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This excerpt from the novel *Touch Me Where I'm Rusting* explores Penelope Moore's immersion into an ugly, violent and at times profoundly beautiful remote Australian community of orchard workers. In the wake of a failing relationship, Penelope moves from inner-city Sydney to an isolated town where she intends on buying back her father's childhood orchard using the funds she hopes to procure from selling her home, which was left to her upon her grandmother's death. Upon arrival, she witnesses a stabbing, and later finds herself working at an orchard side-by-side two people who were involved: Amber, the woman who stabbed a man, and Angus, a man who witnessed the stabbing and may or may not have been involved. To Penny, crime is simple, a business of right and wrong, but as she works alongside Angus, she finds herself drawn to him. He quickly becomes an individual to her, not just a stand in for wrong, and she starts to question her morality as their relationship strengthens. What had seemed to be an easy out, moving to the country, becomes complex, as Penny finds herself entangled in a world that she both desires and wishes to repel.

TOUCH ME WHERE I'M RUSTING

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I.....	1
II.....	6
III.....	21
IV.....	27
V.....	40
VI.....	48
VII.....	55
VIII.....	67
IX.....	78
X.....	86

CHAPTER I

When Penny first heard a scream she turned over on the weak springs of the mattress and pulled the blanket over her head. The sheets smelled of meat and whiskey. She wished, again, that she hadn't settled to stay at the pub on the outskirts of town, the one with sick looking paint and carpet that was perhaps once maroon, but had darkened to black. A band had been playing up a storm downstairs for hours, mostly covers of songs with a twang that made Penny wish she'd packed earplugs. There'd been so much chaos with the drunks out on the street that the first scream didn't catch Penny's attention. It was when the screams kept coming that she began to wonder if something was wrong. She looked at the alarm clock with unnecessarily large numbers: 2.17a.m..

Another scream. Fear spread through her belly, reminding her that she was a long way from home. She could just see it, getting herself killed, and being thrown into one of those open-cut mines that she passed coming into Shearsend. The murderer would take her pearl earrings and sell them for a mint at a pawn shop. And she, Penelope Moore, would be gone, which was what she wanted. But not dead.

She reached to turn on the light, but changed her mind. Slipping her legs off the bed, she went to the door, rather than the window, to check for the umpteenth time if it was locked. Bolted. With her hand on the door-chain, she remembered what the bartender said. "Hope you're not scared of the dark, lovey. You'll be all on your own from

around midnight till morning when the first of the staff come in. There's a phone downstairs with emergency numbers. I'll show you the list." But she never did.

Penny crossed to the window and opened the slit in the curtains just enough to see out. She didn't have a view of the carpark or the single streetlight, as she'd expected; instead it was of the main road, carless, and a train yard full of sleepers. When she arrived at the pub earlier that night, she hadn't bothered to look out the window and get her bearings, because she'd been so exhausted from her unplanned departure from Sydney, and the hours she'd spent at her dad's childhood orchard where she met a man who she doubted she'd ever see again, but if she did, she planned to make him a substantial meal so that his ribs wouldn't show through his shirt. She cracked the window and listened. A silence followed—strange in its resonance.

Closing her door behind her, she stood in the hallway that was dark but for the glow of an exit sign. Opposite was a guest room, but Penny didn't need to force an entrance because it was already open. The blinds were drawn. Penny couldn't see anybody beneath the streetlight, only pot-holes. She scanned the furthest reach of the light, focusing on every shadow, every object. The floorboards groaned in the hallway. She started, expecting to see somebody in the doorway, but there was only an entrance mat.

It was then she saw a figure pass beneath the streetlight and knew it was the man in need of a meal. Her first impulse was to open the window and call out his name, Angus, but the way he moved was urgent and made her not want to disturb him. She

crouched so as not to be seen. He moved into the darkness and probably jumped the makeshift boundary fence of the pub and went home—wherever home was.

Slightly disappointed, she began to turn from the window, but stopped as somebody came running into the centre of the carpark. It could've been a man or a woman, going by the shortness of their hair, the flatness of their chest, and the stocky, strength of their body, but then they screamed and Penny knew that it had to be a woman. It made Penny distressed to see how much of a mess she was making of herself with the longneck that she drank from, spilling half of it down her face and wetting the dirt. She paced, like a plastic bag caught in a whirlpool, stumbling every few steps. Each time she circled she drew in closer to the streetlight. It seemed that the woman was just some lonely drunk, not even targeting her anger at anybody in particular, just making a scene for herself, too disconnected from humanity to want an audience.

Penny cracked the window, thinking that she wasn't going to get any sleep until this woman passed out, so she may as well eavesdrop. The screaming got louder, but Penny realised it wasn't just the woman making all the noise, but a man yelling back from the dark. *It must be Angus.* She hadn't thought him capable of such aggression. It wasn't that he seemed all that gentle, more that he seemed too tired to be angry, too aware that life wasn't one to hand out favours, especially not to men like him. But then the man came out of the darkness, and it wasn't Angus but somebody who looked like they never grew to full height, so instead they put on muscle to make up for what they lacked. He looked like he was going to take the woman by the hair, but she waved her bottle at him so violently he backed toward the streetlight.

It was then that she saw Angus leaning against the streetlight, smoking a cigarette that had no trail of smoke. He started to speak to the woman like she was a wounded dog and he had the ointment to heal her. Locking her gaze on him, she lunged, and he ducked just an instant before she struck him. The bottle shattered against the post of the streetlight and glass showered down on Angus, which he shook off like it was as harmless as snow.

The woman was still clutching the neck of the bottle. Penny couldn't watch anymore, closed her eyes and begged to be taken home to where life was sad but at least safe. When she opened her eyes she cried out. One of the men writhed on the ground. Fuck, was it Angus? She wasn't ready for this random man to be injured. Dead. But it wasn't. It was the other man. And the woman was screaming with a constancy that sounded as if it would never end. And she was dropping the bloody bottle neck to the ground. Falling to her knees and driving her face down into her hands.

Angus was gone.

Headlights flicked from the dark edges of the carpark. The combi, Penny had seen earlier that day, sped to where the man was no longer writhing, but lay still. Angus jumped out of the driver's seat before the vehicle had come to a complete stop. He unlatched the side door and kicked it open with his boot. When he threw the man in, Penny clutched her own body. The woman was still rocking. Hadn't stopped.

"Get in," Angus yelled at her. "Get the fuck in."

She kept rocking.

He picked her up and threw her in beside the man.

Seconds later the carpark was empty. Penny stared at the streetlight till it hurt, then lay down on the bed that was not her own, and closed her eyes against the sickness that was filling her belly. Her mouth. *Get up.* But the phone. It was so far away.

CHAPTER II

It hadn't even been a full day ago that Penny arrived in Shearsend, unable to remember how to get to the orchard where her father grew up, the one he'd left behind for the love of a woman—her mother. The last time Penny'd been to the country she was ten years old, and didn't know what it was to need to escape. She only wanted to get away with her dad for the fun of it, take the lunch her mum packed because, “the cafes probably won't have much selection out there.” She hadn't bothered to memorise the directions, sketch them down in her kid-journal, as she was certain her dad would always know the way to the little dirt lane that led to the shack he'd called home and the windmill by the dam that sounded like it was trying to be sick every time the wind blew. And she, the girl moving through the high-grassed fields, taking her shoes off, no mother around to tell her to put them back on.

As she slowed and entered Shearsend her phone's ring cut into her thoughts, brought her back to the reality that her family were looking for her, and so was her girlfriend, Flore. It was her twenty-fifth birthday, and she'd been expected many hours ago at her parent's bay-view home in Manly. The fish would probably still be sitting there in the centre of the marble table, with those eyes that looked like a naughty child had spilt milk on them. “I don't purchase fish steaks,” Elizabeth, her mother, would announce at the dinner table whenever they had guests. “I adopt the entire creature and serve it up whole. More of a dignified death, wouldn't you say?” How the guests would

laugh! Penny grabbed the mobile and threw it into the glovebox, next to her hand creams, selection of perfumes and the almost empty jumbo-jar of headache pills. The phone's ring continued, barely muffled.

She'd ask somebody in town, they'd know how to get to the orchard. Hearing she was Paul Moore's daughter, they'd want to chat about him, find out what he was doing with himself these days, and although she didn't want these questions in her state, she was glad to distract herself from the weight in her head, the tight grip in her stomach, by constructing updates on her father, "he has a fantastic gardening—well, landscape design—business...yes, mum's doing incredibly well with her interior design. You know her. But I guess you also know she was the one who made us sell the orchard, because my brother and me wanted to go there every weekend and mum wanted us to focus on our studies, not spend all our time running around fields....which Flore didn't get to do much as a kid either....yeah, I guess you could say she was dragged up...." She'd driven through town, barely seeing the closed down furniture shop with newspaper covered windows, birds squabbling in the blooming jacarandas, elderly men smoking pipes and sitting on benches with stray dogs nibbling at the hot-chips they dropped, kids kick-flipping the handrails of the Centrelink office, getting yelled at by a security guard. God, she'd driven to the end of town and hadn't even stopped to ask anybody how to get to the orchard. One lone pub remained, opposite the train-yards. A frail man hobbled up the steps.

Penny veered to the roadside and opened her window. "Excuse me?"

The man took forever to turn around on the stair without losing his balance.

“Goodness me, that’s a fancy car you’ve got there.”

“I’m looking for Deep Spring Orchard.”

He chuckled. “You—no you’re not.”

“Pardon?”

“A girl like you? What do you want with an orchard?”

“My father, Paul Moore, he lived there as a child.” She waited for him to ask the questions about his life, his successes; she prepared herself to answer.

“Don’t know him.”

“Oh.” She leaned across the passenger’s seat, as if getting closer to him would jog his memory. “Paul Moore?”

“Deep Spring’s gone to the dogs, love.”

“Would you mind just telling me where it is?”

He scratched his head. “Well, you see, it’s so overrun with scrub you can barely figure out where the driveway is...and the other thing is—” Ten minutes later, she drove away with directions and nothing short of the man’s life story. Her phone rang. She snatched it out of the glovebox. Turned it off.

The track was overgrown with ivy that should’ve looked pretty, but when it dragged across the bonnet of her car the metal screeched and the whole scene became ugly, made Penny think of the girls who needed her, all thirty-nine of them. God, it was the week of their High School Certificate. She was supposed to be encouraging them,

telling them again and again that they were talented, that they were going to do wonderful things with their futures—go on to be artists and dancers. They would be looking for her before they entered the doors of the hall that Penny always struggled to open, because they were the type of doors that made men feel official when they handled them, but made women feel weak. The girls would be asking one another where their favourite teacher was, why she hadn't brought the ginger snaps that she had promised to bake to bouy them up for the hours of chewing their pens and sketching responses. They would cry. Penny hated it when they cried. But she also loved it, because then she could offer them tissues and her rosewater hand-cream that they loved to apply to their cracked cuticles. Flore had always thought it was crazy, and admittedly a little bit endearing, what Penny let the girls get away with; their far-fetched stories about love and the loss of it, when they were supposed to be knee deep in the last moments of King Lear's life.

The trees thinned and opened onto a clearing, and there was the shack, the one she expected to recognise, to feel a connection with, but it had changed, was destroyed with graffiti. There were tags from top to bottom, sketches of Bambi—somehow slutty—and other little sexed-up animals, and women with lips and hips, and bits and pieces of men that Penny snorted at, angry, and yet not at all surprised by what the teen-vandals (they had to be teens) had done to the home her father had loved. Still loved.

Under a gum tree by the shack she saw a combi. She folded her arms across her stomach and looked around for the owner. Saw nobody. Picking her way through the long grass, she walked to the van and stepped up to the side panel. She had never seen anything that messy: underwear, socks—so many socks—blankets, all dull colours, rough

textures, fishing magazines, tackle and bait, empty packets of noodles, a carton of fetid milk, Wheet Bix crushed and ground into the blankets. Beneath all the mess it looked as if a figure slept, but there was so much junk Penny couldn't be sure. She tapped the glass.

A dog barked. By the shack door it stood, eyeing her, one eye blue, one black. Penny whistled, but it ran into the orchard, so she followed. There was a breeze but it only carried heat. Her smock billowed, made her body feel bigger than it really was, made running harder than it should've been. The trees flashed by, fruit-less. She ran harder, certain that she was getting closer to the dog, its cool eye, its dark eye. Her shoes slipped free and she looked over her shoulder, laughed. Entered bushland.

She didn't see the blade in the grass. Crying out, she grabbed her foot, saw blood oozing from a wound that looked clean, as if drawn on by a pen. A pocket-knife, blade bloody, protruded alongside a dandelion. But the dog was getting away. Must be going to find its owner. She wiped the blood off the blade, dropped it in her smock's pocket, and ran on, ignoring the pain in her heel.

The bushland ended abruptly. No more than fifty meters away a man stood naked with his back to her, where the field dipped low into a dam that was big and dark. Heat built up in her crotch so fast it felt like somebody was pressing their hands upon her. She could count the times she'd seen a naked man before: her brother as a teen when he carelessly left the bathroom door unlocked, and that guy, Edward, who tried to have sex with her when she was seventeen, but she'd started laughing at his penis which killed the moment, and she could never admit to him that she was glad of that, instead had to

apologise in a variety of ways till he almost believed that he had no reason to feel like less of a man. But something about this man's body made her feel like she couldn't laugh. A splash in the dam caught her attention. The dog circled in the centre, submerged but for its head, circling as if it was chasing a duck or a stick, but there was neither, only insects and ripples. It barked and the sound carried across the open field, sent flurries of sparrows into the sky.

From far off a shot sounded. The man didn't flinch, but instead stretched like he'd just woken and turned to face Penny.

