

AWATANGI
T A Winters

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Prologue

They drove into Awatangi in the evening, as the sun washed low down the coast and stained the beech and kahikatea a fiery orange-green, and the sea-haze blew in from the unseen ocean, thick with salt, pale and luminous in the last hazy light.

The town was quiet. The pub and the shop were warm puddles of light in the fading day. The shop was still open, must have just switched to its longer summer hours, and there were a few cars around the side of the pub, in the shingle car-park. A dog barked in the distance. In the bush, behind the town, flocking evening birds called to one another. Through the open car window there was a smell of cut grass, of frying from the pub, of salt from the sea, and of diesel exhaust from the last truck to pass through. And always, the wet-leaf smell of the bush. The town was exactly as Jess remembered it.

She parked outside the shop and closed the window as she stopped, did it automatically to keep the bugs out. She glanced sideways. Kate seemed to be asleep, was always tired at the end of the week, hadn't spoken for the past hour and had been yawning before that.

"I love you," Jess said softly.

She hadn't intended to be heard, but Kate said, "I know. Stop telling me."

Jess waited a moment, and Kate opened her eyes. "What's up?" Kate said, "Where are we?"

"Here," Jess said. "Awatangi."

Kate looked around, seemed confused.

"Down in town," Jess said. "I'll just get some milk."

"And have a smoke."

"And have a smoke."

"You should stop."

"I did."

"Yeah," Kate said. "Sorry."

Kate yawned.

"Hey Jess?"

Jess waited.

"Don't make this harder than it is, you know?"

Jess thought she knew, asked anyway. "Make what harder?"

"This. Everything. I love you. I think you're hot. Sometimes I dream about you. It doesn't have to be complicated so don't make it worse than it is."

"Okay," Jess said.

"Just saying."

"I know. Same goes for you."

"Yeah," Kate said. "Probably."

"You okay?"

“Mostly okay.”

“You dream about me?”

“Sometimes, yeah.” Kate stretched. “And stop whispering at me when you think I’m asleep.”

“I wasn’t.” Jess said, and Kate just grinned.

“Go away now.” Kate said. “Get the milk. Let me sleep.”

Jess kissed her and got out the car. She stretched, tried to untwist her back, breathed in. Her car always smelt faintly of damp, no matter how much she aired it. Too many surfboards and wetsuits dumped in the back, too many abandoned towels. The whiff of soggy carpet never quite went away. Kate said it smelled like dog and always opened a window as soon as she got in. Jess stretched again, popped her shoulder, still couldn’t fix her back. Old car seats, she supposed, and driving all afternoon. She lit a cigarette. It had been long enough since her last one that she got a little buzz when she breathed in. She hadn’t been smoking in the car because Kate would complain. She looked around at purpling dusk and house lights, at the familiar shapes of pub and shop and mountain ridges behind the town. It had only been a month since she was last here, but she was glad to be back.

Awatangi was small, the kind of place you could easily miss. An eighty k speed limit, and no signposts as you came into town. Ten houses, the pub and the shop, a few empty buildings, and a few paddocks where buildings had once been. The pub had cheap rooms and takeaway food and seemed to survive. The shop struggled, would have gone under if people hadn’t made a point of supporting it. The buildings in Awatangi all looked similar, wooden weatherboards, corrugated iron roofs, water tanks on concrete blocks out the back. A lot of red paint, a particular shade that was almost crimson, dull and rich and brooding. If not red, then white and green. As far as Jess could tell there was no significance in the choice of colour. People just repainted things the same colour they’d always been. She breathed in again. All around the town, behind the town, the bush was thick and dense and richly alive. It was as much a part of Awatangi as the houses. Jess could smell wet earth, could hear the wind rattling the beech. It was already getting dark. The sun set early behind the trees. She looked up. The mountains were shrouded in cloud, hidden, as they were half of each day, most days of the year.

She started walking, wandered down the middle of the road. The highway was quiet in the evening. It was mainly a tourist road, and by now all the tourists would have parked up for the night. She walked past the community hall, closed for years because of an unsafe roof. Its doors were chained, its windows boarded over. Although there was talk now and then of fund-raising for repairs, of lottery grants and raffles, little ever happened. There weren’t enough people around to care any more. The hall would probably never reopen. She crossed the road to the old shop, still thought of the old shop and new shop, even though the old shop had been closed most of her life. There was a faint outline of a cartoon grocer on the front windows, still visible as sticky marks on glass. On either side the door were benches. In summer the children of the bach families ate ice creams here, in the shade. Jess stopped beneath the verandah and peered in the windows, saw cobwebs and caked dust and the same taped-up newspapers she remembered from her childhood. Every year she checked, and every year they were still the same. When she’d been seven or eight and compulsively reading everything in sight she’d stood where she was now and looked at

news that, even then, had been a decade old – Muldoon’s election campaign, Whina Cooper’s land march, and New Zealand getting third in the world netball championships. The ink was faded now, the paper yellow and photos indecipherable, but she’d once studied these pages so carefully that she could still recall whole paragraphs. She blew smoke against the window and kept walking.

She passed two houses and reached the rugby field, a council-owned paddock at the edge of town. Knee-high grass and rabbit holes, occasionally grazed by sheep. The only thing that showed it was a rugby field were the raw-log posts at either end – it usually wasn’t mown, and had no painted lines, and the pub’s toilets were the changing rooms. There was only one game a year now, the locals versus baches match, and that hadn’t been held for a while because neither side could find enough players. There’d been talk of making it a sevens game, or making it touch and playing mixed teams, but as with the hall, nothing much had happened. Jess stopped. She’d walked through town and still had half a cigarette left to smoke. She stood for a moment, then turned around and went back.

In the street in front the pub an old Holden station wagon was parked sideways – lazily sideways – across three spaces, parallel to the road. Jess walked past. The Holden had its windows open, had the keys in the ignition. And a surfboard in the back. She stopped. Not many people surfed on the West Coast. The sea was too deep and dangerous, the breaks too hard to reach. Awatangi was one of the few accessible beaches, and Jess had always had it to herself. She wasn’t sure she liked someone else turning up. She looked at the Holden more carefully. It was a familiar kind of car, a surfboard transporter with room to sleep in the back. The windows were dirty and salt encrusted, the back bumper plastered with stickers, the paint a faded off-cream. She looked a moment longer, then kept walking. She was curious, was unsettled by seeing the surfboard, but didn’t want to get caught loitering and have to talk and be polite. She stood across the road and squinted at the pub, tried to see the Holden’s owner inside. She couldn’t see much. The pub’s windows were reflecting the setting sun, dazzling her.

Just as she gave up, the pub door opened, slammed shut. A woman came down the pub’s steps and walked towards the Holden. She was carrying a crate of beer under one arm, wedged onto her hip, was wearing khaki combat pants, jandals, a white singlet. The cuffs of her pants were frayed from dragging on the ground. She was slim and dark, had her hair tied back from her face, swirling tattoos on her upper arms, and carvings – perhaps shells or charms – around her neck on leather strings. Jess didn’t need to see it to know there was a shark’s tooth in there somewhere, everyone had one, even if they said they didn’t believe it kept them safe.

Jess had never seen her before, and knew most of the locals by sight. She wasn’t a tourist – not with that car and a crate of beer under her arm, not with the board in the back. She must be a visiting relative, or someone returned after a long time away who Jess had managed not to meet in all her summers here. She looked Maori, which might be why. There were a few families a couple of k up the road, around the marae, who Jess didn’t know very well.

The woman across the street tugged a car door open. Hinges creaked. She swung the crate onto the seat and slammed the door shut. Slammed it hard, as she had the pub’s, made the Holden rock, made a loud bang in the empty street. She looked around, and finally saw Jess watching. For a moment she was still, seemed surprised, then she grinned self-

consciously and half-raised a hand in a wave. She got into her car – slammed that door too – and looked over at Jess again. Then seemed to notice Jess’s boards. She looked thoughtful, looked the way Jess felt at seeing her, then started her car – music blared from open windows – and drove off.

Jess stood there for a moment, still watching. She felt something, a warmth, a spark. She watched the Holden drive away and wondered what she was doing. Kate was what mattered, not eye contact with strange women across dark evening streets. She loved Kate – finally had Kate – and Kate was asleep, right behind her in the car. She knew why this was happening. For so long it had been normal to look at other people while Kate was around that when things changed, when she no longer should be looking, she couldn’t quite shake the habit. And even though she knew, she was looking all the same. She stared after the Holden.

“Who was that?” Kate said from inside the car, indistinct, still sleepy, and Jess, guilty, just shook her head.

The Holden drove north, the way it had been facing, towards the marae and away from the beach. The woman’s hair hadn’t been wet, so maybe she carted a board around with her all the time, or maybe she’d sat on the beach for a while before she went home. Jess hadn’t had to share Awatangi beach before, not out on the breaks where it mattered. She didn’t like the idea. One other person didn’t make a difference, but it might be the start of something. People talked. Places got known and popular. Jess had learned to surf here, had always surfed here, and didn’t want a thing about it to change. She tried to calm herself down, told herself she was being over-sensitive. In Christchurch you avoided other people because there were so many around, and the habit stuck for a day or two when you first arrived back in Awatangi. You forgot how empty the West Coast was, how you didn’t mind seeing people because there was so few around. There were pieces of dirt in the bush, only a few hundred metres from the road, that no-one had ever stood on, not ever, and times, in winter, when Jess had gone a whole week without seeing another person on the beach. Over here, one other person hardly mattered, and she probably wouldn’t notice once she got used to the idea. She just needed time to adjust.

A sandfly drifted onto her arm. She felt the tickle as it landed and squashed it with her thumb. She glanced down. No others yet, but they wouldn’t be far away. They remembered where people stood and came back to those places, and it had got to the windless time just after sunset when bugs were at their worst. She went into the shop and bought the milk, then drove off south, towards the bridge and the beach and the baches.

Chapter One

Jess was in love with Kate, and Kate wasn’t in love with Jess, and there was very little Jess had ever managed to do to change the situation. She had become used to it. They had been friends since they’d been five, had gone to the same schools and lived in the same

street, and had never drifted apart like most friends did. The summer they turned seventeen, Jess had realised it wasn't only friendship. She'd been looking at Kate across a table in a café, just sitting there looking while Kate talked, and had realised she was in love with Kate. She remembered that clearly, an actual thought, oh shit, I'm in love with her. Kate had been looking out the window, had turned and caught Jess watching her. She must have understood Jess's expression. She stopped what she was saying and sat there waiting. Seemed to be waiting for Jess to tell her. Jess had shrugged helplessly, wondered what to do, said nothing. And the next day had blurted it out. Kate was Kate and knew everything about her anyway.

"Hey," she'd said, from a beanbag beside Kate's feet, while they were watching TV, "I think I might have a thing for you."

"Oh yeah," Kate said, "Yeah, I kind of wondered." She didn't look at Jess, just stared at the screen.

"Well," Jess said.

"Well what?"

"So what do we do?"

Kate looked at her, seemed almost puzzled, "Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I don't feel like that..."

"I know."

"I'm sorry." Kate seemed like she wanted to say more, but then just shrugged.

"Nah," Jess said, "Don't worry."

"It'll go away."

"You think?"

"Should do."

Kate changed the channel, and they sat for a while, but nothing more was said. That conversation was everything that mattered between them. Jess loved Kate, and Kate didn't love Jess, and there wasn't anything Jess could do to alter this. She didn't know how to tell someone she'd known all her life that they would be perfect together, if that someone couldn't see it for herself. Kate didn't seem to mind Jess's feelings – sometimes she seemed almost flattered, sometimes just sympathetic. Occasionally she got a bit callous reminding Jess she wasn't interested, but only when she was already hurt or frustrated by something else. Jess met other women, and got involved with them, and Kate got to know them too and was usually the best, most supportive friend anyone could have. Kate had been wrong, though. Jess's feelings hadn't gone away. Jess adjusted, learned to live with them, but always knew she would drop everything for Kate, if Kate ever asked. Jess tried to be the best friend she could be, was there for Kate's tears, for her celebrations, was there when everyone else was busy. Sometimes she wondered if she was being a bit pathetic, but she knew didn't really have a choice. Besides, following your best friend around because you had a crush on her wasn't that different to following her around because she was your best friend. Jess got on with her life, and most of the time they both seemed to forget it was there. And after seven years of waiting, of hoping Kate would change her mind, Kate did.

One day, after work, Kate turned up at Jess's place and said, "I'm having a shitty day, I don't want to go home."

"Yeah," Jess said, "Me too. Come in." As if there'd been any question of it.

“What’s up with you?” Kate asked.

“Work. Doesn’t matter. You?”

“Got broken up with again. Over nothing.”

“I have wine.”

“Me too.” Kate held up a supermarket bag.

They drank. They talked. At a certain point they reached the moment when Kate did her thing. Whenever she broke up with someone, after she’d had a drink or two, she started saying she’d had it with men and was going to try women. She said it after every breakup, and usually Jess just ignored her. This time, not really sure why, Jess didn’t. She just looked at Kate.

“What?” Kate said, and reminded Jess of that first time Jess had confessed how she felt.

“You always say that,” Jess said, “And you never mean it. Do something about it rather than just talking shit.”

Kate looked at her.

“Go on,” Jess said. “I’m right here.”

“You’re not the only woman I know, Jess. Maybe I want someone else.”

“Except I’m right here. So if you’re going to...”

“Yeah right.”

“Why yeah right?”

Kate didn’t seem sure, fiddled with her wine glass.

“Dare you,” Jess said, still not really sure why she was pushing.

Kate just laughed.

“Chicken,” Jess said.

“I will.”

“Bullshit.”

“You don’t really want me to.”

Jess was surprised. “Of course I do. Why not?”

“Because it won’t work. Because actually doing anything about it would spoil the thing.”

Jess thought about that. “I want to.”

“Come on, Jess, you don’t really...”

“I really do.”

Kate looked up, was beginning to seem unsure.

“I love you,” Jess said. “I want you. Of course I want you.”

“Years ago, maybe.”

“And now.”

“Not like this...”

“Like what?”

“Being used. Kind of.”

“I don’t mind.”

Kate looked at her for a moment, then laughed. Jess was pretty sure she was trying to laugh her way out of it, turn things into a joke because she didn’t know what else to do. Jess just sat there and waited until she was paying attention again.

“Kate,” Jess said. “I really don’t.”

“Bullshit,” Kate said. “You’re just trying to wind me up...”

“I’m really not.”

“You are such a liar.”

Jess didn't know what to say. “No, Katie, not about this. This one thing...”

Kate was looking at her intently all of a sudden.

“I've always wanted you, you silly cow,” Jess said. “And if you want me too, even just once to try, then...”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. Shit, you know how I feel.”

“Yeah,” Kate said, and looked at her. Just looked, like she never had before. She reached out, touched Jess's cheek, smiled. Moved a strand of Jess's hair, brushed it away from her face, put it back behind her ear. Jess stayed still, perfectly still.

“Shit,” Kate said, and picked up her wine glass.

“Yeah.”

“No, I mean, shit.” She sipped.

Jess waited.

“I suppose this has been bound to happen.”

Jess shrugged slightly, meant maybe.

“We've talked about it enough.”

“Now and then.”

“And, you know, you can't have your best mate in love with you without thinking about the implications sometimes.”

Jess nodded.

“And you can't have a best mate who does chicks without wondering what you're missing out on.”

“You flirt with me all the time,” Jess said gently. “That must mean something...”

“But only a little bit. Just fun, so we both feel good. Not... shit. Not like this.”

“If we did,” Jess said. “We wouldn't have to do anything in particular.”

Kate looked at her.

“Whatever you want,” Jess said. “As much or as little as you want.”

“I know,” Kate said, “I know. Oh shit.”

Jess stayed quiet, let her think.

“Oh my god,” Kate said. “Oh my god, I'm thinking about this.” She drank. She put down her glass. “Are you serious? Really, really serious?”

“Yeah.”

“What if we start, and I chicken out? Or we do and it puts me off and I don't want to again?”

“We'll work it out when it happens.”

Kate sipped some more, looked at Jess. “You're hot. I mean, I always thought if I was going to do a girl I'd do you.”

“Yeah?”

“Of course. But shit...”

“Actually doing it?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to?”

Kate was silent a moment. Then, “Yeah.”

“Kiss me.”

“Okay.” Kate looked at her, all serious, but didn’t move.

“Kiss me.”

Kate swallowed. “In a minute.”

Jess waited, then whispered, “Kiss me, Kate.”

“Fuck you,” Kate said, but she laughed.

Kate leaned over. She was clearly expecting Jess to back out – had her eyes open, was smirking all the way in, acting like it was a joke – but she leaned over and kissed Jess.

And Jess kissed back. Kissed, and couldn’t believe what she was doing.

Kate seemed surprised, made a little murmur, then seemed to relax ever so slightly.

Jess had been waiting all her life for this. She couldn’t decide whether to concentrate on what she was doing – to make it better for Kate – or to memorise every second, in case it never happened again. After a minute she stopped thinking and just kissed. Kate tasted of wine and a little of salt, from the chips they’d been eating earlier. Her lips were soft, a little way apart. She wasn’t a bad kisser. For a moment, it was perfect. Then Kate pulled back, and breathed out, and said, “Oh shit.”

She touched her mouth. Not a wipe, just a thoughtful touch.

“Sorry,” Jess said, “I’m sorry...”

“Yeah,” Kate said, and looked at her. “I’m not.”

“I didn’t mean...”

Kate looked at her a moment longer, then laughed. “Like fuck you didn’t.”

“I didn’t...”

“Bullshit, Jess. You’ve been after that since we were ten.”

“Seventeen,” Jess said quietly, but smiled all the same.

“So...” Kate said.

“Yeah,” Jess said, leaning back, tipping her chair, making space. “So...”

Silence for a moment.

“You okay?” Jess said.

“Yep.”

“You kiss good,” Jess said.

“You too.”

“You have to say that now I did.”

Kate smiled. “Yep. And I’m still waiting for you to say gotcha or something.”

“I’m not going to.”

“I know, but it seems like you should.”

Jess was unsure what to do next. She picked up the wine bottle, filled her glass, filled Kate’s. She suddenly wanted a cigarette for the first time in a year. She looked at Kate, and Kate shrugged and looked away.

“Okay,” Jess said, and waited. Sometimes around Kate you just needed to wait.

Kate stared into her glass. Then she looked around the room, like she hadn’t seen everything in it a hundred times before. She drew patterns with a fingertip in the spilt wine on the table, drew for a long time, then looked up. “Okay,” she said, “I want to.”

“You do?”

“Yeah.”

Jess thought about common sense, about what happened in the morning, but also about

what she'd be turning down. "Okay."

Kate leaned forward, and Jess kissed her again. This moment was everything she'd ever wanted, and she was sick of being sensible and trying to stop it. Maybe this was meant to happen.

"You're sure about this?" Jess said into Kate's mouth. "Really, really sure?"

"Probably."

"You know what you're doing?"

"No. But thank you for checking. And trying to talk me out of it."

"I'm not trying to talk..."

"I know. But thank you."

"You started this," Jess said. "Don't blame me if..."

"I know," Kate said. "I know. All blame is mine."

"And I've tried to stop you."

"More than anyone could expect you to."

"This could still end..."

"Stop."

"Yeah," Jess said. "Okay."

They kissed for a long time. Jess started getting a cramp in her leg, but didn't want to move it in case moving made Kate change her mind.

"Ask me if I want to come to bed," Kate whispered.

"Okay."

"Ask me."

"Do you want to come to bed?"

"Nah, no thanks," Kate said, then looked at Jess and laughed. "Sorry."

"Yeah, okay. Smartass."

"I'm sorry."

"That wasn't nice."

"Your face."

"Fuck you."

"Bedroom?" Kate whispered.

Jess stood up. She still wasn't sure, but didn't know what else she could do. She wanted this, and didn't want to try too hard to stop it. And maybe this was how it was meant to be. Kate tried a bit of this and a bit of that until she finally realised what she'd needed all along was right in front of her.

"Hold on," Jess said, and went into the bedroom. She kicked clothes under the bed, shut the wardrobe and drawers. It wasn't that she was untidy, just that Kate was a little bit more obsessed with cleanliness than she was. Kate had walked out on guys for having funny-smelling bedrooms and Jess didn't want it happening to her. She glanced around for dirty undies, sniffed the sheets and decided they were okay, lit a scented candle anyway just to be safe, and went back into the kitchen.

Kate seemed to have got nervous sitting by herself. The wine in the bottle had shrunk, and she was avoiding Jess's eyes again. She was suddenly all serious, all grave and concerned. Jess wanted to make a joke, but she didn't know what to say.

"Come on then," Jess said, and Kate looked at her for a moment, then refilled her glass and stood up.

Kate sat down on the edge of the bed and put her glass on the floor. She touched her shirt, as if to unbutton it, then she seemed to change her mind, picked up the glass again and sat with it in front of her, cupped in both hands, like a shield. Like she did when she was meeting new people. She was nervous. Jess watched, but stayed on the other side of the bed, gave her the space to think about what she wanted to do.

“You okay?” Jess asked after a while.

“I’m sorry,” Kate said. “I don’t know what it is.”

“Nerves,” Jess said, “That’s all. Wondering if we’ll be good for each other, and if we’ll still talk in the morning. I’m worried too.”

Kate smiled, seemed grateful. Jess took her hand, twined their fingers together, squeezed gently. Kate stayed tense, so Jess let her hand go again.

“We can stop,” Jess said.

“Nah.”

“Any time you want.”

“Just give me a minute.”

Jess waited.

“Or ten.” Kate said.

Jess laughed.

“Thing is,” Kate said, “I’ve slept with friends before. Guy friends. Just to make them happy, just because we both wanted to.”

“As you do,” Jess said.

“So why not you?” Kate said, “Who I love more?”

“Kate, don’t...”

“Shut up, Jess. It all makes sense in my head. It’s just now that I’m sitting here...”

“We can...”

“Shut up.”

“If you need to...”

“Shut up.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Shut. Up.”

Jess shrugged, went quiet.

“I just need to...” Kate said. “Need to something. I don’t know what.”

“I’m here. For as long as you need. Whenever you’re ready.”

“Shut up,” Kate said, then, “I’m sorry, I’m being awful. This should be sweet and romantic and wonderful for you and I’m getting all...”

“It’s okay. Whatever you need.”

Kate got interested in the books piled beside the bed.

Jess watched her, thinking someone worrying this much probably didn’t want to sleep with her, no matter what she said.

“We don’t need to,” Jess said again, and was terrified Kate would agree.

“Stop brooding. I’m pretty sure I’ll get there.”

“Really?”

“Stop being so... you.”

Kate sipped her wine, watching Jess. Scrutinising her, like she hadn’t seen her before. She reached out and touched Jess’s hair, seemed surprised as she did. She stroked Jess’s

neck and smiled when Jess closed her eyes. She finished her wine, stood up, and went into the kitchen. She came back with a full glass, and asked, "Do you want any more?"

"I'm okay."

Kate nodded and sat down.

"Kiss me," Kate said. "Kiss my arm or my neck or something. Get this started."

Jess looked at her for a moment, then slid over. Kissed Kate's wrist, so she shivered. Her arm, so she closed her eyes. Light, almost-tickling kisses, on her neck. On her lips, until she kissed back.

"Give me a minute," Kate said, watching the ceiling.

Jess lay down, lay close beside Kate, not touching, just nearby. Content to wait. Kate finished her wine and was starting to seem less nervous. She looked into the empty glass, seemed to be trying to decide something. She put the glass down on the bedside table.

"Okay," she said. "Take me."

"Take you?"

"Yeah, take me. Are you going to take the piss, or are you going to get on with it?"

Jess leaned a little closer, and Kate started kissing her again, suddenly seemed to be in a hurry. She pulled at Jess's clothes, tried to get a hand inside Jess's jeans and found the waist was too tight, tried to undo Jess's shirt and got all tangled up, the buttons back to front for clothes on herself, but also back to front for a shirt on a guy. Jess left her to it, let her work it out. Kate pulled the shirt over Jess's head, tugged off the jeans, then slowed down, seemed fascinated by Jess's body, kept looking and touching and looking some more.

"God," Kate said, "I've never seen you like this before."

"Yeah you have," Jess said. "Heaps. In a bikini."

"That's different."

"Same as."

"No," Kate said. "It's different. Everything's different now."

Kate seemed to want Jess's underwear off, so Jess helped, and they started kissing again, deep and long and intense.

"Your boobs keep getting in the way," Kate said.

"They always do," Jess said. "That's kind of the point."

"Don't laugh at me," Kate said.

"I'm not."

Kate looked at her.

"Hey," Jess said, "I wasn't laughing at you."

"It's not that. It's..."

"Tell me."

Kate shook her head.

"Hey, tell me."

"You've done this before."

"Yeah."

"I haven't."

Jess looked at her and realised. "Hey, no. This is important to me too. This is everything to me. Nothing means more than this."

"Really?"

“I love you. I’ve always loved you. How could this ever be anything but special?”

“Thank you,” Kate said, and everything seemed all right again.

They went back to kissing, and Jess touched Kate like she’d always wanted to, and Kate started to sigh. “That’s how it should be,” Jess whispered, and Kate just said, “I know.”

It was everything Jess could have hoped for. A little part of her still worried about what happened next, but that part was easy to ignore. She concentrated on Kate, tasting Kate and touching Kate and making Kate happy. She learned new things, things you never knew about your friends no matter how much you talked – that the insides of Kate’s elbows were sensitive, that she tried hard to please her partner, that she got all melty and soft and sleepy after she came.

Jess looked at Kate afterwards and decided she looked slightly stunned. Looked at her and kissed her and said, “Hey, you’ve never been like this before.”

“Yeah.”

“I like it.”

“Yeah.”

“You okay?”

“Hold me.”

“Because you’re not okay?”

“Shit Jess, because I like to be held after I come.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

And Jess held her, without talking, while Kate curled against her and hugged her arm.

“I need water,” Jess said eventually, “And my arm’s going to sleep.”

Kate let her go.

Jess slid out the bed. She had a feeling Kate was watching her as she walked to the fridge, as she walked back. Had a feeling, but might have been wrong. When she got back, she held out the bottle to Kate, and Kate didn’t seem to want to look at her any more. She climbed into bed and suddenly Kate wouldn’t kiss her, tried to hug and had Kate pull away. It wasn’t obvious, just that when Jess touched her, after a minute she shifted and stretched and edged away.

They both went quiet. Jess because she didn’t know what to do, Kate because whatever fucked up thing Jess had been afraid would happen just had. Kate had gone all quiet and uncertain and Jess didn’t know how to bring her back. They’d always been able to guess a little of what the other was thinking. If you know someone all your life, you can do that, Jess supposed. She couldn’t tell now. Whatever was wrong, though, it was her fault. She’d taken advantage. She should have tried harder to talk Kate out of it. She felt guilty. Felt like an idiot for leaving Kate alone. She lay looking at Kate’s back, wanting to hold her, wanting to touch her, but knowing she had to give Kate space to deal with whatever it was. She wondered if she should go and have a shower or something, and leave Kate alone, but in the end, because it usually worked when Kate was upset, she just stayed where she was, quiet and patient, waiting.

“I don’t know what to do now,” Kate whispered at last.

“You don’t have to do anything. That was wonderful...”

“No, Jess.” Kate sounded almost annoyed. “God, I mean, I don’t know how this changes things.”

Jess thought she understood. Kate would want labels and rules, would need some way to

describe this in her head. She wouldn't have wanted to ask, so would be defensive now, slightly irritated. Jess wondered what to do. They needed the friendship to get past this awkwardness, but it was awkward because of the friendship. Perhaps too awkward for the friendship to help.

"It doesn't have to change anything," Jess said.

"Don't be stupid," Kate said, then, "Sorry."

"It's okay. This changes things, but it doesn't have to be in a bad way."

"You would say that. You aren't the one who just slept with a woman." Kate stopped. She didn't turn around, but her voice changed. "I mean, you did, obviously, but... Don't you dare fucking laugh at me."

"I'm not."

"You know what I meant."

"I know."

"So what do we do?"

"You're still my best friend."

"Yeah." Kate's voice was softer now. She seemed to be relaxing.

"This could make us closer," Jess said.

"Maybe."

"You were good. It was fun. I had a wonderful time..."

"I was okay."

There was something in her tone, and Jess suddenly realised what this was about. She should have guessed. "You were perfect."

"Really?" Kate rolled over.

"Yeah."

"But I didn't know what to do."

"Really not that hard to work out. And besides, we've talked about it enough."

"I suppose. Really okay?"

"Better than okay. Wonderful."

"You too," Kate said. "So what is this? A thing, or a oncer, or a shag between mates we never talk about again...?"

"I don't want it to be once," Jess said. "And I don't mind talking about it again."

"I know you don't mind."

Kate seemed to be waiting, wanting Jess to go first. Jess didn't want to answer either. Not first. She had more of herself in this than Kate did, which Kate should understand. But this was Kate, so Jess didn't have a choice. She couldn't lie, she couldn't try to limit how much she got hurt, all she could do was say the only honest thing there was. "This is everything," she whispered.

"What?"

"You know what this is to me."

Kate looked at her.

"Jesus, Kate. I want you, I've always wanted you. Since we were kids. And now... You know what this is to me."

"Yeah," Kate said. "Yeah, I suppose I do."

"It's up to you," Jess said. "You tell me what this is."

Kate opened her mouth, closed it again. After a minute said, "I don't know. I really

don't."

"That's okay," Jess said. Felt bitter, but spoke gently, kept her bitterness inside.

"You don't have to say that."

"Say what?"

"Say it's okay when it isn't."

Jess smiled. "It's okay. We'll wait and see. It's what you usually have to do."

They lay still for a while and thought about that.

"Look." Jess said suddenly, sitting up. "When I was first with Audrey, when things were weird..."

She stopped, and tried to work out what to say. Audrey had been her first girlfriend. Kate couldn't have been a better friend to Jess, had been supportive and patient and there if Jess needed her, but she'd also been a bit of a bitch to Audrey for no obvious reason. When Jess had challenged her, Kate had said that if Jess wanted to be treated like being with women was no big deal then she had to put up with her friends ignoring her casual fucks who were girls just like they'd ignored her casual fucks who were guys. Jess had said Audrey was a partner, a relationship, but Kate hadn't seemed to care. Jess had asked whether Kate was jealous, or just hated not being the centre of attention any more, and Kate had snapped, "Don't be ridiculous," in a particular way they both knew meant Jess was being anything but. Jess thought Kate just hadn't liked Audrey as a person, and that had got mixed up with Kate thinking she was losing her place as the closest person in Jess's life. She hadn't been, which, once Audrey had worked that out, was part of why Jess and Audrey broke up. And after that, without really talking about it again, things had gone back to normal between Jess and Kate.

"I hated that," Jess said. "I missed you. I hated not having you around. And I don't want it to happen again."

Kate touched Jess's hand. "I know. It's okay."

"Is it?"

"Yeah," Kate said. She sat up and put her arms around Jess, and hugged her. Wrapped herself in the sheet first, but hugged too.

"Thank you," Jess said.

"Nah, no worries. I'm not going to lose you over a little thing like a root or two, mate."

"I'm glad."

"Yeah, so am I."

Jess looked at her. "A root... or two?"

"Well, you know. Just in case it happens again."

Jess just looked at her.

"Shut up Jess," Kate said, and laughed, and for a second it seemed like everything was normal again. Jess was relieved. Relieved enough to make a mess of things.

"I love you," Jess said. "I really, really love you."

She'd said it before. Had said it whenever she sent a postcard and half the time when she sent a text. She'd said it just a little while ago and then they'd gone to bed. But then it had been different. It had been friends talking. She only realised as she spoke that things had changed, that in the past hour those words had become something more. I love you without sex is friendship. I love you after sex is I love you.

Kate said nothing for a moment, then, "Oh god," and, "Sorry."

She rolled over, sat up, stared at Jess, stricken.

Jess stared back. Everything seemed about to come apart.

“I don’t mind what we do,” Jess said quickly. “I mean, I mind a lot, but we do what you want. Whatever you want. Anything.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. I’m not losing you over this.”

Kate nodded, seemed reassured.

“Tell me,” Jess said. “What do you want this to be?” And then she waited.

“I don’t know,” Kate said. “I love you. I mean, I love you too, you’re you. But...”

“Go on.”

“I don’t want all that crap. Not being looked at walking down the street and everything. And I just broke up with someone, I can’t...”

Jess didn’t know what to say.

“I’m so sorry,” Kate said.

It hurt, it hurt terribly, but wasn’t unexpected. Jess decided to lie, because someone had to. “It’s fine. I just don’t want to lose you. Other than that I don’t mind.”

“Really?” Kate said.

I love you, Jess wanted to say. I love you and I want you. Of course I mind. I can’t stand to get this close and have it ripped away. “Yeah,” she said, “Really. More would be good, but if you don’t want to...” She shrugged.

“Okay,” Kate said. “Could we wait and see? Could you give me a day or two to think? I liked this. I don’t know... but I think I liked it. It feels like I might want to do it again.”

And suddenly Jess was pleased, although she tried not to let it show. “You don’t have to say that just because...”

“I’m not. Although it’s very different and strange and I had no idea until an hour ago this might happen and I’m still getting used to it. So I might suddenly sit up and scream and wonder what the fuck I’ve just done.”

Jess nodded slowly, “Fair enough.”

“But yeah, I think I liked it.”

Kate said she had to go to work tomorrow and better get going, and Jess said she should stay, and Kate looked at her for a minute, then said, “Yeah, okay.” Any other time she would have just assumed, since they’d been drinking and she’d have to leave her car, but it seemed that was another thing that changed with sex, that Jess had to actually offer. They slept in Jess’s bed, with Jess holding Kate, and to Jess it had seemed, if not quite perfect, then pretty close.

Until she’d woken up in the morning and found Kate gone and a note beside the bed: Have to go to work, will call later. Everything will be okay.

It was a sweet note, but still a just a note. Kate hadn’t bothered waiting around, or waking Jess to say goodbye. Jess started to get an awful feeling that she’d done something terribly wrong.

*

Jess decided to give Kate space, to let her work things out on her own. She’d wanted to phone Kate as soon as she woke up, but knew better. Jess was stubborn and bloody-minded,

and Kate was pedantic. It was how they'd always been. Jess would fight to the death for something she didn't care that much about because someone had made it a fight, and Kate would walk away from what she really wanted because she had to win a point. Jess couldn't risk making herself the point Kate walked away from. She couldn't risk demanding something Kate wasn't ready to give.

She waited. She fidgeted. She couldn't concentrate. She smoked a leftover roach to calm herself down. She almost went for a surf, but didn't want to be out if Kate phoned. Not that Kate couldn't get her on her mobile, but she didn't want to take the risk. She told herself not to expect anything, but hung around waiting anyway. Waiting and hoping. And just when she was about to really start worrying, Kate phoned. It was the middle of the morning, the time Kate would normally ring anyway, late enough Jess would be awake, not so late she'd have gone out. Kate would be at work, on her morning break. As Jess picked up the phone she wondered if Kate was trying to tell her something by the timing, that she didn't want to talk, or that everything was back to normal – normal like it had been two days ago.

"Hey," Jess said, and nothing more, let Kate choose what to say.

"How are you?"

"Yeah, you know."

"No, I mean, how are you? With everything."

"Yeah, okay."

Silence for a moment. "This is awkward," Kate said.

"You noticed."

"I should go. I just wanted to say hi. See how you were."

"Okay."

"I should, um..." Kate stopped. "Hey, Jess, could I see you tonight?"

Jess had been surprised. "Of course."

"Could I come over?"

"Whenever you like."

"Six?"

"Okay."

More silence. Jess wanted to end the conversation, to wait until later and see Kate in person, but she didn't know how.

"I suppose I should let you go," Kate said.

"Yeah, okay," Jess said, "See you." Then wondered if she'd been too quick to agree. Part of her wanted to keep Kate talking so they'd snap back to normal, except that she didn't want normal, she wanted last night.

"Well," Kate said. "Bye then."

"Yeah," Jess said, "Bye."

And Kate hung up. Which despite that Jess wanted to keep her talking, probably made things simpler.

Jess had ten good minutes, then started worrying again. Wondering if Kate had been ready to talk so soon, if that meant Kate was planning to call things off. Wondering why she was obsessing so much, when she could just ask.

After lunch Kate called again, and said she was sorry, that she needed to change things, needed to say her goodbyes to the ex. Goodbyes sounded hopeful, Jess thought, but

changing plans to say they mightn't be so good. Jess wasn't happy – she was angry and jealous and miserable – but she decided she wasn't going to be that person. “Sure,” she said, did her best to sound calm, “Come see me afterwards.” Kate said it was just a drink after work and she'd be there by seven.

She wasn't there by seven. Nor by eight. By nine Jess was thinking of car accidents and changed minds so strong they never spoke again. She wanted to phone, but also didn't want to make things worse if Kate was dealing with something complicated. The boyfriend hadn't been around very long. She didn't know him, didn't know what to expect. She waited because there wasn't much else she could do. She almost opened wine, but knew, the mood she was in, she'd drink it too fast. She wished she had more pot. She had the TV on but had no idea what she was watching. She forgot to eat. By nine thirty she stopped worrying about car accidents and started assuming it was a change of mind – if it had been an accident then Kate's family would have let her know by now.

A little after ten Kate turned up.

She was three hours late, showered and clean, her hair still wet, and Jess knew without asking what had happened. She shut the door in Kate's face and ignored her phone for three days – ignored it, but checked it now and then, so she knew Kate hadn't tried to call. Three days was longer than they'd ever not talked before. She moped around the house and watched a lot of TV and prepared herself for heartbreak, for losing Kate completely, even as a friend. She started smoking again. She did that rather than drink, because she knew if she got started right then, the drinking would get messy.

The third night, Kate called. At two in the morning. Phoned and said, “Hey,” just like she did every other time. Said, “Hey,” then “God I'm so sorry,” and started to cry.

Jess waited until Kate was done, not speaking, just there. “I can't do this over the phone,” she said at last.

“Can I come over?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Now?”

“Not now.”

“Are you all right?”

“No,” Jess said, not really angry any more, just being honest.

“I meant...” Kate said, but she didn't seem to know what she meant, “Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.”

“I love you,” Kate said.

“But like a friend. Not like we just slept together.”

“I don't know.”

“I'll see you tomorrow,” Jess said, and hung up.

She knew Kate didn't mean to be cruel, that Kate was trying to work things out too, but cruel was what it ended up being. She didn't blame Kate, but she had to start protecting herself, finding some way to live with whatever happened.

Talking was a good first step. To get things clear, to know where she was.

*

Kate looked awful, like she'd been crying.

“You look like shit,” Jess said, when she opened the door.

“Yeah, so do you.”

“I know.”

Jess had a plan for what she wanted to say, wanted to get things right, but she forgot it as soon as she saw Kate. She just went quiet, waited to hear the worst.

She sat on the couch, looked at Kate. Her cigarettes – the third packet in three days – were sitting on floor beside her feet. She picked them up, fiddled with the packet’s lid, opened and closed it. She was wanting one, but stopped herself. Kate had never liked her smoking. Kate was watching her hands. They were both watching her hands.

“You started again?” Kate asked.

Jess shrugged. The reason why was fairly obvious.

Kate understood. “Sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Really, I’m sorry. I…”

“It’s nothing. It’s not important right now.”

“Still…”

“Kate, not now. I didn’t start very much. I’ll stop again sometime.”

“You still do that?” Kate said.

Jess looked down. One cigarette in the pack was upside down, the lucky one. Everyone used to turn one over in high school.

“Yeah.”

Kate seemed to be thinking. Thinking, or didn’t know what to say. Jess waited.

“You never smoke inside,” Kate said. “Even at home.”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Jess shrugged. She’d never really thought about it. She realised what Kate was getting at, and wondered if she was right. She did things for Kate’s sake. A lot of things. For Kate’s convenience, because Kate was always around and wanted something a particular way. Jess wondered how many more there were. A lot, she assumed, since Kate had always been there.

“Landlord doesn’t like it,” she said.

Kate was watching her, looked a little disbelieving, like she’d been thinking the same things. “Oh god,” Kate said, “I’m so sorry.”

“Hey,” Jess said, “It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” Kate said. “It’s really not. I’m terrified. That I can’t live up to what you want. That I’ll fail you. Let you down. I’m terrified I won’t do things right and everything will be wrecked and awful.”

And it was said.

Jess almost lit a cigarette, put them down instead.

“It’s bad now.” Kate said. “But it could be worse. What if I leave you? Hurt you? Ruin your life?”

“What if you already have?”

“Oh Jess…”

“I love you,” Jess said. “I want to try. And the last three days have been pretty unpleasant. Whatever the worst actually is, it couldn’t be much worse than now.”

“You’re sure?”

Jess nodded, started picking at a loose thread on the arm of the couch.

“It might get untidy,” Kate said, “I don’t know what I want. How long I’ll want it. That seems like it might be a thing, later on.”

“You want me?”

Kate looked like she didn’t know how to answer.

“As a friend?” Jess asked.

“Definitely.”

“As more?”

Kate hesitated. “Yeah, maybe.”

“How much more?”

And again Kate didn’t seem to know what to say.

“Sex is probably, you know, the deal-breaker,” Jess said.

Kate didn’t answer.

“I’m not trying to pressure you,” Jess said, “Just being realistic.”

“I don’t know if I love you. Like that.”

“I know. We can find out.”

“I don’t know if I want to.”

“Then we don’t have to.”

“I don’t know what I want.”

“We can try and work it out. If you want to try.”

“Yeah,” Kate said, very faintly. “Yeah I do.”

“You want to try? To find out what this could be?”

Kate cleared her throat. “Okay.”

“You’re sure?”

Kate was nodding slowly.

“Okay,” Jess said, and felt enormously relieved.

“I’m sorry,” Kate said, “Terribly sorry. About, you know... I shouldn’t have.... ”

“And...?” Jess said.

“Dumped him last night. And again at lunchtime, just so he was clear.”

“Then it’s okay.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Yeah it is.”

“I hurt you.”

“And you probably will again.”

“Jess...”

“Forget it. It’ll be worse if you stress about it, and I’d rather not hear any more.”

“Just like that?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“We should talk, though.” Kate said. “Work out where this is going.”

“Later, sure.”

“We need some rules. So this doesn’t happen again.”

“Another time. Let it go, Katie.”

Kate shrugged, seemed reluctant, but did. Jess leaned over and kissed her, and after a while they went to bed.

*

Jess couldn't imagine how she could sleep with her best friend and one true love and fail to bring it up in conversation, but she did.

The next night Kate turned up to see if Jess wanted to do something, and they went to a film. In the theatre, Jess held Kate's hand, which made Kate uncomfortable, which annoyed Jess, which seemed to make Kate think Jess was asking too much, so they both got annoyed and went home alone. The next day Jess told Kate to come around after work, but they just opened some wine and went to bed. Jess was having trouble knowing what Kate wanted. Kate liked sex, but only sometimes. She'd kiss Jess at home for hours, but wouldn't hold her hand in public. Jess was a bit surprised by that as Kate had never seemed to have a problem with Jess holding other people's hands. There was a lot they needed to say to each other, and Jess thought they both wanted to, but that neither could work out how to begin.

The thing about her and Kate, Jess thought the thing that let them cope with Jess's feelings and kept them friends, was that they never really talked. They had conversations, discussed shoes and movies and politics and where the best waves in the world were. They planned and dreamed. They always said sorry after fights. They just didn't talk about anything that mattered. They'd been doing it for years, had probably started because they had better things to do when they were ten, and hadn't learned since. And because they knew each other well enough that most of the time, talking wasn't needed. Except that now it was a problem.

Jess tried to get Kate to open up a couple more times. Once they ended up fighting and the other in bed. It was starting to feel like they were avoid something, although that made no sense when, as far as Jess understood what was going on, they both wanted to get things clear.

"We need to do something," she said in the end, in bed, after a fight.

"Okay," Kate said.

"We're going away. Somewhere. Anywhere. Pull a sickie. Even just a weekend. But we need go somewhere and sort this out."

"Okay," Kate said again, and Jess, expecting a fight, was surprised.

Jess knew they'd end up in Awatangi. She gave Kate the chance to pick somewhere else, but knew where they'd go all the same. They left on a Thursday night, after work, and took a long weekend. Kate slept most of the way, but Jess didn't mind. She'd been driving this road as long as she had a car, several times a year, and didn't need to be talking to keep herself awake. She put on music and slumped in her seat and let her ankle find a comfortable speed. The afternoon sun flickered like a strobe among the roadside trees and made halos of their leaves. They passed macrocarpa windbreaks and empty fields, passed a lavender farm, purple against the dusty landscape. They passed Porters, where mountains were wedges of shingle against the sky, flanked with screes like waterfalls. Passed Cass, red-painted and tiny under its grassy hills. They followed a lime-green tanker through Arthur's Pass, watching it jolted by the wind and broken tar, and stopped in Kumara for fish and chips which they ate as they drove.

The coast was a place of crashing surf and wood-strewn beaches and forests that filled the world, a place where the trees ran to the ocean and the shingle to the sky. There were

odd little farms cut from the bush as in pioneer days of old, and rumours of penguins and reclusive artists and dope growers back in the bush. It rained three hundred days in the year and the world quite never got dry, just steamed away the dampness in the bright sunshine and waited for the next storm. It was peaceful and quiet and they could be alone. It was the right kind of place for a complicated relationship to begin.

Chapter Two

At Awatangi the ocean was a hundred meters from the highway, hidden behind a strip of coastal forest. Passing drivers usually didn't notice, trapped inside their cars. The sound of waves was inaudible over engine noise, the smell of salt was shut out beyond closed windows. They drove on oblivious. If you knew to listen, though, you could make out the thud of breakers from the middle of town, could smell the salt over the scents of the bush and frying in the main street. The sound was faint, slightly unnerving until you realised what it was, but Jess liked it, liked knowing the sea was nearby. Driving out of town, she opened the car window, felt the salt blowing in, faintly sticky, on her arm and face. She peered through the windscreen, into the dusk. Decided, from the way the grass and tree-branches bent, from the sound of the waves, that the wind was a light westerly or sou'west. Usually not bad for surfing, if the swells followed the wind, which they generally did, and if it didn't blow up into a storm, which it might.

She accelerated slowly. It took less than a minute to drive from the town to the bridge and the turn-off to the baches. The road passed through a remnant of unlogged bush. The grass verges disappeared and the roadside reflectors were nailed directly onto tree trunks. It was dark under the canopy. Jess switched on the headlights, even though they were through as soon as she did and out onto the bridge and she could see again. She looked down. The river was up, but not by very much. The Awatangi was small, narrow and deep, oddly coloured for a river on the coast, neither milky-grey and glacial nor forest tannin-brown. It was a clear blue-grey, like a mountain lake, the colour that children draw tears.

On the far side of the river, close in against the bridge and difficult to see, were two vehicle tracks. Both were muddied shingle, poorly maintained. The one on the left led up to the baches, the one on the right down to the beach. There had once been an AA signpost on the corner, but it had fallen over years ago and never been replaced. Jess glanced sideways. Kate was still asleep, was unlikely to wake on her own. It was irrational, but after seeing another surfer, she wanted to check, to make sure the beach was the same, that a hundred tourists weren't camped there right now. She turned the wrong way, went down to the beach. She drove slowly, easing the car through the potholes, watching moths swoop in towards the headlights and burst on the windscreen. The track was rough, the remnant of a road built a hundred years ago to drag hand-sawn logs to sailing ships. Every year the pits and holes were a little worse, and every year she needed to drive a little slower. She put the headlights on full beam, and yellow washed over scrubby gorse.

Awatangi Bay was small, an indentation barely enclosed by two headlands. A gravel ridge ran the length of the beach, like a single high dune, and continued out into the river mouth to form a spit. The ridge was thick with gorse and grass and yellow dandelion flowers. Behind the spit, the river flowed into a small tidal lagoon, really a mudflat, insect-spotted and filled with sour water. Flax and reeds grew in the mud, and scrub further back where it was drier. Jess had waded in once, years ago, just to see what was there, but never would again. It was tangled and slimy and after fifteen minutes of scrambling around she was sure she'd felt an eel brush her leg and had got out as quickly as she could. The vehicle track ran around the edge of the estuary and up onto the shingle ridge. Behind the beach, parking spaces had been hacked from the track-side gorse, and paths led over the ridge to the water. Jess stopped at the first of the parking spaces and got out. The wind on her face was fresh and cold. She breathed in, smelled only salt. There was no normal sea-smell at Awatangi, no odour of rot and weed. The beach was too steep and narrow, and washed clean by every tide. Nothing lay around decaying. The wind from the sea smelled only of salt, sometimes of water on hot stone.

Although the day was fading, the bay faced west and there was still enough light to see. She climbed the spit, picked her way along a path. She walked barefoot, carried her shoes. She was risking treading on gorse, but wanted to feel the sand under her feet. The sand was cold. It always cooled quickly once the sun was gone. It was harder to walk through, too, seemed to have a thicker texture at night than it did at noon. She'd always wondered why.

She stopped on top the ridge, when she could see the ocean, and could also see the full length of the beach. It was empty. No surfers, no-one camping. She was relieved. She folded her arms to keep herself warm and stood for a while, looking around. Listening to the breakers, feeling the breeze on her cheeks. The crash of the waves was steady, the weather settled, the fetch long and from the west. If the weather held there might be some good surfing tomorrow.

She was glad to be here, and especially to be here with Kate. This battered shingle beach was home, the place in all the world she most belonged.

The dusk became night. She went back to the car, rubbed her feet on the grass to try and clean off the sand, made the gesture but didn't try too hard. She'd stopped caring about sand years ago, just lived with it getting everywhere as part of being at the bach. Kate still seemed to be asleep. She drove back to the highway barefoot, her feet a little slippery on the pedals.

The baches were on a ridge above the road, hidden among the bush where the slope flattened out. You could just make out roofs from the highway if you knew where to look. A vehicle track climbed the hillside to the bushline, through gorse and punga and feathery brown bracken. Jess's family's bach was one of the furthest from the road, three back from the turning circle at the end of the track. The oldest baches were all up there, in the prime spots, out of sight and sound of the highway.

She parked and turned off the engine. Left the headlights on, would need them to see inside until she got lanterns sorted out. She sat for a minute, just looking. The bach had wooden walls and a sagging iron roof and two water tanks on concrete blocks out the back. All along the front was a broad verandah, enclosed in wire insect screens, with an outside toilet at one end. Life at the bach was primitive. There was no cell signal and no electricity, despite people talking about getting the power put on for the last thirty years. Rain-fed

tanks were the only source of water, and a wetback system on the open fire the only way it could be heated, so the fire burned all day except in the very hottest part of summer. The toilet was connected to a septic tank, so was clean and didn't smell, but it was a nuisance having to go outside at night. The only light was kerosene and battery lanterns, which needed constant maintenance – refilling or recharging from car cigarette lighters – and the only way to cook was with a gas hob, the gas in chest-high steel bottles outside, the kind restaurants had. The bach didn't have power or proper plumbing, but Jess loved it here. It was home, the place she'd grown up far more than houses in Christchurch, the place where her family had belonged forever. Its smells, rain and damp wool and woodsmoke, were the memories of childhood.

Jess leaned over to Kate. "Hey," she said softly, "Wake up, we're here."

"Actually here?" Kate asked, without opening her eyes.

"Yeah, actually here."

Kate stretched. Jess climbed out and went up the steps, let the screen door bang behind her. She had a key on her keyring, another was hidden on a nail above a rafter. She unlocked the door, went inside, and looked around. The car headlights cast odd shadows through the front windows, but she could see well enough to find the electric lantern on the shelf beside the door, left there for late-night arrivals, and to switch it on. It worked properly, hadn't been left so long it had run flat. She switched on a second and decided that was enough light, that they could do without the kerosene lamps for tonight. Kerosene was difficult, needed more fiddling to get going. It was easier to run the electric lights flat and sort everything out tomorrow.

She walked around the room, looking at things, touching things, taking a moment to be home and making sure everything was as it should be. Most of the inside of the bach was a single open space. There was a bathroom at the front, with a sink and shower, and two bedrooms at the back, one with a double bed and the other a set of bunks. The big main room was the lounge and living space, and had a kitchen area off to one side. The floor, everywhere but the kitchen and bathroom, was bare wood, sanded but unvarnished, silky-soft underfoot. In the kitchen and bathroom it was scuffed lino. In the kitchen, on the wall above the sink, there was a white enamel zip water-heater, despite there being no electricity. Jess's grandfather had got it cheap thirty years ago, had fitted it expecting power to be put on, which had never happened. There was also a fridge under the bench which did work, a small caravan model that ran on gas, although Jess usually did without, saved the gas, and left milk in a bowl of water in the cupboard under the sink.

Kate wandered inside and sat in a kitchen chair, still looking sleepy. Jess went outside and got an armload of bags.

"I should help," Kate said.

"Nah, don't worry."

"I should."

"It's easier if I do it. I know where everything goes."

"Yep, it's complicated. Food here, bed stuff in there. I think I could probably work it out."

"It's okay, just sit there."

Kate shrugged and yawned and did.

Jess got the box of food and the bottles of wine, got the sheets and duvet. She started

making the bed, and Kate stood up as if she was going to help.

“Really, don’t worry,” Jess said, and Kate sat down again.

Jess brought her own sheets. The ones people left at the bach weren’t fitted, and were barely wide enough to fold under the mattress and hold properly. Turning over at night pulled the edges loose. Getting into bed sometimes pulled the edges loose. Sex always did, so you had to get up afterwards and remake the whole bed. Jess didn’t like waking up with her face on the itchy woollen blankets underneath, and begrudged the extra time needed to make the bed every day. She always took fitted sheets, had once turned back at Springfield when she forgot.

She went back into the main room. Kate was poking around in the box of food. “Where’s the bottle opener?”

“Second drawer.”

“Tea or wine?”

“Don’t mind. Either.”

Jess went back outside, got her surfboards out the car and put them on the porch. There was no real need since she’d be driving down to the beach, but it was a habit. She didn’t want to lose them if the car was stolen. She switched off the car’s headlights, got a lantern, and went around the side of the bach to turn on the gas and water. The gas tap needed a thump with a hunk of wood to loosen it. The water tap was in a hole, past dirt and cobwebs. Reaching in and turning it was the only really unpleasant part of arriving.

She went back inside and washed her hands. Kate pointed to a mug and went out onto the porch. So Jess could smoke, Jess assumed. There was a tatty old couch and a couple of chairs out there, the porch wide and sheltered enough they didn’t get wet and rot when it rained. Jess dried her hands, took the mug – it was wine – and followed her outside. Kate was sitting on the couch, under a jacket, watching the last sandflies gather on the insect screens. Jess sat beside her. Kate leaned her head on Jess’s shoulder. She still seemed sleepy.

“Is smoking going to piss you off?” Jess said.

“Nah.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

Jess got out her cigarettes, lit one.

“Since it’s my fault and everything,” Kate said.

Jess didn’t answer, tried to blow the smoke away from Kate, but didn’t really manage to.

“What’s going on at work?” Kate said.

“Nothing.”

“Something is.”

“I had my hours cut, that’s all.”

“Will you be okay for money?”

“Not really.”

“Can I help?”

“Give me a job.”

“I’ll help if I can,” Kate said. “Just tell me how.”

“You can’t.”

“Okay.” Kate sounded a little annoyed. She thought money and careers were her thing,

and that Jess needed her help.

“I want you to help me figure it out sometime,” Jess said, “But not now.”

“Now’s fine.”

“Not now, Kate.”

“Why not?”

“There’s more important things.”

“Like what?”

“Us,” Jess said, “For instance.”

Kate went all quiet, like she was ashamed. They sat, staring out into the night, listening to the waves down on the beach.

“So,” Kate said. Kate filled silences when she was nervous, but never knew how to start talking about the obvious. Obvious things like, so mate we fucked, how was that for you?

Jess didn’t answer.

“I thought we were supposed to be dealing with this thing,” Kate said.

Jess shrugged, found herself strangely reluctant. Perhaps just tired from driving, perhaps not wanting to go first, to put herself out there and get hurt.

“It’s only been a week,” Jess said. “We’ve got a few days. It can wait.”

“We should start now. Try and sort it out before it gets worse.”

“Nothing’s getting worse.”

“Except you resenting me.”

“Yeah,” Jess said. “That. But don’t say his name.”

Kate went quiet again. After a minute, “I know you don’t want to talk about it...”

“But we’re going to?”

“I think we should. Clear the air.”

“Everything’s fine. Nothing needs clearing.”

“Something does. About me and...”

“Don’t say it. And yeah, okay, that does.”

“And about what this is.”

Jess stood up, went to the screen door and threw the cigarette end out onto the shingle. She sat back down. Kate seemed to be waiting. “I don’t know,” Jess said.

“What this is?”

“Any of it.”

“That’s why we need to start working it out.”

Jess sat for a moment, wondering what to say, wishing this hadn’t come up. She really didn’t want to go first, but this was too important for games. She wanted Kate to know she’d been hurt, wanted it not to happen again, but didn’t know how much she could ask.

“Yeah,” Jess said. “Okay.”

“So tell me.”

“Why can’t you go first?”

“Because it’s you that has a problem.”

“With...”

“Yeah.”

“Why did you sleep with him?” Jess said, “And why did you take so long to phone me afterwards?”

“I’m sorry,” Kate said, “I just... It was unfair.”

“Unfair,” Jess said, “And cruel.”

“Cruel,” Kate conceded.

“You hurt me. More than you ever have before.”

At first Kate seemed like she was going to make a fight of it, to try and defend herself. Then she just looked sad. “I know,” she said at last.

Jess watched moths bang against the insect screens, heard mosquitoes hum past. Kate picked up the bottle and refilled both mugs.

“It’s not that you slept with him that bothers me,” Jess said at last. “It’s that you were such a bitch about it.”

“I know.”

Jess hesitated. “Actually that isn’t true. You sleeping with him really pisses me off too.”

“Jess, I know. I understood.”

“It was fucking selfish.”

“It was.”

“I mean, if something like this is going on, and you say you’ll come and see me, then you do, no matter what else is going on.”

“I was wrong.”

“And you don’t sleep with someone else while I’m waiting for you.”

Kate nodded slowly.

“In fact, you don’t sleep with someone else at all, when you’re supposed to be starting something with me.”

“I said I was wrong.”

“Yeah, you were. Shit, Kate, it’s me. I’m not just some person you happened to fuck.”

“I’m sorry,” Kate said. “I don’t know what else to say.”

“That it won’t happen again.”

“It won’t.”

“Okay then.”

Kate was sitting a little away from Jess, leaning on the end of the couch. Watching, seemed to be thinking. “Do you think this is a mistake?” she said. “Us?”

Jess looked at her. “Do you regret it?”

“No.”

“Are you glad we tried?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Then no mistake.”

“It just seems so hard.”

“I know.”

“And I hurt you.”

Jess shrugged, sipped.

“It just seems to go wrong,” Kate said. “We get a little way, then we make a mess of it.”

“Not go wrong,” Jess said. “Just confused.”

“Maybe.”

“And we don’t talk. Not properly. That doesn’t help.”

“We’re talking now.”

“This once. But usually...”

“Yeah,” Kate said, “I know.”

Jess looked at her, wrapped in a coat, leaning on her knees, confident, relaxed, just Kate as she always was. Except now Kate who fucked Jess.

"I'm glad we're here," Jess said, "Trying. Whatever happens."

"I'm just nervous," Kate said. "You know that, don't you? That was most of it. I'm nervous about everything."

"I know."

"I mean, shit, I never thought this would happen, and now we're..."

"Yeah."

"You and me."

"Yeah."

"I'm scared. I'm worried. I don't want anything bad to happen. I don't want to cause it."

"You won't."

Kate rolled her glass between her hands, looked out into the night. "I liked kissing you," she said, after a while.

"I liked kissing you too."

"I thought it would be like kissing you hello. Kissing you properly, I mean. But it's not. It's... wonderful."

Jess leaned over and kissed her.

"When I kiss you," Kate said softly. "I feel something."

"I know."

"You turn me on."

"Yeah."

"It's you."

"It is."

"No, I mean it's you."

"Yeah," Jess said, "It really is."

"And we're about to go to bed together. And sleep." She seemed surprised, as if she'd only just realised.

"We have before."

"Not like this."

"Yeah, not like this."

"It's you," Kate said again, and kissed Jess. Kissed like she meant it, for a long time.

Then she yawned. "Shit, sorry."

They kissed again and she yawned again.

"Go to bed."

"I'm okay. Keep talking if you want. Or whatever."

"Whatever?"

"Yeah."

But as she said it she yawned, and this time she made Jess too.

"Go to bed."

"Are you coming too?"

"If you want me to."

"I do."

Kate seemed sleepy, seemed to want to make out, to talk, but kept yawning. "Just sleep,"

Jess told her, “You’re tired, we can talk in the morning, do whatever in the morning.”

“Whatever, hey?” Kate said, but seemed grateful.

Later, when Kate was asleep, as the breeze came up a little and the first cool air of a storm blew in, Jess sat out on the porch and sipped wine and smoked. She was too awake to sleep after driving all day. She listened to the wind and owls and possums rattling the trees. The wind got stronger, came in gusts. Between gusts she could still hear the ocean, a frog, once a car on the road. She thought about the day, and about Kate. Being at Awatangi was perfect and right, and being there with Kate was what Jess had waited for all her life. Somehow she would make everything work.

After a while she went inside and slid into bed beside Kate and slept.

Chapter Three

Jess woke with the dawn chorus. A thousand birds shouting feed me, fuck me, fuck off, her aunt called it. So many birds that their calls blended together and each was lost in the general clamour. The birdsong was always loud at Awatangi, louder than in the city. Jess liked it, liked being woken this way and knowing she was at the bach, even after she’d been up half the night driving. She lay in bed, mostly asleep. The room was dim, lit by the brassy blue of dawn. Deceptive light, bright enough to see by, but not to see properly. The air was slightly cool. She groped around and pulled the covers back onto herself. Kate must have pushed them off during the night.

She was holding Kate, curled against her back. She could smell Kate’s skin, could feel Kate’s breath on her arm, had a little of Kate’s hair tickling her nose. She blew, failed to move the hair, and shifted her head over instead. Kate was breathing steadily, sounded deeply asleep, would probably stay that way for at least another hour because no alarm would wake her. Jess held her, almost feeling obliged to enjoy it because holding people you loved while they slept was one of those things you were supposed to want to do. She shifted again. There was button or something digging into her arm. Kate was wearing pyjamas – sexy polyester and satin crop-top pyjamas, but still pyjamas. Jess slept nude, hated waking up tangled in anything except another person and liked the feel of sheets on bare skin. Normally, sharing a bed with Kate, she’d have left on a t-shirt and underwear, but last night she’d decided it was a bit late to worry. Even though Kate had her pyjamas on.

She listened. The bach was close enough to the beach that listening would tell her whether it was worth getting up to surf. She could hear breakers very faintly past the birds, the tempo familiar, like her own pulse. Quick waves, which meant small waves, the noise sharp, not muffled by distance, carried by a slight onshore breeze. It wasn’t what she’d hoped for. An onshore wind stopped the waves breaking cleanly, made them harder to surf. She thought about getting up. At Awatangi, the best waves were usually at dawn. The wind dropped overnight, let them firm a little. The tide also helped. Mid-tides had better paced

waves, and it must be getting towards that now. Low tide had been at half-three – she'd checked the bach's tide-table book before she went to bed, looked at the Westport times and added twenty minutes. She didn't have a watch, used her phone as one but had left it in the car because there was no cell signal here. From the daylight, she guessed it was after six, and so right now the surf was probably as good as it would be all day. She was tempted, but decided not. Any other day would be different, but today, here with Kate, she was happy where she was.

The sun rose above the mountains and shone directly onto the bach. Jess knew the moment it happened. Little spots of light appeared on the walls, suddenly intense. The sun shining through holes in the curtains. The room became warmer. Outside, the birds quietened down. Jess waited a little longer, then got up. There was a half-full bottle of water on the floor. She sipped a little, left most of it for Kate. She found her jeans and a shirt tangled on the floor, pulled them on, and went out into the main room.

The curtains were half-open. She went to the front door, stepping without thinking around creaky floorboards and a sharp edge of the kitchen lino. She closed her eyes, went outside, felt her way down the steps and onto the shingle parking area. The ground was damp with dew, the gravel a little painful on bare feet. She walked out towards the track, careful not to bump into her car. It must have rained overnight, then cleared. There was a wet-dirt smell rising from the bush. She stood for a moment, her eyes closed. Awatangi never felt real until she saw it by day. When she arrived at night, her mind still expected the dirty aridity of the east – yellows and browns and dust – even though she was in the middle of a rainforest. She waited a moment, anticipating, then opened her eyes. All was as it should be. Everything rich and damp, everything empty, everything a hundred shades of green that, after a month in the east, her mind forgot could exist. She turned around slowly, saw the mountains past the bach roof, the river and beach down through the trees. She stood still, feeling the sunlight on her skin, listening, smelling. The air was warm, a softer kind of warmth than in the east, as if the air was soothed by the exhalations of all the trees. She could hear the waves breaking more clearly out here, could taste a hint of wind-borne salt. The beach was still tempting, and on any other day she would have gone, but today it couldn't compare with staying where she was.

She went back onto the porch for the toilet, then washed her hands at the outside tap. To keep the noise down, because the inside pipes sometimes banged. The water was cold, so cold it felt almost like it was burning her skin. Last night's rain fresh in the tanks. She let the water flow over her fingers, numbing them, then bent and drank from cupped hands. Awatangi water tasted better than Christchurch water, perhaps because of the moss on the bach roof. She shook her hands dry, thought about a cigarette, decided not. They were in the car, her car keys inside, and she didn't want to get back into the first thing in the morning habit anyway. Not before ten, she'd told herself the other day, and not straight after sex. Long enough to enjoy resisting temptation.

She looked around, down the track, at the nearer windows and driveways. The other baches seemed empty – no cars, no smoke, no lights. Awatangi was seasonal, usually quiet in winter and spring. It was too far to drive for just a weekend, and there wasn't that much to do once you were here. The nearby bush was fairly inaccessible, no good for hunting or tramping, the fishing, according to her grandfather, was only adequate, not worth travelling for, and the whitebait run was early and short. It would still be whitebait season, as far as

she remembered, but the actual whitebait would be gone by now. The stands on the river looked like they'd been packed up for the year. Spring was quiet. In summer, the place would change. Every bach would be occupied, some by two or three families. Awatangi was like a town that only existed for three or four weeks a year. A town of plastic furniture and foam mattresses and cricket on car radios. Jess was happy to have the place to herself. She preferred the quieter months, knew all these people, had all her life, but sometimes just wanted to be alone.

Sandflies started appearing. She went back inside. Even though it was a warm morning, they'd need a fire for hot water. Whoever had last visited – probably her uncle – had left the hearth made up. She found matches on a bookshelf, scratched one alight, and touched it to the paper in the hearth, dabbed as many times as she could before it burned down and singed her fingers. The fire crackled and caught. She waited a couple of minutes, watching the flames, until she was sure everything was burning, then stood up and wiped her hands on her jeans. She was about to go back to bed when a sudden thought – sudden vanity – made her go to the bathroom and brush her teeth. She stole Kate's toothbrush because Kate was organised and had put it out, and hers was still in her bag. She undressed in the lounge so she didn't make noise – or fall over with her foot caught in her jeans while trying to keep quiet – and slipped back into bed.

The bedroom was already warm. Between the sun on the iron roof and the fire, it would be too hot inside by mid-afternoon without some windows open. None were, but Jess couldn't be bothered getting up again. They'd survive for a couple of hours. Kate's breathing was steady, repetitive enough to be lulling. The roof made little pings as it heated and expanded, and the room smelled of woodsmoke from the fire. The wind had died down outside. The birds had gone. The only sound was the wash of distant surf.

She dozed. Hadn't meant to, but was comfortable and tired. She woke up, found she'd rolled onto her side, was facing the wall, and Kate was gently stroking her back.

"Hey," Jess said without looking around, then, "What're you still doing here?"

"What?"

"You're here. Where's the note?"

Kate laughed, didn't seem offended. "Yeah," she said, "Fuck you too."

"Needed to be said."

"It really didn't." Kate kissed Jess's shoulder. "Good morning,"

"Morning."

Jess felt warm and sleepy. Kate continued to stroke her back, tracing spine and shoulder-blades. "I love your back," Kate said, "I always have. You have a bite."

"Ah." Jess wasn't really listening, was concentrating on Kate's hands.

Kate touched. "Here. Fresh."

"I was outside before."

"What's it like?"

"Not raining."

Kate didn't answer, kept stroking. Jess almost went back to sleep. "You're gorgeous," Kate said after a while.

Jess stirred. "What?"

"You're gorgeous."

"Ah." Jess opened her eyes again, felt too lazy to roll over, just looked straight ahead at

the sun-dappled wall. "Okay."

"I can tell you now. I hadn't really thought about it until just then."

"Fair enough."

Kate prodded. "Thank you, Kate, I'm flattered."

"Yeah, thank you Kate you smarmy cow."

Kate went back to stroking. She seemed to be exploring. Delving. Touching. She ran her hands down Jess's back, around her hips. She seemed relaxed, maybe felt more comfortable here than at home, both being on holiday and knowing they wouldn't be interrupted. "I love your hair," she said, and looped a ringlet around a finger.

"Don't you dare pull that."

"I wouldn't..."

"Just don't."

"I love your lips." Kate said. A finger touched, brushed.

Jess kissed lightly as it passed. "And just realised you could tell me?"

"Exactly. And your back. You're muscley."

"I am. Should I be saying nice things back?"

"You could."

"Is saying them back why you're saying nice things to me?"

"No." Kate prodded again for just a second. "Not entirely."

"So partly?"

Kate pretended to sigh. "Why assume I want something?"

"Usually you do."

"Not usually."

"Sometimes you do."

"Maybe sometimes."

"Trying to get the last word?"

"Am not, do not," Kate said, and moved her hand. "Funny," she said, squeezing, "How it's a bum when you're a mate, but an ass when I'm sleeping with you."

"I suppose it is."

"I love your ass," Kate said.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." Kate slid half onto Jess's back, lips tickling Jess's neck, hands down between their bodies, skin sliding, the full-length contact making Jess shiver. "And I love your nose," she whispered into Jess's ear. "It's pointy."

"Pointy is good?"

"Pointy is always good." Kate kissed around the back of Jess's neck, under her hair. "Your tongue's pointy."

"Everyone's tongue's pointy. Kind of."

"Yeah, well." Kate kissed Jess's shoulder. "I really, really love your eyes."

"You can't see my eyes."

"So turn over."

Jess rolled over. Started to roll and got stuck. "Stop it," she said, and Kate grinned and stayed where she was for a minute, being difficult, before she lifted herself up to make room. Hair got in the way, got caught beneath Kate's hand. They tried for a moment to untangle it.

“Shit,” Kate said, seemed to having trouble.

“Ow,” Jess said. “Elbow.”

Kate moved, let her get free. “You okay?”

Jess nodded.

“Yeah,” Kate said. “Those eyes.”

“You like?”

“I like.”

Jess looked up at Kate. Thought about kissing her, thought about pulling her close and making her come. Kate was smiling, seemed happy, so in the end Jess just lay there and looked at her. “You’re all I ever wanted,” Jess said, “You know that?”

“Yeah,” Kate said, a little uncertain.

“I love you,” Jess said, and as she did she knew it was a mistake.

Kate went still. She looked away, avoided Jess’s eyes. Was suddenly interested in the new parts of Jess she could see now Jess was on her back. She looked, she touched, she tried very hard to seem like she hadn’t heard. It was almost convincing, except that Jess knew her too well. She was trying too hard to seem distracted. Jess was upset, couldn’t work out what it was okay to say when. She wanted to take it back, but it wasn’t the kind of thing you could apologise for saying. She started getting angry with herself because she didn’t know what she ought to be angry about.

Kate caught Jess’s hands, wrapped their fingers together, and started kissing Jess all hard and passionate. She bit Jess’s neck, sucked her breasts, got her leg up between Jess’s and pushed, and it felt good, would have felt good, except that Jess was furious with herself. Hurt and furious. She tipped her head backwards and looked at their hands, avoiding eye contact too now. Their hands were the same size. Kate’s nails were longer and were polished. Jess concentrated on hands, bit back something – she wasn’t sure what – something dark and unpleasant. She bit it back, and stared at their hands. Nasty, she thought, when you said your I love you and got nothing back. Even saying it to someone who already knew how you felt. It didn’t have to be like this. Kate could just have said yeah and got on with things, she didn’t need to go all cold and weird.

Kate slid up, still holding Jess’s hands, and tried to kiss her. Jess turned her face aside. Kate looked hurt, and she was immediately sorry. She thought she understood. Things were changing. It must be difficult for Kate to know what to do if she didn’t want to answer. This little pretence was about as well as it could be handled. Jess was hurt – a little jealous, a little sad, a little angry, but mostly hurt. What she was feeling wasn’t unfamiliar – rejection, but not quite. It happened every time she saw Kate with a new boyfriend, every time Kate got a crush, every time Kate seemed happy with someone who wasn’t Jess. Why not me? Jess always wanted to say, but always kept quiet.

Like she should have just now.

It was her mistake. She should have known better.

She decided to go along with Kate’s pretence, to try and make it right. She lifted herself onto her elbows and started kissing Kate’s neck, started gasping and sighing a little bit more than what Kate was doing deserved.

Kate seemed to understand. She cleared her throat. “Hey, Jess…”

Jess stopped, waited.

“Nothing.”

Jess wondered if that was an apology. She made a noise, a murmur, no real words. Sort of meant don't worry, sort of meant thanks for trying.

Kate went back to Jess's neck.

"That feels good," Jess said. "Really good."

Kate's hair got in the way again. She sat up to tie it back. Jess moved her arms, just happened to, and saw Kate notice her breasts, get all attentive and still. It had happened before. Kate seemed to have a thing about boobs. Jess supposed they were new for her. Someone else's, at least. She smiled. Kate reached over and touched Jess's shark-tooth necklace, tapped it with a fingertip and made it sway slightly. She kept staring. Jess's nipples were hard, got harder for being looked at. Pale skin suddenly dark. Jess had once been alarmed enough by that colour change to show Kate, make her watch. Not sure what she was worrying about, just wanting reassurance she wasn't unusual. They'd decided it was a blonde-and-pale thing like invisible eyebrows and not getting a proper tan.

"Do you remember," Kate said. "When you got me to...?"

"I was just thinking about that. Which is kind of scary."

"Not really, given we're here. Like this."

"Still."

"You know what I mean. It's not really surprising."

"Yeah," Jess said. "Probably," but was still pleased how similar their thoughts sometimes were. It had always meant something.

Kate was still staring. She licked her finger, touched Jess's breast, stroked. Her touch was light, almost ticklish. Jess gasped. Kate took her hand away.

"Don't stop," Jess said. "It was nice."

"Didn't stop because of you."

Kate touched again. Poked, so Jess's boob kind of swayed.

"Hey, Kate," Jess said, watching Kate watch her chest. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Nothing." Kate looked almost guilty.

"Stop playing."

"Well, you know. I couldn't before."

"Could have if you'd asked."

Kate stuck out her tongue. Jess laughed, and it was almost like things were back as they should be.

"Take these off," Jess said, and pulled at Kate's pyjama top.

"In a minute."

"Take it off," Jess said, "Stop pissing around."

Kate grinned and did. Slowly. "Lie down," she said.

"Don't be bossy."

"Lie down," she said again, and pushed Jess backwards. Jess let her, pulled her down too. She had been happy, but as soon as they stopped talking, some of her bad mood came back. She was thinking too much. Only partway back to happy, she supposed. She felt only half involved, was glad Kate wanted her, but kept wondering if it was only to avoid the hanging I love you. An awful thing to think while someone went down on you, but it fit. Kate hadn't been starting things and now she was. Jess lay on her back and stared at the ceiling and brooded, occasionally made a pleased little noise at Kate to show she was paying attention. It really wasn't Kate's fault, she thought. She really ought to learn. Should

know better than to throw I love yous around. Things had changed, but not that much.

Kate moved, shifted her hand, did something differently, and Jess, still only half paying attention, suddenly came.

“Shit,” she said breathlessly. “Oh shit, that was good.”

Kate sat up, kind of half-wiped her chin. Jess watched her. Something still seemed to be wrong. “What?” Jess said.

Kate looked at her for a moment. “You’re not just saying that?”

“Of course not.” They’d been here before. Kate seemed to have decided she hadn’t practiced enough to be any good, and Jess didn’t know how to tell her she was her, and that was all Jess needed. “Hey,” she said, “No I’m not.”

“Okay,” Kate said, but didn’t sound convinced.

“It was good.”

Kate shrugged and looked away.

“Really,” Jess said. “It was good. What’s wrong?”

“You didn’t seem to be all here...”

“Oh.” Jess looked at her. They knew each other too well. She wondered if she should say sorry, but with Kate you just didn’t. It turned into a power thing. “Yeah, just distracted. That’s all.”

“Yeah?” Kate studied her. “Well don’t be.”

“I won’t.”

“Don’t,” Kate said, “It’s rude.”

Kate kissed her, then just sat there waiting. A demanding kind of waiting.

“What?” Jess said.

“I just did you.” Kate sounded odd, like it was a negotiation.

“Fuck,” Jess said. “You don’t need to be like that.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Something is.”

“Nothing important.” Jess sighed. “Want some or not?”

Kate grinned. “A little some, please.”

Jess laughed and started kissing her, gave up worrying, concentrated on Kate like she should have been all along. She took it slowly, took care, let Kate get herself there all breathless and trembly and deep. Kate lifted her hips up off the bed, and twisted her hand into Jess’s hair, and pulled on it almost enough to hurt, then slowly loosened until it was a caress again. Jess kept going. She’d been trying to show Kate it didn’t have to be a race, you then me and then we’re done, that they could take a little longer, make it a bit more than what Kate might be used to. Kate went limp, seemed to be coasting, smiled down at Jess and pulled her head around in a friendly kind of way.

“Hey,” Kate said.

Jess kept going. Kate wriggled backwards, slid out from under Jess’s mouth. Sat up and leaned on the wall.

Jess was a bit surprised. “What’s up?”

“Nah, nothing. Just I’d got there.”

“I know.” Jess bent and kissed her Kate’s knee. Kissed and let a little wet smear on Kate’s skin. Kate stared at it, looked up at Jess, at Jess’s lips.

“I still can’t believe we just did that,” Kate said. “I did that. To you. With you.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not worried. It just seems... odd.”

“It’s not odd.”

Kate gave Jess a look like she wasn’t understanding at all, almost dismissive. And maybe Jess wasn’t. There was something in the way Kate was looking at her, a little bitter and a little envious, that made Jess wonder if Kate wanted her, was attracted to her, or if she just wanted to be her or something. It was odd, not a thought she’d ever had before. Jess reached over and touched Kate’s cheek and Kate seemed to relax. Jess moved to kiss her, but Kate slid sideways, half-rolled out of the bed.

“What?” Jess said.

Kate seemed to be looking around for clothes, seemed slightly flustered. “Breakfast?” she said, “Coffee?”

“I can do it.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Yeah, all right. If you’re sure.”

“It’s fine.”

Jess was confused, didn’t understand what had just happened. Wasn’t sure anything had. “What’s wrong?” she said.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Kate said, rummaging through the clothes on the floor. Her clothes, since most of Jess’s were still out in the lounge, but she gave Jess a snotty look anyway. Apparently the mess was Jess’s fault. Kate found her underwear. She wasn’t someone who’d make breakfast naked. Jess didn’t say anything. Kate seemed to need a few moments alone after sex. Guilt or something, Jess supposed. Some people didn’t like kissing after getting head, and Kate had always seemed like she’d be one, so maybe that was all, but it seemed like something more.

