Evergreen Avenue

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Prologue

Adelaide, South Australia – Circa 1960s

The woman sat apart from the others, staring vacantly down into her lap. Although an impressively built structure, the Psychiatric Hospital in which she found herself spending her days, had a morbid and depressing quality that she preferred to ignore.

Picking at imaginary lint from the sash of her hospital issue dressing gown, she took a shaky breath and sighed deeply. Letting her gaze drift down further toward the dirty games room floor, her attention was snagged by the intricate tile patterns. The sight of them chipped away at a memory that her mind did not want to re-visit. Her brain, obediently shutting the door on such recollections, chose to count the patterns instead. Three shades of brown, three different rectangle lengths, and three tiles per square inch. Losing track of her counting as the latest patient once again let out a short, sharp and high-pitched scream, the woman covered her ears and decided to leave the now too crowded room.

Opening the double doors, she headed back slowly toward her own room. I'm not supposed to be here. He agreed that I'm not supposed to be here she thought to herself as her fingers ran along the walls of the institution. Entering her small space, she shuffled slowly toward the narrow bed. As she lowered her aching head down onto the familiar, albeit lumpy pillow, she flexed her mental muscle, searching for those that she had lost. Feeling confused by her efforts, she once again wondered who it was that she was searching for.

To her great relief, the nurse appeared at that moment with the tiny little pills. They always helped her to feel less confused. I'm okay, it's okay, she thought desperately. Rocking back and forth and humming a sweet tune of her own making, the frail woman began to feel less anxious. The nurse left the room, her mind already on the fact that her shift was technically due to end in thirty minutes.

"Did our resident psychic have any updates for you tonight?" Mary asked mischievously as she carelessly dumped her handbag onto the floor.

"Oh, would you quit it with the psychic talk Mary?" Raylene pulled her locker door open and shrugged out of her uniform.

"Hey, you have another half an hour left to go you know." Mary frowned in mock disapproval.

"Yeah but you're here early to pay me back for pulling a double shift for you last week remember? Besides, I have that date with Aaron tonight. I'd like to be on time for once."

"I know Ray, I was just joshing with you. Hey, that's proof right there you know. Didn't she grab your arm and say the name Aaron one night?"

Raylene felt a chill and then shook her head in frustration. Mary may believe in such ridiculous notions as so called psychic ability, but not her. So what if the weirdo in Room 201 sometimes seemed to know stuff. Obviously, she was just taking in more than she let on. Hadn't she been bragging about her new boyfriend to the other nurses only a couple of nights before the incident? It wasn't a stretch to assume that the woman had just simply overheard. Mary was reading into things, that was all. Applying one more coat of lipstick as she checked her face in the mirror, Raylene patted her workmate on the shoulder and sashayed out of the room.

Mary watched her friend leave and restlessly flicked the pages of her Women’s Weekly magazine. This place gave her the creeps, especially during the night shift.
Sighing heavily, she stood up to begin her rounds and thought of the small woman with the spooky eyes. Maybe Raylene is right after all. She's just another harmless patient who has lost her marbles. Her soft-soled shoes made tiny echoes as she passed by room 201.

A scream, loud enough to jar Mary's teeth, suddenly filled the quiet hallway. Clutching her heart and placing her hand on the wall for balance, Mary took three calming breaths before entering the room. Surely there were easier ways of earning a shilling.
Chapter One

Adelaide Hills, South Australia – Circa 1970s

Penny was awake but had yet to open her eyes. It had always been her habit to mentally go over the contents of her dreams whilst still keeping her eyes closed. Deciphering the meaning of them was another thing entirely but she enjoyed the chance to ponder before the rest of the household overtook her thoughts. Penny heard the magpies start to chatter and smiled quietly to herself. Rising early with the birds had been a habit since childhood and she had forgotten how different things sounded up here in comparison to the city. Penny had spent all her childhood in this leafy and picturesque town. Situated roughly 15 kilometres east of the City Centre, this place has always been a place to escape the blistering heat of the Australian summers and provided a country atmosphere that many people craved. Adelaide, although considered small compared to other Australian States was still vastly different from living up in the hills. She had missed the peaceful soundtrack her hometown had to offer.

Grabbing her dressing gown as she stumbled out of bed, she gingerly made her way through the remaining unpacked boxes. It had been two weeks since they had moved in but both Penny and Russell had decided to take their time unpacking. What was the point in rushing, when this was to be the home they would grow old in together?

She couldn't help but feel giddy at the thought. In Penny's mind, the units, apartments and various other dwellings she had resided in over the years had been too transient to be considered anything more than adequate shelter. This house, this sprawling, character filled and homely house was to be a haven she could truly begin to create memories in.

The property had many features to fall in love with. Russell and the kids were sold the moment they saw the half-acre backyard. With the in-ground swimming pool and countless trees just begging to be turned into a treehouse, they'd made up their minds to move in even before they had stepped inside. As it happened, the home was as wonderful inside as out. With two stories, two bathrooms, five bedrooms and the enormous sunroom, it meant that there was enough room to house their own family, as well as having the freedom to have guests over if they so choose.

For Penny however, she simply fell head over heels in love with the kitchen. A small part of her mind felt guilty at being so excited over what her hip feminist friends were trying to escape from. She appreciated the movement that recognised women as more than just homemakers but being a wife and mother had ended up feeling instinctively natural to Penny. To her way of thinking, it was choice that mattered. Some women chose to focus on their careers and other women, like her, had always wanted to take care of a family.

The previous owner, eager to sell, had built an extension onto the back of the house with the intention of attracting more buyers. It had been a strong selling point, which their real estate agent had been keen to highlight. As a result, the kitchen now overlooked the magnificent sunroom. With the floor to ceiling windows, this allowed an unobstructed view of the sprawling back yard. If Penny were to turn in a complete circle whilst standing in her kitchen, she would see the dining area, lounge room, sunroom and backyard in one fell swoop. The knowledge that she could cook whilst still being a part of everything that was going on around her, seemed perfect to Penny. Just yesterday she had decorated the kitchen tiles with stickers of fat green apples.
The exposed brick above the stove top made it feel warm and toasty. With a circle of copper pots hanging above the kitchen island, which was coloured a resplendent and magnificent orange, she simply could not believe it all belonged to her.

"Mum...Muuuuummy!" Penny's happy reverie was interrupted by the panicked cry of Tildy, her youngest. At just six years of age, she had expected Tildy, more than Simone and Joel, to take the move in her stride. Instead, she had had more trouble settling in than either of her older siblings.

Running up to the second floor, which housed all the bedrooms, Penny rushed into her youngest daughter's room.

"Shhhh....shhhh Tilds... Mummy's here," Penny soothed, sitting on the edge of the bed. With the Holly Hobby wallpaper and the picture window overlooking the back garden, Penny wondered how anyone could be anything but happy in this room.

Grabbing her Mother into a fierce hug, Tildy felt bad that she had woken up calling for her Mummy. *Now Simone will call me a baby again* she thought mournfully.

"I'm sorry Mum. I didn't mean to cry out again. I just had a bad dream."

"Aww Honey. What was it about this time?" Penny enquired, smoothing back her daughter's golden hair. Once again, Penny couldn't help but marvel at how much her daughter resembled Russell. With her own dark, wavy hair, she wouldn't have believed that this gorgeous creature was her own if she hadn't given birth to her herself.

"It was the man again...the man with the really short hair. He's so sad Mummy! I told him to think of something happy. You know? Like switching your mind to a happier thought, like you change channels on a TV?"

*Not this again* Penny thought wearily. It had been two whole days since Tildy's sleep had been marred by this nightmare. Russell had put it down to the move. That maybe it had been traumatic for their daughter to leave the only home she could ever remember. Even if it had been a tiny, run down house in a dodgy suburb. It had been all that they could afford after Tildy had turned two. Having had Joel sixteen years ago at the tender age of nineteen, Penny and Russell had initially lived in the granny flat that was behind the house Penny had grown up in. Simone came along three years after Joel. Having two children running around made it challenging enough for the young couple but when Penny surprisingly fell pregnant a third time (after being sure that they would have no more) they knew it would become a necessity to find a place of their own. They initially moved into a cheap three-bedroom unit, in a suburb closer to the city. They finally upgraded a little when Tildy was two, to a house with four bedrooms. Neither were exactly what you would call luxury living but both had fulfilled the need for space at the time.

When Russell's hard work at the advertising firm was recognised with a promotion to Art Director, Penny managed to convince him that the house they were living in wasn't cutting it anymore. Neither was the location. As she had gotten older, Penny had realised just how much her aging parents meant to her. After much discussion on family, lifestyle and the benefits of living near relatives in a smaller setting, Penny had managed to convince Russell that moving back up to the hills was a good idea. Luckily, so far the decision had paid off. Well, except for these nightmares.

"I have an idea!" Penny announced.

"You do?" Tildy asked expectantly.

"Go wake up your brother and sister and meet me in the kitchen," she demanded, bouncing up from the bed.
The nightmare now totally forgotten, Tildy jumped into the middle of the room, anxious at the chance to wake up her siblings. *Mummy said so* she thought to herself, already practicing her retort to the inevitable complaints both her siblings would no doubt surely make. Especially Simone.

Russell pulled the sheet over his head, trying like hell to hold onto the remaining tendrils of slumber. As his thoughts became more coherent and less jumbled, he knew he might as well give up the fight. He was awake. Not yet ready to physically get out of bed however, he switched positions to glance at the clock radio. The leather-quilted bedhead with the state of the art built in stereo had been Russell's idea. The glowing red numbers filled him with resentment. Seven o'clock! It was his only day off after working long hours Monday through Thursday. Knowing full well his grumpiness was unreasonable, he held onto it anyway. If he were honest with himself, he'd admit that he had no real right to be miffed about being woken. He was a family man - had been for sixteen years now. *Hell, you'd think I'd be used to it* he thought, rubbing his hands roughly over his face.

Joel, his oldest, had not been planned. He'd planned on finally making it with Penny. He'd planned to have her so totally seduced she'd be the proverbial putty in his eager hands. He had not however, planned ahead in the contraception department. *I thought most chicks were on the pill nowadays* he had thought, when first hit with the news that Penny was expecting.

Penny...how he'd managed to even get a second glance from this amazing woman was still a fact that surprised him. He had been a typical young Australian guy. Obsessed with cars, beer, music and well, let's face it, himself. He'd been a walking nightmare for any girl looking for a serious relationship. As it turned out, a relationship was the farthest thing from Penny's mind too. All she had been looking for was some harmless fun. Her Father, with his stoic and stubborn ways, had made Penny feel trapped. It wasn't even in her nature to go looking for trouble. She'd been happy to stay at home trying out new recipes with her Mother. When her Father kept on insisting that she was not to leave the house on a Saturday night (when she hadn't even asked to) something inside her had started to rebel. She may have had a naturally obedient nature but she had inherited his stubbornness. If you told Penny she was strictly prohibited to do something, she often felt an urge to defy you, no matter what the consequences may be - a rather surprising trait given her otherwise laidback and calm nature.

So, on one fateful Saturday night, Penny, with the help of a few girlfriends, snuck out of her bedroom window. The late-night pizza place, nestled amongst the grocery store and the small town's only Post Office, had a jukebox that the owner kept filled with up-to-date music and pizza that was, well, terrible if you wanted the truth. To those in the know however, it didn't matter what the food tasted like, it was the people who frequented the establishment that bought the punters out. Penny had been filled with a sense of both freedom and a little fear that often came about after defying her Father. Boys hadn't necessarily been of much interest to her thus far. Sure, she was aware of the opposite sex. She loved a romance novel and a romantic movie as much as the next girl. If she was honest with herself however, she didn't fully relate when her girlfriends bragged about their sexual experiences or spoke of what they believed to be true love. So when she first spotted Russell McVee that night, she didn't initially understand why she suddenly had trouble catching her breath. She vaguely recalled his face as belonging to one of the boys that had been in the year above her at High School. His dark blonde hair was longer than most of the other guys. The longest lashes she had ever seen framed his wide set blue eyes. They were
full of merriment as he listened to a friend relay a story. Totally out of character, Penny approached him from the left and tapped his shoulder. Not wanting to be rude to the guy chatting to him on his right, Russell placed his hand on Penny's upper arm and turned his head swiftly to indicate he'd be just a minute. Not being quite sure of what he had just seen however, Russell immediately did a double take. The aforementioned friend, now totally forgotten, saw what was going on and turned away to talk with someone else.

"Where on earth did you come from?" he asked with wonder. He couldn't recall having ever seen this girl before. She had big green eyes that seemed to see more than anyone else's. What gave him that impression, he couldn't quite say.

"Nowhere special," was her reply.

Not quite remembering what he had asked her, Russell just smiled and smoothed her hair out of her eyes.

"I'm Russell," he told her softly.

"Penny," she whispered back.

Neither of them knew why they suddenly had the urge to speak so quietly. It was as though something of utmost importance was about to happen and if they spoke too loudly, that certain something would cease to occur.

"You don't normally hang out here do you?" Russell observed.

"Did you just ask me if I come here often?" Penny grinned widely.

"You're right," Russ chuckled. "I guess there is a reason why that one became a line though. It's a fair enough question."

"True," Penny conceded. "My friends have often told me about this place but tonight is the first time I've decided to come along."

"Why? Where do you normally go?"

"Nowhere. I'm kind of embarrassed to admit it but I'm a homebody at heart. I get shy amongst crowds."

Russell looked at her face and was touched by the blush that had suddenly appeared on both cheeks. Grabbing her hand and leading her into the parlour, Russell pointed to the jukebox and asked her to choose a song.

"My treat. I want to know what kind of music makes you happy."

Penny felt nervous. Should she choose something impressive or something she honestly loved. Deciding to trust her instincts, she went ahead and punched in her choice.

As Karen Carpenter's voice rang out across the room, Penny placed both hands over her eyes and felt instantly embarrassed. Russell surprised her however by removing her fingers from her face and singing along with the first verse.

"You know the words?" she laughed incredulously.

"What? You don't? This lady can sing!"

Penny felt instantly at ease and let Russell engulf her into a giant bear hug. They were inseparable from that night on. Penny's Father didn't approve. Penny's Mother was secretly jubilant. When their only daughter announced that she was pregnant, her parents went through the motions of irrespectively being infuriated and ecstatic yet again.

So with Russell's tendency to be irresponsible and Penny's habit of losing her senses whilst defying her Father, an instant family was born. As were two other babies within the space of nine years. It could have been disastrous. In fact, with all the odds stacked against them, you'd be forgiven for thinking they'd both now be a couple of middle aged people, shell shocked with how their lives had turned out.

As luck would have it however, they made a surprisingly compatible pair. Certain
opposites do indeed attract. The best examples go one better by having opposite characteristics that actually work well together. When Russell slept in, Penny relished her quiet thinking time alone. When Russell needed to don his big headphones to lose himself in his latest record purchase, Penny grabbed the opportunity to curl up with a good book. At dinner parties when Penny became shy, Russell would tell jokes and make conversation whilst all the while squeezing her hand and bringing her out of her shell. Most importantly, he made her laugh. Big, massive, throw back your head laughter. To Penny's surprise and delight, she had the same effect on him. It was what she cherished most about their marriage.

Still thinking about Penny, Russell jumped into the shower, which was conveniently located just five steps away from the bed. Another perk of living in this house was the luxury of an ensuite. Not having ever been the type that can think without a shower, he let the steam unclog his pores while the pelting water un-fogged his brain. Feeling better within minutes, Russell started to sing.

Penny smiled at the sound of her husband belting out his favourite Neil Diamond song. Passing Tildy the pancake mixture, she fished the juicer out of the cupboard.

"Morning Mum," Simone mumbled sleepily as she slid onto a stool beside Tildy. At thirteen years of age, Simone was much like her Father in the mornings. It took her a while to wake up.

"Finally! I woke you guys up ages ago. Mum let me stir the mixture all by myself," Tildy proudly declared to her sister.

"Yeah?" Simone replied, hardly listening.

Penny placed a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice in front of Simone.

"Drink," she instructed.

Joel's steps could be heard coming down the stairs. With a perpetually cheerful disposition, Penny's oldest child came sliding into the kitchen using his socks like a pair of skis.

"Laaadies!" he threw out heartily as his morning greeting.

"Ladies?! You're speaking to your sisters and your Mother! Saying 'ladies' makes you sound like a dork," Simone declared moodily.

Ignoring his sister's tone, he got her into a headlock and kissed the top of her head.

"Arrggh! Mum!" Simone bellowed loudly.

The others just laughed, used to Simone's reactions.

"Morning," Russell greeted everyone warmly as he entered the sun-drenched kitchen.

"We made pancakes!!" Tildy declared to her Father, holding up her steaming plate for his approval.

"So you did Tilds. Are these all for me?"

"Nooo...they're mine! Mummy's still making yours!" Tildy giggled, enjoying her Father's teasing.

Russell kissed his daughter's forehead and joined the other children at the breakfast bar. Mussing up Simone's mane of dark hair and noting just how much more Joel looked like Penny every day, Russell felt true contentment.

He had told Penny that it was the yard that had made him decide that this place was the one. But truth be told, it was for reasons unknown that had him feeling sure that he could not live anywhere else. The moment he had turned onto Evergreen Avenue, it was like the car knew exactly which house to stop at. He recalled Penny fussing about with the land agent's notes, looking for the house number. If she'd noticed he'd stopped at the correct house without knowing which one was for sale, she
didn't let on. With no 'For Sale' sign out the front and with a lot of handsome houses lining the tree lined street, Russell still wouldn't be able to tell you why this home stood out from the rest. With its wrap around porch and its all white exterior, it certainly was a beautiful house. If Russell had been more in tune with his thoughts, he would have noted that it was the enormous tree, which stood proudly, slap bang in the middle of the front yard and not the sprawling estate that had grabbed his attention. With his family chatting excitedly beside him he had not had time to focus on the strange feeling of déjà vu that had started to envelop his senses. Instead he just went with blind instinct and impulsively got the paperwork started as soon as they got back from inspecting the property. Regardless of the unorthodox way he had chosen their new home, he felt sure that they would be happy there.
Chapter Two

Joel didn't understand why his sister Simone now hated where they lived. She claimed to miss the excitement of the city. Why anybody would prefer concrete and traffic over rivers and trees was incomprehensible to Joel. Besides, she had only just turned thirteen years old. What was she going to miss - the nightlife and discos? He'd loved Nan and Pa's place when he was a little boy. He'd spent his early childhood up here in the hills. His memories of exploring creeks and lakes, visiting the small town bookstore and letting himself run in and out of the other resident’s front doors and riding his bike up and down the local streets were so deeply instilled in his mind that he felt like he had finally returned home. That stint of roughing it in an ugly cream brick unit and the god-awful house on Maxwell Street were but blips in Joel's mind.

Sure, the latter had had the bonus of four bedrooms instead of three, which meant his sisters and he had enjoyed having their own rooms, but he'd missed the quiet of the Adelaide Hills. Instead of crickets chirping at night, they'd had to listen to a chorus of beeping horns and police sirens. He'd been too young to understand why his Father had needed the commute to and from his work to be shorter. He didn't really understand Mummy's need for 'space' from her parents. He'd suffered a horrible bout of homesickness when they'd first been forced to find a place of their own. At eleven years old, he'd never realised that the small cottage situated behind his Grandparents place wasn't a real home. It was only when they were actually moving that he'd heard it referred to as a Granny Flat.

"But Nanna lives in the main house. She's a Granny, so why do you call our house a Granny Flat?" he had spluttered out, utterly confused.

"Because my young fellow," his Dad had said affectionately "A Granny flat is supposed to be somewhere the elderly live when they get too old to live far from their loved ones."

"But we're not old. Pa and Nan are. Who is going to look after them if we leave?" he'd cried out with genuine concern.

Looking at his young son with pride, Russell had felt his heart swell with love. If there was one thing Penny had taught Russell, it was the incredible human capacity for love. Sure he'd loved his parents growing up, but he'd loved his car just as much. It wasn't until he'd met Penny that he understood what it was to genuinely care about another person's happiness. The fact that he now felt that kind of love multiplied by one million for his children, was something he knew he would always be grateful to Penny for. He loved his little people more than life itself and they had truly changed him.

"You love people like you're an old soul Joel," he'd told his son that day.

He'd ruffled his son's dark hair as they'd continued loading up the truck.

Given his fond memories, the day his Mother had announced they were moving out of the city had been a happy one for Joel.

"We're going back to the Granny Flat?" he'd asked excitedly.

"No," Penny had replied. "We'll be getting a place of our own. Now that Dad has been given his promotion, he has people working under him. This means he can delegate more and his hours are more flexible. Besides that, I miss my hometown. It'll be nice to be close to your Nan and Pa again too."

"Woo hoo!" Joel had whooped with glee. Wrapping his Mother in a giant bear hug, he began to start thinking about what this would all mean. A new school and new friends. Would my old primary school buddies still be there? he'd thought with
So far, it had been everything he had hoped for. The house was amazing. He had his own private swimming pool! School had finished for the year, and it was the beginning of the Christmas holidays. He was a bit nervous about high school next year. He'd enrolled at the local High School and was slated to begin Year Eleven at the beginning of February. Feeling anxious about being the new guy in school, Joel had asked if he could attend classes during the final few days of term. After a meeting with the headmaster, everyone agreed it couldn't hurt for Joel to reacquaint himself with the school community. During his first visit last week, he had been looking forward to seeing if any one from his younger years was still around. He'd ended up reconnecting with Robby, a boy he had not seen in five years. As he was led from the office into a classroom at the back of the high school, he'd looked over a sea of faces, not recognising any of them. His eyes had swept over a face that literally made him lose balance. He hid it well by deftly sliding into a seat two rows in front of where the girl had been sitting. Fighting a strong temptation to look over his shoulder to have another look, he kept his eyes glued to the front of the classroom. That was when Robby had entered. He'd recognised him straight away. He'd grown quite a few feet taller of course and his strawberry blond hair was longer but Joel would have recognised his old buddy anywhere. Obviously, Robby hadn't forgotten him either.

"Holy hell! Joel McVee?" Robby cried out enthusiastically.
"That's me," Joel grinned back "How you been Robby?"

Sliding into the seat beside Joel, Robby slapped him on the back and shook his head in disbelief.

"You remember me then? Man....I can't believe you're here! Your olds move back in with your Grandparents?" Robby enquired.
"Nah....got a place of our own. Evergreen Avenue. You know it?"
"Hell yeah I know it! We're practically neighbours. We share a view of the park. Walk over the bridge and you'll see my place. You should come over tonight. Catch up with everybody."

Robby was the eldest child in his family, born nine months after Joel. There was also Patty and Lulu, his younger twin sisters and his Mum and Dad.

"You still have Rocky?" Joel asked, in regards to the Harrison's dog.
"Nah man. Poor old Rock went to doggy heaven two years ago. He was a good mate. Miss that little guy."

Joel nodded his head in sympathy. He'd loved Rocky too. Before they could catch up further, the teacher walked in. He handed out a flyer listing various sporting activities that would be held over the Summer months. The more athletic types broke off into groups to discuss what teams they were keen to join. Others dug deep into their bags to retrieve either food or reading material to pass the time. The teacher, not too fussed about keeping order so close to the end of the school year, complained about the heat and opened up the windows to let a bit of a breeze filter into the stifling room. Not much was taught or learnt as everybody's mind was filled with the up and coming Christmas break. The day went by swiftly and Joel had left the high school feeling charged and optimistic. Promising Robby he'd drop by that afternoon, he made his way down to the High School car park to look for his Mum's car. It was only as they were pulling out that he remembered the girl. He recalled her hair; dead straight, light brown and halfway down her back. Her big brown eyes had met his briefly before he'd turned away. He definitely did not recognise her from his Primary School days. Who was she? Would he have to wait until next year to see her again?

He could wait he guessed. Eleven full weeks of summer bliss with Christmas.
and New Years in between. He felt sorry for other countries where the people couldn't go swimming on Christmas day. Simone would call him crazy. All she'd ever wanted was a white Christmas, just like she'd seen on TV. Not Joel. He loved the sun on his face and the grass beneath his feet. He especially loved the big oak tree out of the front of their house. He could see it out of his window as he lay in bed before sleep, waving to him in the night air. He felt truly at home here and thanked the universe for finally bringing him back to where he was meant to be.

Simone was restless. She was bemoaning the fact that she was finally a teenager and yet living in a town where nothing exciting happened. Lying on a hammock in her new backyard, Simone daydreamed about where she'd rather be. Somewhere exciting, like on television. Since the move, she'd developed a new habit. Late at night, when she was supposed to be asleep, she would tip toe down the stairs, skulk through the front foyer and ever so quietly position herself behind the couch in the lounge room. Her Father liked to watch TV when the children had gone to bed, whilst her Mother would read or fuss about in the kitchen. They never had any need to go behind the large sectional lounge suite to look inside the buffet at that time of night. So there Simone would sit and watch such programmes as The Love Boat, Quincy and her personal favourite, Charlie's Angels. Her Mother thought such shows were rubbish and too American for her tastes but Simone drank it all in.

She had to be honest with herself and admit that she preferred this house to the one they had lived in last summer. Not that she'd ever confess this to Joel. Sure, she had adored being close to the city and missed the excitement of watching all those people hustle about, looking so busy and purposeful. Having her own swimming pool however and seeing her family so happy, was worth being in what Simone referred to as 'the sticks'. Joel hadn't been as lively before they'd moved back here. Tildy hadn't known any better she guessed but her Mum and Dad had been so excited and cheerful these past few weeks, she could see that moving had been the right thing to do. Besides, if this was where she would be stuck until she was old enough to go forth and have her own adventures, then she guessed it wasn't so bad. Pushing her foot against the tree to make the hammock sway again, Simone's ears perked up as she heard voices from over the fence.

"I swear to God Estelle, if you embarrass me like that again, I'll up and leave your sorry ass. You hear me?"

"Yes Todd...I'm sorry..." a mouse-like voice responded so quietly Simone could hardly hear it. Slowing her hammock down, Simone slid off the side and made her way over to the fence separating the two yards. Through a broken slat she could just make out a female form in a pink bathing suit. Two big hands with hairy knuckles were gripping the woman's elbows as Simone held her breath, waiting for one of them to speak again.

"You're nothing you know. If I wasn't here to look at you, no one would. The way you throw yourself at people is humiliating!!" Mr Hairy Knuckles roared.

"I know...I know...I just feel..."

"You think I care how you feel?" he spat out cruelly.

Russell spotted his daughter outside and called out to her.

"Simone! Have you seen the attachment that goes on the...oh hang on...never mind...got it!" he yelled from the back shed, finally spotting what he was looking for.

"Get in the house," the man spoke menacingly, lowering his voice.

Waiting quietly until they had both disappeared inside their home, Simone ran back to her own house, crouching low.
"What on earth is wrong with your back Sim? Stand up straight!" her Father admonished as she passed him by.

Wow Simone thought with a rush as she re-entered the house. That was like watching a real life soap opera! Not really caring if her pitiful neighbour was okay with that oaf of a man next door, Simone instead focused on the fact that some sort of drama was unfolding. Her own Mother and Father rarely quarrelled. When they did, it was usually over something so silly that both of them made up before any real tension pervaded the household. True, it was nice to have parents who so obviously still loved one another but Simone just knew. When she turned into a woman, she wanted drama, passion and mystery. Life would be just too boring without it.

Tildy pushed her Barbie's campervan down the side of the house. The air conditioning unit that hung out the back of a window was at an annoying height for this particular activity. Vowing to avoid this section on her next trip around the house, Tildy ducked down low to avoid cracking her head on the sharp corner.

Not feeling confident about her wish to receive everything on her Christmas List, Tildy had decided to use an empty ice-cream container to create a make shift swimming pool for Barbie and her friends. Finding the perfect spot under the apple tree, Tildy parked her van beside the trunk and proceeded to dig in the dirt with her bare hands. Busily concentrating on her task, Tildy's mind began to wander. Her feelings toward the new house were mixed. Her surroundings sure were prettier than Maxwell Street. She honesty hadn't realised how boring the old house was until they had started house hunting. Her parents told her that this wasn't her first trip into the Adelaide Hills. Apparently past Christmas days and birthdays were spent at Nan and Pa's place but Tildy assumed she must have been too young to remember, as she was astounded at how green and colourful everything here was. The main street was tree lined with cute little rows of shops that looked like something out of one of her storybooks. She had felt her anxiety lessening the more they drove around the picturesque town.

Her good feelings only grew stronger when they turned onto what was to become her new street. She'd never seen a road that stopped at the end before. Mummy had called it a funny name. A coldy sack, Tildy recalled. A fence was situated at the bottom of the street separating it from another road, which continued onwards. Beside this was a gate, which let the local residents enter onto a lakeside reserve. Everything looked so cozy and magical to Tildy.

She'd fallen asleep that night feeling peaceful and happy. It was only at 3am when she awoke from a dream feeling sadder than she had ever felt in her life that Tildy's good feelings started to waver. It hadn't been a nightmare exactly. She'd had those before. Monsters, spiders and aliens were the stuff of nightmares and she'd always felt much better after awakening as it was a relief to know that it wasn't in fact real but a yucky old nightmare. This had felt different. She had not felt peace upon awakening but dread. This man, this poor miserable man felt a sadness that was stronger than anything Tildy had ever experienced. Nothing much happened in the dream. It always started the same. The big and beautiful tree was standing majestically in her front yard, just as it did now. The man sat beneath it reading a book. When Tildy approached the man, which she always did, he would look up with tears running down his face. He wasn't scary looking and he wasn't a threat to Tildy - she did not feel any sense of danger at all. What Tildy felt was sympathy. She just wanted the sad feelings to go away. His hurt was her hurt. She woke up each time feeling a sense of doom that was just too much for a little girl to fathom.
Even the word sad did not seem to be the right word to describe the emotion that she and the man shared but Tildy felt she didn't yet know the word for this type of feeling. All she knew was that it wasn't the type of feeling that an ice cream or a hug could fix. After waking up and yelling out for her Mother this past week, Tildy felt she had to stop doing that. She knew her Mum was worried and Simone thought she was a baby. *Which I'm not* Tildy thought defiantly. Looking at her toys, she wondered briefly if playing with Barbie dolls was babyish. Quickly discarding the notion and deciding it was not, Tildy turned on the backyard tap and filled up the ice-cream container.

"Come on in Barbie. The water is fine!" Tildy made Ken call.
Chapter Three

Estelle sat in front of her dressing table, staring at her face. She had always been dissatisfied with her looks. Being voluptuous meant that it took great effort to remain slim and attractive. The one thing she had always relied on to get attention was her face. Her teeth were a little crooked and her hair was average but she had always received compliments on her eyes. Big, wide set and crystal blue, she knew exactly how to make them up to garner the greatest impact. Since her thirty fourth birthday however, she had noticed things changing. Lines had begun to appear around her eyes. Putting on make-up these days felt like trying to draw on a rumpled up sheet of paper instead of a smooth and flat canvas. Throwing her eyeliner across the room, Estelle jumped up in a huff and opened her bedroom window, which overlooked her neighbour's front garden.

