

“The Hunt”
a novel
and the accompanying exegesis
**“A Voyage Through Darkness:
Finding a Voice in the Silence of Bluebeard’s
Castle”**

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Abstract

The novel “The Hunt” follows the journey of a thirteen year old girl, Alice, as she navigates a path through the uneasy terrain of family breakdown, the onset of puberty and the slow, deliberate entrapment by an older man and his female accomplice. The novel charts Alice’s progress towards captivity, as she becomes slowly alienated from both her family and best friend. Alice finds herself in a perplexing world, where only her instincts alert her to the presence of danger. The novel can be read superficially as a story about a young girl and her pre-teen world of horses, friends and parents. However the significant themes of the novel are predation and capture, cruelty, alienation and the presence of mortal danger. The novel seeks to give voice to an aspect of the captor/captive narrative that is frequently absent: namely the perspective of a victim, in this case a young girl, who barely understands what is happening to her. The novel explores a world where things are not what they seem.

The exegesis, “A Voyage through Darkness: Finding a Voice in the Silence of Bluebeard’s Castle” explores the role of myth and fairy story in the development of the thematic and narrative concerns of the novel “The Hunt”, framed particularly through the story of “Bluebeard”. It chronicles the struggle to develop a credible narrative voice, particularly in the central character of Alice. It also traces and analyses the “narrative footprints” of those who have covered similar territory in fiction, returning to archetypal myths and fairy tales and acknowledging “Bluebeard” as a template for a type of predatory male. Questions of feminine disobedience and curiosity are explored as keys to freedom.

The exegesis examines texts that represent the predatory male/female captive dynamic: namely Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*, John Fowles’ *The Collector* and most recently, Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones*. These texts, in revising the “Bluebeard” tale, inform my novel, although “The Hunt” attempts a different ending. I

argue that archetypal myths and fairy tales still provide a framework through which a modern readership can interpret and therefore better understand our world.

Statement of Originality

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Vanna Morosini and to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Date

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“The Hunt”

A novel

By

Vanna Morosini



Figure 1. Edvard Munch "Puberty" (1894-1895)

Original painting held in the collection of the National Museum, Oslo

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Chapter 1

Miranda's finger twisted in and out of her hair, weaving through the thick strands in a wild, circular motion. Her head was bent forwards, and from behind Alice could see her fingertip bend and curl its way in and out.

"Hey!" Alice whispered, leaning forward to kick the leg of Miranda's chair, "what's the answer to number 7?"

Her eyes darted sideways at Mr Mackenzie but he remained perched on one side of his desk, leg swinging, his gaze fixed on some distant point outside the window. Miranda giggled under her breath, so softly it came out as a faint wheeze.

"Don't know!" she managed to whisper, before Mr Mackenzie's voice cut the silence in the room.

"Girls! Be quiet! This is a detention and you are not to speak!"

His head swung in their direction, and Alice dropped her eyes to her page, which was covered in small crosses in her attempt to answer the multiple choice questions they had been given. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Miranda shuffle forwards in her seat.

Mr Mackenzie sighed and looked at his watch.

"That's probably enough for now. Time to go home."

His voice boomed across the empty classroom. He slid off the edge of the desk and stretched his shoulders backwards, his thin arms reaching out behind him like emaciated wings.

Alice leaned down to grab her books from under her desk, afraid she was going to choke on the stifled guffaws bubbling up her throat. Miranda kept her head down, Alice knew, for the same reason. She stuffed her books into the school bag at her feet and stood up, ready to go.

As the girls bustled out of the classroom Mr Mackenzie turned to them one last time.

“And girls, remember, quiet in class tomorrow!”

“Yes, Mr Mackenzie,” they chanted in unison as they piled into the corridor, jostling each other like playful puppies.

Mr Mackenzie sighed. Not for the first time he watched them stagger across the courtyard, overcome with peals of laughter, and thought how these young girls were all the same. They moved and thought as one, and as each day passed he had more trouble telling them apart. Increasingly their faces blurred together into an amorphous mass of adolescent girlhood. He slipped his glasses up on to his forehead and rubbed his eyes, squeezing the balls tightly in their sockets until the gentle pain of it relieved the distant throb of the migraine he was sure was building in the depths of his skull.

“Mr Rooster!... Mr Rooster!...”

Miranda flapped her arms in a distant parody of Mr Mackenzie, shuffling in a semi-circle before she was overcome with uncontrollable glee. Her slim frame crumpled up against Alice, whose high pitched squeals of mirth reverberated around the empty schoolyard. They almost tripped over Alice’s forgotten school bag, dropped in the dust.

“Stop... stop...” Alice gasped, clutching at her friend’s arm as she drew deep, ragged breaths, her face red.

“I can’t.. laugh... anymore... my stomach hurts..” Shoulders hunched forward, she rolled her fists into balls and pressed, hard, into her middle. Bent double she sat down on the asphalt, which was still warm from the fading afternoon sun.

Miranda snorted once or twice, loudly, and then slumped onto her discarded schoolbag. Both girls sat, chests heaving. When they recovered their composure, Miranda grinned over at her friend.

“Come on,” she said, squinting into what was left of the afternoon sun, “That’s enough fun for one day. Let’s go.” She tapped her wristwatch with her index finger. “It’s getting late.” Miranda sprang to her feet and brushed the dust from her uniform. “Mum will kill me if she finds out I got another detention.”

Alice heaved herself on to her feet. “Well, Dad won’t even know. He’s always late home from work now Mum’s not here.” She swung her bag on to her shoulder and walked towards the bike shed.

Miranda gave her friend a playful shove. “At least your Dad’s around! And my Mum’s such a nag.”

Alice grinned at her friend. “Well, that’s one good thing about Dad. Messy, never cooks or washes, and always forgets everything, but he’s not a nag!”

Miranda took off towards the bike sheds. “Hey, maybe my Mum and your Dad should get together!” she shouted, running backwards. “That would be fun!”

“No way!” Alice sniggered at her friend and ran to catch up.

In the sheds, Miranda was already fumbling with her bike chain. “Race you home!” she cried.

“You’re on!”

Alice slid the key into her bike lock and heaved her bag on to the bike carrier. It thudded on to the flimsy metal as though full of stones. The girls wheeled their bikes on to the pavement.

Alice pushed off the kerb without waiting for her friend. “May the best bike win!” Pedalling furiously, she took off down the hill, ponytail flying.

Miranda shouted back something, but Alice could not hear over the sound of the wind in her ears. She knew her friend was close behind, but her bike was newer, and a lot faster.

When Alice rode her bicycle through the front gate later that evening, her house was in darkness. She waved her hand at the automatic sensor and it clicked on, driving away the shadows. The driveway was vacant as she wheeled her bike around the back of the house. It seemed longer than usual. An oily stain marked the bricks where her father’s car was usually parked. When she passed under the light she checked her watch. The hands pointed to just after seven. A gust of wind rustled the branches and she froze. The skin prickled on the back of her neck.

“Don’t be silly”, she reprimanded herself, talking loudly into the gloom. “There’s nothing there!” With purposeful strides she marched around to the back door, and propped her bike up against the wall. Her hand reached for the outside switch, and when she flicked it on the darkness retreated before a wave of garden lights. The backyard was empty.

“Told you so,” she muttered as she fumbled for her keys. She entered the dark kitchen and switched on the light, before locking the back door. She threw her school bag on the kitchen floor and turned on every lamp in the house, flooding it with light. In the lounge room she flicked on the television set and sprawled her bony frame across the sofa. The television’s reassuring burble filled the empty rooms.

Alice heard the unmistakable hum of her father’s car in the driveway. She reached for the remote control buried in the cushions beside her, silenced the television, and listened. Seconds later she heard his steps in the hall, followed moments later by his cheery shout of greeting.

“I’m home!”

The front door slammed, and Alice sat upright, smoothing the pillows beside her.

“Hi Dad,” she called, glancing up at the clock on the mantelpiece. “You’re late!”

Her father appeared in the doorway. His tie was loose and he had removed his jacket. He slumped on the sofa beside Alice, his body sagging into the cushions. He ran his fingers through his hair, now a bird’s nest of tangled curls.

“I know. Work is just so busy right now. I’m sorry Alice.”

She wriggled down further into the cushions, and her father draped his arm loosely around her shoulders. His eyes drifted to the television screen, lured by the evening news. Alice shuffled closer and tucked her legs under her body to make herself smaller. Her father’s solid bulk was reassuring.

He was absorbed in the flickering images on the screen. One of his fingers tapped silently against the upholstered armrest. He reminded her of a zombie.

She poked his leg with her toe. “So Dad, what’s for dinner?”

He turned his head in her direction. One of his eyes was bloodshot and blue shadows pooled under the lids.

“You look bad, Dad,” Alice exclaimed. “Are you sick?”

“No. Just tired.” He sighed and rubbed his face with the flat of his hand. “I thought we could have take-away tonight. You can choose.”

“Great!” Alice leapt from the sofa and disappeared into the kitchen, only to reappear moments later, head bent over a take-away menu. “Well, let’s see.... How about the chicken with cashew nut that Mum loves so much!” She stopped short after noticing her father’s stricken face. “Sorry Dad,” she grimaced. “I didn’t mean...”

“Don’t worry Alice!” He made an attempt to laugh. Alice bent her head to look at the menu so she did not have to watch. The letters blurred into a blue mass on the page, but she kept her head lowered, pretending to read.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched her father heave himself from the sofa and walk into the kitchen. She heard the familiar beep of the portable phone being removed from its cradle.

“So Alice, what’s it to be?”

“Here, you decide.”

Her father took the menu from Alice’s outstretched hand. Only then she realised he was checking the phone messages. As she returned to the lounge room and threw herself on the sofa. She knew already her mother had not called.

The television droned on. Alice tilted her head towards the kitchen, listening as her father dialled the restaurant and made the order. Then she heard his footsteps plod down the hallway towards her parents’ bedroom. The door thudded closed behind him. She nestled her head into a curve of the cushion and curled her legs up against her body. All of a sudden the house felt very empty.

The phone rang. Alice unravelled her limbs from the sofa and flung the cushion she had been clutching to the floor. She raced towards the kitchen, sliding across the shiny ceramic tiles like an alpine skier.

“Hello!” she shouted as she grabbed the telephone receiver. “Alice speaking.”

There was a brief silence at the other end of the line, followed by faint rustlings and gasps. Then the line went dead.

Taken aback, Alice stood staring at the beeping receiver in her hand. She returned the phone to its cradle so abruptly it made a beep of protest. Almost immediately, it rang again. This time, Alice stood in front of the phone and watched the

plastic handset as it rang twice, and then three times. Still she could not bring herself to answer.

“Alice!” her father yelled down the corridor from his bedroom, “Can you get the phone!”

His voice jolted her into action. She plucked the phone from its cradle for the second time.

“Hello?”

“Hello! Alice! Can you hear me?” boomed the voice at the other end of the line. It was Miranda.

“Oh, it’s you! Thank God.” She wriggled on to the stool by the phone, cradling the receiver under her chin. “Did you try and call just now?”

“Yeah, sorry, that was me.” Miranda giggled faintly. “I thought about putting on a weird voice to freak you out, but seeing as you couldn’t hear me...” she chuckled, “And then the phone disconnected anyway.”

Alice’s father appeared in the kitchen. “Who is it?” he mouthed silently at her. “Miranda” she mouthed back. He nodded, and held up the take-away brochure before tapping his watch with an index finger. Before Alice could reply, he turned on his heel and disappeared from the kitchen.

“Hey, are you listening to me?” Alice heard Miranda ask plaintively from the other end of the line.

“Yeah, yeah, of course.” Alice shifted on her stool and wrapped one foot around its base. The faint pain of the stretch felt vaguely pleasing. “That was just Dad. He’s just going down the road to pick up our take-away.”

“Yum, lucky you. What are you having? We had disgusting greasy chops for dinner.”

“Oh... Thai, as usual.” Alice grabbed a pencil that lay beside the phone and scribbled on a discarded envelope. She drew a pyramid of triangles, pressing hard with the pencil to make thick grey lines.

There was a pause and Alice heard a soft crunching sound.

“What are you eating?” she asked, “Is it chocolate?”

“How did you know?” Alice heard more crunching. “It’s a Tim Tam. Mum bought them and I’ve nearly eaten the whole pack.” There was another crackle of plastic. “Maths homework is so boring. I need Tim Tams to get through it.”

“I haven’t even started.” Miranda’s voice chattered on down the line but Alice wasn’t listening. Using the sharp tip of her pencil, she poked at the envelope, making blunt holes in the paper.

“Alice?” Miranda’s voice broke the spell. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me tonight.” She heard the front door slam and her father’s footsteps in the hallway. “I’d better go now, Miranda, Dad’s just got home.”

She hung up the receiver just before her father appeared in the kitchen. He placed the white plastic bags bulging with silver containers on the counter and rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “Let’s eat!” he declared with gusto.

“Okay, Dad,” Alice slid from her stool and shuffled towards the overhead cupboards, where she took two white plates from the stack on the shelves. Her father opened each container, carefully placing each greasy silver lid into one of the plastic bags. One of the containers had leaked and left a brown imprint on the kitchen counter.

Once all the containers were lined up, he reached for a handful of spoons in the cutlery drawer before ceremoniously poking one into each container. Alice thrust a plate towards him and he accepted it with one of his lopsided grins. He seemed in a much better mood than before.

“Think we have enough here, Alice?!” he chuckled as he began piling his plate with a steaming mass of rice and vegetables. He heaped brown strips of chicken and beef over the mound of food.

“Dad! You’ll get fat!”

Her father grinned and patted his stomach with his free hand. He did not answer, and it was only when he turned around to grab a paper napkin that she realised his mouth was stuffed with food. She glanced down at the take-away and noticed one of the spring rolls was missing.

She rolled her eyes and sighed. “Oh, Dad!”

Her father waved his fork over his shoulder as he disappeared into the lounge room to eat his dinner. Small droplets of sauce marked his progress across the kitchen floor. Alice grabbed the kitchen cloth and stalked across the floor to wipe away the line of brown spots covering the tiles.

Then, clutching her plate and a can of Coke she followed her father into the lounge room. He had his feet up on the coffee table and balanced his overflowing plate of food precariously across his ample belly. With his eyes fixed on the television, he barely acknowledged Alice as she slumped on the sofa next to him.

She frowned as she noticed a blob of sauce splattered on his chin. “Dad, you’re disgusting. Use your napkin!”

“What?” he stammered, through a mouthful of food.

Alice tapped her index finger against her chin. “Here... use a napkin.”

“Oh, sorry!” he guffawed like a small boy and slid a whole spring roll into his mouth with his fingertips. A flake of pastry stuck to the corner of his mouth.

Despite herself, Alice grinned. She grabbed a paper napkin from the coffee table and thrust it at her father.

“Thanks,” he muttered, his cheeks still bulging. Alice ignored him, but smiled to herself as she picked up her fork. They ate in silence until the end of the news.

Later that evening Alice lay sprawled across her bed, trying to concentrate on the novel she was supposed to be reading for her English homework. Her mind kept wandering, and she found herself reading the same sentence over and over. She rolled on to her back and propped her legs against the wall, but her change of position did not help. Her eyes scanned the words, but her mind did not absorb their meaning. The story was vaguely familiar, and she couldn’t quite shake the feeling that she had read this book before.

“Ah, there you are Alice!”

Her father’s head appeared around the doorway. Alice, startled, nearly dropped her book on the coverlet. “Dad! You nearly gave me a heart attack!” She frowned at her

father as he perched on the end of her bed. “Why can’t you just come into a room like normal people?”

He sat at the end of her bed looking down at his hands, turning them over and over as though he hadn’t seen them before.

“What is it Dad? You’re worrying me!” She sidled next to him and dropped her book on to the floor.

“Well, Alice,” he paused to clear his throat, “You know your mother and I haven’t been getting along well lately...” He paused again, and ran his fingers through his hair, before continuing. “We may have a small break from each other for a while.” This last sentence he blurted out, before looking up at his daughter for the first time. His eyes were damp and red-rimmed. She sat rigid on the bed next to him, her mind blank. “So, it’ll just be me and you.” He slapped her knee, which was pressed close up to him, and gave it a tight squeeze.

Alice placed her hand on his. It looked small and pale in comparison. His knuckles went white as he gripped her knee even tighter. Then he slapped his other palm down on the bedclothes and stood up. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. Everything is going to be okay.”

Alice nodded, unable to answer. Her father disappeared into the corridor. She listened to his heavy tread as he walked away towards the kitchen. Moments later the radio blared. She slid from her bed and gently closed the door. Sounds from the kitchen still filtered through so she pulled her quilt over her head and lay curled up in the safety of her warm cocoon.

The next morning, Alice’s father was ready early. He rapped with his knuckles on her door to wake her up like he did every morning. He looked the same as he always did, hair neatly combed and still wet from the shower, shirt ironed, clean shaven, tie neatly knotted. She watched him over her breakfast cereal and rode to school barely able to remember what he had said the night before.

Chapter 2

Alice leaned forward and pedalled hard. Her bike flew through the suburban streets, down the hill away from her school. The wind forced tears from the corners of her eyes as the houses passed in a blur. The ache in her legs and stomach felt good. She pushed herself harder until her breath came in ragged gasps and her lungs were on fire.

Her bike swung in a wide arc around the corner at the bottom of the hill. Alice stared straight ahead, not bothering to glance over her shoulder to check for oncoming cars. As she gradually lost speed, she sat up in the saddle to catch her breath and rode at a more leisurely pace.

It was Friday afternoon. Miranda had left school hours ago, picked up in her mother's small red hatchback to attend a doctor's appointment. As Alice reached her suburb the landscape changed. The houses were newer, nestled into the base of hills still covered by bushland and the abandoned paddocks of once thriving farms. New housing subdivisions had bled into the bush, blurring the divisions between the wild and domestic worlds. The streets around Alice's house were lined with tall remnant gums, and still lacked gutters or footpaths. Wild parrots swept over the treetops, confused by the profusion of neat suburban gardens among the eucalypts. Alice's house perched on a hillside, with a view of the valley spread below her bedroom window. Red tiled roofs poked through gaps in the tree canopy, the only hint that the landscape was suburban rather than native bush. At night, when the traffic sounds had died down, the wind carried the faint bleating of sheep from the remnant grazing land on the far hillside. Sometimes, during the day, she saw the flock, their forms like little white cotton balls peppering the slope.

When Alice reached her street corner she did not turn her bike towards home, but kept riding along the road. She did not want to be alone in an empty house or to start homework on a Friday evening that was not due until Monday. She pedalled onwards, towards the shops, once part of a country village but now incorporated into the spreading mass of suburbia.

Alice guided her bike towards one of her favourite places. Even as a child she had always been fascinated by the small industrial area beside the train line, where narrow laneways wound between once active factories, now deserted. Abandoned workers' cottages lined the streets; their narrow doors only feet away from the pavement. In the centre of this area stood what looked like a mansion to Alice; a house with a wide circular driveway and a verandah all the way around, decorated with Victorian ironwork as delicately fashioned as the finest lace. Alice had never seen anyone come or go from this house. It kept its mysteries, and she always wondered who lived within its grand old rooms.

A racetrack, no longer used, stood a few streets away from the abandoned factories. Attendance there had once been part of the weekend's entertainment for the factory workers, but now the white railings sagged, their painted wood peeled and cracked. The turf around the track had dried in yellow clumps and the crumbling stadium opposite the old finish line was cordoned off with plastic orange netting. Dog walkers still frequented the open ground, but usually it was an empty, windswept place.

A few streets behind the derelict racetrack, Alice and Miranda had discovered a racing stable. At least that was what they thought it was. They had found it by accident. From the laneway outside it was impossible to tell what lay behind the high corrugated iron fence. It was so tall you couldn't even see over the top if you perched high on the pedals of your bicycle. From behind the thin walls came tantalising sounds; the loud clapping of hooves on cement floors, the rattle of buckets, the restless whinny of a horse calling for its meal. On the other side of the laneway was a silent warehouse, with a heavy chain wound around the gate. Alice swung her bicycle in long, sweeping arcs as she made her way past the stable entrance. The sweet smell of hay and horses wafted over the fence. She rode back past in the hope she could catch a glimpse of the creatures held captive inside.

The late afternoon sun was beginning to mellow into early evening. A kitten was poking its head through a gap in the galvanised iron. She dismounted from her bike, and dropped it to the pavement to go to the tiny animal. As she sat down on the asphalt, the kitten twisted its striped face towards her and purred. She was afraid it was stuck in the

sharp iron. With her finger she gently stroked the creature's fur, probing to try and loosen its neck. But it appeared to be stuck fast.

Alice leaned back on her haunches and brushed the loose asphalt from her hands. The footpath was littered with sharp pebbles.

The little cat gazing up at her was so young its eyes had not yet lost their fogginess. She stroked the top of its head with the pad of her index finger. The fur was satin soft, and its eyes closed into slits of contentment. A long black line curved around its eyelids and away down its cheeks. It resembled a lynx, in miniature. "What are we going to do with you?" she muttered.

She tried once more to free the kitten. With her hands gently wrapped around the tiny head she pushed backwards. She was so engrossed by her effort that she did not notice the woman walk up behind her.

"WHAT do you think you are doing to one of my kittens?"

Alice felt her heart leap in her chest. The kitten's tiny head magically disappeared, leaving an empty gap in the fence. She pulled her hand free, gasping as she felt a sharp pain shoot across her palm. Beads of blood welled up along the soft flesh where she had cut herself on the galvanised iron's sharp edges.

Alice unravelled herself from her place on the pavement. The woman's stare was cold.

"I was only trying to help it get unstuck." Alice's voice was faint. "I was worried something bad might happen if I didn't do anything."

The kitten had disappeared, freeing itself without trouble when she had let go. She looked down at her hand, which was dribbling blood into her palm. The story sounded unconvincing.

"Come and I'll put a band-aid on that for you," the woman said brusquely, with a nod towards Alice's wound. "My house is just around the corner."

Alice looked dubiously in the direction the woman was pointing. She didn't remember seeing any houses there. The woman stared pointedly at her, as though impatient for a reply. Her baggy cardigan hung over a faded floral dress, and her flesh coloured stockings sagged around her ankles. Thin strands of uncombed white hair stood up on the back of her head.

“Come on, follow me,” the woman insisted. “You need something on that now.”

She thumped away down the street. Her broad back looked vast from behind and Alice noticed with surprise how large the woman really was. Alice felt the slimy blood in streaks on her palm. Red splotches marked the pavement at her feet. The blood unsettled her.

The woman reached the corner and looked back. “Are you coming?” Her voice was sharp.

“Okay then,” Alice called back.

As she walked, she cradled her bloody hand in the crook of her arm. The old woman waited at the corner until she caught up.

“Follow me,” she said.

In single file they walked along the pavement, and then continued down a small laneway shaded by trees. Alice had never noticed this pathway before. It wound its way behind the warehouse that stood like an island in a sea of bitumen behind its chain link fence. A large group of cats lay sprawled on the asphalt. Tiny kittens leaped over one another and raced in circles. Alice recognised the kitten she had tried to rescue earlier, a yellowish tabby with black markings like a miniature tiger. It leapt and tumbled with a black playmate, its miniature tail as erect and bushy as a pipe cleaner.

Alice and the woman trudged on in silence. Behind the warehouse the path came to an abrupt stop. In front was a narrow street lined with rows of single fronted attached cottages. Each house had a tiny verandah enclosed by a picket fence, with a gate opening directly on to the pavement. The houses seemed to lean in, derelict, as though uninhabited for a very long time. Dead pot plants sat alongside the front door of one house, and there were torn net curtains in the front window of another.

At the end of the street the woman turned into a wide gravel driveway. Lemon scented gums lined the driveway, which curved in a smooth arc towards the house. It was the house that had fascinated Alice since she was a child.

The wide spread of the garden gradually revealed itself. The corridor of trees and agapanthus opened out to a wide lawn. The bluestone farmhouse was shaded by wide verandahs on all sides. With her slow, deliberate tread, the old woman climbed the blue slate steps up to the verandah. Two wide concrete balustrades curved down

towards the front path, opening out at the base like a pair of welcoming arms. Balancing on the end of each was a white plaster ball. One of them had weathered and cracked, and a sliver of the concrete orb lay on the gravel. Alice noticed the yellowing paintwork, the chipped front step, the faded glamour of the house around her. One of the gutters had broken and drifted down towards the rose bushes. The verandah was a tunnel of green: lacy tendrils of clematis wound around the white lacework and a thick hedge of gnarled rose bushes grew through the wooden balustrades. Their blooms reached up to the sun from the garden beds below, redolent with scent. “Now, wait here,” said the old woman gruffly, speaking to Alice for the first time since they had arrived.

She pointed towards two ornate wicker chairs on the verandah, placed either side of a matching table. Plump embroidered cushions, badly faded by the sun, covered the seats. “Make yourself comfortable and I’ll go and get something to clean up that cut,” she said.

The screen door screeched as the woman flung it open, and it slammed behind her as she disappeared into the darkness of the house. Alice sat down, perching on the wicker seat as instructed. She traced the delicate curlicues of raised cane with her fingertips while she waited. The woman was gone for a long time. Alice sat quietly. The verandah stretched away from her, as long as and straight as a bowling alley. A shaft of sunlight fell across the worn floorboards at her feet. She extended her toes to reach the patch of sun, wiggling them inside their leather sandal casing.

A wild garden spread out below. Beyond the wide semi-circle of lawn lay a tangle of shrubs and flowers. Hidden among the rampant growth a few wooden sheds quietly rotted. An abandoned pergola slowly disintegrated under the thick tendrils of an ancient vine. The central patch of lawn featured a cracked sundial and a birdbath brimming with water. A sparrow descended to bathe in the green water, writhing and fluttering its feathers and scattering showers of droplets into the air.

There was a movement in the undergrowth. Alice sat forward in her chair to get a better look and noticed a large ginger cat stretched on the grass, slowly licking its paw. It proceeded to wash its face and ears, eyes closed against the late afternoon sun. The cat ignored the bird. As though aware of being watched, it paused, its tongue protruding

from its mouth like a red flag, and opened one eye, swivelling an ear in Alice's direction. A quiet throb of pain pulsed from the cut in her palm. The scab was moist and the blood had turned almost black. She flexed her hand and watched as a small crack appeared in the scab and scarlet oozed from the wound.

An orange blur appeared out of the corner of Alice's eye. The large ginger cat leapt into her lap and rested its sturdy paw on her shoulder. It pushed its face so close to hers that she felt its whiskers brush her cheek and its chest vibrate with a loud rolling purr.

The screen door screeched open and the elderly woman reappeared carrying a bowl of steaming water and a clean cloth. As the door banged closed the cat leaped from her lap and settled itself in the patch of sunlight at Alice's feet.

"I see you've met Clem."

The woman nodded towards the cat, before stiffly lowering herself to her knees and placing the bowl at Alice's feet. A tangle of dark swollen leaves floated in the steaming liquid, partially obscuring the bowl's delicate crosshatch pattern of blue. Something about it was familiar, until Alice realised her mother had one just the same.

A ripe, organic smell of fetid water wafted in the air. The woman reached into her cardigan pocket and placed a large box of band-aids beside the bowl. Watching her, Alice couldn't help curling her fingers protectively across her palm.

"Now," barked the woman as she grasped Alice's hand and turned it over. "Try and keep still." Her palm felt cool and smooth as she gently pried open Alice's fingers and spread them flat. Spread out across the woman's broad palm, Alice's hand looked small like a baby's.

The ginger cat spread itself across the wooden floor and closed its eyes. The tip of its tail snaked back and forth as though it had a life of its own.

"What's in the bowl?" Alice asked. The woman did not reply. She reached down with the clean cloth and soaked it in the steaming green liquid, then pressed it firmly against the wound. Alice gasped and tried to jerk her hand away, but the woman held on tight. Faint tendrils of steam rose from the cloth.

"That's not so bad, is it?" The woman said, looking up at Alice from under her bushy eyebrows. Her eyes were a bright cornflower blue.

“No, it’s not.” The throb in Alice’s palm had subsided, replaced by a warm glow. “It feels a lot better.”

The woman nodded and lifted the cloth to have a closer look at the cut. “You’ll be fine now,” she said. “Just make sure you keep a band-aid on it for a while.” She shook a band-aid from the box. The cloth had removed the encrusted blood and left a clean pink streak where her skin had been neatly sliced by the iron. The sides of the gash were white and slightly raised, but no more blood seeped out. The cut looked much longer now that it was cleaned.

“Here,” the woman said, thrusting the band-aid at Alice, “you can put this on yourself.” She rose to her feet, still clasping the wet cloth in one hand. As though waiting for her to finish, the ginger cat leapt up and stalked towards the woman, its erect tail curled into a hook. The woman bent down and ruffled the cat’s fur.

“Hungry now, Clem?” Her gruff tone was softened by a hint of tenderness. The cat looked up at her and opened its mouth in a silent cry. It weaved circles around her legs.

“Thank you for helping me,” Alice said, standing with one foot tucked behind the other. A loose tendril of hair had sprung free from her ponytail and was caught in the corner of her mouth. She brushed it away with the back of her hand.

The woman nodded, and bent to pick up the bowl of now cooling water. She straightened slowly, one hand on the small of her back.

“My name’s Bev.” Her gaze was direct. “Or else you can call me Mrs Pitchers. It’s up to you.” She smoothed the front of her crumpled apron with one hand before sliding in the packet of band-aids. Her cat sat a few feet away, glancing up at each of them in turn.

“Well, thanks Mrs Pitchers. My cut looks much better now.” Alice looked down at the band-aid stretched across her palm. “It’s not bleeding now. And it doesn’t even hurt.”

Mrs Pitchers looked pleased. Her blue eyes sparkled. “Just take care then.”

“I will, Mrs Pitchers,” Alice replied. “And I’ll check on the kitten on my way home.”

Mrs Pitchers nodded in reply. Without saying anything further, she disappeared into the house. The screen door slammed shut behind her.

Alice bent down and stroked the ginger cat's head.

"Bye Clem. See you again sometime."

The cat watched her leave, motionless except for the tip of his tail, snaking and weaving beside him.

* * *

After Alice disappeared into the street the cat turned his head to watch a bird swoop towards the birdbath. His ear flicked backwards at the creak of the screen door and the woman's heavy tread on the floorboards as she came and stood beside him.

"Well, Clem, that was a bit of excitement we don't normally get," said Mrs Pitchers as she folded her arms across her ample chest. She stood and listened to the usual chatter of birds and the distant drone of traffic from the main road a few streets away. With a grunt of discomfort she bent down and picked up the cat, ruffling his head as she tucked his long body into the crook of her arm.

"Come on then, you'd better go inside while I go and feed the others."

Clem bent his orange face up at her and purred. She opened the door and placed him gently in the hallway. The cat scurried towards the bright kitchen, his claws clicking on the linoleum.

"Good boy," Mrs Pitchers crooned at his retreating form, the plume of his orange tail held high, "see you when I get back."

She pulled the front door closed and rattled the keys in her pockets.

"Can't be too careful," she muttered to herself, as she thumped across the verandah and down her garden path, carrying a heavy plastic bag full of cat food.

The drone of traffic from the main road a few streets away was louder, which meant peak hour was in full swing. The woman looked up at the sky, already dimming with the onset of evening. A wash of orange and pink covered the sky.

"Nearly dark," she mumbled, and trudged on.

The street was deserted. As she passed each house she remembered earlier days, when at this time of the evening kids would be playing on the pavement, and mothers would chat to one another from their tiny front verandahs. They were all gone now.

When she reached the corner, one house had a green rubbish bin balanced precariously against the gutter, where the garbage truck had dropped it that morning. Bev Pitchers stopped and tugged it upright, before pushing it back beside the front door, remembering to dip her head as she stepped under the low verandah. She turned to walk away, but the cottage's front door opened a crack, and a tiny wizened face peered out.

"Oh, thank you Bev, you are a dear," the face piped up. Mrs Pitchers bent down towards the old woman, whose head barely reached up to her waist.

"Always a pleasure, Mrs Wilson," she replied, her voice booming in the enclosed space. "Is there anything you need?"

"No thank you, dear." Mrs Wilson squeaked. "Our Ron is coming by later on, and he's going to bring my groceries. So I'm right for now." She nodded her head and smiled, her face criss-crossed with a web of wrinkles. A twig like arm emerged from behind the door to pat the woman's arm.

"You go now, dear, it's getting late," she warbled.

"Goodbye Mrs Wilson." Mrs Pitchers replied, "I'll come by tomorrow and see how you're going." As she turned and walked out on to the pavement, she heard the front door close and the slide of locking deadbolts.

Now it was getting late. Bev Pitchers strode down the path that led around the back of the factory. She glanced through the cyclone wire fence into the abandoned car park, clearly empty of any living form.

"They must be waiting, poor devils," she said to herself, with a twinge of guilt. She quickened her step, and rounded the corner into the alleyway.

A battered Ford was parked crookedly alongside the corrugated iron fence, as though the driver had parked in haste. The woman shook her head. She recognised that car. But behind it was another vehicle she had never seen. It was an immaculate silver late model four wheel drive. She frowned. Cars like that never normally appeared in her area. As she walked past, she heard the sound of clanking buckets and a raised voice, followed by a clatter of hooves on concrete. A shrill whinny rang out.

She paused outside the stable gate. She had never been inside, although she had glimpsed horse's heads hanging over stable doors on the odd occasion the gate had been left open. As she waited, she tilted her head to catch any more sounds. But it was silent inside the stable yard. She shuffled closer to the gate and suddenly it swung open. She jumped back in surprise.

"Can I help you?" asked a man dressed in riding clothes, his face only centimetres from hers. Mrs Pitchers stepped backwards into the laneway and tried to regain her composure. The man was smiling, but his eyes were cold. With distaste she recognised Roger Quilty, leaner and more weathered than when she had last seen him.

"No, thank you." Mrs Pitchers stood upright, and squared her shoulders. She tried to look into the stable yard but Quilty moved to block her view.

"Excuse me," he said, and stepped up closer, his chin jutting out towards her. "I need to lock up now. If you don't mind..." He stared pointedly into her face, without a flicker of recognition. Mrs Pitchers blinked and felt an unfamiliar flutter of nerves. He turned his back on her, and locked the gate with a heavy padlock and chain.

"Is everything all right in there?" she asked. Quilty ignored her until he had finished with the padlock. He dropped it into place and it clanged against the iron fence. When he turned around he was smiling.

"Yes, everything's fine," he said smoothly. "Horses have a habit of getting nervous around feeding time." He laughed, revealing yellowed teeth. "Are you the lovely woman who takes care of those poor cats?" he asked, tilting his head solicitously towards her. She had forgotten how tall he was.

"Yes, I am," she replied. He rested his hand lightly on her shoulder. Mrs Pitchers shook it off. Unconcerned, he tucked it in to the pocket of his immaculate jodhpurs.

"Well, I've been feeding them too," he added, turning to gaze directly into her eyes. "I'm really glad I've finally met you." His smile was radiant, and Mrs Pitchers couldn't help smiling back.

He fumbled in his pocket for his car keys, clicked open the passenger door and leaned inside. As he straightened, he pulled out a bulky plastic bag bulging with tins just like Mrs Pitchers' own.

“Here you are,” he said, handing her the bag. “I bought this at the supermarket on my way here. You may as well have it.”

Mrs Pitchers took the bag from his grasp. She wasn’t sure what to say.

“Better go then,” he said cheerily as he slipped into the driver’s seat and switched on the engine, “see you some other time.”

The driver’s door slammed shut and he reversed the car past the woman, still standing with the plastic bag of cat food in one hand. From inside the bubble of his car’s interior she saw him lift his hand in a wave.

Once he was gone, heavy plumes of diesel exhaust hung in the air. Mrs Pitchers reached into her pinafore pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. She blew her nose, trumpet like, and then coughed.

“Filthy car,” she muttered. She leaned over the plastic bag and began to count the tins. There were five large ones, and a small bag of dried cat food. When she looked up she was no longer alone. Small forms had appeared from under the fence, cats of all shapes and sizes, and a large group of tiny kittens. They weaved between her legs, some miaowing plaintively, others silent. A few sat on the pavement and waited.

“I know, I know,” crooned the old woman. “Not long now.”

She slid her hand into her pinafore and removed a blackened spoon. From the bag she pulled out a battered Tupperware container, scratched and opaque from long use. One of the corners had sprung free and leaked cat food down the side. Mrs Pitchers wiped it clean with her handkerchief.

“Here you are, sweeties,” she said as she scooped cat food in clumps on the pavement. A swarm of cats descended on each pile, their hungry mouths devouring until there was only a dark stain of liquid left on the asphalt. Cats swarmed from one pile to another, in hope of finding a morsel of food. The small ones waited at the edges of the group, unable to fight their way past the hissing adults.

Mrs Pitchers looked inside the plastic bag and pulled out a large tin. She peeled off the lid and shook it until the contents slid free and dropped to the ground in a quivering mass. In a frenzy of abundance, Mrs Pitchers opened every tin, leaving small mountains of cat food spread across the empty parking lot. She opened the packet of dried food with her teeth and scattered it like seed. As the cats ate, she leaned against

the fence to admire her handiwork. The hissing stopped and each cat moved calmly between each pile.

Mrs Pitchers sat and watched them until each cat had eaten its final morsel. Her thoughts drifted to Roger Quilty. It had been years since she had seen him. The last time was when he was an assistant trainer at the now long defunct local racecourse and even then he had made her skin crawl. The cats wandered away and she got up heavily, her back aching. She cleaned up the used tins and stuffed them into her shopping bag before beginning the slow walk home.

* * *

The next morning Alice sat at the kitchen bench, idly tracing her fingertip over the smudged advertisements in the classified section of Saturday's newspaper. Her neck ached from bending forwards, and her black stained fingers left dark smears on the white laminate. She perused the column of classifieds, lingering on those she had circled in thick pencil:

“Attractive bay mare 14 hands lovely temperament good for beginners saddle included \$750 Ph 82399876.”

And another;

“Exceptional moving grey gelding, 15 hands, show winner, reluctant sale \$1,000 Ph 856743876.”

Each description brought an image of the horse in question springing to life in her mind's eye. But her attention kept returning to the first advertisement she circled, the one about the kind bay mare who would be gentle and good for beginners. Round and around her finger went, until the newspaper was soft and furred, the text reduced to a faint blur.

“Where's the paper, Alice?” her father asked, causing her to jump from her seat. “Come on, hand it over,” he said, reaching out his hand and twitching his fingers. “I want to read it before you mess it up any more.”

“Okay Dad.” Alice sidled away from the kitchen bench, hiding her blackened fingers behind her back.

Her father grabbed the paper and, folding it up neatly, tucked it under his arm. She watched his broad back covered in the thick folds of his terry towelling dressing gown retreat into the lounge room where he flopped onto the sofa and snapped the paper open, holding it up so she couldn’t see his face.

The phone rang. Alice reached across the kitchen bench and plucked it from its cradle on the wall. “Hello?”

“Hello darling,” cooed her mother on the other end of the line. “Can you get Dad for me?”

“Sure Mum. Are you having a good time?”

“Oh yes, sweetheart.” There was a pause and the muffled tones of a whispered conversation. “I think I might stay a few extra days, the weather’s so lovely here,” her mother continued. There was a man’s voice in the background. “Could you go and get your father please?”

“Dad,” she yelled, tilting towards the doorway, “it’s Mum on the phone.” She placed the receiver on the kitchen bench and leaned down close to it in an attempt to catch any more voices. But the line was quiet.

“What are you doing, Alice?” Her father, exasperated, pushed her out of the way and grabbed the receiver. She wandered into the lounge room and sat on the sofa. She could hear his voice rise and then descend into a violent whisper. The words eluded her, but she recognised the tone very well. Another argument. Her grubby fingers picked aimlessly at a loose thread on the sofa cover.

“Well fine, do what you like!” she heard her father yell, and he slammed down the telephone into the cradle with a crash. “Right!” he said, as he appeared in the doorway, his hair tousled and his lips pursed into an angry frown, “Grab that paper. Today we are going to buy you a horse!”

“But Dad...” Alice protested.

Her father held up his hand. “Don’t argue,” he replied, his tone firm. “Today is the day you are finally going to get a horse. You can’t tell me you don’t want one now,

after all the mooning you do every Saturday over the paper.” He sat down on the sofa with a thump and handed Alice the crumpled broadsheet.

“Now, pick one out, and we’ll go and see it.”

“But... What will Mum say?” Alice stammered. “Won’t she be angry when she finds out?”

“Don’t worry about her, I’ll take care of that,” her father replied. “She’s not here, so she can’t complain.”

