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AMARA

A thesis
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ABSTRACT

Amara is a satirical reimagining of the Jesus story told from a God's-eye perspective. It lightly probes the myth of the virgin birth, miracles, Christianity's departure from the teachings of Jesus, the notion of an omnipotent God, and what might happen if a Gen Z Messiah arrived in the age of DNA testing and rolling news.

In an Australian relocation of the biblical Annunciation, Mary, soon to marry Joseph, becomes pregnant while claiming to be a virgin. Joseph tries to identify the father by collecting genetic samples from neighbours in the same apartment block. When this proves unsuccessful, and after being threatened by an antagonistic angel, Joseph abandons his search and accepts a bizarre alternative explanation: that Mary conceived while sunning her perineum on their balcony.

Amara is born in a barn on 1 January 2000. Three girls, children of refugees, turn up with gifts after dreaming of her birth and become part of the family. A Catholic priest and a dogmatic parishioner become aware of a possible incarnation. While Joe is receptive to the priest's interest, Mary rebuffs his attempts to become involved, determined to protect Amara and give her a normal life. Joe and Mary have a second child, Joshua, and life is mostly suburban normal. As she grows, Amara reveals herself to be an extraordinary child, with an unusually close relationship with God.

When Amara is ten, she disarms a knife-wielding man with a history of mental illness – an act that inexplicably restores his sanity. A journalist is assigned the story, and her investigation uncovers possible earlier miracles. The ensuing media interest prompts the return of the priest, parishioner and angel and makes normal life impossible for the family. A Catholic bishop sees an opportunity to deflect public attention from the growing scandal of institutional child abuse and offers sanctuary to the family at a retreat in the countryside.

The submitted manuscript represents the first stage of a larger narrative following Amara from birth into adulthood.

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PART ONE

April 1999

1.

Mary would soon marry Joseph. A year after moving out of the family home, she lived on the second floor of a four-storey apartment block, standing alone at the end of a street, butting onto a small park. She was in the third year of a Bachelor of Education, majoring in biology, that she hoped would lead to teaching at a high school.

To celebrate her engagement, a girlfriend had given her a book, *The Tao of Sexology: The Book of Infinite Wisdom*, which included a sun-worshipping practice to expose the anal and vaginal areas to sunlight. One day, reading it while sunbathing on her verandah, Mary decided to try the exercise. Slipping off her underpants, she put a pillow under her bum, pulled her thighs toward her, and aimed sunward.

With a warm summer wind swirling around the building, a soundtrack of cicada thrum and singing birds, she felt a dreamy connection from her sun-kissed nethers to the heavens – when something warm splatted between her legs. Looking down at a patch of pearly goo creaming her vulva, then up at a puffy white cloud shrinking into the blue, she thought errant bird poop, wrapped the towel she'd been lying on around her, and went inside to wash it off.

Later, when her period didn't show, she figured stress related to her upcoming wedding. When another week passed with no blood, she went to see her doctor. A positive urine test showed she was pregnant.

'I can't be,' Mary said.

'The test is very reliable, but we can do a blood test – if you want.'

The next day, the doctor called and told her the blood test confirmed she was pregnant.

'But it's not possible.'

'Mary, the chances of it being wrong are less than one percent. I see we've never prescribed you any oral contraception. What birth control method do you use?'

'I haven't needed any. I haven't been with anyone.'

'Really. Well, you could come in and have an ultrasound scan – that would be *absolutely* conclusive.'

The next day, lying on an examination bed in a small, dimly lit room, a probe moving in tight circles on her abdomen, Mary heard the sonographer say she was pregnant.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Look, you can see the gestational sac.' She pointed at a tiny, greyish blur on the small screen. 'And see that little flicker? That's the embryo's heartbeat.'

'How long do you think?'

'You can see the heartbeat, so I'd say at least six weeks. I'll give you a picture to take home.'

Mary accepted a paper towel and wiped the gel off. In her car, she looked at the small black-and-white photo, her world shrinking to a grey smudge in her uterus. She closed her eyes. Could she have been drugged? Wouldn't she have known? There was no chance Joe could be responsible; they were intimate but chastely intimate. The only time something gooey had been near her vagina was that afternoon on the balcony.