Spotting one of the new neighbours, Estelle crouched down low so as not to be seen. Well well well she thought excitedly. Who might we have here? Russell McVee, unaware he was being spied on, wiped his brow with the back of his hand. He sure adored his new back yard but mowing it was proving to be one hell of a work out. Now tackling the front lawn and feeling happy that his chore was almost complete, Russell decided to have a mini break. Pulling off his t-shirt to cool down, he looked around for the garden hose. It was tempting to go out the back to take a quick dip in the pool, but not having been looked after well by the previous owners, it was too much like the colour of pea soup for Russell to give in to the urge. It was yet another job on the list of things to do. He'd be damn well knocking that one off the list next however. Having his own swimming hole would be a novelty that he was sure would never wear off. Turning the hose on full blast, he stood under the stream of cool water, waiting for it to cool him down enough to finish what he'd started. Bringing the nozzle down to his mouth, Estelle assumed he was about to have a drink. Instead, Russell began to sing into it like it was a microphone. Estelle was surprised to hear that he didn't sound too bad. She had no idea what the song was, something about riding on a magic carpet. Swaying her hips to the rhythm he was creating, Estelle suddenly heard her name being called from downstairs.

Instantly feeling tense, she closed her curtains and made her way down to greet her husband.

Todd used to treat her like she was a precious jewel. He hadn't always been mean. In fact, when they had first met fifteen years ago, he had been very gentle and kind. He'd promised her the moon and stars and had ended up delivering. Growing up in a less than impressive neighbourhood, Estelle's Mother had taught her well. Aint no reason someone with your looks can't have it all Stelly. God may have not blessed ya with brains, but he sure as shit gave ya a whole bucket full of sex appeal! The young Estelle had sure been happy that she had a whole bucket full of something. At ten years old however, she didn't really know what sex appeal was. Her Mum sure thought it was something important though, so she made it her mission to find out what it was. By age 13 Estelle had figured it out. The boys would line up behind the shelter shed at school to witness in the flesh the full extent of Estelle's sex appeal and Estelle didn't mind one bit. She began to equate being sexy with being powerful. More physically developed than the rest of her peers, she was able to make the boys do practically anything to earn a glimpse of her ample cleavage. By age 19, she had figured out that grown men would pay her actual money to see even more. If it hadn't been for Todd, she'd be an over the hill hooker by now with no one to love her.

I'm really very lucky she told herself as she entered the grand kitchen that Todd
had had custom built just for her.

"There she is," Todd snarled, twisting her around and grabbing her from behind.
"Hey honey," Estelle responded automatically.

Suddenly being struck by a juicy idea, Estelle battered her eyelashes, turned her head and looked up at Todd coyly.

"Have you noticed we have new neighbours?" she asked with faux innocence.
"Two hippies and their rug rats?" Todd growled. "Yeah I've seen 'em. I bet you a grand that house was bought with Daddy's money."

Pushing her skirt up over her hips he slapped her hard on the behind and then shoved her to the floor.

"I thought maybe we should go over and welcome them," Estelle stammered, ignoring the fact that she was now sprawled on the cold linoleum.

"Welcome them? What the hell for?" Todd roared furiously. "I know damn well what sort of welcome you want to give!"

Closing her eyes, Estelle steeled herself for the inevitable blow and cursed herself for saying the wrong thing. *Idiot*, she chastised herself. Let him have his way, serve him his lunch and then clean up. Is that so hard? Estelle's self talk was as brutal as Todd's fists. She did her best to protect her face and prayed that the majority of the blows connected with her lower body. The resulting bruises were much easier to cover up that way.

Todd lit his cigarette and accepted the glass of wine from Estelle. He liked having the luxury of being able to come home for lunch. Ten years ago, he'd gone one better than his Father and took his Dad's used car lot after he'd passed and turned it into a highly profitable business. Being able to come home to his wife whenever he pleased made it even easier to keep an eye on her. *Stupid woman* he thought, feeling amused. He loved how his wife behaved after a good old-fashioned beating. His Mother had been the same. 'Gotta keep 'em in line son' his Father had been fond of saying. He was right too. Todd sometimes felt he loved Estelle too much. Damn, she was good to look at. He'd always appreciated a striking hot blonde. During his high school years, he'd tried it on with the best looking girls in his year. It wasn't his fault they were snobby and stuck up. Some girls just didn't know what it was to appreciate a strong man.

Back then, when he found that he needed an outlet for his sexual frustrations, he'd begun to frequent an establishment known for it's discreet form of entertainment. He'd been twenty five and horny as hell. Walking in one night after having been there numerous times, he spotted a vision in white carrying a tray of drinks to the table beside him. She looked like a real life Disney character. It's true, the lights coming on at 4am to announce closing time were less than kind. She had a crooked eye tooth and a cheaply made hairpiece to create her beehive hair-do but Todd had been hooked. Her ample cleavage revealed creamy soft skin; her legs went on forever and her eyes! It was those massive baby blues that had intrigued him the most. She was as sexy as hell but her eyes had screamed total innocence.

After a swift courtship, Estelle would have done anything he'd asked. So he asked for her hand in marriage. He wanted to own her. He wanted her to love, honour and most importantly, obey him for the rest of their lives. She was shocked at first when Todd had been forced to teach her the rules. She'd learnt fast however and now he considered himself the luckiest man on the block. Not that the new bird next door was anything to sneeze at. Sure, he preferred blondes but that brunette beauty would make Marilyn Monroe look like a dog. He doubted the husband knew how to keep a woman
like that in line however. He'd seen the bloody poofter with an apron on for Pete's sake. What the hell was going on in that house? He figured it was none of his business. Still, maybe he'd follow up on Estelle's idea and welcome them to the neighbourhood after all. It could be fun. Feeling aroused at the thought of the brunette, Todd called Estelle into the room. *They all looked the same with the lights off* he thought, chuckling to himself.
Sixteen year old Ella Kingston dangled her feet over the edge of the bridge and daydreamed. Her parents were not due home for another two hours yet and she much preferred passing time outdoors than wandering around her home alone. Mr Harrison, a neighbour and Father to her friend Robby, often called Ella a latch key kid. She knew that was a term given to kids who had to let themselves in with their own key and she figured she fit the bill. During the school terms, between the hours of 3:30pm to 6:00pm she was supposed to do her homework, prepare her own dinner and then maybe do a bit of reading. In reality she usually goofed around, ate rubbish and then fried her brain in front of the idiot box. Her parents liked to eat late, which Ella had complained about in the past so it was agreed she could prepare something for herself earlier as long as she cleaned up afterwards. Initially she tried to be creative and make herself elaborate meals based on the recipes she found in The Margaret Fulton cookbooks that her Mother kept in the kitchen cupboards but never read. Ella's Mother was not one to spend much time in the kitchen. Not being much of a natural cook herself she ended up surviving mostly on pasta and cereal. If she was really hungry for something substantial she could always visit a friend’s house at a time she knew she'd be invited to stay for dinner. She didn't want people to catch on to that plan however, so truly wholesome home cooked meals were few and far between.

Hearing the crack of a twig, Ella looked up to see a boy making his way toward her. Oh my gosh it's him, she thought with a mixture of nervousness and glee. Her mind went back to the last time she had seen him. The unexpected arrival of a new student, so close to the end of term had struck Ella as odd. She could not say why she'd reacted so strongly to the boy with the beautiful green eyes. She had seen him earlier in the hall and had felt a sense of being underwater as she had watched him make his way down the corridor. She silently sent a word of thanks to the universe for placing him in the same classroom as she. She honestly could not pinpoint exactly what it was that made him seem so special. He had the same layered hair style as many other boys her age. He also wore the standard blue jeans and jacket every other kid was sporting that year. Something about him however, stood out to Ella. The way he carried himself and his over all demeanour spoke of a quiet, understated confidence. He had a look about him that seemed as though he was deep in thought and yet at the same time he would smile politely if someone made eye contact. He'd even touched her friend, Joan McKensie's elbow when she'd slipped on the tiled floor that the cleaners had just finished mopping. Making sure the girl was steady on her feet before he continued walking on, the boy was totally oblivious to the adoring look Joan had given him as he went on his way.

Now here he was, in her favourite spot along the creek. Feeling shy, but determined not to run away from him like a frightened deer, Ella waited for the boy to reach the bridge.

Earlier, as they'd pulled out of the high school parking lot, Joel had told his Mother about bumping into Robby Harrison that day.

"Oh my goodness! Little Robby?" Penny glanced over and smiled at her son.

"I'm so glad Joel. Gosh, you two were like partners in crime when you were little."

She felt happy that her son had found an old friend. He was the son of Penny's own old friend, Dayna.

"I know! Could hardly believe it when he recognised me," Joel marvelled. "Not
that it was hard recognising him. It was just like seeing the eleven year old Robby stretched up into a sixteen year old."

Joel smiled at how easily they had rekindled their friendship. It was like he had only just seen him yesterday. Making her way down the main street, Penny signalled left onto Evergreen Avenue. She spotted her husband pushing the lawnmower over their overgrown front lawn. As she pulled up the driveway, she noticed one of her neighbours peering out of their front window. The curtain fell closed again as Penny tried for a closer look. She guessed it was probably about time she introduced herself around, at least to those people living on either side of her house. Realising Joel had just asked her a question, Penny asked him to repeat what he had said.

"I was hoping I could cross the creek to Robby's place this arvo. He said to stop in and catch up with the rest of his family," Joel reiterated.

"Oh sure. Of course you can," Penny replied, handing him his backpack.

"Just be home in time for dinner and say Hi to everyone for me. I must arrange a catch up myself."

"Sure!" Joel had kissed his Mum on the cheek and bounded up to the front porch. Now making his way to the end of his street, his thoughts turned to the girl that he had seen in class earlier that day. Maybe Robby can tell me who she is he thought hopefully. He hadn't had much serious interest in girls at his last school. He'd definitely started noticing them more and felt the first real stirrings of attraction, but no girl had made him feel the way he had today. Which was odd, considering he had not even heard her speak. Let alone had a conversation with her himself. It had been a complete surprise to him to feel such a strong connection to someone he didn't know. It made him all the more curious to see if he'd still feel the same way once he did actually get to speak to the girl.

Completely lost in his musings, Joel did not notice straight away that he was not alone. Slipping on a broken stick, he quickly regained his balance and made his way down to the bridge. Looking up at him with the sweetest expression in her eye was the object of his recent thoughts. Raising his hand in a shy wave, Joel walked toward her, wondering what to say. She solved that problem by speaking first.

"They say a person can make something happen just by thought alone you know," she declared, surprising Joel with her odd statement.

"Yeah?" he replied amused. "You've had some success in that area then?"

"Well...not deliberately. But I was just thinking about you and now here you are," she said, suddenly feeling shy. Taking a seat on the rickety old bridge beside her, Joel gave her a grin.

"Seems to me that maybe what we have here is a case of psychic ability more than channelling the power of your mind."

Ella stuck out her hand.

"I'm Ella," she said, remembering her manners.

"Joel," he replied, taking hold of her hand. Instead of the usual shake and release, both of them were unwilling to let go as they eyeballed each other. Suddenly feeling self-conscious, Ella let out a laugh and took her hand back and placed it in her lap.

"You're new here then?" she enquired.

"Old and new," Joel shared. "I lived here when I was a little kid and my family decided to move back a couple of weeks ago. In fact, I was on my way to visit someone I knew from back then. Do you know Robby Harrison?"

"Oh sure, I know Robby. He lives three houses down from me. That's my place
"over there," she told him, gesturing to a split level house overlooking the creek. "Wow, it must be great being so close to the water," Joel said wistfully. "You live nearby too?"

"That's my street over there. The one with a cul de sac. 20 Evergreen Avenue is my house."

Ella let out a gasp. "The haunted house?" she whispered, looking up at him with big wide eyes. "Well, no...not that I'm aware of," Joel responded, his interest piqued. "Is there something I should know?"

Grabbing his hand, Ella urged him to his feet. "C'mon! I'll come to Robby's house with you. He won't believe that you've moved into that place. He can explain it better than I can."

Feeling charged at the prospect of a good ghost story, Joel followed her up the hill towards Robby's house. *Simone will flip when I tell her!* Joel thought, thinking of his sister's high love of drama. Acknowledging the fact that his good mood was also probably due to meeting Ella, Joel smiled to himself. Things couldn't possibly get much better than this.
Estelle fluffed up her hair, positioned the casserole under her left arm and lifted up the neighbour's brass knocker. She knew full well that the mousy woman next door had caught her spying earlier. She figured a friendly visit and an offer of a home cooked meal would placate her into realising she was not some sort of nosey parker. Better yet, she hoped the husband would be the one to answer the door. There was nothing she loved more than someone else's husband lustng after her. It made her feel powerful when she noticed an already taken man undressing her with his eyes.

The door suddenly sprung open and Estelle was surprised to see a child standing before her. Long golden hair and big green eyes looked up at her full of curiosity.

"Who are you then?" the little girl asked her.

"Oh hey honey. My name is Estelle. Is your Daddy home?" Estelle purred looking over the child's shoulder.

"Muuuum! Some lady is here looking for Daddy," the child called out loudly, still looking up at the strange lady before her. "She smells like meatloaf!" she added, as her Mother came around a corner holding a tea towel.

"Oh Tildy hush. Don't be rude," Penny said nervously. She offered Estelle a smile.

"Oh hello there. I'm Estelle...from next door?" Estelle stammered out.

"Oh sure...of course. Gosh, I'm sorry. I've been rather complacent about introducing myself around. I'm Penny. We're still unpacking I'm afraid," she explained, gesturing towards the chaos surrounding her. "Come on in."

Stepping over the threshold, Estelle suddenly felt nervous. This was the infamous ghost house after all. She and Todd had been living in the area for over a year now and they'd heard all the stories. Feeling annoyed that the little brat was still staring at her, Estelle held forth her best casserole dish.

"Here. Beef stew. I figured it must be challenging moving in and providing a proper hot meal every night."

"Oh Estelle. That was so thoughtful of you. I've already sorted tonight's dinner but you're right. I've still got my own slow cooker packed in a box somewhere. Is this dish okay to freeze?" she asked politely.

"Oh of course. No worries. Just return the dish when you're able."

Walking into the kitchen, she was pleased to note that it was not as flash as her own. Sure it was cozy and pretty enough but Todd had insisted their own place be less cluttered and 'lived in'. It was one thing they still agreed on thankfully. Estelle's childhood was spent in a pigsty. What constituted as homey to some just seemed messy to Estelle.

"Your husband not home from work yet?" she asked looking through to the backyard. She knew damn well he'd been home all day. She just wanted a close up look at those eyes.

"Russell has the day off today but he just left to get something from the hardware store. Would you like something to drink?"

"No thankyou. To be honest, I can't really stay. My husband Todd will be home shortly and it doesn't pay to not be there when he gets home you know?"

"Um...well sure. I guess."

"Okay then!" Estelle said brightly. "Don't be a stranger, all right? We must get together properly soon, us and the husbands. Maybe a BBQ or something?"

"Oh of course...BBQ...Great. That sounds good," Penny replied awkwardly. She followed her new neighbour to the door to see her out.
"Well...Goodbye then."

"Bye Estelle. Nice to meet you."

Penny closed the door with relief. Without quite knowing why, she found herself feeling glad to be rid of her visitor. Penny was not usually one to make rash judgements. She was insightful enough to know that most people revealed themselves in layers. An individual who comes across as shy when initially meeting people for example, could turn out to be quite fun once they'd dropped their guard. Going against her usual nature however, Penny had decided already that Estelle was not the kind of woman she could ever befriend.

"That lady had her pretend face on Mum," Tildy suddenly declared, helping herself to an apple on the kitchen counter.

"What makes you say that Tilds?"

"Oh you know. She looks pretty but she has a bit of ugly underneath. Can I play outside until dinnertime?"

"Sure. I'll call you when it's ready."

Penny smiled to herself. She was in full agreement with her youngest daughter. No amount of make-up could hide an ugly character. Glancing at the oven clock, she found herself wishing she knew the Harrison's phone number. She'd failed to get their new contact details after they'd moved house a year or so ago. She didn't know if Joel would be home in time to join them for the roast dinner she'd been preparing all afternoon. She guessed it didn't matter. He was busy rekindling an old friendship. Which is something Penny was rather looking forward to doing herself. Robby's Mother, Dayna Harrison, had been a good friend to Penny once. The friendship had fallen by the wayside a year or so after she and Russell had moved away but she was hoping that they still got along as well as they did back then.

She may have returned to the place where she had grown up but after so many years had gone by she'd felt less and less like a 'hills girl'. In fact, she'd go so far as to say she felt a little bit like an outsider since she and Russell had come back. She'd always felt a pull to head back up to her childhood stomping ground however and was keen to re-join some sort of social circle again now that she was back home. As she opened the oven door, she decided she'd start to broaden her social horizons by contacting Dayna tomorrow. Feeling a burst of optimism, she was pleased when she heard her husband pull up the driveway. Maybe Joel will be invited to stay at The Harrison's for something to eat she thought, as she mentally prepared to put aside a plate, just in case.
Dayna felt a burst of joy as she swung the door wide open to welcome her old friend's son inside.

"Joel McVee!" she cried out happily as she resisted the urge to envelop him in a giant bear hug. Having a teenage son of her own, she knew how squeamish they could get if an adult showered too much affection on them, especially one they may not even remember. To her utter delight however, Joel was the one to hug her!

"Mrs H!" he yelled out heartily as he opened his arms up wide. "Got any Anzacs for me?" he asked, referring to his old childhood habit of swiping her homemade Anzac biscuits from her pantry.

Laughing at the memory, Dayna ushered him and Ella inside.

"Hey Ella. You pick up a stray on the way Joel?" Dayna joked, softening her words by giving Ella's arm a squeeze.

"How are your parents going? I've been thinking of your Mum since I heard you guys were back. You'll have to give me your phone number before you leave."

"Oh for sure," Joel replied feeling right at home. "She said to say Hi."

It was a different house than the one he used to visit all those years ago but the furniture was pretty much the same. Dayna's artwork covered nearly every wall. She'd gotten good over the years and Joel told her so.

"Well thank you! I guess others must agree with you. I've sold a few pieces over the years. Even had a few displayed in an art gallery."

"Wow. I'm impressed. Mr Harrison still writing?"

"He is. Mostly freelance work but the local paper publishes his stuff regularly."

Dayna and Mitch were the coolest parents Joel had ever met. Warm, funny, and easy going, they were hippies in their heyday and had a light handed approach to running a household and raising kids.

"Robby!" Dayna called towards the back door, announcing their arrival. "Joel and Ella are here!"

"Joel!" a friendly male voice called out. "Come into the kitchen my old friend."

"That you Mr H?" Joel shouted back, walking towards the sound of his voice.

Entering the galley style kitchen at the back of the house, Joel found Robby's Dad standing at the stove.

"Hey!" Mitch greeted them both as Ella and Joel entered the room. Stirring a pot of rice, he gave Joel a one armed hug. "The rumours are true then. Man, would you get a look at you. You may not like to hear this buddy but you are the spitting image of your Mother! More masculine but just as pretty."

"Ah I'm used to hearing it. Tildy is the one that looks like Dad."

"Tildy... she was just a baby when you left. She must be what? Six now? How is Simone? She was just a wee little thing last time I saw her."

"She's moody, temperamental and smarter than she has a right to be," Joel said, only half joking. Truth be told, he loved both his sisters, as different as they were. Everybody instantly loved Tildy with her sweet and whimsical ways but people often did not know what to make of Simone. Sometimes Joel thought he was the only one who knew what an actual sweetheart she was deep down.

"So are you two staying for dinner? Got plenty for everybody," Mitch told them, stirring his famous butter chicken.

"Um...yeah sure. I may have to give you guys my Mum's number now though. She said to come home for dinner."

Overhearing the conversation, Dayna leaped at the chance to call her old friend.
After also confirming that Ella was to stay too, Dayna jotted down the number Joel dutifully recited and retreated to her bedroom. If it was like the old days, this could turn into a long chat.

"What's your name?" a small voice suddenly asked Joel.

"Hi! You must be one of Robby's sisters. I'm Joel."

A tiny face, peering sideways out of the pantry door, smiled up at Joel. Another face, identical to the first, quickly popped out beside the other one.

"Hey!" Mr Harrison called out. "I told you, no snacks before dinner!"

The two girls squealed in delight as they bolted through the kitchen clutching a bag of Smiths Potato chips.

"Hey quit hogging my friends and get back to cooking dinner," Robby teased his Dad as he opened the back screen door. Mitchell, too preoccupied with catching his daughters, didn't answer as he followed the two chip thieves out of the kitchen.

"Your sisters are hilarious," Joel chuckled.

"C'mon you two, come with me out the back," he told his friends as he gestured outside. Following him out past the clothesline, Joel was impressed as his friend led him into a well sized rumpus room. Along the back wall was a comfy old couch. A billiard table stood in the centre. A pinball machine stood waiting to be played in the right hand corner and alongside the couch was the most impressive record collection Joel had ever seen. Just as impressive was the expensive looking stereo system on the left, completing every teenager's dream of the perfect room.

"Are you kidding me?" Joel spluttered incredulously. "You have seriously got it made here man." Crouching down to inspect the LPs, Joel pulled out an album. "Kiss - Love Gun. Nice choice. How on earth do you afford all these records? You must have over one thousand albums here!"

"Friend of Dad's is a DJ," Robby explained. "He gets the new releases early and always passes a copy onto us. He knows I'm a music fan so..." Robby felt proud that Joel was looking at his collection in awe.

"Wanna hear it?" he asked, already sliding it out of its sleeve. "So what brings you by Ella? I didn't know you guys knew each other."

"Joel found me on the bridge," Ella explained, blushing and hoping like hell the boys didn't notice.

"So get this Robby," Ella began, hoping to get the attention off of her. "Joel's oldies bought the Number Twenty house."

Clumsily dropping the needle on the record, producing an awful scratching sound, Robby swore.

"Shit!" Picking up the needle and placing it down again gently, Robby punched Joel in the arm. "When you said you lived on Evergreen, I didn't know you meant twenty Evergreen Avenue!"

"You guys better start explaining why that is such a big deal 'cause I sure as hell have no idea what you're on about," Joel stated, starting to feel annoyed by the over reacting.

"Well, take a seat mate, this may take a while," Robby sighed, pointing to the old couch.

Waiting for the last number to finish dialling, Dayna chewed her thumbnail anxiously. She'd called thirty minutes ago but there had been no answer. Across the creek, placing the last plate inside the dishwasher, Penny eagerly answered the phone. Her roast had been ready early and she and the rest of the family had already finished eating. She'd just been debating whether or not to look up the Harrisons in the phone.
book, when the phone rang.

"Hello?" she answered as she gestured to Simone and Tildy to keep the noise down.

"Penny?" Dayna asked, already knowing the voice belonged to her old friend.

"Dayna!" Penny cried out joyfully. "You're not going to believe this, but I was just wishing I had your number! Was that you that called earlier?"

"Yes! Did you know Joel was over here visiting us?"

"Yeah, he left a while ago and I wasn't sure if he was coming home for dinner or not. We ended up eating without him. When the phone rang before, we ignored it out of habit. You know, dinner time rules."

"Oh sorry! I didn't mean to interrupt your dinner. We haven't eaten here yet and Mitch wants to know if Joel can eat with us?"

"Oh of course, as long as it's not putting you guys out?"

"No, no of course not. You know Mitch, he loves to cook and always makes too much," Dayna paused and felt an overwhelming rush of happiness that she had her old friend on the line. "It's so good to hear your voice Pen. Why on earth did we ever stop talking?"

Penny's thoughts went back a few years. Back to her Father's 60th Birthday Bash. Being a well-respected member of the community, Roland Anderson had had half the townsfolk turn up to help him celebrate. Penny and Russell had been living closer to the city for about a year by then but had made their way up into the hills that weekend to be a part of the festivities. Both of Russel's parents had tragically lost their lives years before, not long after Joel, their first Grandchild had been born. Whilst driving home during a ferocious storm one evening, the now late Mr McVee had lost control of his vehicle on the infamous Devil's Elbow. Both he and his wife had been instantly killed.

Russell, after the birth of Joel, had fortunately been accepted into Penny's family with open arms by then. His in-laws played a major part in Russell getting over the loss of his parents. Penny's Father, it is true, did not like the relationship to begin with. Only after he saw that Russell truly seemed to love his daughter and was going to stick around, did Roland decide to make amends for his earlier distrustful behaviour.

The night of the birthday party had been magical. The Anderson's back yard had been transformed into a beautiful lit up wonderland. The garden, already a magnificent showpiece due to Bonnie Anderson's bright green thumb, lit up with the glow of a thousand fairy lights. Penny had realised that night just how much she had missed everyone. Having the pleasure of their company all in one place had triggered the first stirrings of Penny's desire to move back home.

She and Dayna had kept in touch the whole year before the party via lengthy long phone calls. Also, Dayna's monthly trip into the city to shop in a larger variety of stores, had allowed Penny to see her on a regular basis. Penny had noticed Mitchell, Dayna's husband, paying her a lot of attention that night. She'd even enjoyed it to a certain degree. They'd all gotten to know each other well during the few years following high school graduation. Inter-couple flirting was a regular occurrence at most get togethers back then and Penny figured it was a bit of harmless fun. Mitchell, on the other hand, had been harbouring a crush on Penny Anderson for years. Sweet and kind, with a hidden goofiness that one only saw when Penny felt truly comfortable, Mitchell had always had a thing for her. Russell, although a hills boy, had been a year ahead of the rest of them during the school years. Penny hadn't even noticed him until that night at the Pizza Place.
Kicking himself for not having had the courage to move on Penny sooner, Mitchell had watched the whirlwind romance unfold with a heavy heart. Rebounding with Dayna hadn't been an entirely bad decision. They'd both been into politics and the freedom movement back then. Although not as classically beautiful as Penny, Dayna had an impish prettiness with her pixie crop strawberry blonde hair and freckles on her nose. He'd even convinced himself that his past infatuation with Penny was a high school thing, a silly flight of fancy that the older version of himself had grown out of. He had grown to truly care for Dayna. She had, by that time, given Mitch three beautiful children. If what he felt for his wife wasn't exactly earth shattering, at least the love he felt for his kids was. Besides, they had a marriage that boasted true and unwavering friendship. That was stronger that any silly crush he'd felt for Penny. Or so he'd thought.

Realising she'd been silent for a beat too long, Penny laughed nervously and answered Dayna's question. "Oh gosh, I don't know why we stopped talking Daynes. Kids, life, distance."
"I guess. I'd often wondered if I'd done something wrong. After your Father's party we just seemed to drift apart."
"Well, I'm back now," Penny said quietly, nervously moving the phone's receiver to her other ear. "I've missed you Dayna."
"Me too! Catch me up on everything!"
"Okay," Penny smiled, pulling up the kitchen stool to settle in for a chat.

With her sister already settled in for the night, her father watching TV and her Mum on the phone, Simone sat in her bedroom and felt bored out of her brain. She was also mad. Earlier in the evening, after Joel hadn't turned up for dinner, Simone had asked where he was.

"Oh Joel is catching up with the Harrison family. I forgot to tell you Russ, Joel and Robby reconnected today at the high school."
"Oh good! I'd been wondering if Mitchell and his family were still living here. You must be looking forward to seeing Dayna again," Russell smiled, helping himself to some gravy.
"Yes I am," Penny replied, feeling nervous. Russell had never known about what had happened at her Father's 60th and Penny was determined to keep it that way. "Well that's not fair!" Simone whined, throwing down her fork. "I know the Harrison's too. Maybe I would have liked to have seen Lulu and Patty."
"The twins are almost the same age as Tildy Simone. Surely you would find them too young to play with."

Scowling at her Mother, Simone felt the old resentment build up. She loved her Mum. That had never wavered. What she had seen that night three years ago however, had made her question everything. If her own Mother had secrets, then how the hell was Simone meant to trust anybody again? Looking at her father, Simone felt a twinge of panic. She adored her Dad. What if moving back ended up being a huge mistake. What if her Mum secretly loved Mr Harrison and left her Dad for him? Simone loved drama but not that kind of drama. Not the kind that could potentially tear her family apart.

Complaining of stomach pains, Simone asked to leave the table.
"Oh, are you okay honey?" Penny asked, wondering if her daughter was getting her period. Penny herself had not gotten hers until aged fifteen but she knew that any time after eleven years old, it was possible.
"I'm fine!" Simone snapped. "It was probably just the meat. It tasted a bit off."
Feeling bad for her outburst, she ran up the stairs to her room. Flopping herself
down on the bed, she reached for her favourite stuffed toy she kept hidden under the
bed.

"I don't think the meat tastes weird Mummy," Tildy said quietly, feeling confused
by her big sister's outburst. She couldn't stand it when members of her family fought.
She had a hard time not channelling everything she knew them to be feeling. She'd
been like that all her life. At this moment she felt a weird kind of angry coming from
Simone and waves of worry had been bursting out of her Mum's brain the last few
minutes. It was a struggle to not ask everyone what was wrong when Tildy knew she
wasn't supposed to exactly know there was anything wrong.

"Thanks sweetie," Penny murmured, patting her daughter's hand. Simone had
been funny with Penny for a while now. At first she figured it was hormonal.
Reaching thirteen years of age was a tricky time in any girl's life. She'd heard of other
teenage daughters giving their parents hell and was mentally preparing herself for the
time when her little girl wouldn't look up at her with childlike adoration anymore. She
just hadn't known it would be this soon.

Russell nursed a beer whilst watching a movie on TV. It was an old Hitchcock
thriller that he'd already enjoyed once before. Only half concentrating on the screen,
he found himself eavesdropping on his wife's conversation. Dayna had called straight
after his family had eaten dinner and then had called again presumably after the
Harrison's had finished theirs. He was glad that his family were reconnecting with
The Harrisons. Not having been a part of that crowd until he and Penny had gotten
together, Russell had sincerely enjoyed getting to know Penny's friends. Mitch had
been an acquaintance and most faces had been familiar, seeing as he'd seen everybody
around town or at the High School over the years.

He'd especially appreciated Mitchell's friendship. He'd been there the night
Russell had met Penny and after she'd left to sneak back home, Russell had asked
around about her. Mitchell had had nothing but nice things to say about her, joking
that he should have swooped in before Penny fell under Russell's charm. Not that he
was serious though, Joel assumed. Mitchell and Dayna had gotten together not long
after he and Penny had and seemed perfect for each other.

Russell heard Penny burst into laughter again and then heard his name being
called a moment later.

"Russ! Joel needs a ride home," Penny was calling out as Russ came into the
kitchen. "It's too late for him to be crossing over the creek."

"Oh, sure thing," he agreed, grabbing up his keys. "They live over the creek now?
What's the address?"

"Here, it's all written down. Just go two blocks down Maple and take a left. It's
on Kingfisher Street."

Not missing a beat, Penny replied to something Dayna said and reached over to
put the kettle on. Russell kissed the top of her head and headed out to the car.