Alice read out the classifieds she had circled to her father. The paper quivered from the tremors in her fingers.

“Too expensive,” he said as she made her way down the list.

“Isn’t there one for about \$300?”

Alice scanned the advertisements she hadn’t circled, afraid that he would change his mind. “Well, there’s this one,” she said dubiously, and pointed to a one line advertisement she had previously dismissed.

“Okay! That’s the one then!” Her father slapped his knees with the flat of his hands, as though the purchase was already a done deal. “Let’s go!”

After a brief phone call to the horse’s owner for directions, Alice was bundled out of the house and into the car. Her father drove towards their destination, whistling softly under his breath. As she watched the houses roll by from the passenger window, she wondered about the horse they were going to see. No mental picture came to mind.

When they arrived there was no-one waiting to greet them. Behind the house was a small yard, and in it stood a large brown horse, eyes closed and head hanging, the tip of one hind hoof resting on the dust. As they approached it raised its head, shifting its weight on to all fours. Thick tufts of hair covered its body, but not enough to hide its ribs.

Alice tugged her father’s hand, but he didn’t seem to notice. At that moment, a woman rounded the corner of the yard.

“Hello,” she said, eyeing Alice and her father with a dispassionate stare.

“Hello!” he replied, and his hand jutted out in the woman’s direction, ready for one of his enthusiastic handshakes. The woman did not respond.

Her father, undaunted, continued on. “We’ve come to try your horse. Can my daughter have a ride?”

The woman nodded. “Sure,” she said, with a quick appraising glance at Alice. “He hasn’t been ridden much, but he’s very quiet.”

She walked briskly away, only to reappear moments later with an old saddle and bridle slung over one arm. Alice watched as she threw the saddle on to the animal’s bony back and forced the dirty metal bit into its mouth. Her father chatted amiably to the woman, who remained silent. And then Alice was aboard, walking slowly near the yard, the horse’s long skinny neck stretched out in front of her.

The momentary exhilaration of riding was soon dimmed by the shuffling gait of the creature, which stumbled badly as the woman encouraged her to force it into an ambling trot.

“Well Alice,” said her father, “do you like it?”

Alice wanted to shout “NO! NO! I don’t!” But the woman’s piercing stare struck her into silence. She said nothing, and finally the horse staggered to a walk. Alice stared hard at her father, willing him to turn around so she could make some signal to him that she didn’t want this horse, not this one, but he stood resolutely with his back to her, chatting to the taciturn woman. Finally he turned towards his daughter, still plodding around the yard in ever decreasing circles. Alice thought the horse seemed tired.

“Well, you look like you’re having fun Alice,” he said with a beaming grin. He turned to the woman. “We’ll take him. Will you accept a cheque?”

She nodded, smiling for the first time. The horse stopped, and stood as though rooted to the ground. Alice slid off his back and held the cracked reins between her sweaty fingers. The horse ignored her.

Chapter 3

The following Monday after school Alice rode her bike to the stables. When she pedalled up to the gate the laneway was empty. She propped her bike up against the corrugated iron and bent down to peer under the gate. All she could see was more asphalt.

At that moment a battered car swept into the lane and pulled up alongside her. The radio blared from an open window. Alice sat up and pretended to fiddle with her shoelaces, her fingers fumbling with the already tight knots. The rumbling engine was extinguished and a car door slammed.

“Hi, are you okay?”

A dishevelled girl appeared and looked down at Alice, who was still crouching near the stable gate. The girl was tall and thin, her dark hair limp and hanging down her face. Her scuffed riding boots were encrusted with what looked like mud.

“Do you need any help?” The girl asked as Alice struggled to her feet.

“Oh no, I’m fine,” Alice stammered.

“Right,” the girl nodded. She looked over to Alice’s bike. “I thought you had some problem with your bike.” She stared enquiringly back at Alice, who flushed red. The girl smelled of sweat and dirty clothes.

“No, my bike is fine.” Alice shuffled her feet, unsure of what to say. “I’d better get home now.”

“Wait. Would you like to come inside and look at the horses?”

Alice knew her father wanted her home early. His warning voice rang in her mind but she blocked it out. “Okay,” she agreed. She wanted to ask about agistment, but did not know how to raise it.

The girl smiled, showing nicotine-stained teeth. She grabbed the handlebars of Alice’s bike and began wheeling it towards the stable door. “We’ll put it in here just in case,” she said. “You never know who might be lurking around in a place like this.” The girl wheeled Alice’s bike inside and propped it up against a dilapidated feed shed.

Alice followed, and as she closed the gate she saw the little kitten's face peering at them from a narrow gap in the fence.

Once the gate slammed shut it was like being in another world. It was so quiet in the stable yard. The high fence blocked out the constant hum of peak hour traffic from the main road only half a block away. Instead there were sounds of muffled hoof falls as the horses moved around their stalls, restless for their evening feed. A row of horses' heads hung over the half doors of their stables, waiting for their feed to arrive. One of the horses snorted softly. From inside the feed shed came a clang of buckets. "I'm in here," the girl shouted, "won't be long. Just have a look around."

At the sound of her voice one of the horses banged loudly with its hoof against the stall door. The girl appeared and growled at the horse, whose head disappeared from the stable door as it retreated to the back of the stall.

"Bloody mongrel," the girl muttered, as she melted back into the feed shed.

Alice noticed the rotted timbers, cracked paving littered with old feed and straw and the mountainous pile of the manure pit. The roof sagged, and the gutters were sprouting grass. Where were the sleek creatures with their shining coats, the gleaming bridles hanging by the stable doors, and the neat rows of immaculate stables, all freshly painted? The horse returned from the back of his stall and hung his head over the top. The wooden stall door was missing a plank and Alice could see his legs moving through the gap in a silent dance of impatience as he waited for his food. At that moment he swung his head towards her and gazed at her, ears pricked forward. His black head was long and bony, and had deep hollows above the eyes. A narrow white stripe stretched down his face, and then right at the end curved to one side and ended over one nostril. It gave him a strange, lopsided appearance.

More clanging came from the feed shed. The black head vanished and moments later a thunderous banging began to reverberate around the stable yard. Alice could see the horse's rump rising and falling in his stall as he kicked his stable door with both hind hooves. The old wood shuddered with every impact. A spray of dust and old straw floated down to the pavement with each blow, adding to the debris.

The girl flew from the feed shed and grabbed a pitchfork carelessly propped up against the manure pile.

“Shut up!” she yelled, and hit the stall door with the wooden handle.

The banging ceased instantly. Alice could see the top of the horse’s ears as he disappeared once more into the back of the stable.

The girl’s face was flushed red. Her freckles glowed darker and her skin was flecked with chaff. She grabbed the pitchfork and fumbled with the bolt on the stable door, oblivious to Alice’s presence.

“Oh, um... It’s okay...” Alice stammered, afraid she was going to beat the horse. “I can hold him if you like?”

Shyly, she walked towards the stable door and stood near the girl. She stood rigidly with the pitchfork in her hand, but her other hand slid from the bolt. She looked momentarily confused, as though Alice had disturbed a nightly routine and now she was unsure of what to do next. Alice’s nostrils curled at the girl’s sharp smell.

The horse stood quivering at the back of the stall. It’s neck and flanks were damp with a dull sheen of sweat. The girl took a final look at the horse and then gently propped the pitchfork against the wall. She brushed her hands against her pants and turned to face Alice. She took a deep breath before speaking to her in a perfectly normal voice.

“Sure.”

She grinned and reached for a battered halter hanging on a rusty hook near the door. “We’ll just tie him up out here where he can’t cause any trouble.”

She held the halter behind her back as she entered the stall, approaching the horse with careful steps and one hand outstretched. The animal shuffled backwards and pressed itself against the far wall. It kept its eye on the skinny girl, watching her every move. When she was close enough the girl flung the lead rope over the horse’s neck. Taking its opportunity, the horse lunged and bit the girl’s arm, swinging its head up immediately afterwards to avoid the retaliatory fist. The girl’s head barely reached the horse’s shoulder, but she was still able to loop the lead rope and drag the animal’s head down to where she could strap on the halter. As she led the horse from the stall she handed the lead rope to Alice, rubbing her arm ruefully with her free hand.

“Wish those things came with a muzzle,” she jerked her thumb towards the halter strapped firmly to the horse’s head.

Alice didn't know what to say. The girl shrugged, and disappeared back into the feed shed, leaving Alice alone in the stable yard gingerly holding the end of the rope.

The towering horse stood with his head raised high and ears pricked, staring into the far distance. Alice glanced in the direction he was looking towards so intently, a place over her left shoulder. A small striped face peered between the broad branches of the peppercorn tree growing alongside the high fence. When the kitten saw Alice looking, it arched its back and raised its tail in recognition. Alice smiled. But then the horse leapt to one side, nearly tugging the lead rope from between her fingers.

"Whoa," she whispered, not knowing what else to say. "Whoa, it's okay". She clutched the rope with both hands, then reached out and gently stroked the creature on the neck. It felt slimy with sweat. She quivered as she clutched the lead rope that hung between them as limp as a sausage.

"Nice job in calming him down," the girl's voice remarked from over her shoulder. "That one's a real devil."

She turned to see the girl leaning against the battered iron of the feed shed. She stared at Alice, one eye covered by a lank of stringy hair. "How old are you?" she asked, suddenly.

Alice felt the girl's gaze burn into the side of her face. "I'm thirteen."

The girl grinned. "You seem younger." She pushed herself from the wall with her shoulder and sauntered over. She trailed a long piece of hay stuck to her boot with a clod of manure. "Can you guess how old I am?" she asked.

Alice wasn't sure what to say.

"I knew you couldn't! Well, I'm sixteen, but I know I look way older." The girl grinned triumphantly. "My name's Bernie. What's yours?"

"Alice."

"Hi, nice to meet you." She walked towards Alice with her hand outstretched, but stopped as the big horse snorted loudly behind her. Her hand fell by her side, and she tucked her loose hair behind her ears, squinting up at the alert horse towering over Alice. "Just keep him there another minute while I get his feed," she mumbled.

When Bernie slouched away into the feed shed, Alice could feel the horse's tension dissipate. He dropped his head and began nosing at the blackened straw littering the ground.

"Don't eat that!" Alice whispered, giving the lead rope a light tug. "It's dirty!"

The horse raised his head obediently, but still kept it low as Alice brushed his forehead with her fingertips. Loose white hairs drifted slowly towards the ground and the horse's head dropped lower. Its ears drooped sideways.

"You look like an old donkey!" Alice whispered. She moved closer and ran her hand down the animal's neck. Up close it seemed even taller than before, and she could clearly see the curve of its ribcage through the sheen of its fine coat. Its belly was tucked up like a greyhound and its fine legs were smooth, although marked with small scars. The horse's mane was short and rubbed into tangled clumps, full of white dandruff.

"Yuk, look at you," Alice whispered, "You need a brush!" The horse snorted. It shook its head and a glob of greenish saliva landed on her arm.

"Great, look what you did now," Alice muttered. The saliva stuck firmly to her school jumper even though she shook her arm with abrupt jerks.

"Are you okay?"

Alice spun around to face Bernie, and tucked her arm behind her back.

"Yes, I'm fine. Thanks."

Bernie grinned, and began walking towards the nearest stable, a large white bucket in each hand. The horse pawed at the concrete with its front hoof, the metal shoe scraping against the hard surface. "Keep him there while I feed the others, will you?"

As Bernie clattered buckets in the stables, swearing at some of the impatient horses waiting inside, Alice wondered how she could bring up asking about agistment. At the back of her mind tugged the thought that she was going to be very late home.

"You know," she said, her voice raised so Bernie could hear her from the depths of the stall, "I'm looking for agistment for my horse." She paused, took a deep breath, and continued. "Is there any chance I could keep him here?"

From inside the stall there was silence. She could hear the soft sounds of horses munching their feed, and the shuffle of hooves from the horses still waiting. The horse behind her was quiet.

“Well...” Bernie appeared at the stall door and swung it closed, throwing the bolt across before turning to face Alice. She rested the two empty buckets at her feet. “We have racehorses here,” she paused and looked Alice up and down, “not kids’ ponies.”

“Oh, I don’t have a pony,” Alice stammered, “it’s a full size horse.”

Bernie looked taken aback, and then laughed, tipping her head back so Alice could see down the black hole of her throat.

Alice bit her lip so hard it stung. Her skin tingled as the blush spread to her ears. “I... I mean he’s not a racehorse... but...” she willed herself to stop talking, as Bernie’s chuckles subsided.

Bernie wiped her eyes on her grubby sleeve. “You know, you are the second kid who has come around here lately...” she paused, looking Alice up and down. “Maybe the Boss has some room on the farm,” she added.

Before Alice could answer, the horse behind her swung its head in the air, nearly pulling the lead rope from her grasp. Alice clung to the rope and tried to pat its head, but the horse raised it so high that she couldn’t reach.

“We’d better feed him and put him away,” Bernie said briskly, her tone suddenly matter-of-fact. “And then we can talk.”

She disappeared into the horse’s stall with the full bucket, and Alice could hear the sound of grain rattling against the metal feed bin as she filled it. The horse could hear it too, and barged against Alice’s shoulder in an effort to get back to his stall. Alice didn’t know how much longer she could hold him.

“Bring him in now,” Bernie shouted from the depths of the stall.

Alice gingerly led the horse around the hitching rail towards its stable, but as she reached the entrance it pulled free and charged inside, its hooves thundering on the bare concrete. She heard Bernie shout and then curse, before emerging with the halter hung over her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Alice said. “I just couldn’t hold him any more.”

“That’s okay,” Bernie replied, in a gruff tone. “Just wait here until I finish feeding the others.” She glanced down at her watch. “I’m running late already.”

Moments later Bernie reappeared beside Alice, wiping her damp hands on her jeans.

“Okay then, just ring this number,” Bernie said, as she pulled a pencil stub from her pocket and scribbled across a piece of crumpled paper, before thrusting it at Alice. “That’s the Boss and he’ll be able to tell you if he’s got room.”

She glanced across at Alice’s bike propped up against the fence. “You could almost ride there tonight,” she said, before adding, “if you’ve got time. The place isn’t far from here. Only a couple of minutes in the car, but I don’t know how far on a bike.”

“That’s okay,” Alice replied, “I can always go tomorrow. And thanks very much for giving me this number.” Alice waved the piece of paper at Bernie’s retreating figure.

“No worries,” replied Bernie. “I’d better finish these bloody horses otherwise there’ll be hell to pay.”

Alice wheeled her bicycle into the laneway.

“Bye then,” she said, turning to wave. Bernie raised her hand in a salute before swinging the gate closed. Alice was almost ready to ride away when Bernie called out after her.

“Make sure you come out to the farm!”

Before Alice could answer, the corrugated iron gate clanged shut, and she was alone in the laneway. She stuffed the piece of paper in her pocket and pedalled towards home.

Later that evening, Alice and her father had another take-away dinner together. After chasing the last few grains of rice around her plate, Alice stood up from the table.

“Have you finished, Dad?” she asked. Only a few dried crusts of spring roll clung to his greasy plate.

“Yes, thanks, love,” he answered, grinning up at her as he slid a toothpick in between two back teeth.

Alice cleared the table and took the dirty dishes in to the kitchen, where she dumped them on the kitchen bench. One of the glasses fell on its side and rolled off the bench in slow motion. It hit the floor with a thud.

“Alice, did I hear something fall?” her father yelled from the lounge room.

“No. Everything’s ok.”

She leaned down to pick the glass up from the floor. There was no response from the next room. Alice placed it neatly down on the bench top, beside the plates. “Dad...” she yelled, “I think I’ve found somewhere to keep my horse.” She paused. The muted sounds of the television drifted in from the next room. She waited, idly pushing the glasses around the white oval of the dirty plates.

“Where? Is it nearby? Because I don’t have much time to drive you around to go and see it, you know.” Alice’s father appeared, his round bulk filling the doorway.

“Yes I know, Dad.”

“That’s why Miranda and I want to go and have a look at it tomorrow. On our bikes,” she added, hastily.

There was a long pause from the doorway.

“Well... where is it? Do you have to ride far? You know I don’t like you riding around on your bike after school, especially since that girl went missing, the one I read about in the paper. What was her name?”

“Her name was Charlotte, Dad. Charlotte Evans.”

“Yes, that’s right. And she was your age, wasn’t she? With a horse connection?” Alice’s father gave her one of his piercing stares.

“I don’t know, Dad,” Alice replied, exasperated. “Don’t worry, we’ll be fine. And anyway, this place is not far. It’s just up the road from here. You know that farm with the white fences? Well, it’s there.”

“Oh, yes...” Her father rubbed the back of his head. “Well, okay. I suppose that’s alright. But...” he held up an index finger and pointed it at her, “you must come straight home afterwards, and be back well before dark. Is that agreed?”

“Agreed.” Alice stood up from her seat and grinned. “Thanks Dad.”

“At least it will get that woman off my back, she’s been driving me mad. How am I supposed to know where to keep her horse? She should have thought of that before she sold it to us.” He winked at his daughter and wandered back to the lounge room. She heard the sofa creak as he sat down. The television droned on.

Alice remained in the kitchen. Her mind wandered back to the feel of the horse’s coat against the flat of her hand as she stroked his neck, and the clean smell of fresh hay. She raised her fingertips to her nose and breathed deeply. Remnants of the warm smell of horse sweat still clung to her fingers.

The dirt road wound its way up the hill ahead. Long shafts of late afternoon sunlight stretched across the hard clay as Alice slid from her bicycle seat and turned around to face Miranda, who laboured behind, standing upright on her bicycle pedals in an effort to catch up. A light breeze shimmered the eucalyptus leaves above their heads, and blew a curtain of hair across Alice’s face. She pushed it brusquely away with the flat of her hand and tucked it behind one ear.

“Hurry up, Miranda!” she yelled. “Otherwise we won’t make it.”

Alice had to control the urge to just pedal on and leave her struggling friend behind.

Miranda didn’t answer, but lowered her head and pedalled with renewed effort. Alice twisted forward in her seat and stared ahead. They hadn’t ridden far past the last house and yet the suburbs felt far away. A lopsided barbed wire fence sagged beside the road. The paddock appeared vacant, only magpies strutted amongst the tussocks of tall grass.

Miranda’s bike skidded to a stop beside Alice. She did not speak or even look up. She slumped against the handlebars, chest heaving. Alice glanced over at her friend and waited. Fingers of shadow lengthened across the road, and as the sunlight retreated Alice shivered at the sudden chill in the air.

“Come on now, Miranda,” Alice said, “it must be at the top of this hill.” She looked over at her friend who nodded her assent.

“Let’s keep going.”

A rosella swooped low in front of Alice, gliding on green wings. It screeched to its mate and veered away between the gum trees. Alice kept riding. This time Miranda was just behind her, and she could hear her tyres crunching on the loose pebbles. The road curved right and then levelled out. They had reached the crest of the hill.

“Thank God!” Miranda muttered.

A white sign lay ahead, partly obscured by a row of native shrubs. Alice turned and grinned at her friend.

“Look, we’re here!” She jabbed her finger towards the sign.

“Yeah, great!” Miranda nodded.

A neat pattern of paddocks enclosed by lines of white fencing unfolded before them. The sign by the entrance read “*Sunnybrook Farm Thoroughbred Agistment*”. The proprietors’ names were Roger and Cheryl Quilty. Suddenly she felt nervous about entering, and skidded her bike to a stop.

“Watch it!” Miranda screeched, almost colliding with Alice. “Why did you stop?”

“I don’t know,” Alice said. She gazed at the white fences, the pink roses lining the driveway, and the green hedge up ahead behind which were surely the immaculate stables and house. “It just seems so nice here...”

Miranda reached over and rested her fingers on Alice’s arm. “Don’t worry,” she said softly, “the worst they can do is say no.” She looked up the long driveway, “and it is close to home.”

Miranda hoisted herself back on her bike seat and pedalled up the drive.

“And anyway,” she yelled over her shoulder, “after making me come up that hill, we’re going in.”

Alice grinned and rode after her. It didn’t take long to reach the tall hedge they had seen from the road. A rectangular space was cut in the centre, to make room for a white wooden gate. The hedge was cut square, with not a tendril loose. As they rode past Alice caught a glimpse of a Victorian villa, wrapped in a wide shaded verandah.

They followed the driveway as it wound around the house. It ended in a turning circle and parking area beside a stone wall festooned with climbing roses. They propped their bikes up beside a battered white utility.

“Will our bikes be okay here?” Miranda whispered.

Alice nodded. “Yeah, I think so.” With a glance at her friend, she walked over to a narrow wooden gate at one end of the wall and slipped her hand under the latch. The gate creaked open. Alice grimaced at the sound, and she heard Miranda stifle a giggle. “I feel like a thief,” she whispered.

There seemed to be nobody around. A brick path led around the side of the building, and then opened out into a large stable yard. The wall they had parked their bikes against was actually the back of the stables, built in an “L” shape around an open stable yard. A covered shed with tie up rails and a wash bay were built along the other side, and looked like a modern addition. The girls paused as they rounded the corner. Spread out before them was a patchwork of sweeping green paddocks, criss-crossed by white wooden fences. Each one appeared to be inhabited by a single horse, and they were dotted across the valley into the middle distance. The property was much larger than it appeared to be from the road. The horse in the paddock beside the yard raised his head and whinnied. It stood staring at them, ears pricked forward.

Miranda elbowed Alice and they stared back at the watching horse. The animal snorted loudly. A spray of droplets flew from his wrinkled nostrils before he dropped his head and resumed grazing, one eye firmly planted on the two girls.

“That’s Ned, he keeps an eye on everything around here.”

Both girls jumped. The voice came from somewhere behind them. A slender form emerged from the gloom of one of the stables. It was a boy, with a pitchfork slung over one shoulder.

“Can I help you?” His gaze swung from one girl to the other.

Alice and Miranda exchanged glances, and spoke at exactly the same moment. The boy held his hand up to halt the stream of words with a wide grin spread across his freckled face. Alice’s cheeks flushed. The boy’s grin widened, and Alice couldn’t help noticing how white his teeth were.

Miranda spoke first. She pointed to her friend.

“Alice is looking for somewhere to keep her horse. A girl down at the stables near the racecourse told us to come here and ask.”

There was a brief silence. The boy scratched his head and looked away towards the horse called Ned, who had walked over to the fence and hung his head over the top rail as though waiting for a pat.

“I’m not the person to talk to,” he replied, finally. “And I’m not sure if the Boss is here right now.”

He bounced the end of his pitchfork against the brick paving to loosen wisps of hay tangled in the spines.

“You can go and ask at the house.”

He nodded his head in the direction of the thick hedge. The house’s red roof was clearly visible from where they stood.

“Oh, okay.” Alice nodded.

“Right then.” The boy raised his free hand in a farewell gesture. “See you around.”

He walked towards the empty stables, ignoring Ned whose neck was stretched over the fence, his gaze intently fixed on the boy. When he was gone the horse shuffled away to nose at his feed bin.

Alice and Miranda stood uncertainly in the stable yard.

“Do you think we should go?” Miranda asked, in a quiet voice. “There’s a number on the sign out the front, we could get it and then your Dad could call tonight.”

“Why don’t you want to ask?” Alice whispered back. “We’re here now so we may as well.”

She strode towards the hedge. Alice turned around after a few paces and looked back at her friend, still standing uncertainly in the stable yard.

“Are you coming?”

“Yes, I’m coming!”

They followed a gravel path that led them towards the back of the house. The back door was propped open by a brick and radio sounds murmured inside.

The girls walked towards the door but stopped abruptly as a woman's head and shoulders emerged from behind a clump of rose bushes. One of her hands rested on the small of her back as if staving off pain.

"Who are you?" she asked sharply. She frowned, causing a deep furrow to form between her eyebrows. A scarf wrapped her hair, but her face was framed by a halo of escaped blonde tendrils.

Alice stepped forward and gestured towards the stable yard.

"Hi," she stammered. "My name is Alice and I was wondering if I could speak to the owner. I am looking for somewhere to keep my horse."

The woman's expression did not soften.

"I don't live far away," she added. "Just down the hill there." She pointed in the direction of the driveway.

"I don't know who gave you the idea that we did agistment." The woman's voice was cold. "This is a racehorse training establishment." Her icy gaze swept over the two girls. "And we don't do pony club here."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Alice muttered. Her eyes felt hot. Miranda hung her head and looked down at the ground, shuffling one toe on the gravel.

"Please don't do that."

Alice froze, but the woman's head motioned towards Miranda.

"I'm sorry." Miranda's voice was so soft it was almost a whisper.

The woman pursed her lips and made a small disapproving noise, but did not reply. "Cheryl! Where are you?" A man's voice echoed from the house.

Alice heard heavy footsteps, and a tall figure appeared at the back door.

"Cheryl. There you are!" The voice sounded irritated. "Have you seen..." The man stopped when he caught sight of the girls standing awkwardly near the gate.

"Oh, I didn't realise we had guests!" His tone shifted to one of gruff good humour. He walked towards them, hand outstretched. "Roger Quilty." The man's angular face smiled down at Alice, but his eyes were cold. An odour of stale cigarette smoke emanated from his immaculate clothes.

Alice poked out her hand and the man clasped it in his long fingers. "Nice to meet you," he said, staring deeply into Alice's eyes. He squeezed her hand until she

shook it free and tucked it behind her back. Unconcerned, he turned to Miranda. “And who is your friend?”

“Miranda,” Alice replied. “And I’m Alice.”

“And how can I help you, Alice?” he asked. Alice noticed a faint twinkle in his eye, as though he was enjoying himself.

“Well, I am looking for agistment for my horse. A girl at your stables told me to come and ask here.” Alice looked over at Cheryl, still frowning in disapproval. “But if you don’t do agistment that’s okay. I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

The man listened without comment. When she had finished he turned to Cheryl.

“I don’t know who told you we don’t do agistment. It’s on the sign, for God’s sake!” His voice was hard. Cheryl’s head dropped and she walked inside the house without saying a word. “So, when do you want to bring it here?” The man smiled at Alice.

“Pardon?”

“Your horse! When would you like to bring it here?”

“Oh, um... next weekend?”

Alice remembered her list of questions. She rummaged in her pocket before pulling out a crumpled piece of pink paper. A flicker of amusement crossed the older man’s face.

“Um... how much is it a week?” she continued, trying to flatten the slight stammer in her voice. “It’s just my Dad will want to know.”

Roger Quilty crossed his arms and gazed out towards the green fields beyond the gate. He took a few moments to answer, and Alice was sure he was going to nominate a price they couldn’t afford. Finally he spoke.

“For you, fifteen dollars a week. And we’ll throw some hay in as well. How’s that sound?”

“Okay.”

“Fine, then. That’s all sorted.”

The man pulled a business card out of his pocket and scribbled a number on the back with a pencil stub. He handed it to Alice.

“Here’s my mobile number. Ask your Dad to call me and we’ll sort out how to get your horse here.”

“Thanks Mr Quilty.”

“Well, girls, you’d better be getting home.” He patted his coat pockets as though searching for something, before pulling out a battered soft pack of cigarettes with his fingertips. “Off you go.” He waved his hand dismissively at them, before striking a match and lighting his cigarette with one hand. Before they could answer, he turned his back to them and disappeared into the house, leaving a cloud of cigarette smoke.

Alice and Miranda exchanged glances and fled the garden. Their bikes looked forlorn in the empty yard. The utility was gone.

Miranda wheeled her bike away from the wall and climbed aboard. “I know it’s good news about the agistment and all... but that guy gives me the creeps!”

“Shhh...” Alice admonished, holding a finger to her lips. “Don’t talk so loud!”

“Well, I’m out of here,” Miranda replied. “Beat you to the end of the drive!”

Alice leapt on to her bike and took off after her friend’s flying ponytail.

“Truck, I suppose.” Alice’s father sounded doubtful. He scratched the side of his face with one finger. Alice could hear the faint mumble of a voice down the other end of the line. “I see... then what would you suggest? Because as you know, we don’t have a horse float.” Her father listened to the mumble for a while longer. Alice stayed glued to the armchair, looking down at her feet planted on the carpet. “Well, thank you, that would be very helpful.” He paused and waited for the mumble to finish. “This Saturday would be fine. Around 10 o’clock. Yes, we’ll be there. Do you know the place? Sunnybrook Farms? You do? O really, what a coincidence! Well that makes it easy then. See you Saturday. Bye.”

Her father put down the phone and muttered under his breath. He flopped down on the sofa opposite Alice. She leaned forward, her elbows propped on her knees.

“Well... Dad... what did you decide?”

“Don’t worry sweetheart, it’s sorted. That woman is bringing the horse to the farm for us on Saturday, which is one less thing we have to worry about.” He sighed and stretched his arms out across the back of the sofa. “She is an odd kind of woman, though.”

“Is that what you said when she hung up the phone?”

Her father shot her a piercing look. “Did you hear that? Well, it’s not exactly what I said, but that doesn’t matter.” He grinned. “It’s just that woman’s manner. At least she knows the farm you found, so she didn’t need directions. Bit of a coincidence, I reckon. But then these horse people probably all know each other.”

He reached for the television remote and pointed it at the set in the corner. The screen flickered to life. “News time,” he announced, with a lopsided grin at his daughter. He swung his legs onto the coffee table as Alice got up from her seat. “Not staying, Alice?”

“No Dad. Too boring.” She leapt out of her chair and skipped down the hallway towards her room.

Pale light seeped through the edges of her drawn curtains when Alice’s bedside alarm chimed at 6 am the following Saturday morning. Alice got up and padded into the kitchen to prepare breakfast. She thought of all the things she needed to remember to bring with her: a halter and lead rope, her grooming kit and riding hat, just in case. It seemed like a short list.

Back in her bedroom, she dressed and glanced at her clock. Six thirty. She propped her plastic grooming kit near the door, along with the halter and her hat. She sat on her bed and waited until her father knocked on her door at seven thirty.

“Alice,” he called, “time to get up!”

“Come in Dad. I’m ready.”

“Of course you are,” he said, putting his face around the door. “Well, let’s hit the road in 20 minutes. Just give me time to have a coffee.”

Alice emerged from the house into the sparkling morning. She put her gear in the car boot and buckled herself in to the front passenger seat and waited.

“You are not messing around today,” her father said as he reversed down the driveway. “Normally it’s me waiting in the car for you.”

“That’s because you are usually taking me to school.”

They drove on. Alice watched the passing suburban streetscape slowly thin out to open bushland and small fields. The houses were few and far between, and then they were driving through thick scrub, the car weaving around the tight bends.

“How do you get here on your bike?” her father asked. “I wouldn’t be happy for you to ride on these roads.”

“We take the short cut, Dad,” Alice replied, her eyes fixed to the passing scenery.

“Just so long as you don’t come along here,” he muttered without taking his eyes off the road.

They drove up the hill and over the crest. The large horse property stretched out in the valley before them.

“Looks pretty flash Alice,” her father said, dubiously. “Are you sure it’s not too expensive?”

“No Dad.” Alice replied firmly. “I’ve already told you. Mr Quilty said the agistment is fifteen dollars a week, including hay.”

“Okay then.”

They parked beside the large hedge. There didn’t seem to be anyone around.

“Hang on Dad, I’ll go and see if I can find somebody.”

Her father nodded.

“Fine. I’ll just move the car over there.” He pointed to the wall. “That way Mrs Simpson can get her truck in and turn it around.” For a moment Alice couldn’t think who Mrs Simpson was, but then she realised who he meant.

“Good thinking Dad.”

She leapt from the car and went into the stable yard. All the stables were empty. Their doors were open and the bedding inside was swept up into small piles. Somewhere in the building a radio played softly.

Alice walked through the stable yard and through the gate into Mr Quilty's garden. This time there was nobody there. She walked up to the back door and knocked. The sound echoed through the house. Alice waited, but still no one came. She retraced her steps and this time she heard a clang of buckets from one of the stables. She poked her head around the open door.

"Excuse me," she asked, hesitantly, "my name is Alice and I'm bringing my horse here today." A figure emerged from the stable's gloom and Alice recognised the boy she had met earlier.

"Right," he said, dubiously. "No-one told me about it." He paused, and looked her up and down. "Have you had the horse long?" Alice thought it was an odd question.

"No, I haven't. The woman we are buying him from is delivering him here today." She paused, and the boy didn't reply. "I think he was a racehorse once." She added, hopefully.

He slid his cap back on his head and met her gaze. She noticed his eyes were a very pale blue. "Well I suppose that's fine then." Alice noticed a faint flicker of a smile. "Everyone's away at the races, but we can turn him out in the back paddock. He won't do any harm there."

"My Dad's waiting in the car park. Can I tell him we'll bring my horse in here when he arrives?"

"Sure." The boy replied. "I'll just be mucking out one of these stables anyway, and then I'll show you where to take him."

He turned and disappeared back into the stall. Alice raced around the corner and up to where her father was waiting in the car, his arm resting on the doorframe. She knew he'd probably be longing for a cigarette, like he always did when he was waiting. Her father hated waiting.

"It's sorted Dad," she said, breathless from running. She glanced up over the car's roof and saw a small white truck swaying up the winding driveway.

"He's here!"

The driver acknowledged her with a wave of her hand, dangling outside the open window. A loud pounding came from the back of the truck.

As the truck lumbered into the parking area the boy from the stables appeared and stood beside Alice.

“Could hear him coming a mile off. Thought I may as well come and help out.” The boy explained.

The truck circled and then stopped. Alice caught a glimpse of Mrs Simpson’s grim expression. Her face was set in a frown of concentration.

The car door slammed as Alice’s father emerged to greet Mrs Simpson, who opened the truck door and jumped to the ground. The pounding from the inside of the truck had stopped.

“Had a good journey?” Alice’s father asked.

Mrs Simpson snorted. “Fine thanks.”

Something in her expression told Alice this wasn’t true. The older woman strutted around to the back of the truck and unlatched the tail ramp. The boy helped her lift down the ramp, while Alice and her father looked on. Step by step Alice’s horse emerged from the truck. First his wisp of a tail appeared, then his narrow hindquarters and skinny body. Once he was standing on the driveway, he raised his head and whinnied loudly. The noise was deafening. From somewhere in one of the paddocks a horse whinnied back.

“Bit of life in the old devil yet,” the boy remarked.

Mrs Simpson frowned. “He’s very quiet. He should give you no trouble.”

As if to contradict her, the horse snorted and pawed at the gravel, spraying it on to Alice’s father’s car. Small stones ricocheted against the duco.

“Steady on!” Alice’s father exclaimed. “That’s my new car!”

Alice wasn’t listening. She watched her horse as he stood with his head up, gazing into the distance. Mrs Simpson had to tug at the lead rope a number of times before the animal followed her. She led him to Alice and handed her the rope.

“He’s all yours now. Good luck.”

Without waiting for a reply she turned and disappeared around the other side of the truck to close the tailgate. Alice turned her attention to her new horse. She didn’t recognise this imposing creature whose head was held high as he gazed out to the

paddocks in the distance. For the first time she noticed he had a white star under his wispy forelock.

Alice barely registered her father's rapid whisper to Mrs Simpson until she appeared beside Alice holding a dusty saddle and dried out bridle.

"These are yours too," she said as she thrust them at Alice.

Alice glanced over at her father, who was grinning and gave her the thumbs up.

"Here let me take this," the boy said, as he materialised beside her and lifted the saddle and bridle from her arms. "And follow me," he jerked his head in the direction of the horse. "We'd better get him settled."

"Okay, thanks."

"And by the way, my name's Alex." He draped the bridle across the saddle seat and tucked the whole lot expertly under one arm.

"Hi Alex. Thanks so much for your help." And Alice meant it.

"No worries," he muttered. He handed the gear to Alice's father and indicated for Alice to follow him.

"Let's turn this bloke out."

Alice nodded and turned to her Dad, who was putting her saddle in the car boot. She noticed him glance surreptitiously at his watch.

"I'll be back in a minute, Dad," she called.

"Fine!" he replied, raising one hand to Alex. "Thanks mate for your help."

Alex waved back and they began walking. They plodded along until they reached the raceway, a narrow grassy corridor between two paddocks. Alex trudged up ahead and made no conversation as they made their way towards the property's far boundary. Without warning, a horse in the adjoining paddock thundered over the rise, screeching to a halt at the fence line. Alice's horse attempted a few prancing steps but Alex stopped him with a sharp tug on the halter. The other horse kicked out and squealed, before galloping up the hill, bucking as it went.

"Bloody idiot!" Alex muttered. "I should have warned you. He's always doing that."

They walked on until they arrived at a large metal farm gate opening out into a paddock with wire fences, not white wooden ones like the others.

“This is where we put dry broodmares,” Alex said by way of explanation as he swung the gate wide so Alice and her horse could pass. “Let him go in here and I’ll pass by later and check him when I feed up.”

“Okay,” Alice nodded.

Eager to get away, her horse snorted and shook his head. The buckle loosened and the halter dropped at her feet. Suddenly free, the horse put his head down and rocketed away, galloping over the hill, neighing and bucking, sending clods of mud flying. This wild creature did not seem like the same animal she had ridden only a week before.

Alex swung the gate closed. “Horse moves well,” he commented wryly as they trudged back up the hill towards the stable yard.

Chapter 4

“He’s beautiful Miranda,” Alice whispered excitedly into the phone. “Well, he’s a bit skinny for now, but once he gets some weight on...” she giggled. “I think I’m going to call him Bucephalus! Maybe Bruce for short.”

There was silence down the other end of the line.

“Miranda?? Are you still there?”

Miranda cleared her throat. “Yes, I’m here. Sorry Alice. Bruce sounds great. I can’t wait to see him.”

“Why don’t you come riding with me tomorrow? We can ride double. I’m sure Bruce won’t mind.”

“I’d love to Alice,” Miranda replied. “That would be awesome.” There was a pause and Alice thought she heard a woman’s voice in the background. “I’d better go now.”

“Sure.” Alice replied. “Just come over to my place around 8.30. And don’t forget to put the basket on your bike, because we need to carry the gear with us.”

“Okay,” Miranda replied, her voice soft. “See you tomorrow then.” And she hung up.

Alice was left staring into the beeping receiver. She placed it back in the cradle with unusual care.

The next morning a soft tap on her window woke Alice. For a moment she lay quiet, unsure as to whether she was still dreaming. Then she heard it again: tap, tap, tap. Alice sprang out of bed and snapped the blind open. As she slid up the window Miranda tumbled in from outside.

“Sorry if I scared you!” she exclaimed in a loud whisper, not looking the least bit contrite. “Did you think I was a murderer?” Her face lit up with glee.

“No way! I knew it was you.”

Alice curled back under the bedclothes and Miranda slipped under the covers at the end of her bed.

“So why are you here so early?” Alice asked.

“Well, I just couldn’t wait to come and see Bruce!” Miranda giggled. “I love that name!” Her smile faded as she turned to her friend, suddenly serious.

“I’m sorry if I seemed rude last night, but you rang in the middle of a fight with Mum. She was standing right near me so I couldn’t tell you.” Miranda paused, and picked at an invisible thread on her jumper. When she looked up her expression had brightened. “But then I woke up really early, so I thought I’d come and get you up!”

Alice glanced over at her bedside clock. 6.30am.

“Come on, let’s go!”

Both girls threw off the bedclothes and jumped out of bed. Alice pulled on her riding clothes and they tiptoed down the hallway into the kitchen. After grabbing carrots and apples from the fridge they slipped out of the house through the back garden.

Alice had already tied the saddle on to the front bar of her father’s bike.

“Is that your new saddle?” Miranda asked. “What about the bridle?”

“That’s where your basket comes in,” Alice replied. “Where is your bike anyway?” Miranda’s bike was nowhere to be seen.

“I tied it up on the street.” Miranda said. “I didn’t want to wake your Dad up by wheeling it past his window at 6.30 in the morning. He might have thought I was a weirdo if he came out and busted me.”

Alice smiled. “Don’t worry, he thinks you’re a weirdo anyway!”

Miranda slapped her friend’s arm in mock outrage. “He does not! He loves me!”

Alice grinned and held her finger to her lips. They crept past her father’s window, steadying the saddle between them. When they reached the footpath Alice saw her friend’s bike chained to a street pole. Miranda had not forgotten the basket.

As they rode up the farm's driveway Alice noticed a long horse truck parked near the stable block. Horses were being loaded up the steep ramp, swaddled in cotton rugs from head to toe. They stepped gingerly forwards in long padded boots which reached almost to their bellies.

"It must be race day," Miranda said, with a sideways look at Alice.

