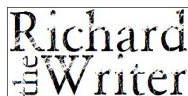


Kaylani

Richard Jefferis



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Chapter One

She stood there beside the train, nervous and uncertain. She hadn't intended to get off at Flinders Street Station but none of the other stations on the city loop had tempted her and there was nowhere to go after Flinders Street except to go back to where she'd come from. That wasn't an option. Her ticket was for Melbourne as well so changing to another train would mean she'd have to get another ticket and have to choose somewhere to go. Still, Melbourne was big and anonymous and that was what mattered. Which station in Melbourne she got off at didn't.

Most of the other passengers seemed to know what they were doing. A few straggled along carrying assorted items of luggage so they were probably tourists and they seemed to know what they were doing as well. Importantly, however, they all ignored the slim young woman with shoulder length unstyled dark hair and a lost expression. She pushed her glasses up a little higher with her finger, grasped the straps of her rucksack firmly in her other hand and, suppressing a surge of anxiety, she followed them along the dirty platform and up the drab iron and concrete steps to the main concourse. At the top she hesitated and looked back but she was the last of the train's passengers and no one was behind her. There were others on the adjoining platform, of course, waiting for their train to arrive but none of them paid her any attention except a teenage boy who was leaning against a pillar and staring at her. She shivered and hurried after the other passengers.

Most had already gone through the bank of ticket barriers but more passengers from another train further along were climbing their staircase so she walked towards the barriers, fumbling in the pocket of her hoodie for her Myki card. The first few caught up with her by the time she reached the barriers and one traveller, impatient and intolerant, pushed in front of her to slap his Myki card against the machine before pressing through. The girl, her name was Kaylani incidentally, jerked back in surprise then jerked forward again as she sensed someone come up close behind her. She touched her card against the barrier's sensor and pushed through.

A sense of relief washed over her. She'd done it! The tatty old barrier

was a symbol of ... what exactly? Kaylani wasn't sure. She'd sneaked out of the house and got on a train to Melbourne and either of those could be considered her moment of breaking free but equally either could have been the moment of being spotted and ensnared again. Nothing had happened on the long train trip and the guy on the platform watching her hadn't followed. Now, standing this side of the ticket barrier with people pushing past and muttering under their breaths about how she was in the way, Kaylani felt fairly certain she'd escaped. It was unlikely that anyone was going to hurry up and pretend to be her friend again. No one was going to appear and persuade her, gently but firmly insistent, to go back. So perhaps the barrier was a symbol of freedom or perhaps of anonymity, of aloneness and solitude or simply of her self coming forth to face the world, the real world.

Mind you, the real world this side of the barrier wasn't that impressive. Kaylani stepped away from the barriers and looked around. To her left was the edge of the concourse and beyond and below were a seemingly infinite number of platforms, some with trains, some without, but all with people and noise. To her right was a large array of left luggage lockers and a wide entrance to the station's toilets. Further up were several cafés, a couple of book shops and a flower stall. Beyond those were the steps that led to the outside world and daylight. A few birds circled below the dome and loudspeakers squawked announcements of departures. A brave new world perhaps but one that was tawdry and drab, the dirt of a couple of thousand or more passengers an hour passing through that no amount of cleaning could ever remove even if the station's cleaning budget could afford it.

The important thing, however, was not the scruffiness of the station or even the proximity of the toilets, although Kaylani knew she'd need to visit them fairly soon. The important thing was that she was on her own with no one to guide her and tell her what to do or what to think. What happened next was entirely up to her, unmanipulated. It was scary as she wasn't used to it but it felt good.

Kaylani stowed her Myki card inside a pocket in her rucksack then slung the rucksack over her shoulders and marched over the the toilets. She did her business in one of the many cubicles then washed her hands, staring at her reflection in the mirror. The dark browns of

her hair had grown out since she'd quit university mid-term five years before and her hair needed a decent cut and style by a proper hairdresser, not one of the others. Her face was thinner too and a little makeup wouldn't go amiss. Makeup hadn't been allowed and she'd probably forgotten how to do it. Still, the slightly vacant look that had been bothering her was gone and her face now looked alive again. Animated, curious even.

"Welcome back," she muttered. "It's been a while."

She ran her fingers through her hair and wondered whether to keep it her natural mid-brown or go back to dying it deep brown again then laughed at herself.

"Maybe it would be better to find somewhere to live before you go dying your hair again, girl," she thought. "Some sort of job would help too."

Kaylani sighed then grabbed her rucksack again and ventured back out onto the concourse. She bought a newspaper and a can of Coke from one of the bookshops using some of the cash she had. She sat on a bench nearby, staying at one end because someone else was sitting at the other end. She popped the ring pull on the can and scanned every page of the newspaper looking for the Classified ads where, hopefully, some sort of cheap accommodation would be listed. There wasn't any. Oh there was a Classified section of course but all the listings were for people wanting to meet other people or sell something and there were a few jobs listed, seemingly only high powered management positions which she couldn't do, but no accommodation unless she wanted to buy an entire house.

"Damn," she said and pursed her lips. The older gentleman sitting at the other end glanced at her then looked back at the array of Departures and Arrivals screens that hung from the roof. She studied him out of the corner of her eye, anxiety welling up again.

"Umm, excuse me," she said quietly. Her throat felt a little constricted.

He looked at her again, a slightly worried expression on his face.

"I've only just arrived in Melbourne," she said, "and I don't know anyone. What's the best way to find somewhere to rent a room? There's nothing in the paper." She waggled the newspaper to emphasise her plight.

"Try a hotel," he said tersely. "Melbourne's full of them." He abruptly got up and walked away.

Kaylani stared after him, confused. Had she somehow annoyed him? Someone else crossed her vision then sat down on the bench. A middle aged slightly too plump woman but fairly well dressed. The woman breathed a sigh of relief and lifted one foot and slowly rotated it. Kaylani steeled herself to talk to another stranger again.

"Excuse me," she said. The woman looked at her, one eyebrow raised, and put her foot down.

"I've only just arrived in Melbourne," said Kaylani, "and I need to find a room to rent but there's nothing in the paper." She rustled the newspaper again.

"Is that the Age?" asked the woman.

"Umm, yes, the Melbourne Age," said Kaylani after checking the front page.

"Thought so," said the woman. "Best time is Saturdays. That's when most of the Classifieds come out or Facebook. Facebook would be better."

"Oh," said Kaylani. "Umm, but it's only Wednesday and I don't use Facebook."

"Bit of a bugger then, eh," said the woman and waggled her foot again.

"Umm, do you know of any cheap hostels around here?" asked Kaylani after a few moments

"Wouldn't have a clue," said the woman. "Sorry."

“Well, thanks anyway,” said Kaylani.

“You might have a wander down Flinders Street,” the woman said, wagging her other foot. “Loads of hotels along Flinders Street.”

“I think a hotel would be too expensive for me,” said Kaylani, her anxiety welling up again.

“I'm pretty sure there's a homeless shelter further along as well,” she said. “You could always try there. Or is it student accommodation? I really don't remember.”

“OK, thank you,” said Kaylani, realising the woman wasn't going to be much help. “Maybe I'll try that then.”

She stood up and tossed the newspaper and the half empty can into a nearby rubbish bin then walked slowly out into the bright sunshine. The iconic stone steps of Flinders Street Station's facade greeted her. Worn steps that lead down to the pavement and the road that teemed with people, traffic and trams. The warm sunshine pushed away the beginnings of sadness that had started to descend on her. For some reason she'd thought it would be easy to find somewhere to live in Melbourne although she hadn't really given a lot of consideration about what to do once she'd got away.

“Well, I suppose I am homeless,” thought Kaylani, staying at the top of the steps and gazing round, “although I don't fancy a homeless shelter.”

The station entrance was on the corner of a busy crossroad with a crowd of people waiting for the traffic lights to change so they could cross. On the other side of the road was a large pub and opposite, directly across the intersection and looking distinctly incongruous, was a large cathedral.

“I suppose I could always sleep round the back of that,” thought Kaylani, “at least for tonight. But what if there's other people there? Real homeless people? Or the police come and find me? Jesus, what if they send me back?”

She stood indecisively at the top of the steps for several minutes wondering what to do then slowly she walked down the steps and joined the back of the crowd waiting to cross.

“Is this Flinders Street?” she asked the woman standing next to her.

“Yes,” said the woman, glancing up from her phone in surprise. “And that’s Swanston Street.” She nodded roughly in the direction of the cathedral.

“Thank you,” said Kaylani just as the lights changed and the crowd surged forward.

Kaylani followed, taking care not to step on the tram rails in the centre of the road and veered a little to the right to avoid some scaffolding that was blocking part of the pavement. Someone shoved her rucksack and she jerked to the left again and banged her shoulder on one of the scaffolds. Her glasses slipped down her nose and, slightly panicked, she twisted around the scaffold and snagged the hood of her hoodie which jerked her to a halt and nearly made her fall backwards. Her right arm flailed and someone grabbed it.

“Easy now,” said a gruff male voice.

“Sorry,” she muttered, feeling deeply embarrassed. She pushed her glasses back up and glanced at the man.

“All good,” he said. “You OK?”

“Yes,” she said, her throat constricting again. “My jacket ... umm ...”

“Yeah, it caught on that joint,” he said pointing to a large bolt that held two sections of scaffolding together. “Still, no harm done, eh.”

He smiled, nodded then walked away as Kaylani’s chest tightened and her throat closed completely, cutting off her breathing. She scrabbled urgently in her hoodie pocket and pulled out her inhaler. Its cold hard plastic felt comforting as she quickly put it to her mouth and sucked deeply. Her throat started to open again and her chest began to relax. She sucked again then gulped in air, all the while pressed against the

cold steel bars. Several people walked past but no one gave her more than a glance.

“Oh Jesus,” muttered Kaylani, gripping the scaffold with one hand. She breathed deeply several times then made herself stand fully upright. A big tram rumbled past, vibrating the ground and she felt claustrophobic.

“Maybe I should just go back,” she thought, staring blankly over the traffic. “I don't think I can cope with all this.”

“Do you have to stand just there?” demanded a thin middle aged woman in a whiny voice. She had a cardboard tray of takeaway coffees in her hand. “You're blocking everything, what with that bloody great thing on your back an' all.”

“Oh, sorry,” said Kaylani. “I was ... um ...” and she waved her inhaler as some sort of excuse.

“Vaping's bad for you,” said the woman irritably. “Move!”

Agitated, Kaylani let go of the scaffolding and hurried forward, disorientated and confused. The other end of the scaffolding seemed a long way away but she managed to get there and ducked off the pavement to stand and lean against it, out of the way of the pedestrians. A cyclist swerved to avoid her and swore but she didn't notice.

“I hate this place,” she muttered and took a smaller suck on her inhaler as a precaution. “This was a bloody stupid idea. Maybe I should go back. Maybe no one's even noticed I'm gone. It would be safer.”

Still, the constrictions in her throat and chest were now completely gone although there was a biting in the back of her throat from all the exhaust fumes. Her heartbeat was going back to normal again as well although everything was a little misty. She took off her glasses and wiped them with her sleeve. Back in place the world, or at least that part she could see, was clearer. The traffic lights must have gone red again as the traffic had stopped moving and a man in a white van was

staring at her and talking to himself. Alarmed, Kaylani jerked across the pavement and found herself in a narrow alley. She turned to look at the van again and the man was still talking but he was now looking down at his dashboard and prodding something with his finger.

“He must be on his phone,” thought Kaylani. Then the van drove off and she breathed a sigh of relief. She put her inhaler safely back in her pocket and wondered again whether or not to go back to the station and get on a train or carry on walking down Flinders Street looking for a cheap hotel or the homeless shelter or whatever there was.

“Oh, what to do, what to do,” she muttered, indecisively. “I can't go back but I can't stay here. It's all too difficult!”

Slowly she became aware that she was standing next to a small café and there was a pleasant smell of fresh coffee with an underlying edge of fried grease. Through the window she could see a couple of people queued up at a counter.

“Maybe a coffee would help,” she thought. “I could sit quietly and get my act together and figure out what to do.”

Again she hesitated then berated herself for being stupid and indecisive.

“It's only a bloody coffee!” she exclaimed and marched in through the door.

“Can I have a skinny latte?” she asked when the man in front of her paid for his and moved out of the way.

“Takeaway?” asked the girl indifferently. “Regular or large?”

“Umm, can I sit over there and have it?” asked Kaylani, pointing at the long counter with stools that ran the length of the window. No one else was sitting there.

“Sure,” said the girl, looking at her for the first time. “You OK?”

“Yeah,” said Kaylani, now worried that she looked upset or something. “Why?”

“You just look a little out of it?” said the girl, her indifference reasserting itself. “No worries. Regular or large?”

“Umm, regular,” said Kaylani.

“Be a couple of minutes, OK?” said the girl.

“OK,” said Kaylani and ambled over to the far end of the counter. She slipped her rucksack off and put it on the stool next to her in case anyone came in and wanted to sit there.

She sat down and gazed out the window at the people and traffic passing by. A few people glanced in at her but no one really took any notice.

“If I go back then I’ll be under their control again,” she thought. “I managed to get away but if I go back they’ll be watching me even more closely and I may not be able to get away again. No, I mustn’t give in. I’ve got to be strong and figure this out for myself. I’ve got to do it, I have to.”

“Skinny latte?” asked a deep but cheerful voice behind her.

She jerked round and saw a beaming black face with a bald head and a thick salt and pepper beard.

“Oh, thanks,” she said.

The man put the cup on the counter in front of her then pulled over a little dish.

“Sugar and sweeteners,” he said by way of explanation. “Enjoy.”

Kaylani smiled and nodded and turned her gaze back to the street but was aware the man had also put a clear plastic display sign on the counter not far from her. She turned again but he was walking away.

“I wonder what that is?” she thought and reached over to twist it round then stared at it in bemusement.

FURNISHED
ROOM
TO RENT
apply inside

Chapter Two

“Surely not,” she muttered. “Surely they can't have found me already?”

Her heart started to beat faster and her chest tightened a little. With a sudden movement she pulled the display sign down so it lay flat on the counter and cast covert little glances around to see who was watching. No one was. There were a couple of people waiting to be served but they were watching the girl serving and the man waiting beside the coffee machine was scanning his phone. Cautiously she lifted the sign part way and read it again.

“It's a trap,” she thought and dropped it back down again. “They know I'd have to find somewhere to stay so they've set this up so they can catch me.”

She looked around again but the black man wasn't anywhere to be seen. The same girl was taking the orders and a different girl, one she hadn't seen before, was standing at the machine making the coffees.

“Where'd he go?” she wondered. “Did he see me in the window and come in to put the sign beside me? Make sure I'd see it?”

A middle aged woman came over and sat on the stool beside Kaylani's rucksack. She glanced at Kaylani and Kaylani stiffened, ready to run if the woman spoke to her. Instead the woman shifted a little so she was half turned away from Kaylani and started going through her handbag.

Kaylani relaxed very slightly and leaned her shoulder against the wall, watching what was going on in the café. A few moments later she stiffened again when the black man came out of a doorway behind the serving counter with a tray of cakes. He slid the tray into the display cabinet then turned to speak to the girl making the coffees. She said something in reply then, alarmingly, she nodded in Kaylani's direction. The black man nodded in turn and picked up a freshly made drink.

“Cappuccino, almond milk,” he said, coming over and putting the mug down beside the middle aged woman.

“Thank you,” she said, closing her handbag.

The black man frowned and reached suddenly towards Kaylani. She shrank back against the wall but he only picked up the display sign and put it firmly against the window. He gave Kaylani a look as if to say “don’t do that again” then walked away. Kaylani breathed a sigh of relief.

“Maybe it isn’t a trap after all,” she thought. “Maybe it’s for real.”

She noticed her latte and, with a slightly unsteady hand, pulled it towards her.

“How would they know I was here?” she thought, staring out the window again. “Unless they followed me. And how would they get that man involved so quickly? For sure there weren’t any blacks there. And the sign. Maybe it’s just a coincidence.”

She glanced down at her latte then held out her hand. It was almost steady again.

“And I do need somewhere to stay,” she thought. “Maybe it’s a sign that I’m doing the right thing?”

She started to giggle at the thought of a sign being a sign then caught herself.

“But maybe it is a trap,” she thought and took a sip of the latte. It was quite nice but not particularly hot now. “Still, I can always ask and if it looks like a trap at least I’ll be ready.”

She took a bigger sip then it crossed her mind that the drink might be drugged. She stared suspiciously at it but there seemed to be nothing happening to her body other than the tightness in her chest fading away.

“What if it’s too expensive?” she thought, her anxiety rising again. “What if they won’t rent it to a woman on her own? What if it’s smelly or dirty?”

“Oh God,” she said out loud, her voice quivering a little.

The middle aged woman looked at her then looked out the window at a youngish man who'd stopped to read the sign. The man looked around then looked at his watch and clearly decided he didn't have time to enquire about the room and hurried off.

Alarmed, Kaylani grabbed the sign again and put it under her rucksack.

“Should I or shouldn't I?” she wondered. “After all, I need somewhere and a room would be better than a hostel but what if it actually is a trap? Nah, it can't be a trap, it happened too quickly but it might be. But then it might not be. What to do, what to do? Should I keep looking for this hostel place? What if that's more expensive than this room? What if they're expecting me to go to the hostel? Wouldn't this room be better? They wouldn't know I was there if they're expecting me to go to the hostel.”

She had some more of her latte, trying to make up her mind. She wished she had someone to ask but the middle aged woman seemed unfriendly. In an agony of indecision Kaylani slowly pulled the sign out from under her rucksack and propped it against the window again. She stared at it for a few moments then took it down and had a gulp of her coffee before putting it back. Someone else, a young woman, stopped outside to read the sign and Kaylani jerked it away again.

“It's taken,” she mouthed and the young woman scowled and walked away.

“So who do I talk to about the room?” wondered Kaylani, running her fingers along the hard plastic edges of the sign. “I don't see that man anywhere.”

Nervously she picked up her rucksack and stood behind a couple ordering some cakes. The girl put them on plates and the man paid for them.

“Have here or takeaway?” asked the girl, glancing at Kaylani. A small

frown crossed her face as Kaylani looked vaguely familiar.

“Umm ...,” said Kaylani and fumbled with the sign.

“Oh right,” said the girl and turned away. “Mallow!” she shouted.

The black man reappeared in the doorway and looked enquiringly at her.

“Someone about the room,” she said and turned back. “Talk to him.”

“Hello,” said the man pleasantly and smiled. “You’re interested in the room to rent?”

“Umm, yes,” said Kaylani, hesitantly moving closer to him. She heard the girl asking the next person what he wanted.

“It’s fully furnished,” said the man. “Big room with shared kitchen and bathroom. The rent’s \$200 a week, in advance.”

“Oh,” said Kaylani.

“You won’t find better for less,” he said. “Not round here anyway.” He reached over and took the sign from Kaylani’s hand. “You want to see it?”

“Um, yes, if that’s all right,” said Kaylani, pleased that things were now progressing.

“No problem,” he said. “I’ll just get the keys.”

He disappeared back through the doorway then re-emerged, holding up the keys and smiling.

“This way,” he said, going through the door and turning left into the little alley. Kaylani followed, her anxiety rising again as the alley seemed to have no exits other than to Flinders Street. The alley was rather narrow, certainly not wide enough to get a car down, and one side was a bare brick wall with no doors or windows.

“What's your name?” he asked as they walked past a tattooist with a selection of rather grim and faded tattoos in the window.

“Um, Kaylani,” said Kaylani. “Kaylani Tawney.”

“Nice name,” said the man. “I'm Adedayo but most people call me Mallow.”

“Oh,” said Kaylani.

“The room's on the third floor,” said Mallow, stopping outside a narrow door between the entrances to a shop whose window seemed to be full of cuddly Winnie The Pooh toys and a bookshop. He pointed upwards. Kaylani looked up automatically but the building towered over her and she couldn't immediately see which was the third floor. Rather worryingly there was only the bookshop then the alley was blocked off with high chain link fencing. He pushed open the door to reveal a staircase with threadbare carpeting and walked up. He stopped on a narrow landing.

“This floor's got the kitchen and bathroom,” he said, opening a couple of doors on the right so Kaylani could peer in.

The kitchen door was a dull green and the kitchen itself was small and had a sink, a gas cooker, a fridge and several cupboards, all of which were old and a little grimy and there were some dirty dishes in the sink. The bathroom door was brown and the room was slightly smaller than the kitchen and had only a sink, a toilet and a shower with a stained and cracked base. A damp towel hung over the shower rail and a couple more hung from a towel rack. There was a used disposable razor on the sink and a large but half empty packet of sanitary pads hanging from a hook in the side of a cabinet. The bathroom smelt of damp and there was some mould on the ceiling.

“That's a tenant,” said Mallow, indicating a faded blue door on the other side of the landing, “and that's the storage room for the shop below.” This door, the same side as the kitchen and bathroom, had been painted red, a long time ago, and had a padlock as well as a normal handle lock.

“How many people share the kitchen and bathroom?” asked Kaylani.

“All five rooms,” said Mallow, “and the two shops below. Although with you here there’ll only be one guy, Jack, on the top floor. The rest of yous will be women. Oh, and Wallace, who runs the bookshop but he doesn’t use the kitchen.”

“Oh,” said Kaylani, a little worried about the prospect of living so close to a man but equally worried about so many women. Where she’d come from was mostly women as well.

“Yours is the next floor up,” said Mallow, going up the next flight of stairs. This landing only had two doors, both once white but now the paint was grubby and cracking. “There you go,” and he unlocked one of the doors and pushed it open before stepping back to let Kaylani in.

It was, as advertised, a furnished room but not furnished lavishly. There was a single bed, an armchair, a table, two wooden upright chairs and a lot of empty space as the room was quite large. The wardrobe and chest of drawers against one wall looked quite lost. Aside from that there was a large ceiling fan and a small electric radiator in a corner. It was clean however and there were a couple of rugs on the old wooden floor. A reasonable amount of light came in through the two windows which only had simple lace curtains.

Importantly, however, Mallow didn’t slam the door shut behind her and lock it. Nor did he follow her into the room and try to overpower her. He just leaned against the door frame and idly hummed a little tune. Equally importantly, as Kaylani wandered around the room touching what little there was, the room had a friendly, almost cosy atmosphere. It had no smells and not much dust. She wandered over to one of the windows and pulled aside the lace curtain. The view wasn’t exciting as it was mostly the brick wall opposite but she could see the sky above and down into the alley.

“The windows open if you want them to,” said Mallow.

“What’s that brick wall?” asked Kaylani.

“The back of the pub on the corner,” said Mallow. “Used to be another row of houses but the pub bought them and bricked up the windows and doors. They use them for storage now.”

Kaylani nodded then her attention was caught by two polished wooden sticks, held together at one end by a metal chain, hanging from a hook in the wall beside the window.

“What're these?” asked Kaylani, taking them off the hook and inspecting them.

“I think they're something to do with Kung Fu,” said Mallow, coming over to look at the sticks. “I've seen Bruce Lee whirling things like this around his head in Kung Fu movies. The last tenant must have left them behind.” He tried a whirl experimentally and nearly broke a window.

“Oh,” said Kaylani as he hung the sticks back up.

“Funny thing to leave behind,” she thought.

“Do you live here as well?” she asked, turning to look at him.

“I live over the café,” he said, “so if you have any problems come and see me. Anytime, day or night. So, you interested?”

Kaylani hesitated. The room was OK and the kitchen and bathroom were tolerable and she did need somewhere to live but \$200 a week? Assuming she didn't eat that would mean her cash would last about six weeks.

Mallow watched her indecision and assumed it was to do with the facilities. It wasn't, of course. Kaylani had simply got out of the habit of making decisions for herself. Other people had been telling her what to do and think for the last few years.

“So what do you do for a living?” he asked.

“Oh, umm, I'm a student,” Kaylani said, unwilling to admit she was unemployed.

“Right,” he said then hesitated. “Have you got linen and crockery and things like that?”

Kaylani shook her head slowly, suddenly feeling overwhelmed. It had been hard enough to make her escape without having to make preparations for the future as well. She felt exhausted and all she wanted to do was sit down and cry.

Although he was a businessman, running the café as well as renting out all the rooms in the four houses in the alley, Mallow wasn't entirely hardhearted and ruthless. Kaylani was a nice looking girl, neat and polite, not like some tenants he'd had over the years and he was getting a definite sense that she had a history. Not a particularly good history either.

“She's probably not a student either,” he thought. “Doesn't look like a druggie though.”

“So money's a bit of a problem then, I guess,” he said, making his decision. “I can let you have some sheets and a blanket or two to tide you over until you can get things of your own. There's pots and pans in the kitchen but you can have some plates and cutlery and so on from the café as well if you need them.”

She just looked at him, wondering if his apparent kindness was a setup, a preliminary to something else. Mallow sensed her hardening and shrugged. Her problems weren't his problems after all.

“Well, that's the best I can do,” he said gruffly. “Take it or leave it. Someone else will have the room by tomorrow if you don't want it. Never a shortage of tenants in central Melbourne.”

Kaylani hesitated then suddenly blurted “I'll take it”.

“Awesome,” said Mallow, his beaming smile returning. “I don't bother with references or anything like that as they're a waste of time. I trust my gut instead. It's more reliable. So, you can move in any time you want.”

“Can I move in now?” asked Kaylani, suddenly desperately wanting

this room and to be alone to get herself together again.

“Sure,” said Mallow. “Just give me a week's rent in advance. Come up to the café and I'll give you a rent book and you can pick up the sheets and so on as well if you want them.”

“Yes, I'd appreciate that,” said Kaylani. “All I've got is this,” and she held up her rucksack.

“So she's a runaway,” thought Mallow. “Wonder what or who she's running from? Abusive husband most likely although she looks a bit young to be married.”

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Twenty five,” she said and rolled her eyes. “How old are you?”

“Fifty two,” he said and laughed, relieved she wasn't underage. “Come on, let's go back to the café.”

He locked the door behind them and she followed him out into the alley.

“What's the name of this alley?” she asked, stopping to look around. It was very different to the countryside where she'd spent the last four years.

“It's not an alley,” he said. “Too small. It's called Burgun Walk. It used to be a walkway between Flinders Street and Flinders Lane but the Council knocked down the rest of the houses.”

“Is that why there's that fence?” asked Kaylani.

“That's right,” said Mallow. “They're getting ready to build a big shopping centre there,”

“Surely this alley would be too narrow for a shopping centre,” she said, frowning.

“Oh the main entrance will be in Swanston Street,” he said. “Be a year

or two before they start serious work on it though.”

“So there's just these four houses left?” asked Kaylani. “What'll happen to them?”

“Nothing,” said Mallow. “They'll be staying, at least for the foreseeable future. I own all four and the Council's not said anything about buying up the land.”

“Right,” said Kaylani, turning to look at the row of terraced houses. “So am I living over the toy shop or the bookshop?”

“It's not a toy shop,” said Mallow. “Virginia only sells Winnie The Pooh memorabilia but yes, you're over it. Wallace runs the bookshop.”

“What about the tattooist?” asked Kaylani. “Who runs that?”

“Spike,” said Mallow. “He's a really nice guy although he looks like a real bad-ass bkie. Do anything for you will Spike.”

“That's good to hear,” said Kaylani. “So there are, what, four houses and three floors above the shops?”

“That's right,” said Mallow. “All tenanted, except for the two over the café. I live in those. We've got our own little community here and sometimes we have a little party, especially at Christmas and on Melbourne Cup Day.”

“That's nice,” said Kaylani. “Umm, if you don't mind me asking, why are you called Mallow?”

“Ohh,” said Mallow, chuckling. “Do you ever have a hot chocolate?”

“Sometimes,” said Kaylani.

“Well that's why,” said Mallow. “Most places serve a piece of marshmallow or two with hot chocolate. Me, I just eat them all myself. I love marshmallows.”

Chapter Three

“G'day,” said a cheerful voice. “You must be the newbie.”

Kaylani whirled round to see a woman in the doorway to the kitchen. She was holding a large yellow plastic container in one hand and a big pink water bottle in the other.

“Oh hi,” she said, a trifle apprehensively as she'd thought the house was empty and had popped down to the kitchen in her pyjamas. “Um, yeah, I'm Kaylani.”

“I'm Mary,” said Mary, coming inside and dumping her things on the counter. “I'm just across the landing from you. Heard you a couple of times and I've been wondering if I'd ever meet you.”

She was a strange looking girl. There was little of her body apparent underneath her fairly shapeless baggy dark blue tracksuit but what there was suggested bulk and yet her face was taut and finely sculptured under the mess of dark hair piled carelessly on top of her head. She looked not much older than Kaylani and was completely devoid of makeup or ornamentation. She held out her hand and Kaylani, after a momentary hesitation, took it. Mary had a surprisingly strong grip and Kaylani flexed her hand after Mary had let go.

“Oh, yeah, I've kind of been just staying in my room,” said Kaylani. “Um, just chilling.”

The kettle clicked and Kaylani turned to pour boiling water over her pot noodles.

“For three days?” asked Mary with a laugh. “That's a lot of chilling. You seriously going to eat that crap?”

“Well, yes,” said Kaylani, prodding her noodles with a fork. “What's wrong with it?”

Mallow had said there was a Woolworth's Metro supermarket further up Flinders Street and Kaylani had stocked up on four 5-packs of pot

noodles after collecting the loaned bed linen. For variety she'd got two Beef flavour and two Chicken flavour. Three days later she still had two and a half packs left as she didn't have much of an appetite.

"There's no nourishment in them," said Mary, taking a 4 litre carton of milk from the fridge. "Nothing but additives."

"Oh," said Kaylani. She looked down at her noodles then looked over as Mary spooned some powder from her container into her water bottle. "So what's that then?"

"Protein powder," said Mary, pouring milk in. "Strawberry flavour. Want some?"

"Um, no thanks," said Kaylani, watching as Mary screwed the top on the water bottle then started to shake it as though it was a cocktail.

"No worries," said Mary. She put the milk back in the fridge and leaned against the counter. "So where're you from?"

"Oh, umm, Gippsland," said Kaylani wondering if she dared be rude and walk away to the privacy of her room. There was something about Mary that suggested power and it made Kaylani nervous. "A little place called Orbost."

"Never heard of it," said Mary cheerfully. She took a sip of her protein shake and pursed her lips as though expecting Kaylani to say something. She didn't. She just stood there prodding her noodles with the fork.

"I'm from Werribee," said Mary when it became apparent Kaylani wasn't going to speak. "So where do you work?"

"I, umm, don't have a job," admitted Kaylani.

"So that's why you've come all the way from Gippsland to Melbourne?" asked Mary. "To find a job?"

"Something like that," said Kaylani. She picked up her mug of noodles then put it down again as it was still too hot. Feeling the need to do

something with her hands she adjusted her glasses instead.

“What did you do in Gippsland then?” asked Mary, taking another sip.

“I was kind of on a farm,” said Kaylani vaguely.

“No farming work in Melbourne,” said Mary with a laugh. “Mostly just shops and offices round here. I work in Parliament House, in Swanston Street.”

“You’re an MP then?” asked Kaylani, surprised. Mary didn’t look much like an MP.

“God no,” said Mary with a snort. “I’m just a junior analyst.”

“Oh right,” said Kaylani then, as an afterthought, “good”.

“Money’s crap though,” said Mary. “Well, nice to meet you. I’m just off for a run then I’m going to the gym. Maybe see you later.”

“Yeah, for sure,” said Kaylani unenthusiastically.

Mary gave her a quizzical look then walked out with her container and bottle. Kaylani heard her run up the stairs and waited. Sure enough Mary came bounding down the stairs a few moments later. The front door slammed and Kaylani quickly took her pot noodles upstairs to her room. She locked the door then cautiously pulled the lace curtain back a little from one of the windows and peered down. Mary was in the middle of the alley doing some stretches. Then she jogged on the spot for a minute or so, lifting her knees very high before doing some more stretches with one foot high up against the wall.

“She looks very fit,” thought Kaylani and let the curtain fall back.

She wandered over to the bed and sat, folding her legs underneath her, while she slowly forked the noodles into her mouth. She’d spent all of Thursday and Friday on that bed, leaving only briefly to get more pot noodles or use the toilet, slowly coming to terms with her new situation. The solitude was therapeutic and she was wary of

meeting people. Now, on Saturday morning, she was beginning to think it was time she got out of bed and became a little proactive. In what way she didn't know but her body was telling her it was time she started to at least think about doing something.

“Maybe I should go running with Mary,” she thought, “or go to a gym,” but she dismissed the idea. The thought of being with someone else wasn't particularly appealing. It was actually very nice just being here in her little room, all on her own with no one giving her orders or being overtly cheerful and coercive. No need to pretend to be cheerful and willing. No need to get enthusiastic about nonsense. No need to do anything really.

She put her empty mug on the floor beside the bed and wriggled her way backwards so she could lean her back against the wall and shut her eyes.

“How could I have let myself get involved with those people?” she asked herself for the thousandth time. “Was I really so stupid to be taken in with their lies, their shit?”

She shook her head slowly then opened her eyes again and looked around. The walls were bare and the room was actually pretty bleak even though it felt safe. The clothes she'd worn when she arrived on Wednesday were still in a heap on the floor and her rucksack, still packed apart from her pyjamas, still sat beside the door where she'd dropped it. The rent book Mallow had given her still lay on the table where she'd tossed it, beside where she'd dumped the packets of noodles. The towel and spare blanket Mallow had loaned her still sat, carelessly folded, on one of the upright chairs.

“I suppose I'd better do something,” thought Kaylani. “For sure I'm going to run out of money soon enough. Oh, what the hell, tomorrow will do. Not like a few days is going to make much of a difference.”

She pulled the blanket up and wrapped herself in it then just sat, gazing blankly at the wall, her mind empty. Much as it had been since she'd arrived.

* * *

“You know,” thought Kaylani, some time later, “those marks on the wall look just like a duck.”

She traced the outline of a duck over the marks with her finger then shivered. The wall felt hard and unforgiving. Slowly Kaylani eased herself out from under her blanket and stood up, nearly knocking over her mug.

“I need a pee,” she muttered and scratched her head. Her hair felt thick and greasy. “I need a shower too.”

She sighed and picked up her clothes then sat on the edge of the bed. An urge to crawl under the blanket again came over her and her hand reached out to grasp it then pulled back.

“No,” she told herself firmly. “Toilet then shower then you can go back to bed.”

With a small effort of will she forced herself to stand and collect the towel before going over to the door. She stood there for several moments listening carefully but there was no sound. She unlocked the door and poked her head out. The sudden sound of the toilet flushing caused her to jerk her head back and push the door almost shut. Still listening she heard the bathroom door shut and, almost immediately, another door shut.

“That must be the room below,” thought Kaylani, cautiously looking out the door again. She couldn't see or hear anyone.

She pulled the door fully open and listened some more. Still nothing. Leaving the door open she scurried down to the bathroom on the floor below and scuttled in. Shutting the door she breathed a sigh of relief and locked it. She dumped her clothes and the towel on the floor then used the toilet before stripping off. Avoiding looking in the mirror, she put her glasses on the side of the basin next to an elderly looking nail brush then turned on the shower and waited a few moments for it to become hot before stepping under the stream. The hot wetness cascaded over her and she turned several times, luxuriating in its warmth and feeling the water cleanse her mind as well as her body. Other than her hands it was the first time she'd had

a proper wash since leaving Orbost and she could almost feel the grime of the past few years begin to slough off.

After a couple of minutes she picked up the remains of a bar of soap that sat in a little niche in the shower wall and began to rub it over herself. It wasn't enough and she stepped out of the shower, dripping water on the floor, to fetch the nail brush she'd seen on the sink. She scrubbed herself all over, avoiding the pattern of scars beside her hip, with the soap and nail brush until her skin began to tingle then massaged her hair and scalp with the soap. She stood for a while, rinsing her hair then a wave of disgust washed over her and she scrubbed herself all over again with the soap and nail brush and again washed her hair with soap. By the time she was satisfied much of her skin was bright red and felt a little raw in places. Mind you, the stinging of the hot water on those patches felt good, vital. She started to feel alive again. Not as alive as she vaguely remembered she used to feel but certainly more alive than she'd felt for a long time.

"I need some proper shampoo," she muttered as the water streamed over her face. It was beginning to cool down as the hot water in the tank began to run out.

Reluctantly she turned the taps off and got out of the shower. The mirror over the sink had steamed over so she couldn't see herself but she dried herself with the towel then wiped the steam off the mirror. She quickly wrapped herself in the towel and studied her hair.

"And some decent conditioner," she said, wrinkling her nose at the state of her hair. It was appreciably less greasy but now felt scratchy from the soap.

She let the towel drop before getting dressed but the thought of putting on her dirty clothes, the ones she'd worn all the way from Orbost, repelled her so she bundled them up. Wrapped in the towel with her clothes in one hand and her pyjamas in the other she unlocked the bathroom door and edged it open slightly, listening. There was the faint sound of a voice coming from the room across the landing; judging by the music of it it was a news bulletin of some kind. Whoever lived there probably had the TV or a radio on. Beyond that there appeared to be no other sounds. Kaylani pulled the door

open and scuttled up the stairs.

“Hello,” said a male voice, unexpectedly.

Kaylani froze and quickly glanced behind her. Part way up the next flight of stairs stood a man, gawping at her. With a gasp she dashed up the last couple of steps and into her room, slamming the door behind her. She leant against the door, her heart beating fast. There was a creak then a footstep then a gentle tap on her door.

“Oh God, oh God,” she muttered and closed her eyes, her glasses a little askew. One hand felt for the lock and the other gripped her bundle of clothes.

There was another tap on the door. A double one. Tap-tap.

“Please go away!” pleaded Kaylani silently. “Please! Just go away!”

“Excuse me,” came the male voice. “I think you dropped your pyjamas.”

“Fuck!” exclaimed Kaylani, forcefully but very quietly. She opened her eyes to look at her hands. Sure enough she only had her clothes, not her pyjamas.

There was another tap. Louder, more insistent. Then the voice again. “Hello? Hello?” Another tap.

Kaylani couldn't move. Breathing rapidly, her eyes darting around the room, she could do no more than press against the door, praying the man wouldn't try to open it. That he'd just go away.

“Umm, I'll just leave them outside your door, then,” said the voice. A pause. “Oh, I'm Jack. I'm in the room above you. Umm. I'm sorry to have disturbed you. Um, yes. They're outside your door.”

Kaylani listened as the man noisily clumped his way downstairs. It sounded like he'd gone down the next flight as well which probably meant he was going out. Kaylani run over to the window and peered down into the alley. Sure enough a few seconds later a tallish, slim,

youngish man with a shock of thick black hair came out. He turned to check the door had locked behind him then strode off up the alley.

Kaylani watched until he'd gone then watched as a middle aged man with a young teenage girl came down the alley and disappeared into the Winnie The Pooh shop. She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the cool glass for a few moments then stood up and went to the door. She listened for a moment then opened it. Sure enough there were her pyjamas. To her dismay they were neatly folded. Which meant he'd handled her pyjamas. The ones she'd been wearing continuously for three days. Her dirty pyjamas. She snatched them up and slammed the door, her face burning.

"Well that settles it," she muttered. "I've got to go out now. I need to find a launderette."

She picked up her rucksack and emptied it onto the table then stuffed her dirty pyjamas and the clothes she'd been wearing inside. She got dressed in her one clean pair of jeans and a clean t-shirt then brushed her hair. Her remaining clothes and a few other odds and ends that she'd brought with her ~ the rest of her things she'd had to leave behind ~ looked lost and forlorn on the table so she folded them neatly and put them away in the chest of drawers. Her underwear in the smaller top left drawer, her t-shirts in the top right drawer and her couple of skirts in the wide drawer beneath. She didn't have anything else to put in the other drawers.

The two books she placed neatly on the top of the chest of drawers and she tucked her spare pair of glasses and her spare inhaler in the corner of her undies drawer. That was it. Pretty much all that remained of her life. Everything else she'd had had been confiscated, such as her mobile phone, her bank account and her jewellery, or she'd abandoned, mostly work clothes and a few books, when she escaped. She still had her driver's licence and Medicare card, of course, which were in her purse.

"And I'd better go to Woolworth's as well," she thought. "Get some shampoo and conditioner. Maybe get some decent food as well since Mary's so dead set against pot noodles. Some eggs maybe, and some milk."

She checked her purse was in the zippered side pocket of her rucksack then, out of habit, checked she still had an inhaler in her hoodie pocket.

“Better get another one as well,” she thought, “that one must be getting pretty low. I wonder where there’s a pharmacy.”

She picked up her rucksack then hesitated before putting it back down on the table. She took her purse out of the side pocket and pulled out a wad of bank notes. It was all the money she had and it seemed a bit risky to carry it around when she now had somewhere to leave it. She checked she still had \$1050, plus some coins, then took \$1000 over to the chest of drawers and hid it under her spare bra. Then she took it out again and tipped the chest of drawers back a little so she could slip the thin stack of \$50 notes underneath. Satisfied, she grabbed her rucksack and hoodie and carefully locked the door behind her.

She checked the front door was locked as well but since other people used that door she had little control over whether it stayed locked. Glancing in the café window she couldn’t see Mallow and the girls serving weren’t the ones who’d been serving on Wednesday. She hesitated before going in but reasoned that Mallow probably employed other people on the weekend. It occurred to her that he might even give her a job but she was reluctant to ask so soon. Maybe in a week or so. She stood behind the man who was waiting to be served and wondered if she fancied a toasted bacon and egg sandwich. Slowly she became aware that another man, sitting at the counter under the window, was looking at her. A shaft of anxiety shot through her and she felt a strong urge to turn and run back to the safety of her room but quelled it. Surely nothing would happen in a public place like this?

“Is Mallow around?” she asked when the man in front of her paid and moved away.

“Mallow!” shouted the girl.

“What?” shouted Mallow from somewhere out the back.

“Someone to see you,” shouted the girl. She looked at Kaylani and shrugged.

“Who?” said Mallow, appearing in the doorway. “Oh hello. How's it going?”

“Hi,” said Kaylani, moving out of the way of someone who'd come in behind her. “Um, sorry to bother you but is there a launderette anywhere near here?”

“No idea,” said Mallow. “Sorry. We use a laundry service.”

“There's one in Royston Place,” said the serving girl as the customer placed his order.

“Awesome,” said Kaylani. “Where's that?”

“Go up Degraives Street,” said Mallow as the girl turned her attention back to the customer. “Then right into Flinders Lane. It's just down there a bit.”

“Great, thanks,” said Kaylani. “And a pharmacy?”

“I think there's one in Degraives Street,” he said. “Isn't there, Angie?”

“Yeah, on the corner,” said Angie, holding the card reader out for the customer to pay.

“Thank you,” said Kaylani.

“So how's it going?” asked Mallow. “Room OK?”

“I love it,” said Kaylani, smiling.

“Cool,” said Mallow.

“I'm just off to do some laundry,” said Kaylani. “Umm, I'll be off then.”

“See you later,” said Mallow and turned away.

Kaylani went over to the door, acutely aware that the man was still watching her. She deliberately avoided looking at him and pulled open the door.

“Excuse me,” he said, standing up. “Did you find your pyjamas where I left them?”

Chapter Four

"I'm sorry?" said Kaylani, stopping with the door half open. She hadn't caught what he'd said but it had something to do with pyjamas.

"Your pyjamas," said the man, quite loudly. "You dropped them on the stairs."

"Ah," said Kaylani, feeling herself starting to go red in the face. She glanced over at Mallow and he and Angie were watching her. Embarrassed, she muttered "yes, thank you" and tried to go through the door but a couple were coming in.

"I'm Jack," said the man, holding out his hand. "Pleased to meet you."

Kaylani wanted to hurry away but the man was standing in the doorway while the woman scanned the menu board so she couldn't get out. She couldn't just let the door go either as it would have hit the man standing in the way. With a sigh she transferred the door handle to her other hand and gingerly touched Jack's hand. She kept her eyes averted.

"What's your name?" he asked.

Kaylani glanced quickly at him and saw he was smiling in a friendly way which was worrying. Strangers who were friendly were not to be trusted.

"Kaylani," she said abruptly and turned to leave again but the man in the doorway was still there.

"Can I buy you a coffee or something?" he asked. "As we're now neighbours."

"Oh, no," blurted Kaylani, starting to feel pressured and flustered. "I've got to go, umm, ... to the laundry and, umm ... places."

The man moved out of the doorway at last and Kaylani quickly stepped out. She glanced back through the window as she passed and Jack was watching her, looking puzzled. She hurried up Flinders

Street.

“What was he after?” she wondered when she'd started to regain her equilibrium. “Was he one of them and was going to try to talk me into going back? But he lives in the room above me so maybe he isn't one of them. Maybe he was just being friendly after all. Was he Indian? He looked Indian. Maybe he was Pakistani. How can you tell? What street did Mallow say? Grave Street? Was that it? Ah, this is Degraes Street. That must be it. And turn right at the end, or was it left? Come on, Kay, get a grip. It was right, I'm pretty sure it was right and there's the pharmacy in this road. And he wouldn't be one of them would he, not with him being Indian or Pakistani. Why would he want to buy me a coffee though? People don't usually buy their neighbours coffee. Oh God, was I mean? Maybe I should have stayed for a coffee or at least been nicer to him. He probably thinks I'm a rude bitch now. Maybe he is one of them but no, he can't be. He's the wrong colour. Spoke good English for an Indian though. What do I do if he knocks on my door later? Oh God. What if he wants to come in or asks me up to his room? Who folds other people's pyjamas anyway? What if he's a weirdo?”

* * *

Going home, and Kaylani was already thinking of her room as 'home', Kaylani glanced in the café window. There were no customers and Angie was wiping down the counters. Kaylani turned the corner into Burgun Walk and froze. Three large men in shorts and singlets were standing outside the tattooist, smoking and talking. She took a step backwards then steeled herself and moved over to the wall of the pub to get around them.

“Allo gorgeous,” said one of the men, looking her up and down.

Kaylani ignored him and hurried into the Winnie The Pooh shop rather than fumble with her door keys. She pushed the door shut and peered through the glass. The men were still talking and were making no move to follow her inside. She turned around and gasped. A Winnie The Pooh as tall as she was stood beside the door with a pot in his hands that said 'Welcome' rather than 'Honey'.

“Wow!” said Kaylani, reaching out to stroke his brown fur. “That's just so awesome!” Pooh just grinned happily at her.

She turned further around and her rucksack banged against the door glass so she slipped the rucksack off rather than risk destroying the shop as she walked around. Behind the giant Pooh were several racks of clothes; t-shirts, sweat shirts, cycling jerseys, even a few sun dresses and hoodies, many with pictures of Winnie The Pooh doing various things. In some he was reaching up and swatting bees, in others he was guzzling from a honey pot or flying a kite or walking with Piglet. Other pictures were of Eeyore or Owl or Rabbit and, inevitably as this was Australia, quite a few with Kanga and Roo. Some just had quotes from the stories. A few of the images were from the Disney movies but most were from the original illustrations in A A Milne's books. Beyond the clothes were shelves of pillow cases, doona covers, table cloths, pyjama cases and throws. In the middle of the shop were racks of figurines, diaries, note paper, stubbie holders, mugs and so on. The variety was endless. There were even mobile phone covers and nightlights.

Kaylani was entranced. She wandered around, her attention caught by first Pooh candles then pebbles decorated with images of Pooh and Piglet then a dish of Pooh key rings and pencil sharpeners.

“I need a key ring,” muttered Kaylani, rummaging through the dish.

One of Pooh sitting on a tree branch in the rain trying to protect a row of honey pots precariously balanced appealed to her and she picked it up.

“An excellent choice,” said a soft female voice behind her. “That's from the first Winnie The Pooh book.”

“Oh really?” said Kaylani, turning to look at her.

She was an older woman, in her late 60s Kaylani guessed, with long straight grey hair surrounding a relaxed face. The laughter lines around her eyes were pronounced.

“Chapter nine,” said the woman, taking the key ring from Kaylani and

stroking it. "In which Piglet is entirely surrounded by water."

"You know the Pooh stories really well then," said Kaylani, impressed.

"My dear," said the woman softly, laying her other hand on Kaylani's arm. "I live and breathe Winnie the Pooh. Just the key ring?"

"How much is it?" asked Kaylani.

"\$5.95," said the woman. "I've not seen you here before. Are you a visitor to Melbourne?"

"Actually I've just moved into the building," said Kaylani, feeling quite relaxed with this woman. "I'm in the room above this shop."

"Anastasia has left?" asked the woman, a slight frown flitting across her face. "She didn't say anything to me about leaving."

"I'm sorry," said Kaylani. "I meant I'm in one of the rooms above the shop. I'm in the middle although I don't know who's in the room below me."

"Ahhh," said the woman. "Yes, I heard that that room had become vacant although I never met the previous incumbent. What's your name my dear?"

"Kaylani," said Kaylani.

"What a lovely name," said the woman, releasing Kaylani's arm. "I am Virginia. You are an admirer of Winnie The Pooh?"

"Well I read the books when I was a child," said Kaylani, "and I've seen the movies of course."

"Excellent, excellent," said Virginia. "So you've just moved in?"

"A few days ago," said Kaylani.

"Then the room will be bare and devoid of character," said Virginia. "Mallow isn't one for decorating and the finer things in life. Perhaps a

poster or two to cheer things up for you. This way.”

“Um, OK,” said Kaylani, following her around the racks to where an array of posters hung suspended from rods on swivels.

“Perhaps this one,” suggested Virginia, shuffling through the posters until she found one of Pooh trying to reach something small and black on his back. Piglet was watching closely. “It’s from one of my favourite chapters in The House At Pooh Corner.”

“Oh yes?” said Kaylani. “Which one is that?”

“Chapter Three,” said Virginia. “In which a search is organized, and Piglet nearly meets the Heffalump again.”

“I don’t really remember that one,” said Kaylani, flicking through some of the other posters. “What were they searching for?”

“Who, not what,” corrected Virginia. “Very Small Beetle had gone missing so they went looking for him.”

“Ohhh, I remember,” said Kaylani, stopping at a poster. “Very Small Beetle was known as Small for short, wasn’t he. That always made me laugh.”

“Then you are a true believer, my dear,” said Virginia, smiling. “Which is your favourite from the The Hundred Acre Wood?”

“I always liked Tigger,” said Kaylani, gesturing to the poster she’d stopped at. It featured Pooh in his doorway with his night cap on and holding up a candle to illuminate a disconsolate Tigger.

“So you see yourself as a stranger in a strange land?” asked Virginia.

“Excuse me?” asked Kaylani, surprised by that remark.

“Tigger was a newcomer to the The Hundred Acre Wood,” said Virginia, rolling up the poster. “He first appears in Chapter Two of The House At Pooh Corner, in which Tigger comes to the forest and has breakfast. No one knows where he came from and he is

desperately keen to fit in and be accepted. He tries hard but never quite gets it right. Although of course he does in the end.”

“That sounds a bit like me,” said Kaylani thoughtfully. She’d been keen to fit in and be accepted in Orbost, although that changed with time, and she kind of wanted to fit in now, in a keeping to herself, leave me alone sort of way.

“Pooh never lies,” said Virginia solemnly, picking up a copy of The Tau of Pooh by Benjamin Hoff. “Perhaps you’d like to read this as well? It’s an interesting exploration of the parallels between Taoist philosophy and Poohist philosophy.”

“Sounds a bit heavy to me,” said Kaylani. “I think I’ll just take the key ring for now. Ooooh, I like that one.” This was the same picture as on the key ring, Pooh on a branch in the rain protecting his honey pots, but full poster size

“And the poster,” said Virginia smoothly. “It’ll look perfect on your wall. Perhaps where you can see it from your bed when you get up in the morning.” She took the poster off the rack and held it up for Kaylani to look at properly. “Perhaps it will help you in making connections, just as Tigger did with Pooh.”

“How much is it?” asked Kaylani.

“\$22.95,” said Virginia, rolling it up again.

“Hmm,” said Kaylani thoughtfully, looking at the poster. “Well, it seems a bit pointless to have the poster and the key ring with the same picture.”

“Easily solved,” said Virginia with a smile. “Have the Pooh meeting Tigger picture on the key ring instead.” She rolled up the poster and handed it to Kaylani before going back to the key rings.

“So that’s, what, \$30 for both?” asked Kaylani indecisively. “I haven’t got that much on me.”

“\$28.90,” said Virginia, handing Kaylani a Pooh Tigger key ring.

“Let's call it \$27.50 since you live above The House Of Pooh and you can drop the money in later when you're passing.”

“Umm, I don't know,” said Kaylani hesitantly, starting to get a little worried. “I don't have a job and money's a bit of a problem at the moment. Maybe I can come back another time. When I've found a job. I can pick them up then.”

“You're far too young to worry about trivia like money,” said Virginia, moving towards her cash register. “Money worries are for old people like me. Perhaps if I include one of these Pooh necklaces? Hmm? How about this one?”

She plucked up a small silvery heart shaped pendant with a small image of Pooh peering around the edge. On one side of the pendant were the words 'Keep me in your heart' in tiny letters. It hung from a narrow silver chain.

“I think this would suit you very nicely,” said Virginia. “You have the neck for it and you have no other jewellery.”

“How does she know I have no jewellery?” wondered Kaylani then realised that Virginia simply meant she wasn't wearing any other jewellery, not that she didn't have any at all. The necklace was kind of cute too.

“Shall we say \$30 for all three?” asked Virginia, watching Kaylani as she held the necklace to her throat while looking in the tiny mirror on top of the necklace stand.

“OK,” said Kaylani with a little laugh.

Virginia smiled and rang up the items. She wrote '3B Kilani still owing' on the receipt then printed another and handed it to her.

“Have a lovely day,” she said.

“You too,” said Kaylani.

“Oh and here's some BluTak for the poster,” said Virginia, reaching

under her till. “Mallow doesn't like nails in the walls.” She proffered a smallish lump and Kaylani took it and thanked her. No money was mentioned.

The men had gone when Kaylani emerged from The House Of Pooh so she unlocked the door to the upstairs rooms and went inside. Up in her room she had another look at the necklace and smiled before putting it around her neck. It nestled comfortably at the base of her throat. With the poster in one hand and the lump of BluTak in the other she rotated slowly wondering where the best place to hang it was.

“Anywhere would be an improvement on the bare walls,” she muttered, “and I'll be able to see it from the bed anywhere as well, except directly behind.” In the end she hung the poster between the two windows as it seemed more symmetric. Then she got the milk, eggs and bread from her rucksack and left them on the table while she put her clean laundry away in the chest of drawers. Every drawer now had something in it although none were anywhere near full.

“I'll get some more clothes when I get a job,” thought Kaylani and dispiritedly pushed the last drawer shut.

Sitting on the bed she threaded the keys onto her new key ring then kicked her trainers off and wriggled backwards so she was leaning against the wall. She studied the key ring, thinking about Pooh and Tigger and how things always worked out for Pooh in the end even though he wasn't a clever bear.

“He was kind and good hearted though,” thought Kaylani, remembering when Pooh helped build a new house for Eeyore when the old one got blown down. Unconsciously she touched the pendant of her new necklace and the motif 'keep me in your heart' popped into her mind.

“Chance would be a fine thing,” she muttered as her good mood dissipated. “I'm never getting involved with anyone ever again. They'll just use me. Never again. Bastards.”

She shifted down in bed and lay curled up with her eyes closed for a

while. Then she opened them again and realised she couldn't see Pooh or the honey pots clearly because of the light from the windows.

“Bugger,” she thought and pushed herself off the bed. She managed to peel the poster off the BluTak without tearing the corners and positioned it on the door wall where she could see it while curled up in bed.

“Much better,” she thought, curling up on the bed again. “I wonder where Tigger came from? Did he want to come to The Hundred Acre Wood or did he escape from somewhere and arrived by chance? It was a bit of luck that Pooh found him and not, say, Eeyore or Rabbit. Pooh tried to help him as best he could.”

She rolled over, her eyes searching for the marks on the wall that looked a bit like a duck. They were still there although the duck seemed a little flatter than it had, a bit squished. Then a door slammed downstairs and she heard footsteps running up the stairs. They went past her door and continued upwards then another door closed although it didn't slam.

