

The Devils' Cradle

Darcy Daniel

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To my wonderful Gran, I thank you for all you have done for me, all of my life. You will always and forever be in my heart.

Note to international readers:-

The families of Australian politicians value their privacy, rarely appearing in the public eye. While the Australian Prime Minister attracts attention from the press on a daily basis, the Premier of the State (the equivalent to a US Governor) receives much less attention, and their families are rarely, if ever, seen or mentioned in the media.

MONDAY

Nina Holt woke with a start. Her heart jack-hammered, but instead of gasping for breath like she desperately wanted to, she held it in, kept her eyes closed and didn't move a muscle. Bad dreams were a regular occurrence, so she felt no need to reach for the bedside lamp to chase away the darkness. Besides, she wouldn't dare wake Michael.

Lying motionless, she waited for the fog to clear from her mind, waited for reality to seep in and tell her heart there was nothing to fear.

She almost smiled at that ridiculous thought. Almost. There was always something to be afraid of in this house.

Slowly, her other senses returned, revealing something far more unsettling than the fading nightmare.

Silence.

Nothing except the sound of blood swirling through her ears. Her pulse stuttered. Where was her husband's steady breathing, his soft snore, the sounds she'd listened to every night for over a decade?

For a sliver of a second, she wondered if he'd died in his sleep, then dismissed the idea. She'd never been lucky, so why would luck bestow a favour upon her now?

No, the room held a discernible emptiness.

Which meant she could move.

As Nina tried to roll onto her back, she discovered her body refused to cooperate. She'd become so conditioned to remaining motionless for fear of waking Michael, she hadn't noticed that something was terribly wrong when she came out of the nightmare.

The effort to move her legs seemed insurmountable, as if her limbs were being pressed against the bed by an invisible weight, forcing her to use every ounce of concentration to make the appendages obey her commands.

Gradually, her left leg inched toward the edge of the bed, and as it did so, the realisation that she'd experienced this laden sensation before hit her hard. Michael had drugged her.

Although his use of chemicals on her had been few and far between, Michael had always slipped her just enough sedative to keep her conscious, yet totally defenceless. He wanted her to know exactly what he was doing to her. After all, that was part of the fun.

But this time, she couldn't even remember saying goodnight to her son, let alone climbing into bed, which meant Michael had gone against his nature and given her enough to totally knock her out.

Why?

She managed to pry open an eyelid. The illuminated numbers on the bedside clock glowed red. Six minutes past one. That surprised her. If Michael had given her a high dose of the sedative, she should have slept until morning. Maybe the nightmare induced adrenalin rush counter-acted the drug, at least enough to wake her mind, but her body remained useless and heavy.

With immense effort, Nina rolled onto her back. As she caught her breath, she tried to get a sense of whether or not Michael had sex with her while she'd been unconscious. She didn't ache anywhere, and her underwear was still in place, still dry. Dread filled her. If he hadn't drugged her for his usual purpose, then why? What was he up to? Where was he?

Like a large spider, she didn't want Michael anywhere near her, but needed to know exactly where he was at all times. Better to stare him in the eye than know he lay in wait, ready to scuttle out from some unexpected hiding place to inject his venom. Knowing where he was, what kind of mood he was in was the only way she could anticipate his needs and keep his violence at bay—at least for a moment.

As she contemplated Michael's reason for drugging her, a terrifying thought bloomed in her mind.

Sam.

What if Michael had taken Sam away? Hidden him where she had no chance of ever finding him? The thought stole her breath. Sam was the only light in her dark world. If it wasn't for her son, she would have checked out long ago. Michael knew that all too well. Taking Sam would be his cruellest torture of all.

Nina knew he wouldn't hurt Sam, that he loved the boy just as much as she did. But because of their affection for each other, Michael could easily convince Sam to play a cruel prank on her. That was his style.

She had to get up and make sure Sam was still in the house. Though she felt like she was at the bottom of the ocean, weighed down by water as thick as molasses, a new surge of adrenalin helped her limbs move more fluidly.

Finally, her feet sank into the thick luxurious carpet. She rose, tested her legs. They were weak but stable enough to hold her weight. As she took silent stilted steps toward the bedroom door, she glanced through the open plantation shutters. The full moon stared back, seemed to mock her with a promise that what waited down the hallway would be everything she feared.

As she crossed the master bedroom's threshold, Nina broke into a panicked run. Stumbling along the hallway, she tripped over her own feet and landed with a thump on the carpet outside Sam's room.

From the floor, she couldn't see him.

Using the doorframe to haul herself to her feet, her knees almost buckled when his small form, safely tucked in bed, came into view. She clung to the doorframe with relief. The moon hadn't been mocking her after all. Instead, it provided enough light to show her that her son was exactly where he should be.

Once her breathing slowed, Nina shuffled into the room, stood beside his bed and watched him sleep.

Only 9-years-old and already handsome. Although she wasn't sure about the existence of a god, someone was on her side, because every day she was grateful Sam looked nothing like Michael. With blond hair and blue eyes, Nina saw a mixture of herself and Sam's own uniqueness every time she looked at him. Of course, Sam would be appalled by the very idea. He wanted to look like Michael, wanted to be like Michael.

And day by day, Michael's behaviour and attitude ingrained itself within her only child.

Sam adored his dad, idolizing him to an extent that made it easy for Michael to drive a solid wedge between herself and her son. It filled her with dread, not only because Sam was becoming a pint-sized version of Michael, but because of the promise she'd made to herself. When Sam

was a toddler, she promised that if he ever exhibited even a hint of Michael's vicious side, she'd have no choice but to take him and run. She might not care what happened to her, but she cared about her son and the type of man he would become. She would risk her life to prevent him growing into a monster.

That didn't stop fear racing through her heart at the mere thought of running, though. Running would mean bringing down the wrath of not only Michael, but his brother, Greg.

As the Ford Falcon dipped and bumped slowly over the driveway's uneven surface, Greg Holt leaned forward in the passenger seat and stared through the windscreen. The moon hung in the sky between tall gumtrees bordering the dirt driveway, providing enough illumination to safely

navigate the car without headlights. He couldn't have picked a better night for the task they were about to carry out.

In the driver's seat, Michael hunched over the steering wheel in an effort to keep the car on course. Only two years separated them. Although that gap meant nothing now, during childhood two years had seemed like a lifetime. Those two years of seniority made Greg feel responsible for protecting Michael from their father's rages. Those two years had meant a lifetime of beatings taken in Michael's place.

Now 42-years-old, Greg still protected his little brother. At least, that's what he let Michael believe. What Michael didn't know was that years ago Greg discovered how much he enjoyed doing what they were about to do. The intense high he'd experienced after that first time had been better than any drug he'd ever taken, and he'd tried most. Now the opportunity to do it again had presented itself. Although this would be the biggest favour Michael had ever asked of him, the reward would be the same as he'd receive for cancelling a speeding ticket for his brother.

He didn't mind. The reward was pretty fucking great.

"Here'll do," he said.

Michael obediently stopped the car in the middle of the driveway.

Greg popped the glove box and removed the .22 snub-nosed revolver he'd lifted from a dealer five years ago. Already loaded with sub-sonic rounds, the small gun had served him well in the past. It would be just as effective in a few minutes.

Fishing under a folded map he'd been meaning to toss away, he found his badge. When it glinted in the moonlight streaming through the windscreen, he took a moment to admire it. He'd worked hard for that badge. Almost two years ago it merely read *Detective*. Now the words he'd always wanted to see were indented permanently into the cold, shiny metal.

Detective Inspector.

Sacrifices had needed to be made by those who were competing for the position, but that just made the promotion all the sweeter. He'd won, and those who thought they were smarter, more educated, had lost—big time.

Hanging the badge around his neck, he checked his watch. Half past one. He preferred to do this a little later, around three, when Martin Wenzel would be in his deepest sleep. But Michael insisted he be home before Nina woke. Why argue? He enjoyed giving Michael small victories, letting him think he had the upper hand.

Slipping on a pair of leather gloves, he said, "Give me two minutes, then drive on up."

"I know what to do," Michael said.

He wanted to snap back, tell Michael he knew nothing about what they were moments from doing, but only smiled and stepped into the frigid winter night.

His breath plumed in the air, reminding him he was long overdue for a smoke. But that could wait. His craving for what he was about to do far outweighed his need for nicotine.

From the rear seat, he grabbed a folded woollen blanket. All set, he silently closed the door and strode along the remainder of Wenzel's rural driveway.

As he rounded a bend, the trees shrank away from a clearing, revealing Wenzel's poorly maintained house. The moonlight reflected the last vestiges of white paint stubbornly clinging to the weatherboard. No lights glowed from the windows. He already knew Wenzel didn't have a dog or pet of any kind. Even better, he didn't have a wife or girlfriend either. No, Wenzel was far too busy trying to bring down Tasmania's Premier to bother with a relationship.

As a leader and organizer of environmental protests, Wenzel had built a substantial network of tree-huggers over recent years. The media, parasites that they were, loved the rowdy protests and hot environmental issues raised by Wenzel every time Michael made a public appearance to discuss his party's policies. Wenzel had become quite a celebrity in Tasmania, and it seemed nothing could discourage the fucker. Unfortunately for Wenzel, he had no idea who he was dealing with when it came to the Holts.

Greg crept up the concrete steps and stood on the small porch before Wenzel's front door. Without a sound, he unfurled the woollen blanket and spread it over the concrete porch, as if about to sit down for a picnic.

Heart hammering with excitement, he positioned himself in front of the door and pounded on the hollow wood. The door shuddered in its frame with each strike. When a light came to life along the side of the house, Greg moved closer to the door.

"Martin Wenzel?" he shouted with authority. "Police. Open up."

Muffled curses and footsteps came from inside. Greg held his badge in front of the peephole, tightened his grip on the Glock in his other hand, and waited.

"What the hell?" Wenzel grumbled as the door swung open.

In a flash, Greg grabbed Wenzel by his t-shirt. Before the tree-hugger's eyes had time to register surprise, Greg pressed the barrel of the suppressor to Wenzel's chest and fired twice. As Wenzel's legs buckled, Greg yanked him forward, stepped aside, and released him.

Literally a dead weight, Wenzel collapsed onto the woollen blanket. Working quickly so the blood wouldn't have a chance to soak through the single layer of wool and stain the concrete, Greg tossed the edge of the blanket over Wenzel and rolled him, encapsulating his body in thick layers. Since he'd shot Wenzel directly in the heart, he wasn't too worried about copious amounts of liquid pumping from the tree-hugger, but he wasn't taking any chances.

While he waited for Michael to bring the Falcon around, adrenaline circulated through his system as he stared at the cocooned corpse at his feet. Although this kill hadn't been as sweet as his first, it still excited him. It wasn't a perverted sexual excitement like he'd seen in the mentally unstable low-life's he came across in his line of work. No, this was the excitement he imagined a caged bird must feel when it finally flew free.

Everyone wore social masks, and he'd learnt that killing was the only time he could remove that mask and become his true self. After all, wasn't that what people believed was the secret to happiness? To be themselves, to accept who they were and be happy with that? They were right,

but unfortunately killing wasn't something he could indulge in on a regular basis. Not if he wanted to keep his job and stay out of prison.

Right on time, his Falcon rolled around the bend in the driveway. As instructed, Michael reversed up to the steps. A moment later, the boot yawned open like a dark mouth, ready to consume its victim.

Greg waited for Michael to join him, then hugged Wenzel's upper body through the blanket while Michael lifted Wenzel's feet. The shovel and pick in the boot rattled when they dumped the body on top.

Michael grinned. "I can't believe it's done, that it's this easy."

"Nothing's done till he's in the ground. So get your arse to Site Two and wait for me. I'll be there in five."

Greg waited for Michael to drive away before entering Wenzel's house. Inside, he located the master bedroom, found an old suitcase on a high shelf in the wardrobe, yanked clothes off hangers and tossed them in the case. Then he moved to a tallboy, picked up handfuls of underwear, socks and t-shirts and, along with a couple pairs of hiking boots and runners, stuffed them into the suitcase. Satisfied that it looked like Wenzel had packed for a trip away, he carried the case into the living area where he found Wenzel's wallet and car keys on a coffee table.

Before he left, he removed an open carton of milk from the fridge and poured the contents down the drain, leaving milk residue in the sink.

After placing the suitcase in Wenzel's car, Greg climbed behind the wheel and started the 20-year-old Toyota. Apparently hippy tree-huggers weren't flush with money.

When he arrived at the abandoned mining site, his Falcon sat idling before the locked gates. Greg climbed out with the padlock key he'd secretly acquired over six months ago from an unsuspecting site manager. Back then, they'd been in the planning stages of Wenzel's demise and had yet to find a location to dump his car. When Greg received a call about trespassers cutting the padlock at the site, he'd known he'd found the perfect location.

Nice guy that he was, he'd purchased a new padlock for the manager and brought it along to the site within the hour, but not before having a copy of the key made.

Now he used that key and swung the gates inward.

They'd been out to the site a few nights ago to make sure the quarry water was deep enough for their purposes. When they'd tested the depth of the water, the jade liquid swirled with a milky beauty, not that Greg was inclined to appreciate such things. All he saw was the perfect grave for Wenzel's car. The cloudy water obscured anything more than a foot beneath its surface, and the dam was well over twenty feet deep where it met the quarry's cliff-like wall.

Another deciding factor in choosing the quarry was that the land above the cliff sloped toward its edge.

Positioning Wenzel's car a good fifty metres up-slope from the dam, he turned off the lights and engine. After locking the steering wheel, shifting the gearstick into neutral and winding down all the windows, he waited for Michael to haul his arse up the slope.

Michael had wanted to sit Wenzel's body in the car to make it look like he'd driven over the cliff himself, but Greg convinced him that the decomposing body would leak fluids that would rise to the water's surface, fluids that would be noticeable against the milky jade water, fluids trespassers might find curious.

He had no idea if that were true, but his theory convinced Michael that the body might be found, leading to an autopsy which would reveal the bullet holes in Wenzel's chest. Bullet holes that would lead to the police opening a homicide investigation and questioning all of Wenzel's enemies, including Michael. With a little more prodding, Michael agreed to burying Wenzel's body on his own property where no one would stumble upon it by accident.

Of course, his brother had no idea the dead man would be joining another body already buried there.

As Michael joined him, Greg smiled, reached into the car and released the handbrake. The Toyota began to roll immediately. Without a word, they followed the car, put their gloved hands on the boot and pushed, running flat-out.

As the car picked up momentum, they pulled up and watched, panting as the car careened down the remainder of the slope and sailed over the edge.

Silence. Silence. Then an enormous splash.

“Got the torch?” he asked Michael.

Michael turned it on as they approached the edge. The beam of light shone on the water below, revealing the tip of the boot bobbing as bubbles burst on the liquid’s cloudy surface. Then it sank, disappearing in a swirl of jade.

As they walked back to the Falcon, Greg removed the sweaty gloves and held out his hand. “Keys.”

“I don’t mind driving,” Michael said.

“Sure. Long as you don’t mind getting pulled over with a body in the boot. Long as you don’t mind explaining why you’re driving my car when I’m sitting beside you. Go ahead.”

Michael gave him the keys.

An hour later, they arrived at Michael’s property. While they waited for the large wrought iron gates to swing open, Greg looked across at Michael and grinned.

“When do I collect my reward?” He made it sound like a question, but it wasn’t.

“Tonight suit you?”

“Sure.”

As the gates swung all the way open, Greg punched the accelerator, travelled along the sealed driveway and past the double story sandstone house Michael called home. Swinging off the drive, he drove onto the open expanse of manicured lawns at the rear of the house. A hundred metres in, the headlights shone on the trees ahead. As he drew closer, he swung the car around, backed up to the tree-line and killed the lights and engine.

Without a word, they both got out. As Greg walked toward the rear of the car, the ghost gums caught his eye, their white trunks luminescent in the moonlight. Raising the boot lid, they hauled out Wenzel's wrapped body.

As they shuffled toward the trees, Greg glanced at the house. And smiled. There in the window, Nina's pale face stared out, watching. A shiver of a thrill travelled down his spine. She might have caught them in the act, but he knew she would never breathe a word of it. Not to him. Not to Michael. Not to anyone.

Nina listened to Michael snore softly at her side. She cracked an eyelid and checked the time.
6:00 AM.

Michael had returned to the house around three. When he entered the bedroom and stopped beside her, she kept her eyes closed and remained motionless. The smell of freshly

turned earth and sweat wafted over her as he leaned closer. His breath swept against her face and, when he pressed his lips to her forehead, it took every ounce of willpower to keep her body relaxed. Even after he moved away and the shower began to run, she remained the epitome of an unconscious woman. Soon after, he flopped into bed and, to her relief, fell asleep almost instantly. Exhausted. From digging a grave.

At least, that's what she believed they'd been doing. When she'd seen them remove something large from the boot of Greg's car, the reason Michael had drugged her made perfect sense.

It wasn't the first time she'd witnessed a similar activity taking place. A few years ago, she crept to the toilet in the middle of the night and caught a glimpse of headlights near the tree-line as she passed the window. But Michael had been in bed that night, and as she stared through the window, the low swirling mist kept her from seeing all the details. When a man passed in front of the headlights, she recognised Greg, hunched over, dragging something on the ground, something that lay in the mist beneath the headlight beams.

