last decade* and that my photography was *so right now* – not that he'd actually seen any of my work, given that he'd just met me. I was charmed in turn. I said that if he stuck with me there would be nothing but good times ahead for him. He said he'd never leave my side. And that was pretty much it. I fell passionately in love with him right then and there.

It wasn't just the fact that Matthew bore more than a passing resemblance to a young Patrick Dempsey and had a curl in the middle of his forehead. I was not so pathetic that I would claim to have fallen in love with Matthew because he had movie star looks and great hair. I was basing my attraction for him on something more than that.

Matthew was a computer whiz at IBM with ambition to burn. ‘The internet’s the way of the future,’ he told me. ‘And I’m determined to be the best in the business.’ He knew where he was headed and so did I. We both had dreams and determination.

Even better, Matthew liked photography, even if it was photography that leaned towards the arty (!) end of the scale – *Playboy* photos that celebrated breasts, thighs and other female body parts. But I was willing to overlook that. We were young. We were in love. We got engaged quickly. We married quickly.

In hindsight, I think my speedy marriage was a gross over-reaction to my parents’ divorce and the urgent need to find lasting security and comfort. Maybe also to escape from Robyn’s theatrics. Who knew she would follow me into my adult life?

At our engagement party, I found out I wasn’t the only one who had something to prove. Matthew was trying to show just how heterosexual he was – given that his elder brother had recently announced to his family that he was moving to the United Kingdom with his partner, Gary.

When I married Matthew I knew these things about him:

1. He was gorgeous and he did have great hair (unlike me).
2. He liked photography (it takes all types).
3. He made me laugh.
4. He was ambitious for us both to succeed.
5. He truly loved me and promised he would forever (he said so in his wedding vows).

Yep! Back then, we couldn’t keep our hands or tongues off each other. I guess it was natural that after all this time we wouldn’t still be lusting after each other every minute of the day. After so long together, our physical intimacy blew hot and cold. These days it was decidedly cold. There was no desire in Matthew’s

eyes or even a great expression of happiness on his face when I greeted him in the evenings. Maybe he'd just stopped looking at me altogether. One thing was certain though: the longer we remained intimately inactive, the more unsure and anxious I became. Truthfully, I was almost embarrassed to appear naked in front of him.

At least with Matthew away this week, I could pretend that we were still happy together.



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‘I’m having the baby,’ Robyn heaved into the phone.
Sisters. Can’t shoot ’em.

‘It’s six thirty in the morning,’ I said, climbing out of bed and tripping over myself in the tangled sheets. ‘Take a deep breath. You are not having the baby . . . Are you having the baby?’

‘I’m hyperventilating. You have to get over here. It’s time.’

‘Relax. Have a cup of tea.’ It wasn’t time. I knew it wasn’t time because every morning for the last month Robyn had rung me with these same words: *I’m having the baby*. The laboured breathing, the anxious tone. The first couple of times I raced through the peak-hour traffic only to find that the crisis had passed and Robyn, happily ensconced on the couch with a cup of Orange Pekoe, was flicking through the *Sydney Morning Herald* while watching *Sunrise* on television.

‘It’s time to give up on this whole pregnancy thing. I’m tired. The paint fumes are driving me nuts and all those tiny baby clothes . . . they wouldn’t even fit a doll. I’ve been thinking, kids are more trouble than they’re worth. They’re needy, all-consuming and what thanks do you get?’

I sighed. 'Not a lot.'

'Exactly. I really don't think that I'm up to the task.'

'Of what? Motherhood?'

'Yep. Dan was right to take off.'

'Robyn, exactly how much sleep did you get last night?'

'A bit. Not a lot. Enough. I can't remember.'

'I think you might need more. You're eight and a half months pregnant and you're going to have a baby very soon.'

'But a baby means the end of my youth, the end of freedom, and the end of life as I know it, Katie. Don't you ever feel like packing it in, that it's all too much? Don't you ever feel like taking a holiday, a long holiday to . . . oh, I don't know, the Mediterranean? Or the Maldives? The Maldives would be perfect this time of year.'

'I think about it every day, Robbie, but I can't. I have responsibilities. So do you.'

'Dan had responsibilities. He still shot through.'

'That's different, he's a man. Besides, Dan's a moron, an idiot.'

'A moron who's travelling through Europe, an idiot who's soaking up the sun on the French Riviera.'

'Robyn! Forget about Dan. You need to rest. I'll call you later. Hanging up now,' I said, and hung up before she had a chance to reply.

At breakfast, Mum launched in with, 'I want you to have dinner with Bob and I, Katie – you, Matthew, the kids, Robyn. How about Friday night, when Matthew's back from Melbourne?' before I'd managed even one sip of coffee. 'It'll be nice. You'll see.'

But I knew it was more than dinner. I didn't want to see *him* again and I especially didn't want to have to explain Dad's

sudden appearance to Lexi and Angus. I couldn't even explain it to myself.

'Why do you want to get hurt all over again? Reopen old wounds?'

'People change. Your father has mellowed.'

'People don't change, Mum.' Not him at least.

She shot me her 'you're breaking my heart' look. And I probably was. I'd tried the same look on Lexi and Angus many times. It used to work. It doesn't anymore. There may be a time in the future when I can bring my heartbroken parental face back into circulation again. But for the moment, it's tucked away until I can be sure that my real daughter has returned from Planet Teenager.

When Angus walked into the kitchen, I busied myself going over (and over) the seven times tables with him. Pure agony. How could I make it any clearer that six lots of seven was the same as the seven lots of six we memorised ad nauseum last week for his six times tables. Giving up, we switched to his news item, *My Favourite Australian Animal*, due yesterday and which *absolutely has to be presented in class today, Mrs Lombardy said so*. I found a moth-eaten toy koala lurking in a box under Gus's bed and told him to improvise.

'Sometimes I think I'm just a slave to this family,' I said to the kitchen wall as I washed my mug in the sink and mentally wrote my to-do list: take Gertrude to the vet for her yearly flu injection; worm Rupert; buy Bugs a new collar and harness. He chewed through his last one in less than two weeks. A couple of weeks ago, we found him several houses away cavorting with several other rabbits who lived in the area. I also needed to buy Lexi new sneakers. Not that she had worn out her last ones. That girl had bigger feet than me.

‘No, love, you’re the one who has it all,’ my mother chimed in, interrupting my thoughts. ‘You have choices. I was a slave to the family, remember. I had nothing to offer but my homemaking skills.’

‘Well, could you use them now and help me with this?’ I pointed at Angus who was throwing the stuffed koala at Rupert.

‘There’s no way I’m ever going to be a slave,’ said Lexi, licking the Vegemite off her toast.

‘Lex, that’s disgusting. And besides, sometimes you have no choice. When you get married, you change, give up things . . .’

‘You don’t have to.’ Lexi was indignant.

You do, I thought to myself as I glanced at an ancient print of mine hanging in the hall, but I wasn’t prepared to have another stand-up fight with my daughter. She’d learn soon enough.

‘You have to get a life, Mum,’ she said.

‘Excuse me? Why do you think I’m doing this job at *Delicious Bites*? Do you think I like it?’

‘No, Mum, I know you don’t like food photography. How could you? Even after watching every episode of *MasterChef*, you don’t like cooking. Why don’t you do something you really want to do?’

Because, I thought to myself, when you have children, sometimes you have to make sacrifices – bow out of the world as you know it to raise a family. Unfortunately, when you’re ready to re-enter the world of the living, sometimes the living doesn’t want you anymore. Anyway, I know I can’t have it all – not all at once. It’s not possible. When I was younger, I assumed that when I reached adulthood, I’d no longer have to answer to anybody. I’d finally be able to please myself. But unless you live

alone on a deserted island, you quickly discover that real life's not like that. Life's a compromise.

'Lexi,' I said, choosing my words carefully, 'the magazine is a stepping stone, an opportunity to further my skills and get paid for it.'

Mum nodded. 'I gave up tech after I married Bob and look where it got me. I didn't get my first paying job until after Bob left me.'

Lexi glared at me and Mum. 'You're both crazy. When I'm older, I'm going to be free. Free to do exactly what I want whenever I want to.'

'And I hope you are free, Lexi, but life is about choices. You make certain choices and you have to live with them. For example, right now you could choose to take yourself upstairs and make your –'

'I know the drill,' she said, putting up her hand to silence me. 'I can make my bed or stay here and get screamed at.'

But still she stayed. In the three minutes it took to go through Angus's times tables again, Lexi and Mum had moved on to Mum's date, chattering excitedly. I lived in hope that her enthusiasm for Dad would wear off once reality set in. In the meantime, I had to put up with Mum cooing like a lovesick teenager. Just what I needed – two adolescents in the house.

All this meant that I arrived at work on Tuesday morning not feeling any better than I had at midnight. Probably because I'd barely managed three hours' sleep.

'You look like you need this.' Arnaud bent down and handed me a coffee.

I was in the studio measuring distances between the floor camera and the dining table which I'd already set according to

Graeme's specific instructions. It was number five on my menial list. In fact, I'd spent the morning doing all sorts of dogsbody jobs: loading film into some of the Hasselblads and digital backs onto others. There were several cameras, ranging from the digital SLRs, small enough to fit into the palm of my hand, to the huge floor camera that rested on a three-metre-high tripod.

Earlier, I'd put some test prints on Graeme's desk. Mercifully he hadn't been there. It was the first time I'd been into his office and actually had a moment to look around. Locked in a huge side cabinet over sixty Thunderbirds were lined up, staring out across the office.

Right now, I was involved in focus pulling, measuring the distance from the camera to the dining table; well, as involved as I could be given that Arnaud was hovering above me and I was on the verge of having a full-blown anxiety attack. Inappropriate thoughts raced through my head. My breathing was shallow . . . What if I dropped a camera? The tripod? What if I got the distances wrong or tripped over the electrical cables, stepped on a laptop and broke my ankle . . . or neck? What if Graeme, Fern and Arnaud realised I was an incompetent fraud?

Arnaud was staring at me.

'Thanks,' I said, taking the cup from him. 'That obvious?'

'Not to the untrained eye.'

'What are you doing up here anyway?' *Asking me out for that drink you promised, gorgeous?*

'After yesterday's excitement I want to inspect the damage myself. Rumour has it that Graeme overturned the utilities table, *non?* And trashed the pots and pans, and kicked an enormous hole in the wall.'

'Really?'

'*Oui.* And you, Katie, lived to tell the tale. How is it?'

‘Graeme’s got the whole tortured-artist gig down to a fine art. He’s like no-one I’ve ever met before. Fern likes him though – says he could be working in London or New York, but stays here out of loyalty to her. Meanwhile, everyone else walks around on eggshells, trying not to upset him. Is it normal for people to throw dinner plates around?’

‘Depends on what you define as normal. Wait till you get to know him better,’ said Arnaud, his French accent becoming sexier with each word.

‘He gets better?’

‘No, but at least you won’t feel so bad about calling him tortured.’

I sipped my coffee. ‘Graeme’s not too bad in small doses. He’s very clever with an extended zoom and does some innovative moves with angles and lighting . . .’ I took a deep breath and changed the subject. ‘How did things work out with Mardi?’

‘Ah, Mardi . . . still networking to get Benjamin into the As, complaining that most of the boys are big for their age because they’re being fed steroid-filled battery chickens for dinner.’

‘Kate!’ I heard Graeme shout from just outside the studio. I missed my mouth completely. Excellent. A coffee stain on my pale pink shirt.

‘You all right?’ Arnaud fossicked around the bench and produced a dripping, grey dishcloth. I already felt insignificant and frazzled in Graeme’s company. Now he was going to think that I was a klutz as well.

‘These stills are okay,’ Graeme said, waving a print sheet in the air and leering at the breast with the coffee stain. ‘The lighting needs finetuning and the colours are all wrong but the essence of what I’m after is here.’ He threw the prints on the table and kept walking.


I was relieved because everyone sees things differently through the lens. It wasn't a given that Graeme would automatically see what I saw or vice versa. It often took years of working closely with someone before you were in sync – and even then, there were no guarantees. You couldn't *get* every picture, you miss things . . . looking through the viewfinder, as in real life, no-one sees exactly the same image, even when it's staring you in the face.

Arnaud picked up one of the contact sheets. 'But where is the food? This is a picture of two wooden blocks and a pink napkin.'

'The blocks are just a stand-in to fix the viewpoint. The food will come later. And the napkin's not pink, it's cherry.'

'Photographers.'

After Arnaud left, I thought about what Graeme had said. I couldn't wipe the smile from my face. For the first time since starting here, he'd actually made me feel like I was a *real* photographer.

A decorative graphic consisting of a central swirl of grey lines and dots, with several small grey hearts scattered around it, primarily in the upper left and right areas.

The sheets, usually so soft, were scratchy, prickly. I felt itchy all over. I tossed, turned, couldn't get comfortable. Sleep hovered, out of reach. I closed my eyes, determined to relax, but instead images of Arnaud rose. Arnaud with his cat-like green eyes, his perfect hard body. I touched my breast, and the T-shirt I was wearing became a black push-up bra. Then I added black silk stockings attached to a garter belt and thigh-high black boots with stiletto heels. Where was I? Where were we?

For now Arnaud is with me, here in a fabulous Turkish bathhouse, water all around, velvet draperies, and the smell of incense. He reaches for me, caresses my naked belly, lingering over my naval and I feel hot stirrings. He pulls me to him, his mouth seeking mine, his tongue thrusting deeply into my mouth, my own tongue thrusting greedily back. He pulls away and – wait! Oh my God! It isn't Arnaud at all! It's Graeme, with his rich brown eyes, laughing at my surprise.

He commands me to stand perfectly still, not to move. He kneels before me and begins to kiss my inner thighs, his tongue tracing the tops of my boots, exploring the region with the skill

of a veteran climber. Then I feel other hands on my shoulders, tracing down my spine, unhooking my bra, reaching around to cup my aching, hungry breasts. Arnaud! Here, too! I am swept with waves of passion unlike I ever imagined. I am like a person lost in the desert, parched and alone, who finds an oasis. I drink in all the fiery, wet, pulsing sensations as these two men stroke, lick, touch, tease and thrust themselves into me, and I give myself over completely to the uninhibited delight of being worshipped and adored.

How amazingly dangerous, how frightfully decadent, how perfectly wonderful.

‘Mum.’

Angus’s voice was in the distance, but what about Arnaud? Graeme? I can’t quite pull myself away –

‘Mum! Wake up. It’s your birthday.’

I opened one eye. Angus was standing in front of my bed with a tray bearing breakfast and scattered with several pink camellias from the garden.

‘Angus, thank you,’ I said, sitting up and dismissing the dream from my mind. His smile was almost as big as his face. There was Vegemite toast, a cup of tea and a glass of orange juice. ‘Thank you so much, beautiful boy,’ I said again, reaching over to kiss him.

‘We know you have to work,’ said Mum, walking into the room with Lexi trailing behind her. ‘But we didn’t want you to leave on an empty stomach, especially on your birthday.’

I wolfed down the toast and tea and within minutes was showered and dressed and standing in the kitchen with my loved ones and their gifts of chocolate (Angus), lipstick (Lexi) and a Pandora bracelet with handbag charm from Mum.

‘Thank you. They are all very beautiful gifts,’ I said before rushing out the door.

It wasn’t until midday that Matthew called. ‘I’m sorry I’m not there,’ he said. ‘But I’ll make it up to you, I promise. And I’m sorry I forgot to organise flowers and a card –’

‘That’s okay. Angus did.’

‘I’m also sorry about the argument the other day. I was just so shocked at Lexi’s hair.’

‘Yeah,’ I said, half-heartedly.

‘Why don’t you go out with Diane tonight to celebrate?’ Matthew suggested.

‘It’s mid-week. She has kids to look after.’

‘Well, I promise I’ll make it up to you. Love you.’

Throughout the day, Robyn and several friends, including Diane, called. It wasn’t like I didn’t feel special. I just wanted Matthew around.

As I was packing up to go home, Arnaud popped his head in. ‘We’re going out for a drink. Come and join us.’

‘Better not. It’s my birthday and –’

‘All the more reason.’

‘But Matthew’s away . . .’

‘I insist.’

I hesitated all of ten seconds before calling Mum.

After assuring me that everything was under control at home, ‘there’s a casserole in the oven, Gus is doing his homework and Lexi’s home from netball practice,’ she insisted I go out. ‘It’s your birthday. Enjoy yourself. Lexi wants to have friends over to watch a documentary on penguins on the Discovery Channel – something about a biology assignment . . .’

‘Sure, as long as you don’t mind,’ I said, hoping she wouldn’t. It would be good for Lexi to have some old friends over, girlfriends she’d known since primary school. Maybe even do a bit of teenage bonding by remembering when they used to dress up and dance to Hi-5.

‘It’s fine, but I do have a request.’

‘Anything,’ I heard myself say. Then crossed my fingers.

‘Dinner, my house, Friday night. You, Matthew, the kids – and Dad. A belated birthday celebration for you.’

Friday night! God! The pain! How would I survive it? But until I agreed, I knew she’d continue to pester me about dinner with Dad. There was nothing to be gained by further resistance except heartache. It was better to get it over and done with.

‘Okay. It’s a deal. Can you make sure the girls go home at a reasonable hour? I won’t be late. Thanks, Mum.’

I was tired. Tired – and nervous about going out for drinks with my colleagues.

Every place I’d ever worked had office politics, whether it was a small magazine or the photographic department of a large newspaper. It was part of office culture, just like leaving dirty coffee cups in the kitchen sink when no-one was watching and whispering on the phone to friends when you thought no-one was within hearing distance.

But social work drinks were usually where it all happened. My ancient experience with after-work drinks:

1. Staff always jockeyed for position, trying to get the boss’s attention, in a vain attempt to get ahead.
2. Everyone from the receptionist to the managing director worked their agenda, hidden or not.
3. Sooner or later, chatter got round to office gossip.

4. Inevitably, wine would be spilled.
5. By the end of the night someone's harmless flirting and/or gossip would have turned into something more sinister.

So there I was, propped up at the bar with nine others, drinking cheap wine and getting to know my co-workers. Much to my disappointment, I couldn't see Arnaud anywhere, so I settled down next to Coco, a redhead with a penchant for black high-heeled, pointy-toed boots and tight-fitting skivvies. She was one of the staff writers: bubbly, friendly and always ready for a chat the few times I'd bumped into her in the kitchen. Coco was young, about twenty-two years old, and I envied her enthusiasm, her *she'll be right* attitude.

'My birth name is Karen, can you believe?' Coco said with an exaggerated drawl. 'Too pedestrian. Coco is much more glamorous, don't you think?'

'Absolutely,' I said, wondering what I could change my name to.

'So, how are things working out with Graeme? You know,' she said, as if sharing a secret, 'he's made all the girls on staff cry. I'm over him now, water off a duck's back, but I'm surprised he hasn't gotten to you yet. You've been here a week.'

'Hmm,' I said as I spied Arnaud walking in.

'Yeah, watch him, Kate; Graeme can be a real leech.'

I laughed. 'I'm sure there are more interesting people for him to sleaze onto than me. I'm a mother.'

'Hasn't stopped him before, trust me.'

What? The implication being Graeme shags anything with a pulse?

'So does he have a wife? Kids? A dog?'

‘The Bachelor of the Year? Hardly! Definitely no wife and no kids – none that I know of, anyway. He isn’t a commitment sort of guy. He works, he drinks, and he has girlfriends from time to time, often a couple at once. He’s a cad, really.’

Arnaud came over with a drink in hand to toast my birthday. ‘Hip, hip, hooray,’ sang the assembled crowd. I felt rather special.

As Arnaud and I talked, I noticed Fern chatting easily with Graeme at the other end of the table. On the one hand, Graeme was short-tempered, aggressive, violent, arrogant and rude. On the other, he could be gracious and social. I could see why some women fell for his charms. He was definitely an enigma.

He was saying, ‘Fern, you know me. I explode, storm out, then come back five minutes later. Really, I’m a pussycat and easy to work with.’

Fern threw her head back and laughed.

Yes, Graeme had a certain danger to him and he was handsome when he wasn’t throwing cooking implements, but he definitely wasn’t my type.

All too soon, Arnaud was standing up to leave, helmet in hand. ‘Would you like a lift?’ he asked me.

I looked at my watch. Seven o’clock. I could go home, have dinner, a bath, read Gus a story and put him to bed. Then have an amicable chat with Lexi and her girlfriends. It sounded like a plan. A good plan. A sensible plan. But my head was buzzing and I liked it. It had been a long time since I had been out on the town with work colleagues. Over eight years. And it was my birthday. I swayed, happy to discard my familial responsibilities. I could do without watching a documentary on the mating habits of penguins. And I doubted my ability to remain upright on his bike.

‘No, I’ll stay for a bit longer.’

‘Make sure you leave your car then, okay?’

Arnaud! Such concern. A true gentleman. I wanted to kiss him then and there. But I restrained myself. Although I did hold onto his arm a little longer than I needed to when I said, ‘Arnaud, I’m really glad you’re here. You make coming to work a lot of fun.’ But it was only to stress how pleased I was about getting to know him – professionally.

‘*Merci* . . . Take it easy and ’appy birthday.’

A minute later he was gone and I was wondering why I hadn’t left with him. I didn’t need the fresh glass of wine Coco handed me. It would definitely be my last. Then I would catch a cab home. Easy.

‘I guess you were shocked at Graeme and Mara’s antics this morning?’ Fern said, when I pulled a chair up beside her to eat my seared salmon and salad.

‘You mean when Graeme and Mara argued violently over the degustation menu for next month’s photo feature and lobbed fruit and pans at each other while I cowered in the studio corner?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘Not at all.’ I smiled. ‘Though I was grateful that no knives were thrown.’

‘Don’t take it to heart. They both like to think that they are creative geniuses and I guess they both are. Graeme’s also on edge because with Mara appearing on *MasterChef*, he’s worried her celebrity will eclipse him.’

‘You are amazingly rational and calm. I’m on edge the whole time I’m with them both.’

Fern picked at her lettuce. ‘They’re the talent, I’m the manager. Both of them want to be in control, to take the opportunity to

showcase their creativity. Unfortunately, it leads to clashes, which I do my best to manage. Not always with success . . .’

‘Clashes? They fight like animals.’

‘Yes, but eventually they always calm down and compromise. It’s all for show. Graeme is really quite gifted.’

‘So you keep telling me.’

‘Truly. And not only is he a brilliant photographer and visionary, he brings the hip, cool factor to the magazine. Graeme’s the one who cruises the social circuit . . . always networking in the hottest clubs. He gets the magazine noticed big time.’

‘I’ll say,’ said Graeme, walking over with a macho swagger to join us. ‘If you’re not impressed by me now, I don’t know what else I can do. I am, after all, me.’ He took off his glasses and sat down without breaking eye contact with me. I blinked and turned away, unnerved by the flutter of attraction I felt for him.

I was drinking too much wine, my salmon was hardly touched. Soon after our conversation, Fern left, citing personal commitments. I moved back to Coco, who proceeded to fill me in on all the office gossip. The scandal. The lowdown. The skinny. I was far too intoxicated to take the high moral ground and stop her. And even if I hadn’t been drinking, I doubt I would have stopped her unless the gossip had been about me.

Even though I didn’t know most of the people Coco mentioned, her anecdotes were compelling. I was hooked.

‘Do you know *how* Simone – the girl you replaced – broke her ankle?’ Coco asked me.

‘Fell off a wonky ladder?’

‘Sort of. I wasn’t there, but apparently Simone was so incensed by a snide comment Graeme made about her camera angle that she forgot she was standing on a two-metre plank and leapt off to abuse him. Broke her ankle when she hit the floor.’

It was around this time that everyone left the pub except Coco, Graeme and myself. The more I talked to Graeme, the more convinced I became that he was entertaining, witty and charming – all the things that make someone fun to be with. Of course, after all the wine I'd consumed, I was easily entertained. And distracted. I'd never noticed his perfect skin, strong hands and deep, throaty laugh until now.

I listened attentively as Graeme told me the *real* story about Simone and her broken ankle. 'It was her vile temper and impulsiveness that led to her broken ankle, K girl. I had nothing to do with it,' he said. 'Simone can't stand to be told anything. I made a simple suggestion about the camera angle and she flew off the plank, so to speak.'

'Get out!' I was fascinated.

Soon after, Coco got a telephone call and left. Alarm bells were ringing in the back of my head but I didn't listen. Instead, I stayed for one more drink.

But I'd had so many *one more drinks* I'd lost count.

'Not only that,' Graeme continued, 'but Simone's a dobber – and no-one likes a dobber, do they, K? She runs to Mara whenever she doesn't agree with me. I'm her boss, for fuck's sake. Since when do you argue with your boss? Or tattle-tale?'

As I listened to Graeme talk, I kept repeating the mantra in my head: *I am not going to get drunk and kiss this man. I am not going to get drunk and kiss this man.* Unfortunately, I was already drunk. I think. Anyway, I got drunk and kissed that man.

‘Katie, it’s after seven, are you okay?’ Mum’s voice called from behind the closed door.

‘I’ll be right out.’ My head hurt. I vaguely remembered arriving home. It was after . . .

‘Okay, love?’ Mum opened my bedroom door a little. ‘I’ve brought you up a cup of tea. Lexi’s much better, but –’

‘But what? What’s up with Lexi?’

‘I thought it was harmless. How was I to know they were adding vodka to their orange juice?’

‘What?’ I was developing a migraine behind my right eye.

‘I told you last night – Lexi, the vodka . . . her friends . . . vomiting on the carpet.’

I had to think for a moment. Was I the one who vomited on the carpet or was Mum talking about Lexi?

‘And the chillies! Why on earth that Susie girl fed Lexi chillies, I’ll never know.’

I was confused, with a very dry mouth, and had lost several hours from last night. ‘Hang on. Back up a minute. What chillies?’

‘And, Katie, I kept calling your mobile but you didn’t answer. I didn’t want to bother Matthew . . .’

‘God! You didn’t call Matthew, did you?’ I shrieked. In doing so, my head split in two, but I’d deal with that later.

‘No, silly, I told you last night. I made Lexi drink lots of water, threw her in the shower, made her drink more water and finally put her to bed . . . just before you came home at three in the morning.’

‘What about her friends?’ I said, having visions of her friends arriving at their respective homes drunk.

‘Luckily, they didn’t drink it. They certainly didn’t seem intoxicated. Apparently, Lexi was the only one brave enough to gulp the glass in one go.’

‘Brave or incredibly stupid?’

‘I think she might have learned her lesson. She was very ill.’

‘She’s thirteen!’ I said, resting my aching head in my hands.

‘And you’re thirty-six. What on earth happened last night?’

‘Nothing. A few birthday drinks.’

‘A few?’

‘Mother, I’m fine.’ I sounded guilty, exactly how Lexi did when *she’d* done something wrong.

‘Good, because you look half dead.’

‘Thanks.’ What should I have said? *Sorry, Mum, but I, too, was pissed last night?*

‘It’s just that you look puffy and flushed and last night you were so worried about not driving your car home. But as long as everything’s okay . . .’

She left it at that and walked out of the room. I slowly drank my tea and seriously contemplated not going into work. How much longer did I have to go? A week? Two weeks? Whatever, it was too long. I showered, dressed and walked downstairs.

Lexi had her head bowed when I entered the kitchen.

‘You look awful,’ I said.

‘Ppthat,’ she replied. ‘Where were you last night? I needed you.’

‘Excuse me young lady, you are very lucky I was at my birthday dinner with new friends from work or this could have been a lot worse.’ A lot worse. Imagine if Matthew had found out.

‘I was really scared. And when Susie gave me chillies, I thought I was dead . . . and then I puked –’

‘Yes, I get the picture, Lexi,’ I said, clutching my forehead.

‘You gonna tell Dad?’

‘I don’t know. You’ve done a very silly thing to yourself, not to mention what you’ve put Nanna through.’

Lexi started to cry.

‘It’s all right. I guess we can handle this . . . can’t we?’ I bent down and put my arms around her. ‘But I don’t ever want to hear about you spiking your orange juice again. Ever. Even when you’re twenty-five!’

Lexi dried her eyes, shrugged, and with a mouthful of egg said, ‘Yeah.’

I wanted to gag, couldn’t think straight. I’d been out drinking while my thirteen-year-old daughter was at home doing the same thing. Clearly, my mothering skills left a lot to be desired.

I watched as Lexi wolfed down the remainder of her egg. At least she didn’t appear to be suffering any after-effects. I leaned against the kitchen bench in a daze, my legs barely able to support me, until Lexi bounded past me and out of the room.

‘Mum, how do you spell *ignoramus*?’ Angus said, walking up to me with an open exercise book in his hand. My mind was blank. ‘For school,’ he prompted.

I couldn't answer. I was thinking about Lexi, my car, Graeme and my acute embarrassment. I had kissed Graeme. How could I have, especially when my little girl was at home being force-fed chillies in a foolish attempt to sober her up? And what about Matthew?

'I guess I need to order a cab.'

'I can drive you, Kate,' Mum said.

'Where's your car?' Lexi asked, walking into the kitchen at the same time as Mum.

'At work. Engine trouble,' I lied. 'Have you apologised to Nanna?'

'Sorry, Nan.'

'I know you are, sweetie,' said Mum, kissing her softly on the forehead. Again, if I'd have done that as a teenager, I would have been whipped off to boarding school quick smart. 'You had me worried, that's all.'

That's all! Was this the same woman who grounded me for a month when I was fourteen because I drank half a glass of spumante at a cousin's wedding?

After Lexi left the room, I said to Mum, 'Thanks for the offer of a lift but I'll catch a cab if you can take the kids to school for me. And thanks for being here these last few days. I'll pick Angus up from soccer this afternoon.'

'Remember, you've got Robyn's antenatal class tonight.'

'Do I?' I vaguely remembered her having to reschedule because of my new job but it was a hazy recollection.

'I can ring her if you're not up for it.'

I touched Mum's hand. 'Thanks, but I'll be fine.' Except I wasn't. I felt like crying. I didn't want to work in an office surrounded by other people all day, every day. It was hard always thinking about what to say next. Making sure you sounded

intelligent, knowledgeable. Being on your best behaviour at all times. Being careful not to offend anyone, ever. Toeing the company line, no exceptions. Saying no to after-work drinks, not getting drunk or kissing your boss. I wasn't cut out for it. My head was spinning. I was hungover, embarrassed. But I knew the sooner I saw Graeme and cleared the air, the sooner I'd feel better.

Better was probably not the right word . . . less wretched.

So far so good, I thought, as I walked into the foyer. I had taken several Nurofen and was holding a large skinny cappuccino. It was eight forty-five am, a perfectly respectable hour to arrive at work. I walked up the stairs, past the offices and into the studio.

'Hey,' said Mara. She walked over to me and handed me my job sheet. 'I'd watch out. Graeme's on the war path, *again*.'

'Really? Is he here?'

'No, he called from the car. So much for our bonding session last night.'

Inwardly, I cringed as I tried to remember. My recollection was that Mara stayed for dinner and then went home.

'Good night?'

Confident that my behaviour was acceptable up to that point, I said, 'Yeah. It was fun.'

'It's just the next morning you have to worry about, hey?'

What did she mean by that? Did Mara know? Had Graeme told her?

I looked at the list as I walked back out of the studio and into the kitchen ready to complete my first job of the day, making Graeme's coffee. I was a bloody chore whore, that's all I was! I knew my job revolved around me working to save Graeme time, but why couldn't he buy his own coffee from Tribeca across the

street like everyone else or, better yet, plunge his own? Maybe he wouldn't still expect it after last night. Maybe from now on I'd be relieved of coffee-making responsibilities.

'You go, girl.' I swung around. It was Coco. 'You and the big guy were certainly getting into it when I left last night.'

'Pardon?' I was horrified.

'Did you have a good time? I was worried about dumping you with Graeme, but boyfriend calls, I run. You and Gra-Gra were having a right old laugh. I told you he had a way with the ladies. Check ya.'

Without waiting for a reply, she walked out, the happy click of her high heels echoing down the corridor.

It was going to be okay. It wasn't yet nine o'clock but at least I'd seen Coco and Mara. They seemed fine. It wasn't like I had taken my clothes off and tapdanced on table tops. I sipped my coffee, rubbed my aching head and walked back into the studio.

I sat at the utilities bench and reread Graeme's note. Curt. Short. No niceties to indicate that last night had meant anything to him. Good. I didn't want our relationship to change. Excuse me, was I still drunk? What relationship?!

'Kate, you okay?'

I looked up. It was Fern.

'Sorry I left last night when you were in the middle of telling me about Matthew – I didn't realise things were so bad. But I had to be home by eight. You know how it is.'

'I'm sorry if I chewed your ear. I didn't mean anything by it,' I said, hoping I sounded plausible. I couldn't exactly remember our conversation. 'Birthday anxiety, I guess.'

'Still, I'm worried about the extra pressure I've put on you by talking you into taking this job. If it's all too much I'll understand. I know how difficult it is to juggle work and

family.’ This coming from Superwoman. I felt ashamed. Fern could manage *Delicious Bites* and Graeme, as well as several other magazines and two extra children. What on earth had I said to her over dinner?

‘And working with Graeme? He is prone to brain explosions . . .’

‘Understatement.’

‘You will tell me if something’s not right?’

‘Of course.’

‘So, we’re still on for Saturday night?’

I looked at her blankly.

‘You, me, Terry and Matthew? Dinner, my house?’

I vaguely remembered making dinner plans. I quickly agreed and Fern departed.

I tried to relax. No-one had seen what happened between Graeme and me last night, so now all I had to do was slog through the initial embarrassment with him and move on from this unfortunate business.

I busied myself checking the white balance and aimlessly waving around the exposure meter, waiting on tenterhooks for Graeme to walk in. Despite my hangover, I felt a growing sense of frustration that I wasn’t the one taking the photos. Yes, I was assisting Graeme, doing all the set-ups and taking the test shots, but I wasn’t the genius snapping the button.

Finally, I heard his voice.

Hurrying into the kitchen, I turned the kettle on and watched, willing the water to boil faster. Checking his cup was clean (for the tenth time) and that the sugar cubes had not dissolved, I turned to the plunger. Were exactly three level tablespoons of ground coffee sitting at the bottom? Check. I tapped the kettle. He walked straight past the kitchen and into the studio. He said something to Mara but I couldn’t distinguish the words.

Carelessly, I sloshed two and a half cups of boiling water into the plunger and was away.

I walked into the studio just as Mara walked out. Graeme and I were alone in the studio together. The moment of truth.

'Hi, Graeme,' I said brightly, and placed his coffee in front of him. He grunted and continued inspecting the test shots. Excuse me? Was he ignoring me? I waited a bit longer. 'I've finished everything on the list.' Nothing. He didn't even look at me. What exactly did he have to be ashamed about? It's not as if he had a wife and two children. 'Everything okay?' I persisted.

'Listen, babe, I know you want me and hey, I wish I felt the same, really. If I could help you out I would, but it's not happening for me.'

'But –' I was outraged. Wanting him to *help me out* was absolutely the last thing on my mind.

'Easy, tiger. You won't get me to change my mind by throwing a tantrum and pouting. It's not going to happen. You're nice enough but you're not my type. What's the line from that movie? Oh yeah: *I'm just not that into you*. So how about you clean these lenses?'

I looked at Graeme and said, 'Thanks, but I'd rather hammer nails into my skull,' except no sound came out. Humiliation pulsed through every vein in my body. I felt worthless and pathetic. Not to mention mortified that Graeme could think that a) I was attracted to him, and b) I actually wanted to sleep with him. I was the one who had made the mistake. I was the one who'd responded to the inappropriate attention he'd paid me.

Ten minutes later, Matthew called. It was my lucky day.

'I called you a couple of times last night. Did you have a good birthday? Pip said you went out with people from work.'

'Fern,' I replied.

'How's Lexi?'

'Lexi?'

'Yes, Lexi . . . our daughter.' Mum told. He knew something. He was going to kill me. My life was ruined. 'Kate, what's the matter with you? Your mum told me Lexi was too sick to come to the phone last night. Did you take her to the doctor's? Is she all right?'

'She's fine. A slight tummy bug. She went to school happily enough this morning.'

'Nothing else?'

If you really want to know, I got pissed last night and made an idiot of myself while Lexi was at home showing off to her friends by skolling vodka and orange. 'Nothing else. We miss you.'

By three o'clock, I'd had enough of fixing viewpoints, arranging lights and positioning props like pumpkins, soup tureens and ladles. I had an involuntary twitch. All day I'd worked to avoid being alone with Graeme, but as I was getting ready to leave, he walked in and screamed, 'The fucking fluorescent lights are tinting the set with a vomitous shade of green,' and walked out again. So I spent the next hour sniffing back tears and lugging huge plastic diffusers into place to create an even light on set.