“That's probably that man Jack,” thought Kaylani, watching the ceiling and listening for any sounds of someone moving about. “Or whoever lives in the other top room.”

There was a quiet muffled thump from almost directly overhead as though something had been dropped.

“It's Jack,” thought Kaylani and rolled over to look at the Pooh and Tigger key ring.

“What if Tigger's me,” she thought, “and Jack's Pooh? I'm all alone in a strange place and he put out a helping hand. He didn't have to pick up my pyjamas or offer me a coffee. He could have just left them on the stairs and ignored me in the café. Plenty of people would have. Maybe he's just a nice person and isn't out to get me?”

She rolled over again and the duck on the wall looked almost startled.

“The wonderful thing about Tiggers,” thought Kaylani, “is Tiggers are

wonderful things. Their heads are made out of ... what are their heads made out of? Umm, I don't remember. Something or other anyway. Maybe I should go and apologise to Jack? OK maybe he does have some ulterior motive and I'd rather stay away from people but I don't actually want to go as far as making any enemies. I just want to be left alone but if he thinks I'm a rude nasty person he might try to make things awkward. Hell, all he has to do is stamp on the floor in the middle of the night. Maybe I should go and apologise? What do you think, duck?"

The duck didn't respond. It just stood there on the wall looking a little squashed. She rolled over again and stared at the poster of Pooh on the branch with his honey pots.

"Rubber!" she thought. "Their heads are made out of rubber, their bottoms are made out of string. No, that doesn't make sense. Why would Tigger have a string bottom?"

She groaned and rolled on her back.

"Tigger isn't afraid to talk to people," she thought, dropping her arm over her eyes. "I shouldn't be either. I just need to be more careful, not so bloody stupid and gullible. That's where Tigger goes wrong. He's so desperate to be liked. Well, I'm not. I don't care if people don't like me. I don't want them to like me, just as long as they leave me alone. Sod Jack. If I run into him again I'll apologise but I won't go and see him. To hell with that."

Chapter Five

It was the smell that finally drove Kaylani from her room late on Sunday afternoon. Faint wafts of roasting chicken drifted under the door which slowly built in intensity. At first she ignored the smell but after a while she lifted her head from her pillow and sniffed.

“Roast chicken,” she muttered. “Nice.”

She rolled over and looked at the duck on the wall then traced its outline again. It was definitely getting more and more squished and she wondered why. Then a thought struck her and she sat up urgently and peered at the marks.

“Well, they're not insects or bugs,” she thought, scraping a couple of marks with her fingernail. “Not mould either and they aren't changing shape. They look more like flecks of paint but surely paint would come off? Maybe they're pencil marks or something. Maybe someone was going to fit something to the wall and did the measurements and stuff but never got around to finishing. How come they're moving though?”

She sat with her back against the other wall and stared at the marks then she twisted round and away from the wall to see if there were any marks there. OK, the walls hadn't been painted for a while and were a bit dingy and faded but what marks there were were isolated and didn't form any sort of pattern. There was also a nail sticking out quite high up above the bed which probably had had a picture hanging from it at one time. A faint scrape some way below suggested where the bottom of the picture may have been.

Slowly Kaylani's eyes moved across the wall, searching for marks. Nothing stood out, apart from the nail obviously, although there were a couple of shallow indentations at roughly the height of a chair back and a patch where the plaster had been repaired and painted over in a matching colour but with gloss paint rather than matt. Then her stomach rumbled, surprising her. It hadn't rumbled for days, ever since she'd lost her appetite.

“I wouldn't mind a bit of roast chicken,” she thought. “I wonder where

the smell's coming from?"

She got off the bed and opened the door. The smell got noticeably stronger. Then a door on the floor above opened and Kaylani hastily pulled back and shut the door as quietly as she could. She stayed behind the door listening as someone came down the stairs. The footsteps paused momentarily outside her door.

"Must be Jack," thought Kaylani, holding her breath in case he heard her.

The footsteps shifted along the landing then down the next flight and she breathed again. Opening the door a few inches she heard Jack's voice then what sounded like Mary's but she couldn't make out the words. Then there was silence followed by the slamming of the front door.

"OK, so Mary's cooking roast chicken," thought Kaylani and shut her door again.

She went over to the window and peered out but there was no sign of Jack. She turned around and toiled with the two books on the table then sighed and went and sat in the arm chair. The smell of roast chicken was stronger now, since she'd opened the door in fact, and she swallowed some saliva that had collected in her mouth.

"I wonder if Mary would have a little bit of chicken to spare," she thought. "I could have it in a sandwich."

She jumped up and went over to the door then faltered. The prospect of actually asking Mary for some chicken was alarming and she felt her chest tightening. Slowly she went back to the table, a faint wheezing coming from her throat as she breathed. She fumbled through her hoodie for her inhaler but the tightness in her chest eased and the wheezing went so she left it.

"Nah," she muttered and stood by the window, looking down.

A woman with a couple of youngish children came out of the Pooh shop. Each of the children had Pooh bears clasped in their arms and

were jiggling around excitedly. It was difficult to tell if they were boys or girls from directly overhead as they were in shorts and t-shirts and Kaylani couldn't see their faces. The mother moved over to look at the bookshop then turned away and called for the kids to come with her. Other than them there was no one in the alley.

"I'll wait until Mary's done," thought Kaylani, "then I'll go and do myself an egg sandwich."

She nodded resolutely and went back to the armchair, grabbing a book as she passed the table. She sat down, trying to ignore the smell, and studied the cover. She'd grabbed the books from the communal lounge when she'd left Orbest but hadn't seriously looked at them before. This one was called *The Dressmaker* by Rosalie Ham which had caught her attention as she'd been studying Textiles and Fashion when she dropped out of Uni. The book had a vaguely familiar woman on the cover dressed in 1950s clothes and carrying a sewing machine.

"Maybe I could make myself a dress," thought Kaylani. "Be nice to have a dress. All I've got are these jeans and a couple of skirts. It's not that hard to make a simple dress. I could hand stitch it."

She turned the book over and discovered the woman on the cover was Kate Winslett, who'd starred in the movie of the book. Idly she flipped a couple of pages and found a quote on the page opposite the publication details.

*The sense of being well-dressed gives a
feeling of inward tranquillity which
religion is powerless to bestow.*

"Hmm," thought Kaylani and tried to visualise a colourful, easy to hand-make dress but the smell of roast chicken sidetracked her.

"Hah!" exclaimed Kaylani and let the book drop. "If I take some pot noodles down to the kitchen maybe Mary will tell me off again and offer me some of her roast chicken. That's an idea!"

She jumped up and tossed the book onto the table then grabbed one

of the packets of pot noodles from her stash on the chest of drawers. Then she headed for the door but veered back towards the armchair.

“But I’ll have to talk to her,” she muttered, turning the noodles over and over anxiously.

She sat there for a few moments wondering what to talk about and if some roast chicken was really worth it then she brightened.

“Maybe I can tell her I’m making a dress and we can talk about clothes,” she thought. “That’s a pretty safe topic. Then again, she’s a funny shape and wears those shapeless tracksuits. Maybe she’s not interested in clothes. Oh God, what if she asks me to go clothes shopping with her?”

She chewed on a fingernail for a few moments then got up abruptly and stood in front of her poster.

“You’re going to have to talk to people sooner or later, Kay,” she told herself, “and Mary’s not out to trap you. What do you think, Pooh?”

Pooh didn’t answer but she got the impression that Pooh was happy to talk to anyone, especially if they had some honey.

“Stupid bear,” thought Kaylani. “That’s how you get trapped and screwed over.”

Her stomach rumbled again and she held up her packet of noodles. It felt dry and crunchy and wasn’t in the least bit interesting.

Agitatedly Kaylani got up again and walked over to the bed and sat down then jumped up and put the noodles back on the chest of drawers before sitting on the bed once more. Then she jumped up and stalked over to the window and peered out. There was someone looking in the window of the tattooist but otherwise the alley was deserted.

“This is ridiculous!” exclaimed Kaylani in frustration and turned back to the room. “I can’t spend the rest of my life hiding in here!”

“But it's safe,” her inner voice answered.

“Well, yes,” said Kaylani and sat in the armchair. “It is safe.”

She got up again and, for want of anything better to do, went over and peered at the marks on the wall that looked like a duck. Then she sat on the bed and looked at Pooh, sitting on a branch in the rain.

“What would Pooh do?” she wondered then laughed at herself. “Why am I trying to get advice from a cartoon bear? You know what to do. Go down to the kitchen and talk to Mary. If she doesn't offer you any of her chicken then make a fried egg sandwich. For sure she'll approve of that.”

She jumped up again and started to undo her pyjama top then hesitated.

“I don't need her approval for what I eat,” she muttered. “I don't need anyone's approval for anything. All that's over now. I'm free. Free to do what I want. And if I want to go to the kitchen and eat pot noodles then I'm bloody well going to go to the kitchen and eat the damned things!”

She abandoned the buttons and pulled the pyjama top over her head then yanked off the bottoms. She quickly pulled on a clean pair of undies and her jeans then a t-shirt before stalking to the door. She pulled it open then froze as indistinct voices came up the stairwell. Slowly she shut the door and leaned against it.

“Maybe not,” she muttered and went over to the bed and lay down.

She felt Pooh staring even though he had his back to her so she rolled over and looked at the duck.

“Maybe it's my eyes,” she thought. “Maybe there something wrong with my eyes and my vision's contracting and that's why the duck's getting squished.”

She rolled back over and looked at the Pooh poster then the table then the armchair but they looked like perfectly normal posters, tables

and armchairs. Not in the least bit squished. She rolled over and shut her eyes. It was easier than stressing about marks on the wall but she could feel Pooh's eyes boring into her back. He was beginning to annoy her, make her feel guilty.

“Oh all right then you bloody bear!” she exclaimed and rolled off the bed. “I’m going, OK? OK?”

Pooh just sat there on the branch, in the rain, hugging his honey pots. His back spoke volumes though and Kaylani grabbed a packet of noodles and stalked out the door, leaving it wide open.

Half way down the flight of stairs she turned around and walked back up. She went in her room and grabbed her keys from the table and walked out again, this time locking the door behind her. The smell of roast chicken was quite pronounced but there were no voices coming from the kitchen. If anything the silence intimidated Kaylani more than the voices had. Maybe they'd heard her door and were waiting for her to come down?

She turned to go back in her room then heard the toilet flushing. There was a faint sound of running water then Mary emerged from the bathroom. She must have sensed Kaylani on the landing above as she glanced up then jumped.

“Jesus,” she called. “You gave me a fright!”

“Sorry,” said Kaylani, clutching her noodles tightly.

“Come down and meet Anastasia,” said Mary, peering up at Kaylani.

“Oh God,” thought Kaylani, wishing she was back in her room. “Umm ...”

“Is that the new girl?” asked a blonde woman appearing in the kitchen doorway.

“Kylie,” said Mary, gesturing with her head at Kaylani.

“Hi there,” called Anastasia, looking up at Kaylani. “Nice to meet you

at last.”

“Oh, umm, hi,” said Kaylani. She apprehensively took a step down then another.

“I didn't believe Mary when she said the room was taken,” said Anastasia, watching her. “Haven't heard a sound from you. I'm right underneath you, you see.”

“Ahh,” said Kaylani. She hesitated at the last step then forced herself to take it. “Umm, I'm Kaylani, not Kylie.”

“Soz, my bad,” said Mary with a smile. “You off out?”

“I, um, no,” said Kaylani, a little nervously. Her throat felt a touch constricted and she remembered she'd left her inhaler back in the room. “I was just coming down to, um, to, well, make some noodles.”

“The youth of today,” exclaimed Mary, even though she was much the same age as Kaylani, maybe a year or two older. “Lives on those crappy pot noodle things she does.”

“You're welcome to join us for dinner,” said Anastasia, smiling. “We have a roast chicken together every Sunday. I'd have invited you earlier but I didn't think you were in.”

“Henry used to,” said Mary. “He was in the room before you. Actually he used to cook it himself but Anastasia's doing it this week. He's a chef, you see. Come on. Want some juice or do you slowly poison yourself with coffee?”

“Um, thank you,” said Kaylani, unable to quickly think of a way out. “Umm, what sort of juice?”

“Orange, apple, cherry,” said Mary, going into the kitchen as Anastasia stepped out of the way. “You choose.”

“Some apple juice would be nice,” said Kaylani.

It had been dim on the landing but now she was in the bright light of

the kitchen she could see that Anastasia was probably in her early 50s with a mass of blonde hair, dark at the roots, that merged into braids a little below her ears. Entwined in the braids were strips of coloured wool and brightly coloured beads. She wore a low cut t-shirt that displayed a decent amount of her boobs and her wrists were wrapped in quantities of bracelets that tinkled. Mary still had her hair piled on her head and wore a shapeless tracksuit although this one was grey.

“There you go,” said Anastasia, holding out a glass of apple juice. Kaylani noticed her nails were long and ornately painted. “Have a seat.”

“Thanks,” said Kaylani.

There was a Sunday newspaper on the high backed wooden chair and Mary was hovering around the plastic chair so Kaylani perched herself on the stool.

“So you moved in on Wednesday?” asked Anastasia, pouring vinaigrette over a bowl of mixed greenery. Her eyes were disconcertingly blue.

“Yes,” said Kaylani, “um, yes.”

“You must be out most of the time,” she said, starting to toss the salad with some wooden spoons. “I haven't heard a thing.”

“No, I, um, read a lot,” said Kaylani. “Although next week I'll probably be out looking for a job.”

“What sort of job are you looking for?” asked Anastasia, getting a couple of tomatoes out of the fridge.

“Maybe some shop work,” said Kaylani. “I don't really have any skills.”

“That's a shame,” said Anastasia. “We've got a vacancy for another Librarian at the State Library of Victoria but you'd need to be qualified for that and have a background in research.”

"Is that where you work?" asked Kaylani.

"Yes," said Anastasia. "I'm Senior Assistant to the Archivist. Have you been to the State Library?"

"Um, no," said Kaylani, who didn't know there was a State Library. "I only arrived in Melbourne on Wednesday but I've been meaning to. Where is it?"

"Oh you must," said Anastasia, slicing the tomatoes with a rather blunt knife so the edges were jagged. "It's only just up Swanston Street, on the corner with LaTrobe." She waved the knife in the general direction of Swanston Street and Kaylani jerked backwards. "So where are you from?"

"Queensland," said Kaylani, having decided never to mention Orbost again. "A little place called Coorparoo which is just to the south of the river in Brisbane."

"So what brings you down to Melbourne?" asked Mary, as Anastasia opened the oven door. A wave of hot chicken smells engulfed Kaylani and she almost fainted with a sudden hunger.

"Oh, um, I'm thinking I might go back to Uni again," said Kaylani, watching as she lifted a large glistening roast chicken out of the oven. "And a job."

"Again?" asked Anastasia. "A second degree or a higher one?"

"I dropped out of my degree in Brisbane," said Kaylani as Mary stooped to get out a dish of sweet potatoes as Anastasia was manoeuvring the chicken onto a chopping board. Kaylani's glasses had misted up so she took them off and polished them with the hem of her t-shirt.

"What were you studying?" asked Anastasia. She got a third plate out of one of the cupboards then rummaged in a drawer for another knife and fork.

"Textiles and Fashion," said Kaylani.

“You should talk to this girl,” said Anastasia, pointing the knife and fork at Mary. “She might learn something.” She put the plate down in front of Kaylani then dropped the knife and fork on top.

“Fashion's wasted on me,” said Mary, plonking the dish of sweet potatoes on the table. “Haven't got the body for it.”

“True enough,” said Anastasia, picking up a very sharp looking carving knife. “You need to be slim and sylph-like to do fashion justice. Hope you don't mind having a leg, Kaylani. Mary only eats the breast and she has all of it.”

“No, a leg's fine,” said Kaylani, her mouth watering at the prospect of some real food.

Anastasia deftly sliced both legs from the chicken and put one on Kaylani's plate and the other on her own. Then she unceremoniously removed both the breasts whole and put them on Mary's plate.

“Help yourself to sweet potatoes and salad,” said Mary, pushing both dishes towards Kaylani.

“Only leave at least half for Mary,” said Anastasia with a grin. “She eats a lot.”

“Sure do,” said Mary cheerfully then she grimaced. “Although this'll be my last decent feed for a while.”

“How come?” asked Kaylani, putting a single piece of sweet potato on her plate as she didn't like sweet potato.

“I've got a comp coming up,” said Mary, taking the rest of the potatoes. “I've got to get cut.”

Puzzled, Kaylani looked at Anastasia who didn't notice.

“Which comp?” asked Anastasia.

“State finals,” said Mary. “In six weeks.”

“She’s a bodybuilder,” said Anastasia finally noticing Kaylani’s puzzlement.

“A bodybuilder?” said Kaylani, frowning. “I thought only men did that.”

“No, women do to,” said Anastasia. “Go on, Mary, take your top off.”

“It’ll only put Kaylani off her dinner,” said Mary, cutting off a chunk of sweet potato.

“Oh, go on,” said Anastasia. “She won’t believe me otherwise.”

“Oh if I must,” said Mary with a curl of her lip.

She put down her knife and fork then unzipped her tracksuit top. She slipped it off one arm, revealing a sweat stained t-shirt underneath. With a half smile she twisted to face Kaylani and flexed that arm. A bicep the size of a cricket ball bulged alarmingly.

“Jesus,” exclaimed Kaylani, transfixed. “Je-sus!”

Chapter Six

“Impressive, isn't she,” said Anastasia, amused by Kaylani's reaction. “You should see the rest of her.”

“I'm not sure I want to,” said Kaylani, staring in morbid fascination at the bicep.

Mary laughed and slipped her arm back inside her track suit.

“Go on,” said Anastasia, “Show Kaylani your abs.”

“She doesn't want to see my abs,” said Mary, reaching for the salad bowl.

“They're like cobble stones,” said Anastasia.

“No they're not,” said Mary. “I've still a way to go yet.”

“You mean you're trying to get bigger?” asked Kaylani.

“I want to turn professional,” said Mary. “If I get through to the Nationals and do well there then I will but I'll need to put on, oh, maybe ten kilos more muscle to be competitive.”

“That's a lot of meat,” said Anastasia with an amused glint in her eye. “Just imagine ten kilos of steak from the supermarket sitting on the table, then wrap it around her.”

“Jesus,” said Kaylani, blinking. The imagery of ten kilos of steak on the table was something she could see but it failed when she tried to imagine it on Mary. She cut up some chicken and chewed on it slowly while eyeing her.

“So why is this your last meal?” asked Kaylani as Mary took the rest of the salad. “Don't you need to eat a lot to stay like that?”

“I need to lose my fat for the comp,” said Mary. “I eat plenty when I'm just training but in the weeks leading up to a competition I cut out virtually everything so my skin gets as thin as possible and the

muscle striations can be seen. It's no good going into a competition with muscles covered in fat."

"But you aren't fat," said Kaylani.

"Maybe not by normal standards," said Mary, polishing off the last of the sweet potatoes. She swallowed then stood up, pulling her tracksuit top open to expose her midriff. She twisted her shoulders slightly then tensed her stomach muscles. They did indeed look like a set of cobble stones.

"See here?" she said, pointing to just below her rib cage on one side. "There's a bunch of small muscles there which you can't see because there's a couple of millimetres of fat covering them. There's loads more all over my body and once I've got rid of the fat you'll be able to see them but my skin has to be paper thin."

"Right," said Kaylani slowly, surreptitiously feeling under her own ribs. As far as she could tell there weren't any muscles there at all. Mary zipped up her tracksuit again and sat down.

"Which means," she said, "as the finals are in six weeks I'll be on a major diet for the next four weeks then for the last two weeks I'll virtually starve. Just a couple of small protein shakes a day so my body doesn't start eating the muscles."

"Isn't that dangerous?" asked Kaylani.

"Not really," said Mary. "That how our bodies have evolved and why we have fat in the first place. It's so we can store up energy when times are good and live off the fat when they're bad."

"Oh," said Kaylani. She slowly chewed on a piece of chicken leg and wondered if she should go on a diet as well.

"Hey," said Mary, finishing the last of her meal. "Do you want to come and see me compete? I can get you a free ticket if you like. Anastasia's coming, aren't you."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," said Anastasia drily, "but I'm really

only going for the men,” and she laughed.

“Yeah, right,” said Mary, rolling her eyes. “Don’t ever bring your boyfriend here, Kaylani. That cougar will be all over him like a rash.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” said Kaylani, wondering why Mary was inviting her to see her compete. Was there some ulterior motive?

“Now that surprises me” said Anastasia, frowning. “I’d have thought the guys would be swarming around a pretty little thing like you. Are you a lessie?”

“God no,” said Kaylani, feeling bothered because the attention was now on her. She took off her glasses and pretended to clean them so she didn’t have to look at Anastasia or Mary. “I, umm, did have but we kind of, well, broke up.”

“Is that why you’re here?” asked Mary. “He screwed you over and got the house, yeah?”

“Something like that,” said Kaylani evasively. “Umm, you’re in the room below me, aren’t you Anastasia? And Jack’s in the room above?”

“You’ve met Jack?” asked Anastasia.

“Yes,” said Kaylani. “We, umm, bumped into each other on the stairs a few days ago then I met him in Mallow’s café.”

“See?” said Anastasia, gleefully. “The only guy in a house full of women and he makes a bee line for you. Don’t worry hon,” and she leaned over to pat Kaylani’s hand, “you’ll have another boyfriend very soon.”

“Um, I don’t think so,” said Kaylani firmly. “Anyway I’m not looking for a boyfriend.”

“We all say that,” said Mary, “but we never stick to it,” and she laughed.

Kaylani managed a weak smile.

“So who's in the room above Mary?” she asked.

“A crazy ghost,” said Anastasia.

“What?” exclaimed Kaylani, frowning.

“Her name's Sarah,” said Mary, “and she's not a ghost. She's just very quiet and doesn't come out of her room much.”

“So when did you last see her then?” asked Anastasia. “Got to be six months or more since I last saw her.”

“You know I don't really remember,” said Mary, frowning. “A couple of weeks I think although I hear her sometimes. Poor kid.”

“You mean she just sits in her room all the time?” asked Kaylani.

“Yes,” said Anastasia. “A bit like you really.”

“Oh Kaylani's nowhere near as bad,” said Mary. “She's here now, isn't she? Sarah's never eaten with us. I don't think she eats at all.”

“No, she does,” said Anastasia. “I hear her in the kitchen every now and then but if I open my door she scuttles up the stairs like a frightened rabbit.”

“I did hear someone on the stairs a couple of nights ago,” said Kaylani pensively. “It was in the middle of the night and it wasn't Jack. I recognise his footsteps. Would that have been Sarah?”

“So Jack's living in your head now?” asked Anastasia and laughed uproariously.

“Of course not!” said Kaylani indignantly.

“Take no notice of her,” said Mary, picking up the dirty dishes. “She thinks it's funny to stir people up. Yeah, that probably was Sarah. Wasn't me, that's for sure. I sleep like a log.”

“So is Sarah actually crazy?” asked Kaylani, “or just shy?”

“Who can say,” said Mary, sitting down again. “I never hear a TV or radio or anything, just some chanting now and then. Never heard the vacuum cleaner either so God knows what state her room’s in.”

“We have a vacuum cleaner?” asked Kaylani. She had wondered about cleaning although her room didn’t need it yet.

“It’s in that cupboard,” said Mary, pointing behind Anastasia. “There’s an iron and ironing board in there too.”

“Great,” said Kaylani. “I was wondering what to do about cleaning.”

“I think she is crazy,” said Anastasia. “I was here in the kitchen a while back and she came out of the bathroom. She was carrying a pot of something which was giving off a lot of vapour, like steam only it smelt a bit like one of those things you put your head over when you’ve got a bad cold or something. Anyway, I commented on it and asked if she had the flu since I hadn’t had my annual flu jab and she said no, it was for the spirits to coalesce around. Weird, huh?”

“Spirits? What spirits?” asked Mary, frowning.

“No idea,” said Anastasia. “She buggered off upstairs and hasn’t spoken to me since.”

“Maybe she speaks to the dead or aliens or something,” said Mary.

“What aliens?” asked Kaylani, suddenly intent.

“How would I know,” said Mary. “Ask Sarah.”

“Interesting,” said Anastasia, looking at Kaylani thoughtfully. “Most people would have picked up on speaking to the dead but you reacted to aliens.”

“Oh, no reason,” said Kaylani, cursing herself inside. “I guess maybe, um, I don’t believe the dead can speak.”

“But you believe in aliens?” asked Anastasia.

“Absolutely not,” said Kaylani quickly. “So, um, how old is Sarah?”

“Hmm,” said Anastasia. “Oh, I don't know. Thirty maybe. Mary?”

“Maybe a little older,” said Mary. “Maybe she's younger than that but she acts older, if you know what I mean. How old are you?”

“I'm 25,” said Kaylani.

“Jack's 25 as well,” said Anastasia. “He's a student too.”

“Yeah?” said Mary. “I thought he worked at the hospital?”

“He does sometimes,” said Anastasia, “but he's at RMIT doing a Masters in Medical Engineering.”

“You mean like X-ray machines and things?” asked Mary.

“I think so,” said Anastasia. “He did try to explain it to me once but my background's in history and historiography so it didn't make a lot of sense.”

“What's historiography?” asked Kaylani.

“It's the history of history,” said Anastasia.

“She's full of crap like that,” laughed Mary. “How can history have a history? It's all what happened in the past.”

“How wrong you are,” said Anastasia. “History is what historians study and write about so historiography is the history of those historians.”

“See?” said Mary, raising an eyebrow at Kaylani.

“Not really,” said Kaylani, her mind still on aliens.

“She's spent too long with all those musty old books in the State Library,” said Mary. “It's addling her mind.”

“Oh you talk nonsense,” said Anastasia. “That's what comes from throwing all those weights around all the time. There have been people writing histories since well before the first century BCE and every one of them has had their own point of view. In fact, most histories have been written in order to justify some emperor or other or to put down some other faction. Historiography is the study of those historians to find out what particular axe they had to grind and how they distorted the facts they had to put forward their point of view.”

“So are you saying the history books are all wrong then?” asked Kaylani.

“Not at all,” said Anastasia. “It's just that, for example, a history of 20th century Europe written by a historian with Marxist inclinations would portray events in a very different light to one who was more liberal.”

“You mean like a holocaust denier?” asked Mary.

“Up to a point,” said Anastasia, “although holocaust deniers are denying historical facts rather than twisting them to fit their own ideology. Trump is a good example. Future left wing historians will condemn him totally and present facts to support their perspective whereas right wing historians will praise him and support that praise with their own cherry-picked facts. Future historiographers will study those historians and how they interpret the history of 21st century America.”

“So what's BCE?” asked Kaylani who'd only been half listening.

“Before the Christian Era,” said Anastasia. “It's a more unified dating system.”

Mary snorted and Anastasia curled her lip disdainfully at her.

“Our chronology is based around the birth and death of Christ,” she said. “So the Twentieth Century actually means twenty centuries after the death of Christ and is wholly Christianity centric. It has no meaning in non-Christian societies and many consider such dating

offensive. Hence the referring to an era of belief rather than a presumption of infallible truth.”

“I’m going down the gym,” said Mary, jumping to her feet. “They talk more sense there.”

“You think the forcing of your body into ever more unnatural extremes makes more sense?” asked Anastasia.

“Maybe, maybe not,” said Mary, grinning like a Cheshire cat, “but you’re coming to see me and my unnaturally extreme body in a few weeks and I’m never going to the State Library.”

“OK you have a point there,” said Anastasia with a dismissive laugh.

“Let me know if you want tickets, Kaylani,” said Mary. “Jack’s going as well.”

“Where is it?” asked Kaylani. “I don’t have a car.”

“Melbourne Pavilion in Kensington,” said Mary. “It’s not far and you can get a tram.”

“It’s next door to the Melbourne Zoo,” said Anastasia, “appropriately enough.”

“At least it’s not falling down,” retorted Mary. “See you, guys.”

“We love each other really,” said Anastasia as Mary disappeared, seeing the look on Kaylani’s face.

“What did she mean?” asked Kaylani, “about it falling down? The State Library is really falling down?”

“Oh she’s just being silly,” said Anastasia. “No, there’s an artwork outside the Library’s main entrance which is of a ruined library entrance half buried in the ground. I think it’s supposed to be symbolic of the ravages of time on history but the Library itself is very solid.”

“Oh right,” said Kaylani. “Well, I think I’ll go back to my room. Thank you for dinner.”

“You’re welcome,” said Anastasia. “We usually take turns to get the food and cook it so if you want to join us on Sundays ...?”

“Umm, I don’t know if I’ll be able to,” said Kaylani, not wanting to get overly friendly with people. “I need to get a job and I’ll probably end up with something at the weekends.”

“Fair enough,” said Anastasia. “Especially as you’ll be studying during the week.”

“Huh?” asked Kaylani.

“You’re going back to University,” said Anastasia. “Or had you forgotten?”

“Oh right,” said Kaylani as she had forgotten saying that. “Sorry, I misunderstood.”

“No problem,” said Anastasia. “If you run into Sarah tell her I said hello.”

“Sure,” said Kaylani. She hesitated, wondering if she should help with the washing up but Anastasia was already running hot water and stacking the dishes. She gave no sign of wanting any assistance.

Back up in her room, Kaylani locked her door just in case and collapsed into her armchair.

“Well, that wasn’t too bad,” she thought, “although what was all that about aliens? Is Mary one of them after all? I need to be careful there.”

She jumped up and peered out of the window.

“And she invited me to that competition thing. Why would she do that? I hardly know her after all. Why’s she being so friendly?”

Four people looking like tourists were standing in front of The House of Pooh. One of them looked up and Kaylani jerked back. She hesitated then edged forward again. Two of the people had moved over to look in the book shop window.

“And why would Anastasia invite me to have dinner with them every Sunday? What's she really after? Is she trying to bring me inside their group? Are they in a different group or are they working with Orbost?”

She let the edge of the lace curtain drop as the two tourists at the book shop trailed after the other two.

“Have they been trying to get their clutches into Sarah? Is that why Sarah doesn't speak to them anymore? It sounded a bit dodgy that she doesn't come out of her room. Maybe they were trying to stop me getting to know Sarah. But why would they do that, unless Sarah knows something about them and they're afraid she'll tell me.”

Kaylani backed away from the window then turned and slowly walked around the room until she was standing in front of the Pooh poster.

“And is Jack one of them? Maybe he told Anastasia he'd tried to talk to me but I wouldn't have coffee with him. That could explain why she seems to want me to date him. Maybe all three of them are working together. Maybe I should find somewhere else to live. What do you think, Pooh?”

Pooh, as always, refrained from answering, although Kaylani did get a sense that he'd tightened his grip on his honey pots.

“No, you're right,” she muttered. “If I move somewhere else I'll have no idea what I'd be getting myself into. If I stay here at least I'm forewarned and can keep my guard up. And if they get too friendly or start talking about aliens again I can always move somewhere else then.”

She wandered back to her armchair and sat down.

“But then it was Sarah that was talking to aliens, wasn't it?” she

thought, chewing on the side of her thumbnail. “Or talking to Anastasia about aliens anyway. Maybe Anastasia and Mary are all right and it's Sarah I need to be careful of.”

She jumped up and wandered over to the bed.

“And if Jack's involved, why hasn't he tried to speak to me again? Surely if he was working with them he'd be more persistent? God knows they're a persistent lot. The ones at the Uni never gave up.”

Slowly she stripped off and started putting on her pyjamas.

“And maybe Sarah is shy, maybe she's reclusive. Maybe Anastasia and Mary think I'm reclusive. Oh shit. What if I am reclusive? What if I end up like Sarah? She sure sounded like me. Sneaking out when no one's around to go to the kitchen or the toilet. Hell, I don't want that. I want to be normal again, not some weird freaky recluse living in a dump that people laugh at. I don't want people laughing at me or feeling sorry for me. I just want to be normal again. Maybe I should find another boyfriend? Oh God, what if he wants to go to bed with me? He's bound to, isn't he? That would be dreadful.”

Chapter Seven

“Funny name for a book shop,” thought Kaylani, venturing out on Tuesday.

She'd sidled past the doorway to The House of Pooh with her back to it in case Virginia noticed her and came out to remind her about the money. The name **Lateral Books**, in a heavy red Gothic script, had been at eye level in the opposite doorway and she couldn't avoid reading it. Her intent had been to go straight inside but either the name or the script had felt unfriendly and the drawn blind behind the window off-putting so she stepped out into the alley and quickly turned left in case Virginia was looking out her shop front.

The name was also inscribed on a black board propped on a shelf of a bookcase standing in the front window, this time at midriff level. A dark grey cloth hung behind the bookcase so the interior of the shop could not be seen. The overall effect was faintly disturbing, especially as the rest of the bookcase was empty, apart from a skull that sat at the top in the centre, and gazed blankly out into the alley. Kaylani stared at the skull for a few moments then shivered before turning away and going up to the chain link fencing.

When she'd first come up the alley with Mallow to inspect the room she'd noticed the chain link fencing but on the two occasions she'd left the house to go out she'd gone to the right, towards Flinders Street. She'd stared out of her windows any number of times but because of the angles she hadn't been able to see where the chain link fence had joined the terraced houses. Had she given the matter any thought she would have presumed that the fence joined the corner of Lateral Books but the reality was that it didn't.

Another house had once been attached to Lateral Books. Indeed, in the distant past a terrace of houses had stretched all the way from Flinders Street to Flinders Lane. The depredations of time, property development and council work had reduced the row to the four houses joining Flinders Street and the partial remains of a fifth house. At the ground floor level perhaps two metres of the front wall still remained and the fence was bolted securely to the edge of that although a section was loose and bent where people used it as a

shortcut. The front wall of the upper floors tapered in so that at roof level no front wall remained. Peering through the chain links, Kaylani could see that some of the internal walls on the ground and first floors still remained.

“I guess they tapered it so it was less likely to topple over,” she thought, gazing upwards, “but why not take down the inside walls as well?”

Beyond the ruined fifth house were the remains of the walls of two more houses; patches of bricks bordering the cobblestones of Burgun Walk and broken floorboards. Beyond them and also to the right around the side of the pub, the area was just a desolate wasteland. What buildings had once been there were now rubble, weeds and torn up cobblestones. Beyond were the backs of the buildings of Flinders Lane. It was a depressing sight and, after looking through the chain link fence for perhaps no more than twenty seconds Kaylani turned back to look at Lateral Books.

The thought of working in a book shop had appealed to her. Perhaps even more appealing had been the fact that the book shop was not heavily frequented – unlike, for example, the book and magazine shop inside Flinders Street Station. Now she'd seen the book shop properly, however, Kaylani could understand why customers stayed away in droves. She'd seen any number of people go in and out of The House of Pooh from her windows and many had looked at Lateral Books but she'd seen none go inside. Now she could understand why. Only those who were determined would open the shop's door and tourists, on the whole, were not determined. The House of Pooh was vastly more attractive and there was a decent little café at the end.

Kaylani leaned back against the chain link fence, feeling disappointed. A little cheated too if truth be known. She'd convinced herself that if she got off her bed and made an effort that the fates would meet her half way and a job at the book shop right next door would be hers for the asking.

She sighed and pushed herself away from the fence and started walking down the ally then hesitated.

“Maybe the owner knows the shop looks crappy,” she thought. “Maybe he or she wants to change it but can't. Maybe he's old or ill and hasn't the energy to rearrange things. You never know.”

She turned to look at the shop front again and tried to imagine it filled with a display of bright cheerful books and fairy lights and a 'Buy Two Get One Free' sign. Perhaps even some artfully draped cloths in eye catching colours

“It would work,” she thought. “Would be even better if someone painted a mural on the other wall. Hell even some graffiti would work. It's a bit grim here. Almost like a prison exercise yard with that fencing.”

Three people came out of The House of Pooh, looking happy. One held a large stuffed Eeyore and the others clutched various Pooh related things.

Kaylani watched as they walked towards the café then, spotting Virginia's long straight grey hair in the depths of The House of Pooh, she hurriedly pushed on the door of Lateral Books. It opened a little stiffly.

The shop was adequately lit although a couple more lights would have made it more cheerful. The walls were lined with shelves and several tall book cases stood back to back in the centre. Between the book cases and the shelves the floor was covered in linoleum. The place smelt of old books and dust and mice.

“Guess it must be a secondhand bookshop,” thought Kaylani, looking around and not seeing anything that looked new.

She stepped forward and the floorboards creaked alarmingly loudly amidst the silence. Kaylani fought an urge to turn tail and leave. Instead she selected a book at random and pulled it off the shelf.

“What the hell?” she thought, staring at *How to Talk to Your Cat About Gun Safety: And Abstinence, Drugs, Satanism, and Other Dangers That Threaten Their Nine Lives* in confusion. The picture of a cute kitten on the cover offered no clues so she put it back and pick another at

random. It was entitled *Satanism and Witchcraft: The Classic Study of Medieval Superstition*. Kaylani's lips tightened and she went around the end of the bookcase to see what delights were on the other side.

Framed & Hunted: A True Story of Occult Persecution she read on one spine and didn't bother to take it off the shelf. Beside it was *Psychic Self-Defense*.

"Oh God," she thought, grimacing. "Do I really want to work here?"

"Greetings, traveller passing though," said a nasal voice suddenly from somewhere behind her. "Although myself a stranger to youth and beauty I welcome both such into my humble domain."

Kaylani nearly screamed and spun round quickly.

"Who's that?" she exclaimed since there was no one there. "Where are you?"

"Tis only I," said the voice and a man's head emerged from behind a bookcase. "Wallace Clunes, book seller, at your service."

"You scared me," said Kaylani, a trifle breathlessly as she really had been scared. Her legs trembled.

"I apologise profusely," said Wallace disconcertingly. It wasn't what he said that was disconcerting. After all, an apology is an apology and his tone suggested he meant it. Unfortunately, although he was looking at Kaylani with one eye, his other eye appeared to be looking at a paperback edition of *The Mystical Qabalah* propped up on a shelf some distance from her head. Kaylani shifted her weight to her other foot and the floorboards creaked again.

Wallace stepped out from behind the bookcase and Kaylani stepped back anxiously. He was wearing a faded old check shirt with several buttons missing and a pair of stained trousers held up with what looked like an old tie around his waist. On his feet, no socks, was a pair of newish looking trainers with no laces. His hair was greasy and dishevelled and he clearly hadn't bothered to shave for a couple of days or more. He looked to be in his thirties but it was difficult to

judge.

Wallace stepped forward and held out his hand as if inviting Kaylani to shake it. Kaylani looked at his hand then took another step backwards. 'Unappealing' was perhaps not quite a strong enough word to describe him. With a sigh he dropped his hand.

"Why doesn't the floor creak for you?" she asked.

"Perhaps a better question is why it creaks for you," he said and held up a finger. "Ask not for whom the floor creaks, it creaks for thee."

"You what?" said Kaylani, her face betraying her confusion.

"A misquotation from *For Whom The Bell Tolls* by *John Donne*," said Wallace. "It seemed apt under the circumstances but perhaps not. How may I be of service to you?"

"Um, I came in here by mistake," said Kaylani, anxious to leave but unwilling to push past him.

"Perhaps fortuitously," said Wallace, coming closer. "Although given the location of my premises and the clear signage it is not immediately apparent how such a mistake could have arisen. Perhaps your interests lie among the esoteric? You have not the usual appearance but, as they say, appearances can be deceptive. Ahh, perhaps it is I who is mistaken for are we not beside the redoubtable House of Pooh? Perhaps it is the charms of that little bear that you seek rather than enlightenment into the realms of the mysteries of the occult."

"Umm, yes," said Kaylani, nervously edging back a little further. "Winnie The Pooh. I'm his hugest fan. Yeah, for sure. I must have come in the wrong door."

"And I am bereft," said Wallace, coming closer still. "But all is not yet lost. You are here now and destiny may have had a hand in that. I have books on divination for instance which may interest you."

"Ah, no," said Kaylani, unable to go back any further. "No, Pooh is

what interests me.”

“You do not wish to know the future?” asked Wallace, his voice thickening. A lace-less trainer slid forward a little as one eye stared at her and the other looked at *Compassionate Satanism: An Introduction to Modern Satanic Practice*. “But doubtless you are right. Perhaps you already know your future.”

“Can I go?” asked Kaylani, her fear increasing. “Please can I go? Please?” She felt rooted in place as her will faded.

“I am not stopping you,” said Wallace. He stepped back and sideways to make room for her to get past.

Kaylani needed no urging and jumped past him. She hesitated at the end of the bookcases then made a break for the entrance. Outside, she leant against the door of The House of Pooh, trying to fight her fear. She felt woozy inside and breathless.

“I see you have met our redoubtable Wallace,” said Virginia, opening the door.

Kaylani stumbled but caught herself.

“Is he for real?” she asked.

“No,” said Virginia. “He’s an inadequate little man who reads too many of his weird books. He hasn’t the balls to put any of it into practice though.”

“He scared me,” said Kaylani, beginning to calm down.

“Yes, he can be scary,” said Virginia, glancing at Latent Books door. “I don’t think he realises. Don’t worry though. He’s completely harmless. Wouldn’t hurt a fly. Do you smoke?” She took a packet of cigarettes out of her pocket and held it up enquiringly.

“No,” said Kaylani. “I’m asthmatic.”

“Ahh,” said Virginia. She looked at the packet then put it back in her

pocket. “Unfortunate.”

“Yes,” said Kaylani. She frowned, wondering why she hadn't had an asthmatic attack inside Latent Books. She'd certainly been stressed enough.

“Feeling better?” asked Virginia.

“Yes thanks,” said Kaylani. “Umm, how does he stay in business? He must creep out all his customers.”

“He's mostly mail order,” said Virginia. “Never gets any actual customers in his shop. He must have thought Christmas had come early when you went in.”

“Do Satanists believe in Christmas?” asked Kaylani, now reasonably composed again.

“Oh he's not a Satanist,” said Virginia with a little laugh. “He just sells books about it. Gives him a thrill I daresay.”

“Thank God,” said Kaylani with feeling. “I don't fancy living on top of a Satanist.”

“Don't worry,” said Virginia. “He doesn't live round here. He lives somewhere in Footscray. With his mother and half a dozen cats.”

“Right,” said Kaylani. “Where's Footscray?”

“Oh, a few k that way,” said Virginia, waving her hand roughly to the West.

“Well, I'd best be off,” said Kaylani. “Umm, I haven't forgotten about the money.”

“That's fine, dear,” said Virginia, taking out her cigarettes again. “I trust you.”

She lit one and watched as Kaylani slowly walked down the alley then smiled as Kaylani pushed open the door to the café.

“Yes,” she thought. “I trust you. But will you trust me?”

“Hey,” said Mallow, seeing Kaylani. He was operating the coffee machine so presumably the girl who normally did was off or having a break. “What can I do you for?”

“Umm, I don't suppose you need some extra help in here?” asked Kaylani, diffidently.

“You looking for a job, then?” asked Mallow. He stopped what he was doing and put both hands on the counter to look at her.

“Yes,” said Kaylani. “I have got some experience in hospitality.”

“Sorry, love,” said Mallow. “I never employ tenants and I never rent out to employees. Makes things complicated, see.”

“Oh,” said Kaylani, disappointed. The café had been next on her list as it was in the alley and she didn't want to ask Virginia for a job. The tattooist was out as well since that probably needed experience and training. Besides, she didn't fancy tattooing snakes and eagles on bikers' backsides or wherever.

“Sorry,” said Mallow again. He gave a little shrug and turned back to his machine.

She turned away just as Jack came in the door. He looked at her with no visible reaction then joined the short queue to order.

“Oh great,” thought Kaylani. “He's pissed with me as well. Still, now's as good a time as any to apologise.”

“Excuse me, umm, Jack,” she said quietly, standing next to him but not too close.

He turned to look at her, expressionless although his dark eyes were kind.

“I, um, wanted to apologise,” she said. “For being rude.”

He stared at her for a few moments then smiled. It wasn't a big beaming smile but it was friendly enough and better than a scowl.

"So you're not racist then?" he asked and stepped forward as the queue shortened.

"Racist?" exclaimed Kaylani in surprise as this wasn't the reaction she was expecting. "No, of course not." She shifted sideways as well.

"Well, I thought, with me being Indian ...," said Jack and shrugged wryly.

"No, it's not that," said Kaylani, wondering how to explain.

The man in front of Jack stepped out of the way, having paid.

"Hey Jackie," said the girl serving. "The usual?"

"Yes please, Brit," said Jack, pulling out a battered wallet. He looked at Kaylani. "Can I offer you a coffee?"

"Shit!" thought Kaylani. She hesitated then decided that rejecting his offer right after apologising to him for being rude would be even ruder. "Thank you, but let me get them."

"OK," he said, as Brit watched, her hand hovering over the till. "What'll you have?"

"Skinny cappuccino," said Kaylani, taking out her purse. "Regular."

"Where shall we sit?" asked Jack as Kaylani paid.

"Oh, anywhere," said Kaylani, dropping her change into her purse.

"Table two," said Jack to Brit and she nodded.

Kaylani followed him over to table two and sat down opposite him. Beside him felt too ... intimate. Almost like a date. She dumped her rucksack on one spare seat and he dumped his on the other.

They sat in silence for some time, Jack watching Kaylani with a faintly puzzled expression and Kaylani staring at the table top blankly.

"It's Kaylani, isn't ..." said Jack just as Kaylani said "I didn't mean to be ...". They both stopped self consciously and waited for the other to speak.

"Sorry," said Jack after a couple of heartbeats. "You were saying?"

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry," said Kaylani nervously. "It's just that, well, um, I've only just moved here and, um, I don't know anyone and I was just having a shower and dropped my pyjamas and ..." She petered out.

"And I freaked you out?" asked Jack.

She nodded and avoided looking into his eyes.

"I can understand that," he said quietly. "I know what it's like to move somewhere new and not fit in."

"I wasn't being racist," blurted Kaylani. "I was just embarrassed and, well, scared."

"Glad to hear it," said Mallow, coming over. "Cappuccino and espresso. Whose is whose?"

"Mine's the espresso," said Jack, holding up his hand.

"Thanks," said Kaylani as Mallow put the cappuccino in front of her.

They sat in silence as Jack stirred two sugars into his espresso.

"Then when you offered me coffee ...," said Kaylani unhappily.

"That freaked you out as well?" asked Jack, his face curious.

She nodded and he pursed his lips.

"Tell you what, Kaylani," said Jack. "It is Kaylani, isn't it?" She nodded

again. "Let's forget it. Things went wrong at first but we're having coffee now. Is it freaking you out?"

"No," she said although it was a little. She hadn't wanted to be this sociable with a guy so soon and had stupidly decided to apologise to him on impulse without thinking through possible consequences. Maybe it would have been better to wait until she could catch him on the stairs. It wasn't his fault he thought she was normal.

"Good," he said and smiled. "So let's assume we've never met before and start over?"

"Oh God," thought Kaylani, quailing a little. "Start over? He thinks this is the start of something? Now what do I do?"

Chapter Eight

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" asked Kaylani, realising Jack was speaking.

"I asked where you're from," said Jack, frowning slightly. "You said you've only just moved here."

"Oh, yes, um, Brisbane," said Kaylani.

"Don't you find it a bit cold down here?" he asked.

"No, I'm used to it now," she said, watching Jack's hands as they curled around his espresso cup. His nails were neatly cut but the one on his forefinger was a little jagged and had a small discoloration.

"That was pretty quick," he said with a laugh.

"What was?" she asked, jerking her eyes up to his face. She looked away quickly.

"Getting used to the climate," he said. "You've only been here a few days."

"Oh, um, I've been here a while," she said, feeling flustered. "I mean here in Victoria. Um, not Melbourne. That's what I meant. I'm, er, I've only just moved to Melbourne. Yes."

"Ahh, I see," said Jack. "Whereabouts in Victoria?"

"Oh, um, ..." said Kaylani, trying desperately to think of somewhere in Victoria that wasn't Orbost since if she said Orbost he'd want to know what she was doing there but nowhere came to mind. "How about you? Where are you from?" Her hand was gripping her mug tightly and her knuckles were turning white.

"Adelaide originally," he said, "but I moved to Melbourne, oh, ten years ago now."

"Oh," she said and tried to make her hand relax but it wouldn't. She

surreptitiously tried to rub her hand with her other hand and managed to slop hot coffee and froth over her fingers.

“Shit!” she exclaimed and jerked her hand away, giving it a shake at the same time. Her thumb caught the handle of the mug and it spun around and toppled over, disgorging the coffee all over the table and onto Jack’s lap. He jerked back in surprise, his hands flapping . The chair scraped noisily on the tiled floor.

“Oh God, I’m sorry!” she blurted and cupped her hands over her mouth and nose in dismay. A familiar tightness started in her chest.

“Excuse me,” said Jack, jumping up and turning to the man sitting behind him who he’d hit with the chair. “Please excuse me. A minor accident, nothing more.” He held his hands up placatingly.

The man grunted, glanced at Jack then looked at Kaylani who was now starting to wheeze badly and was rummaging through her rucksack.

“No worries, mate,” he said, waving a hand dismissively at Jack. “She all right?”

“Kaylani?” asked Jack, turning back to her. “Is all well?”

Kaylani flapped her hand at him then found her inhaler. She quickly put it to her mouth and pumped it twice, sucking in the Ventolin greedily.

“Kaylani?” asked Jack, leaning over with his hands on the table with a concerned look on his face.

“I’m fine,” said Kaylani after a couple of breaths. She sat back feeling drained, confused and lost, her inhaler clutched tightly in her hand.

Jack stood up straight again and picked up a couple of paper napkins. He began wiping the coffee from his hands.

“Are you sure?” he asked, still looking concerned. “Can I get you anything?”

“Your trousers! Oh my God, I'm so sorry!” exclaimed Kaylani suddenly, noticing the wet stain over his crotch and the upper part of one leg. It looked like he'd peed himself.

“Ah yes,” said Jack, looking down. He took some more napkins and started to dab ineffectually at the stain, pulling the material away from his leg with his fingers. “Most unfortunate. Most unfortunate indeed.”

“Scuse me,” said Brit, bustling over with a cloth. She picked up Kaylani's mug and started to mop the table. “You want another cappuccino, hon?”

“What?” said Kaylani, agitatedly. She jerked her head around to stare at Brit, feeling trapped. “I'm sorry, what?”

“You want another?” asked Brit, glancing at her.

“Yes,” said Kaylani uncertainly, “um, no, umm, ... I don't know,” then her agitation spilled over. “Oh, leave me alone! All of you, just, just ... just leave me alone!” She jumped up, grabbed her rucksack and ran out of the café.

“Having a bad day, is she?” asked Brit, looking at Jack. “Or did you upset her?”

“I do not know,” said Jack, looking at the door closing behind her in bemusement. “All I did was say I was from Adelaide. Was that wrong of me?”

“Beats me,” said Brit cheerfully. “Adelaide's not that bad. There, all done.” She gave the table a final wipe, repositioned the little rack of sugar and salt sachets then marched back behind her till. Customers were waiting.

Back in her room Kaylani hurled her rucksack at the armchair then collapsed on the bed, tears trickling down her face. She curled up and cried for a little while then slowly uncurled and kicked her trainers off. Her trapped feeling was subsiding and she felt safe in her room.

Jack's footsteps came slowly up the stairs and paused outside her door. Kaylani stiffened and listened intently. Unconsciously her hand, the one that had fumbled the coffee mug, gripped the hem of her blanket. There was a long pause and the tension in her began to build again.

"Please go away," she muttered under her breath. "Please go away."

There were two more footsteps then another pause then two more as Jack came back to the door. Then he tapped several times, gently, as though not wanting to disturb her. Kaylani held her breath.

"Kaylani? Are you in there?" he asked, fairly quietly. It was almost as if he didn't want her to answer. "Kaylani?"

She didn't answer. She didn't even breathe. A few more seconds then his feet began to go up the staircase. She let out a long breath and started to relax again.

"That's funny," she thought, her eyes roaming over the wall beside her. "The duck looks more like a platypus now."

She giggled then clamped her hand over her mouth in case Jack was still listening at the door.

"But he's upstairs," she thought a few moments later and dropped her hand. She frowned at the platypus then reached out to trace its outline with her finger. A memory of the coffee mug going flying came back to her and she groaned.

"Oh God, how embarrassing was that?" she muttered. "And all over him!"

She rolled over and lay on her front with her head hanging over the edge of the bed.

"That creepy guy in the book shop must have really got to me," she thought. "Why else would having coffee with a guy freak me out so much?"

There was a smallish stain on the rug beside the bed that she hadn't noticed before. It kind of looked like a fish although it didn't have a fin on its back. She stared at it, thinking back over the meeting with Jack in the café.

"OK, I was taken a bit by surprise," she thought. "I guess it wasn't unreasonable for him to offer me a coffee after all. Guys are like that and I'm sure he didn't mean anything by it. Just being sociable since I am new here but why was I so rude again? It was just a bit of chat but I sat there in a panic then made a fool of myself. Oh God, I hope the coffee didn't burn his leg or anything and his trousers will be a mess."

She rolled on her back again and stared at the ceiling.

"I guess he knocked on the door to see if I was all right," she thought. "He must have wondered what the hell was going on when I lost it and ran out. Jesus, I screamed at him, didn't I? Did I? Did I really scream at him? Or was it at that bloody woman going on about another coffee? Jesus, poor sod. I threw hot coffee all over him, ruined his trousers, burnt his legs then screamed at him because I'm a ... what? What am I? What have I become? I never used to be like this."

She rolled over and stared at the fish again.

"He forgave me for being rude the first time," she thought. "Don't expect he'll forgive me this time though."

She rolled over yet again then grabbed her pillow and plumped it a few times.

"What if he comes back to see how I am?" she thought, holding the pillow on her lap. "He did just now and I didn't answer so he'll probably come back. Maybe he thinks he did something wrong and upset me? I guess I'll have to answer the door sooner or later."

She held the pillow to the side of her head and let herself flop back on the bed, half curled up.

"I don't want him in my room," she thought, staring at the wall just inches in front of her face. "I don't want anyone in my room but if he

does come back I'll have to open the door otherwise he'll think I'm a total fruitcake. He's probably up there now, lying on his bed or staring out the window wondering what kind of nutter I am. Maybe he won't speak to me again? OK, that would be easiest but it isn't nice, is it. I'm not that horrible a person am I? Someone people are too afraid to talk to? Not that I want people to talk to me but I didn't used to be like this did I? Maybe I am a fruitcake? Maybe those bastards fucked up my head more than I realised?"

She curled herself up fully into a ball then straightened out again with her head and pillow at the foot of the bed.

"He's going to come back," she thought and rolled over to stare at the rug again. "He's the type. I saw it in his eyes. He'll come back because he'll be worried about me. Or he'll pretend to be worried anyway. He probably just thinks I went for a walk or something and he'll come back later. I bet ya. And he'll want to come in. He'll want to come in and talk about it and show how concerned he is and try to be my friend. Pah! No chance. I'm onto him. Bastard. He probably made me spill my coffee deliberately so he could come into my room later and be my concerned bestie."

She reached down and scratched the side of her ankle then rolled over again.

"But he isn't one of them, is he. He's just a guy who happens to live in the room above me."

She twisted back to stare at the ceiling.

"So how do I stop him coming in without being rude? I don't like being rude. It's not me at all. It's not how I am. I used to be a nice person, now I'm just a rude bitch screaming at people in caf  s for no good reason. Oh fuck."

She rolled over and buried her head in her pillow.

"I'm going to have to go up there and apologise again, aren't I? Shit. At least he won't be coming into my room. OK, he might invite me into his room but I can handle that. I just don't want people to come

in here. Buggerations!”

With a groan she levered herself into a sitting position then sat there for a few moments gathering her strength. Then she pulled her trainers back on and went to her rucksack to get her inhaler, just in case. It wasn't there.

“Frig!” she exclaimed, looking round. “Where'd I put it?”

She thought back and, while the memory of her running out of the café and back to her room wasn't clear, she seemed to remember she still had her inhaler in her hand when she came into the room. She'd tossed her rucksack in the chair then jumped on the bed, hadn't she?

She went over to the bed and pulled the blanket off and, to her relief, the inhaler fell on the floor. She picked it up and held it for a moment then put it in her jeans pocket.

