



## GROWING UP WITH BOOKS

a NOVEL by Melanie James - [email: mail@melaniejames.com.au](mailto:mail@melaniejames.com.au)

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## GROWING UP WITH BOOKS - a novel (60,100 words)

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#### At 12

By the time I was twelve I knew I was the most over-sexed twelve-year-old in the world. I'd look at girls at school each day and think, are they doing it? I looked at my best friend, Kathleen. Did she do it? What I was doing wasn't in any book. Hadn't been covered at the mother-and-daughter sex education night at school last year.

That's because I was the only one.

I'd been touching what my mother used to call my *private* and now called nothing. We didn't speak of *that* part of my body anymore.

I'd been doing deals with God for a couple of months. Praying for the strength to stop what I knew must be wrong. Nothing that felt so good could be right.

I'd tell God that I'd only do it tonight and that I wouldn't do it again if He'd just forgive me this one more time.

I wasn't keeping my side of the bargain very well. There always seemed to be another time, and another and on some days many others. And so I kept on, knowing I was the only one. Why me?

Sometimes I would be good and not touch myself at all for a few days. I'd say decade after decade of the Rosary until I fell asleep, fingers firmly on the rosary beads and nothing else. But the desire would take over me and I'd start like fury all over again. It was funny how it felt better if I hadn't done anything for a while. As if all the sparks built up in some secret part of me for release in one huge blast.

I didn't understand how God worked. Making it feel better wasn't punishment for succumbing to temptation. I found myself not doing anything deliberately some nights, even though I really wanted to, just so the end-bit would feel even better.

That end-bit.

Amazing.

It was risky, though. It was so hard to keep still when it was stronger. Often my body would shudder and shudder and I'd make a noise. I had to be careful no-one ever heard or saw me.

I was being so bad during these summer holidays. Even though I'd made a New Year's resolution not to keep on with it, and prayed really hard at Mass, I hadn't lasted very long. Now I had all this time during the day when nobody was around.

"We trust you at home on your own now you're in high school," Mum had said.

Ha. Trust.

I kept reading "The Dusky Innocent". *It* had started off all *this* business. I'd never done anything like what it made me do. I'd come across it in September, the day after the school fete. I hadn't been especially looking or anything. I'd just been hanging out in the downstairs room, what mum called the rumpus room.

Dumb really, hardly a rumpus with only one kid in the house.

I spent most of my time down there. Except when I was with Kathleen. She preferred hanging out in our bedrooms. She was turning into Marcia Brady. Or trying to. We were both closer to Jan. Dags. Living in the world of the dags.

I'd been pretending to ice-skate. Kathleen and I had been to see *Ice Castles* in the holidays. It was so romantic. I was inspired to skate. Skated my thick-socked feet in big figure eights around the tiled floor. There wasn't anything else to do.

Kathleen had gone to The Blue Mountains with her family for the day. She'd asked if I could come along like she did when we went on a day trip, but her dad had said no.

"No wonder," Mum'd said, "They already have five kids to drag along. They don't need extra trouble."

I'd been bored with playing my couple of records. I'd read every book I owned and the Library was still closed after the fire. I missed the Library. Some boys from Macquarie High had set fire to it last Easter, on Holy Thursday night to be exact. I'd been at the vigil service with Kathleen and her mum when flames started dancing through the stained glass Pentecostal scene.

At first, I'd thought I was seeing a vision from God. I'd always wanted to see one, like the Children of Fatima or Saint Bernadette. It had looked like the Holy Spirit descending for real for a while but then it got a bit out of hand. Everyone had started to murmur. Then, we heard sirens.

I was disappointed about it not being a vision. People didn't talk of anything else right through until after Easter Tuesday. Some girls on the bus said that the boys who'd lit it couldn't keep their mouths shut and were bound to get done. The Police caught them up near the train station a few days later. The Library had lost everything.

So you could almost say it was the Macquarie boys' fault that I ended up picking up the "The Dusky Innocent".

Almost.

So I was skating around the room when I realised the storeroom door wasn't closed. I couldn't bear having that door open. Dad kept his ouija board in there. He reckoned he talked to ghosts with it occasionally and I wasn't to touch it without him being there. It was a good one, genuine, not a toy. That's what Dad'd said. I just wished he'd throw it out. It gave me the creeps.

I skated over to the doorway and peered into the dimness. Slim ghost-fingers of daylight rayed down through the air vent set high in the wall. I backed out carefully pulling the door closed but, just to the left, I spotted something. Books! Boxes of books. I'd never seen them before and figured dad must have brought them home from the fete the day before. I held my breath and squeezed inside, carefully avoiding the ghost fingers, and quickly dragged one of the boxes out where it was safe.

I unpacked the books into a pile on the floor. Scouring each cover, I searched for something, anything to read. War books, spy books, old Reader's Digest condensed books. Nothing. About to give up and get another box, I came across a battered paperback with a blurry photograph on the front.

I couldn't believe it. In misty blue and mauve, a woman stood with her breasts showing. Not just the cleavage, everything. What was more amazing was that the man behind her was squeezing one of them. They were kissing too, her long neck stretched back at an odd angle. I took it out. "The Dusky Innocent" was stamped in blue letters across the woman's hips.

In my heart, I knew that just holding it was wrong. But I couldn't put it down. Looking at the man's hand on the breast made it hard to breathe. Could holding a book be an impure act, reportable at Confession?

I thought about it, tearing my eyes from the breasts, turning the book over, letting my fingers flick

through the yellowing pages.

I read the back cover. *A tale of steamy passion...*

Surely it couldn't hurt just to look at it, just to read a bit and see. No-one would be home for a while.

It began with these two people leaving a bar and walking down all these streets. The man persuaded the woman to stop for a moment and they ended up kissing, tongues entwined. I'd never touched someone else's tongue with my own. I tried to imagine. The man and woman rushed the rest of the way home. I felt a bit strange as I read how he took her hard brown nipple into his hot mouth but then I started kind of wriggling.

It made me feel funny, buzzy, warm right down inside.

My own small hard breasts longed to be touched. Touched, or something.

I kept reading.

Moved until I lay belly-down along the couch. Fabric coarse and scratchy, it scraped in a kind of nice way against my nipples, through my skivvy. My bottom squeezing in and out, my entire body moving, controlled elsewhere. Things around me faded and merged into the book. I knew how the woman in the story was feeling as the weight of the man's body crushed her breasts, her hips moved forward to his.

I pushed my own hips down into the lounge.

My hand inside my jeans, pressing my fingers through my undies until two lay either side of where the crack started.

Hard to keep reading.

I pinched inwards, firmly, and again. His hand was stroking her faster and he could feel her breath coming in short gasps. I could hear her. Feel him. Then, something happened. My body surged, emptied, filled with electric tingles. My thighs bucked themselves against my wedged hand. Waves of spasm shot out through each muscle, each finger and toe. A hot rush hit my cheeks, my eyes. I hung there in mid-space as it slowed. Then, I simply floated away.

Did I nod off for a while? My cheek pressed so the thatch pattern of the couch cover imprinted on my skin. The room should have looked different. I managed to heave myself half-up and leant on my elbows. Nothing was different, except me. I felt delicious but then, oh wow, things changed. The haziness was lifting.

It began to dawn, *this* was sex. God, what had I done?

I began linking vague things together in my brain. It didn't make a lot of sense. What had I felt? That whoosh, that heat. I'd stumbled on something I wasn't supposed to. Was I destined to Hell? I took big breaths in and out, tried to balance the pleasant weight in my muscles with the doomed weight of my soul. I just sat for a while.

With relief I realised my legs could still move which turned out to be a good thing because mum and dad's car was pulling into the driveway. *Shit!* I jumped up. Giddy as the blood plummeted down into my feet. I shoved the book back into the bottom of the box, piled all the others on top of it and pushed it roughly back into the storeroom. I'd stumbled into sex and had to cover my tracks.

I was sure I'd be found out. I always was when I did something wrong. My face burned, a crimson beacon of guilt. I helped mum bring in some shopping and hid behind the cardboard boxes full of groceries as I lugged them up the front steps. I could hear dad closing the car boot down in the carport.

Mum walked into the kitchen behind me, her sneakers squeaking on the newly lino-ed floor. Large orange and white squares. Part of her master-plan to do up the house. She'd only got as far as the kitchen so far. She dumped her box of stuff on the cluttered bench top.

Packing away a few things into the fridge, I stood with my long hair hanging around my face. I prayed, "Please God, don't let her see," and moved deeper into the coolness. I heard her sigh. "I don't know what to cook tonight. I thought fish but it's a bit soon to have\_," she stopped, swinging back the fridge door with a jerk. "Megan! You're such a sneak!" she yelled.

My heart raced wildly as I pleaded to Him. "God? Please help me?"

She grabbed my shoulder. Spun me round to face her. "I can't leave you at the fridge for a moment without you pinching something. You'll never be nice and slim the way you're going. What were you eating?"

My stomach unknotted a bit. This was well-charted territory. I was supposed to be on a diet. "Nothing."

"It's always nothing," she muttered. "Now get away from the fridge. If you're hungry eat an apple then set the table for tea."

"Yes, mum."

"And don't *yes mum* me."

"No, mum." Cringed as I said it. I knew what would follow.

She clouted me hard across the arm. "Don't be smart."

"Ouch!"

I couldn't win when she was like this and began to set the table. Dad at the end, giving him a clear view of the television news. Mum on his right, close to the kitchen. Me on the left side. Dad liked to keep a close eye on my table manners at all times.

Mum brought over the plates. "I'm sorry, Megan. I didn't mean to snap at you before." Then, more quietly, "I've got my period and I've told you how that puts me a bit on edge."

I nodded my cloudy understanding. Periods weren't something I'd had yet.

### **At 28**

Let's just say we're starting at the beginning. But what is the beginning? The positive test? The fuck? The day we threw out the diaphragm? The telling.

I couldn't drive straight home with the news.

Mum had told me once that she'd grinned for days when she'd found out she was having me. I wasn't exactly grinning but I felt pretty pleased with myself. Instead of driving straight home from the doctor's I headed westward along Parramatta Road for a while, getting used to the idea.

At each stoplight I checked myself out in the rear view mirror. Could someone tell if they just looked at me? The car behind beeped its horn. Green light. I clunked the car into gear and drove off. The driver gave me a look of pure filth as he overtook me.

"I'm pregnant," I madly shouted to him through the closed window. It was freezing outside.

He replied with two fingers.

Pregnant. One minute you're not and next minute you are. Simple as that. Three drops of wee, a little plus sign and there you have it. Pregnant. Meaning finally having a baby.

Having a baby.

I think I'm grinning. I turn left down The Hume Highway and start to circle back towards home.

We'd been letting nature take its course. I'd chucked away the diaphragm nearly a year ago. Me hoping for sooner, Andy for later. Timing-wise, we were verging on later.

As I walked through to the living room, I could see Andy through the closed French doors. He was in his studio at the end of the back garden, charcoal-sketching on a large white canvas. I waited for a while, folding my arms against the coolness of the August day, watching him move. He didn't draw with his hand but with his body, as if charcoal was an extension of his being. The long, fluid lines were certain.

I loved this man like crazy.

His dark hair fell into his eyes as he bent forward. With his free hand he pushed it back and held it in place. He had such gentle grace. Was it in his DNA? Would our little one have the gene for gentle grace?

He straightened up, sensing me, put down the charcoal. "Been there long?"

"No, not long." I moved to him, took his hand and led him out of the studio. Sat him down on a decaying garden chair under the lemon tree just outside.

"What are you up to?" he shivered, "It's cold out here!"

I knelt on the grass in front of him, resting my elbows on his knees. Took a big breath in. "How does fatherhood grab you?"

He looked at me, searching my face. "Mege?"

I smiled.

"Really? For sure?"

"Yes, for sure."

"Oh that's wonderful," he laughed, pulling me up onto his lap.

I burrowed into the warmth of his big, old jumper, taking in the familiar, comforting smell of wool and oils and paint. "Truly? It's what you want?" I said against his chest.

"Of course, it's what we've been planning isn't it?"

My eyes met his once more. "Oh I know but, you know, now that's it's actually happened I thought...I thought.."

"You thought what?" His eyes were shining.

I nestled closer to him. So very right. "I love you, that's all."

He hugged me even more tightly. "I love you too."

We sat quietly, wrapped together in our cocoon. Branches lurched and twisted above us. Don't know how long we stayed there. An aeroplane cruised overhead and the phone rang a few times, picked up by the machine. Suspended in the eye of a storm.

"When's the baby due?" I heard him ask after a while.

"Early to mid April. The doctor wants me to have a scan next week to confirm my dates."

We made love that afternoon. Such a relief to fuck without thinking, "Are we making a baby?"

"You must be pretty early," the woman doing the ultrasound announced flatly, prodding the scanner deep into my belly fat. "I can't see anything here."

She picked up my card and scribbled something. Flipping it over to my details she murmured, "*Prima gravida*."

"Pardon?"

"*Prima gravida*, first pregnancy."

"Oh." I had a feeling I should apologise.

"Go and empty your bladder." She sighed, what a bother. "I'll have to do the scan trans-vaginally."

I scrambled off the table and wiped the electro-gel she'd used off my skin with a piece of rough paper towelling. I wanted to cry out that the thought of having a trans-vaginal scan didn't exactly thrill me either, but I kept quiet. I slunk past her and her equipment to the door in the corner. The light in the toilet was glaring white after the muted tones of the scanning room. I breathed again as I emptied my bladder. Litres flowing from me – all nurses could hold a wee in forever, it was part of the training.

Back on the table, careful to position the disposable sheet under my bottom.

"Open your legs," she said resignedly.

She put a condom over a phallic-shaped scanner, smothered it in K-Y and eased it into my vagina.

Safe sex with an ultrasound machine. Great.

"Ah, there it is." The fuss was being caused by something about the size of a grain of rice. She spun knobs and buttons on the machine and moved the cursor through the snow on the tiny television screen.

"Five weeks two days." I was due in mid-April.

### **Mercy 13**

It had taken me a few days to realise that there weren't any outward signs of what I'd done in the downstairs room. Had it been a one-off?

There couldn't be any harm in trying it again.

Could there?

"Just once more, as a test."

A while passed before I managed to get the right opportunity. Eventually I got a chance. Back downstairs, I took up from around about where I'd left off in the book. Sure enough, it happened. So easy too. I'd known where to put my fingers, where to press. As soon as the sexy bits started and I felt the buzzing, I did what I'd done the last time. Pressed inwards through my pants, bucking gently against my hand. Brilliant. Better than the first time.

I touched myself. At first, only when mum and dad went out and I could read the book. Then, daily. I started taking a few more risks. Like in bed at night. My conscience protested but I figured that I wasn't really doing anything much. Just touching my undies really, just touching something through my undies. God would only think it was really a sin if I put my fingers inside my undies and did it. I'd vowed to Him never to do that!

I wondered whether it would work without the book.

As I lay there in my bedroom, the pale hall light shone into my room. I never closed my door. Mum'd think it was funny if I started to out of the blue. I managed to leave it only slightly open. Light fell in a long skinny rectangle across my quilt. Pretending to be sleeping on my stomach, I worked my nightie up around my waist. Scenes in the book were with me, branded into memory. I placed my fingers, splayed like before. Pinched and rubbed, pushing pressure inwards through my thin cotton knickers. The end came quickly. Panting, as if I'd run a race.

I'd made a noise!

Would the sound have carried? Had mum and dad been able to hear my breathing go funny just at the end? What would I have said if they'd come in just at that moment?

I turned over and heard the noise of the bed head squeak for the first time in my life. Had it always done that? Had it squeaked that loudly when I pressed my hips "in an ancient rhythm" into the mattress to meet "his need"? I waited to be found out.

Nothing.

I knew what I was doing was wrong in some ways but, on the other hand, could it be that wrong if it made me feel so good? It left me feeling so relaxed. Well, that's what I was saying to God. Inside, I knew

that He knew that I craved the end sensation. I wanted it more and more. Greedy. Another sin on top of the sex bit.

On New Year's Eve I started my diary. Curled up on one of Kathleen's beanbags I thought about it. I looked across at Kathleen who was absorbed in the Opera fireworks display on television. She'd wanted to go into town to see it together but we hadn't been allowed. We were stuck babysitting her brothers and sisters instead.

I shifted a bit to get more comfortable and looked down at the fresh pages of the new diary. I decided it had to be in writing that I made my New Year's Resolution not to do *it* anymore. That would formalise the commitment.

But what if someone found it? Or what if I died and the whole world discovered what I'd been doing while I'd been alive? I knew then if I was going to write about any of this, I would have to invent a code. What would sound like nothing at all to anybody else? An ad on telly came on for Levis. That was it!

So my New Year's resolution read "I promise that I will never *wear jeans* again".

I lasted a week.

Found myself drifting downstairs when everyone was out. Kathleen had bought me another single for Christmas. Stevie Wright doing all three parts of "Evie". So beautiful. Especially part two, the slow one. I put it on, crackles already bad at the beginning from my guessing where to put the needle down. Dad said I'd wear it out. Could you wear out a record?

I started to dance, a ballet acting out the tragedy of Evie and Stevie's love. Not real ballet. Hadn't learnt. Too fat mum'd said. I hugged myself as I spun around and around, pushing on my breasts to stop the hurt of their story. The strains of the last bars faded out as I dropped dramatically to the floor, a tragic figure losing her grip on life.

The needle caught at the end. Tried to ignore it but couldn't. I wished our family would get one that lifted itself off at the end like Kathleen's dad's did. I stood deciding whether to play it again. I moved my hand down, pressed in against my groin. I knew what I wanted to do.

What about your New Year's resolution?

Shut up, I screamed at the voice within.

You're so bad, it answered.

But I can't help it!

I was soon on the lounge, book turned to page one hundred and twenty-four. I hadn't done this for nearly a week. Sensational. Sprawled, out of breath after the release. Eyes still glued to the page. Barely read half of my favourite scene. He'd only got as far as throwing her onto the carpet and pinning her down, his "grinding hardness forcing her to grudgingly acknowledge her own hunger".

I liked how this woman had no choice but to give in to her need. I wasn't alone, this sex thing was a greater force than both of us.

### **Gravida 28**

Andy leant over me, continuing to caress my stomach. Stretched lazily on our bed we'd spent most of the morning reading but I sensed the mood was changing. Little by little he'd moved his body closer to mine and the casual caresses were becoming more than casual. I let my book fall to the floor and turned to him, pressing my body into his.

"Finished the book?" he asked playfully.

"No."

"I didn't mean to disturb you."

"Didn't you?"

"No."

"Well you did disturb me," I replied, folding one leg around his hip, "very much."

He laughed softly as he started to kiss my neck. "Seems it doesn't take much at all to disturb you these days."

"I can't help it!" I moved my hair so he had better access. "I just feel hot inside all the time."

"Mmm, I'm not complaining." He kissed my lips and opened my mouth with his. I pulled back a little.

How could I tell him kissing made me feel sick?

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry," I managed, "I just felt a bit off."

He immediately moved from me. "I'm sorry."

I pulled him back over and gave him a hug. "It's okay, it's gone already. It's just kissing makes me nauseous. Everything else is fine."

He slowly began kissing my cheek and my neck. "Is this all right?"

"Ah-huh."

I soon felt his warm mouth moving down onto my throat and chest. My breasts, tingly, heated, demanded attention. I thrust them towards him. He sucked wetly at the nipple of one then the other, gathering them closer to him with his hands.

"Ahh. Gently!" I cried.

He jumped back from me. "Shit, I'm sorry. I won't touch you there any more!"

"But I want you to."

"But it hurts you."

"I know but it still feels kind of good."

He moved back to my breasts, caressing with a feather-like touch.

"Mmmm."

We moved on. Further.

Thrusting now.

"My pussy feels so different. Does it feel different to you?"

"It feels great." Thrusting.

"No, I'm serious. Do I feel different to you?"

Stop thrusting. Buried deep. "Must we have this analysis right now?"

"Uh-huh."

Andy shook his head. "I should have known." He stirred his cock around inside of me. "Mmmm," he murmured. "You feel wetter, hotter."

"Nice wetter? Nice hotter?"

"Mmm, like lava-pussy."

"Lava-pussy? I think I like that one."

"You feel tight and full. Really ripe."

Yes, yes, that was it. I felt ripe. My pussy was some kind of hot plump purple fruit, engorged with warm, fermenting juices. "Fuck me," I urged him, "fuck me."

He plunged deep. I drew him further and further into me. He was in the leg lock and loving it. He cried out as he came, pushing me over the edge.

I was one giant plum splattered deliciously all over the room.

*Lots of things in pregnancy are purple.*

Knowing I was alone in the house, I didn't bother to shut the bathroom door. The light was best in here. Positioned over a shaving mirror I held my labia spread apart. I was purple, on the inside. In my mind I had sensed purpleness and here it was. Just like she said it would be. "Your vagina will have become a bluish or violet colour." Amazing.

*She* was Sheila Kitzinger. Unknown to me before, Sheila Kitzinger was fast becoming my new best friend. Her book, *The New Pregnancy and Childbirth*, was my new gospel. The blurb on the back said it was "an up to date manual of physical and emotional preparation for expectant parents". Well, that's what I wanted. It assured me that zillions of women had done it all before and it was best if it was all left to nature. Right.

To be physically and emotionally prepared. It didn't sound too hard. You just had to look after yourself and make sure medical specialists didn't railroad you into any unnecessary interventions they seemed so fond of. There didn't seem any reason not to go for natural. Besides, the Birth Centre had much better decor than the rest of the women's hospital.

Having made sure that you could get nitrous oxide gas if you really wanted it, I booked in.

### **Paris 23**

If I could be anywhere else in the world where would I be?

There was only one answer, of course. Paris.

But it was impossible. I had so much stuff. Furniture. Crockery. Things. Junk. Nowhere to store anything if I went anyway.

But it would be nice. Cafes, galleries, The Seine. All the things I'd always longed to see. Maybe I could sell my car, pay off my debts and go. I'd always wanted to.

But I couldn't. Just the thought of packing up all this stuff, organising movers, storage. Horror. I'd just have to stay in Sydney. I'd just have to stay in the bloody awful job and sweat it out until he finally came to some sort of decision.

And there it was. I couldn't move forward in my life until Andy'd sorted out his.

"If I felt I could ask you to wait for me, I would," he'd said, "but I know I can't ask you to do that."

"You can, you can," I'd wanted to scream. And in a way he had. He'd planted the seed. He was leaving for a year, two, maybe more but he'd be back. Sometime. I should wait for him. And here I was. Waiting. And the worst part of it was that he knew it. Wherever he was on his discover-himself world jaunt, he knew that little old me was waiting for him just as I always had.

On a sticky Sunday afternoon in February I should have been out with my mates at the Watsons Bay pub. Instead, I was collapsed in an armchair with a cask of Riesling at my feet. I hadn't even changed. No energy. My skin itched hotly under the aqua and white polyester the hospital called a uniform. It'd been a shit of a day in intensive care. Nothing was going right.

It was all *his* fault.

The wine glass was already empty. Even refilling it was almost too much of an effort. Almost. It was an effort to do anything. There was no way I could move to Paris.

I leant back and closed my eyes letting Mireille Mathieu's *Je Suis Heureuse* flow through me. Music had a way of filling up the emptiness inside me that nothing else could. Except him of course. When I was with him I wasn't empty. He made me feel like the sun.

What a waste. A waste of a day. A waste of a life.

I felt myself sinking deeper. There'd never be anyone else. I followed the melodrama taking place in my head with some relish. The wine slipped down so easily. I could just sit here and get drunk again and drag out all my maudlin music favourites. The French ones.

You've been doing this for weeks.

What?

Swanning about as if your lifeblood was ebbing slowly from you.

So what if I have?

Your friends think you're a pain in the arse.

No they don't, they've been very supportive.

Yeah, but it's wearing thin.

So what?

So buck yourself out of it and get on with your life.

Why should I?

Because if he knows you're happy to wait around for him, he'll keep you waiting forever.

He'll come back.

He mightn't.

He'd better.

Or what?

I don't know.

For God's sake go to Paris.

What's in Paris anyway?

Fuck knows, but it has to be better than this.

What if it's not?

Does it matter?

I s'pose not.

So, what's stopping you?

I dunno. Too much furniture?

Furniture?

What would I do with it all?

Girl, if the only thing holding you back is your furniture - GET RID OF IT!

### **Mercy 13**

Going into the second year of high school was pretty exciting. We weren't the new girls anymore. Best of all, there was a whole new crop for the rough chicks who sat at the back of the bus to hassle on the way home. Not that Kathleen and I were totally forgotten by them, but the pressure was much less than in first year.

How did you get to be like them?

They didn't care if they were caught without their hats on or if someone reported them smoking or being in a shop in uniform. Weren't they scared they'd get put on detention or have their parents find out?

I envied their coolness. I didn't want to be uncool. I wanted to be like them. Kathleen thought they weren't worth the trouble.

"If they're that bad on the bus, then they must be real sluts outside school," she said.

At night in bed, I'd ponder the facts about myself. Was I slut-material? It was pretty evident I was a sex maniac. I knew it was going to be dangerous if I started going out with boys too. If I was this sex-mad with just myself, I'd be completely uncontrollable if a boy touched me. I'd have to be very careful. It was on a Saturday afternoon, not long after my thirteenth birthday, that I took up this point with Kathleen.

"Do you think you'll go on The Pill?"

"Megan! Shhh!" She bounced up from her bed and quickly shut the door.

I lowered my voice further. "Well do you?"

She studied my face closely. "What right now or in the future?"

"Just, you know, whenever." My nerve was beginning to fail me. We often talked about other people and sex but not much about ourselves. Kathleen got easily embarrassed and nearly always ended up exploding in hee-haw laughs. I didn't even know if Kathleen had her periods yet.

"I dunno. I might consider it, you know, if the situation came up or something."

I pretended to concentrate on twirling my left pigtail around my finger. "You think it would be okay if you were with a guy?" I looked to see how Kathleen was handling it. "You know, having him as a boyfriend?"

She was going almost purple. "Yeah, if you were going with him or..." She searched her head for some words, "Or..I dunno."

"You don't think you would take it just in case?"

Kathleen exploded. "Just in case?" She rolled off the bed, convulsing. "Oh, Mege," she gasped between laughs, "j-just in case?"

I crouched beside her. "Shut up. Your mother'll hear you."

She closed her mouth and squeezed her forehead, trying to stop.

"Quickly, think of something sad." It usually worked for me.

"Oh God, oh God," Kathleen gasped, her eyes wet from her efforts. "It's just, just that you sounded so serious. Like you thought that you might need the Pill tonight or something. *Just in case of what?*"

I waited a few moments until I was sure she had recovered enough. "Well, what if you were with a guy and you suddenly got carried away?"

Kathleen giggled.

"Stop it!"

"Sorry."

"Well?"

"I dunno. I don't think I'd let him go that far."

"But what if you wanted to go all the way too?"

"Well, you just can't. You've got to tell the boy to stop."

"Why?"

"I dunno, you just do. I suppose you could..." Kathleen's face was turning dark again, "get pregnant."

Again she exploded.

"*Kathleen?*" I needed to talk about this and she wasn't making it easy. She jumped at my raised voice but I pushed on. "Isn't that why you should take The Pill? Just in case you get swept away in the moment and find yourself having it off before you know it?"

"I think that you'd know it, don't you?"

Could I really talk about this with anyone without giving myself away? I decided that I needed to try.

"I've got this book\_"

"What book?"

"A book I found."

"Where?"

"Kathleen, it doesn't matter."

"Sorry."

"This woman gets swept away all the time."

"What, by a guy?"

I nodded.

"Can I read it?"

I hadn't expected this. I thought for a moment. Perhaps I could give it to her. I was sure my parents wouldn't miss it and I didn't need it much anymore. It was getting to a point where I wouldn't have minded another book. "Sure," I answered.

"Great."

"But I have to warn you."

Kathleen moved closer. her blue eyes wide.

"It's pretty, you know... bad."

She slowly nodded her understanding of the situation.

"You'll have to hide it somewhere."

"Where?"

"I don't know. Somewhere your mum or Terese won't find it."

"Oh God, Terese would take it straight to mum and dad if she found it. I'm really beginning to hate her you know?"

I nodded.

"I think if I hid it under my shoes or something it would be safe. What do you think?"

I was about to say I thought that would be fine when the door flew open. It was Kathleen's mother.

"Okay. I've told you time and time again. Now get out here. If you can't say what you want to say with the door open you shouldn't be saying it at all. Now out."

Mrs Watson stood her ground in the doorway with her arm outstretched, pointing in the direction she wanted us to move. I waited for Kathleen to move first, surprised to see that she hadn't immediately jumped into action at her mother's voice.

"But mum?" Kathleen pleaded rolling back onto the bed, "we can't say anything in front of Terese."

"I don't see why not! She's eleven now. You should all be playing happily together, not whispering and carrying on in here. Now I won't tell you again, outside and play."

I didn't see the point in pressing any further but Kathleen was still weighing up her options. "Come on," I said, not wanting her to get into any more trouble, "let's go outside."

We lurched ourselves up off the beds and wandered into the backyard. It was impossible to continue our conversation here. The kitchen window near where Mrs Watson was chopping vegetables was wide open. "What do you want to do?" I asked, plonking down onto one of the barbeque table stools.

"I don't know. What do you want to do?"

"I don't know."

"We could go to Parramatta pool," Kathleen suggested half-heartedly.

I shook my head. "Too many kids. Anyway, what time do you make it?"

"Just after three thirty."

"And do what?"

"I don't know. Beats sitting around here doesn't it?"

"You just want to see if Gary Carmichael is hanging out down there."

"Do not," I lied.

"You do. Anyway, I don't feel like walking down to the shops."

"Well neither do I." I sat up straighter and flicked my hair back in an attempt to look superior.

"Liar."

"Am not."

"You are," cried Kathleen, "anyway, Gary Carmichael is still going steady with Jenny Wheeler."

"Who says?"

"Linda Ryan. Her sister and Jenny Wheeler are best friends."

"Her sister is such a slag. Everyone says so."

"Megan!"

"Well she is."

Kathleen leant forward, eager to push her point home. "Well that doesn't change the fact the Gary and Jenny are going together."

I knew I couldn't win this one. Deep down I was sure that Gary was only going out with Jenny Wheeler because she did it with him. She was even a bit older than him, nearly sixteen. I was sure that he liked me a bit. He'd talked to me a couple of times over the past few months so that must have meant something.

Mrs Watson opened the back screen door a little and poked her head out. "You girls coming to Confession?"

She looked straight at me. I wondered how much she knew about me and the things I did. "I'll go if Kathleen's going," I managed, "if mum says it's all right."

Mrs Watson nodded. "Of course Kathleen's going. Go and get cleaned up. I want to leave in fifteen minutes, to avoid the rush."

The door swung back with a bang. "At least you'll be able to see if Gary is down the shops," whispered Kathleen, "Mum always walks that way to church."

"Yeah I suppose so. Listen what are you going to wear?"

my face cross.

I shook my head.

"No I didn't think so. It might be better just to wear jeans."

Whoosh. Guilty heat rushed into my face. Every time someone talked about wearing jeans, I immediately thought of my diary. It also reminded me that I should confess what I'd been doing. But was I truly sorry? If God could see and hear everything that everyone of us did in our lives, he knew that I'd be lying if I said I was sorry. That would then just be another sin to compound the others. They were certainly piling up.

"Megan? Are you in there?" Kathleen waved her hand on front of my eyes.

I jumped a little. "Yeah. I'm okay. Um, I was just thinking of what to wear."

"And?"

"Um, I might wear my white pants with my Hawaiian shirt."

"Sounds good. I might wear mine with my jeans."

"Can we both go in Hawaiian shirts?"

Kathleen considered for a moment. "Yeah, it should be all right, it's not like they're exactly the same."

"Okay, see you in a few minutes."

### **Coast 18**

There was no heat in the sun. The wind blew in straight from the ocean and bit into our faces. It was a good excuse for wet eyes, although we were all keeping a brave face on things.

I'd told Mum and Dad I'd be right to move into the nurses' home on my own. They'd insisted on coming. Both our cars were packed to the roof with my stuff.

We pushed through the wind, each holding a plastic garbage bag full of my clothes as a shield. Across the car park to the not-so-welcoming-three-storey-dark-brick building with the sign – Nurses Residence Restricted Entry . We joined the few other girls and parents milling around the front desk.

"NURSE!" a woman shouted.

I shrugged, wondering who the hell she was calling for, and turned back to listen to Dad and Mum exchanging banalities about July weather.

I felt three sharp taps on my shoulder.

"Ouch!" I cried as I spun around.

This woman's brow was a deep frown. "That was the third time I'd called you," she said to me. "Come along now, there's a lot of you to get through."

"I'm sorry I didn't realise..." She'd already stormed back into the office.

It was ridiculous calling me 'nurse'. I felt like an impostor. I signed for a set of keys and was assigned me a room. Second floor. Only the male nurses were assigned to the ground floor apparently. I picked up my garbage bag and headed upstairs to check it out.

Mum and Dad followed. Dads on moving-in day were exempt from the "no males" on the floor rule.

"I wish you had packed suitcases," mum said for the tenth time today. "What will people think of you?"

We paused for a breather at the top of the stairs.

A long dim corridor lined with little lights just above carpet level lie before us. Pale painted doors on either side, all numbered. I found my Room, number 269, and took one step inside.

I physically sensed Mum and Dad peering over each of my shoulders.

It was stark.

The walls were beige and there was a pale blue New-South-Wales-Hospitals-patterned quilt on the low, single bed. The furniture, comprising a wardrobe, a dressing table, a desk and a stool was all painted in a glum mushroom colour. Walking forward, I put my things down and discovered the furniture was metal. Awful.

Mum and Dad were giving it their best shot.

"Well it's not that bad is it?"

"You could do a bit with it."

"You'll be able to put up a few posters and things won't you?"

And then, more quietly, muffled. "There's not even a sink!"

There was a window, the view obscured by heavy curtains in circa '73 burnt orange and brown. It was so very different to my room at home. Like a cell – prison or nunnery? If I turned to mum and Dad I would cry. I didn't want to cry.

I walked the few steps to the window and pulled back the drapes a little, waded through the white netting behind them.

"God knows what the bathrooms will be like."

"I can't see her staying here."

I smiled to myself. I'd stay.

Through the glass pane, finely crusted with white salt, lay the majesty of a pounding Pacific Ocean. White spray blew up and over the jaggy cliffs and on a sudden impulse I threw open the window. The air rushed into the small room and almost instantly the door behind Dad slammed shut.

"For God's sake shut the window?"

"But mum, come and look. You can smell the salt!"

Mum and dad came over and peered at the view. Mum shut the window and smoothed down her hair.

Dad tut-tutted, "Your car will rust right through out here you know."

With those words of encouragement, my nursing career was on its way.

I knew it was July but it had never felt so cold. I left the cafeteria at ten to seven, not wanting to be late for my first ward visit. At just seventeen I was the youngest in my intake. All week people had continued calling me "nurse". It was written on my door: Room 269 – Nurse Moran.

I supposed I looked like a nurse in my new brown shoes and regulation skin-tone panty-hose, blue button-through tunic and plain white starched cap.

My hair was drawn up under that cap and I used white bobby-pins to keep it in place. We didn't get our first year stripe on the cap until we'd lasted three months.