"Was that a gun?" she called out to him, no longer thinking about his body.

He didn't cover himself.

"Hunters...Are there hunters?"

He stared at her.

Fixed on getting a response, she walked across the field towards him. "Are people even allowed to hunt on this property? Who owns this place? You? Are you the owner?"

"I'm starkers, is what I am," he said, glancing down at his penis. "Mind if I put some clothes on before we have a chat?"

She swallowed.

"Cheers," he said, and picked his clothes up from the grass and dressed. He was lean, like he hadn't eaten properly for years; his ribs showed in a way that made Penny want to touch them, his hair wasn't quite dreadlocks but rather was a matt of knots and

burs, the colour of rotten meat, and his body was sun-browned, as if he'd often been naked, swimming wherever he could find water.

“There's a pigeon shooting club north of here,” the man said, and seeing her response added, “Clay. The pigeons are clay.”

She half-smiled.

“It's hot as fuck. Want to sit down under that gum?” he said.

They sat where the tree roots split the ground, growing out of the soil rather than in. The dog was tired of circling its imaginary prey, but it kept paddling and barking hoarsely, with a determination that made Penny feel sad.

“I don't own this place.” He lined a pinch of tobacco along Tally-Ho. “Wish I did.”

“Why are you here?”

“Been gone from Shearso for ages. Just got back today and thought I'd try my luck, see if anybody had bought this place. If they'd give me work. Guess not. I'll just have to go to Mumblety-Peg; shit-house orchard but.”

Penny took the cigarette he offered her, although she'd promised herself as she drove across the Blue Mountains into the country that she'd never smoke again, because that was Flore's habit and it was one Penny had been fighting ever since she met Flore at Harry's Cafe de Wheels on the wharf where she'd been frightened of the rats and Flore had tried to explain that they were sort of beautiful, if you could see past their hairless tails and feet that were too small, and Penny had stared hard at the eyes of the other woman, her lashes ginger like her hair, and she'd seen that the woman believed what she

was saying, that she honestly thought the bodies were in some way worth recognition, even admiration, and when Penny asked Flore if she'd like to come back to her apartment for some gin, Flore had said yes, and they'd walked through the dark city streets when there were less cars than usual, only lovers and junkies, and Penny had taken Flore's hand and felt a clamminess that she liked because she was certain they would touch one another that night and run the water of her bath deep and she could wash the cool sweat away and replace it with warmth.

"I'm Penny," she said.

"Angus."

She had a drag of the cigarette. The filter he'd made out of cardboard offered little relief from the burn. Her eyes watered. "I'm looking for work too."

"Ok—" He lit his own cigarette and looked her over. "Where the hell are you from?"

"Potts Point."

"What, Sydney?"

She bit back a smile. "Yeah."

"What are you doing here?"

The dog swam to the shore and lay in the mud near a yabby that had long ago died and was just a shell. She tried to breathe out slow. "God...I don't know. My girlfriend and I always talked about buying this place back. It's where my dad grew up. And we were going to start an orchard and all the rest of it. Grow peaches, I suppose."

"Are you a lesa?"

She raised an eyebrow.

“A lesbian,” he clarified.

“I knew what you meant,” she said, touching the wound on her heel, trying to clean some dirt from it, but it had caked with her blood and wouldn’t come away. “I’m with a woman...well, I was...”

He waited for her to finish her sentence. She didn’t. “Where is she?” he asked. “Your girlfriend.”

Penny couldn’t stop herself from snorting—thinking about Flore, her habit of not being where she was supposed to be, her habit of leaving when Penny least expected it; should’ve expected it. “She’s at my parent’s house, I think. Probably eating my birthday cake.”

“Happy birthday.”

She blinked. “Yeah, cheers.”

“Didn’t she want to come with you to start your orchard?”

“I don’t exactly know. Never got a chance to speak to her before I left.”

“Did you run out on your own party?” He ran his fingers across his ribs like they were a washboard. “If I actually had parties I reckon I’d do that, right before they cut the cake.”

Inspecting his eyes, she saw a splint of brown among the green that gave him a look of sadness, but she couldn’t work out if he was sad or just looked it. “You’re paying me out.”

He half-smiled. “I mean, yeah, a bit. How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.”

“Was there a jumping castle?”

She started laughing. “I never got to find out. I didn’t even go.”

“You should get back there and make the most of the pony rides.” He dug his teeth beneath his thumbnail and spat dirt by his boot.

She stopped laughing. Stood up. Tried to take a deep breath but it was snagging right where the air was supposed to go down.

Angus stood, reached for her shoulder and held her firm. “You alright, mate?”

She tried to smile. “Yeah....it’s just that....” It’s all so sad, that’s what she wanted to tell him. It’s all so fucking sad. But she couldn’t tell this stranger, this dirty stranger with a strong hand on her bony shoulder; this guy she didn’t know and probably wouldn’t ever see again. Didn’t even care if she did or not.

“You want me to rack off? Give you some space or something.”

She did, but then she didn’t. The sun was setting fast, casting a golden light that Christians would say had something to do with God, but Penny wasn’t feeling God.

“You should take your dog with you,” she said. “He was lost when I found him.”

Angus rubbed his forehead hard. “He’s not my dog. Must be a stray or something.”

“Where’s it going to go?”

“I’ll take him to the pound.”

“No,” she said. *Flore would hate that.* “They put animals down at the pound.”

He pushed his hair back, out of his eyes. “Don’t worry, Penny. I’ll make sure the mangy mutt finds a happy home.”

She wanted to ask him to promise, and she would’ve if she was the ten year old who came to the orchard fifteen years ago, and built a teepee with her quiet spoken father, that fell down when the wind blew. Angus whistled for the dog. Together they walked along the shallows of the dam, as if the only way to return to the shack was through the water. The dog trailed its nose low, licking at the ripples like he could swallow them up and make them go away. When they reached the edge of the bush, Angus looked back and he and Penny stared across the dam at one another, and right when her saliva started to taste sweet he turned from her—walked into the scrub.

When the sun touched the horizon Penny was digging a hole with a stick, that was not neat like a bowl but messy like a wound. Every time she thought of walking back to her car she knew she would then have to choose where to go next, and even if she found a place to stay that night, then what? She had \$932 in her bank account, which admittedly wasn’t much considering how well she got paid at the school, but she and Flore had had to get away from it all, so they’d gone to Lord Howe Island and blown Penny’s savings on shacking up in a bungalow and eating well and touching one another till they forgot they were having problems. It was on the island that they came up with a plan for buying back the orchard: sell Penny’s grandma’s apartment that had been left to her upon her grandma’s death.

“Let’s sell all the hideous furniture too,” Flore screamed into the wind as they stood on top of Mount Gower and watched storm-clouds mix and fold on the horizon.

Penny laughed, but the wind snatched the sound away. “You can’t be serious?”

“Fuck yeah, I’m serious.”

“My mum would kill me.”

“Who cares?”

“I like being alive,” Penny screamed against the wind.

Flore grinned so widely her hair filled her mouth. She spat it out. “I don’t.”

Penny turned away from Flore, looked out to the storm clouds and wondered how they’d grown so much bigger in a matter of minutes.

The dam was black, the fields ashen. She blinked, expecting to clear her vision and see the land in hues of green, but the scene held onto the first colours of night, and Penny realised that she was cold. Hungry. Smearred in clay. She washed her hands in the dam, feeling the last heat of the day in the waters. Night was coming quickly, with a suddenness that worried Penny. She looked at the sky and only saw black upon black. Somebody had told her stars would be bright in the country.

When she reached the shack, she barely had time to register the combi before the headlights blinded her and it sped away.

Penny returned to the pub on the outskirts of town. It was the last place offering accommodation, and by no means the best choice, because there was no best choice, there were only dull faced pubs that served as drinking holes and places to sleep and fend

off bed lice. Penny parked behind the pub in a big dirt patch edged with dumpsters and loose rubbish that hadn't made it into the place it belonged. An old man was wandering around the edge of the carpark under a streetlight, playing a harmonica that was coloured so bright it must've been intended for a kid. Dogs with wounds slunk out from under the dumpsters and ran to the neighbouring park.

Fans were on in the pub, shifting hot air and balls of dust that tried to hide beneath tables and chairs. The woman at the bar spat when she spoke. Her teeth were white, but that was because she'd had work done on them; she spoke about the work, about the dentist who she'd tried to fuck but he hadn't even wanted a taste of her. "Could've saved a buck or two," she said. "At least had a bit of him." Penny tried not to blink each time she swore, tried instead to focus her attention on the television flashing advertisements of reduced socks and underwear.

"Anyway, enough about my teeth," the woman said, whose name was Jen. "What you want here, darling?"

"I'd like a room," Penny said.

"You want a room?" Jen said.

"Yes," Penny said. "Please."

"Here?"

Penny shifted her weight and glanced out the window where a truck passed with its high-beams on.

"Sorry love, I don't mean to be rude or anything. We just haven't had many young women like you stay here. If you keep driving another hour or so you'll reach a

pretty big town with some alright hotels. Got pools. Breakfast buffets. Internet.”

“No. This is where I want to stay.”

“Well—” Jen said, taking a big set of keys down from a hook and walking to the stairs that looked like they’d supported too many people. “You coming?”

The Rose was the final room, the only with an ensuite. Jen struggled with the lock, using her shoulder to force an entrance. Penny stopped against the smell of body odour; the bodies that had sweated it out in this room had been anything but healthy. When Jen opened the window a trail of sugar-ants marched down the wall in single-file.

“I met my husband in this room.” Jen lit a cigarette and squished a single ant. “He’s fucked off now. I like to imagine he’s dead.” She flicked the ash of her cigarette, and it caught in the breeze and blew back into the room. “We had sex on that bed every day for a month and then got married. Are you married?”

“No.”

“What are you running from, then?” Jen asked. “Your daddy? How old are you? Eighteen?”

She moved to the bed, tired of being asked that question, and sat down, curling her heel around so she could see the knife-cut. It didn’t look as bad as it felt. She decided it had healed enough for her to get work. “Is this a really small town?”

Jen laughed. “Of course it is, love.”

“Do you know everybody here?”

“Who are you after?”

“Angus. I don’t know his last name.”

“Slater.” Jen folded her arms. “Yeah, I know him. Why?”

“He mentioned an orchard where I want to get work, but I’ve forgotten what it’s called...something about a peg...Do you you know the name of it?”

“I know the name of it, alright.”

Penny waited.

“What do you want with Slater?”

“I’m not looking for him,” Penny said. “I’m looking for the orchard.”

Jen shook her head. “You better be careful who you go looking for around here. There are some rough ones you should steer clear of.” Penny tried to explain herself again, but Jen put her hand up. “Look love, I’m not your mum. You do whatever you want, but just remember you’re not a local, so you’d better take the advice of a local. Righto?”

As Jen walked to the door, Penny decided she’d go into town and speak to the first person she met. They’d tell her the name.

“Mumblety-Peg Orchard,” Jen said as she was right about to leave. “That’s where you’ll find him.”

“What does that mean?”

“How the fuck would I know?”

Jen shut the door and Penny grabbed the Bible on the bedside table and wrote the orchard’s name across The Lord is My Shepherd.

CHAPTER III

She didn't eat breakfast. Couldn't stomach it. Her hands were unsteady from lack of sleep and the confusion of thoughts in her head. She knew if she just got to the police station she could offload everything she'd seen the night before and she'd feel clean again. Driving seemed too challenging in her state, so she walked into town. Along the footpath of the main street, she lowered her head and tried not to make eye contact with anybody, because she knew that country people had a tendency to smile and want to talk about things that really weren't important to her. There was no more room inside of her for things that didn't matter.

It was only a day ago that she made the decision not to take the exit to her parent's house. She hadn't heard from Flore in five days, which was even longer than usual, and every time she checked her phone she couldn't help imagining another terrible thing had happened to her reckless girl. On the morning of that day, she went to Flore's aunt's house, where Flore had been living since she moved from Bargo to the inner-city. The house smelled like dog and mould. Penny asked the woman dressed in a silk nightgown at midday where her niece was. Maggie smoked and blinked and said she didn't have a clue, that she wasn't going to lose sleep over that girl and the mess of her life. "Just like her mum," Maggie said with an upturned lip that showed her satisfaction in casting stones at both generations.

It could be an overdose, Penny thought as she drove away from the dingy terrace house overlooking the shipyards. She could be dead, her body stiffening where it lay along one of those hot summer streets. Better to get out and walk. On foot, she discovered parks she'd never seen before and realised how little she knew about Flore's neighbourhood. There were homeless people in the parks, watching her with eyes that spoke of the momentary happiness their bottles brought them. Penny offered them money, asked if they'd seen a woman with skin so white it burnt easily, freckles along the bridge of her nose. They laughed at her money. Told her they'd seen lots of women. Many times.

She didn't tell her family about Flore's disappearance, for while they loved Flore and welcomed her every Sunday for brunch, bought her presents at Christmas—new clothes to replace the stained ones—and included her in all their family holidays overseas, they also patted Penny's knee every time she told them she hadn't seen Flore in a few days, as if there was no surprise there. They should've been surprised. Flore was sometimes unpredictable, but she was an artist and she enjoyed people, late nights, cheap alcohol, music that Penny didn't understand, and animals—ugly ones. That was why Penny loved Flore. And yet part of what loving her entailed was taking care of her, making sure she didn't hurt herself, especially when she crashed and went through dark times and wouldn't leave Penny's apartment, would lie in the bed and smoke till the room turned grey, saying she had nothing for her exhibition in less than a week, that she hadn't been to her mum's grave in over a month and if she didn't go then she wouldn't know how to paint, how to be honest and sincere in her depiction of the world.