“Why did I have an attack in the café and not in the book shop?” she wondered. “That creep was far more scary than Jack was.”

She pondered this for a few moments but reached no satisfactory conclusion.

“Right,” she said out loud. “Let's get this over with.”

She marched over to the door, opened it then hesitated.

“I must look a right mess,” she muttered and went back inside her room to get her hair brush. Down in the bathroom she washed her face then brushed her hair. She felt better for that. More in control of herself and better equipped to face Jack, if not the world.

“Right,” she said, staring at herself in the mirror. “Affirmative action!” and gave herself a thumbs up.

She wasn't sure what “affirmative action” meant or what it had to do with apologising, yet again, to Jack but it sounded positive. Proactive, even. Something a dynamic girl-about-town might do.

“Yeah right,” she muttered. “Girl-about-town. As if.”

She grimaced at herself in the mirror then took a deep breath before opening the door and marching upstairs.

She hesitated on the top floor landing, a little disorientated. Which was Jack's room? Knock on the wrong door and the real fruitcake, Sarah, might open the door and Kaylani didn't feel she could cope with that right now. She backed away and peered over the banister to check which side her own room was. Jack was above her so, logically, he should be on the same side.

“Oh, it's you,” said Jack, opening his door. “I heard footsteps then nothing so I wondered what was going on.” He half smiled, uncertain what to do.

“Oh!” exclaimed Kaylani, feeling flustered already since things weren't going to plan. “Jack!”

“Yes,” said Jack. “Are you feeling better?” There was a muffled thump from the room across the landing and Jack glanced at Sarah's door then pushed his wide open. “Come in, come in.”

Kaylani steeled herself then stepped inside. He closed the door behind her.

“So, how are you doing?” he asked. “Um, did I upset you?”

“Oh no,” said Kaylani quickly. “You didn't upset me. In fact I've come up to apologise to you.” She shrugged and pulled an apologetic face. “Again.”

“Ahh,” said Jack. “There is no need to apologise. I thought I had offended you in some way.”

“Not at all,” said Kaylani, stepping further into the room. “I was just stressed and had an asthma attack, that's all.”

“Ahh,” said Jack. “Asthma. That is not good.”

He quickly looked around the room then hurried over to the bed and pulled the bedspread over some dirty clothes.

"It's just that ..." started Kaylani then stopped in embarrassment.

"Yes?" asked Jack coming back.

"Oh, nothing," said Kaylani. Her throat felt a little constricted so she took out her inhaler and toyed with it. "Umm, well, I came up here to apologise you see so, um, well, I apologise, I guess. I'm not usually this rude."

Jack smiled hesitantly and looked rueful. He had no idea what to say and this was a situation far outside his experience. It seemed best to say nothing since this girl seemed to become a little strange when he did.

"It's just that," blurted Kaylani after the silence had grown, "well, I've been in Victoria for several years and I was in a place and, well, it wasn't a nice place and I managed to get away and I'm here now but I'm all mixed up inside and I don't trust anybody and then you come along and start being nice to me and everything went wrong and there was this really creepy guy before I went to the café and you surprised me and now I'm here in Melbourne and I'm all on my own and I don't know who I can talk to and I'm trying to find a job but it all went wrong and then this weird guy, oh and I owe that woman in the toy shop \$30 and it's all too much for me to cope with and I spilt coffee over your trousers and ... and ..."

She petered out as she realised she was wringing her hands and babbling then closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"So," she said, willing her voice to stay calm. "I apologise."

Jack didn't move. He just stood there, watching her expressionlessly.

"Umm," said Kaylani, blinking. She realised he was wearing a different pair of trousers so he must have got changed when he came back. "Oh, and if you give me your trousers I'll get them washed and pressed and everything."

“There is no need,” he said after a few heartbeats. “Ahh, it was only coffee and will easily wash out.”

“Are you sure?” asked Kaylani. “I’m more than happy to ...”

“A little spillage, nothing more,” he said.

“Right then,” said Kaylani. “Umm, well. I’ll be going then.” She had a vague feeling she’d made a fool of herself and just wanted to hide in her room and never come out again.

“A moment,” said Jack, holding up his hand. He strode across the room to where his desk, covered with books and papers, sat under the window. He picked up his wallet and walked over to Kaylani, pulling out some notes.

“Would this help?” he asked, thrusting \$30 towards Kaylani.

“What?” barked Kaylani. “What are you giving me money for?” She backed against the door.

“I did not follow all that you said,” said Jack, “but you did say you owe someone in a toy shop \$30. I thought it might help if I loaned you the \$30 so you could pay off that debt and reduce your stress. It is not healthy, you know.”

“You want to give me \$30 to pay that woman?” asked Kaylani, frowning.

“Yes,” said Jack, wiggling the money a little. “If it would be of help to you.”

“What do you want in return?” asked Kaylani suspiciously.

“Nothing,” said Jack. “Perhaps when all is good for you then you might pay me back but it is only \$30. Perhaps two small pizzas, no more.”

“So you’re not expecting me to do anything for the money?” asked Kaylani.

“Do anything?” asked Jack, puzzled. “What would I ask you to do? I want only to help you out of your predicament.” He let his hand fall to his side.

“So you're just offering me money with no expectations?” asked Kaylani, wanting to be very clear on this point.

“Um, no,” said Jack, looking very confused. “Or yes, I'm not sure which, but I have no expectations. It is only a small loan.”

“Why?” asked Kaylani, feeling conflicting emotions bubbling up inside her. “Why would you do this? You don't know me.”

“I know you are deeply troubled,” said Jack, “and I would like to help you. Please, if \$30 will ease your way then please take it. With my blessing.”

He held up the money again and Kaylani stared at him then burst into tears.

“Oh dear,” said Jack, his shoulders sagging. “Now what have I done?”

Chapter Nine

“Please don't cry,” said Jack, watching her helplessly. “Look, I'm putting the money away. See?” and he ostentatiously held up his wallet and put the notes back inside. “There, all gone now. See?”

He tossed the wallet onto a chair but it didn't seem to stop Kaylani crying. She just stood there, her shoulders hunched and tears rolling down her face. One hand tried to shield her eyes from Jack and the other kept clasping and unclasping the hair on the side of her head.

“Oh, please don't cry,” said Jack, his face worried and seemingly on the verge of tears himself. He stepped forward and touched Kaylani gently on the shoulder in a vague attempt to console her. She jerked back in alarm.

“Don't touch me!” she snarled through her tears and lashed out at his arm. “Don't touch me!”

“I'm sorry,” said Jack, stepping back quickly. “Um, please, come and sit down. Please. This way, over here.”

He hurriedly pushed a number of books and a pocket calculator off his one armchair onto the floor then beckoned Kaylani over. She didn't see him beckon as she still had her hand over her eyes. Very cautiously Jack reached over and tugged the hem of her sleeve.

“Over here,” he said quietly, “over here.”

Again Kaylani tried to push him away with a grunt that could have been 'no' but there was little energy in it. More importantly she stumbled forward as well and Jack tugged on her sleeve again, more insistently. This time she stepped forward and her foot slipped on the calculator and she lurched, crashing into Jack. Instinctively he put his arms around her to steady her. She lashed out but her elbow was trapped. Jack tightened his grip, fearing she might hit him and she struggled for a moment then gave in to her emotions. She collapsed into his arms and started sobbing uncontrollably on his shoulder.

“Oh my, no,” muttered Jack, deeply alarmed. Unable to let go in case

she fell and unable to move forwards or backwards he just stood there, clueless, supporting Kaylani and letting her cry. It seemed to work though because, after a minute or so, she tried to disentangle one arm and wipe her nose. She was still crying but more gently, not sobbing and she was supporting herself now, no longer a dead weight.

Jack relaxed his arms and gently tried to push her shoulders away but she pressed her own arm tightly against his back. The other was still trapped between them.

“Just hold me,” she whispered, “please, just hold me.”

Nervously Jack swallowed but did as she asked. He wanted to push his glasses back on more securely as the top of Kaylani's head had pushed them askew but it seemed inappropriate. Her hair tickled his face but he ignored it. Slowly he became aware of the warmth of her body against his and he began to feel protective. He had no idea what had happened but slowly he lifted one hand and started gently stroking her hair. Kaylani snuggled against him and slowly her crying stopped.

Then she suddenly jerked away, deeply embarrassed.

“Oh God,” she said, looking at him aghast. “I'm so sorry! Oh God.” She wiped her cheeks and pushed her hair back. “That was unforgivable of me. I'm so sorry.”

“What?” said Jack, his face showing his confusion.

“I've got to go, I've got to go,” exclaimed Kaylani, throwing her hands down and agitatedly twisting around.

Her foot landed on the calculator again and she fell heavily against the armchair then dropped down onto her backside, one elbow pushing deep into the chair, the other arm flailing. Her glasses fell off as the armchair slid back and crashed into the wall leaving her with her back on the floor and her head against the armchair, her neck sharply bent.

Jack stared in shock for a few moments then jumped forward to try to

help her up. She grabbed his hand then let go as she began to laugh at herself quietly.

“At least she's not crying,” thought Jack.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, bending over to look at her. “Did you hit your head?”

“I'm fine,” she said, still chuckling. “Just a sec.” She struggled for a moment to get her body back into some sort of alignment then held out her hand. “Help me up.”

Jack took her hand and hauled her up.

“Thanks,” she said, rubbing the back of her neck. Then she twisted her body and stretched a bit, easing the multitude of little pains the shock of falling over had caused.

“Are you all right?” asked Jack, stepping backwards.

“My bum hurts,” said Kaylani, rubbing it. “Oh! My glasses! I've lost my glasses!” She started peering shortsightedly around.

“Here they are,” said Jack, picking them up from the floor beside where she'd fallen. “It is fortunate that you didn't land on them.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking them and putting them on. She peered at Jack then took them off and polished them on her t-shirt. She put them back on and looked at him again.

“Your shirt's all wet,” she said quietly. “Umm, sorry about that.”

“It will dry,” said Jack, relieved that she seemed to be normal again. “Umm, I do not know what happened but I think tea is definitely in order. A nice cup of tea and we will let things calm down. Yes?”

“Umm,” said Kaylani hesitantly, knowing she looked a mess. Her hair felt wrong and her face felt wet and dirty. Her jeans felt twisted and tight in the wrong places as well but she didn't want to adjust them in front of Jack.

“Tea is definitely called for here,” said Jack, his stressed mind unable to think beyond that for the moment. His forte was electrical engineering problems, not emotional ones, no matter how electric they seemed. “Please, sit and have tea with me. This has been a most stressful situation and both of us need to compose ourselves. Please, sit.”

“Umm, OK,” said Kaylani as she still felt quite fragile inside.

“Excellent,” said Jack, beaming. He hurried to the corner of the room where he kept his kettle and a ten litre container of water.

“Umm, if you’ll excuse me,” said Kaylani, “I’ll, um, just go and wash. Um, I’ll be back in a minute, OK?”

“OK,” said Jack, half hoping she wouldn’t come back and half hoping, almost desperately, that she would. She was a very strange girl but the warmth of her body still remained in his memory and his surge of protectiveness had by no means dissipated. She both scared and intrigued him.

Kaylani closed the door behind her and adjusted her jeans so they were comfortable again then slowly walked down to the bathroom.

“Well, that was embarrassing,” she thought. “Christ knows what he thinks of me now, bursting into tears like that. Still, it was nice to be hugged. I haven’t been hugged for ages.”

Her hair brush was where she’d left it in the bathroom so she washed her face, brushed her hair and scowled at her reflection. Her t-shirt was now creased and tear stained so she stopped off in her room to change it.

“The door’s open,” called Jack when she self consciously tapped on his door.

She went in and Jack beamed at her. He’d changed his shirt as well, she noticed. And made his bed.

“I’m back,” she said, suddenly feeling nervous.

“You are looking happier,” he said. “Please, make yourself comfortable.”

Kaylani didn't answer as, although she felt happier, she also felt a little shy and was out of the habit of receiving compliments.

He gestured with his hand and Kaylani saw that he'd put the armchair back in position and tidied away the books. He'd also put his bedside table beside the armchair and that there was a tray with two tea cups, a carton of milk and a plate of Tim Tam biscuits.

“How sweet,” thought Kaylani, going over.

She sat in the armchair, giving Jack a quick glance to see if he approved first, and looked around. The room was the same size as hers but it looked smaller because it was cluttered with books and papers.

“The tea is almost ready,” he said, bring over a small teapot. He put it down on the tray then dragged his desk chair over to sit the other side of the little table. “Do you take milk and sugar?”

“Just milk, please,” she said.

He poured the tea and added milk.

“Please, have some biscuits,” he said, proffering the plate.

“Thank you,” said Kaylani, taking one. “Have you been here long?”

She was conscious that Jack's room was comfortable and felt lived in whereas hers was virtually bare and characterless.

“Almost four years,” he said, sitting back.

“Someone told me you are a student,” she said, nibbling a corner of her Tim Tam. “I think it was Anastasia.”

“Ah, yes,” he said, nodding. “I am at RMIT.”

“What are you studying?” she asked.

“I am doing my Masters in Health and Medical Physics,” he said with a smile.

“Sounds complicated,” said Kaylani. “So what's it all about?”

“Developing new devices and procedures for diagnostic imaging and radiation oncology,” he said.

“You mean like X-ray machines and things?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“It's funny,” said Kaylani, screwing up her nose. “You never think of things like that being developed. You just go to hospital and they use them on you and you don't think about it. Wow, so you actually design these things?”

He shrugged. “I'm still learning. What about you? Are you a student?”

He was nervous about asking since she probably didn't have a job which was why she didn't have the money to pay that \$30 and he really didn't want to open up that subject again.

“I was,” she said and her face fell.

“Ah,” said Jack, reluctant to enquire further.

Kaylani finished her biscuit.

“Yes,” she said. “I was doing Textiles and Fashion at The Uni of New South Wales but, umm, I dropped out in my second year.”

“Ah, yes,” said Jack. “Would you like another biscuit?”

“Thank you,” she said, taking one. “This is nice tea, what is it?”

“Lapsang souchong,” he said and smiled. “I am a traitor I admit but I prefer Chinese tea to Indian.”

“Well, it's nice anyway,” said Kaylani and put her cup down. She bit her lip anxiously a couple of times then blurted “I owe you some sort of explanation.”

“Ah,” said Jack, visibly startled. “You do not have to explain anything to me.”

“But I want to,” said Kaylani, realising that yes, she did actually want to. Her first hug in years had pricked her shell and what was festering inside needed to come out. Well, some of it anyway.

“Please do not do anything you will regret,” said Jack, putting his teacup down.

“It's a bit bloody late for that now,” said Kaylani, with a contemptuous laugh and bit the biscuit in half.

“Ahh,” said Jack, looking uncomfortable. “Umm, you said something, umm, earlier, which I didn't understand.”

Kaylani raised an eyebrow in mute query.

“About being somewhere that wasn't a nice place,” said Jack.

“Did I really say that?” asked Kaylani, startled.

Jack nodded.

“Wow,” said Kaylani. “Wow.”

She looked down at the biscuit in her hand then stuffed it in her mouth, gathering her courage. She'd never talked about this before, to anyone. Jack just sat there, wondering what was to come.

The silence stretched as Kaylani sat there, struggling to overcome her inhibitions but she had an almost surreal sense that this was the time, this was the place, and if she didn't begin to open up she'd stay closed off for ever.

“You remember COVID?” she suddenly said.

“Yes,” said Jack, nodding. “It was a bad time.”

“For sure,” said Kaylani. “I was just starting my second year at Uni. You know I'm asthmatic?”

“Yes,” said Jack. “You had an attack in the café earlier.”

“Oh yeah,” said Kaylani, nodding thoughtfully. “I'd forgotten.”

Jack smiled encouragingly.

“COVID scared me,” she said. “No one knew anything much about it at the time but they knew it was respiratory and being asthmatic it scared the pants off me.”

“I can imagine,” said Jack softly but she didn't hear him.

“I was feeling pretty lonely and vulnerable anyway,” continued Kaylani. “I'd spent the first year in student accommodation with lots of other students but I moved to a room in a house for the second year and it was quite a long way from the Uni and a lot of the people I'd got to know in my first year weren't there anymore. I'd broken up with my boyfriend during the Christmas break as well. Then COVID came along and I got scared. I had long trips on the bus to get to Uni as well and that made it worse. All those people breathing on me and my asthma ...brrrr.” She shivered and closed her eyes at the memory.

Jack stayed silent.

“I made a couple of friends though,” said Kaylani after a few moments. “Women friends. At least, I thought they were friends. Annie and Caroline. They seemed to understand and they did their best to reassure me, convince me everything was going to be OK. That I was special. I needed to hear that because I was going through this bad patch, you see. Then the lockdowns began and I was convinced I was going to get COVID and die horribly, all alone. My asthma got worse and every time I had an attack I thought I was going to die. It was ... bad.”

She paused and looked at the floor for a while before looking up at

Jack.

“But my new friends were good,” she said. “They both found ways to come and visit me during lockdown which was great. Then they started to tell me that they knew about this place, this special place where there was no COVID. Where I’d be safe, despite the asthma. I wanted to know where this place was, of course, but they said it had to stay a secret because there wasn’t enough room for everybody and, of course, if just anybody went there they would probably bring COVID with them and it wouldn’t be safe anymore. Which was perfectly reasonable and I believed them. More fool me. Anyway, they told me that in their opinion I was special and deserving of going to that safe place and, if I took a COVID test and kept the right attitudes they’d ask Dexter if I could go and stay there with them.”

“Who is Dexter?” asked Jack.

“Dexter Manson,” said Kaylani, staring at her hands crossed limply in her lap. “Apparently he owned this big acreage down in Victoria, near a place called Orbost, in Gippsland. It was guaranteed to be COVID free and he and a few other people, special people like me, lived there.”

“I see,” said Jack. “So did you go?”

“I was dubious at first,” said Kaylani. “Come on, COVID was running rampant and people were dying left, right and centre. If there was a safe place, why wasn’t it being kept secret and used by politicians and ultra-rich people, huh? Why would they accept a student with asthma? Still, my new friends were very persuasive and then someone in the house next door caught COVID and died, which totally freaked me out. I was on the phone in hysterics to Caroline and she came straight over and took me with her to this farm in Orbost.”

“Weren’t you supposed to have a COVID test first?” asked Jack.

“I was supposed to,” said Kaylani, “but while I was on the phone to Caroline she got Annie to phone Dexter and explain the situation. Apparently he said to bring me straight over and they’d give me a COVID test when I got there.”

“Wasn't that a bit risky for them?” asked Jack, frowning.

“You'd have thought so,” said Kaylani, “cept it never occurred to me. I was so freaked out about dying that I didn't give it a thought.”

“Right,” said Jack. “And Annie? Did she go to?”

“No,” said Kaylani. “She stayed in Sydney.”

“How strange,” said Jack. “You'd have thought she'd have gone too.”

“I was too upset to think about it,” said Kaylani, “although I eventually found out that she'd stayed because there were some other people they were working on as well.”

“Oh dear,” said Jack, his frown deepening. “So, ah, what happened in Obst?”

“Orbost,” said Kaylani. She hesitated then smiled. “It was a lovely place. Beautiful. And Dexter was a really nice guy. He was in his early fifties but really nice and sympathetic. Caroline took me to meet him as soon as we arrived and we had a long chat. He was very sympathetic and caring and he said I could stay for a few days just to see how I liked it there. If I did like it and wanted to stay then it would be put to a vote by the others there and if they voted unanimously in favour I'd be able to stay indefinitely. I was just so relieved that I was out of Sydney and away from COVID that I accepted his offer without a thought.”

“But what about your studies?” asked Jack.

“Dexter and I had several long chats over the next few days,” said Kaylani. “He said if I did decide to stay that I'd be able to finish my degree through a Victorian university. He thought it would be a good thing and would be of great use to the community. That's what he actually called it, a community although it did have proper name. Jesus. He also seemed to be very concerned that I was enjoying my stay and about how I was getting on with everybody. Hah, he even told me several times that he could see beyond the surface into the inner me and that I was one of the few truly good people he'd ever

met. He was proud of me, he said. Of course I believed every word and, being stupid, I didn't realise that by telling me that all the others had to vote for me that I'd work extra hard to try to fit in with everyone. I made myself very agreeable, never questioned anything in case I offended anyone, always did what was asked of me and tried to help in any way I could."

"So I'm guessing you did want to stay," said Jack.

"Too right," said Kaylani emphatically. "Go back to COVID infested Sydney? No bloody way."

"And they all voted for you?" asked Jack.

"Not really," said Kaylani. "My strategy of being extra nice to everybody worked or so I thought but what I didn't realise was that there never would be a vote. If Dexter wanted me then that was the end of it. What Dexter wanted was the be all and end all and nothing else mattered. Turned out he wanted me so there I stayed. No one, least of all me, had any say in it."

"Ahh," said Jack. "So this was the place that wasn't nice that you managed to get away from?"

"Did I really say it wasn't nice?" asked Kaylani, frowning.

"Yes," said Jack.

"That was bullshit," said Kaylani. "It was nice, for a while at least."

Chapter Ten

Jack stayed silent, just sitting there watching Kaylani. She was sitting back in the armchair, twisted a little to one side. Her hands were loosely clasped in her lap, holding her tea cup, and her legs were resting together, pressed lightly against the side of the chair's arm. More importantly she looked ... well, calm wasn't the right word. Although her eyes behind her glasses were distant, there was an animation in her face as she spoke, recounting that time, which suggested that the memories were still fresh in her mind. Perhaps relaxed was a better description although there was a definite tension in her as well. Still, she was calmer and more relaxed than he'd ever seen her.

She lifted her cup and took a sip then wrinkled her nose.

"It's gone cold," she said, her eyes returning from the past to look at him.

"Would you like another?" asked Jack, leaning forward.

"Yes please," she said. "It's nice. I like the faint smokey taste. What's it called again?"

"Lapsang souchong," said Jack, picking up the teapot.

He poured more water into the kettle and emptied the dregs in the teapot into an old saucepan with a broken handle before adding more tea. Then he collected their cups and emptied those into the saucepan as well.

Kaylani took another biscuit while his back was turned and looked around the room. It was clearly the room of a hard working student, and a male one at that, but he'd done a good job of making it comfortable. There was a poster of the singer Lady Gaga with a large black man holding a saxophone on one wall, beside another of an Indian actress Kaylani didn't know. The actress was intimidatingly beautiful and stared haughtily at the camera, contemptuous of all the men who looked at her.

“Can I ask ...?” said Jack, pouring the fresh tea. He fell silent.

Kaylani looked at him enquiringly.

He put the teapot on his desk, out of reach in case Kaylani flared up again, then sat down.

“Can I ask in what way this place you are speaking of was nice?” he asked, quite pleased with his choice of words. He actually wanted to know what had gone wrong but was wary of being so direct.

“It was beautiful there,” she said, pouring a little milk into her tea. “And peaceful. The people were nice too. OK, it was hard work as it was a working farm and everyone had jobs to do but it was quiet and felt safe. We all ate together in the evenings then one or two of them would bring out small bongo drums and flutes and we’d chant and sing. It was almost spiritual and it took no effort to join in. It was like I’d found a place, a community where I was accepted for who I was. And, of course, I accepted them too. Totally.”

She sighed and picked up her tea.

“Then after, ohh, maybe three weeks,” she continued, “Giselle told me that Dexter wanted to see me.”

“Who was Giselle?” asked Jack.

“She was the one who actually ran the place,” said Kaylani. “She was older than the rest of us, her late forties I think, and she got things organised and told people what to do and so on. Dexter didn’t really get involved in that side of things. It made sense in a way, since the rest of us were women so a woman overseer seemed perfectly natural. Anyway, I went to see Dexter and we had a long chat about how well I was settling in and how much they all enjoyed having me there and so on. Then he explained that, even though we sold much of the produce it was still expensive to run the place since there were over twenty mouths to feed and taxes to pay and so on.”

“There were twenty women there and only one man?” asked Jack, frowning.

“Yes,” said Kaylani. “Actually I think there were pushing thirty by the time I left. It was actually nice not to have men around most of the time. Anyway, between them, Dexter and Giselle, they explained that it wasn't really fair for me to continue to stay and take from the community without giving anything back.”

“But were you not working on the farm?” asked Jack, still frowning.

“Yes,” said Kaylani. “Ten or twelve hours a day most days but they were very nice about it and persuasive so when I handed over all my things which Caroline had brought down in her car I felt good about it.”

“What do you mean, all your things?” asked Jack.

“Ohh, most of my clothes,” said Kaylani, “my books, my computer, my phone, my CDs and stereo. After all, as Dexter pointed out, I didn't need these things any more. Everything I needed was provided by the community. Even my jewellery. What did I need jewellery for? There were no men to impress, other than Dexter, and he said he was impressed by my inner beauty, not the gaudy trappings of consumerism. It was a bit of a wrench to give him my bank and credit cards and PINs but, yeah, what did I need money for? It seemed to me, at the time at least, that being happy and making Dexter and Giselle happy were the most important things.”

Jack raised an eyebrow but refrained from commenting.

“It was actually quite freeing,” said Kaylani, seeing Jack's expression. She felt a need to justify herself, if only to some extent. “We're brought up in this society where money and possessions rule everything but when all of that is taken away, or given away, all you are left with is yourself, the people around you and your relationships. It was strange at first, not having heaps of clothes or earrings or whatever but it made me feel closer to the group. And, of course, all the others knew about it and they brought me closer to themselves as well. After all, they'd all given away everything too.”

“I see,” said Jack noncommittally.

Kaylani snorted.

“Yeah, I know. I was bloody stupid,” she said. “But you’ve got to remember I was asthmatic and desperately afraid of COVID. We didn’t have any contact with the world outside the farm, only Dexter and Giselle did. We had no TVs, no radios, no phones, no internet. I thought COVID was running rampant and people outside were dying by the thousands. And they were pretty clever about it as well, since all the time Dexter and Giselle were telling us how special we were, how fortunate we were to be part of something really big which was what Alter Mundus was all about.”

“Alter Mundus?” exclaimed Jack, his eyes opening wide in surprise. “What was that?”

“Didn’t I tell you?” asked Kaylani, frowning. “That was the name of the project. What the farm was all about.”

“No, you never mentioned Alter Mundus before,” said Jack. “I thought you said it was called the community.”

“No, the community was what we called ourselves,” said Kaylani. “But Alter Mundus was the name of the bigger project that we were part of.”

“I see,” said Jack. “So what was Alter Mundus?”

Kaylani sighed and sipped her tea.

“You’re going to think I’m really stupid and gullible,” she said. “Hell, looking back I know I was stupid and gullible but I fell for it hook, line and sinker. I wanted to believe, you see. I wanted to be one of the chosen people, the special people. It made me feel good about myself, strong instead of weak, important. Can you understand that?”

“Indeed, yes,” said Jack softly. “We all need to feel good about ourselves.”

“I know it was all a con,” said Kaylani, her eyes growing distant again. “I know that now but I didn’t then.” She paused. “It was almost like a

dream come true. Shit, it was a dream come true. To be able to go somewhere where COVID didn't exist and my asthma didn't matter. To build a new society, free from all the prejudices and hatreds that we have here. The end of capitalism, consumerism, poverty. Somewhere where global warming wasn't happening. My God, to be part of something like that ... it was ... it was just so awesome!" Her hands were up in front of her, grasping at something that was almost within her reach and her body was taut. "So fucking incredible! And it was happening, can you understand that? It was really happening! And happening to me! Me! I was going to be part of it. It just blew my mind! Jesus!"

"Um, to be part of what?" asked Jack.

"Alter Mundus," said Kaylani, dropping her hands again to lean forward. "It's Latin for 'Another World', which is exactly what it was. Dexter explained all this before I handed over everything. The Alter Mundus project was the collecting of suitable people, special people like me into small communities around the world. When the time was right space craft were going to come and collect us and take us to this other world where we'd start over."

"Space craft?" asked Jack. "You mean aliens?"

"Yes," said Kaylani.

Jack snorted in derision and tried to hide it with a gulp of tea.

"Oh you can laugh," said Kaylani, curling her lip at him, "but you never met Dexter. He was very charming, very ... very charismatic. He had a way of explaining things so that they seemed obvious and right. I believed him. So did all the other girls. OK, OK, looking back I can't believe how incredibly dumb I was but at the time it all seemed so oh, I don't know, so eminently sensible. The alien fleet was on its way to get us and there was survey vessel parked behind Jupiter which was coordinating everything and in regular contact with Dexter and the other community leaders. In fact, although no one ever explicitly said this, it was implied, presumed even, that COVID had been created by the aliens as a way of getting rid of the undeserving. It all made sense. It was almost Biblical in a way, part of God's plan. A flood of COVID

to get rid of the unbelievers and an Ark to take us, the special people, to the Promised Land. There was a certain natural beauty about it.”

“Well, I think I can understand,” said Jack. “I am not a Christian but I can get a sense of how you must have felt.”

“I’m not a Christian either,” said Kaylani, “but I grew up in a Christian society so a lot of the beliefs kind of filtered through, you know, kind of like part of the landscape.”

“Indeed,” said Jack. “Part of the Australian value system, the way of life.”

“Exactly,” said Kaylani, taking the last biscuit since Jack didn’t seem to want it.

“So presumably the aliens never arrived?” asked Jack. “You got tired of waiting and left?”

“Not at all,” said Kaylani. “Dexter gave us monthly updates on their progress and they were always going to take us away soon. I guess I’d still be there waiting except, well, yeah ...” and she petered out, her face going vacant.

“Except?” prompted Jack, leaning over to put his empty teacup on his desk.

“You’ve got to understand what it was like there,” said Kaylani softly. Her eyes flickered over to meet Jack’s. “Although it was great, idyllic even, we had no say in anything. All decisions were made by Dexter and Giselle. Not just the work we did but what we wore, what we ate, what we sang, when we went to bed. We even had to ask permission to go to the toilet and makeup and hair styling was totally out. We weren’t allowed to ask questions. Hell, we weren’t allowed to think. There were a couple of other women, Maxine and Rhonda, they were both part of the inner circle with Dexter and Giselle, who monitored everything we said and did. Anything out of line was jumped on and squashed immediately and anything serious was punished.”

“Are you serious?” asked Jack.

“Absolutely,” said Kaylani. “There was one girl, about the same age as me. Her name was Evanie. One time, during one of Dexter’s regular updates, she started to question him, asking why the Alter Mundus craft were always coming but never arriving. She wanted to know how much longer we’d have to wait. Dexter was furious. He had Maxine and Rhonda strip her naked then hold her down across a table while Maxine whipped her with a leather strap in front of all of us until her back and bum were covered in blood. Another time Rhonda caught Jessica talking about a pop concert she’d been to before joining the community and locked her in a cupboard for three days without food or water.”

“Oh my word,” exclaimed Jack, staring at Kaylani in disbelief.

“One time I was too slow in carrying out one of Giselle’s orders,” said Kaylani. “I’d had a bit of an upset stomach during the night and was late for breakfast so I was still eating when she told me to go and feed the chickens. I wanted to finish eating so I didn’t jump up immediately and Giselle stormed over, grabbed me by the hair and dragged me to the chicken coup.”

“Is that why you left?” asked Jack.

“Oh no,” said Kaylani. “It was probably another three years before I left.”

“But why did you accept such treatment?” asked Jack. “This I do not understand.”

“Oh it’s simple,” said Kaylani. “Dexter had this gift, you see. He was able to explain everything and make it seem sensible, even necessary, no matter what it was. He’d sit you down, look you in the eye and, while holding your hand and with absolute sincerity, explain just how misguided you were in thinking otherwise. It was incredible really, thinking back. He was even able to explain how Evanie’s flogging was essential because she’d broken the bond of trust between us by questioning him. Without that trust, he said, we’d never be able to build the new society as trust was a vital component of the new social order. Besides, we were mostly roboticised and pretty much unable to think for ourselves. If Dexter said it was right then it was right. Even

when Clair lost her hand we didn't object."

"I don't think I want to know," said Jack heavily. "How did Clair lose her hand?"

"She was clearing out a drain," said Kaylani, drily. "Maxine walked past carrying a whipper-snipper and Clair didn't see her. She scooped out a handful of dirty, smelly mud and tossed it away and it went all over Maxine's leg. Maxine was furious and used the whipper-snipper on her hand as punishment. The cord stripped Clair's hand down to the bones. Giselle ended up taking her to the hospital in Orbost but they couldn't save it. She never came back to the farm."

"What's a whipper-snipper?" asked Jack, frowning.

"Oh, it's a thing for slashing grass," said Kaylani. "Sort of like a lawn mower but with cords instead of a blade."

"Oh my word!" exclaimed Jack, horrified. "Did anything happen to Maxine?"

"No," said Kaylani, shrugging. "She was part of the inner circle, you see. All four of them, Dexter, Giselle, Maxine and Rhonda were inviolate."

"Sounds more like a dictatorship to me," said Jack.

"Absolutely," said Kaylani. "That's what I came to realise and why I left. I doubt there were any other communities either. I think it was all Dexter. I think he set up the sect as a little fantasy island for him where he could control and dominate women. Oh he had his enablers, Giselle and the other two, but it was all about Dexter. COVID must have seemed like a dozen Christmases rolled into one for him."

"How do you mean?" asked Jack, pursing his lips.

"Well it wasn't just me who joined because of COVID," said Kaylani. "I was one of the first, probably because of my asthma, but there were only ten or so women there when I joined and within a year there were twenty five of us, excluding the four inners. Most of us recruited

from university campuses. Dexter must have have a whale of a time dominating and humiliating us, not to mention all the money and other things he took.”

“Humiliating you?” exclaimed Jack. “What do you mean, humiliating you?”

“Ohh, I don't know,” said Kaylani, sighing. “Umm, well there were the minor punishments for one. Like, umm, oh not letting someone have sanitary pads because of something trivial or being plastered with mud and made to wait all evening before being allowed to shower. And, of course, there were occasions when he'd give a talk on hygiene or anatomy or something and would make one of us stand naked in front of the rest while he manhandled whoever it was.”

“Did that ever happen to you?” asked Jack.

“Only once,” said Kaylani. “He made me stand there topless while he groped my breasts during a talk on childcare and breast feeding even though we have no babies and no real chance of getting pregnant. Don't get me wrong though, that's as far as it went. I don't know what he got up to with Giselle and the other two but for the rest of us it was just about being dominated and controlled. There were no orgies or rapes or anything like that. I'm pretty sure he didn't grope me for the thrill of touching me. It was more about showing everyone that he could do what he wanted with us. That he was all powerful.”

“So is that why you left?” asked Jack.

“No, said Kaylani. “Even that groping he made seem a reasonable thing. We were all women, he said, and one day we'd have babies and we needed to know how to look after them. It was just my luck that be picked on me but he picked on everyone sooner or later. No, it was something that happened after I'd been there, ohh, two, two and a half years, that made me start to question what was going on and made me open my eyes and see that it was all just a gigantic con and it was actually all about Dexter dominating his little group of women slaves.”

“Go on,” said Jack grimly. “I have a feeling I'm not going to like this

but go on.”

Kaylani shifted uneasily in the chair then stared at the wall for a long time while Jack sat there, watching her and worrying.

“Oh what the hell,” she muttered then looked challengingly at him. “Don’t ever ask to see this because I will never, ever show anyone. OK?”

“OK,” said Jack nervously.

“He branded me,” said Kaylani softly. “Here on my hip. With his initials. With a soldering iron. To mark me forever as his property. That’s why I left but I can never leave, can I? Not now, not ever. I’m his property, you see, and one day he’ll come to get me back.”

She made no move to wipe away the tears that started to flow down her cheeks. Quietly, heartrendingly. She just sat there, unmoving, in her own little hell.

Chapter Eleven

Jack stared at Kaylani in disbelief for a few moments then got up and fetched a handkerchief from his small collection. Going back to her he lifted one of her limp hands and pressed the hankie into it. She looked up at his touch then down at the hankie.

“Thanks,” she said quietly and pulled at it a few times with her fingers before wiping her eyes and blowing her nose.

“This is becoming a habit,” she said with a rueful smile before dabbing her eyes again.

“I’m worried you are going to dehydrate,” said Jack matter of factly as he sat back down. He was struggling to comprehend what Kaylani had told him. “He used a soldering iron?”

As an electrical engineer Jack was entirely familiar with soldering irons and knew they functioned at around 350°C. He’d also burnt his fingers a couple of times using one. Even a quick touch hurt but a drawing of some sort? He shook his head in disbelief.

Kaylani nodded and blew her nose again before sipping some more tea. She held the cup up for a moment as if to show Jack she was re-hydrating.

“That must have been very painful,” he said.

“It was bloody agony,” said Kaylani flatly. “Rhonda and Maxine held us down and Giselle did the actual branding.”

“Us?” asked Jack. “Held you down?”

“We all had to be branded,” said Kaylani, sipping her tea. She’d regained her composure although she was still a little distant. “Even Rhonda and Maxine, although I don’t know if Giselle was. And they didn’t use anaesthetic. It took a week or so to do us all. About twenty minutes each as the soldering iron kept having to be re-heated.”

“But how could you permit such a thing?” asked Jack, shocked. “Could

you not have refused? Left the farm?"

"You still don't get it, do you?" said Kaylani heavily. "It was all part of the control he had over us. We had to be branded so the aliens could tell who was to go and who was to be left behind. At least, that's how Dexter explained it and the brand itself made sense. It was a little spaceship, you see, ohh four centimetres high," and she held up her fingers to show what four centimetres looked like.

"I thought you said it was his initials," said Jack, frowning slightly.

"I didn't realise that until later," said Kaylani. "When the burns had healed and the inflammation went down."

"I'm sorry," said Jack, slowly shaking his head. "How can someone's initials look like a spaceship? I don't understand."

"A D on top of an M," said Kaylani, trying to draw the shape in the air. His look of incomprehension made her jump up and go to his desk. She grabbed a pen and a notebook. "Can I?"

"Sure," he said, twisting round to watch.

"Like this," she said, sketching rapidly then held up the pad.



"The D is the body of the spaceship," said Kaylani, "and those are the exhaust pipes, or jets or whatever." She touched the M with the pen.

"I see," said Jack. "Um, wouldn't an advanced alien civilisation have something better than rockets?"

Kaylani snorted and tossed the notepad back on his desk.

“I was a fashion student, indoctrinated by a monster who had me totally under his control,” she said, going to sit down again. “You seriously think I was going to argue Star Wars with him?”

“I suppose not,” said Jack, picking up the pad. He studied the image then looked at Kaylani's hip, trying to imagine what the brand looked like and trying very hard not to imagine her being held down on a table by two brawny women, screaming while a third burnt that image into her flesh. It made his blood run cold and he shuddered. He could almost smell the burning flesh.

“Anyway,” said Kaylani, shifting round so her left hip, the one with the brand, was away from his gaze, “that's when I finally realised. It took, ohh, more than a month for it to heal properly but I was quite lucky. Zoe's got infected and hers took a lot longer. I was changing the dressing and putting some antiseptic on hers when I suddenly realised that we'd all been branded. Why? We were all isolated on the farm. No one else ever came there so why did we need this special marker to distinguish us from anyone else? All the aliens had to do was come to the farm and take everybody. It didn't make sense. It was only then, looking at Zoe's, that I saw it wasn't a spacecraft. It was a D and an M. Dexter Manson. His initials. And then everything started to fall into place. There were no aliens. No one was coming to save us. We were all just Dexter's property. That's why we had to hand all our things over, why we didn't get paid for all our work on the farm. Why the evenings were filled with chanting and singing so we never got time to think. It took a while to really understand though. For a long time I kept thinking I'd got it all wrong and that we really were a community and Dexter was caring for us but slowly, little by little, I came to see that the rules and discipline, the little cruelties and humiliations, the pawing of us in front of the others, even the explanations and flattery were all part of a pattern of control. That's when I decided to get the hell out of there.”

“It couldn't have been easy,” said Jack.

“No, it wasn't,” said Kaylani. “We never had any free time where we could be alone and the only transport was kept securely locked in a shed. I didn't have any money or phone and no real idea of where I was. If I'd just walked out I'd have been reported almost immediately

and where would I go anyway?”

“So what did you do?” asked Jack.

“I came up with a plan,” said Kaylani, grinning a little proudly. “I knew most of our old clothes, the ones we’d all had to hand over when we’d joined, were kept in another shed, along with all the other things Dexter hadn’t been able to sell. I went to see him and explained I’d been a student of fashion and textiles and we had all these clothes just lying around. Why didn’t I rework them into fashion items and sell them at a market? That way the farm would get some more income.”

“And he agreed?” asked Jack, intrigued.

“Yes,” said Kaylani happily. “He probably figured he had me completely under his control and the thought of some more money ... Hell, he probably got off on the idea that after everything he’d done to me I was still his willing little slave, worshipping his every breath. Bastard.”

“So what happened?” asked Jack.

“There was an old sewing machine,” said Kaylani. “It probably belonged to Dexter’s mother or something but it still worked. Anyway, I spent several months cutting up a lot of the old clothes and reworking them. Actually that was quite fun and I realised just how much I’d missed working with clothes and making them and all that. Don’t forget, I’d been there, ohh, four years or thereabouts.”

“When did you join, then?” asked Jack.

“Early 2020,” said Kaylani. “Just when COVID was beginning.”

“So this time last year you were on the farm, working on the clothes?” asked Jack.

“Yes,” said Kaylani. “Actually I nearly changed my mind then, as well.”

“You can't be serious?” exclaimed Jack.

“It wasn't a bad life,” said Kaylani. “So long as you suppressed your own identity it was actually quite pleasant and comfortable, most of the time. And since I was back working with clothes I was happy and I didn't have anything else to worry about. Actually if it hadn't been for the market I'd probably still be there now. And don't forget, Dexter was still very charismatic and loving and I had lots of little niggles in the back of my mind about how wrong I might be.”

“So how did the market figure in all this?” asked Jack, shaking his head. He didn't really understand how Kaylani had got involved in the first place and why she hadn't just run away after the branding was beyond him.

“You don't believe me, do you?” said Kaylani, watching him. “You think I'm making all this up?”

“No, I do believe you,” said Jack. “I was just thinking how incredible it all sounds.”

“That someone could be so gullible?” asked Kaylani.

That was exactly what Jack was thinking but he couldn't admit it.

“That the authorities permit such things,” he said.

“I don't expect they care,” said Kaylani. “Dexter paid his taxes I guess and I don't expect anyone made a complaint. There were a few others who got away but I doubt they went to the police. For sure I won't.”

“You ought to,” said Jack.

“And do what?” asked Kaylani. “They'll only go and talk to Dexter and he'll convince them that I'm only a foolish girl who's imagining things. They'll think he's a great guy and tell me to stop wasting their time.”

“You could show them your brand,” said Jack.

“No way,” said Kaylani instantly. She paled at the thought of letting anyone, let alone the police, the courts, the judges and maybe even the newspapers and TV seeing how she'd been permanently marked as someone else's property. The brand wasn't just on her skin. It was burnt deep inside her mind, inside her soul.

“OK,” said Jack, not understanding but feeling the depth of her emotion. “Tell me about the market.”

“Giselle and Maxine went with me the first couple of times,” said Kaylani after watching Jack thoughtfully for a few moments, “but it was a revelation. There were hundreds of people there and no one was wearing a mask! It was incredible. COVID was supposed to have ravaged everything but Orbost looked just like any normal country town. I managed to sneak a few quick chats with people and although COVID was still around, most people had been vaccinated. Vaccinated! I couldn't believe it! I'd been on that farm for four and a half years and had no idea.”

She shook her head in disbelief and shrugged her shoulders ruefully.

“Anyway, Giselle and Maxine were there so I couldn't do anything,” she continued. “I just kept on reworking clothes and going to the market. After a while Giselle stopped and Maxine started paying less and less attention to me and more on the market. She'd also made friends with a guy and spent time with him whenever he was there too. I was able to find out where Orbost was and where the farm was and so on, which was useful although I couldn't get away as I had no money. Giselle or Maxine handled all the money from the sales. I could have run off but I wouldn't have got far.”

“So how did you get away?” asked Jack.

“There was a new girl,” said Kaylani. “She arrived only a few weeks ago. Her name was Kirsty. It turned out she was a lesbian and one of the other girls had reported her for trying to seduce her. No way could Dexter permit anything like that. He had to be top dog and the thought of one of the girls, one of his girls, being seduced by anyone other than him must have really got to him. She had to be punished, of course, made an example of. When we all gathered together to

watch the punishment I hung at the back then sneaked out. I don't know what happened to her after I left but Giselle had already shaved her head by then and they were clearly getting ready to do a lot more to the poor girl. I knew I had a little time and I'd seen where Maxine put the money from sales at the market so I broke into the office and took all the cash I could find. Then I ran over to the room where the clothes and things were and took a few things I'd set aside and the rucksack Kirsty had brought which hadn't been sold yet. Then I ran out and walked to Orbost. I was scared to death they'd come after me and find me so I spent the night behind one of those big garbage things at the supermarket then got on a train to Melbourne. And now I'm here."

Kaylani stopped talking. She had a strong sense of anti-climax and a niggling feeling Jack didn't believe her.

"And now you're here," said Jack. He shook his head. "I have no idea what to say."

"There's nothing much you can say," said Kaylani, getting up. "It's all over now and the stupid girl has to get her life back together again somehow. Anyway, thanks for the tea."

"What do you mean?" asked Jack, also getting up.

"I mean I'm going back to my room," said Kaylani. "Thanks for letting me cry on your shoulder."

"Have I upset you?" asked Jack, confused.

"No," said Kaylani, feeling disgruntled. "I owed you an explanation and now I've given it to you. That's the end of it."

She walked over to the door and froze with her hand on the knob at a sudden scurrying noise.

"What was that?" she asked, turning back to Jack.

"I don't know," he said, a puzzled look on his face.

She opened the door just as the door opposite quietly closed.

“Who lives there?” she asked, pointing at the door.

“Sarah,” said Jack. “I don't know her last name.”

“Do you think she was listening?” asked Kaylani.

“I wouldn't think so,” said Jack. He lowered his voice. “She's a bit strange,” and he wagged his finger beside his head.

“How?” asked Kaylani, pushing the door almost shut.

“She doesn't have anything to do with the rest of us,” said Jack quietly. “In fact she hardly ever leaves her room. I'd be surprised if she was listening at the door though. I wouldn't think she'd be that interested.”

“Hmm,” said Kaylani, eyeing the door. She toyed for a moment with banging on Sarah's door and demanding an explanation but frankly the thought of a confrontation terrified her. Slowly she pulled the door open again.

“Umm ...,” said Jack nervously.

“Yes?” said Kaylani, turning to look at him.

“Umm, would you like to stay and have some dinner with me?” blurted Jack. “It's almost dinner time.”

Kaylani stared at him, a confusion of emotions welling up inside her. Then her nerve broke.

“Sorry,” she said in a strangled voice then hurried out the door, leaving it open behind her.

Jack stared after her as she ran down the stairs, his own emotions just as confused as hers although different.

“Goodbye,” he said as she disappeared into her own room but she didn't hear him.

He glanced up at a faint noise and saw Sarah's door was cracked open a little. Not much but enough to let her listen, if she was listening. But why would she have been listening at his door? He frowned and closed his door firmly. Being a tidy sort of person and a creature of habit he collected the tea things and put them beside the door to take down to the kitchen later to wash up. Then he wandered over to his desk and sat down, staring out the window.

“What a strange girl,” he thought. “But then, she has every right to be. If she was telling the truth which she may not be. Maybe she's just another crazy girl.”

He got up and quietly walked over to the door. He opened it just as quietly and peered out. Sarah's door was now fully closed again.

“How strange,” he thought and went back to his desk.

He sat there for a while thinking about Kaylani's story.

“Dexter,” he muttered. “What was his name? Dexter Something.” He pondered for a few moments then clicked his fingers. Dexter Manson, that was it. He booted his laptop then connected to the Internet and Googled 'Dexter Manson'. There were a lot of hits for a TV show called Dexter and some criminal called Charles Manson but nothing for the combination 'Dexter Manson'.

“What was that thing?” he muttered, staring out the window again. “Alter something.”

It didn't come to him so he went into Google Translate and translated 'Another World' into Latin.

“'Alter Mundus', that was it,” he thought and Googled that.

Intriguingly Google found the website for a farm called Alter Mundus. Jack clicked on the link and the website opened. It was a ninety acre farm that grew mostly green vegetables. The large photograph on the main page showed it to be a productive, prosperous looking farm in a pleasant part of the world. It could have been Australia but it could just as easily have been somewhere else. Jack clicked on the Contact

page and gasped. The farm was run by someone called Dexter Manson and the contact address was PO Box B87, Orbost, Gippsland.

“Well now,” said Jack softly. “Isn’t that interesting.”

He leaned back and stared at the page for a few moments then leaned forward and tapped the About link. The page opened to reveal a large photograph of Dexter Manson. He was a pleasant looking man, probably in his fifties, with neatly cut greying hair and a close cropped beard. He was wearing a greyish green Barbour-type jacket over a subdued shirt and looked every inch the prosperous and well-to-do farmer. He had a self satisfied air about him as he gazed a little to one side of the camera.

Beside the photograph were a couple of paragraphs about the history of the farm which Jack wasn’t much interested in. He scrolled down to look at the other, smaller photographs of the property but they weren’t particularly interesting. Typical farm scenes really. Then he stopped and scrolled back up to one. It showed a field of cabbages with half a dozen people in the middle ground harvesting the cabbages and putting them into some sort of trailer. Over to the right, however, was the back end of a large truck with two women loading crates of cabbages into the truck.

Jack peered closely at the photograph but it was too small to make out any particular details of the people in the line, save that they were people. The two loading the truck were clearer. One had her back to the camera but the other had a similar body shape to Kaylani and had dark hair.

Quickly Jack right-clicked on the photograph and selected Open In New Tab. The photograph was larger and the woman, although similar, was clearly not Kaylani. Irritated, Jack sat back and stared at the picture. Something was niggling him. Then he leaned forward and studied the picture again. It was dark inside the back of the truck but there looked to be a face there. Someone was inside the truck, presumably stacking the crates once they were loaded.

Jack quickly opened a graphics app and copied over the picture. Then he went into Effects and increased the lightness of the picture. The

two women loading paled considerably but the face inside the truck was unmistakably Kaylani's face.

“Oh my word,” muttered Jack, staring at Kaylani. “She *was* telling the truth!”

He slumped back in his chair and put his hands over his face.

“The poor, poor girl,” he muttered.

He sat there for a few moments, contemplating Kaylani and her story then dropped his hands and opened his eyes. He picked up the notepad and stared at the spacecraft design for a few moments then tossed it aside. He closed his graphics app after saving the image and returned to his browser. After adding the farm website to Favourites he returned to Google. Slowly he typed in 'Cults' and pressed enter.

Chapter Twelve

Safely ensconced back in her room, Kaylani leant with her back against the door, her head sunk on her chest and her eyes shut. A wave of darkness swept over her.

“Stupid,” she muttered, “stupid, stupid, stupid.”

With the last 'stupid' she rapped her knuckles against the door frame hard enough to hurt. Rubbing her knuckles she sighed then slowly lifted her head and looked around.

“This place is a dump,” she said, enunciating clearly, and went over to peer out the window. Nothing of interest was happening so she toyed with her Pooh necklace then went and sat in the armchair.

“Urghhhh!” she snarled a moment later and jumped up. Everything was wrong; the chair, the room, the view. She felt exhausted yet restless, out of place.

“Bastard,” she muttered. “How did he manage to con me like that?”

She glared at Pooh sitting on the branch with his honey pots then went and threw herself on the bed. Her head felt tight and her brain limp. She took off her glasses and let them fall to the floor then began to rub her temples.

“You really shouldn't have done that,” she muttered, closing her eyes. “You didn't owe him an explanation at all. He thinks you're weird anyway and explaining won't have helped. He's probably up there now laughing himself senseless. He'll probably tell all his mates about this freaky girl who went and got herself abducted by aliens or something. Jesus, what if he tells Mary and Anastasia? They'll all be laughing at me every time I leave the room!”

Unconsciously her left hand stole down and started to rub the raised scar tissue on her hip. The scars felt huge and prominent under her jeans.

“Oh God! What if they ask to see it?”

She rolled over and buried her head in the pillow, her left hand pressed against her hip. She could feel those foul initials throbbing against her palm.

“What if someone comes in while I'm in the shower?” she thought. “What if it's Mary? She'll probably stare and laugh at me. What if she wants to touch it?”

She rolled onto her back again, horrified at the thought of someone staring at her, touching the symbol of her ... gullibility, stupidity, weakness.

“I've got to move,” she blurted and sat up suddenly. “I can't stay here anymore. I've got to get out.” She tensed, ready to jump up and pack her few belongings then slumped down again, this time on her side.

“Where?” she muttered, gazing at the platypus shaped marks on the wall. “And why did he ask me to have dinner with him? What's he after? Maybe he thinks he can control me the way Dexter did. He's probably up there now, rubbing his hands gleefully and plotting how to twist me, manipulate me, the shit. What would you do, platypus? You think I should go someplace else?”

She rolled over and didn't see the head of the platypus twist around to look at her.

“No,” she muttered and glared at the floor. “No!” She sat up and slapped the crumpled bed clothes. “I will not let them beat me! Let the bastards stare and snigger!”

“Yesss,” said a faint voice behind her.

Kaylani jerked round but there was no one there. There couldn't be. There was only a wall behind her.

“Twat,” she muttered and reached for her glasses. With the world back in focus again she got up and wandered over to the window.

“And why's that Sarah listening at the door?” she wondered. “Why's she interested in me? What's her game? What did she hear? Did she

hear everything? Is she up there with Jack laughing at me?"

Her stomach rumbled so she rubbed her belly then touched the scars again.

"Fuck you all," she said loudly. "Fuck. You. All. You don't control me!"

She whirled round and marched over to her stash of pot noodles. She grabbed one of the last two packets, not caring if it was beef or chicken. They both tasted much the same anyway. Pulling open the door she glanced up the stairs to see if either Jack or Sarah was watching then marched down to the kitchen.

"Hey," said Anastasia, glancing up from her phone.

"What you staring at?" demanded Kaylani, fancying Anastasia was looking at her hip.

"Just the news," said Anastasia, frowning slightly at Kaylani's aggressive tone. "Having a bad day?" She looked back at her phone.

"Nah, I'm good," said Kaylani, studying Anastasia's face. She seemed to be more interested in her phone than Kaylani but it could easily be she was feigning disinterest.

She went to pour water in the kettle for her noodles, casting surreptitious sidelong glances at Anastasia.

"So have you talked to Jack recently?" asked Kaylani, turning to face her and watching her eyes.

"Hmm? No, not for a day or two," said Anastasia, glancing up at her. "Have you?"

"No, not really," said Kaylani wondering if Anastasia had looked at her hip when she glanced up or not. She rather thought not but wasn't sure. "Anything interesting in the news?" Maybe Jack had texted her instead. Hell, what if he'd photographed the sketch she'd drawn and was circulating it? Kaylani groaned inwardly.

“Just more doom and gloom,” said Anastasia, putting her phone down. “There was one interesting thing though. Apparently the government is going to make businesses register their SMS systems with a central registrar.”

“What for?” asked Kaylani. No, she was pretty sure Anastasia wasn't checking out her hip.

“To stop scammers,” said Anastasia. “The idea is that whenever a genuine business texts you their number will be checked in the register by the phone company and the text marked as genuine. If a scammer sends you a text they won't have an ID number and the phone company will mark it as unverified. Seems a good idea to me.”

“Oh,” said Kaylani. She turned around and emptied the noodles and the flavour sachet into a mug. “Seems a lot of effort to go to though.”

“Don't you get scam messages?” asked Anastasia. “I do. Loads of them.”

“I don't have a phone,” said Kaylani, her hand hovering to pick up the kettle as it started to come to the boil.

“You surprise me,” remarked Anastasia, picking her phone up again. “I thought your generation was born with a phone in your hands.”

“I used to have one,” said Kaylani. “A few years ago.”

“So why don't you now?” asked Anastasia.

Kaylani stiffened. Was Anastasia trying to pump her for information? The kettle clicked and she picked it up after a moment or two.