Upstairs, finally sensing her sister was asleep and feeling her Mum's happiness as
well as hearing it whilst Penny laughed downstairs on the phone, Tildy finally felt
relaxed enough to go to sleep as well. She just hoped, as she nodded off, that the sad
man would choose to not visit her dreams tonight.
"It all started a couple of years after you left," Robby began, turning down the music on the stereo.
"What started?" Joel moaned, feeling impatient.
"Okay, okay," Robby grinned. "Let's start at the beginning shall we?"
"Please," Joel made himself comfortable on the old couch and spread out his hands. "Begin!"
"A new teacher called Miss Green took on old man Gringle’s art classes after he retired. That was about midway through Year Eight."
"Mr Gringle had turned sixty five and had decided it was time to live it up at some senior citizen’s village. Anyway, Miss Green was everything Mr Gringle wasn't. Young, blonde and pretty in a hippie kind of way. She was cool as anything. You would have liked her Joel. She and her boyfriend rented out the house your parents now own. I'm not sure who actually owned the place but I know they were only tenants because the boyfriend's Father came and helped them move out last year, grumbling for all to hear that they were breaking the lease and 'no one could blame them!'" Robby yelled at the end, imitating the man's gravelly voice.
"So why did they leave?" Joel asked. He was suddenly eager to hear the rest of the story. He motioned for Robby to continue.
"Well, that depends on who you talk to. The general consensus however, is that he wanted them to leave."
"He? The Father?"
"No! The ghost!"
Not sure if he was willing buy it, Joel remained quiet and waited for Robby to finish.
"The story goes, that some sort of tragedy happened in that house decades ago. Something about a crazy Mother, a missing boy and a suicide. A bunch of us tried to research the history of the house once but the old lady at the library said that there are no records of anything happening there - that it's just a bunch of hogwash."
"Well, there you go then. It's not haunted at all. Do you guys believe in every rumour you hear?"
"So answer me this then old buddy. Why did it remain empty for so long after the previous owner passed away and why, when somebody did try to live there, they ended up moving out after less than a year?"
"Maybe they're idiots who bought into all the talk and scared themselves so much they decided to leave?" Joel suggested, starting to feel annoyed.
"Have you heard any strange noises in the night?" Ella asked Joel nervously.
"I really haven't," Joel hesitated. "But..." Joel was unsure whether or not to bring up Tildy's nightmares.
"Don't hold out on us. Spill!" Robby demanded.
"Well it's Tilds," Joel said quietly. "She's been having nightmares since we moved in."
"Tilds?" Ella enquired.
"My youngest sister, Tildy," Joel rubbed his hands through his hair and laughed, feeling embarrassed. "Oh look. This is stupid. You guys have got me all spooked. It's probably nothing."
A shout came from the back door of the main house, telling them that dinner was ready. Feeling silly for letting them get to him, Joel jumped up from the couch and gave Ella a sheepish grin. Sensing his unease, Ella took his hand and led him out of
the rumpus room. Carefully sliding the record back into the plastic sleeve, Robby saw the gesture and smiled. He'd never seen Ella look at any guy like that since he'd known her. He liked Ella a lot, but to him, she was just like another sister. Robby couldn't think of a better match. As for the fact that Joel had moved into the ghost house, Robby couldn't think of a better excuse to have a party. They could conduct a séance! Feeling charged, he followed his friends into the kitchen. A good ghost story always made him hungry.

Much later, whilst lying on his bed, Joel tapped along to Pink Floyd as he thought about his night. Dinner had been a riot. Robby's younger twin sisters had grown up a lot but neither of them seemed to remember Joel. They'd asked Ella if he was her boyfriend, to which Ella had turned a bright red. Robby's parents were just like Joel remembered them - hilarious, a little bit wild and outrageously honest. They'd drunk wine throughout the meal from giant, maroon coloured goblets and had even let the older children have a few sips. Ella's cheeks got even redder as she became flushed from the alcohol. Robby seemed totally used to it and kept his cool. Joel on the other hand, felt himself getting a little tipsy, so pretended to not be thirsty the rest of the meal. Which was delicious and filling.

After dinner, Dayna went off to call his Mother again (even though she'd spent the last half an hour before dinner on the phone to her already) and Mitchell showed Joel his brand new, full colour, television set. Noticing that Ella seemed to be getting tired and not wanting to walk across the creek in the dark, especially after all that talk of ghosts, Joel thought about asking Mitchell if he could have a ride home. Before he could ask however, Dayna came into the lounge room dragging the longest telephone extension cord Joel had ever seen.

"Joel honey, your Mum wants to know if you need a ride home. She'll send your Dad if you want?"

"I can drop him off!" Mitchell slurried, tripping over as he got up off the floor.

"After one bottle maybe," Dayna grinned at her husband. "But you my dear, have nearly polished off two."

The matter being settled for him, Joel said his goodbyes and walked toward the front door with Ella and Robby in tow.

"So Joel," Robby whispered as he closed the front door behind him. "Whadya think about having a party at your place soon? We could invite our crowd from school. Give you a chance to meet everyone before school goes back after the hollies."

Scratching the back of his head, Joel shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know man. We've only just moved in and the place is still disorganised."

"Oh Joel, that would be so cool though! You have that enormous pool and we could throw a BBQ and just hang out," Ella said enthusiastically as she grabbed Joel's arm. Feeling like he would agree to just about anything this girl asked of him, Joel reluctantly agreed that he'd ask his parents if it would be possible.

Just then, Russell pulled up the drive. Seeing headlights splash across his lounge room, Mitchell opened the front door to greet his old friend. Dayna followed close behind.

"Russ my old mate!" Mitchell yelled out a little too loudly. "How the hell are ya?"

Grinning widely, Russell clasped his old friend's hand and gave Dayna a kiss on the cheek.

"Hey Dayna….Mitchell. Thanks for having the boy over tonight."
"Oh it was our pleasure Russell," Dayna cried warmly, putting her arm around Joel. "He's grown up into such a cool young guy. You and Penny must be so proud of him."

"Yeah, he's okay I guess," Russell joked, getting his son into a headlock and messing up his hair. Turning bright red in embarrassment, Joel sheepishly looked over at Ella who was shyly looking on with a small grin on her pretty face.

"Oh Hi," Russell said, noticing Ella and realising there was someone else there who wasn't a Harrison.

"Hi Mr McVee," Ella spoke up bravely, fighting her shyness. "I'm Ella. I live up the road a bit; one of the neighbours."

"Well, hey there. Nice to meet ya," Russell replied.

"So Russell," Dayna said, grabbing back his attention. "Penny said you're almost settled in?"

"Ah, yeah. Almost. You guys should come over one night. Have dinner and maybe a swim if we can get the pool cleaned and ready before Christmas."

"We'd love that," Mitchell told him.

"Great! I'll ask Penny to arrange something...okay...well, it's late. I best get going," Russell said, turning towards his car. "You need a lift Ella?"

"Oh no. I'm really only a couple of doors down. Thanks though," Ella said gratefully. Shuffling her feet and feeling like she wished she could say goodbye to Joel in private, Ella gave a small wave and started off down the street. The Harrison's bid their own farewells and headed back inside.

"Um, Dad. Wait," Joel said, grabbing his Dad's arm. "Would you mind if I said a quick Goodbye to Ella?"

Seeing the look on his son's face and noticing that Ella was slowly dawdling along the pathway toward her home, Russell smiled at his son.

"Sure thing. I'll wait in the car."

Joel gave his Dad an appreciative smile and ran to catch up with Ella.

"Hey," he said softly, touching her elbow.

"That felt so weird, just walking off," she admitted shyly, playing with her hair.

"That's weird is that I feel like I've known you for longer than just a few hours," Joel confessed, suddenly feeling foolish. Letting go of her face and looking up at the moon, Joel squeezed his eyes shut and let out his own nervous chuckle.

"That was cheesy huh?" he spluttered, worried that she thought he was weird.

"I do. Truth is, I felt like I saw an old friend that day in the hall."

"In the hall?" Joel repeated, feeling sure that they'd first saw each other in the classroom.

"Yeah. You helped Joan McKenzie up after she slipped on the floor remember? She watched you walk off afterwards like she'd just seen a movie star. I recall feeling jealous that she'd had even that small interaction with you."

Feeling bolstered by her words, Joel leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. Feeling her face instantly heat up under his lips, Joel pulled back and grinned.

"So far, you have been the best thing that has happened since moving back up to the Hills."

Feeling flustered and thrilled, Ella pointed towards Russell's car. A Little River
Band song was softly emanating from the car's speakers and Joel's Father was singing along.

"Your Dad is waiting Joel. You better get going."

"Okay. Wait! I don't have your number," Joel said, searching his pockets for something to write with. All he found was a pencil with its tip broken off.

Reaching over and grabbing a large leaf off of her Mother's aloe vera plant, Ella plucked the broken pencil out of Joel's hand and scratched her number onto the surface of the leaf. She handed it to Joel, rubbing the aloe gel into her other hand.

"Can you read it?" she asked.

"Is that last number a seven or a nine?" Joel laughed, impressed with her resourcefulness.

"A nine!" she cried, jumping up and kissing him quickly on the mouth. Taking off down her long driveway, Ella couldn't believe that she'd done that. Stepping clumsily off the curb, Joel turned toward his Dad's car and opened the door.

"No comment," he laughed, as his Father opened up his mouth to speak.

"Fair enough," Russell smiled back as he headed toward home.

Now back in his bed and safely settled in for the night, ghost stories and haunted houses were the last things on Joel's mind. His final thought, as the record came to an end and his eyes drifted closed, was of Ella. He wondered if this was what love felt like.

So what do you think about having a house warming party?" Penny called out from the ensuite. She never went to bed without first taking off every scrap of make-up. "Dayna would help me organise it. We were thinking we could set up the back yard with trestle tables and Chinese lanterns."

Putting his book on the night table, Russell rearranged his pillow and lay on his side.

"Well sure," he replied, thinking it would be a good way to reconnect with everyone. "We haven't managed to catch up with our old friends since we moved and it may be a good way of meeting the neighbours. Were you thinking along those lines? Of inviting people we don't necessarily know yet?"

Walking into the bedroom, Penny picked up her Vitamin E cream and began to moisturise her hands. "I actually already met the neighbours on our right. The wife anyway. Her name is Estelle. She looks like Dolly Parton and behaves like a Stepford Wife."

Russell chuckled at the image.

"It's true!" Penny giggled. "She bought over a casserole, inspected my kitchen with a critical eye and then fled back next door to be sure she was there when her husband came home."

"As a good little wife should," Russell smirked with a twinkle in his eye.

" Okay, so it's settled. We'll invite The Harrison's of course, our new neighbour Estelle and her husband, anyone in our street who may be interested and Mum and Dad. Who else?"

"Everyone from our old group. Provided they still live in The Hills. Tommy and Lyn, The O'Malley brothers and Steph and Kate."

Clapping her hands, Penny jumped up and grabbed a pen and paper from her bedside drawer.

"You can be in charge of the music. Dayna and I can cater and decorate. Dad can sort the drinks from O'Malley's Pub. Hey, do you think it's still called O'Malley's? Shane and Daniel must be running it by now. I'll call Dad in the morning."
Scribbling down her party plan list, Penny's stomach flipped a little as she recalled the last celebration she attended with all of these people. Telling herself that Mitchell probably couldn't even remember the incident, she placed her list back inside the drawer, turned off the bedside lamp and snuggled up to her husband.

"So-----Dolly Parton huh?" Russell said, running his hand up Penny's thigh.

"Since when do you like busty blondes," Penny asked him as she parted her legs and guided his hand the rest of the way.

"Since never. Give me a dark haired vixen any day," he told her as he kissed her neck.

Kissing him back, Penny welcomed him into her arms and sighed with pleasure. She loved this man so very much. What on earth she'd been thinking that night she still did not know. She would have to make sure to have a private talk with Mitchell before the party. Just to ensure that this was not ever going to be an issue. Losing all thoughts of her friend's husband as Russell slid inside her, Penny let herself go. This was home to her and always would be.
Chapter Eight

Tildy was the first one up the next morning. She wasn't sure what day it was. School holidays made each morning feel like the weekend. She quietly tiptoed down the stairs in search of her Mum. Sensing the ground floor was empty before she reached the bottom step, she backtracked to peek into her parent's bedroom. Her Dad was sprawled over most of the bed, snoring softly. Her Mother was curled up on the edge. Knowing her Mother was awake even though her eyes were closed, Tildy whispered "Morning Mummy" as she tried to squeeze in between her parents.

Smiling silently, Penny rolled over and gave her daughter a cuddle.
"Morning Tilds. Daddy's a bed hog," she told Tildy.
"He sure is!" Tildy agreed as Russell mumbled something unintelligible and rolled over.

"Mummy is it a school day still? Like a not weekend day?" Tildy asked, her mind thinking of cartoons.
"Nope, it's a Saturday sweetie. All the days are getting mushed up together huh?"
"Yeh. Each day used to have a feeling you know? Mondays are grumpy days, Tuesdays feel colourful 'cause we do art on Tuesdays with Miss Kerr," Tildy stopped as she thought about her old school. She guessed her days would have different 'feels' next year with a new school, new class and a new teacher.

"What about the other days?" Penny enquired, enjoying hearing her daughter's thoughts.

"Oh. Well Wednesdays make me think of camels 'cause the man on the radio always says it's hump day on Wednesday. Thursday is food day 'cause you buy lots of food on that day and Friday is fun day 'cause it's the day before the weekend and Friday and fun both start with an 'F'!" she announced proudly.
"That's right! And Saturday and Sunday?"
"They kinda feel the same but Saturday has a more exciting feel than Sunday. Sunday is sleepy. So today is Saturday right?"
"Right!" her Mother cried as she started to tickle her daughter.
"Muuum!" Tildy squealed in delight.
"Oh for goodness sake you two! Go start your exciting Saturday downstairs! I say Saturday and Sunday both feel sleepy 'cause they both start with an 'S'!" Russell grumbled, pulling the quilt over his head.

Laughing at his grumpiness, Tildy and Penny got up and made their way downstairs to the kitchen.
"So, what do you feel like for brekky Tilds?" Penny asked her daughter.
"Um.....banged eggs please." Tildy replied seriously.
"Okay," Penny chuckled. "So...guess what?" she anounced as she cracked eggs into a bowl. "Daddy and I think we should have a party at the house before Christmas."
"Oooh really?" Tildy squealed with delight. "Can I help? I can make a passaparcel?"
"Well, a pass the parcel game would be good for a birthday party but this is going to be a kind of house warming-slash-pre Christmas type party," Penny explained.
"Huh?" Tildy responded, confused by her Mother's choice of words.
"Oh, well 'house warming' is when you invite people over to celebrate a new home and to make it feel warm and cozy. Like it's lived in. Does that make sense?"
"Yeah but why did you say slash?"
"I just meant it like this," she demonstrated, picking up a piece of paper and
"See? Like it's two things."
"Oh, yeah I get it now. Am I invited?"
"Of course! It's your house, you'll be one of the hosts," she explained.
"What's this about a party?" Joel enquired, sleepily entering the kitchen.
"Morning Joel! Yeah, we're going to have a housewarming party with a Chrissie theme. Whadya think? Good idea?"
"Great idea! Robby asked me just last night if we could throw a party but I didn't think you'd agree to it. The house is only half unpacked and the pool is green."
"All the more reason to get organised then. I'll get Dad to make a start on what we're going to do about that swamp out back and we'll all have to decide on when. I'd already decided to invite the Harrison's. Is there anyone else you want to ask?"
"Yeah, actually, there is," Joel said shyly and blushed.
"What is this?" Penny chuckled. "You've gone all bashful."
"I met a girl Mum," Joel confessed grinning as he got himself some orange juice. Feeling delighted but treading carefully, Penny just said simply "Yeah?"
"Yeah. Her name is Ella, one of Robby's neighbours. I'm not sure what her family situation is but can we invite them?"
"Oh definitely Joel. I think that sounds great."

Knowing better than to show too much enthusiasm, for fear of embarrassing the boy, she just smiled at her son and started to scramble the eggs. Russell and Simone, both not being morning people, would be sleeping for a while longer yet, so she placed the remaining mixture in the fridge thinking she'd wait to eat with them. Feeling happy that things seemed to be turning out so well, she decided to let the kids eat in front of the TV with Bugs Bunny. Walking outside, she took her morning coffee with her and mentally started to decide where she would set everything up. Oh and I must call Dad to ask about our old friends and the pub situation she reminded herself.

Roland Anderson sat on his favourite stool listening to the oldies station. He loved spending time out in his shed. It wasn't a space where broken tools and junk went to die like other sheds he'd seen. The only things broken in Roland's shed were treasures waiting to be restored. It was actually his workshop. He'd run Anderson's Antiques for as long as his daughter Penny had been alive. Taking something long forgotten and returning it to its former glory was an obsession with Roland. He despised brand new furniture, calling it soulless and without any hint of a story. Penny used to argue that old furniture was once brand new too. Sure, Roland agreed, but things were made to last back then, the craftsmanship was of a higher standard and each piece was an original. Production lines and chain stores which churned out furniture in massive quantities meant that Mr Jones could walk into Mr Smith's house and see the exact same furniture, just set out differently. He took pride in the fact that his home was decorated like no one else's. He had a right to feel proud. He and Bonnie had a home that people gasped over.

Walking into the Anderson's house was like walking into a storybook. With a stone fronted facade and a front garden filled with an array of flowers and trees, the property had a whimsical atmosphere that Penny had always felt proud of. Spilling over with character and charm, each room held pieces that begged to be pawed over. Cabinets with secret drawers, chairs featuring intricate woodwork, ornate mirrors framed in amazingly detailed ironwork, it was like entering Alice's Wonderland.

The idea had been to fill their mystical wonderland with children. Unfortunately,
the road toward parenthood had been a tough one. The first miscarriage, although disappointing had not been a deterrent to Bonnie. She’d dried up her tears and tried again. After the fourth time, she’d felt as though she would rather die than go through that kind of heartbreak again. Just when Bonnie was about to give up completely, Penny had come along. The couple were so thrilled with their new role as parents that they’d eagerly began to try for more. When the next attempt resulted in yet another miscarriage however, Bonnie counted her blessings and refused to try for any more. Their daughter was a blessing and both of them felt lucky to have her.

Understanding completely, Roland never pushed his wife to find out what the cause of the multiple miscarriages was. If there even was in fact any one reason. Truth be told, he suffered as much as Bonnie after every loss. Being a man who preferred to keep his emotions private, he would comfort his wife in silence then would take himself out to his shed and cry for every child that for some reason or another was unable to join their family.

Roland knew he was unreasonably strict with his only child. Penny had always been a well behaved girl. Remarkably bright, quick to learn and mindful of her parents, it had at first been almost ridiculous the way Roland would enforce the rules. Initially laying them down wasn't the problem. Every child needs boundaries and restrictions. It was the way he was raised and he wanted to be damn sure Penny knew what was expected of her. It had however, gone deeper than that. He was terrified of seeing his precious Penny hurt. He and Bonnie loved that little girl - a love that became all the more intense when it became obvious that they would be unable to spread that love around in equal measures.

He knew he was the reason Penny inadvertently ended up being with Russell. He was the reason she felt the need to sneak out behind their backs, to seek adventure that she otherwise may not have gone looking for. Although the initial shock had been worrisome and the resultant pregnancies even more so, Roland had to be honest - he was now secretly happy that things had turned out better than he could have ever hoped.

His son-in-law truly loved Penny. It was obvious when seeing them both together how much that man adored her. Bonnie had been overjoyed at seeing Penny breeze through her pregnancies like it was the most natural thing on earth, which Roland guessed for some women it was. Now that Penny and her family were back home again and living only a block away, Roland felt settled once more. He had not enjoyed Penny living closer to the city, not that he ever voiced how much he had missed her and his Grandchildren. It was downright embarrassing to blather on about one's emotions. Hadn't he been told that enough from his own Father? Would you like a dress to wear Rolly? One with a long enough hem to wipe away those tears? his Father had been fond of saying to his young son. How he had hated to hear his Father's drinking buddies laughing up a storm at that one. Nope, doesn't pay to let anyone see you in your weak moments. Bonnie's voice called out from the back porch just as Roland began sanding his latest find from last weekends flea market.

"Roll, Pen's on the phone!" her chirpy voice informed him.
"Okay!"

Bonnie enjoyed Saturday mornings. As much as she adored being a part of her husband’s business and helping the customers find a treasure with which to decorate their homes, she couldn't help but look forward to the slower, more easy going pace the weekend would bring. It's true, sometimes Roll would be up before the birds to attend various garage sales, flea markets and the local trash & treasure but this did not mean Bonnie had to join him. In the earlier part of their marriage she didn't miss one.
The endless bartering however, started to wear on her nerves and she slowly, bit by bit, opted to stay home. Roland loved the challenge of haggling. It gave him a buzz and a thrill to whittle the seller down to the very last cent. He was happy even if it nearly came to blows, well, let's be honest, especially if it nearly came to blows.

Not that her husband was a violent man. In fact, he was the complete opposite. Big, tall and strong with a perpetual scowl on his weathered face, Roland Anderson had once been tremendously misunderstood. During his younger years, it had taken the thoughtful insight of a younger Miss Bonnie Lang to see how deep his feelings truly went. Not that she knew this by the man sharing his thoughts with her. Relying mostly on grunts and head nods for communication, Roland was a man of few words. His actions however, spoke volumes. He would do anything for those he loved.

The blanket placed over her legs when she accidently fell asleep on the couch. The freshly cut flowers on the dining room table to greet her in the morning. The glass of water and aspirin on her bedside table when she'd complained of a headache. These kinds of gestures had been present from their very first date and that was the Roland Anderson that Bonnie had fallen in love with.

Hearing the phone ring as she made her morning cup of tea, Bonnie reached over to answer.

"Anderson residence!" she greeted in her usual friendly manner.

"Hey Mum," Penny said warmly.

"Penny! Morning darlin'. How are you?"

"Yeah good. We've almost finished unpacking and we managed to find a pool guy who was willing to come out today to see what can be done about that green mess out the back."

"You only called him today? Oh Pen, you're leaving things a little long aren't you?" Bonnie scolded, instantly regretting her words. Sometimes it was hard to not parent a child that was now all grown up.

"Sorry Pen," she said before her daughter could reply.

"Oh no no. You're right Mum. We have been kind of lazy about things since we moved in. Truth be told, we didn't see the need to rush, what with it being the holidays and all. But!" she said excitedly. "We're upping the ante now because we've decided to throw a house warming party. We want you and Dad to come."

"Oh okay. Gosh, are you sure that's smart so close to Christmas? I'm not nagging, I'm just thinking it may be hard for people to attend what with it being the silly season and all."

"Yeah, I did think of that. But ultimately, as long as you and at least a couple of our friends can attend, then it'll be worth it. What do you think about next Saturday Night?"

"Ahhhh...let's see. Yep. That's do-able," she decided, looking at her calendar.

"Groovy! Hey have you still got those fairy lights from Dad’s 60th? In fact, is Dad around? I thought I'd put him in charge of drinks and wanted to ask him if O'Malleys is still trading."

"Well, yes to all three questions. We have the fairy lights boxed up under the stairs, your Dad is out the back and Daniel O'Malley runs 'O'Malley's' now. Shane O'Malley became an accountant and works in the city."

"You know, I can just picture Dan running that place. Thanks for the info Mum, can you throw Dad on now?"

"Sure, just a second," Bonnie replied, placing the phone on the counter. A housewarming party would be nice she thought as she opened the back door. I just hope the ghost doesn't decide to join in the fun she thought feeling nervous.
Straightening her skirt and swiping the hair out of her eyes, Penny nervously knocked on her neighbour's door. She'd tried Estelle's place first but there had been no answer. Not even having had a glimpse of who lived on the left of their house, Penny was caught between curiosity and anxiety as she rapped her knuckles on the door again. Hearing a rustling noise to her right, she followed the sound and spied a young boy sitting high up in a tree.

"Oh hello up there," she called, trying to sound friendly.
"Hey. You looking for my Mum?" the boy of about twelve asked.
"Well, I guess so. I was just coming over to say Hello. I'm your new neighbour."
"Mum's in the sauna. We just got back from Melbourne last night." The boy jumped down, grabbing branches on the way.
"I'm Jessie," he said, sticking out his hand.
"Hi Jessie. That was quite a jump! Listen, your Mum is probably too busy right now to..."
"Hi!" a warm voice yelled out from the backyard. A woman of about Penny's age, draped in a towel, was walking toward the driveway. Short and tanned, with an open and friendly face, the woman, whom Penny could only assume was Jessie's Mother, finished putting her blonde hair into a ponytail and gave her a quick wave.
"Sorry. Haven't had a good steam in two weeks and needed to unclog the pores, you know? I'm Cathy...Cathy Tanner," she said, sticking her hand out in the same way Jessie had.
"Hey Cathy. Penny."
"So someone finally bought the haunted castle huh? That house is too pretty to be left empty. Glad someone decided to ignore all the silly stories. Want to come inside for some Tang?" Cathy asked, ushering Penny toward the back.
"Um...sure. Wait," she said, stopping dead in her tracks. "Haunted castle?"
"Oh," Cathy moaned. "You didn't know? My husband always says I have a permanent foot in my mouth."
"Didn't know what?"
"Come on. Come inside. I may as well fill you in. Don't look so worried. It's really all just a bunch of tall tales and hearsay. That last couple just bought into all the hype you know?"
Not knowing what the hell she was on about, Penny reluctantly followed Cathy inside.

"So there is hope for the old swimming hole then?" Russell asked, crouching down to inspect the pool guy's findings.
"Yep. It may look bad but your PH level is low enough that we don't need to drain it. I'll shock it with some granular chlorine, you let the pump run for 24 hours and you'll see a major improvement by next Tuesday."
"Fantastic. That's a relief. We wanted to have a party next Saturday so it's good to know the pool will be able to get used by then."
"Oh yeah. She'll be good to go by then for sure. You just moved in?"
"Yeah a few weeks ago actually but we've been taking our time about settling in. I should have gotten the pool sorted out by now. It took the decision to throw a party to really get me to do something about this."
Judging the guy to be competent at his job, despite his obvious young age, Russell was just debating about whether or not to hire him as their regular pool
cleaner when he heard the phone ring from inside the house. Leaving the guy to it, he ran inside and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" he answered breathing heavily.
"Uh...Russ?" a familiar voice said. "That you?"
"Mitch? It's me. I just ran in from out the back."
"So it was good to see you the other night. Dayna has been raving about how glad she is that you and Penny are back."
"Pen's been the same. In fact, I'm not sure she's told Dayna yet but we're throwing that party we spoke about next weekend. Short notice but are you guys free?"
"Should be. Even if we aren't, we'll cancel whatever it is to come to yours. Need help with anything?"
"Don't think so. We'll be getting the grog from O'Malleys and I'm sure Pen and Dayna can sort out the rest. I'm basically in charge of music and setting up tables and chairs."
"I have some trestle tables in the shed if you could use them?"
"Sounds good."
Tildy tugged on Russell's sleeve. "Dad?"
"Hang on a sec Mitch. What is it Tilds?"
"Can I unpack the box that says 'Books'? I want my Milly Molly Mandy stories."
"Yeah 'course. Just stack them on the built in shelves in the lounge room."
"Listen Russ," Mitch interrupted. "I can hear you're busy. Call me back or drop by when you want to sort out the tables okay?"
"Oh sure. Sorry about that. I best go anyway, got the pool guy here who says the pool isn't the disaster I thought it might be."
"So I guess I should bring my togs next Saturday then?"
"You betcha. Talk to you soon."
"No worries mate, Bye."
Tildy plonked herself down on the shag pile rug that lay beneath the bookshelves and opened the first box. At only six years old, Tildy knew she was a good reader for her age. She couldn't read a novel super fast like Joel could but she loved tracing her finger along the words and entering into alternate worlds filled with characters that felt like life long friends. Enid Blyton was a favourite. She had already finished all of The Magic Faraway Tree books and loved anything featuring children of her own age. Sometimes she even preferred books to TV but after Simone teased her about being a bookworm, she kept that opinion to herself. Noticing straight away that the first box contained her Mummy's books, she pushed it aside for later, intent on unpacking her own collection.

The next box did not have books at all but was instead filled with all of their family photo albums. Deciding to take a look at her old baby photos, Tildy pulled out the massive albums and noticed one that she had not seen before. Coloured a dull pink and falling apart along the spine, she very carefully opened up the front cover to have a look inside.

The photos were of people that Tildy did not recognise. Expecting to paw over the familiar pictures of herself and her siblings, she instead found herself looking at moments captured of people who looked like strangers.

'Loretta's Engagement Party' one of the photos was captioned. In the photo was a group of people dressed rather formally, standing in a room decorated with streamers. Everyone was smiling and holding glasses of drink that, from experience, Tildy knew tasted yucky. Last Christmas, tired of missing out on what her Mother referred to as 'bubbly', Tildy waited until no was looking and took a quick sip straight from the
bottle. Screwing her nose up at the memory, Tildy once again shook her head. Why anyone would deliberately drink something that tasted like sour leaves was beyond her. Besides, from what she could tell, it just made people act all show-offy and stupid. *Give me a chocolate milkshake any day* she thought to herself.

Slowly flipping through, it suddenly dawned on her that this album must have belonged to one of her Grandparents. Picturing Grandpa Anderson's mantle that held old photos of her beloved Nan and Pa in their youthful days, Tildy decided that she was looking at her Father's parent's photos rather than her Mum's, as she did not recognise a young looking Nan Anderson in any of these shots.

Most were of a handsome looking couple in various states of happiness - birthday parties, camping trips, two professional looking wedding portraits, a few of an obviously beloved pet dog. Finding it strange that there was none of her Father as a baby, Tildy decided he must not have been born yet.

Enjoying her trip back in time, Tildy suddenly found herself staring a face that was familiar. He wasn't in the main group that was posing for the photographer but was instead standing in the background. She almost did not recognise him at first, as he looked so happy. Gazing lovingly at one of the women mugging for the camera, Tildy realised she would know this man anywhere, happy or not. *The sad man* she realised with complete and utter astonishment *was real!*

Penny entered Cathy's home and smiled. Forgetting her earlier anxiety, she couldn't help but feel calm in the surroundings.

"Oh Cathy. Your home is beautiful! It feels like we're still outside!"

Looking around her lounge room through Penny's eyes, Cathy could see what her new neighbour meant.

"Oh I just love plants. I took up macramé last year and decided to hang a few of my favourite plant holders around the room."

"Macramé?" Penny enquired.

"Oh I know. It's pathetic really. I got so bored after having Jessie and quitting my job that I've tried every hobby there is to stay sane, you know?"

"I guess" Penny answered, realising that by looking after her family and running a household she sometimes forgot to pursue outside interests. *Maybe I should make time to do something creative too* she mused.

"So do you want that cold drink or should I put the kettle on?" Cathy asked, heading toward the kitchen. Following her through two wooden swing doors that felt like something out of a Wild West movie, Penny decided she could use a hit of caffeine.

"Oh coffee would be great. Thankyou."

Seating herself at the kitchen table, Penny suddenly remembered what bought her over in the first place.

"So Cathy. I actually came over to invite you to a housewarming party we're throwing next weekend. Do you think maybe you and your husband would like to come over? I know we don't know each other yet but I thought it'd be a nice way to get to know the neighbours."

"Next weekend..." Cathy repeated pushing her lips to the side. "That should be okay. I'm not sure if Brian will be here, he travels a lot for work but Jessie and I would be happy to pop over. Are kids invited though, or is it more of a dinner party?"

"Oh, it's going to be very informal. I have three kids of my own so Jessie would be more than welcome. In fact, my daughter Simone is probably only a year older than your son. He's about twelve isn't he?"
"Thirteen. There are no other kids his age on our street. I'm sure he'll be thrilled to know one of his new neighbours is about the same age. You take milk, sugar?"