Kate went into the main room, said, “Shit,” loudly, and came straight back.

“Um,” Jess said. “Yeah. Curtains.”

“The curtains are open.”

“Only one,” Jess stretched, “And no-one’s around.”

“Still,” Kate found a shirt, pulled it on, and went back into the main room, “One big one.”

Jess gave her the finger, but waited until after her back was turned. Didn’t want to start something. It felt like they were both trying, even if they weren’t always getting it right.

Jess lay and listened to Kate clattering around in the kitchen, could tell what was happening from the sounds she was making. Gas roared, water ran, the kettle filled and was clanged onto a burner. Plastic rustled a few times, probably a bread bag. A drawer scraped. Then everything went quiet, a kind of furtive silence. Jess listened carefully, heard the zip of a zipper, heard a surreptitious creak as the front door opened. She rolled sideways. She could see Kate’s jeans beside the bed, could see her suitcase against the wall. Kate must be wearing Jess’s jeans to pee, something that would annoy her enormously if Jess did it. Jess lay back and waited and thought about knowing people so well you could just tell when they were up to something. Kate came back inside and washed her hands, but left the water running. It sounded like she was brushing her teeth. Jess wondered if she should be offended. Brushing before morning sex was considerate, but brushing afterwards was

saying someone tasted funny. Kate went back to the kitchen, stepping on every wobbly board along the way. She'd never worked out how to walk around the back quietly. She started rummaging in the food box.

"Milk's under the sink."

"Found it. Where's the sugar?"

"In a plastic thing, it's already open."

After a minute, "Got it."

More clanks and rustles. Kate swore, had maybe picked up something hot. Water poured.

"Okay," Kate shouted.

"I'm here."

"No shit," Kate sounded slightly sharp. "Get ready to catch."

"I'm ready."

"Really ready, or just shitting me ready, because I'm carrying a lot."

"Ready ready." Jess sat up. Kate came in, two mugs in one hand, two plates on her arm like a waiter, a water bottle held against her side. Toast, it looked like. Something hot in the mugs.

"Coffee?" Jess asked.

"Yep."

"You're the best."

Kate waved the mugs at Jess until she took them, put the plates on the floor. She didn't get undressed when she got back into bed, just climbed back in and smiled at Jess oddly – smiled and then looked away and passed Jess a plate. Jess wondered for a moment, then realised. She sat up, leaned on a pillow, and while arranging herself pulled the sheet up over her chest. Apparently Kate couldn't eat with sweaty tits in the room.

Kate bit her toast. "Hey," she said, "I just thought. What would your family say if they could see this?"

Jess stared at her a moment, surprised.

"Oh shit," Kate said.

Jess thought dark and bitter things. Bitter at her parents, just a little bitter at Kate.

"Oh shit," Kate said, "Jess, I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"It's really not. I'm sorry."

"Nah, don't be. I know what you mean." Jess shrugged. "And fuck knows. Probably that I corrupted you or something."

"I didn't mean what they'd actually say, just, you know, what they'd think. Me and you here."

"In grandma's bed? You being you and me being, you know, me?"

"Um, yeah."

"I'm pretty sure they'd still say I corrupted you. Being a pervert and all."

Kate looked at Jess for a moment.

"They always liked me better," Kate said. It sounded bitchy, but Jess thought she was trying to make a joke, cheer things up. It probably would have been funnier if it hadn't been true.

"Maybe," Jess said.

"Definitely," Kate said, apparently unwilling to let the effort go.

“Fuck you,” Jess said, and looked away.

“Hey,” Kate said, sounded hurt and worried. “You did.”

Jess rolled over.

Kate slid after her. “Corrupted me, I meant.”

Jess didn’t answer. Kate squeezed her, kissed her neck. “You okay?”

“I didn’t corrupt you,” Jess said, “Not really.”

“But you did,” Kate said. “And I’m very, very glad.”

Jess was surprised enough she just lay there. Kate seemed suddenly embarrassed, went back to her side of the bed and started reading her book.

“Really?” Jess asked.

“Leave it Jess,” Kate said, didn’t look up. “Moment’s gone.”

Jess lay back and sipped her coffee. After a while, when it seemed like it wasn’t right after sex any more, she got up for a cigarette. She couldn’t be bothered getting dressed so she sat in one of the scratchy old chairs in the lounge and blew smoke up the chimney.

“Is there hot water yet?” Kate called.

Jess got up and ran some to check. “Warm.”

Kate went past wearing a towel. Jess sat in her chair and wondered about offering to soap Kate’s back. She didn’t. Kate was in an odd mood. It seemed safer not to push. When Kate was done – walking past in a towel again when she usually wouldn’t bother – Jess had a shower too. She wandered back into the bedroom and got Kate’s damp towel, used it to start drying her hair.

“What do you want to do today?” Jess asked.

“That’ll be a while,” Kate said, looking at the towel. No electricity meant no hairdryers. She’d thought ahead, her hair was dry. She probably wanted Jess to notice.

“Yeah,” Jess said, but had dealt with wet hair so often she didn’t care any more. “Today?”

“Weren’t we meant to talk?”

Jess looked at her, decided it wasn’t the time. “We can later.”

“Perhaps,” Kate said, “We could go down to the beach.”

“Perhaps,” Jess said, smiling, “We could.” She put down her jeans and got out a bikini. “Pity I washed my hair.”

Chapter Four: Kate

Kate lay on the bed, watching Jess sort out her clothes, and worrying that she might have upset her. With Jess it was sometimes hard to tell. She tended to be secretive about her feelings – at least to Kate – and sensitive about her family. Kate had suggested the beach because she wanted to cheer Jess up, and the beach had seemed simpler than more sex. She wanted to do something else for a while.

Jess was wearing half her bikini, was hunting in her pack for the top. The top of a bikini,

at least, any one would probably do. She had dozens. In a couple of days there'd be bikinis in the car, on the line, dumped on chairs in the lounge. Jess got feral at the beach, wore bikinis and thick fisherman-knit woollen jerseys all day. Like she was reverting to childhood, togs and a jersey, no shorts, no shoes, determined to stay in fun clothes at all costs and leaving wet ass-prints on the furniture. Kate watched, half staring because it was turning out she liked tits, half not because she'd seen them often enough before and the friends habit was still pretty strong.

Jess found her top and threw it on the bed, started getting out tubes of sunblock and bug repellent and a bottle of disinfectant. She smeared dettol on herself whenever she went outside, an old west coast trick. She still got bitten, and still swelled up despite what people said about getting immune, but she didn't get bitten as much as Kate. Because of the dettol, she said, and because Kate flapped. Flapping at the bugs made them worse, wafted your scent around and attracted more. If you just stood still they wouldn't bother you. "Much," Kate would say, and make Jess grin. Sometimes Kate believed her, and sometimes she thought Jess was vain enough to want to wear bikinis and would say anything to justify herself. She had about bike helmets at school.

Kate watched. It should be sexy, she thought, given Jess was mostly naked and was rubbing things onto herself. Should be, but wasn't. Jess put on sunblock and bug goop and disinfectant, then put on her top and jersey while everything was still sticky. Kate sniffed, could smell her from the bed. She could see crusty stains on Jess's clothes.

"You smell like a toilet," Kate said.

Jess looked up, seemed a little surprised.

"The dettol."

"Oh yeah." Jess grinned. "Glad you like it."

"I'm not touching you again until you wash it off."

Jess looked at her like she was thinking of chasing Kate around and trying to smear insect repellent on her, then just said, "Ocean kind of does that."

"Not what's inside of the jersey."

"Yeah," Jess said, "Probably." She stood there waiting, like she expected a punch line.

"What?" Kate said.

"You know the trying to have the last word thing?"

"Am not."

"You are."

"Not."

"Yeah, you can't win this one unless you give up. Think about it."

Kate stared at her for a moment, then went into the kitchen to get a drink. Trying to look annoyed, playing it up a bit.

Jess went outside, got into focused preparation mode. Kate picked up the bug repellent and trailed along behind. She'd done this enough to know when she was about to be ignored. Jess got her board, one of the two she'd brought over with her, short and pointy-fronted, and did something with wax. Kate sat on the couch and sprayed on some bug repellent and waited. Jess went inside and boiled the kettle, made a thermos of cocoa – it would be hot and over-sweet – filled a bottle with water, got towels.

"Ready?"

"Whenever you are."

“So now?”

Kate went and stood beside the passenger door, waiting for Jess to reach over and unlock it. Assuming Jess would be the one who drove. Then suddenly wondered why. It wasn't just because it was Jess's car, although it was, and wasn't because she hadn't driven it before, because she had. Something deeper, some kind of rule. She didn't drive people she was sleeping with, they drove her. Odd, now she'd caught herself. She wondered if she should ask to, and prove something, but she knew Jess would just hold out the keys, and she didn't actually want to because the track was muddy and potholed and rutted and she'd feel stupid asking and then saying no. And because most of the guys she'd been with would have made a fuss, and Jess probably wouldn't care.

She watched Jess unlock the driver's door.

“Hey Jess,” she said. “Can I drive?”

Jess looked at her for a minute, then held the keys out over the car roof.

“Nah,” Kate said. “Don't worry.”

Jess got in and unlocked the door. Kate climbed in too, saw a sandfly follow her while the door was open. Jess didn't seem to notice.

“What was that about?” Jess asked.

“Just wondered.”

“Fair enough.”

“So why didn't you actually come around the car?”

Jess looked over.

“If you were going to let me drive we needed to swap places.”

Jess grinned. “Hey Kate, do you think maybe you overthink things just a little bit?”

“No,” Kate said coldly.

“I assumed you wanted to check if you could.”

Kate looked at her, thought how annoying it was when Jess knew what she was thinking. “Doing that really pisses me off, you know that?”

“You do it too.”

“I know.”

“So, I'm driving?”

“Yep.”

“Not you.”

“Start the fucking car.”

Jess started the engine. “Should I ask what you were wanting to check?”

“Just some control thing.”

“Oh Jesus.”

And that pretty much ended the conversation. Jess didn't care as much about social inequities and abuses of power as she probably should, had spent most of her time at uni drinking beer rather than being outraged like everyone else. She tended to hear a conversation about politics getting started even when that wasn't what was happening.

“You asked,” Kate said.

“My mistake.”

Jess put the car in gear and started driving. As soon as they moved, the sandfly began a frantic dance against the windscreen, bouncing and flitting up and down like it was terrified.

“How did that get in here?” Jess said.

Kate shrugged.

Kate watched and wondered if it was actually panicking or if it was too small a thing to feel scared, was just reacting to patterns of light and movement automatically, like a robot. She wondered if people did that too. Half the time she seemed to, which irritated her even more than Jess reading her mind.

Jess stopped at the highway and the sandfly calmed down a little. The stop sign was misplaced, too low, blocking the view south down the main road. Jess peered past it. Kate looked around. Pukeko lived in the roadside flax, sometimes ran across the highway or loitered on the track, but she couldn't see any today. She looked at ochre lichen on fenceposts, dark flaxes in ditches, grey rainwater in the swamp across the highway, and thought how drab it was. The red stop sign was the only bright colour she could see. Jess reached for the sandfly, started chasing it around the windscreen, trying to squish it. To add it to a dozen other smudge-marks on the glass.

“Leave it,” Kate said, “Watch the road.”

Jess ignored her, but was only half-trying. Groping blindly while peering at traffic, waiting for a gap.

Campervans went past. New, shiny cars went past.

“Tourists?” Kate asked.

“Tourists,” Jess said.

Jess was normally a careless driver, sometimes enough to worry Kate, but was always cautious right here, at this one corner. Childhood training, Kate assumed. Being told over and over to look across the bridge to see if anyone was coming. Get told at five and seven and ten years old, and it must sink in. And she'd learned to drive around Awatangi, so this was probably the first stop sign she'd ever met. Kate remembered bunny-hops on the beach track and Jess's father swearing at her as she tried to get the car going. She remembered her own brother, Baz, teaching them both later, in a quiet industrial area on a Sunday afternoon. She tried to work out how old they'd been. Probably thirteen or fourteen. They hadn't had learner licences, had picked up the country habit of driving in paddocks long before they were legal on roads. Jess had learned to drive at Awatangi and surf at Awatangi, and, Kate suddenly remembered, to kiss at Awatangi as well.

“You're the first person I ever kissed,” Kate said, “Properly, I mean. Tongues. Did you know that?”

Jess left the sandfly alone. “Yeah, I did. And you were for me.” She pointed back past her shoulder, “Here. And here we are back. And it was completely unintentional.”

“Really?”

“Ah, yeah. I didn't even think about it. Here is just... here.”

“Suppose we were here so often things were bound to happen.”

“Yeah,” Jess said, and gave her a funny look.

“Not those things.” Kate looked around, saw there was no traffic, and said, “Gap.”

Jess shot across the road. Without looking, Kate noticed, trusting Kate.

The track ran beneath the embankment where the highway curved onto the bridge, around the estuary, and down a river terrace to the beach. Near the river mouth it climbed up on top the shingle ridge, got clear of the scrub, and became wheel-ruts on bare stones. From there you could see the whole bay. Jess stopped, left the engine running and the car in

gear, and looked out to sea. After a minute she wound down the window. Kate looked too, had enough practice to know what Jess wanted. These were good-ish waves, the tops whipped creamy white by wind. Actual waves, though, not just frothy surf.

“Long solid fetch,” Jess said, “For an onshore wind. There must be a storm out in the Tasman.”

“I reckon.”

Jess grinned. “Big waves, even with the breeze the wrong way.”

“Yep,” Kate said, “I got that.” She had. Jess sometimes forgot how often they had these conversations.

“I thought it was changing. It looked like a low over Lord Howe the other night. It must have stalled.”

“Did it?”

“A-ha.”

“You don’t say?”

“Fuck you.”

“You love this geeky shit,” Kate said, “Don’t you?”

“Yeah.” Jess said. “Sometimes. Though sometimes, you know, who cares.”

Jess started driving again. The track continued along the back of the beach to the cliffs at the south end. At the bend where the track curved south there were a couple of cars pulled off onto the trackside grass. Out on the water, two people were surfing, bobbing among the waves, and a woman was sitting on the beach, near a pile of towels and clothes, watching. Kate glanced at Jess. Even in the best of her moods Jess didn’t like sharing beaches, especially didn’t like sharing Awatangi. She’d surf Taylor’s with forty other people with no problem at all, but wouldn’t even get in the water on the coast unless there was a space of about a kilometre to either side of her. She wasn’t used to playing nice at Awatangi, Kate supposed.

“New people,” Kate said. “Who’re they?”

Jess made a disgusted noise in the back of her throat. An “ach” that reminded Kate of Jess’s father, although she’d never tell her that. “Locals,” Jess said, sneering, her lower lip kind of curled.

“Do that again,” Kate said.

“What?”

“That expression,” Kate tried to show her, “Do it again. Locals.”

Jess tried, but couldn’t. After a couple of attempts she gave up.

“So we’re not going to say hi?” Kate asked.

Jess looked surprised. She was driving with one hand and half her attention, because they were going slowly, still looking out to sea. She grinned, reached over and touched Kate’s leg. “Nah, we’d have to talk and make friends and blah. I don’t want to share you right now.”

“Blah?”

“Yeah, blah. Make nice. Ask who people are. All that shit. Blah.”

“Fair enough.”

Jess’s voice was a little softer. “And I want a girl on the beach watching me, too.”

Kate thought that was kind of sweet.

The trackside grass was long, thick with clover and dandelions. More rain here, Kate

supposed. Dragonflies were hanging around, got buffeted aside as the car passed. One hung around near Kate's window for a minute, like it would have come inside if the glass hadn't been in the way. Jess parked at the end of the beach, in the wheel-rut turning circle under the dirt cliffs. She turned off the engine and waited a moment, watching the sandfly on the windscreen. It calmed down, and she squished it against the dashboard. She got out the car quickly, jumped out, slammed the door, minimised open door time so more bugs didn't get in. Kate was slower, couldn't be bothered with the drama. She got out slowly, but shut the door before Jess could complain.

She stood beside the car and smelled salt, felt the breeze, watched clouds overhead. It was windy. It often was at Awatangi. Sometimes, in bad weather on the beach, the rain seemed to taste of salt, but it wasn't really the rain at all, was actually sea spray being blown on the wind. Jess was combing conditioner into her hair to stop the salt drying it out. Kate gathered up towels and the thermos and a water bottle from the back seat and waited while Jess stretched – popped her back and pulled on her arms for a minute – zinged her nose, got her board, and went off down into the sea. Kate added Jess's jersey to her armload and followed more slowly. On the beach, just before she went into the sea, Jess bent and stuck her left ankle into the loop of plastic string tied to her board – always the left ankle because she surfed with her right foot forward, the less common way around. Waves had directions, and the way Jess stood caused traffic jams on crowded beaches. Sometimes she came back to shore furious because a wave had been going her way and someone cut her off. Sometimes she got furious enough that she ran off to the coast and sulked for a few days.

Kate walked down the beach. Pebbles clattered as her feet nudged them. They were skipping-stone shaped, worn to flat round disks, acres and acres of water-smoothed grey. There were a few coloured stones mixed through the rest – occasional pastel oranges and blues and sometimes a pure ice-white, like chalk, to which sand never stuck, but most of the stones were grey. Between the pebbles were patches of sand, which scrunched as Kate walked. Scunch and clatter, the sounds of Awatangi beach. And the boom of the waves. The sand was coarse underfoot, almost the texture of dry dirt. Coarse and large-grained and didn't blow around in any but the strongest wind. The finer sand, Kate supposed, had already blown inland. There were two colours on the beach, something Kate hadn't seen before. Mostly it was pale grey like you saw everywhere, but occasionally there was a patch of gritty black which seemed heavier, lingered in the cracks between pebbles, and wasn't sucked back out to sea as quickly as the rest. Where it lay, the beach looked sombre, as if it was always damp with rain. There was driftwood everywhere, bleached white in the sun, and there were a lot of gulls around, cawing and keening in packs. They ignored her, weren't used to being fed so didn't notice people. There were other birds too – oystercatchers, mainly, and some others which Jess hadn't been able to identify. Occasionally a white heron turned up, not nearly as rare as legend said.

Kate dumped her armload of gear onto the shingle, kicked off her shoes, and walked down to the water's edge. The sand was hard below the tide line, packed solid by the constant smashing of waves. Walking on it barely left a print. She let a wave surge around her feet, felt its power even though she was only ankle deep. Felt power, and felt the death-chill of deep ocean. It was too cold to swim here, even in the middle of summer. Scary, too. There was something inhuman about Awatangi beach, with its dead wood and barren

shingle and big, fast-moving waves. Even the water was the wrong colour, grey-green rather than blue. It felt creepy, as if sea wanted to drag her out and drown her and keep her for its own. Jess had never understood why Kate got nervous here. She liked the beach, was too comfortable with it to see the danger. Another wave tugged at Kate, sucking shingle from beneath her toes, almost tripping her. She told herself she was fine, but stepped back from the water all the same.

She went and sat on a log, close enough to the shore she hoped the bugs would leave her alone. Jess was already a long way out, paddling. She watched Jess push the surfboard down and duck under a wave. Not the first time. Her hair had been wet when she went under.

Kate was glad to be here. She liked being at the beach. She missed the city a little – Jess didn't, she did – but still liked the bush and the small town. She'd been coming over here as long as she'd known Jess, a kind of payback for all the time Jess spent at her house. It was comfortable here. She knew the routines and customs. Little things, like not using too much water if it hadn't rained, and keeping doors shut against sandflies and wekas. Like spraying with bug repellent before you went outside, and obsessing over getting washing dry. And firewood. Jess's family had all sorts of strange internal tensions and the firewood thing was one of the worst. You couldn't leave less wood than there'd been when you arrived. "Tramping ethics," Jess said, "Fucking stupid since we have an axe and Dad and Hans have chainsaws," but she split wood anyway, kept to the rules.

Kate sat and watched Jess surf. She'd been doing this half her life, was used to sitting on beaches waiting, but now, here, something had changed. It wasn't just waiting for a friend any more. She didn't know what it was, who she was waiting for, and the lack of a proper label was starting to bother her.

Maybe they should have done this sooner and got Jess's pangs out the way. Got her own too – since apparently she'd had some. She wasn't sure how this had all happened, whether it was momentary loneliness, or heartfelt feeling, or just curiosity on her part. She'd always thought it best to avoid talking about how Jess felt, to ignore it, avoid thinking about it herself. Hoping it would go away, hoping Jess would get over things if they were never brought out into the open and made too real. Perhaps a little worried that too much talking would mean they'd somehow talk themselves into it – which it almost seemed they had. She'd always thought Jess was kind of hot – once Jess's feelings were there, Kate had sometimes been tempted – but it had never felt right, always felt like something wasn't quite how it should be. Something missing in her. She liked Jess, could see Jess was attractive, but had never felt attracted to Jess. Until the other night, when all at once she was.

She supposed sex with friends was complicated. Not the sex itself, but how you felt about the person afterwards, and how they felt about you. Sex was just sex. You groped, you came, you were done. Sometimes you were too embarrassed to ever talk again, and sometimes you cared too much not to try. You risked friends sometimes, hoped for the best, if you were horny, or really wanted them, or whatever. This wasn't like that. Jess was different, her oldest friend, her closest friend, and not someone she wanted to lose over something like this. With Jess, the crush made it messy, and – because she felt guilty, like she was exploiting something – made her that much more willing to try harder. Their whole friendship, the undercurrents beneath it, had always been more than just hidden feelings

and unreturned desire. Jess had loved Kate forever, and Kate had always known she had. Knowing had made everything different. Kate had been less easily hurt, less troubled by life's ups and downs, because no matter what happened Jess would always be there. And Jess had been shaped by it too. Her patience, her lack of ambition, her apparent laziness, they seemed to Kate to be because Jess could see what she wanted but not how to get it. She found it astonishing that Jess could love her as much as she did for as many years as she had, and sometimes she didn't think she appreciated that enough.

And now they were sleeping together. Part of her couldn't get her head past that, and part of her was surprised how little it turned out to matter that Jess was a woman. Far less than she'd assumed it would. It was a little bit hot and a little bit kinky, but mostly far less important than that Jess was Jess, this particular person. She liked how it was turning out to be. She felt closer to Jess, now, and that was important, had always wondered if that would happen if they slept together. She liked how Jess tasted – as her clothes smelled when Kate borrowed them, but more. She liked kissing Jess and realising Jess's mouth was always a little smoky, even when Jess thought it wasn't. She'd liked putting a finger inside Jess and knowing it was about the most intimate thing they could ever do together, and liked finding out Jess felt different inside, on Kate's finger, to how Kate felt to herself. Kind of wetter and slipperier. When Jess came, she opened her eyes wide and gasped and smiled, did it every time. Never closed her eyes and got all self-involved like everyone else. She liked how the sex was different, had a slightly dirty awareness of there being too many breasts in the bed, of skin smoother than she was used to, of longer hair. Jess's body was hard and soft at once, but in a different way to a guy with a little weight. The sex was gentler, like being stroked rather than prodded, and was more attentive, as if Kate wasn't simply being fucked, but was joining in – more stopping to untangle hair and arms and ask how the other was doing. It was tidier too. No splashed semen and discarded condoms, less sweat, and what sweat there was smelled different, softer and more familiar. Kate liked it all, really liked it. And she couldn't get over what a thoughtful fuck Jess was. She supposed you didn't really know people until you did, but Jess just didn't seem the type to be considerate, she was too sarcastic and sharp the rest of the time. Except in bed, where she was tender and sweet and thoughtful.

She liked the sex, loved the sex, but something was going wrong. She felt like something was missing, that she ought be feeling more than she was. Sometimes she'd open her eyes and see this happiness on Jess's face and not know where it came from. Occasionally she would feel it too, just for a moment, and it was like she loved Jess the way she should. Then she'd come, and once she did, the feeling was gone. She would open her eyes and Jess would be looking at her and obviously thinking this love and desire and tenderness, and Kate felt nothing at all, just that she'd made a good mate happy. She'd started getting up after sex to be by herself because she couldn't stand the guilt that difference made her feel. She supposed that was how it was. You go to bed with all these big plans and dirty intentions, and forget them as soon as you get off. She'd had that happen with other people doing other things, but here it felt wrong. Being with Jess should be more than just kinky. It ought to mean more than that. It just should.

She thought she knew what the problem was. They had these habits, old comfortable habits, which were getting in the way. She couldn't make up her mind if being naked was sexy or just awkward. When Jess had first said how she felt about Kate, Kate had kept on

getting changed in front of Jess to show nothing had changed. She wasn't going to be the kind of heartless shit who ditched her mates just when she was needed. The problem was, they both knew that Jess did want Kate, that Kate wasn't imagining it, so Jess spent as much time not glancing at Kate as Kate did feeling obliged to undress in front of Jess, and now they had this habit of not noticing each other's nakedness. Getting naked wasn't sexy any more, and Kate didn't know how to start changing how her head worked. She kept having these Oh God it's Jess moments, touching breasts and faces and wrapping themselves together all naked. It was sex, but sex with her oldest friend, and that meant hot and sweaty was mixed up with odd flashes of memory. When Jess came she made these gasps that were exactly the same sound as she made at beaches, swimming, getting into cold water. When she got turned on, she would murmur oh shit like she had when they were twelve, and she'd been a bit bogan, and had seen a car she liked. Her kisses tasting like chapstick Kate had borrowed a hundred times, and every time she spoke, said anything at all, Kate would suddenly remember it was Jess talking, not some disembodied fuckbuddy. She knew Jess like a sister, and loved Jess like a sister, and she couldn't help wondering if that was the problem. She'd known Jess all her life, had grown up with Jess, and Jess felt too close for Kate to be fucking her. At least, too close for Kate to do it without feeling guilty about that too.

The guilt was poisoning things. Kate was finding she'd get horny, that she'd want to, but that someone had to be the first to reach for a zipper, and knowing she'd feel uncomfortable later meant it wasn't going to be her. There was an inertia to doing anything with Jess, and that inertia was putting her off the whole thing. It was easier just to sit there, to do nothing, to read a book. Anything but what they were doing. She was beginning to understand something. Something she had never wanted to know. Jess loved her and she didn't love Jess back. Not in the same way. Not as much. And that was never going to change. She loved Jess enough to get involved, to be here, to spare Jess hurt, but not enough to love her. She'd understood something else, too. That no matter what she told herself, no matter how she tried, this wasn't just a casual fuck between friends. Someone – Jess – was going to get hurt.

She knew she should talk to Jess, or let Jess talk to her. She knew she had to explain that this might not be going where Jess wanted it to. She was thinking about little hurts now and bigger hurts later and wondering which was really worse. She ought to stop, but she didn't want to yet. She sat and thought and hoped she'd be able to find a way out of the situation before it got too painful.

Jess came back to the beach after an hour or so, came out the water shivering cold and – inexplicably, as she always did – pulled on her jersey without drying herself. Kate wanted to point out that a minute with a towel would mean a little less water inside the jersey, but didn't bother. Jess would say the bikini was wet anyway so there was no point drying anything else. She did things like that all the time, disorganised and faintly inexplicable. Jess got her jersey on and bent and kissed Kate, hair and necklace falling forward around their faces. She tasted cold and salty from the sea, tasted a little of smoke. Kate, still a little surprised at herself, kissed back.

Chapter Five

Jess loved being out on the water at Awatangi. It was all brooding skies and sullen sea and emptiness. What some people got out of tramping – being alone with the wilderness, find a purpose – she got from sitting on the Awatangi breaks, feeling a board move gently beneath her, feeling the wind tug at her hair, and tasting salt on her lips. She got impatient with the east coast, its sandy beaches and crowds of people, sometimes just had to come over here and sit on the shingle and be by herself.

Awatangi was a deep-water open bay, wide and exposed to the weather. Three breaks usually ran inside it – the reefs and shingle bars in the south, the beach in the middle, and a bar in the north near the river. There was also a point break out in front of Awatangi Head, but the swell there, across the mouth of the bay, was often so big you had to sit around and wait for it to drop. Awatangi's best wave was a norwest swell in an easterly wind, glassy hollow waves that ran straight onto the beach and made life perfect, but norwest swells were rare. More common – and constant for days on end – were souwesters, when the north-facing bay was sheltered by the Head and the waves barely broke inside it, and the only surfing to be had was out on the point, a long paddle away. Today, it was almost souwest, not quite on. The waves were missing the southern half of the bay, angling past the Head and onto the far end of the beach, near the river. Down where the other group were. Jess could have joined them, but didn't want to socialise, and she couldn't be bothered with the long paddle out onto the point. Years ago she'd found a shingle bar close in against the point which had an adequate swell in a not-quite souwester. It didn't look like much from the beach – she'd first seen it from up on the cliffs – but some wave reflection or the shape of the sea floor pushed the southernmost part of the swell in tight against the cliffs and funnelled it over a bar. It was just good enough in bad weather to be reliable, and it was running a small break today. She rode the cliff rip out and parked herself there. It wasn't perfect. She had to wait longer for each wave – by the time they'd fought their way through the turbulence in the middle of the bay and reached her a lot were flat and frothy – but the shorter paddle made it worthwhile.

It was vain, but she'd left rashies and wetsuits back at the bach, had worn just her white bikini. She was cold. Had felt cold as soon as she got in the water, was shivering whenever she wasn't paddling. The ocean on the west coast was cold, far colder than the east. The sea was deep, and in spring was chilled by the huge spring snow-melt coming down the rivers. Jess was cold and shivering. She was getting a wedgie from her bikini bottoms whenever she came off, and being smothered by wet hair when she surfaced because it wasn't tied back. She was surfing less because she was being fussier about which wave she caught so she wasn't left standing when one petered out. And none of that mattered. Kate was on the beach and watching. She tried not to notice that the woman sitting down the far end of the beach was probably the one she'd seen outside the pub the day before. She wasn't sure, hadn't seen a face as they passed, but there couldn't be that many people hanging around Awatangi with surfboards.

She was having to wait a long time between waves. She lay on the board while she waited, kept herself low and out the wind. As she lay, she stared down into the water, but couldn't see much. In choppy swells, on lower tides, with the wind coming up, the waves

were thick with foam and silt churned up from the bottom. Water like this made her nervous. You couldn't see what underneath you, looking up. She lay and looked at whatever might be staring back and caught just enough waves to make it worthwhile. She went back to the beach earlier than she would if she'd been on her own, didn't want to leave Kate waiting and felt a little guilty about noticing who anyone else might be. She walked out the sea with her board under her arm and pulled on her jersey. Kate held out a water bottle – she knew the routine after years of waiting on beaches – but this time was different. Before handing it over she gave Jess a long dirty kiss.

Jess kissed back, stayed there until Kate pushed her away and said, "You're dripping."

Jess sipped, sluiced out her eyes, rinsed the rest of the bottle through her hair, washing out – or at least diluting – the salt.

"Cocoa?" Kate asked, sloshed the thermos.

"Nah. I'll just..." Jess was suddenly very cold. She shivered, a single spasm then several. Her teeth clenched. Awatangi without a wetsuit was never smart, especially this early in the year. She needed to change properly, get her hair dry, and put on a hat. Wet hair meant she was losing heat like she wasn't wearing the jersey at all.

"You sure?"

"I'd better change. I'm fucking cold. I'll have it up at the bach."

She got undressed beside the car, after a glance to make sure the other surfers were still down the far end of the beach. Kate watched, slightly horrified. She never understood that if you made a fuss doing anything people would want to see what you were up to, but if you just got on with it they barely noticed. Card tricks, or getting cork out of wine in a restaurant, or changing on a beach, furtive meant people looked, and just taking off your top like you didn't care meant no-one else did either. This time, though, halfway through changing, tangled in the jersey with her arms over her head, Jess realised someone was noticing – Kate was staring, quite entranced, as if Jess's carelessness was turning her on. Jess quite liked that, would have done something about it if she hadn't been so cold. She got the jersey on and the worst of the water out her hair, and got into the car with a towel wrapped around her legs to keep the seat dry. She tried to turn the engine on, to get the heater running, but her hands were too numb to work the keys. She had to get Kate to lean over and turn the ignition while she stood on the accelerator pedal. She combed more conditioner into her hair – her hands shaking – and scrubbed the zinc off her nose, and while she did, Kate nagged her to drink the cocoa.

"I'm fine," Jess kept saying, and Kate ignored her, got quite stern, waving the thermos and saying, "Drink."

It was sweet Kate bothered. It was probably smart Kate bothered – Jess was colder than she'd realised, had to sit for a several minutes before her hands warmed up enough to drive. Back at the bach, she had a shower, but didn't really get warm. The water was still only tepid, hadn't had time to heat up again. She put on a jersey and jeans and thick work socks and sat beside the fire, and after twenty minutes got warm enough to stop thinking about the cold. She got up and filled the jug, and stood beside the bench waiting for it to boil, looking out the window at the mountains. There was always snow on them, the same snow as had washed down the river and chilled the sea. She'd lived her whole life within sight of those mountains, here with them looming over the bach, in Christchurch as a smudge on the horizon. It would be strange to be away from them. She never had.

“When I was a kid,” Jess said, “I’d sometimes want to walk up the river, up the path to the whitebaiter’s stands, you know, but just keep going. Walk up into the hills and see what was there.”

“We should.”

“Nah, I did. There’s a gorge a k or two up, you can’t get through it and can’t get around without climbing cliffs and a fuck of a bush bash. And the river’s full of rocks, so you can’t swim. I had a look on a map. There’s not really much there anyway.”

“Oh,” Kate said, “Okay.”

Jess had the feeling Kate was thinking something she didn’t want to say. She was a bit distracted, a bit distant.

“What’s up?” Jess said. “Should we talk?”

Kate shrugged.

“After lunch?”

“Sometime.”

“We don’t need to.”

“You want to.”

Jess looked at her. “I thought you did too.”

“I suppose.”

“Or not, if you’d rather not.”

Jess waited, and Kate didn’t disagree. “Lunch?” she said.

It seemed to take a minute to Kate to notice the question. “Ah, sure,” then slightly suspiciously, “What?”

Jess shrugged.

“Soup?” Kate said.

“Don’t think we brought any. I can look.”

“Nah, don’t worry.”

“Sandwich?”

“I suppose. Bit boring.”

Jess had a feeling of unspoken undercurrents. They weren’t precisely fighting, but Kate was making too much of a fuss when she could just sort out something for herself. “Well, what do you want?” Jess said, not quite sure why she was bothering.

“A sandwich is fine,” Kate said, but seemed resentful.

Jess shrugged, had lost interest, was already getting out bread and plates. Kate, giving way to the inevitable, shrugged and said, “Yeah, okay, why not.”

*

They didn’t talk, just went back to bed and stayed there most of the day. Jess slept for a few hours to catch up from the night before, and Kate read. Jess wondered if it mattered that they hadn’t talked, hadn’t even begun the serious talk, but it didn’t seem urgent. They had four more days, and everything was starting to seem half-settled already. About three, Jess went and surfed again, on her own and in a wetsuit this time. Kate stayed in the bach and read, said she was feeling tired. Jess felt guilty leaving her alone, but she didn’t have much else to do. Normally, on a dirty weekend with someone new, she’d expect to be talking a lot, sharing their lives, but with Kate, there wasn’t much new to say. They already

knew everything about each other. When she got back, Kate was still on the bed.

“You okay?” Jess asked.

“Yeah.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

“You sure?”

Kate snapped her book shut. “I said yes.”

“Sorry,” Jess said, and went and sat on the porch.

At dusk, as it got dark, Jess walked down to the beach again just to see what was happening. She didn’t take a board, had no plans to surf, just wanted to go and look and guess to herself what the sea would do tomorrow. She sat for a while, smoking and watching the evening, thinking about nothing in particular.

Sea haze drifted in and settled in the river valley, thick and slow and smoky, smudging the heavy dusk colours to oily blues and greens. The sun set through the haze, the last sunbeams intensely rich and gold. The mountains down the coast became smears of charcoal and grey. It was beautiful and breathtaking and almost not worth noticing because it happened here every day.

Jess watched it, finished her cigarette, crushed it out on a rock and tucked the end back into the packet. She thought about going back, but lit another instead because the packet was already out. It became dark, the ocean black. She listened to the hiss and roar of unseen breakers. The sky clouded over, hid the moon. She decided she’d better move. She crushed the cigarette end into a sooty wad and carried it back up the track, dropped it on the highway as she crossed. She walked slowly, without any real concern about the dark, had been walking around Awatangi all her life and knew the night-time sounds well, rustling trees and coughing possums and whispering owls. In a few minutes she saw lantern light from inside the bach.

When she opened the door, Kate said, “You okay? I wondered where you’d got to.”

“Just sitting. Sorry, I just...” Jess shrugged.

“I was starting to worry...”

“Sorry. I’d have taken my phone but it wouldn’t have helped.”

Kate still seemed concerned, perhaps a little angry.

“The car keys are right there.” Jess pointed to the table. “You could have come and found me.”

“I wouldn’t have seen you in the dark.”

“I’d have seen you. I’d have waved or something.”

“Yeah okay,” Kate said, and picked up her book again. She seemed to be trying to show that everything was fine. Then she put her book down. “It’s creepy down there.”

Jess was surprised. “No it isn’t.”

“It is a bit.”

“Not really. I mean, it’s dark, but not creepy.”

Kate didn’t look convinced. “What were you doing down there for so long?”

“Just thinking. And looking at the weather.”

“Thinking about what?”

Jess got embarrassed, didn’t want to explain, went to find a drink instead. “You want wine?”

Kate held up a mug.

“You want a refill?”

Kate sloshed it.

“Smartass.”

“Where’s the bottle?”

“Your bucket fridge thing.”

“What?”

“Under the bench.”

“Oh.” Jess looked in the cupboard, found Kate had propped the bottle in the bowl of water, with the milk. She took it out.

“So. Thinking about what?”

Jess shook her head, but Kate just waited, which meant she wasn’t going to give it up. Her waiting was different to her sitting, was more attentive. She’d keep nagging until Jess answered or snapped at her to shut the fuck up, which would mean a fight.

“I just like to feel how big the ocean is,” Jess said. “And how little we are.”

She thought it sounded strange, which was why she hadn’t wanted to explain, but Kate seemed to think it over. After a moment Kate asked, “We?”

“I don’t know.”

“Jessie, tell me. I want to know.”

Jess shrugged, didn’t want to explain but also did. “Everything here, mountains and trees and you and me. The ocean will always win, everything ends up getting washed into it and mixed up together, so nothing really matters much.”

Kate still seemed to be sitting waiting, as if Jess hadn’t quite explained clearly enough.

“When you’re away from the coast,” Jess said, “You kind of forget and think everything around you is real, but it’s not. Over here it’s so empty and so close to the edge that you realise that we’re just people standing on the last rock in the world, looking out at the biggest ocean on the planet. And somehow all the grey water and grey shingle and driftwood gets down inside your soul and... I don’t know. Something.”

Kate seemed to be thinking about that. Jess found a mug and poured wine, put the bottle back under the sink, even though it probably didn’t make much difference for chilling wine.

“Why can’t Piha be the soul of the country?” Kate asked, “Sandy and sunny and blue and everything?” Kate had been born in Auckland, had lived there until she was four. In some really important ways, Jess thought it showed. Kate went on about pohutakawa trees flowering at Christmas, which Jess had never seen happen in her whole life, and Kate never believed it would snow, even though she’d been living in Christchurch when the big snowstorm happened.

“Maybe it can,” Jess said, “If you’re from up there. I’m not, so even in the middle of summer I see grey water and cloud and black rocks.”

“Jess, that’s weird.”

“No it’s not. I just have shingle in my soul and you have sand, so you don’t understand.”

Kate stared at her.

“What?”

“It sounds like there’s something more.”

Jess was surprised. “Just what I said.”

“Nothing about us?”

Kate was still waiting.

"I don't know," Jess snapped, starting to get annoyed. "Stop looking at me like that."

"I'm not."

Kate shrugged, but seemed reluctant to let it go.

"I was just thinking," Jess said, "That's all. It doesn't mean anything. And you asked." She took a slow breath, decided to make peace. "What do you want to do about dinner?"

"I don't mind. You want me to do something?"

"If you like, though I can. I don't mind."

Kate didn't move, so Jess assumed it was her. She started looking in the food box.

"So what was the weather doing?" Kate said.

"Ah, turning northwest I think. It'll rain soon."

"Didn't you say that this morning?"

"Might have," Jess said, "But this time I'm right."

Jess cooked, and in between times watched Kate, knowing it was safe to stare. Once Kate started reading she wouldn't look up until someone spoke or she finished the book.

*

Jess lay awake in the early hours of the morning wondering how annoyed Kate would be if she woke her up for sex. The wondering was something to do instead of watching the ceiling for hours. She was brooding, worrying about how Kate really felt about everything, doubting what was happening. And getting herself horny from thinking about sex too much. She turned over noisily a couple of times, hoping to wake Kate, but her breathing didn't change. She coughed and got no reaction. She gave up, reached over, trying to remember how Kate's pyjamas worked.

"Hey," Kate said suddenly. "What's up?"

Jess jumped. "Shit, you're not asleep?"

"Was thinking."

"What about?"

"Nothing much."

Jess waited, hoping they'd been awake thinking about the same kinds of things.

"Work," Kate said, "Actually."

"Oh."

"What?"

"Nah, nothing."

Kate didn't seem to go back to sleep, but didn't say anything either.

"You smell different when you're asleep," Jess said, "I thought I could tell but maybe I can't."

"Different how?"

"Just different."

"So that's why you're being a pervert."

"Pervert?"

"Yep," Kate sounded sleepy, indolent.

Jess could feel Kate's nearness – scent and breath and the tightness of shared sheets creating an awareness almost as intense as vision.

“I don’t suppose...” Jess said softly, moving her hand.
“Just kiss me,” Kate said, “I’m sore. You wore me out.”
Jess did. Tenderly, lovingly, feeling herself relax and get sleepy too.

Chapter Six: Kate

Kate woke up alone the second morning at Awatangi. She wasn’t that surprised, assumed Jess had given in to temptation and gone down to the beach. She called out and got no answer, got up and checked, made sure the car was gone, then went back to bed. There wasn’t a note or anything – Jess wouldn’t think to leave one for something as obvious as going for a surf – but the coffee pot was still warm, so she hadn’t been gone long. She would be a while. Without Kate on the beach to remind her to stop she’d keep on doing just-one-mores for hours. Kate lay on the bed and read. After a while she made more coffee and some toast, and opened a tin of soup for Jess for when she got back. She wondered if Jess being at the beach meant something. They’d been snapping at each other a little the day before. Jess might have been upset, thinking the trip wasn’t going as she wanted it to, and gone surfing to cheer herself up. Or she might just have felt like a surf.

After an hour Kate heard the car. Jess slammed doors and shouted hello and spent a while outside, running water. Probably hosing out her wetsuit. Kate got up and made more toast and heated the soup. Was standing beside the stove when Jess flung the door open and crashed inside, all dripping hair and wet footprints, hugged Kate and kissed her then looked at the bench and said, “Thank fuck, food.”

The coffee had got bitter and the soup was luke-warm, but Jess drank both anyway, didn’t seem to notice. She ate quickly, stuffing herself, three bites to get rid of a half-slice of toast, dunking and slurping the soup without a spoon.

“Hungry?” Kate said, watching. “Pig.”

“No breakfast. Didn’t want to wake you up.”

“Sure,” Kate said, “In case I wanted to do something else.”

“Yeah,” Jess said, “That too.”

Kate looked out the window at sunshine, thought of Jess’s weather predictions. “Going to rain, is it?” she said.

“Will eventually,” Jess said, and went to have a shower.

Kate sat in the lounge and read. Jess wandered around, rubbing her hair with a towel. Sighing now and then, clearing her throat, making a fuss of combing her hair, moaning at every knot. Kate ignored her. Jess dumped the towel behind the bedroom door and went outside, seemed to be filling the lamps with kerosene from the shed. Kate could hear sloshing, smell a kind of petrol-station smell. She assumed Jess should be out on the grass, that it wasn’t safe to be so close to the house, but that Jess would be on the porch anyway. She kept reading. Jess came back inside and kind of hovered. Kate could feel her eyes.

“Stop it,” she said.

“What?” Jess said. “I’m not...”

“Stop fidgeting,” Kate said. “Stop staring at me.”

Jess frowned, and started poking around on the bookshelves. “What do you want to do today?” she said.

“Read,” Kate said. She had the feeling Jess stuck out her tongue or something. She glanced up, and Jess’s face was carefully innocent, which pretty much meant Jess had.

“You really have nothing to do?” Kate said.

Jess shrugged. “Could cut some wood...”

“Do that then.”

“Or fuck...”

“Reading.”

Jess pulled a face and dropped into one of the armchairs. Hard enough it rocked. She started spinning slowly, so the chair made a steady creak.

Kate ignored it.

“Fuck it,” Jess stood up, “I’m going to cut some wood.”

“kay.”

“Don’t want to get too far behind what we’re using.”

“Yep.”

“I...”

“Yeah.”

Jess looked at Kate, a kind of irritated, affectionate look, then picked up a cap from a hook near the door. It looked like one of her uncle’s fishing hats, all greasy and dank and stained with something horrible. She tried it on. It was something she would never wear anywhere but Awatangi, and something that, at Awatangi, she wouldn’t even notice was disgusting. She ponytailed her hair and put the cap back on with her hair rolled up inside it.

“Why?” Kate asked.

Jess looked up, didn’t seem to have realised Kate was watching. “Why what?”

“Why your hair?”

“Splinters.”

“Right.”

“And dust.”

“So cutting wood?”

“Yep. It’s that time, I hate to say. You can keep me company if you want. You know, watch me do the thing.”

Kate looked at her. “Do you want me to?”

“Do you want to?”

Kate stood up, went out onto the porch. It didn’t make much difference to her where she sat. Jess had left an ashtray on the arm of the couch. She put it on the floor, sat down, realised she could still smell it, and pushed it further away with her foot. It was a warm day, actually quite nice outside. There were some sandflies around. She could see a couple hovering outside, on the insect screens, but was safe where she was. The screens were Jess’s grandfather’s idea. He said they made the bach look funny, but baches were meant to look funny, and he didn’t get bitten, so he didn’t care what people thought. He’d said that to anyone who’d listen, said he’d never understood why no else screened their porches, said

Kiwis liked to suffer, sandflies and tough old tramping boots and wet woollen jackets and everything. He was proud of his little innovations, explained them to anyone who'd listen, and tinkered in sheds sometimes trying to come up with more.

Jess had disappeared, seemed to have gone into the bedroom.

"Where are you?" Kate called.

"Deciding what to wear."

"To cut wood?"

"That I don't mind getting full of splinters and sweat."

"Could do some washing."

"Could do."

"How are we doing for towels?"

"Yeah."

"Are you listening?"

"Yeah."

"Have you decided yet?"

"Pretty much."

Jess came back out in jeans and a singlet. A black singlet. Kate looked at her and smirked.

"What?"

"You lost your gumboots or something?"

Jess looked blank.

"You look like a farmer, mate."

Jess glanced down at herself. "The singlet? Yeah, suppose." She opened the screen door, went outside, banged it closed. "Hey Kate..."

"Yeah?"

"Fuck you. And I mean that with all the love I have."

Kate grinned. Jess went around the side of the bach to the shed. It was half a woodshed, half a storage shed. The woodshed side was full of kindling, was always full of kindling, since everyone spent half their time here cutting more. The storage side held axes and shovels and other tools, and another of Jess's grandfather's inventions, a home-made, hand-powered washing machine. And a lot of spider webs.

Jess came back with an axe and leather gloves and a wedge thing for splitting logs. There was a particular patch of ground where you cut wood, halfway between the shed and the bach, thick with wood chips and bark, almost like a school playground. There were slices of logs, cut with chainsaws, stacked along the side wall of the bach, under the eaves, left there to dry. Jess hauled some logs to the wood-chipped patch of ground and started hacking them into segments. Kate half-watched while she read, pretending not to.

Jess was pretty good at wood-cutting, usually hit the log exactly right so it split, didn't need to bang a second time. She didn't seem to be checking sizes, must have done this enough she could tell by eye what was small enough to fit in the fireplace. Each time she lifted the axe her arms flexed, looked quite sexy, and each time the axe came down she paused for a second while she shook it loose from the wood, and looked almost posed, like a pioneer or something.

"You're cute being all domestic," Kate called.

Jess stopped and looked at her. "Thanks, I think." She pulled up her singlet and wiped

her face.

“Jesus, Jess,” Kate said.

“What?”

“Wear a fucking bra if you’re going to do that.”

“Cut wood?”

“Use your shirt to wipe your face.”

“Sweat,” Jess said. “Dickhead,” and went back to chopping.

Kate read and tuned out the clunk of the axe. She glanced over occasionally, sometimes caught Jess’s eye, which seemed to please Jess when it happened. Jess was making a pile of bits of log, quite a big pile. Once it was as high as her knee she started picking up arm-loads, carrying some to the shed and some inside. Then she smashed up some old planks for kindling.

“Okay,” she said, “I’m done.”

“Good?”

“Yeah.” Jess came back onto the porch and flopped down next to Kate on the couch.

“Should you put the axe away?” Putting tools away was one of Jess’s father’s things. It was still out there, wedged into a log.

“A-ha.” Jess took Kate’s water-bottle and drank until it was empty. She was covered in wood-chips and dust and dirt.

“You stink,” Kate said.

“Thanks.”

“You’re all sweaty.”

Jess shrugged, seemed tired. Stuck out her tongue though.

“And dirty.”

“I know.”

“Have a shower.”

“In a minute.”

“Go sit somewhere else.”

Jess took off her shoes, threw them down the other end of the porch, towards the toilet. Threw socks after them and put the hat on a chair. Then leaned back on the couch and didn’t move. Kate suspected it was a wind up, but wasn’t sure. And wasn’t sure why it suddenly felt like this was becoming a problem.

“Do the axe.”

“I’ll get it later. Like tomorrow. Or the next day.”

“Once it’s rained?”

“Yep, pretty much.”

Jess yawned.

“Hey Jess, you know how you smell and everything?”

“In a minute.”

“Go.”

“Shit, in a sec.”

Kate read for a few minutes longer, then cleared her throat. Jess looked annoyed, but got up. Water ran inside, then stopped. Jess came back out, her clothes damp and sticking to her skin, like she hadn’t bothered drying herself.

Kate looked at her. “Couldn’t find a towel?”

“They’re all wet. I’ll hang them up later.”

Kate thought about showers and toilets and the lack of rain. “We’re okay for water?”

“Yeah, should be.” Jess combed her hair out with her fingers. “I’ll go easy on the showers.”

“It’s looking good,” Kate said, “Your hair. It’s shinier.”

“You think?” Jess seemed pleased. She always did when Kate said something nice, so Kate decided to try and remember to more often.

“Must be the rain water,” Jess said. “No chlorine or something.”

“There’s no chlorine in Christchurch water.”

“Oh yeah. The moss, then.”

“Sure it is,” Kate said. Jess was probably stealing her product, usually did when she had the chance. She went through so much she used supermarket all-in-ones. Kate didn’t really mind. “I might do the dishes,” she said.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Come and dry.”

“I just sat down.”

“When you’re ready.”

Kate went and washed the dishes. After a while, shouted, “Jess.”

“Coming.”

Jess didn’t appear. Kate let the sink drain and started drying the dishes in the rack. Jess turned up just as she was finished, said, “Oh shit, sorry.”

“Don’t worry. Could you sort out the towels though?”

“Yeah, sure, I’ll just...” Jess went through into the bedroom.

After a while Kate shouted, “Towels,”

“Yeah, I’m doing it.”

Kate didn’t want to keep asking, but felt like nothing would get done if she didn’t. Jess had to be the one to deal with the washing because Kate didn’t know how to work the machine. It was a 44-gallon drum on a rotating frame with a handle on the side and a wringer bolted to the top. You put in clothes, water, and soap, turned the handle for a while, then wrung everything out and hung it on the line. Kate wasn’t sure how much washing and rinsing was needed, and the wringing looked like something that could crush fingers if you did it wrong.

“Towels,” Kate shouted, when she finished the dishes. She looked into the bedroom. Jess was lying on the bed, seemed to be staring at the ceiling.

“Maybe we can just dry some on the line,” Jess said.

Kate picked one up and sniffed it. Already musty, after just a day. “We should have hung them up straight away.”

“Probably should. It’ll be okay.”

“They smell.”

“Hold your breath while you dry yourself.”

“Jesus, Jess...”

Jess stood up. Looking annoyed, but also slightly ashamed. She picked up an armload of towels and went out to the shed, went backwards and forwards a few times getting hoses sorted out and water flowing. Kate wondered if she should go and help – watch, really – and decided she probably should. She stood in the shed’s doorway. Jess was sloshing the

drum backwards and forwards, making the whole machine gurgle and rattle but pretty much doing to the towels what a real washing machine would do. She seemed bored, was kind of swinging her arm around but not really paying attention. She had a smudge of grease on her wrist. Kate pointed, and Jess said, “Oh,” and wiped it on her shirt.

“Did your family ever think hand-washing might be easier?” Kate asked. “You know, on a rock in the river?”

“Nah. Grandad was a gentleman. Wouldn’t occur to him to do the washing himself, but he’d sure as fuck make it easy for grandma.”

“Right.” Kate watched her. “This is easy?”

“Easier than a rock in the river. Less far to carry everything.”

Jess let the water out – there was a drain hose that went outside somewhere. It was probably illegal to dump laundry water into the bush – like it was probably illegal to dig rubbish pits out the back – but her family had been doing things like this for so long no-one thought about it. She filled the drum again from the hose – had been standing on a kink in it to stop the water – and started sloshing the drum again.

“Rinse cycle,” she said.

“I know.” Kate watched her and thought and remembered something she’d been meaning to say. “Hey, that first time at your place.”

Jess looked up.

“You would have stopped whenever I wanted you to.”

Jess leaned on the washing drum, looked at Kate. “Of course.”

“Thank you.”

“Okay...”

“That’s all. You’re sweet and patient and kind and I don’t think I ever said that. So thank you.”

“Yeah,” Jess said, after a moment. “No worries.”

Kate leaned over the washing machine, grease and dust and all, and kissed her. Just for a minute, then moved back. “Well,” she said, “On with it.”

Jess grinned. She started wringing towels, did them one at a time and passed them to Kate to hang on the line. Kate felt a little guilty making Jess do all the work, but not so guilty she said anything. When they finished, Jess went and coiled up the hoses and turned off the taps. She stopped on the porch, on the way back inside, and looked around. The sun was warm and the wind was almost still. “It’s actually a really nice day,” she said.

“Apparently it happens sometimes over here.”

“Apparently it does. I might sunbathe a bit.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Not raining,” Jess said. “The bugs are outside the screen. The neighbours aren’t here.”

“You’ll get bitten.”

“And the bugs are outside the screen.”

“Most of them.”

“I’ll take the risk.”

“You don’t tan.”

“I do a little. And I like the sun on my skin. Rub sunblock on me.”

“Do it yourself. I’m not going to encourage you.”

Jess changed into a bikini and lay down out on the porch, across the open doorway. Self-

sunblocked, Kate assumed. For a moment she was tempted to creep over and open the screen door and let the bugs in just because sunbathing on the coast was such a horrible idea, but she didn't. She stayed where she was, inside, on the couch, watching. Jess was only partly visible through the doorway, from her hip to her shoulder and occasionally a swinging foot. She was lying on her front, seemed to be holding her hair in a loose ponytail at the back of her head. It stirred occasionally in the breeze. She was reading and – for once – was absorbed in something else, wasn't staring at Kate. Kate put down her book, felt like it was safe to look since Jess wouldn't know.

She looked at Jess's hair and skin, at the curve of her back and tight muscle around her shoulders, at the old surfing scar on her arm. She should do this more often, Kate thought. Look at Jess the way Jess looked at her. Jess had this habit of glancing over every so often, like she was keeping track of where Kate had got to. She had been doing it for years. She seemed to think about Kate all the time, made her plans around what Kate was doing, came home from shops or libraries with things she thought Kate might like, noticed new moles on Kate before Kate did herself. Noticed, and usually didn't mention them in case she seemed creepy, and then gave herself away accidentally by saying, when Kate noticed, that the mole had been there for ages and Kate shouldn't worry – then realising what she'd done and getting all embarrassed. Kate teased her, told her it made the creepy thing worse, but actually thought it was kind of sweet.

Jess rubbed her arm. The big scar on her arm. It was a habit she had, something Kate didn't think she knew she did. Perhaps unconsciously trying to pick the long-gone scab, or insecure about the injury. Jess got hit every so often by the surfboard's fin and had ended up with several obvious scars. Two big ones on her right leg, another on her tummy, a smaller one in the middle of her back, and the long, ragged cut on her arm she was rubbing now. Her arm was the worst, all tangled and thick and knotty. Worse than the rest, and completely her fault. She was scared of needles, had no tattoos, wasn't pierced anywhere except her ears – had only had those done because Kate made her promise when they were eleven. When she'd cut her arm she'd got all scared and macho and hadn't had it stitched, so it healed badly. Kate had been on the beach, had been terrified when Jess came out the water oozing blood. Terrified, even though Jess had been quite calm. Jess had just pressed a towel against the gash and sat there swearing until it stopped bleeding, and refused to see a doctor. Kate was so used to seeing the scars she didn't really notice any more. Jess didn't try and hide them under clothes, just left her arms and legs bare like everyone else, but Kate thought she was aware of them sometimes. Of how people reacted. Enough that the rubbing might mean something and not just be an itch. She'd once not got laid because of the scars, had taken a girl home and had her get all disgusted and upset once clothes were off and bodies on display. Jess had never admitted that upset her, but Kate thought it had, and that she hadn't really understood what had been wrong. To her, the scars were something to be proud of, a kind of badge of honour of being a surfer, and she didn't understand why other people didn't feel the same way.

Jess stretched and sat up, glanced inside, and caught Kate watching. "What?" she said.

Kate shook her head, looked back to her book. From the corner of her eye she saw Jess lie back down with a very self-satisfied smile.

"Don't look so bloody smug," Kate called.

"Don't psychoanalyse me."

“I...”

“I can tell from your face.”

“Tell what?”

“When you’re getting all psych student.”

“I wasn’t...”

“No-one likes it when you do that.”

“They...”

“They don’t. They’re just being polite.”

Kate didn’t know what to say.

“And I’m out here whenever you want me.”

Kate looked back down, noisily turned a page of her book.

Jess took off her bikini top and threw it inside. Kate wasn’t sure if that was meant to get her attention, or prove something, or was just Jess being Jess. When Kate went to the gym she changed under her clothes or left her underwear on. She wasn’t particularly shy, just tried to cover up. And Jess lay around with her tits out, on the porch, where anyone could come past and see her. Kate couldn’t imagine where she got that confidence from. Jess had been the first person Kate knew to sunbathe topless, only at home and on her front, but the first all the same. She was unselfconsciousness like that. Too many years being under-dressed on beaches, Kate supposed, and of losing parts of bikinis when she fell off surfboards. Or perhaps just thinking that people looking at her boobs weren’t seeing scars. One or the other or neither, Kate wasn’t sure. She sometimes wished she could be a little more like Jess. Jess was free and mostly happy and always herself, and Kate often felt like she was none of those things. Even when Jess was insecure – about the scars – she wasn’t very insecure at all. Most of the time they didn’t matter. And Jess had her surfing. Kate wanted to care that much about something, wanted to be prepared to organise her life around it like Jess did around tides and storms and weather, abandoning friends and parties and jobs because they didn’t fit and never even seeming to mind, but she never had. Jess had her contentment and her surfing. She had Kate, which Kate supposed was a thing as well, had her looks and her hair and had that people always seemed to like her. After a decade, now she was thinking about it, Kate realised the blonde and sporty thing grated a little. She thought a little more and realised she envied Jess. It wasn’t right. It was the last thing she wanted – the last thing Jess would probably want too, even though it was a kind of compliment – but it was there. She should try and remember that Jess was always penniless and had no real career and was likely to end up broken-hearted because of Kate. Should remember orthodontists and Jess’s really nasty teenage zits and how upset she used to get because her boobs were too small. She should, but sometimes it was hard. Jess’s life seemed pretty good. Except the pining after Kate – which Kate couldn’t help, and which was halfway settled now – Kate envied her a lot. And sometimes that was very annoying.

Kate heard the scratch of a lighter and smelt smoke. It worried her that Jess had started again. Only a few a day, not nearly as many as she used to, but Jess didn’t have much self-discipline about things like that. She might get back into a habit. Kate knew she should leave it alone, that saying anything would make it more likely, but wanted to anyway. Even though, last time Jess had been stopping, she’d cut down to only one a day, then refused to give that last one up for months. Had abandoned the effort and restarted four times because she thought Kate had been nagging her too much. She’d been a complete bitch to be around

too, constantly edgy and snappy and often almost cruel. Crueller than she realised, and seeming worse because Kate missed her usual niceness. Jess quitting wasn't fun to be around, and she was only having a few a day, so it was probably best not to say anything. Better she kept smoking while they went through everything else right now.

One of Jess's legs started moving slightly, in a kind of pattern. Kate watched, decided she was probably listening to music, half-heartedly keeping time. One of her hands was on her tummy, just resting there, but close enough to her bikini bottoms it started Kate thinking. It was cool inside the house, looked warm out in the sun. Jess's skin was a little shiny, like she was sweating. That started Kate thinking too. She sat there a long time, just watching.

Jess finished the cigarette, sat up and threw the end out onto the gravel. Her boobs swayed a little as she moved and her hair fell down around her face.

Kate suddenly wanted her. Instantly, and startlingly intense. Like this flood of wet and horny had been poured into her. She didn't know why it had happened so quickly, and didn't know what to do – or even if she wanted to do anything. Feeling this intensely scared her. Her stomach tightened up and made her feel a little queasy. One of her knees was trembling a little, like she might have to be careful how she walked. Her mouth felt dry.

Jess turned over again and scratched her back, then rubbed her arm again.

Kate looked at Jess's arm. Then stood up and went outside. She wasn't sure why the rubbing was the thing that made her move, but it was. The deck was warm underfoot. The air was almost still, had only the slightest breeze, teasing, like a lover's breath on arms and face. Her knees worked, but she felt a little dizzy and her tummy was still sore. She looked around, checked none of the neighbours had arrived. Checking belatedly, she thought, because her face must give away everything she was feeling.

Jess was lying on her front, headphones on and face on folded arms, oblivious to Kate having moved. Kate looked down at her. At her bare back, at tiny golden hairs catching the light, at the way her bikini stretched, off-centre, over her ass. Her hair fluttered in the wind, and her back moved up and down as she breathed. Kate looked at the scar on her back, at slim arms, at long lean legs, and wanted to touch so badly she couldn't wait.

She knelt down, sat across Jess's hips. Jess jumped – jumped and said, "Shit," probably far louder than she'd intended. She pulled off her headphones and looked back over her shoulder, "You gave me a fright."

"Yeah." Kate reached out and touched Jess's shoulder, slid her fingers down her arm, touched her scar. Felt it smooth and thick under her hand.

"What're you doing?" Jess said.

"Feeling your scars."

"Why?"

"Just wanted to."

Jess blinked and looked at her. "Okay."

Kate bent over and kissed her. Touched the scar in the middle of her back. Reached behind herself and touched Jess's legs.

"Turn over," Kate said.

Jess nodded. "Lift up."

Kate moved to let Jess turn around, then kissed the scar on her tummy. Then her arm. "I'd never not want you because of these," she whispered.

“Oh,” Jess said. “Good. Okay.”

Kate reached down, put her hand between her legs, under her skirt, and just pushed, made contact. She needed that pressure, felt like she was throbbing all over, like all the distant parts of her were rushing in from hands and feet and pooling in her tummy. Jess watched her, watched quietly, didn't say anything at all.

“I want you,” Kate said.

“Yeah, I guessed.”

“No, I mean, I want you. Like I'll stop breathing...”

“I know.”

“Like I might die.”

“I know.”

“Like if I don't have you right now...”

Jess looked up at her and smiled and said, very softly, “Kate, I know.”

Kate felt better. Still odd, not herself, but better. Jess sat up and kissed her. Smooth with sweat, warm from the sun. Their hair moved in the wind, tickling Kate's skin. Jess kissed hungrily, like she always did, greedy and wanting, pulling at Kate's clothes like Kate would be pulling at hers if she had any on. Kate felt cool air on her chest, felt breasts nudge her own, a kind of swaying slither. She pressed herself against Jess, pressed their boobs together, as close as she could, all squishy and soft, like climbing inside each other. She tasted smoke. She felt Jess's hands, pressed into them, and wherever Jess touched her, she felt the touch linger a moment, tingling, after Jess's hands had gone. She was over-alert, felt too much. There was a nail in the deck under her knee, sharp-edged and hard, a fly buzzing around somewhere outside the screens. Jess's mouth, on her neck, tickled so much it almost burned, and Jess's leg, pushing slowly between hers, felt so sinuously explosive she was a little surprised she hadn't fainted. It felt almost like she was coming, only the slightest little less, and it didn't stop, just kept on going.

She realised she was trembling. Realised that, other than trembling, she was still, had been just sitting there. She needed to move as well. She stroked Jess's face, and tried to get her to look up. Jess wouldn't, so Kate pulled at her chin until she did, and started kissing her. Normally Kate hated the tonsil-poking thing – they both did, and she knew they both did – but she just wanted to be inside Jess, wanted to taste and feel her every way she could. She got her hand inside the bikini, her fingers inside Jess, but wanted her tongue inside her too, wanted to hold her everywhere she could, and make her feel what she was feeling. She sat on Jess's knee, hugging her, being held, inside her, tingling and sobbing. Like something fiery and extraordinary was flowing out of her and into the world.

She came. She must have. She couldn't remember exactly, but after a while seemed to have started thinking clearly again. Jess was still moaning and gasping and grinding wet and hot against her hand. Kate looked around, decided she'd had enough of the public thing, even if no-one else was there. She started trying to pull Jess inside. It took a while, Jess didn't seem to understand at first what she was trying to do. They slid, pushed the door closed, didn't get up off the floor, just rolled around all sexy and dirty and wild. Kate got scraped knees and elbows and sneezed a couple of times from the dust, so Jess pulled the throw off the couch and they lay on that. Kate's hand hadn't ever been out of Jess's bikini, she was getting pins and needles from it squeezing against her wrist, but then Jess did something and she forgot and didn't remember again. They finished getting undressed,

although Kate didn't quite remember when, and the feeling of tingly fieriness flowing out of stopped, although she didn't remember when that was either. Then it was just having sex – really good sex, but not like it had been – and her tummy had stopped aching, and she wasn't sure how long it had all taken. Jess didn't seem to want to stop, and Kate didn't want to make her. They kept going as long as they could, then just kind of petered out, exhausted. Slowed down and stopped moving and just lay on the floor, side by side, without really deciding to.

Kate could feel dirt stuck to her back with her sweat. Could feel her skin drying, tingling, like she'd been licked raw all over. She found what seemed to be a hickey on her neck, and had no idea how it had got there.

"Holy shit," she said.

"Yeah," Jess gasped, still breathing heavily.

"I've never... Not like that. Not in my whole life."

Jess flopped her arm sideways and touched Kate's cheek. "Good."

Kate looked at her. "And you?"

Jess seemed surprised. "Of course not."

"I mean, fuck. Holy fuck. Is this why people do this?"

"Have sex?"

"Have sex with other girls."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Fuck."

Jess rolled over, got up onto her knees. "I need water."

"Yeah."

Jess went to the sink, filled a bottle.

"Me too," Kate called.

Jess came back, still drinking, and passed the bottle to Kate.

"Curtains," Kate said, because Jess was up anyway.

"Isn't it a bit late?"

"Yep, but I forgot earlier."

Jess went and pulled the curtains closed all the way around the house, came back in the dim warm dark and pressed her face against Kate's bare tummy. "I love how you smell."

"How do I smell?"

"Like... Kate."

"And how did you think I would smell?"

"Like Kate, of course. I've been sniffing you all my life."

Kate reached beneath herself and rubbed her back. Started thinking about other aches. "Fuck my knees are sore."

"Yep."

"And my back."

"Same here."

"I can't feel my hand."

"Why not?"

"It was stuck inside you all morning."

"Oh yeah. Sorry."

"I really can't. It's gone numb. And I think I ate some dust. There's something crunchy

in my mouth.”

“How’d you get dust in your mouth?”

“It was on you. I licked you.”

“Oh yeah.” Jess grinned, seemed pleased by that.

“I can’t stand up.”

“Try.”

“I can’t.”

“Sit on the couch.”

“I can’t do that either.”

Jess stood up again, held out her hands. “Come to bed.”

“I really can’t.”

“I’ll drag you.”

Kate sat up. Jess grabbed her hands and got her up and Kate’s knees really were so sore she couldn’t stand for a moment without Jess propping her. They hobbled to bed, and Kate almost wanted to start it all over again, except that she could hardly move. She just lay there, wriggling her hand, trying to get its feeling back. Jess seemed happy to watch her – didn’t talk, didn’t do anything, so after a while, Kate got bored and started to read. Jess got up, threw Kate’s clothes back into the bedroom, and went to make lunch. Kate thought there was something very them about ending like that. In a good way, like they fitted together as friends too, as well as all the sex.

Chapter Seven

Jess had been astonished by Kate’s sudden passion, by Kate just turning up and jumping on her. She didn’t mind, was glad Kate had come over all horny, just felt a little bit disorientated, like she hadn’t quite caught up with everything that was happening. Really good sex did that to her sometimes, left her dreamy and bemused by the world and what it was doing. They’d gone back to bed and Jess had lain there watching Kate until Kate started reading, and Jess, thinking Kate needed some space, had got up. She made lunch and did the dishes and sat on the porch for a while looking at trees. When she started getting bored again, she went back inside and said, “You want to go for a drive? Be tourists for a while?”

“And look at the beaches down the way, perhaps?” Kate said without looking up.

“Maybe. Both.” Life was perfect and Jess wasn’t going to let Kate annoy her. And she wasn’t particularly planning to go looking for breaks, because she’d done that years ago and already knew where they were. She was thinking about views and bushwalks and being on holiday. “You want to?”

Kate shrugged and put down her book. “Yeah, why not. But not too much walking.”

Jess looked at her.

“My knees are sore. I can’t walk. Someone spent all morning fucking me.”

Jess liked hearing that. She kissed Kate as she passed, started getting ready.

Jess's station wagon was fourteen years old. More than half as old as her. It was the most expensive thing she'd ever bought. It had dents in the front corners from banging against gorse, a chipped windscreen, a scratch on the bumper, and rust that caused her problems every time she went for a warrant. She knew she should take better care of it, wash the salt off, read the stickers the garage left reminding her to change the oil, but she never did.

"You don't want a surfboard?" Kate asked, as they were getting in the car.

"Nope. Told you. Tourists."

"What if you find a good beach?"

"Won't in this kind of weather," Jess said, and Kate looked knowing, like she'd won something, or worked something out. They started driving, went south because that's where the national parks and scenery were.

"You sure you don't want to look?" Kate asked once or twice, glancing towards the sea.

Jess just shook her head. Normally when they were driving places, on the east coast, or up around Nelson, or the time they'd gone down to the Catlins for a holiday, everywhere they went Jess would be pulling over and looking at breaks from hillsides and seawalls. Kate had got used to it, expected it. And somewhere other than the coast, that was what Jess would be doing, but around Awatangi there was no point. There weren't any breaks. She'd looked. Other than the highway, there were only five roads and thirty tracks in all south and central Westland, and she'd driven along them all to see where they went. She'd scoured topomaps and driven down old forestry trails in the hope they ended up somewhere. She hoped for a place like Awatangi, where to find the beach you had to go and look. Or a place like on the Jackson's Bay road, away down south, where little sandy trails led past baches and out onto the beach. She hoped to find somewhere like that and kept looking, but never had. She'd stood on the car roof looking across fields and trees, had dashed across paddocks with a surfboard under her arm, had waded down creeks so dark with tannin they reflected like mirrors, and bush-bashed through swamps and tangled salty scrub. It passed the time, but was never worth the effort. Either she didn't find the sea, or she did and there was no break, or if there was a break it was neither better nor worse than Awatangi so wasn't worth the struggle to get there. Eventually she'd realised the surfing beaches on the coast were generally the obvious ones. People had built towns in places with deep water beaches, like Awatangi, where sailing ships could get close, and good surf happened at the same kind of beach. It wasn't that she didn't know the secret surfing spots, it was that there weren't any. All those trips had been a waste, frustrating and dirty and very time consuming. But now she knew she'd looked, had checked everywhere, and that made her feel like she'd tried. Like she wasn't being lazy about the things that really mattered.

"Nah," she said. "There's nothing."

"There must be somewhere else..."

"There isn't."

"You've looked?"

"Yep."

"Not everywhere."

"Everywhere."

"Still..."

"Everywhere. It's a waste of time. You get your hopes up but never find anything."

Kate didn't answer, and Jess knew why. She thought Jess was being lazy, making excuses, and about most other things, that was what Jess would have been doing. But not about this.

"Seriously, Kate, I've looked, I've checked everywhere. It's done, I'm certain there isn't anything, and I'll never bother again."

"Okay," Kate said. Then after a while, "It's really that bad?"

"There aren't any breaks. Really."

"I meant was looking really that bad? You sound frustrated."

"Oh." Jess thought. "Yeah, I suppose. I'd have liked to find somewhere no-one else knew about. People get to in Australia and Indonesia and Thailand, so why not here."

"I thought you were going to Bali one day. You could look there."

"Except I probably never will. And except for the why not here part."

"So why not?"

"Wrong kind of coastline. And a different ocean, I suppose."

"We could look, if you wanted to. Maybe in different weather..."

"I checked in different weather." Jess knew what she was trying to do. "But thank you."

"Okay. It just might have been fun to go and look."

"Nah, hot and sweaty, not fun."

"Why didn't you take me?"

"Didn't really think it was your kind of thing."

Kate looked a little hurt. She liked to think she was outdoorsy, but wasn't really.

"And usually you weren't around," Jess added.

Kate shrugged, but still seemed a little offended.

"Really," Jess said, "It wasn't fun. These are old forestry tracks, so long boring straight roads, no scenery or anything to look at it. And no shade because all the big trees near the road were already cut down, so it's really hot. And no air conditioning."

Kate made a face. Jess's car didn't have any, and hers did, and in summer she always picked Jess up to go somewhere rather than the other way around. She seemed to be listening, though.

"So sweating like a pig," Jess said. "Like getting stuck to the car seats sweating. And no music because you need to be listening for waves. And you have to keep the fan on low too, because of that. And there's no breeze, you have to drive really slowly because there's this long grass in the middle of the track, between the wheels, and you can't see what's in there, so there might be a rock that smashes your engine and then you're completely fucked. Walking ten k back to the road because you're not getting a cell signal out there kind of fucked."

She remembered a day in the Ianthe Forest, a windless summer day so hot she hadn't really want to spend any time in the car at all. Remembered a headache and a heat rash on her legs where they rubbed on the seat and a sunburnt right arm. Remembered bouncing and bumping along, always edgy because of that sump-cracking rock and no way to see it coming, and the grass in the middle of the track swooshing against the front of the car. She'd passed beware logging trucks signs so old they were white-on-black, not black-on-yellow, signs which presumably predated the forestry accord, so she'd mostly ignored them, but only mostly. The map had been useless because this was private land so someone had just drawn a pretty diagram that was nothing like what was actually there, and useless

anyway because after fifteen years of growth there was no way to tell the main track from side-tracks and know where she was. She remembered hearing crickets over the engine noise and broom popping in the heat, but never any sea. She'd seen kahikatea in the distance, which might have meant water, but couldn't find a way to get there. She'd been tired and dehydrated. By noon had known it would be stupid to get in the water even if she found the beach because she was too tired, which meant the very best thing that could happen that day was she'd be coming back another time, and another time she might not find her way through the maze of tracks.

"Poor Jessie," Kate said.

"Meaning it was a stupid thing to do?"

"Meaning poor Jessie."

"Oh," Jess glanced sideways. "Yeah, well. Thanks. The worst thing is you usually look at a map afterwards and realise you're miles from the sea. It's usually a complete waste of time."

Kate leaned over and kissed her shoulder. "But very brave."

"What, driving around in the bush?"

"Yep."

"Okay. And you thought you'd have wanted to come?"

"Maybe not. How do you know where to go?"

"Look for a beach marked on maps. Or no cliffs." Jess thought of the Ianthe Forest. "Once I was pretty sure we'd been there when I was a kid for a picnic. I thought I remembered the way, but... you know."

"Everything looked bigger?"

"Yep, pretty much. And trees pretty much all look the same. No landmarks. I always meant to go back with a topomap and find that beach."

"Did you?"

"Course not."

Kate's face changed, and Jess could guess why. Jess was being a slacker, and even now, when it didn't matter at all, Kate didn't approve. Jess wasn't sure how to respond, so she went quiet and concentrated on the road.

They drove south. Through forest where everything looked wet and past farms where everything looked swampy, the farms becoming fewer and the bush more wild. Jess found this landscape a little unnerving, too big and damp and empty of people.

"The cows are a different colour south of Awatangi," Kate said, "Brown and white."

"More waterproof," Jess said. She had no idea if that was true, but since the rainfall increased as you went south it might be.

"Really?" Kate said, then seemed to think about it and looked away. Jess decided not to be a smartass again. Kate looked annoyed again, probably just felt silly, but it was hard to tell.

The road got narrower on hills. Trucks and buses took up the whole lane, pressed right up to the centre line and loomed over the car. Sometimes, after one passed, Jess felt like she needed to check her wing mirror was still there. Sometimes she was almost sure it wouldn't be. Campervans were the worst, usually drove with a wheel almost on the centre line. Jess tried to move over when she saw one coming, but there were a lot around, so she couldn't always. She passed a slow one on a tight 35 corner at the bottom of a hill, took a risk

because she didn't want to be stuck behind it all the way up, and cut it a bit close. A four-wheel drive was coming the other way, and the driver make wanker gestures as he passed. Slowed down to do it, too, with four cars already stuck behind him.

"Yeah," Jess said, "We can see how you feel about letting people get past." She glanced at Kate. "Plenty of room."

Kate nodded, usually didn't mind Jess doing things like that on roads she knew.

"Fuckwit," Jess added.

Jess tried not to pass too much. She wasn't really in the right mood for fast driving. Today was a road trip, not racing to get somewhere, and passing all the time wasn't very road trip, not in a car that needed you to plan ahead and get a run up. She mostly stayed at the back of lines of traffic, usually slowed down a bit and let them all get ahead. Once the road ahead was clear, she sped up, and felt like a local when they saw lines of rental cars going the other way all shiny and new and holding each other up, all five k under the speed limit and afraid to overtake on winding roads, when she was going the other way in a rustbucket at a hundred and twenty with her arm out the window.

"You mind?" She asked, holding up cigarettes, and Kate shook her head, said, "Chew gum before you kiss me."

Smoking while she drove made her feel even more local. She fiddled with the stereo and held the cigarette out the window and steered with her knees on straights, and thought of the old guys with hats in campervans coming the other way scared of white lines and trees. She didn't really mind the tourists. They were a nuisance when they were in front of you, but she was used to it, and the coast had always been about tourism, the highway built for tourists as much as for farming. Towns like Awatangi wouldn't exist any more without the baches keeping people coming back. She noticed new tourist places as they drove. There were more every year. A new café and souvenir shop, new farm-stay and helitour signs. Awatangi was no exception, the winter before last the pub had suddenly sprouted a deck over what had been carpark. Jess didn't especially like it, would prefer things stayed as they were, but it happened and it wasn't worth getting upset.

She threw the cigarette end out the window, thought, as soon as she did it that Kate would disapprove, even though it wasn't going to start a fire and it was only on the road. She glanced sideways. Kate was frowning slightly, but didn't say anything.