“I didn't really need one,” she said vaguely, pouring boiling water over the noodles.

“Well, good for you,” said Anastasia with an approving laugh. “Mine's taken over my life.”

Kaylani glanced at her suspiciously. Was that a dig? Was she laughing

at her? It didn't seem to be as Anastasia was scrolling through things on her phone but that didn't necessarily mean anything.

“So, no Mary tonight?” asked Kaylani, stirring her noodles with a fork.

“She's at the gym,” said Anastasia. “She's there most evenings. I don't know how she does it. All she had to eat was two boiled eggs and then a full workout on top of it. She must be dedicated. Obsessed even.” She paused her scrolling to read something.

“She knows,” thought Kaylani. “That's why she's making all these sly sneaky comments. That bastard Jack must have told her all about me.”

“I admire her all the same,” continued Anastasia. “To commit yourself wholeheartedly to something is a wonderful thing. I couldn't do it.”

“Jesus,” thought Kaylani. “Is she saying I should go back there?”

“So what are you saying?” asked Kaylani.

“Nothing really,” said Anastasia. “Just that to get to the top of any field of endeavour requires dedication and determination. Mary has it and I don't. I admire her but I don't envy her.”

“So if she stopped you wouldn't want her to go back?” asked Kaylani.

“God no,” said Anastasia. “If she wants to stop doing it then that's her choice. Nothing to do with me.”

“Hmm,” said Kaylani thoughtfully.

“I was reading Ash Barty's biography recently,” said Anastasia. “Can't remember why but I was impressed at the end when she said she got on her exercise bike after winning Wimbledon to get ready for the next tournament. After a minute or so she realised that she simply didn't want to do it any more so she got off her bike and announced to the press she was retiring. Fair play, I thought. Not like some who drag on for years when they've lost the desire.”

“Who's Ash Barty?” asked Kaylani.

“Seriously?” asked Anastasia, looking up from her phone. “She was in the news every day for the last few years. Until she retired of course.”

“I've never heard of her,” said Kaylani.

“She was the best Australian tennis player since Yvonne Goolagong,” said Anastasia. “So you're not a feminist then?”

“Umm, I don't see the connection,” said Kaylani, sitting down to eat her noodles.

“Men feel threatened by successful women,” said Anastasia, “so they close off opportunities for women to succeed. Ash Barty put women's tennis on the map and a lot of men don't like that. Her winning all those tennis championships and then Wimbledon made her a feminist icon.”

“Oh really?” said Kaylani. “So, um, you're a feminist?”

“Too bloody right,” snorted Anastasia. “I can't stand men who put women down and try to control us. We're just as good as men if not better and it's time they realised that.”

“Hmm,” said Kaylani, wondering if Anastasia knew about Orbost after all. Maybe she didn't.

“You don't agree?” asked Anastasia, frowning.

“Oh I totally agree,” said Kaylani. “I hate controlling men too.”

It was only partly true as she only hated Dexter most of the time, not all of it. A few times over the last few days she'd had a wave of despair over the love she'd lost. Granted it was a bad domineering love but it was real and he'd cared, in a strange sort of way. Now it was gone and there was a big hole in her life.

“Sweet,” said Anastasia, her face relaxing again. “So how's the job hunting going?”

“Badly,” said Kaylani.

“Where've you tried?” asked Anastasia.

“Umm, the bookshop next door,” said Kaylani.

“I'm surprised Wallace didn't give you a job,” said Anastasia. “A pretty little thing like you would have had that creep drooling or worse.”

“I, um, didn't actually ask him for a job,” said Kaylani. “I went in and he freaked me out so I left again.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Anastasia. “I went in once as I'm into books but never again. Where else?”

“That's all,” said Kaylani. “Well, Mallow's café too but he doesn't employ tenants.”

“Is that all?” asked Anastasia, frowning.

“Yes,” admitted Kaylani, shamefaced. “I haven't really, well, felt up to it.”

“Maybe you should spend some time with Mary,” said Anastasia. “Some of her determination might rub off on you.”

Kaylani didn't answer. She just scraped around the mug trying to get the last few bits of noodles out. Just getting away from Orbost seemed to have drained most of her energy and even the thought of being as determined as Mary made her feel weak.

“I don't know that there's much in the way of casual part time work around here,” said Anastasia after a while. “Most of the employers are big, like insurance companies and so on. You could always try the pub next door. Pubs always need staff and the hours are good for students.”

“Maybe,” said Kaylani. “I've worked in a pub before but ...”

The thought of having to be sociable to all those people was quite scary. After years of virtual isolation the crowds at Flinders Street station had been a challenge and most of them hadn't been drinking.

"Oh well," said Anastasia. "There are quite a few shops in the area as well. In fact Collins Street and Bourke Street are the shopping centre of Melbourne. They're where the trendy fashion stores are which would suit you, being a fashion student. You'd stand a better chance if you didn't live in jeans all the time though."

"I don't live in jeans all the time!" exclaimed Kaylani, bridleing.

"Never seen you in anything else," retorted Anastasia. "They look to be the same jeans too."

"Well, I don't have many clothes," said Kaylani apologetically. She pursed her lips. "I need to get a job first so I can afford to get some more. Actually, I wanted to ask. Where's a good place round here to get fabric? I was thinking of making a few dresses for myself."

Actually she hadn't been thinking that. She hadn't got as far as thinking about clothes beyond the basic idea that she really ought to get some more. It was up there with getting her hair done and re-learning how to apply makeup. Something for the future but not just yet. When she felt more able. Still, now the idea was out there she felt good about it.

"Probably Queen Victoria Market," said Anastasia. "It's just up the top of Swanston Street and along Victoria Street a little. It's huge. You can get just about anything there. Get something bright and flamboyant. It would suit you better than those wallflower dowdy greys and heavy dark blues."

"I guess," said Kaylani although the thought of standing out didn't really appeal at the moment. "Still, I need a job first. Making a dress from scratch is expensive especially as I don't even have any needles or scissors."

"I've got some scissors you can borrow," said Anastasia. "And some needles."

“What sort of scissors?” asked Kaylani.

“Umm, scissors,” said Anastasia. “Maybe that long,” and she held her hands apart to show how long they were.

“What do you use them for?” asked Kaylani.

“Cutting up things,” said Anastasia. “Ohh, I don't know, paper and stuff. You know, the usual things.”

“They'll be no good for dressmaking then,” said Kaylani. “Scissors need to be extra sharp otherwise the fabric won't cut cleanly. Even using them for paper just once ruins them for fabric. Thanks anyway.”

“I didn't know that,” said Anastasia. “I've never actually made any clothes. Yes, I can imagine you wouldn't want ragged edges. So, you're in a bit of a chicken and egg situation then aren't you.”

“How do you mean?” asked Kaylani.

“You need a job to get some decent clothes,” said Anastasia, “and you need some decent clothes to get a job.”

“Oh,” said Kaylani, her darkness beginning to return. “I hadn't thought of it that way.”

“Umm, I don't mean to be rude,” said Anastasia, twiddling with a bead in one of her blonde braids, “but you could, umm, do with going to a hairdresser as well. Your hair's a bit of a bird's nest. A trim and style would work wonders.”

“I know,” said Kaylani ruefully, pulling at the ends of her hair. “I've seen myself in the mirror.” She nodded to the bathroom.

Anastasia frowned. “You hadn't seen yourself in a mirror before? Where've you been?”

“Umm ...,” said Kaylani anxiously, realising her mistake. She couldn't immediately come up with a cover story off the top of her head. The fact that the women on the farm cut their own or each other's hair

from time to time wasn't something she wanted to reveal.

"Well if you won't say you won't say," said Anastasia with a dismissive shrug. She rather thought Kaylani had been living in some sort of new age commune but that didn't bother her. She'd lived in a commune herself for a couple of years back in the 90s although she'd never let her appearance go to the extent that Kaylani had.

"Oh God," thought Kaylani, feeling embarrassed and more than a little inadequate. "What the hell have I become?"

"Aha!" exclaimed Anastasia, snapping her fingers suddenly and making Kaylani jump. "I've got an idea. What size are you?"

"I'm sorry?" said Kaylani, surprised.

"Dress size," said Anastasia. "What size are you?"

"Oh, um, 10 I think," said Kaylani, trying to remember.

"I'd have said an 8," said Anastasia, looking her over. "Doesn't matter. There's a couple of Op shops near here. There's one in Flinders Lane and I think there's one in Little Bourke Street. Go and have a look for some nice outfits. Probably won't be much in an 8 but there's bound to be some nice things in a 10 or 12 which you'd be able to cut down. Maybe even a 14 if it's a flowy billowy style although I think you'd look better in something tighter. You've got a nice slim figure."

"Thanks," said Kaylani. "Actually that's not a bad idea." She wondered briefly why she hadn't thought of it herself. "And it'll be a lot cheaper than buying the fabric. Quicker too."

"They might even have some dressmaking scissors as well," said Anastasia.

"I wouldn't risk it," said Kaylani. "God knows what they'd have been used for if they're in an Op shop."

"Well, true," said Anastasia. "Maybe not. For sure there'll be good scissors at Queen Victoria Market."

“Sounds like a plan,” said Kaylani, nodding.

“Might even put a smile on your face,” thought Anastasia but she refrained from saying it. After all, some people just had faces that weren't smiley.

“Well, thank you for those ideas,” said Kaylani. “I think I'll go up to my room now.”

“No worries,” said Anastasia. “I, erm, hope I didn't offend you at all?”

“No, not at all,” said Kaylani. She felt embarrassed and ashamed rather than offended.

Back in her room, Kaylani took her two skirts out of the chest of drawers and looked at them. They were OK. Not great but OK. They'd belonged to one of the other women and Kaylani had found them in the farm's store room and put them aside to take. They were both size 10 and, after Anastasia's comments, Kaylani wondered if they'd fit her. She hadn't actually tried either one on.

She slipped off her jeans and pulled on one of the skirts. It felt strange putting on a skirt again after years of jeans and overalls but it felt good too. She zipped up the back then let go. The skirt's waist slipped down to her hips.

“Jesus, that's no good,” thought Kaylani.

She unzipped it and slipped the skirt off.

“I could probably take a couple of centimetres off the waist without taking off the zip,” she thought holding it up and studying it critically. “The seam's easy enough.”

She put the skirt back on then folded the waist around her thumbs.

“Yeah, that'll probably do it,” she muttered. “What do you think, Pooh?”

Pooh's back remained expressionless but she sensed a feeling of

approval.

“Or maybe tighter, you think, Puss?” she asked, turning to the platypus on the wall. “Oh!”

The platypus wasn't there. Even the marks on the wall were gone.

Chapter Thirteen

“Oh! You're back!” exclaimed Kaylani, sitting up suddenly.

She'd had a bad night. The sudden and unexplained disappearance of the platypus had filled her with an overpowering feeling of abandonment and loneliness, that everything was empty and pointless. She'd dropped the skirt on the floor then, feeling stupid because she knew the platypus wasn't real, just marks on the wall. Even so she'd run her hands over the wall trying to find it. Then she'd pulled her bed away from the wall and searched underneath in case it had somehow fallen down. Inevitably it wasn't there either and grief and loneliness had welled up inside her. Abandoning the search she got in the bed and her anxieties began to run amok. For a few minutes in the middle of the night, surrounded by darkness and the faint insistent noises from Flinders Street, she'd let her mind dwell on thoughts of ending it all; revelling in the luxury of no more worries, no more decisions, no more people bothering her. No more anything really, just an endless relaxing carefree sleep.

She'd given up on those thoughts after a while as the simple mechanics of how to do it required more effort than she was able to give. Then the headache began and sleep became little more than an aspiration. She had fallen asleep though, a deep dreamless sleep, and woke to find the room filled with daylight. Another sunny Melbourne day had begun. And, when she opened her eyes, the platypus was back.

Kaylani stared at the platypus for a while, an unfamiliar sense of joy suffusing her body. Reaching out, slowly in case she scared it, she touched the platypus and traced its outline.

“I missed you,” she said softly.

Admittedly it was facing the other way now but she resolved to ignore that trivial detail. The important thing was that Puss was back and hadn't abandoned her after all. A sudden thought made her jerk her head around but Pooh was still there, still sitting on his branch, still protecting his honey pots. So was the fish mark on the rug but that was just a stain and Kaylani didn't relate to it.

She lay back against her pillow with her hands behind her head and gazed at the ceiling.

“Today is going to be a good day,” she said out loud, surprising herself with her positivity. “I’m going to buy a dress and get a job!”

She threw back the covers and jumped out of bed. Still in her pyjamas she marched downstairs to the bathroom, not bothering to check first if anyone was watching from further up.

“I wonder what the time is,” she thought as she stripped off and stood under the shower. She was careful not to let her hair get wet as she didn’t have a hair dryer and wanted to get out and about rather than wait for her hair to dry naturally. “Maybe Anastasia or Mary haven’t gone to work yet and can let me have a couple of pins. That way I can wear a skirt.”

She towelled herself dry then put on her pyjamas again. She tapped a couple of times on Anastasia’s door and listened but there was no sound from inside.

“Bums,” said Kaylani cheerfully and went up to her own landing to tap on Mary’s door.

Jack was just coming down the stairs from his room. He stepped slowly, peering into his bag and rummaging. Still three steps from her own door, Kaylani couldn’t make it in time.

“Oh hello,” he said, looking up just before he walked into her. He smiled and looked searchingly at her face.

“Um, hello,” said Kaylani quietly, suddenly shy.

“Are you feeling better?” asked Jack.

Kaylani nodded. “What time is it?” she asked.

“Half past ten,” said Jack. “Um, I’m just off to uni. I’ve got a lecture at eleven.”

“Ahh,” said Kaylani. She wondered what to say next. Jack seemingly had the same predicament as he just stood there, his bag still hanging open.

“Right then,” he said when it became apparent that no conversation, meaningful or otherwise, was going to take place. “I’ll be off then. See you later.”

“Yeah,” said Kaylani.

Jack hesitated as she was in the way then he started to edge around her. She came back to life and flattened herself against the wall to let him past.

“Thanks,” he said and carried on down the stairs. Kaylani watched him go.

“Oh Jack,” called Kaylani as he was half way down the next flight.

“Yes?” he called, turning and coming back up a couple of steps.

“Do you have any pins?” she asked.

“Pins? What sort of pins?” he asked, coming up further.

“Umm, pins,” she said, miming pinning something with her hands. “You know, pins for cloth.”

“No,” he said. “Um, what cloth do you want to pin? I’ve got a stapler if that would help.”

“I’ve got a skirt I want to wear,” said Kaylani wondering if staples would be strong enough and if they’d look stupid. “It’s a bit too big in the waist and I don’t want it falling down all the time.”

“Ah, no,” said Jack. “That would not be good. Would safety pins work?”

“Safety pins would be good,” said Kaylani.

“Awesome,” said Jack happily, coming back up to her landing. “How many do you want?”

“Just two,” said Kaylani. “One for each side.”

“Excellent,” he said. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

He bounded up the stairs and disappeared into his room. A few seconds later he was back. Kaylani was relieved to see the safety pins were quite small and could be hidden inside the waistband.

“Thank you,” she said as he gave them to her.

“You’re welcome,” he said, beaming. “Sorry, I have to go. I’m a little late as it is.”

“Oh, OK,” said Kaylani, a little relived and disappointed at the same time.

He bounded off down the stairs again and Kaylani heard the front door slam. She went into her room, jiggling the safety pins in her hand and picked up the skirt from where it still lay on the floor.

“The pub’ll be open,” popped into her head.

“Oh my word,” she muttered and froze, the skirt in one hand and the pins in the other. “The pub.”

She dropped into the armchair and stared at the window.

“Pubs always need staff,” she thought, anxiety welling up inside her, “but they’re full of people. Strangers!”

“Yeah,” she muttered, “and it’s time you started getting used to people again.”

“But they’ll want to talk to me,” she whispered after a few moments.

She glanced down at the safety pins and unconsciously opened one.

“So what if they talk to you? They’ll only be ordering drinks and things.”

“Well, maybe.”

“And I can always walk away if they try to talk me into anything.”

Slowly she stood up and took off her pyjamas. The skirt was still too big, unsurprisingly, and she pinched a little of the waistband on each side, adjusting until it felt tight enough. Keeping one hand securely on the waistband she slipped the skirt off then slowly and deliberately pushed the safety pin through and fastened it.

“You can do it,” she thought and let the skirt drop to arm’s length. She walked over to the window and peered out. A group of Asians, most likely tourists, were milling round in the alley, taking photographs and peering in the shop windows.

“Just like them,” she thought. “Just strangers with no ulterior motives. You can do it. Just be strong. It’ll be fine.”

She swallowed then looked down at the skirt and inserted the other safety pin roughly opposite the first.

“If it fits first time it’s a sign,” she muttered, “and I’ll try the pub. If it doesn’t then I’ll try somewhere else.”

She looked down at the tourists just as one of them looked up and pointed his phone at her. She jerked back.

“Jesus, I can’t handle it,” she muttered and took a couple of steps backwards.

“It’s only people,” said a thick, warm friendly voice.

She whirled round and Pooh was twisted around on his branch, looking at her.

“What?” she exclaimed.

"It's only people," said Pooh again. He smiled and his eyes twinkled. "You'll be fine."

"Oh yeah?" said Kaylani, refusing to think about how a bear in a poster could be talking to her. "You're a bear of very little brain. How would you know?"

"He's right," said a thin, reedy voice from over by her bed. "You can do it."

She looked across and the head of the platypus was twisted as it looked over its shoulder at her. Its wide flat bill looked to be smiling. Its eyes held hers for a few moments then one hind foot came up and started scratching its head. It closed its eyes in pleasure.

Kaylani stood there, not knowing what to do. She looked at Pooh again but he was sitting on the branch with his back to her, as always. She walked over and touched him. He felt like glossy paper, just the way a poster should.

"Am I going mad?" she asked, hoping Pooh wouldn't turn round and say "yes". He didn't. He just sat there, clutching his honey pot. She glanced over at the platypus but it had finished scratching and was facing forward again, albeit still in the other direction to the way it had used to.

"I am going mad," muttered Kaylani, going over to feel the wall. It felt just like a wall should. "I'm imagining things."

She slowly rotated in case anything else should talk to her, the armchair for example, or her rucksack but everything stayed silent. Slowly she stepped into the skirt and zipped it up.

"Bugger," she muttered. "The bloody thing fits!"

She rotated again, daring something, anything, to remind her what she'd said out loud about the skirt fitting. She got a sense that everything, including the table, the bed and the rug, was holding its breath, waiting for her decision. Even the light bulb was tensely expectant.

“Oh, all right then,” she exclaimed, throwing her hands down in exasperation. “I’ll go to the pub and ask for a job. OK? OK?”

There was a collective release of breath although it could just as easily have been a truck’s air brakes or something like that in Flinders Street.

“Talk about pressure!” muttered Kaylani as she stalked over to her chest of drawers to get a top. There weren’t any. All the spare tops she had, three of them, were in the small pile of dirty washing and the one she’d worn the day before was in a little heap beside the bed.

“I’ve no top to wear,” she said, staying facing the chest of drawers with her back to the room.

She felt the room’s tension build and the skin on her back began to feel tight and goosebumpy.

“OK, stop!” she exclaimed, holding up her hands in supplication. “I’ll wear a dirty one.

Her back relaxed and the tension dissipated. She bent down and rummaged through her washing, holding up each t-shirt in turn to check how dirty it looked. One was passable so she pulled it on then sat on the edge of the bed to put on her trainers. That done she looked around the room almost defiantly.

“Happy now?” she asked.

“Don’t forget the Op shop,” said Pooh, his back still facing her. “You’ll need some money.”

“Oh yeah,” said Kaylani, surrendering herself to the absurdity of the situation. It seemed easiest. “Thanks.”

She tilted the chest of drawers back and, with a little difficulty, retrieved a \$50 note from her small stash of cash. She put the money in her purse and stuffed it inside her rucksack.

“Wish me luck,” she said. There was no reply but she had a funny

feeling she didn't need one. Luck was going to go her way today.

She carefully locked the door then went down to the bathroom.

“Jesus,” she muttered, looking at herself in the mirror. “What do I look like?”

The t-shirt clashed with the skirt and the trainers looked just plain wrong. She tucked the t-shirt inside the waistband of the skirt, which was an improvement. At least it made the colour combinations seem a deliberate fashion statement rather than just slovenliness. Her Pooh pendant was hidden inside the neck of the t-shirt so she pulled it out and let it hang in front. It didn't look right so she tucked it away again. Her hair though was a bit of a problem. She pondered for a few moments then gathered it into a short pony tail. It was an improvement although the combination made her look somehow ... American. Letting go of her hair she searched around and spotted a hair tie on the floor beside the sink. It had a couple of hairs attached ~ longish dark ones so it was probably Mary's rather than Anastasia's although it could conceivably have been one of Sarah's. Jack's hair was dark but it wasn't long enough for a hair tie. She pulled the hairs off, gave the tie a quick rinse under the tap and used her fingers to comb her hair back before using the tie.

“I can live with that,” she muttered, looking at herself in the mirror and wishing she didn't have to. “Oh well.”

Then her courage deserted her and she felt all trembly. She held on to the towel rail for a few moments and took several deep breaths. She wanted to run back up to her room and hide beneath her bed clothes but couldn't face the contempt of Pooh and Puss.

“You can do it,” she muttered but the face in the mirror, paler than it had been a moment before, looked disbelieving.

Kaylani closed her eyes then reached up and pulled the Pooh pendant out from under her t-shirt. She held it tightly and muttered “I can do this” several times. Slowly her trembling subsided.

“What's the worst that can happen?” she asked.

"You get talked into joining another freaky group," said the voice of experience.

"Wrong answer!" she exclaimed, tugging on her necklace. "You don't get a job there, that's all! Then you'll try somewhere else."

She pulled a face at her reflection and marched out.

"Whoa, too many people!" exclaimed Kaylani, recoiling when she got to the end of the alley. The early lunchtime crowd were out and people and traffic were everywhere. She stopped and stared then someone elbowed her in the side of her boob, trying to get past her and into the café. She stumbled back a little, rubbing her boob. Someone wolf-whistled.

"I can't cope with this," she muttered as anxiety welled up.

She turned and started to walk back down the alley then spotted Wallace come out of Lateral Books. She hesitated, wondering what to do if he spoke to her when he walked past. Instead he lit a cigarette and stood outside his doorway. The same set of three doorways that included hers as well as The House of Pooh's.

"Shit," muttered Kaylani and turned away quickly in case he noticed her.

The tattooist was closed – it didn't open until three in the afternoon and closed late – and the café was bursting at the seams. She had nowhere to run.

"Oh God," she thought and, with trepidation in every step, she slipped into a gap in the passersby. Fortunately the pedestrians were going towards the traffic lights beside the pub and moments later, after being funnelled through the scaffolding, she was squeezed into a doorway on the corner with Swanston Street. It was easily wide enough for three people, perhaps even four, and had brown tiles to mid height and cream ones above. There were two doors and one was open.

"Scuse me," muttered someone in a white shirt and depressingly

cheerful tie.

Kaylani pressed herself against the tiles and the man disappeared through the open door, closely followed by someone else in shirtsleeves. Kaylani took a deep breath, steeled herself then stepped inside.

It was surprisingly airy. All the windows were open, letting in a cooling breeze of exhaust fumes and the ceiling was very high. The place was moderately crowded but there was a vase, at least as tall as Kaylani, filled with long stemmed flowers that almost reached the ceiling. She stopped beside it as no one else was there and peered around. Unlike most other pubs she could remember, this one was filled with tables, most of which were occupied. Some had people eating and chatting, others had people with coffees. They were also chatting. Those with alcohol, mostly beer, were lined up at the bar or over by the windows. Intriguingly there were a number of thin pillars supporting the ceiling and the ceiling itself was ornately decorated with swirling plaster patterns. It looked, Kaylani was forced to admit, to be quite a nice respectable pub and not in the least bit seedy. On the whole the people inside looked to be tourists or from local businesses rather than rough and ready boisterous types.

There was a gap at the bar and, after some hesitation and internal morale boosting, Kaylani left the safety of the vase and walked over. A middle aged man in a business suit that screamed 'salesman!' and a decent sized belly was propped on a bar stool where the gap was and his eyes followed Kaylani as she walked over. They slowly moved down so that he was looking at her ankles when she reached the bar. She felt very self conscious but he must have approved as he said "G'day".

"Oh hello," said Kaylani nervously. She looked up and down for whoever was serving. A youngish man in black trousers and a white apron was at the far end, holding a glass up to one of the bottles on the rack.

"Buy you a drink?" asked the salesman.

"Oh, umm, no thanks," said Kaylani. Her legs felt weak and she held

on to the bar for safety.

“So why're you in a pub then?” asked the man with a laugh. “C'mon, be friendly like. The name's Ken,” and he held out his hand.

“I'm, er, looking for someone,” she said, glancing at his hand but otherwise ignoring it. She noticed there was a gold band on one of the fingers but was too flustered to work out what it signified.

“Boyfriend is it?” asked Ken.

“I'm sorry, what?” asked Kaylani, wishing he'd go away. Her heart was beating faster than normal and she felt a little short of breath.

“I asked if he's your boyfriend,” said Ken.

A woman, midway between being young and middle-aged, came out of a door a little further along which Kaylani hadn't noticed. She wore the same style black trousers and apron as the barman. She smoothed her apron then looked around the bar.

“So what's your name then?” said Ken when Kaylani didn't answer. She was watching the woman intently, hoping she'd come over. She still didn't answer.

“Ah, sod you then,” said Ken irritably. He pointedly turned his back on Kaylani just as the barmaid spotted her and came over.

“What can I get you?” she asked, half smiling at Kaylani.

“Some bloody manners,” snorted Ken.

The barmaid glanced at him and curled her lip at his back in a sneer. He was a regular and she didn't like him.

“Yeah?” she said, looking back at Kaylani.

Kaylani felt a little dizzy and gripped the bar more tightly.

“Umm, who do I see about a job?” she asked then started coughing as

her throat constricted.

Chapter Fourteen

“You want some water?” asked the barmaid sympathetically.

“No, I’ll be fine,” gasped Kaylani between coughs. “A fly ... I swallowed a fly.” She waved her hand in front of her face and resolutely ignored the dry tickling in her throat. She was reluctant to get her inhaler out just yet. She felt it was a sign of weakness even though she’d been using it since childhood.

“Nasty,” said Ken, twisting round to watch in amusement.

“That’s better,” said Kaylani as her throat eased. “Sorry.”

“No worries, sweetie,” said the barmaid, looking at her a little strangely. “I’ll just find Laurie. He’s the manager.”

She turned and went back through the door from which she’d emerged.

“A job, huh?” said Ken, still watching Kaylani.

“That’s right,” said Kaylani. She wished he’d go away and leave her alone.

“You’re wasting your time,” said Ken with a sneer. “You’ll have to talk to customers if you’re working here.”

“I guess,” said Kaylani, wondering if this was such a good idea after all. “Then again,” she thought, “I’ll be protected behind the bar and probably too busy to chat with anyone.”

Ken eyed her thoughtfully over the rim of his beer glass then smacked it down on the bar.

“So you lied about meeting your boyfriend then,” he said bluntly. “You don’t like me, huh?”

Kaylani froze in alarm.

“No one likes you Ken,” said the barman coming over. “Least of all the women. Same again?”

“Cheers, Greg,” said Ken, glancing at him then back at Kaylani. “She won't have a drink with me, can you believe that?”

“I'd say it shows she's got some sense,” said Greg, pouring Ken another draught lager. He winked at Kaylani.

Her head had cleared somewhat and she let go of the bar before edging a little further away from Ken. He tossed a \$20 note on the bar and took a long pull on his fresh drink while gazing thoughtfully at her.

“What can I get you?” asked Greg, putting Ken's change on the bar in front of him.

“Oh, um, nothing thanks,” said Kaylani. “I'm waiting to see, umm, Laurie.”

“Oh right,” he said.

“She's after a job,” said Ken. “Wasting her time I told her. She'd have to be nice to customers then.”

“Give the lady a break, Ken,” said Greg firmly. He looked back at Kaylani. “Laurie knows you're here?”

“The other lady, um, the barmaid's gone to get him,” said Kaylani.

“He probably did a runner when he saw you coming,” said Ken and plonked his glass down. A little of the contents sloshed onto the bar.

“One more crack and I'll ask you to leave,” said Greg, scowling at Ken. “Stop harassing our customers.”

“I ain't harassing her,” said Ken pugnaciously. “And she ain't a customer. Won't even have a drink with me.”

“I won't tell you again,” said Greg, pointing his finger at Ken. “Cut it

out or get out.”

Ken pulled a face at Greg then slid off the bar stool.

“Gotta take a piss,” he said and walked unsteadily towards the toilets.

“Sorry about that,” said Greg, wiping the bar where Ken had spilt his drink. “One of these days he’ll get banned from here. So you’re looking for a job? In this pub?”

“That’s right,” said Kaylani.

“Good for you,” said Greg smiling. “The name’s Greg,” and he held out his hand.

“Kaylani,” said Kaylani. She hesitated then briefly touched it.

“So you live round here?” asked Greg, “or is this a second job?”

“Umm, yes, I live not far away,” said Kaylani.

Greg spotted a customer further down waving an empty glass.

“Well, good luck,” he said and went off to serve him.

Kaylani watched him go then looked around. Ken hadn’t quite made it to the toilets and was talking to someone she couldn’t see at the other end of the bar. He was throwing his arms around quite animatedly.

“I’ll get used to it again,” thought Kaylani. “It’s not that hard. Just got to get my confidence back. Got to be firm and take no nonsense. It’ll be fine.”

The barmaid came back after another minute or so, although it felt like half an hour to Kaylani. She felt very conspicuous standing there alone and without a drink. Fortunately no one else tried to speak to her. If they had she’d probably have run out.

“Come on through,” said the barmaid, lifting up a folding section of the bar. “Laurie’s upstairs. He’ll see you now. First door on the right,

up the stairs,” and she pointed to the door she'd come through.

“Thanks,” said Kaylani.

Greg gave her an encouraging smile as she passed which she nervously reciprocated. Then she was through the door. She hesitated while the door swung shut behind her and the hubbub from the bar receded appreciably.

“Be strong,” she muttered, closing her eyes and taking a couple of deep breaths. “His name's Laurie and he's just a guy. Nothing to be afraid of. Be strong.”

She opened her eyes and took another deep breath then started to ascend the stairs. Her feet clumped a little on the bare wooden steps and echoed quietly in the stair well. At the top there was a long corridor and the first door on the right was half open. She tapped and pushed it fully open.

“Umm, Larry?” she asked when she saw a large middle aged balding man bending over a filing cabinet.

“Laurie,” said Laurie, standing up with a sheaf of papers in his hand. “You the girl looking for a job?” He gave her a brief cursory glance then started to leaf through the papers.

“Yes,” said Kaylani.

“Well, give me your résumé then,” he said impatiently, reading a document. He held out one hand and clicked his fingers.

“Umm, I haven't got one,” said Kaylani, quailing.

“What you wasting my time for then?” he said dismissively. “I need people with experience.”

He twisted a battered office chair round then slumped into it, still looking at the document.

“I knew it!” he exclaimed suddenly and slapped the paper. “Bastards

are charging me for 50 litre kegs when they only delivered 30 litre kegs.”

He grabbed the phone on his desk and only then noticed Kaylani was still there.

“You're still here?” he said, frowning at her. “Why?”

“Umm, I have experience,” said Kaylani hesitantly. “I just don't have a résumé.”

Laurie looked her up and down and raised an eyebrow.

“You a student?” he asked.

“Umm, yes,” said Kaylani as she was sort of thinking of going back to uni one day.

“Thought so,” he said and studied her more closely.

Actually she didn't look too bad. OK her outfit was a little odd but she wasn't dressed like a tart the way some of the girls who came in looking for work did. In fact she looked quite wholesome and respectful in an understated way and there was something appealing in the way she stood there anxiously. He dropped the phone back on its rest.

“Where are you a student?” he asked.

“Umm, RMIT,” she said as it was the only Melbourne university she could think of.

“OK, respectable place,” he thought, nodding.

“Grab a seat,” he said, gesturing to a plain upright chair that was pushed up against the wall.

“Thank you,” she said and edged over. The chair had a battered 30 can Carlton Dry carton filled with paperwork on it. She picked the carton up and put it neatly on the floor before sitting down.

“So what's your experience?” he asked, leaning back in his chair.

“I worked behind the bar for half a year at Framer's Hotel in Fortitude Valley in Brisbane,” said Kaylani, “and a year at the Old Cutter in The Rocks in Sydney.”

“OK,” said Laurie, nodding. “I know the manager of the Old Cutter. What's your name?”

“Kaylani,” said Kaylani. “Kaylani Tawney.”

“How do you spell that?” he asked, picking up a pen.

“T A W N E Y,” said Kaylani, “or did you mean Kaylani?”

“That too,” he said.

“K A Y L A N I,” she said.

“Sweet,” he said and picked up his mobile phone and leaned back in his chair. He gazed thoughtfully at Kaylani while the phone rang and eventually someone answered it.

“G'day John,” he said, still gazing at Kaylani. “Laurie down at Young And Jackson's in Melbourne. How's it going?”

Someone, presumably John, replied because Laurie responded with “yeah, good too mate.”

He lurched forward and picked up the invoice he'd scribbled Kaylani's name on.

“Listen, mate,” he said, turning the invoice sideways so he could read it. “Got a girl here looking for a job called Kaylani Tawney. Says she worked for you.”

He frowned as John said something.

“Says he's never heard of you,” said Laurie holding his phone to his chest and looking challengingly at Kaylani.

"It was a while ago," she said, frowning. "Before COVID."

"She said it was before COVID, mate," said Laurie into his phone.

Clearly John now remembered her name as Laurie's expression changed.

"Yeah, skinny little dark haired thing," he said. "That's right ... uh huh ... yeah? ... uh huh ... awesome, thanks mate. Catch up with you soon." He hung up and tossed the phone on his desk.

"Five years is a long time," he remarked. "What you been doing since?"

Kaylani had been dreading this question. She had trouble admitting to herself that she'd been taken in by a cult and brainwashed for the last few years so she really didn't want to admit it to someone else.

"Oh, um, I moved in with a guy," she said, astonishing herself at thinking of a possible explanation on the spur of the moment. "Um, it didn't work out." It even seemed plausible now she'd said it out loud.

"How come?" asked Laurie, curious since she seemed a nice girl.

"Umm, I'd rather not say," she said, the 'moving in' part having exhausted her creativity.

"Oh Jesus!" exclaimed Laurie, scowling. "Bastard knocked you round did he?"

Kaylani half nodded since it was true in some ways even if it wasn't quite the way Laurie probably thought it was.

"Shit!" exclaimed Laurie. "I hate mongrels like that," and he slammed his meaty hand on the desk, making Kaylani jump. He shook his head in despair at the state of the world and glowered at the paperwork littering his desk.

"So where're you living now?" he asked after a few moments.

"I've got a room in Burgun Walk," she said. "Just behind the pub."

"And he got the bloody house, eh?" snarled Laurie. "Jesus! Just bloody typical. S'pose you've got no money either?"

Numbly Kaylani shook her head. OK, she still had a thousand or so dollars that she'd stolen from Dexter's farm but it probably wasn't a good idea to tell Laurie that. After all, if he gave her a job she'd have to use the till.

"OK," he said, coming to a decision. "You available Friday evening?"

"Yes," she tried to say but it stuck in her throat. She tried again and it came out reasonably well.

"Good," he said. "I've a function in Chloe's Room Friday night. I'll give you a trial run then, OK. If it works out I'll take you on for the evenings. Can't say fairer than that."

Kaylani stared at him.

"You're giving me a job?" she asked in a semi whisper. Her hands started to shake as they clasped her rucksack on her knees.

"Nah," said Laurie, not noticing her hands. "I'm giving you a trial. What happens after is down to you."

"Oh wow!" exclaimed Kaylani, her heart beating faster. "Thank you!"

"No worries," said Laurie, approving of her reaction. "Oh, you done your Responsible Serving of Alcohol?"

"Oh, er, yes," said Kaylani, "but I don't have the certificate anymore."

"Unsurprising," he thought, "since she probably had to get out in a hurry."

"I'll take it on trust for now," said Laurie, "as Johnno in Sydney wouldn't have taken you on otherwise but if I take you on permanently you'll have to do it again."

“Shouldn't be a problem,” said Kaylani. “It was easy enough first time round. Is there anything else you need?”

“Assuming Friday works out,” said Laurie, “I'll need your bank details and Tax File Number. Oh, if you make it through the first hour I'll pay you cash for the whole evening but after that it'll be into a bank account.”

He drew a circle around Kaylani's name on the invoice then underlined it twice then wrote FRIDAY CHLOE in capitals beside it.

“OK,” said Kaylani, feeling a little faint. She didn't have a bank account and had no idea what her Tax File Number was but she'd figure something out. Actually this wasn't strictly true as she did have a bank account but Dexter, or more likely Giselle, now had control of it. For sure she wasn't going to be using it anymore.

“Sweet as,” said Laurie and smiled. Then he looked down at the invoice and frowned as the nasty little matter of mismatched kegs became uppermost in his mind again. “Any questions?”

“Umm, just one,” said Kaylani and he looked up at her. “Who's Chloe?”

“What?” he asked, frowning.

“You said I'd be in Chloe's Room,” said Kaylani. “Who is Chloe? Will she be OK with me?”

Laurie laughed.

“She'll love you,” he said, waving his hand at Kaylani and looking down at his paperwork. “Be here at 5, OK.”

“OK,” said Kaylani, not getting up. She wasn't sure if the interview had ended or not.

“What?” asked Laurie, noticing her after a few moments.

“Um, shall I go?” asked Kaylani, half pointing to the door. “Are we

finished?"

"Yeah," said Laurie. "See you Friday."

"Right," said Kaylani, standing up. "Umm, goodbye. And thank you."

"No worries," he said glancing up and reaching for his desk phone again.

Kaylani got up and walked over to the door. Her legs felt a little weak.

"Put me through to Ray," snarled Laurie as she went out. She hesitated then pulled the door shut behind her.

"I've only got a bloody job," she muttered, leaning her head against the cool smoothness of the door at the bottom of the stairs. "Oh my word!"

She stayed like that for several moments then pulled herself upright and gave herself a little shake before opening the door. The bar was three quarters empty now as the lunchtime rush was over.

"How'd it go?" asked Greg, who'd been keeping an eye out for her.

"I got the job," said Kaylani, still not quite believing it.

"Awesome!" exclaimed Greg holding his hand up for a high five. She just looked blankly at him, wondering why he had his hand up. He laughed self consciously and dropped it.

"So do you want to go out for a drink tonight?" he asked. "Celebrate? It's my evening off."

"Oh shit!" thought Kaylani as anxiety started to well up inside her. He wasn't bad looking in a funny sort of way but a date was way outside her comfort zone.

"Umm, ..." she started.

"Oh, leave her alone you horny sod," said the barmaid, coming over.

“Jesus you're bloody worse than my ex you are. Hello, I'm Kylie.”

“Kaylani,” said Kaylani, relieve to have some support. “Pleased to meet you.”

“So when do you start?” asked Kylie.

“I've got a trial on Friday,” said Kaylani. “In Chloe's Room, whatever that is.”

“It's one of the function rooms upstairs,” said Greg. “Bummer, I was hoping you'd be down here in the bar with me.”

He grinned at Kaylani and Kylie bashed him on the upper arm.

“Go see to that customer,” she barked.

“OK, OK,” said Greg, holding up his hands defensively. “Just being friendly.” He ambled off.

“Take no notice of him, Kaylani,” she said, watching him go. “He tries it on with every new girl.”

“Oh right,” said Kaylani. “Umm, what should I wear on Friday?”

“Didn't Laurie tell you about that?” asked Kylie, her eyebrows narrowing slightly. “Outfits are provided,” and she waved her hand up and down her body. “Trousers, blouse and apron, although you wear your own shoes. Make sure they're comfy as you'll be on your feet all evening.”

“No I don't think he said anything about that,” said Kaylani with some relief. It wasn't like she had many clothes to choose from in the first place. “Umm, would it be OK if I had a Coke or something? I'm parched.”

“No worries, sweetie,” said Kylie. She went over to the soft drinks mixer and started to fill a glass.

“How much is it?” asked Kaylani, fumbling for her purse in her

rucksack.

“On the house, sweetie,” said Kylie. “You’re one of us now.”

A vision of Giselle saying those exact same words, *you’re one of us now*, filled Kaylani’s mind and a wave of nausea swept over her as the smell of her burning flesh again filled her nostrils.

“Oh God,” gasped Kaylani, going pale and clutching at her hip. “Oh God, I think I’m going to be sick.” The bar started to go all swirly then her legs gave way and she slumped forward, knocking her Coke out of Kylie’s hand.

Chapter Fifteen

“Jesus!” exclaimed Kylie and pressed Kaylani hard against the bar with her hip before she slid to the floor.

“What happened?” asked Greg, hurrying over.

“She collapsed,” said Kylie, twisting to get her hands under Kaylani’s armpits. “Help me get her to a chair.”

Greg started to slide his hands around Kaylani’s waist just as Kaylani groaned and tried to stand up.

“What you doing?” she exclaimed and tried to struggle out of their grips.

“You fainted,” said Kylie, letting go. Kaylani staggered but Greg’s grip around her waist was firm. “You got her?”

“Yeah,” said Greg. “She doesn’t weigh much. Come on, let’s get you to a chair.”

Kylie lifted up the bar section and Greg half carried Kaylani through and lowered her into a nearby empty chair.

“Her colour’s coming back,” remarked Kylie, watching her.

“What happened?” asked Kaylani, blinking. She put both hands to her head and leant forward a little.

“You collapsed,” said Kylie. “When did you last eat?”

“My glasses!” exclaimed Kaylani, realising they were gone. “Where are my glasses?”

“Just a sec,” said Greg. He marched back to the bar and picked up her glasses which had fallen into the puddle of Coke. They weren’t broken but they were dripping. He leant over the bar and rummaged for a cloth.

“Here you go,” he said after wiping them. He handed them to Kaylani and she put them on.

“That’s better,” she said, looking around. They felt a little sticky but at least she could see properly again.

“So when did you last eat?” said Kylie again.

“Oh, um, last night,” said Kaylani. “Umm, I haven’t slept too well the last couple of nights. That’s all it was, and the excitement of getting the job.”

She looked anxiously at Kylie and Greg wondering if they thought she was weak and couldn’t handle it.

“Hmm,” said Kylie, frowning. “Greg, you want to get back to the bar?”

“You’re sure?” asked Greg.

“There’s customers waiting,” said Kylie.

“OK,” said Greg, still watching Kaylani. “Panic over, huh?”

“Yeah, panic over,” said Kaylani. “Sorry about that.”

“No biggie,” said Greg, smiling. “Happens every now and then. At least you didn’t throw up all over the place. That’s just gross.”

“The bar,” said Kylie firmly. Greg hesitated then went back to work. “So how’re you feeling now, sweetie?”

“Embarrassed,” said Kaylani.

“Don’t be,” said Kylie. “This is a pub after all. You just sit here quietly. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“I ought to go,” said Kaylani, half getting up. Kylie pushed her back down.

“No rush,” she said. “Just sit here and rest, OK. I’ll be back in a

minute.”

“OK,” said Kaylani and reached down for her bag. “Oh, my bag! Where is it?”

“It's behind the bar,” said Kylie. “You dropped it. I'll get it for you.”

“Thanks,” said Kaylani. She sat back as Kylie fetched her rucksack then checked her purse and inhaler were still inside.

“Jesus, I made a fool of myself,” she muttered, looking around to see if any of the customers were watching her. “They probably think I'm drunk or something.” No one seemed to be paying her any attention.

“Here, eat this,” said Kylie, reappearing. She put a plate and a fresh Coke on the table.

“What is it?” asked Kaylani.

“A ham sandwich,” said Kylie. “There were a few leftovers in the kitchen. Don't worry. I'm not going to charge you.”

“Ahh, thanks,” said Kaylani. “Um, I'm not hungry though.”

“Eat it anyway,” said Kylie. She glanced at the bar to check Greg had everything under control then sat down.

Feeling pressured, Kaylani reached half-heartedly for the half sandwich closest to her and bit off a small piece of the corner.

“So why'd you faint?” asked Kylie, watching her chew.

“Like I said,” said Kaylani. “I've not been sleeping too well the last couple of nights.”

The ham sandwich was actually quite nice and she slowly bit off another morsel and chewed it.

“Yeah, sure,” said Kylie, noticing. “Well, I'd better get back to work. You sure you're OK now?”

“Yes,” said Kaylani. “I’m fine. Thank you.”

“No worries, sweetie,” said Kylie, standing up. She looked down at Kaylani. “You know, starving yourself won’t get him back.”

“What?” asked Kaylani, looking up at her in puzzlement.

“The guy who dumped you,” said Kylie. “Starving yourself won’t get him back and he isn’t worth it anyway.”

“I’m not ...,” started Kaylani then realised that she was opening herself up to giving the real explanation for her lack of appetite. An emotional breakup was a preferable and more plausible explanation. “No, you’re right. He isn’t worth it.” She smiled at Kylie and took another, bigger, bite of the sandwich.

“Sweet,” said Kylie and reached down to give Kaylani’s hand a reassuring squeeze. “You’ve got to look after yourself, you know.”

Kaylani nodded and Kylie walked off.

“She’s right,” thought Kaylani. “I ought to look after myself better.”

She looked around again and still no one was paying her any attention, other than Greg. He smiled when he saw her looking at him and gave her a little wave before turning to a customer.

“I’ve got a job!” Kaylani muttered, suddenly remembering. “I’ve got a job!”

She looked at the half-eaten sandwich in her hand and started to put it back on the plate.

“No,” she muttered. “A packet of pot noodles a day isn’t enough. They’re crap anyway. No nourishment. I’m going to need to eat better if I’m going to work here.”

She picked up the sandwich again and forced herself to eat it. Then she took a gulp of her Coke as the sandwich was a little dry and debated whether or not to eat the other half that still sat on the plate.

“Oh, just eat the bloody thing,” she muttered and picked it up. “And go to the supermarket and get some decent food, not more pot noodles.”

She slowly ate the other half of the sandwich then remembered Laurie said she needed a bank account.

“I suppose I'd better open one,” she thought but the thought of dealing with bank bureaucracy made her quail. “Hell, I can do it tomorrow, or even Friday before I start work.”

She finished her Coke and stood up. Kylie had disappeared but she gave Greg a shy little wave. He gave her a big wave back and bellowed “See ya!” Several people looked over to see who he was yelling at. Embarrassed again, Kaylani hurried out the nearest exit and found herself in Swanston Street rather than Flinders Street.

Disorientated, she stood on the pavement for a few moments then realised where she was because the Cathedral was just across the road which meant the station, and home, was to the right. An hour or two's lie-down seemed a very appealing proposition at that moment, maybe even until the next day.

“Anastasia said there's an Op shop in Flinders Lane,” she thought, looking left up Swanston Street. “It's only just up there a bit. I could have a look then go home. And I can go to the supermarket on the way back.”

It seemed like a good positive pro-active plan so she started walking that way, enjoying the mild sunshine. Swanston Street wasn't as busy as Flinders Street, at least for pedestrians, and almost no one else was walking that side anyway as most of what lay between the pub and the buildings of Flinders Lane was vacant offices behind chain link fencing. A big sign proclaimed the site was earmarked for the new shopping centre development with work due to start early in the new year.

As she turned the corner into Flinders Lane Kaylani saw a branch of Westpac Bank on the other side of the road and turned her head away. Perhaps twenty paces further on she stopped and turned to look

back. A man with a briefcase was walking towards her but she ignored him.

“A bank,” she thought and sighed.

She walked on a few more paces then stopped again and looked back.

“People open bank accounts every day,” she thought. “They won't think it's strange I'm opening one. They won't ask questions about why I don't have one already. They won't ask questions or be nasty or laugh at me.”

She stood there undecided for a few moments then, her eyes fixed on the bank's facade, she forced herself to walk towards it. Tyres screeched and an angry car horn blared at her. She jumped back in panic.

“You stupid bitch!” shouted an angry faced man through his open car window. He made a rude gesture and drove off. The driver and passenger of the car behind looked curiously at her but didn't shout.

“Oh my God,” she exclaimed, frozen in place and shaking slightly.

“You should cross at the lights,” said the man with the briefcase as he walked past. “It's safer.”

She stared at his receding back then look across Flinders Lane. The bank was still there and there was a moderate amount of traffic.

“That was stupid,” she thought. “Stupid, stupid, stupid. This is a bloody city. You could have got yourself killed!”

A tiny part of her thought that would make life easier but she squashed it and walked back to the traffic lights. When the lights changed and the little green walking man light came on she crossed then walked up to the bank. Unfortunately it was open so she had no more excuses.

“How can we help you today?” asked a small, cheerful faced man holding an iPad as she looked around for a queue to join. He wore a

brown sleeveless wool cardigan to protect him from the icy chill of the air conditioning.

“Umm, I want to open an account,” said Kaylani, wondering if he worked there and if he could be trusted.

“Excellent,” he said, beaming. “My name's Michael and I can help you with that today. If you'd come this way?”

Kaylani followed him over to a couple of easy chairs separated by a low table with a rack of leaflets. There were other clusters of easy chairs dotted around with a couple talking earnestly with a young woman at one of them.

“Have a seat,” said Michael, holding out his hand.

“Thanks,” said Kaylani and sat down, holding her rucksack protectively on her knees.

“Now, if I could ask your name?” said Michael, sitting down himself and laying his iPad ready on his knees.

“Kaylani,” said Kaylani. “Kaylani Tawney.”

“Can I call you Kaylani?” asked Michael.

“Sure,” said Kaylani.

“Beautiful,” said Michael. “Now we have a range of accounts offering a wealth of benefits. Perhaps, Kaylani, if you could tell me the intended purpose by opening an account with us? That way I can advise you better.” He looked at her expectantly.

“Oh,” said Kaylani, not having given the matter any thought as she hadn't had to think about money for several years and before that she'd been a student without much money anyway. “Umm, I've just got a job and I need a bank account.”

“Ahh!” exclaimed Michael, looking at her as though she'd just inherited a fortune. “And is this your first job, Kaylani?”

“Umm, yes,” said Kaylani even though it wasn't. It just seemed easier.

“You must be very excited,” beamed Michael.

Kaylani nodded. “Is he this pleased to see everyone or is it just me?” she wondered.

“Might I suggest, Kaylani,” said Michael, tapping something on the screen of his iPad, “our E-Saver Everyday Transaction Account? It's perfectly designed for those new to the workforce, such as yourself. The account is accessible by both Internet and Phone banking and provides an annual interest rate of 1.2% calculated on a daily basis provided the account remains in credit, subject of course, to interest rate changes. The only conditions are that you have your salary or wages paid into the account and that you do not go overdrawn, otherwise fees may become payable. You will, of course, be issued with a debit card which can be used to withdraw cash at any Westpac branch without additional charges and at hundreds of other ATMs nationally although a small fee may well apply to those.”

“Umm,” said Kaylani, blinking. “OK.”

“So how does that sound to you, Kaylani?” asked Michael, a little confused by her lack of reaction.

“Yeah, fine,” said Kaylani.

“So you'd like to go ahead and open an E-Saver Everyday Transaction Account, Kaylani?” asked Michael.

“Sure, why not,” she said. “Umm, I can use it to pay for things, yeah? In shops?”

“Of course,” said Michael. “That's what the debit card is for, Kaylani, although Internet and Phone banking are available as well.”

“Great,” said Kaylani. “Let's do that then.”

“Excellent decision,” said Michael happily. “I can do that for you right now.” His fingers started flying all over the iPad. “Do you have some

photo ID with you?”

“Umm, I've got my driver's licence,” said Kaylani, fumbling with her rucksack.

“That will be perfect,” said Michael.

Kaylani found her purse and pulled out her driver's licence.

“Oh,” said Michael, taking it. A slight frown crossed his face. “This is a New South Wales licence.”

“Is that a problem?” asked Kaylani, suddenly anxious.

“Not necessarily,” said Michael, studying the licence. “Are you still living at this address in Sydney?”

“Ahh, no,” said Kaylani. “I'm living in Melbourne. Just near here actually.”

“Ahh, excellent,” said Michael. “Do you have anything with your present address on it?”

“Umm, I don't think so,” she said, peering inside her rucksack. “Oh, how about this?” and she pulled out her rent book.

“2B, 3 Burgun Walk,” said Michael, copying the address from the rent book into his iPad. “Yes, that's behind Young and Jackson's, isn't it?”

“Yes,” said Kaylani.

“I just need a few other details,” said Michael. “Date of birth, tax file number and so on.”

“Oh, I don't know my tax file number,” said Kaylani frowning. Her anxiety level had dropped but now rose again.

“That's fine,” said Michael. “You can let us know any time although I have to tell you that any interest earned on the account will be taxed at 40% until such time as we have the number.”

“Oh, OK,” said Kaylani.

“And shall I enable phone and Internet banking for you, Kaylani?” asked Michael, his finger poised and ready.

“I don't have a phone or the Internet,” said Kaylani.

“Good Lord,” said Michael and chuckled. “How do you manage in this day and age? I couldn't live without either.”

“Um, I get by,” she said, now adding a feeling of social inadequacy to her anxiety.

“Well, good for you,” said Michael. “You must have a life then, unlike me,” and he laughed. “Now, I'll just print this off and get a signature and we're all done.”

“Great,” said Kaylani as he jumped up. There was a faint whirr from behind a screen and he emerged with several sheets of paper.

“If you could sign here and here,” he said, laying one of the sheets on the table. Kaylani took the pen he proffered and tried to sign but she'd forgotten how. It came out as a series of illegible jerks. She felt embarrassed but Michael didn't seem to mind.

“Now these are your copies,” he said separating some of the sheets. “The full terms and conditions will be sent by post in the next few days. Welcome to Westpac!”

“Is that it?” asked Kaylani, surprised. She'd expected it to be a lot more complex and bureaucratic.

“That's it,” said Michael. “All you need to do now is give these numbers,” and he tapped the top sheet, “to your employer.”

“Cool,” said Kaylani. She felt she ought to read the documents but instead just folded them and shoved them in her rucksack.

“And if your banking needs change,” said Michael, “please don't hesitate to come and see me.”

“Well, that was surprisingly easy,” thought Kaylani when she'd left the bank. The weather, which had started quite hot and had cooled down since, was now threatening to rain. “So was getting the job. I had a feeling today was going to be a good day.”

She carried on walking, looking for the Op shop Anastasia had told her about and feeling, not happy exactly, but less out of place, less separate and disconnected from the world. A man, probably in his forties, smiled at her and, without thinking, she smiled back then walked on another ten or more paces panicking that he might have turned around and was now following her. She stopped outside a wide shop window and glanced back, pretending to look in, but he was nowhere to be seen.

“That's a relief,” she muttered and looked inside the shop properly.

The sight of three women sitting in chairs in front of mirrors having their hair done brought back memories and she stood there, fingering her own hair. She still had the hair tie she'd picked up from the bathroom floor holding her hair back in a short ponytail. Unconsciously she pulled it off and shook her hair loose. A faint image of herself reflected back in the glass window, superimposing her face on the head of the closest hairdresser. The girl was oblivious to Kaylani peering in while she worked on her customer and chatted happily but for a moment, when the girl glanced up, her hair melded with Kaylani's reflection, changing Kaylani's appearance dramatically. The girl smiled then turned back to her customer, leaving Kaylani alone with her reflection again.

“I want to be like that,” thought Kaylani. “I hate looking drab and ugly!”

A wave of self-loathing swept over her and she resolutely pushed open the door and marched inside.

Chapter Sixteen

The girl Kaylani had been watching saw Kaylani in her mirror. She patted her customer on the shoulder and said something then came over. From outside she'd looked to be in her mid twenties but up close she was clearly a decade older. She smelt of Chanel overlaid with hair spray.

"Hello," she said, taking in Kaylani's drab appearance. "I'm Bryony. How can I help you today?" She smiled but without enthusiasm.

"My, um, hair needs doing," said Kaylani, feeling intimidated.