Nodding her head yes to both, Penny again started to feel anxious as she recalled what Cathy had said outside.

"Um...so, what's this about my place being haunted then?" she asked, feeling foolish.

"Oh look. I'm sorry to have blurted that out so tactlessly. Truth be told, I don't believe any of it and I assumed you were of the same mind, seeing as you bought the place. Didn't your real estate agent tell you all about it?"

"No. I have no idea what you're talking about. It's true, the home was cheaper than we knew it should be but after getting it inspected and finding no faults structurally, we were just happy to think we'd nabbed a bargain." Penny thought back to a few other things their agent had mentioned.

"Now that I'm thinking about it, I actually did get a slight impression that the previous owner had had a hard time selling it. I recall the agent letting it slip that he'd added the back extension to attract a buyer. Which seemed odd to me, as it was an impressive property with or without the sunroom. Is there anything I should be worried about?"

"In my opinion? No." Cathy took a seat across from Penny and placed her hand on top of hers.

"You look spooked but don't be. Okay? I've lived next door to that house for five years and I've certainly not heard any chains rattling or bumps in the night." Taking a sip of her coffee, Cathy paused until she made sure Penny's shoulders were relaxing. Seeing her new neighbour offer a rueful smile and sensing her light tone had done the trick, Cathy gathered her thoughts and wondered how to best relay the information.

"Look, like I said, I've only lived here for five years so have just heard drips and drabs but basically, people around here are of the belief that your home has a resident ghost."

"Just one?" Penny quipped trying to match Cathy's relaxed tone.

"Well, as far as I know," she smiled. "Apparently it's the spirit of a lonely, harmless man who took his own life decades ago. Only two occupants have talked about it. An elderly lady who'd lived there since the fifties and the young couple who rented it out last year. If you ask me, the old lady made up the rumours to keep kids off her front lawn. As for Miss Green, well...drugs can make people believe in all kinds of crazy things."

"Drugs?"

"Miss Green and her boyfriend moved in around three years after we did so we were privy to their arrival. By the time autumn rolled around the following year, they were gone. The place had been empty for over a year until you came along."

Getting up to retrieve some biscuits from the pantry, Cathy gave Penny a minute to collect her thoughts.

"So wait a minute. If a grumpy old lady and some drugged up hippies are the only ones to have mentioned a ghost, then that would explain why our agent didn't say anything. It hardly affects a sale."

"That's true, but this is a small town and people talk. I'd assumed you would have heard. In the interim between the old lady dying and Miss Green moving in, that place had been left abandoned for nearly two years. Kids had been breaking in to have parties and were holding séances. I'm sure nothing ever really happened but you know what kids are like."

"But I grew up here and I don't recall an old lady saying her house was haunted."
"Well, I don't think the elderly lady's stories had quite the same impact as what went on recently. That poor young teacher ran around town telling all sorts of tall tales. I witnessed one of the episodes myself."

"A haunting episode?" Penny gasped feeling alarmed.

"No, a mental health episode. That woman totally lost it towards the end Penny. She just wasn't right in the head if you ask me."

"You say she was a teacher?"

"That's right. An art teacher. Took over from Mr Gringle when he retired. She was bright, fresh faced and friendly when she first arrived. Came over from Melbourne I believe. Sure, she was a little eccentric and looked more like one of the high school students than a teacher but she seemed harmless at first."

"So what happened?"

"Well, I asked her one day why she, a single young woman, was renting such a big place all on her own. She said that her Father didn't want her shut up inside some pokey little unit amongst other young folk who could be a bad influence. He thought that living on a quiet, suburban, family oriented street would help keep her grounded and safe. If you ask me, he wanted to keep tabs on her. He stayed over there all the time. Also paid her rent I believe."

"That's a little unorthodox, considering she was a grown woman," Penny stated.

"Maybe a little. I just put it down to her being a pampered little rich girl who liked playing the part of a carefree hippie. It seems she wasn't just playing pretend however. She got herself a marijuana-smoking boyfriend and had all sorts of wild parties over there. She and her Father had a massive row on the front lawn one day and after that he started coming over less. That's when things started getting out of hand. I even admit I called the police once to have them turn the music down."

Penny didn't know what to say to that and took another sip of her coffee.

"Don't get the wrong idea though. I'm no party pooper. I'm happy for my neighbours to let loose every now and again. I turn a blind eye to most things but when it's 3am on a Tuesday Night and my son is complaining he can't sleep because of all the noise, well, I end up taking any means necessary to make sure my family isn't disturbed."

"That's fair enough. I probably would have done the same."

"Anyway, a few months after she got together with her boyfriend, I caught her running around in her back yard, totally nude."

"What, as in no clothes on whatsoever?"

"That's right, she was as naked as the day she was born. To be honest, that, in and of itself, isn't so alarming. She was in her own private backyard after all. What was odd was what she was doing." Taking a long sip of her coffee, Cathy peered at Penny over the rim of the cup.

"Well...what was she doing?"

"Screaming. Screaming her freakin' little head off. 'That child is mine! Mine! You can't take away my baby!' she was wailing. It was like her poor little heart was breaking Penny. I'd never seen a person so overwrought."

"What baby? And who on earth was she screaming at?"

"No one Penny. That's the weirdest thing about it. She was completely alone."
Chapter Ten

Simone threw her Dolly magazine onto the bedroom floor and peered out the window. Her Father was talking to the pool guy out the back. With shiny sun bleached hair and the darkest tan Simone had ever seen, she could not believe what she was seeing. Surely he's no more than sixteen she thought gleefully. Opening her chest of drawers, she rummaged around until she found her bathing suit. Hastily pulling it on, she studied herself in the mirror. Feeling frustrated and restless, she scowled at herself in the mirror. I look like a twelve year old she thought mournfully. Dramatically throwing herself facedown onto the bed, she didn't notice her Mother entering the room.

"If you're waiting for the pool to be ready, you'll be waiting a long time sweetie," her Mother chuckled as she put away some laundry. After the unsettling chat she'd had with Cathy, Penny had decided that some predictably normal and uneventful housework was in order. It was the furthest thing from being creative but she could try her hand at a hobby another day.

"Mother!" Simone screamed. "Have you ever heard of knocking?"
"Why yes, I have," Penny responded, refusing to lose her cool.
"Oh, so you've heard of it but you don't bother respecting me enough to knock first? Geez...I get no bloody respect around here! I'm sick of it!"
Silently counting to ten so as to not give in to the snappy response that was on the tip of her tongue, Penny let out a long drawn out sigh.
"I'm sorry Sim, I didn't know you were in here."
Penny sat down on the edge of the bed.
"Listen, I don't appreciate the use of bad language, but you're right. I probably should have knocked first."

Feeling surprised that her Mother was agreeing with her, Simone decided to say nothing. Crossing her arms over her chest, she instead looked up at the ceiling.
"Dinner will be ready at five," Penny told her as she stood up to close her daughter's bureau drawer.
"Mum?" Simone squeaked out quietly.
"Yes?"
"I'm sorry too. I've just been feeling moody lately. I don't know why."
Fighting an urge to grab her daughter into a fierce embrace, Penny just leant against the doorjamb and gave her little girl a small smile.
"Thanks Sim...and I understand. Change isn't easy."
"Mmmm. It's not change that's hard. It's waiting for things to change that is so frustrating."
"Oh?"
"Sometimes I think I'll look like a dorky, flat chested kid forever." Feeling embarrassed that she'd shared so much; Simone felt her face turn bright red.
"Oh Simone!" Penny cried, almost crying in relief. "That's what has been bothering you? Oh sweetie, believe me, you don't want to be in such a hurry to grow up. Sometimes I wish I could have stayed your age forever. Getting older comes with a lot of responsibilities. Just enjoy being young while you still can."
"Urgh! I knew you wouldn't get it!" Simone yelled, pushing her Mum towards the bedroom door.

Realising she'd said the wrong thing but knowing nothing more she said would get through to her daughter now, Penny reluctantly left the room. Would she ever figure out the right way to talk with her teenage daughter?
Simone knew she was being harsh but her Mum was totally clueless. Be a kid forever? What a joke! Everyone knew adults had it made. No parents telling them what to do, no curfews, no problem catching the eye of a hot older guy. Sneaking another glance out the window, Simone decided to try her luck anyway. *Maybe he's closer to my age than he looks* she thought hopefully as she made her way down the stairs.

Joel sat in the front hall by the phone staring at the receiver. *Just pick it up and call her* he said to himself for the hundredth time. He broke the aloe vera leaf in half to get more of the gel out. He'd written the number down on paper when he first woke up that morning and was now trying to think of clever and witty things to say to Ella on the phone. *So that party we spoke about is probably going ahead. May wanna bring your bathers if you're keen for a swim.* Shaking his head at how dorky he was being, Joel snatched up the phone and starting dialling.

"Joooooel! Where are you?" his Mother yelled from the kitchen. Slamming the phone down in frustration, Joel got up and dragged his feet down the hallway.

"Oh, there you are! Dad wants you to talk with the pool guy. Apparently he feels it's important that you know how to care for the pool. Which is probably a good idea seeing as..." Penny's voice trailed off as she watched Joel nod his head and make his way out to the back yard. Sliding the screen door open, he was pushed aside as Simone made her way towards their Father. Following her out to the two men crouched beside the pool; he couldn't help but notice the odd way she was behaving. Sticking out her hip and twirling her hair around her finger, his sister seemed intent on getting the pool guy's attention.

"Gross Joel thought he's older than me!"

Looking at him with absolute horror, Simone whirled around and punched him in the arm.

"YOU COMPLETE MORON!" she screamed as she ran off further down the back.

"What the hell?" Russell exclaimed as he turned toward Joel.

"You'll thank me later," Joel smirked as he slapped his Dad on the back.

"So I hear a lesson in pool care is in order," he directed to the pool dude.

"Hey Mate. Dave," Pool Guy said, offering his hand.

Simone watched on from behind the lemon tree. Feeling absolutely humiliated, she felt the beginning of tears behind her eyelids. Just as she was about to give in to them, she heard a noise from above, "Psssst."

Swirling around in surprise, she scanned all over the backyard, looking for the source of the sound.

"Over here," a voice spoke, only louder this time.

Letting her eyes turn upward, she finally spotted the owner of the voice. A young boy, probably about her own age, was sitting high up in a tree house over in the yard next door.

"Oh!" Simone cried out in surprise. "You startled me!"

"Sorry, you looked upset and I didn't know if I should talk or not."

"You build that tree-house?" she asked, trying to change the subject.

"Nah. My Dad did. I helped but I'd be lying if I said my help made a real difference."

Climbing up onto a branch, Simone tried to reach the top of the fence. Realising
what she was trying to do, the boy reached out to her.
"Here, grab my hand and hoist yourself up and over. You can use my Dad's BBQ to make your way down." Following his instructions, Simone suddenly found herself in her neighbour's back yard. Glancing around nervously, she looked for a way up.
"There's a ladder on your right," he offered. Simone climbed up into the coolest tree house she had ever seen.
"Wow!" she breathed out slowly. "This is so cool."
"I'm Jessie," the boy said suddenly, sticking out his hand.
"Oh, Simone," she replied awkwardly accepting his handshake.
"So, who's the moron then?" Jessie smirked at her.
Trying not to laugh and realising that she was no longer angry, Simone took a seat on a bright green beanbag and started giggling.
"Something funny?" Jessie asked, joining her on the floor.
"I guess I'm the moron actually," she admitted, feeling silly about her attempt to get the pool guy to notice her.
Having watched the whole thing and not wanting to tease her any further, Jessie decided to change the subject.
"So have you seen the ghost yet?" he asked, watching closely for a reaction.
"Huh?" she responded looking confused.
"Guess your Mum hasn't told you. My Mother gave her the whole run down this morning. Your place is supposed to be haunted."
"You...are...kidding...me!" Simone squealed feeling excited. A big grin spread out across her face.
"You're not scared?" Jessie asked in surprise.
"Scared? Hell no! This is so exciting!! Tell me everything!"
Smiling at her enthusiasm, Jessie decided he liked Simone. He'd been disappointed that the kid next door his own age, the one he'd heard his new neighbour talk about, was actually a girl. He was swiftly coming around to the idea now however. Reaching into his secret lollie stash, he handed her a Polly Waffle.
"You may need this," he stated with a grin.
Ripping open the wrapper, Simone smiled at her new friend. Maybe this summer wouldn't be so boring after all!
Chapter Eleven

Estelle added another layer of concealer to her eyelid and inspected her face in the vanity mirror. *It'll have to do* she thought mournfully as she proceeded to comb out her hair. She had heard the knock on the door earlier but wasn't up to facing the neighbours. Todd had been in an especially nasty mood this morning and had taken it out on her face.

Which was surprising really. He was usually a lot smarter about where the evidence of his beatings showed. Rubbing her finger along the top of her thigh, she remembered the night he had mistaken her flesh for an ashtray. Not that she hadn't deserved it of course. That was the last time she'd cooked eggs for his breakfast. *How was I to know he hated eggs* she thought in frustration. Quickly pushing that thought to the back of her mind she instead decided to focus on the night that lay ahead. Todd was to be away on business until Tuesday and had left implicit instructions to Estelle that she was to not leave the house until his return. What she was supposed to do with herself until then, she had no idea. She hated reading, TV was okay but it never held her interest for long.

Looking at her face again, she wondered if anyone could actually tell she'd been hit. Biting her lower lip and feeling nervous, she opened her wardrobe and fantasised about leaving the house.

Feeling especially chipper, Todd made his way down to the city centre. Revving the engine and turning up his stereo he congratulated himself again on how he had handled Estelle that morning. *Silly cow didn't know which way was up anymore* he thought with a chuckle. He had always known the right places to hit, the sensitive spots as well as the most likely areas to remain hidden - the upper arms, the abdomen and her back. The look on her face when he'd smacked her square in the eye was a sight to behold. Those big baby blues got even bigger and her lower lip quivered uncontrollably until he had shocked her into silence with one word, 'NO!' It worked on babies and puppy dogs, and evidently it worked on her too.

Making a left and pulling into the underground car park, Todd nodded his head at the attendant and turned his thoughts to the redhead waiting in Room 215. He'd been working so damn hard these past few weeks. He deserved a well earned break. At least he could relax knowing that Estelle would stay put. He knew she would be too damned vain to let anyone see her with a swollen eye. He just hoped it was almost back to normal when he returned. He hated looking at an ugly face.

Dayna waved goodbye to Mitchell as he pulled out of the drive. Russell had called earlier to see if Mitchell wanted to visit the O'Malleys pub that evening - something about catching up with Daniel O'Malley and organising the drinks for next Saturday Night. Dayna smiled to herself as she thought about the up and coming party next weekend. She'd had such a good time at the last big party she'd attended with the McVees. It was a long time ago but it'd been such a joyous night that Dayna had never forgotten it. Roland Anderson's 60th was an event that had bought the whole town out of their homes and into the Anderson's backyard.

Mitchell had gotten so sloshed that night that he'd disappeared for hours and couldn't remember a thing the next morning. Not that Dayna had minded. She was used to her husband's tendency to drink too much. She'd be a hypocrite to complain. She'd always been partial to a drink or two herself. She'd spent the evening dancing and laughing it up with her old high school buddies, playing the old 'remember when we did this' game. Reminiscing and indulging in a bit of nostalgia had been so much
fun for Dayna that she was looking forward to a similar night at the McVees next weekend.

Feeling restless, she dialled Penny's number to see what she was up to. Maybe they could start planning the party together over at her house. The twins were at a sleepover and Robby was old enough to make his own plans, which she was sure he already had.

Penny answered on the second ring and told Dayna to bring herself over with a bottle of wine and pen and paper. Party planning sounded like a swell idea and why not make a night of it with a bit of a drink or two? With the sun not due to go down for another hour yet, Dayna decided to cross over the bridge now.

"Mum, can I head over to Robby's place tonight?"
"Well sure, his Mum just called and is coming over here for the evening. Are you sure you guys don't want to hang out here with us?"
"Um..."
"On second thoughts, I'm sure you'd rather not be stuck with two old ladies on your Saturday Night. Just let me know what your exact plans are and be home before midnight. Okay?"
"Sure thing!" he cried, kissing her on the cheek. After calling up Robby and agreeing to meet him in his rumpus room, Joel ran upstairs to decide what to wear. He had a plan to swing by Ella's place on the way and wanted to make sure he looked good before he did. He'd dialled her number a thousand times over the last eight hours and just couldn't bring himself to let it connect. He wanted to see her in person anyway and thought it couldn't hurt to just knock on her door.

Ella, just at that moment, was sitting at her Mother's dressing table, staring at the shiny green telephone. Picking it up to check for a dial tone, Ella sighed at the familiar sound and placed it back in its cradle. Was it ridiculous to expect him to call the very next day? It being the weekend, she'd assumed he'd want to do something tonight. Wandering into the kitchen and opening up the fridge, Ella was disappointed to find that nothing new had materialised since she'd last checked the contents ten minutes ago. She wished for the hundredth time that her Mother was home to talk to. Her Mum was always so confident and charming. Hell, both her parents were. Surely they'd have some sort of advice to give her. Both career oriented and successful, Ella was the only teenager she knew who had a Mother who worked as much as her Dad did. Tonight they were at a business dinner trying to woo a new client. Ella had decided long ago that she'd never work weekends when she grew up.

Sure, she was proud that her parents were so hip and modern. Their home was flashy and impressive, with a hot tub and a games room but it had no life in it. This was not only due to the lack of people in it but also the ultra modern decor. Not like the Harrison's home. She adored Robby's parents; Dayna with her pixie cropped hair and flower printed dresses and Mitchell always cooking up a storm in the kitchen. That house was always a mess with the twins running about making all sorts of noise. Ella was always made to feel like a part of the family whenever she visited. Robby almost felt like a brother to her.

Switching on the TV, she turned the dial until she saw an old black and white movie on the screen. Deciding to settle in for the night with Audrey Hepburn and a bowl of popcorn, she was startled to hear the front door bell ringing. Frowning whilst she made her way to the door, she found herself thinking of Joel again. Surely he would have called first if he wanted to pop over?
Ella was pleased to see his face through the peephole and opened the door wide. "Oh, Ella, good you're home!"

"A fact you could have confirmed if you'd picked up the phone." Worried that her comment gave away the fact she'd been impatiently waiting for his call, Ella offered him a sheepish smile.

"Would you judge me too harshly if I confessed that I tried to call but kept chickening out?" Joel suddenly seemed fascinated with his feet as he shuffled his shoes about and scuffed up the front door mat. Finding his awkwardness adorable, Ella burst into laughter and dragged him inside.

"Come in and quit acting so shy Joel. I've been waiting by the phone all day!" Laughing and feeling a massive sense of relief, Joel let himself be led inside.

"Where are your Mum and Dad?" Joel asked, taking in the modern furniture and the spotless kitchen.

"Oh they're at a client dinner. They're both lawyers." Ella rolled her eyes and opened up the fridge to find something for Joel to drink.

"Both of them?" Joel was impressed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd met a Mother who worked. He knew his Mum wanted to be a nurse or something before he was born but she seemed happy enough now and never said anything to the contrary.

"So you have no brothers or sisters? I think I remember Robby saying so."

"That's right. Just me and the two work-a-holics."

Sensing it was a sore point, Joel didn't know whether to prod further or change the subject. Before he could make up his mind, Ella solved that problem by suddenly kissing him full on the mouth. Asking him if he wanted to see her room, Ella took Joel's hand and headed toward a grand staircase. Joel quickly decided that Robby could wait a while longer as he followed Ella upstairs.

Whilst Ella had been fixing Joel a drink at her place, Robby was preparing the rumpus room for his friends visit. Two bowls of cheezles and a six pack of beer that he'd swiped from his Father's bar fridge would do just fine, he figured. Looking for another LP to impress Joel with, he skimmed through his collection and decided on some Led Zeppelin. Glancing at the clock and wondering what was taking Joel so long, he decided to crack open one of the cans while he waited.

Meanwhile, over the other side of the creek, Dayna was knocking on Penny's door and was pleased when Tildy answered on the second knock.

"Tildy? Is that you? Gosh sweetie, you were just a little toddler the last time I saw you."

"Mum's in the shower. She said I could open the door if a lady with short blonde hair was knocking. I peeked through the window and you have short blonde hair."

"That I do. I guess you don't remember me then?"

"No. But that's because I was just a kid back then. I'm six now you know. Wanna come in?" Charmed by how cute Tildy was, Dayna said thankyou and entered the house.

"Daynes?" Penny shouted from upstairs.

"Yeah it's just me! Tildy here said she was to only open the door for beautiful shorthaired ladies. She said I fit the description." She gave Tildy a wink and Tildy grinned back. Penny gave a laugh and said she'd be right down.

"You can come into the kitchen if you like. Mummy made a treat for you. She said I had to wait until you got here though before I could have some."
"Ooooooh, whatcha got then munchkin? I love treats."
"Me too!" Tildy cried like they shared a rare thing in common.
"Sorry Dayna," Penny said, entering the kitchen. "I really needed that shower. I've been baking all afternoon and it made me all hot and sweaty."
"Oh no no, that's cool. These cupcakes look amazing."
"Well, dig in. Tilds, you have been very patient love. You can help yourself to one but remember it's bedtime at seven o'clock okay?"
"Sure Mum," her daughter yelled out as she grabbed two cupcakes and ran upstairs.

"Hey! I said one!" Penny cried out laughing. She didn't really mind to be honest. Her youngest daughter had been unusually quiet this afternoon. Finding her in the lounge room earlier, staring at an old photo album, Tildy had slammed it shut and looked so white, that Penny had feared her child was ill. Not really answering when Penny had asked if she was okay, Tildy had instead asked if they could do some baking. Deciding that would be a nice idea, Penny had agreed, forgetting all about the albums.

"Wow, this place is so pretty Penny! I had no idea." Turning in a circle to get the full effect, Dayna shook her head in amazement. "I've never been in here before. I love it! Where do you keep your wine glasses?"
"Top cupboard above the dishwasher," Penny replied taking a seat at the kitchen island. "So you like the house then? Even if it is haunted?"
"Bugga. You've heard the stories then? I wasn't sure whether I should mention it or not," Dayna replied, pouring them both a glass of wine.
"Yeah, the neighbour filled me in."
"Which one? Estelle or Cathy?"
"Oh you know both of them?" Penny exclaimed, surprised.
"Kind of. Cathy is great. She attends the pottery class I like to go to every Thursday night. She's into yoga too, they have great instructors at the RSL. Estelle I only know of through because Mitchell purchased our car off of her husband last year. She's an odd duck, that one."
"I had the same opinions myself. Cathy seems lovely. She was very warm and chatty. Estelle on the other hand is hard to figure out. She dropped off a casserole yesterday but didn't stick around long enough for me to get a proper impression. I was going to invite both of them to the party though."
"Well, seems appropriate I guess. It's only good manners to inform the neighbours that you may be increasing the noise level that night. Seeing as you're new to the street, it couldn't hurt to get to know them. Just make sure you keep Russ away from Estelle. She doesn't mind coming on to other people's husbands."
"Choking on her wine, Penny felt her face go bright red."
"Hey!" Dayna cried, whacking Penny on the back. "I was only kidding. She's just a shocking flirt that's all."

Feeling the old guilt creep up again, Penny decided a change of subject was in order. "Sorry! It just went down the wrong way. Hey, let's put some music on. Russell will be playing DJ at the party and I've decided to hide all the Rodney Rude records. I hate it when the music stops and the men decide to throw that rubbish on."
"Good idea. Hey remember when we all tried to sing along to that Everly Brothers song at your father's party? Seeing your Dad trying to hit all those high notes was so funny!"

Knowing full well that she wasn't there to witness that particular moment, Penny found herself realising that what had happened between her and Mitchell that night
would not go away. Whilst others had commented on Mitch being absent for a big chunk of the evening, no one had ever noticed that Penny had also been gone for a short amount of time. Penny, unlike Mitchell, had not had the option to just ditch the party and go home. It was her Father's 60th after all. Her presence would have been missed eventually. That evening, after straitening her skirt and fixing her hair, Penny had meekly re-joined the festivities, silently praying that no one could see the flush in her cheeks or smell the guilt emanating from her pores.

"Mmm...Dad always fancied himself a bit of a singer," she replied vaguely. "I hope your party goes as well as that one did Pen. That was such a fantastic night."

"Yeah, it should be great," Penny answered, sliding an Abba album out of its sleeve. "Where's Simone and Joel tonight?" Dayna enquired, flipping through the rest of the McVee's record collection.

"Simone complained of a headache earlier, so I sent her to bed with an aspirin and Joel is probably at your place by now. Didn't Robby tell you they made plans to hang out tonight?"

"No, but I'm glad. I let Robby pretty much do his own thing these days. He's a good kid. We decked out the rumpus room when it became evident that he and his friends needed their own space to hang out."

"That reminds me, Joel seems quite taken with one of your neighbours. I think her name is Ella?"

"Ella," Dayna said the girl's name with a sad smile on her face. "She's such a doll that girl. May as well be an orphan though, what with her being left alone most of the time."

"What do you mean? Where are her parents?"

"They're a couple of business types. The Mum, surprisingly, is even worse than the Dad. Both of them are lawyers who work practically twenty four hours a day. Ella stops by at least twice a week, conveniently at dinner time. I don't think the poor thing knows how to prepare herself a good home cooked meal. Mitchell has taken to making a bit extra every night just in case she stops by."

"Mitchell still does all the cooking for you? My goodness Penny, I would love it if Russell cooked for me sometimes."

"Oh but Penny, Russell is such a catch and you know it! Sometimes I can't believe how gorgeous he is. I swear Mitchell has a man crush on him," she laughed, thinking of how often he's talked about Russ and Penny since they'd moved back.

"Well, hopefully they're having a lovely romantic date at O'Malleys then," Penny giggled. "To Mitch and Russ!" Dayna cheered, holding her glass up high. Getting up to dance to 'Waterloo', Penny laughed at her friend and joyfully joined in.

Simone heard her Mother and Dayna grooving along to Abba downstairs and figured that now would be a good time to sneak out. She and Jessie had had a fabulous time in his tree house that afternoon. After being called inside for dinner, Jess had made Simone promise to look out for a signal after the sun went down.

"I'll signal you and then you climb over the fence to the tree-house okay?" Two flashes of light had caught her attention a few minutes ago, coming from the direction of Jessie's backyard. Putting on her backpack, which she'd stuffed full of supplies earlier, Simone opened up her bedroom window and started making her way down the garden trellis.
Jessie hoped Simone had been looking out for the flash of his torch. Deciding to try again in ten minutes, he set about lighting four big fat candles, which were placed in each corner of the tree house. He’d told his Mother about meeting Simone earlier and his Mother had been pleased to hear that he’d made a new friend. His Father, who travelled a lot for work, would probably not be as happy. He would be disappointed to find out his son’s new friend was a girl. Jessie couldn’t help it if all the boys in his class thought he was a dork. He was teased relentlessly this past year for wearing the wrong clothes, liking the wrong music and being more interested in his comic books than sports. His Dad had given up trying to encourage his son to become some kind of football star. Brian had been a celebrated athlete back in his day and now loved nothing more than sitting in front of the TV, cheering on his favourite team.

One Saturday afternoon, when Brian had thought he and Jessie were bonding over a grand final match, he’d caught his son doodling pictures all over the TV Week Magazine. He’d turned Ernie Sigley’s face into that of a wizard - a pointed hat and a long flowing beard. He’d snatched the pen his son was holding out of his grasp and threw it across the room in disgust.

"You're not even watching!" he’d bellowed at his boy. "You just missed the mark of the season because you're too busy drawing your pathetic pictures!"

Knowing he was being unfair and even a little cruel, Brian had apologised to Jessie after the game was over, explaining that he was just disappointed. Having a son was like a dream come true he’d said. He’d been dreaming since Jessie was a baby of all that they’d share. Feeling guilty and depressed about not being the son his Father had so obviously wanted was hard on Jessie. He’d heard his Mother berate his Dad about his treatment of their only son. *He may not be a carbon copy of you Brian, but he’s a wonderful little guy. You should really get to know him instead of trying to change him.* He’d loved his Mum for trying and was heartened to hear his Father sound remorseful. He had enough presence of mind to know that their not getting along was not necessarily his fault. He was just a different kind of person to his Dad. Still, no matter how much he knew this in his heart, he still sometimes wished he were different.
Sitting at the bar, laughing uproariously at Daniel's stories, Russell was having a fantastic time. With his wild red hair and natural good humour, Daniel, along with his brother Shane, had been good friends of both Mitchell and Russ during their university years. Daniel had spoken to Roland Anderson earlier that afternoon and had been happy to give the McVee's a good deal on the cost of the alcohol. All Russell had had to do was work out the quantities and what beverages they wanted. After the business of organising drinks for the housewarming was over, Russell had decided to stay a bit longer and have a few beers. Mitchell agreed to that idea and ordered the first round. Dan was happy to see the two men. They shared some great memories together and he was happy to let his bar staff take over most of the work that evening so he could chat with his old mates.

"Hey Mitch, remember that time we tried magic mushrooms and you thought you were a Christmas beetle?" Daniel laughed.

"Oh man...that was a freaky experience. I swear, it was not my reflection when I looked in the mirror!"

"Was that the night we played the Beatles 'White' album over and over again and that guy was convinced he was John Lennon?" Russell asked.

"Ha! No, that guy was convinced he was George Harrison. Then Mitch came out of the bathroom yelling 'I'm a beetle, I'm a beetle!' and the dude started shouting back "No I'm a Beatle, I'm a Beatle!" Daniel called out, slapping his hand down on the bar. They all laughed loudly at the funny memory.

At that moment, a woman walked into the bar. People had been wandering in and out of the establishment all night. Couples out for a quiet drink, groups of young men looking to get smashed and play pool, the occasional loner who would take a seat at the end of the bar and stare into his beer like it had all the answers. A single woman on her own however, was rare - especially one as good looking as this lady. Heads turned as she made her way towards the bar. Dressed in expensive clothes but wearing a little bit too much make-up, the woman spotted Russell and Mitch and gave them both a sidelong glance.

"Do you know her?" Russell asked when Daniel gave the woman a nod.

"That's Estelle Newberry. Her husband owns Newberry Motors. Haven't seen her in here before though."

Daniel moved over to Estelle to take her order.

"That woman is trouble," Mitchell said quietly, emptying his beer glass and signalling for a refill.

"How so?" Russell asked his interest piqued.

"She's an attention seeker of the worst kind. Come to think of it Russ, I think she may be your new neighbour."

Remembering what Penny had said about the Stepford Wife next door, Russ started putting two and two together.

"You know what, I think that must be the woman Penny told me about yesterday. Apparently she bought over a casserole to welcome us to the neighbourhood. I got the impression that Penny didn't think much of her."

"Not surprising. She's hardly somebody a nice woman like Penny would befriend. She may look like she comes from money, but honestly, this chick has absolutely no class. Her husband is a bit of a jerk too. Tried to rip me off last year when we decided to buy a new car. I nearly ended up taking my business to a dealership in town but as soon as I mentioned that, he ended up cutting me a fair deal."
"I'm pretty sure Penny was thinking of inviting them next Saturday though. We've already invited the neighbours from the other side."