At the time, she hadn't understood what she was seeing, only that it made her skin crawl. Last night left her with no doubt. A wave of nausea and relief engulfed her. Nausea at what the only two men in her life had done, and relief that she hadn't told Michael what she'd seen Greg doing on that previous occasion. At the time, she'd considered it, thought it might be something that would drive a wedge between the brothers. Her instincts had told her to keep her mouth shut, that it was better to have a secret from Michael, something tucked away for when she really needed it. Unfortunately, after what she witnessed in the early hours of the morning, she knew that secret was useless. Michael must have allowed Greg the use of his property back then. If she had revealed what she'd seen Greg doing, Michael would have punished her for spying and tattling.

Her stomach churned. She couldn't lie with the monster beside her another second. Carefully, she slipped out of bed, grabbed her robe and padded into the en-suite.

Turning on the shower, undressing while she waited for the water to heat, she caught her reflection in the large mirror over the vanity. Her ribs showed, though not so much as to appear skeleton-like. She thought of herself as slender, not skinny, but did wonder if she had a realistic take on her body image.

The first time she'd stood in this bathroom eleven years ago, the first time she really looked at herself since her imprisonment, her withered body had been covered with dull, lifeless skin punctuated with scabs made by incessant, compulsive picking. The perfect example of a body ravaged by an addiction to heroin. Now her skin glowed from a healthy diet and clean living.

At least from the front.

Undoing the long, heavy plait that fell past her bottom, she dragged a brush through her hair, noticing the scraggly split ends. It desperately needed a cut, but Michael wouldn't allow that. No, he liked her hair long so he could use it against her whenever the urge took him.

As steam filled the bathroom, she turned from the mirror and strode to the stall door. Just before she stepped beneath the hot spray, she glanced over her shoulder and swept her hair out of the way. Her reflection revealed scars littering her back and buttocks, scars she'd accumulated over the last ten years. For a moment, she wondered which body she preferred. Then she stepped beneath the flowing water and lost herself for a while.

Ten minutes later, Nina stood before the bathroom mirror and, with practiced precision, twirled her long hair into a perfect bun and secured it at the back of her head. She thought the look was severe and old fashioned, but Michael insisted it represented elegance. The perfect style for the wife of a public figure. She wasn't stupid enough to contradict him by pointing out that she rarely accompanied him to any events. He didn't like having her in the public eye, didn't want to share her with anyone. Except for the one person excluded from that rule.

Meticulously applying her makeup, she filled in the small scar that cut through her right eyebrow with a pencil. Imperfections were not allowed unless they were caused by Michael. And he would never give her an imperfection that might be seen by his adoring voters.

In the walk-in-robe, Nina stood in her underwear and pressed her hand to the window's cold glass. Outside, white particles of fog floated with motionless precision. She wished the fog had rolled in earlier to block her view of what she'd seen last night. But this window faced the front of the property. The dim dawn light allowed her to make out the shape of the butterfly trees flanking the long driveway. Beyond the fourth tree, the fog engulfed the rest of the world. Not that it mattered. There may as well have been no rest of the world.

As she removed her hand from the window, she studied the condensation around the handprint. Right there: proof she actually existed.

Too soon, the evidence faded.

Goose pimples tightened her skin, tickled their way up her spine and over her arms. They had nothing to do with the freezing temperature outside. The central heating kept the house warm and cosy. The reaction came from the niggling idea that she might be able to use what she'd seen last night to escape.

Really? Who are you kidding?

She shivered and rubbed her bare arms as she fought off the idea. It would never work. Greg would make sure of that.

Turning away from the window, Nina studied her side of the wardrobe. The meticulous row of designer skirts, blouses and dresses filled her with contempt. For just one day, she wanted to slip into a pair of jeans, a t-shirt and runners. She supposed other women might drool over her wardrobe, but doubted they'd be prepared to pay the astronomical price for such luxury.

She chose a Marni knee-length skirt and a Lanvin cashmere sweater. She had no idea what the labels meant, but they meant something to Michael. After all, he chose them for her like he did everything, right down to her underwear.

Dressed, she selected a pair of Fendi heels from an impressive collection of stilettos. Of all the things Michael made her wear, heels were by far the most despised. She guessed he found it

amusing that the torture on her feet eloquently reflected the torture he inflicted upon her whenever she put a foot wrong.

She emerged from the walk-in-robe with the Fendi's dangling from her fingertips. Michael lay in the same position. Careful not to wake him before his alarm sounded in exactly six minutes, her bare feet carried her silently from the room.

Hurrying along the upstairs hallway, she passed three spare bedrooms and a bathroom before she reached the far end of the hallway and walked into Sam's room.

In the dim light, Sam slept beneath covers decorated with rockets, stars and moons, so much like that of any other 9-year-old boy, it made her heart ache. He was more than just her child. If it wasn't for Sam, her chances of being alive right now were slim. Giving birth to the son Michael wanted saved her life. Not only had his birth pleased Michael, but it had given her a purpose, a reason to remain in this hell, day after day.

Leaning over him, she kissed his smooth forehead. His eyelids flickered, but didn't open.

Nina crossed to the window and opened the plantation shutters. Her gaze followed the light as it streamed into the room. Not one toy littered the floor. Everything was in its proper place, including his clothes. A wave of sadness swept through her as she remembered her own childhood bedroom which always looked like a wild party had taken place.

Children were supposed to have messy rooms. Wasn't that part of being a kid? But Michael didn't care what she believed. Only *his* beliefs ruled. Besides, Sam didn't know any better. All he wanted to do was please his dad, make him proud. And if that meant keeping his room clean at all times, then he made sure that's how it stayed. But this room was the only room in the house where Sam picked up after himself. The rest was up to her.

Nina opened his perfectly organised wardrobe, plucked out his private school uniform and hung it on the doorknob.

Making her way over to the side of the bed, she kissed his forehead again and gave his shoulder a shake.

“Come on, sleepy head. Time to get up.”

Sam groaned and pulled the covers over his head. She smiled. He would never dream of doing something like that with Michael. Although Sam disobeyed her, she liked the idea that he felt comfortable enough with her to do so.

“Come on, honey.”

“I’m sleeping,” came his muffled reply.

“Okay, then. I guess we’ll just have to wait another day to get your report.”

The covers flew off his face. “I forgot about that.” He leapt out of bed and stripped off his flannel pyjamas.

As she headed to the door, she called over her shoulder, “Don’t forget to change your undies.”

“Mum! I’m not a baby.”

Padding silently down the carpeted stairs, the image of him cradled in her arms on the day he was born came to mind. It seemed so long ago, a different lifetime. Michael had been so proud, so caring and gentle in the hospital. The perfect husband. Though their relationship was different from most, she hadn’t cared. Michael had given her so much, all the material things she could ever hope for. But when she came home from the hospital with Sam, everything changed.

No longer the object of Michael’s sole affection, Sam replaced her. When she did something wrong, she soon discovered just how vicious her husband’s punishments were. He’d only occasionally laid a hand on her before Sam came along, but once he had Sam safely home, that changed. Though he rarely used his hands. He liked implements, tools, weapons.

As Nina crossed the threshold into the open-plan kitchen and breakfast area, she glanced to her left and froze, her bare feet planted on the heated marble tiles.

As always, Michael’s keys lay on the half-table to the left of the internal garage door. Beside those keys rested his wallet, and beside that sat a small bowl into which Michael emptied the

loose change from his pockets every night. Now that bowl contained a single gold coin amongst the silver.

From this distance, she couldn't be sure if it was a one or two dollar coin. Not that it mattered. What mattered was making it hers without getting caught.

She cocked her head and listened. Blood roared through her ears as she strained to hear the tell-tale sounds of Michael moving around upstairs. He usually took his time in the shower, but not always.

Her feet carried her over the warm tiles until she stood before the bowl. A two dollar coin. She reached for it, but as her fingers touched the cool metal, she hesitated. If Michael walked in right now, she'd be in serious trouble.

That's what you tell yourself every time you do this, and he hasn't caught you yet.

She pinched the gold coin between her fingers, gripping it so tight her nails turned white. Stooping, she placed the coin beneath the table and swept it toward the wall, just as she always did. If Michael noticed the coin missing, he'd discover it under the table and believe it fell when he emptied his pockets. At least, that's what she hoped he'd think. So far, her theory hadn't been put to the test.

Rising, she waited, willing her heart to slow down. Every time she stole from Michael, she thought it would be the last. But ten years had passed since she began taking the gold coins, and in all that time, he never noticed. Which surprised her, since he was so vigilant about every little thing. Though she knew without a doubt he'd notice if she took money from his wallet, he seemed oblivious to the coins. Maybe because they were an annoyance. Or maybe because he was biding his time, just waiting to catch her in the act and demand she show him where she'd hidden the others, waiting to crush every last drop of hope from her soul by taking away her one and only avenue of escape when the time came.

And she knew, that time would inevitably come.

Bleary-eyed, and not in the least grateful for the day off work, Case Herder shuffled out of his bedroom in thick socks and a warm tracksuit. Rubbing his hands together against the cold, he made his way through the open-plan living room to the kitchen, turned on the kettle and hurried over to the fireplace.

As he crunched pages of a newspaper and stacked kindling on top, the phone rang.

He turned and stared at the handset on the kitchen bench.

It rang five more times before the answering machine kicked in.

“Casey? Are you there?” his mother-in-law asked. “It’s Emma. Please pick up...David and I know today must be just as difficult for you as it is for us. And we haven’t spoken to you for so long. Casey? Casey, we want you to come and visit us up at Cradle Mountain for a few days. Call me back when—” The machine cut her off.

Case released a long stream of air.

He’d known his in-laws would ring today. After all, they phoned every week. And every week he avoided their calls.

But today was a day of more importance than most. Today was the two year anniversary of his wife’s murder.

Case turned toward the mantelpiece. Their honeymoon photo still remained on the thick oak slab. He moved closer and studied their happy faces. How long had it been since he felt that good? Two years seemed like the logical answer, yet he couldn’t dismiss the undercurrent of tension that had seeped into his marriage three or four months before Julie’s murder. Something hadn’t been right, but he’d been too busy to get into another heated discussion with her, believing that the strangeness between them was just a side effect of the honeymoon period coming to an end, that they’d get over the rough patch and settle into a good marriage.

But in the photo, they looked happy. With their arms around each other, they stood in the snow in front of a sign reading *Welcome to Cradle Mountain*. When they returned from their honeymoon, he remembered Julie gushing to her parents about the beauty of the place. Her enthusiasm must have rubbed off because a few months ago, Emma and David sold their home and took up the positions of live-in managers at Cradle Mountain Lodge. Case wondered if it made them feel closer to Julie, if being there served as a reminder of just how happy their daughter had been on her honeymoon when she’d visited Cradle Mountain. He hoped so.

As parents, he knew they would probably never let go. As her husband, the loss had made him dead inside. Nothing interested him. Nothing mattered anymore.

Well that wasn't entirely true. One thing did matter: catching Julie's killer. That was all that kept him going. But once that happened, he wasn't sure what the hell he'd do with himself.

His day off work wasn't about that, though. The time had come to pack away her things. He'd already put it off too long.

Removing the framed photograph from the mantel, he carried it into the spare bedroom. The room contained a wardrobe, home gym, and Bob the boxing dummy, who had taken quite a beating in the months after Julie's death. As Case entered, he glanced at the photo of himself on the wall, walked over, took it down and leaned it against the wall with the photo facing inward. Seeing himself in full police uniform didn't do much for him anymore. That career ended only a week after Julie's murder.

Having no alibi because he'd been home alone the night she was murdered made him the prime suspect, as were all spouses in such cases. That, he understood. What he didn't understand was why the soon to retire Detective Inspector Jamison put Greg Holt in charge of the case when Jamison knew both himself and Holt were competing for the position that would open up when the Detective Inspector retired.

The moment Holt arrived on Case's doorstep to take him in for questioning he'd known his chances of getting that promotion were dead in the water. The promotion he'd worked toward so Julie, already pregnant, could quit her hairdressing job and stay home when the baby arrived. The promotion would have seen him receive a substantial pay rise to accomplish just that. The promotion—for reasons he couldn't fathom—Julie had constantly tried to talk him out of, claiming that their lives and financial situation were just fine, that she liked working. Reasons he dismissed every time she brought them up, which happened to be quite often.

So instead of accompanying Julie to her parents' house where she wanted to announce the news of her pregnancy together, he'd stayed home and studied for the promotion.

That had been the last time he'd seen her. They'd both been upset with each other, and when she left, he hadn't even bothered to get up from his desk to kiss her goodbye. Feeling guilty, he hadn't been able to sleep until Julie's mother sent him a text letting him know Julie was about to head home.

When he woke early the following morning to discover his wife's side of the bed empty, he presumed she'd changed her mind and stayed the night at her parents, something she occasionally did after enjoying a few drinks. Only one problem. She was pregnant. She wouldn't have touched a single drink, let alone a few. Maybe she felt too tired to drive home. Or maybe she was still pissed at him for not going with her. Either way, he needed to know she was safe, so he phoned her parents.

David answered five rings in, his voice heavy with sleep. "This'd better be damn good."

"Sorry, Dave. It's Case."

"Congratulations. Now ring back at a reasonable hour."

"Wait," Case said before David could hang up. "I just want to make sure Jules is okay."

"Ask her yourself."

"Thanks, Dave. I appreciate it." A long pause followed, and he imagined David dragging himself out of bed to go and give the phone to Julie.

"What're you thanking me for?"

Case frowned. "For putting her on..." Another stretch of silence.

"She's not here," David said, sounding wide awake.

"She probably crashed in your guest room."

"I saw her to her car, saw her drive away last night."

"David? What is it?" Emma asked in the background.

"Dave...she's not here either," Case said as he jumped out of bed. He grabbed a pair of jeans, pulled them on with the phone cradled against his shoulder. Bedclothes rustled on the other end of the line.

“Jules didn’t go home last night,” David told Emma, a slight edge in his voice.

Case tried to tamp down on the panic rising in his chest.

“Emma’s calling her mobile. She got a reason not to come home that we don’t know about?” David asked.

“No,” Case said as he shoved bare feet into a pair of runners. “At least, well...she wanted me to come with her last night, to tell you about the baby, but I had to study.”

“She wasn’t too happy about—”

“Casey,” Emma said in his ear. “It went straight to voicemail. Even if Julie was furious with you, she’d let you know if she wasn’t coming home. Have you checked your mobile for messages?”

“Shit. Hold on.” He grabbed a t-shirt and pulled it over his head as he hurried into the kitchen and unplugged the mobile from its charger. Shaking, he woke up the screen. No messages. With dread sinking into the pit of his gut, he brought the cordless phone to his ear. “Nothing.”

Silence on the other end.

“I’m coming over,” he said. “Maybe she broke down or something. Had no mobile reception. I’ll probably find her in her car, asleep on the side of the road.”

“Look out for us. We’ll do the same thing from this end.”

He grabbed his keys and raced outside, not even feeling the bite of the minus five degree air as he climbed into his car and drove away.

Five minutes into the hour-long drive to Longley, his mobile rang. He snatched it up without checking the screen.

“Casey,” Emma said, her voice trembling. “We’ve found her car—”

As sobs took her voice, he felt his own throat tighten.

“We’re on Sandfly Road, about two K’s from our place,” David said, his words not much steadier than Emma’s.

“Where is she, David?”

“She’s not here.” There was a long pause as Case listened to David’s footsteps crunch over gravel. Not much louder than a whisper, he finally said, “I think there’s blood inside the car.”

“No.”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this, son.”

Heart hammering, Case gripped the steering wheel.

“Call the police. I’m still at least forty minutes away.”

By the time he arrived at the scene, a marked cruiser and an unmarked car he’d used himself on occasion, blocked off the road. The uniformed cops waved him through, the sympathy in their eyes making his gut drop out from under him.

As he hurried toward Julie’s car, Detective Greg Holt closed the driver’s side door with a latex gloved hand. He turned and caught Case’s eye. Holt simply gave his head the tiniest of shakes. It stopped him in his tracks. He knew that shake, knew what it meant. He’d given that shake to fellow cops himself when he had to let them know a situation was hopeless without letting on to any nearby relatives.

He stumbled slightly as he moved closer to her car, his knees barely keeping him upright. Holt met him half-way, put a hand on his elbow, stopped him.

“Where is she?” Case managed to force out.

“No sign of her. But the blood in the car...If it’s hers, no one could survive that sort of blood loss. I’m so sorry, Herder.”

Case stared at him. For the first time since meeting the man, he actually seemed genuine. Of all the times in the history of their working relationship, this was not the time he wanted to see Holt display sympathy.

“I have to see,” he said, and took a step toward the car.

Holt’s grip on his elbow tightened. “You don’t wanna do that.”

Case jerked his arm free and strode toward the car he bought his wife a year ago for their second anniversary. Nothing special, just a simple second-hand Holden Astra, but a whole hell of a lot more reliable than the bomb she'd been driving.

When he arrived at the car, he stared through the driver's window. He couldn't see much with the sky reflecting on the glass, but when he leaned closer, he saw what looked like a massive black ink stain on the driver's seat.