I was extra glad this morning that I'd paid the extra ten dollars for a thigh-length royal blue woollen cape. It had aqua satin lining and it was only when I wore it that I felt anything like a real nurse. I headed up the cement walkway between the buildings, head down and body braced under my precious cape against the icy wind.

Seven of us met our tutor, Sister Carney, at just before seven at the nurses' office in Ward Six. I stood with the beginners along the back wall of the office as the night nurses began handing over the patients to the day staff. This was called 'having report'. The words they used were very unfamiliar and it sounded like code. The night nurse spoke very quickly. I was trying to get it down in my small notepad.

*" IDC on hourly measures, Fourth hourly neuro obs, second-hourly IG feeds, QID nebs, nil-by mouth, second hourly turns..."*

I gave up. The day nurse sitting in the chair in front of where I was standing was taking it all down on a

piece of scrap paper. I couldn't understand a thing she'd written.

Cardigans and capes off on the ward, that was the rule. The fibres picked up germs too easily. We left ours in a pile in the corner of the office and shivered in spite of the heating.

Ward Six had pale yellow walls with grey-green bathroom tiles on the lower half. I avoided the eyes of the men in the beds and followed Sister Carney out onto the verandah where some patients had their beds. Only one man was in bed and he looked asleep. The others were sitting in vinyl armchairs with blankets over their knees.

Sister Carney smiled and greeted them good morning in a loud cheery voice. One man smiled at me. He didn't have many teeth and needed a shave. I smiled back quickly and returned my eyes to Sister Carney. She was telling the men how we would make their beds. Her smile created uncomfortable lines in her cheeks. How anyone could be cheerful at this time of the day was beyond me. She began to pair us off. I was odd.

"Start with that one and I'll be over in a minute to help," she said to me.

Sister Carney was indicating the far bed. I walked over and stood looking at the bed sheets. Bits of food and short dark body hairs were strewn across them. I began to take a pillowcase off a pillow when I heard someone approach from behind.

"And where's your linen trolley, Nurse?"

I turned and Sister Carney was standing there with raised eyebrows. I couldn't answer.

"You were about to take the linen from the bed and carry it until you found a trolley," she informed me, "You were about to spread the micro-organisms in these sheets right through the entire ward. Now get a linen trolley."

I turned to obey and the man who belonged to the bed winked at me from his chair.

The pan room was filled with overflowing linen trolleys and a stack of urinals ready to go into the boiler. The mauve-clad ward assistant rolled her eyes when she noted the lack of stripes on my cap. Rank-less. Useless.

"Whaddya want?" she huffed.

"A linen trolley."

"There's stack of them on the ward," she said as she turned to empty the boiler of sterile urinals with a pair of long heavy tongs.

"Where abouts?" I ventured bravely.

She dropped the tongs onto the bench, strode over to me and grabbed my arm roughly. She dragged me over to the door of the pan room. "Look, what's that?" she asked, pointing to a trolley sitting half way down the ward. She pushed me towards it.

"Thanks," I croaked, before heading down the ward.

A man called, "nurse" as I walked by but I didn't answer. I was trying to remember which door led to the verandah and was now mid-way up the ward, trolley gripped whitely in my hands.

This style of ward was called "Nightingale" and was essentially a huge hall, seemingly endless right at this moment, with high metal hospital beds lined up along each of the long walls.

It was noisy with transistors turned up loud, and men shouting to one another over the talk-back callers. A nurse called out that the shower was free and another nurse wheeled off the next patient. He was protesting that he didn't want to go out into the cold bathroom. He couldn't speak properly and was wailing as the nurse pushed on. I looked over and saw that he was only young and that his legs were contracted up to his chest. I turned away and continued with my trolley up the ward.

I stopped to let a kitchen worker in a yellow tunic wheel through her kitchen trolley of blue plastic water jugs. She smiled and said "good morning". I tried to smile, managed a nod. I saw the door I was after off to the side and quickened my step, manoeuvring the linen trolley past the breakfast tables and hire televisions sitting on tall metal stands.

A man with his back to me blocked my path. He was stooped and his faded green pyjama-bottoms were hanging half-way down his bum.

"Excuse me?" I said tentatively. No response. Again, "Excuse me, sir?"

He slowly turned and took an unsteady step towards me. He was offering me his overflowing urinal. It sloshed over the sides onto his hands and the floor as he swayed.

"Ta -ay-ke i-it." He thrust it at me and it sloshed again, splattering my shoes and the lower part of my legs. I looked at him and half his face was drooping, a large spittle was dangling from the corner of his mouth, moving like a pendulum with every sway of his body. He lurched again and I stepped back, unable to help him.

"George, what are you doing out of your chair?" came a bright voice from behind me. I stepped to my left and a tall slim second-year glided past me and took the urinal from him. She turned her head back to me

as she led George back to his chair. "You're going to lose your lot if you're not careful. That's them isn't it?"

I peered down the ward and saw Sister Carney and my group outside the office putting on their cardigans and capes. I released my grip on the linen trolley and joined them.

I was in the cafeteria line waiting to pour instant coffee from the urn into a thick white cup. The place still smelled of toast and bacon from breakfast time. We had fifteen minutes for morning tea. I met up with some people from my class and sat looking out through the torn fly screens at the white-caps being whipped up on the ocean. I had white-caps in my stomach.

The large room was full of chatter as more and more of my large training group filed in for coffee after their ward visits. We'd been divvied up across some twenty-five wards. They looked all right, laughing and joking around. The talk at the table centred on the morning. I listened and heard how they'd all loved every moment. I answered questions in monosyllables and thought of the urine splatters now dried on my shoes and panty-hose.

I left earlier than the others and stopped by the toilets. I looked into the mirror and tucked the frizzy bits of hair back under my cap. I tore some paper towel, wet it and scrubbed my legs and shoes.

In class, our homeroom tutor, Sister Macintyre, was encouraging us to share our experiences. One by one each nurse told of how helpful the other staff had been, how nice the patients were, how interesting their diseases were, how impressive the operations seemed to be and how they couldn't wait for next time.

I sat between my new friends, Brian and Nell, mentally composing my resignation. I didn't think I'd ever be able to talk again.

Sister Macintyre was looking over at me frequently but each time I avoided her eyes. The discussion went on and on. I wanted to die.

"Megan?" came my tutor's voice, "How did you go on Ward Six?"

I lifted my head and saw the concern on her face. My mouth opened to speak and instead let out this huge sob.

I rose to leave the room, mumbling, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I stumbled over the chair leg and kicked my toe on Brian's desk. I sobbed and half laughed. Hysterical? Brian reached over and put his hand on my shoulder, squeezed and steadied me. He seemed such a nice guy.

I sat back down next to him and he put his arm around me. asking if I was all right.

I nodded and blurted, "It was awful."

### Paris 23

He suggested we walk back to his apartment. I suggested we found somewhere else to dance. He agreed. As long as it wasn't like this place. I looked back through the door of *La Scala*. It was noisy, just like he'd said. But it had been fun for a while. Yes, it had been fun.

The Slow Club? It sounds strange. We could dance a *slow*. A *slow*? He pulled me to him right there on the footpath of Rue Rivoli. This is a *slow*. He placed one arm around my waist, took my hand in his and held it at shoulder level. We danced. Slow dancing. Cheek to cheek. The doorman outside *La Scala* laughed, applauded. We bowed. Performance over. No encores.

We walked, his arm loosely around my shoulder. It was late, or early. Around three. The night air was cool, pleasant after the cloying atmosphere of the discotheque. A May night. Springtime in Paris, the stuff of dreams. My dreams. How far is The Slow Club? A fair walk. Did I mind walking? No. It's fine. Too late for the Metro, perhaps a taxi? No, I'd like to walk.

There were people about, walking slowly along the archways of Rue Rivoli. A few couples, *gendarmes*, an African stall holder with bright beads and wooden birds. Do they never rest? Of course they do, he said. Each brother takes a shift, that way they never lose their spot. Rue Rivoli is one of the best for the tourists. Do I look like a tourist? He laughed gently. You look like my little Australian girl. Is that okay? Very much so.

He pulled me closer. On the other side of the street I saw the huge shadow of The Louvre against the sky. I hadn't noticed it until now. We were stopping. He told me that the flood lighting went out at midnight. I could still make out the details of the building. I'd seen so little the other afternoon. I turned to tell him so, to suggest a visit. Instead he kissed me. His mouth was full and soft. Slightly parted. Waiting. Well? I began to kiss him back, parting his mouth further. Our first kiss. Nice. As we walked I saw him smile.

We seemed to change direction down near the *Hotel de Ville*. I wasn't sure. Was it getting light?

He led me down a narrow arcade and through a heavy fire door. There were no signs. Where the hell were we going? My shoulders tensed, ready for anything. He said to trust him. I reminded him that we'd only just met. Another flight of stairs. It was well lit but the paintwork was faded and peeling. It smelt

damp. How far down had we come? See? He pointed out a hand-written name scrawled on the wall and an arrow. *Le Slow Club*. Listen.

I listened. He was right, there was music.

Around another corner and the music was louder. Jazz. Slow bluesy jazz. The hall walls were now bare brick, the roof above us arched until we were walking through an old brickwork tunnel. The lighting dimmed and then we were there. A wide low archway. Couples dancing. Through another there were clusters of tables, mostly full. The haunting strains of a trombone.

We stood at the bar. *He* suggested a *kir*. A *kir*? White wine with *creme de cassis* liqueur. Why not? While we waited for the drinks I looked around. Strange place. Through smoke I could smell age and sweet dampness. People. Some in old fashioned dress, tight skirts. Some even sporting berets, tight striped tops and long cigarette holders. I asked him to tell me more about this place. He told me it was an old train station. How old? Who knew? Another drink.

Dance?

A *slow*? I asked.

Of course.

I was in Paris, at a nightclub, dancing with a man I'd picked up in a cafe. I placed my head on his shoulder. The script was pre-written. I'd seen the movie, read the book.

He whispered, nice?

Mmmm.

He led me in a swaying circuit around the floor. Close. His breath moist on my cheek. I closed my eyes.

A *slow*. A whole club dedicated to slow-dancing. To romance. To easing the way back to the apartments of men you'd only met in a cafe hours before...

An hour before dawn, he said. It was definitely getting lighter. Did I perish in the sunlight? No, don't be silly. We stopped on a bridge halfway across The Seine. In the grey half-light I could make out the currents on the surface of the dark water. Can you swim in the river? No, but there are swimming baths further along. Did I like to swim? I told him I'd been a champion at school. He was impressed. I watched him watching the water. His brown-black hair fell forward onto his face. He had a great nose, dramatic

cheek planes. I wondered whether he could swim. I thought to ask but instead I kissed him.

The script has me held in this passionate embrace. A dark-haired couple on the crest of an old stone bridge. Closer and closer he holds her and she responds. Her hand clamouring down his back, the curve of hard buttock. His hand cups her breast. She can barely breathe as he kisses her neck, her earlobes. And the light turns to pink.

I love you, he said. I smiled but touched his mouth with my fingers. Don't say that. He suggested we walk back to his apartment. I found a taxi.

Avenue Charles Flocquet. The taxi-driver nodded. Brave, I thought, a woman driving at night. Or perhaps she'd not long started her shift. Did it matter? We headed up through *Invalides*. The streets were empty. I was sitting close to the man I'd met just hours ago. His hand casually caressed my shoulder. This part of the city was unfamiliar. The buildings we passed were set back from the roadway, behind huge leafy trees. Chestnuts, he said.

We were slowing down.

*"C'est juste en face du parc, Madam."* Number twenty-three.

Stopping. He handed some notes to the driver. Something growled. Climbing out I saw the large German Shepherd lying across the front seat. You'd have to have something like that, I said, as we walked to large black iron gates. I studied the grand stone building before me with its huge shuttered windows. He told me not to get too excited. That his place was tiny, probably the servant's quarters in past times.

The night was ending and I was arriving at a man's apartment. Just say good-bye. He sensed my hesitation and held his hand out for me to take. No pressure. I studied the handsome face. Light eyes and dark hair, what could I do? I asked if he made good coffee and he laughed. Am I Italian? He didn't wait for my answer but led me through the mosaic-tiled foyer of the building. Was he Italian? I'd presumed he was French.

His front door opened into a short hall lined with closets. Go straight through, he said. I was standing in the middle of one large room. Ceiling, maybe twenty feet high. To my left a wide, marble fireplace with a mantle mirror, gold framed, stretching up to the roof. Not much else. Table. Chairs. Bed.

Coffee?

Please.

Sit down, relax, he'd be back in a moment. He went through a door and closed it. A kitchen? On the

edge of the large bed, listening. Muffled noises then a flush. A bathroom? Waiting. Yawning. I'll just put my head down on this pillow. For a moment. Until he comes back. So nice. Wish I'd caught his name.

### **Gravida 28**

Not one of my bras came close to housing my rampaging tits. Things were on the move.

"You need to be fitted," commented Andy's mum, as we wandered through the lingerie at David Jones. She led the way through the racks of the summer stock. "The ladies here know what they're doing."

"Fitted?"

Normally, I loved looking at lingerie. Teddies in French lace, burgundy, gold and emerald. Push-up strapless bras with matching high cut undies in black lace. DJ's had the lot. So where were the black lace maternity bras? Everything we looked at in the small section tucked away in the corner looked functional with a capital "F".

"Can I help you?"

I turned and saw a stout older woman standing next to me. Dressed in the mandatory David Jones' black she looked just how I wanted her to. Detached, professional and vaguely motherly. Storybook motherly, not like any mothers I actually knew.

"What size do you normally take?"

"It varies a bit but around a 14 or sometimes a 16B or C."

She shook her head while gazing at my obviously ill-clad breasts. "I think you'd be at least a D-cup, maybe more at the moment. How far along are you?"

"Just gone five months."

"Well, she's come along at the right time," the woman said to Andy's mum, as if acknowledging that her advice to get fitted had been correct. She addressed me once more. "Now, do you favour white or something in skintone?"

"Skintone I suppose but I'd also like something in black. I wear a lot of black and\_"

"We don't carry anything in black."

"Oh."

"There's not much call for it."

"Oh." What was there to say? It was all there in the open. I was a deviant woman for suggesting it.

In the dressing room I was vaguely aware of the conversation between my mother-in-law and the saleswoman. Smalltalk. The chitchat that seems to accompany all the ritual preparations one goes through in life. I pulled on a beige boulder-holder. The clasps at the back hooked down a band that was close to five inches wide. One of the cups unclipped as I fastened the bra. The feeding panel, I guessed. My right breast stood out, no sign of sag, suspended by the sturdy frame. I closed the clasp, drawing up the half-lace cup. *Tres* functional.

I turned left and right, checking out the side and rear views. Not a sexy sight. I hated these change rooms with mirrors fore and aft. Every dimple, every expanding fat pad on show. I pulled the straps a little tighter on my shoulders. No denying it felt comfortable. The dragging sensation I'd had for months was completely alleviated.

"Can I come in?" The saleswoman.

"Sure."

"How is it?"

"Is it supposed to look like this?" I asked.

She ran her fingers along my back checking the fit. She turned me around to face her. With more efficiency than any nurse I'd seen she adjusted the tension on the bra cups and doubled checked that they wouldn't obstruct the feeding ducts in the future. As she finished she smiled. "It's a great fit. Oh I know it's probably a far cry from what you're used to. In pregnancy you've got to go for support and comfort." Then, more gently, "Husbands understand."

They might but I certainly didn't, I wanted to shout. But I kept quiet. It was just part of the territory. Your boobs became service items and thus so did the bras. "How much is it?" I asked dutifully.

"Forty five, ninety five."

Great. The most expensive bra I'd ever purchased and it looked like a straightjacket. As I dressed my mind was screaming. I want a black bra, a sexy white bra. Anything! Here I was in a new era of sexiness with no accessories!

Andy's mum stepped forward as I walked over to the cash register. "I'll get that for you love, an early birthday present," she said taking the fifty dollar note from her purse.

I took pictures of myself. Tasteful, nude photographs with the date and stage of pregnancy I was at written on the back. I wanted a record. Each month I'd line the shot up, set the timer on the Minolta auto-focus and quickly strike a three-quarter view pose.

"You're having a baby?" asked the photo shop man.

"Yes." I replied happily. But then I realised that he couldn't have known for sure just by looking at me across the counter.

"Why do all women having a baby take photos like these?"

I looked at him carefully. He was Chinese and it struck me as somehow shocking that he'd actually studied my photos at any length. Perhaps he just shouldn't comment.

Yes, that was it. He shouldn't comment. I had felt safe with a Chinese man.

He waited for an answer. I'd never been to this shop before. I guess I'd been too embarrassed to take them to where I normally took photos. My anonymity was supposed to protect me. Maybe that's what the photo man was thinking too. He could only ask someone he had never met. A normal customer wouldn't be right.

"So you get a lot of photographs like these coming through?" I asked.

"Oh yes, all the time but usually when they are, you know.." He made a gesture with his arms to indicate a huge stomach.

"I see. Well, I guess it's just so we can remember what it's like."

"It's only Australian women who do this. Never Chinese women."

I thought about it. Were Chinese women I knew *that* different from me? "Perhaps they just take their pregnancy photos to another shop?" I suggested.

The man was taken aback and pointed to my photos. "No, Chinese women wouldn't do this sort of thing."

I'd started doing exercises most days. I followed Sheila's instructions. Stretches and strengthening things like squatting and inner thigh work featured mainly. She suggested involving your partner in the daily routine. I put it to him.

"Do you think it would help you?" he asked.

"Would you like to?" I responded.

"If you think it would help anything, sure, I'll do whatever you tell me to."

I thought some more. I didn't want him to exercise with me. I just wanted to know that he would have had I wanted him to. Was I going crazy?

Our friend Jocelyn took another sip of the cappuccino and held the cup, poised in mid-air. "Mark didn't make love to me at all once I started showing."

Kathleen and I looked at each other. It'd been ages since the three of us had got together. Sitting in the morning sun at a Bondi Junction cafe, Jocelyn's new baby in our midst and my growing stomach resting on my lap, I felt far removed from the old days. Poor old Jocelyn, stuck with Mark when she'd always aimed so high. Kathleen and I had always thought he was weird. It was navy life we reckoned. After nearly twenty years of being surrounded by young boys, we had a sneaking suspicion that they might have been more to his taste than Jocelyn.

"Not that he's that interested in sex now either." Jocelyn reached over to adjust the hood of the pram against the shifting sunlight. "Now his excuse is that I'm breastfeeding."

"I thought that breastfeeding was a bit of a turn-on for men," Kathleen offered, looking from me to Jocelyn, then back to me. "Well, enlighten me! Isn't it true?"

"Don't look at me," I cried, "I'm not there yet!"

"But you'd have colostrum by now." Jocelyn was the expert on all such matters.

I hadn't noticed colostrum and told her so.

"I'm sure you'd have colostrum."

Kathleen interrupted, "What the fuck's colostrum?"

I answered without hesitation. "This clear stuff that changes into proper milk after you've had the baby." Thanks Sheila. "See, I know what it is," I assured Jocelyn, "I just haven't got it yet."

Jocelyn assumed her expert voice, "Have you tried expressing?"

It hadn't occurred to me.

"Well go home and express. I'm sure you'll have colostrum."

Kathleen laughed loudly. "Yes Megan, get home and squeeze those tits."

Jocelyn's baby stirred.

"Shit, sorry mate," Kathleen whispered, "I can't get used to having her around."

"You and me both," came the flat reply.

I just had to find out if I had colostrum. That evening when Andy walked in the door, I jumped him. Dragging him into the bedroom, I pulled off my top and bra. "Help me find out!"

### Paris 23

"Me-gan?"

Was someone calling? Mea-garhn?

"Me-gan? I have made coffee."

Of course, the coffee. "Oh, thanks." I lifted my head. My body was between smooth sheets, light blankets. The room was quite dark, floor to ceiling curtains drawn. The man-I'd-just-met-in-a-cafe sat on the bed next to me in boxer shorts and took a drink from the large steaming cup he held in his hands.

I wriggled up from under the covers, reached for the cup of coffee resting by the bed. Mmm, aroma. "Um, how long have I been here?"

"A while, it is almost lunch time."

Lunchtime? I took a sip.

He smiled. "I was not sure if I should have awoken you." He brushed my hair back from my face, ran his finger across my cheek and touched my mouth. It rested there for a second. My eyes found his and I kissed the fingertip. "Drink up your coffee," he urged. I drank.

"Is the toilet through there?"

He laughed. "Yes, but don't worry, I doubt very much if you'll be getting lost."

Crumpled, slept-in clothes. Handbag from the table and close the door behind me. Blinded. Oh God it was broad daylight. Where the hell was I? Quick, face away from the window. A toilet in the kitchen? Or a kitchen in the bathroom? I wee-ed as quietly as I could. Embarrassing if he heard. A small odd-shaped room, ceiling high and sloping. Triangle shower recess. A bidet. Tiny stove, a bar fridge and a sink. Was this hygienic? Allowed? I flushed and washed my hands at the tiny basin.

Bright light, little sleep and smudgy mascara. Nightmare. I scrubbed my face and put some toothpaste from the cupboard-behind-the-mirror on my finger. It would have to do. Makeshift scrub and rinse. It

wasn't the first time. I took the hairbrush from my handbag. My diaphragm case stared up at me. No, I'm ignoring you. I've only just met him. I ran the brush through my hair, scrunched it a bit. A tumble-y-wavy look. What would happen when I went back in? The way he'd looked at me. Mmm. Might as well pop the diaphragm in.

You don't even know his name.

Shh. There, it was done. If something happened, it happened. A little eyeliner and some mascara made my eyes return to my face. Done as I'd ever be. I paused by the frosted glass window and found it locked.

Into the dimness. Though not as dim as before. He was adjusting the louvres of the shutters.

He walked to stand in front of me. "I trust you found everything?"

Yes.

He took my handbag from my hands and placed it on the round dining table once more. He kissed me. Good morning, he said and kissed me again. Gentle but insistent. Slightly stirring but on a steady climb. My arms around him now. His back was firm but the skin so soft as a girl's. Weird. Nice. His thin boxers allowed his erection to swell large against me. I pressed my breasts to his chest and our teeth scraped slightly as the kiss deepened.

Air.

He unzipped my dress. Its sleeves fell from my shoulder and the black sheath puddled around my feet. He held my hand as I stepped from it. To bed. He reefed down the covers and lay me on the expanse of white sheet. I moved to take off my bra. Leave it. Next to me now he placed his face between my breasts and breathed in, out, in, out. He pulled the lace cups down and under each orb, corseting my breasts forward and up. His licked long and slow across one nipple, then the other. He blew softly and watched them pucker and harden.

Light eyes, dark hair. Always a killer.

I pulled him to me. Kiss me. He edged my pants down and down. I wiggled them off. I pushed down his boxers and cupped his arse. Hips on auto. Thrusting. Open your legs, he urged. Blunt, pushed me to the edge. I opened, wet. He raised up and freed his erection. Fingers wet with saliva I stroked.

Hard.

Guided him in, deep.

Sunday afternoon.

Paris.

Fucking.

Paris.

Fucking.

Mmmm.

His breathing calmed. After a while he whispered that I didn't leave.

Huh?

"You didn't leave," he repeated. Thinking. "Or is it arrive?"

I leant up lazily on my elbow. "What are you talking about?" I laughed, finger-combing his hair back into place.

"In English, it gets confusing. I can't remember which one it is."

"Which one it is for what?"

This time, he laughed. Rolled me gently over onto my back. "For the orgasm."

"Oh!" It started to sink in what he was on about. "What is it in French?"

"Well, one could say many things. You could say *as-tu arrive?*"

"Wait, don't tell me...that means have you arrived?"

I was correct. I pictured someone crying out, "I'm arriving, I'm arriving!" at the crucial moment. Like a train. It cracked me up.

"Why is it so funny?"

"It's just funny, that's all."

He looked troubled. "So, in Australia, you don't arrive?"

"In Australia," I giggled, "we come!"

He shrugged, placed the flat of his hand over my jiggling breast. "That is okay. In Europe we come too." He shifted his weight and brought his lips to mine.

I broke the kiss. "What do you mean you come too?"

"Well in French," lip-kiss, "one can say he is coming, but," cheek-kiss, "if you want to," neck-nuzzle, "you could say he is arriving." Pause at the base of my throat. "Or leaving." He ran his hand down the side

of my body, in at the waist, up and over my hip.

"Leaving?"

"Yes," he said, pulling me to him, "like I said at the beginning of this conversation, *tu n'est pas parti.*"

He was telling me that I didn't leave. I told him that it didn't matter. That it was nice anyway.

Ha! Little Australian girl.

He kissed me again. Touched between my legs.

Nothing else touched. Just the spot.

I murmured that he didn't have to.

He said to shhh. That he wanted to.

Circles. Small. Wet. Faster.

"*Viens*, Megan, come."

Eyes holding mine. My breath uneven.

Just the spot. Straight like an arrow.

Like a train, after all.

Steaming up. He leaves me in the shower and I hear the sound of keys, locks rattling. Window open.

Sunday afternoon whooshes in.

Oh wow! I was standing under the shower looking straight across at the Eiffel Tower. He laughed.

Little Australian girl. But it's the Eiffel Tower, just there! A window, a hedge and the Eiffel Tower. Finish your hair, he said, the hot water won't last. He stepped back into the shower and adjusted the taps. Wet bodies slide and our hands tangle in my sudsy hair. Cold. Quick, rinse.

Beautiful towels for a man on his own. I wrapped myself in large fluffy burgundy, he wore thick navy and white stripes. He smiled, it's your colour. I turned and gazed through the window. The hedge was tall, shielding me from the eyes of the passers-by only metres away. The Tower rose high above. I had to lean forward to glimpse the top. I heard the fridge close.

"It is empty," he said. "I think you are hungry, no?"

I was.

In the main room, we dressed.

"We should go out to eat somewhere. Somewhere nice."

"I need to change. I can't wear this."

His eyes travelled down my crinkled dress. "Where are your things? At your hotel?"

I was staying on the other side of Paris in the Hotel du Londres, just down the road from *Gare de Nord*.

He moved to the bed, patted the mattress beside him. "That quarter is *deguerlasse*. Awful," he said as I joined him. He thought for a minute before he spoke once more. "Last night you told me you were starting as an au pair, a nanny."

"Yes, I move in on Saturday week."

"So, do you have plans for between now and then?"

Who knew? "Just playing it by ear I guess. Going back to The Louvre, out to Versailles maybe. I don't know."

"But the hotel," he asked, "have you paid up for the next fortnight?"

"No, I just paid a week in advance when I made the booking from London. I pay the rest at the end. Why?"

He took my hand and held tightly. "I would very much like for you to stay here."

"Here?"

He looked around the room. "I know it is not much but we would be together. I could even show you the sights after work, I finish early a lot these days. Maybe we could meet for lunch."

"You're serious aren't you?"

"Why not?"

I was tempted. Dark hair, light eyes. The Eiffel Tower in the shower. I said I'd catch a taxi across to the hotel so I could at least change. No, please, I'd prefer to go alone. I'd think about it on the way over.

Pen in hand, the tiny space I'm allocated on the postcard is challenging me to begin writing. It's useless sending this to Kathleen, she's not a postcard girl. She'd want the letter, pages oozing with blow-by-blow accounts. I'd be the same. No, this'd be a quick note to the family.

*Dear Mum, Dad and Brian,*

*Well...*

Now what? I'm just sitting here waiting for a man? In a cafe? Hardly.

Where else does anything happen in Paris? Yes, I'm moving in with him. No surprise there. Right from when I first saw him across the tables. In a cafe, of course, on Boulevard St Michel. Melt. I thought I'd become immune. Ha. Not unlike Andy.

I put down the pen.

Very like Andy.

I hadn't been looking for company. Was quite happy to be on my own as I'd been for a week. Maybe that's why he'd come over. No outward sign of desperate woman seeking a man.

Milk coffee. *Cafe au lait*. I'd been here since six. He was coming at six thirty. Would he come? Who was he anyway? A man I'd met in a cafe while pondering where I'd go on my first Saturday night in Paris.

But he was sexy. And an adventure. Thirty five-ish, maybe older. Would be nice to fill in the fortnight. Ruthless bitch.

No, ruthless doesn't come into it. He's nice. Nice company.

Nice? Nice sex.

No denying it.

Paris has always sucked you in.

Was it true?

"Ah Megan, you would love Paris." The words of my French teacher, Madame Lantier. She had taken twenty-two of us to Noumea. Fancy taking a bunch a fifteen year olds away! We'd been drinking *Orangina* in squat bottles with skinny long straws in a sidewalk cafe, thinking we were being oh-so-sophisticated.

Everyone used to say I was her favourite. It was mutual. I loved her. I loved French. Things French. Movies. Names. Music. Wine. Gigi. Emannuelle.

God, Emannuelle. She'd been all the rage for a while. Mum had found the book thrown under my bed just before I'd moved out of home. "I don't think you should be reading that!" She'd sounded so indignant, it'd been hard not to laugh. After all the so-called filth I'd demolished over the years, it had been pretty light going.

A year or two later Andy and I had seen the film. A late late session on a hot February night, a revival screening. My first erotic film. Mmm. Risky frottage in the back seat of the Roma Cinema. Special.

Where was he now?

Could be anywhere. Impossible to keep in contact even had he wanted to. Would he want to?

The old grey mantle crashed down on me. My insides twisted, started the old raw churning, churning. Why did it have to be so hard with him? Other people fell in love, made the commitment, were married. Why was it so difficult for him? Why couldn't we do all the things he wanted to do, together? If he loved me why wasn't he here, now?

The late afternoon sun shifted through the trees dappling shadows across the shiny metal tables. A private performance. This was Sunday afternoon in Paris. It was breathtakingly beautiful and I filled my chest with the air. Held it, leeches the essence of the city out of it and then gradually, so gradually, let my chest fall. There was nowhere I else I longed to be. I was here.

I relaxed into the back of the chair and sipped my coffee, observing the world passing by over the top of the thick, white-edged cup. No-one was rushing me. There was no pressure to order more. You could sit for hours on one coffee just watching the late afternoon sun through the trees. Better than perfect. The darkness within was dissipating. I had made it. No-one had believed I'd actually sell up and come here but I'd done just that.

Your time.

Yes, my time. My life. And I decided, as I was sitting waiting for this drop-dead gorgeous Italian, that I would lead it. I would not mark time any more. From now on, I would live as if Andy was never coming back. Crunch. Okay, so it wouldn't be painless but at least I'd be alive, on my terms.

So, where is he?

Who?

The Italian.

It was almost time, almost six thirty. How long should I give him if he wasn't punctual? Half an hour? An hour? I slurped the dregs of the coffee and wished to hell I could remember his name.

Did I ever doubt that he'd come? He ordered *un espresso*. I ordered another *cafe au lait*. We ordered food. He laughed softly as the waiter walked away with our order. I'd always be a tourist if I kept ordering *cafe au lait*. But white coffee was what I wanted to drink. He leant forward. My first lesson in Parisian. Parisian? There was French, and then there was Parisian, he said. If I wanted white coffee I should order *un grand creme*. Or better still, a *petit creme*. Only tourists drank huge cups of milk coffee after breakfast time.

Tourists. I knew. Nothing worse than being a tourist. Nothing better than being Parisian late on a Sunday afternoon. Sun, now low, filtered, over the city rooves. Glimpses of gold-tinted breeze as a scooter whipped up the fine debris in the gutters. On the tiny table came my ham and tomato roll, his *croque monsieur*, my *grand creme*, his *expresse* and his water.

The next scene. The dark-haired couple pounce on their food like they haven't eaten all day. They haven't. They munch their way through bite after bite, each oblivious of the other. Then the urgency abates. Their eyes meet as they pause. He reaches across the table with ease. Paris. Even the tables are made for love.

"I am so happy that you accepted my offer to stay," he said. He kissed my hand.

He looked up at me through dark thick lashes. Gorgeous. "There's just one thing," I said softly.

"What is that?"

Big breath, be brave. "I know this sounds silly but, I can't remember your name."

He smiled, moved his head slowly from side to side. Bemused.

"It's not funny, it's terrible."

"Terrible?"

"I'm moving in with a man I've known for less than twenty four hours and I don't know his name."

He thought for a moment. "My name is Marco."

"Marco?" I couldn't remember his name but Marco wasn't at all familiar.

He smiled wryly. "Marco Polo."

Thanks. I knew it had been too easy.

He fell back with laughter. "Sorry but I could not resist. You didn't ask me before now? Why?"

"I don't know. I suppose it suddenly seemed important now that I'll be staying with you."

"For more than one night? Is this what you mean?"

Well, yes but I couldn't say that could I? My cup was empty. I caught the waiter. "*Un expresse, s'il vous plait.*" If that's what he ordered, that's what I'd order.

The man I was sitting with raised his eyebrows. He was impressed. "So you are taking off the skin of the tourist."

"Trying."

"Ah," he exclaimed, "but my little Australian girl would have happily had a dalliance for a night and

when the girlfriends back home asked who he'd been she would have said, oh it was Pierre or maybe Jean-Paul?"

Mortified. How could he read me like this? I felt his hand cup my chin and lift it until my eyes met his again.

"Megan, I am sorry to play with you. My name is Max."

"Max?"

"Well, Massimo actually, Massimo Fascari. But in Paris, it's better to be Max. Massimo is *trop ritale*."

"*Trop ritale?*"

"Parisian for too Italian."

My *expresse* arrived. "*Merci*."

It tasted bitter. "You don't look Italian." He didn't.

He pushed the sugar towards me. "And how is it that I should look like?"

I felt the heat rise in my cheeks as I spooned sugar into the tiny cup of coffee. "I don't know, darker maybe?"

"I'm from the north," he said gently, "from Venezia."

I felt like an idiot. "Oh."

"That is one thing Marco and I do share."

From the interior of the cafe some young guys were singing along with the juke box. Cute-sy French pop. I couldn't make out the words.

Max sang the chorus softly for me. "*Je prefer l'amour en mer, c'est juste un question du tempo*."

"I prefer the love something something." I laughed, I was lost.

"*I prefer making love at sea, you know, on a boat, it's just a question of the tempo*. The waves rocking the boat and all that."

"It works best in French I think."

"Most things do."

### Coast 18

I told Brian I was a virgin. Sounded strange. I'd lied so often about having it off to my friends over the years; I'd started to believe it myself. For four day since the first ward visit, Brian had stayed close to me.

Each night he'd walked me up to my room. The second night I'd invited him in. Each night, I had let him go further. Comfort. Curiosity. Now, finally, I decided why not. He seemed safe.

I figured it had to happen one day.

On my narrow single bed, he didn't bother to pull down the state-issued quilt. I looked up at him as he jerked his shirt buttons undone while maintaining this weird eye contact that I imagined was supposed to be sexy. It was all a bit off-putting so I dragged my eyes away from his face and found myself gazing at his erect penis, just freed from the confines of his jocks.

Brian blocked my view for a moment as he bent over to pull his socks off. Then, when he stood up again, I was shocked to see his cock bouncing as he took the few steps across to the bed. Was he diving for water?

Lying down half on top of me, I was aware of little else except his erection's presence against my thigh. I was trying to avoid looking at his face but it wasn't easy. He'd grabbed hold of me around the back of the head and was closing in with his mouth.

You're here now, I thought to myself, might as well try to get into it. I rubbed my lips over his with as much enthusiasm as I could but was constantly distracted by his penis rubbing up and down on my leg.

He moved downwards and brought his mouth to my nipple, sucking away and teasing it to stand out like a little cone. He kept popping it in and out of his mouth, making smacking sounds. Nothing.

