



KATHY GEORGE

SARGASSO

'Shades of du Maurier's
classic *Rebecca* in this riveting,
atmospheric mystery.
Captivating.'

—
TÉA COOPER, author of
The Cartographer's Secret

*between one breath
and the next,
he calls to her ...*



KATHY GEORGE sent her first short story off for publication when she was a teenager ... Rejection, however, has never deterred her, and these days she has a master's degree in Australian Gothic Literature, has had short fiction published in a number of Australian literary journals including *The Big Issue* Fiction Edition, and has won prizes for her writing.

Kathy was born in South Africa. She has lived in Namibia and New Zealand but she has called Australia home for a long time now, and lives with her family in Brisbane. She is passionate about photography, travelling, and the ocean, and when she is not at her desk she can usually be found at the sea.

Discover more about Kathy at kathygeorge.com.au.

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SARGASSO

FICTION



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For Tim, always

There is something at work in my soul, which I do not understand.

Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

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Acknowledgements

1

Now

My hands are bandaged, but otherwise I am uninjured. Outwardly, there's nothing wrong with me. I have heard them say it is a miracle we are both alive, particularly Tristan.

The last thing I remember is the screaming. I remember that because I wasn't the one doing it. It wasn't Tristan or Flint, either. It was the house. Sargasso. The house was screaming, keening like wind flung helpless into the sky on a hot day.

They have given me a laptop, not a pen and paper. The doctor said it would be less painful to type with one finger than to hold a pen. But I expect the real reason is that they are afraid of what I might do with a pen. I heard him tell the nurse—when you don't talk people assume you are deaf as well as mute—that the laptop is important because it gives me the means to communicate in case I want to get it off my chest. And I suppose this is what I am doing here, although I am not sure what the point is. They didn't believe me when I was a child, why should they believe me now?

I have a bed, and a chair, and my own bathroom. I had an IV drip too, but they have taken that away now. The room is small but it has a window high up on one wall, cracked ajar, just enough to let in a little light from the outside world. And a little air.

And this evening after dinner, I thought I smelt the sea. I thought I smelt Sargasso, too, in the ashes blowing towards me.

2

Then

I was seven when we moved to Sargasso. It was the summer holidays. My father was an architect and my grandmother had helped him buy a piece of land on the coast, putting up the money for a house. It was her idea to call it Sargasso. *Sargassum* was a fancy name for kelp, and Sargasso was an area of water in the North Atlantic Ocean—the Sargasso Sea—the only sea on earth that has no coastline, no borders. That makes the name unique, she told me. Dad designed the house and oversaw the construction, slaving over the tiniest details. *An innovative house*, the reviews said at the time. *Conceptually brilliant. Intransigent*—I had to look that word up because I was little—and *inventive*. They also said *isolated* and *introverted*, but we took no notice. Dad said there'd always be people who were resentful.

My memories of the move are sketchy, but I know Dolly cried and that's probably why Flint found us. I was given her a day or two before we moved. She came in a long box, like the roses Dad sent to Mum, always with a card that simply said: *Eleni, love Henry*. Only Dolly didn't smell like roses, but of vinyl. If I close my eyes I can still smell her, even after all these years. It's a particular odour, vinyl. To a little girl it's the scent of anticipation. Of joy. I can see her, too, her moveable eyelids and soft, brown lashes, blonde curls and sparkly blue eyes. Her mouth partly open, she gazed at me from inside the box as though she had something to say, and even before I got the lid off she spoke. 'I'll always be your friend,' she said.

We were like that before Flint, close. She had dimples in her knees and wore a pink and white checked dress gathered at the waist, with a frilly petticoat underneath. On her feet were thin plastic shoes.

Mum said she was my consolation present. A distraction, I suppose she meant. Not that I was upset to be leaving, but packing boxes cluttered the hallway and big men in overalls roamed the house, and nothing was where it should be. The night before even my Winnie-the-Pooh light was gone, and I told Mum Dolly had woken in fright. Kelly, who was five years older than me, said I should grow up. Dad said nothing. He was standing in the kitchen—because they'd already taken the chairs—biting into a piece of toast and marmalade, and he ruffled my hair and gave me one of his special smiles. Dad wasn't judgmental. There weren't any expectations or conditions with Dad. He simply loved me, loved us.

He and I drove ahead in the ute. Sargasso was built on a headland, outside Shepherd Cove, a holiday town two hours' drive down the west coast of Melbourne. We'd sold our small terrace house in the inner city, and Mum and Kelly were staying behind to clean up. Mum thought I should remain with her. She said Dad would forget me once we arrived, that I'd get in the way, but I begged and pleaded, and finally she relented. I think she was relieved, really, to get me out from underfoot. Kelly said, 'Good riddance, you little twit,' when Mum was out of the room. And, 'Take that stupid doll with you.'

Dolly was buckled up alongside me, her pretty dress creased, but not complaining like Kelly would have. We sat up front with Dad, feeling important. I told Dolly it was like being the Queen, but Dad said the Queen always rode in the back.

We reached Sargasso before the movers. Dad reckoned they'd probably stopped for smoko, which I didn't understand. I didn't say so.

Dolly and I stood on the threshold, inside the portico, while he unlocked the front door with a grin of happiness on his face. The house was finally finished. It was a momentous occasion. Dolly and I held hands, listened to the house breathe, and waited for permission to enter. 'Dad?' I said, but he'd stepped back. He was surveying the house from top to toe. Drinking it all in. 'Oh, Hannah,' he murmured, his eyes shining. 'What a beauty!'

I knew Sargasso was very special, so I didn't nag. But after a bit he began to unload his tools and pulled out his ruler, the one with the bubble in

the middle, positioning it on a windowsill. Muttering and scratching inside his ear with his pencil. He always carried a snub-nosed scribbler and a little fold-up ruler, and no matter where we were he measured things: doorways, ceilings, steps. Mum flushed when he was an embarrassment; but she loved him so much he could've done anything and got away with it.

The floor of the big, empty entrance hall was wooden and smooth and clean. It struck me that I should take off my shoes, so I sat my new friend against the doorway and bent down to laboriously unbuckle them. And the house sighed.

'I think it's the waves on the beach,' I said, but as we tiptoed over the threshold a breath of air lifted the fringe on my forehead, and I knew I was wrong. The house really was sighing.

The entrance hall had a lofty ceiling. I had to strain my neck to look up. Ahead of us a wide staircase to the second floor adjoined a wall. To the right, through swing doors I would later find a spacious kitchen with harlequin tiles on the floor and, to the left along a passage, a powder room, and then a library with wall-to-wall shelves and another high ceiling, sloping this time. I didn't think about exploring any of these rooms then, because at the bottom of the stairs a heap of pebbles with a seashell balancing on top caught my eye.

The shell was shaped like a baby's ear, with a shimmering inlay of mother-of-pearl. I picked it up and held it to my ear as I'd been shown to do, and heard the ocean. 'It's the same sound the house makes,' I said, but Dolly was already gazing up the stairs. I put the shell in my shorts pocket and took a tentative step up. The staircase was wide and wooden; there was no railing and I had to hug the wall. Holding my friend firmly in case she was tempted to stray to the edge, I told her not to look over my shoulder.

On the landing, three passageways stretched in different directions, ahead, right and left.

'Ahead,' she instructed.

'No, right,' I said. I'd been learning to tell my left from my right and wanted to show her I knew the difference.

'Why?' she asked.

'Because I'm in charge.'

'Why do you have to boss me around?' she asked.

The path ahead led us to a room with a polished wooden floor, with walls and a peaked ceiling all made of glass. In the sky, hovering on a current of air was a seagull with legs like red ribbons. I said, 'Hello, Mr Seagull,' but he only looked at me with his mustard seed eye.

We walked to the room's edge, me clutching Dolly tightly, and she gave a gasp of fright. The ground fell away and the ocean stretched before us as though we were flying. We watched the heaving foam and the wind-furrowed troughs of the waves. Something below the water seemed to be trying to gather itself together and break through the heavy surface, but it was pulled down again and again and swallowed up. We remained until Dolly felt dizzy—she hadn't seen the sea before—and when we turned to go back, we caught a glimpse of something overhead. A flitting movement where the glass ceiling met the inner wall. Much bigger than a bird. She said it was a shadow. A shadow of what? I asked, but she couldn't say. How could a shadow get up there? I persisted. We should have gone right, I told her, but she didn't respond. As she rested within the crook of my arm I felt her unease. I glanced down, but she wouldn't look at me. I was retracing my steps to the landing when a loud clap, like a door banging in the wind, startled me and I froze. Dolly began to cry, but I was only half-listening. My hand was in my pocket fingering the seashell, feeling its smooth and cool insides, the faint ridges on its outer surface.

I moved on and took the passage to the right. There were doors leading off but they were all closed. Every now and then I glanced over my shoulder as if I sensed something following us. We didn't go far before we came to another staircase, a narrow one. 'No,' Dolly said through her tears. 'No. I want to go home.' But I gripped her harder and up we went, me holding onto the wall for support. When I reached the top, I couldn't look back. It was too steep. I knew she could feel my heart knocking in my chest. We had to go forward but a set of heavy doors was before us. 'I don't want to go there,' Dolly whispered as if somebody were listening. I looked at the doors—they were trembling like my hands—and then the fear, the fear of something following, something slithering up the stairs, took over.

I reached out and yanked the handle. Dolly screamed. Bright, white light and a gust of wind buffeted us. I steadied her, tensed my body and stepped out onto a large, tiled patio enclosed by a wall. The wind whipped around angrily, as if we had no business being up here. I stretched up on

tippy-toes and realised we were on the roof, and we were very high. On one side, the track reached back to the stretch of eucalypts, and on the other was the glitter of endless sea. Directly below us, to the left, was the peaked roof of the glass room.

Dolly was crying without stopping. I took a few tentative steps out onto the patio, and the door behind us caught another gust and slammed shut. There was nowhere else to go now. I looked for my seagull, shielding my eyes against the sun, and the ashen sky revolved around me as if I'd stepped off a merry-go-round. The wind churned little eddies of sand into the corners, and I saw another heap of pebbles topped with a seashell. Was it a game? Did finding the second shell mean something? Tilting my head, dragging Dolly behind me, I struggled over and knelt in the lee of the wall to retrieve the shell.

I heard voices, then, on the other side, far below me.

I let go of my doll. I reached up, gripped the wall's edge and pulled myself up, grazing my knuckles and scraping my knees. With my tummy on the ledge, I wobbled. I peered through my messy hair to the ground, a long, long way off, and felt giddy. I saw Dad's half-unpacked ute with the gate down. The white, rectangular roof of the removalist's van, its gaping back doors. Heads of men—as if they had no arms or legs—moved about.

The wind surged up behind me, wrenched at the hems of my shorts and tugged hard.

'Dad,' I screamed, 'Dad,' as it strained at my T-shirt and tried to lever me off. I teetered. The ground below swayed from side to side. Somebody shouted. And then, abruptly, something grabbed at my legs and hauled me back.

I fell on top of my rescuer. When we had disentangled ourselves, and I had pushed the hair out of my face, I sat up and looked closely. It was another child. He had a floppy brown fringe that fell over his forehead, freckles across his nose, and clear, green eyes. A scar the shape and size of a Lego man ran down one side of his face.

We stared at each other for a long time, and then he laughed. He laughed in astonishment, with delight and with rapture; it seemed to be all these things at once.

'What's your name?' I said finally.

'Flint,' he said.

3

Now

It is mid-November when I turn from the coast road onto the dirt track and brake abruptly, clouds of dust rising behind the car. The little clock on the dashboard says it's 10.20 am. I've made good time from Melbourne. Releasing the pedal I inch forward, coming to a stop under the scant shade of the eucalypts.

Sargasso is beyond the trees. In the morning light. Unseen, as yet, but clear in my mind's eye.

I sit with the engine idling. Listen to the rattle of the leaves, the sand shifting against the car. I hear the carolling of a magpie, and much further afield the squawk of a seagull.

Twenty years. The significance of the occasion cannot be overlooked. But here I am—frozen—unable to move beyond the trees.

Why? What's wrong with me?

Is it possible I'm nervous?

But why would I be nervous? Apprehensive?

What do I have to fear?

Nothing. I have nothing to fear.

I am simply savouring the moment. Relishing the anticipation of arrival. Because until I actually see Sargasso for myself, anything is possible.

Anything.

Without dwelling on it further I push roughly at the gearstick, lurch forward, and the house slides into view.

Sargasso. After all this time it still appears as if hewn from the cliff on which it stands.

A house of glass and stone, and staircases. Let's not forget the staircases. When I was a child, the edge of those stairs felt perilous; all that glass seemed fickle, duplicitous.

From the outside, Sargasso is imposing and impressive. With clean simple lines. My eye is drawn by the portico before sweeping on to the long flat length of the rooftop. Even from here the house appears shabby, a little battered around the edges, the gravel driveway almost eaten away, but it still has presence. Attitude. It's alive—a creation requiring sun, fresh air and rain—not simply a lifeless conglomeration of building materials, and I wish I could share my return to Sargasso with Dad. He'd be so happy to know someone cared.

I drift down the driveway in second gear. The scattered trees, dusty and grey, are in need of a good rinse but above me the tissue-paper blue of the sky is empty, rain unlikely to visit any time soon.

To the right of the portico I spot a rudimentary garden bed. Somebody—the previous tenant perhaps—has constructed a border of granite rocks and inside it some fleshy, broad-leafed succulent has run rampant, smothering the scrawny weeds. To the left, a clump of agapanthus that Mum tended over the years has grown and multiplied into a large grotesque tangle of green leaves. But apart from these minimal changes, the entrance is much the same.

Sandy and plain.

Unpretentious.

I abandon the car outside the garage, skirt the rocks and weeds, and fit the key into the lock with shaking hands. Though it's been twenty years I know what I'll find inside. I remember the layout of the house. The entrance hall with its imposing staircase and lofty ceiling and, to the right, through swing doors, the kitchen and its patio facing the ocean. On the far side of the kitchen, the door opening to the glass walkway that led to the garage and laundry, and Dad's studio above, the open rungs of the stairway and the place beneath. To the left of the hall, a passage to the powder room, and the library with its high walls and shelves. Upstairs, the four bedrooms

off the landing, the glass room looking out to sea, and the steep narrow stairs to the rooftop.

The heavy door swings back and a rush of warm stale air greets me. The tenants vacated a month ago, but it's a shock to find the entrance hall devoid of any life. Empty. Barren. And so very still, as if Sargasso has been holding its breath.

Inside, my eye falls on the staircase, and even after all this time I remember the heap of pebbles with the iridescent seashell on top. It makes me smile. Nothing here today, of course. I take the stairs two at a time, clutching on to the ornate bannister that was later installed, my footsteps echoing. I cross the landing to the glass room. It radiates heat, and the glare's intense. Standing at the window, faint and dry-mouthed, I squint upwards but there's nothing above my head. No seagull to welcome me. In the distance the sea is a luminous lake of silver. And I think of my father all alone on that day, adrift in that tempest, the boat tossing hither and thither like a matchbox. I can still picture the shell of it, beached on the shore. Empty and forlorn.

The light hurts my eyes, and I turn away.

Where to now? What next?

Jittery with excitement, I don't know where to start. There are so many rooms to explore, hidey-holes to rediscover, staircases to climb, places—foreign and enchanted—where my imagination took me. But I've grown up in the years I've been away and am afraid Sargasso has too, that things won't be as I remember them. That it will disappoint me. I can't cope with disappointment.

I find myself at the foot of the stairs leading to the rooftop, and up I go, one step at a time, clinging to the walls as I used to. But the doors at the top are no longer so forbidding, so solid or so hefty. I have grown tall and they have shrunk. I gaze back down the stairway and it is ordinary, wooden and dull, not steep at all.

The doors are locked and although I go through every key in the fat bunch in my hand, I can't find the right one. Still, it's a while before I give up.

My bedroom disappoints me, too. It's smaller than I remember. The carpet is stained and threadbare. In my absence some other child has lived

here. Dirtied it. Disrespected it. I don't want to think of anyone in my sanctum. I don't want to think of another child at Sargasso full stop.

The curtains are missing and yellow sun scowls through grimy windows. It's stiflingly hot. The wooden sill, its varnish peeling, is littered with dead black flies and husks of decomposing moths. I creak open the stiff windows and push them wide, and hear the waves breaking on the beach on the other side of the house. Alongside the garage, the thicket, dense and darkly overgrown, trembles in a shimmer of heat. My little white Golf stands below with the driver's door wide open. I can't remember leaving it like that but it reminds me that I have belongings to unpack, and I amble back to the ground floor. At the newel post, I hesitate and think about visiting the place under the stairs, but I don't. That's special—I want to leave it until the last.

In the car my handbag, which was on the floor, is now on the seat. It's gaping, which is odd, but then I remember I retrieved the house keys from it. I scoop up the bag and some books, press the boot release. I'm about to haul out my suitcase when I hear a pitiful meow.

'Kotteb!' I say. A pang of guilt. I've forgotten him. I dump the books and handbag in the boot, then grab the carry cage from the backseat. I lug him through to the kitchen and set him up with food, water bowls and his bed. It takes me two more trips to bring in everything, and I leave it all in the kitchen because I'm not sure where I'm going to sleep. My old bedroom has lost its appeal. Besides, it's too far away from Kotteb.

I open the pantry to put away groceries, flick the light switch and—nothing. I go outside and locate the fuse box on the garage back wall. The metal door has rusted shut in the sea air and I catch my nail prising it open. Hopping around in pain, clutching my finger in my other hand, I utter a few choice expletives and disturb a couple of birds in the trees. Crows: I don't remember them from the time before. We had magpies, a mother, father and a chick. I don't like crows. They are big and intimidating, and swagger around like warlords. I flick the switch to turn the electricity on and wonder what will happen when they meet Kotteb.

In spite of that I unpack the esky in the kitchen, find the cheese and cut up some titbits for them. Oscar Wilde said to forgive your enemies because nothing annoys them so much. Kotteb, smelling food, watches me with interest and takes some cheese in the careful way he always does, sniffing

hesitantly, then closing his mouth around the morsel and carrying it out of sight to consume.

Outside again, and with the crows placated, I open the garage using the remote. According to the estate agent, Sophie, it should contain a small fridge, one the tenants left behind because it's on its last legs and my only option until I decide what I'm doing. I step into the gloom, and dust rises in drifts from under my feet. The interior is strangely empty—no rows of Dad's tools, all neatly aligned on a cork board, no workbench—but the fridge is there. So, too, a smell of petrol. Three cans against the far wall. I heft them—one full, one half-full, and one containing no more than a dribble. I wonder at this, and then have a vague memory of a generator. Somewhere behind the garage. Dad bought it thinking Sargasso's isolation would mean frequent power cuts, but I doubt we used the thing more than a handful of times.

The fridge is a little sour smelling, but I plug it in at the wall and to my relief it kicks into life. From the boot I bring in a bucket, a spade and a rake, and stand them up against the wall. I connect the hose to the tap, drag it to the garden bed and turn on the water. I'll let the weeds soak while I finish unpacking.

I can't stand the sight of them. Or the rocks. I want them out. Gone. I want to return the garden, such as it was, to the way I remember. I want *everything* to be as I remember. Is that so very wrong? I can't bring Mum and Dad and Gran back, but I can try to make everything else the same.

I am the only one left to care. Kelly doesn't care about Sargasso, she never did. She inherited money instead. She thinks she's got the better deal.

In the lawyer's office, she said, 'Oh, Hannah,' when Mr Niall read out Gran's will.

'What?' I said. We could talk like that in front of Mr Niall; he was a friend of Gran's and had known us since we were little.

'Do you really want the house?'

'Of course,' I said. 'Why wouldn't I? It's my last link to Dad.' She said nothing more. She straightened her jacket collar and touched her lips with one finger, worried her lipstick had worn off, and, after a brief glance at both of us over the top of his glasses, Mr Niall read on.

A short walkway made entirely from glass connects the garage to the house. I hesitate at its entrance, but then I march down it. It has a parquet

floor and strips of sunlight lie across its golden patterns. I don't look at the place under the stairs: I ignore it. I'll come to it later, when I have more time. When I am ready. The glass walkway is narrower than I remember. And stuffy. Filled with hot, stale air—overlaid with a familiar aroma, a remnant from my childhood. Then I hear my phone, still in my handbag on the kitchen bench, and forget everything and run to answer it.

'Hello?' I say breathlessly.

'So you got there safely?'

'Yes. Sorry, I've been busy and—'

'You forgot. Come on, admit it,' Tristan finishes, but there's a smile in his voice.

'I did forget,' I confess, 'but there's so much to do. I want to clean and tidy before you get here so you can see the house at its best. You're still coming down tomorrow evening, right?'

'I wouldn't miss it.'

In the background of Tristan's office another phone rings, and the murmur of somebody answering it reaches me. Tristan says something abrupt but it's not to me, and I think fondly of how his dark hair will be unkempt, his tie loosened. He'll be looking ever so slightly dishevelled, his mind already on the call he's about to take. Tristan's stockbroking career is high pressure, but he loves it. He's also very good at it.

'I've got to go,' he says in a rush, his voice rising with excitement, which means that something's happened on the market: stock has fallen or risen, and he has to make an immediate purchase, or sale. 'Sorry, Solo. I'll call you tonight. Love you.'

'Love you, too,' I say, but he's gone.

I lay the phone down and glance up to see the cat with his fluffy ginger tail erect and his spine arched, backing away on tippy-toes from the swing doors leading to the kitchen. Doors that are swinging ever so lightly.

'Kotteb?'

Has he made them swing? It's possible, although he isn't familiar with swing doors. We don't have any in our apartment, or cat flaps, for that matter. But he is a cat, and cats are curious.

I walk over, push one door with my finger and peer into the entrance hall. Naturally, there's nobody there.

‘Scaredy cat,’ I tell him, knowing Kotteb is not afraid of anything, not even dogs. Gathering him into my arms, I push my face into his soft ginger fur. In appearance he looks like a child’s toy lion, but it’s deceptive. Underneath all that long hair and fluff his body is bony and rigid. He purrs. Sticking out one paw he licks it, and wipes it over his ear.

‘All right,’ I say, ‘I know when I’m not wanted,’ and put him down. He sits with a foot stretched diagonally to the sky, balancing ridiculously, and licks some more, ignoring me. Half the time he doesn’t seem to care whether I live or die.

After I’ve unpacked the esky’s contents into the little fridge I pull on some old shorts and a T-shirt. I find my gardening gloves and go out to check on the garden bed. The weeds are half-soaked. I move the hose, and start on the rocks, heaving them around to the rear of the garage. The sun is fiercely hot. Underneath my hat my hair dampens with perspiration, and soon I have scratches and streaks of grime up my arms and legs.

I don’t stop until I’ve moved the last rock. I lean against the garage wall, sweating, wondering what to do with twenty-eight rocks. It feels strange for decisions about Sargasso to be mine. Will a time come when I share them with Tristan? We’ve been going out for over two years, but nothing has been promised, or even said. I like his family; they seem to like me. His mother recently remarked I was a stabilising influence, that I fit in, that she’s never seen her son happier. For my part, he is by far the nicest guy I’ve known, which is why I haven’t harped on commitment. If he is going to marry me I want commitment to come from his heart, not because he thinks it’s expected of him.

I wander around to the garden bed and drink straight from the running hose. I have no idea what the time is. I leave my muddy boots at the door and go inside in my socks. Kotteb, dozing on his bed, opens one eye to glare at me. My phone says it’s 1.30 pm. I have no messages. I grab a towel and my togs from my suitcase, and head for the beach.

4

Then

At lunchtime Mum and Kelly arrived, and I was telling Mum about Flint before she stepped out of the car. I'd made a friend—someone to play with in the Christmas holidays—with no help or encouragement from any adult, a big step for me. I couldn't possibly keep him to myself. And it meant I was the centre of attention, if only for a few minutes.

Dad was busy in the garage methodically unpacking and sorting his tools into new homes, but he joined us for a cold drink and a sandwich. Earlier he'd started on some of the kitchen boxes, but decided it made more sense to leave them to Mum, and layer upon layer of butcher's paper littered the floor. Dolly and I had to pick our way and push through a maze of open, half-unpacked cartons. Above us on the countertop towered crockery and glasses—wine, champagne and drinking—awaiting storage, as well as bundles of cutlery. Amongst this chaos, Mum had located the bar stools and cleared a small patch of counter where we could eat without knocking anything over. But when she eventually settled herself with her plate in front of her, she didn't eat. She picked at a lettuce leaf and glanced at my father.

'Hannah says she was up on the rooftop this morning, and that she nearly fell over the edge. Apparently someone called Flint pulled her back down.'

Dad, almost obscured by a tower of white dinner plates, said, ‘Who? What?’ and paused with his bottle of ginger beer halfway to his mouth. He glanced at me.

Instinctively, I sat up straighter while Mum and Kelly stared.

Mum wasn’t accusing Dad of not looking after me. She wouldn’t have done that. She wouldn’t ever have interrupted him, either, or corrected him, because that was the way she was brought up—but that’s beside the point. My mother never blamed him for anything because she loved him too much. We all did. His vagueness, his air of distraction as if he were physically with us but mentally elsewhere—this being one example—drove us crazy sometimes, but it was part of his charm.

‘Sweetheart, where are the towels and things?’ he said. ‘Let’s go to the beach. We can unpack some more when it’s cooler. What do you think?’

And before Mum could answer, Kelly, who was sitting alongside me, said, ‘I need a new bikini. *Desperately*. Like tomorrow,’ and the moment when I might have taken centre stage again, passed. But then, I was used to that.

*

Flint came and went at his own whim. It seemed there were no rules for him, no parental instructions about when he had to be home.

I never went to his house, though I asked him once if I could. It was a few days after we’d moved in and, for five minutes or so, he and I had run out of things to do.

We were standing on the dusty driveway, which was too warm for our bare feet but neither of us wanted to be the first to admit it. Listlessly, we aimed pebbles at an old baked beans tin at the bottom of a eucalyptus. It was around eleven, a sort of slow, suffocatingly hot day. Every surface simmered. Even the magpies in the trees had quietened; it took too much effort to warble.

‘Why don’t we go to your house?’ I said.

He picked up a stone and threw it into the can with a *Ping*.

‘No. Your turn.’

Selecting a pebble from the pile between our feet, I raised myself on tippy-toes, taking my time to aim.

‘Hurry up,’ he said.

‘Why?’

‘Because I’m winning.’ He grinned. ‘And I want to win some more.’

I pitched and missed the target altogether, raising only a puff of dust.

‘No, I mean why can’t we go to your house—?’

‘We just *can’t*! It’s boring,’ he said. ‘You won’t like it.’ He lobbed another stone effortlessly into the tin.

‘Why won’t I like it?’

He tossed a pebble up and down in his hand. ‘Hannah, do you like baked beans?’

‘Do I like baked beans? Beans, beans are good for your heart,’ I sang out, ‘beans, beans make you fart.’

He snorted with laughter.

‘Baked beans are yummy,’ I said and aimed for the tin again. And missed, again. ‘It would be nice, don’t you think, to eat beans at your house?’

He put his hands on his hips. ‘Quit yakking on about my house, Hannah! Why go to my house when we have all this?’ And he made an expansive gesture, which took in the house, the beach and the sky. Then he stretched his arms wide, pursed his lips and began to sputter and buzz, pretending he was a plane taking off, and I took up the challenge. I became a high-powered, full-throttled jet, whining and dive-bombing him from behind, and the topic of visiting his home was forgotten.

I never mentioned it again. Clearly, he was embarrassed. Probably it was nothing like Sargasso. And discussing it displeased him. I didn’t want to displease him. I didn’t want to jeopardise our friendship. I would’ve done anything he wanted me to. *Anything*.

Kelly emerged from the house in a sundress, wearing sandals and adjusting her sunglasses, which usually meant we were going out. She shaded her eyes with one hand, jangling a wrist of golden bangles. ‘Hannah!’ she called.

‘Quick,’ I said, ‘hide!’

We took cover behind the garage wall, our chests heaving.

‘Who’s she?’ asked Flint.

‘My sister.’

‘Hannah!’ Kelly called again, getting agitated.

‘What a bossy boots. You’d better go,’ he said, and gave me a little push.

I came out of hiding and sauntered over, as if her presence were neither here nor there.

‘Where were you! Who were you playing with?’

‘Flint,’ I said.

She found this funny. She said, ‘Flint?’ in a drawn-out way and smirked. ‘The same Flint that pulled you off the wall?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where is he?’

I narrowed my eyes the way I’d seen her do. ‘He doesn’t want to meet you. He knows you’re not nice.’

But she was in a good mood, probably at the prospect of exploring Shepherd Cove’s shops and impressing the locals with her big city airs, and all she said was, ‘Go inside and get changed, stupid. Mum’s waiting for you.’

And I was glad she didn’t care, because I didn’t want to share Flint with anybody.

*

I didn’t see Flint again for days, as if he were making up his mind about me. It was like that a lot in the beginning. Only later did we become inseparable. I felt it was a test, that if I complained about his absence I would destroy our friendship before it amounted to anything. I had to pretend I didn’t care, that I was capable of amusing myself without him. This was important, because it was ages before school began for the new year, and long days stretched ahead of me. Lonely days—if I didn’t have Flint. It was all right for Kelly—she wasn’t changing schools, she was going to board during the week and come home some weekends with Dad. Dad was already doing the commute. Sometimes he stayed over with my grandmother—she had a little house in Melbourne, in Brighton—but mostly he returned to Sargasso, occasionally working from his studio above the garage.

My sister didn’t have to make new friends. She was old enough to travel by herself to the city and spend the day with the friends she already had.

While I was waiting I thought about the houses we passed when we drove into the town, wondering which was his. Whether, if I looked hard enough, I might see him playing in a front yard. I could wave, then, and say to Kelly and to Mum, ‘Look, there’s my friend, Flint!’ and they might actually stop talking, and look at me. I took refuge with Dolly, because this was before I put her away on the top shelf of my wardrobe. We rearranged my room, and held tea parties for the soft toys. One morning Mum let us make pancakes, which she’d never done before. We didn’t have television to entertain us. That was one of Dad’s little peculiarities. He said the world was a wonderful place and nobody, especially not a child, needed a talking box to occupy their time. Or their heads. And so in the heat of the day we sat on the leather sofa in the cool depths of the library with Kelly, and coloured in colouring books with fat, waxy crayons. I read my Spot books out loud to Dolly—*Spot’s Helpful Day* was her favourite—and Kelly said, ‘Why can’t the idiot doll read them herself? She can do everything else.’

5

Now

The tide's coming in when I reach the beach. I check for rips but the sea's peaceful, not the wild beast I've known it to be. I stand on the shore, dithering. I haven't swum here since my father's death and I have to admit to a certain hesitation. I don't trust this particular stretch of coast anymore. I spy a sandbar on the other side of a deep channel and decide I can do it. I can swim to the sandbar, and when I reach it, stand upright, catch my breath, and swim back again. Here and now. It's time to get over the past. And my fears.

I enter by degrees. Toes first, then legs. Soon waves and froth are surging up to my pelvis, and I shiver involuntarily. I wade further in, and then dive into a wave. The bracing cold takes my breath away, but I strike out for my goal. The sooner I get moving, the warmer I'll be. But, in no time at all, I am weary. My arms, unused to lifting heavy rocks, ache with fatigue. I flag, treading the deep aqua water of the channel, seeing the gritty floor, and my blurred toes. And a fish! It flashes past me in a shimmer of coral pink. Then a swell heaves over me and I sink, submerge, lose myself in this other, undulating world where sound is muffled and movement thick. And always *always* there's a fear of something unknown slithering and slinking behind me.

When I shoot up—tense with frigidity—I propel myself shoreward, my arms spinning like windmills in a stiff breeze. I catch a wave and let it carry

me to the beach. Drag myself to the warm sand and collapse with exhaustion on my towel, reclaiming my breath. After a minute I roll over onto my back. I glance at the house on the clifftop, and quietly and thoughtfully—as if it’s pondering my presence here—it looks at me. It’s funny how a house can resemble a face. Sargasso does. The protruding glass room is its nose, and the bedroom windows on either side, its eyes. But only from the side facing the beach. The front—with the portico, two storeys of window and concrete, long flat rooftop and glass walkway to the garage—is not like a face at all. It is deceptive.

I nod off within minutes, but the heat soon wakes me. It’s too hot to stay here. I pull my shorts and T-shirt on, push my matted hair under my baseball cap, and haul myself up the track. On the way, I remember the hose. It’s still running on the weeds. There’s no excuse now. I have to clear them or all that soaking will go to waste.

Kotteb is stretched out on the cool harlequin tiles in the kitchen. Only his flicking fluffy tail indicates he’s alive. After some hit and miss I find the right key for the sliding doors that lead to the patio and the cliff, and open them. Kotteb will be glad of fresh air and earth to root around in, and he has enough sense not to wander off the edge.

I grab an apple, bite into it and, chewing quickly, head back out. I retrieve the spade from the garage and turn off the hose. The crows hang around, vigorously attacking the apple core I fling at the base of their tree, and flapping in indignation as the spade whacks into the earth. Every now and then I hit a buried rock and shock reverberates through my hands and arms. By mid-afternoon I’ve piled most of the fleshy plant and the worst of the weeds into a small haystack. Scooping up armfuls, I carry them around to the side of the garage and drop them over the cliff’s edge. After the last bundle, I stop to look out to sea. The wind has risen, whipping up white caps on navy blue, and the cool air on my sweaty, salty skin gives me goosebumps.

Kotteb’s investigating the patio and rough patch of garden when I return to the kitchen, and at the sound of my voice he pads inside to purr around my ankles. I give him some wet food, then drink copious amounts of water. I check my phone but Tristan hasn’t called again.

By eight I am ready for bed. It's absurdly early, but there's nothing to amuse me. Besides, I am unaccustomed to such vigorous exercise, and I'm tired, too tired to concentrate on the book I brought with me. The little girl with a vivid imagination, who makes a terrible decision and spends the rest of her life trying to atone for it, can't hold my attention. Actually, it's the wrong book for me because it recalls my childhood self. Without doubt, I, too, made a bad decision. Without doubt, I try to atone for it. Some days I even manage not to think about my father.

Thoughts of the coming weekend distract me. I'm anxious for Tristan to not simply like Sargasso, but to *love* it as I do. But he has preconceptions—how could he not? He knows it's no ordinary house. He's read the reviews—we kept them, of course—and he knows my dad drowned here. I wouldn't be surprised if he thinks Sargasso is haunted. I'm guessing of course; I don't know what he thinks about that. We haven't discussed it. He was taken aback when I inherited the house—as was I—and advised taking my time over any decision I made. Something so meaningful and valuable shouldn't be decided on in any haste.

In the kitchen, against the far wall, I'm sitting cross-legged on my flat rubber yoga mat. I have no inclination to go upstairs, to leave Kotteb's company and the comfort of his heavy warmth on my legs.

I've already turned off the lights, and I lie down, wriggle around him, and pull the blanket up. 'Meh,' he says.

Although physically exhausted, my mind is hyperactive, and I soon find myself thinking about Flint, my childhood friend. Flint, my shadow and constant companion. Flint, who often kept me company in the place under the stairs. With a little start, I realise I haven't been there—I've been too distracted. And, yes, I'm more than ready now. It might be just the thing to send me to sleep.

Sargasso has three staircases—four, if you include the dark and dank one, festooned with cobwebs, to the cellar. There are the entrance hall stairs I climbed hugging the wall on our first day; the steep ones leading to the rooftop, and an open rung set to Dad's studio.

A big, airy room above the garage, it had cork walls for tacking up building designs, and plate glass windows that looked out to sea. There were drawing tables and swivel chairs, and a kettle and small fridge. And a sound system so Dad could play music while he worked. It was

purposefully built away from the house, reached by stairs just inside the glass walkway connecting the two buildings, and it was here under this staircase that I often played with Flint. As a child, I loved to lie on the floor gazing between the slats to the ever-changing sky above. Early in the morning it was milky, later in the day it turned to the bright blue of a plastic balloon, and still later in the evening it swirled with pinks and blues like watercolour paints. At night it was dark and moody, like the sea. I felt peaceful there, sleepy sometimes, too. It was a good place for thinking, and for planning what Flint and I would do when next we met.

Leaving the internal door open so Kotteb can follow should the mood take him, I drag my mat, thin soft blanket, and pillow under one arm, down the parquet floor of the glass walkway that connects the garage to the house. I don't turn on any lights. I don't need to. Just before the door to the garage is the set of open stairs leading to Dad's studio, and here, in the lee of the stairs, I make my bed.

I am no longer a child and have to bend my long legs to fit. Kotteb sits on the parquetry and looks doubtfully at me. When I lie down, he trots back to the kitchen as if we might've forgotten something, and on his return, entry and exit are thoroughly inspected. Eventually he pads up to my face—I smell his fishy breath—and surveys me with inscrutable eyes. Just as I am despairing of him ever settling, he hops over and sits behind my knees.

I hear the wind shift in the darkness. Through the glass I see the tree branches sway. A leaf twirls and whirls on its way earthward. And I watch the stars between the stair rungs, bright pinpricks as cold and as hard as diamonds on blue cardboard, until at last I drift off.

*

I sleep deeply until some unknown and dark hour when Kotteb's hissing wakes me. A pale fingernail of moon shows him stretched up on all fours, back arched, tail swishing.

'What is it?' I whisper.

In answer he prances along the walkway, legs stiff, and lets out a chilling meow that sets my heart racing. I sit bolt upright, banging my head on the treads above. The moonlight falls on the parquetry, illuminating the patterns, the golden orange hues. I press back into the shadow of the

stairway. I hear nothing out of the ordinary. See nothing. Only the shapes of the trees moving in the wind outside, the sky aglitter with stars. Whatever Kotteb heard, is still hearing, can only be picked up by hypersensitive ears. He paces the floor as if anxious to escape. He sniffs at the door leading to the garage.

Then I hear it too, from a long way off.

Hannah.

I freeze, wait for the voice again, but there's only the wind shaking the leaves and the distant waves breaking on the beach. I try to recall the pitch, the timbre, work out to whom the voice belongs, but ... nothing. I must've imagined it. There's no other explanation.

Unless I'm dreaming. But here are the rough bricks of the garage wall pushing at my back. And the rungs of the staircase above my head. I feel the wooden grains beneath my fingers. The glass walls on either side of me shine dully. I am not asleep. Fumbling under my pillow for my phone I find it's after midnight. It seems much later.

Kotteb pads back, satisfied he's scared off whatever threat was there. I reach for him and pull him into my arms, but he's still on guard and resists. He paws at the blanket, lies down, and tucks his front legs underneath him, head erect, ears back. Chilled, I push myself back under the blanket, but remain awake for a long time, staring into the dark, my ears straining.

*

Before breakfast I finish clearing the last of the weeds and the rampant fleshy thing. A cool change has blown in overnight and it isn't as hot as yesterday. I turn on the hose and spray the eucalypts alongside the driveway until they look a little more welcoming, a little greener and a little less bedraggled, then I go inside for muesli, fruit and coffee.

When my stomach stops growling, I turn to the housework. Making my way methodically through the rooms Tristan and I will inhabit, starting with the entrance hall and the kitchen, wiping down counters and shelves. At one point I think I hear the voice from the night before. *Hannah.* A man's voice. There's something familiar but I can't put my finger on it. But *was* it in my head? Kotteb seemed to think it was real. A stubborn melted candlewax stain on a shelf distracts me, and I think no more of midnight summonses.

There's enough work to keep me busy for a month or more, and I wonder if Tristan will mind me being away from our South Melbourne apartment for so long. When he agreed to my coming to Sargasso it was with the knowledge that I needed a complete break from my work as a geriatric nurse. Caring for the elderly is never easy, and acting as head nurse in a retirement home, which I'd done for two years, was draining—emotionally and physically. Mostly emotionally. On top of this, my beloved grandmother died in early September, on the third to be exact. She was four days off turning ninety-five. I hadn't been coping with her death and the board of the retirement home knew this. Shortly afterwards, when I had a traumatic shouting match with the adult children of one of our residents and a man in a great deal of pain, and they reported me, strangely, it worked in my favour. Ordinarily, the board wouldn't have given me compassionate leave for Gran's death, but this made them realise time off was necessary for my sanity, and they granted me three months' stress leave, up to and including New Year. Unpaid, of course. The idea of fixing up Sargasso then became a reality; it would be both therapeutic and something to occupy me. However, I was sure there was a limit to how much time away Tristan was prepared to give me. It's not that he's demanding, or pushy, it's just logical. We're a couple. Couples are supposed to spend time together.

Window frames need sanding and revarnishing. Cupboards require new knobs. Light fittings are missing globes. I'd hire someone to do all these things, but I don't have a fund of ready money. Land rich, cash poor. I will be fairly wealthy after I sell Sargasso—if I sell Sargasso. I have no idea what I want to do. Not yet. I'm hoping the answer will come during my stay. The carpet in some rooms will have to be professionally replaced but I can do the small things: painting, varnishing. No doubt there are loose pavers up on the rooftop as well. I've been unable to find the key and I still haven't got out there.

After lunch I go through the rooms and make notes about what requires attention and the tools and equipment I'll need. The list in my notebook grows and grows. Whether I sell the house or keep it as an investment, the repairs have to be attended to first.

By the time I reach my parents' room it is almost dusk. I've left it until last. I feel awkward going in, as if I have no right entering without permission. We never did that when we were children, we were taught to

knock, and wait to be allowed in. We never slept with Mum and Dad, either. If we were distressed or sick they came to us, spending the night if necessary. It was simply the way things were: they valued their privacy.

It's the loveliest room in the house. Sumptuous is the word that comes to mind. Large, four times the size of any normal bedroom, with his and hers walk-in robes, it has a spacious marble ensuite with a sunken bath that looks out over the sea. Floor-to-ceiling glass covers one wall. When Mum and Dad lay in bed they must've been able to hear, and see, the ocean.

There are indentations on the carpet where the previous bed stood, and I lean against the wall, half my body bathed in early evening light. I have no doubt that Tristan will love this space, and want us to sleep here.

Sometimes—not often—the door was accidentally left ajar and I'd quietly hover outside, once glimpsing my mother in the bath, her long chestnut-coloured hair caught up behind her head, my father with that vague preoccupied expression on his face as he wandered unclothed towards the bed. Sometimes—when the door was closed—I'd hear them in bed together and be a little frightened. Later, when I was older, I knew enough to imagine them naked, with the covers thrown back, my father rearing above my mother, her kittenish mewling a response to his lovemaking—Tristan and I can't sleep here.

'Solo?' A real voice, a true voice, echoes up the stairs. I back out quietly and close the door behind me.

*

The man who nicknamed me Solo has arrived and let himself in. He's a *Star Wars* fan, and the name came about when he shortened Hannah to Han.

From the top of the stairs I see Tristan standing in the dark hallway, a six-pack of beer in one hand, a bottle of wine in the other, a sleeping bag slung over his shoulder, and a yoga mat tucked under his arm. With the business suit the look is incongruous.

'Wow,' he says when I reach him.

'Wow yourself.'

I put my arms around him, and kiss him hello, but I've not got his attention. His eyes are moving over the soaring walls of the entrance hall,

the lofty ceiling, the wide staircase now with ornate railing, and the polished wooden floor. He's taking everything in.

'Kitchen's through here.' I push at the swing doors with my foot. 'Be careful not to let Kotteb out. Tristan?'

Finally, he looks at me.

'Hello.'

I smile. It's hard not to. He has an open, happy face, with suntanned skin, soft dark hair that's always awry, and blue-grey eyes. He's kind and easy-going. If he has faults they are that he's shorter than I am, and if he has to choose between a good wave and me he will always choose the wave.

'I've missed you,' he says.

He moves closer and raises his face. He smells of Minties and I wonder if he's had a quick smoke outside. Officially he's given up but ...

'Mmm.' He rubs his nose against mine.

'It's only been one night.'

He sighs. 'I know.'

He places the beer and the wine in my hands and lets the sleeping bag fall to the floor.

'I'll get the rest of my stuff. I won't be long. Open one of those for me, please? I'm dying. *Dying*. I've had a shit of a day.'

I leave two beers on the kitchen counter and go through to the garage to put the rest in the fridge, and when I return he's on his haunches talking to Kotteb, scratching his ears. Kotteb purrs like a generator.

'Why's the fridge in the garage?'

'I need help to carry it through.'

'Okay. We'll do that tomorrow.'

I open the beers and pass him one. 'Cheers.'

'Cheers.'

We clink bottles.

'Tour?' he says.

'What, now?'

'Of course now.'

*

We do the whole house. As predicted he likes the glass room and my parents' bedroom best. Like me, he can't wait to get out onto the rooftop, and he promises that before the weekend is out he'll find a way to open the door.

At dinnertime, I cut up some garlic and sauté it before adding fresh tomatoes and herbs for a pasta sauce. Tristan wanders around—there are no chairs—with a beer in his hand. To go with the pasta, I'll construct a simple salad with feta crumbled over the top.

'Where did you sleep last night?'

'Under the stairs.'

'*Under the stairs?*'

'Oh. There's a glass walkway between the garage and the kitchen—you might've seen it from the driveway—that's where I slept.'

'A *glass* walkway?'

'Uh-huh.' I move the frying pan off the heat and hold out my hand.

'Come. I'll show you.'

I push open the door.

'I used to sleep here sometimes as a child,' I explain. 'It's kind of a special place for me.'

It's dusk outside, and the soft light bathes everything in a romantic glow, but despite this my neatly folded blanket and rubber yoga mat look distinctly unromantic.

'You want me to sleep *there?*' He hooks his thumbs into his belt.

'You don't have to.'

He leans forward to kiss me.

'I'll do whatever you want.'

*

We open the wine and park ourselves on the floor near the open patio doors, the bottle between us, and talk.

Tristan has discarded tie and jacket, shoes and socks, and sits cross-legged in his white business shirt and black suit pants. While we watch the sky fade and then darken, I tell him about the repairs that have to be attended to. He tells me about a new client with expectations and a fat bank balance, and about how he almost lost a million dollars. I explain my

responsibility to bring the house back to the way I remember it. He says he might have to work the following Saturday. We fork up the pasta—one of my better ones—and demolish the salad. Then he says he has something for me, in the car, and picks up his keys and slips out the swing doors. He's gone for a while.

I rinse the bowl, wash the cutlery and two plates, and the frying pan. I am standing it on the draining board when I hear a commotion out in the hallway and Tristan bursts through the swing doors and into the kitchen. He stops when he sees me.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing.' His eyes dart around the room.

'Tristan,' I say gently.

He takes one hand from behind his back and holds it out.

'Here.'

A mango. A rusted-gold, smooth-skinned globe. I smell it from where I stand.

'Oh, heaven,' I say.

I take it and give him a thank you kiss. His mouth is cold. No taste of cigarette.

'What happened out there?'

But he turns his face and moves away. 'Nothing. I told you.'

'You were gone a long time.'

'I needed to pee.'

It sounds feeble. How long does it take to pee? But I let it go.

We eat the mango on the patio edging the cliff, where it doesn't matter that the juice runs down our chins and drips onto the pavers. Kotteb sits like a sentinel in the doorway, silhouetted by the light. Above, the darkness presses down on us, glinting with stars. We take turns to suck on the pip until there's nothing but coarse hair and hardness left. Then Tristan hurls it over the cliff edge.

'Sticky, sticky.' I hold out my hands like a child, and he licks noisily at the juice on my chin, making me giggle.

'Shower time.' He gives me a gentle push. 'Off you go.'

I shower upstairs in the main bathroom, and when I'm done come down to find him shuffling bedding under the stairs. I leave him to it and make tea. I bring back two mugs and find the yoga mats laid out along the length of the walkway, with the pillows at their head under the stairs and Tristan contemplating this arrangement.

'I couldn't fit both of us under there the other way,' he says. 'God knows how you did.'

'Carefully.' I smile.

I put down the tea, go back to turn off the lights in the kitchen, and join him to sit on the blanket.

'Does this feel weird to you? I mean, sitting here?'

'Hmm.' He sips at his tea.

'Did you have a special place to sleep as a child?'

'My childhood was boring.'

'It wasn't. You've told me it was the happiest time of your life.'

'It was pretty happy,' he says thoughtfully. 'Living by the sea, surfing every arvo after school.'

'Do you wish you were a kid again?'

'Nuh. I'm happy where I'm at.'

Our eyes meet and I wonder if I can push him into saying something about us, about how happy we are, and then his gaze slides past mine and over my shoulder.

I turn to see Kotteb has emerged in the doorway. He surveys us briefly, then retreats to the kitchen, his tail up. Retaining some dignity.

'He's feeling like a gooseberry,' Tristan remarks. He puts his mug on the parquetry alongside his pillow. 'Too hot.'

Leaning over, he starts to kiss me, slowly and gently, and then he gets up on his knees to slip my singlet over my head, and ease me down onto the mat.

'Okay?'

I murmur something positive but I'm not okay. It's too soon, too quick. The transition from chatting to lovemaking too sudden. And as his hands move over my body, I shiver. Suddenly I am cold, rigid with cold. I don't know where it's come from but maybe I am getting the flu.

Tristan clambers on top of me, his knees are between mine, pushing open my legs. I try to focus but I am uncomfortable. The small of my back

aches. Perhaps I am getting too old to have sex on the floor. I wonder if I've remembered to close the garage door. His fingers are a little rough, and his breath smells of alcohol.

It all feels wrong.

Why?

What is the matter with me?

Struggling up, I force him off.

'I can't do this,' I mumble. 'I just can't, not tonight. I don't know why. I'm—I'm—'

He lies back. Stares at nothing.

After a minute, he says, 'You're tired, Hannah, that's all. You've been working like a dog.'

He puts one hand comfortingly on my back.

'Lie down,' he says. 'Go to sleep.'

6

Now

In the morning when I wake, he's gone.

I walk upstairs and from the glass room watch him take several waves. There isn't a cloud to blot the horizon, and the swell is good. He's lithe and graceful and brave, never once bailing, at least not while I watch. He has his wetsuit on and it will be some time before he comes in.

I can't find Kotteb, which suggests Tristan has fed him and he's exploring the house.

My notebook's on the kitchen counter, and after I've dressed I drive into Shepherd Cove to see if I can find doorknobs and light bulbs. I leave a note for Tristan, just in case.

This is my second visit to Shepherd Cove since I've returned, and I can't get over how it's grown. I have to slow to pass a new housing estate, and stop at a pedestrian crossing, before I reach the town proper. An esplanade runs alongside the beachfront, with the main street a block further in, and I spot a small hardware shop this end of the main street. I have a vague memory of going here with Dad. It's set back from the road and has ample parking out front. The shop is old-fashioned, with narrow aisles stuffed with everything from beach umbrellas to paint brushes to electrical fittings. It's only just gone 9.30 am and there's only one other customer, and some old guy wanders over to ask if I need any help.

'I'm looking for doorknobs,' I say.

‘What kind, love? I have plenty ... This way.’ He leads and I follow. He has grizzled hair and a lined face and I wonder if he’s the owner. If he is, he’s of an age when he should be out fishing, enjoying his retirement, not worrying about customer service and profit and loss.

‘Over here,’ he says, showing me a rack full of doorknobs of all shapes and sizes, some made out of plastic, some wood, some brass. Who knew you could get such a variety? ‘Take your time, and yell out if you need anything.’

‘Thank you,’ I say. ‘I will.’

I fill my basket with several knobs, grab a screwdriver, then head off to find the light bulbs. I might as well get them here, although they are probably cheaper at the supermarket.

The old guy’s at the checkout when I reach it. ‘Looks like you’ve got a job and a half ahead of you.’

‘I have,’ I say. ‘I’m fixing up the house on the coast.’

He stops his hands moving over my purchases to look at me. ‘Sargasso?’

‘Yes. Do you know it?’

He reaches for a light bulb. ‘Are you the new owner?’

‘I’m the owner, but I’m not new.’ I smile at him. ‘My father designed the house. My family lived there a long time ago ...’ I trail off. I don’t want to go into all that.

‘You’re one of the daughters,’ he says.

‘Hannah,’ I tell him.

‘Bernie,’ he says, putting the last bulb into the bag. ‘Nice to meet you, love.’

He tells me how much it is, and I pay using my credit card. I’m just about to head off—the next customer has already put down his items—when Bernie says, ‘You’ll probably be wanting more stuff at some point, Hannah. Come back to me, love. Don’t go to the big place outside the town.’

‘Sure,’ I say. ‘I didn’t know there was another hardware store.’

‘Well, let’s try to keep it that way. Hello, Mac,’ he says, turning his attention to the guy behind me, but I catch the man’s soft-spoken response as I leave.

‘Hello, Bernie, how’s it going, mate?’ It’s the tone of his voice that gets me. Gentle and concerned. Compassionate. I guess I will find out why soon enough.

I return to Sargasso and dump everything on the kitchen counter. I change into my bikini, grab my towel and take the track to the beach.

After the heat of the first day, the weather’s perfect. Above me balances an empty upside-down bowl of bright blue. I skip along, something I haven’t done since I was a child, brushing the tops of the paspalum grasses with my hand.

I drop my towel near Tristan’s, and wave. I remember what happened between us last night, and wonder what was wrong with me. Then I step out of my shorts, and wade into the water. It seems much colder than it was two days ago and I decide I won’t swim, but I stand there for appearance’s sake, pretending I have every intention to.

‘G’day,’ Tristan says, swinging by on his board and bringing a rush of foam to my knees.

He walks onto the beach and struggles out of his wetsuit, letting it flop down on the sand, before joining me at the water’s edge. He takes my hand. His chest is pimpled with goosebumps.

‘You’re freezing.’

‘I know, but I’ll soon get warm.’

We walk back to our things and lie on our towels and close our eyes. I wonder if he’s disappointed about last night. He won’t have forgotten. I prop myself up on one elbow and study his dark hair sticking up every which way, and the sun glistening off the water droplets on his shoulders. I am playing with a piece of grass, running it through my fingers, when he reaches over and stills my hands.

It’s his eyes, his touch, and the shadow below his bellybutton where his stomach falls away from his boardies and a thin line of black hair disappears into darkness, that stirs me. My pulse quickens, that sweet involuntary ache flickers between my thighs. I wait for some part of that revulsion I felt last night to return, but it doesn’t.

He leans up to kiss me and his mouth is warm and soft and salty. He pushes me down onto my towel, covers my body with his own, and nuzzles my eyelids and my face. He doesn’t say anything. Nobody is around and there’s no reason to return to the house.

He's gentle and loving. I wriggle underneath him, slide off my bikini bottom, and he lifts himself as his fingers find the warm and wet place they've been searching for. He enters, rocks against me, and I feel the length of him moving deep. We kiss and murmur endearments, nudging against one another. Our urgency grows, our passion mounts. I am close to coming when I arch my back and turn my head. See the bulk of Sargasso outlined on the cliff. The sun skitters off the windows and the glass room glints like a hard shiny eye observing me and I cry out and have to look away.

*

It isn't until later that afternoon that I remember Kotteb.

We've decided to drive into Shepherd Cove to eat at the pub, and I am locking up the house.

'Have you seen Kotteb?' I ask Tristan, who's walked into the kitchen.

'Not since last night,' he says, buttoning his shirt cuff.

At the patio doors I pause with my hand on the handle.

'But didn't you feed him this morning?'

'No.'

'No? What, he wasn't here when you came down?'

He shakes his head.

I step away. 'We'd better check he hasn't been locked in anywhere.'

'But how could he get locked in? It's only us here.'

'I don't know, but you know what cats are like.'

I chew at my lip, trying to remember when and where I last saw him.

'It's not like him,' I say, 'he doesn't wander off. Where did he sleep last night? Was he with us?' And then I have to look away because I remember what happened.

Tristan takes my hands. 'Relax, Han. I'll do the downstairs, you do the upstairs. We'll find him. It'll take less than ten minutes.'

He turns me around and pushes me towards the swing doors. 'See you soon.'

*

But when we meet again in the kitchen, neither of us has found Kotteb. I fill his bowl with dry food and replenish the water. I straighten his bed, picking fluff from the pillow.

‘Can we just do one thing?’ I ask, dropping the pillow and moving across to the patio. ‘Can we check out here?’

‘But I can see he’s not there.’

‘I mean—’ my voice falters ‘—over the edge. Look over the edge.’

I reopen the doors and step out. There isn’t a breath of wind, and as I walk to the fence and the patio’s gate at the cliff’s edge I smell the rich aroma of kelp.

‘It’s very steep and it’s a very long way down,’ Tristan calls.

I keep walking. And then he’s there, moving ahead of me.

‘I’ll do it.’

‘No.’ I push him sideways. ‘He’s my cat. If I want to look over the edge, I will.’

‘Hannah, please.’

But I let myself out of the childproof gate and creep forward. At the cliff’s lip I go down on all fours and crawl.

Kelly once showed me there are ledges and shelves on the rock face and that if you throw something down—in this case one of my beloved soft toys—it doesn’t always land far below. But Kotteb isn’t on any of the ledges, meowing pitifully. And the sand below is clear. No furry marmalade corpse.

‘He’s not here.’

I raise my head to see Tristan metres away, peering over like I am.

‘Get back,’ I tell him.

‘Make me,’ he says.

*

I fret about Kotteb and the whole evening is spoilt because I can’t relax, can’t think of anything else, and nothing Tristan says or does distracts me.

We leave the pub early, unhappily, about nine. Tristan lets me drive because it will occupy me. Also, the road twists and turns and drops away to the ocean on one side, and it’s a little frightening if you haven’t driven it before. I’d been on it that morning, and of course I’m familiar with it from childhood. But when we near the turn-off to Sargasso I slow down, peering

into every shadowed bush, inspecting every bit of road kill, and although he doesn't say anything I think Tristan is rapidly losing patience.

When we reach the house I bolt inside, sure I will find Kotteb waiting in the kitchen, miffed that we've gone out without telling him, and curling around my ankles for cuddles.

But he isn't here.

I reopen the doors, go out to the darkness of the patio, call his name, but there's no response.

Close to tears, I walk all the way up to the glass room again, calling him, and further, up the stairs to the rooftop.

I pause in front of the locked doors.

'Kotteb, Kotteb, where are you?'

I push my hands into my jacket pockets, about to descend, when I hear faint, scratching noises. I stop, listen again.

'Kotteb?' I say urgently. 'Kotteb?'

But now there's no sound. Not a whisper.

In any case how could he get onto the rooftop? The doors are locked. The rooftop is three storeys from the ground floor. He would need wings.

Hiccoughing with grief, I walk back down to find Tristan has set up our bedding in the kitchen.

'In case he comes in,' he says.

*

On Sunday morning we take the fat bunch of keys and sort it on the counter. We pull every last key off the ring, find which door it belongs to, and give it a label. When we are done it is 11.47 am, and there's still no key to the rooftop doors.

'Can you open it?' I ask.

'I don't know,' Tristan says. 'Have you got a screwdriver?'

'Yes! I bought one yesterday.'

I pull out my bag of hardware from the pantry, extract the screwdriver, and we go upstairs.

I stand back and watch while Tristan inserts it between the doors and applies some pressure, only to see the implement slip from his grip and carve an ugly groove into the wood.

Without a word I go down to my Golf. I rummage around in the boot well, where the spare tyre is stored, and find what I'm looking for.

I meet him in the hallway, coming out to see what I'm doing.

'No way.' He takes the hefty tyre lever. 'No, you can't do that, Solo. You'll *really* damage the doors then, and they'll both have to be replaced.'

'But—' I wail.