As they rode past the truck no-one greeted them or even gave them a second look. The grooms were stony faced as they led the horses up the ramp, one by one. Alice wondered why they seemed so grim. None of them patted the horses or even spoke to them. As Alice rode past one of the animals it suddenly reared, nearly lifting the handler off her feet.

"Jesus! You bastard!" a girl's voice exclaimed, clearly taken by surprise. The horse snorted loudly and dropped to all four feet but then stood rigid, head raised, staring at Alice and her bicycle with the strange shape aboard.

The girl steadied the animal and then turned to follow the horse's gaze. Alice recognized Bernie and smiled. The older girl grimaced with annoyance.

"Bloody hell," she shouted, "couldn't you have gone the other way? Can't you see we're loading here?"

"Sorry," Alice muttered. "I didn't realise..." Her voice petered off into an indistinct mumble.

Bernie turned away and tugged the horse's halter. After a few moments the animal dropped his head and followed her up the ramp into the truck, pushing her with his shoulder as he passed.

Alice dismounted from her bike and wheeled it to the wall. Miranda did the same, following silently in case she should startle a horse and get into trouble too. The air around them rang with the drumming of horses' hooves as they loaded up the ramp and jostled inside the truck, hammering the floor as though impatient to get moving. Alice fumbled with her saddle, trying to untie the rope she had so diligently wrapped around it the night before. But now she regretted her thoroughness. All she wanted to do was get it off as quickly as possible. Her eyes burned with the familiar prickle of tears. At another harsh word she was afraid she would begin to cry. Just the thought of it mortified her.

As she loosened the final knot she felt a hand on her elbow.

“Hi,” a familiar voice said, “Do you want me to show you where to put that?”

Alice turned around and recognised Alex, the boy who helped on the day her horse arrived. He looked different; his hair was washed and combed off his forehead, and he wore a clean shirt and moleskins.

“Oh thanks,” she muttered. As he reached for the saddle she surreptitiously wiped the corners of her eyes with her sleeve.

Alex slung the saddle over his arm and introduced himself to Miranda.

“Hi, I’m Alex,” he said, matter-of-factly. Once he saw Alice had her things he nodded in the direction of the stables. “It’s this way.”

The three of them avoided the truck, which now had its ramp up and engine rumbling, ready to leave. Alice and Miranda trotted behind Alex who led them around the stable block and into a breezeway with a row of stables on either side.

“Aren’t you going too?” Alice asked. “I don’t want to hold you up.”

“Don’t worry,” Alex replied over his shoulder. “I’m going with the Boss in his car. He told me to show you where the tack room is.”

“Okay,” Alice replied. “Thanks.”

The tack room was full of rows of tiny flat saddles suspended over metal rails. The far end of the room was used as an office. Its shelves overflowed with paper and files, and an ancient grey filing cabinet dominated one corner. Framed photographs of racehorses covered the walls. Alice breathed in the sweet smell of leather and looked across at her friend, who was mesmerised by the old photographs, her eyes scanning each one.

Alex walked towards an empty rack at the end of the row of saddles. He slid Alice’s saddle on to it and pointed to the bare space underneath.

“You can keep your gear here,” he said. “If the door’s locked, just come and find me and I’ll open it for you.” He nodded at them and was about to leave when Miranda moved forward.

“My name’s Miranda,” she blurted. “Sorry I didn’t say anything before,” she added.

“No worries,” Alex replied with a smile. “Better go now. Can’t keep the Boss waiting.” His boots rapped on the concrete floor as he walked away.

Alice and Miranda exchanged glances. A look of delight suffused Miranda’s face.

“This is amazing, Alice.” She pointed at the wall of photographs. “There’s some pretty famous racehorses on that wall.”

Miranda was about to speak again but Alice put her finger to her lips. She walked quietly towards the doorway and peeked out into the corridor. The stable block was silent: no ringing of hooves on the concrete, no quiet shuffling from the stables. Alice couldn’t hear voices or even a radio.

“It’s fine,” she declared in a normal voice. “There doesn’t seem to be anyone here. They must have all left for the races.”

Miranda looked relieved. “Good. That girl was full on!”

Alice didn’t explain to her friend that she had met Bernie before. She rummaged in her bag until she found the halter. She pulled it out along with a carrot, which she stuffed in her pocket.

“Come on, let’s go.”

Miranda looked surprised. “Are you going to bring Bruce up here?” she asked.

“Yep. Why not?”

The girls walked towards Bruce’s paddock. Once they were out of sight of the stable yard they skipped down the slight incline. The horses paused from their grazing as the girls passed. One of them galloped off, his head and tail raised high as he circled his paddock, before skidding to a halt at the fence line.

“He did that the first day Bruce came,” Alice commented. “I think he’s a bit mental.”

Miranda stopped and reached out her hand to the snorting animal. His flanks were heaving and a slight sheen of sweat lay over his sleek coat. The horse arched its neck and delicately sniffed her fingers.

“He’s beautiful!” she gasped. “His nose is so soft, like velvet.”

The animal lowered his head and Miranda stroked his forehead. She traced her finger around his white star. “He’s not mental,” she said, firmly. “He’s lovely. And

probably just bored with no-one giving him any attention.” She turned to Alice. “Do you know what his name is?”

Alice shook her head. “No-one said anything to me. I think Alex called him a bloody idiot.”

Miranda looked affronted. “He’s not an idiot!” she exclaimed, still stroking the horse’s forehead with one hand. His head hung lower over the fence until Miranda was able to reach his ears. “His name is Field of Colours,” she said. “Look... it’s written on his halter.” She turned to her friend, but Alice’s attention was elsewhere.

Alice saw Bruce grazing on the hillside. “Miranda! There he is!” She waved her arms. “Hello Bruce!” she yelled.

“Alice! Stop it! You’re upsetting him!” admonished Miranda as the horse flung its head in the air, alarmed at Alice’s wild movements. He backed away, and then trotted off along the fence line.

“Sorry Miranda, but look, there’s Bruce!”

She pointed to the hill, and even from this distance Bruce’s bony frame was evident. His thin neck made his head look larger. Miranda was quiet, long enough for Alice to know she was thinking of something complimentary to say. Alice tugged at her arm and ran towards the gate.

“Come on,” she said, “wait till you see him up close.”

Once inside the paddock they walked up to Bruce and Alice slipped the lead rope around his neck. Getting the halter on was a struggle because he refused to stop grazing long enough for her to slip it over his head.

“He’s easy to catch,” Miranda commented. “And he’s a nice colour.”

Alice glanced sideways at her friend. She knew she was trying to be kind.

“The woman who had him didn’t look after him very well.” Alice replied firmly. “So he’s very skinny. We are trying to feed him up.”

She ran her hand over his rough coat, in an attempt to smooth it flat. The horse stood between them, hanging his head almost to the ground. He still chewed at a mouthful of grass, and blobs of green saliva dropped from his lips on to the dirt at their feet.

“I read somewhere that means he needs his teeth done,” Miranda remarked, as a large ball of slimy grass dropped beside her boot. “He can’t chew properly, so all the food just drops out.”

Alice patted his neck. “Maybe that’s why he’s so skinny.”

“I think there are horse dentists,” Miranda added. “I’m sure they would use one here.” She reached down and stroked his ears. “He seems very nice Alice. He’s going to look beautiful and he seems to have a nice nature.” The horse closed his eyes as she kept stroking. “He probably just needs someone to love him.”

“I think so,” Alice agreed, as she contemplated her horse. It was hard to look beyond the staring ribs and dull coat. She wondered what she would say in Miranda’s place, particularly when she compared him to the gleaming, muscled animal in the paddock next door.

“Come on,” she said, giving the lead rope a tug. “Let’s get him saddled up and have a ride. You’ll see how good he is then.”

She took a few steps forward but the horse didn’t move. He stood with his head hung low and the pink sausage of his tongue poking out from between his lips. Alice tugged again.

“Come on Bruce! Let’s go!” She turned to her friend. “Do you think he’s okay?”

Bruce stretched his nose to the dirt and coughed. His whole body shuddered, and a wet clump of grass flew from his mouth and landed at Alice’s feet.

Both girls stared at it.

“So that’s why he didn’t want to move,” Miranda said. “My God, it’s disgusting!” Alice poked at the foamy blob with the toe of her boot.

“Yuk! Don’t!” Miranda squealed.

Alice grabbed Miranda’s arm and pushed her towards the blob. They both began struggling and squealing, and in the process Alice realised she had let go of the lead rope.

“Oh, no! Bruce!” she lunged towards the rope coiled on the grass, but Bruce just dropped his head and resumed grazing.

“Wow, he’s so quiet,” Miranda said, short of breath. She flopped on the grass. “At least I can have a rest. He’s not going anywhere.”

Alice reached for the lead rope and poked her friend in the arm.

“Come on lazybones, we want to go for a ride before those people come back.” She tugged a few times on the lead rope and after a few more mouthfuls Bruce lifted his head and followed Alice and Miranda to the gate. They passed the horse in the neighbouring paddock, and this time his antics made no impression on Bruce. He ambled beside Alice, not even flicking an ear in the other animal’s direction. Alice hoped there was nothing wrong with him. He was so disinterested in everything, except food.

Back at the stable yard, Miranda went to have another look at the photographs while Alice groomed Bruce on her own. As she brushed away the loose hair and dust, his coat glowed with a low sheen. The horse stood with his feet splayed and eyes half closed, and looked asleep. She knocked the hair loose from the bristles and kept brushing. Small mats of hair floated down the raceway.

“Alice, look at the mess you are making!” Miranda had reappeared and pointed to the clumps of hair floating along the floor. “It was immaculate in here when we came in,” she added. “Those girls are going to kill us.” She found a broom and swept the loose hair into a pile. The broom touched Bruce’s legs, but he didn’t appear to notice.

“Thanks Miranda, that’s great.”

When she had finished, Alice stood back and admired her handiwork. “Don’t you think he looks better?”

Miranda stopped sweeping and leaned on her broom. His mane was combed and smoothed flat, and his tail was full and bushy. Even his tufted coat was smooth. As though he knew he was being admired, Bruce raised his head and stared into the distance, his forelock to one side and his white star clearly on view.

“Wow!” Miranda exclaimed. “He looks great!”

Alice placed the saddle blanket over Bruce’s bony back. As she lowered the saddle into place he arched his back, but then was still. Alice pressed her hand down on the saddle, but he didn’t move again. Bruce sighed, and as Alice did the girth up she noticed small white hairs on his belly.

When they were ready they led Bruce out in to the yard. Alice buckled on her riding hat as Miranda held the horse and gently stroked his nose. She placed the reins over Bruce's head and stood beside him while Alice grabbed the stirrup iron and poked her foot into it. The horse remained perfectly still. Alice wondered if he had gone to sleep. When she landed in the saddle she felt him flinch again, but he did not take a step forward. Miranda stepped away and Alice squeezed with her legs. Bruce hesitated and then walked off in the direction of his paddock.

Alice laughed, exhilarated to be riding him again. This time she didn't notice the plank like neck and the skinny shoulders.

"No Bruce, not that way!" Alice tightened her grip on the reins and steered Bruce's head in the other direction.

"Shall we explore over here?" she called over her shoulder to her friend, who walked a few paces behind.

"I don't mind," Miranda pushed her hands deep into her pockets and followed Bruce's swinging tail.

Alice rode on. They passed the high hedge around the house and followed a road worn in to the grassy hillside. The paddocks were bigger here, with groups of horses grazing together. Some had spindly foals bounding in circles around them, or stretched out flat on the grass.

"Hey, how about we ride double?" Alice suggested. She patted Bruce's bony back with the flat of her hand. Miranda looked dubious.

"Come on," Alice insisted. "It'll be fun!" She leaned forward and stroked Bruce's neck, "and he won't mind."

"Okay." Miranda skipped forward and stood beside Alice's stirrup iron. Bruce stood as still as a rock.

"Here, put your foot in the iron and then swing up behind me." Alice reached her hand down to Miranda. "Give me your hand and I'll hold you."

Miranda grabbed hold of the stirrup iron and slid in her foot. "Here goes."

She clutched Alice's hand and in one easy motion sprang onto Bruce's back. When she landed behind the saddle Bruce lifted his head and grunted.

"Is he all right?" Miranda asked, worried. "Did I hurt his back?"

“No, I don’t think so,” Alice replied.

She bumped his sides with her heels and after a moment’s hesitation Bruce walked on. Her fingers let go of the stiff leather reins and she stroked the animal’s mane. Bruce plodded along the fence line, past the clusters of mares and foals. As the track rounded a corner, Bruce stopped. Both girls lurched forward and Alice’s hat tipped over her eyes.

“Why did he stop?” Miranda asked.

Alice re-adjusted her hat and then grabbed the reins tightly. “I’m not sure,” she answered. She squeezed Bruce’s hairy sides with her calves but he didn’t move. His body felt rigid. It was hard to see in the sun’s glare but she could see movement among the bushes ahead. Bruce saw it too, and snorted. He raised one hoof and stamped it loudly on the bare dirt of the track.

“What’s he doing?” Miranda exclaimed. Her grip tightened around Alice’s waist.

“I think there’s something in those bushes,” Alice whispered.

The branches rustled again and two small calves burst out and ran away down the hill, their strap like tails arched over their backs. Bruce jumped and Alice felt him tense, as though he was going to run. But he stood rooted to the ground as he watched the calves race down the hill.

“Good boy!” Alice exclaimed as she stroked his neck. “Good boy.” When the calves were out of sight the horse relaxed. He walked on without any prompting from Alice.

“He was really good, wasn’t he?” Miranda said over Alice’s shoulder. “I thought for a moment we were goners.”

“Me too.” Alice replied. “Maybe he didn’t want to gallop with all this weight on his back.”

“It’s not funny, Alice. You’re not stuck back here without a saddle to hang on to. His back is really slippery.” Miranda wriggled in her place behind Alice. “I keep feeling like I’m going to slide off.”

The track wound through a patch of low trees and scrubby bushes. The horse plodded along, his hooves thudding on the dry clay. They reached the crest of the hill

and halted. The valley lay stretched out below them. Alice could see the patchwork of paddocks that made up the farm and where the boundary fence met the road. Further away clumps of bushland covered the lower slopes of the hillside. Above it all a few wisps of white cloud floated across the expanse of blue sky.

“Wow, what a beautiful view,” Miranda said, looking over Alice’s shoulder. “We can see everything from here.”

“I know. It’s great.” She pointed to the paddock below. “Can you see the dam down there? It’s huge!” At the base of the hill, where the two slopes joined to form a natural catchment, a pool of yellow brown water twinkled in the sunlight. On one side an embankment had been created to form the dam wall, leaving a wide pathway across the top. One end was covered in a smattering of horse droppings. The sun had lost its morning softness and now covered everything in a harsh white glare.

“Hey Miranda, how about we take Bruce down there and have a swim?”

“Are you crazy?!” Miranda replied. “What if someone sees us? Maybe we’re not allowed to swim in the dam.”

“Don’t worry,” Alice replied, “who’s going to see us out here? And anyway,” she continued, “that paddock looks empty to me.”

Miranda sighed. “Okay. I suppose so.”

Alice nudged the horse’s sides with her heels and he walked on. “Hang on Miranda, we’re going down.”

Alice leaned back in the saddle and she felt Miranda do the same. Bruce began the descent, his hooves slipping and sliding on the loose clay. He stumbled once and Alice nearly lost her balance but he righted himself and continued on.

“He’s a good boy, isn’t he?” Miranda said. “He just keeps going. And we must be pretty heavy.”

“I was thinking that too,” Alice replied. “Maybe we should get off and walk up the hill on our way back.”

“Good idea,” Miranda replied. “Although it is nice to get a lift.”

They stumbled their way to the base of the hill, swaying their bodies with each lurching movement. The horse grunted at each footfall but kept going. When they were on level ground again his strides lengthened and the grunting stopped. Alice

adjusted her position in the saddle and loosened her hold on Bruce's mane, which she had been clutching during their descent. She picked up the reins and guided him towards the paddock gate.

They stopped at the entrance to the paddock.

"I'll open it, Alice," Miranda said, and slipped from the horse's back.

The gate creaked and Miranda had to push hard to open it. The hinges were rusted, and the gate sagged at one end.

"Spooky," said Alice, as Bruce plodded through and stopped on the other side, as soon as she tightened the reins. "Maybe no-one's been in here for years."

Miranda laughed. "I don't think so," she said, "unless a ghost car left those tracks." She pointed to a pattern of encrusted mud in the shape of tyre tread. "Someone was here not long ago." Miranda hoisted the gate up and pushed it closed.

"I suppose so," said Alice. "Do you want to have a go of riding Bruce?" she asked.

Miranda grinned up at her friend. "I'd love to! Are you sure that's okay?"

"Yeah, of course. Why not?" She dropped the reins on Bruce's neck and kicked her feet free of the stirrups. Bruce immediately dropped his head and began to graze. Alice swung her leg over his rump and vaulted to the ground. She handed the reins to Miranda.

"Here you are. Would you like a leg up?"

"No, I think I'm okay." Miranda held the stirrup iron with one hand and vaulted in to the saddle. Alice stood back as Miranda picked up the reins, a grin creasing her face.

"It's great to be up here!" she exclaimed. "I haven't ridden for ages."

Alice squinted up at the sun, which suddenly felt like it was burning into her t-shirt.

"Let's go down to the dam." She patted Bruce's neck and walked towards the glittering brown water.

"Come on Bruce," Alice heard Miranda say as she tugged at the reins to try to get Bruce to lift his head. The smooth leather soles of Alice's riding boots slipped on the grass as she walked, crab-like, down the side of the hill towards the dam. She could

hear Bruce snorting behind her. They reached the bottom of the incline together, and the horse pushed ahead of her on to the flat ridge that formed the highest bank of the dam. Once he arrived at the water's edge he put his head down, almost pulling Miranda from the saddle, and drank deeply, one front leg bent so he could reach the water.

Miranda laughed. "I almost fell in then!"

Bruce pawed the water with one front leg, creating large waves that buckled the water's calm surface.

"I think he wants a swim," Alice shouted over the noise of the splashing. Bruce sank to his knees. "Watch out!" she called to her friend, giggling. "I think he's going to roll!"

Miranda's face went blank and she kicked her feet free of the stirrups. In the next moment she was standing knee deep in dam water. She pulled hard on the reins to keep Bruce from sinking to his knees.

Alice raced over and together the two girls managed to get Bruce on to dry land.

"My God," Alice gasped, "I thought you were going to be drowned, or squashed!"

"Me too!" Miranda stood hunched forward, the flat of her hand resting on her knees as she regained her breath.

"Just look at him," she said, indicating Bruce with a tilt of her head. "Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth." Just as she spoke Bruce tossed his head and pawed at the dust with his front hoof.

"Don't speak too soon," Alice giggled. "He's going to dive in to the water any minute!"

"Hey, I've got an idea!"

"What?" Miranda replied, warily.

"No, don't worry! I thought we could swim him in the dam!" Miranda gave her a blank look. "What do you reckon?" Alice was enthusiastic.

Miranda looked over at the horse, whose head was up and for the first time that day looked animated.

"Well... he looks like he wants to..." she said, doubtfully. "But what if one of us comes off and he gets free, we'd never catch him again." She waved her hand around

her to take in the wide expanse of grass and hillside around them. “It’s huge in here, I can’t even see where the fences are.”

“No way! You’ve seen Bruce. All he’d do is put his head down and start eating. He won’t waste energy running away.”

“Well, I suppose so.”

She bent down and picked up the reins from where they were lying in the dust and handed them to Alice.

“But you go first. And then if he likes it I’ll come along too.”

“Okay,” Alice agreed. She led Bruce away from the water’s edge and took off his saddle and girth. She peeled off her boots and jodhpurs and held Bruce in her t-shirt and underpants.

“Alice! What are you doing?” Miranda giggled, scandalised. “What if someone sees you?”

“Come on, don’t be such a bore! Strip off too, you’re coming in as well, you know.” Bruce began dancing on the spot.

“Look, he wants to go for a swim!” Alice exclaimed. “Come on, give me a leg up before I get one of my toes squashed.” She hopped up and down on one leg to try and prevent Bruce’s shuffling hooves treading on her bare feet. Miranda grabbed one leg and swung Alice aboard. This time he didn’t flinch when she landed. Alice slipped and slid on his bony back until she grabbed a handful of mane and steadied herself.

Bruce lurched towards the water’s edge and leapt in to the water.

Alice screamed. She clung on tightly to Bruce’s mane as he waded towards the centre of the dam. She felt the powerful thrust of Bruce’s legs as he swam, towing her through the cold water. Every few seconds he snorted loudly to clear his nostrils.

“Wow, he’s amazing!” Miranda called from the bank. “He looks like a dog when he swims. He’s definitely done it before.”

Bruce circled the dam three times, making a ‘v’ shaped ripple as his head cut through the water’s surface. Then, tiring, he headed for the bank. He pulled himself up through the heavy clay and shook himself, doglike, from head to toe. Alice slid off and fell into the mud at his feet, still clutching the sodden reins in her hand. She stood up, beaming, and gave him a vigorous pat on the shoulder.

“Good boy! You were awesome!” She turned to Miranda, water dripping from her soaked t-shirt and underpants. “That was great! You have to have a go!”

“Okay, but only if you come too.”

“No problem! I’d definitely do that again!”

Miranda stripped off her jodhpurs and shoes. Gingerly she walked with bare feet to the water’s edge, mud squeezing through her toes.

“You’re going to love this,” grinned Alice. She clambered on to Bruce’s back and reached down to her friend. “Here, grab my hand and I’ll pull you up.”

With one quick look at Bruce, who paid them no attention at all, Miranda sidled up to Bruce’s flank and grasped Alice’s outstretched hand. She vaulted aboard Bruce’s back and wrapped her arms around Alice’s waist.

“See, that was easy, wasn’t it?” Alice said as she picked up the sodden reins and guided Bruce back towards the water’s edge.

But before she could reply Bruce lunged into the dam and began to swim. Miranda held tight to Alice’s waist. She floated in the cool water of the dam, tugged along by the strength of the horse’s swimming.

“It feels like flying!” she shouted in Alice’s ear.

“I know!” Alice shouted back. “Isn’t it great!”

Bruce did two laps of the dam and then his strokes began to falter. He drifted towards the water’s edge and dragged himself up on to the bank. His coat was shiny with water and plastered flat against his skin. It made his neck look even thinner.

Both girls slid off his back. “That was awesome!” Miranda exclaimed as they stood dripping on the wet bank.

“He’s such a good boy!” Alice slapped Bruce’s neck. “Why don’t we let him graze for a while? And we can dry ourselves on that rock over there.” She pointed up the hillside where a long flat rock poked out of the clay.

“Okay then,” Miranda replied. She began to pick her way on bare feet towards the rock. “I need to dry out,” she added, “my underpants are sopping wet.”

“Mine too.”

Alice reached up and unbuckled Bruce’s bridle. The leather oozed water. Bruce tossed his head and trotted along the bank down to a patch of green grass. Alice picked

her way through the prickles and sharp stones to where Miranda perched on the rock above.

“Come on sissy!” Miranda called down to Alice. “It’s nice up here!”

She stood up and spread her arms wide. “I could fly off this rock and down over the valley!” Miranda’s underpants sagged with the weight of the water and her t-shirt was translucent over her wet body.

Alice pulled her t-shirt over her head and flung it on the ground.

“Last one in is a rotten egg!” she shouted as she streaked towards the brown water.

Miranda leapt up and raced towards the water’s edge, a small yellow smudge of mud covering the back of her underpants. The girls ran, splashing and giggling, into the slimy water. Bruce raised his head and looked towards the noise, tendrils of green grass poking from each side of his mouth.

From the hill above them a man reached across the front seat of his car and took a pair of binoculars from the glove box. He leaned his arm out of the window and peered at the girls through the lens. The bonnet of his silver four-wheel drive pointed in the direction of the dam, but he cut the engine so the only sounds were the swish of wind through the long grass and the girls’ muted shouts drifting up from the dam below. He watched Miranda wade out of the brown water, her underpants sagging and her t-shirt plastered to her skinny frame. He saw her pick up a muddy clod and throw it at Alice, who emerged from the water topless, her body as shapeless as a boy’s.

From where they swam the girls didn’t seem to see him, but he caught sight of the skinny horse on the hillside below. Only the horse had spotted him. It stood alert, ears pricked, and even from where he sat the man could see every muscle tense, poised for flight. He started the engine and reversed out of view. The girls played in the dam, oblivious to his presence, but the horse watched him until he disappeared over the hill from where he had come.

Now that the water on their skin and clothes had begun to dry in the hot sun, Alice felt covered in a thin, slimy film that made her itch. Vapour rose from Bruce's coat, which shone in the sun. The water had darkened his colour, and he looked black. The smooth sheen of his flat coat accentuated the furrows between his ribs and the hollows under his hipbones.

They trudged up the hill. Bruce hung his head as they walked.

"I'm going to ask Alex if we can give Bruce some hay," Alice said to Miranda, as they entered the stable yard.

"Ask me what?" Alex appeared carrying a hay net stuffed full.

Bruce tried to grab a mouthful of hay but Alex blocked him by holding up his free hand. Bruce dropped his head.

"What did you want to ask me?" he repeated.

"I wanted to know if we could feed some hay to Bruce," Alice stammered. "He's so skinny and I want to fatten him up."

"Sure," Alex replied. "Just help yourself." He lifted his cap and smoothed his forehead with the back of his hand. His gaze skimmed over Bruce's angular frame. "Do you mind if I check his teeth?"

"No, not at all," Alice replied. "Do you need me to take his bridle off?"

Alex shook his head. "No need. I'll just have a quick feel."

He slipped his hand between Bruce's thick lips, wrinkled and black like an elephant's. Alice could see the bulge of his hand under the skin as he probed Bruce's mouth. He pulled his hand free, and wiped it on his trousers.

"Sharp as razors," was his verdict. "That's probably why he hasn't been able to keep any condition."

He bent over and ran his hand over Bruce's legs, his fingers feeling each bulge and pressing the soft tissue. The horse remained still, his eye on the hay at Alex's feet. When he had finished his examination of Bruce's legs, he ran his finger over the brand on the horse's shoulder, faded into a blurry smudge on the skin.

"I recognise that brand," he said softly, almost to himself. He traced the outline of what looked like a sweeping "s". "Sweetenham Stud," he said. "That's the brand

belonging to Sweetenham Stud.” He stood back and looked Bruce over. “I reckon this guy has raced. And from his legs I’d say he’s had a few starts, too.”

Alex walked around to Bruce’s other side. “I thought so,” he muttered softly, as though to himself. “He’s about 10 years old.” The horse swung his head around and nuzzled Alex’s shoulder. “Nice old fella,” he said, as he patted the horse’s neck.

“Well, I reckon he’s been off the track only a few years, and there’s every chance he was pretty fancily bred too.” He added, turning to Alice. “If you like I can see if there’s any info on him in the Studbook. It’s pretty easy to find out.”

“Do you think he might have been famous?” Alice blurted. Miranda rolled her eyes but Alex chuckled.

“I don’t know about that,” he said, bending over to pick up the ball of hay. “But I’m pretty sure he raced. And his legs are still good, so he wasn’t hammered too hard.” He swung the hay ball over his shoulder, pausing to let Bruce grab a bite. “The dentist is coming next Saturday, if you want me to book him in. I reckon he needs it.” Alex walked off towards the stable block.

“Thanks!” Alice called to his retreating back. “I’ll bring him up next Saturday.”

“Oh, and how much does it cost?”

Alex poked his head back around the stable door. “Forty dollars. Pay the guy direct.” He nodded by way of a goodbye and disappeared into the stable’s gloomy depths.

“Wow,” said Alice. “Bruce was a racehorse!”

They led Bruce into the breezeway. The sudden gloom blinded Alice, so she couldn’t identify the shadowy figure looming in front of her. She nearly collided with him before she recognised Roger Quilty’s rangy form.

“Hello there. It’s Alice, isn’t it?”

Alice nodded.

“I trust Alex is taking care of you?” he continued.

Alice blinked. “Yes, thank you.”

Mr Quilty glanced down at his watch and nodded at them both. His lips stretched into a smile, showing yellowed smoker’s teeth. The smile looked odd. Alice had the impression he didn’t smile very often.

“Have fun girls,” he said. He strode outside, his lanky figure swallowed up by the brightness of the stable yard. Moments later they heard his voice as he barked orders to a stable hand. Alice’s fingers quivered as she fumbled to tie the knot fastening Bruce’s lead rope to a ring in the wall. Miranda leaned towards Alice, her breath against the back of her neck.

“He’s weird,” she whispered.

“Shhh... Alice whispered back, frowning. Bruce pawed at the concrete floor, his hoof scraping against the hard surface. She shook the halter with one hand. “Bruce, stop it!” she reprimanded. He lowered his hoof and snorted.

“I think he’s hungry,” Alice said to her friend. “We’d better get him some hay and take him back to the paddock.”

Miranda nodded. “Good idea.”

Bruce had begun a quiet dance behind her, his head high as though impatient to get moving.

“Come on then, let’s go.”

When the girls arrived back at the stable block they slipped down the breezeway towards the tack room.

“Here,” Alice said, handing Miranda the hay net. “If you put this away I’ll do the halter and meet you back at the bikes.”

“Sure.” Miranda disappeared in the direction of the feed room.

A girl appeared in the tack room doorway and with a cursory glance at Alice she retreated. Alice’s shy smile of greeting faded. As she walked towards the door she rubbed her free hand on her jodhpurs. Her palm felt slimy.

A burst of laughter came from the tack room and Alice hesitated near the doorway, but it was too late to walk away. She paused and entered.

A sea of faces greeted her. Girls lay sprawled in the armchairs at the far end of the room, nursing cans of Coke or cups of tea. Spirals of cigarette smoke curled above their heads. Alice stood, awkward, against the doorframe.

“Hi,” she stammered.

The faces stared blankly at her. One girl slurped her tea. Alice gestured to the rows of saddles on the wall. “I’ve just come to hang up my halter.”

Her words hung in the air. The girls exchanged looks. Alice recognised Bernie sitting in the centre of the group. The older girl did not acknowledge her, but gave the girl sitting beside her a conspiratorial smirk as she took a deep drag of her cigarette. She exhaled a long stream of smoke from her nostrils and waved a thin hand at the saddles.

“Sure, go right ahead,” she said. “Don’t let us stop you.”

Alice smiled and nodded. “Okay,” she said. “Thanks.” Her scalp tingled from the feel of their eyes on the back of her neck. She found her allocated corner and rustled among the bags containing her meagre grooming gear. She stuffed the halter in one of the bags and stood up to leave the room. The silence was oppressive.

As she was leaving Bernie spoke. “Hey, don’t go so quickly,” she said, with her husky smoker’s voice. “We haven’t had a chance to introduce ourselves.” She patted the empty seat beside her.

Alice wasn’t sure what to say. She hesitated. “My friend is waiting for me…” she began, but the girl just waved her fingers as if to dismiss Alice’s protests.

“Oh, come on,” she said. “Just sit down for a minute!” The other girls joined in a chorus to cajole Alice.

“I can’t stay long,” Alice said, her voice shaky. She swallowed. “Miranda will be waiting.”

“Here, have a Coke.” A chubby blonde girl leaned over and handed Alice a can, so chilled it had droplets of moisture clinging to its sides.

“Thanks,” Alice smiled at her, but the blonde girl had already looked away.

“Let’s introduce ourselves,” Bernie continued. She patted her chest with one hand. “As you already know, I’m Bernie.” She looked around at the other girls as though they were her audience. “I’ve been working here the longest. In fact, I’ve been here since I was about your age.” She shot Alice a glance and flopped back in her chair. Her long fingers pointed at the chubby blonde girl. “And that’s Alison. She’s been here second longest.”

Alison stared, and nodded.

“Then there’s Katrina.” A freckled girl with mousy brown hair lifted her fingers in a wave. Alice recognised the girl who had told her off earlier. Bernie continued on. “And next to her we have Susie.” Susie smiled at Alice. Alice smiled back gratefully. “And then Cathy is lucky last.”

“Hi,” said Cathy, a stocky girl with short, dyed hair.

Bernie swung around to Alice. “And what’s your name again?” she asked.

“Alice.”

A short uncomfortable silence followed. Alice took a long swig of her Coke. The cold fizz burned the back of her throat and she swallowed hard to stop herself from coughing. All the girls were looking at her. Bernie reached over to the open packet of cigarettes on the coffee table and shook them until one poked out. She slid it to her lips and flicked on a lighter, drawing hard on the cigarette until the end glowed red.

“So, what’s your horse’s name,” she asked, through curls of smoke.

“Bruce,” Alice answered. A soft titter spread through the group.

Bernie laughed. Alice noticed her teeth were stained a pale yellow.

“Bruce! That’s my old boyfriend’s name!” Alison giggled. Bernie continued on, “Maybe that’s why he’s a bit of an old dog!”

A nervous smile flashed across Alice’s face. She wasn’t sure what Bernie meant.

The brown haired girl, Katrina, reached across and patted Alice’s knee. “Don’t mind her,” she said. “She’s just annoyed that she can’t control her horses, and your one stirred them up so much this morning.” Her voice had an edge, even though she was smiling.

Alice glanced at Bernie, whose face tightened.

“Yeah right,” Bernie snorted. “They were fine. Being the only one around here experienced with young horses I get the mental ones, that’s all.”

Alice’s gaze swivelled from one girl to the other. “What did he do?” she asked. “He’s normally very quiet. I’m sorry if he disturbed anybody.”

“Nah, don’t worry,” Bernie said. “He just thought he was coming along with us to the races, that’s all.” She took a deep drag of her cigarette. “He must have been a track pony or something when he was younger.”

“Or a pack horse!” Alison piped up. All the girls laughed, Bernie and Katrina most of all.

Alice went red. She felt her cheeks flaming, even her ears burned. “Actually, no, he was a racehorse.”

The sniggering stopped, and Alice turned around to see Alex standing behind her. She had not heard him come in over the squeals of laughter.

“Oh really,” Bernie said. “How do you know that?”

“His brand,” Alex replied, his voice flat.

Bernie said nothing. She dropped her cigarette butt into her can of Coke. It hit the liquid with a hiss. She stood up. “See you guys tomorrow.”

A chorus of goodbyes followed her out of the room. Alice noticed that Bernie had ignored Alex. All the girls stood up. They picked up bags, muttered to one another, and melted away. Alice was alone with Alex, still clutching at her Coke.

“I sure know how to clear a room,” Alex said, to no one in particular.

Alice was quiet. Then she remembered Miranda. She leapt up and put her Coke on the coffee table. “I have to go!” Alice exclaimed. “My friend has been waiting for ages.”

Alex lifted the front of his cap and scratched his hair with one finger. His gaze travelled over Alice’s clothes, wet and smeared with streaks of yellow mud. “I’ll add your horse’s name to the list for the horse dentist. Just bring forty dollars next Saturday.”

“Okay, see you then,” Alice squawked.

She fled the room and ran to the stone wall, where Miranda waited with the bikes.

“What kept you so long?” Miranda called when Alice appeared. “I’ve been waiting forever!”

“I’ll tell you later,” Alice said, “let’s just go.”

* * *

Miranda pedalled slowly along her street. It was almost dark, and when she arrived home no lights were on. She swung open the front door and stepped straight in to the darkened living room.

“Mum?” she paused, waiting for a reply. “Are you home?”

Miranda strained to hear any noise coming from behind her mother’s closed door. The clock ticking on the faux mantelpiece was the only sound in the silent house.

She crept down the narrow corridor to her bedroom. Once inside, she closed the door softly. With a sigh of relief, she peeled off her wet and muddy clothes and dropped them into her laundry basket. Her calves still ached from the long ride home. Ignoring the clumps of mud in her hair and her skin’s faint swamp smell, she pulled her favourite t-shirt from under her pillow and slipped it over her head. She was too tired to have a shower. The bed beckoned and she slid under the covers, flicking on her small bedside lamp. Its reddish light spread across the room, dim in the corners but bright enough to illuminate her horse pictures stuck to the wall. Miranda lay with her head against the pillow, and gazed around the room at all her horses. Figurines lined her bookshelves; prancing stallions with flowing plastic manes, a mare and tiny plastic foal nuzzling one another, a sturdy Clydesdale trudging along an imaginary field. A man rode his obedient bay along the end of her bookshelf, a small plastic saddle covering the horse’s back, his reins a rubber band she had stretched to fit inside his tiny clenched fingers.

Most of her pictures were from horse magazines, cut out neatly to fit in rows on her walls. She liked the breed magazines best, with their full page colour pictures of prize-winners, coats shimmering as they stood to attention for the camera.

Miranda’s eye caught the framed photograph she had propped up on her bedside table. She picked it up and gazed at it, her eyes roving over the laughing faces, her father’s arm draped over her shoulder in a casual embrace. An invisible breeze, the same one that draped a strand of Miranda’s hair across her cheek, blew his hair back so it stood nearly upright on his head. She wondered what he looked like now. If his hair was now grey or still black, like in the picture. Not for the first time she wondered why her father had stopped calling or coming to visit. Three years was such a long time.

She tucked the photograph against her chest and rolled to face the wall. The sharp definition of her favourite horse of all, whose noble face gazed down at her every

night as she went to sleep, blurred as a dribble of tears slid down her nose and dropped to the pillow.

The silence in the room was disturbed by a quiet knock at her door. Miranda sat up and brushed the tears from her eyes with the flat of her hand. She blinked twice, fiercely, and smoothed her hair flat, before she reached over and propped her father's photograph back on the bedside table.

"Can I come in, Miranda?"

It was her mother, her voice so soft Miranda could hardly hear it.

"Yes Mum, come in."

The door opened and her mother stepped inside. She stood awkwardly near the doorway, and glanced briefly around her daughter's room as though she hadn't seen it before.

"All these horse pictures..." she whispered, as though to herself. "So many of them..." She walked over to the wall to take a closer look. "Which one is your favourite, Miranda?" she asked, without turning around.

Miranda paused. Her mother had never asked about the pictures. Normally she breezed into her room and barely looked at them, as significant to her as a fly on the wall.

"Well, it's this one." She turned and pointed at the picture of the palomino horse beside her bed. "This one is my favourite."

Miranda saw her mother's shoulders heave as she let out a deep sigh. But when she turned around she was smiling. "Yes, that one's beautiful." Her eyes roved over the glossy coat and the flowing cream of the creature's mane and tail. "That's the one I would choose too."

Her mother came and sat beside Miranda on her bed.

"You know, I never understood this horse thing," she continued, "I never liked them. Dirty, dangerous animals, I've always thought."

Her hand smoothed the fabric of her skirt, over and over again, until the material stretched across her knees, flat and shiny. Miranda watched her hand move back and forth, at the way her mother's stout fingers spread out over the fabric, her long red fingernails bright against the white crepe of her skin. She felt the warmth of her

mother's body pressed against her own. They sat together for a long time. Finally, when Miranda felt she could hardly sit still any longer, her mother drew her in a tight embrace.

"I know you miss your father," she whispered.

For the first time in a very long time Miranda allowed her mother to hold her, as she sobbed quietly on her shoulder. Both of them sat awkwardly in her tiny bedroom, watched over by the shiny impassive heads of the horses plastered on every wall.

* * *

Mrs Pitchers chuckled to herself as the grey kitten poked its head through a hole in the galvanised iron sheet.

"Psss... psss... psss..." she hissed softly, as the little creature squirmed and twisted its way through the hole. Once the lithe body was free it skipped sideways towards her, and wrapped itself around her legs.

The old woman smiled. Her roughened fingers caressed the soft ears as the kitten looked up at her and purred.

"Hello little tractor," she whispered.

The kitten stood on its hind legs and butted her hand with its tiny head. The old woman laughed. "I know, I know..." she said, as she reached into the plastic bag and retrieved a tin of cat food.

"Just a moment."

By the time she had peeled the lid from the tin and began spooning the slop on to the asphalt more cats had appeared, melting from the shadows and dark corners of the abandoned warehouse lot.

The grey kitten ignored the others and sat quietly at Mrs Pitcher's feet, looking up at her and purring. All the other cats devoured the small piles, and soon a crowd of skinny cats of all colours surrounded the old woman and the tiny kitten.

Finally Mrs Pitchers reached into her plastic bag and pulled out a special, small tin.

“Here you are,” she crooned to the small creature waiting patiently at her feet.

He watched carefully as she opened the tin and spooned its contents to the ground. When she had scraped out the last remnants the kitten lowered his head and ate with delicacy.

Mrs Pitchers chuckled and smoothed the plush fur. “Well, you are certainly looking better now,” she said, softly. She glanced down at the tin in her hand. “This stuff is worth the money alright.”