By the time I left the studio, I was exhausted. Matthew was coming home tomorrow and I was a nervous wreck. I needed to go to bed. But first I had to pick Angus up from soccer practice and make it through the dinner, bath and homework tantrums. And then there was Robyn's antenatal class tonight as well.

'Hey, buddy, what did you get up to at school?' I asked Angus as we drove home from the soccer grounds.

'Stuff.'

‘Any advance on *stuff*?’

‘Nup.’

‘Good day, then?’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Random.’

That little catch-up session went well.

At home, there was no sign of Mum, but after a quick tour of the house I discovered Lexi and Hunter kissing enthusiastically by the pool. She was supposed to be at the library finishing an assignment on Greek mythology. I looked at my watch. It was four forty. She wouldn’t have been expecting me home till after five.

Teenage girls are sneaky. Sneaky, obnoxious and devious.

Other things I know about motherhood:

1. It’s permanent (i.e. for the rest of your life permanent).
2. You will be an embarrassment to your child at one point or another.
3. Your children will be an embarrassment to you at one point or another.
4. You will be hated on and off for the rest of your life.

‘I hate you, Mum,’ said Lexi after I asked, or rather demanded, that Hunter go home and I’d confiscated her phone and iPod.

‘Thank you, darling. I’m thinking of getting video monitors installed in strategic locations around the house and garden.’

‘You would do something evil like that, wouldn’t you, just to make my life more miserable than it already is.’

I wouldn’t actually. Far too expensive.

‘How could you embarrass me like that in front of *him*? I hate you!’

‘So you’ve told me. Twice.’

‘Everyone will laugh at me.’

‘What do you mean?’ She didn’t answer me. ‘Lexi, you shouldn’t be kissing boys at your age.’

‘You don’t understand. Hunter’s my boyfriend. The *right* kind of boyfriend.’

‘He’s your boyfriend now? A week ago he was only a friend.’

‘When I’m with Hunter, the other girls don’t treat me badly.’

‘Who’s treating you badly?’

‘No-one. Leave me alone.’

‘Last night you get drunk, this afternoon I find you kissing Hunter. What next? You’re a choir girl, for God’s sake!’

‘What’s wrong with kissing? Juliet was only thirteen.’

‘Lexi! I don’t care about the other girls in your class. This is about you and your behaviour!’

‘Juliet, as in *Romeo and Juliet*.’

My daughter had dibs on being superior. *Romeo and Juliet*! For goodness’ sake, it was a complete and utter tragedy and all because some adolescent infatuation was elevated to the status of sacred love. I racked my brain. Surely Juliet was older. Though, from memory, she was only thirteen, albeit two weeks shy of her fourteenth birthday.

‘And look where immature, blind passion led her! Didn’t turn out too well, did it?’

‘So you’re telling Dad?’

There was no way I was telling Matthew, because if I told him about Lexi, I’d have to admit that I was out till all hours and didn’t bother checking my phone even though Mum rang six times and left four frantic messages. I was a bad mother; a neglectful mother.

What was Lexi thinking?

What was I thinking?



‘She looks different,’ I said to Robyn as we drove to her antenatal class. ‘It’s not just her hair either. I’m not saying she’s had sex, heaven forbid. I’m just saying that it’s obvious her brand-new body parts are having an effect on her – and her boyfriend. It’s all happening so quickly. I’m having a hard time dealing with it.’

‘What does Matthew say?’

‘You think I’d talk to Matthew about this? Are you crazy?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘I’m being serious. I don’t think it would be wise to tell Matthew about it just yet. Besides, he’d blame me for it.’

‘He wouldn’t blame you. It’s not your fault. Lexi’s different to you.’

‘You can say that again. She and her friends know how to whip a condom onto a banana. Imagine doing that when you were thirteen!’

‘Me, sure, but you? Never.’

‘Everything’s changed, Rob. I’m falling behind. I wasn’t even at the head of the pack to start with. Even in *Girlfriend* magazine, Lex can learn the finer points about foreplay and sexual intercourse, which is why I don’t let her read it.’

‘She’ll find out anyway. I got a good lesson on anal sex the other night thanks to *Sex and the City* repeats.’

‘You’re really helping. I’ve even banned *Video Hits* on Sunday mornings, much to Matthew’s annoyance.’

At the hospital, Robyn and I sat with eight other couples in the conference room waiting for our session to begin. We’d seen the waiting rooms, labour rooms, maternity rooms, bathrooms, nursery, the stirrups and rubber boots. Robyn had stuffed plastic babies through plastic pelvic bones and almost fainted. We’d watched birthing videos where she *had* fainted. We’d done

breathing exercises, back massages, squatted, flopped into beanbags, crawled about like dogs, and learned about alternative pain relief. And that's where I drew the line.

'My advice is drugs. Take a lot of drugs,' I told her.

But Robyn hadn't been a fan of the drug option. Right up until she caught sight of the vacuum cleaner with the toilet-plunger attachment in antenatal class four. After that, she was close to agreeing with me. It took most of the two hours in class five, however, to convince her that when push came to shove, so to speak, a little epidural probably never hurt anyone. And that was nothing compared to Robyn's reaction when she saw the forceps.

'I'm going to be ripped apart!'

'Most probably,' I agreed.

You'd think Robyn and I would have bonded with at least a couple of people in our group while on this traumatic and intimate journey, but no. Up until a couple of weeks ago, they'd assumed Robyn and I were lovers and so had excluded us from their mid-session coffee banter. It was only after they found out that we were sisters that everyone guffawed and welcomed us into their tight little group. They then proceeded to tell us their wretched life histories. I liked it better when they assumed we were lesbians. Now, because of my new job, we'd been thrown in with a completely new group again.

I feigned interest as Nurse Julie explained the finer points of mastitis on the whiteboard but my mind wandered.

Did Angus remember to take his leaf project to school? Why did Lexi destroy her hair? What was Matthew doing down in Melbourne? Why did Mum have dinner with *that* man? I wonder what it would be like having Arnaud suck my nipples and massage my naked body? And then I thought back to last night and a wave of humiliation and despair swept over me.

‘Katie,’ Robyn said, snapping her fingers at me. ‘Everyone else is taking notes.’

I looked around at the heads down, busy fingers writing. ‘First timers. You’ll be fine,’ I said, patting her knee.

Nurse Julie looked like she’d never had intercourse in her life. I bet she wouldn’t care whether or not she orgasmed. I doubt she even had children.

When I got home, Angus was asleep. Lexi was asleep. And Mum was in a hurry to get back to her own house. I didn’t want to know why.

I took myself off for a long hot bath and immersed myself in bubbles. It was several minutes before I realised there were tears streaming down my face, due to the Graeme fiasco, the state of my marriage . . . Lexi and the venom in her voice when she told me she hated me.

Lexi was three years old the first time she told me. It was the middle of the night and she’d staggered into our bed half asleep, warm and smelling of strawberry shampoo. She crawled in under the blankets and as I reached out to pull her close she pushed me away, yelling, ‘Get away, Mummy, I hate you.’ Then she kicked her legs into my stomach and threw herself on top of Matthew. He didn’t stir but I’ll never forget that night.

I had to face facts. I was getting older. My little girl was no longer little. She stood at one hundred and sixty-five centimetres, only two centimetres shorter than me . . . okay, we were the same height.


She was no longer mine, not that I’m saying I ever owned her. But she used to look at me with a modicum of love and respect; now there was only distaste, distrust and anger.

What happened to the girl in pink leotards with pigtails and pink ribbons?

Then there was Matthew. What used to be a slow creeping distance between us was fast becoming a gaping chasm.

I lay in the bath wondering what I could do to escape, leave everything behind and get out. If I lived to be seventy, and I was optimistic enough, on a good day, to believe that I would, then I had lived half of my life already. There were still many more years ahead of me and I hadn't a clue what to do with them. If I was ever to win awards for my photography, publish said award-winning photos, trek the Himalayas, or own a fabulous gallery full of my award-winning photography, time was running out. I needed to be getting on with it.

Instead, I was still dreaming the dreams I had in my head from long ago. They weren't coming true and I doubted they ever would. They were the dreams of a young and idealistic woman who imagined living her life in a perfect bubble of happiness with her husband and children, pursuing her creative ambitions, and cocooned from life's harsh realities and disappointments.



I woke up before the alarm went off feeling that this was the beginning of the end of my life. I was having a midlife crisis. I had to be. I felt unattractive, had zero energy, couldn't jog fifty metres without my legs aching, my kids hated me . . . I hated me.

What was there not to have a crisis about?

At least that would account for my ridiculous behaviour with Graeme.

I'd recently read that the five signs of a midlife crisis include:

1. Uncharacteristic thoughts, including feelings of entrapment, anger, depression, boredom, anxiety and dissatisfaction – all of the above, thanks. I wanted to run away and start a new life. I felt like a prisoner, a caged animal. Don't get me started on anger – the neighbours, their dogs, our hedges, the plumbing . . . there was a long list.
2. Constant inner questions, such as, *What do I want to do for the rest of my life?* and *Who am I?* – another tick. I was always

having those thoughts except I asked them with several #\$\$%*# expletives thrown in.

3. Difficulties with work and relationships. Another thumbs-up. Everyone in my family drove me insane. I hated work.
4. Emotional outbursts. Hell, yes!
5. Showy behaviours, such as flirting and affairs. *EEK!*

Thankfully, I had the prospect of a brisk morning walk to distract me. I even took off my pyjamas and dressed in appropriate exercise gear so that by the time Diane opened the front gate, I was outside the house and jogging on the spot. Well, perhaps not jogging but at least I was awake and upright.

‘I don’t want to do this but I will.’ I forced a smile in the dark. ‘I’m here for you.’

‘Great,’ Di said flatly as we walked out my front gate and trekked up the street.

‘I don’t know how you do it, Di, working full time, five kids. I’m not coping with work at all and mine’s only a temp job. Plus, I made the mistake of getting drunk on Wednesday night . . .’ I hesitated, unsure whether to tell her about Graeme and the kiss, but decided to keep it to myself. Diane had her head down and was walking at a frightening pace. ‘And the office politics! But at least I get to see the gorgeous Arnaud.’

‘That’s nice,’ she said, her tone subdued.

‘Then last night, at Robyn’s antenatal class –’

‘I’m pregnant.’

‘Shit.’ I stopped in the middle of the street and looked at her silhouette in the darkness. ‘But what about the vasectomy?’

‘The pregnancy predates the op.’ Di started walking again.

‘How many months?’

‘Two, two and a half maybe. Of all the fucking stupid things in my life to have happened.’

‘What . . . have you thought about . . . options?’

‘Yeah. No. I . . . I don’t know. The whole reason Brent had the vasectomy is because we don’t want any more children.’ Diane sniffed. ‘It’s a fuck-up. A really bad fuck-up.’

Again, I considered telling her about Graeme, to show her that she wasn’t the only one who’d fucked up, but it didn’t seem appropriate. Di didn’t want to talk anymore so we walked the last three kilometres in companionable silence.

‘I’ll ring you,’ I called to her as she opened her front door.

Back home, there were beds to make, animals to feed and children to find. They were out there, somewhere in the house, waiting. Just waiting to antagonise me. Given the shock of Diane’s news, my midlife crisis could wait. I’d fucked up. Move on. Kissing Graeme wasn’t the smartest thing I’d ever done but neither was drunkenly mooning a police officer when I was twenty-three. At the time I was mortified – once the hangover kicked in and I woke up to find myself inside a police station holding cell. I never thought I’d live that one down, but I did. You move on. Life’s crap one minute and then not so crap an hour later.

As a rule of thumb, I believe it takes roughly six weeks for the horror of a crisis to work its way through and pass. I can’t remember what I was worrying about six weeks ago but I’ll bet I was having dramas. Now, six weeks on, those old dramas have been forgotten and I’ve got new ones to work with. In time, these current dramas would fade. Though I’ll admit the kissing incident was a major departure from my normal daily activities.

‘Mum, the retard’s whacking me.’ Lexi’s voice could pierce a balloon. I heard a whack, then a thud, a scream, associated

crying and a door slam. I climbed out of the shower, wrapped a towel around myself and walked down the stairs to the sound of someone banging on the kitchen door. Lexi was nowhere to be seen. I opened the door. It was Angus, shivering and crying.

‘Mum, she hit me,’ Angus screamed, then picked up a punnet of pansies and flung them across the courtyard, narrowly missing the cat. What parallel universe was I living in? Since when had Gus turned into a snarling, two-headed monster? I thought that honour was exclusively reserved for Lexi.

‘She hit me. Hard!’

‘Angus, leave the plants alone. Tell me what happened. Did you hit her first?’

‘No.’ I could tell he was lying because Angus is a very bad liar. His whole face twitched, convulsing, as he desperately tried to think of a way out of it. Sensing he was in trouble, he took off down the backyard, screaming, ‘I hate this horrible family.’ Cheers. Why had I let my mother leave last night?

‘Mum, tell me he was adopted at birth. He really can’t be my brother, seriously.’

‘Seriously, Lexi, he is your brother and you’re old enough to know better. Why don’t you walk away when he starts annoying you?’

‘Because I’d be in London by now, that’s why. He’s so gay!’

‘You’re so gay!’ Angus roared as he stripped leaves off the gardenias.

Next door, the two dogs were going ballistic, throwing themselves at the fence, which was going to come crashing down any second.

‘Everything all right over there?’ Great. Meddlesome Margaret. ‘That’s an awful lot of noise for so early in the morning. Peter

and I are trying to enjoy a quiet cup of tea and we can't hear ourselves think over the racket.'

'Everything's fine, Margaret,' I said as I grabbed Angus by one hand and twisted his ear with my other hand. 'Get. In. Side. NOW!' I hissed through gritted teeth. I pushed him inside and slammed the door. 'As if I haven't got better things to do with my life than pander to you two every second of every day.'

'Where are my shoes?' Lexi demanded, ignoring me. 'They were there last night,' she said, pointing to the middle of the kitchen floor.

'Freezer.'

'What?'

'I've told you before. You leave things lying around and I'll put them in the freezer.'

At work, the excited conversation buzz in the kitchen was deafening.

'What's up?' I asked Coco.

'You'll never believe it. Mara has taken stress leave. No-one knows when she'll be back.'

'Really? Why?'

'Well, people are speculating, as you do . . .' Coco said, toying with me, 'that it's because of Graeme – the bullying, the fighting, the constant niggling. I dunno. I think something might have happened at the pub the other night, too.'

'Really?' Panic set in. This wasn't going well at all. It was one thing to gossip. It was an entirely different story if the gossip possibly involved me. I feared the worst.

'Yeah. There's a whisper going around but it can't be true. It just can't be.'

'What? Tell me!' I shrieked, losing all sense of calm.

‘It’s hearsay, but some of us think that Graeme and Mara have a thing going and that the fighting is just part of their insane passion for one another.’

‘What? Graeme and Mara are having an affair?’

Coco hesitated. ‘Could be. But I reckon something happened the other night to change all that. We’ll find out soon enough. Meanwhile, I’ll keep my investigative ear to the ground. Let me know if you hear anything.’

‘Sure, okay.’ I walked into the studio and stood at my table, staring at the blinding white wall and thinking. Coco had spilled the speculative beans on Mara and Graeme, and those beans didn’t include me, so was I obliged to report to her anything new I heard? Was I in gossip debt?

Fern stopped by the studio barely five minutes later. ‘Have-you-seen-Graeme-this-morning-Kate?’ she asked without taking a breath.

I shook my head.

Fern glanced around the studio. ‘Well, that’s just great. I suppose you’ve heard.’

‘That Mara’s taken stress leave? Is it true?’

Fern nodded. ‘Those spats I thought were all part of the flow of creative energy are apparently real. They hate each other.’

‘But I heard . . .’

‘What? What did you hear?’

‘Nothing. Just that Graeme and Mara . . .’

‘Oh the affair? I heard that too, but Graeme assures me they’re not. Besides, he’d be stupid to do that, here of all places. He told me that there’s nothing going on between them, and I believed him. But now I think . . . well, I guess it could be true. Regardless, it means we’re in trouble. I need Mara. Almost as much as I need Graeme.’

It occurred to me that maybe Mara and Graeme could be having an affair and that Mara had seen Graeme and me together at the pub the other night. There was something about that night I couldn't put my finger on. It was at the back of my head hiding in an alcohol-induced haze. Or was it? My real and fantasy lives seemed to be colliding. One minute, I'm imagining cavorting with Arnaud and Graeme in the Turkish bathhouse just down the corridor, the next I'm actually kissing Graeme at the pub? I needed to pull myself together, and quickly.

'Graeme. Thank God.' Fern grabbed Graeme's arm.

'Whoa, easy girl,' he said, shaking himself free and grinning.

'Haven't you heard?'

'About Mara? I've heard. So she's pissed at me. She'll come around. She always does.'

'I'm not sure, Graeme. Not this time. I think you've pushed her too far.'

'So get another editor.'

'Hell, Graeme, it's not that easy. Mara is more than a bloody editor. She is a chef. She has cachet. We can't just replace her like that.' Fern snapped her fingers. She looked genuinely concerned. Fern was flappable after all. 'Besides, she's scheduled to appear on *Celebrity MasterChef* in three weeks. Imagine the publicity the magazine will get from that!'

'We get enough publicity because of who *I* am,' Graeme huffed.

I took a tape measure and checked the distance from the bowls to the camera and the edge of the carpet to the tripod, then looked at them through the viewfinder in the hope that I would magically disappear. Then I stared out the window at the only greenery I could see – a lone rubber plant, spindly and in desperate need of water – across the road at the entrance of Tribeca café.

Fern looked over at me. 'Kate, thank goodness you're here. We need you.'

Jesus! Why? All I was doing was shifting furniture. Anyone could do that. I might have been setting up the shots but I wasn't the one taking the photos.

'I'm not sure about that,' I said. 'Food photography's a bit out of my league. Perhaps I have taken on a bit more than I can handle.' Especially after Lexi dissolved into tears at having to wear frozen shoes to school.

'No, you haven't. In fact, Graeme and I were going over the preliminary shots for this month's issue last night,' said Fern.

Graeme held up several proof sheets in his hands. 'I don't often compliment anyone, but I couldn't think of anything negative to say about these.'

'You're a natural. Always have been, Kate.' Fern looked over to where Mara was normally stationed and shook her head. 'Some problems are more easily solved than others.' She turned and walked out of the studio with Graeme trailing close behind.

A while later, Coco asked me again if I'd heard any more. I told her I hadn't.

'I still can't believe she's going out with him.'

'It might not be true,' I replied.

'So how do you explain all the aggro between them?'

'Maybe they do hate each other.'

'I guess,' replied Coco, eyeing me suspiciously.

It was as if Coco knew I was withholding information. I could barely look at her.

It was three o'clock before I remembered that today was Angus's athletics carnival. I made it just in time to hear the team war cries and school song. But I took lots of photos. In years to come, Angus

would believe I was there for the whole day. I congratulated him on his two second-place ribbons.

‘Did you see me, Mum? I rocked.’

‘Sure did, sweetheart,’ I lied. ‘You were brilliant.’

‘Welcome home,’ I said to Matthew that evening and kissed him. It was nice to have him home. Now things could get back to normal.

‘Thanks, hon. Big week.’ He sighed and flopped on the lounge. My eyes quickly scanned the room. Newspaper scattered across the floor, empty chip packet on the coffee table, milk carton on the kitchen bench. Lid off. All the animals in the house, lounging around. Yep, getting back to normal. The normal everyday chaos.

‘So how was it?’ I asked, trying to engage him as his eyes practically rolled to the back of his head.

‘The Melbourne office is a mess. It took me three days just to sort out the overdue tenders. I had performance review meetings with all the staff. They still don’t get it. You’d think they’d never heard of the global financial crisis. I didn’t finish half of what I wanted to get done. But I did manage to book a restaurant for the two of us tomorrow night to celebrate your birthday and new job.’

My birthday. I’d forgotten about that. At least I’d tried to. While I was kissing another man, Matthew was organising a romantic dinner for us. I was definitely a bad person.

‘Thank you,’ I said, edging myself closer towards him. ‘But Fern’s invited us over tomorrow night.’ Matthew seemed to have dozed off. I nudged him slightly. ‘If you’re so busy, why don’t you create another position? Divide your workload?’

Matthew shook his head. 'Have you read the papers? You know how tight business is. Besides, I don't mind the work most of the time.'

What could I expect from a man who had a sign hanging on his office wall that read *I love Mondays*.

'But I'm exhausted. I've had a splitting headache ever since our argument the other day,' he said, rubbing his temple. 'Hope it's nothing more serious, but you never know.'

I sat down beside him and massaged his head. When it came to illnesses, Matthew leant to the hypochondriac side of the swing. Having a headache was Matthew's code for, *I have an inoperable brain tumour and less than three months to live*.

One time, I rushed him to hospital in the middle of the night because he was in agony wailing that he was dying of stomach cancer. Turned out, it was constipation. Then there were times, usually accompanied by the onset of summer and the arrival of a new mole, when Matthew whipped himself into a frenzy over skin cancer. God give me strength when he turns forty-five and conversation turns to prostate cancer.

I hoped he didn't develop a sniffle – one sneeze and he'd convince himself he was dying from Swine Flu.

'How's Lexi?' he asked. 'I haven't seen her yet.'

'Still bald, but we're coping.' I neglected to mention the binge-drinking session and the kissing incident.

'So she's settled down?'

'Hmm.' I nodded.

'At least we can stay home tonight and watch the footy, maybe order in curries – just what I need,' he said with a huge grin.

'Yeah, I'd like nothing better than that.' I love football, especially five hours straight on a Friday evening. 'But I promised we'd go to Mum's for a belated birthday dinner.'

‘Haven’t you spent the whole week with her?’

‘Look, I don’t want to go either but I promised. Besides, Dad will be there.’

‘Your dad? I thought you said they’d have to cart you away in a wooden box before you’d agree to see him again?’ Matthew and I had been together fifteen years and he’d never met my father. I guess he thought he’d escaped that particular family introduction forever.

‘Yes, I did, Matt, but it’s complicated. It’s just better to get on with it. See him, and then come home.’

Matthew stared at me with a look that said, *Honey, your family is really peculiar. Is your mum really seeing your dad again after all these years? And if so, do I really have to witness it?* Well, yes, you do. If I have to suffer through this evening so do you.

‘But the Roosters are playing.’

We arrived at Mum’s promptly at seven without too much squawking. Even Lexi, who never normally wants to go out with the family because it’s *way too embarrassing*, was thrilled, and dressed inappropriately for the occasion in a black midriff-baring creation. Angus wasn’t overly keen, but with Nintendo in hand he figured that being at Nanna’s was almost the same as being at home, except with a different fridge full of food.

Obviously, Matthew would rather have been at home snuffling through the sports pages and preparing himself for tonight’s game, but he’d stepped up and even showered.

And I was feeling relaxed from the glass of wine I’d had in preparation. As luck would have it, I’d read an article in the newspaper, a respectable one, not a gossip rag, about new research published by academics in London. They’d found that *people who drink wine have significantly sharper thought processes than*

teetotallers. That's the spirit! Apparently the benefits of alcohol can be detected when a person drinks up to four or five bottles of wine a week. I'm a winner. And get this: *drinking half a bottle of wine a day can make your brain work better, especially if you're female* – which I am. Isn't that heartening?

On the strength of that, I was determined to be pleasant to everyone. I felt the week had been dramatic enough without me becoming hysterical about seeing my father again. Sure it would be hideous, but after some awkward pleasantries and dinner, we could all go home and resume our respective lives. Eventually, Mum would see that Dad hadn't changed and would chalk it up to experience. In a couple of years, maybe Christmas two years from now, we'd all sit around eating roast turkey and laughing about it while each drinking our obligatory half-bottle of wine.

However, despite my bravado, I was nervous. My legs could barely carry me to Mum's front door. She and Dad must have been watching through the vertical blinds because with several metres still to walk, the front door flew open and there was Mum, looking gorgeous in a cerulean 1960s-inspired pantsuit complete with beading and fringe work. She'd even been to the hairdressers and was sporting highlights. Mum hadn't had highlights since the late eighties. They'd done a great job.

'Hello, everyone,' she beamed and rushed out to hug us all together at the same time. Somewhat difficult but she managed it, even though she was desperately nervous and shaking.

Then I saw him.

'Katie.' He hugged me tightly.

Mum and Dad, together as a couple, were welcoming us to dinner. It was surreal, like I was caught in some weird *Father Knows Best* television program.

I stepped back from my father's embrace and introduced him to Matthew. Once inside the house, Dad immediately handed him a beer and said, 'What about those damn Broncos?'

Hey presto! Matthew and my father had instantly bonded over football. And I was sure that once football chatter had been exhausted (which wouldn't happen until after football season ended), there would be the state of the economy and lack of rain to discuss. Men.

Midway through a glass of wine, Robyn walked in, dressed in a red caftan with a yellow hibiscus print and multicoloured hair.

'What's this?' I asked.

'Oh, the hair?' she said, twirling blue strands around her index finger. 'I got bored. Needed a change.'

'What?' I said, poking her rotund belly. 'That not a big enough change for you? And what's with the bare feet?'

'If you must know, none of my shoes fit. Not only is my stomach bulging but my feet are also getting fatter by the minute.'

Robyn waffled on about her life or lack thereof, all but ignoring Dad. It was amazing. She was so obsessed by her own perceived woes, Dad's presence barely aroused a flicker of interest.

I excused myself and went into the kitchen in search of Mum.

'Everything okay?' she asked me. 'When you came home in tears the other night, I didn't know what to think.'

'In tears? Which night?'

'Your birthday. You were in a real state.'

That didn't sound right. I vaguely remembered seeing Mum and not really comprehending what she was saying, and then taking a Berocca and falling into bed.

‘It’s all right, love,’ Mum said, wrapping her arms around me. ‘We all make mistakes. Everything will work out, you’ll see.’

‘I’m more worried about you.’ I glanced into the dining room before adding, ‘And Robyn and Lexi, of course.’ I carried the salads to the table and we all sat down.

‘Mum told me you left Nanna and ran off with another woman,’ Lexi said to Dad. ‘Where is she now?’

‘That’s enough, Lexi,’ I said.

‘What? You asked Nanna and said she didn’t know either. I’m only trying to help.’

‘That’s okay, Lexi,’ Dad said. ‘I have always loved your nanna. It’s just that we went our separate ways for a while.’

And? I wanted to say. *Did Miss Inspirational die? Did she get a better job and eclipse you? What?* But that conversation didn’t go anywhere. All eyes were on Robyn.

Lexi turned to me. ‘How come you’re not freaking about *her* hair?’

‘Robyn’s an adult. She can do what she likes with her hair.’

‘Did you know that babies can be born with teeth?’ Robyn spluttered. ‘What’s the story with that? I’m giving up teaching. I’m going to create sculptures instead.’

‘Love, have some water,’ Mum said, getting up from her seat and walking over to Robyn with a full glass. I felt pouring it over Robyn’s head might be more appropriate.

‘So you’re a sculptor, Robbie?’ Dad asked. He had no idea.

‘Not yet, but I’m going to be. I’m going to be an artist and live in a mud-brick house.’

‘A mud-brick house that you’ll build yourself, I suppose,’ I said.

Robyn nodded. ‘Yeah, I’m really psyched about it.’

Everyone just shrugged and went back to eating, except Matthew. He looked bewildered. I knew what he was thinking and this time, I had to agree with him. Maybe my family *was* peculiar.

Dad turned to Mum. ‘What are you thinking about Pippin-Poodle?’

‘About how happy I am that everyone can be here with us tonight, Bobby-Boy,’ Mum answered with a faraway look in her eye.

Who were they talking to? Their pet dogs? They weren’t holding hands but still did a great impression of lovesick teenagers. Every time Dad opened his mouth, Mum giggled and flirted. It was embarrassing.

Then it was Lexi’s turn to hold court. ‘I want to be taken seriously at school. That’s why I cut my hair off.’ She had managed to charm both Dad and Matthew into believing that she was bald only to avoid being mistaken for an airhead.

‘And Pop, you wouldn’t believe the random school sport colours. I mean seriously, who ever made up the colour yellow is gay. They *so* need a bullet. It’s *so* not flattering at all.’

Robyn looked like she might burst into tears. ‘Yellow’s better than lime!’

I sat at the table dumbfounded. While Lexi explained to the table the hardships of peer group pressure, Mum guffawed like a fool.

‘I’m escaping all that friend bullshit by building a mud-brick house in the country,’ Robyn said. ‘My friends are all completely bizarre, anyway. I’ll have new ones soon enough.’

I was surrounded by idiots. At least Angus had the good sense to put his head down and play his DS. Meanwhile, Matthew

drank beer and stared wistfully at the television in the adjoining lounge room.

Mum was now holding Dad's hand.

I felt miserable. Miserable because they looked so happy. Mum was blissfully unaware of the fate that was to befall her when Dad left her for the second time. For the moment though, they were simply merry morons. Sure, they'd been divorced a hundred years and were virtual strangers, but that didn't stop them.

Then they kissed.

After an eternity, Mum and Dad pulled their faces away from each other and smiled contentedly. Dad clinked his glass against Mum's, just like in countless American movies where the father, as head of the family, says he has an important, life-changing announcement to make. Then Dad actually said, 'Thanks for coming tonight. Your mother and I would like to say –' and when he looked at Mum, I knew.

Finally, I realised what this evening was all about. Dad was riddled with cancer. He was about to die. It was the only logical conclusion. Dad had decided it was time to come clean and tell us what was truly going on. *I only have three months to live and your mother, through the kindness of her heart, has agreed to take care of me during my final days.* It all made sense. Hallelujah!

'– we're getting married again.'

'Pardon?'

'Katie, your dad and I are getting married. What do you think?'

I couldn't believe my ears. 'So you're not dying? Of cancer?'

'No.' Dad gave me a strange look.

'In three weeks' time we'll be married, won't we, Bob?'

'You betcha, Pippy.'

'Aren't you going to congratulate us?' Mum said.

‘Congratulate you!’ I leapt up out of my chair. ‘Of all the ridiculous things to do, why do you have to get married?’ I was circling the table, couldn’t stop pacing. ‘It didn’t work out the first time, remember.’

‘It did. We were married eighteen years.’

‘Yes, eighteen years – twenty years ago. You’ve been divorced longer than you were married. Why do you want to tie yourself down again?’

‘I don’t see it like that, Katie. I love your father and he loves me. We want to be together. We want to be married again and we *are* getting married, whether or not you agree with it.’

Strangely, as I was having the conversation with Mum, I imagined the exact same scenario being played out with Lexi in a matter of years – Lexi defiantly standing before me, saying, ‘*I’m in love with Spike/Zac/Hunter (insert appropriate name). We want to be together. We are getting married.*’ It gave me chills. I couldn’t see any good reason for Mum to marry again. I mean, what did she have in mind? A minister? A reception at the local RSL? Speeches? Bridesmaids? The whole shebang?

Then, to my horror, I quickly found out.

‘Lexi, darling, I’d love for you to be my bridesmaid.’ The words were out there, hanging, for the entire world to hear before I could catch them, put my hand over Mum’s mouth and shoot her, or at least kick her very hard in the shins or head. I was numb.

Seconds later, Dad said, ‘Angus, your nanna and I would like you to be our ring bearer.’

‘Ring bearer?’ I spluttered. ‘No. No. No.’

‘Can I choose my own dress, Nanna?’

‘Yes, Lexi darling, you can wear whatever you like.’

No. No. No. Why was she saying this? To torment me? To make my life a worse living hell than it already was? I looked around for hidden cameras because surely this was a joke.

‘Mum,’ I said, ‘this has gone far enough.’

‘I really don’t see what all the fuss is about,’ said Mum impatiently, her voice rising with each word. ‘Your father and I are getting married – accept it.’

‘Who asked who?’ I wanted to know.

‘Your father and I discussed it. We’re not teenagers, Katie.’

‘You could have fooled me.’ I glared at Mum, then at Dad.

‘Oohh, I’m going to be a bridesmaid, I’m going to be a bridesmaid,’ Lexi sang.

‘Lex, you’re not going to be a bridesmaid because there isn’t going to be a wedding. Full stop. End of story. Now, please be quiet. I have a headache.’ Which I did. Of all the ridiculous things . . . Mum and Dad remarrying.

‘Seriously, what about my dress? I am going to be Nanna’s bridesmaid.’

‘And remember, I get a ring,’ Angus said. ‘What’s a ring bearer? Do I get lollies?’

‘Shush, both of you.’

‘Look, Katie,’ Dad said finally, ‘if you and Robyn are truly against it, we won’t get married.’

‘Bob!’ Mum shrieked.

‘No, love. If it’s going to upset everybody, then it’s not the right thing to do. The whole idea of us remarrying is to bring the family closer together, not tear us further apart.’

‘That’s the most sensible thing I’ve heard all night,’ I said. ‘Why don’t you just live together and see how that goes? Then, if it works out, maybe in a year or ten, you can think about getting married. How about that?’


Robyn said, 'I'm fine with the wedding bizzo. Go for it. It's not my life. But you'll need to get on with it so that I can book my flight. Did I mention that I'll be building my mud-brick house in Panama?'

'Don't say a word,' I said to Matthew as we walked out to the car a little later. 'Not one word.'

We drove home in silence. Except for a brief moment when Lexi said, 'Tonight wasn't at all like I expected.'

'Quiet, Lexi.'

'Well, it wasn't. Where's Panama?'



‘*M*aybe Robyn’s got the right idea,’ I said to Matthew later that night in bed. ‘Moving to Panama mightn’t be a bad proposition.’

‘I thought she was building a mud-brick house in the country?’

I tuned out and thought about Robyn’s plan – even if she wasn’t having a breakdown, which I suspected she was, taking off to Panama could be the solution to all *my* problems, because I was starting to feel like *I* was on the verge of a major breakdown.

‘I’ve been wanting to talk to you about something,’ said Matthew. ‘An opportunity has come up in Toronto.’

‘An opportunity? What kind of opportunity?’

‘A contract for a year or so . . . give or take.’

‘For you to work over there? Leave us?’

‘Of course not! We’d all go.’

‘What? To Toronto? I don’t think so.’

Relocating reared its ugly head every couple of years. I always managed to beat it off with a stick. This time would be no

different. We'd talked about shuffling off overseas before. Not to Toronto, mind you. Canada was a new destination. Though it would provide a great opportunity to brush up on my French.

'There's the kids' schooling, Mum, Robyn.'

'Kate, you're always putting other people first. Always. Except me. You never put me first. Ever. I'm always way down on your list of priorities.'

'You, Matthew? What about me? When do I get a look-in? It's not as if I'm swinging from the chandeliers having the time of my life. I'm barely hanging on.'

'No matter what I have to say, you always manage to turn the conversation back to you. Your needs. Your requirements. What about me? You won't even listen to me.'

'I am listening. Go to Toronto. Stay there for all I care. It will be one less person I have to deal with at home. And it's not like I'll miss the sex.'

'What sex?'

'Exactly! You want me to uproot the family, move overseas and we don't even sleep together anymore.'

'Why would I want to? You're always angry.'

'That's not true. I'd call it politely indifferent. Anyway, what about you? You're never here, and when you are you're only interested in football.'

'I could say the same about you.'

'I hate football.'

'You're always talking about your mother or Robyn or the kids.'

'Ah, that would be because they're my family. And if you haven't noticed, Angus is having knife nightmares, Lexi has a strange boyfriend, Robyn refuses to believe she's pregnant and Mum is remarrying my father. It's too much. And you're not

even interested in my new job. I don't remember the last time you told me you loved me. I didn't so much as get a card from you on my birthday – and you expect me to move to Toronto with you.'

'You're ranting again. I'm going to sleep.' Matthew rolled over to the other side of the bed as far away and as quickly as he could. And I lay there thinking. Thinking about how it had come to this.

Saturday morning wasn't any better. Matthew wasn't talking to me because of the aforementioned Toronto skirmish (and I think he was also miffed that I'd brought up the unspeakable: sex and lack thereof); Lexi wasn't talking to me because, once again, I had destroyed her life – this time by not letting her be my mother's bridesmaid; and Angus thought that somewhere along the line, he'd been diddled out of sweets.

But even though I was the wife/mother/daughter/sister from hell, it was still up to me to find clean clothes for everyone to wear and tidy the house. I also had to get Angus to soccer on time. Matthew couldn't take him – again. Why? A charity golf tournament with clients. Convenient? I think so.

'What's for breakfast, Mum? I'm starving.'