Had James or Simon been fooling around on the balcony, the swirling wind sending ejaculate torpedoing onto her exposed vulva, and one pushy sperm made it through? She didn't remember hearing them – though she'd only been half-awake.

It couldn't be the old man in the ground-floor unit. Watching him inch his way to the letterbox with a walking frame suggested he was past shooting seed skywards. The only other person near enough, if flying semen was the source, was the man on the top floor, who they rarely saw during the day.

Despite it seeming absurd, it was all she could come up with. She sent Joe a message saying she was having an early night, that they'd talk tomorrow, and went to bed. And had a dream where she was floating in boundless light with a voice telling her not to worry, that the growing embryo was a blessing.

She woke to sunlight edging the curtains and wondered how to tell Joe.

2.

Mary met Joe – dark-haired, brown-eyed, with skin that lapped up the sun – at a weekend farmers market, when they both reached for a last aubergine. Both insisting the other have it, Joe bought it and gave it to her. A smart move for Joe, recently single and not particularly adept at meeting women. They'd stepped away from the vegie stall, wandered the market chatting, and ended up swapping numbers.

For Mary – fairer than Joe, with olive eyes and a body toned through running and yoga – it was her first serious relationship and, partly because of her Christian upbringing but also by choice, she was still a virgin. They were intimate and physical with each other but stopped well short of penetration, Joe accepting her desire to wait until they were married.

Several evenings each week Joe came to Mary's, and they ate dinner together. The day after the sonogram, she told him her unbelievable story. About the book, about sunning herself on the balcony, about being pregnant, her theory of wayward flying semen, and the dream she'd had. She said she was still a virgin and offered to go to a doctor to prove it – though she wondered if the yoga stretching would make an examination meaningless.

Joe was temporarily struck mute. He looked into the eyes of the woman he'd trusted, eyes that still asked that of him.

'You're saying you got pregnant sunning your fanny on the balcony?' he said.

'I know that sounds crazy, Joe.'

'And somehow this is a good thing?'

'The dream, I ...'

'This is too much for me. I need to go.' Joe left the apartment and drove out west to Cecil Hills, where he was making an old barn habitable on a small block of land – a leftover from when the area was farmland. It was where they planned to live after getting married, close to both their parents. Giving the door a wee kick to unjam it, and leaning slightly to compensate for an uneven floor, he walked through a gap in the timber framing to a dusty old sofa with a wooden box for a coffee table.

Joe wondered if he had imagined the last year, the happiest in his life. His mum and dad loved Mary. His friends loved Mary. There was no one he could talk to. He messaged her and said he'd call tomorrow, and went to bed.

And had a dream that, unlike most dreams that unravelled when he woke, remained vivid. A voice that warmed him, a voice that was kind but authoritative, a voice that said to trust Mary – to believe her, to marry her, to be the child's father.

He messaged Mary to say he was coming over.

Mary had lain in bed, hoping to hear from Joe and wondering how to move forward – she couldn't imagine doing life without him. She'd had another dream. This time she was sitting with Joe under a fig tree on a perfect green lawn that stretched to the horizon. A baby lay sleeping, swaddled in a white blanket. There was no voice; just a feeling that all was well.

When he arrived, knocking quietly on her door, she opened it to a man who stood unsure of himself, but calm. She stepped aside as he entered and sat on one of the chairs around the kitchen table, avoiding the wobbly one he'd made her as a birthday gift.

Mary sat opposite him and, after a few moments, reached her hands across the table hoping he would take them. He did, and they sat looking at each other. Her eyes went blurry.

'Tell me again,' Joe said.

She closed her eyes, pushing tears out, and told him. When she'd finished, she saw Joe had closed his, but his lips were soft.

'I had a dream last night. It was like your dream. It said to trust you. To love you.' He stopped talking. 'I want to believe you.' He squeezed her hands. 'I'm confused. I don't know what to think.'

'I know how insane it seems, Joe. But there's no other way I can think of. And the dreams. They're so real...'

'I know, the voice. Ignoring it seems wrong. But getting pregnant sunning your fanny seems so ridiculous. I mean, how?'

'I don't know. It was super windy; I was kind of open, and when it landed some of it must have got inside me.'

'Sperm?'

'I thought it was bird poop. I didn't look too hard.'