Sometimes Penny couldn't be there and Flore hurt herself so badly Penny couldn't wash the stains from the sheets, from the mats in the bathroom, and no matter how much Penny cried—how much Flore promised she wanted to stop, wanted to make Penny happy, not scare her, not hurt her—Flore couldn't stop herself from doing it. “It's not about me,” Penny said, time and again. “It's about you getting well.” And although Flore nodded, it was as if she heard the words in another language and while the tone of the words made her solemn, the message held no meaning.

When Flore came out of her dark times, she'd start running, although she didn't own the right shoes and she didn't wear tight clothes, like all the other serious runners, but wore oversized tops and floral maxi-skirts and bracelets and necklaces with quartz pendants—no bra. She asked Penny to come one day. Penny laced her sneakers, like a real runner, and they walked hand-in-hand to Harry's Cafe de Wheels where they'd first met over the rats. Flore took off her sandals, clutched them in her hand, and said, “come on.”

At first Penny stuck behind her, as they wound through the tourists dripping tomato sauce on their shoes and sharing strawberry milkshakes, but once they reached the botanical gardens, Flore started to pull away, and Penny began to see that her girl could run and she could run fast, and other people were seeing this too, as she darted past them, her hair trailing, her skirt held high, and there were dogs pulling at their leads, wanting to break free and run with this woman, but their owners pulled them to heel, told them to sit and be still, and Penny's sides were starting to sting—like she'd drunk a milkshake with the tourists and it was curdling within her—and Flore was getting so deep into the

gardens that Penny almost couldn't see her, but for the fact that her hair was so unusual, and yet Penny knew if Flore reached the palm trees clustered like a jungle, she would be gone for good, because amidst the trees the footpath split and there was no way to know which way Flore might've gone. Penny pushed hard and tried to believe that she could run forever in her sneakers that were cleaner than a counter-top, but although her mind pushed hard, her body grew sluggish, as if it didn't really believe her mind, and Flore reached the palm trees and slipped into the shade.

As Penny's birthday drew near, and their Lord Howe Island holiday became a dull memory, Flore's running stopped and she disappeared soon after. It was the text Penny received from her brother on the day of her birthday, right as she crossed the Harbour Bridge and approached the Manly turn off, that made her keep driving north: *Peachy, Flore just arrived!* Maybe it was the exclamation point that pushed her on—punctuation that meant nothing to her brother, but everything to Penny. Flore's arrivals always were something to be startled and amazed by. A perfectly timed surprise, but never one that tasted sweet, instead made Penny feel unwell, just the thought of Flore standing on the steps of her parent's home, a straw hat with a drooping brim on her head, eyes partly covered, and her arms outstretched to her lover. Penny would be expected to have a smile at her party, expected to give a speech about what she was grateful for, how loved she felt by those around her, and she knew she couldn't do that. All she wanted to do was scream, but she'd been taught not to make too much noise indoors at her parents because the ceilings were so high that sound boomed ten times louder than intended. She

needed, instead, to drive out to where a field would offer itself to her, and there upon dry land she could scream till her throat tasted like pain.

Penny was sitting on the curb opposite the police station, looking at a honeyeater darting about a banksia with aggressive intent. A few police cars had pulled up in the time she'd been sitting there, and although the cops had glanced at her, they hadn't bothered to ask if she needed anything. A glass of water? Directions? She liked that her sunglasses were big on her little face, that her smock suggested she wasn't a local, because then they'd just think she was an odd traveller—a European—with nothing better to do than admire a honeyeater. The hinges of the station door were in need of greasing and the springs had gone slack, so the flyscreen smacked shut behind everybody who entered. Not that many people did. If she went through that door, she couldn't play the misguided tourist, but would have to start explaining the three people in the carpark. They'd ask for specific details, but every time Penny tried to recall how it had all played out she couldn't remember if she'd been awake or asleep, if she'd unlocked her door or if it'd already been unlocked, if she'd gone to room 3 or 6. And then they'd start to ask why, why she was in the country, why she didn't call the police the second she saw what she did, why she'd simply strolled to the station like it was the perfect day for a leisurely walk. Her hands kept shaking; they'd been doing that a lot lately. Perhaps she could claim she were a heavy drinker and then they'd let her off the hook and not expect so much of her retelling of events. And perhaps when she explained to them that her life was a shambles, they'd want to hurry her out the door before she started getting hysterical, the way women do. She couldn't stand the thought of them thrusting tissues

into her hand and patting her on the back like she was a pillow that had lost its fullness, so she stood up, frightening the honeymooner, and decided to come back the next day when she was more put together; when she wouldn't waste time thinking about Flore, but would arrive with notes to assist her statement and a takeaway chamomile tea to steady her hands.

CHAPTER IV

Penny stayed up most of the night hearing screams that were only passing trains slowing on the tracks. She scrawled notes on the back of a VB coaster, attempting to detail what she'd seen the night before, while simultaneously trying to decide if she was going to go to Mumblety-Peg the next day to get work. She doubted Angus would be starting a new job any time soon, not after what had gone on the previous night, but what if he did show up at the orchard? There was no way of knowing if he was involved with that woman—if he was dangerous too. When she'd asked Jen if there were any other orchards she could get work at, Jen had slapped the bar, "How bloody big do you think this town is, love? The only thing we double up on are pubs. You wanna work at an orchard, get yourself over to Mumblety-Peg at the crack of dawn and stay away from Angus Slater."

Sleeping through her alarm wasn't something Penny did often, but the next morning she woke when the sun was already on its way up. She dressed and promised herself she'd go to the police station after she went to work.

The sign was too big. Vivid. *Mumblety-Peg Orchard*. A group of people caught her attention. They were walking up the driveway, shoulder to shoulder, like they were heading somewhere they didn't really want to go, but they were happy to be going together. She scanned the crowd for Angus, didn't see him. Cracking her window, she

heard them all whistling so loud it came out like a perfected recording, in which they'd had many attempts to get it just right. They all had messy hair thick with knots, dreads, feathers, coloured wool. Their clothes didn't fit right, as if they'd all traded wears as they walked to work. Their boots were heavy. Unlaced. One girl wore no shoes at all and she skipped—twirled. A flock of rosellas passed overhead and the group stopped and watched the passing as if the sky was their religion and that was how they prayed.

Her footsteps must've been loud. The group turned to face her, all thirteen of them.

“Who are you?” one woman asked. Her head was shaved, a rhinoceros tattoo on her scalp.

Penny said her name; some of them smiled, like it was funny.

“What are you doing here?” the woman demanded.

“Calm yourself, Mac. She hardly looks like a national threat,” a man said who appeared to be the only one who had showered that morning. His skin was white, browned only by freckles, not a tan, and his hair was intentionally shaggy, unlike all the other shaggy heads. “Hi Penelope, I'm Digby, the token Brit, or should I say the only person here who has any hint of civility.”

Penny shook his hand and found herself smiling, warmed by his soft skin.

“So tell me, what can we do for you?” he asked.

“I'm hoping to get work,” she said.

He looked her over. “Oh, Lord, you're in for a little shock.”

Slipping his arm around her shoulder, they linked with the group and walked towards a shed that grew big on the horizon. The shed turned out to be nothing special, just a huge corrugated iron box with no windows and a peach the size of a hot air balloon painted on the west facing wall. Penny stood admiring the peach. “I did that,” a young girl said who couldn’t have been older than fifteen. The mess of acne on her chin was in such a state that it suggested she’d been living away from adult care and medical attention for some time. Penny couldn’t help thinking a few appointments with her dermatologist would settle her skin down in a matter of weeks. The girl introduced herself as Rhi. “Don’t call me Rhiannon. I hate my full name.” Beside the shed was a tree that was sabotaged with carvings. Digby told her she’d have to carve her initials beside his if she lasted a day. She assured him she’d be lasting a lot longer than a day. “I hate to fall on a cliché, love,” he said. “But famous last words.”

A ute pulled up loaded down with kelpies, loose tools that all looked to Penny like weapons, and a chainsaw that one of the dogs was sniffing and wetting with drool.

“That’s boss man,” Digby said as a tall man and a short man got out and didn’t bother to close their doors behind them.

“The tall one or the short one?” Penny asked.

“The tall one. His name’s Derrick, so of course they all call him Dezza. It’s such an awfully long name—best to make it bite-sized.”

“Alright, you lot. Sit up straight,” Dezza said, not leading by example as he leant against his ute. A kelpy with an unusually small head licked at his ear. He roughed its snout and pushed it away. “If you take any longer with the north field we’re going to be

rooted, because this drought's only going to get worse. Fires sprung up on the ridge last night, but I think they've been taken care of—for now. Mac, what are you grinning about? I won't be paying you lot for doing nothing, so you'd better stop arsing around and actually get the job done.”

“Pay us more, then,” a teenage boy said, flossing the gap between his front teeth with a blade of grass. Beside the boy sat Rhi who looked too young to be in love, but was obviously smitten with the kid who knew how to speak out against authority figures. She sucked a strand of her long curly hair as if it was the grass the boy used as floss.

“Who's little miss white-shirt over there?” Dezza said, pointing at Penny.

Penny crossed her arms over the shirt she'd bought in the one clothing store in town. She'd had a suspicion that white wasn't going to be the best choice of colour, or new clothes for that matter, but there'd only been one store with a church-going line of wears, and since she desperately needed underwear and something other than her smock and ballet flats, she'd buckled. The boss stared at her. She wished she'd dragged her shirt through the dirt a few times.

“Vinnies,” Digby said.

Penny glanced at him. “What?”

“That's where they all shop. Avoid Bev's Boutique at all costs.”

Dezza whistled at her like she was one of the drooling kelpies. “You looking for work, little miss white-shirt?”

Penny stood up, determined not to be pushed around by the tall man who she could see was attractive beneath all the sun's wear. “Yeah.”

“You ever worked a day in your life?”

“Funnily enough, I have,” she said.

He grinned and shook his head. “You’re a tough one then, are you? Well good, I won’t put you in the packing shed. You can get out there picking. Hope you brought sunscreen.”

The short man drove out of the shed on a tractor which pulled an open faced trailer. All the men jumped onto the trailer but Digby, who slipped a hat into her hand and said, “Go on.”

She looked at him and back at the staring men. “Are you kidding? No other women are pickers? What is this, the 1950’s?”

Digby laughed. “They could pick all they want, it’s just a damn sight easier packing.”

“What do you do?”

He shrugged. “Pack.”

“This is such crap.”

“Tell Dezza you want to pack.”

“Little miss white-shirt, you want to get on the band-wagon or not?” Dezza yelled.

She grabbed Digby’s bottle of water. “See you...when I see you.”

A guy with arms the colour of freshly cut meat slapped the spot beside him on the trailer. She sat and tried not to breathe in his week-old scent. He offered his name, but she didn’t offer hers, because there was a single cloud that had passed over the sun and

everything had darkened a shade, and in the distance an engine chugged as if it was facing a steep incline; she didn't need to see it to know who was coming. She wanted to call herself a fucking idiot, say it out loud so everybody could hear, recognise she was in trouble, but what difference was that going to make? The combi came into view. Penny decided to get up, get away, but Dezza was watching her like she was the best entertainment he'd had since April Fool's day, and the thought of him looking even more pleased with her departure made her sit still, drop her head and run the tip of her tongue around her cheek in circles, count every second rotation.

Angus got out of the van wearing a shirt that didn't fit right, as if he'd stolen it from a washing line and it turned out to be kids-wear. A line of hair showed from where his jeans hung low. Penny wanted to do anything but stare at it, think about where it reached to—ended—remember what she'd already seen.

"You've got to be kidding me," Dezza said, moving to Angus, slapping him on the back. "Is this some kind of an apparition?"

"Giddyay Dez." Angus half-grinned. "Glad to have us back?"

"Glad? Mate, I couldn't be happier. Where's Pete?"

The side door of the van opened and a lean and muscular woman got out. Penny knew her immediately. The woman kicked the dirt as if she was checking to see if the ground would give way. She spat. The group wasn't staring at Angus anymore, but at the woman; by the way they shifted and muttered among themselves, it was obvious they knew her and weren't ready to offer the first greeting.

Dezza whistled at the woman through the gap in his front teeth, as if it was feeding time for a herd of cattle.

“Hey dickhead,” the woman said with a grin. “Did you forget my name?”

“Fat chance, Amber. Welcome back, sunshine.”

She slipped her hand in her back pocket and took out some beef jerky. It looked like she was going to eat it, but instead she chucked it to the dogs and they went wild.

“So where’d you say Pete is?” Dezza asked.

Angus glanced at Amber. “Still travelling.”

“Travelling?” Dezza asked. “Well good on him, best to stay out there as long as you can, otherwise you end up back here in this shithole.” Dezza slapped Angus a second time. “The missus will want you over for a barbie.” He looked at Amber as if he was going to offer for her to come too, but didn’t.

She laughed, obviously pleased with not getting an invite. “You run out of snags, Dez?”

“Don’t start your shit, Amber,” he said, and pointed to the group standing at the shed door. “Get on with it, you lot.”

Amber itched her scalp as if she had lice and walked over to the group who welcomed her by stepping back, creating distance.

“Hey Ambs,” Mac said, offering her hand. They shook like men who drank Bundy straight and talked about fucking.

“How about you, Angus?” Dezza asked. “You want to work up to picking? Pack for a bit?”

Angus glanced at the trailer, and seeing Penny for the first time, crossed his arms like he was cold. She shivered. It took him a second before he walked towards her, blinking like the sun was getting to him. He didn't even have to look at the sunburnt man beside her to make him shift. When Angus' thigh touched hers she tried to move away from him, but she was wedged between the man she wanted to escape and the one the sun burnt. The trailer jolted, the wooden boards of its bed shuddered, and they moved towards the trees overburdened with fruit.