Cups of tea and juice were banged down on the table and toast was flung in the general direction of plates. The only ones oblivious to the hostility were the marauding animals that lay waiting for whatever scraps fell their way.

'Angus, don't feed Rupert from the table.'

Angus glared at me and kept passing crusts to the panting dog.

'So, you're playing the Cowboys today? I'm sure you'll beat them,' I said, hoping to win back his love.

'I'll come to soccer this morning, Mum,' Lexi chimed in.

'Pardon?'

'Soccer. I'll come. That's okay, isn't it?'

I regarded her suspiciously. Normally on a weekend she was never out of bed before ten, yet here she was, dressed and at the breakfast table at seven fifteen.

'Lexi wants to come because Hunter's brother Rory plays for the Cowboys and we're playing at their home ground,' said Angus. 'Lexi and Hunter kissing in a tree –'

'Angus!' Lexi and I shrieked at the same time.

'Shut up, retardo,' Lexi added.

Dressed in lurid checked golfing trousers, Matthew silently got up from the table, kissed Lexi and Angus and stalked off. No kiss on the cheek for me.

'We're leaving in half an hour,' I said to the kids as I headed upstairs. 'Please clean up your rooms before we go.' I walked past Lexi's room. A piggery. Past Angus's room. Ditto. I wandered into our bedroom, made the bed, picked up Matthew's wet towel and clothes, then showered. My mind was racing, like I was on speed. Not that I'd ever taken speed. I didn't even know where to buy speed. I'm sure Lexi would know. And Hunter, for that matter.

Driving to soccer, the kids listened to their iPods and I had time to think. Like it or not, Mum and Dad would probably get married again. Mum was determined. I'd have to deal with it. Robyn was loopy. There was nothing I could do about that. And Matthew? I wondered if he was serious about Toronto. Perhaps he was just saying it to wind me up further. In hindsight, maybe last night wasn't the best time to mention our nonexistent sex life.

And on top of that we were having dinner at Fern's. I wondered whether Matthew would even go with me. He might have already

booked his flight, leaving me alone to deal with the kids and pets. So much for a pleasant weekend. Yep! Old dramas moved down the list of importance as new ones took their place.

‘A bit dramatic, don’t you think?’ Robyn barked into my mobile as I drove into the car park.

‘Pardon?’

‘Your exit last night? Dramatic.’

‘I was choking.’

‘On cheesecake?’

‘I had to leave. Don’t you think it’s odd – Mum and Dad have been divorced twenty years and now all of a sudden they’re getting married again?’ I turned around to Lexi and Angus. They’d pulled out their earphones and were hitting each other. ‘Would you two please stop slapping each other? I can’t hear myself think.’ I sounded like my mother. My mother when Robyn and I were teenagers and she was still married to Dad.

‘Each to his own,’ Robyn persisted.

‘I don’t know how you can be so blasé. Last night, they were grinning, giggling and holding hands like a pair of love-struck teenagers. Obscene. Finishing each other’s sentences. The nicknames . . . ugh. Nasty. It’s like the last twenty years didn’t happen. But they did, Rob. He’s broken her heart before. What’s to stop him from doing it again?’

‘I have my own dramas.’

‘These are our parents we’re talking about.’

‘I know, but I have other things on my mind.’

‘Like what? A mud-brick house? Panama?’

‘Steady! I’m pregnant.’

My patience with Robyn was wearing thin. ‘We’ll talk about this later,’ I said. I put the phone in my bag and stepped out of

the car. Another freezing Saturday at soccer. Lexi and Angus quickly disappeared into a sea of children and I lost them. But I did see Arnaud.

Despite everything, a wave of relief washed over me as soon as I saw him. I dropped my shoulders, the stress disappeared and I smiled. Okay, so I was mildly infatuated with him.

‘Hey,’ I said and waved. He hadn’t shaved and was looking especially rugged and outdoorsy.

‘Tell me what is happening with you,’ he said, as he pumped up soccer balls.

‘You really don’t want to know.’

He threw a soccer ball at me. ‘Try me.’

‘Okay . . . My mum and dad are getting married again, to each other.’ I bounced the firm ball on the barren oval.

‘But this is wonderful news! The whole family can be reunited.’

‘No, it’s a nightmare. I want to die.’

‘There must be an easier solution?’

‘I guess I could kill them, but then there’s the whole prison thing . . .’

‘*Oui*. The food, the exercise yard, and non-parole period. I do not think it would be so great. So maybe you could accept it?’

‘Pooh to that. They’ve seen each other like three times in twenty years and all of a sudden they’re getting married. Married, for God’s sake! I think they’re rushing it.’

Arnaud put his hand on my shoulder. ‘Maybe, but sometimes you just know.’

‘Sorry, Arnaud. I shouldn’t be dumping this on you, but you did ask.’

‘Please. I am happy for you to dump.’ He went back to pumping air into the black-and-white soccer balls.

'My mum's normally so sensible, so together. Yet when she's with Dad . . . well, the thing is, they look like a couple. A very happy couple, unfortunately,' I said, mesmerised by Arnaud's muscleman arms and hands.

Arnaud stopped mid-pump. 'If it makes you feel better, their euphoria probably won't last more than six months. They will soon be immersed in the unpleasantness of everyday life like the rest of us.'

'I guess . . .'

'Tell me what happened after I left the other night.'

'Oh that?' I said, recoiling at the memory. 'The party fizzed once you left.'

'I do not know about that. You looked to be enjoying yourself. What happened?'

'Nothing.'

Arnaud put his hands on his hips.

'Why? What did you hear?'

'Only that there was a scuffle between Mara and Graeme and she walked out, never to return to *Delicious Bites* again.'

'Well, if they scuffled, I didn't notice it.'

'But?'

'But, yes, Mara has taken stress leave and Fern is concerned about it.'

'And?'

'And nothing, honestly. That's all I know. At the pub everyone seemed to be getting along fine. You would never have known that Graeme and Mara had been fighting earlier in the day and I never would have suspected that they were having an affair. At least that's the rumour.'

'Mara? I thought she would have more style than to make music with 'im.'

'It's only gossip.'

'*Oui*, but some truth, maybe. Grafton has been through most women at Modular. Has he not tried with you?'

'I'm a mother,' I tittered nervously. Time to change the subject. 'Arnaud, you know enough about me and my dysfunctional family to write a book and I know practically nothing about you.'

He stared at me for a second. 'I am very boring and now I must warm up the boys.'

'Okey doke,' I said as he walked away. Who says okey doke, dingbat? (Or dingbat, for that matter?) For a moment I was lost in a world of happiness where only Arnaud and I existed.

'Mum,' Lexi said, walking up beside me. 'You look a bit weird.'

'Lexi, I was wondering where you were.' A straight-out lie.

'You were looking at that guy the same way the girls at school look at Hunter.'

'Lexi, I certainly was not. What are you talking about?'

'You had that faraway look in your eyes that girls who are in love get.'

'Don't be silly.'

'It's just gross, Mum, you're meant to be married.'

'Enough, Lex. You have no idea what you are talking about.' I didn't need Lexi telling me I was gross. Or pathetic. I already knew that.

'I wondered why you got so dressed up this morning.'

'Lexi, I'm not dressed up,' I said, glancing down at myself, shocked to find I was wearing ridiculously inappropriate black suede boots. Come to think of it, I had spent several extra minutes blow-drying my hair and putting on mascara and lipstick. I hadn't even realised. Looking around, I noticed all the other mothers were wearing sneakers. 'Did you find Hunter?'

‘Nope.’

Had I really dressed up for Arnaud? I hadn’t gone out of my way to wear heels and apply makeup this morning. It wasn’t something I’d consciously thought about and conspired to do. But there was no denying I’d made an effort. I put it down to the fact I was working every day. It had become a habit. That was my excuse and I was sticking to it.



‘Welcome, welcome,’ said Fern as she ushered Matthew and me into her home. ‘It’s been too long.’

I’d only met Terry a couple of times, years ago, and barely recognised him when Fern reintroduced her ‘devilishly handsome’ husband to me, mainly because he was bald and had stacked on at least twenty kilos since I’d last seen him.

Her house was picture perfect. I felt like I’d stepped into a *Vogue Living*, French provincial – no, Hamptons – feature. I couldn’t imagine her children getting messy here and spilling Milo on the oriental rugs, or dog hairs littering the cream suede lounge.

In fact, apart from the photos and art work on the fridge it was impossible to believe that four children actually lived here – until they appeared in person wearing gorgeous designer pyjamas. After the introductions, Lily, Rose, Thorn and Leaf (a theme obsession, obviously) disappeared with quiet orderliness. If it were my house, Angus and Lexi would have been interrupting every few minutes with tears and tales of torture.

We settled on the beautiful cream lounge and I spied a photography book on the table. Not just any photography book, however. The photographer was Sarah Stanthorpe – a woman who'd been in my year at college. We weren't friends. She had no friends. I think she might have been bipolar. Anyway, the book was begging to be opened.

'What's this?' I asked Fern, pointing to the publication.

'Thought you'd like that, Kate.'

Like was definitely the wrong word. Having a collection of my photographs published – in full colour, no less – was my dream. My heart sank further with each passing second. It was agony. And Sarah? She had thought she was better than everyone else doing the course and didn't shy away from telling us. She'd undermine my confidence with snide remarks like, *Kate, don't you know anything about film or shutter speeds? Why are you wasting your time and everyone else's?* I couldn't believe all those same feelings of inadequacy were resurfacing now, years later.

'I've been meaning to tell you about Sarah. I was at her book launch last month. Her publishers, Venus, are in the same building as Modular, just upstairs.'

I felt ill. Gulped my shiraz. 'It's big,' I said. Big and thick.

'She's certainly hit the big time,' agreed Fern. 'She was overseas for a few years. These photos are a compilation of her wildlife photography. I think she's planning a themed series – wildlife, beaches, babies . . .'

'Isn't that what you've always wanted to do, Kate?' Matthew said, picking up the book.

'Ha!' I snorted. 'When would I have the time?' I could have killed him. He was right, of course, and I was sick with envy. It should have been me. Sarah wasn't a great photographer; at least she wasn't when I knew her.

‘Sarah’s married and has a couple of kids,’ Fern continued.

I smiled. Yet another superwoman who could do it all and have it all.

‘But just before the launch, she left her husband. She’s dating a twenty-two-year-old landscaper,’ Fern giggled. ‘Can you believe it?’

‘Some people,’ I said, wrenching the book from Matthew’s hands. ‘Not that I’m bitter and twisted.’

‘Not at all,’ Matthew agreed.

I wanted to scream. So Sarah had published a glossy photography book, *My Eye, My Lens*. Despite the shocking title, I wished it was my book sitting on Fern’s coffee table. I was desperate to run off to the bathroom and examine it in all its gory detail, but three sets of eyes were on me, waiting for me to speak. I opened the first page and quickly snapped it shut. I couldn’t do it to myself. Not here. Not in front of Fern.

‘Take it home if you like,’ Fern suggested. ‘Have a close look. You’ll be surprised.’

‘That’s okay,’ I said, putting the unopened book back on the table in front of me.

‘Go on,’ Matthew encouraged. ‘Maybe it will inspire you.’

I didn’t want to talk about it anymore. Sarah was just another person who was a hundred times more successful than I would ever be. *C’est la vie*.

Sarah and Fern were living the dream. Terry obviously doted on Fern. From where I sat, they were the perfect couple living in the perfect home with perfect (and quiet) children. So Terry was a bit fat; I’m sure Fern loved him just the same.

‘Tell me how you’re really getting along at *Delicious Bites*?’ Fern asked as we dined on tender tuna in white bean sauce.

‘I’m enjoying it,’ I lied.

‘Come on. I know food’s not your favourite subject.’

‘It’s a challenge, that’s for sure.’

‘As they say,’ said Fern, ‘if you can shoot food, you can shoot anything. After you finish up, you should get back into serious photography, go out on your own.’

‘I keep telling her that,’ Matthew agreed.

‘It’s something to think about,’ said Fern. ‘But at least while you’re at *Delicious Bites* you’re learning from the best. Graeme’s a creative genius, albeit an eccentric one.’

I nodded. ‘Still, I’d like to be more involved with taking photos rather than just setting them up for him to shoot.’

‘Exactly, which is why you should be out there taking photos. But at the magazine, Graeme is the photographer and you’ve been hired –’

‘As his assistant, I know.’

‘Look,’ Fern said, taking a sip of wine. ‘I know how good your photography is, but the truth is, Graeme doesn’t want the competition. He can be a bit precious.’

‘A *bit*? And don’t you think he’s just a little demented as well?’

‘Don’t know about demented. He’s demanding . . .’ Fern took a moment. ‘And I guess he can be unstable at times.’

‘Doesn’t it make you feel proud to work in an industry where unstable nutcases can still be respected and succeed?’ Terry smirked.

‘I guess,’ I said, remembering the kiss. Why the hell had I allowed Graeme to kiss me like that? Why hadn’t I listened to my inner voice? I’d been wary of Graeme right from the start. That superior attitude, the arrogant manner. So many times I wanted to tell him that he wasn’t that great. But I didn’t. I let him kiss me instead.

I sat at dinner listening to the conversation swirl around me as I searched the deepest recesses of my mind to figure out exactly what had gone on between Graeme and me, but I couldn't remember anything more. So I tried to focus on the current conversation, as Terry and Matthew talked football. 'What about those damn Broncos, hey?' and then the economy: 'What's the bloody government doing?' I listened but felt outside the moment, like one of those people who have near-death experiences and find themselves hovering over their body. My head was spinning.

When we got home, Matthew was keen to prove that we were capable of a sex life, but I couldn't. I was anxious about what might have happened with Graeme and felt too guilty to take advantage of Matthew's new-found libido. So I massaged his back and neck and he was asleep within minutes. Meanwhile, I was wide awake.

Graeme! Technically, if I am to be honest, I kissed him as much as he kissed me. I lunged for him in the pub as all those horrible insecure feelings of loneliness and unattractiveness bubbled to the surface. I'd felt especially alone because it was my birthday and Matthew was away. But that's no excuse. It's pathetic to think that after a few wines I could be swept along and end up pashing and groping him in the back seat of my car.

Or was it a taxi?

Where the hell had that memory sprung from? What car? When? Oh God, it was so much worse than I'd first thought.

I climbed out of bed and began pacing the house, walking from room to room, picking up toys, dog biscuits, sweeping up rabbit droppings, anything I could to avoid going back to bed and thinking about the inevitable: Sarah's book, and the Graeme/car combo that was desperate to dance back into my head. For

some reason, I'd been in the back seat of a car with Graeme and we were . . . well, I can't exactly remember what we were doing. Suddenly, I was feeling very worried . . .

I walked into the study and turned on the computer. It had been three days since I'd checked my emails. There were thirty-four new messages. Without reading them, I deleted twenty-eight dubious ones. The rest were from friends. One was from Matthew.

Katie, hi gorgeous. Sorry I'm away for your birthday. I love you so much. I hate leaving you. It's tough, I miss you. I know it's not easy on you either. Sorry I blew it about Lexi's hair. I know you couldn't have done anything to stop her. She's a teenager. We just have to get used to the fact that she's not always going to behave the way we want her to. Looking forward to spending the whole weekend with you – hope it's not booked out with social engagements. Love you, hon, Matt xxxx

I stared at Matthew's email, tears running down my cheeks, feeling like the biggest bitch ever. I hated myself more than ever. I switched off the computer and crawled into bed. I wriggled over to Matthew and snuggled up to him. He didn't respond. He was sound asleep but it felt good to feel his warmth.

The next thing I knew it was morning and Matthew was walking into the bedroom holding a cup of tea for me. He sat down on the edge of the bed. 'I hate it when we fight. I know you're having a tough time and I haven't been around much lately, but I do love you.'

'I read your email last night, Matt. I am a cold-hearted bitch. I'm sorry.'

'You're not cold-hearted.' He leaned over and kissed me. 'It's just that we don't get enough time alone. Maybe we should plan a holiday, just the two of us. It'd be nice to have a conversation

without being interrupted all the time.’ Matthew kissed me again. ‘I think –’ he said, as the phone started ringing. ‘Just a sec.’ He picked up the phone. ‘Hello,’ he said into the mouthpiece, then passed the phone to me. ‘It’s your mum.’

‘Hi, Mum.’

‘Don’t *hi*, Mum me, Katie. Your behaviour the other night was appalling. I expected an apology from you yesterday.’

‘I was in shock. I’m still in shock. I can’t believe that you’re going through with this.’

‘Is it so wrong of me to want to marry your father again, Kate? Is it? You’re breaking my heart.’

I tried to imagine myself in the same position, if Matthew and I were to reunite, twenty years after our divorce. Would I want to marry Matthew again? I liked the bloke and all, but marrying him again and giving up my freedom? Would I really go through it all again, knowing what it entailed? Sure, Mum didn’t have to go through birth and child-rearing again, but all that extra washing? Snoring? Sharing television rights? It was a tough one.

‘You’re going to have to let it go,’ Matthew said to me later at breakfast. ‘I know you’re upset, but it’s her life.’

‘Upset! Mum was doing fine on her own. She has it all. Independence, financial freedom. She’s a free spirit living the life she wants.’

‘But *she* wants your dad.’

‘I get that, Matthew! I just can’t understand it. She has everything she wants already.’

‘Obviously not, Katie.’

‘Well, if that’s true then why not just live with the man? Why go through the hoopla of a wedding ceremony?’

'You did.'

'I'm well aware of that.'

'Would you do it again?'

'What kind of question is that?'

'An honest one.'

'It's not about us. It's about Mum, it's about . . . Look, it's personal, okay? You wouldn't understand.'

'And you say Lexi doesn't talk anymore. I wonder where she gets it from.'

'I just don't feel up to a wedding . . . my mother's wedding.'

'Like you said, it's not about us.'

'But the dress, the wedding details. Has she thought about that? Has Mum thought about the fact that she's leaving her perfectly acceptable life behind and starting who knows what kind of life? I hate it. It will all end in tears.'

'It might. But then again, maybe it won't. Who knows?'

'I do,' I said, tears welling. 'I've lived through it before.'

'They're adults. They know what they're doing,' Matthew reminded me.

'Do they? Do they really know what they're doing? I wonder.'

I picked up the Sunday paper and started scanning for the sex survey. (There was always some sort of sex survey in the *Sunday Telegraph*.) I found it within minutes. According to latest research, thirty percent of thirteen-year-old girls have engaged in deep kissing. *Deep kissing*. That's how the newspaper described it. Were they trying to politely inform readers that tongues were involved? I courageously continued reading to find that ten percent of them have had sex. I stopped reading and closed my eyes. That meant that three girls in Lexi's class were . . .

Thanks for enlightening me, *Sunday Telegraph*! Now when it came to my teenage daughter and her friends, not only did I have

my imagination to deal with but I also had cold hard facts. It dawned on me that I could easily be a grandmother before I was forty, or thirty-seven! I contemplated discussing the scenario with Matthew but wisely thought better of it.

‘You know, Kate, I think Angola might be the go,’ Robyn said that afternoon over the telephone.

‘I know, I read your email.’ I yawned.

‘I’m sorry. Am I keeping you up?’ Robyn didn’t sound one bit sorry. ‘As I said, Angola might work better for me than Panama.’

‘Angola? Robyn, you can’t take a baby to Angola. At least someone like you can’t.’

‘You can’t stop me. I’m going.’

‘I know I can’t stop you, but Angola is a war-torn mine-infested country.’

‘Don’t try to put me off. Why do you always try to shatter my dreams?’

‘I’m not trying to shatter anything. I’m simply stating facts. Makeshift houses, stagnant water, malaria, rabies . . .’

‘I guess.’ I heard her breathe deeply. ‘You’re right. It’s just the foetus talking.’ She hung up.

As I sorted several loads of dirty washing, I thought about Diane and Robyn, Mum and Dad, and Matthew and me. I was beginning to think that there really was no age that defined a midlife crisis. It was something that could strike anyone at any time, any place.

And then I smelled something. Something unfamiliar. It was more than the combination of dirty soccer socks, perspiration and the general unclean smell that the clothes basket usually offered. It was a fragrance of some kind. Not mine. Probably Lexi’s. I pulled out her school shirt and sniffed. No, her shirt smelled

of the citrus orange scent Lexi always wore. I piled the clothes into the washing machine and stopped when I reached one of Matthew's business shirts. Aha! I sniffed and an overwhelming aroma hit me. At first I thought I was imagining it. But no. A flowery scent had definitely attached itself to Matthew's shirt. It was perfume. I recoiled. Maybe Matthew was having an affair. It would certainly explain a few things. I took a step back and slumped against the washing machine. I could almost feel my heart breaking as a tsunami of sadness washed over me. I could hardly breathe. I thought about Mum and her feelings of emptiness and despair after Dad left. Then I thought about Matthew and me. Despite making a commitment to love and stay with me forever, if he was involved with another woman, it meant he'd given up on us.

When I walked into the lounge room, Matthew had his feet up and was eating a packet of chips and watching the football on TV. He looked particularly contented and I wanted to destroy him. I wanted to rant at him about the perfume on his shirt, to fling it at him and accuse him of having an affair, but I couldn't face the truth. Not yet. Instead, I picked a dirty sock up off the floor and threw it at him.

'Steady,' he said, looking up at me, then picking up the chips that had fallen out of his hand. 'You want me to do the washing?'

'No. I want . . .' *I want to know whose perfume is on your shirt. I want to know if you're having an affair.* 'Nothing,' I said finally.

'What's up? Is this about your mum? I'm guessing that it can't be about me. I never get a look-in.'

'Matt,' I started. I didn't want to continue the fight. I had no energy left. 'I don't need arguments with you on top of everything else.'

‘I know, I know. You don’t need me causing trouble as well. I can’t help wondering if you wouldn’t be happier on your own – it’s no secret you’re breaking your neck to get away.’

‘Yes, but where would I go? That’s the question.’

Matthew looked like he was about to say something but stopped, then found his voice. ‘Why do you go to the ends of the earth for others but not for us? Why are you willing to throw it all away?’

‘What about you? I think you’re purposely cutting yourself off from me so that when you leave it will be easier on the family.’

‘You’re not making any sense. What do you want from me, Kate?’


‘A miracle.’

‘Well, so do I.’ With that, Matthew picked up his chips and the newspaper and vanished.

Yeah, that went well. These days it seemed Rupert was top dog (literally) followed by the two children (pretty equal as far as I could tell), then me. I really didn’t mind the kids being higher on the ladder than me, but Rupert?

Surprisingly, Matthew and I didn’t talk for the rest of the evening. I had washing to hang out, clothes to iron, year three homework to correct, the usual.

Finally, I curled up with Angus and fell asleep listening to the Harry Potter CD. I managed to wake up long enough to crawl into the marital bed around two in the morning.



‘Katie, you haven’t said anything more about Toronto,’ said Matthew as he stepped into the bedroom after his shower on Monday morning.

Toronto! As if! I was kind of hoping it would disappear, like many things in my life; the kiss with Graeme, Sarah’s book, Mum, Robyn . . . my flabby thighs. Why had I said no to walking with Di this morning? ‘Matthew, my mind’s been on other things.’

‘It always is.’

‘Okay,’ I said, spoiling for a row. ‘If you want the truth, I think it’s a stupid idea. There, I’ve thought about it. I’m not going to Toronto.’

‘That’s it? No discussion? A straight-out no?’ Matthew wrapped a bold scarlet tie around his neck and secured it with a perfect Windsor knot in seconds. ‘There’s no pleasing you, is there?’

‘Are you getting a divorce?’ Angus had wandered into the bedroom, one hand fiddling with his Nintendo, one hand fiddling with something down the front of his pyjamas.

‘Divorce? We’re having a discussion, Angus,’ I said as I made the bed. ‘Grown-ups quarrel sometimes, just like you and Lexi do.’

‘So are you going to call Dad a *retard* and *gay*?’

I held my tongue. Perhaps comparing our argument to his and Lexi’s wasn’t such a great idea after all.

Divorce was still on Angus’s mind when I dropped him at school an hour later.

‘I don’t mind,’ he said. ‘Jack thinks it’s great. He gets to go on two holidays, have lots more toys, lollies and everything. Are you coming in to see Mrs Lombardy?’

‘No, Angus, why –’ And then I remembered the note she’d sent home weeks ago requesting a meeting with me. ‘Yes, I guess so.’ I hesitated at the kiss-and-drop zone before deciding it would be social suicide to stop there. I whizzed around the corner, narrowly missing three chattering children jaywalking across the street, and parked.

At the school gate I was stopped by a pack of eager year six students raising money for the school band. I bought five raffle tickets for ten dollars. Then I put in an order for a dozen Krispy Kreme Donuts – fundraiser for covered walkways – and quickly made my way down to Mrs Lombardy’s class before any other children could nab me. I had no money left in my purse.

The classroom door was locked. As there were still a few minutes before school started, I waited and watched as Angus kicked pebbles with his shoes. ‘Don’t do that, Gus.’ It made no difference. He continued kicking stones. I walked over to the office. Turns out Mrs Lombardy doesn’t teach on Mondays. Why didn’t I know that? I was the class mother and meant to be in

the loop. I left a note with the office secretary and noticed a pile of Nutrimerics brochures on her desk.

‘Interested?’ she asked. ‘We’re raising money for new after-school care equipment.’

‘Why not?’ I took a brochure and scooted out the door. ‘Angus, remember you’re going to after-school care this afternoon.’ I have no idea whether he heard me or not, but five other Anguses in the playground turned to look at me.

As I entered the Modular Magazines building, I wondered what had happened to the woman who used to be Kate Cavendish. The woman who was strong, independent, feisty and determined.

There was a time when I wanted to rule the world with my great photography, the exhilaration of holding a camera, focusing in on my subject . . . the freedom. Elation. I might have only been in my early twenties, but I was ready to take on the world. Even after Lexi was born, I was gung-ho.

There was no doubt in my young mind I was on track to becoming one of the few really successful photographers in the country. I had all the prerequisites. I’d completed my degree at the right institution and I was fearless and fast. I had ambition and determination, just like Sarah Stanthorpe. I could have produced a book like hers.

But it didn’t happen. I used to wonder where it all went wrong. Wonder when I stopped having potential. Stopped having ambition. Stopped dreaming of what might be.

The old me would never have put up with Graeme; I would have knocked him out at our first meeting. But I hadn’t been in the workplace for eight years. I’d forgotten the rules and now that I was beginning to remember them, I didn’t have the nerve.

What I needed to do was take some astounding shots, get my confidence back and leave *Delicious Bites* on a high note. ‘That Katie Cavendish, now there’s a genius.’ ‘A whiz with the camera, truly breathtaking.’ ‘Have you ever met anyone like her? And the magic she can weave with potatoes? Brilliant.’ Something along those lines anyway.

But the main problem with food photography was the food. We’re talking groceries – pumpkins, risotto, pears. How did anyone expect to get mind-blowing shots working solely with foodstuff? ‘Thank God Katie Cavendish’s gone. You should have seen her behaviour at the pub the other night. We were all watching her, such a slut. And her photos? Ugh!’

I climbed the stairs and walked along the corridor to the studio. Sarah’s book was waiting for me on the work bench along with a Post-it note from Fern: *K, you must look at this. You’ll be surprised. Talk later, F.* I pushed it aside and got on with my job.

But I found I had little to do, what with Mara still missing in action and Graeme God knew where. I’d prepared the all-white set for the next shoot, ‘White Magic: Christmas in July’, and was bored. I checked the production schedule again. I’d done everything on the list. So I started mucking around with the tripod and the Hasselblad. Having the cameras hooked up to a computer made the shots that much more instant and accessible.

I arranged watermelon pieces with blueberries and strawberries on a white plate and snapped off several photos. Then I really got creative with some chilled beetroot soup. But I didn’t stop there. The all-white set of paper lanterns, damask napkins, delicate glassware and fine porcelain, was begging for attention. I just needed to throw in the white roses and tulips, and retrieve the white Christmas tree (meringue tower) and white chocolate cake from the cold room to complete the picture.

Three hours later, having taken too many photos to count, I was exhausted but satisfied. Over a salad sandwich at lunch, I ran my free hand over the cover of Sarah's book. What did I have to lose? I opened it and found myself staring at the acknowledgements page. A hint of a smile crossed my lips. No mention of friends, just colleagues and several editors at Venus Publishing. At least I had friends. I glanced at my watch. How did it get to two o'clock already? I didn't have time to look at Sarah's book now. I needed to chase up print details with Fern.

She wasn't in her office, so I popped the best of my Christmas shots on her desk and headed across the street to buy myself a coffee.

I was in the queue when I recognised a voice I hadn't heard in years. It belonged to Sarah Stanthorpe. What the hell was she doing here? Wasn't it enough that she'd stolen my dream of publishing a book? Now she was intruding on my real life as well.

'Kate, after all these years,' she said, sidling up beside me. 'I was shocked to hear that you were working for Fern. I would have thought she would have called me first. After all, her magazines are prized for their consistent high quality. Not that I'm suggesting you're not up to it, Kate, but *I am* published, not that I would have accepted such a lowly position. How are you, by the way? You look tired.'

I said, 'Sarah, nice to see you again after all these years.' I should have punched her in the nose. Even though Fern had told me Sarah's publishers occupied the same building, I never imagined I'd be standing face to face with her.

'I'm just having lunch with my editor,' Sarah said, and waved to a nondescript, middle-aged man with a goatee sitting at a window table. 'Did Fern tell you I have a three-book deal?'

That was a kick in the guts. Three books! I could barely stand. ‘I’m pleased for you,’ I smiled through gritted teeth. The queue was very long. There were still another four people ahead of me.

‘You always had dreams of publishing a book, didn’t you? Or was it a gallery you wanted to open?’

‘I can’t quite remember,’ I mumbled. I felt numb. Numb with humiliation. Sarah used to accuse me of having *delusions of grandeur* back when we were at college. I felt she was implying much the same now.

Sarah shrugged her shoulders. ‘I thought you’d abandoned your photographic aspirations for a life of domestic bliss – or should that be drudgery?’ She hadn’t grown up at all. Sarah was still acting like a queen bee, fifteen years later. ‘And now you are here.’ She coughed. ‘Food photography, so dreary, don’t you agree?’

I was saved by my ringing mobile. ‘Excuse me,’ I said as I reached inside my bag.

‘Mrs Cavendish? It’s Tania Westley from Lexi’s school.’

‘Mrs Westley?’ I cupped my hand over the phone. ‘My daughter’s school,’ I said to Sarah.

‘Enjoy,’ she called out as she sauntered back to her table.

I asked Mrs Westley, ‘Is everything okay?’

‘Mrs Cavendish, I’m calling to ask you the same question. From what Lexi tells me, on the very rare occasion she attends school, you are very ill. Almost dead, in fact.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes and she’s been taking rather a lot of time off to care for you. Lexi was about to leave school again when I suggested we call you first. But Lexi assures me that she needs to leave right now to give you a sponge bath and change your bedclothes.’

‘Is that so?’ I said, walking out of the café so I could hear properly. I cringed, wondering who else was listening on the other side of the line. All the teachers in the staffroom were no doubt having a great giggle. However, that was the least of my concerns. ‘What else has Lexi told you?’

‘That after your affair with the gardener –’

‘We don’t have a gardener!’

‘Lexi’s father left and you had a mental and physical breakdown.’

‘Hence why she needs to change my bedclothes?’ A couple of patrons at an outside table looked up from their lunch in surprise.

‘Exactly.’

‘This won’t happen again, I can assure you. Lexi won’t be taking any more time off for at least a few years. I’ll be there in thirty minutes.’

I’d kill her, that’s what I’d do – just as soon as I recovered from the shock of Lexi telling her principal that I was having sex with our nonexistent gardener.

Back inside the office, I ran up the stairs two steps at a time.

‘Kate, have you got a moment?’ It was Fern.

‘Not really. Lexi’s pulled a prank at school. I have to leave.’

‘You will be back, won’t you?’ It was Graeme. ‘We have a shoot at Palm Beach tomorrow and I know how much you’re looking forward to that – natural light and all.’

‘Ignore him, Kate. Everything okay with Lexi?’

‘Yes, she’ll just be grounded till she’s twenty-five.’ I fiddled with my shoulder bag and keys while Graeme conspicuously checked his watch at the studio door.

‘Sorry, Graeme,’ I said as I brushed past him. ‘I have to go and sort out my wayward daughter.’

Half an hour later, I was face to face with Lexi’s principal.

‘It’s not just about Lexi skipping school, Mrs Cavendish. It’s a combination of several things, I’m afraid. Her hair, her uniform, her general attitude.’

Lexi was sitting outside Mrs Westley’s office. She had spiked what little hair she had with a jar of gel, her uniform was two sizes too small, and her expression? Well let’s just say I wasn’t going to be receiving flowers from my only daughter any time soon.

‘Lexi, please go back to class while I have a chat with your mum,’ Mrs Westley instructed her.

‘But there’s only half an hour left,’ Lexi moaned.

‘Lexi, manners! I’ll be waiting for you after school’s finished,’ I said. Without a backward glance, Lexi sauntered down the corridor.

‘Lexi started as one of our brighter students,’ Mrs Westley continued as she ushered me into her office and closed the door, ‘but in the past two months her grades have slipped significantly.’

I sat and listened, ashamed that I hadn’t kept a closer eye on my daughter. Mortified that Lexi had told her teachers and God knew who else that I’d had an affair with the gardener and was now in the throes of a breakdown. Of course, no-one believed her (I hoped) but that’s how rumours started.

‘Is there anything happening at home that might help us understand Lexi’s behaviour?’

‘No. Nothing’s changed in Lexi’s home life. It’s all pretty much the same as it has been. Her grandmother is getting married to

her grandfather again, which is slightly unusual, but Lexi seems quite pleased about that. She doesn't tell me much anymore. Seems to keep to herself when she's at home. She talks to her friends mostly and she's been seeing a boy. I guess you'd call him her boyfriend, even though I think she's way too young to have a boyfriend. And then there's her mobile. She's always on the phone, talking or texting.'

'In the past month alone,' Mrs Westley read from notes, 'Lexi has missed in excess of nine complete days of school.'

'Goodness.' Was that the best I could come up with? Goodness.

'I must say, I'm surprised you haven't noticed.'

'Well, I work during the day. I've started this new job and –'

'I see.'

'But I try to keep an eye on her.'

'She's got a lot of school work to catch up on. Several missed assignments that need to be completed if she is to have any chance of passing this term.'

'I'll see that Lexi completes them all. Definitely.'

The principal handed me several reams of paper and a dozen or more books. 'We'll keep a close eye on her, make sure she doesn't leave the school grounds before home time, but you have to establish firm ground rules at home as well.'

'Yes,' I said quietly. 'I don't seem to connect with her anymore. She's got new friends . . . now her school work is slipping. It was so easy before –'

'Before she turned thirteen and was a tangle of hormones, rebellious compulsions, social anxieties and academic pressures?'

'That about sums it up.' I forced a smile. 'I feel like I'm walking a tightrope with Lexi the whole time. Nothing I say or do is ever right.'

‘My advice? Listen to her and try to remain calm and open-minded. Walk beside her when you can and try to remember that the teenage years are a phase. Sooner or later we all outgrow them. They wouldn’t be kids if they didn’t give their parents and teachers hell. In my experience, girls rebel because they either want more or less control over their lives. The key is to understand their behaviour *before* trying to change it.’

I stood up, nodded and bit my bottom lip.

‘Don’t worry too much,’ she said, resting her hand on my shoulder. ‘Lexi’s not the first teenager who’s skipped school . . . or imagined that her mother was having an affair.’

‘Mmm.’ I was going to kill her.

It was three twenty. I had a few minutes before Lexi was due out of class so I rang Matthew at his office but was immediately diverted to his voicemail. I tried him on his mobile. Same response. I tried again. I was persistent if nothing else.

‘Hello, Kate.’ He finally answered, clearly distracted.

‘Matthew, Lexi’s been skipping school. I’ve just been in to see the principal.’

‘And?’

‘And I thought that you should know.’

‘Why? What else has happened?’

‘Nothing. Your daughter skipping school is a big enough deal, I think.’

‘She okay?’

‘Not after I’ve finished with her. She won’t be allowed out of the house for the next five years.’

‘Yeah. I’m about to go into a meeting. Just take her home and have a talk –’

‘It’s the middle of the afternoon. I have to get back to work.’

‘Kate, where are your priorities? You can’t possibly think that taking photos of salad is more important than sorting Lexi out.’ There was a moment of silence followed by, ‘What happens to Gus when you can’t pick him up from school?’