Holt came up behind him, eased him out of the way, and opened the door with his gloved hand.

Case froze.

Careful not to touch anything, he leaned into the car and saw blood spatter over almost every surface. But on the doors, the dashboard and the steering wheel, the blood was smeared, not like the blotchy raindrop splatters everywhere else.

"Someone wiped their prints," he said to himself.

"I know. Now c'mon, Herder. You know you can't work this case. You need to step back, go be with your in-laws."

Holt was right, but Case didn't want to be the victim, the man whose wife had been murdered. No. He wanted to do his job, be the detective who could detach himself from all the emotion and concentrate on the facts. That's where he felt safe, where he belonged.

But the department wouldn't allow that. Not that he cared. They might be able to stop him from being officially involved in the case, but they couldn't stop him from hunting this fucker down and slaughtering him the way he'd obviously slaughtered Julie.

A week after finding Julie's car, and accompanied by two uniformed officers, Holt turned up on his doorstep unannounced. He wasn't a fool. He'd known the day would come, so he accepted the ride to the Hobart Crime Investigation Branch without complaint.

What he hadn't expected was the throng of reporters waiting in front of the police station. They shouldn't have had any idea what day or time he'd be brought in for questioning, yet there

they were. Someone in the department had obviously tipped them off, and in that instant he knew that not only was his promotion dead in the water, but so was his career.

In fact, he still had the newspaper clipping to prove the media's detestable ability to leave out pertinent facts.

Putting the photograph of himself and Julie on the gym bench, he turned to the wardrobe. As he opened the door, the over-stuffed storage space spat out a couple of old police magazines. He stooped, picked them up and came face to face with the newspaper article attached to the inside of the wardrobe door with a piece of tape. A colour photo showed a clear shot of his face as Holt led him toward the station's entrance. Above the photo, the headline read: *Local Detective Prime Suspect in Wife's Murder.*

He sighed. The vultures conveniently forgot to report that he hadn't been arrested, let alone charged. Only questioned, just like any spouse under those circumstances.

Turning away from the wardrobe, he looked at the police magazines in his hand. Greg Holt's smiling face stared from the cover of the top magazine. Anger coursed through him as he remembered why he'd kept that particular edition. It announced Holt's promotion to Detective Inspector, the position Case had been studying for on the night of Julie's death. Even though Holt hadn't solved the most prominent case of his career, he still managed to get the promotion. And why not? By then, there hadn't been any other contenders.

Two years later, Holt was no closer to finding out who killed Julie. For that matter, neither was he. All he could do was hope he'd get the chance for revenge when the killer was found. Thinking about that day was easier than thinking about the loss of his wife, the very reason he still avoided Emma and David as much as possible, their grief too raw to deal with.

After shoving the magazines in the wardrobe, Case headed to the garage to retrieve the moving boxes he purchased months ago. Packing Julie's belongings away should be his final acceptance that he'd never know what happened to his wife.

But he didn't believe he'd ever be able to let it go.

After two cups of coffee and a slice of toast, unable to put off the inevitable any longer, Case stood in front of the open wardrobe in his bedroom.

“Come on. Get it over with.”

He reached toward the left side, where Julie’s clothes had slowly crept into that corner. Grabbing a handful of hangers, he took them off the railing, folded the clothes over his arm and placed them in the open cardboard box at his side. He repeated the process until the railing contained only his own clothing.

Reaching up to the shelf above the hangers, he pulled down a pile of jeans and track pants, placed them in a second box and faced the wardrobe again. Only one more pile remained.

It all seemed too easy. Shouldn’t he feel the loss, the finality of it all? Shouldn’t he feel his failure?

He pulled down the last pile. The jumpers were thick, and as he turned toward the box, a few toppled off the top. A flash of colour caught the corner of his eye. He froze, not sure if he really wanted to look. But of course, he had to. He couldn’t just leave them on the floor. Tossing the jumpers in his arms into the box, he picked up the strays and dumped them in too.

Except for one.

The colourful jumper Julie wore on their honeymoon. The jumper she wore in the photo at Cradle Mountain.

Almost against his will, Case pressed it to his face and inhaled. Lavender fabric softener filled his nostrils. Although the fabric softener reminded him of Julie, he smelt it on his own clothes often enough. He released a breath, shook his head. What a sap. Her scent was undetectable.

But would it matter if it had been there? Would it be enough to let in the grief he kept at bay? He didn’t think so. How could he grieve when he’d failed her so miserably? What right did he have for that sort of self-indulgence?

Intellectually, he knew he had to let go of the anger. Anger he directed at her killer and himself. He simply had to let go and accept. Wasn't that what he was trying to do by packing her things away?

Folding the jumper neatly, he placed it on top of the pile in the box and faced the wardrobe. To the left of the safe bolted to the floor, all that remained were her shoes.

He carried the full boxes into the spare room and placed them against the wall beside the weight machine. From the bench, he picked up the honeymoon photo and placed it on top of the colourful jumper in the box, then closed it. Later, he'd take everything out to the garage.

After assembling another box, he returned to the bedroom and knelt before the open wardrobe. He hooked his fingers into a pair of strappy stilettos and dropped them in the box. Unlike some women, Julie never had a thing for shoes. She owned one pair for special occasions, two casual flats for the summer, a few pairs of flats for work, a pair of hiking boots and two pairs of runners. He tossed the older pair of runners, the ones she wore around the property, into the box. Only one pair remained. Her new Nike's, which were perched on top of the box they came in.

He pulled them out, took the runners off the shoe box and opened the lid to place them inside.

But something was already in there.

A mobile phone. A mobile phone that was not his wife's.

In the walk-in-robe, Michael Holt admired himself in the mirror as he adjusted the red silk tie around his neck. He smiled, pleased with himself. He looked damn good for 40. Unlike his brother, who didn't give a damn about how he presented himself to the world, Michael took great pride in looking his best at all times.

Perception was everything.

He knew that if he appeared to be a respectable leader and a loving husband and father, then he could only be viewed that way by any curious outsider who decided to look into his life.

There had been more than a few of those since he'd become Premier of Tasmania two and a half years ago.

But this afternoon, when he appeared at a logging site to speak of the employment and economic boost extensive logging would bring to Tasmania, the press would be more interested in Martin Wenzel's failure to show at his own demonstration. An environmentalist and fanatical believer in the climate change scam, Wenzel and his protests had long been a thorn in his party's side. And to Michael's amazement, the polls were showing that the public were slowly but steadily siding with the opposition, the opposition who supported Wenzel's beliefs. With the next election only six months away, there really hadn't been a choice but to squash Wenzel.

Losing the election was not an option. He needed to sit more than one term to be seen as a success. Then he would begin his campaign to become Prime Minister of Australia. Only one Tasmanian Premier had achieved the highest level of government. Michael planned to be the second.

Shaking his head, he smiled. If only that moron Wenzel had understood that trees were a renewable resource, all of this could have been avoided. But now, with that thorn in his side removed, he was certain Wenzel's protesting minions would fade away without their beloved leader around to organise them.

In the walk-in-robe, Michael took his suit jacket from the perfectly aligned row of quality suits, carefully folded it over his arm and strode from the room.

At the top of the stairs, he heard Sam and Nina talking as the aroma of bacon wafted up to him. Curious, he crept down the steps and silently crossed the marble floor, positioning himself beside the kitchen doorway. He hated the time she spent alone with Sam, time he thought she might use to manipulate the boy and undo everything he taught him.

For a moment, they remained silent. Had she heard him?

"Sam, honey," Nina said. "Could you do me a big favour and set the table?"

He waited with anticipation for Sam's response.

"Come on," she encouraged. "Just this once?"

“But...Dad wouldn’t like that.”

Michael grinned. He’d taught his son well.

Pushing away from the wall, he moved into the doorway and leaned against the frame. Nina stood at the stove, her back to him while she attended to the bacon. Sam sat at the table, surprise clearly written on his son’s face at the sight of his sudden appearance.

“Dad wouldn’t like what?” Michael asked, watching Nina stiffen at the sound of his voice.

“Silly Mum wanted me to set the table,” Sam said.

Proud of him, Michael gave his son a quick wink as he crossed the tiled floor and stopped beside Nina. Obediently, she turned toward him, her eyes downcast, just as they should be when she did something that wasn’t allowed.

He reached out, stroked her cheek with his fingertips, then pinched.

“Yes indeed,” he said, “she is a silly Mum.” He released her cheek and gave it a pat hard enough to sting. She didn't flinch, didn’t even blink.

A timer buzzed. Nina ignored it, waiting for him to give her permission to return to her task. He placed a kiss on her red cheek, turned toward the table and took a seat across from Sam.

They smiled at each other, a special bond that only a father and son could share, a bond Nina would never have with her child. Something he made sure of every day. Nina was his, not Sam’s, and Sam was his, not Nina’s. They belonged to him, but not to each other. Nina’s role in his son’s upbringing was simply that of completing chores like any decent nanny. And that was as close to a relationship that he allowed. He loved them both with all his heart, and he wasn’t a fool. One day Sam would go out into the world and find his place. And when that happened, Michael knew with a certainty that made his heart swell, that Nina would be there for him as wife, employee and plaything. He would never be alone. Being alone was unimaginable.

As Nina hurried over and placed the cutlery on the table, he gave Sam another wink.

“It’s important to remind her how useless she is,” he told Sam while he watched Nina scuttle back to the stove. “But about as effective as telling a dog not to lick its butt.”

Sam giggled.

“It’s just her nature, buddy. But it never hurts to remind her of her place in the pack, right?”

Sam nodded eagerly. But as Nina placed their hot breakfast before them, he noticed his son giving her a guilty glance.

Michael slammed his hand on the table, rattling the silverware. Sam jumped.

“None of that, buddy,” he said. “You have to remember; she’s lucky. She has us to keep her in line. Just imagine where she’d be without us. Homeless, on the streets, doing who-knows-what to get by.”

Michael gazed at the fear in Nina’s eyes, something she usually hid well. Now she looked like a frozen rabbit caught in the headlights of an eighteen-wheeler. Watching the cogs turn in that slow brain made him smile. Her greatest fear was Sam knowing where she came from, and in that moment, she thought he might be about to reveal that truth. That gave him a great deal of satisfaction. It was one of the many holds he had over her.

If she ever took the time to really think about it though, if she had even half a brain in her gorgeous head, she’d know he would never hurt Sam by revealing the truth about her sordid, miserable, pathetic past. An existence he’d saved her from when she stumbled into his house, into his life. An existence that would have killed her had it not been for his incredible kindness.

Nina rinsed off the breakfast dishes while Michael read the morning newspaper on his iPad. Before its invention, he'd read the real paper, and occasionally she'd found an issue in the recycling bin. On those rare days, she'd devoured every page before he came home, hungry for news of the outside world, hungry for any form of communication besides that provided by

Michael or Greg. But when Michael had proudly brought home his new toy and explained how many things he could use it for, her heart sank. Especially when he made a point of showing her that the iPad could only be accessed with a password, just like his computer.

As she arranged the dishes in the dishwasher, then latched the door, she sensed Michael behind her, watching.

“Delicious, as always,” he said.

“You’re welcome.” She pressed the start button, keeping her back to him.

“I know I am.”

Her heart skittered before it re-set itself to a gallop. She didn’t want to turn around, but that’s what he expected, what he wanted. So she did.

Smiling that smile she knew meant trouble, he stepped into her personal space and reached for her hands. She knew better than to pull away or show any fear. Besides, she told herself, what was so frightening about a husband taking his wife’s hands in his? Gently, he caressed them as he brought them up and placed them on his shoulders.

See? There’s nothing to worry about. He just wants a hug from his loving wife before he heads off to work. He’s forgotten all about your slip.

He moved closer. Their bodies touched, but he kept coming, backing her up until her lower spine came into contact with the sharp edge of the granite bench-top. As he bent his head and pressed his lips against the side of her neck, she looked past Michael’s shoulder and saw Sam watching. Closing her eyes, she wrapped her arms around Michael’s neck and pretended to enjoy his attention, something she often had to do so Sam would see nothing but his parent’s showing affection for each other.

She felt a tug on her neck as Michael drew her skin between his teeth and applied pressure. Just a little, enough to warn her he could tear that vulnerable flesh from her whenever he chose.

The force of his body against hers increased. A dull pain spread across her back where the unforgiving granite pressed into her. In an instant, he took her lips and thrust his tongue deep inside her mouth.

She wanted to gag, or bite, but either action would mean something far more unspeakable than what Michael already had planned for her. So she opened wider and fought every natural instinct to pull away as he ground against her, the solid granite feeling as if it would cut her in two at any moment. Pain flared as he pressed harder, and for a moment she thought she might pass out. The only thing that kept her conscious was Sam, and the knowledge that Michael's body blocked their son's view of what was really happening. If she blacked out, she wouldn't be able to hide it from him. And that would mean further punishment.

But Michael seemed to be aware of her breaking point. Easing the pressure slightly, he slipped his lips from hers and drew a wet line across her cheek until he reached her ear. Without a moment's hesitation, his tongue slithered around in exploration, then plunged, as if he were trying to drill a hole right into her brain. Just as suddenly as it began, he drew back slightly.

"Your punishment for that little violation of the rules will have to wait until tonight."

As he spoke, his whisper flowed over her wet ear. Goose pimples exploded on her skin. It took everything she had to stop an involuntary shudder from taking over her body.

Giving her a quick peck on her cheek, Michael released her, and she smiled, making sure Sam couldn't see anything other than his parents in love and happy.

Michael left the room, and she knew exactly where he was going. When he returned, sure enough, he held the television's short antenna cable in his hand. He never, ever forgot to take it with him every day. Watching television on her own, television that he believed would put ideas in her head, was not allowed. The same logic applied to books. Fiction, the stuff of dreams and imagination, a means of escaping from reality, did not exist in this house.

No books, no television, no newspaper. He had created a world of isolation so profound she often wondered if she would be able to cope if she returned to the real world.

The only types of books allowed were cookbooks. Those she received on a regular basis. Every time Michael brought a new one into the house, the first part she devoured was the author's biography. She felt a sense of connection with each and every one of them because cooking was the only forced task she enjoyed. More than enjoyed. When she cooked, she lost herself in measurements, slicing and dicing, mixing and creating. And it was the only thing she ever received a compliment for. Without the planning and preparation of meals every day, she wasn't sure she'd still have her sanity.

After locking the antenna cable in his briefcase, Michael stopped at the table beside the internal garage door. Her heart jolted as he collected his wallet and scooped the loose change from the bowl. He pocketed the money without a glance and shrugged into his suit jacket.

Just hang on, only a few more seconds and he'll be gone.

Michael picked up his briefcase, strode across the polished tiles and planted a kiss on top of Sam's head.

"School report today, isn't it?"

Sam turned in his chair and grinned at Michael. "Yep."

"It's 'yes'. And I can't wait to see the proof of just how smart you are."

"Me too."

Michael laughed, ruffled Sam's hair and headed for the garage door.

"See you this afternoon."

"Bye, Dad."

While Nina waited for the door to click shut, Sam sipped at his orange juice in a perfect imitation of Michael.

But the click of the door wasn't enough. She'd been fooled by that before, with Michael returning seconds later, having forgotten something. No, she waited for the rumble of the garage door, the rev of Michael's Lexus. She waited for the sound of the engine to fade as he drove out, then the rumble of the descending door. Only then did she move.

With stilted steps, she rounded the kitchen bench and moved to the windows where she watched Michael's car disappear around a bend in the long driveway.

"Don't worry, Mum. He'll be back."

She turned, smiled. "I know, honey. Anyway, you'd better go put on your shoes and jacket."

Sam hurried off, disappearing into the laundry off the family room where they kept their outdoor shoes and winter coats.

Nina stumbled to a chair at the table and sat as she pressed a hand to her lower back. Finally, she exhaled a silent breath in response to the pain she'd been hiding since the moment Michael ground her into that granite bench-top. She wished she could cry, but the urge to do so was nowhere to be found. Not after Michael taught her about the consequences of crying. A lesson taught with pliers one sunny afternoon. A lesson she would never forget.

"Mum? Where's my jacket?" Sam called from the laundry.

Nina didn't want to move. Sitting helped a little.

"It's there, honey. In the cupboard."

"I can't see it!"

She inhaled as she rose to her feet and clicked across the tiles to the laundry. Sam stood in front of the open cupboard, hands on his hips as he waited for her to do what he was quite capable of doing himself. But she wouldn't push it, not today, not when she was already in trouble.

She found the coat on the floor, where it must have fallen from its hanger. Sam turned his back to her. As she raised the coat, pain shot up her spine. Ignoring it, she helped him into the jacket, hiding the pain when he turned and let her zip him up.

If she wasn't hurting, she would have enjoyed the simple task, a task that allowed her to be close to him, touch him without any complaints.

"Okay, all ready?"

"Yep... I mean, yes."

She wanted to tell him he could say *jep* around her all he wanted, but decided against it. Something like that was bound to get back to Michael.

Reaching into the cupboard, she removed her long woollen coat and gingerly eased her arms into the sleeves.

“Mum? Is something wrong?”