"Oh well, one party doesn't mean you have to end up being best friends."

The men both watched as Estelle sashayed towards the jukebox. Bending over further than was absolutely necessary, Estelle chose a Donna Summer song. Suddenly filling the bar with the raunchy disco track, Estelle started to seductively mouth the words *ahhhh love to love you baby*. Finding this display more humorous than sexy, Russell started chuckling under his breath. All the men in the place watched Estelle as she gyrated back toward the bar. To Russell's surprise, he soon realised her attentions were entirely focused on him.

"Wanna dance?" she slurred, as she made an embarrassing attempt to look desirable.

"Uh, no thanks. I'm good," Russell spoke quietly, so as not to embarrass her. Mitchell looked on nervously, wondering where Estelle's husband was. Todd Newberry may think his reputation was impeccable but everybody knew the slick businessman had a nasty temper. Mitchell doubted that the man knew what his wife was up to this evening.

Seeing the look of determination in her eye, Daniel finished serving drinks to the guys at the pool table and decided to step in for his friend.

"Estelle!" he said loudly, to make her shift her gaze from Russell's face.

"What?" she barked angrily, losing her balance as she swung her head in Daniel's direction.

"How about we get you a glass of water."

"Huh?" she frowned in confusion. "I haven't even finished my vodka yet!"

Steering her towards a booth in the corner, Daniel whispered in her ear.

"Does Mr Newberry know where you are tonight darlin'?"

"Yes!" she retorted, her eyes shifting guiltily from side to side.

"How about I get one of the bar staff to give you a lift home. You've had way too much to drink and I won't allow you to cause a scene in my establishment."

"Too much to drink? I just walked in Daniel. I've had one vodka!"

"You've had one vodka here. How many drinks did you have before you walked into my bar?"

Looking down at the ground, Estelle searched frantically for something to say. Damn Daniel anyway. Who was he to tell her what to do? Just because they'd hooked up that one time when she'd first arrived in town, didn't mean he had a say in what she did or didn't do. She smiled at the memory of the first time she'd met Daniel. Todd had been so busy turning his Father's car yard into a successful business that he'd had no idea his wife had started attending the local gym to keep herself busy. When Daniel had spotted her in the swimming pool that day, he'd been oblivious to the fact that she was a married woman. Breaking it off immediately when he'd realised who she was, he'd lived in fear for a good month and a half afterwards. If Todd ever found out, Daniel was convinced that he would beat his sorry ass to a pulp. Luckily, both he and Estelle had not told anybody about it and as far as he was concerned, the matter was forgotten.

"You know, Todd may be interested in hearing about how well we know one another Daniel. It may be smart of you to quit bossing me around."

Daniel glared at Estelle and wordlessly moved back behind the bar. Feeling flushed with victory, Estelle headed back toward the dance floor but was disappointed to see that Mitchell and Russell had left. The head bartender told Daniel that his friends had had to leave - something about one of them having had too much to drink.
"Damn it!" she muttered under her breath. Spotting her hunky new neighbour as she'd walked into O'Malleys had made her feel like fate was on her side. Bloody Daniel had to ruin everything she thought furiously, as she snatched up her purse and stormed back out to her car.
Chapter Thirteen

Tildy pulled the photo out from under her pillowcase and looked at the picture of the sad man again. She couldn't quite say why she felt such a connection to this person. Tracing her finger along his jawline, her head was filled with images she couldn't understand. A woman's face smiling and laughing, the sound of a baby crying, hands moulding clay into a ball. Tildy's head started to ache and she climbed down from her bed. She switched her thoughts toward Simone and was surprised to find she couldn't feel her in the room next to hers. Creeping along the hallway she pressed her ear up against her sister's bedroom door. Not hearing a sound, and more importantly, not sensing a presence, Tildy pushed the door open. Walking up to the mound on the bed, she prodded the lump underneath the covers and realised her sister had stuffed it full of pillows. Making sure it once again looked like the form of Simone sleeping, Tildy backed out of the room and crept to the top of the stairs.

She could hear her Mother and Dayna giggling and discussing the plans for the party. Tildy sat there debating with herself about whether or not to tell her Mother that Simone was not in her room. Picturing the wrath her sister would no doubt unleash on her if she dobbed, Tildy made the decision to keep quiet. Besides, her mind told her that Simone was not in any danger anyway. In fact, she felt she was close by and quite happy. *Maybe she's with the new neighbour boy next door* she thought as she tiptoed back to her bedroom.

Crawling back underneath the covers, Tildy thought about the photo album again and decided she would have another look through it tomorrow. She also thought about asking her Father if there were any more old albums from his childhood. Feeling happy that she had a course of action and not feeling at all apprehensive about what tonight's dreams may have in store, Tildy closed her eyes and fell straight asleep. It was not lost on her that discovering the man was real had lessened her anxiety somewhat. Instead of not making any sense and the dreams being something scary and confusing, Tildy now found herself looking at it as a mystery to be solved. This man was real and may need Tildy's help.

Next door, Simone was unpacking her backpack and listening to Jessie explain what a ouija board was.

"My cousin from Melbourne has one. We spent Christmas with them last year and we played around with it a bit. It's supposed to summon spirits or entities who are present."

"Did it work at your cousin’s place?"

"Not really," Jessie admitted reluctantly. "Everyone was being silly and you really have to take it seriously for it to work."

"Well, *I'll* take it seriously. I bought everything you asked for," Simone said, showing him all she had bought - paper, scissors, glue, two black textas, a drinking glass and a big piece of cardboard.

"Oh great! Perfect."

Simone and Jessie went about writing the alphabet in large neat print. Jessie decided Simone's handwriting was neater than his, so he began cutting out her letters to make twenty six square shapes. Arranging them in an arc and placing the words 'YES' and 'NO' on either side, he began gluing the letters onto the cardboard.

"Now. What you do is, you place one finger each on the glass and you begin to ask questions. The spirits then guide the glass toward 'YES' or 'NO' or they spell out messages."
"Hang on a minute. The glass will move all on its own?"
"Well yeah..." Jessie frowned, sensing Simone's distrust.
"But how do I know you won't just be pushing the glass toward whatever letters you want?"
"Mmm...you have a point." Jessie agreed. "Maybe we could hold our fingers just above the glass?"
"Would that still work?"
"I don't know."
"Oh let's just try it the right way first and we'll promise not to cheat. Okay?"
Simone stated, impatient to begin.
Placing both of their pointer fingers on to the glass, Jessie began speaking.
"Calling all spirits," he said in his best serious sounding voice. "If you hear me, please announce your presence."
Both children sat perfectly still waiting for a response. Except for the candles flickering a little bit more than they had been, nothing happened.
"Maybe you try," Jessie whispered.
"Um...hey spirits, I mean ghosts or whoever. Ah...please use this glass to answer us okay? Um. Point to yes if there is anyone else here other than me and Jessie."
"Jessie and I," Jess corrected.
"Shhhhh!" Simone admonished.
Feeling her arm getting tired, Simone took her finger off the glass.
"This is stupid," she pouted impatiently.
"Well, give it a chance!" Jessie retorted in frustration.
"Sorry."
Placing her finger back onto the glass, Simone once again asked for any spirits to make their presence known.
"Jessie!!!" a voice bellowed from below making both the children scream.
"Shit! It's my Mum!"
Simone held her breath as Jessie ran toward the ladder and peered through the treehouse doorway.
"Hey Mum," he called down sheepishly.
"Oh thank god Jessie," Cathy cried in relief. "I went to check on you and you weren't in your bed. What on earth are you doing up there? Are you burning candles?"
"Uh yeah. Sorry. I couldn't sleep. Don't worry, I'll blow the candles out and come inside in a minute."
"Okay," Cathy sighed, heading back toward the house.
Simone let out her breath and started to giggle.
"Woah, that was close," she laughed. "Can't believe your Mum didn't hear me scream too!"
"Yeah I know! My Mum's cool though. She just likes to know where I am, that's all."
"Well, maybe the spirits aren't out tonight anyway. I better go and get back into my bed before my Mum decides to check in on me."
"Okay. Maybe we could try again another night?"
"Oh for sure!" Simone agreed.
As she began to make her way back down the ladder, followed closely by Jessie, she thought she saw the glass move out of the corner of her eye. Deciding it was a trick of the moonlight she kept her mouth shut. There is probably no such thing as ghosts anyway she told herself.
Chapter Fourteen

Robby was dozing on the couch when he felt a hand shake him gently awake. "Robby...wake up man, it's Joel."
"What? When is it? I mean, what time is it?"
"I don't know, not quite ten o'clock?" Joel estimated.
"Where the hell you been? You said you'd be here hours ago!"
"I know man. I'm sorry. I ended up stopping by Ella's first and we lost track of time."
"Oh I get it," Robby rolled his eyes. "You got the serious hots for her huh?"
"I guess you could say that, yeah."
"Well where is she then?"
"She got spooked when her olds pulled up the driveway. She made me sneak out the back door. I climbed over their fence and nearly fell into the creek!"
"Serves ya right for ditching me," Robby grumbled, feeling slightly miffed that Joel had put Ella before him.
"Look I know. It was pretty lousy of me to forget the time like that. I just seem to lose my mind when I'm around that chick you know?"
"Well, not really. I've never put a girl before my mates."
"Maybe you've just never been in love before."
"Oh give me a break Joel. You've known her for two seconds. Here," he said as he threw him one of the four beers that were left. "I'll forgive you if you stay here for a bit and get pissed with me. I'm already half way there."
"Deal," Joel chuckled as he placed the record player needle back to the beginning of the album. The boys spent the rest of the night catching up on each other's lives. Joel envied Robby's seemingly charmed existence. His parents, more often than not, let him do whatever he pleased. The rumpus room was known as his domain and apparently neither one of his parents ever step foot inside. They just yelled from the back door whenever they needed him.
"Never?" Joel repeated disbelievingly.
"They really don't. They know what goes on in here but it's like they don't care. They were total hippies in their day man. They're all into freedom and letting me figure out who I am on my own terms, you know?"
"Well, actually I don't know. My olds, well mostly my Mum I guess, always want to know what I'm up to. It's never really bothered me before. When I look at this set up though..." Joel let the sentence hang.
"Mmm. So, you smoke dope then?"
Feeling nervous and wondering if he should just be straight up with his old friend, Joel chewed the inside of his mouth and decided to just tell the truth. "Honestly? I've never been given the opportunity."
"For real? I thought city kids were all about getting stoned."
"Maybe they are, but the crowd I hung with were more into sports I guess."
"You're not a sporty bloke though," Robby pointed out.
"I know, but the other choices were even less appealing. You had the total chess club nerds and the scary ass criminal crowd. I guess I just felt the kids who liked to kick the footy around at lunch time were more harmless."
"Guess so...well, I have a joint you could try. Want some?"
"Ahh...what the hell. Okay," Joel agreed impulsively. He'd had the best night so far. This could just make it even more fun. What harm could it do?
Ella sat on the lounge pretending to be watching TV when her parents walked into the room.

"Ella?" Melissa Kingston said in surprise as she shrugged out of her jacket. "I didn't think you'd still be up."

"Oh I got caught up watching an old movie. How did your meeting go?"

"Fantastic!" her Father Stephen answered as he poured himself a nightcap from the bar. "Your Mother worked her magic and the Baxters have agreed to let us handle their case."

"That's great," Ella offered, trying to sound enthusiastic. "Um...but listen, I was wondering something."

"Don't say 'um' Ella," her Mother scolded. "It makes you sound uneducated."

"Oh. Well. Sorry. Um. Oh, I mean..."

"Spit it out Ella."

"Well. I've made a new friend you see. His parents have just moved in and they're throwing a housewarming party next Saturday night? I was hoping to go. We're all invited."

"Next Saturday?" her Father asked.

"Yes. Can we go?"

"That should be fine but unfortunately we won't be able to join you darling. We promised the Baxters we'd be celebrating by this time next week."

"Oh of course," Ella said softly.

"Well don't sit there pouting. We didn't say that you couldn't attend. What are the parents like?"

"I've only met the Dad but he seems very nice. He's in advertising I think. Joel says his Mum is a real sweetie."

"And this Joel. He a responsible type then?" Mr Kingston asked.

"Oh he's fantastic Dad! You'll really like him. He's smart and funny. He loves music and he has two little sisters that he absolutely adores." Ella's voice trailed off as she realised she was gushing. Frowning at her daughter, Melissa felt the first jolt of concern enter her brain.

"A word of advice Ella. There is absolutely nothing wrong with making new friends, be they boys or girls. However, don't go getting all doe eyed over this Joel person. No boy is worth neglecting your studies over. You understand?"

"Yes Mum," Ella sighed, as she headed toward the bathroom. "I think I'll have a long soak in the bath and head in for the night."

"Okay sweetheart. Sweet dreams," her Mother said as her only child silently left the room.

"We may have a budding romance on our hands Mel," Stephen winked at his wife.

"Don't even joke about it," Melissa groaned as she snatched the brandy out of his hand.

Joel heard laughter and felt oddly let down. Maybe he just didn't have the kind of body that responded to marijuana. Marry-joo-wahna he thought as he stuffed another handful of cheezles in his mouth. Man, they tasted good - like a ring of cooked cheese and oh so salty. He ran his hands over his mouth to shift the crumbs and heard Robby laughing again.

"What the hell is so funny man?" he yelled as he turned his head toward his friend. To his surprise, Robby was lining up the pool cue to take a shot and was completely straight faced.
"Why don't you tell *me* Joel. You've been cackling like a school girl for the last five minutes."

Finding himself shocked and amused at the same time, Joel threw his head back and laughed.

"Robby! Ohhh man...I don't know what the hell is happening!"

Slapping his mate on the back, Robby just grinned and took the beer can out of Joel's hand.

"Probably best not to mix the two."

"Yeah. Probably." Joel knelt down on the floor and lay out on his back.

He didn't recognise the music that was playing but it seemed to swirl around his body like a blanket.

"My arms feel like marshmallows Robby. What sort of carpet is this? I feel like I'm sinking."

Feeling amused by his friends first stoner experience, Robby took another swig of beer and sifted through his record collection to find something that would totally blow his mate's mind.

"It's all part of it Joel. Just let yourself go with it. My first time was in the creek surrounded by trees. Alone! I'm surprised I ever tried it again after that experience."

"Trees. Trees are amazing aren't they?"

Laughing softly, Robby had to agree.

"That they are Joel."

Robby found the perfect album and slid it out of its sleeve.

"Get ready to have your mind blown!" he announced as he put the needle on the record.

Driving down the main street as they left O'Malley's pub, Mitchell checked his speed and wished he'd said no to the two shots they'd had before they left. He was feeling a little woozy and was hoping Penny would fix him a coffee when they got back to the McVee house. As his thoughts turned to Penny, Mitchell found himself remembering the scent of her skin, the curve of her lips and the way she swept all of her hair to one side to allow him better access to her neck. He may have only spent that one time making love to her but he had never forgotten how much she enjoyed having her neck kissed. He had never forgotten the way she had responded to him that night. The dream that had lain dormant for so many years had finally come true for Mitchell. His fantasy woman became a reality that was far better than anything he could have imagined.

He'd kidded himself before the night of Roland's party that his feelings for Penny had died with his youth. Marrying Dayna and having had three children had been life changing for Mitchell. He'd stopped daydreaming about Penny years ago and had truly believed that seeing her again would be no big deal. But it had. It had shaken him to the core when he and Dayna had been swept up into welcoming hugs from both Penny and Russell.

Russell, at that moment, having no clue what his friend was thinking about as they drove back to his place, was fiddling about with the stereo. He finally settled on a station and drunkenly began to sing along. "I got seven women on my mind, four that wanna hold me, two that wanna bone me, one cause she's a friend of mine....."

"I think it's 'two that wanna stone me', " Mitchell laughed, snapping out of his thoughts of Penny.

"Oh...oops. I think I like 'bone me' better. Hey! You missed the turn! Back up!"

Mitchell breathed out a sigh of relief as he pulled into Russell's driveway. Hoping
the women were still up but being mindful of waking the kids, Russell held his finger to his lips as he tried putting his key into the lock.

"Shit!" he cursed as he dropped his set of keys onto the ground. Laughing but still telling Mitch to be quiet, Russell tried again, only to have the door swing inwards before he connected the key with the lock.

"Come inside you giggling fool," Dayna laughed, as she pulled both men into the lounge room.

"Look at you! You're pissed!" Penny shook her head as Russell stumbled in and gave his wife a hug.

"Shhh! You'll wake the baby," Russell whispered.

"Baby?" Penny chuckled. "Have you time travelled back six years or something?"

"Ohhhh they're all still my babies," Russell said as he slapped his arm around Dayna. "Daynes knows what I mean, right Daynes?"

"Yeah I know Russ." Smiling at her husband over Russell's shoulder, Dayna asked Mitchell how much they had had to drink.

"Well," Mitchell began, "He seemed fine after five or six beers but he had two shots after the Stepford wife turned up and I think that's what tipped him over."

"Estelle?" Penny asked in surprise. "She and her husband were at O'Malley's?"

"Estelle yes, husband no," Mitch informed them.

"Well that doesn't sound right. She seemed afraid to not be there when he came home for lunch. Surely she wouldn't feel it's okay to go to a pub without him."

"When the cat's away and all that," Russ mumbled. "That little mouse wanted to play with me Pen. You may have to fight for ya man!" Russell found this hilarious and started to help himself to Dayna's bottle of wine. Gently coaxing it out of his hand, Penny put it up behind the bar.

"C'mon honey. Let's get you into bed shall we?"

Penny told Mitch and Dayna that they could help themselves to anything in the kitchen and crash in the spare room if they wanted to. Politely refusing, saying that Mitch seemed okay to drive home, Dayna kissed both Penny and Russ on the cheek and shut the front door quietly behind her. As they were opening the car doors to Mitchell's station wagon, a car careened wildly around the corner. Swinging into the Newberry's driveway and narrowly missing one of the garbage cans, Estelle clumsily got out of her car and stopped dead in her tracks as she spotted the Harrison's staring at her.

"You never saw me," she said quietly. "Understand?"

"Understood," Dayna responded as the woman stumbled toward her front door.
The next week flew by as preparations were being made for the party at the McVee house. Penny bumped into Estelle early Wednesday morning when they were both at the supermarket. Although in a rush, Estelle had graciously accepted her invitation and promised that both she and Todd would be delighted to attend. Penny and Russell had both decided to just do a letterbox drop for their other neighbours in the street, instead of formally inviting them all in person. The note stated that noise levels would be kept to a minimum (especially after midnight) and that those wishing to join them for a housewarming/Christmas bash were more than welcome.

Penny had hardly seen Joel who had been dividing his time between Robby and Ella's houses. Simone had become fast friends with Cathy's boy Jessie and Tildy had been content to sit quietly near the bookshelf, thumbing through photo albums and daydreaming.

So far Penny had a guest list of fifteen adults and seven kids and was preparing to cater for many more, just in case neighbours, other halves or friends of friends decided to drop by. Dayna and Mitchell had been a great help, as had Penny's Mum and Dad. By the time Saturday morning came around, they had the trestle tables and chairs set up, the party lights hung, the alcohol delivered and the speakers from the stereo had been placed to face out of the sunroom windows toward the backyard. Penny had been preparing food all week and yet still worried it wouldn't be enough. The pool, to Russell's delight, looked amazing. The glare from the crystal blue water was almost blinding. Penny figured the back patio could be used as a dance floor and if the weather held (which wasn't a concern at all, given the hot Summer they were having) she could keep most of the mess outside, making the Sunday clean up that much easier.

"When is everyone expected to arrive?" Russell called out as he helped himself to a beer that was sitting in the laundry sink. Penny had filled it with ice earlier and was hoping it wouldn't melt before the guests arrived.

"Well, I left it casual. I've been telling people that anytime after six is fine. Mum and Dad said they'd pop in around about now actually," she replied, glancing at her watch. "It's just after five Russ and I haven't even had a chance to get ready yet. Can you keep an eye on things if I have a quick shower? I don't want Tildy messing with that pool gate again. I saw her trying to figure out how to open it earlier."

"Got it covered Pen," Russ assured her as he guided her toward the stairs. "Go and pretty yourself up me lady."

"Yeah okay, kind sir."

Chuckling to herself as she headed toward her bedroom, Penny shook her hands in front of her body and took a deep breath. *It's just a party* she told herself. Knowing her habit of getting anxious about such things, she pulled open her bedside drawer and debated about whether or not to have one of the little pills the Doctor had prescribed her. She'd complained of anxiousness last year whilst living in the city and had found a Valium could take the edge of during those moments she felt most uptight. Deciding that she was being silly and reaching for the glass of wine instead that she'd bought up earlier, Penny tried not to think of Mitchell and the last party they'd attended together. For all she knew, he may not even remember. *He was awfully drunk* she recalled as she let the shower do its work. *I'll just pretend it never happened and if he brings it up, I'll act like he's talking crazy and that I don't even know what he's on about.* Pleased with her decision, Penny let her mind turn towards more important matters, like what the hell was she going to wear?
"Daaaaaaaad!" Tildy yelled from the kitchen. "Doorbells ringing!"
"Well answer it then! I'm up a ladder and its probably just Nan and Pa."
"Okay!"
Tildy peeked through the front door window and saw that it was indeed her Grandparents.
"Happy Housewarming!" she cried as she threw open the door.
"Oh Tildy!" Bonnie exclaimed as she drank in her granddaughter's appearance.
"You look so beautiful! Like a proper little party host."
"That's right Nanny!" Tildy declared, pleased that her Nan had noticed her emerald green satin dress. Picking up the hem and spinning in a circle, Penny hoped they both noticed how it flared out in a big circle.
"Where are your parents?" Roland asked, disappointing his Granddaughter with his lack of enthusiasm regarding her dress. Seeing her face, Roland sighed and said the words Tildy so obviously wanted to hear.
"Wait a second. Tildy? Why I thought you were Simone, you look so grown up!"
Satisfied that her dress had the desired effect, Tildy's mood brightened once more.
"Mum's in the shower and Daddy's up a ladder," she informed them as she took off toward the sunroom.
"Gosh, Rolly. I swear that girl gets more words out of you than anyone I know."
"Umph," he replied, proving her point.
"Hey there In Laws!" Russell greeted Penny's parents. "I'll be down in a sec. These lights don't wanna stay put...there...got it."
Russ stepped down from the ladder, shook Roland's hand and kissed Bonnie's cheek.
"Beer? Wine?" he asked as he walked behind the bar.
"Scotch on the rocks and Bon'll have a shandy thanks Russ."
"Done." Russell began preparing the drinks without bothering to make small talk. He knew his Father In Law well. Truth be told, he quite enjoyed Roland's company. He may come across gruff to those who don't know him well but Russell had learnt over the years that the man's silence could be comforting. They could just be two guys relaxing side by side with their own thoughts replacing inane chatter.
Bonnie busied herself in the kitchen unwrapping the salads she'd been told they wouldn't need but which she decided to bring anyway. Simone sauntered in just as her Grandmother was trying to make room in the fridge.
"Hey Nan. How's tricks?"
Smiling at her eldest Granddaughter, Bonnie couldn't help but marvel at how much she resembled Penny. It's true that Joel was the one who looked most like her daughter. Although a boy, he had the same bright green eyes as Penny and even had the same hair, albeit shorter. Simone however had Penny's mannerisms and stubborn nature. Penny had always been eager to please and mostly did the right thing as a child. If you were to tell her to never do something however, she would stick out her chin and defy you, much to her Father's dismay. Simone was jutting out her chin now, just like her Mother used to do before her. Guessing that she was daring her Nan to question her choice of clothing for the evening, Bonnie decided to ignore it and instead grabbed Simone into a bear hug. If the exposed belly button and tiny denim shorts were a problem, she'd let her daughter deal with it!
Acting annoyed but secretly pleased with her Nan's show of affection, Simone gently disentangled herself from Bonnie.
"Geez Nan. It's like you haven't seen me in months!" she declared, softening her words with a kiss on her Nan's cheek.

"Did you bring your special potato salad?" Simone asked, opening the fridge to have a peek.

"I did but don't dig in until the guests have had their fill."

"Okaaaaay."

"Where's your brother? Out the back?"

"Nah. He's over at his giiiiirlfriends house," she drawled, making kissy kissy noises in the air.

"Girlfriend?" Bonnie asked, feeling joyful at the thought of Joel meeting a girl he liked.

"Yeah. Her name is Ella. She lives over the creek and is super rich. Well, her parents are anyway. She's okay though I guess. You'll meet her tonight."

"Hello Mum," Penny said as she walked into the kitchen still trying to adjust her dress. "Did Russ get you a drink? Where's Dad?"

"I'm good love, I have my shandy and your Father is at the bar."

Suddenly the bell started ringing and people began to stream into the house quite steadily over the next few hours. Both neighbours from either side showed up around 6:30, Daniel O'Malley bought along a bunch of old high school and university buddies. The Harrison's bought their brood, with Ella and Joel in tow. A few curious residents of Evergreen Avenue stopped by to have a look and introduce themselves. By 8:00pm the party was in full swing and Penny couldn't have been more pleased.

Mitchell had so far been the perfect gentleman, showing no signs of having remembered what had happened between them that night.

"Penny!" Dayna shouted, "Come say Hi to Laura! Remember we used to have Biology together that year?"

"Penny we're out of dip!" Russell shouted.

"Muuuum! Can we go swimming yet?" Tildy's voice pleaded.

Letting out a sigh, Penny ignored everyone and took a minute in the laundry room to have a few sips of wine straight out of the bottle.

"Having a little hide are we Pen?" Mitchell's voice surprised Penny and she choked on her beverage.

"...Mitchell...oh god. That went the down the wrong pipe."

Clutching her chest and placing the bottle on the washing machine, Penny hoisted herself up on to the dryer.

"Hey...you okay? Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"No...no. It's okay. I just needed a moment and I thought I was alone."

"Russ said this was where he'd stashed the good beer so I was just helping myself."

Placing his hand on her back and making large circular motions, Mitchell asked Penny if she needed a glass of water. Feeling uncomfortable with the gesture, Penny slid back down and straightened her dress.

"No Mitchell. No water. I think I'm okay now. I better go refill the dip container."

Avoiding eye contact completely, Penny made a move toward the laundry door. Mitchell placed his arm in the doorway and struggled to catch Penny's eye. After a few awkward seconds, Mitchell removed his arm from Penny's way and watched her head back into the kitchen.

"Oh Penny..." Mitchell spoke her name quietly. "Do you remember?"

Pretending not to hear, Penny decided the dip wasn't important and she made a beeline for her husband. It seemed that the safest place to be tonight would be by her
husband's side. *What a complete idiot I was, thinking I could throw this party and have the whole Mitchell thing be a non-issue.*

"Hey Pen." Russell nuzzled his wife's neck as she slid her arm around his waist. "Having fun?"

Up until a few moments ago Penny was having a great night. Now feeling anything but festive, Penny lied and said she was having a wonderful time.

Tildy was impatiently waiting for her siblings to get changed into their bathers. She'd had a few dips in the pool over the past week and had loved it! Not being an entirely competent swimmer however, she was not allowed in there yet on her own. Having to wait for an adult or her brother and sister to go in for a swim was very frustrating for a six year old.

"Stop banging on the door Tildy! I'll be out in minute!" Simone had got absolutely no reaction from her parents regarding her outfit tonight. She'd cut her jeans into short shorts earlier that day and thanks to a growth spurt last year, all the t-shirts she'd worn as an eleven year old now showed off her belly button. She'd felt daring, proud and grown up in the revealing outfit. Jessie however, had taken one look at her after arriving with his Mum and had taken her to one side.

"What on earth are you wearing?" he'd asked whilst looking her up and down.

"Ah...clothes?"

"I've spent the last week with you Sim... and this," he said gesturing toward her shorts and top, "is not you."

"Oh really, like you'd know." Simone felt insulted but was curious to know why Jessie felt that way.

"Okay. Take my Mum for instance. She's old and all but she's still kind of pretty wouldn't you say?"

"Well sure I guess."

"Alright, now think about Mrs Newberry, the neighbour on your other side."

"You mean Estelle?"

"Yeah. She's a knockout right?"

"Well yeah, in a tacky kind of way."

"My point exactly! My Mum is super fit from attending yoga classes every week but there's no way she is as beautiful as Estelle. Looking at them side by side however, my Mum always looks like a much classier act than Mrs Newberry. Do you see my point? Good looking people shouldn't have to sell it so hard."

Picturing Cathy's floor length blue dress and then remembering Estelle's boob tube and tight pant ensemble, Simone started to see Jessie's point.

"So what do you think I should wear then?"

"What you always wear. You're super pretty Simone, you look great in your flares and peasant tops. Oh and that summer dress you wore the other day? The one with the swirls. That looked great too."

"You're an odd boy Jessie. Why on earth do you care about this sort of stuff?"

"Cause it's more interesting than football, that's why!"

"Hmm, well that's cool. So what should I wear then?"

"Well, I'll have a think about that later. For now you better just throw your togs on or your little sister will punch a hole in the wall!"

Turning toward her wardrobe, Simone couldn't believe her good luck in finding Jessie. He was the only person she knew who told it like it was. She appreciated that.

Watching Ella walk down the pool steps, Joel felt his mind drift back to the other
night in her bedroom. She was so damn beautiful he couldn't stand it. If her parents had not chosen that moment to pull into the driveway he knew what they would have ended up doing. He wondered once again if Ella was experienced. Grabbing her waist as she swam toward him he looked at her face and decided to ask her at some point. He worried about that, because for him it would have been the first time. Would that scare her off? Pushing the thought out of his mind as Robby ran up to execute a bomb dive not four feet away, he jumped out to mimic his friend and decided to just focus on having fun. That was what Robby always did.

Estelle stood one step behind her husband as Todd wowed the other men with his tales of success and achievement. He did not like it if Estelle wandered off during parties. He had always instructed her to wear something sexy when attending such functions but she was to make it clear to all, that she was his. He'd periodically throw him arm around her shoulder whilst socialising or would grab her hand or arm. The only time she was allowed to venture off was to either get him a drink or visit the toilet room. She was so bored and frustrated she thought she might cry. She was itching to dance and so desperately wanted to take a dive in that gorgeous swimming pool. Imagine his reaction if he saw me in my new red bikini she thought, staring at Russell.

"Someone has their eye on your man Penny," Dayna whispered to her friend as they went inside for another bottle of wine.

"If you mean Estelle, I already noticed. Her husband has her on a short leash though, so I don't think it's a problem." Penny screwed up her nose. That Todd gave her the creeps.

"Silly cow. She may think she's a class act with all that flashy jewellery but she and her husband are both a couple of wankers," Dayna declared.

Remembering her friend's tendency to get a bit catty after a few drinks, Penny pushed a glass of water into Dayna's hand.

"Retract your claws kitty cat and take it down a notch. This is a party remember?"

Snorting and barking out a laugh, Dayna grabbed Penny around the shoulders.

"See? We still know each other well don't we?"

"We do........." Feeling her chest tighten at the thought of Dayna ever finding out about what had happened with Mitchell, Penny made a decision.

"Here, you take these chips out to the men and put an album on that we can all dance to. I think its time we turned up the volume."

"Yes!" Dayna agreed as she stumbled back outside.