Had Matthew been living under a rock? ‘If he doesn’t have an after-school activity and Mum can’t pick him up, he goes into after-school care and I pick him up on the way home. And after-school care is where he’s headed today.’

Matthew dismissed me and I set off in search of Lexi. I spotted her straight away. The attitude, the slouched shoulders. Silently, I bundled her into the car.

‘This is *so* embarrassing, Mother. No-one else’s parents come onto the school grounds to collect their children.’

‘I had a special invitation, Lexi. From your principal. Remember?’

‘Are we going home?’

‘Not yet. You’ll have to come into the office with me.’

‘I don’t want to go,’ Lexi whined.

I didn’t really care what Lexi wanted to do. I couldn’t trust her at home by herself so she had to come into work with me. That’s all there was to it. ‘Are you wearing your retainer?’ I snapped. I knew she wasn’t.

Huffing, she unzipped her backpack, retrieved it and loudly pushed it inside her mouth. ‘Happy?’

‘Why on earth would you tell your teachers I’m having an affair with the gardener?’

‘Gives them a rev . . . Do you know how boring geometry is?’

‘I don’t care!’ I said and counted to ten in my head. I remembered a similar conversation with my own parents. ‘*I want to be a photographer. Why do I need to pass Maths?*’ It was right before Mum and Dad split. And I had a horrible feeling that history

was about to repeat itself. Not that I thought Lexi was anything like I was as a child or that she was in any way responsible for the problems Matthew and I were having. But the whole scenario seemed a little too familiar. Too close to home.

Blanche Ebbutt in *Don'ts for Wives* – yes, I'd been reading it. How could I not. It's such a stupid bloody book, it forces you to take notice. In fact, I'd come to consider Blanche rather like my own personal Dali Lama and, during those moments when I knew I truly wanted to become a better person, a more rational and loving human being I thought to myself, what would Blanche do in this situation? I knew for a fact that in this case, she'd say, silence is the best answer. Still, I was furious.

'That's no reason to invent lies about me or skip class. You can't do this anymore, Lexi. It's just not on. And last week with the drinking . . . you just don't get it, do you? Wake up to yourself. You're not a baby anymore.'

'But –'

'But nothing. I've had it, Lexi. I'm not your nursemaid.'

'Then stop treating me like a child.'

'I'll stop treating you like a child when you start acting more responsibly.'

At that moment the nauseating ad about erectile dysfunction boomed through the radio speakers. I snapped the radio off.

'You don't need to be embarrassed –'

'Don't start, Lexi.'

'What? You look really tired by the way.'

I wanted to smack her.

By the time we had crawled through the afternoon traffic and parked at Modular Magazines it was after four o'clock. My return to work was all for show because less than an hour later we'd

have to leave to pick up Angus. But I had a point to prove to Matthew, Lexi, Graeme and myself.

‘So what do you do here?’ Lexi asked me once we were in the studio.

‘Look after the photography side of things,’ I said, swiftly moving Sarah’s book to a dusty corner of the room and retrieving photos from the degustation and winter soups shoots.

‘What happens to the food after?’

‘It’s thrown out. Generally speaking, it’s inedible – we have to use a lot of food colouring and sometimes paint and hairspray to get the food looking good for the photos.’

‘Hmph,’ said Lexi, shrugging her shoulders. ‘These are okay, I guess.’

‘Thanks, Lex, I’ll take that as a compliment.’

‘I thought you were going to put together a book of all the photos you’ve been taking of Robyn, to give to her when the baby’s born.’

‘I did say that, didn’t I? We could do it together. You could help me choose the photos if you like.’

‘Whatever.’

Lexi flicked through a magazine while I pulled out the cameras and other equipment I needed for tomorrow’s location shoot at Palm Beach. I was quite looking forward to shooting outdoors and being at the mercy of the elements. You never quite knew how the wind, sun and clouds would ultimately shape the photographs. There was a degree of unpredictability when it came to photographing in natural light. It would be fun. I gathered up all the cases and began taking them downstairs to the van in the garage.

‘Did you pack the tripod?’ Graeme barked as I tiptoed past his office, hoping to avoid him.

‘Yes.’ Thanks for helping me load up by the way. No, I don’t mind at all. Three trips downstairs to the garage so far. Good exercise. Loving it.

I thought for a moment. ‘I’ve packed the small one. Do you want the larger one as well?’

Graeme sighed loudly, then followed me to the doorway of the studio. ‘Of course I want the other bloody one. If you want something done right . . . Jesus. I don’t know what we’re paying you for, Kate. Running off in the middle of the day . . . you did remember the reflectors, didn’t you?’

Lexi looked up from her magazine. A chef I vaguely knew, Dana, glanced up from her pastry bowl, caught my eye and quickly went back to kneading her dough. I crouched down and opened a cupboard to retrieve them.

‘Got the reflectors,’ I called out in a cheerful voice, just as the psychopath appeared beside me.

‘No need to bellow. I’m right here. This must be the wayward daughter you were talking about.’

God, I hated him. I should have quit right there and then. But I didn’t because I was pathetic and insecure about my place in the world. Plus, I wanted an opportunity to show Fern that I was up to the challenge. I could succeed. I didn’t want to be a failure anymore.

‘Is that man your boss?’ Lexi asked me on the drive home. I nodded. ‘He kinda looks like Chris Martin from Coldplay and he’s kinda loud.’

‘Yes, Lex, he is loud.’ I laughed and Lexi grinned. ‘The good news is that it’s only for a couple of weeks.’

‘Then what?’

'Don't know. Guess I just go back to being your mum full time.'

Lexi smiled again.

'So, Lex, why do you wag school so much?'

'School's boring.'

'That doesn't mean you can stop going. Is everything okay? I mean with Hunter? Your friends?'

'I guess. Yes and No.'

'How are Jazz and Izzie?'

'Mum, it's not about friends anymore. *I'm thirteen.*' It was all in the tone. The way Lexi spoke, she could have been saying, *I have leprosy* or *I am an alien*. 'It's about your clothes and your boyfriend, and only if you've got those, do you get to have friends. Friends on MSN, Facebook . . . Do you know how many girls have got me as one of their "top friends" on Facebook?'

I shook my head. I had only a very vague idea of what she was talking about.

'Fifteen! Do you think I'd have that many if Hunter wasn't my boyfriend? Susie says it's not important what kind of person you are, just as long as you're the *right* sort of person.'

'Why would she say that?'

'Because she knows *everything*! And I'm trying to fit in. Get a life.' I wasn't sure whether Lexi was telling *me* to 'get a life' or whether she herself was trying to 'get a life'.

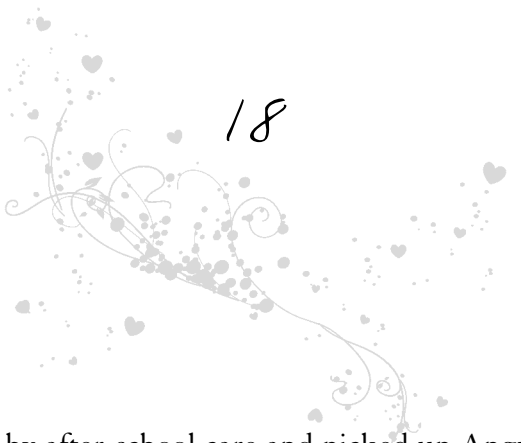
'Lex,' I said in my most sympathetic, motherly voice, 'you can tell me anything, darling, and I'll understand. Really, sweetheart, anything at all. I'm always here for you.'

'Great, Mum . . . I'm thinking about having sex with Hunter. I almost crashed the car.'

'Joking.' Lexi laughed. 'See? Things could be a lot worse.'

We cruised to a stop at the traffic lights and I breathed deeply, trying to regroup. I looked around.

I loved this area, the artisan cottages, the community feel. I could easily set up a studio here. A couple of weeks before Fern's call I'd even inquired about renting space and setting up a photography studio. But I thought it too indulgent, my skills being what they are. However, now that I had a renewed passion for the craft, it was certainly worth keeping in mind . . . Then I glanced into a café and saw Matthew. I was about to honk and wave when I noticed he wasn't alone. He was with a blonde, shapely woman. What the hell was Matthew doing having coffee with an attractive woman several suburbs away from our home when he was supposed to be so damned busy at work? And just whose perfume was that on his shirt?

A decorative graphic consisting of a cluster of small hearts and swirls, with a larger heart shape in the center, positioned above the page number.

Swung by after-school care and picked up Angus at exactly five fifty-five pm. Matthew's car was in the garage when the three of us arrived home.

'Home early, Matt.'

'You sound surprised. I told you I'd be home so you could go to the class mothers' dinner.'

'Class dinner? That was over a week ago. Still, it's nice that you're home early.' *Anything else you'd care to mention?*

Matthew shook his head. 'You told me it was tonight, I'm sure you did.' He turned to Lexi. 'What have you got to say for yourself?'

'Not much.' Lexi threw her school bag down on the floor in the doorway where we could all trip over it. Angus threw his bag on top of Lexi's and then proceeded to roll around on the floor with Rupert.

'Angus!' I said. 'Kids, please take your bags to your rooms. But take any uneaten lunch out first and throw it in the bin, okay?' No response. I turned to Matthew. 'How was your day?'

'All right. Busy. The usual. What's going on with Lexi?'

‘What’s going on? You make it sound like it’s my fault.’

‘Jeez, it’s not your fault. But I’m surprised she can miss so much school without you noticing.’

Funny that both Matthew and Lexi’s principal should think the same thing – and say it out loud.

‘I knew this would happen when you started back at work, Kate. You can’t run a house, look after the kids and have a career as well.’

‘Really?’

‘You know what I mean. Something’s got to give and at the moment it seems like it’s the family.’ Matthew opened the fridge and pulled out a beer.

Keep it civil, I told myself, even though instinct told me to punch him. Hard. ‘So you don’t want me to work outside the home, is that it?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘You may as well have, Matthew. It’s my fault because I’m not monitoring Lexi’s every waking moment. You’re saying I can only pursue my interests, even if I’m being paid for them, strictly in accordance with the mum shift, is that it? Because the reality is I do ninety-nine percent of the work around the home and that’s exactly where you want me to be, at everyone’s beck and call. I never get a break.’

‘Sorry. I guess it’s my fault then,’ Matthew snarled. ‘Though God knows how it can be.’

‘It’s not, but I need a life as well.’

‘Don’t start with me, Katie. I’m really not in the mood.’

‘You’re never in the mood.’

This wasn’t going well at all.

Angus and Lexi picked up their bags, glanced at each other and bolted upstairs.

I took a deep breath and tried a less confrontational tack. ‘Matthew, I’m sorry. Is everything okay?’ I tried to put my arm around him but he pushed me away.

‘What do you mean? As if you’d notice if everything wasn’t okay! You can’t keep blaming me for not pursuing your dreams. I’m not the one who’s held you back from taking photos all these years.’

‘I gave up my life to marry you and have children!’

‘No, Kate, you gave up because you were scared – scared of the new technology, scared of being rejected. The kids and I became a convenient excuse for you because you’d rather shut yourself away in your darkroom than get out and embrace life.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, stop hiding. Now that you’ve been given an opportunity, don’t whinge and say it’s all too hard. Go for it. Do something with your life. I’ll still be here to pay the bills.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘I’m not the enemy here. I’m doing the best I can.’

‘Yeah, well, so am I . . . Let’s order in. Thai or Vietnamese?’

‘So that’s it, is it?’ Matthew said.

‘There’s nothing more to say, is there?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Matthew said, throwing his hands up in the air. ‘I’m just sick of everything – Lexi, you . . . I never get a moment’s peace. I feel trapped.’

‘You? *Trapped*? You’re not confined to a cage, Matthew. And you’re not running around after the kids, helping with their homework, driving to soccer and all the rest of it. What if I’m sick of things as well? Does it ever occur to you that I might be fed up or at my wits’ end?’

‘You’re their mother! You can’t be fed up. It’s your job. Besides, what have you got to be fed up about?’ Without waiting for a

reply, Matthew walked out of the kitchen and into the living room, where he turned on the television.

‘Matthew, is there something you want to tell me?’ Like about the woman I saw you with at the coffee shop. ‘Is there . . . someone else?’

He turned around. ‘Ha! I wish. Sadly, no. I’m not about to run off with the twenty-year-old au pair who lives down the road, if that’s what you’re asking. As if I don’t have enough financial commitments as it is.’

I didn’t even know there was an au pair living in our street. That’s how unobservant I am. ‘All right. No Thai,’ I said, rummaging through the pantry. ‘It’ll have to be tomato and bacon pasta.’ Matthew ignored me and turned up the volume on the telly. The sports news had started.

I walked upstairs into the study. The answering machine was blinking. Five messages. I played them.

Message one: *‘Kate, it’s your mother. Please call me. We need to discuss the wedding.’*

Message two: *‘Kate, is it? You put your name down at Angus’s school to attend a weekend workshop on raising resilient children. Great news – we have a vacancy for you this coming weekend. Call me on 9207 9900 to confirm your place.’*

Message three: *‘Hello, Katie? Are you there? This is your dad speaking. I’ll call you this evening.’*

Message four: *‘Hi, Katie, it’s Diane. We really need to walk tomorrow. You got out of it this morning but there’s no escaping tomorrow. Yes, it’s freezing but it’s my mental health we’re talking about. I won’t take no for an answer so don’t bother ringing back with another lame excuse. Come on, porky, you know you want to. I’ll be outside at the usual time.’*

Message five: *'Katie, I think I'm in labour. It's the real thing this time, I'm sure of it. Call me.'*

Nothing that couldn't wait. I ran a bath for Angus and screamed at Lexi to turn down her music, then walked into the bedroom to get changed.

'Mum, it's Poppy on the phone,' said Angus, walking in with the phone in his outstretched hand.

'Who?'

'Poppy Bob. Here take it.' Angus handed the phone to me and ran in the opposite direction of the bathroom.

'Katie, it's Dad. I want to talk to you about the wedding. I know I haven't been around much for the last few years' – understatement of the century – 'but your mum and I love each other. We want to start over again . . . Are you there?'

I nodded. 'Uh-huh.'

'I know we've got a lot of catching up to do and all this seems rather sudden, so if you are strongly against it . . . what I'm trying to say is that if you're not happy about it, I won't marry your mum.'

'Okay.'

'Okay, what?'

'I am strongly against it and I don't think the two of you should get married. At least not next week, anyway. Why the rush?'

'Because we want to. Will you at least think about it, for your mother's sake if not for mine?'

'That's what I am doing . . . thinking about Mum. I have her best interests at heart, which is why I don't want her to go through the misery and disappointment of being married to you again.'

'It's not like that. I love your mother very much, and I love you and Robyn as well. I want our family back together again.'

‘You can’t wipe away twenty years, Dad. This is real life. What’s to say you’re not going to leave again like you did last time?’

‘Pip knows I would never leave her. I never wanted to leave in the first place. It’s – you need to talk to your mum, okay?’

‘I’m busy at the moment dealing with my own family dramas.’

‘Just try, please?’

I hung up the phone.

‘Why did you do that?’

I turned around. It was Lexi. ‘Do what?’

‘Say you didn’t want Nanna and Pop to get married?’

‘Lexi, you wouldn’t understand. They’ve been married before. It didn’t work the first time.’

‘But they said they love each other, and getting married would make Nanna happy.’

‘Trust me, it’s for her own good.’

‘You’re so mean. That’s all you ever say: *it’s for your own good*. Are you going to punish Nanna for the rest of her life like you’re trying to punish me?’

Dinner was bleak. Lexi didn’t speak, Matthew didn’t speak, and the bacon and tomato pasta was well and truly overcooked. Angus talked a lot about the kids in his class whose parents had divorced. He was still very much of the opinion that divorce was great because of the higher lolly count.

‘Mum, Nanna’s on the phone,’ said Angus, when he found me hiding in the study surrounded by chocolate wrappers.

‘Tell her I’ll call her back, Gussy,’ I said, mouth full of mini Mars Bars.

'She says she needs to talk to you right now. I think she's crying. Can I have one of those?'

I took the phone and handed Angus two chocolates. 'Give one to your sister,' I said, as he skipped out of the room. 'Hello?'

'Katie, this can't go on. Your father and I love each other. You can't do this to us.'

'What –'

'I know about the conversation with Dad. The wedding –'

'It's for your own good.'

'Don't you bloody tell me what's for my own good. I am not a child. I have been alone for twenty years. Twenty! Your dad is the only man I've ever loved. Will ever love. Don't interfere. It's none of your business.'

'It *is* my business. I'm your daughter.'

'Yes you are, and I'm telling you to butt out. You don't see me interfering in your home life, although I have more than a few opinions about it, I can tell you. But I keep my thoughts to myself.' Mum stopped and blew her nose. 'Don't you see, Katie? I'm trying to right the past. Make up for all the wrongs –'

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing Katie, you're young. You have your whole life in front of you. Me? I want to enjoy my old age. I want a companion. I want my husband back and I am going to marry him whether or not you approve. If you don't like it, don't come.'

It was after eight thirty by the time Angus was settled in bed. I turned on his Harry Potter CD and lay down beside him for a few minutes. Try as I might to concentrate on Stephen Fry's voice, I kept thinking about Mum. I thought she was happy with her life, at least she was, until Dad waltzed back into it. Now, all of a sudden she couldn't live without him!

And as if I had my *whole life in front of me*. Ha! I wasn't young. I was knocking on forty's door, for God's sake.

Matthew watched the tennis, which was good I guess, because it distracted him and left me free with my own thoughts – about the woman in the coffee shop . . . Lexi . . . When I checked on her, she was doing homework, working through the pile of books on the floor that the principal had given me.

She didn't want to talk any more about the conversation we'd had with Mrs Westley, but at least Lexi promised – reluctantly – that she wouldn't leave school without my permission again. I wanted to believe her.

I walked into the study, turned on the computer and searched the internet for some advice – any advice – on how to deal with my teenage daughter.

This is what I came up with. I should:

1. Not criticise or judge Lexi. Instead, I should talk and listen to her.
2. Reflect on my own adolescence and remember both the positive and negative messages I received from my parents. Try not to repeat their mistakes or to share their unhealthy attitudes. (To what? I asked myself.)
3. Smoothly guide my daughter. (What? Instead of kicking her about the place? The advice assured me that this wouldn't be easy, but that the effort was clearly worth it. Really? I had to think for a moment. Was the effort worth it? Wouldn't it all blow up in my face tomorrow, the next day and the day after that?)
4. Be a healthy role model. (Oh dear.)
5. Remember, when all else failed, to breathe. (That was a given, surely?)

I almost wanted to go to bed unwashed, mascara caked on, foundation, or what remained of it, left to rub off onto my pillow, teeth unbrushed. I felt like a crumbling wreck. But then I thought, *Katie, what if your husband is having an affair and is about to leave you? What if your kids do run away from home and you're left all alone? Do you really want to add blotchy skin and decaying teeth to your list of worries?*

I scrubbed my face until it was taut and shiny and I cleaned my teeth until my gums ached and the enamel was worn. After the eye cream, face cream and neck cream, I examined myself critically in the mirror. What was Mum banging on about? Okay, I didn't have one foot in the grave yet, but I certainly wasn't getting any younger. On the plus side, at least I didn't have raccoon eyes and bad breath. By the time I crawled into bed, Matthew was asleep, legs spread and snoring. I was restless. Restless and wide awake, thinking about the perfume on Matthew's shirt. Was I focusing on that so I didn't have to take responsibility for my own adulterous actions? Perhaps trying to convince myself that if he'd been unfaithful as well, I'd be in the clear?

Tuesdays: you're over the hurdle of Monday but Friday is still a distant prize. All things considered, there's really not much to like about Tuesdays except cut-price movie tickets.

The alarm buzzed and I hit the snooze button . . . until I heard Di tapping at the window. I dragged myself out of bed, took my pyjama top off, slipped on a bra and put the top back on. Okay, I was a lazy walker. I threw on my pale blue hoodie and track pants, scrunched my hair into a ponytail, pulled on my sneakers and was out the door within four minutes of waking.

'Are you sure these hills aren't getting steeper?' I wheezed, hot and desperate to peel off my hoodie, thus revealing my very pink pyjamas.

'Come on, pork –'

'Don't ever call me that name again!'

'Okay. Pretend you're climbing a mountain to see Arnaud. I assume he's still your dream guy?'

'Goody!' My pace improved slightly.

'You know if Matthew found out . . .'

‘He wouldn’t care. Besides, it’s harmless.’ There’s this one dream I have where Arnaud and I slip away on his yacht. I can’t sail, but in this story, I’m a quick learner. In real life, I also get incredibly seasick but none of these wretched realities get in the way when I’m in my perfect world. The sun is shining, I’m one hundred and seventy centimetres tall, weigh fifty-four kilos and am wrinkle-free . . .

‘You’re playing with fire. Just don’t get yourself burned.’

‘It’s make-believe. A game I play inside my head to keep me happy, especially when everything else is turning to crap . . . I got called in to see Lexi’s principal yesterday. She’s been skipping school and told her teachers I’m having an affair with the gardener and that I’m also having a nervous breakdown.’

‘Way to go, Lexi.’

‘Charming, don’t you think? Her grades are slipping . . .’

‘You know this is making my decision so much easier.’

‘So you’ve decided not to have the baby?’

‘Five is enough, don’t you think? Mind you, as I said, Nina and Sam get on really well, so touch wood that will continue. But the younger three, oy! Tom’s refusing to do his homework and bullying the other two. Bella’s taking all of the boys’ toys and squirrelling them away to who the hell knows where. And then Brent’s moaning on the lounge because he’s been robbed of his manhood. So adding a baby to the mix?’

‘You’ll be busy.’

‘Not if I give a couple of them to you.’

I rolled my eyes.

‘Take Tom at least. Hey . . . do I have to drag you?’ Di shouted, as I gasped for air.

‘Would you? I can barely move.’ I pulled my hood across my face as far as I could and increased my step to match hers.



As much as I complained, I felt invigorated and full of energy after my walk. Before Matthew left for work, we made peace with each other, sort of. Well, we grunted civilly. In all honesty, though, we may as well have been living on opposite sides of the planet such was our emotional distance from each other.

‘This isn’t your battle,’ Matthew said in reference to Mum and Dad after he kissed me goodbye. ‘Trust them. They’ll sort it out.’

‘Yeah, Dad’s right,’ Lexi said, as the front door closed behind Matthew.

‘Lexi, I’ve told you before, it’s complicated.’

‘But they were married for like a gazillion years.’

‘As I said, it’s complicated.’

‘You don’t want any of us to be happy, do you?’ Lexi’s voice was getting louder. ‘You’re not happy, so you don’t want anyone else to be happy either. You don’t like Grandpa. You don’t like Dan. You don’t like Hunter. No-one’s ever good enough for you.’

‘That’s not true, Lexi. When you’re older, you’ll understand.’

‘How old do I have to be? I understand plenty. You just don’t want to listen to me.’

No. I just didn’t want to explain to my daughter why her grandfather was a shit. And I didn’t want to tell Lexi that Robyn’s husband was a shit too. As for Hunter . . . Well, Hunter wore pornographic T-shirts. I still hadn’t got over that.

Changing the subject I said, ‘Could your skirt be any shorter?’ She glared at me as if I had two heads. ‘Don’t you find it draughty when you sit down?’

‘I’m not eating this garbage,’ she said, ignoring me and peering into her lunch bag.

‘Why? It’s –’

‘Boring. I’m not eating it,’ Lexi said, mobile to her ear and making a stop sign in my face with her free hand.

I was so furious I could have choked her. Ingrate. ‘If you’re not happy with what I give you, you can make your own lunch. Simple. Starting today.’

I grabbed Lexi’s phone and her lunch.

‘I’ll eat it. Same goes for you, Angus,’ I said before Angus had a chance to defend himself. Lexi scowled at me, took an apple from the fruit bowl and stalked towards the door.

‘I need my phone back,’ she called out.

‘Well, clean up your pigsty of a room. Angus, we’re leaving.’

I dropped Lexi off minus her phone and waited until she walked through the school gates. Common sense told me she could just as easily skip out again minutes after I drove away but I had high hopes of her making it through a full day.

‘Mum, I’m not supposed to be at school until eight thirty, the teachers said so,’ Angus complained as we pulled up at the kiss-and-drop zone shortly after eight o’clock. ‘I’ll get a detention.’

‘No you won’t. Can’t you go to the library or kick a football on the oval until then? It’s only this once,’ I said, knowing full well I’d dropped him before eight thirty several times in the past two weeks. I kissed him and pushed him out the door. ‘Good luck with your eight times tables today. I love you.’

He watched from the footpath as I drove away.

At the beach sometime later, the birds were singing, the sky was blue and I was enjoying arranging the set – the lights, sandbags, tripods, backdrops. The fresh air was wonderful. I felt more awake and motivated than I had in weeks. And it was shaping up to be a relatively easy shoot despite the breeze. Even Graeme appeared happy. There’d been no squabbles with the stylist or

the guest chef. The set was downright cheery. My best day at *Delicious Bites* by far.

‘We need some more lemon and rocket, Kate,’ said Graeme as I dusted specks of sand from the duck-egg blue napkins.

I walked back up the beach to the restaurant we were using as a base. In the cold room, I potted around, retrieving rocket and lemons before walking out and opening a door leading to the function room. You just needed to pull open the bi-fold doors to reveal the enormous deck, and *voila!* Breathtaking views of sand and beach as far as the eye could see.

‘Graeme, you startled me,’ I said, hearing a noise and turning around.

‘I was about to send out a search party.’

‘Just admiring the view. Incredible.’

‘You’ve been ignoring me, Kate. But then again, we don’t want anyone getting the wrong idea, do we?’

‘Wrong idea about what?’

‘You and me, babe,’ Graeme said, walking up beside me. ‘The other night . . . sorry I was offhand the next morning. But we have to be careful, the walls have ears and eyes – and you know how jealous girlfriends can be. It was a bummer we were interrupted that night. But I’ve got time now. Everything’s under control outside. Let’s . . .’ He moved towards me and I backed away slightly.

‘The other night was a mistake. I was drunk. I’m sorry if I led you on.’

‘I don’t think you led me on, Tiger, though you were mighty feisty. I’ll give you that. You married chicks,’ he laughed. ‘You really want it, don’t you?’

‘No. No. I really don’t.’

‘But I think you do,’ he said, stepping in close.

'I don't think so,' I said, my voice unsteady but loud.

'That's not what you said the other night. Are you hot, Tiger? I'm hot. Very hot.'

Through his pants I could see a suspicious bulge. I felt ill. What had I been thinking? I must have been more smashed than I thought. There was no way I would ever consider an intimate act with this pathetic excuse for a man, ever.

'Graeme, you've got the wrong idea. I have to go.' He grabbed my hand and I swung away to the door. 'Let me go!'

A voice from the other side called out, 'Kate, are you in there?'

Graeme reluctantly let me pass. 'Later.'

Unfortunately, he appeared beside me down on the beach soon after. 'So are we shooting these dead octopi or not?' he snapped after glancing through the test shots I'd taken before the rocket misstep.

All the props were in place. The chef was putting the finishing touches to the plate, the lighting was good and the Hasselblad was firmly mounted on the tripod. All Graeme had to do was click one button and then bask in the accolades that would inevitably follow extolling his extraordinary vision.


'We're ready to go,' I said.

But seconds after he took the photo, he turned on me, furious. 'That reflector, there,' he shouted, pointing, 'is in completely the wrong position.'

Frustratingly, Graeme was right. The wind had blown it slightly and the new angle meant that the lighting was totally wrong. All that hard work for nothing. I set about fixing it while Graeme barked instructions at me. He must have said, 'I fucking hate working outside,' at least a dozen times in the space of ten minutes.

When I was sure that the set was once more perfect, I called him over. 'I can take the photos, if you'd prefer,' I said, eager to get behind the camera.

'If I'd prefer?' he repeated loudly enough for bystanders to stop and stare. 'Let's get this straight, Kate. I am the photographer; you are the proverbial dogsbody. I take the photographs; you lug the furniture.'



After a horrendous finish to the day, I drove straight to Mum's. I wanted to apologise for acting like a six-year-old spoilt brat. I had assumed the role of dutiful daughter for so long that I'd stopped considering her feelings. Maybe I hadn't wanted to acknowledge that Mum was a sexual woman who had desires and fantasies of her own. If they included my father, then so be it. Who was I to say how she should be living her life? It wasn't like I was doing a bang-up job.

'Mum,' I said when she opened her front door, 'I'm sorry about everything. I don't want to argue with you. It's just . . . I always thought you were happy.'

Mum led me inside, sat me down and put her arms around me. 'I am happy – but your father has been missing from my life for too long. I've done things in my life that I'm not proud of. And it's rare in life that you get a second chance, an opportunity to right wrongs. I'm doing that now.'

'I don't understand, but I'm not going to stand in your way. I just want you to be happy.'

'I am, darling. I'm happier than I've been in a long time. Your father loves me very much. He always has. And I love him, too.'

'That's all that matters. But if he hurts you again . . .'

'He's not going to.'

'I guess you've had long enough to find someone else and you haven't. So if you're really sure . . .'

'I am. Now, what about you? You look terrible. Has something happened? Did you tell Matthew about . . .'

'About what?'

'Your late night last week? Lexi?'

'No. I feel so guilty about Lexi. What if -'

'Guilt is a wasted emotion. There's no point to it, you're only hurting yourself. Besides, Lexi's fine. Probably won't go near chillies or orange juice for some time though.'

'How could I desert her when she needed me most?'

'There'll be other times, trust me. The trick is to learn from your mistakes and move on. You'll come through this, I know you will. Forgive yourself. Vow to become a better, stronger and wiser person as a result. That's what life is about. None of us is perfect.'

'I saw Matthew at a coffee shop with someone . . . a woman . . . yesterday. And I smelled perfume on his shirt the other day. I think he's having an affair.'

'Goodness, he's not having an affair. He loves you. Are you sure it's not wishful thinking on your part?'

'How could you say that? Of course it's not. I genuinely think he's unhappy and he's looking for an escape route.'

'And you, Katie?'

'I don't know. I'm always checking to see how I feel about my life and my marriage. I'm constantly asking myself, is it good

enough? Am I good enough? Is everything the way I want it to be?’

‘That’s what I mean, love. Listen to yourself – it’s exhausting. You put yourself under so much pressure all the time, it’s not surprising to see you collapsing in spite of your best efforts not to. You need to slow down and start enjoying yourself. All that worrying and fretting is not helping.’

‘But everything’s turning to crap. Lexi’s skipping school. She says I don’t understand and don’t trust her, but how can I when she’s lying to me? She’s out there, desperate to live some kind of adventurous life, a mini Robyn, and it scares me.’

‘She’s growing up. We all have to at some stage. It’s not easy, but Lexi will grow out of it. You and Robyn did.’

I raised my eyebrows.

‘Well, you did, at least. Lexi’s a good girl at heart. You might be in for five years of hell now, but eventually she’ll pull through. You both will.’

‘Lexi thinks I’m the most boring, unexciting –’

‘All daughters think their mothers are boring and unexciting and have no life to speak of.’

‘Touché. I’m sorry. But Lexi is too . . .’

‘Young? And I’m too old, is that it?’

‘No, of course not. I remember being thirteen. The lure of the cool group at school. Falling out of favour because you weren’t wearing the right brand of jeans. I know all that. I know that being good is boring and being rebellious and naughty is exciting and fun. I get it, but it breaks my heart.’

‘You skipped school when you were a teenager.’

‘Not when I was thirteen.’

‘Maybe not then, but you did a couple of years later. You obsessed over boys, had fights with girlfriends. If memory serves

me, there was always a new drama every day of the week. And hey, we survived, didn't we? As hard as this is to hear, Lexi has to find her own way, within reason, but you can't stop her getting into trouble. The only thing you can do is be there for her to pick up the pieces when she falls. It's what mothers do – and daughters sometimes. I'm sorry I wasn't a better role model for you and Robyn after your father left. I wasn't there when you needed me.'

'Mum, you've always been there for me. That hasn't changed.'

'I did the best I could, but –'

'But, nothing.'

'Okay,' said Mum, composing herself. 'I've got just the thing to take our minds off our troubles. Planning my wedding.'

I sniffed and nodded. 'Just remember apricot is a colour that should only be used to describe a fruit.'

Later that night I went to see Robyn. 'The colour looks great, Rob,' I said as I inspected the baby's room. Thankfully, Mum had had the good sense to hire a painter. The baby's room was now the canary yellow that Robyn had wanted in the first place.

Baby clothes were strewn in piles over the bedroom floor and spilled out into the hallway. 'How about we put these clothes back in the cupboards?'

'I had to catch a train home from the city today,' Robyn said, making no attempt to pick up the clothes. 'I was wedged between two very fat people in the middle of a small, narrow, ripped train seat.'

'So there were three of you?'

She glared at me. 'What do you mean?'

'Three fatties huddled together.'

‘The train was overcrowded, thank you very much. And I was wedged between two elephants. I was about to ask the guy next to me to move closer to the window – he was practically on top of me – when I noticed he didn’t have an arm. Imagine how much squashier it would have been had his right arm been attached.’

‘Robyn!’

‘What? I could hardly ask a one-armed man to move along, could I? No wonder I hate public transport. There’s the BO, the constant pushing and pulling, shoving, the inevitable stopping, and for what? For what reason did we stop in a tunnel for ten minutes? Pitch black. I was terrified that somebody was going to touch me. I was waiting for the grope.’

‘Obviously not from the one-armed man.’

‘Well, no, not him, but others. There were other people on the train looking at me. And then there were the screaming schoolies, way too self-involved to have any regard for those around them. Which reminds me, I saw Lexi at Chatswood station as our train crawled by.’

‘And?’

‘She was having fun.’

‘What kind of fun? Or shouldn’t I ask?’

‘Sitting on some handsome boy’s lap. There might have been kissing. Some tongue involved.’

‘That’s my daughter you’re talking about, Robbie.’

‘Yeah, well I’d monitor her trips home if I were you.’

‘I’m trying.’ I looked around the now perfectly tidy nursery. ‘What else do we need to do to prepare for this new bub of yours?’

‘Enough with the baby, Kate. The baby’s had enough attention.’

‘It’s not even born yet!’

‘Exactly, and look at all the carry-on about it. The baby’s taking over my life. What about me? What do I want to do? Go trekking in Nepal for starters. I’m going to leave the baby with Mum and go and find myself.’

‘Listen to me,’ I said, taking her by the hand. ‘You are about to give birth to your baby.’

She pulled her hand away. ‘Details, mere details. I hate canary yellow. I’m not having a baby. End of story. I’m off to the travel agent. Want to come?’

‘You’re not going anywhere. For a start, it’s nine o’clock at night and no travel agent is open. Come on.’ I walked out of the nursery and into the living room. ‘Let’s get this place cleaned up. Then you’ll feel better.’

I know my sister is delusional. That’s pretty much a given. But she’s also a neat freak. Usually, she can’t say no to an energetic clean-up. We’re similar in that way. But tonight, she was happy to sit on the sofa and watch while I toiled.

It was therapeutic. Cleaning up Robyn’s mess helped take my mind off Lexi and the never-ending series of flashpoints with her – her drinking, her hair, her clothes, skipping school, kissing a boy (presumably Hunter) at a train station. What next? It was exhausting and depressing. I had little control over her and I couldn’t seem to get through to her, couldn’t connect.

I shuffled some papers on the side table. ‘There’s unopened mail here.’

‘Really?’

‘Don’t you think you should go through it? Some of it looks weeks old.’

‘Here. Give me a look. They’re all bills, I bet.’ She opened the first one. ‘My new passport! I’m set and ready to go.’

‘Great. Keep opening and I’ll make us a cup of tea.’ I took an armful of dirty cups into the kitchen and switched on the kettle. The kitchen was a mess. Half-eaten sandwiches. Sour milk on the kitchen bench.

‘Jeez, Rob,’ I yelled to her in the next room. ‘Have you heard about the latest miracle invention? A dishcloth and water? Disinfectant perhaps?’

Robyn walked in, her face pale.

‘What is it? Is it the baby? Do you have cramps? I’m sorry for giving you a hard –’ Robyn handed me a letter. ‘What’s this?’

I unfolded the letter while Robyn pressed her back against the kitchen wall and slid down the side until her legs and bottom were on the floor. I scanned the piece of paper in my hand. It was from Dan . . . *new love, Noelle . . . met in Spain . . . living together . . . want to fast-track divorce . . . marry Noelle . . . loving life . . . good luck . . . Love, Dan.*

‘Oh, Robyn, I don’t know what to say. I’m shocked that Dan would do this to you.’