Startled, she froze, not sure how to respond. How long had it been since someone asked about her wellbeing? She couldn't remember, but the fact that her son was the one to ask filled her with hope. But if the reason he asked was because he saw her pain, well, that was unacceptable.

“I'm fine.” A little rattled, she turned him toward the door. “We'd better get a move on or you'll miss the bus.”

Sam grabbed his school bag, and she helped wrestle it onto his back. Memories of her own school days were dim, but she certainly couldn't remember having to lug around such a heavy load.

Outside, the frigid air stung her cheeks and froze the tip of her nose. As Sam walked along the driveway in front of her, she opened his school bag and removed a beanie.

“Honey, you'd better put this on.” He stopped and let her pull the beanie over his head and ears. “Better?”

He nodded and started along the driveway again. In her heels, Nina found it difficult to keep up, the pain in her back jarring with each step.

“Why don't you slow down a little?” she asked.

“You're the one who said we'd better hurry up.”

Despite the pain, she put on a burst of speed, the clicking of her heels muffled by the thick fog. The one kilometre walk to the gates at the end of the driveway seemed to take longer than usual when they were surrounded by mist. Just a trick of the mind, she knew. When she couldn't see the gates, it seemed like she was trapped in a world with no escape, only endless whiteness.

Not long after Sam started attending school, she'd counted the steps from the door to the front gates. One thousand, five hundred and seventy nine steps. Back then, Sam sometimes wanted to be carried. When he first made such a request, she'd been thrilled. Any chance to hold him in her arms was a chance to experience heaven. But she soon discovered that a one kilometre walk in heels with a growing boy in her arms did not equate with heaven. Once again, Michael won his war to keep her as separate from Sam as possible.

As the black wrought iron gates materialized before them, she realised those days were long gone. Time moved so swiftly, even when she was forced to stand still.

"Got your clicker?" she asked.

Sam stopped, shrugged out of his school bag, unzipped it and pulled out a small remote control. He pointed it at the gates, pressed a button and watched them slowly swing inward.

As they walked to the end of the driveway, Sam kept stealing glances at her.

"What is it, honey?"

"I...I didn't mean for you to get a smack."

Concern and an apology? You must be doing something right.

Nina reached for him, and when he didn't jerk away, she placed an arm around his shoulders and pulled him close. Then he hugged her. Not his usual flimsy, half-hearted hug, but a hug with strength and truth behind it.

She stroked his head through the beanie. "It's okay. It's not your fault. It's mine. I need to learn the rules better. Besides, it was just a pat really."

He looked right into her eyes. "Really?"

How could she tell him that the slap on the face was nothing compared to the crushing her spine endured while his beloved dad pretended to hug her? Even if she found the guts to tell him the truth, he wouldn't believe her.

"Really," she said, hating herself for lying, but hating Michael more for forcing her into a position where she would have to break her son's heart if she told the truth.

Sam suddenly jerked away, and for a second she thought he saw the lie in her eyes. Then the faint rumble of the bus approaching reached her ears.

“Quick, it’s coming,” Sam said, shooing her away as if she were a mongrel dog no one wanted.

From elation to devastation in two seconds.

Nina quickly planted a peck on his cheek.

“Muuuum! Go!” He hit the button on the remote control, sending the gates on their slow glide toward each other.

“I love you, honey. Have a fun day.” She hurried through the closing gates.

As she walked away, the bus stopped on the road’s shoulder, the door hissing before it lumbered back onto the road. A moment later, the gates clanged shut behind her, imprisoning her like they did every day.

In a prison of her own making.

The nine foot brick wall that stretched out on either side of the gates didn’t extend the entire length of the property. If she turned left or right and walked far enough, she would eventually reach a post and rail fence. A fence she could easily slip through.

But what then? Where would she go? The only family she had lived on this side of the gates.

No, it wasn’t a fence or locked gate keeping her prisoner. It was Sam.

Sam was her anchor, and until she found the strength to uproot him, she would never be free.

Tightening the coat around herself, she wondered if that strength existed inside her, or if it was fear, not weakness holding her back. For now, though, she didn’t want to think about it. Thinking about it only created anxiety, and inevitably, she ended up vomiting into the toilet, proving to herself just how weak she really was.

As she hurried into the house through the side door, she flung off her heels, padded to the side table, and dropped to her hands and knees. The heated marble warmed her hands as she reached beneath the table and closed her fist around the two dollar coin.

Crawling to the wall, she leaned against it as she stretched out her legs. Warm against her palm, the coin gave her comfort. She closed her eyes and sat with her stolen morsel. On the other side of the room, the wall clock ticked off the seconds in the otherwise silent house. It seemed to torment her, reminding her that the time for a decision was growing ever closer. Drawing in air, she let it leave her lungs in a long exhalation and opened her eyes.

If Michael saw her now, like some derelict on the ground, a resurrection from her past, he'd have a fit. As she smiled, an unexpected laugh escaped her throat.

She clamped a hand over her mouth, an involuntary response to any form of happiness.

Pressing her back against the wall for support, she felt the dull ache of a bruise across her spine and hips as she rose. Determined to worry about that later, she walked into the laundry and shut the door.

Opening her hand, Nina stared at the coin on her palm. The first time she'd taken one, she'd put it right back in the coin bowl after realising she had nowhere to hide it. That day, she set about trying to figure out the perfect place, the one place Michael would never think to look.

A few days later, she ran out of bleach while preparing to clean the ground floor bathroom. She remembered carrying the empty bottle to the garbage bin and, as she lifted the lid to throw it inside, it suddenly came to her.

Now, on her knees again, Nina opened the cupboard beneath the laundry trough. Pulling out boxes of detergent, cleaning chemicals and fabric softener, her hand finally came to rest on a bleach bottle. She dragged it out, unscrewed the lid, and dropped the coin inside. The rattle came immediately. She peered in through the top. The bottle was almost full.

How many did that make?

She reached back into the cupboard. Soon she had five plastic bottles of varying cleaning products lined up before her. Five bottles containing one and two dollar coins. She wondered how much that added up to and considered emptying one, counting it out then averaging it between the five bottles. But what if Michael made a surprise visit and caught her? She couldn't risk it. Placing the heavy bottles back in their hiding place, she arranged the real cleaning products in front of them again.

Is it enough? Will it ever be enough? And how will you carry that load? It has to weigh at least twenty kilos. How far can you carry that and hold onto a son who won't want to go anywhere with you?

She couldn't think about that. Thinking about it gave her time to make excuses.

Shuffling into the family room, she decided to go about her daily routine. Without the distraction of a TV to watch or a book to read, each day seemed almost the same. The only variation was what she prepared for dinner every night, and whether or not she had to entertain a regular, but unwelcome guest.

In fact, she was sure Michael would be just as happy with a robot if it could cook and clean, and of course suck his dick and fuck whenever he wanted. She almost laughed at that thought, because wasn't that what he'd created? Wasn't she just as obedient and devoid of emotion as a robot?

Greg picked up the desk phone receiver and pressed a button. "Talbot, get your arse in here."

He hung up, leaned back in his cracked leather chair and placed his feet on the battered old desk.

The state government needed to spend some serious money upgrading Hobart's C.I.B., but he wouldn't hold his breath.

Unfortunately, their budget for the police force was tight, and Bryant and his massacre at Port Arthur back in 1996 hadn't helped matters. Greg couldn't remember the exact figure, but a lot of cops had taken the easy way out by claiming Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, for which the government compensated them. The payouts had been substantial, not to mention the hiring of new cops to replace the numbers they'd lost. And to top it all off, not one of the pussies had put a bullet in Bryant's head. Instead, the government now had to foot the bill while the cock-sucker lived out the rest of his days in the psychiatric wing of Risdon prison.

That boiled down to not having a new chair, or a new desk.

A tentative knock came from the door, then Constable James Talbot poked his head inside.

"Get in here," Greg ordered.

Talbot entered, concern etched on his face. The idiot thought he was in trouble. Greg smiled, not to ease Talbot's mind, but because the fact that Talbot thought he was in trouble indicated he had something to be in trouble for. Good. The cops with something to hide were just the type Greg wanted on his team, the type he could manipulate into doing what he wanted.

Talbot closed the door and stepped up to the desk. "Sir?"

"Hear you're interested in moving up through the ranks, becoming a detective. That right, cunt-stable?"

"Yes, sir."

Greg placed his hands behind his head and rocked the creaking old chair a few times, as if considering Talbot's ambition.

"Well," he finally said. "Tell you what, Talbot. I just got a call from that tree-hugger organisation—the one Wenzel runs. You know it, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Apparently he's gone missing. No loss, if you ask me, but his minions think it's a big deal."

“Has it been twenty-four hours, sir?”

“Not yet, and usually I’d tell them to go fuck themselves until then, but it’s not that simple.”

He levelled his gaze at Talbot as he dropped his feet to the floor and leaned forward. “Problem is, if I do nothing, they’ll likely go to the media with some cock and bull story about me not helping until *after* the big protest they have planned for my brother this afternoon. You get the picture?”

Talbot nodded.

“Good. So as much as I’d like Wenzel to disappear off the face of the earth, we better make an effort to locate him. Apart from my personal concerns, it does seem out of character for him to choose today to get lost when he’s got such a high-profile demonstration organised. Don’t you think so, Talbot?”

“Yes, sir. Highly unusual.”

“Which makes me think the shithead’s up to something. What would make a man ditch his passionate cause and just vanish?”

Talbot shifted slightly. “I don’t know, sir.”

Greg pointed a finger at him. “That’s what I want you to find out. That’s what being a detective’s all about. That’s why I’m giving you a shot. I want you to go check it out. Report directly to me.”

“Yes, sir,” Talbot said, a slight smile on his lips. He turned away, reached for the door handle.

“And Talbot,” Greg said, waiting for him to turn back. “Consider this a test. You do good, and I’ll put a recommendation in your file.”

“Thank you, sir.”

When the door closed behind Talbot, Greg leaned back in his creaking chair. Talbot would find exactly what he wanted the naive young constable to find.

Fuck all.

Amongst the mess in the spare room's wardrobe, Case finally found a phone charger that fit the mysterious mobile. His heart gave a sharp thud. He wasn't sure if he wanted to know what information the phone contained. If Julie had hidden it from him, whatever was on the damn

thing couldn't be good. He always believed they'd been honest with one another, that they knew each other's secrets, dreams, failures and disappointments. Yet he held in his hand proof that he hadn't known his wife as well as he thought. She'd kept a secret from him. Something important enough to hide.

Moving around the home gym, he found a wall socket, bent to plug it in, then hesitated. For a moment, he considered putting the phone back in the shoe box, then in the cardboard box, then taping it shut and storing it in the garage to be forgotten.

Once he turned on the phone, he knew without a doubt that his life would change. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. At the moment, his life consisted of a methodical routine and loneliness. How much worse could it get?

Even though he was no longer a cop, a detective still lay buried just beneath his surface. He plugged the charger into the socket, powered on the phone and took a seat on the gym bench.

First he checked the call register, but there wasn't a single call coming in or going out. Then he checked the text messages. Message after message from the same number appeared. No name, just a number.

He clicked on one.

Your soft-cock husband's on shift tonight. We gonna fuck?

He stared at the small screen in utter shock.

As his heart began to beat faster than it had in a long time, he dialled the number and pressed the phone to his ear.

"The number you have called is no longer in service," a computerised voice announced.

He hung up, stared at the phone. It was a cheap, prepaid piece of shit. No doubt whoever had messaged Julie also had a prepaid piece of shit. A piece of shit he'd obviously destroyed when she died.

He scrolled through the messages, selecting one after the other, but it seemed they were careful not to mention any names.

“Who are you, you—”

His fingers froze.

Please Greg. This can't go on. It was a mistake. Just leave me alone.

Case stared at the name. *Greg*. He only knew one Greg. Did Julie know another? He didn't think so.

His heart raced, pushing blood through his veins so fast his temperature soared.

That fucking cunt.

He rose, not sure what the hell he was going to do, only that his body wanted to move, and that he felt incredibly alive and full of energy in that moment.

Dropping the phone, he turned to the boxing dummy, curled his fist and smashed its face. Bob rocked gently, infuriating him further. He may not have been able to punch back, but Bob was no weakling. He was hard and solid, meant for boxing with gloves on, not bare fists. But Case welcomed the pain against his knuckles. With an intense rage he hadn't known existed within him, he pummelled Bob until he collapsed on the floor in exhaustion.

As he shook uncontrollably on the carpet, breath blasting from his constricted throat, he realised he finally knew who killed his wife. It made perfect sense. All the pieces fit together.

Greg and Julie had been screwing behind his back. Why she would want to touch that bastard, he didn't know, but she obviously had. Maybe they'd known each other all along. Maybe they'd been lovers before he met her when she was holidaying in Sydney, before he'd fallen in love and moved his whole world to Tasmania to be with her.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Had she been planning to leave him for Greg? Was that what all her nonsense arguments about not pursuing the promotion had been in aid of? Because she wanted Greg Holt to have the better job? Because she was planning on leaving her loving husband for that arsehole?

Case shook his head. All he could do was speculate, but those explanations, as fucked up as they were, felt nauseatingly true.

He grabbed the phone from the floor where he'd dropped it and found the very first text message. Sure enough it was dated around three months before her death. About the same time he'd noticed that tension between them, about the same time their sex life had vanished, about the same time he was too caught up in studying for that promotion to notice what was going on under his nose. He'd even thought the lack of sex was her way of punishing him over the time he spent studying instead of paying her the attention she obviously craved.

Then there was the day she announced her pregnancy. She seemed excited, but there was something unsettling behind her eyes, something he hadn't questioned.

Case drew in a sharp breath.

Was the baby even his?

He tried to wrack his brain. Yes, their sex life had declined drastically, though it hadn't been entirely non-existent. It was too long ago to try and pinpoint their last half-hearted attempt at making love before her pregnancy. He didn't want to think about that now. There were more important things to concentrate on, like the fact that he now had a suspect for her murder. If they had been an affair—laughing it up behind his back—then the odds of Greg Holt being her killer were astronomically high.

Jesus, Holt must have thought he'd won the jackpot when Jamison put him in charge of the case. Not only had he been in a position to cover his own arse, he could steer the case in any direction he chose, right down to trying to peg it on the loving husband.

Fuck.

His body still trembled from the shock of it all, his heart still raced, like it had suddenly found a new life-force to tap into where, before this revelation, there had only been an almost depleted battery.

He rose, his legs unsteady beneath him.

Holt was a dead man.

In the bedroom, Case knelt before the open wardrobe and turned the dial on the safe. He opened the door, took out his Glock. And hesitated.

It would be so easy to find Holt and put a bullet in his head. But then what? Sit in jail the rest of his life? Did it matter? What life did he have anyway?

But something inside him niggled. His wife had betrayed him in a way he never thought her capable of. How many other things didn't he know about her? Would he really feel satisfied if he wound up in a jail cell over a woman who stabbed him in the back? Maybe not, but even after what she'd done, she hadn't deserved to die. Her parents hadn't deserved to lose her.

One thing he knew for sure, Holt wouldn't get away with it.

After all, Holt had killed everything in his life except his body, but if he could put all this behind him once and for all, he could start over, build a new life, a real life, instead of existing in this limbo.

Taking a deep breath, he locked the safe but held onto the gun.

Going off half-cocked would only get him in trouble. If he really wanted to kill Holt, then he'd bloody well do it without getting caught. But he needed more proof than a text message that mentioned the name Greg. He needed something concrete, something that couldn't be disputed after he took Holt down. He needed to think, clear his head.

Strange as it sounded, target practice usually did the trick. That was why he'd landed a job as an instructor at a pistol club after he left the police force. Since he seemed incapable of grieving until he found Julie's killer, shooting became a release for all that pent up emotion he refused to allow himself to experience until he'd set things right, as right as they could be anyway. Besides that, it never hurt to keep his skills sharp. So, he'd taken the job and stuck with it ever since.

An hour later, Case stood behind the cottage and pointed his Glock at Bob, who he'd dragged a good fifty metres into the open expanse of land. As the unused land's long grass rippling on a slight breeze, he aimed at Bob's head.

And squeezed the trigger. Again and again. As he lowered the pistol, his phone vibrated in his pocket. He fished it out, slid off his ear-muffs, checked the screen, and answered it.

“All set?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m just about to text you the number.”

“Thanks, mate.”

“Just, you know, if ya get caught...”

“No one’ll ever know what you did,” Case said. And he meant it. He hated involving anyone in what he was going to do, but Chris Powell was the only one he knew who could manipulate technology with the same ease as taking a breath.

“Okay, man. I’ll send you through the number.”

Case hung up and stared at Bob. Poor guy. Both his eyes were now empty sockets, and for good measure, another hole pierced his forehead. When he figured out how to take Holt down, once he had irrefutable evidence, that’s exactly how he wanted the bastard to look.

Greg pushed through the C.I.B.'s front doors and shrugged into his black leather jacket. As he hurried along the street toward his car, his mobile phone vibrated in the back pocket of his jeans. He snatched it out and checked the screen. Michael.

“Yeah, for fuck’s sake. I’m leaving now,” he barked, hanging up before Michael could respond. What was there to say? They both knew he didn’t want to go. They also knew he would, and that he’d make the most out of a bad situation.