Just get on with it, wishing there was some way I could just get up and leave right now.

It wasn't too much longer when Brian heaved himself over on top of me. He reached down and dragged one of my thighs out towards the side of the bed. He fell down into the space between my legs. Why didn't he just tell me what to do instead of all this pulling and grabbing?

He lifted himself up on one elbow, so most of his weight was off my body for the moment and ran the fingers of his free hand up and down the folds of my labia. I knew I wasn't wet.

He wasn't in a rush. Instead I felt him stick a finger inside me and start to roam. He slid his finger out and dragged some of the dampness from inside to rub around. He did this a few times. During this lull, I started to panic.

I wanted to get up. Not go through with it.

Not that I was scared of the penetration, that was very familiar territory.

Wasn't it supposed to be more than this?

I started deep breathing.

Brian moaned in response.

I couldn't stop now. It wouldn't be fair to Brian.

More deep breathing, must calm down, must calm down.

Brian was still working away on me and, it wasn't unpleasant, it was nothing. My mind started to wander. The stories I'd been telling had been more exciting than this effort.

Brian was re-positioning himself so that his penis was poised at my entrance. Here goes, I thought, as I felt him ease his way inside.

"Easy, easy," he said over and over.

For him, maybe.

Different to my own fingers, I had a distinct sense of his penis being cylindrical, pushing my tissues out in all directions at once. My insides made room for it; he was deeper than I'd ever experienced anything before.

Once inside, Brian started to move himself back and forward, rocking into me and then pulling back in a slow and steady rhythm.

This was new.

I had imagined having a cock inside my many times but I'd never thought of a man attached to it, moving like this. The forces at work were stronger than I'd expected.

Brian was trying to drill deeper but I already had my legs open as far as they went. He was grunting slightly now, his forehead sweaty. He kept reaching around and grabbing my buttocks to pull them up off the bed. It seemed my legs were in the way of things.

Should I bend my legs a little or stay flat like a starfish? Who knew?

Suddenly, Brian pulled out of me.

Was something wrong? Without saying anything, he grabbed one of my legs and then the other. He bent them and placed them in a way that had them almost wrapped around his elbows. The whole manoeuvre took my breath away.

Before I could do anything else, I was in a near shoulder stand with Brian high on his knees and thumping into me. His moans became disjointed, the thumping faster. I could do nothing except bear it and look on. It surprised me that I could take this pounding without apparent harm. I felt completely removed

from the whole scene. Seemed to move outside myself, looking on at this bizarre act from across the room.

Brian cried out and rammed himself to the hilt. He stopped mid-thrust. I watched the tiny spasms passing through him and wondered at the way his face twitched and contorted. Then, he sighed, dropping my legs without any warning and fell on top of me. After a minute he rolled off me and onto his back.

I lay very still. Close to the edge, listening to the wind rattle the window.

I felt like washing machine after the wash, rinse and spin cycles. I'd done a full load. What happened now? I found myself wanting to laugh, to cry. I did neither. Brian started to snore. I had a feeling it could be better than this.

### **Mercy 13**

The towering crucifix cast long heavy shadows across the wide sandstone steps of the church. To me, it seemed as if it had been designed this way, designed only to usher in feelings of dread and sorrow in the sinners filing in late on Saturday afternoons. It hadn't always seemed like this but now I carried the weight of mortal sin on my soul now. At least I think I did.

I was uncertain about which Commandment I broke when I did what I did. Number six, adultery, was the Commandment about sex things. I knew adultery was when the sexual act was done with someone who wasn't your husband, what Mum called playing up. But what I did was with myself. So was that adultery?

"Slow down a bit," Kathleen cried, pulling on my sleeve.

"Sorry." She was trying to hang back a bit from her mum and brothers and sisters, pretending we weren't with them at all.

Kathleen suddenly jumped in really close to me and hissed. "Look. Look!"

"Kathleen!" My eardrum was ringing. "What?"

"That was that Patrick-guy from the bus."

"Are you sure?"

Kathleen nodded madly. "Oh he's so gorgeous. Don't you think he's gorgeous?"

"He's not bad."

"Not bad?" Kathleen voice was almost squeaking. "How can you say "

"Will you girls come on?" shouted Mrs Watson from the church foyer.

Kathleen and I quickly crept in, ignoring the glances that Mrs Watson's voice had attracted. We took the pew in front of the others. Kathleen's brothers and sisters had already begun to quarrel. Mrs Watson had other things to occupy her attention.

I knelt and bowed my head to pray. I wanted to make a good Confession but that meant saying something. I was committing a sin going to Communion every week on top of everything else but what else was I to do? Mum and dad didn't ever go to Communion but they'd think it was strange if I didn't. Perhaps if I just told the priest what I'd been doing and that I was truly sorry, which in some ways I was, I could go to Communion tomorrow with a pure soul.

I looked around the church. I liked it during Confession times. In the fading gold light everything looked softer, more holy. People moved around wherever they wanted. Some doing the Stations of The Cross, others shuffling up to the confessionals, ladies stopping for a quiet chat at the intersection of the aisles. The guitarists rehearsing for Mass tonight were starting to play softly. Quiet strumming floated above the sunlit particles in the air.

I used to think when I was very little that souls travelled up to Heaven in the sparkling dust. That was until I got frightened after Ash Wednesday in about first class. The priest was daubing me on the forehead. "Remember man that thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return". The thought of being surrounded by dead people floating through the air was too eerie and I avoided sunbeams for years afterwards.

I felt a jab in the back. Kathleen got one too.

"You two go and line up first," Mrs Watson whispered, "then when you get back you can watch the other kids while I go up. And don't roll your eyes at me, Kathleen."

We headed out of the pew.

"Tell God you're sorry for what you do to your mother."

Kathleen rolled her eyes again, but only I saw it. In the queue, there were a couple of people ahead of us. It would not be that long and I'd be in there. I tried to ignore Kathleen's attempts to talk and point out people we knew. I needed to think about what I was going to say.

Confession wasn't easy anymore. It was no longer just a matter of rattling off a few standard sins and getting a couple of Hail Marys for penance. Now, I had a sin that sat like a crate of bricks on my soul. How would I ever confess it? What if I was the first girl to ever sav such a thind? I had no idea of how the priest

would react to such an admission. He might think that I was sick or something and rush out and call a psychiatrist.

I remembered my First Confession booklet from second class. There had been a section called "Examination of Conscience" and it set out all the different sins. The first section was headed "Sins against God". The second - "Sins against your parents" and so on until the last that was - "Sins against yourself". I could see the questions I was supposed to ask myself prior to each Confession right before my eyes.

*"Did you have an impure thought?"*

*"Did you do an impure deed?"*

The door on our side of the Confessional opened and we all moved up one spot. Impure thoughts and deeds. At seven years old, they had seemed very mysterious. I'd softly asked Sister Mary Joseph about what they meant. Already I had known that whatever it was should only be spoken of in hushed terms. She'd answered in a booming voice, "You'll know."

All I knew now was that it was almost my turn. I looked around me to see what the hold up was. The line hadn't moved for a while. I heard the low murmuring begin among those waiting. It happened whenever someone was taking a bit long with their Confession.

"Perhaps they've killed someone," Kathleen muttered under her breath. "Did you see who it was who went in?"

I shook my head without turning around. Someone said, "Shhh".

Kathleen kept whispering. "Wouldn't be awful if you were taking a long time and you knew everyone outside was talking about you."

I nodded hoping that she'd forgotten the stir my own mother had caused a few years ago when she'd decided to go to Confession. I'd never known her to go before but she had decided to be my Confirmation Sponsor and that meant going to Communion and everything. She had been in with Father Ryan for nearly an hour, just talking about things she'd explained later. He was the young priest she reckoned was too good looking to be one. My cheeks still went hot just at the thought of it.

The door finally opened and Mrs Winbourne emerged. She looked as if she'd been crying. I took her place in the toilet-sized cubicle hoping that old Father O'Malley was in a good mood. It didn't look promising.

and tried to pray. I watched the shiny grille with the little sliding door behind it for any sign of movement, trying to anticipate when my turn would begin. I could hear bits of what Mr Spiteri was saying in the other Confessional. I tried not to listen but couldn't help trying to decipher the general gist of the muffled exchange. It seemed garbled, the voices rising and falling\_

The window door slid back. "Begin."

I jumped. I wasn't ready. I stuttered out, "Bless me, Father..."

"Yes, my child?"

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." My mind went blank.

"Yes?"

"Um," I managed, my heart pounding, "I've forgotten."

Silence. Then, "I see. Tell me how long it is since your last Confession."

This was easy. "A fortnight, Father."

"And what sins do you wish to confess?"

"Um." I struggled for the strength to say what I knew God wanted me to say but it would not come.

"Come along, my child."

"Sorry, Father." I made my decision and began the usual list, gaining more and more momentum as I went along. "I was rude to my mother, I spoke during class a couple of times, I stole some food out of the fridge and," I took a deep breath, "I did an impure deed. For these and all my sins I am very sorry Father." I waited, praying that he hadn't picked up what I'd said.

After several moments Father O'Malley spoke. "This impure deed, was it committed alone or in the company of others?"

Oh God. "On my own."

"Pardon? Speak up will you?"

I cleared my throat. "Alone, Father."

"I see." More silence and then, somewhat sadly, "What was this impure deed?"

My hands were clenched so tightly they ached. I closed my eyes and tried to say it, waves of hot and cold flooding over me. "It um...it had to do with a book, Father."

"What sort of book?"

my eyes were stamped again, I would not cry.

"A dirty book?" he suggested.

"Yes, Father."

"I see. Where did you get such a book?"

"I found it at home."

"At home?"

I cringed. How could I have been so stupid? Now the whole family would be in trouble if he saw who I was. I attempted to lean to the right a little, out of his dim line of vision. "In an old box of books. I think dad had just bought them from the fete, he didn't know it was in there."

"And you found this book and read it?"

"Yes, Father."

"What have you done with the book now?"

"It's still at home."

He seemed to think for a moment. "You must get rid of it."

"Yes, Father."

"And pray to God our Heavenly Father that you will not be tempted to read such a thing ever again."

"Yes, Father."

"Now, for your penance say one decade of the Rosary and contemplate the agony of our Lord being scourged at the pillar for your sins."

I emerged feeling quite light-headed. I walked across to where the Station of our Lord being scourged at the pillar was depicted in an old oil painting, carefully avoiding eye contact with anyone. I knelt beneath the painting taking long, slow, deep breaths. I looked up at Our Lord and began my prayers. But they wouldn't come.

Would Jesus really have looked like this man? He was on his knees, his face contorted by powerful feelings, blue eyes lifted towards Heaven. His head, long hair fixed bloodily by a crown of thorns, was flung back leaving a pale arch of neck exposed. His body was twisted as his weight swung against the ropes that bound his wrists to the pillar. The whip left oozing droplets of blood and sweat trickling down over each finely corded muscle. His stomach was sucked in tight and the sheet that swathed his hips hung low.

Did Jesus have what other men had down there?

I tried to push each image from my head and concentrated hard. I had many rain of grace...

It was hard to imagine Jesus having a penis. Would he have used it for anything? What about those wet dreams men were supposed to have? A guy couldn't control what happened when he went to sleep, could he? Maybe if you were God, you could.

"Hail Mary full of grace...." I couldn't get past the first line.

Would I really stop touching myself? The fact that I'd got away with not telling all was a bit of a thrill. I was lucky, I knew that.

Rising slowly from my knees, I went back over to where Kathleen and the other kids were sitting. I couldn't get over how good I was starting to feel, such relief that it was all over.

"What were you doing over there?" Kathleen asked as I knelt beside her.

"Checking out the scourging Station while I said a whole decade."

"Wow, what'd you say to get all that?"

"Why, what did you get? The usual?"

"Yep. Three Hail Mary's and a Glory Be. So tell me what happened."

I hesitated, wondering what to say. "Where's your mum?"

"Over there."

I looked across at her mother. Her head was bowed between her hands, she looked like she'd be there for a while.

"Megan? Tell me what happened."

I sighed. "I told him about the book."

Kathleen sat back on her heels, her bum resting on the pew. "You idiot!" she hissed.

"I had to."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It must have been on my mind and just slipped out with my other sins." Kathleen was looking at me as if I was mad. "I dunno, it just came out."

"What'd old O'Malley say? Drop it over to him?"

"Shhh, no. He told me I had to get rid of it. Although I don't know how."

"Dummy, just give it to me like you were going to in the first place. That's getting rid of it isn't it?"

"I don't think that's what he had in mind." I smiled. "Why are you so keen to have it?"

The steam started on her throat and traveled quickly upwards. "No, you know, never seen anything like it before."

"Yeah, it's pretty interesting. Kind of explains things."

Kathleen came very close to me. "About sex and all?" she whispered.

I nodded. It sure did.

### **Gravida 28**

Andy walked in as I was drying my toes. He smiled as he saw me straining forward over my melon-belly.

"Here, let me." He took the towel from me and finished the job.

"Don't tickle," I laughed.

"I'll try not to."

He tickled me again, more deliberately. I tried to pull away and started to sway off balance.

"Gotcha," he said as he caught me, holding me steady. His arms around me he pulled me to him. "It's getting hard to get close to you," he laughed, looking down at my tummy.

I turned around so my back and bottom nestled close into his body. "Better?" I asked softly.

"Mmm, nice." He brought his hands to my breasts. I let my head rest back on his shoulder as he drew lazy caresses around each one. I caught his gaze in the large vanity mirror. The steam-mist was lifting from the glass revealing my large round body, pink and warm from the hot shower.

Andy kissed the back of my neck. My hair was still piled in a mass of damp curls high on my head.

"I love you," I murmured as his hands moved down my body.

"I love you too," he whispered in my ear, "both of you."

He ran his hand over and over our burgeoning creation. His hands travelled across my skin and down into my pussy. "You look so sexy," he said softly, his eyes again meeting mine in the mirror, "all full and ripe and clean and soft and yummy."

He meant it. I watched my body respond under his hands, his breath on my cheek. Clear little droplets forming on the tips of my nipples. Breasts reddening further as my arousal grew stronger, the bluish veins deep within them becoming more vivid. It was sexy. It felt sexy and as I watched our reflected image it looked sexy.

Andy turned me a little so he could kiss my mouth. I moved close into him, facing him on the diagonal,

my belly jutting out to one side. I unbuttoned his shirt and rubbed my breasts against his chest.

“Mmm, come over here.” He led me over to the chair behind the door and swept the pile of clothes tumbling to the floor. I undid his jeans and kneeling before him I pulled them off, my mouth encircling his erection. He pulled me to my feet, and I felt his cock pressing low on my tummy.

“I want to come inside you,” he breathed. “I want to feel you close and hot and wet.”

My vagina congested, surged with wanting him. I pushed him down onto the chair and moved to straddle him. My belly was hot flush with his but my pussy was miles away from where I wanted it. I leaned back trying to find the right angle, Andy struggling to support me. The strain on his back reached critical point. It wasn't going to work.

I looked into his eyes. You couldn't take it seriously. I broke into a giggle as I stood up and contemplated Andy seated before me, his cock standing hard and fast, waiting for my next move. After a short while he gently took my hand and turned me. Then, holding each side of my arse he brought me back onto his lap. My giggling got worse, feeling like a Mac truck being backed into a loading dock.

“Well what?” he asked.

I considered our options for a moment. “Let's get out of here.” This time I took his hand and led him out of the bathroom and across the hall into our bedroom. “It mightn't be as adventurous, but hey, it's comfortable.”

Andy laughed as we crawled in under the doona. We soon recaptured the mood. Spooning back into his body I guided him into me. So nice. The tightness inside me loosened to accommodate his gentle thrusting. I was soon moving to meet each one, faster now, harder.

Our breathing was heavy. His hand closed over my mine and placed it down under my belly. “Touch yourself,” he murmured, pressing my hand with his. My fingers found my wet clitoris hot and hard and I was soon tracing small circles around and around, keeping rhythm with each thrust of Andy's cock. He moved his hand from mine to my breast and massaged the seeping liquid into my nipple.

My body, oozy and gushy. Moving outside the lines. Weird. Exciting.

He sensed the shift.

The thrust changed rhythm. He started to come. I loved feeling him, watching him, smelling him, hearing him. My own orgasm erupted, searched for the outlet. Found a fine wire somewhere within and pulsed weakly until it petered out.

Andy wrapped his arms around me. Murmured, "I love you, I love you."

"I love you, too," I managed as I tried to shift my position a little.

Immediately, he was up on one elbow. "What's up?"

I brought my hand to his cheek. He was so concerned. "I'm fine it's just a bit uncomfortable. Like all the build up's still there. Feel my tummy."

"It's a rock!"

I nodded. "It always goes like that after I come, it's just getting stronger these days."

I shoved a pillow between my legs and moved it up a little to support my tummy. My uterus was a large hard knot of muscle, a medicine ball, dragging all the ligaments forward.

"Do you want me to move?" Andy asked, "What can I do?"

"I'm okay," I assured him, "you know, it just takes a few minutes for it to calm down."

He kissed the skin on my shoulder, light, cool kisses. "I don't want you to hurt after we make love."

"Hey, am I complaining?" My uterus was starting to soften. The baby within rolling a visible undulation slowly across my abdomen. I kissed Andy. We were on an unknown journey, course uncharted and conditions ever-changing.

### Paris 23

When I woke he was gone. To work I presumed. Import and export, he'd said, something to do with seafood. It had been the same for three days. I stretched out and contemplated the wondrous effectiveness of shutters. Why didn't we have them in Australia? In the near blackness I sat up and reached for the clock. Almost eleven. I jumped up and performed what was fast becoming a favourite ritual. Throw back the curtains, open the window, the shutters and *voila!*

It never failed to thrill. No hedge to obscure the view from the front window. The *Champs De Mars* park spread before me and above it all, glorious in Spring sunshine, the Eiffel Tower.

Somewhere in my head I knew it was just glorified Meccano but it meant so much more. Seeing it like this each morning was my prize for taking control of my life. That was if being a kept woman in Paris for a week qualified as being in control. What the heck!

The phone rang. Slow even rings. Different to the urgent pick-me-up-now cries of phones back home. It was probably Max ringing about lunch if the format of the last two days followed.

"I'll be finished here soon. Should we meet again?"

"Sure. Where this time?"

He thought for a moment. "How about something different. Do you like Woody Allen?"

His accent. Woood-dy Al-arn. So sexy. "Sure, see you at *Opera*."

I cut diagonally across the *Champs de Mars* and headed down through the wide, leafy paths. The pale gravel that covered all the walkways crunched beneath my sandals as I quickened my pace down towards the Metro station, *Ecole Militaire*. Wednesday. Along the footpaths and all around the Metro entrance were the market stalls. I weaved my way through the crowd and left the blue brightness of the day behind.

I was underground. Sounds of a saxophone dripped down the walls of the subway. Further along, the source. The young black woman ignored the coins I threw onto the worn felt of her instrument case.

The turnstile. I whipped out one of my yellow tickets and fed it through the machine. I liked looking as if I knew what I was doing, not fumbling around like a mere visitor.

On the train I sat, quietly studying the look of the other women in the carriage. You could tell the locals. Blank faces. A certain gauntness in the cheeks, mouths slightly pursed. Elegance. It flowed from every pore. The way they clutched their handbags.

Draped their scarves.

Crossed their legs.

Wore blue and turquoise. Together.

They were slim, sleek and slightly built. An arrogance showed in the set of their shoulders. Some flicked through magazines, most just stared ahead, careful not to engage the glance of another. I wanted to be like them. I assumed what I hoped was a similar air. I slightly jutted my chin, puckered my lips a smidgen.

In the dark window I saw my shape. It wasn't right. No-one in Paris had fluffy hair. It had to go.

"Me-garn!"

I turned at hearing my name called above the traffic mayhem. Max was way over the other side of the wide boulevard, alongside the Opera House itself. He signalled for me to wait, that he'd come over.

I loved the way he always greeted me with a kiss.

We walked arm in arm in the sunshine, no shop awnings like at home. "You look nice," I said. He did.

Even just in jeans and a shirt there was something about him. A certain look. What was it about Europe that did this to people?

Max checked his watch. "If we hurry we can be in time for the session at one twenty. It's the *Rose Purple du Caire*."

I had to think for a tick. "Oh The Purple Rose of Cairo. That should be good." I matched his quickening stride for a while but then stopped. "Max, is there a later session we could see?"

He turned to me. "Yes, I suppose there might be. Why, is something wrong?"

I shook my head. "I think I should get my hair cut."

He smiled. "Right now?"

"I think I'd better do it while I have my courage up."

"But don't you like your hair?" he asked, bringing his hand to the side of my face, losing fingers in curls.

"Look around, none of the French women have hair like mine."

"But you are not French, Megan."

"I know that, but I want to look like I am. Isn't there somewhere around here I could get a haircut?"

Max laughed. "Let's walk up towards Galleries Lafayette and see. How long have you been in Paris?"

Why was he asking me this? "Um, twelve days now." We had to dodge around the lunchtime crowds. Everyone in the city was out and about. The air was a melange of perfume, cigarettes, cars and food. Odours basking in the fresh warmth.

"What has impressed you to make you want to change what you look like?"

I swept my hand across the air. "Look at them all, the women. They look so stylish, so, so French!"

"And you think that having a haircut will change things?" Eyebrows raised, the beginnings of a grin straining his cheek muscles.

"I don't know but I feel somehow old and frumpish."

"What is *frumpish*?"

How could I explain it? "Kind of old and suburban-looking. Does Paris have suburbs?"

Max laughed. "Yes, of course. In Paris the suburbs are called *les banlieux*."

"Are they ugly and boring?"

"Yes, to some degree I suppose that they are."

"Well, that describes frumpish pretty well. Now where can I get my hair cut like that?" I pointed out a

young woman passing us by. Her hair, sleek, bounced with each step. She wore pale-blue pleated jeans, almost jodhpurs, the latest style here. She crackled as she sauntered by us, so crisp was the white shirt, collar upturned. The small burgundy patterned scarf tied just-so at her neck.

Max thought for a moment or two. "There is a place not far from here. A little place on *rue de la Tour*."

I tried hard to follow the conversation. The speed, the idiom. It was difficult just like I'd been warned. Seated at the mirror I could see lots of head nodding and forehead furrowing from the hairdresser. She examined my hair while Max gave the directions. I caught odd words. *Australie. Trop frizzy*. Finally some agreement was reached. Max retired to the sofa across the room and watched every move.

*"Viens Mademoiselle, viens."*

I followed as directed and found myself stretched back over a basin. A towel was being wedged down around my neck. Some things were the same no matter where you were. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the massaging rhythm of the hairdresser's fingers deep on my scalp. Very warm water rinse. Conditioner. More rinsing. Through my pleasant haze I sensed the presence of someone being sat at the next basin. Phew! Perm solution. Its strong odour awakened my lulling senses like smelling salts.

Then, the seat was tilted forward. *"Allons"*.

Back in front of the mirror. I held my breath as I watched the cutting reveal my white neck. She was stripping away my cover. My eyes searched for Max, for reassurance, but the sofa where he sat was not in view.

Blow-dried. Adeptly she tamed every strand of hair into place. Now and then another stylist came over to coo over the transformation. A mirror was positioned so I could see the rear view. The fluff and bubble were gone. In its place was a smooth velvet helmet finishing bluntly at the nape of my neck. Max was at my side.

*"C'est bien, non?"*

I made myself smile. The girls around me tittered. The protective sheet was taken away with a flourish and I followed this new vision of myself in the mirrors that lined the salon across to the cashier. All I could see was face. Chubby cheeks and chin. Max was already handing over the notes. He called to my stylist, *"Mademoiselle?"* She hadn't been far away. Max handed another note to her. In Paris you tipped everyone. why not the hairdresser? I had a lot to learn.

The hairdresser scrunched the note into her uniform pocket. *"Merci, Monsieur, au revoir mademoiselle."*

He led me outside. "Let me look at you." I let myself be turned this way and that.

"I could have paid you know," I said softly, "I had the money ready."

Max was running his hand through the smooth bob of my hair. "It gives me pleasure to do these things for you," he insisted, "besides, who knows how long I'll be able to do it for."

"Max, what do you mean?"

"Come, let's get some coffee."

We started to walk. "Please tell me?"

He stopped and held me at arms' distance. His grip on my shoulders was very firm. "You've come into my life at an difficult time. I'm on the cusp of something."

"The cusp? What are you talking about?"

He shrugged. "What can I say? Things will either be very good or they will be very bad. Very bad."

"You're being a bit mysterious!" I tried to lighten it up a bit but his demeanour did not change. "Max," more gently this time, "please tell me what's happening?"

He shook his head. "Let's go." He started walking again, taking my hand and pulling me along.

"No, stop," I shouted, shaking my hand from his. "I want to know," I called to him, "what do you mean by very bad?" He stopped in his tracks but didn't face me. I called to him. "Is something going to go wrong? Is it your work? I don't even know what you do!" People walking by just kept on their way. No-one turned a head at a crazy Australian girl. The city had opened a private space to us. We were invisible.

He turned on his heel and walked back to me. "Megan, if you are going to be part of my life I'll talk to you about things." His voice resonated like a thick tuning fork. "If this is all going to end next week, then it is not worth discussing. Just sit back and, as they say, enjoy the ride."

The bitter undercurrent wasn't hard to detect. "Is it all going to end then?" I asked.

"I think that, how do you say it, the ball is in your court." He continued softly. "You know how I feel."

"How do you feel?"

He pulled me close to him. "I told you the night we met that I love you."

I eased myself from him. "You can't know you love someone in a night, or a week."

He twisted his full mouth. "So. if you're the expert. tell me how long it takes to know you love

someone."

I suddenly felt stupid standing in a busy street talking like this. "Max, I don't know how long but more than a week, more than a month I suppose."

"For you perhaps," he replied.

If the truth was to be told, I was dying for a huge cup of white coffee. "*Un express, s'il vous plait.*"

Max leant forward and took my hand. "And you wonder why I love you!"

I stirred sugar into the tiny black coffee and relaxed back into the chair. Behind low thick shrubs that bordered the cafe in pots you could escape the sharp noise. I closed my eyes savouring the sun's rays on my body. Tickle. Cool breeze on newly-bared neck. I reached back. Fingertips meeting sharp edges of newly-cut hair.

"Don't worry," Max assured me, "it's fine."

For two days I'd been shaking my head, swinging my hair in little whips across my cheek. "You know, I like how it feels but I don't think it looks right on me."

"Why is that?"

I patted my cheeks and under my chin. "Do you think it makes me look a bit fatter in the face?"

He didn't answer, just sat there looking at me.

I felt compelled to keep talking. "I suppose I'm used to sort of hiding under all my hair or something."

Max didn't speak right away. Searched for the right words. "Megan," he began tentatively, "you know that I think you are a beautiful woman. But, if you want the look that I think you want, like those girls for example..." He looked across at two young women sitting on the other side of the cafe. "Then, *il faut mincer.*"

I studied the girls he'd pointed out. Everything about them was sleek, like the women on the train and the one with the hair that bounced. "What's *mincer*?"

Max again looked to be searching for the right word. "Slim down," he said finally.

"Oh."

The Pont d'Alma seemed to hang as if suspended in space above the river. The mauve twilight was of a hue that I'd never seen back home. It was sublime. Magic. That, or my brain was playing tricks from lack of food. I stopped to rest my aching feet. My sandals weren't designed for this type of work. I reached down to adjust a strap that was killing me and saw the beginnings of a burgeoning blister.

Max crouched down to examine my foot. "Perhaps I was too eager to get started."

He looked up at me like a puppy begging forgiveness. I mussed up his hair a bit. "Let's just get to your place and eat something for heaven's sake. I'm starving!"

He laughed. "Me too."

We'd walked for kilometres. This was to be the *regime*. The diet. The plan. Max had worked it out for me. From the cafe we'd walked down through Place Vendome, past Maxim's to the Place de la Concorde. At this point I'd suggested the Metro but no. If I was serious about the new me, it had to start today. Walk everywhere, no more taxis or trains. We'd headed from there towards Pont Des Invalides and then right along The Seine to Pont d'Alma. Now the Eiffel Tower rose above us.

Across from his apartment we caught the shops just starting to close.

"Can you buy some bread? I will get the rest." Max ran across to the grocers, leaving me outside the *boulangerie*. They were obviously ready to close for the evening. The stout blonde matron frowned as I entered. "*Oui, mademoiselle?*"

"*Deux baguettes s'il vous plait.*"

She reached down into the crates and plonked two long skinny loaves on the counter. "*Quinze francs.*"

I counted out fifteen francs and handed them to her. "*Merci, madam*"

"*Au revoir, mademoiselle.*"

The door closed promptly behind me. I loved the crazy formality of these menial exchanges. Even though she'd wanted to close the door in my face she'd had to follow the routine. It was always good morning, madam, thank you madam, *au revoir* madam.

Outside, I waited for Max. Night was falling fast and the breeze had turned gusty and cold. The divine smell of loaves in my arms was making my head spin and I couldn't stop myself from snapping off a chunk. My teeth sank through the crust into the white fluffy bread inside. I'd never tasted bread this good. I shoved it into my mouth and savoured each bite. God, I was hungry. I saw Max coming towards me. He laughed and shook his head. "Ah, my little Australian girl!"

### Mercy 13

I pulled "The Dusky Innocent" from the depths of my school case and handed it to Kathleen. "Here, put this in your bag before the bus comes."

"Not now!" She twisted her head around to ensure no-one had witnessed the near encounter in the cool morning sunshine.

"What's wrong with now?" All she had to do was take it. It had taken me over a week to work out how to get the damn book from the storeroom box into my schoolbag without getting caught. I'd finally managed it last night and here Kathleen was worrying about who might see her at the bus stop.

I shoved the book back into my bag below my lunchbox. She really gave me the shits sometimes.

Kathleen sighed loudly. "Look, I just don't want to carry it around in my bag all day. Someone might see it. Can't you give it to me after school? On the way home?"

I wasn't sure I should risk having it in my bag all day either but if Kathleen was anxious already, she'd be a wreck by three o'clock. She'd probably drop it right in front of Sister Ann. "Okay, after school then."

"Thanks, Mege."

It was funny having something so eliciting burning in my bag all day. I was dying to show someone but knew I couldn't. The girls I hung around with would die. Goody-goodies all of them. They were the same ones that I'd hung around with since primary school. I secretly hated them. Hated that I was one of them. I was desperate to get in with another group, but who'd have me? Nearly everyone thought I was like them, always good. If only they knew! I couldn't even talk to Kathleen through the day. We only had one class together this year and she hung out with the netball fanatics during lunchtimes. Still, every now and then, I'd see her across a corridor or something and she'd look at me knowingly. As if we were part of some national secret.

Second last period was Maths with Miss Piper. She had re-arranged the class seating in the second week of term and for the first time in my life, I was sitting up the back. She reckoned that putting better-behaved pupils next to ones who were troublemakers was a good idea. I found myself next to Sandra Wills.

At first, I was shit-scared. It was her hair mainly, all spiky at the front. She looked tough. I looked anything but. My two ponytails didn't look cool no matter how low I wore the elastic bands. I wanted short hair but I wasn't allowed. Dad wouldn't let mum get her hair cut either.

"A woman's supposed to have long hair," he'd shouted when mum had suggested a change. "It's beautiful, feminine."

Even so, I wanted to have mine all cut off one day, even if it was only to my shoulders. I bet Sandra had always been able to do whatever she wanted to her hair.

It turned out she wasn't that scary. Basically, she liked to talk in class and it didn't matter who was sitting next to her. Her mother let her go to the pub. She was even allowed to smoke at home. On Mondays, she'd always have a hangover. Maths was first period on Mondays and I'd hear all about her weekends. She was fourteen already but looked even older. She carried around a copy of someone else's driver's licence proving she was eighteen. Her weekends were so different to mine she might as well have lived on another planet.

As time went on, she must have begun to like me because now and then she said "hi" if we passed in the corridors or in the toilets.

"Why do you hang out with the dags?" she'd asked me one morning.

I'd laughed and said that it was because I was one.

She disagreed and said that I had potential and probably wasn't a real dag like most people thought.

Kathleen hadn't been very impressed when I told her that Sandra Wills had actually said that I had the potential to emerge from the world of the dags.

"Be careful," she'd said, "that lot are pretty wild."

"She hasn't asked me to join their group or anything. She just said that I might have potential."

Well, months down the track I was still with the dags. But it did seem that on this particular afternoon, I had a chance to show Sandra the less daggy side of me. While we were waiting for Miss Piper to arrive, I opened my school case on the desk, carefully shielding the contents from the front of the room with the case's lid.

"Have you read this?" I asked trying to sound casual.

"I don't read much. What is it?" Sandra peered into my bag. I slid the book from under my lunchbox. She looked at me with wide eyes. "Shit Megan, where did you get this?"

I brushed my hair back from my face in a flick that I knew looked sophisticated. "Oh," I drawled, "I brought it from home."

Sandra raised her eyebrows. "Your mum lets *you* read this stuff?"

"Well, not exactly." I racked my brain for the right answer.

Sandra studied the well-worn cover picture. "Have you got many others like this?"

I shook my head.

"My mum's got a few I think."

"Oh?"

Sandra nodded as she flicked through the pages. "And this one? Have you read it?"

"Yep."

"Any good?"

I stopped for a moment. "What do you mean?"

"Megan!" Sandra rolled her eyes that were outlined in pale brown pencil, the most any one at Mercy could get away with. "Is it full of really dirty bits?"

I didn't want to admit that my reading hadn't got as far as finding anything to compare it with. "Pretty dirty," I answered.

Sandra was reading the back cover. "Mmmm....steamy passion..."

The heavy door creaked open. The between-class mayhem started to subside as Miss Piper clomped into the room. Arms full of exercise books. She always wore embroidered cowboy boots that seemed too large. Those and a big woollen poncho.

"Quick," I gasped, "give it back."

Sandra laughed. "Get away!" She shoved the book into her dilly-bag.

"Sandra!"

Miss Piper's voice cracked across the class. "What's going on down there?"

"Nothing, Miss," I replied immediately.

"Nothing, Miss," Sandra echoed.

"It doesn't look like nothing. Get that case off the desk and pay attention." She turned to the blackboard.

I pleaded with Sandra, whispering in desperation, "Give it back, I've promised it to someone to read."

"So?"

"So I've promised it to them."

"Well they can bloody well have it after I've finished with it!"

"But\_"

"I'll bring you in one of mum's okay?"

"Sandra I've\_" I was cut short.

"Right you two!" Miss Piper was striding down towards us, poncho fringing streaming behind her.

"Stand up, both of you." She placed her hand heavily on Sandra's shoulder. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do with you. Go out and stand in front of the blackboard."

Sandra squirmed out of Miss Piper's hold and bent to pick up her bag from the floor. I watched Sandra slink out to the front. She didn't seem worried at all.

"I'm surprised at your conduct, Megan Moran. Surprised and disappointed. I thought you, out of all the girls, would have the strength of character to discourage her chatter and get on with your work."

"Yes, Miss." My face burned and my vision was going watery. Why couldn't I be like Sandra and simply take it?

Miss Piper looked away. "All right now. Susan Bright and Carla Khaliffe come and take this desk. Megan, go and sit next to Barbara. Sandra will sit in the front desk, on her own."

Sandra went to move.

"Stop right there! You'll stand at the blackboard for the rest of the lesson and catch up on the work you don't do in Detention this afternoon."