Robyn stared straight ahead at the open dishwasher. ‘I . . . I always thought he’d come back. That he was just overwhelmed by the baby but that eventually he’d come home and the three of us would be a family, all together, forever. I thought that’s what would happen. I thought that once he came back and saw the baby, his baby . . . well, I thought he’d love me again. Love us.’ Robyn rubbed her stomach. ‘How could he have met someone else? He’s going to be a dad. He should be shopping for prams and bassinets, not a new wife!’


I sat down beside her and put my arm around her. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Robyn kept rubbing her stomach in slow circular movements as she stared into space. ‘Dan’s not coming home, is he?’

'No, I don't think he is, darling.'

'I'm going to be all alone forever, aren't I?'

'No, you're not, Robyn. I'm here. I'll always be here for you.'

A decorative graphic consisting of a cluster of small hearts and swirling lines, positioned in the upper right quadrant of the page.

The phone beside my bed rang at precisely six thirty the next morning, at exactly the same time as my alarm went off. Why bother with a state-of-the-art alarm clock when you have a neurotic pregnant sister?

‘Hi, it’s me. It’s time, Katie.’

‘Yes, Robyn.’ I yawned. Who else could it be at this hour? And no, it wasn’t time. But I was glad for the early wake-up. I wanted to arrive at the office before Graeme sauntered in demanding his morning coffee. The very thought of being in the same room with Graeme filled me with dread and loathing, but I had promised Fern I would do this and by God I was going to, even if it killed me.

‘Feeling better this morning?’ I asked her.

‘No, shocking, but I guess I have to get on with it.’

‘That’s the spirit.’

‘Mum, can Hunter come over this afternoon?’ Lexi asked as we drove to school.

Could it be? Was this the Lexi breakthrough I'd been hoping for?

'I mean, if you're not letting me skip school and I have to come home straight after netball practice, can he come over?'

'That would be fine, Lex, but I don't really want the two of you here by yourselves.'

'Mum, gross! We're just going to hang out.'

'Maybe he can come for dinner instead?'

'For dinner? You're joking, right?'

'What's wrong with sharing a meal with us?'

'Because you're not normal.'

'I'm a mother. I'll never be normal again.'

'Exactly. If he stays for dinner, you might bring out the lame Family Conversation Starters cards.'

'And why not? They're a great way of getting to know each other.'

Lexi groaned. 'Can he come over this afternoon? Just for an hour?'

On Wednesdays, Lexi had netball practice until four thirty, which meant that she wouldn't be home till close to five o'clock. I could do it. Arnaud had changed soccer practice this week to this afternoon, so I could swing by and pick Angus up from the oval and still be home by five. 'Okay, but I'm going to be keeping my eye on you both.'

Angus wasn't happy when I dropped him at school at ten minutes after eight.

'The clock's slow,' I lied. 'It's closer to twenty past eight. Do up your shoelaces, please. And tuck your shirt in. You've got Vegemite on your chin. Eat all of your lunch. Jack's mum is picking you up from school and taking you to soccer practice. Remember your manners and wipe your feet before you hop

in her car. And don't forget to bring home two reading books. Proper reading books, Angus. Books that have more than six words of two syllables on each page, okay? I'll be at the oval at ten to five.' It was like talking to a brick wall.

He was already inside the school gates. Shoelaces undone. Shirt hanging out. And he had really long fingernails. I'd been meaning to clip them for weeks.

I walked into the studio, cappuccino in hand, trying to remember the dream I'd had last night. It annoyed me that I couldn't quite remember. It had been interrupted by Robyn's phone call. It would come to me eventually.

I heard Graeme's voice. Drat! He was here. Raised voices boomed from his office. His door was wide open. I stopped and peered in. Fern was blasting him.

'Graeme, this little problem, as you call it, won't disappear by itself. You caused it, remember, so you need to fix it. Today.' Way to go, Fern. The woman had style. She didn't let Graeme bully her. She was all action.

I saw Graeme suddenly push his chair out from behind his desk and stand up. 'No, Fern. Christ! Didn't I make myself clear?'

'Yes, but –'

'You're not listening to me.'

I quickly stepped out of sight. But I was mesmerised, struck by their fury. Surely, the entire floor could hear Graeme's raging voice. He was a seething mass of anger about to explode.

'Graeme, we need Mara . . . *MasterChef* . . .' Fern's voice was so low I couldn't hear every word she was saying.

'Either she goes or I do,' Graeme boomed.

'Be reasonable. We're committed to a Wednesday deadline – one week away. We have to make it, and the only way that's

going to happen is if Mara is here.’ Fern’s voice softened. ‘I’ll make it . . .’

Again I couldn’t quite hear what she was saying. I edged closer to listen but I didn’t want to get caught gawking. I was amazed that crowds hadn’t gathered in the hallway.

‘You’d better,’ Graeme said as his door slammed shut with Fern imprisoned inside. I hovered a moment longer but Graeme was obviously aware that his raised voice could be heard throughout the building, because I didn’t hear any further sound coming from his office.

I opened the studio door and turned on all the lights. What I didn’t expect to see was Sarah’s book sitting back on my table. Bloody hell. I’d only seen her a couple of days ago. I didn’t want to continue our association by forcing myself to look at her photos. She was a success; I wasn’t. I didn’t need to open her book to convince me.

‘Hey, Katie,’ said Coco. I jumped five metres into the air and spilled my coffee. ‘Seen Fern this morning?’

‘I heard her just now with Graeme,’ I replied.

‘Really? I just knocked on his door.’

‘They were arguing. Maybe they’ve gone downstairs.’

‘Maybe. I need layout approval. And since there’s no Mara, I need Fern.’

‘Need Fern for what?’ Fern asked from the doorway.

‘Layout approval, and I need Graeme as well,’ Coco said.

‘Graeme’s left for the day,’ Fern said sharply. Coco and I looked at her. ‘Go on, Coco, I’ll be right with you. Kate, about the photos you took the other day . . .’

‘Photos?’

‘White Magic? Christmas?’

‘Oh, those? Just playing around. Sorry. I know I was –’

‘They’re fantastic. Fresh, light. I’m using one of them on the front cover this month. I was going to use Graeme’s pic, the one with the exotic feathers, sequins and black satin, but yours is so much more innovative and sophisticated. Don’t mention it to Graeme though, he’ll find out soon enough.’ Fern clicked her tongue and sighed. ‘Oh well, that’s why I’m the boss. I have to make the hard decisions.’

‘Fern, I . . . Thank you.’

‘No, thank *you*. I wouldn’t use your photos if they weren’t brilliant. Well done. Now, have you looked at Sarah’s book?’

I shook my head.

‘Give it back to me then.’ She sounded exasperated.

My dream from last night flashed before me as Fern walked out of the studio carrying Sarah’s book. I was in the back seat of my car with Graeme doing something . . . and we stopped. Then we were in a taxi. I was in the back seat with Graeme and we were heading . . . to his apartment.

My God! What happened? As much as I didn’t want to know, I needed to – but my brain had blanked it out. I couldn’t remember beyond the fact that we were headed to Graeme’s apartment and that I definitely wasn’t protesting.

‘Hey, Kate,’ Fern said later in the day when I passed her in the corridor. ‘Come in for a moment.’

I followed her and sat down in one of the two burgundy lounge chairs in her office.

‘Based on the great shots you took the other day, would you mind heading back up to the beach on Friday and taking some location shots? We don’t have enough. The good news is that Simone will be back next Monday –’

‘That’s great.’ It was the best news I’d had since I started the job. I was about to be set free.

‘But since Mara’s still AWOL, I’m hoping you’ll stick around until we find her and convince her to come back to work. You don’t have to answer me straight away. I know you have other commitments.’

I felt guilty listening to Fern telling me how busy I was. Fern was the one who had four children as well as several national magazines to manage. How did she do it? And with such grace and ease? And the way she handled Graeme. Fern obviously hadn’t been privy to his lecherous behaviour, his wandering hands, smirking gestures and the complete vileness that is Graeme Grafton. Fern was above all that nonsense. I wasn’t envious, just in awe.

‘What will you do if Mara doesn’t come back?’

‘I really don’t know. We need her. She’s the driving force of the magazine. If she doesn’t come back . . .’ Fern shook her head. ‘She has to come back. That’s all there is to it.’

‘Guess who I saw at the café across the street? Sarah! She hasn’t changed at all since college. There’s no humility about her at all.’

‘Have a look at her book.’

I shook my head. ‘She doesn’t need any more glory.’

‘Take the book! Graeme’s not here so you’ll have no interruptions. Take it and go.’ Fern handed me Sarah’s book again and, resignedly, I walked out of her office.

I sat down at the table in the studio with the book in front of me. What was it about the bloody book that scared me so much? First of all there was the cover with the words SARAH STANTHORPE, INTERNATIONALLY ACCLAIMED PHOTOGRAPHER, plastered across it. *Internationally acclaimed photographer!*

Her smug face was on the very first page, her superior self-righteous expression looking out at me as if to say, ‘Ha ha. My photography’s better than yours. Na na, na, na, na. I have a three-book publishing deal. You’ve got nothing. Nothing but envy, you talentless no-good piece of trash.’

Maybe not. Maybe Sarah was simply smiling a happy smile. But it looked like she was speaking directly to me and I didn’t like it. I couldn’t turn the pages. My hand hovered over the acknowledgements page, frozen. Fear of what I’d see, I guess. The fear of finding that Sarah was so much more talented than me and always had been. I had stomach cramps, a looming headache and was sweating. Why did I care so much? I was scared that her photography would be so poignant, so meaningful, so soul-crushingly perfect that I would never want to pick up a camera again in my life.

Quietly, I flicked through several pages, then several pages more, until I reached the double-page spread in the middle of the book.

It was a stunning portrait of three lions, two adults and a cub, basking in the sun on a flat rock surrounded by lush green grass. The adult female was licking the cub, her eyes wide open. It was a beautiful picture. Their upper bodies were perfectly framed – the photo taken at the precise moment the sunlight hit the back of their heads.

The accompanying caption read: *Words cannot express the exhilaration I felt being up close and personal with these magnificent animals as they watched over their cub in the late afternoon sun. Image taken at Kruger National Park, South Africa, Spring, 2006: Nikon N90S/600m lens and Kodachrome 64 film.*

Tears rolled down my cheeks.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Fern's. 'Beautiful, isn't it? I remember the day that photo was taken.'

'The fourteenth of October, 1994.'

'Your photos just keep getting better, Kate.'

'It's my photo.'

'Of course it's yours. I remember you included it in your final assessment portfolio.'

I almost laughed through my tears. 'I waited hours to get that bloody shot. Waiting for just the right moment. Africa, hey? At least she got the lens and film details right.'

'I bet Sarah's publisher would be very interested to know that it was you who took this photo at Taronga Park Zoo, Sydney, not Sarah at Kruger National Park, South Africa. And you know what, Kate? Your photo is by far the best. No matter how many times I look through the collection, yours stands out.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I wanted you to see it for yourself.'

'But she stole my photo.'

'She certainly did. What are you going to do about it?'

I shrugged my shoulders. I was too stunned to do more.

'Kate, why are you here?'

'Because you asked me, and when you asked, I thought about it and it hit me: I realised what my life had been missing all these years. I love taking photographs. I want to shoot everything I see. I'm so sorry I gave up. I feel like I've wasted so much time, lost so many opportunities.'

'You have to get out there. You're an artist. Don't get me wrong, I'd love for you to stay at *Delicious Bites* permanently, but you have real talent. Use it.'



Still reeling from the knowledge that Sarah Stanthorpe had stolen at least one photograph from me, I arrived at the oval to pick up Angus from soccer training. Eleven filthy little boys, half of whom were shirtless (including my son), were running around the oval screaming. It was freezing cold.

‘Put your shirt back on,’ I yelled at Angus. He glanced at me for a moment, then ran in the opposite direction towards the bush.

‘Hey,’ Arnaud said. ‘I know what you are thinking.’ He couldn’t possibly have known what I was thinking at that precise moment, but I still blushed. ‘Why has Arnaud let them take their shirts off? I didn’t, but they don’t listen to me when they’re running with the pack.’

‘Angus never listens to me either, so don’t take it personally.’

Too suddenly, Angus was beside me, covered in mud from head to foot and jogging up and down on the spot holding his penis. ‘Mum, I’m busting.’ Several other boys looked on, laughing.

Once I’d found various shirts, school shoes, school bags and uneaten scraps of lunch, I hurried four filthy kids into my now filthy car and drove off.

I dropped Jack and Josh off at their respective homes, tooted my horn to Di when dropping off Tom, as she called out, ‘We’re walking on Friday,’ and headed home to the sound of Angus’s Nintendo buzzing in my ear.

Thinking about Arnaud. Thinking about him walking into the studio and locking the door behind him. He’d lean against the door and look at me, smiling. Daring me to make the next move. And I’d take the bait. Saunter over to him, and drag my fingernails around the collar of his shirt. He’d be too startled to

say anything. I'd loosen his shirt, blow softly in his ear, and put my finger to his lips to shush his questions.

Shhhh, I'd say. *You don't want anyone to hear, right?*

Breathing more heavily, not really daring to believe what was happening to him, Arnaud would reach for me, pulling my skirt higher, exposing my thighs, and I'd let him. Let him caress my skin and touch my breasts through my sheer blouse.

Kate! I couldn't be thinking about this now with Angus in the car, in the middle of peak-hour traffic! It was nonsense. I was on a collision course to hell. If I wasn't careful, my world would come crashing down around me and I'd have no-one to blame but myself.

Anyway, what would happen after the first seduction? After Arnaud and I had fucked for forty days straight? Being a man, Arnaud would catch up on some much-needed shut-eye, but what about me? Women liked to analyse . . .

The thing about affairs or at least the fantasy of affairs, is that it's all about the build-up. The temptation, the flirting, the first kiss, Arnaud's tongue. But what happened when the fantasy became reality? While the sex might be incredible, new and exciting, eventually we would still arrive at *What's for dinner?* and *Have you seen my other black sock?*

Life goes on and on. School, homework, tears and tantrums – those things wouldn't magically disappear. Maybe they did in other people's lives, but I was sure that they wouldn't in my life. Even if I was with Arnaud and his magical tongue.

'Lexi, I'm home,' I called out as Angus and I walked through the front door. I couldn't face walking in on Lexi and Hunter doing . . . whatever. The last time I'd seen Hunter, I'd practically thrown him out of the house. I was hoping it wouldn't come to

that this time. When I walked into the kitchen they were sitting at the bench, Lexi looking a picture of sweet innocence, even with two buttons of her school shirt undone.

‘How are you, Hunter? Would you like something to eat?’ I said in a pleasant, *I-want-to-be-your-friend* tone.

‘Mother,’ Lexi said, in the voice of irritation she’d recently developed, ‘we’ve eaten. We’re going upstairs to play music in my room. Come on, Hunt.’ He followed her up the stairs.

‘Lexi,’ I said, calling her back. ‘Keep your door open, okay?’

She glared at me and rolled her eyes. ‘I’m not a baby, Mum.’

That’s exactly what worried me. But what could go wrong? Lexi was home at least, not out in a deserted car park in the back seat of someone’s car – I cringed as the thought crossed my mind.

I was amazed by Lexi’s confidence in herself and her future, whatever that might hold. Not withstanding the ongoing dramas with her, I had to admit I was envious of her youth, her *I-don’t-give-a-shit* attitude and her blossoming sexuality. Not that I would ever admit that to her. Or Matthew for that matter.

It’s not that I wanted to be a teenager again and relive all those adolescent torments and raging hormones. I didn’t. But Lexi was on the brink of an amazing adventure; her whole life was ahead of her, there for the taking. Lexi would make plans, chart her own destiny and barrel head first into her future.

And her mother? No doubt Lexi saw me as a meddling middle-aged woman living a tedious, conventional life in the suburbs. No wonder she rebelled. Rebelled against the predictable boredom of good girlhood and beyond . . . everything that her mother embodied. If only she knew I was dying to break free, as well.

I'd long since missed my chance to take ecstasy and snort cocaine. I'd had opportunities in the past, but had always declined. At least I could be honest with my children when they asked if I'd ever indulged. The moral majority would applaud me. Even now, eight percent of me, maybe more, desperately wanted to experiment. But no! I was a housewife, living in suburbia. I couldn't even collect my mail without Margaret knowing exactly how many letters were in my hand.

'That's atrocious; you need to do something about it. Can you sue her?' Matthew said when I told him about Sarah's book.

'I'm not sure. I think copyright laws have changed. Besides . . .'

'Besides what?'

'What's done is done. The photo is in her book now.'

'I can't believe you're saying that. Where's your fighting spirit?'

'Mostly in the laundry.'

'What's happened to you? The woman I fell in love with would have ripped her to shreds.'

'The woman you fell in love with also weighed eight kilos less and didn't have wrinkles.'

'Stop being so melodramatic.'

'Thanks. Just what I need. Another lecture.' I walked away to answer the door. 'Good God! What have you done?' I said to Robyn as she and her shaggy blonde hair and nose ring walked inside.

Hairdressers say that critical times for hairstyle changes are after the demise of a relationship and after the birth of a baby. Full points to Robyn.

'You like? I got a trim and a colour.'

'I can see that.' It reminded me (though Robyn's hair was nothing like it) of the time I got a spiral perm just after Mum and Dad's divorce. I looked like a startled poodle. Even before I left the salon it was ugly, but it was truly frightful when I was required to manage it myself. Days later, I shuffled back to the hairdressers and demanded they cut it off. For free. They did. Another disaster. I contemplated getting hair extensions but in the end decided it was more economical to wear a beret (a nod to the French) for the next two years. Since then, I've kept it permanently shoulder-length and brown, and trim it myself when needed.

'Hi, Matthew,' Robyn said when she walked through the kitchen to the fridge. 'Any wine, sweetpea?'

Matthew glanced up from the newspaper in Robyn's direction, looked as though he might say something, but changed his mind and went back to reading.

I opened a bottle of wine and took it and my sister into the lounge. 'Mum's coming over.'

'Yeah. So, I've been thinking about the wedding. We could have a joint wedding/bon voyage party. What do you think?'

'Bon voyage?'

'For me,' Robyn said excitedly. 'A bon voyage for me. Just tack it on to the wedding gala. I haven't had a party for a while so it's perfect timing. I can farewell my friends – not the truly weird ones, of course – and at the same time catch up with Mum and Dad. A bit of food, dancing, wine. Mum won't mind.'

'Hold that thought, Robbie,' I said, momentarily wondering if Blanche Ebbutt wrote a *Don'ts for Sisters*, as I answered the front door again.

'I didn't know you'd be coming,' I said when I saw my father standing beside Mum. He touched my arm and kissed me hello.

‘Darling, how are you?’ Mum said to Robyn. Surprisingly, she didn’t react to Robyn’s hair or nose ring. Dad seemed oblivious, just like the old days.

‘Okay, I guess,’ Robyn replied, rubbing her belly.

‘Nanna,’ said Lexi, coming down the stairs, ‘I’ve got some great ideas for my dress.’

‘Me too,’ Angus said.

‘Lex, have you done your homework?’ Hunter had left less than an hour ago and Lexi had only just finished dinner. There was no way she could have completed all of her study. ‘Including the extra assignments?’

‘Mum!’

‘Are you okay?’ I moved closer to her.

‘Fine!’ Again with the irritated tone. ‘Why shouldn’t I be?’

‘How are you, Lexi, sweetheart?’ Mum started. ‘I hear you’ve been giving your teachers a hard time.’

‘Katie and Robyn used to run away from school when they were about your age, Lexi,’ Dad said.

‘Thanks, Dad, that’s helpful,’ I said.

Matthew walked in with a beer for Dad and a wineglass for Mum. He proceeded to open the beer and pour Mum a wine as the rest of us shouted around him.

‘Really?’ Lexi was enthralled. ‘Mum didn’t tell me that. She always pretends she was such a goody-goody.’

‘Oh no,’ Dad smiled. ‘Far from it.’

‘I was good,’ I countered. ‘Especially when I was thirteen.’

‘I wasn’t,’ Robyn chimed in.

‘Robbie, your hair!’ Lexi squealed. ‘Totally awesome.’

‘Yeah, good hair, Rob,’ Matthew said, giving Robyn two thumbs-up, then he looked at me and said, ‘I tried not to comment.’

‘Says he who hasn’t changed his hairstyle in fifteen years,’ Robyn snorted. ‘As for your straggly mane, Kate . . .’

‘What? What’s wrong with it?’ I said, flipping my head from side to side. ‘I can whack it in a ponytail and it looks great. Short hair requires constant maintenance, styling products, buckets of grooming time.’

‘Don’t listen to her, Robbie, I think your hair is way cool,’ Lexi said. ‘As for the nose ring, I want one. Can I have one, Mum?’

‘Of course you can. When you’re thirty-five.’

‘You never let me do anything. You know, Nanna, Mum doesn’t want you and Pop getting married again. Isn’t she the worst mother in the world? She’s so mean.’

‘Lexi,’ Mum said, ‘that’s not true. And besides, your mum and I have spoken about the wedding and she’s very happy about it now. Aren’t you, Kate?’

‘Of course,’ I lied. ‘Speaking of which, we need to talk about the wedding plans with Nanna, so you two finish your homework and then you, Lexi, can talk about your dress, and you, Angus, can find out all about being the ring bearer.’

‘What about the lollies?’

‘There’ll be plenty of lollies on the day, sport,’ Dad said, trying to ruffle Angus’s spiky hair.

Mum pulled an invitation from her bag. ‘It’s only a draft but what do you think?’

I snatched the invitation from her and examined it. Printed on the front of the card was a photo of the four of us taken at a beach thirty years ago – Mum and Dad holding hands and looking incredibly young and gorgeous. Each was holding a child with their free arm. My head was leaning on Dad’s shoulder. I was such a daddy’s girl in those days, I’d forgotten.

'I remember that day,' I said. 'We were staying at the old beach house . . . we built sandcastles all day. I remember –' I stopped and caught my breath. They were good times. Really good times. 'It's a great photo,' I managed, and wondered why it had to come to an end all those years ago.

'I know it's short notice – only two and a half weeks away – but we only want family and a few friends. I've called them all, anyway. The invitation is merely a formality.'

'So tell me what you've decided?' I held the invitation in my hand, feeling myself tearing up.

'We were going to have the wedding at my house.' Mum glanced at Dad. 'Rather, our house, but then we thought it would be much nicer to have it at a restaurant. Then there's no worrying about the weather . . .'

'Or cleaning up,' said Dad. 'You know how your mum gets.'

'Good God!' Robyn grunted. 'Cramps. Cramps.'

Mum clucked sympathetically and continued. 'We've organised the celebrant. We've agreed on flowers. But we're stuck for a venue.'

'Aren't you supposed to give one month and one day's notice when you marry?' I said.

'Oh,' said Dad, smiling. 'We organised all that after our first night together.'

Oooh! I knew when I was beat. 'I might have a place for you,' I said. 'I did a photo shoot up on the northern beaches the other day and there was this gorgeous restaurant, Noah's by the Sea. It's got a stunning outlook, right on the beach. There's even a private function room. If it's not booked, you could be in luck. It would be in keeping with the invitation too.' I'd have to overcome the almost-grope by Graeme that darkened my memories of that room, but I'd overcome greater things.

‘Sounds perfect,’ Dad said, interrupting my thoughts.

I walked over to the telephone stand and retrieved a notebook and pen. ‘If we’re going to do this bloody wedding, let’s do it properly.’

Matthew stood up and left the room. Okay, so perhaps he wasn’t up for another family celebration. I sometimes forgot how hard it must be for him, having my family living in the same city as us. One of Matthew’s brothers lived in London and the rest of his family lived in Adelaide. We hardly ever saw them. But my family! Rarely a day went by that Mum or Robyn didn’t pop in.

I had just finished writing *I. Ring Noah’s by the Sea, tomorrow am*, when he returned with a bottle of Moët and five flutes.

‘This calls for a celebratory drink!’

‘I’m sorry,’ I whispered, when I stood up to join him. And I was. I loved Matthew, no doubt about it. But I still wasn’t happy with the state of our marriage. I felt we were both going through the motions and that emotional connection was seriously lacking. We needed to work things out, but the hugeness of our problems overwhelmed me, especially when I was completely surrounded by family. Like now. Also, there was my very real concern that Matthew was indulging in extramarital activities, and as for me, I still couldn’t remember why the hell I was in a taxi heading to Graeme’s apartment that night. The memory was always just out of reach and it scared me.

‘Here’s to Pip and Bob,’ Matthew said, after he poured everyone a glass.

It was a true Kodak moment. I should have taken photos with my nifty pocket camera, but I wasn’t quite there yet.

Dad stroked Mum’s arm while she talked about the flowers. ‘White tiger lilies for the ceremony, and bouquets of white roses for the tables. What do you think?’

Looking at them together again, I almost recognised the father who'd cooked us Sunday roasts when we were growing up; the father who'd taken us on family beach holidays and the father who'd stroked my arm, just like he was doing now with Mum, whenever I fell over or was troubled . . . Pity he ducked out just as I was having serious growing pains, boyfriend hassles and exam pressures.

'Are you writing this down, Katie?' Mum asked, pulling me back to the present.

'Sorry, I missed that.'

'I said, do you want me to call the restaurant?'

'No, I'll call first and see if it's available.'

Mum nodded. 'Okay. Then I'll print the invitations and send them off.'

'What about music?' Robyn asked, when Matthew and Dad drifted off into another room to watch sport on Foxtel.

'Yes, music – although . . .' I hesitated.

'Although what?' Mum asked.

'Are you going to have a bridal waltz?'

'I haven't thought ahead that far.'

'Well, Mother, remember mine and be warned.' Flashbacks of Joe Cocker came scuttling back. 'Remember "You Are So Beautiful"?''

'Sounded good in theory,' agreed Robyn, 'but it was way too slow and Joe's voice!'

'Sounded like he was having a convulsion.' I shook my head. 'Horrible.'

'Everything makes sense in hindsight,' Robyn said. 'What about mine? "I Will Always Love You"? Ha! What a joke that turned out to be.'

'I'll make sure I ask your advice before your father and I choose the wedding song. That is, if we have a wedding song.'

‘Nanna, when are we going to talk about *my* dress?’ Lexi’s hurt voice came from the top of the stairs.

‘Right now, love,’ Mum said, standing up, champagne in hand. I watched as she climbed the stairs to join Lexi.

‘So, what do you think about all of this?’ I asked, picking up the wedding invitation again.

‘I was shocked at first,’ Robyn started. ‘But after the few months I’ve had, I realise anything can happen.’

‘I never would have thought that Mum and Dad . . . I mean, imagine getting back together again after all this time apart.’


‘I can’t. It certainly won’t happen with Dan and I.’

‘It might.’

‘Yeah, and I might really build a mud-brick house in Panama. Dan wants to marry this Noelle creature, someone he’s probably known less than a month. Anyway, I don’t want to think about Dan. He’s no longer part of my life.’ Robyn sighed. ‘It can’t have been easy for Dad, separated from us for all those years. It’s so sad. I remember one night just before they split, Dad crying, begging Mum to let him stay, pleading with her. He said he could change, that he’d do anything to keep the family together and the marriage alive. Mum was so cruel, so adamant that the marriage was dead.’

‘Well what did he expect?’ I said, springing to Mum’s defence. ‘He had an affair with Miss Inspirational, and he did go on to marry her, remember. Let’s not forget the facts, Robbie.’

‘I know, but I’ll never forget that night. He looked like he’d lost his best friend. He stayed in the spare room next to mine and cried all night.’ Robyn shook her head. ‘It was horrible. I’d forgotten all about that.’



‘Guess what?’ Coco beamed as she stood in the doorway of the studio the next morning. ‘Rumour has it that Graeme and Mara had a rendezvous yesterday.’

‘Really?’ I took a bite of banana bread and a swig of my skinny cappuccino.

‘It’s obvious, isn’t it? What other reason could there be for him disappearing so suddenly? Besides, I overheard Fern on the phone to him yesterday afternoon and I got the impression she wasn’t happy with him. There was lots of *Well, we’ll see about that* and *You’re not the only photographer around who can do this job*, that sort of thing. So I reckon that Mara’s broken it off with Graeme and he’s trying to woo her back for the sake of his job. Whether or not it’s worked . . . Anyway, let me know if you hear anything more.’

‘Will do.’ I watched for a moment as Coco strolled out towards the open-plan office where the computer heads worked, then answered my ringing phone.

‘What did the restaurant say?’ My mother’s tone was anxious.

'You haven't called yet, have you?' I glanced at my watch. It had just gone ten thirty.

'No, but I was just about to, give me a minute.' I hung up and dialled the restaurant. I was hoping for a miracle and what do you know? It didn't happen. I called Mum back straight away. She picked up her phone in less than half a ring.

'Saturdays are booked out until Christmas,' I told her.

'No!' Mum's voice quavered.

'But they can fit you in on the Sunday.'

'Sunday? I'll have to talk to Bob and the marriage celebrant and –'

'Robyn and I will help. I can take you up tomorrow afternoon to have a look, if you like.'

'And Dad?'

'And Dad.'

Eldest daughter pulls through. I was exhausted. Surprised at how tired my legs felt and I hadn't even been walking this morning. My whole body felt like it was about to shut down. I put my head down on the desk and closed my eyes.

'Dreaming of me again, huh?' Graeme said and leaned across the desk until his face was barely five centimetres from mine. 'Go on. Tell me that you were, please.' Graeme had been like that all morning, making smart-arse comments.

When I'd given him his coffee earlier, he'd said, 'So nice to be waited on, Katie. While you're here, I have a couple of other *jobs* I know you'll be interested in performing.' I wanted to tip the plunger of boiling coffee over his head but instead backed out of his office without saying a word.

Now I was face to face with him in the studio and he wasn't pulling back.

'Get a grip,' I replied, jerking my head away and standing up.

‘Well if you’re going to behave like a bad tempered child, K girl . . .’

‘Me! Who do you think you are speaking to?’

He pushed his glasses up onto his head and stared down at me. ‘Last time I checked, darling, I was your boss. It wasn’t so long ago that you were happy I was making you squirm – with delight, I might add.’

‘You should be reported.’

‘Be my guest, honey. But just remember – that little secret of ours? It doesn’t have to be a secret, not if you don’t want it to be.’

‘I’m glad you’re both here,’ said Fern, walking into the studio. ‘Has Graeme told you the good news, Kate? We’ve solved our Mara issue. She’s coming back.’

‘That’s great but –’

‘It is, isn’t it? We can all be one big happy team again – and make this month’s deadline. Speaking of which, Graeme, I’m going to use one of Katie’s photos from the White Magic shoot.’

Graeme shot me a filthy look. ‘Hang on. She didn’t –’

‘Yes, she did,’ said Fern happily. ‘So I’m going to use one on our front cover to coincide with Mara’s appearance on *MasterChef*. Great publicity for you, Kate. It’ll be hard deciding which photo, though. They’re all brilliant. Must dash.’ She headed for the door.

‘If you think for one minute,’ Graeme hissed, ‘you’re getting front cover credits! Let me tell you something, that will happen over my dead body!’ He followed Fern out the door, shouting, ‘Hey, Fern. Wait up.’

The fame was nice while it lasted. I couldn’t see Fern going out on a limb for me if it meant upsetting Graeme – not with all the upheaval this place had seen in the last few weeks.

‘How about that drink,’ said Arnaud, as I was contemplating leaving the office for the day.

Truth be told, I just wanted to go home. I glanced at my watch. It was only four thirty. ‘I guess so,’ I replied, suddenly feeling bright. ‘A quick one.’

‘Très bien! I am very lucky to be having a drink with the woman who has upset Graeme, *non?*’

‘How?’ I asked, suddenly feeling very guilty.

‘Everyone knows Fern wants to use one of your photos on the front cover of the magazine. That has never happened before. It has always been Graeme’s baby. Meet you at the bar in ten.’ He smiled and held up ten fingers.

I crossed my fingers. You never know.

I dashed to the bathroom to spruce myself up. Some lipstick here, a shake of the head and hairspray there. A spray of perfume. A dab of powder.

A few minutes later, Arnaud and I were sitting at a booth two tables away from where Graeme and I had kissed barely a week ago. He was knocking back a Heineken. I was sipping a Hunter Valley chardonnay.

‘How is everything?’ Arnaud asked. ‘The wedding . . .’

I frowned. This wasn’t what I wanted to talk about. I was having a drink with Arnaud to escape my reality, not embrace it. I wanted to talk about us running away together. Talk about my wayward husband joining a Mormon splinter group. I needed sympathy. It was all part of my fantasy master plan.

‘The wedding . . .’ I said vaguely, clutching my wine as though someone might try to steal it from me.

‘Angus?’

Angus? Inattentive. Rather like yourself, Arnaud. Where

were the declarations of love, the plans to escape our lives, to break free?

‘Fine . . . good,’ I murmured.

‘From where I’m sitting, Kate, you have it all – you’re beautiful, you have two gorgeous children . . .’ I shut my eyes and listened as Arnaud talked. I imagined him reaching over, taking my wrist, placing his hand over the top of mine . . .

‘I thought I might find you here, Arnie.’ It was a woman – and judging by the greeting, one Arnaud had been intimate with . . . several times.

‘Ze love of my life,’ said Arnaud, quickly standing up from his seat.

‘Hello, darling,’ the woman’s voice purred. ‘Who is this?’

‘Kate . . . I’m Kate,’ I said.

‘Where are my manners?’ said Arnaud. ‘Kate, this is Sophie, my girlfriend. Sophie, Kate is a colleague.’

‘Charmed,’ said Sophie, smiling icily.

‘Lovely to meet you,’ I stammered, feeling like I was trapped in a nightmare – or a very bad B-grade movie.

Sophie sat down opposite me while Arnaud went to the bar to buy more drinks.

‘Kate, tell me about yourself.’

‘Not much to tell, really.’

‘I find that hard to believe.’

‘Arnaud is a great soccer coach,’ I said quickly. ‘Angus is learning a lot from him.’

‘Arnaud is your son’s soccer coach as well? I’ll have to pay more attention to Arnie’s activities in future,’ she said with a laugh.

‘Yeah, the boys love him.’

‘Arnaud is a great person, full stop. Great with kids, adults

– women especially.’ Sophie looked me straight in the eye. ‘I bet he lays on his accent a bit thick, right?’

‘No!’

‘I’m sure he does. Arnie’s been living in Australia for years. I think he overdoes the French bit to give the bored mums a thrill. Not that I am suggesting you’re boring, Kate. Far from it. Given that the two of you are having a drink together . . . well, you obviously get along famously.’

‘Arnaud is just a friend . . . I’m married.’

‘I’m sure he is, and I am happy for him to have friends.’

We watched in silence as Arnaud walked back to the table with drinks.

‘How are you finding life at Modular, Kate?’ Sophie asked, once Arnaud had sat down.

‘Okay,’ I croaked. ‘I won’t be there for much longer.’

‘Sorry to hear that,’ she purred.

‘Because of Graeme?’ Arnaud asked. He turned to Sophie. ‘Graeme is Kate’s boss.’

‘Poor thing. I’ve only met him the once. Remember, darling?’ Sophie said, rubbing Arnaud’s thigh with her slender hand. ‘At last year’s Christmas party? He was pawing anyone with a vagina. Such unattractive behaviour. Men who think they’re God’s gift, they never seem to learn.’

‘Graeme’s not too bad,’ I lied, growing more uncomfortable by the second.

‘Really?’ said Arnaud.

‘Okay, he is bad. He’s one of the most appalling men I’ve ever met in my life. I don’t know how the staff put up with him. At least my time there is finite.’

I checked my watch. I had been in Sophie’s company for an excruciating seventeen minutes – I figured I had needed to stay


at least that long so as not to appear rude . . . or uneasy. But now I stood up. I couldn't bear it any longer. Arnaud and Sophie were nuzzling each other and talking excitedly about their plans – plans for the weekend, plans for their holidays, how they would spend the next fifty years of their lives together.

'If you'll excuse me, I really do need to get home to my family. They're expecting me.'

The object of my affection, make that my *wasted* affection, for the last however many weeks was actually a happily attached man. A man who would no sooner run off with me to a deserted island than fly backwards on a broomstick to the South Pole.

I studied my reflection in the rear-view mirror of my car. Tragic. I took a tissue and wiped the lipstick away. Too much colour. I flattened my hair. Too much hairspray. I sat in my car for a good ten minutes with my head resting against the steering wheel, thinking . . . thinking about nothing.

Nothing in particular, apart from my own stupidity.



‘Oh, Di, you look terrible,’ I said. ‘Even in the dark.’
‘Don’t ask, just start walking.’

‘Is there anything –’

‘NO! Tell me what’s been happening in your life.’