'But nothing. You said yourself Kotteb couldn't be there. How could he have got there?'

'I don't know.' I cry again and he opens his arms and holds me close.

He says, 'Why don't you come back home with me tonight?'

I pull away.

'No.'

'But I can't leave you like this.'

I sniff, straighten my shoulders.

'I'll be fine.'

I return to the car and put the tyre lever away.

'Should we have some lunch?' Tristan asks from the hallway.

'I'm not hungry,' I say, closing the front door behind me.

'I am.'

'Sorry.' I pull a face. 'I'm being selfish.'

The first things I see in the kitchen are Kotteb's bowls standing untouched in the far corner. They almost undo me again. I ditch the stale water and refill the bowl from the tap.

When I look up Tristan's watching me. Probably working out how to convince me to go back with him. He wasn't keen on my coming down here alone in the first place. My chest tightens.

'I'll put a salad together,' I say, forcing normality into my voice.

'I can make myself a sandwich,' he says. He opens the little fridge that we moved into the kitchen yesterday, and bends low to look into it.

'You shouldn't have brought the cat, Han.'

'He is *my* cat,' I assert.

He peers into the fridge for an inordinate amount of time, and I remember the argument we had about my bringing Kotteb. Tristan was convinced he would wander off.

'Why don't you get a locksmith, this afternoon?' he asks.

'Because it'll cost too much. It's a Sunday.'

‘I’ll pay for it.’ He clutches a tomato and the cheese and butter, and kicks the door closed.

‘No. I couldn’t let you.’

‘Why not? I’ve got the money.’ He opens the fridge again and has to reach low for the avocado he forgot. ‘This fridge smells,’ he says in an aside. ‘You know I’ve got the money.’

This is true. He does have the money. He’s astute with finance, which is understandable; it’s part of his job as a stockbroker. I am hopeless, giving it away when people ask me to, mostly to the RSPCA.

Of course if I sell Sargasso that will change.

‘I’d like to do it.’

He walks over, puts his arms around my shoulders and looks into my eyes.

‘I love you,’ he says. ‘I can’t stand seeing you like this.’

*

The locksmith arrives within the hour. He’s a big guy, tall and strong, dressed in a tattered T-shirt, down-at-the-heel work boots and board shorts. In one hand he carts a heavy toolbox.

At the front door he nods politely to me, puts his hand out to Tristan and introduces himself as Marsh. Once upon a time I knew a Marsh. A boy who was terrified of snakes. This man looks as if nothing frightens him.

‘Waves any good?’ he asks Tristan. He’s seen the surfboard standing against the garage door.

‘Haven’t been out today, mate.’

The locksmith glances at me again and I see myself sink in his estimation. Clearly I’m responsible for losing the key in the first place, and for keeping Tristan from the surf in the second.

He kicks off his boots to reveal bony bare feet—no socks—and follows Tristan. I tag along behind.

As we climb the stairs he gazes around.

‘Nice house.’

‘Pretty bloody fantastic,’ Tristan agrees.

‘It’s yours?’

‘No, it’s Hannah’s.’

I receive another measured look, but it's hard to tell what the man's thinking. His expression is neutral. It's one of those faces where emotion—worry, happiness, anger—is not easily discernible.

We turn the corner at the glass room, and he says, 'You're Hannah Prendergast?'

'Yes.'

But he doesn't follow that up with anything.

We climb the second set of stairs.

'Did you know my family?' I ask.

I start to wonder if he's heard me, or whether he's ignoring me, when he says, 'I know that—that—'

'My father drowned here?'

'Yes. I'm sorry, the whole town remembers. Is this the door?' We've reached the landing and he's changed the subject, bending down to take a closer look. On his haunches he runs his finger along the ugly scratch Tristan made. He opens his toolbox and roots around. He pulls out a compact, solid screwdriver and begins to dismantle the lock with expert ease. Tristan moves to stand alongside me, reaching for my hand.

Marsh works carefully, not wanting to damage anything, but it takes longer than I expect.

Impatient, I look away back down the stairs. My eyes follow the sequence of the narrow amber treads, one by one, but I'm not seeing them, I'm imagining the doors opening. I expect bright light, a gusting wind, and an endless expanse of pavers before the wall that I almost toppled over as a kid. I remember a small pile of beach pebbles. An opalescent seashell. A child called Flint.

I hear the fitting come loose. I let go of Tristan's hand and edge closer, watching Marsh jiggle the knob until, finally, the doors begin to part.

Outside the day is windless, the sky flat with heavy, low cloud. The rooftop seems to have shrunk. The wall's still there, but nearer to the entrance, and lower, and little heaps of windswept sand are still piled in the corners but there are no pebbles. No seashell. I see at a glance there is nothing here for me. No Kotteb.

I walk over to the wall with my arms wrapped around my body. I stare down the other side, to the ground far below. My little Golf and Tristan's red WRX are in the driveway, the locksmith's dirty cream ute parked

behind them. And beyond the vehicles are the crows, conspicuous by their colour. One struts on the ground, its head arrogantly cocked towards me, the other sits in the lower branches of the ragged gum tree, not saying anything. Not cawing. Like me, they seem to be waiting for something.

When I turn, the locksmith is fitting the new lock. Tristan holds the wood steady. They are talking about a surfing beach on the other side of Shepherd Cove.

I pass them and go down the stairs. I turn at the glass room and traverse the landing. I ascend to the hallway and cross the expanse of harlequin tiles in the kitchen to the internal door. In the glass walkway, I get down on all fours and crawl under the staircase and lie down, on my side, curled up. I close my eyes. Tears gather behind my eyelids and run across the bridge of my nose and my cheek. I don't know how I know, but Kotteb is dead.

*

I wake to find Tristan crouching above, gently shaking me.

'You're not staying here,' he says. 'You're coming home.'

I don't move. It all comes rushing back. Kotteb's disappearance, my conviction he is dead.

'No,' I tell him at last.

'Yes, you are. Come.' He rises and prods me with his foot. 'Let's get your things. Let's pack up. We can leave food and water for Kotteb.'

'Kotteb's dead, Tristan.'

'How do you know?'

'I just do.'

He shakes his head. And when I don't move he says again, more gently, 'Come on, Hannah. Sweetheart. Get up,' and holds out a hand.

I take it and heave myself up. I am stiff and cold. I stand in the walkway and fold my arms. 'I'm not going.'

'Han.' He leans his forehead against the staircase and slowly rocks it against the wood.

'You're so bloody stubborn. I'd stay but I can't. I've got a client coming in tomorrow at eight and I've got reading to do tonight. Please?' he says. 'Solo?' But I won't look at him.

I leave him and walk through to the kitchen. Kotteb's bowls are untouched. Tristan's overnight bag waits near the swing doors. I pick up my phone and check the time. It is 4.07 pm.

It's been raining. Out on the patio the pavers are puddled with rainwater, the railings wetly black. Far below, the ocean is a jumble of frothy white caps and surging swell. Low, grey cloud scurries across the sky as if it has some place to be.

He comes up and stands behind me, puts his arms around my shoulders and kisses the nape of my neck.

'I want you to phone me,' he instructs. 'Every night and every morning.'

'Mmm.'

'And I want you to buy a bed, a proper bed. I'll pay for it.'

He turns me around to face him.

'I want to sleep with you next time I come down, in a proper bed.' He kisses me on the nose. 'Okay?'

'Okay,' I say.

*

After he's gone I roll up the bottoms of my jeans and put on a thick jumper. I close the front door, and head down the track. The sand is cold and hard underfoot, the sea water icy between my toes. I walk to the cliff face in front of Sargasso and look up, scouring every crevice. I scout around at the bottom, searching between jagged rocks and in kelp-strewn pools. Walking the length of the beach, I check the tideline.

But there is nothing.

Nothing except broken shells, the odd rusting bottle top, a decomposing crab and a tangled mess of gnarly fishing line. Nothing. No real surprise.

By the time I trudge back up and turn the corner it's dusk and the house looms ahead of me, big, solid and in darkness. I pick my way to the front door and let myself in. I find the half empty bottle of white wine we brought back with us from the pub the previous night, pour myself a glass, and go upstairs for a shower. My footsteps echo. My shadow stretches eerily ahead, navigating the passage corner before I do. I turn into the bathroom, fumble for the light switch on the wall and remember the feeling

when Tristan and I made love on the sand, the feeling that Sargasso was staring at me. And I have a weird idea I am not alone. Somebody's here. Watching me. Patiently observing, through the crack of an open door perhaps. Watching. And waiting.

Waiting for what? I do not know.

*

When the wine is all gone, I think it possible I might sleep. I turn off the kitchen lights and make my way upstairs, clutching my blanket and pillow. I can't face the special place, or the kitchen. Not without Kotteb. I open the door to my bedroom, but the smell and the carpet and the filthy windowsill put me off. And that other child, the very idea of them. Whoever he or she might have been. The next room along, diagonally across from mine, is Kelly's—no point trying to sleep there. And the one after that is the guest room, where my grandmother slept when she came to stay.

7

Then

Gran came to stay after Christmas, maybe a month after we moved in, but before I started the new school year at any rate.

Before she arrived, our mother sat my sister and me down in the kitchen. She told us Dad's mum was fragile. And old. She said, 'I want you both to be polite and patient, to spend a little time every day talking to her.'

Kelly, fiddling with her bangles, said, 'She's rich, isn't she?'

'Well, yes, as it happens she is, but that's not the point. I want you to be nice to her.'

'Why?'

'She's our grandmother,' I put in. 'And we don't know her very well. That's why we need to be nice.' I swung my legs furiously back and forth. My feet didn't reach the ground.

'What would you know?' my sister snarled.

'Kelly,' Mum said sharply. 'Hannah's right.' She folded her hands across her apron. 'I'd like to think that when you girls have children, they'll be nice to me.'

'Pfft,' Kelly said.

It was one of those conversations I felt sure was meaningful, although when I went over it in my mind I couldn't work out exactly why.

Rose Prendergast, my grandmother, had wispy white curls and brown and bowed legs like a beetle's; she was small and slight. She dressed in

stockings with low-heeled shoes, and soft narrow skirts with floaty blouses. In the middle of summer she wore cardigans, which I called jumpers until she corrected me. There was a name for everything in God's world, she insisted, and we should use it. Oh, and she had a string of pearls, she never went anywhere without them. I was convinced she even wore them in the bath.

Of course, I forgot I was to spend a little time with her and, in any case, I was distracted. Dolly and I had pulled one of the flattened packing boxes from the top of the stack in the garage and, with some difficulty, reassembled it to make a cubby in the place under the stairs. It wasn't technically in the house and I was therefore more likely to be allowed to keep it, at least for a few days. Its nearness to my father's studio was also comforting, though most of the time he worked out of his office in the city.

Grappling with the cardboard box—it was rectangular and bulky and awkward, and Dolly was no help—I had managed to manoeuvre it upside-down under the stairs. But I soon found I wasn't strong enough to saw a doorway through it. I was almost crying with frustration when, 'There you are,' my grandmother said behind me. I was so startled that the knife slipped and clattered to the floor.

'Where did you get that, child?' she said. 'Give it to me.'

It was a Stanley knife with a bright yellow handle and a squat silver blade and I wasn't meant to have it. I passed it over wordlessly, and my grandmother pursed her wrinkled lips. She held it upright between us, like a weapon, and for a small moment I was afraid.

'Hmm,' she said. 'Now what are you doing? Making a doorway?' She did that a lot, asking questions and then answering with another question.

'Hold the box, child.'

I did as I was told, and she pushed up her cardigan sleeves and cut into the cardboard. The sawing motion made the box bounce against my chin. I held on tighter.

She stopped before she was done and looked at me, as if she were God creating the universe and deciding on my future in it.

'Do you want a flappy doorway, or one cut right out?'

'A flappy doorway. Please.'

'Right. A flappy doorway it shall be.'

‘There,’ she said a minute later, standing back and surveying her handiwork. I stared in admiration.

‘Now where does this go?’ she said, sliding away the blade and handing the knife to me. ‘In the garage? Put it back, pronto, before I tell your mother.’

She’d gone when I returned, but I didn’t think twice about that. I hopped excitedly on one foot. I crawled into the cubby, taking Dolly with me. It was warm inside, and dark, especially when I pulled the flap closed, and it smelled dry and papery. I lay on my back on the parquetry, Dolly beside me, and stretched out my legs. I made scissoring movements with them, and thought about Flint. What would he say when I showed him this new place? I said to Dolly, ‘Do you think he’ll like it?’

‘Who?’ Gran’s voice sounded strange outside, sort of hollow.

I sat up hurriedly.

‘May I come in?’ she said, knocking on the cardboard and making it jiggle.

She’d brought cushions and a rug. She passed them to me and I spread the rug, then she took off her shoes and went down on all fours and slowly crawled inside.

‘I can’t possibly sit up in here,’ she said, raising her head to look at me. ‘Give me a cushion.’

She eased onto her back, and bent her skinny legs like a deck-chair. Head settled against the cushion, she rearranged her pearls. Then, her hands were across her chest, touching fingertips together. She said, ‘Miss Prendergast, how nice of you to have me over.’

I smiled shyly.

‘It’s a pleasure,’ I said. ‘I’m glad you could come.’

She’d left the door open, so that even though it was murky inside the cubby there was enough light to see the tiny purple roses decorating the white cotton of her blouse and her chest fluttering as she breathed in and out.

‘Who were you talking to earlier?’ she said. ‘Dolly?’

I nodded.

‘Does she answer you?’

‘No,’ I said, squirming a little on Dolly’s behalf, ‘she’s only a doll.’

She patted the tips of her fingers together.

‘I hear you have a friend, a boy, a boy called ... called ...’

‘Flint.’ I nodded. ‘He talks to me. He’s my best friend.’

The fingertips patted some more, as if exploring.

‘How old is he?’ she said.

I said nothing. I didn’t know the answer. When I’d asked him he’d replied loftily, ‘Age is just a number.’ I didn’t know what he meant.

‘Where does he live?’

I opened my mouth, said, ‘But,’ and shut it again.

I was squashed up against her side, sitting cross-legged, and she put one hand over my knee, covering it like a worn and soft glove, and for a while neither of us said anything. I was about to ask her if she would like to come again for afternoon tea, when she said, ‘You know what? At some point I’m going to have to get up.’

‘Up?’

‘Yes, up. Up. I’m going to have to get up.’

She pushed herself into a half-sitting position with her elbows and looked hard at me in the gloom. Our faces were inches apart, and I noticed she didn’t actually have eyebrows. They were drawn in with pencil.

‘What’s your name again?’ she said.

‘Hannah.’

‘Hannah,’ she said, ‘I think I’m stuck,’ and she waited for that information to sink in. ‘You’re going to have to push on this shoulder,’ she said, indicating her right shoulder with her chin, ‘and then push on my back.’ She took a deep breath. ‘Are you ready?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

I pushed and heaved and she groaned a little, but somehow she got onto all fours again and, very slowly this time, crawled out. I went out, too, so she could lean on me to get to her feet.

She hobbled into her shoes, kissed me on the forehead, and said, ‘Thank you for having me.’

Then she limped down the walkway, swaying a little. I heard her say, ‘Ouch. We won’t do that again, will we, Mr Prendergast?’ and I realised she was talking to my dead grandfather.

In the afternoon, I put Dolly away on the top shelf of my cupboard. I had to balance on an upside-down plastic storage container to do so and it wasn't something I enjoyed. But I had spoken the words, *She's only a doll*, out loud and I couldn't forget them. What was I doing playing with a doll when I had a real live boy to play with? It had also occurred to me that perhaps Dolly was the reason Flint was staying away. If I had Dolly why did I need him? So I put her away. I couldn't look her in the eye as I tucked her pink and white skirt under her bottom and straightened her legs on the shelf. Her face was lowered, gazing at her lap. She seemed so very sad. 'I am sorry,' I told her. My voice was quivering. I did feel awful. And that night when I lay in bed waiting for sleep, I thought of her sitting up there in the dark and the cold, and I had a few tears. I promised her then that if Flint didn't come back I would make it up to her.

*

At the breakfast table the next day, Gran said, 'Cat got your tongue, child?'

'Hannah,' my mother reminded her from the kitchen bench. A fresh lemon, a jar of nuts and a packet of sugar were at her elbow. Most of the time my mum baked Australian-style for us—scones, pikelets, banana loaf—but every now and then her Greek heritage surfaced and she made some delicacy. Today she was cutting pastry for baklava. A greased baking dish stood on the bench, and the smell of cinnamon wafted through the air. I hadn't asked to help. I didn't like nuts.

'Cat got your tongue, *Hannah*?' Gran said.

I looked up from my boiled egg. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'I mean you're very quiet this morning.'

I glanced at Mum, who was bent over the counter, then leant towards my grandmother and whispered, 'I don't know where Flint is.'

'And?' she whispered back. 'Let me guess, you have to take down the cubby today?'

I nodded, and spooned some egg into my mouth.

'Have you tried meditation?'

I shook my head. 'What's— What's—' but I wasn't brave enough to repeat the word. 'What's that?'

‘It’s when you think long and hard about something, as if you really, *really* want it. Like this.’

She lifted a cereal spoon from alongside her plate, clenched it tightly with two hands, and closed her eyes.

I saw her lips work. Then she opened her eyes, blinked, and put down the spoon.

‘What did you think about? What do you really want?’ I asked.

‘Hannah, eat up,’ Mum said.

‘I am.’

‘You’re not.’

Picking up a toast soldier I stuffed it whole into my mouth, scratching my gums with its dry edges.

*

After breakfast I sought out my grandmother to discover what she thought about when she meditated and what she really wanted and, as was so often the case with adults, I didn’t find any of that out, but she did tell me the three things that were essential not only for meditation, but for facing the day. And she was right; there was something to be said for clean teeth. I sat in the cubby and ran my tongue over their smoothness. I’d brushed my hair, too, and washed the sleep from my eyes. Putting one hand on each knee, I straightened my back and closed my eyes. ‘Flint, Flint, Flint,’ I muttered.

I opened them, but he wasn’t there. I tried again. This time I pictured him, grinning, with his brown hair flopping over his forehead, but not his scar because I was a little bit funny about his scar. I desperately wanted to know how he’d got it, but I also didn’t. It might be a gory story. This time I said *Flint, Flint, Flint* in my head.

Still no Flint.

I wasn’t really surprised. It was a silly idea, I thought. And it was no good. I was never going to see him again.

After a mere couple of weeks our friendship was over. I would have to go upstairs and fetch Dolly and apologise for leaving her behind, and spend the rest of the day making it up to her. I would have to put up with being alone for the rest of my life. Worse still, I would have to put up with Kelly making fun of me. Forever.

Then I remembered there was something magical about the number three. Witches and wizards and fairies always did things in threes, so I tried one last time. I conjured up his face and gazed straight into it, scar, clear green eyes and all. It was frightening looking at him like that. I guess the really scary bit was him staring right back, as if he could see inside, into what made me Hannah. My heart bumped against my chest. I felt as if I were searching for an answer to a question, but I didn't know what the question was in the first place.

'Flint, Flint, Flint,' I murmured.

I was still alone.

I said the worst word I knew.

'Shit.'

I stumbled out of the cubby, tears welling.

Outside the flappy door stood someone a little taller than me, someone a little blurry.

'Hannah?'

Before I knew it, I had hit him.

'Where have you *been*?' I cried. I raised my arm to hit him again, but he caught it.

'Don't,' he said.

I snivelled.

'Show me the cubby.'

'No.'

I pulled away, but he wouldn't let go.

I lowered my head—I didn't want him to see my tears—and saw his hand clenched around my wrist. He was much stronger than I was.

'Let me see the cubby,' he said again.

'No,' I said. 'You'll have to wait now. You'll have to wait until—until I'm ready. Until I say so.'

He let go and stepped back. But I could tell he was still looking at me.

I studied the wooden patterns on the floor. A few moments ago we'd been staring at each other. I couldn't believe I'd hit him.

'Sorry,' I muttered.

'So,' he said, 'are you ready to say so?'

'What?' I looked up.

'You said I'd have to wait until you say so,' he said patiently.

‘Oh.’

He held out his hand. ‘Come.’

I wiped my hand across my eyes and sniffed loudly.

‘All right,’ I said.

*

He didn’t like being in the cardboard box.

He lasted less than five seconds, long enough for me to sit down and say, ‘I’ve got cards. You want to play snap?’ And then he backed out.

‘Hannah,’ he said from outside, ‘come.’

‘Why?’ I said.

‘Because. I don’t like it. I don’t like being in small dark places with something over my head. It feels like prison.’

For a moment I was stunned. I think my mouth fell open.

‘You’ve been in prison?’

‘No! I’m just saying if I was—if I were to go, that would be how it would feel.’

I sighed deeply. ‘Oh, all right.’

I ducked my head through the flap and stood beside him in the walkway. With a few movements he pulled the box out from under the stairs, and flattened it.

‘What are you doing?’ I cried.

But he didn’t answer; he simply dragged the box towards the garage.

By the time he came back I had recovered. I’d straightened the rug, and placed the cushions opposite each other, with the cards between them, as if we were having a picnic. As if there’d never been a cubby.

Without a word, he sat on one of the cushions. He closed his eyes and raised his face to the stairs and the sky above, as if he were praying, and the sunlight fell in bars across his body. He stretched out his hands, palms up, and said, ‘Ah, sun.’

I sat down opposite him and smiled. Picking up the cards, I held them out to him. ‘Deal,’ I said.

8

Now

I miss Gran. Now, particularly. I would do anything to hear her say, ‘Chin up, child,’ although she’d be more likely to say, ‘What are you going to do? Sell the house?’ It’s been almost two months since her death and I miss her small hard body and her brown bowed legs. And her sharp wit. After Mum died and before the men in my life came along, she was my rock.

The curtains in the guest room are a rich cream colour. I draw them back and open the window; the smell and sound of the sea drift in. I hear a wet bang as a wave breaks on the shore. It’s high tide. A pause, then a hiss as it recedes. Another bang, and the pattern is repeated. Out there it’s dark, the moon isn’t up, and the sea is a blurred pale petticoat with a lace frill.

I push my yoga mat up against the wall. The morning light will wake me. I close the door, breathe out a sigh. Whoever’s watching me is not going to watch me sleep.

*

It is barely dawn when I open my eyes. I rise and stand at the window, yawning and stretching. A thin mist hovers over the coastline, but the sun is up and the sky is blue and wide and cloudless. It’s going to be a lovely day. And I have slept well. The only thing that casts a pall over the day is the memory of Kotteb’s disappearance, and I fight back my tears.

In the kitchen I wash and dry his water and food bowls, and put them away in the pantry. I carry his bed through to the garage. Then I make myself a cup of tea and take the doorknobs and screwdriver I purchased upstairs.

I'm done by ten, shiny new knobs adorning every door. I phone Tristan as instructed and leave a message. I dress, lock up and go out to the car. I want to drive into town, find the local veterinary clinic and leave my details in case someone brings in Kotteb. I am also going to look for a bed, and go to the hardware store for sandpaper and varnish.

But I don't get further than the driveway.

The crows are bickering over something on the other side of my car. Cawing and squawking and flapping heavily. I walk around so I can see what it is.

It is Kotteb. Or his body, at least.

I drop everything and scream. I scoop gravel and fling it wildly at the crows.

Howling with grief, I lift Kotteb from the dirt. I lean against the Golf with his bloodied and limp body in my hands, one ginger paw hanging uselessly between my fingers. Dried blood stains his mouth but other than the slashes of the crows' pecking he seems unharmed. I nurse him in my arms, his fur soft against my skin, while the tears run down my cheeks. Every now and then his hair stirs in the breeze. I'll need a spade, I think, the cold practical part of my mind kicking in.

Where the weeds had been I dig a grave. The earth is still soft and giving. I am mid-dig when I hear a vehicle and glance up to see a dirty cream ute coming down the driveway, throwing up clouds of dust. It's the locksmith, Marsh.

I go on digging. He parks his vehicle behind mine and walks over and, without a word, takes the spade from my hands.

I lean on my knees, wipe my nose with the back of my hand, and stroke Kotteb's fur. Ants are crawling over him. I brush them off. Death and decay are swift companions.

'What's his name?' He throws aside a spade of dirt.

'Kotteb,' I tell him.

'Strange name for a cat.'

'It's from a story by Paul Gallico called *The Silent Miaow*.'

‘What happened?’

‘You really want to know?’ I pause. ‘It’s about a kitten who types—’

‘No, I mean, what happened to Kotteb?’

‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’ I didn’t. It was too agonising to think about—Kotteb in pain, needing me, and me never coming.

‘Have you got a box or something?’ he says, spearing the spade into the earth so that it stands upright, quivering.

I shake my head. ‘We only arrived on Thursday.’

He walks over to the ute and ferrets around in the tray. He’s wearing a khaki uniform and unlike yesterday his work boots are sturdy and new. And he is wearing socks. Their whiteness is startling against his bare brown legs.

He hands me a rectangular box with *Reece* written down one side.

‘They’re plumbers, aren’t they?’

He glances at me and nods. I have an unsettling feeling I know him after all. But this man is so different he can’t possibly be the Marsh from my childhood.

‘Suppliers,’ he says, ‘they’re plumbing suppliers.’

‘You do plumbing as well?’

‘I have a mate ...’ he begins. ‘I help out if I’m needed.’

I kneel on the damp ground and settle Kotteb’s body into the makeshift coffin, curling his tail in after him. I kiss one dirty finger and transfer the kiss to his fluffy forehead, and then I close the lid.

The hole is deep but not wide enough and Marsh has to dig some more. When the box is in but not covered, I stand up.

‘Why are you here?’

He shrugs. ‘I came to see if Tristan wanted a surf later this arvo ...’

‘He’s gone back to the city.’

He wipes his hands on his pants. ‘Obviously.’

‘But, thanks,’ I say, gesturing towards the little grave.

‘No worries.’ He looks hard at me. ‘You’ll be okay now?’ He has round brown eyes similar to that other Marsh. Brown buttons. His hair’s straggly and bleached blond, drawn back into a ponytail. And his face is tanned from surfing.

‘I’ll be right.’

‘Good,’ he says, and walks away.

I stand next to the small plot and wonder what to say, as the ute pulls out of the driveway.

I've had Kotteb since he was a tiny kitten and I watched him leave his mother and wobble across the floor to me without looking back. He could fit into the palm of one hand then, like a skein of orange cashmere wool.

In the end I say nothing. There's some bunny tail grass a little way down the beach track, and I throw a posy of it on top, and then I cover it with earth.

All I want to do is lie down and close my eyes, but conditioning forces me to stay active, to go into town as planned. In the small hardware store, I buy sandpaper and varnish. I avoid the grizzled old guy because I will burst into tears if he speaks to me. I find a coffee shop in the main street but I've lost my appetite, leaving most of my iced coffee. Equally unappealing is the thought of going to look for a bed.

*

I get through the rest of the day by working in my old bedroom. I clear and wipe down the windowsill, and then I sand the window frames. Although the sky is cloudless it isn't a stinker of a day and I get in a good four hours' work. From the vantage point of the window I see the crows loitering in the driveway. Sometimes they flap to and fro, squabbling with each other, other times they sit quietly, shading themselves in the branches of the eucalypts. Every now and then they fly down and peck at the dirt as if they have rediscovered traces of Kotteb. Once I catch them looking balefully at me.

They unsettle me. I feel they're waiting for something. Who or what, I have no idea.

I wonder whether the crows killed Kotteb. Or whether something else happened to him and they carried his corpse from another place to the driveway. And I wonder what it was I heard outside the rooftop doors that made me think Kotteb was there.

When Tristan rings at 4.25 pm, I am glad of the chance to talk although the conversation's far from cheerful.

'But how did he die?' he asks.

'I don't know.'

'But aren't you curious?'

‘Tris,’ I say, ‘I’m not going to send him for a post-mortem, am I?’

‘Sorry,’ he says.

Both of us are silent then, and his words from the weekend echo in my head: *You shouldn’t have brought the cat.*

It’s entirely my fault that Kotteb is dead.

Promising to call before I go to sleep, I say goodbye.

I decide to quit for the day. There’s nothing further I can do in that room. I’ve given the frames one coat of varnish and they need to dry.

9

Then

One day, when we were playing snap again, Flint announced he was tired of it. He wanted to go to the beach.

‘The beach?’

I rubbed the sharp edges of the cards against my chin. This was our third round and I was winning. I didn’t particularly want to stop.

‘But I’m not allowed to go on my own.’

‘You won’t be on your own. I’ll be with you,’ he said with irrefutable logic. He stood up, and tossed the cards onto the rug. ‘I’ll wait for you out front.’

*

I went as I was. No towel, no sunscreen, no hat. Being seen with any of these things by any family member would make them suspicious. *Where are you going, Hannah? You’re not going to the beach by yourself, are you?*

At the internal door, I peered out across the expansive black and white tiles. I smelled lemon juice before anything else, and saw a cake cooling on a wire rack. A mixing-bowl stood in the sink, half-filled with soapy water, and the breakfast table had been cleared. The vase of daisies was back on the table. Mum was not there. She was probably making her bed and redoing mine. Or she was holed up in the library, reading. My mum was a

bookworm; did I mention that? I tiptoed through, hesitating at the swing doors before peeping into the entrance hall—it was empty. As I slipped inside I heard again that strange sound I'd heard on the first day, as if the house were sighing. I shivered. I glanced over my shoulder and gazed up the staircase into the gloomy depths of the upstairs landing, but no one was there.

Within seconds I was outside.

Sargasso didn't have beds of flowers or lawns or gardens. It grew from the scrub and earth. And even later, when Mum insisted on some kind of landscaping, it was minimal: a rough path leading to the beach track, a lonely agapanthus and some reeds. Because of this it didn't take long to skitter from the portico and duck behind the nearest clump of wild grass. I looked back but there was no movement in any of the windows. Flint wasn't waiting anywhere outside, either, despite his promise.

I decided not to wait—waiting was an invitation for someone to see me and yell, 'Hannah!'—and I took off in the direction of the beach.

Down the dirt track I skipped, batting my hand against the wild grasses growing at the path's edge. The sky was cloudless, the sun an orange beach ball, radiating heat and prickling my scalp. I pretended to be a rabbit, springing from one side to the other, my hands in a begging position, my front teeth jutting from my lips. Then I became an elephant, plodding on heavy, solid feet, waving a trunk in front of my face and trumpeting. When I grew tired of this I was simply me, with hot bare feet, hopping and jumping along and panting with exertion.

I was almost at the place where the path petered out when I heard Flint hollering behind me. I stepped up onto a patch of weeds to protect my feet as he came tearing down.

'Race you!' he called.

'Where were you?' I shouted after his disappearing back, but he didn't reply.

I took off after him. I ran straight past him and into the sea. The cold sand under my scorching soles and the shallows lapping around my ankles were delicious.

'What's the matter?' I called when he didn't come. 'Can't you swim?'

He had a spindly piece of driftwood in his hand and was drawing lines in the sand.

‘Of course I can swim,’ he said without looking at me.

I came out of the water.

‘What do you want to do?’

‘Races,’ he said. ‘We’re going to do races.’

‘But you’ll easily beat me.’

He looked up at me, stick in hand, squinting into the sun. ‘I know that. I’m giving you a head start. Look.’

I walked to my starting line and gazed into the distance to the finish, which was the big black rock on the other side of the beach, he said. The distance was much longer than I was used to.

‘Where do you run from?’

‘There.’ He pointed with the stick up the track. It was a long way back, and I saw then that it was possible for me to win.

‘Okay,’ I said, and a glimmer of pleasure appeared in his eyes.

I took my position. Over my shoulder I watched him trudge up and toss away the stick. He crouched down with his fingertips poised on the surface. I thought I’d better do the same.

‘On your marks,’ I heard him call. ‘Ready,’ he called. ‘Set, go!’

I ran. I ran as fast as I could, faster than I’d ever run in my life. It was important to win. I had a head start. If I lost, I would not only lose but be humiliated as well. The sand was firm and gritty under my feet. The black rock seemed to shake as I pounded along the beach, but remained steadfast in my sight and grew steadily. My heart hammered in my chest. Yet I felt good, as if I could run all day. I had no idea where Flint was, how far away, or how close. I dared not turn to see.

When I was almost at the finish line I heard him breathing heavily behind me and felt the impact of his thudding feet. I had forgotten to check whether we actually had to touch the rock, but somehow I knew that only touching would do. But how to tap the surface and avoid crashing into solid and heavy granite?

I changed direction slightly so that I could brush the rock and run on and fall into a heap, and with lungs bursting and feet juddering I stretched out my fingers to do so, and saw Flint’s arm following mine.

But I got there first! And, with a shriek of triumph, I fell to the side. He landed on top of me—a sudden heavy warmth, sharp with angles, twitching with energy—and then he rolled off.

‘All over, Red Rover,’ he said. This was a phrase he trotted out when one of us beat the other at something. In turn I had used it with my mother and she’d called it *quaint*, whatever that meant.

We lay with chests heaving, gazing up at the sky, waiting for our hearts and lungs to return to normal. When I got up, Flint sat forward and stuck out his hand.

‘Congratulations.’

I saw he was looking at me in a new light. We shook. Our palms were sandy and his tickled against mine.

‘Swim?’ I said.

‘All right,’ he said but with reluctance, as if he were doing me a huge favour.

The water was cool, the colour like lime jelly. Shining and shimmering. I dug my toes into the gritty bottom and watched my legs move up and down. I let the tide slap against my knees, and then I waded further out. I was in shorts and a T-shirt. Once, I might have stripped off to my knickers, but I was nearly eight now, well, eight in October, and I was shy around Flint. I didn’t care if my clothes got wet. They would dry quickly.

I was up to my waist and had plunged through my first wave when I saw him alongside me. I saw how he held himself, arms stiffly at his sides like a drying penguin, and how he stared ahead, chest like an ironing board. Me, being me, I jumped over peaks and dived through them and came up pushing my hair off my face and blinking salt out of my eyes. I splashed about. I watched the sun catch the water droplets and turn them into daytime stars. I flicked water at him. ‘Stop that,’ he said and glared at me. I struggled out further and hurled myself into the next wave of froth and white water.

‘Come on,’ I called to him, but I could see he wasn’t having any fun. And then I catapulted myself into one last breaker.

It was bigger than I expected, churning me about and pinning me to the sandy depths. I emerged, heaving for breath, briny liquid sloshing in my mouth, and I couldn’t stand. My feet wouldn’t touch the bottom. I couldn’t see Flint, either. I put down my head and swam for the shore, but another rush of sea battered me from behind, and I came up again, treading water, gasping and spluttering.

‘Flint,’ I cried out. All of a sudden, I was very small and the volume of ocean all around me enormous and overwhelming. And then a trough appeared and I saw him bobbing about. ‘Flint,’ I cried again, and above the foam we looked at each other and I saw panic in his eyes. And then he went under.

Somehow I got to him and lifted him up. Kicking strongly, again and again like a tadpole, like I’d seen the lifesavers on the beach near the city do, I fought my way to shore. I didn’t know when I’d learned to swim; I seemed to have been swimming all of my life. Several times I was submerged and came up again, gasping. My arms felt as though they would break with the dead weight of him. Until I felt sand beneath my feet. But it wasn’t over. A barrage of white froth towed me out again. Waterlogged, exhausted, I kicked again and again. My head went under. I let go of Flint. Sank. And teetered on tippy-toes. I gained a foothold, and another. Reached for him. Then I was pulling him through the shallows. Up onto the beach. Collapsing, and coughing and coughing, my chest burning.

*

A big shadow came between me and the sun, shutting out the bright light, and I rolled over and opened my eyes. Mum stood above me.

‘Hannah,’ she said urgently. She was breathing heavily. She knelt down. ‘Hannah, are you okay?’

I sat up and spat out a mouthful of sea water and coughed some more. ‘Where’s Flint?’ I got out.

‘Flint?’ she said. ‘Flint was with you?’ She frowned in bewilderment.

She grabbed my arm and shook me. Her face was mottled, white with anger and red with exertion, her dark hair wild around her shoulders. For a moment she didn’t say anything, as if she couldn’t trust the words that would come out of her mouth.

‘Hannah, you cannot do this. Disappear. You know you’re not allowed to go to the beach by yourself. Look at you, you almost drowned.’

‘I didn’t,’ I said. ‘Flint did. *He* almost drowned.’

‘Don’t argue. Now get up.’

I did.

‘You’re grounded,’ she said, looking down at me, and I saw then that she was barefoot, that she must have left everything and run. ‘Inside, all week. No argument.’

*

After Mum had tucked me in that night, Dad came in and perched on my bed. For a while he gazed at me, and then he looked away.

‘Why did you go to the beach, Hannah?’ he said at last.

‘Flint wanted to go.’

‘Flint? Who is this Flint?’

‘He’s my friend.’

‘And do you always do what Flint says?’

‘Pretty much.’

‘Even if it’s dangerous?’

‘It wasn’t dangerous, not for me. I didn’t know he couldn’t swim.’

Dad sighed. ‘You should try to stand up for yourself more, Hannah. You should have told him—this Flint character—that you didn’t want to go to the beach—’

‘But I *did* want to go.’

‘Hannah, you’re not allowed to go, not by yourself.’

‘But I wasn’t by myself.’

He put his face in his hands.

‘We’re going round in circles,’ he said.

I picked at the folds of my covers. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t like it when I made Dad unhappy.

‘Hannah, when you go to the new school you’ll make friends, and we’ll invite some of them over. But you’ll have to wait until then. It’s not so long.’

‘I don’t need other friends. I have Flint.’

‘We haven’t met Flint, have we?’

‘No.’

‘Where does he live?’

‘Somewhere,’ I said, stalling. ‘It can’t be far away.’

‘Look, why don’t you invite him to stay for dinner tomorrow night? Then we’ll get to meet him.’

‘Dad,’ I said.

‘Hannah, if we get to meet him, and his parents, and we see he’s a responsible kid, then maybe, just *maybe*, we’ll let you go to the beach with him.’

‘Dad.’ I felt even more miserable. ‘He’s not allowed out at night,’ I told him, my eyes full of tears. ‘His parents are strict, like you.’

My father pressed his lips together. He tapped one foot, a soft soughing noise on the carpet.

‘Then he should come during the day. On the weekend, when I’m home.’ His face brightened. ‘We’ll have a lunchtime barbeque.’

‘Henry?’ Gran was at the door.

Dad turned.

‘Mum?’

She came into the room as quietly as a little bird, hands clasped across her blouse and cardigan. She made a point of not looking at me. For someone so small she said a great deal without saying anything at all.

Dad sighed. ‘Mum, I’m trying to have a conversation with Hannah.’

‘A conversation is when two people *talk* together, Henry,’ Gran told him. ‘Let the child be.’

‘Have you been eavesdropping?’

‘So what if I have?’

‘Yes, well.’ Dad glanced at me. Somehow I felt responsible for his embarrassment.

‘I have to go now, Hannah.’ He rose from my bed. ‘But we’ll talk about this again. Goodnight, sweetheart.’

Bending over, he kissed my forehead and left without another word, or another look at his mother.

She moved to the window. She held the curtain open with one hand, and with the other she fingered the pearls around her neck and looked into the darkness. I wondered what she saw out there.

Then she came over. ‘I think it might be better for you if you didn’t mention this boy to them again, child. He’s not quite ... quite ... *suitable*,’ she said.

I nodded dumbly.

She stared at me for some time, which made me anxious. Was there something I should say? If only I were older I would know what it was.

‘I can’t reach up there, child,’ she said at last, and, wobbling on the springiness of the mattress, I realised I was towering over her.

‘On your knees?’ she suggested, smiling.

Now I could look her in the eye, well, almost.

‘Goodnight, Gran,’ I said, carefully hugging her. When we still lived in the city and I was at kindergarten some farm animals had visited for the morning: a lamb, ducks and ducklings, fluffy chickens and a hen. Hugging Gran felt like holding a hen. She was bony *and* soft, and I was never quite sure whether she might suddenly squawk and flutter out of reach.

*

A few days later Dad passed me in the passage on his way to work. He was clearly late for the two-hour drive, trying to do up his tie and walking at the same time, but he stopped and, flipping one tie end over the other, said, ‘Isn’t there something you’re supposed to have done, Hannah?’

I looked at him and pursed my lips, and before I could think of a way to distract him, he said, ‘That boy, wasn’t he coming to dinner?’

‘Do you mean Flint?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘yes. I mean Flint. What’s happening there?’

‘Nothing,’ I said, meaning I hadn’t asked him. I had no intention of asking him. For one thing, I knew my parents would never approve of a boy whose feet were filthy, whose clothes were often torn, and who urgently needed a haircut. For another, I was taking Gran’s advice to heart.

‘Good,’ he said, jerking the tie into place, the tendons of his neck straining. ‘Let’s keep it that way. I don’t like the idea of you playing with children we haven’t met. Now, have you seen Kelly? Is she up? She’s supposed to be coming with me. Kelly!’ he called. And off he walked.

*

Dad had told me to try to stand up for myself and, strangely, I had an opportunity to do that very thing the next time I saw Flint. I’d been grounded as Mum had threatened, but by day five she was tired of me being under her feet and let me off early, and I wandered around the grounds

looking for Flint. I came across him eventually at the back of the garage, sitting against the bricks in a patch of sunlight.

‘Flint,’ I said, moving towards him eagerly. But I stopped short. He wasn’t alone. He was with a snake, wound around one arm like a thick piece of green cord. At the sound of my voice it slowly raised its sinewy neck and fixed its eyes on me. I went cold. Hairs along my bare arms and legs shot up.

‘Come say hello to Nigel,’ Flint said.

Nigel? I couldn’t move. I gulped. ‘N-no,’ I stuttered. Small muscles spasmed under its jawline and its green and gilded scales glittered in the light.

Flint looked up at me, squinting in the sun. His eyes were the same colour as the creature’s skin. ‘What’s wrong, Hannah? Don’t you like sss-snakes?’

‘N-no,’ I said, stammering again. I shuddered. ‘Get away,’ I whispered. My voice had seized up. My body had gone rigid.

Then Flint put out one hand and tenderly stroked its back and a sort of *arghhh* sound came out of my throat. I managed to put one foot behind me, and then another, and another. I backtracked in jerks, stumbling over my own feet, until I rounded the corner of the garage, and fled.

He found me later in the driveway. A pair of magpies warbling in the trees were keeping me company, and I was doodling in the sand with a stick. I said nothing. I didn’t even look at him. I was thinking that, yes, I had stood up for myself but I hadn’t exactly stood my ground, had I?

‘Sorry,’ Flint muttered.

I looked up. He was dusting off his hands as if to say that’s the end of that, then.

‘If you ever do that again,’ I began, bossily, ‘if you—’

‘I know, Hannah,’ he said. ‘I get it. Now what do you want to do?’

*

Gran returned to her own home sometime in late January, not long before I started school.

I remember being upset. She was the only grown-up who understood me. It wasn’t that we spent a lot of time together, or talked a lot—about

anything—but that we were somehow connected. If I met her anywhere in the house, we always hugged. Once she called me Hannah, and I corrected her and said my name was *child*. She thought that was funny.

The day she left I wanted to go with Dad and her in the ute, but Dad was going on to work afterwards so I wasn't allowed. I stood in the driveway, the dirt cool under my bare feet, the light filtering through the trees, saying goodbye. My grandmother must have been upset too, because one of her stockings was twisted. Kelly pointed it out, and sniggered.

Before they left Gran whispered something in my ear, about *that* boy and about keeping a secret, and when they'd driven away, my sister said, 'What did she say to you?'

'None of your beeswax,' I told her.

I felt good about that for the rest of the day.

10

Now

The beach is deserted when I walk down at dusk. I never saw another person on it, apart from the members of my family, Tristan, and Flint, of course. When my father's boat washed up, there were hordes of people, but just for a day or two, only until his body turned up.

You can't see the beach from the coast road. Access is from the track leading to Sargasso, and most beach-goers assume it's private property. But it's for anybody to use, only nobody does.

I walk at the water's edge, skipping out of the way when an enthusiastic wave catches me unawares and threatens to soak my rolled-up jeans. I stride to the black rock to get moving, the one Flint and I ran races to, and then I amble back home again.

The evening passes quietly. I make myself scrambled eggs and open a tin of peaches and, by degrees, eat them all. I can't describe how lonely I am without Kotteb. How my eyes keep searching the room for him, even though I know he's gone. I sit on the floor and pick up my book again. I read until Part Two, which is the conclusion of the young girl's childhood and a little after halfway, and then I take a break. My backside has gone to sleep, and I want to reflect on what I've read so far. Briony, the main character, has a vivid imagination. She's disturbing, in some ways so much like I was. I get up, awkward with stiffness, and write *camp chairs* on my shopping list.

I sleep again in Gran's room. I like being here. It reminds me of being a child, sitting on the edge of her bed while we played rummy that time I was grounded. We bet against each other, using Smarties. We didn't tell anyone we were betting. It was our secret. I like having secrets. They make me feel special, and they made me feel superior to Kelly back then.

This time I don't sleep as well. In the night I hear strange creaks and groans as if the house has a life of its own.

At one point I go to the window. The wind has got up. Buffeting the roof and walls, it creeps through the open window with an odd little moan.

I remember that my bedroom windows are ajar to dry the varnish. I should close them in case it rains.

My bedroom door is shut, blown by the wind. I push against it and the air in the room whirls with energy, threatening to snatch the door from my hands. I have to heave it behind me. The varnish has dried sufficiently, and as I pull in the window I catch a glimpse of movement in the darkness beyond.

The moon is brighter and bigger than the brittle fingernail it was last week, and by its light I see the wind wrenching the trees, contorting them to its will. Then I see the shape of a man underneath the eucalypts, alongside the driveway. The darkness is alive with static and as I watch the shadow dissipates and fades to nothing. I do not know if I have really seen a man there after all. And I long all over again for Kotteb's company.

I think about phoning Tristan but my insecurity will make him all the more insistent I return to Melbourne. If being at the house raises new anxieties, it will be pointless for me to stay here. He will argue strongly for me to come back to the apartment. Home.

Back in my grandmother's room with the wind keening outside, and the walls and roof creaking and groaning in defence, I brood over Kotteb. I remember how fiercely protective he was of me when we slept under the stairs. Despite his feline disdain, he loved me ... And I wasn't there in his hour of need. Was it possible that with our comings and goings he slipped out of the swing doors? Came across the crows? One single crow he could've fought off, but two ganging up on him would be too much. The thought distresses me further, and I try to recall happy times. I remember how, as a kitten, he'd clamber onto my body in the mornings when I was still asleep and bat my face with one paw to wake me, how he'd always

come at a run to greet me, meowing his hellos, when I arrived home from work. And, finally, I drift off to sleep.

In the morning the room is broiling. Airless. I have slept late and the sun blasts through the window. I get up and gaze out at a wild and restless sea, white with froth and glare. Agitated. While thin ribbons of cirrus cloud slice into a pale blue skin of sky.

The wind has brought the heat. It's one of those ghastly hot days when everything is gritty to the touch, electric with static. My hair is as flat as a nylon sheet. I cannot paint on such a day.

*

I drive into Shepherd Cove with the idea that I'll make a morning of it because I can't do any painting. I'll revisit the coffee shop but sit down at a table, and take my time.

I slip into the newsagent for the newspaper before I find my way to the air-conditioned interior of the café and order a cappuccino, and fold back the paper to the second last page and the crosswords. I try to concentrate on the clues but somebody near me is talking about the hardware store and how the owner's doing it tough because of the impact of the newer, much bigger one. Now I understand the concern in the voice of the man called Mac. I lose my place, and have to reread the same clue. *Heathcliff's speciality (7)*. Hate and love are emotions Heathcliff displayed regularly but both are four-letter words so it can't be either. I sit and think but nothing else comes to me; it has been a long time since I read *Wuthering Heights*.

My mind wanders back to Sargasso. I go through all the things I still have to do. I think about Kotteb. I imagine him waiting for me in the kitchen, sitting alert but alone with his tail curled around his body, the end twitching. It's easier than thinking of him dead. I fold up my newspaper. I drink my coffee and go shopping for a bed.

As a child, I hated being dragged away from Sargasso and Flint, and have only hazy memories of the town. The main street, running parallel to and behind the coastline, is similar to many other coastal villages: a bunch of buildings with awnings, shuffled together like shabby shoeboxes. I notice now that the walkway, composed of heavy slabs of concrete lifting at the edges, is a hazard for the elderly. Every so often there's a shop I recognise,

the newsagent for instance, but the café, with its bright mocha-and-white striped awning and French doors, is new. Shepherd Cove is abuzz with holiday-makers dressed in shorts and T-shirts with zinc cream smeared across their noses. They clog the streets, the clamour of their chatter rising and falling. Across the road heat from the tarmac rises and shimmers, as it has always done, and the smell of exhaust from cars searching for parking places gets up my nose.

I find a double bed in the only furniture store, but I don't buy it. It's horribly expensive. I feel sure Tristan can find one cheaper, but there remains the problem of how to transport it to Sargasso. If he buys a cheaper one in the city, will the cost of delivery—a good two-hour trip—negate any savings? I ask the sales assistant what they will charge to deliver this one to the house.

'What's the address?' the middle-aged woman asks, her gold gypsy earrings glinting in the light.

I tell her. 'The house on the cliff,' I add.

'Sargasso?'

'Yes.'

'Oh,' she says. 'You must be the Prendergast girl.'

'I am. How did you know?'

She smiles. A kindly look. A look that says, *Well, what did you expect? Everybody here knows everything about everybody.* I think about the locksmith called Marsh, and wonder what he's been saying. I can't imagine that the hardware store guy—Bernie?—has been talking about me.

'Hughey,' she calls across the showroom to a desk in the far corner, and a man with a pen caught between his teeth looks up from paperwork.

'This is the Prendergast girl,' she tells him as if I am a celebrity.

He says nothing. He looks at me over the top of his glasses then returns to his invoices.

'I'm Veronica,' she says, her warm brown eyes searching my face. I guess everyone remembers what happened.

'Hannah.'

She quotes a figure for the delivery and we tally it up. It's way more than I reckon Tristan should pay, and I tell her I'll think about it and let her know. She hands me a business card. It says her name is Veronica Reed and

that Reed's Furnishings have been providing quality furniture to Shepherd Cove for over twenty-five years.

The camp chairs at the hardware store start off being an easy purchase. The old guy is nowhere to be seen; instead I am served by a monosyllabic youngster.

'Bernie here?' I ask him.

He tips his head. 'Down the back. In the storeroom.'

I pay for the chairs, leave them folded and upright at the counter, and head to the rear of the shop. The door to the storeroom is open and Bernie's in there, clutching a clipboard and a pen, and counting stock, and I wait until he's finished jotting in the number.

'Hello,' I say brightly, putting my head around the door.

He looks up, his jowly face remaining impassive. 'Yes,' he says.

'It's Hannah,' I say, 'remember? From Sargasso?'

'What can I do for you, love?' He seems preoccupied and despondent. I can't blame him. From what the people in the coffee shop said, he can't be having much fun.

'Nothing,' I say. 'I'm right. I got what I needed. Just wanted to say hello.' I shrug. 'I know it's none of my business, but I've heard that you're ... you're ...'

'Going under?'

'Nah! I'm sure you're not. I'm sure it's all going to come right. It can't be that bad?'

'Oh, it is, love, it is.' He looks as if he might cry—although I know he won't.

'Well,' I say, 'I'll keep popping in. I'll keep needing stuff. So I'll see you soon. Bye,' I say, and raise my hand.

He raises his in return, doing a sort of slack salute, which seems to amuse him, and I think that although it was all a touch awkward, it was worth it.

*

The last thing I do is pick up groceries at the supermarket.

By now the car's interior is boiling hot and stuffy, the steering wheel burning. I turn on the ignition, ramp up the air conditioning, and open all

the windows. And while I wait for everything to cool, I call Tristan and leave him a message about the bed, asking him to let me know what he thinks.

Then

I couldn't understand why Flint wasn't at my school. I'd been so sure I'd find him there, not in my class—because he was older than I was—but in the grounds at playtime. I wasted my recesses and lunch hour looking for him on that first day. A confusing and bewildering activity because everything was unfamiliar and there were so many strange faces. It meant I missed out on making friends, which was not a good start. I never recovered from this, and throughout my primary schooling I didn't have a best friend, or even someone I could sit with, and in those first few weeks I wandered from group to group, always the onlooker loitering at the fringes. Once I discovered the library, however, all my insecurities melted away.

But on that first day when Mum picked me up from school and, sensing that all was not well, suggested a milkshake, I shook my head. I said I needed to see someone ASAP, having learnt this abbreviation from Kelly the week before. Mum asked who, but I told her I couldn't tell. It was a secret.

Mum said nothing, but I noticed that we took the corners of the coast road a little faster, and that we pulled up in the driveway in a rush and a cloud of dust, and I knew I had to guard my tongue a little better.

When I demanded an explanation from Flint, he said, 'I don't go to school.'

'What do you mean?'

‘Just that. I don’t,’ he repeated slowly, ‘go ... to ... school.’

‘But how do you learn anything?’

‘I don’t need to learn anything. I already know everything.’ He smirked, and because I was in awe of him, I accepted this without question.

At bedtime I said to Mum, ‘Do you *have* to go to school?’

‘Oh, yes,’ answered Mum, firmly.

‘Well, I know someone who doesn’t. He says he knows everything so he doesn’t need to go to school. Why are you smiling?’

She closed the book she’d been reading to me.

‘Nobody knows everything.’

‘Not even Dad?’

‘Not even Dad.’

I considered this for a bit. I think I was in shock. Flint not being at school had been bad enough, but now I was confronted with Dad’s lack of knowledge.

‘Are you sure he doesn’t?’

‘I’m sure.’ She nodded.

It was a lot to absorb.

‘Goodnight, Hannah—’

‘Wait—wait— What was I talking about before?’

She sighed. My tricks to postpone bedtime were many and varied and mostly old hat to Mum.

‘About someone who didn’t go to school,’ she said.

‘Oh, yes. So why isn’t he, *this child*’—I corrected myself—‘at school?’

She took her time answering. She stood up, put down the book, straightened my covers, and then she leant over to kiss me goodnight.

‘Mum?’

‘I don’t know, Hannah. Perhaps he has homeschooling.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s when you get taught by your parents, usually your mother, and you don’t go to school.’

I gasped. ‘Oh, Mum. Could I do that?’

‘Absolutely not,’ she said.

‘Why are you called Flint?’ I asked him one day.

He shrugged.

‘Why are you called Hannah?’

‘I don’t know. All I know is that it’s a palindrome.’

‘A *what?*’

‘A palindrome. If you say it backwards it’s the same as saying it forwards.’

He thought about this.

‘What happens if you say Flint backwards?’

I closed my eyes and looked at the word in my head.

‘Tnilf,’ I said, snorting it out.

He laughed.

‘Tnilf yourself.’

He said, ‘Hannah, Hannah, had a stammer, could do no grammar.’

‘But I don’t have a stammer.’

‘But if you did.’

We sat thinking some more. For once we weren’t doing anything. Not a thing. It was too hot to move. We were drooping in the shade of the stairs, with our backs to the wall, our floppy hands resting on our folded knees. I liked the way boys sat like this, so at ease with their bodies.

‘I can’t find anything to rhyme with Flint, can you?’ I said.

‘Flint, Flint,’ he said, ‘give us a hint, where are the mints? Doesn’t sound right, does it?’ he said. ‘Hey, do you have any mints?’

‘No, do you?’

‘Where would *I* get mints from?’

I said, slyly, ‘I know where we *can* get some.’

‘Where?’

‘Kelly’s room.’

Flint wasn’t in the habit of going upstairs with me, or into any of the downstairs rooms. Sometimes we lay under the stairs, but mostly we played outside, under the trees, *in* the trees, on the driveway or in the vast area of scrub between our house and the coast road, and sometimes at the beach. We had to be careful about the latter, because I wasn’t supposed to be there *on my own*.

It was a Saturday morning. A long weekend. Kelly was home from boarding school and she’d invited a friend over for the day. She was sixteen

now, and the friend was a boy. I'd been playing with a boy for as long as I'd been at Sargasso, but this was a new step for her and I did wonder why she'd chosen to bring him home when previously any mention of males on my part had been pooh-poohed. *Boys are so childish*, etc. I'd been given strict instructions to keep out of their way, of course, which for the moment was easy because they were down on the beach.

I don't recall where Mum was. I think she'd gone into town to get groceries. Dad was in his studio and I knew he wouldn't come out until Mum called him for lunch.

Flint and I crept through the kitchen into the entrance hall and up the stairs. We tiptoed along the passage, hugging the walls. It was dark and sombre, the bedrooms all closed against the heat, the air stifling. At Kelly's door, I carefully turned the handle.

Earlier in the day I'd heard Mum call her room a dog's breakfast. We didn't have a dog so I wasn't sure what she meant, but the room was messy. Her bed was unmade. The wardrobe gaped wide. The desk was strangely tidy. Ordered. An A4 notepad, the lines covered in her neat handwriting, and an open textbook, the pages tagged with strips of coloured paper, lay on top of it. The curtains were neither open nor shut but somewhere in-between. Her overnight bag lay on the floor, overflowing with T-shirts and jeans and belts and a bright red pair of sneakers, and in amongst that higgledy-piggledy mess was a dog-eared copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Years later, when I picked up the book to read at high school it all came back to me, the lingering smell of perfume, the underlying odour of something earthy and fetid which I didn't recognise. The expectation of mints, roughly textured and strong on my tongue. And, of course, the thrill of danger. Who could forget that?

Kelly kept the mints in her bedside drawer. Showing off, I skipped over the bag. I reached for the drawer's handle and in the excitement of the moment yanked it open. It came clean out, landing on my bare foot.

'Arghh,' I said, hopping about in pain, and clutching my toes.

'Shh,' Flint said, putting his finger to his lips, and then we both gazed down at a little square box that'd been dislodged and spewed out its contents, small white cottony things, shaped like rockets, on the floor.

'What are those?' Flint asked.

'How should I know?'

Then we both froze and looked at each other in horror—there were voices in the passage.

‘Quick, the wardrobe,’ I said.

We bundled ourselves in, pushing past winter coats and flouncy-skirted dresses, and with the tips of our fingers pulled the doors after us. We made it with seconds to spare.

I remember the stink of mothballs, and the smell of Flint’s dirty bare feet. My own foot was throbbing. I wondered if it was bleeding. Would the blood stain the carpet, and how would my sister explain that to Mum? The heat made my hands slippery, and the wood threatened to slip from my grasp.

I thought Kelly would immediately pick up that something was amiss because we’d left the door to the bedroom open, but she was a little preoccupied as it turned out.

Something heavy fell onto the bed. The bedsprings squeaked and we heard a distinctly male grunt and Flint dug his elbow into my ribs making me yelp. The boy was with her!

I cannot pretend we were virtuous. We were children, curious and shameless. We were always going to look.

We shifted the opening just enough to give us a sliver of sight, and saw his back on her bed. It was bare, and browned by the sun. Kelly lay spread-eagled beneath him. I think she still had her bikini on but I wasn’t sure. There was a lot of naked flesh. They were kissing. It was disgusting, but that didn’t stop me watching. Or Flint. We were both mesmerised, but awkward, too. I heard Flint breathing, heavier than usual, as if he had a cold, and my face grew hot, and not from the claustrophobic heat of our hidey-hole.

And then, as we watched, the boy rose abruptly onto his knees, and fiddled in an urgent sort of way with the front of his board shorts.