Filled with resolve, Penny scanned the back yard until she found Mitchell. We're going to nip this in the bud right now, she thought with determination. Mitchell caught her eye, saw her jerk her head toward the laundry room and eagerly made his way through the crowd.

Russell was having a fantastic time. He was enjoying catching up with the old hills crowd and Cathy and Brian from next door were turning out to be an interesting couple. He was a bit fed up with listening to Todd Newberry however. That man seemed to be much too enamoured with the sound of his own voice. Russell firmly believed that everyone deserved to be given the respect of being heard. Todd however, did not offer that same respect back. Picking a good moment to cut the one sided conversation short, Russell asked Todd if he needed a refill whilst backing up to head toward the bar.

Seeing her opportunity and telling Todd she had to go to the loo, Estelle ducked
quickly inside to follow Russell.

"Phew, all that dancing made me thirsty," she purred as she slid onto a bar stool.

"You were dancing?" Russell frowned, having just seen her spend the last ten minutes standing sulkily behind her husband.

"Oh well. Yes earlier..." she said quietly, coughing into her fist.

"Okay, so what'll it be?"

"Hey, you trying to show me up McVee? Leave it to the professionals man!" Daniel laughed as he stepped behind the bar.

"Ah, now here is a man who knows how to tend bar!" Russell bellowed. "Make the lady a cocktail Dan. I'm off to grab one of my imported beers from the secret stash." He took the opportunity to make his escape. That Estelle woman made his skin crawl.

"Why don't you just fuck off Daniel?" Estelle whined. She was furious at him for scaring Russell off like that.

"Yeah okay potty mouth. Geez, you think Russell McVee is interested in you? He couldn't get away from you fast enough doll."

"Don't call me that. I'm nobody's doll."

"You sure have yourself painted up as one." Daniel retorted. He had no idea why, but this woman got his heart racing. Maybe it was the unabashed confidence or the fact she always seemed on the verge of erupting in ways Daniel could not fathom.

"You really are a firecracker Estelle."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked grumpily.

"Come out the front with me and I'll show you."

Suddenly sensing Daniel's interest and loving that look of lust that had entered his eyes, Estelle started to feel good about herself again. She doubted Todd would notice if she was gone another five minutes.

"Okay Mister. What ya got for me?" Smiling as Daniel took her by the hand, they both slunk toward the front door.

Mitchell was full of hope as he made his way up the back step to open the laundry door.

"Penny...thank god. I..."

"Oh just stop it Mitchell!" Penny interrupted. The puppy dog look on his face was making her angry.

"Huh?" Mitchell felt his stomach flip over. He had been encouraged by Penny's obvious attempt at getting him alone. The look on her face now however was anything but friendly.

"What? You thought it was going to be like last time? Last time was a mistake Mitchell. I was drunk and homesick. Russell was working like a dog to get that promotion. I hated living in the city. I never knew I'd miss my parents as much as I did. I didn't realise how much I missed home. You took advantage of all of that and I just got swept up in the moment! It can never happen again Mitchell. Do you understand me? Never!" Penny started to cry. She'd gone through nearly one and a half bottles of wine this evening and hadn't even eaten any of the delicious food that she had prepared.

"Penny...okay...bloody hell...I'm sorry! Okay?" Mitchell ran his hands through his hair and handed Penny a towel for her tears. "Man, have you had that speech rolling around in your head these past few years or what?"

"I'm scared Mitchell. Dayna and I...we've become such good friends again and I've missed her. You've got to promise me that you'll forget what happened at my
Dad's party. It's not like we were in love or anything. It was just sex. It didn't mean anything."

Not answering Penny and looking at the floor, Mitchell felt a crushing sensation envelop his chest. Christ, can a person feel it when his heart breaks he thought with despair.

"Mitchell?" Penny was feeling frantic. "Promise me Mitchell! Russell and Dayna must never find out!"

Listening to his wife's voice, Russell stood rooted to the spot. The words made sense but the context did not. Mitchell and Penny? Taking two steps back and then walking forward again, Russell felt like his brain was malfunctioning. You could have told him that the earth was actually flat after all and he'd be less confused.

"Russell! A little birdy told me you've hidden the good stuff somewhere." Russell, with his head in his hands, heard someone speaking to him but couldn't match a face to the voice.

"Russell?" Brian repeated.

This is my new neighbour, the neighbour I like. Not that other dickhead, Russell thought, his mind whirling.

"You okay man?"

"Yes...no. I...Brian. Where's Dayna?"

"Um. Dayna...Dayna. She the one who looks like Mia Farrow? I think she and my wife are friendly but I don't know her that well..."

"Yes! Where is she?"

Before Brian had time to think, Russell pushed him aside and headed out the back door.

"Russell?" Brian yelled out.

Hearing her husband's name, Penny grabbed Mitchell's arm.

"Shit! Get out...go back to the party!"

"Wait! Penny, do you think he heard?"

"I don't know!!" Pushing him out of the laundry and into the kitchen, Penny headed out toward the back yard.

"Dayna!" Russell called out spotting his friend dancing beside the pool.

"Russ! It's Fleetwood Mac! Dance with me...Russell?" Sensing something was wrong Dayna let herself be pulled to the side of the house.

"Russell...what on earth? My god...are you...are you crying?" Dayna was stunned. She had known Russell for a long time and she had never seen him this upset.

"What is wrong Russell? Stop that! Dry your face and speak to me damn it!"

"Oh Dayna. Fuck! I don't know. It's obviously a mistake. I must have heard wrong or maybe they were talking about something else...I don't know...."

"Can you just stop talking in riddles and tell me what the hell is going on?"

"I overheard Penny and Mitchell talking. God!" Russell suddenly jerked his head upright. "What the hell am I doing crying to you! I should be punching his fucking face in!" Feeling the initial hurt give way to rage, Russell turned on his heel, intent on finding Mitchell.

"Stop right there and explain to me what has happened!" Dayna demanded. She hoped like hell that her powers of deduction were not up to par. What Russell was alluding to was making Dayna's heart race much too fast.

"Your husband and my wife screwed one another! That's what happened!"

Consumed with his own shock and pain, Russell forgot to be sensitive to the fact that this would be as much of a blow to Dayna as it was to him. Seeing her face
register denial, then anger and then finally pain, Russell reached for her arm.

"Daynes...I'm sorry..."

"Where are they?" she spat out.

"Mummy Mummy! Watch me dive!" Tildy cried out gleefully.

"Not now Tildy! Where's your Father?"

"I don't know," Tildy responded quietly.

To her dismay, she suddenly realised something was wrong. So caught up in the fun of swimming, she'd failed to recognise the shift in atmosphere. Tildy had been happily channelling the upbeat mood of the party guests up until this point. The adult's main vibe had been relaxed and festive and waves of love had been emanating from Joel and Ella all evening. Simone and Jessie were proving to be a source of endless hysteria, so hyper and excited they were to be at a proper grown up party and Robby always exuded a calm and mellow vibe. She had been in her total element - surrounded by groups of contended and relaxed people.

Now that she was tuning in more however, Tildy sensed chaos and anger.

"Joel! Get out of the pool. Something is wrong!"

"Huh?" Joel turned his attention away from Ella, and swam up to the edge of the pool.

"Put your floaties back on Tilds. It's not safe otherwise."

"No. I'm done swimming...please Joel. We have to find Daddy. He's really angry!"

Joel, not being surprised by Tildy's statement, heaved himself out of the water and grabbed a towel.

"Here. You're shivering."

He'd only been witness to this a few times before but he had learnt long ago that if Tildy said someone was upset, hurt or in trouble, she was usually right. Don't ask him how the hell she knew these things, she just did. Joel stopped wondering about it a long time ago and just saw it as part of who Tildy was.

"Robby, I need your help. Keep an eye on the kids. Tildy and I have to find my Dad."

"Awww man...I'm no babysitter Joel."

"Besides, who is he gonna babysit if there are not any babies! Jessie and I are both thirteen you know."

"Suit yourself Simone but don't blame me if you drown."

Despite his words, he wasn't actually worrying about anything happening to Sim, she was the strongest swimmer of them all.

"Joel," Ella said softly, "What's going on?"

"Nothing. I just wanna make sure my olds are okay. I think Dad is upset about something."

"I'll come with you." Ella said, concern in her eyes.

"Why don't we all go look for him," Simone suggested. "If something is wrong with Dad then I want to be there when you find him." She reached down and dragged Jessie out of the water.

So it was decided that they'd all join in on the search for Russell. Robby resigned himself to the fact he was coming along too and they opened the pool gate.

The party had thinned out considerably by this point. None of the new neighbours were present except for those they'd officially invited. Cathy and Brian were snuggled up beside the record player, flipping through albums. Bonnie and Roland had pleaded
exhaustion an hour ago and had gone upstairs to the guestroom to sleep. Penny had no idea where Russell, Daniel and Estelle were but Todd and about three of her old high school friends had started a game of poker next to the barbecue out the back.  
"Have you guys seen my husband?" Penny asked the poker players.  
"You can't bluff for shit my friend!" Todd announced as he scooped up his winnings.  
"What did you say?" he asked Penny distractedly.  
"My husband. Where is he? I seemed to have lost him. Where is Dayna and Mitchell for that matter?"  
"More importantly, where is my wife?" Todd said as he stood up from the card table clumsily.  
"More importantly?" Penny repeated rolling her eyes. "You are a such a pompous prick," she muttered under her breath.  
Luckily for Penny, Todd did not hear her insult and was making his way toward the front of the house. The front door was wide open, the warm summer breeze blowing the window curtains up into his face.  
"Estelle!" he called out sharply.  
Feeling his voice hit her like a slap on the back, Estelle pushed Daniel into the bushes and pulled down her skirt.  
"Oh um, Todd. I couldn't find the bathroom so went back home for a minute to use our toilet."  
"Well, you can turn right around and head on back there. The party is over for you. I'm staying to play poker."  
Before Estelle could place one foot in front of the other, a shout could be heard coming from the direction of the lake.  
"What the hell?" Todd said walking out onto the road.  
Hearing her husband's voice, Penny ran out across the front lawn and began to sprint down the street. Her shoes were thrown into the bushes as she attempted to gather speed.  
"Ow!" Daniel cried from his hiding place amongst the lavender bushes; as one of Penny's shoes hit him square in the face.  
"Shhh he'll hear you!" Estelle whispered in a panic.  
Todd was oblivious, as his attention remained focused on where Penny was headed. Pretending he just came around from the side of the house, Daniel walked up to Todd and asked what was going on.  
"I'm not sure. It sounds like someone is fighting down there and Penny took off toward the creek. I'd go check it out but I'm not really into violence. Probably best I don't get involved you know? Estelle!" Todd shouted once again. "Let's both get inside our place, this party is a bust."  
Having overheard her husband's comments regarding violence, Estelle was smart enough to note the irony.  
"Okay honey," she responded obediently.  
"Daniel!" Joel called out as he, his siblings and his friends walked out onto the front lawn. "Have you seen my Dad?"  
"Oh, ah...listen kids. It's probably best you just go back inside. It seems your parents have, um, an issue to take care of."  
"Dan...?"  
"Inside Joel," Daniel repeated not unkindly. His tone however left no room for argument.  
As more shouts came up out of the dark, Tildy broke free from her brother and
made a dash toward the end of the cul de sac.  
"Daddy!" she screamed as her little legs carried her fast enough away that her bright golden hair became nothing more than a dot under the streetlights.  
"No Tildy!" Joel screamed.  
Suddenly chaos reigned as Daniel fought with his urge to go after Tildy whilst being mindful of the need to make the other kids stay put. Cathy, Brian and the other three adults joined them on the road as more shouting could be heard coming up from below.  
"Let me go! That's my sister!" yelled Joel as Daniel placed his hand around the boy's upper arm.  
"What the hell is all that yelling?" asked Cathy.  
"Tildy, come back here now!" screamed Simone.  
"Get your hands off my boyfriend!" cried Ella.  
"EVERYBODY JUST SHUT THE HELL UP!" shouted Brian.  
"Cathy, keep the kids inside along with everybody else. Daniel, you and me are going to see what's going on down there. If we're not back in thirty minutes call the police," he shouted over his shoulder as he Daniel made their way down the driveway.  
Joel had no choice but to see reason and appreciated his neighbour gaining some control over the situation. Ushering his sister and friends back into the house, he just hoped that one of the adults bought Tildy home safe.  
"So tell me what's happening here." Russell's new neighbour asked as they headed away from the house.  
"Hell if I know. From what I can gather, that's Mitch and Russ down there fighting. Penny seemed distressed and went down after them. I'm guessing Dayna is down there too as I haven't seen her in a while."  
"Well, one of them will spot Tildy running toward them so that should sober their tempers some."  
"Yeah, should do. I just hope Tildy stumbles upon them before she reaches any water."

"Help her Helen!" the woman cried out, her voice full of panic. Throwing off her bed blankets and pushing herself up into a sitting position, she let out a gasp as her arthritic joints howled in protest.  
"Shhhhh shhhh, no need to upset yourself now. Lay back down," a calm, yet slightly patronising voice instructed.  
"But she's running blind! She can't see through her tears!"  
"I know, I know...she's okay now though...she's okay..."  
"Oh...she is? They found her then? Did Helen find her?"  
"She sure did. Eeeeverything is okay..."  
The nurse administered a sedative and smoothed the old woman's hair back off of her head.  
"It's all going to be okay Mrs Dwight. Everyone is safe."  
The young nurse smoothed the blankets back up to the fragile patient's neck and moved silently out of room 201.  
"Mary? Did Mrs Dwight have another episode?" Dr Green queried as the nurse was leaving the patient's room.  
"Oh yes, another 'Helen' moment. I gave her a sedative and she seems quite peaceful now."  
"Okay, perhaps I'll just pop in to double check. Her blood pressure is of some concern to me."
"Of course Doctor."

It occurred to the nurse once again that Dr Green's level of interest in his patients was extraordinary. Such dedication. Every nut case should be so lucky to have a man like him looking out for them, she thought as she glided down the corridor to return to the nurses' station.

Picking up her chart, Dr Green once again felt the familiar twinge of guilt. The woman in front of him bore absolutely no resemblance to the beautiful and frightened young woman who had been bought before him some twenty five years earlier. Her madness had aged her, as had the inactivity and depression that had become her lot to bear in this godforsaken establishment. He'd once believed in psychiatry. He'd once felt optimistic and hopeful that any mental illness could be cured through therapy, analysis, and the will to change. How naive he had been to think that one could teeter on the edge of madness without one day falling all the way in. The drug use did not help of course, as he'd been witness to time and again. Being pre-disposed to such a condition need not necessarily affect the potential sufferer. He and his colleagues at the university were just starting to understand the links between certain triggers and full-blown schizophrenia.

He'd tried in vain to keep his daughter away from such triggers. He'd known from the earliest days that Helen was sensitive. Displaying an unusual amount of empathy, even at the tender age of 18 months, Liam could see that she was indeed her Mother's daughter.

"Daddy? Hurt?" Helen had said one sunny Sunday afternoon.

His mind drifting back to a time that seemed so long ago, Liam sat on the edge of Helena Dwight's bed and let himself remember. Moving had been an exhausting affair. The deceit, the cover-up, the constant fear of losing this small person he knew from day one he would do anything to keep, had been unbelievably stressful. Sitting on the floor that day, waiting for the furniture van to arrive, a younger Dr. Green had been showing no outward signs of being distressed. Lost in contemplation and wondering once again if there had been any way to do things differently, Liam had felt a small hand touch his arm. Those two words; words he had not ever heard spoken from this precious little child before, had moved him beyond words. Until that moment, baby Helen had uttered 'Da Da', 'Up' and 'Drink'.

Mixed in with the feelings of utter astonishment, pride and warmth however was an emotion that chilled him to his very core. What Dr. Green also felt when he looked at this little girl with golden hair and big blue eyes was an emotion he had felt before when looking at those same eyes in a much older face. Terror. Liam felt absolute, nausea inducing terror. Not for himself, not out of concern for his own safety. No, what he felt was a deep and blinding terror for the well being of his daughter. Gripping her tight and vowing to never let her end up like her Mother, Liam had cried until he had no more tears left.

Now, looking down at this woman, a woman he had once loved, before the madness took over completely, Liam once again started to weep.

"I'm sorry Helena. I'm sorry..."

Through the murkiness that was her mind, Helena heard the man crying. He meant something to her, what exactly, she couldn't quite recall. Her mind drifted back to another man - this one young and happy. So excited at the birth of their child. She smiled at the memory. She saw him standing under the shade of a majestic oak tree, laughing as he threw the little boy into the air. Enjoying the memory and wishing the bothersome grey haired man would stop crying, Helena rolled onto her side and fell back asleep.
As long as she is with Helen she'll be okay, she thought as she felt the bed tilt from the shift in weight as the man got up off the bed. Liam placed his hand on her head and then silently left the room.

Bunching her fists against her eyes, Tildy tried fervently to stop the streams of tears that had begun to flow into her ears. This forced her to stop running so she could get a handle on things. She knew the lake was just a little further up ahead. Words her Mummy had told her to never repeat, along with ones she had never heard before, were still drifting up toward her as she began to alternate between a jog and a shuffle as she made her way past the last remaining houses. Hearing the echo of footfalls from behind, Tildy panicked and made a sharp veer to the left. She did not want to be stopped and felt she was the only one who could calm her Mummy and Daddy down.

Finally reaching the lakeside park, Tildy was aware that she was not in the correct spot to come across her parents. Deciding to head down anyway and just follow the water to the right, Tildy gingerly began to make her way downward.

Slipping on the muddy slope, she reached out to grab at the various plants that lined the murky river but all her hand could find was more mud. Telling herself not to panic, Tildy reminded herself that she was becoming a strong swimmer. Her own swimming pool at home was deeper than this lake. Determined to reach the water and swim her way back toward her quarrelling parents, Tildy let herself fall, confident she had nothing to truly fear.

Landing in the water was a shock at first as Tildy had to stumble about to regain her footing. Just as she felt steady enough to spin around to face the right direction, her foot slipped on a piece of rock. Feeling her ankle twist, Tildy opened her mouth to cry out but was instead assaulted by a torrent of water which cut off her startled yelp as well as her air supply. Panicking and suffering from utter disorientation, Tildy could no longer distinguish up from down. Her last thought as her mind starting to switch off was of her Mother and Father. Did they know she was here looking for them and if not, who did?

Mitchell had stood alone in the kitchen for several minutes after Penny had rudely shoved him out through the laundry door. Letting himself be foolish once again over that woman was obviously a massive mistake. Why the hell did he completely lose his head where she was concerned? He loved his wife and he loved his children. Who was Penny anyway but a giant tease that had been leading him on all night?

Even as he attempted to justify his behaviour with that thought, he knew Penny had not done anything wrong. He loved her too much to paint her in that kind of light. He just felt so god damn guilty.

Deciding to head on home, Mitchell had made his way toward the front door. It wouldn't take long to cross over the bridge toward home. Besides, if Russell had overheard he and Penny talking, he figured he was in no shape to do deal with that right now.

Earlier, as Dayna and Russell had angrily walked through the dwindling party crowd, they'd quickly ascertained that Mitchell was nowhere in sight.
"Maybe he's in the john," Dayna suggested.
"Yeah, or maybe he knows we're onto him and he's making a swift exit."
Both of them walked down the other side of the house and walked out into the middle of the street.
Dayna spotted Mitchell first, his strawberry blonde hair shining under the streetlamps. Instantly feeling protective of her husband, Dayna reached out for Russell's arm. Before she could coax him away, Russell started bolting down the street. Having no choice but to follow, Dayna hitched her skirt up to her knees and followed him down toward the creek.

"You lying sack of shit! Pretending to be a mate whilst all the while you were screwing my wife!" Russell had been berating Mitchell for almost twenty minutes now. Catching him just before he reached the bridge, Russell had grabbed Mitchell by the shoulder and spun him around to take a shot at his face. The fear in Mitchell's eyes however had made Russell pull back.

Now he was reaching into the corners of his mind for every vile insult and demeaning name he could think of, just hoping that Mitchell would respond. Just hoping that something would ignite his temper enough to take a swing. Then Russell could smack the son of a bitch in the face without feeling any remorse.

Why he was feeling hesitant at all was a mystery to Russell. The man had betrayed him in the worst way possible but for some pathetic reason he couldn't bring himself to raise a fist to the guy.

Sensing that Russell was almost out of words, Mitchell sat on the edge of the river and put his head in his hands.

"I'm sorry Russell. I'm sorry you feel like this was some big elaborate affair that was going on behind your back. It wasn't like that though. Penny..." Mitchell's voice caught as he said her name. "Penny wasn't in her right mind that night. Truth is, I fooled myself into thinking she wanted me too when all she really wanted was to feel loved."

"I love my wife you fucking asshole. She didn't need to look anywhere else for that."

"I know...I know that mate."

"Don't call me that Mitchell."

"Okay." Mitchell got up from his sitting position and started to pace. "I'm aware that this doesn't make it right Russell, but Penny...she...I loved her first Russell! Do you understand? I loved her first."

Feeling his temper rise once again, Russell looked at his old friend and shook his head.

"Oh and that makes it okay?"

"No! No of course not. I'm just trying to explain. I didn't pursue Penny for kicks. I didn't think about how I'd be betraying you. All I could think about was her. Her smell, her smile, the way she throws her head back when she laughs..."

Suddenly Mitchell's own head was thrown back as Russell's fist connected with his jaw. The hesitancy he had felt earlier was but a smudge in his brain, totally covered over with a bright and pulsing red fury as Russell finally lost it.

A small part of his mind heard the shouts and screams as he proceeded to make mince meat out of someone he once considered a friend.

"You're killing him!” Dayna cried as she jumped onto Russell's back.

Having watched from the sidelines for the past half an hour, Dayna had initially figured it best that she kept her mouth shut as Mitchell and Russell hashed things out. Sure, she had her own issues with the situation, of course she did. Something told her to hold back however, wait until she and Mitchell were home before she asked him why. Why her two best friends, her husband and her beloved Penny, had decided to
betray her in the worst way possible.
   She felt a piece of her heart break as Mitchell declared his love for Penny.
   *Love?* she thought in shocked despair. *Here I was thinking they were just screwing.*

   Unnoticed by the two men, Dayna had silently fallen to the ground and sobbed as she realised everything she held scared, everything she had believed to be true was a lie. Her husband didn't *love her*... he loved Penny.

   Hearing a sickening thwak as Russell's fist connected with Mitchell's jaw, Dayna snapped her head up to see Russell pulverising her husband. Jumping onto his back and attempting to stop the blows, Dayna was thrown aside like an annoying mosquito.

   Suddenly Brian and Daniel appeared beside Dayna.
   *"That's enough Russell...c'mon Mate, just back off...."* Brian gripped Russell around the upper torso, pinning his arms to his side while Daniel pushed him back from a twitching and quivering Mitchell.

   Letting himself be lowered into a sitting position, Russell took three large gulping breaths and tried to will his heart to stop thumping so wildly.

   Penny chose that moment to quietly back away from the scene and head on back to the house. She had come across the two men at the beginning of Russell's tirade. Sensing that her presence would only make things worse, she'd hidden behind a tree while the scene played out. She'd sensed Russell's hesitancy in punishing Mitchell with violence. Being a man who ultimately believed in peace, Mitchell wasn't one who welcomed a fist fight. He had looked at Russell with such abject fear and contrition that Russell had backed off and gone with verbally abusing him instead.

   Penny had watched as Dayna eventually came on the scene. She'd seen her pain as Mitchell spoke of the love he felt, the love he felt for someone other than her. Penny's nails were digging into the bark of the tree so hard she drew blood.

   She was about to lose everything - her husband, her best friend, the respect of her family. Feeling reassured that Brian and Daniel now seemed to have the situation under control, Penny soundlessly turned away. She was going to have a lot of explaining to do. Feeling her anxiety heighten as she headed back toward home, Penny pictured the pills sitting inside her bedside drawer. She was going to need all the help she could get.
Chapter Sixteen

Forty eight hours. Had it really only been two days since her baby was last seen? Penny rocked back and forth in the lounge chair as her Mother paced back and forth in front of her. Feeling irritated by all the movement, Roland opened up the back door and wandered down toward the swimming pool. Having a quick look around to be sure he was alone; Penny's father gave in to the tears that had been trapped behind his eyelids for hours. Where the hell is she? he wondered for the thousandth time. He loved that little girl with such fierceness. Hell, he loved them all. Penny's children were like the kids his beloved Bonnie had always wanted. The fact he did not Father them was irrelevant. They were still his flesh and blood and he took pride in how wonderful, clever and beautiful they were. Joel, with his cheerful disposition and easy charm, Simone and her tough exterior than hid a heart as big as planet earth...and then there was Tildy. Tildy so gentle and loving, whimsical and yet wise at the same time. She wasn't even seven years old for Pete's sake. How was someone that small supposed to survive being lost in the hills? The police had already drained the river bed in search of his little granddaughter. A massive search had been underway way before she could be declared an official missing person, thanks to the caring hills community, but still no sign of their treasured little Tildy.

The fact that the drama of Penny's infidelity was temporarily put to one side as the more important matter of Tildy's disappearance prevailed was but a bittersweet blessing at this point. Truth be told, everyone concerned wished that Mitchell and Penny's affair was the only thing they had to concern themselves with. What was a bit of cheating compared to the excruciating hell they were all experiencing as the minutes ticked by with no word of their treasured little Tildy?

Simone had not said a word since the party. Her Mother had asked the children to all sit down that night, intent on telling them something of utmost importance. Her eldest daughter sat rooted to the spot, shaking in abject fear. This is it, she thought, her heart sinking. She's going to tell us she's leaving Daddy for Mr Harrison. Before she could utter a word however, Joel had asked where Tildy was. "What? She's here. Go get her out of bed. I need to speak with all of you." "She's not here Mum. That's what I'm trying to tell you. She heard Dad yelling and took off after you all. You didn't see her?"

That was when the panic had set in. Police were called. Her Grandparents had been woken up and Simone had just sat, willing her sister to come home. She knew Tildy was special. Right from the outset, her little sister had seemed 'tuned in'. Simone had, somewhere along the line, taken it for granted. The impromptu cuddle when she seemed outwardly fine but somewhat down inside. The apple pressed into her hand when she'd started feeling hungry. Tildy just seemed to 'feel' people. Simone loved her little sister for that. She loved her for many reasons and did not know what she'd do if Tildy were to never come home.

She thought back to a few years ago, when she and her friends from her old school had wagged it and spent the whole day in the city. She'd felt so free and alive that day! Feeling especially reckless, all three girls had decided to sneak into a movie theatre to see 'Picnic at Hanging Rock'. Simone had sat enthralled as she watched the tale of the missing schoolgirls. The music had haunted her mind for days and she had taken to wandering around her back yard in slow motion, pretending an unseen force was sweeping her up and away from reality. Now she felt that Tildy had been taken away and she'd give anything for her sister to be back. I know you can hear me
"Sim!" Tildy shouted.
"Shhh...it's okay Tildy," a soothing voice spoke, as Tildy felt her hair being
swiped off her brow.
"Mum?"
"No. Not Mum. My name is Helen...don't be scared though. You're quite safe."
Propping herself up on her elbows, Tildy slowly opened her eyes. The shapes and
shadows shifted in a kind of rhythm, a pulsating dance of movements that she soon
realised were attributed to a slight breeze and the candlelight. Scrunching up her fists
as she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, Tildy looked nervously to her right, toward
the sound of someone breathing. A woman sat beside her. Small, blonde and timid,
the woman stared at Tildy with big blue eyes not unlike Tildy's own.
"Who are you?" she asked.
"Who I am does not matter. You're here because you needed my help. You'll
have to stay another night now that the sun has gone down but I think by morning it'll
be time to go home. Your family is worried."
"I know."
Gingerly getting up from the bed Tildy surveyed her surroundings. It wasn't a
home. Correction. It wasn't a house. Not of the kind Tildy was used to. A memory of
the last place she lived in suddenly entered her mind. Not of the house exactly but the
cellar. Tildy had not liked going down the steep steps into the windowless room. Her
Mother had liked to keep jars of food down there and various other canned goods.
The space Tildy now found herself in had the same kind of feeling. A flight of
concrete steps was situated to the right and seemed to end in the sky. Tildy could see
stars through a square hole and realised she was underground. A kitchen of sorts was
set up beside the stairs. It featured a portable gas cooker that Tildy recognised as the
same one her Father used when they went camping. A steel bucket and various pots
and pans completed the rest of the makeshift kitchen.
There was only one place to sleep. A mattress that Tildy knew was not too
comfortable lay pushed up against the wall. Three milk crates completed the
furnishings of the little home, which, whilst being sparse, was somehow kind of cosy.
"You live here?" she asked astonishingly.
"Yes. It may not be fancy but this is my home. It was originally built as a
bunker."
"A what?"
"A bunker, or if you like, a bomb shelter. Some rich old man had it built many
years ago to protect himself from the end of the world," Helen chuckled.
"I don't understand," Tildy confessed.
"You don't have to. It's just simply my home now. One that gives me the privacy
I crave. I have the door open now, but if I choose to, I can close the door and no one
knows I am here."

Helen got up to fill a saucepan with water.
"Do you want some tea?"
"No...um...I mean, no thankyou. I'd like some water though."
Taking a cup of water from the woman called Helen, Tildy sipped slowly while
she tried to gather her thoughts.
"My Mum and Dad. They were fighting."
Thoughts of the party and of her parent's argument filled Tildy's mind. How long
had she been asleep?
"You slept quite heavily. It's been a few days since I found you." Helen said, answering Tidly's unspoken question. *I've been asleep for days?*

Tidly felt unsettled at the thought, but not necessarily frightened. A row of books lay lined up at the head of the mattress. Picking up the largest one, Tidly discovered it wasn't a book, but an album. Photos - photos of people that looked vaguely familiar. Tracing her finger around the face of a young girl smiling up at the camera, Tidly looked up at Helen's face and realised it was her.

"This is you?" Tidly asked, already knowing the answer.
Helen joined Tidly on the floor.
"Yes."
"You look like me." Tidly avoided Helen's gaze as she continued to flick through. Somehow expecting it but still surprised by the appearance of the photo, Tidly slid out the picture of the sad man and held it in front of Helen's face.
"I think you have a story for me Helen."
"A story?"
"Why is this man in your albums? How did you know I was in the river? Why do you look like me?"

Helen sighed as she rose up off the floor.
"You are more perceptive than I expected," she said, as though talking to herself.
"Are you like me?" Tidly asked feeling astounded.
Smiling shyly, Helen grasped Tidly's hands and laughed softly.
"We are connected, yes."
"Then I want to understand. I want you to tell me everything." Helen finished making herself a cup of tea and began to speak.
Chapter Seventeen

Russell winced as the ache in his neck intensified after shifting position on the couch. If anyone deserved to have aching muscles from sleeping in the proverbial doghouse it was Penny. He hadn't dishonoured the marital bed. Instantly feeling guilty of such thoughts as an image of Tildy entered his mind, Russell threw off his blanket and walked toward the kitchen.

Penny had been a mess since the night of the party - the pressure, the horror, the worry. All of it had taken such a toll on the entire family. Her Mother and Father had not left since that night, practically moving into the spare room to keep an eye on their daughter and grandchildren.