“Hey,” Angus said.

She kept her gaze at her knees. There was sweat building, making their thighs slip every time the trailer hit a pothole. The tractor slowed and people started jumping down in pairs, slipping funnel shaped bags around their necks and moving into the orchard. The sunburnt man was telling a story—something about guns and boars and spotlights. He got off with a guy who kept saying, “Nice one,” as if killing boars was as pleasant a hobby as crafting. Penny shifted, but Angus said, “Hang on. You may as well come picking with me. I can show you the ropes.” An ant clung to her thigh, fighting against the breeze. A moment later, only she and Angus were left. Unable to stay beside him for another second, she slipped off the trailer and started to walk into the orchard.

A fabric bag fell by her feet. “You'll be needing that,” Angus called out to her. “You know, if you want to pick any fruit or anything.”

She clipped it around her neck. It hung down past her hips, a huge funnel. Ripping a peach from a tree, she squeezed it and the skin tore. She dropped it into the

bag, then changed her mind, took it out and chucked it on the ground to rot with the rest of the ruined fruit.

“You’d better get a move on if you want to get paid anything,” Angus said, working along the row of trees beside her, his funnel already filling. “A lot of places pay per container, but Dezza’s a good bloke and pays us by the hour, but if you can’t churn it out he’ll give you the boot.”

She looked at the sky, so as not to look at him.

“You’re not all that chatty today.”

Within minutes he was pulling away and she let him go, kept working slowly and with precision, checking each peach over with a tender touch. She knew she needed to work quicker, but she wanted to do this right, hated the thought of getting fired for doing a shitty job; which reminded her of all the missed calls from the school, her concerned fellow teachers thinking her disappearance suggested something terrible had happened. Sickness? A death in the family? Flore...? It wasn’t like Penny to be late, never mind to not show up on the most crucial day of the school year. Penny had been doing a superior job at *life* since she was a few years old and realised her brother, Dom, was going to get a lot more notice than her, considering his acting abilities and success in theatre, his unique looks (that she had too, but on her appeared more elfin than attractive), and his laugh...God, that laugh. She adored him. How could she not? And so did her mother, of course. But Penny also knew she had to work hard, while he did not, and she’d better choose a profession she could excel in and make her abilities known. Initially, she considered doing a PhD in literature, but she was never quite at the top of her courses,

always a few steps behind the truly brilliant students, so she went into teaching, because she was, after all, a superior organiser and particularly good at looking after people (Flore especially).

Angus had gotten so far away he looked like a young boy. The tree before her was so heavy with fruit it appeared tired, exhausted by its own success. Penny's bag wasn't even close to full. Her back hurt. The fruit flies were doing her head in. She swatted at them, failing to kill most, feeling guilty when she got one. It was possible she was never going to be a decent orchardist; the thought made her as exhausted as the tree. She sat down. It was possible, in fact, that she was going to be a complete failure. Likely, even. She hadn't read the book from cover to cover, the one that she and Flore liked to pretend would teach them everything they needed to know. They'd found it the weekend after they returned from Lord Howe Island at a cheap looking stall at the Paddo markets. Penny was embarrassed by the books that looked too loved to be worth a dollar. Flore took each book in hand, told the woman at the money-tin they were beautiful. The woman started talking, telling Flore about each one, "that was my sons...a neighbour in Orange back when I lived there in the 80's...a bushfire in Victoria burnt a library down but they saved a few shelves of books." Penny was getting cold and she wanted to go back to the apartment with the fresh vegetables they'd bought to make stir-fry and drink wine and get in bed wet from the shower and not touch till they dried. Impatiently, she reached for Flore's elbow, her hip, and it was then Flore found the book. It had a simple title, *Orchards*, and it was brown with a splitting spine.

“I’m cold,” Penny said, pulling her cardigan as far as it would reach around her body.

“Was this from the library that burnt down?” Flore asked the woman.

She nodded.

Flore’s cheeks reddened as she turned to Penny. “It’s a sign, babe.”

“What do you mean?”

“The book was saved so we can read it and learn about orchards.”

“Can we go home now?”

Flore held the book to her chest like a shield. “Babe, do you want to do this or not?”

A breeze picked up and moved through the stalls, rustling dresses, flags, jewelry, wind-chimes and patchwork toiletry bags. Penny didn’t like that all the tacky market wears were encroaching on her space. Hoards of shoppers kept bumping her, determined to get one last look at the leather goods stall opposite, before it all got packed away.

“Hey, darling,” a girl was crying over the heads of feverish shoppers. “Do you like this one or the green one?” The man, who was darling, raised his eyebrows so high his partner got annoyed. “What’s that supposed to mean?” In response, he rose his eyebrows higher.

“Penny, are you even listening to me?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“Of course I want to start an orchard with you.”

“It’s not even about the orchard,” Flore said.

“Then what *is* this conversation about?”

“You always talk about the things we *could* do, but then Monday comes and you just want to go back to teaching at that ridiculous school, with those ridiculous girls, and getting that—”

“Ridiculous paycheck,” Penny finished for her.

Flore dropped the book on top of Plato’s *Republic* and it lost balance, tumbling onto the footpath. Offended, the shop keeper snatched it up and dusted it off. Flore raised her voice, “I don’t want to hear about your dreams this Friday night once you open a bottle of wine.”

“Florence, we’re in public.”

“Oh really? I hadn’t noticed.”

Penny wanted to tell her not to use sarcasm—that’s what their therapist had suggested (the one Penny insisted they saw and said it was “her treat”, hoping that might soften the blow of her paying for another shared expense), yet Flore always forgot Nancy’s suggestions and was surprised when Penny reminded her, “really, is that what she said? Oh, I’m sorry babe.”—but Flore had already walked off into a fresh crowd of leather browsers.

“Oi,” Angus yelled out. “The trailer’s coming.”

Penny opened her eyes, became aware of the grass she lay on, the ants moving across her bare legs. Jumping up, she swatted at the black dots all over her white skin.

Angus walked to her and dropped his bag. “I don’t mean to be a fuck, but the best thing to do is get your pants off, or they’ll bite your...” he dropped his head. Laughed.

Penny hit harder.

The tractor honked its horn. Angus picked up Penny’s bag, dumped half of his fruit into hers, and walked away. Reaching the trailer, she unclipped the funnel at the base, and the peaches emptied. The short man eyed her and said, “So you can pick a full bag!”

As the tractor pulled away, Penny turned to thank Angus, realising he’d wanted to save her her job, but he’d already disappeared into the orchard.

CHAPTER V

Penny was driving from work to the police station, when she saw the lane that led to Deep Spring orchard, and considered, instead, spending a quick hour there before she faced the interrogation that she imagined would be unpleasant: she, the city girl with the fancy handbag and neat pearl earrings, dobbing in the locals. Had it been Digby who said they were loyal as dogs out here? Didn't warm easily to posh people? She braked, veered off the main road.

Flore was the first person to ever make her feel embarrassed about her affluence. In all honesty, Flore was the first person she ever got close to who wasn't affluent, besides her father who had gone from poverty to wealth via marriage. Penny's high school years were spent at a boarding school in the Southern Highlands, where she learned ballet, French and ate her meals off cutlery with her initials engraved on the handles. Her friends had been young women who, although fond of some mischief, had the money to keep their lives on track, no matter how much they strayed from the right path on the weekend. As for male friends, there were a limited amount of men in her life, and those she met were her brother's friends, who tended to be cute and gay and very much in love with theatre and the arts, so of course Penny adored them, but never put the effort into making her own male friends. Anyway, men weren't like her father: gentle, noninvasive, humble. Women were more like her father, so she loved them more easily.

Flore teased Penny's wealth, the fact that she lived in her dead grandmother's apartment that was in easy walking distance to superior restaurants and cafes that self-important public figures made appearances at and smiled little in order to maintain an air of mystery. "They know your name," Flore whispered when they were welcomed by hostesses, and shown to the most secluded table, given hors d'oeuvres too delicate to touch without ruining, compliments of the chef. Penny had never even thought to apologise for her wealth, to think about the fact that people in her country couldn't always fill their cars with fuel because it cost too much—didn't even necessarily have a car. A bike.

The first time Penny went to where Flore lived, bunked down with her aunty who disliked both of them, Penny tried to see past the water stains on the roof, the mould the shape of extravagant flowers. She learned to bring her own toilet paper in case they'd run out, which they almost always had, and she started to buy simple necessities, like a kettle to boil water for tea and a laptop for Flore to get her TAFE work done. One day Flore opened her laptop in Penny's apartment and two tiny cockroaches slipped out from a space in the keyboard and scurried beneath a tissue-box. When Penny screamed and asked why the fuck there were cockroaches in the keyboard, Flore told her to pull her head in, not everybody can afford an exterminator.

"And even if I could afford one," Flore went on, "I wouldn't have my cockroaches killed. I like them coming on adventures with me."

"Don't be disgusting."

“I’m disgusting? Because where I live is infested? Babe, you’re such a snobby bitch.”

“I didn’t say you’re disgusting.”

“You may as well have.”

“That’s not what I said, and it’s certainly not what I think. You know that.”

“Do I?”

“I certainly hope you do.”

Flore picked up the tissue-box and squished the cockroaches bodies into smears.

“One day when we buy the orchard together you can own a home where there aren’t any cockroaches,” Penny said.

“It won’t be my orchard,” Flore said. “It’ll be your orchard.”

Penny was struck by the breeze. It smelled slightly of smoke. She liked the smell. The shack, although multicoloured with graffiti, looked somehow peaceful in the afternoon light. She couldn’t remember if the door had been wide open when she first came to the orchard and saw the home where her father had grown up on Vegemite toast and mashed potato. “Couldn’t afford sushi,” he liked to tell Penny. “The heroin of the privileged.” To which Penny would add, “And downward dog.”

Angus appeared in the doorway of the shack with a heavy-leafed branch in hand that he swept across the entrance way, flicking dirt onto the grass.

“I saw what happened at the pub,” Penny said, the words spoken before she could question herself.

Squatting, Angus picked up a leaf and flicking it off the doorstep. He pushed his hair aside. “Righto.”

She couldn’t tell if he was being nonchalant or if what she said actually worried him and he was trying to appear unconcerned. “That woman, Amber...did she kill that man?” Heat rushed through her body. Made her sweat.

“No.”

She didn’t know why, but she believed him. “Have you gone to the police?”

“No.”

“Why not?” She felt safe, standing some meters away, but knew she couldn’t ask him anymore questions if she got closer. With the distance closed she’d have to see him, that line of hair, that scar by his eyebrow, and then he’d be a real person and not just the object of her fear, and then she’d have to worry about his thoughts, his feelings, and all she wanted was for him to admit to everything (whatever everything was) so that she could give all that information to the police and wipe her conscience clean. The simplicity of that transaction would leave her path open again, as she wouldn’t have any people in her way making a mess of her future, tying her down with their needs, that she couldn’t help but respond to, and she’d focus again on all that mattered—the orchard.

But then he walked over to where she was half hidden by a lemon tree that had thorns (she never imagined a fruit tree could have thorns) and he stood before her, with his hands stuffed in his pockets and the muscles in his lips working, and she could see that he was struggling for words and she wished, again, that she’d left Mumblety-Peg when she first saw him. That she’d never met him at all.

“I spose you’ve gone to the police then,” he said.

She saw that sadness again in his eyes, when she shook her head it didn’t go away. “Can’t you just explain to me what happened?”

He laughed, and it looked like it hurt just to do that. “Mate, if only life was so simple.”

“You mean the situation is...” She searched for words, like a mother, trying to get her kid to explain themselves, so that she could go in to bat for them. “Complicated?”

“No,” he said. “That’s not what I mean.”

“What do you mean?”

He stuffed his hands deeper into his pockets. “Not that.”

Penny felt tired of the conversation, couldn’t help thinking how lucky she was to have so little to do with men who were unable to speak openly and kindly. “Well I’m sorry if me going to the police isn’t what you want me to do,” she said, although she didn’t feel sorry at all, not for doing the right thing. But then he started rubbing his throat like there was a needle stuck in it, and Penny suddenly wanted to give him a glass of water, offer for him to sit down, although the ground was hard and dry. “I really am sorry,” she said and meant it.

“You got any smokes?”

She shook her head.

He walked back to the shack and closed the door behind him; she doubted he usually shut doors. A swamp hen scampered across the open field with a trail of hens

behind it, their heads bobbing, so small and fragile. She no longer felt comfortable on the land that should've been her father's.

It was the police car out the front of the pub that made her pull in, not go to the station. She felt less anxious at the thought of chatting with a cop over a beer. The cops were sitting at the bar, telling Jen a story that made her laugh hard, say, "Bullshit!" Penny had expected the pub to be packed, since it was nearing six, but it wasn't. She figured there must be a community event that she hadn't been invited to.

"Heya love." Jen waved her over.

The cops swiveled on their stools and both grinned like they'd been served a steak with pepper sauce. "Heya love," they mimicked Jen, elbowing one another, raising eyebrows. Penny took a seat at the opposite end of the bar and went to order a beer but didn't even know what type she liked. Jen got her a gin and tonic. The lime's skin was discoloured with disease.

"Well you're a pretty little thing," the lean cop said, slugging back beer and getting head on his upper lip. "Where you from?"

Penny took the lime out of her drink and wrapped it in a napkin. "Not here."

"I figured as much," the other one said. Penny could see tats through the thin fabric of his uniform. Words in bold print. She figured it must be his kid's names—just in case he forgot.

"You coming to the match?" the lean one asked, licking the head clean. "We're playing the Roosters."