I should have spoken up and offered myself for Detention too but I just couldn't. I'd never been on Detention and if my mother found out, she'd kill me. I kept my eyes low for the rest of the period.

Outside in the chilly afternoon wind I held onto my hat. The convent roof shaded the playground at this hour and the crimson plum tree leaves fluttered across the asphalt. Thank goodness we'd be in winter uniform soon. I liked the winter uniform. A lot of other girls hated the tie and the stockings and all, but I didn't mind. The only bad thing was that the winter tunic over the long sleeved blouse made my chest look a bit flat.

Still, it would be a relief not to have to freeze on afternoons like this. It was a pity it was so uncool to button up your blazer. I walked quickly and kept my gaze fixed on the ground before me, not looking at the classroom windows where Sandra was probably sitting. Kathleen was waiting at the main gate for me. We passed Sister Ann's inspection and headed up to the train station.

"Do you want to give me the book now?" she asked, several metres up the road.

I didn't answer.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't have it."

"What?"

"I said I don't have the book. Can't you understand English?"

"I heard what you said."

"Well why carry on about it?"

Kathleen almost squeaked in frustration. "I'm not carrying on. I'm just trying to find out what happened."

I explained.

"I wondered why Sandra Wills was on Detention this time. When will she give it back?"

"I don't know," I replied uncertainly. "She did say that she might bring me one of her mother's books for me."

"What, a sexy one?"

I shrugged, "Apparently."

"If she does will you show me?"

I nodded. We said nothing for a while. The bus stop was crowded.

When the bus came we sat about two thirds of the way back in our usual seats. She ripped the velour hat from her head and whacked it across the back of the seat in front. "Oh...shit!"

The ladies down the front turned and glared.

"Kathleen!" I muttered trying to smile at them, pretending it wasn't us. I'd never heard her swear before.

"Oh I'm just so annoyed with myself. I knew I should have taken it this morning."

"Look, don't worry, she'll give it back."

"Yeah, but when?" she moaned.

The six thirty news was on. We sat eating meatloaf and vegetables, watching.

"Gee Gough's looking bad," mum said quietly, "look at the bags under his eyes."

I thought about it for a moment. "Why do all the Prime Minister's get so old so quickly?"

"Shhh," dad insisted, "I'm watching."

"Well," mum commented, "you can't deny he looks bad."

"Jillian, please?" My father eyes widened, the whites looking very white. He did this to add emphasis to things.

"Sorry."

An ad came on. "Now you can talk," he said.

"It's all right, I don't want to say anything now." Mum took another forkful of potato and popped it into her mouth.

"Look, is it too much to ask for a bit of quiet while the news is on?"

We both focused on our dinners to avoid his gaze.

"Megan, what were you asking before when Mr Whitlam was on?"

"Doesn't matter, Dad."

"Well you can ask now."

"I forgot."

I plopped a huge blurb of tomato sauce on my plate. I waited for dad to yell. He didn't.

"How was school today?" he asked me.

I waited until I had swallowed. "Okay."

"Have you finished your homework yet? Have you finished that assignment yet?"

"Almost."

"Almost?"

"It'll be okay, dad, I should have them all covered by the end of this\_"

"Shhh, it's back on."

We again turned our attention to the screen. More politics.

"Can I have another sausage, mum?"

"Ask me later," she mouthed.

Dad frowned deeply.

Another ad. Mum spoke first this time.

"Megan, Dianne Martin rang me today and wanted to know if you were interested in babysitting Lisa on Saturday night."

I put down the glass I was holding. This was something new. I'd never babysat before. "I don't know, would it be all right?"

Dad cleared his throat. "Do you think she's old enough, Jill? She's not long turned thirteen."

Mum sat up straight. "It's up to Megan. If she feels she would like to and is ready to take on this responsibility I think it would be all right."

I hated my mother when she spoke like this. It was in that "don't you disappoint us" tone that meant I was being somehow tested.

"I'll do it."

"You won't get too scared over there on your own?" Dad asked.

I had no idea what it would be like. "No, I won't get scared."

"Well she could always ring us, if she had problems. It's not far away and there's always the\_"

Dad pointed at the television. "Shhh!"

Some river overseas was in flood. Six thousand people dead, fifty thousand homeless. The swirling waters were carrying away their houses before our eyes. It looked like bloated dead goats were enmeshed in the debris.

"They used to warn people when scenes like this were coming on," mum whispered, "especially over dinner."

Dad brought his eyebrows together in tighter concentration. "For God's sake, shhhh!"

Mum closed her eyes and pursed her lips. We all knew it was useless trying to change this nightly ritual. Since mum bought the portable television for dad a few Christmases ago, we had eaten dinner this way. It had some advantages. I didn't have to answer dad's general knowledge quizzes anymore; he reckoned I learnt more from the news. Mum started to clear the table. I went to stand up to help.

"Sit down and watch the news," ordered my father.

I sat.

After dinner, dad went into the lounge-room to watch the seven o'clock ABC news. Luckily, we didn't have to endure that. I stood by the sink a damp tea towel in my hands waiting for the next dish. I always tried to have the dish out of the drainer before mum put the next one down. I dived for a cup.

"Careful!" mum cried as I almost knocked the drainer into the sudsy water. "How's school?" she asked.

"Okay, I suppose."

"Has there been any talk?"

This was leading up to something, I could tell. I shook my head.

"So you haven't heard about the eldest Winbourne girl?" she asked softly.

I wasn't sure I wanted to hear. I shook my head.

"Mmmm that surprises me. I thought it would have been all around by now."

I wrung out the tea towel a bit. Was Kathleen going through this too? I had visions of girls across the suburbs standing by the sink, waiting to hear the latest scandal from their mothers.

"I think it's best you should hear it from me before you hear it elsewhere."

I nodded. I wished she would keep on with the dishes but instead she just stood, looking at me, watching for my reactions, her hands still wrist-deep in the dishwasher. I wished she would wear rubber gloves. I wished she wouldn't stand here and tell me about girls who got into trouble.

"Julie Winbourne is going to have a baby." She paused, for effect I imagine. "She's pregnant."

What did she expect me to say? My pulse raced. Would I be next? That was the unspoken question. I said nothing.

She started on the dishes again, at a furious pace, throwing saucers into the plastic slots of the drainer. "There's no excuse for it these days you know, not with The Pill."

"No, I suppose not," I croaked. I coughed to clear the panic from my throat.

She stopped for a moment, lost in thought, her hands resting in the water that still lapped wildly at the sides of the sink. I grabbed the last saucer in the long row, wiping it for all it was worth, thankful that it gave me the chance to tear my eyes away from my mother. Then she spoke, quietly, as if from far away. "I want you to know Megan, that if you want to go on The Pill, all you have to do is tell me."

I dropped the saucer. It didn't break but bounced across the lino tiles and landed by the fridge. I laughed tightly. "That was lucky, wasn't it?" I looked up at my mother as I picked it up, hoping desperately that she would drop the subject.

"You may not be so lucky if you don't be careful when it comes to sex."

Dad came into the kitchen asking whether mum'd put the kettle on for a cup of tea yet.

"We'll talk later," my mother murmured to me under her breath.

"What?" Dad asked.

"Never you mind, just some girl talk that's all." Mum smiled at me. I smiled back but my mouth felt

crooked, my cheeks were threatening to crack. It felt like another conspiracy. Why did anything to do with sex have to be so secret?

### **Gravida 28**

I'd been contracting since three. I curled up on the sofa in the sun room, burrowing my back into the deep cushions, looking for the support that I hadn't been able to find anywhere for weeks. I'd given up timing the contractions because they weren't getting more frequent or stronger, they were just there. It had been like this on and off for nearly a month. And today was D-day. If nothing happened by eight o'clock tonight, I was going in for induction. Bye Sheila. Bye natural.

I wiggled around a bit more, shoving yet another pillow down to support the weight of my belly. The afternoon sunlight was filtering in and with the telly turned down very softly, I felt myself drifting off to sleep. This was good, I needed sleep.

No more waiting. Twelve days past the due date was enough.

I relaxed into the pillows feeling the most comfortable I'd been for days. That last cushion had taken the pressure off my spine and for once my neck rested at just the right angle. The light breeze pushed past the sunlight and was cool on my cheeks. I felt good. I liked the picture of myself in my mind, hair lifting softly with each movement of air, the folds of dress draped across my legs and down across the cushion like the flow of a stream. My uterus continued to contract. I let it radiate silently, no counting, no measuring. Sleep began to sink closely in around my shoulders.

I rested, suspended on the cusp, in neither one state nor the other. Thoughts drifted through my mind, contractions through my body. I opened one eye just enough to see the time display on the video. 4.52. I closed the eye and quietly counted. My womb drew up, out and hardened, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. Lower down it drew in and up like a thick belt, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty. Thirty-six, fading. Fifty-one, gone completely. My baby writhed and I brought my hand to cup what I imagined to be its bottom. Perhaps things were picking up. My body had three hours to do it on its own and I had complete faith.

I wouldn't have minded something to eat. Or something...

My body was full, so big. I brought my hands up over the large tight melon to my left breast. It was held firm by the generous cup of my maternity bra. The flat of my hand barely covered one quarter of the

orb as I stroked up and over. I fell into a lazy pattern, up and over then dragging my fingers across my nipple to begin the circuit again. I nestled deeper into the soft lounge. My breast swelled, my fingers bumping time and again over the hard nipple kept flattened by the taut fabric. I unsnapped the cup and my breast fell free to the side.

My nipple sat erect, grander than ever before. I brought a finger to my mouth, moistening its tip with saliva and returned to my breast. Gently, gently I tapped a small bouncing rhythm. My nipple engorged and the colostrum oozed to the surface. I loved it. My knees drew up closer to my body and I squeezed my thighs tight together. I massaged the oozing fluid into my darkened areola. My hand across to the other breast, I freed it from the bra cup and expressed a luscious droplet. Cupping the breast in my hand I dragged it up to my mouth and lapped with my tongue. It was sweet and mucoid and my clitoris was screaming.

I bunched my dress up and out of the way and plunged my hand down the front of my knickers. The back of my hand scraped against the panty liner I wore constantly now to absorb the copious vaginal secretions of late pregnancy. I ignored it. My fingers ploughed through damp hair to my clitoris. I was flooding with moisture and merely pressed. My orgasm was instant. Raspberry ripples travelled down and through my epicentre, a seismic sigh. Its trajectory continued in a slow elliptical orbit, melting down until I was nothing but the force in the walls of my womb.

Transfiguration.

It stayed for several minutes but then eased. The baby undulating, stretching, quietening.

5.26. Andy and Kathleen would be walking through the front door at any moment. They'd gone out to get some supplies to see us through the birth, barley sugars and Lucozade.

So much for my rest.

I was proving Sheila Kitzinger wrong. Nipple and clitoral stimulation were supposed to bring on labour. What a joke. I extracted my hand from between my legs and straightened my dress. I fastened my bra and generally arranged myself demurely, as befitted a very pregnant woman.

### **Paris 23**

Rue Des Sablons in the sixteenth *arrondissement*. Yes, this was it. I stopped and looked up at the modern apartment complex in front of me. It must have been one of the newest constructions in Paris.

Disappointment plonked down on my shoulders. This wasn't how it was supposed to look like.

Inside the vast white foyer, I approached the postal boxes and searched for apartment 225. Solanger. That was the name of the family I'd be working for. Should I go and introduce myself? No. It could wait until Saturday. No point in facing the real world just yet.

Along Avenue Victor Hugo the shops were plastered with banners reading "*Soldes*". I'd stumbled across the June "sales". Maybe buying something nice would cheer me up. I still couldn't believe it. I'd pictured the Solangers living in old world grandeur, polished wood floors, Louis furniture. Not the most recently built apartment block in Paris.

I crossed the road and saw my reflection in the side window of a shoe shop. My hair actually bounced. I was getting there, not quite so much chin. Then, I saw them. The most beautiful pair of white stilettos sitting on top of a basket marked *demi-prix*. Half price?

"Can I try them, *s'il vous plait?*"

The *vendeuse* led me to a low chair and watched me as I slipped on the shoes. The soft leather gave gently as it accommodated my wide foot. Court shoes, that's what mum would've called them. But these were so much more. For a moment I wished she was here with me to see them. I just knew she'd adore them too. They were easily the most elegant shoes I'd ever had on my feet. From the point of the toes came a fine roll of leather piping that unfurled as it scrolled across the shoe towards the ankle. It finished in a wing that elongated into a taper an inch-or-so behind the heel.

"They're fantastic!" I walked up and down the thick carpet, checking them from all angles. They'd be great with my white pull-on skirt.

The *vendeuse* smiled. "You are *Anglais?*"

"No, not English, *je suis Australienne*. Are these really only one hundred and eighty francs?"

"*Oui. C'est sensational, non?*"

I did the calculations in my head. How much did I have left? I'd been impulsive and flown from London, which had blown a hole in things. I knew I had to keep five hundred francs emergency money so I could get back to London to catch a flight home if everything went wrong. The shoes worked out to about forty Australian dollars. Bargain!

I walked around the city for the rest of the day toting my elegant shopping bag. Max would love them. I was meeting him for dinner at seven thirty at a little place run by his friend, Olivier, in *rue Varenne*. The

skirt, the shirt, the shoes. It was all planned. I'd look my best and he'd be so proud to be seen with me.

I'd be able to report that I'd walked about five or six kilometres today. The kilos had to be falling off. Back at the apartment, I took a shower. The Eiffel Tower lit up against the early evening sky. Surreal. The air was cold against my wet skin but there was no way I was closing that window. I rubbed myself dry. God, I loved his towels.

In the mirror I saw my damp hair starting to frizz. Hard work keeping sleek. I attacked the wayward curls with the hairdryer but then through the window came a delicious smell. Hot chips. I clicked off the hairdryer. Tourists, just outside the window, behind the hedge, eating hot chips. My stomach sides caved, growled. All I'd had during the day was coffee. Max's *regime* said that if you were venturing out for dinner, then you couldn't eat anything all day. I breathed in hard. My salivary glands pumped as I thought of the vinegar, the tomato sauce, the salt.

Stop.

I forced myself to close the window and returned to my hair.

*Le Gobelet*. That was the place. Stepping out of the taxi I placed my white-clad feet carefully so as not to scuff them. From my hair-ends to my tippy-toes I was shining, electric with style and elegance. And hunger.

"*Mademoiselle, bon soir.*"

"*Bon soir, monsieur.*" Past the *maitre de*, Max at a corner table. He stood as I approached and introduced me to Olivier. Two pairs of eyes travelled to my feet.

"New shoes?" Max inquired.

"Yes, aren't they fantastic!"

"Mmmm," he replied tentatively, "truly *fantastique.*" We sat down, Olivier winked at Max before returning to the kitchen.

Drink?

Max added water to the yellow liquid in my glass. Became cloudy. *Pastis*.

I sipped. Sensual assault as the *anise* exploded in my mouth.

"*Cin cin,*" toasted Max, bringing his drink to his lips.

Food. Smells made me dizzy.

*Pastis* on empty stomach. Max kissed my hand. My mouth twanged with the lingering liquorice aftertaste of each sip.

Mmm, melted butter scent as Olivier returned to our table, tray in hand. Steam rising from tiny shell-shaped dishes. *Coquilles Saint Jacques*.

My head was spinning. I began to eat.

Max watched as I forked a scallop, white dripping sauce into my mouth. Beyond care. I was starving. Too hot. Breathed in to soothe the scald and bit through it anyway.

Divine, I said.

*Orgasme d'estomach*.

Pardon?

An orgasm of the stomach, he explained.

Cooling my burnt tongue with wine. Short pause only. Positioning another scallop on the tip of the fork. Biting into flesh, closing lips around the morsel.

Truly a mouth orgasm, a tongue orgasm, a stomach orgasm

Max raised his glass in appreciation. "I love you, Megan."

The food.

The music,

The lighting.

The man.

Cinked my glass gently against his. Easy to reply, I love you too. But I did not..

*Escargot*, announced Olivier.

More butter.

Tender garlic snails sliding sensuously over my tongue.

More wine? Yes, please.

*Coq au vin*, announced Olivier. Main course.

Wine.

Rest. Looking into each other's eyes.

A flaming pan lights up the heavy wooded alcove in which we sit. A splash of brandy sizzles.

*Crepes Suzette*.

Am I in Heaven?

Later.

His face in darkness.

Light from the bed lamp behind him onto me.

Hair swept back from my cheeks, kisses me on the mouth. Not urgent. Parts my lips, drinks from me.

Leaves me wanting more of his mouth, buttery and sweet.

Beautiful, he said.

He ran his fingers through my hair. The shorter cut is sexy, he said.

You think?

Yes. Take off your shirt.

I unbutton, slip it off.

He watches, takes it from me. Draws me to him and kisses my neck.

Move to give him more of my skin. Kisses across cheeks. Mouths found again. Pushes down the straps of my bra, unclips the catch at the back. Dragging the bra from my arms he throws it in the direction of a chair. Takes my hands.

To his mouth and kisses each finger. Moves to caress my nipples. Adores my breasts.

At the side of the bed, he kneels at my feet. Me, languishing buzzing sensations as he nuzzles my thighs through my skirt. Pushing his head in further towards me. Feel his hands pulling my skirt down over my arse. Hooks his fingers in the side of my pants. Sliding down and off.

He sits at my feet cross-legged, his pale skin aglow against the dark red rug, one hand lightly caressing my foot. Touch yourself, he says.

I play coy. Insist, I am thinking. No, I say.

He shrugs. Suit yourself. He's not playing.

But do you really want me to?

Forget it.

But I could if you wanted me to.

Shhh, he says gently.

Kneeling, he parts my legs, leans into me until his tongue laps through my fur. Calls it fur. So French.

Finds the tip of my clitoris. Pushes me back. On the bed I am arranged. Poised on the edge, legs wide. White stiletto heels scrape the floor. Flattens his tongue against me, travels down. Labia wide, he deliciously stretches me further. Noises. My noises. Trying hard to stay quiet.

I want to hear you, he says.

Make noise. My noises.

Concentrates wet circles closing in on my clit. Fingers plunge into me. Thrust forward feeling him deeper still. Lips hum against me. And again. I'm dripping and he licks up the approaching climax. Fingers keeping rhythm inside me going. Tense. Breath rushing in. He touches my anus. Oh. Pulling away.

I want to, he says.

Clamps one arm around my hip, pulls me to him. Locks his mouth over my clitoris. Lapping, lapping, pushes his finger in.

Oh God. Come without warning. Sphincter clamping down and down.

Cries silenced by his mouth. Moves his body over mine.

Lifting up to meet his thrust, cling on to his neck as he rides. Legs over his shoulders. Lock my white stilettos around his head. Rocking. Rocking. Pushes deep and freezes. Clamping muscles on cock. Feel the pulses, pulses. Feel him. Feel him soften against me. Gasping.

I find his mouth and kiss him. He breaks the kiss to draw breath. He tastes of me.

I told him so. Did I like the taste of a woman? he asks. I couldn't be sure. We kissed some more. Manoeuvred so we could both lie on the bed. So much effort disentangling. I kicked off the shoes onto the floor. "Aren't they fantastic?" I whispered.

Max traced his fingers lightly down my abdomen. "*Fantastique, Megan,*" he murmured, "*Fantastique.*"

### **Mercy 13**

"Lisa's already asleep." Mrs Martin opened her daughter's door a little. I could make out the top of the pale curly head in the dim yellow night-light. "She's never any trouble." She closed the door over and led the way back downstairs.

"Now Megan, make yourself at home. You know where the kitchen is if you get hungry. Have anything you want to. The television guide is on the coffee table."

"Thanks, Mrs Martin."

Her husband helped her on with her coat. "Now do you know how to contact us?"

"Yes, it's all by the phone. Mrs Martin showed me."

"Great," he smiled. I beamed back. He had great teeth, like someone on television.

"Look we won't be late. Back by eleven I should imagine. Barry will drive you home won't you, darling?"

"Of course. See you later."

"Bye." I placed the safety chain across the lock and then turned to survey my domain for the evening.

It was a wonderful house, so modern. Split level with exposed beams across a sloping roof. Sleeping areas upstairs, living area downstairs. Like the Brady Bunch house. I walked the few steps down into what my mother called the sunken lounge room and tried to decide which of the chairs I would sit in. They were large, almost like deck chairs but made of black leather and chrome. I kicked off my shoes, wriggling my toes in the long shag pile before curling up in the chair by the bookcase.

We didn't have a proper book case at home. This one was full of neatly arranged titles and little ornaments on shiny dark wood shelves. I picked up a small metal figure. It looked Indian or something. On closer study, I saw there were two figures entwined. It almost looked as if they were having sex. It was hard to tell because they were standing up. Could you do it standing up?

I put the figure back in its place. I scanned the shelf closest to me, running my finger lightly across the shiny bindings. Neville Shute, Alistair McLean, Ernest Hemingway, Evelyn Waugh. Nothing interesting it seemed. I picked up the TV guide instead. There wasn't much on television either. I walked over and flicked through the channels. Here it was only half past seven and I was bored.

I should have brought a book with me but I hadn't thought of it. I went back to the bookcase. On tip toe I scanned the top shelf. Germaine Greer, Harold Robbins, Leon Uris. Nothing! Cookbooks, gardening books and an atlas on the next. James Michener, Jacqueline Susann. Hang on, that rang a bell! I pulled out *Valley of the Dolls* and sat back in the chair. Peyton Place, wasn't that a serial or something?

I began to read. It began to move from the very first page. New York!

I soon found myself in another world. I was there, in the glitter and lights. I was in New York, on Broadway, in Hollywood. I was Ann Welles, discovered while working as a secretary and now a famous model. I was Neely O'Hara auditioning for the Broadway hit. I went out there on stage with her when she

had to take over the lead role from the aging Helen. I was with them, flatting with them, crying and laughing with them.

My heart accelerated like Anne's did when Lyon Burke returned home from the war. When Anne was carried away with passion in his arms, I was there. I gripped one shoulder, imagining it was his hand on my body. It rubbed insistently against my breasts. I moved lower in the chair, sliding onto the floor so I, like Ann, would feel the strength of his body against my own. I rocked my pelvis hard into the carpet, pushing up my shirt so that the rough wool fibres scratched my nipples. The end was in sight, I kept reading but...

But it wasn't enough. Lyon pulled away, he didn't want Anne's virginity. He stopped. I was hanging. It wasn't like *The Dusky Innocent*. The scene wasn't long enough, I hadn't reached the end. I strained to read on, one hand brushing over the page, holding the book open, the other moving between my legs, pushing inwards through my pants. Anne persuaded him to take her. I sped up my stroking, getting ready for the end. I read on. Where was the description?

Leaving my right hand jammed where it was, I flicked frantically forward through the book with my left. It seemed there was no more.

I couldn't stand the tension. I closed my eyes, trying to conjure up the best bits from "The Dusky Innocent". I pushed the material in my pants inwards, further than ever before. I felt the dampness seeping through. I wanted to feel it, really feel it. I slipped my middle finger under the leg elastic. The fine hair was moist and soft. My body stilled completely as my finger alone continued this new exploration.

My conscience was screaming, I was breaking my vow to God.

You'll go to Hell.

I don't care, I thought as this stronger need bored through me. The top of my crevice was slightly sticky and the pad of my finger barely tapped, drawing the moisture towards it, like testing the setness of a jelly. How could such sensation pulse from such a tiny movement? From such a pin-pointed spot?

Images from the book behind me somewhere, I now climbed all by myself. Up, up a sheer mountain face only to teeter on a peak so fine, it threatened to throw me back down the side I'd come. I spun round and round for that split second before I pushed myself off and fell tumbling into the brilliance.

Flickering television pictures played across my half-closed eyes. The long strands of the shag pile

were a jungle through which they began to re-focus. Coffee table legs, shoes, curtain bottoms. Little by little I moved, the heaviness trickling slowly from my fingertips and toes. Coffee table top, bookshelf. I slowly made it up and sat back on my heels.

What had happened to me?

My shirt was still crunched up and as I began to fix it up, I tried to put thoughts of God from my mind but I could not. It began to consume me. I had really failed Him this time. I'd touched inside myself. Suddenly, I knew it all - I had been tempted, just like Eve. Like her I had failed. I had made promise after promise to Him and had broken each one. And now this.

I looked at the clock. I couldn't believe it was after ten. Had I slept? I went through to the kitchen to check. It was after ten. The Martins would be home soon. My heart pounded. Oh God!

I looked out into the night. I'd begun to read a book and ended up doing all this. And in someone else's place! It was disgusting. My gaze moved closer and I saw myself reflected blackly in the window. This proved there must be something wrong with me. I couldn't possibly be normal. Perhaps I wasn't fit to babysit.

I remembered Lisa. Ignoring the wobbles in my legs, I headed up the staircase. I looked into her bedroom. She was still there. I went over and pulled up the covers she'd kicked off. I caught my reflection again, this time in the dressing table mirror. I looked like a mother checking on her child in a movie, like Mrs Brady checking on Cindy. Then I remembered where my hands had been. I wasn't fit to touch a child maybe, no mother would do what I had just done.

In the bathroom I realised that I looked a mess. My shirt was wrinkled and my hair needed a brush. I opened a vanity drawer, looking for a brush. I only found a comb. I did the best I could with it and then carefully extracted my dark telltale hair from the teeth. I replaced the comb exactly where it had been lying in the drawer.

"The book!"

I'd left it lying on the lounge room floor. I flew down the stairs. I searched for the exact spot that it lived on the shelf. I wasn't sure. Car doors slammed. Voices murmured. The Martins! I shoved the book back in, hoping it was in the right place.

The key turned in the front door but it was blocked from opening by the chain. I ran and unhooked it.

"Gosh did we wake you?" Mrs Martin inquired, "You look like you've been asleep!"

I smiled and figured that that sounded pretty good. I nodded.

"Everything all right? No problems?"

"None."

"That's terrific."

I peered past her. Mr Martin entered the yellow glow of the porch light. "I'll take you home now, Megan, if you like."

Mrs Martin smiled strangely and then turned and muttered, "Are you sure you're all right to drive?"

Barry Martin scoffed, "Course I'm all right."

"Well then, thanks again, Megan." She handed me an envelope from her purse. "Five dollars okay?"

Okay? It was wonderful. Five weeks worth of pocket money in one hit.

Mr Martin opened the car door for me and then jumped in himself. The air around him smelled of beer. He started the car and reversed out of the driveway.

"Well Megan, how was your debut as a babysitter?"

How did I know? I didn't have much to compare it with and I was sure that other babysitters didn't to what I had done. "Okay, I suppose."

"You're really growing up fast now, aren't you."

I hated it when people said stuff like this. Last Christmas my Aunty Paula kept insisting that it was wonderful the way I was blossoming. It was embarrassing and I sure didn't want to hear Mr Martin start on the subject.

"Really a young woman now," he continued. He reached over and squeezed my knee. It didn't feel right. "All the boys chasing you?"

"Um, not really." My heart was racing, something was just not right.

We turned into my street. He drove at a snail's pace.

"Megan?"

"Y..yes Mr Martin?"

"Megan...never lose your virginity, Megan. Promise me?"

I froze, keeping my eyes glued straight ahead, trying to ignore the hand on my leg. "Um..." I didn't know what to say.

"Keep those lads at a distance. I know what young lads are like," he laughed, "yes I do!"

His hand moved higher up my leg, squeezed deep into my thigh muscle. It began to hurt but I couldn't find my voice. My throat had clamped shut.

"Lose your virginity and you lose your self respect. You're still a virgin aren't you, Megan? You haven't lost your self-respect with a boy have you?"

His hand moved in towards my groin as he pulled the car up outside our house.

I was already grasping the door handle. My mind suddenly cleared. Pretend nothing strange has happened. My voice emerged bright and loud, unusual to my own ears. "Thanks for the lift, Mr Martin." I jumped out.

"That's my pleasure," he mumbled. "Anytime."

I slammed the door shut and ran in straight across the lawn. I tapped the doorknocker loudly, half a dozen time or more.

"Megan? Is that you?" my mother called from behind the closed door.

"Yes, it's me."

I walked quickly past her. She was wrapped tightly in her dressing gown, the rest of the family in bed it seemed.

"Megan? Are you all right? You're all funny, flushed or something."

I turned and managed to smile. I knew somehow that I couldn't tell her what had happened. Perhaps I'd done something that made him touch me. Maybe he was just being friendly. "I'm fine. I um...ran across the grass and thought I felt a spider web on me."

Mum shook her head. "You know there're spiders out there. You should stay on the path at night."

I calmed my breathing a bit. "Yeah I'll remember in future."

"So how was the night?"

"Um...okay."

"No problems?"

"No, no problems."

"I knew you'd be all right. They're good people, The Martins."

"Oh God, I feel so guilty." I put down the phone and fell back into the pillows on the bed.

Max let go an exaggerated sigh. "My poor Australian girl!"

"It's hardly poor me. It's the family I feel sorry for. Imagine only getting a day's notice that the nanny you booked two months ago won't be coming after all!"

It was nine thirty and the twilight lingered, lingered. The weeks were slipping by, Bastille Day less than a fortnight away. I put my arm through Max's as we walked across the *Pont Neuf*. In high school I'd painted scenes in monochrome. The mauve evening air cast a gauze mist over the city, every shade of purple. Why was it every time we crossed a bridge I had the urge to kiss him?

Max laughed when I told him.

"But this bridge," I said, "it should be just a bridge but it's not. It's like the stupid Eiffel Tower. How does a chunk of metal affect me this way? It makes no sense!"

"Does it have to make sense?"

"I don't know. It's part of this whole Paris-thing. Living here's supposed to sort it out, get it out of my system, not make it worse!"

Max cuddled me close. "Perhaps I should have left you alone. Paris can get very lonely when you have no-one with you to share it."

I brought my lips to his cheek. "Do you wish you hadn't spoken to me?"

"No, of course not but maybe another week on your own might have cured any romantic notions."

My lips kissed his mouth. Kissed on the crest of the bridge.

"No, you are right," he said, as we headed off, "someone would have found you. You were ripe for this experience."

Ripe. The way things translated was strange sometimes. It sounded wrong but in a fashion described exactly what was the case. Ripe for picking. "Plump and succulent," I murmured as I drifted along on the thought.

We were heading to St Michel. Walking, naturally. Friday night was the best night for the cafe buskers. "Can we afford to be out tonight?" I asked as we walked along the smaller streets, avoiding the crowds.

"Like I said, we may as well live it up now."

“Are things getting very bad?”

“Yes Megan, very bad.”

In recent weeks he'd begun to talk a little more about his work. I knew he was close to bankruptcy.

“But I don't understand how there are no fish just because of a drought. It's not as if the sea has dried up or anything.”

His hand tightened on mine. “Do we have to discuss this now?” He was edgy.

“No, I suppose not.”

He inhaled deeply. “Look, it's the currents. At this time of year, I import sardine from the Adriatic. The extended heat wave, the drought, it affects the currents. The sardine just haven't arrived. Every year they move up into the Adriatic, this year they haven't. Simple as that.”

We paused to cross the road, waiting for the lights to change. It was hard to believe that sardines could be someone's undoing. He stared straight ahead, the tension around his jaw drawing the skin tight. Things were taking their toll. I sifted through my brain-silt trying to help, to find gold. Nothing. Then, a flashback, dad on holidays. Sardines. Stinking out our rented caravan as he mashed them on his toast with a fork. It struck me as funny. I told Max.

Unimpressed. “Fresh sardines, Megan, a different ball game.”

I suppressed the giggle. “You mean a different kettle of fish!”

He screwed up his face. “Pardon?”

Bad time for jokes. “Forget it. Can't you bring in some other fish?” I suggested as we crossed the thoroughfare and found ourselves twisting down another narrow street.

Max sighed. “It's not *that* simple. Working as a broker you have contracts to supply certain things at certain times of year. I have wholesalers screaming who in turn have retailers screaming. They want sardines and I am the person who usually supplies Paris with sardines.”

“Oh.”

“So,” he continued, “the only thing I can do is to try to get lobsters.”

“Lobsters?”

“There's always a market for....” The voice faded. Max had stopped, eyes fixed on what appeared to be an op-shop. “You see that jacket?” he asked, pointing. “Come and have a look.” He waited for a moment to wing-ding down the tiny roadway and led me across to the other side. The window display was lit by

a single bulb. Yellow, dusty. "What do you think of it?" he asked, indicating a jacket hung on the right side.

"It's okay I suppose." Was it black? No, maybe deep green. Frankly, I couldn't see why we'd crossed the road.

"Ah, my little Australian girl, you don't have the eye. This jacket would look superb on you. The cut, the collar!" He kissed the tips of his fingers in a gesture of appreciation. "You must have it."

"Oh yeah, what are we going to do? Steal it?"

Max kissed my mouth. "Leave it to me," he said with the air of finality.

"The lobsters?"

*"Exactement."* We continued on our way.

"No problems with the heatwave?" I inquired.

He smiled. "Not in Ireland."

*"Ireland?"* When did Ireland come into the picture?"

"It's what I have been working on for a week or so now. I may need to go over." He hesitated. "Can you hear something?"

"Like what?"

"Music, I think."

We cut the pace and listened. It was definitely music. Big music. Brass. We walked towards where the sound was coming from, growing louder and louder. I couldn't see much. A cafe set in a tiny square but with what seemed like a hundred people spilling out of it. Suddenly surrounded by great brass tubas, trombones. Horns of every configuration.

The Pied Piper called and all of Paris was closing in, in four-four time. People clapping, cheering, blocking the traffic. An impromptu party. I needed a party. Max was trying to keep me back but I pulled him into the fracas.

Music, cheering, singing, the incessant honking of cars unable to move forward or back. Mo-peds beep-beeping, attempting to weave a path through the middle of us.

"This is bedlam!" I screamed happily to Max.

"What?"

I waved my hand, don't worry.

Huge drums kept the beat as more and more passers-by joined in. Whoa! We were on the move.

Every musician had fallen into makeshift formation and had started to march. We were sucked into their slipstream

"We've got to get out of here," Max screamed into my ear. I felt his urgency and reluctantly let him guide me across the sea of people. Always swim across the rip, I recalled. We pressed our bodies into the wall lining the street.

"Hold on," screamed Max, finding my hand and edging his way along against the flow.

Sirens began to drown out the music, loudhailers crackled incomprehensible directives. The mood was fast changing. There were less people crushed against us now and I could see the massive riot-police van. How had it made it through?

"Keep moving," Max yelled, yanking my arm in the opposite direction.

I moved but over my shoulder I gawked as police hauled people across the stony street on their arses to the van. Musicians thrown in one on top of the other with the instruments just chucked in behind them. Screams of "*non, non!*" rose above the din as two officers rocked a tuba back and forward gaining the momentum to hurl it into the van. Crash. Then the doors were slammed shut.

I heard Max, "Let's get out of here, quickly."

"But it's outrageous, did you see\_"

Chanting. "*Liberez nos comarades! Liberez nos comarades!*" Louder and louder. The crowd closed in on the van.

Free our friends.

All around me came the cry. I joined in, "*Liberez nos comarades! Liberez nos\_*"

"*Ta guerle, arret, arret!*"

He'd told me to shut up!

He dragged me away from the scene. "To have you arrested is all we need, no?"

### Coast 18

"Well, what do you think?"

Nell waited until the two other nurses left. "They seem quite nice. Going back to their place sounds all right to me. Besides," she added with a grin, "Blake said he'd take me ski-ing next weekend."