They passed a roadside lawn-mowing tractor, and the pungent greenness of fresh-cut grass filled the car, overwhelming the last of the smoke. Jess found some gum and chewed it to keep Kate happy. She stuck it to the edge of the ashtray when she was done. They crossed a one-way bridge and Jess flicked a finger of her steering hand to say thanks, but got ignored. One-way bridge rudeness was starting to get worse for the summer. Sometimes the tourist drivers raced her, trying to get onto the bridge before the last car ahead of them left, so Jess had to wait and didn't get a turn. Sometimes they looked like they would just keep going, even though she was already crossing, like they hadn't noticed how narrow the road suddenly got.

"Dickhead," she said, watching a SUV race towards a bridge and suddenly stop at the last minute, realising there was someone in front of him.

"Maybe they don't understand how it works." Kate said. "If you've only ever driven in town, a one-lane bridge must be pretty scary."

"What, they need traffic lights?"

“Maybe.”

“Shouldn’t be driving here if they can’t cope,” Jess said.

“Hick,” Kate said.

They waited, and someone gave way, let them have a turn. A dirty ute. Jess dashed across the bridge, didn’t want it getting stuck behind tourists the way she had been. She finger-waved as she passed, and the driver nodded back.

“You do the finger thing so well,” Kate said.

Jess glanced over, a bit startled.

“The west coast hello,” Kate said.

“I thought you meant...”

Kate grinned.

Jess finger-waved to the next dozen or so passing cars, but none responded. “All tourists,” she said.

“Try him,” Kate said.

Another battered ute. Jess did, and the driver – looking a bit puzzled, as if trying to work out who she was – finger-waved back.

Kate laughed, delighted.

*

They stopped at a lookout with a view of some rocks in the sea, stood beside the car and read a sign. Kate took a photo of Jess reading. No-one else was around. They stood and watched the waves for a while.

Kate stuck her hand into Jess’s back pocket and said, “I’m trying. You know that, right?”

Jess nodded. Kept looking at the water. Looking for breaks, just out of habit. None there, obviously. Sculpted rocks and wheeling birds and crashing waves. She realised what she was doing and made herself look at the view instead. It was very pretty. Scenic and everything. After a minute she said, “Yeah, I know. It’s okay.”

“You’re sure? You don’t mind me being... weird about everything?”

“Nah, it’s fine.”

“Just sometimes you seem...”

“I know. I forget sometimes, that’s all. I’m used to being around you. It’s different to how it is with someone completely new.”

“Yeah, I think I know.”

“And I know this is all new for you, and I try to remember that, and it’s perfectly okay that it’s taking you a while to sort things out. In your head and everything.”

“Okay.”

“So we can do this however you want, as slowly as you want.” Jess hesitated, wondered if she ought to say more, decided she should. “And if you want to stop, we’ll do that too.”

“Really?”

Jess nodded slowly, still looking out to sea. “Yeah. If we have to..”

“Okay.” Kate glanced around. Jess looked too. An empty lookout, an empty carpark, further away, an empty highway. A seagull watching them from a fencepost. Kate kissed her. Quickly, but like she meant it.

“Thank you,” Kate said. “I wouldn’t want to be doing this with anyone else but you.”

Jess shrugged.

“Hey,” Kate said after a moment, “I don’t think I’ve kissed you standing up before.”

“Yeah,” Jess thought of couches and beds, sitting in the car and the beach and rolling around on the floor, “Yeah, probably not.”

“It’s different, you know. You’re the same height as me.”

“I am,” Jess said. “No crick in your neck.”

“Yeah.”

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Do you like it that way? Without a sore neck?”

“Yeah, I kind of do.”

Jess smiled and kissed her again and got back in the car.

*

They turned around and drove back. Had to turn around because there was only one road, and if they kept going they’d end up in Wanaka, eventually doing a circle of the whole South Island and being back in Christchurch. They saw a hitchhiker. Jess always felt she ought to stop. Ought to think about stopping, at least. She never did, usually drove after work, in the middle of the night, and didn’t see anyone who seemed harmless – who didn’t make you wonder why they were still looking for a ride. She still felt an obligation.

“Should we?” she said. Knowing Kate would say no, and looking for an out.

“Nah,” Kate said. “Don’t spoil this.”

Jess drove past without making eye contact.

“You’d have had to put the seats back up anyway,” Kate said.

“You could sit on his knee.”

“You reckon.”

“It didn’t look like he expected us to stop anyway.”

Kate laughed. “You weren’t looking.”

They stopped at the Franz Joseph glacier, just before the town. “We have to do something touristy,” Jess said. They parked in an empty carpark and climbed a small hill to a viewpoint.

“Nice track,” Kate said, “Very clean.”

Jess couldn’t work out if she was being serious or deep in some deadpan sarcasm thing only she got.

“Where is everyone?” Kate said.

“It’s getting late.”

They stood on an observation deck and looked at the view. There were signs here too, explaining what everything was. Down the other end of the deck a group of backpackers were taking photos, talking in something that sounded European.

“I feel like I should be more impressed than I am,” Jess said, looking at the ice, a long way off. “Like I should feel awed and I never do.”

“Yeah.” Kate was standing near Jess, their hands on the rail, almost but not quite touching. She glanced sideways at the tourists.

“What’d you do that for?” Jess said.

“Do what?”

“You know what. Any reason you looked just then?”

“Maybe,” Kate said, and slid her hand a little closer on the rail.

“Maybe why?”

“Just in case,” Kate said, and her little finger touched Jess’s. She swayed slightly, made contact with her hip.

“In case what?”

Kate kissed Jess. Seemed to have been planning a quick peck, but changed her mind and stayed and made a little breathy sigh. Some of the tourists looked, then looked away, didn’t seem particularly interested. Jess put an arm around Kate’s waist, held her loosely enough she could pull away if she wanted to. She did, but not right away.

“Thank you,” Jess said.

Kate touched her lips with a fingertip. Either startled at herself or checking her lipstick. She smiled a little and shrugged.

*

They stopped for petrol. Jess was almost certain they were still in Franz, but needed to think about it for a moment to be certain. Fox and Franz blended together, often seemed the same. Driving north, Fox was on a bend and Franz was second, but there wasn’t a lot else to distinguish them. Both were commercial, loud and busy after Awatangi. Lots of people and lots of helicopters clattering around in the sky.

The petrol station had four bays, two lines of pumps under a canopy. When Jess pulled in, a campervan followed her. She stopped at the rear pump just to be a bitch, left the campervan to decide whether to wait or to back up and go around her. It waited. Confused by petrol pumps as well as bridges, Jess assumed. She wasn’t feeling very helpful after being stuck behind campervans all afternoon, thought one of them could wait for her for a change. She mucked around a bit cleaning windows, was on the passenger side of the car, where the tank was, so Kate opened her door and leaned out and said, “What are you doing?”

Jess smirked until Kate looked around and got it. “That’s awful,” Kate whispered, “Don’t be so mean.”

Jess just grinned.

“Fill the bloody car.”

“It’s funny.”

“Stop it.”

Jess shrugged and filled the car, noticed the campervan driver seemed to have some idea what was up, and was looking annoyed.

Kate got out, said, “You want me to get it?”

“It’s okay.”

“I’ll get it.”

“Kiss me and I’ll pay.”

“I’m going to pay because I’ve got more money, but I’ll...” Kate glanced around. “Yeah, actually I won’t because there’s this pissed off man in a campervan right behind us. You got any idea what might be upsetting him?”

“Me? None.”

Jess got back in the car and waited. Watched the campervan in the mirror. Kate came back with chips and chocolate, seemed to be hurrying.

“Ah,” Jess said, “And it becomes clear.”

“Just drive.”

Jess stretched, pretended to look for the keys, then saw Kate’s expression. “What?”

“If I kiss you will you promise, promise to drive off straight away?”

“Promise.”

Kate kissed her. Jess went to start the car then realised the keys were in her back pocket, from unlocking the petrol cap, and she was sitting on them. Rather than climb back out, she hitched her ass up, fished around beneath herself trying to reach. “I’m trying,” she told Kate. “Just this once it’s real.”

“Oh god.” Kate turned around and waved behind them.

“Don’t do that, I’m trying.”

“Hurry the fuck up.”

Jess thought Kate was joking, wasn’t as angry as she sounded, but wasn’t quite sure. This might count as upsetting other people, which Kate didn’t like. She got the keys and started the car, and as she drove off realised she had been in the outside bay, the only one without a roof over it. The guy behind her couldn’t have driven around because he wouldn’t have fitted under the canopy. She hoped Kate hadn’t noticed.

Maybe she had. She was quiet most of the way back to Awatangi.

“What’s up?” Jess asked once, and Kate said, “Nah, nothing,” so Jess left her alone to think, or whatever she was doing.

“A perfect day,” Jess said, when they got back, “The washing didn’t get wet.”

“It was,” Kate said, so quietly Jess almost didn’t hear. Jess stopped and smiled at her and Kate smiled back.

They sat on the couch with a bottle of wine. Kate reading, Jess staring out into the bush. She started thinking about trees, had noticed as she got older that she noticed them more. When she was young the bush had just been green, a background against which interesting things like beaches and rivers were placed. You only noticed trees you could climb. As she got older she started noticing species and types, how they were different to each other, and which things grew together. Awatangi seemed to be at some kind of dividing point between ecologies. Rimu, kahikatea, and beech all grew in the bush around the town, even though they usually seemed to grow in different places. Lately, she’d been noticing ferns and shrubs too. Didn’t know what any of them were, but could spot their different leaf-shapes. She looked into the bushline, could see a rimu sapling from the porch, something she’d never noticed before. She wondered how long it had been there, how long they took to get as high as her, and whether she or it was older.

She was sitting half-sprawled against the couch-arm, her legs curled up beside her.

“Hey,” Kate suddenly said. “Put down your wine.”

Jess did, although wasn’t sure why. Kate leaned over, like she was wanting a kiss, but touched the back of Jess’s knee instead, right where it tickled. Touched so lightly it had to be deliberate. Jess jumped up off the couch, stood two steps away, and Kate watched her, grinning.

“What the fuck did you do that for?”

“Sorry,” Kate said. “I was just thinking about you being ticklish.”

“I’m not.”

“You are there.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

“I just thought about it, that was all.” Kate didn’t seem very apologetic. “Sit down.”

Jess did, suspiciously. A couple of minutes later, something she was half-expecting, Kate did it again.

Jess jumped up again, almost hit her that time.

“Sorry,” Kate said. “You were so cute the first time.”

“Fuck you,” Jess said, and went inside.

Kate went after her, hugged her and kissed her and said sorry, she wouldn’t do it again.

“But why did you?” Jess asked, a little miserably, and Kate just shrugged.

They opened more wine, stayed outside while the sun set.

“You want some music?” Jess said suddenly.

“No power.”

“And yet, still...”

“How?”

Jess went inside, got her keys, and went out to the car. She turned on the power but not the engine, found something old and soft and jazzy of Kate’s to play, and left the car doors open when she went back onto the porch. She sat down next to Kate. They watched the moths and bugs and sunset.

“How long does a car battery last?” Kate asked.

“Long enough.”

“You’ll get bugs in the car.”

“I’ll get them out again tomorrow.”

“Really, won’t they be...”

“I’ll fly-spray it and shut the windows. Now shut the fuck up and enjoy the fucking moment with me.”

After a while, Kate moved her hand, touched the scar on Jess’s arm again like she had that morning. Started kind of stroking it, almost as if she didn’t know she was.

“What?” Jess said, not usually worried by people noticing, but here, with Kate, just a little cautious.

“Nah,” Kate said. “Just thinking.”

“Does it bother you?”

“God no. You’re like a fucking hero, having scars. Like some kind of... Like you’ve lived.”

“Really?”

“You’re beautiful..”

“So are you,” Jess said, and kissed her.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Okay.”

“Why did you say really?”

“Shut up Jess. Enjoy the fucking moment, remember.”

Jess grinned. “You sure you’re all right?”

Kate shook her head, didn't answer. After a while she said, "Come inside."

"It's nice out here."

"Come inside anyway."

"Why?"

"Shit, Jess, why do you..."

"Yeah, okay," Jess said, turned off the car and followed her inside.

*

Sometimes Jess wondered if Kate wasn't making everything more complicated than it had to be. After they'd gone inside, after sex, after Jess had got up wrapped in a sheet and had a cigarette and Kate had complained about her taking the blankets, and after Jess had brought a bottle of wine and two glasses back to bed with her, they'd lain in bed and talked. And because she'd been wondering about it, Jess asked if everything was okay.

"Sure," Kate said, then, "Mostly. Everything like what?"

"Like you and me."

"You're sure you want to talk about this right now?"

Jess rolled over, was suddenly worried. "Why wouldn't I?"

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Kate, you're scaring me."

Kate looked at her for a moment, just looked. No smile, no word of comfort, just looked, all cold and thoughtful. Then she smiled, "Hey, no, not like that."

"Not like what?"

"Like nothing. I just thought you might be tired."

"Sure you did."

"I did. That's all."

"No bad news?"

"I don't think so, no."

"Why do I need to be sure then?"

"You might be tired. Really, that's all."

"Okay," Jess said, still a little doubtful. "I'm good. Tell me."

"Refill," Kate held out her glass. Jess rolled over and got the bottle from the floor, and poured.

"It's not that I mind the being with you," Kate said, watching her. "I just can't imagine being around another girl all the time. Talking about shoes and hair and tampons."

"We don't talk about shoes and..."

"You know what I mean. The pink fluffy bunnyrabbitness of it all. Always going to the chick flick. Always dressing perfectly. Being nice and talking about our feelings."

Jess put the bottle back on the floor. "That's really not how it is."

"I know it isn't. It just seems like it from where I am. I like boys. I like being bored stupid hearing crap about cars and rugby when I know more about either than some fucking web developer. I like how they talk shit, and are always confident, and never worry about what people are thinking about them. I like how most of the time they don't listen, so when they do you know it's really important."

"No you don't. You don't like any of that."

“I kinda do. I know I complain, but I’m used to it. And, I don’t really like girls. Not like you do.”

Jess laughed.

“Shit, not like that. You know what I mean. All your friends are women. Everyone you care about. Your boyfriends were really only regular booty calls, you never really liked spending time with them. You were always hanging out with me.”

“So, what, once I realised I could get laid with chicks, there was no point hanging with guys any more?”

“I’ve wondered.”

“I’m close to Baz.”

“That’s one.”

“So? One’s more than none.”

“Except that of the people in the world I’m closest to, you and mum are the only women in, what, the top five or six.”

“Who else?”

“I don’t know. Baz. James I work with. Whoever the current boyfriend is.”

“That’s three.”

“Yeah, out of five.” Kate shrugged. “Dad. That’s six.”

Jess wasn’t sure what to make of this. “Yeah, well, it’s not like I’m a real girl anyway. For talking about hair and shoes.”

“What, cause you have chipped nails and split ends?”

“And get up at dawn most of the time and don’t wear makeup and most of my shoes have no heels.”

“And are blonde and a size ten and think bikinis are streetwear.”

“So?”

“Sometimes you’re hard to be around.”

“And again, so?”

“So nothing. Just I like guys.”

“I’m pretty blokey…”

“Shit, Jess, just leave it.”

“What?”

“This is exactly what I mean.”

“I really, really don’t understand.”

“Jess, don’t be such a girl. Just ignore any hidden meaning in what I said and get on with it.”

“Fuck you,” Jess said, and rolled over.

Kate was silent for a moment, then said, “You know there’s no-one closer to me in the world, don’t you? No-one at all.”

Jess rolled over, kissed her. Looked at her a moment, then kissed her again. “Thank you.”

“Are you crying?”

Jess rolled back. “No.”

“Look at me.”

“Fuck you.”

“Hey, it’s okay. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“So stop crying.”

“I’m not.”

“Jess...”

“Shit, just leave it. You don’t want me being girly.”

“We can just this once.”

“Fuck off.”

“Can I hug you or something?”

Jess held out her arms, but kept her face hidden. After a minute, into Kate’s shoulder, she said, “Why did you have to ask? Whether you should hug me.”

“I don’t know what to do now. Everything’s different. Everything keeps changing.”

“I know.”

After a minute Kate asked, “You okay?”

“Just hold me.”

“Hey, um, are we still talking?”

“Why?”

“There is one other thing,” Kate said. “Just a little thing.”

Jess looked at her. “Of course there is.”

“I...” Kate looked back, kind of shrugged, didn’t speak.

“Tell me,” Jess said softly. “What is it?”

“Sometimes,” Kate said, “And I’m sorry, but sometimes I just don’t feel like sex.”

Jess sniffed and wiped her eyes on her hand. “Seriously? That’s it?”

“Well, it seems kind of awful.”

Jess wiped her face again, this time on the sheet. “Yeah, well, there’s times when I don’t either. So I, you know, don’t.”

“Really?”

“Sure. Sometimes it’s just a hassle. Or you’re tired. Sometimes you’d rather just have ice cream.”

“Ice cream?”

“You know what I mean. Sometimes you’ve got a blister on your tongue. Don’t turn it into a thing because its not.”

“Or,” Kate said. “Maybe I don’t want you as much as I should.”

Jess pulled Kate’s face around, kissed her, noticed Kate didn’t flinch, that she kissed back. “Or maybe,” she said, “Sometimes you just can’t be bothered. Don’t worry about it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I don’t want you right now.”

“No?”

“Not at all.”

“Well, thanks.”

“No problem. You’re just not doing it for me, I’m afraid.”

“Oh really?”

“Yep. Couldn’t pay me to.”

“Fuck you.” Kate grinned.

“Yeah, and fuck you too.” Jess sat up. “Shit, I need some toilet paper or something. My nose’s started running.”

“I have tissues.”

Jess looked at her. “Really?”

“Yep.”

“Of course you do. Where are they?”

Kate went and got them, and then, because they were in bed, started reading again. Jess watched her for a while, watched her and held her and tried to look sleepy whenever Kate glanced over, like she wasn't staring. Eventually the pretending became real, and she started dozing, and Kate seemed to realise and turned off the light and they slept.

*

It started raining overnight. The clattering on the roof and windows woke them both up. Jess lay there listening, liking the sound. Kate muttered, “Stop stealing the fucking blankets,” and went back to sleep. Jess listened to the rain until she fell asleep again. She woke up again about three in the morning, was cold this time. The weather must have changed with the rain. A window was rattling in the main room, the one over the kitchen bench that only banged when the wind was norwest. Sleepily, Jess went and wedged it with a kitchen knife, then fetched more blankets from the wardrobe and piled them on the bed. Norwest meant the rain and cold were likely to settle, to stay a several days.

It still raining when she woke up, had changed overnight from sunbathing weather to coats and hats and scarves weather. It was good rain, dramatic, sometimes pounding, sometimes only a patter in the trees, but always rain you could hear and enjoy. She went down to the beach to try and beat the floodwater out into the sea, but was too late. The bay was choppy, the river in flood and flattening the waves. She didn't stay long, didn't go near the sea, but still came back soaked and cold enough to be glad she'd lit the fire. She made coffee and got back into bed. Kate still hadn't woken up. Jess watched her sleep, felt tender, was glad something had been talked about the night before, even if only a little something. She picked up Kate's book and started reading it and listened to the rain on the roof.

Kate slept a long time. When she eventually woke, Jess kissed her and pointed to the coffee she'd left on the bedside table. It was cold, but Kate would drink it anyway.

“Thanks.”

Silence for a few minutes. Kate sipped, said, “Good surf, was it?”

“How'd you know?”

“Wet hair. You know the one thing I don't like about this place?”

Jess glanced out the window. “I can guess.”

“You'd guess right.” Kate got dressed and went outside.

“You're completely different over here,” Kate said when she came back. “Less aloof. More happy.”

“Yeah,” Jess said thoughtfully, “Probably. Sometimes.”

They didn't get up, just stayed in bed, talking. Kate seemed to decide Jess was in a mood and needed snapping out of it. She started teasing her, teasing about things so old Jess knew what she was going to say before she said it. About not getting up until lunchtime and sitting in chairs back to front, the chair back between her legs. She said Jess had only started doing it at the same time as she started doing girls, which was completely untrue. “You sit like a man,” Kate said, and waited.

“You sit like a little girl,” Jess said. “Trying to be cute.”

“So not true,” Kate said, “I just sit properly.” Even in bed, she had her knees together.

“Little girl,” Jess said.

“Slacker,” Kate said.

“Skank.”

Jess sometimes wondered if there was any real venom when they talked to each other like this, or if it was an outlet and let them bitch without real harm. Slowly, because they always did when they were trapped inside by the weather, they began to get nastier. It was like they were reverting to childhood squabbling. They’d known each other long enough that might be exactly what it was. Jess could feel it happening by lunchtime, but had no idea what to do to stop. She started feeling trapped, impatient, annoyed with Kate for just sitting there reading all the time and not wanting to do anything.

“Let’s do something,” she said.

“Okay,” Kate said, without looking up. “What?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Whatever you like.”

“No, what do you want to do?”

“God,” Jess said, “You sound like my fucking mother.”

“Makes sense. Straight women want a man who reminds them of their fathers, you want a woman who reminds you of your mother. And I can do that real well since I know her.”

“Ha ha fucking ha. That’s an awful thing to say.”

“Go play outside, Jessie dear.”

Jess was furious, but didn’t know why. She pulled on her clothes, the first she found, grabbed the car keys and walked to the door.

“I’m going down to the beach.”

“You’re a moody bitch, Jess, you know that?”

Jess stopped at the door and looked at her. Couldn’t believe how angry she was, or how easily Kate could get to her. She had a terrible feeling of wasted time, of opportunities slipping them by. She didn’t want to fight, even now, so she just said, “Yeah,” and walked out, and drove away.

Chapter Eight: Kate

Kate didn’t mean to start fights with Jess, but sometimes they just happened. She could guess what had set this one off. Jess was bored, but feeling obliged to entertain Kate rather than go surfing, so felt trapped, which made her touchy, and easy for Kate to annoy. And Kate wanted to annoy her. Kate was getting sick of Jess moping around complaining about being bored, and didn’t want to talk and – most of all – she felt like Jess was trying to hurry her along, when what she wanted was for everything to slow down so she could think. She

didn't know how to say that, so instead she'd made Jess angry, had known it was happening but kept needling because irritating Jess had felt good. Then Jess had stormed out, disappeared for an hour or two, and Kate felt bad for not stopping things sooner. She worried a little because Jess was gone so long – assumed she was just down on the beach, but worried anyway because you just did when someone disappeared after a fight. Jess had the car, so Kate couldn't go and check very easily. She might have walked if it hadn't been raining, but it was, so she stayed inside.

The rain eased, turned into drizzle, and she almost thought about going again, then she heard car noise and didn't need to. Jess reappeared, seemed all happy and smiling again. She'd been at the beach. Her hair was wet – wetter than rain would make it - and she was wearing a bikini and a damp wool jersey. She walked in like nothing had happened, and behind her came a guy. He was wet too, looked like a surfer with an office job – shorter hair, no obvious tattoos, his scruffiness something that could be undone on Monday morning. “This is Brad,” Jess said, and dumped her towels on a kitchen chair.

Kate looked at her, then looked at Brad. She was still a little annoyed and now was confused as well. Jess in a bikini also meant Jess had changed somewhere, since she'd left in jeans. “Hey,” Kate said after a moment.

Brad said hi and put a case of beer he was holding down on the floor.

“Shower's in there,” Jess said, and gave him one of the clean towels she'd washed the day before. She pointed to the bathroom, and he went in and closed the door.

Kate stood there and stared at Jess until she heard water running. Jess knew she was being looked at because she spent all her time mucking around with her gear and never once looked at Kate.

“Hey Jess,” Kate said, when the water started, “Who the fuck is Brad?”

“He was surfing.”

“Obviously.”

Jess took a beer out of Brad's box, held another out to Kate. Kate shook her head.

“So,” Kate said, unsure how this was supposed to go. “Who's Brad again?”

“A guy who was surfing.”

“Oh yeah. So, um, why is he here?”

“He's living in a van. Travelling. Washing in the sea. So I said did he want a hot shower and a beer and maybe even food.”

“Of course you did. Because you just love other surfers and always want to make friends.”

Jess sat down at the table. “It was raining, Kate, and it's really cold. I was being nice.”

“Yeah, so I'm not being clear I think. Why the fuck is Brad here?”

“For a shower.”

“Okay. And that's all?”

“As opposed to what?”

“He's kind of good looking,” Kate said.

“Yeah?” Jess got up and looked in the cupboard. “Didn't notice. I do girls, remember? Do we have any biscuits or crackers or anything?”

“Fuck you,” Kate said, and went into the bedroom. She heard Jess close the cupboard, heard her follow.

“He's just a guy,” Jess said, from the doorway. “I was just being nice cause he surfs

well, that's really all. Come and have a beer and we can talk later."

"We don't have beer."

"Brad has beer."

"You have his beer."

"Yep."

"Some people don't like it when you do that."

"He won't mind."

"Jess, how do you know that?"

Jess grinned. "I don't."

"Hey Jess, where'd you get changed?"

Jess just stood there blankly, seemed not to understand.

"Where did you get changed?" Kate said. "You didn't have a bikini on when you left."

"Beside the car. Like always. Where else?"

Kate shook her head.

Jess looked at her for a moment, then seemed to realise. "Before I saw Brad," she said, "And way down the beach. What's up?"

"Brad. You. I don't know."

Jess came over and sat on the bed beside Kate. "What exactly?"

"It felt like we had a fight so you went to pick someone up."

"Yeah, and brought him back here. I do that all the time when I'm cheating with people I'm not attracted to. It's real subtle."

"You might be wanting to put me in my place or something."

"Right. Cause, again, as far as I know I do girls."

"Except when you didn't."

"Except when I didn't. And I told Brad about three things into the conversation that I was here with my girlfriend. So while he might think you're a psycho, I'm pretty sure we got the whole penises and vaginas thing sorted out at the start and he's definitely not planning on jumping me."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. I think he just wants food."

"I thought you hated surfers."

"I do. But he was getting rained on."

"Why do I have to talk to him too?"

"You like talking to boring people. Friday work drinks and everything."

Kate gave her a nasty look, tried to show she wasn't impressed. Jess was kind of smirking and shifting her position. Seemed to have something about to burst out of her.

"Hey Kate," she said, "Are you jealous or something?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"If you make a thing of this..."

"Nah, I won't. I just don't think it's happened about anything before, ever, and I kind of like it."

Kate looked at her and was surprised, suddenly realised Jess mightn't understand that usually Kate envied her. She supposed they both hid things from each other. She wanted to explain, thought it might help them both understand why the other got strange sometimes.

She almost did, except that right now it was Jess who had walked out and found the guy and had all the power, and she didn't want to give her any more. Instead she said, "Here with your girlfriend, hey?"

"Aren't I?"

"Suppose so."

"Got a problem with that?"

"Nah," Kate thought about that. "Actually nah. I kind of like it."

"Psycho girlfriend, remember."

"Yeah, got it. Thanks."

"Well, you know. It's always the quiet, angry ones."

"Who do what?"

"Are psychos."

"I'm not quiet and angry."

"You're sulking in a bedroom..."

"Fuck you too." Kate looked at her. "Don't say last word."

"Last word," Jess said, and went back into the main room.

Brad stayed for food and a couple of beers and slept in his van outside the bach. He woke Kate the next morning, knocking on the door. Someone woke her knocking on the door, and she assumed it was him. He and Jess had planned to go surfing together, but Jess seemed to have already left. Kate shouted for Jess, then shouted that he should come in, but Jess didn't answer and Brad didn't seem to hear. She got up, bleary-eyed and still in her pyjamas, to let him in.

"Hey," she said. "Jess is already down there."

"Right," he said. "Sorry, I didn't see her go."

Kate looked past his shoulder and thought, the car's gone, you idiot, but didn't say it. "Down the far end, probably. On the reefs."

"Okay, no worries."

He seemed nice, and she shouldn't have thought he was an idiot just because he hadn't noticed, so she pushed the door open and said, "Do you want coffee?"

"Yeah, great."

Kate put on a hoodie and they sat at the kitchen table and talked. She realised after a while she was almost being tempted to fuck him. She couldn't work out if she really wanted to, and if she did, she didn't know whether it was because she just felt like it, or to prove she could and was better than Jess, or if it was meant to say something about herself, to herself, in the face of everything else that was going on. She was tempted, but just sat there, didn't do a thing about it. Sat and talked until Brad said he'd better get going, that he'd see if he could catch Jess on the beach. Kate went to the door and said goodbye and watched him get his van turned around. She'd done nothing wrong and knew she'd done nothing wrong, but she'd been thinking, and the thinking made her feel like a complete bitch.

Jess came back ten minutes later, had seen Brad on the track. She'd stopped to talk but hadn't gone back with him because doing U-turns on the track wasn't fun.

"You okay?" she said, looking at Kate kind of strangely.

Kate shrugged and went back to bed.

"What's wrong?" Jess called.

“Nothing.”

“I love you,” Jess said.

“I know,” Kate said back, and rolled over to read. She felt undeserving and somehow mean, but she was getting used to feeling like that.

Chapter Nine

The strangest thing about being with Kate, Jess was finding, was how familiar it seemed. In the way they spent their days, in the measure of the hours, very little had changed. It was as though one important thing was new, the having sex, and everything else the same. They talked the same ways and did the same things and, except when they were in bed, she could hardly tell the difference between then and now. She wanted that to change, wanted them to be that extra bit kind and warm and tender all the time, but you couldn't fuck all day, not actually all day, even with the best intentions in the world, and whenever they stopped they were back to how they'd always been.

Normally, when starting out with someone new, you had things to learn about her, another whole life to discover, but that wasn't how it was with Kate. Jess already knew what Kate liked and didn't like, her favourite books and movies and music, her hopes and dreams. Knew Kate's opinions because Kate had worked them out talking to her, and knew – thanks to a Cosmo quiz – Kate's five favourite positions, ranked in order. Not that most of them did her any good without some extra gear. She knew Kate didn't have fears because fears held you back, but all the same was scared of failing and of people not thinking the best of her, and she knew how to cook pasta extra soft, the way Kate liked it, with a little butter in the pot at the very end, before you put the sauce in. She knew who Kate was in ways she couldn't begin to explain to someone else, but ways that must matter, because she usually knew what Kate would be doing without having to turn around and check. But after spending most of her life talking to Kate, there was nothing left for either of them to learn, and that was becoming a problem. They were drifting back to the things they'd have been doing on an ordinary weekend, reading and surfing and getting bored. The only ways Jess couldn't think of to show she was taking an interest were fucking and talking, but neither seemed to work. When she tried to talk Kate had looked puzzled and said she already knew that, and – today anyway – when she'd tried sex Kate said she was sore and not in the mood. Jess was feeling stuck. She wanted to be making more of this, to make every moment count, but couldn't explain that to Kate because she didn't know what it was she was hoping for. So she said nothing, and Kate spent the morning reading in bed, and Jess fidgeted, and Kate snapped at her to stop, and then most of the morning was gone.

Kate got up while Jess was in the lounge, cleaning ash out the fireplace. She seemed to have made an effort, had on makeup and a cleavage showing top. When Jess thought about it, Kate had been dressing well all weekend. Jess looked at her and felt a bit guilty in her

undies and jersey, thought that if Kate was trying and she probably should too. She wondered if she'd shaved her legs since they'd been at the bach, and had an awful feeling she hadn't.

Kate walked past Jess and kind of rubbed her hair, tousled it up – not that it had been particularly tidy in the first place. It was nice, she didn't usually make little gestures like that. She went over to the window and looked out. The rain had changed while she was in bed, turned into stormy drizzle, a fast-moving mist howling in from the sea that soaked you as soon as you looked outside, but didn't ever clump into droplets big enough to make pattering sounds on the roof. Jess hadn't needed to go down to the beach to know surfing would be bad. The waves would have changed with the weather, would be straggly, blown all over the bay.

Kate looked at the rain and seemed surprised. "When did that start? I thought it had eased off."

"Nope."

"Bugger."

"Yep."

"What's wrong with you?"

Jess looked up, surprised. "Nothing." But Kate, for some reason, looked like she didn't believe her. "Really nothing."

"Yeah, okay."

Kate went and made toast and sat in a chair next to Jess while she ate it, prodding at Jess with her toes until Jess snapped, "Stop it," and moved away.

"Want to do something?" Kate said.

"Okay."

"What do you want to do?"

"Nothing outside."

"I assumed."

"Sex?"

Kate looked at her for a minute, then kind of shrugged. "Nah, not right now."

"Something else?"

"Well, um, yeah."

"Cards?"

"Because it's what you do at the bach?"

"Yep."

Kate sighed and pulled a face, then said, "Yeah, okay."

They played cards. Kate let Jess cheat – so she said – because Jess cared so much about winning and it was the only way she could manage to, and each time she said this Jess thought it odd how people chose to accuse you of the things they felt most strongly themselves. Kate cheated and said she was letting Jess cheat, and after a while, after she'd lost a couple of times, she got bored and said she didn't want to play any more. Jess had spent entire days of her childhood playing cards while it rained. It seemed a normal way to spend a day to her, but Kate never had the stamina for longer than an hour. She started paying less attention, which meant she started losing more – and as she lost, she got less interested, less attentive, played worse, and eventually got bored and gave up. She went back to reading, so Jess played solitaire and fiddled with the fire. Fiddling with the fire was

another thing you did at the bach. Rearranging wood and stacking wood and spending a lot of time deciding when to go out and get more wood from the shed so you had enough, and timing it around the breaks in the rain.

“You want me to paint your toenails?” Jess said.

“Okay. Why?”

“I just haven’t for ages.”

“Yeah, okay.” Kate stuck her feet out. “There’s polish in my bag somewhere.”

Jess had used to do this when they were at school. Kate had taken a while to work out how to aim straight, so when she made a mess of it, Jess had done her toes for her. Had stopped, as far as she remembered, about the same time as she’d first told Kate how she felt. She wondered why that kind of thing made a difference, although it obviously had. Kate read while she painted, occasionally looked up and smiled just a little, and Jess squeezed her foot when she did.

Something was changing between them, Jess thought. The silences were getting longer. Perhaps that was just what happened. A friend you swear at, whinge at, and talk all the time, even if you have nothing to say. A lover you try and impress. You want to avoid looking silly, so you keep quiet more often. Even, apparently, if that person already knew you better than anyone else in the world.

It was probably pointless after nineteen years, but Jess very much wanted to impress Kate. She just wasn’t sure how. Sitting there, she realised she still hadn’t had a shower, hadn’t done her legs. That was something. She should stop being lazy and get on with it. There were other things, though, that probably mattered more. She should complain less, and compliment more. Should do things the way Kate wanted sometimes without arguing, just to let Kate win. Stop borrowing deodorant without asking, because it irritated Kate, and bring Kate coffee if she was making one, rather than just leaving it on the bench. And she should really stop snapping, “Turn out the fucking light,” in bed at night, and instead try a hint, say blatant yawning. She should maybe even stop smoking, except that she didn’t really want to, and it was useful at the moment – when Kate annoyed her she had an reason to leave the room without having to think up an actual excuse.

She finished Kate’s nails and had a shower, shaved everything she could think of to shave, and then was back to not knowing what to do. Kate was still reading. She always read more than Jess, seemed happy doing so for hours. Jess tended to flick through books, not as single-minded like Kate, too easily distracted. She seemed to lack a long attention span anywhere but out on the water. She sat and watched Kate and interrupted every so often, which Kate did her best to ignore. Usually just muttered, “I’m reading,” but sometimes, when she was concentrating, she didn’t seem to hear, kind of answered without noticing, so Jess could have a whole conversation Kate wasn’t really part of.

“Are you listening?” Jess would ask.

“Uh-huh.”

“I love you.”

“Uh-huh. That’s good.”

“I want you.”

“Good.”

“Do you want me?”

“Sure.”

“Now?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re not listening, are you?”

And Kate’s attention would snap to Jess, “What?”

Jess would laugh, say, “Nothing,” and Kate, suspicious, would go back to reading.

Sitting inside, dealing hands of cards to herself, Jess started to sniff. She didn’t really notice, just felt her nose run, sniffed, felt it run again. She spent half her life in cold water, and the other half trying to get seawater out her sinuses, blowing her nose, and fighting off weird ear infections. The less sexy side of surfing. There was an ear condition. Everyone who surfed cold water got it eventually, but she had it younger because she’d started earlier and in colder water. The bones inside your ear expanded, kind of spread out so that in the end your ear was full of bone and closed up tight and you were deaf. It was minor surgery to fix, just cutting the extra bone out, but after the surgery you had to stay out the water for two months so she’d always put it off. And slowly losing your hearing wasn’t the worst thing in the world because you didn’t really notice it happening. The bigger problem was the jammed up ears meant she got more ear infections. Discharges and pus and a terrible itchiness up inside her ear. She spent a lot of time poking her ears with bobby pins and taking painkillers, sometimes spent weeks on codeine without really noticing how long it had been. That was life, she supposed, out on the water she was elegance and perfection, and on the beach a sniffing, straggly-haired, itchy-eared troll. The ear problem was usually worse in one ear, depending on prevailing winter winds and the direction you faced most often sitting on your board. Jess’s was worst in her right ear. Kate knew that and had always thought it was funny to whisper so Jess couldn’t hear her. Had never seemed to mind the sniffing either, but suddenly did, seemed to get pissed off, started sighing and looking up and generally showing she disapproved. As though sniffing friends were okay but sniffing lovers weren’t. Jess thought of the things to do differently, and added keeping tissues in the car, beside the bed, and on the kitchen table. She had some in the car, went and got them, but still caught herself doing a disgusting arm-wipe snort thing when she wasn’t thinking.

“Stop it,” Kate said.

“Yeah, sorry.”

“It’s really awful.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry.”

Jess prodded the fire, looked at her cards.

“Fuck,” Kate said, “Would you stop that.”

“What?” Jess said.

“You just sniffed.”

“Did I?”

“You didn’t realise?”

“Ah...”

“You didn’t hear yourself?”

“Um.”

A little later, Kate shouted, “Fuck.”

Jess looked up, realised she had, genuinely hadn’t noticed at the time but could kind of tell her nose wasn’t blocked any more once she thought about it. Kate was looking furious,

like Jess had done it on purpose. Jess was getting a bit sick of the fuss. She wanted to try and be all glamorous and sexy, but Kate knew she couldn't help the sniffing. "Don't be such a whiny little bitch," she muttered.

"What?" Kate said.

"Nothing."

"What did you say?"

"What?" Jess said, over-loud, deliberately.

Kate looked at her for a moment, then stood up and went into the bedroom and slammed the door. She didn't come out until Jess had made lunch and shouted three times it was ready, then she pretended everything was fine. Jess spent the next few hours carefully blowing her nose.

*

The rain got heavier. Kate finished her book, sat there for a while.

"Hey Kate," Jess said. "Do you think we're dysfunctional? As friends I mean?"

Kate looked at her. "Why?"

"We get angry too quickly. And we're pretty mean to each other sometimes."

"I meant why does it matter?"

"Doesn't really. But do you?"

Kate seemed to think about it. "Nah, everyone's like that." She sat for a while, staring at the ceiling. "Do you want to do something?"

"Cards?" Jess said.

Kate shook her head, after a while asked, "Pub?"

"Pool?"

"Oh God," Kate shrugged. "Yeah, why not."

The Awatangi Hotel was a single-story wooden building, white-painted with a green iron roof. It was run down, a little too big for Awatangi, had been built when the town was larger. Inside, the main bar room took up two-thirds of the space, a lounge bar and restaurant the rest. Years ago, when the womenfolk had to drink in out of sight, the distinction had mattered, but now the difference was really only furniture – the main bar had stools and high square tables, the lounge bar chairs and low round tables. There was a deck outside where people ate when the sun was out, and a sheltered corner, beside the stack of empty kegs, where smokers huddled when it rained.

They drove down. Jess had pretty much given up walking around Awatangi when she'd learned to drive. There were three cars in the carpark, and she noticed, despite herself, that none was a white Holden station wagon. She parked as close to the pub door as she could without actually blocking it, but was still several metres away. Other people had already had the same idea.

"Ready?" Jess said. "Remember to lock your door."

Kate's car had central locking and a beeper and sometimes she forgot Jess's didn't. Usually Jess just went back and locked the door. On days like this she didn't.

Kate gave her the finger, and waited.

"Run," Jess said, and flung her door open.

The rain was thick, coming down heavily. The carpark was shingle, potholed, the holes

muddy puddles in the rain. The pub door had been wedged open. Jess feet slid around as she ran, and she had to jump past a puddle, so Kate got inside first. Kate stopped to gloat and pull wet hair off her face while she took off her jacket. Jess ignored her. They were in a short hallway, facing swing doors and a sign saying bar in gold letters. Jess pushed her way in, felt like a cowboy. Almost said it, but didn't. Wanting to impress again.

"Yehaw," Kate muttered.

The pub smelt faintly of stale beer and sweat and grease, had done ever since smoking had been banned indoors. You only noticed when you first went in, then got acclimatised. Your own drink helped cover the smell. It was quiet, still only early afternoon. There was a vacuum cleaner in a corner, stools up on some tables, and only half the lights were on. Jess looked down at the carpet. It was a red square pattern, very busy, lots of little swirls and flowers. Her grandparents used to have the same carpet, and she'd been in half a dozen other pubs that had it too. It had taken her a while to realise why it was so familiar.

Two tables were occupied, both over near the windows. A pair of younger guys sat at one, tourists, maybe foreign, and three older men sat at another, fishermen waiting out the rain. Both groups talked in quiet voices, had jugs of beer. They all looked up when Jess and Kate walked in, then looked away again. From somewhere there was a faint sound of clapping. The TV on the wall, Jess realised after a second. A snooker contest, the volume set low enough the commentary was inaudible and only the applause could be heard. No-one was watching it anyway.

Kate perched on a stool at one of the high square tables. There was a hole in the middle of the table, a plastic plug fitted into it where an ashtray had once been. Kate picked at the plug, seemed to wonder what it was. "Ashtray," Jess said. Kate pulled a face as if to say she'd known that.

"You want a drink?" Jess said.

"Obviously."

"Beer?"

"If we have to."

Jess nodded.

"Hey Jess," Kate said, as she turned away. "Beer in a bottle, okay?"

Jess went over to the bar. It had a brass foot rail underneath. She put her foot up, like she always did, which also made her feel like a cowboy. At one end of the bar was a wall of fishing photos, some faded, others new. As many pictures of sharks as salmon. There was a topomap of the area on the wall beside her, so tourists could get directions to fishing spots without anyone having to move. There was no-one behind the bar. She leaned over, tried to look out the back, couldn't see anyone. She waited.

The pub was run by a married couple who'd been there as long as Jess could remember. Sam was a big guy, quite overweight, but who walked like a bodybuilder rather than waddled. Ann was short-haired and thin-faced and said bugger more than anyone else Jess knew. It was a family place. As far as Jess remembered, Sam's father had run the pub before him.

Ann appeared from out the back, and smiled like she half-recognised Jess. "What'll it be, love?" Ann said.

"A couple of halves," Jess said, and pointed.

Jess turned around. Kate was scowling, made a face once she was sure Ann wasn't

looking.

“Pity about the weather,” Ann said. “You come far?”

Jess said, “Christchurch.” Didn’t want to get into a conversation about family right then.

“With a bit of luck it might stop raining,” Ann said.

No it won’t, Jess thought, but didn’t argue, assumed that got said to everyone. “It’s all right,” she said. “Can’t be helped, you know.”

“Are you staying around here?”

“Yeah,” Jess said, “Maybe.”

Ann put two glasses on the counter. Jess asked for change for the pool table, and Ann turned on the lights down that end of the room.

There were three pool tables in the pub. One of them was a little wobbly, enough that thumping the side when a ball was teetering over a pocket was strategy, not desperation. Jess chose that one, was used to it, and knew Kate wouldn’t remember until it was too late. She didn’t know why, but she wanted to beat Kate at this. She was okay at pool, almost good. Not good enough to play strangers in pubs, but good enough to beat friends over beer. And Kate was competitive, which made beating her more satisfying. Jess won, then won again.

Kate drained her glass, said something under her breath, and went over to the bar. She didn’t come back, sat on a bar stool and started talking to the tourists.

Jess hit the remaining balls around, smashing long shots into corners as hard as she could. She watched Kate out the corner of her eye. Kate was flirting, doing it in the half-assed way she sometimes did, pretending she wasn’t, so she wouldn’t feel self-conscious and rejected if it didn’t work.

Kate finished her drink and bought the tourists a round. She looked over at Jess and raised her glass.

Jess shook her head.

Kate called, “Go on,” and Jess pointed out the window to the car.

Kate shrugged. A bit later she wandered over and tried to get Jess to come and meet the tourists. Jess said she was fine and stuck another dollar in the table. Kate went back to the bar, and Jess racked up the table and started hitting balls around again. One of the tourists came over and asked if she wanted a game. Jess looked up. Kate was watching, had probably sent him over.

“Nah,” she said. “I’m okay.”

“No?” the tourist said. He sounded European.

“No,” Jess said.

The tourist went back to the bar, kind of shrugged at Kate as he went, which pretty much confirmed it for Jess.

Jess played as slowly as she could, tried to miss on purpose, hitting too hard so the balls bounced back out of pockets, but eventually she cleared the table. Kate was still talking. Jess hung up her cue and went over.

“Hey,” Kate said, and seemed pleased to see her. More pleased than she had been all weekend. “This is...”

“Yeah,” Jess said, cut her off. “We should be going.”

“I’m still...” Kate said, and held up a half-full bottle.

“When you’re done,” Jess said, and walked out.

She sat in the car and waited, wondered if Kate would be out in a couple of minutes, or would take an hour. With Kate it was hard to tell. She'd definitely be a minute because she'd have to say goodbye to her new friends, and politeness to strangers was more important than Jess being upset, but she might take longer if she wanted to prove something. Jess's clothes and hair were wet, were steaming up the windows. She turned on the engine, turned up the heater and wiped the side window with her sleeve. It would be a few minutes before the windscreen demisted. She hadn't quite decided if she'd drive off if Kate didn't come out soon, but probably wouldn't. Not at Awatangi, with no way for Kate to phone her and get her back. It would be kind of final.

Kate yanked the door open, got in, slammed it shut. She looked at Jess for a minute, did that same odd, cold stare she'd done the night before, and Jess wondered if she was seriously angry. Then she smiled and said, "What are you, a getaway driver?"

Jess considered for a minute, then shrugged.

"You didn't need to be waiting with the engine running."

Jess pointed to the windscreen.

"Right," Kate said. She'd come outside, had made her joke, but she seemed a little pissed off. Her face was tense, and she wasn't slouching in the seat, was sitting carefully. She started sighing.

Jess waited a while, but knew she'd have to ask in the end. "What's wrong?"

"That was a bit rude. I just wanted to introduce you."

Kate wouldn't make a fuss in public, but she'd let you know how she felt the very second you were alone.

"Yeah mum," Jess said, and decided the windscreen was clear enough. She took the handbrake off and started driving.

"Don't be a bitch Jess."

"Talking to men in bars doesn't have the same end payoff for me, Kate."

"What are you so pissed off about?"

Jess checked the road and pulled out of the carpark. "I just wanted some time with you, that's all. Just us. You didn't need to start flirting with them."

Kate hesitated, then, "Yeah, sorry."

Kate seemed to be calming down, but Jess was annoyed too. "Especially..." she said, and left it hanging. Easy to annoy someone you knew well. Dangerously easy.

Kate didn't answer for a minute. Then, "What does that mean?"

Jess shook her head.

"Especially what, Jess?"

"Nothing." Jess kept her voice calm, happy to be conciliatory now she'd taken her jab. "It just felt like you were being weird because we were there together."

"Weird how?"

"Trying to pick up those guys."

"I wasn't..."

"Yeah, you were."

Kate shrugged. "Okay. But I always try and pick up guys when I go places with you."

"You used to."

Kate just looked at her, didn't seem to understand.

"Shit, Kate. You don't try and pick people up when you're there with someone else."

“I wasn’t there with someone. I was at the pub with you.”

“Fuck you,” Jess said, and changed gear roughly, made the car jerk, sped up a little.

“It isn’t like that.” Kate said. “We’re not like that.”

“So what, no harm done?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Even if it hurts my feelings?”

“Well obviously not if it hurts your feelings. I didn’t know you’d be upset.”

“But that’s the only reason. It’s okay otherwise?”

“Pretty much.”

“And if I’m not there?”

“Shit, I don’t know. I suppose it’s okay then too. What are you so upset about?”

“Nothing’s changed for you because of what’s been happening in the last week?”

“Some things have changed...”

“But not picking up guys in bars?”

“Yeah, not that.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“I don’t know, it just doesn’t. Like it doesn’t if you’re not there.”

“Shit,” Jess looked at her. “Fuck. Why doesn’t that matter?”

“You won’t know. So you won’t be upset.”

“That’s fucking cold-blooded.” Jess suddenly realised she’d been distracted from the main point. “And anyway, I was there.”

“You were.” Kate looked at her, seemed confused. “Um, I’m lost, I don’t remember what this is about any more.”

“It’s okay to give other people the eye if I don’t know about it.”

Kate seemed to be thinking.

“Well, is it?”

“Yep, pretty much.” Kate stopped. “And I’m still lost. What’s wrong with that?”

“Shit.” Jess slowed the car down, got ready to turn onto the baches’ track. “Things have changed.”

“A bit, yeah. But not really that much.”

It seemed almost like a question. “I have no fucking idea,” Jess said.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know what this is. What the rules are.”

“I don’t either.”

Jess changed gear, turned, and started watching more carefully as she drove, going up the track. “I don’t know because you won’t tell me.”

“I’m the one who won’t talk about this?”

“Aren’t you?”

“You don’t want to talk either.”

“Yeah, well,” Jess said, and calmed down a little. “I suppose.”

“Do you want to talk?”

“We could.”

“So tell me what you think this is.”

Jess glanced at her. “Shit, I don’t know. I want to be with you, like a relationship.”

“Oh.”

Kate went quiet. Jess glanced over again saw she was looking worried now. “So I’m assuming you don’t?”

“Um.”

“Shit, Kate, what’s wrong now?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Jess. I just don’t want to go out with you, that’s all.”

“But you’ll fuck me.”

Kate didn’t answer.

“But nothing more.”

“Stop looking snotty. You know this is different.”

“I don’t know that.”

Kate didn’t answer.

“Shit,” Jess said, “I really don’t. How is this different, and to what?”

“Forget it.”

“Kate…”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Just tell me.”

“It’ll hurt.”

“Still.”

“I suppose you’re not someone I’d have a relationship with,” Kate said. “That’s all.”

They pulled up in front the bach. Jess turned off the engine and looked over at Kate. She should have got out and gone inside and let things calm down, but didn’t. She stayed where she was. This seemed like something she needed to know. She waited.

“You’re just Jess,” Kate said. “This is fun, but it’s not…” She stopped.

“Not what?”

“I just mean…”

“What isn’t it?”

“It’s not a relationship or anything yet, that’s all. It’s fun. It’s just sex.”

Jess looked at her.

“Are you okay?” Kate asked.

“I’m fine.”

“Really?”

“Of course I’m fucking not.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Everything’s fine. Except, oh yeah, fuck you too.”

“Jess…”

“Shit, that’s what you just said to me.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Of course not.”

“I didn’t.”

“Whatever.” Jess knew she should stop, but Kate had hurt her, and she wanted to hurt back. “You seemed pretty happy to be eating pussy yesterday, Kate, so don’t get all bitchy at me because you’ve decided you’re straight today.”

Kate got out the car and slammed the door, went up onto the porch and slammed the screen too. Jess had locked the front door when they left, and the key was on the keyring in her hand. Kate seemed to realise, stood on the porch for a minute, then came back to the

car. Jess sat and watched her. Kate tapped on the window.

“Could I have the door key please?”

“I’ll come and open it in a minute.”

“Could you just give me the key?”

“I need it to lock the car.”

“Could you do it now, please?”

“You say please a lot when you’re pissed off, you know that.”

“Hey Jess? Fuck you please. You’re a spiteful, bitter, nasty little bitch and I’m getting sick of your mind game crap all the fucking time.”

Jess looked at her for a minute. Kate looked back, and slowly her expression changed.

“Jess, I didn’t…”

Jess waited just that long, then started the engine.

“Jess, shit…”

Jess turned the engine off again, got out the car. Carefully didn’t slam the door because that had already been done.

“I’ll let you in.”

“Could you stay and talk to me please.”

“No.” Jess pushed past her, went up onto the porch and unlocked the door. When she turned around Kate was standing right behind her.

“You’re in my way,” Jess said.

“I know.”

“Can you move?”

“No.”

“I don’t want to do this now. Could you get out of my way?”

“Not until you listen to me.”

Jess shrugged, didn’t make eye contact. “Okay.”

Kate moved so Jess was looking at her. Jess looked away.

“That wasn’t fair,” Kate said, “And I didn’t mean it.”

“Those were horrible things to say.”

“I was angry.”

“You’ve never called me anything like that before.”

“You’ve never been sleeping with me before.”

“You’re only awful to people you’re sleeping with?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

Jess was a little surprised by that honesty.

“Don’t smile,” Kate said. “It’s true.”

“I’m not.” They looked at each other. “Don’t be a bitch to me,” Jess said. “Please.”

“I’m trying not to.”

“Try harder. That hurt. And I’m not any of that.”

“I know you’re not. You’re not spiteful, or nasty, or bitter, and you don’t play mind games.”

Jess shrugged again.

“And I’m sorry I called you a bitch.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Except I do all the time.”

“That’s different.”

Kate looked at her. “Yeah, I know.”

“So don’t.”

“I won’t. Although I should point out that Barry calls you a chappie dyke all the time and that’s much worse.”

Jess looked at her. “Baz doesn’t mean anything. He says stupid shit all the time and doesn’t think about it. It’s just something he heard somewhere.”

“So for that, he can, but I can’t?”

Jess wasn’t sure, didn’t answer for a moment. It didn’t seem very relevant, but she thought for a moment anyway. “Yeah,” she said. “I suppose so. From Baz it’s just him being him. He doesn’t mean it. You would. And you should care enough not to hurt me. Especially now.”

Kate hesitated a minute, seemed to be weighing up whether to keep going or not. Jess promised herself that this time she’d stop too, if Kate did.

“Yeah,” Kate said eventually. “I know.”

Not sorry, Jess noticed, but definitely calming things down. Kate never said sorry when it really mattered.

“So kiss me,” Jess said, “Show me it’s okay.”

Kate kissed her quickly, pulled away.

Jess looked at her, puzzled.

“Could you give me a minute?” Kate said. “Go inside and let me stay out here.”

“Ah...”

“Just let me calm down, okay. Let me sort out my head?”

“You don’t want to come inside too?” Jess said.

“Not yet.”

“It’s cold out here.”

“I’m fine. Just give me a sec.”

“All right.” Jess opened the door. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I will be. Just a sec, please.”

“I don’t understand what’s...”

“I said something terrible, and I hate myself, and I want to be alone to calm down and forget about it.”

Jess realised Kate was serious. She nodded and went inside and, after considering it, closed the door. Then realised they should have done it the other way around. She wanted a cigarette, should have stayed outside and let Kate go inside.

She was still a little irritated at Kate. If nothing else, for always making everything about herself. Jess had horrible things said to her, but it was Kate who was outside calming down. It was a very strange way for things to be.

She sat down at the kitchen table and waited, and after a while Kate came inside.

“We okay?” Jess asked.

“Yeah, we are now.”

Kate sat down on the couch, looked over at Jess. “Want sex?”

“Not really.”

Jess had never got make-up sex, was usually too hurt by what was said in arguments to want to right away.

Kate came over, tried to kiss Jess. Jess shrugged her away. She tried again, and Jess stood up and went into the bedroom.

Kate followed.

“Hey,” Jess said.

“Hey.”

“What’s up?”

“You tell me. You’re being weird.”

“Yeah, I suppose I am.” Jess nodded slowly.

“You okay now?”

“You hurt me.”

“I know.”

“Okay then.”

“Sorry,” Kate said.

“Yeah, sorry too. I know you weren’t...”

Kate came and sat beside her on the bed, put an arm around her. They sat there for a while.

“Well?” Kate said, “Do you want to?”

“Yeah, all right.”

Jess was a bit reluctant, felt an obligation and still a little unforgiving. Felt worse when Kate got up afterwards and brushed her teeth. Her cigarettes were in her jacket, next to the bed. She rolled over and got them, lit one lying on the bed. Only because it was easy and she didn’t have to move.

Kate came back and said, “Do you have to do that in here?”

“What?” Jess asked.

Kate looked at her, sounded more annoyed. “Smoke in here. Straight afterwards. I have to sleep in here too.”

Jess had already had a couple of puffs, all she really needed. The first was the best. She dropped the cigarette into a half-bottle of water that was beside the bed.

“Now you’ll taste like smoke,” Kate muttered.

Jess just sighed and lay there, let Kate have her post-fuck guilt, or whatever it was. Didn’t say that even if she smelled of smoke at least it was smoke and pussy and she didn’t feel like she needed to wash out her mouth. Thought it, but didn’t say it. Thought that she was the one who’d been hurt, and now Kate was making up something to be upset about so the wrongdoing wasn’t on her, but didn’t say that either. She reached over and stroked Kate’s back and hoped she would take that as a sign all was well, but Kate seemed to be ignoring her.

Chapter Ten

Three good days with Kate and then it all starts to fall apart, Jess thought. It was always

the way. And yesterday had been the last good day for surfing, too. It seemed significant, a rule of life. That weather didn't hold, rain always came, a fine spell turned, and Kate would end up being a bitch. Something to worry about when things were going too well, that the good would soon be over and the balance would tip back the other way.

There was always this latent potential for catastrophe between her and Kate. They were sharp with each other sometimes, but not usually malicious or mean. Now, trapped inside, annoyed at the weather, slightly morose and not quite back from the fight earlier, disaster was looming. Jess could feel it and didn't know how to fix things, and the uncertainty put her on edge.

"What do you want to do?" Jess asked, after coffee, after wine, after putting up with Kate's mid-afternoon reading silence and spending half an hour prodding the fire and adding wood.

Kate shrugged, didn't look up from her book.

"Cards?" Jess said.

Kate didn't answer.

"Kate, cards?"

"I heard you."

"And?"

"Nah."

"Not much else to do."

Kate lifted up her book. "I'm sick of rummy."

"Something else?"

"Nah."

"Snap?"

Kate didn't answer.

"Fish?"

"Jess..."

"Strip poker?"

"The eight of diamonds is missing."

Jess shrugged.

"Besides," Kate added, glancing over, "You're not wearing much."

Kate was dressed, had on socks, jeans, a top and a hoodie, the clothes she'd worn to the pub. Jess was in underwear and a t-shirt and nothing else. She hadn't bothered dressing when she got up because she knew she'd end up sitting next to the fire. She remembered she was meant to be trying harder and felt a little guilty. Then decided not to. She'd only been in bed because she'd let Kate fuck her when she didn't really want to, and had only done that because Kate had started a fight.

"I'm not wearing much," Jess said. "And, so?"

Kate looked up. "You think, do you?"

"I'll still beat you," Jess said, drawing an eight and a diamond on one of the jokers.

"Oh really?"

"Of course," Jess said, completely insincere. Kate had been a bit of a tomboy, had an older brother, and had probably learned poker before she could talk.

"Can't be bothered," Kate said.

"Cause you'll lose."

“Jess, stop it.”

Innocently, Jess said, “What?”

“You think you can trick me into playing.”

“Trick you,” Jess said, shuffled, “I’m not going to trick you.”

“Which means what?”

“Trying to have the last word?”

“I’m not.”

“Whatever you say. No tricks. You’re so fucking competitive you’ll play me in the end if I just keep saying I’ll win.”

“Will not.”

“I’ll win…”

“Won’t.”

“…because I’m better than you.”

“Really?”

Jess stood up and did a little hip-swaying dance. “And because I’m luckier than you.”

“Oh are you?”

“And because I’m prettier than you.”

“Bitch.”

Jess sat down. “Prove I’m not.”

“Not prettier by winning at cards? That’s stupid.”

“That’s the game.”

“Stupid.”

“If that’s what it takes.”

Kate stared at her for a long moment.

“Or not if you don’t want to,” Jess said.

“I don’t.”

Jess shrugged and went down to the beach instead. She took a board, and went out, but didn’t actually surf. The waves weren’t forming properly, so chasing them around the bay would have been a lot of paddling and waiting around for not very much return. She just sat on the board and watched the waves. Felt herself moving with the sea, rising and falling as each wave passed. It was calming, a change from Kate. She was drifting sideways along the beach, but not enough to matter. She watched the seagulls. One hovered above her, watching her in return. She could see mountains through a break in the cloud. She couldn’t be bothered paddling for a bad wave, and wasn’t ready to go back to the beach for the next round of fighting, so she just sat on the ocean and felt peaceful. Sometimes she felt like a water baby – didn’t want to leave the sea, didn’t really like life on land, didn’t want to go back to it, even though she knew that eventually she’d have to. When she did, sitting on the ocean had made her feel better.

Kate’s mood seemed to have improved too. Perhaps she’d missed Jess. While Jess was wandering around looking for dry clothes, she noticed Kate watching her wander. Kind of looking out the side of her eye pretending she wasn’t. Jess got dressed and flopped onto the couch next to Kate, and Kate put her book down and said, “Hey, come here.”

“What?”

“Come here.”

“I’m here.”

“No, dickhead. Come here.”

Jess leaned over, and Kate kissed her. Kissed her, and smiled in a way that made Jess get all breathless, like getting wet except it was her heart. As if this might work out after all. They fought a lot, snapped at each other and hurt each another, and then sometimes, almost despite themselves, it seemed like everything could be good and perfect.

“What?” Kate said.

“Nothing. Kiss me again.”

Kate did.

“Again,” Jess murmured into her mouth.

Kate did.

“And again.”

Kate laughed. “Don’t get greedy.”

“Yeah, okay.”

The fire crackled and a piece of wood toppled onto the hearth. Jess went and got it, poked the fire for a minute, then lay down on the floor near Kate’s feet and looked up at her.

“What one thing would you tell me,” Jess said. “What should I know about you, if we were complete strangers and had only just met?”

“What do you mean?”

“Normally you can’t tell someone you’ve just started sleeping with everything about yourself because they’ll think you’re a dickhead. Basically. But with me you can, so what would you tell me?”

“Shit, I don’t know. A bunch of stuff.”

“Pick one. The most important.”

“Yeah, all right.” Kate went quiet, thinking. “That I have the best friend in the world and I love her more than I ever loved anyone I ever slept with, including her.”

Jess thought about that. “Thanks, I think.”

“Friendship matters more than sex.”

“Yeah,” Jess said. “Yeah, I suppose it does.”

Kate slid onto the floor too, put an arm around Jess’s waist. Jess leaned on her and they watched the fire.

“Hey,” Kate said. “We’ll get there.”

“Hope so.”

“We will.”

Jess nodded.

“This is nice,” Kate said. “The fire.”

“I know.”

“You know what I haven’t done in ages?”

“Many, many things.”

“You know what particular thing I’m thinking about now that I haven’t done in ages?”

Jess shrugged.

“Got a marker pen around here somewhere?”

“Probably. Why?” Jess remembered. “Oh yeah.”

Kate had been arty at school, had used to draw butterflies and dragons and strange little fairies on Jess’s arms and hands. Compensation, she’d said, because Jess was scared of

needles and would never have a real tattoo. Like the toenails, the drawing had stopped without either of them quite knowing why, and like the toenails, Jess could guess the reason. She found a pen in a kitchen drawer and brought it back to Kate, and Kate started drawing on the bare parts of her arms and legs, wherever she could easily reach.

“I missed this,” Kate said.

“Missed drawing, or missed drawing on me?”

“I still draw.”

“Doodles on memos.”

“Not only,” Kate said, but said it like she didn’t really believe it herself, and Jess realised in time not to argue.

“Funny how you stopped,” Jess said. “But I kept surfing.”

“Not really. You’re a lazy-ass slacker and I grew up.”

“Yeah,” Jess said, and glanced over to make sure that was actually a joke. It seemed to be. “Do you wish you hadn’t?”

“Nah. I like having money. Stay still. And food and a roof and shit.”

“You could have managed.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t want to.”

Kate drew henna dots on one of Jess’s hands, drew spiral lines around and up her arm, then made her take off her shirt and drew butterflies on her breasts, lapping at flowers around her nipples. Jess, health-conscious in a way she wasn’t at fifteen, wondered if she should worry about the ink. She squinted at the pen as it passed and it seemed to say non-toxic on the side.

Kate started on her tummy, made her gasp. “Tickles?” Kate asked.

“A bit.”

“Good. Telling me I did my life wrong.”

Jess grinned at her.

“Roll over,” Kate said. Jess did, and Kate started on her back.

“Whatcher drawing?” Jess said, after a while.

“A beach, a woman surfing, a whale.”

“Like a sailor tattoo?”

“Exactly like a sailor tattoo.”

“Except for the woman surfing.”

“A South Sea Island sailor tattoo. Hawaii or somewhere.”

“New Zealand?”

“Yeah, that.”

“Why a whale?”

“There’s always a whale.”

“Seen a lot of naked sailors, have you?”

“Yup,” Kate said, concentrating on her drawing.

“What’s that?” Jess asked, twisting around and looking past her shoulder.

“Sailing ship. Cause it’s a sailor tattoo.” Kate drew another girl on the beach, started on something else. “Keep still.”

“What’s that?”

“Taniwha lurking in the forest.”

“In the forest?”

“Sure.”

“Get me a mirror.”

Kate fetched her makeup compact.

Jess, peering backwards, said, “Looks more like a tiger with a cleft palate.”

“That’s what they look like. Stay there.”

“What you doing?”

“Getting a camera.”

Jess folded her arms across her chest, even though she was lying on her front. She’d sunbathed enough to know small boobs and lifting up on your elbows could mean you were showing more than you meant to. “Ah, why?”

“I want a picture. Of my drawing.”

“Which is on my chest.”

“I thought you didn’t mind people seeing you.”

“Seeing isn’t photographing.”

“Your back then.”

“Be careful.”

“I’m being careful,” Kate took some photos. “Turn over.”

“Fuck you.”

“Please, Jessie, please please? You can put your hands over whatever you don’t want pictures taken of…”

Jess did.

“Except the butterflies.”

“No way.”

Kate took a couple of photos. “Please, Jess.”

Jess looked down. Kind of peeked down under her hands, without lifting them up. “Doesn’t matter, it’s smudging anyway.”

“Oh.” Kate seemed disappointed. “Yeah, never mind. Suppose you must have sweaty hands.”

“Oh really fuck you then. Lots and lots.”

“Hold out your arms.”

Jess did, and Kate took a few more photos.

“Hurry up,” Jess said.

“Stay still.”

“I am.”

“And stop rubbing.”

“It itches.”

Kate gave up, put the camera away, went and got wine instead. Jess waited a while before she got dressed. To let the ink dry, so it didn’t rub off and stain the inside of her clothes, but also because she liked the way Kate was watching her. Kate sat on the couch and got a bit tipsy and watched Jess harder. Jess asked what she was looking at, and she said nothing, and said it in a way that was slightly mocking, slightly smirky, which made Jess think the fight from earlier was completely over and everything was right again. Potentially toxic ink seemed a small price. They finished the bottle, and thought about opening another, then Kate decided she was tired and they went to bed instead. Kate fell asleep reading. Jess didn’t sleep, just lay staring at the ceiling, thinking and remembering.

Remembering, she supposed, because it had been that kind of day.

This thing with Kate, this thing that had become her life, had been going on so long that she sometimes forgot what it was like not to be in love with Kate. She'd known and been aware of it for seven years, since the day in the café when she realised how she felt, but as an undercurrent it had been around for much longer. The earliest moment, the earliest thing she recalled between them, was when they were twelve and Kate had first shaved her legs. She'd shown Jess, and Jess had touched, curious. Touched and stroked. Felt silky-smooth skin warm under her fingers. Kept on stroking, far too long. Kate hadn't protested, had just sat there all thoughtful and watching. Eventually, Jess realised what she was doing and took her hand away, and – as far as she remembered – hadn't thought too much more about it. Only looking back was it significant. There had been something between them after that, because not only had Jess stroked Kate's leg, but she'd stroked Kate's leg and Kate hadn't minded. Jess thought that moment was the salvation of their friendship. The beginning of the salvation. They had a thing to share, a small core on which to build, a secret. Most people lost friends like Kate through inertia, nothing more. They drifted apart, didn't care enough to hold on. Between Jess and Kate there was now foundation, so they didn't drift quite as far, and tried a little harder to get back when they did. It was a little thing, but it was enough.

Two summers after the leg stroking there'd been another moment. At a swimming pool, on the hydroslide, messing around, both launching themselves too soon after the other so they crashed together all the way down. Jess remembered wet skin and wet lycra, its slippery texture strangely sensual. One ride they'd got all tangled up together, had shot out the slide and into the pool with their legs entwined, one of Kate's between Jess's and one of Jess's between Kate's. They'd splashed around, sliding together, neither trying very hard to get free. She remembered floating, looking at Kate with this hot shiver running through her, and realising – from Kate's expression and from the way they were pressed together – that Kate must be feeling it too. After a few seconds they'd drifted apart, and the contact was broken, and they got out the pool. They started climbing the stairs, back up to the top of the slide, and Kate wrapped the hydroslide mat around her torso like she always did, and Jess didn't bother like she always didn't, and as they climbed Jess noticed Kate look at her, just for a second, the way the guys around them were. She hadn't known what to make of that. A few slides later they'd stopped in the tunnel, halfway down, to make a dam, and there was a moment, staring, unmoving, when Kate went still and looked at Jess and waited. Just waited. Jess could still remember the smell of chlorine and warm water and the way sounds were muffled echoes inside the tunnel. She hadn't kissed anyone for real then, and was pretty sure Kate hadn't either. She hadn't known what to do. She'd been scared, terrified of what she was feeling, afraid of losing Kate. Then they'd heard the next person coming down the slide, and the moment was gone. Jess started sliding again, and at the bottom had tripped Kate as they were getting out the pool, just to make something clear – although she wasn't sure what. Sometimes since, she'd wondered how it would have been if they'd started back then, but knew it would probably have been a disaster. They'd have both been all insecure and nervous and trying to keep it a secret. Their school hadn't been especially nasty, but it had still been a school, and Kate would have cared if everyone started calling her names. If Jess was being honest with herself, she probably would have too.

Nothing more had happened until their last year of school. One night after a party, when

Kate was crashing at Jess's house so she didn't have to go home drunk, while mostly asleep, and mumbling drunk, she'd told Jess to stop mucking around and just fucking kiss her. Jess had just laughed. Kate said go on, made it sound a bit like a dare, a bit like she wanted to, and Jess had looked at her for a moment and thought, why not. She kissed, just for a moment, and as she did she realised she'd thought for too long and Kate had gone to sleep. Kate didn't seem to remember in the morning, so Jess hadn't said anything, mostly because she didn't know what to say. She thought a lot though. About what she'd been feeling as she kissed, about why she had, and about how the kiss, and the hydroslide, and a few other things, all fit together. Then she'd had her oh shit moment in the café, and everything had changed. And then she'd waited. For years. Patient and longing and hoping and – when she was realistic – mostly thinking nothing would ever happen. And then, one day, it had.

She lay listening to Kate's breathing, trying to relax. She was having trouble sleeping, was probably thinking too much. That, or she was dreaming about being awake. It happened sometimes, and she could only tell it had when she noticed some inconsistency – rain she remembered that turned out not to have fallen, or chapters of a book she hadn't read. She lay beside Kate and tried to sleep, but eventually gave up. The curtains were open, the moonlight bright. She got up, got dressed, found her clothes easily with the light. She looked around. The room looked sad. Moonlight sucked the colours from the world. The clothes on the floor were puddles of grey, Jess's hair was white, Kate's black, as were the tiny flecks of stubble beneath Kate's upflung arm, dark poppy seeds on pale skin.

She went outside, walked down to the beach. The rain had eased, but probably only for the moment. The ground was wet, the sky smeared with fast-moving cloud. She stood on the beach and wondered what she was doing. If it was worth it. She was beginning to think Kate was just a hopeless, pointless fling. She didn't want it to be, but being realistic, that was probably all it was. Kate didn't seem to want to try – either afraid, or just not interested. And Jess had to, whatever happened, because Kate was all she'd ever wanted. She needed a cigarette, but had left them up at the bach. She thought about Kate drawing on her like she hadn't in years, thought about painting toes and understanding each other and how little the sex actually mattered to what was really between them. She thought how important Kate was to her, and how little Kate sometimes seemed to realise. She would do anything for Kate – anything at all, even give this up if that was what Kate needed – and Kate seemed to think this was just sex and a laugh like any other fling. She didn't know how to tell Kate how she really felt, and didn't know if she should, in case it frightened Kate away.

She looked out into the black ocean. A moon-wake reached towards her across the sea. She looked at it and realised it was later than she'd thought. The moon was almost setting, and it was full, which meant the time was close to dawn. She considered staying and watching the sunrise, but Awatangi sunrises weren't much to see, hidden behind the mountains and usually behind clouds as well. She walked back up to the bach. She heard a truck somewhere on the road, delivering bread or milk or newspapers. Heard it a long way off, but didn't see it. The rain started again as she walked, soaking her. She hung her damp clothes on chairs near the fire, dried herself off, and went back to bed. Kate stirred as she got in, turned and hugged her, and Jess was glad of the warmth and that she was there. The rain started coming down more heavily.

Even after the walk, she lay awake. It was their last day tomorrow. She needed to do something – Kate wasn't going to – but she didn't know what could possibly help.

*

After breakfast, once Kate had her coffee and toast and looked mostly awake, Jess said, "We need to talk sometime today. Not right now if you don't want to, but sometime."

"Yeah," Kate said. "I know."

Jess waited.

"Let's go to the beach," Kate said.

"If you like," Jess said, wondering why, then assuming it was an excuse, avoiding the conversation. "But we do need to talk."

"Yeah," Kate said, "I know."

"When you're ready."

"Not now?"

"Now if you want to."

Kate seemed to think about it. "Nah," she said. "Later."

"Do you actually want to go to the beach?"

Kate thought for a moment, looked out the window at rain. "Nah to that too."

So it had been an excuse. Jess went back towards the bedroom, planned to go back to bed for a while. Mostly just to sleep some more, since she didn't need to be up, but also vaguely hoping Kate might follow her.

"I have been thinking," Kate said. "Just so you know."

Jess stopped and turned around. "Okay."

"I just didn't want you thinking I wasn't."

"I didn't."

"Are you? Thinking?"

"Of course I am. A lot."

"So what is this? What's going on?"

Jess sat down on a kitchen chair, the nearest thing, and looked across the room at Kate. "I really don't know."

"You seemed to, yesterday."

"I want something to be going on," Jess said. "But I don't know if it is. More than mates having sex, I mean."

"Yeah," Kate said. "Okay."

Silence for a minute.

"So I'll be the one who asks," Kate said. "Is something going on?"

"I think so."

"And what is it?"

"I don't know. We kind of need to decide that together."

"You're my friend. We fuck. Does it have to be more than that?"

"It is more than that."

"Not if we don't want it to be."

Jess just looked at her.

"We'll talk later," Kate said.

Jess nodded and went into the bedroom.

“Why’s it so complicated because you’re a woman?” Kate called.

She sounded grave, a little sad. Like all at once she was thinking, and needed someone to lighten her thoughts. “It’s not,” Jess said. “It’s cause you’re a difficult bitch.”

“Oh yeah,” Kate called. “I forgot.” She sounded better, a little more relaxed.

They went back to silence. Jess didn’t sleep, just stayed out of Kate’s way. She sat on the bed and dealt herself solitaire hands and glanced out the window now and then at the weather. When she lent backwards she could see through the door into the lounge. Kate was reading again.

The morning passed slowly. Jess got undressed and got into bed in the hope Kate would join her, would look at her like she had the day before, but it didn’t seem to work. Kate just kept reading. After a while she got up again, got dressed, went outside for firewood and the toilet. She stayed in the lounge when she came back inside. Tried to read, prodded the fire, and wondered about making something to eat.

“I could live over here,” she said after a while, “I’d never really thought of it before, but I think I could. All the time.”

“You’d get bored,” Kate said, only half paying attention.

“Nah, I like it here.”

“For a week, then what would you do?”

“I’d be okay.”

“Jess,” Kate said, and put down her book. “That’s not sensible. You’d miss everyone, you’d need a job, and living here...” she looked around, “This would need electricity... Where would you get food from? What would you do for fun?”

“You.”

“Me what?”

“I could do you for fun. We could both move here.”

Kate laughed.

“You’re not laughing cause that was clever, are you?”

Kate stopped and looked at her. “Um, kind of.”

“Except you’re laughing at the idea of moving here.”

Kate looked away, kind of shrugged. “Sorry. I mean, I know you’re serious, but there’s nothing here. And I have... everything in town. I’m not going to move.”

“It was just an idea. You didn’t need to laugh.”

“And it wouldn’t work. I know you.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Nothing. It just wouldn’t work. Not for me, anyway. A week is fun, but I’m not moving over here.”

“And I’ll change my mind after a week like I do about everything?”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“Yeah you did.”

Kate shrugged.

“You didn’t need to laugh, though.”

“I know, I just...”

“I think I’ll go for a walk.”

“It’s raining.”

Jess went over to the door, picked up a jacket. "Only a little."

"Shall I come?"

"Don't worry."

"Can I come?"

"I'd rather be alone."

"Jeans," Kate said.

"What?"

"You need some pants."

Jess looked down. She was wearing Kate's pyjama bottoms, had put them on an hour ago when she went outside because they'd been the first thing she picked up. She looked around, saw her jeans.

"Jess," Kate said, watching her, "Hey..."

Jess ignored her, got changed, and found her shoes. "Jess," Kate called, then again as Jess went outside. Jess ignored her, slammed the door as she left. Slammed the insect screen too. It rattled rather than crashed, wasn't very satisfying.

It was a miserable day. Rainwater dripped from the trees and ran down her neck, pooled on the ground and soaked her shoes. She reached the beach and found everything was grey – water and clouds and gravel underfoot. The river was up, churning and muddy brown, starting to spill over into the swamp. She stood on top the shingle ridge and studied the bay, hoping to spot changes in wave patterns as the floodwater hit the sea. She couldn't see much more than foamy chop. The water was unsettled. The rips died down when the river was in flood. It changed the currents, acted like a vacuum cleaner, sucking the backwash out to sea all along the beach. That sucking flattened the surf as well, stopped all the breaks in the bay running properly. It was a bad day. Without the rips, paddling out – if she'd gone – would have been a long grind through heavy waves, and wouldn't have been worth it anyway because there was no surf running. She wasn't disappointed she hadn't brought a board.

Surfing at Awatangi was difficult. It took effort to learn, watching the water and studying the waves and noticing how they changed with the weather and the tides, but when it all came together, Awatangi was perfect. Its best wave was a huge ocean swell that swept in from storms out in the Tasman, a smooth, steady wave that barely broke as it ran up onto the beach, right there in front of you. It was rare, one day in sixty if you were lucky, but it was glorious when it happened. More often, most of the time, Awatangi got norwesters and westerlies, sometimes for weeks on end. That meant blowy chop rather than real waves, rain squalls, occasionally a wind so strong a gust could blow you off your board. Jess felt like she spent half her life surfing in the rain, which didn't really matter with a wetsuit on but didn't feel quite as fun. Sometimes the rain got so heavy it closed in like a whiteout, hid the beach and cliffs, left her sitting in a circle of grey sea, unable to see waves coming and having to follow the sound of breaking water to find her way back to the beach. Some days there weren't actually waves inside the bay at all, just choppy water that swirled in circles and went nowhere, and some days the outgoing backwash was so strong it undercut incoming waves and stalled them, so the wave just kind of stopped, which was startling if you were trying to catch it, but easy to see happening once you knew.