Perhaps, subconsciously, I knew what was coming, but in any event the prickles from Kelly’s winter woollen coat on my sweaty skin and the ache in my clinging fingers overpowered me. The wardrobe door slipped from my grasp and swung open.

For perhaps the first and last time in my childhood I had the upper hand. If my sister told on me, I could relay my version of events to Mum, *and* to Dad, with any number of embellishments. Kelly was therefore in a tricky

situation. And any other child might have remained where they were, folded their arms, and looked on in a gloating fashion. Untouchable. At least for now. It was perhaps odd then, that I escaped from the room without any encouragement from my sibling. Not so much as a word. I was gone before she found her tongue.

I don't know what happened to Flint. I was much too anxious about myself to think of him. What troubled me more was what I witnessed in that moment when the door fell open and the boy jerked around. Something fleshy between his fingers. I had seen Dad's penis on the odd occasion when he was peeing in the powder room and forgot to close the door, so I thought I knew what to expect, but this was long and sinewy, and in my opinion much too large to be a penis. It was also shiny at the tip, and had both frightened and repulsed me. *What could it be?*

Asking my parents was out of the question.

There were girls and boys at school I knew by name but only slightly by nature, and it was clear I couldn't possibly ask them. I knew it was a delicate subject. If I wanted to discover more I would have to ask Flint. I did think of asking Gran—she would not have been affronted—but she was not with us at the time and I could hardly pick up the phone to ask her a question of that nature.

I bided my time with Flint. I waited until the incident was nearly a week old, old enough at any rate to not be an awkward subject for either of us. I don't think I was smart enough to wait until we were both relaxed—that was incidental. There was an opportunity after a day's play of lobbing marbles and fighting off the enemy when we had Paddle Pops, which I'd got from the freezer, and we were sitting in the shade, propped up against the trunk of the gum tree. It helped of course that neither of us was looking at the other.

'Flint?'

'Hmm,' he said in-between sucks.

'That boy with Kelly last week.'

'What about him?'

'Well, did you see that thing?'

He paused in his sucking and glanced at me.

'What thing?'

'That thing ... between his legs.'

‘What about it?’

‘What was it?’

There was a long pause when all I heard was the sound of his mouth working.

‘Flint?’

Several sticky drops fell onto my fingers. I licked at them hastily.

‘His dick.’

I gave a snort of incredulity.

‘It couldn’t be! It was too big.’

I went back to my Paddle Pop. It was melting faster than I could keep up with.

‘It gets like that when a boy and a girl, you know ...’

I paused again.

‘Really?’ I said faintly.

‘Uh-huh.’

Suddenly my Paddle Pop didn’t taste so good. Being an adult seemed to be a life filled with oddities and unforeseen predicaments. I wasn’t sure I wanted to grow up.

After a bit, I said, ‘Flint?’

‘Hmm.’

‘What do you mean when a boy and a girl, you know ...?’

‘Hannah!’ He was filled with sudden irritation.

‘Well, I don’t know! Who’s going to tell me if you don’t?’

He flung his empty stick into the air.

‘Have sex,’ he said. ‘Make babies.’

‘Eww,’ I said. Somehow I couldn’t imagine Kelly doing what our parents did. It made me feel ill. I finished my Paddle Pop, licking at it with excruciating slowness. I doodled with the stick on the ground, getting dirt on my sticky fingers.

I wished we’d never gone into my sister’s room; I wished that such a thing as peppermints had never been invented.

Finally, I glanced across at him. He was staring into the distance, hands gripped together around his legs, chin resting on his knees. Expression so very sad.

‘What is it?’ I asked. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing,’ he muttered, and went on staring into the distance.

When Kelly did this, Mum called it *brooding*.
Whatever it was called, I knew better than to question him further.

12

Now

I drive home from Shepherd Cove with sand drifting across the road, a tempest ripping through the trees and roaring through their branches. It's noon when I pull up in the driveway, leaving behind a whirl of dust.

The wind threatens to tear the car door from its hinges. I grab my parcels, shove it closed, and stagger across to the house. When I am safely inside I remember Kotteb's grave and peer through one of the glass panels. The earth has hardened and dried. It looks untouched, as if the grave isn't there. I should get something to mark it, but I don't know what.

I unfold the camp chairs in the kitchen and set them up near the entrance to the patio. Bright blue, stiff with newness, they look out of place. It occurs to me I should've bought a small card table, something to eat off.

Sprawled in one chair, I consume an avocado and lettuce sandwich, balancing the plate on my knee. The sky outside is white. I turn to avoid the glare, facing the two walls, harlequin tiles, and swing doors.

My seat seems low, the expanse of tiling enormous, the room lonely without Kotteb. I struggle to finish the sandwich.

Since there's no point sitting around doing nothing, I rinse, dry, put away my plate and cutlery, and collect the bucket from the garage. I put in a cleaning cloth, plastic gloves, and a container of sugar soap, then I push against the swing doors and step into the hallway.

Straightaway, at the bottom of the staircase, I see the heap of pebbles with the seashell on top.

I stare at them for some time, one hand flat against the wood.

They weren't there earlier.

I close my eyes, but when I open them the pebbles and shell are still there.

What does it mean?

I put down the bucket. Or drop it, I can't remember which.

I cross the hallway.

Very slowly, holding on to the railing, I climb the stairs. And I get the feeling I did on my first day back—the feeling that Sargasso is holding its breath.

At the glass room I contemplate going in, as I did with Dolly all those years ago. But I don't.

All that heat—and I feel its hot little fingers crawling towards me—might bring me to my senses, break the spell. And I don't want to break the spell. I want to be a child again, clutching Dolly in my hand. I want my parents to be alive. My grandmother to hug me in the passage and call me *child*. I want the magic of my childhood to come back ...

I climb the staircase to the rooftop. And reach the doors.

I stare at them.

They are closed, locked. The new lock is shiny and brightly golden.

But the key is in the lock. All I have to do is turn the key.

Taking a deep breath, I turn it. I open it and the wind catches the door and wrenches it out of my hand. The white light blinds me, and my hair flies up and swirls around my face.

Buffeted by the elements I step out onto the pavers.

The rooftop is empty. Unchanged from two days ago when I came searching for Kotteb. In the corners of the walls, little eddies of sand settle and then rise to drift once more.

The sun shines with a bright heat but the sky is blue up here, not white at all. Cloudless. I turn my head this way and that, but there are no pebbles heaped against the wall, no seashells.

I walk over to the wall. Rest my hands on its rough stony edge while the stiff breeze ruffles my shirt.

In the distance I see the lonely eucalypts rattling their dry leaves, the dusty, winding track, and the wind hurtling after who-knows-what across the landscape.

The crows are in the gum trees. My Golf in the driveway.

What was I expecting?

Everything is as it should be. There is no Dolly, no Dad, no Mum, no—
I turn away from the wall.

Someone stands in the open doorway, watching me.

‘Hannah.’

It isn’t a question.

He is tall. Rangy-looking as if constantly hungry. The scar the shape of a Lego man has faded, but he still has clear green eyes, freckles across his nose and untidy brown hair flopping over his forehead.

He has become a man.

I step across the pavers, staring shamelessly.

‘*Flint?*’

My voice is filled with wonderment. I am the child who has been given the gift.

I wait, but he takes a step towards me.

And another. The wind lifts his hair and he smiles, squinting into the sun.

When we were children we might have rushed at one another, grabbed each other’s hands and danced a little jig of excitement. But now we are grown-ups and far too dignified.

Or so I think.

Crossing the rooftop in three strides he lifts me off my feet.

His hands around my waist, he twirls me around and around and faster and faster so that the sky becomes a spinning blue top above me.

He is strong. He laughs and says, ‘Hannah, Hannah, Hannah!’

‘Stop,’ I cry.

My cheek is pressed to the sharpness of his warm, stubbled jaw, the rough cotton of his shirt collar against my mouth. His nearness is intense. ‘You’re making me dizzy.’

‘Oh, Hannah,’ he murmurs in my ear, ‘I want you to be dizzy.’

But he stops. Gradually he comes to a halt. Lowers me, and my sandshoes touch the warm pavers.

I step reluctantly out of his arms, brush aside bits of hair caught across my forehead, wait for the world to steady.

‘Flint?’

I cannot believe he is here. After all this time.

He wears khaki shorts, and work boots like Marsh but his are soft leather, and whatever he does for a living it’s outside work; his legs are tanned.

He’s studying me, too. His eyes move up and down my body and settle back on my face.

I step back, almost blushing.

‘I’ve—I’ve got a boyfriend.’ It sounds stupid as soon as I say it.

‘I know.’

‘*You know?*’

‘I’ve been watching you.’

He has the grace to look embarrassed. He tries to tear his eyes from mine, but I see him struggle with the effort.

‘You’ve been watching me?’

‘Just a little.’

And then we fall silent.

We stare.

I clasp my fingers behind my back. Because I want to touch him again, hold him, smell him and feel the heat of his skin, but I have to stop myself. Isn’t it enough just to stare? I have a million questions too, but this isn’t the time.

‘Come.’ He holds out his hand. ‘Show me how I can help. I know you’ve been working on the house. I heard you, sanding the window frames.’

‘You heard me? Where were you? Why didn’t you join me?’

‘Hannah.’

I shouldn’t say anything. It’s too soon for questions. I hear it in his voice.

Instead, I take his outstretched hand. I squeeze his fingers and he squeezes mine back. I glance at him. His eyes shine. His smile is jubilant. His face is the happiest I’ve ever seen it.

13

Then

Learning about Flint was like assembling a jigsaw puzzle. I knew that he didn't like the sea or, rather, he didn't like being in it. Clearly, he couldn't swim. I assumed he had no brothers and sisters because he never spoke of them. He was left-handed. He didn't go to school. His mother taught him at home. His home embarrassed him—probably his parents were poor. I didn't know. He was a miser with revelations. Sometimes they surprised me. Sometimes they didn't.

One day we were loitering in the driveway, where we'd been feeding a family of magpies, in particular a young chick, but that had come to an end when Mum in exasperation forbade me to open the fridge again. The magpies were fat and full anyway, and had retired to the low branches of the tree to sleep off half a slab of cheese and several rashers of bacon.

A thicket of bush ran alongside the edge of the driveway, beside the garage. It rambled on to the end of our land and a fence, or so I'd been told, which halted its progress. Dad said Farmer Giles's property was on the other side of the fence, and that I was not, under any circumstances, to go into the thicket. I could get lost or fall off the edge of the cliff, Dad told me. The farmer's name wasn't really Giles, it was Dan Hatherall, yet the name stuck. Dad also told me Farmer Giles probably had a gun.

'Have you been in here?' Flint asked, indicating the thicket with one hand. He was bouncing a tennis ball to me with the other.

‘I’m not allowed. Have you?’

‘Oh, yes.’ He smiled secretively. I hated it when he had knowledge of things that I did not.

‘And?’

‘If you walk all the way you get to a fence, and then there are sheep.’

‘Sheep? Farmer Giles has sheep?’

In my astonishment I missed the ball and had to run down the dusty driveway to retrieve it.

I had not thought about sheep, or cows or any other animals you might find on a farm. Perhaps it was because you couldn’t see anything from our property or the coast road. Perhaps it was because I was not familiar with country life.

However, the sheep were clearly the reason I’d been forbidden entry, not because I would fall off the edge or get lost. Like a lot of little girls, I was enamoured of animals and if I’d known there were sheep at the neighbouring farm I’d have been pestering Mum to go over there every five minutes.

When I returned clutching the tennis ball I did not bounce it back to Flint. I held it and squeezed it.

‘You might get into trouble,’ he said.

‘I don’t care. It’ll be worth it.’

‘You know the sheep may not be there?’

‘Where will they be if they’re not there?’

‘On another paddock. One we can’t see.’

‘Oh. What about the gun?’ I added as an afterthought.

‘What gun?’

‘Dad says Farmer Giles has a gun.’

‘Pah,’ said Flint.

We both turned and gazed towards Sargasso, but the house was still and quiet. We could see no sign of my mother. It was a Friday afternoon and nobody else was home. Dad was not back from work.

‘All right?’

I nodded again and without hesitation he pushed into the thicket and I followed.

The bush was prickly and scratchy on my arms, but there was a path of sorts, which Flint was following.

The soil clung to my toes. The air, heavy and hot, weighed on my shoulders and cicadas clattered in my ears. I wished I'd had some water before I'd left. When I called out to Flint to wait because I'd stepped on a burr, my voice seemed very faint.

Flint ignored me. We pushed on, ducking and sidestepping disorderly lantana and brambles. When we came to a clearing I was delighted. I half-expected to find something fantastical, maybe a unicorn. How could this secret place of stubby grass edged with young green saplings exist in all this drab tangled prickly mess?

'What the hell is that?' I was trying out Dad's word, for there was a bicycle propped against a tree. It was old and rusted, but it was still a bicycle.

'Don't swear.'

'Well, what is it?'

'What does it look like?' he said wearily.

'A bicycle.'

'Hannah. Seriously. How do you think I get here?'

'Can I have a go?'

'No.'

I perched on a boulder, said 'Sheesh,' and gazed around to hide my disappointment.

'Don't say that, either.'

'Why not?'

'Because,' he said, 'it's short for Jesus. It's not nice to say Jesus, not unless you're praying.'

This caught me by surprise. We never talked about God, or religion. It was something I could bamboozle Kelly with, and I tucked it away for later use.

Flint was wandering around snapping twigs off random trees, brushing dead leaves into a pile, sort of tidying the place. At one point I heard him say 'Shoo,' quietly, and I wondered if it was that snake called Nigel he was talking to. He had been good about not scaring me with anything reptilian ever since.

I watched the trees, and the breeze moving through them making the foliage tremble. They were leafy and bright green, not like the wild, dark, overgrown scrub we'd come through.

‘Do you pray?’ I asked.

‘Sometimes.’

‘What do you pray about?’

He shrugged.

It was frustrating when he refused to answer my questions.

‘Tell me,’ I demanded.

‘No,’ he shot back.

‘Why not?’ I shouted.

‘Because you don’t discuss your prayers with other people.’

‘But I’m your friend.’

‘So?’ he said.

‘I tell you everything.’

‘That’s your problem.’

I put my head on my knees and closed my eyes. I felt betrayed. What was the point of a one-sided friendship? But in my heart I knew I’d overstepped the boundaries. When I did that, he almost always put me in my place.

‘Ahoy me hearties,’ he cried out. I looked up.

He’d snapped off a particularly long stick and stripped it of leaves and was swishing it through the air like a sword.

He knew how to distract me.

‘Hannah, the grass is the sea, and that boulder you’re sitting on is an island. You have to call for help and I’ll come and get you.’

‘Can I be a mermaid?’

‘You can be whatever you like.’

‘Well, if I’m a mermaid you have to be a sailor, a captain, okay? Not a captain Hook, a navy captain with gold ribbon on your shoulders.’

‘I’ve got it, Hannah.’ He was very patient when I was bossy.

I always gave our pretend-games my all, sometimes getting carried away. I would cling to him as he fought off sea dragons and evil, mythical creatures that dived at us from above. I would cry out, ‘Kiss me, kiss me.’

I didn’t *really* want to be kissed. For me, it was all about making it as real as possible.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ he always said at that point. This time was no different.

When he'd rescued me for the third time, I asked if I could rescue him, if I could be the captain and he the mermaid.

'All right,' he said, dubiously, 'but obviously I'm not going to be a mermaid.'

'What do you want to be?'

He thought for what seemed an overly long time.

'Hurry up,' I said, 'why's it so difficult?'

'I'm a baby,' he blurted out, 'and you're my mother.'

'A *baby*?'

I didn't know any rescue tales with babies in them.

'Yes, a baby,' he said, handing over the *sword*. 'Like Moses in the bulrushes.'

'Oh, that story.' I vaguely remembered the name, from school I thought. Religion didn't feature strongly in our family.

'Okay,' I said. 'I can do that. Are you ready?'

'Ready.'

He curled up as best he could on the hard boulder, his bare legs and filthy feet dangling off one end, and made a high-pitched whining noise. It was pretty irritating.

Various obstacles, such as crocodiles and sea snakes, tried to thwart me but eventually I sat down cross-legged in *the sea*—there was nowhere else to sit—and pulled him onto my lap.

'There, there,' I said, 'you're safe now. Mummy's got you.'

He closed his eyes, put his thumb in his mouth, and snuggled up to my chest.

'Mum-mum-mum,' he said, as I stroked his face and gently rocked him in my arms. He was heavy and warm but it was a good feeling having his heaviness on me, and something else besides, something that I couldn't put into words, something that made me wonder if it was because of this that Kelly had let the boy lie on her.

At this point he opened his eyes and looked at me. It was a weird feeling, both of us gazing at each other. I got prickles all over. Nice prickles. And then he closed them again. I wondered if he was thinking what I was thinking—about my sister, and the boy.

Would it feel any different if we did what they'd done, if I lay back and pulled Flint on top of me?

But what if his penis grew like the other boy's had done? In horror, I shunted myself rapidly backwards, letting his head bump to the ground.

'Ouch,' he said. 'What did you do that for?' And he cried like a baby again, forcing me to go through the whole rescue operation once more, but this time I took care not to let my thoughts wander.

*

Some time later I remembered why we were here.

'The sheep!'

Flint looked up at the gathering dusk.

'It's too late now, Hannah.'

'No, it's not. We have to see the sheep. It's why we came, Flint. *Remember?*

'Oh, all right, but don't blame me if you get into trouble.'

I tossed aside the stick and we walked to the edge of the clearing and continued on through the bush. It was more overgrown on this side. Almost impenetrable. We'd gone no more than a couple of metres when I was ready to give up. I was scratched all over—arms, legs and face—but I was too proud to say so.

When Flint turned to me to say something, he said instead, 'Hannah, you're bleeding. You're going to get a rousing. You have to go back.'

'No,' I said, 'why should I?'

'Because it's going to be dark soon. You'll be here all alone.'

'Where will you be?'

'I won't be here. You'll be here all alone,' he repeated, 'and you know how you hate being alone.'

'All right,' I said meekly. 'Flint?' I bit my lip.

'What?'

'Will you come with me?'

He sighed. 'Let me go first. I know the way.'

When we reached the driveway, the lights in the house were all on, and the front door was wide open. I left Flint and ran all the way. I heard my mother in the kitchen and called out to her that I was back, and then I scampered upstairs. By the time she came up after me, I was in the bath.

She was relieved to have me home and pleased I'd got into the bath without a fight, so she didn't tell me off for being late, well, not straightaway. When she saw my scratches, she sighed.

'Hannah,' she said in that way when you know that plenty more is coming.

'It was the baby magpie—I had to rescue it. It wandered into the bush and got stuck. I had to be its mum.'

In my childish view, a lie was not quite so bad when you laid it alongside some other version of truth.

On her knees, bent over the bath, the soapy facecloth in her hand, I don't think she believed me for an instant. 'Is that right?' she said. 'Hannah, you cannot come home ...' she began, but I was thinking about Flint, lying contentedly in my arms. I thought about locking eyes with him. And the goosebumps. What did they mean? And I thought about playing the mother, a part I'd been happy with. I'd had no desire to be the baby. It was a pathetic, helpless part to play.

14

Now

We go downstairs and into my bedroom. It holds no overtone of memories, and it's easy to show him the work I've been doing, and what I still have to do.

'Have you got paint for the walls?' he asks.

'No, I was going to finish varnishing all the window frames before I started on them. And—' here I remember the bucket '—I was about to clean the walls since I can't do any varnishing today.'

'Why don't I start cleaning the walls while you go into town and get paint and brushes?'

I can't believe somebody's offering to help me, *really* help me—Tristan didn't—and I rush into it.

'You're sure?'

He nods, earnestly. And then we start to laugh, because it's all so familiar, what we would've said as children.

But I can't bear the thought of parting so soon. And I wonder how he can ... and then I know it's a test. He wants to see how badly I want to be with him, how high he rates on my list of priorities.

'No, I'll do that another time, in the morning maybe. Let's work together this afternoon. We can clean this room and maybe Kelly's—'

'And your grandmother's? And we can paint tomorrow.'

'Yes,' I say. 'Exactly.'

And we grin again.

*

When we are done sugar-soaping the walls, I go down to the kitchen to check the time on my phone. If it's after four, we'll stop work. If not, we'll start on my parents' room.

There's a message from Tristan. I stand at the bottom of the stairs in the entrance hall and call up to Flint that it's ten past four, and while I'm waiting I read: *Get the exxy bed. No time to go shopping.* He's inserted a sad face emoticon.

I delete the text. I'll go to Reed's Furnishings in the morning, when I get the paint.

I open the front door and wait for the wind to knock me off my feet, but while we've been cleaning it's blown itself out and calmed to a gentle breeze.

Flint appears at the head of the stairs carrying the bucket and the cleaning cloths.

'Do you want to go for a walk on the beach?'

'I'll come with you, but I won't swim,' he warns.

I don't query this. While we worked I didn't ask questions, either. I filled him in on my life: told him how my mother became an alcoholic and died when I was eighteen. The official version was that she succumbed to liver complications but, really, she died of a broken heart. She never got over my dad's death, suffering from depression, before alcohol took hold. Her demise was long and drawn-out. We all suffered, helplessly watching her regress from the vibrant young-looking woman she was, to a gibbering, word-slurring wreck.

I related how Kelly was one of the top lawyers in a prominent Melbourne firm, with a swanky apartment in Dockside, and a wardrobe just for her shoes. She was thirty-seven and not looking like having children. She couldn't manage to keep a hold on her men, although her current love interest—Sam—had been around for over a year now. I liked Sam. He was laid-back and unpretentious. Kelly had said, 'Don't be fooled by the attitude. The man is a Rhodes scholar.' Apparently, he was also a good fuck. Her words. I didn't tell Flint this.

Lastly, I told him about Gran. How she'd lived independently to almost ninety-five in her little house in Brighton, and passed away peacefully in her sleep, leaving Sargasso to me. I didn't dwell on Gran. I was still teary about her. The bottom line was these were all safe subjects. All about me.

*

He heels off his boots and peels off his socks when we reach the sand, and I'm stunned by his white and tender feet.

'But you used to go barefoot everywhere. I don't think you owned a pair of shoes.'

He purses his lips. 'I grew up.'

'Can you still run?' I tease.

'Where is that rock?'

'There.' I point across to the big boulder of black granite. Driftwood and broken seashells litter the tideline, and swathes of foam and froth lie on the sand. The breeze tugs at the foam, tossing it into the air and shredding it.

'Where did I start from?'

'Up there, at the end of the track.'

'Okay.' He looks up at me. 'You're on.'

We take our positions. I have a head start as before but now I'm much older, and although I'm slender and my legs are long I'm not exactly athletic. I doubt very much that I will win this time.

'On your marks,' he calls. 'Ready? Set, go!'

I run as hard as I can. Perhaps not as if my life depends on it because winning or losing doesn't mean so much to me.

I glance back and find Flint on my heels. He settles into a pace alongside me. If I run faster so does he. If I slow, he slows. We're almost at the rock before it dawns on me he's laughing.

I stop short and stagger around, toes dragging through the sand, breathing heavily. The soles of my feet ache.

'You haven't touched the rock.'

'I—don't—care,' I gasp.

'Oh, yes, you do, Hannah Prendergast,' he tells me. 'You care. I know you. You're anal about such things. You haven't changed that much.'

I lurch over and touch the black granite, gritty and warm. 'There.'

'I don't want you to change, Hannah.'

'Ch-change?' I'm still puffing. 'How am I going to change?'

He leans against the rock, so close I feel the heat of his body. He shrugs off his shirt and ditches it to one side. His chest is hairless, glistening with sweat. He's muscular—big shoulders—and tanned, but on the thin side.

'I want things to stay the same, Hannah, the way they always were. With us, I mean.'

'I can do that. At least, I think I can.'

'You have to get rid of him first,' he murmurs, stepping forward, picking up a pebble and skipping it across the tideline.

'Get rid of whom?'

But I know whom. And for a change it's Flint who's said too much, not me. I don't pursue it. I don't want to spoil things by bickering on our first day. I push away, step out of my clothes, head to the water.

I don't stay in long. I'm still nervous about being in the sea. And the waves are wild and rough. Strong. Crashing and cracking onto the shore, threatening to sweep me off my feet and carry me away.

*

'Can you stay for dinner?' I ask in the kitchen. Even as I say it, it feels weird to be asking, and he realises this, too.

'That'll be a first, won't it? Me, staying for dinner?'

'My mother didn't like you,' I blurt out.

'I don't know why, I tried to be nice,' he says, which is a strange thing to say since he never met her. Well, to my knowledge he didn't.

I bend low to open the little fridge. I can't remember what I bought this morning. The shopping trip feels a very long time ago.

'Do you eat everything?'

'Pretty much.'

'I'm a vegetarian, but not a strict one.'

'I've noticed.'

How much has he spied on Tristan and me? When did he start? Did he watch us make love on the beach?

I take out tomatoes, and cloves of garlic and an onion from the pantry. The newspaper lies on the countertop where I dropped it, and he pulls it towards him and unfolds it to the front page.

‘I’m going to have a quick shower and then I’ll come back and throw something together,’ I tell him. ‘You okay, down here?’

‘Hmm?’ He glances up, wearing that expression men do when they’re not really listening. ‘Yup,’ he says.

‘There’re some beers in the fridge. Help yourself if you want.’

I step through the swing doors into the hallway, then remember my phone and turn back to get it. This would be a good time to ring Tristan.

Flint, still engrossed in the paper, stands with one bare foot balanced on the top of the other like a stork. I reach around him for my phone.

‘Why?’ he asks.

‘Why what?’

‘Why do you have to phone him?’

‘How did you—’

‘Who else are you going to phone? Your sister?’ he snorts.

I let that go. ‘I have to phone him,’ I say. ‘I can’t *not* ring him. If I don’t ring him he’ll send somebody to check up on me.’

‘Well, we don’t want Marsh turning up,’ he murmurs.

‘You know Marsh?’

Now he looks at me. ‘Don’t you remember? He’s the kid who came to play, the one who was terrified of snakes.’

‘*That’s* Marsh?’ I’m incredulous. He looks nothing like the other Marsh, the kid Marsh.

‘That’s him.’

‘What happened to him?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He looks so different.’

‘He grew up ... and found surfing.’

‘So— So how do you know him? Have you met him since ...?’

‘No, not really.’

Upstairs, I ring Tristan. I tell him everything I’ve done but I leave out Flint. It seems logical not to mention him. For all I know, he might’ve gone home without telling me, the way he used to when we were kids. That thought embeds itself like a splinter.

After I've disconnected, I creep down the stairs. Carefully I push at the swing doors with one finger and peep in. I'm rewarded! Flint's still here, and although I've been noiseless he senses my presence. He turns from the paper to look at me. And winks.

And all the way back upstairs I blush like a silly schoolgirl with a crush.

*

Flint eats everything on his plate. He tells me it's the best meal he's had in weeks.

I put the dishes in the sink, run in hot water to soak them, while Flint swishes out the frying pan. It's dusk, my favourite time of the day, and I step through the patio doors, out onto the pavers and walk to the railing.

The wind has died and the ocean calmed to a gentle rumble. The smell of sulphur drifts in. Seaweed must've washed up somewhere. The sky's stiff like parchment, the first star of the night a lit lamp on the horizon.

'So, tomorrow,' I say, thinking aloud, 'I'll go into the town first thing and get paint. I'll need a ladder, too. What else, do you think?'

Nobody answers.

I turn around. 'Flint?'

There's nobody here.

I cross the patio. He isn't in the kitchen. He's disappeared.

Pushing through the swing doors, I cross the hallway to the passage leading to the powder room and library, but it's all in darkness.

'Flint?' I call.

I peer up the gloomy and murky stairs. Call his name again.

Opening the front door, I gaze out. The light from the hallway falls across the portico in a bright rectangle, but the portico's empty.

The driveway's deserted too, apart from my Golf gleaming dully in the twilight. A slight breeze shakes the leaves of the trees, whispers across the bark of the trunks, while shadows dance along the sandy track.

I look hard but I can't see Flint anywhere. I can't even see his shape: tall, a little gaunt around the face, but sinewy with strength.

I close the door and slump my back against it, going over our conversation. Was it something I said? Did I ask another tactless question?

I did, but it wasn't tactless or tricky. It was about getting a ladder for goodness' sake! Distressed, I screw up my eyes.

And then, close by, a voice says, 'You haven't got a spare toothbrush, have you?'

I jerk upright.

He stands between the swing doors.

'Wh-where did you go?'

'I brought down your bed, such as it is'—a trace of sarcasm—'from your grandmother's room. I put it under the stairs. That's where we're going to sleep, isn't it?'

We?

I hardly know how to reply. I open my mouth and shut it again.

'But we're adults now,' I say.

'Really? I never would've guessed.'

A faint smile. A raised eyebrow.

I push past him into the kitchen, brushing against his body as I do so. Feeling the warmth radiating from him, the restrained power of his lanky frame, and smelling the odour of the human being that's specifically Flint. I do it on purpose.

Then I stop, and turn around. He stands between the doors, but facing me now. We look at one another. Lock eyes. His expression is one of faint curiosity. It's a challenge, I realise. He's challenging me to sleep alongside him. My knees begin to tremble.

I reach out to grab a chunk of his upper arm, to pinch him, like I might've done when I was little. But he catches me midair.

'What?' He's strong, forcing my hand back down.

'Nothing.' Inwardly, I'm squirming. I let my hand go limp and he reluctantly releases it, his fingers trailing away from mine.

'I need a towel, too. I'd like to shower.'

'You—you don't have to go home?'

'No, I don't have to go home.'

He pauses, long enough for me to be mesmerised by his green eyes.

'Would you like me to go home?' he asks.

Under the stairs, I sit cross-legged. Flint lies stretched beside me, propped up on one elbow on the blanket. I shuffle the pack and deal out a hand of poker.

‘Do you still have a thing for the Jack of Hearts?’

He smiles as if the question were neither here nor there, but with Flint it’s never of no consequence.

I pick up my cards. ‘I had a thing for the Jack of Hearts?’

What am I doing, pretending I don’t know? I’m embarrassed to admit it, that’s why.

‘Of course you did. If you didn’t get dealt a Jack of Hearts, you’d declare a misdeal and deal again. One time you dealt out three times in a row, don’t you remember?’

‘No.’

‘Hannah, you’re lying,’ he murmurs. ‘I always know when you’re lying.’

I wriggle my legs and wish I could change the subject. Surely we all do things in our childhood that embarrass us when we’re older?

‘I bet you have Mr Hearts right now.’

I stare blankly at my hand.

‘Do you?’

‘Ye-es.’

‘How’s that possible?’

I say nothing. The heat in my face grows as I wait for him to ask if I cheated. But, shifting his cards, he doesn’t look at me.

‘If I were a lesser man, I’d be jealous.’

‘Jealous of a card—’

‘No, not a card. Jealous of the Jack of Hearts.’

He shifts two more and glances at me. The top button of his shirt has come undone and under the shadow of his collar I see where his brown skin ends and the innocent purity of his collarbone begins.

‘Hannah?’

He always says my name as if it were something more. As if he means something else, but it isn’t clear what.

‘What is it about him?’

I pat the blanket with my free hand and say feebly, ‘What are you doing? Are you folding or do you want another?’

‘No, I don’t want another ... Not yet. I want to know.’

‘You don’t want to know—’

‘I do.’

‘It’s stupid.’

‘Go on. I’m listening.’

Gazing around, I search for something to rescue me. But all I see are the thin glass walls of the walkway, and beyond that the thick blackness of the night.

‘Well?’

‘He ... he reminds me of you.’

‘Me?’ He’s genuinely taken aback. Seems pleased by the idea. ‘Why me?’

In desperation I look down again at my hand, seeing my cards properly for the first time. I can get out of this. All along I could’ve got out of it, if only I’d seen what I was holding.

‘Royal Flush,’ I crow, putting them down with a flourish.

*

Not everything in life is meant to be shared. Some things shouldn’t be spoken about. They should be kept secret, close to your heart. The look in the Jack of Heart’s eyes is one of those things. When I was little I couldn’t articulate it. It’s a look of yearning. Of longing. Of hunger for something you want but can’t have. It was the same look I saw in Flint’s eyes all too often.

*

After I’ve won five times in a row, I toss the game aside. ‘Sleep,’ I say.

We lie down alongside each other on the yoga mats. I’m careful not to let my body touch his but we’re close enough that I feel the hairs on his arm. I’m wearing pyjamas, boxer shorts and a top, nothing too skimpy. He’s in his clothes, for which I’m grateful. I lie on my back with my arms across my chest, the way I always fall asleep. He lies on his side, his eyes on me. I hear him breathing. I don’t want to turn my head in case I make eye contact.

I wonder if he's thinking about the last time we lay here together, when we were children? I am. But I shouldn't be.

I gaze up at the glittering night sky between the rungs of the staircase. I try to think of something to distract me, relax me. It's been a long, emotional day and I'm physically tired—I should have nodded off the moment my head hit the pillow.

He lifts my hand, startling me, and guides it across the night sky.

'There's the Southern Cross,' he says sleepily, 'and there's Orion's Belt. And the Seven Sisters. Pleiades,' he adds. 'I never told you but I used to pretend they were my sisters. I even gave them names ... talked to them at night.'

'And did they answer you?'

'What do you think?'

'I think they told you what you wanted to hear.'

'And what would that be?' I know he's smiling, still holding onto my hand. His is warm and strong, the skin roughened from the afternoon's work, and I feel its faint but comforting pulse of life.

'What—'

'Shh,' he interrupts. 'A wandering star,' he whispers in awed tones, and points. 'There.'

I find it, and follow it with my eyes but I say nothing. For one thing, I know from the way he's shushed me I am not to speak. For another, *wandering star* is a lovely way to describe what is otherwise no more than a man-made metallic object hurtling through space.

'Now you can talk,' he says when it finally fades from sight.

'Why, thank you.' My sarcasm is lost on him. He's staring intently into the heavens.

'What are you thinking about?'

'Us ... I wish we could live in a satellite and journey through the heavens. Only you and me. Forever.'

'But you hate being cooped up. And you'd get bored.'

'No, I wouldn't! I'd never get bored, not with you. *Ever*.'

I pause. I ask, lightly, 'What names did you give the Seven Sisters?'

'The girls' names you told me about when we were little ... Tiger Lily, Tinkerbell, Wendy ... Alice and Heidi. Nancy. And Joan,' he adds. 'How could I forget Joan?'

‘Who was your favourite character, from then?’

‘Peter.’

‘Why would you want to be Peter? He never grew up.’

‘That’s the point. Why *wouldn’t* you want to be Peter? No parents. The boss of those boys, flying here, there and everywhere. And a girl who adores you.’

‘Wendy.’

‘Wendy? I thought her name was Hannah.’

‘Lame,’ I say.

He yawns. ‘Sleep?’

‘Okay.’ I’m not enthusiastic. Sleep seems elusive tonight. I think I will be lying awake for a long time.

‘Goodnight, Hannah.’ His lips touch my cheek. He’s kissed me.

Now

Flint's still by my side in the morning. I want to stay and watch him, but that'd be dangerous, especially if he woke up and caught me. I carefully push back the blanket and rise, heading for the kitchen to make tea.

I open the patio doors and drag out a camp chair. Mist is rising from the sea, the sun filtering weakly through. It's much cooler than yesterday and I shiver in the salty air. When the tea is lukewarm, I gulp it down, then go upstairs, find jeans and a T-shirt, dress.

Flint's poured himself tea and sits on the patio sipping at it when I come down. Hunched forward, the nodules of his spine press against his shirt. He looks thin, and vulnerable.

'Good morning!'

'Hello, Hannah,' he says, glancing at me over his shoulder. His mood seems sombre.

Before I change my mind I tell him I'm going into Shepherd Cove to get the paint. I don't mention the bed.

'Do you want to come with me?' I ask, but he shakes his head.

'Do you have to go home?' He shakes his head again.

I feel uneasy. I'm frightened he won't be here when I return. That I'll lose him again. And I hang around the back of his chair hoping he'll let me see his face, that he'll say something encouraging.

Why's he making it hard for me?

‘Okay, I’m going now,’ I say, and still he says nothing.

Outside, I see Kotteb’s grave. Windswept, the ground is dry and hard and something takes hold of my heart and squeezes. I haven’t thought about Kotteb since yesterday.

Under the trees, near where the crows hang out, I find some sticks. I break them off into two lengths and fashion a cross, using strips of paspalum to bind the sticks together, and then, on my knees, I force the cross into the earth.

When I’m done, I dust off my hands, glance up and see Flint watching me from the glass panels beside the front door.

Then he moves away, and disappears into the house.

*

‘G’day, Miss.’

It’s the old guy with the grizzled hair, Bernie. I’m staring at tins of paint, a leaflet of colours in my hand.

‘Hannah,’ I tell him. I know if I keep telling him my name, he’ll get it eventually. ‘Remember I’m from Sargasso?’ I’m proud of the house, and I like saying its name. I’m proud of my father, too. Taken too soon from my life.

He nods. ‘You’re after paint?’

‘I need something for the interior,’ I say.

He suggests a neutral off-white shade. Then we choose brushes, he finds me some drop sheets, and retrieves a ladder from the storeroom. He knows his stuff and I’m glad to have him help me.

He’s putting the brushes into a carry bag when he says, ‘What’re you going to do with it, with the house?’

‘I haven’t decided,’ I tell him. ‘I’m fixing it up for now. It’s had tenants in it for such a long time.’ He seems to have forgotten I told him this last time.

‘So you’re living there?’

‘Uh-huh.’ I slide my credit card into my purse.

‘And you’re doing this all by yourself?’

‘Kind of. My boyfriend comes down on the weekends, and an old friend is giving me a hand. Do you know a guy called Flint? He’s a local.’

He shakes his head. 'Flint who?' And I can't answer him.

He helps me carry everything out to the Golf. We put it all into the boot except for the ladder that we balance at an angle across the tops of the seats.

'You be careful now,' he says, patting the roof of the car. And then he trudges back inside.

*

I don't see Veronica at the furniture shop. I dawdle near the entrance until Hugh pushes back his chair and comes forward.

'Veronica?'

'It's her day off. Is there something I can help you with?'

'I was in here about a bed the other day. Veronica and I agreed—'

'Oh, yeah,' he says. 'I remember. You're the Prendergast girl.'

He has a habit of scrunching up his nose to adjust his glasses. It reminds me of a hamster. A girl I knew in high school had one. Her name was Laura, and she called her hamster Lamington. Funny. Laura brought Lamington to class one day and let us hold its fat, warm, bristly body.

He accepts the price Veronica and I agreed on, and I pay, using my credit card again. Tristan will pay me back; I know this. He's scrupulously fair over such things.

'They'll deliver sometime tomorrow morning,' Hugh says.

'When?'

'Can't say. Depends on their schedule.' And he scrunches up his nose again.

It's mid-morning by the time I call in at the bottle store and buy more beer and a bottle of wine, and slip into the newsagent for the paper. I want to get back, but I remember Flint enjoying it yesterday. The woman behind the counter looks at me a little harder than necessary. By now the whole street must know I'm living in *the house on the cliff* and that I am a Prendergast. Maybe the whole of Shepherd Cove.

*

On the way home, on the winding coast road, I pull into a layby. Leaving the engine running, I phone Tristan. I want to do it before I get to Sargasso,

before I reach Flint.

‘I’ve ordered the bed,’ I tell him.

‘Great,’ he says, ‘I’m looking forward to using it.’

I say nothing and he goes on.

‘It looks like I won’t have to work on Saturday, so I’ll be down Friday, like before. Any wave?’

‘No, it’s calm at the moment, but we’ve had heat and gale force winds and—’

‘The whole works? I can’t wait to see you, baby. The apartment’s so quiet. No you, no Kotteb,’ he says. ‘Sorry,’ he adds. ‘I keep forgetting ...’

I glance in my rear-view mirror as I hear the roar of a vehicle and a BMW hurtles past.

‘What was that?’

‘A Beemer.’

‘Where are you?’

‘On the road.’

‘You stopped *on the road* to phone me?’

‘Yes.’

He tut-tuts. ‘Get your pretty little arse home.’

‘Yup,’ I say tightly.

Lobbing the phone onto the seat, I put the Golf into first and churn out of the layby, throwing up dust in my wake.

*

I push open the front door in a rush.

‘Hello?’ I call.

I hover on the threshold, motionless, head tilted to pick up sound. My heart gives a little kick of joy when I hear movement upstairs, and I take the stairs two at a time.

He’s not on the landing. All the bedroom doors are closed and the passage is gloomy. I go down it, systematically opening each door and looking in.

‘Flint?’ I call.

There’s only my parents’ room left, and I turn and make my way to it. My hand on the doorknob, I push on the door. Inside, the room is filled with

light, with sun, but nothing else.

‘Flint, where are you?’ I can’t keep the despair out of my voice. My friend has gone and left me again. So soon.

I turn to go and a big shadow falls darkly across the doorway. Looming over me. I scream.

‘Hannah,’ Flint is saying, ‘Hannah. It’s me, it’s me,’ but I am gasping for breath, my hands helpless at my side. In shock ... And he—he’s laughing.

He pulls me into his arms. Holds me close against his warm, hard body and rough cotton shirt. ‘It’s okay,’ he says. ‘It’s okay. I’m here.’

We stand together like this until my breathing has quietened. Until the shock wears off and I become conscious that our hands are entwined, that one of his knees is pressing on my thigh and my mouth is up against his neck—

I pull away. I don’t know where to look.

‘What took you so long?’ he says.

‘I-I got you a paper,’ I stammer. ‘I had to choose paint ... brushes. You know how it is.’

My hands are empty I notice. In my rush to find him, I’ve left everything in the car.

‘W-what is your last name?’ I manage to get out, trying desperately for normality. ‘I was asking the guy at the hardware store about you—’

‘Why’d you do that, Hannah?’

‘He asked me if I was doing this alone. I said you were helping me.’

‘He wouldn’t remember me,’ he says.

‘Do you know him? Do you know Bernie?’

He looks away. Smiles, as if I’ve said something silly.

‘No, I’m teasing you. Of course I don’t know anyone called Bernie. I’ll come down,’ he goes on, dusting his hands on his shorts. ‘You’ll need help getting the ladder out of the car.’

Down the stairs we go, until I stumble and lose my footing, and he reaches out to grab me. ‘Okay?’ He’s concerned. He puts his arm around my shoulder, its weight and warmth resting on my bare neck.

‘Hannah.’ He glances at me and grins. ‘Scaredy-cat, Hannah.’ His face is filled with wonder. Delight. And I relax just a little.

The rest of the day passes easily. I paint the skirting boards, the doorways and doors, while Flint tackles the ceilings and the walls with the roller brush. Conversation is sporadic, but not awkward. I steer away from questions. By five we've given my bedroom, Kelly's, and my grandmother's, their first coat of paint.

We're both too tired to walk on the beach. Instead we crack open beers and flop into the camp chairs on the patio. We watch the sea and the last of the sun bouncing off the dazzling water. The waves are small, what Tristan calls anklebiters, hesitantly crawling up the sand and quietly backing out. The sky's a sheet of butcher's paper over our heads, flimsy and wan-coloured. The first star's not out.

We've propped our feet on the rail and I'm so comfortable and relaxed I hardly notice when I finish the first beer and Flint gets me a second, and I ask a question before I realise it.

'Are you scared of the sea?'

'You know I am.'

'Why?'

'We nearly drowned.'

'You mean that time with me?'

He's studying the beer label, picking at it with one finger. '*Fat Yak*,' he says. 'Funny name for a beer. Where'd you learn to drink beer, Hannah?'

'Oh, I don't know. Uni, probably.'

'You went to university?'

'Yes,' I say. 'I have a nursing degree. What about you, did you go to uni?'

He shakes his head. Tips his bottle back for a sip.

'That time with me,' I say, 'when we nearly drowned ...?'

He squints at the level of the beer remaining.

'... I saved you,' I tell him.

'No way,' he says, 'that's not how I remember it.'

'What?'

'That's not how it happened, Hannah. *I* saved you,' he says gently.

'No, you didn't—'

'Yes, I did,' he murmurs. 'I've always been saving you.'

'*What!*'

'Hannah.' He puts his finger to my lips, says, 'Shush.'

I'm so startled by the touch of his skin against my mouth that I do shut up.

He rises, then, and disappears into the kitchen, leaving me to think it must be a boy thing, this need to assert he's the hero.

'I'm hungry,' he calls. 'What are we having for dinner?'

'I don't know. I can't remember what I bought.'

'I'll look in the cupboard.'

'Good luck.'

When I go in to join him, he's opened a tin of vegetable soup, made toast, and two eggs are coming to the boil. It may not be nouvelle cuisine but it's food and I'm grateful someone else has made it.

*

We're at work in my parents' room the next day when I hear noises downstairs. I leave Flint and find two delivery men in the entrance hall. They tell me they knocked, then let themselves in because the door was unlocked.

They carry the bed up for me, staggering up the stairs and tilting it sideways to wedge it around the corner. Shuffling it down the passage and into the middle of Gran's room. There's still plenty of space for bedside drawers, a wingback chair and a coffee table, the way I want it, the way it was furnished when my grandmother stayed with us. I like the idea of this, of having one room in the house beautifully furnished. Although I tell myself I shouldn't make it too comfortable, dip too deeply into my funds, when I still don't know what my plans are.

The delivery men troop down and I follow to see them out, and although Flint doesn't make an appearance I have a feeling he's both watching and listening.

I check the time downstairs. It's 12.34 pm—1234! I love it when the numbers play with me—and I make a quick call to Tristan, getting his message bank and reminding him to bring sheets.

Then I return to Flint, pick up my brush. I dip it into the paint tin and slide it along the skirting board.

'Is that where you're going to sleep with whatshisface? Your grandmother's room?' he asks, from up the ladder.

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Why not in here?’

‘It doesn’t seem right, somehow ... when my parents are dead.’

His roller squelches backwards and forwards. A shadow flits across the wall and I look up as a seagull flies past the big glass windows.

‘Do you love him, Hannah?’

‘Tristan? Of course.’

‘I mean *really* love him?’

I pause with the brush in my hand. Feel the heat of my face beginning to flush. ‘Yes,’ I confirm again.

One of the rungs creaks as Flint climbs down the ladder. I concentrate on not letting paint drip on the drop sheets. I concentrate but even so the silence is enormous. Awkward. As if I have said something very wrong. Inappropriate. I keep my head down. I don’t want to look at him. I don’t want to see his expression. Hurt and bewildered. Pained. This is what I imagine.

He repositions the ladder and when I look up he’s checking the ceiling. ‘When—when’s he coming?’ I hear the catch in his voice.

‘Friday afternoon.’

‘And today’s Thursday?’

‘Today is Thursday.’

I don’t know what else to say. After a bit, I move the paint tin, and kneel again. I hear Flint sloshing the roller around in the tray.

‘And you won’t tell him about me?’

I shake my head.

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because you’re a secret.’

‘I’m a secret and we like secrets, don’t we, Hannah? Good girl,’ he adds, more confidently.

‘Would you not call me that?’

He goes back up the ladder, and doesn’t say anything until he’s reached the top and is looking down on me.

‘What would you like me to call you? Princess? Oh, darling one?’

‘Hannah.’

‘Hannah, Hannah, carried a spanner, used it in a most peculiar manner,’ he says.

*

‘You’re very quiet,’ I say, as we lie together under the stairs. The moon’s not yet up and the blackness twinkles with a million tiny lights. I hear the whisper of waves breaking on the shore, and Flint’s steady breathing.

‘He’s coming tomorrow,’ he says.

‘What will you do? Will you go home?’

‘Don’t ask, Hannah,’ he tells me.

*

In the night I wake. I turn over, to drift off again, and discover I’m holding Flint’s hand. He squeezes mine gently.

We lie like that. Not saying anything. The warmth of his body next to mine is a comfort. His presence, a reassurance. I remember lying beside him as a child. He was me, and I was him. We were complete. We didn’t need other people. Anyone else.

In the morning, his yoga mat is empty. And cold. I don’t know when he’s left me or when I’ll see him again. *If* I’ll see him again. And I don’t want to get up. But I must.

When I do, I stand on the patio and gaze out as if I can somehow find him in the heavens. The early morning sky is the colour of bones.

16

Now

I should drive into town to get supplies for the weekend, but I can't motivate myself. Instead, I continue painting my parents' bedroom. I start at 9.00 am on the dot. I take my phone upstairs with me so I don't have to keep running down to see what time it is, or whether Tristan has called or texted.

I've only one long skirting board to finish when it rings. The flashing name on the screen is Sophie Kantor, the real estate agent handling the possible sale of Sargasso. Sophie was at primary school with me. We weren't close, nobody was close except Flint, but hers was a name I knew when I was looking for an agent. She's done it tough, getting pregnant at eighteen, and divorced at twenty-five, and is trying to make a go of her real estate business. I don't much care for her, but at least I know her. Better the devil you know, and all that.

'Hello, Sophie.'

'Hannah. How are you?'

'Good,' I say. 'You?'

'Yeah, great. How's the renovating coming along?'

'Okay. I'm probably a bit slow, but I'll get there.'

I pause, wait for her to get to the point. She does.

'I've got a family down from Melbourne for the weekend. I don't know how they know about your house, but they do. They want to see it. I know

it's not on the market yet, but could you squeeze them in? This morning?'

'I'm in the middle of painting.'

'I'm sure they don't care. What time? Is now possible?'

'Okay, as long as I can carry on. I'm not leaving.'

'That won't be a problem. Thanks, sweetheart. We'll see you soon.'

Fifteen minutes later I hear commotion in the driveway, and step over to the window.

Sophie's Jeep has come to a stop behind my Golf, and a huge people-mover vehicle is parked behind that. Children are piling out of it. I count four.

'I'm up here,' I call through the open window. 'The front door's not locked ... Come on in.'

'Thanks, Hannah.' Sophie waves. She's dressed in her usual business suit of tight skirt and stilettos.

The children stare up at me. Two girls and two boys. The dad has cropped black hair and wears pilot sunglasses. The mother's blonde tresses are piled on top of her head, sixties style. She's petite. It's hard to distinguish her from the children. She smiles up at me, and mouths, 'Thank you.'

I squat down in front of my skirting board again, and I've settled back into work when the passage reverberates, and four kids burst into the room.

'Hello,' says one, 'what's your name?'

'Hannah,' I answer. 'Careful, don't touch the skirting boards,' I warn. 'They're wet.'

'What's a skirting board?'

They are barefoot and have browned legs. One has glistening pink nail varnish on her toes.

They grow bored with watching me and move away.

'Hey, Jeremy, let's go upstairs!' one says.

'There's another upstairs?'

'Didn't you see ...? I'll show you. Come on.'

And they all tear off again, pounding down the passage.

The girl with the pink nail varnish lingers. Out the corner of my eye I see her rubbing the hem of her skirt between two fingers.

'My name's Madeline.'

'Like the book?'

She sighs. 'Everybody says that.'

'But it *is* a lovely story,' I say. '*That's all there is; there isn't any more.*'

'There's always more,' she says.

'How do you mean?'

I hear shouting, the sound coming from the open window. The other children must've reached the rooftop. I get up quickly and cross to the window. Madeline follows. I put my head out and look up.

All three kids are hanging over the wall, balancing on their stomachs.

'Stay here,' I instruct Madeline, propping my brush on the paint tin lid. 'Don't move.'

I scoot towards the landing, cross it. Vaguely aware of people in the glass room, I take the steps in leaps and bounds. Burst onto the rooftop. My chest heaving, I have to tell myself to slow down, to amble towards the children.

'Kids, why don't you come down?'

There's no reaction. I might as well have not spoken.

'Whee,' says one, holding out his arms as if he were flying.

The oldest boy—I think he's the oldest, he's certainly the tallest—rises to his feet on the wall. 'Hey, Jeremy,' he says. 'Look here.'

I grab the two that are on their tummies by the waistbands of their shorts and drag them back. 'Get off,' I say sternly.

They look shocked. Shocked, I suppose, that a stranger has dared to tell them what to do, but they obey me and wriggle backwards onto their feet.

'Get off,' I say to the balancing boy.

He raises his eyes. They're an unusual shade, almost black.

'Why?'

'Because I'm telling you to.'

'And who are you?' He smirks.

'I'm a badass,' I say, 'the kind that eats little boys' livers for breakfast.'

'Yeah, right,' he says. And laughs. And wobbles.

It happens so quickly I hardly know what I'm doing. I've grabbed at him. We're in a heap on the pavers. My hand hurts, my back's sore. He's shouting, 'Get off me! Get off me!' Only I'm not on him, just tangled up.

His parents step through the doorway then, because I hear other voices—the father shouting. I look around as the mother approaches.

'Are you okay?' she says, her hand on my shoulder.

‘I think so.’ My palm is stinging. I examine it. I’ve grazed the skin. Droplets of blood are oozing through the broken flesh.

She pulls her son to his feet. ‘What were you thinking? You silly boy!’

‘What happened?’ the father asks.

I point. ‘He was on the wall. I thought he was going to fall. I pulled him off.’

‘She pushed me,’ the boy says.

Sophie finally totters through the doorway. It’s the stilettos—stairs are a real challenge. ‘The children shouldn’t be up here.’

‘I’m so sorry.’ The mum looks guiltily at me. ‘I got distracted ... in the glass room. It’s so beautiful.’

I nod. My hand’s burning, my legs quivering.

Holding on firmly to her wayward son, she walks back to the entrance, the children following like ducklings.

‘Is it true,’ the father asks, low-voiced, at my side, ‘that the house is ... is a bit odd?’

‘Odd? What do you mean?’

‘Odd as in doors mysteriously banging, that type of thing.’

‘What? No! My father designed it, you know. He was an architect.’ It seems pointless to mention that Dad died here, died in the sea down below.

The man shrugs and smiles. It’s a pale imitation of sincerity and somehow I don’t think he’ll be putting in an offer, not after this. The rooftop is too much of a risk. Truth to tell, I’m relieved. I don’t want those children living at Sargasso. I didn’t like them running up and down the passages. It’s disrespectful. And I don’t want to be tempted by an offer I can’t refuse.

I limp back inside after them, and slowly pull the doors closed. And before I shut them I glance up. The sky revolves and turns black. Bright lights explode like stars at the backs of my eyes, and I don’t know any more if I am a child or a grown-up. I have to sit down with my head between my knees on the stairs. It must be delayed shock.

*

I settle back into my task, thinking *Sargasso odd? Really?* but it isn’t long before I hear another vehicle in the driveway. I’m not expecting anyone, so

I rise quickly and move to the window. If it's someone I don't want to see, I can pretend I'm not here. But it's the locksmith, Marsh. Well, it's his ute, anyway. I wait until he emerges and lean out.

'Hello,' I call, gazing at him with new eyes, trying to equate this tall, well-built guy with the spongy kid I knew.

He stops in his tracks, shades his eyes against the sun. 'Hannah?'

'That's me.'

'Got a delivery for you,' he says.

'I'm not expecting anything. Where's it from?'

'Furniture shop,' he tells me, unlocking the tray's gate. A long rectangular box is on the back. 'Fridge.'

'I didn't buy any fridge.'

He glances up at me. 'Why don't you come down?'

By the time I reach the portico he has manhandled the box onto a hand trolley and is making his way across.

'Are you sure this is for me?'

'Veronica told me it was for you.' He pauses at the portico like I am stupid, and looks at me with a steady gaze. 'Somebody's obviously bought you a fridge.'

And I begin to see traces of the boy I once knew: the lips still a little pink, the button brown eyes.

'Shoes off?' he asks.

'Not necessary.'

He's wearing his uniform of khaki. Clean shirt recently ironed, hair fresh and bouncing on his shoulders, not tied back in a straggly ponytail.

'K.'

He goes ahead of me. I trail behind thinking the fridge could only be from Tristan. The rusty little one we brought in from the garage *is* small and awkward. And it does smell.

He tears away the cardboard and unpacks the big white appliance, shuffling it into place, moving the little one out of the way. 'Want me to dump this?'

'That'd be nice.'

He unwinds the cord and plugs the fridge in. 'Don't turn it on just yet.' He looks at his watch. 'You need to wait half an hour.' Then he turns his attention to the smaller, old one. 'You want to unpack this for me?'

‘Yup. Sure.’

I kneel down and pull out what’s left, rising to put it all on the kitchen countertop. There’s not much. I’m aware of Marsh standing behind, quietly watching me, and feel self-conscious. I wonder if I should say anything about knowing him from childhood, but I don’t want to be reminded of that other Marsh.

‘There,’ I say, when I’m done.

‘Thanks.’ His hand brushes against my back as he leans forward to heft the appliance onto the trolley.

‘Back in a mo,’ he tells me, wheeling it out of the kitchen. ‘Got paperwork for you to sign.’

‘I’ll come out.’

‘K,’ he calls.

I stand at the door of his ute. He passes me a clipboard and points, embedded dirt under his fingernail, to where I need to sign. ‘There. Right, top copy’s for me, bottom one’s for you.’

He tears it off. Hands it over but holds onto the paper until I’m forced to meet his eyes.

‘You want another cat?’

The question takes me by surprise. For a moment I’m struck dumb. But the idea’s appalling. ‘No!’

He puts up his hands in mock surrender. ‘Fine,’ he says.

*

After he’s gone I go straight upstairs and finish off the skirting board. Taking my brush downstairs to clean, I leave it outside in the shade to dry.

I pack the stuff from the countertop into the gleaming new appliance and turn it on. I can’t quite believe this tall, sparkling appliance is mine. It’s very generous of Tristan. But what’s it saying? That it’s okay to stay as long as I like? Or just that he wants me to be comfortable while I’m here?

There isn’t much to pack. A bit of milk. An almost empty bag of mixed lettuce. A solitary egg. These few things look ridiculous on the vast amount of shelving. In the cupboard’s a single tin of tomatoes, a bag of onions and a box of water crackers. I could make some kind of lunch out of this, but none of it really appeals.

I walk out to the patio and watch the sea. This morning when I got up it was calm, but now the wind has picked up. White caps dot the incoming swell, and clouds have massed on the horizon as if we may have a storm later. A cloud passes overhead and for a moment the water turns navy blue.

I go upstairs to Gran's room and change out of my painting clothes, remembering the way Marsh's hand brushed my back. Did I imagine it? Was it accidental? Strange man. But then, he was a strange child.

*

Because it's Friday Shepherd Cove is busier than usual, and I struggle to find a parking place. In the end I park out on the coast road. Walking in will be hot but it'll pass the time, although it isn't as if I'm anxious for the time to pass, for Tristan to arrive.

In the café I order an iced coffee and a Caesar salad without bacon and turn to my newspaper and crosswords. By the time I've finished my lunch I've solved half the cryptic one. I'm getting up to leave when Veronica enters and I reach the counter slightly ahead of her. In-between asking the waitress how much I owe her, I give the furniture shop lady a smile. 'Hi.'

'Hey,' she says.

'A fridge was delivered this morning,' I tell her. 'A very nice one. Do you know who's responsible?'

'Someone called Tristan. I remember the name because it's unusual. How's the bed?'

'I haven't used it yet.'

'Oooh,' she teases. 'Have fun, then.' She winks.

I'm blushing as I look for change in my purse and when I look up the cashier, who's about sixteen, is smiling.

I put away my purse. 'How come the locksmith made the delivery?' I ask Veronica.

She shrugs. 'Said he wasn't too busy this week and could he run any deliveries.'

*

I relax a little in the supermarket. I'm not likely to meet anybody I know. I buy salmon fillets and baby potatoes for dinner, asparagus, eggs and wholegrain bread, cold chicken for Tristan, and brie. Fresh lettuce. And fruit. By the time I get out of there, it's after 2.00 pm.