She squinted.

“Footy, love.”

“We could take you down to the oval,” Tatts said. “Introduce you to a few of the local lads. I reckon they could make your time here a bit more interesting.”

“Interesting,” the lean one repeated with a snigger, as if he was the only one who got the innuendo.

Jen slapped the bar with a tea towel. “Come on boys, pull your heads in.”

“Are you two on duty?” Penny asked.

“Yeah mate,” they both answered.

“You got a complaint?” Tatts asked. “We’d be happy to do anything for a young lady like you.”

“Anything,” The lean one licked a drip of foam from his schooner; looked pleased at being able to lick something at that moment.

They’d drive out to the land that should be her father’s, shoulder the shack door open, and grab Angus from where he sat on sour smelling hay. Angus would struggle, because he’d know these guys by name, probably went to high school with them, and he’d know that they wouldn’t be all that interested in what he had to say. They’d be excited to get him on the ground and dig their knees into his ribs. They’d wheeze with the effort. Cough with satisfaction. Slap one another on the shoulders once they got him in the car. Talk shit to him the whole way back to the station. Tell him they’d fucked his mum. Love that he had to listen. Say nothing.

“Nope,” Penny said, pushing her empty glass away as she got up to leave. “No complaints.”

“You sure, love?” Tatts asked.

She walked to the stairs, already thinking of getting clean, running the bath water to the rim.

“Hey Pen,” Jen called out.

Penny stopped, with her hand clutching the stair’s railing.

“You really alright?”

Penny smiled, wishing for the hundredth time that she could act as well as her brother. “Of course.”

There was a knock at the door. Penny lay in the bath, submerged to her nose. Jen called her name over and over again. Was this it? Was she really going to cover up what she’d seen? She dropped beneath the water and opened her eyes. The world looked prettier when bleary. What did she owe Angus? Why in God’s name should she protect him from the ugly men who should be taking him in and getting the truth out of him? She exhaled. Liked the noise the bubbles made when they burst on the water’s surface. She’d get the truth out of him (she promised), but she also wouldn’t get too involved. Not after everything she’d been through with Flore. She didn’t deserve anymore bullshit in her life. It was her time to simplify her days with the pure act of keeping trees alive, picking the fruit they offered her in thanks for their good health. Fuck it, she’d get a dog—not that she liked them all that much. Call it Samson. Never cut its hair. Let the thing grow up strong.

CHAPTER VI

It was the first overcast day there'd been since she arrived in the country. When she and Angus were dropped off at the last row of trees, where the orchard met an open field, Penny watched the trailer pull away and felt tired seeing it go. Her bag was too big. Too empty. She hadn't noticed Angus watching her as he rolled a cigarette, but then he offered it, and she took it to delay having to speak, wanting to just stand with the grass tickling her ant bitten legs.

"Did you go to the cops?" he asked, expressionless.

She changed her mind about smoking. Held the cigarette out for him to take back.

He didn't take it.

She shook her head.

"You didn't go?"

She shook her head again.

"Why not?" He looked annoyed.

There was no way of making sense of her choices, explaining that the cops weren't good people, that they wanted to fuck her, even though they probably had kids with names like Jayden and Summer.

"Why'd you say you were going to them if you weren't?"

“I am going. I just haven’t had the chance.”

“Fuck’s sake, Penny, you’re not popping out for a soy latte. You’re going to the cops about a stabbing.”

“Jesus,” she cried. “You’re not supposed to be the one lecturing me about this.”

He looked like he wanted to yell, but he didn’t. “Damn fucking right.”

“Just fuck off, would you,” she said, but the words came out like she’d been practicing cursing. He smirked at her like she was an idiot and she wished she’d kept her decisions to herself.

Angus looked beyond her and his eyes widened.

“Oi, white-shirt.” Derrick approached with Tatts and his lean coworker.

Acting on instinct, Penny reached out to grab Angus’ wrist—hold him so they couldn’t take him—but he was gone.

“Well fancy meeting you again,” Tatts said. “We had no idea we were chatting with an escapee last night.”

“Would’ve chucked the cuffs on you there an then if we’d known,” the lean one said, touching his gun like a lover.

“Too right,” Tatts said pulling a little black book from his pocket and flipping it open with an air of importance. He scanned an almost blank page, nodded slowly. “So it would appear you’ve got the whole world out looking for you.”

“Any reason you left home without letting anybody know?” the lean one asked.

Penny made no response.

Tatts had a slight gut, although he was young and otherwise fit. He rubbed his palms across the strained fabric of his shirt, as if he'd just eaten too much. "Don't play silly buggers. Why didn't you let your parents know you were running off to the country? They're up in arms, calling police from here to bloody Timbuktu."

Penny tried to look at the man's face. Not his gut.

"Here we were expecting you to be in a right mess," he carried on, enjoying his speech, "At least on some kinda drugs—but instead you're just picking peaches." The two men chuckled. "Why the secrecy?"

She knew she was starting to blush, and she knew they liked it.

"Next time you go for a little drive, give mumsy a tingle and you'll save us boys some work."

She wanted to bite back—say strolling around an orchard looking for her was hardly work.

"Is that you, Slater?" the lean one called out, crouching to get a clear view beneath the trees' canopies. Penny swallowed. "Bloody hell, it is you."

Angus took his time picking a final peach and placing it in his bag. When he strolled over, he rolled a cigarette as he walked, paying more attention to fingering the tobacco into a fine line than looking at the group that watched him.

"Where the fuck have you been the last few months?" Tatts said.

"Fishing," Angus said.

"Where's your brother? I miss that bastard."

The lean one spat. "More to the point, where's that crazy bitch?"

“Don’t know who you mean, fellas,” Angus said.

“Yeah you do,” Tatts said.

Angus reached out and snapped a peach free, bit into the flesh. Tears of juice clung to his stubble.

“Is she back here or what?” The lean one insisted.

“Eat a peach, lads,” Angus said, holding out the stone.

The policemen laughed, wanting to show Angus they weren’t bothered by his bullshit, but Penny could see their jaws tightening.

“Would you mind if I picked some fruit now?” Penny asked, not wanting to watch the men play tough.

Tatts eyed her, told her she’d caused enough trouble as it was, to go home and stop mucking around at the orchard. “I don’t want to have to speak to that mother of yours again,” he yelled over his shoulder, walking away.

Penny took a peach and tore into it without looking where she bit. Her teeth struck the stone. “Why’d you let the cops see you?” she asked Angus.

“They weren’t looking for me.”

“Well they will be.”

He shrugged. “So your parents send out coppers every time you go for a Sunday drive then?”

“Yeah, that’s exactly it.”

“How old are you?”

“We’ve had this conversation.”

“Can’t say I’ve had my mum look for me since I was three.”

“Right, so I’m immature because my parents care about me.”

“There’s caring and there’s sending the police out searching for you.”

“You’re a bastard,” she said. “I’m not embarrassed about the way my parents love me.”

“Yes you are, which I’m thankful for. If you weren’t blushing I’d think you were probably sleeping with your dad on top of all of this.”

Penny never wanted to hit somebody, but she did then. “I bet you love how uncomfortable you’re making me feel,” she said, itching an ant bite on her thigh till it bled. “You’re that type of person...or should I say, you’re a man. You feel powerful when I feel ridiculous.”

“That’s a crock of shit.”

“Then why are you mocking me? What do you get out of this?”

A hoard of fruit-flies clouded around his head. He didn’t bat them away. Let them settle on his knotted hair, suck at the sweat of his scalp. “Alright, I was being a prick. I’m sorry, hey. It’s just that you’re easy to tease, you know, rocking up here thinking you’re going to grow a peach and feel better about your life.”

“You really think that’s the extent of my plan?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, I reckon that about sums it up.”

“No wonder you think I’m an idiot.”

“I never said you were—”

“You’re the idiot,” she said. “Thinking anybody could be so absolutely

ridiculous.” But he was right. And fuck, he was wrong. There had to be something more than those white-socked girls at the school who smelt like coconut lip-balm and knew their futures were bright as they drove away from the stone gates in their Minis and Beetles with Babushka dolls lined along the dashboards—from little to medium (never to big). “I needed to get away from there,” she said, quietly. Firmly.

A tear sprung in her eye, the brightness of the day suddenly making her weep. She blinked, tasted the air, the heat and fruit and dying grass. She wanted to look up. So she did. Saw only blue.

“Who is Amber?” she asked, swallowed her saliva.

“My brother’s wife,” he said simply, but she knew he didn’t say everything because he swallowed—too.

“Where’s your brother?”

“At my mum’s.”

“Where?”

“Couple of hours from here. Small town. Real small town.”

“And you’re here with Amber.”

He brushed his nose roughly like he was going to sneeze and wanted to stop it happening. “Yeah.”

“And you shouldn’t be here with her.”

He opened his mouth to speak. The fruit-flies lifted from his hair.

The tractor broke their focus, its engine chug ragged. “What are you two playing

at?” the short man yelled, seeing their empty bags.

“The coppers were here,” Angus said, still staring at Penny. “Had some questions for us. We didn’t have time to pick.”

The short man stood up between the steering wheel and the seat, trying to look tall. “What’s that got to do with getting the job done?”

Angus shrugged.

“You better have those packed to over-flowing when I come back,” he said, glaring at Angus like Penny wasn’t even there.

“Mate, you won’t recognise these bags when you get back,” Angus said.

“Don’t fuck with me, Slater, or I’ll get you fired.”

Angus moved into the orchard.

The short man finally looked at Penny. Smirked. “And you, what the fuck are you doing here?”

Penny dumped the contents of her bag. Left the short man leering.

CHAPTER VII

The first thing she saw wasn't a tent, but a pig on a spit rotating in the air, its limbs stretched out like it was leaping into water, its eyes shut, its mouth wide open. The fire burnt beneath the body, sending smoke and the scent of meat into the treetops. Surrounding the animal, a few people stretched out on the dirt, like they'd just hiked to the top of a mountain, and needed to rest before they looked at the view.

The tents were not store-bought, but pieced together with tarpaulins, sheets of corrugated iron, crumbling plasterboard and leaf-heavy branches. There were enough couches to seat the nation, scattered about the campsite at random, with broken frames and gouged cushions that coughed feather and foam. Flags swayed in the light breeze. Wooden wind-chimes could be heard but not seen. On the bank of the creek a vegetable garden thrived with climbing beans and tomatoes, all but shielding the sight of the water. When Penny strained to see between the trellises she noticed a few naked teens all hanging from a single rope-swing as it arced across the water. They dropped—a mess of bodies.

Penny looked for Angus, but couldn't see him.

Digby whistled as he approached. "Look at you."

“All class,” she said, pointing at the hole in the jeans she’d bought at Vinnies and the cent sized glimpse of her arse.

“I didn’t think you’d come.”

“Needed to get out of that pub. The maroon carpet saps all of my hope for humanity.”

A boy, no older than sixteen, came out of a tent clutching a butcher’s knife which he took to the pig. Beside him stood Rhi, who obviously loved him—his cuts made her smile—and when he took chunks of flesh away from the bone, she held plates out for him, took the meat and breathed in its salty scent. A generator whirred by a tent which was packed with 1960’s fridges shaped like bubbles, and people strolled in and out, selecting longnecks and cracking the tops off on logs.

“We all brew,” Digby said. “We have a shelf in a fridge, and anybody is welcome to anybody’s beer. I’m the least popular brewer. They only drink my stuff once every fridge is dry.”

“I’ll drink your beer,” Penny said, taking the plate that Rhi offered, mounded high with pig meat. Penny leant in close to Digby. “Is there anything green to eat?”

“Weed,” Digby answered. “Buckets full of the stuff.”

The sun set and the night cooled. It was then she saw Angus walking along the far side of the creek approaching the camp. From a distance he looked even skinnier than she remembered. She’d offer him the last hunk of meat on her plate, say she wouldn’t leave him alone until he ate it, ask why his mum hadn’t taught him to eat well—didn’t you watch Popeye? Any kids shows? The fire was hot against her skin. Digby brought

her another beer. She dropped her empty onto the pile she and Digby had created at their feet and half listened as he told her a story about London and this woman he'd wanted to marry, but then she'd decided to become a nun, and it was right when Penny asked if Digby was a Catholic, and he said, "Not anymore! I'm not following a God who takes my women!" that Angus reached the camp and she rose to give him the meat. But Amber got to him first, spoke low in his ear, with an urgency fueled by alcohol, and Angus tried to take her hand, but she pulled away—spoke louder. He blinked at her words as if he were trying to take them in, but couldn't make sense of them. When he opened his mouth to speak, she cut in, told him to fuck off. So he did. To the other side of the fire, where he picked up a guitar and strummed it with a gentleness that made it seem like he'd forgotten Amber's anger, but then he hung his head so low it revealed his exhaustion. At first, Penny didn't hear music, but rather the hollow body of the guitar. It sounded like breath. A cave.

"While I can see you're finding my story about Camilla a riveting one," Digby said. "I think I'd better point out that Amber looks like she's going to kill you."

Penny pulled her gaze away from Angus and saw Amber by a eucalyptus, leaning her shoulder into a knot that looked like a wound. It wasn't so much the way she stared at Penny, but more where her hand was, slipped down the waist of her jeans, a firm hold on her protruding hip bone. And maybe it should've looked casual—like she wasn't even aware of where she touched herself, or perhaps it was even supposed to be enticing in some way, but instead it just looked desperate—as if she needed to keep hold of her own bones to stop herself doing something she'd regret.

“Slater,” Rhi yelled over to Angus. “Play louder!”