Awatangi was complicated, but you got used to that. It was also dangerous, and sometimes it scared Jess that she'd become so careless about a place like this. The waves

were always big, the water freezing, and although she knew the bay, knew where reefs and rocks were, it was easy to drift without realising and get into trouble. The reefs could get nasty. There were a couple on the south side of the bay that had shoals like whitewater rapids at low tides. She'd lost a board in there once, had forgotten her ankle strap so when she came off the board had just floated away. Into the whitewater, and once it was there, she couldn't do anything to save it. Couldn't go in after it, not in water like that, so she just had to swim around and watch while it got bashed to pieces. Worse than the shoals was that, after rain, rubbish washed down the river and into the bay. Some of that rubbish could kill you, like tree trunks and dead cows. Hitting a log at speed would smash the board and – if she got thrown into the trunk – maybe knock her out or get her stabbed on a branch. That was bad, but the dead cows were worse. Those were shark bait like nightmares were made of. She'd seen a carcass twice, and both times had got out immediately and stayed away for a couple of tides. Sharks scared her like nothing about Awatangi. With so few people around, she might be the first to realise a shark was in the bay, and that was something she really didn't want to happen while she was out on the water. She's never seen one, never seen anything suspicious, but she worried, and wore shark-tooth necklaces to keep sharks away. She told people she didn't believe it worked – like everyone else – but she didn't get into the water without one – like everyone else – and the only time she'd lost a necklace while out on the water she'd gone back to the beach and gone home and found another right away. It was a sign. A sacrifice to the sea. The sharks got something instead of getting you. And she didn't believe it – like no-one believed it – except that here, surround by a thousand miles of grey ocean and by waves so high you couldn't see over them in the troughs, she didn't take the risk. She'd always worn one, and had never seen a shark, so maybe it worked.

Walking down the beach, watching the sea, she started feeling better. She'd never really got the hang of trick surfing, had never been able to impress people much beyond being able to stand up, but that was okay because here, this place, she could keep up with the best, and just thinking about it made her feel good. Awatangi was her, and everything about it had shaped how she surfed. When she'd first started, she taught herself from a book because there was no-one else around. She'd stood on the board the way the book said, her right foot at the back. That was fine on the beach, and good for practice, but the breaks on the beach were sheltered, didn't run well very often, and eventually she'd got sick of waiting and gone out to the point. The waves out there were much, much bigger, and like most on the coast, were very directional, always broke to the left. Standing like her book said, on a left-breaking wave, she hadn't been able to see where she was going, and in water that big, so far out to sea, that had been terrifying. She'd gone back to the beach and started again, taught herself to surf with her feet the other way around. It stuck, seemed to have switched something around in her head, and she'd never managed to change back. After that she'd stopped fighting the bay and got used to it instead, did what she needed to do rather than what she thought she ought to. Over time, she came to know it, and to like everything about it. She'd learned reef breaks were easier, once you got past fears about being smashed onto rock, because they were predictable, were always the same at the same point of each tide. And that big waves were better, not just less boring, but powerful enough they could push through bad weather and keep running, if you knew how to look. At Awatangi, the waves weren't wonderful, but they were consistently imperfect. Once you

knew them, you'd find something to surf on. In Christchurch, surfing was more on or off, yes or no, and she got sick of caring about wind and tide and next week's weather, of picking beaches based on thousand-mile-off storms. To a point, she liked the intellectual side to surfing, but only to a point – not when she wanted to surf and the weather got in the way.

She walked down the beach and thought about Kate and wondered what she was doing here. She should go back, she shouldn't leave Kate waiting, but she was. She walked all the way down to the end of the beach, then stood for a while, doing nothing. Even though the surf was crap and it was raining, even though she knew she should make the most of every moment she had left with Kate and time was running out, she stayed. She supposed it was easier. Kate was tiring and demanding, and the beach was home. She was starting to feel worn out. She looked around and thought about the weather and wondered what would happen tomorrow. It was a kind of divination. She'd been doing it all weekend. Telling herself that if the weather was good that meant they'd have a good day, and if it rained they'd fight. She was down here now embracing her inner pagan, looking for omens, as if by being able to guess the weather she might know what to do about Kate. She knew it wouldn't work, but knowing wasn't enough to make her stop.

The three other surfers, the Holden woman from outside the pub and her friends, turned up. They didn't seem to see Jess. She was wearing dark colours and didn't have a car, must just be a smudge away down the beach. She stood still and watched them, didn't really want to be seen. They lined up and studied the water. Talking about whether to bother, Jess assumed. It always happened in groups. You couldn't just do what you wanted once other people were involved, you had to have a consensus. After a while they all got back in their cars and drove off, and Jess started walking again, assuming they'd have gone to the pub. She was wrong. They reappeared after fifteen minutes, must just have gone off for thicker wetsuits or different boards or something. They went out on the water, and were well out by the time Jess reached that part of the beach, so she didn't need to talk. She walked past their gear, ignored the guys and watched the girl and decided skill-wise she was about where Jess was. Good, probably the best of the three because the girl always had to try harder, but perhaps a bit rusty and trading on a lifetime's practice to deal with the water today. But good. She was managing with some really awful water, and doing better than most people. Jess watched, and felt that little tingle again.

Strange as it was, she'd never hooked up with another surfer. She supposed there weren't too many women who were interested, and she usually surfed alone, but it still struck her as odd. She'd always wanted to. She'd seen couples out on the water, one teaching the other or just keeping each other company, and had wanted that too. She'd tried to teach Kate, years ago, wanting to share something she cared about, but Kate hadn't really been interested, hadn't really tried, just thought it was so she'd stop complaining about how much time Jess spent at the beach. It surprised Jess how completely Kate managed to misunderstand her sometimes. She watched Holden woman surf, and missed what she'd never had, and, for a moment, almost resented Kate. And then felt guilty. About watching, about caring how good Holden woman was, and about that tingle most of all.

She went back up to the beach, went inside, snapped, "Sorry," at Kate, and went into the bedroom.

"That sounded sincere," Kate shouted.

“Maybe you should fucking apologise to me,” Jess shouted back.

“Maybe,” Kate said, and went quiet.

Jess let her have her last word. She lay on the bed thinking about dark wetsuits on grey water, and thinking about Kate and lost opportunities. She was starting to feel minutes sliding by, to feel each was something precious being lost. She didn't want to fight, and she really didn't want anyone else, she just wanted a little while to be happy with Kate, and to know Kate was happy too, and that something might be happening here. She lay there and thought and after a while, exhausted after being up half the night, she went to sleep.

She woke up when Kate came into the bedroom. It was dark outside. She must have been asleep for several hours. The room was dim, shadowed in the corners the lanterns couldn't reach. Kate sat down on the edge of the bed, but stayed silent until Jess said, “Hey.”

“We're fighting more,” Kate said.

“Yeah, I know.”

“I think because I've been feeling like I have to decide something.”

Jess looked at her. Sat up and leaned on the wall. “Maybe.”

“I hate that kind of pressure.”

“I know.”

“It makes me feel... trapped.”

“Katie, I know. I know you. I understand.”

“Yeah.” Kate smiled.

“We have to talk,” Jess said.

“Yeah,” Kate said. “Yeah, I know.” She was quiet for a while. “Do you remember that first night?”

“Of course.”

“I was just thinking about it.”

“It was good,” Jess said.

“It was.”

“Thank you,” Jess said. Meant thank you for saying so, for giving her some hope. Kate smiled like she understood without needing to be told.

They sat quietly for a while.

“I love you,” Jess said, “I mean, I really, really love you.”

“I know,” Kate said, “I know. I love you too, but maybe...”

She stopped, looked around, seemed helpless. Jess waited, and felt like she couldn't breathe.

“Maybe not in the same way,” Kate said. “Maybe only as a friend. My closest, dearest friend...”

“But a friend.”

“Yeah,” Kate said.

“Oh fuck, Kate...” Jess's mouth went dry, and she suddenly found she couldn't talk.

Kate was looking at her strangely. “Hey,” Kate said. “Hey, it was only maybe.”

Jess felt sudden hope.

“Nothing's decided,” Kate said.

“Okay.” Jess thought. “You don't have to decide anything.”

“I'm not.”

“That's okay.”

“I’m not deciding yet. Just... not yet. But be ready in case.”

Jess looked at her.

“I don’t know why,” Kate said. “Just in case.”

“In case you break my heart?”

“Jess...”

“That’s what you mean, though.”

“Don’t be like that.”

“I’m not being like anything, I’m just asking.”

Kate looked at her.

“I’m really not,” Jess said. She felt a little bit hurt, a little bit angry, mostly just empty.

Kate leaned over and tried to touch her, but Jess rolled onto her side, out from under Kate’s hand.

“I’m tired,” Jess said.

“Yeah, right.”

“I am. Could I sleep a while longer?”

She closed her eyes. Kate sat there for a while. Watching, Jess assumed, being worried. Kate seemed uncertain. Jess stayed still, knew Kate would realise she wasn’t asleep, but hoped by ignoring her, by pretending, she could make Kate go away. She bit her hand, bit into the fleshy part of her thumb, to stop herself sobbing.

After a while Kate stood up. “I’ll go and make something to eat,” she said. “Come through when you’re ready.”

*

Jess lay for a while, thinking and trying not to cry. Kate made some cooking noises, then went quiet, had probably started reading again. It was tempting to stay in bed, to hide, but Jess sat up. There were things she needed to know, and probably some things she ought to say. And she should find out how Kate felt, and what Kate wanted.

Kate was at the kitchen table, reading, with a glass of wine. Jess sat down and poured herself one too. Back at a kitchen table, she thought, where it all began. There was a pot on the stove, but the gas was off. Kate glanced at it when Jess walked in.

“Waiting for me?” Jess said.

“Yep.”

“So in there,” Jess said, and looked towards the bedroom. “What was that?”

Kate shrugged.

“Yeah,” Jess said. “I know.”

“You okay?”

“Maybe.”

Kate nodded slowly. “So,” she said. “I was thinking. We should have a couple of rules.”

“Rules.”

“Of course. This is me.”

Jess smiled a little, because that was what Kate wanted her to do. “What kind of rules?”

“For when we’re back in Christchurch.”

“Do we have to?”

“Yep.”

“We can’t just see where things go without actual rules?”

“Not a chance. Rules.”

“Okay,” Jess said.

“Shall I tell you?”

“In a sec.” Jess went quiet for a moment, thinking. “I love you. I love you a lot. But.... I can’t quite describe this. It’s like a patient love, so it’s okay that you don’t feel it as much. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, it kind of does. And I’d hoped I might feel more how you wanted me to. After a while.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean, I love you too. Just maybe not as much as you’d like.”

“I know.”

“I am sorry it isn’t more. Isn’t more yet.”

“I know that too.”

“I don’t want to lose you as a friend. I don’t ever want that. To even risk losing you.”

“That’s what people always say,” Jess said, “That they don’t want to risk the friendship. But then they do. Risk it, I mean. Not lose it.”

Kate looked away. At the stove. “I made pasta,” she said. “Do you want some?”

“Not now.”

Kate looked like she wanted to be offended, but wasn’t really. “Okay.”

“What’s wrong?” Jess said.

“Nothing.”

“This feels like we’re breaking up or something.”

“Sort of. But not a breaking up since we’re not an it to start with.”

“Yeah.” Jess looked around, went quiet. “I don’t know what to do here,” she said. “What to say.”

“Same.”

“What do you want?”

“Not to lose your friendship.”

“I meant what are your rules?”

“I don’t know. Not rules exactly. I just don’t want to tell people or anything like that. I don’t want anyone to know.”

“Okay.”

“That includes my flatmates.”

“Yeah, okay. So whatever we do we do it at my place.”

“And I’m not sure what that’ll be. It’ll be different at home, with everything... normal, around.”

“Yeah, okay, if that’s what you want.”

“Is that all right?”

Jess shrugged, “What else can I say?”

“Don’t be like that.”

“I’m not being anything.” Jess stood up, went and looked in the pot. “Are we done?”

“We can talk as long as you want to.”

“Nah, I’m done.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

Kate just looked at her. “I’m here if you need me,” she said after a while.

No you’re not, Jess thought, and you never will be again. She felt angry, betrayed, but also surprisingly calm, enough she hid what she was thinking. The worst hadn’t happened, and that was something. Kate was being difficult, but she wasn’t saying no, so there was still a chance. Jess lit the gas, started warming the pasta. Then she turned around. “Are you actually hungry?”

“Not really.”

“Me either.” She turned off the gas, turned around. Kate was watching her. “So, you want to do something else?”

“Maybe. Like what?”

“Like fuck. All night. In case we never do again.”

Kate seemed to be thinking that over. “Yeah, okay.”

“We don’t have to.”

“Nah, it’d be nice.”

“Good.”

Kate was still looking at her. “Hey Jess,” she said, “I was meaning to tell you. I like the sex, okay?”

“Oh.” Jess was surprised. “Yeah, okay. I hadn’t really realised.”

“You didn’t?”

“How would I?”

“No reason to. Except if you, you know, asked. Or we talked. Like normal people. Or you paid attention to all the shrieking and moaning and shit.”

“Oh yeah, that.”

“So yeah. Just saying. So you know. It’s just everything else I’m not sure about.”

“Okay,” Jess said. “So, um, you want to…” she glanced towards the bedroom.

Kate stood up. “All night, was it?”

“Yep. Until I break you.”

“Big talk.”

“Oh, big do.”

“Yeah, and fuck you too, Jess. Whenever you’re ready. Bring it on.” She went through into the bedroom.

“Last word,” Jess called.

“God, shut up.”

Jess watched her undress through the bedroom doorway and couldn’t quite work what she was feeling. Hurt, but also not. She got up and turned off the lanterns and went into the bedroom too. Nothing was really resolved, which wasn’t what she’d wanted for their last night, but it was enough. The sex was sadder than usual, more yearning, even with Kate egging Jess on to keep going all night. Jess kissed Kate all over, tried to remember every part of her, how she felt and looked and tasted. She cried, seemed to each time she started thinking too much, but told Kate she wasn’t, even when Kate said she could feel tears on her skin. They didn’t last all night, despite Kate trying – despite Kate pinching Jess once to keep her awake – but they were at it a long time, and Jess was glad they’d tried. The effort, doing something a bit silly, seemed to make them closer again.

Jess woke first, very early. She didn’t move, lay beside Kate, listened to the dawn

chorus, and watched dawn melt into the room. She thought she might have been holding Kate all night. She'd woken up in the same position they went to sleep in. When she could see well enough to make out Kate's face, her bruised lips and closed eyes and a half-smile on her face, Jess kissed her and whispered, "Wake up, it's time to go."

Kate mumbled and rolled over.

"Hey," Jess said. "Wake up."

Kate opened her eyes and looked puzzled, then said, "Hey," and, "Oh yeah."

"You want a shower?"

"Yeah, okay."

"Breakfast?"

Kate smiled and touched Jess's face. "Yeah," she said, "Maybe."

Jess got up, got started tidying the place up. She needed to pack up the gear they'd brought with them, and put everything else back in the right cupboards. Sweep the floors and take the ash out the fire and get the coffee rings off the table. Kate stayed in bed for most of it, and Jess didn't really mind, wasn't feeling much like company. She took Kate coffee and pushed her into the shower, and got everything done before Kate was really awake. They locked up and drove away, and didn't talk much in the car, either. Jess gave Kate space, let Kate decide how to do this, and Kate seemed happy to stare out the windows at the trees. It felt like something was over, some adjustment back to normal life was being made. Jess didn't like it, but didn't really know what else she could do but go along.

Chapter Eleven

Holidays always seemed to end too suddenly, before you were ready. You were somewhere, and then you were home, and there wasn't enough time to adjust in between. After several days on the coast, Jess almost couldn't face the idea of going home at all. It felt like something fragile was about to be disrupted.

She dropped Kate off at her flat, like any other time they'd been away together, dropped her off in the street and waited to make sure she got inside. Except that this wasn't any other time. It felt like Kate should ask Jess in, should say something more than just goodbye, but that wasn't Kate. Sappy farewells after dirty weekends just weren't her thing. They kissed quickly. Kissed, even though Jess had half expected Kate to avoid it.

Kate got her bag out the back, leaned back in the passenger-side door. "Okay," she said, "Um, thanks."

"Yeah, no problem."

"Still, thanks. For being patient and everything, you know. It was fun."

Jess was surprised. She couldn't help noticing it was happening a lot, like maybe she didn't know Kate as well as she thought she did. "Really?"

"Yeah, really. I had a good time."

It all seemed so normal, Jess wondered if she was being odd herself. “This is weird,” she said.

“Yeah,” Kate said.

And Jess didn’t know what else to say.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” Kate asked

Jess nodded.

“Call me at work. We can have lunch or something.” She leaned in, one knee on the passenger seat to reach, and kissed Jess. “Hey,” she said, “Don’t look like that. Not so glum.”

“Didn’t know I was.”

“You were.” Kate backed out of the car. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Jess felt an explanation was needed. “Just tired, I suppose.”

“Me too.” Kate gave a quick little wave, shut the car door, and walked up her driveway.

Jess went home and brooded. She missed Kate. A quick goodbye wasn’t enough after five days together. She felt mopey and dark all evening.

*

Kate’s work depressed Jess. An insurance company’s call-centre, cubicles and fluorescent lights and small grey desks, and everyone Kate talked to was angry or worried or both. Kate saw it as a short term thing on the way to management, but Jess wasn’t so sure. There seemed to be a lot of people at Kate’s level thinking that. Saying so annoyed Kate, frustrated her. She wanted Jess to be supportive of what she did. The one time they’d talked about it properly they’d almost had a huge fight. The big end-of-friendship fight they’d never quite had. Neither wanted it, and they’d both been able to feel it starting to happen, so had backed away. After that, office gossip seemed safer, or just not talking about work at all.

They met outside Kate’s work at lunchtime. Right outside Kate’s work, in the middle of the day, potentially a hundred people who knew Kate within sight. Suddenly Jess wasn’t sure how to say hi, whether to kiss or not. She hesitated, thinking of Kate’s rules, let the moment drag on. Kate gave her an odd look, said “Hi,” and walked off down the street. They went to a cafe, the nearest one to Kate’s work, and as they sat down Jess realised that might be a problem as well.

“Are you okay?” Jess asked after a minute, but Kate just gave a tight little shake of her head and flicked through a magazine.

They shouldn’t have met during the day. Kate couldn’t switch off her work persona for a half-hour lunch.

After a few minutes Kate put the magazine down. Their food came. Kate looked around and Jess had a nasty suspicion she was checking for people she knew. “How are you feeling?” Kate asked.

“Yeah,” Jess said. “Fine. Tired.” I missed you in my bed last night, she wanted to say.

Kate seemed distracted, nervous, like Jess might suddenly stand up and shout that her pussy tasted good. She started talking about someone she worked with who might be promoted which might create an opening.

“That’s good,” Jess said.

“Yeah, how’s work for you? The hours thing?”

“Same as, I suppose. I’m on the way now.”

“Oh yeah.”

Kate should probably have known that. She knew Jess’s timetable, and it didn’t change that much. She just pretended not to because she was a snob and friends with rostered hours were a little beneath her dignity – even though doctors worked rostered hours. Jess watched Kate eat, watched her lips, remembered what they’d been doing a day ago. Kate talked about something she’d watched on TV the night before and Jess said she’d gone to bed early.

“And you’re still tired today?”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“Yeah, it’s noisy in town once you get used to the quiet.”

Jess nodded.

Kate seemed to be making conversation. “Did you surf this morning?”

“Just stayed in bed.”

Kate looked disapproving. She sort of respected the obsession with surfing because it meant passion, and passion was good. Jess the slacker staying in bed all day was different. Jess watched Kate trying to think of something else to talk about, could see the indecision on her face. After a minute, she talked about shoes. Hers were pointy and new and didn’t hurt. Jess didn’t listen, just sat and tried to feel glad she was there. After ten minutes she couldn’t stand it any more. Not watching Kate try and deny everything that had been there between them a day ago. She stood up, she said she had to get to work. She didn’t know whether to kiss or not so she didn’t, just stood up and walked out the café. At the door she changed her mind, turned around, walked back.

“Hey,” she said.

Kate was reading magazine again, didn’t see her coming. The coffee machine made a grinding noise just as Jess spoke, so Kate didn’t hear her.

“Hey,” Jess said again, and touched Kate’s shoulder.

Kate jumped, said, “Shit,” then, “Sorry.”

“What are you doing tonight?”

“Tonight?” Kate looked at her. “Nothing, I don’t think.”

“Want to do something?”

“Okay, sure.”

“Thank you.”

“Um, why?”

Jess shook her head.

“Was that...?”

“Yeah, I have to go.” Jess kept standing there.

“Bye,” Kate said, and seemed faintly bemused.

“Can I kiss you?” Jess said. “Goodbye, like I normally would?”

“Um...” Kate said, and looked around.

“Never mind,” Jess said, and walked out again. And this time stayed away.

*

Jess went to work. It was work. Faintly depressing, in that she was swapping time she'd never have again for money she didn't care much about, and otherwise just dull. It was a suburban video rental shop, the kind of place nobody expected much. You vacuumed the floor and put the returns back vaguely near the right place, and didn't bother with too much else. If something it was lost it was lost, and everyone spent a lot of time smoking out the back. She leaned on the counter and half watched the trailers loop on the in-store screens and waited. It was something she'd learned sitting on the water on a board when the waves weren't coming, just to put herself in a trance and wait. There was the odd customer, people dropping off last night's new releases, but not many. The rush was later when people stopped on the way home from work.

She wondered what to do. A week ago she'd had a full-time job, although not on paper. They'd offered to make her full time, but she'd stayed on rotating shifts so she had time free to surf. Kate had always nagged her to get the details of her contract sorted out, but she never had, and now she was being shafted for being lazy. Twenty hours a week wouldn't be quite enough to pay her rent, and it would be probably be easier to get a whole new job than keep this and get half of another. She'd pointed this out to her manager, and he'd said he'd be sorry to lose her, but what could he do, and she had a month before the new rosters came out to think about it. There'd been an upside. She'd played on his guilt to get the time off to go to Awatangi.

She could probably find another job if she needed to, one like this, pretty simple and basic. Work wasn't something she needed to enjoy too much or wanted hassles organising. It just filled in time. She'd once tried working in a surf shop, assuming it was good to work around something you liked, but had found she couldn't switch off real life with constant reminders there were better places to be than here – like out on the water with that board, wearing this wetsuit, surfing like in that poster. That had been a lesson. She'd left after a few days. She'd tried fast food and clothes shops and waitressing, and retail was retail, all pretty much the same. All she needed was flexible hours and some natural light. Staff discounts on things she'd probably never buy didn't matter. It wasn't saving the world, but at least people ended up a little happier for the shop being there, unlike Kate's insurance company.

Thinking about it all, she started to realise that work wasn't really the problem. Although didn't dislike her job, and didn't particularly like it either, it wasn't that. She didn't like much in her life, wanted, pretty simply, not to be in Christchurch. She wanted to be on the coast, surfing, away from everything here.

Kate phoned about six. She knew Jess could answer her mobile at work. "Hey," she said, "Look, I'm sorry, but I have to work tonight..."

Jess listened, heard traffic noise. "Sounds like you're at the bus stop."

"Yeah," Kate said, "Work to do at home."

Jess was disappointed and annoyed, but didn't argue.

"My bus is coming," Kate said. "How about tomorrow night?"

"Sure," Jess said, "See you," but Kate had already hung up.

After work, Jess went out to Taylor's for a surf. She missed Kate that evening. More than the night before. Perhaps feeling a little betrayed, when earlier she'd still been hoping things might be different. Without Kate around, she daydreamed about Awatangi.

*

The next day Kate rang and asked if she was still coming over or had Jess made other plans. Asked almost like she hoped Jess had. Jess said no, come over. Kate usually came to Jess's because Kate had flatmates and Jess didn't. They lay on Jess's bed and shared a bottle of wine and got tipsy. In the bedroom because that was where the TV was, and lying on the bed because it was the only place to sit. During an ad break, Jess rolled over and tried to kiss Kate.

"Not here," Kate said. "Not in Christchurch."

Jess looked at her.

"I told you."

"I thought you meant sex."

"If we start kissing now, we'll have sex."

Jess shrugged.

"It's true."

"Maybe, but ..."

"I did say."

"I know... but no kissing?"

"Nope."

"No-one will know."

"Not the point. And what the fuck does that mean?"

"Do you not want to? Or do you just think someone will tell you off if you do?"

"Yeah," Kate said, "Or you can be a bitch."

"Am not."

"Are too."

Kate turned her head and stuck out her tongue. Jess tried to kiss her again. For a moment Kate kissed back, then rolled her head aside, stared upward, breaking the kiss.

"I'm really horny," Kate said. "And I do want you. And it doesn't help knowing that I can have you any time I want. But I don't want to, not here."

"Have me any time you want?"

Kate just laughed.

"Yeah," Jess said. "Maybe. So do something about it. Get yourself off. If you don't want me to do it for you."

"Yeah, right."

"I'll just watch."

"Nah."

"Try."

"I can't."

"Dare you. I will too, if you want."

Kate looked sideways at her. "That's just sex, isn't it? If we're both at it."

"It'd be hot," Jess said. "Don't be embarrassed."

"No."

"Go on."

"Nah."

"Why not?"

“Just nah. Stop nagging. Maybe another time.”

“Yeah, okay.” Jess sat up. “What then? A movie?”

“What’d you bring home?”

“Um,” Jess went and got them, held them out. “Just some new releases. The ones more people had been getting out.”

Kate took them, read the backs of the boxes, and said, without looking at Jess, “No promises about tomorrow, okay? Maybe we do, maybe we don’t.”

“Yeah,” Jess said, “I know.”

And that seemed to be the end of the sex. Jess wasn’t completely upset. She wanted more from Kate, didn’t want too many fuckbuddy habits developing, didn’t want Kate inviting herself over when she was horny and offering nothing the rest of the time. It would be too easy – with Kate wanting secrets and Jess feeling as she did – for it to end up like that. And that would be too complicated. Kate seemed to need a cold-blooded switch between friends and sex, and Jess really didn’t know she could handle sitting there watching TV when she still had the taste of Kate in her mouth.

They watched a movie, and Jess put her arm around Kate, and when the movie was over Kate went home.

*

Life was worse in Christchurch. Not harder or more irritating, just worse. She suspected it would be so in any city, but Christchurch got the blame because it was the only one she knew. Even when she was happy, it was a miserable place, somewhere to tolerate rather than enjoy, and when she was down, it was unbearable. A world full of strangers, none of whom cared. That feeling of isolation bothered her sometimes. She didn’t mind being alone – she spent half her life alone, out on the water – she just minded being alone in a crowd. She wanted to leave Christchurch, hoped somewhere bigger or smaller, or anywhere else, would be different, but she couldn’t. Because of Kate. Kate was happy in Christchurch. Kate was from up north, where golden beaches awaited golden people and hoping was something other than just exhausting. She’d never felt trapped somewhere she hated.

Jess had once seen people watching a suicide attempt. Just standing around and watching. Someone was making a terrible decision, working out whether they could go on, and strangers beneath them were shouting “jump”. Strangers who didn’t care. They shouted jump because they were heartless and shallow and didn’t believe they would ever end up where that person was, and because, in a crowd, they could – there were too many people for the police to find the shouters. All they wanted was a thrill, a moment to talk about back in the office. A car crash or someone’s skirt blowing around or someone spilling their food, anything. A suicide, if that was what there was. Jess had looked around her, at the watching faces, and had wondered about these people. Wondered what had turned them into this. She hadn’t stayed, hadn’t wanted to see. She’d walked off wondering if this was a Christchurch thing, or a city thing, or just that half the people in the world were complete shits. She’d never worked it out, but thinking about that day made her want to escape. She’d been promising herself for years and never quite getting around to it, but every time she thought about that day it made her determination a little stronger. She was afraid she’d lose something of herself if she didn’t get away, the part that said it wasn’t okay to encourage

other people's despair just because you were in a crowd. The part that wasn't so sick of her own life that she just didn't care any more. She needed to hold on to the part of her that had become angry, and she knew if she didn't leave soon, she never would.

She realised she was going after being back a few days. There were a lot of reasons. That whatever this was with Kate, it didn't seem to be helped by being home. That they'd been happier in Awatangi – and if she was back in Awatangi, Kate might come over to see her, and then they might be happy again. That leaving town would give some space, without having to say to Kate that they needed space. Most of all, that she'd always run from problems, and it usually seemed to work.

She wondered how hard it would be to organise, and how complicated it would get with Kate. She'd need a job, although not very much of a job if she was at the bach and not paying rent. She realised after a while she was trying to talk herself out of something, and failing to, which pretty much meant it was the right thing to do. She got the phone and sat back down, got up again for cigarettes and a bottle of wine. She drank a glass, all in one go, quickly, then sat beside an open window and phoned work.

She asked for the supervisor and asked him for time off. He said no, that she'd just had a week.

"It's an emergency."

"Sure, Jess, it always is."

She bit her tongue, didn't ask what the fuck he meant by that. She had a feeling it wasn't her particularly, that he meant everyone.

"Please," she said, "This is really important or I wouldn't ask."

"You just had a week, and with no warning."

"I know, and now I just need a couple more days. What if I find someone to cover for me?"

"You know you can't do that." Because it risked someone accidentally working more than thirty-five hours a week and getting overtime.

"So when can I?"

"Next week?"

"Definitely next week?"

"Jess..."

"This is really important."

She was on the brink of resigning then, just saying so and hanging up. Perhaps he could tell. "Okay," he said, "Next week."

They didn't want her working full-time, but still wanted her around. Training someone new was a nuisance, even if it only took a couple of hours. She'd always worked for people with this kind of self-absorption, people who didn't seem to understand their little businesses weren't the most important thing in their employees' lives. She'd learned how to deal with them – had always known, really, because high school teachers were the same – they just wanted their authority recognised, wanted to think you cared. You acted like you did, and you got away with more because they thought you were one of the good ones. You played a little on the friendship they always thought you had. "Monday until Thursday?" she said, "Please?"

He sighed. "Yeah, fine. Monday until Thursday."

"Thank you."

“Yeah, well. Only because I feel bad about what happened with your hours. Don’t let me down on this.”

“Thank you,” she repeated. Repeated on purpose, avoiding making any promises she wouldn’t keep. She didn’t like him much, but she wasn’t going to lie to him.

She’d use those four days to find a job on the coast, get herself sorted out. Best to hold off, not do anything final until she had other work sorted out. Kate should be proud of her.

She had another cigarette and refilled her wine glass, then rung her aunt and uncle. She got her uncle, would have preferred her aunt, but couldn’t ask without being rude. Hans and Maria didn’t have any kids and had always been close to her. She’d stayed at their place when she was a kid, sometimes gone over to the bach with them to give her parents a break. They’d told her quietly, at her twenty-first party, that they were leaving his half of the bach to her, so long as she promised never to sell it. Made her promise right then, even though from their grins they knew she was pissed and stoned and not really making sense. There was a legal thing too, if she broke the promise. She’d signed a letter saying she agreed to the condition. She liked them, liked them so much that sometimes, nasty as it was, upset as they’d be as if she ever said it out loud, she almost wished she’d been their daughter. She rung them first, before her parents, because they’d be much easier to deal with.

Hans asked how she was, and she said, “Yeah.” He asked what she’d been up to and she said, “Not much.”

“You want Maria?”

“Nah, you’ll do.”

“What’s up, Jessie?”

“You know.”

A slight pause. She heard something metal clang – maybe a pot lid – like he’d just put something down and was paying attention now. “Tell me.”

“Just the usual.”

“Ah...” He did the ah thing too. Her father didn’t, but she’d picked it up from her grandfather and Hans. “The usual being...?”

“Not the girls thing,” Jess said, “Not the work thing.”

“Good and good.”

“Did you hear I lost my job? Lost hours at my job, I mean.”

“Are you okay for money?”

“Should be.”

“Is that why you rang...?”

“I wouldn’t ring just to ask for money.”

“Course not. But what do you want? I’m cooking.”

“I don’t know. I just don’t think I can stand Christchurch much longer.”

“Fair enough.”

“I think I need to get away for a bit. Maybe to the bach.”

“Seems like a good idea.”

“Yeah, I can’t think of anywhere else. I wondered if I’d be able to use it over summer.”

“Long as you don’t mind sharing if anyone turns up.” Family friends sometimes used the bach, and occasionally it was let out.

“No problem. And I can clear off if need be.”

“Probably shouldn’t need to. I wanted to go up north anyway, and we can keep friends

away, no loaners this year. It'd just be us or your parents if anyone did."

Jess's parents probably wouldn't go if they knew she was there. Hans and Maria definitely wouldn't, for the opposite kind of reasons. "Thank you," Jess said, "Thank you so much for this. I can't tell you. Best uncle ever."

Hans hesitated a moment. "Sounds like something's up. Anything else you want to talk about?"

"Not really. Just things getting a bit much."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"You already have."

"Yeah, okay." There was another clang, and this time he said, "Bugger."

"I should let you go," Jess said.

"Okay, no worries. You want me to tell your parents? Save you dealing with it?"

"Thank you," Jess said, "Oh God, thank you so much."

"Yeah, no worries. Needed to give them a call anyway."

She said goodbye and hung up and poured another glass of wine and thought to herself that it all seemed to be coming together.

She rang Kate. The hardest call. Kate said, "Hey," and she said, "Hey," and Kate talked about work for a moment, until Jess interrupted and said, "I'm thinking I might move over to Awatangi for a while."

Kate went quiet. Jess couldn't decide what reaction was best – Kate being horrified and missing her, or knowing her well enough to realise this was something she had to do.

"Are you at home?" Kate said after a minute.

"Um, yeah. I'm calling from..."

Kate must have looked at her phone's screen. "Oh yeah. Stay there, I'll come over."

"Okay," Jess said, and hung up.

Twenty minutes later Kate knocked on her door.

"Awatangi," Kate said, as she walked in. Jess handed her a glass. "Thanks."

"Yep."

"To live?"

"Yeah, just for summer."

Kate looked at the glass, at the bottle. "Are you pissed?"

"Not really."

"And is that anything to do with this?"

"Nope. I mean, I decided this afternoon. Then I drank to organise it."

Kate sat down. "What about me?"

"What about you?"

"What will I do if you're not around?"

"Wank?"

"I mean without my best friend around, you heartless dickhead slacker bitch."

"Oh, right. That's sweet."

"And fuck you. Summer?"

"Summer I suppose. A few months."

"What'll you do?"

Jess shrugged. "Find a job. I hadn't really thought about it."

"Are there jobs over there? I thought unemployment..."

“In the shop or cleaning motels or something.”

“Cleaning... God, Jess.”

“If I have to.”

Kate still looked horrified. “When are you going?”

“Saturday, I suppose.”

“Shit, that’s soon.”

“I know. I just decided.”

“You didn’t want to talk to me?”

“I just decided.”

Kate seemed to be thinking. She sipped her wine, looked at Jess. “It might be good for you to get away for a while. The coast is nice.”

“You won’t miss me?”

“I’ll miss you, but you won’t be that far away.”

“Suppose not.”

It felt a little wrong. Jess had hoped for more, tears and misery and declarations of how much she’d be missed.

“Hey,” Kate said. “You all right?”

“Everyone seems to be asking me that lately.”

“Well...?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. Just that nobody seems to mind that I’m going.”

“I mind. I just don’t want to get in the way of you doing what you need to do.”

Jess got up for more wine. “But you do mind?”

“Of course I mind, Jess. Shit, I’ve never been away from you at all. Not ever.”

“Except holidays.”

“Except holidays, but that’s only like a week. You’ve never lived somewhere else. Not since I was four.”

“You really mind?” Jess asked. Kate didn’t answer, and when Jess looked over, she was surprised to see Kate crying and nodding at the same time.

“Hey,” Kate said, sniffing, “Look what you made me do.”

“You’ll miss me?”

“I’ll miss you. It won’t be the same.”

“Hey, I won’t be that far away...” And Jess started crying too. “Shit,” she said.

Kate wiped her face, looked around and found some tissues. She blew her nose and looked over at Jess. “Okay.”

“Okay what?”

“If this is what not fucking does to you, let’s fuck.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, why not. I haven’t shaved anything and my feet probably smell, but I’ve been horny like... I don’t know, like I’m so horny I can’t think properly since we got back and it’s getting kind of annoying. So let’s.”

“I’ll still probably go.”

“Of course you will. Shit, I didn’t mean that.” She seemed to think that over. “Did you think telling me you’d move might...”

“No.”

“You sure? Seems like something you’d do.”

“Fuck, Kate, no. I want to go. I’ll miss you and everything, but... kind of fuck you for saying that, though.”

“Yeah, okay.”

They looked at each other. Jess could feel a fight almost there, didn’t want it. “So,” she said. “Horny?”

Kate smiled. “Course I am.”

“And you want to, now?”

“Yep. Go change the sheets and find the candles.”

“Yeah, okay.” Jess stood up. “Um, you don’t really want me to...?”

Kate just looked at her, then stood up too. “I will miss you,” she said. “More than I can imagine.”

“I know. Me you.”

“So make the next few days count, okay?”

“I’m not going forever. Even if I do move, this is just a few days, and then I’ll be back for a bit.”

“Yeah, and then you’ll go again. So make the next little while count.”

“Yeah,” Jess said. “Okay,” and promised herself she’d try. “So, horny.”

“Stop sounding so surprised.” Kate looked into the bedroom. “Anything you need to hide?”

“Like what?”

Kate shrugged, seemed to be waiting. “So,” she said. “Do me, I guess.”

She started undressing, standing the doorway, and Jess grabbed her and started kissing her and pushed her onto the bed. Later, Jess realised that although Kate hadn’t planned to stay – she hadn’t brought a toothbrush – she’d been happy enough with things that she just kind of did, had got into bed and never quite got out again and ended up asleep, and that seemed like a wonderful thing.

*

The next few days were good. Kate stayed over once, and visited the other nights, and wasn’t difficult on any of them. She was acting like she’d miss Jess, and was willing to try a little – even if secretly, and only at home.

Jess almost offered to delay leaving, wait another couple of days, but didn’t because she knew Kate wouldn’t approve. Part of Kate respected Jess for leaving, and Jess didn’t want that to change.

On the Friday a storm blew up during the afternoon, and Jess got edgy in case she was missing good waves and made Kate go out to Sumner with her after work just for a look. She stood on the sea-wall in the rain and looked at the water, while Kate waited in the car. The surf never quite materialised, so they sat in a cafe and waited. Later, when the rain had stopped but while the waterfront was still empty, they walked along the beach and Kate let Jess hold her hand.

Kate stayed that night too, said she wanted to be around to say her goodbyes before Jess’s last shift. Jess dozed more than slept, woke up early, was excited to be leaving even though she didn’t want to show it too much around Kate. Kate lay in bed and watched her get ready and seemed almost forlorn. They got out of bed with a couple of hours to spare,

and Kate sat and watched Jess kind of sadly as she packed up some clothes. Jess looked up and caught her and went back to kiss her, and they ended up in bed again. Afterwards, while Jess was getting dressed, Kate grabbed Jess and held her and whispered, "I never thought I'd ever have to miss you like this, and I do already."

"Do you want me to stay?" Jess asked.

"Not for me."

"But you do."

"Not unless you're staying for you. Don't stay just for me."

"Of course I'll stay for you, if that's what you want."

"No," Kate said, sat up and wiped her cheeks, "No, I'll be okay. Won't even remember who you are in a week."

"Fuck you."

"It's just weird, you know. You've always been there, just down the road..."

"Or three suburbs away."

"Same difference. Always nearby, and now you won't be."

"I don't have to go..."

"Yeah, you do, so go. I'll be okay."

"I really don't have to go."

"Stop saying that."

Jess picked up her phone. "Actually, though, I do have to go. To work, I mean, not to the bach."

"Then go."

"Okay, I should." Jess looked around, decided she had everything. Looked in the fridge for milk that would go off, made sure she'd got her toothbrush. Then, "Okay, I'm going. Kiss."

Kate kissed her. Kept kissing her, almost made her late. Not that Jess really minded. She couldn't believe what a fuss Kate was finally making, was glad, but couldn't quite believe it.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay?" Jess asked.

"Go. You'd hate me if I said yes at this point."

Kate followed her outside.

"I'll stay if you want me to," Jess said.

"Go."

"Okay." Jess kissed her again, kissed some more through the open car window, and finally drove away. Kate phoned as she turned the corner, to say goodbye, phoned twice more while she was at work, then said she wasn't going to again, that she needed to stop, and that was goodbye for a few days. Jess said she loved her and goodbye and got a funny look from a customer she was serving, but it was Saturday night so everyone in the shop was single and lonely or drunk and in groups, so she didn't really think it would matter. And eight hours later she was on her way.

Chapter Twelve

Jess drove all night, started after work at midnight, and arrived at seven in the morning as dawn was breaking over the mountains. She unpacked the car and swore at the birds and was glad to see there were still no other people around. She knew she wouldn't sleep right away, so she made coffee and went for a surf and by then was tired enough she slept until noon. Then she spent the day sitting around the bach worrying about her lack of work. Worrying, and not doing much. She watched the sunset and was glad to be back and told herself she had to do something about first thing it tomorrow morning.

She slept in. At lunchtime she went into town. Ideally she was wanted a job nearby, at the shop or the pub in Awatangi, but if they didn't work out there should be a motel cleaning job in Franz. Not perfect, but it would do. It was coming into the summer busy season, and she didn't have rent to worry about, and she could live on instant noodles if she had to. Not healthy, but she could. Or boiled rice and dahl, cooked with driftwood, the rice bought by the ten kilo sack. Cheap living like that was possible over here, and she knew she could cope with bad, bland food indefinitely because she'd sometimes had to at uni.

She parked in the main street, outside the hall, and tried to work out what to say. Then she started worrying about her clothes. She was wearing beach clothes – because she'd been on the way to the beach – shorts and a singlet, a bikini underneath. That probably wasn't right. She decided she needed to think about clothes more, think overnight, and try tomorrow, dressed properly. She went and bought a loaf of bread from the shop, just to scout the place. There was a local talking at the counter, which settled it. She wasn't going to ask with someone else there. Surfing today, she decided, and job-hunting tomorrow.

While she was down in town she got out her phone and switched it on to check her messages. Kate had texted a couple of times, asking how it was going and saying she missed Jess, and Kate's brother Barry had left a voice message saying he'd heard Jess was at Awatangi and on her own, and that if she didn't care he'd come down for a couple of days. Call him back if she did. Baz knew how Jess felt about Kate and he'd probably heard something was up. That settled it for Jess. She decided surf and relax and have a holiday for a couple of days. She'd still have two more, and if she still hadn't found anything when she was supposed to be back in Christchurch, she could ring work and say she had the flu or something. The job would wait, she'd have some fun first.

*

Baz pretended to be a lad but was really a bit of a geek. He was a civil engineer, some kind of supervisor, who worked on big things like bridges and buildings and was only needed some of the time. He turned up unexpectedly, between jobs, and just kind of hung around. If anyone asked what he was doing he'd grin and not answer because he liked to pretend it was dodgy, somehow illegal, but he was just being a smartass, trying to look mysterious. Jess had grown up with him, in a vaguely distant way. He was four years older, which hadn't mattered when she was five or twenty but did for a while in between. He'd been useful to have around, had bought her and Kate beer before they'd been able to themselves. He'd once almost hit on Jess, when she was fifteen. Then backed off,

apparently deciding the kid sister's underage friend was a line he didn't want to cross. Or perhaps a surrogate sister he'd known all his life was the line. One or the other. They both knew Jess knew, although neither had ever mentioned it, and Jess sometimes thought that was a bit of a shame because she'd have liked to get him drunk and point how much of a terrible idea it would have been.

Baz spent a lot of time fitting into some idea he had of how he ought to be. He pretended to think he and Jess were going to pick up girls together and share them, pretended he was only her mate because he wanted to watch. He pretended that kind of a thing a lot, and Jess would have believed him, except that the few times she'd got gropey when he was around he'd got all uncomfortable and made excuses and left, because, he'd said later, perverting at someone you actually liked as if they were porn just wasn't right. He pretended a lot, so much that Jess wasn't completely sure whether he actually liked rugby, or only thought he ought to like it. She was more certain about fishing because he did it when no-one was looking. Coming out to Baz had been awful. Jess mostly just let people assume from the presence of girlfriends and hands being held, but Baz had pretended not to understand, forced her to explain in excruciating detail and then almost pissed himself laughing when he couldn't keep a straight face any longer.

Baz turned up mid-afternoon and made a big performance of his arrival, beeping his horn and hugging Jess and shouting a lot. Jess had been sitting at the kitchen table when he arrived, had heard the car and gone out onto the porch. He brought a sleeping bag and nothing else, walked into the bach and said, "Looks exactly the same."

"As it would," Jess waved to the main bedroom, where she was sleeping, "Throw your stuff in there, it's only us."

"Too easy," Baz said, and grinned a grin that was supposed to be a leer.

"Geek," Jess said, and he looked offended.

He looked in the fridge, "Where's the beer?"

"At the pub."

"Shit, Jess. You didn't even care that much?" He stuck his hand inside the fridge. "Hey, did you know this thing isn't running?"

"Yep."

"So long as you know. Back in a minute or three."

He stomped outside and drove off back down the track. Jess boiled the jug on the off-chance he wanted coffee before beer, sat outside and waited until he came back.

"Guy in the pub never remembers who you are, does he?" Baz called when he got back. He lifted a crate out the back of his car and balanced a bag of ice on top the crate. For just a second, Jess thought of Maori surfer girls who also liked their beer in crates.

"So what's his name?"

"No fucking idea, but I know his face."

Baz dumped the crate on the porch.

"Don't shake it up," Jess said.

He ignored her, went back and got a chilly bin from the boot, bit the ice bag open, and filled the bin with ice. Jess watched, slightly horrified, as the bottom layer of ice melted and turned into pink slurry as it mixed with the remnants of fish blood. Baz seemed not to notice. He opened a beer with his keys and passed it to Jess, took another for himself, unloaded the rest of the crate into the chilly bin and pushed the box between them for

empties. Jess noticed the beer didn't quite sink down into the layer of pinky water, so by the time she was holding fish guts while she drank she'd be pissed enough not to care. Baz put the lid back on the chilly bin, put his feet up it with a thud, lifted his bottle to Jess, and drank.

"You're such a fucking control freak, Baz," Jess said, looking at the chilly bin under his boots, but he just smirked at her, she suspected pleased she'd noticed.

"So what's new, Jess?"

"You know, not much. Living here."

"Yeah, that. Anything, say, in your love life?"

"Um, maybe."

"Want to tell me?"

Jess shrugged, "Got me a new girlfriend. That's new."

"Anyone I know?"

"Any reason you ask?"

"I hear I do."

She looked sideways. "And how the fuck did you know that?"

"I hear things."

"Did she tell you?"

"Yup."

Jess was surprised, had thought Kate would keep it quiet. "Did she really?"

He smirked. It was an old game, tricking each another into revealing what they shouldn't. They usually told anyway, but made it a competition first. He'd managed to extract Kate's weed-smoking, drinking, and lack of virginity by tricking Jess, and now he was doing it again.

"You shit," Jess said.

"Kind of funny, isn't it. First time she sleeps with a guy, you go and blab. And the first time she sleeps with a girl..."

"If you say so."

Baz suddenly seemed interested. He was a bit of a gossip. "You mean it wasn't?"

Jess shrugged. "She never said. How did you know?"

"Had a feeling, that was all. And it was bound to happen one day. She got all blushy when I asked about you."

"She's a silly bitch."

"Ain't she just."

"So she doesn't realise you know? I mean, she thinks she kept it secret?"

"Shit yeah, course she doesn't realise."

"Keep it that way, yeah? For me."

"Of course. So what's going on?"

"We shagged."

"And?"

"And I don't know. Ask Katie."

"It's more than that, though."

"What do you mean?"

"You lurv her..."

"So?"

“And you said girlfriend.”

“Oh yeah.”

“How bad is it?”

“Bad.”

“You want to talk?”

Jess looked sideways at him. “Not to you.”

“Shit, Jess...”

“No way.”

“Not the sex, I mean. But the other stuff...”

“Yeah, I meant that too. You’re her brother.”

“So?”

“Um, divided loyalties?”

Baz grinned. “I like you more.”

“No way. And aw thanks, but still no way.”

Baz slugged back a good third of his bottle, then belched. Jess lit a cigarette, and passed him the packet without being asked. He only smoked around other people, and only sucked it into his mouth, but he always sponged off her when they were drinking. “Is it serious?” he asked.

“For me?”

“Obviously it is for you. For her?”

Jess shrugged. “Fuck knows.”

“That bad?”

“She’s thinking.”

Baz reached over and patted Jess’s shoulder. “Poor Jessie.”

“Ain’t I just.”

They opened two new beers. Baz threw the caps out onto the shingle.

“Don’t do that,” Jess said. She knew he wouldn’t listen, that she’d have to go out and pick them up tomorrow, but she said it anyway.

“It’s only stones, Jess, it doesn’t matter.”

“Just don’t.”

“I saw Audrey the other week,” Baz said.

“Don’t do that either.”

“She misses you. Apparently.”

“Baz...”

“Quite a lot.”

Most people Jess knew hadn’t really liked Audrey, her first girlfriend. Audrey was a bit too student politics and a bit too self-important to be easy to deal with – although Jess had thought those things were fairly admirable at the time. Baz had got on with her, seemed to care enough to try because it was important to Jess. Baz and Audrey were similar in strange kinds of ways, too, faintly self-mocking, sympathetic while pretending they weren’t, generous to strangers. Generous to everyone except their own lovers, who they both tended to take for granted.

“Why are you even talking to her?” Jess asked.

Baz shrugged, “Why not? Saw her in the pub, with her mates, said hi.”

“In Wellington?”

“Nah, Christchurch still. When I went to see the olds.”

“Olds?”

“Yeah, olds. She won’t check out asses with me.”

“Shouldn’t see people as their physical form,” Jess said. “Only what’s inside.”

“Yeah, she mentioned something like that.” He grinned, tilted his chair back and pretended to look at Jess’s. “Then again, she was sleeping with you for two years so I guess she didn’t really mean it.”

“Twenty-one months.”

“She said you were a spoilt bitch who was kidding herself, but in a kind of sad way like she didn’t really mean it. I think she’s a bit upset about the whole thing still. And you don’t ring her.”

“Never know what to say.”

Their break-up had been sudden. Unexpected to everyone except Jess, who had got sick of being bullied and been unable to explain that to Audrey in a way Audrey understood. In the end she’d left, just walked out one day with no warning, and she still felt guilty about that, like she’d failed somehow by not explaining properly.

“What am I kidding myself about, do you think?” Jess said.

“Wasn’t clear. I think Audrey likes people to be kidding themselves about all sorts of things so she feels smarter. But, you know, I’d assume your heart being elsewhere at the time. Or something.”

“Yeah,” Jess said. “That.”

“She told me to say hi when I saw you.”

Jess threw the end of her cigarette out onto the shingle, half-under Baz’s car. “Next time don’t.”

“I think she’s almost ready to be talked to again.”

“I don’t want to be mates with her.”

“A few years ago you did.”

“I grew up.”

“It’s the rule, Jess. You eat pussy, you got to be pals after you split up.”

Jess reached over and slapped him. Mostly gently.

“What?” he said, then realised, “Oh yeah. Sorry.” There was a list of words. Baz didn’t get to talk about vulvas in front of her.

Baz rocked his chair back and forward so the boards beneath it squeaked and opened another beer. “Seriously, mate,” he said. “The family gossip circle thought you might want a shoulder to cry on. Or drink with, whatever. And I felt like a holiday, so here I am.”

Jess put down the beer she was drinking and started on the fresh one. “When you say family gossip circle...”

“I talked to mum.”

“Kate won’t be happy.”

“Nah, mum guessed because she’s a clever lady. And because she’s clever, Kate won’t know. And you still think you’re not fucking obvious and everyone doesn’t know about your little crush.”

“Oh. Okay, well, thanks.”

“No problem. Like I say, felt like a holiday. And someone needs to tell you that Katie isn’t worth it. She’s tried out her fantasy, found it out has bad breath...”

“I do not.”

“... and doesn't want to play any more. Go find a decent girl who appreciates you.”

“I thought I had one.”

“Who appreciates you, Jess.”

“She does.” Jess looked at him. “Yeah, I know, but shit Baz, I love her.”

“Yeah, I know.” He patted her arm again. “I know Jessie. Drink up.”

“Yeah, I am.”

“No mate, drink up.” Baz dropped his feet onto the deck with a bang, went back to his car and came back with a paper bag. “Get that out the way so we can hit the real stuff.”

“Oh god,” Jess said.

“Just what you need.”

“I'm really not sure I do.”

“Yeah you do. Drink up.”

He held out the bottle. Although Jess knew it wouldn't end well, she took it, sipped the smoky-caramel whiskey. They drank straight from the bottle because Baz said it was more hygienic than using a cup, and Jess almost thought he might be right. She didn't have a hope of keeping up, but tried anyway, which meant she lost track of things a little until she woke feeling horrible the next morning. Gut-sick from mixing drinks, head pounding, dehydrated because she forgot to drink water before she went to bed, and worse because she'd smoked too much. Her mouth tasted like shit. Like ash. Like ashy shit. She lay motionless for a long time wondering if she was going to throw up.

She mostly forgot what happened when she was drinking seriously. Had little half-flashes, kind of like dreams, more of them if people reminded her, but mostly lost everything. Depending what you'd done it could be useful. She was pretty sure she'd cried herself to sleep the night before, crying from actual sadness, not just the liquor. And that Baz had held her and stroked her hair and told her it was okay. He was still asleep. At least, someone was snoring. Someone stunk of beer, although that could well be her. Someone appeared to have undone her bra through her shirt just to remind her they could. After a while she turned her head and checked it was actually Baz.

Moving was a mistake. She ran for the toilet, threw up, then went to the bathroom and rinsed out her mouth. Baz hadn't moved, would sleep until noon, seemed to be able to sleep through a hangover. She went outside. Baz's smell – or the bed's – was making her queasy again.

She started to feel better, sitting in the sun. They had been out on the porch all night so there wasn't too bad a smell of empties inside. She had a shower, ate a hunk of bread, and decided she might as well walk down to the beach since she was up. Nothing much was happening there. She went back to the bach and made coffee and started frying eggs, crashing around to wake Baz up.

“Shit,” he called, “I'm up. Lay off.”

“Breakfast.”

“In bed?”

“Get up you lazy shit.”

He did, grumbling. Ate, didn't talk much while he did, then looked at her. “Did you ever catch the sandfly?”

This kind of thing happened to her a lot. When you drink knowing you'll black out, you

get used to guessing what morning-after conversations are about.

She couldn't. "What?"

"You were trying to catch a sandfly with chopsticks."

"Why?"

Baz shrugged.

"Yeah, fair enough. No, no idea if I did."

"Got a ciggie?"

"Outside."

He went and draped himself on the couch. "Hey, last night..."

"Yeah."

"No, last night, I was serious. Look for someone else. Kate isn't worth the trouble."

Jess had a feeling he'd been on about that for a while.

"Stop it, Baz."

"Yeah, okay. Just saying." He fished around in his teeth for a minute. "Good eggs."

"Jesus."

His hand stopped. "Right. Sorry."

A bit later they went back to the beach. The waves had improved and Baz watched Jess surf, but it wasn't the same as when Kate did. No-one else was on the beach, which Jess was glad of, because Baz was sometimes quite perceptive. Baz got bored and said he was going fishing – shouted to her when she was close in to the beach. He kept an old rod under the bach. He took the car, came back and got her after a couple of hours, and they spent the rest of the day sitting on the porch playing cards. Baz slept for a couple of hours, then drove off to Picton for the first ferry sailing in the morning.

After he left, because she'd been thinking about it without thinking about it the whole time he was there, Jess decided that she wanted to stay in Awatangi, that she couldn't face a permanent return to Christchurch. Absolutely, definitely, a no changing her mind. She had no job, a borrowed house, and only a sort-of girlfriend, but she was going to do this. She went down into town and phoned work to quit, then phoned her landlord and gave notice on her flat. Work was sad to see her go, at least, the guy she left a message with seemed a little bit sad, and her supervisor wouldn't appreciate disrupted rosters. The old couple who owned her flat seemed more upset, but also more understanding. She told them she'd be back to clean everything out within three weeks, and would arrange inspections and things then.

She'd cut her ties, set her bridges on fire, and was proud of herself. Now she just had to find a job in an area with chronic unemployment. She decided to go for another surf and leave the worrying until tomorrow.

Chapter Thirteen

Although she'd meant to, Jess didn't look for a job. Instead, she sat on the porch, and

surfing, and was vaguely aware of her money disappearing. She waited the first couple of days because she wanted a break, to get her head ready for disappointment, then she'd waited a couple of more because the weather changed and the waves were perfect, then she'd got interested in a book she found on a shelf and spent a day reading it, and by then most of a week had passed. She was fairly sure she was procrastinating because finding a job – or failing to – made something about all this certain and she wasn't completely ready for it to be certain yet, but it was also because there was no real hurry to do anything. She'd spent most of her life having to go places for other people, and now she didn't have to anything at all. It was nice.

Aloneness had a different quality in Awatangi. It was something you chose, and something she'd always come over here to find. The coast was emptier, had far fewer people to run into. While the other beaches stayed empty, she could move between home and beach and back home and speak to no-one else at all. She'd see cars passing on the road, hear traffic from the porch, see the other three surfers down at the beach, but these were sightings at a distance, lives passing hers at speed, not human contact. She liked it, could see why people walked away from their lives and moved places like this. She liked the isolation, and wondered if that was normal. Wondered if she should be on her own quite as much as she was. Wondered how long she could live like this. Hermits and pioneers did, she supposed. She worried she might get odd and forget how to talk to people. She was already inventing things to do to make herself busy, something she'd never done over here before. She reorganised the crockery so the plates she used were easier to get to. She cut extra firewood. She got very efficient about charging the lanterns and remembering to go out and plug them in. After a week without seeing anyone, she started to get worried how little she cared, and that was what made her stop procrastinating. Human contact, more than money, was a reason to go and find a job.

She went for a surf first to clear her head. Showered, and dragged things out as long as possible. Washed her hair and shaved her legs and cut her fingernails on the porch. Then, for no particular reason, she rewaxed her boards, even though the day was cloudy and the sun wasn't really hot enough to soften the wax. She had to wait thirty minutes rather than ten before she scraped it off. She spent a lot of time deciding between apricot scented wax or peach. It mattered since she'd be spending hours with her nose inches away from the board, but didn't matter that much. She washed the dishes and tidied books back onto shelves and finally, having run out of ways to stall short of cutting firewood, she got ready to go.

Her clothes were still in the gym bag and bin liners she'd brought everything over in. She wondered what to wear. Christchurch would need a skirt and tights and a shirt with a collar, but here that mightn't be right. It might look like she didn't understand the community and wouldn't fit in at the pub. Or it might show she respected the place enough to bother. She wasn't sure, wondered what to do, then realised she didn't have tights anyway. She thought a little more and decided it probably didn't matter what she wore – if there was a job there was a job. Most likely there wasn't, but if there was, she was probably be the only person within a hundred k who wanted it, so any clothes would do.

In the end she put on jeans and a singlet – black because it looked more formal – and put her hair up because people said it made her look older. She drove down into town and parked in the main road, outside the pub, across from the shop. She smoked a cigarette,

getting herself ready to go in, then another.

Then she started the car and drove off.

Asking and being turned down at either the shop or the pub meant her chances in the local job market would be halved. Instantly. She hadn't quite thought of it that way before. There were only two places she could get a job, and really, there was probably only one. The pub hired backpackers every summer, had for as long as she could remember, but she'd never seen anyone else in the shop. If she asked in the pub, and they said no, she had nowhere else to go. She really didn't want to have to drive to Franz every day and clean up other people's shit in a motel, she just didn't, but as soon as she asked at the pub, she'd be on her last chance in Awatangi, and a motel in Franz or Ross would be all that was left. She almost wanted to give up, go back to Christchurch right then. Either to ask for her life back, or to pack up her flat, she wasn't sure which. Instead, she stopped, did a U turn, parked in front the pub again, and went inside before she changed her mind.

It was quiet, didn't seem get busy in the afternoons. There were a couple of old guys in a corner with Sam, and a horse race on the TV. Ann was nowhere in sight – Jess would have preferred to talk to her. Sam glanced up and half-raised a hand to let her know he'd seen her. She sat right at the bar, on a stool. She thought about backpacker summer help. She had to ask soon, before they hired someone else. She wondered if they had already, hoped they might still need a cleaner or dishwasher.

Sam said hello and put his hand on a tap, and waited. She nodded, and he started pouring. She'd been in a couple of times, enough he'd remembered who she was and what she drank.

"Still quiet up there?" he asked.

"I think I'm the only one around."

"It'll get busier."

"I know."

She must have sounded like she didn't approve. He looked at her and grinned.

"You here for a holiday again?" he asked. Jess had been coming over for weekends for years, turned up in the pub now and then.

"Just taking a break. I thought I might stay around a while."

"Is that right?" he gave her a look. When Jess had been sixteen those looks had been terrifying. He did them whenever she went to the bar, and she'd taken them as sizing up her age just before she got thrown out. Later on she'd decided it was just his way of getting a pause in a conversation while he thought what to say next, and that he'd known perfectly well she was underage and didn't care because the nearest cops were in Hokitika. He gave her a look, then nodded. "Good on you."

"Is Ann around?" Jess asked.

"Day off. Up in Greymouth."

"Right."

"Why's that?"

"Nah, nothing."

She ordered a burger, and he went out into the kitchen to make it.

While Jess was eating, when she was close to finishing, he came back down the bar with an old black and white photo in a wooden frame.

"Take a look at this."

She wiped her hands on a napkin before she took it. Two young guys sitting on rocks, eating from paper packages, a billy nearby. It looked like they had stopped for lunch while tramping into a mountain climb, a rope was visible on one pack and an ice-axe on another. Lunchtime, Jess guessed, from the shadows under the brims of hats. Shadows deep enough there to hide eyes, obscure features, make identification difficult. Jess assumed one or other was related to her. Maybe the nineteen-fifties, maybe a little earlier. Both men had short haircuts, both wore collars even though they were in the bush. She'd seen a lot of these photos, there were dozens around the bach.

"That's your granddad," Sam said, pointing to the man on the left. Then to the other, "That's Micky Flynn. His family's still around too, he was an early glacier guide. I think my father took the photo."

Jess looked at her grandfather, thought how odd it was that the coughing old man she remembered had once been young and healthy. Sam said it was strange how all these old guys had known each other, as if the back country had only a few hundred people in it and they all ran into each other like they were down at the post office. Jess said yeah and she knew what he meant.

The phone rang. Sam went to answer it, and didn't come back. Jess finished her burger, finished her beer, slid off the stool and went back up to the bach. Groundwork laid, she hoped. An excuse to wait a couple of days before asking.

That evening she started pulling the old photos out from under the spare bed, looking through them. They were in a round hatbox, hundreds of old photos, all loose, some creased and folded and stained. An archive of sorts, people and places the family had forgotten. Time passed backwards in the box – the newest photos were at the top, colour prints fading orange, the oldest black and white ones were at the bottom. She went to the bottom, unearthed the oldest photos without worrying too much what she was disturbing on top, piling handfuls on the floor as she looked through them. As far as she knew, she was the only one who'd looked at these for years. She was untidy, but not rough, made sure she didn't rip anything.

There were lots of photos of her grandfather in the bush, with groups of men in shorts with slicked-back hair. His tramping mates. As many of her grandmother on holidays and drives and picnics, sitting on beaches or beside roads or in paddocks. They seemed to do a lot of picnics back then. There were views of beaches and shingle roads, of timber buildings and mountains and trees, always trees. A plane taking off from a sandy beach, a crowd of people and a horse watching. A steamer off a beach, waves and shingle and smudged smoke, perhaps the old service that used to call down the coast until the road was built. Lots of photos of Jess's grandparents, her dad and uncle as children, a smooth-rounded chromed car. There were lots of the bach as it was built, painted, refined and expanded, Jess's grandfather growing older while the bach got bigger, in each photo he stood in roughly the same spot, near the front steps. In some ways looking at the peripheral detail, the clouds and trees and outlines of mountains, was more interesting than looking at people she didn't know. It was surprising how little the landscape changed, how a cloud stack piling up over the mountains looked the same fifty years ago as today.

As she reached the top of the pile, she started to recognise people. Younger versions of her father and uncle, their faces slowly becoming those she knew as they got older. Her aunt Maria appeared and didn't seem very pleased to be photographed. A little later her

mother did too, in brightly-coloured minidresses. She found herself as a baby, as a small kid. She found several of her grandparents with her on their knees. These were taken from about the same place as the bach-building photos, but now everyone was sitting on the porch. Her parents started aging, looking like themselves, and her grandfather disappeared from the photos. After a few photos of her looking sulky, with folded arms, Jess did as well, and then her grandmother. The most recent photos were from about ten years ago, when Jess had been fifteen. She supposed that was about when the big family holidays stopped. Her parents were fighting more, and she wasn't interested, and her grandparents were dead which took most of the purpose of going away.

She sat for a while and held a picture of herself and her grandparents and felt like she wanted to cry. She had no idea why. Being here, she supposed, surrounded by memories of them. She hadn't missed them like this in years.

As well as the photos, there were several hundred old National Geographics jammed into old wine boxes under the bed. Two car bootloads they'd hauled over when she was a kid, Jess remembered. She fished a couple of boxes out and decided to read her way through them, skim each page and see what she learned. It seemed a nice thing to do, while she was here, was probably why her grandparents had subscribed in the first place.

*

She went back into town the next morning, and parked outside the pub. Then decided that going back in the very next day might be weird. She went back home and sat on the porch and watched the wind in the trees and the bugs on the insect screens. After lunch, she went back to town, and phoned Baz from the main street.

"Hey," she said, "You know the guy in the pub?"

"Which pub?"

"Here, dickhead."

"Sure."

"Could you ring him and ask if I can have a job?"

"Okay."

"Thanks."

"You really want me to? I will if you do."

"Yes. No." Jess remembered how nervous she'd been. "Maybe yes."

"I can if you want."

"Let me think about it."

"Okay."

"It's just that if I fuck this up, there's nothing else, and then I'll starve."

"Or go back to Christchurch."

"Yeah, or that. Except I told everyone I was moving, and I gave notice and everything."

"Yeah."

"I don't know how to work in a pub."

"Can't be that hard. Give people drinks."

"Suppose."

"I can ask him."

"Nah, I'll do it. Probably."

“Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

“Call me if you want me to.”

“Yeah, I will.”

She sat for a moment looking at the pub, then decided to go for a surf.

*

Her three shadows were on the beach, the two guys and Holden girl. They were becoming the people she saw most often in all the world, had been there a couple of times during the week. They seemed to stay in a group and prefer the other end of the beach to her, so she hadn't talked to them, just waved when she went past. She liked to think everyone was impressed with each other and respecting the separation of the beach. It seemed to work well, they got the better end of the beach – less distance to drive and the more consistent break – and Jess got the end she actually wanted. That afternoon, she got a smile from Holden girl.

She stayed out on the water longer than usual, kept an eye on the other three. She couldn't pick which was Holden girl at this distance because they all had light-coloured boards and dark wetsuits and she hadn't watched them enough to be able to pick it by the way each surfed. While she was out on the water she noticed several other cars turn up and park, saw people wandering around. There were more people on the beach than she'd seen in a year, although no-one else seemed to have brought boards, or be showing any interest in the water. She went back in eventually, drove home, and passed people on the track collecting driftwood, a couple of guys unloading chilly bins and crates. Not many of them looked like surfers, but you couldn't always tell. Not many of them looked like anything in particular. A party, Jess assumed. Several people looked up as she drove past and some smiled or waved. Jess half-lifted one hand as she passed, and went back up to the bach.

She sat on the porch and read. As it got dark, listening carefully, she could hear noise from the beach. Music, shouts, a clink of glass, and once what might have been singing. It was loud enough to tempt her, not enough that she couldn't ignore it if she wanted to. She listened, undecided. There was a fire down there somewhere. The fire itself was hidden behind the trees, but the flames reflected from the misty evening cloud, and a smear of sparks gusted upwards each time the wind blew. She was pretty sure that if she walked down she'd be welcome, just wasn't certain she wanted company. In the end she pulled on a jacket, tucked the last couple of Baz's beers into her pockets, and walked down the track and across the main road. She stood at the end of the beach for a few minutes, watching.

There was a loose circle of people around the fire, a few others among the cars, a couple on their own a little way apart from everyone else already making out. Jess looked around, searching. Didn't see what she was looking for at first, then did. Holden girl was in the circle near the fire.

Jess wasn't noticed at first, not until she walked out into the firelight and said, “Hi.” Heads turned, people looked her over. Holden girl smiled. Jess was watching her carefully, wasn't yet sure, but thought she'd noticed Jess in the same kind of way Jess had noticed her.

“I have beer,” Jess said, and showed a bottle. Then wondered if that sounded stupid.

“So do we,” someone said back, and sounded pissed.

“Sit down,” another voice said in the darkness, “Pull up a bit of wood.”

Jess sat on the sand, chose the opposite side of the circle from Holden girl, sat slightly to one side so she could see around the fire, not have to look through the flames. As she sat down Holden girl half raised her hand and waved. Someone asked where Jess had come from, and she said up at the baches, that she'd seen them all earlier. “Oh yeah,” someone said, “The white car that went past.” Someone else asked if Jess lived here and she said she did, for now.

There was food cooking at the edge of the fire, potatoes and corn and what was probably fish, all wrapped in squares of tin foil. Every so often someone would flick a few parcels out with a stick and pass them around, sooty and hot. Jess said thanks each time, but passed the packages on. People were passing around bottles too, asking who needed one. Each time someone asked, Jess held up her beer. She talked to the people next to her and tried to listen more than she spoke. After days alone listening was enough. She watched the fire and sipped her beer, and in the spaces when no-one was speaking, she looked straight ahead into the flames so she could watch Holden girl from the corner of her eye. Watched her pass a vodka bottle to her friends, watched her take it back. Watched her drink slowly, sips, mere tastes. In the flickering light her skin shimmered and her eyes were alive and now and then she glanced ever so casually over towards Jess. Each time that happened Jess heard her pulse, suddenly loud in her ears, and felt something tighten low down in her chest that made it a little hard to breathe. She watched the three of them together. They seemed all casual and familiar. Comfortable with each other. It looked like Holden girl was liked by her friends, and Jess liked people who were liked.

She watched when she could, and when she turned away to talk to someone, she got the feeling she was being watched right back. There was something going on over there, a careless lack of notice paid in Jess's direction. Once Holden girl leaned over and said something to one of the guys and all three glanced at Jess. And Holden girl smiled when they were caught, didn't seem bothered. Jess had a feeling she was being checked out, and that was interesting because she never knew things like that. Never at all. Usually Kate had to kick her and say something, let her know she was being noticed. Once she'd been hit on and acted so startled the woman doing the hitting had seemed offended by her surprise. Jess needed someone who was sure of herself, who'd make the move, and right now she had a feeling someone was. Except that she never knew things like that, even though right now she thought she did.

Jess felt a little bit guilty. The thing about loving someone forever and without real hope was that you had to develop ways to cope, and sometimes those ways weren't very clever when you actually thought about them. She wanted Kate, but over the years she'd learned to make do with what she could get. Sometimes she just needed someone warm in her bed. Sometimes she just got horny. Things had changed with Kate, but at the same time they hadn't. Kate wasn't here, and Kate wasn't hers, and she didn't know if sleeping with anyone else would upset Kate. She hadn't wanted to, had been happy to wait for Kate to work things out, until she'd seen Holden girl across the fire. Now she was suddenly wondering. She sat and told herself to stop thinking like that, but even while she was, she was glancing across the fire. And failing to stand up and walk away.

She looked back at Holden girl, across the fire, and told herself she should go for it. This was what she needed. She couldn't see a downside.

Except for Kate.

Kate was far too much work. Spoilt and selfish and starting to look more and more like she was never going to want this, like she would forever be fucking Jess around and breaking her heart and leaving her sitting in the middle of nowhere crying her heart out. She was tempted. But it seemed too soon to give up on Kate, when Kate was what she'd wanted all her life. She sat and watched and knew she should get up and leave, but didn't.

After a while one of Holden girl's two friends hand-rolled a cigarette, did it with a certain revealing furtiveness. Jess had noticed the musky-sweet smell of pot already, hadn't seen the source but had noticed several people were smoking in the shadows. Holden girl's friend lit up the joint and passed it to her. She took a puff, then got up from where she was sitting and walked around the fire towards Jess. Walked with a swaying, sexy, fuck-me walk, right up to Jess and held out the joint.

Jess just sat there and looked at her.

She was perfect. She was beautiful. She had eyes that smouldered, and lips that wanted, and was right here and waiting.

And she wasn't Kate.

A little wisp of smoke trailed from the ember at the end of the joint, and a little oil stained the cigarette paper brown. Jess could smell it clearly now, like wet grass and burning leaves.

She knew that more than anything else right now she needed to fuck a complete stranger, to get everything out her system. And she realised, to her surprise, that there was no way in the world she was going to cheat on Kate, not while even a hint of a hope remained.

She reached up and took the joint, took a long, slow puff, and handed it back.

She held her breath and smiled a friendly, innocent smile she hoped would shut down whatever this was before it started. She'd had it done to her enough she could master the smile. Sorry I don't do girls and I have no idea what you mean.

Holden girl kind of smirked and turned away.

Jess waited half an hour, so it didn't look strange, then got up and walked back to the bach. She sat on the porch and looked at the stars and cried.

She hated this situation, hated that she'd walked away from something that might have been good, but knew there was nothing else she could do. She just wanted to be happy. She wished it wasn't all so hard.

*

By the next morning, Jess was starting to regret walking away from Holden girl. Regret it just a little, think that perhaps she should have talked for a few minutes. Talking wouldn't have meant anything, wouldn't have hurt Kate, and might have left her feeling less overwhelmed by everything. She went down to the beach for a pre-job hunt surf, to get Holden girl out of her mind, but found the fetch was wrong and the tide too low for her reefs to be running. There were breaks out on the point, and the tide was low enough she could have got out along the rocky platform under the cliffs and jumped straight into the sea, but it was slippery and not all the rocks were smooth and she couldn't really be

bothered.

She stood there for a while. She could go and look for a job, or she could wait until the waves got better. No-one else was around, and she liked having the beach to herself. She started walking, heading back towards the river. She reached the area where the fire had been last night, saw a few empty bottles and cans lying around, saw some seagulls pecking at crumpled tinfoil. She went back to her car and got a plastic bag and started picking up the rubbish.

She heard the rumble of a car engine on the track. The Holden.

She thought about hiding, but the beach was wide and open. Nowhere to hide even if she wanted to, and she wasn't sure she did. She stayed where she was.

The Holden stopped. A car door slammed. That woman was always slamming doors, Jess thought.

She looked up. Holden girl was walking towards her.

As far back as she could remember, Jess had admired surfer chicks on their boards, had never quite worked out whether she watched girls surf because she liked girls and hadn't realised yet, or if she'd always half-known she liked girls and watching them surf had confirmed it. In her head she'd wanted to be like them first, later to fuck them, but heads weren't really a good judge of this kind of thing. She stopped and waited for Holden girl. Watched her walk closer. Holden girl had the thing – the balance, the confidence – that surfing gave you. The sexy arms and legs – all the paddling and balancing meant you got lean and muscled without bulking up. Jess was proud of her own arms, liked them better than any other part of herself, and she really liked Holden girl's arms too.

Holden girl walked up to Jess, stopped in front of her. Her hair was tied back, and she was wearing shorts and a singlet. Her wetsuit must be in the car.

“Shit, thanks.” Holden girl said. “You didn't need to. I was just coming to do that.”

Jess looked at her rubbish bag, then held it out.

Holden girl laughed and took it. “I'm Keri,” she said. “You're staying up at the old baches, yeah?”

Jess was surprised, but also not. Awatangi gossiped. Keri knowing who she was didn't have to mean anything, but Jess still felt a little tingle anyway.

“I used to come here as a kid,” Jess said. After a second, “I'm Jess.” She wondered if she should hold out her hand, but touching didn't seem like a good idea. Especially since she had rubbish hands.

“Yeah, Sam told me. The guy in the pub.”

“I know who he is.”

Keri's eyes were wide and brown and rimmed by thick lashes. Jess realised she was staring, then realised that Keri was staring back.

Both looked away. Jess stared out to sea, decided that was safer and she'd keep looking that way, no matter what. The tide had come in a little, the waves were firming up, peeling down the length of the beach, right-handers, overhead to double overhead.

“Good break now,” Keri said. “It's got better.”

“Yeah,” Jess said.

“You were waiting for the tide?”

“Just a bit longer.”

“Do you like it down there? I mean, if you want to use the other break...”

“I like it down there.”

“The reefs?”

Jess nodded.

“No wetsuit? Isn’t that a bit cold?” Jess was wearing just a rashie. She turned and pointed down the beach, to her car.

“Right. I thought I saw you without one a while ago.”

“I was hoping was all. But it was too cold.”

Keri nodded slowly.

Jess hated when she got all monosyllabic and nervous like this. Like being sixteen. She stopped staring at the water, thought it might seem rude, like she didn’t care if Keri was there or not. She started staring at the pebbles in front of her feet instead.

“Are you from around here?” Jess asked. “I just wondered because I haven’t seen you before.”

“My family is. I was away for a while.”

“Yeah,” Jess said. “Me too.”

Silence again.

“You have a good time last night?” Keri said.

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t stay very long.”

Jess shrugged slightly.

“Shame we didn’t get to talk,” Keri said. “I’d hoped you’d come over and say hi.”

“Yeah, there were a lot of people around. You know.”

“Just hi.”

“Hi,” Jess said, then wondered if that sounded arrogant.

Keri laughed. “Hi.”

“You surf well,” Jess said. She started feeling this warmth building up between them, like the air was vibrating.

“You too.”

Jess looked up from the pebbles. Keri had really long lashes. Thick lashes. Jess realised she was staring again and started to blush, and this time Keri didn’t break the stare, just smiled slightly.

Jess got wet. Just like that. Some girls had dirty talk or a dirty laugh. Keri just had to stand there. Fuck-me eyes, Jess supposed. Fuck-me eyes and fuck-me lips and a fuck-me grin. Jess shifted the way she was standing and tried to think about something else. She looked around, could see the Holden but no other cars.

“You on your own today?” she asked.

“Knew you’d be here, reckoned that was safe enough.”

Which must be why they always surfed together, not just for the company.

“And I wanted to see you,” Keri said, “Alone.” She kept staring at Jess.

“Oh,” Jess said.

And suddenly it was past wondering if there was something. She knew. This wasn’t flirting. This was fucking right here on the beach if she so much as nodded. Jess didn’t move. Neither of them moved. The air between them was still tingling, and seemed thicker than air should be.

“I can’t,” Jess said, “There’s a girl.”

“Yeah,” Keri looked at her for a moment. “Yeah, there usually is.”

Suddenly Jess wondered if she’d misunderstood, if it had all been as clear as she’d thought a second ago. Embarrassed, she turned around walked off. Just walked away, thinking she’d made a fool of herself, thinking shit, shit, shit.

“Hey,” Keri called, and Jess stopped, “That it’s a girl, that’s good. You know what I mean?”

Jess turned and looked back. She wasn’t going to admit it but she did.