With a weary sigh she allowed her heavy body to sink to the asphalt. Mrs Pitchers felt a soft touch on her arm, as light as a butterfly’s wing. She reached down to stroke the grey kitten’s ears. He climbed into the old woman’s wide lap, circling a few times before settling into a tiny ball.

Mrs Pitchers heard the lurching roar of a horse truck long before it appeared around the corner. The loud engine shattered the afternoon peace. The small kitten heard it too and by the time the truck pulled up outside the stables, it had disappeared from Mrs Pitcher’s lap. The old woman stayed where she was. From her place on the pavement she could not be seen from the other side of the street.

She stretched her legs out, wincing at the pain in her knees. All the cats had gone. Only faint wet stains remained of the food she had given them. She reached towards her plastic bag but something stopped her from getting up just yet.

Someone cut off the truck’s engine and she heard the driver’s door slam. As soon as the engine went quiet, the loud thump of horse’s hooves reverberated from the truck’s interior.

“Keep still you stupid bastard,” a gruff voice shouted, and then Mrs Pitchers heard a bolt scrape against metal. Soon she heard the measured, deliberate steps of a horse being loaded down a horse float’s wooden ramp. When she heard the ring of metal shoes on pavement she craned her head around the low fence that obscured her from view. A large brown horse stood at the base of the loading ramp, its legs spread wide on the bitumen. It stared straight at her. A thin girl hung on grimly, and as Mrs Pitchers watched she gave the lead rope a violent tug.

“Stand up,” she growled.

But despite her fierce tone Mrs Pitchers thought she heard a quiver in the girl's voice. She smiled. "You've got her sorted," she whispered.

The large brown horse dwarfed the girl. Her head barely reached the animal's shoulder, and her frame was as slight as a child's. But the horse was good tempered and lowered its head obediently. It followed the girl as she walked to the closed gate and hammered on it with her free hand.

While she waited, the girl pulled a grimy handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her face with it. After a few moments she hammered again. The horse shuffled its feet at the unfamiliar noise.

"Hey, open up! It's me!" The girl's voice sounded peevish. Mrs Pitchers leaned forward as much as her stiff hips allowed, but when the gate swung open she couldn't see who was behind it. The girl and her horse disappeared, and when they were gone another girl sprang from the passenger side of the truck, closed the loading ramp and then jumped into the driver's seat. Mrs Pitchers caught a glimpse of blonde hair and a round face before she drove away.

After the rumble of the truck's engine had receded, peaceful quiet descended once again. Mrs Pitchers sighed, and began the complicated process of getting her body in position to stand up. She groaned as her back sent warning pains shooting up her spine, so strong she almost cried out loud. But she struggled to her feet and then brushed the grit and tiny hairs from the front of her dress.

With her plastic bag in one hand Mrs Pitchers left the warehouse lot through the large hole in the fence that was once used by the local kids. She turned to see if the cats had returned, but the buildings were empty of life.

Her thoughts drifted towards dinner; but her mind stubbornly kept returning to the truck and its majestic occupant. Trucks had come before, most often the ones from Smith's Knackery, who took away poor unfortunate creatures that Mrs Pitchers had always thought looked perfectly fine, even young and vigorous, some of them. As she passed the stable gate she stopped and paused. Head cocked slightly, she listened closely for any noise and then leaned closer to hear what might be happening behind the high wall. It was quiet. She listened for voices, but there were none. She stood a while longer, but then, feeling oddly unnerved, she tightened her hold around her plastic bag

and carried on towards home. As she walked, she wondered, not for the first time, what went on behind those high walls. So strange and secretive, she thought, as she walked slowly home under the evening sky.

Chapter 5

The following Saturday Alice pedalled up the driveway of Sunnybrook Farms and parked her bike in the usual place. As she rounded the corner the stable yard was a buzz of activity. Horses were tied up outside every stall, and the horse dentist, a tall man with grey hair, stood out in the open clutching one of the racehorses with one hand, the other half way up the animal's throat. Alice stood transfixed as he pulled a long metal rasp from between the creature's jaws, leaving a long stream of bloody foam to curl on to the bricks below.

The dentist dropped his rasp in a steaming bucket of water and unbuckled the metal contraption holding the horse's mouth open. The creature shook its head and the dentist gave him an affectionate pat. The horse seemed unaffected by the procedure.

"Next," he shouted over his shoulder.

Bernie sprung to attention from where she had been slouching against an open stable door. The dentist did not acknowledge her as she led the horse away.

Alison appeared leading a bony brown horse. With a shock of recognition Alice realised it was her own.

"Bruce," she called.

At the sound of her voice the horse raised his head and swivelled his ears in her direction.

"He sure knows you," the dentist said, smiling, as Alice appeared beside Bruce's shoulder.

"I suppose so," Alice mumbled. "I haven't had him long."

Bruce curled his neck around so he could nuzzle Alice's pocket. She pulled out the carrot piece with her fingers and Bruce accepted it with delicacy from the palm of her hand. Orange chunks fell to the bricks below as he ate.

“Well, he certainly needs his teeth done,” the tall man commented. “Bet they hurt.”

He turned towards Alice and thrust out his hand.

“Bruce Driver,” he said.

“Alice Williams.”

His gnarled fingers wrapped themselves around her tentatively outstretched hand.

“Nice horse you have here,” he continued, casting his eye over Bruce’s scrawny frame. “And not only because of his name!”

His voice boomed across the stable yard. Alice saw Bernie and Alison exchange looks.

“Thank you,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

The dentist did not answer. He ran his hands over the horse’s body and down his front legs.

“Hmmm...” he muttered. “Still in good shape...”

He stood back and looked thoughtfully at the old horse. “I’ve done this one before.” He declared. “Yep, I’m sure I have.”

“I haven’t had him long...” Alice began again, before the dentist interrupted.

“Don’t worry dear, it was a long time ago.” He scratched his scalp with his index finger, pensive. “I reckon about five years.” He nodded his head. “Yep, five years.” He stroked Bruce’s neck with the flat of his hand. “Been a hard five years, old fella, by the looks of it.”

Alice was quiet. Bruce’s hips and ribcage seemed to protrude even more than before.

“Don’t worry love, he’ll put it back on,” the dentist said kindly, noticing her downcast look. “You wait once his teeth are done, it will make the world of difference.” He slipped on the metal head collar and began to rasp the horse’s teeth with his long file. “I reckon he hasn’t had these done in years,” he said. “They are as sharp as knives.”

The dentist worked on Bruce for a long time. After he had used his file he pulled out a giant pair of nippers and squeezed hard. There was a loud crack, and a

piece of tooth fell at Alice's feet. It was yellow and stained, and looked pre-historic. She bent down, picked it up and slipped it in her pocket.

When he was finished, the dentist dropped his nippers into the bucket and wiped his slimy hands on his trousers. "I reckon he'll be much more comfortable now," he said as he slipped the head collar from Bruce's head. "You won't know him in a couple of weeks," he added.

The horse snapped his jaws shut and shook his head. A spray of pink foam flew through the air and landed on Alice's arm.

"He'll start to put on weight and before you know it he'll look a million dollars."

He handed her the lead rope and gave the horse a final pat. "See you next time, old timer," he said.

He turned away and was about to pick up his file to get ready for the next horse when he turned back.

"Wait a minute, I remember him now." He stood and took a long look at the old horse. "I reckon he's old Pathfinder, from Ian Templeman's stables."

He walked around the horse to check the faint mark on the animal's far shoulder, which was all that was visible of his brand.

"Yep, nine years old. That would be about right," he muttered softly. "You've got a champion here," he stated to Alice. "Last time I saw him was as a four year old, and he was cleaning up everywhere. This horse has won a fortune on the track."

Alice heard a snort from over near the breezeway. She glanced over and noticed Bernie whispering something in Alison's ear. Both girls smirked.

The dentist took no notice. "Ask Alex to check the studbook and see if you can get any information on him. But I'll bet anything he's the horse."

"Do you know why he stopped racing?" Alice asked, trying to keep her voice low so Bernie and Alison could not hear.

"Injury, I think," the dentist replied. "Probably raced the poor old bugger half to death," he added. "That's what they usually do with the good ones."

"Well thanks," Alice said.

His weathered face broke into a smile. "My pleasure! I bet there's not many of your pony club friends who could say they own a champion racehorse!" he chuckled.

Alice smiled shyly and tugged at the lead rope to lead Bruce away. Once clear of the stable complex she patted her horse's thin neck. The thought of telling her father he had bought a famous racehorse for three hundred dollars made her smile.

She skipped alongside Bruce's plodding frame but the animal took no notice of her. When they reached his paddock he waited patiently while she opened the gate. Once she had removed his halter he wandered to the water trough, small puffs of dust rising from each footfall. Alice watched him go. She tried to imagine him shiny and muscled, ready for a race, but it seemed impossible that the angular old horse with the tufted tail had ever looked like that.

When she returned to the stable block the place was quiet. She flung her halter with her pile of gear and hurried away before she met anyone. Outside the stable block her bike waited where she had propped it against the wall. She leapt on to the seat and pedalled down the driveway. It wasn't until she swooped through the gate and on to the dirt road that she allowed herself to ride all the way home with a grin plastered to her face.

Soon the bony, awkward creature of a few weeks ago was gone. In his place stood a gleaming animal, with a rounded body and a gentle arch to his neck. He had a new gleam in his eye, and as he pranced beside the gate Alice saw a glimpse of the racehorse he had once been.

She reached into her trousers and pulled out a carrot. The horse stretched over the gate and grasped it delicately from her fingers.

As he ate Alice moved closer and ran her hands down his neck. His muscles were hard and his coat felt smooth. She ran her palm over his shoulders and his ribs were now covered with flesh.

Alice opened the gate and slipped the halter over Bruce's head. It was difficult to put the strap over his ears because he kept his head held high, eyes focussed on something in the distance. Alice followed his gaze but she could see nothing unusual.

“Come on Bruce,” she muttered, as she tried to push his head lower with her free hand. “Put your head down.”

The animal ignored her, and kept its gaze fixed firmly in the distance. She struggled to swing the strap over the animal’s ears until Bruce dropped his head and tried to rub it against Alice’s shirt. At first she thought he was being affectionate and her faint unease disappeared. But he would not stop rubbing, despite her efforts to push him away.

In desperation she slapped him on the neck and pushed his head away, hard. “Bruce! Stop it!”

This seemed to work. Bruce took a step back and shook his head. But then he began to prance, lifting each hoof high off the ground.

Alice ignored him. Her fingers were wrapped so tightly around the lead rope that her knuckles were white. Bruce seemed to calm down as she led him up the hill. His prance slowed to a walk and he lowered his head as he walked beside her, so close she could feel his warm breath on her arm.

The grass along Bruce’s side of the fence was churned into thick mud. Clumps of dirt had been thrown metres away from the fence by flying hooves. Alice glanced sideways at him. There remained little trace of the skinny slow plodder he had been only a few weeks before.

Once they arrived at the stable block Alice tied him up beside the open tack room door. A radio played quietly somewhere in the background. With rapid brush strokes she groomed Bruce’s now shiny coat.

She stood back a few steps to take a good look at him. As though aware he was being admired he stood up tall, gazing over Alice’s head. He seemed much taller. The soft covering of muscle rounded out his body, emphasising his powerful hindquarters and strong legs.

“You should pay more attention to your horse,” said Alex. He took a step towards the animal and stroked his neck.

The horse lowered his head and nuzzled Alex’s pockets.

Alex looked up from stroking her horse's ears and laughed at the sight of Alice's worried expression. He stepped back and wiped his hand on his moleskins, in an effort to remove the loose hair coating his fingers.

"It seems he really is old Pathfinder, who won a lot of money for the Boss' brother, of all people." Alex shook his head. "Not that it did you much good, old feller." He gave the horse two affectionate slaps on the shoulder. "Anyway, the Boss told me to give him an extra feed ration to build him up a bit. Field of Colours, the crazy horse next door, left early but his owners had paid up till the end of the month, so we gave him the extra feed. Didn't think you'd mind about that?"

There was a brief silence as both of them stared at the horse. He had relaxed and dropped his head low, nosing the floor for stray hay stalks.

Alex continued, "They won't be back from the races until later on this afternoon. It's probably a good time to go for a ride seeing as it's quiet around here now." He slapped Bruce on his newly rounded rump. The horse didn't flinch. "But watch out, he's going to be feeling his oats today. I'd go easy if I were you."

He grinned. Alice picked up her brush and resumed grooming Bruce, who let out a long, contented sigh.

Alice heard a dim thudding of hooves outside and she felt Bruce's body stiffen. He swung his head in the air and whinnied, mouth open and nostrils dilated. Alice jumped. The sound reverberated around the walls of the empty stable block. A faint reply drifted in from the fields outside. Bruce stood rigid, with ears pricked and eyes focused on the opening at the end of the breezeway. He towered above Alice. For the first time she felt a flicker of apprehension.

"Come on then, calm down!" she tried to growl at the horse, but he ignored her. She grabbed the lead rope stretched taut by his raised head. "Come on Bruce, head down!" she tried, again. This time the rope slackened and the horse lowered his head. "Good boy," Alice crooned, trying to sound calm.

The tension slowly left the horse's body and after a few moments he stood as he had before, resting a hind leg with his head lowered. He blew gently at a few stray stalks of hay on the concrete, which whirled out of reach. Alice watched him from the corner of her eye as she brushed his coat methodically. When she stood on tiptoes she

could only barely reach the top of his back with the tip of the brush. For the first time she realised how tall Bruce actually was.

The horse stood patiently as she lifted the saddle on to his back and fumbled with the dried leather and stiff buckles of the bridle straps. When she had finished she led him to the stable yard. A wide path led away from the stable yard and followed the hedge beside the house. It then turned a corner, and Alice couldn't see where it led.

“Well Bruce, here goes.”

She threw the reins over Bruce's head, and hopped up and down on one leg in her attempts to mount. Bruce turned and sniffed her, but remained motionless. With a final effort she managed to wriggle into the saddle and sat upright. At that moment Bruce moved off. Alice's feet searched in vain for the stirrups as he walked across the stable yard with a determined step.

“Wait Bruce,” she muttered, as she scrambled for the reins, which had slid half way down his neck.

The horse did not slow down. He continued down the path and as they reached the hedge he broke into a trot. Alice almost slid off but managed to grab a handful of mane and jam her remaining foot into the stirrups. Stray branches from the hedge whipped her face as they trotted past. They turned the corner and reached the soft sand of the exercise track. The track swept past the house and followed the line of the hedge. Bruce launched into a slow canter.

“Whoa,” Alice yelled, “whoa Bruce.”

Her body leaned back in the saddle and she pulled on the loops of rein flapping against Bruce's shoulder. But with each pull he tucked his head in even more and lengthened his stride. Alice had never ridden this fast before. The ground rushed beneath his pounding hooves.

Her legs hurt from trying to cling on and her fingers stiffened around the reins. Bruce's hooves thudded against the soft sand and Alice realised that he wasn't going any faster. She struggled to sit upright and fumbled until she clasped the reins with the correct grip. Suddenly she felt more secure. Her fingers felt the weight of the bit in Bruce's mouth as her body rocked with the horse's stride.

The exercise track curved around the hedge towards a training track, marked out with white railings. They swept down the slope and the two tracks merged together. Bruce's strides grew longer and faster until the smooth canter of a few moments before had transformed into a pumping gallop.

The railings flashed past. Wind whipped tears from the corners of Alice's eyes. The reins fell from her hands as she clung to the pommel of the saddle. Her arms and legs ached as every muscle strained to keep her perched on the galloping animal.

Alice focused on the sandy track ahead. Her body tried to keep pace with the frenetic rocking of his body as he galloped hard. They seemed to go on and on. Just as Alice's grip loosened and she thought she could not hang on any longer she felt the horse's speed decrease. Each stride was accompanied by a grunt as his body laboured through the heavy sand.

Alice let go of the saddle's pommel. With a deep breath she forced herself upright and reached down to pick up the reins, which were slimy with sweat. White foam soaped the leather near the horse's saturated neck. The hair had curled into tiny whirls and steamed from the moisture and heat from his body.

Alice pulled on the reins. "Whoa, boy," she croaked.

Her throat felt raw. She swallowed, and tried again.

"Whoa now, good boy, whoa," she chanted, and miraculously the horse began to slow. He shortened his stride and then dropped to a shuddering trot. Unprepared for the sudden change of speed Alice nearly bounced from the saddle. But she grabbed the pommel again and gave the reins another squeeze with her free hand.

"Good boy," she crooned as the horse slowed to a walk.

He dropped his nose so it was almost touching the sand. Bruce's breathing came in a series of sharp grunts and wheezes. His flanks rose and fell like bellows.

Worried, she dismounted. Her legs gave way and she collapsed in the sand.

The horse stopped dead. White foam dripped from under his neck and between his back legs.

Alice staggered to her feet. She brushed the sand from her clothes and pulled the reins over Bruce's head. Together they walked back along the track, each step heavy and measured.

“You must have been some racehorse,” she whispered to the exhausted horse plodding beside her.

The stable yard was now bustling with activity. A row of horses stood fidgeting at the tie up rail. Metal shod hooves clattered on the concrete as horses were moved back and forth. The banging of buckets and shouts of the stable hands drifted towards them as they walked up the track. Bernie and Alison were chatting in the doorway of an open stable.

“Why are these horses not fed yet!” Roger Quilty shouted to the empty yard.

The words floated down to Alice so clearly it was as though he was standing right beside her. Bruce raised his head and looked alert for the first time since his gallop. Quilty glanced at his watch, then spun on his heel and shouted over his shoulder, “Everyone in the tack room in five minutes!”

Figures appeared from the dim recesses of the empty stables and the breezeway. Heads down, the stable hands moved the restless horses. Sounds of clanging feed buckets rang through the stable yard. One of the animals tied up outside his stable began to paw the ground with a front hoof. He raised his front leg high in a graceful arc. He kept it poised, hovering, before dropping his hoof and scraping the metal shoe along the concrete. As Alice puffed up the final incline, she watched as the horse stood motionless and stared with ears pricked in the direction of his stall. When there was no response he raised his hoof again, but this time a plastic bucket flew from the empty stable and hit him on the shoulder.

The horse dropped his hoof and stood quietly. He swung his head to watch the bucket clatter across the stable yard and come to rest in a dry stormwater channel.

Just as they reached the stable yard Bernie stepped out of the stable in front of them. Alice’s shy smile of greeting faded as Bernie stared through her, without even a flicker of acknowledgement. Alice put her head down and led Bruce into the breezeway.

This time it was full. Horses stood tied up outside every stable, and each stall was a flurry of activity. When Alice reached her spot, a horse was already tied up there. Someone had undone her halter and thrown it with her grooming bag against the tack room doorway.

At that moment Alex appeared. He pointed down to the pile of Alice's belongings.

"What's this crap?" he shouted. Alice had never heard him use such a sharp tone before.

Alice raised her hand. "It's mine," she whispered.

Alex frowned. "Well, put it away. If the Boss sees it there..." he disappeared into the tack room.

Alice led Bruce towards the wall and picked up his halter. She stood uncertainly, glancing up and down the aisle to see if there was anywhere free that she could tie her horse. All she could see were rows of round, shiny hindquarters.

As she was pre-occupied looking for a space, a hand landed on her shoulder from behind.

"Hi, Alice is it?" a soft voice asked. Alice wheeled around and looked into the kind face of one of the stable hands. Her face was familiar from their first meeting in the tack room. She remembered her name was Susie.

"Yes, that's right," Alice stammered. Susie tucked a long strand of dark hair behind her ear, from where it had escaped from her loose ponytail. She had a dark smudge on her cheek.

"Well, my horse is ready to go in to his stable. If you want to follow me you can tie yours up in his place." She gestured to the line of horses. "That's if you are looking for somewhere to tie up."

"Yes, I am." Alice blushed. "That would be great."

"Okay, follow me."

Together they walked towards the open door at the end of the breezeway. When they came to the last horse, Susie untied the grey and led it into the last stable. As she passed Alice she grinned.

"Been giving him a workout," she said as she nodded at Bruce. "A hard one too, by the look of it."

She disappeared into the dark stable, only to reappear a moment later with the animal's halter loose in her hand. Alice was fumbling with the knot as Susie came and stood beside her.

“He’s a good looking old thing,” she said, as she stroked the stiff fur on Bruce’s neck. Her fingers rubbed at the dry sweat on his coat. “Why don’t you hose him down,” she suggested. “It will be much easier than trying to brush all this out.”

“Okay,” Alice replied. “But I’m not sure if he’s been hosed before.” She looked Bruce over doubtfully.

Susie laughed. “You bet he’s been hosed! He was a racehorse, wasn’t he?” Alice nodded. “Well these guys get hosed just about every day.” Susie gestured vaguely towards the other horses. “We’d never have time to get them clean otherwise.” Susie bent down and slipped under Bruce’s neck to begin undoing his girth. “Come on, let’s get his tack off and I’ll show you where the wash bay is.”

She slipped the saddle from his back, which had left a shaped wet patch imprinted on his coat. “My God,” Susie said as she stood back and looked Bruce over. His back was faintly steaming. “Has anyone explained to you how to get a horse fit?” she said. A small frown creased her forehead, and a firm tone had crept in to her friendly voice.

“Well no,” Alice stammered. She could feel a hot flush spreading across her cheeks. “But I didn’t mean for him to get this sweaty…” Her voice faded under Susie’s disapproving gaze.

But Susie leaned towards her and patted her on the arm.

“Oh I see, he got away with you, didn’t he?”

Alice nodded. Susie smiled. “Don’t worry, it’s happened to me plenty of times.” She turned towards Bruce and began to unbuckle the stiff leather of his bridle. “Just because they are old doesn’t mean they lose their spirit.” She patted him on the nose. “Especially an old trouper like this one.”

“Did you know him when he was a racehorse?”

“No, I haven’t been doing this for long.” Susie paused and stroked the horse’s neck. “But I heard the others talking about him. Apparently the Boss knew him.” Susie bent down to undo the knot in the lead rope.

“Oh,” said Alice. “No-one has said anything to me. I didn’t know anyone was talking about him.”

Susie handed Alice the lead rope. “Yeah, well. Nothing’s above board around here.”

Alice stood uncertainly, holding the limp rope in one hand. Bruce didn’t move. He looked tired.

“Come on! Follow me.” Susie looked down at her watch. “I’ve only got a few minutes until staff meeting.” She turned and strode down the breezeway. Alice hurried behind, tugging Bruce’s lead rope.

Susie led them to the wash bay. It had a drain in the concrete and a couple of hoses coiled up on brackets against the walls. “Here it is. Gotta go!” She disappeared before Alice could thank her.

“Okay, here goes,” Alice said, under her breath.

She swivelled the tap until a strong jet of water hit the concrete and splashed against Bruce’s legs. Then she worked her way up his body, training the hose over the dried white marks of sweat under the saddle blanket and over the crusty swirls of fur on his neck. She hosed between his hind legs, where the white soapy foam of sweat had dried stiff. When she had finished only his head was dry.

The breezeway was empty of horses now. Angry voices drifted from the open door of the tack room. Alice led Bruce down to the far end, and tied him up beside the open doorway where no sounds of the heated discussion could reach her. She picked up her brush and began to rub at the only area of dried sweat left behind Bruce’s ears. She brushed until all traces of dried sweat were gone. The horse’s coat was still heavy with water, so she ran the flat of her palm over his emerging curves to try and scrape some of it away. Large droplets fell on the bare concrete and pooled under Bruce’s belly.

Now his wet coat gleamed. Alice stood back to admire him. With his coat plastered to his body she could clearly see every hollow and curve of growing muscle. His neck was thicker, with the beginnings of an arch. His ribs were now covered and his hindquarters had begun to fill out their previous flat planes. But the biggest change was the look in his eye. Unlike when Alice first saw him, he stood tall, with his head lifted. Alice could barely recognise him as the bony creature she had first seen with her father only a few weeks before.

“Okay gorgeous,” she said as she walked over to his head and untied the knot. “Let’s go.”

When they walked past the tack room Alice heard a man’s voice shout from behind the closed door. She shuddered, and tugged gently on Bruce’s lead rope. “Let’s get out of here,” she whispered. “I don’t want to speak to anyone from in there.”

They passed the hay shed and kept going down the dirt road towards Bruce’s paddock without meeting anyone. When they arrived at the top of the hill there was no whinny of greeting as they walked past, and no thunder of hooves as they walked alongside the fence. As she reached the gate she saw it was propped wide open and the paddock was vacant. Alice stopped and looked to see if a halter was slung on the gate awaiting the horse’s return, but there was nothing.

Alice glanced down at her watch. It was early afternoon, and she had been gone for hours. She put Bruce back in his paddock and sprinted back up the hill. Her saddle and bridle were still piled on the floor in an untidy heap. She bent down and picked up her tack. When she reached the tack room she stood outside, uncertain whether to knock. Then the door suddenly swung open and she was face to face with Mr Quilty.

He glanced at her without a glimmer of recognition. His face was white, his lips drawn into a thin line. His pale eyes were hard. Alice stood still, heart pounding. Mr Quilty brushed past and strode down the breezeway towards the house, leaving Alice alone in the doorway.

Rustles of movement and the clinking of coffee cups being washed in silence greeted her hesitant entrance in to the tack room. The armchairs had been pulled into a semi-circle, facing a low table where obviously Mr Quilty had sat. Nobody spoke. A white board stood behind the low table, with the names of horses scribbled on it. Alice noticed the name of Bruce’s missing paddock neighbour, Field of Colours, at the bottom of the list. There was a red line through the middle of it.

Alice recognised the girls she had met earlier, with a few extra faces she had not seen before. A couple of wiry boys sat at the back of the room, eyes flicking from one person to another. She hurried to the back of the room and slipped her tack into its place. She made sure everything was neat and then with a deep breath she walked back towards the door. Just as she reached the doorway, a voice called across the room.

“Alice!” It was Alex. “The Boss wanted to see you today. Something about old Pathfinder,” he said as he walked up to her. “I don’t think he’s in the mood now though, so don’t bother.”

Alice noticed the murmuring had stopped, and all eyes were on her.

“Okay,” she stammered. “I can’t go anyway because I’ll be late home and my Dad will be worried.” Alice heard someone stifle a snort of laughter from somewhere behind Alex’s shoulder. He frowned, but didn’t turn around or make any comment.

“That’s fine then. Go and see him next time.” He smiled tersely, and Alice fled from the room.

Her boots pounded the concrete as she ran to where her bike was propped against the brick wall. The air felt fresh and clear after the oppressive atmosphere of the tack room. She wondered why Field of Colours was gone, and why his name had a red line through it on the whiteboard.

Alice pedalled vigorously down the driveway, hoping her father hadn’t noticed how long she had been away. She rode with her head down, pushing hard on the pedals to coax as much speed from her bike as her legs could generate. From the corner of her eye she glimpsed the white railings of the football oval, so she knew she had nearly reached the corner. From there it was only another ten minutes along the bitumen, where she could make much faster progress.

She glanced up briefly and caught sight of a board someone had tied to a tree trunk at the oval’s entrance. As she rode past she caught sight of the words “Pony Club”. Her fingers squeezed the hand brakes hard, and the bike wheels locked and skidded, sending a spray of gravel on to the road’s edge. Alice turned her bike and rode back to take another look at the sign.

It was tied to the tree with binder twine, and painted white with black lettering. It read, “Pegasus Pony Club, Meets first Sunday of the month, All welcome.” Under the sign there was a phone number. Alice rummaged in her pockets and found an old pencil stub. She scribbled the number on the back of a crumpled bus ticket and shoved it back in her pocket.

When Alice arrived home her father’s car was not in the driveway and when she opened the front door the house was still and quiet. As she walked down the corridor

towards her room she noticed her parents' bedroom door flung wide and her mother's open suitcase on their bed. From the doorway she saw the floor was strewn with clothes, and the wardrobe doors gaped open.

She ran down the corridor to the kitchen but there was no further sign of her mother apart from a large set of keys spread out on the dining room table. Alice searched the kitchen and the lounge room but no-one had left a note. Disappointed, she escaped to the sanctuary of her bedroom, overcome by a sudden need to lie down. An envelope was propped against her pillow with her mother's handwriting scrawled across the front.

She sat on her bed and ripped it open. A card fell on to the coverlet, showing an antique illustration of a horse, its nostrils flared painfully and waving a cropped tail. She opened it and a fifty dollar note dropped on to her lap. Her mother had scrawled a birthday message inside, but Alice did not read it. She closed the card and stared at the horse on the cover. It was brown, and very fat. Alice flung the card on the floor and rolled on to her back, staring at the old familiar cracks on the ceiling. They formed patterns she had identified in her infancy: the crescent moon, the little bell, the small dog, up on his haunches, begging. But today they didn't reassure her. Her birthday was long gone. She could barely remember what she had done that day.

A hard lump in her pocket pressed uncomfortably against her side. She fished it out and recognised the scrunched up ball of paper with the scribbled Pony Club phone number on it. Alice sat up. She swung her legs off the bed and walked to the kitchen to find the phone. The wall bracket was empty. Alice rifled through the cushions on the sofa and finally found the receiver, hidden under an open magazine. She punched in the phone number and waited.

The phone rang on and on. Alice was just about to disconnect when a woman's voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Oh, hello," Alice replied. There was a brief silence. "My name is Alice and I saw your sign near the oval about Pony Club," she said. "I thought you could tell me when the next rally is on and how I could join."

“Yes, dear, of course.” The woman’s tone was kind. Her voice carried a faint quaver.

“We are meeting this Sunday, as a matter of fact,” she continued. “You can come along and we can organise all the paperwork once you are there.”

“Paperwork? What do I need to bring?”

“Well...” the woman paused, “you need to bring your parents and they need to sign the consent form for you to attend.” There was a brief silence and Alice wondered if she was to reply when the woman continued. “And then you have to pay your joining fee.”

“I see,” Alice fiddled with the soft tassel from one of the cushions. “But do my parents need to come this Sunday? Because Mum has been away for a long time and I think they’ve got plans for this weekend,” she blurted.

The woman was quiet. She seemed to be thinking. Alice chewed at her fingernails. She knew her parents would definitely not want to go to a Pony Club meeting this Sunday.

“Well, dear... how about this. What say I post you the consent form and you can get your parents to fill it out. Then when you come along this Sunday you can give it to us. Will that be alright?”

“Oh thank you! That would be great. You see, I need some help with my horse but I’m not sure if he’ll be okay for Pony Club anyway.”

“Well, don’t worry. I’m sure the instructors will be able to help you. They’ve seen every type of horse there is!” The woman chuckled. Alice suspected she didn’t know much about horses at all. She gave the woman her address and hung up.

With a flick of her wrist she tossed the phone back on the coffee table and laid her head back on the cushions.

The muffled sound of two car doors slamming in the driveway alerted Alice to her parents’ return.

“We’re home!” Her father’s voice boomed down the hallway accompanied by the clip clop of her mother’s heels on the floorboards.

Alice sat up. “In here,” she called. Her mother appeared in the doorway first, her face set in a hard mask. When she caught sight of her daughter the stiff lines dissolved into a smile.

“Hello darling!” she crooned. She sashayed around the sofa and spread her arms wide. “Come and give me a hug!”

Alice rose and stood awkwardly. Her mother scooped her up in her open arms and tried to kiss her cheek, but Alice tilted her head away and the kiss landed on her brow.

“Hi Mum,” she said, softly.

“What! No kiss?” Her mother held her daughter out at arm’s length, a wide smile stretched across her face. Alice noticed the small crease of annoyance in her mother’s forehead.

She reached forward and pecked her mother on the cheek.

“That’s better!” Her mother let her go and sat down. She patted the space beside her. “Now tell me all about what you’ve been up to!”

Alice sat down reluctantly. She glanced across at her father who had planted himself in the armchair opposite. He nodded and smiled broadly, but she wasn’t fooled; his eyes looked worried.

“Well...” Alice began. “Did you know Dad bought me a horse?”

There was a brief silence.

“Well, no. Your father didn’t mention that.” Her mother shot him a sharp look, but he avoided her eye, pre-occupied with adjusting his wristwatch.

“Yes, we bought it one weekend,” Alice’s father said, looking up. He leaned forward in his chair. “You know how she moons over the paper every weekend, Em. So I thought I’d put her out of her misery!” He laughed loudly, but her mother said nothing.

Alice came to his rescue. “Yes Mum, he’s gorgeous! You should see him. I’ve found out he was a famous racehorse, too. Isn’t that amazing!”

Alice’s mother looked dubious. “A racehorse? But you can barely ride!” She turned to her husband. “Is the animal safe?”

Alice's father looked perplexed. "Of course it is. I went with her to try it out. You wouldn't be able to make the thing move fast if you set a firecracker under its tail!"

Alice laughed to oblige her father. "That's right Mum. He's really quiet. In fact I'm taking him to Pony Club next Sunday."

"Are you?" Her mother looked from one to the other. "In that case we are all going along too. I want to have a look at this super quiet racehorse." She slapped her palms on her knees and stood up. "So that's fixed. Now I'm going to have a lie down. It was a long flight." She left the room and they heard her footsteps recede down the hallway.

When she was gone Alice's father sighed, and leaned back against the headrest. "That horse of yours better behave," he muttered. "Otherwise I'm stuffed."

Without any more explanation he got up and followed his wife. Alice stayed sitting where she was, idly watching the dust motes dance in a shaft of sunlight. A soft sound of muffled voices reached her from behind her parents' closed door. She reached for the TV remote and flicked on the set, raising the volume until it drowned out the sound of her parents' argument.

All week her mother worked late. Every night Alice and her father had dinner together, each one silent at their end of the table. The empty place setting in the middle weighed heavily on them.

"Why isn't Mum here?"

Alice finally asked her father one evening as he spooned vegetables on his plate. His spoon hovered before he put the bowl down and he regarded Alice with an intensity she had not seen before.

"Look Alice, you're old enough to know what's going on." He paused, and looked down into his plate. Alice waited. "Your mother and I are going through a rough patch," he continued. "She doesn't want to spend much time with me at the moment."

"What do you mean Dad?"

“God Alice, do I have to spell it out!” her father sounded exasperated, then looked stricken as her face crumpled. Her lip quivered and she bit it firmly with her front teeth, determined not to cry. His hand reached across the table and held hers. It felt warm and a little clammy. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart.” His eyes looked shiny. “I didn’t mean to snap at you. It’s not your fault at all.”

He leaned back in his chair and released her hand. “What I mean is I’m not sure your mother wants to stay with me. I think she may have met someone else in Queensland.” His voice was flat and emotionless. The words hit Alice like someone was pelting her with stones.

“What do you mean, Dad?” Alice stammered. “Is she going to leave us?”

“Not us, Alice. Me.” Alice was silent. With wide open eyes she stared at her father across the table. “Don’t look at me like that Alice.” He put down his fork and turned his head away from his daughter. “I don’t know what to say. We just have to wait and see what your mother decides.”

Alice’s stomach churned. The thought of eating her dinner made her feel sick. She put down her fork and got up from the table. Her father said nothing as she left the room and walked to her bedroom, closing the door quietly behind her. As she sat on her bed, perched with her knees tucked up under her chin, she heard her father turn on the television and listen to the evening news.

All she could think of was Pony Club this Sunday and whether she could make Bruce behave like a quiet child’s pony. Her worst fear was that maybe her mother would leave because they lied. At the very least the truth would make her even angrier. As she slipped on her pyjamas to get ready for bed she felt numb. She turned out her light and curled into the cave of her bedclothes.

Later, a figure crept in to her bedroom, illuminated by a shaft of light from the hallway. Her mother’s fingers were cool as they brushed a stray lock of hair from Alice’s forehead. “Good night, sweet pea,” she whispered.

The mark of those cool fingers lingered on Alice’s forehead as she drifted to sleep, surrounded by the sweet odour of her mother’s perfume.

Alice rolled on to her side. A warm, slimy pool had formed on the sheets. Without opening her eyes she slipped her hand under her pyjamas. Her eyes flew open when her fingers touched wet fabric and when she pulled her hand out from under her quilt it was covered in a sticky wetness. She sat up abruptly, lifted the bedclothes and swung her legs out of bed. The wet fabric of her pyjamas stuck to her leg as she reached across to switch on her reading lamp. The old familiar feeling of shame and dismay at wetting the bed crept back for the first time since she was a small child. But the wet pool on her sheets was dark, almost black. She looked at her fingers and they were stained crimson. It was blood.

Alice stood up and ripped her quilt from the bed. A warm drop of blood landed on her bare foot and she realised she was still bleeding. Her fingers fumbled with her pyjama buttons, and finally she managed to remove her bloodied nightclothes. She stood, shivering, in her wet underpants in the middle of her bedroom, unsure what to do. There was blood all over her bed, on the sheets, the quilt and on the floor. Even her hands were stained. Worse still, she could feel the blood continue to pulse from her body in a steady flow.

“Mum” she whispered.

Her sticky fingers fumbled with the doorknob and she traversed the empty corridor to her parents’ room. Their door was ajar, so she pushed it open and slid quietly into the room. Her father slept sprawled on his back, one hairy arm flung over the bedclothes. His mouth was open and his breath exhaled in a gentle snore. The space where Alice’s mother slept was empty. Only a depression in the pillow signalled she had even been to bed. Alice looked wildly around, but the bathroom was empty. She stood with her hand jammed between her legs in an effort to stop the blood from dripping on to her parents’ carpet. Then she heard a soft murmur coming from the kitchen.

Alice left the room and went back to the corridor. A shaft of light shone under the closed kitchen door and she hobbled down the corridor towards it. When she entered the kitchen she found her mother talking softly into the phone, perched on a kitchen

stool in her dressing gown. The smile on her face drained away when she saw her daughter dripping blood on to the white kitchen tiles.

“I’m sorry, I have to go.” The phone landed in the cradle with a beep of protest.

Alice flew into her mother’s outstretched arms. A harsh sob croaked from her lips, and her mother smoothed her hair, tangled from sleep and agitation.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” her mother crooned. “We’ll get you cleaned up in no time.”

Her mother took off her dressing gown and wrapped it around Alice, her face softened by a veil of concern. She leaned down to speak directly to her, like she used to do when Alice was small. “Now wait here. Mummy is going to get you a pad, and some clean undies and pyjamas. Won’t be a second.”

Alice nodded and her mother disappeared into the hallway. As she waited the wall clock ticked loudly behind her, the only sound in the kitchen. Another splash of warm blood fell on her foot. She looked down, only to see another small droplet add to the growing puddle of blood at her feet. Alice turned and looked at the wall clock. 3am. A salty tear dribbled down her cheek and remained suspended on her top lip.

The kitchen door opened and Alice turned around. Her mother had returned with a clean pair of pyjamas and a large cotton pad in one hand. In the other she held a pair of clean underpants.

“Okay, let’s get you in the shower and clean you up.”

With one hand on Alice’s shoulder she guided her towards the bathroom. Alice stood forlornly in the middle of the cold bathroom floor while her mother ran the shower, dipping her fingers under the strong jet of water to check the temperature. Alice watched the steam rise and billow into the corner of the ceiling. She wanted to avoid looking at the narrow trail of red droplets dotted across the bathroom tiles.

“Now, in you go!”

Her mother pulled her dressing gown from Alice’s shivering form and steadied her daughter as she stepped from her bloodied underpants. The hot shower reddened Alice’s skin as she stood silent under the forceful pressure. Blood mixed with the water that swirled down the plughole. Alice watched the crimson wash from her body.

When Alice stepped from the shower a few minutes later the droplet trail of blood was gone. Her mother was wearing a clean dressing gown and stood waiting in the middle of the bathroom floor with a bath towel outstretched. She stood meekly while her mother towelled her hair, even though it was only damp from the steam.

“Now Alice, I want you to put these on.”

She handed her daughter clean underwear and the pad. It looked impossibly long, like a surfboard. Alice took it and turned it between her fingers.

“Okay Mum.” Her voice was barely a croak.

Her mother showed her how to remove the paper adhesive strip at the back of the pad and press it into place. When she pulled up her underwear it felt awkward and bulky, but also clean and dry. The sticky wetness was gone.

“Now sweetheart, you are all grown up.”

Alice didn't know what to say. She wasn't sure what her mother meant, and she didn't explain. She kissed her daughter's forehead and then guided her towards her bedroom. The room was clean and tidied, and fresh sheets covered the bed. Alice's mother folded back the quilt and plumped the pillows.

“Hop in sweetie,” she said, softly. “Your bed is as good as new.”

Alice slipped gratefully between the sheets, and pulled the quilt cover under her chin. “Thanks Mum,” she whispered.