His fingers came down on the strings with the aggression Penny had expected when he first started to play. He sang, his voice rusty—not smooth like the singers Penny loved—thick like he was going to cough, yet somehow beautiful. A sound Penny wanted to get closer to, set in her memory—a recording she could play whenever she wanted to taste a rustiness in her saliva and feel a stillness where her body usually held tight.

“Jesus Penny, she looks about ready to stab you,” Digby said, glancing at Amber.

“Don’t say stab.”

“Why not?”

“I hate that word.”

Rhi was dancing in nothing but a man’s shirt and boots. She was screaming words that hit against Angus’, that lagged a second behind, shrill and brittle. A hoard of guys jumped up. Slung arms around each other’s shoulders. Yelled—noise, no words. The boy who’d cut up the pig rolled a forty gallon drum into the open, and started stomping on the lid.

“Moist,” Digby said.

Penny glanced at him. “Pardon?”

“Fucking hate that word.”

She tried to laugh.

He grabbed her wrist, pulled her into the centre of the group. Whiskey. Tasted like the fire. Digby’s hands on her hips—she hadn’t known he’d want to put them there. She also hadn’t known the alcohol would go to her head, make her forget about Amber,

feel light, beautiful, happy. Bodies left scent on her skin, but she didn't mind, felt good to know people were touching her, welcoming her into the place they called home. And they were all smiling, seeing the way she danced, let her arms fall from being folded, threw her boots—liked that they landed on the ash by the fire—felt the dirt on her soles, remembered the wound on her heel. Fire burnt through the darkness, made them all sweat, take off their shirts, unbutton the first notch of their jeans, cry out to cool down.

Then Angus was there, before her, and he was laughing—she was laughing—and they touched for just a second, her hand on his spine, and his bones left a print on her fingertips, a sting, and then they were being pushed together, as the group grew more wild, stomping and screaming and clapping, and their bodies were hard against one another, and although they didn't let their hands touch, his hips touched her hips, and he smelt like wood, ash, salt, and he was looking down at her, half-smiling, and she could see where his tooth was chipped, and he said something, but she couldn't hear the words, yet it didn't seem to matter because when she didn't respond—just kept looking up at him—he laughed and leaned lower as if he was going to brush his nose against hers, and she really wanted him to, but then the group began to shift and there was no reason for them to be pressed together anymore—though she wanted to cling to that scent, swallow it whole, see that tooth, feel that spine—but space was expanding between them, filling with firelight—smoke—and it seemed if she'd just stayed in that space, not pulled back from him, she wouldn't feel cold. Tired. Aware that she was alone. And nobody else was alone. They had tents. Lovers.

She dropped a bottle that she'd forgotten she held. A boy picked it up, tried to give it back to her. "Stop," she cried, but the singing drowned her out. The song, one Penny didn't know. The pig. Still rotating. Its fat dripping into ash.

She ran.

The creek was warm. A bottle brushed her shin. Rum. The lid on. She drank from it and forced herself to swallow. The moon looked lonely. She wanted to reach out and touch it, bring it in closer until it lit the scene. Made it familiar. There were words stumbling in and out of her mind, and she knew that was all she needed—words—to explain to the police why she never doxed Amber and Angus in, to tell her family where she'd run to, and to speak to Flore. Say—something. And Amber too, she could hurt Penny unless she spoke. Gave reason for being at the orchard—there, where the tents were shanties and would some day fall down and be forgotten.

The rum kept moving inside her, wouldn't still, wouldn't stop burning, started to feel more sore than good. She lent over till her face almost touched the water. Saw her reflection in the darkness. Placing her palm across her image, she washed it away, and replaced it with ripples.

"Oi." Amber stood on the shore, bottle in hand. Dancers blurred in the firelight at a distance. Flames. Limbs. "Why'd you run off?"

Penny kicked the water. Wet the shore.

"You scared of me or something?" Amber said, stepping into the shallows—boots still on— crossing the gap between them. "You left your girlfriend, right? Angus said so." She bit at the fat, black freckles on her lips. "Why?"

“She was already leaving me.”

“So you wanted to beat her to it?”

“No. It was happening. I couldn’t—what does this have to do with you?”

“You want to fuck Angus.”

“God...what the fuck are you saying?” The bush was getting too big. Owls flew through the canopies, didn’t stop to land. “I’ve never even had sex with a man.”

“But you want to.”

The fire burst with a boom and embers erupted into the sky.

“Stupid pricks,” Amber said, barely looking over her shoulder. “They’ll burn their faces off.”

Penny strained to see boys running from the fire with empty jerry-cans of fuel.

“I’m going home,” she said.

Amber closed the meter between them, slipped her finger into a belt loop of Penny’s jeans. Her breath smelt like weed. Liquor. “Stay for a bit.”

“I need to—sleep,” Penny said.

“It’s getting cold.”

Penny ran her fingers over her brows. Rubbed her eyelids till she felt tears.

“Why’d you just say that?”

“How old were you when you first kissed a woman?”

The owls. There must’ve been hundreds of them. All the cooing. “Fifteen....no, I mean, fourteen.”

“What was it like?”

“Silly. She was my neighbour. It was when the clocks changed and—” She stopped. Didn’t know why’d she’d started talking. Kept going. “And we were out in the park near our houses and she told me she’d never kissed anybody before. Asked if she could kiss me. I didn’t like her or anything. She had eczema. That’s all I could think about when we kissed.” Penny put her hand to her mouth, breathed into her cupped palm. “That’s terrible. I just couldn’t ignore the cent sized red splotches on the fold of her nose.”

“Kiss me,” Amber said.

Penny shook her head.

“Why not? You kissed that girl.” The freckles, so black, moved when she talked, slipped inside her mouth.

“I don’t kiss every girl that asks me to kiss her,” Penny said.

They’d stopped shifting closer. They were as close as they could be. The water around them stilled.

“You won’t kiss me.” Penny dropped her head back and smiled. “You don’t even want to.”

Amber leaned in and took Penny’s bottom lip into her mouth. When she bit, it didn’t hurt at first, but then she clenched tighter, dug her sharpest tooth into the softest flesh. Penny pulled back, tasted blood.

Footsteps thundered, as if a herd of brumbies approached. The group ran towards the creek, tearing off their clothes and losing them to the ground. Penny got out of the

way, to let them run by, trip and fall into the shallows. “Get in,” they screamed at her and broke into a water fight.

When Angus said, “Hey,” she was trying to focus only on the bodies tangling in the water like a ball of yarn taken by the wind. Amber had disappeared, which made Penny more anxious than she already was. Her lip wept blood onto her teeth that she tried not to taste. As a child her mum had always told her not to lick blood off her wounds, “It’s the only thing that separates us from beasts.” Of course, as a child Penny hadn’t known she was serious about the blood but not the beasts, and no matter how much time passed, Penny couldn’t stop taking the warning seriously.

“Hey,” she said to Angus.

“How ya goin’?”

She tried to steady her gaze. “I’m wasted.”

“Mate.” He laughed. “Me too.”

“Really?” He didn’t look all that drunk to her, although his eyelids were soft, like he wanted to fall asleep but something was driving him to stay awake. She wanted to put him to bed. “It must be hard getting a good night of sleep, living here in tents.”

“I don’t live here.”

“Where do you live?”

“In my brother’s caravan at the moment, out on Lee’s Lane.”

“You live there with Amber and your brother? There can’t be all that much room.”

“Amber isn’t living there with me, and neither is my brother. He’s at our mum’s.”

“Why?”

In the water, everybody was naked, tackling like kids who were still young enough to bathe with the opposite sex and think nothing of it. Mac swam to the other side of the creek. Inspired, everybody followed.

“You getting in the water?” Angus asked, unbuttoning his shorts.

Feeling the heat of his actions, she stepped away, three steps, and faced the water. He too faced the water. Glancing at him, she saw his naked body, one shade lighter than night. Calmed by their symmetry and the cicadas feverish song, she slipped her dress over her head. Unclipping her bra, she already felt bare. She removed the lace from her body, and lowered her underwear to the dirt. The water at first felt warm then cool. As she slipped her crotch below the surface, she focused completely, stopped thinking about anything beyond that second; forgot she had a body above her hips. Angus was just meters from her, but the distance between them felt fat.

A shadow appeared, darker than night’s cover, just meters from where they stood, and began moving up the creek, creating no splash, only ripples. It drew towards the bend in the creek that some said led to a waterfall. When Angus started to pull away, follow the shadow, Penny knew it was Amber. When he reached her, she dragged him into the creek’s depths.

The water rushed around Penny, as the group returned from the opposite bank, their screams filling the bare sky. They surrounded her, although she fought against

them, trying desperately to see what Amber was doing to Angus. Amber could hurt him, stab him, just like she'd done to another man. The people that she knew by name turned into faceless bodies as they circled her and chanted something between screeches of laughter. A shudder passed through Penny and kept coming in waves. The group moved clockwise, so she moved counter to them, walking on the spot, trying to make their movement seem like something she was part of. But the more she moved, the faster they whirled, until the water whipped her, made a noise that sounded like children whispering secrets—hundreds and thousands of them. She ran at the bodies and they took hold of her, laughing at her weakness, and pushed her beneath the water. She tasted silt, reeds and riverbed. Her screams turned to bubbles, and she forgot she was in water and drank it back like air.

They released her. Retching, she stumbled to the shore and heaved water onto the mud. When they all stopped laughing and crept closer to see if she was ok—told her they were just having a bit of fun, didn't mean to drown her or anything—she didn't pay any attention to them, because as soon as she wiped water from her eyes, she saw Amber straddling Angus as they fucked standing. Amber came with a ragged cry and dropped into the water as if she'd been shot. Resurfacing, she walked to shore and passed the group, naked, and disappeared into the bush without collecting her clothes. Angus remained in the shallows, stretched out, and for just a moment Penny wished he was dead, but then a cloud covered the moon and the scene darkened to a shade that felt ungodly and she wished instead that he was by her side and together they were fighting

against the night and making do with what little they had, discovering something more than dirt and suffering.

CHAPTER VIII

At sunrise, Penny returned to the pub, ran the bath to the lip and rested her weary body in the waters. She realised it was the weekend, that she had no idea what people did in the country for leisure. All there was for her to do was recover, yet that seemed impossible, because a sadness had taken hold of her ribs, again, was making it hard to breathe. She was back where she started, although this time she wasn't sure what the sadness meant, whereas she'd always known why she was broken over Flore. Everything was perfect between them, until Flore found that woman. Flore said it meant a lot. The sex. She didn't lie to Penny, and Penny couldn't help appreciating that one respect she was shown when she felt at her lowest. Flore told Penny they'd met at the Jewish Museum in front of the wall of shoes and they'd both been sad, so they'd gone into the park with takeaway coffees and they'd spoken about grief till they felt good about their sadness, about their ability to feel agony over evil.

“Did you touch her in the park?” Penny asked as she tried not to listen to Flore's words, to hear only the cadence.

“Yes,” Flore said. “But that's because we were sad. So fucking sad. And you know I've been a mess lately, but when I was with—”

“Stop...don't say her name.”

“...her, I didn’t feel tired anymore. I know that doesn’t mean anything, but it’s true.”

Penny had wanted to cheat on Flore. To hurt her. To bruise her till she cried like Penny cried. But when she dressed in jeans so tight they cut at her crotch, and went to the bar where she and Flore liked to go and gaze at women who made them frantic with desire for one another, she could only see the spills on the countertop where she ordered a gin martini. The liquor tasted dirty, as it promised, and when a woman with raised collarbones and grey eyes approached her, Penny could only see her bones, and not her eyes, and she had to go home and press her face against her pillow till she choked for air and it was then she made a decision that there was no reason to leave Flore for the grey-eyed woman, since she couldn’t love anybody else in her state, and even if she were ever to get happy again, she knew that her happiness could never be equal to the happiness she’d felt with Flore. She decided to forgive Flore, just as she’d been asked to, and to realise that people make mistakes—although she knew Flore didn’t make a mistake; to give your body to another was a decision.

Penny stared at her body that she hadn’t loved until Flore had loved it, her moles that had become beautiful because they were secrets that nobody else saw, only Flore, and she had loved each one, touched it and documented its place like it were a village on a map—a place of importance. But then Penny could never really understand why Flore loved her moles, because that was the part of her own body she hated the most. She felt herself get wet just thinking about Flore, thinking that no matter what that woman did Penny couldn’t help but want her...completely. When she touched herself it didn’t feel

like Flore's touch, she knew it was her own, and she couldn't pretend there was desire in it, could only feel the sadness, the longing. The loss. But she touched herself anyway.

Penny drove to the orchard to escape her sadness, and arrived, half expecting to see Angus sweeping leaves from the shack, but instead she found nobody; the property empty in morning light. Her sadness deepened, but she couldn't understand why. Had she wanted to see Angus? What was there to say? Something about him taking his brother's wife, just as Flore had taken that woman from the museum. What did it matter? For some reason she couldn't stop thinking that it mattered a lot.

She entered the shack that she hadn't stood inside for fifteen years. The air tasted like a creek-bed. She could've sworn it was bigger than it really was; just two rooms, with no furniture and a sink deep enough to please a washer woman. Moving from corner to corner she tried to connect the space she found with her memory of it, but the two would not touch. Although Angus had swept the rooms, there were still leaves, lint and balls of dust the size of Firetails. Getting on her hands and knees she scoured the raw floorboards, filling her palms with what shouldn't be there, fighting against the urge to lay her body down and sleep everything away.

The sun was setting. She got her phone out of her car. When she switched it on, it flooded with texts and voicemails from her family: frantic, beckoning. She deleted each one and searched through her contacts for Queenie, a real estate agent and a dear friend of her fathers, who went to all his charity events for homeless youth and gave big.

Queenie was in love with her father, Penny was sure of it; would do anything for that man.