Stopping on the curb in front of his Falcon, he lit a cigarette and took a deep drag, enjoying the burn in his throat, making the most of it before he reached his destination, where the ridiculous law wouldn’t allow him even this tiny bit of ecstasy.

Greg climbed in the Falcon and sat behind the wheel for a moment. The one thing he liked about winter was the pleasure of getting in a car that had been sitting in the sun. As warmth seeped into his bones, his stomach grumbled. His watch read 12:35pm. No wonder. Plus he forgot to eat breakfast. Maybe he could swipe a few pieces of the birthday cake Michael would undoubtedly have with him.

Ten minutes later, Greg arrived at the Hobart Village Aged Care facility. He would sooner put a bullet in his head than end up in such a place, an option his father would have taken as well had he known his fate. Larry wouldn’t have used a gun, though. He was too much of a coward for that. He would have taken pills, gone to sleep and never woken up: the pussy’s way out. Fortunately, the stroke had taken away any chance his father had of escaping the horror of a nursing home, the horror of knowing his children dumped him there because his life had been reduced to nothing but an inconvenience. Greg smiled. Their father may have tortured them when they were kids, but he was paying the price now.

Greg left the warmth of the car, lit another cigarette, and headed toward the entrance where Michael already waited with the customary birthday cake balanced on one hand.

“You’re late,” Michael said, swishing at the cigarette smoke before turning toward the door.

Greg took one last drag, then ground the butt out on the concrete and followed Michael inside. As they passed the nurses’ station and headed along the corridor, he tried to block out the cloying odour of whatever it was they used to cover up the stench of piss and shit.

No matter how new the facility or diligent the staff, there was no avoiding the fact that old fuckers were inevitably reduced to their infant selves, a regression a bullet would save him from. Michael had Nina to look after him—one of the reasons he wanted someone a good ten years younger—but Greg had nobody and was under no illusion that he ever would. That suited him fine. He was the one who made all the decisions, the only one in control of how he lived, and eventually, how he died. No one, no religion, no government, no *woman*, would tell him what he could and couldn't do.

When they reached room 29B, Michael opened the door and stepped inside. Greg took a breath before doing the same.

Larry sat in a wheelchair beside a narrow bed, staring at a sitcom on the television mounted to the wall. One side of his face sagged unnaturally from the major stroke he suffered more than fourteen years ago, a stroke that had come unexpectedly when he'd been collecting his mail from the letterbox one day. A neighbour had been doing the same thing and witnessed the event. Fortunately, an ambulance was called. It would have been such a shame if the bastard had died then and there. He didn't deserve an easy death.

"Happy birthday, Dad," Michael said as he placed the boxed cake on Larry's lap and opened the lid.

"Yeah, you old cunt." Greg clapped him hard on the back. "Hope you're enjoying yourself."

With his one good eye, Larry watched them with utter contempt.

Michael moved around to the other side of the bed, putting as much distance between himself and their father as possible. Although Greg was repulsed by Larry, he took a seat on the bed and faced the old bastard.

"Look at him. All helpless and deformed. Doesn't it just warm your heart?" Greg said, glancing over his shoulder at Michael. They grinned at each other.

“Just imagine, Dad,” Michael said, “if you were any sort of man, you could be home right now, celebrating your 65th while being lavished with affection by your loving wife. You remember our mother, don’t you? The one you let get away?”

Greg scoffed. “Beats me why you think Mum would’ve put up with his asshole tendencies any longer than she did. Isn’t that right, Dad?”

Larry simply glared with that one eye. Greg knew he wanted to respond, but couldn’t. His speech was barely more than an incomprehensible gurgle. The strong, ferocious voice that made them cower when they were kids had become a laughable joke. And Larry knew it, so he kept his mouth shut.

“She shouldn’t have had a choice,” Michael said. “But this pathetic excuse for a man didn’t have the ability to hold onto a mere woman.”

Greg reached out, scooped up a chunk of icing from the edge of the cake and shovelled it into his mouth. He sucked on his fingers, enjoying the slight taste of nicotine mingled with the sweetness. Making a show of licking his fingers before he speared them into the cake, he took a huge, messy chunk and held it up to Larry’s mouth.

Repulsed, the old man rolled his head back as Greg moved it closer.

“Come on, Dad. Mike went to all the trouble of buying it for you, least you can do is eat it. Open up.” He waved the cake before his father’s mouth, knowing he hated to eat food someone had touched, let alone food contaminated with saliva covered fingers.

Greg swiped the cake across Larry’s mouth and eased it away. Larry spluttered in an attempt to rid his lips of the contaminated cake.

Feigning offence, Greg sighed. “What? You think we poisoned it or something?” He shovelled the cake in his own mouth, chewed. “Fuck, Dad. You know how much we enjoy seeing you living it up in here.” He made no effort to swallow the cake. He wanted Larry to see it in there, rolling and squishing around, blending into a delightful mush, the memory of the beating

Larry gave him the first time he forgot to chew with his mouth closed fresh in his mind. “No. We wouldn’t let you off that easy.”

With his good hand, Larry fumbled on the bed for the nurses’ call button. Greg grinned, snatched it up and moved it out of reach.

“What’s the matter? You need a girl to come protect you? That it, Dad?”

Larry raised a shaking hand, pointed toward the bathroom in the corner.

Michael clucked his tongue. “I think he needs the toilet.”

“Well, what a crying fucking shame. Remember one of those road trips of yours? Think I was about six or seven, and I needed to piss. But would you stop?”

Eye riveted to the nurses’ call button, Larry gripped the wheelchair’s left wheel and pushed. The chair turned uselessly toward the bed. He reversed the motion, tried again. Same result.

“Waited till I had an accident, didn’t you? Then you stopped. Remember my punishment? Because I fucking do. You remember that, Mike?”

Michael shook his head, stood, and moved to the end of the bed.

“Yeah,” Greg said, “now that I think about it, you probably stayed home with Mum.”

“A smart choice, wouldn’t you say?”

The bitch had always favoured little Mikey, but not enough to take him with her when she abandoned them, when she left them to suffer at the hands of their demented father.

He watched as Michael frowned at a walking cane hanging on the metal bed-end. After a moment, he picked it up.

“What’s this, Dad?” Michael asked. “Some sort of psychological encouragement?”

Greg smirked and looked at Larry. “What? They think if you look at that thing long enough, you’re going to get out of that chair and use it? Not a hope.”

Larry still had his sights set on the nurses’ call button.

If the bastard chose to ignore him, there were ways to get his attention. Greg turned to Michael and held out his hand. “Here. Give it.”

He grabbed the cane before Michael released his grip and tugged it out of his hand. Now he had Larry's attention. Raising the cane, he swung it at the old fucker's head.

And brought it to a stop a couple of inches from his skull.

Urine splashed the floor beneath Larry's wheelchair.

Greg chuckled. "Filthy old bastard." He turned to Michael and found him grinning. "Think we'd better tell the nurses it's time to get him into nappies."

"He'd love that."

Facing his father, he took great pleasure in seeing the humiliation in his left eye.

"Well," Michael said. "I think that's it for our obligatory visit."

Greg stood, stared at the cane, then rolled the rubber end into the puddle of piss beneath Larry. Slowly, he raised it and inched it toward his father's face. Larry's left eye widened in horror. Greg watched with satisfaction as urine dripped onto the cake. He thrust the cane at Larry's face. The old man flinched, raised his left arm and weakly slapped the cane away.

Greg laughed and dropped the cane's rubber end into the urine again, but this time he placed it on the bed, the contaminated end resting on his father's pillow.

"Nice," Michael said. "Well, Dad. Enjoy your cake."

Greg waited for Michael to walk out before bending close to the old man's ear. "Looking forward to it next year, Dad."

He passed Michael at the nurses' station, sucking up the fawning the nurses always gave the Premier of the State when he visited, and headed toward the entrance, desperate for a smoke.

Beneath the shade of a gumtree, Case sat in his car in the nursing home parking area, watching the entrance he'd seen Greg and the Premier of the State enter a while ago. So focused on Greg, he'd completely forgotten the younger of the Holts ran the whole state. How convenient for

them both. He wondered how many times each had used their positions to help the other.

After the Holts entered the building together, Case connected his phone to his car's built-in Bluetooth and dialled the special number Chris had given him, remotely activating the program on Greg's phone. The program acted like a listening device, opening up the phone's speaker whether the phone was turned on or not. Even better than a stationary listening device, it went everywhere the phone went.

Case had been stunned the moment Greg's voice came through the car's stereo speakers. Yes, he needed to turn it up, and there was some rustling from whatever pocket Greg carried the phone in, but apart from that, he heard every word Greg said, along with every word anyone within Greg's vicinity said.

What he heard once they were inside the nursing home sent a chill down his spine. From the one sided conversation they had with their father, it was obvious they were there to torment the man. It was also obvious that they had suffered at his hands as children. Not that Case condoned their behaviour nor disagreed with it—he really didn't care either way—but it did give him some insight into how the two brothers were moulded. And they both seemed to be on the same side, which made him think that if one was the sort of man who could kill, then maybe the other was capable of something similar.

When Greg emerged from the nursing home and lit a cigarette, Case inched down in his seat slightly, even though he knew the shade of the gumtree offered enough concealment. He waited for Greg to get in his car, but he seemed in no hurry to do anything but enjoy his cigarette.

A few minutes later, Michael joined him.

“Finished letting the nurses stroke your ego?” Greg asked.

“I can hardly tell them to leave me alone, can I? Anyway, will you be attending the press conference later?”

“Nah. Got too much going on to stand around being bored out of my fucking brain. I've organized a team to be there, make sure Wenzel's mob don't get out of control. Got a sneaking

suspicion they won't be a problem this time round, though."

Case clearly saw them grin at each other, like they were sharing a secret.

"I'd better get back to work," Michael said.

Greg clapped him on the back. "Still on for tonight, right?"

"Of course. I suppose you want dinner too?"

"What do you reckon?"

"Fine. I'll see you about seven," Michael said and headed toward his expensive car.

As the Premier's Lexus drove away, Case followed it with his eyes, trying to recall watching him on the news. Although the last two years had left him disinterested in the world, some of it had managed to sink in. He remembered seeing Michael Holt on the TV the night he won the election, one arm around his son, the other around his gorgeous young trophy wife.

He turned his attention back to Greg standing outside the building's entrance, dragging deeply on the almost depleted cigarette.

Case gripped the wheel. He always knew there was something off about Greg Holt. They were never partnered, but he could sense the guy's contempt from the moment he'd landed the job at the Hobart C.I.B. Case believed that contempt had come from a place of professional jealousy. They were the same rank, but Case had far more experience from working in one of Sydney's busiest police stations. Greg must have instantly seen him as a threat. But the feeling he got from Holt the first time they were introduced, and every time they had to deal with each other, hadn't been as simple as that. There was something else beneath Holt's false, pleasant exterior. He just hadn't been able to put his finger on it. Everyone else in the department thought Greg was a great guy, good at his job, a man who got things done and got along well with his colleagues. So Case had shrugged off his impression of the man, telling himself he was imagining things. If everyone else thought so highly of him, then who was he, the new guy, to say different? It wasn't like he had to work side by side with him. They were merely colleagues who occasionally crossed paths.

How wrong he had been.

Greg tossed his cigarette on the ground, crushed it under the heel of his sneaker and sauntered toward his Falcon, the same vehicle he'd been driving since Case met the guy. Obviously, unlike his brother, Greg didn't have a taste for expensive material things. No, he had a taste for married women.

Greg climbed into the Falcon. It would have been so easy to hide in the back of that car and blow Greg away the moment he settled into the driver's seat.

But would death be the easy way out for Greg? Case's first instinct had been to kill the asshole, but upon reflection, it might be more satisfying to see the fucker rot in jail, a place where cops enjoyed a welcome like no other prisoner. It was a choice he needed to decide upon, but one which could wait until he had evidence that couldn't be refuted. A text message wasn't enough for the police to go on. Even the mention of Greg's name meant nothing since Julie hadn't used his surname. There were plenty of men named Greg.

As the Falcon drove away, a sudden thought occurred to him. He had always wondered why Julie pulled over the night she was murdered. At the time, the car had been examined and found mechanically sound, so he knew she hadn't broken down. There were also no signs that she'd been run off the road, rammed or side-swiped. It was one of those mysteries that gnawed at him.

But as Greg's car left the parking lot, a piece of the puzzle slipped into place.

Julie would have pulled over if the police had been behind her with their lights flashing. Worse still, she could very well have thought it was him. Once before, following an argument, Case had gone after her, found her on the road, and turned on the flashing lights in the grill of his unmarked car. When she'd pulled over, he'd made a show of apologising to her. She'd thought it was sweet and had forgiven him for whatever pathetic thing they'd argued about.

Could that be why she pulled over? Thinking it was her husband coming to apologise for not accompanying her to her parents? In her mind, it would have made sense. He knew which

roads she needed to travel between her parents and home.

Case felt sick, imagining her stopping, thinking he was about to grovel at her feet, then her horror when Greg, the man she had told to leave her alone, appeared at her window. The man who was possibly the father of her baby. The man, he was certain, who killed her that night.

Greg wouldn't be stupid enough to leave any evidence in his home or car. The only way to get him was to try and catch him talking about it.

There were two problems, though. One, it had been two years since Julie's murder. If Greg had talked about it, it would have been just after killing her. The odds of him mentioning it this long after the fact were slim to none. Two, Greg wouldn't talk to himself aloud about Julie. But there was one person he might have confided in, especially if they were cut from the same cloth. And if Michael Holt knew about it, he'd probably shared it with his trophy wife. And knowing women, she might have told her girlfriends.

It was probably all too late, but pieces of history had a way of coming up in general conversation, especially between a man and his wife.

He picked up his mobile and called Chris.

"Case, my man. Everything working okay?"

"Perfectly, thanks. But I have to squeeze you for another favour."

The silence on the other end of the line told him this wouldn't be as easy to extract as it was the first time.

"Already?" Chris asked.

"Yeah, I know. I wouldn't ask unless I needed it."

"Who is it?"

"Holt's brother. Michael. And his wife. I don't know her name."

Another long pause. "Wait a minute. You talking the Premier?"

"That'd be the one," Case said, already bracing himself for what he'd have to pull on Chris if he refused.

“I don’t think so, man. A cop’s risky enough, but spying on the Premier and his wife...that could lead to some serious shit.”

“This isn’t a goddamn movie, Chris. No one’s getting caught, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“I don’t know...”

Case pinched the bridge of his nose, hating having to do this, but doing it anyway.

“I saved your little girl’s life, didn’t I?”

Silence again. Case wondered if Chris was reliving the incident, if he was picturing his 3-year-old daughter lying face down in the fountain.

He and Julie had been taking a stroll through the park after a visit to the doctor to confirm her pregnancy. He clearly remembered the tortured cry, clearly remembered turning to see Chris pull his limp little girl out of the fountain.

Chris had brought her to the park on an access visit for a few hours. But when he’d gone to buy them some food from a street vendor, he’d turned his back on his daughter for a moment. That’s all it took for the little girl to fall in the fountain and swallow a lungful of water. Had it been lunchtime, the park would have been bustling with office workers, and someone would have spotted her. But at ten-thirty on a weekday morning, the park was deserted.

Except for Case and Julie.

Case raced over, but Chris wouldn’t let go of little Abby. Not until Julie convinced Chris he was a cop, that he knew CPR. It wasn’t the first time he’d brought someone back, but it was the first time he’d saved a child.

And Chris had been overwhelmingly grateful. They’d stayed in contact over the years, and every time they talked, Chris insisted that if there was ever anything he could do for him, then all he had to do was ask. Case always politely thanked him, knowing he would never have any use for a tech-head who worked for a major telecommunications company.

Until this morning.

“Jesus, man,” Chris finally said. “I’ll get back to you.”

Relieved, but not liking himself very much, Case hung up, started the car, and set off after Greg.

Nina stood in the living room's doorway and watched Sam play his Xbox game. His serious expression unsettled her. When he concentrated like that, he seemed to magically take on Michael's features. His fingers tapped frantically on the game controller as he leaned from side to

side.

She glanced at the screen. A car racing game. Much better than the violent shooting and fighting games Michael often played with him.

Entering, she placed a glass of milk and a plate of freshly baked biscuits on the coffee table and took a seat beside her son. He showed no sign of acknowledging her presence, so she waited patiently for him to finish his current race.

That's when she noticed his school bag on the floor between them. A manila envelope peeked out of the unzipped bag. She reached down and plucked it out. A white label on the front of the envelope read *Mr. & Mrs. Holt*.

"Is this your school report?"

"Yep," Sam said without missing a beat on his game.

She stared at the envelope, knowing full well Michael would forbid her from seeing her own child's achievements. Her face flushed with anger. Anger at Michael and at herself for letting him control every detail of her life. Why shouldn't she see her son's report? The envelope was also addressed to her.

"Well, let's take a look."

"No!" he shouted.

Sam paused the game and snatched the envelope from her hand.

"Dad has to see it first. You know that."

Something inside her darkened. She grabbed the envelope. Sam refused to release his grip.

"I have a right to see it too." She tugged harder.

Sam rose before her, pulled. "Not before Dad!"