I still have the long walk back to the car with the shopping bags, and the clouds I saw earlier on the horizon are now overhead, swollen and low, and tinged with purple.

I just beat the rain, which begins as I drive home, big fat drops that splatter the windscreen. By the time I pull up outside the garage rivulets are running across the driveway and, grabbing the groceries, I make a run for the portico, avoiding the puddles, the newspaper over my head.

With the food put away, I walk up to the glass room to look out to sea, but the windows are streaked with rain and the ocean's a blurred, heaving mass of grey. Rain pummels the roof. I find a jumper, return to the kitchen and the soggy newspaper and bent over the kitchen counter, battle with the remaining crossword clues. When my phone beeps to let me know I have a message, I expect Tristan will be here soon. Instead, it's Gwen Trioli, the nurse who relieved me at the retirement home where I was employed. I gave her my number in case something needed clarifying, or she wanted to talk—I was anxious for her to settle in.

How's it all going? she's texted. *We miss u! If you need a hand let me know. Happy to come down and help out. Gwen xx. P.S. Ted sends his love.*

I sigh. Ted, I think. Dear old Ted. Ted Harris. But I mustn't dwell on him. It won't do me any good. Much as I like Gwen, I do not want her here. I don't want anybody here, actually. I push the phone away. I can ignore it for a while, at least until tomorrow.

When the phone beeps again a few minutes later I expect I'm going to have to respond, but this time it is Tristan. He's texted he's been held up at work, and doesn't expect to leave the city until about ten, which means he won't be here until midnight.

I open the fridge and take out the salmon. I'm hungry and I might as well cook dinner.

After I've eaten, cleaned up, and wiped down the counters, I don't know what to do with myself. I walk through the entire house, feeling the walls, and the floor's texture under my feet, touching the bannisters. I love Sargasso, and it relaxes me. I think about Flint and what he might be doing.

I imagine him in some tiny dwelling, but I can't imagine whom he might be with. Does he live alone? Or does he share a house with someone? Maybe he still lives with his mother ...

I wonder if I should've told Tristan not to come.

Back in the kitchen I decide to take my book upstairs with me to the new bed, but then I can't find it and don't know when last I had it. I go through to the place under the stairs to get my blanket and the pillows, but the book isn't here, either. And for want of something to do I decide to go up the stairs to Dad's studio. I haven't been since I've been back—there's been no need to. As a child, Dad's studio was out of bounds. It wasn't a place I frequented, or where I played. Except the once.

The studio is empty, bare. Stale smelling and dark. The venetian blinds are gone, replaced by elegant roller blinds that operate with the touch of a switch.

Wolfish-grey light slinks into the room as the blinds roll out of sight. Outside a vast black void falls away to reveal the ocean, lumpy and dirty like the floor of a shearer's shed.

I stand at the window, shifting uncertainly, long ago memories not of my father, but of Flint and me, slowly returning.

Then

‘Look up my nose.’

‘*What?*’

We were balanced up high on a branch of the eucalyptus tree beside the garage, dangling our bare feet.

Holding on firmly, I tilted my head towards Flint. ‘I said, look up my nose.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it’s interesting. Haven’t you ever looked up a person’s nose before? They’re all different.’

‘How do you mean?’

He leant down to peer up my nostrils. ‘Disgusting,’ he pronounced.

‘Inside, they’re all different. Just like we have different faces. Let me see in yours.’

‘You’re strange.’

He stared at me again but angled his head.

‘Hmm,’ I said, in the way that my mother did, at the same time noticing that Flint’s eyelashes were a bit like Dolly’s, only longer and featherier.

‘What do you mean, *hmm?*’

I leant back, daringly. ‘It’s very pale. Inside. I mean, you don’t have red goobies.’

‘Goobies?’

I'd noticed that sometimes there were words that Flint didn't understand, but then I was used to other children not fully comprehending me and I didn't question it.

'My gran has red things in her nose. And my dad has hairs coming out. Now that's disgusting.'

'What does your dad do?' Flint asked, peeling bark from the tree.

'How do you mean?'

'I mean for work.'

'He draws houses.' I knew this much about my dad, but couldn't have elaborated.

'Does he have an office?'

'Yup. He has one in the city and one here.'

He pulled on another piece, worrying at its edges. It was a blue gum, and peeling away the bark revealed the creaminess of the tender wood underneath. In some ways I felt bad about this. He was hurting the tree, but I couldn't stop him. He picked at scabs in the same way.

'Where here?'

I jerked my head. 'Above the garage.'

'Uh-huh,' he said, as if he already knew all about the studio but wouldn't admit it.

He said nothing further, and for a while we busied ourselves prising off more bark and throwing chunks down to the ground. When we got a large chunk off, we crowed.

'What does your dad do?' I asked.

'I don't have a dad.'

I stared at him. The idea shocked me.

'You don't believe me.'

'I do,' I insisted. 'It's just ... I can't imagine not having a dad.'

He said nothing for a long time. I didn't pursue it. I was worried he might cry.

'Can we go there?'

'Where?'

'To your dad's office.'

Now it was my turn to say nothing. I was not allowed in my father's studio, not by myself.

'Can we?'

‘Um. Nuh—’

‘Oh, Hannah, don’t be such a goody-goody. Why not?’

‘Because.’

He waited a bit, peering around for more bark, but we’d got nearly all of it now, at least where we were sitting.

‘Well, I’m going home, then.’ And in a smooth movement he fell from the tree, clutching the branch with one hand and swinging free, letting go, and landing on his feet with a puff of dust.

‘Oh, all right,’ I said, but I didn’t move. The studio was probably locked and we wouldn’t be able to get in. And, possibly before I even reached the ground, something might distract him and he would forget.

*

But nothing distracted him. And my dad’s studio wasn’t locked. I turned the handle and the door opened.

We stood for a moment on the threshold adjusting our eyes because it was dim inside. All the blinds were pulled down. And then Flint pushed his way past me.

On the nearest table was a sketch of squares and rectangles all joined together, short lines at the sides of the rectangles, and numbers written down neatly on them. It didn’t look like a drawing of a house, well, not a house as I knew it, but my father had shown me architectural plans before and explained them to me.

‘I thought you said he drew houses.’

‘It’s a house with the roof taken off. We’re looking down on it.’ I jabbed at the drawing. ‘Look, here’s a kitchen, and this here is a staircase.’

Intrigued, he stared at it.

‘Where are the drawings of Sargasso?’

‘Sargasso? How would I know?’

He left the table, went over to the window and adjusted the blinds. Light streamed in.

He gazed out at the ocean, then he seemed to grow bored of that and picked up a long thin piece of metal. It looked like a ruler, but it was floppy.

‘*En garde*,’ he said, taking a fighting stance and brandishing it in the air like a weapon.

‘What does that mean?’

‘That I’m going to fight you, and you have to be prepared.’

I picked up the first thing I found, which happened to be a pencil, and copied his actions.

‘*En garde*,’ I said.

He burst out laughing.

‘You’re not going to get far with that, silly.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because you just won’t.’ But he took up his position again. He could see I was serious.

We looked at each other.

‘What happens now?’

‘This.’ He danced towards me whipping the thin metal rod in the air.

I copied his actions and brandished my weapon in his face, inches from his jaw.

He flinched and stepped back. Then he prepared to come at me again, but tossed the long thin strip to one side in exasperation.

‘I don’t want to hurt you,’ he said, as the end of the metal caught the corner of a desk and flicked up into my face.

‘Hannah!’

‘Ow,’ I said, clutching my burning cheek.

‘Here, let me look.’

He pulled my hand away and led me to a chair.

‘Sit down.’

Fishing in his pocket, he took out a handkerchief. I didn’t know any boys who carried handkerchiefs.

He wet one corner with saliva, and dabbed at the wound. It stung, but up close I was aware of his frown of concentration, his concern, and the light and dark green depths of his eyes. I forgot about the pain. He showed me the stain of blood on the cloth. I was impressed. I was bleeding. This was as good as beating him at something. I had a war wound.

He put the handkerchief into my hand. ‘Here,’ he said, ‘keep dabbing it. It doesn’t really hurt, does it?’

‘No,’ I admitted, sliding off the chair and stuffing the hanky into my pocket. I’d seen my father’s record player, and I made a beeline for it.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Wait and see.’

Dad loved his music. Tucked away in his studio he would play rock ‘n’ roll LPs with the volume turned up high, and if we were on that side of the house the haunting strains of ‘Moonlight Mile’ or ‘All Along the Watchtower’ would reach us.

I let the needle drop gently onto the black vinyl and the first energetic and rhythmic chords of ‘Love Her Madly’ bounced around the room. I turned down the volume. I didn’t want my mother to know we were there.

Taking a step forward, I wriggled my shoulders and gyrated my hips in time to the beat the way I’d seen my father do.

‘What are you *doing*?’ Flint asked again, this time with incredulity.

‘Dancing.’ Wasn’t it obvious?

‘But that’s not how you dance.’

I stopped, and frowned.

‘It isn’t?’

He stood stiffly, his heels together and one arm held out to me. ‘Come. I’ll show you.’

We shuffled across the floor between the chairs and the desks. My eyes were level with his throat, and I saw the faint beat of his pulse. And how there were little goosebumps on his skin. I tripped over his feet several times. Banged my ribs into the corner of a table. I wanted to laugh but the expression on his face forbade laughter.

‘You’re useless,’ he said in despair, throwing his hands out.

I went back to writhing around the room. ‘That’s why I like this,’ I said, thrusting out my pelvis and beginning to pant with the exertion of it. ‘You don’t have to—to know steps—you just do—do whatever—you like.’

He watched me for a bit, tentatively moving his hips, but he looked so awkward and uncomfortable that when the song came to an end, I took off the record and put it away.

‘How do you know how to do that—that—’

‘Waltzing? I learnt when I was little. How do you know how to—’

‘Dance like this? I just do.’

We stared at one another.

‘You’re *really* strange,’ he said. ‘But I like you.’

It was the first time anybody had ever told me they liked me. And I had to turn away to hide my glow of pride, and my smile of joy.

We dawdled a little longer but the magic of the unexplored had gone. Flint seemed disappointed that my father's studio was so ordinary and dull—I don't know what he was expecting—and we soon abandoned it and returned to the wide, open spaces of Sargasso's surrounds.

*

My mother found the handkerchief in my shorts that night, when I was in the bath, and she was turning my pockets inside out.

'Where did you get this?' she asked, dangling it by one corner as if it were contaminated.

'I found it.' I was pushing around a toy duck, which I was really too old for.

'Where did you find it?'

'In the yard.'

'Why's it got blood on it?'

'I hurt myself.' I offered up my cheek. 'See?'

She inspected my cheek and she turned the bloodstained handkerchief over in her hands. It was white cotton with a border of brown and green stripes. It could have been Dad's, but I think she knew it wasn't.

'Yes, well,' I said. Pompously.

'What?'

I did not know what to say. The phrase had sounded clever when Dad had used it with Gran, *his* mother, but I was learning that not every phrase or word I heard could be repeated.

'You wash yourself now, young lady,' Mum said sharply. 'And then, bed.'

Now

I remember the floppy ruler nicking my cheek, the brown- and green-bordered handkerchief that later, as a teenager, a psychologist had forced me to throw away in a distressing ceremony. I remember the music filling the room. My clumsy attempts at waltzing.

You're really strange, but I like you.

I fumble in my pocket for my phone, and sift through my music. I don't know much about the classics—Dad wasn't a fan—but Gran did try to educate me. Tchaikovsky's 'Swan Lake' was one of the last pieces she introduced me to before her death. But, more importantly, in the years gone by I've learnt to waltz.

It sounds tinny on my phone. But I turn the sound up loudly and close my eyes. For a moment I sway in time to the ebb and flow of the violins, my hands at my sides, and then I lift my arms and let the music swirl me around the room. Before long I'm dreaming I can feel the light pressure of fingers at my waist. And then, guiding me as we drift and twirl over the empty floor, a hand moves to the small of my back.

'Flint?' I say, in my imagination.

'Don't talk.'

'But—'

'Hannah,' he says in that mildly rebuking way he often does.

I tentatively touch the rough stubble on his jaw and move my fingers across his face, and he catches them and kisses the tips of them and we drift across the room again, flowing with the music. Then he pulls me in close, my head in the lee of his shoulder, my mouth against the cotton of his shirt and I am protected. Loved and cherished.

And I want him to kiss me. Oh, how I want him to kiss me!

But the music stops abruptly—the battery’s gone flat—and in the sudden silence I reel against the wall, jarring my shoulder. Opening my eyes, I put out a hand to steady myself.

‘Flint?’ I say.

But there’s nobody here. Of course there’s nobody here. My imagination has run away with me.

*

Tristan arrives after midnight. Half-asleep, I shuffle downstairs and let him in.

His face and hands are cold, his hoodie spotted with raindrops, and when he pulls me in for a hello cuddle, I resist.

‘Go back to bed,’ he says. ‘I’ll be up soon. I’m too hyper to go to sleep.’

I struggle to stay awake until he comes up, and the next thing it’s light outside. My phone tells me it’s 6.01 am.

‘Look at that swell,’ I say at the window.

It’s huge. Big dumpers are rolling in, smacking the sand with a reverberating *Whoof*. Froth and debris lie along the tideline. Further out, the sea sloshes about, rising and readying itself for the ride in. Seagulls sway in draughts of wind offshore, swooping and skimming in the pale light.

‘Come back to bed, Solo,’ Tristan says sleepily.

‘No.’ I’m pulling on my jeans. ‘I want to walk on the beach. You should come,’ I say, but I might as well be talking to myself.

*

By the time I return, Tristan’s standing in the kitchen in his board shorts, wolfing down a bowl of muesli.

‘You should have woken me,’ he says between mouthfuls.

‘I did.’

I rinse my sandy hands at the sink. ‘Where’re the sheets for the bed?’

‘In my bag. I think it’s in the hallway.’ He tilts the bowl to his mouth to get the last of the milk. ‘Do you like your fridge?’

I look up. How could I have forgotten? I feel awful. ‘Yes, of course I do. I’m so sorry. I love it. It’s so thoughtful of you.’

I go over to him and kiss his whiskery cheek. And he places his bowl on the counter, puts his hands around my waist and draws me close. His stubbled jaw rubs against my smooth one and he smells of milk and muesli. His hair is all over the place, and he has sleep in the corners of his eyes.

‘You’re tormenting me,’ he murmurs. ‘I want you.’

‘Later,’ I tell him.

‘Hmm,’ he says, nuzzling my neck.

I pull away. ‘Waves, remember? Surfing?’

‘Right,’ he says, ‘I’m going down.’

‘Be careful,’ I say. ‘It’s dangerous out there.’

‘That’s the way I like it,’ he tells me.

*

I pick up the doona Tristan brought, reach for the overnight bag containing the sheets, and head upstairs. When I’ve finished making the bed the room looks half decent. It looks like *our* room instead of Gran’s.

It’s still only 10.00 am. I could watch Tristan surfing from the glass room but I don’t want to. Instead, I respond to Gwen’s text, telling her all is fine, and I am managing okay on my own. For now. I type the *For now* so as not to seem rude. I think about sending a message to Ted, but I don’t know what to say. If I were there I would pop my head around his door and say, teasingly, *Love ya, babe*. Which would almost certainly lift his spirits and bring a smile to his face. But that doesn’t seem the sort of thing one should send in a text message via a third party, particularly a third party with whom I have a working relationship. I plug in my phone to charge it, make a cup of tea and take my blanket and my book—which I’ve found beneath a pile of dirty washing—under the stairs. The yoga mats are still there and I settle myself and open the book. Flint, I think, before I’ve read a sentence. I wonder what he’s doing right now. And what he does for work. I

wonder why he felt so real to me last night. And what will happen when he kisses me. Will he kiss me? And I wonder if he thinks about me as I think about him?

*

Tristan comes in after twelve, exhausted and starving. I make him a brie and cold chicken sandwich and we sit on the patio and watch the waves while he eats. It has turned into a nice day. Sunny, but not hot. I nibble at a piece of cheese. I'm apprehensive, not hungry. It won't take Tristan long to broach the subject of sex again. He's a man, and sex is never far from a man's thoughts.

‘So what shall we do?’ I say, trying for lightheartedness.

‘I know what *I* want to do.’

‘Apart from that—’

I look at the cheese in my hand. I wish Kotteb were here and I could feed him what's left.

‘We could go for a walk,’ I say. There are nature trails all over this part of the coast.’

‘Don't you want me to do some painting?’

‘I'm not in the mood for painting.’

He puts his empty plate down on the patio.

‘What are you in the mood for? Obviously not sex,’ he mutters.

I clasp my hands behind the chair and rock back.

‘I don't know.’

He sits forward.

‘What's wrong, Solo?’

‘Wrong? There's nothing wrong.’

‘You know there is. Tell me.’

‘I don't know,’ I say miserably.

He picks up his plate and walks into the kitchen. I hear him rinsing it under the tap. He comes out again. He's pulled on a T-shirt and put on his runners.

‘Okay,’ he says, ‘let's go for this walk.’

*

We don't talk in the WRX. I show him where to go, which turn-off to take. We park under some green leafy trees at the entrance to the walk—there are no other cars—skirt the solid metal bar preventing access to vehicles, and climb three or four wooden steps. He takes my hand.

‘Are you sure you don't want to talk about Kotteb?’

‘No—’ I say abruptly. He glances at me. ‘It's just ... just ... I feel so guilty—’

‘Guilty?’ He frowns. ‘You're not to blame—’

‘I am! I'm the one who brought Kotteb in the first place. And if I'd checked on him that morning he probably would still be with us. Instead, I let myself get distracted, went to the hardware store, did dumb things, and all the time he might've been in pain, might've been needing me.’

‘Hannah,’ he says, and squeezes my hand.

The path is sodden and worn, edged by loose mulch and heavy foliage. Ferns, sprinkled with raindrops, glint in the light. The deeper we progress along the path, the earthier and damper the smell becomes. Here and there the dark soil is freshly turned. An animal, a wombat perhaps, has been rooting around, digging up sustenance.

In places, the track is heavily shaded and muddy. There's little sound except for our breathing, and the occasional whipbird. I see a tiny wren with bright blue plumage flitting in the dank gloomy undergrowth. We find animal droppings: wallabies, I think. I look up, and high above between brown-barked trunks and bright green leaves, I see small portals to the blue sky.

I tire long before Tristan, but I force myself to walk on until I can go no further. I stop and put my hands on my hips, drawing breath.

‘Better?’ Tristan, who's ahead, turns to me. He bends his forehead to his shirt sleeve, wiping away perspiration.

‘Better,’ I confirm. I do feel better. At peace.

He plunges off the path, and I let him go, content to simply be. When he returns a minute or two later, he takes my hand.

‘I've found water.’

The stream is clear and fresh, trickling over mottled pebbles and grassy moss. Bent over the rivulet, we drink deeply. It's cold and sweet. I flop down on the earth and rest my arms on my knees. When Tristan sits behind

me and pulls my shoulders back so that I'm half-lying in his lap, I don't resist.

He makes love to me. It isn't rushed. Or self-conscious. It's slow and yet passionate. Lost in the moment, I don't think of Flint at all. And afterwards he murmurs, '*Tout ce qui importe est pour aimer et être aimé en échange.*' All that matters is to love and be loved in return, which is what he always says when it's perfect. He loves practising his French on me. He spent a year in Paris as an exchange student when he was at school, and usually I have no idea what he's saying but he knows the effect it has on me—I get goosebumps. I have never been to Paris although I've always wanted to go. There has always been some reason why I didn't want to leave Australia.

We lie back, satiated. Exhausted. Tristan dozes. I think he's asleep but he says, 'What are we doing for Christmas?' He's watching me through lidded eyes.

I sit up. Christmas. It's—what? Well over a month away? It's not like him to plan ahead. 'I don't know. Why are you asking me?'

I don't want to think about Christmas. It'll be my first Christmas without Gran. I'm not looking forward to it.

'Aren't we going to your parents?'

'On Christmas Day,' he says sleepily. 'I thought we might go away for a few days, after. Just you and me.'

I pull a face. 'So you want me back in the city?'

'I'd like you back home.'

'All right,' I say, but without enthusiasm. The idea of returning to Melbourne depresses me. I don't want to go there. I don't want to go anywhere; I only want to be at Sargasso. *Sargasso*. It's about now that I remember Flint. It's absurd but I feel guilty. I feel I've been unfaithful to him.

I lie down again. Way above me the leaves skip in the breeze. I watch the shadows dance between the tree trunks. The light drips from the sky.

19

Then

At the end of the year, I was called into the house in the middle of the day. I didn't know why Dad was yelling for me, or why he was home. Probably it was getting close to Christmas and things at the office were winding down. I ran out of the thicket and across the driveway, but stopped in my tracks because he was standing in the portico waiting for me, tapping his fingers against some papers.

'Hannah, Hannah,' he said, 'I've told you more than once *not* to play in there.'

I hung my head, thinking of what to say.

'I was fetching a ball.' I told him a little white lie. A small one.

'Where's the ball?'

'F—f—f—' I began, and blew out air.

'*What* were you going to say?' he demanded, a strange expression on his face, part bewilderment, part indignation.

'Nothing.'

He looked disconcerted and tapped his fingers again. 'Okay. So where's the ball?'

'I don't know.' I knew exactly where it was and who had it. Another little white lie. 'I must've dropped it when you yelled for me.'

'You went to fetch it. And you dropped it.' He frowned. 'Are you serious?'

‘Yes,’ I said assertively, looking him in the eye.

This seemed to satisfy him. ‘All right.’ He sighed. ‘Come inside.’

Mum stood at the kitchen counter, putting together a salad. She looked up at me and smiled. Dad sat, and placed the papers in front of him.

‘Sit, Hannah,’ he said.

I perched on the edge of a chair.

He had a drink in front of him, a ginger beer, and he reached for a sip. I don’t think he was deliberately prolonging the moment. I think it was more that he was trying to make an occasion of it.

‘Your school report has arrived,’ he announced. ‘Hannah, it’s very good,’ he said. ‘We’re very happy.’

From the counter, Mum cheered, and I grinned at her.

‘There are just two things.’ Dad indicated the papers in front of him. ‘It says you have a tendency to daydream—Hannah, are you listening?’ for I was thinking of Flint again.

‘You have to stop daydreaming, Hannah. You must learn to concentrate, especially during class. Do you know how important ...?’ And he droned on, but I wasn’t listening. Flint would be getting impatient. How long would he wait? How soon could I get away?

‘Hannah!’ Mum startled me. I looked at her. ‘You’re miles away, aren’t you? What do you want for lunch?’

‘Lunch? I don’t want lunch.’

‘Don’t be silly, of course you do. I’ll make you a sandwich. What do you want on it?’

‘Um, lettuce and Vegemite.’ I hopped off the chair. ‘Actually, can you make three sandwiches?’ I was thinking fast. ‘And can I take them away with me—like a picnic?’

‘Three? You usually struggle to finish one.’ She reached for the bread. ‘Why can’t you eat with us?’

‘I don’t want to.’ I thought that perhaps if I told the truth, I could get away quicker.

My father snorted through a mouthful of drink and wiped his mouth. ‘Why? What’s wrong with us?’ he asked, but he was laughing.

‘You’re my parents.’ Wasn’t it obvious?

He shook his head. ‘You’re way too young to start behaving like that.’

‘Behaving like what?’

‘Like Kelly.’

‘I’m never going to be like her.’

‘Pleased to hear it.’ He looked down at my school report again. ‘There’s something else. Your teacher says you don’t mix well with the other kids.’ He gazed at me with concern. ‘What are we going to do about that, Hannah?’

‘Nothing.’

‘I don’t think we can do *nothing*, Hannah.’

I checked the kitchen counter but Mum was still fussing over the lettuce.

‘Oh, hurry,’ I cried, jiggling on one leg.

‘Don’t you want to hear what ideas I have?’ Dad asked.

‘No.’ Now she was cutting the sandwiches, reaching for the Glad Wrap. She stopped suddenly, and looked at me. ‘Do you need to go to the toilet?’

‘No. No, I don’t.’

‘Then stop jiggling.’

I tried to, but it was hard. Keep still, legs, I said, or else. *Or else what?* they taunted. I’ll—I’ll cut you off, I threatened. *Cut us off? Ha-ha*, they said. I glowered at them as Mum held out my lunch parcelled in cling film.

‘What? What have I done now?’

‘It’s not you, it’s my legs,’ I explained. ‘They won’t do as they’re told. Does that happen to you?’

‘No.’ She frowned, and then she held out a bottle of Coca-Cola. ‘Special treat.’

‘Oh, Mum!’

‘Friends, Hannah,’ my father repeated as I bolted from the room.

20

Now

At two the next morning I'm awake. Wide awake. I try the old trick of lying on my stomach and burying my face in the pillow, but I can't drift off again. I turn onto one side, then the other. Finally, I try my back. But that's no good, either. It's not the new bed, which is very comfortable. It's insomnia. I suffer from it every now and then and I've learnt to accept it, and deal with it. Once I've opened my eyes I might as well get up, I know this much. Tristan doesn't stir when I rise.

In the dark I follow the passage to the glass room. I stand at its windows and stare out. The moon, swelling every night, has risen, illuminating the sea, and I hear the waves breaking on the beach. See the papery sand. My gaze follows the shoreline, the ragged movement of the tide pushing and pulling at its edge. And then I see something. A figure, I think. I strain my eyes to make it out. I'm sure it's a person, someone standing near the black rock. I wait for it to move, and it does. The shape moves along the seashore.

I don't hesitate. I turn and pad barefoot out of the room, across the landing, and as I slip down the stairs I hear the sound I heard so very long ago with Dolly, the sound of the house sighing.

The front door closes quietly behind me. I don't have my torch, but no matter, I can find my way in my sleep. I wonder if I *am* asleep, but then I stub my toe on a half-submerged rock near Mum's overgrown agapanthus and I know I'm not.

I half-run, half-walk, picking my way on the softness between the sharp stones and the spiky weeds, until I come out onto the beach. I scan the area, but nobody's in sight.

At the water's edge I follow the tideline all the way to the rock, then I turn and reverse my steps, this time walking higher up, trudging through the soft sand.

I stop every now and then to gaze around me, but it's always only me and the vast open sky and the dark mass of Sargasso on the cliff. I study the windows, and the glass room. I peer at the place where the rooftop must be, but there's nothing. No shadow. No movement. No Flint.

Only the darkness shivers and shimmies in front of me.

*

I sleep long and late. Tristan returns from surfing and I'm still in bed.

He brings me a cup of tea. 'Han,' he says softly. I hear him put it down next to my side of the bed, but I keep my eyes closed, my breathing steady.

Then I hear him in the shower. I get up and dress quickly and scuttle downstairs. It's twelve o'clock.

When he appears in the kitchen, he looks at me suspiciously.

'Toast? Eggs?' I say brightly.

'No, thanks. I've already eaten.'

I reach for the dishcloth and walk over to the wall to rub at a dirty mark.

'I'd love some coffee,' he says, after a minute. 'Did you bring the plunger?'

I open the pantry and reach in. 'It's only the little two-cup one.' I place it on the counter.

'I'll make it,' he says. 'Want some?'

I nod. I drag the camp chairs to the patio and set them up in the lee of the roof, where there's some shade. I walk to the railing and stare down at the beach, hoping to see Flint there somewhere. It's a hot bright day, and I have to squint in the sunlight. I casually lean back and look up to the wall of the rooftop to see if I can catch his shadow. But there's nothing.

Dropping my gaze, I look into the kitchen. Standing at the counter in front of two mugs, Tristan's watching me with curiosity.

‘Coffee for Captain Han Solo coming up,’ he calls and by the time he emerges I’ve settled myself into a chair.

We drink in silence. I glance at his profile out the corner of my eye. The suntanned skin, the open, now unhappy, face. I can’t remember ever feeling so awkward with him, not even when we first met, and I can’t reconcile this with yesterday afternoon when we were away from the house. In the most intimate of moments, he looked into my eyes and told me he loved me.

He tells me he’s going to get the papers. ‘Would you like to come with?’

‘Too tired.’ I stretch out in my chair. ‘I didn’t sleep well last night.’

‘Why didn’t you wake me?’

‘For what?’

But he knows better than to reply.

I stay in my chair until I can no longer hear his WRX. Then, almost stumbling over my feet, I cross the kitchen, bang through the swing doors leaving them flapping in my wake, and run up the stairs. By the time I reach the rooftop my thighs are trembling and my breath rasping. I turn the key in the lock and stagger out.

I half-run to the wall and look over the edge. The crows are here. They sit in the gum tree that edges the driveway. They acknowledge me by staring. They have no shame.

I go through the whole house. My father’s studio. The powder room. Under the stairs.

But I don’t find him. Flint’s not here. He isn’t at Sargasso.

Somehow the hours pass. We retreat to the kitchen to read the papers because it becomes too hot on the patio. Occasionally Tristan reads out a line or two and I respond with, *I don’t think that’s right, do you? Or Really? He said that?* But apart from that we don’t talk.

Four o’clock and I stand and stretch and yawn.

‘When are you leaving?’

He looks up from the paper.

‘Do you want me to go?’

‘No. No, of course not. I was just asking.’

I rinse the coffee cups under the tap so I don’t have to look at him. I dry them, put them away, wash out the coffee plunger, and wipe down the counters.

He reads on, rustling the pages, and I go out to the patio, lean on the railing to watch the sea.

When I hear him cross the kitchen floor and feel him standing behind me, I stiffen. I don't want him to touch me.

He doesn't. He stands beside me with his left hand almost but not quite touching mine.

He, too, pretends to be intrigued by something beyond the breakers. This way we don't have to look at one another.

'Look, maybe I won't come down next weekend ... Because whatever's going on—'

'Nothing's going on.'

'Well, it's clear you don't need me here.'

I run my palms backwards and forwards on the railing until one of them catches on something sharp and I think I may have a splinter.

He pushes his hand through his hair. 'I'm going up to get my things.'

'I'll get them,' I say, moving quickly. 'Let me do something.' I don't know what I'm thinking. All I know is that I can't bear to stand around while this—this drama unfolds.

Restless, consumed by voracious energy, I take the stairs two at a time and, upstairs, stride into our room. But I have to halt abruptly in the doorway. I have to step back, draw in breath, and clutch the doorframe for support.

Flint is in the room.

'What—' It bursts out of me.

At the window, he puts a finger to his lips.

'How'd you get in?' I whisper.

He shrugs. 'The front door's unlocked. When?' he murmurs.

'Soon,' I say. 'Tonight, to be on the safe side.'

His tongue passes over his lips. A day's growth of stubble is on his jawline. He's wearing jeans, and a worn green checked flannelette shirt that matches his eyes. His feet are bare, no longer so pale. He's positively glowing with life.

'Tonight? Tonight's difficult. I can't promise—'

'I don't care,' I hear myself say. 'Please?'

I close my eyes and open them again. He's still here, watching me. Watching me as if I am an actor and any second now he will call *Cut!* and

ask me to do the scene again.

‘Flint?’ I say.

A faint smile appears on his face. He’s enjoying this. He’s enjoying directing my emotions, seeing my display of yearning for his company. I haven’t held back.

I do so now. I stiffen. ‘The bag—’ I get out. ‘The overnight bag.’

He reaches down and pulls it from the side of the bed. The zipper’s closed. ‘Here.’ He pushes it across the floor to me.

‘You packed it?’

He nods.

‘Hannah?’

I look up from reaching for it.

‘I will come to you,’ he says, ‘I just don’t know when.’ And he smiles at me again, only this time the smile is tender and sincere, his eyes shining with love.

*

Tristan is at the newel post, jangling his keys, as I descend the stairs.

‘Who were you talking to?’

‘Talking?’

‘Yes. Talking. To *whom* were you talking?’

I push the hair off my face. I reach the bottom and hold out the bag. I wonder if it’s obvious that—that—

What happened up there?

‘Nobody. Who would I be talking to?’

He doesn’t move. His blue-grey eyes bore into mine.

‘Exactly. Who would you be talking to?’

I play dumb. Straighten my shirt. Push my hair behind one ear.

‘Ready?’

‘No,’ he says. ‘No, I’m not ready.’

He drops the bag. He climbs the stairs, and doesn’t look back.

If I was frantic before, I am now frantic in another sense. I can’t stand here and wait for— Wait for *what*?

I don’t know what Tristan will find ... What he will say if he finds Flint. What Flint will do ...

I walk outside. I kneel on the warm ground next to Kotteb's cross. 'Oh Kotteb oh Kotteb oh Kotteb,' I hear myself mutter as if I have gone mad. *Have I gone mad?* And then I pick up a gritty pebble and turn it over and over between my fingers.

When Tristan emerges from the portico he doesn't look at me. He walks to the WRX, tosses his bag into the backseat, and gets in.

I stand up. I'm prepared to at least wave and I lift my hand, but he reverses and drives away without glancing at me. I feel as if I've been stabbed in the heart. I watch until I see his little red car zoom between the ragged eucalypts at the end of the track and disappear. I listen carefully. I hear the Subaru accelerate as it moves along the coast road. Third gear into fourth. Fourth into fifth. It's a fast car and Tristan likes to drive it fast.

I go inside.

Holding on to the bannister I haul myself upstairs.

Flint won't be here. I know it's useless to look.

But I trudge down the passage and into our room, and I look anyway.

*

That evening a text comes through from Tristan.

WTF?? it says. Thanks for leaving lid off tpaste. Good one Solo

Then

Halfway through the year, Mum had to go into hospital in a hurry. I knew it was something to do with those bits that made babies, but I wasn't told much, only that I would have to stay with Gran in the city for a few days. Dad couldn't get back from work in time to fetch me every day, and I wasn't old enough to stay in the house on my own until he came home at night.

I didn't have an opportunity to tell Flint. It all happened in a rush. Dad picked me up from school, said the doctor had sent Mum straight to the hospital. I was to pack some things. He'd already spoken to the school and my teacher, he said.

I didn't know what to do about Flint. What would he think when he couldn't find me? In the end I wrote a note. I left it under a rock near the driveway and I drew arrows in the dirt to draw attention to it.

I wrote,

Dear Flint,

My mum is sick. I have to go to the city to stay with Gran. Back in a few days.

Hannah.

And I put a little x for a kiss, but then I rubbed it out again.

Gran's house was small and squishy after the wide-open spaces of Sargasso. I had visited before, of course, when I was much younger, but I had forgotten nearly everything about it.

There was carpet with big swirls throughout, except in the kitchen and bathroom where there was a thick, heavy plastic. Dad said it was called linoleum. The windows weren't very big, not like Sargasso's, and some of them had frosted glass, so you felt caged in. I didn't think Flint would have liked it. The toilet had a chain, though, which you had to pull—he would've approved of that novelty. The train station wasn't very far away so that when there was a lull in conversation you could hear the trains coming and going. I liked that part. I had to sit on a cushion because the chairs were low, but I didn't mind because Gran cooked a roast chicken. It was delicious. It had a golden brown skin and when no one was looking Dad slipped me one of the oysters, one of those soft and juicy pockets underneath the body. I thought about Mum, and wondered what she'd get to eat.

Kelly was there from boarding school for dinner. She was fifteen now, and had changed again, and not only in looks. Her dark hair was long and straight, swinging on her shoulders, and she had a fringe. She was wearing a short tartan skirt, black tights and a denim jacket, of which I was jealous. She helped Gran, fetching plates and bringing through peas and roast potatoes. She was polite, even to me, letting me talk for at least a few minutes before she interrupted. She wanted to know what was happening to Mum. Dad said Mum's gynae was one of the best, and she was in good hands. Then Kelly asked exactly what they were doing, which is when I went to the toilet. I didn't want to know. It was bad enough imagining Mum in pain and all alone in hospital.

After dinner, it started to rain and there was a swishing sound, and water squelching beneath car tyres. Rain dripped from the eaves. At Sargasso when it rained it was wild and stormy. The wind tugged at the house as if it would wrench it from its moorings and fling it skywards. You never heard the slow drip of rain. I liked it, but I liked the passion and fury of Sargasso's storms more.

The next morning Gran took me to the Brighton library to get a book. I'd never seen such a big library with so many books before and I had

difficulty picking only one, but in the end I chose *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* because I thought Huck sounded a little like Flint.

When we got out of the library Gran asked me what I wanted to do next. 'Ride on a train, please.' So we caught one and went on it all the way to the end of the line.

The rain had washed all the buildings and the houses and trees overnight and they were clean and bright in the sun. I loved the clackety-clack sound the wheels made. I loved how the carriages clung to the tracks, even when you were sure that this time they were going to come off. And how, if you pressed your nose up against the window, you could sometimes see the beginning and end of the train at the same time. I loved how you could watch other travellers without them knowing—getting a glimpse of them standing on the station as you went by.

We got out at the end of the line and I smelled the sea. Gran said we were in Port Phillip Bay and that's why the waves were little and calm, not like Sargasso's boisterous wild ones. We bought crispy, fat chips and sat on a bench in the weak sun and watched big container ships coming and going. Soon we were surrounded by seagulls. Gran got up and waved her handbag at them, making them squawk and go nuts until I thought they might carry us off. I imagined Gran and me in the sky with our little legs dangling down and our square shoulders pegged out by the seagulls' beaks like washing on the line, and I giggled. I shared the joke, but Gran didn't think it was funny. She was worried about someone seeing her knickers.

When we finally got back she went to have a lie-down. I opened the first page of *Huckleberry Finn* and realised I hadn't thought about Flint all day, well, not since the morning at the library.

*

Mum came out of hospital two days later, very late in the afternoon, and Dad drove us home. On our way to pick her up I asked Dad how she was, and he said, 'As good as can be expected.'

I'd been away from Sargasso for three days, not really that long, but the first thing I did was look for the rock. And a note.

I had to do it surreptitiously of course, and I dawdled at the car while Dad took Mum in, and then I looked around. I found the rock and a piece of

paper under it. But was it the note I'd written or a fresh one?

I slipped it out as Dad appeared in the portico, and stuffed it rapidly into my pocket. Then I helped him carry up Mum's and our suitcases, but as soon as I got upstairs to my room I pulled it out again.

I recognised the same piece of paper I'd left for Flint. But there was something written on the other side.

I peeled it open in haste.

Hannah,

Thank you for letting me know. You could have stayed. I would have looked after you. I will always look after you.

Flint.

The handwriting was messy, but I didn't care. There were no spelling mistakes, not so I could tell, and the grammar was all correct.

I went to bed with the note under my pillow. I was not even ten but suddenly I felt like I could be any age I wanted. I was sophisticated. I was grown up. I had a note, a note from a boy. A boy had written to me. *A boy, and a note.* Flint had written to me. My heart fluttered wildly. My head sang some song I did not know the words to.

But what did it mean?

Did it mean I was in love?

When I saw him the next day I had to put all that to the back of my mind. I knew enough about boys to know that declarations of love would have embarrassed Flint. Besides, he probably already knew that I loved him. Didn't I follow him around all the time? Didn't I usually, mostly, *nearly always* in fact, do what he wanted to do?

22

Now

On Monday I work until one o'clock when I run out of paint.

I wash my paintbrush and the roller outside under the garden tap and see again the overgrown tangle of agapanthuses near the portico. I move the hose to the base of the plants and turn it on.

With the spade I whack into the agapanthus. My skin soon glistens with perspiration. Dirt sticks to my arms and legs. I separate the mass of greenery into cuttings, each one with some root attached to its stem. I have fourteen! What a marvellous mother this agapanthus is, producing so many little babies in the face of such heat and aridity. I smile. Will I ever have a baby? I think I want a baby—I know Tristan does—although I have little experience with children. Tristan's older sister has two, which at least means the pressure's off us. I don't know about Flint. It's not something we've talked about, and I make a mental note to talk to him about babies.

All the time I am gardening the crows swagger and strut at my heels. Flap up awkwardly when I make a sudden movement. I wonder what they are scheming. I've heard they are very intelligent. Do they plot? Think about tomorrow? Or simply live for the moment?

With the recent rain and the water from the hose, the earth is malleable and I dig fourteen holes with little effort. I plant a curving path of agapanthuses leading from the house to the beach track, pressing the soil

down around each one. When I am done I'm exhausted, but pleased with my efforts.

I take off my filthy clothes and leave them in a pile at the front door, going upstairs in my undies.

*

I've turned off the water and stepped out of the shower when there's a knock on the bathroom door.

My heart leaps.

'Hannah?'

But the voice isn't Flint's. I struggle to place it.

I grab a towel—the bathroom door isn't locked—and take a deep breath.

'Who is it?'

'It's Marsh.'

I wrap the towel securely around me, fling off my shower cap and open the door.

He's outside in his work gear.

'You left the front door open. Unlocked.'

His tone is accusatory.

'So?'

'You shouldn't have.'

'You've come all the way upstairs to tell me that?' It dawns on me. 'Tristan sent you.'

'He's worried about you—by yourself.' From his hesitancy I infer that Tristan's told him a bit more than that.

'I'm absolutely fine ...'

I hear another voice but can't make out the words, and Marsh glances down the passage. I clutch the towel a little tighter.

'Who's that?'

'Brodie,' he tells me. 'Come here, Brodie.'

A small boy appears with reluctance in the doorway. He's probably three. Barefoot, dressed in floral boardies, he clutches a toy digger in dirty chubby hands. He has overlong blond hair like his dad, and I have no doubt he's already been on a surfboard.

'Hello, Brodie,' I say, 'I'm Hannah.'

I glance up at Marsh. He's grinning. The situation is kind of absurd. He shakes his head, and puts his hand on the boy's shoulder.

'We'll be getting along, then. You be sure to come down and lock that door, hey?'

'It's the middle of the day, Marsh.'

'That doesn't matter.'

I am notorious for leaving doors unlocked. Tristan is always telling me off about it. Was I expecting someone, he once demanded? I said, no. He told me to stop doing it then, stop leaving the door open. It's irresponsible, Hannah.

I lick one finger and rub the light switch where I've left a grubby print.

'Do you know someone called Flint?' I say.

Marsh ducks his head and his brown eyes peer out at me from under thick, fair eyebrows. 'Should I?'

I shrug.

'I guess not.'

Again, I think about raising the fact that we know each other from way back, but I see no point. Why would I want him to feel awkward? I didn't care much for that other Marsh; I'm starting to warm to this one. This one that's clearly in a relationship—he has a child. I feel a bit differently about him now. I probably imagined his hand brushing my back the other day in the kitchen.

He looks at Brodie.

'Now we're really gone, 'k? Say goodbye to Hannah.'

Brodie waves his digger at me. 'Bye.'

'Goodbye, boys.'

They turn and amble down the passage.

'Don't touch the walls, Brodie,' I hear Marsh say.

*

The hardware shop is empty. Well, empty of customers. I trail the overstuffed aisles wondering if there's anything I need apart from paint.

When I reach the checkout I hold a terracotta pot and a punnet of parsley in one hand, and clutch a bag of potting soil in the other. I place them on the counter and while I wait tidy the small cardboard box of rolled

mints alongside the till, aligning the spearmints neatly on one side and the peppermints on the other. But there isn't an even number of each, there's a spare roll and you can't have a spare. You just can't! I add it to my pile of purchases.

'Hey, Bernie,' I say, as the old guy appears from the storeroom down the back. He's blowing his nose and a large white handkerchief covers half his face. As he walks he rocks from side to side like a sailor. Could be a bad back or a stiff knee.

'G'day, Sargasso.' He stuffs the hanky into his pocket. He looks amused by the idea of calling me after my house because he can't remember my name.

'Hannah,' I say, gently.

'Hannah. What can I do for you today, love?'

'Paint,' I tell him. 'I need more paint.' I pass him the slip of paper where I've written the brand and colour. 'Four litres, I think.'

He nods. 'Okey-dokey. I'll go make this up. Won't be long.'

Resisting the urge to begin tidying the box of cigarette lighters as well, I lean against the counter.

Outside, a bunch of boys loiter in front of a Holden V8. The bonnet is up and one sits behind the driver's wheel, revving the engine. They must be Year Twelves from the local high school, who are done with exams.

A commotion from the back of the shop brings me to my senses. A thud and a crash. Startled, I take a couple of steps down the aisle.

'You right, Bernie?'

No answer.

I move forward, then all the way to the rear.

'Bernie?'

At the entrance to the storeroom a paint tin lies on its side pouring out thick creamy liquid. Bernie's facedown on the floor, his legs tangled, not moving.

I grab the tin, righting it before it spills any further, and then I reach for his shoulders and with some effort—the man is heavy—turn him onto his back. His airways are clear. He is breathing. His pulse is weak, but there.

I pull out my phone. The 000 operator asks me for a street number but I don't know what it is. I charge to the front of the shop but the boys and the

Holden are gone. I run into the parking lot and collar the first person I see for the information.

‘41,’ I tell the operator, stepping back in the door and heading straight for Bernie. He’s still breathing.

‘Won’t be long, dear,’ she says. ‘Ambulance is on its way.’

I find a sheet of black plastic in the storeroom and lay it over the paint. I tug open a chamois leather container I find on a shelf, run the cloth under cold water and hold it to his forehead. His face is grey. My hands are shaking. I am panicking. What if he dies on me? I am no stranger to death—in a retirement home, people die all the time. Fact. But you never get used to it.

‘Hello?’ somebody calls. I step out of the storeroom: a woman, with two little girls dressed in tutus and carrying wands, at the front counter.

‘We’re closed,’ I call. ‘Sorry.’

‘I only want this.’ She waves a bath plug at me. ‘I’ve even got the right money. Can I leave it on the counter?’

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘And close the door behind you.’

I feel awkward but I search through Bernie’s pockets for a phone. I need someone to ring. But either he doesn’t have a mobile or he’s put it down somewhere. I jog back up to the checkout to find a personal number to phone in an emergency. The fire brigade, police and ambulance numbers are on a note sticky-taped to the till, but nothing else.

I examine the shop phone but it’s one with numerous buttons and instructions, and those types of phones frighten me. I think about Veronica with the warm brown eyes from Reed’s Furnishings, but I don’t have her number with me. I grab the Yellow Pages from under the counter and carry it back to Bernie. His pulse seems a little stronger. I am looking up Reed’s Furnishings when I hear the ambulance’s siren.

I direct them to the back of the shop. There’s no room to manoeuvre a gurney from the front, and the back has folding doors that can be unlocked and opened. It’s also private.

Two paramedics, one male, one female, dressed in navy blue uniforms. The woman chews gum non-stop. Thin hair scraped back into a tight knot, she does the talking for the both of them. She asks me what happened, and what I know of Bernie’s medical history, keeping conversation to the bare minimum. I’m not much help with the history, but I let them get on with

what they have to do. She assumes I work in the shop. I tell her otherwise; she isn't interested. Her job is to save lives and the technicalities are of no importance, and I am fine with that. And then, finally, the guy speaks. On his haunches beside Bernie, he looks up and says the fact that Bernie is breathing is a good sign. Possibly it's a heart attack, he says. I think that's a little obvious and quite frankly he shouldn't be voicing an opinion, but I hold my tongue.

When they've loaded him into the ambulance and left, I clean up the spilled paint as best I can. My hands, and my sandals, are blotched with white. While I work I wonder how severe the heart attack is, and how Bernie will pull out of it, and who will run the shop while he is incapacitated.

The phone has been ringing intermittently and I've been letting it ring, but now I pick up one of the calls.

'Hello, er, hardware store.'

A moment's hesitation.

'Bernie there?' A well-spoken voice. Male.

'He's had an accident. Who's this?'

It's Bernie's brother-in-law, ringing to see if he wants a lift to the Rotary meeting tonight, and within half an hour Phillip turns up to take over the shop.

Sandy-haired Phillip, probably ten years younger than Bernie, wears tortoise-shell glasses, a business shirt and a bow tie. A *bow tie*! He is officious but not unfriendly. He takes down all my details, in case he needs me for further information he says, and when I tell him I live at 'Sargasso, the house on the cliff', his expression doesn't alter. He thanks me at least three times for taking care of Bernie and the shop.

'It was nothing,' I tell him, again.

'It wasn't nothing,' he says.

It's 5.45 pm when I step outside and I still don't have any paint.

I turn into the entrance of the barn-like hardware store outside the town as they are closing the doors, but I get what I need, and head back to Sargasso.

I'm a little way out of town when I feel the puncture. Not a slow leak, which I could limp home with, but a tyre being ridden hard on the rim. Banging my hand on the steering wheel in frustration, I pull onto the verge and put on my hazard lights.

As I lift the spare out of the wheel well, I wonder where I've picked up the nail—outside which hardware shop—and whether it's been deliberately dropped. And then I wonder why I'm being paranoid.

The last time I changed a tyre was, well, to be honest I can't remember when it was. I have to jack up the wheel, so I get down in the dirt and do that first. Half of me hopes a knight in a Maserati or a ute—I'm not fussy—is going to save me, but twenty minutes later I'm still battling with the first wheel nut.

After my fingers slip and I snag the skin of a knuckle, I get up and pace, sucking on my wound, and tossing up whom to call. But there's no one—no one close at any rate—and weirdly this seems to calm me. I settle to it again. This time I spit on the join between the nut and the screw, and finally it starts to budge.

By the time I reach the last nut, my fingers are raw, and I'm feeling my way in the dark. Muted light glimmers from the car's interior but it isn't enough.

I hoist the flat into the boot, position the heavy spare into place with aching arms, and go through the tedious process of replacing and tightening the nuts.

When I shut the boot, climb back into the car and turn the ignition, my hands are not only filthy, but shaking with fatigue. The dashboard clock says 8.15 pm. I flick the glass cover with my finger but it isn't tricking me. I've been away from Sargasso for over five hours. If Flint isn't waiting for me when I get back, I'll be—I'll be—

I don't know how I'll be. I don't want to think about how I'll be.

*

At home I brush myself down in the driveway. I leave the paint in the boot and stumble forward, picking my way to Sargasso's gloomy bulk.

I step into the entrance hall, which I left unlocked for Flint—and flick the light switch. The light's so bright after the darkness outside, the hall is

cavernous. The ceiling soars above my head. I turn the light off again and the thin elongated shadow of the staircase bannister trembles against the wall.

‘Flint?’ I call.

Nobody answers. And there are no pebbles at the bottom of the stairs.

Exhausted though I am, I trudge through all the rooms, calling for him, and saying his name like a mantra. *Flint, Flint, Flint.*

But they are all empty.

It’s only me.

And Sargasso.

23

Now

I have a shower. I remember that much. I'm running out of clean clothes and will have to find a laundromat in the morning ... But as for the rest of the night, I have no idea what I do with myself.

I sleep like the dead. If somebody called my name I didn't hear them.

When I wake, the morning light slices into my befuddled brain. I turn over and bury my face in my pillow. I don't want to get out of bed. I don't want to face the day. I long to be unconscious again. Then I think I will have to get out of bed to feed Kotteb, and I remember there is no Kotteb.

Eventually I drag myself downstairs. There's nothing at the bottom of the stairs.

Out on the patio it's sunny and warm, much the same as yesterday. A tang of salt. No wind.

I haul a camp chair outside and slump into it. Still in my pyjamas I stare into the middle distance, twirling my hair around one finger.

I chased Tristan away. Lost Kotteb. All in the space of two weeks. And where is Flint, where is that man—the man who is no longer a boy—in all of this?

It's so quiet I hear the house breathing. In. And out. In. And out. Tick. And tock. Tick. Tock.

After a bit I return to the kitchen, and move down the glass walkway. I stop at the place under the stairs. I stand with my thumbs hooked into my

pyjama waistband, and stare. The parquet flooring, the orange and golden hues of the wood, the intricate patterning of rectangles and squares which all fit together, edge to edge, angle to angle, has me in its thrall. Why am I always here? What draws me to this quiet, tucked-away corner of Sargasso? It's like a puzzle—only, I'm missing a piece. I lose track of how long I stand, staring.

Back in the kitchen I force myself to fill the kettle and boil it. Get a teabag. Dunk it. Take out the milk. Swirl it with a teaspoon. Sip, and burn my tongue.

I find jeans and a shirt that are half-clean in the pile on the bedroom floor, and make myself go out to the car and fetch in the paint, and then I remember that as well as doing laundry I have a flat tyre to be repaired. I decide to do these two things before I do anything else.

*

I leave the tyre at the garage and while my clothes are spinning around, I buy the newspaper and slip into the café. I order a cappuccino at the counter. The young woman who serves me says, 'Aren't you Hannah Prendergast?'

'I am,' I tell her.

'Oh,' she says, her face lighting up, 'I'm Bec. Do you remember I was at school with you? I own this ...' she says proudly, sweeping out her arm to take in the coffee shop. 'I'm so sorry about your dad,' she murmurs, closing the till.

'No worries,' I say, and retreat to the safety of a table.

Bec, I think, Bec? I glance at her as she selects a pastry with tongs and puts it into a paper bag for a customer. She has dark hair tied back in a ponytail, big eyes. A pretty smile. I vaguely remember a Rebecca, and that she was good at drawing. Now she owns a coffee shop. Life is full of surprises.

I'm earlier than I was a week ago, and there are only two other customers. I'm not distracted by anyone gossiping about anyone else, but I still can't focus on the crossword. I keep thinking about what Bec said. *I'm so sorry about your dad.* As if she means it. I read half a clue, and find I've skipped to another. I give up and move on to the Sudoku. Working one

number at a time. Methodically. Numbers are good for me. I lose myself in them. When I finish it's time to pick up my washing. I look for Bec to say goodbye. I tell her I'll see her again and then, on the off chance, I ask, 'Do you know someone called Flint? I mean, does the name ring a bell?'

She frowns.

'He's a couple of years older than us,' I add. 'But he lived here before I went away.'

'There was someone with a name like that in high school ... He was friends with my brother. Do you remember Simon?'

I shake my head. I barely remember Bec.

'I'll have to ask Simon, and get back to you.' She pushes a business card across to me. 'Here's my number. If you phone in a couple of days, I'll have an answer.'

'What did he look like, the guy in high school?' I ask, picking up the card and putting it in my pocket. I shouldn't ask, I should stop while I'm ahead.

'Tall. Brown hair.' She screws up her eyes, trying to picture him, I guess. 'Freckles. Introverted.'

Ha, I think.

'Why?'

'He's helping me with the house,' I say, 'you know, the renovating.'

She nods her head, but her brow's still furrowed. 'So why ... why do you want to know about him ...' she falters 'if ... if you know him?'

A good question. Why didn't I see it coming?

I twirl a finger in the air, feeling awkward and stupid. 'Well, see,' I say, 'there's a whole heap of history I missed because I left. Sophie Kantor, for instance. And you. I mean, look at you, with a coffee shop and all. Such a great success story.' I am gabbling, but it distracts her enough for me to say my goodbyes and make an exit without further embarrassment.

I take a slow drive past Bernie's hardware shop and all I'm thinking is, *Got you, Flint*. You stopped being homeschooled. You went to high school. That's a no-brainer. All I need now is a last name and an address.

Surprise, surprise. Bernie's shop is open.

I pick out a card table with folding legs, and a white plastic-coated drying rack, and carry them to the checkout. The terracotta pot, parsley,

potting soil and mints are still where I left them the day before, but pushed to one side, and I tell the cashier I'll take them, too.

She's a grey-haired, older woman wearing a blue apron. I ask her how Bernie is, and she sniffs and asks me how I know he's ill. When I tell her I'm the one who found him, her attitude changes. She looks at me and actually sees me this time. 'Oh,' she says. 'Oh.' She becomes teary. She puts her hand on mine and pats it.

I say, 'Don't talk, it's okay.'

'You must be Hannah.' She sniffs again.

I nod.

'You should go and see him, darl,' she gets out. 'He'd like that. He's at St Luke's.'

I nod again.

When I get out to the carpark I make a spontaneous decision to do just that. It will help pass the time ... the time until Flint comes back to me.

St Luke's. I have to google it.

*

Shepherd Cove's hospital, St Luke's, is a heritage-listed building. To reach it, I drive along the main road, then down some suburban streets of cutesy picket-fenced Victorian cottages. Set on acreage, the hospital is isolated from the rest of the town, and backs into a hill, a reserve of scrub, bush and eucalypts. Parking's out the front, to one side, and it's free. How nice.

I don't know much about the history of the town, but I do know that the Ash Wednesday fires of '83 engulfed a number of houses in the area and the hospital was damaged. This was pre-Sargasso, but I remember Dad talking about it, because of his interest in architecture. The creamy façade and building's shell have been retained, but conveniences like sliding glass doors leading to Reception have been incorporated. 1894 is still in black lettering above the entrance. I take off my sunglasses in the foyer and wander over to Reception. I tell the receptionist I'm looking for Bernie.

'Bernie who?' She stares at her computer screen, fingers poised above her keyboard.

'I have no idea.'

I'm rewarded for my stupidity with a long stare over the tops of her glasses.

'I'm sorry. I know him as the owner of the hardware store. He has grey hair.'

'So do most of our patients, love.'

'Owner of the hardware store,' she calls to a passing nurse, 'what's his last name?'

'McCauley. Bernie McCauley,' the nurse responds. She walks briskly and carries a metallic bedpan covered with a white cloth.

'Here we go,' the receptionist says, looking at her computer. 'Ward 7. Up the stairs, and to your left.'

The staircase in the entrance foyer is wide and covered in pale green linoleum with gold strips at the edges of the treads. High windows to the rear let in blocks of sunlight. I pass a man and woman coming down, the woman crying softly into a handkerchief. At the head of the stairs, I turn left.

Ward 7 contains six beds, but only three are occupied. One by a patient sitting up reading a book, the second by a head of dark curly hair on a pillow, which only leaves the patient at the window.

Bernie is asleep. He's hooked up to a drip, wearing nasal prongs, and looks almost normal—not as if he had a major collapse yesterday—but for the medical equipment. I perch quietly on the edge of the empty bed alongside his. The room is quiet. The window looks out to parkland and forest. I hear the sound of a trolley in the distance, and the pervading smell of hospital food, and glance at my watch to find it's almost twelve. I pull up a chair then, and sit closer. Bernie's breathing is even, but laboured, the big hand lying on the waffle-weave blanket wrinkled and covered in age spots. Reaching out, I put my hand over his rough one, and cover it, and he flickers open his eyes. Focuses. 'Hello, love,' he wheezes, closing them again.

'G'day,' I whisper. I don't need to whisper, but I do. 'How're you feeling?'

'Shithouse.'

I squeeze his hand. His breathing deepens and he drifts off again. The noise of the trundling trolley grows, the smell of food becomes more

pungent, but he doesn't wake again. I sit like this, with my hand covering his, for ... for ... I don't know how long.

My father died when I was young, and I never met either of my grandfathers, or my mother's mother, and sitting with an elderly person has—but for my work—been denied to me. Of course I used to sit with Gran, but more often than not we did something. The crossword. Cards. Scrabble. Gran was as bright as a button right up until the last. Anyway, my point is it is no hardship. It is something I like doing. Enjoy doing.

*

The last thing I do before I head to Sargasso is call in at the supermarket and get some supplies.

When I pull into the driveway, it's just before two, and as I walk into the portico clutching my things I remember to acknowledge Kotteb's grave. 'I love you, Kotteb,' I say. I haven't done this enough.

I unfold the drying rack on the patio and spread my damp laundry on its rungs. I unfold the camp table in the kitchen and set it up between the chairs.

Sprawled in one, the plate on the table, I eat an avocado and lettuce sandwich.

I don't want it—I'm not hungry—but I turn to face the expanse of harlequin tiles and the two blank walls and the swing doors, as I did before.