'There's really been no one else?'

'No, Joe. There's been no one else.'

Joe finally accepted the lack of alternatives. The balcony impregnation remained the most likely explanation, as implausible as it was, with James and Simon the most likely source of the flying semen, given their propensity for having sex at any time of day and everywhere in their apartment – living beneath them occasionally caused the betrothed to feign deafness. They dismissed the stranger on the top floor, as they hardly ever saw him outside when it was sunny.

'And no abortion, eh?' Joe said.

'I don't want to,' Mary said.

'Okay.'

'You sure, Joe?'

'Yeah. But I want to find out who the father is.'

And that was all it took for them to move forward together. For Mary, believing science unlocked the mysteries of the world inhibited any serious consideration of a heavenly progenitor, though she wasn't entirely able to dismiss intrusive thoughts of that other Mary's fateful insemination. Joe, not from a religious home, was more interested in uncovering whose sperm had fertilised her egg. They decided to keep the pregnancy to themselves and wait until there were visible signs to acknowledge it with their families.

3.

Joe had mostly finished converting the corrugated-iron-roofed and wooden-floored barn into a habitable home. It sat in the middle of a half-acre block, the grass more pasture than lawn, with gum trees and jacarandas lining the boundary, and a work shed out the back. The plumbing, electricity, and drainage were handled by contractors – Joe's parents had insisted. His dad and friends helped put in windows, a ceiling, and the cabinet work in the kitchen and bathroom. All the services were connected, and the home was ready to join the newer houses on the recently subdivided street and support a family.

It was in the backyard, on the first day of June, that a marriage celebrant witnessed their vows under a simple white wedding arch Joe had built, surrounded by immediate family and close friends. The invite said smart casual, and only Joe and three of his friends, and Mary and three of hers, were dressed to match – Mary's group in white, Joe's in black. Mary's mum had got hold of the guest list and sent around a modest wedding registry, and the room where guests had left their coats was stacked with gift-wrapped boxes.

They'd been lucky with the weather, and trestle tables and folding chairs were set up outside. A friend turned up early that morning with a large rotisserie barbeque with a suckling pig on the spit. During the vows, the savoury sweet aroma of roasting pork mixed with the scent of eucalyptus. When the ceremony was over, and two other barbeques were spitting and smoking with smaller cuts of meat, food under cling wrap in the kitchen was brought out.

Joe's best man, acting as master of ceremonies, told the guests there'd be speeches, but as soon as the meat was ready, they'd load their plates before carrying on. Only Mary's dad had spoken when the call came that grub was up.

Joe was not a big drinker, nor were his guests a heavy-drinking crowd – the single inside toilet was managing the workload, the back of the shed an occasional alternative – but he'd had a few by the time he stood under the wedding arch. He welcomed and thanked everyone for coming and gave the usual response to the

father of the bride. He looked over at Mary, sitting with her arm around one of her bridesmaids. She smiled.

'Uh, well... now that we're married, I'd like to share something with you...' He glanced at Mary again, briefly wondering where her smile had gone. 'Mary and I are having a baby.'

There was a burst of cheering, clapping, a few whistles, and someone yelled, 'You dirty bugger!' Mary's and Joe's parents turned to each other, shaking their heads – they hadn't known. Mary was quickly surrounded by her bridesmaids, and Joe's friends shook his hand or clapped him on the back.

The party continued with a few more speeches. Mary confirmed the pregnancy, saying it was a surprise, as was Joe telling everyone. A karaoke system was wheeled out and the last few hours were spent singing and dancing.

When it came time to say goodbye, Dorothy, Mary's mum, took her hands. 'Darling, I was a little surprised. But your father and I are very happy for you. You and Joe will make great parents.'

'Thanks, Mum. I'm sorry we didn't tell you sooner. We hadn't told anybody.'

'She's already talking about shopping for baby-clothes,' said Bob, her dad.

'I'll call tomorrow, Mum. We can have a good talk about it.'

'It was a lovely evening. We're so happy for you both,' Michael, Joe's Dad, said.

'I'm going to be a grandma!' Shelly said.

There was a round of hugs, and goodbyes.

Before leaving, Michael and Shelly stood with Bob and Dorothy on the street.