Nina yanked the envelope toward her. And it tore right open. She stared at it in horror, wondering what possessed her to disobey Michael so blatantly.

"Look what you did!" Sam yelled.

As she raised her eyes, she saw the flash of her son's hand fly toward her a moment before

he slapped her hard across the face.

Utterly stunned, Nina stared at him with dread. Just like Michael, his face contorted with rage and indignation.

Then something shifted behind his eyes. His expression became slack before he burst into tears. She had no idea if it was because of the look of horror on her face, or Sam's own shame at what he'd done.

Heart thumping fast, Nina pulled him into her arms on the couch. To her relief, he hugged her back, his grip almost fierce as his body shook against her, his sobs muffled against her breasts.

After a moment, he looked at her, his face streaked with tears, his eyes puffy.

"Mum, I didn't mean it...I didn't know I was going to..."

She held him tighter, rocked him like she used to when he was younger and Michael was at work.

"Shh. It's not your fault. It's mine. All mine."

For the first time in her life, she spoke the absolute truth. Everything that had happened to her, every choice she made had put her in the position she found herself in at that moment: with her own son crying in her arms because he'd hit her. Hit her just like Michael.

All those choices had been hers and hers alone. Yes, Michael controlled her life now, but why? Because long ago she chose to allow him to do so.

But if she made all the choices that led her to this moment, couldn't she make new choices?

The very thought terrified her. If every choice she'd made up to this point was wrong, then how could she trust herself to ever choose correctly? As she thought about the promise she'd made to herself, she rubbed Sam's back.

Hadn't she been waiting for proof of just how much Sam was in danger of following in Michael's footsteps? Well, she couldn't deny that she'd just experienced that proof in the worst possible way. Her cheek still stung from Sam's strike.

The strange thing was, a part of her was glad he'd slapped her. It seemed to have woken her up. She couldn't ignore it, couldn't keep pretending Sam would be okay. No. It was her job to make him okay. She had to keep that promise.

The time had come.

After comforting and assuring Sam that he wasn't in trouble, they heard the familiar rumble of the garage roller door.

"He'll see!" Sam said, panic in his eyes.

Nina didn't have to ask what he meant. Sam wasn't worried about Michael seeing the red blotch she was sure decorated the left side of her face. In fact, she wondered if Sam might actually tell his dad what he had done to make him proud, but quickly dismissed that idea. Telling Michael he'd struck her would mean explaining why. Sam knew Michael would blame him for letting her get her hands on the school report before him.

Although Michael never raised a hand to his son, Sam instinctively knew he should be very afraid of Michael should he put a foot wrong. She guessed that was the reason he was such a stickler for Michael's rules.

Extracting herself from Sam's embrace, she took the torn envelope from him without any resistance this time.

"Wait right here," she said. Taking off her stilettos, she bolted from the room.

She entered Michael's study, acutely aware of the fact that she wasn't allowed in the room, but also aware that she wasn't allowed to walk around in bare feet or read her own son's school report. What was one more broken rule?

Opening drawer after drawer, barely able to breathe, she finally found his stash of envelopes. They were all white, but Michael hadn't seen the original, so he'd never know the difference.

Expanding the tear in the manila envelope, she withdrew Sam's school report.

The rumble of the garage door stopped for a moment, then started again for its descent.

Michael would be inside in seconds.

She shoved the school report into the white envelope, ripped off the backing tape and sealed it. There was no time to worry about the lack of an address label. Picking up the old envelope, she raced into the living room.

Sam stood ram-rod straight beside the couch, his face a mask of anxiety. She gave him a weak smile and shoved the envelope into his school bag.

In the kitchen, the internal garage door slammed.

“Where is everyone?” Michael called.

Nina picked up Sam’s school bag, handed it to him.

“Take this into the kitchen,” she whispered. “Like you can’t wait to give him your report.”

Sam nodded and hurried away. Nina quickly slipped on her stilettos, then stared at the torn envelope and backing strip on the couch. She couldn’t let Michael find them. Picking them up, she folded them into the smallest square possible, then shoved them down the back of her waistband, into her underwear, then between her butt cheeks. Later, she would rip them into tiny pieces and flush them down the toilet, but for now, she had to get herself into the kitchen before Michael wondered what she was up to.

By the time she entered, Michael held the white envelope in his hand, but he wasn’t looking at it, he was studying Sam.

“Have you been crying?” he asked.

Sam’s eyes widened slightly before he shook his head.

Crying was not allowed in this house. Michael saw it as an intolerable weakness.

“His milk went down the wrong way,” she said. “He had a bit of a coughing fit.”

“Did I ask you?”

“I just thought...”

“That’s the problem, isn’t it? You don’t need to think. It only gets you in trouble.”

“Yes, Michael. You’re right. I’m sorry.”

He glanced at Sam. "Is that true?"

Oh god. Would this be a repeat of this morning? Would Sam tell Michael the truth again?

"Yes," Sam said. "She shouldn't think."

Michael chuckled, shook his head and looked at the envelope.

For some reason, he wasn't going to push it, which amazed her. Usually he scrutinized every minor detail. Then, to her horror, she saw he was doing exactly that.

He turned the envelope over, then flipped it again.

The missing address label. He knows.

Without looking at her, Michael tore open the envelope and pulled out the report.

Nina released a silent breath as she glanced at Sam. His eyes were glued to his dad with anticipation.

Michael scanned the front page, flicked it over and studied the next page, and the next, until he reached the end. Finally, he looked up, his face breaking into a smile.

"Well, well. All A's."

Sam beamed. "Really?"

"Come on now. You don't have to ask, do you?"

Sam shook his head. "I thought I did good."

"Did well," Michael corrected. "Now, if I remember correctly, I think I promised you a reward if you managed to get straight A's."

Nina watched the excitement on Sam's face as Michael opened his briefcase, removed a small wrapped gift and handed it to Sam.

Without hesitation, Sam ripped off the paper and stared in amazement at a Swiss army knife.

"Wow!" Sam said, flinging himself at his dad. As Michael hugged him back, his gaze locked onto her.

"I'm just glad you've turned out to be a chip off the old block."

Sam pulled away, looked at him with confusion.

“What’s that mean?”

Michael laughed as he ruffled Sam’s hair. “It means you’re just like me, only smaller.”

Sam grinned. “Cool.”

Nina watched the affection between them with trepidation. While Sam knew enough to fear Michael at certain times, his love for him always stayed at the forefront.

“So, how do you like the knife?” Michael asked.

“It’s awesome. Thanks, Dad.”

“Don’t you think he’s too young to…” She let her words trail off as Michael glared at her. How could she be so stupid? But then, how could he? Giving a 9-year-old a knife? How could Michael believe that was a good idea?

“Did I ask for your opinion?”

“No,” she whispered.

“Did you?” he asked Sam.

Sam shook his head, the elated smile from moments ago nowhere to be found.

“So it seems your opinion means what it always means. Nothing. Now,” he said, turning to Sam, “except for school, you should keep it with you. You never know when it’ll come in handy. That little knife’s saved a lot of lives.”

“It has?” Sam asked in awe as he looked at it resting on his palm.

“Absolutely.” Michael said, checking his watch. “We’ve got half an hour before we need to leave for the press conference. How about I challenge you on that fighting game?”

“Cool,” Sam said as he raced from the room.

Michael turned to Nina, gave her a smile. “No need for you to come. Just make sure dinner’s ready at seven.” Deliberately thumping into her shoulder as he moved past, he strode after Sam.

She waited until he was in the living room, then moved. Hurrying into the downstairs bathroom, she tore the envelope and backing strip into tiny pieces and flushed them down the

toilet.

A few minutes later, Sam's laughter reached her ears. How she loved that sound, but so rarely heard it.

When Sam started school, she'd had a vision of him having lots of little friends over to play, their laughter and squeals filling the quiet house. She'd even expected Sam to go to his friends' homes too. And she'd hoped that there he would see how real parents behaved toward one another. He'd see how loving their fathers were to their mothers and realise that Michael did not treat her the same way. She'd even imagined him telling their parents about his home life, about the way Michael treated her. Even though she never wanted to spend a night away from her son, she'd looked forward to Sam receiving an invitation for a sleep-over at a classmate's home.

How stupid she'd been to fantasize about anything remotely normal.

The moment the subject came up, Michael banned Sam from going to friends' homes or having them visit his own house. That would mean she'd have an opportunity to talk to other mothers, and he couldn't possibly allow that. So, he'd explained, it was her fault their son couldn't have friends outside school hours. Her fault. Always her fault.

Letting the laughter draw her closer, she entered the living room.

Sam and Michael wrestled on the couch, Michael cheating by tickling Sam under the arms and eliciting squeals of laughter.

As she moved further into the room, Michael caught sight of her and abruptly stopped the fun. He rose, straightened his tie and shirt.

Sam lay on the couch, his brow furrowed with confusion. "Dad?"

Without taking his eyes off her, Michael said, "For some reason, I'm not in the mood anymore." He grabbed his suit jacket from the arm of the couch and marched from the room.

She knew all too well what was going on. Michael was punishing her for questioning the appropriateness of Sam's gift. He'd done it so many times before, she could barely believe she'd walked into his trap, but the sound of Sam's happiness had been irresistible. And that was always

the time Michael chose to use that particular form of torture. It was his way of convincing Sam that Dad was the giver of fun, and Mum was the killer of fun.

Sam stared after him, then his gaze locked onto her. The look in his eyes made her shiver. He truly believed exactly what Michael wanted him to believe.

“You ruin *everything*,” he said and raced after Michael.

Her heart twisted painfully. After what he’d done to her earlier, after the guilt and remorse he’d shown, he’d already abandoned her again in favour of Michael.

At this point, does it really matter?

Maybe not. She’d formed the most basic of plans, knowing that to think too far ahead, to think about it in too much detail, would only make her change her mind.

But tomorrow, she would take Sam and run.

Greg placed the phone receiver in its cradle and waited. A few moments later, Talbot knocked on the door and entered with a thin file in hand. Greg watched his face for any sign of excitement as he approached the desk. Seeing none, he relaxed. Why he doubted himself, he didn't know. He'd picked Talbot for the task with the full knowledge that the constable lacked

experience.

“Find anything?” he asked.

Talbot shook his head with disappointment. “Nothing but evidence that Wenzel’s gone away somewhere.”

“Elaborate. In detail. From the beginning.”

Talbot took a seat without being asked. Greg let it slide. This time.

“I arrived at the premises at ten-forty-five. No one responded to my knock on the door. I proceeded to perform a perimeter check of the house and noted the carport was empty. Since I was not sure of Wenzel’s marital status, if he had a partner who might also use the car, I couldn’t be sure if Wenzel was indeed on the property or not.” Talbot stopped, opened the thin file on his lap and scanned it.

Greg raised an eyebrow slightly, surprised by the constable’s reasoning. His impression of Talbot had been one of a cadet who had just scraped through his graduation at the police academy. A low, but insistent tension began to churn in his gut.

“Anything else?”

“Since we had received a call tipping us off to Wenzel’s disappearance, I couldn’t rule anything out, so I decided to enter the premises to make sure Wenzel wasn’t dead or in need of medical attention. The front door was locked, but I did locate a window around back that was open. I entered through that window and found myself in the laundry. I proceeded through the house, calling out and checking every room. There were no signs of upturned furniture or anything that would suggest a struggle. When I was certain the house was empty, I inspected Wenzel’s bedroom and found a large amount of clothes missing from his—”

“How do you know they were missing?”

“There was a large gap in his wardrobe, which didn’t look natural. I also checked his drawers and found only one pair of underwear. Upon further inspection, I noted a gap on the shelf in his wardrobe about the size of a suitcase. I checked the laundry clothes basket and washing

machine to make sure the missing clothes weren't there, but both were empty.”

Jesus, this guy was thorough. The tension in Greg's gut sharpened. “And then?”

“I checked the kitchen. On the counter, I found an empty carton of milk with an expiry date a week and a half away. In the sink, I found evidence that the milk had been poured out.”

“What's the significance of that?” Greg asked, knowing full well.

“Well, sir, if someone's planning on going away for a while, they might dispose of any foodstuffs that would expire during their absence so they don't have to deal with them when they return.”

Greg nodded, not liking the fact that Talbot impressed him.

“In conclusion, it appears that Wenzel packed clothes for a trip away and left the premises of his own free will.”

Greg rubbed his chin, the two day growth prickling beneath his fingers. For a second, he thought about the red marks it would leave on a certain someone's pale skin later.

“I agree,” he told Talbot. “Probably decided to go camping and forgot to tell his loyal followers.”

Talbot swallowed, tilted his head slightly. “Still, it seems a little strange that he'd leave like that since he's organised such a big protest today.”

“Probably just plain forgot,” Greg said with a shrug. “Guy's a pot-smoking, tree-hugging hippy.”

“He is?”

“I'm surprised you didn't do a search on him before you went out to his property,” Greg said, pleased he finally had something to criticise. “He's been charged with possession a few times. We even thought he might have a plantation out there, but never found anything.”

As Talbot nodded, Greg felt the tension in his gut ease.

“It's a good result, Talbot.”

“I know. I just hoped that it might be something big.”

Greg leaned forward on his desk. “Don’t you see? Even though Wenzel’s just taken a holiday, you’ve proven to me that you have the makings of a good detective.” He nodded toward the door. “No way those dip-shits Sykes or Pinter would have done the thorough job you did. So don’t let it get you down. Something else comes up, I won’t forget about you.”

For the first time, Talbot cracked a smile. “Thanks, sir.”

“Thank *you*. Now get out.”

Talbot stood, looked at the file in his hand. “You want me to call...” he opened the file, scanned a page. “Melissa Cross. Let her know?”

“It’s your case, isn’t it?”

Talbot nodded and left the office.

Sighing heavily, Greg leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. With that out of the way, his thoughts returned to the night ahead, and with that thought came the first stirrings of an erection.

Barefoot in the kitchen, Nina concentrated on cooking dinner. At least, she tried to. Thoughts about tomorrow kept creeping in, threatening to dissolve her determination with what-ifs. What if Michael decided to have the day off tomorrow? What if he called the school to check on Sam?

What if he just *knew* she was up to something? Those were exactly the type of thoughts she wanted to avoid, but seemed incapable of preventing.

Turning to the oven, she cracked it open. The sizzle and aroma of lamb assaulted her, making her mouth water. Would this be her last home-cooked meal for a while? The thought saddened her. Cooking was her one escape, something she could immerse herself in and let every aspect of her pathetic existence fade into oblivion. Out of everything she knew she wasn't, she knew she was a good cook.

The garage door rumbled. Nina shoved her feet into her stilettos, hurried to the stove and stirred a pot of gravy. When she took the lamb out of the oven, she would pour the juices into the gravy to give it a rich, bold flavour.

The internal garage door swung open, and Sam bounded inside, his face flush with excitement as he raced toward her.

“Mum! I'm gonna be on TV tonight!”

Her heart ground to a complete stop before it took off at a gallop. Sam appearing on television was the last thing she needed. She didn't want his face splashed all over the television, making it fresh in the public eye. But she smiled, cupped his face in her hands.

“That's wonderful, honey.”

“Dad's gonna set the recorder. He said as soon as Uncle Greg gets here, and we finish dinner, we can watch it.”

She released Sam's face and gripped his shoulders. “Uncle Greg's coming over?”

“That's right,” Michael said. Standing at the side table, he removed his wallet from the inside pocket of his jacket and emptied loose change from his pants into the bowl. “He should be here any minute.”

Oh god, why? Why tonight of all nights?

As Michael walked toward her, she turned to the stove to check on the gravy.

“I hope you made enough for everyone.”

“Of course,” she lied. While there was plenty of lamb, she’d only cooked enough vegetables for the three of them. She’d be eating light tonight, just like she did every time Michael invited Greg over without informing her.

“Can we take a peek at the news?” Sam asked.

“No. We’re waiting for Uncle Greg.”

“But Dad—”

“Patience, Sam. You can’t always get what you want when you want it. But if you have patience, eventually everything will come to you.”

From the corner of her eye, Nina watched Sam’s face slacken with disappointment.

“Now go and get yourself washed up,” Michael said.

Sam hurried out, his feet loud on the stairs as he thumped up to the second floor.

Michael moved behind her as she stirred, wrapped his arms around her and cupped her breasts. Then he pinched. Hard. She continued to stir the gravy as if she felt nothing.

“You might want to get changed into something a little more appropriate before our guest arrives,” he murmured against her neck.

“But the dinner...”

Michael’s hand left her breast and turned off the burner.

She smiled, turned in his arms. “Thank you.”

He looked into her eyes, and for a moment she thought she’d gone too far, thought he sensed her deception.

“Something delicate,” he said, stepping aside to let her pass.

She nodded, careful not to release a breath of relief until she left the kitchen.

In the bedroom’s walk-in-robe, she selected a red dress with a sheer layer of fine mesh draped over the silky material. Taking off her bra, she slipped on the dress, looked in the mirror, turned. The low-cut top dipped half way down to her midriff, the swell of her breasts embarrassingly exposed.

Not the sort of dress she wanted to wear in front of Sam. But he'd seen her in such outfits before and would think nothing of it.