"He's going to take you skiing? You've only just met!"

Nell shrugged uncomfortably. "Well, he didn't actually say that he would. I mean it's not definite or anything but he sounded like he might mean it."

I took and my lipstick and reapplied it.

"How about you and ...what's his name?" enquired Nell.

"Neville."

"Well do you like him? He seems all right to talk to."

I looked at Nell in the mirror. She was leaning over the smooth grey basis, absorbed now in the task of touching up her mascara.

"Why do I get the one who's nice to talk to and you get the one who's gorgeous!"

Nell laughed.

"Well I didn't notice you wasting time talking on the dance floor," I said.

Nell stood back and smoothed her hair. "What do think?"

"You look fine," I assured her.

"No not me. I meant about going back to their place. I think we should go, I mean we'll all be together.

Nothing can happen!"

I looked at my watch. Already after 12. "I don't want a late one. I'm on in the morning."

"Yeah me too, me too. But we won't be late. It'll just be a drink."

"Okay I suppose but whose car are we going in?" I packed my makeup back in my handbag and fluffed out my hair.

"Mine," said Nell walking towards the door. "They didn't bring a car."

"You sure we're not just a taxi service?"

"I'll ignore that remark," laughed Nell.

We walked back into the dimness. The disco was still pumping away but the crowd was starting to thin.

We were at the monthly staff night at the local watering hole, the Seals Club. It wasn't limited to staff and Blake and Neville were outsiders.

Nell led the way back to the table where they were both waiting for us.

"Let's go."

It was dead on eight o'clock Wednesday evening when Andy and I walked up to the admissions desk and rang the bell. There was no-one in sight behind the old polished wood counter. Just a radio on top of the filing cabinet playing "Hot Stuff". God, was that seventy-eight or seventy-nine? It had been a favourite. It brought flashes of Kathleen and I boogieing away to Donna Summer at the local pub. The basement disco had always been packed. Mostly sixteen year olds like we'd been, all smoking and drinking Southern Comfort and Coke. Except Kathleen. She didn't smoke. I used to make her hold a cigarette when we danced so she didn't look like a dag. What idiots we'd been.

Andy rang the bell again and put down my bag. It wasn't my main bag, just the stuff I'd need at first. The main suitcase was in the boot of the car. Why wasn't anybody coming to attend to us? I hated hospitals. I knew them too well. What the smells were, where the trolleys were clattering off to.

A squat grey-haired woman emerged from a door to our left. She was loaded down with medical records and files. "Be with you in a jiffy," she called as she scampered through to the back of the office. We were right on time, which was the way I liked it. It was the way I always liked it. On time. Punctual. Put it in the diary and be there. Simple. Not like this baby.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes. I'm Megan Moran. I'm a booked admission for a Prostin induct\_"

The practiced smile of the beige-clad desk clerk faltered a little. "Don't you work here? In the hospital?"

Andy put his arm around my shoulder and squeezed. He knew how I detested this whole scene. I snuggled in close to him. "I've never worked in this section."

"Doesn't matter where you work honey, after being here twenty five years like I have, you get to know who's who. Can I have your card?" I handed the plastic folder over to her. "You're a nurse aren't you?"

I nodded. "Only very part-time these days. I weaning myself off it."

She didn't respond to that one. She'd already started punching in my information, making me official. "You can't be guaranteed a private room you know?"

Andy held me close. "We understand."

Did we?

### Paris 23

Max zipped up the suitcase. It was full, he didn't know how long he'd be in Ireland. "I'm sorry I won't be here for Bastille," he said, enclosing me in his arms.

I was staying behind. There was no money for two to travel. I rested my head on his shoulder and listened to his instructions. I wasn't to go out after dark, especially around Bastille when people went crazy, keep the shutters locked, don't have the window open all night. I assured him I was a grown up girl.

"I want you to stay safe, that's all."

"I know."

I could feel his fingers through my hair. "My little Australian girl, will you be here when I get back?"

Yes, I'd be here.

He shrugged. "Maybe, maybe."

I pulled away from him. "Such faith in me!"

He studied my face. "How can I have faith in you when I know you don't love me?"

I thought for a few moments. I did love him. More than lust, more than care about. It hadn't shattered the core of my being but maybe that kind of love was never meant to last. "Max," I whispered, "I feel differently now."

"Tell me?"

"You're my friend, my lover, what more can I say? I love you."

He hugged me tightly. "Enough to marry me?"

Who knew how much love was enough? Perhaps that searing core-love was too much, burnt too fast to last the distance. "We'll see," I replied softly.

### **Mercy 13**

I couldn't sleep. It'd been like this all week. I wished there was someone to talk to. I took out my diary and again tried to write something down. But how could I write? And what if someone saw it? This was not something that I could code under wearing jeans or anything else. I stared at the blank pages.

Useless. I wished I had a book to read, wished I had *Valley of the Dolls*. I wanted to feel Anne's joy when Lyon held her close to him. I wanted to find out if Lyon married her after she gave him her virginity. Did she keep her self-respect? I wanted to know what happened to the girls, how they all turned out in the end. Anything to get rid of Mr Martin from my head.

Every time I thought about his hand on me and his talk about virginity I went all cold. Questions, questions. Lyon had been prepared to make love to Anne until he found out she was a virgin but then, he'd pushed her aside. Was making love to a virgin so bad? Why then was it bad to lose it? Why had Mr Martin wanted to know about me? What had he wanted me to say? And what about the way his fingers moved right up my leg, kneading my skin as if he owned it? Did Mrs Martin know he felt the legs of babysitters? It had probably never happened before.

It was my fault. I'd made him do it.

Perhaps he was able to tell what I'd done in his house. Perhaps he could smell it on me. Something in my chest sank low at that thought. I remembered a bit in *The Dusky Innocent*. The man had said, "Your scent drives me wild" to the woman before taking her on the lounge. They'd already made love once that chapter but it was her scent that got him all worked up again. Perhaps Mr Martin had been able to smell my scent. I knew that doing what I did was a sin but just the thought of it now made me feel like dying.

It was wrong, abnormal. Perhaps the whole thing had been a message from God. Perhaps God had chosen Mr Martin to teach me a lesson. He would be the logical choice I suppose, being so Catholic and all. The thought made me shiver. Was I really of such interest to God?

An early afternoon breeze brought a strangely sweet smell wafting across the covered section of the playground. The microphone spluttered moistly as Sister Anne almost swallowed half of the ball bit and began to speak. She had no idea. About a hundred of the one hundred and twenty second formers standing in their class lines giggled. It was always the same. I was one of the ones who tried not to laugh. Not because I didn't think it was funny, but because I figured she would single me out for Detention if she saw me.

There was no denying that she was tongue-crazy. When she spoke, she flicked it like a viper over her lips between each word. All around her mouth seemed to glisten with spit. Her lips would furl and unfurl over one another in a slow oozy rhythm. She was unbelievably ugly already, all this didn't help.

"I have two topics to raise with you girls today," the microphone ploofed loudly. She waited until the crowd settled once more. "Firstly, a rather delicate matter. I'll not use the microphone to speak of this..." We waited expectantly. This was something new. Sister Anne clicked off the switch and started to shout. "...Has come to...attention...not know....use...of the...ettes....hear me...back."

We all looked at one another. "No Sister," came the chant.

She clicked on the microphone once more and speaking in a very low tone, began again. "Can you hear me now?"

"Yes Sister."

"I don't particularly want to announce this for the world to hear so pay attention..", she continued softly, her microphone ploofing all the "p's". "You will notice the dreadful smell that is permeating our surrounds."

There was a titter from way down the back.

"This is no laughing matter!" Sister Anne boomed. "The incinerettes are clogged with lunchtime refuse - paper bags and glad-wrap. I am mortified. I now have the embarrassing task of requesting some men to come out to our school and clean them out. It's disgusting that men have to come here and clean up a mess like this one." She scanned the lines of us for any signs of guilt. "You know what it is that should go into them and that's all that should go into them. If any girl has information as to who is responsible for the mess down in the main toilet block I want that girl to come to me privately before classes finish today."

She waited for several minutes. It was an old trick that never worked, seeing if silence flushed out the guilty. It only served to make the innocent jittery if you ask me. I kept my eyes fixed straight ahead, guiltless looking I hoped.

No-one came forward. She continued on.

"Finally, the Young Christian Students Association is having a membership drive." Sister Anne ignored the murmuring from across the assembly. "There will also be, in association with the Marist Brothers School, a dance to welcome all the new members. It will be held on Saturday week commencing at seven pee-em at the Marist Hall. There will be supervision, you can assure your parents, and members only will be permitted. Our Mercy Y.C.S. branch head, and Sister Marie will sign you up after school today in Room 1612. Now I think that it all I have for this afternoon."

Young Sister Marie's mad signalling caught Sister Anne's attention and she rushed over and whispered something to her. Sister Marie was so pretty and really nice to talk to. No-one could understand why she'd become a nun. "I have been asked," Sister Anne announced flatly, "to inform you that the dress for the dance is semi-formal and that the band playing is from Marist Brothers Senior School and is called....um... what was it again?" She bent once more to Sister Marie and announced with a shaking head, "The band is called Shoot the Tube and I'm sure they'll play all the hit parade tunes. Assembly dismissed."

Standing just outside room 1612 a few hours later, my stomach was full of butterflies. I'd been waiting for so long to go to a dance. Mum was sure to let me go this time. She just couldn't say no again, not with the whole of second form going. I looked around me. No-one else looked as excited as I felt. I tried hard to calm my insides down a bit. It would be so uncool if someone suspected that I thought this whole thing was terrific or something. I folded my arms and attempted to look a bit bored with it all.

I'd be glad to get out of this corridor. Trust Sister Anne to have picked 1612 to rub in her point. It was just along from the main toilets and the pong still lingered. Stupid twits for putting stuff in the incinerettes. I didn't put anything in them, ever. I'd had a look inside the little door when I had first started high school but it was just a little tray. I hadn't had a clue at first but then I'd work it out. It hadn't been hard, they were often stuffed to overflowing. I was determined to use Meds like mum so I wouldn't have to stuff used pads anywhere, let alone in those incinerettes. You could just flush tampons, mum had said. Much easier when you went visiting and you could swim too.

But Mum had said that you couldn't use them straight away. I had a body-contoured adhesive-backed Modess pad camouflaged in my schoolbag in case of an emergency. Mind, at nearly fourteen, if I started my period it wouldn't be an emergency, it would be a miracle.

The line moved forwards. I was out of the corridor. There wasn't long to go now, the sign-up desk was in sight. My butterflies took off again and I had to stop myself from smiling too much. Kathleen and I had waited for this. Finally we would get to meet some guys. All the parents loved it too because they thought the Brothers closely supervised everything. From what we'd heard, they weren't very strict at all, and not too holy either. They apparently even had weekend camps and things too. But not straight away or anything. They only accepted second form girls in the last half of the year. We weren't allowed to be real members until next year. Still, we were luckier than the guys at Marist Brothers. They had to wait until the end of third form. Everybody knew that boys were late to mature.

I spotted Kathleen at the front of the line. She waved madly at me to join her.

"I can't just push in," I mouthed back.

She shook her head and pointed to a spot in front of her.

Moving smoothly, I nonchalantly made my way towards her and slipped into the line. I ignored the slightly pissed-off comments behind me.

"She was only at the loo you know," Kathleen assured them.

"Liar," I muttered to her.

"Well, I don't want to miss our train. If we don't get the 3.34 we miss the bus and I won't see you-know-who."

"I'm sure he never even notices us. Besides, I don't see why you like him, he looks stuck up to me."

"Shut up," she whined, "he might talk to me one day. He never will if I'm not even there will he?"

It turned out he wasn't on the bus.

"But do you think he'll go to the dance?" Kathleen asked anxiously.

"I don't know, don't the fifth formers have their own dances?"

"I don't know." She gazed out the window. I could tell that she was beginning to get pretty wrapped up in this guy. People always stared dreamily when they were wrapped. I knew it wasn't the scenery that held her attention. The bus route took the windiest most boring way home possible. There was nothing to see and we saw it every day.

Mum was always carrying on that I stared into space. She was always saying that I lived my life in a dream. That, and "for someone who's supposed to be bright you do some really stupid things." I suppose I did do stupid things sometimes. It must have been Gary Carmichael on my mind even though I wasn't always aware of it.

Kathleen turned back to me. "I feel so depressed. I wish I had a satin dress to wear to the dance."

I sighed. "Me too."

"I'm going to ask mum but I bet she'll say no."

We sat in silence. I would have given anything for one of those dresses. They were so cool.

Embroidery on the shoulders, double stitched peaks on the sleeve cuffs and buttons all the way down the front. I wanted one in burgundy. I had a tub of deep burgundy pot-of-gloss for my lips already. Oh, it would match so well.

## **Gravida 28**

Another contraction. I wished they'd stop. They weren't getting stronger or more frequent. They were just there. If only I could have slept. I tried lying on my other side. Watched the beige stripy curtain that I'd

pulled around my bed flutter in the warm air. The ceiling fan droned and clicked, set on low. The central heating was on. Couldn't be turned off until the end of August. I'd already asked. They hadn't taken into account a warm spell at this time of year.

The woman across the room called out, slurring, "Sarah, S-sarah."

"Shut up you stupid bitch," I someone else mutter.

She groaned and went back to sleep.

Another one. My womb pulled up and a hot band spread through me and around my lower back.

Uncomfortable. Not letting me sleep. Was labour starting?

It ebbed away. I wanted to be home, tucked in close behind Andy in our own bed. Why did it have to be like this?

### Paris 23

Nine at night and I was vacuuming the large Persian rug in the middle of the room. Happy Bastille Eve! Max was still away, nine days and counting. Why I couldn't sit back and enjoy being a kept woman while it lasted was beyond me. I wrapped up the cord and returned the Hoover to the *concierge*. Next I scrubbed the one other room. No matter how clean everything was, it never seemed right having a toilet and shower in the kitchen. Still, I could stand it as long as my Eiffel Tower view stayed right where it was.

I turned up the radio sitting on top of the fridge and sprinkled the Ajax over the shower tiles. The DJ screamed the call, "*Radio N-R-G*," and launched into the next song.

It couldn't be.

James Reyne? In Paris?

The slow bass introduction began. It was him. I sat back on my heels as Sydney rushed into my head. He warbled, "*As the Manly ferry makes its way to Circular Quay*." I closed my eyes. Sydney. Andy. Late night trips home across the harbour on old blue and white ferries. Breeze thick and salty, the swell of crossing The Heads. Slow rolling, undulations, rocking back into his body. Arms around me, keeping me warm. Inside? No, I'd say. And we'd continue in the half shadows, decks clear but for us.

The old pain. A pressed primula. For Andy to admire the desiccated remains from time to time.

"*Don't be so Reckless, throw down your gun.*"

Sing. Don't cry.

I crowed, "*Like Scott of the Antarctic, dum dum dum da de dum de dum.*" Bloody James Reyne. You never could hear the words right, never knew what he was singing. "*She don't li-i-ke, that kind of behaviour.*" This bit I knew. "*She don't li-i-ke, that kind of behaviour.*"

Christ knows what the shitty song was about anyway! "*Don't be so Reckless.*"

I opened my eyes. The twinkling lights on Harbour waters faded away with the dying beats of the song. Wow, scrubbing bathroom tiles in Paris. How exciting. I reached over and flicked off the radio. Outside, the action sounded like it was hotting up.

I unlocked the shutters and looked over to the park. Under the floodlights it was carnival time. Firecrackers, music. Ten thirty and the party was just starting.

I'd promised Max not to go out.

I crawled into bed.

I picked up the book I'd bought for next to nothing at a book exchange. *The Thornbirds*. I don't think I'd ever even seen a sheep station in Australia but still it was somehow comforting to read about home.

"*Allons enfants de la pat..*"

"*Arret, con.*"

Attempts at *La Marseillaise* outside the window. More laughter. Was I missing every party in Paris? I tried to get into life with Father Ralph. Drogheda. Damn, that music sounded hot.

Max's warnings rang loud. I had to stay.

Whose life is this?

Mine.

Well, what are you doing stuck in here?

Keeping safe.

Fuck safe. You can be safe back in Sydney.

Into my jeans, a light coat and out the door. The warm night was charged with the energy of people everywhere, all on the go. Along the walkways sounds bounced off the canopy of leaves above. Lamps shone dull yellow spheres through firecracker smoke.

Heading towards the source of the music I'd been hearing for hours and I slipped into a large boppy crowd half-circling an upbeat jazz quintet. Black guys, so black only their eyes and teeth shone out. Steaming, wailing their saxes and clarinets as bodies around me rocked.

Then, just beside me a string of crackers fired.

"Shit!" I squealed, crashing back into the guy beside me. A laugh, his large hand on my shoulder. "*Ca va?*" he asked as he restored my balance.

"*Ca va,*" I assured him. "*Merci.*"

"*Tu es toute seule ce soir?*"

He looked friendly, cute. Here goes, I thought. I told him, in halting French, that he was right, I was alone tonight.

"*Pas encore,*" he said with a smile, "From here on, you with me will be. Okay? I am called Pasqual."

He was young, eighteen perhaps. *Very* cute. Longish fair hair, tanned, smooth skin. "I'm Megan."

"Me-garhn. It is *jolie*. Pretty."

I turned back to the music. More and more people were starting to dance up front.

"Me-garhn?"

"*Oui?*"

"My friends and myself," he explained, indicating the couple just across from him, "we are going looking to see the other things..." Pasqual gestured the wider park. "You will come, yes?"

Yes. Why not.

He introduced Isabelle and her boyfriend, Herve. I guessed they were all around the same age.

"*Vin?* Wine?" asked Isabelle pulling a litre plastic bottle from the fraying day-pack slung over her shoulder.

I took the red wine from her. "*Merci.*" Gulped and passed it back.

"*Pas mal?*" she laughed across to me as she in turn passed it to Pasqual.

No, it wasn't bad.

For the next few hours we tore around the park like mad things. I bought some Tom Thumb crackers for a few francs and joined in the mayhem. Pasqual offered his hand and we raced over to where ten or so guys had started playing African drums. The crowd was with us and the party erupted again.

Another litre bottle hit the dust. Head swimming with wine and African beat. A conga line. Pasqual's hands warm on my waist as an ever-lengthening snake wound its way in and out of trees, finding cross paths that meandered through the park's edges.

Pasqual said something I didn't catch and I found myself being wrenched from the line. Hand clasped

in his, led me back the way we'd come. In the thickness of trees, he stopped.

"Can I..." He brought two fingers to his lips as he searched for the word.

Why not? I stepped towards him and we embraced, a little awkwardly at first. Then the kiss. So different to Max. So soft and wet and sensual. A boy's kiss. Boy's urgency.

Drums.

The conga line was upon us.

"*Viens*," he said, taking my hand. I followed as he looked around for the other friends. It was impossible with all the people around, the darkness.

"*C'est quel heure?*" he asked seeing my watch.

Twenty past three.

"*Tu es fatigued?*"

No. I wasn't tired. He kissed me again.

Under the Eiffel Tower, across the road to the river. Sitting close, dangling legs over the cement bank of the Seine. Lights from the road, the tower, sparkled on the water. He took out a small pipe. "You smoke? *Ashish?*"

"Sometimes."

He handlit the pipe and sucked. The small bowl glowed red and then was out. He held it in his chest as long as he could and slowly exhaled. My turn. It wasn't too heavy and as I passed back the pipe he said he had an idea. What?

His arm around my shoulder, his hand under my jacket to my breast. "Go to Megan's place," he whispered close to my ear. His finger circled my hardening nipple, questioning.

"We can't."

Pasqual pouted. Full lips in full flight. Only French boys. "You want me, *non?*"

Yes, I wanted him but no. "*C'est impossible.*"

"*C'est toujours possible*," he insisted, bring a hand to my thigh.

"*Non, Pasqual*," removing his hand, "*Pas comme ca.*" Not like this.

Studied dejection. He peeked from under his fringe to check if it was working.

I smiled. "I'll go if you want me to," I suggested softly.

He shook his head. "No, stay please."

We sat holding hands for a long time before he turned to me. "Do you want to look to the sun? As it... er....ups?" He brought one hand up and over in an arc through the air.

"The sunrise? Where from?"

A smile. "*Viens*, I to you show the best place."

He was right. At Montmartre, on the top steps of Sacre Coeur Church we watched the day unfold. He fed me chocolate, Coke and passed over the hash pipe from time to time. In halting French and English, a type of *Franglais*, we talked through grey, mauve, pink and gold. About Australia, what work I did, why I was in Paris. I told him about Andy. About Max.

Pasqual talked of school, living at his mum's. *Oh merde!* How old was he? Sixteen. *Sixteen?* I hadn't kissed anyone who was that young since I was at school. Just a boy. I stood and walked down several white marble stairs. It was a quarter past six and I wanted to go home. Turning to him I called, "Coming?"

He shoved his hands deep in the pockets of his loose fitting jeans as he followed me down and down from Sacre Coeur. I could hear him lamenting, he should never have told me. Yes, it did change things.

In the Metro back to *Ecole Militaire*, his stop was further on. We kissed one final time, my just making it through the closing door onto the platform. He stood nose-against-glass as the train pulled out. Waving bye.

### **Mercy 13**

"No. And I mean no. Don't ask me again."

"But Kathleen's mum said that she could have one."

"Do I look like Kathleen's mother? I said no."

"But please mum?"

She came fuming out of the kitchen, and stood right in front of me. We looked directly into each other's eyes these days.

She started to speak in that tone that was almost a singsong whisper. I'd pushed her to the edge. "I'm not paying thirty dollars for a dress that I can run up for less than half the price. Now I've offered to make you a dress out of that navy blue satin I've got in the cupboard. If you don't want that, suit yourself and wear something you've already got."

She stood for a few more moments, her lips pressed together whitely. I didn't say anything. She walked back into the kitchen and started banging things around. I continued to set the table for tea.

I stayed angry all night. It wasn't fair. I would look like such a nerd in a homemade satin dress. It wasn't that I didn't like mum's sewing generally but unless this dress was exactly like the ones in the shop, I would never be cool. I knew even if she managed to get most of it right, we would never be able to do the embroidery bits properly.

And if that wasn't enough, dad had a go at me for walking around with a long face. It seemed that lately I couldn't have any facial expression at all. I was always being told to stop pulling a long face, to get that smart-alec look of my face, to buck up and stop looking like dreamy-dora. Perhaps I should just wear a mask. It felt like I was most of the time anyway. Everyone else could look shitty if they felt shitty, but little Megan had to look happy and sweet all the time.

Well little Megan wasn't happy and sweet all the time. By the time I got to bed I was fuming inside. I dared to push the press button lock on my bedroom door for the first time in my life. I turned off the light, flung myself on the bed and bawled. I shoved the pillow over my head to try and muffle my sobbing. I'd never cried like this before, my whole body knotted and hurting. I couldn't stop my chest and throat from having these blubbering convulsions. I just sobbed and sobbed until there wasn't another one left inside me.

Why was I crying like this? I'd simply cracked open. With my head under the stuffy confines of the bedclothes and pillows I tried to name what I was feeling. Anger. Anger and frustration. My whole life was nothing less than infuriating.

### **Gravida 28**

2 am. The verandah rail was cool to touch. Leaning over it I looked down onto the empty street. Why did I have to be here, alone? My womb again drew up, folded in on itself. Stronger? Maybe.

A baby by morning they'd said. All going well. Prostin gel applied to the cervix, off to sleep and wake up in labour. Sounded too good. I should have suspected that it wouldn't have been that simple.

Overdue.

Nine and a half months was enough for any pregnancy. Wasn't it?

Using the railing, I pushed myself upright again. God, I needed to sleep. Couldn't. At least out here

you could breathe the air. I wanted to go home.

I wanted Andy.

Wanted to have this damn baby and get on with it.

Face it, what I wanted was starting to fade into the background. I'd stepped onto a moving footway. Couldn't get off. Dangerous to get off now. So they said. Checks needed. Close monitoring, anything could happen.

Ha, nothing could happen.

I could be like this forever.

Hang on. This one seemed heavier. My breath caught in my chest as my uterus undulated. The forces were gathering. As it subsided once more a rush of excitement took its place. It was happening!

### Paris 23

Max had arrived back a week later, pleased to see me but grey with despair. Each morning he'd be off early and for three days running he'd been home before lunchtime. The afternoons were spent in loud frenetic telephone conversations to Italy, to his backers. "*Merde!*" he'd shout again as he slammed down the phone. Then he'd pick it up and start madly dialling again.

The days were becoming more frugal. The phone bill was well overdue and we hadn't been out to dinner for weeks. Pasta was on the menu nearly every night. Max had given me money for grocery shopping this morning. "It would be wise to just buy the bare essentials."

I hated seeing him like this. Stressed, angry, so different to the man I'd met a few months before. Wandering around the supermarket I figured bare essentials still meant red wine. Cheap, drinkable stuff. Six francs a litre in a plastic screw top bottle. Tonight we were getting drunk. There wasn't much else to do. Besides, it felt right to get drunk.

Propped up in bed together Max absent-mindedly stoked my breasts.

"You have such bad timing," he sighed, as I refilled the glasses. "The most exciting woman in my life for years comes along as everything falls apart."

I slurped down a mouthful of the chateau *plastique*. "Don't worry about it tonight. Let's just get

completely *sou* and fuck ourselves silly."

Max smiled and shook his head. "Little Australian girl!"

### **Mercy 13**

Into a wall of music. Heavy bass riffs pounding breastbones. Spinning wheels swirling colours through the smoke. Magic. Kathleen started screaming something at me, smiling like she was retarded. I elbowed her in the side. "Don't be a dag," I screamed. "Let's go down the back a bit."

Her proper shop-bought pale blue satin dress looked good. I figured I could use her for cover most of the night. Not that mum hadn't done a good job on my satin dress but it just wasn't right. Everyone in the room could tell it was homemade. She had stitched on appliqués instead of doing the embroidery and put a zip up the back. The buttons down the front were fake, just sewn on for effect; they didn't open like they were supposed to.

On the whole I didn't feel too bad. I'd spent ages fumbling around with the curling tongs and for once my hair hadn't frizzed too much. Mum hadn't even gone mad on me for wearing tons of burgundy pot-o-gloss on my lips. Major victory.

The night was great except that the guys didn't come near us. Hardly any of them danced at all. They just hung out around the edges of the hall, smoking and laughing. Two of them loitered not far from where Kathleen and I were dancing with some other girls. One guy kept looking over at me. At least I thought he was. I would look at him then he'd look at me. As soon as he looked at me, I looked away again. I didn't want to seem too eager.

It wasn't until the last dance that anything happened. The band was starting to play "Angie". When Mick Jagger sang it, desperate and wanting in a rough sort of way, it made me wish that my name was Angie. Not much had been written for a girl called Megan.

"Wanna dance?"

I turned towards the voice. It was *him*. Why had he waited for the very last song? "Sure," I replied. Did that sound cool enough? I had to be careful not to blow it. He took my hand and led me a bit further over to the side of the hall.

Because it was a slow song, I wasn't actually dancing, more like rocking in his arms. I linked my hands around the back of his waist, it seemed the place for them. My throat felt thick and my heart was flip-

flopping all over the place. I was in a guy's arms for the first time. We exchanged names. He told me his was Mick. Or was it Rick? I couldn't be sure with the music so loud, but I was hoping it was Mick. It would be so cool to have a boyfriend called Mick.

The band had hardly started to sing the words of "Angie" when I noticed this sick look on his face. Something had changed but I couldn't figure out what it was. Next minute his half-opened mouth, moist lips looking pretty slimy, came down on mine.

I shouldn't have opened my eyes. I spotted Kathleen straight away. Her eyes were huge and her mouth was wide open. Not as wide open as mine though! Mick had started this kiss open-mouthed, I never had a chance. I closed my eyes like they were supposed to be closed and concentrated. I was sure that Mick had inhaled just as his mouth had met mine. There was definitely some sort of mini vacuum going on because although this was revolting, I couldn't move away.

He seemed intent on pushing on my teeth with his and although I moved back with the pressure of it all, he kept coming. With my lips sent out to the far reaches of my face, his tongue delved deeper. It settled wetly on the floor of my mouth and just kind of trembled. I had never touched someone else's tongue. My own was in full retreat, a tight curl at the back of my throat. His went in for the search.

He slid his tongue in a slow revolution, up and around, until it hooked mine. I breathed in sharply through my nose. Were you allowed? He paused a bit and then did another revolution and another and another, picking up momentum as time ticked on. I figured out I should just follow his lead and tried to move my tongue around his. It felt like a big steaming slug was in there. I tried hard not to think about it. But the slug-thing stayed with me until the need to swallow some saliva overtook it.

His large hand was low on my back and he kept my body braced against his. He was drawing small circles through the satin of my dress with his thumb. It wasn't keeping the same pace as his tongue. His tongue was getting faster and faster and it seemed as if all I had to do was keep up. It felt like a mixmaster going on, our tongues doing these endless laps of the small circuit.

How did these things end? How long would it go on for? Mick was silently jetting air in bursts down his nostrils, I gathered from this that it was okay to breathe at least. I couldn't afford to stuff this up too much, he might say something to someone. I couldn't afford to be labelled a bad kisser.

I was beginning to experience pain. My jaw had never been prized open like this at the dentist and the root of my tongue felt as if it had a sprained muscle. I half opened my eyes and through my cakey mascara,

I could see Kathleen hadn't moved. I closed them tight again. Other eyes were on me. Everyone in the hall was staring. At least it felt like they were. It was dark, but not that dark that you couldn't see who was kissing who.

So here I was thinking I'd just have this slow dance with this guy and perhaps he'd ask for my phone number and we would go to a movie or something and look where I had ended up. I knew I'd have trouble when it came to boys, with the physical side of things. Trouble controlling myself. But was this like I'd imagined? Was it normal for a guy to tongue kiss you so soon?

It was turning out to be a bit of an epic. The spinning colours carried right through my shut eyelids. Weird to have these circles in my mouth, on my back and in my eyes. I was falling inside myself. Still it might have been worse. What if the strobe lights had flashed on?

"Angie" finished with the crash of drums that'd finished every song that night and that was Mick's signal to stop. He drew his tongue back and thankfully closed his mouth, dragging my lips together with his. I couldn't help a slight slobber at the end. More of a quick slurp-type thing. I was sure it was uncool but it had to be better than dribbling saliva down my chin. The wetness of the whole thing sent a shudder running under my skin.

Someone was turning on the main lights. What a shock. In full fluorescent glare, Mick held my hand. I searched for Kathleen and sure enough she was still standing as if stuck in cement, sad puckered balloons above her head. People were leaving. The looping foil streamers were being pulled down from the ceiling as people walked from the hall, souvenirs perhaps. I wished they would turn down the lights again.

I looked back at Mick. He was staring blankly across the room which was a worry. Was he stoned? "Um, come and meet my friend," I ventured.

It seemed like the fact that I spoke more than my name came as a surprise. "Oh I might give it a miss, the guy I got a lift here with is probably waiting with the car outside but look, thanks anyway Rita."

The muscles in my chest caught. "My name's Megan!"

"Shit, sorry Megan. I thought you said Rita." He searched across the room again. "Look, do you and your friend need a lift home? Where do you live?"

Kathleen had moved. She was taking little steps sideways, towards the door. When she caught my eye, her head started to do small jerks in the same direction. Her forehead was crinkled and her mouth lopsided, she wanted me to follow.

"No we're right, thanks Mick."

"Vic."

"Pardon?"

"The name's Vic, not Mick."

I couldn't believe it. "Like as in Victa?"

Drum cymbals crashed to the floor, reverberated around us.

"Yeah, sort of," he answered, his free hand moving to take the packet of Marlborough from the chest pocket of his shirt, "but after my dad." He rolled his eyes.

I tried to smile. He lifted my hand, I kept hold. He wanted me to let go so he could light his cigarette.

"Sorry," I said.

"No worries."

"Well, good-bye I guess."

"Yeah see ya," he replied and blew a long stream of smoke from his nose.

I went to walk away but he grabbed my hand before I got very far. The hand holding the cigarette clinched my shoulder. His mouth was closing in again. I tried to duck but instead just got a slobber across my cheek before he managed to get a few laps of his tongue around the back of my teeth. He tasted foul. I broke the kiss quickly.

"See ya," I half-gasped before I ran across the dance floor to where Kathleen waited for me.

She went to speak.

"Don't say anything," I hissed, "just walk out of here, quickly."

She nodded and followed my direction. I avoided the eyes of my class by digging around in my shoulder bag as we walked through them. I didn't answer when I heard my name called.

Mum was waiting already, I could see her in the car. At least she didn't join in the gatherings of some of the other mothers and fathers on the footpath.

Kathleen burst as we crossed the dewy grass that lay between the boy's school grounds and the street. "Megan? What are you going to do?"

"Just shut up. Act normal and for God's sake don't say anything while where in the car about it. We'll talk later okay?"

"Okay but I just can't believe it. Mege, it was so awful to watch."

"SHUT UP."

On the way home, I did all the talking while Kathleen tried to stifle a fit of the giggles. She spluttered a few times, but she managed to turn them into coughing fits when I pinched her leg.

"Coming in for a cup of tea, Kathleen?" Mum asked.

I mentally communicated with her. Refuse at all costs. Refuse at all costs. She accepted.

I went straight to the bathroom. Kathleen followed me up the hall.

I turned, blocking the doorway. "Kathleen, I'm going to the toilet okay?"

"But Mege\_"

I slammed the door closed and locked it. I could hear her loud whispers through the door.

I refused to listen. "Shut up," I hissed, "you'll wake up Dad and Brian."

Hearing her wander back out to the kitchen I leant against the tiled wall. The chill seeped through the satin into the skin of my back. It felt comforting and I took a couple of deep breaths. I needed time to think. Could mum tell something had happened? Probably. She had a knack of knowing most things. When I was really little, just after I started school, she used to tell me about her secret eye. It allowed her to see me even when I wasn't in her sight. All mothers had them she'd said. I would always ask her to show me, to show me where this eye was on her head. She'd point to her forehead and tap lightly. Only other mothers could see it. For years I'd walked around thinking myself under constant observation. It was proving to be a hard habit to get rid of. Between mum and God my chances of getting away with much were next to none.

I turned to look into the mirror above the sink. I looked awful. My eyes were ringed with smeary black, the pot-o-gloss lips long gone. My freckles and the two pimples on my chin were there for all to see. No wonder they had the dances in the dark. Vic probably wouldn't have asked me to dance in the first place if he had seen me like this, in the light.

Why did his name have to be Vic? How could I tell Kathleen his name was Vic? How embarrassing. I washed my face a bit and decided to tell everyone his name was Mick. No-one would know better anyway. Besides, people would have forgotten about it by Monday. Maybe.

I sat next to Kathleen at the dining table where mum was setting up some supper.

"Kathleen was just telling me how you were asked to dance, Megan," Mum chirped as she put down the plate of melted cheese on toast. Her voice was chock-a-block with questions.

I glared across at my so-called friend and answered as required. "Yeah."

Mum smiled in that knowing way that I really hated and whizzed back into the kitchen to get the tea.

She was probably pleased I hadn't been a wallflower. I took the opportunity to kick Kathleen.

She scowled. "Ow, don't!"

"Shhh."

"Well don't." She leaned forward and beckoned me closer. "Listen, are you all right?"

"Ye-ea-ah, of course."

"But Mege, the germs and all."