Keri seemed to see something in her face. “We’re at the pub most weekends after work,” she said. “Come and have a drink sometime.”

“Thanks,” Jess said. Thanks for the invitation and also thanks for making it right. She made herself keep walking. The embarrassment was gone, but the seconds from fucking thing was still there. She went back down the beach to her car and knew without looking that Keri was watching her all the way.

*

Jess didn’t stay on the beach any longer in case she did something she didn’t want to. Or something she did. She drove back to town and parked outside the pub. She should just go inside and ask for a job, get this out the way, but she was already feeling strange didn’t want to make it worse.

She phoned Kate, said, “If I came over right now, do you want to do something tonight?”

“Sure,” Kate said, seemed not to hesitate, not to see anything deep in the question. Jess felt guilty, even though there was no reason for her to be.

“I’ve missed you,” Kate said, “Here isn’t the same without you.”

“I’ve missed you too,” Jess said, and was grateful Kate had said it.

She started driving. Just put the car in gear and drove, in her rashie, without taking anything. She had clothes in Christchurch, at the flat, could buy cigarettes along the way, didn’t need anything else. It took hours, but when she got there she rang Kate and Kate was waiting and everything was as it should be. She got changed and picked Kate up and they went to a bar and just sat and talked. Jess watched Kate with a kind of greedy pride, which Kate seemed to notice and decide to coolly ignore.

“You know that science chick you were going out with in third year,” Kate said suddenly.

“Megan?”

“Yeah,” Kate said, took a sip of her drink, “Did I ever tell you I caught the two of you at it one night?”

Jess looked at her. “Bullshit.”

Kate just smiled, which meant she was probably telling the truth.

“How did you catch us?”

“Walked into your room without knocking. When you were distracted. Clothes on, you know. Doing the leg rubbing thing.”

“I don’t get that distracted.”

“Uh huh.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I’d believe you and everything, except that now I know you do.”

“I’m not that distracted when I’m...” Jess said, and Kate just looked at her. “Yeah, okay. Um, and you’re telling me because...?”

“Always meant to. It was hot. Really hot. Got me wondering, that was all.”

“Wondering?”

“You know, wondering. Since that was when you’d been running around, um...” Kate seemed to become aware of the audience again, let her voice trail off.

“Doing a lot of wondering?” Jess offered.

Kate grinned, “Yeah. Since you were running around wondering all over the place, I got to thinking about me. That’s all.”

“And?”

“And now I’m here.”

“Wondering?”

“Yeah, wondering twice a day, you slut. I just thought of it, that was all. Wondered if it might mean something.”

Jess looked at her.

“Shit. I mean, thought it might mean something.”

Jess leaned forward. Kate realised what she was about to do, whispered, “You can’t,” and tried to back away, but she was up against the wall. Jess kept moving forward and kissed her. Kate was tense and first, then relaxed, and once she had Jess let her go.

“Trying to make a point?” Kate asked, and Jess grinned and kissed her again.

*

Kate stayed in a good mood, spent the rest of the weekend at Jess’s flat. “Make the most of it,” Jess said. “I have to be out in a week.”

She’d planned to go back to Awatangi on Monday and look for work, but ended up staying in Christchurch. Kate seemed to assume she was staying until the flat’s notice ran out, packing everything up, and Jess didn’t want to disappoint her. Some time away from Awatangi was probably a good idea, and she was starting to worry about money a little bit, so saving the cost of petrol for a round trip would be a good idea. It was a strange week. Now she was ready to go, but hadn’t, it was like her life was on hold. She was just waiting. She packed up boxes while Kate was at work, took them to her parents’ garage to store. She tried to go when she knew they’d be out, but saw them once or twice when she couldn’t avoid it. She watched movies, tried to see things she’d miss over the next few months. It felt like she was filling in time, waiting for something to start. She saw a few people and explained where she’d be and said goodbye. The surfers understood, the pot smokers made assumptions about the coast, and most people seemed to approve. She did some cleaning around the flat. She surfed a far bit. That took time – with the driving backwards and forwards and cleaning all her gear afterwards. And she waited for Kate. Waited for her to finish work, finish at the gym, finish at the supermarket. She was kind of pining and knew it, waiting for Kate’s attention and dropping everything as soon as Kate was ready.

Kate seemed to suddenly realise things were changing, and that Jess wasn’t going to be around. She started changing too, seemed more relaxed about the whole thing. She said she’d missed Jess the few days she was away, hadn’t realised how hard it would be. All of a sudden, she seemed not to mind public displays as much, as long as the display was subtle.

Kissing was out, usually hand-holding too, but she would accept everyday contact that lingered a little longer than it needed to, touches of arms and hands to draw attention, rearranging of her hair or clothes. And she would kiss, if hidden, around a corner or in a parked car, and hold hands under the table in a café. Jess wasn't sure, but Kate seemed to get turned on a bit by being sneaky, to like that as much as she did the kissing itself. Kate started counting off the lasts. The last weekend. The last time Jess would see a particular thing on TV. Jess kept reminding her it was only for a while, that she'd be back, but Kate didn't seem to believe it and was acting like Jess would be gone forever.

Only once had she said, "You should stay."

"Are you asking me to?" Jess had asked.

Kate looked at her for a moment and then said, "No."

Kate spent most evenings at Jess's, and as Jess gradually packed up her things, Kate started complaining. Pretending to complain, Jess hoped. That there were no towels – because they were in boxes – no clean sheets, no books or music and especially no food, since Jess had taken it all to the coast when she'd left the first time. There was a box of apples in a cupboard, not so wrinkly they couldn't be eaten but a bit nasty-looking and needing peeling first. Otherwise they had takeaways. "Cold chow mein for breakfast and cold pad thai for lunch," Kate said. "And apples for snacks in between."

One evening Kate started messing around in the kitchen while she peeled an apple, trying to get as long a strip of peel as she could. "Remember the true love's initial thing?"

"No," Jess called from the bed, then remembered from when they were kids, "Oh yeah."

Kate threw the peel over her shoulder, examined it, looked surprised. "Shit, I think it's actually a J. Sort of."

"Can't be," Jess said. "It's never the letter you want it to be."

"This time it is. Come and look."

Jess did, and it was almost a J. No crossbar at the top, but a straight bit and a curve.

"Depends where you look from," Jess said. "From here it's a J, but from over there it could be a little R."

"Are you trying to spoil this?"

"Just saying."

Kate handed her an apple and a knife. "You go."

"Nah."

"Go on, just see."

"What if it isn't the right thing? Then we spoil a beautiful moment."

"But what if it does? Then we make it twice as beautiful."

Jess started peeling. Her first effort Kate dismissed as too short, but her second was a full circuit and a little more, had a bit of a curl to it.

"What do I do?"

"Throw it over your shoulder."

As Jess started to, Kate added quickly, "Wait, first give it to me."

Kate took back the knife and cut Jess's piece of peel from each end, so it was split vertically, almost in two, but still joined in the middle.

Jess watched.

"Just making sure," Kate handed the peel back, "Throw."

"Does it count if you've rigged it?"

“Depends. Do you want it to?”

Jess smiled and threw the skin, got a shape with an angled tail at either end that might have been a K, or just as easily an X or an IC or, since one tail was longer, a Y.

“Hey,” Kate said, pleased, “K, I am your true love.”

But Jess was thinking of brown-lashed eyes and silky hair and swirling tattoos.

*

On Thursday, two days before Jess planned to go, Kate rung Jess from work and said she knew Jess would just be sitting around doing nothing and pretending to pack.

“Yeah,” Jess said. “Um, yeah, actually, I am.”

“Do you want to go somewhere for dinner tonight?” Kate asked, “Since you have no food in the house.”

“Sure.” Jess said. “What? Thai? Indian? Pizza?”

“No,” Kate said, “Do you want to have dinner with me tonight.”

“Like a date?” Jess asked carefully.

“Not like a date,” Kate said, “I don’t do dates cause I’m like-wow not from California and dates are things in history courses and small Arabian dried fruits, but some sort of romantic situation, yes.”

“With me?”

“Yep.”

“And you?”

“Exactly.”

“And you don’t mind us doing this? In Christchurch?”

“I thought we should try.”

“Okay.” Jess nodded even though she was on the phone. “Yeah, that would be good.”

“Thought you might think so. I’ll pick you up tonight. From your place. At seven.”

“Okay,” Jess said, “But it’s not a date.”

“Not at all. Just a romantic dinner.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

“Last word.”

“Don’t you dare do that now, bitch,” Kate said, and hung up.

Jess was a little unsure what to make of this new Kate. She’d been being the perfect girlfriend all week, as if they only worked as a couple when they were about to be apart.

*

Jess got ready. Got shoes and a dress out of boxes, sorted out her hair. She looked in the mirror at herself, looked around her mostly empty flat, and wondered about her life.

Sometimes she felt she was being consumed by darkness. Not misery or despair, just a fading out, a becoming unnoticed, the way rocks and waves merged together in an ocean seascape at dusk. It was the strangest thing, as if she were emptying out, and one day wouldn’t be there and wouldn’t notice until she was gone. It didn’t really worry her that she felt that way – only that she cared as little she did. It could happen at the oddest times, like

now, when she really ought to be happy. Pot helped, just a puff or two, enough so she got a warm feeling in her middle which took the emptiness away. She had a little, finished off what stash she had, while she was waiting for Kate.

The emptiness she was used to. Other times, a lot more often recently, she had a feeling that her life was melting, as if it dripped through spread fingers, that nothing was getting done and forgotten promises to herself were going unmet. She told herself she was only twenty-four and had plenty of time, but she didn't quite believe it. Life now was the best it would ever be, she was healthy and fit and free, and all she had to look forward to was pain and slowness and obligations. She could see why people got angry reaching forty and realising that nothing they'd done with their lives, nothing they'd thought was important, actually mattered any more – and it terrified her she was only twenty-four and understood that. She still had things she cared about – Kate and surfing – but she could see how empty life would be if she lost those two, how it wouldn't seem worth getting out of bed any longer. She hated knowing what a fine line separated her from hopelessness, found it scared her. And usually, when she thought about this she got stoned too, stoned and drunk and looked mournfully at Kate, then went off and fucked a complete stranger. There was nothing else she could think of to do.

But not tonight.

She sat in her empty flat and waited for Kate and made herself not worry, and when Kate arrived, the dressing up seemed to be worth it because she kept glancing sideways at Jess. At Jess's legs when her dress slid up as she got in the car, at her boobs when she walked.

"See something you like?" Jess said.

"Yep."

"Good."

"So what's with the no bra?"

"You're looking, aren't you?"

"But outside? Where people will see?"

Jess laughed. Then shrugged, just to see Kate look again. "Watch the road."

The place they went was small and private, all cut stone and curved staircases and intimate candle-lit tables. Jess wondered if Kate had chosen somewhere small because small was romantic, or because small meant fewer bystanders and less chance of being recognised. Then she felt awful for being so suspicious. They walked into the restaurant, both sets of heels clicking together on stone.

"God that's sexy," Jess whispered, "That sound. Our heels."

Kate looked surprised, then smiled. "Yeah, I suppose it is."

Jess almost kissed her right there, but decided not to. Kate held the door while she went inside. They sat down. Kate seemed nervous. Jess touched her hand, and she looked relieved, then a little embarrassed.

"I'm jumpy," Kate whispered, "I've never..."

"We've had dinner tons of times."

"Not like this. Not dressed up."

"You're gorgeous," Jess said. "This is perfect."

Kate smiled and picked up her napkin. Then put it down again, looked all nervous again. Much more old Kate. "I'll get this," Kate whispered. Very Kate. Euphemisms, awkward about money, hating to say Jess couldn't afford it so she'd pay, so in the end just blurting it

out. “Just to get saying that out the way.”

Jess nodded, “Thanks.” She leaned closer, across the table, “I’ll put out.”

For a second she wondered if she’d gone too far, spoiled the moment. Then Kate laughed.

Jess watched Kate. She always seemed more comfortable in restaurants than Jess. Not because Kate was more used to them – although she probably was – but because Kate wanted to be more used to them and that made her try harder. Jess was too used to being a waitress, never relaxed properly, had never made the post-uni adjustment to being a restaurant customer. She always felt like she was playing at being a grown-up in places like this, whereas Kate seemed like she was playing well. She talked to waiters, she asked about wine. Jess watched her and looked around and almost, just for a second, could see what Kate was trying to do with her life. To be able to go places like this. To make nice things happen for people you cared about. It could almost seem worthwhile. A waiter poured wine into Jess’s glass, and Jess looked away, around the room. It felt like he was in her space. Another thing she hadn’t acclimatised to. She studied Kate, who glanced up and flushed again under her scrutiny.

“It’s good,” Jess said, sipping. “Red and everything.”

She wasn’t taking the piss, just didn’t want to feel out of place herself but admitting she had no idea what to say. Kate seemed to understand. “Yeah,” was all she said.

A couple of times during the meal Kate reached over and touched Jess’s hand, did so without thinking, without looking around first, and she seemed unconcerned when she did.

“Hey Jess,” Kate said suddenly, “We’re keeping this a secret, right?”

Jess glanced around, at the waiters, the floor-to-ceiling windows, and the other diners.

“Relatively,” Kate added.

Jess cleared her throat and said, “Sure.”

Kate looked thoughtful. “Except,” she said, “From…”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, a secret’s never a secret, is it? A secret’s just what you tell people when you’re talking about it, so they know to tell the next person not to spread it too far. Calling something a secret doesn’t stop it getting out, it just makes it spread more slowly.”

“Ah yeah, I suppose so.”

“So who’ve you told?”

“No-one,” she hesitated, “Um. As such.”

“As such?”

“Some people might know.”

“Like Barry?”

“Ah yeah,” Jess said, carefully precise. “He said you told him.”

“He guessed. So he says. And I suppose you’ve mentioned it to one or two friends.”

“Not really,” Jess said, “Only people who know to keep their mouths shut.”

“Except to other people who know to keep their mouths shut.”

“Um, yeah.”

“So everyone knows.”

“Well,” Jess considered, “Not people you work with. Not your parents.”

“They know.”

“Nah.”

“Mum knows. She keeps asking about you and giving me looks. You know the look. Like when you say you don’t have homework and she knows you do.”

“Shit, Kate, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well. God knows what Barry’s told them. He’s pretending he didn’t.”

Jess decided to be honest. “Yeah, sorry. He tricked me…”

“That thing you two do?”

“Yeah…” Now and then Kate was still annoyed about the virginity thing. The pot she hadn’t minded, since her parents hadn’t really cared, but she’d been upset Baz had learned she was sleeping with someone because the someone was one of his mates.

“It’s okay.”

“You sure? He did trick me, but I think he’d guessed.”

“It’s fine. But still, the thing is, everyone knows.”

“Um, I suppose so, yeah.”

“Everyone.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh shit,” Kate said, but seemed quite calm about it.

“Sorry,” Jess said, and decided that despite the fuss, Kate didn’t really mind.

“Could we have dessert?” Kate said to a waiter.

“Don’t you have to tell them what we want?” Jess said.

“Done. You were in the bathroom.”

“What did you get me?”

“Wait and see.”

“You’re so in charge,” Jess whispered.

“Fuck you,” Kate whispered back.

Jess laughed, and almost wanted to climb over the table and hug her. “This is the sweetest thing anyone’s ever done for me.”

The dessert was ice cream and sticky date pudding. Jess gave Kate half her pudding and, spoonful by spoonful, stole most of Kate’s ice cream. Kate ignored her, ate slowly. When her plate was empty she looked over at Jess and said, “You really look beautiful.”

“Didn’t we do this already?”

“Doing it again.”

Jess put down her fork carefully, asked softly, “Beautiful you like my clothes or beautiful fuck me all night?”

“I do like your clothes,” Kate touched her hand, “But beautiful fuck you all night.”

“Really?” Jess considered, couldn’t think what else to say but, “Ah.”

“Is that so surprising?”

Yes, Jess thought. “Not at all,” she said, and wondered what had changed. She hoped it wasn’t just Kate feeling obliged to give her a good evening.

Kate was still looking, smiling.

“Ah,” Jess said, “Should we go?”

“Probably should.”

“Okay then.”

Kate looked around, trying to find the waiter. Jess just stood up.

Suddenly it was Saturday, and Jess had to be out the flat and gone from Christchurch. She had everything she didn't want in Awatangi boxed up at her parents or lent to different people. She had some money, enough to live on for a while. Everything that needed to be done was done. Jess phoned Kate, said, "I'm leaving tomorrow."

"I know," Kate said. "I did remember."

"Want to do something?"

"Assumed we would."

"What?"

"Dunno," Kate said, "Fuck?"

Jess laughed.

"You still got sheets on your bed?"

"A-ha."

"You still got a bed?"

"For now. Erin's coming to pick it up in the morning."

"Don't bother getting dressed, I'll be there soon."

*

The last day in Christchurch was like the last day at Awatangi should have been. Tender and sexy and loving, none of the bickering and tension. The daytime was fun and the evening was a little mournful, and Kate cried along with Jess in the night when they started missing each other.

Jess woke before dawn, and kissed Kate until she woke up.

"I need to go," Jess whispered. "But come out to the beach with me first."

"Why?" Kate asked sleepily.

"Just for a walk. Just to go somewhere. To say goodbye."

"To me?"

"To the beach."

"Which beach?"

"You choose."

"Okay," Kate mumbled, and started looking around for clothes.

They went out to Brighton, because Jess usually went to Taylor's and Kate liked sand dunes. It was a cold day, souwest but not raining, a cold wind rippling grass and flicking hair and sand into eyes. Jess didn't even bother to take a board, knew it wouldn't be worth it. The wind was offshore, but not enough to push up a good swell.

Walking along the beach, Kate said, "I was thinking..."

Jess stopped and looked at her, and was suddenly worried. "I was too."

"Go on."

"You first."

"It's okay, go."

"Actually maybe I should." Jess said. "If you want to say something too."

She looked at Kate, hoping for a hint, but Kate just waited.

"Um, look," Jess said. "I understand if you want to end things. If you do, end them, but it's a one-off thing. You tell me it's not working and I take you at your word and we never

try again.”

Kate nodded.

“If I have to get over you,” Jess said, “I can try and do that, but only once. I can’t keep doing that over and over again, it would be too hard.”

Kate nodded again, seemed to be thinking.

“Promise? Only once, and not until you’re absolutely sure?”

“Of course,” Kate said, “I promise.”

“Okay,” Jess said, “I’m done.” She waited, expecting the worst.

Kate looked at her. “What?”

“Go on, give me the bad news.”

Kate realised. “Shit, not that. Oh Jess, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean you to think... I was just going to say that I feel more comfortable with things now, that was all. And that I’m glad.”

“Oh,” Jess said, relieved, “Oh right.”

She looked at Kate and Kate looked at her and Jess started to laugh.

“You okay?”

“Fuck. You gave me a fright.”

“I’m sorry, you jumped to conclusions...”

“Yeah, I know. But fuck...”

“You want to sit down?”

“Yeah.”

They sat on top a dune for the view, huddled together against the wind. Jess kissed Kate occasionally, stroked her hair and shoulders, held her hand. Kate accepted Jess’s touch, but didn’t respond.

Jess watched a wind-battered gull nearby watch her, heard others high overhead keening and wailing.

“I hate that sound,” Kate said, glancing up.

Jess was surprised. She knew Kate didn’t like gulls but hadn’t known why. She loved the sound of gull calls, found them haunting and lonely. “Really?”

“Flying rats,” Kate said.

“Yeah,” Jess said, and they were quiet again.

After a while Kate said, “I need to go home. I said I’d go to mum and dad’s for lunch.”

“Oh,” Jess said quietly. “Okay.”

“Which means it isn’t.” Kate looked at her. “You said you were going in the morning, so I assumed I’d be free.”

“That’s fine.”

“I didn’t know you’d still be here, Jess.”

“No, you need to go. I understand. Really.”

“What’s up?”

“Nothing,” Jess shrugged, “It’s very organised, that’s all.”

“I wanted some company straight after you left.” Kate seemed hurt, puzzled. “Why are you so pissed off?”

“Because I came over here to sort things out and we haven’t.”

Kate looked surprised. “We have, things are fine.”

“So where are they?” Jess hated how she was being. There was something about Kate that brought out the absolute worst in her, she just couldn’t help it.

“I don’t know” Kate said. “I still need time.”

“So not sorted out?”

“I suppose not.”

Jess shrugged. “Okay. Fine. Let’s go.”

They walked back to the car in silence. When she dropped Kate off at her flat, Kate kissed her, but seemed reluctant again. Jess pretended to herself she hadn’t seen her look around first.

She drove off, and Kate stood there and waved, but something seemed to have been spoiled.

*

Jess got back to Awatangi determined to sort out a job the very next day. She stopped at the shop for bread. One of Keri’s two guys came in as Jess was leaving. He stopped in the doorway, said, “Hey. Been away?”

“Christchurch.”

“Yeah, we wondered. Didn’t see you for a while.”

“Just some things I had to do.”

“All done now?”

Jess nodded.

“I’ll tell Keri.”

“Ah,” Jess said, then stopped. She had been going to say no need, or say why does she care, or just say okay. She wasn’t sure which she meant, so instead she just said, “I should...” and half-pointed towards the car.

“Yeah, me too. Everyone’s waiting for me for dinner.”

“I’ll see you round,” Jess said.

“Count on it.”

He looked at her as she got in the car, and Jess couldn’t quite place that look. It wasn’t being checked out but it was definitely being assessed for something. Someone, she assumed, and knew she had to stop this.

He waved as she drove off, and she realised she didn’t know his name.

Chapter Fourteen

The day after she got back from Christchurch, while she was still feeling some urgency, Jess decided she had to go into town to look for work. No more pissing around, no more excuses. She had to do town, today, now, had to get it over with, so if she didn’t find something she had time to go and look for a cleaning job. She just went. Didn’t worry about what she was wearing or how she looked. She tried the shop first, pretty sure she’d have no luck, just to get it out the way, and so she wouldn’t keep thinking she had it as a

last resort. She went in and said hi and asked, but they were already shaking their heads as they listened. So she walked across the road and into the pub. It was jarring. Sam was behind the bar. She almost decided to wait and ask Ann, because Ann had always seemed more friendly, but she made herself keep walking.

She went and stood in front the bar. Stood, rather than sat on one of the stools. She wondered about just having a beer, but worried it would look bad. Eleven in the morning, the place not even really open, and she was at the bar.

“Hey, Sam.”

“Jess.”

“Hey, um, you know how I decided to move back here for a while.”

“Yeah, you said.”

“Well...” She knew she ought to ease into it, make conversation, chat a while. But if she did she might lose courage and never get round to asking. Fuck it, she thought.

“I was wondering if there was any work,” she said.

After a moment, she added, “For me.”

“Sit down.” He pointed to a stool, came around the bar and sat next to her, seemed to be thinking. “Look,” he said, “I’ll be honest...”

“Oh shit,” Jess was disappointed, then realised what she’d just said. “Ah, sorry.”

“I hope you didn’t get your hopes up. We don’t really have anything this early in the year. It’s too quiet.”

“Yeah, well thanks anyway.”

“Will you still be around in a couple of months? Around Christmas it starts getting busy, we usually need someone then.”

“Yeah, probably around,” Jess said. “But I don’t know what I’ll be doing by then, you know?”

Sam nodded.

“You don’t have anything at all?” Jess said. “It doesn’t have to be in the bar. Cleaning, or in the kitchen, or anything.”

“We don’t really get busy enough.”

“Yeah, fair enough,” Jess said.

Sam was looking at her, seemed to be thinking. Jess had a feeling that he wanted to help but couldn’t afford it. Maybe because of her family connection to the place. Family counted for a lot in Awatangi.

“Anything’s fine,” she said. “Any hours. I’m at the bach and not paying rent, I just need to eat.”

He kept looking at her.

“Really,” she said, “I’ll probably work cheaper than you expect.”

He still seemed to be thinking, as if he was convincing himself.

“I’ll do anything,” she said, “I’m not joking.”

He looked at her for a moment, then suddenly said, “Righto, yeah, maybe we can sort something out.”

Jess stayed quiet and waited.

“You worked in a pub before?”

“Restaurants. Not for a while. Waitressing.”

“Yeah, that’s good. Behind the bar?”

“Just the waitressing. Sorry.”

“Yeah, no worries, it’s not that hard here. Not that many cocktails. You know how to pull a beer?”

“I’ve seen it done,” she hesitated. “Could you show me?”

“Yeah, righto.”

He got up off the stool, kind of slid and pulled himself up. They both went behind the bar. He poured a small glass of beer. Jess, nervous, did one too, tried to copy what he’d done.

“Tip the glass more,” Sam said.

She did, but too late. Hers was a bit frothy and overflowed when she didn’t shut off the tap quickly enough. Otherwise it looked okay. She’d drink it.

“Righto,” Sam said. “Tip that out. Unless you want it.”

Jess almost did, but didn’t want to make a bad impression. She tipped both glasses into the sink and sat down again.

“Don’t suppose you speak any languages?”

“Um,” Jess said, “English. Does that matter?”

“Nah, it’d just be useful if you did. No worries.”

He asked other questions, but not as many as Jess would have expected – where she’d worked, how she liked those jobs, what she’d done. Jess found he was quite good at drawing answers out of her, that she relaxed and told him things she probably shouldn’t in a job interview. That she hated the pointlessness of some work, that she was nervous as fuck because this had to be the last job going in Awatangi, that for now she’d rather have a job that fit in around surfing – which she hoped a pub job would – than a career for which she’d have to make sacrifices.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “That makes sense.” That seemed to decide him. “You’ll need enough to live on, I suppose, or this won’t work? That’s the bottom line?”

“Ah,” Jess said, not wanting to put him off, then nodded, “Yeah.”

Sam picked up a paper napkin from the bar, started folding it into triangles, smaller and smaller. Talked to it rather than her, “Maybe if you have lunch and dinner down here…” He looked hesitant, so Jess made an agreeable noise.

“You could eat here. Not necessarily from the menu, if you don’t want to, but using what’s lying around. So there’s no extra spending. Maybe if for the meals you work a couple of hours during the day for free, just the afternoons when it’s quiet so I can get on with things without having to keep an eye on the bar. Maybe if you do that then I could pay you for the evenings. Probably not much, minimum wage, but the work isn’t hard.”

Jess thought that over. It wasn’t what she was expecting, but it wasn’t also that bad an offer.

“And we’d be flexible about when you worked,” Sam said, “If that mattered for fitting in with your surfing. And you wouldn’t have to do anything too unpleasant.”

“No cleaning toilets?”

“Thought you’d do anything?”

Jess looked up and he was grinning.

“All right,” he said. “No cleaning toilets.”

“Okay,” she said, “that all sounds fine.” She’d decided to take the job. Had pretty much already decided when he’d said there might be something, regardless of what it was.

Sam seemed as surprised as she thought she ought to be. “Yes?”

Jess nodded, “Yes.”

Sam stuck out his hand and she shook. She had a feeling that was the deal right there, that she’d never see a contract. He said something about holiday pay, but she was too excited to care or really listen. “For clothes,” he said, “That kind of thing’s fine, this is just a pub.”

“Okay,” Jess said, “that I can do.”

“When do you want to start?” Sam asked, and Jess shrugged and said, “Tonight?” which seemed to please him.

“Only if that suits,” he said, but seemed like he was already arranging it in his head.

“So I have the job?” Jess said, just wanting to make sure.

“You have the job.”

“Okay then.”

“I’ll see you about seven,” he said, “You can start getting the hang of the place.”

“Okay,” Jess said again. She went outside and just stood there for a while, next to her car, beside the highway, feeling proud of herself.

She had a job. She went and sat on the bach’s porch and stayed there all afternoon. She took a stack of National Geographics outside with her, but didn’t pick any up. She let some second thoughts occur to her because she knew they were going to anyway. That she was living in a bach without electricity, working part-time for minimum wage in a half-empty pub. That was here, but her life was in Christchurch, where she already had a job which she could probably get back if she begged. She thought about those things for a while, but knew she wasn’t going back.

She listened to the waves and trees and stared at the sky. It was the first fine day after several of rain, and those were always glorious on the coast. The air was clean like it never was in the east, like it had been washed – which she supposed it had. She could hear a tui now and then, and the sky had been blue all afternoon and perfectly cloudless. Looking through the insect screens it seemed cross-hatched, like the canvas of a painting. The sensible thing to do, she told herself, was pack up and go back to Christchurch. Do whatever she had to about Kate. That should be her priority. But she thought about that and realised it wasn’t what she wanted right now, that other things were more important. Like a job somewhere that didn’t depress her, like living near the beach, on her own, with air like this to breathe and a sky like this to look at. Like being away from everything she’d always had to tolerate in Christchurch. No more norwesters – here that just meant rain. No more Riccarton Road traffic. She wanted Kate, but right now she wanted to be away from Christchurch more. She thought all afternoon and tried to be sensible, but couldn’t convince herself. She was going to stay in Awatangi because it was all working out too perfectly for her to do anything else.

She went back to the pub that evening. Sam had tax forms for her to sign. She was almost disappointed, had hoped for an under-the-counter cash job just for the drama of it, and Sam seemed to notice.

“What’s up? Didn’t expect the IRD forms?”

“Well, um, yeah.”

“Not worth the grief of crossing those buggers. Which reminds me, just because you used to drink here when you were a kid doesn’t mean anyone else can.”

“Okay.”

“Seriously. Times have changed. We get checked far more often now, so don’t serve anyone.”

“Yeah, okay. No-one underage.”

“Unless they’re with their families. Ask me if you’re not sure.”

“Seems a bit rough.”

“All your happy memories of the place?”

Jess grinned.

He showed her where everything was and introduced her to the locals, half of whom she knew by sight. She fought with the till, kept forgetting how to get it open to make change for people. She met Ann again, this time as an employee. She started learning important things she like how to pour beer. “Keep practicing,” Sam told her, “Don’t get cocky, you’re not doing it nearly right.”

“Thanks,” she said at the end of the night. “I really appreciate this.”

“No worries, you’re doing us a favour too.”

“Still, thanks.”

“Nah, just people looking out for each other.”

Jess nodded, but still felt lucky. That she’d ended up somewhere people did, and that they’d do it for her, and most of all that it meant she could just walk into a job she desperately needed and be okay, just like that.

She felt happy that night as she went to sleep, like she was getting somewhere. She didn’t think to ring Kate and tell her until the next day, and when she did, Kate didn’t seem that impressed, almost seemed upset. Jess wondered if she’d been hoping Jess wouldn’t find a job, would have to come home, but didn’t ask.

*

Working at the pub wasn’t demanding. Jess poured a lot of beer, took a lot of orders for chips, and loaded a lot of dirty glassware into the dishwasher. Then unloaded it again. She vacuumed and mopped the floors when she got there, and wiped everything down at night. She kept an eye on stock, but Sam told her not to worry, that he was doing it too and they hardly went through enough of the back-shelf items to make counting worthwhile. Just check the quick-pour spirits above the bar weren’t running out. She refilled sauce bottles and bowls of sugar packets and pushed buttons on the espresso machine. During the day, she cooked bar snacks, which meant looking in the freezers for the right packet and heating it up. Ann showed her how to use the deep fryer and taped a list to the wall with frying or microwaving times for everything. Daytime was quiet. Jess was mostly there just in case. One person alone couldn’t run both the bar and the kitchen, but two people was usually too many. Jess did as much as she could, and either Sam or Ann did the rest while the other got a break.

In the afternoons, when the bar was quiet, she stood in the kitchen and watched things boil while Ann chopped and stirred and got ready for the evening meals. Ann seemed to want Jess to be able to cook, but didn’t quite trust her to do it. The summer girls never could, Ann said, not as well as was needed in a commercial kitchen. Ann seemed to say things like that, and Jess was pretty sure she wasn’t meaning to be rude, was just giving

information. She lectured Jess about dice sizes and cooking times and food hygiene, but hardly ever let Jess actually do anything. Jess assumed she didn't like someone else in her space, and when she asked, Ann said that was exactly it and she shouldn't worry, just keep an eye on the bar. Jess did what she could, and after Ann had spent a week talking about refrigeration and salmonella and washing her hands, she was allowed to take pre-cut pizza toppings out the fridge and put them on the dough. She tried making an omelette once but Ann looked at it and said, "Maybe it's best you don't do these any more, love."

When Jess thought about her day it seemed busy, but mostly she just stood at the bar and talked to people. It was surprising how easy that was to do. Remembering names and drinks was good, but it wasn't like people would get angry if she was wrong. The most complicated thing to deal with was large orders, when people reeled off half a dozen drinks they'd been saying to themselves to remember as they walked across to the bar. Sometimes she forgot, and sometimes they did too, and they had to shout to their friends for a reminder. A couple of times she gave people three of this and two of that rather than the other way around, but Sam said not to worry, just give them what was needed to fix it and let them keep the extras as freebies. As she got the hang of who drank what the mixed up orders became less of a problem. She found she remembered a list of names rather than a list of drinks, and her hands found the right taps to pour from automatically.

Sometimes the waitressing got complicated, when she had too many people in at lunchtime and they were all tourists she didn't know and she had to keep running out to the kitchen to check the fryer or empty the microwave. Five tables of three or four and a twenty-minute lag between order and delivery. As well as waitressing, she would be serving at the bar and talking to the customers and wondering if the men's toilet was backing up again and whether Sam had changed a keg like she'd asked. When it all got too much – when people got too much – while passing orders to Ann, in the kitchen, she would whisper, "Do we spit in food around here?", and Ann would grin and say, "Patience."

Sam said in passing that Ann had been a chef in Dunedin. Jess thought she could tell, asked how Ann had ended up here, and he said, "She was on holiday and thought she was leaving in a week. Didn't plan on settling here and staying her whole life." He gave Jess a look. "You remember that."

Jess shrugged. "Yeah, well. Sometimes seems like that wouldn't be such a bad idea, you know?"

He gave her another look, this one a lot more approving, and said, "I think I do."

And Jess felt like she'd settled in a little more.

*

The pub was a cafe and tourist restaurant in the day, slowly changed back into a pub at night. Most of the daytime drinkers were elderly, seemed to live alone and hang out in the pub all day. Most of the tourists were younger and travelling on their own, in rental cars and campervans. They didn't get tour buses, because Sam didn't bribe the drivers like you had to. In the evenings it got busier, and got noisier. A lot of people seemed to shout their hellos and goodbyes and mates, sometimes got heated arguing about rugby. When it got too loud, Ann would say, "Hey, keep it down," and if anyone was staying in the hotel rooms, she'd go and open the door to their hallway and peer along, as if she could see sleep being

disturbed. Weekends got noisier, as most of the locals stopped in for dinner or a drink, which meant Jess was rushed for the first half of the evening and still busy the second.

The pub was a community focal point, Jess decided, not a gold rush shantytown. It wasn't quite what she'd thought it would be. No fights, for one. Sam said the aggro guys headed up to Hokitika or Greymouth for the weekends and lived quietly the rest of the week, too worried about the consequences of being banned in the only pub within thirty k to make trouble. The biggest problem was the pool table. Twice in the first week Jess had to step in and explain Kiwi pool rules to tourists. No, she'd say, you didn't get two shots after a foul, no you didn't lose if the white left the table, and yep – smirking – you did have to drop your pants if you lost without sinking anything. She never saw a down-trou, but people seemed to like telling tourists about it while sinking three or four balls off the break. She got to know international pool rules. As far as she could work out, the British had different fouling rules, and Americans didn't rack properly, put solid balls on each corner, and both wanted to play their own way, while Europeans seemed to just accept local rules, as long as someone explained them first. People only played for drinks. Sam chased them out if they tried to play for money, said it caused too much trouble on such wonky tables.

Jess started to work Sam out. He'd wouldn't say anything if she was doing well, and would only tell her a day or two later if she screwed up. It made learning slow. At the beginning of her second week she was offered a drink and didn't know what to do. She got flustered, said, "No thanks, I don't know if I should."

The guy offering, one of the old fishermen, said, "It's fine, Sam doesn't mind."

"Nah, but thanks anyway. I should check first."

"If you're sure."

Sam must have overheard. While Jess was eating her dinner, chips and eggs and salad, he came and sat down with her with a bowl of chips of his own.

"Pass the sauce?" he said, and Jess did. Then sat there. She was starting to recognise Sam's way of beginning a conversation.

He ate a few chips. To save time she said, "Getting offered drinks?"

"Yeah," he said, "Don't worry, it's all fine."

"Wasn't worrying."

He gave a look. Don't be cheeky, she thought.

"Just take the drinks," he said. "If you want to, don't if you don't."

"Okay."

He'd already told her she could have a few now and then for free, just to take what she wanted and not put it through the till. Jess had realised during the week that this was a bad idea, that doing so put the estimates of stock use out and that everyone should be more concerned, but if Sam didn't care then she wouldn't.

"Was going to say too, if you have any mates come in, give them drinks. Do rounds, but don't you pay for your round."

"Okay, thanks."

"Fair's fair. You're doing more than I thought and we're not paying you."

Jess held up a chip.

"And you eat less."

She laughed

"So long as it's only tap beer," Sam added after a minute, "The freebies. Or house wine."

That's just for friends, though. If it's someone from out of town saying 'have one yourself' then charge for both."

Jess nodded.

"Or basic spirits," Sam said. "That'd be okay too. Just nothing top shelf."

"Yeah, okay."

"Out of town friends get drinks. Just not strangers."

"Yeah Sam," Jess said, and grinned, "I got it."

"And don't tell Ann," he said, "A bit of discretion, okay?"

Jess looked at him for a moment. "Okay," she said, a little unsure.

"It's fine, just be discreet. Don't get her upset about the books being messed up."

Jess nodded.

A couple of nights later Ann told her much the same thing, and added not to tell Sam. Jess looked at her and said okay and kept her silence, left them both to their little game of generosity.

*

Jess thought she was turning out to be quite a good bartender. She seemed to get on with people most of the time, and she thought that was because deep down she believed it didn't matter, whatever it might be. People talked to her, sometimes people got upset –worked up about politics or sport or their friends – and Jess didn't mind. They could vent their feelings and she listened. Racked glasses, wiped the bar, and listened, and after a while they calmed down and talked about something else. Being fit helped too. She spent a lot of time standing up, but she was used to that and didn't get especially tired. She carried things and polished things and got landed with mopping out the bathrooms and vacuuming because she didn't object to doing it. Sam stuck to his deal about cleaning toilets, though, despite Louise, the woman who did the cleaning, teasing him about it.

She managed to avoid learning how to change the beer kegs. No particular reason other than it seemed a difficult job, twisting and heaving and with a risk of making a mess if you got it wrong. She thought about it too much and got a bit phobic, made excuses when Sam tried to show her until he gave up. One afternoon when Ann was busy and Sam was away the pilsner ran out, so Jess just told people it was off today until one of the locals complained. "You change it then," Jess told him, sharply, then realised he'd gone off and done it. She gave him a free jug and said, "No need to tell Sam, hey?" After that there was no point learning herself, since someone would always offer. She presumed Sam knew – he seemed to forget about showing her – and didn't mind.

"I like doing this," she said to Sam one evening. "Bartending."

"Good," Sam said.

"But when do I get to be a sympathetic ear?"

He squinted at her, then seemed to get it. "You don't really around here. Kiwi blokes, you know. People are private."

"Damn," Jess said, flippant. She picked up a full vodka bottle, a premium one, pretended she was about to spin it on her hand. "Suppose I'll have to learn tricks instead."

"Don't you dare."

"Saw it in a film once. After that I thought I'd try setting drinks on fire."

“Yeah, good luck with that.” He stared until she grinned and put the bottle down.

She started getting to know the routines. Not just the mopping while Sam cashed up in the evening, but being able to guess when he would call it a night and lock the doors. He usually closed early if it was quiet, once all the expected locals were in for night – didn’t throw people out, but didn’t welcome newcomers either. Once the door was locked, so long as people kept buying, Sam didn’t seem to mind when he closed up, although people usually left fairly early. On the Friday night of Jess’s first week they were open until two, but that was unusual. Eleven during the week and half-twelve on weekends was more usual. Ann was the opposite, always scrupulous about the advertised hours, always left the door open until right on eleven, and made everyone leave by half past. Locals knew Tuesday and Wednesday wouldn’t be big nights because that was when Ann was on. Jess preferred Ann’s way during the week so she knew when she’d be in bed, but Sam’s at the weekends when it was busier as it was more fun.

Ann and Sam both ignored what other did, even though it must have been obvious from the noise as people left, and from when the other came to bed. A way not to argue, Jess supposed. It took her a while to notice, but they did it about other things. Smoking especially. Ann went along with the law, said she didn’t want the fines or the smell, but Sam said they weren’t going to get fined with the nearest inspector in Christchurch and that the smoke smell was better than the actual pub smell turning up for the first time in sixty years – mildew and stale beer and sweat, and Jess sort of agreed. Whenever someone lit up inside, a couple of times on a busy night, Ann went over and told people to go outside, and Sam just ignored it. Jess copied Sam and carefully didn’t notice, but in a way that she hoped wouldn’t encourage them. She was the new girl and wasn’t going to go wading into something like this. The one time Ann said, “Hey, tell him to go put that out,” Jess just shook her head and concentrated on the jug she was filling, stayed like that until Ann sighed and went over herself. On Ann’s nights off the air inside got a bit thick, as Sam called it. You couldn’t really see anything, couldn’t smell much, the air wasn’t smoky as such but there was something there. It was like school, Jess thought, people holding cigarettes down the sides of their legs and waving them slowly so the smoke dispersed. Roll-ups were everywhere, and went out on their own, so people puffed once then waited a few minutes and relit and did it again. Ann thought she was finally getting somewhere, was training people out of their beer-and-a-smoke habit, but Jess wasn’t so sure. She made it a point not to smoke herself inside, and to announce loudly she was going to the carpark, but other than that she stayed uninvolved.

“Payday,” Sam said one morning, and Jess realised she’d been there a fortnight and a couple of days and it was Thursday again, “Ah, I’ve lost your bank account number.”

“I’ll get it,” Jess said, then, surprised, “I’ve been here a fortnight.”

Sam grinned, “Doesn’t seem like it? That could be good or bad.”

“Good,” Jess said, “It’s been fun.”

“You have to say that to the boss.”

She grinned. “Can I use the computer to get my account number?”

Sam waved towards the office, kept talking while she waited for the modem to screech and connect. “What we’ve done with other people,” he said, “Since there’s no banks around here and so you don’t get left holding cash, is pay you with internet banking then let you withdraw whatever you want with eftpos.”

“Okay,” Jess said, “Yeah, that’s fine.”

She wrote down her account number and gave it to Sam. He took a folded piece of paper out of his pocket, spread it on the bar. “Okay, this is you. So, earnings,” he pointed, “Tax,” a tap, “And this is what you get. No company super, I’m afraid.”

Jess nodded. It was less than she was used to, but a little more than she’d expected, and she didn’t need very much anyway.

“Less tax,” Sam said. “You’re part-time. Lower income.”

“Right.”

He went into the office and tapped away at the computer, came out after a few moments and handed her a piece of paper, his signature and paid scrawled diagonally across the page. “Payslip.”

She had almost expected that. Sam did all the paperwork, although writing paid on things and making piles was about the extent of it. There was a small office out the back, beside the kitchen, a desk and chair, a computer and a three-drawer steel filing cabinet, and a shelf high on the wall. Every surface except the computer keyboard – and sometimes parts of the floor – was covered with paper. Till receipts and sales charts from the accounting software, order sheets and catalogues, old copies of the accounts and price lists and order forms. Sam ignored the mess, had a gut feeling for what was needed, and just dumped paper wherever it wouldn’t be in the way. He seemed to consider things filed if they were somewhere in the office. He left illegible notes on scraps of paper all over the pub, phone numbers and reminders and half-complete stock counts. Jess would collect them up at the start of her shift and leave them on the till for him. She would hear him out the back during the day, on the phone to suppliers, “Did you get the fax? What number? Third row down? ... ah.. yeah, that’s three, yeah sorry mate.” Or, if someone had a special offer, “So I need to take twelve to get the deal? Okay, sure thing.” He did everything on the fly, and seemed to know roughly what stock they had and what was running out in his head. Ann wanted to carry only the stock than they needed, to minimise the money tied up in unsold liquor, but Sam would take a deal when it was offered because “we’re going to sell it in the end and we get it on tick, so why not.” Jess wasn’t sure this was quite true, but she helped him unload cases anyway. He seemed to like having a protégé around who listened. He spent some time now and then explaining why he was doing something, and Jess, who couldn’t remember the last time a boss had bothered, listened and tried to remember. All the same she made sure to give her timesheets to Ann, suspecting that if Sam took one it would never be seen again.

“Hey Sam,” Jess said one morning. “I just wanted to check. Is this all working out for you guys?”

“What all?”

“Me all.”

He stopped, looked at her. “Yeah, you’re doing well. Really well.”

Feeling paranoid, but wanting to be sure, she pushed. “So this is a long-term thing. I’m not just on trial?”

“You weren’t ever on trial. We gave you a job for summer, you have a job as long as you want it.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, look. We normally have someone until around March or April, for when it’s

busy. The job's here until then, but since you're already around, we can probably work something out for after that."

Jess sat down. "You mean..."

He seemed faintly teasing. "What, a real job? That's a surprise?"

"Ah yeah."

"You're working out well. With a bit of luck I'll be able to leave you to it and take a couple of days off sometime."

"Yeah, if you like."

"No pressure. And this is probably a pipe-dream, but it's something to aim towards. You ever thought about getting a bar manager's licence?"

"Ah, no."

"Have a think about it. We'd have to pay you more when you were here alone, but it might be useful."

Jess nodded, surprised, and went back to work.

The next day he gave her a key, told her to leave the cash in the tills and just lock up and leave when she was done. The next day she also checked her bank balance, took a hundred dollars out from the bar eftpos just so she had some cash. She wondered if she should get someone else to do it, went and asked Ann, but Ann said just do it herself because if they couldn't trust her with cash they were in trouble anyway. A little later, standing idly at the bar, she wondered about the same banknotes circulating through her and the till and the shop, just going in circles. She took a twenty out the till and drew a smiley face on it with marker pen. Then she kept an eye out. It reappeared three times over the next two weeks. The community was small.

*

Jess felt like she was fitting into Awatangi as a resident rather than a visitor, was surprised how easy it was. She supposed she'd always been half-local, people recognised her from one summer to the next as one of the bach people. She was surprised the first time the couple in the shop talked to her, pleased she knew enough to step to one side while talking so the person behind her could get to the counter. They started ordering things for her, hummus and dahl, tofu that didn't need refrigeration, and healthy bread. People started to say hello when they saw her in the street, which gave a sense of belonging she'd had never really felt in Christchurch. She found a local woman who cut hair in her kitchen, and after checking her out with Anne and explaining to the hairdresser that "I'm really paranoid about people cutting my hair, I mean really paranoid", she got a haircut and was happy with it. While she was cut they talked about local things and local people, and when she went back to work Ann noticed and told her it looked good.

She began to get to know people. There was a group that hung around the pub more than they probably should, Sam's cronies, and now her regulars. The local AA rescue guy, a part-time mechanic who worked from his house and kept a car-trailer out the back. A couple of retired miners who'd been actual prospectors, which was very romantic except they'd used bulldozers rather than gold pans. The fishermen who turned up at the pub every time the river was doing the wrong thing. She saw this group often, almost every day, met the other locals more slowly. The few dairy farmers, mostly younger sharemilking couples

who didn't come in much because they had to be up before dawn. Sphagnum moss pickers and jetboat drivers, DOC workers and glacier guides. She met the local odd-job guy, a former logger, now retired, and the local stoners who rented an old farmhouse and didn't get out much. She recognised a few of them from the night of the party. She met the local cop and the local doctor, both from Whataroa, who passed through occasionally. The doctor was married to a potter, and said she'd been supported through medical school, so now it was his turn, but Sam said that a country GP hardly broke even, and tourist crafts did well, so it was actually the other way around. After hearing about her for a couple of weeks, Jess met Cheryl, the town solo mum. Cheryl liked a drink and a root – so she told Jess, while buying a round – and thought it was good to see someone young around the place. Cheryl worked at a shop in Franz sometimes, when her kid was at school, and was on the DBP the rest of the time. She had a caesarean scar across her tummy, visible over her jeans. Her tummy was sculpted and flat, flatter, Jess thought, than her own. Cheryl noticed Jess looking and said she did a hundred crunches every night. The kid sat at the bar and drank milkshakes and talked to Jess about movies, and she remembered enough from the video shop she could talk back.

After a month it felt like she'd met everyone. There weren't that many people around because there weren't many jobs. Most of the local businesses were family ones, owned by several generations of the same family. Sam had inherited the pub from his parents, and it seemed like something similar had happened with the shop and half the local farms. Businesses in Awatangi could only provide a living if they were inherited, and you didn't have a mortgage to pay off. You broke even, but ended up tied to the gift for life, couldn't sell because no-one else could pay off their mortgage to buy it. People who didn't inherit a farm – and some who did – tended to move away for study or work and not come back. There wasn't much work here, but then again there weren't many people, so it evened out. Jess started to realise how lucky she'd been to walk into the pub when she did. Her job was probably the only one that didn't need you to know about farming, glaciers, or the bush. And at the same time, Sam and Ann needed her, because there were no other workers around. If you were here, then you'd already made arrangements to live, either a job or on the dole. That was why they'd had to hire backpackers other years. When she asked if that was right, Sam said yes, that the backpackers were transient, wouldn't stay around Awatangi all summer when they could head to Queenstown, and he needed someone who'd stay put. When Jess turned up, the half a job expanded a little to keep her around. Sam would carry her through the rest of spring in order to have someone trained and ready for summer.

Jess got into a routine. She surfed in the morning, worked the afternoon and evening. Some days she went a second or third time – those when the wind blew from the west and the thickness of salt was rich on the air, when she could go outside and feel the salt breeze on her cheek, or hear the breakers crashing from the pub carpark. On those days she would go inside and ask Sam for an hour off and dash down to the beach, then work the rest of her shift salt-skinned and tangled-haired. On mornings with bad waves, especially if it was raining when she woke, she'd just stay in bed and catch up on sleep.

Her life started fitting together. She was smoking again. After a couple of months of telling herself it was just the occasional cigarette, she'd admitted to herself she was off the wagon, although only a few a day. She didn't drink much, only with someone else, could

see how that could get started – and easily out of hand – working in a pub and living alone. She didn't miss people as much as she'd thought she might. There was always someone around the pub, and she was used to living alone. She got used to eating at the pub, dinner talking to Sam, the other meals usually alone. She got out of the habit of reading while she ate. She began to spend more time just sitting on the porch looking at clouds and trees and the sea, hearing the wind. She started to understand why people over here seemed to do that, sitting around like stoners staring at nothing in particular. Feeling a weird kind of satisfaction at what they'd stumbled onto. Jess found herself doing it too.

The one thing keeping her from feeling completely at home was the coming out thing. She hated this bit. Had to do it, but always found it awkward. She cared so very little and other people cared so very much, and that always made it difficult. She told people because she'd rather find out if there was a problem before she'd invested too much in them, but had always found, in the kind of jobs she'd had, that no-one ever cared. All the same, she was worried. This was different. This was a good job, definitely the only one nearer than Franz, and she thought maybe she shouldn't be risking it, maybe discretion was better than honesty.

"Hey Sam," Jess said one day, while they were counting stock, "There's something I want to tell you."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"Look, this is a bit tricky. It isn't, but it can be, you know?"

Sam seemed to be waiting.

Jess pulled a stool over and sat down. Sam did the same. "It doesn't need to change anything. It shouldn't change anything. And I'm just telling you because one day you'll say something and then I'll need to tell you anyway, and if I do it when I'm on the spot I'm get nervous and lie instead of just telling you, and I'm a terrible liar, so telling the truth up front just seems much easier."

"Go on."

"Honesty is best, you know?"

Sam nodded.

"I just feel I should tell people... tell you, even though, no big deal, doesn't change anything, but, um, I have a girlfriend."

"Yeah."

"I usually have a girlfriend, I mean. Right now I have a kind of girlfriend."

"Hope that works out for you."

"That's all?"

"If you're worried, I don't think anyone around here will care."

"Oh." Jess just sat there a minute. "Okay then."

"Yeah," Sam said, "I'd think that most people care more that your Gil's granddaughter than anything else. It kind of makes you local."

Jess nodded slowly, had noticed the same. "Yeah, I suppose so."

Awatangi was isolated and insular and a place for secrets. Secrets like divorces and bankruptcies and walking away from an unfulfilling life. Things you hid from your friends, not ones that brought the police to your door – although Jess wouldn't be shocked to learn there were dope patches back in the bush, or that someone had turned out to be a famous missing person who'd walked out on their life and family and ended up here. Awatangi was

a long way from the world, and anyone who ended up here did so for a reason. Jess hadn't thought about it quite like this before, but sitting at the bar she started to realise why she liked the place so much.

Sam stood up. "And Jess, anyone who cares has known for years. Your uncle's mentioned it now and then, new woman in your life and everything. I really don't think anyone gives a shit."

"Oh," Jess said. "Right."

"Yeah."

"Okay then."

"So yeah, you have a girlfriend. I heard. Can we get back to the stock-take now?"

"Yeah, if you like."

*

Jess saw Keri several times at the beach and each time it was harder to turn and walk away. She wasn't sure what was wrong with her. She started worrying that outing herself to Sam would somehow bring Keri into the pub, would invoke her and make her real. That worried her, but tempted her too, tempted her a lot, and that temptation gave her an incentive, on her first day off, to go back to Christchurch. She drove over and stayed a Tuesday night, arranged to stay with Kate. Kate was in the bath when Jess arrived. The flatmates let her in. Jess climbed in too, poked Kate with her toes until Kate moved her legs and made room. She watched Kate lie back and sigh and seem to relax, almost to sleep. Kate had spent years dozing off in baths, "You'll drown one of these days," Jess said.

Kate opened one eye. "You're telling me that?" she mimed a wave curling and breaking, but grinned.

Jess laughed, "Yeah, suppose."

Jess lay back, looked at the ceiling, and asked, just for the hell of it, "Want a fuck?"

Kate was quiet a moment, then, "Sure, why not."

Jess was surprised, hoped she didn't let it show.

The whole time she was there, Kate was odd. She listened to Jess talk about Awatangi like she usually would have listened, but was distant, clearly didn't understand why Jess was doing it. It was like something had come between them, a kind of detachment that had never been there before, like this was just a booty call. Jess hoped Kate was just worrying about something at work, or was protecting herself from being hurt that Jess had moved away. Something like that, that she'd get over. She tried to tell herself that, but had been annoyed anyway, had got aloof right back and started sulking. It was pretty clear the visit wasn't working, that someone had gone wrong, but she stayed all day anyway, hoped it would get better. It didn't, and Kate seemed to start getting sick of her, so she left early.

After midnight she pulled over somewhere in the mountains, a rest area in the middle of nowhere. She switched off her lights and suddenly it was dark. She got out the car, took her keys, but didn't lock the door. If it was locked and she lost the keys she wouldn't find them again until dawn. Closing the door extinguished the last light. It was still, there was no moon, no wind, and no other traffic. The middle of the South Island was empty. So empty it was quite hard to believe, until you stood like this and remembered you'd been driving for twenty minutes without seeing another person. One road, one town, a handful of people

scattered in farms and tramping huts. You didn't realise when you were just driving through, warm and safe in your car and two hours from anywhere. Some nights when she did this, when the moon was new and the sky was overcast, there was nothing but black once the car lights were off. It was disorientating. On those nights it felt like you could stand two steps from your car and get turned around and wander off into the mountains, and never find your way back. Tonight she had a little light, could see the car once her eyes adjusted. It was still a little creepy. She stood beside her car long enough to scare herself, and somehow that cheered her up. She shook off the faint sense of disappointment that seeing Kate seemed to have caused, got back in the car and drove home.

*

Jess found that pretending to keep Sam's information from Ann, and Ann's from Sam, made her closer to them both. It gave the illusion of secrets, even if they weren't really there, and the illusion was enough for trust, and trust was the basis for friendship. Working together a lot helped too, as did the way she came and went during the day so it seemed more like they were family than work. She was closer to Sam because she worked alongside him more, and they talked between customers, but she became close to them both.

"Ann's worried about you," Sam told her one afternoon, "Thinks you need friends your own age. That you're spending too much time with us oldies."

Jess looked around the bar, seven people other than themselves, average age sixty. "A-ha. And where would these young people be?"

"There's some younger folk around the place. She thinks you should meet them," he wandered off, wiping the bar with a teatowel, "Just a heads-up."

"Shit."

"Something wrong?"

"I know how this goes." Jess had seen Ann helping people out before. Interfering. "Can't you do something?"

"Hell no."

Jess followed. "I'm happy, really. I like it here. I don't like people very much."

"Funny job to choose if you don't like people."

"Only job there was. A lot of the time I don't even like my friends. Not without mountains between us."

"Anne's just trying to help."

"Can you make excuses? Tell her I'm hiding from my girlfriend and want to be left alone?"

"I hadn't, but I can."

"You hadn't?"

"Course not."

"I just assumed... you know, what I told you got back to her."

"Not my business. No-one likes a bartender who gossips."

"Yeah, suppose not." Jess looked at him. "We're talking about what I think we're talking about here?"

"I imagine."

“I thought everyone knew.”

“Everyone who cared, probably. But she’s mostly in the kitchen.”

“Oh shit.”

Sam shrugged slightly.

“Could you tell her?”

“If you want me to.”

“Yeah, tell her...” she considered why he might not have, “Unless she’ll be horrified.”

“Can’t imagine she would be.”

“Tell her, tell everyone.” Jess said. “Spread rumours. It makes it easier if people just know, so I don’t have to keep explaining.”

A customer was standing at the bar. She saw him out the corner of her eye, but stayed where she was for a moment, wanted to be clear.

“You sure?” Sam said, “I thought you’d...”

“Yeah, do. And Ann, you’ll, ah, keep her off my back?”

“I’ll try. No promises. She likes her little projects.” He seemed to be enjoying Jess’s discomfort. She tried for a nasty look, and went to serve the customer.

*

After apparently avoiding her for a month, Keri came into the pub one Friday. She wore a slinky black top and dressy pants and heels. She was with a larger group, her two shadows from the beach and some others who’d been there that night around the fire. Seven in all, three girls, four boys. By now, Jess could pick occupation by clothing. Two wore DOC tops – which made it easy – another two had rugby jerseys, so were probably farmers. The rest, including the surfing shadows, had Gore-Tex jackets which meant glacier guides or similar. They seemed to have been drinking already, were a bit loud and cheerful. Ann appeared from out the back and made one of the rugby jerseys go outside and take off his gumboots. He came back smelling of pot. Keri sat down with her back to the wall, facing the room, but seemed to be carefully not looking at Jess. The rest of the group were noticing Jess quite obviously, which might be because she was new in town, or might be for some other reason. She waved at Keri and Keri – after a nudge from one of her friends – waved back.

Jess got on with serving people.

Keri got up after twenty minutes and made for Jess’s end of the bar. Walked past Sam to get there. Jess watched her approach and for a second considered running away.

“Hey,” Keri said, and leaned on the counter.

Close up, her eyes were the colour of coffee in bright sunlight, smooth and dark like morning waves. There was something very knowing in her smile, like she knew exactly how fuckable she was, and was pretty pleased with herself about that, and wasn’t going to cut Jess any slack by not being hot. She was wearing a low top and was leaning too far forward onto the bar, seemed to be doing it on purpose. She wasn’t wearing her necklaces, only a single greenstone pendant. It hung away from her skin, swayed slightly as she moved, caught Jess’s eye. Her arms were bare and her tats showed. She was dressed up, but was still herself, and Jess thought that was very sexy. She was easily the best dressed person in the bar. Jess considered the top. It was nicer than anything Jess owned, nicer than

anything she'd seen since she got to town. Not what a local Awatangi girl usually wore to the pub on a Friday night. Jess had a feeling Keri knew and wore it anyway, didn't care. Making a point to herself, maybe, dressing how she wanted to, how she would have somewhere else she used to call home. Jess looked, and decided she liked the top.

Jess realised she was staring, that she should be talking, getting drinks. Keri didn't seem to mind, but the silence was going on too long. Jess wondered how this wasn't obvious to everyone else in the bar.

"Hi," she said.

"Heard you were working here."

Jess cleared her throat, found it suddenly dry. "Oh yeah?" she said, hoped it sounded like Oh, so you're noticing what I do? Keri grinned, seemed to get it.

"I thought I'd stay around for a while," Jess said.

"I'm glad."

Jess spent a moment thinking about her being glad. Keri took a slow breath that moved her breasts. Tacky, Jess thought, but looked all the same.

"So yeah," Keri said, "Welcome and all."

"Thanks."

"If you need a tour guide... someone to show you around."

"To show me around?"

"Show you all the local sights. Show you what you might be missing." Keri grinned, like she was proud of being so blatant.

"What I might be missing?"

"Yeah, you never know."

All the repeating made Jess feel she was being sucked into some flirting thing she wasn't quite ready for. "You look good," she said, "Nice top."

"Trelise Cooper."

"You're kidding," Jess said, then, "Sorry. Just, ah, here?"

"Had it, why not wear it," Keri grinned and popped her shoulder strap with her thumb, "Bra is too."

"A-team, hey?" Jess said.

"You got it."

Jess started wondering how far her A-team went, and Keri looked at her like she knew what Jess was thinking. Jess's breath didn't seem to be coming quite as easily as it should. She felt too hot. Say it, Jess thought, ask about the other girl. Say it and let me get this over with, let me turn you down. But Keri just stood there smiling. Jess waited, and then realised she wasn't going to ask. She knew when to stay quiet, not to give the chance for a no.

"So," Jess said, "Clothes and everything. You're not from around here, are you?"

"I'm from around here. I just spent a while somewhere else."

"Where people wear Trelise?"

"Yep."

Jess was curious, wondered what her story was. Surfer bum with designer clothes was always interesting. She didn't know how to ask without actually asking, which would imply she was interested. She hesitated.

"You're from Christchurch?" Keri asked.

"I was. Now I'm from here." Jess wasn't sure why she said it like that. Probably wanted

to impress.

“Yeah, I get that.” Keri seemed thoughtful. “Same here, I suppose.”

“Woman of mystery.”

Keri grinned, leaned a little closer. “Well, you know. Us townie girls have to stick together.”

She was good, Jess thought. Good like Jess would never be. Creating a bond between them like that. She was so good Jess knew she had to stop this. Stop it soon. She had to get out of this conversation.

“Hey, ah, what did you want?” she asked, and for a breathless moment almost hoped Keri would say you.

“Beer and a shot,” Keri said, and pointed to show which.

“And them?” Jess asked, waving to her friends.

“They can look after themselves. I’m talking to you.” She looked down the bar. Jess looked too. Another one of the group was being served by Sam.

Jess poured the beer. Did it badly, her hands shaking a little. Keri seemed not to notice. Jess turned around for the vodka, and past the bottles on the shelf, in the mirror on the wall, Keri was watching her. Unsurprisingly. Keri hadn’t taken her eyes off her since she’d walked up to the counter.

Jess turned back around with the bottle. She put a shot glass on the bar. Poured vodka.

Picked up the glass and drank it herself.

Keri watched, grinning.

“What?” Jess said, getting a fresh glass, “I needed it more than you.”

“Did you?”

“Yep.”

“Why’s that?”

“You’re here.”

Silence for a moment.

“Oh shit,” Jess said.

Anyone else would have blown it then, Jess thought, would have got all clever. Keri just nodded gravely, like it was the most sensible thing in the world for Jess to have said.

“Right,” Keri looked at the bottle in Jess’s hand. “Could I, um, have...”

Jess poured another.

Keri waited. “If you need this one too...”

“You’re right.”

Keri held out money, and Jess shook her head.

“Thanks,” Keri said.

“Yeah, no worries.”

Someone was already waiting behind Keri. She picked up both glasses and stepped back. Jess watched her for a second, thought about what she was missing, then said, “What can I get you?” to the next customer.

Keri went back to her friends, and Jess spent more time than she should have watching that corner of the room. Sam looked puzzled, once had to say, “Hey,” and nod to a customer Jess was ignoring at the bar.

“Yeah,” Jess said vaguely, “Got it. Sorry.”

After an hour things quietened down. The Friday rush was worst from five to seven.

People stopped after work and had a drink while they worked out what to do with their night. Some just went home, some stayed, some organised a party, and others went down to the glaciers or up to Hokitika. A lot of convoying between towns went on during the weekend. Jess had been surprised at first – people would drive eighty k just for a drink in a particular pub – but she was used to it now. After seven the pub cleared out a little, but Keri's group stayed where they were, seemed settled.

Sam moved down the bar and nodded ever so slightly in their direction. "You know Keri?"

"Not know, just seen her on the beach a couple of times."

"Yeah right, she surfs."

"That she does."

"Her whole family do, actually. Her dad used to say they're the eighth canoe, rode all the way from Hawaiki on longboards."

"They're local?"

"More local than you, miss. For a couple of hundred years."

"I haven't seen her before."

"She lived up north for a while. Studying maybe."

"I meant I haven't seen her ever. Even when we were kids."

Sam gave her a funny look. "You wouldn't though, would you. Not with your dad."

"What's that mean?"

Her looked at her a moment longer, then shrugged. "Nah, nothing. Forget it. I've probably got the wrong end of something."

He seemed embarrassed, and Jess had no idea what he was talking about. She looked at him for a moment, but before she could ask more, a customer called her over. When she'd finished with that, Sam seemed to have moved on, said, before she could ask anything more, "Go talk to them if you want. They're the only people your age around here."

"Nah, it's okay."

"Really. I think that's about all of them. May as well say hi while they're all in one place."

Jess shook her head, from across the room finding it easy to resist temptation and think of Kate.

"You okay?" Sam asked, looking at her carefully.

"Yeah, fine," Jess tapped the fridge with a toe, "We're low on Villa sav. I'll get some more."

"Bring a couple of the chardonnay too, we seem to be going though it."

She fetched the bottles, carried them loose in her arms, then got into a long discussion of trout fishing with a couple of the older holidaymakers, her neighbours now, bach regulars who came over every summer. She remembered enough of her uncle's talk to make conversation, could mostly follow what they were saying.

"All okay?" Sam asked her once, passing, looking a little concerned.

Jess nodded, gave a puzzled expression that was meant to be why wouldn't I be? He seemed satisfied, but must have said something to Ann. A bit later she came out and told Jess to take her break.

"It's okay, I will in a bit."

"Take your break." Ann looked firm. Looked across the room. "Have a beer, go over and

say hello.”

“Nah, I’m okay.”

“Just go, young lady.”

“I’m busy.”

“No you’re not.”

Jess managed to avoid her some of the time by serving people, but she wouldn’t take no, seemed determined to stand there talking it over until Jess gave in.

Jess, getting exasperated, whispered several times, “I can’t. I don’t know any of them.”

“Only one way to fix that,” Ann said, equally quietly. Discreet now she was making progress.

“No.”

“You’re the barmaid,” Ann said, “You control the beer. They’ll talk to you even if they hate you.”

Jess looked at her for a moment, wondering if that was meant to help.

Ann laughed, and said, “Go.”

“No,” Jess said, decided she needed to explain, “Look, there’s a girl in Christchurch…”

“Probably a few thousand of them. So?”

“A particular girl,” Jess said. She hoped Sam had told Ann something or that wasn’t going to make sense.

“I just said go have a beer with them.”

Ann folded her arms in her way that said she’d wait all night. She did it when people were smoking inside, or when she was telling someone they were too pissed to serve. Calm, arms folded, willing to wait forever.

“Yeah, but…” Jess said. The yeah was enough.

“Have a beer,” Ann said, poured one, handed it to Jess, “Now go.”

Jess went down the bar and through the gate and did a hard U-turn and came back along the front of the bar, right to the point she’d started from.

“Go,” Ann said without looking up.

“Ciggies.”

They didn’t have a machine but kept a few packets behind the bar. Ann looked disapproving, but handed over a packet, apparently randomly.

“Not inside,” Ann said, “If I let you it’ll just encourage the rest of them.”

“Yeah, of course,” Jess said. “Just to play with.” She opened the packet, slid the cellophane back over the bar to Ann. Banged and tapped and fished out a cigarette.

“You’re a nervous wee thing, Jess, you know that? Go.”

Jess pushed the packet forward so it fell down the back of the bar. She slid off the stool and picked up her beer, and walked over to Keri’s group. Walked slowly so they all saw her coming and she wasn’t left standing there unnoticed when she arrived. They could decide to close her out or let her in, and whatever they did, she’d have tried and Ann might leave her alone.

They opened up, let her in. Of course they did, with Keri sitting there. People said hi and someone dragged over a stool, and she crowded in shoulder-to-shoulder around the small table. They were telling stories about people she didn’t know and places she hadn’t been, but Jess didn’t mind. She was glad not to have to think up things to say after doing it all day. She sipped her beer and flipped her cigarette between her fingers, like doing magic

tricks. She tapped it on the table and stuck it behind her ear and looked everywhere around the table but at Keri.

After a while, she looked at Keri. She smiled. Keri must have been watching out the corner of her eye, because she smiled back straight away. Jess did it again a bit later, smiled and looked and that was all. Keri fiddled with her pendant and watched Jess, and Jess flipped the cigarette over her fingers and watched Keri back.

After a while people started talking about what to do next, about going to someone's place because he'd been planning a bit of a party. Keri leaned over, the first time she'd spoken to Jess since Jess said down, leaned over and said across the table, "Hey, do you want to come?"

You didn't just say that, Jess thought, and Keri smirked like she knew exactly what she'd said and that was what she'd been asking.

"Um, I'm working all night," Jess said, "Sorry."

"We'll be going all night," Keri said, still grinning.

Jess looked at her. No-one else at the table seemed to have picked up what Keri was saying. They all just kept talking among themselves.

"The party," Keri said, and seemed innocent. "Will be going later than Sam'll want to stay up. Come down after work. We can write down how to get there."

"Nah," Jess said, "I really shouldn't..."

"Or someone can come and get you if you like." She pointed to one of the rugby jersey guys, "Our sober driver there's taking people home after anyway. He can get you."

Jess just sat there. Other people started to notice. "Come on," someone said, "It'll be fun."

"I really can't," Jess said.

Everyone was listening now. Jess looking at Keri pleadingly.

"Fair enough," Keri said, "Another time then."

Thank you, Jess mouthed at her, and she stared back with a little half-smile. Pleased she'd put Jess on the spot, Jess thought, and pleased she'd got a reaction. Pleased, it suddenly occurred to Jess, because she owed Keri now, in a very tiny way. Keri was good. Very good.

Chapter Fifteen

It started seeming normal to be at Awatangi. Jess got used to lanterns and open fires and only working half the time. After a month and a half at the pub, she noticed money beginning to build up in her bank the way it never had before. She wasn't spending much, she supposed, wasn't paying rent or power bills or buying a lot of food, and there was little else to spend money on in Awatangi if you worked in the only pub.

The last parts of her life in Christchurch got tidied away. She filled in the form to get back her bond, paid her last bills. The power company didn't seem to have done a final

reading, and when she phoned them to ask about it she got put on hold and forgotten about, so she just wrote “do a final reading” on the bill and posted it back. After a few messages from people who sounded a bit snotty she hadn’t called them back, she changed her mobile’s voicemail message to say she wasn’t going to answer because she was outside of cell coverage most of the time, but here was another number – the pub’s – where they could get her. After that she had a steady trickle of calls. People started getting used to her being there, started phoning just to talk, rather than to check she was okay. Sometimes even managed to ring just when she really needed them.

“Jess,” Sam shouted one afternoon, while Jess was trying to work out her timesheet and pour beer at the same time, “Phone.”

“Got it,” she called, but handed the customer the glass before she actually picked up. One day someone was going to hang up the other extension really quickly and cut a call off.

“Hey troll, how’s the beach?”

“Allie?” Jess said, then called “I’m on a break” to Sam. She pulled the phone through into the office, slid the door shut, and perched on the edge of the desk.

“You’re there,” Allie said. “Your phone said.”

“I’m here.”

“Why are you there?”

“Felt like a change.”

“That got anything to do with Kate?” Allie asked. Jess’s feelings for Kate weren’t much of a secret from people who knew her well.

“Maybe,” Jess said.

“Tell me.”

Jess talked. Allie listened. Jess just dumped everything out. It was good to be listened to, get her thoughts straight. She couldn’t talk to Kate about Kate, didn’t know anyone in Awatangi well enough yet, and Baz listened like a man, trying to fix things. Allie just listened, let Jess talk, said I know and it happens and poor you every so often.

“I can’t help wondering,” Jess said in the end. “How long should I keep trying to make it work when it just isn’t?”

“As long as you can,” Allie said, “Until you can’t.”

“And how long when someone else is there, waiting for the first to end?”

Allie hesitated. “When you say waiting...?”

“That’s what she pretty much told me.”

“The other one? That she was waiting?”

“Yep.”

Allie seemed to think that over. “Then maybe about now would be the time to start again?”

“Yeah, maybe.” Jess sighed. “Fuck knows.”

“Maybe it is time to give up on Kate, ichiban.”

Jess fiddled with a pen Sam had left on the desk, “Not yet.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Wait and see, I suppose.”

“Seems like you’ve always been doing that.”

“Yeah,” Jess said, “I know.”

Silence for a moment.

“You know that thing,” Jess said. “When you first see someone. When she just looks at you and it sets you on fire. She does that.”

“Kate?”

“Not Kate.”

“Oh,” Allie said. Then, after a moment, “Most people would think it’s a good thing. To have that with someone.”

“Just the wrong someone.”

“Yeah,” Allie said. “Just the wrong someone.”

“I should go,” Jess said.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I am. It helps to talk.”

“Okay,” Allie said. “Look after yourself.”

“I will,” Jess said, “Bye,” and hung up, went back to serving people.

*

Baz reappeared. He seemed impressed by the job in the pub. “A job,” he kept saying, “In a pub.”

“Yep,” Jess said.

“Do you get discount beer?”

“I get free beer.”

“Do I get discount beer?”

“You get me serving you.”

“Oh,” he tried to look disappointed. “Yeah, I suppose that’ll do.”

Jess had asked him to help with the new gas bottles. The delivery truck couldn’t get all the way up the track, so she’d have to do the last bit of the delivery, and moving the bottles needed two people.

“Sure,” he’d said. “When are you going to run out of gas?”

“You know, when you’re next over.”

“Soon, next year?”

“Um, soon might be better. Wouldn’t it be nice to come and visit me?”

“Yeah, Jess, of course it would.”

“Wouldn’t it be nice to come and visit me next week?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

She ordered new gas, arranged for the delivery while he’d be there. They wrestled the two empty gas cylinders into the back of her car, chest-high steel monsters as big around as the circle of her arms. They looked like bombs – were bombs, Jess reminded herself. Moving the empties wasn’t too hard, the weight was only the empty steel case. They pushed them sideways and pivoted them on their bases and slid them onto an old piece of carpet in the back of her station wagon. This was the easy part, she remembered from watching her dad and uncle. Getting the full cylinders back up was a lot more difficult. Full, they were a lot heavier. They drove down carefully, waited at the bottom of the track for the delivery truck. When it turned up, the driver lowered his lifting deck to the level of

the car and they pushed the cylinders off and straight onto the deck. The driver lifted it up, rolled the empties off, rolled full ones on. Just like moving kegs around, Jess thought.

"They need to go in top first," Jess reminded the driver. So when she and Baz slid them out up at the back they'd be upright.

"Yeah, got it love," the driver said.

"On the blanket," Jess said. So they could slide the bottles out again.

He just looked at her.

"Yeah," Jess said. "Okay."

The driver climbed down, got ready to help push. He and Baz looked like they were going to do it on their own, and probably could have but Jess elbowed in beside Baz and helped anyway. They pushed, got the cylinders into Jess's car.

"They're a bit heavier," Baz said.

"Yeah," Jess said, "Forty-five kilos heavier." That was what was written on the sides. She signed for the delivery and the truck turned around and went back towards Greymouth.

"Ready?" Jess asked, and Baz nodded.

She drove back up to the back, carefully. Baz leaned back to half-hold the cylinders. Pointlessly, Jess thought, since if one rolled a hand wouldn't stop it and he'd just get crushed fingers.

"Don't do that," she said. "Get your hand out of there."

"It's fine."

"Stop it."

"I'm okay."

"Shit, Baz, move your fucking hand."

He looked at her and did.

"And stop treating me like a girl. You never do any other time."

He kept looking.

"Pushing the cylinders."

"Yeah, sorry."

"You're sure we'll manage?"

"Course we'll manage, Jess, we're both real men. Drive over the lawn."

"Thanks Baz, seen it done before."

"Don't bog down."

"Thanks Baz."

"Remember the back of the car weighs more than usual."

"Fuck you Baz."

He grinned. "Just saying."

She turned and backed up to the concrete step that took the gas bottles, a meter back from it and square to the wall. They should be able to slide each bottle back a little, tip it out, and let it slide down into place. Hopefully, tip and slide slowly enough that they didn't smash a hole right through the wall.

"Hold on," Baz said, "Let me think about this."

They stood beside the car and he looked at the wall for a while. "We could rig some sort of harness," Baz said, "To the top of the bottle." There were open handholds around the top rim. "Then it shouldn't be able to swing too far."

"If we measure the length of rope right."

“Obviously.”

“Got a rope, Baz?”

“Got a towrope, Jess. I figure this bugger doesn’t weight as much as a car.”

“Dad and Hans never do anything like that.”

“We’re smart. We have degrees. And they don’t try this with a cute little station wagon. The roof’s going to get in the way.”

“Yeah,” Jess said, “Suppose it will. Okay.”

Baz spent some time working out distances and tying knots. He brought his car around and then ran the rope from the bottle, through the open front door of Jess’s car, to his car’s towbar.

“Regular boy scout,” Jess said when he was done.

“Yeah, but without the buggery.”

He stood beside the car for a while watching the rope.

“Shall we do this?” Jess said.

Baz started checking his knots. Almost nervously. “Yeah, okay.”

They got in the back of Jess’s car, backs to the dashboard, and pushed with their legs. The cylinder slid. The car springs creaked as it moved.

“Okay, stop,” Baz said. “Just let me think.”

“Thought you were sure.”

“Shut up Jess.”

He looked, checked his knots. “Okay, we’re going to lift it up. Slowly.”

Jess nodded and moved her hands.

“And be careful,” Baz said, “Watch the rope while it tightens, don’t let it catch you.”

They lifted carefully. There was an elastic sprong noise, a clang as the cylinder landed on concrete. Both cars creaked as a lot of weight moved around.

“Shit,” Jess said, and got ready to jump out. It sounded bad, the bottle seemed to be still moving, slipping.

“Hold on,” Baz said, and scrambled out to look. Jess followed. The bottle was resting on the bumper of her car at a forty-five degree angle. Halfway between horizontal and vertical, and halfway between the car and the wall.

“Exactly what I wanted,” Baz said.

“Yeah right.”

“Weren’t you listening?”

Jess just looked at him.

“Hardest part wasn’t lifting it, it was stopping it getting away,” Baz said. “Now we just push it upwards.”

He got out and looked at the bottom of the cylinder and the concrete platform for damage.

“Hey Jess, you screamed before.”

“Did not.”

“Like a girl.”

“Fuck you.”

“It’s okay, Jess, I won’t tell.”

“Stop it.”

He went around and loosened the knot.

“Won’t it fall?” Jess asked.

“Nah, the weight’s on the ground now. The rope was just to stop the top swinging over when it went out.”

“Right,” Jess said, watching the bottle suspiciously. She stayed well out the way until Baz was ready, but the cylinder hadn’t moved.

“Okay,” Baz said. “Help me lift it.” They lifted, and it rocked into place.

“Hey, it worked,” Jess said.