‘My life is one long series of humiliations, but you already know that. I met Arnaud’s girlfriend last night.’

Diane turned and looked at me.

‘Arnaud and I were having a drink at this bar after work. Anyway, she practically accused me of having an affair with him. It was awful. I felt lower than an ant.’

‘What did I tell you? These so-called harmless flirtations . . .’

‘Why do I keep fucking up my life? I seem to do it so well.’

‘Kate, your life isn’t fucked. Are you pregnant?’

‘No.’

‘Divorced?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Is your stepson having sex with your daughter?’

‘Oh, Di! No way!’

‘It’s true,’ said Diane, stopping and sitting on the kerb. ‘I walked in on them both in Nina’s bed. Not on top of the bed, Kate, but nestled under the blankets, naked! What am I going to do?’ Diane was crying. ‘It’s awful. They say they’re in love. In love! Nina’s fifteen for God’s sake. It’s illegal for starters, never mind all the stepbrother/stepsister complications.’

‘Do you think it might have been a one-off, an experiment? Have you tried talking to Nina about it?’

‘She won’t listen to me. Neither of them will. Brent’s gone ballistic, accusing Nina of all sorts of things. Of course, he’s not saying a word against his own son. It’s too much to bear.’

‘I can’t believe Brent would do that.’

‘Well he did. He just mumbled, “Boys will be boys”. I’m beside myself with worry.’

‘Can you separate them?’

‘How? I can’t ban them from seeing each other when they live in the same house!’

‘Boarding school?’

‘I’m thinking about it.’

‘Katie, how much longer are you staying at the magazine?’ Matthew asked when he walked into the kitchen for breakfast.

‘Not sure. Why?’ I was sipping coffee, not really paying attention. I was still thinking about Diane, pregnant and having to cope with Nina and Sam’s antics. There but for the grace of God, I thought to myself.

‘No reason. I just was wondering when you’d be finishing up, that’s all.’

‘You never know, I might accept a permanent position.’

‘You hate food photography.’

‘Food photography is better than no photography, Matthew. And it’s a way back into the industry.’

‘I wish you’d make up your mind.’

‘Why? What do you care?’

‘A lot, as it happens.’

For the briefest of moments I thought he might be going to add something more. Confess something. He looked distraught. What did he want to tell me? Nothing as it turned out. Just as quickly he turned away and the moment was lost. I stomped upstairs to the bathroom to have my shower. Inside I was shaking, wondering whether Matthew was planning on running away with his girlfriend to Toronto.

‘Morning,’ said Coco when I walked into the building. She looked rough and smelled of stale cigarette smoke and wine.

I peered at her. ‘Everything okay?’

‘I guess.’ Coco cradled her coffee and rocked from side to side when she spoke. ‘The buzz is that Mara’s back. I think she’s behind closed doors in the meeting room with Fern and Graeme.’

I spent the morning preparing for the extra shots Fern wanted photographed at Palm Beach and thinking about how I was going to tell Fern I was leaving.

I needed to get my life in order but felt lost . . . alone. But as Kurt Cobain once said, wanting to be someone else is a waste of the person you are. I needed to find my spirit again, my passion for life and family. But where to start? Matthew believed I was unloving and uncompromising; Lexi insisted I was out to ruin her life; and my friends? Well, they used to think I was fun, or at least had a hint of a personality. But now, who knew? Apart from Di, who I walked with, I didn’t have time for friends.

Sometimes, I wanted to completely change my life, become a new person, but most of the time, I just wanted to be satisfied with the life I was living . . . the life I had. Be happy with my husband and children and take great photos, that's what I really wanted to do. That was my passion. But then photography made me think about Sarah and her bogus book.

Fern had asked me what action I was taking against Sarah and Matthew asked the same question. But I didn't know. Sarah's book was out there, published for the world to see. I knew the photo was mine and was pissed off that she'd stolen it from me but I didn't have the energy to fight with yet another person. But I knew I needed to find my fighting spirit because I was damn sure I wasn't going to let Sarah get away with stealing my work.

I sat at the utilities desk by myself drinking lukewarm coffee and staring out the window at the street activity below. Not quite the inner city – but still it was another world, a world full of street eaters and coffee carriers, scurrying to work, to catch a bus or to eat at a café. Where I lived no-one scurried anywhere except at five thirty in the morning when they power-walked with dogs and friends. Suburbia. A place where people eked out an existence once they acquired two or more children. And once there, you were locked in until the kids left home or you died. Whichever came first.

'Heard anything?' I said to Coco on my way out. There was still no sign of the three of them despite Coco hovering around the closed door with an empty glass and a very red ear.

'Not a peep,' she said. 'It's annoying the crap out of me. I hate missing out.'

I headed up the coast, pleased to be out of the office. Checking Fern's instructions, I began ticking off each picture as I photographed it.

Close-up of water lapping at the pier, tick. Seagull in mid-flight against cloudless blue sky. Tick. Seagull perched on a white post in foreground, ocean in the background. Tick. This was more like it. I had a camera and was in my element. This was what I loved. Taking photos of living, breathing things. Things that showed expression and blew in the breeze, not pumpkins, ceramic dishes and napkins.

I was engrossed in taking photos of couples strolling along the beach and kids playing in the park, when I noticed Mum and Dad walking up to me.

‘I’ll take you up to the restaurant,’ I said, putting my camera down.

‘No need, darling,’ Mum said. ‘We’ve already been up there. It’s all sorted.’

‘How? When?’

‘Just now. We didn’t want to interrupt you. You looked so involved in your work, we took ourselves off to the restaurant. It’s perfect, just perfect.’

‘Yes, Katie,’ Dad agreed. ‘It’s exactly what we were hoping for, isn’t it, Pippin?’

Mum nodded. ‘Midday, Sunday two weeks.’

‘Lexi and Angus will be thrilled,’ I said. ‘Not many kids get to be at their own grandparents’ wedding. Everything okay with the celebrant?’

‘Ah, the celebrant. I’ll just make that call now,’ said Dad, before moving away slightly and punching numbers into his mobile.

‘What next?’ I said to Mum. ‘Invitations?’

She nodded. ‘We’ll print them tonight and deliver them all tomorrow. The only interstate guests are Aunt Libby and Nick and I know there’s no way they’ll miss this, free drinks and all. And of course we’ll invite Matthew’s parents.’

Good. At least Matthew wouldn't be completely outnumbered.

'How are you doing, Katie?' Mum linked her arm through mine.

'I'll be glad to leave *Delicious Bites*, that's for sure.'

'I'm not surprised, love. Working there can't be good for your state of mind.'

'What do you mean, *my state of mind*?' I asked, unlinking my arm and turning towards her. 'I'm doing okay.' As if I could fool Mum. I was miserable.

Wasn't it only a few days ago that I'd thought I was having a breakdown? I couldn't keep up with my state of mind. In the past twenty-four hours alone, my emotional wellbeing had run the gamut of feelings from desolate to euphoric. Perhaps euphoric was too strong a word. It had run the gamut of emotions from desolate to hopeful.

'I know you're doing okay, Katie, but I think you'd feel better if you weren't there, especially around *that man*.' Mum said *that man* as if . . . well . . . as if she knew things she shouldn't know.

'Great news, Pippin,' said Dad, touching Mum's shoulder. 'The celebrant can do it! And there's no problem with having the ceremony on the beach, weather permitting.'

'Can you believe that in a matter of weeks we'll be married again?'

'Forever this time,' Dad said, hugging her.

'Yes, forever,' Mum replied.

Dad turned his attention to me. 'We couldn't have done this without you. Thanks.' He leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.

'There's nothing to thank me for. I haven't done anything.'

'Only found this beautiful restaurant with the billion-dollar views. Who's up for fish and chips? Do you have time?' Dad asked when he noticed me checking my watch.

Not long after, the three of us sat on the beach drinking ginger beer and eating battered fish and potato scallops.

‘What do you want to do with yourself, Katie, after your stint at the magazine? I’ve seen all your albums at Mum’s house and the portraits on the walls. You’re very talented.’

‘Oh . . . I’ve been thinking about putting an album together of Robyn’s pregnancy photos, to give to her when she has the baby.’

‘That’s a wonderful idea – and I’m sure there’s a lot more you can do as well, like setting up your own studio. It’d be a crime to waste your gift, Katie.’

‘Speaking of crimes, a woman I was at college with has published a book of photos and she included one of mine.’

‘That’s wonderful,’ Mum said.

‘No, I mean she stole it from me and is claiming that it’s *her* photo.’

‘That’s outrageous! What are you going to do?’ Dad asked.

‘Seek legal advice and contact the publishers.’

‘What can I do to help?’ Dad asked. ‘She can’t get away with that sort of nonsense.’

I almost smiled. ‘No, you’re right. She can’t get away with that sort of nonsense. As for me, I want to take photographs, but I couldn’t handle the magazine industry full time. Been there done that. I’m too old –’

‘What?’ Mum and Dad said together.

‘I’m not cut out for corporate life, the office politics. It’s all about following other people’s directions, their rules, their way of doing things. Matthew’s company has offered him the opportunity to live in Toronto for a couple of years. Maybe we could do that.’

Dad laughed. ‘You sound like Robyn.’

‘God help me. No. I’m not going to Toronto. I don’t think Matthew is either. I just think he was after a reaction from me. And he got it.’

‘Do you want him to go?’ Dad asked.

‘I guess so, if it’s good for business.’

‘Forgetting business for a moment,’ Dad said, ‘do you really want Matthew to live in Canada for the foreseeable future?’ Mum gathered up the scraps and walked over to the bins. Several seagulls trailed behind. ‘Because I’ve lived through it. I know first hand what it’s like when a family splits. It’s not good. There are no winners.’

Had I just heard him correctly? He was hardly in a position to be offering me advice, especially when it came to my family and my responsibilities to them.

‘Are you forgetting that I lived through it, too?’ I said, trying to remain calm. ‘It wasn’t easy for Robyn and me, not to mention what you put poor Mum through when you left. Look, I’m fine with the marriage thing – though why you have to do it so quickly is beyond me. But that’s between the two of you; you’re both adults. I’ll kill you if you break Mum’s heart but I’m willing to trust you again because she does. But don’t ever preach to me about family life and family values. They certainly didn’t mean a lot to you when you ran off and married –’

‘Katie,’ Mum yelled, ‘that’s enough! You have no idea what you’re talking about. You of all people should know that there are some things in life more complicated than they appear.’

‘I should have tried harder to be a part of your life and my grandchildren’s lives,’ said Dad. ‘I’ll always regret that I wasn’t there for you, but if you give me a chance now, I’ll do my best to make up for it.’

‘Haven’t you ever done something foolish?’ Mum said, knowing full well that I had, many times over. ‘Something selfish? That you regret?’

‘I don’t want to interfere in your home life,’ Dad continued. ‘And I have no right to. I’m just saying that decisions made in haste sometimes backfire. Sometimes things don’t always work out for the best.’

We sat on the beach in silence for several minutes. Dad was the one who spoke first. When I was little, he was always the one to initiate a peace plan, especially as Robbie, Mum and I preferred to sulk in separate corners of the house.

‘This reminds me of the time you sang in the school concert. You must have been nine, maybe ten at the time. After the concert, we drove to the beach as a treat and we all sat in silence looking out at the waves. Do you remember why?’

I thought for a moment. ‘I didn’t think you were at that concert.’

‘Your dad was always there, Kate,’ said Mum. ‘At every concert, every award night, and every parent–teacher meeting.’

Mum was certainly remembering our family life through rose-tinted glasses.

As for me, I couldn’t recall. ‘Sorry, I don’t remember.’

‘Your hair had been curled in ringlets specially. You always wanted curly hair’ – maybe that’s why I got that horrid spiral perm later on – ‘and I said that you were our own little Shirley Temple up there on stage. Well, you didn’t like that. *I’m not a baby*, you said. *I’m not Shirley Temple*. Then Robyn and Mum started singing, *I’m Shirley Temple and I’ve got curly hair . . .*’

‘That’s right. I cried and you asked them to stop singing. Said that it was no way to treat a star like me. You stood up for me.’ I hadn’t thought about that concert in years, yet now that I was

reminded, I could clearly remember the concert, the singing, the beach and the tears. And it *was* Dad who had looked after me.

‘I remember another time when the four of us were at the beach,’ said Dad, as he poured sand from one hand to the other. ‘You must have been four, five maybe. Just learning to swim. The waves were crashing around, the wind was blowing. You were determined. Determined to dive into the water just like your dad. *I can do it, Daddy, I can do it. Let me swim. I’ll show you*, you said. And you flung yourself into the water and by God, you swam, darling. Your head bobbed under a wave and just as quickly it bobbed right back up again. Mum almost had a heart attack but I knew you could do it. Determination and faith, Katie, you’ve always had it. I wish I had that moment on tape. I wish we could always live in that moment. But, sadly, time waits for no-one.’

‘That’s why I love taking photos, capturing a moment in time – that’s what Nanna used to say.’

‘Ah, Nanna,’ said Dad, staring out to sea. ‘My dear old mum. Bless her soul. Nanna loved you so much, Katie.’

‘I know,’ I said, fighting back tears.

‘You have your whole life ahead of you, sweetheart,’ he said, putting his arm around me. ‘And you have to live it with that same determination and spirit you had in your youth. Things aren’t always going to go your way; in fact, they hardly ever do – but you have to keep trying.’

As I sat and listened to him on the beach, I realised that things in Dad’s life probably hadn’t worked out the way he wanted them to either.

‘Never give up the dream of what you want for yourself,’ Dad continued. ‘I never gave up hope that one day your mum and I would be together again. We were meant to be.’

I wanted to love him again. To feel that closeness we'd had when I was a child, to recapture all the time we'd lost because of what he did, how he'd hurt Mum and almost destroyed her spirit and will to live.

'Why did you do it, Dad?' Why did you cheat on Mum and ruin it all? Destroy our happy life?

He didn't answer.

I waved goodbye to them both and climbed into my car. I watched as Dad walked Mum to the passenger side of his car and opened the door for her, their smiles so wide, their happiness impossible to disguise.

Mum said that when she saw Dad a couple of weeks ago, it was as if time had stood still. The last twenty years simply vanished and now they were starting afresh. She knew at the art gallery that she wanted to be with Dad forever and realised that she had to take a chance, and find the courage to step up and tell Dad that she still loved him, even though he'd left her for someone else all those years ago.

Katie, I just keep going over all the reasons why Bob and I married in the first place, she'd said. Mum was willing to risk being hurt all over again for the sake of having the love of her life back in her arms once again.

And it seemed to have paid off. So far.

I spent a busy evening answering emails, returning phone calls and catching up on the week's newspapers. I didn't learn a lot apart from the fact that new research out of London claimed that women were angrier in the home than men. Who'd have thought? The article went on to say that women were more angry in the home because they struggled to combine paid work with

running a household. I could have told them that for free! At least now I had a valid scientific reason for my anger.

Then Diane phoned and I offered to take Tom for the weekend.

‘Thanks, but after soccer tomorrow, we’re going up the coast for some family bonding time.’

I thought of offering her my Family Conversation Starters cards but stopped myself.

‘Of course, Nina and Sam are forbidden from going near each other.’

‘Good luck with that.’

‘I’ll need it. I saw my therapist today, Kate, and she advised me to look at my life like it was a pie.’

‘What kind? Apple, cherry?’

Diane was not amused. ‘See you Monday morning.’

I fell asleep thinking about what Di’s therapist had told her and trying to picture my life as though it were a pie. I imagined serving up slices – for the kids, Matthew, my work, other family members. Pretty soon I ran out of pie. Perhaps the fact that I had no pie left for myself was the reason I was cranky and a bad mother. Surely there had to be some pie left for me. But then I imagined explaining that to Matthew – honey, there’s not enough pie for me. He’d just tell me to buy another one. There was never enough pie to go around.

I woke up on Saturday morning feeling hungry and wretched. Hungry because I was craving pie, and wretched because I realised I didn't want to get up. I desperately wanted to gaze into a crystal ball and see that a week, a month, a year, ten years from now, all would be okay. I closed my eyes and visualised Matthew and I together, years from now, happy and in love. Matthew's gorgeous Patrick Dempsey looks have survived, as has his full head of hair, though now it's in shades of salt and pepper. I'm beside him, looking pretty much as I do now, maybe a few kilos lighter. Obviously in later years I join a gym and take to Botox with gusto!

I got up, showered, then stood in my walk-in wardrobe – it wasn't that big but there was enough room to turn around in as long as I didn't put on any more weight – looking at racks of unsuitable clothes. I had nothing to wear. I know that's what all women say but it was true. I literally had nothing to wear. My jeans sagged around my backside, my shirts revealed unflattering bulges. As for my jumpers and coats, most were misshapen or

faded. I really hadn't paid a lot of attention to fashion these past few years.

'Mum, where are you?'

'In here, Lexi,' I said. 'I have nothing to wear.'

'That's my line. Besides it's only a soccer game. Please don't get dressed up like you did last week. That was *so* embarrassing.'

'I didn't get dressed up,' I said, inwardly wincing at the memory.

'Please don't wear heels. Wear black boots and jeans. That'll do. Dad said he's ready to go.'

'What? I've still got a towel wrapped around me, no makeup and my hair –'

'Mum, I've got my own issues. I'm just passing on the message.'

I stood in the cupboard for a few minutes longer before deciding on black pants and a forest green sweater. It wasn't going to set the world on fire but at least I felt comfortable.

'Hey, Arnaud,' I waved when we arrived at the soccer field. I hadn't seen him since the night with Sophie and was determined to act naturally. I was still mortified but had to move on. I'd decided to end our mental affair anyway. Mental in more ways than one.

'I've got to tell you,' Arnaud said, shaking his head, 'the kids are way easier to deal with than the parents.'

'Mardi giving you a hard time already?'

'And the rest. Two parents have already come up to me this morning complaining that their boys were rested too long last week. Then Mardi pipes up, *I don't want my Ben pulled off the field at all because he's the best player*. Which he is, but I am not the one to tell her that.'

‘So what did you say?’

‘I said it is a team game and every player needs to be rotated throughout the match.’

‘Bet they were happy about that.’

‘Not at all. I felt like handing over my whistle and saying, “Here, guys. Go for it.” I do not get paid for this. I do it for the love of the sport, to teach young boys the art, the skills. I don’t have to come here week after week to coach and ref.’

‘Feel better now you’ve got that off your chest?’

‘*Oui – merci.*’

‘Good for you. I think you do a great job –’

‘Mum,’ Lexi said, interrupting the conversation. ‘You are just *so* sad.’

Arnaud looked embarrassed.

‘Lexi, I didn’t mean it like that,’ I said, my face turning an unattractive shade of beetroot. ‘I just meant that Arnaud is a great coach.’

‘Yeah, right.’

Arnaud blew his whistle and began rounding up the kids for the start of the match.

‘Dad’s right there, you know,’ said Lexi, pointing.

I looked over to see Matthew wolfing down a sausage sandwich and walking towards me, smiling. He looked kind of cute. He offered me a bite of his sandwich, which I accepted, and the game began.

I was fiddling with my camera, getting ready to take a few action shots, when barely three minutes into the match the standard shouting started. Fathers from the other team shouted instructions like, *Tackle him, Tommy!* and *Ryan, get forward or get off the field*, to their sons as they paced like caged lions, up and down the sideline, air punching and roaring.

Did these people really have so little in their lives that the highlight of their weekend was stamping their feet and beating their chests every Saturday morning at their eight-year-old's soccer game? And then I remembered. I was one of those parents. I wanted my child to win. I wasn't any better just because I kept those feelings to myself, though I hoped I never got so worked up that I'd attack a ref with an umbrella.

I watched as a couple of overbearing dads pushed aside two reserves from our team in an effort to get a closer look at their sporting progeny. That's when Matthew walked up, tapped one of them on the shoulder and said, 'Guys, settle down. They're only kids.'

They ignored him and continued yelling, so I moved further down the line. Unfortunately, just at that moment, a boy from the other team accidentally tripped and fell right beside Angus.

I grabbed Matthew's arm. 'Is he okay?'

The boy stood up, seemingly unhurt, but his father, one of the screamers, yelled, 'Oi, ref, you fuckin' fool, my son's been kicked to the ground. Whatcha gonna do about it?'

Within seconds, the fracas escalated. Arnaud stopped the game, checked on the child, made sure Angus was okay and then walked over to the father who was wildly gesticulating and sweating profusely. He'd barely reached him before the guy punched Arnaud in the face and he fell to the ground, hard.

'Matthew, help him,' I yelled as other parents and kids began screaming. Matthew almost tripped over himself in an effort to get to Arnaud and, as he reached him, more punches were thrown.

It was verging on an all-in brawl. Hang on – it *was* an all-in brawl. Parents and officials exchanged blows as other mums, dads and grandparents hurled insults across the field while their

children looked on in shock. It took over twenty minutes to halt the fight and that was only because someone had the good sense to turn on the oval's automatic sprinklers.

A nose was broken, a cheek shattered and two wrists fractured. The black eyes and bruised egos were too numerous to count.

Arnaud's face was covered in blood. I was gagging, trying to stop myself from vomiting. It was an awful couple of hours.

'This is sport, is it?' Lexi said on the drive home.

I brushed the wet hair from Matthew's forehead. 'You're going to have a black eye.'

'Yeah, probably.'

'I'm very proud you didn't hit anyone, though. You just helped Arnaud.'

'And got punched in the process.'

'But you did the right thing, Matt. Really, you did.'

In the back seat, Lexi and Angus made up rude songs about soccer hooligans and I stared out the window wondering. Wondering where the distance between me and Matthew had come from. Why *did* we argue so much? Usually our fights were petty and pointless. Me: *Pick your clothes up off the floor, hang your wet towel back on the rack.* Him: *Jeez, Kate, let it go for once, will you? The house doesn't need to be perfect. The world isn't going to end because there are wet towels on the floor.*

And, of course, he was right. The world wasn't going to end because the house resembled a tip. But it mattered to me. Once upon a time it didn't matter so much. Once, I loved Matthew more than anything in the world. More than a tidy house. But grocery shopping, toilet cleaning and changing nappies would get in the way of even the greatest romance, I'm sure.

I didn't want Matthew to leave. And I didn't want to leave Matthew either – fighting over visitation rights and whose turn

it was to spend Christmas with our kids, I didn't want it to come to that. And I certainly didn't want to end up divorced like Mum and Dad, even if it meant that we'd remarry later down the track when the messiness of raising our children was behind us. I didn't want to win that badly. Maybe he had a point when he said I shut him out and didn't listen to him anymore. Sitting across from Matt in the car, I thought about all the things we did have in common, starting with Angus and Lexi. We both loved spaghetti vongole, Italian being Matthew's favourite cuisine. Okay, that wasn't going to sustain a life together but there was more. We both loved hiking, gardening and watching black-and-white old movies. How long had it been since we'd done any of those things? Between work and running around after the kids and making sure there was enough milk in the fridge, it didn't leave a lot of time for frivolity. And that was something I really needed to change.

We were stopped at the traffic lights when Matthew turned to me and said, 'I look pretty bad, don't I?'

'Not at all.' I smiled. 'You look rugged, lived in. Does it hurt?'


'A bit.'

'I'm so sorry.'

Matthew reached over and held my hand. 'It's going to be all right. Everything's going to be okay.'

From the back seat Angus piped up with, 'Why do grown-ups do stupid things all the time?'

'I have no idea, darling, no idea at all,' I answered truthfully.

A decorative graphic consisting of a central swirl of grey lines, surrounded by numerous small grey hearts and dots of varying sizes, scattered across the upper half of the page.

In the shower on Sunday morning, I made a decision. It was time to get my life back on track. No more moaning or feeling sorry for myself. I had a great life. Really, I did. I wasn't just saying that. But I needed to seize control again. Stop my head messing with my heart. Stop whingeing and worrying about things I had no power over – because there were plenty of things I could manage according to my needs.

All I needed was a plan, one I could stick to. I needed to:

1. Eradicate Graeme from my life.
2. Stop wasting time thinking up escape plans and pointless fantasies.
3. Talk to my husband – that'd be a start at least.
4. Be a more sympathetic and patient mother to Lexi and Angus.

Then, when I'd mastered all of the above, I could finally move on with my life and conquer goal number five.

5. Do something for myself.

But what? *What was I going to do for the next half of my life?*

Wrapped in a towel, I walked into my wardrobe. Still nothing to wear. That was another thing. I needed to buy new clothes. I opened my enormous underwear drawers – three of them. They were overflowing with ill-fitting greying knickers with frayed elastic.

All the ugly underwear I'd ever owned in my life had come to live out their final days in my drawers. There were countless bras that didn't fit. They were either too big, too small or had wonky wires that speared me. And all because I refused to get professionally fitted. For years I'd guessed my size rather than suffer the embarrassment of having an elderly bespectacled lady with a tape measure draped around her neck fit me. I glanced at the beautiful black lacy lingerie that Matthew had bought me last Christmas and persisted in asking me to wear for the next two months. I didn't have the heart to tell him the set was two sizes too small.

I dumped the contents of my drawers on the bed and walked downstairs in search of a plastic garbage bag. One normally reserved for garden waste.

'What's going on?' Lexi asked as she watched me throw piece after piece away, including several sets of maternity knickers and bras.

'Spring clean.'

'It's winter.'

'I'm getting in early. Come and sit on the bed and watch me toss everything out.' I wanted Lexi to join me. To have a chat. Or not. For her just to sit on my bed and watch me the way she used to when she was four years old. Back when she was little and adored me. We adored each other.

‘No thank you!’ Lexi replied, clearly repulsed at the suggestion.

‘Come on, stay with me. And for goodness’ sake, put in your retainer and stop grinding your teeth.’ I tried not to nag, but I was her mother, after all. And I wanted her to have straight teeth.

‘I do it to stay in control, like you do.’

‘Pardon? If I grind my teeth – do I really grind my teeth? Anyway, it’s got nothing to do with control. It’s because I feel so overwhelmed. Grinding my teeth is a diversion. It’s definitely not something I use to get your attention.’

‘Really? Because it works.’ Lexi stood up and walked out.

Half an hour later, I was left with two reasonable bras – at least they could be worn without cutting off circulation – and only three pairs of briefs. It was oddly satisfying staring into a full plastic bag of garments I knew I would never have to look at again. And then there were the empty drawers. The possibilities, the expectation . . . I peeked into my wardrobe. Now that was a battle waiting to be fought . . . but one step at a time.

Besides, it was almost time to meet Mum and Robyn. We were going wedding shopping.

I called out to Lexi and surprisingly she responded. ‘What do you think?’ I asked her as I stood in front of the mirror, deliberating over my black spotted dress from three seasons ago. ‘Does it look okay?’

‘I guess. You need one of those True Mirrors.’

‘A what?’

‘A mirror that has lots of different angles so you get a three-dimensional view. You know, so you can see yourself as other people see you.’

Truth: I wasn’t sure I really wanted to know how others saw me.

‘Before we meet Nanna, I want to buy some new underwear,’ I said, after we’d parked in the city. I was in search of gorgeous lingerie. Undergarments that would transform and inspire me. Give me the confidence I was seeking. And I knew just the place, a gorgeous lingerie shop. ‘Just down this arcade,’ I said to Lexi, who was dragging her feet.

‘This doesn’t look like your kind of shop,’ Lexi remarked when we stopped in front of it.

Probably because the window display featured slim models in various suggestive poses, wearing skimpy black lingerie and tiny peek-a-boo bras and crotchless knickers.

‘Nonsense,’ I replied.

We stepped inside. A petite strawberry-blonde stopped picking at her fingernails for a microsecond and glanced over. She looked incredibly bored. Bored or haughty, I couldn’t tell, but I could see her black push-up bra through her thin chiffon top. No doubt she was wearing a thong as well. Lexi was right. I felt immediately intimidated. I mumbled something about a black bra I’d been admiring and scurried out of the shop. Lexi followed.

‘I told you so.’

Next stop, David Jones. Lexi wandered off in search of the music section and I headed to the underwear department. It was huge. Vast tracts of land featuring a multitude of bras and undies in every conceivable style and colour. Hipsters, G’s, boy leg, Wonder bras . . . on and on. Racks as far as the eye could see.

A woman in her late fifties approached me. The name on her silver badge was Pearl. I tried hiding behind a sheer black teddy but she found me. Before I knew it, we were in a tiny change room together, Pearl, myself and the twelve wall-to-wall mirrors. I took off one of the two bras I owned.

‘Hmm,’ she said, examining my shoddy worn bra. ‘Formfit haven’t made this model for over a decade.’

‘Really,’ I said, crossing my arms over my chest while trying not to appear precious or uncomfortable about my nakedness. ‘I thought it might have been eight years old, but ten? Really?’

‘When was the last time madam was fitted?’ Without waiting for an answer, she pushed my arms away and hooped her tape measure across my back and around my front, over my embarrassed nipples.

‘Measured?’ I repeated. ‘A couple of years.’ I had never been measured before and as I stood, shivering and exposed in the cubicle, I understood why.

‘Thirty-eight C, I think. I’ll bring you some samples.’ She disappeared from the closet and I was left alone with the mirrors and my naked chest. Maybe it hadn’t been such a good idea to turf out all of my underwear.

I forced myself to look in the mirror. At least I still had my skirt on. No doubt Pearl would collapse if she saw the state of my cottontails. Moments later, she was back fitting a new black bra to my reluctant body.

‘Here, I’ll fasten the snaps,’ she said, turning me around. ‘There. Now bend over, that’s right. Cup your breasts with your hands. No, inside the bra, that’s right, so that your breasts feel comfortable and fill out the bra. Now stand up. Straight up. That’s right. Now with both of your index fingers, separate your breasts.’

I tried to do as I was told.

‘Excellent. Let me look at them. See. Standing up at attention, not squashed and hidden from view. You have lovely breasts. You should show them off. How do they feel?’

‘Good. Great . . .’ And they did. No wires cut into me. And my boobs actually looked bigger, rounder, bouncier. The bra was pretty too. It wasn’t a ridiculous slip of material a teenager would wear but it was lovely nonetheless. I was sold.

I bought three pairs in black, white and nude, all with matching knickers. At the counter I spied a book, *What Not To Wear*, and added it to my booty. My clothes needed a complete overhaul and I had to start somewhere. I put it all on my American Express card without looking at the total. After ten years of wearing the same bra, I was entitled.

Even so, I choked slightly as I signed my name.

Lexi and I found Mum and Robyn bickering in a nearby coffee shop.

‘Remember what happened to Samantha just before her wedding? She had that chemical peel. Her face was one giant red peeling pus ball. Gross.’

‘Thanks, Robyn,’ Mum sighed. ‘I’ll remember not to book a facial peel.’

‘You don’t want to get your teeth bleached, either. You’ll blind the guests.’

‘What are you two talking about?’ I asked, after Lexi and I had sat down at the table and ordered drinks.

‘Robyn’s just telling me about all the things that can go wrong on my wedding day.’ Mum rolled her eyes and continued sipping her Earl Grey tea.

‘Not *on* your wedding day, Mum, before it.’

‘Like getting one of those spray-on fake tans and coming out looking like an orange monster?’ I said. ‘By the way, do I grind my teeth? Lexi says I do but –’

‘God, you always grind your teeth. I’m surprised you’ve got any left. You need to get one of those mouth guards. Anyway, what was I saying? Oh yeah, that’s right, the list of potential wedding disasters is endless,’ Robyn went on. ‘And then there’s the wedding itself.’

‘Robyn!’ I said, sensing Mum was close to tears.

‘What? You have to prepare for these things. What if the restaurant serves prawns that have been sitting in the sun too long? And someone vomits on Mum’s dress? Or worse, mine? Or –’

‘Or you say something wildly insensitive to upset me?’ Mum snapped. ‘Give it a break, please?’

‘What? What did I say? Don’t worry about me. No-one will even notice me at your wedding. I’m too ugly, too fat. Maybe I shouldn’t even go.’

‘I feel the same way,’ I said. ‘Do you think that I want to get dressed up like a meringue and prance around? No. But I have to and if I have to, so do you.’

‘Mum! Did you see that guy?’ Robyn said, as she swung around in her chair. ‘Perverts, freaking perverts are everywhere.’

‘Robyn, keep your voice down. No-one’s looking at you,’ I said.

‘They are. They’re all staring at me.’

‘That’s enough,’ Mum said, and banged her cup on the table. ‘I thought I might be able to rely on you two to help me, but Robyn, you’re so obviously taken up with yourself and your delusions, and Katie, you have issues I don’t want to go into right now, but I thought that you might both, for once, just this one time, put me first. Is that too much to ask?’

‘Sorry,’ I mumbled.

'Me too,' muttered Robyn. 'It's the foetus talking. I wish he'd keep quiet.'

Lexi looked at the three of us and coughed. 'Dr Phil was hosting a wedding special last week and he said that when somebody's getting married, everybody needs to say, *It's their day, and if I need to step to the side and give them this day, then it's a gift that I am going to give them.*' She took a breath and, in a tone that suggested superiority, said, 'I think that Nanna would like us to do that.'

'Thank you, Lexi. The calm voice of reason from my granddaughter.'

I wanted to ask Lexi exactly when she had been watching *Dr Phil*, as the program's on in the middle of the day, during the week, when she is supposedly at school (!), but I didn't want more fighting.

Instead, I leaned across the table and kissed Mum on the cheek. 'I've got a checklist here. Why don't we run through it and see what still needs to be organised?'

I read down my list. 'Let's see. Restaurant, check. Menu?'

'Selected.'

'Pre-nup? Signed?'

'I beg your pardon?' Mum warned.

'Just kidding. Wedding gown?'

'At home hanging in my wardrobe.' Mum's dress was a secret. She wouldn't budge on details no matter how hard we pressed her.

'Any hints?' I asked. 'Just tell us the colour.'

'Is it ruched?' Robyn asked.

'Are you wearing a mini?' Lexi wanted to know.

'My lips are sealed,' Mum replied.

'You're very good at keeping secrets,' I said.

'I've had a lot of practice.'

'Next on the list – hair, makeup etcetera? All booked?'

'Absolutely.'

'What about special effects?' Robyn asked. 'You know to give your wedding the *wow* factor . . . like disco lighting? Or maybe professional entertainers?'

'What?' I said. 'Like jugglers? A circus act?'

'Maybe, or a wedding stripogram. Something to lighten the mood.'

'Implying that the mood won't be light on its own?' Mum was fierce. 'We're having a string quartet. I think it will be quite beautiful.'

'Of course it will,' I said, as we stood up. It was time to get down to business: searching for appropriate wedding attire for Lexi. It was going to be a long afternoon.

'Robyn is wearing black. I want to as well,' Lexi grumbled.

'Just because Robyn has decided on a black chiffon muumuu doesn't mean you have to,' I told her. 'Any other colour, Lex.'

'That'd be right. Just because I want to wear black, you're telling me I can't.'

'It's not that, darling,' Mum soothed. 'It's just that it's a wedding . . . it's festive. And there are so many great colours in the shops. You can choose any one of them.'

'Or all of them,' I said.

'Ha, so it's okay for me to wear a colourful dress but not have colourful hair?'

'That's entirely different.'

We walked into a dress shop where every piece of clothing was a size zero (size zero being the equivalent of an adult having an eight-year-old girl's waist measurement, but let's not get me started on that particular subject) and exposed plenty of skin.

'I . . . I don't know,' Mum said, gazing at Lexi as she paraded a form-fitting, hot-pink halter-top complete with diamantes. It was more like a very revealing bra. The skirt was calf length but it sat on Lexi's hips, or rather her pubic bone. Very low cut. Everything Lexi picked out was tight, backless, frontless, slashed to the thigh, or a combination of the above.

'Here,' I said to Robyn, having picked up a perfume from the counter. 'Let me squirt this on you in case it's revolting.'

'For goodness' sake!' Robyn dutifully extended her arm and I sprayed. Ten seconds later we both took a deep breath and wrinkled our noses. 'Yuck!'

So much for perfume taking my mind off Lexi's dress. After much deliberation, we compromised. Sort of. Lexi chose a pale pink silk backless ankle-length dress.

'I adore the colour,' said Mum. 'Soft and romantic.'

'I'm not happy about the backless bit,' I said to Robyn and Mum when Lexi went back to the change room. But Lexi had flawless skin and I had to admit it was the least slutty outfit in the shop. Some outrageously priced silver sparkly sandals completed her outfit. And everyone was still on speaking terms. Bonus.

It was my turn next.

I'd had my eye on an emerald green Von Troska number for a while so the four of us trudged into the shop to take a look. Being the new confident me, I marched straight over to where it was hanging and took the dress off the rack.