"What?"

She came closer still. "The germs. It's so unhygienic, all that saliva and stuff."

"Oh God, shut up will you"

"But the germs! You know Mum's a nurse and she reckons\_"

"Kathleen, for Christ's sake!" She looked really worried and suddenly my mouth felt absolutely mucky.

I thought about it for a moment. "Look, I'll use some Dettol and gargle or something okay?"

"I think you should."

Mum came back in, wiping her hands on a bit of handtowel. "Should what?"

"Nothing," I answered.

"Nothing," Kathleen echoed.

She sat next to Kathleen and pinched a piece of cheese on toast. "There's something going on!" She was talking like a kid almost. She was bringing the toast to her mouth when she dropped it face down on the table cloth. "It's only an old one," she assured Kathleen as she tried to scrape up the cheese with a teaspoon. "Come on, tell me."

I gazed at her face as it turned to me, then Kathleen and then back to me. She was excited. I felt sad that I couldn't tell her about the kiss. Why couldn't I? She was always saying how great it was that we could talk about everything, like friends or sisters. She'd told me these hideous stories about nanna telling her nothing about anything. She had promised never to be like that with me. I did talk to her sometimes, but this was different.

After a while she gave up and pushed back her chair. She sounded flat. "Clear up when you're finished. I'm going for a shower."

Kathleen was desperate to talk and I was desperate not to.

"Just go home okay?" I almost threw her out the front door.

I cleared up the dishes in record time. There was no way I wanted to continue the question session on a one to one basis with mum either. I unzipped the back of the dreaded dress and threw it over my bedroom chair. I felt secretly pleased that even though my satin dress wasn't a proper one like Kathleen's, it was me that was asked to dance. Maybe guys didn't care what the exact style of a dress was. Perhaps they couldn't tell homemade.

I was in bed, light out, door three quarters closed when mum finished in the bathroom. I breathed in and out slowly, counting each intake of air to three before exhaling to three.

"Megan? Are you asleep already?"

Breathe in two three, breathe out two three. It worked. I'd read it in a book somewhere. It had been a life and death situation. A girl in Germany was being watched carefully by a guard in the war. It had been vital to her survival that he think her asleep. I knew I was in similar circumstances.

"Night," Mum murmured as she wandered into her bedroom.

I didn't answer. Being so still, I noticed my ears ringing. Not surprising considering I'd danced in front of the speakers most of the night. I felt strangely calm, but sad at the same time. I was sad about mum. It couldn't be helped. She would think it all too disgusting. She wouldn't approve of tongue kissing at a dance.

Tingles spread through my stomach. I'd made it through my first kiss it seemed. Although it was all pretty gross, it was good sign that he'd wanted a second one. I must have done it all right. There'd be nothing worse than having it all around that you couldn't kiss. I'd heard the chicks up the back of the bus talking about someone who kissed badly and none of the boys liked her.

The tingles spread upwards and I my cheeks burned in the darkness. I went over each detail in my mind, pretty sure that I hadn't liked it. But then, maybe I had liked it. I tried to work out just how I did feel.

Relieved. I knew that much.

The fact that I hadn't immediately wanted to have sex with him was a tremendous relief. I'd been worried about how if a few passages in a book could make me do things, what a guy's actual touch might make me do. Still there was a big difference in kissing a guy in the middle of a hall full of people and being alone with him. What if we'd gone outside, tongue-kissed away from everyone else? Perhaps that's when the danger would've surfaced. Though it seemed unlikely if all it made you feel was a bit sick.

## Coast 18

Neville opened the door of the flat and switched on the lounge room light.

"Come on in. I'll fix us some drink. Beer okay, Blake?"

"Yeah.

I looked around at the sparsely furnished unit. It was rental beige throughout. The fluorescent lighting wasn't helping.

"What about you girls? I've got some wine in the fridge, that all right?"

Nell smiled. "That'd be great Neville. Won't it Megan?"

"Terrific," I managed.

Nell was obviously annoyed at my lack of enthusiasm. I tapped my watch, raised my eyebrows in question. It was close to one and we were miles from the hospital.

Blake came over and whispered something in Nell's ear. She giggled and turned to kiss him.

I left them to it and went over to flick through the record collection. Not much and all pretty middle of the road.

"Here you go folks," said Neville as he brought back the drinks from the kitchen.

Nell and Blake laughed and whispered. Then Blake announced that they'd give the drinks a miss.

"Nell's coming back to my place for the night."

"Hang on," I cried. "I thought you both lived here!"

"No, I'm over at Gladesville. This is Nev's place."

Neville put the drinks down on the coffee table.

I glared at Nell.

"You'll be right Megan," she said, picking up her bag. "See you later."

"Yeah, nice to meet ya," said Blake.

I went to follow. "Hang on, Nell." But they'd gone.

I should have run after them. I went to act on the thought but then I heard Nell roar off down the road.

Shit, what now?

Well, I guess it's just you and me.

What? I turned and Neville was standing holding two glasses.

"I should go," I said, mentally calculating if I had enough in my purse for a taxi. Where was I exactly?

"Stay for one drink," insisted Neville. "I'll put on some music."

He got me to hold his drink as he started flicking through some records. "I reckon you'd like something classical."

Maybe he wasn't a complete dweeb.

I walked over the window and sipped my wine. It was too sweet. The night outside was black. What the hell was I doing here?

The needle started to crackle as it found the start of the track. The Blue Danube.

"Why don't you come and sit on the lounge?"

I shook my head. "No I'm fine here. I'll just\_ "

He got up and stood in front of me. He looked at my lips. "You have a lovely mouth, lovely lady." He took my drink and kissed me.

I stepped back but he followed and I was pinned against the window. He explored my mouth with his tongue as the strains of the Blue Danube reached a crescendo. I felt an overwhelming desire to laugh but Neville took my splutter for something else and he suddenly lurched me to one side and I landed on the lounge with a crash.

"Ahh," I cried.

"Oh I know baby, it's good."

He was on my hair and I struggled to free it.

"Shit, sorry," he heaved, shifting slightly.

Neville was burrowing his mouth down the side of neck. I was trying to think straight. I had to get out of this. Quite unexpectedly, the Blue Danube finished. The needle lifted itself off the record. Neville hadn't seemed to notice.

"Um Neville?"

"Mmmm"

"Neville, the music's finished."

He lifted his head and looked down at me, confused. "You want more music?"

I nodded.

He shifted himself off me and walked on his knees over to the record player. I took the chance to get up, pulling my dress back on my shoulder.

"How about some Johnny Farnham. I haven't got anymore classical."

"Surely there's something else on that record," I said, locating my bag near the door.

Neville turned to me, looked surprised to see me off the lounge. "No," he murmured, "it's just a single."

I looked at him on his knees, hair all skewed to one side holding the small disc of vinyl.

"A single?"

"Yeah," he replied, not looking at all embarrassed. "You never know when a chick's going to like doing it to classical stuff."

I studied his face. "Shit, you're not joking are you." I walked over to pick up my bag. Neville got to his feet.

"Does this mean you're not going to stay the night?" he asked.

I nodded, dumbstruck.

"Oh."

I put the bag strap on my shoulder and went to leave.

"Megan? Before you go can I ask you something?"

I hesitated a moment. What harm could it do?

"Well, if you're not going to stay the night, would you just give me a bit of head before you leave?"

I laughed softly. Neville looked dumbfounded, wondering what on earth he'd done wrong. I opened the door and walked out onto the landing.

As I walked down the stairs I heard the door close softly, he wasn't following me.

As I walked down the stairs I thought of a dozen different things I could have said.

I strolled out into the night, onto the street. Left or right? I headed left hoping it would lead me to a phone box or a main road. Under a streetlight I checked my purse, I had enough for a cab, just.

My stilettos were killing me. I walked up the hill barefoot, shoes in hand. I was on duty in less than five hours. I was going to kill Nell.

## Paris 23

Herald Tribune Classified Ad:

*English speaking salesgirl wanted for Parfumerie. Experience preferred. Apply in person. Parfum du Paradis. Rue Helder.*

Duty Free. I walked under the banner and into a long narrow shop. Floor to ceiling bottles and the rich smell of ylang ylang, musk, jasmine and vanilla. Undertones of *Opium*. Glass, mirrors, spotlighting.

You have to get this job.

I know.

Well, go for it.

Thanks. Max had gone to Italy, Chioggia, to try and work something out. He hadn't paid the rent and I was down to my last few francs. The *conciierge* was looking at me suspiciously every time I walked past her.

A beautifully made-up woman wearing a dress with puffed short sleeves was closing in. A woman-child who looked as if she was off to a six year old's birthday party. "*Est-ce que je peux vous aider?*"

I knew she was asking if she could help me, but the accent. Definitely southern belle. As if Scarlet O'Hara was speaking French!

"Mademoiselle?" she ventured again.

"Yes, good morning," I managed. "I'm here about the salesgirl position."

"Oh great, just a minute. You'll need to see Monsieur Reisch. I'll see if he's available."

I smiled as confidently as I could. This wasn't the Parisian cool I'd become used to. "Thank you."

The southern belle laughed, her bobbed fluffy curls bouncing. "Lighten up, you'll be fine. What's your name?"

"Megan Moran."

"English?"

"No, Australian."

"Neato!"

Neato?

"Okay, Megan. I'll be right back." She flashed a vast keyboard of white teeth. "By the way, I'm Candy."

I watched her sashay down to the back of the shop and through a side door. Candy? I surveyed my

surrounds. It was busy. All the way along the highly polished counter young women were demonstrating perfumes to clusters of tourists. The air was ringing with the nasal twangs of American women. Near the entrance, huddles of vinyl airline bag-carrying men stood checking their watches and changing their weight from foot to foot.

They needed to be entertained. Anyone could see that. Otherwise they'd be hurrying their wives out of the place in no time at all, maybe without a sale.

"*Mademoiselle?*"

I turned at the heavily accented voice. I quickly took in the sour-looking overweight man who stood before me. "*Bon jour, Monsieur.*"

"So you want to work here with us?" he snapped.

"Yes, *monsieur.*"

"What experience do you have?"

"Well, In Australia I've\_ "

"You're *Australienne?*"

"Yes, I\_ "

"I don't employ *les Australiennes.*" He began to walk away.

I called after him, "*Monsieur?*"

To my relief he stopped and faced me once more. His crepey-eyed gaze narrowed.

"I believe I have a lot of skills to offer you." I tried to convey the confidence I was far from feeling.

"An Australian girl two Summers ago was nothing but trouble."

"*Monsieur?* I am a trained nurse. I'm good with people. I can assure you I won't cause you any trouble." Was I sounding desperate?

"*Mademoiselle,*" he sighed, "leave me your telephone number and I'll call if I need you."

I was being dismissed. Damn. "*Monsieur,* I don't have a telephone number. I could leave my address."

"As you wish." He pulled out a note book. A gold pen.

"It's number twenty four, *Avenue Charles Flocquet\_*"

"In the seventh *arrondissement?*" he interrupted, truly looking at me for the first time.

"Yes, just on the *Champs de Mars.*"

"I know where it is," he stated, "I also live in the seventh. *Avenue Emile Zola*, just across from you."

I felt myself stand taller. In the crazy politics of the seventh *arrondissement*, even I knew that *Avenue Emile Zola* was on the less exclusive side of the *Champs Des Mars*. *Avenue Charles Flocquet* was much classier.

"*Mademoiselle*, perhaps we should talk a little more." He looked around his shop. "It's a little noisy here, yes? Perhaps we should take a coffee."

He lightly took my arm near the elbow and led me out of the shop and across to a cafe. Seated so he could keep the perfumery in view he indicated I should order first.

"*Un expresse s'il vous plait.*"

He looked impressed. Thanks Max.

"You've been in Paris a while then I see?"

"Three or four months," I replied.

"I am intrigued how a young Australian woman should find herself living in *Avenue Charles Flocquet*."

It was hard to believe that my address had changed everything. I had to play along. He seemed averse to desperation. "I live with my boyfriend, he has an apartment there."

"I see." The coffees arrived. Express service. He watched as I spooned sugar into mine. "It occurs to me, *Mademoiselle*, that a woman in your circumstance would not have to work."

I smiled. "Well, I suppose not but, I like my independence to some degree." I watched his face carefully for clues. It seemed safe to continue. "Besides, Max works long hours everyday and this would give me something to do."

Monsieur Reisch finished his coffee and flicked the tiny cup and saucer towards the middle of table. My time was ending. He drew some money from his wallet and left it under the saucer. He started to stand and offered his hand. "*Au revoir, Mademoiselle*. I'll think about it and let you know."

I started to take the offered hand but stopped. A brainwave. "*Monsieur*, today is Tuesday." I kept my tone casual, as if it didn't matter either way. "What if I came in for a few hours for the next couple of days?"

He frowned. "And?"

"Oh *Monsieur*, I wouldn't expect to be paid of course but by Friday, you would know if you liked me and I'd know if I liked the job. We could make our final decision then perhaps?"

"If you want," he replied, "see you at ten tomorrow."

"*Merci, Monsieur,*" I called lightly as he walked back to his shop. Eleven o'clock. I finished my coffee and left. Walking back towards *Opera* my nerves finally gave way. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so I did both. I couldn't continue like this. Refuge was a phone booth, pretending to be listening to a conversation. A fine tremor travelled down my legs. Oh yes, I just need a job because I like my independence to some degree! What a joke. Actually, *Monsieur*, we're weeks behind with the rent, the phone's been cut off and I can't afford to eat anything but boiled pasta.

But I'd done it. I was in. Under the terror I began to feel the beginnings of glee. I *would* make it. I wanted to tell someone that I had the job. Well, practically. Was bursting with the need to talk about what had just transpired. My mastery of the situation. The bloody-mindedness of snob-value that never changed.

I clicked the telephone and dialled the reverse charge line.

Mum, I'd call mum. She'd think that working in a perfume shop was nice. Glamorous. It'd be just after midnight in Sydney but she'd said to call anytime.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring.

Where were they? I put down the phone.

Late August. At the snow maybe? Funny to think how far I was away from them. Should I try Kathleen? No, it was too late to call. All I could do was wait for Max to return to Paris. Or maybe...

There, it was done. Standing in the queue at the post office I toyed with the postcard I'd written. Just a hello-how-are-you note to Andy's mum in Canberra. Oh yes, I've found a job in a perfume shop and, by the way, if you're talking to Andy please pass on these contacts just in case he'd like to catch up. The queue moved forward. It wasn't too late to back out. I flipped the cardboard over and over in my hands. I'd scribbled down Max's address and the address of *Parfum du Paradis*. Think positive.

What harm could it do?

At the counter I parted with a few precious francs and held my breath as the cashier stamped the card and threw it behind him into the bag. It was done.

## **Gravida 28**

"How are you going out here?"

The night nurse wandered out to join me.

I shrugged.

"You're not getting much rest are you?" She handed me a cup of tea.

"Thanks." I sipped. Sugared. Somehow comforting.

"I've just phoned down to the Birth Centre. They're not busy so the midwife said you can move down there."

"But I don't think I'm really in labour yet."

"I know, but you'll be more comfortable. Perhaps you'll be able to sleep."

3 am. Useless phoning Andy. If this was going to be a long haul he'd need all the sleep he could get. The Birth Centre midwife introduced herself as Bernadette. She seemed nice. I snuggled down under the blankets of the double bed and tried to sleep. And tried to sleep. Sleep.

The room was comfortable. The bed comfortable. But still I lay awake. Contractions. Not going anywhere. Just there.

4 am. Bernadette softly opened the door.

"It's okay, I'm still awake."

She made no noise at all as she approached the bed. Barefoot. She sat next to me and took my hand. "You just do whatever you want to. Lie down, sit up, sleep, don't sleep. Just go with the flow."

"Okay."

"Now, let's have a listen to that baby of yours." She brought the small machine she'd been holding to rest by the bed.

"It's funny sometimes," I said.

"What's that?"

"I kind of forget I'm here to have a baby."

Bernadette laughed quietly, nodding all the while. "Most people get a bit like that. Now, let's have listen."

She held the small apparatus to my belly and there it was. Boom-a-boom-a-boom-a-boom-a. Fast. Strong.

"That's definitely a baby," Bernadette said.

I sat back up a little. "I believe you." I don't think I did.

"Come with me," she said.

I slid out of bed and followed her out of the room. The central area of the Birth Centre was dimly lit. There were a few dishes in the sink. Haphazard scatter cushions at one end of the couch. We crossed the room, the sight of friendly disorder around me somehow settling my nerves a little.

"Come over here and take a look at this little angel. She'd six hours old now."

"Why's she out here?"

"Her mum and dad needed to crash and they couldn't take their eyes off her. I said I'd watch her for a while."

"Have they crashed?" I asked, wanting to know how other people handled this strange scene.

"Yep. Haven't stirred since two."

I came to be staring down into the little perspex crib. A flaxen haired bundle slept so peacefully it seemed unreal. So beautiful. My throat choked up, I started to cry. After a moment, Bernadette placed her arm around my shoulders whispering, "You'll have one soon. That's what's in that tummy of yours." With her free hand she patted my big abdomen.

I didn't believe it. I just knew I was never going to have a baby. That these stupid contractions would drag on and on and not do anything. Everyone would think I was faking it and they'd send me home. I shouldn't have been here in the Birth Centre. I was wasting time and space.

"Now, are you okay?"

I nodded.

"I won't be in for a while 'cause I've got someone on her way in and she sounds like she's a fair way along. Third baby too."

I panicked. "I'll go back up to the ward if you need the room."

"It's okay, there are others, besides, you're having your baby too."

I was led back into my room.

"Sure you're okay?"

I wasn't but nodded anyway.

"Do you want to call in your partner to sit with you or something?"

There was nothing I wanted more. I wanted Andy. Here. But it would be selfish. Nothing was really happening. He needed to sleep. "No, I'm fine."

Left to myself once more I wandered around the room. Chintzy. New colonial style. Every five minutes or so my uterus contracted down hard. I tried hard not to look at the large clear clock hanging above the door. I did look. Perhaps they were getting a little stronger. Yes. I curled up in the largest armchair. Cornflower blue. Good for spiritual health. Calm.

Walkman on. Settled back, and flicked my way through the cassette collection I'd brought along. Everything from Pavarotti to Kakadu Waterfalls. Cold Chisel to Ella Fitzgerald. When I'd packed I'd had visions of maybe singing and dancing my way through labour. When was that? Yesterday? Last century?

*Running down that road, running up that hill, with no problems.*

Kate Bush. My very own compilation cassette of all the favourites. I'd spent last week taping. Making sure I wouldn't have to bother with those tracks I never wanted to listen to. No need to be fast-forwarding through labour, I'd figured.

Whoa!

What was that?

From somewhere deep a rolling power-wave surged up and dragged downwards. It was starting. Labour! I pulled off my headphones, not wanting to miss any aspect of these incredible forces gathering inside me.

I waited. The second hand ticked around once. Twice. Three times. Then, half way around the fourth circuit it happened once more. My breath. It caught my breath. Exhilaration as my breathing clicked into a new rhythm all of its own, travelling up and over the surge. Not pain but power. Fan-forced.

For half an hour I drifted through some reverent trance-state. Slow meditative breathing in the troughs. Rising far over the crests. My body was doing it. Fool for doubting. How could it have been otherwise?

Pride.

In dealing with labour the way I wanted to, like the true earth-mother I knew myself to be. In control, going with the flow. I'd read somewhere, once, that giving birth was the ultimate sexual experience for some women. The heady cocktail swirled through my veins. Sexual? Perhaps not. Exciting, satisfying? Definitely. Breathe in and out and in and out and in and out. How could Megan Moran have ever doubted herself, the goddess within? Her most dramatic role to date.

Smash! An icy bullet shot through me. My trance lay in chunks on the floor.

What the hell had that noise been?

Again. Scary, long wails.

More noises. Moaning? Groaning? No, more than either of those. Some awful, awful sound wrenched from hell.

Silence. Then murmuring. Oh no, I heard. No more, I heard.

Another voice, calm. Don't push yet.

Oh Andy, help me. Frozen. I was frozen. My uterus starting to contract.

Oh God. The woman next door wailed and wailed. A wounded whale. Oh stop it stop it. Oh God, she cried.

I needed Andy. Needed him now. Right now. Oh shit this was starting to hurt.

5.10 am. That was it. He had to come in. I struggled across the room to the phone. Where were my legs?

Dialling. Hello?

It was Andy.

"Can you come in right now?"

Brushing away sleep. "Yes, yes of course. What's happening?"

"Not much but, oh, *please* come in," I cried, "I need you now."

"I'm on my way." Click.

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep. I was still holding the phone to my ear when I felt the next contraction starting up. Oh God. Perched on the side of the bed, tensed to the eyeballs, I wished it would stop.

Hurting, please stop. It did but then, the terrible noise from next door.

Primal siren. The woman bellowing slow-motion Tarzan cries.

A man it's okay-ing, hang-in there-ing, I love you-ing.

Bernadette. Low, resonating through the thin wall. Rest now. And then, push now.

Arhhhhh!

Chilling. I didn't move. Couldn't move. As my contraction came again I tensed tighter. Tighter.

Couldn't breathe. Andy, where are you?

Some time later, years maybe, the door opened.

"Megan," Andy cried, "what's happening?"

His arms enfolded me and I fell into him. "I'm so scared, so scared."

"Are you okay? Are the contractions..."

He didn't finish. The noises had started again.

I pushed my head into his chest. "I can't stand it."

He held me even tighter. And there we sat. Audio spectators to the emergence of a new human being. It went on. And on. My own contractions, five minutely now, dotted our vigil. But we didn't move.

Almost there now, we heard.

I *can't*, we heard.

Easy now, we heard. Now push.

Arhhhhhhhhh. Then oh! Oh! Oh! Oh, a baby! Oh look a baby. It was the woman. Over and over she said it. A baby! A baby! A baby!

More noises. Happy noises. And then a little cry.

A baby!

Andy held me so I thought I'd snap. And I did. I started to cry. And through my big messy sobs I heard Andy's.

After a while I looked at the clock. 6.52. Bernadette walked in.

We weren't good. She could tell.

"Still coming every five minutes?"

I nodded.

"Any stronger?"

I nodded. Then finding my voice, "Is she okay?"

"Next door, you mean?"

Who else could I have meant?

Bernadette grinned. "Oh yes. A beautiful baby boy and not a hitch." Then, hearing the chance added, "Or a stitch!" She laughed to herself. "Now," she said, "let's see how you are."

On the bed, legs spread. Gloved fingers reaching inside me. Her lips pursed as she pushed higher.

"Ow!"

"Sorry," she said. The gloved fingers were removed.

"Well?" Andy queried, "how is everything? Okay?"

Bernadette grimaced. "Nothing. The cervix is completely closed."

### Paris 23

"*Bonjour*, Me-gan."

"*Bonjour*, Augustine."

Today was D-day. Monsieur Reisch had all but ignored me since Wednesday morning. You had to take it as a good sign. Mustn't have been doing much wrong. I'd been left in the hands of Augustine, the manager, and I did everything I was told. The other salesgirls were generally pretty good, showing me the ropes and making sure I didn't get into hot water. Candy took me under her wing. The puffed sleeves on Tuesday weren't an aberration of the day. They were standard issue it seemed. She lilted along and explained how it all worked.

"Megan, we're all here to service the bus tours."

"The bus tours?"

"I'll give it to your straight." She lowered her Alabama voice a little. "The bus tour guides bring their busloads to us. You know, they give them the spiel how this is the only place to buy their French perfume, the best service, the best prices blah-de-blah, you understand?"

I did.

"It's the same all over," Candy continued as I followed her downstairs to the stockroom. "In Switzerland it's the watch factory and in Holland it's the clog shop. They're on the take from everyone."

"How much do they get from here?" I asked as we arrived among great stacks of boxes.

"That depends. Usually around twenty percent of the sales. Though I know some of them get as much as thirty."

I ran the sales I'd seen from just one bus load through my head. "Why so much?"

Candy gave me a knife and we started to cut through the masking-taped cardboard. "If we didn't give them that much, they'd go somewhere else that would. Duty free shopping is a very competitive business."

I thought about the prices, the lack of paperwork. "But how is it duty free?"

Candy threw back her head and laughed. "It's not of course!"

"But that's terrible!" I whispered.

"Listen. These tours are full of people who just don't want to know. They pay their money and they go

wherever the bus takes them. Here, unpack everything in box-lots along that bench there and we'll check it against the invoices."

We were unpacking a shipment from Dior. I had the box of *Eau Savage* after shave. "What do we do with the testers?" I asked, holding up the plain white packages.

"Just put them to the side. Augustine looks after them," Candy called back across the room. "She makes sure we get our share of them. You won't miss out."

By Thursday I had the hang of it and was selling perfume. I worked alongside an English girl called Georgina. I did whatever she did, used her words. We had certain brands that we had to try and push. The American women wanted *Opium*, *Chanel No. 5* or *Joy*. Georgina explained how Monsieur Reisch was on minimum commission from those lines so it was up to us to suggest alternatives. *Ysatis*, *Lumiere* and *Azzaro 9*. Newer fragrances that had only just made it into American department stores.

As two o'clock Friday approached I waited for Monsieur Reisch to decide.

At ten to two, I saw him leave for the day. I was with a woman from Utah. Her nails were painted mauve with little star diamantes embedded in swirls. The sale was already over nine hundred francs. I fought the urge to run after him.

"I just adore this how do I say it again? Ee-sart-ease?"

"*Ysatis*. That's right, madam."

She tapped the side of her cheek in an exaggerated gesture of thought. "Give me another half a dozen of the smaller sized bottles. They'll do for my husband's secretaries."

As was the protocol, I escorted the client, the purchases and the sales docket to Augustine at the cashier's desk. The customer smiled at me as I walked back to the counter. "So nice to find a French girl who speaks such good English," I heard her comment to Augustine.

Please, please just let me have this job.

Just after two. Augustine was free. "Is Monsieur Reisch coming back today?" I asked.

"No. He won't be back until next week. He's gone to London now for a couple of days. Why?"

"He was going to let me know if I had the job," I blurted.

Augustine threw up her hands. "Of course, you've got the job. Do you think you'd still be here if you didn't have the job?"

I was shaking. "But when do I start and all that?"

"Tomorrow. You work six days a week, nine-thirty until seven. Twenty francs an hour. Wednesday afternoons off, okay? See you tomorrow morning."

Six thirty. The room was so empty without Max. Would he ever come back? I picked up the phone again. Still dead. I strained the spaghetti and wished for a blob of butter for it. My first food for the day. Starvation was proving to be an excellent form of weight loss.

"*Ou est-ce que Monsieur Fascari?*" the *concierge* asked each time I passed her door.

That was the big question. Where was *Monsieur Fascari*? He'd been gone for six weeks. No word, no contact number. What had happened?

For the millionth time the smorgasbord of dire endings he might have encountered passed through my mind. Fatal car crash, Mafia connected murder, drowned at sea?

Why no word at all?

It was Sunday, my day off. I had ten francs until payday. Enough for a coffee. I was standing at the front window watching the chestnut leaves falling in the street. They swirled small willy-willies in the afternoon breeze. Late September was everything I'd imagined Paris in Autumn could be.

Except that I owed more rent than I could ever earn.

I'd managed to scrape a bit of money together which had kept the *concierge* at bay for a while but now she was on my case.

I had to get out.

Walking. Wearing out my shoe leather, literally. Across parks, along streets. The wind was gusting and I drew my summer-weight coat around me. Pity about the op-shop jacket never eventuating, I could have used its extra warmth.

It was grim joy as I realised how far my coat was wrapping around my body. I was definitely thinner. Would Andy like me thinner? His passion was for curves.

You like you thinner.

I do.

So does it matter what *he* thinks?

I suppose not.

The wind shifted, cooler still. At the *Pont Neuf*, I walked up to street level from the river embankment. The booksellers were packing up, struggling to fold away trestle tables in the wind. Who could blame them for heading home early? I shoved my hands to the bottom of my coat pockets and fingered the ten franc coin laying safely in my right one. Perhaps I should just catch the metro home. Home? Ha, not for much longer. Even if I paid my entire next week's wages, about one week's rent, that bitch wasn't going to be happy.

I had to think of something. There had to be an alternative to going back to London and flying home.

Another gust of wind and a speck flew into my eye. Shit!

Stopped in my tracks as I rubbed my eye streaming. Hold the eyelid out from your eye. Who'd always said that at moments like these? A tissue from my bag to mop up the smudgy black mess. A droplet on my forehead. Great, now it was going to pour. People were starting to rush to get out of the storm. Into the cafes, the metro, the cathedral.

It would be packed inside Notre Dame. Sunday afternoons were concert afternoons. Free admission to hear heavenly music. Always a winner, in the midst of a squall, there'd be a crush. Still, it came at the right price. I toyed with the idea of just turning around and going back to the flat.

Wait a minute.

Notre Dame...something weird. Like it was beckoning.

Idiot.

No truly, I feel called.

Called?

Compelled, I walked forward through the brown, dead leaves scuttling across the stones. I looked up to where the tips of the cathedral's towers sliced open the clouds. The tempest. God and earth touching.

God.

He hadn't figured largely on the agenda for years. Why now? Was I like those people, atheists, who when lost at sea had a convenient conversion and prayed for rescue?

Stupid girl, don't cry.

I squeezed my eyes closed and forced the tears from them. I didn't want to leave Paris but knew it

was coming to that. But not like this, I pleaded. Not forced home because yet another man had left me in the lurch.

Something had to give. Okay, so Andy was history and Max was fast joining him but I had to get through. I wiped my face with the back of my hand and realised it was more than tears. Run for shelter.

But no. Stop. What was that? Could it be? Laying perfectly flat on the ground, leaves and papers blowing all around it was a one hundred franc note. I quickly looked about and found myself alone in front of the cathedral.

Mine!

It was like finding twenty bucks. Food! Milk coffee, toasted cheese and tomato, pastry. Thoughts making my head spin.

For a start I could give the Sunday service a miss. I took a sharp right and headed through the waves of fine misty rain. Getting drenched but who cared, I could afford to sit somewhere warm.

As I stepped from the bridge I paused, glanced back at the cathedral.

Thanks.

Idiot.

I would be to ignore a minor miracle.

### **Gravida 28**

It was like being dumped onto the set of some sitcom. Standing in a lift full of people. The woman at the back having a rip-roaring contraction. Hanging onto the railing that's mounted around the shiny beige walls of the lift. Supported by husband who is attempting not to let the woman crumple to the floor.

"Just keep breathing, don't hold your breath," encourages the nurse who's accompanying us down from the labour ward.

I threw my head back and gasped for air. This was hurting.

A second attempt at Prostin gel induction had thrown me into choppy surf. Wave after wave pounded through me, dumping me hard on the sharp sandy bottom. Barely enough air to make it to the surface. Only enough time to wipe the salt from my eyes and the next dumper whacks me.

I'm so tired.

10 o'clock and I want to drown. I'm curled on the arm chair back in the Birth Centre. My cell. The

place is a mess. Andy's offering pillows, massage, water, music.

"Just leave me alone," I hissed.

Why had I jumped out of bed so early yesterday morning? I'd woken just after six and now here it was twenty-seven hours later. Ha, who was counting.

I tried to doze between the contractions but I couldn't get comfortable.

"What if you try the pillow behind your back?" Andy suggested, kneeling in front of me.

I didn't answer. Why not the pillow across the face? Smother out this nagging dragging ordeal once and for all. He took my non-answer as a go-ahead to shove the pillow down my back.

"Thanks," I managed, squeezing his hand and then, feeling the next contraction switched my grip to the sides of the chair. From somewhere dark I heard the door open. As the contraction eased I looked up.

"Kathleen," I cried.

"Mate, how are you?" She came to me and wrapped her arms around my shoulders.

I bawled, "Awful."

I didn't want looking after. Just wanted to pass on the baton and go home. Kathleen looked after Andy. Coffee, something to eat? That'd be great. Thanks.

Stuck in the pit of a well. Sensation echoes, the pin prick of light above me unreachable. Someone's put on Kakadu waterfall music.

Water torture. Each drip and drizzle pits my brain.

I screeched. "Can we turn that noise off?" All I could see were eyes. Pained expressions in the eyes of people I cared for most. They were hurting. Good. So was I.

The midwife was back. Helen? Was that what she'd said when she'd come on? That's right, I was here to have a baby. Hard to keep focused on that. She listened for the heartbeat. Boom-a-boom-a-boom-a. No problems. Terrific.

"You know, Megan," Helen began to lecture, "you're not going to get very far just sitting in that chair like that. You should be up and walking about."

If I'd had a gun I would have shot her.

"You've more chance of getting things moving along if you're up," she continued.

"I thought I was supposed to try and rest," I spat, "aren't I supposed to conserve energy for later?"

Helen sighed. She hated patients like me I could tell. "I think your priority has to be getting this labour

going and you're not going to do it sitting here." She walked over and opened the venetian blinds. The midday light flooded the room. "It's a great day out there, you should all get out and take a look at it."

Andy had come to my side, crouching down next to the chair he suggested a walk. "Okay," I agreed. Whatever. Who cared?

"Can we go very far?" he asked Helen.

"Wherever you like, just pop back every hour or so to check in."

Kathleen helped me into my dressing gown. I watched her kneeling at my feet, putting my slippers on for me. I couldn't remember ever feeling so low.

"Can we sit down? Please?" I couldn't go another step. I parked myself sideways at one of the weather-worn plastic picnic tables that were dotted around the grounds at the back of the hospital. The way the seat was welded to the table structure I couldn't fit to sit properly. I straddled sideways. The huge jacaranda that domed over the area was losing its leaves. I swept them off the table and put my head down on my folded arms.

"Do you want something?" Kathleen asked, seated opposite.

I shook my head, not bothering to lift it one inch.

Andy sat behind me. He started rubbing my back. Right down near my bottom where it really ached. I cried some more. The ultimate sexual experience? Whoever had written that had been sick. What'd she been comparing it to?

Nothing was going right. The midwife thought I was lazy and who knew what Andy and Kathleen were thinking? I was a big faker. The contractions had eased to something akin to heavy period pain since beginning our afternoon stroll. I wasn't going to have baby after all.

It was just after two o'clock when we trudged back to the Birth Centre. My obstetrician was there.

"Oh good, I was hoping to catch you," Dr Fairmont said. She put her arm around me and led me back into my cell. I looked around. Someone had tidied up. Made the bed. Fluffed up the pillows, the bean bag.

"It's about eight hours since anyone checked your cervix so let's see what's happening." She instructed me to lie on the bed. She gloved. I opened my legs. As she probed around I saw her face scrunch this way, then that. She tut-tutted as she withdrew her fingers.

"Well?" I asked, mentally telling myself to be thrilled with one or two centimetres. Let's face it, any

dilation at all was progress.

She patted my hand. "Still completely closed."

Andy stood at the end of the bed. He looked close to tears. Kathleen's mouth was a grim straight line.

Everywhere I looked my own desolation was reflected.

The midwife was at Dr Fairmont's side taking instructions.

"I think it's best if both of them get an hour or two's rest. Then I think we'll try some more Prostin gel at about four."

"Okay," agreed Helen.

Dr Fairmont gave me another pat. "See you soon."

It didn't appear I had much choice.

As the door closed Helen sprung into action. "Right," she announced, "I think it's best if you come back at four." Kathleen immediately picked up her bag. Helen had that sort of voice. I wanted to cry out, what about what I want? But I was past it.