“Screamed,” Baz said, “Like a little girl.”

The other bottle was easier for knowing how everything worked. Jess didn’t distrust Baz’s towrope nearly as much the second time.

“Fuck,” Jess said, chaining both new bottles into place, surprised she was sweating. “I think I’ll start cooking on the fire. That was a bit of a bitch.”

“Nah,” Baz said, stretching so his back popped. “Piece of piss. Do it again tomorrow.”

She looked at him. “That’ll be on your own, mate.”

They went inside. He saw the pile of National Geographics, smirked at Jess. “Admiring the native women, hey?”

She blushed. Actually blushed. She was pretty sure he wouldn’t realise why.

“Shit Jess,” he said, apparently sympathetic. “I know it feels insensitive, but we’ve all done it. I was into them all the time when I was ten.”

“I’m going to work.”

“Have fun,” he said, and flopped onto the couch.

*

Baz stopped by the pub after lunch to say he was going fishing. He was gone all day, reappeared in the evening and sat down at the end of the bar. Jess gave him dinner and introduced him around, made sure he had people to talk to. He seemed to have already run into a couple of the fishermen. He got more blokey in company like this, annoyingly so. All fishing and rugby and cars. Jess stayed far enough away not to get involved. Talking to him would mean either being bored or being teased, and she couldn’t really be bothered with either. Now and then, when there was no-one nearby to show off to, he’d go back to being normal Baz, and then they could talk.

He seemed settled in, drank beer slowly and watched the TV in the corner. She made him pay for his drinks, even though Sam had said not to. He could afford it, and she didn’t want to have to worry about how much he was getting through. She assumed Sam had meant a drink here and there, not a session.

Whenever it was quiet, she went and leaned on the bit of the bar near to him, let him talk to her. Most of the time he talked about the TV, about a rugby game that was on. And sometimes not.

“Jess,” he said, watching a stray Scandinavian tourist across the room, “You like skinny blonde chicks, right?”

“Sure. Sometimes.”

“What about her?”

“Other than that she’s with a guy, you mean?”

“Right now she might be sitting over there saying ‘Nah, not the girl behind the bar, she’s

with a guy'."

Which Jess supposed was a point.

"Why Kate, is what I mean?" Baz said, "If she isn't your type."

Jess shook her head.

"Tell me."

"She's always been my type, I suppose. She's Kate."

"You could do better."

"You've mentioned that once or twice."

"Just saying."

"Yeah, so don't."

Jess went down the other end of the bar and racked glasses. Baz watched TV. The bar emptied out. Most of the locals had already gone. Sam got tired and left Jess to close up. Once the last few locals left and the Scandinavians went back to their camper, Jess locked the doors and turned off the outside lights and started mopping.

Baz watched for a moment, then said, "Where's my sandwich?"

"What?"

"Sandwich."

She'd told him earlier she'd make him one once she'd closed up. "In a minute."

Baz sighed and spun around on his stool, looked around the room, tried to seem bored. After a while he said, "Sandwich."

"Shit, in a minute."

She finished the mopping, went into the kitchen, made them both one. Took them back out to the bar. "Want another beer?"

Baz held out his glass.

"Pay up."

"Isn't that against the law? You're shut."

"Till's still on. Pay."

He gave her a ten dollar note, and she didn't give him change.

"Hey."

"Stop complaining. Or pay for the rest of the food."

"Yeah, okay." He bit, then said, "Ow fuck."

"That'll be hot."

"No shit." He bit again anyway. "I was thinking. Katie told me once you decided to be a slacker. That there's this line you were both close to and she went one way and you went the other."

"Oh yeah?" Jess licked cheese off her finger. "And what do you think about that?"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure it's bullshit. You've been working all night and you didn't look like a slacker."

"I think she'd mean careers and ambition, not laziness."

"Do what makes you happy, I say."

"Except I don't know what that is," Jess said. "She might have a point."

Baz looked at her. "You're twenty-four."

"And?"

"In ten years you might have something to worry about."

"Kate's twenty-four and cares about this kind of thing."

“Kate cares about a lot of stupid bullshit.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Jess kept eating, started thinking about Kate. Baz suddenly snapped his fingers in front of her nose. She jumped.

“Stop daydreaming,” he said.

“I’m not.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“Shut up.”

He smirked and swung around, looked at the TV. She finished cleaning up. It was nice to have him here, nice to have Sam and Ann around and people like Allie on the phone, but she was starting to miss Kate. The way Kate knew her better than anyone. The way she didn’t need to explain things – like she seemed to have been a lot lately – because Kate just knew. She wasn’t used to having to tell people what she was feeling.

“You know what I really miss about Kate,” Jess said.

Baz laughed.

“Yeah, not that. Being told I look nice.”

It was something Kate did, said Jess’s hair or earrings or top looked nice. Not just Jess, anyone who was around. Kate thought looking good was important, and tried to notice when other people made an effort. Jess had got used to it, and now, all of a sudden, she’d moved and it had stopped. It was strange, seemed almost vain to care, but she missed it.

“You look nice, Jess.”

She stared at him for a moment. “Yeah, thanks.”

“And I know how you feel. I miss it too, you know. Being told I look nice.”

“Kate tells you that you look nice?”

“Shit no. That’s why I miss it. She never has.”

Jess went to empty the last load out of dishwasher and finish cleaning up. In the car, driving home, Baz poked her in the ribs, “You still have your Kate face on.”

She swatted his hand away, knew if she didn’t she’d get another prod. “Don’t do that while I’m driving.”

“You look all daydreamy and forlorn.”

“Bullshit.”

“Yeah you do. You’ve been doing it for years, whenever you get to thinking about Kate and how much you want her.”

“Do I?” Jess said, then, “Nah.”

“You do.”

“Not.”

“What were you thinking about, then?”

“Fuck off.”

After a moment, he said, “I like your earrings.”

“What?”

“If it’s getting you down that no-one says nice things to you, then I like your earrings.”

She looked at him, then just said, “Thanks.”

They sat on the porch and drank beer and watched the moths bang on the wire screens. Baz started talking about his family. Jess listened for a while, then asked, “How are they taking it?”

“Taking you doing their baby girl it?”

“Yep.”

“Ambivalent, I think. They always wanted you and me to hook up, make you a real daughter...”

Jess grinned and gave him a finger.

“So I guess,” Baz said, “Although they got disappointed that wasn’t going to happen a while back, now they’re seeing new hope.”

“They don’t mind?”

“They probably don’t think Katie’s good enough for you.”

“Stop saying that.”

“It’s true.” Baz shrugged. “But they’re used to the idea by now, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“What idea?”

“You and your proclivities.”

Jess looked at him, knew something more was coming.

“And that it was inevitable you’d start recruiting inside the family.”

Jess looked around for something to hit him with. Found nothing, threw a bottle cap instead.

*

Baz showed no sign of leaving. When Jess asked if he didn’t have things to do, not saying he should go, just asking, he just said probably, but if anyone needed him they’d phone the pub. He fished and followed Jess down to work and watched TV, said he missed the ads when he was at the bach. When the pub was quiet, he nagged her to play pool. Years ago, she’d made the mistake of telling him she was pretty good, which meant he’d had to prove her wrong. She tried again every so often, just to see if she’d got any better, but didn’t seem to have. He always told her she’d almost beaten him, and she thought it was nice he pretended.

One evening, as they were finishing a game, a Dutch tourist came over and said she’d like to “do the winner.” Jess kept a straight face. Baz didn’t. “What?” the girl asked, kept looking between Jess and Baz and pushing on Baz’s arm to get an answer. Jess said nothing, just gave them both drinks and left them to it, and they spent the rest of the evening huddled in the corner whispering in each other’s ears. Jess watched, and muttered, “Bimbo,” to Sam occasionally.

“Her?” he asked.

“Him.”

The Dutch girl’s friends went to their campervan, and the Dutch girl came home with Baz. She called Baz *buth*, like how a lisping bee would sound. Jess had been introduced earlier as a flatmate, for simplicity, she supposed. She could feel herself getting annoyed with them both and tried to make herself stop. She said to Baz, “I’ll use the spare room,” assuming he wouldn’t care the sheets had been slept in, and went for a walk down to the beach. At uni she’d heard enough of flatmates fucking never to want to again. It seemed like it should be hot, but somehow just wasn’t. Awkward and a bit weird and more like hearing someone lift weights than anything else – the same grunts of effort and gasps of success, just without the metal clangs. When she got back, it was quiet and the lights were

off, so she assumed they were done. She made up a bunk in the spare room and slept there.

In the morning, she made coffee, shouted it was ready, and went and sat on the porch. Then changed her mind. First thing in the morning, hearing strangers pee was probably worse than hearing them fuck. Dutch girl went out to the toilet, came back inside, said thank you for letting her stay on the way past.

“No worries,” Jess said.

“I hope you work things out with his sister.”

“Yeah,” Jess said, “Thanks,” and wondered what exactly Baz had told her.

Baz drove her to down to the pub to meet her friends, and Jess waited on the porch until he got back. “Hey,” she said. “Thanks for sharing my business all over the world.”

He flopped down on the couch. “She asked who you were. I just said that’s Jessie, she’s my sister’s best mate and this is her house, but don’t worry, nothing between her and me because she’s got a thing going on with my sister.”

“Did you have to?”

“Not much else happening, so yeah.”

“Not much happening?”

“I’m sweet and we’re friends, apparently. I guess they do things differently in Dutchland.”

Jess realised, found it satisfying, somehow. “You didn’t get any.”

“Nah I didn’t. You know what I think? I think this house is cursed.” He leaned back, looked out to sea, stretched. Said, quite deliberately, “I like your necklace, Jess. It’s real nice.”

“Yeah, thanks Baz. I like the shirt.”

“What, this old thing?”

“A-ha. It’s great.”

Silence a moment. “You’re supposed to do it back,” Jess said. “Say something nice.”

“Right.” He squinted at her. “I like that shirt too, Jess.”

“Thanks Baz. I like the haircut. Is it new?”

“Did it last weekend with my clippers. Glad I got it right. Nice tits Jess.”

“Thanks Baz.” She put her cup down. “We can stop now, though, if you like.”

“You sure? I was just getting going.”

“Nah, you’re right. What was her name? I don’t think I caught it.”

Baz shrugged. “Who cares? She’s gone, I’ll never see her again.”

“You’re like a player without the getting laid, you know that?”

“Yeah, I’m working on it. Beer?”

“Bit early.”

Baz sat there staring at her, face a pretence of disgust.

“Thanks,” Jess said, “A beer’d be great.”

They drank. They watched sandflies on the screens. After a while she went to work. A day later he suddenly said, “Fuck it, I’m out of here. I need a break from the curse.”

Jess thought he was joking, just sat and looked at him, but he went and packed and loaded up his car. She still wasn’t quite sure he was serious until he was standing in front of her, with his arms out, saying goodbye. She hugged him and asked, “You’re really going?”

“Shit yeah.”

“Because you think you’re not scoring here?”

“Yep. You’ve cursed it.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“You do.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“And thanks.”

“You take care, okay?”

She nodded, and watched him drive away.

*

Because she was usually up at dawn surfing, and up at night working, Jess got into the habit of having an afternoon nap. She’d get all woozy and unfocused and need a sleep, would go back to the bach and sit on the porch with the breeze in her hair, or doze in her car all warm and stuffy in the pub carpark.

One afternoon, while sleeping in the car, she woke to see a familiar white Holden pulling into the carpark. She watched, half-slouched, not sure she was visible, as Keri hauled an empty crate out the back seat and went inside. Jess wanted to follow. She hesitated, wondered if she should, then gave in. She got out her car, crossed the carpark as slowly as she could, made herself go around to the front door. Delayed long enough that when she went into the bar, Keri had gone.

“You’re back,” Sam said, and glanced out the windows. “You just missed... Ah.”

“What?” Jess said, quite sharply, and Sam didn’t answer.

They both watched the Holden pull out the carpark and drive north.

“She asked about you,” Sam said.

“I’ll bet.”

“She is, by the way. So I’ve heard.”

“Yeah,” Jess said. “I noticed.”

“Dishes,” Sam said, pushing an apron across the bar gently, “You may as well since you’re back.”

Jess nodded. Felt proud of herself for avoiding temptation just long enough.

Chapter Sixteen

Jess wondered for a couple of weeks why she didn’t know Keri, and what her father had to do with it. The not knowing bothered her. She was pretty sure she’d never seen anyone else surfing down at the beach, even before she’d started herself, and she couldn’t understand how, since then, the only two women who surfed in the area had never run into each other.

“How old is she?” Jess asked Sam one afternoon. Spoke without thinking, then realised

Sam was smirking and belatedly added, "Um, Keri."

He kept grinning.

"Never mind," she said, and went into the kitchen.

"Couple of years older than you," Sam called. "I can find out her birthday, if that helps?"

"Imagine my finger," Jess called, but thought about dates. Two years wasn't enough of an age difference that they'd never have met. Assuming Keri had started surfing when she was fairly young, which made sense if her dad was into it, Jess should have met her. All Jess could think of was that Keri must have spent summers somewhere else. Summers away and then moved when she finished school. That was the only way it would fit. As a kid Jess had mostly been here in summer. By the time she was coming over her on her own, Keri would have been gone. Still, something didn't quite fit.

It bothered her enough that a few days later, she sat down with Sam at lunchtime and said, "Tell me about my dad. What you meant the other night about not knowing Keri."

"Thought you'd forgotten."

Jess shrugged, and he looked a little like he wished she had.

"This is gossip," Sam said.

"Okay."

"I mean, don't take it to heart."

"Sure."

"I mean it. I shouldn't even tell you."

Too late now, Jess thought, with a build-up like that. She made a cross her heart gesture.

"You're dad's a bit odd sometimes. Fair comment?"

Jess nodded.

"Irritable, you know."

To say the least, Jess thought. Her family had always been distant to each other. It had got worse since she'd started bringing girls home, but not that much worse. Her parents seemed to think that having a child had been a nuisance, that most of what she did was a nuisance, and the whole thing with women was just the latest of many ways she'd found to irritate them. That was why she'd spent so much time at Kate's when she was younger.

"He's an asshole," Jess said. "But what can you do?"

Sam looked disapproving. Disrespecting her elders, Jess assumed. "I get to say that and you don't," she said, which seemed to make things right again.

"This is nothing to do with Gil," Sam said, "He was a good guy. This is just your dad."

"Sam, I might look like I'm waiting here patiently..."

"Yeah, sorry. It's nothing much, just politics. The coast is a union place, and people don't take well to being told they should be thinking differently."

"And dad...?"

"Yeah, your dad. He was always a bit... He didn't really spend a lot of time down here."

"He was a bit of a wowser?"

"Yeah. Didn't mix with people. So it sort of looked like an outsider barging in..."

"Sam, what happened?"

"He got into a discussion down here. I think he'd only come in to tell people how to vote..."

"He always tries to tell me."

"Yeah? Well, people argued, he didn't like that, some unfortunate things were said."

“Like?”

“Layabout dole-bludgers.”

“Not very nice thing to call someone.”

“You might say those it was aimed at weren’t impressed.”

“Who was it aimed at?”

“Keri’s dad, mostly.”

“Ah.”

“And this being a economically disadvantaged rural area, where unemployment is a fact of life...”

“Yeah, got you. Big feud?”

“Not a feud. No real drama. They just didn’t like each other much after that.”

“Sort of makes sense.”

Sam nodded, “I imagine that’s why he kept you away from this place. Yours was the only family that didn’t come down.”

Jess thought about that. “Yeah, okay. I hadn’t really realised, but that makes sense.”

“My old man tried to patch things up. Get everyone talking. But it was probably a bit late once they’d started shouting. Pride and everything. I think your dad always blamed mine a bit. For letting the silly buggers go on, you know.”

“Sorry.”

“Wasn’t you.”

“Still. From my family to yours, I apologise.”

“Yeah, thanks Jess, that means a lot.” He grinned.

“Thought it might. And why does that mean I’ve never seen Keri before?”

“Her dad never let the kids use the beach. Said it was you bach bastard’s beach and his family was too good for it. He made them go round the other side of the Head.”

“It’s all cliffs.”

“So you say. I gather there’s a track.”

“No there isn’t. I looked years ago.”

“A secret track. Only for family.”

“Ah. And he surfed? Her dad?”

“He did.”

“And he stopped using the beach here because he was angry at my father?”

“Your father and some of the other bach owners. Your dad started it, but there was a bit of a Nats and Labour thing. People with baches liked Muldoon more, that sort of thing.”

“But he stopped using the beach?”

“From what he said, it wasn’t that good a beach in the first place.”

“It’s not perfect, but it’s okay. Seems a shame.”

“If it makes you feel better, it was only a couple of months in summer. He’d keep an eye out for cars and smoke up on the ridge and stay away when townies were around. And I think the fishing’s better north of the head anyway.”

“Ah.” Jess thought about it. “Yeah, that’s quite clever, really. Looking for smoke.”

“He thought so.”

“Is he still around?”

“Nah. Died last year. I think that’s why young Keri’s back. She came back to keep an eye on her mum and sort of stayed. She was back and forward for a while last year, then

seemed to settle here.”

Sam got up and took plates to the sink. “I did wonder, what did your folks say about you working here?”

“No idea. Haven’t told them.”

“That’s not such a good way for things to be.”

Jess shrugged. “Not much to do about it. Dad’s always been a bit of a difficult prick and mum kind of goes along with what he says. We haven’t really talked much in years.”

“Jess, I’m sorry…”

She shrugged.

Sam seemed to be remembering. “I was never sure whether to let you in here. When you were younger. In case he caused trouble.”

“He never knew.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yeah, Sam, fathers are fine with their teenage daughters sneaking out at night to meet boys in pubs. He didn’t know.”

“Right.”

“Far as I know, they thought I was down at the beach surfing. I used to change on the track and hide my board in the bush. They never really bothered checking up on me. I was a sneaky bitch back then.”

Sam grinned.

“I didn’t realise you knew who I was.”

“Think about it. Working here, how many local people don’t you know?”

“Yeah suppose. Well thanks for letting me in back then. I appreciate it.”

“Don’t get ideas. You keep on checking IDs.”

“Because we might actually get raided?”

“No Jess, because Ann will get pissed off. Just make my life easy, okay?”

Jess grinned.

Sam stood up. “I’d better get back to it.”

“Yeah. I’ll just go for a ciggie.”

He looked at her. “You okay, Jess? No terrible news there?”

“Nah, I’m fine. Good to hear, actually. It’s been bugging me how I didn’t know Keri.”

She stood up and went to the door.

“Hey Jess,” Sam called.

She turned around.

“Family feuds, how very star-crossed.”

“Up yours, Sam.”

He grinned and went into the bar.

*

Jess decided to build an outdoor bath. She wanted a bath and expected to be at Awatangi long enough to use it. And she thought she probably could. The advantage of a blokey kind of family. Ann knew someone who knew someone who, thirty k or so up the road, had an outdoor bath at their bach. Jess phoned them and arranged to go have a look the next weekend they were over. They were new-agey kind of people with two young kids. Jess

assumed they had a bach because they had a dope patch back in the bush, but might have been wrong.

She poked around their bathtub, decided it was essentially just a brick barbeque with a metal bath cemented on top. She'd watched her uncle build a concrete-block barbie when she was about twelve, thought she remembered enough to get it to work. You just had to make sure you had enough air going through for the fire to keep burning. The tub she was looking at had a water pipe from the house tanks, but she could make do with a hose. She thought about it and decided she'd also need a mosquito net and some way to hang it, but that shouldn't be too hard. Perhaps some parts of an old clothesline. She thought there was one under the bach.

She asked around, put an ad on the community noticeboard outside the shop, and ended up with a trailer-load of heatproof chimney bricks, delivered. She bought cement. She borrowed tools from Sam, "Take them as long as you want," he said, "I don't need them and I know where they are." She found a metal bathtub in a scrap yard in Greymouth and had that delivered too. She couldn't find anything under the bach to use as a mosquito net frame, so she drove up to Greymouth one weekend and bought four metal stakes from a hardware shop, and mail-ordered the net itself to get one big enough. Then she started building the foundations on fine days.

*

Several times Ann said she should go down to the beach with Jess, that she could do with a walk in the afternoon while Jess was surfing. Jess had said that'd be good, but nothing actually seemed to happen, so she assumed it was a thought rather than anything else. One afternoon, as Jess was getting ready to sneak off for a surf, Ann came out the kitchen and said, "Mind if I come with you?"

"Not at all. I mean, yeah, if you like."

"You seem to spend half your life down there, so I thought I might as well take a look."

"There isn't much to see."

"I'll bring a book."

"Yeah," Jess said, "Okay then. I'd like that."

She drove down and left Ann sitting on the beach while she surfed. She couldn't quite work out what was going on. Assumed it was some bonding thing, but was almost worried Ann was about to confide she was going to divorce Sam or something. She did a few short runs on the beach break, then headed back in. Ann stood up when she saw her coming and walked up to the car with her.

"You want me to carry something?" Ann asked.

"Nah, don't worry. Everything's wet." And there was a bit of a trick to managing the board so the wind didn't catch it.

Her towel was shut into the car door to dry in the wind. Her keys were in her wetsuit's zippered pocket.

"You want cocoa?" Jess asked. She always made a thermos of cocoa before she left the pub.

"Thanks."

Jess got the thermos and, after a rummage in the back, found some plastic cups. She kept

a half-packet lying around because she spent too much time on beaches with people who only brought a bottle. She gave Ann the insulated cup from the top of the thermos, used the plastic one herself. Ann leaned on the bonnet.

Jess was cold. She towelled her hair dry and reached for the zipper of her wetsuit. It was almost a habit just to change. She was about to, then suddenly realised she was naked underneath and Ann was right there. When it was cold and she thought she'd be alone on the beach, she didn't bother with a bikini, because the bikini's knots got pressed against her skin by the wetsuit and dug in. She stopped the move, made it into a stretch, decided she'd rather be cold than get into a conversation with her boss about how she was naked and her wetsuit was full of pee. Not actually full right now since the water cycled through and the pee ran out, but pee had been in it earlier.

"You look cold," Ann said.

"I'll live."

Ann turned around, stared down the beach. "Get on with it, girl."

Jess did, shivering. Made a half-assed effort to hide behind a towel, but didn't really bother.

"Good cocoa," Ann said.

"Yeah," Jess said, finished up. "Too much sugar in it."

"I noticed."

Jess sat beside her on the bonnet. "Are we here to talk or something? Or just hanging out?"

Ann looked at her. "Is there something in particular you want to talk about?"

"Not really."

"You sure? Settling in? Everything fine here?"

"Yeah, I'm good."

Ann nodded. "This woman in Christchurch..."

"Sam told you?"

"He did. That okay with you?"

"Yeah, I wanted him to. Is that why we're here? Is it a problem?"

Ann looked at her. "You must have run into some nasty people in your time, young lady."

"Why's that?"

"Assuming everything's going to be a problem, just straight off the bat."

"Yeah," Jess said. "Suppose." She thought about that for a moment, wondered if it was true.

"I wondered if you wanted to talk about her, that was all. If that would help."

"I don't know."

"Do you miss her?"

"A lot."

They sat for a while, watching the waves.

"So this isn't going to be a thing between us?" Jess said. "That she's a she, if you see what I mean?"

"Don't be an idiot, Jess."

"Okay then."

They watched the waves a little longer.

“Can I say something?” Ann said.

“Sure.”

“It doesn’t seem like she’s very good for you. Lifelong friends and all, but still...”

“Yeah, I know,” Jess said, and stood up. “Suppose we should be getting back.”

“It’s quiet up there. Just when you’re ready.”

“Yeah, okay.” They sat a bit longer, didn’t really talk, but that seemed to be enough.

*

Baz turned up again, and when Jess said she hadn’t heard from Kate for a while, he phoned her and made them talk. Jess went and sat in the office and told Kate how things were going. Kate seemed surprised Jess was enjoying it so much. She said it in a kind of grudging way, as if Jess had proved her wrong on purpose.

Jess felt herself getting annoyed, “What do you mean?” she said.

“Nothing to do, you know.”

“I don’t mind that, Kate.”

“Oh,” a slight pause. “I’d have thought you would.”

“That’s you.”

“I don’t...”

“I’m not you, Kate. I like it here.”

“Yeah,” Kate said, “Okay.”

She sounded odd. Didn’t like being talked down to, even if she wasn’t quite sure why. Any second she’d start explaining why she wasn’t wrong, it was just that Jess didn’t understand what she’d meant. Before she could, Jess said, “No worries, you’re forgiven.”

Kate went quiet.

Jess decided she should try and be nice. “The job’s casual,” she said. “There’s no certainty, and odd hours and shit pay, but you get that anywhere.”

“Well, not anywhere.”

“Not in Christchurch, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not in Christchurch.”

“Yeah, I noticed.”

“It’s different here, that’s all.”

“Course it is,” Kate said.

Jess almost let it go, then didn’t. “Hey Kate, stop trying to change me.”

“I’m not.”

“Yeah you are, and don’t.”

“I’m not.”

“Yeah right. Get a better job, sort out your contract, you shouldn’t spend so much on rent...”

“I just want what’s best for you.”

“What you think’s best for me.”

“Yes.”

“You used to get really pissed off when Audrey did that.”

Kate didn’t answer.

“It’s okay, I mean, I like that you want to try, but I’m happy being me.”

“No you’re not. Not always.”

Which was true. “Mostly.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll try not to.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, of course. If you want me to. Shit, Jess…”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“Sometimes I think you’ve got a really fucked up idea of me in your head, you know? Just some of the things you say sometimes.”

“I know. I said sorry.”

“Yeah, well, you should be.”

And suddenly it was about Kate again. Jess listened for a while, then went back out into the bar and handed the phone to Baz, “It’s your sister.”

He listened for a moment. “She says you didn’t say goodbye.”

“I know.”

“She wants to know why.”

“Tell her I’m busy. Tell her to be happy to talk to you.”

“She isn’t.”

“Just talk to her Baz.”

She had a sudden odd thought. Audrey had always nagged her to stand up to Kate. She had, but once she’d started, she ended up standing up to Audrey too, and that eventually broke them up. Now she was standing up to Kate like Audrey had always wanted, but Audrey was long-gone and would never know.

Baz left again the next day. Having done his bit to make them talk, Jess supposed.

*

As the end of spring became summer, Jess sat on the porch and watched storms rush in from the sea and collide with the mountains. Lightning flashed behind low cloud, filling the sky from horizon to horizon with an eerie bright glow. Heavy rain fell, thick with the smell of ozone and wet leaves. Jess sat, hugging herself against the sudden cold, just a little afraid in case lightning should strike near her. She felt close to the world and apart from people. The lighting was frequent enough, during a big storm, that she wondered if she’d be able to read by it. Once, she went inside and got a book and found she almost could – the flash was bright enough to burn an after-glow of the words onto her retina, but wasn’t quite often enough. She had to stop between flashes.

After a week of storms, it started getting warmer. She woke up one morning and found a sheep grazing next to her car. It made a surprising amount of noise tearing and ripping at the grass. She tried to catch it and tie it up but couldn’t manage. It looked slow and stupid but was just smart enough to hop sideways and stay an arm’s length away. In the end she went down to the pub and asked Sam whose it was likely to be. He phoned around and found someone missing their lawnmower and it was gone by the time she got home.

People began to drift into the baches for summer. It wasn’t busy yet, but there were more people around than Jess was used to, and that sometimes put her on edge. She’d got too used to the winter emptiness. Not families yet, but a few fishermen and retired people, and

one week a mother with two young children. Jess talked to people when their paths crossed, on their porches or from car to car, through open windows on the access track. People would call hello if they saw her on the porch, but didn't stop and talk. As if the imaginary wall of the screens kept them away.

One day on the beach, the mother came over while her kids were playing in the shingle. Jess had the feeling she wanted the company more than Jess did. They talked for a while, until she asked if Jess wasn't lonely over here on her own, and something about did she miss guys.

"Nah," Jess said, "Not really."

"Sick of men."

"Ah, no. Not really. Actually there's a girl. Who obviously isn't here, which is a problem, but yeah."

"A girl?"

"Yeah, you know. A girl. As in..."

"Oh, right. You don't find that a problem over here?"

"Nah, its fine. Everyone's usually fine."

"Except the girl?"

"Except the girl. Who doesn't want to live here."

Silence a moment. Like the mother wanted to say something but wasn't sure what.

"It's tricky," Jess said, "I'll tell you sometime." By which she meant she wouldn't. A lie to get out of a conversation that was getting too personal. The mother seemed to realise, just nodded.

"I should be going," Jess said. "I have to work."

She didn't see the mother again.

The bathtub building went slowly. Jess laid concrete foundations one fine weekend, then, a week later, a layer of bricks for the fire ashes to sit on. She hadn't worn gloves, hadn't thought of it, so ripped a fingernail and had dry skin for a week afterwards. The next fine day she finished the brick frame, tearing another fingernail, but thought it was pretty much finished. She was quite proud of herself. She hadn't been sure if she should make some kind of cradle for the tub, so it could be moved if it rusted, but decided that was too much trouble, that she'd just cement it in place. She'd planned to build a chimney, but looking at her slightly wonky work wondered if there was a risk it would topple over on her one day. The foundations weren't that straight. In the end she decided she would, just to keep woodsmoke out her eyes, but would wait until everything else had set properly before she did.

*

She went to Christchurch a lot. Probably more often than she should have, felt like she was arranging her life around coast to coast trips and spending half her pay on petrol. Something seemed wrong between her and Kate. They were losing a relationship that had never properly started, and risking losing a friendship too. Kate was becoming a very annoying person to Jess, and – Jess suspected – she was to Kate. They'd never got sick of each other's company before, but now they seemed to every time they saw each other. Kate got on Jess's nerves, her reluctance, her uncertainty, her intermittent bitchiness. They

couldn't talk without fighting, and they couldn't fight without bringing a lifetime's friendship and trust into play, which would mean irreversible and permanent hurt. All they could do was sit in silence or fuck, so they did a lot of both.

On one visit she found a little package of condoms on Kate's beside table. There were seven, two flavoured, the rest plain, held together in a little bundle with a double-looped hair tie. Jess wasn't sure if she was meant to find them, but couldn't think of any other reason Kate would leave them in plain sight. She didn't say anything, knew a question would start a fight. Later, Kate got a phone call, and stopped making out with Jess to answer it. She used her flirty voice, and Jess could hear the tinny spillover of the voice at the other end, could hear half of what was said, and that was enough to tell it was a guy Kate was talking to. She sat up on the end of the bed and stared at Kate and waited until Kate said goodbye and hung up.

Kate didn't meet her eyes.

"You know I'm not sleeping with anyone else, don't you?" Jess said.

Kate rolled onto her back and just lay there, clothes untidy, hair spread out around her face. She looked at Jess and said calmly, "Okay."

"Not that you're not either?" Jess said, "Not that you're glad I'm not?"

Kate shrugged.

Jess was hurt, was unsure what to make of that. It wasn't a lie but it kind of was. Avoiding a lie by saying nothing. It wasn't starting a fight, but you didn't act like that unless you wanted one. It was nasty and cruel and Kate had to know Jess would be hurt.

Jess was about to leave, to shout, to make ultimatums, but suddenly she was too afraid to do anything. Afraid of what it might start, and what Kate might do. She sat, silent, staring at Kate, and after a long moment she decided to say nothing, to let it go, that she had to make herself stay quiet.

Kate watched her. Watched her decide to say nothing. And then Kate smiled. A cruel, powerful smile Jess had never seen on her before.

"Jesus, Jess," she said. "You always think the worst of me, don't you?"

Jess wondered who this woman was, almost found her courage, but for now just said, "No."

"Always the worst possible way of looking at things."

That was it. All she needed was Kate to keep pushing. Jess looked at her and said, "Fuck you," with every bit of venom she had.

Kate didn't notice, just kept prodding. "You're a moody bitch," she said. "You know that?"

I hate you, Jess thought. I can't not hate you, after everything you've done to me.

"Moody Jess," Kate said.

"You always say so," Jess said. "But I'm not sure it's true."

Kate just laughed.

"Fuck you," Jess said again, and got up, started getting dressed.

Kate finally seemed to notice something had changed. "What's wrong?"

Jess shook her head.

"Come back to bed," Kate said.

"Which bit of fuck you wasn't clear?"

Jess got into jeans and a shirt, didn't bother with the rest. Threw her gear into her bag

and left the bedroom. Bare feet, because she couldn't remember where she'd put her shoes and she knew she had others in the car. Kate caught her at the front door. Stood in the way, so Jess couldn't open it, tying up her robe.

"Come back to bed," Kate whispered. "Please. Everyone's asleep, you'll wake people up."

Jess stayed where she was, spoke quietly. "I'm really sick of you treating me like this."

"Like what?"

Jess just looked at her, and after a minute Kate shrugged.

"Don't play games," Jess said. "I know you. I know you better than anyone in the world and I can fucking see it happening."

"Okay, no games."

"Just tell me the truth."

"Okay."

"Promise?"

"Yeah, I promise. Come to bed."

Jess let herself be led into the bedroom, but didn't move much past the door. That seemed enough for Kate. She closed the door.

"Truth," Jess said.

"What about?"

Jess just waited.

"I did try and sleep with someone else," Kate said. "Another woman, but it didn't work out."

Jess looked at her. What do you mean you tried, she wanted to ask. What the fuck does that even mean? Not that something almost happened, not that you're sorry, just that you tried. You went out and tried to make it happen.

"What's up?" Kate said, "You should be happy."

"How so?" Jess couldn't quite keep bitterness out of her voice.

"I thought it was a good sign," Kate said, "It isn't any girl, just you."

Jess told herself she ought to be used to Kate by now. She'd spent years watching Kate with other people, and it seemed like that should help. She should be used to this. She tried to tell herself it wasn't a big deal. Except it was. It was a tremendous deal, she just couldn't let herself think about it too much.

Then she gave up.

"You're a fuck up, Kate, you know that?"

"Yeah, and fuck you too."

"No, you really are. There's all these terrible, awful things I want to say to you, but if I do then we'll never talk to each other again."

"Sometimes I wonder if that mightn't be best."

"Yeah," Jess said quietly. "Sometimes I do too."

Kate got offended, lay down and turned off the lights and pretended to go to sleep. Jess lay down beside her and pretended too, listening to traffic outside, staring at the ceiling.

Eventually she slept. She dreamed that she was walking on the Awatangi beach and that all the billions who had ever died lost and alone were walking with her. The missing and vanished, the unfound and misplaced. The birds were made of driftwood and they flocked in clouds, like gulls for picnic scraps, creaking as they flew and pecking at the eyes of the

dead. Blood flowed from Jess's own eyes and her fingernails had been torn out, but the dead and lost were so numerous that the birds bothered each for only a moment. Jess's feet crunched as she walked, and when she looked down and saw she walked on bones. The ocean was black, flat, still. The sun rose and it was all the colours in the world at once and it set her skin afire. She tried to speak and her teeth fell from her mouth. She realised she was asleep because the sun couldn't rise that fast, now racing into the sky while you watched it, not quickly enough you'd not have time to hide in the shade as you caught alight. She realised she had realised she was in a dream and was proud of herself, but then the dead and lost dragged her out into that dark sea and drowned her, to make her one of them. She woke, still dressed, sweaty but cold.

She touched Kate. "I'm sorry," she said, but Kate just grunted and rolled over. Jess decided it was time to go home to Awatangi.

*

While she packed the next morning, and looked for the missing shoes, Jess thought. It felt like they didn't talk, even though they did. They talked about Kate's work and Jess's surfing and people they both knew. They talked about how long it would take Jess to drive back to Awatangi and what they should do next time she was over. They just didn't talk about was anything that really mattered.

Then, when Jess was packed, ready, about to go, Kate said, "We have to talk."

Jess sat down on the edge of her bed. "Go on."

"Most people don't get to know someone as well as I know you. Or sleep with someone they know that well either. I'm glad I have."

"Yeah," Jess said. "I've thought that before."

"But I don't know if it makes us stronger or if it's going to wreck us," Kate said. "Tear apart the friendship."

Jess just sat there looking at her.

"I miss you," Kate said.

"And I you."

"No, I mean I miss the old Jess. Before all this."

"Is this so bad?"

Kate looked at her for a long time, then said, "Yeah."

Jess didn't know what to say.

"You're the other half of me," Kate said, "And now it feels like you're gone."

Jess looked at her and started to cry, "You've never said anything like that to me before. Anything so sweet. And so horrible."

"I've never needed to. I've never felt like I was losing you before."

"Oh fuck," Jess said, and cried harder.

"Things are going too far."

"You're not losing me."

"Everything's changing. I don't think it'll ever go back to how it was before."

"It will if we want it to."

"No," Kate said, "No it won't. It's different now. I've slept with you. And you think you love me."

“I do love you.”

Kate looked at her and gave a little half-shrug. As if the difference didn't really matter.

“Lots of people sleep with each other and deal with it afterwards,” Jess said.

“Not people like us.”

“What's us?”

“We're too close. You mean too much to me.”

Jess wiped her cheeks, couldn't work out what to say. Half of her feared Kate was right and wanted to agree, to think they were special. Half of her wanted to say they could do anything they wanted to because they were special. Kate seemed to want to be convinced, but Jess had no idea what to say.

“God, Jess,” Kate said. “My whole life. Everything I am and everything I ever will be. You've always been there. You're everything to me.”

“I know.”

“This isn't just sex. This isn't being in love. There's something between us so...”

Jess waited.

Kate shrugged. “This matters more than all of that.”

“More than love?”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck, oh fuck,” Jess said. She looked at Kate, knew what she had to do. “Look, if we need to go back to how things were, we will.”

“We can't.”

“If we have to stop, we'll stop. And we'll pretend none of this ever happened.”

“That's not possible.”

“It has to be. I'm not going to lose you, Katie. Whatever we need to do to fix things, we'll do. Okay?”

“Maybe,” Kate said.

“Yeah maybe. Fuck. We'll pretend.”

Kate didn't seem convinced.

“Come on,” Jess said, “You've never tried to stay friends with someone before? You break up and for a while, every time you see them you want to hit them or fuck them or sit on the ground crying. But it goes away, and a while later it's like that part of you's gone, you look at them and nothing of what you once felt is left.”

“I can do that,” Kate said softly. “You can't.”

“Yeah I can. I've stayed friends with people before.”

Kate looked upset, miserable. “Not ones that matter.”

Jess looked at her.

“Only casual fucks,” Kate said. “God, Jess, never people you loved. Not one.”

“Like who?”

“Audrey. You haven't talked to her in years.”

“Kate, not now.”

“I'm just saying. It'd be easier to believe that was possible if you'd stayed friends with someone. But you never have.”

“I have,” Jess said, but wasn't sure herself.

“When's Audrey's birthday?”

“What?” Jess shrugged. “I can't remember.”

“See?”

“But Audrey isn’t you. Audrey doesn’t matter any more.”

“Except that once you loved her. Like you say you love me.”

“Not as much as I love you.”

Kate seemed surprised.

“I don’t care if I lost her,” Jess said. “I have lost her. But I’m not going to lose you. That’s all that matters.”

“Okay.”

Jess waited.

“Yeah, okay.” Kate stood up. “We should stop talking about this now. You should go.”

“Is it okay? I mean, are we? Leaving it there?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll do whatever I have to do. I promise.”

“Okay.”

“Promise me too.”

Kate looked at her. “I promise. Whatever I need to.”

“Okay,” Jess said. “So do we actually need to do something? Right now? How bad is it?”

Ever so slightly, Kate shrugged.

Jess waited. Wasn’t going to give up on this one until she had an answer.

Kate looked at her for a long time then said, “No, not yet.”

“Thank fuck.”

Kate smiled slightly. “But you should still go.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, but you know. That was pretty intense.”

Jess didn’t want to leave. It was getting late, but she didn’t want to leave as things were. Then Kate looked at her and said, sad and faintly resigned, “You know what the real problem is, though, don’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“The problem we’ve always had.”

“Ah... not really. And maybe you shouldn’t tell me right now.”

Kate hesitated, seemed to think, but then said, “You’ve always been after me. Always trying to fuck me. Always around when I break up with someone, when I’m sad or hurt or lonely.”

That was completely unfair. “Being your friend you mean?” Jess said, “Fuck you.” And this time she really meant it. She walked out. Walked out and drove home and didn’t look back.

*

Kate rung the next day, rung the pub while Jess was at work. “I hate this,” Kate said as soon as Jess answered. “For the first time in my life I feel like I don’t have you, that you’re not there. And I don’t know what to do to stop feeling like that.”

“I don’t either,” Jess said.

A long silence.

“I have to go,” Jess said, “I’m still angry. It wasn’t fair, what you said.”

“I know,” Kate said.

“Call me later.”

“I’ll try.”

Jess went and sat in a toilet stall and cried, and then went back to work. Sam looked at her oddly, perhaps saw red eyes, and asked if she was okay. Jess said she was fine, it was just the girl.

“Yeah,” he said. “Okay. If there’s anything I can do. Time off, anything, just let me know.”

Jess said she was fine. She went to the bar and was talked to by one of the regulars, told how to stalk a deer herd through matagouri. Essentially don’t, she decided, but that wasn’t how the man telling her saw it.

Kate didn’t call back, and Jess didn’t really expect her to. A year ago Kate would have if she’d said she would, no matter what, but things had changed. It got to half past one, far too late for Kate to ring. The bar was closed, the lights off, tables cleared, floor mopped, but Jess hung around anyway, just in case.

“Can I say something?” Sam asked.

“Sure.”

“If it causes that much pain, it may not be worth it.”

Jess, feeling brittle, smiled and said, “No pain.”

Sam shrugged. “Sure, okay. Just saying.”

Jess nodded. “Thanks. But no pain. And it is worth it.”

She slid off her stool and went home and hoped she was right.

*

Baz turned up a few days later. Not entirely by coincidence. Jess assumed. He wandered into the pub mid-evening and said he’d been driving all afternoon. He perched at the end of the bar, down by the gate where Jess loitered when she wasn’t serving, and had a beer, then another.

“You know,” Jess said. “You and Kate both drink far too much. What’s that about?”

Baz shrugged. “You drink as much as I do.”

“Yeah, but I know what that’s about.”

“Can I leave the car outside?”

“Sure, everyone else does.”

“Nothing’ll happen to it?”

“Nothing ever has before.”

“Very good. Barkeep,” he knocked on the bar. “Another of these fine beverages.”

“Yeah,” Jess said, and poured him another pint.

Jess heard the side door open, looked up and saw Keri walk in. For some reason she didn’t quite understand, she made eye contact, glanced at Baz, then slowly shook her head. Baz saw, turned to see what she was looking at, but by the time he did Keri had moved and all he saw was an empty doorway. He looked at Jess, puzzled, but didn’t say anything. Keri seemed to understand, sat with her friends, stayed away, and sent someone else to the bar for drinks.

Jess watched her while pretending not to, while listening to Baz. She had a feeling Keri was watching her back, but was being subtle. She wasn't quite sure. After a while she went out the back to get a case of wine from the storeroom. She was crouching behind boxes, hunting for the right case, when she heard someone open the storeroom door. She glanced up, expected Sam or Ann, and saw Keri.

She froze, wasn't sure what to do.

Keri didn't see her straight away. Jess stayed where she was and watched for a moment. She hadn't been able to study Keri while Keri was unaware before, like Keri always got to do to her. Keri seemed different when she didn't know she was being watched. She flicked hair back behind her ear. She fidgeted as she looked around. She bit her lip a little and looked almost nervous. She got nervous, apparently.

Jess stood up, and Keri jumped. Jess grinned, was pleased she'd got to do it back once.

Keri's eyes changed, got wider, got happier. Got more fuck-me. Unlike Kate, Jess thought, Keri was pleased to see her. As if her day hadn't been wasted because now she was here with Jess.

Here in a very small room with the door shut behind her.

"Oh shit," Jess said, and backed up against the wall.

"Hey," Keri said.

Suddenly Jess was pissed off at the unfairness of it. She wanted this, she wanted to be able to respond, to flirt back. And she couldn't.

And it wasn't fair either, but she aimed her anger at Keri. "Stay there," she said. "I mean it."

Keri nodded agreeably.

"What do you want?" Jess said.

"You know, nothing much. Say hi. Sneak around. Since you seemed up for it."

Jess looked at her, cold, trying not to be impressed.

"So what's with the guy at the bar?" Keri said. "Old boyfriend or something?"

"Old friend."

"And you don't want me talking to you because..."

"None of your business."

"Right." Keri moved slightly.

"I'm serious," Jess said. "Stay there."

"I'm staying." She moved again, was slightly closer.

"Stop it. One more step..."

"Oh yeah? You'll what?"

"I don't know."

"You could scream."

"Yeah, I will. You shouldn't be in here."

"Sam won't mind."

That was Awatangi all over. "Yeah," Jess said. "Suppose not."

Keri was looking at Jess. Her expression changed. Less sure of herself, less flirty, suddenly concerned. "You okay?" she said softly, "You seem..."

"Yeah, I'm all right. Hey, Sam told me about your dad. I'm sorry..."

"Yeah, thanks."

"And about how your dad and my dad didn't get on."

“Yeah, that. I didn’t realise who you were at first.”

“Is that a problem for you?”

“Does it seem like it’s a problem for me?”

“Um, not really.”

“Is it for you?”

Jess shrugged. “I never really listened to my parents...”

“About stuff like this, me neither.”

“Okay then.”

Keri smiled, and Jess stepped back. That particular smile was dangerous. The smile from the beach. She bumped into the wall, and realised she was trapped. Trapped, although Keri made no move to come closer.

“What do you want?” Jess said, pressing against the wall.

“Everything,” Keri said. “I want to taste your skin and your lips and I want to smell your hair. I want to ride a wave with you at dawn with a storm bearing down on us. I want to know if you sleep on your front or your back or your side.”

Jess opened her mouth, but stayed silent, didn’t know what to say.

“I want to know what you lie awake thinking about,” Keri said, “And who you want to be when you’re old.”

“Stay there,” Jess said, and picked up a case of wine, held it in front of her. “I’m going to throw this at you if come any closer.”

“What’s wrong?”

“You.”

Keri looked at her.

“Not in a bad way,” Jess said. “But you.”

Keri grinned. “And I want to see you come.”

“Stop,” Jess said.

“I want to make you come all night. I want to wake up beside you.”

“Oh god,” Jess put the case down. Her anger was gone. Her faint sadness was gone too.

Keri seemed to know, smiled. “Better?” she asked.

Jess realised she couldn’t breathe properly.

“You okay?”

Jess nodded, reached out. “Stay...”

“I am.”

“Do.”

“I am. Promise.”

“Okay.” Jess looked at her. “You have a way with words.”

“My job,” Keri said.

The door opened and Sam walked in. He saw them, stopped, looked surprised, then said, “Shit, sorry,” and backed out.

They both looked at the door.

“He’ll talk, won’t he?” Jess said.

“Nah.”

“Nah no or nah probably.”

“Um. Only probably.”

“Shit.”

Keri brushed that same loose strand of hair back behind her ear. Jess sat down on a box.

“You okay?” Keri said.

“Being around you fucks up my knees. I can’t stand up when you’re this close.”

“Oh.” Keri just stood there for a moment, and seemed surprised. Jess was pleased she’d caused it. See, she thought, I can do it too.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Jess said, without actually looking up.

“Like what?”

“Like that. Like fuck-me eyes.”

Keri laughed for a while, then said, “No.”

“Or not,” Jess said, “If you don’t want to.”

“Can I sit down?” Keri asked, and took a step closer.

“No.”

“Are you okay?”

“Not remotely.”

“Are you going to look at me?”

“No.”

“I can go?”

“No,” Jess said, then, “Yeah, you probably should.”

“I should,” Keri agreed. “But do you want me to?”

“No,” Jess said, very quietly.

“Good,” Keri said, and opened the door. Opened the door and walked away.

Jess thought for a moment she hadn’t heard right, then realised she’d heard exactly right. She sat on the case of wine for a while, until her knees started working again and her breathing slowed down a bit. She put two fingers on her wrist, tried to take her pulse, and wasn’t sure but it seemed fast. She noticed her hands were sweaty and wiped them on her jeans. She stood up, went out into the bar. Keri and her friends were gone.

“What’s up with you?” Baz asked. “You look all…” He kind of squinted at her. “You’re flushed.”

“Am I?”

“Fuck, Jess, you didn’t…” he looked around the room. “Who?”

“Don’t be a dickhead. I just had to move some boxes.”

“Yeah?” He got all smug and smartass, and she realised she’d made a mistake. “So where’s the wine you went to get?”

She’d forgotten. She looked at him, decided to lie. Shrugged, and said, “We’re out.”

“Right.” He held out his glass for a refill, seemed to forget.

She poured him another beer. If she ever did want to have an affair, Jess thought, she’d be good at it. It was a pity she didn’t.

Sam went past and for once, despite what Jess expected, didn’t grin or smirk or do anything clever. Just walked past and ignored her and went out the back. She watched him go and wondered what that meant. Approval, perhaps.

She handed Baz his beer and he went back to watching TV. She leaned on the bar and wondered what was going on, how her life had got so complicated.

Baz left the next day, to Jess’s surprise said he had a work thing to do. Keri stayed away from the pub for a week. To keep the anticipation up, Jess assumed. And just because she knew didn’t mean it didn’t work.

Chapter Seventeen

Spring became summer and the air grew heavy and warm. Jess sat on the porch and smoked and watched the weather change and felt too lazy and sleepy to move. Sometimes she lay on the sea, on her back on a board, bobbing with the waves, staring up into a hazy blue sky. Sometimes she lay on the beach, feeling the shingle and sand vibrate as the waves broke, and watched the clouds. Then, the world seemed filled with everything but people. It seemed like that should be lonely, but it wasn't. It was just comforting.

Living at Awatangi was different to visiting. It rained a lot, and the rain changed things in ways she wouldn't have imagined. On holiday, if it rained, it was only a couple of days and you just stayed inside. When you lived here, you still had to deal with life, to work and cut firewood and get washing dry, and hanging things on racks in the spare room was the least of the changes. People tended to ignore the rain and carry on with what they were doing. They'd stand around talking in downpours, apparently oblivious to the weather, would go and do the shopping or walk the dog even as the river started flooding. The sandflies weren't as bad as they could have been, but were still pretty bad. Sandflies usually got worse on the coast as you went south, and Awatangi was a fair way north, and didn't have swamps back in the bush like some other towns. All the same, at dawn and dusk, and in humid, overcast weather, when the air got heavy and quiet and still, then they were ferocious. Jess acclimatised, started standing talking in the pub carpark while rain spattered her face and the puddles swelled and bugs flew hunting patterns looking for bare ankles and hands. She didn't get to the point of wearing gumboots to work, but wore old shoes a lot more often because of the mud.

She surfed too much. She always had, but it was easier at Awatangi because the commute was short and work didn't get in the way. She went every morning and usually again in the afternoon, would sometimes stay at the beach for hours. Her hair got dry and brittle and she had to start moisturising all the time to stop her skin flaking. She'd never really been bothered too much by wetsuit rashes, but now started getting them, had to start changing each time she got out the water, couldn't just leave the same bikini or rashie on under her clothes. Worse, she was surfing so often she get didn't much else done. She failed to buy groceries, pay bills, and make phone calls she'd promised to make, almost needed lists to remember things she had to do. When she wasn't in the water, she vaguely obsessed about it – weather, waves, approaching sunset – to the exclusion of real life. That wasn't new, but there was more time to do it now. She found she was getting to like the small-town thing too. She knew people now, and then they asked how she was while she poured their beer, they meant how was she, they weren't just making a polite noise to fill in time. She had a feeling that if she said anything other than fine, she'd still be being asked in a year how she was doing now. She was part of a community and didn't really feel like she ever had been before.

Early in December, Brad the Surfer came back. He walked up the bach's access track and tapped on the door. Jess had been about to go to work, but stayed instead. Sam didn't seem to care when she turned up as long as she got there sometime. She made Brad tea and offered food although all she had was bread. He told her he'd been down as far as Haast and was now heading back up north to try Nelson. He'd found a couple of the breaks she

knew about, and she didn't mention the others because he was leaving anyway. And because, like Sam said, she was turning into a secretive local.

"Where's your girlfriend?" Brad asked after a while. "Sorry, forgot her name."

"Kate. Christchurch."

"She's not living here any more?" He sounded like he meant did you break up?

"Nah. Kinda, kinda not."

"Oh, okay," he shrugged. "That kind of thing's shit. It's a shame."

"Yeah," Jess said, "She still comes over now and then though."

After a while Jess said she had to go to work. She drove him back down to the road and told him to come find her after he'd had a surf.

"Saw some other people down there," he said when he reappeared.

"Oh yeah?" Jess could guess who, and got a kick out of just hearing about Keri. Got a kick, but wasn't going to follow it up too strongly because she wasn't going to start acting like she had a crush. Even if she did.

"I asked if they knew you and they said they did."

Jess was pleased, tried not to smile. Crush, she reminded herself. "Yeah," she said, "I know them too."

"I didn't realise there was anyone else around who surfed."

"Just me and them, as far as I know. They're good people. Say hi if you see them again."

He sat across the bar like Baz always did, talked and had a few beers. Anne asked who the young man was, and Jess said just a guy she knew. When Brad got bored, Sam drove him back to his van. He was gone in the morning when Jess went down to surf.

She got another power bill. Still no final reading, but with a late payment fee added. She ignored it. She meant to phone and sort it out but had better things to do than wait on hold. She kept putting it off until it seemed like long enough had passed it wasn't worth worrying about any more so she threw the bill away.

*

There was some talk in the pub of reviving the annual rugby game. Touch, so women could play and there'd be enough people for two teams. The game was usually held in January, when bach people were around, because the ground was always soft enough from rain that the season didn't matter. Jess was asked several times if she'd play. Asked by both teams – the game was baches versus town, and both sides claimed her – and both times she shrugged noncommittally, but meant no. She hadn't held a rugby ball since high school and hadn't been good at it when she did.

She mostly forgot about the whole thing – assuming it would never happen – until Keri turned up in the bar with her friends and came over and asked, "So, you playing in this footy game?"

Jess looked at her for a moment. "Are you?"

"Sure. Half the team's my family. No-one else under fifty around here."

"Beer?"

"Yep. You should give it a go. It's fun."

"Not really my thing."

"Shame," Keri said. "I could loan you a rugby jersey, if you want. It should fit."

“You have rugby jerseys?”

“In fact I do. So?”

Jess didn't answer. Keri held out a ten, and Jess shook her head.

“You have to start taking my money one day,” Keri said.

“Maybe.”

“Won't Sam mind?”

“If it bothers you, go give it to him.”

Keri looked at her a moment. “The taking is the problem, yeah? That you might touch me?”

Jess nodded.

“Okay,” Keri said. “No worries then. So, the footy. You should play. It's not like getting dumped by a wave doesn't hurt too.”

“Um... hurt too?”

“Hurt like being tackled does.”

“I thought it was touch.”

“It is.” Keri grinned. “So how about it?”

“I can't.”

“Wuss.”

“I can't,” Jess said again, “Because you might have to touch me.”

Keri looked at her, didn't seem to understand.

“And since you can't touch me,” Jess said. “I can't play.”

“We could be on the same team.”

“Even worse.”

“I could promise.”

“You couldn't keep it. Not once we were all playing.”

“I'd keep any promise I made you,” Keri said. “No matter what.”

Jess got that weak-kneed feeling again.

“Any promise,” Keri said.

“I really can't.”

“We could have a shower afterwards. That might be fun.”

Jess looked around, made sure no-one else was within earshot. Keri put the ten dollar note down on the bar and walked away.

*

Summer began properly. Days so bright Jess had to squint to see, even with sunglasses on, and so hot her car smelled of warm plastic and the road of melting tar. There were two main signs that summer was approaching in Awatangi. The flax in the roadside ditches flowered, and the sewerage truck came and pumped out the septic tanks. The truck couldn't get to the top of the track so they had run hoses up. Big canvas hoses filled with shit. Shit-pumping day was an annual event, organised beforehand, everyone warned to get their cars down to the road and to expect noise and possibly smell. Jess made sure she was out all day, left at dawn, took her clothes with her, showered at the pub.

As if they'd been waiting until after shit-pumping day – which Jess's family always had – the summer bach families started turning up. Only a few families at first, mostly those

without kids at school. Jess vaguely knew everyone who was arriving, and some came and tapped on the door and called hello, had a cup of tea and asked how she was and how her family were and was she really working at the pub? It was nice, Jess thought, people who you knew enough just to talk to, didn't have to do anything more. She made tea and said everyone was well and had the alarming moment she had every year when she first saw someone she knew was only a few years older than her and now had a couple of kids. And felt sorry for him, even though she knew he wouldn't understand why. Seeing people she remember from childhood, now grown up, Jess had a strange feeling the world was moving on and leaving her behind. She wasn't sure why. People talked about things she didn't care about, OEs and jobs and getting married, and she smiled politely and felt like she was missing something, even though she didn't care if she was.

With children around the noise increased a lot, and lasted all day. It happened every summer. Jess didn't like children, assumed it was an only child thing, that she'd never had to get used to younger siblings. The kids were all pretty horrible to each other, shouting and teasing and ganging up. It was surprising how nasty they were and how little she remembered being that way herself, but maybe you just forgot. It occurred to her, sitting on the porch, watching, that she loved Kate the way people were supposed to love their children, sort of patiently and selflessly, half-expecting it to turn out badly and make her life awful, but doing it anyway.

*

In the middle of December a storm blew up, heavy rain and gusty winds and five meter swells running on the reefs on the point. Jess went out and surfed. Once out, she realised she'd underestimated the size of the waves from the beach, underestimated the sideways chop and the sheer force of the water. She almost died. She wiped out, fell a couple of meters down the front of a wave and hit the water awkwardly, hard enough to stun her. She went under, felt the wave push her a long way down and churn her around, so she lost track of which way was up. While she was under water, a rock swept past her head, so close her hair touched it. It was luck she didn't hit it, nothing else. She was being swept along by the wave, was helpless. She almost ran out of breath, thought she was really in trouble, then surfaced, pulled up by her board. The board saved her. Boards often did. She was tied onto a big floaty thing, and in the end that won. She was exhausted, couldn't remember ever being this weak in the sea before. She held on to the board and kicked, but couldn't swim in water that big. The board was dragging her around more than she was steering it. The waves were big, kept knocking her around, sweeping into her face. She was swallowing water, retching it up, unable to breathe half the time, trying to pull herself up and lie on the board. It was almost as dangerous as being underwater, almost as likely she'd drown, but after a few minutes, the sea pushed her back into the bay and clear of the chop around the rocks, and she was safe. Although even in the bay the waves were big enough it almost make her seasick.

She climbed up onto the board and lay there smiling to herself, too tired to move. She was terrified, had nearly died, but she was alive, and that was what mattered. The worst hadn't happened. She went back to the beach knowing she'd ridden the biggest, wildest waves of her life and that not only would no-one ever know, but most people wouldn't

understand if they did. She got out the water and started shaking, felt light-headed and queasy, had to sit down on the shingle just above the tide line. After a while it passed, and she drove home, and had a shower, and went to work. Just an ordinary day. She spent it smiling to herself. Sam asked what was up, but she just shook her head, knew she couldn't explain. She stopped at the beach on the way home that evening, just to look. Feeling sort of proprietary. The waves had died down, the storm had become rain and mush, but she knew how it had been earlier in the day, and knew she'd never forget.

Keri came into the pub the next day, and as she ordered beer she looked at Jess. Looked, and then looked again more carefully.

"Oh shit," she said. "You didn't."

"Didn't what?"

Keri's expression was half-awed, half-concerned. Jess quite liked it.

"You were out on the water yesterday," Keri said.

"Ah, yeah."

"You're mad."

"It wasn't that bad. I'm used to big water."

"You're still mad." Keri looked at her a minute, seemed to be trying to decide. "How'd it go?"

"Yeah." Jess shrugged.

Keri seemed to understand. "Be careful out there," she said quietly. "I'd miss you."

"I'm not going out again."

"Probably best," Keri said, and smiled, and went back to her friends. She had several smiles, Jess had noticed. A polite smile, a thinking one, one for when she thought something was funny but not funny enough to laugh. She had a knowing smile – the one she did when she caught Jess watching her – and the fuck-me smile that made Jess wet from across the room. This smile was different. Respectful and impressed and slightly longing. Like she wanted to be out there too, even though she knew she shouldn't. Like despite herself she'd been impressed. Like she got it, which meant she also got Jess, and Jess was both pleased and scared to know that.

*

A week before Christmas Jess's wisdom teeth started to ache. It had happened twice a year, each year since she was twenty, a week or so in the middle of winter and a week around Christmas, sometimes only some of the teeth, this time all. She had no idea why. Being scared of needles meant being scared of dentists, so she hadn't been since the primary school dental clinic. And because she suspected the picks dentists used caused cavities – they were running businesses, so why wouldn't they get in there and create a bit of extra work while they could. Kate told her this was silly, but Kate had five fillings and Jess had none so Jess didn't listen. Her teeth would stop aching in their own time and there wasn't much she could do to hurry them up. She waited, and got irritable.

Everyone else was getting excited about Christmas, talking about family visits and planning presents. Sam and Anne both asked what was Jess doing for Christmas, and seemed to assume she'd be going back to Christchurch. Nothing much, she said, and they seemed to take that as something but nothing much, rather than nothing at all. Baz phoned

and asked if he should come over since he'd be in Christchurch for the holidays. He was single this year, could split his time between her and his family however she wanted. "After Christmas," Jess said. "They're your family and I don't mind."

"You sure?" he asked, sounding doubtful but like he'd go along with it.

"I'll be fine," Jess said, "I'll probably just do something around here."

"Okay then."

A couple of days later Kate rang and said Jess should come over for Christmas with her family. "Did Baz put you up to this?" Jess asked.

"No," Kate said, and sounded surprised at the question. Jess was happy for a moment, until Kate added, "Mum did." Which might or might not mean Baz was the instigator.

"I'll stay here," Jess said, "I have to work Christmas Eve."

Not strictly true, since she could probably have taken time off, but it was one of her usual nights.

"You sure?" Kate asked. People always seemed to ask twice when it was Christmas.

"Maybe I could see you afterwards. While you'll still on holiday."

"Maybe," Kate said. Not okay or that'd be great or even I'll try, just maybe. That, and the thing with her Mum telling her to phone annoyed Jess enough she cut the conversation short.

She worked through the pre-Christmas excitement. Covered the pub on her own one afternoon while Sam and Anne drove to Greymouth to buy each other presents, talked to people about what they were doing, and remained as detached as she could. She didn't explain because people never seemed to understand. She just liked Christmas on her own, found it peaceful, all closed shops and empty streets and away from her own squabbling family.

Instead of Christmas, she distracted herself with the bath. She asked Sam to help lift the old tub into place on top the bricks, and she cemented it in place. The next night they closed the pub earlier than usual and Jess, Sam, and Anne went up to the bach for a ceremonial toasting of the bathtub. Jess was surprised they were bothering, told them they didn't need to, but was kind of glad they ignored her. She and Anne sat on the porch while Sam braved mosquitoes to get the fire lit. They could hear him swearing each time he was bitten. When the fire was burning he called them around and they all tipped beer over the tub. Anne went to their car and got a short plank out the back seat. She handed it to Jess, "Tub-warming present," she said.

"Thanks," Jess said, holding it. It was short, less than a meter long, quite thick, and sanded very smooth. She looked up, puzzled.

"To sit on dear," Anne said, "So you don't burn your ass."

"Right," Jess grinned, "Actually hadn't thought of that."

"You would have."

Sam and Anne left, and Jess went and sat in the bath, under her netting, while mosquitoes whined past. There was a bit of smoke, it wafted out around the sides of the tub. She coughed now and then, although she was smoking anyway. She decided she probably did need a chimney.

Jess's teeth stopped hurting on Christmas Eve. She'd got so used to it she didn't notice at first. She was working, it was a busy night, and she'd got into the spirit of things as much as she planned to, put on Christmas music CDs and hugged her way around the pub when it came time to lock up. She and Sam pushed everyone out, then stood there watching them wander off down the road singing. Watching, she realised her jaw didn't ache any more. She poked at her back teeth with her tongue and decided it was gone for another six months.

Sam looked at his watch, then said, "Merry Christmas," and hugged her again.

"Yeah," she said. "Merry Christmas," she said.

"You should stop by tomorrow."

"Nah, it's okay."

"We'd like you to."

"Don't just because you think I'll be lonely."

"We're not."

"All right then."

"When?" Sam said, "Anne'll want to know."

"You tell me. Whenever you like."

"Mid-afternoon," Sam said, "Stay for dinner if you like. If you've got bored by then."

"Nah, I probably won't." Jess said. "But thanks."

*

Jess got woken up just after dawn by the neighbourhood children, but she rolled over and went back to sleep. Later, she went and sat on the beach and looked out to sea and hoped to see a whale. Just because it was something no-one else would be doing today, and maybe the whales knew and wouldn't bother hiding. She opened a bottle of wine and drank a third of it, then ate chocolate for lunch until she felt a bit queasy. Then she went to visit Sam and Anne. They'd agreed no gifts, but Jess had played that game before and had taken a tie for Sam and a necklace for Anne, so when they gave her board wax she wasn't too alarmed. They sat in the flat behind the pub and sipped sherry and because they were all just sitting and talking, Jess told them more than she'd intended to about her problems with Kate.

She left before dinner - almost had to have a fight with Anne to manage, but did. She went home and sat on the porch and finished the wine. About half the baches were occupied, but everyone seemed to have settled down inside. There was some barbequing going on, and occasionally kids shouting at each other, but otherwise it was quiet. She didn't notice how quiet until, towards evening, she heard a car coming up the track and realised it was the first she'd heard all day.

It was Keri's Holden. Jess was surprised, but not as much as she thought she ought to be. Keri drove up and did a half-turn outside the bach, ended up with the driver's door facing Jess. Said, out the open window, "Hey."

"Ah, hey," Jess said, and stood up. She decided that wasn't welcoming enough, went and pushed the screen door open and said, "How's it going?"

"Yeah," Keri said, and opened the car door. She was wearing a skirt and a singlet, half dressed up but mostly too hot to bother. The skirt was fairly long, so she hitched it up before she slid sideways out the car, might have hitched a little more than was necessary.

Jess got a flash of thigh and kept on looking, then realised Keri was watching her watch and looking smug. She let go of the skirt, left the car door open and leaned against it.

Keri's hands were in fists, and she seemed slightly tense. Jess looked at her, then realised Keri hadn't been up here before and might think she was intruding.

"It's good to see you," Jess said.

Keri relaxed, "Yeah?"

Jess shrugged and went down the steps, stopped at the bottom.

"You okay up here?" Keri asked, "On your own, I mean."

"Yeah. Christmas isn't really my thing, that's all."

"Anne said. Made bit of a point of saying, actually. That you'd be at their place after lunch, but you'd be free later."

"Yeah."

"Hey look, it's later. What do you know?"

Jess sat down on the bottom step.

"Knees?" Keri said.

"A-ha."

"Sorry."

"No you're not."

Keri grinned. "So, Anne's kind of..."

"Yeah, I know. It's awful."

"It's kind of sweet."

"It's embarrassing."

Keri stopped leaning on the car, took a half-step forward, "You are okay, though?"

Jess nodded.

"I wondered if you wanted to do something," Keri said, "My family's having a... barbeque if you wanted to come."

"Nah, I don't want to intrude, not on a family thing."

"Big family. Fifty people there, half of them not related. That's not a problem."

"Except I'm my family and this is yours."

"So, what, star..."

"Don't."

Keri looked at her.

"Don't say it. Sam's already been on about that one."

"Okay. But you should come. No-one will care any more. Not about you, at least. Not if I tell them to be nice."

"I'd really like to, but..."

"You want to be alone."

"Yeah, I do. Want to be alone..." Jess hesitated. "And there's the other girl."

"It's just a bit of a party. Dinner, a couple of beers, probably some singing if you like that kind of thing. Nothing that would be a problem for this other girl."

Jess looked at her for a long moment. "You're going to be there?"

"Planned to."

"Then it's not just a party, is it."

"Suppose not."

"And I'm thinking that whatever everyone else is doing, you and me being there together

is going to be a problem for the other girl. One day or another.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah.”

Keri was looking at her.

“Thank you though,” Jess added, “If I could... So thank you.”

“No worries,” Keri said and took another step closer.

Close enough Jess got worried and stood up. Keri’s hair was loose, blowing a little in the breeze. Jess wanted to catch it for her. Wanted to see if Keri was close enough it would blow across her hands, if she stretched her arms out. This was getting dangerous. There was a door and a house and a bed behind her, and she was remembering how much she wanted this.

“You’re terrible, you know that?” Jess said.

Keri half-shrugged. Smiled. She wasn’t wearing lipstick, but she had something shiny on, gloss or balm or whatever. Jess wanted to kiss her and find out what. Wanted to see if Keri closed her eyes when she kissed. Where she put her hands. Jess held herself still, made herself not move at all. She knew, just knew, that any second Keri was going to try and kiss her. She wanted it, and she couldn’t let it happen.

“If you want some company,” Keri said, “I don’t need to go. I could...”

Jess shook her head. Wondered what exactly she was saying no to.

“Please,” Jess whispered.

Keri waited a heartbeat longer, then stepped back.

Jess looked up, surprised and grateful, and Keri grinned her knowing grin.

“Fuck,” Jess said, “Seriously. Just fuck. You have no idea.” She wanted Keri to know she was grateful, wanted her to know without having to say so in words, or admit to herself how close she’d been. “You’re strong,” Jess said.

“I’m patient,” Keri said, “That’s all.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Not for now.”

Jess nodded, told herself to just stop talking before she said too much.

Keri got back into her car. Did it without fussing with her skirt this time. “Look after yourself,” she said, and closed the door.

“You too.” Jess felt safer now solid metal was between them.

Keri started the engine and leaned back out the window. “And hey,” she said, “Merry Christmas.”

She tossed Jess a small plastic bag, tied with red-and-green ribbon. Jess caught it, proud she didn’t fumble, realised by sight and texture it was pot.

Jess looked at it for a moment, then laughed.

“Yeah, well that’s lucky,” Keri said. “Could have gone horribly wrong.”

“If I dropped it?”

“If you called the cops.”

“I should have got you something.”

“Nah, another time. You got papers?”

Jess nodded. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, well. Don’t be sad if you don’t need to be.”

“I won’t.” Jess decided to ignore anything else she might mean. “Barbeque?” she asked.

“Cooked in the ground Christmas barbeque,” Keri shrugged, “Thought barbeque sounded less, um, daunting. You know, fifty people all sitting around. All formal. All the aunts staring at you.”

She grinned, mouthed bye, and drove off.

*

Kate rang the pub on Boxing Day. Jess had said she probably wouldn't go into town on Christmas Day so wouldn't get phone messages, but all the same was a little sad Kate hadn't tried. She'd missed four calls, one from her mother, three from friends, none from Kate. Kate rang in the evening and they talked briefly, but didn't say much. Kate seemed caught up in the whole Christmas thing, family and parties, but had managed to resist the urge to send Jess things. Anne gave Jess a couple of significant looks and asked how the rest of her Christmas had been, and Jess just said, fine thanks. Keri stayed away from the pub for a few days, which Jess thought a shame but also a good idea.

More families turned up at the baches, almost overnight. Jess went home from work on Boxing Day evening and found every bach had at least one car outside it. She had to squeeze past a couple of SUVs jammed up against the side of the track, and had people parking in her driveways a couple of times until they realised she was around.

She kept to herself, and it wasn't really noticed. The people with kids sent them off to ride bikes together, and the parents drank gin together. She didn't fit in with either group, so wasn't missed. This was a slightly different crowd to the pre-Christmas one. More big groups that kept to themselves, less of people her parents' age who remembered her.

Baz arrived a few days after Christmas. Drove through the crowd of bike-riders with his hand on the horn, parked, got out, and snapped, “Stay the fuck away from my car.”

“I don't think you're meant to talk to them like that,” Jess told him from the porch.

“Why not?” he asked, and went to the sink to unload beer and ice.

They sat on the porch and drank.

“Mum says go see her next time you're in town,” Baz said. “They miss you.”

“Yeah, I will.”

“No really, do.”

Jess shrugged, “Okay.”

“Just do, okay. Don't be such a hardass bitch about everything.”

Jess was surprised, “I'm not.”

“Except when you are.”

Down the track a little way, a nine-year-old punched a six-year-old as hard as he could. The smaller kid ran off crying. “You show the fucker,” Baz said, and lifted his beer.

A bit later they heard more shrieking then outraged tears. “The big kid just got punched by the sister,” Jess said.

“You have an ear for it.”

“Yeah, you know. Hear it all day long.”

There was some adult shouting. “That was dad saying play nice with your brother,” Jess said, “Which really means fuck off and play, we're getting pissed.” She waited, heard a woman's voice, “And that was mum finding out about the sister punching people. Mum disapproves, but I kind of like the wee brat. She's sassy, smacking the boys around like

that.”

“You would.”

They listened to shrieking for a while. “Fuck but they’re loud, aren’t they?” Baz said.

“It’s been like this for a fortnight.”

“How do you stand it?”

“You get used to it. And they’ll all go away again in a month.”

Baz stood up, “I think I’m sick of this.” He went and turned his car stereo on, turned it up, “At least I can’t hear the little bastards now.”

One of the parents complained after seven minutes. Jess kept an eye on Baz’s watch and timed it.

“Sure thing,” Baz said as he got up. “I’ll turn my music down if you turn your fucking children down.” Jess was pretty sure the father didn’t hear.

The children left Baz alone. Jess supposed he looked scary, short hair and tats and army-surplus type pants with too many pockets. Jess apparently didn’t, had small children show her things and ask her how to surf. Once she was offered a baby to hold by its mother and had no idea how to respond, stood surprised for a moment, then said no. She got this every year and still hadn’t found a way out. She was a girl, so she must like children. Usually she talked for a while, politely, and usually Baz watched from the porch and toasted her with a bottle and laughed.

“I’m thinking about giving surfing lessons,” she told Baz. “Half an hour down on the beach and there’d no more kids in town.”

“Very pied piper.”

“I reckon.”

“You bring it on yourself. Looking all young and unsaggy. You remind all the dads what they’re missing.”

“It’s the kids that talk to me.”

Baz laughed for a while, said, “Pocket money.” Then laughed some more.

“What?”

“The dads pay the kids to talk to you. And then they can talk to you too...”

“Nah, that’s...”

“I would.”

A Pasifika family had turned up in one of the baches. Baz sat on the porch watching their kids play with the rest of the neighbourhood pack and said, “What an ethnically diverse community old Awatangi is these days. Samoans and all.”

“Tongan. I talked to them the other day.”

“Right. Still, must be nice for you that you’re not the weirdo freak round here any more.”

“A-ha. Other than I’m not and they’re not, but sure.”

“You’re not jealous are you? Resenting the loss of your unique identity? No longer the diversity flavour of the month, just another bitchy recluse now?”

Jess didn’t react. After a minute, Baz said, “Do you think that dog’s a pet or a snack on the hoof?”

“Baz.”

“What? I’m respecting their culture. Some people eat dogs and I’m not judging them at all for that. I just wondered if it was leftovers from Christmas dinner or something.”

“God,” Jess said, “Baz.”

He grinned and, now he'd got his reaction, and said nothing more. They went back to drinking beer.

Chapter Eighteen

Jess worked New Year's Eve to give Sam and Anne a break. They took turns sitting on the other side of the bar while Jess poured them drinks. Kate phoned about eleven, said "Happy New Year," but was distracted, at a party of her own. Jess missed her, asked her to come over as soon as she could. Baz, perched at the end of the bar as usual, heard and shook his head. Keri didn't turn up, and Jess wasn't sure if she was sad about that or not. She tried to focus on missing Kate and leave the rest alone. To Jess's surprise, Kate rang back the next day and asked if Jess wanted her to come and stay for a couple of days. Jess said that would be great, and couldn't quite work out why it seemed so odd.

When she told Baz he started packing up his gear.

"You don't have to go," Jess told him.

"Sure I don't."

"You don't, really."

"Not till tomorrow. Is she driving over?" He waited until Jess nodded, "I don't need to go too early then. So long as I'm clear of Kumara before she gets there, she won't see me."

"Shit, Baz, she knows you're here, doesn't she?"

"Course she does," Baz said, then got all quiet and wouldn't talk about it any more.

Jess was excited, fidgety. "Like a fucking kid at Christmas," Baz told her sourly.

He went down to the pub with her while she worked, smirked while she asked Sam for a couple of days off. When they got home they sat on the porch for a beer and Jess's last cigarette of the night and Jess asked, "So what was that about, earlier?"

Baz went all mumbly, didn't want to talk about it, eventually admitted he had a feeling Kate would get weird if he was lurking around to remind her of her respectable life back home and it was better if he cleared off and left them to it in their lovenest.

"Oh," Jess said, and thought that over. "Thanks."

"S'fine."

"No really, Baz. Thanks."

He dinged her bottle, and later she leaned on his shoulder and cried silently. She didn't know why, since she was supposed to be happy.

They drank more. About midnight Baz said he felt a bit crook and went into the toilet and retched.

"If you must in there," Jess called. "At least aim straight."

He flushed and came back and slumped on the couch. "Where else?"

"There's a whole fucking forest out there. Townie."

He reached for his beer. Jess watched, "You're not going to."

"Feel fine now. Got it out my system."

She shook her head and just said, "Fuck."

*

Baz left. Jess tidied herself up a bit. She got lazy about grooming at Awatangi because no-one cared. She shaved her legs and painted her nails and squinted at her eyebrows in the mirror, wondering if they needed plucking, then decided that if she plucked there'd be nothing left. Kate drove up five hours after Baz had left, so must have got an early start. She hugged and kissed Jess, then looked around at the SUVs and families and said, "Let's go inside," then kissed Jess again properly once the door was shut.

"Want some?" she said, and laughed when Jess said, "Shit yeah."

Everything seemed fine until that evening. Sitting out on the porch in the darkness, Kate suddenly said, "Is it cheating on you if I sleep with guys?"

Kate was sitting where Baz usually did, where he had until that morning, and suddenly Jess almost wished he'd stayed. Every time, she thought. Even when it was going well, Kate and her were a disaster waiting to happen. She was always fairly happy when Kate wasn't around, and then Kate turned up, and all Kate's shit suddenly reappeared, and Jess was miserable. She thought of the condoms in their hair tie. Whatever Kate had done was done, Jess decided, and it wasn't anything she hadn't lived with before.

"Yeah," Jess said. "Why's that?"

"I'm just asking," Kate said.

"Why?" Jess kept her voice steady.

"Shit, I just wondered. Don't get so upset."

"I'm not upset."

"You sound like you are."

Jess wished Kate could be more like Baz or Keri or absolutely anyone else. Not Kate. Not so complicated and untrustworthy and unintentionally cruel. "Why?" she said, "Did you?"

"I just wondered," Kate said, "If you thought that was cheating. That's all."

"Don't see why," Jess said, "You've never promised me anything, never said you owed me a thing, why would it be cheating. Do whatever the fuck you want."

"Don't be a bitch. I'm just asking. I just wanted to know what's going to piss you off."

"Everything," Jess said. "Obviously. Fuck."

Kate sipped her wine, looking as angry as Jess felt, and Jess had no idea why.

"I don't think this is working," Kate said.

Jess just sat there.

"I said..." Kate began.

"I heard."

"Well?"

"You're sure?" Jess said. "You remember what we said on the beach?"

"I remember."

Jess just sat there, felt surprisingly calm. Kate leaned over and touched her cheek, and it was only Jess realised she was crying.

"It's okay," Jess said.

"It's not."

“It is.”

Kate was looking at her, seemed worried. “You don’t look right.”

“I’m fine.”