As I did on the day I found Flint.

And again the expanse of floor seems very large, and the chair very low, and the room very empty. Alice in Wonderland must have felt like this.

When I've eaten I rinse, dry, and put away the plate. Neatness is important to me. So is ritual. I collect the paint and my brushes from the garage and deposit them in the hallway.

I wait in the kitchen, going through the steps in my mind—the steps that might possibly bring Flint to me. It's absurd—but I'm prepared to try anything. I'm crazy enough to try anything.

I take a deep breath and re-enter the hallway, pushing against the swing doors.

But there are no pebbles at the bottom of the staircase. Why did I think there would be? Every day since he left I've come into the hallway looking

for pebbles. Am I mad?

I close my eyes and open them again but still no pebbles appear. The practical side of my brain reassures me nobody's perfect. Flint is an erratic personality; why shouldn't his actions be equally unreliable?

I cross the hallway.

Slowly, I climb the stairs, the railing under my hand. Why am I doing this?

I reach the landing, cross it, go down the passage, and climb the staircase to the rooftop. At the top the wooden doors are locked. All I have to do is turn the key, which I do.

I open the door. Outside, it's calm. Windless. The rooftop is empty, apart from the little drifts of sand in the corners. The sky is empty, too.

I walk over to the wall and rest my hands on its rough stony edge. In the distance I see the tattered eucalypts and the winding track. Nothing moves in the still air.

Everything is as it should be.

I glance back to the open doors, but nobody is standing there.

My disappointment is acute. My chest feels like a dead weight. A dead weight heavy enough to suck me under.

I glance back over the wall, and notice the crows. They weren't here before. One squats in the tree. The second, its coat a shiny deep black, hops on the ground. They don't acknowledge me. They're looking towards the front door.

I lean further over the wall and Flint steps out from the portico. Tall. Brown hair. Freckles. Introverted. A slight breeze lifts his floppy hair and he gazes up, smiling, squinting into the sun. This, I think, is when I fall in love with him.

'Hannah, Hannah, flew a banner ...' he says, but I'm not listening. I am already moving. Falling over my feet to get to him.

Then

At the end of the year, when Kelly had returned from boarding school and a few days before summer holidays started for me, Dad bought a boat, a little wooden runabout with an outboard motor. It was a surprise to both of us, although Mum was obviously in the know. He turned up with it on Saturday morning, hitched to his ute. And the first person he took out in the boat?

Well, it was me.

I am making myself sound more important than I was. The truth was that Mum suffered from seasickness. And Kelly? Kelly had a boyfriend, and she seemed to be torn between pleasing him, and pleasing Mum and Dad. First she said yes, of course, she'd love to go, but then the boyfriend phoned, and she changed her mind about going. The hurt expression on Dad's face when she told him indicated she'd become someone he could no longer relate to. I'd never been able to relate to her, so this was nothing new, but she *had* changed from that girl I'd seen at Gran's house. She wore tight jeans, and a lot of black. She put on black lipstick and painted her nails. She argued a lot with Mum and Dad, always about politics, sometimes even brandishing the newspaper to prove her point. She was bossier than ever. And short-tempered. Fortunately, she wasn't around much; she spent much of the holidays hanging out in Melbourne with the boyfriend.

Mum packed us a picnic lunch and told Dad and me that Kelly was *developing her identity* and that we should give her some leeway.

‘What’s *leeway*?’ I asked as I watched her slice a tomato for our sandwiches. She slid a piece across to me and looked at Dad but he shrugged as if to say, *You can field this one*.

‘Space, I suppose,’ Mum said. ‘Room. Don’t be strict. Be flexible.’

I wasn’t sure what *flexible* meant, either, but my mouth was full of tomato, and I worked out the less I said the sooner we could get going.

In the boat, Dad said, ‘Bugger developing an identity, that was just plain rude.’

I think he was talking more to himself than me, and he was baiting my hook at the time, and when he nicked his finger and swore I wasn’t surprised. I asked him to let me try and although he was dubious, my little fingers were nimbler than his big ones. To be honest I enjoyed sliding the slippery worms onto the hook. I couldn’t cast though. I tried several times and got the line into what Dad called *a pickle*, so he said it was fine if I threw it in. I learnt to hold it between my fingers, and to tell the difference between a nibble and the pull of the swell. The nibble was my favourite part, followed by the strike and knowing that I had something on the end of my line. But I learnt that even if you experienced the joy of a bite, nothing was certain. And afterwards I discovered that it took days for the fishy smell to leave your hands.

The bit I didn’t like was killing the fish. Some fishermen throw their catch into a bucket and leave them gulping for air, slowly dying. Dad didn’t like that. He said it was inhumane. He had a short stubby knife with a serrated edge and when we held onto a catch he stabbed it just above the gills.

When we threw a catch back, mostly because it was too small, Dad taught me to be gentle while extracting the hook and to work quickly so the fish didn’t spend too long out of water.

‘You have to kiss it.’

‘*What?*’ I had it caught between my knees—it was a little silvery one, a bream—while I was wriggling the hook out, and I stopped to look at him.

‘Don’t stop, keep working.’

‘But wh-what did you say?’

‘You have to kiss it goodbye. You’ve had the joy of it being on your hook, you’ve touched it, and now you’re going to say goodbye ... Kind of like, it was nice knowing you.’ Dad smiled at me. His eyes were shining. He was enjoying himself as much as I was.

‘Two hands. Or it’ll slip. Quickly, Hannah.’

I lifted it up and brought it to my mouth, and gave it a quick peck—its lips were cold—before I let it slide into the water. It bobbed for a bit on the surface, and then with a quick flash of its shimmery tail was gone.

‘Perfect,’ Dad said.

I gazed at him. ‘Do all fishermen do that?’

‘Only real fishermen,’ he told me.

We didn’t talk much that day. The sound I remember most is the water lapping against the side of the boat, and the constant roll from the swell. And the sun in my eyes. Dad might have said, ‘Wave’s picking up, sweetie’ or ‘One more cast and we’ll go in’, but I don’t remember. It was a peaceful, happy time.

At one point he asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up. I so much wanted to say that I would have liked to draw houses like he did, but that would’ve been a lie.

I shrugged, and said, ‘I have no idea.’

‘Never mind,’ he said, ‘it’ll come to you. Your heart will tell you what to do.’

‘My heart? Really?’

He nodded. ‘Sounds funny, but you’ll know what I mean when it happens.’

When we got home Mum was delighted that we’d caught something, though I think she was happier because she didn’t have to think about dinner. Dad showed me how to scale and gut the fish. I pulled out the glistening slimy organs, and examined the intestines, finding sand, and fragments of shell. I wanted to see what the fish had been eating. I was engrossed by my discovery, and I wondered if this was what Dad had meant, about my heart telling me things. Before we put the fish on the barbeque Mum made me go for a bath, and when I came down they were kissing in the pantry, even though Dad was fishy-smelling. They opened a bottle of wine, touched each other a lot, and teased me affectionately. It was a very happy day, and in a way I was sad Kelly wasn’t there—she had gone

to Melbourne and was staying over at the boyfriend's. The boat was a success. And I wished every day could be like that.

The only person that wasn't happy was Flint.

I met him in the driveway on Sunday. We always spent Sundays together. I would wander up and down the driveway, and the next second he'd turn up. Sometimes running down the track from the coast road. Sometimes appearing from the thicket. I loved how on that day the whole world relaxed. Everything was calm, even our activities were low-key. But not today. Not this day after I'd been fishing.

'Hey,' he said, 'where were you yesterday?'

He had a tennis ball in his hand, and it seemed to me he was more interested in playing with it than in knowing where I'd been. But I was learning that this was a trick. He really *did* want to know where I'd been. It was almost as if I couldn't go anywhere without telling him. And yet I wasn't allowed to ask him where he was when he wasn't with me. Of course I could ask, but he wouldn't answer, or he'd change the subject.

'Fishing!' I said. 'Dad bought a boat. We went out yesterday and guess what?' I did a little jump of joy. 'I caught something.'

He bounced the ball hard, so that it soared over our heads, and caught it again.

I moved back and put up my hand. 'Throw,' I said, squinting into the sun, but he ignored me.

'Well, you could have told me you were going.'

He bounced the ball again, with the same viciousness, putting his whole body into it.

'I had nothing to do all day, Hannah. *Nothing*. I waited for you for ages.'

'I didn't *know* I was going, Flint. It was a surprise.'

I looked at him but he kept his head lowered. He wouldn't meet my eyes. He dropped the ball and kicked it, loped after it, and kicked it again.

'Well, aren't you going to ask me what I caught?' I called out.

'What did you catch?' he said sulkily, coming back to me, the ball still at his feet.

'A bream. And a flathead. A flathead's weird-looking. It's so ugly—'

'What are we going to do?' he interrupted.

'When, now?'

‘Yes, now.’

‘I don’t know.’ I shrugged. ‘What do you want to do?’

‘I don’t want to hear about fishing that’s for sure.’

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘I won’t talk about fishing.’

I stood where I was with the sun in my eyes, and watched him dribble the ball with his bare feet all the way up to the straggly eucalypts and all the way back down again.

‘So?’ I said.

‘So?’ he mimicked.

‘Flint, don’t be like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘You know ...’

‘You know ...?’ He was good at mimicking my voice.

‘If you’re going to be like that, I’m going inside.’

‘Go, then,’ he challenged.

He looked up from the ground. Under his fringe his eyes were hard and glinting like shards of green glass.

I took my hands out of my pockets. They were clenched into fists.

I wanted to hit him.

Something else occurred to me: I couldn’t remember feeling this strongly about him.

Yes, I’d always been very passionate about him being my friend, and, yes, I had tried to hit him before when I was much younger, but that had been a reflex reaction, a result of frustration; this was different. I was *actually* standing here thinking about hitting him. Smacking him. I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to pinch him, kick him, pull his hair, scratch his face. Pummel him into the dirt. Really get into it. I wanted to fight him.

I went up to him and smacked him across the side of the face with the flat of my hand. Just like that.

My arm reverberated. My wrist jarred with pain.

And the shock in his eyes was real. Awful.

And then I ran. I don’t know why I ran. I wonder what would have happened if I had stood still? Faced him. Would he have hit me back?

He caught me at the back of the garage. In amongst the rocks and reeds. And these days he was much taller than I was. He pushed me from behind and I lost my footing and pitched forward. In two moves he was straddling

my back. My hands were caught roughly behind me and my face pushed into the ground.

‘Hannah, Hannah,’ he said, ‘eating dirt in a rude manner.’

‘Ow,’ I cried, ‘you’re hurting me.’

‘I know.’ He spoke through gritted teeth. ‘Like you hurt me.’

I tried to get my breath but there was sand in my mouth and up my nose.

‘Come on, I didn’t hurt you that much,’ I got out.

‘Don’t lie. You hurt me plenty.’

He twisted my wrists. Pain shot up my upper arms. This time I bit my lip and didn’t give him the satisfaction of crying out.

‘Why did you hurt me?’

I spat out dirt. ‘You were being stupid—’

‘I was being stupid?’

I didn’t respond. I stopped writhing and kicking and rested my head sideways on the ground.

I heard the sound of the waves breaking on the beach far below me, the nearby reeds swishing in the sea breeze. I thought I heard the ants’ little legs scratching on the ground in front of my eyes. I wondered how long it would take before one decided to climb up my nose. I turned my head slightly to look up at Flint.

He was heavy, a lead weight, propped on the small of my back, forcing my pelvis into the hard ground. My wrists where he gripped them were smarting.

I gave a sudden heave and he wobbled, but nothing changed. If anything his grip tightened, and his knees dug further into my sides.

‘Hannah?’ he muttered after a minute, bending forward so that his hair was in his eyes.

‘Yes?’

I could feel him staring at the back of my head. I glanced around again. I didn’t know what he was thinking, but he looked confused. He opened his mouth to speak, and shut it again.

I waited. I don’t know what for. What I expected him to say, or do next. But when he said, ‘All over, Red Rover?’ I felt it was an anticlimax. Something meaningful that should have been said had not been said. What it was, I didn’t know.

‘Okay,’ I said. And he released me, and slid off my back.

I stumbled to my feet, rubbing my aching wrists and brushing the dirt off myself, and when I looked up he was halfway to disappearing around the corner of the garage.

‘Flint!’ I called, but he didn’t turn around.

He began to jog, in fact, to run away.

‘Flint,’ I screamed, a sob rising in my throat. ‘Don’t go!’

I didn’t want it to end this way.

I had a terrible feeling that I had pushed him too far, and that I would never see him again.

But I was too late. By the time I rounded the garage he was gone.

I agonised over it for hours, replaying the scene in my head. I didn’t know if he felt left out and was upset over me fishing with Dad, or whether it was because I’d hit him. Hurt him. We’d hurt each other. And we’d both been aware of how strong he was. We’d also seen that if we wanted to, we could be cruel towards one another. Spiteful.

I can’t deny that physicality played a big part as well. Being in such close contact had brought back those feelings from when we’d acted out the mother and the baby. I was still a child in shape and form, but like any child I had thoughts about my body and, I’ll be honest, about his. I was now more conscious of the physical differences between us, of the fact that he was a boy, that sometimes when he wrestled with me I came into contact with parts of his anatomy that stirred me unexpectedly. One day he would be a young man, and I would no longer be a little girl. And how would we feel about each other, then? More importantly, I was aware now of how we reacted when we touched one another.

And I suspected that he was, too.

*

The next few days were challenging. There was no homework in the last week before the holidays so I had nothing to do after school, and all afternoon to do nothing in. Of course I thought about Flint. I spent hours under the stairs, and twice I cried myself to sleep, but he didn’t turn up.

On the second afternoon I stood on the upside-down plastic storage container again and pulled Dolly out from the top shelf of my wardrobe. I straightened her pink-checked dress, wiped the dust from under her blue-

sparkly eyes, and sat her on my bed. Then I knelt in front of her, and we looked at one another. I felt ashamed that I had ignored her for so long, and I wondered if she would start off by giving me heaps because I'd neglected her.

‘Dolly?’ I said. But she didn’t reply. She didn’t even blink.

‘Dolly?’ I said again. ‘You’re probably angry with me, but, er ...’ I came to a halt. I wasn’t very good at being humble.

I started out again, but I couldn’t get her to say a word. She looked straight through me. And I realised that she was only a doll after all, and that it was ridiculous to be talking to her.

After a minute I put her back gently on the top shelf, tucking her dress underneath her and treating her with the respect she deserved. It was the least I could do as a mark of our friendship.

Now

I don't remember getting down from the rooftop.

I reach the bottom of the staircase at the same time as he leaps up the hallway stairs.

He crosses the landing in three swift moves and bails me up against the wall.

'Hannah,' he says, breathlessly. He's so close I can see spittle on his lips, and how his gaze keeps shifting from my eyes to my mouth. Under my hand his chest is warm and pulsing with life, as if he's run several kilometres.

I gaze up at him, yearning for him to kiss me. Why's it not happening? Is he too shy?

Instead, he lifts one hand and cups the side of my face. 'I love you,' he says. 'I love you, Hannah Prendergast.'

'Oh, Flint,' I cry, and still he doesn't kiss me! If anything, he leans back out of reach, as if he knows I want him and is making me wait.

'Whatshisface,' he says. 'We have to tell him. You have to break it off with him first. I can't ... I can't *kiss you*'—he says it like they're foreign words—'until I know you're *completely* mine.'

'Really?' I sigh deeply. 'I suppose you're right.' But all the same I reach up and put my hands around his neck and press myself against his hard,

strong body and at least he doesn't stop me doing that. Swooning with desire, as I am.

After a bit, I move my face so that we look deeply into one another's eyes. His eyes are vivid green with intensity, his expression utterly serious—but strangely apprehensive. And I can't, for the life of me, fathom this out. What is he afraid of?

'Where've you been?' I say.

'Where've *you* been?' he answers.

*

I don't mention the previous days. I don't mention what Bec told me. What we have is too fragile. It takes a lot of strength but I carry on as if the time without him means nothing. We paint and work and josh around, but things aren't like they were before. For one thing, I can't bear to let him out of my sight. For another, I'm going to have to talk to him. I can't have a relationship with someone who isn't here half the time. I *have* to feel secure.

I go downstairs late in the afternoon and check my phone. It says 4.32 pm and I stand at the bottom of the stairs and call to Flint to pack up and come down. I have a voice message, a private number, and I move to the patio to listen to it.

Phillip, Bernie's brother-in-law, says Bernie hasn't had a heart attack, they know that much. The hospital is still doing tests apparently. He says Bernie would like to see me, and will I please call him, Phillip, to arrange a time to visit.

*

Over dinner, which we eat at the card table, I tell Flint what happened to Bernie, and about Phillip.

'... And Phillip left a message,' I say. 'Bernie wants to see me again.'

Flint cuts into his vegetable lasagna. 'This is good,' he says, forking up another mouthful.

'Thanks,' I say, pushing a piece of limp eggplant onto my fork. 'Probably all he wants is to thank me,' I add. 'Last time I was there, he was

pretty out to it.'

'Hmm.'

I wait again. Then I can't stand it, I can't stand the suspense. 'Is that okay, if I go and see him? Are you going to be here tomorrow?'

He looks up. It's enough to silence me, and make me regret banging on about Bernie. It isn't the usual *Hannah* statement, when I've asked too many questions. There's pain in his eyes. He's sad, and I have no idea why.

'What's wrong?'

'I don't want you to go,' he says, blinking rapidly.

'But they'll think it odd if I don't.'

'Let them think what they like.'

'I don't get it,' I say, looking down and willing myself to finish my dinner. I have every intention of going, but I'm not going to argue about it.

'You could come with me,' I suggest.

'No,' he says abruptly, and forks up the last morsel on his plate. 'Afterwards,' I say, 'I intend to drive into the city to tell Tristan about us.' I pause and watch Flint lick up the remaining traces of food with one finger. 'That's okay, isn't it? That's something you want me to do?'

'Yes,' he says, 'that's definitely something I want you to do.' He's finished eating, and I'm scarcely halfway.

'Will you be here, when I get back?'

He drums his fingers impatiently on the table. 'I'll try to be, but I can't promise. Don't be long. The longer you are, the less likely it is that I'll still be here.'

'Wait for me, please?' I ask, but he doesn't answer. He looks away, through the open patio doors.

'When I get back,' I reassure him, 'it'll just be you and me. We'll be free ...'

He turns to stare at me, and keeps staring, as if I have said something immeasurably stupid. 'We'll never be free, Hannah,' he murmurs.

But I don't comprehend the implications of this. I am only half-concentrating, dreaming already of when I get back ... How it will be ... Just him and me.

We hold hands in the dark, under the stairs, only it isn't dark because the moon is waxing. In a few days' time it'll be full. Above our heads its luminance drifts between the rungs of the staircase. The sky is navy, cloudless, and sprinkled with pinpricks of light. We say hello to the Seven Sisters, and count them to make sure they're all there.

I hear the waves breaking on the beach. They aren't wild, not tonight. It's a gentle shushing with a rhythm, a faint beat, like a song.

Flint lies facing me. With one finger he traces the profile of my nose. I vaguely see his face, his floppy hair, the line of his elegant nose.

'You know I've always loved you,' he says.

'I've always loved you, too,' I say, but this isn't strictly true—there were all those times when I was with Tristan, when I wasn't *always* thinking of Flint—and my response doesn't carry the weight of his declaration. It sounds mechanical, and in the awkward silence I prattle on, trying to explain myself, and making it worse. 'But I have so many questions, Flint. Won't you tell me what you do? Where you live?'

He withdraws his hand, closes his eyes, and rolls over. Turns his back to me. Says, 'In the scheme of things, these things don't matter, Hannah. They're trivialities.'

'Not to me, they aren't! Flint?' My voice is trembling.

But he lies beside me, motionless and mute. He's here, but he's also not here.

Gone someplace else.

Then

I read a lot while I waited for him. I took a blanket and a cushion and my book and settled myself under the stairs. I read *The Secret Garden* and *Robinson Crusoe*. And *My Friend Flicka*. And every now and then, when I turned the page or went to get a drink of water, I thought about Flint. *My Friend Flint*. Ha!

School broke up on Thursday. On Friday Mum cornered me in the kitchen and said she was sick of seeing me moping around the house, and what was wrong with me.

‘I’m bored and lonely,’ I said, which was true.

‘But you’re always on your own, and you’re never bored. Or lonely. You always find something to do.’

I shrugged my shoulders as if I didn’t care.

‘This is different.’

‘Why is it different?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said although I knew very well. A note of misery had crept into my voice.

‘Come here.’ She pulled me into her arms for a hug. She was warm and soft and she always smelled like flowers.

‘Would you like to have a friend from school over?’

‘No.’ My mouth was against the cotton of her dress.

She pushed me away and looked hard at me.

‘Why not?’

My lower lip wobbled.

‘Hannah?’

‘I can’t.’ Tears rolled down my cheeks.

‘Rubbish. Why can’t you?’

I sniffed.

‘Because I already have a friend.’

She frowned.

‘But if you already have a friend why don’t you invite her over?’

‘You don’t understand,’ I cried.

‘No. I don’t understand. Please tell me.’

But I stood there snivelling, saying nothing. She said, suspiciously, ‘Is there a problem with this girl?’

‘Boy,’ I mumbled, ‘boy.’

‘All right, boy, then. What’s the problem with this boy?’

‘Nothing.’

I hiccupped. And wiped the back of my hand across my nose.

‘*Nothing?* Come on, Hannah,’ she said cajolingly, ‘there must be something you’re not telling me?’

I did another hiccup and shifted from one foot to the other.

‘I don’t think he likes me anymore.’

There, I’d put it into words. I exhaled in a big shaky sigh. There was such relief in getting it out into the open.

Mum went down on her knees. She held onto my hands and she looked me in the eye. She had brown eyes, big ones—Kelly had them, too—and when Mum looked at you it was hard to look away.

‘Hannah, boys are different to us. You might think he doesn’t like you anymore, but he’s probably just forgotten about you for the moment, probably been distracted by something ... Cricket, maybe. Does he play cricket? When school starts again you’ll see, he’ll be your friend again.’

‘If you say so,’ I said. She was talking about somebody else, imagining a boy utterly unlike Flint.

But Mum was a genius. Talking about cricket had given me an idea. I hurried into the garage and scrounged around for an old bucket. I didn't find a bucket but I found a tin. It still contained a little oil, sloshing around the bottom, but I made sure the lid was on tightly and brought it out to the driveway. I placed it in front of the garage door, and went back inside to get a tennis ball. I had no idea how to bowl, but I'd seen Flint do it and I knew I had to raise my arm over my head and in one smooth movement let the ball fly naturally from my fingers, and try to hit the target. How hard could it be?

Quite hard. Very hard, in fact. But I got better. By the time Flint arrived I was hitting the tin almost every time.

I didn't realise he was watching me until I turned to walk to the crease, and saw him under the tree, resting against the trunk.

I wanted to run to him, and dance around him with joy, but I knew I mustn't.

I tossed him the ball.

'Want a go?'

He started further back than me, and did a little run beforehand and a funny little half-step which ensured his foot landed on the crease before the ball left his hand. I hadn't done that. I had room for improvement.

'Have you got a bat?' He didn't look at me. He had the tennis ball in one hand and with his other he was smoothing the surface the way the professionals do.

*

Dad and I went out fishing about once a month after that first successful time, but I made a point of telling Flint that I was going, and although he didn't say anything when we met up again on the Sunday it was always a bit strained at first, and a bit awkward. It always made me feel guilty. As if I wasn't entitled to be out enjoying myself without him.

Now

In the morning Flint's up early. He makes me tea and carries it in with a posy of bunny tails, tied with a blade of grass, as if whatever dark undertones were present the night before were in my imagination. He lets me pull his face to mine and kiss him on the mouth. How sweet he is.

'I'll start work on the passage today,' he says at breakfast. 'We're making progress, Hannah.'

'You like jam, do you?' I say, gazing at the pile of marmalade he's ladling onto his toast.

'Is that all right?' he says, looking up. 'Am I allowed to? Am I allowed to come and go, to not have a car? To—to—'

'Stop it,' I say. I can't believe the bitterness in his voice. 'You're behaving like a child.'

'I am a child,' he says.

He bows his head and concentrates on finishing his toast. Brushes the crumbs from his lips with the back of his hand, and then he says to me, quietly, 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean that ... It's just, I'm a bit tense,' he explains.

'Over what? Over me telling Tristan?'

'Yes,' he says, 'that.'

While he's gathering paint and brushes together I call Phillip and arrange to meet him at the hospital at 10.00 am. I pack away the breakfast

things, tidy the kitchen.

Upstairs in the passage, Flint's on the ladder.

'I'm going to the hospital,' I call out.

He's painting a cornice and he stops to stare at me.

'But I asked you not to.'

'I know you did. But I'm going, anyway.'

Still staring, he climbs down the ladder.

'From there I'll drive straight to the city to see Tristan,' I tell him. 'I won't come home first.'

He moves in front of me, his nostrils flaring with his every breath.

'Suit yourself.'

'Flint. Don't be like that.'

'Like what?'

'Don't you want me to break it off with Tristan?'

'Of course I do! You know I do!'

He takes my chin none-too-gently in his hand and looks into my face. His eyes are tight with emotion.

'It's the other thing, the going to the hospital. I don't want you to do that.'

'But why not?' His eyes focus on some place past my shoulder and I repeat the question impatiently. 'But why?'

'Because people talk!'

'So? Let them.' I try to move away but he sidesteps, blocking me off.

'How about you don't want to share me'—I challenge, squaring my shoulders—'that's why you don't want me to go to the hospital.' And then I go on, unable to stop. 'You didn't want to share me when I was little and you don't want to share me now—'

He shoves me back into the wall, cutting me off mid-sentence. Sparks of green quiver in his eyes.

'Because you're mine! You belong to me!' He throws his hand away in exasperation. 'You don't get it, do you, Hannah? We belong to each other, nobody else. We don't *need* anybody else. I chose you. I gave myself to you when I was little. I'm yours, Hannah. *Yours*. There's never been anybody else for me, not even that other child who lived here. I tried to be friends with her. I—'

'There was another child ... here?'

‘Yes. After you left—’

‘A girl?’

‘A *girl*.’ He spits out the word.

A girl. There was another girl ... here ... with Flint. I can scarcely take it in. I am ... I am ... jealous.

‘And ...’

‘She didn’t want to be my friend. She used to scream when she saw me. She wasn’t like you, she didn’t need me—’

He breaks off, and looks at me tenderly. He’s not being nasty, he’s being truthful, and his whole being is focused on gazing at me.

‘I would never be unfaithful to you, Hannah.’

I try to speak but can make no sound. I swallow, but still there are no words. Since I returned to Sargasso I’ve had a strange instinct about my bedroom. I didn’t want to sleep there. I had a feeling somebody might’ve lived in the house that I didn’t like. Now I know, somebody did. And I can’t bear to think of another child inside Sargasso, exploring my favourite places, lying under *my* stairs ... talking to ... to ... *my* Flint. Playing with him. Flirting with him.

I go into his arms. And hold him. Tightly.

After a minute, looking up, I say, ‘But I still don’t understand. What’s that got to do with visiting an old guy in hospital?’

He frowns. Confusion crosses his face. ‘I don’t know how to explain it any clearer, Hannah.’

Then he lowers his head to kiss me. Properly kiss me. And it’s desperate and hungry and fierce. Not what I’m expecting. And I want it to go on and on, but he pushes me away as if he can no longer trust himself. I am shaking, and there’s a trace of blood on Flint’s mouth.

Then

It was summer. Mid-January. Hot, dry and dusty.

We'd returned to the thicket which ran alongside the driveway, and pushed our way through the bush and lantana to the fence, and found the sheep. After the claustrophobic density of the bush, the paddock was green and airy, rambling into the distance, sheep scattered over it like tufts of cotton wool. A vast sky above. Way over near the horizon, the vivid red corrugated iron roof of Farmer Giles's farmhouse flashed and flickered in the sun.

I leant against the fence wire. It was bouncy but also taut, cutting into my body. I imagined the strength you would need to build a fence. Farmer Giles must be a strong man. I smelt the sea because it was over to our left, and I wondered how many sheep fell off the cliff, and then I realised that surely there'd be another fence, barricading them in. I was glad I had not spoken that thought aloud. I didn't like displaying my ignorance to Flint. It was a constant battle to prove that although I was younger I was his equal. But getting back to the animals, even though they had all this freedom, they were trapped. It seemed a little unfair.

The sheep weren't nearly as exciting as they might have been in previous years. I was growing up, I suppose. Eleven, heading towards twelve. Flint, by contrast, was fourteen—tall and strong.

‘Happy now?’ he asked, glancing at me, his arms stretched out along the top wire.

‘They’re smelly, aren’t they?’

One had been nibbling on grass near the fence but had bolted when we’d arrived, and we’d got a whiff of its earthy smell. A pile of fresh black droppings nearby added to the odour.

‘Can you see any lambs?’

‘I think we’re too late for them. I think they come in August or September. Do you eat lamb?’

‘Lamb chops. They’re my favourite.’

‘Hmm.’ Flint licked his lips. He was always hungry.

He pushed and pulled at the fence so that I wobbled against it, and I knew he was thinking.

‘You know what we should do? We should have a fire, with chops. Do you think your mum’s got some?’

I was hungry too, come to think of it. I had no idea what the time was but all I’d had to eat since breakfast was an orange, which I’d shared with Flint. The thought of lamb with the fatty bits crisped by the fire, made my mouth water.

‘Where would we barbeque?’

He pointed over his shoulder. ‘At our place, in the clearing. Well?’ he said, after I said nothing.

The idea was appealing, but I was apprehensive about a fire. I knew it was dangerous, especially in the bush. It could get out of control, and sweep through the countryside burning down houses and anything that stood in its way.

‘We’ll need matches,’ he told me. ‘You’ll need to get them.’ His eyes lit up. ‘We could be real bushwhackers, then, with a billy and all!’ He turned. ‘Come on, Hannah,’ he urged.

Somewhat reluctantly, I followed.

*

As it happened Mum and Kelly were in the kitchen. I heard their voices as I cautiously moved into the entrance hall. My sister, home for the holidays, was about to go into her final year of school and they had much to talk

about, most of it uninteresting. She wanted to be a lawyer and I gathered that there were universities to apply to. Other things—such as a dress for the formal—took up much of her time with Mum. She didn't argue so much with Mum and Dad now, and seemed to have lost interest in boys, focusing on her studies instead.

I stood quietly in the hallway. I did not want to go into the kitchen. Mum would ask me what I was doing with myself. Did I want a sandwich for lunch? Etc. How could I possibly eat when I knew Flint was waiting for me, equally hungry, in the bush? And there was no way I could get away with walking out with a pack of chops, let alone the matches.

Turning, I went down the passage to the library, curled up in a leather chair and picked up a book instead. My own book was under the stairs, where I'd left it this morning before I'd gone looking for Flint. I looked at the clock on the wall. It was big and round with a black rim, a white face and black roman numerals. One-thirty.

Soon, I thought, Mum and Kelly will finish whatever they're doing, go upstairs, and I will have the kitchen to myself. I would need it if I were going to find the matches. I knew we had some, but I wasn't sure where Mum kept them. Perhaps I wouldn't be able to find them, and then I would have a decent excuse for not having a fire.

I couldn't settle. The library was gloomy, the long heavy curtains closed against the heat. The perfumed scent of the pink-tinged lilies in the glass vase was overpowering. Pungent. The air hung motionless, suspended. The clock ticked with abnormal loudness. I felt as if I were in a complete and separate universe to Flint. I wondered if I would ever see him again. I watched the second hand march relentlessly forward, round once, round once again and then around a third time. A fourth and a fifth. A sixth. Time was a strange concept. Sometimes it went by like a rabbit scampering behind a sand dune. Other times it plodded forward with painstaking and excruciating slowness. But in reality time always moved at the exact same speed, didn't it? The whole thing was deceptive. It wasn't time that was moving in leaps and bounds, or boringly slowly, but your mind. Time was a fixed thing. It couldn't change. But how did you make your mind go fast or slow?

Whatever the mechanics of time, I couldn't stop it. In the same way, I felt, I couldn't prevent the barbeque. And the fire.

Oh, I could have returned to the clearing and told Flint I couldn't find the matches, or put my hands on my hips and made a statement to the effect that I would not have a bar of him making a fire, but this would never happen. Why would I do that? He was my friend. I would never have deliberately gone against his wishes. In the same way I could not halt time.

I could balance on the back of the sofa and take the clock off the wall and smash it, but time would still be moving forward. Relentlessly forward. Somewhere. As close as the next room, perhaps. In the same way, I told myself that the idea of the fire and the barbeque had been set in motion and I could not stop them.

The leather of the armchair warmed with the heat of my agitated body and I wriggled this way and that, seeking out its cooler parts. I read a whole page of the book in my hand but I absorbed nothing. I thought of Flint waiting for me in the dappled clearing. He would be wondering where I was and what had happened to me. Why I had let him down?

Finally, I heard Kelly leave the kitchen. Not five minutes later, Mum followed. Her footsteps paused in the hallway and for a brief moment—I stopped breathing—I thought she would turn towards the library, but she closed the front door instead and made her way upstairs.

The clock said twenty past two.

I found the matches straightaway, in the pantry, alongside a pair of tall glass candleholders. The candleholders were on the top shelf and I had to get a chair to reach them, but it was relatively easy. I stuffed the matches into my pocket and put the chair back before I went looking for the lamb chops. I tried the fridge first, and there was a pack, but then I realised that if I took them I would be found out in the next day or so. It would be far better if I took something from the freezer, which was less likely to be missed. The freezer was one of those standalone ones the size of a small cupboard. It was full of oblong packages as hard as concrete, and my fingers became numb delving through them, and my stomach frigid with leaning over the edge. It was hard to identify what each package contained, but I soon found something I did recognise. Sausages.

I grabbed them and let the lid fall. Would Flint mind if we had sausages instead of lamb chops? I didn't think so.

Strangely he was asleep when I reached the clearing. I had never seen him sleep for the simple fact that I was never with him at night. Once, on a dare, I had agreed to meet him under the stairs at midnight. I had no clock—Mum always woke me for school—and I had to keep myself awake until Mum and Dad went to bed and I could venture downstairs and check the time in the kitchen. Flint and I played cards for a while, using the moon for light, until I could no longer keep my eyes open and more or less fell asleep where I was. He was gone when I woke up of course.

He was lying now on the short stubbled grass on his side, with his knees pulled up, and his hands tucked between his legs, and I had the opportunity to examine him. It was his face that interested me more than anything, the scattering of freckles across his cheeks and the long eyelashes, the scar. I noticed his nose was changing, lengthening. It was no longer short and stubby. His lips were thin, not full like mine were, and here was something I had not noticed before: a feathering of down on his upper lip!

I was exploring further when he opened his eyes and stared right at me. The hair on the back of my neck prickled, and the breath left my body.

In my confusion I blurted out the first thing that came into my head.

‘Where’d you get that scar?’

He said nothing. He stretched and yawned. Sat up. And gazed around him.

‘Did you get the matches? And the chops?’

I patted my pocket to indicate the matches, and pointed to the sausages which I’d placed in the sun to defrost. ‘Sausages.’

‘Why’d you take so long?’

‘Kelly. And Mum. In the kitchen.’ I rolled my eyes.

‘Right,’ he said.

‘The scar?’ I queried.

He put up his hand and touched it.

‘Have you seen my fire?’ he said. ‘I built one, over there.’

I nodded. But I didn’t move my eyes from his face. I felt a thrill like the frantic fluttering of a bird stuck inside a house.

‘You really want to know, don’t you?’ he sighed.

I nodded again.

‘My father ...’ He gazed into the distance.

‘Your father what—?’

‘My father drank. Regularly. He hit me with a bottle one time. He was always hitting me ... beating me.’

I had been expecting a story of a car accident perhaps, or of a fall onto something sharp such as jagged rocks. But Flint’s father beat him? Became drunk? I was speechless. In shock.

Rising, Flint busied himself rearranging his kindling as if it were neither here nor there, while I sat dumbfounded.

His words were not ones I was familiar with, and they conjured up scenes of awfulness, of horror. I wondered yet again about his other life, the life he led when he wasn’t with me, and the life he’d had before I met him. It was clear that his early childhood had been very different from mine.

And I realised that in the same way he looked out for me, I wanted to protect him. From now on. Indulge him. It was the least I could do.

29

Now

In the foyer of St Luke's I look around for Phillip, and he rises from a chair in the reception area, putting his phone away. He's wearing a business shirt and a red and blue polka-dot bow tie. He adjusts his tortoiseshell glasses, and shakes my hand. 'Hello again, Hannah.'

'Hi,' I say.

He indicates the main staircase adjoining one wall and we begin the climb to the first floor.

'Thank you for coming,' he says.

'No problem. Did he tell you I came to see him the other day?'

'No.' He seems taken aback.

'Well, he was pretty groggy. How is he going, generally?'

Phillip purses his lips. 'Apparently not out of danger yet. But he seems okay. It's hard to know.'

I nod. 'Does he have family, apart from you?'

'My wife, she's his sister. And our kids. Of course they're all grown up now ... Moved away.'

'No children of his own?'

'No. Never married. Always been a bachelor, our Bernie. There was someone, a long time ago, but she died ... and after that ...' He shrugs.

We stop outside the door marked *Ward 7*. 'Here we are,' he says.

He enters, walking ahead to the bed by the window. The two patients who were here previously have gone, and there are two new ones in their places. However, the bed alongside Bernie's is still empty, and Phillip perches on the edge of it.

'Well, I've brought her,' he says to his brother-in-law. 'And she tells me she's already seen you, the other day.'

'Did she?' Bernie murmurs, frowning slightly.

'G'day,' I say. 'You told me you were feeling shithouse.'

Propped up on pillows he is rheumy-eyed. He gives me a wan smile and puts out his hand. I shake it. It's trembling and cool.

'Hello, love,' he says. 'How're you keeping?'

'Good.' He's still holding my hand. 'It's you we're worried about. Gave me quite a scare, you did.'

'Yeah, sorry about that.'

'She did a fine job,' Phillip says. 'Must have nursing in her blood, hey?'

I smile. But I'm saved from having to elaborate because the duty doctor walks in, and Bernie releases his grasp.

'Excuse me,' he says to Phillip. 'Can I see you for a moment?'

Phillip rises from the bed. 'Sure,' he says. 'This's Hannah, Leon. She's the one who called the ambulance.'

The doctor introduces himself and I shake the big man's hand. He's probably in his late forties, and his palm swallows mine.

'Hannah?'

'Prendergast.'

'Now why is that name familiar?'

'House on the cliff,' Phillip volunteers.

A glance passes between them. Definite and deliberate—I'm not imagining it. I have the distinct feeling it's not because of Dad's death, it's something else. Something more. Something I'm not aware of perhaps because I was a child when Dad died?

'Nice to meet you,' Leon says. 'If you'll excuse us ...?' and they turn to go.

'What was that look for?' I ask Bernie when they've left.

'You don't know?'

I shake my head.

My hand is on the coverlet, and he reaches over to pat it.

‘Bit of a story,’ he says. ‘When I’m stronger.’

I look at him earnestly, but I can’t ask for more. Not in his present state. I’ll just have to wait.

‘How’s the painting coming along?’ he asks me.

‘Good.’

I remember Flint then, remember that kiss, and wonder why he doesn’t want me here. An old man, a hospital visit, it all seems harmless.

I ask Bernie if he wants anything—water, tea—but he says no. I get him to lean forward while I pull out his pillows, fluff them up and rearrange them, and settle him back down.

I walk over to the window, which is ajar. The parkland consists of gums and shrubs, with the forest as background, and even this far away I can smell the sea. I tell Bernie it’s high tide, that I saw a good swell from the coast road, and that there were surfers at The Hole. The mention of surfers reminds me I still have to face Tristan.

I wonder what the time is—I don’t want to look, it would be rude—but I am conscious I have a two-hour drive to Melbourne, maybe more, depending on the traffic, ahead of me. And then I have the huge task ... of telling Tristan. Suddenly I can’t think of anything else.

I return to the bed.

‘You want to go, love?’

‘I’ve got things to do,’ I say. ‘I’ll visit again, another day. Tell Phillip I said goodbye.’

‘Right,’ he says.

I lean over and give him a peck on the forehead. Maybe it’s a little familiar, but his smile tells me he likes it.

I phone Tristan from the hospital before I leave, and the call goes through to his message bank. I tell him I’m coming to see him, that I should be there by about one. My voice is a little stilted but I can’t help that. Perhaps it’ll prepare him.

The highway is neither busy, nor quiet, but somewhere in-between. As I drive, I think about that look between the doctor and Phillip and feel uneasy. I wonder what it’s about, whether it’s something to do with Sargasso, or my father. I’m not sure I want to find out. I stop once for petrol on the outskirts of the city and check my phone whilst I do so. Tristan’s left

me a voicemail, saying I should call him when I arrive, and to drive carefully.

I don't often go into Melbourne, let alone park there, but I manage to find a parking lot without going down any one-way streets the wrong way. I phone Tristan again and for once he answers.

'I've got forty-five minutes,' he tells me. His tone is friendly. 'Gitan's?'

'No, the park,' I say. 'The usual bench, or near it. I'll probably get there before you.'

I don't want to meet him at Gitan's. It has too many happy memories. And by vetoing the restaurant I hope I'm telegraphing a warning of sorts.

He greets me warmly, as if we've simply had an argument, as if what happened on Sunday was a silly spat, but I feel hollow inside. Strangely, I've never been through this process. I've never dumped anyone. It's always been me on the receiving end.

But within a few minutes his warmth dissipates. He latches on to a few clues: my reticence when he leans forward to kiss me hello, the fact that I sit upright on the bench instead of sprawling across it the way I usually do, and that the sandwich he's bought me lies beside me in its packet, untouched.

It occurs to me that when you're doing the dumping you can make observations and analyse them, as if you're watching yourself say and do things from a vantage point.

After one bite, he puts his sandwich down. His arms are stiff, his hands on his black-suited thighs. He looks at the ground as he finishes chewing.

'Have you made a decision on the house, Han?'

'Sargasso?'

'Yes, Sargasso,' he says patiently.

'No.'

I've shredded a leaf in my hands. I brush the fragments off my jeans and they flutter to the path. I planned to tell him I no longer love him, that I've fallen out of love, but I can't. I can't pretend. I have to tell the truth. I have to tell him about Flint.

'I've met someone else,' I say quickly. 'It's someone from my childhood ... You don't know him. He—he turned up at the house.'

'What?' He looks at me blankly.

I realise I have to speak slower. Give him time. I've had days to adjust to the idea, but for him this is a shock.

'I've met someone else,' I say again. 'A childhood friend—'

'When? Why didn't you tell me?' He rises, staring at me now. His face is reddening.

'I'm telling you now.'

'When? When did you meet them?'

'Last week.'

'Before I came down?'

I nod.

'Last week,' he says. He pauses. I can see his brain absorbing this information. 'You met him last week—I'm assuming it's a *him*—and you already know that you ... that you ...' He stops again as he puts two and two together. 'Are you breaking up with me, Hannah?'

I nod for a second time.

'But how can you be so sure? It's only a week, a week since you met him.'

'I'm sure.'

He walks a little way from me, and then he turns and comes back. Now his face is ashen.

'Why, Hannah?'

I bend and pick up another leaf and crush it between my fingers. 'Why what?'

'Why him? Why him when you know—' he looks away '—I absolutely adore you.' The statement hangs in the air. 'Why did you let me come to the house, then? Last weekend?' He puts his fingers to his temples, no doubt remembering the Sunday that was so awkward.

'I—I didn't know what I wanted.'

'What? You weren't sure? You mean, it could've been me? If I'd known ...' He goes quiet. 'You could've told me,' he says, low-voiced. 'I would've fought for you. *Fought for you*,' he grinds out.

I glance at him. The bench is under an oak tree and his face is dappled. It could be a stranger's face.

'Are you screwing him? Have you fucked him yet?'

'No—no, of course not.'

‘Not yet, but you will.’ He narrows his eyes. ‘He’s waiting for you at the house right now, isn’t he? *Isn’t he?*’ he demands, and my face contorts with anguish.

He picks up what’s left of his sandwich and tosses it onto the grass. In seconds the birds are fighting, squabbling over chunks of tomato and pastrami.

‘What do you want to do?’ he says stiffly, over his shoulder.

‘Do?’

‘I mean, your stuff. The apartment.’

I’ve been so overwhelmed by Flint that I haven’t thought this far ahead.

‘I—I suppose I’ll have to move my things.’

‘I suppose you will.’

He tugs on his lapels to straighten his jacket. He doesn’t look at me; he looks straight ahead.

‘What’s his name?’

‘Flint.’

I wait for him to say, *Flint who?* but he doesn’t. He walks away without a backward glance.

I sit on the bench and watch his disappearing back and I see him take his hand out of his pocket and raise it to his face and I think he might be crying.

By the time I reach the car I’m shaking. Probably I shouldn’t drive, but I want to get out of here. ASAP. And I look at the parking stub and see that if I leave within the next few minutes I will save myself an additional ten dollars.

When I am well clear of the city—only one near-mishap with a semitrailer—I pull over and my head falls onto the steering wheel while the traffic roars past. I want to talk to Flint. I ache to talk to him. To hear the reassuring sound of his voice, to hear him say *Hannah*, but he doesn’t have a mobile phone. Well, I’ve never seen him with one, and why would he have one and not tell me?

There’s no one else I can talk to without having to divulge the breakup, and Tristan will pass that on to our friends and his family soon enough. I sit in the car dry-eyed. I can’t cry. I have misplaced my grief.

I met Tristan at Bistro Gitan's in South Yarra on Bastille Day, three years ago. A Thursday night. I was there with colleagues from work, celebrating someone's birthday. Tristan was with a client. They sat at the table beside ours. It happened that I was at the end and he and I sat diagonally opposite each other, so that when he talked to his client he saw me out the corner of his eye. I picked up snippets of conversation. I can't remember them all but they were to do with finance and investments, companies that were performing well, and so on. Stockbroking stuff. I tried not to look at him. I found him appealing, the suntanned face, the wide forehead, the clear blue-grey eyes. I wasn't seeing anyone. I'd been on my own for nearly a year, and I noticed he wasn't wearing a ring.

Our eyes kept making contact, and then sliding away.

When his client left the table, Tristan leant back in his chair, watching me without shame. Eventually, I couldn't help myself, I looked at him, and in a poor French accent he said, '*Je pense que vous êtes très jolie et j'aimerais coucher avec vous.*'

A shiver ran up my spine and I didn't know where to put my eyes.

Someone at my table overheard this, knew some French and said, 'Ooh la la.' The others caught on, teasing me mercilessly, requesting a translation. Which was given. *I think you are very pretty and I would like to take you to bed.*

Tristan's client came back, and we quietened down. I forced myself not to glance in his direction again, even when they got up to go. But when we finally split the bill and left, Tristan was waiting outside—in spite of the cold—leaning against the pale plastered wall. He came forward when he saw me, took my hand and kissed it.

'My name's Tristan.'

'Hannah.'

'So very pleased to meet you, Hannah,' he said, as if he meant it.

He didn't take me to bed that first night, but it was only a matter of days before he did.

*

I pull into Sargasso a little before four-thirty, longing to see Flint even though my head's still full of Tristan. I recall that even Kelly liked Tristan.

She said he was sensible and intelligent. High praise.

Flint's not here. He's abandoned everything. The brush, still wet with paint, is lying on top of the paint lid on the sheeted carpet. I close up the tin, wipe off the brush, and take it down to wash under the garden tap. I wish I knew where he was, but this is the way he was when we were children. He came and went at his own whim. Why should he change now?

It's low tide and I walk the length of the beach over hard wet sand. The sun is a hazy ball of liquid gold, low in the sky. It won't be long before it's melted into the hills.

I remember another time with Tristan. I had a crisis at work. One of my favourite residents died unexpectedly, and although you try not to let these things get to you, I was emotional. And he took me away for the weekend. It was the middle of winter and he hired a cottage at Flinders and a tinny, and took me fishing. He knew I could fish, but he didn't know that it's one of my favourite things to do—because it reminds me of my father. Or that the bream would be running. It was a calm, cold day. Rugged up in thick cabled jumpers we sat in the gently rocking boat. The water lapped against the hull. Occasionally we heard sorrowful stories from seagulls sweeping overhead.

We reeled in, again and again, talking of many things. What stuck in my mind was a story of Tristan, his knees to his chin, huddling on his surfboard for hours while a shark circled him. 'Something like that changes your life,' he told me. 'I thought I was going to die.' He looked out to sea, testing his fishing line between his fingers. 'I started doing things differently after that. I didn't wait for life to come to me. I went after it.' He reeled in a bit of line. 'Life's fragile, Han. And we don't know what comes afterwards. I think there's nothing,' he told me. 'I think there's just a great big black void. What do you think?'

I pulled my jumper sleeves over my cold hands. 'You'll laugh when I tell you.'

'No, I won't.'

I took a breath. 'I think there's a place, a big old house maybe, where everybody I love is gathered.'

'Everybody? And like what, we all live happily ever after?'

I nodded. 'Something like that.'

'You've got a vivid imagination, Solo.'

Afterwards we ran a long hot bath. We ate thick succulent chunks of battered fish with mashed potatoes and green peas in front of the fire. And we made love. I forgot about the retirement home, work, and my responsibilities, and when I returned on the Monday I felt strong. I felt confident. Ready to save the world.

Tristan was thoughtful and considerate.

I turn at the big black granite rock to walk back down the shore and glance up at the house, and see a shadow in the glass room. One moment it's there, the next it's gone. I run. I run all the way along the beach, panting and gasping on the track, avoiding the sharp stones.

I crash through the front door and hurtle up the stairs. Cross the landing in skips and jumps. The glass room is open, but I see at a glance there's no one inside. I don't stop, although my legs ache. And I wheeze with breathlessness. Somehow I climb the stairs to the rooftop.

But the rooftop is empty, too.

I go through the ritual of walking to the wall, leaning my hands on the rough stonework, peering over—no crows in sight—and turning to look back at the doorway.

No Flint.

My chest is heaving, my hands clenched into fists at my sides. I need him. Doesn't he know how much I need him? Why can't he be here! Doesn't he realise our time together is precious? Early next year I must go back to my job. I don't have the money not to. How is that going to work? How are we going to bear the separation?

I wander back down the stairway. I am barefoot and my footsteps don't echo. Light spilling from my grandmother's room creates a dusky hue in the darkened passage. In the vacant entrance hall, the lofty ceiling soars above my head. Sargasso feels big and empty. Hollow. There could be nobody here, not even me. Maybe I don't even exist.

Then

Flint knew how to make a fire. I didn't doubt that he'd made one many times before. He chose a spot with sand as a base, rather than weeds and grass, where there was plenty of airflow. The kindling and twigs caught with the first match. It helped, of course, that it was so dry, that it had been so hot. I sat beside him and fed the fire with dry leaves, one by one, watching the smoke drift and disappear between the trees, and wrinkling my nose at the smell.

The annoying part was waiting for the wood to burn down into coals, and for the sausages to defrost.

We played a game while we waited. You had to describe a food without using its name, or colour, or shape, or what you made with it. You couldn't, for instance, mention chips to describe a potato, or the other way around. It made me think hard about roast chicken, and what it was about roast chicken that I loved. Was it the thin, crispy skin that flaked in my mouth, or the dark, flavoursome meat I nibbled off the bone? Was it those little juicy pockets the bird keeps hidden beneath herself? Flint's favourite food was rabbit pie. *Rabbit!* I did eventually guess it, because he gave me enough clues, but I couldn't understand it. 'How could you eat a rabbit?' I said, feeling tears not far away.

'How could you eat *lamb* chops?' he retorted.

After all that talk of food we were ravenous. We bounced the scalding sausages from one hand to the other. We bit into them, scorching the roofs of our mouths, while the warm juice ran down our chins.

‘Ow,’ I said, my mouth gaping.

‘Hot,’ Flint got out, doing the same thing—hopping up and down—and we both laughed.

By now the shadows had lengthened, and I knew that very soon I would have to leave him and return to the house. And when I left him and made my way back to the driveway and Sargasso, it was perhaps for the first time that I experienced a real sense of loneliness. I did not want to go. I did not want to leave the clearing and the glowing coals or the boy who sat alongside them, doodling in the dirt with a twig, studiously *not* watching me walk away. I did not want to leave Flint.

The one thing that comforted me was that my fears about having a fire had been unfounded. It had not got out of control. It had not swept through the bush, burning everything in its path.

*

At dinner, Mum said, ‘Somebody at this table smells like they’ve been sitting round a campfire.’ She looked at each of us, one by one.

‘Hannah, where’ve you been?’

I had my fork halfway to my lips. I quickly hurried it along, then gestured to my full mouth.

What am I gonna say what’m I gonna say, I was thinking.

‘Did they say anything on the news about us getting rain?’ Dad asked.

‘Nothing expected until next week,’ Kelly told him. ‘How can they possibly know that far ahead?’

‘You’d be surprised,’ Dad said. He had a lot of faith in the weather bureau.

‘I reckon they’re guessing,’ my sister said.

‘Hannah?’ This from my mother.

Now Dad and Kelly looked at me, too.

‘What?’

My mother sighed.

‘Yes, Mum,’ I said quickly.

‘Where’ve you been?’

‘Yes, Hannah, you stink.’ Kelly moved her plate away and wrinkled her nose.

I rubbed my bare feet together. I loaded my fork with spaghetti bolognaise, I mean *really* loaded it, and it was on the way to my mouth when my mother stopped it with her hand.

‘Hannah!’

Dad abandoned his cutlery to concentrate on me.

‘Why do you smell like a fire? Did you make one?’

‘I found one,’ I said slowly. This wasn’t a lie.

‘Where?’

I made a vague gesture with my hand. ‘In the bush.’

‘Did you light it again?’ Mum asked.

‘No!’ This wasn’t a lie, either. And it was easier than I thought to pretend to be shocked by such an idea.

‘Well, then, why do you smell like you do?’

Dad took up his knife and fork again, but I could tell he wasn’t going to use them until he had a satisfactory reply.

I looked down at my plate, brushed an imaginary speck of dirt from my shoulder. When I glanced up they were all still gazing at me.

‘I ... I played in the ashes.’

‘That’s disgusting.’ Kelly picked up her chair and shuffled it away.

‘You played in the ashes?’ Mum repeated, glancing at Dad. The *What-kind-of-child-have-we-here?* glance.

‘I-I used them to paint myself with,’ I said, getting keen on the idea, ‘you know, like the Aboriginal people do.’

‘They use paint, not ash.’ My sister wrinkled her nose again. ‘Ugh,’ she said.

I put my head to one side.

‘You look ugly when you do that.’

‘Hannah!’ Mum said.

Dad brushed his hand across his face as if he had an itchy nose. He was trying not to laugh.

‘And you’re sure the fire was out?’

‘Yes, Mum.’

Lie number three.

*

I think the smell woke me first. So that even before I heard my parents running down the passage, I was half awake.

I pushed back the covers, left my bed, tiptoed to the window, and drew back the curtain.

A bitter smell.

Smoke billowing across the driveway.

In the distance, long tongues of flame flickering and licking hungrily at the night sky.

The thicket was on fire.

Flint.

I dressed quickly. Remembered to put on shoes. Runners. Somewhere I had a torch—the bottom of my wardrobe—and the batteries weren't flat.

I stepped out of my bedroom. The lights were on in my parents' bedroom, and down below in the hall. I scooted along the passage, keeping close to the wall.

At the top of the staircase, I hesitated. The front door was flung wide. Light on in the kitchen. Somebody was in the kitchen, on the phone, talking wildly. Mum. The smell of smoke was everywhere. Acrid and invasive.

I padded down the stairs.

Outside, Dad had his back to me. He'd dragged the hose from the garage and was trying to connect it to the tap with thick, silver tape. The connection was missing. We never used it. We didn't have a garden.

Flint, I kept thinking.

I slipped out the front door, waited a moment in the shadow of the portico, and then made a run for it.

Dad never even saw me.

I didn't run into the thicket. That would've been stupid. I knew I had to find a way to get around it, to approach from another direction.

On the coast road, I heard the whine of the fire engine. I pressed into the bush as it passed, its siren blaring. Going hell for leather, Dad would've said.

The entrance to Farmer Giles's property must be along this road, I thought, the next track after ours.

It was. A milk urn turned sideways for a mailbox and a wooden sign hanging from a post. *Greendales*, it said. Beneath that: *D. Hatherall, Esq.*

The long track was rutted and furrowed with caked mud. The cattle grid dusty and dirty. How did I see all this? I had my torch.

There were farm dogs. We didn't have a dog. I didn't know their ways, or how to approach them. I would've loved to have one, I had begged Mum often enough, but Sargasso was not fenced and a pet was therefore out of the question. There was something else. I was secretly afraid of them.

I kept to the fence bordering the dirt track, so that if one came I could slip between the wires and push myself into the bush. But no dogs came. They must've been chained, because I heard them howling, joining the high-pitched screaming of the fire engine.

I pulled myself up the fence, wobbled on the top rung, and then slipped and fell back. I tried again. This time I held on more firmly, and clambered over. I tramped through a paddock, and met another fence. Now I reckoned I was in the paddock where we'd been at lunchtime. I looked about me. One paddock looks much the same as another, I thought. Huddled against the far fence was the pale blur of a mob of sheep. A half-moon was in the sky, partly obscured by eerily lit pillows of smoke. I pressed on. Halfway down the fence line now. Surely this was where we'd stood at lunchtime?

I scrambled over and fought my way into the undergrowth, torch in one hand, my other protecting my face. Ahead was the trembling glow of the fire as it lunged through the dense vegetation. I heard it crackling and popping. Snapping. Then a crack and a heavy sound: a falling branch.

I felt the heat, intense and fiery, blasting its way forward. On the move. Taking my breath away. My eyes watered and I spluttered. I was bent over double, coughing and spluttering, when something slithered over my shoe. Something in a hurry to get out.

What was I doing, trying to get in?

If Flint had fallen asleep beside the fire, he would surely be dead. Nothing could survive what I saw ahead—that fury, that furnace. He would have lost consciousness first, then been burnt alive. I shuddered. But the reality was that nothing I did now could save him. Whatever had happened had already happened.

If he hadn't fallen asleep, he would be safe.

I had to hope he hadn't, that he was safe.

It was all I could do. All I could hang on to. The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Of course he would be safe. Why wouldn't he? He was Flint.

I turned and made my way back.

*

They caught me at the fence, in the full glare of the headlights. A second fire engine, lumbering across the paddock, sent to douse the flames from Farmer Giles's side.

I ran, but a man grabbed me and swung me into his heavily coated, yellow arms. 'Got you, young lady,' he said.

They carried me into the kitchen, and Mum and Dad turned pale.

'Hannah!' Mum put her hand over her mouth, her face in anguish.

Dad didn't move. Didn't say anything. He was struck dumb, I think.

31

Now

The full moon is a shimmering gold coin afloat in black ink. I lie under the stairs, watching stardust drift to earth, and going over all the times I've been with Flint since my return.

There are three, three proper times, and much as I like counting things I don't think any significance can be attached to the number. But why hasn't he returned? He knew I was going to be free. When we were children he was over almost every day, so where's he now? Has he been unable to get away from work? And what does he do? Then I start to wonder if he's like Mr Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, and actually has a wife. *A wife*. It doesn't bear thinking about ...