"Quite," said Bryony. "What were you thinking of having done?"

"I, erm, don't really know," said Kaylani. "Maybe just tidying up and, um, a bit of styling."

"We can certainly do that for you," said Bryony, studying Kaylani's head. "Do you want to keep the same colour?"

"Ummm," said Kaylani, nervously fingering some tendrils.

"Perhaps a little something to heighten and enhance your natural colouring?" asked Bryony, realising Kaylani was nervous and thinking she was probably a little simple minded

"Yes," said Kaylani, pleased to have the decision more or less taken out of her hands. "Heighten and enhance." After all, she rationalised to herself, anything would be better than leaving it as it was.

"I can fit you in, ohh, tomorrow afternoon at four," said Bryony, scanning the appointments book. "With Cassandra. Would that be convenient?"

"Oh, um, great," said Kaylani. "Yes, tomorrow at four. Great."

"Excellent," said Bryony. "I'll just write that down for you so you don't forget."

“Thanks,” said Kaylani. “Umm, how much will it cost? Roughly?”

“About \$200,” said Bryony, glancing up at Kaylani as she wrote down the details.

Kaylani swallowed and tried to hide a grimace as that was a week's rent. Bryony must have noticed as she straightened up and lowered her voice slightly.

“We do have our Exclusive Ladies Club which offers a 15% discount to members,” she said sympathetically. “Normally that's only available on subsequent visits but I can waive that if you'd care to join now.”

“Umm ...,” said Kaylani hesitantly, wondering if this was a set up.

“That would take off \$30,” said Bryony helpfully, “bringing it down to only \$170. There are significant discounts on products too.”

“OK then,” said Kaylani, taking the plunge. After all, \$30 was \$30 and she didn't have to ever come back here again. There were plenty of other hairdressers and Bryony was probably only trying to drum up new business rather than trap her into something.

“Excellent,” said Bryony. “I'll just do you a membership card.”

A few moments later Kaylani was back on the street, clutching her appointment and membership cards and feeling both jubilant and dismayed at the same time. There was a bench at a tram stop nearby and she went over and sat down as she was feeling a little drained and breathless.

“Maybe I'd better not go to the Op Shop,” she thought. “This haircut's costing a lot more than I expected.”

She fished out her purse and slipped the appointment card inside then studied the membership card. It was gold with Exclusive Lady in silver in an ornate font. On the back was her name, neatly handwritten, and the salon's phone number.

“So I'm an Exclusive Lady now,” thought Kaylani, feeling rather

special. She ran her finger over the printing and smiled. "That's nice."

She sat there for a few minutes, enjoying the feeling of being an Exclusive Lady, then got up when a rattly old tram pulled up. Several people got off and a couple jostled her, making her feel nervous again.

She came across the Op shop almost by accident. It was just past Degraeves Street which she had to go down to get to the supermarket, on the other side of the road and a bit further on. She hesitated then decided it wouldn't hurt to see what sort of things they had even if she couldn't afford to buy anything until she'd at least been paid for Friday evening. There was always the possibility that Laurie didn't make her permanent so her stash of cash would have to see her through until she found another job.

The Op shop didn't look too prepossessing from the outside but Op shops never do. Still, it seemed to go back quite a long way inside and there were a lot of clothes. Mostly, as Kaylani quickly discovered, donated by larger ladies in the 14 to 24 size range. Still, rummaging through a pile of jeans Kaylani found a pair of size 8 off-white jeans and went to try them on. They were slightly too big but not big enough to make a size 6 feasible. They were only \$3 and looked clean and barely worn.

"Awesome," thought Kaylani, looking at herself in the half length mirror bolted to the back of the changing room. "I like the colour, too."

She put her skirt back on and, with the jeans folded over her arm, she continued to happily browse.

"Oh! That's nice," she thought, spotting a white dress. What made it distinctive was that it had two large pinky-red orchids on it. One going from boob to waist on the right and the other going from just above the knee to the bottom hem on the left. It was, unfortunately, a size 12. Kaylani hung it on the end of a rack and stepped back to assess it critically before checking the seams.

"Hmmm," she thought. "Good quality material and decent stitching."

The cut's very good too and the patterns only go to the seam which means I can unpick it and cut it down. Have to shift the shoulders straps a bit though but that won't be a problem. Definite possibility."

She looked around and spotted another mirror. Grabbing the dress she dumped her rucksack on the floor beside the mirror and the jeans on top of it then stepped back, holding the dress up in front of her.

"Oh my word!" she breathed as the bright cheerful colours breathed new life into her previously drab appearance. "I love it!"

The pinky-red of the orchids even went well with the pink tinted translucent frames of her glasses and, at only \$8, the dress was a snip.

"Cool," she thought, looking at the label. "Fidelity, they're a decent brand. This must have been quite expensive new. Certainly feels like it."

There wasn't any real decision to be made here which was helpful as Kaylani had been finding it difficult to make decisions lately. She neatly folded the dress and put it with the jeans. The only real problem with the dress was that it looked distinctly odd with her battered trainers.

That problem was solved a couple of aisles further over where the ladies shoes were. There was a nice pair of wedge heel sandals in her size in pale pink which went with the dress and, as an added benefit, the off-white jeans. They didn't go too well with the skirt she was wearing but that didn't matter. It was the dress that was important. There was a small scrape on the heel of one of the shoes but it wasn't noticeable unless you looked for it. At some point whoever had donated them had stood on chewing gum and been unable to get the gum completely off but that was on the sole and wouldn't be seen unless she put her feet on a table or something.

Armed with her new dress, jeans and shoes and a feeling of mild triumph, Kaylani marched down to the till where a pleasant faced older lady with grey hair was serving and got sidetracked by a fairly large painting leaning against the wall. She went over to get a closer look.

“Wow,” she said softly. “Would you just look at that!”

It was a painting of an idyllic tropical scene with a waterfall and pond surrounded by a luxuriant green forest. The colours alone made the painting strikingly vivid but what caught her eye and her imagination was a large bird, a parrot of some kind, that was perched on a branch in the foreground. It was brightly coloured and was gazing out over the pond, clearly deeply content with its lot in life.

“That would look so awesome in my room,” muttered Kaylani, looking at the painting from different angles. “Really brighten the place up. How much is it?”

There didn't seem to be a price tag so Kaylani tilted the picture forward so she could look at the back. There was a label at the bottom in the centre but she couldn't read it upside down so she let the picture drop back against the wall while she put her rucksack and purchases on a table covered with books. Hands now free she pulled the painting out completely and turn it around.

“Giles Brandish Art Gallery, Knightsbridge, London,” it read. “Parrot By Waterfall by Ainsley St Claremont 1992, £2495.”

“Frigging hell,” muttered Kaylani. “£2500? That's, what, five or six grand! Jesus!”

“That's a lovely painting, isn't it,” said a soft voice behind her.

“Yes it is,” said Kaylani, twisting to see the older woman who'd been at the till. “How much is it? I couldn't see a price tag.”

“There should be one on the frame,” said the lady. “Perhaps it's fallen off.”

“I can't see one on the floor,” said Kaylani, having a quick look.

“Oh well,” said the lady. “How about \$10?”

“Sounds good to me,” said Kaylani. “I'll take it.”

“That’s a shame,” said the lady, smiling. “I was rather hoping it wouldn’t sell then I could have it.”

“Oh!” said Kaylani surprised and a little disappointed. “Well, if you really want ...”

“I’m only teasing you,” said the lady, reaching out to give Kaylani’s wrist a friendly squeeze. “It’s yours.”

“If you’re sure ...” said Kaylani.

“Of course, dear,” said the lady. “Is there anything else you’re looking for?”

“No, just this,” said Kaylani, “and these.” She touched the clothes on the book table.

“How nice,” said the lady, touching the dress. “You know, I rather think it goes with the painting. It has a tropical look about it.”

“Perhaps,” said Kaylani doubtfully. She gathered up her clothes and rucksack in one hand and awkwardly carried the painting in the other.

“How much is that?” asked Kaylani as she waited at the till while the lady worked her way through her various purchases, putting the clothes and shoes in a carry bag. She pointed to a stuffed cat of some description, tucked away in a corner behind the till. It was fifty or sixty centimetres tall and could have been a small tiger or a large tabby, it was difficult to tell. Importantly though the cat had a happy face with a broad smile and was sitting upright with its tail curved around its haunches. It seems to be looking straight at Kaylani and saying “I love you! Please take me home with you!”

“Oh the stuffed toy?” asked the woman glancing where Kaylani was pointing. “All stuffed toys are \$2.”

“Awesome,” said Kaylani. “I’ll have that too.”

The lady reached over and picked up the cat by its ears. Kaylani

wincing.

“So that’ll be \$28 all together,” said the lady, putting the cat on the counter. “Would you like some earrings?” She slid a tray of boxes of earrings along the counter towards Kaylani. “They’re on special. Buy two pairs and get a pair free.”

“How much are they?” asked Kaylani, bending over to have a look.

“\$2 a pair,” said the lady, “except for those in this box which are \$6 a pair.”

“So that’s basically three pairs for \$4?” said Kaylani, holding up a rather nice pair of earrings. They were gold, or more likely imitation gold, and had two slim gold rectangles dangling down. She put them down on top of her new dress.

“Yes,” said the lady as someone came up to stand behind Kaylani.

Kaylani chose another pair which had gold crescent moons and, because the woman behind her coughed and made Kaylani feel under pressure, a pair which were pale green coloured drop pendants with a twist in them.

“I’ll just put the earrings in a bag,” said the lady, reaching under the counter. She brought out a small blue jewellery pouch and slipped the earrings inside. “\$32.”

Kaylani took her purse out of her rucksack and handed over her \$50 note. She slipped the jewellery bag inside one of the rucksack’s pouches while the lady counted out her change then put her purse back inside the rucksack. After a brief hesitation she stuffed the cat inside the rucksack as well and tied the cord around its neck. With the rucksack on her back she could carry the shopping bag in one hand and the painting in the other.

“So, \$18 dollars left,” she thought standing outside the Op shop. “Shall I go to the supermarket or not bother? I’ve still got a packet of pot noodles.”

Either way she had to go down Degrares Street and would be passing the supermarket so she headed off, the tiger – she'd decided it probably was a tiger and even if it wasn't, a tiger would go well with her tropical painting – happily watching everything that was going on behind her.

Halfway down Degrares Street she stopped walking to look at the painting again.

“Damn that's awesome,” she thought and smiled.

“Nice,” said a plump young man in a business suit and overly long hair, stopping to look at the painting as well. “Is that a Constable?”

“Umm, I don't think so,” said Kaylani. “The label on the back says Ainsley somebody.”

“Who?” asked the young man.

“Umm, Ainsley St Claremont,” said Kaylani, turning the picture round to look at the label.

“Never heard of him,” said the man. “Or her. Nice though. I particularly like the iguana in the background.”

“What iguana?” asked Kaylani, propping the picture against the wall so she could look at it better.

“There,” said the man, pointing to a small iguana sunning itself on a rock beside the waterfall.

“Oh yeah!” exclaimed Kaylani, seeing it for the first time.

“Did you paint that?” asked a middle aged man in shorts. The camera around his neck suggested he was a tourist. “You're a street artist?”

“No, I've just bought it,” said Kaylani, feeling flustered.

“Do you want to buy it?” asked the plump young man, looking at the tourist.

"I don't know," said the tourist, looking thoughtfully at the painting. "How much?"

"\$200," said the young man.

"It's not for sale!" exclaimed Kaylani, scowling at everyone.

"Is it sold then?" asked a thirty something woman, pausing to see what was going on. "It'd look lovely outside the bathroom, don't you think, Frank?"

"If you say so, Beverly," said Frank disinterestedly, stopping beside her. He pulled out his wallet. "How much is it?"

"It's not for sale!" exclaimed Kaylani, snatching up her painting. "Go away everybody. Go away!"

"There's no need to be rude," sniffed Beverly. "Come on Frank."

"I could have got you a lot more than two hundred bucks," said the plump man as the tourist frowned and walked off. "Maybe even five. You're sure it's not a Constable?"

"Go away," said Kaylani firmly, even though she was trembling with agitation. "Go. Away."

"Jesus, what a no hoper," said the young man disgustedly. "You deserve to be poor, you know that?"

He walked away a few paces then looked back and shook his head despairingly. "Maybe even a thousand," he muttered. "What a waste!"

"And good riddance to you too," muttered Kaylani, holding her painting protectively. "And a fat lot of use you were!" The tiger just smiled happily back at her.

The prospect of a single packet of pot noodles as comfort food led Kaylani into the supermarket when she reached it. After wandering the aisles aimlessly and getting the painting repeatedly caught up in other shoppers, Kaylani came desperately close to buying a couple

more four packs of pot noodles but managed to talk herself out of it. In the end she bought a dozen eggs, a loaf of sliced multigrain bread, a small tub of margarine, one tomato and a 100g bar of chocolate. With trepidation she approached the checkout, already wondering which item to give up if the total came to more than \$18 but her luck was in. She put the 20 cents she got in change in her purse and nearly ripped the painting to shreds on a metal corner of the shelf which was at just the perfect height for putting shopping bags while they were packed.

"I'm exhausted," she muttered, propping the painting against the window of The House Of Pooh. She dumped her shopping bag on the ground and slipped off her rucksack to get her key out. "What a day."

Instead of putting the key in the lock she leaned forward and pressed her forehead against the door for a good thirty seconds then twisted round so her back was against the door.

"I'm bloody knackered," she said out loud with her eyes shut.

"That's because you don't eat properly or exercise," said Mary, appearing around the corner of The House Of Pooh. "Been shopping have you? Hey, nice picture. Where did you get it?"

"Ohh, an Op shop in Whatsits Street," said Kaylani, opening her eyes reluctantly. "You know, the next one up."

"Flinders Lane, you mean?" asked Mary. "Oh, that one opposite Degraes Street?"

"Yeah I think so," said Kaylani, prising herself away from the door."

"Oh how delightful!" said a creepy sounding voice as the door to Lateral Books opened. "I hear voices and what do I find? The two most charming ladies of my acquaintance, no less. The heavens are smiling on me today, or perhaps the Devil has come to tempt me!"

"You what?" said Mary, staring at him as though he was a cockroach.

"Tempt away, say I," said Wallace, one eye looking at Mary and the

other at Kaylani, “for temptation is my Mistress! And speaking of temptation, can I tempt you both into my lair?”

Chapter Seventeen

“Not a hope in hell, mate,” said Mary, looking at him contemptuously as Kaylani stiffened and pressed back against the door. “Go on, scram.”

She reached around Kaylani to push her key in the lock. The door opened suddenly and Kaylani stumbled backwards. She lashed out wildly, trying to grab something, and Mary caught her hand.

“Steady on girl,” she said, hauling her effortlessly upright again.

“You are magnificent!” said Wallace, leering at Mary. “Such controlled power! So erotic and yet so enticingly feminine!”

“Eff off, shithead,” said Mary, pushing him aside with her shoulder. She released Kaylani who took a couple of steps inside while rubbing her hand. Mary had a very strong grip.

“Your words cut me to the core of my being, angel of my dreams,” said Wallace, retreating inside his lair. “But rest assured ...” Mary pulled his door shut so his words got cut off.

“Thanks,” said Kaylani, adjusting her glasses which had nearly fallen off and were sitting askew on her nose. “He freaks me out.”

“Oh don't let him get to you,” said Mary dismissively. She stooped to pick up Kaylani's rucksack and carry bag. “He's all mouth. There you go.” She handed the bag and rucksack to Kaylani and picked up the painting. “I'll follow you up.”

“Oh, right, thanks,” said Kaylani, going up the stairs.

“So you settling in all right?” asked Mary, following.

“Yes, very well thanks,” said Kaylani.

Anastasia's door was ajar but, to Kaylani's relief she wasn't in the kitchen. Wallace's sudden appearance had made her feel agitated inside and she didn't feel up to talking to Anastasia, especially as

Anastasia would want to see her new dress and would probably want to talk about hairstyles.

“Found a job yet?” asked Mary.

“No, not yet,” said Kaylani, pausing outside her door. She didn't want to open it with Mary there in case Mary wanted to come in for a chat. “Are you back from work?”

“Yup,” said Mary, propping the picture against the wall beside Kaylani's door. “Just going to get changed and have some tucker then I'm off to the gym.”

“Ahh, good,” said Kaylani, waiting for Mary to open her door before putting her key in her lock. “Well, thanks for your help.”

“No worries, hun,” said Mary. “Catch you later.” She went inside her room and casually pushed the door almost shut.

Relieved, Kaylani opened her door and dumped her rucksack and bag on the floor then leaned around the door frame to get the painting. The front door slammed so she quickly shut her door and leant against it as Jack ran up the stairs. He paused outside her door and Kaylani held her breath. Her heart seemed to thump loudly enough for him to hear but he didn't and, after a few moments, he ran up the next flight.

Kaylani twisted around so her back was to the door and closed her eyes, her mind blank. She took a few deep breaths, wheezing slightly, then opened her eyes. The room was as she'd left it but felt stuffy. Dumping the painting against the door she walked slowly over to one of the windows. Wallace was walking down the alley. She watched until he was out of sight then undid the catch and lifted the window so it was half open. A mild warm breeze came in and Kaylani inhaled gratefully. The traffic noise was much louder with the window open but Kaylani didn't care. The sounds were all outside her and somehow part of a different world, a world that did not include her. Her world was this room and inside her head. This was where she felt safe.

“Hello Pooh, hello Puss,” she said quietly, turning round to look at

them.

Neither answered but she felt they were both pleased to see her. It was a nice feeling. Reassured, she kicked off her trainers then unzipped her skirt and tossed it over the back of the armchair. Ambling over to her bed she pulled off her t-shirt and undid her bra and let them fall on the floor.

“Hello bed,” she crooned then collapsed on it in just her undies. “What a day! I’m so glad to be home.”

She rolled onto her side, facing the wall, and lay for a few moments but it didn’t feel right so she rolled over onto the other side so she was facing the room.

“Yes,” she muttered, looking around. “This is home.”

She lay there for a while letting her eyes slowly roam around the room, just appreciating it for what it was.

“Where shall I put my painting?” she wondered. “Between the windows or opposite Pooh? I’m going to need a nail or something as well. Or maybe over the bed? No, I think opposite Pooh would look best. If I put it between the windows it’ll get lost in the light and if I put it over the bed I won’t be able to see it. And I mustn’t forget my appointment tomorrow. It’s not until four.”

Alarmed she suddenly sat up.

“How will I know when it’s time?” she asked out loud. “I don’t have a clock or anything! Shit, maybe I should have got a cheap watch at the Op shop. Still, I can always pop out first thing in the morning and get one.”

Calmed, she lay back down and snuggled into her pillow.

“And I’ve got to go to that market,” she thought, her gaze falling on her carry bag. “I need some scissors, needles and pins. Oh and some white thread. Probably a tape measure as well. It’s going to look lovely when it’s done.” Within a minute she had drifted off to sleep, perhaps

happier than she had been at any time in the last few years.

She didn't sleep for long. Perhaps an hour, certainly no more. It was still daylight outside although perhaps the breeze coming through the window was a tad cooler. She stretched then lay on her back.

"I'm feeling hungry," she thought in surprise. Her hand pressed her belly and she fancied she felt the ripples of a hunger pang through her fingertips. "Wow, maybe my appetite is coming back. I'll get up in a moment and go and make a fried egg sandwich."

She started to move her hands over her flat belly and explored her right hip where it jutted up but resolutely ignored the left hip.

"Yes, too thin," she muttered and ran her hand over her breasts. "And they're disappearing. I should eat more."

With a sigh she sat up then reached over and picked up her t-shirt from the floor. Her bra she left where it was. No one was going to see it. She pulled the t-shirt over her head then wandered over to the door to pick up her rucksack.

"Where's my painting?" she exclaimed, staring at the door. "Where'd that go?"

Confused she looked around the room then froze. The painting was hanging on the wall, just where she was going to put it. Opposite Pooh.

"What the hell?" she muttered. "How'd the hell did it get there?"

She walked over and stared at it then looked back at the door. With a frown she poked the side of the painting. It shifted to the side then slid back when she took her finger away. Intrigued she pulled the frame a little way from the wall and peered behind. The wire at the back was hung on a small nail that protruded from the wall.

"Weird," she said, letting go of the picture. "I don't remember doing that. Did I do that, Pooh? Did I hang the painting?"

She pursed her lips then ran over to the door. It was locked.

"I must have," she muttered, turning to look back at the painting. "Unless someone climbed in the window but why would someone climb in and hang a painting for me? This it, like totally weird. How could I forget hanging it? Where'd I get the nail anyway?"

She walked over to the window and peered out then looked back at the painting.

"There must have been a nail already there," she thought. "I don't remember seeing one but I must have spotted it and got up, hung the painting then gone back to bed. Doesn't make sense otherwise."

She stepped over to the armchair and picked up her skirt.

"Was it you, Pooh?" she asked out loud, stepping into the skirt. "Or you, Puss? Nah, must have been me. After all, no one else knew where I wanted to put it. Bit of luck there was a nail in the right place."

She zipped up her skirt then gazed at the painting, admiring it. She could easily imagine she was in the painting as well, perhaps sitting beside the pond or even swimming in it.

"No," she muttered, her hand moving unconsciously to cover the scar on her hip even though she had her skirt on. "No swimming. Someone might see. Maybe just a picnic then. Lovely picture though. Awesome!"

After a while she went over to the door and picked up her rucksack. She freed the tiger from its prison and tossed the rucksack onto the armchair. Then she wandered around the room before deciding to put the tiger beside the door.

"As a guard," she muttered and smiled. "A protector. He needs a name though. Hah, no real decision there, eh Pooh?" She glanced at Pooh then back at the tiger. "Tigger, what else would he be called?"

She patted Tigger on the head then picked up the carry bag and took it over to the table.

“Yes, that’s an awesome dress,” she thought, holding it up. “It feels nice too and if I get the alterations just right it’ll be a bit slinky as well.”

She neatly laid the dress on the table, letting the bottom hem and top straps hang over the edges. She tweaked the sides a little so the dress lay flat with no wrinkles.

“Yes,” she thought. “I’ll get the scissors tomorrow and work on it after I’ve had my hair done.”

She got her new off-white jeans out of the bag as well and left them neatly folded beside the dress.

“Where’s my earrings?” she muttered, peering inside the bag. “Where’ve they got to? Ah! Silly me!”

She picked up the rucksack and went through its side pockets. With a small sigh of satisfaction she found the jewellery bag. She tossed the rucksack back on the armchair again and carefully emptied the little bag onto the table.

“These are really nice,” she thought, inspecting all three pairs. “Even these green ones. I won’t wear them though until I’ve had my hair done.”

She laid them neatly in their pairs on top of her jeans, trying to imagine how they’d look on her then snatched them up and hurried down to the bathroom to try them on in front of the mirror.

“Love them,” she muttered, twisting her head from side to side with the gold rectangular pendants in her ears. “Yeah, really nice.”

“Hello, hello,” said Anastasia, peering in the door which Kaylani had forgotten to close. “Got some earrings have you?”

“Oh hello,” said Kaylani, a little miffed to have company. “Yes, I bought them at that Op shop you told me about.”

“Nice,” said Anastasia, looking at the earrings she had in. “They suit

you. These are nice too,” and she picked up the green pendants.

“Yes,” said Kaylani, “but I don't really have anything to wear with them.” She resented Anastasia picking up her earrings. They were hers!

Anastasia saw Kaylani's expression and put the earrings back on the side of the sink. One slid off and nearly went down the plug hole but Kaylani caught it in time and picked up the others as well, just in case.

“Sorry,” said Anastasia. “Good save though. So why don't you get something to go with those green ones?”

“I probably will,” said Kaylani, taking out the rectangular earrings. “I got a dress too today.” She regretted saying that as soon as she'd said it but it was out there now.

“Oooh,” said Anastasia. “Can I see?”

“It's too big for me,” said Kaylani, prevaricating. “I need to cut it down a couple of sizes first.”

“Oh, that's OK,” said Anastasia, flapping her hand. “I just want to see what you look like in something decent. It doesn't matter if it doesn't fit yet. Where is it? Up in your room?”

She turned to leave the bathroom and Kaylani had a momentary panic.

“Oh, um, I'll bring it down and show you,” she said hastily and put her hand out to stop her.

“It's no trouble to go upstairs,” said Anastasia, a slight frown crossing her face. “It's only one flight.”

“I'll bring it down,” said Kaylani. “I'm just about to do some dinner anyway.”

“Oh, OK,” said Anastasia, a little puzzled. “Why doesn't she want me

in her room?" she thought. "What's she so secretive about?"

"Great," said Kaylani, relieved.

She squeezed past Anastasia and fled upstairs to her room. With the door safely shut she paused for breath then unclasped her hand and checked all the earrings were there. They were so she walked over to the table and laid them neatly, one by one, on her white jeans.

"Yes, they're mine," she muttered, stroking them. "And no one's going to take them away from me."

Reluctantly she picked up her new dress then got the rucksack from the armchair as it had her food shopping in it.

"Well, here it is," she said, going into the kitchen. She put the rucksack down and held up the dress.

"Oh that's nice," said Anastasia approvingly. She reached out to touch it and Kaylani fought an urge to jerk it away. "Very nice. Good material too."

"Yes," said Kaylani. "It's a Fidelity."

"Really?" said Anastasia, raising her eyebrows. "Don't usually get much of their stuff at the Op shop. You did get it at the Op shop or did you buy it new? It looks new."

"Yes, I got it at the Op shop," said Kaylani, holding the dress to her chest and smoothing one of the sides around her waist.

"The colouring suits you," said Anastasia, looking her up and down. "Two sizes too big, hmm? Why not keep it as a loose dress. It's got the style for it."

"I could," said Kaylani, looking down at herself, "but I want a tighter dress."

"Well, you're slim enough," said Anastasia. "You could use another necklace as well. That style is crying out for a longer necklace."

"I'll keep an eye out," said Kaylani, neatly folding the dress. "Oh, and I've made an appointment with a hairdresser. Tomorrow."

"Excellent," said Anastasia, turning to put the kettle on. "Which one?"

"Exclusive Ladies," said Kaylani, putting the dress on a chair as there were dirty dishes on the table. "In Flinders Lane."

"Wow!" exclaimed Anastasia, turning back to look at her in surprise. "I thought you were a poor student?"

"What do you mean?" asked Kaylani, frowning.

"They're just about the most expensive around here," said Anastasia. "Very good, mind you, but expensive. I didn't think you'd be able to afford them."

"Oh," said Kaylani, a little shamefaced. "I didn't know. Umm, I just went in on the off chance."

"They'll make a new woman of you," said Anastasia, reaching out and squeezing Kaylani's upper arm sympathetically.

"I hope so," said Kaylani with an embarrassed laugh. She moved her arm slightly as she didn't want to be touched and Anastasia dropped her hand. "I don't much like the old me."

"Why ever not?" asked Anastasia, frowning. "There's no shame in being natural and not wearing makeup or whatever. Was it what I said yesterday?"

"Not really," said Kaylani. "You were right and I knew it. I just hadn't got around to doing anything about it." She pulled open a cupboard door. "Do we have a frying pan?"

"Bottom drawer, under the cooker," said Anastasia. "What are you going to cook? I don't think pot noodles work in a frying pan."

"Is she having a dig at me?" wondered Kaylani, not answering. She found a frying pan and put it on the stove then turned to get her

carton of eggs from her rucksack.

"I wasn't having a dig at you," said Anastasia, watching as Kaylani put a little margarine in the pan. "I was only making a silly little joke."

"That's OK," said Kaylani, keeping her back to Anastasia.

"Have I upset you?" asked Anastasia. She reached over and touched Kaylani's shoulder, making her jump and pull away.

"No," said Kaylani. "I, um, just don't like talking about myself. That's all."

"Is it because of the commune?" asked Anastasia.

"What commune?" demanded Kaylani, whirling around with a spatula in her hand. "Who told you I was in a commune?"

"No one," said Anastasia, backing away and sitting on a chair. "Why? Were you?"

"No," said Kaylani.

"So where were you?" asked Anastasia. "Before here."

"I don't want to talk about it," said Kaylani tersely, cracking a couple of eggs into the pan.

"OK, OK" said Anastasia. "Just wanted to get to know you a little better, that's all. Nothing wrong with communes. I was in one myself for a couple of years, back in the 90s. Not everyone's cup of tea but I enjoyed it at the time. Now look at me," and she laughed.

Kaylani didn't answer. She just concentrated on her eggs. Anastasia watched her for a while wondering why Kaylani was so uptight. It was obvious there was something in her background that had made her like this and Anastasia's instinct as an archivist and researcher was just itching to find out what it was.

"So have you seen our resident ghost yet?" asked Anastasia as the

silence started to become oppressive.

Kaylani looked up from buttering the bread for her sandwiches.

“You mean Sarah?” she asked. “No, not yet. I’ve heard her a few times though.”

“Not Sarah,” said Anastasia, enjoying the moment. “We’ve got a real ghost here. She’s been seen a few times.”

Chapter Eighteen

Kaylani just looked blankly at Anastasia then scowled before quickly shovelling the eggs onto the bread any old how. She slapped the other two slices on top, picked up the plate and walked out without saying a word. Anastasia watched her with a bemused air.

“Are you alright, Kaylani?” she asked as Kaylani marched up the stairs. Kaylani didn't answer.

Back in her room, Kaylani dumped her plate of sandwiches down on the table and went and stood by the window, staring down at the empty alley below.

“She knows,” she thought. “Bloody Jack must have told her and she's trying it on for herself. She must think I'm really stupid if I'm going to fall for that load of crap again. Ghosts for crying out loud! Does she really think I'm going to believe her nonsense? What's she playing at, eh? What's her game? Is she trying to scare me? Get me running to her every time I hear a little noise or something? Stupid bitch! No way is that cow ever going to control me. I fell for it with those fucking aliens but ghosts? Who's she trying to kid? Well she can go screw herself as far as I'm concerned.”

Kaylani watched as a couple of tourist types wandered down the alley and peered in The House Of Pooh's window. A few snatches of conversation floated up but they weren't English. Then they wandered to the end of the alley and peered through the chain link fence.

“She'll probably bang on the ceiling a few times in the middle of the night,” thought Kaylani, watching them walk back down the alley. “She'll try to convince me it's her ghost but it won't be. It'll be her trying to scare me. Well, I won't be scared since I'll know it's her. What's she after, I wonder? She knows I don't have any money and I didn't tell her about the job. Frigging hell, what if she's some sort of lesbian and is trying to get me to be her sex slave or something? Or bondage? Maybe she's working with that creepy shit in the bookshop and they've got a dungeon in the basement. They probably think they'll be able to freak me out with this stupid ghost story then get me down into their dungeon where they'll say I'll be safe. Like Dexter

telling me I'll be safe when the aliens come and get us.”

She turned away from the window and glowered at the floor. Was Anastasia looking up at the ceiling plotting what to do next?

“Oh shit!” exclaimed Kaylani, going rigid. “What if she's got a speaker hidden in this room? What if she's planning on making weird noises and trying that auto-suggestion shit on me? What if she's got a frigging camera in here and she's watching me?”

Semi-panicked Kaylani ran over to the wardrobe and wrenched the doors open. There was nothing in there but a few empty clothes hangers but she poked and prodded then pulled every drawer out of the chest of drawers to see if there was anything inside or fixed to the bottoms of the drawers. Then she pulled the chest of drawers away from the wall and peered behind.

“Maybe it's under the bed,” she thought and dragged all the bedding off and left it in a heap on the floor. She heaved up the mattress and peered through the wire springs of the bed frame. There was plenty of dust down there but nothing that looked remotely like a speaker or a camera. She let the mattress fall back then slowly rotated, studying the room.

“Under the table,” she thought and got on her hands and knees to investigate. Then she pushed the armchair over and checked under that.

“It's got to be here somewhere,” she thought, abandoning the armchair.

Again she rotated, this time studying the tops of the walls and the corners. There were some spiders' webs and she dragged the upright chair over to each corner so she could stand on it to wipe away the webs in case there was something hidden behind.

“Hah!” she exclaimed, surveying the room while standing on the chair. “The light! I bet it's in the shade!”

She jumped off the chair and dragged it under the light. She twisted

the shade this way and that then upside down but it was just an ordinary light shade. Dusty and dirty admittedly but with nothing concealed in or on it. She even took out the light bulb but it was just an ordinary bulb. Beginning to sweat from the activity, she walked round the room again. She even twisted and rattled the door knob but it seemed to be a perfectly ordinary door knob with nothing hidden inside.

In the end she gave up, having found nothing remotely suspicious and sat on the chair that still stood under the light.

“Jesus, what a mess,” she muttered, looking at the bedding and her few possessions scattered on the floor. “I suppose I’d better tidy up. Why am I sweating? Is it me or has it got hot and close in here?”

She frowned then got up and went to stand at the window again. The cooling breeze had gone and the air outside was now thick and heavy. Peering up she could see dark clouds.

“Must be a storm coming,” she thought.

She opened the other window to try and get a breeze circulating then went over to the door to turn the light on as it was getting dark inside. She listened for a few moments then cautiously opened the door and peered out. The landing was dark and she could hear Anastasia’s TV coming faintly from below. She debated for a few moments then left the door a little ajar to encourage any breeze. Then she went over and pulled the armchair upright again.

“Well, that was a waste of time,” she thought, sitting down. “Maybe this is what Anastasia wanted after all. To get inside my head. Maybe she’s down there now, laughing herself silly as she listens to me running round up here trying to find some non-existent speakers or whatever. Maybe it’s all just a mind game? To see how far she can push me?”

She sat there for a few more moments, then felt her belly rumble.

“I suppose I should eat,” she muttered, eyeing the plate of egg sandwiches on the table. “I did cook the damned things after all.”

She sighed and reached over for the plate then sat there looking at the sandwiches with distaste. The eggs were cold and the uncooked yolks had oozed out and congealed. One sandwich was mostly just bread with the egg half on the plate. She lifted up the top slice of bread and pulled the cold fried egg more or less inside before putting the bread back.

“Didn't even salt it,” she thought mournfully and bit into it. She gagged a little and had to make herself swallow but she managed to eat all but the crust of one sandwich and perhaps half of the other then gave up. Her belly had stopped rumbling and that was the main thing.

“So what do you reckon, Pooh?” she asked, pushing the plate onto the table. “You think Anastasia's trying to get inside my head?” She glanced over at the poster. Pooh twisted to look over his shoulder at her and shrugged.

“Yeah,” said Kaylani, “you're right. Who cares, huh?”

With a sigh she got out of the armchair and made her bed. Then she put the drawers back in the chest of drawers and put her things back inside. She changed into her pyjamas then turned off the light before lying on top of the bed. The air was still thick and humid and what breeze came in the windows didn't get as far as the bed. After a while she took off her pyjamas and lay naked on the bed. Even though it was dark she felt very exposed and after a couple of minutes pulled up a corner of the blanket so it covered the scars on her hip.

Sleep didn't come though. Anastasia's attempt to scare her with a ghost brought back memories of Dexter. She'd trusted him, loved him even and thought he'd loved her. Giselle too in her own strange way. Anastasia wasn't a patch on either of them. She just didn't have the same believability, the same persuasiveness. Kaylani tossed and turned for what seemed like hours, a sheen of sweat on her skin making her feel dirty. Then a shaft of light fell across her face and up the wall. She jerked over. The light was coming from where she'd left her door ajar.

“Oh no,” muttered Kaylani, staring in alarm. Maybe there was a ghost

after all?

Then someone started to come up the stairs. A slow steady pattern of footsteps, accompanied by creaks from the stairs themselves.

“Oh thank God,” she muttered as Mary’s door opened then closed. A few seconds later the light went off.

Perturbed at how far Anastasia’s brief mention of a ghost had got inside her head, Kaylani lay there for a while, her ears straining for every little sound. Then she got up and padded over to the door and closed it very quietly. She locked it then walked softly over to the window and looked down.

“It must be late,” she thought, hearing only a few cars on Flinders Street. “Jesus! When’s this storm going to break?” She fanned her face and chest with her hands and contemplated going to have a shower.

“But Anastasia’s right next to the bathroom,” she thought. “She might hear me.”

“So lock the door,” her left, logical, brain said.

“But she might wait outside the door for me to finish,” her right brain replied.

“So what if she does?” her left brain said. “Just walk past and come back upstairs.”

“She might follow me up,” her right brain said.

“Jesus!” said her left brain. “Just sweat then!”

“Yeah,” said her right brain. “Or go for a walk outside. It’ll be cooler there.”

“As if,” said her left brain contemptuously then sighed. “Better put some clothes on then.”

Kaylani giggled at the thought of walking naked through the streets of

Melbourne in the rain then she hurriedly pulled on her skirt and t-shirt when she realised someone might see her. They'd look at her scars and know the truth about her.

She listened at the door for a few moments then quietly opened it and peered out. It seemed safe so she crept out and quietly pulled the door shut behind her. Stepping on the sides of the stairs so they didn't creak she slowly made her way down and out through the front door into the alley. It wasn't noticeably cooler and there was no breeze at all at ground level.

"I wonder what time it is?" she thought, staring down the alley towards Flinders Street. "It must be after nine as the café's closed."

There were still lights on in the tattooist's but The House Of Pooh and Lantern Books were dark. She was about to walk down to Flinders Street and see what was going on down there but the thought of running into people who might speak to her put her off. Instead she turned to go back inside then felt an urge to go and look through the chain link fence at the other end of the alley.

"Maybe I'll see this ghost there," she thought and laughed to herself even as she felt fluttery and shivery inside.

"There is no ghost," she told herself firmly. "Anastasia was bullshitting you."

She started up the alley then hesitated and turned back to the front door.

"Wuss," she muttered. "There's nothing there!"

She turned back and made herself walk the few steps past Lantern Books to the chain link fence and peered through. It wasn't actually that dark as there were several lights on in the buildings on the other side and one building had a spotlight of some sort on the roof that shone down. It wasn't particularly bright but it left a few shadows.

She stood there for a while, her fingers entwined in the mesh of the fence then felt an unaccountable urge to go inside, to wander around

the construction site. Or perhaps it was just an urge to get away from the houses in the alley. She pulled on the chain links, wondering if she'd be able to climb over. Then she remembered where the fence had been pulled away from the wall of the ruined house next to Lantern Books.

"I could squeeze through there," she thought, her eyes searching for the gap. "Other people have. They've probably been using it as a shortcut to Flinders Lane."

She let go of the chain link fence and started to edge over, her eyes probing the darkness close to the wall.

"Oi!" shouted someone. "What the eff are you up to?"

An icy shaft stabbed through Kaylani's bowels and she suddenly wanted to pee. She twisted round in alarm, her back pressed hard against the fence. A very large man was hurrying up the alley towards her.

"Whatever you're effing up to," he growled, pointing at her, "effing do it someplace else, OK."

He came up quite close and towered over Kaylani as she hung on to the fence. She couldn't see his face but he had long hair, shaved at the sides, and a long beard and his shoulders seemed to fill the alley.

"Um, I'm sorry," she muttered, fear twisting her insides.

"Go on, bugger off," he growled. "Now."

Kaylani didn't move. Her hands were locked in the mesh of the fence and she was having trouble staying upright.

"You heard me," said the man dangerously. "Fuck off out of here."

"But I live here," stuttered Kaylani. The familiar constriction in her throat and chest was tightening and she started to wheeze.

"Nah you don't," said the man. "I know everyone what lives along

here and you ain't one of 'em. Move it or do I have to drag you out?"

"But I live there," she said weakly, nodding towards The House Of Pooh. She wished she could unlock a hand so she could point. "Above Anastasia."

The man stared at her.

"Who else lives there?" he demanded.

"Um, um, um," muttered Kaylani, desperately trying to remember Jack's name. "That student guy, umm, oh and Sarah!"

"Oh," said the man. "So who are you?"

"Kaylani," said Kaylani. "Umm, Kaylani Tawney." She managed to get one hand working again and nervously touched her glasses. She took several deep wheezy breaths and remembered she'd left her inhaler inside her room.

The man lifted his hand and waved a finger at her.

"Oh yeah," he said thoughtfully. "Yeah, Mallow said something about a new girl. That you, is it?"

"Yes," said Kaylani. It seemed as though the danger had passed. Her heartbeat slowed a little and the constriction in her chest began to ease.

"Right you are, then," he said, backing off a little. "Thought you was a druggie or a derro or something. Me name's Spike. I run that there tattoo shop."

He held out his hand and, after a few moments, Kaylani reached out and touched it.

"Hi," she said, unable to think of anything else to say.

"Just came out for a smoko like," said Spike, amiable now he knew who she was. "Saw you up the end here. Hope I didn't scare you

none.”

“No, you didn't scare me,” said Kaylani weakly. She hadn't been so petrified for years.

“That's all right then,” said Spike. He looked down the alley then back at Kaylani. “Used to get a lot of derros and druggies up here. Couple of 'em OD'd. Mallow didn't like it, see, so I said I'd keep me eyes open.

“And thank you for that,” said Kaylani, beginning to recover.

“Argh, no sweat,” said Spike, opening a packet of cigarettes. “Want one?”

“No thanks,” said Kaylani then, afraid she might have offended him, she added “I'm asthmatic.”

“Oh, right,” said Spike. He looked down at his cigarettes then put them in the pocket of his jeans. “Right, see ya round then eh. Kaylani, yeah?”

“Yeah,” said Kaylani. “Umm, see you, ah, Spike.”

He nodded abruptly then turned and ambled off up the alley, lighting a cigarette on the way.

“Fuck,” exclaimed Kaylani, dropping her hands to her knees and focusing on breathing.

The tightness in her chest dissipated but the tightness in her throat remained so she slowly made her way back to her room, careless of the creaks of the stairs. Two deep sucks on her inhaler later she felt better.

“No bloody ghost would dare come here,” she muttered with a little laugh. “That Spike would scare the undead to death!”

She contemplated eating the remaining half of her sandwich but it looked quite disgusting so she tossed it out the window instead. Then

she got undressed again and got back into bed.

“Actually, it's good he's here,” she thought after a while. “Bit like he's protecting me.”

An almighty crash of thunder woke her some time later. She lay there listening to the rain slash down then the room was lit up by a flash of lightning and thunder crashed again a moment later.

“Oh Jesus,” she exclaimed. “The windows!”

She jumped out of bed and ran over, feeling the dampness from the rain coming in, on her feet. She slammed both windows shut then stood at one, looking down. The alley seemed to be awash.

“At least it's cooler,” she thought and went back to bed.

A few moments later she sat up in alarm as something scabbled at the side of the bed.

“What the ...?” she exclaimed, fear rising again. “Who's that?”

“It's only me,” said a friendly growly sort of voice.

“Who's me?” demanded Kaylani, peering at the shape she could see near the bottom of the bed. She could only make out a dark outline but it didn't seem to be overly large nor threatening.

“I'm Tigger,” said Tigger. “Can I get into bed with you? I'm feeling a little scared and lonely. Groww!”

Chapter Nineteen

Nervously Kaylani reached down and touched the dark shape. It had short fairly coarse fur and, as her hand explored, she could make out ears and whiskers. Whatever it was it felt like the stuffed cat she'd bought from the Op shop and wasn't in the least bit threatening.

“Growwww!” said Tigger encouragingly.

“Well at least you're not a ghost,” said Kaylani softly. “And I'm feeling scared and lonely too. Come on.”

She reached down and helped Tigger get on the bed.

“Thank you!” said Tigger brightly and started exploring the bed.

“OK, this is kind of weird,” muttered Kaylani, lying back down.

“What's your name?” asked Tigger, jumping on her chest. “I'm Tigger!”

“Oofff,” exclaimed Kaylani at the sudden impact. “You're hurting me!” She grabbed him and pushed him down so he was on the bed beside her hip. “There, that's better. I'm Kaylani.”

“Sorry,” said Tigger in an apologetic yet cheerful way. He shuffled around a little and made himself comfortable.

Another flash of lightning lit the room and, a few seconds later, another heavy peal of thunder. Tigger pushed himself hard against her and Kaylani reached down to pat him reassuringly.

“I must be going mad,” she thought and pursed her lips in the darkness. Then she smiled. “I suppose it was inevitable,” she muttered. “Too much stress.”

“Growwww,” rumbled Tigger sleepily. “Good night!”

* * *

It was still raining heavily when Kaylani woke up but she didn't notice the rain at first. What she noticed was that she was lying curled up on her side with her stuffed tiger clasped tightly in her arms and her chin resting on its head. She was a little surprised but it felt good so she snuggled into the tiger for a while. Its short coarse fur tickled her bare skin a little but that felt good as well.

"I slept well," she thought in surprise. "No bad dreams. Just that one about the tiger coming over and getting into bed with me which was nice. I haven't had a cuddle for a long time."

She stroked the tiger's fur a few times then reluctantly pushed it aside and sat up.

"Oh, it's still raining," she thought and curled her lip. "At least the storm's finished."

She felt a little chilly since she'd gone to bed naked and the storm had dropped the temperature quite dramatically so she wrapped herself in her blanket and wandered over to the window. The carpet around the windows felt damp.

"Oh well, it'll soon dry," thought Kaylani. "Hope it doesn't go mouldy underneath though. I wonder if I should ask Jack or Mary if they've got a heater to dry it out? Ahh, whatever."

She found a dryish spot between the windows and stood there peering out. The rain was coming down in sheets and, even from the third floor, she could see the water swilling around in the alley. Needless to say there was no one in the alley and the sky looked dark and threatening.

"Ugh," muttered Kaylani. "Well, I'm sure as beans not going to the market in this. I'll get soaked."

She wandered back to the bed and exchanged the blanket for her pyjamas as she needed the bathroom. Then she picked up Tigger and put him back beside the door.

"I must have picked him up and taken him to bed with me," she

thought, staring at him. “Funny dream that though, him coming over and asking to get into bed with me. I wonder what it means? Maybe I dreamt about that guy in the alley as well. What was his name? Mike? When it stops raining I might go into that tattoo place and see if it's the same guy.”

She turned to unlock the door and froze.

“Oh sweet Jesus!” she exclaimed, horrified. “I only left the bloody door unlocked all night! How the hell could I have forgotten to lock it?”

She locked the door then unlocked it and locked it again three or four times to check it still worked and hadn't unlocked itself then went down to the bathroom. The urgent business over, she flushed the toilet and washed her hands before inspecting her face in the mirror.

“Yeah, you don't look so tired anymore,” she muttered. “And who cares if it's the same guy? If I go in I'll have to talk to him and if it is the same guy I'm not too sure I want to meet him anyway. He was kind of scary and for sure I don't want a tattoo.”

She frowned at herself in the mirror then pulled her pyjama bottoms down a little so she could see her hip. As always just the sight of it brought back unpleasant memories that were never far from the surface of her mind and she shuddered.

“That's a thought though,” she muttered, staring at the livid scars. “Maybe I could get a tattoo to hide it. I'd still know it was there but other people will just think it's a tattoo. Hmm. I wonder if you can tattoo over scars and hide them?”

Thoughtfully she pulled her pyjamas back up.

“Maybe a nice flower,” she thought, “like a rose or something.” She tried to imagine it but all she could see in her mind's eye was the scarring, that hateful brand that forever marked her as a piece of his property and she shuddered again.

“You bastard,” she muttered. “You piece of shit. How the hell did I

ever let it happen?"

Her reflection just stared back at her, unable to answer the question.

She stalked out of the bathroom, hating herself for her weakness and stupidity. Part way up the flight of stairs she heard a heavy thud then, after a brief pause, some muffled swearing. She hesitated, peering up the next flight.

"Jack mustn't have gone to Uni today," she thought. "Sounded like he tripped over. Hope he didn't hurt himself."

She toyed with going up to see if he was all right but decided against it and slipped into her own room.

"I hope it stops raining before I go to the hairdresser," she thought, going over to the window. The rain was still chucking down. "And how will I know when it's time? Maybe I should ask Jack to give me a shout seeing as how he's here."

She turned and gazed around the room then stopped when she saw the table. Sitting neatly beside her new earrings on her new off-white jeans was a dark red box.

"What's that?" she thought, frowning. "I don't remember that."

She walked over and picked it up. It was quite plush, almost velvety in texture, and the size of a jewellery box. She gave it a little shake then opened it.

"What the hell?" she exclaimed staring in astonishment. "I didn't buy a watch!"

Confused, she slumped into her armchair, still holding the box. It actually looked brand new as there were no marks on it and inside the watch sat on a black cloth base that was raised in the middle so the watch wrapped around it. In fact, and Kaylani rubbed the black cloth with her fingertips to make sure, it was silk. The watch itself was an expensive looking rose gold ladies bracelet watch with an elegant white face.

“No way did this come from an Op shop,” said Kaylani, frowning. “Anyway, it couldn't have. I didn't think of getting a watch or a clock until after I got back from the Op shop and I only spent thirty bucks or so there anyway. No way did I get the dress and earrings and other things and forget about getting this.”

She put the box on the arm of the armchair and stared at it, wondering where it had come from.

“Oh shit!” she exclaimed, suddenly remembering. “I didn't lock the door last night. Oh my God! Someone must have come in while the door was unlocked and left it! Jesus, that's so creepy. Someone coming in and wandering around while I was asleep? Oh my God, who would have done such a thing? And why a watch? It looks expensive too.”

She poked the box to check it was real and still there and it shifted a little. It was real.

“There's no note either,” she muttered, jumping up to check the table. “No card or anything.”

She sat back down, managing to catch the box before it slid off the arm and fell on the floor. She closed the lid and checked underneath to see if anything was written there then opened it again and gently pulled out the silk thing that was holding the watch in place. There was a folded card underneath but as Kaylani took it out and unfolded it she realised it was just the manufacturer's warranty. There was no mention of who it was from or even a receipt or price tag. Just a bracelet watch. A gorgeous rose gold watch. Which just happened to perfectly match the pinky-red orchids on her new dress.

“I bet it was that bloody Jack,” muttered Kaylani, scowling at the watch. “I bet he noticed my door wasn't locked and sneaked in during the night. That's why he's not at Uni today. He's up there waiting for me to find it and come up and show how grateful I am. Fucking manipulative little shit! He must have followed me yesterday which is how he knows about my hairdresser's appointment and he probably knows I don't have a watch. Thought he could trap me with a present, did he? I'll show him!”

She snatched up the box and stormed out of her room and banged hard on Jack's door.

"Oh hello," said Jack, opening the door. "How are ...?"

"I don't want your fucking watch!" shouted Kaylani, throwing the box at him.

He jerked back in surprise and the box caught him on the cheek.

"Just fucking leave me alone, all right!" shouted Kaylani and stormed back down the stairs and slammed her door. Snatching up her inhaler she threw herself on the bed and sucked in a couple of doses of Ventolin.

Jack stood in his doorway, blinking in astonishment and rubbing his cheek, but she'd gone.

"And hello to you too," he thought, looking at his fingers to see if there was any blood on them. "What was all that about?"

There wasn't any blood. The box had been well padded. He looked around to see what she'd thrown at him and spotted it, halfway across the room. He went over and picked it up.

"Oh my word," he said, opening the box.

He looked back at the door but there was no sign of Kaylani returning in the near future.

"That's a nice watch," he thought, "but why does she think it's mine? It's a ladies watch. And why did she throw it at me?"

He stood there for a few moments wondering whether or not he should go and talk to her but frankly she scared him.

"I'll give it ten minutes," he decided. "Let her calm down."

It was probably nearer twenty minutes before Jack plucked up the courage to go down to Kaylani's room. She heard his footsteps on the

stairs and the pause outside her door before he tapped a few times.

“Umm, Kaylani, are you there?” she heard him say.

“Go away,” she shouted from her bed.

“Umm, OK,” said Jack. He turned to go back upstairs then turned back to face the door.

“I’ll just leave the watch outside your door, then” he said, a touch nervously. “Umm, it’s not mine.”

There was a pause then she heard him go back up the stairs. With a deep sigh she got up and walked over to the door. Sure enough the red box was sitting on the floor, almost exactly aligned with the centre of the door as Jack had a fairly precise sort of mind. She opened it and the watch was still inside, none the worse for being used as a missile.

“Grrr,” growled Kaylani, screwing up her face.

She marched upstairs and banged on Jack’s door. He partially opened it and stayed half out of sight.

“Here,” she said, thrusting the watch at him.

“I have no idea what is happening,” said Jack cautiously, “but it is nothing to do with me.”

“Well who else would leave a watch like this in my room?” demanded Kaylani, waving the box at him.

“I have not been in your room,” said Jack, his eyes flicking between Kaylani’s face and the box. “I would never go in your room uninvited and I did not give you that watch.”

“Oh,” said Kaylani, confused. She’d convinced herself he had and couldn’t understand why he was denying it. “But ...”

He waited but she didn’t say any more. Instead she just gave an angry

little shake and started back down the stairs again.

“Kaylani?” asked Jack.

“What?” she demanded, stopping on the stairs and staring challengingly back at him.

“Umm,” said Jack, stepping around the half open door. “Can we not talk about this?”

“What is there to talk about?” she demanded. “Someone left this watch in my room and you’re saying it wasn’t you. Enough said.”

Jack stared at her, his mind churning. She stared back for a few moments then abruptly turned to go.

“Please Kaylani,” blurted Jack. “Let us talk.”

“What about?” asked Kaylani, looking at him again.

Jack pushed the door fully open and stepped back.

“Please,” he said, lifting his arm to invite her inside his room. “Let us talk.”

Kaylani frowned then slowly walked back up the stairs and into his room.

“Hello,” he said, smiling. “Thank you. Would you like some tea?”

Kaylani hesitated. Was he just being nice to try to manipulate her? Another ploy since the watch hadn’t worked?

“OK,” she said since she was thirsty and on her guard anyway.

“I’ll put the kettle on,” said Jack, beaming. “Please sit down.”

“Why aren’t you at Uni today?” asked Kaylani, sitting down even though she felt jumpy.

“The rain,” said Jack fussing with the kettle and tea. “There is flooding down at the Spencer Street junction and the trams aren't running. It happens every time there is a storm. Melbourne is notorious for flooding.”

“Oh,” said Kaylani in surprise. She hadn't known about the flooding as she was new to Melbourne. Maybe he really did have a good reason to be home today.

“It's because Melbourne is low lying,” said Jack. “When there is a bad storm the waste water cannot properly escape into the river and the drains back up. It is worse in South Melbourne but north of the river is affected too.”

“I didn't know that,” said Kaylani.

“Ah yes,” said Jack, bringing the tea over. “Trams are not amphibious, you see.”

“Well, I suppose not,” said Kaylani.

“Would you permit me to see this watch again?” asked Jack, sitting down at his desk.

“Sure,” said Kaylani with a shrug. She handed over the box.

“It is a very fine watch,” said Jack, looking at it. “Can I take it out of the box?”

Kaylani very nearly said “it's your watch, do what you like with it” but changed her mind. Instead she just said “OK”.

Jack took the watch out of the box and carefully laid it on his desk. Then he picked up his phone and photographed it.

“What are you doing?” asked Kaylani.

“I'm endeavouring to find out what this watch is worth,” said Jack. “Now I have a photo of it I can search for it.”

“So how much did you pay for it?” asked Kaylani.

“I did not,” said Jack, doing things with his phone. “Ahh. This is an Adina Flair and retails for around \$400. I am, alas, a poor student and cannot afford to purchase such fine watches as these.”

He put the watch back in the box and handed it to Kaylani. She didn't take it so he put it on the armrest of her chair then sat back and gazed thoughtfully at her.

“What?” asked Kaylani, frowning.

“I am thinking back to what you told me a few days ago,” said Jack slowly. “Do you remember?”

“Of course I remember,” snapped Kaylani. “You didn't believe me.”

“You told a very strange story,” said Jack hesitantly as Kaylani seemed on the verge of flaring up again, “but I do believe you.”

“Balls,” said Kaylani bluntly.

“Let me show you something,” said Jack, turning to his computer. He brought up the image he'd saved from Dexter Manson's website which showed Kaylani in the back of the cabbage truck then turned the screen to face Kaylani. “This is you, is it not?”

Kaylani peered at it then got up and moved closer.

“Yes,” she said. “Where did you get it?”