Kathleen sat on the bed and gave me a cuddle. "I'll be back soon okay?"

"Okay."

"Now you two," Helen continued as she walked over the blinds and snapped them shut, "into bed and sleep."

Oh yeah, sure Helen, I wanted to blast at her. Andy collapsed onto the bed next to me. I tried to snuggle back into him but the contractions were still coming every few minutes, still just nagging and aching. Doing nothing.

Andy's breath became slow, regular. He was asleep. I was glad someone was. I lay there clock-watching. There had to be a better way.

There was.

Out of bed and slip into the bathroom. Diving into my toiletry bag and pull out a bottle of fuzzy peach bath foam. There was one thing going for this damn place, the bath was big. Deep. Filled with hot water and peachy bubbles I lowered myself in.

Relax. Relax. The water lapped at my shoulders. Engulfed in liquid heat the tension was drawn out through my skin. I would stay here forever.

Knock knock. Open.

I didn't budge.

"What are you doing?"

Ah, the lovely Helen.

"What does it look like?" I replied curtly, not opening my eyes.

"A bath at this stage will just slow everything down, you know."

I sat up and glared at this woman standing over me.

"Nothing is happening," I hissed, "so I can hardly slow it down, can I?"

Helen sighed. "I'm off duty in a minute or two. I was just coming in to tell you that Joanne will be taking over."

I fell slowly back into my warm watery cocoon. "Thanks." I closed my eyes. You are dismissed, I thought. I heard the door close. Good.

Joanne took my hand. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to, okay?"

I looked up at this marvellous woman and nodded. "Thanks." How could two midwives be so different? Since Joanne had walked into the bathroom all those hours ago I'd felt safe, kind of loved. It sounds strange but as she'd coaxed me out of the bath I left one safe, warm cocoon and was enveloped into another.

They'd tried more Prostin gel and I knew by the way my body felt that nothing had changed. Dr Fairmont had said that if things hadn't progressed by tennish tonight they'd move me up to labour ward for a full induction. Part of my brain screamed for her to just do it. Why wait until ten?

Joanne had tried to explain. "It means an epidural anaesthetic, a drip, monitoring - the full bit."

"So lots of women have that don't they?" Andy queried, sitting behind me and massaging my shoulders.

Good on you boy, I thought, let's get this show on the road!

"Yes," replied Joanne softly, "but it's all intervention that may be unnecessary. You don't have to rush things. You can stay in the Birth Centre as long as you like. Some women are here for two or three days before they have their babies."

She saw my look of horror and smiled.

"I mean it takes that long for labour to truly establish itself."

"But if I go upstairs to labour ward and have the induction I could have a baby by morning and all this

will be over." It seemed clear in my mind what the course should be. A day and half without sleep and I'd had it. "Andy, what do you think?"

"Hey, it's up to you. I'll go along with your decision here."

Joanne let my hand go and picked up her monitoring machine. "Look," she said brightly, "don't make your decision now. It's just after nine. We'll examine you at ten and see how far you've come. Who knows, you may be four or five centimetres dilated and all this worry will have been wasted."

"Okay."

We'd sent Kathleen off for some late dinner and no-one was around. For the next hour Andy and I huddled together on our little boat, buffeted through the dark swirling waters. We'd been cut adrift from the world. Up and over each contraction we'd go. No rhythm to them now at all. Indiscriminate whacks and thuds. I knew they were hurling me nowhere.

"I love you, Megey," Andy whispered into my hair.

I couldn't speak any more. I nodded my head and burrowed closer into his warmth.

A quiet tapping at the door. A gentle opening. "How are you going?"

Joanne was back. "It's nearly ten and Dr Fairmont will ring soon to see how things are. Shall we see how you're getting along?"

As she examined me, Andy stroked my cheek. I looked up at him, trying not to wince too much as the fingers inside me pressed and prodded high and deep.

"I'm sorry, it's hurting I just want to make sure I'm really feeling what I'm feeling."

"What are you feeling?" I asked. Was I opening?

Joanne sat back on her heels. "Nothing at all."

Tears blurred my eyes and dripped down my face. Andy wiped them away but still they kept coming. This was the most horrible thing I'd ever had anything to do with. I just wanted to go home and forget it ever happened.

Joanne took my hand. "Megan, look at me."

I tried to focus.

"Megan, I don't say this very often at all but for heaven's sake, go up to the labour ward. Have the epidural, have the induction and have your baby!"

"Really?" I sobbed.

"Really," she affirmed. "You're getting nowhere and you're tired. If you go now you'll get a little bit of sleep and be ready to push that baby out in time for breakfast."

### **Coast 18**

Sunshine. That's what they called me, these four ladies. One of them reckoned I gave the best back rubs. She had cancer of the oesophagus and her bones almost poked through her skin. She couldn't eat anymore and had to be fed through a tube inserted through to her stomach directly. Her husband was a big police officer and he took her for a walk up and down the long white corridor of the ward when he came to visit. She had skinny legs that went from the bottom of her pink nightie and finished in balls of pink fluff at her feet.

On the way to tea, I saw him around the corner near the lifts, crying on his own. I walked past before he could see me. What could I say?

He was gone when I returned from my break. Only a few more hours to go and I'd be with Andy. He was my new boyfriend. I'd met him at a "Triple 0" party a few weeks back and we were spending all our spare time together. He was a paramedic with the Ambulance Service.

I smiled to myself as I rang the chimes to signal the end of visiting hours at eight o'clock. Andy made my body sing, so different to Brian. Urgh, I just wanted to forget that one. Poor barstard, I couldn't bring myself to be near him now.

I gave an extra flourish to the end of the chiming. I wanted to get off on time and was hurrying out the stragglers so I could get on with the ward-tidy and the flower-round. No-one could sleep with their flowers in their room, they said.

Halfway through the round a post-operative woman waved frantically at me.

"A vomit bowl, quick," she managed before bring her hand to cover her mouth.

I left the tidy-trolley and ran to the pan room to fetch a round metal bowl. Careering back into the two-bedded room I got the bowl under her chin just in time. I pulled the curtain across for privacy.

She retched and retched but hardly anything came up after the first bit. She held my hand and continued to retch over the bowl. The Sister entered and swished the curtain back towards the wall, exposing my patient.

"It's past eight-thirty, the ward tidy isn't finished and the quilts are still on the beds!" she announced.

"I'm with a patient." Was she blind?

She exited, shaking her head. After a while, I released the woman's hand and grabbed a cool washer.

"Don't worry about her, love," said the older woman in the next bed, "everyone knows she's a witch. I smiled but kept my thoughts to myself.

I was wiping my woman's head when the Sister re-entered.

"Didn't I tell you to do the ward tidy and get these quilts off?" she shouted, plucking at the blue cover on my patient's bed.

"And I said I'm attending to a patient." My voice was loud, my anger with her barely controlled.

She glared at me with narrow eyes and I held the look without a quake, my cheeks blazing. Several seconds passed before she turned on her heel and clomped out of the room.

I finished wiping my patient's face and hands, cleared away the mess and continued with the ward tidy. Only two hours to go.

Andy slid out of me, moving down my body. He let his mouth dribble wet kisses down my throat, between my breasts. My skin jumped as his lips touched each bit. I heard my breath coming in little gasps. I loved the fact that he didn't roll off me, with that lurch that cast me aside, used goods. He lapped at the smooth curves around my navel. He made humming noises, mmming into my skin and nuzzled his nose through the top of my pubes. I raised my head, shoving a wayward pillow back under my head. Our eyes met.

"Nice?"

I nodded slowly. "Nice."

"But you didn't come."

"So?"

"So, I want you to."

I brought my hand to his curly blonde head. "Silly. It doesn't matter. It can still be nice. It's nice just being close to you."

"But I want you to feel pleasure, real pleasure."

"Andy, this is the pleasure I get when I fuck. It's exciting, it makes me feel good. I don't know, it's hard to explain\_"

"But you don't come?" He shifted his weight off me and began to kiss the side of my waist, moving upwards.

I jumped.

"You're ticklish."

"Very."

"Mmmm."

"Mmmm?"

He laughed quietly. "It's just been filed away for future use."

"Terrific," I drawled.

He was at my breast. He was licking long licks up to where my nipple perched, taut. My breath was uneven. He brought his lips to my areola and ran his tongue around and around, finally bring his mouth up and up until the nipple sprung free from his hold.

His voice was thick again. "I love this."

I opened my eyes to see his, fixed on the tip of my breast, now rouged and jutting. My pelvis turned to liquid. My hips edged sideways to move against him. His softened cock was against my thigh. I pressed closer into his skin. His mouth was again hot-sucking the fullness of my breast. He moved across me, stroking and kneading. Mouthed one nipple, the other, dragging my breasts together so they were one.

"I want you," I whispered into his hair, his neck, his chest.

"I want you to come," he whispered in response.

"Mmmm, I want you to come too."

"I've already come, Megan. You've got to catch up."

He took my hand from his hip and brought it to rest on my breast. He covered it with his own hand and guided the massaging. I felt strange and tried to disengage my hand from the sandwich.

"What's wrong," he murmured, his lips brushing against mine.

"I feel silly."

"Don't."

I smiled. "Just like that?"

"Just like that." He increased the pressure of his hold on my hand and brought it to rest between my thighs. "Touch yourself, Megan. Show me how you masturbate." Our hands were drawing gentle circles. Through my desire I felt fear. Was this a trick? Would he laugh if I took up his invitation.

"Why?" I asked softly.

"Because I want you to come. I want to watch you come. I want to see your beautiful sexy body moving in ecstasy." His fingers took mine down into the hot dampness. "Do it Megan, masturbate."

He relaxed his hold. I tentatively moved my middle finger inwards.

"Are you sure you want me to?"

"Oh yes, very sure." He left my hand solo and began to kiss my mouth. His tongue found mine and we kissed deeper and deeper. I felt the moans at the back of his throat, his cock rubbing against my hips, hardening...

"Fuck me," I breathed.

"Not yet, not 'til you've made yourself come."

His mouth moved to my hair, to my ear. Licking and nibbling, sending ripples down my neck. I heard, low and breathy, "Do it."

Nudged beyond the fear, my wetness seeped from me. I rubbed my hand flat up and down the mons. "Ah yes, that's it," I heard, "God, you look so sexy, so sexy." I brought my fingers inwards rolling them around in the creamy moisture before pushing them inside. I heard a moan. His? Mine? I brought them out and in, bucking softly so the pressure built up at the front. "Touch your clit," he urged.

"Not yet not yet," I cried. I squeezed my eyes closed.

"Don't shut me out, share it, please?"

His own eyes were ablaze, flashing.

"Hold me?" I cried. He pulled my body into the heat of his skin.

I was close, so close. He knew it. He raised his head until he was resting on one elbow and watched me. I fixed my eyes on his and I slid my fingers over my clit. Back down, up and over. Back down, up and over. The point of pleasure was getting smaller and smaller. My legs had closed, they lay straight and stiff. The tip of my middle finger vibrated right on the crucial point. Smaller and smaller, no breathing now, more and more intense until it began. The point imploded, turned inside-out pulsing hot through my spine, out the

top of my head.

His took my fingers, brought them to his mouth. Sucked. "I want to fuck you, right now."

"Mmmm." It was all I could manage.

He moved between my legs, pushing them apart with this own. His cock was turgid. Anxious for entry. He knelt for a moment, his gaze travelling from my eyes down to my pussy. He placed a hand on each hip and leaned forwards until his mouth touched it. He lapped once, long and searching up and over my clit. I jumped, still so sensitive. He smiled and licked his lips. "Yum."

His body came down to cover mine.

A few hours later I was back on the ward. I had a ten o'clock appointment to see the Deputy Matron to explain why I'd refused to do the ward tidy. It was the perfect spoiler to a great night with Andy.

I looked over from where I was feeding a woman and felt my stomach knot with anxiety. Nell was hiding behind the door with half a slice of Vegemite toast stuffed in her mouth. The slice had been spare so she'd checked that there wasn't anyone senior around and started spreading it. "What if someone comes?" I hissed from across the room.

"It's just going to get chucked out. Besides, it's only a piece of toast, Megan."

The patient in the corner bed, closest to where Nell was standing asked, "Don't you girls get any breakfast?"

My stomach growled as I thought of Andy, some things were more important than breakfast.

Nell cut another slice of toast into halves. "No, never have time and morning tea is hours away."

The lady proffered her plate to me. "Would you like some of mine dear? I won't eat all of this." I replied no thanks through my hunger pangs.

Nell was just starting on the second slice when our tutor, Sister Carney walked in. I froze as Nell ducked further behind the door. Nell's cheeks were bulging and her eyes were boggled. She was shaking her head frantically. I avoided looking at her and focused on Sister Carney.

"I've come to see how you're getting on," she announced brightly. "Isn't Nurse Simpson here too?"

"Um, I... um.. I think that..." I couldn't lie so I said nothing. I looked at the two patients opposite and saw their eyes were fixed on Nell, who was almost turning violet as she tried to swallow all the toast. Sister Carney followed the patients' eyes and took a step forward.

Peering around the door directly at Nell, she merely crooked her finger and walked out of the room. Nell followed, swallowing madly. I wasn't the only one going to see Deputy Matron.

### **Mercy 13**

No-one was supposed to hang out at the station. Kathleen and I never did. It was potentially a week on Detention if you were sprung. So I felt a bit of a shock when I heard my name called out as I followed Kathleen through the turnstiles. I turned towards the voice. It was Emma Burgitt! She was madly signalling for me to come over.

“Shit! What’ll I do?”

Kathleen shook her head. “Ignore her.”

I slowed right down. Emma’s friend, Danielle, was signalling too. I called to Kathleen, “I won’t be a second.”

Kathleen huffed. “Well don’t expect me to wait for you.”

I met her eyes. “Well see you later then.” I sounded braver than I felt.

I walked towards Emma and Danielle, my nerves making it hard to judge whether I was appearing too eager or not. They weren’t ultra cool or anything but they weren’t daggy either. I took off my school hat as I approached. No-one who hung out at the station wore their hat.

“Hi.” It was a safe start.

“Hi,” said Emma.

“Hi,” said Danielle.

“Hi,” I said again. Idiot!

“So Megan, I saw you ended up with Vic at the dance?” Strange how when Emma said Vic it didn’t sound too bad. She had this way of sticking out her chin when she talked.

“Yeah, kind off,” I answered uncertainly. Was he one of their boyfriends? Had I stumbled into someone else’s territory?

They laughed. “Looked pretty convincing to me, right Danni?”

“Right.”

I struggled to find something to say, something right. “Well, it was just for that night. I’m not going with

him or anything.”

“Yeah, I know,” Emma replied. “He was only down in Sydney for the weekend. He’s Brad’s cousin.”

I looked from one face to the other. “Brad?”

Danielle, who was taller than I’d thought from up close explained. “Brad Gillman. Emma’s boyfriend.”

“Oh.” I began to understand. Or so I thought. I waited for something else to be said but they were both silent. Then, Emma’s mouth began to pucker and her eyes were going teary. Danielle saw what was happening too. She had the palest blue eyes and her thick dark lashes closed narrowly over them. “Oh, I could really kill Jenny Baker every time I think about what she did to you, Em.”

Emma smiled tragically. “I found out the day before the dance that Brad had been two-timing me with Jenny,” she told me breathily, “so...so I dropped him.” She sounded almost wistful.

I made a mental note to add wistful to my list of emotions to practice at home and replied as coolly as I could, “Shit, that’s awful.”

“Did...did Vic mention anything about Brad?” Emma whispered as if her life was fading, “or me?”

I didn’t know how to tell her the answer except to be completely honest with her. “Um.. he might have.. um.. not that I can remember.” I cringed. “Sorry.”

Danielle placed her long elegant hand on her friend’s shoulder and squeezed gently. It was obvious the pain of it all was still strong inside Emma’s heart. Danielle continued, since her friend had become quite choked up. “The worst is that Jenny Baker’s now going around saying it was Brad who dropped Emma!”

I shook my head slowly from side to side like I’d seen Danielle do it. “Gee, what a bitch!” We stood in silence for a while, giving Emma time to pull herself together. Danielle continued to stroke and squeeze Emma’s shoulder until finally Emma turned and smiled weakly. The crisis had passed for the moment.

Wandering out of the station towards school, I knew that I’d been given a peak into another world. A real life place where girls were caught up in the drama of going steady and getting dropped.

A place where a girl could be wistful.

### **Paris 23**

Cold from the inside. Bone cold. Now I understood.

Tonight it was minus nine. Could not afford to buy winter clothes. Could barely afford to eat. Still, if you had to freeze to death there were worse places than Paris. I crossed from the *boulangerie*, a warm roll

stuffed up my jumper. Along the icy footpaths I slipped and slid my way back to the hotel room that I now called home.

Almost there, I spotted the little fountain on the corner, frozen. Solid? I tapped on the ice with my fingernail. Snap! It was solid. I looked down at the jagged edge of nail. Just like my life here. Snapped. Finished.

Inside the tiny, dark hotel I lingered by reception for a while. Thawing. The heat never rose any higher than ground level. I was in the garret.

Paris. Starving in a garret. Where was the romance?

It had been fine at first, before this cold snap. Thought I'd made the perfect escape - gotten away scott-free as mum would say. But perhaps freezing to death was to be my punishment. Seemed harsh for ripping off a few weeks rent from the *concierge*, especially when she'd been such a bitch. She'd watched me for weeks, waiting for me to do a flit.

Which is exactly what I'd done.

Up in my garret I surveyed my domain. I'd taken so little with me, just my backpack. Nothing of me and Max apart from a thick jumper of his. More would have made the *concierge* suspicious. I bet the bitch was wearing my white stilettos.

Shit it was cold.

I stood in front of the frigid metal radiator. It was only eight o'clock, would only get colder.

"Into bed," I told myself, "and sleep." If I slept I wouldn't notice it. Maybe.

Across from the small single bed there was a tiny window. Closing the curtain might keep in whatever heat there was in the room. Glinting white glass. Fingers sliding across the pane. Ice.

On the inside.

I scratched at it with my nails, revealing slits of black night. The ice fell onto the sill. Pretty. It didn't melt. Watching. Watching. No change.

I pulled the curtains closed. So, it was sub-zero in the room already. Survival. It had to be number one. I dragged out everything that was warm from my bag and put it on. Thank God for Max's jumper. Layered up I crawled under the bedclothes. I unplugged the bedlamp beside me and plugged in my hairdryer. Setting hot and high. Warm air blew onto my face. I'd win yet.

Half an hour and the casing started to get hot. Off.

My ears still buzzed with the echo of the noise. I unplugged the drier to let it cool. Keep it for desperate.

Isn't this desperate?

Shut up.

Looks desperate to me.

Shut up!

What you need is body warmth.

Ha. Fat chance.

I bet Andy's keeping warm, somewhere.

Thanks for nothing.

He wouldn't be on his own on a cold night.

Probably not.

Definitely not.

I rubbed my hands over my breasts. If Andy was here we wouldn't be worrying about the cold. I let my hands move down my body. I burrowed through the layers of trackpants and tights. Ridiculous to think of sex.

Or maybe not.

I wasn't particularly aroused but I could be coaxed.

For therapeutics reasons, I told myself.

Yes.

To keep warm.

To help me sleep.

Yes.

## **Gravida 28**

She was lifted out of my body and passed overhead. Like a comet across the skies, all that came before her paled. A dusky wet thing, legs already running. I arched to watch as the emergency team descended upon her.

"Is she okay? Is she okay?" I called.

No answer.

Andy held my hand tightly. Beyond the low curtain of green drapes the operation continued, but I only had eyes for my baby.

Andy was on his feet, my hand still clasped in his. He moved as far as our physical link would permit, straining to see what was happening.

"Is she okay?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," someone answered this time, "we're just wrapping her." With that they brought her over to us. This wondrous little face with eyes blue as blue peered calmly around. For several minutes she observed us and our surrounds in quiet contemplation.

"She's Lucienne, isn't she?" I managed to ask Andy.

He nodded, his eyes awash. Our daughter continued to take it all in and we could do nothing but watch her in silent awe. Then, her face began to change. Her forehead puckered and her full rose lips quivered. She started to cry.

I looked at Andy and he at me. What did we do? Flat on my back on the operating table I was unable to take her into my arms. I encircled one arm around her and Andy encircled her from the other side.

"Hello," I said. What else did one say to a brand new person? "Hello, Lucy." At the sound of my voice, our little girl's crying stopped, her head turning towards me.

"She knows your voice," Andy insisted, "she knows it, look at her."

Then at the sound of his voice, she turned to look at him.

I smiled at our baby. "You've been listening to us for a long time, haven't you?"

She rested, quiet now, gazing straight back at me.

"I'm your mum," I whispered. But she already knew that.

Tears. She was finally with us. It was lunchtime Friday, over fifty hours without sleep. I looked at my husband and my child. It was over, and just beginning.

Someone murmured something to Andy. I didn't catch it.

"They have to take her, to examine her properly," Andy said anxiously.

The nurse moved forward and lifted the little bundle from between us.

I tried to keep our baby in sight. "Where are you taking her?"

"Through to the nursery," came the reply, and then to Andy, "you can come with us if you want."

His decision. I think it was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. He looked at me. It was all in his eyes. His pain, his love. My heartbeat loud, reverberating through my body. Thump. Thump. Thump. Cracked my breastbone, too large, too noisy for my chest. I watched as he looked over to our child, restless and softly crying in the nurse's arms.

There was nothing in this world, nothing, that I wanted more than for him to stay with me. "Go with Lucienne," I said as strongly as I could. He took a step towards our child, his hand still holding mine. "Go on," I urged. I knew he needed to be with her. "Make sure she's okay," I said.

"Are you positive?" he asked, releasing my hand a little.

"Yes." And I was.

I heard the clunk. Our lives changed gear at that very moment.

He kissed me lightly on the cheek, his lips lingering on my skin for a few moments.

"Thank you," he whispered.

I ruffled his hair a little, his thick beautiful hair. "Go," I said, "they're waiting."

### **Mercy 13**

I mashed my face down into the lounge, tensing my muscles against this new pain. Biting. Searing right into me. I'd rubbed the little nub fiercely trying see how many times I could achieve the end bit during one session.

Now I'd done it. Agony.

Had I rubbed too hard? Twit! I gingerly pressed my fingertip inside the top of my fold and tapped lightly. My hips jerked away from my own touch. Raw.

Oh God, I didn't mean to do it!

A voice inside. You knew He'd punish you for all this one day.

Please, take away the burning. I'm sorry, God. I know I shouldn't have read *The Happy Hooker*. I know I shouldn't have been greedy. Please, don't make it hurt. Not like this. Please God, don't make me have to go to the doctor who'll be disgusted and have to tell mum and dad what's happened. Please, God, I won't do it again if you just stop it.

It was hard to get my breath and my left calf was cramping. Try to stay calm. Breathe properly, in and

out, don't panic.

But what if mum and dad found me like this? I listened for signs of movement upstairs, but all was quiet. They were still out. Thank you, God. He wasn't entirely against me it seemed.

I managed to lean over and pick up the book that had slipped onto the floor. *The Happy Hooker* by Xaviera Hollander. Sandra Wills had outdone herself with this one. Her mum had just finished it and knowing I was hanging out for another book, Sandra had given it straight to me. She'd obviously not read it herself, otherwise she'd never have let it out of her possession. Hoisting myself carefully over onto my back, I held it to my chest.

It had been a sin to read it but I'd wanted to anyway. That was even a worse sin. Pre-planned. Where and when and all that. Just like pre-meditated murder, all worked out before-hand.

This was what He must have meant about being led into temptation. Not things like giving into the urge to talk in class or eating things that weren't on my diet. It was this. The sex thing. Wanting the sex thing more than going to Heaven. It was too creepy to think about.

I sat up a bit. The book fell open to where I'd stopped reading. Although I tried to ignore it, my eyes were drawn once more to the text.

Imagine *writing* about touching yourself! And all the other things she did, with another girl and everything! And that was before she was even a prostitute. There was no searching for sexy bits with this book, sex was on every page almost. There was even a description of a woman sucking on a man's penis!

One day, a guy driving by the shops with his mates had called out to me to suck his cock. I didn't think people actually did it. I thought it was like when you heard guys say "eat my shit" to each other. Just a figure of speech sort of thing.

Perhaps only prostitutes like Xaviera did it.

Perhaps it was only prostitutes who touched themselves. It was a strange relief not be the only one who did it but I sure didn't want to be a prostitute. Being oversexed was one thing but everyone knew that prostitutes were nymphos. I didn't want to be a nympho. Maybe this was how it started, nymphomania that is. Touching yourself.

Prostitutes. I couldn't believe that I'd end up one. Like the women dad and mum had shown Brian and I one night when we'd driven at snail's pace through the Kings Cross traffic. Had they all started out like me?

Two neon cocktails had clinked in the night above a flickering sign - Club Taboo. None of the other places looked this good. Brian and I both kneeled up, peering out the back of the car. There was a huge man in a bowtie that looked too little for his neck standing in the doorway and heaps of people partying on the upstairs balcony.

"It looks unreal," I'd said, "what's it like inside?"

"Promise me you'll never go to the Taboo Club." Dad's voice was strange, serious.

"Why?" I'd wished he'd been driving even more slowly.

Instead he thumped the steering wheel to emphasise his point. Brian and I both spun around. "Just promise me!" he yelled, and then more quietly, "No questions."

It seemed stupid but what could I do. I promised.

"That's the El Alemain fountain," mum had offered in a measured voice.

We'd dutifully looked over at the round ball of water and headed down to Woolloomooloo.

Dad murmured to mum, "It's just a bad scene, baby. A bad scene that's all."

Mum had squeezed his knee and nodded. I couldn't figure it out. The women in the doorways on either side of Club Taboo hadn't looked terrible enough to cause a bad scene. They just wore hot pants and boots and things. Before Dad had gone all funny, he'd called them ladies of the night. It was Mum who'd set me straight later, telling me they were called prostitutes and that men paid them to have sex. She said it was against the law.

Men paid them to have sex?

They'd have to be ugly-ugly. Some very ugly men had wives for sex so the ones that needed prostitutes would be even uglier than them. Talk about desperate! They'd be even worse than Mr Beadsley up the street. Skinny legs, barrel bellies and greasy strands of hair combed over their bald spots. Yuk. Kathleen and I were desperate to have boyfriends but this was different desperate. The thought of all those girls with revolting men was awful.

Could prostitutes say no if someone really disgusting approached them on the street? And what about the police? Why didn't they arrest them all? If we could all see who they were, why couldn't they? Very curious.

Then, something flashed to mind. That word!

My eyes travelled down the page. There it was. *Clitoris*. That was what I was looking for. I read the

passage again.

*"But all I had was a hardened little clitoris."*

I knew straight away which bit she meant. It had a name! Did mum know that it had a name? I tried saying it a few times.

"Clit-oor-is. Clight-or-is."

That sounded right. "My clight-or-is is feeling better." And it was.

I read on.

*"I moved my mouth down under the sweater and started sucking those glorious breasts with the erect nipples."*

Imagine sucking on a girl's nipples. I couldn't really. I was pleased that hers were erect. Mine went hard and stuck out when I felt sexy. It was funny the way they changed. Flat and little sometimes, then bigger, harder.

Funny how reading about things I would never do made me feel sexy. Xaviera was acting like a lesbian, and I knew I wasn't a lesbian. Mum had told me about lesbians and all a while back. She'd told me to be wary of girls with hairy arms.

"Like Geraldine Pope?" I'd asked. Geraldine from down the road was the hairiest girl I knew.

"Well, not all girls with hairy arms are lesbians but often they are. Except when they're Greeks or something, then it doesn't count."

I remember screwing up my face, not having a clue what she was on about.

"You see, Megan," she continued in her this-is-one-of-those-little-talks voices, "everyone has male and female hormones inside them. Usually in just the right amounts to make you either a man or a woman."

"Oh." This was completely new to me.

"But sometimes things go wrong and some girls are just born with too many boy hormones and some boys are born with too many girl hormones. They're not in balance."

I'd asked why.

She hadn't known but told me that this all resulted in them liking people of the same sex instead of the opposite sex. "You should understand that they can't help it. All the same, just make sure you watch out for lesbians. Just tell them very clearly if they ask you to get involved with them that you're not interested. Tell them that you're not that way inclined."

I hadn't encountered one yet to practice my little speech on yet.

Could I ever kiss Kathleen or suck on her boobs? I shuddered. No. But I could imagine how nice it could be for someone to suck mine. What would it be like? I brought my hand to my mouth and put some spit on my palm. I dragged up my tee-shirt and popped my nipple out of my bra. I cupped my hand. It was a mouth.

Gary Carmichael's. Yes. My nipple hardened like a little seed. He'd said hello to me a few days ago. Just hello. But to see those lips speak to *me*. Full, almost pouty. Warm and soft on my breast. My *clightoris* stirred. It must have been on the same nerve link as my nipple. I was bringing my hand to my mouth to wet it again when I heard a car pull into the driveway. *Damn!* Someone was home.

### Paris 23

*"Bonjour, mademoiselle."*

*"Bonjour, madam."*

*"Ca va mieux?"* the birdlike woman who ran the hotel enquired.

I nodded. Yes, I was feeling better. I still felt like shit but I was feeling better. Sitting down closest to the only functioning heater in the room, I waited for her to bring coffee. A huge handleless steaming soup bowl of the stuff. I'd never wanted a coffee more than this.

The small sunless room to the left of Reception was empty apart from me. Too early for tourists to venture out of warm beds. The snow had lain on the ground icing up for a week now. This early November cold snap had to crack soon. That's what everyone was saying.

The kitchen door swung open and the woman pirouetted out balancing half a dozen baskets of baguette chunks. One basket per table. Eight chunks in each. Two per person.

*"Prenez, prenez,"* she insisted as she approached my table.

As I swept the bread from her tenuous grasp I caught the waft of the most delicious smell in the world. Forget *Chanel* and *Givenchy*. I held the basket in front of me and inhaled. The cold tablets I'd taken were starting to kick in, my nose clearing. Hot-chill shivers would abate to a mere clammy glow by the time I started work in an hour.

"Go home," Augustine had ordered two days ago, shoving the half-packet of cold tablets she'd extracted from her handbag into my palm.

It had been an order and so I'd gone. Back to my hotel. There were feverish memories of the past thirty six hours staggering down the hall to the loo but the rest was well, vague. Things'd cleared at around five thirty this morning. Cleared to the point of realising I had to make it into work today so I could at least pay the hotel bill for the week.

*"Voila, mademoiselle."* Coffee.

*"Merci."*

I slurped, savouring the near scalding liquid as it sank through the tight core of my chest. Ahh.

I reached for the bread. Each morning while the woman was out of the room I'd spread two chunks with butter and jam to eat immediately and do a few more to eat later. This morning I merely dunked, head held in one hand, bread in the other. Spreading butter and jam would take too much energy.

Candy switched off the vacuum cleaner. "Move in with me!" She was serious. "Just 'til you get on your feet at least."

"But\_"

"No buts about it," she drawled, "you're in the spare room. Starting tonight." She clicked the vacuum back on and continued Hoovering behind the counter.

What could I say? It was the only way I'd be able to stay in Paris. I jumped on her and gave her a huge hug.

"Yipes," she screamed, "getta hold on yourself! The masses will be descending upon us in a minute."

## **Gravida 28**

There was something luxurious about being in bed at nine thirty in the morning on a Tuesday. It didn't matter that I'd been up at three and at seven, there was still a certain decadence in it. There was maybe even a little more decadence about climbing back into bed at such a late hour than there was in never having been up at all. Who knew or cared? I snuggled under the doona and looked across at the bassinette.

Lucy slept deeply, not three feet away from me. She was all wrapped up in love and bunny rugs until she next stirred to make contact with the world outside her tiny body.

I couldn't help but wish that Andy was with me now. By the time we got to bed at night we were both

so absolutely stuffed, there was little thought of much more than a quick kiss and the bliss of a few hours sleep. But now, here at this moment, my thoughts were drifting towards the carnal. The carnal seemed a little bizarre in the presence of a clean white bassinette. But then so did most things.

Andy had held me close last night, tight arms around me and breath soft on the back of my neck. Koala cuddles we called them, locked together like two pieces of a jigsaw. "It's nice to have my old Megan back," he'd whispered, stroking my tummy and drawing me closer still.

It was nice to be back. His hand had travelled to my breast and lightly caressed its fullness. I felt a melting somewhere inside. Desire rose through me like warm bread in the oven. Where had it come from? How could this man's touch on my breast arouse this within me? I'd doubted that my breasts would ever function sexually again. My baby's suckling was fantastic, a sensation that was unbeatable, but it was definitely maternal, not sexy at all. How did my brain know the difference between the touch of my child and the touch of my man?

Our little baby girl had stirred just at that moment, hungry. I broke away from Andy a little reluctantly, my curiosity to explore sex once more, well and truly kneaded. We hadn't made love since Lucy had been born. My bleeding had ebbed to a total stop last week but fatigue had been the biggest factor. Fatigue and some apprehension, maybe on both our parts. I was still tender too, we'd have to be careful to go easy, not generally our style.

I found myself stroking my breasts. Would my body still work? Would it be the same? How could it be the same after what both of us had been through over the last four weeks?

My breasts were still incredibly engorged with milk, not settling like it said it would in all the books. The books said that a woman's breasts often spurted milk at the point of sexual climax too. Nothing would surprise me now. It might even be exciting, the prospect of milk jetting across our bodies and pooling in a mess of Andy's dark chest hair as I rode my way through a flying orgasm. Possibilities.

But orgasm may not come as it had in the past. Should I test myself out?

Face it, I was horny.

I drew my tee-shirt up and over my head and unclipped the bra I'd taken to wearing twenty-four hours a day. My breasts were no less heavy and tender but in the grey light of this wet cold morning they looked nice. Amazing to view the nipples hardening against the cool air, the areolae plump and dusky with milk and arousal. I ran both hands down my belly and lightly caressed the short sharp hairs that formed the new

growth. I'd only be shaved at the front and soon my fingers were gently combing through soft moist curls, dipping down deep between the lips to find the sensitive membranes.

Oh I'd missed this.

I brought one hand back to my breasts, caressing one then the other, squeezing until a small droplet of milk formed on the very tips of each brown nipple. Like pre-come from a cock. My finger rubbed my clitoris in small circles as I stared at the milk droplets growing bigger and bigger. My breath caught in my chest and I felt the start of my orgasm deep in my pelvis. It vibrated through my back and down each limb, a deep bass tremor. The droplets broke and trickled whitely down the tight skin of my breasts.

Old familiar contractions ebbed. No spurting, no pain, no gushes.

I lay staring up at the ceiling. A part of *me* still existed. How? Nothing else had escaped.

### **Mercy 13**

I wasn't going to take it to school, but more than a week had gone by without a read. Any opportunity that had looked promising always turned out to be too risky. Now I couldn't wait any longer. I didn't even tell Kathleen that I had it with me. I hid it inside my loose leaf folder, in the pouch section so it wouldn't drop out. When I arrived at school I made for the loos. Not the main block that was about as private as Parramatta shopping mall on a Thursday night, but a smaller block in the science wing.

There was no-one else in there so I sat myself on the toilet seat lid and took up from where I'd left off. I couldn't believe it, just non-stop sex. I had a real urge to touch myself but I knew I couldn't do it. Especially not in the toilets. I wasn't that desperate, surely. Besides, just squirming ever so slightly on the hard plastic seat was getting the same effect, almost.