I think about Flint's face. I conjure it up: the green eyes and elegant nose, the floppy brown fringe, the faint scar down one side of his face. I let it hover in front of me.

I lean forward to kiss him. Catch the overlong hair at the nape of his neck between my fingers. He kisses me back. Hesitantly, lips tentatively touching, then mouths melding together, tongues exploring.

It starts off gently, but in no time I'm flustered to say the least. *We're* flustered.

Because he touches me. Here, and here. Where it matters. He undoes my buttons one by one, peels off my shirt, pushes his face into my breasts. Takes my nipple in his mouth. Kisses my neck. Between my breasts again.

My mouth. I wriggle out of my jeans and knickers. Run my hands over his back. Feel the hard boniness of his shoulders.

I am naked. Breathless. Kneeling in front of him. Reaching for the buckle of his belt.

‘Hannah!’ he calls from a long way off.

The voice jerks me bolt upright, wide awake. Blinking in surprise. But there’s nobody here, it’s only me.

I cry out with disappointment.

‘Hannah!’ His voice calls again. But imagination, need and desire are calling, and I sink down to my blanket—

‘Hannah!’ Louder now, and closer.

I push aside my wants, struggle up onto my feet, and peer through the glass walkway into the dark.

Outside it’s bright with moonlight—magical half-light, like the negative of a photograph. Running down the driveway, dusted with eerie light, calling my name, is Flint. He comes to a halt in front of the walkway, puts his hands up to the glass and peers in, a moon shadow at his heels.

I push the hair off my face. Limp into the garage, hit the switch on the wall. The garage door slowly grinds open, and I shift impatiently from one foot to the other. Slipping beneath it when it is only halfway up.

‘Hannah!’

Without so much as a hello, he crosses the distance between us, cups the back of my head in one hand and crushes me to him. His body is rigid with stress. Quivering with anxiety.

I kiss him and his mouth is cold and tastes faintly of wood smoke. The stubble on his jaw grazes my chin. Then, holding me from him, he gazes into my eyes. He looks at me as if he’s waited a long, long time for this moment, but now that it’s upon him he’s unsure of what to do. Apprehensive.

‘Did you tell him?’

‘Yes,’ I say.

‘Oh, Hannah,’ he murmurs, his voice catching.

I put my hands around his neck. ‘Carry me.’

He lifts me into his arms, and even as we stumble across the garage floor he’s kissing me, touching his mouth to my forehead, my nose, my eyes.

‘Where were you?’ I get out as we reach the place under the stairs.
‘What happened?’

He shrugs, and lowers me gently to the blanket.

And leaves me there! I look up at him. He’s standing, staring down at me, seemingly uncertain of what to do next. And it’s then that I realise why. Why he’s not talking, why he’s a wreck. It’s possible he hasn’t done this before. He’s a virgin, a nervous one at that. And I am more than a little startled, to say the least. Then it dawns on me that for once I am going to be the leader, and he the follower.

I smile encouragingly. The child filled with wonderment and delight. ‘Lie down,’ I tell him, patting the blanket. ‘Here. Next to me.’ And he does. And we turn and face one another. In the moonlight. And I put out my hand to touch his face and he catches it and kisses my fingertips. My eyes overflow with emotion.

‘Don’t,’ he murmurs. ‘Don’t cry, Hannah.’

‘I’m so happy,’ I tell him. ‘I’m so happy I’m crying.’

And he reaches for me and cradles my head to his chest.

How I do love this man ... This man that lets me see his insecurities ... Who is awkward with naivety and yet not afraid to share this with me. This man I will love until I die.

Then

In the morning I was interrogated by an investigator. They let me do it in the kitchen. He wasn't a policeman, Mum explained to me before he arrived, he was a fire investigator, but if I didn't tell the truth they would be forced to take me to the station and put me in a cell.

'Really?' I said.

'Eleni. Sweetheart,' Dad said. It was one of the few times he called Mum by her name. She was always *Honey* or *Sweetheart* or *Sugar*.

It was the only thing Dad said at that time. I caught him looking at me, especially when the fire investigator was talking, and he looked sad. Disappointed. I felt awful. I'd let him down.

I'd let Flint down, too. Yesterday I had promised to safeguard him from any horrors, and what had happened? I had abandoned him.

The fire investigator man was tall and thin, with a bump for a tummy. His trousers were pulled up high and buckled tightly. He had a moustache. But he wasn't attractive like the Jack of Hearts. He didn't have that look in his eyes.

They made me sit on a chair opposite him, but not with the table between us. He started off being nice, friendly. He introduced himself, and I told him my name, and he asked me what I was doing in the bush.

I told him I often played by myself in the bush—out the corner of my eye I saw Mum nodding her head—and that it was nothing for me to be

away all morning. Or all afternoon. I always came back in the evening.

Then he asked me if I'd taken something out of the fridge. I said no, the freezer. I saw Mum's mouth open. She began to speak, but he silenced her with a little movement of his hand.

I told him about the sausages. He asked how many there were and I said six. He asked if I'd eaten them all, and I had to lie, and say, yes. Was I a big eater? he asked Mum. *Sometimes*, she said, which didn't help him at all. He didn't believe me about eating all the sausages but he didn't say anything. He made notes in his little book instead.

Then he asked if she had any matches in the house, and she told him, yes, in the pantry.

'Get them for me,' he asked.

'They're not here.' She turned from the pantry in surprise. 'Hannah, did you take—' but he silenced her again. Then he asked me the same question.

I said, yes, I had taken the matches. Again, he made a note in his book.

When had I taken them? he wanted to know. I knew the exact time because of waiting in the library. I explained about waiting, but not about time, and how you can't stop it.

He wanted to know about the lighting of the fire. How did I know how to make a fire?

'Dad taught me,' I said, and my father nodded from his side of the room.

Sometimes I grew bored while I was waiting for the man to make notes, and I leant back and swung my legs. He always stopped me. 'Keep still,' he said. And every now and again when he thought my attention was wandering he would say, 'And who was with you?'

Sometimes he said it quietly to see if I were listening, or take me by surprise, and other times he said it like a command, but I always gave him the same answer.

'Nobody. I was on my own.'

'Where are the matches, then?'

'I don't know. I must've dropped them.'

At one stage he sent my mother up to the bathroom to find my shorts from yesterday and bring them down. They were filthy, of course, but he didn't seem to mind. He went through the pockets. I guess he was looking for the matches.

Finally, he pushed back his chair and said he was done.

Dad told me to go and wait in the library, and *not to move*.

The clock in the library said twenty minutes past eleven. The aroma of the perfumed lilies in the glass vase was still overpowering.

I thought about Flint. I wondered if he was all right and when I would see him again. I was fairly sure—I don't know how or why—that he was okay. It was the same certainty I'd had in the bush the previous night. But I didn't know how I would be able to get away to find him, or for him to find me. He wouldn't think to look for me in the library. He'd never done so before.

At 11.42 Dad came to the door. He had his work clothes on, his tie hanging loosely around his neck. He didn't look at me. He said, 'You can come back now, Hannah.'

Mum sat at the kitchen table with a cup of something in front of her. She didn't look at me, either. She stared at the tabletop. I don't know where Kelly was. I hadn't seen her all morning.

Dad stretched his neck in that way a tortoise does, and passed one tie end over the other.

'Who helped you, Hannah?'

'Nobody.' I lied again. To my dad, this time. *I lied to my dad*. I almost couldn't do it.

Mum started to cry.

'We could've all been killed,' Dad said. 'You could've burnt us alive. In our beds. Did you think about that?'

'No.' I lowered my head.

Dad straightened his tie, squiggled his neck. His veins bulged.

'You're in your room, Hannah, until you tell us who helped you.' He paused. 'I think you know who. I think somebody was with you, and you're protecting them.'

'Okay,' I said slowly, not wanting to lie again. But Dad didn't seem to pick up that I was agreeing.

'No books, mind.' He looked at Mum. 'She's not to have any books, honey. I want her to think long and hard about this.'

Mum nodded. She glanced at me with red-rimmed eyes and put her hand over her mouth and I didn't want to see her face all contorted and pained again, so I looked away.

‘I’m going to the office now,’ Dad told her.

He leant down and kissed her on the forehead. He put his hand on her shoulder. ‘Sweetheart,’ he said gently, and his voice was filled with sorrow.

*

From my bedroom window, I saw the damage we’d caused. There was no thicket left. Blackened stumps of trees, like stubby pencils, poked from the earth, still smoking. The ground was powdered with grey, and strewn with the grotesquely shaped limbs of trees. Above, an absurdly blue sky. And the sun shining down brightly on it all, gloating.

A bitter smell hung over everything. Was *in* everything. The curtains. My bedcovers. My clothes.

I slept for a while. I don’t know how long.

And for the first time ever when I woke up I wanted to know what the time was.

A sandwich and a glass of fruit juice stood on a tray inside the door.

I needed to pee. We didn’t have locks on our bedrooms so I slipped out and went to the bathroom. I took ages, washing my hands and my face and brushing my teeth all over again, for something to do. I studied myself in the mirror, and I thought I looked older. In the same way that there was something about the Jack of Hearts’ eyes, there was now something about mine.

Mum knocked on the door and asked me if I was all right. I said yes, I won’t be long, and then I hung up the hand towel. She was in the passage. She looked at me and opened her arms, and we had the hugest hug. I asked her what the time was, and she said around two-thirty.

I had a pack of cards and I passed the rest of the day playing Patience.

Dad came when it was dark, and I’d already been given my dinner. He picked up the tray from the floor and asked me why I hadn’t eaten anything. I said I wasn’t hungry.

‘Are you ready to talk, Hannah?’

‘Yes.’ I was sitting cross-legged on my bed.

He put the tray down on my desk, and perched on the bed’s edge and smoothed his hands over his knees. ‘Right,’ he said. ‘Hannah, this is very serious. I don’t know if you understand how serious this is. Apart from

getting us all killed, apart from destroying our lovely home, the fire could have spread and wiped out Farmer Giles and all his animals.'

'Yes, Dad,' I said.

'I don't think you would have done this on your own, Hannah. Do you think you would've done it on your own?'

'Maybe.'

I stretched out my legs so that my toes were near his thigh and left hand, but he didn't touch them.

He scratched the back of his head.

'Who helped you, Hannah? Who's got the matches?'

I shrugged. Shrugging doesn't count as a lie.

He sighed. 'I thought you said you were ready to talk?'

'I am. But not about that.'

'Right,' he said again, standing up.

'Wait. What time is it?'

He glanced at his watch. 'Eight-twenty.' He peered at the face. 'No, hang on, eight-twenty-two.'

Then he picked up the tray and left.

*

Something woke me in the night, which was annoying since I'd taken ages to fall asleep—because I was hungry. My stomach ground against itself. It cried, *Feed Me! Feed Me!*

I lay still, trying to nod off again, and heard the sound that had woken me, the sound of a pebble hitting my window.

I shot out of bed.

It was Flint. Standing below my window. In the darkness. The moon glimmering on his face.

I pushed the window further open, and waved.

He looked different from above. Slight. Vulnerable and lonely. I was used to gazing up at him, of the impression of height, and of power, and of him being almost a man. Looking down on him was an unfamiliar experience.

I didn't speak. I was afraid I would become too excited and wake Mum. Dad slept through anything.

‘Hannah,’ he whispered, but I put my finger to my lips and shook my head.

He stared at me.

I stared back. His eyes shone in the moonlight. A pain shot through my chest. It almost overwhelmed me and for a second or two I couldn’t breathe. I felt helpless. I needed to tell him why I couldn’t get to him.

Theatrically, I pointed in the direction of my parents’ room, and then I drew my finger across my throat.

I don’t know if he understood, but it was all I could think of.

And then I *did* think of something else. I put up my hand. *Wait*, I indicated.

I ran to my desk, ripped off a piece of paper from an exercise book and scrawled: *Grounded*.

I stuck the pencil between my teeth and bit on it. Then I wrote, *Wait for me, Flint. Wait for me*.

Dashing back to the window, I held out the fragment and let it drop. It twirled and swirled through the darkness like a white feather, and he dropped the pebbles in his hand and snatched it at the bottom.

He read. He nodded. He smiled up, the warmth in his smile crinkling the corners of his eyes.

Most of the time Flint was ordinary with me, but every now and then he behaved as if I was something unexpected that filled him with delight, like a surprise gift. This was one of those times.

He blew a kiss.

To say I was taken aback would be an understatement. I quickly blew him a kiss back and let the curtain drop because I was beside myself with emotion, euphoria, ecstasy—all those e-words. If I stood there any longer I might throw myself out of the window and into his arms.

And—assuming I lived and didn’t break one or both of my legs—it would be like him to say, *What’d you do that for?*

*

The next day I didn’t eat my breakfast. Or my lunch.

Dinner was souvlaki, one of my favourites, and a leafy green salad with slices of avocado and Mum’s salad dressing drizzled over the top. And

potato salad.

I didn't eat that, either.

My stomach cramped and complained, and curled itself into a knot, and then uncurled itself and twisted the other way until it was so constricted it started to shriek.

I told myself there were kids in Africa who regularly went without food and it was simply a matter of getting used to it. But I might as well have been talking to a pot plant.

I thought of food all the time, even when I was thinking of Flint.

Dad entered my room again after dinner to fetch my tray.

He didn't say anything. He picked it up and went away.

A little later he knocked on the door.

'You must be very hungry.'

I nodded.

'Are you ready to talk?'

I shook my head. 'Why's finding out who helped me so important to you?'

He came in, and rocked on his heels, arms folded.

'Because if someone helped you, then we can shift some of the blame from you to them. Not hold you *entirely* responsible.'

'Oh,' I said. 'What time is it?'

He glanced at his watch.

'Time you started talking to me.'

He sat on the edge of my bed as before. He said nothing for so long that I shuffled the cards and dealt out a hand of Patience on my doona.

He got up and carefully and gently pulled the rumpled doona under the cards until it was flat, and sat down again.

I started to play. He watched for a bit, and then he said, 'What do you say we do a deal, Hannah?'

I paused. 'What sort of deal?'

'You tell me who was with you, and I won't tell anybody else.'

'Pfft,' I said. 'How can you possibly promise that?'

He looked at the carpet.

'You're right. I can't promise that.'

I focused on Patience. I moved a seven and a four, and lifted up the next card. It was a Jack of Hearts.

‘What if,’ I began slowly. His head turned and his gaze met mine. ‘What if I tell you who it was and in return you promise not to ground me any further?’

He said nothing for a bit.

‘What about him?’ He stressed the *him*. ‘Can *he* be punished?’

‘Yes, but you’ll find that difficult.’

He frowned. ‘Why?’

I opened my mouth and closed it again. If Flint didn’t want to be found, nothing and nobody would ever make him appear. I knew that much.

‘Whoops,’ I said, ‘you nearly had me there.’ I put out my hand. ‘First we need to shake on the deal, Dad.’

‘Wait a minute, what am I agreeing to?’

‘I tell you who was with me. You stop grounding me.’

‘And I can find this boy and punish him? Tell his parents, tell the fire people?’

‘Yup.’ I nodded.

He was still puzzled.

‘Why are you giving him up now? At this stage? Was it all his idea, Hannah?’

‘I’m pretty hungry. And bored.’

‘Was it all his idea?’ he repeated.

I let my hand fall. ‘No, Dad. It wasn’t all his idea. Who got the matches, who took the sausages?’

‘But did he force you?’

I shook my head. ‘Nuh.’

‘Okay,’ he said slowly. He was still puzzling it over but he put out his hand, and we shook.

‘Is there any dinner left?’

‘Wait. Hang on, Hannah. I need a name.’

‘Flint.’

‘Flint? Flint who?’

‘Ask Mum.’ I had no doubt she would remember who Flint was, even if Dad didn’t.

I got up off the bed to move to the door. But it was too much, too sudden. I didn’t even know I was fainting.

I came to with Dad bending over me, a glass of water in his hand.

‘No more water,’ I said, ‘I need food.’

He pulled me up into a sitting position and leant me against the bed.

‘Wait here. I’ll go get your dinner.’

I sat on the floor with my back against the bed, and imagined Mum’s face, Mum’s reaction, to what Dad would tell her in the kitchen.

When he returned, he put the plate of souvlaki and salad on my desk, and a glass of milk alongside it, and pulled out my chair.

‘Eat it slowly,’ he instructed, ‘or it’ll all come back up again.’

After a bit I became conscious that he hadn’t left the room. He was sitting on my bed again.

‘Hannah,’ he said. ‘Your mum tells me that Flint is the friend you had when you were very little. That boy we never met.’

‘Uh-huh,’ I said. I was chewing.

‘Have you been playing with him again?’

‘Uh-huh,’ I said. I would’ve said *uh-huh* to anything as long as I could keep eating.

‘Your mum says we should send you to a psychiatrist,’ he said, painfully.

‘A psy-psy—’ I broke off. ‘I can’t even say it. Why? What is it?’

‘It’s a person you see when you need help—’ he tapped the side of his head ‘—up here.’

I put down my fork and turned to him.

‘I don’t need help. I’m fine.’

‘I think you are, too,’ he murmured.

I turned back to my plate. It was easier not to look at him.

*

I went to a psychiatrist anyway. A psychologist, actually. Mum said it was for my own good, but it was for *their* good, really. Hers and Dad’s. They thought they were helping me and that made them feel good.

The psychologist had a big clock in her room, but it was a digital one. 15.30. I liked knowing what the time was, that I only had to be there for an hour, and that the time *would* pass, but it took a while to get used to the unexpectedness of the minutes ticking over. Taking me by surprise.

I told Flint about the psychologist. I thought he might find it funny, but it made him angry. He thought it was all Dad's doing, when really it was Mum. Dad was preoccupied by his work a lot of the time. He didn't really care who I played with, or how I passed my time. It was Mum who fretted. Mum who worried. There was nothing wrong with my grades, but she thought I needed something to occupy my time; to keep me away from Flint. I knew that.

She organised a boy to come in the afternoons. Lawrence Nilsson. He was the son of someone in her book club. We sat at the kitchen table and Mum introduced us and after she'd gone he told me his real name was Lars. I loved the way he said *Lars*, rolling his tongue over the consonants.

'Can I call you Lars?' I asked shyly.

'If you want,' he said.

He was a bit apprehensive of me to start with, as if I might bite, which made me wonder what Mum had told him about me. He was two years older than I was and went to the local high school, and his task apparently was to help me with maths, which was odd because my maths was good. I was okay at English too, and science. But not team sports. Or making friends.

I saw through it, of course. I saw that he was there to stop me thinking about Flint or playing with him because, yes, initially after the fire Mum tried to make me stay at the house, to keep tabs on where I was all the time because if she was with me or in the vicinity Flint didn't come over, but she soon tired of that.

Lars and I got into the habit of completing a few maths problems and spending the remainder of the allotted two hours playing cards. He didn't have a favourite card. He thought it odd that a person could have one. He taught me to play poker. When Mum came in one day in the middle of a game he told her he was teaching me bridge because it was a good social skill to have, like tennis. Then of course he was obliged to teach me bridge.

'Do you feel like Pip come to play?' I asked him one day as I was dealing out a hand. 'You know, Pip and Miss Havisham?'

'I know who you mean,' he said. 'A little,' he agreed, picking up his cards. 'You are pretty enough to be Estella, but you are fair. I always think of Estella as dark, don't you?'

I nodded. Lars wore round glasses that made him look like an owl. He had tufts of blond hair that stood up straight at the back of his head, too. He was very clever, I think.

‘You’re not conceited, either,’ he added as an afterthought. ‘*And ...*’ He paused dramatically, something else obviously occurring to him. ‘And I’m not in love with you.’

He hooted with laughter at this, as if it were the funniest thing in the whole world. He had a strange sense of humour. Things were either dead serious or hysterical. There was no in-between.

Now

We get up late, and the only reason we get up at all is because Flint is starving. I scramble eggs and braise tomatoes, while Flint makes coffee and toast. We eat with purpose, saying little, touching fingers across the table, and one-handedly mopping up tomato juice with crusts of bread. Flint has more toast smothered in marmalade, which makes me smile. We keep reaching for each other, and there's a sense of a new understanding between us, a point of no return.

After we've eaten I run hot water in the sink, but he comes to stand behind me and nibbles on my ear and presses himself gently against me, and I leave the plates and cutlery soaking.

It is afternoon before we get up again. At 4.10 pm we go for a walk on the beach, and I take note of what kind of day it is or, rather, it's been. Sunny with scraps of cotton cloud. A stiff breeze whistling off the sea. A faint odour of seaweed.

The swell is promising, and by tomorrow morning will be delivering a good wave. I can't help but think of Tristan.

Then

Lars mentioned tennis was a good social skill to have, so Mum enrolled me in after-school classes and I had to play one day a week. I didn't enjoy it, especially not doubles where I was always letting down my partner, but I did get the hang of scoring quickly. And I made a good umpire. Sometimes the coach let me score games instead of playing.

I made another acquaintance out of this: a boy named Marsh.

I didn't know Marsh was short for Marshall and I thought it a strange name, but it suited him. He was pink-skinned, and spongy and plump like a marshmallow, with two button brown eyes in a broad, soft face.

He took a shine to me, probably because we were both bad at tennis. We were always the last to be picked for teams, standing alone but together, pretending this wasn't happening. I defended him, too, when the others bullied him. It wasn't so much that I disagreed with them—he *was* lazy about collecting balls—it was more that there was no way I was going to give them the satisfaction of agreement.

When Mum arrived to fetch me one afternoon, we were talking outside the gate, and the next thing I knew the two mothers had arranged for Marsh to come over.

I was annoyed, but Flint was furious.

He had been angry enough about the psychologist. Then there was Lars to contend with. Then tennis. And now this.

‘What’s your father going to make you do next?’ he demanded, kicking at anything within reach, tree roots, rocks and stones.

‘You know what?’ He turned to me, his eyes dark with anger, slashing at a reed with one hand. ‘I’m *glad* I don’t have a father!’

Unlike me, he never shouted. Or ranted. His face always went pale, and he vented his anger physically but mostly silently.

I learnt to stand by and let him get it out of his system, and then cheer him up, encourage and cajole. For a while I didn’t quibble over the games he chose. I let him do anything and everything he wanted. Invariably, that involved me having to submit to something or other, whether it was having my head chopped off or being burnt at the stake. And I had to apologise.

‘Say you’re sorry,’ he would insist, patiently, quietly, standing over me.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry,’ I would mumble on my knees with my hands tied behind my back, but I had no idea what I was atoning for, and why. To my knowledge Joan of Arc never did so. I pointed this out to Flint and all he said was, ‘Yeah, well, maybe she should have.’

There was a tiredness to our games those days, as if we were both too old to be indulging in such childishness and there should’ve been something else to occupy us, only we didn’t know what it was.

*

Marsh didn’t know any card games apart from snap.

‘What?’ I said. ‘You don’t know rummy?’

‘No, I don’t,’ he challenged as if there was nothing wrong in being ignorant.

Mum had put out a plate of her homemade Florentines and he picked up a second one and nibbled at it, dropping crumbs over the table and getting chocolate on his fingers.

‘Okay,’ I said slowly. ‘Well, then, what do you want to do?’

He licked his fingers one by one. ‘We could watch telly,’ he suggested, hopefully.

‘We don’t have a television.’

‘You don’t have a television?’ It was his turn to be mortified. ‘But how —’

‘Shall we walk to the beach?’ I said, changing the subject, embarrassed by the fact that we didn’t have a TV. Acutely aware that here was one more thing that made me different to other kids.

‘Okay,’ he said but without enthusiasm.

He rose from the table, stacking up biscuits then carefully manoeuvring them into his shorts pocket. Clearly he thought we might be away for a while.

‘Have you brought your togs?’

‘I can’t swim.’

‘What?’ I was shocked. Now I knew two boys who couldn’t swim. ‘There’s not much point in going then, is there?’

He shrugged. ‘Up to you.’

We walked out of the front door, and I stood for a moment on the portico, my hands on my hips. What on earth was I going to do with him?

‘What happened there?’ He pointed to the land beside the garage.

‘Fire.’ I did not want to elaborate.

‘Wow. Hey, shall we go walk in there?’

‘We can. But it’s not pretty.’

It was decidedly unpretty. It was charred and blackened. Sooty and pungent. Mostly barren—although a few new green shoots had been sticking up their heads and blindly peering into the light.

‘I don’t care,’ he said.

So we went into the thicket that wasn’t a thicket. And I took him to the clearing because, well, it was still a clearing of sorts and we were less likely to get dirty there. Marsh already had streaks of charcoal over his runners, socks and up his legs, and smears of it on his hands because he kept touching tree stumps and picking up stones. My mother was used to me being filthy, but I didn’t know what his mother would say.

‘What do you do here?’ We had reached the clearing. He was waiting for me to show him something, I realised.

I shrugged. ‘Play. Act out things like pirates and mermaids ...’ I trailed off. It sounded feeble. It sounded like stuff five-year-olds might do.

‘Really?’ he said, as if he had heard of such things happening but never witnessed them.

‘What games do you play?’ I asked.

I was standing on the boulder looking down at him, and for a moment I thought it might be fun to have *him* kneeling at my feet with his hands tied behind his back, mumbling apologies. I knew what he'd be asking forgiveness for. Imagine not knowing any card games except snap!

'I don't play *games*.'

'What about tennis?' I pointed out. 'That's a game.'

'I do that because I have to.'

He extracted a biscuit from his pocket. But before it reached his mouth he noticed his fingers and the charcoal and dirt now blending with the chocolate smudges, and frowned. He moved the Florentine to the tips of two podgy fingers and, widening his mouth like a frog, posted the biscuit whole inside.

'What do you do, then, for fun?' I said quickly. On purpose. I had a hard time trying not to laugh. His jaws worked up and down and his cheeks bulged, and crumbs appeared on the fringes of his mouth. His lips were always pink, as if he wore lipstick.

'I—I like puzzles,' he got out at last.

'Puzzles?'

I hopped off the rock.

'Why didn't you say so? I love them too. My best is what is put on a table, cut, but never eaten?'

'Jigsaw puzzles, Hannah.' He started to cough. He put his hands on his knees and coughed some more. Bits of biscuit shot out of his open mouth and his eyes watered.

'Water,' he squeaked, when he got his breath.

We made our way out. I let him go first, dawdling behind, watching his sturdy, plump legs plod through the ash and sand, thinking it was going to be a long afternoon.

I saw the snake before he did. I don't think he was even looking at his feet.

I turned. Flint was nowhere in sight but that didn't mean he wasn't here. Wasn't responsible. It was possible he'd been watching us the whole time. He was very good at not being seen when he didn't want to be. What other explanation was there for the snake? It was nearly winter, and there was nothing to eat in the blackened and dead thicket and so why would a snake be here? I didn't know if it was Flint's pet, Nigel. He knew my feelings

about snakes and since that day he'd frightened me he'd been careful to keep them out of my sight.

'Look out,' I called softly to Marsh. I didn't want to frighten him. 'Snake, near your feet.'

It gave me the creeps but in all fairness the snake got the rougher deal. It had been manhandled by Flint and then had Marsh screaming blue murder, doing a dance above its head. I didn't find it funny because I felt sorry for it.

Flint thought it was hilarious, though. He laughed about it for ages afterwards. Which made a nice change from his anger.

*

He was angry a lot, in those first weeks after the fire. Angry about the consequences. Which seemed never-ending. The psych appointments and Lars, then the tennis lessons and Marsh. All keeping us apart.

But after Marsh had been and gone, and obviously was never coming back, tennis petered out for the simple reason that Mum came along one afternoon to watch and saw I had no talent (I admit I played badly for her benefit), and after that it didn't take much to convince her that going was a waste of time and money. Then I no longer had to go to the psychologist—another expense, and a big one apparently—and Dad had never been keen on it in the first place. Lars continued to come but it was only a couple of weeks after that, that he stopped. We were sitting at the kitchen table one afternoon working on a maths problem when Mum came in to get us a drink and a plate of biscuits, as she always did. Lars pushed his glasses up his nose and told Mum he wasn't going to come anymore, that I was regularly beating him at every card game, and I was doing just fine at my schoolwork. He didn't think there was anything more he could do for me. It'd been two months, he went on, and he needed to concentrate on his own studies. Mum asked him what he was going to do and he said psychiatry and my mother's eyes grew big and she nodded earnestly. I said goodbye to Lars that afternoon. He gave me a high five, then took off on his bicycle, pedalling furiously up the dirt track and back into town, tufts of hair sticking out of his helmet. I saw him just the once after that, outside the town's library, and he said, 'Well, if it isn't Miss Estella,' and hooted. I

think he laughed like that because he was shy and it was his way of getting through any awkwardness.

And so Flint and I were on our own again. And he seemed to put it all behind him, and we fell into our old ways. Playing cards, acting out dramas, and disappearing for hours wandering around Sargasso.

Now

A few days later I'm washing our clothes by hand in the laundry at the back of Sargasso, when I hear Flint call me. I told him I didn't want to visit the laundromat. This takes longer, and is work, of which I'm not afraid, but importantly it means I don't have to leave him, and he seemed pleased by my logic.

I step out the door, shaking my wet hands, and he comes at a run, around the side of the garage.

'Come with me.' He smiles and holds out his hand. 'I want to show you something.'

'What is it?'

He grins.

'Not telling.'

He leads me to the front of the house, and we walk up the driveway towards the track to the coast road.

It's another perfect day. A slight sea breeze, the sun high in a cloudless azure sky.

'What've you been doing?' I ask. 'I mean, since I saw you at breakfast?'

'In your parents' room, second coat, then I saw something from the window.'

'What?'

‘Ah-hah!’ he says mysteriously.

He swings my arm up behind me in the air, and lets it fall back down.

‘Ouch.’

‘What?’

‘I’m not so young anymore, you know.’

‘What are you talking about?’ he says. ‘You’re just a little chicken.’

He lets go of my hand and pulls me in close, his warm arm around my shoulder. We walk hip-to-hip up the track.

‘You’ve got to be quiet,’ he whispers.

‘Aren’t I always?’ I whisper back.

A muffled snort of laughter. ‘No.’

He veers off the track to the right and we walk through thick sand and the odd clump of *paspalum*, avoiding the occasional gum. These are the far reaches of the beach. And when we arrive at two eucalypts growing side by side, he pulls me behind them.

Between the closely spaced trunks we have a sliver of view: the white sandy beach dunes, the spikey yellow grasses, the odd squat bush. To the left the land rises and the undergrowth begins; the coast road is up there somewhere. And down to our right, a long way off, the sea. I hear the boom of rollers breaking on the beach. See the silver shimmer of sun on wet sand.

‘What am I looking for?’ I whisper.

‘Wait and see,’ he murmurs, positioning himself behind me with his hands on my shoulders.

I wait. I’m conscious of the heat of his body. His breath tickling my ear. The reality of him is still complete and utter joy. He leans forward and nibbles at my earlobe.

‘Stop that,’ I say. ‘How can I concentrate when you’re—you’re ravishing me?’

‘Shh,’ he whispers and nibbles some more. And then I see them amongst the dunes, a family of wild rabbits. A doe and her six bunnies. The bunnies are petite. Pale grey with white bobbing tails. They are little bits of bouncy fluff, and they keep very close to mum. She edges forward, her nose twitching, and the little tufts of fluff bounce around her like tennis balls.

‘Aww. They are so sweet.’

‘Hmm,’ Flint murmurs, lifting my hair and kissing the nape of my neck.

I tear my eyes away from the rabbits and half-turn.

‘You know what? I think you’ve brought me all this way to—to—’

‘Possibly.’ He stops kissing me and puts his arms around my neck and hugs me. ‘I love you, Hannah,’ he says, and I fall in love with him all over again. It seemed to me, during this time, that every day there were moments when I was in awe of *us*, of him. That by some small gesture, or look, he took my breath away.

I return to the rabbits. I’ve found them again when they skitter every which way and are gone so quickly it’s hard to comprehend. Then I hear a vehicle turning onto the track. Somebody is driving in to Sargasso.

We dive around the gum trees, so that we’re obscured, and Flint peeks around the trunk.

‘I think it’s your friend Marsh,’ he says.

‘He, who was frightened of snakes?’

‘That’s the one.’ Flint sniggers.

‘Shh,’ I say, as the vehicle brakes in the driveway and the engine is cut.

‘Hannah?’ he whispers.

‘No,’ I murmur, ‘you can’t. It isn’t fair. He really doesn’t like snakes.’

‘Why should I care if he does or doesn’t? I can’t wait to see his face. It’ll be hilarious—’

‘No, it won’t. Not for him, it won’t.’

He pauses as if he might actually be taking Marsh’s feelings into account, but I think that’s unlikely. It’s more likely he’s thinking about where he can get one.

‘I may not find one,’ he says. ‘We’ll see. But you have to stay here.’ He’s serious.

‘Flint, please don’t ... I don’t want you to.’ But he leans forward, kisses me quickly on the mouth, and is gone. I sidle around the trunk, the bark rough and brittle under my hands, and see Marsh disappear into the portico. I duck back, out of sight. I don’t know where Flint has got to. He’s quick. He would’ve snuck across the track somewhere and gone into the thicket.

Perspiration dampens the back of my neck, and I fan myself with my hand. I think about foiling Flint’s plan and striding out into the driveway. But that would make him mad, and I don’t want him to be mad. I wonder what happened to the bunnies, and hope the mum gathered them all together again. A bird bursts into song above my head. I don’t know what kind it is

but it's happy, full of the joys of summer. Then again, perhaps it heard the word *snake* and is warning its friends.

When I peer out from the tree, Marsh is nowhere in sight. Clearly, he's in the house searching for me. The parked Golf. The front door wide open. It isn't an unreasonable assumption that I'm somewhere inside. I wonder what he wants.

I am still staring at the front of Sargasso when Flint slips into view. He's found one. A carpet snake is wrapped around his arm. He uncurls the python, sets it down in the portico and makes shooing movements with his arms. They aren't venomous—they kill their prey by constriction—but I don't know if Marsh knows that. Possibly he's got over his fear of snakes. That'd be the best outcome: that the prank will be a fail. The next thing Flint is around the side of the house, the side containing my family of agapanthuses, and is hidden from view, well, from Marsh's view. I can see him.

We wait. My anger grows. Why doesn't Flint ever listen to me? Why does my opinion count for nothing? In fact, does he ever take my feelings into consideration? Why is it always about him? Then I hear Marsh holler 'Hannah?' and 'Han—' The second Hannah is never completed. A strangled cry rips the air, and a crash as if someone has fallen over.

His khaki shirt half out of his shorts, he appears in the portico at a run, making a skip and a giant leap for his ute. He gets in, slamming the door. But his anxiety doesn't stop there. The engine howls into life. Reversing in an unruly and bumpy turn, he skids the tyres in the dirt, and takes off as if a thousand snakes are slinking and slithering after him. The brakes squeal as the ute slews onto the coast road.

Flint is in convulsions. He staggers back to me, hands on his hips, dragging his heels through the sand, laughing so hard he lurches against a tree.

'Did you hear the crash?' he manages to get out.

I nod, but I am striding back to the house.

'Hannah,' he calls after me.

I thrust my hands into the laundry water and pummel the washing. I think about Marsh and his terror. It isn't fair to inflict that kind of pain on someone. When Flint hovers in the doorway, I take no notice. I don't even glance at him.

‘Hannah?’ he murmurs.

‘Go away.’

But he moves in behind me and gently runs his hands up my arms and presses himself against me so that I smell him, so that I feel the warmth and power of his body against mine, the roughness of his cotton shirt against my back.

‘Flint,’ I warn. ‘Stop it.’

He nuzzles the nape of my neck. ‘Why should I? You like it,’ he murmurs.

He slips his hands under my T-shirt and cups my breasts and arches his hardness against me. My fingers in the water still. I close my eyes. I hear myself making animal noises, whimpering like a puppy, as I tip my head back against his shoulder.

He turns me gently around, pushes his hips against my pelvis and pins me to the laundry tub. Bending his face to mine, he kisses me softly on the lips.

‘I’m so angry with you,’ I murmur.

‘I know, and you have a strange way of showing it. But don’t let me stop you—’ he says, as I reach for his shirt and pull it from his shorts.

*

We have a week like this. A week of idyllic uninterrupted happiness. It might be ten days. I lose track of time.

Flint tells me he’s taken leave from work.

I order food and groceries over the phone and they are delivered.

I don’t think about much else. Although, occasionally I think of Bernie in his hospital bed and the story of Sargasso (or my father, I’m not sure which it is) I’m yet to hear. Now and then, I remember Tristan, and every so often I wonder what is going to happen when I have to return to my job.

We don’t work, or do much painting.

We are preoccupied. With each other. With the world within Sargasso.

But mostly with each other.

Then

Once, in the driveway, we were playing hide-and-seek. It was my turn to find Flint and I'd looked everywhere. I was getting desperate. The sun was bouncing off the house, glaring into my eyes, and my tongue was sticking to the roof of my mouth. Bending over, I pushed my hands up against the warm garage door and closed my eyes. I felt the nape of my neck burning but I stood there for a time, giving Flint every opportunity to run into base.

'Please come in now,' I muttered. 'I'm tired. And hot. Aren't you hot?' I kicked my toes against the door. 'Where're you?' I shouted at last, turning around with my eyes screwed shut. 'I give up.'

'I'm right here,' a voice said.

I blinked in fright.

It was my father.

He looked hard at me.

'Who were you talking to, Hannah?'

'I was ... I was ... talking to you.'

'No, you weren't. You didn't know I was here.'

I looked at the ground, clasped my hands behind my back. My face was flushing. I doodled in the sand with my toe.

'Were you talking to yourself?' he asked, more gently.

'Yes.' I looked up at him with relief. 'Do you do that?'

'Sometimes.'

He put out a hand and ruffled my hair. ‘What are you going to do today, sweetheart?’

‘I don’t know yet. That’s what I was trying to figure out.’

‘Why don’t we invite someone over to play—?’

‘No.’

‘But why not? It’s not good to be alone so much.’

‘I like being alone.’ I jutted out my chin. ‘What are *you* going to do with yourself?’

‘Me? I’m going up to my office.’ He tilted his head towards his studio.

‘So you also like being by yourself and not having friends over?’

That was my parting shot. I walked away to the portico. I glanced over my shoulder once but he stood motionless, staring at me.

By the time I reached my bedroom and peered out from behind my curtain, he was crossing the glass walkway and going up to his office.

Once I got out of the house it took me ages to find Flint, and even longer to calm him down.

‘What did *he* want?’ he demanded. ‘He was *spying* on you, Hannah. Why can’t he leave us alone!’ and so on.

Now

We are lying idly under the stairs one evening, dozy but not asleep. We never use the bed in my grandmother's room. For me, it has too many overtones of Tristan. No doubt Flint feels this way too, although he's never said.

We haven't made love for a day or two, and the last time we did I initiated it. As a consequence, I'm waiting for him to make the first move tonight, to show me he wants me. Of course, this doesn't mean we've stopped touching one another, hugging, holding hands, or sleeping all tangled up together. And it seems to me that he's actually happier when we're simply touching in some way than when we're in the act of having sex. Almost as if the sex is just to please me. It is odd; I've never known a man like this.

'Hannah?'

'Hmm?'

'How many lovers have you had?'

I turn to him. Flat on his back, he's staring up at the darkening sky.

'Does it matter?'

'You know it does.'

Abruptly, he sits up. He doesn't want me to see his face. Doesn't want me to know how much this conversation pains him. I put my fingers on the small of his back, move them against the bony nobbles of his spine.

‘Hannah?’

There’s no point fighting it.

‘Tristan ... Luke and Freddy,’ I tell him.

‘Only three?’ He glances at me over his shoulder. ‘You’re not lying?’

‘Why would I lie?’

A pause as he gathers himself for the next question.

‘Which one was first?’

I think about refusing to answer, but that would make him cross and I don’t want him to be angry. Especially not when we go to bed. I don’t want him to leave me again, either. Ever. *Ever*.

‘Freddy. I was still at school. He hardly matters.’

‘Everybody matters.’

My fingers move up his spine. He’s too thin in my opinion, but his body is strong, and he eats a lot.

‘What was it like?’

‘What was what like?’

‘You know what I’m asking you!’

I pause.

‘Why are you doing this to yourself?’

‘Answer the question, Hannah.’

I take my hand off his back. Turning my head, I gaze out through the glass walkway at the darkening driveway.

I remember rain bucketing down. Freddy crouched between my legs on a floor in a stable—where we weren’t meant to be. His parents thought we were upstairs, watching videos. If I close my eyes I can still feel straw clenched in my fists.

‘Hannah?’

‘It—it was awkward and clumsy ... And it hurt.’ I take a deep shuddering breath. ‘There. Are you happy?’

‘Why should I be happy?’ he demands in a strangled voice.

I roll onto my side, away from him. Through the thin glass I watch the thicket turn drab and become secretive, as the night closes in. I know there’s more, that what he wants to say he cannot articulate.

‘What about Luke?’ he asks at last. ‘What was he like?’ But I shake my head. I am not going to talk about Luke. Not even for Flint.

‘Hannah?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Which one made you the happiest?’ He nudges my foot when I don’t respond. ‘Hannah!’

‘One I haven’t mentioned,’ I murmur.

‘So, there was another one!’

The bitterness in his voice tells me he’s turned to me again. I have his full attention.

‘He’s the one I loved best of all,’ I say, pausing, so I can hear him breathing. ‘He was hot,’ I say dreamily. ‘Tall. With expressive eyes. And I couldn’t let him alone. I was addicted. I went back for more, again and again ... Night after night. I’ve never loved anyone like I loved him.’

I turn to Flint but he’s watching me with a slack mouth and such anguish in his eyes, I can’t carry on.

‘He was in my dreams,’ I tell him. ‘And his name was Flint.’

I roll over and push him down, covering his body with mine, and then straddling his hips. I rock against him until he hardens, take him inside me, and then I slow down. Clenching his torso between my thighs, rubbing one of his nipples between my fingers, making him suckle at my breast. It doesn’t seem to matter what I do as long as he can keep looking at me, and I at him. He insists on this. He gets a kick out of watching me pleasure myself with his body, I can tell. And little by little, and again and again, I arch against him, feeling him move within me and him wanting it now, wanting the climax, saying urgently, ‘Hannah, Hannah,’ but I tell him, ‘No, not yet.’ Until finally I relent and release the passion and the violence, the biting and the savagery, and we come together in a convulsion of fury and he howls my name, face raised to the sky and neck tendons straining. He always calls my name when he comes.

*

When we first began making love, I was in control. I was the initiator and the leader. And now, very often, I still make the first move, acting on my desires. But I know that it’s only because he *allows* this to happen, that if he wanted to he would dominate our sex life, but he doesn’t seem to want to, he seems happier for me to take control. But only in this aspect of our

relationship. Everywhere else he's the alpha male, in charge of me, patently possessive, there's no doubt about that.

Then

I knew that when I turned twelve and finished primary school I'd have to go to Melbourne and board like Kelly for high school. And, in my last year, I started to rail against this in the hope that Mum and Dad might make an exception.

I didn't like going places or meeting new people. It made me anxious and uncomfortable. I was happiest when I was left to my own devices. At home. I was what my mother called *a homebody*, and I used this observation to back up my arguments. In spite of my earlier promises to *not* behave as Kelly had done, constantly arguing and bickering with Mum and Dad, I began to act in precisely that fashion.

I'd been very careful not to let on to Flint about this. He would be upset. I remembered his reaction when I'd gone fishing with Dad, and had no doubt that the idea of me boarding, and us having to spend weeks apart from one another, would provoke a similar, if not more excessive, outburst.

The day started off badly. With no warning—and I knew why there was no warning—I had to go with Mum to the city to sit an exam at the school. Mum said it would enable them to see what I was interested in, but I knew it was to sort the not-so-clever girls from the bright ones.

While I was sitting at the desk in this great airy hall with the other girls, I did consider writing stupid answers. If my answers were nonsensical enough maybe I wouldn't have to go, but then I thought that would

probably lead to more interviews, and possibly even a return visit to the psychologist, so I didn't.

Mum had wanted me to wear a dress. I wore them under sufferance twice a year: on her birthday—because it made her happy—and on Christmas Day. But I made such a fuss, she compromised and let me wear a skirt and tights. The skirt was tartan and like the one Kelly used to have but unlike Kelly's it was long, and of course I didn't have a denim jacket, I had to wear a cardigan. And my black patent leather buckle-up shoes. There was no getting out of that. I noticed the other girls were mostly in jeans and runners and warm jumpers, and because I was taller than all of them I felt a little like a large version of Dolly in their midst.

There was one bit about the school I did like. It was the building. It was beautiful. It was old, and constructed of heavy blocks of sandstone. The roofline was decorated with turrets, and the windows were curved at the top like church ones. And it had a clock tower. That was probably my favourite part, the clock. The classrooms, although they were newish by comparison, were made of the same stone, and beside them was a huge oval of grass. When you were in class you could look out to the greenery and the blue sky beyond. Flowerbeds and stands of oaks decorated the oval. The tree branches were bare now and probably tree climbing wouldn't be allowed, but I looked forward to lying underneath the leafy canopies and gazing upwards.

After the exam and a tour of the grounds there was another surprise: an interview with the headmistress. I suppose you could say it went all right. It was too early for me to say whether I liked her, although she seemed to like me, and I had no idea how important this would become—during the difficult years.

I made her laugh. She commented that I was tall for my age. 'You're not at all like Kelly, are you?'

'No,' I said, 'I'm not.'

'Well, I hope you are a little like her in here.' She tapped her head. 'Kelly has been one of our best students.'

When she paused, letting that sink in, I tapped my head, mimicking her.

'I might not be the same as her in here,' I told her, 'but in here,' I put my hand on my chest, 'I think you'll find you like me.'

And she laughed. I think she was surprised. I don't know where my little speech came from. It just did. I thought, then, that it was possible we might get along, but as I said, it was too early to tell. I always took a long time to make up my mind about people.

After that I had to have a uniform fitting, and then we had lunch with Kelly, which was *dead* boring, and all the while the clock was ticking. My sister was a first year now at the University of Melbourne, living in residence, with lots to tell Mum, and very little to say to me. She had only an hour to spare, she told us three times. When she left, Mum said we had to go shopping. Apparently I needed new clothes. Apparently I needed a *bra*.

That was the final straw. I hardly had breasts at all, at least I didn't think so. They were only little swellings, and now I had to wear this irritating contraption. And I knew Flint would be able to see its outline underneath my T-shirt. *Flint*. All I wanted to do was to get home to him. I hadn't been able to leave a message, and he'd be annoyed I hadn't turned up. He'd known we weren't going fishing—we'd discussed that already—Dad had a client who wanted a sketch of a house by Monday.

Flint would've been lonely, too. I wondered what he would've done with himself all day.

By the time we turned onto the track to Sargasso, it was 16.58 according to the clock on the dashboard.

You would have expected that my preoccupation with time would've meant I had a watch, but I didn't want a watch. I didn't want to know *every* second of every day, only now and then. If I'd had a watch I would've been mesmerised by the seconds ticking by. I would've *wasted* them, watching time slip away. That was my obsession, that I couldn't prevent it passing.

'Can you drop me here?' I asked Mum.

'No. You can't go running around in those shoes or those tights. You must go upstairs and change.'

I hadn't forgotten what I was wearing. As if I could! But I was so anxious to see Flint I'd been prepared to risk the outfit. Actually, I wasn't sure how he would react. Would he laugh? Or would he give me that long studied stare he'd lately taken up, as if he were no longer sure of me, or of himself? He thought I didn't know he stared. But I'd seen him, and his glance away, and his reluctance to meet my eyes.

‘What’s the hurry, anyway?’ Mum asked.

Afraid of what I might blurt out, I didn’t answer.

In my bedroom, I shrugged out of my clothes, leaving them on the floor. Another no-no. I dragged on my jeans, hopping on one foot with agitation, and was halfway out the door while I was still pulling a T-shirt over my head.

When I bolted out the front, the shadows had lengthened, and the light was fading. It was cold. The chilly breeze of evening swept across the driveway shaking the leaves and raising drifts of dust.

I hurried to the back of the garage. The reeds chafed against one another in the wind, and the ants clung precariously to their swaying stems. ‘Flint’s not here,’ the reeds rustled.

On the beach big frothy breakers rumbled in to shore. Sea mist shifted across the cold hard sand.

‘Flint,’ I called, hugging myself, and shivering, ‘Flint!’ But I couldn’t find him, even though I ran all the way to our rock.

I tried the area alongside the garage, too. But the thicket was unappealing. Still growing back to its former green and dense self after the fire.

By now I was biting my lip with agitation. I didn’t care anymore about having time to play. All I cared about was finding my friend. I had to tell him I hadn’t deserted him; I’d been forced to go out. I didn’t know what I would say about where I’d been; that might come to me when I saw him. If I was lucky I could distract him with a game of cards. There wasn’t much time left for anything else but a hand or two of poker under the stairs.

Under the stairs. That was where I should’ve been looking in the first place. How could I have been so stupid!

I ran back inside.

I made sure the garage was open. I sat cross-legged under the stairs. Closing my eyes, I conjured up his face. Like I had when I was little. The green eyes, the long hairy legs, the intriguing dark down now visible on his upper lip. ‘Flint, Flint, Flint,’ I murmured.

But he didn’t show up.

Now

When I wake up one morning, I'm alone.

I jump up. Still wobbly on my feet, I run through the house.

'Flint, Flint,' I call. 'Flint!'

'I'm here ...' His voice comes from my old bedroom.

I pause in the doorway, getting my breath back. 'You're working.'

'I couldn't sleep,' he tells me, from up the ladder. 'I decided to do that second coat.'

'I thought you'd gone. I thought you'd left me again.'

'I don't ever leave you without there being a good reason.'

'Where do you go, when you leave me? Where is your home?'

'Oh, Hannah, do we have to go over this again?'

'Yes.'

'Okay, my home is here.'

'Very funny. Where do you work? Why don't you have a car?'

I have asked these questions before, with no response. This time is no different.

'I'm talking to you! I know ... I know ... you went to high school here.'

I am angry. Frightened. His absence has scared me, reminding me that he can disappear without warning, at any time.

'What?' he says, pausing in his painting.

‘You were friends with someone called Simon. I know his sister. She owns the coffee shop in town. Why don’t you want to share this with me? You were introverted,’ I say more gently. ‘I know your family didn’t have much money. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.’

He dips the brush into the tin and strokes it meticulously across the cornice as if I haven’t spoken.

‘I want to know all about you,’ I persist. ‘I need to—’

‘No, you don’t, not really.’ He stops mid-stroke to speak to me. ‘You’ve accepted me for what I am for so long, why should that change?’

‘But you never tell me anything about yourself.’ I am whining like a teenager.

‘I don’t need to tell you, Hannah.’

‘Where are your parents?’

‘Dead.’

‘But your things, your stuff—you must have possessions? A house?’

‘Of course I have a house. I also have you.’

He looks at me again, and smiles. He’s trying to cajole me. ‘Come here,’ he says.

I don’t want to fight him. I walk across the room and offer up my face, and he descends the ladder halfway and drops a kiss on my nose.

‘There,’ he says, as if I am a child to be placated.

I turn away. I am annoyed, although I don’t want to be. Why can’t he just answer my questions like any other normal person?

‘I’m going to the hospital to see Bernie this morning,’ I tell him.

‘What? Why?’

‘I want to see how he is.’

‘But you were there just the other day.’

‘I know.’

‘Hannah, you don’t need to go. We don’t need to be apart.’

‘I want to go,’ I say. ‘I like the old guy. Old people matter to me, Flint ... that’s just how I am. Besides, I’m only going to the hospital, not to Mars. I won’t be long.’

I will be as long as it takes Bernie to tell me a story. A story about Sargasso. I haven’t told Flint, but that look between the doctor—what was his name, Leon?—and Phillip has never left me. I need to settle it. To know what it is about Sargasso, or my dad, that I don’t know.

‘I don’t want you to go, Hannah. I told you before I don’t want you to see him.’

‘But I can’t stay here forever, Flint. There’s stuff to be done. I have to get groceries, for one.’

‘Why can’t you order them online, like before?’

‘Because it’s expensive. It costs money to deliver them. You know that.’

‘Very well. You do it at your own risk.’ His voice is emotionless, rather than angry.

‘What do you mean?’

But he dips the brush into the paint again and won’t look at me. Brooding, that’s what he’s doing.

When I call him for breakfast he doesn’t come. I go upstairs in case he hasn’t heard me. ‘Flint?’ I say, but he ignores me. It’s as if I’m not here. Uneasy, I stand in the doorway and stare at him, with no result. I come back downstairs.

No longer hungry, I skip breakfast. I’ll get coffee in town, I decide. It’ll do me good to sit down and think about our relationship. What am I going to do when my money and stress leave run out and I have to return to work? My leave is scheduled to finish after Christmas and just after the new year begins. How’s he going to cope with my absence?

Then

After I said goodnight to my parents that night I lay on my bed and read. I couldn't sleep. I was far too distressed about Flint, and there was so much to think about, what with boarding school and everything, I could hardly concentrate on my book.

My door was always left ajar and when I heard Mum coming upstairs I quickly turned out the light. My bedroom looked out over the driveway, and their much bigger one was across from mine, looking to the ocean. All I had to do was to wait for Dad to come up and sit tight until their door was closed.

Finally, I felt my way along the passage. I crept down the stairs, my pillow under one arm, dragging my doona in the other.

I had planned to open the garage door, and lie there and wait, but Flint was already there.

'Hello,' I whispered. 'How did you get in?'

'They forgot to close the door.'

He shuffled over making room for me and I plonked my pillow beside him, and crawled in.

We lay for a bit, not saying anything, watching the thick navy velvet embedded with glittering glass above our heads.

I heard Flint breathing. I thought I heard his heart beating, but it was probably my own, and I sensed the warmth of his body. But the silence

between us was so complete I thought I heard the planets grinding across the galaxy.

I didn't have the courage to say a word. I didn't know where to begin.

I'd been dying to see him all day and now that we were together I couldn't talk.

I couldn't even look at him.

All I could think about was going away. How much I would miss him. How heartbroken I would be. How devastated *he* would be. What would we do without each other?

There were moments when we were complete. More than best friends. He was me, and I was him. Inseparable.

A lump was in my throat the size of a tennis ball. Everything was exaggerated: my heart beating painfully, my chest far too tight for my ribs, my sense of smell, of touch.

Cold and shivering, I pulled the covers up to my chin, pushed one arm underneath, down the side of my body, and immediately met his. I flinched, but I didn't move it away. His skin was warm, I felt its hairiness, and the backs of our hands touching.

And when, finally, I couldn't stand it anymore and glanced at him, he said, 'It's all right. I know where you've been.'

'*You know?* How do you know?'

'I'm not stupid.'

I gave a tremulous sigh. My anxiety had all been for nothing. Not only did he know I'd have to go to boarding school, but he seemed accepting of the fact. I wondered how he knew. Had he been spying on my parents?

'What will you do while I am gone?'

'What do you think?'

There was such a note of misery in his voice I caught my breath.

'Wh-what shall we do tomorrow?'

My voice came out falsely bright and quavering with tension. But I needed to say something—*anything*—to distract him, to lighten the moment.

'We have the whole day. We could do anything you like. What do you feel like doing?' I rabbited on.

'Nothing,' he said.

'Nothing?'

He rolled over onto his chest, propping himself up on his elbows, and his face loomed above mine.

‘Hannah?’ he said tentatively.

Even if I had wanted to, I could not have said anything.

I reached for him and pulled him into my arms, and he came willingly, lying along the length of me.

And then I kissed him.

It was a silly schoolgirl peck, the lightest touch of my lips on his, but everything compounded it: the smell of him, the darkness as his head blotted out the stars, the dry warmth of his skin under my hands.

‘Hannah,’ he started again, ‘you’re—’

‘Shh,’ I murmured, and then I opened my legs because he was heavy, and his pelvis fell between my thighs.

Abruptly he pushed himself off me and sat upright.

‘What?’ I said to his back.

‘Go,’ he said harshly, staring into the darkness. ‘Go.’

And when I didn’t move, ‘Hannah! Get!’

Tears started in my eyes. I grabbed my doona and pillow and scuttled out. Half-limping, I stumbled along the walkway without looking back.

*

I spent Sunday in my room, alternately trying to concentrate on my book, and pacing the floor. Every so often I would lean out the window and stare with desperation into the distance, at the fire-scarred thicket, at the dusty track leading up to the bedraggled eucalypts, at the empty forlorn driveway.

I wanted so much to see Flint, and yet I didn’t.

I was afraid.

Afraid of something I did not understand.

Now

Just before nine-thirty I find a parking place outside the hospital without too much trouble. I am getting out of the car when my phone rings. It's my sister. I can guess why she's ringing. I pick up. I want to get it over with.

'Hello?'

'Hannah.'

'Kelly.'

This is the way she likes to talk on the phone. I have to acknowledge her and pause. She likes to think she has control.

'What's going on?' She comes straight to the point. 'I spoke to Tristan last night. He ... he told me something about you and someone called Flint. Is it true that you've given him up for Flint? *That* Flint? From your childhood?'

I say nothing.

'You know we never met him.'

'That's not my fault.'

'Well, I wouldn't entirely agree with that. You never made the effort to introduce him to us. Hannah?' when I don't respond. 'Are you eating properly?' she asks. 'Looking after yourself? When do you expect to finish the house? What are you doing with it?' She pauses and I hear her tapping her pen against her teeth. She knows she shouldn't; she knows it's bad for

her pearly whites and believe me hers are pearly white, but when she's agitated she can't help herself.

'Tristan's such a nice guy—' she's almost wistful '—he was so good for you. What were you thinking, dumping him? Hannah? Hannah!' she exclaims a third time when still I don't reply.

'I'm still here.'

'Well?'

'Well, nothing,' I tell her. 'I have given him up for Flint.'

'I think you're making a big mistake.' Tap-tap. 'You've no idea, have you? No idea what you've lost. Really, Hannah!'

'It's my life—' I start.

'I've got to go,' she tells me. 'I'm due in court and I've done no preparation thanks to worrying about you.'

She disconnects without saying goodbye. She's flustered, I can tell. I picture her in her black power suit—it has to be black because she's fronting the judge. If she wasn't, it would be lemon or dusky pink—she likes to defy convention. Her suit skirt will be short but not ridiculously so, and her long black hair will be wound into a bun. She'll be wearing sensible shoes that she'll swap for Jimmy Choos for dinner later tonight with Sam. *Sam*. I wonder what's happening there? I don't think she's going to appreciate it if I get married before she does.

Then

The following weekend Dad went out in the little boat. Alone.

I hung around the house, waiting for Flint, wondering what was going on between us, and what I would do or say when I saw him. *If* I saw him.

I had got up very early, as I'd done all week, remembering how things stood between us as soon as I woke, and helpless to drift off again.

At my bedroom window I'd looked out at the pale clean sheet of sky. If I were a grown-up I could have got someone to write in the heavens for me, to leave a message for Flint. But what would I say? This time saying sorry didn't seem appropriate, didn't cover it. What I'd done went far deeper than that. It was sexual and overstepped the bounds of our relationship. Nothing would be the same again between us. Even if we tried to put it behind us, there'd be moments when he caught my eye and I'd know what he was thinking. And vice versa.

I was pounding a tennis ball against the eucalyptus trunk alongside the driveway, when I heard Dad.

'Coming fishing, Hannah?' he called from the portico.

I glanced around and saw him outlined by the bulk of Sargasso. Both my father and Sargasso, waiting expectantly to see what I would do next. The house was in cahoots with my father. A witness to my behaviour, too.