“From the website of the Alter Mundus farm,” said Jack, “which is owned by Dexter Manson. Do you know these other women?”

He brought up another photograph which showed several women scattering seed in a field.

“Yes,” said Kaylani quietly, suppressed memories flooding back. “That's Jessica and that's Zoe and ... I know all of them. The one standing in the corner of the field is Maxine. Oh my God.” She put

her hand to her mouth and stared at the screen.

"I am sorry to make you re-live these things," said Jack gently, "but I wanted you to know that I do believe you."

"Why are you doing this?" demanded Kaylani, backing away. "I won't let you do anything to me! Not in a million years! You'll never get control of me!"

Jack nodded.

"I do not wish to," he said, "but I am concerned about you."

"Why would you be concerned about me?" demanded Kaylani, "if you don't want to control me?"

"You are a human being," said Jack, "and I like you. You have suffered a horrible thing and I want to help you."

"No you don't," said Kaylani, stepping back further and stumbling into the armchair. "I don't trust you! You just want to make me your slave, like he did. You don't really give a shit about me. You just want me as a toy, a plaything, something to amuse you when the trams are flooded. Don't you dare fucking touch me!"

"I'm not going to touch you," said Jack, carefully putting his hands on his desk where Kaylani could see them. "But I have been doing some research into the psychology of people who have managed to escape from cults and trust is the first thing to disappear."

"And you think saying that is going to make me trust you?" demanded Kaylani. "I trusted Dexter and look what he did to me. You expect me to trust you now?"

"No," said Jack. "I don't expect you'll ever trust me or anyone else. But will you trust yourself or is that an impossibility as well?"

"What do you mean?" demanded Kaylani, confused.

"It's a simple question," said Jack. "Do you trust yourself or not?"

She stared at him, not answering.

Jack pursed his lips.

“So, this watch,” he said, picking up the box. “Tell me what's going on here.”

Chapter Twenty

“I already told you,” said Kaylani. “I found the watch in my room and thought you’d left it there.”

“Yes, said Jack, “but give me more details. Did you find it in your bag or pocket or something?”

“What difference does it make?” asked Kaylani, frowning.

“I’m just trying to find out what happened,” said Jack, “and once we know what happened we might be able to work out who put it there. If it was in your bag, for example, someone could have slipped it in when you were out or if it was somewhere odd the previous tenant could have hidden it there and forgotten to take it.”

“Oh,” said Kaylani. “No, it was on my table.”

“Which is where?” he asked. “By the window? Near the door?”

“It over near the wall opposite the door,” said Kaylani. “Between my bed and the windows.”

“I see,” said Jack, thoughtfully. “So it’s unlikely anyone could have reached in and put it on the table or thrown it in through the window.”

“I’m on the third floor,” said Kaylani, a touch sarcastically. “How could someone throw it in through my window?”

“Easy enough with a drone,” said Jack. “That’s a point. Was it wrapped? It could have been a mail order delivery that was delivered to the wrong address.”

“Are you serious?” exclaimed Kaylani. “Drones making deliveries?”

“It’s possible,” said Jack, sipping his tea. “They’re doing it in America and Japan. I admit I haven’t heard of drone deliveries in Melbourne yet but that doesn’t mean they haven’t started.”

“Wow,” said Kaylani, thinking about how out of touch she now was.

“So was it wrapped?” asked Jack.

“No, it was just the box,” said Kaylani, nodding at it. “It was sitting on my jeans on the table beside my earrings.”

“Hmm,” said Jack. “It's difficult to see how it got there then unless someone did come in the room and put it there deliberately. It would seem a sensible place too.”

“What do you mean, sensible?” said Kaylani. “What's sensible about putting a fancy watch in someone else's room?”

“Umm, well if someone was passing your door and didn't want someone else to see it, they might have slipped it in through the door quickly,” said Jack, “especially if the door was already open. It seems to me though that putting it with your jeans and earrings suggests whoever it was wanted you to find the watch quite quickly.”

“Oh come on!” exclaimed Kaylani. “Who'd be passing my door in the middle of the night and run into someone else and have to hide a watch?”

“Fair point,” said Jack, pursing his lips. “I was just speculating. Oh, maybe someone stole it from Sarah and heard someone else coming up the stairs.”

“I suppose that's possible,” said Kaylani reluctantly, “but why put it on the table and why not come back and get it a few minutes later?”

“That's why I think whoever it was wanted you to find it,” said Jack. “Oh, you don't suppose it was Sarah? That's the sort of thing she might do since she avoids everyone.”

“But why would she give me a watch?” asked Kaylani. “I've never met her.”

“Who knows,” said Jack, shrugging. “Maybe she wanted to give you a present or something.”

“Oh please,” said Kaylani, looking scathingly at him. “Why would a recluse want to give a stranger a present? And why not just leave it outside my door?”

“I have no idea,” said Jack, scratching his head. “She is a bit strange but I have to admit I’m really just clutching at straws. Ummm, I’m guessing the watch wasn’t there last night?”

“No, I’d have seen it,” said Kaylani. “I found it when I got up this morning.”

“Well, it is a puzzle,” said Jack. “It wasn’t me and if it was Mary or Anastasia they’d have given it to you directly or possibly have left it outside the door but neither of them would go inside your room. I don’t suppose anything was taken? There’s nothing missing?”

“No, nothing’s missing,” said Kaylani.

“I suppose it’s possible that a thief broke in during the night and put the watch from a previous burglary down while he investigated your room,” said Jack, “but I find it hard to believe he’d forget to take it with him.”

“And at least take my earrings,” said Kaylani. “This is getting silly.”

She picked up her tea and cradled it in her hands while looking at the floor. It was still pleasantly warm. Jack sat quietly, gazing to one side of her and lost in thought.

“What did you mean?” asked Kaylani suddenly. “About trusting myself?”

“Hmm?” said Jack. “Oh, I don’t know to be honest.”

“It was a funny thing to say,” said Kaylani, sipping her tea.

“I suppose it was,” said Jack. “It’s just that, well, after reading some of those articles about people who’ve managed to get away from cults ... well, something they all have in common is that none of them trust other people. I just wondered if, since you’re unlikely to be able to

trust anyone else, if you'd be able to trust yourself. Or not. A process of elimination, really.”

“Oh,” said Kaylani.

“And, thinking about it,” continued Jack, “I do wonder if you can't even trust yourself, if it would ever be possible to learn to trust anyone ever again. On the other hand, perhaps if you can trust yourself then maybe that's a basis for starting to be able to trust others again. Given time, of course.”

“OK,” said Kaylani, still staring at the floor.

“So do you?” asked Jack. “Do you trust yourself?”

“I ...” said Kaylani slowly, “um, I ... don't know.”

“Ahh,” said Jack, stiffening. “So, umm, are you concerned you might ... um ... hurt yourself?”

“Oh no,” said Kaylani, glancing up at him then back down at the floor.

“From what I've read,” said Jack uncomfortably, “self harm is quite common in, umm, such cases and, erm, so are thoughts of, ahh, shall we say, um, ending everything. Getting rid of the problem permanently, so to speak.”

“You mean suicide?” said Kaylani bluntly, looking at him. “No, you don't need to worry about that. I'm not the suicidal type.” Even though the thought had crossed her mind she knew she wouldn't be able to carry it through however attractive it may seem. She looked back down at the floor again.

Jack breathed a sigh of relief. Even though she was a strange, unpredictable creature she ... intrigued ... him, far more than any of the girls he'd met at the university. She was attractive too, in a strange dishevelled, almost carefree, sort of way.

“Yes, carefree, that's the word,” he thought. “Despite everything she's

been though she seems somehow care free. Almost as though she's risen above all the normal cares of day to day living."

"So, ahh, why don't you know if you trust yourself?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know," said Kaylani, rotating her tea mug slowly in her hands. "It's just that ..."

"Yes?" said Jack after a few moments.

"Well, I'm, like, finding it very hard to make decisions," said Kaylani. "Like yesterday. I know I need to go to a hairdresser but when I found one I couldn't decide whether or not to go in and I nearly didn't. I mean, come on, a hairdresser? Like, how hard is it to decide to go to a hairdresser? I've been to hairdressers hundreds of times! It's not like it was a life or death decision."

"Perhaps you were worried about the expense," said Jack knowing that indecisiveness and doubt was another major trait of cult survivors.

"It's a factor, sure," said Kaylani. "But I've got a job now, at the pub next door. I start tomorrow so getting my hair done should be a priority, wouldn't you think?"

"That is most excellent news," said Jack, pleased for her. It also occurred to him that if she was working near by she'd be less likely to move out in the near future.

"Yes," said Kaylani, "and that wasn't an easy decision either. It should have been as I've got experience of pub work but I had to force myself to go and ask. I seem to be lacking confidence in myself these days."

"Understandably," said Jack, "but finding a job will help bring back your confidence, I'm sure."

"Bloody hope so," said Kaylani.

Jack shifted uneasily in his chair, wondering if he dared ask Kaylani if he might be allowed to visit her in the pub when she was working. Perhaps even have a drink with her. It would be nice, after all, to see

her in a another setting, a different context. It could even be thought of as a pre-first date date. On balance though he decided he didn't have the nerve just yet. He rubbed his cheek where the watch box had hit him and wondered if she'd always been volatile or if it was a result of her experiences.

"I think I might be seeing things," blurted Kaylani suddenly, making him jump. She bit her lip and wished she hadn't said that as these things can't be unsaid.

"You mean the watch?" asked Jack, puzzled. He picked it up in case there was any doubt about which watch he was talking about.

"No," said Kaylani and jerked upright. "You can see that too. I mean things that aren't there. Well, they are there but they shouldn't be or at least they shouldn't be doing what they're doing. If you see what I mean."

"No, I don't see what you mean," said Jack, his puzzlement not diminishing. He put the watch down carefully and clasped his hands in front of him.

"Well, like I've got this poster in my room," said Kaylani, "and Pooh turns round and talks to me sometimes."

"Poo?" exclaimed Jack, his eyes opening wide in surprise. "Your bowel movements are talking to you?"

"Noooo!" exclaimed Kaylani, "Pooh! Winnie the Pooh. You know, from the Pooh shop downstairs. The House Of Pooh."

"Ahh, you mean that little bear," said Jack, greatly relieved. "What does he say?"

"He helps me make decisions," said Kaylani. "So does Puss."

"Puss is from the Pooh shop as well?" asked Jack.

"Nooo," said Kaylani, waving her hand. "Puss is a platypus. I thought he was a duck at first but he turned into a platypus. He's on the wall,

beside my bed.”

“A platypus,” said Jack, confused. “I see. On the wall. Another poster?”

“No, he's just dirt marks,” said Kaylani. “So I'm obviously imagining him but I'm not imagining Tigger. He's real, except he's a stuffed toy.”

“And Tigger is a what?” asked Jack.

“Tigger is a tiger,” said Kaylani, “or a cat of some sort but he called himself Tigger so I guess he's a tiger. He's a friend of Pooh's.”

“So this Pooh who's in the poster brought Tigger into your room?” asked Jack. “Even though Tigger is a stuffed toy and Pooh is a poster? I'm confused.”

He was beginning to wonder if Kaylani needed professional counselling.

“It's simple really,” said Kaylani. “When I first moved in there was a duck in some dirt marks on the wall that turned into a platypus. Then I bought the Pooh poster from Virginia and yesterday I got Tigger from the Op shop.”

“And the Pooh poster was to cover the dirt marks on the wall?” asked Jack. “Who is Virginia?”

“Virginia runs The House Of Pooh,” said Kaylani, “and no, I got the poster because I liked it not to cover the marks. Puss wouldn't have liked being covered anyway.”

“I see,” said Jack, bemused. “Did Puss tell you he didn't want to be covered?”

“No,” said Kaylani trying to remain patient but aware she was beginning to sound deranged. “I didn't give Puss a thought when I bought the poster and I still owe Virginia \$30.”

Jack dismissed the \$30 as debts were real and concrete things. It was

the animals that were more concerning.

“And this stuffed toy, this Tigger, talks to you as well?” he asked.

Kaylani nodded. “Uh huh.”

“What does he say?” asked Jack.

“Well, last night during the storm, Tigger came over and got on the bed,” said Kaylani, starting to get embarrassed at how stupid she sounded. “He was scared you see, and lonely. That’s when he told me he was Tigger.”

“I see,” said Jack, wondering if perhaps Kaylani would be better advised not to work at the pub. In her present state of mind adding alcohol didn’t seem the best idea. That said, he didn’t think he’d be able to dissuade her. “And you didn’t find this surprising?”

“Not really,” said Kaylani. “The storm scared me as well and I was feeling a little lonely so I knew how he felt.”

“No, I meant the toy getting on the bed,” said Jack. “I’d be very surprised if, say, my computer tried to get into bed with me.”

“Oh, I see what you mean,” said Kaylani with a tiny giggle. “Well, yes, I suppose I did think it was a little surprising but then, since I’d already been talking to Pooh and Puss it wasn’t really that surprising. Anyway, I thought I was going a little mad, you see, which was a relief.”

“You were relieved you were going mad?” asked Jack, now quite worried.

“Yes,” said Kaylani. “Going mad is a nice simple explanation. If I’m not going mad then how the hell is it possible that Puss and Pooh and Tigger can talk to me and move around?”

Jack rested his head on his hand with his elbow on the desk and stared at Kaylani. Unbelievably, in the midst of all this confusion, she’d actually said something logical and sensible. Then a thought

struck him. A very nasty, illogical, outrageous thought.

“Oh dear,” he said.

“What?” said Kaylani, wishing the last few minutes had never happened.

“I ...” said Jack, struggling for words.

“What?” demanded Kaylani, getting worried. “You think I should see a psychiatrist?”

“Actually no,” said Jack, pushing himself upright in his chair. “I was thinking that, maybe, but then something occurred to me.”

“What?” asked Kaylani. “What occurred to you?”

“Well,” said Jack. “Umm. Look. I'm a physicist, yeah. I work with medical equipment, radiology and so on. I deal with real solid things every day, yeah.”

“Yeah,” said Kaylani. “So, what, you're freaking out because there's a mad woman in your room?”

“No, not really,” said Jack. “I was beginning to but then I had this thought, you see.”

“So you said,” said Kaylani, drily. “Do you think you'll share it with me before I die of old age?”

Jack smiled then became serious again.

“You've just been telling me that there are things in your room that move and talk,” he said. “Things that shouldn't move and talk, at least not in the real physical world.”

“Yeah,” said Kaylani. “That's why I don't know if I trust myself. It's your own fault, you know. You shouldn't have asked.”

“Well, true,” said Jack. “But you're thinking you might be going mad

because you're seeing these things move and you're talking to them."

"So you're saying I actually have gone mad?" asked Kaylani. "I don't feel mad. Although I admit I was thinking of walking around Melbourne last night in the rain. Naked."

Jack's train of thought was suddenly diverted at the idea of Kaylani walking around naked although he wasn't too sure about the rain side of it. Reluctantly he forced his mind back to the main issue. Or at least the issue of the talking things since Kaylani naked seemed a pretty big issue to him.

"No," said Jack slowly as he refocused his mind. "I was wondering if you weren't seeing things. If you are, in fact, seeing and talking to objects and patterns that are, in fact, moving and talking to you."

"You must be mad!" exclaimed Kaylani. "Are you a fruitcake or what?"

"Excuse me?" said Jack, hurt. He'd rather thought she'd be pleased he believed her rather than simply dismissing her as a mad woman but now she was accusing him of being mad himself.

"Oh, I get it," said Kaylani, staring at him. "You're pretending to believe me because you're scared I am mad and I'm going to turn on you or something."

"What?" said Jack, slumping in his chair and blinking rapidly. "Where did that come from?"

"I've been telling you about things that can't be happening," said Kaylani, "so I probably am going mad. Actually I probably have actually gone mad since I'm not overly bothered about the idea of going mad although I do find it a little embarrassing. Anyway, as you said, you are a physicist and deal with real physical things so you must be worried about me and what I might do. That's why you're trying to find a rational, sensible explanation. To appease me."

"Wow," said Jack, sitting up again and staring at her. "I'm seriously impressed. That was a very clear and entirely rational explanation of your thinking."

“Thank you,” said Kaylani, half sarcastically. “I can think straight every now and then even though I am a nutter, you know.”

“Well that's the point,” said Jack. “I don't think you are.”

“You don't think I am what?” asked Kaylani frowning, her tea forgotten. It was cold now anyway.

“I don't think you are mad,” said Jack. “In some ways I hope you are as it would be easier, but I suspect not.”

“OK,” said Kaylani, looking warily at him. “I'm listening.”

Jack leaned over and picked up the watch in its neat box.

“Now, correct me if I'm wrong,” said Jack, “but you have some dirt marks that look like a platypus that talks to you, yes?”

“And moves,” said Kaylani.

Jack nodded acknowledgement.

“And a poster of a bear that talks and moves, yes?” he said.

“Yes,” said Kaylani, wondering where he was going with this.

“And a stuffed cat that talks and moves, yes?” he asked, looking intently at Kaylani.

“Yes,” said Kaylani, squirming a little.

“And this,” he said, holding up the watch. “An interesting coincidence, is it not? This watch appears miraculously in a room of moving talking inanimate objects.”

“So what's your point?” asked Kaylani. “The watch doesn't talk to me. At least, it hasn't yet.”

Jack smiled, perhaps to show sympathy or perhaps because he fully expected the watch to actually tell her the time soon rather than just

show it.

“What if they’re related?” he asked. “Puss, Pooh, Tigger and the watch? What if these things really are moving and the watch really did just appear and you’re not imagining it all?”

“Like I said,” said Kaylani, surprisingly calmly under the circumstances. “It’s a whole lot easier to just admit I’m mad and be done with it.”

“Well, yes,” conceded Jack. “But what if you aren’t mad? And the physical presence of this watch does tend to suggest you’re not.”

“Then we’re screwed,” said Kaylani. “Posters and stuffed toys are taking over the world.”

Jack snorted and shook his head sorrowfully.

“Did you know there is a ghost in this house?” he asked. “I’ve seen it.”

Chapter Twenty One

“Yes, Anastasia told me,” said Kaylani. “It’s all bullshit though. Ghosts don’t exist.”

“Well that’s an interesting philosophical point,” said Jack, nodding. “Is it fair to say a manifestation of something needs to have a physical existence?”

“The something must have otherwise there can’t be a manifestation of it, surely,” said Kaylani frowning. “A TV image isn’t real but the TV station that broadcasts it must be. And whatever it was that was filmed, the actors or whatever.”

“I’m glad you said that,” said Jack, smiling. “Now, don’t you want to know what I saw?”

“Why are you glad?” asked Kaylani suspiciously.

“Because it tends to suggest that you have moved on from whatever it was that got you involved with that Alter Mundus thing,” said Jack. “That you’re not going to believe something simply because someone told you.”

Kaylani screwed up her face and shrugged dismissively.

“I trusted Dexter and I don’t trust you,” she said. “That’s the real difference. I don’t trust Anastasia either.”

“OK, fair point,” said Jack. “Let’s forget about it then. You’re going mad and that’s all there is to it.”

“Oh faff,” said Kaylani. “You’re not going to manipulate me that easily.”

“I’m not trying to manipulate you,” said Jack. “I’m trying to find an explanation for the mysterious appearance of the watch and the other things that have been happening to you.”

“And you think ghosts explain it?” asked Kaylani. “You seriously think

I'm that dumb?"

"Not at all," he said, leaning forward. "I actually think you're very intelligent. Too intelligent, in fact, to dismiss everything as some sort of mental aberration."

"Flattery won't work either," said Kaylani. "Can I have my watch back?"

"Sure," said Jack, leaning back to pick it up. He handed it over.

"Is that the right time?" she asked, glancing at it. "Quarter past twelve?"

"Umm, it is in fact 12:17," said Jack, looking at his computer screen. He picked up his mobile and checked that as well. "Yes, 12:17."

"Cool," said Kaylani. "I'd better be off then. I need a shower and to wash my hair before I go to the hairdresser. Thanks for the tea." She got up and started walking towards the door.

"Can I come down to your room and see the stuffed toy and other items?" asked Jack. "I may spot something you haven't and it would be awesome if they moved or talked while I was there. That would prove you aren't imagining it all."

Kaylani froze. Jack in her room? No. Way.

"So, go on then, tell me what you saw," she said, wanting to divert Jack without having to explain why she didn't want him in her room.

"It wasn't much," said Jack. "It was, ohh, a year or more ago. I was coming out of the bathroom after having a shower and as I was going up the stairs I saw a pale shadowy thing that looked like it could have been an out of focus woman or something like that."

"Is that all?" asked Kaylani, coming back and leaning her hip against the back of the armchair.

"I thought I had a bit of soap in my eyebrow or something," said Jack,

rubbing his eyebrow with a finger, “but it didn't go away after I wiped my face. In fact, it seemed to move under some sort of control as it came out of Mary's room, went up the stairs and then into Sarah's room. I followed it.

“Far out,” said Kaylani, interested despite herself. “Did you talk to Mary or Sarah about it?”

“I knocked on Sarah's door,” said Jack, “but she didn't answer but I did go and talk to Mary the next day. She said she'd seen it several times. Apparently it just appears in a corner, goes across the room and leaves. She said it gave her a fright the first time but that she doesn't really notice it anymore.”

“Right,” said Kaylani, frowning. “Has she seen it go into my room?”

“She didn't say,” said Jack. “I spent the next few days trying to think of ways of recording and tracking it but as I never saw it again and I had a major assignment due I abandoned that and more or less forgot about it. Until you came along.” He laughed.

“So you're saying both you and Mary saw this thing?” asked Kaylani. “On the stairs outside my room?” She was still frowning.

“And quite possibly Sarah,” said Jack. “I did bump into her a while later on the landing and tried to talk to her but she quickly disappeared back into her room. She doesn't talk to any of us, as far as I know. Maybe she talks to the ghost instead.”

“Didn't it bother you?” asked Kaylani.

“Not particularly,” said Jack. “I'm a scientist. My first reaction was to find out what was causing such an anomaly. My first thought was there might be a crack in the floor or a wall that allowed light to leak through and that the apparent motion was due to my own motion and changing perspective. Much like a rainbow when it appears to move with you. I couldn't find anything and, after talking to Mary I couldn't see how light through a crack would account for something appearing in a corner of her room, crossing the room, going through a door, up a flight of stairs and through another door. Short of some sort of

projection system that is itself capable of moving through walls I can't envisage how it could be achieved. I suppose there could be a holographic projector of some sort in the ceiling but I couldn't find any indication of a track for it to run along which it would have to do to get past the walls."

"So you just accepted it was a ghost and forgot about it?" asked Kaylani.

"As I said, I had other more pressing things to think about," said Jack, "and it seemed benign. After all, Mary wasn't overly bothered and I've not heard any screams or anything from Sarah. I've seen her three or four times since and she seems much the same as usual. Mind you, she hadn't long moved in before I saw the manifestation so it is entirely possible her behaviour is due to the ghost rather than pre-dating its appearance. In fact, now that I think about it, it's possible that the ghost is in some way related to Sarah. Perhaps she is able to project her own out-of-body experiences. After all, Mary is in the room directly below Sarah so perhaps some manifestation of Sarah drops down to Mary's room then comes back up the stairs."

"Why wouldn't it just go back up through the ceiling?" asked Kaylani.

"Who knows," said Jack, spreading his hands. "Maybe it likes the exercise."

Kaylani snorted as the thought of ghosts needing exercise was taking things too far.

"OK," she said suddenly after staring at Jack quizzically for a few moments. "Umm, well, nice talking to you. Another time, maybe, OK." She left quickly before Jack could have a chance to ask about seeing her room again.

She went back down to her room and found Tigger was curled up on her bed, sound asleep. He opened one eye and watched as she crept around the room getting her towel and so on without disturbing him.

* * *

Kaylani had just got back from the hairdresser when she heard Mary come home from work. She took a deep breath to steel herself then opened her door and marched across the landing.

“Oh, hello,” said Mary, opening her door. “Hey, wow! Look at you!”

“Do you like it?” asked Kaylani self-consciously as she twisted her head from side to side.

“I love it!” said Mary. “Come on in, excuse the mess.”

Her room was fairly bare, although not as bare as Kaylani's. Beside the small TV was a pile of bodybuilding magazines that was threatening to topple over. Like Jack she had her own kettle and a couple of large water cartons. Unlike Jack she also had a small fridge and a one ring hotplate. The wall opposite her bed was covered with photographs of muscular women in various poses. Such mess as there was consisted mainly of discarded clothing and political pamphlets, many of which had been scribbled on. Mary herself was neatly dressed in a grey mid-calf pencil skirt, a short sleeved white blouse and high heeled shoes rather than her usual tracksuit and trainers. As she walked across the room Kaylani's eyes were drawn to the highly defined calf muscles that were on display and the bulge of her thigh muscles under the tight skirt.

“I'd offer you a coffee but I don't have any,” said Mary as Kaylani gingerly stepped inside. “Not allowed you see.”

“Why's that?” asked Kaylani, stepping over something that claimed to be the Liberal Party of Victoria Manifesto but looked far too thick to be easily digested.

“Caffeine's a banned performance enhancing drug,” said Mary, “and is detectable for up to six weeks so it's easier just to forget about coffee entirely in the build-up to a comp. I don't even have any in the room to avoid temptation.

“Oh yes,” said Kaylani remembering, “you've got that competition coming up. Is that why those pictures are there?” and she waved at the photographs on the wall.

“Yup,” said Mary with a laugh. “My opposition. They’re there to psyche myself up. I’m afraid I’ve only got water. Sit, sit.”

“Water would be great, thanks,” said Kaylani, sitting on the worn couch.

“So where’d you get your hair done?” asked Mary, pouring a generous amount of water into a fairly clean tumbler.

“Oh, um, Exclusive Ladies in Flinders Lane,” said Kaylani, fingering some of the tendrils that hugged the nape of her neck.

“Expensive, huh,” asked Mary, handing her the tumbler. The muscles in her forearms resembled steel hawsers. “Still, they did a great job. You look incredible!”

“Thanks,” said Kaylani, feeling a little embarrassed. “I’m not sure I like it though.”

“Oh?” said Mary, plonking herself heavily at the other end of the couch and kicking off her heels. “Why’d you go for that style then if you don’t like it?”

“I didn’t,” said Kaylani. “Cassandra asked me what I wanted doing and I said I didn’t have a clue and just left it to her. I kept my eyes shut until she said she was done. It’s called a razor-cut pixie style, apparently. I do like the colour though. I’m not mousy anymore.”

“For sure,” said Mary. “Love the colour too. Wow, that was risky though. You could have ended up with anything. Actually I’d like my hair cut like that. Having it long’s a pain but I’m stuck with it.” She pulled on her ponytail and grimaced then laughed again.

“How come you’re stuck with it?” asked Kaylani, frowning slightly.

“Federation rules,” said Mary. “Competitors must retain their femininity during a competition, whatever that is” and she did finger-quotes around the word ‘femininity’. “My coach says that means long hair and boobs since that’s what guys are into and the Board is mostly guys.” She sighed and looked down at her chest sadly.

“Well at least you're all right in the boob department,” said Kaylani as Mary's boobs under her blouse looked to be a size or so bigger than her own.

“Oh I wish,” said Mary, putting her hands over her boobs. “I haven't got any boobs left. These are just my pectoral muscles. When I turn professional I'm going to have to get implants or get banned. Wanna see?” She started to unbutton her blouse.

“Ah, not right now,” said Kaylani quickly. She had a suspicion Mary might even invite her to feel her chest muscles which was a little disconcerting. It also crossed her mind that Mary must have a fair amount of testosterone in her system to be able to build up that much muscle and who knows what that did to her sexual orientation.

“OK,” said Mary cheerfully, leaving the buttons undone. “Hey, Anastasia says you got a job, yeah?”

“That's right,” said Kaylani. “Um, at the pub next door. I start tomorrow night.”

“Awesome,” said Mary enthusiastically. “Good for you,” and she gently punched Kaylani on the shoulder. Gently by her own standards that is. It hurt and Kaylani rubbed her shoulder. “Sorry! Don't know my own strength. Hey, with that hairdo and your cheekbones their turnover will double! The guys will be flocking in in their droves.”

“Well, maybe,” said Kaylani, her embarrassment flaring up again. The last thing she wanted was any guys turning up to look at her, let alone droves of them.

“So what dress are you going to wear?” asked Mary. “Some sexy little number I bet.”

Kaylani jerked her shoulder away just in case but Mary restrained herself.

“Um, no,” she said. “There's a uniform provided.”

“Oh right,” said Mary. She paused then added “you mean like those

bar chicks in Kalgoorlie?” then guffawed and slapped her knee.

“I don't follow,” said Kaylani wondering if coming to see Mary was such a good idea after all.

“They're topless,” said Mary, “or so I've heard.”

“Oh right,” said Kaylani. “No, the pub's uniform is a black shirt and slacks and a white apron.”

“How boring,” said Mary. “Hey, do you mind if I get changed and put some eggs on? I'm off to the gym in a bit and I'm starving.”

“Oh, um, yes no, sure,” said Kaylani. “Go right ahead.”

“I'd offer you something,” said Mary, jumping up, “but all I've got is eggs and protein shakes. I'm on a diet you see.”

“Yes, the competition,” said Kaylani. “No, I've already eaten.” She hadn't but it seemed easier to say that.

“So what can I do for you?” asked Mary, pulling off her blouse and grabbing a saucepan. She tossed the blouse on her bed then poured some water into the saucepan. Kaylani twisted around to look out of the window.

“Umm ...,” started Kaylani, feeling as though she was about to make a fool of herself. “I was talking to Jack and he said you'd, well, ummm ...” She glanced over at Mary.

“I'd what?” asked Mary, putting two eggs into the saucepan and putting it on the hotplate. She turned around to look at Kaylani. Kaylani looked away immediately but not before registering that Mary did indeed have well developed pectoral muscles with no flesh covering them.

“Don't look again until she's changed,” she thought. “Don't look!” The masculinity of Mary's muscles, despite the femininity requirement, was causing a few confusing feelings in her.

“Umm, that you'd seen a ghost,” blurted Kaylani.

“Oh,” said Mary, unzipping her skirt and stepping out of it. Kaylani focused on a wilting pot plant that sat on one of the window sills. “Yeah, sure. What of it?”

Kaylani badly wanted to turn around and see what expression Mary had – was she laughing at her or being condescending? – but she stared at the pot plant and clenched a fist.

“Well, could you tell me what you saw?” asked Kaylani.

“Oh you've seen it too have you?” asked Mary.

“Um, I might have,” said Kaylani, not wanting to tell Mary about Pooh and the others.

“Yeah, Jack was like that when he saw it,” said Mary. “All he saw was a glow in the dark or something like that. He thought it was a reflection or something but he came to ask me about it anyway. God knows why.”

“So you didn't see a glow in the dark?” asked Kaylani.

“Nah,” said Mary. “I see a woman. At least she looks like a woman. A bit indistinct. You know, fuzzy and out of focus. She doesn't glow either, well not much anyway.”

“Oh right,” said Kaylani. “So if she doesn't glow how do you see her in the dark?”

“Oh, in the dark she's more like an outline,” said Mary, rustling some things in the back of the room. “I kind of feel her presence as well.”

“How do you know what she looks like then?” asked Kaylani, hearing Mary coming over. She glanced around and Mary was in a pair of tight very short shorts and a baggy sweat stained t-shirt. “How do you even know she's a woman?”

“I usually see her during the day,” said Mary sitting on the couch

again. “Mostly early in the morning before I go to work. Like I said, she’s indistinct and fuzzy but she’s definitely wearing a dress. You know, one of those old fashioned long ones that go out sideways like a cone.”

“Wow,” exclaimed Kaylani, twisting round to a more comfortable position. Impressively Mary wasn’t laughing at her nor looking condescending. She looked entirely serious. “So how many times have you seen her?”

“Ohh, I don’t know,” said Mary, scratching her thigh. “Maybe two, three times a month.” Kaylani noticed she had very short neatly manicured fingernails. “Maybe she can’t risk breaking her skin,” she thought.

“Two or three ...? Bloody hell!” exclaimed Kaylani again in surprise. “Jack said he’d only seen it once.”

“That’s probably because he’s not around when I get up,” said Mary and laughed. “We don’t have that kind of relationship.”

“Well, no, I imagine not,” said Kaylani, squashing an image of Jack and Mary together. For sure it would be an unlikely pairing.

“I nearly wet myself when I first saw her a couple of years ago,” said Mary ruminatively. “Nah, more like eighteen months or so. Somewhere round there anyway. I’ve been here a little over three years, you see, and I never saw her to begin with. I’d have moved out if I’d seen her early on but I’m too settled now. Besides, she’s more or less just part of the furniture these days. I don’t take a lot of notice anymore. It’s not like she throws things around or anything.”

“So what does she do?” asked Kaylani. Eighteen months didn’t seem long. Surely ghosts haunted places for centuries?

“Oh, nothing much,” said Mary. “She just appears in that corner,” and she pointed with her thumb to the back corner of the room where the house joined the derelict house next door, “walks across the room to the door and goes through.”

“Does she open the door?” asked Kaylani, “or just sail through it?”

“She sails through,” said Mary. “Like the door wasn’t there. Then she goes upstairs to Sarah’s room. I followed her a few times then got bored.”

“OK,” said Kaylani thoughtfully. “I guess she glides up the stairs rather than using the steps?”

“Yeah,” said Mary.

“And does she ever come back down?” asked Kaylani.

“That’s the weird thing,” said Mary, jumping up to check her eggs. “I’ve only ever seen her go from here up to Sarah’s. I’ve never seen her come back the other way.”

Chapter Twenty Two

Kaylani hadn't slept well for a long time, perhaps for several years. She couldn't remember when she'd last had a full night's sleep with pleasant dreams rather than fitful sleep between bouts of anxiety and unpleasant dreams that bordered on nightmares. Tonight was different though. Yes, she still had bouts of anxiety but they were predominantly about being in a room full of strangers, very likely many of them men, and having to interact with them. And ghosts. This ghost that she'd dismissed as Anastasia playing with her was becoming disturbingly real. Both Jack and Mary claimed they had seen it which made it more substantial than a general 'I know someone who says they've seen it'.

Perhaps both were lying but that raised new anxieties about *why* they were lying. And were they lying as a team or simply having fun by picking up on each other's stories? After all, the stories got more elaborate. Anastasia merely said this ghost existed. Jack took that further and said he'd seen something glowing but vague and just the once. Mary, in turn, went further with repeated visitations from something that was distinct enough to be wearing a dress.

Her dreams were different as well. Tonight's dreams had included someone whose features were a strange amalgam of Giselle and Dexter who drifted up the stairs and in and out of the rooms looking for her. Kaylani knew with absolute certainty that this was Sarah although none of the strangers wandering through the rooms ever referred to her by name. They never actually spoke to her or acknowledged her in any way but it was Sarah all right. The rooms too were a strange mixture of the bathroom here in Burgun Walk, distorted and elongated, the large kitchen in her parents' house in Brisbane, the shed back on the farm where the brandings and punishments were carried out and some vague but vast space that was poorly lit and echoed like the inside of a church. Far different to her usual unpleasant dreams.

It was dark when she woke with the feeling of being suffocated by a bag over her head. She could feel it on her skin and clogging her mouth and nose. In panic she clawed at her face and the material came away easily. Gasping for breath, her throat and chest

constricting, she lurched over and scrambled around on the floor for her glasses but couldn't find them. She threw back the covers and tried to jump out of bed but caught a foot in the bed sheet. Her top half fell heavily on the floor and she lay there, momentarily winded, with one foot still up on the bed. Kicking with the other foot and twisting her torso she managed to free herself and crawled over the the chest of drawers nearby. She grabbed her inhaler and sucked deeply.

She sat on the floor with her shoulder pressed hard against the chest of drawers as the Ventolin took effect. As always the medication was quick and the constrictions eased.

"Bloody hell," she muttered and looked around. Things were out of focus but this was definitely her room and it was well lit. Getting over the shock of her rude awakening she slowly got to her feet and found her pyjama top was unbuttoned and had half come off. One arm, her left, had come out of the sleeve entirely and now hung down her back. She slipped the top over her other arm and held it up, pulling the offending sleeve out sideways.

"That must have been what was covering my face," she muttered and held the arm across her mouth and eyes. It certainly felt very similar. Irritably she tossed the top on the bed and bent to find her glasses. They weren't where she'd left them; where her hand naturally touched the floor when she lay in bed, but she found them after a few moments. They were under the bedclothes which were themselves in a heap on the floor at the foot of the bed. With relief she put them on and her world came back into focus.

"Are you all right?" asked Puss, watching her from a spot some way higher up the wall than usual. He'd probably gone upwards to avoid the fighting on the bed.

"Yeah, I'm fine," said Kaylani, resisting the urge to put her pyjama top back on to cover her naked chest. After all, Puss had seen her get undressed and dressed many times already. Also, and she hadn't decided which yet, he was either a platypus or a pattern of marks and neither would be particularly interested in a human female chest.

“Good,” said Puss, worming his way back down the wall to his usual spot. “You scared me.”

“I scared myself,” said Kaylani with a deprecating little laugh. She ran her fingers through her hair and was disconcerted to find there was a lot less now than there had been.

“Oh yeah,” she muttered, remembering. “I’ve got a new hairstyle!”

She grabbed her pyjama top and pulled it on as she marched over to the door. She listened for a moment then unlocked it and hurried down to the bathroom. Locking the door was a habit she had no intention of ending in the foreseeable future, if ever, despite the fact the ghost could pass through doors and walls. She didn’t lock the door to keep ghosts out. It was people she was more worried about.

She made use of the toilet then spent several minutes in front of the mirror inspecting herself and finger-combing her hair in various ways before conceding that Cassandra, her Exclusive Lady stylist, might actually have had a good idea of what she was doing after all.

“I like it,” said Kaylani, trying different expressions to see how they went with the style. “It makes me look kinda cute and, ohh, alluring, maybe? Not mysterious, more, ohh, tomboyish I guess, but hey. And it brings out my cheekbones, like Mary said. My face is too thin though. I should eat more.”

She slipped her pyjama top off and inspected her reflection in the mirror. Her ribs were countable and her belly was a little concave which was nice but her boobs were disappointing.

“Oh well,” she thought with a sad little sigh. “I suppose they’ll come back too if I eat more. Maybe I should get falsies like Mary. I wonder how much they cost? Maybe I should start shaving my armpits as well since my new dress doesn’t have sleeves. Yeah, I could go to the market and get scissors and stuff tomorrow after I’ve been paid and start the alterations on Sunday”

Despite her anxieties and misgivings she didn’t give a moment’s thought, serious or otherwise, to not getting through her Friday

evening tryout. She toyed with dropping her pyjama bottoms as well, to see how her bum and legs looked but that would mean seeing the scars so she decided not to. After all, no one else would ever see them as she had no intention of ever taking her clothes off in front of anyone.

“Still, I love my hair,” she muttered, peering at herself again as she tousled her hair a little more. “Eyebrows need some work though. I wonder how my earrings will look now?”

She pulled her top back on but didn't bother to do up the buttons. After listening at the door for a moment she went back up to her room.

“What?” she exclaimed, frowning as she stepped inside. There was definitely an atmosphere in there. A vague feeling of expectation, of anticipation. She stayed in the doorway, uncertain.

“There's something for you on the table,” said Pooh happily and Tigger bounced a little in excitement.

“You mean like another watch?” asked Kaylani. She looked at the table but it was much as she'd left it. The dress, the jeans, the earrings looked undisturbed.

“Sort of,” said Puss with a chuckle.

“Hmm,” said Kaylani suspiciously. She started to walk slowly towards the table then she spotted something on the floor in the middle of the room. She bent to inspect it and it looked suspiciously like bird droppings.

“What's this?” she demanded, pointing at it.

“I'm sorry,” said Polly the parrot, hopping around on the branch in the painting so she could look at Kaylani. “I couldn't get out of the room. I didn't mean to.”

“Ahh, that's my fault,” said Kaylani, frowning. “Um, how about I leave the window open so you can get out when you need to?”

“That would be a goodness,” said Polly.

“Where's Iggy?” asked Kaylani, noticing the iguana wasn't on his rock anymore.

“I'm here,” said Iggy, crawling out from behind the armchair. “I was just seeing what was on the other side of the room.”

“OK, no probs,” said Kaylani. “I'll be back in a mo.”

“The wonderful thing about tables,” sang Tigger, barely containing his excitement, “is tables are wonderful things!” He ran over to the table then over to Kaylani and bounced some more.

“OK, OK, I'll look in a moment,” said Kaylani, holding up her hands. “I've just got to clean this up before someone steps in it.”

“Growww!” exclaimed Tigger excitedly and nearly landed in the bird droppings.

“I'll only be a moment,” said Kaylani and she hurried down to the bathroom to get some toilet paper.

“Now will you look at the table?” asked Pooh when she'd wiped up the mess.

“Sure,” said Kaylani, going over. “Umm, what am I looking for?” She put the screwed up toilet paper on the corner of the table.

“The dress, the dress, growww!” shouted Tigger, running in circles around the table.

“What about my dress?” asked Kaylani, picking it up. Underneath was a neat pile of folded strips of the same material. “Oh. My. God.”

She held the dress up and studied it then held it to her body. It wasn't two sizes too big anymore. In fact it looked to be just about the right size for her.

“Holy fuck!” she exclaimed and jerked the dress away so it landed on

the table.

"I think she likes it," said Puss, climbing down the wall to get a closer look.

"Try it on," said Pooh encouragingly.

Kaylani looked around and saw Puss, Pooh, Tigger, Polly and Iggy all watching her with various expressions of delight. Even the fish in the mat beside the bed had stopped swimming around and was sideways on, watching her with one flat fishy eye.

"Talk about pressure," muttered Kaylani.

She slowly slipped off her pyjama top then, very self consciously, undid the cord of the bottoms and let them crumple around her ankles. She picked up the dress and stepped into it. Pulling it upwards she slipped one arm inside a shoulder strap then the other. Finally she reached beside her back and fumbled for the zipper. She pulled it up then ran her hands over her torso.

"Wow!" she breathed and looked down. "It fits perfectly!"

"I told you she'd like it," said Puss. "Didn't I tell you she'd like it? Didn't I?"

"She likes it! She likes it!" shouted Tigger running around the table in the other direction. "Growwww!" He lost his sense of direction for a moment and crashed into the armchair. Fortunately he bounced and didn't hurt himself.

"You OK?" asked Kaylani barely noticing as she fingered the shoulder straps. She looked down at one of the straps, pressing her chin into her chest. "Wow! Even the shoulder straps have been repositioned!" She checked the other strap then took a couple of tentative steps forward.

"And it's been taken up too," she exclaimed, looking at her feet. "It's just the right length for me! This is just unbelievable! Oh my god! Who did this?"

Tigger stopped bouncing and a stillness came over the room.

“Well? Which of you was it?” asked Kaylani, “or did you all have a hand in it?”

“She did it,” said Pooh quietly.

“Who's 'she'?” asked Kaylani. “Polly couldn't have done it all on her own.”

“I just watched,” said Polly. “I would have helped but I don't have fingers.” She spread her wings as if to demonstrate the truth of this.

“So who was it?” asked Kaylani. “Who's 'she'?”

There was no response.

“Well, it couldn't have been Anastasia,” said Kaylani, frowning. “She's already told me she can't make clothes and it wouldn't have been Mary since she was at the gym all evening. Oh God, it wasn't Sarah, was it? Did she come in here while I was with Mary or during the night?”

“Sarah hasn't been in here,” said Polly and looked at Pooh.

“Come on, Pooh, who was it?” asked Kaylani, looking at him as well. “You can't lie. Winnie the Pooh never lies.”

“She did it,” said Pooh. “She was only trying to help you.”

“Yes,” said Kaylani, “and she's been very helpful. But who is she? Who do I thank?”

“Umm,” said Pooh worriedly.

“You don't mean ...” asked Kaylani as realisation began to sink in. “You don't mean it was her?”

Pooh looked relieved and nodded.

“Bloody hell!” exclaimed Kaylani. “Are you seriously saying a ghost altered this dress for me?”

“Umm,” said Puss as Polly switched agitatedly from foot to foot and Iggy edged back behind the armchair.

“For frig’s sake!” exclaimed Kaylani. “I thought that sort of thing only happened in Disney movies.”

“But you do like it?” asked Pooh, an anxious expression appearing on his face.

“Yes I do,” said Kaylani, running her hands down her sides, “only ...” She stopped.

“Only what?” asked Polly. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Oh, nothing’s wrong with it,” said Kaylani. “It’s perfect. Even the orchid designs match up but ...”

“But what?” asked Iggy, edging forward again.

“It’s just that, well, um ...” said Kaylani, feeling dreadfully ungrateful and churlish.

“Just what?” asked Pooh.

Even Tigger had stopped bouncing and was staring at her in dismay.

“It’s just that most of the fun is doing it myself,” said Kaylani in a rush. “That’s what I was looking forward to doing. I was even going to go out and get some dressmaking scissors and pins and things today so I could work on it tomorrow.”

She felt terrible.

“Oh,” said Puss in a disappointed voice.

There was a sudden crash and Kaylani whirled. One of Pooh’s honey pots had fallen off the branch in the poster and landed on the floor.

Fortunately it hadn't cracked.

"Oh bother," said Pooh and laboriously started to climb down the tree.

"It's OK," called Kaylani, holding up her hand. "I'll get it."

She hurried over and picked up the pot. It was a nice pot, brown and smoothly glazed. She could smell the honey inside. She carefully balanced the pot back on the branch and Pooh protectively put his arm around it.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"You're welcome," said Kaylani, scratching an itch a little below one armpit.

It didn't go away so she scratched again then became aware of another itch just below her other armpit. She scratched there too then she felt something moving against her fingers and the skin of her side. There was something wriggling the other side as well.

She screeched as the wriggling movements started to move downwards and frantically fumbled with the zip before virtually leaping out of the dress and throwing it on the floor.

"God, I hope it isn't lice or maggots," she muttered, lifting her arms to inspect her sides. "It did come from an Op shop after all!"

She found nothing under her arms and, after a final scratch, she dropped them and looked up just in time to see the dress waft over to the table. The pile of neatly folded trimmings slid over to the edge of the table and the dress laid itself flat on the table. It gave a couple of jerks as though being tweaked perfectly flat then lay still. Forgetting she was naked, Kaylani edged forward nervously.

"Oh my God," she muttered when she saw the thread on one side slowly unsewing itself. It was almost as though the thread was alive the way it wove itself between the threads of the dress. A little like a long very thin snake sliding between grass stems but going backwards

rather than forwards. Unjoining the front and back of the dress.

“I don't believe it,” muttered Kaylani, watching in fascination. The other side was unthreading as well. In fact, the right side of the dress was unthreading slightly faster than the left and was catching up. Somewhere around the waist it did catch up and the two sides kept pace with each other for a couple of centimetres then the right side moved ahead.

A sudden movement at the top of the dress caught her eye and the threads holding the two shoulder straps suddenly slithered across the table and coiled themselves up. The top quarter of the dress folded over on itself and the threads at the back of the straps came out and went over to join with the other two so there was only one coil of thread. Then the material flipped back to lie flat on the table and the straps moved away from the dress. It was pretty obvious what was happening.

“I didn't mean for you to undo all your hard work,” said Kaylani, looking around to see if she could see anyone. She couldn't of course but that didn't stop the sides unthreading.

When the last of the side threads had undone they both slithered over the table and joined with the threads from the shoulder straps. Then the bottom of the dress flipped up and the hem started to unthread. That too joined the now fairly large coil of thread on the table. Then the back hem unthreaded.

“OK,” thought Kaylani, still naked and still fascinated, “but what about the off-cuts?”

Her unspoken question was answered moments later as the pile of folded off-cuts separated and unfolded themselves. They shifted over and positioned themselves then, with exquisite precision, joined back onto the material. Kaylani shifted cautiously closer but could see no marks where the joins were made.

“Bloody hell,” she muttered. “I wish I could patent this!” and giggled.

The re-sewing of the dress was something of an anticlimax. It had an

air of inevitability about it as the thread quickly sewed up the hems, then one side then the other. There was still a little thread left over and the shoulder straps, now slightly wider and longer, were reattached to the dress.

Finally, the dress stood upright in the air, gave itself a little shake then folded itself up neatly on the table.

Nothing happened for a while then Kaylani slowly reached over and prodded the dress. It didn't move. She prodded it again and it still didn't move. Very gently she picked it up and let it unfold. Unsurprisingly it looked exactly as it had yesterday. A nice, clean dress, almost new, that was two sizes too big for her.

"Well, now," said Pooh, still protectively hugging his honey pot. "That didn't take long, did it?"

Kaylani glanced at Pooh then, hugging the dress in her arms, she said, "Thank you very much for altering my dress and thank you very much for putting it back the way it was."

There was the faintest of pulses in the air of the room then a smallish black cloth bundle appeared on the table.

"Oh Lord," thought Kaylani. "Now what?"

"Open it," said Pooh, his happiness restored.

"Yes, open it, open it," cried Tigger bouncing ecstatically.

"Umm, OK," said Kaylani, a trifle anxiously. Quite why she didn't know since a smallish black bundle was nothing compared with what she'd just witnessed but the mind works in mysterious ways.

She carefully folded the dress again and laid it on the table then picked up the bundle. There was something hard and lumpy inside. She gave it a few squeezes, as you do, trying to guess what was inside but with no great success. Then she put it back on the table and undid the thin cord around it. Inside was a pair of dressmaker's scissors, an ordinary pair of scissors, a selection of sewing needles, a

packet of pins, a thread unpicker and two reels of thread, both white.

“She hopes that will help,” said Polly.

“It's awesome,” said Kaylani, experimentally opening and closing the dressmaker's scissors. They looked to be exceptionally high quality.

“Thank you!” she said, lifting her head and talking to the room.
“Thank you very much! Umm, I don't suppose you have any pinky-red thread though, to match the colour of the orchids? Or straight red? That would do too.”

Chapter Twenty Three

“Hey, well done. You've passed the first test!” said Laurie when he spotted Kaylani hesitating by the large vase in the pub.

She'd spent much of the afternoon pinning and re-pinning her dress and concentrating on not thinking about how it had already been altered and reinstated nor who 'she' might be. When her watch, another thing to not think about, told her it was 4:15 she'd started to get ready for her first night's work and her anxieties had come flooding back. Consequently at 5pm she was in the pub, loitering half hidden by the vase and hoping she wouldn't be seen. It was not to be. Laurie had spotted her and beckoned her over.

“Um, my first test?” she asked, coming up to the bar.

“You turned up,” said Laurie tersely although he did semi-smile. “Plenty don't. What was your name again?”

“Kaylani,” said Kaylani. “Kaylani Tawney.”

“Right,” he said, pointing his finger and raised thumb like a gun at her. “Never forget a face but I'm a bugger for names. Sweet. Come with me.”

“G'day, hon,” said Greg with a broad smile as he approached from the far end of the bar. “So you came back, hey.”

“Umm, yes,” said Kaylani. She hesitated then asked about Kylie.

“She's in Chloe's Room,” said Greg.

“Oi, Kay-whatsit,” barked Laurie from the door midway down the bar. “Come on.”

“Oh, um, 'scuse me,” muttered Kaylani and hurried after him.

“What size are you?” asked Laurie as he marched up the stairs.

“Eight,” said Kaylani.

"I think we've got some eights," he said, barging into the room next to his office. It was filled with cleaning equipment and piles of laundry. He pulled a large cardboard box from a shelf and started rummaging through it.

"There you go," he said, tossing a cellophane wrapped shirt towards Kaylani. He pushed the box back on the shelf and pulled out the one next to it. A wrapped pair of slacks was tossed in her direction as well.

"If you survive the evening I'll give you a second set," he said. "It's your responsibility to wash 'em and if they get damaged let me know, OK."

"OK," said Kaylani. "Um, shall I get changed now?"

"Yeah," he said marching out. "There's a lavvy down the corridor. I'll be in Chloe's Room. I'm putting you with Kylie, OK."

"OK," said Kaylani. "Umm, where's Chloe's Room?"

"That one," he said, pointing to a door opposite his office. "Come on, hurry up. Haven't got all night." He pushed open the door and disappeared, leaving Kaylani alone and feeling rather breathless in the corridor.

"Right then," she muttered and started walking. There were half a dozen other doors along the corridor and, after opening several to discover they were store rooms and another function room she found the toilet. She got changed and was relieved to find the slacks had pockets so she could keep her inhaler with her. Laurie hadn't said what to do with her clothes so she left them in the laundry room on the top shelf with the new uniforms and stuffed the cellophane into a black garbage sack that looked to have rubbish inside. She hesitated outside the door to Chloe's Room, checked her house keys were still on a piece of string around her neck then took a couple of deep breaths before opening it.

She found herself behind a small bar which sat at one end of a medium sized room. Although the room was already laid out with

several tables and chairs in two rows, what caught her eye was a very large painting of a naked woman in a heavy gilt frame that went from almost the floor to the ceiling and dominated the space between the two windows. A chubby blonde girl was laying out place settings on one of the rows.

“Ahh, there you are,” said Kylie. She smiled at Kaylani. “So you made it then.”

“Wouldn't miss it for the world,” said Kaylani, deciding she ought to be a little more enthusiastic.

“That's the spirit,” said Laurie, appearing through some double doors at the far end on the right with two apprehensive looking girls in tow. “You've met Kylie, haven't you, Kaylene?”

“Yes, we've met,” said Kylie.

“Great,” said Laurie. “Now, Brent's phoned in sick so which of the other new girls do you want in the Private Dining Room?”

“Sunita,” said Kylie decisively. “Cassie can help out in the Rooftop Bar.”

“Awesome,” said Laurie. “Come on.” He turned and marched the girls out the double doors.

“I'm Kaylani,” said Kaylani, “not Kaylene.”

“I know,” said Kylie. “Laurie will get it right once you're working here properly. We've got over two hundred staff and half are part time. We've got new people starting every week as well so remembering names can be a bit of a problem. I'm the Function Manager, by the way. So, how are you feeling?” She looked at Kaylani somewhat intently.

“Um, OK,” said Kaylani, surprised.

“Not going to faint tonight are you?” she asked.

“Ahh, no,” said Kaylani. “I, um, made sure I had something to eat before I left home.”

“Good thinking,” said Kylie. “Now tonight we've only got a small party of 30 or so in here so Morgan will be behind the bar and you and Lucy will be serving the tables. I'll be flitting around between the three functions we've got on tonight and the Rooftop Bar.

“OK,” said Kaylani. “What do you want me to do?”

“Set up your tables,” said Kylie. “Do it the way Lucy's doing it. Then when that's done you can both go and set up the tables in the Saloon as well. Guests won't be arriving for a while and serving's scheduled for around 7 so when you've finished the Saloon get Lucy to show you round. This is a big pub with two main bars, a gaming room and half a dozen function rooms as well as the kitchens and stores so it's a bit of a rabbit warren. I had a new girl start, ohh last year, and she got lost and we didn't find her for over a week. Poor thing nearly starved to death.”

“Are you serious?” asked Kaylani, looking wide eyed at Kylie.

“Nah,” said Kylie with a laugh. “Only joking, although it is easy to get lost until you know your way around. By the way, love your hair.”

“Thanks,” said Kaylani, touching the hair on the side of her neck. “So, um, who's that?” and she pointed at the painting.

“That's Chloe,” said Kylie.

“Yeah I figured that,” said Kaylani, “since this is Chloe's Room but who is she?”

“No idea,” said Kylie, looking over at the painting. “I do know we can't get rid of it though.”

“How come?” asked Kaylani.

“The National Trust won't let us,” said Kylie.

“That’s because it’s an iconic Victorian painting,” said Lucy, coming over. “It was painted in 1875 by the French artist Jules Lefebvre and bought by a Melbourne doctor called Fitzgerald in 1883. When he died it was put up for auction and bought by Henry Young, the original owner of the pub, in 1908 who had it hung in here.”

“Well, get you!” exclaimed Kylie. “How do you know all that?”

“I’m doing Art History at LaTrobe,” said Lucy, smiling. “The National Trust and Heritage of Victoria decided in 1988 that the painting has to stay here indefinitely because of its social significance.”

“What social significance can a painting of a nude woman have?” asked Kaylani.