Her family were going to be angry when they heard she'd sold grandma's house. It had been left to her, but she knew the unwritten rule was that the home was to remain in the family—or rather, to remain as Penny's home until she grew old and passed away. She often wondered if they were pleased she was a lesbian, for the simple fact that there was less possibility she would have a child, wouldn't likely expand her family by more than a partner and perhaps a dog. Grandma's home would always be just right for her. And no, there was no reason for her to decorate it her own way, not when it was so beautiful already. Penny had never told her parents she hated the emerald velvet chaise-longue, the crystal ash-trays that Flore thought were an open invitation to smoke indoors, the bookshelf that Penny swore would one day come tumbling down and kill her—filled with novels she couldn't read, as most were French because her grandma turned her nose up at translations. She'd wanted to tell her family it was not the right style for her, that it made her feel small and like she was being watched, but she simply couldn't bring herself to do it. It was as if her grandmother was still alive, buying more antiques, filling the apartment to the brim, and everybody was taken with her selections, her eye for the ornate.

Penny had forgotten, just slightly, how to play posh, but she slipped straight back into it as soon as Queenie answered. They spent five minutes on greetings, loaded heavy with “darlings,” “mmm...divine,” and a well timed “fuck” that was drawn out, softened by its length. Penny prepared Queenie, then asked if she could help out with a little

surprise for her father. Yes, it's the orchard. Perfect, I know. But to buy it back I need to sell Grandma's apartment, which of course isn't a problem at all because it's in my name and yes, mum and I have talked it through at length, but don't mention it to her because she might let it out to dad....I know, she's rubbish at keeping secrets. Queenie gushed, "You're just brilliant, darling. The kindest daughter a man could ask for. I can already see it, Paul returning to the orchard he loves so much and it being your home. I never saw you as a country girl, but I've got to admit, this is just perfect. And don't you worry, I'll get a superb price for the apartment. Honestly, I can have it sold in a jiffy. Anything for your father...anything at all."

Penny hung up. She needed to smoke something, found a butt of one of Angus' rollies, and took the final few puffs. Fireweed swayed in the breeze, releasing seed across the open field. So pretty. So perfect.

Jen was calling out instructions to the late-teens who worked with a sneer, when Penny got back to the pub. She wanted to go straight up to her room, to sleep off the last twenty-four hours—to sleep off the year—but Jen waved her over, said she looked like shit and pushed a Bundy across the bar. "Drink this, it always makes me feel better."

Penny sipped it and felt worse. "I'm moving here permanently."

"That's a bloody terrible idea," Jen said, glancing at one of the teens mopping the floor by the entrance. "For God's sake, Kayla, change that water. It looks like a rotten tooth!" She turned back to Penny. "Morons. They're all morons. Once they turn

twenty-one they grow a brain, but it doesn't start to work until they're about thirty. How old did you say you are?"

A group of miners walked in, their faces scrubbed but still coal stained. They all nodded at Penny and she smiled. They went back to talking about a fishing expedition.

"You been hanging out with Slater?" Jen asked, after loading the boys up with beers.

"Who?"

"Angus."

"Oh, he works at Mumblety-Peg," she said, tearing a drink coaster. "I see him a bit."

"Jesus, just look at you, all red at the very sound of his name."

"I'm a lesbian, Jen."

"You wouldn't be the first to want a dick."

Penny burst out laughing, told Jen to grow up.

Jen filled her glass to the brim.

Penny hadn't planned on drinking, ever again, but the miners asked her if she wanted to play darts, and then they told stories that made her laugh and she told a few that they liked, got them buying her beers, and she felt like she'd scored herself a band of brothers. One of them had hair like Angus—a crown of knots—and she found herself wanting to touch it. To smell it. Which made her feel crazy. Drunk. So she went into the toilets and sat down without wiping the seat, and peed a trickle.

It was midnight and Penny was alone on the verandah smoking a pack of cigarettes she found on the cistern of the toilet, left behind by some drunk. Jen and the sullen teens were doing the final clean up, banging mops against cornices, over-spraying countertops with disinfectant, shaking out rubber mats and hosing them down in the back carpark. A train passed so slowly it looked as if it was stationary. The ringing of the tracks sounded like girls screaming. When the man with the knotted hair left, he'd asked for her number and she told him she didn't go for men. He looked surprised, which made her lash out, say something stupid like, "And if I did I wouldn't go for you." She felt like her giggling seventeen year old self, shocked by the sad flesh of a penis, and yet she also knew she wasn't that girl anymore. Something was shifting. But when she tried to figure out what, exactly, her mind stilled and wouldn't think anymore, instead her body spoke up, said it was thirsty, cold, tired.

"Hey Jen," she called.

Jen popped her head out the door. "Yeah love."

"Where's Lee Lane?"

"Why'd you ask?"

Penny shrugged.

"Pete Slater used to live out there in a caravan," Jen said. "Is that where Angus is staying now?"

An insect sizzled in a bug zapper.

"Come on Penny, is that why you want to know where it is?"

“I met a girl called Sarah in the supermarket and that’s where she lives...asked if I’d come visit her.”

Jen lit a cigarette, held the smoke down till it disappeared. “You gotta follow Ridge Road out to the mountain range. You know it? Past that ugly cottage, the pink one, on the edge of town—that one with the alpacas in the neighbouring field—if you stick on that you’ll come to Lee Lane, near a burnt down truck-stop.”

“And then what?”

She shrugged. “Look for a caravan, I guess.”

Penny loudly denied that she was looking for the caravan.

“It’s the only *residence* on Lee Lane, you dickhead,” Jen yelled over her shoulder, as she walked inside. “And don’t even think about going out there at this time of night. You’ll get yourself killed.”

Penny unlocked the double-bolt of the pub’s backdoor. The moon was covered by a sheet of clouds. She heard a scuffle and saw some dogs slink out from behind the skips, their eyes reflecting the shine of the single street light. Penny whistled. They moved restlessly, paws dragging in the dirt, one clutching a hunk of bread it’d found by the skip. She got in her car, glanced in the rearview mirror to see if the dogs were still watching her, but they were gone.

She found the pink cottage, Ridge Road, and the burnt down truck-stop. Slowing, she searched for a lane, but there were only trees, vines, animals that she couldn’t see. Her fuel light came on. “Fuck,” she muttered, tapping the gauge, knowing it made no difference; it wasn’t going to fill her tank. Pulling to the side of the road, she got out, and

looked up and down the stretch of endless tar. Behind her there was only darkness.

Ahead, only light. Neither path looked more inviting.

She saw a sign. Lee, no 'Lane'. She walked across the road, peered up the overgrown lane, and saw tyre tracks in the dirt. Fresh.

The bush crowded in around her car. Showing up, uninvited...he might not be happy to see her, might think it was pretty weird that she searched him out. He'd ask why she was there, and once again she'd have to give reasons for her actions and she was coming to realise that was not one of her talents. As the track got steeper, she lost traction. Pressing the accelerator till it touched the floor, she started skidding back down the incline as the tyres dug deeper. Letting her foot rise, the tyres slowed, regained traction. It crossed her mind that after the amount of beer she'd drunk, now might not be the time to be driving.

She was burning up, needed air. With all the windows down she could hear owls (always owls) and a cry like a child. For just a moment she believed there could be an infant out there. Lost. She put the radio on, could only find static, kept searching through the airwaves. Striking a rock, the steering wheel kicked, and she lost hold of it. Veering towards a tree she grabbed the handbrake, but it didn't help, she was slipping and her tyres were not going to hold. She didn't look over her shoulder as she slid down the rise, funneled by the eroded ruts, plummeting into a gum tree. Her head snapped back against the seat and her fuel light flickered. She switched off the headlights, turned off the car, folded her arms across her belly and held herself till she felt assured she wasn't going to keep falling.

She wanted to think about how much of a bad idea her midnight journey was, but the cry in the bush was getting louder, and she wasn't willing to spend a night out there alone. Geography wasn't her strong suit, but she was certain this track led to the ridge, and since the caravan wasn't behind her, it had to be ahead. And it must be warm, intimate, clean; shaking her head, she got out of the car, knew not to pretend it'd be clean. The light from her mobile was minimal, but enough for her to see the next rock to step on, the best way around the ruts that ran down the track. She hummed as she went, keeping up the sound to fend off the cry. When sweat ran between her breasts she realised she must've walked far. She looked back and couldn't see the Volvo.

It was then she heard music. It was distant, sounded as if it was coming from above her. She kept climbing, choosing the best foot hold, sweating, until she saw light that looked like it came from the sky, but she knew it couldn't be a star. It was too bright. Too close.

The rise flattened out onto a small clearing where a fireplace burned low, but there was no music, only a caravan with a patched rear-window and flat tyres, a clothesline strung with rotting shirts darkened by rain, sun, dirt, beer bottles sticking from tree branches, labels peeled clean, a hollowed-out guitar with soil and dead tomato plants. The only light came from the fire. Penny walked to it, and looked into a lidless billy with dark liquid. Bending low, she smelled tea. Black. No honey. No sugar. She wanted to drink it, refresh herself.

The caravan door was half open. She slipped inside.

It was dark, except for a sliver of light that came through the patched window onto a bed at the far end where Angus slept, covered only by a sheet. She could smell his breath held captive in the space—tannin, tobacco—and she had to take hold of the countertop (feel the stick of something on the surface).

If he woke, she'd tell him she was hungry and she'd explain why she came once he fed her something, gave her some of that tea, a blanket. She felt her way to a bench, by a fold-out table, and lay down to think about how to wake him. But her thoughts slowed. Included parts of Flore she wanted to bury. The girls with their high-socks. Lip-balm. And something about her brother, a question he'd asked her once when she was ten, although she couldn't remember if it'd been about sex or sadness, but she knew it was about something she didn't yet understand and felt silly not being able to answer.

CHAPTER IX

It might've been the kookaburra that woke her or the wood chopping; both were equally as loud. Dried saliva caked her cheek. The smell of smoke coming through the open door struck her the wrong way, made her cough. Angus wasn't in his bed, and she knew that he'd seen her and there was no option now of escape. There was nothing to do but to go outside, and speak to him, see how her words came out now that she'd rested the madness off.

He looked weak in the morning light, standing by a block of wood upon which he chopped logs, tossing them towards the fire. Fog hung low, that could've really just been smoke, but Penny could taste moisture in it; knew she was in the mountains, far from the ocean she'd grown up in sight of, far from the taste of salt. Angus didn't have a shirt on, only wore jeans that had lost one leg below the knee to age. The billy was bubbling. Penny wanted tea like she wanted a shower, a proper bed, a hot meal.

"Angus," she said, not moving from the step of the caravan.

He leant on the axe, looked through the fog. "Penny."

The morning wasn't bringing clarity, was taking away her conviction. All she could think of to say was, "Can I have some tea?"

He rubbed his sternum, like he was trying to get a good breath of air. "Yeah, no worries." He dropped the axe, collected a few logs and threw them on the fire. After he

went into the caravan, he came out with a bag of loose leaf tea. “It’s kinda strong,” he said. “I got it off this girl I met in Byron.”

“Is it tea?” Penny asked.

He laughed when he saw she was smiling. “Yeah mate, a clean brew. Trust me.”

She sat on the dirt, by the fire, and held her palms up as close to the flames as she could without burning herself. “What time is it?”

“Five-ish.”

“God,” she sighed. “I never sleep in the country.”

“Gotta stop calling this ‘the country’, like it’s one big space that isn’t the city. It’s got more character than that. Right now you’re on Lee’s Ridge. You should call it that.”

He sprinkled leaves into the billy, stirred it with a stick. There were upturned metal camping cups on a log, that he asked her to pass to him. She saw the permanent tea stains inside, liked how battered, how loved they were.

“Maybe one day you’ll come to the city with me and I’ll be able to show you that I know places by name.” She tried to visualise them turning up in his combi with all the stale food and blankets, trying to find parking on Victoria Street, and walking to her favourite cafe on Chalise Avenue, ordering large lattes so that they wouldn’t finish the drinks too quickly, laughing at the clean jeans and leather shoes everybody wore but them.

“No chance,” he said, pouring her tea. “I wouldn’t be caught dead in Sydney. Used to go to The Cross a bit when I was younger, drop a pill or two, stay up till the

streets started looking ugly with daylight. Couldn't do it now. I need space when I wake up. Shit loads of the stuff."

"You can go out in the city without taking drugs, you know."

He chuckled. "You say that like a school teacher."

"I am a teacher."

"Christ, I should've known."

She tried to sip her tea, burnt the roof of her mouth. "You don't like teachers?"

"Penny, nobody likes teachers. You wear cardigans. You buy diaries and actually use them. You organise fetes and get upset when the fairy-floss guy doesn't show up."

"Are you deliberately using inclusive language or do you mean me specifically?"

He took a big sip of his tea. "Penny, it doesn't make a difference, either way I mean you."

"I'm not sure I asked to have my vocation mocked by you."

His laugh was loud. "Vocation? Fuck, Penny, what are you? A priest?"

"No," she said, simply.

A branch snapped in the fire, burnt through, and sent a flurry of sparks into the treetops.

"Penny," he said. She stopped looking up and met his gaze. "What are you doing here?"

Blushing, she sat back from the flames. "This fire is too hot."

He finished his tea and dropped the mug. It clanged on a rock.

She tried to look him in the face without seeing his body as a shadow, moving against Ambers, but the harder she tried, the more she saw the water shudder around the figures, ripple and reflect moonlight. “Thanks for the tea.”

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“To Sydney?”

She walked towards the overgrown track.

“Oi, Penny. Where’s your car?”

“Just there,” she said, without indicating where ‘there’ was.

“I’ll walk you to it.”