'Er, no.' I caught the ball and put my hands behind my back as if I'd been sprung doing something naughty. 'I can't,' I said, pushing a stone in

the dirt with my big toe.

Lies again. I had lost count of how many I had told.

‘I have a project to finish.’

‘A project to finish and you’re playing ball?’ Dad clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. ‘Better get to it.’

‘Yup,’ I said, ‘I will.’

I bolted past him, giving him the briefest of glances.

Disappointment was in his eyes, and that same hurt bewilderment I’d seen on his face those years before with Kelly.

I nearly stopped in my tracks. I almost crumbled. Oh, if only I had! If only I had changed my mind.

But I didn’t. *I didn’t.*

I didn’t give up waiting for Flint to go fishing with Dad.

I chose Flint over my father.

Then

Dad never returned.

In the early afternoon a storm came up out of nowhere, which the weather bureau—in whom he had so much faith—had not predicted. A gale force wind, waves as high as three metres, and lashings of rain.

And in the morning, in the calm, the little boat washed up on the shore, but my father was not in it.

Three days later his body, battered and bruised, was found on the beach. They called off the search and the rescue boats, and a month later the coroner issued a verdict. He went on in detail about the storm, and the weather bureau's error—various meteorological conditions making it impossible for them to get it right—and the fact that no life jackets were in evidence, and concluded with a verdict of accidental drowning due to extreme weather conditions.

Mum had said goodbye to Dad in the kitchen. She was baking some Greek treat. She gave up driving down to the beach with him and walking back because she was *baking*—she never let herself forget that. And shortly after Christmas, when her grief combined with my own almost destroyed us both, Gran persuaded us to return to Melbourne. And so we left Sargasso, and the house, which was actually Gran's, went on the rental market.

I never got to say goodbye to my dad, to apologise for my lies, to tell him how much he meant to me, to say how much I loved him.

My grief almost destroyed me because it was compounded by the fact that not only did I lose my father, but I lost my best friend, too. I lost Flint. For in those months between losing Dad and returning to the city, I never saw Flint again.

Now

In the hospital ward Bernie sits up in a chair beside his bed. He's staring into space, but has some ruddiness in his cheeks.

There's no one else in the room. The previously occupied beds are now empty. I wonder what he's been thinking about, all alone like this with nothing to do. Clearly, he doesn't read. There's no evidence of a book or magazine close at hand.

'Hannah!'

'You remembered my name.'

'I don't forget a pretty girl.'

Some men just like to flirt. They don't mean any harm by it.

'How are you?' I ask.

'Getting there. At least they know what's wrong with me now.'

I perch on the end of the bed.

'And?'

'I've got an ulcer. Big.' He grimaces. 'Big enough to make me pass out the other day. They're going in there tomorrow to see what they can do.'

'Poor you.' But I don't want him to dwell on the operation. Being anxious will make it worse, so I change the subject. Not really for the better, though.

'How's the shop going?' I ask. 'Is it still running?'

‘For the moment but I don’t know how long. Of course it’s the shop that’s given me the ulcer in the first place.’

I don’t argue. I don’t know the ins and outs.

‘Phillip’s putting a fair amount of pressure on me to sell it.’

‘And you’re not likely to find a buyer because of the other hardware store.’

‘You’ve got it in one.’

He looks at his hands. They are big, gnarled and bumpy with arthritis.

‘Finished painting, yet, love?’

I laugh. ‘It’s a big job.’

‘It’s a big house.’

‘Bernie,’ I say, ‘when I was in here the other day you said something about the house, something about it being a bit of a story. Can you give me a shortened version?’

‘Tell you what,’ he suggests, ‘walk an old man out to the verandah so he can have a smoke, and we’ll have a yarn.’

As instructed I find cigarettes and a lighter concealed in an empty chocolate box inside his bedside table drawer. I put them in my shoulder bag and help him from the chair. We shuffle out to the verandah adjacent to the ward, and sit in the shade on a long wooden bench. The verandah looks out over a sunny paved courtyard containing some pot plants clumped together and three wooden benches, empty. I pass him the lighter and cigarettes and he lights one with shaky hands.

‘Are you allowed to smoke?’

‘I won’t say anything if you don’t.’

He puffs silently. I sit hunched forward, feeling uneasy. Kelly’s phone call has unsettled me. I shouldn’t be making a big deal out of this.

‘Living alone is for the birds,’ he says, apropos of nothing.

‘Too right.’

It doesn’t bother me that he’s blurted this out. That happens with oldies. Sometimes they say what they think. Sometimes it’s hurtful, sometimes it’s funny. This is neither, just something that strikes a chord with me, too. He draws on the cigarette, and I realise he needs an ashtray; he’s dropping ash all over the verandah.

‘Wait,’ I instruct and dash back into the ward to pick up the nearest bin.

‘Here,’ I say, returning, and putting it at his feet. He tosses in the stub and leans back in his chair. Folds his solid, hairy arms.

‘So?’ I ask.

He smiles at me and reaches for the cigarette pack and taps out another. I get the feeling he’s enjoying himself. It’s taken me a long time but I’ve learned to be patient. I wait while he lights up. With his trembling hands he has difficulty getting the wick to flare, and eventually I take the lighter from him and flick it.

‘Ta.’ He blows out a perfect smoke circle. I give a little clap.

‘Could do a kangaroo once,’ he says.

‘A kangaroo? No kidding.’

‘Do I look like the sort of person that kids?’

‘I think you’re a larrikin from way back,’ I say, grinning. ‘You could be my grandfather, you know.’ It’s out before I’ve thought it through. The grandfather I never knew. My dad’s dad. Bernie’s about the right age.

He smiles at me. ‘That’s nice of you to say, love. You know, I don’t have any grandkids. I expect Phillip’s told you. And I could use a couple right now.’

I nod. ‘You must let me know ... whatever I can do to help.’

‘It isn’t so much that, as just having someone to chew the fat with. To distract me. I got too much on my mind.’

‘Sure,’ I say.

We sit companionably again. Me on my hands while Bernie puffs. The silence, while it’s there, isn’t awkward. I watch a dressing-gowned man shuffle from one side of the courtyard below to the other, and then begin the trip back again.

‘You’d be wanting to know about the house,’ he says at last.

‘Yes, please.’

‘It’s not too long a story,’ he tells me. ‘Actually, it’s quite short.’

I nod encouragingly. I imagine he’s having trouble knowing where to begin. And then I think, why am I overthinking this, blowing it out of proportion?

‘You know your dad’s buried at the house, right?’

‘What?’ I blurt it out before I can prevent it. ‘No. I didn’t know that.’ My father’s buried at Sargasso? Why don’t I know this, and what does it mean? Where’s his grave? I wonder.

Bernie flicks ash at the bin. 'Well, now you do know, kid. Sorry if it was a bit of a shock. You might find the next thing even more shocking.'

'No,' I say, jutting out my chin. 'I can handle it. Go on ...'

'Er, the thing is ... the thing is people say the house is ... is ...'

'Odd?'

He nods, and I laugh in astonishment. *Odd? What the?* And I remember Tristan rushing in with wild eyes that time he visited, and of course the father with the pilot sunglasses who mentioned the word.

'That's it? That's all? The house is strange?'

He draws on his cigarette. Nods. 'Told you there wasn't a great deal to it. Just some people are funny about houses. I didn't know how you were going to take it. You seem to be quite accepting.'

I shrug. 'Well, I've never seen anything weird. Anything else I should know about?' I add slowly, carefully.

Bernie looks at me, and glances away, and for just a second I get the feeling that he's about to tell me a whole lot more, and then the moment passes.

'Nuh. That's it. You should ask Phillip about it. I don't believe it myself, but he's got it all documented, what the previous tenants told him, etc. He knows the local history inside out. He's an expert.'

'Would he know where my dad's grave is?'

'*You* don't know?'

'No,' I say thoughtfully. 'I remember the day of his funeral, of course. I wasn't allowed to go. I was bundled off to one of my mother's book club friends. But I've never been told anything about his being buried on the property. I guess I just assumed he was cremated.'

'Not an unreasonable assumption. How old were you?'

'Twelve.'

'Hmm. Maybe that's your answer.'

I nod and hold out the bin for the stub, which Bernie's been nursing.

'I have a vague idea,' he says. 'About the grave.'

'You do?'

'Steady. *Vague*, I said ... According to Phillip, the original occupants of the land—'

'Indigenous people?'

‘No, English settlers, from way back. They owned the land over a hundred years ago and they’re buried on the property. I believe your old man is buried there, along with them.’

‘Really?’ I shake my head. ‘I’ve never heard any of this before.’

I’m suddenly cross with my mother. Why didn’t she tell me? And then I think—I *remember*—how she was afterwards, and I can’t say I blame her for never raising the topic.

‘Would those graves be on the house plans?’

‘I don’t know but that’s something you could check, love.’

I *do* know where the plans are. They’re sitting on top of a filing cabinet in Tristan’s apartment. I can picture them there. It’s a wooden filing cabinet, with three deep drawers, in the second bedroom that Tristan uses as a study. I left them there when I returned from the lawyer’s, from Mr Niall, after he read Gran’s will to me and Kelly.

‘Can I have another cigarette?’

‘You shouldn’t be smoking.’

‘Don’t you start. I thought you were on my side.’

I laugh. ‘I *am* on your side.’ I tap out a ciggie from the pack, prop it in his mouth, and light it for him. Although I shouldn’t.

‘Thanks, kid,’ he says. He pulls on the smoke, glances sideways at me.

‘What do you do for a living?’

‘I’m a nurse,’ I say.

‘Thought so,’ he says. ‘Well, thought it was something in that line. You’re different, you know. Caring.’ He nods appreciatively, and covers the back of my hand, patting it absentmindedly with his free one.

And for just a little while I let myself imagine Bernie is the father figure in my life when I have no father figure. And part of me is happy that I have found him, and part of me is sad. Happy, because we seem to need each other. Sad, because old people die. It’s a fact.

*

By the time I turn off the coast road into Sargasso’s entrance with some groceries and the newspaper, I am thinking about nothing else but my father’s grave.

I almost forget Flint wasn't speaking to me when I left. I glance at the clock on the dashboard; I've been away for well over two hours. Enough time for him to get over his little tantrum. Also sufficient time for him to walk out on me—leave me, again.

But he's in the driveway as I clear the eucalypts and motor down the track.

He's talking to the crows.

Well, that's how it looks, anyway. Kneeling on the ground, the two crows in front of him, his hands are moving expressively. Why am I surprised? He has an affinity with wildlife. I have remarked on this before. He rises hastily when he hears the vehicle and is opening my door before I have cut the engine.

'Hannah.' He takes me into his arms. We hug fiercely. He covers my face with kisses. His body is hard and strong against mine. Warm. Vibrant. Alive, and welcoming.

'What were you doing?'

'Talking to the crows.'

I look at him as if he's nuts.

'Why? What's wrong with talking to crows?'

'They're nasty pieces of work. They killed my cat.'

I open the boot, and he reaches for the groceries. 'Your cat?'

'The grave at the portico? That's my cat.'

'Maybe it was self-defence,' he says. 'Maybe your cat threatened them.'

'You don't kill someone because they threaten you.' 'You do in the jungle. You do *anything* to survive. Maybe the crows didn't want to live in fear of your cat.'

He walks off, laden down with the shopping. 'Anyway, I like them,' he says, over his shoulder. 'And they were here first. And being here first gives you rights.'

*

At lunchtime I relay what Bernie told me about my father, and the graves, but Flint's not exactly concerned, or interested. 'Hmm,' he says, and 'Really?' I am not all that surprised; he didn't like my father in the first

place. He didn't like fathers full stop. Understandable, given his own history.

'Oh, and he said the house was odd. As in weird,' I add, while Flint crams the last of his lunch into his mouth. 'You don't really care, do you?'

'No,' he says, talking with his mouth full. He's playing footsie with me under the table. 'I want to get the painting done,' he tells me, swallowing. 'That's my first priority. It's taking forever. And I have to go back to work at some point.'

'Work?' I echo. This is the first time he has mentioned his work. Raised the subject, of his own accord.

'Hmm.' Not looking at me he gazes at his empty plate.

'What is it you do? Do you work with animals?'

He shakes his head, smiles faintly. 'No.'

'Okay.' I pick up my sandwich and put it down again. I wonder if he's playing with me. Staring at him, I wait for some clue, but nothing comes. It occurs to me that like Bernie, he's enjoying the attention. And, for once, he's not fighting my questions.

'I know, I know. You're—you're a landscaper! You work with plants and trees.'

He glances shyly at me. Smiles mischievously, his eyes crinkling at the corners. 'Maybe,' he says. He pushes his plate away. 'Can you clean up here, so I can go back to painting?'

'Of course. I'll come help you later,' I tell him, 'but right now I want to walk around and look for these graves. You've never seen them, have you? You don't know where my father's grave is? Or these English settlers?'

He scratches at a blob of paint on his nail. 'I wish I could help you, Hannah,' he mutters, then abruptly pushes back his chair and rises. 'Don't leave Sargasso, not without telling me, please?'

'Okay,' I say. *Whatever*, I think. 'Flint?'

He picks up a Granny Smith apple and crunches into it. 'Hmm?'

'Could you help me plan a garden, out there?' I point beyond the patio doors. 'Something we could do together?'

'I'd like that,' he says, and his cheeks flush.

The idea pleases him. It pleases me, too. Finally, I know what he does for a job. Or do I? Why suddenly after all this time tell me what his job is? Was it just to distract me from talking about the graves, and why? He does

seem reluctant to even discuss them. But then I am accustomed to him being reluctant to talk full stop. Some girls in my shoes might've spat the dummy ages ago with Flint's refusal to answer questions about his life, and walked out. Ended it. But, to tell the truth, I've known him such a long time the lack of answers doesn't *really* bother me. Every now and again I do get insistent but, sooner or later, the moment passes.

As I tidy the kitchen I think about a possible location for the graves. I wish I had the house plans with me, but I never dreamt I'd need them. I'm relying on them indicating the location, though not of my father's grave, of course. But once I know where the settlers' graves are, I'll know my father's is not far away. Unfortunately, I'll have to speak to Tristan to get hold of the plans, and I'm not ready to do so. Just the sound of his voice will undo me.

Outside, I walk all the way around the house. It's 2.10 pm, warm and sunny, a sea breeze keeping the temperature bearable. The crows observe me from the branches of the tree as I amble towards the back of the garage. Crows don't perch. They take over trees and squat, bringing down the tone of the neighbourhood. I haven't been around the back of the garage since I moved the rocks from the front garden a month ago now. A month. I've been at Sargasso for a month. It feels much longer. I feel as if I've never been gone.

But the rocks are not there. I come to a halt unable to absorb the fact they've disappeared. Vanished. There's no evidence to suggest they ever were here. The earth is dry and flat, sandy, unmarked. I walk a little way towards the cliff and peer forward. If they've been rolled over the edge, some would have caught in the many gullies on the way down. But there's no evidence of that.

It's all very strange. Did I move them after that day? Have I simply forgotten? But I know I haven't.

Puzzled, I return to the front and walk to the left of the house, crossing over my path of agapanthus that could do with another watering. Perhaps I didn't put the rocks behind the garage in the first place. Perhaps I put them somewhere else? But that's stupid, I definitely left them there.

By four o'clock I've covered every inch of ground all the way up to the track leading to the coast road. The only place I haven't been is into the thicket, the infamous thicket, alongside the driveway.

I return to the house, but before I go in I turn on the hose and drench the agapanthus. Flint opens my bedroom window and calls out while I'm busy.

'They're looking good.' He means the plants. 'I'm completely done in here,' he tells me, and closes the window.

He appears in the portico with the paintbrush and roller. I disconnect the hose, and while he washes his painting tools under the tap I tell him about the disappearing rocks, about how I've looked everywhere except in the thicket.

'So now I have two puzzles,' I say. 'I started off with one and have accumulated another.'

'But you like puzzles.' He pushes his fingers through the brush, not looking at me, concentrating on getting out every last bit of paint.

'Ye-es,' I say. 'But I'll have to talk to Tristan to get the plans, and I don't want to. I can't ... I can't face him. Not yet.'

Flint glances up at me.

'Let's go look at this garden we're going to plan,' he says.

*

All the next day I find myself thinking about the graves, particularly Dad's grave. It's important. I need to acknowledge it, visit it. I want to sit with my dad's remains for a while. Just like I sat with Bernie. Companionably. Comfortably.

Even when I'm sanding windows, cleaning my paintbrush, and kissing Flint, I think about Dad's grave. And sometimes it's only Dad I think of. Other times it's Mum, and Dad. But mostly it's the grave: eating at me, gnawing at me.

I need to do *something*.

Now

In the afternoon we're working in my old room when I tell Flint I'm going downstairs for a drink of water and ask him does he want anything? An apple, he says.

In the kitchen, I find two missed calls and a text from Gwen Trioli, my replacement at the retirement home. A jolt from the past. And while I haven't exactly forgotten what I once did, it isn't something I've been thinking about.

Hey, she's texted, tried calling to tell u Ted Harris died this am. Sorry ☹ Family are in denial. You'd swear we told them he would live forever. xx

Even as I read the words my eyes are filling with tears. I've known this day would come and it's still a shock. It always is. I loved the guy. He had such a positive outlook on life. Put everyone else to shame. I will miss him dreadfully when I go back.

Thanks, I write, sniffing and smearing snot across my cheeks with the back of one hand. Sad to hear that. But it wasn't any kind of a life, was it?

I pause there, and then I backspace and take out that last sentence because it could be open to interpretation. But then my words feel inadequate, so I add, *Give my love to the girls. And Joe. xx*

The girls are the other nurses, and Joe is the handyman/porter. It's rather a pathetic response but I press send before I change my mind.

Before I lose my nerve I phone Kelly. It is 4.32 pm. 432! Not an inconvenient time to phone. Almost the end of the working day.

‘Hannah.’

‘Hey, Kelly.’

‘What’s the matter, Hannah?’ She sounds tired. ‘I’m in the middle of something.’

‘It’s Friday afternoon,’ I tell her, wondering if she ever winds down.

‘I know.’

‘The house plans—’ I hate asking a favour but I have no option. ‘Do you think you could get them from Tristan and post them to me?’

‘Why do you need them?’

‘Could you,’ I repeat, ‘get them from Tristan?’

She sighs as if I have asked her for the moon. ‘I don’t know. I’ll try. I’ll certainly tell him you need them—’

‘No, don’t do that—’

‘Why not?’ She pauses. ‘It might be a good thing if he goes down there and meets Flint. I’d like to know what he thinks of the man.’

I’ve been working away at a mark on the countertop while I listen, and I’ve rubbed so hard I’ve almost taken the skin off my finger.

‘I don’t want him to do that,’ I say, sucking on it.

‘Why not?’ she says again. ‘You don’t want to see Tristan, is that it?’

She waits but I can’t think of a comeback.

‘Are you still in love with him?’

‘No,’ I tell her, ‘I’m not.’

‘I think you might be.’

‘You wish.’ I wasn’t going to ask her but I need to change the subject. ‘You don’t know where Dad is buried, do you?’

‘Gosh, Hannah, that’s going back a long time. I was at boarding school. I didn’t go to the funeral—’

‘I know you didn’t—’

‘Well, you can’t expect me to remember stuff that happened when I wasn’t there.’ Then, ‘Sorry,’ she says, ‘I have to go.’ And disconnects.

*

When I get back upstairs, Flint puts down his roller.

‘Got my apple?’

Blast. I smile weakly. ‘I forgot.’

‘Hannah, I only asked you for one thing.’

He looks at me with suspicion. ‘You were a long time. What else did you do while you were down there?’

‘I had a text message.’

‘And?’

‘Some old guy I know died.’

I kneel on the floor and pick up my paintbrush.

‘And ...’

‘And what?’

‘What else did you do? It couldn’t have taken all that long to reply, hmm?’

I come clean. There’s no point trying to draw this out any longer. ‘I phoned Kelly.’

‘What for?’

I glance up. He hasn’t touched his roller. He’s concentrating on me.

‘To ask her to get the house plans. To post them to me. I want to know where these graves are.’

He descends the ladder. I think he’s going to fetch his forgotten apple and I begin to paint the skirting board.

But he halts beside me. ‘Has she got them?’

I think about lying, about saying *Yes, Kelly’s got them*, but I don’t like untruths between us. ‘No.’

‘Who—’

‘Tristan. Tristan has them. I told you the other day. They’re on top of a filing cabinet in his apartment.’

‘Why?’

Now I look up at him. His face is severe with anger. ‘Because I left them there, Flint. Because I used to live with—’

I stop because he’s put up his hand to silence me.

‘That was stupid, Hannah, *really* stupid. Now we’ll have *him* turning up here.’

With the brush in one hand, I look at his boots. This is an odd time to think of it, but it reminds me of when we were children, and I had to kneel

in front of him and apologise. This time, however, I know what I'm expressing regret for.

'I'm sorry.'

He doesn't move away. He's frozen.

For a moment time stands still, only it doesn't. Can't. It never stands still. Somewhere it is always ticking, always moving forward. *Relentless.*

I wait to see what he will do next, say next. A small part of me is afraid. I remember how angry he used to get, slashing at stuff with his hand, kicking at tree roots. And I am close to his boots.

I put down my brush.

I rise until I am looking into his face. His skin is ashen, his nostrils dilated, his body rigid. He's not keen on meeting Tristan—that's an understatement. Or is it that he's not keen on *me* seeing him again?

'Flint,' I murmur.

I keep looking at him. I don't let my eyes leave his. I reach for the clenched fist at his side and gently unbend his fingers and with my other hand I trace the hard line that is his mouth.

'Flint,' I say again.

His fingers relax and entwine with mine. His face softens and his eyes flicker.

I put one hand on the warm nape of his neck and ruffle his hair and I draw his face to mine and still I keep looking at him and saying his name and then I kiss him.

He is a little slow to respond and I move my tongue against his and gently press myself against his rigid frame and then I curl a strand of hair between my fingers until it is taut like fishing line.

'Ow,' he says against my mouth. 'Let go.'

'No.'

'Hannah,' he groans. He jerks his head and my hand falls away and he pushes his fingers under my shirt and fumbles for the button on my shorts at the same time as he forces me up against the wall and we kick over the tin of paint and it goes everywhere, but we are oblivious.

*

Afterwards we lie quietly on the floor—away from the paint—exhausted by our passion.

It's intimate, our lovemaking, and animal-like. Wild. We bite each other and cry out. Always. But we are never selfish. We never stop loving one another.

He's dozing, cradled in my arms, when I gently rock my hips against his.

'Do you remember when we were children?' I say. 'Lying, like this, under the stairs?'

He smooths the damp hair back from my forehead.

'How could I forget?'

'What happened that night? What did I do wrong?'

'You were just a girl, Hannah.'

'You were young, too.'

'I was a teenager, you weren't.'

'So?'

He turns his face from mine.

'Did you ... did you want me?' I tease gently. 'Did you have an erection?'

'Hannah!'

'Why can't I know?'

'You were a child!' he admonishes me. 'It isn't appropriate.'

I bury my face in his neck in embarrassment. Maybe he's right. Maybe this whole conversation is a bit off. I think back to that night, to everything going from bad to worse. My lies to Dad ... the forlorn little boat aground on the beach ... never seeing Flint again ... moving back to Melbourne and all the sorrow that ensued.

I look up. 'But why did you ... did you leave me?'

I stumble over my words, my eyes filling with tears. So many times I've asked myself what might've happened had he not left me.

'You pushed me away. All you could think about was your father.'

'Did I?' I don't remember doing this; I only remember Flint never coming back. 'I didn't mean to, you know. I-I didn't—'

'Shh,' he says, kissing my forehead. 'Don't dwell on it, Hannah. We're together now, that's all that matters. And I love you, I love you so very much.'

He rolls off me, dozes beside me, our legs still tangled up.

‘Flint?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Flint, do you want a baby?’

He jerks his head up. ‘*What?*’

‘I mean, not now, but some day ... Do you?’

‘No.’

‘No? Just like that, no?’ I pause. ‘You mean it’s not something you’ll even consider?’

His body stiffens alongside me. Extricating his legs, he rises from the floor and begins to pull on his shorts.

‘I don’t want children, Hannah. End of story.’

‘Oh.’ If I sound disappointed, I am. I didn’t think it would be something he’d refuse to even discuss.

He looks across at me, and my lip starts to wobble, tears springing anew to my eyes.

‘Oh, Hannah,’ he says.

I nod dumbly. ‘I didn’t think ... didn’t think you’d—you’d refuse ...’ I can’t finish.

He sighs. Bends his head. ‘I can’t have children. I thought you knew that.’

‘But there are treatments—’

‘Hannah, just leave it, okay?’

‘But Flint—’

‘Hannah!’ he shouts at me.

*

The sound of a vehicle in the driveway the following morning alerts me. I glance at Flint. We’re working in the kitchen. Sanding down the patio doors.

‘That’ll be Tristan, most probably. What are you going to do?’ I add, when he doesn’t say anything.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Are you going to come out and say hello?’

‘Hell, no—’

‘But why not?’

‘I don’t want to.’

‘Well, he might come into the kitchen, be prepared for that.’

‘No, he won’t.’

He works vigorously against the wood again, his back leaning into it, not looking at me. ‘You won’t let him. You’ll talk to him in the driveway. He’s *not* to come in, do you understand?’

Putting down my sanding block I take a deep breath. I remember the hurt, stunned expression on Tristan’s face the last time I saw him. I’ve adjusted to our separation but I’m still not ready for a face-to-face.

I check my reflection in the glass of the microwave, pushing my hair behind one ear, and Flint notices. His hands are still as he stares. I don’t want to glance back at him. I am frightened by what I might betray.

I open the front door. Tristan is kneeling beside Kotteb’s grave. My heart lurches, and I haven’t even made eye contact.

‘Hey,’ I say unsteadily.

‘Hey, yourself.’ He straightens the rough little cross with one hand. He’s carrying a sheath of red roses.

‘I miss Kotteb,’ he tells me. He rises then, holds the flowers out to me. ‘Here, these are for you.’

‘Thank you.’ I have to accept them, what else can I do? It’s a generous gift. There must be twenty buds, at least. Beautiful buds. They would’ve cost a fortune.

He’s wearing stone-coloured chinos and one of his good, casual white shirts, which is unlike him. I was sure that if he came down he would take the opportunity for a surf. He’s dressed up for me, I realise stupidly.

I wait, nursing the roses, while he dusts off his hands, his mouth in a strained grimace as if it pains him to be here.

‘D-did you bring the plans?’ I say, not meaning to start out so directly.

His eyes skitter away. ‘Is that all you care about?’

‘No. You know it isn’t.’

‘The plans are in the car.’ He makes no move to get them. He’s stiff, waiting for me to ask him in. And all the time he looks away from me, up at the roofline, then down the beach track, shading his eyes from the sun.

‘Shall I get them?’ I say, putting the flowers down in the portico.

He turns and holds out the remote and I hear the locks pinging. 'Front seat.'

The WRX is spotless inside. No beach sand, no damp towels. Or discarded T-shirts. In spite of the lingering fragrance of flowers, I smell cigarettes. He's smoking again.

He's right behind me as I straighten up. I catch a whiff of aftershave, my favourite one.

I hold the file to my chest—a barrier between us.

'Why do you need them?' He straightens his hair with his fingers.

'There's something I want to look at.'

'Oh?'

Unlike Flint, he seems genuinely interested. And I think why shouldn't I show him? He might have some ideas. I open the file on the car's bonnet, and riffle through it until I find the plans.

There are three or four waxy pages, all folded up, and it takes a little while to get them out and spread them. Fortunately, it's a calm day and there's no wind.

Tristan helps by holding down the corners of the plans.

'This is the rooftop,' I say, talking more to myself, trying to get my head around the lines and rectangles, and the distress of seeing Dad's signature at the bottom of the page.

'And this is the second floor.'

I shuffle more papers.

Of course the one I want would be last, but finally I have it in front of me. I stretch my hand across its surface, smoothing it, and stop in the corner where Tristan's hand waits to pin it down. He puts his hand on top of mine. It's warm and familiar.

'Don't.'

'Do you want me to take my hand away?'

'Yes.' I swallow. And he lifts his palm.

'This is the ground floor,' I tell him. 'I'm looking for graves.' The talking helps to calm me.

'Graves?'

'Apparently my father is buried here, on the property, near some graves.'

He brushes a fly from his face.

‘I know it sounds strange,’ I say.

I’m running over everything I see on the plan: the kitchen, the library, the staircase leading up to Dad’s studio, but there’s nothing. Nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to indicate graves.

‘Is the house haunted?’ Tristan asks.

I glance at him. ‘No. Why? Do you think it might be?’

He steps back and looks away.

‘That time you came,’ I say quickly. ‘That time when you ran inside and looked as if you’d seen a ghost, what happened?’

‘I don’t want to say.’

I fold up the plans, following the creases.

‘You don’t want to say because you’re scared of frightening me?’

I reach for the file on the roof, but he gets to it before me, and when he passes it he hangs on, forcing me to look at him. He’s concerned; I see it in his eyes.

‘I won’t be frightened. I’ve lived here all my life.’

‘Some of your life. You lived with me, remember?’ He blinks rapidly.

‘Or have you forgotten? We were happy, Han.’

He lets go of the file. I open it and shove the plans back inside.

‘Well?’ I say.

‘Well, what?’

‘What happened?’

‘Something was moving in the trees.’ He points to the thicket. ‘There. In the undergrowth. It was big ... crashing around.’

‘Was it a wallaby?’

He gives me a withering look. ‘No.’

‘So it looked like something?’

‘No, I didn’t see it. I only heard it. But something was ... was ...’

‘Was what?’

‘Odd. I felt strange ... Sad. Actually I felt like shit. I got into the car like I was going to go home. And then I told myself I was being an idiot and got out again. It was bizarre.’

‘Did you go into the thicket?’

‘Of course not. Are you crazy?’

I lift the file and stash it under my arm, but it’s too cumbersome. I bring it back out, hold it across my chest again, and stare into the thicket beyond

his car. It looks harmless. Ordinary. Scrub, lantana and weeds, eucalypts and wattle.

I turn back to find Tristan staring at me. I gaze down the dusty driveway. We say nothing. I'm afraid to be the first to move, to speak.

'Th-thanks for coming,' I say at last.

'Hannah,' he says, low-voiced. He's taken the car keys from his pocket and is clenching and unclenching his hand around them. 'Remember when I asked you to come home for Christmas ... Remember I told you I wanted to go away?'

I nod, not sure where he's going with this.

'I was going to take you to Paris. There's a little café in Montmartre in the shadow of the Sacré-Coeur, where they serve croissants and cognac, and out the back there's an archway with a lattice gate leading to a rose garden —'

Paris. The world tilts.

'I was going to ask you to marry me.'

He murmurs something in French, then. I don't know what it is because he's talking too quickly and moving on, not giving me a chance to absorb what he's said. A chance to respond. I am still stuck at Paris. Caught in a pew of the Notre Dame, cycling along the banks of the Seine, strolling down the Champs-Élysées.

'Come to lunch?' he asks.

'No,' I murmur, answering mechanically. 'I can't.'

'So you *do* want to come.'

He steps closer. A faint whiff again of aftershave. Of cigarettes, jarring me to my senses.

'You're smoking again.'

'What did you expect?'

He puts up a hand to touch my face. I step back.

'I just want you to be happy, Hannah.'

I should walk away, to the portico, to the front door. Close it behind me.

'Tell me you're happy with him— Are you? This Flint,' he says when I don't respond and I catch a note of disparagement. Throwing caution to the wind now, his eyes are holding mine, no sliding away.

'Can I meet him? Is he inside?'

‘No—’ I turn. Stride towards the house. ‘No, you can’t,’ I say over my shoulder.

I don’t look back until I’ve opened the door and stepped inside, remembering, too late, the roses.

He stands where I’ve left him. Staring at me. Then, abruptly, he moves and gets into his car.

I close the door and sag against it, shutting my eyes, steadying my heart. Paris. *I was going to ask you to marry me.*

I hear the Subaru accelerate as it turns onto the coast road. Second gear into third gear. Third into fourth. And finally, with a roar of anger, fourth into fifth.

Now

In the kitchen, everything—sanding blocks, varnish—has been abandoned. The newspapers protecting the floor lift in the breeze coming through the open patio doors, and I catch them before they fly away. I stop for a moment in the sunlight, but I don't feel its warmth.

Flint's not here. He's walked out on me. And I have no idea when he's coming back.

I put it all away, all the painting paraphernalia, with a heavy heart. In the garage, in a neat pile. I sweep out the kitchen, wiping down the counters and mopping the floor. And I fetch the roses and put them in an old paint tin on the countertop. It's all I have big enough to contain them. I know why he's brought roses—he used to send me a dozen every Bastille Day, sometimes scattering half the petals all over our bed.

Upstairs, I distract myself by washing my feet and changing out of my shorts into jeans and a clean T-shirt. I will go into town and see if I can track down information about the graves. The council office is where I'll start. I have to do something. If I stay here I will sink deeper into depression.

But as I go down the stairs it dawns on me—perhaps I'm still half-thinking of Tristan—that it's Saturday, and the offices will be closed. I won't get anything out of anybody until Monday morning.

What will I do with myself until then?

I reach the entrance hall. I stop in the middle of it. It's particularly hollow and vast this morning. Lonely.

I find myself looking down the passage that leads to the library. I haven't been into that room since the first day I returned, and then it was a quick cursory glance, the same when I'd looked for Flint. There wasn't a reason to go there.

I stride down the passage, compelled by some force I can't explain. What does it matter if I pop my head in there before I go out? I am going out, that's clear. I don't want to stay in the house, not after I've dressed up. Not alone. Not without Flint.

The curtains are closed. A faint light filters through, enhancing the wooden bookshelves. Shelf after shelf. From floor to ceiling. All bare. All empty. Waiting. I hear the clock ticking on the wall. I see its round outline through the gloom. Black-rimmed, white-faced. Erect, pompous Roman numerals. And I think it odd that the clock has been left. Did Mum decide to leave it for the next tenants, and how long do clocks last for, anyway? Being electric, I suppose it could last indefinitely.

The time is all wrong. It says twenty-three minutes past one. Nobody has reset it since I turned the electricity on.

I step into the room. I fancy I can still smell the pungent aroma of the lilies in their vase from all those years ago, and feel the prickly heat of that day I waited on the leather sofa. But I don't need to stand on the sofa to reach the clock now; I am tall and can lift it from the wall.

But as I lift it something goes awry.

Perhaps the sudden movement after all this time disturbs the wiring inside. The clock hands spin forward. All three of them go haywire. Crazy. Whirring with energy, they rotate around and around and around at an alarming speed. Relentless.

I drop the clock in fright. Suspended by the electric wires it crashes back against the wall. The glass shatters. The fragments tinkle to the floor. The hands stop moving. The clock swings, tap-taps against the wall, and then gradually, slowly, comes to a halt, the hands pointing to an indeterminate time.

Now

I stop at Bernie's hardware store.

The entrance throngs with customers. A sign, decorated with sprigs of holly but half-obsured by someone's shoulder, tells me it's four days until Christmas.

Christmas. The word Tristan mentioned this morning. I've been so caught up in my own world I had no idea.

Pot plants are for sale—last minute gifts—on a display table outside the door. Hydrangeas, in petal pinks, subdued blues, and violet verging on indigo. I select a violet one, find a ceramic pot to match, and take both items to the checkout.

The cashier, a schoolboy, is not familiar.

'How's Bernie?' I ask him.

'Who?'

'Bernie, the owner.'

'I don't know,' he says. 'I just work here. Someone called Phillip employed me.'

He rises on his toes and peers over the heads of the customers. 'There. Down the back. The guy with the bow tie.' And the boy rolls his eyes.

I crane my neck and see Phillip, holding a packet of what looks like fertiliser, deep in conversation with a customer. The boy's right, he's wearing a bow tie ... in a hardware store. I pay for my purchases, decide it's

too difficult to make contact and this is not the time, nor the place, to talk local history or graves, and head out to the Golf.

*

It's only been a few days since I was with Bernie, but he isn't in his usual ward. It's a little confronting because the ward is full of strangers. It's gone from being half-occupied to overflowing. Christmas has that effect on the elderly.

I walk back down the stairs to Reception and ask where I can find Bernie McCauley. He's been moved from where he was, I explain.

The receptionist looks at her computer. It's the same woman I met before, only today she's wearing a headband of reindeer antlers. She turns her head from the screen to me. The antlers quiver. 'Are you family?'

'No,' I tell her. 'But I found him. I'm the one who found him ... on the floor of his shop.'

She shakes her head. 'No can do.'

'Why? What's the problem?'

She checks we're alone, lowers her voice. 'He's in intensive care. His ulcer haemorrhaged yesterday. And I didn't tell you that.'

*

The town is way too busy for me; I'm not good with crowds. I'm also not feeling like doing anything after the news of Bernie's decline. A haemorrhaging ulcer can be life-threatening. I decide to buy my groceries and get out as quickly as possible.

The supermarket is hectic, and I have to wait for a vehicle to pull out before I can park. It's lunchtime and a Saturday *and* not long 'til Christmas. What did I expect?

I pick up a basket and wriggle through the turnstile, waiting for a woman to guide her overloaded trolley past me before I step forward. The noise is deafening. There are people everywhere, Christmas jingles playing over the sound system. I stop at a display of mangoes and heft one in my hand, checking its weight and ripeness. Two women nearby are calculating

how many to buy. One is counting off guests on her fingers. She is up to twenty-three.

Last year my Christmas Eve gathering consisted of three: Gran, Tristan and me. I invited Kelly but at the last minute she flew to New York with Sam.

I place the mango carefully in my basket and move on. I try to shut out the clamour and mass of shoppers bumping into and moving around me, and concentrate on what I might need in the next few days. What we might need, Flint and I, because we'll probably have Christmas together.

It will be our first Christmas together. I can't count the Christmases from my childhood, when I saw him for half an hour if I was lucky. Or not at all. Because I couldn't get away from the family.

Finally, my shopping is done, my basket heavy, and I lug it to the checkout and stand patiently in line behind a young couple holding hands, waiting my turn. The queue moves slowly. Somebody up ahead has more than twelve items and a ripple of discontent runs down the line.

I see them as I'm navigating through customers, making my way out—Marsh and Brodie, making their way in. I haven't seen Marsh, apart from the time Flint frightened him with the snake, since that day in the passage. For a minute I hope they haven't seen me, but the entrance is too confined and we will pass within a metre of each other. Marsh swings Brodie up into his arms; he's safer there. The child's still clutching his toy digger, but his little chubby hands are clean.

'Hey, Hannah!' Marsh, clearly pleased, smiles broadly.

'Hey.'

He brushes his hair back. It's clean and loose, bouncing on his shoulders, and he has more than a day's growth on his jaw.

'You're leaving,' he says, stating the obvious.

I shrug. 'It's mad in there.'

I transfer my gaze to Brodie. 'Hello. Do you remember me?'

He squirms with embarrassment.

'Hannah,' I tell him. 'In the shower.'

I smile and step forward to let someone behind me get past.

'Do you want to get a coffee?' Marsh asks. 'We can do the shopping after,' he says to Brodie.

Brodie nods. 'K,' he says. And then they look at me.

‘Let me get this into the car.’ I indicate my shopping. ‘Then I can think straight.’

They follow me out. Walking abreast with a child and attempting conversation would be foolish with all the cars coming and going, so I don’t even try. I have the boot open when they catch up. I’m a fast walker.

‘I don’t know about coffee,’ I say, thinking of Flint. ‘I really should get back.’ Can I count on him being there when I return?

Marsh puts Brodie down and he stands beside us with his dad’s hand protectively on his shoulder. He wears a white T-shirt bearing the outline of a Christmas tree with little coloured beads on the branch tips. I put the last bag into the boot and, making sure Brodie’s fingers are nowhere near the lid, bang it shut.

‘Your mum probably wants you back with the groceries, anyway,’ I say to him.

‘We’re separated,’ Marsh says quietly.

I draw in a breath.

‘Sorry.’

‘You weren’t to know.’

The sun is in my eyes. Bright and hot. I pull my sunglasses off the front of my shirt and slide them on, and feel a little less awkward. A little less conspicuous.

‘Ice cream.’ Brodie turns to Marsh. ‘Ice cream, Daddy? Please?’

‘I promised him one,’ Marsh explains, ‘after the shopping.’

‘Well, why don’t we do that?’ I suggest. ‘Skip the coffee—it’s way too hot for coffee, anyway—and get ice creams.’

‘Cool beans,’ he says.

*

Marsh licks at his ice cream, occasionally glancing at me over the top of Brodie’s head. Marsh has vanilla. I requested rum and raisin. Brodie has chocolate. I think you can infer things about people from the flavour of their ice creams. The three of us sit on a wooden bench facing the beach, with a market umbrella on a table shading us from the sun.

‘So is Tristan down at the house?’

‘No. No, I’m alone.’

‘You mean the lucky guy’s surfing?’

I lick at a drop of ice cream on my hand. Should I lie, or change the subject? But I don’t have to decide because he asks me something else.

‘What’s the wave like, down at your beach today?’

‘My beach?’

‘I always think of it as yours.’

I laugh. ‘I don’t own it.’

We watch people as we eat. Men with hairy chests and beer bellies bulging over board shorts. Lifesavers in Speedos. Bikini girls with the straps undone lying facedown on candy-striped towels. Boys throwing a footy. Sandcastles. The smell of coconut suntan lotion.

Sitting there with Marsh, and a little person slurping noisily at ice cream between us, I think this is what it must be like to be a family, and for a moment Flint and that other life seem unreal, otherworldly. A dream I slip into and out of.

‘Is he expecting you for lunch?’

‘Who?’ How much have I told Marsh? Does he know about Flint? I can’t remember.

‘Tristan,’ he says patiently.

‘Actually, he’s not here.’

He ducks his head and peers at me from under his thick fair eyebrows, and I’m glad for the sunglasses.

‘Trouble in paradise?’

‘Do you always ask this many questions?’

‘Sorry.’

I’m down to the last bit now, and Brodie’s attention is caught by my crunching the cone. His hands are wet with runny chocolate ice cream and his mouth smudged with brown. He smiles sweetly at me. He has tiny milk teeth. His eyes are astonishing, wide and blue. Not Marsh’s eyes.

‘We’ve broken up,’ I say around mouthfuls.

‘Broken up?’

Marsh is itching to know more, that’s obvious, but a tennis ball rolls to a halt under the bench and distracts him. He retrieves it and throws it back in a fluid movement.

‘Thanks,’ somebody calls, and Marsh raises his hand in acknowledgement.

‘So you’re all alone out there,’ he says.

‘Well, not exactly. There’s this guy helping me with the house. Flint. Do you know him?’

‘Should I?’

‘He was at your high school. A class or two above you. Bec—do you remember Bec?—Bec says he was friends with her brother.’

He shakes his head. ‘That guy wasn’t called Flint, he was Flynn. I remember that because of the actor, Errol Flynn. And I’m surprised I even remember that. School ... It wasn’t exactly a memorable time.’

It’s my turn to glance at him. He’s finished his cone and is wiping Brodie’s mouth and chin with his fingers. I pass him my paper napkin but Brodie says, ‘Dad, stop!’ And then, ‘Hannah do.’

We exchange a glance as Marsh passes back the paper napkin. ‘He likes you.’

‘Did you know it was me,’ I ask, gently wiping the little boy’s face, ‘on that first day when you came to change the lock?’

‘Of course—’

‘Why didn’t you say anything?’

‘I was enjoying myself ... because you didn’t know it was me.’

‘You’ve changed so much.’

I squeeze the sticky napkin into a ball. I wait out a respectable pause and then I say, ‘I really must get back. The groceries ...’

I leave it hanging and slip out from my seat, slinging my bag over my shoulder.

‘Thanks for the ice cream,’ I tell Marsh. ‘See you,’ I say to Brodie.

‘Kiss?’ he says. I glance at Marsh and laugh, then peck Brodie lightly on his sticky cheek. Above the sweet fragrance of chocolate ice cream, I smell a child. I’m not used to children.

‘Kiss?’ Marsh says hopefully.

‘Dream on,’ I tell him. ‘Bye,’ I say to Brodie, waggling my fingers.

Standing on the traffic island waiting to cross the road, I glance back. Marsh has turned his whole body so that his strong brown legs are now this side of the bench, his elbows leaning back on the wooden tabletop. He’s watching me.

It’s blatant ogling. Unsettling. I wonder if it has something to do with me telling him Tristan and I are no longer an item. If perhaps I’m wrong

about Marsh. Maybe he hasn't changed that much after all. And then I wonder if my unease has nothing to do with him but with the fact that he says the Flint who went to school with him and Bec was called Flynn. But anybody can make a mistake, right? Flint/Flynn. Who's to say Marsh is right and Bec is wrong?

*

It's from that moment, when I leave Marsh and Brodie, that I experience an overwhelming sense of loneliness.

By the time I reach Sargasso and enter the hall with my shopping bags, my heart is physically aching. Wearily I go back out to the car to fetch the hydrangea and when I return I place the deep blue flower in the ceramic pot at the bottom of the stairs, and stand back. It's effective, but I'm not happy. The single shrub, dwarfed by the sheer size of the entrance hall, only emphasises the emptiness. The starkness. There's something else too, which is silly. Only one thing belongs at the bottom of the staircase: a heap of pebbles with a seashell balancing on top. Anything else looks wrong.

I put away the groceries, and then I walk through the house. I begin on the rooftop and do a complete tour, every room—even my parents' bedroom and Dad's studio—but they're all empty and quiet. I hear my footsteps, up and down the passages and on the treads of the stairs. I hear the murmur of the wave breaking on the beach. The mournful lament of a solitary seagull. I think about Bernie lying in hospital alone, haemorrhaging.

In the glass room I stand at the window. It's stiflingly hot, the sea a silver platter reflecting light and rippling with movement. The sky is bare, a fraying remnant of washed-out cotton cloth.

When I step out onto the portico and look up and down, scanning the landscape for a form, a shape, anything that resembles Flint, I see the crows. They're sheltering in the eucalypts, out of the sun. They swivel their heads and give me a cursory glance. But they aren't interested in me. There's somebody else who means so much more to them.

I remember them in the driveway at Flint's feet, talking to him.

What is the connection between him and them? Why do I see them when I'm waiting for him?

I end up at the place under the stairs, sitting cross-legged on my blanket, picking aimlessly at a loose thread, unravelling several stitches. I curl up my fingers, force myself to lie back and gaze at the sky. Lie still.

‘All over Red Rover,’ I say.

My heart heaves. It heaves like a chained and tortured beast rising painfully to its feet in dank and dim quarters.

‘So,’ I whisper, with difficulty. ‘Jack of Hearts,’ I murmur.

But no one comes. Nothing moves.

I wonder how long I have to wait. How many more hours of loneliness I have to endure. Doesn’t Flint know time is getting away from us? Moving? Always moving. Always. Tick. And tock. Relentless. Relentless. Tick. And tock.

I picture him in my head. His lanky but restless frame. Brown hair. Freckles across the bridge of his nose. Green eyes. That sometime smile.

‘Flint, Flint, come back to me,’ I say, and I begin to cry, to weep. My heart is breaking.

Now

I wake because somebody is knocking on the door. I sit up to find the nape of my neck moist with perspiration. I don't know what time it is. I left my phone on the kitchen counter. But the air temperature feels cooler. The sun hangs low in the sky, and the shadows of the gum trees are long and indistinct.

A ute is in the driveway. Marsh's. I hadn't seen him for ages and now, suddenly, he's in my face. It's got to have something to do with me telling him Tristan and I are over.

I make my way to the front door. My tongue's claggy in my mouth. I want to brush my teeth. Rinse my face.

Marsh's on his own, but the shape of someone's head is in the cabin. Brodie.

'Hi.' I push the hair off my face. I wonder if it's obvious I've been asleep or, more to the point, that I've been crying.

'Hey.' He shifts from one leg to the other, clearly uneasy. 'I was wondering—' he begins, then glances away and his words all come out in a rush, 'I was wondering if you could look after Brodie for me, for a while? I just need to get some gifts. For Christmas. It'd be so much easier without him.' And he flashes me his best smile.

'Sure,' I tell him. What can I say? He's caught me off-guard, and I can't think of an excuse on the spur of the moment, not a credible one.

‘Oh, thanks,’ he says. ‘Thanks so much. I’ll just go get him.’ And he walks out to the vehicle while I wait in the doorway.

They return together, Marsh holding Brodie by the hand. Brodie’s still wearing traces of his chocolate ice cream, and clutching his digger, which gives me an idea of how I can amuse him.

‘I won’t be long,’ Marsh tells me. ‘Maximum two hours.’ He glances at his watch. ‘I’ll be back before seven, and he’s eaten. You don’t need to worry about dinner for him.’

I take Brodie’s little hand. I’m half-expecting the child to object to this arrangement, to kick up a fuss, but he waves goodbye to his dad, and we watch until the ute’s disappeared up the track. Brodie looks expectantly up at me.

‘Let’s go play cars!’

I lead him over to a sandy patch on the side of the driveway where, at some point, someone wheeled up a barrow of beach sand and dumped it at the side of the drive. Probably they were doing some masonry repair work. I get down on my knees, build some roads with my hand, and make encouraging *brum brum* noises, and he soon gets the idea.

But after a minute or so of trailing his digger through the dirt, he says, ‘Hannah have—?’ and pushes it over to me. I can’t work out what he calls his digger, but it isn’t a word I recognise. How sweet, I think, he’s sharing, without being prompted. I have a turn then, of navigating my route, while he waits patiently on his haunches for me to finish. He has cute little toes in little leather sandals and his feet are brown. I need something that can double as a vehicle, I think. Probably a plastic food container will do. It doesn’t have to be real.

‘Brodie,’ I say, standing up and dusting off my pockmarked knees, ‘Hannah’s going inside to get a digger. You wait here, and play?’ I don’t know why I speak like this, as if I am three as well.

He nods, propelling the digger through a hill of sand that’s particularly resistant, and making noises indicating the digger’s dropped a gear. So endearing.

I run back inside. In the kitchen, I find a plastic container. Then I think we probably could also both do with a drink. I certainly could. So I grab a bottle of cold water from the fridge and two glasses. I dither over this, but I don’t have plastic ones. He’s just going to have to manage a glass. The

container under my arm, and juggling the bottle and the glasses, I hurry back out again. I am perhaps three minutes?

Three minutes too long. Three minutes I should never have taken. Three irresponsible minutes.

Because when I go back out, Brodie is nowhere in sight. And neither is his digger.

I am not a parent, a mother, and it's hard to say whether my horror is as awful as a mother's might be. As Brodie's own mother's might be. To say nothing of Marsh. I can imagine that he would react silently and quickly. Efficiently. All I know is, I almost drop the bottle and the glasses. The plastic container certainly falls. Later, I find all these things in the portico, but I have no recollection of dumping them there.

Stupidly wasting time—I mean, it's clear the child's not here—I run over to where we've been playing and scuff the sand with my shoes. Right, I think, back of the garage. I careen around the corner, on the way remembering the cliff face and almost having an apoplexy, but I can't see him when I arrive. Breathless, fear pounding through my veins, I teeter on the edge, but there is no little boy's body on the sandy bottom, nor spread-eagled over a rock, nor caught halfway down a gully.

I run back to the driveway. What about the thicket, the clearing? That's close by; he could easily be in there. Calling his name, I hurtle down the path. It's overgrown and thick with wild grasses. I get halfway into the jungle-like gloomy undergrowth and shout again, stopping to listen for a response, but no child answers me. Surely if he were here, he would say something?

I jog back out again. I stand in the driveway, shifting impatiently, my head jerking around for clues ... And hear a seagull squawking, squabbling over something a long way off. The beach!

I charge to the path. Run helter-skelter down it, kicking up sand behind me. My head starts to throb with a stress headache, but I'm only vaguely aware of this. The fact that the light is fading is not in my favour. It's probable the child can swim, his father being a surfer, but if there's a rip, or he gets out of his depth ... it's unthinkable.

I reach the beach and have a clear view to the black rock and the water's edge.

But there's nothing.

What now? I'm hopping from one foot to the other ... one foot to the other ... How have I let this happen? What was I thinking, going inside and leaving him?

I don't have any other ideas. Perhaps there'll be some clue down at the water. I might find his digger. I set off again.

But there's no trace of anybody, anything living. I squint at the ocean, but I can't see a child's head in the water. Bobbing up and down. Being swamped by waves. A child losing his footing. I remember my mother arriving on the beach that day Flint almost drowned. Frantic. Flustered. Wild with anger. I am not angry; I am distressed beyond measure.

What about footprints? If I can find Brodie's footprints, then I will know he was here. He *is* here. I mustn't think of him in the past tense.

I walk back slowly along the tideline, but the sand is clear and clean. Smooth. Even though all the light is almost gone there is no trace of disturbance on the sand. Then I head back up to the path, and all I see are my own footprints.

I stand in front of the stygian bulk of Sargasso, dithering. I glance around at the house. 'You must've seen something,' I say. 'Please, won't you help me?'

But Sargasso says nothing. Does nothing. Only waits expectantly. What did I think it would do? How did I think it would help me? I have been reduced to talking to a house.

Oh, Jesus, what am I going to do?

I have to call for help, that's what I have to do. I must admit that I lost a child and call for help. I have lost people before—my father, my mother, Gran ... But this is the first time I have lost a child. Why am I always losing people?

My head pounding, I drag myself inside to look for my phone on the kitchen counter.

But I am stopped by bloodstains on the floor. No, not bloodstains, roses. Tristan's roses. They were on the countertop, but someone has upended the paint tin—water has pooled on the chequered tiles—and turfed out the blossoms. The flowers have been smashed, jumped on perhaps.

But I have no time for this now.

The battery of my phone is flat. In the red.

‘Arghhh,’ I scream, and my head threatens to burst from my skull. What a time to choose! I plug it into the charger, but I must wait long anxious minutes while it gathers enough power for me to make a call ... Make a call ... Do I even have Marsh’s number?

Oh, fuck!

Where’s the receipt from when he came to fix the lock? That will have his number on it. What have I done with it? Where did I put it?

I yank open drawers. Turf out stuff. Scatter papers over the floor. I’ve mislaid it. Can’t find it. I haven’t got it. Possibly Tristan took it since he paid the guy. ‘Possibly ... Possibly ...’ I talk to myself again as if I have gone mad.

I must call the police. I must call the police before I lose it completely.

Triple zero.

I punch in the numbers. It rings. I am waiting for the operator to speak to me when I become conscious of some small noises from the glass passageway. I walk slowly towards the doorway.

‘Hello,’ a voice says in my ear. ‘Please state your emergency.’

In the dying light of the day, a small child is sitting on my yoga mat in the place under the stairs. Brodie has a pack of cards in his hand, and he’s dealing out for himself and for someone who is no longer here.

‘Hello?’ the voice repeats.

*

I disconnect. Brodie looks up at me. ‘Hannah, play?’

I nod dumbly, touch my throbbing head, and sink to the floor. Pick up my cards.

‘Who was here, Brodie?’

‘Boy,’ he says, and smiles happily, as if it were fun.

It is all unravelling. What we have, Flint and I. What we *had*.

And I am choosing not to see it. Not to believe. I am looking the other way.

I don’t want it to end. I love him.

It isn’t only that I love him.

I don’t think I can live without him.

*

Marsh turns up for his son not long after seven and doesn't stay, although he drops hints that he'd like to. I don't invite him and, naturally, I don't tell him what happened. Dealing with the elderly, I've learnt the wisdom of this.

I clean up the mess of roses from the kitchen floor and manage to salvage three blooms that I put in a glass of water. I have a long shower and wash my hair and when I finally turn off the taps, the wind has got up. I hear the grit of sand against glass, the leaves clattering in the trees. The keening, as it forces its way into the house.

It's a dust storm, and I haven't experienced anything like it here at Sargasso. In my grandmother's bedroom particles of dirt and smut fly through the open window. I close it. I throw on some clothes and go downstairs. I have to heave at the patio doors to shut them. Whitecaps litter the sea surface. Spray skitters skywards. The beach is a whirling dervish of sand.

From the entrance hall I gaze out through the glass panels. In the murkiness I watch the dust being tossed against the garage door while the trees bend sideways, straining at their roots. My car, my Golf is standing out in all this! I stagger out to it, and the storm grabs me and shoves me across the driveway. I reel around the vehicle and almost lose my footing in my leather sandals. It's only by sheer determination that the door doesn't fly out of my hands. I get in. Haul it closed after me. The thicket alongside the driveway shakes and shivers. Scraps of leaf swirl on its earthy floor. Leaves and twigs rain down on the windscreen.

I start the engine and press the remote, and pray the wind won't tear the garage door from its moorings. As soon as I can, I drive in and sit tight until the door is winched closed.

From the walkway, I watch as sand pelts the glass and branches whip to and fro. I make a dash for the kitchen and, as I reach it, all the lights die.

*

I don't know what to do with myself. In the dark, I wander from room to room, listening to the discordant moans slithering through the crevices, the house juddering on its foundations, the sand blasting the glass. I think about

getting the generator going, but I'm not so sure I know what to do, how to start it. And I will have to go out into that—that *madness* to do it.

I think about Brodie, and how I almost lost him. And how I would've managed to go on if I had lost him. And I think about the 'boy' he mentioned. I have no doubt who he is, but the magnitude of how he tormented me is almost more than I can comprehend. It threatens to overwhelm me. Where do I begin to make sense of it?

Jumping out at me in neon lights in my brain is the word *jealousy*. *Jealousy makes you nasty*. Whose mother hasn't said that, at some point?

I think about my dad's grave, too, and how I still haven't located it.

It grows late and I find my book, the one I haven't touched for weeks, and curl up under the stairs with it and my torch. But I can't concentrate. I worry about wasting batteries. I keep rereading the same sentence. *Jealousy makes you nasty* goes around and around my head. Brodie's sweet little face with his milk teeth and wide blue eyes hovers between me and the page. And *his* face. Flint's. Where is he? Why does he *do* this to me? Torture me? I turn the torch off and lie in the dark. My phone is flat and I can't even listen to music to distract me.

Between midnight and 1.00 am the wind blows itself out. Sargasso settles into a kind of peace, adjusting its trusses and supports, and groaning with relief. I get up and venture to the front door, pushing it wide.

A half-moon like a lemon slice illuminates the chaos left in the storm's wake. Broken limbs of trees, twigs, stems and foliage are strewn on the ground. And reaching grotesquely to the sky, like a corpse, a blue-gum branch lies across the driveway. I walk out and pull it to the edge of the thicket.

I wander down the driveway, then something cracks above me, and before I can react an enormous branch hits the ground behind me with a shuddering *Whump!*

When the flurry of dust settles I hear a fluttering noise. Something is caught in the branches, and then that something squawks. In the darkness it takes me a while to locate the sound. It's one of the crows. Pinned under a branch, one wing is flapping frantically. It's trying to free itself.

I hurry back to the house for my torch.

Its wing is caught by a stubby but sharp twig. All the weight of the branch is behind it. I can't move it; it's colossal and heavy. The only way to

free the bird is to saw off the twig. And a saw isn't a tool I have in the garage.

I run inside again, return with my sharpest knife, and prop up the torch.

It's a slow process. With each grind into the wood, the pointy end grinds into the intricate mesh of feather, sinew and bone. I talk to the crow while I work, keeping him calm. He seems to know I'm trying to help. He's quiet, and no longer flaps madly, or squawks, but his shiny dark eye never leaves my face.