“Most of the Aussie soldiers who were in the First and Second World Wars, Korea and Vietnam left on ships from Port Melbourne,” said Lucy, gazing at the painting. “They were loaded onto trains at Flinders Street Station to be taken to the docks so they had their farewell drinks here in this pub. For many of them Chloe was the last woman they saw before they left to go to war and, of course, a hell of a lot never came back. Hundreds of letters were written to her from the trenches in Europe and Turkey as well as the front lines in Korea and Vietnam. Some American soldiers even worked up a plan to kidnap her but that got foiled. She was even the mascot of the Royal Navy frigate HMAS Melbourne although I don’t know if she still is.”

“Far out,” muttered Kaylani, also staring at Chloe.

“You want to know the really sad part though?” asked Lucy, turning back to look at Kaylani.

“Not really,” said Kaylani. “I don’t like sad stories.”

“Oh, OK,” said Lucy, a little put out. “I won’t tell you then.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” exclaimed Kylie. “Tell us!”

“Well, if you insist,” said Lucy, glancing at Kylie. “The model was a French girl called Marie who was Lefebvre’s lover. She killed herself

not long after this painting was finished when he refused to marry her. It's said she dissolved match heads in a glass of wine and drank it and died a most horrible death."

"Ugh," said Kaylani with a little shudder. "Nasty."

"Of course it may not be true," continued Lucy happily. "There's another painting of the same girl, also called Chloe but only of her top half. It was painted by an Australian artist called J. C. Waite in 1887 here in Melbourne which suggests Marie was alive and well in Melbourne twelve years after the first painting."

"No it doesn't," retorted Kylie. "He could just as easily have copied the top half of this one."

"Well, true," said Lucy. "Waite could have seen it when it belonged to Fitzgerald. He did another one of Marie in 1908 as well but this time fully clothed. I've read that it wasn't a new painting, just that he'd painted clothes on the first one but no one can be sure."

"Couldn't it be x-rayed or something?" asked Kaylani.

"Nah," said Lucy. "It was destroyed in a fire at Melbourne Town Hall in the 1920s along with most of Waite's paintings. An American journalist at the time did write that she'd visited Lefebvre in his studio in Paris and he'd told her that after he finished this painting he went abroad for a few months. When he came back he found Marie had got involved with some low lifes who'd tried to force her into, as the journalist put it, 'a way of life from which her soul revolted' and she killed herself. Could have been prostitution, could have been drugs, could have been anything really."

"Poor girl," said Kaylani, empathising.

"Hmm," said Kylie. "Well, this is all very interesting but the tables aren't getting laid. Come on, look sharp."

* * *

After a slow start Kaylani was kept busy enough and, after all the

meals had been served and the empty plates cleared away, Kylie asked her to help Morgan behind the bar. It took very little time to learn the prices of the more common drinks and the till was an easy-to-use touch screen machine. Several times she noticed Kylie watching from the double doors and, as the drinkers thinned out and things quietened down, she saw Kylie having a quiet word with Morgan.

“Could be about anything,” she thought to herself but knowing in her gut it was about her. Still, she hadn't made many mistakes as far as she knew and no one had complained. She'd had her bottom fondled once but that was par for the course. Some men, and it was a man, seemed to think barmaids were freely available. She'd put him straight with a very polite whispered “do that again and I'll call the manager” and the man hadn't done it again. She was quite proud of that, partly for not creating or causing a scene but mostly for not getting overly agitated and needing to use her inhaler. In fact she'd only needed to use it once, when things got rushed and stressed serving the meals, and a very quick visit to the corridor behind the bar had been sufficient.

“OK, Morgan, girls,” said Kylie when the last few stragglers looked like they might be getting ready to leave. “Clear up and put the tables away. There's a presentation in here tomorrow afternoon.”

Lucy showed Kaylani how to fold the legs of the tables so they stacked neatly and Morgan helped them carry the tables to a store room further down the corridor. When she got back to Chloe's Room Kylie was talking to Laurie.

“So how was your first night?” asked Lucy giving one final look around to check the room was clear enough for the cleaners in the morning.

“Not too bad,” said Kaylani. “I'm a bit knackered though.”

“Ahh, you'll get used to it,” said Lucy. “Well, I'll be off. Hopefully I'll see you around.”

“Yeah sure,” said Kaylani, “and thanks for your help tonight.”

“No worries,” said Lucy. She called a cheery farewell to Laurie and Kylie then disappeared.

“I guess I’d better hang around,” thought Kaylani, glancing at Laurie and Kylie still busily discussing something. “Surely they’re not still discussing me?”

She mentally shrugged and wandered over to look at Chloe.

“First World War, huh,” she thought. “What, 1914, 1915? Something like that. I’m guessing most of the soldiers back then hadn’t ever seen a naked woman before. Probably a lot were from rural areas too as Melbourne wouldn’t have been that big then. No wonder she had so many fall for her.”

She glanced over and Laurie and Kylie were still talking.

“So what happened to you, huh?” thought Kaylani, looking back at Chloe. “Did you really kill yourself or did you live a long happy life? Was it unrequited love or did you get mixed up with the wrong people? Maybe you did marry that French guy but he put it around you’d died horribly so the painting would be worth more. Maybe he even lied to that journalist.”

She jerked back in surprise. Had Chloe just winked at her? She stared at the girl’s face and decided she couldn’t have done since Chloe was looking to the side of the painting and only her facial profile was visible.

“Must be my imagination,” she thought. “All those bloody things going on in my room and now here. Maybe I am going mad, despite what Jack said. After all, the dress is still size 12 so there’s no proof any alterations were done.” She glanced at her watch then resolutely pushed it from her mind. It was only a minor complication after all.

“Kaylani,” called Laurie again.

Kaylani came out her of reverie and jerked around to see Laurie staring irritably at her.

“Sorry,” she said, figuring he’d already called her and she hadn’t heard. She walked towards him but he turned away.

“Come into my office,” he said over his shoulder.

“Grab a seat,” he said, kicking the door shut with his heel.

Kaylani picked up the battered 30 can Carlton Dry carton filled with paperwork that had found its way back onto the only other chair in the office and put it on the floor before sitting down. Laurie sat heavily in his chair and took a form out of a thick folder on his desk.

“So what evenings are you available?” he asked.

“Oh, umm, any evening,” said Kaylani, presuming this meant she’d got the job. “So Kylie was happy with me?”

She’d expected to pass the try-out but Laurie had seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time discussing her with Kylie which had filled her with doubts. In her experience pub try-out summations were generally along the lines of “yeah, no worries,” or “no way mate” with at best a sentence of justification.

“Yes,” said Laurie. “How about Wednesday to Sunday evenings? 5 to midnight or thereabouts?”

“That would be perfect,” said Kylie.

“Awesome,” said Laurie. “Kylie said she’d put you on the bar and you had no problems. Is that right?”

“Yes,” said Kaylani. “I’ve done bar work before and it all came back very quickly. The till was easy to use as well.”

Laurie snorted.

“Has to be,” he said. “We get some right drongos here who can’t remember the price of a beer let alone add up three of them. Sweet. I’ll put you in the main bar downstairs Wednesdays, Thursday and Sundays and the Rooftop Bar Fridays and Saturdays. That OK with

you?”

“Whatever you say,” said Kaylani.

“I love your attitude,” said Laurie, managing a full smile. “You OK to start tomorrow? In the Rooftop Bar?”

“Definitely,” said Kaylani.

“Right,” said Laurie. “Got your bank account details and tax file number?”

“Ah,” said Kaylani. “My bank details are in my other clothes but I forgot all about the tax file number.”

“Not a biggie,” said Laurie. “Get me your bank details now and your tax stuff soon as.” Kaylani jumped up. “Where are you going?”

“My clothes,” she said, “They’re in the room next door.”

“Right,” said Laurie. “Grab yourself another uniform while you’re there.”

Kaylani returned a few moments later clutching her clothes, a couple of cellophane bags and a piece of paper. She handed the paper to Laurie and sat down, balancing the clothes on her knees.

“Sweet,” said Laurie after getting a few more details from Kaylani. “Did you give me a copy of your Responsible Serving of Alcohol certificate?”

“I’ve lost it,” said Kaylani. “I’ll do it again but you said you’d trust me for the moment because I used to work for John at The Old Cutter in Sydney.”

“That’s right!” he exclaimed, doing his finger and thumb gun pointing again. He made a note of that at the top of the form then pulled open the bottom drawer of his desk and took out a small cash box. He took out some notes and locked the cash box before returning it to its drawer.

“That's for tonight,” he said, handing Kaylani the money. “From tomorrow it'll be paid into your bank weekly, OK. On Wednesdays.”

“Great,” said Kaylani, feeling unusually happy. Somewhere to live, a new hairstyle and now a job. Things were beginning to happen.

Chapter Twenty Four

It was quarter to midnight when Kaylani left the pub but there was still a fair amount of traffic on Swanston and Flinders Streets as it was Friday night. There weren't many pedestrians though and Kaylani was able to hurry through the dim tunnel created by the scaffolding of the repair works just past the traffic lights without being jostled. Outside Mallow's café however were several teenagers clustered around a couple of girls who were showing off their new tattoos under a street light. One of the girls had her t-shirt lifted high and one arm raised so her tattoo of ferns and colourful flowers winding up her side was unobscured. The other probably had a tattoo on her chest but she had her back to Kaylani although it was apparent from the way she held her arms she was pulling the front of her shirt down. None of the boys noticed Kaylani as their attention was fully focused on what the girls were revealing.

Spike, however, took absolutely no notice of them. He was leaning against the wall of the tattoo studio with one foot up and smoking. He glanced up as Kaylani approached.

"G'day," he said and nodded so his beard waggled. "You're out late."

"Hey," said Kaylani. "Yeah, I'm working at the pub now. Are you still working?"

"I'm done," he said and stretched the fingers of his right hand. "Jessie's just finishing off her last then we're shutting up. Been a long day." He dropped his ciggie in a metal ash tray beside the door. "Then that lot turned up a couple of hours ago, four of them wanting tats." He nodded towards the group by the café.

"Does it take long to do a tattoo?" asked Kaylani, curious.

"Depends," he said. "A little 'un might take twenty minutes, half an hour maybe. A big 'un with a mix of colours could take days. You see that girl? The one with the tat up her side? It's a big 'un, going from her arse to her neck. Probably taken fifteen hours all up."

"Wow," said Kaylani, looking back at the girl. She'd pulled her t-shirt

down now and was drinking out of a bottle. "So you did all that today?"

"Nah," said Spike. "This is her fourth visit. Gotta do big ones like that in stages as the skin gets all inflamed. Got to let it settle down otherwise it all ends up a bit weird and distorted. Gotta do the outline first then let it settle then do the colouring. Can't do big blocks of colour in one go."

"So is hers finished?" asked Kaylani.

"Yeah," said Spike. "That one anyway. She wants another, going up her leg, and she's thinking about a sleeve as well."

"Sleeve?" asked Kaylani. "What's that?"

"Full arm tat," said Spike. "Wrist to shoulder. Some get the hand done as well. Dunno where she gets the money though. Asked me for a discount saying she was unemployed." He snorted derisively.

"Right," said Kaylani. "So are they expensive?"

"That 'un on her side was two grand," said Spike. "Lot of work, see."

"I can imagine," said Kaylani. "Umm, can you tattoo over scars and things?"

"You can," said Spike, fiddling with his cigarette packet, "but it doesn't look right. The skin of the scar is different to normal skin see so you can still see where the scar was and the colours don't hold so well. They look thin and washed out. Best if you can make the scar part of the design so it looks more natural, like, but that ain't possible most of the time."

"Oh right," said Kaylani then hesitated before forcing herself to ask, as casually as possible, "how about brands?"

"Brands are just scars," said Spike. "Do 'em meself although there ain't a lot of call for them. Get a few what's had brands and want to hide 'em but unless they were done professionally it's usually a waste

of time.”

“Why's that?” asked Kaylani.

“Hmm? Oh amateur brands are crap,” he said. “The burning depth ain't consistent, see. Goes deep in some places and shallow in others which means the thickness and rise of the scarring is all over the place and the lines are usually jagged and wavy. Nigh on impossible to cover an amateur brand. Only real way is a skin graft. You got a brand then?”

“Oh no,” said Kaylani hurriedly. “I was just curious. I've heard of people getting brands, that's all.”

“Yeah,” said Spike. “Didn't think so. You ain't the type. Don't expect you've got any tats either.”

“No, I haven't,” said Kaylani. “Well, um, I'd best be off to bed. See you.”

“Yeah,” said Spike, pushing himself off the wall. He stood in his doorway and watched Kaylani as she walked past The House Of Pooh.

“Well,” thought Kaylani as she unlocked her front door, “that puts an end to that idea then. Not sure I fancy a skin graft either. Where would they take the skin from? Wouldn't that just leave another scar as well?”

* * *

“Hello dear,” said Virginia when Kaylani pushed open the door of The House Of Pooh the following morning. “New hairdo I see. Suits you. Very becoming.”

“Thanks,” said Kaylani. “I, um, started working yesterday so I've come to pay you the \$30.” She waved a \$50 note at Virginia.

“You must be so pleased,” said Virginia, taking the note. “Friday is an unusual day to start a job though, isn't it?”

"It's at the pub," said Kaylani.

"Ahh, that would explain it," said Virginia, putting the money in her till. She took out the receipt with '3B Kilani still owing', put a line through it and wrote 'Paid' beside it. "Can I interest you in anything else?"

Kaylani looked around the shop at all the images of Pooh and the others on the mugs, bedspreads and so on and wondered if they all got off and moved around when Virginia wasn't there. After all, the shop was only two floors below her own room.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" asked Kaylani, realising Virginia had said something.

"I asked if you were interested in anything else," said Virginia, taking a \$20 note from the till but not handing it over. "A bedspread perhaps?"

"How much are they?" asked Kaylani, going over to look at one hanging on the wall with a map of the Hundred Acre Wood on it.

"That one's \$124.95," said Virginia.

"Perhaps not," said Kaylani, quickly diverting to look at some thimbles on a shelf. She didn't have a thimble. There hadn't been one in the sewing pack. "How much are these?"

"\$1.50," said Virginia.

"I'll take this one," said Kaylani, picking up a thimble with a cute picture of Pooh holding Piglet's hand.

Virginia looked disappointed but Kaylani didn't notice. She was admiring the thimble on her finger.

"Perhaps a book or two?" asked Virginia. "Some incense?"

"Oh no," said Kaylani. "Just the thimble."

Virginia sniffed and put the \$20 back in the till before counting out \$18.50.

“Thanks,” said Kaylani, taking the money. “Umm, I’ll probably come back for a bedspread when the weather gets cooler.”

“Indeed,” said Virginia.

“Snotty cow,” thought Kaylani. She smiled though and gave Virginia a little wave before leaving. She gave the Lateral Books door as wide a berth as possible, which wasn’t much because of its proximity, and scampered up the stairs in case Wallace put in another sudden appearance. He didn’t as the Closed sign was still up but better safe than sorry.

“Oh, hello,” said Anastasia, emerging from her room just as Kaylani was passing. She stepped back quickly.

“Sorry,” said Kaylani, stepping sideways to avoid colliding with Anastasia. “Didn’t see you there.”

“No harm done,” said Anastasia. “Just going to make some tea. Do you want one?”

Kaylani hesitated. What she wanted was to be alone in her room but having survived the pub the previous evening she felt she should make some effort to be a little more sociable. After all, she didn’t want to end up like Sarah.

“Oh, yes, that would be nice,” she said, quelling a slight anxiety that bubbled up. “Thanks.”

“So how was your first day on the job?” asked Anastasia, going into the kitchen. “Or night rather. Well, evening.”

“Actually it went well,” said Kaylani. “In fact they’ve made me permanent.”

“That’s good,” said Anastasia, filling the kettle. “Actually I thought of you yesterday. You don’t happen to speak Korean, do you?”

“Korean? No,” said Kaylani, sitting down at the kitchen table. “Why?”

“We’ve had a sudden and unexpected vacancy appear,” said Anastasia, taking two mugs at random from the drying rack. “Someone made a complaint about the quality of translations on some of the materials produced by our Public Relations Department a while back and an investigation discovered that the man who does the translations into Korean doesn’t speak a word of Korean.”

“You are joking?” exclaimed Kaylani. “How did he get the job then?”

“That’s what we’d like to know,” said Anastasia. “It transpired that he’s spent the last two years translating everything using Google Translate. He’s been sacked, of course, which is why I thought of you. I imagine the job pays better than a pub.”

“Surely he’d have had to at least say something in Korean at the interview?” said Kaylani.

“Quite possibly he did,” said Anastasia, dropping a couple of tea bags into the mugs. “But since we had no Korean speakers no one would have known if he was right or not. Anyway, knowing our personnel people they probably sent him a page to translate and thought what he sent back looked all right. I imagine he’d have used Google Translate for that as well.”

“Still, it says something for the quality of Google Translate that it wasn’t picked up for two years,” said Kaylani. “Why bother to have a specialist translator? Why not just use Google Translate?”

“It’s the principle,” said Anastasia. “A number of academic researchers were retrenched a few years ago so the union is making this a major point of contention. Their argument being that had the academics not been retrenched this would not, indeed could not, have happened. Nonsense really since plenty of academics have been caught claiming qualifications they don’t have. Sugar?”

“Just milk thanks,” said Kaylani.

“Still, the union never misses an opportunity to criticise

management,” said Anastasia, “and management likewise. Especially as another round of retrenchments is rumoured to be happening soon.”

“This is at the State Library?” asked Kaylani. “I thought jobs at places like that were pretty secure.”

“Decidedly not,” said Anastasia, putting a mug in front of Kaylani and sitting down. “Every few years more computers are installed and staff laid off. I dare say it won’t be too much longer before no one is left except the Board because they’ll never lay themselves off, even though the most basic AI system would make better decisions.”

“What’s AI?” asked Kaylani.

“Artificial Intelligence,” said Anastasia. “It’s shot ahead in leaps and bounds over the last two or three years. I daresay it’ll take over pubs too soon enough.”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Kaylani, “although technology revolutionised the textiles industry.”

“So why do we still have thimbles?” asked Anastasia, picking up Kaylani’s thimble to look at. “Cute.”

“Mostly as ornaments,” said Kaylani, “as hardly anyone makes clothes anymore. Hey, I started on my dress yesterday. I’ve got it all pinned so I’ll probably do some cutting today and make a start on sewing tomorrow.”

“That’s nice,” said Anastasia. “I’m looking forward to seeing it finished.”

“So am I,” said Kaylani. “I’d forgotten how much I enjoy working with fabrics.”

“So what have you been doing for the last few years then?” asked Anastasia.

“Ahh,” said Kaylani, realising too late the hole she’d fallen into.

“Umm, mainly farm work.”

“At that commune you were with?” asked Anastasia.

“Something like that,” said Kaylani, casting around for something to change the subject. “Oh, hey, I wanted to ask you something.”

“What's that?” asked Anastasia, squeezing her teabag.

“You remember telling me about that ghost?” asked Kaylani.

“The one that freaked you out so much you ran out of the kitchen?” asked Anastasia.

“I didn't run out!” exclaimed Kaylani, going slightly pink.

“OK,” said Anastasia. “You were a bit huffy though. Anyway, what about it?”

Kaylani stared at her for a few moments, wanting to explain then squashed that desire. The less she said about her past to anyone the better, especially as she still had a feeling Anastasia knew from Jack and wanted to be judgemental.

“Have you seen it yourself?” she asked.

“No,” said Anastasia. “Or at least if I have I probably assumed it was something else. I know Mary's seen it though and I think Jack might have. Why? Have you seen it?”

“No,” said Kaylani truthfully as she hadn't actually *seen* a ghost.

“So why worry about it?” asked Anastasia.

“I'm not worried about it,” retorted Kaylani, feeling a bit stressed.

“Could have fooled me,” said Anastasia calmly watching her. “I saw your face when you ran out. Walked out, I mean.”

“What do you mean?” asked Kaylani, frowning. “What's my face got to

do with it?"

"You looked quite alarmed," said Anastasia. "Almost frightened."

"Oh that wasn't anything to do with ghosts," said Kaylani, the muscles around her eyes tightening.

"Oh yes?" said Anastasia. "What was it to do with then?"

Kaylani stared at her, realising she'd been trapped again.

"Oh nothing," she said lamely and dropped her eyes to look at her tea.

"Yes, nothing's pretty scary, isn't it," said Anastasia. She waited a few moments but Kaylani didn't respond. She just stared at her tea then fished the teabag out with a spoon.

"So will you be wearing your new dress at the pub?" asked Anastasia, wondering why Kaylani hadn't just abruptly got up and left the way she did when the ghost was first mentioned.

"Hmm? Oh no," said Kaylani. "I've got a uniform to wear."

"That's right," said Anastasia, snapping her fingers. "I'd forgotten. The staff all wear black, don't they."

"Yes," said Kaylani. "Black shirt and black slacks."

"At least it's not a French Maid outfit," said Anastasia. "I've heard some places do that."

"Yeah?" asked Kaylani, not that interested. "Mary said something about topless bars in Western Australia. I don't know how true that is though."

"I've heard that too," said Anastasia. "So what's happened to you?"

"What do you mean?" asked Kaylani, glancing at her suspiciously.

“You said you haven't seen this ghost,” said Anastasia gently, “but something's bothering you, isn't it.”

“No, nothing's bothering me,” said Kaylani.

“Uh huh,” said Anastasia. “So who do you talk to at night?”

“What do you mean?” asked Kaylani, frowning. “I don't talk to anybody.”

“I'm in the room below you,” said Anastasia. “I sometimes hear voices and not just yours. And feet and the occasional thump.”

“Ahh,” said Kaylani.

“But I don't hear anyone coming or going on the stairs except you, Mary and Jack,” said Anastasia, “and, very occasionally, Sarah.”

“How would you know who it is going up the stairs?” asked Kaylani.

“You all have different sounds,” said Anastasia. “”Mary's got quite a heavy solid step whereas yours is lighter and faster. I hear everyone go past my room so I know what you all sound like.”

“Right,” said Kaylani. “Well I haven't got anyone else living in my room, if that's what you mean.”

Anastasia laughed.

“No, I expect not,” she said. “If you had they'd be busting for the toilet by now, unless they manage to hold on until I'm at work. So who do you talk to?”

“Myself,” said Kaylani.

“And put on different voices?” asked Anastasia.

“It amuses me,” said Kaylani.

“Piffle,” said Anastasia. “You're far too serious for nonsense like that.”

Come on, tell me.”

“There's nothing to tell,” said Kaylani, frowning.

“Suit yourself,” said Anastasia, “but there's something going on and you want to tell me so why don't you?”

“There's nothing going on,” said Kaylani tartly, “and I don't want to tell you anyway.”

“So why are you still here?” asked Anastasia. “Usually you just get up and go when you don't want to talk.”

“I haven't finished my tea,” said Kaylani lamely.

“Doesn't usually stop you,” said Anastasia. “At first I just thought you were a rude little bitch but I'm pretty sure you're not. Mary doesn't think so either. She thinks you've got troubles.”

“So you've all been discussing me, have you?” exclaimed Kaylani hotly.

“Of course,” said Anastasia with a laugh and a dismissive wave of her hand. “There's four of us sharing this one house, well five if you include Sarah. Of course we talk about each other.”

“So Jack's told you all about me, has he?” asked Kaylani, starting to get annoyed.

“So, Jack knows about you does he?” asked Anastasia. “Interesting. No, he hasn't told me anything.”

“I thought you said you all discuss me,” said Kaylani stiffly.

“I was exaggerating,” said Anastasia. “We have different jobs and different patterns. It's really only me and Mary that get together and then only for Sunday lunch which we aren't having at the moment because she's dieting for her competition.”

“Now I'm lost,” said Kaylani.

“Don't be,” said Anastasia. “Mary just said she thought you had troubles after you left after lunch last Sunday. Other than that we haven't talked about you.”

“So Jack hasn't told you about me?” asked Kaylani.

“No,” said Anastasia. “Why? What is there to tell?”

“You're an idiot,” thought Kaylani to herself, gripping her mug tightly. “You've got trapped yet again!”

“Oh nothing,” she said. “Only ...”

“Only what?” asked Anastasia, perking up.

“Umm, do you ever see things in your room that aren't ghosts?” asked Kaylani realising she did want to talk about Pooh and the others.

“Of course,” said Anastasia, frowning. “I have a TV, books and so on.”

“No, I mean things that shouldn't be there,” said Kaylani.

“What sort of things?” asked Anastasia quietly.

“I've got a poster on my wall,” said Kaylani, “of Winnie The Pooh.”

“Oh yes,” said Anastasia. “So Winnie The Pooh talks to you?”

“Yes,” said Kaylani. “And Tigger jumps around a lot. He gets excited.”

“I imagine he does,” said Anastasia, sitting back and looking at Kaylani strangely. “What else?”

Chapter Twenty Five

“Frankly it's unbelievable,” said Anastasia a while later.

“You think I'm making it all up?” asked Kaylani. She felt cross with Anastasia for virtually forcing her to tell her then not believing her when she did.

Anastasia just looked at her then down at her clasped hands on the table. Kaylani's were out of sight under the table but were slowly clenching and unclenching.

“A distinct possibility,” said Anastasia, “although while unseen forces making a dress during the night is a common meme, particularly in films, the unmaking of the dress in front of your eyes does add a certain layer of creativity.”

“It wasn't made and unmade,” said Kaylani, screwing up her nose and curling her lips downwards in annoyance. “It was altered and restored. The dress was most likely made in a factory in China.”

“To be sure, to be sure,” said Anastasia. “Would you like some more tea?”

“No,” said Kaylani, pushing her chair back as she stood up. “I'm going back to my room. Talking to you was a bad idea.”

“Actually you're not the first person to say that,” said Anastasia genially. “Why do you think I'm twice divorced and living in a single room on my own at the relatively young age of 51?”

“I confess I hadn't given your background a single thought,” said Kaylani, pausing in the doorway.

“And why should you, child?” said Anastasia, also getting up. “You have problems enough of your own. Come back and sit down. We haven't finished talking yet.”

She picked up both mugs and tossed the old tea bags in the bin then filled the kettle again. Kaylani watched her from the doorway then

slowly came in and sat back down.

“What else is there to say?” she said. “Unless you think I’m crazy.”

“Well it is a distinct possibility,” said Anastasia, turning around and leaning against the sink. “But then, who’s to say what’s sane and what isn’t, eh? After all, millions of people are absolutely convinced that there is an entity that directs their lives without a scrap of tangible evidence to support that conviction. So, if such people set the bounds of sanity then all we have to do is presume that your dress and the other happenings in your room are simply a manifestation of that entity and we have conclusive proof of your sanity, at least within the bounds of their mindset. It’s as simple as that.”

“You what?” asked Kaylani, confused.

“God, sweetie, God,” said Anastasia. “Surely you have heard of God even if you aren’t a believer?”

“Oh,” said Kaylani, pursing her lips and thinking about it. “Just a minute. Aren’t people who’ve said they’ve talked to God or seen visions or whatever pronounced insane and sent to loony bins?”

“Only in recent times,” said Anastasia, turning back to the kettle when it clicked, “and I dare say by those who are not convinced of God’s existence or who see the claimant as somehow a threat to their own power. No, in times past such people were revered. Joan of Arc springs to mind for some reason.”

“I wasn’t much good at history at school,” said Kaylani, “but wasn’t she burnt to death for that?”

“No, that was because she led an army against the English in the Hundred Years War after seeing visions of the Archangel Michael,” said Anastasia, “although ironically she was tried and burnt for heresy by the English despite becoming a patron saint of the French which makes actually my point rather nicely. My point was merely that sanity is not a clearly defined standard. It very much depends on who is making the judgement call and undoubtedly involves a fair number of personal prejudices. Certainly there are some who will judge you as

'crazy'," and she wiggled her fingers as finger-quotes, "and others who will see you as perfectly sane in every respect."

She dropped a couple of fresh teabags in the mugs and poured in the water.

"Oh," said Kaylani, confused again. "So are you saying you don't think I'm crazy?"

"Of course you're crazy," said Anastasia, adding milk. "At your age you should be off raising a family and paying taxes and all those boring conventional things that society expects of us, not living in a single room in a back alley and conversing with stuffed toys, an old woman who's given up on life, an amazon who wants to remodel herself into an image of Thor The Destroyer and a budding rocket scientist."

"Um, Jack isn't a rocket scientist, is he?" said Kaylani with a frown. "At least I don't think he is."

"It doesn't matter what he is," said Anastasia, putting the mugs on the table. "My point is that we're all crazy in some way or another. It's just a matter of choosing the yardstick to measure relative craziness against. Anyway, you're asking the wrong question."

"I'm kind of lost here," said Kaylani. "I don't even remember what question I did ask."

"You asked if I thought you were crazy," said Anastasia. "I've already given you a longish answer but since you don't appear to have understood it here's my short answer. No."

"No what?" asked Kaylani, shaking her head a little and wishing she'd gone back to her room when she had the opportunity.

"No, you aren't crazy," said Anastasia, opening a cupboard door. "Would you like a biscuit? There are some Tim Tams here."

"Oh, no thanks," said Kaylani. She sat back and wondered if in fact it was Anastasia who was a little crazy. Maybe she'd been on her own

too long?

“You should,” said Anastasia, taking the packet out and opening it. “They’ll raise your blood sugar level and help get your brain working properly again.”

“My brain’s working just fine,” said Kaylani.

“Then why do you think I think you’re crazy?” asked Anastasia, taking two of the biscuits and putting the packet in front of Kaylani.

“Because I’ve been telling you I’ve been seeing things,” said Kaylani.

“Well, true enough,” said Anastasia. “And no one else has seen these things, have they. Or have they?”

“No,” said Kaylani. “No one’s been in my room.”

“And I daresay if you brought your dress down to show me it wouldn’t constitute proof,” said Anastasia. “After all, it was altered back so the fact that it is as it was doesn’t really tell us anything. Nor does the watch which you say just appeared but it could have come from anywhere. Still, there is one thing that you’ve overlooked.”

“What’s that?” asked Kaylani, taking a biscuit.

“No one except you has seen anything,” said Anastasia, pausing to eat a biscuit and, perhaps, to add a little drama and tension, “but I’ve heard things. Perhaps Mary has as well”

“Yes, but I could be putting on funny voices,” said Kaylani.

“Indeed you could,” said Anastasia, “but when you’re not there?”

“You mean they talk to each other when I’m not there?” asked Kaylani in surprise, taking another biscuit without noticing.

“Yes,” said Anastasia. “I heard some indistinct voices last night, as well as some thumps which I now presume to have been Tigger. I dismissed them as I thought you were in the room but then I heard

you talking to Spike as my window was open which reminded me you started work last night. Then you came in and talked to the voices for a while. Tell me, why did you ask Spike about tattooing over brands? It seemed a strange thing for a girl like you to be talking about.”

“Oh wow,” said Kaylani softly, staring at her half eaten biscuit. “So they are real after all.”

“Or perhaps I am just pretending to have heard voices for some ulterior reason,” said Anastasia mischievously. She picked up another Tim Tam and snapped it in half before beaming at Kaylani. “That’s something for you to consider as well.”

“Are you?” asked Kaylani, looking at Anastasia intently.

“No,” said Anastasia. “No offence but I don’t find you that interesting. Or at least I didn’t until now.” She popped one half in her mouth and chewed happily.

“Why do I interest you now?” asked Kaylani, the chocolate on the half eaten biscuit in her hand melting unnoticed on her fingers. She found it rather alarming that Anastasia was interested in her in some way.

“I’ve been living in my room now for, ohh, a little over four years,” said Anastasia. “When I moved in there was a girl in the room above, your room, called Mandy. I often heard noises from there and it came as no surprise when she announced she was pregnant and moved in with one of her many boyfriends. After her was a Muslim lad called Ishmael who prayed every morning. He was there for, ohh, maybe six months then he moved out. Then there was a Chinese student called Lucy Li who never made a sound. She was there until not long after Sarah moved in on the top floor. After her was another student, Hoang, from Vietnam. He was fairly quiet as well.”

“OK,” said Kaylani. She discarded the half biscuit and licked the chocolate off her fingers. “Why are you telling me this?”

“You remind me a little of Lucy Li,” said Anastasia. “She used to see things in that room as well.”

“Get out of here!” exclaimed Kaylani in surprise. “What sort of things?”

“I’m not really sure,” said Anastasia. “Her English wasn’t particularly good but I think it was something to do with her ancestors. Anyway, she didn’t particularly like whatever it was she was seeing so she moved out.”

“What about the others?” asked Kaylani.

“No they didn’t see or hear things,” said Anastasia. “Or if they did they never told me. I do find it interesting though that Lucy Li and you have both seen things in that room, Mary sees regular ghosts in her room across the landing and Jack in the room above you thinks he saw something.”

“What about you?” asked Kaylani. “Have you seen or heard anything in your room?”

“Me? Oh no,” said Anastasia. “Actually I feel rather left out. Disappointed too. I’d love to see strange things happening in my room but sadly all that happens is banal in the extreme. I daresay I’m not receptive to that sort of thing. Too much of an academic I suppose.”

“I wonder if Sarah’s seen anything,” mused Kaylani. “Mary did tell me she’d followed her ghost up the stairs and apparently it went into Sarah’s room.”

“Yes, she told me that as well,” said Anastasia. “I wanted to ask Sarah about it but she doesn’t talk to anyone. I’ve only seen her a few times in the year or so she’s been here and she just smiles politely and walks away quickly if I speak to her.”

“What does she look like?” asked Kaylani. “I’ve never seen her although I think I may have heard her on the stairs once or twice.”

“Bit of a nondescript sort of thing,” said Anastasia. “Dresses rather shabbily and doesn’t seem to take much care of herself. We get all sorts here. I remember Matt who was in the room above yours before

Jack. He used to photograph children in the alley from his window until he got arrested. Apparently he was caught photographing kids in Flinders Street Station as well which didn't go down too well. The train people don't allow photography for some reason. I daresay it was the children that got the police interested however."

"That's a bit creepy isn't it," said Kaylani with a little shudder. "Photographing kiddies."

"Well I don't imagine they were naked," said Anastasia. "Not at the Station anyway. No, he wasn't a nice chap at all. On the odd occasions when I talked to him he was always making smutty remarks. I was quite pleased when he went."

"So what do you make of it all?" asked Kaylani, taking the last biscuit before Anastasia took it. "Is this house haunted do you suppose?"

"Oh quite possibly," said Anastasia. "It's very old. All the houses in this alley are. Actually, this is something that might interest you. You know the name of the alley? Burgun Walk?"

"Yes," said Kaylani. "What about it?"

"I was mildly curious when I moved in," said Anastasia, "so I did a bit of research. Back in 1835 a group from Van Dieman's Land started a settlement about where the Immigration Museum is now, just up Flinders Street a little bit. Then another penal colony was started here not long after so this area around Flinders Street Station goes back to the 1830s. As far as I could tell from the records Burgun Walk first appeared in 1839. I'm not saying these houses were built back then but there would have been some sort of dwellings here in Burgun Walk otherwise they wouldn't have given it a name."

"So you think the house is haunted by the ghost of someone who lived here back in the 1830s or 40s?" asked Kaylani.

"Perhaps," said Anastasia, "but the name's quite interesting don't you think?"

"Isn't it just the name of someone from Van Dieman's Land?" asked

Kaylani. "Burgun was probably just the first to live here."

"Yes, that's what you'd think," said Anastasia, "and that may well in fact be the case. It's just that Burgun is a derivative of the old English word 'Burgrune' which meant a powerful woman skilled in the mysteries."

"For real?" asked Kaylani, her mouth hanging slightly open.

"For real," said Anastasia. "I looked it up. After the arrival of Christianity in England the word changed its meaning slightly to become a general term for a pagan sorceress."

"Wow," said Kaylani. "So how did someone from Tasmania end up with that as their surname?"

"Well that's the thing," said Anastasia. "There's no-one called Burgrune or Burgun in the Melbourne phone book or in Tasmania so I suspect the name Burgun Walk wasn't the name of someone who lived here. I was going to check the records to see if anyone was convicted of witchcraft and deported to Australia in the first shipment or two to the new Melbourne penal colony but never got around to it. There was a round of redundancies at the State Library at the time so I had to look busy on important things not do private research. Once things settled down I'd more or less lost interest. Probably nothing in it anyway but I am a researcher so my instinct is to investigate things."

"Bit of a coincidence though, isn't it?" said Kaylani. "There's a ghost which has been seen by several people and other strange goings on in a house in an alley named after a pagan sorceress."

"Not really," said Anastasia. "There are thousands of haunted houses and castles all over the world which aren't named after anything sinister and plenty of oddly named places you'd think should be haunted which aren't. Besides, why's nothing happened until the last few years?"

"You don't know nothing's happened," said Kaylani. "You only know what's happened since you've been here and you only know what

people have told you. Mandy and whatshisname the Vietnamese could have seen all sorts of things but never told you. Same with the kiddie photographer.”

“That’s true,” said Anastasia. “And I don’t know anyone in the house next door. I know Mallow and Spike, of course, but not any of the tenants.”

“What about the house the other side?” asked Kaylani. “The one that was knocked down.”

“What about it?” asked Anastasia, frowning.

“Well, when was it knocked down?” asked Kaylani. “Maybe things happened there as well or maybe the process of knocking it down triggered something in this house?”

“I’ve no idea,” said Anastasia thoughtfully. “It was already partially knocked down when I moved in. In fact the rest of the alley had been demolished although the land hadn’t been set aside for the new shopping centre back then. I think the plan was for offices but that fell through.”

“OK,” said Kaylani. “Anyway it’d be a bit like some old horror movie, wouldn’t it. The bulldozers move in and release some horrific hidden forces that terrorise the neighbourhood until Matt Damon comes along and saves us all.”

“Oh I do hope not,” said Anastasia with a laugh. “I’d much rather be saved by Tom Cruise. Anyway nothing horrific’s happening, is it. Just some harmless old biddy wandering around occasionally and a few invisible friends for you to talk to.”

“They’re not invisible,” said Kaylani quickly.

“Well, maybe not,” said Anastasia, “to you anyway, but they are your friends, aren’t they.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Kaylani.

“You do seem to spend quite a lot of time talking to them,” said Anastasia, “and you don't have any other friends, do you.”

“Well, I'm new to Melbourne,” said Kaylani defensively. “I haven't had time to make any friends.”

“Perhaps if you spent less time in your room and got out a bit more you'd find some,” said Anastasia.

“Oh that's not fair,” said Kaylani. “I've only been here a week and a half and I was looking for a job first.”

“That's not entirely true though, is it,” said Anastasia. “You got the first job you asked for. You didn't even leave your room for the first week. Why did you leave that commune anyway? Didn't you like it there?”

“You seem awfully interested in my background,” said Kaylani, flaring up. “Why's that?”

“Probably because you're so desperate to hide it,” said Anastasia. “Why? What happened to you?”

“It's none of your business!” exclaimed Kaylani, jumping up. “Keep your nose out of it!”

“Off to your room are you, sweetie?” said Anastasia. “Going to talk to your invisible friends again?”

“Oh eff off,” snarled Kaylani and stormed out of the kitchen.

“I bet it was a cult rather than a commune,” thought Anastasia listening to her pound up the stairs and slam her door behind her. “She's way too sensitive about it to be just a commune. Funny though, I wouldn't have thought she was that gullible. She seems fairly switched on and cynical enough but maybe that's just now, not back then. I wonder what the bastards did to her, poor thing.”

Chapter Twenty Six

“Who does she think she is?” snarled Kaylani, throwing herself on her bed.

“Who does who think who is?” asked Puss, creeping down the wall to peer more closely at her.

“That bloody Anastasia,” snapped Kaylani. “In the room below this.”

“Oh,” said Puss. “You seem upset.”

“Who's upset Kaylani?” cried Tigger, bouncing across the room. “You just tell me who's upset her and I'll sort 'em! Grrroowwww. Yes, I'll sort 'em! Quick as Poohsticks.”

“Are you upset, Kaylani?” asked Pooh anxiously, twisting round on his branch. “Would you like some honey? Honey is very good when you're upset.”

“I'm not really upset, guys,” said Kaylani, sitting up so she could swing her legs over the side of the bed. “She just annoys me. Always prying.”

There was a flutter of wings and Polly landed awkwardly on the edge of the chest of drawers. She would have been more graceful but Iggy was clambering up the front corner and she didn't want to land on him.

“Was it about us?” asked Polly, stepping sideways so Iggy could clamber on top of the chest of drawers.

“Not really,” said Kaylani, “although she did call you my invisible friends.”

“Invisible hey?” said Tigger with an extra high bounce. “I'm invisible! Woo hoo!”

“Sadly not,” remarked Puss drily. “Calm down and stop bouncing! You'll knock me off the wall.”

“Sorry,” said Tigger, stopping mid bounce and collapsing on the floor. “It’s just that that’s what Tiggers do best.”

“And you do it very well,Tigger,” said Kaylani, reaching out to stroke his head. “It’s more that she keeps trying to find out where I’m from. I think she thinks I was with a commune or something but I really don’t want to tell her about ... you know.”

“No,” said Pooh. “You should try and forget that place.”

“Easy for you to say,” said Kaylani. “You’re a bear with very little brain but I’ve got quite a lot of brain.”

“All the more reason,” said Polly. “Too much brain gives you too much room for unpleasant thoughts to fly around in.”

“I don’t know why she wants to know,” mused Kaylani, regaining her equilibrium. “Maybe she’s just nosey but maybe she wants to try to manipulate me. If she knows my secrets then she’ll have a hold over me. I just hope she never thinks to ask Jack. I should never have told him either. That was a mistake.”

“Don’t worry about Jack,” said Iggy. “He’s not like that. He never breaks a confidence.”

“How would you know?” asked Kaylani. “You’ve never met him.”

“Yes, we have,” said Iggy, “or at least Puss has.”

“Puss?” exclaimed Kaylani, twisting to look at the platypus. “When did you meet Jack?”

“I climbed up the wall when you went to see him about the watch,” said Puss. “He seemed to be very trustworthy. Besides, he likes you. He likes you a lot.”

“Oh come on!” exclaimed Kaylani. “He think I’m a total weirdo!”

“No he doesn’t,” said Puss. “He thinks you’re lovely and that you’ve been badly mistreated.”

“Oh and I suppose he told you that, did he?” said Kaylani with a dismissive laugh.

“Yes he did,” said Puss. “Except he didn't know I was there. He said it to himself.”

“Oh, great” said Kaylani, her nostrils flaring. She rolled her eyes as well. “That's the last thing I need. OK, he's a nice enough guy but a relationship ... no. I'm never getting involved with anyone ever again.”

“Does that include us?” asked Tigger in a very mournful voice.

“No, silly, of course it doesn't mean you!” exclaimed Kaylani. “You're my friends and it doesn't matter what Anastasia thinks.”

“We're your friends!” exclaimed Tigger bouncing with delight. “We're your friends!”

“Now see what you've done,” said Polly irritably. “You've set him off again.” She sniffed disdainfully and ran her beak through the feathers on her chest.

“Yeah, yeah, calm down, Tigger,” said Kaylani. She waved her hand at Tigger and waited until he'd stopped bouncing. “Anastasia also said something else which I wanted to ask you guys about.”

“What was that?” asked Puss.

“She was telling me that the name of the alley we're in comes from the old English word for a sorceress,” said Kaylani. All of them, including Tigger went very quiet. “Do any of you know anything about that?”

They all quietly shook their heads, even the fish that swam in the pool of the mat beside the bed.

“Seriously?” asked Kaylani.

“None of us were here then,” said Pooh. “We only came here when you brought us here.”

“I didn't bring Puss,” said Kaylani. “Puss was already here. On the wall.”

“No,” said Puss. “The marks were on the wall. You made me from them.”

“That's a bit of a technicality,” said Kaylani. “You are the marks and the marks were here before I arrived so you must know something.”

“I don't expect the marks were here when the alley was named though,” said Iggy.

“Well, fair point,” said Kaylani. “I just wondered if the sorceress the alley is named after is also the ghost. The 'she' you said who made my dress.”

No one answered.

“Well?” asked Kaylani. “Are they one and the same or is the ghost the ghost of someone else?”

Still no one answered.

“Oh this is silly,” said Kaylani firmly. “You all know the ghost. After all you're the ones that told me she made the dress. So who is she Puss? Pooh? Polly?”

“Umm,” said Pooh in a nervous voice.

“Yes, Pooh?” asked Kaylani. “Are you going to tell me?”

“No,” said Pooh and touched one of his honey pots for reassurance.

“Why not?” asked Kaylani.

“She wouldn't like it,” said Pooh in a whisper.

“Who wouldn't like it?” asked Kaylani.

“I think what Pooh meant,” said Puss, retreating a little way back up

the wall, “is that she will tell you herself when the time is right.”

“Are you serious?” said Kaylani, frowning. “Like, when?”

“When the time is right,” said Puss, retreating a little further.

“When will that be?” asked Kaylani.

“I don't know,” said Puss.

“Anyone know?” asked Kaylani, looking around.

They all shook their heads.

“This is getting ridiculous,” said Kaylani. “But you admit this ghost is real, yeah?”

“She did alter your dress,” said Polly.

“And gave you scissors and things,” said Pooh.

“So that makes her real, doesn't it?” asked Tigger anxiously.

“I guess so,” said Kaylani. “So what you're saying is that one day, or one night more likely, she will suddenly appear and reveal everything?”

“Who knows,” said Iggy. “She does what she wants.”

“So it seems,” said Kaylani. She leant back on her arms and puffed out her cheeks. “What if she never does? What then?”

“We don't know what the future holds,” said Polly. “We're just paintings and pictures and marks. We don't know anything.”

“No, apparently not,” said Kaylani. “And hey, guess what. Neither do I. I don't even know if I'm just imagining you all. Anastasia said she hears you talking but maybe she doesn't. Maybe she's just winding me up. Hell, maybe she's even trying to make me go crazier faster. So am I going crazy?”

“No, you're not going crazy,” said Pooh.

“Well, you'd have to say that wouldn't you,” said Kaylani with a snort. “If I am going crazy then your existence depends on me staying crazy, doesn't it.”

“You think too much,” said Pooh. He dipped his paw in a pot and pulled it out dripping with honey. “Have some honey. It will make you feel better.”

“Not right now,” said Kaylani, getting off the bed. “I'm going out. I need some fresh air and I need to do some shopping before I go to work. Thanks guys for making things so much clearer. Not.”

“Don't forget your keys,” said Polly.

“I won't,” said Kaylani. “See you in a bit.”

* * *

“Oh, hello,” said Kaylani, stepping through the doorway at the top of the central staircase into the Rooftop Bar. It was deserted apart from a slim girl with her hair up in a high ponytail. “I'm Kaylani. I'm new here. Laurie said I'm to do the Rooftop Bar on Fridays and Saturdays.”

“Awesome,” said the girl, turning to look at her. “I'm Toni. Yeah, Kylie said something about a new girl. Have you done bar work before?”

“Yes,” said Kaylani, “although not for a while.”

“It'll come back quickly enough,” said Toni with a laugh.

“I'm sure it will,” said Kaylani, looking around.

The bar was on the top of the pub and only the bar and an area around it was covered. The rest of the space had tables with chairs protected by umbrellas and a section in the furthest corner with benches around a fire-pit that wasn't covered. The white walls were about waist height with glass panels on top that went to mid chest,

presumably to discourage people from leaning over and falling off. After all, it was four stories down to the ground below and people who've been drinking aren't always skilled at estimating risk. There were only a handful of people up there as yet, clustered into four or five groups.

"It's nice up here," said Kaylani, stepping into the sunshine and feeling a pleasant breeze on her face.

"You'll probably change your mind when it's raining and windy," said Toni, taking a stack of glasses over to the glass washer machine. "And cold."

"I don't expect many people come up here then," said Kaylani, going over to the wall.

"You'd be surprised," said Toni. "Some people come up here whatever the weather. Mostly smokers when it's bad though."

"So smoking's allowed up here?" asked Kaylani, looking round at her.

"So long as they're not around the bar," said Toni. "Smoking's not allowed under a roof."

"OK," said Kaylani. "So the umbrellas don't count as roofs?"

"They can be collapsed," said Toni.

"Right," said Kaylani, turning back to look at the view. "Hey, is that the Cathedral over there? It's huge!"

"Sure is," said Toni.

"What's that pink thing over there?" asked Kaylani.

"Federation Square," said Toni, not bothering to look. She'd been working the Rooftop Bar for over a year now.

"What's that?" asked Kaylani.

“It's a big open square,” said Toni. “Sometimes they show movies or cricket matches there. New to Melbourne are you?”

“Yes,” said Kaylani. “I've only been here a week. Well, ten days.”

“Where're you from then?” asked Toni.

“Brisbane,” said Kaylani, continuing to follow the wall around. Flinders Street Station she recognised even though it looked different from up above.

“Must feel cold then,” said Toni, stacking the clean glasses under the bar.

“A bit,” said Kaylani, walking past the fire-pit. She peered over the glass panel to look down into Burgun Walk and could almost see into her room from where she stood. She wondered why she hadn't noticed people in the Rooftop Bar before.

“Probably because I look down when I look out of my windows,” she thought, “not up.”

She turned around and leant her back against the panel.

“And there's no lights this side,” she thought, noticing.

“I don't expect anyone's told you,” said Toni, coming over to join her. “People can eat up here but they have to order from one of the bars on the ground floor, unless there's a barbecue up here which there isn't tonight.”

“When do we have barbecues?” asked Kaylani.

“There is a schedule,” said Toni. “They're special events as we have to get Council approval because of the fire risk. I don't think the next one's for a few weeks yet.”

“Right,” said Kaylani. “So how come there's no lights this side?”

“Dunno,” said Toni. “Never thought about it. Maybe it's because

there's people living in those houses down there.”

“Could be,” said Kaylani. “I live down there and having lights on half the night would be a nuisance.”

“Oh yeah?” said Toni, peering over. “Which one?”

“That one,” said Kaylani, pointing. “Over The House Of Pooh.”

“The what?” asked Toni, frowning.

“The House Of Pooh,” said Kaylani. “It's a shop that sells Winnie the Pooh stuff.”

“Oh right,” said Toni disinterestedly. She turned round and spotted some people coming onto the rooftop and nudged Kaylani. “Customers. Come on.”

The bar got busier as the evening progressed as the weather stayed clear and warm. Around nine it started to get dark and the lights in the main area of the bar came on, giving the Rooftop Bar an almost tropical feel. The Burgun Walk side, however, remained in darkness although there was enough light coming up from Flinders Street to make out the shapes of people milling round or sitting on the benches. Dotted here and there along the length of that side a few couples took advantage of the darkness to keep their activities private.

It was probably around ten that Kaylani came back from the toilet and noticed a woman on the edge of the lights watching her. She frowned slightly but it's not uncommon for people in bars to watch the bar staff when they're not paying attention to the people they're with.

“At least she's not a guy working up the courage to come and talk to me,” she thought and went back behind the bar and got on with serving customers.

Perhaps ten minutes later the woman made her way to a vacant section of the bar and put down an empty glass. Toni went over and put the glass with the other glasses to be washed and served her with

another drink. The woman chatted with her for a few moments then wandered back to stand near the Cathedral side wall.

“That woman I just served thinks she knows you,” said Toni as she walked behind Kaylani as Kaylani held a glass to one of the whisky bottles suspended at the back of the bar.

“What woman?” asked Kaylani, jerking her hand away from the bottle in surprise. Fortunately the mechanism was spring loaded and shut itself off without spilling whisky everywhere.

“That one over there,” said Toni, nodding in the general direction of the Cathedral. Kaylani looked but there were probably thirty or forty women that side.

“Where?” asked Kaylani, putting the glass back up to the bottle.

“Dunno,” said Toni. “She asked if you were Kaylani though. Is your surname Towney?”

“Tawney,” said Kaylani, putting the glass on the bar in front of the customer who had ordered it. “Did she give her name? I don't know anyone in Melbourne.”

Toni deftly removed the crimped tops from two bottles of beer with one hand and put them on the bar while grabbing two glasses with the other.

“Evelyn I think she said,” she said. She took the proffered note and rang up the beers on the till.

“Shit!” exclaimed Kaylani. “I forgot to charge that guy for the whisky!”

“Don't put it through the till,” said Toni laconically, handing the change to the customer. “Call it spillage.”

“Right,” said Kaylani. “I don't know anyone called Evelyn. What can I get you?”

“Four Carlton Dry's,” said a beefy man leaning over the bar to look at

Toni's backside.

"Draught or bottled?" asked Kaylani.

"I think she's gone," said Toni, shifting over a little to serve someone else.

"Draught of course," said the man, clearly admiring the view.

"What did she look like?" asked Kaylani, pouring the draught beers into glasses and lining them up on the bar.

"Jesus, I don't know," said Toni. "Late twenties maybe, blonde. \$18.50 please."

"Thanks love," said the beefy man tearing his eyes away from Toni's backside and pushing a \$50 towards Kaylani. "Keep the change."

"Thanks," said Kaylani. "You want a tray?"

"Nah," said the man. "It's all good." He arranged the four glasses into a diamond shape and picked them up. Impressively they all stayed together and he stepped backwards into someone behind him and dropped the lot. "Fuck!"

A cheer went up from the people around him and Toni looked at Kaylani and rolled her eyes.

"Mop's at the end," she said and grabbed a cloth to wipe up the beer that had gone on the bar. "Stand back!" she shouted, holding up her hands. "Broken glass! Stand back!"

Kaylani hurried to the end of the bar and found the mop and a long handled dustpan and brush. Pushing her way between the people standing around the bar she made her way to where the beefy man was ordering four more beers from Toni while using the opportunity to study her chest.

"Who the hell's Evelyn?" wondered Kaylani, sweeping up the broken glass. That done she paused and looked over to where the woman

who'd been watching her had been but she was no longer there.

"Hmm," she thought, her chest and throat tightening a little. She mopped up the beer as best she could then swept again in case she'd missed any glass. She dumped the mop and brush set back at the end of the bar and took the opportunity to sneak a quick inhale on her inhaler before getting swamped with customers wanting drinks before last orders was called.

It took a while to collect all the empty glasses after people had gone but Kaylani was out of the pub by half past midnight. She'd not had much time to think about Evelyn but she paused in the main doorway of the pub to look around in case there was a woman waiting. There were, in fact, at least half a dozen women waiting but they were all with men and none resembled the woman who'd been watching her although they all seemed to be in their late twenties and all but one was blonde. More importantly, none of them was watching the pub entrance so Kaylani quickly walked out and scurried through the scaffolding tunnel.

"Maybe Evelyn's not her real name," thought Kaylani, turning the corner into Burgun Walk.

There was no one loitering outside the café and Spike wasn't outside the tattoo parlour. The lights were on inside though and Kaylani heard the faint buzzing of a tattoo gun as she passed the open door. She looked around as she opened her front door but there was no one in sight. Breathing a sigh of relief she hurried up to her room and went inside, carefully locking and checking she'd locked the door.

"I don't know anyone called Evelyn," she thought, looking through the window to check the alley again before turning on the light. "And no one round here knows my name unless they're a friend of someone in the house. And no one knows my surname apart from Mallow although I suppose he could have told someone else."

She poured some water from the five litre bottle she'd bought that afternoon into the kettle she'd also bought and switched it on then got changed into her pyjamas. They were comforting as well as comfortable, unlike her pub outfit which was utilitarian and not

especially comforting.

“Laurie at the pub also knows my surname,” she thought. “Maybe he sent someone up to check on me since I didn't see Kylie anywhere. Seems a bit strange though. And if it was someone from the farm looking for me why would they come to the pub? Maybe they might think I'd gone to Melbourne but wouldn't going back to Sydney or Brisbane be more sensible? Oh God, I hope it's not someone from the farm looking for me.”

The kettle clicked, making her jump. She went over and made a cup of tea, using the mug she'd bought with the kettle.

“I've got to find out,” she muttered, slumping in her armchair.

“Find out what?” asked Polly, flying in through the window and landing on her branch in the painting.

“Someone's looking for me,” said Kaylani, balancing her hot mug of tea on the arm of the armchair. “I want to know who it is and why they're looking for me.”