“No...” Kate slid down the couch, put her arm around Jess. “Hey, don’t worry. We can keep trying for a while longer.”

“What do you mean?”

“You look like you’re freaking out.”

“No really,” Jess said. “I’m fine.”

“You look pale. And you’re shaking.”

“No I’m...” Jess looked at her hands. “Oh.”

“It’s okay,” Kate said, “We’ll try a bit longer.”

“Only if you want to.”

“It’s okay.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah, I want to.”

“I’m calm.”

“You’re not.”

“I am.”

“Okay.” Kate looked at her, seemed angry, like she’d been tricked. “You’re such a....”

“Don’t say it,” Jess said, “Whatever it is. I’m not.”

“If you say so.” Kate reached for the bottle and refilled her glass.

Jess decided they had to go somewhere. If they stayed here they’d just get drunk and fight. Awatangi was small, there weren’t that many places to go. The pub or the beach was about it, and she assumed Kate would prefer the pub.

All the way down she hoped Keri wouldn’t be there, and she wasn’t. Jess wondered why she felt like she was having an affair.

She introduced Kate around. Sam said he’d heard a lot about her, and Kate gave Jess a look. Jess waited until Kate wasn’t looking and nodded to Anne, who was staring at the back of Kate’s head. Anne made a sour face and went back into the kitchen.

Jess went around the bar to pour herself a beer. “What do you want?”

“You look cute there.”

“Cute? Fuck you.”

Kate had an odd expression. “Not cute. But comfortable. Like you fit.”

“I spend half my day standing here, so, you know.”

“I meant it was a good thing.”

Jess shrugged, wasn’t sure what to make of that. “What do you want?”

“How about a cocktail?”

“Ah, no.”

“Go on.”

“I don’t know how.”

“You work in a bar.”

“I work in a pub. On the coast. Sometimes people ask for wine.”

Kate seemed not to get it.

“You can have a something and something,” Jess said. “Pick two things I’ll mix them up.”

“No cocktails?”

“Kate, I really don’t know how.”

“Look under the bar, there must be a book.”

“I don’t think there’s a book.”

“Just have a look, there’s always one.”

Jess ducked down and looked in the only place that wasn’t full of fridges, the shelf right beneath the second cash register. Nothing. She stood up, “Sam, do we have a cocktail book?”

“No book, but I might know. What are you wanting?”

“Nothing,” Jess said. “You were supposed to say no.” And to Kate, “You can have beer or wine or something and something. Choose quick.”

“Spoilsport.”

“I’m going to go and sit down...” Jess said.

Kate studied the shelf behind the bar. “Feijoa vodka.”

Jess looked at her. Keri drank vodka, not flavoured, but still vodka. Kate didn’t. It was a little bit odd, serving Kate from the place she usually served Keri. “When did you start on that?”

“A while ago. Maybe since you’ve been over here.”

“Yeah, maybe. Ice?”

Kate nodded. Jess gave her glass a heavy pour, then reached into the fridge and got her a bottle of beer too. Kate watched.

“Looking at the responsible drinking signs too much,” Jess said, but she really just wanted to slow Kate down, didn’t want her having too much and getting difficult. She led Kate to a table in a corner, as much out of sight as it could be and away from the kitchen door.

“Hey Jess,” Kate asked. “Why’s everyone looking at me?”

Jess shrugged, “You’re new. You know how this place is.”

“Hey Jess. Um. Hate to ask, but is there any chance, any chance at all, that you might have mentioned in passing to someone that this situation exists?”

“Ah, yeah,” Jess said. “Um, possibly.”

“I feel like I should be pissed off about that,” Kate said, and although she didn’t actually look it, Jess decided to keep her hands to herself for the rest of the evening.

They talked, a bit about Kate’s work, more about old friends. Kate kept in touch with people and Jess didn’t and Kate felt the need to keep Jess up to date. Then Kate said, “So, I was going to say. Baz is over here a lot.”

“Yeah, you know. Keeping me company.”

“So you two aren’t...?”

Jess looked at her, astonished. “With Baz?”

“So no then?”

“Shit no.”

“Never?”

“Never once.”

“But you had such a crush.”

“Yeah, and then I realised I didn’t like men.”

“And you guys are so close.”

“Well, yeah. But I don’t have to fuck him to... Jesus, Kate. Baz, then you? That would be...” she shook her head, couldn’t find the words, “Shit.”

Kate shrugged. “Sorry.”

“Still. Fuck.”

“I was just asking.”

“But both of you? Jesus, Kate.”

“I just wondered. You seem happier here. Like there’s someone. I just thought that maybe...”

“Fuck, Kate,” Jess said. “Baz?” And carefully ignored everything else Kate was implying.

They went back up to the bach and had another bottle of wine. Kate dozed off before Jess could jump her again, but Jess didn’t mind. For the first time in a while it seemed like things might be going okay. Kate left the next morning, said she had work in a couple of days and had things to do first. Jess didn’t bother asking what, just kissed her goodbye in front of the screaming kids and let her go, knew her well enough to know when she was making excuses.

*

As soon as Kate had gone, Jess drove down into town and phoned Allie. She felt like she needed to talk to someone.

She got Allie’s voicemail. Almost hung up, then just talked instead.

“So,” she said, “Things Kate hasn’t said to me in a while. That she’s proud of me. That she wants me to be happy no matter what I do. That she loves me. Last time she said she was proud of me was when I told her I’d hooked up with Audrey, and that was before she’d met Audrey, so five years ago. She’s never said she wants me to be happy. Not once. Never said that I matter more to her than her job. Never heard that. She’s good with some stuff though. Says I’m hot a lot. That I’m beautiful, I hear that all the time. She sends me texts saying she wants to fuck me, and she’s really polite about saying she liked it after we’re done. Almost like she read in a book she should do that. Anyway, I need to talk so give me a call back if you like. I’ll sit here for a while in case you get this.”

She made herself not hope, told herself Allie was probably still asleep. Jess only waited because Allie sometimes left her phone on an increasing-volume ring, so by the time she heard it there wasn’t time to get it.

A couple of minutes later the phone rang.

Jess looked, saw who it was, answered and said, “I’ve got people, everyone really, telling me to give up on Kate...”

“Hey to you too. And don’t give up.”

“You think so?”

“If it’s worth it, persevere.”

“And if it’s not?”

“Since you can’t tell until it’s over, you may as well keep trying.”

“And if you do and then find it’s not?”

“What have you lost?”

Which actually made a lot of sense. “I suppose,” Jess said, and wondered if she was

trying to talk herself into something, and what it was.

“I know it’s hard,” Allie said. “I know you’re hurting.”

“Should I call you back?”

“Free minutes, don’t worry. What’s going on? It sounds pretty bad.”

“Yeah, you know, just what I said.”

“She doesn’t say she’s proud of you, she just wants sex...”

“Yeah, that.”

“I know its hard, ichiban. I wish I could do something.”

“It used to be enough. A year ago I’d have killed to hear I was hot, or that she wanted me. I don’t know what’s changed.”

“Maybe you have.”

“Maybe.” Jess thought about it. “I wish it hadn’t. A year ago I’d have been happy how things are now, but now... I just want to hear she’s proud of me. That I did well.” She started to cry, wasn’t sure why now, all of a sudden, except it felt like she’d been holding something in and couldn’t any more. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

“Hey, it’s okay. Imaginary hug.”

“No it’s not. Shit. I don’t cry.”

“Just go with it.”

“Sometimes I really hate her, you know. You wouldn’t believe the shit she’s put me through.”

“I’d believe it.”

“Sometimes I... I don’t know. It’s all just too much.”

“I know.”

“You don’t really.”

“Yeah, I do. Everyone’s psycho girlfriend is the same.”

“So what do you do?”

“Suffer what you must.”

Jess laughed, then realised it actually made a lot of sense. She sniffed.

“And remember the other half.” Allie said. “The strong do what they can. It’s not personal, ichiban. Just, you know, abuse of power.”

Jess thought about that for a while and thought she knew what Allie was getting at. Kate didn’t mean to hurt her, she just couldn’t help it.

“We always love the wrong people,” Allie said, “It’s just how the world is.”

“I suppose.”

“Do you want to come over and see me? Have a break?”

“Maybe.”

“Any time. Do.”

“I might. What are you doing at the moment?”

“Mall, shopping, coffee. Why?”

“You know, so I can ask how you are and everything.”

“Better than you, I think,” Allie said, and talked about her flatmates and her girlfriend and a holiday she was wanting to take. After a while Jess started feeling better, and told her about Christmas and Awatangi and how to pour beer the right way, until Allie said her phone was going flat and she had to go.

*

It was the middle of summer, when the tourists were everywhere and the beaches were full and no-one else seemed to be around. Especially a particular no-one. Jess hadn't seen Keri for a couple of weeks, since Christmas, and wondered what had happened to her, whether she'd gone away for the holidays.

She wondered, and then Keri came into the pub as if Jess had conjured her up by thinking about her too hard. It was the middle of the afternoon, was quiet. There were some tourists on the outside deck and some of the fishing club in talking to Sam, but no-one else. Jess was wasting time pretending to be useful, counting bottles in the fridge and tidying the glassware because Sam tended to dump things anywhere and mix it all up.

She stood up, holding a couple of wine glasses, and saw Keri across the bar. And almost dropped the glasses.

"Hey," Keri said.

"Shit," Jess said, "You, ah... gave me a fright."

"Sorry."

Keri was smiling her fuck-me smile. She was in what must be work gear, clothes Jess had never seen her in before, a charcoal suit, a blouse that showed a little cleavage. Her hair was up, her makeup on. She had silver bracelets on her arms and a silver ring on her finger.

"Oh shit," Jess said. "You're perfect. You're beautiful."

Keri looked like a different person, but somehow still herself. Even in a suit, the last tiny curl of a shoulder tattoo was showing above her collar, and her hair was pinned back with a greenstone comb. Jess had always had a bit of a weakness for a girl in business clothes, and suddenly felt that weakness coming back full force. She reached up to slide a wine glass into the overhead rack, but her hand missed. She tried again and still couldn't find the slot. She didn't look up to see why, was still staring at Keri.

Keri smiled a little more. "You like?"

"Trelise?" Jess asked.

"Just Portmans."

Keri took her hand out from behind her back. She was holding a single lilac-coloured rose.

Jess still hadn't managed to rack a single glass, so she put them on the bar. Carefully, one at a time. She could feel her hands shaking. She felt like she ought to be annoyed that Keri could affect her like this. You can't, she wanted to say. You can't do this to me. If you keep tempting me I'll give in.

Keri seemed to understand. She stood still, the rose stem held between two fingers, as if waiting for Jess think things through.

From the corner of her eye, Jess saw Sam glance over. She decided she didn't want to do this in public. "Come here," she said, and led Keri behind the bar and into the office. As Keri passed, Jess smelled jasmine, and perhaps a hint of salt. After weeks of avoiding her, Keri was suddenly close enough to smell. Jess inhaled, then realised what she was doing and stopped.

"Hey," Keri said. "You okay?"

"You look..." Jess said.

"Family thing I had to do," Keri said. "Thought I'd stop by since I was dressed up."

Jess nodded slowly, “Good thought.”

Keri held out the rose. “When the other girl’s out the way, let me know.”

Jess knew she couldn’t answer, couldn’t promise anything. She reached out and took the rose. Took the stem an inch below Keri’s hand, so their fingers didn’t touch, then wondered if that was an answer in itself.

Keri walked back out into the bar. Jess followed her, felt stunned, watched her all the way to the door.

Sam came over and leaned against the wall. “So, what did young Keri want?”

Jess swallowed, “Ah, she didn’t exactly say.”

“Right,” Sam said.

“Stop it.”

“Glad to see the two of you getting on.”

“Sam...”

“Just saying,” Sam glanced down. “Purple, you know what that means?”

“No.”

“Love at first sight. Mystery. New beginnings.”

“How the fuck do you know that?”

“Things you pick up.”

“Next time don’t tell me, okay?”

“Better put that in water.”

“Yeah,” Jess said. “Would it keep longer if I dry it?”

“Could do. How would I know?”

Jess shrugged.

“Hang it up somewhere and see,” Sam said. “You never know.”

“Yeah,” Jess said. “I might do.”

“Righto,” Sam said, and wandered off.

She took the rose home and leaned it on a bookshelf where it could dry and she could see it. The thing was, she decided, that while she loved Kate with all her heart and always had, right now she really, really wanted Keri and that was getting a lot harder to ignore. Keri kept pulling these bullshit romantic gestures, and was annoyingly good at them. Jess was getting to a point she’d never thought she would, starting to seriously wonder what she ought to do.

The next day the crickets started their scratching song, loud and throbbing and heavy in the air. It seemed earlier than other years, and louder, loud enough she’d have had trouble talking if there’d been anyone else around to talk to. She looked at her rose and wondered if the coincidence meant anything. A little part of her wanted to believe it did.

*

Baz phoned and said he’d come over for a weekend. He showed up in the evening, after Jess had finished work, while she was in the bath. She’d been spending a lot of time in it because she’d realised she had a bath and pot and there was very little else anyone needed for happiness. And because the hot water helped with sore muscles after surfing. She heard him crashing through the house calling to her, watched him disappear and reappear in windows as he looked in each room. He must have seen her head sticking out the tub. He

stopped, shoved a window open, and shouted, "Don't jump, it's just me."

"No shit. I heard the car. Then I heard you shouting."

"Bloody hell, you made the bath work."

"Was working last time you were here, you just didn't notice. But I appreciate the confidence."

"You staying out there long?"

"Yep. Bring a beer."

He hesitated. "You wearing anything, Jessie?"

"Don't bother me if it don't bother you."

He shrugged and brought her a beer, and seemed to be making a point of not looking in her direction. "Hold it out more," she had to say, and he glanced, and moved the bottle so she could reach.

"It's okay, Baz," she said. "I've got bubbles in here with me. You won't see much."

He looked, seemed surprised.

"It's an outdoor open fire bubble-bath," Jess said. "But hey. You'd better get in under the net. Bugs'll eat you up."

"S'all right. I'll wait inside."

"If you're sure."

She got out half an hour later. She'd worked out how to drain the water and dry herself and get dressed all while lying in the tub, under the net, then run inside before the sandflies worked out her wrists and ankles were bare. She scrambled out from under the netting and dashed.

Baz was sitting on the porch with a beer. She flopped into a chair beside him and rolled a cigarette. "What was that about?"

"What was what about?" he said, and held out her lighter.

"Not sticking around. Not looking."

"Just seemed polite."

She looked at him a little puzzled and had a cigarette, then went inside to dress. It started to rain, the kind of rain that blew in sideways, under the verandah, and made the front porch uninhabitable. Baz followed her inside and they sat at the kitchen table.

"Anything you want to tell me?" Jess asked. "Changing feelings, any of that shit?"

"What you worrying about now, Jessie?"

"Just asking."

"I'll fuck you if you want me to, Jess, but I'm not falling for you if that's what you mean."

"Good to hear, Baz."

"Yeah, thought it might be."

Baz seemed a little uncomfortable.

"What's up, Baz? Still thinking about me in the bath?"

"Can we talk about something else?"

Jess looked at him for a moment. "Nice weather we're having, isn't it?"

Baz turned around and looked at the rain battering the front windows.

"At least there's less bugs when it's raining," Jess said. "You want some dinner?"

"You don't want to go to the pub?"

"Nah, can't be bothered. I'm there all day."

“If you’re sure...”

“There’s no tourist girls in tonight.”

“Okay then, let’s stay here.”

Jess got up and started tidying up the kitchen so she could make dinner. Baz watched her wipe a piece of bread around in the concealed food in a frypan then eat it. “Hey Jess,” he said, “You know how you don’t seem to do many dishes. Is there any chance that’s because you don’t actually do many dishes?”

“Yeah,” she said, “Probably.”

He looked around, kind of idly. Looked over at a bookshelf, then got up and peered more closely. “What’s this?”

“What’s what?”

“This flower.”

“Ah, it’s a flower, dickhead.”

“Where’d it come from?”

“Someone gave it to me.”

“Which someone?”

“Someone you don’t know.”

“Someone who’s caught your eye?”

“Someone who might have.”

“Anything going on I should ask about?”

Jess shrugged, then decided he deserved honesty, “Not yet.”

“Grab her, Jess,” Baz said. “Grab her before she gets away. Kate isn’t worth missing out on something else for.”

Jess drained her bottle in one long swallow.

“Who’s it from?” Baz said.

“No chance.”

“If I don’t know her anyway...”

“Absolutely no fucking chance at all.”

“If I was you I’d move it before Kate sees it.”

“Yeah, no shit.” Jess started looking in cupboards for something to eat.

*

“You know what I think,” Baz said after dinner, “I think Kate is going to fuck you over because you’re blonde and hot and she isn’t and she hates you for that.”

Jess was smoking inside because it was raining and Baz didn’t care. She picked a little sliver of tobacco from her lip. “That’s a pretty horrible thing to say.”

“Someone needs to say it.”

“Not really they don’t, no.”

“She’s always resented you. That’s pretty obvious.”

“Envied maybe, a little bit. Not resented. I mean, I know she’s funny sometimes...” Jess looked at him. “Hates me?”

“Not consciously.”

“That’s pretty awful.”

“I said not consciously.”

Jess was upset he'd even think it, that anyone would, but there was just enough truth in it to make her wonder. "I don't think she's like that." She sounded uncertain, even to herself.

"She's a bit of a bitch."

"This is way past bitch. I'm her best friend."

"She probably doesn't realise she's doing it. And things have always been a bit... weird... between the two of you."

"Weird?"

"Obsessive. Clingy. Too close. How many people do you know who're still best mates with the kid they met the first day of school?"

"Third day."

"You know what I mean. It's kind of odd. And the whole you being in love with her thing..."

"That's kind of why still mates."

"That's kind of why the obsessive creepiness."

"You've never said any of this."

"Never needed to."

"I think you're wrong."

"But you're not sure. So think it over."

Jess stubbed out her cigarette, reached for another. "Yeah, actually, I don't think I'll be doing that."

Baz shrugged.

"I don't want to be like that. To think like that."

"Up to you. I'm just saying."

"Yeah, I know. But I'd rather you didn't say anything about it again, okay?"

"Whatever you want."

"Okay then." Jess stood up, checked outside. The rain had stopped. "I think I'll go for a walk."

"You okay Jessie? Not pissed off?"

"Not pissed off. A little bit hurt, maybe. It's a pretty horrible thing to tell someone."

Baz shrugged again, looked a little guilty. After a lifetime of dealing with Kate that was better than an apology.

"We're okay," Jess said. "We're fine. But I just want to go for a walk and get away from this."

"You know it's raining?"

"Yeah, that's okay. It's easing up a bit."

Baz raised a hand in farewell. As she walked off Jess heard him open another beer.

*

When she got back, he was out on the porch again, and had drunk enough he didn't seem to realise she was there for a minute. He had a couple of unopened beers on the floor beside him, and when he reached for one, he couldn't close his hand around it properly, so it slid along in front his fingers and spun on the floor. He sat there looking at it for a while, seemed quite surprised. Then braced himself, balanced carefully, bent down, missed and picked up an empty. Jess wondered if people sitting out on the porch getting falling-over

drunk might bother the more wholesome families, but it didn't seem to. They were probably all doing the same thing.

"You okay there son?" Jess asked.

He blinked and looked at her and said, "Hey Jessie Jessie Jessie, you came back."

"I did."

"Oh fuck me, you've grown a bartender voice."

"Nah." She considered. "Maybe. That's kind of cool."

She sat down beside him and he leaned on her heavily.

"Oh fuck me. Fuck you, fuck me. Do you want to fuck me, Jessie?"

"Not really Baz. But thanks."

"No worries. You sure now?"

"Yeah, Baz."

"I could manage if you wanted to."

"Nah, you're right."

"Okay then. Just since you asked."

He was still trying to drink from the empty bottle.

"You know that's empty, don't you?"

"Bullshit." He held it up. "Oh yeah." He started to stand up. "I'll just go get another." His legs swayed, didn't work properly.

"Maybe you've had enough sir."

"You're cutting me off?"

"Suppose I am, yeah."

"Well fuck you." He seemed to think this was funny, and sat down on the couch to laugh for a while. "Fuck me, fuck you. Bartender."

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yep, yep. You fucking bartender. You shouldn't love Kate so much though. Snot good."

"My thing to worry about, not yours."

"I know. But I worry too, Jessie. Jessie Jessie. You need to be..."

"Yeah?"

"You need to be... fuck I don't know."

"Happy?"

"Yeah, that."

Then he went to sleep.

Jess left him there with a sleeping bag draped over him. Possum bait, she thought, but made sure the screen door was properly shut.

*

When Baz left, feeling lonely, hoping she'd say yes, Jess phoned Kate and said, "Could you come over and see me?"

"It's a long way to drive," Kate said.

"I drive it."

"You're from Christchurch."

"Um, so?"

“You’re used to it.”

“I’m just asking. You don’t have to. I thought you might like a break.”

Kate’s voice was strange, as if she was irritated to be asked and forced to say no. Probably she was. “Maybe another time.”

“Another time?”

“Maybe,” Kate said. “It’s just I have a lot on. It’d be easier if you came here, wouldn’t it?”

Easier for you, Jess thought, said, “Okay, sure.”

“Don’t sound like that, you still get sex.”

Jess hung up. Kate rang back, but Jess ignored her phone.

Chapter Nineteen

Jess felt like everything with Kate was creeping past the point of no return. Like the moment in a building demolition, after the explosions, when the walls had become a cloud of dust and the building’s fate was sealed, but for a moment, a second, everything still stayed upright.

She decided to phone Audrey. If it would stop Kate worrying about whether she could stay friends after a breakup, then it was a small thing to do.

Sitting outside the pub one afternoon, smoking, she dialled Audrey’s number. She didn’t need to look it up, could still dial it from memory.

“Hey,” she said, before Audrey could speak, thought she deserved the chance to hang up if she wanted to. “Hey, it’s me.”

“No shit,” Audrey said. “What do you want?”

“Baz said you’d been talking.”

“About you.”

“I should have rung sooner...”

“Yeah, you should have.”

“I was going to... I don’t know, I kept making excuses. And after a while it seemed like it had been so long it had turned into a thing, and then the longer I didn’t ring the bigger excuse I needed.”

“So you’ve got a really good excuse now?”

“Ah,” Jess said, “No.”

“You told me you’d call, that we’d stay in touch. And you never did. Not once.”

“I know.”

“And now you are.”

“Yeah.”

“Shit, Jess, what the fuck do you want?”

“Just... to say sorry. Something happened lately that got me thinking...”

“Kate.” Even after years Jess could tell it wasn’t a question. Early on, drunk, Jess had

told Audrey about Kate, and Audrey had said she knew, it was obvious, but she wanted Jess anyway. They didn't really talk about it again, but it left a sour little wound between them that never really went away. "Fuck you," Audrey said, but didn't hang up.

"Audrey..."

"You're just going to..."

"I just wanted to say sorry, that's all."

Audrey didn't answer. Jess assumed that meant she should talk.

"I was a bitch. I was spoilt and self-centred and you didn't deserve all the shit I caused you. And I'm sorry."

Audrey was quiet for a long time, and Jess just waited.

It struck Jess that you didn't really know someone until you'd broken up with her. Even after years in a relationship, people still tried, were still on their best behaviour. Breaking up brought out the real person, vulnerable and scared and angry. And breaking up brought out the real you – and you learned how you were too. Whether you went with dignity or were a mess, whether you abused power and how you abused it. You learned things about yourself, and in some ways those could be as bad as the hurts other people inflicted. As far as Jess remembered, Audrey had been a better person breaking up than she had been to be with, and Jess had been a worse one. Audrey got noble and Jess got spiteful. Jess didn't think she'd ever told Audrey that, didn't think she'd ever said sorry. She should have a long time ago, should have let go of a bit of her pride if it made Audrey feel better. It would have been a small thing. Audrey had always loved Jess more than she loved Audrey. And Audrey was a good person. She was kind and generous and listened well, as long as you weren't saying anything that was a criticism of her. Perhaps a little too obsessed with work, but Jess was used to that from Kate. In fact, Kate and Audrey were quite similar, something Jess had noticed a long time ago and decided not to think about. Audrey's birthday was in June, Jess suddenly remembered, and felt awful for having forgotten in the first place.

"Sorry," Jess said. "I don't know what else to say. Sorry, sorry, sorry."

"Yeah, okay," Audrey said, but was still quiet.

"That's all," Jess said, "I'll go away now if you want me to. I shouldn't have just called without warning you..."

"That's okay," Audrey said. "Your apology, that's okay. And calling without warning."

Another silence. "Since you're here," Audrey said. "Let's talk."

"Okay."

Jess didn't know what to say. She just waited.

"I suppose we never had much in common," Audrey said. "Except, you know, I was in love with you and you were you."

It sounded like she'd been saving that up. She still seemed angry. Jess didn't like knowing she'd hurt someone this much, that she was disliked so intensely.

"Um," she said.

"Don't you want to know anything? How I am? Did I find someone new?"

"I suppose," Jess said, although she didn't actually care. "Did you?"

"Of course I did," Audrey said, "Shit. It's been years. And she's not nearly as fucked up as you. Thanks for asking."

"I'm glad."

"What's that mean?"

“What I said. Don’t be so suspicious. I’m glad you found someone.” Jess was starting to remember more. Like that when she was angry, Audrey never took anything at face value, always assumed a subtle dig. “Is it good? I mean, is everything working out?”

“Yeah, it is.”

Silence again. Jess tried to think of something to say. Tried, but couldn’t.

Audrey must have been remembering herself. “You put me through some pretty awful shit,” she said. “Cheating and lying and not telling me when you wanted to end things. It was horrible.”

Jess had almost forgotten the cheating. Probably deliberately. Only once, and not with someone who meant anything, but it had been a shitty thing to do. Once she’d been caught she tried to cover up, and that had made it all worse.

“I’m starting to realise,” Jess said.

“Good,” Audrey said, and sounded satisfied.

A favour you should do your ex, Jess thought. Let them know when your life got to be shit, let them gloat a little and put you in your place.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Jess said, “That’s all, really. I just wanted to tell you.”

“Thanks.”

More silence. Jess was thinking she should make an excuse and go.

“Hey Jess?”

“Yeah.”

“When it all goes to shit with Kate, don’t do anything stupid, okay?”

“I don’t...”

“Don’t hit her or kill yourself or anything. Don’t threaten to, either.”

Jess sat there for a moment, then said, “Audrey, what the fuck? That’s kind of over the top.”

“Fighting with you can get intense. I just mean, don’t do anything too crazy, and don’t say any of the nasty shit like you said to me.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I don’t mean anything, I’m just trying to help.”

“That’s a pretty awful thing to just say...”

“Yeah, okay. Forget it.”

Jess hesitated, “I’d better go.”

“Do that.”

“So yeah, bye.”

Jess was taking the phone away from her ear.

“Hey Jess...”

“I’m here.”

“Look, call again sometime, okay? You just surprised me. I didn’t mean to be like this.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay.”

Jess waited a second, in case Audrey wanted to say anything more, but Audrey just said, “Bye,” and hung up.

Jess went over to Christchurch, drove over during the day, arrived in the early afternoon, before Kate finished work. She met Allie for coffee, then went shopping for work clothes. She'd been needing some for a while. The mall seemed too loud after Awatangi, so she was quick, got it done then went out to Taylors. She found some people she knew surfing and managed to borrow a board. When it got close to five, she went back to Kate's and sat in the driveway and waited for Kate to get home.

Kate, for once, seemed happy to see her. No guilt, no complaining, she just dragged Jess into her room and started pulling at her clothes. Afterwards, Jess was lying there thinking about brown hair and skin and eyes, when she realised Kate was staring at her.

"Where were you?" Kate asked. "You seemed to... drift away."

"Just thinking about something."

"Yeah," Kate said. "What's that?"

"Work," Jess said. Which in a way was almost true.

Kate seemed surprised, "You? Work?"

"Just a thing at work. Sorry, what were you saying?"

"Nothing much," Kate said, but talked anyway.

Jess tried to remember if she'd been thinking about Keri during the sex, or only afterwards. During seemed worse. During was fantasies, afterwards was just daydreams, and seemed more excusable, even though it was probably actually worse.

Kate had a shower, and Jess lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling, thinking. There was something she couldn't quite place going on. Kate still acted like she loved Jess, like she wanted her, but it seemed like something was changing. She wondered if it was a breaking up thing, tried to remember how things had been with Audrey, towards the end. After a while she rolled over and looked in Kate's bedside drawers. The condoms were there, it seemed like all of them, but this time Kate was hiding them, and Jess couldn't decide why.

Kate moped around until Jess asked if she wanted to go out. They found a bar and had a drink and while Kate was at the bar getting another, a guy came over and hit on Jess. "Sorry," she said, "I'm with my girlfriend," and Kate came back just in time to hear.

"Jess," she whispered. "Shit, don't say things like that."

Jess shrugged. A year ago Kate would have used her to get rid of someone she didn't like. Now it was another thing to remember not to do.

"I have to live here," Kate said, and went all quiet.

Jess remembered being five, when she had just started school, and getting teased because she still sucked her thumb. One girl hadn't let up, had kept on making a thing of it, had one day started pulling Jess's hair. Kate walked over and punched the girl, no warning, just a heavy smack out of nowhere that hurt Jess too because the other kid hadn't let go of Jess's hair when she fell down. Jess and Kate had looked at each other. After a minute Kate had said, "Don't pull her hair, she's my friend," and they had been ever since. And years later, in a mall, while Jess was shopping with her then-girlfriend and Kate, holding hands with the girlfriend, some guys their age had walked past and said something, laughed kind of nastily. Kate had turned around and shouted, in the middle of the mall, "Hey, what the fuck did you just call my friend?" Jess had told her to leave it, and the guys had just walked away, but Kate had shouted anyway. It was awkward, kind of embarrassing, but also heroic, and while she hadn't needed Kate defending her the second time around, unlike the

first, she'd still liked that Kate bothered.

Jess was going to remind Kate, but Kate was already knocking back her drink and standing up. "Hey," Jess said, and reached towards Kate, "Hey, are you okay?"

Kate walked out. Jess, helpless, followed her, wondering what had happened to her faithful defender.

Kate was quiet all evening, seemed almost resentful. Jess could see how the rest of her time in Christchurch would be, and left instead, kissed Kate and told her she'd come back soon and drove to Awatangi, weaving through flocks of summer tourists and overtaking at the ends of one-lane bridges. She should know better than to out people who didn't want to be outed, she told herself. Told herself, but didn't really believe it. Something was up with Kate. She had a terrible feeling Kate wanted things to end, but didn't know how to tell her.

*

Jess wanted to know what was going on with Kate, and tricking Baz was the easiest way to find out. That, or asking their mother, but tricking Baz was more fun. She waited a couple of weeks, until Baz was next over. They were sitting on the porch, staring into space, drinking beer. Sometimes it felt like they never moved. Jess went inside and got Keri's little bag of weed from a drawer. "I have a little something," she said. "You want?"

"Ah," Baz said, "Sure," and glanced out towards the other baches.

"Don't be obvious and they won't notice," Jess said, "They're used to me smoking out here. Besides, most of the wholesome families have gone home."

"Leaving who?"

"Half the old guys are potheads."

"So you say."

"So I say, but think about it. They were hippies in the sixties."

"Suppose," Baz said, but still glanced around while Jess rolled.

Baz got talkative when he smoked, just most of the time didn't make much sense. Jess half listened. She didn't really need to be listening, he just needed someone to talk at. She got a little stoned and listened to him.

"Hey," she said to him after a while, very casual. "Kate's hooked up with someone else, hasn't she?"

"How did you know?"

"I didn't," Jess said, and looked out to sea. "Not until right now."

"Aw fuck."

"Yeah, aw fuck."

"I think she's finding it all a bit hard, Jess. That's all."

"You know anything useful?"

"Like what?"

"Who it is?"

He shook his head.

"Anything? Boy or girl?"

"No idea. But I'd assume it isn't a chick, just from what she's said..."

She stared at him for a moment then said, "Oh God," and started rolling another joint.

She could feel an ache starting deep in her ear, a kind of swollen itchiness too far inside

to reach. It happened a couple of times a year, ear infections from being out in cold water and cold wind all the time, and there wasn't much she could do. Once she'd tried getting in there with a bobby pin and itching, but that made everything worse. She popped her jaw from side to side and tipped her head in case there was water still in there, but it didn't seem to ease it. It made her irritable. More irritable than Baz's news had already made her. She snapped at Baz when he left the screen door open, snapped again when he threw his bottle cap at a weka. She saw his grin, and realised he'd probably intended to miss – or at least, was trying to give that impression now – but was still annoyed.

"Just don't do it," she said, stood up. "I should go to work."

"Want me to come?"

"Nah, stay here."

"You okay? With Kate and everything?"

"Yeah. Ish."

He reached over patted her arm.

*

Jess had most of her mail sent to the pub because the address was easier to explain than the bach's. It came about eleven, and Sam usually left Jess's on the till for her. That morning she got a blank envelope with an Auckland PO Box as the return address. She opened it, assuming it was an ad, and was a bit shocked when she found a letter from a debt collection agency demanding payment for the power bill. Just a demand, nothing more. No explanation or proof or polite reminder first. She was standing there, slightly stunned, when Sam wandered in from out the back.

He glanced at her, then stopped. "Everything all right?"

"Just my sordid past catching up with me."

She held out the letter for him to read.

"It's not much," Sam said.

"It kind of is." Two months they hadn't billed in the middle of winter.

"Didn't you realise they hadn't billed you?"

Jess shrugged.

"Had they not billed you?"

"Kind of."

"You got enough to sort it out?"

"I suppose. It's not that. They never actually sent a proper bill in the first place."

"Ring them."

"I did."

"No," he pointed to the letter. "Ring them. Tell them that."

"Yeah, I know. It just pisses me off that they're so snotty about it. That they don't just ask nicely."

"Ring them."

"And wait on hold."

"While they pay for the call."

"Yeah." Jess wiggled her jaw, poked her finger into her ear, tired to ease the pain. It was starting to feel worse, get uncomfortable, like it was filling up with something. And that

was just too disgusting to think about.

Sam noticed. "You okay?"

"Yeah, sore ear. It happens, cold water and all."

"Go see a doctor."

"Nah, it'll go away on its own."

"Not if you keep poking it. Find a doctor. We're not busy."

"Maybe tomorrow. I'll stay out the water and see how it goes." She started poking again.

"Don't do that," he said.

"I'm okay."

"What I mean is, don't do that in front the customers."

Jess removed her finger, but made a point of wiping it on her shirt while he was watching. He sighed and turned away.

"Ring them now, Jess. It's not worth the trouble of ignoring it."

"Yeah," Jess said, and meant to, but she had a couple of customers, then went to find painkillers in the office and by the time it was quiet again she'd forgotten.

*

She didn't mention the letter to Baz, because she knew it would just annoy him on her behalf and then they'd have to talk about it all night. She'd done her complaining, and now just wanted to ignore the whole thing. She meant to do something, to phone the collection agency, but she was annoyed at their arrogance and distracted by Baz being around, and a couple of days passed without her thinking about it, until Sam asked if she'd paid the bill.

"Shit," she said, "I forgot."

"Thought you might."

"Don't look at me like that, I meant to. I just forgot. I was busy."

"You got enough money?"

"Sure. Pretty much," Jess grinned. "If not I'll rob a bank."

"You can have an advance if you need it."

"It's okay. I'll get it sorted out."

"If you're sure."

Jess looked up. "Thanks though. I mean... I appreciate it, you know."

"You get your ears looked at?"

"Not yet," Jess said, "Dad. One might be coming right. I thought I'd wait."

"You staying out the water?"

"Mostly."

Sam wandered off. Jess hoped that was it, but as she'd half-expected, he must have said something to Anne. The next day Anne caught her and asked, "How's things going Jess?"

"Ah, you know. Going."

"Nothing particular bothering you?"

"Ears?"

"If that's what's bothering you."

"Not really. Why?"

"You seem crabby all the time. I wondered if everything was okay."

Jess was surprised, had a horrible thought. "You're not worried about how I am at work,

are you? I mean, I'm not putting people off or anything...?"

"Nothing like that. I was just worried about you, love."

"You're sure? I mean, I might be being grumpy, but I'm not to the customers..."

"It's fine." Anne reached over and touched her arm, "Your work isn't a problem. I just wanted to check you were okay. I wanted to say something last week, about that letter, but you seemed upset."

"Oh."

"I just wondered if we could help."

Jess thought she meant money, but wasn't sure. "It's not that. Just the usual. Everything I came here for in the first place."

"Sit down," Ann said, "Have a beer."

Jess looked at her for a moment. It was early. The bar was empty. "You want one?"

Ann nodded.

Jess poured a couple of halves, then sat in front the bar with Ann. She picked up her beer. The glass was sweating in the heat, leaving a damp ring on the bar. She put it down slightly to one side, did it again, started making a line of interlinked circles.

"You're sure you're okay?" Ann said, "With everything?"

Jess nodded

Ann looked at Jess's wet circles, "Use a coaster," she said and wiped them away with a beer mat.

"It's a pub," Jess muttered.

"No reason to be untidy. And stop avoiding the question."

Jess remembered the trip to the beach and understood what Ann was getting at. Decided she deserved an honest answer.

"I feel fucked up," Jess said, "Fucked up and horny at the same time."

"Sometimes you do. Who for?"

"How do you mean?"

"Who makes you feel fucked up, and who makes you feel horny?"

Jess looked at Ann for a long moment, then said, "None of your business."

But she knew what the answer was, and it scared her.

"It's all right," Ann said, "It's all right to feel like that. Sometimes you just do. Breaking up with your eye on someone else."

"Yeah," Jess said, "Suppose," but it didn't really help.

"And Jess, the letter. Did you...?"

"Not yet. I will. Just haven't had time. I need to go to Hokitika for the bank."

"I could if you like."

"Don't worry, I'll get there," Jess grinned, "In the end."

*

Jess got another letter from the debt collectors. She phoned the power company, but they said she had to talk to the debt collectors. She said the bill wasn't the right amount, but the person on the phone kept insisting it wasn't their problem, so she gave up, didn't know who else to talk to. She threw the letters into a pile of other things to ignore on the end of the kitchen table, and didn't think any more about it.

Instead, she did housework, decided it had been long enough since she'd cleaned. She swept the floors, cleaned ash out the fireplace, and went over the carpets with the static pick-up roller thing that had been at the bach forever. She did the dishes properly rather than just rinsing what she wanted to use, got the rubbish out her car, emptied the old oil can she used as an ashtray on the front porch.

Then she went to work and moped.

"What's up?" Sam asked.

"Nothing." Jess was checking stock in the fridges, Sam was just sitting on a stool behind the bar staring blankly through the front windows at the empty road outside.

"Sure. Now what's up?"

"What do you mean what's up? Nothing's up."

"Jess, you're brooding. What's up?"

"Nothing."

"Young Keri was in here the other day asking about you," Sam said.

"Was she?"

"She find you?"

"Not yet."

"Might be in today."

"So she might." Jess looked at him for a moment. "Watch the bar," she said, and went to fetch boxes from the storeroom.

"Can I say something?" Sam asked, as Jess lugged a carton past.

"No." She put the carton down harder than she needed to, so the bottles inside rattled.

"Careful there. I might be out of line..."

"Probably." She went and got another box. "People usually are when they say that."

"Sit down," he said when she came back.

She stopped, tried to look reluctant.

"You have every reason to be with the woman in Christchurch. Put the box down."

"Shit, Sam..."

"You know her and she's a friend and you can see that if you can make a life with her it would be a good life. Put the box down."

She did.

"But right now you're being tempted. And I think I know you well enough by now to say that you wouldn't be tempted over a little thing."

Jess thought of shaking knees and her fear of ever touching Keri and nodded slowly. She slid onto a stool.

"You're lucky." Sam said. "If you want to look at it a certain way. Passion that makes your hands shake, that's rare. It's either there or it's not, you can't force it to happen. And unfortunately, there's also no way to stop it once it's there." He looked at her, and there must have been something in her face. He grinned, said, "Wasn't always a fat old bugger in a pub, you know."

"Yeah," she said, "Sorry. Where you trying to give me some advice or something?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Even if I don't want it?"

"Even so."

"Go on then."

“You have to do what’s right for you.”

Jess looked at him. “That isn’t very helpful. Kind of obvious.”

“Not really. A lot of people forget that one, get so caught up everything else they miss how simple it should be.”

After a minute, she admitted, “Maybe.”

And Sam just grinned.

She thought about it and decided Sam was right. She wanted Keri, and she loved Kate. Loved Kate with all her heart, and wanted Keri almost as much, and there wasn’t anything she could do about either of them.

*

The next day, Keri was in the pub with her friends. She wore jeans and a sparkly top, low-cut, cleavage hugging. Jess spent half the night watching her, hoping she’d come over to the bar, and half the night afraid that she would. Sam noticed and kept on smirking, and Jess did her best to ignore him.

“Hey Keri,” Sam called in the end, while standing next to Jess. When Keri came over he just walked away.

Keri leaned on her elbows on the bar. “Hey,” she said, and looked after Sam. “That was rude.”

“Ignore him,” Jess said, and looked down Keri’s top. She didn’t mean to, it just happened. She suddenly realised and looked up.

Keri was watching her. Smiling.

“Do you want something?” Jess said.

“Yeah.”

“A drink?”

“That too.”

Jess just looked at her. “Beer?” she said. “A jug?”

Keri nodded and put a ten dollar note on the counter.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jess said, but Keri didn’t pick the money up again.

“That other girl still a problem?” Keri said.

Jess didn’t look up, just slowly nodded.

“Don’t forget what I said,” Keri whispered.

“I can’t,” Jess said. “I tried, but I can’t.” She lifted the jug onto the counter, but kept her eyes on the beer taps.

She kept her eyes down until Keri disappeared, but her hand still trembled as she took Keri’s money off the bar and put it in the till.

*

Jess’s ears got worse. The other one had started getting sore too. It was bad enough to wake her up in the night, pain like a little needle-jab sharp enough to jolt her awake. She took a couple of antibiotics she had left over from the last round of ear problems and three codeine painkillers, and went back to bed to try and sleep through the worst of it. When she got up again she was dizzy – the ground seemed to be moving slightly, like she was

standing on a bus. She had more pills, had a shower without getting her head wet, and went to work. She didn't feel like breakfast.

The painkillers wore off mid-morning, and by then she was sore enough to take four more with a double-pour of vodka.

"Is that a good idea?" Sam asked.

"Won't hurt," Jess said, as she swallowed the pills.

"Maybe you should go to a doctor."

"I'm okay. It might clear up on it's own."

"And it might get worse. Go to a doctor."

"I'm supposed to be working and my boss is a real bastard."

"Your boss wants you to go to the doctor. I'll drive you if you need me to."

"I can drive."

"You can't stand up."

"I'm fine."

"You're holding onto the bar."

"I'm just a little dizzy."

He looked at her for a moment. "Seriously, Jess, I can't tell how much you're joking,"

"Yeah," Jess grinned. "Mostly. I just had more pills. I'll be right in a few minutes."

He looked sceptical.

"This time I'm serious. Sore ears fucks with your balance. Give me a couple of minutes."

"Stand there for ten and then we'll talk about it."

Sam went out the back and Jess heard him talking on the phone. He came back in and gave her a sticky note with a time written on it. "There's a clinic in Whataroa today. You have an appointment in an hour."

"I'll be fine, really."

"Can you drive?"

"Yeah."

"I meant, how many of those have you had?"

"Pills?"

"Vodka."

"One. Bigish."

"Then shut up and go."

Jess pulled a face but picked up her keys. Her driving wasn't as safe as it probably should have been, but was safe enough to get her there. It was still early, so the tourists were going the other way. The waiting room was filled with sick people, and she had an awful feeling she was catching more than she'd be cured of, just sitting there. The doctor looked in her ear for about a second then wrote a script for antibiotics. Jess tried to think of something else to ask for while she was there, to make the visit worthwhile, but her head was so woozy she couldn't think straight, and she wasn't up to a gratuitous checkup, so she just said thanks and paid and left. She got the prescription and another couple of boxes of painkillers, and drove back to Awatangi, following a backpacker tour-bus.

The infection started clearing up the next morning. Her ears felt better, although still a bit crackly, when she woke up. They hurt, but that seemed to happen, as if treating the infection made them sore. She ate painkillers every four hours, and still felt tense and sore

for the last half hour before she got a dose. Sam noticed, and laughed, and told her she was strung out.

*

The collection agency phoned Jess at work. When they said who they were she said, "Fuck off, I'm working." The woman on the phone asked if there was another number they could ring, pointed out they'd sent two letters.

"Don't be fucking stupid," Jess said, actually surprised they'd ask, "I'm not giving you my number. Use your sneaky tricks to find it."

"We just want to discuss your debt."

"I'll sort it out."

"Seven days," the woman said. "Or we'll take further steps."

Jess had been going to just hang up, but that ominous little threat made her furious, "Fuck you," she snapped.

"What?" the woman said, sounded startled by Jess's venom.

"Just say what you mean you fucking coward. Oh, steps, I'm so worried."

"I'm sorry if..."

"Fuck off." Jess said, and clicked the phone off.

She took a slow breath. Sam was watching, looked at little puzzled. "It's fine," she said. "Everything's fine."

"Okay," he said, and didn't seem convinced.

Her ear still hurt, was taking longer than usual to come right. She decided to blame that for her bad mood.

It turned into a week of bad-news phone calls. Baz called to say he couldn't visit after all as he had a work thing. Jess's mother called to ask if she still wanted to use the bach, and all of a sudden seemed to be acting like the arrangement had been temporary, not for the summer. She did that kind of thing a lot. A courier rang to say they'd lost a package addressed to her, which Jess worked out was a couple of CDs she'd ordered from a shop last time she was in Christchurch. Jess wondered how they knew they were lost without her having said they didn't arrive, but didn't ask.

Then Kate rang and said she had a thing to do the next weekend, so Jess shouldn't come over like she'd planned. "Typical," Jess said, "You're so fucking thoughtless, Kate. Don't bother thinking about anyone else, okay?"

That started a whispered fight.

"Fuck you, Jess," Kate said. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I have to go," Jess said. "I'm at work."

"So am I, but you don't get to say shit like that and just hang up."

Jess reached over and pulled the office door closed. "What the fuck's wrong?"

"I'm sick of you always blaming me and making me out to be a terrible person."

"I never said that."

"You think it. You think it all the time."

"I don't."

"You do. You're really fucking careful never to say so, but you always imply it."

"I never do."

“Like that, right then, saying I never think of anyone else. You have this picture of me in your head which is just horrible, and you’re so fucking bitter you can’t stand to feel anything.”

That baffled Jess. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know why I can’t stand being around you, Jess? It’s because you’re too hard to love, because you’re so twisted up inside. You make everything difficult and get angry about everything.”

“That’s not true.”

“No it’s completely true. It’s mean and cruel to say it, but it’s fucking true.”

“Fuck,” Jess said, and started to cry.

Kate was silent for a moment, then belatedly, “Look, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that.”

“Yeah you did.”

“No...”

“So why say it?”

“Because... I don’t know.”

“Because you did mean it and now you’re lying, or because you’re a bitch?”

“Jess...”

“I’m just wondering. It’s one or the other. A liar or a bitch.”

“Calm down, Jess.”

“I’d just like to know if you meant it or not.”

“Fuck, Jess, stop pushing me.”

“God, Kate, you say the most awful things sometimes. I could hate you so easily.”

“Yeah, well,” Kate said, “Maybe you should. Maybe that would be better for everyone.”

“Fuck you.”

And Kate hung up.

Jess stood there for a moment and made herself stop crying. She turned off her phone so Kate couldn’t call back, and tried to feel angry rather than sad. It didn’t really work. She got her cigarettes and told Sam she was going outside and went and sat behind the empty crates around the back. She threw car-park pebbles at the stack of empty kegs, so they tinged and rang as the stones bounced off. She sucked smoke deep into her lungs and felt its burning calm her.

She heard a car out on the main road, heard it slow down. She looked up, saw Keri’s Holden. Jess was half-hidden, able to watch unnoticed.

Keri stopped and turned off the engine, and then looked at herself in the mirror. Jess wondered about that. Maybe she was just checking the wind hadn’t messed up her hair. Or maybe she was checking how she looked. She got out, seemed to leave the keys in the car, and slammed the door. She was wearing jandals and a denim skirt and a white singlet that showed off her arm tats.

Jess stood up, stepped out from behind the crates. Keri was the last person she should talk to right now, but for the second it took to stand up, she didn’t care.

Keri saw her, said, “Hey,” and came over. “Hey,” she said again, when she got closer, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Jess said. She wiped her face with her hand, unsure if tears were there. “Yeah,” she said, then, “Actually no.”

“Hey,” Keri got closer, close enough for Jess to smell jasmine over hot gravel, “Hey,”

she said. "What's up?" She reached out towards Jess.

Jess stepped back, "Don't touch me."

Keri lowered her hand, looked hurt.

"Sorry," Jess said softly, "I'm sorry. You know why."

"Oh yeah," Keri said, smiled.

"Shit," Jess said. "Shit shit shit."

Everything seemed to be welling up inside her, everything was becoming too much. She turned around, wanted to walk away from Keri, but the pub wall was right behind her. She stopped, stood where she was, her back to Keri.

"Don't punch the wall," Keri said, after a minute. "That'll really hurt."

Jess turned around, "What?"

"You looked like you were thinking about punching the wall," Keri shrugged, "I mean, I get it, but I wouldn't. It'll hurt like fuck. You might break a finger."

"Ah," Jess was starting to feel better, and wasn't sure she should be. "Nah, I was just going to kick something."

They both looked down at her feet. Sandals, toes bare, nails painted red.

"Yeah," Jess said. "Maybe."

There was a slight pause.

"Nice shoes," Keri said.

"Thanks."

"Nice feet."

Jess looked up. In bright sunlight, Keri's eyes were a couple of shades lighter. There was a tiny scar on her left cheek, just below her eye. It looked old. Jess wondered if it was from surfing or something else.

"Nice legs," Keri said softly, and looked all the way up to Jess's face. "So yeah, watch you don't break a toe. If you're going to be kicking things."

Keri took a half-step forward. Jess stepped back.

"Yeah," Keri said. "Sorry."

Jess could feel the heat of the cigarette ember near her fingers. "I can't let you touch me," she said. She breathed in the last of the cigarette, sucked it deeper than she normally did.

"Why?"

Jess shook her head, threw the cigarette end past Keri, out into the carpark. She watched it smoulder on shingle and dust. "You know why."

"I know, but I want you to tell me."

Jess could smell jasmine again. "No," she said. "You know and I know, and saying it makes it more real."

"I want it real."

Jess shook her head and stepped backward. Her shoulders touched the wall. Keri moved a little. Not necessarily closer, but like she was thinking about it.

"Don't," Jess said.

Keri went still.

"If you touch me, it won't stop. Will it?"

"No," Keri said.

"No," Jess agreed, "So I can't let you touch me."

Keri nodded. "Okay, no touching. I promise."
"This isn't fair," Jess said, "To you. You should just walk away."
"I was here for beer."
"That's not what I meant."
"I know."
"Shit," Jess suddenly felt angry, felt close to tears again. "This whole thing is awful."
"Not me."
"Not you. The rest of it. The waiting, and the not being able to do what I want to do. It's awful, and I'm not going to let you get dragged into it too."
"You can't stop me."
"I can try."
"Don't."
Jess sighed. "Please, just give up on me."
"Nah. Remember what I said?"
Jess jabbed at the shingle with her foot. "Don't punch the wall."
Keri waited.
"Yeah," Jess said, "Of course I remember."
"Well then."
"It's not fair on you."
"I'll let you know if it's a problem. The waiting."
"Don't wait."
"Okay," Keri said. "Come over here. Sit," she waved to the Holden's bonnet, "Tell me what's up."
"Shouldn't you be doing something..."
"Get beer for later. Post a letter. Get milk and flour. Real busy day for me."
"I should get back to work."
Keri laughed, "Yeah right, like Sam cares where you are."
Jess looked to the bar door, looked back to Keri. "I'm trying to think of another excuse."
Keri laughed again. Jess really liked that laugh, it was rich, in Keri's throat. A laugh like silk, she thought, a laugh like sex.
Jess stepped back, "Don't laugh like that."
"Why not?" Keri asked, surprised.
"When you laugh like that I want to fuck you."
A long pause. Keri looked startled. Jess felt herself flush.
"Oh shit," Jess whispered, "I can't believe I keep doing that."
"I kind of like it."
"Yeah, well."
"Not as subtle as some people are, but direct, you know. It's good."
"Um," Jess said, and looked around the carpark. "Maybe I should..."
"You want to talk about things? About her?"
"I can't. Not to you. That wouldn't be fair."
"Yeah," Keri said. "I suppose it wouldn't."
"I should go."
Jess stood there.
"Look," Jess said. "I don't want you to wait... Um, that's not true. I don't think you

should wait..."

"Which is a completely different thing..."

"But if you do..."

"I'll wait."

"If you do, then... when I can. As soon as I can..."

"Yeah?"

"When I can, I'll tell you."

"Okay," Keri said. "Yeah, okay."

"That was all," Jess said. "I just wanted you to know."

"I'd better give you my number, hadn't I?"

Jess nodded towards the pub, "Sam'll know."

"A-ha, and about ten seconds after you ask he tells everyone..."

"He wouldn't."

"He probably wouldn't." Keri went over to her car, got in. She had a pen in the sun visor, bent over and got something off the floor in front the passenger seat.

She wrote, then came back to Jess and held out a slip of paper. Jess stood there. Keri grinned, knelt down, and put the paper on the ground, put a pebble on top so it didn't blow away.

Jess looked at her for a minute, then knelt down and picked it up. A phone number. She turned it over, saw it was a receipt for petrol from Hari Hari.

"Okay," Jess said.

"Call me."

"As soon as I can." Jess looked at her. "If I can."

"When you can."

"Yeah," Jess said. "I have to try and make it work with her, you know?"

"I know."

"I'll, um..." Jess turned around, looked at the pub. "What did you want?"

"I'll talk to Sam. It's on tick for Mum."

"I didn't know we did accounts."

"You don't, Sam does. So the summer help doesn't get embarrassed having to say no." Keri grinned and walked inside, leaving Jess where she was.

Jess watched her, frustrated and horny and angry all at once. She stood there for a moment, then went around the side of the pub and sat on the front steps until she saw Keri drive away. Just to avoid seeing her again and spoiling the dramatic exit.

*

Jess left her phone off all night, couldn't deal with Kate right then. Couldn't deal with her, and had a little part of herself that wanted to give Kate time to fume and do something irreversible. She didn't turn her phone back on until lunchtime the next day, and when she did she found Kate had sent three messages all implying she was sorry without actually saying it. She rang a couple more times, but Jess looked at the screen and didn't answer, and after a while, she stopped trying. Jess brooded, wondered if Kate was right and she was difficult to love, wondered if she was bitter.

In the end she asked Sam, in passing, trying to be casual, "Do you think I'm bitter?"

“Nah,” he said, “No more than’s reasonable.”

“Which isn’t the same as no.”

“Close enough to. Why’s that?”

“No reason,” Jess said, and thought no more about it.

Sam must have. That night, while they were cleaning up, he said, “Jess, why did you ask if I thought you were bitter?”

“You know, just wondered.”

“Wondered because...?”

“Someone told me I’m impossible to love because I’m too bitter. I was wondering if that’s true.”

“Someone being the woman in Christchurch?”

“Just someone.”

“Nah, I don’t think you’re bitter.” He sat down on the customer’s side of the bar, reached over and poured a couple of beers, did it badly, froth everywhere, then passed one to Jess.

“Tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Whatever it is,” he said, “Why she called you bitter and why you care.”

“There’s a girl.”

“You keep saying.”

“It’s complicated.”

“I imagine it is. Is she worth it?”

Jess thought for a while. Thought carefully. “Probably not.”

“And then there’s Keri.”

Jess looked at him, wary as much of matchmaking as gossip.

“Who’s in here twice a week throwing herself at you.”

“Not really throwing.”

“Not really,” Sam said. “But she would be if she thought it would help.”

Jess fiddled with her glass for a moment, “Maybe.”

“So there’s this one girl, who makes you look like you look sometimes do, and is complicated. Then there’s this other girl who makes you look like you do other times, and isn’t.”

“How’s that? How do I look?”

“Around Keri? Dazed. Astonished. Like you can’t quite imagine how that just happened to you.”

Jess nodded slowly.

“So,” Sam shrugged, slid off the stool. “Can’t see where there’s anything complicated myself. Seems pretty straightforward, really.”

“Yeah,” Jess said, “Yeah, I suppose it is.”

She said, “Thanks,” then went back to mopping the floor.

*

The next night, Keri was back again. It was out of her usual pattern, which made Jess suspect Sam had interfered. It was moderately busy, mostly locals, one and Keri seemed to be talking to people as she made her way across the room, taking her time. Jess went back

to what she was doing, refilling the beer-bottle fridge, down beneath the bar. If she left the boxes of bottles there, she'd end up tripping over them. Almost certainly, with Keri in the bar.

Keri leaned over and tapped Jess's shoulder with a rolled-up newspaper, said, "No touching, see?" and held the newspaper up.

"Hey." Jess stood up. She suddenly wondering if she looked sweaty and whether that was bad.

"Yeah, hey. Listen, I just wanted to say you're my fucking hero, yeah?"

"Ah, why?"

"For trying to make the other girl work."

"Are you serious?"

Keri grinned, "Mostly."

Jess could smell beery breath from her side of the bar, noticed a slight slur in Keri's words. "Are you pissed?"

"Little bit."

Jess laughed.

"I mean it though," Keri said.

"Yeah?"

Keri shrugged, "Yeah, I do. I'd rather you didn't try with her. Obviously. But if you must then I'm glad you are."

"I think that almost makes sense."

"Good," Keri made a beckoning gesture, "Hand."

Jess stepped back. "No."

"Just your hand. I just want to touch it."

Jess shook her head.

Keri seemed amused. "You're that scared of me?"

"Ah, yeah."

Keri grinned and did her cupped-hand wave, "I'm waiting."

"I know."

"Hey," Jess said, as Keri turned to go, "Vegemite or Marmite?"

"What?" Keri said, then grinned. "Marmite."

Jess looked at her.

"Is that right?" Keri asked.

"You're perfect for me," Jess said, a little sadly.

"Good," Keri said, and went back to her friends.

Jess decided she needed her dinner break, to be out in the kitchen, out of sight, for at least an hour. There was no-one serving for several minutes until she found Sam and sent him out. When she finished and went back into the bar, Keri was gone.

*

If seeing Keri wasn't enough, if Sam trying to sell her on Keri wasn't either, two days later Audrey unintentionally joined in. She phoned while Jess was at work. Jess didn't expect her to call, didn't recognise the number even though she knew it by heart. She answered with just a yeah.

“Jess,” Audrey said, “Hi.”

“Oh shit,” Jess said, a silence, then, “Sorry, I wasn’t expecting…”

“You said I could ring.”

“It’s just that you never do.” She realised how that might sound and added, “But I’m glad you did, what’s up?”

“Nothing really, I just… I don’t know. Talking to you again was nice. I was thinking about you.”

“You still do?”

“Yeah,” Audrey said, “I still do.”

Silence. “So,” Audrey said, “I was thinking. About you and Kate.”

“Okay.”

“Do you still remember the first time we kissed?”

“Of course.”

“You remember it well?”

“Yeah.”

“What you felt, that you knew it was different.”

“Your kiss changed my life,” Jess said simply, “I’ll never forget it.”

“Oh,” Audrey sounded pleased. “Well,” she said, “With this thing with Kate. If you feel like that then it’s worth it, and if you don’t it’s not. That’s all I wanted to say.”

Jess was silent.

“Jess?”

“I’m here.”

“Do you feel like that?”

Jess was silent again.

“Just something to think about, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” Jess said. “Thanks.”

“I don’t want to interfere.”

“No, you’re not. I was just thinking. But yeah, I’m glad you said that. I always cared what you thought, you know?”

“Yeah,” Audrey said, and “Bye.”

Jess stood there for a little while and thought. Thought about Keri and how much she wanted to taste Keri’s mouth. Thought about Kate and how, after seven years, actually kissing Kate had been nothing at all like kissing Audrey.

*

Keri reappeared. During the afternoon, when it was quiet, while Jess was doing her afternoon housekeeping, refilling the sauce bottles and putting more sugar packets out on tables and topping up salt and pepper shakers.

“Grinders,” she said to Sam as he passed, “We need pepper grinders.”

“I know.”

Keri walked in. Jess didn’t see her, had her back to the door, but she heard the door creak, and saw Sam glance up and disappear. She knew who it was then, knew so strongly she almost imagined she could smell jasmine perfume.

“Twice in a week,” Jess said. She didn’t turn around, and the person standing behind her

didn't answer.

"What is it this time?" Jess asked, still without turning around. "Am I suppose to give in if I see you all the time?"

For a second there was no answer, just long enough she got really worried.

Then Keri said, "Yep, pretty much."

Jess was relieved, kept voice the same. "How's that working for you?"

"Yeah, you know. Are you going to look at me?"

Jess turned around slowly. Keri. Skirt, hoodie, jandals, hair in a ponytail. Fuckable and perfect. "Yep," she said, "It's you."

They stood there a moment. The bar was empty.

"Did you want something?" Jess asked. "Or just to stalk me?"

"Just wanted to ask something. Can do the other if you like."

"Nah. Just ask."

"So I just wondered something."

"Yeah?"

"Why is it you keep calling her the other girl, not me?"

"I don't." Jess thought. "Do I?"

"Yeah you do."

"Oh shit."

"I'd have thought oh shit."

Jess tried. "It's probably only because I'm talking to you."

"Yeah, that makes sense. Because you must talk to her about me all the time."

"Fuck," Jess whispered, "Oh fuck. How long have I been doing that?"

Keri shrugged, "Always."

"Is that why you're always so smug?"

"Yeah, probably. There was something else, too..."

Jess looked at her.

"I'll give you a minute, if you need it..."

"I'm okay."

"Take your time."

"I'm fine."

"Okay, so I was also wondering..." Keri stopped.

"Go on."

"If she's the other girl," Keri said, "Then what am I?"

Jess knew she had a stupid grin, but couldn't get rid of it. "You had to come right out and say that, didn't you?"

"Yep," Keri said, "Oh fuck yes."

Keri smiled her fuck-me smile, half-waved, and walked out. And with her hands trembling slightly, wondering what she was doing, Jess went back to filling the sugar bowls with the little paper packets.

Chapter Twenty

Jess decided she needed to get away, to find a new beach and see some new water and ignore all the complicated crap that was her life. She asked Sam for a couple of days off and he gave her one of his looks and asked if anything was wrong. She lied, said, “Nah, just waves doing good things,” and he seemed to accept that. “Tomorrow,” she asked, “Do you need me around?” and he said sure, go, have fun.

She left when the pub closed for the night, took a change of clothes and a sleeping bag and just drove north through the night. It was peaceful. The rest of the world disappeared beyond the road. With music on and no other cars around it was like floating along a tunnel through an inky black world. She passed milk tankers and delivery trucks. She startled possums, which sat watching her approach. She knew she should run them over, but couldn't bring herself to, and swerved around them instead. She drove slowly, wasn't in a hurry, planned to head up past Westport, sleep in the car beside a beach, and surf at dawn. That was her plan, and she hadn't realised she was doing something else until she got to the big roundabout at Kumara and turned right for Christchurch instead of going straight ahead and staying on the coast. Not what she'd intended, but once she'd taken the turn, doing so made perfect sense. She drove all night, arrived in Christchurch just before dawn, went to Kate's place and parked in the driveway.

During the week, Kate always woke up at six-forty. Jess set her phone's alarm for a couple of minutes before that and went to sleep sitting in the driver's seat. When the alarm went off she got out and tapped on Kate's bedroom window. Kate slid it open, said blearily, “What the fuck?” and “Hey.”

Just like old times, Jess thought. Kate held out her hand. Jess grabbed it and climbed in.

“You been at the beach?”

“On the way.”

“Is there a storm or something?”

Jess shrugged. “Just felt like being here.”

“Bathroom?”

“Shit yeah.”

When Jess came back she found Kate hovering in the middle of the room, holding a towel. Workday mornings Kate had lots of nervous energy. “Lie down,” Kate said, “Be at home. You need anything else?”

“Nah.”

“I have work...”

“Yeah, no worries. Pretend I'm not here.”

Kate went and had a shower. Jess lay down on the bed – breathing in the Kateness of it – and dozed for half an hour while Kate got ready. She was half aware of Kate moving around, but was so tired the noise was muffled and distant, like sound underwater. It was warm and soft and comfortable in the bed. She half slept. Kate woke her up with coffee, and told her to come into the kitchen. Kate didn't seem to be trying to keep the noise down, she talked in the hallway and banged cupboard doors, so the flatmates must already have gone to work. Jess wasn't sure how workaholic these two were, but since they lived with Kate they were probably pretty bad.

“You want breakfast?” Kate asked, pouring cornflakes into a bowl.

Jess shook her head.

“More coffee?”

Jess held up her cup, still half full.

“You okay?” Kate said. “You look awful.”

“Thanks.”

“Really. You look like someone who’s been driving all night.”

Jess gave her the finger.

“You really came all this way to surf?” Kate asked.

“To see you, dickhead.”

“Oh.” Kate seemed surprised, then smiled. “Right.”

Kate wasn’t really a morning person, had only got that way by practicing. She was perky but slow until she got going. “Wake up,” Jess said.

“Getting there.”

“You’ve been up for ages. I have an excuse.”

Kate looked blank.

“Driving all night... Not sleeping...”

“Oh yeah.” Kate yawned. “Where are you going? Which beach?”

“Does it matter?” Jess got up for more coffee from the plunger on the bench. “Taylors, probably.”

“We should have lunch later.”

“Okay.”

“Meet me at work?”

Jess considered past mistakes. “How about the gardens? In front the museum?”

Kate nodded. “Yeah, all right.” It would be three minutes walk for her, maybe five. “Are you coming back here?”

“Yeah, if that’s okay. I’ll sleep a bit more.”

Kate removed the door key from her keyring and slid it across the table. She brushed her teeth and did her lips. Left, then came back again and kissed Jess and said, “I’m glad you’re here.”

Jess sat at the table and finished the coffee. Then she went and poked around in Kate’s room. Kate still had condoms beside the bed. It seemed like the same number, but Jess wasn’t sure, and Kate was organised enough to replace what she used, so counting probably didn’t mean much. Jess counted anyway, then checked around the rest of the room. There weren’t any discarded wrappers under the bed or mysterious clothes abandoned in corners, and when she looked in the undies drawer for sexy notes – where Kate always kept them until she broke up with the giver – there weren’t any, so whatever had been going on, maybe after a couple of flings Kate had got through it. Jess lay down on Kate’s bed, her face on Kate’s pillow, and breathed in Kate’s smell some more. Shampoo and skin, familiar like her own. She’d only meant to lie down for a few minutes, then get up and go out to Taylors, but she went to sleep. After driving all night, coffee didn’t make much difference to whether she slept or not.

Kate phoned an hour before lunch and woke Jess up, would have timed it to give Jess time to shower and get into town. “Thanks,” Jess said, “I’m on my way.” She still felt woozy. Her eyes felt sore. Sleeping a few hours sometimes made her feel worse than

having no sleep at all. A shower and more coffee halfway woke her up, but it was still an effort to concentrate driving into town.

She sat on a wooden bench in front of the museum and waited for Kate. It was hot, almost too hot, but the sun made her feel more awake. She had to squint against the light. Her sunglasses were still sitting on the kitchen table in Awatangi. She'd forgotten them because she'd left at night. She watched people and waited and smoked. She was smoking too much, wasn't worrying about money as much any more, had lost the incentive to keep count. When she stopped and counted, she'd got back up to a pack a day worth of roll-ups without really having noticed.

She saw Kate coming from down the street but pretended not to, in case Kate wanted to sneak up and make her jump or something. Kate didn't, just walked up and said, "Hi."

"Hey," Jess said, "How long have you got?"

"Long as you like. A couple of hours. I've got some time owed."

"What, for me?"

"Yeah for you, of course."

Jess was momentarily surprised. Kate wouldn't usually bother. She told herself not to be so ungrateful and said, "Thanks."

They bought food and started walking. Wide lawns, spreading oaks, flowers. They did laps with the joggers and fitness walkers, down the main driveway, past the playground, back around the river.

"I miss you, you know," Kate said, "When you're over on the coast."

Jess wasn't sure what to make of that. There didn't seem to be a safe response. Saying she was glad Kate missed her seemed a bit smartass, and saying she missed Kate too, sometimes even when Kate was standing right next to her, would just start a fight. She stayed quiet.

"Have you thought about moving back?" Kate asked, "It'd be nice to have you just... around, like you used to be."

"Just around?"

"You know, just around. So I can phone you. So we don't need to plan seeing each other weeks ahead."

"Oh yeah," Jess said, "And why might you want to see me?"

There was another couple walking ahead of them. Kate glanced their way, seemed worried about being overheard. "You know," she said, and looked around, didn't seem to want to answer. Jess stuck her fists in her pockets and waited. The other couple took a side path.

"Sex," Kate whispered.

"That's all?"

"Or just to see you. Go shopping or have coffee or whatever. Like this. Like it used to be."

"Like it used to be," Jess said, "Not like it is now?" She was trying to be subtle. If Kate wanted her as a lover she'd move back, no question. But only if Kate wanted her as a lover, not just to be a friend. Kate gave her a look, sceptical, slightly smug. Smug meaning yeah I'll fall for that, Jess thought. "Had to ask," Jess said. "So which?"

"I don't know. I don't know what it is now."

"So move back for sex?" Jess said.

“Well, yeah.”

“Shopping?”

“Yeah.”

“Having a drink now and then?”

“Of course.”

“Planning a life together. Picking out a cat...?”

Kate looked worried.

“Shit,” Jess said. “Joking.” She hated to trivialise something that meant so much but she had to know and that had seemed the best way to ask. Or she could be direct. “So would it be for anything other than fucking and shopping?”

“Of course.”

“Anything that isn’t friends fucking?”

Kate looked uncomfortable. “Well...”

“Be honest.”

“I suppose not.”

“Nothing more at all?”

Kate didn’t answer. After a while she shook her head.

“Okay,” Jess said. It was almost a relief. Hurt, but a relief too.

“What’s wrong?” Kate asked.

“You want me to give up a life that’s making me happy for the first time in years,” Jess said, “Doing something I want to be doing, just to come back here and go shopping?”

“And sleep with me,” Kate whispered.

“And sleep with you.”

“Since you’ve been after me for years, I thought you might want to do it a bit more often now we’ve started.”

“Yeah,” Jess said. “I would have too.” It was strange, and Kate was right. She couldn’t see why she wasn’t running back to Christchurch as soon as Kate asked either. Something had changed, and she didn’t know what. All she could think of was that Awatangi hadn’t turned out the way she expected.

“It’s only a job in a pub,” Kate said.

“As opposed to what?”

“I don’t know. A career.”

“Yeah,” Jess said, “I suppose it’s not that.”

“So move.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

“I just said. I like it over there. And it matters to me.”

“What does?”

“My job, Kate, try fucking listening.”

“Don’t get snotty, Jess. I’m just asking.”

“And I’m just saying no.”

Kate shrugged, but didn’t seem to be paying attention any more.

Jess hunted in her pockets, found her cigarettes.

“You should stop that,” Kate said.

“I know,” Jess said, and put the cigarettes away again. She could see how this would go.

Kate would tell her what to do, would take her for granted, mostly because Jess let it happen. It had always been like this, and usually Jess didn't mind. Except that suddenly she did. She started feeling annoyed, started thinking that what Kate wanted shouldn't be the only important thing between them. She stopped walking, wondering what was wrong with her. "Just for once..." she said, but didn't want to finish for fear of where it might lead.

Kate was looking at her, waiting.

"Nah, nothing." Jess was angry, with herself as much as Kate. "I think I'll go," she said, "I'm a bit tired. Call me later, okay?"

"What's wrong?"

"I'm tired."

"Tell me."

"Nothing's wrong, but I'm going now." Avoiding arguing with Kate – when you were close to an argument yourself – took a certain single-mindedness.

"Where are you going?"

"For a walk."

"We're having a walk."

"I'll call you later."

"Jess..."

Jess walked away. She was thinking the unthinkable. She knew she'd never leave Kate, but for a second she almost wanted to. She could almost imagine a future without Kate, and that was terrifying.

As she walked away, she imagined she felt Kate's eyes on her, imagined Kate was standing there watching her leave, upset like Jess would be if their places were reversed. She could almost feel Kate's gaze, but when she looked back, Kate had gone.

She walked around the gardens for a while – three cigarettes worth of time – then went back to the car.

Kate was sitting on the bonnet.

"Knew you'd be back eventually," Kate said. She seemed pleased with herself.

"Yeah," Jess said, decided not to be angry. "How'd you know where I parked?"

"You always park here." Kate pointed upwards. "Shade."

"Smartass," Jess said, and unlocked the doors,

Kate slid into the passenger seat, said, "So?"

"So nothing. I just wanted to be by myself for a while."

"Why are you so angry?"

"I'm not. I don't think I am."

"Oh." Kate didn't seem to know what to say to that. She sat a moment, then just started talking. About Awatangi again. Jess listened, and realised she was being fixed. Even after her getting angry, after her walking away, Kate was assuming that she'd do as she was told after she'd had her little tantrum. It was insulting. And even if it was true, Kate had just jumped ahead to Jess giving in, without even pretending she had to wait for Jess to agree. She was telling Jess how best to organise the move back, how to start looking for a flat. Not offering her own place, just leaving Jess to look by herself. That decided Jess. It didn't matter what Kate asked or wanted, she was staying at Awatangi. She was angry again, was getting angrier the longer she sat there. She tried to listen, but found she was so angry she couldn't hear Kate's words, couldn't concentrate on what Kate was saying. She stopped

trying, wound down the window, and lit a cigarette, even though she knew it would piss Kate off. Her hand was shaking. She sat for a moment, wondering how her life had become what it was, then interrupted Kate, talked over her. "Shall I drop you back at work?"

Kate stopped, surprised. "Yeah, okay."

She was looking at Jess strangely. Jess assumed she was annoyed at being interrupted, was almost surprised when Kate said, "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah." Jess started the engine.

"Really sure?"

"Stop asking me."

Kate went quiet, watched Jess drive, stayed that way until Jess stopped outside her work. She got out, said bye, but hesitated, seemed reluctant to walk away.

"Hey Kate," Jess said out the window, "You know I like my job, don't you?"

"You said you did."

"You know I've never liked a single job I've ever had. Not liked it."

Kate waited, seemed unsure what to say.

"And I like Awatangi too. I live living there."

"You can still go back for holidays."

"Kate, I like Awatangi. I like working in the pub."

"That's... good."

"Yeah, it is."

Kate was puzzled, couldn't see what Jess was getting at. Jess gave up. "Don't talk it down, okay?"

Kate nodded. "Okay."

"Bye," Jess said, and drove off.

She'd planned to stay in Christchurch another day and see Kate that evening, but now she didn't want to. She went to Kate's flat, got her things, and left Kate's key on the kitchen table. She phoned Kate on the way out of town to say goodbye, and as far as she could tell, Kate wasn't that upset she was leaving. Jess decided not to be upset either.

It was late when she arrived back at Awatangi. Past closing time, but it was one of Sam's nights working so the pub was still open. Jess stopped on the main road and looked across at the lights. She felt like seeing people. She parked around the back and went inside. No-one seemed to have noticed she was gone or that she was back sooner than planned, but she didn't mind. She had a beer sitting on the wrong side of the bar and talked to Sam and felt like she'd come home.

*

Another letter arrived from the debt collectors, a final demand. It said so in big letters at the top. Jess threw it on the table with the others. She meant to do something – look over the letters at least – but that night she was tired and the next she was upset about Kate and all week her ears were getting worse again, so she forgot. Forgot, until one afternoon a guy turned up at the pub in a shirt and tie and shiny shoes. He wasn't a local, and he wasn't really dressed like a holidaying tourist, and as soon as he walked in he looked at Jess and asked, "Jess Baader?"

She looked him over, could guess what he wanted. "Who're you?"

He glanced around, seemed to notice the place was empty. It was still early. They weren't really open, even though the doors were, something locals usually understood and tourists usually didn't. "Are you Jess Baader?"

Jess put down the glass she was holding, "Might be."

"Could you tell me your name please?"

Jess smiled, decided he wasn't a customer so she didn't need to be nice. "Fuck off."

"You don't have to be like that, I just asked..."

"I said fuck off," Jess considered a moment, added, "How dare you come in here... Look, just fuck off."

He put a card down on the bar, and said, deadpan, but like he knew, "Have her call me please."

"Yeah, I'll get right on it," Jess said, and watched him leave. "Fuckwit."

*

The debt collector's visit upset Jess more than it should have. Partly the intrusion into her life, partly because she knew he'd be trouble in the end. She was missing Kate too. Missing feeling like Kate would always be there, missing feeling like Kate actually cared. Something in the way she'd left Christchurch felt a little like breaking up. She went down to the beach that afternoon, like she always did, but didn't feel like surfing. She just sat on the beach and stared out to sea, left her board in the back of her car and stayed in her work clothes. She watched the waves, felt miserable and overwhelmed.

After she'd been sitting for a while, she heard the rumble of a car coming down the beach. A rumble, so Keri's Holden. They'd been seeing each other now and then, but not often, mostly passing without talking. They stuck to their own breaks, at opposite ends of the bay, and surfed at different times – Keri later in the day – so Keri was usually arriving as Jess left. Keri seemed to be respecting Jess's space, too, not stalking her here, as if the beach was for surfing, and everywhere else for flirting. Jess was grateful – mostly grateful – that Keri got her so well.

Keri and her friends had been out on the water when Jess arrived, and that must have been half an hour ago by now. It wasn't surprising they had finished while Jess sat there. She wondered what Keri wanted. She stayed where she was for a moment, then got up, walked to the track, and waited beside it. Keri stopped, but left the engine running and didn't get out the car. She was wearing a bikini top and shorts, was sitting on a towel to keep her seat dry. Her tummy was flat, even sitting down. Her hair was wet, dripping slowly onto her shoulders. "Hey," she said.

"Hey," Jess said back, watching the drips.

Keri seemed to be looking at Jess's clothes. "Not going out today?"

Jess shrugged.

"You've been here an hour and you're still just sitting there. Water not right for you or something?"

"Oh." Jess thought about that. Maybe it had been an hour. "Yeah, something like that."

"Is everything okay?"

Jess meant to say yes, but she shook her head. "Not really."

Keri waited. After a moment she said, "So tell me."

“You sure?”

Keri turned off the engine. “Of course. I’m here. Tell me.”

“It feels like everything’s coming apart. Like everything’s a mess I can’t fix.”

“I know how that can be.”

“You’re the only good thing in my life right now.”

“Bullshit,” Keri smiled, “I mean, thanks and all, but that’s bullshit. Look at that ocean. Look at the place we live. You like it here?”

“Of course.”

“You have a job. And Sam and Ann are good people. And you have at least one friend who’ll come all the way over to see you, that guy you always drink with.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“So don’t try that everything is awful crap.”

“You really think it’s worth it to live here? Being away from people and having no money and everything?”

“Yeah, I do. This is home.”

Jess nodded slowly, realised she understood. “Okay,” she said, smiling but trying not to, “So you’re the only good non-work, non-beach thing in my life right now.”

“That I can manage.”

Silence for a moment. Jess realised she was staring at the water droplets again. “Thanks,” she said, “For coming down and checking on me.”

“No worries.”

“And for cheering me up...”

“No problem.”

“...Again.”