Although warmth flowed from the vent in the ceiling, she shivered. Michael bought the dress at least a month ago, but this was the first time she'd put it on. The colour he chose wasn't lost on her. Just another reminder of where she'd come from, what she would always be in his eyes...and Greg's.

Why tonight?

But she refused to let it faze her. In fact, Greg's presence might work in her favour. If Michael noticed her stress, he would most likely put it down to her fear of Greg, of the inevitable.

One last time. You've done the same thing hundreds of times before, the only difference is, this will be the last time.

Case almost hit the brakes when Greg turned onto Sandfly Road. The first thought that went through his head was that Holt knew he was being followed. Why else would he lead him to the road where Julie lost her life?

But Greg couldn't know. Case had parked well down the street from Greg's house in Hobart, and when Greg finally left, Case kept plenty of cars between them. Besides, Greg didn't know the vehicle he now drove. He'd bought the Holden Commodore a few months ago, thinking it might give him a little pick-me-up. It hadn't, but he couldn't deny he liked the damn thing. If Julie had been alive, he never would have considered such a luxury, but now he had no reason to save his money. He had no wife, no family, no one to look after.

Only one car separated him from Greg now. Since Sandfly Road only led to upper-class rural homes, he hoped the car in front wouldn't turn off before Greg. The road was about six or seven kilometres long, but he had no way of knowing how far Greg would travel.

Earlier, while he'd been waiting for Greg to leave his house, Chris rang with Michael Holt's number. The weird thing was, Michael's trophy wife had no listed phone number, landline or mobile, which set off alarm bells, not only in his mind, but in Chris's. What modern, wealthy woman had no phone? Sure the landline was probably listed under her husband's name, but no mobile? Chris said he'd checked her husband's account, but it only listed one mobile. Something wasn't right.

Before he could think about it in more depth, his headlights caught the wooden cross on the side of the road. Without thinking, he took his foot off the accelerator and braked. He hadn't been out here for over a year and was shocked to see how much the white cross had faded. All the flowers were gone, even the plastic ones Julie's parents had draped over the cross.

A sadness he hadn't experienced while clearing out Julie's clothes settled inside him. The dilapidated cross seemed to represent someone long forgotten. Although he hadn't gone a single day without thinking about her, it was true that those thoughts were growing less frequent. And he couldn't blame her parents for the state of the cross. They no longer lived on Sandfly Road. If they were to visit the site, it would mean a four hour journey. Why should they bother? After all, it wasn't Julie's final resting place.

Only one person knew where her body was located. And the fact that Greg now travelled

this road gave him one more reason to believe he had the right man.

Case pressed his foot to the floor, the Commodore's V-8 power surging beneath him. Breaking the speed limit by over forty kilometres, he soon found the other cars again.

Another few K's along the road, the car in front braked, then swung onto the other side of the road as Greg's Falcon turned left into a driveway and stopped. Case drove past, noticing the tall gates swinging open before Greg's car.

In the rear-view mirror, he saw the Falcon drive forward and disappear behind a brick wall.

He slowed, pulled a U-turn and headed back to the residence Greg entered in time to see the gates swing shut. As he drove past, he saw no name on the letterbox.

Unperturbed, he turned around again and passed the driveway until he found a wide shoulder. Parking well off the road, he killed the engine and headlights and grabbed his mobile phone. Connecting it to the stereo, he dialled the special number that opened the speaker on Greg's phone.

As Nina removed the dinner plates she'd warmed in the oven, a sharp rap came from the back door. Even though she knew Greg had arrived when his headlights washed over the windows, his knocks jolted her so much she almost lost her grip on the plates. When she glanced at Michael

sitting at the breakfast table, he smiled.

Her stomach churned as he rose and opened the door.

Greg stepped inside, shook Michael's hand, gave him a quick man-hug, then looked right at her.

"Fuck, something smells good," he said.

"Dinner's only a few minutes away," Michael assured him.

"Hi, Uncle Greg," Sam said from the doorway.

Sam's face fell when Greg ignored him and sauntered toward the kitchen.

As he leaned on the bench-top, Nina quickly set about serving dinner.

"Nina," Greg said by way of a greeting.

She glanced at him, smiled. "Hello, Greg."

"Will you watch the news with us, Uncle Greg?" Sam asked.

A sly grin spread Greg's lips as his eyes snaked over her body.

"Nice dress," he said.

Fighting to keep her repulsion hidden, she turned her back on him and carved into the lamb, wishing it was him she could slice.

"Nina?" Michael's voiced boomed. "Have you forgotten your manners?"

The knife hesitated halfway through the lamb. She plastered on a smile and faced them.

"Thank you, Greg. That's very kind."

The words sounded hollow to her own ears, but Greg's slick wink told her that even if he noticed her insincerity, he didn't care.

After dinner, they adjourned to the living room. Nina sat on the couch beside Sam, grateful Greg chose the leather armchair Michael usually occupied, a spot he'd taken when Michael headed to the bar in the corner to get their drinks. Nina noticed him place his mobile phone on the arm of the chair when he sat, and wondered if he was expecting a call, a call that would force him to leave.

Wishful thinking.

Michael returned, handed Greg a glass of scotch and seated himself on the other side of Sam. He never offered her alcohol, and she knew why. He didn't want her senses dulled, at least not on a night like tonight. Besides, if Michael allowed her access to the bar, she'd be a raging alcoholic by now. Anything to take her away from here.

"Can we watch now, Dad?"

"Sure," Michael said and picked up the remote.

"I'm gonna be on the news too, Uncle Greg."

"Going to be," Michael corrected.

Greg merely rolled his eyes as he turned his attention to the television.

Nina wanted to slap him. All Sam desired was some sort of acknowledgement from his uncle, though she couldn't understand why Sam tried anymore. Greg had never wanted anything to do with his nephew. When she tried to broach the subject with Michael he told her to mind her own business.

Taking a risk, she put her arm around Sam and gave him a comforting hug.

Over the top of their son's head, Michael glared at her.

She slowly removed her arm, placed her hands in her lap and stared at the television.

“Okay, ready?” Michael asked.

Sam bounced on the seat beside him. “Yeah!”

Michael fast forwarded through the advertisements, then reversed the picture when he saw

himself on the screen.

“...coordinator, Martin Wenzel, who has previously led rowdy protests, was absent today at the Premier’s news conference...”

As the reporter droned on, he couldn’t help but share a knowing smile with Greg.

“There I am!” Sam shouted.

Michael turned his attention back to the television as the reporter stood before him. He had his hands on Sam’s shoulders, keeping his son in front of him for the cameras to see exactly the type of family man he was: a man who cared, a man who would never put his son’s future at risk.

“Premier Holt, what are your thoughts on Martin Wenzel’s no-show?” the reporter asked.

He smiled into the camera. “Obviously I’m pleased that he’s come to his senses. What most protestors fail to realise is that bringing extensive logging back to this State will provide employment to hundreds of Tasmanian’s, both directly and indirectly. More than likely, every one of the protestors here today will benefit, but fail to realise it.” He gave Sam’s hair and an affectionate ruffle. “After all, we need to be mindful of the next generation’s future, and what better way to build a strong economy than with a completely renewable resource?”

“Nice one, Mike,” Greg said before sipping his scotch.

The reporter signed off, and the next story began.

“Can we watch it again?” Sam asked.

Michael smiled. “Tomorrow, buddy. It’s already past your bedtime.”

“But Dad—”

“Hey, come on now. None of that. Off you go.”

Reluctantly, Sam rose from the couch. “‘Night, Dad. ‘Night, Uncle Greg.”

Once again Greg ignored the poor little guy, but Michael remained silent. He knew why, and the why was enough for him. He understood. After all, he’d been there to understand.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Nina cross her arms and swallow nervously. Did she think she could get out of what was about to happen by trying to be invisible? Yes, that’s how he

liked her to be the majority of the time, but tonight wasn't one of those times.

“What are you waiting for?” he asked her. “Go with Sam, then get yourself ready.”

As she rose on unsteady legs, his eyes flicked to Greg, who watched her every move with blatant desire. Michael didn't mind. He knew Greg only wanted her sexually. He certainly wasn't a threat to their marriage. Greg's presence in the master bedroom only helped strengthened his control over his wife, proving to her time and again that he was the master of her life, her fate, just as it should be. He had saved her life and provided for her like no other man would have, not if they knew where she came from.

And Greg was a good reminder. Even though he loved his brother, he knew him for the low-life he was. Every time Greg was with Nina, Michael was sure she was taken back to her time on the streets, to a time when she was so desperate for her next fix, she sold her body to whoever was willing to pay for it without a second thought. And, to his knowledge, Greg only ever screwed hookers, never a normal, well balanced woman who might, by some remote chance, want a relationship with him.

Greg didn't do relationships. Never had, never would. Women were not his favourite creatures. But what he could do was remind Nina how impossible escape was. Not that Michael believed she had any intention of doing so, but one could never be too careful. Reminders were a necessary part of the life he'd given her.

When Nina disappeared from view, Michael raised his glass toward Greg.

“To eliminating anyone who gets in my way,” he toasted.

“To enjoying the rewards,” Greg said.

They grinned at each other, then downed their drinks. Michael watched Greg wipe his mouth with the back of his hand, put the tumbler on the side table and grab his mobile from the arm of the recliner. *His* recliner. Which Greg knew, yet still chose to sit in, trying to show him who had the power in their relationship. It was almost laughable. Greg might have power in the outside world, but not in this house, though Michael didn't mind giving him a false sense of

security about who held the alpha male role.

As Greg rose from the recliner, Michael shook his head. “Not yet. Give Sam a chance to fall asleep before you go up.”

“Fucking kids,” Greg mumbled as he fell back into the chair.

“Yes, well, he’s my fucking kid, and as you know, I don’t want him twigging to what goes on here from time to time.”

“Don’t know why. Thought you wanted him to think less of Nina.”

“But not less of me,” he said. Yes, he wanted Sam’s opinion of Nina to be diminished, but not at his own expense. Sam was too smart. He’d want to know why his father allowed Greg into their bedroom. And that was a conversation he would rather avoid. Forever. Greg was simply a tool to keep Nina in line. Privately.

Nina waited in Sam's bedroom while he brushed his teeth. Waves of nausea rolled through her stomach, sending saliva rushing into her mouth. As sweat broke on the surface of her skin, she clenched her jaw, swallowed over and over, refusing to let the vomit rise, sure her face was as pale

as Sam's white bedroom walls.

It was strange. Now that she'd decided to run, the thought of Greg's hands on her, the thought of Greg anywhere near her, made her sick. But before deciding to leave, she'd remained indifferent to him, accepting him as part of her life, simply disappearing inside herself when it was time to...let him have his way.

But something had awoken inside her. It had been weeks since her last time with Greg, and in that time, she'd changed, come back to herself. She could no longer pretend away the bad things, not now that they'd sharpened into crystal clear focus.

She could no longer convince herself that Sam was the only reason she needed to escape. If she didn't run, not only would Sam become Michael, but she would die inside. Staying meant imprisonment for the rest of her life. There would be only one way out, and she couldn't hurt Sam that way. Maybe in ten years he wouldn't care if she killed herself, but in ten years, her brain would be mush. She wouldn't be herself any longer. She'd be a shadow, a ghost.

She'd already been awakening, but today, Sam's slap had woken her all the way up.

From the hallway, Sam's bare feet pounded the carpet, then he raced through the doorway and launched himself at his bed.

Nina helped him under the covers and tucked them beneath his chin. He looked at her, his eyes still bright with excitement. Dread filled her. Still so worked up about his appearance on television, it didn't look like he'd get to sleep anytime soon. But as she contemplated what that might mean, he frowned.

"Mum? Is everything okay?" he asked with genuine concern.

She smoothed his hair off his forehead and told him the absolute truth. "Everything'll be fine. I promise." At least, it would be tomorrow.

As she kissed his cheek and turned off the bedside lamp, she steeled herself for what was to come next. All she needed to do was get through it one last time.

Then she'd be free.

After what seemed like the longest twenty minute wait of his life, Greg bounded up the stairs, turned left when he reached the landing, and headed toward the master bedroom.

His erection strained against the front of his jeans, his heart thudding hard. Nina was the

only one who could do that to him. None of his other whores had that effect. Yes, he could get it up. Never a problem in that department. But his heart never raced the way it did when he was with Nina.

Shaking off that disturbing thought, he crossed the bedroom's threshold and locked the door behind him. One of Michael's rules, so the rug-rat wouldn't accidentally stumble upon his mother in a compromising position. He didn't give a flying fuck what the ankle-biter saw, but suspected that if the kid discovered what was happening, then the *rewards*—as Michael liked to call them—might become few and far between, or worse, non-existent.

As he strode further into the empty room, he wondered why he cared about no longer having access to Nina. It wasn't like he'd be deprived. Sex came to him whenever and wherever he wanted. But with Nina, it was different. He didn't want to give her up.

Where the hell was she, anyway? Usually she sat on the edge of the bed and waited for his instructions.

Thinking she might still be in the process of getting herself ready, he headed toward the ensuite. No luck. Making his way to the other side of the bed, he stopped.

She sat on a small stool in the walk-in-robe, her arms crossed over her stomach as she rocked slightly. He knew why she was so nervous compared to all the other times. After seeing him from the window last night, she now knew everything about him. *Everything*.

“C'mon,” he encouraged her. “Out you come.”

She rose obediently, the long silk nightgown she wore sliding over her as it reached for the floor, the weight of the material pulling taut against her naked body beneath. Her hair remained in that ridiculous bun Michael forced her to wear, pinned up, neat as a librarian's. The exact same hairstyle their mother always wore. For a long time, he'd wondered if that meant Michael wanted to fuck their mother, or if he only wanted her to act like his mother in every aspect except for the bedroom.

But when Nina had confided in him—probably believing she could cause trouble between

them—and explained that Michael couldn't perform sexually until Greg had his way with her, he'd developed a theory. Apparently little brother had a problem getting it up unless he thought of her as a filthy whore. Nina told him that after he'd had sex with her, Michael could perform, but the effect only lasted a few weeks. Greg thought he knew why. Gradually, after time passed between his rewards, Michael started seeing her as a mother figure again and couldn't bear to screw her. That explained why his rewards were quite regular.

His brother really was a twisted prick.

Though he hadn't mentioned anything about it to Michael, the moment Nina told him, he knew why. She thought that if he ridiculed Michael about it, the rewards would stop. More fool her. He kept the information to himself and continued to receive his rewards.

Nina took a few stilted steps toward him, then stopped, her eyes riveted to the floor. She knew he liked to study her, knew he liked to make the most of their time together. His eyes slid over her trembling body as his cock hardened almost painfully with anticipation.

“Closer,” he said. She took two more steps, stopping a few feet away.

There was no denying her beauty. Michael had made the right choice all those years ago. Greg hadn't seen it at the time, hadn't seen the beauty hidden beneath Nina's mask of filth and desperation accumulated from a life on the streets and an addiction to heroin. Michael had seen it all: a girl with a life that was leading straight to an early death, a girl young enough to mould, a girl with no one in the world who would miss her, a girl Michael could turn into his obedient wife.

But Greg had certainly seen it every day since. She was the best decision Michael had ever made, though he'd never tell him that.

“Closer,” he said again.

Nina took the final step, landing her in his personal space. He inhaled deeply, taking in the perfume she wore only for him.

His fingertips tingled as he reached toward her. Then he touched that soft skin and ran his

fingers over her shoulders, down her bare arms. Goose pimples rose beneath his touch, and he smiled as he dropped his gaze and watched her nipples pucker beneath the thin material.

Nina stared at his chest as he brought his hands up behind her head and released her long blonde hair from the tight bun. When it tumbled free, he brushed it forward so it fanned her face and caressed her bare arms. They'd played Lady Godiva a few times. Of course, he'd played the part of the horse she rode. Without thinking, he lowered his head, his eyes fastened on her lips. When her eyes widened, he stopped himself, shocked by what he'd almost done.

He'd been about to kiss her. What the fuck was wrong with him? He didn't *kiss*. Anyone.

Furious with himself, he let the anger burn to the surface. Grabbing her chin, he bit his fingers into her cheeks and tilted her head until she had no choice but to look at him. And what a look it was.

Repulsion.

"There it is," he said, "Fuck that gets me hard."

Roughly, he pulled her against him, cupped her arse and forced her pelvis forward, grinding his erection against her, proving he spoke the truth.

"Greg, you don't have to—"

"Shut up," he said, surprised she'd spoken at all. Normally he couldn't even get a moan out of her. Knowing what he was, what he was capable of doing, must have affected her more than he'd realised. What didn't make sense was why she'd be more defiant. Shouldn't she be more afraid?

"Greg, please don't—"

"I said, shut up." She needed to remember her place, needed humiliating. And he knew what she hated most. He placed his hands on her shoulders and applied pressure. "That pretty little mouth of yours is about to be occupied."

She sank to her knees before him.

"Lower the straps," he instructed.

Her fingers trembled as she brushed each thin nightgown strap from her shoulders.

“Now pull it down.”

While he watched her tug at the sides of the gown, he unbuckled his belt and unbuttoned his jeans. The nightgown slipped from her upper body and pooled at her knees. He flicked her long hair out of the way. She wasn't the emaciated teenager she'd been on the night she arrived. Although a little on the skinny side, she'd filled out nicely. Sometimes, he thought, too nicely. That body of hers was addictive, and he didn't like anyone having that sort of power over him.