Her mother smiled, and ruffled her hair. “You're welcome,” she said, “that's what Mums are for.”

Her lips pressed on Alice's forehead in a dry kiss. The sheets felt cool and clean against her skin. Suddenly she was very tired.

“Goodnight,” her mother whispered as she switched the light off.

“Goodnight Mum,” Alice mumbled. As her mother closed the door she rolled over, and fell immediately into the deep abyss of sleep.

Chapter 6

The phone rang on and on, echoing through the empty house. Alice rolled over, and pulled the quilt over her head. But she could still hear the phone ringing. Then her eyes opened wide and she remembered; today was Pony Club day and it was probably Miranda calling. She flung off the covers and bounded out of bed. As she slid across the kitchen floor in her bed socks to reach the phone she glanced at the clock. It was 9am, and she was already late.

She plucked the phone from its receiver and shouted breathlessly into the handset. “Hello! Alice speaking! There was a pause at the other end of the line.

“Hello.” The man’s voice was cautious, reserved. “Can I speak to Emma Williams please?”

“Umm... I don’t think she’s here.” Alice looked around for a piece of paper and a pen. “Can I take a message?”

The voice paused. Alice had the feeling the man wanted to hang up, but then thought the better of it. “Yes, you can. Could you tell her Mr Hermitage rang?” The voice was more assured now, even authoritative.

Alice scribbled down his name with a pencil, cradling the handset between her chin and her shoulder. “Do you want to leave a number?” she asked.

“No, no, that will be fine. She knows my number.” He seemed about to hang up, but then added, “And can you say it’s urgent?”

Alice paused. “Okay. I will.” There was an awkward silence.

“Thank you.” Alice heard the click of the receiver as the line went dead.

“You’re welcome,” she said as she put the receiver back in its cradle. She sprinted back to her bedroom. A few minutes later, when she was struggling into her jodhpurs, the phone rang again.

“Oh crap!” she exclaimed. “Where are Mum and Dad?”

She hopped down the corridor and into the kitchen again, with one leg stuck in her jodhpurs. This time it was Miranda.

“Where are you Alice?” demanded Miranda, even before Alice had time to say hello.

“Well, I’m still at home, where you are ringing me.”

Miranda did not sound amused. “Look, I’m waiting at the farm and you’ve only got about an hour to get here, tack up Bruce and ride to the Pony Club grounds. Otherwise you will be late and that will be so embarrassing. I’ll just have to pretend I don’t know you.”

“Look, I know. It’s just that Mum and Dad aren’t here for some reason and I was relying on them to wake me up.”

She thrust her leg into her jodhpurs and was now able to stand upright. She cradled the handset between her chin and shoulder to do up the zip. “I can be there in twenty minutes. I’ll just ride like mad.”

“Okay then.”

“Hey Miranda!”

“What?”

“Can you go and catch Bruce and start getting him ready? You know where all our stuff is, don’t you?”

Miranda paused. “Are you sure that will be okay?” Her voice descended to a whisper. “There’s a few of those mean looking girls around here today.”

“Don’t worry about them.” Alice replied, confident. “They’ve met you anyway. Just go and grab the halter and get Bruce. Before you know it I’ll be there.”

“Oh, alright,” Miranda sighed. “But make sure you get here soon, I don’t want to be here on my own for too long. This place gives me the creeps.”

“Sure, don’t worry.”

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye.” Alice slammed down the phone and raced back to her room to finish getting ready. Miranda’s call had left her feeling guilty. Irritated at herself, she stuffed a spare windcheater into her bag as she heard her parents come through the front door.

“Look, I know,” her father was saying. “But at least you could give it a try for a while.”

The front door slammed and drowned out her mother’s reply, if there even was one. They kept talking as they walked into the kitchen. Alice stopped listening. It was always the same conversation anyway.

Before rushing from her room she checked her reflection in the dressing table mirror. The kitchen was empty when she ran in to grab some apples from the fridge.

“It’s Pony Club day today!” she yelled towards the lounge room.

The murmur of voices stopped and her father appeared in the kitchen doorway.

“What? Why didn’t you tell us?” He sounded annoyed.

“Look Dad, I did.” She swivelled around to face her father. “I told you ages ago. You and Mum have just forgotten.” She turned away to peer into the fridge. “Nothing new about that,” she muttered under her breath.

Her father appeared beside her and spun her around to face him.

“What did you say, young lady?” Alice was surprised to see a gleam of anger in his eyes. Her father never got angry.

“I said there’s nothing new about that,” Alice repeated, defiant. “You and Mum never listen to me.”

She shook her father’s hand free from her shoulder. “And Dad, I’ve got to go. I’m late.”

“Well, we’re coming too, you know.” Her mother appeared in the kitchen with her handbag tucked under one arm. “I need to check out this horse of yours.”

Alice knew her father did not want to go, and that her mother was equally as determined to come along, if only to interrupt her father’s constant questioning.

Alice shrugged. “Suit yourself. But I have to go, NOW. Miranda is waiting for me.”

She hoisted her backpack into a more comfortable position and strode past her father on her way out of the kitchen.

He grabbed her arm as she passed. “Wait Alice. We’ll drive you.”

Alice stood uncertainly in the kitchen. She didn’t really want them to come but her mother was insistent. “Okay,” she assented. They left the house together.

Alice stared out of the window as they drove. Her parents did not speak to each other, and the tension was thick in the closed atmosphere of the car. She couldn't help resenting them: it was their fault she was late, and she was sick of their arguments and bad feeling. When they arrived Alice jumped from the car as it was crunching to a standstill on the gravel.

"Hey!" she heard her father protest, but she slammed the car door and cut off the rest of his words. She ran around to the stables, where she caught sight of Miranda and Bruce, who looked clean and well groomed. His tail was combed and bushy, the long hairs nearly touching the ground. Miranda had brushed his coat until it shone, and smoothed his mane so it lay flat against his neck. She had even put the saddle on, and as Alice appeared she was in the process of slipping the bridle over the horse's ears. Bruce had dropped his head so Miranda could reach.

"He looks great Miranda. You did a fabulous job!" Alice ran her hand down his soft neck.

Miranda flushed with pleasure. "Do you think so?" Her fingers fumbled with the bridle and then she handed the reins to Alice with a flourish. "There you are, one horse, all clean and tacked up!"

Alice grinned, and leaned forward to give her friend a quick hug. "You are the best friend anyone could ever ask for," she whispered into her friend's ear. "Thanks so much."

"So this is the famous racehorse?" Alice's mother's voice boomed over the silence of the stable block.

Alice cringed. "Mum! Not so loud," she hissed, looking around to see if anyone else had heard. Her mother didn't reply, but walked over to Bruce and began stroking his face. The horse closed his eyes.

Alice felt a sudden pang of guilt. She knew by her mother's rounded shoulders that she had hurt her feelings. She walked over and placed her hand on her mother's arm. "So Mum, don't you think he's beautiful?" she asked.

Her mother kept her face turned away. Taking a tissue from her handbag, she pretended to blow her nose. "Yes, he's lovely." She cast her eye over the animal. "He seems very quiet, too." Alice smiled happily.

“Well, well,” her father exclaimed, as he came around the corner to join them. “What a change!” He walked up and confidently laid his hand on the horse’s rump. “He’s not the same bag of bones he was when I last saw him!”

“Brian! Hush now,” said her mother. She threw her husband a disapproving look. As though on cue Bruce seemed to pose: he held himself upright, raising his head and staring into the far distance with ears pricked forward. From the way he was standing his white star was clearly visible.

“Not bad for \$300,” Alice’s father commented.

Miranda returned from the tack room and stood beside Alice. “Hello Mr and Mrs Williams,” she said.

“Hello Miranda!” Alice’s mother exclaimed warmly. “It’s lovely to see you!” She wrapped her arms around the girl, who stood stiff and embarrassed.

“Lovely to see you too, Mrs Williams,” she blushed.

“Hi Miranda.” Alice’s father raised his hand in greeting. “Thanks for helping Alice out this morning.” He turned to his daughter. “You’d better give Miranda a ride today too, you know. She deserves a go.”

“Of course Dad. Bruce is kind of our horse anyway, not just mine.” She looped arms with Miranda, who looked pleased.

Alice’s father smiled and rubbed his hands together. “Well, come on. We’d better go.”

He reached for his wife’s hand, but she was rummaging inside her handbag and ignored him. He tucked his hand in his pocket and turned to the girls.

“Come on Miranda, you come with us!” his voice boomed. His good humour did not fool his daughter.

Alice led Bruce in to the stable yard and poked her foot into the stirrup iron. He stood still as she hopped on one leg and then struggled into the saddle. Face flushed, she sat upright, hoping her ungainly efforts had not been noticed. “Good boy,” she muttered, giving his neck a quick pat.

“Will you be okay, Alice?” her mother’s voice floated across the yard.

“Of course, Mum,” she answered, her voice brusque with nerves. “I’ll be fine.” Using the pretence of adjusting her stirrups, she turned away from her mother’s concerned face.

“Okay then, Alice. I’m going with your father and Miranda.” She paused, but Alice didn’t respond. “Bye then.”

“Bye,” Alice muttered under her breath as her fingers fumbled with the buckle. She didn’t look up until she heard the sound of her mother’s footsteps retreating.

The reins felt dry between her fingers. Bruce chewed the bit and she could feel the soft pull of his mouth against her hands. Alice sat upright in the saddle and squeezed with her calves. She swallowed, expecting Bruce to bound forward, but he remained stationary. Her fingers loosened the reins, and she squeezed again. This time he walked forward, his hoof falls slow and regular as he calmly left the stable yard.

As they walked around the side of the building and in to the car park area Alice’s whole body relaxed. They plodded down the gravel driveway, and from her elevated position Alice could see her parents’ car waiting at the end of the driveway. Its right hand indicator light blinked slowly.

The journey towards the gate was without incident. Alice halted Bruce alongside the car and her mother wound down the window.

“Are you alright?” she asked, concerned. Miranda stared blankly at her from the back window. Alice was sure her parents had had “words”.

“I’m fine Mum.” She leaned down to speak to her father on the driver’s side.

“You guys had better go, the horse truck’s coming and you are blocking the way.” The car drove off as the horse truck turned into the gravel drive. Stones sprayed against Bruce’s legs as it roared past without slowing down. Alice waved, but there was no acknowledgement from inside the truck. She glimpsed Bernie’s grim face behind the steering wheel.

The truck seemed to unsettle the horse. He began to prance on the verge, his head arched in to his chest as he jiggled up and down, almost on the spot. Alice clutched at the reins, already slimy with sweat.

“Calm now, boy,” she crooned, nervous. Her hand reached down to stroke his shoulder. It was damp with moisture.

Bruce's stride settled. Alice noticed that her father had pulled over fifty metres up the road. Seeing his car provoked a surge of irritation.

"I just wish they'd go away!" she muttered. Bruce flicked an ear back when he heard her speak. They walked on until they reached the side of the car. Bruce stopped when Alice's father wound down the window. The horse stood motionless as Alice's father peered up at her from the driver's seat.

"Everything okay?" he asked. A small frown of concern creased his forehead.

Alice raised her eyes in a look of exasperation. "Look Dad, I'm fine. Okay? Why don't you guys go ahead and meet me at the Pony Club grounds?" She raised her hand and pointed ahead. "It's only down the road, so why don't you wait for me down there?"

Her father looked dubious. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure. You hanging around like this will bother Bruce."

Her father glanced up at the horse, standing calmly beside the car. "He looks fine to me, Alice."

Alice shrugged and poked Bruce in the ribs with her heels. The horse grunted and strode ahead, leaving Alice's father hanging over the driver's window. As they moved off Alice squeezed gently on the reins just to make sure he didn't get the wrong idea. She heard the crunch of tyres on gravel and her father's car glided past. An eddy of wind blew up a cloud of yellow dust as the car passed, so she was only able to glimpse the outline of her mother's rigid profile and Miranda's face peering at her through the back window.

She lifted her fingers to wave, but then the car disappeared around the bend ahead.

As Bruce's hoof falls plodded gently on the dirt road, Alice was ashamed at her earlier rudeness. She decided she would be kinder to her parents, and as her body swayed to the horse's movements her nerves ebbed away. The horse maintained an even rhythm, glancing over the empty fields on either side. The road was deserted and they did not meet any other traffic until they arrived at the entrance to the football oval. A new wooden plaque with "Pony Club Rally today" emblazoned across the front was in

place and as they walked through the entrance, Alice saw rows of dilapidated horse floats and horses in all shapes and sizes lining up on the grassy expanse.

Bruce noticed them too. He halted abruptly, nearly knocking Alice in the nose as he raised his head high and trumpeted a loud whinny to the cluster of horses milling around the centre of the oval. Alice blushed red, and squeezed with her legs to keep him moving. Traffic banked up behind them as more cars turned into the oval's entrance. Bruce did not move. He stood as though cast in bronze.

Alice caught a glimpse of her parents and Miranda, leaning against the railing at the far end of the oval. She waved and smiled bravely, as though nothing was happening.

She squeezed with her legs again, and this time Bruce sprung forward as though shot from a rocket. Alice clung on, and with her free hand jerked on the reins. Bruce's head flew up, but he checked himself, and moved forward in a series of small leaps. Alice, in desperation, pulled on the reins again, and shoved her legs further into the stirrups. The animal snorted, and curved his head against his chest. Alice tried to sit still in the saddle and the horse began a slow jog, his body arched sideways. Alice tried to look calm, but she noticed people glance at her and her horse's crab like progression around the periphery of the oval.

When she reached her parents her mother looked worried. "Are you okay up there, Alice?"

"Sure Mum," she beamed, trying to sound confident. "Bruce is just a bit excited to see the other horses, that's all."

Her mother nodded, and pursed her lips as she watched Bruce. "I'm just not sure he's the right horse for you Alice," she added, her voice grim.

"Don't worry Mum," Alice cried as Bruce pranced away towards a fat grey pony.

The small boy riding it frowned at Alice as Bruce sidled up to them. "Watch out," he piped. "My horse kicks!"

The little fat creature squealed and wheeled around to plant two hind feet under Bruce's ribcage. Alice heard the horse grunt and suck in air. He arched his back but before he could move the pony was gone and an elderly woman stood beside Bruce's head, her hand firmly wrapped around his bridle.

“Hello dear,” she said, her voice kind but with a steel edge. “My name is Mrs Bishop and I’m in charge of safety here today.”

Bruce tried to raise his head but Mrs Bishop pulled sharply on the rein and he lowered it obediently. She ignored him and continued talking to Alice.

“Now why don’t you follow me into the ring with the others, and we’ll do your paperwork later.”

Alice nodded and the woman led a now docile Bruce towards the centre of the oval.

Her mother had disappeared, but Alice saw her father near the railing and waved. His look of concern melted away when he saw her, and he waved back. Alice scanned the crowd and saw her mother standing alone under a gum tree, one finger pressed into her ear as she conducted an animated conversation into her mobile phone. Alice turned away.

Bruce began to jog as they reached the group of horses. Mrs Bishop growled at him and he dropped to a walk. Alice peered down at the elderly woman’s permed grey hair. Her arm holding the bridle looked frail, but Alice noticed her muscles ripple under the pale skin as she held the horse tight. She was like a shorter and less robust version of Mrs Pitchers, and Alice wondered if they were related.

A tall girl stood in the middle of the group, ticking names from a list pinned to a hot pink clipboard. Her long blonde hair rippled down her back. When Alice rode over she swept aside the blonde curtain of hair and Alice was surprised to see the lined face of an older woman staring up at her.

“I’m sorry Anne, but I don’t have any more on my list.” The woman’s voice was high pitched like a young girl’s. Her long painted fingernail trailed down the names. “No, I haven’t missed any.” She blinked at Mrs Bishop and waited.

Mrs Bishop turned to look up at Alice perched high above. “What is your name, dear?” she asked, kindly.

“Alice. Alice Williams.”

The blonde woman searched her list again, but Mrs Bishop interrupted her.

“It won’t be there, Sandy.” Her tone was sharp. “She’s new.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Sandy giggled. “Silly me.” Mrs Bishop turned to Alice again.

“And your horse’s name, dear? We need to put him on our list too.”

“Bruce.” Alice’s voice was low. Spoken out loud like that his name seemed ridiculous.

Mrs Bishop made no comment. “Well dear, I’ll have to let you go now. The rally is about to begin.”

Her wizened hand slipped from the bridle and Bruce immediately shook his head, suddenly free. Instantly Mrs Bishop’s hand was back again. “Now, follow Sandy here,” Mrs Bishop continued, as though she had not been interrupted. “And if you have any trouble, just wave to me and I’ll come and help you.” She gestured to a small trestle table set up under a tarpaulin beside the oval entrance. “I’ll be sitting over there.” Before Alice could answer she was gone.

The group of horses and riders began to move off towards the far end of the oval. Alice let Bruce follow behind. She noticed the small boy and his fat pony at the far end of the group. The pony had a small red ribbon tied around the top of its bushy tail. Everyone else seemed to avoid them.

Alice looked around at the others. Most of the children rode ponies of varying sizes. With a mixture of pride and nervousness Alice realised Bruce was the largest horse there. All of a sudden the group halted, and Bruce’s nose poked into the tail of the horse in front. It leapt forward and the girl riding it turned around to frown at Alice. Alice blushed, and mumbled an apology. The girl shrugged and looked away.

“Now everyone,” a woman’s voice boomed from the front of the group. “Get into a wide circle and start walking, so I can see each one of you.”

The horses at the front shuffled into line.

“Come on, come on, we don’t have all day,” the voice boomed again. As the ponies formed an egg shaped circle Alice was able to see who had spoken. It was a woman of very short stature, carrying a riding crop tucked under one arm. Her hair curled around her small head in tight black ringlets, and her deeply furrowed face squinted in the bright sun.

She strode over when she noticed the new addition to the group. “I haven’t seen you before,” she announced. Despite her diminutive size, she planted herself in front of Bruce and he halted abruptly, throwing his head high to avoid her. The woman’s ringlets barely reached Bruce’s shoulder.

“No, today is my first day here,” Alice replied.

“Well...” the woman paused as she ran her eye over Bruce. “You seem to have an old campaigner here,” she commented. “Have you done much with him?” She fixed her steady gaze on Alice, who reddened.

“No, not really,” she stammered. “I haven’t had him very long.”

“I see. Well, come into the circle and we’ll see how he goes.”

“Okay,” Alice replied, but the woman had already gone.

Alice guided Bruce to follow the horse in front. He seemed interested, flicking his ears back and forth, but remained calm. Over near the parked cars she saw her parents leaning against the railing, along with Miranda’s smaller figure.

At that moment the woman shouted to the group.

“Aaannndddd.... TROT!”

The command was accompanied by a loud crack of the riding crop as she smacked it against her boot. Bruce shot forward at the sound, almost ejecting Alice from the saddle. He rammed into the horse in front, pushing against the padded hindquarters of a large stout pony. His momentum cut a swathe through the bunch ahead, which parted as Bruce strode through. Once he saw an opening, he rolled into a loping canter and broke completely free of the circle milling around the instructor.

“You there!” the woman yelled, “get that horse under control!”

Alice, red faced, tugged desperately at the reins. Bruce ignored her efforts. He tucked his chin into his chest and kept going. All Alice could see was the curve of his neck in front of her hands, and the blur of grass glimpsed through his pricked ears.

“Oh no,” she muttered to herself. “Oh no, oh no, oh no...” Her voice cycled through her head like a mantra as she leaned back in the saddle and pulled on the reins as hard as she could. Bruce snorted and lengthened his stride. The white railings surrounding the oval flashed past and Alice realised she wasn’t going to be able to stop him. She let the reins slip through her fingers and concentrated on staying in the saddle.

As they made their way around one lap of the oval Alice could see adults running towards them and the group of children and horses huddled in the centre. Some of the horses were excited and pawed and fidgeted as Bruce thundered past. But none of them broke away. Alice noticed Mrs Bishop holding on to an agitated pony whirling in small circles with an ashen faced boy sitting frozen in the saddle. She blushed and looked away. She tugged again on the reins but Bruce did not slacken his speed. For the first time Alice wished her father had bought her one of those ordinary fat ponies instead of this mad ex-racehorse.

After a few circuits Bruce's stride shortened. A bloom of sweat covered his neck, and even from the saddle Alice could see the red rims of his distended nostrils. As he slowed to a canter Alice noticed a group of adults moving towards them from the centre of the oval. They positioned themselves in Bruce's path, and as he cantered along the railings a tall man with grey hair emerged from the group. When they were nearly upon him he raised his arms high to block Bruce's way. The horse slid to a stop to avoid the man, who lunged at the reins dangling from the animal's neck. But as he lunged he slipped and fell on the damp grass. His hands remained clasped around the reins, and when he lost his balance he pulled Bruce down. Alice remembered flailing hooves and clods of flying mud, before the ground rushed towards her and everything went blank.

She opened her eyes to a ring of faces looking down at her. Voices spoke but she could not clearly make out any of the words. Suddenly the group parted and a shaft of sunlight fell across Alice's face, causing her to blink and close her eyes. A cool hand rested against her forehead.

"Everyone stand back please," the voice said. Alice recognised the quavery tones of Mrs Bishop.

"We have to call an ambulance," Alice heard a man insist in an agitated voice. He was panting, as though he had been running. She recognised it as her father's.

“It’s okay, Dad,” Alice spoke. “I’m okay now.” She tried to sit up, but her head spun and she flopped back on the grass.

“You are not okay,” her father answered, firmly. “You are probably concussed, and we are getting an ambulance.”

Alice saw Mrs Bishop rest her hand on her father’s arm. “Don’t worry, Mr Williams, an ambulance is already on its way.”

Her father swallowed. When he spoke again his voice was calm. “Thank you.” He stroked Alice’s forehead. “It’s just that I saw it all, and I thought she was going to get killed on that bloody animal.”

Mrs Bishop nodded, but didn’t reply. At that moment the instructor arrived with a small pillow and a plaid picnic blanket. Gentle hands spread it over Alice as she lay on the grass and someone tenderly lifted her head to slide the pillow beneath. Mrs Bishop stood up and ushered the remaining people away from Alice’s prostrate form.

“I’m okay, Dad, really.” Alice looked up at her father, whose face was creased with worry. Her pale hand crept out from under the blanket and wound its way into his wide palm. He clasped it tightly. When he turned away Alice saw his eyes were moist.

“It wasn’t Bruce’s fault, Dad. He got a scare, and this is the first time he’s gone anywhere like Pony Club before.”

“And the last.” Her father’s tone was fierce. “That horse is a maniac.”

“He’s not, Dad. He’s got a good temperament, really.” Alice smiled feebly. Her father caught her eye and held it in a firm gaze.

“Listen Alice, you don’t know how lucky you are not to have been seriously injured. What if something like this happened when you were riding on your own?”

Alice was quiet. She turned away from her father’s piercing gaze.

“Imagine if there was no-one to help you. I wouldn’t even know something had happened.” He shook his head. “No, that horse is dangerous, and you can’t ride him again.”

“But Dad...” yelped Alice in protest.

He put his hand up to silence her. “No argument. My decision is final. I should never have bought you that bloody animal.”

Their conversation was interrupted as Alice's mother rushed towards them. Miranda trailed behind, looking lost.

"Nice of you to turn up," Alice's father remarked, dryly.

Her mother ignored him. "My God Alice, are you okay?" She leaned down and kissed her daughter on the forehead. "Miranda told me you had a fall."

"Yes Mum, but I'm fine now."

"That's crap Alice." Her father interjected. "An ambulance is on its way. She's probably concussed." He rose to his feet and stepped away, leaving Alice, Miranda and her mother huddled together. The rest of the crowd had dispersed.

"Oh Alice! I can't believe you hurt yourself." She stroked Alice's forehead with a cool hand. She looked over to where her father stood with his back to them, hands jammed into his trouser pockets.

"I'd better go and see what your Dad wants to do." She got up and brushed the grass from her knees. "You'll be okay with Miranda here?"

Alice nodded. She watched as her mother placed her hand on her father's shoulder. He shrugged it away.

"Alice, wow. That was a bad fall."

Alice turned to look at her friend. "Oh, Miranda, I'm so sorry I've ignored you today. It must have been hell hanging out with Mum and Dad."

Miranda pulled a face and then smiled. "Nah, it was okay. Your Dad and me just freaked out when we saw you fall." She leaned in to whisper into Alice's ear. "It was that stupid old guy who did it, too. Bruce was getting ready to stop and he just pulled him over." She nodded sagely as though letting Alice in on a big discovery. "I don't think it's Bruce's fault either."

"Thanks Miranda." Alice suddenly felt a wave of nausea flow over her. Vomit rose in the back of her throat. Miranda's face swam into view.

"Are you okay Alice? You've gone really pale."

She smiled at her friend but didn't answer.

"It's okay Alice," Miranda whispered, as they heard the sirens approach. "The ambulance is here."

She patted Alice's hand as doors slammed beside them. Alice was placed on a stretcher and slid into the ambulance. Her father climbed in beside her and sat clutching her hand. As they drove away the rocking motion of the ambulance soothed her, and she felt overcome by a need to close her eyes. Her father saw her eyelids droop. He shook her shoulder vigorously.

"Alice!" he cried over the wailing siren. "Stay awake, sweetheart!"

Her eyes burned with the effort of keeping them open. "But Dad, I'm so tired. Just a little sleep..."

"No baby. Not now." There was a note of urgency in her father's voice. "You have to stay awake until we arrive at the hospital. It won't be long."

"Okay Dad," mumbled Alice. "Seeing as it means so much to you." She smiled vaguely, and he squeezed her hand.

The journey seemed to take a long time. Alice looked around the ambulance. One of the green clad paramedics smiled at her. She smiled back. And then a thought struck her.

"Dad, what happened to Bruce?" She tried to sit up in the stretcher, but her father stopped her with a firm but gentle hand.

"Don't worry about him. Your mother and Miranda took him home. He's absolutely fine."

"Oh that's good." Alice sighed and leaned her head back against the flat pillow. "I can't believe I forgot all about him."

Her father smiled tersely but didn't reply. The ambulance circled and the back doors sprang open. The paramedics slid her stretcher out with expert grace and spun her into the Emergency Department.

Alice and her father waited in a side bay near the reception desk. A makeshift curtain was pulled across to provide a semblance of privacy. Her father did not speak. Every now and again he squeezed her hand, and she turned to give him a smile.

"I love you Dad," she murmured.

Her father leaned down and kissed her forehead.

"I love you too, sweetheart." His fingers stroked her cheek like they had when she was little. "You will always be my little girl."

Alice closed her eyes. She felt oddly peaceful here, in the middle of a hectic emergency ward. Hours seemed to pass before anyone noticed them. Suddenly the curtain was swept across and a young man appeared with a chart and a stethoscope flung around his neck. Two young nurses trailed behind. They all looked tired.

“Well, well, suspected concussion.” The doctor ignored them and read his chart with head bowed. He looked up, as though noticing them for the first time.

“Hello, I’m Dr Adamson. Sorry about the wait.” He bustled over to Alice. “Right, let’s see what’s wrong with you.”

His supple fingers prodded her body, probing her neck for signs of swelling. He did not speak or look at her during the examination. When he was finished he nodded at her to lie down. The doctor scribbled on his chart. “Now, tell me your name, age and address.” He spoke so rapidly Alice barely understood him.

“Do you mean me?” she asked.

The doctor nodded. He looked annoyed. “Of course, who else?”

“Oh, okay.” Alice looked him in the eye. “My name is Alice Williams, I’m thirteen years old and I live in 5 Grevillea Way, Oakwood. And my phone number is 8243 7165.” She added, a note of triumph in her voice.

Alice noticed her father’s grin. She grinned back.

“Now, now, you two,” said the doctor, “no showing off.” But Alice noticed the ghost of a smile curl his lips as he scribbled on the chart.

“So, now, Mr Williams, you had better tell me what happened.” The doctor sat down on Alice’s bed, pushing her legs gently aside to make room.

Alice lay back on her pillow and stared at the ceiling as her father relayed the story of Bruce’s gallop and her fall. He became animated as he told the doctor about the old man who pulled Bruce down, clearly blaming him.

When her father had finished the doctor got up from the bed. He seemed stiff, as though he hadn’t sat down for a long time.

“Well, young lady, I think we can send you home.” He patted Alice’s leg through the thin cotton hospital blanket. “You are a very lucky girl.”

He turned to her father. “I want you to observe her closely over the next 24 to 48 hours, which means three hourly checks through the night for you, unfortunately.”

Her father nodded. “That’s fine.” He ruffled Alice’s hair. “I’m just glad she’s okay.”

“Well, she is. But she has also had a nasty fall and a grade 3 concussion. I would like her to see her doctor in a few days for another check.” He turned to Alice. “And no more riding for you, at least for a few weeks.” He peered at her over the rim of his glasses. “Understood?” Alice nodded.

“Because if you fall again in the next few weeks it could be fatal.”

He swept the curtain aside and left the cubicle, trailed by his entourage of nurses.

“Did you hear that?” Without looking up, Alice knew her father was giving her a stern look. She turned to face the curtain. The fabric rippled slightly, as though moved by a gentle breeze. “Alice! I’m talking to you!” Reluctantly, Alice rolled over to face her father. “I know, Dad. But Bruce didn’t mean it. He’s a good horse really.” Alice’s face felt hot. A wet tear slid down her cheek.

The anger that had been building in her father’s face softened. “I know sweetheart. But I can’t have you put in danger like that again.”

Her hand slipped from his grasp as he stood up and ran one hand through his hair. “I just can’t let you keep it.”

Alice rolled over and stayed silent. This time she watched the rippling curtain until it was time to go home. The nurse arrived with a wheelchair and her father wheeled her out to the pick up area. No-one arrived to pick them up, so after waiting a few minutes her father hailed a taxi, muttering under his breath about her mother’s absence. As they drove through the empty suburban streets towards home he remained silent, staring out of the window. Alice lay back in her seat, fighting off sleep. She rubbed at a spatter of mud on her jodhpurs. Her fall seemed long ago, as though days had passed rather than just a few hours.

Shadows danced on her bedroom wall when Alice woke, disorientated. Her throat constricted in a strangled cry, but she swallowed it away before she made any sound.

The quilt slipped to the floor as she sat bolt upright in bed. Her heavy breathing was the only sound in her quiet bedroom.

“Mum!” she whispered. But nobody came.

Alice reached down and picked up her quilt. She cocooned herself in it, letting her bare toes poke out the end as she took deep breaths to calm herself. Her fear gradually ebbed away, replaced by her bedroom’s comforting familiarity. The jagged shadows on the wall became simply reflections of the tree branches outside and the looming dark figure above her bed could be nothing but her old brown teddy. The gauzy curtains billowed like sails because her mother had left the window open.

Alice was hot, so she let the quilt slip from its tight wrap around her body. The cool breeze was a relief as it softly caressed her bare legs. Her tongue stuck uncomfortably to the roof of her mouth. She slid from her bed and padded quietly into the corridor, in search of a glass of water. A soft mumble of voices drifted towards her from the kitchen. She crept closer, until she could clearly overhear her parents’ conversation.

“I know Emma. I know what you are saying. But I don’t agree.” Her father’s voice was soft but insistent.

“Come on Brian. You know how devastated she would be if we got rid of it.” There was a brief pause. Alice heard the clink of a glass being put down on the coffee table. “And Mr Quilty assured me it can be fixed.”

Alice’s ears burned. She crept even closer, until she was standing right behind the kitchen door.

“I don’t give a shit about what Mr so and so says. Didn’t you see the fall she had today?” Her father grunted derisively. “Well, no, I suppose you didn’t.”

“Come on Brian,” her mother replied, a hint of exasperation in her tone. “I’ve already explained about that.”

“Well, not quite. You’ve said you had to speak to that Hermitage wanker to tell him you are not going back for now. But in the process you missed seeing our daughter nearly get killed on that crazy animal.”

“That crazy animal you bought her, I might add.”

There was a long pause. Alice strained to hear and the floorboard under her foot creaked. She grimaced and held her breath. After a pause her parents continued.

“Look, I don’t want to keep going around in circles here,” Alice’s mother said. “Let’s see if we can sort this out.”

Her father sighed. “Right. Okay. So what do you want to do?”

“Look, let me tell you what happened after you left.”

There was another pause followed by a soft clink of a glass being placed on the coffee table. Alice realised they were in the lounge room. She slipped through the open kitchen door and sat quietly on the floor, out of sight.

“Miranda and I were frantic,” her mother continued. “Before we knew it you were both whisked off to the hospital and I didn’t know what to do. That woman, Mrs Bishop, was great. She organised everything. After you had left, she appeared holding Alice’s horse, which was limping and covered in sweat. Apparently other people had been trying to catch it for ages. She asked me what we wanted to do with him. I said I didn’t know, so she offered to take him back to that agistment place in her friend’s horse float. I said that would be fantastic. She told me to follow them in the car because she knew the place we were talking about. We led the horse to the float she pointed out, and you know, Brian, he was well behaved.”

Her father grunted.

“Look, I know, I know,” she said, with a hint of impatience. “But really, the horse was good. Next thing, he just walked into the float. It was easy. They waited for us while we got the car and then we all went in convoy up the road.”

“Okay fine. So what’s your point?” interrupted Alice’s father.

“If you’ll just listen, I’ll tell you.”

Alice peered through a crack in the open door. She could see her mother’s legs curled on the sofa, and watched as she leaned forward, took a sip from a glass of wine, and then put it on the coffee table. Her parents’ heads were out of view, but Alice sat back quickly just in case they saw her.

“Right. Well, all I wanted to do was drop off the horse and get into the hospital. There was nobody around, so we took the horse off the float and tied it up using a halter Mrs Bishop kindly lent us from some kind of stash she has in her car. I tell you, that

woman is a legend. Then she gave us the gear, and Miranda went to put it away in the tack room, because apparently she knew where it was. While we were waiting, I asked Mrs Bishop what she thought of the horse, and whether it was suitable for my daughter. She took a while to reply. Then she said that she thought the horse was a nice one and had a good nature, but was an untrained ex-racehorse who only knew about the track, and as such was an inappropriate mount for a child beginner, however nice natured it was. She explained that she didn't think the horse was a genuine bolter, but just that it was only doing what it knew, which was to gallop. As she was explaining all this, Miranda returned with Mr Quilty, who happens to be the owner of the place."

Alice's mother paused again to light a cigarette. The acrid smell drifted across to where Alice was sitting.

"Only one, Emma. You know I hate the smell of cigarette smoke in the house." Her father sounded tired.

"Sorry," her mother's tone was apologetic, much to Alice's surprise. "Just this one. Then I'll go outside."

After a deep drag on her cigarette her mother continued.

"So anyway, this Mr Quilty appears and says that he couldn't help overhearing our conversation and wanted to know if Alice was okay. I told him I thought so, but that she was under observation in hospital for suspected concussion. He seemed quite upset by that. Anyway, he asked me what had happened and when I told him he seemed surprised the horse had run away like that. By this time Mrs Bishop had gone. She left pretty much as soon as Mr Quilty arrived. Actually I got the feeling they knew each other and didn't get along. So then Mr Quilty said he knew someone who could re-train racehorses and make them safe for normal riding. I said I wasn't sure if we would continue on with this horse, because we didn't think it was suitable for a young girl." Her mother paused while she took another drag on her cigarette. "Did you know that Alice's horse had been a big prize winner on the track?"

Alice's father murmured something she couldn't hear.

"Well, he was," her mother continued. "Apparently he was some kind of superstar. And, get this, Mr Quilty's brother owned him when he was racing. Isn't that amazing?" She seemed pleased by this revelation but Alice's father remained silent.

“Anyway, what it means is apparently the horse was always a lamb when he was in training. Never put a foot wrong and had the sweetest nature. They all loved him.”

“Right. So much so that they just got rid of him when he stopped making them money. You should have seen the condition he was in. Come on Emma. This all sounds suspect to me.”

“Wait. Just hear me out. What he said was you can’t just take a horse like him to Pony Club and expect him to be like all the other plodders there. He’s had a different experience of going to events and for him he was just behaving in the way he’d always behaved.”

“So what? He’s still a danger to our daughter. I don’t give a shit why he does it.”

“Look Brian, you’ve got to let me finish. What Mr Quilty suggested was that he has a friend who may be willing to re-train the horse for a small fee to make him safe for Alice to ride. He said the guy would do it as a favour, because he always had a lot of time for the horse when it was racing. In fact, apparently he made a bit of money on it, so Mr Quilty figures he owes the horse one.”

Alice’s father sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t think we can take the risk. What if she falls again and this time isn’t so lucky? What about then?”

“I know.” Her mother’s voice was solemn. “But what are we going to do? Alice will be heartbroken if we get rid of it. And plus, who’s going to buy it? Mr Quilty did say that unless it gets some training the next step for the horse is the dogger truck. And if we let that happen, Alice would never forgive us.” She butted her cigarette out in the ashtray before continuing. “Maybe we should get it trained and then see how she goes with it, under supervision of course, and if it’s not suitable we can sell it then. What do you think?”

There was a long silence. Alice leaned forward to try and catch a glimpse of her father through the crack in the door but all she could see was his foot jiggling up and down. The smell of smoke wafted through the open doorway and caught in Alice’s throat. She swallowed hard to prevent herself from coughing.

“There is one other reason why I think this is a good idea,” Alice’s mother continued, her voice soft.

“What’s that?”

“Mr Quilty said that the horse could leave pretty much straight away, so by the time Alice can ride it in a few weeks time it would be ready for her. He also said his friend had daughters around Alice’s age and he was sure she could stay there for a few days to give her some training with the horse before it left.” Alice’s mother paused. “And I thought we could use that time to take a short break together, just you and me, and work out some of the issues we’ve been having.”

Alice held her breath until her father finally spoke.

“Who was it on the phone at the Pony Club?”

Alice’s mother was quiet. When she answered her voice was so low Alice could barely hear it. “It was David.”

“I see.” Alice heard the sofa creak. She could just imagine her father’s pose as he leaned back and crossed his arms.

“No actually, you don’t see.” Alice’s mother’s raised voice quavered. “I was telling him not to call me anymore, and that I wasn’t coming back to work because I wanted to stay home and work on my marriage.”

Alice gasped out loud. She immediately lifted her hand to her mouth and winced, but it was too late. After a short silence her father called out to her from the sofa.

“Come on out Alice. You may as well sit out here with us and hear the rest of it in comfort.”

Slowly Alice untangled her stiff limbs and got up off the floor. She padded into the lounge room and sat on the edge of the sofa beside her mother.

“Well, what do I say now?” He paused, pretending to consider his options. “Given the strength in numbers, I suppose I’ll just have to agree,” he finally said.

Alice leapt from the sofa and threw her arms around her father. He smelled faintly of wine and cigarettes.

“Thanks so much, Dad,” she planted a kiss on his cheek, “and Mum.” She turned briefly to her mother, “you guys are great!”

Her father took her chin in his fingers, and tilted her face upwards to look straight into her eyes. “But I want you to understand Alice, that if the horse doesn’t work out, we are going to sell it.”

Alice averted her eyes, but nodded her consent. “Yes Dad.”

“Good.” His arm slid from her shoulders as he unravelled his tall frame from the depths of the sofa. He looked down at his daughter, still curled up on the cushions. “Get to bed and we’ll talk about this some more in the morning.”

Obediently Alice went off to bed. It wasn’t until she was nestled under the covers that she remembered her glass of water.

When Alice’s doctor checked her a few days after her accident, he insisted she be kept home on bed rest for a week. Alice spent the first few days watching television and sleeping, but then she was bored. During the last half of the week she wandered the house, aimless, sick of television and unable to sleep any more. On the weekend she decided to ask her parents where Bruce had gone and when she would be able to see him. When they returned home from a late lunch she confronted them in the hallway.

“Hi,” she said as they came in, laughing, through the front door. Her mother swept her hair from her face in a coquettish gesture as she stepped into the hallway, still clinging to her husband’s arm.

Alice’s father looked up. “Hi love,” he answered, still smiling from their private joke. “How’s it going?”

Alice peeled herself away from the doorframe.

“Okay, I suppose.”

“I’ll make us a cup of tea,” her mother announced in a cheerful voice. She patted Alice’s arm as she passed.

“Come sit and tell us about it.”

“Oh no, there’s nothing to tell,” Alice blurted. “I’m not upset or anything.”

She nibbled on her fingernail as her father threw his arm around her skinny shoulders and steered her in the direction of the lounge room. She allowed herself to be guided to the sofa, before her father pushed her with mild force on to the cushions. He grinned. Despite herself, Alice smiled back.