I've never been this close to a crow before. Under the torchlight his feathers are deeply black and glossy. He is coal sculpted into bird. Ancient. Prehistoric. Beautiful, in spite of all the swagger. I can't forgive him for Kotteb but the idea of revenge, of leaving him to his fate, never crosses my mind.

I get through the twig, but it's jammed and I'll have to wriggle it free. I pause. It's possible the bird will peck me and my hand will be so near he won't miss. That beak is a weapon of destruction.

'Hold on, mate,' I say. And then I do it because it has to be done.

It happens quicker than I expect. With a ruffle of feathers, he is free and up on two feet. Not only that: he hops up onto the back of my hand, his scratchy claws on my skin.

'Whoa,' I say, in amazement.

He cocks his head, looks at me. The light catches the side of his sleek satiny head. He pushes his beak forward and I fear the worst. He's going to peck me after all, but he doesn't. He slides his beak along my hand. Maybe he's cleaning it? Perhaps it's a gesture of gratitude? Then he stretches both wings out experimentally and, with a flap, rises ungainly from his perch. I look up to watch as he skims the roof of Sargasso, a dark phantom, black against black, listing to one side. He does a wide loop and returns to an unsteady landing in the branches above me. There's a squawk as he settles in with his mate, then silence. And I am alone once again.

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Now

In the morning when I finally drag myself out of bed, I have a message on my phone. Another text from Gwen. It's plain and simple.

FYI Ted Harris's family are raising concerns with Dr Miller. Will keep you posted. xx

I blink rapidly. I don't need this. *I do not need this.* Keep calm, I tell myself. Ted has gone. The guy is dead. He can't hurt you unless the family lay charges. And why would they do that when they were the ones who asked for the morphine to be increased in the first place?

Harris had a tumour. Inoperable. He couldn't do anything for himself any longer and had to wear a nappy. The indignity of this cannot be described. I'd warm up his beanbag, hold his cool withered hand, talk about the past, and tell him he was a sweetie. Until that day he was crying ... A grown man crying in pain. That was what the shouting was about with his adult children; they wanted me to do something. It was out of my hands, I said. (Officially it was. Morphine dosages are rigidly controlled. Every milligram is checked off and accounted for.) I told them that they had to speak to Dr Miller to increase the dosage, which I understand they did, but got nowhere. They subsequently told me I was a cold-hearted so-and-so. How could I stand by and do nothing while the man suffered? And we had a slanging match in the corridor. Now they have concerns. Now they want an inquiry. To what end? It will be hard to prove that Harris was getting more

than was prescribed—I was very careful, I know the pitfalls—and even harder to prove that the higher dosage caused his death. He had cancer. His organs would've been shutting down. These are facts. When someone is old, and dying, coronial inquiries and autopsies are not the norm. The relatives are just grateful their loved ones have been released. Ted Harris's family, however, clearly have another agenda.

This unsettles and distresses me. It's confronting. I don't want to leave Sargasso to be a witness at an inquiry. I don't want to leave Flint.

*

I return to working in the kitchen. I spread newspaper under the patio doors and finish sandpapering them. It isn't easy. My hands are shaky. Tears not far away. How am I going to explain going away and the possible repercussions to Flint?

My phone rings and I pause briefly to see who it is. I'm so agitated I expect it to be Gwen. Or someone official telling me to present myself. But it's Sophie, the realtor. Her name lights up on the screen and I let her go through to my message bank. I am not in the mood to talk to anyone. But a few seconds later, the ringing starts up again. I ignore it a second time, but when it shrieks at me a third, I pick up.

'Hello.'

'Hannah? I hope I haven't caught you at a bad time?' Sophie is nothing if not persistent.

'No, no, this is fine,' I lie. 'I was just, um, upstairs.'

'Look, I know you're not sure whether you want to sell, and I know the last family was, well, we won't go there ... Hannah, I've got a family here again. They're *really* interested. It is Sunday but there won't be another opportunity, what with Christmas and so on. Would it be too much trouble to have a look today? This morning?'

'This morning?'

She lowers her voice. 'They're pretty serious. I think it's an opportunity. I wouldn't have rung you otherwise.'

I say nothing. I push the sanding block until it is square to the countertop edge and leave it there. Then I dust off the countertop with my

hand, wiping it on my jeans. I start at one end and I keep going, dusting and wiping, dusting and wiping, dusting—

‘Hannah?’

‘I’m not selling. I can’t. I may change my mind, but right now—right now, I can’t.’

‘You can’t? What’s stopping you? I thought the house was yours?’

‘It is.’

‘Why can’t you sell, then?’

I gaze out through the patio doors. The sky is stretched as taut as the hide of a drum. The sea sparkles with silver. The breakers hurl themselves heedlessly and joyfully onto the shore. It’s an idyllic scene. A view to die for ...

But I hear something. Something I recognise now. An underlying, muted sound ... The house breathing. The house listening ... The house waiting to hear what I will say. The *odd* house that I love so very much.

‘Hannah?’

‘I don’t want to,’ I say.

‘Oh,’ she says. ‘That’s different. I am sorry to hear that. My buyers will be most disappointed. Get in touch if you change your mind.’

*

I’ve retrieved the tin of varnish from the garage, opened it and placed it on the kitchen counter together with the paintbrush ready for work, when I hear a vehicle in the driveway and a quick toot-toot.

This had better not be Marsh. I wish people would leave me alone. Alone, so I can be with the only person I want to be with. The person that I need to face, to have a serious confrontation with.

It is Marsh. And Brodie’s with him. Both standing in the portico. I have to dredge up good manners from somewhere that feels like the soles of my feet. It gets easier when I focus on the child, the child I almost lost. He lifts his hand and waggles his fingers, as he saw me do yesterday. Sometimes he seems older than his years. I can’t help smiling.

‘Hello, squirt,’ I say, and he comes shyly forward to put his warm little hand into mine.

‘How’re you going?’ Marsh asks.

‘Good,’ I say.

‘Quite a wind yesterday, hey?’

He stands tall, his arms folded across his broad chest, his sunnies pushed back on his head. A lot of girls might find him attractive, but he does nothing for me.

‘A gale,’ I agree. ‘How are you, Brodie?’ I ask, looking down.

‘Beach?’ He gets to the point, glancing at his dad for support.

‘Yup, beach. You wanna come?’

‘I’d like to, but I can’t. I’m in the middle of painting.’

‘Paint-ing?’ Brodie says in that slow questioning way children do.

I get down on my knees to his level.

‘Do you want to see my painting?’

He nods vigorously, his blond hair bouncing up and down. If he nods any harder, his head will fall off.

We troop into the entrance hall. I lead the way and push through the swing doors. Then I stop.

Someone has picked up the tin and hurled the varnish across the wall. Made a wide golden arc. The varnish is still dripping, oozing down the surface like honey.

‘What happened here?’ Marsh asks.

‘Painting,’ Brodie tells him.

Of course I know who’s responsible. It could only be one person. As if he hasn’t done enough damage already. When I find him I am going to kill him!

If I find him ... If ...

‘Come,’ I say. I shuffle them back out to the entrance hall, reluctantly release Brodie’s hand.

Marsh is loath to go. He talks about calling the police. He thinks the culprit is still in the vicinity and he stands his ground in the portico, bewildered by my inertia.

‘Look, I know who it is,’ I say at last. ‘I’ll sort it.’

‘You do?’ He narrows his eyes. ‘You sure?’

‘I’m sure.’

I shepherd them out to the ute, wait while he buckles Brodie into his child’s seat.

‘I’m coming by later’—he closes the passenger door—‘to check on you.’

‘Please *don’t* do that,’ I tell him as he clambers in. ‘In fact, *please* don’t come to the house again.’

‘Aw, Hannah.’ He’s speaking to me now through his open window. ‘Come on ... What’s a guy to do?’

‘Nothing,’ I say. ‘Nothing, okay? I’m not interested.’

Not a minute too soon, he reverses, swings the ute into a tight turn and roars up the bumpy track. It’s clear he’s angry. Nevertheless, I put up my hand and wave to Brodie.

*

I clean up the varnish. It’s not easy because it’s oil-based. What’s in my favour is that the kitchen still has to be painted. A little bit of sanding over the spill and the surface should be right to go.

It’s about eleven-thirty when I hear a vehicle in the driveway, one that sounds like a Subaru WRX. If you live with someone who drives one, you’ll nearly always identify the engine. And I am torn between putting down my brush to go to the door or painting on as if I don’t care that Tristan is here. In the end, I choose the latter—not because I don’t care, but because I don’t want him to see my pleasure. It will be good to have company, a friendly face, after what happened with Marsh ... After the text this morning from Gwen. Someone I know well, and once cared for. Loved, actually.

He knocks at the door, and I call out, ‘Come in, it’s open,’ and the next thing he’s in the kitchen, a suntanned, vibrant presence.

‘Hey.’

I turn and look at him over my shoulder. He’s barefoot, in striped board shorts and a white T-shirt, his dark hair all mussed. He grins at me; he’s been surfing.

‘Hello.’ I smile back—his nose has had a bit of sun.

‘I’ve brought lunch,’ he says. ‘Can you take a break?’

‘I’d love to. I just want to finish here. I only have this last frame to do.’

‘Cool,’ he says. ‘I’ll go get it from the car. Do you have beers?’

‘Uh-huh,’ I tell him, and he disappears again.

‘It’s sushi,’ he announces on his return, putting down containers on the countertop.

‘Yay,’ I say. ‘It’s been ages since I ate sushi.’

He doesn’t remind me that when I lived with him I used to eat sushi nearly every day. He’s being careful.

‘Can I go see what you’ve done upstairs?’ he asks.

‘Sure. We’re just about finished up there.’ And I wonder if he wants to go up to find traces of Flint, to see if we’re still together? He won’t find anything, of course. He might come to some conclusion if he goes to the place under the stairs, but he isn’t likely to do that.

I am outside cleaning my brush under the tap when he wanders out. ‘It looks nice,’ he says. ‘Fresh. You’ve done a lot.’

‘Well, I did have help.’

Awkward Moment Number One.

Then, ‘Hey,’ he says, ‘did you find your dad’s grave?’

‘No, not yet.’

I stand up and swing the brush in the air, to get rid of the moisture. ‘You know, that’s something you could help me do. After lunch. Are you in a hurry to go?’

‘No, no hurry. Do you want to go down to the beach? Now, I mean?’

‘Too hot,’ I say, joining him in the portico. ‘I’m just as happy here.’

Back inside, I hoist myself onto the island countertop while he gets out two beers. He opens them and passes me one, and we clink bottles, say ‘Cheers,’ at the same time. I have to look at him when I say *Cheers*. It’s something he taught me, to always look at the person you’re drinking with. It’s surprising how many people don’t. And I look at him and glance away to tip the bottle to my mouth, but I’m conscious he’s still gazing at me. He doesn’t say anything, however, and Awkward Moment Number Two manages to slide by.

I remember him telling me that time of the shark: *I didn’t wait for life to come to me. I went after it.* That’s what he’s doing here.

We eat our sushi on the countertop, sitting side by side swinging our legs and gazing out to the sea. ‘What happened to the rest of the roses?’ he asks, pointing his head in the direction of the remaining three blooms.

‘Died,’ I say.

‘Hmm,’ Tristan says. ‘That’s no good. I’ll have to have a word with the florist.’

I wince. Sorry, I say inwardly to the florist. Sorry for lying.

He tells me he’s taken leave until after the new year, and then he picks up a piece of sushi with his chopsticks and says that he’s still going to Paris. If I want to come I only have to say. I swallow and the wasabi goes down the wrong way and I splutter and cough, eyes streaming, until he leans across and pats me on the back.

‘Drink,’ he suggests. I do, and turn to him gratefully. He smiles at me, that open, happy face, with the warm blue-grey eyes, and I’m aware that I still find him very attractive.

*

‘Right,’ he says, when there’s no more sushi and our beers are empty. ‘Where do you want to start looking for ... for this grave?’

I slide off the counter. ‘I’ve been around the whole house,’ I tell him, ‘and found nothing. The only area I haven’t investigated is the thicket. But I’d be surprised if it was there. It’s not a place either of my parents went to.’

‘It’s as good a place as any to start,’ he says, putting the empties neatly beside the bin while I place the takeaway containers in the recycling.

‘You’ll need shoes,’ I tell him. ‘It’s pretty rugged in there.’

We grab his sandals from the car, and I lead the way.

The trail that Flint brought me on all those years ago, and that I went halfway down yesterday looking for Brodie, meanders on between prickly branches of lantana and bramble. I follow as best I can. The earth is sandy and loose, except where it’s knotted with roots. Once, I go the wrong way around a tree and come face-to-face with a wall of scrub, and have to retrace my steps. Tristan doesn’t comment, he waits and then follows.

The clearing still resembles a clearing, although it’s peppered with weeds and saplings. It’s still a place of peace. Sunlight slants through the trees, dappling the ground. Leaves flutter overhead, as they always did. But in one corner there’s an ugly pile of rocks. Granite rocks.

These are the ones I’m missing! The ones from the back of the garage. I’m sure if I count them there’ll be twenty-eight.

‘Why are these rocks stacked like this?’ Tristan asks. ‘It looks deliberate.’

‘You won’t believe this,’ I tell him, ‘but these rocks were in the front garden the day I arrived. I moved them all to the back of the garage. I have no idea how they got here.’

I do have an idea, only I’m not going to let on. Why would Flint have moved these rocks here? What is he hiding?

And then I know. It’s not that he’s *hiding* my father’s gravestone, he’s *covering* it. He can’t bear to look at it.

‘Help me move them?’ I ask Tristan. ‘I think I know what’s underneath.’

He picks one up, staggering under its weight. ‘Where do you want them?’

‘Let’s make a circle with them?’ I gesture with one hand. ‘Around the edge of the clearing?’

He nods. ‘Sure.’

We work until, finally, in the fading afternoon light a dirty black marble tombstone is revealed. It lies flat to the ground and it’s big, as long as a body and just as wide.

Tristan leaves me and goes back to the house for the bucket, water and a sponge, while I sit quietly with my father’s remains. I’ve worked out why he’s buried here. The answer’s obvious. It’s quiet and peaceful. Tranquil. Mum chose it because it’s a little Garden of Eden. And I wonder if my parents also knew about this little spot, whether they came here together for some quiet, romantic moments?

By the time Tristan and I have washed the tombstone clean with a sponge we are working in the dark. I run my wet fingers over it, and decipher my father’s name *Henry Charles Prendergast* and his date of birth, and of death, but that’s all, that’s all there is. No *Dearly beloved*, or *Father of Kelly and Hannah*. Maybe that’s all he wanted. After all, the real memorial to my father is close by. A massive structure, imposing and impressive, with clean lines and soaring walls. The real memorial is Sargasso.

We bring back the bucket but leave everything else at the clearing for tomorrow, finding our way back to the house in darkness, and kicking off our filthy shoes at the front door.

‘Would you like to have a shower before you go?’ I ask, not giving him the opportunity to linger.

‘Yup. That would be good. I think I’ve got a clean T-shirt in the car. Do you have a spare towel?’

‘There are a couple stacked in the bathroom. Help yourself.’

And he disappears first to his car, and then I hear him padding upstairs.

We haven’t talked much this afternoon. He’s been respectful, aware of the solemnity of the occasion. I think he knows my emotions are in turmoil—not only about discovering the grave, but about Flint. He hasn’t even mentioned Flint’s name. Asked me where the man is.

Flint! How could he have withheld Dad’s grave from me! Lied to me? And then there are the rocks. Why did he do that? What right did he have? It almost amounts to desecration. His behaviour lately has been disturbing. I can forgive him withholding information about himself, and even his little tantrums I can let slide. But I can’t forget how he tormented me over Brodie, and I can’t forgive him for keeping my father’s grave from me. I don’t know what to do, what to say when I see him. *If* I see him. Where will I start?

I’m sitting on the patio with a big glass of water when Tristan comes back down, looking fresh and clean, although his shorts are still filthy.

‘Why don’t we go to dinner, to the pub?’ he asks. ‘My shout.’

I shake my head. ‘I’m too tired. I just want to have a shower and fall into bed.’ I point at his boardies. ‘Besides, they’ll never let you in with those ...’

‘True.’ He nods ruefully. ‘I’ll head off, then ... Unless there’s anything else?’

‘No. Thank you.’ I start to rise from my chair, and he puts his hand on my shoulder.

‘Stay, I can see myself out.’

‘Thanks. And thanks for your help today.’

‘No worries.’

He gives me one last prolonged look, and naturally I’m the first to glance away.

I sit quietly, hearing the Subaru accelerate as it turns onto the coast road. And I wonder when he will be back. It’s clear to me that I do want him to return.

We've been happy today, content in each other's company. He didn't ask too much from this new development between us. And although he kept his feelings in check I know it won't take much to bring them to the surface. I know this because while we worked we touched hands accidentally and we both snatched our hands back as if we'd been stung. Awkward Moment Number Three.

Tonight I'm lying in the bed in my grandmother's room, and as I lie waiting for sleep I find myself wondering if it's possible to love two men at once?

Can I still love Flint after what he's done?

Now

At first light, I start work again. I lug a bucket of warm soapy water through the thicket to the clearing and clean the marble tombstone more thoroughly, using a scrubbing brush. Then I haul a second bucket, slopping water over the edge as I stagger lopsidedly along. The sun is skimming the tops of the trees now, but it's cool in the clearing and I have goosebumps. I go back for cold water for rinsing. After that I return to the house to grab a coffee. I eat my muesli standing up and shovel it in without decorum.

Then I head out again, this time with a bottle of water. The sun is well awake now. It seems to have its eye on me, and reaches into the thicket with long hot fingers. I begin on the clearing. I rake the stones and pebbles, puffing up dust, into one pile off to the side, and then I begin making a pyre of weeds and grasses, which I'll burn later. I am happy to be doing something. And particularly happy to be doing this. It's satisfying. And I feel close to my dad as I work. I remember something funny, too. Occasionally it had bothered me that I didn't have a brother. It had bothered me because I felt there were things I didn't do with Dad that a son might've, so early one Saturday morning, when I was probably about eight, I decided I was going to make something in his workshop and surprise him with it. But firstly I had to look the part, and I took the bathroom scissors and cut my hair, hacking at it in front of my bedroom mirror. It was frustrating, taking way too long, and so I chopped great big uneven swathes away, my

hair getting shorter and shorter. Eventually I threw the scissors down in exasperation—my hair stuck up every which way but it would have to do—and swaggered out of the room. I practised my boy's walk, my hands thrust into my pockets, my head at a lofty angle, and—arghhh—tripped over a pile of dirty washing in the passage, which brought me up short. But I was undeterred (I was stubborn) and I set off again, this time without my head held ridiculously high, and headed for the garage. I opened the roller doors to let in the light and stood, my legs planted apart—the way I'd seen Flint do—in front of my father's workbench. Dad had an old crate full of wooden offcuts and I placed one on the workbench and gazed around again. I surveyed his tools. Hmm. I had no idea what I was going to make but the drill seemed a good place to start. Ah-hah. There was an old oil drum in a corner. I pushed it up to the workbench, clambered on top, levered the drill off its hook on the wall, and plugged it in. It was heavy. I needed two hands, which meant I couldn't hold the piece of wood at the same time. I looked around again. Another ah-hah moment—I was beginning to think being a boy was filled with these—because there was a clamp at the end of the workbench. I repositioned my oil drum, stuck the wood into the clamp, and wound it up tight. Then I had to go back for the drill, dragging it across the top of the workbench, but now I was ready, and I hefted the tool in two hands and with my thumbs together pushed the ON button. The machine swung wildly in the air like a snake, as if it had a life of its own—in charge of me, and not the other way around—and the noise was deafening. It's a wonder I didn't fall off my perch. I didn't even scream I was so taken aback. Just when I thought I was going to drop it, drop the beast that I had no control over, Dad burst in, grabbed the contraption out of my hands and laid it on the workbench. There was silence, sweet and absolute, at last. Although my ears were ringing and a burnt smell hung in the air.

'Hannah, what do you think you're *doing*!' Dad was still in his sleep shorts, and his face was as white as his T-shirt.

It seemed awfully difficult to explain.

He reached over and unplugged the drill. 'Hannah?'

I tried to act casual but it was difficult—teetering on an oil drum.

'Hannah. What were you doing? Answer me!'

Clearly, he was annoyed, and tears began to prick my eyes. *Nothing* I wanted to say, but I knew that wouldn't work. Not today.

I sniffed. 'I was trying to be your boy.'

'My boy?'

'Yes. The boy you don't have. The son.'

'What?' His voice softened. 'Oh, Hannah,' he said. He reached for me and picked me up and big as I was I clung to him, my legs wound around his waist, and snuffled into his neck. 'I don't need a son,' he'd said thickly, his eyes wet with tears. 'I have you.' He'd extricated himself and gently put me down, then reached out and touched my head. 'But what the heck happened to your hair, sweetheart?'

I remember that for days afterwards I went around saying, 'Heck, what the heck,' until my mother threatened to wash my mouth out with soap.

I labour without stopping. My back breaks from the constant bending, the sweat drips off me. My boots are dusty, my socks speckled with grass seeds. And every now and then I find myself saying, 'Heck, what the heck.' The hours pass. The sun moves through the trees and the shadows change places and the sparrows flit to and fro, sometimes chirping to me. If I need to pee I squat in the bush. My well-used gardening gloves wear through, develop holes, and I get blisters. I try going without them but my hands slip on my tools, my nails break and tear as I grip weeds and heave at grasses. I put them back on. Work through the pain. It is well after lunchtime when I am finished. I rake over the ground one final time and stand back, trembling with exhaustion and leaning heavily on the rake's shaft, to survey my work. Good job, Hannah. The clearing is neat and tidy. What I need now are some white pebbles to lie around the headstone, to finish it off. To give it some dignity.

The shaft is wet in my gloved hand. I glance down and see it's bloody. *Heck, what the heck.* The blisters on my palms and fingers have worn through to the raw flesh and are oozing fluid. Some are leaking blood.

I return to the house, dehydrated, grimy and exhausted, to clean up. And there's still no Flint.

What there is, is a missed call from Tristan. He's left a garbled message. Something about an accident last night and hospital. 'It'd be nice to talk,' he says.

I ring him straight back. 'Tristan?' He's a bit groggy.

'I whacked my head on the window,' he tells me without even a hello.

'What happened?'

‘I had a blowout on the way home ... On the coast road—’

‘*What?*’

‘Um,’ he says, ‘not much fun. I can tell you I shat myself. I managed to swerve into a layby, but I hit some rocks ... the front’s all stove in—’

‘I’m not interested in the car,’ I say, clutching the phone more tightly. ‘What happened to you?’

‘I’m all right. Some cuts and bruises ... My head. The glass shattered ... I guess I’m lucky in that I knew what to do.’

‘Oh God, that’s dreadful. I am so sorry ...’

‘Yeah, well, I was a bit jittery, but they gave me something to calm me down.’

‘Where are you, what hospital?’

‘Geelong,’ he says. ‘Mum’s coming to pick me up.’

I hear other voices in the background, and he says, ‘The doctor’s just turned up to release me, Han. I’ve got to go ... but thanks for phoning back, hey.’

‘That’s okay,’ I say, ‘get better soon,’ and disconnect.

What a terrible thing to happen. He is one lucky guy. He could have easily been killed. But he knows about cars, as he said. He would’ve known what to do.

*

I clean myself up with difficulty—my hands are sore—and head into Shepherd Cove. Somehow I forget about lunch, about eating. There seems to be an inordinate amount of traffic on the way in. I drive straight by Bernie’s hardware store and on to the hospital. I want to find out how he is, and I want to tell him about my discovery.

A Christmas tree stands in the foyer, decked out in shiny purple balls and gold tinsel, with a heap of gaily wrapped presents at its foot, and the staircase is wreathed in gold and purple ribbon. A different receptionist is on duty. This one has little golden stars for earrings, and a sprig of holly clipping back her hair.

‘Bernie McCauley?’

Her fingers pause on the computer keyboard. She’s transcribing some figures from a sheet of paper and she looks up.

‘Oh, sweetheart,’ she says. ‘He’s gone.’

‘Gone? You mean you’ve moved him?’ My voice rises on a note of panic.

‘No. Gone ... Died.’ She pauses. ‘I’m sorry.’

No, I think. No.

I remember his big gnarly hand covering mine, the gentle, teasing way he spoke to me, his solid fatherly presence.

I turn from the counter and my sleeve catches on a sparkly Christmas bell and sends it flying. And when I pick it up from the floor and replace it on the counter, the receptionist has stood up, realising she’s upset me. She notices the way I hold my hand and leans across and opens my palm. I screw up my eyes because of the pain.

‘What have you done? These need dressing.’

I try to withdraw, but she holds on to me.

‘Elaine,’ she calls, over her shoulder. ‘Take this lass to have these blisters dressed, please.’

I sit without speaking while Elaine works with salve and bandages. I think about Bernie, and how in such a short space of time I grew so fond of him. The elderly are always going off and leaving me behind, leaving an empty space, a great gaping hole, which I’ve been known to fall into when I’m not careful. Depression is insidious. It has a way of sneaking up on me. I distract myself by thinking about the hardware store, a place that gives character and meaning to this little seaside town. I wonder how long it’s stood here. What it might’ve looked like when Bernie first opened its doors. And I wonder if Phillip will wear a white business shirt with a black bow tie to the funeral, or whether he’ll choose a bright, cheerful one.

‘How did you get them?’ Elaine asks.

‘Get what?’

‘The blisters.’

‘Digging in the garden,’ I tell her.

‘Are they sore?’ she asks. ‘They must be, you’re crying.’

*

Although I’m sure the hardware store will be closed out of respect, I drive by and catch a glimpse of someone locking the front doors. I make a sharp

U-turn and pull into the parking lot, making Phillip look up. I stop the car and jump out and we meet halfway across the tarmac.

He looks strained. His face is white and his bow tie bedraggled, but he gives me a warm hug, displacing his glasses. For a minute I can't speak—I'm wiping my eyes and fishing for a tissue in my pocket.

'Next week,' he says. 'The funeral's next week, the day before New Year. We have to give the rellies a chance to get here.'

'Th-thanks ... I'd like to come.'

And then I don't know what to say, not without breaking down. I look away, thinking again about Bernie. Maybe there was more I could've done? I could've spent more time with him, if I'd been allowed to, if Flint had let me.

'So, now you know about the graves,' I hear Phillip say.

'What?'

He's looking at me. 'Bernie told me he told you about the graves at Sargasso,' he says patiently.

'Oh, that. The people buried near Dad?' As I say the words I realise I have forgotten about them. I have been so focused on my father, I have forgotten to look for other headstones.

He nods.

'He mentioned that people say the house is *odd*,' I say. 'Do they mean haunted?'

He grimaces and glances at his watch. 'Sorry, Hannah, can we talk about this another time? I should go. You understand I have a hundred and one things to do before the funeral ...'

I nod. 'Of course.'

'Tell you what,' he says, 'when I get home I'll email you what I have. What's your address?'

I tell him and he reaches into his top pocket and withdraws a neatly folded invoice, writing on the back of it.

'Are you going to be all right?' he asks, looking hard at me.

'Yes,' I say, 'why shouldn't I be?'

'I'll see you next week, then?' he says, replacing the slip of paper in his pocket.

'Definitely,' I tell him, and I pull the keys out of my back pocket, and turn to make my way to the Golf.

*

I drive over to the other barn-like store and buy six hessian bags of pebbles. Six possibly won't be enough, but it's a start. And at 3.00 pm I am back at Sargasso.

I'm about to close the car door when I hear a crow cawing and raise my head to see the pair in the gum trees. I have no idea which is the one I rescued. They are mirrors of each other. Doppelgangers. They aren't looking in my direction, they're looking towards the rooftop.

'Flint?' I call, gazing up there as well.

But nobody answers or appears. I look back at the crows, but they're both still staring up. Mesmerised by something I cannot see.

I don't run to the portico, I walk. My heart has already forced its way up into my throat. I open the door and climb the entrance hall stairs with a sense of déjà vu. I pass the glass room, ascend to the rooftop. I force myself to walk slowly because I can scarcely breathe. I force myself to walk slowly because my legs have turned to jelly. I walk slowly because it's clear that, in spite of everything, I still love Flint.

How can I when he has wronged me in so many ways?

Because his soul is joined to mine. Because his heart is seared into mine. Because he is me, and I am him. I love him with my childhood's faith. I love him because I can do naught else.

The door to the rooftop is ajar. I push it open and step outside.

He turns to look at me and it's as much as I can do not to run to him.

He's ashen-faced, swaying slightly, as if he's waited for hours, straining towards the sound of my voice, yearning for my presence. And straightaway, I am wrong-footed.

I want to be angry with him, and instead I feel empathy. I want to give him a severe talking to, and instead I long to hold him. Hold him close, and never let him go. When I hold him close he is a good man.

He has a twig in his hands, snapping it into fragments. But his eyes are on me. I take a step towards him, pause, and hear my own shaky breathing. And then I go forward again. And all the time he warily watches me. Surely love isn't meant to be like this?

The sun is shining down on his face. The glare makes him squint, but his green eyes are brilliant with inner energy. Now I am within touching

distance, and his chest moves in and out as he breathes raggedly, and still neither of us says a word. Then his fringe drops across his eyes and he brushes it to one side, breaking the moment.

‘Where’ve you been?’ I demand.

He blinks, and a nerve twitches along his cheekbone. I imagine it isn’t the question he expected. I know it isn’t what I thought I would say ... when I found him. But the scenarios one makes up in one’s head are always very different from what transpires.

‘Where’ve you been?’ I repeat, a little less harshly.

‘Waiting,’ he says.

‘Waiting for what?’

‘Waiting for you to find me.’ His mouth twists unhappily as if he knows he’s being childish and cannot avoid it.

‘It’s not hide-and-seek, Flint. We’re not children.’

He tosses the stub of twig over the side of the wall. He clenches and unclenches one hand.

‘You think I don’t know that?’

‘I gave up looking for you. I called and called—’

‘You didn’t look everywhere.’

‘No, I’ll admit it. I didn’t look everywhere. I told you, I gave up looking.’

‘Oh, Hannah,’ he murmurs. ‘How could you give up on me?’

‘We can’t go on like this,’ I say. ‘Why do you walk out on me? Where do you go? It’s killing me ... And what—what about Brodie? How could you do that to me?’

‘Do what?’

‘Don’t lie to me, Flint! I know it was you.’

‘Hannah,’ he pleads.

I cry out with anguish and throw myself at him, and in that moment he closes the gap between us and takes me into his arms.

I beat my fists against his chest but he catches my wrists and encircles them in a steely grasp and forces my hands back down.

‘Why did you let *him* come here, Hannah? How could you? *How could you?*’ he grinds out, when I don’t respond.

Then he lets go of my hands, and I raise my fists again and drum them on his body until I am exhausted. Spent. I sob against his chest, letting go

all the emotion of the last days: him leaving me, almost losing Brodie, being with Tristan again, and, most distressingly, Bernie dying.

*

We go inside together, closing the door behind us, and before we reach the bottom of the stairs, I have turned to him. He is my lover and I have turned to him for love. But he stops with one foot on a lower tread and puts his hand on my chest, pushing me away.

‘No, Hannah ... You—you don’t deserve it.’

‘I don’t deserve it! What about you? What about what you’ve done?’

‘But I’m not the one wanting sex,’ he says silkily.

‘*What?*’

I shove his shoulder towards the wall and he teeters. Falling back, he clutches the front of my shirt, steadying himself. He glares at me. He’s panting, his mouth half open. A tooth, wet with saliva, glints at me.

Narrowing his eyes, he tightens his grasp on my shirt and begins to push and pull me back and forth like a ragdoll.

I start to lose my footing. I glance down the staircase and the bottom is a long way off. ‘Flint,’ I cry out. ‘Don’t ...’

‘Don’t *what?*’

‘Flint!’ I scream. I am trembling. ‘Don’t hurt me. Please?’ I beg. Any minute now I am going to fall. I am going to tumble down the stairs. Down, and down. And he stops, his throat constricting as he swallows.

‘Hannah,’ he groans, ‘oh, Hannah, what have you done to me?’

And then I make him fuck me on the stairs, because that’s what it is: fucking. There’s no love involved, no care, no consideration. The only romance is in the dusky light of the dying day. And there is only Flint and his face before me, his hard body moving restlessly under my oh-so-painful hands, his mouth and the taste of him, and this moment. I am fierce, hungry. Crushing my body against his. Crying out, not only with passion, but with fear.

Because there’s something both terrible and sad about us, as if we both know that the thing that’s bound us together for so long has ratcheted up another notch, like the wheels of an instrument of torture, become more intense. Is, in fact, consuming us.

Now

In the morning, although I wake late, he's still with me, which surprises me more than a little. And then I wonder if he is staying with me so that Tristan can't?

Over breakfast I ask him if he will help me spread the pebbles around the grave, and he agrees.

Taking the bags from the boot, we drag them to the clearing or, rather, Flint heaves them one by one. He won't let me. He says my hands are too sore. But he can't stop me spreading the pebbles, making a border, and that starts up the bleeding again. Red oozes from under the plasters, and I get it on my shirt and the pebbles, and my hands are so very painful.

I am on my knees, arranging the last of the stones when he says, 'The other people ... The ones you were looking for. They're buried here, too.'

'*Here?*' I look around agitatedly. 'So close to Dad? How do you know this? Where?'

'I don't know exactly.' He prods the earth with the toe of his boot.

'That means—as children—we must've played on their graves. That's awful,' I murmur.

I get up, brush the dirt off my knees, and survey my work. The white pebbles look good with the black marble. I thought I wouldn't have enough, but I do. It all looks respectable. Neat. I am pleased.

‘How long have you known about ... about ...?’ I make a gesture with my hand.

‘Ages,’ he says reluctantly.

‘And you never thought to tell me?’

‘What? And lose you again to—to—*him*. To this! To a piece of dirt!’

‘Flint,’ I protest.

‘It’s true, Hannah, you would’ve become obsessed. Why do you think your mother never told you he was here?’

‘You didn’t like my father, Flint. You ... you hated him. Why did you move the rocks? Cover him like that? Answer me!’ I demand, when he says nothing.

‘Why do you think?’

‘Because you wanted to hide him, you didn’t want me to find him. Actually, I think it’s because *you* didn’t want to see the grave. *You*, not me, didn’t want to face it!’

I clench my hands in exasperation, but my blisters are starting to dry out and stiffen, and it hurts.

‘Oh, if *only* I’d gone with him that day ... And not waited for you! Where were you, anyway?’

‘You waited for me?’

‘I waited for you day and night ... I waited for days, Flint. You made me suffer,’ I tell him. ‘You still make me suffer—’

‘No. It is *you* that makes *me* suffer. It is *you* that tortures *me*!’

He has collected the hessian bags and he folds his arms over them. His face has gone white, and in a sudden movement he steps forward and kicks out at a tree trunk. He says something but his words are lost.

‘What?’

He looks at me. He does that thing with his eyes where he fixes me, pins me to the spot, and I can’t look away—the same thing he does when we make love.

‘What’s more important to you, Hannah? Me, or him?’

And I can’t answer. I don’t *know* the answer.

*

When we emerge from the thicket I am weary: physically exhausted, mentally drained. Tired of the endless quibbling—we go around and around like sheep milling in a pen. I am grateful for Flint's help today, but I can't seem to look at him without thinking of how he has wronged me, and in so many ways.

A mist has drifted in. The light is gauzy, and the air carries the tang of salt. It's probably around two, most of the day gone already. I glance up, my eye caught by a flicker of movement, and see the crows. They are circling high above our heads, circling the house, circling us. Silently, smoothly, swooping. Turning and looping. Without stopping. Set in motion by some otherworldly force. I shiver. And then I remember it's the day before Christmas. It's Christmas Eve.

*

He takes me upstairs to have a shower. He says there's something about water running over a body that helps to soothe it, and I know this is true. My hands are a mess. They sting like crazy when I get them wet, and I grimace with pain, and when Flint has finished drying me the towel is blotched with blood.

That nurse was thoughtful, giving me extra dressings, and he uses them to bandage my hands for me, and makes me take some of the painkillers she gave me. He is kind and gentle. He helps me find clean underwear and a T-shirt and jeans and dresses me, while I hold my hands up like a puppet. And then he insists I have a nap, and we go to the place under the stairs and lie tangled together, my hands too sore to make love.

We lie with our faces almost touching. Usually when we lie like this, we murmur sweet sentimental things: pillow talk. Sometimes quotes from one of our favourite children's books.

This late afternoon he says to me, *'You know that place between sleep and awake, the place where you can still remember dreaming? That's where I'll always love you. That's where I'll be waiting.'*

I have nothing to say. I am quiet, staring at his face. I will never forget it, I think. The green of his eyes, the freckles across his elegant nose. The way his hair flops onto his forehead, and the fading scar that runs down his cheek.

I can't help thinking that I am anticipating something. Not Christmas presents, I am too old for that, something else ... and as I drift off it comes to me that I am expecting him to leave me again.

This is why he has made me have a nap, so he can leave me while I am sleeping.

I try to rouse myself, to stop from falling into the abyss, but I cannot, I cannot. My arms are limp, my limbs lifeless, my eyelids heavy. The codeine has kicked in.

Don't leave me, Flint! Don't leave me again ... *Please* don't.

And then darkness ...

Now

I wake up sometime around dusk. I don't know what the time is; I don't know where my phone is.

I change, with difficulty, and put on a dress. I put it on for Mum and Gran, and my dad. All the people I love, who are dead. Perhaps I'm silly, but they would want me to look nice for Christmas Eve. I pin my hair up behind my head, which is hard with painful hands. Then jewellery: my grandmother's pearls, the ones I swore she wore in the bath. The dress is white, sleeveless, with broderie anglais around the neck, a tight bodice, and a silky swirling skirt.

I find my phone in the kitchen. The first thing I do is check for any further texts from Gwen. Or emails from someplace official. But there's only one from Phillip, and one from Myer, advertising their Boxing Day sale. Most likely nothing will happen until the new year and I'll just have to sweat it out until then.

Why is it so wrong to help the ones we love?

Phillip's email contains an attachment, as promised. I have a quick look at it. Some dates and notes about a family called Moreau who rented Sargasso soon after we vacated and moved back to Melbourne.

Daughter (aged 12), Phillip has written, reports seeing child in her bedroom. Several different occasions. Severely traumatised apparently. Enough for family to break lease contract and move out.

There's another page about a second family but I close up my phone. I don't have time to read this now. I need to start on the dinner.

I don't know if Flint is going to turn up. But I will lay the little camp table as if he is. If I don't do this, what will I do with myself? I have forgotten how to survive loneliness.

I check that the champagne is in the fridge, and on the countertop assemble the things I bought. I pull on plastic gloves to cover my bandages and cut into the mango, gritting my teeth because of the pain. And when the mango is sliced I make a coleslaw with cabbage and red onion, and some of the fruit. Then I move on to making a potato salad and, finally, salmon fishcakes and a Thai sauce. Concentrating on the food helps me to block out my anxieties. And the agony of my wounds.

As far as Christmas dinners go it isn't magnificent, or traditional, but Dad used to say—when Mum was stressing—that it isn't *always* about the food, sometimes it's about the company. I have a white cloth for the table, and pretty red paper serviettes, and I find some bunny tail grass in the yard and use it for decoration. I also have three fat and heavy white candles, and one goes on the table, which I've set up outside, and the second I place on the far edge of the patio, a beacon you can see from a long way off. The third one is for the front, the portico, but the flame won't stay alight, and I have to move it to the lee of the open front doors. I want Flint to know he's welcome. I want him to know this is his home as well as mine.

Out the back, I've flung the patio doors wide. The mist has melted, the sun set. It's balmy with not a breath of wind, an absolutely perfect summer's night. A million trillion sequins and spangles are in the dim cloth of heaven. They're shimmering as if they know something special. And I bend to light the candle on the table, and lo and behold he steps out from the shadows.

He takes my breath away. Because he's all in black. A spiffy suit, a black shirt and tie, and narrow black shoes. His hair is still damp, curling on his collar.

'Careful,' he says, leaning forward to blow out the forgotten match in my fingers burning down to my skin.

'Whoops,' I say, and smile. How—in spite of everything—I do love him!

‘Thank you for coming. For a while—’ I have to pause to get air ‘—for a while I thought you might not.’

‘Would I do that to you, Hannah?’ And he looks at me with such tenderness in his eyes I wonder why I doubted him before. Doubted *us*. Our future.

‘Champagne?’

‘Yes, please.’

He holds out the flutes and I fill them, meeting his eyes over their rims. The blackness of his suit has turned his irises a shade of tea green. His skin seems pale and his freckles more pronounced, a scattering of sand across the bridge of his nose. I want to run my tongue along the sharpness of his jaw, nudge my mouth against the innocence at the base of his neck.

‘What?’ he asks, because I am staring.

‘I love you,’ I say.

It’s not often that I tell him I love him. I show him, yes, but I don’t often voice it and I can see he is moved. Surreptitiously wiping away a tear as he turns to go out to the patio.

We lean over the railing, the rush and tumble of the sea below us, and clink our glasses together.

‘To us,’ Flint says.

‘To us,’ I repeat.

I might as well be saying *I do*, such is the height of my emotion. I can’t tear my eyes away from him. I have never seen him looking so elegant. So sophisticated. I am falling in love all over again. And I lean forward because I want to kiss him. I want to taste him, touch him ... but some noise in the kitchen distracts him. He turns his head, and I look to where he’s looking. And then I hear it, too.

My phone is ringing.

I don’t want to answer it, but it’s insistent and demanding, making my heart palpitate and my pulse quicken. Ted Harris, and what Gwen said, are never far from my thoughts, and I think I had better answer it ... For my own peace of mind. If I have to front a coronial inquiry I need all the preparation I can get. More importantly, I must tell Flint. Which I am dreading. How will he react to my absence? How will I cope with having to go to Melbourne? Be away from him, and the house?

I move to get it, and Flint's face darkens. He's not happy about this intrusion. Quietly putting down his glass, he steps back out of the light and into the shadows.

'Don't go,' I plead. 'I won't be long, I promise.'

The screen of my phone tells me that the caller is Phillip. What could he want that can't wait until after Christmas?

'Phillip?'

'Hannah?' he says gently. 'Are you okay?'

'I'm fine,' I say abruptly. 'Why?'

'I thought I might've upset you—'

'Upset me? No. Not at all.' A sigh of impatience escapes me. I'm thinking of Flint marking time. Kicking his heels. Of how annoyed he will be. How this call is jeopardising not only what we have, but our future. I can't let it do that. *I can't*.

Phillip starts to speak and I'm rude, really rude, which is not in my nature. I talk over the top of him. 'Phillip, I can't speak now. Another time? I'm sorry.' And I cut him off. Dead. I hear him spluttering just before I disconnect and on the other side I imagine he's adjusting his tortoiseshell glasses and fingering his bow tie in bewilderment. I'll have to make it up to him. Later.

I mute the phone's ringtone, and lay it carefully on the countertop. My hands are trembling, because I have been rude, and because the phone call wasn't about Ted Harris, but might've been. Quickly and quietly, I walk out to the patio. And catch Flint unawares. Leaning against the wall, under the eaves, his head is bowed as if he's been listening to what Phillip has said. But I know he can't. *Surely he can't?*

'Flint?'

He raises his head to look at me.

'What did *he* want?'

'I really don't know'—listen to me, telling lies!—'but I got rid of him. He's gone.'

'Oh, Hannah,' he says and his face is so very sad.

'I'm sorry, *really* sorry. It won't happen again.'

'But don't you see?'

He pauses to jerk his head and pull at his tie, the tendons of his neck thickening like cords. I can tell it's bothering him, the tightness of it, the

constraint. He's not used to having something tied around his neck, and I wonder if that is what I have become: a noose around his neck, a burden, a responsibility.

'You—you—' he says. He steps into the light and in a sudden movement rips at the tie and unravels it. 'Why do you always put everyone else ahead of me? Why am I always second best?'

Slowly and methodically he winds the tie around one hand, fixing me with that look, pinning me to the spot. His eyes are dark and turbulent, his mouth a gash in his face.

'Because you don't love me,' he says quietly and deliberately. And there's something about his measured way of speaking that scares me just a little. 'You *don't love me*, do you, Hannah? Not like I love you.'

My eyes are half on the hypnotising winding of the tie, and half on his face. 'But—but you know I do! I told you, just earlier. I said—I said I love you.'

He slides the tie from his hand and into his suit pocket, pats it absently as if he wants to be sure he remembers where he's put it.

'Ahh, but did you mean it? Because it seems to me you say all sorts of things—you gabble. Did you know that, Hannah? And you disobey me, too.'

'What?'

'You heard me.'

He walks towards me. He walks until he is within touching distance. Close enough to see the green lights of his eyes, feel the warmth of his body.

'I didn't know what to do with you,' he murmurs, sliding his hands into his trouser pockets, and tilting his head to one side to consider me.

'Flint,' I say. '*Please—*'

But I can't get the words out because I am starting to sob. He is walking all over my dreams, stomping on them, grinding them into the earth.

'But now I do. You've left me no alternative. I'm leaving you, Hannah.'

'No, Flint—'

I am sobbing with grief. My heart is breaking. I put out my hands, and he steps neatly away. I lurch towards him, and he ducks out of reach. I am humiliated, again and again, most especially because he smiles faintly, as if this is amusing, as if he is enjoying tormenting me. As if at any minute he

will stop, let me catch him and say, 'Oh, Hannah,' and take me into his arms as if he has been playing a silly game ...

Then, with a last look at me, he turns and runs light-footed through the grasses, his black jacket flapping out behind him like some crippled wing, and just before he reaches the back of the garage, he glances over his shoulder to see if I am following and I remember another time when he ran from me, a time when I hurt him, when I would have done anything not to have done so, when it was weeks before he came back to me.

Weeks.

I can't let this happen tonight.

Stumbling, I go after him, tripping through the reeds, dodging the dark heavy boulders. On my left, a sheer drop, the earth falling away to the sea, and the sea muttering unhappily in the darkness.

When I round the corner, the driveway is empty. The front yard deserted. He's disappeared. Gone.

I cry out with anguish. What have I done to deserve this?

But wait ...

What about the crows? Where are they? They'll know where he is. They've always known where he is.

I gaze up at the trees searching for them, up to the rooftop, up to the dim cloth of the heavens where I laid out my dreams. My dreams that have been shattered.

'Flint?' I call. 'Flint!' I scream until my throat is raw. 'Flint!'

'I'm here, Hannah.'

He steps out from the thicket just ahead of me. He's teasing, smiling, laughing ... and then dodging my hands, running again. Away from me. Towards the house.

The candle in the entrance hall has fallen over onto its side. It's still burning, dripping wax, but before I can right it, I glimpse something dark moving up on the landing above, and I take the stairs two at a time, tripping on the last but one, and falling, banging my chin on the step, bringing tears to my eyes, the taste of salty blood to my mouth. Then I am up and running, limping. Past the glass room, hobbling up the narrow staircase, panting with exertion, bursting out onto the rooftop.

'Flint!' I scream again.

And here are the crows. High in the heavens, they caw and cry in alarm. They soar and sweep overhead, circling through the darkness, swooping over the house and over me, making me duck my head.

At the wall is Flint. ‘Hannah,’ he calls, ‘come to me. Come to me, Hannah.’ And he calls with such emotion in his voice, such love, I am disconcerted. Unhinged. His behaviour is unpredictable. Off kilter. Do I even know him anymore?

I stare at him for we have come full circle. This is where it all began. Here. On the rooftop. On that first day we moved in. I would have fallen, would’ve died, if not for Flint ... He pulled me back ... Saved me. Saved me from myself.

He holds out his hands, entreating me, and I go to him and burrow into the smooth silkiness of his suit lining, winding my painful hands around his chest. And in a dragging, difficult movement he hoists us both onto the wall, grazing my shins, catching the silk of my dress against the rough stonework, and draws me closer still, into his embrace. He touches his icy lips to my forehead, and clutches me to the lee of his shoulder. He clutches me like he will never let me go, my mouth pushed hard up against the cool cloth of his suit.

‘Remember what I told you, Hannah ... about waiting ... waiting in that place between sleep and awake.’

And I realise, then, what it is he means to do.

Why he ran away, tempting me to follow him.

What he meant by *I am leaving you, Hannah*.

I understand why. He has nothing left to lose, not now.

‘No, Flint,’ I gasp. ‘Please. *Please*, don’t.’ And I start to struggle within his grasp.

But something is wrong. His body is trembling, his teeth chattering, his mouth blue with cold.

I gaze up and his vibrant green eyes are growing dull, his skin ashen. The freckles are fading from his face.

‘Hannah? What’s happening to me, Hannah?’ His voice is feeble. I have to lean forward to catch his words. Lean forward so that I am wobbling on the edge of the wall.

And I peer over the wall, into the depths, the dither of darkness.

Only there is no darkness. The ground is illuminated. The driveway lit up. A flickering, guttering, flaring half-light—

And then I see something else. *Someone* else. Someone I know.

Tristan. In the driveway. Gazing up at me. Barefoot, in board shorts and a T-shirt, his hair awry. He looks stricken, as if he is at the wrong address.

‘Tristan,’ I scream, ‘Tristan!’

For the first time I smell it, though I think it’s been burning a while.

The fire.

I smell it and hear it.

A whooshing noise like the wind in the trees ... then, cracking and crashing. Fracturing. Disintegrating. The pungent aroma of wood burning. The acrid smell of smoke.

The house is burning. Sargasso is on fire.

Downstairs, in the entrance hall, the staircase will be bright with white light. Ribbons of heat will flick and lick at the walls, flames of rust splash the ceiling causing the bannisters to tremble in fright.

In the kitchen, the harlequin tiles will warp and melt, ooze. And in the library, the heavy perfume of lilies will be lost forever. The heat will explode the walls and ceiling of the glass room. Shatter shards and slivers over the sea.

And my beloved place beneath the stairs, the parquetry, the puzzle of orange and golden hues, will be destroyed. Consumed. Eaten alive.

Sargasso is on fire. The house I love is going to die—

I turn to Flint—but his arms have become insubstantial as fog. His body pressed against mine is slowly dissolving, dissipating. I catch a glimpse of a man with faded green eyes, then of a boy I once knew with a Lego scar, and then he slips away. Drifts ... Wafts ... Floats ... Into the evening air ...

And I am left with nothing. *Nothing!*

Teetering on the edge, I clutch and claw at the air. Again and again. But there’s nothing there. It’s useless.

Someone reaches out for me, then. Drags me back. Like what happened all those years ago. Only it isn’t Flint.

Above the noise of the furnace raging down below and the sound of the approaching sirens, beyond the twinkling lights on the coast road growing closer, I hear his voice.

Hannah, he calls ... *Hannah*.

I hear his voice echoing in the place under the stairs.

I hear it in the rustle of the leaves on the eucalypts, in the slow wave wasting upon the sand. Behind the garage, and in the reeds chafing one against another. Beyond the wind chasing spinifex along the track to the beach.

Hannah.

And again, far away ... in the distance ... past the black rock ... beyond tomorrow ... and into forever.

Hannah.

He is calling for me, calling for me ... And waiting, waiting for me as he has always done. As he still does.

Now

They have taken everything from me. I wear a hospital gown, with large undies like Gran used to wear. And my feet are bare. The floor is tiled but it's not cold.

There's a video camera in my room but it can't see everything. Nobody can see everything. Nobody knows everything, either. Like the little girl with the pink toenail varnish said, *There's always more*. Nobody can see everything because when I curled up on the floor under the bed it took a long time before someone rushed into the room, and even then they couldn't find me, not straight away. Now I have people randomly peering in at the window in the door. I think it is every half hour. I don't know what the time is and it doesn't seem to matter anymore.

A nurse came to take me to shower. I have to be escorted when I leave the room. I don't know why they are afraid of me running away. Where would I run to? Because my hands are bandaged she had to help me wash myself. I tried to shut her out of the cubicle, but she said she would call one of the male nurses if I didn't stop fussing. It was embarrassing. She noticed the scars on my thighs where I cut myself when I was twelve. They are pale fragile butterflies' wings on my skin. But all she did was raise her eyebrows and it seemed to me that after that she was gentler.

A psychiatrist called Lawrence Nilsson has been to see me.

Lars knows me from way back. He was the one who taught me to play poker a long time ago. And he's going to treat me, to help me get better. I didn't realise I was sick, although it seems to me that as the days pass I'm able to think more clearly away from the house. I was good at poker, although that's no good to me here. But I did ask him to bring me some cards, because there's one card I would like to look at again.

And a man calling himself a fire investigator has been to see me. He doesn't have a moustache like the other one did, but he's so much nicer. He spoke to me softly. He asked me if I started the fire, and questioned me about the man I called Flint. He said they've found no trace of him, and could I tell him a little more about him? And because he was gentle I finally started speaking, and I told him about Flint's kindness when I was little, about his striking green eyes, and that we were soulmates—but I don't think that's the information he wants.

Someone left a bunch of newspaper clippings and photocopies at reception for me. I think it was probably Phillip. The photocopies are extracts from historical documents, certifying that a family called Shepherd lived on Sargasso's land over a hundred years ago. A mother and father, and a boy called Flint. They detail how the boy drowned at sea, in suspicious circumstances—his father was a violent man—and was buried somewhere on Sargasso's land, apart from his parents. I suspect it was under the house, under Sargasso. I am almost certain it was under the stairs.

I have not started the articles on the supernatural that Phillip included. I was going to begin on them, but was distracted by the newspaper clippings, yellowed as they were.

They were a shock. Dated a long time ago. The byline of one says: *Possible foul play involved in drowning of local architect*. It goes on to say that the coroner found a hole in my father's boat, but wasn't able to establish whether it was wear and tear, or deliberate. Clearly my mother kept this information from us. And I wonder if that is what Bernie had been going to tell me but couldn't bring himself to? This is all going to take a while for me to absorb. To accept. And I have put the clippings aside for now because they are distressing, and have started me thinking of other things, things I don't want to face. Did Flint kill Kotteb? Was Tristan's blowout on the coast road an accident?

People keep coming to bother me. Phone me. Or ask me questions. If only they knew I am never going to tell them everything. Some things are mine, and mine alone. Like that time between sleeping and waking. That time when you are never sure whether you are awake or asleep. Where I am, and what I do then—I won't tell. Never. I like that there's a part of me they can't touch—can't have, meddle with, or prod. I sit in the chair alongside the bed and stare into space. All day. It looks as if I am a million miles away, but I'm not. I'm on guard. I am the new keeper of my life. The sentry. And no one enters without my permission.

They have allowed me to visit Tristan. He is in another part of the hospital. Someone had to accompany me, of course, which was awkward, because there are many things I want to tell him—but not in front of a nurse. He's in a coma, but I know that if I spoke he would hear me. They put him in a coma, because of his burns.

They probably won't let me see him again. I behaved badly, becoming hysterical when it was time to leave, sobbing, and begging to be allowed to stay. I have this irrational fear that I will lose him, too.

I want to tell him that we'll go to Paris when he's better, that we'll drink cognac in the shadow of the Sacré-Coeur, as he promised. And that when we return we can get another kitten, if he likes. But, mostly, I want to tell him that I want to go home. Although I'm not sure where home is, anymore. Perhaps home is simply where he is?

These are just some of the things I want to tell him.

And now, because I have nothing to do, I have started thinking about Flint. *Flint Shepherd*. I don't think there is any danger anymore in thinking about the man, or the boy. I think the fire set him free. And maybe that was all he ever wanted.

Last night I dreamt I went to Sargasso again.

I floated down the sandy track that leads from the coast road, knowing that at this time of the day walking barefoot would be excruciating. The sand would sting and burn and make us breathless, and I would hop from one side of the track to the other like a hounded rabbit. Flint and I used to race from the scraggly eucalypts to the house, but he always won. I never could beat him at anything—except cards. He didn't care about pain. He ran straight as an arrow to Sargasso, but then Sargasso was more his home than mine.

It was midday in my dream. Mum would've called it a stinker of a day. Not a breath of wind, heat oozing over my shoulders, a hard sky and the light so fierce I could hardly bear to look up. Even glancing at the sea would be painful. It would shine like shook foil. On such a day Flint and I would walk backwards to the beach so we didn't have to face the glare, giggling and tripping over our heels, dragging our towels through the sand.

Sargasso is on a headland. The sandy path dips and swerves through the tattered eucalypts rattling their leaves, and there it is. At a good distance it resembles an outcrop, something formed by nature and part of the landscape. It stands proud on the cliff's edge. Nothing to mar its beauty. An innovative house, the reviews said. Conceptually brilliant. Original in its design. Intransigent—I had to look that one up because I was little—and inventive. They also said isolated and introverted, but we took no notice. Dad said there would always be people who were resentful.

In my dream the front door of the house was wide open. But there were no tracks in the driveway. No cars in the carport. No sign of anybody in

residence. From the trees, the house seems windblown, softer somehow, its once angular stone edges eroded by sand and time. Drifts of sand lay across the wide doorway and small heaps had accumulated in the corner of the window ledges, like sleep in a person's eyes. Sand sifted slowly from the rooftop. Up close to Sargasso, the heat was intense, bouncing off the cement and radiating from the glass walls, and I was grateful to slip inside.

On such a day it was strange to find no one sheltering within. Kelly, perhaps, in the library with one slender browned foot propped up on the low coffee table and an array of nail polishes spread before her. Or Mum, in the kitchen, cooling herself in front of the open fridge and sipping gin, which she took to later. Instead, the house was deserted. Silent. Not even the mewl of a seagull. Only the grit of sand against glass, and the shush of a wave breaking a long way off.

The rooms were all empty: empty of people, furniture, paintings and rugs.

All the books were gone, too. A whole, high wall of books. All gone.

Only the clock remained, with the hands fixed at an indeterminate time.

I moved upstairs—even the treads of the stairs were sandy—and crossed to the glass room. I hovered at its transparent walls, looking out to the ocean. Then I looked up to the distant sky. And back to the doorway. And out to the ocean once more. I felt again as I had felt as a little girl, that I was being watched. That beyond the monstrous plate glass windows, something, someone, was watching me. Watching me as he did on that first day, as I moved from room to room. Up and down the staircases, clutching Dolly, muffling her voice so no one would hear her cry.

I looked in my room. I looked in my room for traces that I was once there, but I found nothing. Nothing, until I opened the cupboard. Out of habit, I groped underneath the bottom shelf, mindful of splinters, and found the letter, worn thin now, where Flint promised to always look after me. And as I read the words, they disintegrated, slipped between my fingers as things in dreams do.

I found myself cradled in Flint's arms on the floor under the stairs. We were lying on a bed of soft sea sand. The stars shimmered and shivered with excitement, and the moon was swollen, pregnant with promise. We were older and we weren't sleeping.

I woke up, then. I woke up because I was weeping. I woke up because I was awash with anguish.

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When I was fourteen and on holiday at my grandparents' seaside house, I was given Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* to read one rainy afternoon. It left an indelible impression on me, and I subsequently read *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Great Expectations*. Later, I read *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Jamaica Inn*, and *Frankenstein*, and even later still I read all kinds of Gothic literature for my master's degree. *Rebecca*, however, remains my favourite. It still has the power to move me. I have only to hear the words 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again' and I come over all goosebumpy. Daphne du Maurier was an extraordinary writer for her time, and I owe her a debt of gratitude for inspiring me to write *Sargasso*.

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A bit about poker. I may have played the game once. I am better at playing 500. All errors are therefore my own.

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