She shook her head. “I’ll see you later.”

Her car was where she’d lost traction the night before, yet another embarrassment. She knew she couldn’t get it out and even if she did there wasn’t enough fuel to make it to town anyway, so she grabbed her phone, handbag, and the jumbo-jar of headache pills in the glovebox, and kept walking. The day got hot quickly, and she realised she was without water, and she’d been without food for too long, yet she couldn’t go back to Angus, couldn’t keep turning up at his place without a reason that she could express. She got as far as the main road, and dropped onto the loose gravel by the truck-stop. The road was empty.

She switched on her phone, got a message. “Darling, it’s Queenie. What did I tell you? I already have a fabulous offer on your apartment. Call me.”

A breeze picked up and gathered the ash remains of the truck-stop, showering her, turning her sweaty skin from white to grey. Staring at Queenie's number she prepared herself to dial, to accept the offer, to give life to her dreaming. She didn't know how much Deep Spring was even listed for, if the sale of the apartment would cover the cost of it, leave her enough to stay alive. But she did always have her credit card that her parents gave her for emergencies (of which she found there were many), and although her parents sounded increasingly furious at her for not returning their calls, they'd be sure to understand once she surprised her father with her life changes. Her mum would stay angry at her, possibly for years, but her dad couldn't stay angry. Never could.

Penny hung up from Queenie as a ute approached, the sale of her apartment accepted. The farmer who collected her and took her back to the pub was rough voiced and kind, and she spoke to Penny about chickens and the mischief they got up to, as Penny rested her head against the seat, itchy like horse hair.

As the woman talked on, Penny looked out the window and tried to feel joy at having made a decision for herself. What did all the self help books call it? A life choice? A lifestyle? She didn't know, because she didn't read them, but she had a suspicion that she'd done something to be proud of, and yet she was feeling a nagging sense of dread, that began in her temples and would soon be a migraine. The more she tried to think about her orchard, the more she focused on Angus' comments about cardigans, diaries and fetes. What a prick! Like he couldn't do with a proper education, starting with an education on hygiene and manners. No man should ever give his opinion on her life (except her father and sometimes her brother)—especially not a man who

lived in a caravan that would one day be eaten by the bushland. Covered over. Forgotten. People shouldn't live like that, scared of being part of society, scared of responsibility, scared that they might become just another adult who does exactly what it is they're supposed to do—work a job that hurts their mind but not their body, walk a dog the kids gave a shitty name like 'Splotches,' and eat a meal that tastes like it's two days old. Life wasn't always exciting, sometimes it was shitty, a complete waste of time, but it wasn't fair that some people chose not to play the game at all, and that they stood on the sidelines laughing at people who had at least given it a shot—yes, found it wanting, but tried anyway.

“Told you not to hang out with that lot,” Jen said as Penny walked into the bar that was already filled with midday drinkers and their wounded half-smiles.

“I need water,” Penny said in a coarse voice.

Jen shoved a full glass her way, but didn't bother putting ice in it. “Love, I've been meaning to tell you, you're well overdue on paying board.”

Penny closed her eyes against the flashing television, its images an assault on her pounding vision, and felt in her handbag for her wallet. “Take this,” she said, slipping her credit card across the counter.

“That's a lovely handbag you've got there,” a woman said, who wore a beret that needed a good wash.

“Love,” Jen yelled rather than talked. “Says it's declined.”

Penny stared.

“The card, love, it's declined.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yes, it is.”

Penny wasn’t going to repeat herself. Her head. It hurt.

“You got another card?” Jen asked. “Bet you’ve got as many cards as you’ve got pearl earrings.”

“Fuck off, Jen,” Penny said, closing her eyes.

“Piss off to bed, and come back when you’re not in a filthy mood.”

Penny took the refill of water Jen offered and went upstairs.

The Rose Room smelt like it hadn’t been aired in years. Penny was too tired to be shocked at the mess of it, had forgotten just how little attention she’d paid it lately. She dialed her parent’s home. The answering machine blasted formality and enthusiasm in her mother’s recorded voice. “Mum, dad, it’s me. Why have you cancelled my credit cards?” She waited for them to cut the machine, and answer her call. They didn’t. She tried their mobiles, left haughty messages about how shitty it was to do something like that without even understanding her *project* (a favourite word of her mother’s). “It’s such an immature move,” she said, her voice getting louder. “What am I? A child?” She hated the way she was coming across, wished she could say something profound to knock some sense into them. “I don’t know what those police told you—probably some rubbish, like they’re private investigators—but they were complete morons. And sleazes. Perhaps if you call me I’ll actually tell you what I’m doing, and you’ll see...” What would they see? “God,” she whispered, and hung up.

She lay down, but couldn't sleep for the church bells that were tolling from the hillside, kept thinking about Angus and the orchard, muddying one with the other. She tried to imagine planting lemon trees, but then she remembered they had thorns—huge thorns—and she suddenly felt frightened of the very blanket she lay under. When she started to cry, she swore at herself (annoyed with her tears which her whole life she had welcomed and had never been ashamed of, yet in that room felt ridiculous). It was time to grow up, for God's sake. The church bells grew louder. "Fuck off," Penny screamed into her pillow and reached for the bible on the bedside table, complimentary of the Gideonites, to throw it, but caught sight of her jumbo-jar of headache pills and went for that instead.

CHAPTER X

The group didn't even ask what she wanted to celebrate, they just said yes, got in their beaten utes after work and drove to the pub. Angus hadn't shown up for work, which Penny was both annoyed about and thankful for: annoyed that she had to work harder to fill her bag because there was nobody to help her if she couldn't, and thankful that he wouldn't be there with those sad eyes and that grin that suggested he'd worked her out better than she ever could. When she and the group entered the pub and crowded around the bar, the thin cluster of weeknight drinkers stared. A few of them shifted off the bar stools and went outside to smoke and mull over their hostility. Jen folded her arms and looked at Penny as if to say she was a piece of shit for bringing them all there.

“Alright, you dirty pack of bastards, what can I get you?” Jen said, flinging a tea towel across her shoulder.

The first beer tasted the best.

Digby kissed her forehead. “So what are we celebrating?”

Although Digby obviously came from money, she wasn't ready to admit she'd sold off her grandmother's home in order to pave the way to her dreams, so she shrugged and he seemed to think that was a good enough response.

A band set up on the stage. They all looked too old to be out late on a weeknight, but when they started to play, it didn't seem to matter that they were old and had mullets, because they sang loud and got everybody dancing, and when glasses got smashed on the

dance floor it served only to rile the crowd up, get them singing louder. Before long the band started taking requests, and the group cheered for each song as if they hadn't asked for it and the band had read their minds. If the band dared to play a song that hadn't been requested, the group would boo, and laugh, and end up singing with gusto, even if they only knew half the words. The band was elated, like they hadn't had such a good turn out in years.

Mac bought Penny a shot. "Happy birthday," she said, giving Penny a hug so tight it felt more painful than good.

Penny tried to correct her, tell her that's not what they were celebrating, but a few people overheard and yelled out to the band to play a birthday tune. And then they were all swaying, and Penny had another shot in hand, and everybody looked so happy that Penny just took her shot, swayed with sweaty armpits up against her shoulders, danced with the first guy who took her, laughed when he stepped all over her feet, spilled beer down her back—liked that he laughed too.

When Angus first entered the pub, Penny didn't notice as she was in a crush of bodies, her hands in the air, her eyes closed, yelling the wrong words to a song. She was ecstatic. Amazed at herself for saying yes to Queenie. Exhilarated to know she would never again enter that apartment that could never be her home; would always be her grandmother's.

"Penny, can we have a quick word?" Angus yelled over the top of everybody's heads.

She opened her eyes, couldn't see him because almost everybody was taller than her. Both wished he was there. And wished he wasn't. As she squeezed through the crowd, Mac slipped a shot in her hand. The burn gave her confidence. She walked right past Angus, onto the verandah. He followed her and they stood apart, facing one another, dazzled by the light of intermittent passing trucks.

"Your car," he said, holding out her keys. "I filled it with fuel."

"Thanks," she said, and tried to stand straight, tall, but she kept swaying to the left. Had to grab hold of a table.

"Penny...." he stepped forward, like he wanted to hold her, keep her from falling, but stopped himself. "You're drunk as fuck."

"Fuck off," she said, folding her arms. "I'm fine."

"Didn't know you were into getting pissed as much as the rest of us."

"I don't tell you how to live your life, so stop telling me how to live mine."

"I'm not."

"Then what're you doing?"

He lit a cigarette.

"Smoking is not a response," she said. "Answer my question."

"Well yeah, maybe I am suggesting you don't get as fucked up as the rest of us. Is that alright?"

"No," she cried. "It's anything but alright. You're the last person in the world who should be offering advice on how to live." In the dull light cast by the dirty overhead globe, Angus looked sadder than usual, his skin more ashen than tanned, his

hair a mess rather than a crown of his lack of care. His mouth wasn't upturned, like it often was. There was no pride left in his look. "So where's your brother's wife?" she asked, feeling a sense of power, one so foreign and yet so easy to slip into when fueled by Bundy and cheap beer. "Have you fucked her again lately?"

He kept his gaze steady. Didn't blink.

Her mind was stumbling over insults, determined to bring him low. "Thank God I'm not like you, living in filth and acting like I'm enlightened. You'd rather be hungry, dirty and poor than give one second of your efforts to the world at large. You'd rather make love to somebody who is not your own. It's pathetic. And—" she tried to find a word. A strong one. One that would hurt. "Repulsive." She wasn't happy with that, but she repeated it twice more, hoping it'd do the job. It was hard not to look smug after making herself so transparent. She'd finally put her thoughts into words—the thoughts she had tried to voice but hadn't known how when she showed up at his place. Now he knew she had no weird motives, just a need to speak plainly about how tragic his life was. "Well? Say something."

"That guy Amber stabbed was my brother," Angus said, trying to lick his lips but his mouth was obviously dry, made his tongue and lip stick.

"Your brother," she repeated, felt terror prickle at her scalp, spread down her neck. Suddenly, her wrists seemed thin, her fingers small and her hands powerless. What about Dom, her brother (who was in every way more perfect than her), what if she had let somebody hurt him? And what if the person who hurt him was the person she loved (Flore—she loved Flore)? And what...what if she did nothing?

“Fuck, don’t get scared of me,” Angus said, reaching out for her wrist. She stepped back and struck the verandah railing that swayed. The only way to escape him was to pass him. A cover of ‘Khe-Sanh’ kicked off inside, and the group went wild with cheers. It took so long to get to the chorus, that Penny always thought came quickly, the opening verse nothing but a pithy intro so as to reach that constant repetition of “the last train out of Sydney’s almost gone.” But it just kept going, verse after verse, about something that meant nothing to Penny, and Angus was pushing his hair out of his eyes, even though it wasn’t falling that way, and he looked like he was going to speak again, so she turned away to ensure he didn’t, stared at the mess of graffiti on a passing freight-train, followed it with her gaze till it dizzied her. It was getting closer, that chorus, it must be getting closer and when it came it’d repeat over and over until she’d want to go in and kick the amplifiers, and then they’d all yell at her for being, “unAustralian” and she’d wonder what it even meant to be at one with this country. And then it came, but fuck, was it “the last plane”? She’d always been certain it was train and now she couldn’t work out the word, couldn’t tell a ‘t’ from a ‘p’, wanted to run into the pub and sink so deep into the womb of the group, feel the heat of their bodies hard against her fragility, rediscover a strength she only ever felt when surrounded by those who loved her....but did they?

“Penny.” He stepped forward, held his hand out to her. What did he want her to do? Take it? Hold it? Jesus Christ, this man was fucking insane. She should’ve gone to the police, she should’ve walked straight to the phone on the night she saw what Amber did, she should’ve told the cops everything, even if it didn’t come out in a nice clean

speech, one that didn't need to be questioned and clarified—was misinterpreted. It was her fault that Angus was standing in her way and she was cornered against a railing that should've been fixed years ago, that was a hazard, would some day not hold somebody who needed to be held.

“Get away from me,” she said, her voice barely loud enough to climb over the passing freight-train.

“Penny,” he said, softly, and yet she could hear him, through all the clatter. “Sit down.”

“Get out of my way,” she said. “I'm going back in to dance.”

“The bands gone home...there's no more music.”

She looked through the door and saw the pub was empty, except for Jen who stood at the bar wiping it down, trying not stare. A feeling of loneliness overwhelmed her, and she wanted to drop against Angus' chest, cry till she felt calm, but this man was a stranger to her, even though she felt that she knew him, and he was dangerous, her mind kept telling her, but when she looked him in the eyes, she just couldn't believe it.

“Goodnight,” she said.

“Goodnight, Penny,” he said.

The freight train was gone.

Her room would be so lonely. She couldn't face it, so she walked to the jukebox, wanted Van Morrison's 'Brown Eyed Girl.' Her dad liked that song, said it reminded him of her, although her eyes weren't brown. It took so long to select the CD, that she couldn't be bothered finding the song, just touched the screen. 'Sweet Thing' sounded

good. Better than 'Brown Eyed Girl'. She sang the words, because she knew them, sang about the clean water, the kind that would quench her thirst, and tomorrow's sky.

Yes...she would never grow so old again. Sugar baby—no. She wanted those words to stop repeating. Didn't sound good anymore. Lying down, she put her cheek on the floor, but couldn't sleep until she completed a thought; had it been about her jeans that cut at her crotch, or her lowest rib that must be bruised...no, it was about Flore....wasn't it? Or God, was it actually about Angus, and she wanted to cry because of the confusion this man had brought into her life that should be simple—clean—but was not, no matter how much she fought it?

The lights went out.