“Okay, get talking!” He threw himself exuberantly into an armchair and kicked off his shoes. He stretched out his long legs and propped his feet up on the coffee table, revealing a small patch of skin through a hole in his sock.

Her mother bustled in with a mug of steaming tea in each hand. She bumped against her father’s legs to get him to move out of the way so she could pass. He smiled up at her.

“There’s a toll, you know,” he said, with a mischievous look.

She raised her eyes, but looked amused. Alice wanted to leave the room. When her mother leaned down to place a mug in front of Alice he patted her on the rump. Her mother swiped his hand away and frowned at him with mock annoyance. Alice averted her eyes, pretending to be absorbed in her mug of tea.

“There you are,” her mother said as she placed the other steaming mug in front of Alice’s father. “Now, you two have a chat, and I’m going to have a shower.”

Alice watched her father’s eyes follow her from the room. When she was gone, he crossed his legs and began to jiggle his foot up and down.

“Okay Alice, fire away.” He slurped loudly from his mug.

“Look Dad, I just wanted to know what’s happening with Bruce, that’s all. It’s boring hanging around at home all the time. And I haven’t even been able to speak to Miranda. She doesn’t seem to be home ever.” She sipped her tea. It was still hot.

“I know love. But the doctor said you need rest, so it’s best for you to stay home for now. Plus your mother would like to see a bit more of you, seeing as she’s been away for so long.”

“Come on Dad. You guys haven’t been around at all. I think I’d rather be at school than home with you two.” She tried to mask her irritation with an awkward smile.

Her father sighed. “Well, it’s not for much longer. We were going to keep it as a surprise, but apparently the people who have taken that horse of yours have said that you can go up there a week early.”

Before he could finish Alice sprang from her seat and flung her arms around his neck. “Wow! That’s great Dad! When can I go?”

“Hey! You’ll spill my tea!” He lifted his mug up and glared at her with feigned seriousness.

“Well, when? And will I be the only girl there, or are there others?” She flopped on the sofa beside him. “And will they be nice to me? Have you met them?”

“Whoa!” her father exclaimed, “just one question at a time!” He raised his hand like a traffic conductor. When he turned to face his daughter, her face was flushed with excitement. “Your mother’s been organising it as a surprise for you. We didn’t want to say anything until we were sure you could go.”

Alice wrapped her arms around her father and buried her face in his shoulder. She breathed in his warm smell and sighed.

“But just make sure you are careful,” her father said, softly. “You’ve had one fall from that horse already and I’m trusting you to be sensible.”

Alice leaned back and looked deep into her father’s eyes. “Dad,” she solemnly announced, “don’t worry. I won’t ride him until they tell me it is okay. I promise.”

Her father looked relieved. He smiled down at Alice and ruffled her hair. “I’m glad to hear you say that, Alice.” He kissed her on the head and stood up, towering over his daughter who remained seated on the sofa. “Now let’s see what that crazy mother of yours is up to,” he said, glancing at the doorway. Almost before his sentence was finished he was gone.

Seconds later Alice heard her mother’s faint giggle. She rolled her eyes and leaned back against the cushions. Her mother’s laughter floated towards her through the closed bedroom door. Alice turned and buried her face in the cushions, covering her ears. At least I’ll get out of here for a while, she muttered into the fabric. I can’t wait.

When her father appeared at her bedroom door a few days later, Alice was packed and ready. She perched quietly on her bed, nestling her backpack in her lap.

“All set then,” her father chuckled. “Should have known, I only wish you were so keen to get to school!”

Alice stood and slung her backpack over her shoulder. “Don’t worry Dad, I promise I’ll be more into school this year.”

Her father smiled. “Great. Glad to hear it.”

“Well Dad,” she asked, impatient. “Aren’t we leaving now? I’ve been waiting for ages.” Alice giggled when she saw that the hair on the back of his head was as tangled as a bird’s nest. His pants were lopsided and he wore odd socks.

“What?” her father exclaimed, following her gaze. “What’s wrong with how I look? It’s Sunday morning, for Christ sakes!”

Alice’s giggles subsided. “Don’t worry Dad, nobody will see you. Just drop me off and come straight home.”

“Why? What’s wrong with how I look?”

Alice chuckled. “Just don’t turn around, that’s all.”

“Oh, right.”

He smoothed his hair flat with his fingers.

“Now how do I look?” he asked.

Alice laughed. “Like Frankenstein trying to look normal,” she sniggered.

“I give up. You’re impossible to please. But don’t worry, I won’t embarrass you.”

He jangled the car keys and they left the house, closing the door gently so as not to wake Alice’s sleeping mother.

Alice stared straight ahead as the car slowly reversed out of the driveway. The front door opened a crack and her mother’s face, bleary with sleep, peered out. She waved at the retreating vehicle but before Alice could respond the car swung around the bend and she disappeared from view.

Alice stared out of the window. The feeling of irritation was passing, crowded out by one of guilt. Her mind wandered as she watched the scenery roll by; her mother’s fading smile, her own feeling of relief at leaving. They drove on, with only the whistle

of the wind through her father's open window and the indicator's faint clicking as he wound his way through the quiet suburban streets breaking the silence.

Alice glanced down at the crumpled paper in her hand. An address was scrawled across it in pencil in her mother's precise script. She swallowed, and smoothed out the paper on her knee.

"Okay," her Dad asked, "where do I go now?"

Alice read out the address. "I don't know where that is, but it seems like it's pretty far away."

"Yes, it is." He sounded dubious. "It's going to take us a while to drive out there. Plus it's pretty remote." He drove a while in silence. "You know Alice, I'm not sure I'm happy for you to be out there with people we don't know."

Alice held her breath. She stared out the window and tried to ignore the feeling of unease in the pit of her stomach.

Her father glanced sideways at her. "Look love," he continued, "I know you've been dying to get away from us, and God knows it's probably been pretty difficult living with me and your Mum these last few weeks. But I can't let you go anywhere I'm not happy about."

Alice grimaced. "Look Dad, why are you saying this now?" It was hard to keep the whine from her voice.

Her father sighed. "I just don't have a good feeling about this, that's all."

"Dad," Alice replied, "I'll be fine." She rested her hand on his leg, and tried to keep her voice calm and smooth. "I'll ring you as soon as I settle in tonight, and then you'll know I'm okay."

Her father sighed again. He kept his eyes on the road, with one finger tapping against the steering wheel. "Okay," he replied. "And we'll check out the place when we get there as well."

"No Dad! You can't!" cried Alice, dismayed. "You promised!"

"Promised what?" Her father looked puzzled.

"That you wouldn't get out of the car! That you wouldn't embarrass me!" A note of panic crept into her voice. "You haven't even brushed your hair!"

Her father laughed. “Okay, okay. Settle down. But,” he continued, turning to look into his daughter’s face, “I’m going to wait in the driveway until you go inside. And then I want you to come out and tell me everything is fine. That’s the deal. Otherwise, I’ll be coming in and knocking on their door with you. Agreed?”

Alice knew he wasn’t making an idle threat. She nodded. “Sure, that sounds fine.”

“Good.” Her father grunted, satisfied. “Just so you understand. And you still have to call tonight to tell us how you are going.” He glanced over at Alice, seeking her acquiescence.

“Yeah Dad, I will.” Alice replied, impatient. “And now maybe you can keep your eyes on the road for a change.”

“Just so you know, Alice.”

Alice stared straight ahead, and watched the suburbs recede into open paddocks and farmland. Cows and sheep dotted the hillsides, with an occasional house peering from behind a ring of trees. The drive took a long time. Suddenly her father spun the steering wheel and they swung into a narrow bitumen road.

“This was the one, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know Dad, I didn’t get a chance to see the sign,” Alice replied.

The bitumen ended and became dirt, a pale ribbon snaking up the hillside in front of them. Patches of bushland started to appear in the wide, clear paddocks. There wasn’t a house in sight. Not even a solitary sheep grazed on the steep hillsides.

“What kind of horse country is this?” Her father muttered, peering up through the windscreen at the tall eucalypts lining the road. “Only good for goats, or kangaroos.”

They drove on, up the incline and over the crest of the hill. They passed a few lonely letterboxes, nailed haphazardly to fence posts or tree trunks.

When they reached the crest of the hill the landscape changed. The dense bushland cleared and the valley below spread out to open paddocks and a graceful homestead perched on the hillside. Two horses grazed on the lush grasses beside the road. As the car swept down the hill Alice saw a sign. “Hidden Valley” it read, and in smaller letters, “Horse agistment and re-training.” She breathed a sigh of relief.

“Bloody Hidden Valley alright,” her father muttered.

The car slowed to a crawl, then stopped. They both peered up the long driveway to the house above. Alice turned to her father. “Remember our deal Dad,” she insisted.

He shook his head in reply. “I’m not letting you struggle up that driveway alone.”

“Listen Dad, you promised.” Her tone was fierce. “You said you would wait out the front and I could come out and tell you it’s okay.”

Her father pursed his lips and peered up at the house. The gravel was neatly raked and the garden looked well kept. From where they were parked he could see a late model silver 4 wheel drive parked in the garage next to the house.

“Okay,” he relented. “But I’m going to wait here and if you don’t come out soon I’m coming in.”

Alice grabbed her bag and bounded out of the car before he had finished talking. “Sure Dad,” she shouted through the open window. “See you in a minute.” Her determined steps crunched up the gravel driveway. As she made her way towards the house, her steps faltered. Partly obscured by a bush, she turned back to wave to her father, who waved cheerily back. She strode on, a nervous flutter in her stomach.

The paddock beside the driveway was empty. Grass had grown high beside the empty feed bin. The thought occurred to Alice that the paddock had been unused for a while. She marched on. The garden was neat and looked well tended. An old wheelbarrow had been planted with pansies, which tumbled over the side in a riot of colour. Alice could see the two horses grazing placidly in the fields behind the house. She dropped her bag on the verandah and stepped forward to ring the doorbell. Her finger was almost on the button when she stopped and pulled it away.

Alice wanted to avoid her father meeting them. All she could think of was his unkempt hair and odd socks, and the jovial way he had of embarrassing her in front of strangers. She backed off the verandah and retraced her steps back to the car, where her father was waiting, radio blaring. As she approached he leaned forwards and switched it off.

“You can go now, Dad. Everything’s cool.” Alice leaned her elbows over the open passenger window.

Her father paused, reconsidering. “I don’t know Alice...” he shook his head. “Maybe I’d better just meet them to be sure it’s all okay.”

Alice clenched her jaw and frowned at her father. “Look Dad, I’m not a baby anymore. Why don’t you just trust me for once?”

Her father sighed. He leaned forwards and took a long look at what he could see of the property over Alice’s shoulder. She watched his expression soften and she knew she had won him over.

“Okay love. You’re right.” His hand reached across and switched on the engine. “But make sure you call us tonight.” He wagged his finger at his daughter. “Or I’m coming straight back to pick you up, no matter what time of night it is.”

Alice grinned and nodded. “Okay Dad. I’ll call. I promise.” She blew him a kiss as he turned the car and drove slowly away, trailing a plume of dust.

* * *

The bolt slid across the stable door, fastening it closed. Roger Quilty leaned his elbows over the edge, and watched the tall brown gelding get acquainted with his new enclosure. The animal sniffed the feed bin, and then turned to gulp water from the automatic waterer, which gassed and bubbled as he stood and drank. Then he sank to his knees and rolled, legs waving, on the fresh sawdust. Once he had finished he staggered to his feet and with all four legs planted wide, shook himself like a dog after a bath.

Quilty smiled and shook his head.

“You old bastard,” he muttered, “you always knew how to make yourself at home.”

He watched as the horse yanked a mouthful from the hay net tied in the corner of his stall. As Quilty moved away, the animal came and hung his head over the half open stable door, bristles of hay dangling from either side of his mouth. He watched as the man walked down the corridor between the stables and disappeared around a corner.

When he had gone, the horse returned to his hay net. This time, by nuzzling at it with his lips extended, he was able to pull a large ball through the small openings. He sighed and rested one hind leg. The hay was good.

* * *

As Mrs Pitchers made her way up the alley with her slow, lumbering stride, she wondered, not for the first time, how long she would be able to manage on her own. Her joints creaked as each footfall reverberated through her body, finally settling in a dull ache in her back. She sighed, and fumbled in her pocket for the worn spoon with the strong handle she used to pry open the cat food tins, something her fingers could no longer do.

Dusk crept along the alleyway. Shadows lengthened in the corners barely illuminated by the orange glow from the streetlights. Mrs Pitchers watched as the last pink fingers of sunset faded from the sky. When she reached the gate, she leaned against the cyclone wire. It rattled under her weight.

“Oh dear,” she sighed to herself. The alleyway was deserted as usual. She bent down and placed the plastic bag bulging with tins at her feet. When she straightened, she peered through the wire into the factory’s abandoned parking lot. No cats appeared, and this puzzled her.

“Puuusssss..... puuusssss.....” she crooned, but they did not come.

“A van was here earlier, maybe the council took them away,” a girl’s voice said, so close it felt as though someone was whispering in her ear.

Mrs Pitchers jumped, and spun around. A tall, thin girl stood behind her, peering up into her face from under a curtain of long greasy hair. She resisted the urge to wrinkle her nose at the faint odour of unwashed clothes.

The girl tucked her hair behind her ears. Mrs Pitchers looked down at her with distaste. It was the girl she had seen coming and going from the stables, always with a furtive air. She drew herself up to her full height and glared down into the freckled face.

“I don’t think so,” she stated in a loud, clear voice. “Every now and again someone comes to check the factory for vandalism and such-like.” Her tone was firm. “And the cats always hide.”

The girl shrugged. “Just thought I’d tell you,” she said. Her voice was high pitched, with an adolescent squeak. “See you later then.” She turned and walked across the alley to a battered yellow car. Mrs Pitchers noticed the dirt caked seat of her jeans, and tutted under her breath.

The girl opened her car door, which creaked in protest, and the engine fired up with a throaty roar. As she drove away, she waved through the dusty window. Mrs Pitchers didn’t wave back. She remained motionless as she watched the car pull into the stream of traffic at the end of the alley, her face stern.

“Unpleasant girl,” she muttered as she pushed her way through the loose section of chain link fencing and walked slowly across the empty parking lot. Long shadows fell as the light left the darkening sky. She could still make out the flimsy metal door, through which the cats always came, every evening.

As she approached a small grey head poked out from a rusted gap in the door’s frame. Mrs Pitchers laughed.

“There you are kitty,” she exclaimed. “I didn’t think anyone had managed to get you!” The little grey ball scampered to Mrs Pitcher’s feet and wrapped itself around her legs. It looked up at her and miaowed.

“Hungry, are we?” she said. “Well, I’ve got just the remedy for that!” Her hand gently stroked the kitten’s rough fur. It purred so strongly Mrs Pitchers could see its little chest heave in and out.

She pulled a tin of cat food from her bag. With her spoon she prised the lid open and flipped a pile of moist cat meat on to the pavement. The grey kitten sat patient at her feet until she was finished spooning it out, and then, politely, it licked delicately at its dinner. The old woman smiled.

“Bon appetit, little one, bon appetit.”

Chapter 7

Once the rumble of her father's engine had died away quiet descended over the valley. Alice dawdled at the foot of the driveway and watched the plume of dust settle as her father's car disappeared over the ridge. Idly, she kicked at a small stone thrown up by the tyres and watched as it rolled across the road into the thick bushland. The trees rose up and over the crest of the hill, thick as felt. No houses or driveways broke up the continuous stream of vegetation. Alice spun on her heels; for the first time she realised the house she was staying in had no neighbours. It sat perched half way on the only cleared hill in the valley.

She started back up the driveway. As she walked she noticed the horses had drifted towards the house, and now stood shuffling their hooves in the dust near the gate. One of them nickered to her as she reached the verandah. They seemed hungry.

Her bag was where she had left it. With a deep breath Alice leaned forwards and rang the doorbell. It chimed loudly through the house. She stood back and waited. Her palms felt slimy; she wiped them on her jeans.

But nothing happened. No footsteps sounded down the corridor, no muffled voices whispered. She waited, but nobody appeared. Alice leaned forward and pressed the buzzer again. This time she peered into the hallway and noticed a pile of mail scattered on the tiles, from where it had been pushed under the door. The sharp corner of a white envelope poked out from under the door, and she knelt down to grasp it with her fingertips. When she gently tugged, the envelope slid smoothly out. Holding it with one hand she peered back into the corridor. It was still empty, with no sign of life inside. She looked down at the envelope in her hands. It was addressed to a Mrs Cathie Pierson. Her gaze fell on the postmark. The date was hard to read; but she could make out a three and a seven. Three weeks ago.

Still clutching the letter Alice stood uncertainly on the front doormat. The possibilities swirled through her mind: maybe they have gone out; maybe they are running late but will be home any minute; maybe they just forgot the time. She decided

to wait until someone came home. She picked up her bag and perched on one of the wicker chairs, curling her legs underneath. A soft breeze rustled through the hydrangea bushes growing beside the house. Alice wrapped her arms around her thin body as she watched the pale pink pom poms wave gently in the wind. She noticed the petals were brown and curled, and its leaves hung from the branches. The bushes had not been watered for a while. An unused dog bowl was thrust under the branches, empty apart from a layer of a brown dust and a few leaves stuck to the base.

Alice unfurled her limbs and sat back in her chair, in an effort to find a more comfortable position. The sun became stronger, glaring white as it rose in the sky. With no watch to check the passing of time, she felt as though she had been waiting for hours. No car had passed along the road, and there was no sound other than the rustle of wind and the calls of wild birds to keep her company. Even the horses had drifted away to the hilltop to snooze under the shade of the eucalypts.

Alice stood up and stretched her arms above her head. She walked to the end of the verandah and poked her head around the side of the house. Her view was partially blocked by a rainwater tank fringed by rank grass, but beyond it she noticed a gravel path. It wound around the tank and led towards the rear of the house, past a faded wooden gate propped open with a stone. Alice hesitated. She stood uncertainly at the verandah edge, and gazed out at the empty paddocks. The thought that the house's occupants would arrive home and find her looking around their backyard halted her step. She paused, hovering at the verandah edge. Everything was quiet, even the birds had found a roost to wait out the afternoon heat. Alice decided to follow the path, wincing as her feet crunched on the gravel.

Step by step, as quietly as she could, she passed by the tank and through the gate. Behind the house was a paved area covered by a wooden pergola. A wall of glass faced Alice, and her reflection stared back at her, as though from a large mirror. It was not until she left the bright sunlight and walked into the shade under the pergola that her heart skipped a beat. The wide windows and sliding door revealed the house's vacant interior. The wide expanse of polished floorboards was empty of furniture and a telephone propped on a stack of phone books was the only item in the open plan kitchen. Junk mail was strewn over the kitchen floor. The walls were blank and lined with the

bare skeletons of empty bookcases. Alice walked up to the window and peered inside. Her heart pounded as she glimpsed the mail piled behind the front door illuminated by the narrow rectangles of light from the hall windows. Other than this, the hallway was as empty as the rest of the house. She tried to open the sliding door, but it was firmly locked.

Alice slumped into a lone plastic chair beside the window. Now that it was clear the house was uninhabited, Alice could see signs of it everywhere. The unkempt back garden, the leaves scattered over the paths and piled against the bricks in heavy drifts. The empty dog bowl. The echoing house when she rang the doorbell.

She stood up and walked around the other side of the house. From her vantage point she could see the pair of horses outlined against the sky as they stood resting under the trees. One of them raised its head and gazed at her, while the other stood immobile, swishing a fly away with its tail. Their presence reassured her; someone must be coming to feed and check on them.

She walked across the browning lawn and peered through the wire fence at their water trough. It looked clean and was full of water. A sprinkling of hay stalks were scattered on the ground. It looked fresh, as though the hay had only been fed out that morning. The person feeding them would have to turn up sooner or later. All she had to do was wait.

The midday sun burned her skin through the thin t-shirt. She wandered back to the shade under the verandah and settled in the wicker armchair. She felt certain now that nobody was living in the house. The thought that her father would come looking for her later reassured her. Her eyelids began to droop in the soporific heat of early afternoon. She wriggled her body into a more comfortable position, and fell asleep.

The shadows were already lengthening into late afternoon when Alice woke with a start. A stiff breeze had sprung up and whistled past the house down to the gully and road below. Alice was disorientated; her neck was stiff from having slept in an awkward position, and she was unable to turn her head. It took a few moments for her to

remember where she was, and identify the noise that had woken her. She tried to peer over her shoulder in the direction of a loud banging sound, but her head was frozen, stuck to one side by the atrophied muscles in her neck. Gingerly, she sat up and turned her body towards the side of the house. A gust of wind blew, and she jumped at the subsequent loud bang.

For a few moments she remained frozen in her chair, but then she decided to investigate. She walked around the side of the house, and saw the old wooden gate swinging gently on its rusted hinges. As she approached it swung violently in her direction, and slammed with a hard crack against its flimsy frame. Alice jumped, and reached forward to slip the latch into place, so it wouldn't slam again in the next gust of wind. The gate quivered against the latch, but stayed firm. Her foot tripped over a stone in the centre of the path. Alice looked down at it and frowned. Drag marks had left an impression in the gravel, and she could clearly see where the stone had sat for a long time, to prop open the gate. Tall grass had grown around the patch of bare earth where the stone had been.

She tried to put it back into place with her foot, but it was too heavy to move. With two hands clasping the rock's worn surface, she pushed it back against the gate, wincing as the effort strained the stiff muscles in her neck. When she finished she stood up and brushed the dirt from her hands against her jeans. A sharp gust of wind rattled the gate in its lock. The tree above the house groaned and scraped its branches against the galvanised iron roof.

Alice had a strange feeling that someone was watching her. The back of her neck tingled, and she had to resist an overwhelming urge to run. But she forced herself to stay and check the back of the house, scanning under the pergola and across the deserted garden. Everything was the same as before; the plastic chair tilted at an angle, the empty dog bowl thrust under the shrubbery. Alice shivered and walked back to her wicker chair. The light faded fast once the sun dropped down below the hills. Yellow streaks of sunlight were replaced by the sudden fall of dusk. Alice curled up in her chair and waited.

As the minutes passed a rising sense of panic propelled her from her seat and with brisk steps she walked away from the house. The horses had wandered down to the

gate and when they saw her they shuffled their hooves in hopeful anticipation of an evening feed. When Alice reached the fence the brown horse stretched his neck over the taut wire. He opened his lips wide, but Alice was empty handed. She leaned down and began to tear at the straggly grass with her fingers.

“Here you are,” she said as she offered the animal a few clumps of grass, some still with lumps of soil attached. The horse accepted them gingerly, claspng at the grass with his teeth while trying to shake the roots free of soil. The other horse shuffled over and shouldered the first horse out of the way. He stretched his head forward too, and sniffed Alice’s empty hands. Alice picked him a handful of dried stalks, which he sucked greedily from her palm.

Alice stayed with the horses until it was dark. Eventually she was no longer able to see the clumps of grass that still remained untouched in the overgrown garden, and the animals wandered away. She stood and listened to the thud of their hooves as they walked across the paddock and left her standing alone.

No lights illuminated the shadows as Alice struggled to navigate through the darkness towards her seat on the verandah. Even the stars were blanketed by clouds as night settled over the valley. Blinded by the dark, Alice stumbled through the abandoned garden. Shrubs loomed before her and blocked her way, while branches swung low from the trees to whip her across the face as she passed. A plant pot nearly tripped her; she banged her shin hard on its ceramic rim and nearly fell to the ground.

Her step quickened. Her chair beckoned like an oasis. As she pushed past the last shrub she recognised the white verandah railings looming out of the dark. With one hand she grabbed the railing and then froze. A figure separated itself from the shadows and strode towards her, a hand outstretched. Its face was swallowed by the gloom but Alice could make out a tall slender silhouette that she instantly recognised. It was Bernie.

“Hi,” Bernie called. Her voice reverberated through the empty garden. “It’s only me!”

Bernie appeared beside Alice and put her hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay! I’m not a ghost!” She glanced around at the empty house rising out of the gloom, “Although it is pretty creepy here.” She shuddered and steered Alice around the side of the house towards the driveway.

“What are you doing here Bernie?” Alice stammered. “How did you know...”

Bernie dismissed Alice’s question with a flick of her hand. “Mr Quilty told me to come and get you. When you didn’t turn up we worked out there must have been a mistake with the directions and this is the only other place around here you could have been dropped off.”

“Did you call my Dad?” Alice asked. “To let him know what happened?”

“Don’t worry,” Bernie replied, patting Alice’s shoulder. “It’s all sorted.”

Their feet crunched on the gravel driveway as they rounded the corner of the house. Alice could make out the contours of a light coloured sedan parked haphazardly under the carport.

Bernie propelled Alice towards the passenger side door. “Come on, hop in.” Alice hesitated, and Bernie shrugged, sliding her angular form into the driver’s seat. She opened the passenger door from inside, leaning across the front seats.

“Get in!” she exclaimed, irritated. “What’s your problem? You don’t want to spend all night in this dump do you?”

Alice took a deep breath and got in.

“Finally,” said Bernie, as she began reversing at speed down the driveway, the car’s tyres spinning on the gravel. “Now we can get out of here.”

They drove in silence. The car wound its way deeper into the bush. No house lights or passing cars broke through the thick blackness. Bernie threw the car into a lower gear as it struggled up the steep inclines and bumped over deep potholes and crevices in the rough dirt road. As they reached the crest of the hill the road narrowed, becoming little more than a bush track. Then, beyond the crest of the hill, the road became smoother until, to Alice’s surprise, the car hit bitumen. Bernie turned to her and smiled.

“I bet I had you worried there for a while,” she chuckled. “We are nearly there now.”

The car turned, and they travelled down a long driveway lined with tall eucalypts. It stopped in front of a house almost obscured by bush, with only a dim light outside the front door to light their way. Bernie got out of the car and motioned for Alice to follow. They walked to the front door and Alice was surprised to notice that the house was double storey, and deceptively large, nestled behind its canopy of shrubs.

“Ok, here we are,” Bernie said as she pulled a set of keys from her pocket and let them in through the front door. She glanced down at Alice. “You look tired. How about we go to bed and sort everything out in the morning?”

“I promised Dad I’d call,” Alice replied, a note of anxiety in her voice. “I know he’ll be waiting up.”

Bernie sighed with impatience. “I told you Alice, that’s all been fixed. Why don’t you just come with me and we’ll call your Dad tomorrow.”

“No Bernie. I really have to call.”

“Okay,” Bernie exclaimed, throwing up her hands in exasperation. “Have it your way.” She strode down the hallway and beckoned for Alice to follow. “Telephone’s down here,” she said, over her shoulder.

Alice glanced around the house for the first time. Paintings lined the corridor and a Persian hall runner softened their footfalls as they walked. Bernie flung open a swing door and they were in a cavernous kitchen, all white and glistening stainless steel. She handed Alice a telephone handset.

“Here you are, but make it quick,” she said, before perching her tall frame on a stool beside the bench top.

Alice punched in her home number and put the receiver to her ear. She waited, but there was no dial tone. She checked the number and pressed the call button, but the line was dead.

“Typical!” Bernie sneered. “The line’s always down here, in the middle of nowhere.” She came and took the receiver from Alice and placed it back in the cradle.

“We’ll just have to try again in the morning. They’ll probably have fixed it by then.”

“What about ringing home?” Alice asked. “Don’t you have a mobile?”

“Nope. No reception here either. You’ll just have to try the landline again tomorrow.” Bernie tilted her head to one side and gave Alice a quizzical look. “Really, don’t worry, it’ll be fine.” She smiled uncertainly, as though it was something she didn’t do very often. “Let’s get you to bed and then we talk more in the morning.”

“Okay,” Alice agreed, finally. “But you’ll have to take me home tomorrow if I can’t get in touch with Dad.”

“Sure, no problem,” Bernie replied. She stood up. “Now let’s get you organised.”

“Ok,” Alice nodded.

They left the kitchen and returned to the entrance hall, where Bernie bounded up the wooden staircase to the second floor. Alice followed, almost knocking over a bronze sculpture on the landing as she passed.

“Careful! That’s worth a fortune!” Bernie exclaimed.

“Sorry,” Alice answered, sheepish. “Who owns this house, anyway?”

“It belongs to Mr Quilty, of course.” Bernie stopped outside a closed door on the second floor. “Here’s your bedroom for tonight. And if you need the bathroom it’s just down the hall.” She pointed to a closed door a few metres away. Alice nodded and Bernie flung open the bedroom door, gesturing to Alice to step inside. Alice squeezed past, trying not to touch the older girl as she propelled herself through the narrow space. Bernie smelled of stale cigarettes and sweat.

The bedroom, in contrast, smelled sweet. A vase of ponderous roses sat on the dresser, their scent heavy in the air. Alice stood on the pink rug in the centre of the room, clutching at her overnight bag. Bernie breezed in beside her and wrested the bag from her tight grip. She flung it on a pink armchair in the corner and turned to face Alice.

“Well, you can see it’s pretty comfortable.” She smiled with pride, as though she had decorated the room herself.

Alice surveyed the room. Stuffed toys and cushions were scattered artfully over the bed. Framed prints of ballerinas decorated the walls. Everything was pink: the rug she was standing on, the bedspread and curtains, even the soft toys. A pattern of pink roses covered the overstuffed armchair. It was very neat, with no evidence of the mess

and clutter of ordinary living. A tiny doll's house on the dresser caught her eye. It looked like a Christmas gingerbread house, in miniature. She moved towards it to have a closer look.

"Goodnight then Alice," Bernie said, "I'll leave you to it."

"Wait!" Alice called and Bernie's irritated face reappeared in the doorway.

"What is it?" she barked, her friendliness gone.

"I... Can we make sure we call my Dad tomorrow?" Alice stammered.

"Look..." Bernie began, her tone sharp. Then she paused, and composed herself. Her irritated expression softened and she smiled at Alice, standing uncertainly on the rug in front of her. "Sure, of course," she crooned, her voice kind. "We'll make sure we get hold of him tomorrow and tell him where you are. Now don't worry, and get some sleep. We'll sort it all out in the morning." She stepped back into the room and guided Alice towards the bed. "Come on, let's get your nighty on," she said tenderly. She rummaged in Alice's bag and pulled out her nightdress. "Here it is," she said in a singsong voice, as though talking to a very young child. "Now, slip this on and hop into bed. Do you want something to eat? Or maybe a glass of milk?"

"I'm not hungry, but I would like a glass of milk," Alice replied.

"Good idea," the older girl answered, "I'll be back in a minute."

After Bernie left the room Alice wriggled out of her clothes and slipped on her nightgown. She cleared the soft toys from the bed and turned over the coverlet. When she was finished she slid between the cool sheets just as Bernie returned holding a glass of milk.

"There you are," she said, handing the milk to Alice and watching as she drained the glass. "Now, go to sleep."

"Thanks Bernie," Alice muttered.

"No problem," Bernie replied. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Bernie left the room, snapping off the light and closing the door firmly behind her. In the sudden darkness, Alice listened to her footsteps recede down the hall. She rolled over to face the wall and within moments she was asleep.

* * *

A loud thump woke the dozing horse. His eyes jolted open, and he raised his head, ears flicking in the direction of the noise. His muscles tensed; all four hooves were firmly planted on the damp sawdust of his stall, ready to move at any sign of danger. His ears swivelled to pick up any more sounds, but all he could hear were muffled voices. One voice was low and gruff; he snorted when he heard it and swung his body in a circle around his stall, scraping a hoof against the wooden siding as he moved.

Then he stood still again, and listened. A car door slammed and the voices receded. He swung his head over the stall door, and watched the man stalk into the house, followed by the tall girl, who flung her glowing cigarette butt into the shrubbery before disappearing after him. He heard the heavy front door close, and it was not until then that the tension left his body. He lowered his head and drank deeply from the water trough, raising his muzzle to listen for any sound. But it was quiet except for the splash of water droplets falling from his lips into the pool of water. The animal snorted, and shuffled over to his hay net. He stood munching the remaining stalks of hay as dawn broke, and the early morning chorus of bird song began.

* * *

Through a crack in the curtains a shaft of morning sun fell across Alice's face, forcing her awake. At first the blurred contours of the room shimmered before her eyes and all she could make out were bright patches of sunlight and pink fabric. She blinked a few times, her eyelids fluttering in rapid succession. Her vision cleared and she rolled to her side, and it was only then that she noticed a tall man sitting casually in the armchair opposite, his long legs crossed at the knee. One dangling foot tapped a slow rhythm in the air.

“Good morning, Alice,” he drawled, “Did you sleep well?”

Alice blinked, and sat up so abruptly the bedclothes slid to the floor.

“Oh.. hello Mr Quilty,” she stammered. “Um... yes, thank you.” Her tongue stuck in her mouth, which felt full of sand.

Roger Quilty reached towards a glass of water on the dresser, which he handed across to Alice. “Here, have a drink,” his voice was smooth.

Alice took the offered glass and nodded her thanks. The cool water slid down her throat and cleared her head. When she had finished Roger held out his hand and placed the empty glass back on the dresser.

Alice pulled at the bedclothes in an attempt to cover her nightdress. She tugged hard but the top sheet was tangled in a knot and only reached as far as her waist, leaving her shoulders and arms exposed.

“Well now Alice,” Quilty paused, watching her, “you must be wondering where you are?” He chuckled quietly, as though he had made a joke.

Alice nodded. She wasn’t sure what to say.

“You were dropped off at the wrong place,” he said, matter of fact. “There was a misunderstanding, and your father left you at the wrong address.” He paused to clear his throat. “It took us a while to work out what had happened when you didn’t arrive here,” he continued. “And then we realised, so we went and picked you up.” He stopped, and his cool gaze swept over Alice’s bare shoulders. “Unfortunately,” he continued, “We haven’t been able to contact your parents to let them know what happened. They seem to have gone away. In addition, our phone has been playing up, so we have only had intermittent phone service since you arrived.” He paused as if to let her digest this information, and then smiled. “However, in the meantime, you will be very comfortable here. And, you’ll be pleased to know that we have Bruce too.”

There was a long pause. Questions tugged at the back of Alice’s mind, but when she opened her mouth to speak, no words came out. Roger leaned forward in his chair, ready to get up and leave.

“Can you tell me where I am?” she blurted, as he unfolded himself from the armchair. Alice looked up at him. He loomed over her, his head seeming to touch the ceiling.

“Oh, of course,” he replied. “You are at Wildwinds Farm, my other property. Not many people get to come here, so you are very fortunate.” He smiled down at Alice and fluffed her hair with one hand, as though she were a toddler. “This is where we break in and pre-train racehorses,” he continued. “And occasionally others that are giving their owners some trouble.” He flashed her a grin, showing yellowed teeth. “I like to keep this work separate from my other activities.” He waved his long fingers towards the garden outside, visible through a gap in the curtains. “Please feel free to explore as much as you wish.”

He patted her bare shoulder and strode towards the door. As he reached the doorway he paused and turned back to Alice, who was still sitting awkwardly on the bed.

“Remember to ask Bernie if you need anything,” he added, before disappearing out of the room without waiting for a reply.

When he was gone, Alice sprang out of bed and raced across the room to close the door. She pulled on clean clothes from her overnight bag and smoothed over the rumpled bedclothes. The soft toys scattered over the floor she placed carefully back on the bed, but despite her best efforts they looked clumsy and awkward. Exasperated, she threw a couple of pink bears on the armchair and after a quick survey she left the room to begin her search for the downstairs telephone.

After a number of false turns and dead ends, losing her way down the endless hallways of the sprawling house, Alice finally found herself in the middle of the vast white kitchen. She spotted the telephone handset lying discarded on the benchtop, as though it had just been in use and flung aside. Her hands eagerly grabbed at the receiver and she punched in her home number, but when she held it to her ear the line was dead. Perplexed, she pushed more buttons but it made no difference. The phone was silent. She went hunting for the phone cradle to check if it was working and found it hidden unobtrusively behind one of the white kitchen cabinets. The handset clicked into place in the cradle but its lights remained stubbornly off. The cradle appeared to be plugged in, but to check Alice followed the cord to a nearby power point. She flicked the switch on and off, to no avail. With a sigh, she slumped to the kitchen floor, her fingers clutching the useless handset. The slate tiles were cold against her skin.

Somewhere in the house a door slammed. Alice scrambled to her feet and placed the receiver back in its cradle. With an awkward smile she turned to face the door, expecting someone to come in, but no one did. The house fell quiet once more, and Alice left the kitchen, determined to find Bernie.

When she stepped out of the front door the morning sun was already high in the sky. Uncertain where to look, she gazed across the vacant paddocks and empty stables beside the driveway. A faint sound of voices drifted towards her, coming from somewhere behind the house.

With a final cursory glance at the small stable yard she followed the sounds. As she walked, she noticed the manicured shrubbery, the paddocks' white painted railings and the gravel driveway raked into smooth swirls. Other than the distant voices there was no sign of life, either human or animal. No gardener tended to the plants, and there were no horses shuffling beside the white fences or grazing in the lush pastures. Not even a dog lay sprawled under a tree or barked at her as she passed.

Alice trudged on. Behind the house the driveway rose sharply, and she paused to catch her breath, turning to look down at the property spread out below. Viewed from the hill, Alice was surprised at its small size. It lay in the bowl of the valley, a small cleared pool of green surrounded by a sea of native bush. No ribbons of roads crisscrossed the densely wooded hills. Only the road that led to the front gate of the property, which then wound around the house to become the driveway under her feet. Even from here Alice could see no stock on the farm. Apart from Bruce, the place seemed to be empty.

Alice turned and continued her slow walk up the hill. At the summit a cloud of dust drifted across the driveway, accompanied by muffled shouts and the rapid pounding of hooves on sand. She lengthened her stride, concerned about what was happening up ahead.

“Whoa! You stupid bastard!” a girl's voice yelled.

Through a veil of dust Alice recognised Bernie clinging to a galloping Bruce, who was racing in tight circles around one corner of a full size sand arena. As she watched, Bernie stood upright in the stirrups and leaned back as far as she could without falling off, her hands sawing back and forth on the reins. Bruce stumbled, and fell into a

disjointed trot, his head lifted high and his mouth gaping in an attempt to escape the harsh metal bit. Alice noticed with horror the foam around his lips, tinged pink with blood.

A man leaned against the arena's wooden railings, watching the battle unfolding in the arena with keen interest. Even with his back to her Alice recognised Roger Quilty's angular grace.

"What is going on?" Alice exclaimed, her shyness swept away by her indignation at the animal's obvious suffering. "Why is Bernie riding Bruce? I thought he was going to a proper trainer?"

Roger turned around. Alice was surprised to see his smile, quickly suppressed in the face of her consternation.

"Everything is fine!" he boomed, reassuringly. "Bernie IS a proper trainer." He reached out to put his arm around Alice's shoulder, but she took a step backwards to avoid him and his arm dropped awkwardly by his side. She noticed a flicker of irritation cross his face but then he shrugged and turned to face into the arena, not wanting to miss any of the spectacle playing out before them. Alice followed his gaze and was alarmed to see Bruce's shoulder spattered with flecks of bright red foam.

"Stop!" Alice shouted, unable to contain herself, "She's hurting his mouth!" She clutched at the man's arm and tugged. "Please... ask her to stop!"

Quilty spun around and wrapped his fingers around Alice's shoulder with a vice-like grip. His eyes were hard. His sudden transformation shocked her into silence. "Now listen here, you silly girl. If that horse is not stopped from bolting, you will be killed. He has to learn to listen to the bit. And the only way is to make him." He shook his hand free, leaving her shoulder throbbing with pain. "Plus," he added, unconcerned at Alice's discomfort, "there is always the pleasure of watching an expert horsewoman at work."

He smiled, but his eyes remained pale and expressionless. Alice swallowed the words of protest rising in her throat. Uncertain of what to do, she stood beside him as he turned back to watch.

Quilty was so engrossed he paid Alice no more attention. Bernie, grim faced, slapped Bruce hard on the flanks with her whip, leaving a welt mark on his coat. When

the horse rushed forward in response, she leaned back in the saddle and pulled on the reins so hard that Alice could clearly see her tendons bulge with the strain. After a few more circuits, Bruce began to slide to a halt at each yank of the reins, rather than fight his rider in panic. His coat was wet with sweat and white lather. Alice watched as Bernie did this over and over, until Bruce hardly stepped forward when she cut his hindquarters with the whip before stopping still. His torn mouth bled freely, dripping red on to the sand.

When it was over Bernie dismounted with a flourish. Bruce stood with his head outstretched, his nostrils dilating so far that Alice could see their red lining. His sides heaved with every breath. But Bernie was triumphant.

“How was that Roger!” She laughed and slapped Bruce on the neck. He did not move.