Lowering his zipper, he pulled his cock free and touched the tip to her lips. She opened obediently, and he slid into that wet warmth. Grabbing a handful of hair, he had no fear she'd try to bite. With his fists, he'd taught her the consequences of that not long after her arrival. Ever since then, he trusted her not to repeat that mistake, and she never had.

Closing his eyes, he fucked her mouth, pushing deeper and deeper until she gagged, her throat closing around him. He tightened his grip on her hair and rocked forward, coming in a rush of release.

Untangling his fingers from her hair, he slipped out of her mouth and zipped himself up. His legs shook slightly as he watched her bend at the waist, her hand clutching her stomach as if she were about to throw up.

“Make sure you swallow,” he said and grabbed her arm, hauled her to her feet.

They stood face to face, but she refused to look him in the eye.

“Open,” he said.

She hesitated, and he knew she was holding his semen in her mouth, waiting for him to leave so she could spit it out. Not tonight.

“Open,” he insisted.

The movement was so minute, he almost missed the slight contraction of her throat as she tried to hide the fact that she was swallowing. Then she opened her mouth.

Although he felt satisfied down to his bones, the disappointment of it being over so quickly

niggled at him. Reminding himself Michael would need him to debase her again soon enough, he grabbed his mobile and jacket, walked toward the bedroom door and unlocked it. He turned to look at her before leaving, but she'd already made it to the en-suite, the door closing, shutting him out. He didn't like the feeling it gave him, but what he liked even less was having any feeling about it at all.

She was nothing but meat to him. They all were.

Letting himself into the hallway, he froze.

Halfway along the landing, Sam stood in his pyjamas, watching with a scowl.

The anger he thought he'd released returned. Greg strode toward the brat, fully expecting the kid to move out of his way. The little shit stood his ground.

"You're not allowed in there," Sam said.

"Get the fuck back to your room."

"Mum doesn't belong to you. Dad's gonna be so mad."

If only the brat knew. Unwilling to get into a debate with the ankle-biter, Greg skirted around him. That's when the idiot grabbed his arm.

"Dad!"

Greg whirled on him, slammed an open palm into the brat's bony chest and knocked him flat on his back. This was exactly the sort of situation he tried to avoid. Exactly why he hated being around kids. They were weak, defenceless, and at the mercy of adults. They reminded him of what he once was, of what he tried to forget his father did to him every day after his mother left him behind.

Stunned, Sam stared at him from the floor. Greg grabbed the rug-rat's pyjama top at his throat and twisted, towering over the brat with what he hoped was his most threatening expression. Hauling the little shit a foot off the floor, he leaned over him, breathed in his face.

"Don't ever, *ever*, fucking touch me."

To his utter astonishment, the boy barely batted an eyelash. He wasn't scared at all, didn't

cower and tremble the way Greg had when his father loomed over him. This kid had balls; something Michael only possessed when it came to defenceless women. Put his brother in a confrontation with a man and he crumbled, but not this kid.

As an unsettling thought sparked through his brain, the ankle-biter took a huge breath, and let rip:

“Daaad! Daaad!” he screamed at the top of his lungs.

Greg released him and backed away, not from the scream, but from what he saw in those eyes.

The master bedroom door flew open. Nina raced to Sam’s side, pulled him into her arms and glared at Greg.

“Get out,” she said. “*Get out of here.*”

“Don’t talk to my brother that way.”

Greg turned to find Michael at the top of the stairs. This was turning into a fucking circus. But he’d stay for the show.

Turning to Nina as Michael approached, he saw the brat shrug off his mother’s arms and clamber to his feet.

“But, Dad,” Sam said, shooting him a smug look, “Uncle Greg pushed me. He—”

“Get to bed,” Michael snapped. “This is adult stuff.”

Greg watched the kid’s bottom lip begin to tremble. The little shit was totally faking it.

Michael put an arm around the brat’s shoulders and turned him toward his bedroom. “I’ll be there soon,” he promised, his voice soft. “Go on.”

Goddamn pussy. When it came to that kid, his brother was blind.

Michael advanced on Nina. She backed away until he had her pinned against the wall, then he slapped her hard across the face.

Movement from the corner of Greg’s eye drew his attention to Sam, standing outside his bedroom, watching. When their eyes met, the rug-rat scampered into his room and shut the

door.

“You’re already in trouble after this morning’s breach of the rules,” Michael said. “Now this on top of it? What’s wrong with you?”

Nina remained motionless, her eyes downcast, knowing better than to look her master in the eye. Greg had seen it all too many times before. Losing interest, he let out a bored yawn and clapped Michael on the shoulder.

“You can have this domestic crap. I’m outta here.”

As he thumped down the stairs, he heard Michael say to Nina, “Now look what you’ve done. Driven a guest out of our home. Is that the sort of host I taught you to be?”

Greg rolled his eyes as he made it to the bottom of the stairs. Too much drama for him tonight. Usually his brother’s home was calm and organised. Was Michael slipping? Obviously he hadn’t taught that kid to stay in his bed where he was supposed to stay. And if the brat saw no harm in defying him, maybe Nina wouldn’t either.

Case gripped the steering wheel so hard he thought it might snap. From the moment Greg entered the Holt home and commented on his sister-in-law's dress, Case had known there was something terribly wrong going on in there. He just hadn't known how wrong until he heard

what went on in the master bedroom.

A rustling accompanied by footsteps sounded through the speakers, followed by a car door opening and closing. After more rustling, the sound became clearer as an engine roared to life. Case moved his gaze to the rear-view mirror. Moments later headlights shone from the Holt driveway.

Hands aching from his grip on the wheel, Case watched Greg's Falcon accelerate away, the red tail lights shining in the mirror as if they were Greg's eyes, watching, waiting to see what he'd do next.

What he wanted to do was follow the sick fuck back to his home and put a bullet between his eyes while he slept. But that would be far too easy on Greg, and it wouldn't solve the problem of trying to find out the truth about Julie and where she was buried.

Unfortunately, he'd stumbled upon something so unexpected, he felt frozen between doing what was necessary to bring his wife's killer to justice, and doing the right thing for the woman inside that house, a woman who was still alive and desperately needed help.

If he was still a cop, there wouldn't have been any choice to make. He would have walked straight into that house, decked the son-of-a-bitch who had the gall to call himself a husband and father, and arrested him.

But he realised, even if he'd still been a detective, that wasn't the course of action he could take in this situation. There was a reason that woman was still with her husband after who knew how many years.

Greg.

Greg was obviously using his position in the police force to cover this up. If his brother's wife should try to escape, where would she go? Greg knew all the shelters in the whole state; all the cops did. From what he could tell, Nina Holt really was trapped.

Making things harder, more complicated for him. Since he was now just an ordinary citizen, she wasn't his responsibility. It wasn't his place to do anything except maybe make an anonymous

phone call to the police which would then be passed onto Greg and forgotten, and would no doubt lead to more pain and humiliation for Nina Holt.

His hands were tied. He needed to forget what he'd heard and concentrate on the task at hand: bringing Greg Holt to justice and laying Julie to rest.

He tried to convince himself that was fine with him. At least, by following his own plan, he could eliminate Greg from Nina Holt's life, giving her a chance to make her own choices. Right?

He shook the steering wheel with frustration.

She's not your problem.

But something deep inside him said otherwise. There was a reason he'd become a cop in the first place. Whether or not he held a badge made no difference to who he was on the inside.

Still, he couldn't go barging in there without more facts. And he couldn't barge in there without ruining his chances of exposing Greg. The moment Greg knew he was involved, he'd cover his tracks and any evidence that might still be around would be lost forever.

Letting out a growl, Case grabbed his mobile, disconnected from Greg's phone and dialled the special number to open up Michael Holt's speaker. As the phone connected, Case noticed his hand shaking.

The cold. That's all it is.

The instant the phone connected, Michael's voice whispered from the speakers. Case cranked up the volume. The speakers hissed.

"Bedtime means bedtime," Michael said.

"But I had to go to the toilet," the boy whined.

"All of which your mother's supposed to make sure you do before you get into bed for the night. So you see, she's to blame. Wouldn't you agree?"

Case listened as the boy hesitated slightly, then said, "Yes."

Jesus, this guy was unbelievable. It was his wife's fault that their son had caught his brother emerging from the master bedroom? Could the guy be any more twisted?

“But why did Uncle Greg push me?” the kid asked.

Exactly, Case thought. Good on you kid. At least someone has a brain in that house.

When his father didn't answer, the boy tried again. “Why doesn't he ever talk to me?”

“Uncle Greg just doesn't like kids.”

“But why?”

“Because they remind him that he was once a kid...and he doesn't like to remember.” Case detected something in Michael's voice. Was it sadness?

“Did something bad happen to him?” the kid wanted to know.

More rustling, then, “Time to go to sleep, buddy.”

Case heard what he thought was the snap of a lamp being switched off, then complete silence. The quiet stretched out for a long time. No footsteps, no rustling. What was the guy doing? Standing over his son to make sure he went to sleep?

Was he really that controlling?

Nina sat in the hot bath, her hair plaited and pinned in a bun atop her head, her knees pulled up to her chest. Gently rocking, she tried to ease the shuddering which seemed to come from some place deep inside her body, a place where the almost scolding water couldn't reach.

If she'd needed one more little push to convince herself she had to get the hell out of this house with her son, Greg had given it to her tonight. He might not have hurt Sam this time, but there was no doubt he could.

She'd known Greg was disturbed right from the moment he'd stepped into this house in his police uniform. Back then, her drug muddled brain had thought he'd come to arrest her for breaking and entering. Her fear had been insurmountable. She couldn't go to prison. In prison she wouldn't have access to heroin. And she'd needed it. Desperately.

Little had she known that the same fate awaited her here. Greg hadn't been there to drag her off to prison. He'd been there to convince her that she was lucky, that his generous and kind brother wanted to help her get clean, wanted to give her a second shot at life. Wasn't that nice of him?

She remembered telling him to fuck off. She also remembered his fist cracking against the side of her head.

In the bedroom, the sound of the door clicking shut and the lock clacking home caught her attention.

All around her, the bath water's surface vibrated with small ripples caused by her trembling. If Michael saw that, she'd be in deep trouble. Emotion was not allowed.

Releasing the tight grip on her legs, she stretched out in the deep claw-foot tub. Usually, this was one luxury she enjoyed, but it was also a luxury Michael insisted upon after one of Greg's visits. He might not have screwed her tonight, but she still felt disgusting and degraded after touching him. Although the bath helped her feel clean on the outside, it never washed away how dirty she remained on the inside.

She laid her head back and closed her eyes, feigning relaxation. As she willed her heart to slow, she heard the bathroom door open, but no footsteps approached. More afraid than curious, she opened her eyes and turned her head toward the doorway.

Michael leaned against the doorframe, watching her. He gave her that chilling smile he'd

perfected, a smile that told her trouble was coming her way. Casually straightening, he removed his mobile from his pocket, placed it on the vanity and stared at his reflection in the mirror.

“I hope you treated Greg with more respect in the bedroom.”

“Y-yes,” she stammered, her eyes glued to him, knowing she was about to be punished. He’d told her so earlier, hadn’t he? And when he told her to expect something, he never failed to deliver. Integrity. That’s what he called it.

Michael removed the hairdryer from its hook on the wall and plugged it into the electrical socket. She gripped the edge of the tub, her pulse suddenly in a race she didn’t want any part of.

“Now for the little matter of your punishment,” Michael said, then flicked the switch on the hairdryer. It roared to life in the enclosed space as he turned and faced her, his eyes narrow, evil slits.

To Nina’s relief he shut off the dryer.

“Why don’t you get dry?” he asked.

For a second, she thought he wanted her to get out.

Then the dryer roared to life again.

And he threw it at her.

As it arced through the air, she flung herself over the side of the tub, banging her ribs hard against the edge before her body slipped to the floor. Pain flared in her shoulder flared when it connected with the solid marble floor. Sucking in a ragged breath, she realised the bathroom was once again quiet.

She looked up at Michael. He stood a few feet away, grinning, the dryer’s plug dangling from his hand.

He tossed it aside and came at her, his shiny black shoes squeaking on the polished tiles. Instinctively, she curled into a ball. He kicked her hard in the thigh, the pain knotting her muscle, but she didn’t cry out, didn’t whimper, didn’t make a sound.

“You’re pathetic,” he said, grabbing the bun on top of her head. “Up.”

Nina scrambled to her feet, slipped on the wet marble. Heat burned her scalp as Michael pulled on her hair to keep her upright.

Steadying herself, she came face to face with evil. He released his grip on her bun, gently chucked her under the chin, then wiped drops of water from her face.

It was a signal he'd taught her long ago. Without hesitation, she reached for his belt, unbuckled it, pulled on the buckle end and slipped the leather free of its loops.

Michael held out his hand. She placed the belt neatly across his waiting palm, watching the shiny buckle dangle, glinting in the light as he wrapped the hole-punched leather around his hand.

Leaning in, he whispered, "Don't make me tell you."

She turned her back to him, lowered herself to her knees and gripped the edge of the tub. She heard him take a step away and steeled herself.

The first strike came like hot fire as the buckle struck her back. The first hit was always the worst. As each strike came, she jerked, but tried to channel the pain down her arms and out through her clenched hands on the side of the tub. With every hit, she moved the tub just a little, making the hairdryer bob in the bath water.

But this time, each strike meant something to her, gave her strength. Each strike meant one step closer to never having to endure this again. With each strike, she chanted one word over and over again: *Tomorrow. Tomorrow. Tomorrow.*

Then he stopped.

And that was worse.

Nina heard the belt buckle clank against the marble tiles, then the unmistakable sound of a zipper being wrenched open. Shoes thumped against the floor. Clothes rustled as they were shed. Bare feet stepped closer.

Her hands tightened on the edge of the tub and she wondered if it was possible to break her fingers from gripping too fiercely.

Michael's bare foot kicked her feet apart and a moment later she felt him place a folded towel between her knees. Then the front of his thighs slid against the inside of hers as he lowered himself between them, his knees resting on the folded towel.

She was not allowed such luxury.

Michael grabbed her bun and forced her head forward. Fortunately, the side of the tub was too high to allow him to dunk her head under the water. Instead, jolts of pain coursed across her ribs as he pressed her against the unforgiving cast iron edge.

With his free hand, his fingers roughly assaulted her delicate flesh. One found her centre and plunged inside her, then another. He probed as if searching for something.

"He didn't fuck you tonight," he said, as if he'd made some miraculous discovery. "What did he do? Use that useless mouth of yours?"

She nodded slightly.

"Did you swallow?"

She didn't want to answer, but not to would only mean further punishment. She nodded again.

"Nothing's changed, has it? You're still a filthy whore."

She nodded once again.

He pulled her head back, releasing the excruciating pressure on her ribs. As she gripped the edge of the tub, she sucked in a much needed lungful of air without a sound, not wanting him to misinterpret the breath as a gasp of pain.

His fingers searched her hair, found the pins holding it in place and removed them. Her long plait fell down her raw back. A moment later she felt tugging and knew Michael was wrapping the braid around his arm like a coil. Soon enough, he reached her nape and gripped hard.

And then he leaned away, using her braid to balance himself as he pushed into her. Rutting at her from behind like a wild animal, every thrust tore at her hair and bruised her knees. The

guttural sounds of his exertion filled the room, bouncing off the tiled walls. His thighs slapped against hers, his pelvis thumping hard against her rump, each thrust straining her neck as he yanked on the plait.

Her only saving grace was that he never lasted long after Greg had been with her. Letting his brother screw her turned him on, turned him into this wild animal whose only goal was to find satisfaction as quickly as possible.

He soon thickened inside her, then came the pulsing. But the pain wasn't over yet. Gasping for breath, he released her hair and collapsed against her back. The sting of his sweaty, salty skin on her raw wounds almost shot her into the tub. But he held her in place, his weight so heavy she thought the tub would crack her ribs at any moment. Maybe, if she were lucky, one would pierce her heart and put a stop to everything.

Sam.

She couldn't leave Sam with this man.

Finally, Michael's weight eased away and his *thing* slipped out. She remained on her battered knees, awaiting instructions.

"Get up," he said, his voice having lost some of the malevolence it contained just a mere minute ago.

Nina rose, her knees screaming in protest as she straightened and turned around.

Michael stood naked before her, his sweaty chest and torso smeared with her blood like some sort of bizarre war paint.

As if she were the most precious thing in the world, as if he hadn't just raped her, he took her hand, twined their fingers and led her to the vanity where he studiously watched her brush her teeth. He then uncapped a bottle of mouth wash, filled the cap with the liquid and handed it to her.

She knew the routine all too well. She took the cap, tipped the liquid into her mouth and rinsed while Michael timed her on his watch. After one minute, she spat the mouthwash into the

basin and rinsed it down the drain.

Then Michael handed her a second capful. Nina didn't hesitate. She downed the liquid like a shot of tequila. She'd read the label, knew it wasn't meant to be ingested, but Michael insisted. While it burned all the way down her oesophagus, her eyes refused to water as she held tight to one singular thought.

Tomorrow.

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