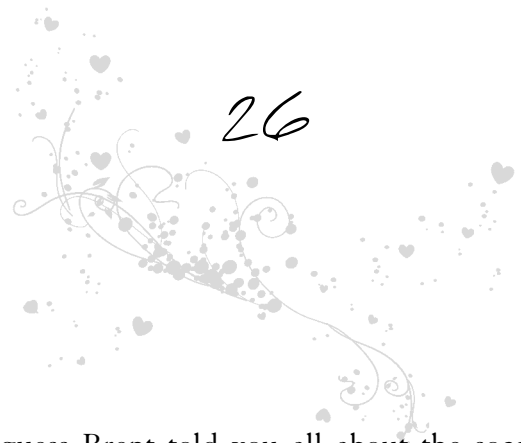
As I entered the change room, a shop assistant with a pointy head said, 'We do have other colours if this one is not to your taste.'

Was there something people weren't telling me? Did I look like a bag lady? Did green look hideous on me?

‘No, I love this colour,’ I told her, as she examined me critically, head to toe.

I hurriedly closed the curtain. Once on, the dress was far from perfect. But if I wore a super-tight Nancy Ganz body stocking underneath it and draped a black wrap strategically around my shoulders and across my mid section – and didn’t eat or drink anything at the reception or the day before – I could possibly get away with it, once my hair was professionally washed and styled, my makeup professionally applied, and I stood in flattering, forgiving candle light. Out of the wind.

Sold!



‘So I guess Brent told you all about the soccer fiasco on Saturday,’ I said to Diane as we walked together in the cold dawn. ‘It was terrible. Punches were thrown, kids were crying, Matthew got smacked in the eye; just dreadful.’

‘I heard.’

‘The kids will have interesting stories for school news this week, but I’m sure they’ll all play soccer again. We just have to be more vigilant about sideline bullies.’

We walked in silence for a moment before Diane spoke. ‘Kate, I’m forty-two years old. As much as I don’t believe what I am doing is right,’ she said unsteadily, ‘I’m terminating the pregnancy.’

I stopped and wrapped my arms around her.

‘My underage daughter’s had sex with her stepbrother. I can barely cope with that *now*. Imagine being sixty and still dealing with teenagers.’

‘As long as you’re sure.’

‘How can I be bloody sure? Of course I’m not sure. It breaks my heart when I think about it. It’s selfish and heartless, but this

thing with Nina and Sam could mean the end for Brent and me. I can't bring a new baby into the mess as well. I am devastated. Absolutely torn apart. I never wanted to be pregnant in the first place, but a termination? If you'd asked me six months ago, I never could have imagined it. It's not right. I'll feel wretched the rest of my life about making this decision.'

'So, keep the baby.'

'I can't. I can't put my children through a second divorce.'

'Does it mean that much to Brent?'

'With the way things are between Nina and Sam, Brent's not coping.'

'And the night away?'

'I didn't sleep. I spent the whole time lying in bed awake, waiting to hear if Nina and Sam tried to bed hop. I might have dozed a couple of hours before dawn. If they got it on during that time, I take my hat off to them. Good luck!'

I thought about how I would feel if I was pregnant. I didn't envy Di having to make that decision. I knew I'd struggle as well.

And if Lexi was having sex? I'd freak. It's not like I expected her to wait until she was married, but I didn't want her having to deal with all the ramifications of a physical relationship until she was mature enough to deal with it. Imagine if she got pregnant! It didn't bear thinking about. Besides, Lexi might not have children until her thirties, or not at all. If that happened, I wondered if I'd become one of those really irritating mothers that talked about 'ticking' and 'biological' in the same sentence.

I arrived at the office ready to speak with Fern. I had kept my end of the bargain. Mara was in the office, Simone would be back today as well. All that was left was for me to leave. As

for Graeme's coffee, forget it. I'd had enough of playing his housemaid.

'Mumbling to yourself,' Arnaud said as he passed me in the corridor.

'Something like that. Working out my battle plan. How are you? You don't look so good.' Arnaud had plaster taped across his nose and his cheeks were black and blue.

'Broken nose. Under-nines soccer, a rough game.' He forced a smile. 'Don't say anything funny. I can't laugh. God 'elp me if I catch a cold.'

'You poor thing. Can I get you anything? Do you want me to duck across the road and buy you a coffee? Breakfast?'

'You are sweet, but no it's –'

'Yes, she is sweet, isn't she?' Graeme said, sneering at us both. 'I notice you haven't made my coffee – yet.' He turned to Arnaud. 'What happened to you? Girlfriend found out about you and the K girl, hey?'

'See you later, Kate,' said Arnaud, dismissing Graeme with a shake of the head.

'Are you still coaching this week?' I called after him.

'*Oui*, of course, but I'll try not to scare the boys.' Too soon, Arnaud disappeared around the corner.

'Sweet on lover boy, are we? Is that why you rejected me?'

'Graeme, I'm not having this conversation.' I wanted today to be my last day, to pack up, say goodbye to Fern and Mara, and leave.

Number one on my to-do list: rid my life of Graeme.

'What makes you think you're so great, Kate? I've seen the way you look at Arnaud. You want him, don't you? You come across all prim and proper but you forget, I've seen you in action.'

I've seen how you behave when you let your guard down. You're an animal.'

'And you're a bully. You shouldn't be allowed to work with other people.'

'Sticks and stones.' Graeme moved closer to me, backing me against the wall.

Pushing him away, I fossicked in my bag and pulled out my ringing mobile.

'Mrs Cavendish?' said a vaguely familiar voice.

'Yes?' I sniffed, wiping my eyes and nose with a scrap of tissue. Graeme glared at me for a moment before stalking away.

'It's Tania Westley.'

'Yes, Mrs Westley,' I said apprehensively. What on earth had Lexi done this time? It wasn't even ten minutes after nine.

'I'm afraid Lexi's had an accident.'

'Oh my –'

'She's okay, but we've called an ambulance.'

On the way to hospital, after I rang Matthew, I kept going over my last words to Lexi as I had dropped her off that morning. *Be good and stay at school all day. Promise?* She waved me away and was gone.

She's okay, but we've called an ambulance. Mrs Westley's words rang in my ears. How okay could Lexi be if she'd been taken to hospital in an ambulance?

My nightmares were getting worse. The worst being that something terrible would happen to Lexi and I'd be powerless to stop it. Powerless to help her. Save her. Keep her from harm. It was my job to protect her. I'd failed two weeks ago to look after her . . . and I'd failed again this morning. I wanted to wrap Lexi in my arms and never let her go.

When I was a teenager, I said things to my mother like:

1. You don't understand. It's not like in the old days, times have changed.
2. I hate you. I wish you were dead.
3. I hate myself. I wish I was dead.
4. Stop worrying about me. I'm fine. I don't need you to protect me.

Funnily enough these were the very same words that Lexi now said to me. On a regular basis. And I knew how untrue they were.

Hours later, Lexi sat propped up in a hospital bed with her arm in plaster. The rest of her body was a mass of bruises, scratches and cuts, the most severe covered in bandages.

'Lexi, what happened?' I asked her after the sedatives had worn off.

She looked at me first, then at her father and finally turned away, closing her eyes. 'You wouldn't understand.'

'Please, Lexi,' I said, sitting down beside her and stroking her hair. 'Try me.'

'Do you really want to know, Mum?'

'Of course I do.' But did I really? Was I ready for what my daughter was about to tell me?

Some things in life you just know, like that there'll always be a mountain of dirty washing to be done even though you did three loads yesterday and the washing basket was empty this morning. And no-one will eat the beef casserole tonight even though they all loved it last week when you substituted chicken for beef.

But some things were more puzzling. I wasn't prepared for Lexi's need to grow up so quickly. She was just thirteen. My

daughter had changed so much in the last six months, she was almost unrecognisable to me. Seeing her lying in hospital, so distressed and shattered, made me want to weep. She was still a young child, at least in my eyes.

‘What were you doing up a tree in the first place?’

‘Spying on Hunter.’

‘How? You were at school.’

‘He was talking to Susie outside the school gates. I wanted to get a closer look at the two of them.’

‘I’ll go and find us some coffee,’ Matthew said. He bent down, kissed Lexi’s forehead and walked out of the room and into the corridor, hesitating before turning left towards the nurses’ station.

‘Why were you spying on them?’

‘God, Mum, because I was, all right?’ Lexi started to cry. ‘I knew you wouldn’t understand.’

‘Lex, all I know is that you fell three metres out of a tree and landed on the ground and now you have a badly broken arm and concussion. All this because you were spying on your boyfriend. Why?’

‘He’s not my boyfriend anymore. He likes Susie better, even though she’s fat. He dumped me and now all my friends will dump me. I’ll be deleted from Facebook, removed from everyone’s “top friends” list. I bet I’ve already been replaced. All because I don’t have Hunter anymore.’

I stared at her. ‘You’re not making any sense.’ I thought Lexi liked her school and her friends, as much as any adolescent could. They wouldn’t really ostracise her because she didn’t have a boyfriend, would they? Then again, I knew how awful girls could be.

‘Sweetheart, I’m sure it will be okay.’

‘How can you say that? Everyone will make fun of me. I’m worthless, a nobody. My life’s over.’

‘Come on, it’s not so bad. Thank goodness it’s only your arm that’s broken. It could have been much worse.’

‘How? How could it have been worse? I have no friends. I wish I was dead.’

‘Lexi, stop being so dramatic. This will pass, trust me.’

‘Why would I trust you? I don’t need you telling me what to do anymore. I know you hate me too!’

As the tired, confused mother of a teenage daughter I wanted to tell Lexi that I did understand her. Times hadn’t changed that much. I worried about her. That would never change. Even when she married and was a mother herself, I’d sit up late at night worrying about her. Lexi’s happiness would always be uppermost in my mind. I didn’t want Lexi shutting me out of her life. I loved her – even though she was bald. I’d always love Lexi. She was my daughter. But what did I know? I was trying to reason with a teenager.

‘Don’t be silly, Lexi, I don’t hate you. I love you very much.’

‘No-one else does. This is absolutely the worst thing that’s ever happened to me.’

Yes, it probably was the worst thing that had happened to Lexi in her short life. What I found so sad was that she didn’t realise that this was only the beginning. Mum was right. There would be many more times like this ahead for Lexi. Her journey had only just begun. But I couldn’t cry. I couldn’t show her that I cared too much or she’d turn away from me and shut down.

Still, I wrapped my arms around her so tightly, she cried out, ‘Mum, you’re smothering me.’

‘Sorry.’ Reluctantly, I eased my hold on her, and caught my breath as I blinked away the tears. I wanted her to feel that

closeness between us. For Lexi to come back to me. Trust me. Feel secure in my arms once again.

She took a deep breath and wiped her eyes.

‘It’s okay. I’m all right.’ Mother–daughter bonding time was over.

But I knew she didn’t mean it. She said it to make me feel better. So that I would leave her alone. Stop smothering her, stop crying and stop embarrassing her.

Once more, Lexi was the calm but jaded teenager who insisted that everything was okay. She was in control – when she wasn’t screaming – just misunderstood, that’s all. Despite the broken arm, the rampant absenteeism, the falling grades and the secrets.

‘Everything will be brighter in the morning,’ I assured Lexi after we had arrived home and I’d helped her into her pyjamas, pumped her full of Panadeine Forte and tucked her into bed. Even though it was only two in the afternoon, the excellent drugs the doctor had given her had taken effect. We were told she’d probably sleep for the next eighteen hours, waking only for pain relief every four to five hours.

‘It won’t. My life’s over.’ Lexi’s bravado slumped as exhaustion took over. ‘And Mum,’ she said, sniffing, ‘I lost my retainer as well. It fell out when I hit the ground.’

‘Shh, it’s okay. Don’t worry about it now. Guess how much I love you?’ I said, referring to the title of her favourite childhood book.

‘Dunno. Not much.’

‘This much,’ I said, stretching out my arms as wide as they would go. ‘I love you right up to the moon, darling.’ I kissed her forehead before she turned away from me. I hesitated a moment and walked towards her door.

‘Mum,’ she called in a tiny voice, ‘I love you to the moon as well.’

‘And back,’ I croaked, rushing back into her room and squeezing her tight.

‘Mum, my arm!’

‘Are you sure about this?’ Robyn asked, when we met at hospital for her final antenatal class.

‘Of course. Lexi’s asleep, and besides, sitting in a room full of moaning pregos will help take my mind off her troubles for a couple of hours.’

With just five minutes to go before the class started, we settled ourselves down. Robyn was looking drained and pale, but calm. She didn’t have the hard edginess I’d noticed in recent weeks. Unfortunately, though, she was wearing another lurid muumuu, this time in orange and brown. Maybe that’s why she looked so worn out. I told her that there were more flattering clothes she could wear but she dismissed me with, ‘These caftans aren’t specifically maternity clothing.’

Who was she trying to hide her bump from? But at least she’d worn shoes tonight. I was looking around the room, checking out everyone’s attire and wondering how many of these strangers assumed Robyn and I were lesbians.

‘No epidural for me,’ Robyn said to the room in general. ‘It’s disgusting. Why would you want to stick a needle in your back?’ She made a stabbing motion with her right hand. It was effective because the woman next to her grimaced and shied away.

‘I’m going to have a water birth, pure and simple,’ she continued. ‘No gas. No drugs and no bloody great needle jabbed in my back. A good, old-fashioned massage with oils and soothing classical music, that’s all the stimulant I’ll need.’ She had obviously

forgotten our recent forceps conversation. That or she was trying to big-note herself in front of her new classmates. There was only one couple I recognised from last week's lesson. Certainly none from the day class we started, months ago.

A couple of pregos nodded their heads in approval. Others, like the woman next to Robyn, looked at her in horror and covered her mouth with her hand.

All the men shifted uncomfortably in their seats. I knew what they were thinking because I was thinking the same thing: *Who is this insane woman? Water, birth, baby, blood, red bloody water. Is there still time to escape?* From my experience, any way you chose to do it, childbirth was not for the faint-hearted.

Eyes swung from Robyn to me. That's right, hello! I'm her birth partner. I sunk lower into my chair. Robbie giving birth was going to be my worst nightmare. Worse than Mum remarrying my father? I think so.

'Really, Robyn,' I said, after we staggered out, two hours later, 'I thought that guy was going to bop you over the head when you started banging on about how all men are only in it for the good times, that none of them would ever stick by their partners once the baby was born so they might as well leave tonight.'

'It's true. They're only prolonging the inevitable.'

'True for your husband, but some of those men looked genuinely excited about imminent fatherhood.'

'Yeah, right. What about you? Telling that woman with the greasy hair that she should rent a childbirth video, one with several explicit birth scenes, go home and watch it repeatedly – on a large widescreen TV with the volume turned up as loud as it will go, at three o'clock in the morning, in the freezing cold, naked and with all the lights, preferably fluorescent, switched

on. Even then, you said, she couldn't begin to imagine the real agony of childbirth. What about that?'

'Obviously, I was just being mean. I didn't expect her to vomit on her partner.'

'Lucky we were already at hospital.'

'She should never have eaten nachos before class anyway.'

That episode had pretty much ended our first and last bonding session with the other inmates. While the rest of the class fussed over the vomiter, Robyn and I plonked down our peppermint teas and half-eaten Scotch Fingers and bolted out the door.

According to my calculations, Robyn was approximately two weeks away from giving birth and I was pretty sure that neither of us was adequately prepared.

I raced upstairs to Lexi's room when I got home. Matthew was sitting beside her in the darkness, stroking her good arm. Gertrude and Rupert were asleep, curled up together at the foot of her bed.

I stood beside Matthew and put my hand on his shoulder. 'How is she?'

'Not bad. I've given her more medicine and she's gone back to sleep. She's pretty out of it. Saying weird things, mumbling mostly.' He stood up and we walked out into the hallway. 'How's your sister?'

'Still distraught about Dan and scared about having a baby on her own. I feel like this is my fault Matthew. If I was looking after her . . .'

'You can't always be there for her. She's an adult. She has to stand on her own two feet.'

'I was talking about Lexi, not Robyn.'

'Honey, Lexi was at school. There's nothing you could have done to stop her from climbing the tree and falling down.'

‘But I didn’t know about Hunter, that he’d broken up with her.’

‘Neither did I. She told me he wasn’t even her boyfriend.’

‘Dads aren’t supposed to be in the loop. Mothers are.’

‘The main thing is she’s safe now.’

‘But what if she’d fallen on her head and broken her neck? My God! I’ve failed. I’ve failed her as a parent.’

‘It’s not a test, Kate.’

‘What do you mean, *not a test*? Every day is a test and every day I either pass or fail. Most days I fail spectacularly, especially where Lexi is concerned.’

‘Mum? Mum? Are you there?’ Lexi called out from her bedroom.

Matthew took my hand. ‘You haven’t failed. *We* haven’t failed.’

‘I’m coming, Lexi. Matt?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Thanks.’

He squeezed my hand and I walked back into Lexi’s room.

‘Hello, my darling. I’m here.’

‘My arm hurts.’

‘I know it does, sweetie, but it’ll be better soon.’ I’m thinking six weeks. Everything takes six weeks.

‘How soon? I’ve ruined Nanna’s wedding, haven’t I?’ Mum’s wedding. I hadn’t given it a thought. ‘No, of course you haven’t. Why would you say that?’

‘Look at me, I’m ugly. I can’t be her bridesmaid looking like this.’

‘Looking like what? So you’ve got a couple of scratches. You’re still gorgeous. And when you smile, you light up the room, bruises or no bruises.’

‘You have to say that. You’re my mother. If you don’t say that, no-one will.’

'You *are* gorgeous, Lexi.' Rupert and Gertrude edged their way further up the bed in search of hands to pat them. I pushed them both onto the floor and, without so much as a sideways glance, they both jumped straight back up onto the bed again.

'Let them stay, please.'

'I don't know how much sleep you'll get with these two snoring beside you.'

'I'll be fine.' She patted them as they settled. 'Mum, do I have to go back to school?'

'Eventually.'

'I just want to fit in. But nothing's working.' She started crying again. 'I thought fat Susie was my friend, and now I'm scared. I don't want to get my head flushed down the toilet.'

Just hearing the words *head* and *flushed* in the same sentence brought back agonising memories from when I was in year eight. Twisted flashbacks. I kept as far away from the girls' toilets as I could. At the time, there were rumours that the school cat, Sox, had been flushed and that's why he was deaf in one ear but they were never substantiated. Still, I don't think I used a school bathroom for three years.

'But worse than that, they'll write rumours about me on MySpace.'

This was a whole new world to me. 'Sweetheart,' I said, massaging her spiky head, 'I'm sure it's just talk.'

'It's not. Girls post rumours on their mobiles, Facebook and MySpace all the time.'

'All bullies are gutless cowards. Cyber bullies are no different. We'll keep a close eye on it and we'll get through this together, I promise.' These new technologies had a lot to answer for.

'So I don't have to go to school tomorrow?'

'No, not tomorrow.'

‘Or the next day?’

‘Let’s not strain the friendship, okay?’ I stroked Gertrude and she purred contentedly.

‘Do you sometimes wish that I was never born?’

Yes, I do actually, I thought, but now probably wasn’t the time to be glib.

‘Never, Lexi. Please don’t ever think that. You’re the daughter I’ve wished for all my life. I can’t imagine how empty my world would be without you living in it. You’re my angel.’ I looked down to where my tears had fallen on her sleeping cheek.

Even with her bruises, cuts and rough hair, Lexi *was* gorgeous. Man-boy posters adorned her walls, her floor was strewn with clothes, books and other paraphernalia, but that was Lexi. And as frustrating and difficult as she could be, I loved her more than ever.

I picked up her school jacket and hung it in the closet. Stuffed out of sight beside her clothes were all the cuddly toys Lexi had been collecting since birth. Hidden, but not out of reach. Whenever I broached the subject of donating them to charity, she’d shut me down. How bad a kid could she be, if she refused to part with her teddies?

Matthew was half asleep when I crawled into bed. ‘She okay?’ he mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

‘She will be. She’s worried about getting her head flushed at school.’

Matthew rolled over and sat up. ‘What?’ He sounded genuinely shocked.

‘Apparently there are some spirited older girls who make it their business to make the other girls’ lives miserable. Lexi thinks she’s on their hit list.’

‘Why?’


'Because of what happened with Hunter, and now with her broken arm and bruises, well, she thinks she's ugly. She thinks she'll never have a boyfriend again and that she's got no friends. She's miserable trying to keep up with the cool kids. I wish I could protect her from it all. The thing is it's probably going to get worse. She's barely six months into being a teenager.'

'She wouldn't have time to be miserable if she was kicking a football around the oval with friends.'

'I'll remind you of that when Angus is thirteen. Besides, you know what girls are like.'

'No, no I don't. I'm beginning to realise I really don't know much at all.'

Poor Matthew, he'd have to learn quick smart.

A decorative graphic consisting of a central swirl of grey lines, surrounded by numerous small grey hearts and dots of varying sizes, scattered across the upper half of the page.

The next morning, it was like the night before had never happened. Matthew scurried out of the house at daybreak to his other life and I showered, threw the dog and cat outside, searched for Bugs but couldn't find him, acknowledged the psycho dogs next door, put on a load of washing and made a cup of tea. All before the clock struck seven.

When Lexi unexpectedly came down the stairs at seven thirty, I was full of love, sadness and hope for her. And Lexi? She was full of . . . well, Lexi was full of cynical teenage anger.

'How are you feeling, darling?'

'Mum, I'm fine,' she said in a bored, *don't mess with me* voice.

'Did you come into my room last night?'

'After I got back from Robyn's? Yes.'

'Oh, I don't remember. How's Robyn?'

'Still pregnant. Uncle Dan's not coming back.'

'Der! He left her like a gazillion years ago.'

'Right. Well, she's still upset.'

'More than normal? Anyway, why do guys even exist on this

planet? When we can clone ourselves, women will take over and the men will exist solely to serve as our slaves.'

'Maybe not in our lifetime, Lex.'

'Maybe not in yours, but mine.'

'Look at me, look at me,' Angus said, as he hopped around the kitchen on one leg to get my attention. He looked slightly demented. 'I'm pretending I've only got one leg, Mum. What would happen if I cut my leg off? Would it grow back?'

'Here's a knife,' Lexi said, reaching for a bread knife. 'Why don't you try it, lizard breath? I read somewhere that legs do grow back.'

'Lexi!'

'What? He wants to know. It's a valid scientific experiment.'

I took a bite of cold Vegemite toast and made sure the knife was out of harm's reach. 'Have you found Bugs, Gus?'

'Yeah. He's under my bed. Looks like he's dying.'

'What? Why didn't you tell me?' I flew upstairs and into Angus's room.

'Bugs, Bugsy boy.' I got down on my hands and knees and looked under the bed. It was a wonder Angus could see anything under there. It was a mass of clothes, books and toys.

'Bugsy?' I could see him curled up on some clothes near the top corner on the far side against the wall. I tried to coax him out but he wouldn't come. I crawled further under the bed. He appeared to be in great pain and – 'Oh God!' I yelled, hitting my head as I crawled back out from underneath the bed. Lexi and Angus were standing close by.

'Mum, what is it?' Lexi said, panic in her voice.

'Get me – I don't know, towels, lots of towels,' I said, trying to remain outwardly calm. 'Hurry. Not the good ones. Angus,

go downstairs and get me the dog box, the one we take Rupert to the vet in. Hurry.'

'Why not Bugsy's box?'

'Gus, just get the dog box now, please!'

He ran away and Lexi rushed back in with towels.

'What, Mummy? Tell me. Is Bugsy going to die?' She was crying. 'Tell me.'

'Sweetie,' I said, catching my breath and taking the towels from her. 'Bugsy's having babies.'

There were five of them – five tiny, blind little bunnies, each not much bigger than my thumb. The oldest couldn't have been more than an hour old. As quietly and slowly as I could, I laid Bugs and his – make that *her* – babies in the dog box together with a towel, water and lettuce.

'Do I have to go to school?' Angus asked.

'Yes, you do.'

'What about Lexi? I want to stay at home with Bugsy too.'

'Lexi has a broken arm. She has to stay at home, doctor's orders. And Bugs needs his rest as well. He, I mean she, has had an eventful night. She'll still be here when you get home this afternoon.'

'So Bugs is a girl now?'

'It would appear so.'

'When did she change into a girl and start having babies?'

'We'll have to figure that out later. Now get ready for school. Scoot. We're going to be late.'

I put Bugs and her children in a quiet warm corner of the lounge room, away from Rupert and Gertrude's prying eyes. Then I tucked Lexi up in bed with a pile of magazines, chocolate biscuits and the telephone.

‘Nanna will be over later, okay?’

‘Sure, whatever. Mum, I’m not reading this!’ She scowled at a *House & Garden* magazine.

‘Read a book then. I just have to clear up a couple of things at the magazine, but I should be home by lunchtime.’

‘Don’t rush on my account.’

I blew her a kiss and got organised.

With luck on my side, I’d be a free woman within a matter of hours. After yesterday, I wanted to go in, see Fern, tell her what I thought of Graeme, and leave. She deserved to know the kind of person she had working for her. Genius or not, if he was intimidating me, he was probably harassing others as well. There was no way Fern would stand for that kind of behaviour.

I dropped Angus at school just as the final bell rang, which was remarkable given that I’d been a rabbit’s midwife less than an hour ago.

‘You’ll have to come into the office to sign me in. I’m late. All the kids are in class.’

‘You’re not late,’ I said, pushing him out the door with my black kitten heel, the shoe that looked good (thinned my ankles) but gave me blisters. ‘The bell’s only just finished ringing. There’s a good boy.’

‘Principal Jordan said that if we’re late, our mums have to come in to the office to sign us in.’

‘Tell Principal Jordan that today you caught the bus.’

‘That’s lying, Mum.’

‘Bye, darling.’ I sped out of the kiss-and-drop zone and waved to Mardi and a couple of other soccer mums. I could almost hear them gossiping. *That Kate Cavendish, she’s either dropping her boy off at the crack of dawn or he’s getting to school so late it’s*

practically not worth him coming at all. And have you heard about her daughter . . . ?

‘No, not good timing, but there’d never be a good time. Yes, five of them,’ I said into my phone to Mum from the car park at Modular Magazines. ‘Are you sure you don’t mind? I don’t want to leave either of them on their own for too long. Thanks.’

I clicked off my mobile and closed my eyes. Opened them. Then closed them again. Barely three metres in front of me stood Fern and Graeme. She moved towards him, cupping her hands around his face. He didn’t pull away. He turned his face to the side and kissed her hands. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Then they kissed, passionately. Graeme wiped his lips and smiled smugly at me. He whacked Fern on the backside and sauntered into the building.

‘Do you hate me?’ Fern asked, walking up to me.

‘I’m . . . I’m shocked. I don’t know what to say.’

‘Gray and I –’

‘No,’ I shook my head. ‘Don’t tell me, I don’t want to hear. Did I mention that my rabbit’s just given birth to five babies? We thought he was a boy. How wrong can you be? Five! We have six rabbits now.’ We sat down on the steps in the morning sun.

‘That’s great, but about Gray – it’s okay, really. We’ve . . . we’ve been together a while now. It’s not ideal, of course, but we make it work.’

‘Please don’t tell me any more, I mean it. You’re too good for *him*. Would Lily like a new bunny?’ I was gabbling away to stop myself from thinking about what I had just witnessed.

‘But the sex! The sex is awesome.’

I really didn’t want to hear about Fern’s adulterous sex life but it was too late. Visions of Fern clinging onto a filing cabinet

in the office supplies room while Graeme penetrated her with quick thrusts from behind raced through my mind.

‘Graeme excites me like no other man I’ve ever had. He makes me tingle. I feel alive when he’s inside me.’

I wanted to throw up. I wanted to tell her that Graeme was an evil, immoral pig. An ape who seduced others in quiet corners of pubs; who chatted them up in office hallways while they tried to work and attempted to have sex with them while on location shoots. I wanted to tell her that he was a sloppy bad kisser! And wore ill-fitting trousers. But I couldn’t. (The last two weren’t true, anyway.)

‘Say something, Katie.’

‘I . . . I just don’t know what to say.’

‘Look, Terry and I aren’t like you and Matthew. We don’t have that camaraderie you and Matthew have. With us, it’s always been a competition. Who earns the most money? Who drives the flashiest car? Who’s winning the most awards? The competition never ends. And as far as sex is concerned, well . . . let’s just say there are no surprises.’

It never occurred to me that Fern and Terry were unhappy. They looked perfect together, not like a couple in crisis.

‘I had no idea,’ I said.

‘Why would you? We put on a good show.’

‘But the children . . .’

‘What about them? They don’t know. It’s not like I’m about to run away with Graeme. He’s available. We both have needs, desires. I find the time to accommodate him and he, let me tell you, certainly accommodates me. End of story. Besides, Terry hasn’t looked at me that way in years. To him, I’m plain old Fern. All I am to him is the mother of his children. I’m not a high-powered magazine exec overseeing ninety staff. He doesn’t

appreciate me. When Graeme looks at me there's pure lust in his eyes. He wants me. Graeme thinks I'm clever, loves my body –'

'Oh God,' I said, putting my head between my knees. 'I think I'm going to throw up.'

'Really, it's not that bad. I can handle it. Terry's not interested in me in that way.'

'How can you say that? You have four kids,' I said, looking up at her briefly before the queasiness seized me again.

'Exactly. Four kids. They are my reality. The rest is illusion, keeping up appearances. Do you know how hard I have to work to keep it together? My perfect life, my perfect children . . . it's all a lie. I'm living a lie. Don't look so shocked, Kate. We all have our secrets.'

I'd been staring at her open-mouthed. Never in a million years would I have guessed that Fern and Graeme – Graeme! Of all people!

'Look, I didn't set out to cheat on Terry. I really didn't. At first Graeme and I just flirted and it was fun. After Lily was born, I made a special effort to get back into shape. Went back to swimming laps three mornings a week. I walked and worked out at the gym in an effort to lose all the baby weight. Do you think Terry commented or even noticed?

'Do you think that he noticed that I was on the Lemon Detox diet for months on end? That I was starving myself to look good for him? That I was getting my legs and eyebrows waxed? All for him, so that he would want me? Desire me again? No. No. No. He didn't say one bloody word about it. There was never any *Fern, you're looking great*. I got nothing. Not one word of encouragement. And pelvic floor exercises! I have bladder control like you wouldn't believe.

‘When I came back from maternity leave seven months ago, Graeme was still here, still keen on me and still flirting. He was pure charm, so good for my post-baby ego. Every day he was here, regular as clockwork, praising me. I know he was probably just trying to get me into bed . . .’

‘You think?’

‘What? You don’t think I wanted to fuck him as well? Sex without strings? I was desperate for it. Desperate to have that mad, passionate fuck that didn’t come at a price. *I love you, Terry. You’re the greatest, Terry.* None of that. None of that fucking mother guilt.’

I had rarely heard Fern swear before, let alone say *fuck*. I felt uneasy. Squeamish.

‘You know what, Kate?’

Please don’t tell me, I wanted to scream. I couldn’t take much more.

‘Terry says that he can’t go down on me because I’m a mother now. What a load of bullshit. For ten years, I’ve missed out. I’m shocking you, aren’t I?’

‘I don’t know Fern, maybe you shouldn’t be telling me this.’

‘With Graeme, I can just think about myself and my own needs. Graeme and I are both selfish that way. But we also connect professionally. Graeme is a talented artist, brave. Inspirational.’ Fern sighed and smiled. ‘So now you know.’

‘So it’s not just sex?’

‘No. It’s not just sex. Truly.’

‘Why don’t I believe you?’

‘Look, I know Graeme can be a rat. I know he cheats on me. And he has every right to. I come with baggage, a husband and children. He had a girl at his place late the other night when

I came over unexpectedly. Poor stupid slut. He made her climb out the window as well. But he got rid of her. We did our –’

‘What?’

‘Oh yes, he does that. He’s a bastard. But he gives great –’

‘Fern, I really need to use the bathroom.’

After I threw up, I sat slumped over the toilet seat for a very long time. A video was running behind my eyelids and I couldn’t do anything to stop it. I closed my eyes. I opened them. Blinked. Nothing worked. The tape playing inside my head just kept on and on, becoming more horrific and humiliating with each passing second until the finale, when I finally saw what I had been doing with Graeme that night.

Drinking a bottle of champagne at the bar . . . moving to a dark corner . . . Graeme telling me there was *no way you’re thirty-six*, and kissing me, his hand under my shirt massaging my nipples. Leaving together . . . falling into the back seat of a car . . . my car!

Graeme falling on top of me, telling me he had *a special birthday surprise* for me. Me pulling his shirt off . . . barely noticing people walking by and peeking in. The police knocking on the door and telling us to stop what we were doing and get out of the car . . . catching a cab to Graeme’s apartment.

Arriving at Graeme’s . . . tripping as I stumbled up the path and through his open front door . . . drinking even more to celebrate my birthday. Gin, maybe vodka. Him chasing me into his bedroom.

The images flashed faster and faster. My drunkenness. Graeme’s face. The bedroom. Graeme’s bed. Him ripping my clothes off. The two of us rolling around the bed.

Then . . . minutes later . . . the front door opening . . . and a woman's voice calling out to Graeme. Him pushing me out the open bedroom window, naked. My clothes and shoes tumbling out soon after and hitting me on the head.

Scrambling to my feet and hiding in the bushes, dazed and confused. Finally, dressing and walking out on to the deserted street in search of a taxi.

Mum's words rang in my ears. *We all make mistakes love, the trick is to learn from them and move on. Forgive yourself. Vow to become a better, stronger and wiser person as a result . . . that's what life is about. None of us is perfect.*

Everything had been quiet when I got home that night. I flipped on the kitchen light and picked up a picture that Angus had drawn. It was of him and me in our garden. He was kissing me and giving me a bunch of flowers. He'd drawn a speech bubble coming from his head. Inside it were the words *Happy Birthday, Mummy. Hope you had a good night with your friends. I love you. Love Angus.*

Then Mum got out of bed and tried to tell me about Lexi drinking vodka and orange juice. *Kate, do you understand what I'm saying? I almost had to take Lexi to hospital. I was scared out of my wits. Why didn't you answer your phone?* But I was too far gone to understand.

I remember walking into the bathroom, turning on the shower, undressing and standing under tepid water for a very long time, crying.

Then Mum knocking on the bathroom door. *Darling, she said when I finally opened the door. What on earth happened to you tonight?*



‘Are you all right, Katie?’ Fern was calling out from the other side of the toilet stall.

‘Fine,’ I mumbled.

‘Okay. We’ll talk some more later.’

I didn’t reply. After she’d gone, I walked out of the cubicle and splashed my face with cold water. I’d been an idiot many times before in my life. Example – when the pet shop owner told me that the rabbit he was selling me was male! The time a new boyfriend told me he loved me and I believed him so I had sex with him on the second date. The time I drank a tumbler of vodka – neat – because Robyn told me it would cure my headache. Very wrong. Or like the time, about half an hour after drinking the said tumbler of vodka, I mistakenly thought that the police walking towards me were male strippers. Wrong again. But all that paled in comparison. This was a catastrophe, a cataclysmic disaster. I couldn’t see myself getting over this nightmare in the six-week period I’d allotted to overcome each new crisis.

Fern was nowhere to be seen. I had to think fast. Focus. Focus on getting out of the building and never coming back. I brushed my hair and applied my lipstick as best I could with my shaking hand. As soon as I stepped into the corridor I came face to face with him – Graeme Grafton.

‘Hey, hey, Fern told you our news. Don’t look so down-hearted, babe. We can still get it together. It’s just that Fern tends to get a bit twitchy about my other lady friends.’

‘Excuse me,’ I said, shaking my head.

‘Come on, you love it. All women do. I’m that exciting, ego-boosting guy you’ve been looking for. Don’t tell me you haven’t had fantasies about me, fantasies you can’t share with your precious husband. Fern and I know all about fantasies, we

act them *all* out. They come to life in the shower, on the beach, in the office kitchen –’

‘Okay, I get it. Thank you.’

‘I can be your real-life fantasy too, just like I’m Fern’s. She wants it badly. And after she comes, she goes. No rings, no strings. I’m cool with that.’

‘You would have to be *the* most disgusting man I have ever met.’

‘That’s not what you said the night you were in my bed.’

‘I was out of my mind.’


‘And now you’re out of your mind with jealousy. Don’t be. It makes you look old and haggard and even more ridiculous than you are, if that’s possible.’

‘Fuck off!’ I screamed. ‘Don’t ever talk to me again.’

Tick number one on my to-do list.