“Bloody great! Well done! Roger slipped through the railings and slapped her arm in congratulation. “Terrific job!” he added. His gaze swept over the exhausted animal with a look of satisfaction. “You always know how to sort out the tough ones.”

Bernie glowed. She tilted her face demurely up at Roger, flushed with pleasure at his obvious delight with her performance.

Alice remained beside the fence. She watched Bruce, heaving, blood dripping from his lips, and realised she could not leave without him. He looked broken. His head hung so low that his nostrils blew eddies of sand with every laboured breath. Sweat had dried in hard ridges on his coat.

Alice was about to slide under the fence and take the reins from Bernie when Quilty turned towards her with a broad smile.

“Well then, let’s go and have lunch to celebrate!”

“No! I don’t want to stay. I... I want to go home and take Bruce with me,” Alice stammered.

Quilty stopped, and his arm slid from Bernie’s shoulder. His smile faded as he turned to face the young girl. “You can’t do that, Alice,” he said, his voice cold. “We haven’t managed to reach your parents yet. They seem to have gone away and left you here to your own devices.”

Alice swallowed. “Well, maybe you can take me home anyway. I have a key...” Her voice petered out as she noticed his expression harden.

“No, that’s impossible.” His voice was firm, and final. “Your father entrusted you to me, and until he says otherwise you will have to stay.”

He walked on, his feet crunching on the dry sand. He reached the gate and swung it open for Bernie and the horse to pass through. Alice stood as though planted to the spot.

“Anyway,” he added, with a glance in her direction, “we have the most delicious lunch planned.” He grinned. “You really won’t want to miss it.”

Alice didn’t know what to say. Quilty watched her coolly, waiting for a response.

“Can we try and call my Dad again after lunch?” she asked, trying to keep the pleading tone from her voice.

“Of course we can!” The man replied, jovial now. His mercurial shifts of mood disorientated her, and she felt she had no option but to agree.

“Okay then,” she nodded.

“Great!” Quilty beamed. As she drew alongside him he patted her gently on the arm. “Don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll get your parents on the phone later and in the meantime, we’ll fix up your crazy old horse and have some fun!” He sounded genuinely pleased.

Alice smiled a tentative smile. They all walked down the hill together, Bernie leading Bruce, now quiet and placid. When they reached the stable Quilty guided Alice towards the house. “Here,” he said, “come with me and we’ll get cleaned up. Bernie can sort your horse out.” Alice glanced towards where Bernie was leading Bruce into the stable, his tack still on. Quilty noticed her hesitation. “Don’t worry, she knows what she’s doing.”

“Okay,” Alice agreed, and together they left the stable yard and walked towards the front door, Quilty’s arm now heavy and awkward across her shoulders.

* * *

The horse stood with his head hung low. No rug covered him, and his coat had dried into stiff whorls, rigid with old sweat. His body heaved with each breath. Red arcs of dried blood crusted his lips, and a web of black droplets coated his muzzle from where the blood had flowed freely earlier. The horse knew the feed bin was empty, and no hay had been left in the knotted tangle of his hay net.

The sound of voices retreated and a door slammed nearby. For a moment he stood alert; but then his body slackened and he shuffled towards the automatic waterer. A layer of green scum floated on the brackish water, but the animal took a long drink, sucking deeply at the tiny trough until a sharp gushing reverberated through the stall as the waterer refilled. He drained the trough, and then he moved over to his feed bin. A few stray flecks of chaff speckled the bottom of the bin, and the horse nosed at them with his lips. This small movement cracked the crusts in the corner of his mouth, and they began to ooze. The horse gave up. He shifted his weight and rested one hind leg. His whole body drooped, but at the sound of approaching footsteps, he raised his head and listened. The top half of his stable door swung open, and Bernie peered down at the exhausted creature. She dragged deeply on her cigarette, until the end glowed hot and crackled. Her gaze swept over the sunken body, the sweat caked coat and the horse's blood encrusted muzzle.

"No lunch for you," she muttered as she dropped the butt and stubbed it out with her boot. "You're going to have to earn your keep from now on." She disappeared up the stairs to her small room above the stables, wiping her palms on the back of her filth encrusted jeans, the ones Mrs Pitchers had so heartily disapproved of.

* * *

Alice marvelled at the cavernous proportions of the dining room. The ceiling floated high above her head and a long mirrored sideboard ran the length of the room, matched by the gleaming dining table. Quilty was amused by her reaction. He had pulled out a

chair and waited while Alice walked the length of the room, her shoes clicking against the polished boards. The table was set for three, and as Alice took her seat, Bernie hurried in, wiping her hands on her trousers. Quilty had taken his place at the head of the table, and flicked his white damask table napkin open, smoothing it over his lap. He had picked up his glass of wine and lifted it in a toast.

“To the finer things of life,” he said, raising the glass to his lips. Bernie followed suit, and in the absence of a wine glass Alice sipped water from the tumbler set in front of her plate.

Alice sat quietly on Quilty’s right hand side. Bernie sat across from her, avoiding Alice’s eye. All her attention was on her conversation with Quilty, and they chattered and laughed about people and places Alice did not know, and events that she did not witness.

Quilty rose from the table and lifted the warming lids from three dinner plates on the sideboard. The rich smell of roast meat wafted towards Alice, making her mouth water. She wondered who had cooked the meal. She had not seen anyone else in the house. When they had come in from outside Roger had instructed her to wash her hands in the small washroom near the back door. He had waited outside, tapping his fingers against the carved architrave.

Alice looked down at her food. She realised she had not eaten anything all day. A few thick slices of meat fanned across her plate, bathed in thick gravy. A roast potato, carrot and a small branch of broccoli were decoratively arranged around the outside. Quilty watched the girls’ faces as they cut the meat and put it in their mouths. Alice chewed and hungrily swallowed the tender morsels. The meat had an unfamiliar sweetness.

“So Alice, are you happy with the progress we are making?” Quilty asked.

Alice gulped. “Ahhh... Um... I’m not sure.”

“Not sure?”

Bernie looked up, interested, from her meal.

“Well, it seems very rough,” stammered Alice. “He was bleeding today. I don’t think it’s good to treat an animal that way.”

Quilty sliced his meat and said nothing. Alice felt foolish. Bernie stared at her over the top of her wine glass.

“Isn’t this delicious?” Quilty cut through another piece of meat. “I had someone come up and make it for us.” His eyes penetrated Alice. “Are you enjoying it, Alice?”

“Yes, thank you.” Alice held tightly to her knife and fork.

“Very tender, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it’s really nice. I’ve never had meat like this before.”

Roger sipped his red wine and wiped the corner of his lips delicately with the white table napkin.

“No, you wouldn’t have. And I’ll tell you why.” He placed the napkin carefully down next to his plate. “We believe in recycling here. Don’t you, Alice?”

Alice nodded.

“Good, I’m glad to hear it. And so we decided to recycle one of the horses who wasn’t performing very well.”

Alice went pale.

“Yes. You might have met the animal we are talking about. I believe he was paddocked next to your horse for a while.” Quilty clicked his fingers at Bernie. “What was his name, Bernie? Do you remember?”

“Field of Colours.” Bernie’s expressionless eyes did not leave Alice’s face.

Alice spat out her meat. A stain spread from the masticated lump on to the white damask tablecloth.

Bernie laughed. Quilty frowned, displeased. “Now, now, Alice. No need for that. What is the difference between eating a cow and eating a horse, anyway? Europeans eat horses all the time.”

Alice dropped her napkin on her plate. She stood so abruptly her legs bumped the table and rattled the glasses.

“I want you to take me home. Now.”

Bernie and the man exchanged glances. To Alice’s dismay, they began to laugh. Bernie’s high pitched giggle escalated until she was laughing so hard she had to clutch the table to prevent herself from falling off her chair. Quilty roared with laughter, tilting

his head back so far that Alice could see his rows of white teeth, all the way down to the black hole of his throat.

“No, no,” he hooted, wiping his eyes. “You can’t go.” He pushed back his chair and loomed over Alice. “I’m so sorry, dear,” he soothed. “I thought you’d take this a lot better than you have.”

He reached out his hand to touch Alice’s in a gesture of reassurance, but she pulled it away. Her bottom lip quivered, but she clamped her front teeth firmly down on it to keep it still.

“I want you to ring my father, now.” She tried to speak in a firm and authoritative voice, but instead it came out as a strangled squeak.

Alice noticed Quilty’s lips twitch, but he didn’t laugh. Instead, he sat down again, and took another sip from his wine glass.

Alice kept standing. Bernie stifled her last giggle and picked up her cutlery. They resumed their meal and both of them ignored her, as though she had not spoken. Alice’s resolve crumbled. She pushed back her chair and left the table, feeling their eyes on her as she fled the room.

Her sobs overwhelmed her when she reached the bottom of the staircase. Hot tears poured down her cheeks as she ran up the stairs to her bedroom. Once inside she closed the door, slumped on her bed and let the tears fall. She curled into a ball on the pink floral coverlet, and wrapped her arms around her skinny chest. A small, hard lump pressed uncomfortably into her hip. She sat up and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand before reaching into the pocket of her jodhpurs, the ones she had packed with such excitement only yesterday. With her fingertips she fished the lump out of her pocket. When she had prised the small object free she examined it closely in the palm of her hand. It looked like something ancient; a fossil, worn with swirls and ridges. Upon closer inspection she realised it was Bruce’s tooth, the one the dentist had given her. She rubbed it slowly between her fingers. The motion calmed her, and still clutching the tooth, she lay back on the bed, her head resting against one of the stuffed pink bears.

She lay there for a long time, watching the afternoon shadows slide across the ceiling. Snapshots of the day’s events ran through her mind; Bruce’s bleeding lips,

Bernie's wild laughter at lunch, Roger Quilty's mercurial shifts of mood. She thought of her father, and his wild worry when she came home late. Where was he now?

When the light began to fade, Alice switched on the bedside lamp, filling the room with a rosy glow. The small doll's house on the dresser caught her eye. Alice rose from the bed and went to have a closer look at the curious object. It was made of wood, with little open shutters and a tiny front door. When she peered inside the window she could see it contained only one room, with carved bed and dresser inside. She picked it up to examine it more carefully. Someone had painstakingly painted miniscule prints on the wall and carved a tiny vase of flowers. An object came loose and fell to the floor. Alice bent to pick it up. When she turned it over in her hand she realised it was a miniature carved figurine of a young girl, her blonde hair swept up into a high ponytail. Her face was crudely painted, with a crooked smile and one blue eye higher than the other. The effect was grotesque. Alice grimaced, and slid the figurine back through the narrow door. With a sense of relief, she returned the doll's house to its place on the dresser.

Voices echoed in the corridor outside. Alice snapped off the light, plunging the room into sudden darkness. She could clearly hear Roger's deep voice but wasn't able to make out the words. Bernie replied with a high-pitched giggle. Alice strained to hear more but they had moved on and the house was now quiet. Without taking off her clothes she scrambled under the covers and pulled them up under her chin. She had no idea what time it was, but the window was now a square rectangle of black. She listened closely but only night sounds broke the silence; the soft hoot of an owl, the wind's sighs through the branches, the rattle of her loose windowpane.

Alice forced herself to stay awake. She planned to make one more expedition to the downstairs phone once the others had gone to bed, but as she waited she fell into a troubled sleep, full of dreams of wild, bloodied horses, plunging madly as they tried to escape their captors.

Chapter 8

Brian Williams watched the cigarette smoke curl upwards in waving spirals, outlined against the shaft of light from the street lamp outside. The house was quiet, so quiet it made him edgy. In the bedroom his wife had fallen into an exhausted sleep, and he had left her there alone, so as not to wake her with his endless movement. Nothing seemed to soothe him; pacing the room, getting a glass of water, forcing himself to close his eyes to try and quiet his racing mind. Finally he decided to leave the bedroom and give up the pretence of trying to rest.

The kitchen was as still and empty as the rest of the house, which felt vacant without Alice's vibrant presence. He couldn't bear the silence of the hallway and the dark space of her empty bedroom, so he closed the hallway door and turned on the kettle. While waiting for it to boil he wondered whether yet another cup of coffee was going to help, when he noticed his wife's cigarettes on the kitchen counter. He picked up the packet and shook a cigarette into the palm of his hand. He slipped it between his lips, and with one smooth movement flicked the match and lit it, taking a deep drag. He watched the smoke stream from his nostrils, and thought how easily it came back after such long abstinence. He remembered his joke with Alice about smoking being his one vice, and how she would always roll her eyes. The memory made him smile.

He grabbed the rest of the packet and his cup of steaming coffee and went to sit on the lounge room sofa. He did not bother to turn on the light. As he sat and smoked one cigarette after another, lighting a new one from the glowing ember of the one just finished, he tried to ignore the aching dread pounding in his gut. The green phone light blinked blindly, stupidly at him, and he knew with certainty that it would not ring with news of his missing daughter. He knew the police were doing nothing, and that to them his child was just another missing teenager, probably having a tantrum in the face of her parents' problems. He shifted his position on the sofa and lit another cigarette. All he

could think of was the police sergeant's smirking face when he explained why he was not home last night, why he did not go back to check on his daughter, and why he dropped her off and waved goodbye, leaving her in an empty house. Spoken out loud in the police station, his reasons sounded lame, even to himself.

"You don't think your daughter had planned it that way, Mr Williams?" the sergeant had asked, not even attempting to hide his smug tone. "Teenagers are cunning, you know." He had smirked, knowingly, at his pimpled colleague, who looked as though he was barely out of the police academy.

Brian had felt an argument rise in his throat, coupled with an almost overwhelming desire to bang their stupid heads together.

"Look, you don't understand. Alice isn't like that. And anyway, she's barely a teenager. She's only just turned thirteen. I know something's wrong." He tried to keep his voice calm.

The sergeant had thrown him a withering look, as though he had heard it all before.

"Well, Mr Williams, when exactly was it that you began to get worried?" He leaned over to read through his notes. "Was it before or after you left to have a night away with your wife?" His voice held a trace of irritation.

Brian's glance darted from one uniform to another. He felt desperate with the conviction they had to do something NOW. But neither man was listening. He stood up, scattering the brochures they had given him over the polished vinyl floor.

"Look, can you just file a missing person's report? Can you at least do that?"

He felt his voice rise as it echoed around the open plan office. The police officer at the front desk looked up from his paperwork and shot a questioning gaze at the sergeant, who gently shook his head.

"Oh I see," Brian shouted, noticing their exchange of looks, "you think I've got some sort of problem?" His gaze veered wildly between the three police officers. He slammed his fist on to the table. "Just do your bloody job and find my daughter!"

The patronising look fled from the sergeant's face, instantly replaced by one of stony indifference.

“Please lower your voice, Mr Williams,” he replied with quiet menace as he stood up. At full height he towered over Brian. “We will be in touch as soon as we discover your daughter’s whereabouts.”

Brian knew the interview was over. As he stumbled from the police station the sharp realisation that he had failed his daughter gave him an almost unbearable pain in his chest. It was while he was driving home he realised he had to find Alice himself. He drove aimlessly, not wanting to go home, not wanting to see his wife’s tortured face and his inability to comfort her. In a circular unbroken loop the internal voice rang on and on in his mind; *if only we had not left her, if only we had checked up more carefully, if only we had not been so wrapped up in ourselves, if only... if only...*

Partly to escape his thoughts and partly to just do something he had driven to Miranda’s house. Her mother had kept her hidden, even though he was sure she had been listening from the front room. He had left feeling subdued, concerned that his panic had alarmed Miranda’s mother and she was only trying to protect her daughter from his wild emotions. But as he got into his car and the engine rumbled to life, he knew deep in his bones there was something wrong.

Back at home he stroked his wife’s forehead as she drifted to sleep, her cheeks damp and her face blotched with tears. He crept away to call the farm and had spoken to the boy, Alex. It was then he had taken the keys and driven the way Alice had ridden her bike so often, in the direction of the farm. When he met the boy he had liked him straight away: his patient manner, his calm tone, his considered, polite helpfulness. The way he showed him Alice’s gear in the tack room, the tiny, forlorn pile of worn harness stowed in the corner. Slowly as he walked around the immaculate stables, he realised the boy Alex had never heard of the plan to work on Alice’s horse. His quizzical look struck Brian. It seemed strange that this boy, who had the most to do with the animal, had not been informed of where it was going. It had simply disappeared. Somehow he was not surprised when the boy mentioned he knew of a place where the horse might be.

Brian took another drag on the cigarette, so deep it burned almost to the butt. He exhaled, and extinguished the stub by squashing it with his thumb, adding it to the large pile overflowing from the ashtray. When he tipped his wife’s packet to reach for

another, he realised with disgust it was empty. He crumpled the packet with one hand and threw it across the room.

The portable phone handset lay discarded on the cushion beside him. On impulse, he fished out the piece of paper the boy Alex had given him earlier, and punched the numbers into the phone. As it rang he stared idly out of the window at the evening sky stained an inky black, not yet the deep darkness of night. The phone rang on, and he was just about to press the end call button when a male voice answered.

“Hello, hello!” Brian said, his words loud in the quiet room. “It’s Brian Williams here. Is this Alex?”

“Yes, it is.” The voice was slow and measured.

“Can you show me the place you told me about earlier? Where you think the horse may have been moved?”

“Mr Williams, I’m not sure it will do any good... perhaps we should wait until morning?”

“No, no... will you come?”

Brian Williams heard a sigh down the other end of the line. There was a long pause and he held his breath, expecting the inevitable rejection. But then the boy spoke. “Okay. But can you pick me up from the farm?”

“Yes, of course. And thanks.”

Brian Williams clicked the phone and bounded from the sofa, hooking the telephone back in its cradle as he strode through the kitchen. He poked his head around the bedroom door, but his wife had not stirred. All he could hear was her soft breathing.

His hand grabbed the car keys from his jacket pocket and he left the house, closing the front door gently behind him. He slid into his car and started the engine with a sense of relief. As he reversed down the driveway, his new sense of purpose eased the pain in his chest, and a vague sense of euphoria propelled him through the darkening streets as he drove to pick up Alex.

* * *

As was her habit every evening, Mrs Pitchers waited while the small kitten finished his food. By the time she piled his fourth helping on to the asphalt the small creature had had enough. He wandered away, stomach distended, and began to lick his paws with long, regular strokes.

Mrs Pitchers sighed. She glanced around the looming shadows in the vacant car park, but no other lithe, silent creatures appeared. She sighed again, and peered into the cat food tin.

“Come on kitty, kitty... there’s more in here.” She swivelled the spoon around the sides of the tin to scrape out the last sticky fragments.

“You may as well finish it. Your friends don’t seem to want to come tonight.”

At the sound of her voice the kitten paused with one leg stretched over its head, its tongue a pink flag. The old woman chuckled at the pose, and the kitten resumed combing its fur flat with its tongue. Mrs Pitchers never tired of watching the meticulous toilette of cats.

Darkness had enveloped the vacant lot and the deserted factory beside it. A soft breeze stirred, and from somewhere in one of the buildings a loose piece of iron began a rhythmic creak.

“Well, I had better be going, little one.” Mrs Pitchers straightened, one hand pressed to the centre of her back.

“One day I just won’t be able to get up anymore,” she muttered.

The kitten waited expectantly at her feet. Mrs Pitchers gathered her bag and spoon, and paused to look down at the little creature. It was clearly alone.

The rumble of a car engine shattered the quiet of the deserted alley. Mrs Pitchers watched the headlights cut through the dark, illuminating the battered galvanised iron fence of the stables. With one smooth movement, she scooped the little kitten up in her hand and placed him in the wide front pocket of her apron. His bony body felt feather light in her palm, and it began to reverberate with purrs of pleasure. She could feel the vibrations through the thin fabric of her clothes.

She stood in the dark and watched as the car pulled up near the stable gate and a thin boy got out. With the car engine still running, standing in the spotlight of the car

headlights he banged on the door with his fist. The galvanised iron rattled, but nobody came. The boy waited. An older man got out of the car and stood beside the younger one. He was tall and heavysset, and beside him the boy seemed as slender as a young child. The larger man hammered the gate, and then in an act of desperation threw his shoulder against it with all the force of his size. The gate shuddered, but held fast. Mrs Pitchers watched the older man rest his forehead on the rusted iron in a gesture of despair.

The old woman left the car park and slid under the loose panel of cyclone wire. The men, blinded by the headlights, did not notice her until she stepped into the light.

“Hello, can I help you?”

Both men spun around and stared blankly at the old woman. Mrs Pitchers nearly laughed out loud at their surprised expressions, but the quiet desperation in the eyes of the older man silenced her.

He strode forward and jutted out his hand. “Hello, I’m Brian Williams.” His grip was firm.

“Beverley Pitchers.” She turned to the young man near the gate. “And you are?”

“Alex Wright.” The young man stepped forward, and wiped his hand on his trouser leg before he shook hers. He met her gaze briefly. “I’ve been cleaning horse stables,” he muttered in explanation. Mrs Pitchers smiled. There was something about the boy’s honest face that pleased her.

“We are looking for my daughter,” Brian interrupted. “You haven’t seen a young girl,” he held his hand about level with his breast bone, “about so high, skinny with pale brown hair, around here have you?” His tone was urgent, pleading.

“Well, actually, I have.”

Brian Williams leaned forward, expectant.

“But not lately.” The man’s optimistic expression crumbled. Mrs Pitchers reached forward and touched his shoulder in a spontaneous gesture of sympathy. The gesture surprised her, and she tucked her hand quickly back into her pocket. “I’m sorry to have raised your hopes. Has she gone missing?”

Brian did not reply. The boy, Alex, stepped forward and gently held Mrs Pitchers arm, steering her away from the older man, as if he didn't want him to hear their conversation.

"You will have to excuse Brian, Mrs Pitchers." He spoke in a low, measured tone. "It's a long story, but he feels responsible for the disappearance of his daughter yesterday, and so far the police are not taking him very seriously." He nodded earnestly up into the older woman's face. She found herself nodding in reply. She was surprised at how short he was when he stood up close to her. "Mr Williams contacted the farm where I work looking for his daughter, and I offered to help him."

The boy paused to rub his forehead, lifting his baseball cap and then settling it again in a gesture she could tell had become involuntary. "I was worried too," he continued. "Not sure why, just had a bad feeling." He gazed over at the corrugated iron gate.

Mrs Pitchers followed his gaze. "Yes, I know what you mean," she agreed, her voice soft. "I have never liked this place."

The boy darted a look from under the brim of his cap. "This is my Boss' place." He said, flatly. "I normally work at the stud farm, but this is his old city stable." The boy paused. "He doesn't really use it much anymore."

"Well, it gives me the heebie-jeebies," she shuddered, as though with a sudden chill.

A slow smile spread across the boy's face. "The heebie-jeebies! Haven't heard that expression since my Gran died."

"Come on Alex," Alice's father interjected, "We have to go. My wife may have heard something." He rummaged in his pockets, agitated. "Damn, I forgot my mobile." His expression reminded Mrs Pitchers of a startled deer, verging on panic.

"Of course you must." She felt in her pocket for a scrap of paper. "Do you have a pen? Give me your number and if I see anything I will call you. Those girls did come here quite often on their bikes." She held out the paper like an offering to Alice's father.

He came around the bonnet of the car and stood beside Mrs Pitchers, taking the piece of paper with delicacy. Then, unexpectedly, he threw his arms around her. The old woman stiffened in surprise.

“There, there,” she soothed, patting his back with an awkward flick of her wrist. All she could think of was the small kitten squeezed in the front pocket of her apron. “I’m sure you will find her.”

Brian released his grasp as abruptly as he had made it. Even though she could see no tears, she noticed him wipe his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Thanks. It’s just that so far no-one has seemed very interested in helping.” He nodded in Alex’s direction. “Except Alex here, of course. I don’t know what I would do without him.” He looked flushed, and ran his fingers through his unruly hair. Mrs Pitchers wondered if he was about to cry.

Alex held out a pen and Brian scribbled his number by the light of the car headlights.

“Here is my number.” Brian handed the paper to the old woman, who pushed it into her apron pocket. Her fingers brushed the soft fur of the sleeping kitten, which did not stir. “And here,” he said as he slid around the car bonnet and reached into the glove box, “would you mind giving me your number too? I will call you if we find her.” He handed her a stained serviette and a felt tipped pen.

“Oh,” she paused, and looked down with distaste at the serviette. But when she looked up and saw the anguish in the man’s face she swallowed the sharp words forming on the tip of her tongue. He watched as she scrawled her name and number across the flimsy paper and handed it back without a word.

“Thank you,” he said, simply.

Both men nodded farewell as they got back into the car and drove slowly away down the alley. Mrs Pitchers stood and watched the red tail lights retreat and then disappear as the car turned the corner.

It was dark in the alley, and after the brightness of the car headlights, the streetlight illuminated a feeble glow. Mrs Pitchers’ hand found the kitten’s rough coat in her apron pocket, and she caressed it gently. The little animal stirred, and then stretched, so she could feel its feet curl against her fingers. The rumbling purr began, and then stopped, as the animal fell almost instantly back to sleep. In the darkness Mrs Pitchers smiled.

She turned back to look at the factory's vacant car park. It was deserted. The shadowy forms had not appeared. Mrs Pitchers sighed. She began the slow walk back to her house, her heart heavy, her mind pondering on that young girl and her father's tormented face.

* * *

Miranda twisted and turned under the bedclothes, her head swimming with thoughts of Alice. Finally she opened her eyes, threw off the covers and sat up in bed, shielding her face against the shaft of light slanting into her room from the street outside. She got up and strode to the window, pulling the curtains closed with ferocious ill humour.

The room plunged into darkness. Miranda felt her way, her fingers questing for her desk lamp's switch which she knew dangled somewhere within reach. Her other hand groped for a recognisable shape, but found only empty space. She shuffled her feet forward and gasped as her shin hit her desk's sharp edge.

"Owww..." she moaned, as her fingers found the switch and flooded her room with light.

Blinking, she sat down on her chair and rubbed the red mark on her shin. Beyond the bright circle of light she could make out her familiar items; her books, her horse pictures pinned to the wall, her stuffed toys. She felt strangely removed from it all, as though the room belonged to someone else, someone much younger than her. Mr Williams' words from earlier in the evening reverberated through her mind, when he had refused her mother's invitation to come inside and had stood stooped under the doorframe, his face haggard.

Her mother had answered the door to Mr Williams' frantic knock. Miranda was just behind her, curious about the identity of their visitor. But her mother dismissed her daughter with a violent wave, holding her hand behind her back where Mr Williams could not see it. Miranda obeyed, but instead of leaving them to talk privately she slipped into the front bedroom where snippets of their conversation drifted in through

the open window. With each new piece of information she felt her heart thud in her chest.

“She’s been missing since last night.... Yes, I know, I dropped her there, it all seemed legit to me, and she was desperate to go... I feel terrible, it’s my fault.” Mr Williams’ voice cracked, and a low moan floated through the window. An awkward silence followed. Miranda’s mother seemed unable to find the right words to respond to his distress. When Mr Williams continued his voice had steadied.

“I just want to know if Miranda knows anything. I don’t have time to talk to her now, but maybe you could??... The police said they would come over tomorrow.” He paused, and Miranda could imagine him running his hand through his unruly hair. “They told me she’ll probably turn up, runaways always do. But I’m not so sure... this doesn’t feel right to me, and Alice has never done anything like this before.”

His voice faltered. Miranda heard her mother twitter some reassuring words, but she didn’t quite catch them.

“Thank you so much. I’ll call if I get any more information.”

Mr Williams’ shadow passed the window and she crept towards the pane to watch him get into his car. His appearance shocked her; his skin looked grey, and deep purple shadows pooled under his eyes. When she turned around her mother was standing in the doorway.

“Do you know anything about this?” her voice was sharp.

“No Mum, I don’t!” Miranda protested. “What’s happened? Is Alice okay?”

Miranda’s mother frowned. “No, she’s not okay.” She walked over to the bed and began to plump up the cushions. Needlessly, Miranda thought.

“What do you mean, Mum?” Miranda’s voice had a slight quaver. She wanted to walk over and grab her mother’s arm to make her stop and tell her what was going on.

“You know as much as me. You must have heard everything from here anyway.” She sat down on the end of the bed and stared at her daughter.

Miranda averted her eyes.

“I know you know something. You and Alice are as thick as thieves.”

Miranda glanced up and met the older woman’s cold gaze. “Mum, I really don’t know where she is.”

Her mother began to pick at invisible specks of fluff on the beige coverlet.

“Yes, yes...” she muttered, “I believe you.” She brushed her palms across the fabric to smooth wrinkles invisible to Miranda. “I just feel sorry for Mr Williams. He looks worried sick over his child.” She turned to leave the room but her daughter reached out and held her arm as she passed.

“Look Mum, I want to go looking for Alice. There’s one place she might be.” She noticed her mother’s dubious expression, and blustered on. “With that old lady, Mrs Pitchers? Remember the one I told you about?”

Her mother shook her head.

“Look Miranda, you are staying home. I’m not having you gallivanting around like Alice and getting lost too.” She poked her index finger in her daughter’s face, so violently Miranda had to take a step back. “And that’s final.”

“But Mum... what if I can find her? What if she’s in trouble?”

“Well, it’s not up to you to find her. That’s the job of her parents and the police.” She walked towards the door and turned a stern face to her daughter just as she was about to leave the room. “You better not try anything silly, my girl, or you will be sorry.”

Miranda bit her lip and nodded. Her mother walked out, leaving the threat hanging in the air.

Now Miranda sat in her bedroom and listened to the wind. “Where are you Alice?” She whispered. “Why don’t you come home?”

A gust rattled the window frame. Miranda turned off the light and crept to her bed, where she pulled the covers over her head to block out the roar of the wild weather outside.

* * *

Alice’s eyes flew open and her gaze swivelled around the dim shapes in the unfamiliar room. Patterns of moonlight and shadow danced on the ceiling above her head, as the wind blew the branches outside. It shimmered the curtains as it seeped into the room

through gaps in the windows. Alice struggled to sit up, but her legs were pinned in the twisted bedclothes. Her memory, blurred from sleep, remained blank. The bedroom was foreign to her, the room of a stranger. It was only when she freed her body from the sheets and was able to sit up that she remembered where she was. She reached for the light beside her bed and froze when she heard a floorboard creak outside her door.

Motionless, she listened. Only the wind moaned outside. But Alice was sure there was someone in the corridor. She could feel it. Heart thumping, she listened hard. Then she noticed the doorknob turn. Sitting motionless, she watched as the lock released with a click. The sound galvanised her, and as the door crept open she leapt across the room and threw herself at the wooden panels, slamming the heavy door closed against the jamb. With her shoulder she heaved at the door, but it did not fully close. She heard a sharp intake of breath from the other side of the wooden panel and looked down to see two fingers caught between the door and the frame. She pushed harder and the fingers wriggled free. Alice scrambled for the antique key that protruded from the lock and twisted it with trembling fingers. She felt the bolt slide across, and when she let go the door remained closed.

There was no sound from the corridor. Every cell of her body was alert; she listened, and knew that whomever was on the other side of the door was doing the same. A floorboard creaked, followed by the sound of muffled footsteps receding down the corridor. With a deep breath she backed away from the door, until her legs buckled against the edge of her bed and she tumbled on to the coverlet. Her hands began to shake, so she wrapped them around her body. Something clattered to the floor, and Alice watched the small object bounce across the rug in the dim light. She peered at it until its distorted shape became clear; it was Bruce's tooth, loosened from her grasp. Alice leapt from the bed and grabbed it, the sharp enamel contours pressing hard into the soft skin of her palm.

The wind howled outside her window and tree branches whipped against the panes. Clutching Bruce's tooth, Alice crawled along the rug to a space between the armchair and the wall, a dark cubbyhole. She folded her body into the tight space, and sat with her knees touching her chest. From behind the chair her eyes remained riveted

to the doorknob, which remained still. The only sounds were the creaks of the branches outside and the howling gusts of wind, and the thunder of her heart in her chest.

Birds chirping outside the window woke Alice. During the night her body had slipped down the wall while she slept and now she lay stretched on the floor, her feet poking out from under the armchair's floral patterned valance. When she tried to struggle into a sitting position her limbs refused to move, frozen in their awkward posture. Swirls of grey dust floated towards her face from under the armchair, where she had a direct eye view across the rug to the gap under the door.

From her prostrate position Alice tried to move her feet, which she slowly rotated from the ankle. Her hands worked too, and little by little she began to regain the feeling in her muscles. The room was still dim, bathed in the pale, milky light of early morning. Alice lay with her head resting against the cold floorboards, listening to the birds' morning song. Their joyful chorus left her feeling forlorn.

Alice tensed as she heard a floorboard creak. She looked up sharply, craning her neck to see. Two dark shadows blocked the strip of light under the door. Alice listened and held her breath. The shadows moved, as though the owner of the feet was planning to walk away, but then had second thoughts. Alice waited. The doorknob did not move. After a long pause the feet disappeared, this time without even a creak from the old wooden floorboards. Alice exhaled, scooting the dust whorls back under the armchair.

Once the figure was gone she pushed her body to sit up. Pains shot up her back and legs, but she ignored them. Panting with the effort, she finally sat up, and slid out from behind the armchair. The pretty room looked benign, but all Alice wanted to do was to leave. She crawled on to the carpet, and on all fours she finally heaved herself up into a standing position. Pins and needles rippled up her legs, and for a moment she felt as though they were going to give way under her weight. She steadied herself, holding the back of the armchair with one hand, and rubbed her other hand over her legs to try and regain some feeling.

A loud knock pounded the door.

“Alice! Are you awake?” Bernie’s voice called.

“Ahh... yes.” Her words caught in the dryness of her mouth.

“Well hurry and get dressed. I’ll see you downstairs in five minutes.”

She didn’t wait for a reply. Alice heard her boots thunder down the steps.

Alice staggered towards the bed. Her clothes were covered in dust from the day before, but she pulled them on anyway. After a quick glance around the room, she realised there was no brush to smooth her knotted hair. She managed to untangle it with her fingers, and then she tied it in a lop-sided ponytail. She stuffed her small money allowance in her pocket, and still clutching Bruce’s tooth, she unlocked the door and stepped out into the corridor.

She paused for a moment, listening for any sounds in the quiet house, before following Bernie’s path down the staircase, her hand resting against the balustrade. She stopped when she saw Quilty waiting at the bottom, wrapped in a red silk dressing gown and wearing a pair of girl’s fluffy novelty slippers in the shape of horses’ heads. For the first time she noticed how tiny his feet were, incongruous on such a tall man. His teeth gleamed as he grinned up at her.

“Good morning! I hope you slept well!”

Alice swallowed. “Yes, thank you.”

He bounced up the few steps that remained between them and took her arm in a loose hold. He guided her to the bottom of the steps with gentle courtesy. “There you are, dear.” He patted her gently on the back. “You must be stiff from all the excitement yesterday.”

Alice’s stomach clenched when she noticed the band-aids wrapped around two of his fingers.

“Now run along and have your breakfast. We have a lot to get through today with that wilful creature of yours.”

Alice slipped from his grasp. An involuntary shiver travelled down her spine as his cool touch faded from her skin. She scurried away into the dining room where Bernie sat eating a piece of toast. She glanced up as Alice came into the room.

“There you are,” she said, spraying crumbs on to the polished tabletop. “I thought you were never coming.” She slurped at her tea, and dropped the cup into her saucer. A brown wave swept over the edge and pooled on the tablecloth.

Alice reached for a piece of toast from the toast rack. It was cold and as dry as a biscuit.

“Can I try calling my parents again?”

“Sure, go ahead. You won’t have any luck though, the phone’s still out.”

Bernie took another slurp of her tea. Liquid dripped from the base of the cup and splashed on to the saucer. Alice began to feel nauseous.

“We are going to have another crack at that stupid old horse of yours,” Bernie replied. “And this time he’s going to give in.”

Alice felt like she was going to throw up. Bernie gazed across at her from the other side of the table. Her hazel eyes looked yellow in the light streaming in through the dining room windows.

Bernie stood up. “Come on,” she said. “Try your parents later. The phone might be working by then.” She drained her teacup and put it back on the table, missing the overflowing saucer. “Come and help me get your horse ready,” she demanded. “The Boss will be ready to start soon.”

Alice did not argue. Both girls left the house and walked across the lawn towards the stable yard. Alice noticed the stables were empty, their doors propped open and the sawdust inside swept up in a pile against the wall. “Where’s Bruce? He was here last night.”

“Don’t worry! We haven’t chopped him up for dinner, if that’s what you are thinking!” Bernie grinned. Alice didn’t reply. “We’ve put him in here.”

Bernie walked around the corner to a smaller stable that was out of sight from the house. Unlike with the others, this door was firmly fastened. A kick thundered against the door as they approached, followed by a muffled squeal. Alice pushed past Bernie and began to unfasten the iron bolt.

“Why have you got him locked up? It must be pitch black in there!” Alice panted as she tugged at the bolt. It was stuck fast, as though rusted into place.

Bernie stood back and watched her struggle with an inscrutable expression.

“It’s part of the training, so get used to it.”

“Well I think the training is cruel!” Alice blurted. With a final tug the bolt slid free. Alice swung open the top half of the stable door and peered in. Bruce blinked at the sudden light, and then stretched his head towards Alice. She brushed his nose with her fingertips before she felt a hand descend on her shoulder.

“Well now, Alice,” Quilty’s voice boomed in her ear, “why don’t you just leave Bruce to us?” His hot breath blew against her cheek.

“I want to go home,” she said, her voice soft. “And I want to take Bruce with me.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Bernie interjected, sounding annoyed. “That horse could kill you the way he is. And all Roger is doing is making it safe. You will just have to trust him.”

Alice looked up at the older girl, her skin spattered with freckles and lined like parchment from constant exposure to the sun.

“Yes, that’s right, Bernie.” Quilty gently spun Alice around to face him. He leaned down so he was at eye level with her and cupped her chin in one of his soft hands.

“Your parents sent him to us for a reason, you know, Alice. This is his last chance. If we can’t make him safe for you, there is only one place that will take him.” The man’s cold stare bore into Alice. She looked down at her feet, but he tilted her chin up until her gaze met his. “Do you understand, Alice?” His eyes were flecked with yellow. They were vacant and empty of expression, despite his concerned tone.

“Yes, I understand,” she whispered.

Quilty smiled. He squeezed her chin and let his hand drop. Alice could smell his breath, minty as mouthwash.

“Now Alice, I would like to make a suggestion.” He handed her a small picnic hamper. “Why don’t you go for a lovely bushwalk and then enjoy this packed lunch? We have a beautiful picnic ground on the hill behind the house.” He smoothed her hair like she was a small child. “It is a bit of a hike.” He swept his eyes over Alice’s slender frame. “But you are a tall and healthy girl, and I’m sure you will enjoy the exercise.”

Alice nodded her assent. There did not seem to be anything to say. She looked up at Bernie, who stood beside the stable, waiting for her to leave. Bruce gazed at her, ears pricked, over the open stable door.

“Enjoy yourself! Oh, and Alice!” Quilty called. Alice stopped and turned to face him. “Remember, only follow the trail that leads behind the house. Don’t go the other way, down past the driveway. I don’t like people exploring there, because the bush is very dense and it is easy to get lost in the scrub. There are steep ravines that are hard to see and we don’t want you falling in, do we?” He was smiling, but Alice could see he was serious. “Promise me?” he called.

“I promise.” Alice muttered, feeling foolish.

“Good girl.” Satisfied, he waved again, this time dismissively. He turned his attention to Bernie and the horse. Alice walked away, clutching the hamper to her chest. She passed the house and looked for the path the man had mentioned. But when she crossed the lawn and reached the driveway, she paused. She could see the path snake up the hill through the shrubbery behind the house. It was clearly the one she was supposed to follow, but Alice hesitated. She gazed down at the driveway, which ended in a parking area beside the house. However, beyond this, she glimpsed the beginnings of another trail, which was soon swallowed up by the thick scrub. It lured her with the possibility of finding a neighbour with a working telephone, or some way to get a message to her parents. She looked back over her shoulder, but as usual the house appeared deserted. The others were out of view, back at the stable yard. Alice decided to see where the path led.

She scuttled across the open lawn and parking area, into the wall of eucalypts. Soon she was enveloped by bush, with only the odd twitter of birds and the swish of the undergrowth to break the quiet.

The track twisted and turned, snaking around broken branches and clumps of impenetrable scrub. Hanging branches blocked her way, and she had to duck and weave to avoid them. Curiosity propelled her along the well-trodden path. She increased her pace, fuelled by anticipation of what she would find ahead.