“How do you know?” asked Puss.

“Someone was asking about me at the pub,” said Kaylani. “Someone who knows my surname. Oh God, what if she comes back tomorrow?”

Just then there was a faint tap tap on her door. Kaylani started in panic and knocked her tea over.

Chapter Twenty Seven

“They’ve found me,” she thought, gripping the arms of the chair in panic. “They’ve found me and come to take me back.” She didn’t notice the hot tea soaking the leg of her pyjamas. The familiar constriction of her throat and chest rose up and threatened to overwhelm her.

The tap tap came again. Somehow hesitant and uncertain; as though the person the other side of the door didn’t really want to disturb her.

“They’re *not* taking me back!” wheezed Kaylani under what little breath she could suck in. “Never, never, never!”

Clutching her chest and gasping for breath Kaylani staggered over to the bed and collapsed on it, her hand searching for her work trousers. Agonising seconds later her hand made contact and she struggled to pull her inhaler out of the pocket as the beginnings of a blackness started to fall over her. Desperately she pushed the inhaler between her lips and sucked weakly. What little of the Ventolin came out had its effect though and the constrictions eased a little. With increasingly stronger sucks the precious drug worked its magic.

The tap tap came again. Fainter, more uncertain. More time between the two taps.

Able to breath again but still feeling weak, Kaylani pushed herself upright and listened.

“Kaylani?” asked a quiet voice, muffled by the door. “Kaylani? Are you there?”

The doorknob rotated slowly as the owner of the voice tried to open the door.

“No!” exclaimed Kaylani as quietly as she could and pushed herself off the bed. She hurried over to the table and snatched up her dressmaking scissors. Thus armed she tiptoed to the door and stood beside it, listening intently.

A single tap this time then a faint sigh. Perhaps of disappointment, of resignation even.

“Kaylani?”

“Who is it?” asked Kaylani, her voice small from fear. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Who is it?” Her voice was stronger this time but trembly. She clutched her scissors protectively to her chest.

There was a sudden intake of breath from the other side of the door then “It’s Sarah, from upstairs.”

Sarah? Kaylani’s eyes opened wide in astonishment. Sarah? The reclusive Sarah who never spoke to anyone? Knocking on her door?? What the fuck???

“What do you want?” demanded Kaylani, every fibre of her body taut.

“To talk to you,” said Sarah. Her voice was as uncertain and hesitant as her tapping had been. If anything, she sounded more scared than Kaylani. “Can I come in?”

Another surge of panic swept over Kaylani. Someone in her room? Her sanctuary?

“No,” she said, putting her hand against the door in case Sarah, or whoever it really was, tried to force the door.

“Please,” came the voice, this time quietly pleading. “It’s important.”

“Let her in,” said Pooh and Kaylani whirled around, brandishing her scissors.

Pooh had climbed down from his tree and was standing a little way behind her. Beside him was Tigger, not bouncing but quiet and focused. Puss and Iggy were also there and Polly was perched on the back of the armchair. All of them were watching her.

“What?” exclaimed Kaylani. “I mean, what?”

“Let her in,” said Pooh again. “It is important.”

“Very important,” said Puss.

“Growww!” said Tigger.

“Kaylani, please?” said Sarah from behind the door. “Please let me in.”

“Are you guys for real?” asked Kaylani, staring at them. “Let her in *here?*”

“Yes,” said Pooh.

“Fuck!” said Kaylani, lowering the scissors.

She hesitated for several very long seconds then, lifting the scissors up ready again, she reached out and slowly unlocked the door. The click of the lock seemed to echo loudly in the tension and Kaylani stepped back, scissors poised and ready.

Sarah, if that was indeed who was behind the door, cautiously twisted the doorknob then pushed the door open to reveal herself.

“Hello Kaylani,” she said shyly.

“Clair?” gasped Kaylani, recognising her instantly. “Clair? Holy crap! Clair? What are you doing here?”

“I’m not Clair anymore,” said Sarah, her eyes fixed on Kaylani’s. “I’m Sarah now. How are you?” She half smiled for a moment then it faded.

She wore old tracksuit pants covered in little balls of fluff and a shapeless t-shirt. One hand was thrust deeply inside her pocket and the other grasped the doorknob tightly. She was a lot thinner than Kaylani remembered and her hair was unwashed and longer but she was still Clair, from the farm in Orbost. Her skin was pale too. Like she’d been indoors for a long time.

"I'm not going back!" exclaimed Kaylani, brandishing the scissors again. "You can tell Dexter that! I'm never going back!"

"Neither am I," said Sarah. "I got away and so did you. Neither of us are ever going back. Can I come in? I need to talk to you."

"Your hand," said Kaylani. "You left because of your hand."

"Yes," said Sarah. "My hand."

She looked down at Kaylani's feet then took her hand out of her pocket. Kaylani gasped. Her little finger and the one next to it were missing, as was a section of that side of her hand and the rest of her hand was scarred from skin transplants. The flesh underneath was thin and the bones and tendons on the back of her hand stood out.

"That's why I'm never going back," said Sarah softly, slowly rotating her hand so Kaylani could see it in all its pathetic horror. "I'm Sarah now. Clair is dead."

"Oh God, Cl ..., I mean Sarah," said Kaylani, her heart breaking. She dropped the scissors on the floor and reached out to hug Sarah. Sarah stepped quickly back out of reach.

"I'm sorry," she whispered in nervous embarrassment. "I just ... don't like people. Sorry."

"I know how you feel," said Kaylani, just as embarrassed as Sarah but no longer nervous. "Come in, come in. Would you like some tea?"

"No," said Sarah, stepping forward as Kaylani stepped back. "Oh, hello Pooh. I wondered where where you'd got to. I've missed you."

"Hello Sarah," said Pooh, smiling at her.

"Excuse me?" said Kaylani, gawping at Sarah. "Pooh was with you? In your room?"

"Yes," said Sarah. "There was a poster of Pooh with Kanga and Roo in my room when I moved in."

“And they talked to you?” asked Kaylani, disbelievingly. For a moment she was irritated that someone else could talk to Pooh but she squashed the thought.

“Oh yes,” said Sarah. “Kanga and Roo still do although Pooh doesn't come down from the poster anymore. I suppose he's busy down here with you. Ohh! Is that his new poster?” She edged over to look at the poster of the tree branch in the rain with the honey pots on it.

“Yes,” said Kaylani, thoroughly disorientated. Pooh had been with Sarah before he came here? Wow.

“And you have other friends as well,” said Sarah, looking at the others.

“Umm, yes,” said Kaylani. “Umm, Tigger is a stuffed toy I got from the Op shop, Iggy and Polly are from that painting,” and she pointed to the painting on the opposite wall, “and Puss is some marks on the wall that looked like a duck only it became a platypus.”

She was half conscious of how absurd this must all seem to anyone observing. Fortunately no one was. As if aware of her thoughts Pooh and the others quietly returned to their normal places.

“How nice,” said Sarah wistfully. “I suppose I should have got some other pictures. Oh, I like your new hairstyle. It suits you. I might get mine done one day. Or maybe not.” She half smiled again and it disappeared as quickly as the other had.

“So tell me what happened to you,” said Kaylani. “I heard Maxine, umm, attacked you with that whipper-snipper and that you'd been rushed to hospital but we never heard anything else. Oh, sit down, sit down.”

“Thanks,” said Sarah. She sat down as Kaylani closed and locked the door again. Sarah inspected the damp patch on the arm of the chair and avoided putting her arm on it. Kaylani pulled one of the wooden chairs by the table over closer to the armchair and sat on it.

“Yes,” said Sarah, looking at her hand. “Clair was taken to hospital

and they did what they could. She was there for a couple of weeks then they discharged her. She couldn't go back to the farm even if she'd wanted to as Giselle had made it clear Dexter didn't want any cripples there so she went to Melbourne and found a room here. What happened to you?"

"I ran away," said Kaylani. "I stole some money, walked to Orbost and caught a train. I ended up here too as well."

"Well good for you," said Sarah quietly. "Clair never had the strength to do that. That's why I don't go out either. I just sit in my room and talk to Kanga and Roo or read books from the library."

"What do you do for money?" asked Kaylani.

"Clair got a disability pension from the Workplace Health and Safety people," said Sarah. "Apparently Dexter told them it was a farming accident, you see. I live on that since they think I'm Clair which makes things a lot easier. It isn't much but it's enough. Are you still making clothes to sell?" She nodded at the pinned but as yet uncut dress on the table. "Clair said you were rather good at making clothes for the market."

"Um, no," said Kaylani. "That's a dress I'm altering just for myself. I, um, I've found a job." She found it a little disconcerting that Sarah talked as though she and Clair were different people but it seemed to make things easier for Sarah to cope with which was the important thing. Kaylani knew something about not being able to cope.

"Yes," said Sarah. "She said something about that. I couldn't get a job. I'm just too scared of people and my hand ..."

"She?" asked Kaylani, staring at Sarah when she realised Clair couldn't possibly know that. "Who's she? You mean Clair?"

"Oh Clair wouldn't know," said Sarah. "No, I mean her."

"Evelyn?" asked Kaylani, taking a stab in the dark. "The woman who was looking for me in the pub?"

"I don't know anyone called Evelyn," said Sarah, frowning. Then she half-smiled wryly. "Hah, I don't know anyone, period. No, Saphronel told me."

"Who's Saphronel?" asked Kaylani, frowning.

"Difficult to say," said Sarah. "She visits me from time to time although she doesn't talk about herself."

"She isn't blonde and in her late twenties, is she?" asked Kaylani.

"Oh no," said Sarah. "She's a lot older than that."

"OK," said Kaylani. "Umm, she visits you? In your room?"

"Yes," said Sarah.

"But everyone says you don't have visitors," said Kaylani, puzzled.

"No, I don't," said Sarah. "Only Saphronel."

"But ..." started Kaylani then stopped as an unpleasant thought crossed her mind. "Umm, does Saphronel wear an old fashioned dress? You know, like a big cone?"

"Ohh so you've seen her too?" asked Sarah. "That's strange."

"No I haven't," said Kaylani, realising that Saphronel must be the ghost that Mary had seen going into Sarah's room. "Umm, you do know that she's a ghost, don't you?"

As soon as she'd said that she regretted it. Sarah was clearly living in her own made-up world and pointing out that Saphronel was a ghost and not real could have unpleasant consequences. Still, it turned out not to be a problem after all.

"Oh I think an out-of-body projection is a much better description," said Sarah. "After all, ghosts are dead people, aren't they?"

Kaylani stared blankly at her for quite an appreciable length of time,

processing what Sarah had just said. Everything had seemed fairly normal when she came back from the pub, ignoring the blonde who'd been asking about her. Now things had become decidedly surreal.

"You mean Saphronel isn't dead?" she asked finally, "You mean she isn't a ghost? She's real, alive?"

"Oh yes," said Sarah, sitting up a little but still avoiding the damp patch on the arm of the chair. "Which is why I'm here."

"Yes, I did wonder about that," said Kaylani, watching her closely. "I've been here for nearly two weeks now and you must have known I was here. After all, you were listening when I was talking to Jack in his room a few days ago."

"Ahh you noticed that, did you?" asked Sarah, screwing up her face a little. "I didn't think you had."

"So why now?" asked Kaylani. "I'd understand if you avoided me completely because I'm a reminder of the past, but why wait two weeks before letting me know you're living here? Why now and why in the middle of the night?"

"Saphronel sent me," said Sarah. "I didn't want to disturb you but she insisted. She wants to meet you."

"And now I'm very disturbed," said Kaylani frowning. She shifted her chair a little further away from Sarah. "A ghost wants to meet me?"

"She isn't a ghost," said Sarah, "as you'll see when you meet her."

"So why doesn't she come and see me herself?" asked Kaylani, ignoring the fact she'd almost certainly never let this Saphronel in her room. "Why use an out-of-body projection to get you to come and fetch me?"

"I wouldn't have a clue," said Sarah shrugging. "I'm just the messenger. Umm, I don't mean to be rude but I'd have preferred it if you didn't know I was here."

"I'm beginning to think I'd have preferred that as well," said Kaylani. "I don't like this. I don't like this one little bit."

"Yeah," said Sarah. "I know what you mean. Meeting people is scary."

"Just a minute," said Kaylani, her eyes snapping to Sarah's face. "Saphronel isn't Giselle, is she? Or Maxine or Rhonda or one of the others?"

"They're dead to me as well," said Sarah, blank faced. "I don't know these people."

"Hmm," said Kaylani and got up to walk over to the kettle.

"Actually I don't think any of them would be able to get Clair doing anything like this," she thought. "She's too far gone. And dressing up as a ghost is way too subtle for Dexter or Giselle. Neither of them's clever enough. Devious but not clever. So what the hell's this all about?"

She poured some water into the kettle and switched it on then looked for her mug. Remembering she'd knocked it off the arm of the chair she turned to go and get it and saw Sarah. She was just sitting there, rather listlessly, staring at the windows. It looked almost as though she was semi-conscious or in a trance or something. What did that mean? Were her emotions so suppressed because of what had happened to her or because she was again working for 'the enemy'? Or was she just plain stark staring mad? Maybe she even had a split personality and was sometimes Clair and sometimes Sarah. Maybe she was Saphronel as well? After all, that girl in that movie with Sally Field had over twenty personalities as a result of her childhood trauma. Hell, maybe Clair was even Pooh, Puss and the others although Kaylani couldn't immediately see how. They had all sorts of incredible special effects in movies these days so it wasn't impossible that some of the equipment for them had found their way down to the general public.

"Sure you don't want a cuppa?" asked Kaylani, going over to get her mug.

"Oh, no thanks," said Sarah, smiling her half smile again. It was kind

of like she'd forgotten how to smile and what she managed to produce was only a long forgotten memory of a smile.

Kaylani retrieved her mug and went back to the kettle to make herself some tea. Returning to her chair she spotted the scissors on the floor where she'd dropped them and picked them up again. She put the scissors beside her mug on the table, both within arm's reach. Just in case.

"So let me get this straight," said Kaylani and Sarah's eyes drifted back to look at her. "There's someone called Saphronel who is able to conjurer up out-of-body projections who wants to meet me but she's unwilling or unable to come and meet me herself so she sent you, yes?"

"Yes," said Sarah.

"And she didn't tell you why she wants to meet me?" asked Kaylani, "or why she can't just come and see me?"

"Yes," said Sarah.

"Yes she did tell you or yes she didn't tell you?" asked Kaylani confused.

"Yes she didn't tell me," said Sarah.

"OK," said Kaylani thoughtfully.

It was so obviously a trap that it might actually not be. Surely no one would be that obvious about it? Not even Dexter, even if he was capable of dreaming up a ghost as a trap. Then again, he did dream up aliens, didn't he. Hmmm.

"So where and when?" asked Kaylani, a little curious despite her misgivings. "In your room? In the morning maybe?" After all, mornings is when Mary saw the ghost so presumably this Saphronel was most active around that time of day.

"Now would be good," said Sarah, "and she's not in my room. She's

waiting for you in her memorial.”

“Her memorial?” yelped Kaylani, taken completely by surprise. “You mean she really is dead after all?”

“No,” said Sarah, a faint frown crossing her face. “No, she’s definitely alive. Memorial is just the name she has for the room she wants to meet you in.”

“Funny name for a room,” said Kaylani. “Maybe it’s going to be my memorial.”

“Oh I don’t think anything like that will happen,” said Sarah. “She just wants to ask you a favour.”

“Oh yeah sure,” said Kaylani with a snort. “Some woman I’ve never heard of sent you, someone who can’t stand being with other people, to get me to go to some weird place with a funny and really rather creepy name just so I can do her a favour? This is a fucking joke isn’t it. Did Jack put you up to this?”

“It’s not a joke,” said Sarah, looking out the window again, “and it may have a funny name but it’s not a creepy place. I’ve been there. It’s quite nice actually. Comfy.”

“So where is it?” asked Kaylani.

“It’s not far,” said Sarah. “I’m to take you there.”

“Yeah sure,” said Kaylani. “Like I am so going to go and see this fruitcake.”

“You must,” said Pooh, twisting to look at Kaylani from his branch.

“Oh yeah?” asked Kaylani. “Why must I then?”

“It would be polite” said Pooh. “After all, she did give you that watch and those scissors. She’s only trying to help.”

Chapter Twenty Eight

“This is so not good,” thought Kaylani as she got changed into her jeans and a t-shirt. “I swore I'd never be guilted into doing something again and now look at me.”

She glanced over at Sarah who was still sitting quietly in the arm chair, staring at the wall between the windows and pulling on some strands of hair. It was almost like someone had flicked her power button off. She glanced at her watch before stuffing her inhaler into one pocket and the scissors into another. It was still only a little after one in the morning.

“Let's get this over with then,” said Kaylani gruffly, going confidently over to the door. Confronted by the lock, her only real security, her confidence dissipated and she stood there, anxiously staring at the key.

“Umm,” she said, turning round, “maybe this isn't such a good idea after all.”

“Be strong,” whispered Pooh from the nearby poster. “Be brave. Everything will be fine, you'll see.”

“Be like me!” cried Tigger, bouncing over happily. “Be fierce! Growwww-rowww-wow!”

“Growww-ow to you too,” said Kaylani, feeling a little better. She glanced at Sarah who was just standing there watching with a vacant expression and gently tugging on a strand of hair wound round her finger.

“Right,” said Kaylani firmly and unlocked the door. She half opened it, hesitated then opened it fully. Sarah followed her and Kaylani locked the door again behind them.

There was a faint sound of someone snoring coming from Mary's room. Sarah put a finger to her lips and started off down the stairs, treading lightly to avoid creaks. It wasn't really necessary as Anastasia was watching some late night show on her TV but they crept past her

door anyway. Sarah because she always crept everywhere and Kaylani because she didn't want Anastasia to open her door and find she was going out with Sarah. That would entail far too many questions for which there were no real explanations. It was pretty obvious neither of them were dressed to go clubbing.

The front door creaked loudly as Sarah opened it and peered out. There were people and cars in Flinders Street as it was still fairly early on a Saturday night but the alley, Sorceress' Walk as Kaylani reminded herself darkly, was dim and deserted. Unexpectedly Sarah turned left and headed for the chain link fence past Lateral Books.

"What the hell?" wondered Kaylani, following her. "There's nothing up there."

Sarah stopped at the corner of Lateral Books where the fencing was attached to the bricks. She glanced back at Kaylani then pushed the section where the fencing had come loose.

"Through here," she said quietly.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" asked Kaylani, peering through the fence. "It's a building site in there!"

"I know where we're going," said Sarah and wriggled through.

Kaylani hesitated then decided to follow. It was a ruined deserted building after all. Almost immediately she stumbled over a couple of bricks on the ground and nearly fell. Sarah didn't notice and went through a doorway in the wall. There was no door and the doorway had no top, just a gaping hole in the floor above. Inside the room it was pitch black.

"Are we nearly there yet?" asked Kaylani, peering in through the doorway. She couldn't see Sarah but she could hear her fumbling around.

"It's not far," said Sarah and struck a match. It flared up and eerily lit Sarah's face from below. She half smiled and used the match to light a small oil lamp. "This way."

Holding up the lamp she walked over to a door in the opposite wall and opened it. Kaylani jumped forward so she was close to the light and followed Sarah down a wooden staircase.

“This is the basement,” said Sarah at the bottom. “It goes the full length of the alley.”

“I’ve been here before,” thought Kaylani, sensing a vague but vast space that echoed like the inside of a church. “Jesus, when would I have been here before? I didn’t even know this existed.”

Fortunately the basement wasn’t strewn with rubble as the builders hadn’t got down this far. The floor, which felt like rough concrete, was clear. Sarah walked off and Kaylani hurried after her.

“Which way are we going?” whispered Kaylani, disorientated.

“Flinders Street is back that way,” said Sarah in her normal voice.

“OK,” said Kaylani, wondering how she’d be able to find her way back up to ground level in the pitch darkness if Sarah and the lamp should suddenly disappear. For sure she hadn’t come across any doorway down to a basement in her own house.

“We’re here,” said Sarah, holding up the lamp to show a door in a wall across the basement.

“Ahh, good,” said Kaylani. “So, um, this Saphronel is in there?”

“Yes,” said Sarah and tapped softly on the door.

“Come in,” said a vaguely familiar voice. “I’ve been expecting you both.”

Sarah turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. To Kaylani’s astonishment the room was fairly large, furnished and lit. It was probably quite dimly lit but after the darkness and the small oil lamp it was almost a glare.

“Welcome,” said Virginia, getting up from a large wing-back chair

that sat to one side of a fireplace. "I'm delighted you decided to join me, Kaylani."

"Virginia?" exclaimed Kaylani. "What the ... what are you doing here?"

"I am Saphronel," said Virginia. "Please, sit with me. You too, Sarah."

She waved expansively to another large wing-back chair that sat the other side of the fireplace. Kaylani glanced at it then back at Virginia while Sarah fetched a smaller upright chair from the other side of the room.

"What the hell is all this about?" demanded Kaylani. "What's going on? Is this some sort of joke? You're Virginia from the Pooh shop. What's all this Saphronel crap?"

"Please, sit with me," said Virginia, sitting back in her chair. "Allow me to explain."

Sarah accidentally let her chair slip out of her hands as she positioned it and it thumped on the floor, making Kaylani jump.

"Please," said Virginia softly.

Kaylani clenched her jaw then moved over to the other chair and sat down. Sarah quietly sat in her chair and started fiddling with her hair again as she gazed into the fireplace. It was a warm night and the fireplace was cold and empty.

"Thank you," said Virginia, settling herself more comfortably. She was dressed much the way she dressed for the shop, in a loose skirt and tidy blouse. Her long grey hair was immaculately groomed.

"So explain," said Kaylani, a touch aggressively as she was feeling very lost and confused. Her throat felt a little constricted so she fished out her inhaler and sucked in a little Ventolin, just in case it was going to get worse.

"I am indeed Virginia," said Virginia, "but I am also Saphronel. Virginia is my real name and was given to me by my parents when I

was born. Saphronel is another name I acquired some years ago when I took on this Mantle.”

“What Mantle?” asked Kaylani, frowning.

“Perhaps you know the meaning of the name Burgun Walk?” asked Virginia. “It is an old word meaning sorceress.”

“Yes I know,” said Kaylani. “What of it?”

“I named it,” said Virginia.

“Don't be absurd,” said Kaylani. “It was named hundreds of years ago when Melbourne was first colonised.”

“In 1842 to be precise,” said Virginia. “I had a small house here, well, more of a hut shall we say, and I walked down to the river each day. Hence the name Burgun Walk.”

“What river?” asked Kaylani, pouncing on that point. “There's no river around here.”

“The Yarra River,” said Virginia. “It's just the other side of Flinders Street Station although of course the station wasn't there then. The entire area was lightly wooded with a few scattered dwellings and the beginnings of cleared fields.”

“Back in 1842,” said Kaylani sarcastically. “I didn't think you were that old. 60s maybe, not a hundred and eighty.”

“I am in fact even older than that,” said Virginia. “I was born in 1798 into a fairly well off family in Ireland. My father had political aspirations and, some years after I took on the Mantle of Saphronel, our entire family ran foul of Lord Lewisham who had extensive estates in Ireland and he had us falsely charged and deported to Australia.”

“Yeah, right,” snapped Kaylani. “So you were on the First Fleet were you? Sod that. I'm leaving.”

She jumped up from her chair and Sarah looked up at her.

“Do you want the lamp?” she asked, holding it out.

“Kaylani's not leaving yet,” said Virginia in a gentle but commanding voice. “Sit down Kaylani.”

Kaylani pursed her lips but sat down again.

“At least do me the courtesy of hearing me out,” said Virginia. “What you choose to do afterwards is up to you but you need to know the facts before making that choice.”

“What facts?” demanded Kaylani. “That you were born in 1798? Don't be absurd.”

“It is a fact,” said Virginia mildly, “and you may come to believe it in time. We were not on the First Fleet, however. We were on a transport in 1840 and went to Van Dieman's land initially. My mother died there soon after and my father remained there until his death some years later but I was sent to the new colony in Melbourne to be the consort to the Governor. I was not so old and haggard then. Besides, I had no objection as Ireland had no mysteries for me whereas Melbourne was new and full of opportunities.”

“Opportunities for what?” asked Kaylani. “Not that I'm saying I believe you.”

“Knowledge,” said Virginia, “native lore, hitherto unexplored energies and so on.”

Kaylani raised an eyebrow and shook her head slightly.

“It doesn't matter,” said Virginia. “What matters is that in 1821 I took on the Mantle of Saphronel.”

“And who or what is Saphronel?” asked Kaylani.

“Saphronel is a sorceress,” said Virginia. “Hence the name of this alley.”

Kaylani gave a wheezy laugh and took another quick shot of Ventolin.

Virginia just watched silently.

“So you're this sorceress, this Saphronel?” she asked when her wheeze had gone.

“In a manner of speaking,” said Virginia. “I am still Virginia, of course, but under the Mantle of Saphronel I am also a sorceress.”

“So this is like some magic kit kids get in toy shops is it?” asked Kaylani, glancing at Sarah who was still gazing vacantly and toying with her hair.

Virginia smiled.

“It is no toy,” she said. “Would you like some refreshments? I know you've knocked over your last two cups of tea.”

A low table appeared between Kaylani and Sarah, complete with three white cups and saucers, a matching teapot, sugar bowl and jug.

“Where the hell did that come from?” demanded Kaylani, staring at it.

Virginia just smiled. “Will you be mother, Sarah?”

“What? Oh yes,” said Sarah coming out of her reverie. “Do you take milk and sugar, Kaylani?”

“Milk, no sugar,” said Kaylani automatically. She scowled at Virginia. “So, what? Some party trick to try and impress me? How did you do that?”

“Oh you'll find out in time,” said Virginia. “I take it you're not convinced?”

“Not in the least,” said Kaylani. “My mum hired a magician for my 8th birthday and he could do tricks like that as well.”

“You wish me to pull a bird from a hat?” asked Virginia. “Alas I have no hat. Will this do?”

A 600 pound rather ill tempered gorilla appeared in the fireplace and snarled viciously at Kaylani when it realised it was too big to get out from behind the facade of the fireplace. That didn't stop the gorilla from swiping a massive hairy arm at Kaylani who cowered back in her chair in extreme panic. Some spit from its mouth landed on her cheek as it roared its displeasure. Sarah nearly dropped the teapot in surprise but didn't. She just half smiled instead and continued pouring. The gorilla disappeared.

"Fuck!" wheezed Kaylani, fumbling for her inhaler. Her chest and throat had constricted massively and she was fighting to breathe.

"You don't need that anymore," said Virginia, beckoning to Kaylani. The inhaler jerked out of her hand and flew over to Virginia. She caught it deftly and placed it on the arm of her chair.

"Gimme that!" wheezed Kaylani lurching forward to grab it.

"You don't need it," said Virginia calmly. "Just breathe normally."

Kaylani lunged for the inhaler but missed as it jumped out of her grasp and settled on the table beside the sugar bowl.

"Fucking give it to me!" shouted Kaylani jumping over to the table. Then she froze when she realised she'd shouted that, not wheezed it. She felt her chest and throat but the constrictions had vanished.

"What the hell?" she muttered, turning to look at Virginia. Unconsciously she wiped the gorilla's spit from her face.

"You are no longer asthmatic," said Virginia. "That is my gift to you."

"I wish," said Kaylani, picking up the inhaler. She put it in her pocket. "I think I'll keep it just in case, if you don't mind."

"By all means," said Virginia. "You are right not to trust me with something as important as asthma. Are you, however, willing to accept that things have just happened that you can't explain?"

"That doesn't mean there isn't an explanation," said Kaylani.

“Indeed,” said Virginia. “And the explanation is that I carry the Mantle of Saphronel.”

“You keep going on about this Mantle of Saphronel,” said Kaylani, ignoring the cup of tea Sarah proffered. Sarah held it out for a few moments then put it on the table beside Kaylani before handing a cup and saucer to Virginia. “What’s that?”

“Saphronel was the first daughter of Isis,” said Virginia, “the goddess of magic and sorcery. She inherited many skills and much knowledge from her mother and when she eventually died she passed that on to another. She, in turn, passed that to another together with the skills and knowledge she had herself acquired in her lifetime. That passing on of accumulated knowledge is the Mantle of Saphronel.”

“Isis? What you mean that Egyptian goddess?” asked Kaylani, somewhat surprised.

“She was not Egyptian,” said Virginia, “although she was widely revered in that country.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Kaylani. “That’s, what, a couple of thousand years ago?”

“Saphronel was born in 2532 BCE,” said Virginia. “That would be over four thousand years ago.”

“That’s a lot of accumulation,” said Kaylani. “So, what, you’re saying you’ve got, like, four thousand years of knowledge in your head?”

“Yes,” said Virginia. “Although I am still Virginia I am also the 20th to hold the Mantle.” She paused and looked levelly at Kaylani.

“What?” asked Kaylani, disconcerted.

“And you will be the 21st,” said Virginia.

Kaylani just stared blankly at her, her mind refusing to accept what she’d just heard. Virginia just sat there, quietly stirring her tea and gazing at Kaylani. Sarah, on the other hand, just looked sad instead of

blank.

“What?” said Kaylani, after several aeons had passed, metaphorically speaking.

“You will be the 21st to carry the Mantle,” said Virginia and took a sip of tea. “Nice,” she said to Sarah.

“Get the fuck out of here,” said Kaylani forcefully. “What kind of bullshit is this?”

“It's not bullshit,” said Virginia. “When the Mantle passes to you you will have all the accumulated knowledge in your memories and you will know the truth of it.”

“And what if I refuse?” asked Kaylani, looking suspiciously at her.

“That is your choice,” said Virginia. “I will have to find another. I am still some way off dying although it approaches. There is yet time.”

“Why me?” asked Kaylani suddenly. “Why am I to get this Mantle?”

“Because you have suffered greatly,” said Virginia softly, “and overcome your suffering. You have great strength of mind which is good for the burden of four thousand years of memories requires great strength. There has been much suffering in those years as well as great joys. You will have the memories of both, just as you have the memories of your time with Alter Mundus.”

Kaylani and Sarah both shuddered at the mention of that hateful name.

“So why not Sarah?” said Kaylani after a while. “She's suffered more than I have.”

“And so I thought,” said Virginia. “That is why I brought her to this alley when she arrived in Melbourne but, alas, it was not to be.”

“So she saw through you, did she?” asked Kaylani, perhaps a little shrilly.

“There is nothing to see through except the truth,” said Virginia. “Sadly Clair, as she was then, was not strong enough to take up the mantle.”

“That’s right,” said Sarah sadly. “I just couldn’t handle it. I wanted to but I just ...” and she petered out.

“What makes you think I can?” asked Kaylani after looking at Sarah and knowing the truth of it. The poor girl couldn’t even handle being Clair any more so she’d turned herself into Sarah the recluse. One short lifetime of memories was more than she could cope with, let alone four thousand years worth of memories.

“Your life may well improve,” said Virginia, leaning forward to pat Sarah on the knee. “Do not despair, child. All is not yet lost.”

Sarah gave Virginia a sad half smile and whispered “thank you”.

“Bloody hell,” said Kaylani, aware that her throat was not constricting which, by rights, it should be as her stress levels were very high. “So, if I do this, umm, will I be able to do that?” and she nodded at the empty fireplace where the gorilla had been.

“Yes,” said Virginia. “Perhaps not at first as you will have a lot of memories to sift through but yes. That is why I have this place. My memorial, as I call it. It is just a quiet place where I can sit and relive the memories of those who came before me. Feel free to use it if you wish or find your own place. It is your choice.”

“Frig,” said Kaylani quietly. “Holy frigging shit! Me, a sorcerer!”

“Sorceress,” said Virginia, knowing exactly what Kaylani was going through as she well remembered what she herself had gone through when the Mantle was offered to her. “Sorcerers are men.”

“So there are others?” asked Kaylani, looking over at her.

“Indeed,” said Virginia, “and you will find memories of some we have encountered.”

“OK,” said Kaylani slowly. “So, umm, like, how do we do this? Does it hurt?”

“It is a simple and painless experience,” said Virginia. “In essence we just hold hands. There is, however, one final test you must undertake.”

“What's that?” asked Kaylani, suspicious again.

“You must swallow this pill,” said Virginia as a small white pill appeared on the table. It sat on a small crumpled square of tissue paper.

“Why?” asked Kaylani. “What is it? What's it for?”

“It is just an aspirin,” said Virginia. “100 milligrams to be precise. A very small dose that will do you no harm. It's not even enough to relieve you of a headache if you have one.”

“So why take it?” asked Kaylani, staring at the tablet as the rest of the room receded.

“To see if you can take that final step,” said Virginia. Sarah, too, was staring at the tablet.

“So it's going to kill me then,” said Kaylani, frowning.

“As I said,” said Virginia, “it will do you no harm whatsoever.”

“So what's it for?” asked Kaylani again.

Virginia steepled her fingers.

“Look at me, Kaylani,” she said. “Look at me.”

“I am looking at you,” said Kaylani, tearing her eyes away from the aspirin.

“You don't trust me, do you,” said Virginia. “In fact you don't trust anyone, do you.”

“Do you blame me?” asked Kaylani.

“Not at all, child,” said Virginia. “I quite understand. That is the purpose of the tablet. I say it will do you no harm and you must trust me on that. If you take the tablet, if you prove you can trust someone, then you are worthy to take on the Mantle. If you cannot trust me then do not take the tablet. It is as simple as that.”

She paused and dropped her hands.

“Are you capable of trusting, Kaylani?” she asked quietly. “Have you got the strength to trust me?”

Chapter Twenty Nine

Kaylani stared at Virginia who seemed mildly curious although largely disinterested which made Kaylani frown.

“Maybe it's all just an act,” she thought. “A front for something else.”

She pursed her lips and glanced at Sarah which was no help whatsoever. Sarah had clearly disappeared into her own mind and was only there in body. The forefinger on her right hand twitched repeatedly but that was all.

Then she looked at the tablet. So small and lonely, shiny white against the coarse white of the tissue. Barely visible in the crumpled folds.

“That's me,” she thought suddenly. “That's all there is of me. Small, lost and alone.”

She slowly reached forward and picked up the pill. It felt so tiny, so innocent.

“This really is just an aspirin?” she asked, glancing over at Virginia.

“Who knows,” said Virginia with a shrug. “Maybe it's cyanide or something. Choose.”

“Great,” said Kaylani, looking back down at the tablet. “Thanks for nothing.”

“Or perhaps everything,” said Virginia softly.

Kaylani's eyes jerked up again to look at Virginia. She seemed disinterested but a sharpness had appeared in her eyes. An intensity.

“She really wants me to take it,” thought Kaylani. “Why?”

A wave of sadness passed through her.

“Is this really how the rest of my life will be?” she wondered. “Suspicion and mistrust?”

She stared some more at the tablet and the sadness slowly dissipated. Maybe her life didn't have to go that way after all?

“Oh, fuck it,” she said and tossed the pill in her mouth. It was easy to swallow but she took a swig of tepid tea to wash it down then waited to see what happened.

Absolutely nothing did. No spasms in her belly, no hallucinations dancing before her eyes. Not even a tightness in her throat or chest. A mild sense of relief perhaps but that was all.

“Now what?” she asked, looking over at Virginia.

“We get on with the rest of our lives,” said Virginia. “I knew I'd made the right choice. Sarah!”

“Uh, what?” asked Sarah, returning from whatever dark corner of her mind she'd been visiting.

“We are finished here,” said Virginia. “You may go. Kaylani will find her own way back.”

“Oh,” said Sarah. “Right. Well, I'll be off then.” She glanced at the tissue on the table then looked at Kaylani and nodded. “See you later.”

“Bye,” said Kaylani, wondering what was going to happen next. She still didn't feel any effects from the tablet. “Thanks for your help.”

When the door had closed behind Sarah, Kaylani felt her chair move. She stifled a yelp and lifted her feet off the floor. The chair stopped immediately in front of Virginia.

“Give me your hands,” she said, holding out hers. “It is time to transfer the Mantle.”

Kaylani took Virginia's hands in her own.

“Should I close my eyes?” she asked, strangely calm.

“If you wish,” said Virginia.

Kaylani closed her eyes and immediately a memory of Virginia going into a pharmacy and buying a packet of aspirin arose.

“So it was just aspirin,” thought Kaylani. “Good to know.”

Then she sighed and slumped back in her chair as four and a half thousand years of memories began to overwhelm her. A barrage of voices in a multitude of languages, other sounds, sights, smells, sensations, emotions, incantations. The stream of memories was incessant, too fast to make any sense, too raw to be anything other than memories. Lovers, haters, relations, strangers, all the remembered faces merged into a swirling mass of confusion until finally Kaylani's mind was filled with blue and an explosion of wonder. She knew, *she knew*, this was Saphronel's first memory. The opening of her eyes, *her eyes*, and seeing the sky over Egypt. Not knowing what it was but wanting to know.

“Kaylani,” came Virginia's voice. “Kaylani, wake up. Wake up now.”

Someone was repeatedly patting her hand and Kaylani tried to push them away.

“Just let me sleep,” she mumbled.

“Wake up, Kaylani,” said Virginia. “Come on.”

Irritably Kaylani opened her eyes.

“Good,” said Virginia, letting go of her hand. “The mantle is now yours. Cherish it.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Kaylani, sitting up. “But I don't remember anything!”

“You will,” said Virginia. “Many memories will come unbidden and many others you will search for. But now you need to rest.”

“Then why did you wake me up?” asked Kaylani as a memory of Virginia asking the exact same question when she woke from

receiving the Mantle herself. "Yeah, I know. You've got to do the paperwork and I've got to go home."

"Yes," said Virginia. "You remember?"

"Only snippets," said Kaylani. "Give me the envelope."

Virginia reached down and picked up a large manilla envelope that sat on the floor beside her.

"You know what's in this?" she asked, keeping it on her lap.

The memory of Virginia signing documents and putting them in the envelope came into Kaylani's mind.

"Yes," said Kaylani. "Your forged death certificate, your Will and various documents to do with your house and The House Of Pooh. I am your executor and you've left everything to me."

"Good," said Virginia. "Kaylani, you may feel confused from time to time but that will pass as our memories sort themselves out. You will remember what to do when you need to."

"When are you going back to Ireland?" asked Kaylani as another memory arose.

"Perhaps today, perhaps tomorrow," said Virginia. "I couldn't make any arrangements until I knew the Mantle was safe."

"Ahh yes," said Kaylani. "I remember now. I hope you enjoy your final years there."

"I'm sure I will," said Virginia, "although doubtless it is much changed since last I was there."

Some childhood memories from Dublin came into Kaylani's mind and she smiled.

"Those were the good days," she said.

“And the best is yet to come,” said Virginia. “I shall leave you now with my best wishes. Go home and sleep and remember.”

“I will,” said Kaylani. “Thank you.”

Virginia and the room faded and became a dark dank basement. Fortunately, or perhaps inevitably, Kaylani remembered the way back to her room.

* * *

“Wow!” exclaimed Kaylani, opening her eyes to see sunlight streaming into her room. She picked up her watch and saw it was almost half past four. “I must have slept all day! Damn that was a funny dream. I wonder what it means?”

A memory came into her head of her first visit to The House Of Pooh, except it wasn't her memory. It was Virginia's and she, Kaylani, had looked as scared and out of it as Sarah still did.

“Oh my,” exclaimed Kaylani, feeling embarrassed. Then some other memories surfaced including one of Matilda, another Mantle holder, facing down a priest thrusting a crucifix at her.

“So it wasn't a dream then,” she muttered. “Bloody hell! This is going to take some getting used to!”

She stretched and looked around the room. Something wasn't right.

“Where is everybody?” she asked plaintively.

Pooh was sitting on his branch, looking decidedly inanimate and poster-like. Tigger was sitting stiffly beside the door. Polly and Iggy were equally static and Puss was just some dirty marks on the wall.

“Oh fuck,” she exclaimed miserably. “Where've they gone? Did Virginia take them with her? I'll miss them.”

A memory of how Virginia brought the characters to life surfaced and, without thinking, Kaylani did the same.

“Sleep well?” asked Pooh, twisting round to look at her.

“Very well,” said Kaylani happily. “Oh, hello to you too Tigger!” as Tigger landed heavily on the bed and tried to lick her face. She beamed around the room and exchanged happy greetings with Puss, Polly, Iggy and the fish.

“You're going to be late for work,” warned Puss.

“That's a point,” said Kaylani. “Do I really need to work now?”

A dozen memories or more of work surfaced from various women over the centuries as well as a couple of remembered periods of starvation and suffering.

“OK, I guess I do,” said Kaylani, a little disgruntled. “OK, I've got an hour to get ready.” She saw the envelope on the table and remembered what it was. “I'll deal with that tomorrow.”

She looked around the room and saw that Pooh was checking his honey pots, Tigger was playing catch with the fish, Polly was perched on the window sill, looking out into the alley, Iggy was sunning himself in a corner of the room and Puss was just sitting on the wall looking pleased with himself.

“I'm happy!” thought Kaylani incredulously. “I'm actually bloody happy!”

“Work,” said Puss sternly.

“Ahh sod you, sour Puss!” exclaimed Kaylani and she started to laugh. A deep belly laugh that surprised her as she thought she'd forgotten how. A thousand memories of wonderful joyous happy times flooded into her mind, overwhelming her for a few moments. One in particular surfaced, the sharing of laughter and joy with a man she'd been very much in love with then she remembered he'd died almost three thousand years ago.

“What a shame,” she thought. “What a crying bloody shame. Oh well, I'd better have a shower and get ready. There'll be other guys, I'm

sure. Maybe even Jack.”

She shook her head ruefully then hugged herself happily for the sheer joy of being alive.

* * *

Around midnight Kaylani left the pub. It had been a busy but uneventful evening although Kylie and a couple of others had remarked that she looked different. She passed through the scaffolding tunnel and turned into Burgun Walk. Spike's tattoo salon was closed which wasn't unreasonable. Only the dedicated sought body art late on a Sunday night. She got her key ready as she passed The House Of Pooh, which had a 'Closed Until Further Notice' sign hanging on the front door.

“Hello Kaylani,” said the oh-so-familiar male voice as two figures detached themselves from the darkness by the chain link fencing.

Kaylani froze as fear and panic welled up inside her.

“Hello,” said the equally well known and hated female voice. “How are you?”

“What are you doing here?” stuttered Kaylani as Dexter and Giselle came close.

“We've come to take you home,” said Giselle softly. “We've missed you.”

“Don't you fucking touch me!” exclaimed Kaylani, backing against the cold glass of The House Of Pooh's window.

“Oh Kaylani,” said Dexter quietly. He shook his head sorrowfully. “We only want what's best for you. The craft will be arriving soon, very soon, and you wouldn't want to miss that, would you?” He reached out and stroked Kaylani's arm gently, lovingly, and she shrank back. “We're all going to a better place and you really deserve to be with us.”

“How did you find me?” demanded Kaylani, pressing herself against the glass.

“One of our old friends spotted you,” said Dexter. “I don't think you ever met her though.”

“Evelyn?” asked Kaylani.

“Yes,” said Giselle, taking Kaylani's hand. Kaylani snatched it away, her heart pounding. “Oh, we were so hurt when you left. How could you have done that to us? I thought we were friends.”

“Fuck you bitch!” exclaimed Kaylani, fighting the feelings of guilt that were rising up. “Get away from me!”

“Oh Kaylani, Kaylani,” said Dexter, coming closer. “What have we done to make you treat us so? We love you. Come, come home with us.” He reached out to hug Kaylani and she shoved him away. He staggered back a little then a memory surfaced in her mind. She thrust the fore and little fingers of her right hand at him and he collapsed to his knees, moaning.

“You OK, Dexter?” asked Giselle, turning to look at him with a puzzled look on her face. “What's wrong?”

“She stabbed me,” he said looking up at Giselle incredulously. “The bitch only bloody stabbed me!”

Giselle frowned then viciously backhanded Kaylani in the face. Kaylani ducked just in time and Giselle found herself slammed against the wall.

“I didn't stab you,” said Kaylani. “It just felt like it. Get up against the wall.”

Dexter cautiously took one hand away from his belly then the other and looked at them. Even in the dim light of the street lamp in Flinders Street he could see there was no blood.

“Neat trick,” he said, slowly getting to his feet. “Where did you learn

that?" He threw a punch at Kaylani while he was still rising which caught her hip and she staggered back a step.

"Get against the wall," she commanded, several memories of how to control voice tone coming to mind.

Dexter jerked then stood beside Giselle who was still firmly held in place.

"That's better," said Kaylani. "You ask what you did to me? I'll show you what you did to me, you evil bastards."

She kicked off her trainers, undid her slacks and let them drop to the ground. Then she pulled open her blouse and tossed it away so she stood there in just her undies. Her brand gleamed despite the dimness of the alley.

"You see this?" she asked softly, tapping the scar. "You see this? You did that to me."

"I see that," said Dexter, standing up straight and squaring his shoulders. "And you know what it means, don't you." He grinned and licked his lips.

"Yes, I know what it means," said Kaylani. "It means you're totally fucked."

"Oh as if," said Dexter happily. "It means I own you, bitch. I own you, body and soul. Now, stop this shitting around and get back to the farm. Now!"

Kaylani stared coldly at him then burst out laughing.

"Oh you fool," she said. "You sad pathetic little fool. You don't own me. I own you!" and she ripped the scar off and hurled it at Dexter. It landed on his chest and burst into flames. Dexter froze for a moment then scrabbled with his shirt as it caught fire. He ripped it off and threw it to the ground.

"You're dead," he said menacingly and launched himself at Kaylani.

Moments later he was pinned to the wall beside Giselle.

“Actually, no I'm not,” said Kaylani, stooping to pick up her slacks and blouse. She rubbed her hip then, surprised, she looked down. The skin of her hip was smooth and unblemished.

“Cool,” she said, pleased. Then a thought struck her. She called up the memory of Virginia interacting with Kanga in Sarah's room.

“Could you ask Sarah to come down to the alley for a moment,” she said, still staring at Dexter and Giselle. “It's Kaylani.”

“Who's Sarah?” asked Giselle, overcoming her fear enough to talk, albeit with a quivery voice.

“You knew her as Clair,” said Kaylani, conversationally. “Remember? You branded her then Maxine destroyed her hand. You don't own her either.”

Giselle and Dexter looked at each other anxiously. Clearly they did both remember Clair.

“So, um, what are you going to do about it?” Dexter tried to snarl. It came out a little high pitched and squeaky.

“Consult with Sarah,” said Kaylani, slipping on her blouse.

The front door opened and Sarah peered out nervously.

“Kanga said you wanted me,” she said anxiously.

“Yes,” said Kaylani. “Come out into the alley.”

Sarah stepped forward then gasped when she saw Dexter and Giselle. Absolute terror overcame her and she tried to run. Kaylani managed to catch her and hugged her tightly

“It's all right, Sarah, hon,” she crooned soothingly and stroked her hair. “It's all right. They can't hurt you now. They can't hurt you. I'm here to protect you. Remember last night? I'll protect you.”

“Last night?” sneered Dexter, picking up on the ‘remember last night’.
“So you’re lessies now, are you? A pair of dirty little queer chicks scissoring in the dark, huh?”

“Be quiet,” said Kaylani, still hugging Sarah and not bothering to look at him. A rubber gag snaked itself around Dexter’s mouth. He struggled to pull it off but couldn’t move his arms.

“You see, Sarah?” asked Kaylani. “He can’t hurt you now, not ever again.”

Sarah looked at Dexter and Giselle with tear stained eyes. She saw the gag and the awkward way they were both pinned to the wall.

“What happened to his shirt?” she asked timidly.

“I threw my brand at him and it caught fire,” said Kaylani. She let go of Sarah and showed her her hip.

“Oh wow!” exclaimed Sarah, staring at the smooth bare flesh. “So you really are Saphronel?”

“I am Saphronel,” said Kaylani as a memory rose of Saphronel saying those exact same words, but in Egyptian, to the Pharaoh. “Would you like me to remove your brand as well?”

Sarah stared at her for several seconds then nodded quickly, fearful and anxious.

“Excuse me,” said Kaylani, sliding her hand inside Sarah’s tracksuit pants. Sarah flinched. “I need to find it.” She found the brand and gently pulled it away. “There now, all gone.”

Sarah looked at the scraps of scar tissue in Kaylani’s hand then felt her hip. Finding nothing she pulled her pants down a little and and peered at her hip.

“Oh my God,” she breathed. “Oh my God.”

“Watch,” said Kaylani and Sarah looked up as Kaylani walked over to

Giselle. She gently placed Sarah's scar tissue on Giselle's bare arm where it burst into flames. She let it burn while Giselle tried to scream then flicked it onto the ground.

"Doesn't hurt much, does it," she said and spat in Giselle's face. "At least that's what you said to me. Wasn't true, was it. How many thousands of other lies have you told me?"

Abruptly she spun away then pulled on her slacks and did up the waist band.

"Oh, your hand," she said, remembering, and went over to Sarah. She held it and gently stroked it three times before letting go. Sarah lifted it and stared in disbelief, twisting her hand from side to side.

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed, seemingly unable to think of anything else to say. "Oh my God."

"The real question though," said Kaylani thoughtfully, looking back at Dexter and Giselle, "is what to do with these bastards now. I really don't want to let them go."

"Brand 'em," said Sarah, hatred disfiguring her face. "Brand each of them with the initials of everyone they've branded."

"That's a lot of brands," said Kaylani. Giselle and Dexter both went very pale and tried to struggle. "Gotta be at least thirty five, maybe more. It would have to be done over an extended period though as we don't want either of them dying from toxic shock or whatever it's called."

She went over to Dexter and stood very close, staring into his eyes. He tried to look away but she slapped his face to make him look at her.

"Still, it's an idea," she said, still staring into Dexter's eyes. "Fair's fair, an eye for an eye and all that." She snorted in contempt then glanced over at Sarah.

"No," she said thoughtfully. "I've got a better idea."

Dexter and Giselle visibly quailed as the prospect of something worse than thirty five brands.

“Guys,” said Kaylani, watching Dexter and Giselle but pitching her voice a little higher. “Could you come down here for a moment?”

A definite tension built over the next few moments then Polly flew down and landed on Kaylani's shoulder. Moments later Tigger landed beside her and bounced two or three times.

“Growwww,” he said, a little disorientated. He felt himself all over in case any body parts had fallen off from the impact.

“What the hell is going on?” demanded Dexter.

“Just hang on for a few moments,” said Kaylani, holding up a finger.

Suddenly the front door burst open and Kanga hopped out. Roo's little head was sticking out of her pouch and Pooh was clinging desperately to her back.

“Oh bother!” exclaimed Pooh when Kanga stopped suddenly and he slipped off. “Oh, there you are Kaylani! Puss and Iggy will be down in a moment.”

Dexter and Giselle just stared at the menagerie. Both looked confused and alarmed at the same time.

“Won't be a moment,” said Kaylani, disappearing through the front door. She returned a few moments later with Puss under one arm and Iggy under the other. She put them on the ground in front of Dexter. Not too close as she didn't want to risk them getting hurt.

“Well now,” she said, nonchalantly leaning against the wall on the other side of the alley. “Don't you recognise your friends, Dexter?”

Pooh and the others looked at her in surprise. Dexter just looked completely lost.

“Umm,” started Pooh.

Kaylani held up a finger and he fell silent.

“Well, Dexter?” she said.

“They're not my friends,” said Dexter, trying to tough it out. He desperately wanted to run away or pee or both but couldn't.

“Really?” said Kaylani, feigning surprise. “But I thought you've been talking to them for years. That's what you told us. Or did you think you were making it up? Come on Dexter. Were those aliens you promised us real or made up?”

“Umm,” said Dexter, licking his lips nervously. He glanced at Giselle but she seemed to have fainted or fallen into a trance. “Ummm.”

Kaylani laughed then sauntered over to stand in front of Dexter and stared him in the eyes.

“They are real,” she whispered. “You didn't make them up. There really are aliens and they've heard about you. They wanted to meet you. Yes, you, Dexter. You're pretty famous off-world. Did you know that?”

“Real?” stuttered Dexter, trying to tear his eyes away from Kaylani's stare. “But I was only ... I mean ...”

“Yes,” she said and bent to pick up Pooh. “You're real, aren't you Pooh?”

“Who, me?” asked Pooh in surprise. “Yes, I'm real. As real as a hefferlump!”

“You thought you were making them up, didn't you, Dexter,” said Kaylani, putting Pooh down again. “Thought you could control a bunch of stupid, gullible women with tales of aliens, huh?”

“Oh sweet Jesus,” sobbed Dexter. “I was only joking! Just trying to help you all live better lives! That's all! I didn't mean any harm!”

“Of course you were, Dexter,” said Kaylani. “I know that. So does

Sarah. And we both thank you, don't we, Sarah." She twisted and winked surreptitiously at Sarah.

"Oh, yeah, sure," said Sarah having no idea what was going on but enjoying it just the same. "Umm, ah, thank you."

"Don't you want to know what we're thanking you for, Dexter?" asked Kaylani, turning back to him. "Don't you?"

Dexter didn't reply. He just started to quietly pee himself.

"Well, Dexie baby," drawled Kaylani, stroking his cheek. "The time has come. You've met the crew," and she waved her hand at Pooh and the others. "Now meet their leader."

She stepped back as a huge hairy creature appeared in the alley. It was so large the walls on each side seemed to bend around it. A massive shaggy head with tusks like a sabre toothed tiger bent down and peered at Dexter.

"Crybaby" it growled and belched in his face.

Dexter screamed and collapsed on the ground in his own puddle, gibbering. His mind unable to cope and splintering rapidly.

"OK, that's enough," said Kaylani and the monster disappeared. "Thanks guys, you can go home now."

Pooh, Tigger, Kanga and the others quietly faded away and returned to their rooms.

"So what was all that about?" asked Sarah.

"He invented aliens to control us," said Kaylani. "OK, branding him over and over again is a nice idea but it really only brings us down to his level. You do see that, don't you?"

"I suppose," said Sarah reluctantly. She still liked the idea of branding Dexter over and over again though. Slowly. With a nice hot soldering iron. And frequent retouches.

“Hmm,” said Kaylani, watching her. “Anyway. He invented aliens so I invented some as well.” She turned to look at Dexter, still gibbering on the ground. “He’s such a control freak he can’t cope with being controlled himself. Not handling it very well, is he.”

“No,” said Sarah and she smiled. Not a half smile this time. A full one that crinkled around her eyes. “What about her?” She gestured at Giselle who’d come out of her trance and was staring aghast at Dexter writhing on the ground and moaning softly.

“I don’t know,” said Kaylani thoughtfully. “Maybe she’ll have a change of heart now she knows he isn’t a God after all. Same with Maxine and Rhonda. I guess I’m going to have to go back to the farm after all.”

“What for?” asked Sarah, frowning.

“There’s all the other girls,” said Kaylani. “Someone’s got to help them, explain what’s been happening. I daresay some will need professional counselling as well. I suppose the police should be involved but I don’t really want to. We’ve all suffered enough. I don’t see any reason to drag this through the courts for years and make their trauma worse, what with victim blaming and all that shit. Hell, maybe a sharp lawyer or a sexist judge could even let them off scot-free and that’s to say nothing of all the sensationalising in the media. This way at the very least I’ll be able to explain to the girls, get rid of their brands and maybe soothe their minds as well. Maybe I can even help them get started on new lives. For sure that bastard won’t do anything ever again. His mind’s broken.”

“Can I come with you?” asked Sarah. “Maybe I’ll be able to help some of them as well.”

“OK,” said Kaylani, bending to pick up her trainers. She caught sight of the notice in the window of The House Of Pooh. “No, I’ve got a better idea. How would you like to run The House Of Pooh for me since I own it now? We can let the other girls decide what to do with Giselle, Maxine and Rhonda.”

Sarah stared at her open mouthed, Dexter almost, but not entirely,

forgotten.

“Are you serious?” she asked quietly, disbelief on her face.

“Totally,” said Kaylani. “Pooh, Kanga and Roo are your friends. I know just how important that friendship really is.”

“Yes,” said Sarah quietly as she unconsciously cradled her now good hand with the other. Tears started to stream down her face. “Yes, I’d like that. I’d like that very much.”