Russell almost felt like the outsider. Like he was the one who had done something wrong. This wasn't the time however to obsess over a misdirected sense of blame. The affair, the betrayal, the consequential gulf that had appeared between he and Penny just made Tildy's disappearance all the more harder to handle. He needed his wife. He missed his best friend. Who else besides Penny understood the love he had for that little girl. The gut wrenching fear that something terrible had happened to her, or worse, that their daughter was hurt or in danger; it was killing Russell to just plain not know.

The kettle started to boil and Russ quickly picked it up for fear the whistle would wake the household.

"Sorry," Russell spoke quietly. "Did I wake you?"

"I haven't even been asleep. My eyeballs feel like sandpaper."

Wanting to comfort his wife but feeling the confusion that comes with conflicted emotions, Russell instead poured hot water into two mugs and walked out the back door.

Penny watched her husband walk toward the pool and felt her insides begin to crumble again. Placing her hand on her wrist to steady the shaking, she poured milk into her cup and added coffee and sugar. She felt like popping a pill but knew she had to keep her wits about her if she was to help the police find her daughter. Tildy! she thought again for what felt like the one-billionth time.

"Where are you?"

"Do I have to say it again Joel?"

"But it is my fault! If I'd run after her that night, she'd be here right now and my whole fucking family wouldn't be falling apart."

"You know, I've been thinking about that." Ella said thoughtfully. "If the way your parents are behaving is due to Tildy being missing then why were they fighting before she ran toward the creek?"

"What?"

"You're forgetting why this all happened Joel. Tildy said your Dad was angry remember? Those shouts from the river belonged to your Dad and Mr Harrison. What were they fighting about?"

Joel looked up at Ella's face as her words sunk in.

"Dad was arguing with Robby's Dad, not my Mum."

"Yes, but your Mum had run down there too. Then she wanted to tell you guys something when she got back. Before she started to talk we all realised Tilds was missing and then the conversation was forgotten."

Thoughts of his parents fighting and the possibility of divorce sprung into Joel's mind. He dismissed them as he felt his stomach turn over.
"Look, I don't care about that right now. I just want my sister back."
"I know. I'm just trying to point out that there was a chain reaction here - your parents fighting, Tildy running after them. That all happened without your input Joel. You aren't responsible."

Joel appreciated Ella's efforts to rid him of the guilt he'd been carrying around but nothing would alleviate those feelings except the safe return of Tildy. Please come home Tildy.

Tildy hoisted the backpack higher up toward her shoulders as she made her way down toward the river. Thinking of all that Helen had shared with her made Tildy feel more grown up than she had ever felt in her life. It's true that some of it wasn't easy for Tildy to understand but she felt it would make more sense as she grew older. She favoured her good ankle as she carefully avoided the rocks and slippery fallen leaves. The sun had been up for a couple of hours now and she was looking forward to eating a hearty breakfast.

Her brain ached again as she sensed more cries from her family. I'm coming home...not much further!

Helen watched as her niece made her way back down toward her home. She kept up her vigil until she could no longer see the bob and bounce of Tildy's blonde hair. Although no longer a part of that world, Helen still felt a fondness for those she had left behind. Her Father no longer checked in on her at regular intervals, so appalled was he at how she had chosen to live her life. To Helen, it wasn't a choice so much as a self-inflicted sentence - one that kept her away from temptation and ultimate madness. She had flirted dangerously with insanity for a huge chunk of her adult life. It was not a place she wished to ever revisit again. She bid Tildy one final farewell as she headed toward her vegetable garden.

Dayna sat on her bed watching her cigarette burn down to the filter. Sunlight was trying valiantly to stream rays of light onto the bedspread but Dayna had not fully opened her curtains in days. The twins had stayed on at her Mother's house since the night of the party and the whereabouts of Mitchell were unbeknown to Dayna. Robby had clumsily tried to be of some support to his Mother but had not managed to get a word out of her. He had heard them arguing later that night when he had finally stumbled across the creek to go home. The McVees had been running around frantically searching for Tildy after it was revealed she'd fled the house. Robby had played his own part in the search for a good two hours before Joel had urged him to go home and check on his parents. He'd gotten the gist of what had happened. The words 'cheat', 'lie' and 'how could you do this to me' pretty much spelt it out for him.

He just couldn't believe it was Mrs McVee that had been seeing his Dad.

Knocking quietly on his Mother's bedroom door, Robby opened it slowly in case his Mother was still asleep.

"Oh good, you're awake," he said as he handed her a steaming cup of tea.

Reaching out and taking the cup from her son, Dayna offered up a shaky smile.

"I'm sorry I've been so quiet Robby. I'm just trying to make sense of everything in my mind."

"That's okay Mum."

"Have you seen Joel since the party?"

"No, not really. I've been volunteering for the police, you know, to help with finding Tildy but I haven't really spoken to any of the family directly."

Robby stared at the row of shirts hanging in the closet and felt the rage boil up
from his toes.

"I hate him you know. Dad I mean."

"Oh Robby. Don't. Please, don't hate your Father."

"How can you say that? He cheated on you Mum. With your best friend!"

Dayna flinched at his words and Robby instantly regretted his outburst.

"I'm sorry. I just can't stand seeing you like this. It's made me realise how happy you actually were before this happened. You just don't seem like you anymore."

Feeling moved by her son's obvious loyalty, Dayna put her arm around his shoulders.

"I'm still me Robby. This is just me feeling sad. I'm also mad as hell at your Father and I feel like I could strangle Penny. Do you want to know what the hardest thing is though?"

Robby nodded.

"I still love them. I miss my husband and I miss my best friend. I feel like crying on Mitch's shoulder and ringing Penny up to have a good old whinge about things. But obviously I can't! I know Penny and I lost touch for a few years but I never did find another friend like her. I had been so happy these past few weeks to have had her friendship back and now this." Penny wiped the back of her hand over each eye.

"The two people I turn to when I'm in pain are actually the cause of it. I don't know what to do about that...I just feel...I feel so lost Robby."

Dayna burst into tears while Robby hugged her tight. He had to do something. He had to fix this, but how? He grabbed the cup of tea before it spilt on the floor and decided he'd had enough. He'd find out where his Father was staying and he'd have it out with him.

Mitchell placed the room service menu back in the bedside drawer and picked up the phone. He listened to reception answer on the first ring and then placed the receiver back in its cradle. Take away containers were spread out all over the bed and his clothes smelt like garlic. Deciding to take a shower, Mitchell began to undress when he heard a knock at the door.

"Housekeeping!" a voice announced too cheerfully.

"Come back later!" Mitchell barked in response.

He hated hotels. He hated the tacky artwork, the bible in the drawer, the honks and beeps from the street below. Dayna had told him in no uncertain words to 'get the hell out!' Not wanting to stay anywhere local, for fear he'd cross paths with other judgemental townsfolk, he'd made his way down the hill in a taxi and asked to be dropped off at the cheapest hotel the cabbie could find. He may have left feeling terribly upset but he'd had the presence of mind to call for a lift, thereby leaving the car for Dayna.

He had realised how little family he had when faced with the dilemma of having nowhere to lay his head. His Mother and Father both lived interstate. His two sisters had been living in London for four years now, both falling in love with men who worked abroad. His mates would obviously have a hard time choosing sides in the debacle he and Penny had created. Who would offer to take him in when a shared friend was the husband of the woman Mitchell had had an affair with? An affair. It was hardly that. It was one night for Pete's sake. If he were to be honest with himself however, he knew he'd have happily entered into a full-blown affair if that had been Penny's desire. What kind of man was he anyway? Willing to betray his mate for a woman? Filled with self-loathing, Mitchell turned on the shower taps and waited for the water to turn hot. Maybe he could wash away the stench of days sitting in his own
filth but nothing could wash his conscience clean.

Estelle was reeling with excitement. Todd had all but shoved her out of the house this morning, complaining he had a headache and needed to be alone. He never allowed her to go out without him. Deciding to not look a gift horse in the mouth, Estelle had happily obliged. Now pulling into the parking lot of O'Malley's pub, Estelle re-applied her lip-gloss and hoisted both breasts up high to create more of an impressive cleavage. Daniel would just die when he saw her. Noting that the parking lot was empty, she made her way to the back delivery entrance and knocked twice. She knew Dan would be inside. He'd explained his routine the night of the party. Telling her all about the long hours he kept running the bar all on his own. Six am starts to sign off on the early deliveries and late nights tending to the regular drunks who frequented his establishment.

Giggling at the surprise she was about to give him, Estelle was disappointed to see another man's face appear at the back door.

"Who the hell are you?" the man asked rudely.
"Where's Daniel?" she demanded, pouting angrily at the rude man.
"Inside. You don't look like no delivery guy. Whatcha want?"
Daniel appeared behind his employee and ushered him away.
"It's okay Geoff. She's a friend."
Estelle ignored the leer that spread across Geoff's face and pushed her way inside.
"You got an office in here Daniel?"
"I do." Daniel grinned. "What of it?"
Feeling her pulse rise and her scalp tickle, Estelle unbuttoned her blouse and looked Daniel dead in the eye.
"Maybe I need to discuss something in private."
Daniel grabbed her hand and dragged her down a corridor toward his office.

Todd impatiently waited for the husband to leave. Surely the silly cow wouldn't allow him stay there a day longer. The man wasn't cutting it. That was obvious. Todd had suspected all along that she was the type who got around. He'd been eavesdropping on them for days and knew all about her dalliance with Mitchell. What the hell she thought that little fag could offer her, Todd didn't know. No, what Penny needed was some action. A real honest to god man to treat her like the whore that she was. That's what she needed. A good slap to show her who was in charge and then some good old fashioned tough love. He was almost there just thinking about it. Hearing a car door slam, Todd peered out the side window and was pleased to see Russell pulling out the drive. The Grandparents had taken the two older kids out ten minutes ago, so with the little brat still missing and everyone else out of the house, Todd had his chance.

Positioning his facial features into what he hoped mimicked genuine concern; Todd slid out the front door and made his way over to Penny's. He knocked once and looked up and down the street. The police had been popping over at regular intervals these past two days but this morning it had been quiet. They'd probably given up searching for the little snot-faced kid. What was the point in still looking anyway? She'd run toward a river for goodness sake - pretty obvious what had happened. Suddenly the front door opened.

"Mr Newberry?" Penny said, looking confused.
"Call me Todd. Please. I wanted to check in on you Penny. Make sure you were okay and offer my services if needed."
Todd couldn't help having an inner chuckle at his choice of words. "Oh, well... that's kind of you Todd but..." "I insist. You look tired," he cooed. "Here, I bought over some muffins. Why don't you let me make you some fresh coffee?"

Todd let himself inside and headed toward the kitchen. "Estelle and I are just heartbroken over little Tilly."

"Tilly...yes. Well... thankyou."

The woman seemed out of it. Her hair was a mess and her eyes seemed all cloudy. Still rockin' a kick ass bod though. He was pleased she seemed unaware about her lack of bra. Her perky little breasts were almost falling out of her dressing gown as she reached into the cupboard for two coffee mugs.

"You must be just sick with worry. Is Mitchell around? I thought I'd talk with him about mounting another search."

"No, Mitchell has um... left for a bit," she replied handing Todd his coffee.

Penny took a seat at the breakfast island and took a sip out of her own cup. Todd ran his hand up Penny's arm and felt her skin erupt with goose bumps.

Taking that as a good sign, Todd then positioned his knee between her legs to guide them gently apart.

"He should be fighting for you Penny. God... do you even know how beautiful you are?"

Feeling the first stirrings of panic through her Valium induced haze; Penny jumped up off the stool and pulled her gown shut tightly.

"Todd! I... I think you should leave. Russell is due back any minute."

"I don't think he is Penny."

Running on instinct, Penny decided to just play along. She knew her neighbour Cathy was out the back with Brian weeding their garden. Penny had heard them not five minutes ago when she had gone outside to throw out the rubbish. Surely if they heard her shout from out there, they would come to her aid.

"The Summer heat is certainly making itself known today," she said nervously. Todd, thrown by the remark, frowned at Penny.

"Do you like to swim Todd?"

Suddenly understanding what was going on, Todd grinned. So she liked to do it in water. He could get into that.

"Will I need my bathing suit?"

"Oh, well... I won't tell if you won't," she replied, her heart nearly bursting out of her chest. She was so scared she felt sure he'd see through her little act.

"God damn it woman. You are a dirty little whore aren't you?"

Seeing his eyes take on an alarming glint, Penny made her way toward the sliding door and hoped like hell the neighbours were still within earshot. If they weren't, she was in deep trouble.

Tildy hastened her pace as the sense of impending danger grew larger. With the new found knowledge that her 'feelings' could be trusted and were in fact a sense that very few people could tap into, Tildy trusted her instincts completely and knew her Mother needed her right now! Panicking and worried that she'd be too late, Tildy decided to start yelling. She could see nothing but trees, dirt and sky. Helen had insisted however that if Tildy kept her mind focused on her family, her natural abilities would act as a built in compass toward home. Even if only one person heard her shouts, it could quite possibly be enough to send someone running or phoning for help. She had to at least try.
"Mummy! Someone please help! Call the police for number twenty Evergreen Avenue!" Feeling foolish but not knowing what else to do, Tildy decided to shout every sixty seconds until she reached her home.

Cathy, still feeling hot from her gardening efforts outside, placed the flowers she had picked inside a vase and asked Brian if they looked okay.
"I'm sure it's the gesture that counts Cath. Penny wouldn't care what flowers you brought her. It's the support she needs."
"Oh I know. C'mon. Jessie has been itching to see Simone all morning but I wanted to give them a chance to wake up and face the day. That poor little girl..." Cathy started to cry.
"Hey! Cathy...don't. Penny needs our strength and positivity right now, not our tears."

Brian held his own grief back as he once again berated himself for not having run after the little girl that night. He'd been so intent on making sure the other children stayed put that he'd let her go down toward that river alone. He had had no idea things would turn out the way that they had.
"I know that look Bri," Cathy said, swiping at her tears. "You're blaming yourself again. No one could have predicted this outcome."
"I know. Let's head next door shall we?"

Constable Harry Evans balanced his coffee on the dashboard as he fumbled for his keys. It had been a quiet morning and he decided to drive by the McVee's home to get the wheels in his mind turning again. The riverbed hadn't turned up anything and the search on foot hadn't been a success either. Cruising slowly past the house and driving toward the end of the cul-de-sac, Evans wound down his window to let in the morning air. Putting his foot on the brake to take a long swallow of his beverage, the Constable suddenly stopped and listened.

The chirp of birds, wind and a local dog barking were the only sounds he could hear. Frowning and wondering why his senses were so alert all of sudden, Evans decided to follow his instincts as he pulled over to the side of the road. There...there it was again. Faint but obviously a human voice, he strained to understand the words.
"Twenty Evergreen Avenue! Please help!"
"What the hell?" the Constable exclaimed. Within a split second, Harry chose action over confusion and grabbed his police radio.
"Responding to a disturbance at twenty Evergreen Avenue. Stand by for backup!"
Evans gunned the engine and made his way back up the street toward the McVee place.

Todd licked his lips in eagerness and followed Penny outside.
"Cathy? Brian!"
"What? What the hell kind of game are you playing?"
"Brian!" Penny called again; sweat breaking out on her forehead. Todd slapped Penny across the face and kicked her feet out from under her. Penny felt a jolt of pain shoot up her hip as she struggled to catch her breath.
"Is this all part of the act Pen? I can play that game if you want."
A sob escaped her throat as she realised her mistake. This sick and twisted animal thought she was role playing?
"Please...just go Todd. I don't want this..."
Todd grabbed her hair as he pulled her up to a standing position. This was going to be more fun that he thought.

Cathy tapped her foot as Jessie ran back upstairs to fetch something for Simone. "Hurry up Jess. We're ready to go!"

Suddenly both Brian and Cathy heard the sound of an engine. "What the...?" Brian exclaimed as a police car came to a screeching halt outside. A plain-clothes policeman leapt out of the vehicle, gun drawn. Holding up his palm to ward off the neighbours, he walked purposefully toward the front door. Just as he was about to knock, he heard a scream from out the back. Calling for back up and running down the side pathway he appeared around the corner of the house with his gun pointed straight ahead.

"Put your hands up Newberry and step away from the lady."

Todd raised his hands and took a look over his shoulder. "Evans?" he croaked out, recognising one of his customers. Constable Evans had just finished cuffing him when he heard further reinforcements arrive on the scene.

"You okay Mrs McVee?"

"Yes...I uh, I guess so."

Suddenly they heard footsteps coming from the side of the house. Expecting to see more policemen, Penny pulled over a garden chair to take a seat. Just as she was about to lower herself into it she heard the sweetest sound any Mother could hope to hear.

"Mummy!"

Penny looked up in shock, a strangled cry of relief erupting from her mouth. "Oh my god. Tildy!!"

Running like she had the wind at her back, Penny charged forward and grabbed her youngest child into a fierce hug. Pushing her back at arms length she looked her little girl up and down from head to toe, making sure she was okay.

"Are you alright? My goodness Tilds! Where have you been?"

"That doesn't matter Mum, I'm home now and I'm alright."

Penny let a flood of tears pour from her tired, swollen eyes. Nothing mattered anymore, not the terrible fright Todd had put her through, not the fact that Russell may never forgive her again and who cares if her best friend ignores her forever. Tildy was home. She was safe. Penny vowed to never let her out of her sight again.
Russell had listened to Penny in shock as she recounted the episode between her and Todd Newberry to the police. A fury unlike any he had experienced before was slowly making its way up from Russell's toes, making his hands ball into fists. If he ever laid his eyes on that piece of scum again, he would happily commit murder. Just the thought of what had almost happened. Tildy's reappearance and Todd's arrest for aggravated assault had reached the ears of everyone in town. The receptionist for Newberry Motors, upon hearing Penny's story had come forward overnight with tales of her own nasty experiences with her boss. This had led to two more women lodging complaints against the man. The only person sticking by him was his wife. Not that that would be enough to get him off. He was looking at some serious jail time.

Now sitting in his car out the front of what he'd once considered his dream home, Russell wondered if he could do it. Could he just forget what had happened between Mitchell and his wife? Could he ever make love to her again without thoughts of his old friend popping into his mind?

Joel suddenly appeared at the car window.

"Hey Dad."

"Joel," Russell smiled up at his eldest child. "How is everybody?"

Russell had spent the last week camping out at a friend's place. He'd kept in touch with the kids as best he could by phone but he missed seeing their faces every morning. He missed things being the way they used to be.

"Has Tildy said anything more about where she'd been?"

"No...Mum has her seeing a counsellor but she just won't talk about it. Claims to not remember anything. The good news though is that she seems happy. Simone and I are certainly happy to have her back. As is Mum of course..." Joel let the sentence hang as he held back mentioning that Mum would also like to have her husband back.

"So...you coming inside?"

Russell looked at the tree in the front yard and remembered the first day he'd laid eyes on this house.

"Yeah, I think I will," he said quietly as he stepped out of the car.

Dayna scrunched her fingers through her hair and knocked on the hotel door. Shuffling noises could be heard from inside and Dayna waited anxiously for the door to open.

"Dayna?" Mitchell cried as he saw his wife standing in the hotel corridor. "Come inside."

Dayna looked around the room with distaste. She hated the city. This place was gaudy and cheaply furnished. Knowing her husband's dislike for hotels, she knew he must be miserable here.

"Nice place you got here."

Responding with a rueful smile, Mitchell removed the dirty clothes off of the bed and gestured for her to sit.

"How're the kids? Robby still hate me?"

"He doesn't hate you Mitchell. He's just feeling protective of me. I had to talk him out of coming here. He saw the information I'd jotted down about where you were staying. I think his intention was to have it out with you but I said I'd like to speak with you first."

Mitchell's face dropped as he thought of his son.

"The twins miss you. They've been hating my cooking."
"Maybe I could come over and cook for you guys one night...just hang out for a bit?"

Dayna took her time searching for the right words. A plane roared by overhead and the air-conditioning let out a hiss as it tried to cool down the dank and stuffy room.

"Mitchell?"
"Yeah?"
"Look...I'm not going to pretend you didn't hurt me. Because you did. I think you know that."
"Of course I know that Daynes."
"The thing is. I...." Dayna cleared her throat and spread the wrinkles out of the bedspread.
"I...um. Oh for goodness sake! Why is this so hard?"
"It's just me Dayna. Say whatever you want."
"Okay." Dayna stood up and opened the small window. The room smelt stale and dusty, making it hard to breathe. After a few moments, she felt her anxiety lesson and she nodded her head. "Well it's like this. I will never forget what you did Mitchell. I don't want to be your wife anymore and I don't want you living with me."

Seeing the hurt look on Mitchell's face, Dayna held up her hand.
"Just wait. Let me finish." She sat beside Mitchell on the sagging bed and looked him straight in the eye. "I won't forget. Ever. But I think I can forgive you. I miss your friendship Mitchell. I miss being part of a team who are always there for our kids. I want my children to have their Father back and I want my friend back. Do you think we could be friends again?"

Mitchell put his head in hands and fought back tears. He'd thought he'd totally blown it. He had been sitting in this hotel room imagining Dayna saying she was packing up the kids and leaving him behind. This was the next best thing to getting back together. In fact, this solution made more sense than trying to re-establish a marriage. Best friends are what they had been all along. Mitchell had just not wanted to admit it.

He grabbed Dayna into a hug and nodded a silent assent. The relief was overwhelming. Grabbing a tissue from the bedside table, Dayna stood up and pulled her handbag up onto her shoulder.

"So I guess we have to make some arrangements then," Mitchell said. "A place for me to live. Nearby I hope. We also have to somehow explain all this to the kids."
"Yes, there will be a lot to figure out. Why don't you crash in Robby's rumpus room until we get organised?"

"Pretty sure Robby will have something to say about that! No, I'll pay for another week here and get myself sorted. Why don't I come over tomorrow night and we'll start the ball rolling?"
"Sounds good." Feeling a bittersweet sense of relief, Dayna nervously straightened her skirt and placed her fingers on the doorhandle. "I'll talk to you tomorrow then?"

Mitchell stood and kissed her on the cheek.
"Thankyou Dayna."

Nodding slowly, Dayna patted her soon to be ex-husband on the shoulder and awkwardly made her way out the door.
"Night Mitchell."

Ella stood outside her Father's study silently fuming. How could he? she thought
angrily. She had always known that her Father helped people stay out of trouble. She had thought it a noble profession - helping the innocent prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that they did not belong in prison. How could she have been so naive? It wasn't the innocent he was defending, but the guilty. That animal had almost raped Joel's Mother and her own Father was going to defend him?

Ella ran upstairs to her room and slammed the door. What would Joel think when he found out? Would he break up with her? Deciding to confront her Father, she stormed back downstairs and followed the sound of his voice. She found both her parents in the lounge room opening up a bottle of champagne.

"Ella! Come and congratulate your Father. He just landed a huge client. This will be in all the papers Stephen!"

"You two disgust me!" Ella screamed loudly.

"Excuse me?" her Mother retorted, her cheeks turning pink. "How dare you raise your voice like that to me? Go to your room!"

"Don't you even want to know why I'm so mad?"

"Not really darling. Not when you insist on behaving in such an uncivilised manner," her Father responded in a tired voice.

"You don't want to hear it because you already know!"

"If this is about that pathetic McVee family then I guess you are correct. I had assumed there would be a conflict of interest seeing as you and that Joel person are...involved. But really Ella, do you truly think this silly little relationship will last?"

"Why wouldn't it?"

"Oh please. He's not exactly one of us darling. Besides, now that your Father will be defending Mr Newberry I'm afraid it will just not do to have you running about with that boy. You will end this ridiculous relationship at once and get back to behaving like a Kingston."

"I would rather die than behave like the two of you! You have no fucking soul!"

Melissa slapped her daughter across the face.

"You are out of control! Get to your room or get out of this house!"

"With pleasure!" Ella cried as she headed toward the front door.

Melissa grabbed her husband's arm as he started to go after his daughter.

"Don't. She needs to cool off. She'll be back."

Ella ran down toward the river, angry tears making the skin on her cheeks feel itchy. As she came to the bridge she saw that she was not alone. Robby sat on the bank, throwing pebbles into the river.

"Ella?" Robby stood up and squinted in the darkness.

"Yeah it's me," Ella sniffed.

"Okay?"

"It's my parents. They're such assholes."

Silently agreeing but biting his tongue, Robby waited for Ella to say more. He'd never liked her Mum and Dad. His parents had inadvertently gained the respect of the so-called upper class in recent years. His Mother's talent as an artist and her Father's successful writing career had the academic crowd frothing at the mouth over the ridiculous financial success these talents bestowed upon his parents. Not that you'd know they were well off just by looking at them. Sure, they'd upgraded to a fancier house and didn't have to worry about bills as much but their tastes were still down to earth. Dayna still shopped at thrift stores rather than boutiques and Mitchell still dressed like a university student with his political statement t-shirts and Levi jeans. Robby had been urging them to buy a second car, hoping to be given the old one now that he'd turned sixteen but instead, Mitchell had just upgraded and traded the old one
in. Said that they were just gas guzzlers that were a hazard to the environment.

The champagne and caviar crowd thought his parents' hippie like ways were 'just adorable' and 'oh so bohemian'. The few times they'd thrown dinner parties for such people had left Robby so sick he'd retreated to the rumpus room to escape the phonies, Stephen and Melissa Kingston being the King and Queen of the pretentious.

"My Father will be representing Todd Newberry."

"Shit!" Robby swore. "Why the hell would your Father want to be associated with that loser?"

"He has money. His car yard is a highly successful and profitable business. He may be a jerk but people kiss his ass in this town. Besides, the media coverage is instant PR for my Father's firm. They're at home right now celebrating."

"You're worried what Joel will say huh?"

"He's gonna be so mad Robby. He's going to expect me to stop my Father from taking Newberry on as a client but my Dad won't listen to me!"

"Well. I think you're underestimating your boyfriend there. Joel is a pretty solid guy Ella. You're not the one defending Newberry, your Dad is. Surely Joel will see that you have got nothing to do with it."

"I guess so. Maybe I should head on over there. Tell him before he finds out from someone else."

"May be the way to go," Robby agreed.

"Okay. Wish me luck."

"Luck Ella."

Robby headed back up toward his house as his Mother's car headlights swept the gully.

"Hey Mum. How'd ya go?"

"Oh Robby!" Dayna gasped. "You scared me! What are you doing? You're supposed to be babysitting the twins."

"I was only a stones throw away. I needed to sit by the water for a bit. How's Dad?"

"He's worried. Sad. He thinks you hate him Robby."

Robby sighed as he admitted to himself that it was shame more than hate that he was feeling toward his Father.

"I don't hate him Mum. I just hate that he hurt you. It's different."

"I know that."

Dayna shut her car door and ushered her son back inside. "C'mon, I want to tell you what your Father and I have decided."

Robby sighed heavily again and followed his Mother into the house.

Ella knocked nervously on the McVee's front door. She'd grown to love Joel's family. His parents were the type of people she had always wished her parents were more like. Well, maybe not in regards to the cheating stuff. She had been in total shock to discover Robby's Dad and Mrs McVee had done it! They didn't even seem to be suited. She had always thought of Robby's parents as being soul mates, both of them being so creative and artistic. Ella had to admit that Joel's Mother sure was beautiful though. How could she not think otherwise; she was the female version of Joel and Ella believed her boyfriend to be the most gorgeous person she'd ever met.

The front door swung open and Ella was pleasantly surprised to find Tildy staring up at her.

"Hey there Tilds!" Ella cried out as she enveloped the girl in a giant bear hug. She was still so utterly relieved that Tildy had returned to them safe and sound.
"Tildy! You must never answer the door without asking who it is!" Penny admonished as she appeared behind her youngest daughter.

"But Mum! I knew it was only Ella and we love her!"

"Okay, just...please! Go and finish loading the dishwasher. Come inside Ella."

"You okay Mrs McVee?"

"Oh Ella. I'm sorry. I'm just still a little bit jumpy where Tildy is concerned."

"That's understandable. I'm so glad she's finally home."

Penny smiled at her son's girlfriend gratefully.

"Joel is upstairs honey. He'll be happy to see you."

"Thanks Mrs M!" Ella called as she jogged up the stairs.

Hearing a timid knock on his door, Joel got up of his bed to see who it was.

"Hey," he said softly as he pulled his girlfriend into the room. "I've missed you."

Sensing Ella's tension, Joel stepped back to take a good look at her face.

"You okay? You look like you've been crying."

"I have something to say Joel and you're not going to like it."

Joel's stomach flipped as his mind raced toward the worst possible thing that Ella could tell him. He'd been an absolute mess whilst Tildy had been gone. He knew he'd been hard to be around but surely she understood that that was all over now? Or had she wanted to break up with him sooner but then with his sister missing she hadn't had the heart to dump him?

"Look I know things have been a drag around here lately but...."

"Joel," Ella interrupted. "Just...be quiet for a minute. Please. This isn't about anything you've done."

Feeling scared but anxious to get it out, Ella explained to Joel about her Father representing Todd Newberry. Joel listened in silence and then sat down on his bed. He put both hands on his head, not making eye contact until Ella was finished. They both stared at each other in silence until Ella couldn't stand it anymore.

"Well?" Ella cried. "Say something Joel!"

Joel stood up and paced the room. He was angry, sure. Why would anyone, let alone the Father of his girlfriend defend that scumbag?

"Oh please Joel. Say something. You're scaring me!"

Realising where her mind had gone, Joel rushed to reassure her.

"Oh geez, Ella...what? You thought I'd be mad at you?"

Joel pulled her close and stroked her hair. "I'm not...bloody hell...why would I blame you? You are not your Father."

"I know. But I thought...."

"It's okay. He had to get representation from someone. It just so happens that that someone happens to be your Dad. I don't like it but I know it has nothing to do with you."

"Can I just say for the record that I don't support him on this? I told them so tonight...in fact I ran out. I don't have anywhere to stay tonight."

"Yes you do. You'll stay here."

"But your Mum...."

"She'll understand."

"Oh Joel, she'll hate me!"

"Hey. I know my Mum. She'll see it like I do. C'mon. She's gonna find out sooner or later and I'll need to tell her you're staying anyway."

"Okay." Ella held his hand tight as they made their way downstairs.
Chapter Nineteen

Over the following weeks, the days rolled lazily by, with no one in much of a hurry to fill them with anything more exciting than a dip in the pool and occasional treats from the local deli. The only true highlight for Russell was when he and Joel had made the trip into town to see a flick at the My Fair Lady theatre. The disappointment of coming back down to earth after such a satisfying escape however had been more than a touch depressing. Penny spent most of her days feeling guilty about the fact that Russell had been the one to move out after her and Mitchell's deceit had come to light. No one would have stood by and accepted Penny being shoved out of the family home had the roles been reversed. Why no one seemed to mind in this instance must be due to Penny being a Mother. In the minds of friends and family, the children needed their Mother, adulterer or not. Come early January, to uphold a sense of fairness, Penny had asked Russell to move back in. Understanding that forgiveness would be a long time coming (if it ever came at all) Penny had offered to sleep in the spare room, whilst she and Russell awkwardly shuffled toward a new version of normal.