Keri laughed.

“You have to stop, though. I don’t want to be that girl.”

“Which girl?”

“The one who always needs picking up after she falls. Who always needs helping out, and takes more than she gives.”

“Right,” Keri said, “Her.”

They looked at each other a moment.

“You’re not,” Keri said, “Don’t worry.”

“I’m not?”

“Nah, you’re not.” Keri cleared her throat, “Hey, um, anything new with...”

Jess shook her head, “Sorry.”

“No worries.”

“I’ll tell you. If anything...”

Keri nodded. Silence again.

“So, yeah, I’d better...” Keri said.

“Yeah,” Jess looked down the beach, saw two shapes standing near towels.

“You’ll be okay?”

Jess nodded. “Having you around helps a lot. More than you know.”

“I’m glad.”

“I am too.”

Keri did her fuck-me grin. “You owe me, then.”

Jess nodded slowly, "Yeah, you know, I pretty much do."

"I'll collect."

Jess laughed.

"Don't laugh, I will."

"I know."

"Good."

Jess looked at her. "Is this like not hanging up the phone first?"

"Probably."

Jess couldn't think of what to say next.

"I win," Keri said, and drove down to the end of the track to turn around.

Jess waved and watched her drive back down the beach. Then she went to her car, got into a wetsuit, and went out to surf.

*

Soon it was the end of January, which meant that soon it would be Jess's birthday. Sam said he wasn't going to do anything particular on the seventh unless she wanted him to. He said it carefully, as if inviting Jess to object – he must have noticed the date on her tax forms – but she just said, "Yeah, that's fine." Baz and Allie and a couple of other people phoned to ask if she wanted to be visited, or to have a party arranged in Christchurch, but she said no, she didn't want to do anything. Every year her birthday seemed to mark the end of summer, something it was hard to be happy about, and this birthday was worse than most. She was about to turn twenty-five, and it had crept up on her. She felt like she should be doing things, making decisions. Almost felt obliged to start caring what she did with the rest of her life, when really she didn't care in the least.

There was still one person she wanted to hear from, even though she was avoiding birthdays. She hoped for a week, but Kate didn't ring to see about organising anything. Jess couldn't help being a little pissed off. A few days before her birthday a parcel turned up, Kate's printing on both sides, don't open this until I phone. Jess put it on a shelf and left it. It was a book. It was always a book. Kate liked to read serious things and improve herself and assumed everyone else did too.

Her birthday came. She woke up early and had ice cream for breakfast like she did every year. It was her birthday and she could do what she wanted, and when she was eight that was what it had been. The ice cream was stashed at the pub because she didn't have a freezer at home. She let herself in, and sat in the empty bar and ate it alone. Sometimes it was the right time to be by yourself. Afterwards, feeling a bit sugary and bloated, she went for a long surf, then she had a bath with the last of Keri's weed. She'd warned Sam she might be late in. When she finally got to work, Sam and Ann were good about pretending not to notice the date. Sam completely ignored it, made no mention at all, and Ann only smiled when Jess first arrived, a big, slightly creepy smile that was obviously meant to convey something, but she didn't say anything explicit. Other people's efforts were mixed. Some remembered and sent messages, some must have taken her no-birthdays thing seriously and didn't. Allie and Baz both rang, which was good, and her family did too, which wasn't as good. Jess and her mum had an awkward conversation for a few minutes, both feeling obliged to try, then her father told her happy birthday and was gone as soon as

he'd spoken. After her mother, she was almost glad he'd been so quick.

Kate phoned at lunchtime, and like she did every year, started singing happy birthday before she said hello.

"Hey," Jess said, "Fuck but you can't sing."

"Screw you."

"Just saying."

"Did you have ice cream?"

"A-ha. Of course."

"Good." Kate liked traditions. "Okay," she said, "Open the parcel."

"Hold on, it's in the car." She'd taken it to work with her because she'd expected Kate to call.

"So go get it, don't keep me waiting."

Jess went outside, opened the package. Inside was a gift-wrapped parcel and a card. She looked at the card first. Kate was predictable. Year after year she wrote to Jessie and love Kate and nothing else. She thought people needed cards but never knew what to say so she did the bare minimum, and had again this year. Jess read the printed message, then read it again. "Hey Kate," she said suspiciously, "Did you read this before you bought it?"

"Read what?"

"The card."

"Sure," Kate said. "Why?"

"Just the message is a bit... not you."

"The poem?" Kate asked carefully.

"Yeah, the poem." Jess cleared her throat and read out, "I'm a little more in love with you every day, you're more precious to me than last year... I don't know. Then some other crap that doesn't rhyme and a list of qualities I don't have. Patience and things."

"You're patient."

"Yeah, I know that, but the card company doesn't. And I'm not really cheerful, am I? They're a bit... generic."

Kate was quiet for a moment, then, "Doesn't it say other stuff?"

"Like what?"

"That only sounded like one verse."

"It's a card, Kate. It says that, then have a special day."

"Oh okay."

Jess already knew the card meant nothing, but she twisted the knife because she was hurt. "If you mean that," Jess said, "If this is some very clever way of telling me..."

"Um," Kate said.

"Then it's the sweetest thing anyone's ever done for me."

"Jess..."

"You're about to try and cover up, aren't you?" Jess said, "Tell me some story about how it was the last card there was."

Kate didn't answer.

Jess dropped the card, watched land on the floor in front the passenger seat. "Thanks for the book," she said, but didn't bother unwrapping it.

After a minute Kate said, "Keep the card, I meant it."

Too late. Jess thought.

“Are you okay?” Kate said, “You seem...”

“You’re a bitch, Kate, you know that?”

“Jess...”

“I have to go,” Jess said, “They need me inside.”

She seemed to be developing a habit of hanging up on Kate. She did it again, before Kate could answer, went back inside and pretended everything was fine.

*

Kate tried to phone back a couple of times, but Jess ignored her. And again the next day, mid-morning, earlier than Jess expected her to call, so Jess answered without checking who it was. She probably would have picked up anyway. Kate said she was sorry, that she hadn’t meant to hurt Jess. Jess expected excuses and only half-listened, but Kate almost sounded sincere, said again she was really sorry, for the card and for not thinking about Jess’s birthday, and that she’d like to come over and make it up to Jess.

“Come over?” Jess said, and for a second thought of Keri and didn’t want it to happen. Only for a second, and then she felt guilty. “Yeah,” she said, “Okay, come whenever suits.”

“Next weekend?” Kate asked tentatively, “The one after?”

“Whichever’s best for you.”

“You choose.”

“Nah, you’re busier, you pick.”

Kate was quiet for a moment. “Do you actually want me to come?”

The problem of friends who knew you too well. “Course I do,” Jess said.

“You don’t sound like it.”

“I’m at work, I’m doing two things at once. There’s someone standing right here, listening.” Jess smiled at him apologetically.

“What, a customer?”

“Of course a customer, it’s a pub.”

“Yeah, okay. Shit.” Kate sounded irritated, then seemed to realise she was getting distracted. “Doesn’t matter. Say sorry to him. You’re sure you want me there?”

“Yeah, I will. And yeah I am.”

“I mean, I don’t have to if you’re doing anything...”

“Fuck, come or don’t come, it’s up to you. I want you to, okay.”

“Okay.” Kate considered. “Yeah, okay. So next weekend?”

“Yeah.” Which didn’t feel enthusiastic enough. “That’d be great.”

“Saturday?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll see you about lunchtime?”

“Great.” Jess said, and still felt like more was needed. “I do want to see you,” she said, “I miss you.” She said it, even though it wasn’t entirely true.

*

On the Friday night, the night before Kate was due, Keri and her friends came into the pub. Jess felt herself getting nervous when the first of them arrived, was edgy enough to be

forgetting orders by the time Keri turned up. Keri had her hair up and her necklaces on and was wearing a tee shirt over a long-sleeved top. The top had sleeves that were swirls of colour, like the tattoos beneath, but brighter. Jess liked it. She watched them for an hour – served other people, talked to anyone she knew, was pretty sure she didn't seem too distracted, but watched Keri out the corner of her eye. After an hour Sam leaned over and said into Jess's ear, "Looking at someone particular?"

Jess jumped guiltily.

She decided she had to talk to Keri. Just talk to her and be near her. She didn't quite know why. To say hi, she supposed, and because she was worrying about where this was going. She could have gone over to the group, but didn't want them all watching. Safer to ambush Keri on the way back from the toilets. She waited until Keri got up and followed her out, loitered in the hallway, around the corner from the bathroom door. It was still early, there weren't many people around. One of the locals went past and glanced at Jess. She smiled and tried to seem busy, started looking at the photos on the wall. She was nervous. Her legs felt weak, and her knees were trying to shake. She crouched down, leaned against the wall, and picked at the worn carpet with a fingernail.

The toilet door creaked open. She realised she had no idea what she wanted to say.

Keri came around the corner and stopped. "Hey."

Jess looked up. "Hey."

"Looking for me?"

Jess shrugged.

"You haven't done that before."

"Is that okay?"

"Very okay. Are you looking for me?"

"Yeah, I think I am."

Jess suddenly realised Keri might think she was here to make announcements, to deliver some news. "Nothing's changed," she said quickly, "Sorry if you thought..."

"Nah, that's okay."

"I just wanted to see you."

"Oh." Keri seemed pleased.

"And I wondered if maybe we should talk."

"Oh yeah?" Keri grinned. "Yeah, okay, we can talk. Nice weather we're having, isn't it? Rained today. Rained yesterday. Didn't rain the day before, mind."

"I meant about..."

"I know what about." Keri crouched down next to Jess. "Nice wall over there."

"So why keep taking the piss?"

Keri shrugged. "Why not."

"It's mean." Jess held out a packet. "Ciggie?"

"I don't."

"Thought you might want to start. Stress of being around me and all."

Keri laughed.

Jess stuck a cigarette in her mouth and looked for her lighter. "I have gum. If you care."

"Should I?"

"I don't know, should you?"

Keri smirked and looked sceptical, both at once.

“What?” Jess said. She was flirting, and from the look on Keri’s face, she was doing it well. She ought to feel guilty, but she actually felt quite proud.

“Ann’ll kill you if she catches you,” Keri said, looking at the cigarettes.

“She won’t catch me.”

“Heard that before.”

“She’s in the kitchen,” Jess said. “Stirring. She’ll be a while.”

“If you’re sure.”

“How long have I worked here? How many nights do I get pissed off standing outside with the raindrops and mosquitoes?”

“We could just go outside.”

“Nah, it’s too far.”

Keri looked at the door, ten meters away.

“Fire door,” Jess said, “Don’t want to set an alarm off.”

“There’s no alarm.”

“Can’t be sure, though, can we?”

“I’m sure.”

Jess grinned and sparked the lighter, breathed in deep, felt the little rush of happiness and confidence that went in with the smoke. She knew she smelt bad and a cough wasn’t sexy, but right now she needed to be the best Jess she could be, and this would help. “So,” she said. “Shall we talk?”

“If you like.”

Jess fanned her hand at the smoke to diffuse it. “It’s what people do, apparently. I thought it might help.”

“Help with what?”

“Things.” Jess flicked ash into the carpet and rubbed it in. Keri was smirking again. “You always have to make it like this,” Jess said, “Don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Keri said agreeably.

“Put me on the spot.”

“Yep.”

“Never give away a thing.”

“That too.”

“Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“That. Stop.”

Keri grinned. “Yeah, okay.”

A long silence. They were looking at each other, both leaning back onto the wall, very close. Closer than they’d been in a long time, possibly ever. Jess could count eyelashes, see a mole, see a tiny scar on the top of Keri’s ear where an earring hole had closed over. She studied Keri’s face, was glad to finally be able to. She wanted to memorise it. She wanted to lean closer. She wanted to stand up and run away. They were only arms length apart, and Jess wanted to close that gap so badly she didn’t dare move.

“So,” Keri said, “Tell me about these things.”

“I…” Jess said, and stopped. Too busy watching Keri’s lips move, watching her breathe. “Shit. I forget.”

Keri laughed. “So remember.”

Jess looked at her, said helplessly, "I really can't."

"I can try and guess, if you like."

"Please..."

"Were they the how long I wait things or..."

"Yeah," Jess said, suddenly a little breathless, "Maybe. Something like that."

"Or the getting it all squared away with other people so you can get in my pants things?"

"Oh shit," Jess said. "I'm sorry."

"So no?"

"I'm sorry. I start, and then I realise what I'm doing. I shouldn't..."

"I don't mind."

"I do. It's not fair to you."

"Told you already, I'll let you know when I can't cope."

"Told you already, I'm not going to treat you like that."

"So do something about it."

"I can't..."

Keri was far too close, was looking at Jess. Close enough Jess could feel breath on her cheek, close enough to kiss. Jess felt her shoulders sliding sideways along the wall. She couldn't breathe, had an ache in her lungs like some sort of panic attack. She held out her cigarette. Her hand was shaking. "Hey, ah, hold this a second."

Keri took it.

Jess stood up and walked backward through the bar door. Backwards, as though Keri were something dangerous to be carefully watched. Keri waved and smirked and let her go.

Jess went back behind the bar. Stood there, breathing deeply, and felt safer.

Keri came past a moment later. She stopped and leaned close. "A second?" she said, but didn't seem annoyed.

"You know why."

"Yeah, I know." She still seemed pleased Jess had said so. "Your ciggie's on the planter box outside. If you want it." She went back to her friends and they all glanced over at Jess. Glanced like Jess mattered. Jess's knees and hands started shaking again, and didn't stop until an hour later when Keri and her friends left.

*

Kate arrived the next afternoon, and even though Kate was right there, and even though she tried to stop herself, Jess kept thinking about Keri. Part of her didn't want Kate around at all, but she didn't want Kate to leave either.

She went down to surf, to get out the house, and saw Keri and her friends at the beach. That just made it worse. Keri saw her coming and waited on the side of the track, looking happy. Jess slowed, wound the window down, said, "She's here," and drove on. Keri stood in the middle of the track and watched Jess all the way down the beach.

Jess tried to avoid Kate all afternoon. She didn't know why. She cut firewood, had a bath, walked down to the shop instead of driving. Kate seemed to pick up on her mood, and for once was considerate, seemed to be trying to be nice. That made Jess feel guilty, and feeling guilty made her irritable, and eventually Kate stopped trying and they just sat and snapped at each other.

“I should just go,” Kate said, and Jess didn’t argue. The next morning, when she left, Jess was actually relieved.

Jess didn’t see Keri again for a week. Didn’t see her on purpose. She changed her surfing times, went later in the morning and earlier in the afternoon to avoid any overlap. Despite not seeing her, Keri was all she thought about. She had a crush. She was daydreaming, forgetting what she was supposed to be doing. Sam asked her once or twice if she was okay, after finding her standing blankly behind the bar when he’d asked her to do something.

One morning, while Jess was in the shower, someone knocked on the front door. She put on a towel and shouted, “Hello,” through the door.

“Jessika Baader?” A man’s voice asked.

Jess hesitated. In hindsight slightly too long, “Wrong house.”

“Jessika Baader?” The man asked again.

“Isn’t it a bit fucking early to be knocking on people’s doors?” Jess tried to see through the net curtains in the front windows without being seen herself.

“It’s after ten.”

“On the wrong people’s doors, then.” She could see someone out there, couldn’t see who. “I just got out the shower. Give me a minute to get dressed.”

She dressed. Then she made coffee and had breakfast and sat down to read a book. She wasn’t quite sure what she’d do if he was still there when she had to go to work, but she could decide that if she needed to. She suspected she had more time to waste than he did. He hung around for fifteen minutes, knocking occasionally, then got in his car and slammed the door and drove off. She waited another half hour, in case he was lurking down the track, but when she went outside and checked, he was gone.

She told Sam about the visit, about how she’d handled it. Partly because she was feeling clever and wanted to boast, partly in case the guy turned up at the pub so Sam knew what was going on. Sam let her tell her story, laughed in the right place, then asked if she needed an advance on her wages.

“Nah,” Jess said, “It’s fine.”

“You’re sure? These guys tend not to go away. They’ll just keep pestering you forever.”

“And I’ll keep foot-dragging forever. They can take me to court and get an order for ten dollars a week if they want to.”

“If that doesn’t bother you.”

“They started it.”

“The rude letter?”

“Yep.”

He shook his head. “Let me know if I can help, okay?”

Jess was grateful. Options were good. “Yeah, okay.”

*

Jess hoped that was the last of the debt collector. She knew it was unlikely, but she hoped anyway, until the day she came home from her morning surf and found a car outside the bach. A newish car, shiny and clean, with someone sitting in it. She kept driving, was proud of her quick thinking, went up to the top of the track, waited a couple of minutes like

she was dropping something off, then drove back down. As she passed the car, the guy inside glanced up, and she was pretty sure it was the man who'd come into the pub. She hoped he hadn't recognised her. It was getting a bit out of hand. She ought to pay the bill. She ought to stop picking fights she couldn't win. She should fix this, but she had a feeling it had become about pride, and she wasn't going to.

She went back to the pub and said actually she'd work after all, if Sam didn't mind.

"Oh yeah," he said, "Something wrong at home?"

"Just the usual, undesirable people on my doorstep."

"Should do something about it, Jess."

"Will do eventually, Sam."

"Good."

"I can't believe the effort they're putting into it," Jess said, "Just for a few hundred dollars."

"Got to make an example, I suppose," Sam said, "Although it probably doesn't help you keep swearing at them. Makes it personal."

"Suppose," Jess said, and went into the kitchen to empty the dishwasher.

Sam followed her, fiddled with a tea-towel, cleared his throat.

"Just say it," Jess told him. "I should pay?"

"Nah, not that."

She stopped, looked at him. "I'm listening."

"You could do a lot worse than young Keri."

She turned around and leaned on the bench. "That was, ah, unexpected."

"I know."

"And not really your business."

"Know that too."

Jess wanted to be clever, but nothing came to mind. So she decided just to be honest. "I know I could do worse. I've known that for months."

"Well then," Sam said.

"That's the problem though, isn't it?" Jess said.

"Why's that?"

"I don't cheat, Sam. I did once and everyone got hurt, me included."

"I didn't say cheat..."

"Except that you pretty much did. Thinking the new person is better for you than the old one, that's how it gets started."

He nodded slowly. "So you just ignore it?"

"Until it becomes unbearable, yeah, you ignore it. You have to." Awful for the new person, but just how it was.

"You're a tough girl, Jess, you know that?"

"Thanks."

"Cut yourself some slack, though." He started to leave.

"I will." Jess smiled grimly, "But Sam..."

He stopped.

"It's not unbearable yet. So back off a little, okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

She went back out into the bar with the full dishwasher tray. "Let's talk about something

else.”

*

Two afternoons later, while Jess was sitting in the bath soaking a surfing bruise and wondering how close it was to being time to go to work, she heard a car drive up the track. She stopped splashing and started listening, had a horrible suspicion as to who it might be. A car door slammed. The porch’s screen door creaked open. She’d been having baths naked because she couldn’t wash properly in a bikini, and because the neighbours would have to try fairly hard to see. She had a towel and clothes outside with her, next to the bath, but had nothing on right then. She wondered if she should grab the clothes and run for it. She’d probably get away, only needed to reach the bush down the hillside. She considered it, but stayed where she was. Other than not liking streaking, and not wanting to run away from her own house, the front door was unlocked and she didn’t really trust this particular visitor, if it was who she thought it was.

There was another knock from round the front. She slid down in the bath, hoped to keep her head low enough to be out of sight, but had a nasty feeling she’d be noticed. The bath was obvious, sitting on its own in the middle of the lawn, and smoke was coming out the chimney above her head.

The screen door clattered again and footsteps crunched on gravel. Someone shouted, “Hello?”

Jess was pretty sure she recognised the voice.

She slid lower, water up to her nose. She should have run after all. She tried to think of a plan, some way to handle this, but nothing came to mind. She wished her grandfather had built a back door.

The debt collector walked around the side of the house.

“Is anyone there?” he called, apparently hadn’t seen her. Not yet.

Jess considered silence, just for a second. Considered staying quiet and letting him poke around, but he was bound to see the bath and come over for a look.

“Fuck off, mate,” she shouted, “I’m in the bath.”

He stopped, looked around, started walking towards her.

Jess sat up, thought better of it, and slid down again. She checked she had plenty of bubbles and folded her arms over her chest. “What didn’t you understand about fuck off, asshole?”

“Are you Jessika Baader?”

“Fuck off.”

“I just need to give you something. A letter.” He was holding an envelope in one hand, a clipboard in the other.

“I’m in the bath, dickhead.”

He was ten meters away, close enough to see that was true. He started to seem a bit unsure.

“You’re trespassing.”

“I just need to deliver...”

“So fuck off round the front and wait for me.”

“Like last time?” Saying that seemed to give him courage, got him moving towards her

again.

“If you’re not gone in a couple of seconds I’m calling the police, mate.” No way for him to know she didn’t have a phone out here, and no way to know – even if he’d checked his own – that she didn’t have a signal. The coast was funny like that, quite often one company worked and another didn’t. “I can look at your letter,” Jess said, “But what am I going to do with it right now?”

“Yeah, okay,” he said, “I’ll wait a few minutes.”

“In your car. I don’t want you on the property.”

He looked at her suspiciously, but seemed to decide she was harmless. He went back around the side of the house.

Jess waited a minute in case he changed his mind, then let the water out and – with some wriggling around – got a towel around her waist and a jersey on. She wondered what to do. She crept up to the bach, tried to peer in the back windows and out the front ones and see what he was doing, but she couldn’t make out much. The windows didn’t line up and the net curtains were in the way. She hesitated, nervous, then followed him around the front. He saw her and got out of his car, but she ran and was inside before he reached her. She snibbed the door, got her keys from the table, deadlocked it.

“Hey,” he shouted, banging on a window.

“I’m getting dressed.”

He waited five minutes and knocked again. By then Jess was dressed and hovering behind the door, wondering what to do next.

“Wrong house, mate,” she shouted.

“You have to come out sometime.”

“You’d think, wouldn’t you?”

She could hear him moving around, heard creaking on the wooden deck and gravel crunching underfoot. She moved with him, watching from behind net curtains and staying back from the windows. He hovered near the front of the bach, on the porch, but kept looking down the sides. She watched for a few minutes, and decided he must be wondering if there was a back door. Wondering, but not wanting to go and check in case she ran out the front.

That gave her an idea.

She went into the spare bedroom, to the window beside the bed at the back of the bach. She opened it very slowly, so the wood didn’t squeak, and lifted out the insect screen. Then crept back to the front door. He was on the porch again, face against a window, trying to look in. She eased her keys out the door as quietly as she could, but must have made some sound because he started knocking again. She went back into the bedroom, trying to give the impression she was just hanging out ignoring him, nothing suspicious happening. She gave him the finger – just in case he could see – and closed the door. Then sat on the edge of the bed and made herself stay still for five minutes, doing nothing, timed it by counting seconds. That was long enough for him to settle down. She put on shoes, made sure she had her keys, and climbed up onto the windowsill. Peered out, listened and heard nothing. He must still be around the front. She turned around, onto her tummy, and lowered herself to the ground. She was nervous now, felt less safe than she had inside the house, but took the time to slide the window shut because she didn’t want him climbing in after she was gone.

She listened again. His feet were scuffing the gravel around the front. He was probably

standing next to the cars.

There were two things she could do. Cut down through the bush to the road and walk into town, or distract him and get to her car. Getting to her car would be harder, but she liked that idea better, even if it annoyed him so much he never went away. He'd seen her in the bath and she wanted to irritate him back.

She found a half-brick in the grass, left over from her bath-building pile, and threw it down the hillside as hard as she could. It crashed off a tree trunk and rattled on branches and sounded a bit like someone scrambling around down in the bush. She heard running around the front, and went the other way, keeping the bush between them. On grass, her footsteps didn't make much noise. She reached the front corner, beside the porch, and stopped. Peered through the verandah screens, half-hidden. He was moving along the edge of the parking area, his back towards her, looking down into the bush. He'd moved a little way towards where the brick had landed, but was still closer to the cars than she'd have liked.

She tried to remember whether she'd locked her car. A few seconds fumbling with keys might make all the difference. She wasn't sure, sometimes did, sometimes not. Probably not, she decided, not during the day when she'd only planned to be inside for an hour. She got her keys out, got ready to run. She wondered if he was allowed to grab her, whether she was about to get rugby tackled.

She ran.

Her feet scrunched on the gravel, but he seemed to take a few seconds to realise what the sound meant. She covered several metres. Then he looked, shouted, "Hey," and was running too.

Jess's car was parked with the driver's door facing towards her, and between them. To reach her, he'd have to go right around her car. She ran, ignored him, concentrated on not tripping. She could see as she approached that the driver's door was unlocked. She grabbed the handle and tugged, tugged so hard her hand slipped and she almost lost her balance. He was coming around the front of the car towards her. She got a finger on the handle again and pulled, got the door open just in time. Jumped in, slammed it shut, and banged the locking button down. She glanced around. The other doors were all locked. The back door locked itself. She was safe, and was so relieved she just sat there and laughed.

After a moment, still laughing, she gave him the finger.

That didn't seem to make him happy. He scowled and folded his arms. Other than that he didn't do much, just stood there. No pulling on doors or banging windows. There must be rules, she decided. Problem was, she didn't know what they were. She wanted a cigarette, reached into her pocket, and realised she'd left them inside. The only flaw in a perfect plan. She hunted around, looked in the glovebox for forgotten packets, checked the ashtray for smokable ends, but had no luck. She sat there sourly for a moment and decided that asking the debt collector probably wasn't the best idea.

He was standing next to the driver's window, watching her. He tapped on the glass, held up his envelope and took out a few sheets of paper. "It's just a notice of proceedings," he said, talking too loud like she wasn't six inches away. "I just have to serve it on you."

He was looking pleased with himself, like there was something she hadn't realised. She considered that smugness for a minute, and wondered if sticking his papers on the car might count. He seemed too happy otherwise. She smiled and nodded, tried to look reassuring,

then pushed the keys into the ignition and started the engine.

He ran around to the front of her car, waving his hands.

She put the car in reverse and looked back. His car was right behind her, blocking her in.

He was looking smug again.

“I’ll fucking run you over,” Jess shouted. She put the car in first gear.

“You’d be arrested.”

“I’ll run you over slowly. So it’s not my fault if you don’t move.”

She tapped the accelerator and the car moved forward slightly. An inch. He stared through the windscreen, seemed unsure. She revved the engine and he took a step back. She rolled forward and he took another.

“Get out my fucking way,” Jess shouted.

“I’m warning you,” he shouted back.

Jess accelerated. He thought about it for a second, then jumped to the side. She turned the steering wheel as far as she could the other way, to be sure she didn’t hit him, and drove away. In the mirror, she saw him run for his car, jump in, and follow.

It was quite exciting. She’d never been in a car chase before.

He couldn’t pass her on the track, so she took it pretty slowly. Didn’t want to hit any kids even if she was on the lam. She was unlucky at the stop sign at the bottom of the hill. Traffic was coming from both directions – a campervan just starting to cross the bridge, and a ute the other way, down the far end of the straight. She waited, being safe. Glanced in the mirror again. He’d opened his car door and was fumbling with his seat belt, must have put it on automatically when he got in. She looked each way again. Both vehicles were moving slowly. The gap wasn’t enough for her turn out onto the main road, but she could probably dash straight across and onto the beach track. She put her foot down, almost stalled, clashed the gears, and shot across in front of the campervan. It flashed its lights and might have beeped, but she was across and too pleased to care. The debt collector got back in his car.

She got a short distance ahead while he waited for traffic, but not enough to hide or get away. Not on a dead-end track to an open beach. She started thinking this might not have been the best idea, but kept driving anyway, hoping something would turn up. She tried to think of a plan, wondered about swinging around in the turning bay before he realised what she was doing, or driving into the scrub hard enough to bash her way through and hide the car, but neither seemed realistic. She had a nasty feeling this wouldn’t end well.

And then her something turned up.

On the side of the track, at their usual bend, Keri and her friends were standing next to their cars, getting ready to go out on the water. They were getting into wetsuits and waxing boards, but stopped and looked up when they heard the car coming. Jess drove up, drove fast, didn’t slow to avoid flicking stones around, didn’t brake until the last minute. She stopped in the middle of the track with a bit of a skid and jumped out.

Keri smiled her fuck-me smile and started doing her hey thing.

“Hey,” Jess said, and ducked behind Keri’s car. It was about all she had time for – she could hear another car close behind her.

“You’re blocking the road,” Keri said.

“Yeah,” Jess said, “He won’t mind.” She checked angles, made sure she had a person and a car between her and the debt collector, and worked out which way to run if she needed to.

“Why’s that?” Keri asked.

“Um,” Jess said.

The debt collector stopped his car and got out. He looked them all over. Keri glanced towards Jess and seemed about to ask a question. The debt collector got his envelope and clipboard and walked towards Jess. Jess took a few steps back. If he wanted to play tag she’d be up for that. He seemed to realise and stopped. “Jessika Baader?”

“Never heard of her,” Jess said.

“Jessika Baader,” he said, “I have a notice of proceedings I have to serve on you.”

“Got to catch me first,” Jess said, and edged back a little further.

“I thought you weren’t her?”

“I’m not,” Jess said. The debt collector took a couple of steps towards her, so she went the other way, drifting back towards Keri.

“Let me see that,” Keri said suddenly, stepping forward, holding out her hand.

“Who are you?” the debt collector asked.

“I’m her lawyer.”

“Are you?” Jess said, surprised.

“Is she?” the debt collector asked Jess. Then added quickly, to Keri, looking pleased with himself, “Whose lawyer? This person’s or Jessika Baader’s?”

“Both,” Keri said, “I’m the only lawyer around here.”

Jess was impressed, wanted to laugh at the debt collector. “Are you really,” she whispered to Keri, “A lawyer?”

“Shh,” Keri said, “You’ll spoil the effect.”

“But you’re a lawyer?”

“Yeah,” Keri went over and took the debt collector’s envelope, took out the papers, flicked through them, came back to Jess.

“You know what this is about?”

“Am I still pretending I’m not me?” Jess whispered.

“Probably best stop,” Keri grinned her fuck-me grin again, “Not really a workable long-term strategy.”

“Um, yeah, then I know what it’s about.”

“Can you pay it?”

“I probably can, I just don’t want to.”

“You’re disputing it?”

“Um, I’m disputing the way they’re asking for it.” Jess couldn’t help herself, added, “You’re hot when you’re all lawyery.”

“So I’ve been told.”

Oddly, Jess felt a pang of jealousy, “Yeah, who by?”

Keri smirked, “Men. So I didn’t care.”

“Ah,” Jess said, stepped a little bit closer, “Right.”

“Hey,” the debt collector called, “What are we doing here?”

“We can do that later,” Keri said, “Do you want to get rid of him, or try and sort this out?”

“Can’t really avoid him forever, can I?”

“Probably not.”

“And he’s getting to be a bit of a nuisance.”

“Has he turned up before?”

“It seems like every time I get undressed. I suppose I could be nice, but he’s annoying me, so I might as well be difficult,” Jess grinned, “Even if it’s not a workable long-term strategy.”

“Stay here.” Keri went over to the debt collector and handed the papers back. “You’ve got the wrong person.”

“Can she prove that?” the debt collector said, and looked Keri up and down. Jess noticed Keri tense slightly during the down.

“She doesn’t have to prove that,” Keri said, “Stop harassing her.”

Keri took a step forward, got close. The debt collector stayed where he was and tried to stare her down. Keri glanced back, and her two friends stopped their loitering and wandered over. All very casually, but still forming a line between him and Jess. Keri took another step, her friends followed, and this time the debt collector took one back. She took another, and now all four of them were moving together towards his car. Jess felt safe enough to go and sit on Keri’s car and watch.

“I’m just serving papers,” the debt collector said, “You shouldn’t be threatening me.”

“No-one’s threatening you.”

“I feel threatened,” the debt collector said.

“Can’t really see how that’s my problem.”

“I’ll call the police.”

“Keep harassing my client and I’ll call him myself.”

“Him?”

“Yeah, him. There’s only one around here. You want to think about what happens if we call the local cop, city boy?”

The debt collector seemed surprised. “I’m from Greymouth.”

Keri laughed, almost nastily, “Like I said, city boy.”

“You can’t interfere in me serving papers,” the debt collector said. “That’s against the law.”

“I’m not interfering.”

The debt collector looked like he disagreed.

“I’m not,” Keri said, “This isn’t her.”

“Yeah right.”

“You’re scaring her,” Keri said.

“I just went to her house and she ran away.”

“Because she was scared. This isn’t the place. Use a phone.” Keri half-turned, said to Jess, “Has he been bothering you at work?”

“He tried.”

“Okay,” Keri turned back to the debt collector, “Her employer disapproves of you approaching her there, you understand? Her workplace is off limits.”

“Whose workplace, Jessika Baader’s or this woman’s?”

Keri didn’t answer, just stood there staring until he got back in his car. He did an awkward seven-point turn – seemed concerned about getting bogged in the gravel beside the track – stared at Jess for a moment, and drove off.

Keri came back to Jess, “You okay?”

Jess nodded, said softly, “You saved me.” She was surprised, couldn’t quite believe it.

“Thank you.”

Keri grinned. “No worries, it was fun.”

Jess started shaking.

“Hey,” Keri said, “You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure? Hey, don’t worry, I don’t think he was going to...”

Jess shook her head. “It’s not him. It’s being around you.”

Keri looked surprised. “Really?”

Jess nodded, felt embarrassed.

Keri went over to her friends, brought Jess back cigarettes and a lighter.

“Thank you,” Jess said, raised her voice and called, “Thank you,” to the friends as well. They waved and went back to their wetsuits and boards. “Quiet, aren’t they?” Jess whispered.

Keri grinned. “You sure you’re all right?” She half-reached towards Jess.

Jess slid off the car, took a step away.

“Right,” Keri said, lowering her hand, “Yeah, sorry.”

“Assuming you still want me. My sordid life laid bare and all.”

Keri pointed up the track, “Him, you mean?”

“Sure. If you’re a lawyer you might not want to be friends with a debt-ridden crim like me.”

“Friends?” Keri said, “I don’t want to be friends.”

Jess looked at her. I want you too, she wanted to say. I want not to be friends so badly it hurts. She lit a cigarette, tucked the lighter back in the packet and sat there holding it, wondering what to do with it now.

“You should move your car,” Keri said, “You’re right in the middle of the track.”

“Yeah,” Jess said, “I’ll do it in a minute.”

Keri nodded slowly. She seemed to be thinking about something else.

“Lawyer, hey?” Jess said, “Wouldn’t have guessed that.”

Keri shrugged like she’d heard it before. “Constitutional law. Not so much a useful lawyer.”

“You were pretty useful just now.”

“Not usefully employable. Not the kind of lawyer you’re thinking of.”

“Ah,” Jess said. She noticed she was staring again, thought she should probably stop. She put the cigarettes down on Keri’s car.

“You’ll be okay?” Keri asked. “With all this? He’ll probably be back.”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

Keri nodded. “Hey,” she said, “If this is a power bill you might want to try not paying any collection costs. Say they didn’t send you the terms and conditions when you signed up.”

“They might not have...”

“They did. But say you didn’t get them.”

“Okay,” Jess said.

“You only have to pay costs if you agreed to beforehand. Doesn’t count if they didn’t tell you until they were already sending you threatening letters. Might be worth trying.”

“I’ll do that.” She dropped the cigarette end, trod it out, looked back to Keri. “Thanks.”

For the help. And advice.” She glanced down. “For that too.”

Some more staring. Keri’s friends were banging car doors to get her attention, but she seemed to be ignoring them.

“Hey,” Keri said, and reached toward Jess’s neck. This time Jess didn’t flinch, and this time Keri remembered on her own and her hand stopped a couple of inches short. “Your necklace,” Keri said.

Jess raised her hand, touched her neck.

“It isn’t there,” Keri said.

“Shit.”

“You know where you last saw it?”

Jess thought she’d probably snagged it climbing out the window. “Yeah, I think so.”

“You’ll find it,” Keri said.

“Hope so.” Jess realised something else. “You noticed.”

Keri smiled. “Course I did.”

More smiling. Jess hoped she didn’t look too inane. “I’d better be going to work,” Jess said.

“We’ll come up in a bit, make sure you’re okay. I will if they don’t.”

Jess nodded, wondered if she should say something else, but saying thanks again seemed too little. In the end she just went over to her car.

“Hey Jess,” Keri called as she was getting in, “Don’t run away from people. It looks suspicious, makes them chase you.”

Jess looked at her a moment, saw she was grinning. “Yeah,” she said, “Thanks, I’ll remember that.”

Jess turned around, did a U turn and didn’t worry about the shingle, and drove back up the track. Keri watched her go.

*

Jess went straight to the pub. She didn’t want to go home in case the debt collector was waiting for her there. She felt tense. She wasn’t sure if it was being chased, or seeing Keri, but something had got to her. Maybe it was both. She parked outside the pub and sat in the car and just breathed slowly in and out. Sam would make a fuss if she looked upset. After a while, when her hands stopped shaking, she went inside.

Keri turned up after a couple of hours. Jess gave her a drink, and she sat at the bar.

“Just you?”

“Yeah, just checking up, you know.”

“I didn’t know if you’d come.”

“I said I would.”

She was giving Jess quite an intense look. “Yeah,” Jess said, “I see.”

“Anything I tell you I’ll do, I will,” Keri said.

Jess nodded slowly. “So only me, or does that go for anyone?”

“Anyone,” Keri shrugged slightly. “Anyone I like.”

“So what, always keep your promises, always speak the truth, something like that?”

“Yeah,” Keri said, “Something like that.”

“What are you, a girl guide?”

Keri smirked.

“You sure you’re a lawyer?”

A long stare. “If I didn’t like you so much, that would piss me off.”

And Jess felt just a little guilty. “Sorry.”

Keri picked up her beer, slid off the stool, and wandered over to the jukebox. She hung around over there for a while, even though she must have seen everything inside it a hundred times. A pro at exits, Jess thought, leaving on a high note and not staying around when she had nothing else to say. Jess was impressed, wished that even once she’d been half that good. She served customers, and between customers she watched Keri, and she had a suspicion Keri knew she was watching and was pretending not to notice.

Keri came back to the bar, drink half-finished, and said, “Hey, another thing. Your guy. He can only hassle you during the daytime. I can’t remember the hours, but if you stay here until closing you should be all right.”

“Okay,” Jess said, “Thanks.”

“No worries,” Keri said, then looked past Jess. “Hi Sam.”

“Who can’t hassle you?” Sam asked.

“No-one,” Jess said, and stared at Keri. “And stop creeping up behind people.”

“Yeah,” Keri said, “No-one. We made it up. I forget.”

“I know your family,” Sam told Keri, “And you’re not a very good liar.”

“So go tell on me,” Keri said.

Sam grinned and wandered off.

“Thanks,” Jess said, and Keri smiled and went over the pool tables.

“Want a game?” Jess called, but Keri shook her head, seemed to just be looking. She sat down at a table with a couple of the local guys.

Jess watched while she worked. Keri had rescued her, she kept thinking, at least for now. Kate didn’t seem interested any more, and Keri wanted her and was going to great lengths to make that clear. Keri was everything Kate was failing to be, right down to surfing and truth-telling. Sam hovered, kept smirking, kept asking Jess if she was okay because she seemed distracted, and each time Jess hissed, “Stop it.” Ann came out from the kitchen once and patted Jess’s arm, and Jess muttered, “Stop it,” at her too. Ann just grinned.

Keri drank slowly and talked a lot. She seemed chatty with other people, only fuck-me cool with Jess. Eventually she finished her glass and stood up. She looked over at the bar, and there was something in that look that made Jess just a little breathless. It seemed like she might come over, but Jess waved her away. Apparently she understood. She left without another word.

When she got home, Jess searched around for the missing necklace. She didn’t find it, but didn’t really expect to, looking by torchlight. It wasn’t in the grass under the window, and wasn’t on the floor inside, but if it had snagged before falling it might have ended up anywhere. She gave up fairly quickly. Having a necklace was what was important, not having that particular one. She’d have more luck finding it in daylight.

Chapter Twenty-One

The next morning it was raining heavily, and seemed to have been raining all night. The ground was sodden, and the water tanks overflowing. Jess abandoned the idea of a necklace hunt as soon as she looked outside. She couldn't be bothered poking around in wet grass, and in weather like this the river would already be in flood, so she wouldn't be surfing for a day or two. She went to work early for something to do, mucked around, and still ran out of jobs by mid-morning. The weather made it quiet – tourists didn't stop in bad weather – and most of the locals were only around in the evenings. Sam gave up on the day and drove up to Greymouth to run errands, and Ann spent most of her time out the back, in their flat, doing housework. Since no-one seemed to want to be eating, Jess scraped the grills down and scrubbed the ovens and fat traps. She phoned Baz at lunchtime – the only one of her friends likely to be awake and not at work right then – and stayed on the phone with him for an hour. She told him about her car chase and the debt collector, and he didn't seem concerned, so she hadn't thought too much about who else he might tell until Kate rang that evening. Kate was furious, snapped, as soon as Jess answered, "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Ah," Jess said, "Serving beer."

"What the fuck, Jess? You could go to prison."

"For serving beer?"

Not wise. Really not wise. "Fuck you," Kate said, and hung up.

Jess waited. Kate wouldn't let a hanging-up stand when she had the high moral ground. She'd wait a few minutes – long enough for Jess to repent – then phone back. Jess watched the clock. It was three and a half minutes until her phone rang.

"Hey," Jess said.

"You tried to run someone over?"

"I didn't try."

"Run someone over?"

"I didn't try to run him over. I just told him I would if he didn't get out of my way. That's completely different."

"Oh," Kate said, all fake calm, "Yeah, well, that's all right then."

A customer turned up in front of Jess, saw she was on the phone and mimed getting change, pointing to the pool tables. She took a twenty, gave him ten of coins and a note.

"Hey Jess," Kate said. "Why the fuck do you have debt collectors after you?"

"Forgot to pay a power bill, then got pissed off by their letters."

"So you thought you'd just avoid them?"

"Sure, until they ask politely."

"They don't have to ask politely, you owe them money."

"Yeah, they keep telling me."

"Fuck Jess, this needs sorting out."

"It's fine."

But Kate wasn't listening. "I'm coming over. This needs sorting out."

"Really, I'm fine."

"I'm coming anyway. Tomorrow." She hung up.

Jess looked at the phone and wondered when Kate had started being the one who got to hang up first.

*

The rain stopped overnight and the river eased by morning, but Jess couldn't surf because she didn't have a necklace. She looked around outside, but couldn't find the one she'd lost. She thought about going up to Hokitika or Greymouth to get a replacement, but couldn't because she was waiting for Kate. Not surfing made her edgy. She was anticipating a fight when Kate arrived, and needed to surf more than usual to calm herself down. She hung around the house and worried. Kate arrived earlier than she'd expected, just before lunch, said she hadn't been able to sleep and had left at three in the morning and driven all night. Jess kissed her, said thanks for coming, and made her coffee. Kate was calm at first – calmer than Jess had expected – but it was only temporary. She asked Jess what was going on and listened to the answer, but while she listened she started getting all angry and disbelieving, so she wasn't really listening at all, just waiting her turn and planning what to shout. She must have been fuming all the way over. Jess couldn't remember when she'd last seen Kate this angry, and thought she'd better save herself the aggravation and behave.

Kate asked for the letters. Jess gave her what she had and said, "A couple might have got thrown away."

Kate sighed.

"I've got a lawyer helping me," Jess said.

"A real lawyer?"

"What do you mean by real?"

"With a law degree."

"Shit Kate, it isn't that bad around here."

"Yeah, sorry. Where's the lawyer from?"

"She's local."

Kate didn't seem as happy about that. Not much would make her happy for a while, Jess suspected, not until she'd got her bad mood out there for them both to see. Kate started lecturing Jess while Jess made coffee, saying Jess was an idiot, was just being difficult for the sake of it, had no idea of the trouble she'd cause herself. Jess knew that arguing wouldn't help, that it would just make Kate worse, but she argued anyway. "I'm being difficult," she said, "But they don't have to be so fucking rude."

"Jess," Kate said, "You owe them money."

"But rude, Kate."

"Money, Jess."

"Rude, Katie."

"Fucking money, Jess, you stupid cow."

"Yeah," Jess said, "Suppose," and after a while she just kept quiet. Kate wanted to help, and that was good, and if Kate calmed down a bit by feeling superior then that was fine too. Jess wasn't sure why Kate was so angry when it didn't involve her, but she was definitely angry.

"You don't need to do this," Jess said. "It's really okay."

“Yeah, I do Jess, because you won’t.”

“All the same, you don’t need to be involved with my problems.”

“Yeah, I do Jess, because you’re my friend, and I know how this will end up if I don’t.”

“But...”

“Shut the fuck up and let me read Jess.”

Jess shrugged, left her with the letters, and went out onto the porch for a cigarette. The rain had stopped, but the sky hadn’t cleared. There wouldn’t be a fine day after the rain this time, she thought, just a quick break between storms. The air felt tense, like something was building up, mostly unnoticed. It fit her mood.

“I need the phone,” Kate called.

They went down to the pub, spread themselves out at a table in the bar. Kate was good at talking to people like debt collectors because she did it all day. She phoned the collection agency and explained that Jess could pay but was being difficult because she thought their letters were rude. The collection agency said Jess owed them money and wanted it paid. Kate agreed that yes Jess did and would, but that Jess felt the letters needn’t have been so rude and would like an apology. The collection agency said Jess owed them money and wanted it paid. Kate asked to speak with someone else. Someone else said Jess owed them money and wanted it paid. There seemed to be an impasse. Kate and the person on the phone talked at each other for a while without apparently paying any attention to what the other said. Jess sprawled in a chair and half-listened. Eventually the call centre person gave up and found a supervisor who – to Kate’s obvious surprise – agreed that the letters were sometimes a bit blunt. Kate asked if the supervisor would apologise, and apparently the supervisor would, because Kate handed the phone over to Jess. The supervisor said she was sorry the letters were a bit blunt, that she could see how Jess had been upset, and Jess said that was fine.

“That was easy,” Kate said, taking the phone back. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah,” Jess said, also surprised.

“Thank you,” Kate said to the supervisor, “I think that’s all sorted out now. Yeah, she’s going to write a cheque right now...”

Jess waved her hands to get Kate’s attention, whispered, “I don’t have a cheque book.”

“Shit. Okay... Can you take a credit card?” Kate stopped. “If it’s mine, does this somehow end up on my credit report, I mean, will my bank see I’ve paid you and wonder why... okay, yeah, if you can do that. You’re sure?” Kate talked for a while about how much she didn’t want this to harm her own credit rating, and the supervisor seemed to be agreeing. “Okay,” Kate said, “That sounds all right. So I’m going to put this on my card,” Kate was looking at Jess as she spoke, “And she’s going to get me cash right now, from her boss, so we’re all square. Then you’re paid and I’m paid and this all goes away.”

Jess shrugged and went to find Sam. Kate started reading her credit card number into the phone.

Jess remembered the collection costs and dashed back. “Hey,” she whispered, and prodded Kate’s arm to get her attention.

“Hold on,” Kate said to the phone.

“I just remembered. I don’t have to pay the collection costs because I wasn’t told when I signed up that I’d have to.”

Kate looked at Jess for a moment like Jess was mad, like Jess was just being difficult for

the sake of it and she wanted to side with the people on the phone. Then she passed on what Jess had said, and listened for a moment. "They say no."

"They can't say no. It's the law."

"Well, they say no."

"Tell them a lawyer told me that's the law, and that I wasn't sent a copy of the terms and conditions when I signed up for the electricity."

"They say they warned you when they sent the first letter."

"That doesn't count. That's what I was told. I have to be told when I first sign up with the power company."

"A real lawyer?" Kate asked. "Not just someone you know."

"Yeah," Jess said, "A real lawyer, with a law degree and everything. I assume."

Kate said to the phone, "She's had legal advice, apparently she's been told she shouldn't pay the collection costs." She listened for a moment, then said, quite sharply, "No, I'm not going back on the agreement, I'm just telling you what I'm being told. I'm nothing to do with this... Look, if you're going to be like that... No, that's fine. All I'm saying is my friend's been told by a lawyer that she shouldn't have to pay any collection costs, and she doesn't want to. That doesn't seem unreasonable to me." She stopped and looked over at Jess. "I'm on hold. Apparently it does sound unreasonable to her, but she's going to talk to her supervisor."

"I thought she was the supervisor."

"Yeah, but the boss has a boss. Now we're going to talk to her."

They waited. Kate tapped a finger on the table and looked around the pub. She was in work mode.

"Yeah," she said after a few minutes, "I'm here." She listened again, then, "She'll pay you right now if you waive the collection costs, and from what I hear you've been having problems even getting hold of her. Yes, I know you'll find her in the end and she'll go to court, I'm just saying it might be better for everyone to take the money now and get this sorted out. Yeah, I'll wait." She must have been on hold because she added, "Assholes, take the money while it's offered. Not hard, people." After several more minutes she said, "Hi," and listened some more. Then, "Okay, that's fine. One second." She looked up at Jess, "No collection costs and you pay right now. Is that okay?"

Jess nodded.

"Okay, yeah that's fine, we're good. Yeah, she's happy with that. Yes, charge my card. And can you send me a receipt or something. Something that says this was someone else's debt, not mine, okay?"

Kate started saying thanks and goodbye kinds of things, so Jess went and found Sam out the back. "Ah, hey, you know that advance..."

"The one you didn't want?"

"Yeah, that one. Um..."

Sam stood there waiting. Waiting in a very expectant manner, like he'd won something.

"Shit," Jess said, "Do you have to?"

"Have to what?" he asked, then relented. "How much do you need?"

She told him and he went out the front, to the till. Jess followed, said, "Thank you," and realised she'd been saying it a lot lately.

"Oh hey," Sam said quietly, "While you're alone, young Keri left this for you."

“Why while I’m alone?”

Sam grinned, and even though she didn’t mean to, Jess glanced over at Kate, checked she was out of earshot across the room. She was pretty sure Sam caught the glance, but he kept his face expressionless. He handed her an envelope.

It was flat, with a lump inside. The flap wasn’t sealed, just folded in. Jess opened it, tipped the contents onto her hand. A shark’s tooth necklace on a leather string.

Sam was watching. “That means something?”

“Yeah,” Jess said, looking at it. “Yeah it does. Thanks.”

She hugged him quickly.

“What’s that for?”

“The advance, what else?”

Jess went over to Kate, who glanced up. “What’s that?”

The friends thing again. Jess had hundreds of dollars in one hand, and for whatever reason – how she walked, or stood, or just from knowing her – Kate noticed the other.

“Nothing. Just something someone left for me.”

She handed Kate the wad of cash – notes and coins so they were exactly square. Kate counted it. Jess hadn’t, but Kate did. Fuck you too, Jess thought, surprised at how much that annoyed her. She watched Kate count, and put on Keri’s necklace. “I’m going to make some lunch,” she said. “What do you want?”

Kate shrugged, seemed to be counting a second time. “Whatever.”

*

Jess made toasted sandwiches, cheese and tomato, made Sam some too because he was hovering and she hoped if she fed him he wouldn’t tease her. He seemed to be hanging around to be nosy, seemed faintly hostile to Kate. On Keri’s behalf, Jess assumed, but couldn’t make it real by asking. She kept giving him stares – when Kate wasn’t looking – to try and tell him to stop, but he pretended not to notice. It was turning into a weird morning. Sam getting strange at her in the kitchen, and Kate looking at her oddly when she was out in the bar, looks she couldn’t quite interpret. Kate kept talking about credit ratings, acting like the debt was the end of the world, kept it up, going around and around, until Jess got annoyed. They started to fight in whispers, both trying to keep it down so no-one noticed.

“Can we go?” Kate asked finally.

“I’m supposed to be working.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Just as Jess started to get really angry, Kate added, “Please, Jess,” in a desperate kind of way.

“I’m heading home,” Jess called, “I might not be back this evening, is that okay?”

“Fine,” Sam shouted from out the back, “See you.”

They left the pub and started fighting properly. Raised voices in the carpark, shouting in the car, shouting loudest of all once they were back at the bach. Kate slammed doors and swore, and then, because they’d never been good at fixing quarrels, they had sex. Jess lay there afterwards and looked at the ceiling and wondered why she’d never realised before that they didn’t know how to end an argument.

“This is a mess, isn’t it?” Kate said quietly.

“Nah,” Jess said, choosing to misunderstand, “You fixed everything. It’s all good now.”

“I meant us,” Kate said. Jess rolled over and looked at her. “What would you do if I left you?” Kate asked.

“Kill myself.”

Kate was still for a moment, still and silent, then she said, “Fuck you, Jess.”

Jess was surprised. “What?”

“That’s a really shitty thing to say. How do you think I’d feel if you were serious?”

Jess shrugged, “Sorry.”

Kate went to sulk in the lounge. Jess waited a while, then followed her. “Come back to bed.”

“I’m reading.”

Jess watched for a few minutes. Kate’s eyes weren’t moving and she wasn’t turning pages.

“Why did you bother coming if you just wanted to fight?” Jess asked.

“Only here to help you out.”

“So go.”

“I should.” Kate was looking at her strangely.

Jess waited a moment. “Well?”

“Don’t make me Jess, I promise I will.”

Jess went out onto the porch. Huge clouds had begun piling up to the south. Flamboyant, grey, fluffy clouds, their feet resting on the mountains, their anvil heads touching the top of the sky. The air was hot and electric. She sat outside and smoked and watched the clouds and wondered if the storm was making them fight.

“You should stop that,” Kate called from inside.

“No idea what you mean,” Jess shouted back.

“Yeah, fuck you too. Stop smoking.”

“Only started again because of you.”

Kate threw something against the inside wall. Probably a book or a shoe, it made a thud, but didn’t seem to break. Whatever it was, Kate would move it before Jess went inside, would be embarrassed she’d got so angry. “Fuck you Jess,” she shouted, but sounded almost bored.

Jess smoked another cigarette and realised she’d had too many, that she was feeling light-headed and queasy. “Hey Kate,” she called, “Are we finished fighting yet?”

“Fuck off Jess.”

“So no, then?”

“Yeah, fuck you.”

“Calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down.”

“Wouldn’t have to if you didn’t need to.”

No answer.

“Want sex anyway?”

No answer to that either, so Jess went inside to see. It seemed to be a yes – Kate went back into the bedroom, left the door open, didn’t say anything. She didn’t really talk all afternoon. She complained once that Jess tasted of smoke, and after that they went an hour without her speaking. Kate seemed not to want to acknowledge Jess was there, not even to ask Jess to move a hand or leg, just lay there looking grim until Jess did what she wanted,

and if Jess didn't work it out quickly enough she lay there looking martyred for as long as it took. Jess thought it was kind of hot to be fucking without conversation. Hot kept them going half the afternoon, and guilt about Keri kept Jess going for the rest of it. Outside, the storm was getting ready to break. The air got heavy and damp, and the crickets became frantic, louder than Jess could remember them being all summer. Inside, Kate stayed quiet, oddly withdrawn. She came a couple of times, reciprocated without complaint, but maintained her silence. By late afternoon they were both tired and hot and exhausted. They dozed off, sprawled clammily across the sheets.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Kate

Towards evening the storm broke. Kate woke first, was woken by the rising wind and the rattling of branches in the nearer trees. She was tired, had hardly slept the night before because she'd been worrying about Jess. Driving over, alone in the car for hours with nothing to do but think, she'd realised Jess was Jess and would never change, that this wasn't going to work. Everything that had happened – the debt collectors, the fighting, the weird impersonal sex – confirmed this. She knew what she had to do, but had put it off, trying to think of some other way. When the wind woke her she got out of bed and went into the bathroom to splash cold water on her face. Then she sat at the kitchen table and tried to work out should happen next.

She liked having Jess as a fuckbuddy friend, and if they could have left it at that, she probably would have been happy. It didn't seem possible, though. They were fighting more and more, doing nothing but fight. Jess always had to keep pushing, keep picking, like their lives were an itchy scab she couldn't leave alone. The longer this went on, the less of what was good would be left when the fighting was done. Kate had to stop it now, if she wanted anything of the friendship to survive. Jess wouldn't understand. Jess always tried too hard to fix relationships, never wanted to be the one to give up, and here that was the wrong thing to do. It just prolonged things, made them worse. If they were going to get out of this with any sort of friendship left – and from the beginning that had been all Kate wanted – then she had to be the one to make it happen. Jess couldn't. Jess probably wouldn't even understand what she was trying to do.

She made coffee and got dressed. This was going to hurt Jess. Was going to hurt like nothing ever had before. Later, some day, they'd be friends again, but for now Kate had to walk away and leave Jess to sort things out alone. She'd been trying to tell Jess this for months, but had never managed to. Every time she tried, she ended up backing down, unable to bear what she was about to do. Early on, Jess had seemed to realise these moments were dangerous, had got all careful and wary about what she said. Now she didn't seem to care, just waded in hurting and shouting and being a bitch – didn't even seem to realise this could end any more. Several times, in the middle of fights, Kate had got close to walking away. Only didn't because doing it then, fighting, she'd say horrible, unforgivable

things they could never come back from.

She poured coffee and found some paper and sat down to write a note. A note, so there'd be no arguments, no second chances. She had to say it as bluntly as she could, then leave, let Jess deal with the consequences. She picked up the cup and sipped coffee. She couldn't think what to say, but it probably didn't matter anyway. The goodbye was what would devastate Jess, everything else was just words.

I have to go, she wrote in the end, I can't stand this any more.

After a minute she added, I'm so sorry.

She wanted Jess to know she was there for her, just not right away. She wanted Jess to know she was loved. She wanted to say this had been a blip, a temporary mistake, a few months out of their whole lives when things had gone awry. She wanted to say that things had been much better how they'd used to be and they needed to go back to that, and that the sex didn't have to stop, if that was what Jess wanted, it just had to fit in around their lives. What she'd written wasn't nearly enough, but anything more would be too complicated. She sat for a long time staring at the page. Then she looked up. Jess was watching from the bedroom doorway.

"Shit, how long have you been there?"

Jess walked over, wrapped in a sheet, all sleepy and perfect and beautiful. Looking at her Kate felt nothing, not lust or love or desire, only a little guilt. That was enough to tell her she was doing the right thing.

Jess picked up the note and looked at it. Then she turned around and went back into the bedroom.

Chapter Twenty-Three

As soon as Jess woke she knew something was wrong. Kate was gone. The bed beside her was cool. She sat up and looked around. The wind had come up outside, but inside, the bach was quiet. She wrapped a sheet around herself, suddenly feeling vulnerable. She slid off the bed and opened the bedroom door, not sure why but doing it quietly. She looked out into the main room. Kate was at the kitchen table, writing a note.

As soon as she saw her there, Jess just knew.

She watched Kate for a while. Watched Kate decide how to break her heart. Eventually, when Kate noticed her, she went over and read the note, then went back to bed. She wasn't sure what else to do.

Kate followed her into the bedroom. Jess found her cigarettes and lit one, lay back down with the sheet in place, taking care she didn't show any skin. Face and arms only, nothing else.

"I have to go," Kate told her from the doorway, "I can't stand this any more."

"You said."

After a minute Kate added, "I'm so sorry. I know that's inadequate."

Jess nodded. Kate had made her move the ashtray earlier because of the smell. It was out in the main room. She flicked ash into a coffee cup.

Kate hovered in the doorway, didn't come closer. "There's so much I need to tell you, but I can't say it yet."

Jess flicked ash again. Kate flinched slightly, but seemed to be forcing herself not to notice.

"Isn't there anything you want to say to me?" Kate asked.

"Will it do any good?"

"You don't seem to want me here either," Kate said. "You told me to go."

"I didn't mean it. Obviously."

"It felt like you did."

Jess shrugged.

"It's more than that, though," Kate said.

"You remember what we said, about only dumping me once?"

"I'm not dumping you."

"Kind of seems like it."

"I'm ending it like we agreed. This just isn't working."

"I didn't agree."

"Months ago, at Brighton. We said that if it didn't seem to be working, then we'd stop."

Jess realised that in Kate's head that made this okay. "A note?"

"I'm sorry."

Jess didn't understand how it had come to this. There were still things they could do. Once you had someone's heart, once someone had yours, you did everything you could until nothing remained to be done. Even if your pride got in the way, even if you didn't really want that person any more, you still tried.

"Please," Jess said, "Don't do this to me."

"I have to," Kate said. "I know how awful this is for you, and I am sorry, but I have to do this. You'll see it's the right thing later on, when you're thinking clearly."

Jess started to cry. Part of her was surprised she wasn't already.

"We're just fighting," Kate said. "All the time now. We never do anything else."

"We can change that."

"I'm not sure we can."

"We can try."

"We have."

"We can try some more."

"It's no good."

"Please, Kate..."

Kate shook her head. "Jess, I'm sorry."

There was more coming. Jess could hear it in Kate's voice.

"I'm so sorry," Kate said, "I truly am..."

"Go on."

"I don't think I was ever in love with you."

And that was that. There was nothing more either of them could say. Some things you could come back from, and some you never did.

"Okay," Jess said, "If that's how it is." She felt calm. Surprisingly calm. In a strange

way, this seemed almost inevitable. She was still crying, but it seemed almost out of duty, as if she wasn't actually that upset but was obliged to make the gesture. She felt numb.

"Are you okay?" Kate asked.

"Yeah."

"I should go..."

"You should."

"I don't want to leave you alone if you're upset..."

"Go," Jess said, "I'm fine."

"Liar."

"I am. Go."

Kate looked at her, and hesitated, and Jess almost thought she was going to stay. Then she turned around and went out into the lounge. That turning away was the end, and that hurt the most. They'd promised the friendship would survive, no matter what, but now, when she knew Jess was hurting, Kate chose to walk away. That meant her promise – her concern for Jess – was nothing to her any more.

Jess lay where she was and stared at the ceiling. She could hear Kate in the lounge, packing up her things. It seemed to be taking a long time. It wasn't until Jess heard water running that she realised Kate was washing the dishes. Jess almost screamed at her, no words, just screamed.

"Just go," Jess called, "Don't worry about those," but Kate didn't hear over the running water. She called again, and Kate still didn't hear. She'd have to get up to tell her, and she wasn't sure she could be bothered. She felt empty inside.

That emptiness was strange. It was like a part of herself had gone missing, like she was watching but uninvolved. She felt a little nauseous, a little upset, but mostly just empty.

She lay there a while, listening to Kate clattering plates, then decided she needed to see the end of this, that she couldn't just hide in bed while Kate destroyed her life. She got up and wrapped herself in the sheet again – the sheet that smelt of sex and Kate – and went out into the kitchen.

Kate looked at her, looked worried, said, "Hey, I'm almost done."

Jess didn't answer, just sat at the table and watched Kate fuss around.

"Hey Kate," Jess said after a minute, "Just fuck off, okay," but Kate didn't react, and Jess realised her voice had gone, was hoarse, that Kate probably couldn't hear over the noise she was making with the dishes.

"You okay?" Kate asked without turning around.

Shit no, Jess wanted to say, but nothing came out. Her throat was dry. She wanted some water, but that would mean getting past Kate to reach the sink, and she didn't want to do that. Kate would be gone soon enough.

"You sure?" Kate said, apparently taking Jess's silence as agreement she was okay.

I'm not okay, Jess wanted to say, but that didn't come out either.

Kate turned around, and Jess just shook her head.

"Hey," Kate said, and Jess ignored her. Stared out the window above the sink, at the clouds and the mountains, and tried not to notice Kate was there.

That annoyed Kate. She got snappy when she was ignored. "You don't need to sit there like a bitch," she said sharply, "This might be unpleasant, but we're still friends."

Jess was surprised, wondered how Kate could think that. No we aren't, she wanted to

say, we never were, we couldn't possibly have been. We were this one horrible thing, this twisted love, and now that it's over, we are too. She didn't speak, was starting to realise there was no point talking any more.

Kate put the last of the dishes on the rack and let the water drain. She looked around, then wiped her hands on her skirt. She was standing beside the sink, and the last afternoon sun made her skin – made the whole room – golden. Dust-motes drifted in the air between them. It was peaceful, Jess thought. She could still smell sex from the sheet, could taste Kate on her lips.

“Okay,” Kate said, “Well, bye I suppose.”

Jess just sat. Didn't move. Made herself not blink. She seemed to have stopped crying somewhere along the way, hadn't noticed exactly when, but if she blinked, she'd cry again. She wasn't sure where the tears were going, but right now they were still inside, and that was where she wanted them.

Kate took a couple of steps closer, seemed to be coming over to kiss Jess. Jess waited until she was almost there, then turned her head away.

Kate looked hurt, seemed not to know what to do. A little bit of rejection back at her, Jess thought. Kate stood for a moment looking puzzled, then just said “bye” and went outside. She had her bag in one hand and her keys in the other, opened the screen door with her foot and let it bang behind her. She got into her car and threw the bag in the back. She was crying, Jess saw, had to wipe her eyes before driving away. Jess stood on the porch in the cotton sheet and watched until she was gone, until the dust had settled on the track and the last sound of the car's engine had faded away. Then she went back inside.

She still felt numb. Cold. Trembling like she'd just survived a near miss with a rock and was high on adrenaline. She was forgetting something but she couldn't work out what it was. She knew this feeling, had been here before, knew you couldn't think straight after a shock, that you got a kind of mental tunnel vision and your judgement got skewed. She knew she shouldn't make decisions right now, but she had to anyway. She didn't have time to wait and think things through. Any minute now the pain of all this, the horribleness of what had just happened, was going to hit her. She knew what she needed to do, and wanted it done before she felt anything worse than what she was already feeling. She put on a bikini, pulled her hair back into a ponytail, left the rashie behind. She locked up the bach. Closed all the windows, turned off the water and gas, left a lantern on the table where it could be easily found, and threw the last bag of rubbish into the pit outside. Then she drove down to the beach. Drove slowly, because now she'd started she had all the time in the world. She opened a window and let the world around her in. Heard the crunch of gravel under tyres, smelled the rich wet earth of the bush, the oily tar of the highway, the bitter salt of the sea. She reached the ocean. The wind was up, the storm finally getting close. Grey, sultry waves were pounding at the beach, spray whipping from their crests, double overhead at least and growing. The storm out to sea was driving them in. She looked up. A sky of dreary scudding cloud. Gulls circled far above, singing to her. She stopped the car and listened for a moment and supposed she needn't care any more about Kate and her flying rats.

She parked carefully, further up the beach than usual. The car might be there a while so she wouldn't take the best spot and get in people's way. She locked it, put the key on top one of the front wheels. No need to take it with her and complicate things. She glanced

around, thought she should try to make herself remember the beach, but didn't really care. Shingle and wood, grey and white. The beach had always been a halfway place, a transition, somewhere unclear between land and ocean, a boundary between misery and peace. Kate's place rather than hers. She gave the beach a single glance, took in all she needed, then picked up her board and walked down to the water where she belonged.

She felt empty. She was alone for the first time in twenty years. Kate had always been there, and now Kate was gone. Jess didn't know how to get past that. She felt as if half her soul had been ripped out. She felt abandoned. Once or twice she'd wondered if she'd kill herself if she lost Kate, and hadn't really thought she would. She'd been wrong. It was the right thing to do. She'd lost everything that mattered to her, and there was no point trying any more. She felt relieved. After so many years of waiting for Kate, she was almost done. She felt free. There'd be no more pain. That would make it worthwhile. She hurt now, and had broken up with enough people to know that this was as good as it was going to get, that after the first shock, everything just got worse. She'd spare herself that misery. And it was a final fuck you to the world. Kate had hurt her, so she'd hurt Kate, hurt her as badly as she could, the only way left to her. Kate would know what she'd made Jess do.

She paddled out to sea. Stopped at the break and looked back. Looked for the last time. That hadn't occurred to her until now. She was surprised how simple this was. How tidy. Doing it this way meant no pain for friends. None for family – not that she cared – no notes, no goodbyes. Just an accident. She always surfed on her own, and these things happened. People would find excuses – would say she got cramp, or was clipped by her board, or had misjudging the approaching storm. Everyone but Kate. She thought about details, didn't think she'd forgotten anything. She didn't care what happened to her things. Someone could sell her gear to pay Sam back the advance. It was kind of funny that she'd settled up with the debt collectors the very day she died, although no-one would notice the joke. She wondered about the legalities. Who delivered the news of ocean drownings, and how long it took them to admit she was gone and have a funeral. She wondered if her body would ever be found, and how they'd identify her, since she'd never been to a dentist or been fingerprinted. There must be a way. She thought about fish nibbling at her and was surprised it didn't bother her. She'd almost welcome a shark, all dramatic and sudden. Not the bites and pain, but the finality. Not that a shark would come. She touched Keri's necklace.

She stopped and sat for a while. The waves were a steady pulse, rising and falling like a sea-giant's breathing. The beach was only visible on the crests, grey shingle and white wood. The bush was a narrow line, a pencil-stroke, impossibly green. The mountains were smears among grey clouds. A wave surged past beneath her. The board rose under her thighs, fell again. She watched water pour onto the beach. Felt no urge to follow, but knew the wave would have been good if she had. A little later another passed, and she watched it too, idly, sitting and thinking.

This was only a rest. She was going to paddle out to sea until she was tired, then lie on the board and let the ocean have her. She could have a rest now because the hard work was done. She was through the breaks, where the water worked against her. From here it was just paddling along a flat ocean until her strength was gone. She was fit, had done this all her life, could paddle for hours. She'd be a long way out before she was tired. Then she'd lie peacefully on her board while hypothermia and exhaustion did their work. If that wasn't

enough, she could tip herself over, swim down as deep as she could and breathe out all her air, but she didn't think she'd need to. Even on this warm summer day, the sea was cold. She was cold. Storm winds on damp skin. She looked around. The sea was beautiful and the surf was breaking. It was lonely and empty and the most perfect evening there could be.

The board turned a little, faced along the beach, the way she'd usually sit to watch for approaching waves. She'd didn't think she'd done it on purpose, but she didn't move once it happened. Several good waves passed beneath her, then another, and without really realising she was going to, she turned around, paddled up to speed, and rode one back to the beach. It was a good wave, crisp and strong. She was glad she'd caught it, even though it meant she'd have to paddle back out. It was her last wave ever, so had probably been worthwhile. She started paddling. She noticed Keri's necklace. Odd she hadn't noticed it earlier. The string was longer than hers had been. The tooth tapped on the board as she paddled, hung low on her neck when she sat up, a sharp-edged caress between her breasts.

She'd miss Keri.

She hadn't thought of that until now. Keri she regretted. She wished they'd got their thing resolved. She shouldn't have been so stubborn, so obsessed with Kate. She should have given Keri a chance. She wanted to see Keri's smile again, to hear her laugh. She wanted to find out what might have happened, wanted to almost enough to turn the board around. Kate had become a habit, she realised, and because of that habit she hadn't let herself think about anything else. Despair had become a habit too, and that wasn't right.

She touched the necklace again. Rubbed the tooth, slippery sided, the tip sharp enough to cut. She touched it to her skin and it made a little ragged tear. They always did that, caused these bloodless scratches as you moved. She felt cold, but part of her was a little glad to still be feeling at all. Kate was an ache in her mind, a raw spot she couldn't quite bear to think about. Getting over Kate was going to be terrible. She wondered why she was thinking that when she didn't need to get over Kate at all. She wanted Keri. She'd lost Kate. She wanted Keri, and getting over Kate would be terrible. She thought about that. Maybe it was easier just to drift away, out to sea, and not worry any more.

But she wanted Keri.

She sat for a while and wondered if she was going back to the beach after all. She wasn't entirely sure why. She'd been going to die, had imagined it precisely – this board, this body, drifting on this ocean, all cold and still. Accepting your own death was meant to be the hardest thing to do, but it had been easy. She'd been ready. Like loading a gun and putting it in her mouth, like knotting a rope or picking up a razor. Something had started and she'd thought it final, and she wasn't sure why she was thinking about changing her mind now.

It was a beautiful evening. Maybe too beautiful to spoil with death. She wondered if dying for Kate might not be a waste after all, if living for Keri might be better. She'd never thought Kate would really leave. She'd thought about what she'd do, but never thought it would happen. Still didn't quite believe it had. Maybe there was a little madness mixed here, as if she'd gone away someplace to get over the shock and taken a while to come back. She was lucky, she supposed. She'd been able to turn back. Sometimes people must kick away the chair then change their mind, must jump and realise they could live with the pain after all. Baz would reach for a gun and would be gone before he could think it through. Kate would float away in a bloody warm bath and be too sleepy to think. Jess had

sat for an hour out past the break and bade life goodbye, and found, in saying her goodbyes, that she wanted to live after all. Riding those waves had saved her. All her life she'd seen a good wave and paddled onto it, so she had again. Just a habit. And surfing, once she was, made her feel alive, made her remember why she wanted to stay that way. You couldn't kill yourself after a perfect run, it just wasn't how it worked. She sat in the water as the light faded to dusk and thought about Keri and knew she was going back to shore after all.

Off in the distance, on the track behind the beach, she saw a car's headlights. Someone picking their way down to the sea in the grey half-light. The car stopped. A door slammed. She saw people moving around, saw the outline shapes of boards being lifted from the car's roof. The sun had set behind the clouds. The last moments of the day were seeping through the sea-mist and fog all murky-bright and dim. She thought the figures on the beach were looking her way, but wasn't sure. She would be more visible to them than they were to her because the light was behind her, and each wave lifted her, silhouetting her against the sky. She watched for a while. She was cold. She paddled, caught a wave, rode it back to the beach. Knelt as the wave broke to keep her balance. She ended up in waist-deep water and found – by their design or hers, or just coincidence – that the people from the car were standing right in front of her. Keri and her two friends. Part of her had known it would be.

Jess wanted it to be a sign. It had to be a sign, she wanted it so badly. She wanted it, and didn't, because then she'd have learned nothing. She surprised herself by thinking that.

She carried her board up the beach. The sand was gritty underfoot, her hair heavy and wet on her back, the wind numbing on her skin.

Keri waited, smiling her fuck-me smile. Jess stopped in front of her. The evening went still. It happened every night, a time in the dusk where the birds stopped their noise and the wind died down, and that night it happened right then.

"Hey," Keri said, and looked around.

"Hey," Jess said back.

They studied each other for a moment. Keri was half-changed, had her legs in a wetsuit and a jersey on the rest of her, had her hair in the short ponytail she only seemed to wear out on the water. The guys called hi to Jess, but she didn't really hear. They told Keri she should hurry, that the light was going, that they should get out there. "Yeah," she said, but stood where she was, looking at Jess.

Looking closely, kind of squinting at Jess's neck. "Didn't find yours?"

The necklace, Jess realised. "No. And thank you."

"No worries." Keri touched her own throat. "I had a spare."

"Still, thanks."

"Yeah, well. I assumed you wouldn't go out without it. Met people like you before."

"Funny thing," Jess said. "The other girl..." She wasn't sure how to put it. "She's gone."

"Oh," Keri smiled, while looking like she was trying not to. "Yeah," she said, "I'm sorry," and couldn't have sounded less like she meant it.

Jess shivered slightly.

"You okay?"

"I am now."

"You sure? I've seen how you react to bad news."

"Nah, I'm okay." She looked at Keri. "It's not really bad news, is it?"

Keri grinned. "Suppose not."

The two guys had got their wetsuits on. They walked past and into the water.

"You're cold." Keri said, and got Jess a towel.

Jess rubbed herself down, wanted to do it sexily but was shivering too much. She handed back the towel and said, in what she hoped was a beginning of the rest of her life kind of way, "So."

"So," Keri said back. Maybe in the same way.

"I have gum," Jess said, "Up in the car."

Keri grinned.

"Or I could quit. If you'd rather..."

"If you like."

"I should. I can, if you want me to..."

"No hurry," Keri said, and seemed sincere.

"I suppose not." Jess waved towards the water. "Do you want to go? I'll wait."

Keri looked at her for a long moment and it was the dirtiest, sexiest, most wonderful look Jess had ever seen.

"You'll wait?"

"Right here."

Keri seemed unsure.

"You've been waiting forever," Jess said, "I don't mind a few minutes."

Keri considered that, then said, "Okay, won't be long." She took off her jersey and gave it to Jess, "Put that on."

Jess did. Keri turned around and pulled her tee shirt over her head, didn't have anything on underneath. She kept her back to Jess, arranging her wetsuit's sleeves, got her hands inside the suit and pulled it on. Luckily for her she'd already done the ungainly crotch-tugging part without an audience. She twisted her arm backwards, reaching for the zipper.

"I'll do it," Jess said.

"Okay."

Jess stood close behind and zipped her up. Zipped slowly, sliding her hand over Keri's skin just ahead of the zipper. She felt something, a fire against her fingertips, and wasn't sure what it was. From the way Keri turned and smirked back over her shoulder, she'd felt it too. Maybe, Jess thought, she had been right to make sure they never touched. Or maybe they should have long ago. Her fingers tangled in Keri's necklaces and she tucked them inside the wetsuit, zipped it carefully to the very top and tucked in the cord.

"Okay," Keri said, and turned around. "I'll see you in a sec."

She was standing close, easily close enough to touch, was looking at Jess and seemed to be waiting. Jess wanted to kiss her, wanted to, but stayed where she was. It felt like something wasn't right yet.

"You could," Keri said.

"I know."

"You don't have to, but you could."

Jess nodded slowly. "Go," she said, "I'll be here."

Keri stepped back, didn't seem disappointed. "Right here?"

"Right here."

"Good. That's really, really good."

Keri put down her tee shirt and picked up her board.

“Hey,” Jess said, “I’m lucky.”

Keri turned around.

“That you waited. Thank you.” Keri smiled and Jess watched her go down to the water.

Jess sat in the darkness on the stony shingle beach, wearing Keri’s jersey, and waited. Just waited. After a while she started to cry. She wasn’t sure why – missing Kate and grateful for Keri, both. It was going to be hard. Even with Keri, it would be hard. Nothing had really changed.

Perhaps it was the shock sinking in, the nearly dying, or perhaps she just reacting to seeing Keri the way she always did, but all of a sudden she felt alive. She felt the world was rich with possibilities, felt each second took too long and meant too much. While Keri was still out on the water, before this was started, anything might happen between them. She watched a wave curl and break, watched a gull float in the dusk overhead, watched the moon begin to rise. She remembered the warmth of Keri’s skin, and wondered how she would taste when she came out the sea. She was shaking, was trembling and not from the cold. She cried harder. She had come so close to losing everything, had become so wrapped up in Kate she’d forgotten how this could be. She didn’t need certainty, it was enough to have the maybes. The maybes were worth coming back for, because she’d lost nothing. If things didn’t work out, she could go back out to sea and do what she’d failed to do tonight.

There was a lot she ought to tell Keri. That she was sorry for making her wait so long. That she’d make it worthwhile. That this was the most important night of her life, and that failing to die was the least of the reasons why. Or perhaps she wouldn’t. It might be too much. With Kate, there had been too many expectations, and she didn’t want to make those same mistakes again. Didn’t want to lose Keri like she had Kate, because – she was beginning to realise – Keri might matter more.

After a while she realised what hadn’t felt right earlier. She stood up, went down to the sea, and scrubbed her hands and face with water. Sipped and spat, and got the taste of Kate out of her mouth, off her skin. She wanted every trace of Kate gone before Keri kissed her. She looked out to sea, found three figures in the darkness. They were waiting on the break. It was night now. They were surfing storm waves by moonlight. She went back to her car for her cigarettes, was glad she’d brought them with her. It must have been automatic, probably something she should thank the debt collector for. She thought of gum, looked in the glovebox and between the seats, but didn’t have any. She thought for a moment, and put the cigarettes back. She wanted to start keeping promises the way Keri did.

She went back down to the beach and sat down to wait.

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