The trail circled a stand of large eucalypts. Alice pushed aside a wattle branch and stopped abruptly as the track vanished under her feet. She perched on the edge of

the steep embankment and gazed down. The path snaked to the left, and wound its way down into the dim recesses of a narrow gully. It no longer seemed likely it led to a neighbour's house. Despondent, Alice turned to go back.

A cockatoo called from one of the eucalypts and landed with a flutter of white wings on the wattle branch just in front of her, blocking her way. It clung to the swaying branch with prehistoric feet, keeping one beady eye fixed on her from under the yellow arch of its raised crest. The bird looked much bigger up close. Alice stood transfixed, afraid to move. The bird strode down the branch, murmuring to itself, before it leapt upwards, shattering the peace of the bush with its ear splitting cries. A rush of air from its wings blew over Alice's face as it flew away. She watched the sky until the bird was a distant speck in the expanse of blue.

Alice turned back to take another look at the path. It descended at a forty-five degree angle, cut into the red clay of the gully wall. Tufts of grass and stunted shrubs clung to the crumbling sides, but the path looked well used. The thought it might be a bushwalker's track spurred her on.

Alice placed the hamper at her feet and began her descent without it. The sounds of the bush became muted as the clay walls rose above her and the sky receded to a narrow strip of blue. The air smelled musty, of damp earth and decay. Her footfalls echoed in the quiet space, becoming louder as she walked further into the deep crevasse.

The path continued along the gully floor and Alice followed it as it disappeared around a corner. A stone, kicked by her boot as she trudged along the path, rattled across the flat rocks. Its clatter was the only noise that broke the stillness of the ravine, other than the thump of her boots on the clay. She glanced down at her feet, and was surprised to notice the imprint of a hoof dried into the soft soil.

She turned the corner and stepped into an open space with a clear view of the sky. Alice's eyes were drawn upward, towards a string of white clouds drifting across the patch of blue. The path had vanished into the sand, and the sheer red cliffs curved around her, forming a natural enclosure. The clearing was empty, apart from a pile of white rocks at the far end. As Alice walked towards them, she realised that they were not rocks, but piles of bones. They lay scattered around the gully floor: ribcage

xylophones arching towards the sky, impossibly long femurs and a smattering of oblong skulls, empty eye sockets gaping.

Alice crept closer, heart pounding. The bones were equine. The head of one cadaver had disappeared, but its hooves still clung stubbornly to the skeleton, metal shoes glimmering. Alice's stomach churned. Covering her nose and mouth with one hand she trod among the corpses, trying not to touch any of them. Footfall after careful footfall led her towards the other side of the clearing, to a gap in the cliff walls. As she approached the exit, it became clear why this place had been chosen for a killing chamber. The crevice in the sheer walls was barely wide enough for a human to pass through, let alone a panicked horse.

Alice held her breath as she walked the final few metres. A strong smell of putrefaction emanated from a fresh carcass, slumped near the exit. Its body lay in a tangle of limbs and hair. One eye was open, covered in a milky film. A torrent of dried blood had blackened the rocks and blowflies buzzed around the horse's head. Alice crept around the body, and as she drew closer saw the gaping hole in the animal's forehead. This horse had nearly escaped, but was shot before it could slither through the narrow opening. It had not died straight away. An arc of soil and stones had left a pattern on the gully floor, where the horse had thrashed its legs in a futile effort to get up.

The blowflies rose in an angry cloud as Alice approached. She hopped over the creature's stiff legs and slipped into the opening the horse had failed to enter. She ran down the path until her side hurt and her breath came in ragged gasps. She slowed to a walk and glanced back over her shoulder. The benign gully walls with their peculiar tufts of grass, the well-trodden path and the blue sky stretching high above gave no hint of what lay around the corner. She rubbed her face with a sweaty palm and vomited a gush of liquid on to the sand.

Her breath came in great sobs. She stood, head hanging, until the wave of nausea subsided. Her gut still churning, she stood upright and wiped her mouth with her sleeve. The hope that the path would lead to help kept her going.

The track continued along the gully. The cliff walls became less forbidding and then disappeared altogether as she emerged into a small valley. To her surprise she saw

a little house just ahead. It was made of wood, painted white with a red roof. The blue shutters and doors were pulled closed. As Alice approached, she noticed the wooden shutters had heart shaped holes carved in their centre. Pink geraniums tumbled from a planter under the front window. A neat path, bordered by white stones and garden beds of colourful annuals, led to the front door. Alice's heart lifted as she ran towards it. She bounded on to the cramped verandah and knocked.

On the second knock, the wooden door swung open. Alice stood on the threshold, uncertain whether to go inside. She rapped on the open door with her knuckles.

“Hello? Is anyone here?”

The silence of empty rooms greeted her when she stepped inside. Alice walked across to the second doorway and peered in.

“Hello?”

The room looked uninhabited. A small single bed, bare of sheets and coverlet, was pushed against the wall. The floorboards creaked as she walked towards it. Alice perched on the mattress, which looked new. She glanced around the bare walls, patterned with fine plaster cracks. A wooden chest of drawers stood beside the bed. Idly, she fingered the handle of the top drawer. On impulse, she tugged it open and it slid half way out before it jammed. Someone had laid flowered paper on the drawer's base, which had curled at the edges and was cloudy with dust. She peered into its dim recess, but all she could see were a couple of bent hairclips. But then she noticed something stuck at the back. Intrigued, she worked her hand inside the narrow gap, catching her fingers on a rough piece of fabric. She traced its edges with her fingertips, trying to find out how to pry it loose. With careful effort, she pulled the small object free and it slid into her hand. Alice examined it in the dim light from the tiny window. It was a girl's tiny purse made of pink satin and covered in beads and sequins. But the colours were worn and faded, and the purse was grey with dust. Alice cradled it in the palm of her hand. Her mother had given her one exactly like this for her tenth birthday.

Her fingers twisted the familiar catch and the purse sprang open. Inside was a collection of hair ties in various colours: purple, pink, yellow and green. Fine blonde

hairs were still entwined around a few. Alice arranged them on the bare mattress beside her. She counted them: two purples, three greens, two yellows and seven pinks.

And then, concealed in the purse's satin folds, was a soft lump. Alice hooked it out with her fingernail. It was a piece of paper, scrunched into a tiny ball. She folded it out on her palm, smoothing out the creases with one finger. The script was written in pencil, and had nearly faded away. Alice peered at it closely and managed to read the words written in a childish scrawl. "*My name is Charlotte and I'm 13. Please find my parents and tell them where I am.*" The last words slid off the paper in a hurried scrawl.

Alice stared at the pattern of fine cracks without seeing them. Her mind swirled with possibilities: was this girl the missing Charlotte Evans? How did she get here? What had happened to her? She curled her fingers over the note, scrunching it into a ball.

The sudden sound of car tyres on the gravel outside forced Alice to her feet. She scooped the hair ties and note back into the little purse, and shoved it in her pocket. With two strides she was at the back door. She slipped outside and scrambled up to the scrub behind the little house. Crouching behind a tea tree she watched as the back door opened and Bernie stuck her head out. Alice ducked, but the older girl merely retreated into the hut and closed the door firmly behind her. Alice rolled back on to the dried grass and stared up at the swaying branches. No noise drifted up from the house, and all Alice could hear was the wind rustling the leaves above her head.

Time seemed to stand still. A chorus of chirps and screeches began as parrots jostled for a roosting place on the branches above. Soft rustles disturbed the undergrowth as the night creatures began to stir. Slowly the light drained from the day, and Alice knew she had waited a long time. Her arm ached from the weight of her body and her legs were stiff after remaining curled in the same position for so long.

Alice raised her head above the low bushes to peer at the hut. Bernie's car was gone. She listened, but heard no sound of voices. Finally, her fear of getting lost in the rapidly approaching dark drove her to her feet. The road Bernie had used seemed to

offer her best chance of escape. She crept down to the hut, trying to remain concealed in the shadows, and kept her eye on the silent building. Once she arrived at the back door she realised the hut was empty.

For the first time, she stood up and breathed a sigh of relief. With one sweaty palm she swept her loose hair from her face and tucked it behind one ear. While lying under the tree she had lost her hair tie but the thought of using one from the pink purse made her shudder.

Alice stood uncertainly, not sure what to do next. She waited, poised for flight, but no sound came from the little house. Only the night noises of the bush surrounded her. When she turned for a final look at the house in the descending gloom of the evening, to her surprise, it glowed with a faint golden light. The shutters were closed, but heart shaped streams of light beckoned her in from the cold uncertainty of the evening.

Unable to resist one final look, she peered through the hole in the shutter. Inside, the hut was transformed. It was clean now and the wooden floor shone. A patchwork quilt of soft pinks and yellows covered the bed. Two fluffy towels were laid out on a chair, and a bunch of roses and lilies in a blue patterned jug sat on the sideboard. Prints hung on the wall and a lamp in the corner threw a gentle glow over the room. Alice was nearly tempted out of the darkness by its reassuring comfort. But instead she stepped away from the window and for the first time noticed the front door was made of solid wood, with a large deadlock. Each of the wooden shutters could be bolted closed with a metal band across the outside.

Alice bounded away from the house into the darkness of the road. She ran until the pain in her side made her want to double over, and she was forced to walk. Night had fallen, and the moon was concealed behind clouds. There was only enough light to follow the pale ribbon of the gravel road. She walked until her breath returned to normal and then she took off in a slow jog.

The road curved around a bend and Alice saw lights up ahead. Excited, she increased her pace until a house came into view. Dark outbuildings surrounded it, and a four-wheel drive was parked near the front door. As she got closer, Alice recognised Roger Quilty's house. She had come a full circle.

Her legs gave way and she fell to the ground by the roadside. Her mind could not think clearly or decide what to do. A voice drifted across to where she sat slumped in the shrubbery.

“Did you find her?” Quilty’s voice barked, sharp and irritated.

“No. I didn’t. No sign of her.” The girl’s voice murmured. Alice recognised Bernie.

“Well she can’t have gone far.” His voice was loud, as though he was standing right beside her. She shuffled further into the bushes.

Bernie didn’t reply. There was a pause.

“Come inside then. I’m bloody starving. We’ll look for her again after dinner.” Alice heard footsteps walk away towards the house.

“Come on then!” The man called, his voice brusque.

“I just thought I’d feed the horse and bed him down for the night,” Bernie answered. Her voice trembled, as though she was nervous.

“Leave it.”

Alice heard Bernie sigh. She realised the girl must be just on the other side of the undergrowth. She shuffled even further away.

“Right. I’m coming,” Bernie replied. Alice heard other footsteps and the front door slam. She sat, silent, but there were no more sounds. She knew they were having dinner, and that she only had an hour or so before they would be back.

* * *

The horse stood with his head hung low. He licked his torn lips and swallowed. Raising his head he shuffled over to the small hollow of the automatic waterer and licked the bowl for any trace of moisture, but his tongue only tasted dust. He blew air through his nostrils and coughed. A stray curl of hay dislodged from the empty rack and floated to the stable floor. The tired horse sought it out with his lips and chewed on the tiny morsel.

The bolt creaked in the lock and he turned his head towards the sound. His ears swivelled back and forth as he tried to locate its source. He could feel the presence of another living creature and suddenly he was on alert. The bolt creaked again, and then rattled free. The lower half of the door opened just enough for the young girl to slide through. The animal watched as she pulled the door closed, but didn't try to bolt it. He snorted, but was too tired to move away. The girl held out her hand, with the webbing halter and lead rope looped through her fingers. She murmured some soft sounds, and the horse stretched out his neck to sniff the heavy fabric, hardened with old sweat and grime.

The horse lipped her hand and lowered his head. Alice caressed his cheek with her fingers. She slid the lead rope over the animal's neck. He did not protest as she buckled up the halter and manoeuvred the empty feed bucket to the centre of the stable so she could use it to wriggle up on to his broad back. Her heels nudged his sides and at first he remained still, unsure where he could move to in the confines of his narrow stable. Her heels nudged again and this time he took a step forward towards the stable door. The girl leaned across his neck and pushed the top half of the stable door open. Her fingers strained to reach the bottom half, and the animal shuffled forward and pushed against it with its chest. The door swung wide and they were out in the stable yard.

The horse stood with his head raised to breathe the fresh night air and rid his nostrils of the odour of ammonia. The girl stroked his neck and then whispered something in a quiet voice. The horse sunk his lips into the water trough beside the tie up rail, sucking in as much of the cool liquid as he could. The girl sat perched quietly as he drank, and when he had finished she tugged on the lead rope. The animal moved off in the direction she indicated, away from the stable and down the driveway. His hooves crunched on the gravel as they made their way past the house and the vehicle parked crookedly beside the garden gate. He plodded on, measuring his gait to the balance of the girl, who sat unsteadily on his slippery back.

They had only travelled a few paces past the house when they heard the front door slam. Footsteps ran down the gravel, and someone shouted. The horse felt the girl stiffen, and she closed her legs hard against his sides. He leapt forward and she slipped

down his rump. He stopped and waited as she clambered back up and clutched hard to his neck, her hand wrapped around his mane. When she was steady he moved off again, this time at a stumbling trot.

The vehicle revved to life and sprayed gravel over the driveway as the wheels spun. The girl jerked the lead rope to the right and the horse veered off the driveway, following a narrow path that led deeper into the bush. The horse lengthened its stride and they raced between the shrubs and narrow saplings, their faces whipped by low hanging branches. A fallen log blocked their way and the horse paused, lengthened its stride, and jumped. He cleared the log and cantered on, leaving the girl behind, crumpled on the path. The loud shouts and revving engine faded as the horse galloped on into the quiet of the bush, until only the thud of his hoof beats broke the night silence.

Chapter 9

“Look Bev, there’s nothing you can do about it.” Her sister placed the teacup firmly on the flowered saucer. “She’s not your child, and you have no idea where she is.”

“True, true...” Mrs Pitchers answered.

Her calloused hands stroked the kitten’s smooth grey fur as he sat and purred in her lap, paws tucked neatly under his body.

“But I just have a feeling there’s a link between this girl’s disappearance and that awful stable.” She shuddered, and reached for her teacup. The kitten opened one eye and reached out a paw in protest at being disturbed.

Anne Bishop took another delicate sip of tea. “Well, who knows.” She glanced over at her sister. “You always did have a good sixth sense.”

Mrs Pitchers smiled.

“But...” continued Anne Bishop, holding up a finger to admonish her younger sister as though she was a naughty child, “Remember, no good comes from poking your nose in where it’s not wanted.”

Bev Pitchers shook her head and smiled at her sister. “Honestly Anne, if there were no platitudes you’d have nothing to say!” Both elderly women sat and sipped their tea in silence.

“I remember her at Pony Club,” Anne Bishop added after a long pause, in which the only sound was the ticking clock and the kitten’s rumbling purr. “Nice girl. Very skinny. Her horse was completely untrained, but not nasty.” She smoothed her fingers through her iron grey hair, set into tight curls. “Of course, the parents didn’t know anything.” She sniffed.

Mrs Pitchers glanced over with affection at her only sister. “A lifetime of children Anne, and none of your own.” Her hand reached out and patted her sibling’s papery skin. “You don’t know how happy you’ve made them.”

The peaceful quiet was disturbed by the sound of a car pulling up in the driveway. Anne Bishop gave her sister a quizzical look. Bev Pitchers frowned and put her teacup down on the table. Footsteps echoed on the verandah's wooden floorboards, before a loud knock rang through the cavernous hallway.

"Well, well," Mrs Pitchers muttered, "who could this be?"

She heaved herself from her seat, carefully lifting the sleeping body of the kitten, still tucked into a purring circle, and placed it on the chair behind her. As she shuffled down the hallway two shadows were silhouetted in the frosted glass beside the door. She watched as one of them lifted its arm and banged the heavy knocker again.

"Yes, yes, I'm coming!" The figure in the glass shuffled its feet.

When she opened the door and switched on the outside light, two wan faces peered at her out of the dark. The older man stepped forward and thrust his hand towards her. "Hello. Brian Williams."

"Oh, yes, of course." She turned to the other man, not more than a boy.

"Hello Alex." Alex nodded a greeting.

"What can I do for you both?" She asked, her body fixed in the doorway, unyielding as she gazed from one face to the other.

"Can we come in, please?" Mr Williams asked. "We don't want to disturb you, but I have something important I would like to discuss."

Mrs Pitchers hesitated. She thought of her sister's advice, and the peace of their evening about to be shattered by the agitation she could feel emanating from the two men, particularly the father. She sighed. "Yes, you can come in."

She stepped back into the dark hallway and made room for the two men to pass. The heavy front door clanged shut behind them, reminding her, as it always did, of a dungeon. They walked towards the rectangle of light emanating from the kitchen. Mrs Pitchers heard a chair scrape against the floor as her sister rose to greet the two men.

"Hello," she heard the father say, "I'm Brian Williams. Do you remember me?"

"Yes, of course," her sister replied, brusquely. "Of course I remember you. In fact, my sister here," she gestured towards Mrs Pitchers, "and I were just talking about you." Mrs Pitchers noticed that the expression on her face was wary but not unkind.

The room seemed suddenly small with the bulk of the two men crowding beside the table and chairs. They stood awkwardly until Mrs Pitchers gestured for them to take a seat. Mr Williams lowered himself into her chair. Horrified, she grabbed the still sleeping kitten from under the seat of his pants.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Mr Williams exclaimed. “I didn’t see it.” He patted his lap with one hand. “Just put it back,” he said as the little creature woke and yawned in Mrs Pitcher’s arms, his tiny pink tongue curled into a circle. After a brief hesitation, she placed the kitten on Mr William’s broad lap. He stroked it with his large hand, and the animal circled a number of times before it lay down and fell asleep. Mr Williams smiled up at the older woman. “Well he’s easy to please!” he joked.

Mrs Pitchers smiled back, noticing that despite his smile his face looked strained. She felt a surge of sympathy, and sat down on one of the wooden chairs, smoothing over the crumpled folds of her apron.

There was a long silence. Finally Mr Williams spoke, his voice hoarse.

“You may be wondering why we are here,” he said, directing his words to both women. Mr Williams shuffled nervously in his chair, careful not to disturb the sleeping kitten. “I just have a feeling about those stables,” he said finally, his voice flat. “It may sound odd, but I think there is a connection between that place and Alice’s disappearance.” His look was earnest as he gazed from one elderly face to the other. When the women did not respond, he dropped his head and held up his hands to cover his face.

Mrs Pitchers rose from her chair and touched the grieving man on the shoulder. “It must be a very worrying time for you, Mr Williams,” she said, softly.

Mr Williams looked up from between his hands. “Yes,” he whispered. “I just know there’s something wrong.”

“Have you returned to the house where you dropped her off?” Mrs Bishop asked in a curt tone. “I would have thought that would be a good place to start.”

Mrs Pitchers frowned at her sister, who merely shrugged her shoulders by way of reply.

“Yes, I have,” he answered, oblivious to her sharp tone. “I’ve looked around the place and there’s nothing there. I told the police about it. Apparently the house has

been empty for months. The owners moved overseas and took it off the market when it didn't sell." He shuffled in his seat. "The police tell me they haven't been able to contact them as yet, but I think they are stalling because in their view Alice is just a runaway who'll turn up any day now." He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand.

Mrs Pitchers stood beside his chair, her hand still resting on the man's shoulder. Her palm tingled from the warmth of his skin radiating through his clothes. "And what do you think?" she asked, quietly.

"I think she's been kidnapped," he stated, his voice bold, as though expecting disagreement. Mrs Bishop raised her eyebrows.

Mrs Pitchers removed her hand and returned to her seat. "I see," she said.

Nobody spoke as Brian Williams' gaze roved from one face to the other.

"You probably all think I'm crazy," he muttered, "but I'm bloody sure of it."

"No, I don't think you are crazy, Mr Williams." Mrs Pitchers answered. "Far from it, actually."

Alex, who had remained silent until now, leaned forward in his chair and spoke. "That stable belongs to my Boss," he said, in a low tone. "But we never use it. He keeps it pretty empty most of the time."

"Well, seeing as you work for him, you can tell us who that dreadful girl is who regularly comes in and out of there," Mrs Pitchers huffed.

"I don't know who that is," Alex replied, his words slow and measured. "I've been working at the stud farm for Mr Quilty for nearly twelve months and I've never had anything to do with those stables."

Mrs Pitchers pursed her lips. Her sister glanced over at her and smiled a wry smile. She knew what that expression meant. "Young man," Mrs Pitchers continued, "I don't want to put you on the spot, but there is something very odd going on in that place."

Alex scratched his cheek with one finger. "Look, I'm just saying no-one at the stud farm uses those stables. If there is anything strange going on, we would never hear about it."

"And so why are you here then?" Mrs Bishop asked.

“I’m here because Mr Williams rang me and asked me if I could help him find his daughter,” Alex answered, his voice firm.

“Really?” Mrs Pitchers was not convinced. “And what business is it of yours?”

Alex smiled. “None, actually. In fact it’s not really in my best interests to go around sniffing into my Boss’ personal affairs. But,” he paused to tip his hat back, “I think something has happened to that girl too. Don’t ask me why, I just do.”

“Look,” interrupted Mr Williams. “Alice spoke of you once as being a kind woman who took her in when she’d been hurt. Plus you live very close to that place and we thought you may have heard or seen something.”

Mrs Pitchers looked at the two men for a few moments. “Actually, I have,” she answered. “I haven’t seen your daughter... Alice is it? But I have seen horses come and go at odd hours, and it’s all very suspicious. And then there is that awful girl... I’m sure she’s up to no good.”

Mr Williams face fell. “Is that all?” He could not keep the disappointment from his voice. “You haven’t seen Alice? Or heard anything?”

Mrs Pitchers sighed. “No, Mr Williams. I’m sorry. I haven’t. But,” and she held up one wrinkled finger, slightly bent from arthritis, “the owner of that stable, Roger Quilty, has a bad reputation around here, going back years. He may well have something to do with your daughter’s disappearance.”

Brian Williams sat back in the chair and let his breath out with a whistle. “Well, now, that’s where we agree.”

Alex leaned forward in his chair. “There might be another place we can look. The Boss has another property, further up in the bush. He takes horses up there sometimes. I’ve never been there myself, but I think it’s near a place called Hidden Valley.”

Mrs Pitchers and her sister exchanged glances. Finally Mrs Pitchers spoke. “I know it well,” she said. “We used to live out there, and spent our childhood roaming through that bushland. There isn’t a road or track we didn’t explore or know about. It was a fair few years ago, mind you.”

Brian turned to the older woman. “So, will you come with us, Mrs Pitchers?” he asked. “I’d really appreciate your help.”

Mrs Pitchers was quiet. She reached down and patted Clem, who was sleeping, curled up, at her feet. "All right, I'll come," she agreed, finally. Her sister frowned, but she took no notice. "Just wait while I get my coat." As they were leaving she turned to Mr Williams. "And please... call me Bev."

* * *

The wind howled through Miranda's favourite tree outside her bedroom window. She lay awake, thinking of Alice. There was an agonising ache in the pit of her stomach. *Where are you Alice?* She felt like wailing, but knew her mother would hear any sound she made from her bedroom across the hall.

She caught sight of the small figurine her friend had bought her last Christmas. It was a dancing girl. Her dress swirled around her legs, revealing glittering red dancing shoes. Her arms were raised above her head as she danced with wild abandon. Miranda had laughed when Alice had given it to her, but then she had noticed her friend's hurt look. Miranda, abashed, had glanced down at the figurine in her lap. The dancer looked entranced, as though she was going to fly away on her twirling feet. She suddenly understood why Alice had given it to her. It was a vote of confidence; a gift shop talisman. Miranda had touched her friend on the arm. "I love it!" she whispered. And she meant it. Alice had glowed with pleasure.

Miranda watched the girl, still dancing in the darkness. She got up, abruptly, from her bed. "I'm going to find you, Alice," she whispered to the figurine. And she began to get dressed.

* * *

Alice opened her eyes and stared up at the branches swaying over her head, outlined against the stars in the night sky. Her body lay next to a dark, cylindrical shape, and

when she turned towards it her face brushed against rough bark. Wisps of dried grass tickled her cheek and she realised she was lying beside a fallen tree trunk. She turned her head the other way and could see the track bend away and disappear into the bush.

Alice lay still. She heard voices, but could not make out the words. A beam of light shone across the branches over her head. The voices became louder, until she could tell one belonged to a man, and the other, softer and high pitched, was a woman's. She tried to sit up, but her body refused to move. Lying motionless, she watched the shaft of light as it disappeared and then reappeared. It was only after a while that she realised it was a torch. Alice shuffled her body closer to the log in an effort to keep concealed.

A girl's voice spoke from the other side of the log.

"I can't see any sign of them here," she called. "I don't think they came this way."

The torchlight swung wildly in the trees above her head, and Alice recognised Bernie's voice. She listened to Bernie's retreating footsteps. When she was gone, the night sounds of the bush resumed. Alice shut her eyes, overcome by a sudden wave of fatigue.

A soft wet object woke her. It nuzzled her ear, and blew soft breath through her hair. She groaned, and opened her eyes. All she could see was a soft nose and a wide nostril, blowing softly against her head. The creature was huge, but she forced herself to move.

"Bruce!" she exclaimed, and the animal pricked its ears towards her. From where she lay all she could see was the outline of his huge frame towering above her.

Her fingers reached over and caressed the animal's nose, and he puffed moist air on her fingertips.

Alice rolled on to her side, and the horse stepped back a few steps. She rose to her knees, head spinning. The animal lowered his head, and she reached out to steady herself by grabbing a handful of mane. Once on her feet, she lifted her head up and gazed around her.

Moonlight shone on the path, and clearly illuminated the hoof marks and the hollow in the dirt where Alice had fallen. On the other side of the log, she saw the

impression of a boot in the damp soil. It was only a few metres from where Alice had lain.

The horse shuffled his feet and Alice turned her attention back to him. The lead rope still hung loosely around his neck. Alice climbed on to the log and scrambled on to his back. She grabbed another handful of mane and wriggled into a comfortable position. Once she was safely aboard, the horse plodded away, down the moonlit path.

They walked for a long time. Alice drifted as though in a dream, happy to let Bruce lead the way. She gripped his mane as he pushed through the undergrowth, bending low to avoid hanging branches and clinging on tight as he broke into an occasional awkward trot.

Alice's body moved with the rhythm of his stride as they twisted and turned along the bush track. The full moon shone above them, and she could see almost as clearly as if it were daylight.

Bruce pushed through a section of undergrowth, and they emerged on to a dirt road. It stretched on ahead, almost white in the moonlight. They had only been walking for a short time when Alice heard the hum of a car's engine in the distance. She twisted on Bruce's back to look behind, and at that moment he began to trot. Her body slipped and she very nearly fell off for a second time. She managed to right herself as car headlights swung into view, and a vehicle bore down on them from behind.

Bruce broke into a swinging canter, which accelerated into a gallop. Alice crouched low, his mane whipping her face as he moved faster over the uneven ground. She could not see where they were going. Her eyes stung from the slashing mane and the cold night air.

In the glare of the car's headlights their shadows stretched large on the road. Alice realised the vehicle was almost alongside when over the sound of the engine she heard a voice calling her name. In a flash she took in Bernie's pale face, her look of panic and her mouth open around words Alice could not hear. Up ahead, a farm gate loomed out of the darkness. She felt the horse gather himself and the car screeched to a halt, spraying the ground with dust and stones as it slid to a stop behind them.

Horse and rider flew over the gate and landed with a soft thud on the other side. As they galloped away Alice looked over her shoulder and saw the car in a cloud of dust

lit by the headlights, and a man wearing tall black boots aim a vicious kick at the gate that separated them.

Now they were in open paddocks. Bruce cantered freely and Alice was comfortable on his back, her body swaying with the horse's motion. She gazed at the moon through the curve of his ears. But soon the rhythm slowed and his canter's magical swing dropped to a rapid trot, and then to a walk. Alice loosened her hold on his mane and rubbed her hand down the length of his damp neck.

"Bruce, you are amazing," she whispered. The horse flicked an ear in her direction but did not break his stride. They walked on until Alice saw a fence line up ahead, ending in the rectangle of a farm gate. The sky was lighter now, tinged with gold. Alice could clearly make out the growing ears of grain as they passed by. When they reached the gate Alice slid off, her legs buckling under her weight.

The gate was chained shut, but not padlocked. She wound the chain free and lifted the gate open on its rusty hinges. Bruce followed, his flanks heaving and neck outstretched. Crop fields stretched all around them, dissected by a gravel road, which disappeared up a shallow incline. Far in the distance she could see the dark line of scrub from which they had come. Turning back to Bruce, she realised how exhausted he was.

"Let's walk, shall we."

She closed the gate behind them, wrapping the chain around it as best she could. They set off down the dirt road, Alice initially unsteady on her feet, but then stronger with each step as she strode towards home.

Miranda struggled up the hill, a low flat one that seemed to go for miles. She felt as though she had been riding forever, and her legs seemed to operate independently, following their own rhythm. When she arrived at the top of the incline, she could see the road stretch endlessly in front of her, reaching over the horizon. Open fields

surrounded the road, bathed in a golden tinge as the sun began its ascent in the dawn sky.

Her breath caught as she saw two figures in the distance, the unmistakable silhouettes of a horse and a girl, walking towards where she sat perched on the seat of her bicycle.

“Alice!” she called, waving her arm wide. And she leapt on to the pedals of her bike and flew down the slope towards her friend.

The car drove on, each inhabitant silent. Endless fields of wheat stretched before the car’s headlights, as they had done for what seemed like hours. The sky was beginning to lighten, forming pale streaks in the night sky. Mrs Pitchers stared out of the window, watching the moon lose its brightness as the sun rose over the horizon.

Her reverie was broken by the car’s sudden skid to a halt, causing it to spin sideways across the gravel road. Mr Williams sprang from the car, leaving the engine running and his door standing wide open. He sprinted along the road towards two figures walking in the distance, one leading a hangdog horse and the other wheeling a pink bicycle. She smiled to herself as she watched the tall man reach the slender child and wrap her in his arms, lifting her off her feet as he clutched her to his chest in a tight embrace.

Later, in the car, Alice watched from the window as the long, flat wheat fields around them turned a pale gold in the morning sunlight. Her father drove with one hand on the steering wheel, his other gripping hers as she sat beside him in the passenger seat. Alex had offered to stay with Bruce, so only Mrs Pitchers and Miranda sat quietly in the back. Alice did not feel like speaking. After the euphoria following her rescue, there did not seem to be anything to say.

They drove towards Quilty's farm. The road curved towards the fringe of bushland ahead, and Alice realised she had not come far in her frantic escape the night before. The car plunged into the dim recesses of the bush, the sunny morning obliterated as the trees arched over the road. The car followed the bends and then turned down a dirt driveway that Alice recognised. Her heart began to pound and her father gripped her moist palm harder with his free hand. He turned and shot her a reassuring smile as they swung into the turning circle in front of Quilty's house, pulling up beside a police car parked on the dusty gravel, its lights flashing.

"Just wait here a minute, Alice." He untangled his fingers from her hand. "I just have to go and talk to the police before we take you home."

He turned and spoke to Mrs Pitchers in the back seat.

"Would you mind keeping an eye on the girls until I get back?"

Mrs Pitchers nodded. "Not at all."

"Hopefully the cops will come and talk to Alice later," he added, glancing over at his daughter, sitting mute on the front seat. "I think she needs to get home now."

Mrs Pitchers reached over and patted her father on the shoulder. "Don't worry. They will be fine here with me."

"Right. Thanks. Be back in a minute." He left the car, slamming the door behind him.

Alice followed his progress as he walked towards the police car. A uniformed officer emerged from the driver's side and they began to talk. She saw the policeman touch her father lightly on the arm and guide him towards the front verandah, now bustling with activity.

The front door opened and Alice held her breath as she saw Quilty emerge, and be escorted to the car by two uniformed officers. He was handcuffed, his arms held rigidly together in front of his body. His face was expressionless as they opened the back door of the police car and ushered him inside. Alice felt Mrs Pitcher's heavy hand descend on her shoulder.

"He can't get you now, Alice. He's going where he belongs."

Moments later Bernie appeared, flanked by two female officers. She looked pale and vulnerable. One of the officers guided her into the second police car, and then slid

into the driver's seat. Its lights still flashing, Alice watched the car slowly pull away from the house, immediately followed by the car carrying Quilty.

As they drove away, Mrs Pitchers sighed. "I do feel sorry for the girl," she mumbled. "God only knows what unspeakable things he did to her to make her turn out like that." The seat creaked as she shifted into a more comfortable position.

Alice turned away and looked out of the window. She leaned forward as she noticed Alex making his slow way down the driveway, perched bareback on Bruce. The horse's head hung low as they plodded towards the house.

"Bruce is here!" Alice exclaimed, the first time she had spoken. She moved to open the passenger door but Mrs Pitchers reached forward and touched her arm.

"Wait now, Alice," she said, her voice soft but firm. "I think it's best if you let Alex sort Bruce out for now. He knows what he's doing."

Alice turned around and looked across at the old woman. Her face sagged with tiredness and Alice resisted the urge to leap out of the car and run towards Bruce. She sat back in her seat.

"Thank you dear," Mrs Pitchers said, relieved. "I don't think I'm up to chasing you around any more." Her attempt at humour fell flat. Miranda smiled politely, but Alice simply stared at the old woman.

"Thank you, Mrs Pitchers, for helping to find me." She responded finally, her voice low. "I'm so sorry I caused you all this trouble." She turned to her best friend, sitting curled in the corner of the back seat, her face blank. "And you too, Miranda. You all saved me from them." She jerked her head towards Quilty's house. As she gazed from one stricken face to the other, a stream of hot tears poured down her cheeks. She rubbed them away roughly against her sleeve.

The old woman's face dissolved into an expression of kindness and sympathy. Alice thought she was going to cry.

"It's no trouble, dear." Mrs Pitchers dabbed at her eyes with a broad handkerchief she pulled from one of her pockets. Then she gripped Alice's arm and stared fiercely into her eyes. "But there is something I want you to remember. You are brave and you saved yourself. You and that crazy horse got away when that poor other

child could not. And who knows how many others there were. I'm proud to have helped you in whatever small way I could."

She let her grip loosen from Alice's arm and leaned back in her seat. "That man had a long, dark history and you helped to stop him."

Alice did not know what to say. She turned away, and watched as Alex put Bruce away in the stable, the one he had escaped from only a few hours before.

"That's a nice boy," Mrs Pitchers said, "and he'll take care of your horse, don't you worry. I'll bet the float is on its way now to pick him up and take him somewhere safe."

The driver's door opened and Alice's father slid himself into the front seat beside his daughter. He turned on the engine and pulled out into the driveway, waving to Alex as he passed.

"Sorry about that. I just had to answer a few questions. But the rest we can deal with tomorrow." He smiled at Alice and squeezed her arm with his free hand before turning to Mrs Pitchers. "Now Bev, would you like me to take you home, or is there somewhere else I can drop you?"

"Home please," she replied.

Once Alice and her father had dropped off an exhausted Mrs Pitchers they headed towards Miranda's house. When they pulled up outside, Miranda's mother was waiting in the driveway, her face creased with worry.

Alice's father got out and after lifting Miranda's bike out of the car boot, went to speak to her mother. When he was gone Alice turned to her friend. "How did you know where to look for me?" she asked.

Miranda took a while to reply. "I'm not sure," she said, finally. "I just kept heading up into the hills, past the Quilty farm. I rode for hours and heaps of times I thought I was lost and going round in circles, but I just kept going. I was really worried Alice," she whispered. "I thought we were never going to see you again."

“You saved me Miranda. That man would have found me again sooner or later. And it was you and Dad and Alex and Mrs Pitchers who saved me...” she began to shake, her arm vibrating against the upholstery.

Both girls looked down at her quivering arm. Alice slid it under her body.

“You would do the same thing for me,” Miranda replied.

Before they could say anything more, the back door opened and Miranda’s mother leaned in.

“Come on now, love,” she said to her daughter. “Why don’t we let Alice go home and get some rest.” She smiled at Alice, but her voice was firm.

Miranda slid obligingly across the seat towards the open door.

“Take care, Alice,” she whispered, and then got out.

Alice waved to her friend as they drove away, and then turned to her father.

“I’m really tired, Dad,” she said. “Can we go home now?”

“Nearly there, sweetheart,” he replied. “Nearly there.”

When Alice emerged from the car moments later, her mother was waiting beside the kerb. She wrapped her arms around her daughter’s slender frame and held her tight. Alice felt her mother’s hot tears dribble down her neck.

“Mum, I’m okay,” she muttered, as she wriggled free from her mother’s embrace.

“I know, I know,” her mother said. “I’m sorry....” Her face was red and blotched from crying. Despite her claustrophobia, Alice felt a wave of tenderness. She reached out for her hand and squeezed. Her mother’s face lit up with pleasure.

“Let’s go inside, shall we?” Alice’s mother whispered in her ear.

Alice nodded. They walked into her familiar hallway, her father close behind. He shut the front door, and as Alice made her way towards the kitchen, her legs crumpled and she passed out, unconscious, on the hall carpet.

The sound of muffled voices woke Alice. She rolled over and pulled the covers over her head, but still the voices droned on, just out of hearing range. Feeling suffocated and gasping for breath she threw the quilt off her body and lay, spreadeagled, on the sheets. Her pyjamas felt clammy against her skin but the cool breeze drifting in through the open window soothed her. It was dark and she had been asleep for hours.

The voices belonged to her parents. She realised they were in the kitchen, only metres down the corridor. She made out her name, and Bernie's and then Bruce's. Intrigued, she sat up and without getting up off the bed reached across to swing her door wide open. She could hear so clearly it was as though she was standing right beside them.

"I'm worried about her, Brian. I think we need to take her to the hospital tomorrow for some tests. She's just recently had a concussion, after all."

"Look, I know. Let's take her. We'll tell the doctors she had an episode tonight. But you know it could also just be stress and exhaustion after what she's been through."

The kettle screeched as the water boiled. Her parents were quiet as they prepared their cups of tea in silence.

"I know," her mother answered, "I can't bear thinking about it."

Alice heard footsteps as her parents moved into the lounge room. She leaned across her bed and strained to listen.

"So, what did the police say?" Alice's mother asked, after a pause.

"They were very apologetic, the bastards." Her father struggled to keep the bitterness from his voice. "Apparently they were keeping their eye on this Quilty guy for a while, but had no evidence other than neighbourhood gossip that he'd always had an interest in young girls. It was finally the brother who tipped them off that something was going on."

"The brother? What's he got to do with it?" Alice heard a clink as teacups were placed on the coffee table. She shuffled closer to the doorway so as not to miss anything.

"He owned the horse originally, when it raced under the name Pathfinder. He had a real soft spot for it because it won a lot of money on the track and that saved him from going bankrupt, apparently. Quilty assured him it was going to be looked after on

his farm for life but instead he just got rid of it. It ended up in a knackers yard which is where that dodgy woman found it and sold it to me.” Her father sighed. “What an idiot.”

Alice’s mother did not comment. After a short silence her father continued. “The brother and Quilty had a falling out so the first the brother heard of the horse’s reappearance was when he was contacted by the studbook as the registered owner. As far as he knew, it had been living on Quilty’s farm all this time. So he was furious and called the cops. They told me he was raving about how Quilty was fiddling around with young girls and to watch him, but they didn’t take it too seriously. But it was enough to make him a person of interest in that poor girl Charlotte Evans’ disappearance, even though there was initially no evidence linking them. And as it turned out it was that rude copper that tipped off the detectives. A second missing girl with an interest in horses was just too much of a coincidence.”

“Did they find her?” Her mother’s voice was so low, Alice could barely hear it.

“No. They haven’t. Not yet anyway. But the detective told me they will conduct a thorough search of the area. No-one’s holding out any hope though.”

“God, how awful for her parents.” There was a long silence. “So what’s going to happen to that terrible girl, his accomplice?” her mother continued.

“I don’t know. Apparently there was a long history there. Quilty kind of took her in when she was twelve and a bit of a runaway. The cops think there’s no doubt she was abused by him, but she’s convinced it’s love. She’s pretty attached to him and they reckon she’s still defending him. I don’t think that’s mutual, though.”

Alice didn’t want to hear any more. She pushed the door closed, until the lock clicked. Her parents kept talking, but now their words were an indistinct murmur. Her bones ached with exhaustion. She rolled herself in the covers, safe in her cocoon, and fell asleep. She dreamed of sitting loose limbed on Bruce’s back as he galloped through an endless field, stretching to the horizon. A growing crop rippled under the moonlight, a sea of silver. The moon was a white ball, hanging in the soft blue black of the sky. They were flying through a field of silver.