Penny's parents, who had taken it upon themselves to move in to the guest room whilst Tildy had been missing, had wisely decided it was time to give their daughter some space. They did not approve of Penny's past behaviour and were pinning all their hopes on their son-in-law's kind heart. Surely he wouldn't give it all up over one night of betrayal?

Feeling restless and anxious now that the festive season was well and truly over, Penny packed away the last of the Christmas decorations. Russell had gone overboard with the presents this year. Amongst the many gifts he had bestowed upon his three children were two portable record players, one each for both Joel and Simone and a brand new bike for Tildy. The tree had been standing awkwardly in the corner a whole month after they had rung in the New Year. Not that they'd celebrated in any grand style. Russell had spent the evening downing beers at O'Malleys whilst Penny and the kids played Monopoly and drank apple cider.

"Mum, I've decided on where I want to volunteer." Simone announced as Penny placed the last of the storage boxes under the stairs. She placed a sheet of paper in front of Penny's face as they made their way toward the kitchen.

"What's this?" Penny asked, still feeling groggy and hesitant to start the day. Sighing impatiently but reluctantly understanding why her Mother had not been herself lately, Simone took a deep breath and spoke again.

"It's for school, remember? Our Social Studies teacher said we had to clock up 3 hours a week volunteering somewhere." Simone tapped her finger on the permission slip.

"A psychiatric hospital?" Penny mumbled in confusion.

"That's right. It interests me Mum. All those lost souls, wandering the halls. Half of them can't even remember their own name!"

"Oh Sim, I don't know..."

"C'mon! Don't get all flipped out on me. It's perfectly safe. They have doctors and nurses around all the time and I wouldn't be left alone with any of the crazies."

"Ah, I think you may find that you'd have to watch how you refer to the patients. Calling them crazy is hardly professional."

Simone grinned as she sensed her Mother caving in.

"Look, I know they're not all crazy. Some of them are just really sad. I like the thought of maybe working with people like that one day. You know, possibly making
a difference to someone who has given up on life."

Penny felt a rush of pride at her daughter's words and slowly plucked the pen out of Simone's fingers.

"Okay...but how will you get there from here?"

"The school has organised a bus for those of us who are volunteering in the city. It'll be on every Monday, Wednesday and Friday afternoon."

Simone clasped her hands under her chin as she waited eagerly for her Mother to agree.

'Oh, alright...just promise me you'll be careful. Okay?"

Simone flung her arms around her Mother in thanks and eagerly snatched the signed form out of her hand.

"This is going to be so cool!" she cried as she grabbed her bag and headed out the front door.

"It's been so strange to be back in this place," Ella declared as she and Joel made their way across the wide front lawn of the high school. They were half way through their first week back.

"I'm so glad I got to start out my first year here with you and Robby. I haven't felt so much like the new kid, you know?"

"I'm still surprised that Simone didn't want to walk with us. I would have loved turning up to school as a Year 9 student with three Year 11s by my side."

"Sim's like that though...independent. Besides, her and that Jessie kid became pretty close over the summer. I think they feel cooler just turning up on their own without a big brother hanging around."

"So are we supposed to meet Robby out the front as usual?" she asked as they dawdled by the front doors.

"He should be here by now. Let's wait for a few more minutes." Joel settled his tall frame onto the front cement steps and gestured to his girlfriend to do the same.

"So my olds are still not too happy about my decision," Ella shared, as she leant up against Joel. "I told them, either I finish out Year 11 here, or I’m leaving home for good this time. There was no way I was going to let myself be shipped off to that snotty private school. They knew I meant it too – they may not admit it but that week I spent at your place really rocked their confidence," she stated, jutting out her chin.

"With the kind of money your parents make, I'm surprised you weren't already a private school student."

"Well my Dad graduated from here. His family wasn't well off when he was young. He got to where he is through 'sheer hard work and determination,'" Ella recited the quote pompously, imitating her Father.

"He wanted his only child to do the same. After all this drama however, they had a re-think and decided to ship me off."

"To keep you separated from me in other words." Joel muttered bitterly.

"Well, it didn't work. I'm staying put."

"Have you heard anything more about Mr Newberry?" Joel asked, eager to change the subject.

Ella screwed up her face and shook her head.

"Dad got him off and then moved straight onto the next case. He doesn't take a vested interest in what happens afterwards to the losers he represents. I just hope the rumours of Mr Newberry moving interstate are true."

"Yeah...he'd be pretty stupid to show his face around here now. My Dad would knock his block off for starters. Not to mention half the town. You know no one has
bought their old place yet. A couple of likely punters have sniffed around but so far it's remained empty."

"Hey! Stop loitering and get to class you two!"

Joel looked up and grinned at his old mate.

"Geez Robby, you're cutting it fine. The final bell is about to ring."

"Yeah sorry. The twins were still all sooky this morning about the holidays being over. I had to help Mum sort them out."

"How's she doing, your Mum?" Ella enquired.

"She's good actually. Been struggling a bit with managing everything on her own but she and Dad are on good terms. Think she just misses his cooking every night."

"Hell, I miss his cooking. I can only imagine how you guys feel," Ella confessed sheepishly.

"Hey, listen to this. My Dad reckons he saw Mrs Newberry, and that guy who runs the pub, at his old hotel last week. He went to settle the bill now that he's found a new place to rent and he saw them kissing in the lobby."

"Daniel O'Malley?" Joel asked in surprise. "What the hell would he see in that woman? Is she even divorced from her husband?"

"They're not divorced. My Mother said every lawyer in town wanted to handle that case if the need arose but they chose to stay together. I assumed she left town with him." Ella shared.

The bell rang loudly; reminding them that school was in session.

"Hey, did you make a start on that biology project yet?" Ella asked Robby.

"Give a guy a chance to acclimate woman!" Robby laughed as they entered the stuffy hallway. Ella just laughed and glanced sideways at her boyfriend. At least Joel was responsible, she thought smugly.
Chapter Twenty

Tildy sat in class and daydreamed. Grade Two was turning out to be much the same as Grade One. Her grand expectations of finally becoming a big kid had failed to be met so far. Right at this moment they were making animal figures out of clay just like regular kindergarten babies.

Adding more water to the clay just like her new teacher told her to, Tildy looked up again to study the young lady who was to be her teacher for the next school year. Thoughts clouded with uncertainty suddenly filled her mind. *She's scared of us* Tildy realised in alarm. Why this smartly dressed woman, with perfectly coifed hair and shiny shoes, would be frightened by a bunch of six and seven year olds was a mystery to Tildy.

Her fingers continued to work the clay of their own accord whilst Tildy's mind wandered. A fine layer of sweat began to form above her lip as the lump of clay began to transform into something resembling a face. The last few months had been a great disappointment for the young girl. Hazy memories of Christmases gone by had had little resemblance to the atmosphere surrounding the McVee house this Christmas just gone. The love between her Mother and Father, although still there, was being kept at bay by the big black and ugly thing called 'The Affair'. Tildy thought she knew what that meant. Something about her Mummy kissing someone other than her Daddy. She also knew it had all come to a head that night of the party. What she didn't understand was why Mr Harrison loved her Mum instead of Mrs Harrison. Weren't people who were married supposed to love each other?

A gasp erupted behind Tildy's right ear and she was snapped out of her reverie. "Tildy!" her teacher exclaimed in shock. "Where on earth did you learn to sculpt like that?"

Looking down at her hands, which were covered in sticky grey clay, she slowly turned her eyes upwards to find herself staring into a pair of eyes she knew so well. Tildy felt her teacher's nerves shoot up another notch. *Normal kids are enough of a challenge*, the young teacher thought despairingly. *What the hell am I supposed to do with a god damn prodigy?*

Later that afternoon Simone and Jessie were on their way toward the Psychiatric Hospital.

"I'm so glad we're volunteering at the same place," declared Jessie. "I'm not so thrilled about your choice of placement however."

"Like sorting through second hand junk for The Salvation Army was an inspired idea."

"Are you kidding me? Getting first pick of all the loot people dump in their charity bins? My Pop from Melbourne once found a limited edition Batman comic from the forties in an op shop. I'd kill for something like that."

"Oh Jessie...don't let your Dad hear you say that. Didn't he say comics were a waste of time?"

Jessie hastily changed the subject.

"How much further is this place anyway."

"We're the first ones to be dropped off so it shouldn't be too much longer."

Raylene checked her watch and made her way downstairs to greet the high school children who had chosen to be volunteers at her place of work. She remembered high school well and recalled her own foray into the world of volunteering. Having been
inspired by the true story of Doris Taylor, the founder of Meals On Wheels in South Australia, Raylene had thrown herself into the role of caring for the elderly. She had enjoyed it so much that it played a major part in deciding her future career. She felt that thirteen years old may be a bit young in regards to caring for the mentally ill however and had chores such as cleaning out bedpans and organising the laundry in mind for these two eager children.

She spotted them making their way toward the intimidating entrance. The grand archway led onwards to the massive front doors, both flanked by two, floor to ceiling windows. Window cleaning she thought as she mentally added to the list she was creating for the children. Deciding to walk out and greet them, Raylene pulled open the doors and plastered a welcoming smile onto her face.

Penny once again found a pile of photo albums spread out in front of the bookshelves in the lounge room.
"Tildy! What did I tell you? If you've finished playing with something, put it away!"

Sensing her patience waning and silently battling her urge to swallow another pill, Penny sat on the couch and pushed the heels of her hands up against her eyes.
"Tildy isn't here Pen...remember? She had school today and your Mum will be picking her up afterwards for an ice-cream run."

Russell saw his wife's head snap up at his words and then saw the shift in her face as she realised what he was saying. Tildy was safe. Her nerves had been on edge ever since her precious daughter had arrived home safely.
"I just keep remembering the horror Russell...the horror of not knowing. Damn it, we still don't know where she had been. Why won't she tell us?"
"She says she can't remember," Russell reminded her.
"I'm just so tired all the time Russell...just...so....damn...tired."

Russell placed his hands around each of her ankles and hoisted her legs up on to the couch. Placing a cushion under head, he reached for the patchwork quilt Bonnie Anderson had made for Simone when she was just a little girl and threw it over Penny's body.
"Just rest for a bit Pen...I'll tidy up okay?"
"But dinner..." Penny mumbled as her eyes made the decision for her and slowly slid shut.

Russell had already decided to forgive her. How could he make any other choice when he loved her so? It had been hell these last few weeks having her sleep two doors down from him in the spare room. His pride however, would not allow a swift reconciliation to take place. What would everybody think if he took her back straight away, after the deplorable thing she had done? If he was honest with himself, he knew deep down he blamed Mitchell more than his wife for the betrayal. It was true; he had been neglecting Penny back then. His work was placing an unbelievable amount of pressure on him to prove himself worthy of a promotion. He'd spent too much time schmoozing his bosses and not enough time with his family. He figured he'd keep things as they were for now. Wait until autumn to let Penny back into the marital bed. If for no other reason than to keep each other warm when the temperature inevitably drops, he thought ruefully. It had been a long hot summer. A summer he would no doubt ever forget.

Stepping away from his wife, he stooped down to pick up the albums that had so caught the attention of his youngest daughter these past few months. He recognised a few of the albums. He and Penny had been quite diligent about keeping a record of
pictures after Joel was born. Simone had been the star of the next lot of shots, which had diminished a little after Tildy came along - like a hobby that was eventually put aside. Vowing to take more photos of all his children, Russell picked up the album that looked the least familiar and began to flick through.

After his parents had passed, Russell had had all their belongings shipped over to where they had been living at the time and them promptly put them away. After the move, obviously a few things had been pulled out and put amongst their own belongings. Turning the pages slowly, he stared at the faces with a slight feeling of unease. He recognised the younger versions of his parents but was disconcerted at the lack of photos depicting himself. In fact, he couldn't recall ever seeing photographs of his parents looking so youthful - and the lifestyle they led! By the looks of things, they attended endless glamorous parties and functions. Growing up, he considered the two of them to be quite placid, 'stay at home' types. He did have a fuzzy memory of his Mother crying and hugging him tight. Telling him that they were so happy to have him as a son. Maybe it was just a simple case of them finally settling down after his birth and enjoying the fact they had a child to raise. Turning another page, Russell traced his finger around a rectangle shape that showed what colour the album pages had been before they had faded into a dull salmon shade. A picture was missing. He wondered what it had been of. Before he could look any further he heard his in-laws pull up out the front. Tildy, no doubt on an ice cream high, was singing loudly as she crossed the lawn. Better greet them outside so as not to wake Penny lovingly.

"Are we ever going to be able to see the patients?" moaned Simone as she pulled another weed from the flowerbed. Tall, beautiful Agapantha plants swayed in the afternoon breeze, as the two children laboured over their task. Raylene had been warm and welcoming upon their arrival. She had given them a swift tour of the hospital and its facilities, reciting a list of do's and don'ts as she did so. It was made especially clear that neither Simone nor Jessie were to approach or speak to any of the patients without a nurse or Doctor present. They were to move about at a slow and steady pace and any communication was to be made using calm and hushed voices. Simone was beginning to think that maybe Jessie was right - this was a bad choice.

"Well, what did you expect Sim? This is a place where people come for help, people who are prone to fly off the handle at the littlest thing. They'd hardly let a couple of kids run around the place, sticking their faces into the patient’s rooms and doing whatever they please."

"I know that Jessie...I just thought we could perhaps visit with them though. Maybe read to the patients or brush their hair. I'd be quiet and respectful. What does she think we are? Five years old?"

"Well, yeah. I see your point. To her though, we are just kids. She doesn't know us."

"Well, I'm going to show her how mature I can be then. Maybe after the first couple of visits, she'll let us do more than just work in this bloody garden."

Yanking out another stubborn weed, Simone pouted and looked toward the massive white building before her. Spotting a movement at one of the windows, she smiled and nodded her head. Raylene would come around, she was sure of it.

Just at that moment, Raylene was making changes to the roster. One of the night shift nurses had called in sick and it was up to her to find someone to fill it. Noticing straight away that none of the other nurses were available, she dutifully pencilled in her own name and sighed as she placed the roster back up onto the wall. Deciding to
do a round of checks, she left her office and made her way toward the East Ward. Glancing out the tall windows as she did so, she was satisfied to see the volunteers had made some leeway in the gardens. She knew quite well that they were disappointed - especially the girl - but she would have no one messing with her patients.

"Morning Helena, how are we today?" Raylene spoke kindly.

Not necessarily expecting an answer, especially from this particular patient, Raylene plucked up the chart from the foot of the bed.

"I have family visiting today!" Helena sang out in a cheerful voice.

Raylene, although quite used to patients talking about imaginary callers, looked up in surprise. She had learnt early on in her career to humour such announcements. A lot of people housed in facilities such as this spent most of their days alone. It's true, a few of them still had loved ones who cared enough to visit, but most unfortunately either had no one who cared, or simply had no family at all. She had never heard this particular patient speak in such a manner before however and was intrigued.

"You do?" she asked, mindful of the fact that she must tread carefully.

"Yes...I know she is here. Why have I not been able to see her?"

"I'm not sure...are you hungry Helena? I hear your favourite pudding is to be the dessert tonight. Would you like me to get some of it for you now?" Raylene fluffed up the pillows, sure her choice of distraction would work. This particular patient loved her treats.

"What flavour?" the old woman asked, clapping her hands.

Pleased that her ploy had worked, Raylene promised to go and check, then quietly left the room. No one, in all the years that Raylene had worked here, had ever visited the woman in Room 201. Feeling sorry for her but remembering to remain professionally impassive, Raylene made her way down to the kitchen. She just hoped that they did have some pudding about. Helena may not remember the conversation they'd just had but Raylene always like to stay true to her word.
The next morning, Estelle lay in Daniel's bed shivering. He'd left early before the sun had barely risen and not wanting to disturb her, had left the air-conditioning on. Deciding to turn it off in favour of the pedestal fan, she hoisted herself out of the king sized bed. Daniel's place was a bit of a bachelor pad. Maybe a touch neater than the average single man's abode, but still decorated with a man’s taste. Wood panelled walls, a billiard table in the dining room and a wall length bar overlooking landscaped gardens; Daniel's other indulgence. He loved to come home, pour himself a glass of water (after serving booze all day and night, he loved the cleansing taste of Mother Nature's brew) and he'd stare for hours at the birds who loved to spend time in his space. He'd been kicking himself this summer for not splurging on the pool he'd promised himself once the bar started making a decent profit. He'd been able to afford it for two years now but could never make himself part with the money.

Estelle found herself enjoying the backyard too. She'd never bothered much with nature in the past. Todd hated manual labour so had had their own backyard cemented over with gaudy looking marble statues scattered about. Estelle had spent most of her time indoors. It had been said of late than the sun could age the skin so she forgo the look of a golden tan with the intention of keeping the wrinkles at bay for as long as she could.

Looking at herself in the mirror, she once again felt her stomach turn over as she tentatively ran her fingertips over her face. What was she going to do? She couldn't hide out here forever. After fleeing from Todd two weeks ago, she had checked into a city hotel under an alias. The small amount of money she'd had in her purse however had soon dried up and she'd had no one to turn to except Daniel. She still could not believe all that he had done for her. Who knew a man could be so kind and gentle? The way he had caressed the bruises on her face the night he had come to her aid, still made her cry. Todd had never touched her like that before.

Todd. A shiver ran down her spine as she pictured his cruel and yet somehow still handsome face. He'd nearly killed her. She realised that now. She'd felt so hopeful the night he had finally been cleared of all charges. She knew he'd go about clearing his name in the most illegal of ways. She was not privy to the details but a judge must have been paid off, or something to that effect, for him to have gotten away with everything scott free.

He had been facing a long list of charges. After the initial incident with Mrs McVee, it soon came to light that Mr Newberry had acted in such a manner before, toward other innocent women in his employ. Estelle had naively thought that standing by her man would be enough. Who would believe the stories flying about if a loving and loyal wife stood by his side? It turned out that things were more complicated than that - even his hotshot lawyer started to worry.

Them bam! Assets were sold off; deals were made and suddenly her husband was free to walk about like an innocent man. She'd pictured a 'champagne and caviar' filled homecoming. She'd assumed Todd would stroll through the door full of relief and confidence, a combination of emotions she felt positive would ensure a good mood. But it was not to be. Estelle had felt the slap before she even saw his face.

The shock rendered her speechless and she took the beating in a way she had never done so before. Lying limp whilst he kicked her kidneys and screamed obscenities, Estelle found herself wishing for death. Hoping that the next blow would rupture something inside of her, stealing her life force and thereby allowing her tired soul to fly free, was all that was going through her mind. She felt blood pool inside
her mouth and felt sure that this was it. The last thing she remembered was waking up beside the entranceway phone table. The first light of dawn was beginning to peek through the curtains. After realising she was indeed still alive, she lay on the cold and hard marble floor, staring at the phone.

After what seemed like hours, she painstakingly got herself up into a sitting position and realised she needed water. Sometime during the assault, she had wet her pants. Her kidneys were on fire and her mouth felt like a wad of cotton balls. Crawling into the kitchen she managed to reach the sink. Hoisting herself up to her full height had required an effort that had her screaming in agony. Pain killers, which she had gotten into the habit of having on hand at all times, thankfully numbed some of the pain. Enough so that she made it upstairs into the bedroom that they had shared for so many years.

She found the closets empty, save for her belongings. The ensuite no longer held the familiar sight of his razors and favourite aftershave. Thinking quickly, Estelle lunged for her make-up case, hoping like hell he hadn't touched it. Lifting up the tray that lay nestled inside her case, Estelle was relieved to see the pile of notes she had stashed there. Why she felt the need to squirrel away this money over the years was never quite clear to Estelle.

Maybe she had been saving it for some expensive new underwear. Or possibly it had been her intention to surprise Todd with a fancy and impressive present one Christmas Day. Somehow Estelle knew that there had been part of her that instinctively knew she'd need this money eventually - money that Todd knew nothing about. Deciding to not over analyse things, she snatched the notes up and tucked them away inside her favourite leather handbag. Choosing only those things that were absolutely necessary, she retrieved her suitcase from under the bed and packed it quickly. She didn't care about the house. She didn't care about the trinkets Todd had bought her for birthdays and special occasions, she just wanted out.

Without looking back, Estelle had called for a taxi, asked for the most discreet hotel in Adelaide and made the decision right then and there; she never wanted to see Todd Newberry again.

Whilst Estelle was recalling her resolve to leave her husband for good, Todd was crouched down inside the station wagon he had taken from the car lot earlier in the week. Before selling the business to a shady investor, for way below what it was worth, Todd had doctored the inventory records and taken the vehicle as his own. He no longer wished to travel in his conspicuous flashy Jaguar. He needed to fly under the radar now that his reputation had been damaged beyond repair. He was no longer in danger of being locked up for good but his freedom had certainly been compromised in other ways. Not a single person in town had escaped hearing about his recent troubles. The night he was finally let off ought to have been a joyous one. He'd stopped by his favourite liquor store on the way home, hoping to celebrate with Estelle over an expensive bottle of champagne. The proprietor of the business however had told Todd, in no uncertain terms, that he was no longer welcome to enter his store. Seething with rage and wishing like hell he could smash the self-righteous son of a bitch in the face, Todd had instead walked out without a word.

He realised with a mounting sense of horror that he would most likely encounter others who shared the liquor store guy's attitude. He was once seen as a King in this town, highly respected and admired. Thanks to that stupid bitch Penny, his reign had ended in the worst way possible. He no longer cared about Estelle. He had stopped just short of killing the silly woman on the night of his release. The only thing
stopping him was the certainty that no amount of money would allow him to get away
with murder.

He'd packed the basic necessities, stashed his valuables into an old squash bag
and left her alone, lying in a pool of her own urine and blood. Disgusting creature.
Vowing to have the house sold and the money deposited into a new bank account as
soon as it was possible, he truly didn't care what became of his wife. As long as his
basic needs were met and his financial situation remained intact, he figured he'd be
okay.

He now watched as Penny left the supermarket with her youngest daughter in
tow. Tildy, feeling anxious about returning to school after the clay sculpture incident,
had feigned illness that morning with the intention of staying home with her Mother.
Penny, who had no reason to disbelieve her daughter, had agreed that her youngest
could stay in bed and rest. After breakfast, Penny completed a quick inventory of the
pantry and mused aloud that she should probably swing by the supermarket after
Russell finished work. Tildy, overhearing her Mother and feeling guilty about her fib,
informed her that she felt a bit better now and could tag along if groceries needed to
be bought. Not entirely convinced but mindful of the empty cupboards, Penny agreed
that Tildy seemed up to it. As they both left the store, Penny stopped to pet a dog that
was waiting forlornly for its owner.

"Aww, look at you sitting there all alone. What a cutie you are," she cooed, as
Tildy scratched the dog behind its ears.

"Can we get a dog one day Mum?" she asked, looking up at her Mother
hopefully.

"Well...dogs are hard work Tilds. They may look cute and harmless but they need
to be fed and walked, and they sometimes need to visit the vet..."

"Oh but I could be the one to look after it!" Tildy cried, not wishing to focus on
the negatives.

"Let's talk about it with your Father when he gets home shall we?"

Already half considering it, more for the protection a dog could offer than Tildy's
desire for a pet, Penny smiled. She gave the adorable creature one last pat and coaxed
her daughter away from the store.

Feeling a wave of agreement come off of her mother, Tildy smiled. The grin was
swiftly replaced by a frown however, as she also sensed a simmering anger rising up
from the asphalt as they passed a large brown and gold Buick, which was parked out
the front of the chemist.

"Do you want to stop at the newsagency Tilds? You wanted to buy some new
coloured pencils."

"No Mum. I think we should just go home now," she responded, feeling uneasy.
Placing her hand on Tildy's forehead, Penny frowned.

"I knew I shouldn't have bought you out and about with me," she sighed.
"I'm okay, I just feel like going home."

Grabbing Penny's hand, Tildy dragged her Mother across the parking lot. As she
waited for her to fish the car keys out of her bag, Tildy looked about nervously.
Sometimes she hated that she could sense things that others could not. Deciding to
ignore the bad feeling, she jumped up into car and smiled at her Mother.

I wonder if I will get to be the one to name our new dog she thought gleefully.

Todd, being mindful of keeping them in sight whilst he remained out of theirs,
turned his key in the ignition and slowly followed the McVee family car.

Lillian Bolden had only been a real estate agent for one month and two days but
already she had sold her first house. The commission had been a welcome bonus for her and her young family. It had been a hard sell to convince her husband that they needed two incomes. Almost as hard as it had been to make her first sale. She was an ambitious woman however and if she wanted the lifestyle that she'd always dreamed of, then her husband's job as a mechanic just wasn't going to cut it.

She shouldered the front door open as she juggled the glossy brochures that were threatening to spill to the ground. This place should have been a straightforward and easy sell. Settled in the middle of a gorgeous tree-lined street, the two storied, stone-fronted estate boasted an impressive modern kitchen, two bathrooms and an Italian inspired back yard. Lillian's nose twitched at the memory of her first visit to the home.

Being briefed on the property, it had been her expectation that she would find the house empty and unoccupied. She was aware of the Newberry scandal, as was most of the community. It was her understanding that Mrs and Mrs Newberry had left for a new start interstate and were after a swift sale. She was aware that people might be put off by the knowledge that the property once housed a wanted criminal. She was hoping that the fact that he used to also be a rich and well-respected member of the community would make it a non-issue.

The morning she had first visited the property however had shaken her confidence. She'd smelt the mess before she had laid her eyes upon it. It had looked like something out of a horror movie. Blood, dried and caked into pools of yellow urine, had instantly made Lillian gag. Staring at the floor and trying to imagine what on earth had transpired to create such a mess, Lillian had quickly made her way through the house, to ascertain whether or not anyone else was present. Finally coming to the conclusion that she was the only there, Lillian had made a decision. Prospective buyers had been due to arrive within thirty minutes. If she were able to secure a buyer for this house, it'd be her second commission within the space of five weeks! She and her husband could start thinking about upgrading into a bigger house of their own.

Hunting down a mop, she had been relived to see that Todd Newberry had left a whole array of cleaning supplies behind in the laundry. Pouring a healthy dose of bleach into the mop bucket, Lillian cleaned up the mess as best she could. She would let nothing stop her from succeeding. If some sort of crime was committed here, if the person responsible for the ghastly sight she had stumbled upon would somehow get away with whatever had transpired due to her cleaning up the evidence, then so be it. It wasn't her responsibility to find out what had gone down. Feeling confident once again, Lillian had enthusiastically greeted the first potential buyers.

Thankful that this morning's open house had so far been less dramatic than the first, Lillian plastered a smile on her face and hoped like hell that today would be the day to secure a sale.

"Wait until you see the size of the bedrooms!" she gushed, as she guided the potential buyers upstairs.

"I hope they find a buyer soon," Penny mused as she pulled into her driveway. 
"Mum. I've changed my mind. I think I'd like to go back for those pencils now," cried Tildy, thinking fast.

"Oh Tildy! What on earth... It's too late now. We're home."

Feeling exasperated with her daughter, Penny shut the car door and opened up the boot. Glancing over at the empty house again, she felt a wave of anxiety. The sight of it still made her think of Todd Newberry and the way he had mercilessly knocked her
to the ground. New owners would hopefully breathe new life into the place, making Penny forget the horror of that day. Lost in her reverie, Penny failed to notice a slight movement to her right. If her mind registered a clicking sound, it shrugged it off as nothing more than the sounds of nature that she heard every day. Struggling with the paper shopping bags, she suddenly found herself surprised that the carton of milk she had purchased earlier was now suddenly gushing out onto the driveway. As she sank slowly down onto her knees, her last thought was of her youngest daughter.

"Tildy?" she asked in confusion, before her eyes slid shut and her mind shut down.

Simone moodily shuffled her feet as she made her way down to the storage cupboard. The window cleaner bottle was almost empty and she'd been given clear instructions on how and where to re-fill it. Jessie, who had been stationed downstairs inside the laundry room, had been put to work sorting the dirty linen. Out of the two chores, Simone had to admit she got off lighter. Missing her friend's company, Simone sighed loudly and snuck a peek into one of the rec rooms.

"There you are!" a surprised and anxious voice cried out.

Looking nervously over her shoulder, Simone wondered whom the small woman was talking to. Not spotting any of the nurses about, Simone risked a small step toward the worried looking patient.

"Don't dilly dally missy...he has revenge on his mind."

Not sure on whether or not she should respond, Simone decided that silence was the smartest option. Smiling shyly and putting her hands behind her back, she nodded to encourage the woman to speak again.

"You're not the fair haired one. You don't know. Please be careful child!"

Starting to think she was a bit out of her element, Simone backed up a step and tried to slink away quietly. Maybe Raylene had been right. These patients could be quite tricky to deal with. The poor thing was uttering complete nonsense.

"What did I tell you about speaking with the patients?" a stern voice scolded from the doorway.

"I'm sorry...I wasn't speaking with her. I was trying to find the storage cupboard."

"In the games room?" Raylene asked sarcastically.

"It's okay Nurse Raylene. Simone meant no harm."

Offering up a grateful grin, Simone waved shyly at the sweet old lady and made a hasty retreat. It wasn't until she had completed the final window of the day that it dawned on her - she had not told the old woman her name.

Russell grabbed some fresh coffee from the staff room and made a mental note to change the background colour on the latest ad he had been working on. Wishing he hadn't eaten that second donut at the staff meeting, he sat behind his desk and grabbed the ringing telephone.

"Art Department." he said, taking another sip of the bitter coffee.

"Is this Mr Russell McVee? Husband of Penny McVee?"

"Speaking." Russell, responding instinctively to the unfamiliar but official sounding voice, felt his chest constrict and stood up from his chair. As the police officer introduced himself and informed Russell of the situation, hot steaming liquid spilt out of the mug and onto the floor.

"Penny?" Russell called out shakily. Not waiting to hear anymore, he dropped the receiver onto the desk and bypassed the lift in favour of the stairs.
Joel laughed into Ella's neck as she tickled his ribs with her fingers. They had been walking home from school together for weeks now and they took twice as long to reach any destination, so infatuated were they in one another.

"I wish we could spend all our days by the river," Joel mumbled sleepily as they both lay on the grass beneath the weeping willow tree. Intertwining her hand with Joel's and watching the sunlight glow through their fingers, Ella sighed. They'd been making out all afternoon and sometimes she felt impatient to do more. Joel would be her first but she felt sure that if she were to lose it with anyone, he would be the guy to choose.

"Joel?"
"Mmmm?"
"You know that first night you popped over? The night I'd been expecting your call but you visited me instead?"
"Yeah. Your parents came home and I had to jump the back fence!" Joel laughed at the memory.
"That's right...well, I often think back to how I kissed you and asked you upstairs. You must have thought I was pretty forward."

Surprised at her words, Joel sat up.
"Actually, you did surprise me that night. I spun out a little when I thought about it afterwards. I was wondering if maybe you were more experienced than me."
"I was just nervous and so happy to have you there...I guess I figured I didn't want you to leave...so..." she nervously let the sentence hang.
"So you thought you should offer to sleep with me?" Joel looked at her face in surprise.
"Maybe...thing is. I wouldn't have been ready then. But now... I've kind of been thinking..."

Before Ella could finish her sentence, the sound of sirens reached their ears. Startlingly close and filling each of them with concern, both Ella and Joel leaped to their feet.
"Is that coming from my street?" Not waiting for Ella's response, Joel ran up the dirt path toward Evergreen Avenue.

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