But the experience wasn’t as uplifting as I had hoped it would be. I was confused. Never would I have thought that Fern would have an affair with Graeme. Risk her marriage to Terry for him? Surely if she needed male attention, she could do so much better.

Graeme smiled, turned and walked away. I felt stupid, sad and, yes, ridiculous. I walked in the direction of the studio, determined not to lose it.

A decorative graphic consisting of a cluster of small hearts and swirling lines, positioned above the page number and extending across the top of the page.

‘How do you do it?’ I said to Mara a few minutes later in the studio. A woman with a bandaged ankle was standing on crutches beside her.

‘This is Simone,’ Mara said with a happy smile.

I nodded weakly to Simone, blinking away threatening tears.

‘Tough couple of weeks, hey?’ Simone said.

‘Understatement. I don’t know how you can work with Graeme without aching to stab him in the back every minute of the day.’

‘We have each other,’ said Mara, slipping her arm through Simone’s. ‘If I didn’t have Simone, I’d go mental, which is exactly what happened when she was sidelined with a broken ankle.’

‘I’m sorry I couldn’t be more help,’ I said.

‘You did great, Kate, but Simone and I know how to handle Graeme.’

‘Most of the time,’ said Simone, looking down at her foot. ‘Anyway, I’m back now, and even with these crutches, I feel stronger than ever. Together, Mara and I can take on the bastard and win.’

‘But what with Fern and everything,’ I began.

‘So you know about them?’ Mara said.

‘Yeah – you both know? I still can’t believe it. I keep asking myself, *Why?*’

‘Who knows?’ Mara said. ‘You do what you can to get by and I guess those two fulfil a need in each other. Simone and I have had endless discussions about it. Graeme’s a bully – brilliant and eccentric when he wants to be, but a bully all the same. If he can intimidate you, he will, just for the purpose of being intimidating.’

‘His weakness,’ Simone added, ‘is that he likes to be dominated, and that’s the basis of his relationship with Fern. She dominates him because of her position here.’

‘But still . . .’ It was too ugly to contemplate. I didn’t want the image of Fern’s perfect life shattered. I looked up to her, admired her. Wanted to be like her. I had thought Fern had it all. She had four children. She had Terry. She was the boss. Why did she need more? Why did she need Graeme?

I left the office without saying goodbye to Fern and got into my car and drove.

What if Matthew found out? It was all I could think about. What if I’d completely destroyed my marriage over someone as pointless and worthless as Graeme Grafton?

I needed to get some perspective. It wasn’t like I’d killed anyone – yet. I was a good person – most of the time. Generally speaking, I was a good housekeeper, wife and mother. My life didn’t deserve to be in tatters.

I had to see Mum. Talk to her. Hear the truth about that night for myself. Maybe my memories were distorted. Perhaps I’d only dreamed about being at Graeme’s apartment. Part of

me clung to the hope that none of it had really happened. That it was a vile hallucination.

‘Mum, are you sure Lexi’s asleep?’ I asked, after I was seated at the kitchen bench, sniffing back tears and sipping my tea. Feeling disgusting.

‘We checked on her barely five minutes ago when you arrived home, Katie.’

‘And Bugsy?’

‘She’s resting too.’

‘Maybe I should check on them again, just to make sure.’

‘Why don’t you settle down and tell me what this is all about. Is it the magazine? Fern’s already called twice for you.’

‘Mum, what did I tell you that night of my birthday? After the drinks?’

‘Oh . . . that. You were in a dreadful state. A bit worse for wear. I didn’t want to bring it up with you until you were ready.’

‘When did you ever think I’d be ready? Please, tell me what I said.’

‘Only that you’d made a terrible mistake. You mentioned Graeme and the fact that his girlfriend had walked in on you both and you were thrown out of the bedroom window . . . naked.’

‘God, no.’

‘God, yes, I’m afraid. After your shower, you insisted on taking a Berocca. Then I gave you a couple of Panadol and put you to bed.’

‘Mum, I made a mistake, a really bad mistake.’

‘I’m so sorry, love.’

‘It’s not your fault, it’s mine. I’m the disgusting one. How could I do it to Matthew, to the kids, to you? Why? I didn’t actually have sex with him, but I would have, had we not been interrupted. Why did I do it?’

'It was a cry for help. A plea for someone to notice you, love you.'

'Not Graeme Grafton!'

'No, but maybe Matthew? We all make mistakes, wish we could turn back the hands of time in the hope that something that did happen didn't happen. What's important is that we learn from them and try not to repeat them. Life is about forgiveness and acceptance. And love. I've been where you are. Believe me.'

'No, you haven't, Mum. I'm a disgusting person. No wonder Lexi –'

'Stop it. Just stop it. It's over. It was a mistake and it won't happen again. Will it?'

'No . . . no it definitely won't,' I whispered. 'I couldn't live like that. I know a lot of women can but it's just not me. I don't want to. I . . . I don't even know if I can live with myself as I am.'

'You can and you will. It was a silly mistake and it's over and done with. It's time to get on with your life. Forgive yourself and move on.'

'Do you think I should tell Matthew?'

'Katie, only you can figure that one out.'

'It was a mistake. A stupid drunken lousy mistake.'

'Then forgive yourself.'

'I can't.'

'You're going to have to; it's the only way you'll be able to move forward.'

'Is that why you're giving Dad another chance? Why you're forgiving him after all these years? Because he made a mistake?'

'Sometimes things just happen,' Mum said quietly. 'I can't remember how it even started. Your dad was so busy at work; he never had time for me, for just the two of us. At least that's

the way I saw it. He lost interest in me. And what with you and Robyn being teenagers . . . I was lonely.'

'Not when we were planning our holiday?'

'By then it was too late. It had already started.'

'Dad's affair?'

'Kate, Dad didn't have an affair. I was the one who was lonely. He thought we were living a perfectly comfortable life. He went to work every day. I made his salami and pickle sandwiches and kissed him goodbye at the front door, but I wasn't happy. I was depressed and felt isolated. It was so easy to . . .'

'To what, Mum?'

'To crave something more . . . something exciting.'

'And?'

'I was the one who found someone else. I was the one who had the affair. It started before the summer.'

'That's not true! It was Dad! He was off with *that woman*. You were distraught, heartbroken, a complete wreck. You worshipped Dad. You're not remembering correctly.'

'I am, I'm afraid.'

'I don't believe you. You're covering for him. You could never do that. Never have -'

Mum put her hand under my chin and lifted my head. 'What, Katie? An affair?'

I nodded.

'Yes, I could, darling. And I did. It wasn't your father who strayed. It was me.'

'Oh my God! Who with?'

'A friend. It doesn't matter now. The affair was over within months. He was married as well. I guess we were both bored. I had no idea that it would turn out the way it did. It wasn't

until afterwards that I realised how much I hurt your father and how much I hurt myself and you girls in the process.'

'But why?'

'Why do any of us do the things we do? For excitement . . . because we're bored . . . but sooner or later, we have to take responsibility for our actions. I'm not proud of what I did.'

'Why didn't you ever tell me?'

'I tried, many times, but you didn't want to know. After a while, life moved on. You married Matthew, Lexi was born. We got on with our lives.'

'Yes, but without Dad.'

'I tried to reconcile with him, to apologise. When I flew to Melbourne and found him in bed with that woman, I was shattered.'

'But you were still married.'

'We were still legally married, but memories play tricks, Katie. That's what I've been trying to tell you. He'd left three months prior to that. It was easier to tell you your dad was working away from home – which he was – in Melbourne. But soon after he left, I realised I missed him and had made a mistake. But when I found him at the Windsor, I was heartbroken. Up until then, I'd expected we could put the affair behind us and get back together. But when I saw him with her, part of me died. So I told him I wanted a divorce. They got married as soon as our divorce came through. Bob's the kind of man . . . well, he didn't want to live alone and I guess he made his decision not to.'

'I can't believe you're only telling me this now. It's been twenty years.'

'I never stopped loving your father. But the occasional bunch of roses and a night on the town would have made me happier.'

I didn't want to take another lover or divorce him. I just wanted your father to notice me, to shake things up.'

'Well you certainly did that. What happened with the other man?'

'Oh, I'd ended it with him before I went down to Melbourne. His wife was none the wiser. I was the one who ended up losing everything – Bob, my life, my family. I'm so sorry. After a couple of years of feeling sorry for myself, I got on with it. I had to. Bob had a new life, with a new wife. You and Robyn had your lives. I was forty-one. I had to sort myself out or wither and die.'

'All this time I thought you were the victim.'

'Katie, I was never the victim. Well, I was a victim of my own stupidity.'

'But our family?'

'I was wrong, very wrong. I never stopped loving Bob or feeling responsible for what happened. But your dad and I have talked about it all. The past is the past. There is nothing we can do to change it. The present and the future, that's what's important now. Bob and I are together again and will be for another twenty or thirty years. I know it doesn't make up for what happened all those years ago, but it's a hell of a start.'

'I don't believe you. You can't be serious. That's twenty years of my life you're talking about! Twenty years that I've hated Dad, twenty years he's missed out on being a father and a grandfather.'

'I'm so sorry, Katie.'

'Sorry's not good enough. Dad's the reason I keep expecting Matthew will one day leave me for another woman, why I assume he's having an affair – because my father did.'

'But your father didn't.'

'I know that now, but all this time I've thought I wasn't good enough. That Dad left the family because of something I did when I was fifteen . . . because I didn't get enough As on my report card . . . because I wasn't pretty enough . . . that somehow I was to blame.'

'Why would you think that? You were a teenager.'

'Why wouldn't I think that? I was a teenager. We were planning a family holiday . . . my mid-term report came home. You and Dad asked me why I'd done so badly at Maths and I told you I didn't need it . . . that I was going to be a photographer. Soon after, Dad left. We didn't go on the holiday and Dad never came back to live with us – but it was you all along. You're the one who destroyed our family.'

'I'm so sorry,' Mum said again.

Mum made me another cup of tea – my fourth, I think – and I sat at the kitchen bench in a Lipton-induced daze and cried. Mum did too. Thinking about the lost years, the years I spent blaming Dad and hating him for a family break-up that wasn't his fault. Okay, he had something to do with it – he'd neglected Mum, after all – but he didn't deserve all the vitriol I'd hurled at him over the years.

After several hours of weeping and feeling sorry for myself, I was sufficiently composed to pick up Angus from school – late – while Mum did what she and I always do in a crisis: cleaned the house. After the fifth call from Fern, Mum told her I wasn't feeling well. Which was true.

By the time I arrived home with Angus, Mum and Lexi were sitting at the kitchen bench ploughing their way through chocolate cake.

'How are you feeling, Lex?' I asked her.

'Tired. I told Nanna I'm not going to her wedding.'

Mum shrugged her shoulders and offered me cake. I accepted.

‘Why would you say that? Of course you’re going. You’re Nanna’s bridesmaid and you’ll look gorgeous.’

‘No I’m not. My arm’s killing me and it’s itchy. And my face . . .’

‘We can fix your face. You’re still beautiful.’

‘Whatever.’

She wandered back to her room and Angus went to look at the baby bunnies.

‘I’m going now, love,’ Mum said a few minutes later, her eyes filling with tears. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’m sorry too.’ We hugged. ‘I was shocked, that’s all. Maybe I wanted to blame Dad for everything that happened when I was a teenager, I don’t know.’

‘We’ll have plenty of time to work through all of this. The main thing is that Dad is back in your life and I promise you he’s not going anywhere ever again. In a few days we’ll be married again and then that only leaves Robyn –’

I slapped my hand against my forehead. ‘Robyn!’ I’d forgotten all about her. ‘I said I’d call her today.’ The poor thing was about to give birth. And I thought my life was crap. I’d really have to ease up on the sticky issues of mastitis, bladder control and sleep deprivation now that motherhood was within days of becoming her reality.


‘I’ll pop in and see how she’s doing.’

‘What can we do for her, Mum? I feel so helpless.’

‘We’re family but Robyn has to figure out how to live her own life, like we all do. When she’s ready to confront Dan, she will. We all have to face our demons sooner or later. It just takes

some people longer than others. She knows you're here for her. We all are. But lucky you! You're her birth partner.'

Memories of last night's antenatal class filled my head. 'And I am so looking forward to it.'



*Y*ou scared me,' I said sometime later when I turned around and accidentally sprayed Rupert with water meant for the conifer hedge.

'I didn't mean to,' replied Matthew, who was standing at the back door with twenty-four long-stemmed red roses in one hand and champagne in the other, a huge grin on his face.

'Gorgeous flowers. You're home early. What's the occasion?' I turned off the hose and walked over to him.

'I thought you deserved something special after everything that's been going on. Then I spoke to Lexi and found out about Bugs. Five new rabbits, hey?' He gave me the flowers and a kiss on the lips.

'That was nice.'

'Did you finish up at the magazine today?'

I nodded. My heart was pounding wildly. He knew. He knew. He couldn't know. If he knew, he wouldn't bring home champagne and flowers.

'Congratulations. You made it. You pulled through, even

though you don't think much of that photographer, the one that Fern called a genius. Graeme . . .'

'Grafton,' I replied flatly. 'Yeah, it's all over.' I was close to tears. I wished Matthew would stop being so damned nice. My stomach was churning and I felt ill. Really sick. I'd betrayed Matthew and our life together. I wanted the ground beneath me to open up and swallow me whole. I made a move to go back to hosing the garden.

'Not so fast.' Matthew caught hold of my arm. It seemed a long time, a very long time since he had done that. The touch of his fingers felt warm and strong. The way they had all those years ago. 'Another five mouths to feed . . .'

'We're keeping them all,' Angus shouted from inside. 'Mum said so.'

Matthew raised his eyebrows. 'Did you?'

'Don't be ridiculous, though I guess we have to keep them for a little while.'

Angus shrieked with joy.

'Katie, I know how much your photography means to you – you look lovely by the way.'

'Thanks.' Matthew actually looked at me and smiled. He brushed some hair away from my face. It was unusually quiet, peaceful. There was an intimacy between us I hadn't felt for a long time.

He pulled me close to him. Wrapped me in his arms and kissed me. Long and hard. All at once I felt a longing for him. And love . . .

'Actually, Matt, there is a place I've been meaning to take you.'

'Sounds intriguing. Photography-related?'

I nodded and he kissed me again. 'Great. I'm up for it.'

‘What are we doing? I’m bored,’ Angus moaned.

‘Mum’s taking us for a drive,’ said Matthew.

‘Well, I’m not staying here on my own,’ Lexi chimed in.

‘All right, everyone in the car,’ Matthew ordered. ‘Yes, you too, Rupert.’

‘I don’t know why we don’t come here more often,’ Matthew said as we strolled down a narrow winding street looking at simple workers’ cottages that housed potters, painters and sculptors. It was a suburb not far from our own but so different. A well-known artists’ enclave with galleries, cafés and clothing designers, some successful but most of them just starting out.

‘Great minds think alike,’ he continued. ‘I was here –’

‘I want to show you something,’ I butted in. We walked around the corner to one of the cottages, which had a *For Lease* sign plastered across its window.

I looked inside. It was a complete wreck just like it had been several weeks ago when I first saw it. But in my mind, I could see a gallery of my portraits in the front room, an office to one side. Maybe I could even have a darkroom, despite darkrooms being virtually obsolete . . .

‘Imagine the possibilities, Matthew.’

‘You don’t have to imagine them. Why don’t you lease the place and build your dream studio here? I met with the real estate agent the other night and –’

‘The woman in the café?’

‘How did you –? Anyway, I wanted to rent it for you as a birthday surprise but I knew it was something you had to do on your own.’

‘Really? I’ve been thinking the same thing for a couple of months now, but when Fern’s offer popped up . . .’

‘You decided to give corporate life another go. But now that you’re finished there, I reckon all you need is a nudge along, right, kids?’

‘But what about Toronto? We could be living *anywhere* in six months’ time.’

‘Yeah, I guess we could, but I’d only go if you and the kids came with me. Who knows what’s going to happen down the track? What do you say? Your own photography business? Be your own boss and take control of the photos you want to create?’

‘Yeah, Mum,’ Lexi piped up. ‘It’d be awesome, better than the stinky laundry.’

‘See? Even Lexi thinks it’s a great idea,’ Matthew said.

‘So do I,’ Angus chipped in.

‘It’s unanimous. What’s holding you back?’

‘Fear,’ I said honestly.

‘Come on, life’s an adventure. Where did agonising over Sarah’s book get you? Nowhere. And it turns out she’s not so special. She had to stoop to stealing your work to get published. What does that tell you? If you want something badly enough you have to go for it. Make it happen. Don’t worry about the process so much that the mere thought of action cripples you with fear. You can do this.’

‘I could enrol in a Photoshop course, get up to speed with digital, embrace the noughties.’

‘That’s our girl! Have a bit of faith in yourself. We do.’

That night the stars must have been aligned in all the right places because we had a good evening – great, actually. There were no arguments, not even a tense moment. We ate at a little Thai restaurant across the road from the cottage I hoped would

soon be mine and even the kids seemed happy. We didn't need Family Conversation Starters cards. We were doing fine all by ourselves.

'We should eat out all the time,' Angus said, stuffing his fifth fish cake into his mouth.

'Yeah, but next time we'll leave Rupert at home,' Matthew said as we watched Rupert salivating on the pavement.

While the kids devoured deep-fried ice-cream, Matthew popped out to the car and returned with a present, my favourite Chanel perfume, Allure.

'You have no idea the effort I put into buying you this,' he told me. 'Women spraying me all over the place; I walked around for days smelling like a gardenia. I'm surprised you didn't say anything.'

I was asking myself the same question. Why didn't I just say something at the time?

After the kids went to sleep, Matthew and I made love and it was very sweet and romantic. Afterwards, while he slept, I thought of my dilemma.

I either had to forgive myself and get on with my life, or not forgive myself and still get on with my life. I knew most people would feel they had a moral obligation to tell their partner about an indiscretion, but I hadn't made up my mind. I truly didn't know what to do. Should I confess to my husband about my night of shame, or not?

Cons:

1. Matthew would never forgive me.
2. Lexi would never forgive me. Because, let's face it, she'd find out sooner or later.

3. Life as I know it would be over. RIP.

Pros:

1. Married people should not keep secrets from each other. Ha! Like that'd ever happen.
2. It didn't mean anything (so why reveal?).
3. Nothing happened – apart from the nakedness and the groping.
4. When all's said and done, marriage is based on trust. If I didn't tell Matthew, the secret would always be niggling at me. Lurking in the background. Waiting to pounce.

I drifted to sleep but tonight my dreams weren't about Arnaud. Tonight, Matthew was my man. Standing inside my newly rented studio, Matthew's hand was resting lightly on my thigh, just the barest pressure, but the heat . . . His hand moved higher inching its way along my silk skirt, sneakily exposing my bare flesh. Then his fingers, oh God! His fingers found their way to the edge of my lace knickers, played there, teasing me. He slid his fingers inward and leaned over to kiss my neck, raking my throat with his tongue, biting, nipping. I could taste the earthy honey on his breath. Instinctively I pressed against him, moaning. This wasn't a dream. It was so much better. The real deal. My life.

The next morning Matthew loved me, cuddled me, kissed me and bounded out of bed. Showered, left his wet towel on the floor, dressed, made me a cup of tea and brought it up to bed. Then he walked out the front door and I breathed a sigh of contentment.

'Mum, are you getting up?' Angus was standing in the doorway, Gertrude wrapped tightly in his arms. 'Gerty's trying to eat the babies.'

I rolled over and glanced at the bedside clock radio: five minutes past seven. ‘I guess I should.’ I dragged myself out of bed and wandered into Lexi’s room. ‘Lexi, you have to go to school today.’

‘I can’t,’ she mumbled from under the doona. ‘I’m in too much pain.’

I opened her curtains to reveal the dull cloud cover outside and she poked her head out from underneath the covers.

‘You can stay at home today but tomorrow you have to go back to school. Besides, your friends want to see you. There were five messages on the answering machine for you last night when we got home from dinner. Maybe when you’re feeling better you can have a party. You didn’t have one when you turned thirteen.’

‘Wow, you’re in a good mood.’

‘Yes, I am. Now about your party,’ I persisted.

‘A slumber party? With pizza and music and DVDs?’

I nodded and Lexi smiled.

‘But you wouldn’t, like, try to hang out and annoy us, would you?’

‘No, but this sleepover, it’s just girls, right?’

After I dropped Angus off at school with five minutes to spare, I stopped in at the newsagent on the way home.

‘What’s this?’ Lexi said when I walked into her room and dumped a couple of magazines beside her. ‘You hate me reading these.’ Her eyes were wide open and staring at *Who* and *Girlfriend*.

‘I know, so don’t ever say I don’t do anything nice for you.’

Lexi and I would be okay. I hadn’t entirely given up on the idea of fixing a bracelet tracking device to her arm. I wasn’t so naive as to think that there would not be many more times

like this, some even more trying than the last couple of weeks had been, but generations of women before me had survived motherhood. I was in with a good chance.

Tidying up my bedroom, I thought about Fern. I really needed to square things with her. And once I'd dealt with her, then I could move on, make a fresh start with my family. I sat on the floor and glanced over in the direction of my underwear drawers. Drawers full of new and exciting underwear.

I stood up and walked from room to room, tidying as I went. I swept, washed windows and vacuumed – anything to take my mind off *Delicious Bites* and my sordid past. After two hours, the house sparkled. There was nothing left to clean. Even the oven was spotless. All the animals were groomed and fed, wormed and treated for fleas. I checked on Lexi. Sound asleep.

Back to my confidence plan. Number two on my list was to stop wasting time thinking up escape plans and indulging in pointless fantasies. Freud once said that only unsatisfied people had fantasies, but fantasies were what kept me going during those wakeful hours between two and four o'clock in the morning when I was struggling with thoughts of inadequacy and despair.

I rang Diane.

'None of us need to apologise for our fantasies,' Diane said, her voice steady and reasonable. 'As long as they remain just that. There's a huge difference between fantasy and reality. Are you talking about Arnaud?'

'I guess, but I don't want him in the real world. I don't think I ever did . . . well, maybe just a little. He was a diversion. I really want Matthew.' It's just that it's so easy to get distracted – and then, bang! One little indiscretion. Well, it can destroy a marriage like it had destroyed Mum's and no doubt would also destroy Fern's. I didn't want that to happen to me.

'You've answered your own question. I'm sure Brent and Matthew have them all the time. Brent's probably wishing he could escape to his fantasy world, given the chaos here.'

'So how are things?'

'Not so good. Listen, I know you're up to your ears in commitments but I've made an appointment for next Tuesday, and I'd really like you to hold my hand.'

'You don't need to ask, Di. Yes, of course I'll come with you.'

'Thanks. Now then, what's happening in your life?'

'Working those few weeks at *Delicious Bites* made me realise that I want to continue with my photography professionally. I don't want to give it up again. There's so much more I want to do with my life. So I'm going to embrace the new era, brush up on my photography and computer skills and rent myself a studio.'

'Good to hear,' Diane said. 'I'm thinking of embracing the new world as well and maybe going back to uni to study child psychology.'

'Really?'

'Well, if you can't beat 'em . . . So tomorrow morning, you know the drill.'

'You do know it's winter and it's dark and cold and miserable at that time of the morning?'

'Ah yes, but spring is just around the corner.'

Diane was right. Spring was looming. We just had to make it through another six weeks of winter. In six weeks' time, Mum and Dad would have settled into domestic bliss, Robyn's baby would be almost a month old and Lexi's arm and bruises will have healed. And in six weeks' time, I hoped, I'd be ensconced in my new studio. *Delicious Bites* would be a distant memory.



‘Mum, there’s someone here to see you,’ Lexi screamed from downstairs. It was good to see she hadn’t lost her fine voice in the fall.

‘Fern,’ I said when I reached the bottom of the stairs. ‘I’ve been meaning to ring you.’

‘No, you haven’t, but thanks anyway. As you’re not returning my calls, I thought I should come over. I take it you’re not coming back?’

I shook my head. ‘I don’t think it would work out. Besides, I’m starting a whole new adventure, renting studio space, the lot.’

‘Congratulations. I know you’re going to be a huge success.’

‘As for Sarah’s book, I’ve contacted a solicitor and we’ll see what happens.’

‘Fantastic. You should get recognition for your photographs, not to mention compensation. You can count on my support. Sounds like you have everything sorted.’

‘There is one more thing I need to tell you,’ I said, my eyes filling with tears. ‘I was the poor stupid slut in Graeme’s bed the night you came over late.’

‘I know. Graeme told me yesterday after you walked out.’

I gasped.

‘It’s okay. He likes to hurt me. He thinks it gives him the upper hand.’

‘Fern, I’m so sorry. I would never normally –’

Fern held out her hand to stop me. ‘You and me both. But I’m in too deep now. I’m trapped. You, on the other hand, are not. You have a great family and an amazing talent. Good luck. Take care of yourself.’

‘You too,’ I said, and stood at the front door waving while she walked out of our front gate to her car.

As I watched her drive away, I thought about how Fern must struggle every day. What did she call it? *Keeping up appearances*. Like me, Mum and countless other women, we resisted admitting our dreams and desires, and banished our failures to the deep recesses of our minds, not wanting to let them consume us. Like Fern, was I guilty of disguising reality with a facade of perfection? No, that's one thing I didn't need to feel guilty about. Try as I might to be perfect, I'd never achieved it. My reality was a distant cousin to perfection.

I don't know how long I was standing at the door before Lexi tapped me on the shoulder.

'Mum, what are you doing?'

'Just thinking. How are you feeling?' Number four on my list was to be a better mother to Lexi. Talk to her. It was worth a shot. If I didn't start treating her like a young adult and letting her into my world, I was going to lose her. I had to be honest with her. Not too honest. She didn't need to know everything about me, my past or all of my secrets, but I needed to let her in. To let her see that I was a real person, not just a mother.

'Come and have a look at this,' I said, taking an ancient photo album out of the linen cupboard. It was full of photos of Robyn and me when we were kids – at the snow, the beach, celebrating birthdays. All with Mum and Dad smiling in the background, adoring us. I guess there must have been times, lots of them, when we fought, but looking at these photos you'd never think so.

Lexi sat down beside me.

'Can you believe Nanna's getting married in a week and a half?' I said. 'When I was a kid, I never imagined I'd be sitting here as a thirty-six-year-old woman and that my beautiful daughter would be bridesmaid at my own mum and dad's wedding.'

'Guess not.'

'It's funny how things turn out. I always thought that Nanna and Pop would be together forever. That nothing could ever break them up.'

'Yeah, I thought I'd be with Hunter forever.'

'I had a boyfriend when I was just a little bit older than you' – sixteen, actually – 'and I thought we'd be together forever as well.'

'Really? You had another boyfriend? What happened?'

'He found someone else.'

'No wonder!' Lexi pointed to a photo of me in my school uniform when I was about her age. Hair slicked down and parted in the middle with two long mousy brown plaits covering my ears. White socks pulled up past my knees. 'You *were* tragic, Mum. Look at that hair!'

'His name was Brett. I wish I could see him again. Show him my beautiful kids. Show him what he missed out on.'

'You don't mean that, do you? What about Dad?'

'Well if I'd stayed with Brett, he'd be your father. You'd be none the wiser.'

'But you were still at school.'

'So I was. But I was in love. At least I thought I was in love.' I flipped over pages and pages of photos and we sat together, looking and laughing.

'Mum, I don't think I want to be thirteen. I'm over it. I want to move straight to being an adult.'

'Why on earth would you want to do that? All that responsibility, having to find a career.'

'It's gotta be easier.' Lexi took a deep breath. 'Friends, school, exams, boyfriends, it's so hard.'

'I know, Lex. And I've got to tell you, I don't think it'll get easier – but you're going to have wonderful times as well. Really

great times with friends and boyfriends. Even school can be a lot of fun.'

'Then why do I feel so sad and lonely, and angry with you?'

'Because, as much as I don't like to admit it, you're growing up. You're trying to find your place in the world and where you fit in.'

'Mum, please don't get mushy.'

'I'm not, I promise. How's your arm?'

'Sore, really sore . . . If I tell you something will you promise not to freak out?'

I had to answer in a split second or lose the moment. 'I promise I won't freak out.' Inside I was freaking out and she hadn't even said anything yet.

'You're not gonna like it.'

'Try me.'

'Well, the reason Hunter broke up with me is because . . .'

Oh God, I was going to faint.

'I wouldn't give him a blow job.'

Oh God. I was freaking out big time. I couldn't breathe . . . hyperventilating. When I was younger, oral sex was part of my fantasy agenda, not something you did after knowing a guy ten minutes.

'Did you hear me? I said -'

I put my hand up to silence her and took a deep breath. I knew that boy was up to no good when I first met him and saw that pornographic T-shirt he was wearing. I was right. *I am* a perceptive mother.

'I heard you, sweetheart.' Wait till I get my hands on him. Imagine what Matthew would say. He'd die. He'd fall down dead in front of me.

'I wouldn't join in party games like rainbow kissing . . . you know what rainbow kissing is, don't you?'

'Yes,' I answered quickly. Diane had filled me in. 'How do you feel about that decision now?'

'Well I'm kind of relieved. He doesn't love me like he said he did or he wouldn't have hooked up with Susie so quickly. I think they're already having sex in trees.'

'Pardon?'

'The grass in parks is too itchy.'

Oh my God! Way too much information. I'd never take Angus to the park again for fear of being hit on the head by some naked teenager falling out of a tree. Surely, this wasn't normal. Thirteen-year-olds weren't romping around in parks having sex, were they? I refused to believe it. But then again, why wouldn't they be? I was at school with several girls who weren't virgins at thirteen. But now, it seems so young. Far too young.

'I know she was sexting him, while he was with me.'

'What?'

Lexi started crying. 'Sending boob photos to his mobile.'

I hugged her. 'I had no idea.'

'Why would you?' she sobbed. 'You're old. Anyway I want to do all those things.'

'What? Sex in trees! Erotic photos on mobiles? Is every girl turning into Paris Hilton?'

'I don't mean all that stuff. I just mean, I'm curious.'

I didn't know whether to hug her or smack her. I hugged her. 'When you're twenty-five, I'm sure you'll be ready for a proper boyfriend.'

Lexi rolled her eyes.

'Seriously, thanks for telling me, Lex.'

'You're not angry?'

‘Why would I be angry with you? You’re smart and you’ll do what feels right for you. Although you are only thirteen –’

‘And a half.’

‘And a half. You know, you can talk to me, Lex, about anything. I’m not always going to agree with you but I trust you and I’ll always love you and try to listen to your side.’

‘Even when you’re furious, like when I cut off my hair?’

‘Don’t push it.’

‘You know that night Nanna stayed and I had friends over?’

‘The vodka, orange and chilli night?’

‘It was really stupid. I couldn’t even taste the vodka.’

‘Yes, it was stupid and incredibly dangerous – you could have ended up in hospital having your stomach pumped, or worse.’

‘I’m sorry. It was the first time. So many girls drink cruisers, I wanted to try.’

I wanted to tell her that there was a vast difference between drinking a full glass of vodka with a dash of orange and drinking a Bacardi Breezer, but I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to encourage her experimentation. It would happen soon enough without my prompting. Even so, I made a mental note to check her phone photos from time to time, and I wondered when, if ever, I’d be able to tell Matthew about this conversation. I was having enough trouble digesting it myself. I’d definitely have to run it by Diane first.

‘We all do silly things, Lex, even parents and grandparents. But the key is learn from them, move forward and try not to repeat the same mistakes.’ (Yes, Oracle. It would be good if I could take some of my own mother’s advice now and then.)



Later that day, when Lexi and I were watching *Twilight*, Robyn turned up.

'I'm really scared, Kate. I'm going to be a shitty mother. I just know it.'

'We all think we're going to be shitty mothers. I still think I'm a shitty parent but you learn as you go along. You'll see. The first thirteen and a half years are the hardest.'

'I guess I'm not going trekking in Nepal.'

'Not for some time, no.'

'Or painting in Umbria.'

'No.'

'Galapagos Islands?'

'Doubtful.'

'I'm going to have this baby, aren't I?'

'Yep, very soon I'd say.'

'And then I'll be a mother.'

'You sure will.'

'Promise you'll be there for me?'

'Always.'

'I hate my bloody hair . . . and this stupid nose ring is just . . . stupid.'

'Your hair will grow back. And the nose ring is . . . okay.'

'You think?'

'Yeah.'



Epilogue

Determination and faith. I've got the determination. Matthew's got the faith. He really does have faith in me.

I'm not sure if I've resented Matthew all these years for the fact I gave up photography after Angus was born – I mean, we both wanted children and I was the one with the womb and the breasts – but he's right. I can't spend the rest of my life blaming him and the kids for not doing what I want to do. I have to at least give it a try. It's time for me to step out and do something for myself.

Up until now, it's always been others who have defined who I was as a person – Matthew, Lexi, Angus, Mum, Dad, Robyn. And it's not that I don't want to continue being a wife, a mother, a daughter and a sister, but the time has come to look after myself as well. And I was more determined than ever to succeed.

My eyes flicked to the television, where an advertisement for this month's issue of *Delicious Bites* was playing. Fern had stood her ground. My photo was on the cover. *My photo!* I allowed myself a tiny smile. I wonder if Fern had walked over Graeme's dead body.

‘Earth to Mum.’ I turned around. Even with her broken arm and bruised face, Lexi looked lovely, angelic. I almost didn’t recognise her. So tall and grown up in her pale pink, silk halter-neck dress.

‘Don’t start thinking I’m going to look like this all the time,’ she said, her cheeks glowing from the soft, barely there blush the makeup artist had applied.

‘Wouldn’t dream of it,’ I said, taking her good arm and slipping it through mine.

‘I’m not your little girl anymore, Mum.’

‘I know.’

‘But I’ll still be your little boy,’ said Angus, rushing towards me for a hug, a mini Matthew, wrapped in a tux.

‘Will you, Gussy?’ I scooped him up with my free arm.

‘You ready, gorgeous?’ Matthew asked, smiling at me.

‘As ready as we’ll ever be.’ It was time. This was no dress rehearsal.

There are three sides to every story, just as there are three sides to every person. There’s how you see yourself, how others see you and how you really are – the truth.

But the truth is . . . well, the truth is too hard to live with sometimes. That’s why we tell stories, purposely forget significant facts. It’s why we daydream and create fantasy worlds that are reckless and exciting. It’s to save us from hurt and protect us from the pain and drama of everyday life.

Am I going to tell my husband about my drunken night of reckless stupidity?

I don’t think so. I can live with the guilt. It’s not worth destroying my marriage over. I’m not saying that Matthew

wouldn't forgive me, but getting naked with another person who isn't your spouse? It could go either way.

You know something else? I don't know that Matthew would thank me for telling him and putting him in the position of possibly having to walk away from the life we've built together. He'd feel humiliated and betrayed, and think I was a selfish fool. Which I was.

Would I want to know if Matthew had betrayed me? Only so that I could punish him and make his life miserable. So that I could have the upper hand. I wouldn't throw him out of the house over it. A two-year affair? Definitely. A two-month affair? Maybe. Two hours? Doubtful.

I know that Matthew loves me but our marriage isn't strong enough for me to test it – yet.

I don't know if I've done the right thing. Time will tell.

At the end of the day, you have to live with yourself, just as I do, with my husband, children and a menagerie of animals. And we're all seeking the same things – peace, love and a warm dry bed. *C'est la vie.*

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Acknowledgements

A huge thank you to everyone at Allen & Unwin, especially Louise Thurtell, Alex Nahlous and Felicity Mclean. Thanks for your vision, your enthusiasm and your encouragement. To Nicola O'shea and Ali Lavau, thanks for the great advice and meticulous editing. Also to Ellie Exarchos for the gorgeous cover.

To Edwina Irwin (teen speak), Bridget Elliott (photography) and Elizabeth Worley (fantasies): thank you for your time, words and expertise. I couldn't have written Kate's story without your input.

Thanks to the amazing women in my writers circle, Allison Tait, Diane Riminton, Selena Hanet-Hutchins, Shelley Kenigsberg and Annarosa Berman, for reading endless drafts and your insightful comments and suggestions! I owe you.

To my fabulous book club pals, Bozena Gawart, Libby Sherrard, Jane McLeod, Fiona Truskett, Janette Corless and Valerie Beattie, I love our get-togethers, even though we don't always read the books we're supposed to.

Finally, to my wonderful family and friends who have humoured me when I've been late (or entirely missed appointments!), and

forgotten to buy milk or make dinner because I've been too wrapped in Kate's world, thanks for indulging me.

Josh, Noah and Mia, I love you more than words can say. And to Betting, thanks for everything but mostly for always believing (and for letting me use the six-week crisis rule!).