By page twenty-eight Xaviera had described how as soon as she lost her virginity she was addicted to sex. That's exactly what I was afraid of. How did you avoid becoming a slut?

Xaviera thought most people had a tendency to be bi-sexual. Was that why I'd found the bit about her and her girlfriend sexy? And what about threesomes?

She had been licking a woman between the legs when the woman's husband walked in on them. He thought that the sight of them together naked on the bed was very exciting and joined in too! I couldn't imagine doing it. She called it eating pussy.

On every page there were new words for things. Blow-jobs and head-jobs, and horny for feeling sexy.

The end bit was called a climax which made a lot of sense because that's what it was. I couldn't work out what a dildo was except that it was an artificial device and I gathered a vibrator was what it says it is. Did it go inside? It was incredible to think that a woman could do things like this let alone write about them. She must\_\_

"Shit!" I jumped about a metre high as the speaker hooter started blaring. I shoved the book back into my folder and ran like crazy up to the assembly area. I was so out of breath I could barely say morning prayers

The morning classes passed so slowly I thought I would burst. Then I remembered. There was library period for English right after lunch. Brilliant. All I had to do was smuggle in *The Happy Hooker*, sit a fair way apart from anyone else and read away. That shouldn't prove to be too difficult. The only thing was that no-one was allowed to take folders in any more because people were stealing too many books in them. I figured I could just stuff the book inside my uniform or something and slip it out when no-one was looking. In the poetry section aisle should do, or at the back with all the classics. No-one went round there much. I knew the library pretty well, knew which books were hardly ever borrowed. It came from working as a library monitor once a week. Pity it wasn't my day today.

The library didn't open for ten minutes into lunchtime to give everyone a chance to eat. I sat with the dags as usual, only half listening to what was being said, munching on my fruit salad and cottage cheese that mum had packed for today's tasty treat. Ughh! It was terrible stuff, cottage cheese, and I found it in my lunch box at least one day every week. At least the fruit salad was all right when I scraped all the gluggy white globules off it.

This was all part of mum's continuing effort to slim me down a bit. The latest fad was Weight Watchers.

"Look at your Aunty Jean," she'd said to me waving the photo and diet plan that had arrived by mail in my face, "she's lost forty-eight pound. She reckons it'd be a good diet for you to go on." Aunty Jean wrote that I should go along to the meetings too. She thought that they provided her with inspiration not to eat naughty things. The stories about Weight Watchers putting people in piggy pens weren't true either, according to her. Mum was taking a wait and see approach.

"We'll try the diet on you," she'd said, "but I don't fancy all that meeting nonsense."

I didn't mind the diet that much and I did like being a bit slimmer. It was much better than the Doctor

Atkins Army Diet, at least this one let people eat fruit. I just wished someone hadn't invented cottage cheese.

It was the diet that gave me the incentive to be a library monitor. You couldn't eat in there and it was during the long lunch break that I had heaps of trouble not giving into the temptations of Chelsea buns and chip rolls. It didn't do much for my quest to be cool, but then sitting in the playground with the dags was worse. At least I wasn't seen with them as often.

I looked across the backs of the faded coloured benches scattered all over the playground. Other groups of girls were sitting together, laughing and sunning their baby-oiled legs. They'd all be back at the beach during the holidays and their legs would have a head start on the rest of them in the tan stakes. Kathleen and I weren't allowed to go to the beach by ourselves yet but I had my sights set on this summer for sure. Those girls with the glistening legs had been going since first form, lucky bitches.

"I'm going to the library," I announced to the dags.

I tipped the rest of the cottage cheese in the bin and picked up my folder with the book inside. I wasn't on guard, which was dumb, and walked right down through the trees where the tough chicks sat. Idiot! Everyone knew it was their territory.

"Hey look, there's goes the goody goody crawly wawly lib-wawy monitor!"

I kept walking, eyes fixed straight ahead. Just ignore them, I told myself, and hope like hell they don't bash me up.

"Are you frickin' deaf or something eh?"

A rare surge of bravery hit me and I turned to face Jenny Baker's abuse head on. "Drop dead," I managed.

They all chorused a huge, "Ooooh aahh."

"Oh gee you're so tough, Meee-gan Moran. I'm weely scared."

"You mean Mee-gan Mor-on!" They all laughed some more. Things were going blurry, one blink and there'd be tears. I could never win. Bloody sluts. I hated the lot of them.

One of them thwacked the remains of a sandwich at me, hitting me right on the arm. There was nothing left to do. I walked away, tomato dripping down my sleeve.

"Jesus! Lay off her will youse?" It was Sandra Wills! "She's all right."

I fought the urge to run and thank her, knowing I had to be cool. She'd be pissed off if I blew it. I kept

my steps smooth and steady until I got inside; then I charged up to level three taking the stairs two at a time.

Sandra Wills thought I was all right! It was hard to believe. She'd stuck up for me! Perhaps she was telling the others right now about me, how I wasn't that uncool, about the books. How they proved that I wasn't the dag they all thought I was.

Level three.

No-one was around as I ducked into the toilets just along from the library. After sponging off what I could of the tomato, I got down to business. In the cubicle, I pushed the book up under the side leg elastic of my knickers. Someone came in.

I flushed the toilet for good effect. The girl outside was washing her hands. I couldn't go out until she'd left, she'd freak out if she saw the book fall out of my knickers. Besides, it probably stuck out and looked as if my hip was deformed.

God what was she doing? I'd have to go out if she didn't piss off soon otherwise she'd think I was strange, being in the cubicle for so long after I'd flushed the toilet.

The water stopped running. "Come on, come one," I said under my breath as I heard the paper towel rip across the tearer. Three more seconds and I'd go out. One, ... two, ... that sounded like she was picking up her bag, ... two and half...yes, she was going. Her footsteps faded down the cement walkway. I turned the chrome lock on the back of the door and came out slowly, testing with each step to make sure the book was staying right where I'd put it.

It worked. I dumped my folder on the table by the door as I walked into the library. The librarian waved to me from behind the glass of her office, she was still munching through her sandwiches. "Afternoon, Mrs Hearn," I called. She wouldn't stir from there for ages. Today's monitor was already at the checkout desk. She acknowledged me with a brief nod as I walked past.

There was only one other girl in the whole place and I waited until she was way over the other side before I made my move. I had to be extra careful. Ignoring the voice inside that was reciting all the things that would happen to me if I got sprung doing this, I entered the last aisle. I had to find somewhere that would be one hundred per cent safe to hide Xaviera. Among all these dreary books, a bright lime green cover blazing the words "The Happy Hooker" in one inch print would stick out a mile. English poets, nineteenth century English literature, and then right down the bottom, a couple of shelves dymo-ed Australian Classics. You never saw anyone over in this section. I crouched low and scanned all around,

peering across the tops of the books through to the next aisle. No sign of anyone, the coast was clear.

I stuck my hand up under my uniform and slid out *The Happy Hooker*. I took a big breath. "Calm down for God's sake," I thought. It didn't work, my heart was jumping all over the place. Was it worth the risk? The stress? I couldn't just hang here holding the book. "Come on Megan," I told myself, "get on with it!"

I shoved it down behind some old books that were a bit bigger than all the others. They were an old set of Henry Lawson's stuff, great numbered volumes. I hated Henry Lawson. Hated bush ballads and all that crap. I pulled a couple of them from the shelf and checked the return by labels inside the covers. Just as I'd thought, no-one had borrowed these since the year before last. I was starting to feel better.

At one o'clock the end of lunch hooter screeched the start of English and pretty soon the whole of my class wandered in. Library periods were usually low key affairs and I was counting on this one being no different.

"Okay everyone," Mrs Doherty called, "you've got forty five minutes of quality reading time. Don't waste it." She sounded bright and enthusiastic as always. Nearly everyone else looked ready for a snooze as they flopped down and slumped over the tables. "Oh and if I find anyone working on other projects," she continued pointedly, "Like geography Sharon Burke, or maths homework Emma Burgitt, there'll be trouble." With a final look around she strode across for her gossip with Mrs Hearn. We were on our own, more or less.

Back over in the last aisle, I retrieved my book. I was dumb sometimes. It dawned on me that I couldn't just swan out, *The Happy Hooker* in hand, and start reading away in the middle of the room. I thought for a second. Brilliant! I'd grab one of those big Henry Lawson's to hide it in and prop it up behind so no-one would realise what it was that I was really reading. Henry Lawson's Book of Prose Volume II. Perfect. It was big enough to do the job and so drab it'd never attract anyone's notice.

At the far end of the reading area, at a free table, I set myself up. It was a bit awkward, uncomfortable with my thumbs at full stretch, but I couldn't work out any other way of holding one book inside the other so they stayed upright. It didn't matter. I flicked through to where I'd left off. I could taste the thrill as I located my page - the threesome.

I couldn't resist reading it again, it was so wild. Did people do this stuff in real life or had Xaviera just made it all up? She had a note at the front of her book where it said that everything actually had happened and only some names had been changed. I didn't think authors could write that unless it was true but this

stuff was so far out it made you wonder.

After the threesome episode, there wasn't much happening for a few pages. I kept moving forward, skimming through bits until I found something promising.

Ah, this looked good. I got a bit more comfortable in my chair. Xaviera had met up with her old school friend, Helga, again. I could hardly wait and read on quickly. It turned out that Helga was now married and eight and half months pregnant. I supposed that would be the end of any sexy things happening. But it wasn't! Helga lifted up her nightie to let Xaviera stroke her belly. Then, lifting the nightie even further she gave Xaviera her breasts. They were ready for the baby but Xaviera sucked on them anyway. A bit of milk squirted right into her mouth. Oh, how revolting! All that flashed to mind was mum's friend Patty and how disgusting her boobs looked when she was feeding her baby - bruised with varicose veins like in mum's legs. The nipple bit had been as big as a saucer almost, all dark and hard like lizard skin. There was nothing sexy in what Xaviera had done. Nothing. It was just sick, very sick. She'd gone too far this time. No wonder the back cover said it had been banned in twenty-seven countries. I skipped over the rest of that bit in case it got worse.

Thank heavens the next chapter was more normal. It had her flying to South Africa and doing it up in the plane. She described things so vividly that I could easily imagine each thing as she wrote it...

*...we removed the armrests from the seats, squeezed down together under the blanket, he facing my back spoon-fashion, and proceeded to make love...*

I snuggled back against him in my mind...

*...we had to be very quiet...*

I knew how hard that was sometimes...

*and, we soon discovered, very careful, because a couple of children cry, "Crows, mother!" and she rushed out and aims a broomstick at the birds as though it was a gun, and says, "Bung!"*

What? I drew away a little. Then I realised. Bloody Henry Lawson! My stupid eyes had kept reading off the page onto his story. I went back up the page to where I'd left off...

...very careful, because a couple of times he became overamorous and I almost fell down between the seats...

That was better. She was just fantastic once she got going. Imagine even in the plane finding a man to have sex with sitting right next to her. Three times in one trip too. How long did it take to fly to South Africa? I read on.

"Oh my God," I thought, this was too much. I put the books down flat for a moment, catching my breath. The library was still all around me. Nothing had changed, which came as a surprise. I'd forgotten where I was. Taking the chance to check things out, I saw that they were still cool, that was until my eyes caught Sandra Wills staring right at me. A hot blush hit instantly and she laughed. Shit! She was coming over.

"Got something interesting there, Meges?" she said softly as she sat in the chair and pulled it in close to me, "I've been watching you." I didn't answer. She looked down at the title, then at me, then at the title again and back at me. "Henry Lawson eh?" She lifted the corner. I slammed down both hands flat across the entire cover. "*Don't*," I hissed.

Sandra reached for Henry Lawson once more. I went to stop her but her eyes told me not to. "What have we here?"

"Shh, be careful."

She smiled and shook her head. "Oh Meges, what are we going to do with you?" She slid the books across the shiny table top and holding them as I had, one inside the other, quickly fingered her way back to the title page. "Holy fuck you're reading *that* here?"

"Sandra!"

"Any good?"

Some of the class were starting to turn around. I reached over and grabbed back the books.

"Oh don't be a shit, Megan, let me have a look."

I thought about how she'd stuck up for me earlier. I owed her. Checking my wristwatch I saw we still had twenty minutes. "Okay, but keep it down for God's sake."

"Yeah of course I will."

"And grab a book to put in front of you." Sandra screwed up her face, not understanding. "In case someone comes," I added.

Sandra laughed quietly. "Got it all worked out haven't you, Meges. Listen, what'll I grab?"

"I dunno." I looked over towards the fiction shelf closest to us. "Just pick anything."

She was soon back and throwing open the book she'd chosen.

"What did you get?" I asked.

"Shit I dunno. Just get on with it. Is it really really filthy? More so than the one you gave me?"

I nodded.

Her eyes were flashing, excited. "Show me the bit you're up to? What have they done so far?"

As I found my place again, I gave her a quick run down. She was suitably impressed. "I'm not sure about the bit I'm up to now though," I said. Sandra came closer until her face was just inches away from mine. "Why's that?"

"Well, I think she's about to have sex with a German Shepherd."

"Oh how gross! Let me see."

We read on together, each holding one side of the books. We must have got to the bit where Xaviera straddled the dog's back so its tail was against her *clightoris* at the same time. I looked at Sandra and she looked at me. We fixed our eyes back to the spot and read on. Xaviera reached around and fondled the dog's penis. My stomach knotted up. We both let go a high pitched wail when we read how the dog's sperm spewed into her hand. I let the books fall onto the table. I didn't know whether to laugh or vomit. From the way Sandra gagged and spluttered, she felt the same. People were looking at us but I couldn't have cared less.

Sandra was almost gasping. "Oh I can't believe she...and the dog...and\_"

A voice boomed from across the tables. "What's going on over there?"

Sandra threw her head down on the table. "Oh shit no!"

My heart dead stopped I'm sure. I knew I had to act quickly, my life really did depend on it. I slid the Henry Lawson towards me with Xaviera still safely underneath until they teetered on the table's edge. I picked Henry up and while doing so, managed to sweep Xaviera off and into my lap. I opened my knees and let the book fall into the pouch that my uniform skirt had made between them. Then I snapped my legs shut. God must have had mercy on me, *The Happy Hooker* was secure.

Mrs Doherty towered over where we sat. "What's the ruckus in aid of?"

Sandra shrugged.

"Nothing, Miss," I said, my voice little more than a squeak.

"There's something going on. What are you supposed to be reading there?" She was pointing in front of me.

I was on safe ground here. My muscles relaxed a little. "Henry Lawson, Miss." It was going to be all right I thought. I'd figured it out well.

"Which one?"

I was confused. "Pardon, Miss?"

Mrs Doherty looked around at the class, who were all gawking at us, as if she couldn't believe that someone could be so stupid. "I asked, Miss Moran, which of the Lawson stories were you reading?"

This was it. Shit. "Um..." I slowly picked up the book and carefully flipping it over, stared at the small lettering along top of the opened page. "Um...The Drover's Wife, Miss."

"The Drover's Wife. I see." I could feel her eyes on the top of my head. "What about you, Miss Wills? What literary treasure were you so riveted by?"

I let my eyes look across at the cover of Sandra's book. It was upside down. Sandra calmly spun it the right way up and read, "Sue Barton - Student Nurse."

"Sue Barton? Well, who'd have thought." I could tell Mrs Doherty was enjoying this now. "Thinking of taking up the noble profession are we? I don't think they're that desperate yet!"

"No, Miss, I mean I don't know, Miss."

Mrs Doherty laughed sarcastically. "You don't know." She waited a few moments before starting again, swinging herself into the seat facing us across the table. "And you Miss Moran, tell me all about The Drover's Wife."

I couldn't avoid her eyes now. I wasn't used to having her look at me this way. Bloody Sandra, if only she hadn't come over. I had to speak. "Um, is it about the wife of a drover? In the bush or something?"

"You're the one whose reading the story aren't you?"

"But I haven't finished it yet and..," I was feeling very lost. Bloody Drover's Wife. Bloody bitch. I bit down gently on my top lip and prayed like mad that she'd move away.

"Well, I'm not at all convinced there's been a lot of quality reading going on down in this corner." She

paused, pulling her mouth to one side as she thought. "I'll expect a five hundred word essay on The Drover's Wife from you, and the same on Sue Barton from you." She sighed dramatically as she pushed herself up out of the chair. "On my desk by Friday morning. Understood?"

"Yes, Miss."

"Yes, Miss." I let myself breathe again. A close call.

She went to move on but instead, she stopped and turned back to me. "Actually, Miss Moran, I'd like a word with you. Can you come over to the office please?"

"Now?" I squeaked.

Mrs Doherty nodded. "Is there a problem?"

"Um, no."

She was waiting for me. My heart thudded in my ears at a million miles an hour. Shit. What was I supposed to do? I started to stand, straightening up bit by bit, letting *The Happy Hooker* fall to the floor as gently as possible. Perhaps she wouldn't notice.

A lime green paperback? Not a chance. "I believe you've dropped something there," Mrs Doherty said, walking towards the table.

This couldn't be happening.

She squatted down to retrieve the book. A voice screamed inside my head, "Move, Megan!" A split second vision of mum standing in Sister Anne's office flashed through my mind. Sister Anne holding *The Happy Hooker* in her hand, waving it at my mother. Expulsion. Disgrace. I couldn't bear it, I'd kill myself. I had to get to it first. Crash-tackling down under the table, my eyes fixed on the target, I cracked my shoulder hard on the table edge.

"Ow shit!" I cried, grasping the bruised skin.

Mrs Doherty, *The Happy Hooker* in hand, straightened up. She glared down at me. "Yes, you could say that," she stated matter-of factly.

The shoulder pain faded as my bleak future began to reveal itself. Oh no. God had finally caught up with me. What would happen now? I waited for my world to crumble.

"Report to me after school." That was all she said.

Thanksgiving and I was stuffing turkey, Southern style. Candy had left instructions. I'd mixed up a huge mound of mince, breadcrumbs and herbs and I was shoving it up the bird. Charming. On the expansive pale pink marble bench that divided Candy's *Vogue* Style and Living kitchen from the minimalist decorated lounge, I worked with only the finest of chef's knives and designer appliances.

Up on the third floor, everything about Candy's apartment was unbelievable.

And it was Candy's apartment. Her dad had set her up, a bribe to get her out of Senegal and the juiciest scandal in diplomatic circles for years it seemed. A long story. I'd heard it in bits. How her father was the ambassador, how she'd had an affair with his deputy, Gerard. Married, of course.

Gerard was coming tonight.

"I didn't stop seeing him," she'd boasted, "we just have to be more organised now."

He was passing through Paris on official business. It appeared he passed through all the time.

"But doesn't your father know?"

"As long as I'm nowhere in sight and the scandal isn't happening under his nose I don't think he cares."

And so it went. Candy lived in luxury and actually worked at *Paradis* for fun.

Thanksgiving was big on Candy's calendar and tonight we were doing a swish dinner for eight.

Wednesday, and my afternoon off gave me time to prepare everything. Candy was on clean-up roster tomorrow.

"Enjoy yourself," she'd called as I'd headed home from work just before lunchtime.

And I was. Enjoying myself.

She'd be home around seven and the guests were due at eight.

Place tidy and table set. After the turkey came shopping for champagne and a few other goodies. A rare feast.

As the checkout operator rang through the cheese, the crackers, the *creme fraiche*, my mind flashed to another time at another check-out. Meagre packets of pasta and a plastic bottle of red. I would never know what happened to my Marco Polo.

"*Trois cents soixante-quarante, mademoiselle.*"

Rattled-off numbers were one of the hardest things to understand in French. Three hundred and seventy four francs. I handed over four hundred and waited for change. Not paying rent for a few weeks was making the going a lot easier.

Back at the apartment, late afternoon.

The scene shows a dark-haired woman, pale, slim. Bending forward she adds oil to a steaming bath. Further forward now she dips her arm and swirls the water, her eyes closing as she breathes in the scent rising with the steam. Ready.

She steps into the deep bath and then gradually lowers her body until she is kneeling. The water is hot, bringing a flush to her cheeks and frizzing the fine hair escaping her headband. Clutching the sides of the bath, inch by inch she allows the water to lap further up her bottom, to close in around her torso. Finally, she submerges her shoulders.

Soon the echoes of her actions become silent.

Relaxing.

Enveloped.

Bliss.

Minutes melt as muscles heat-up and loosen.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

Oh no!

I sat up, shattered. Was about to get out to answer it. "Bugger it," I thought and instead sat right where I was. Would stop soon.

Ring. Ring. Silence.

Sinking back into my hot watery world, I relaxed once more.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

This time I have to get out. Grab a towel and wrap it around me, dripping across the polished floor to the kitchen.

"Yes, um... *oui, Allo?*" I answer watching the pool of water at my feet extend across the floorboards.

"Yes, um hello. Candy asked me to call to let you know there'd be one extra for dinner tonight."

I look up from my puddle, my stomach feeling like the floor is falling out from under me. That *voice*.  
"Andy?"

"Uh-huh."

Heartbeat threatens to jump right out of my mouth. "Where...where are you?"

"Paradise Perfumes. I thought you'd be here." Disappointment. He's disappointed!

"But I'm not there." I can't think straight. Andy in Paris?

"Megan, I realise that."

Silence. What do we say now?

I hear Candy's voice, insistent, sassy - give that phone to me! A struggle over the handpiece.

"Lord, he's stubborn," she says to me, "but very cute."

"Candy!" I scream, "Put him back on!"

"Megan, let's cut to the chase. Do I bring him home or not?"

Yes, bring him home.

### Coast 18

Toenails. We weren't supposed to cut the nails of diabetics but the lady I was helping to walk back from the toilet was not a diabetic. We were making slow progress and I could not help noticing that her toenails were extraordinarily long, extending a good centimetre or so from her toes.

"I'll cut those for you when we get back to your bed," I offered.

"They're right, don't worry about it," she replied huskily.

I looked at her expensive nightgown, fine French cotton not often seen in public hospitals. The carefully applied rouge on gaunt cheeks, the eye make-up failing to hide the sag of skin around large brown eyes. It made no sense to me that this woman would have long ugly, yellow-jagged toe-nails. I helped her up onto her bed and lifted her feet in.

"I really don't mind doing these," I said lightly, fingering one of her toes, "I've got time."

"Urghh! Don't touch them!" she hissed as she drew her feet up towards her bottom. Her eyes were opened wide.

"Okay, okay, I was just offering," I assured her.

She uncurled a little and then took my hand, a hand with long well manicured fingernails. "Darling, I'm sorry," she said, then more quietly, "but... it's not you, it's the war. I... I worked for the resistance in France. I was caught and they ripped out my toenails so I'd tell them what they wanted to know. You see now? I can't bear them being touched. I'm sorry."

I couldn't wait to get off duty. Two days off before starting my first stint of night duty.

Here it was, only a little after nine thirty in the morning and I was at Andy's all on my own. The first time I'd been left alone at a man's house. His shifts were worse than mine. He'd laughed as he'd thrown some of his porn collection on the bed before he left.

"In case you're bored while I'm away," he said.

Across the room in the mirrored wardrobe I saw myself. Spurred on by the theatre of it all, I combed my fingers furiously through my hair and then shook my head so that it fell heavily across my brow. I looked sexy. Good. My breasts stretched the thin interlock of Andy's tee-shirt, my nipples jutting through the fabric.

I ran the flats of my hands up and down my body. My flesh thrilled. It was decadent, self-indulgent, and I loved it. After Andy had left I'd poured coffee and wandered around from room to room. The radio in the kitchen was still on, muffled by the settling energy of the morning rush. I gathered up an object from here and another from there, considering each one's shape, size, feel. Specific sex toys did nothing for me. My wants varied and this quiet exploration was part of the ritual.

I craved cool, metallic curves. Smooth cylinders. My arousal heightened as I took the perfect item from the bathroom cupboard. A large green cylindrical can of shaving foam. I could have come in an instant had I wanted to, but I hadn't wanted to, not then. I had all morning.

Returning to the bedroom mirror, I slowly slid the fabric of the tee-shirt up and over my breasts until they were bare. I simply stood, admiring their shape and letting my arousal surface.

They looked full and weighty. I started to lightly knead their plumpness. I rubbed my hands over and over them, my eyes not leaving the mirror. The delicious nerve pathway between my nipples and clitoris sparked. The slightest pressure on my clit right now would send me over. It was tempting, mmm, very tempting - but I would wait. String it out. See how long I could resist.

I pulled all the covers off the bed, leaving an expanse of pale sheet. Up on all fours I swept my plaything to the far side. Mirror became screen. I watched the action as I dragged my undies down around my thighs, and then slipped them off completely. Watched the tips of each breast brushing time and again across the sheet's fine weave. Saw my deep rose cleft exposing as I leant further forward.

Playing to my audience, I reached for the oil we'd been using last night. Rolled onto my back. Rubbed the scent of warm vanilla into my breasts and let it trickle down onto my belly. Dipped my fingers between my legs and frolicked in warm wetness.

Passing one finger over my clit a rush ignited. Whoa girl!

Lay still. Desire bubbled through my hips pressing my ass rhythmically into the mattress. I grabbed one of Andy's magazines. Random opening revealed a favourite theme of mine. Ah yes. Tied to the bed, he's teasing her with his tongue. My legs opened wide, waiting. She pleaded for cock and he plunged deep inside her. My pelvis was humping. The mag in one hand, my eyes devouring the text, I reached for the can of shaving foam – long, cool metal. My phallus needed no oiling up. Engulfed as I tried hard to keep reading. Impossible. I threw the book to the wind. Closed eyes tight, plunging deeper inside myself. Tracing frantic circles around and around my clit. My throat clamping as tension builds, builds.

Almost there, almost, almost... almost\_

Yes.

Shot into the sun.

Ah yes.

And then it begins. The fall. The slow freefall, spiralling, spiralling back to earth.

Ahh.

The sweet descent of lust.

Seven nights straight. I made the final adjustments to my white starched cap, now embroidered with one crisp navy blue stripe. Officially a first year. Over the first hurdle. I pinned on my fob watch just above my top pocket. Funny how you got used to things. Last week in a shop someone asked for the time and I reached for my left breast, even though I was out of uniform.

Mmm. Seven nights without Andy. I looked in the mirror and checked that my collar came high enough to cover the love-bite. Just. At least it would fade before I visited mum and dad again. They wouldn't understand. They didn't understand any of it. Leaving my nice room, my nice life with them. I didn't understand it myself. I threw my cape around my shoulders, picked up my keys and, checking the door was looked behind me, headed down the long dim corridor towards the hospital.

Ten-past one. It's the first time I've sat down since starting the shift. I'm sitting at the nurses' station, adding up thirty-six fluid balance charts. The senior nurse is checking the drips. I listen to the breathing sounds all around me and I'm puzzled for a moment by a low hum. It's the fluorescent desk lamp. It's one of those ones on a metal adjustable stem that has to be positioned in a way that doesn't disturb the patients but does provide me with enough light to see the bed chart directly in front of me.

It feels good to be here. Though, if I had to choose, I'd prefer to be tucked up in bed with Andy. He's so yummy, but more than that. I thought about how I'd described him to Kathleen on the phone yesterday – tall, dark, handsome of course, twenty three with the first flecks of grey in his deep brown hair. An ambo at the moment but he was thinking of getting out. "An ambo," she'd scorned, "Mum reckons all ambos are creeps."

Not this one, I thought. There was something about him, something that crept down each nerve ending in my skin and took my breath, made me tingle. Last night he'd sketched me. He could really draw, he made me look beautiful. "You are beautiful," he'd said.

A patient coughed. A huge hacking cough and spit. Uhg!

I hated phlegm. Thoughts of Andy were quashed.

I work away quietly, my cape drawn around me to keep out the draught. Ceasing my additions momentarily to check the time – I had to check the patient in bed two on the quarter hour - I caught sight of myself in the glass partition.

I did a double take, sat staring. Bathed in the small light, sitting at the desk with pen in hand, I looked familiar. The image resonated through me but then it dawned. I looked just like the nurse that had been on the front cover of the recruitment brochure I'd seen at school.

The thought pleased me and I sat a little straighter.

I was a nurse.

### **Mercy 13**

"Megan, come in."

There was no way I could look at Mrs Doherty. Not now that she knew how awful I was, what terrible things I probably did. My eyes fixed on the floor, I walked towards her desk.

“Please, sit down.”

My body snapped, cracked as it bent in two, perching awkwardly on the edge of the chair. I kept my gaze away from Mrs Doherty’s, not lifting it higher than the desktop. The lime green book cover shouted at me. You couldn’t miss it. How could she have it just sitting there on top of things, for anyone to see?

Silence. We were obviously waiting for someone else to come. For Sister Anne? Mum?

Please God? But it was too late. All the deals were off. Please, just let me die now.

“Megan?”

What was that? Had she spoken?

“Would you like a glass of water or something?”

I shook my head, eyes still down. I wished I could stop shaking. My skin shivered and I rubbed my palms over my uniform, smoothing the material down my thighs.

“Megan?”

I couldn’t speak, couldn’t breathe.

“Megan, look at me,” she pleaded. She didn’t sound angry.

I gradually lifted my head. The look in her eyes. Warm, kind. This wasn’t what I’d expected. What was going on?

The heat behind my eyes blazed. Don’t cry. Don’t cry...

Tears poured down my face, my nose began to stream. I reached into my pocket for a tissue. I didn’t have one.

“Here.” Mrs Doherty was next to me, box of tissues in hand. I felt the heaviness of her hand on my shoulder. She put her arm right around me and held me tight. “There now, Megan,” she sighed.

I blubbered and blubbered. She stayed right where she was and simply patted her hand softly on my upper arm. It made me cry more.

“Come on, now,” she urged gently, “I just want to talk, that’s all.”

I turned my head to look at her. Was this a trick?

“It’s true, I just want to talk to you.”

“Is Si-sister Anne com-coming?” I sobbed.

Mrs Doherty moved back from me a little. “Sister Anne?” she asked, confused.

I nodded.

“Why would Sister Anne be coming?”

“I thought... I just thought that she'd... that I'd...”

Mrs Doherty smiled sadly. “Megan, this isn't what you think.”

My breath rushed into my chest as I tried to stop crying. “It isn't?”

She took her arm from me and pulled her chair around closer. “When I saw what it was you'd been reading I just felt that we needed to talk.”

“You're not calling in my mother?” I managed.

Mrs Doherty shook her head. “Your mother?”

“I thought you'd tell her.” I watched as my teacher pressed her lips together.

“Megan, let's get something straight. This isn't about being in trouble,” she said slowly. “This is about you and why you're reading something like *The Happy Hooker*.”

What could I say?

My teacher pushed on. “I suppose it's for the sex. Am I right?”

My cheeks were hot beetroot.

“I thought so.”

Please make me disappear, I prayed.

“You know, sexual curiosity is very normal in adolescent girls.”

She waited for me to say something. I didn't.

“It's normal to want to find out what sex is all about. But this?” she continued, waving her hand in the direction of *The Happy Hooker*. “This is dreadful.”

“Oh?”

“Well, look at the way it's written for one thing and the sex? Ugh!” She reached across and picked up the book. “Have you read much else? Do you have anything to compare it with?”

I shook my head vigorously, “No, Miss.”

“I didn't think so. You know, I reckon you could get a pretty strange impression of sex if this stuff is all you're reading.” She let the pages flick through her fingers. “This is exactly the problem I've discussed at the library committee time and time again.”

I shrugged, she'd lost me.

“I've always said that if the powers-that-be don't allow books with sexual content into the school library.

students will find it elsewhere.” She laughed wryly. “And students will always manage to find crap like this.” She looked right at me and threw the book onto my lap. “And it’s crap, Megan. Do you realise that?”

“I don’t know, Miss.”

“My point exactly. Look, read it by all means,” she said, adding with a smile, “be a little more discreet in future, but read it. If that’s what you want. Just realise it’s a terribly distorted view of things sexual. It’s full of abuse and deviance that’s designed to make millions for the author. It’s not the way sex is for most people.”

She paused, searching my face. I couldn’t keep looking at her. Found myself staring down at *The Happy Hooker*.

“I know you’re hungry for knowledge and experience,” she continued softly, “It’s funny... I suppose I just wanted to tell you to take care. You’re young and bright, everything’s at your feet. The stuff in that book is the lowest of the low. Sex can be truly wonderful, do you understand?”

“I think so, Miss.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know if you do or not.” She glanced up to the wall clock. “You’d better get going, you’ll be late home.”

Standing up I held *The Happy Hooker* out to her. “Are you confiscating this?”

Mrs Doherty laughed. “God no, why on earth would I want to keep that rubbish?”

“I... I can just go?”

“Yes, just go.”

Through the ornate iron gates onto the street. Sister Anne’s inspection post had long been deserted and as I wandered up towards the train station it took a while for it to dawn on me that I was still clutching *The Happy Hooker* in my hand.

I laughed to myself as I quickly unsnapped my school case and threw it inside. They weren’t ringing Mum. I wasn’t being expelled. Relief surged with a rush and I broke into a run. It was sunny, it was warm, I was free. With each stride the tension of the afternoon fell away from me, leaving me light and shining.

At the station in record time, I started weaving in and out of the commuters pouring out of the station. I kept up the mad pace until I reached the top of the steps of platform one.

I stood clasping the railing, getting by breath and scanning the platform. Below, in the shade of a

Winfield billboard, a Mercy College girl sat with her books spread out on her school case makeshift table.

She'd waited for me.

"Kathleen!" I screamed down at her, as I flew down the stairs.

She saw me and threw her stuff willy-nilly onto the seat beside her. She was taking the steps two at a time, rushing up to meet me. "What happened, what happened?"

I just smiled and shook my head, grabbing her arm. I led her back over to her things and swung my own school case onto the seat, unsnapping the clasps.

"Are you out?" she gasped.

"Nuh." I pulled out *The Happy Hooker*.

Kathleen's eyes widened. "You've...you've still got it?"

"Here," I laughed, handing it to her, "have a lend for a while."

She took it from me like I was offering her the Holy Grail. "I can read it?" she gasped.

"Ye-ah," I said, as if it wasn't a big deal.

Kathleen turned the book over in her hands, again and again. "Shit, Mege, I can't believe I've got it."

Our train screeched around the bend and hurled into the station. "Quick!" I said as we threw everything back into Kathleen's bag.

The book was once again secure.

"Just take care though," I warned as we jumped on the train, dropping our cases to the floor and taking up position just next to the ever-open doors.

"I'll hide it away somewhere, don't worry," Kathleen assured me as the train moved off.

We hung onto our hats as the wind whipped through the carriage.

"It's not just getting caught you've got to worry about," I shouted above the noise of the old red rattler and the wind.

"What?"

"The book," I shouted, then directly into Kathleen's ear, "apparently it could give you a distorted view of sex!"

Kathleen just looked at me and laughed, disbelief written all over her face.

I insisted it was true. "Mrs Doherty said so."

Kathleen hit me with her hat, laughing. "Shit Megan," she yelled, "at this stage *any* view of sex will do!"

I nodded, then started to giggle. The cracks were starting to show. I couldn't stop. I was laughing, tears streaming down my face. The train screamed into a tunnel. Shot out again. I felt my back slide down the cold metal wall. I was sitting on the floor of the carriage, gales of laughter, heaving sobs.

The train was starting to slow for our station.

I stared, helplessly, up at Kathleen.

"Oh for goodness sake," she said firmly, grabbing my sleeve and hauling me back to me feet. "You're such a dag, Megan."

Ends

Word count = 60, 686

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