'A son-in-law and a grandchild on the same day – that's one for the books,' Bob said.

'Used to happen often enough in our day. Perhaps not announced at the wedding though,' Michael said.

Shelly looked at Dorothy. 'I must say, it was a shock. But now I'm excited.'

'Me too,' Dorothy said. 'Let's take Mary out for lunch, I want to hear all about it.'

'Remind her to call Father Stephen – she'll need to organise the baptism,' Bob said.

Following the wedding, Mary moved in with Joe. The pregnancy was going well – no morning sickness or undue fatigue – only an occasional craving for roast pork, easily satisfied by a visit to the Golden Wok Butchery Restaurant & Takeaway at Bonnyrigg Shopping Centre.

The dreams had stopped, but the exhortation to raise the baby as their own remained strong. Joe still wanted to find out who the father was; Mary wondered if they should even try. Their discussions followed a circular pattern. What was the right thing to do? How important was knowing one's genetic and familial heritage? What if it wasn't James or Simon? What if whoever it was claimed parental rights? And back to *what should they do?*

'How about I talk to the boys,' Mary suggested. 'Tell them I'm doing some research on male reproductive health. It would give me an excuse to ask for a semen sample. Then we'd wait until the baby's born – a snip of hair and we could see if there's a match.'

Joe, more invested in uncovering the donor, had been researching with books borrowed from the library. 'Don't need to use semen; saliva works. Like on TV, where they get them to touch a glass. I've found a place that'll test for DNA.'

Mary wanted to maintain a connection between sperm, egg, and the growing baby, like a chain of evidence. 'Let's try my way first; I can't see them being shy about giving me a specimen. They've invited us over for dinner this weekend, I'll ask them then.'

'Will they need to do it while we're there?' Joe said.

4.

James and Simon were regular ejaculators of semen, usually in each other's company, and not limited to the bedroom. Both fair, James slightly taller, Simon a little thinner, they were young and in love – enjoying summer and each other's bodies, with the joy and verve of those lucky enough to be living in a liberal democracy.

James was mostly finished cooking when Simon came home.

'What ya cooking us, hun?' Simon said, moving into the kitchen and wrapping himself around James.

'My awesome aubergine moussaka.' James pushed his butt out to dislodge him. 'Pour us a glass of vino, it's in the fridge.'

'I got the tomatoes you wanted. And some new toothbrushes.' He waved them at James. 'Green for me, purple for you. I'll pop 'em in the bathroom.'

'I want the green one,' James said.

'No probs. What time they getting here?'

'Soon, darlin', hurry up with the wine.'

After a quick catch-up – the boys drinking wine, Mary a water – James got the moussaka out of the oven and put it on a mat in the centre of the table, then went back for bread and a salad while Simon set the table.

'Wow, lovely plates,' Mary said.

'Yeah, op-shopping rocks!' Simon said.

'Are they angels?'

'I think they're cherubs,' James said, returning with the salad.

'Pity we're going to cover them up,' Simon said.

'I can leave your plate empty,' James said.

'No, pet. You go ahead and fill mine up. Smells delish.'

After dinner, they moved to matching purple sofas in the lounge, k.d. lang crooning in the background. James, after apologising for not being able to make the wedding, asked if there was going to be a baby shower. Mary, her tummy an enormous hard-boiled egg under her dress, replied, 'Soon. You'll get an invite.'

'Needs to be soon,' Simon said. 'Looks like you gonna pop. Got any names?'

'We've kind of got a girl's name in mind, but not sure if it's a he,' she said.

'What's the girl's name?' Simon asked.

'Amara's number one; Chloe number two. Joe's not sure about Chloe because it's another name for the Greek goddess of harvest and fertility; he thinks she'll be a tramp.'

'Hey, not fair, I was only kidding; I like the name,' Joe said. 'And I like Joshua if it's a boy. Help me convince Mary it's a cool name for a boy.'

'Joe and Joshua; yeah, not bad; it works. Josh, Joshy-boy, Josh-u-a; yeah, nice,' Simon said.

'Hey, guess what. I'm involved in some research on male sperm production. Why some men need help, while others produce an excess.' Mary glanced at Joe, then back at the boys. 'Man, I lived beneath you; you'd be good donors; sounds like you waste enough.'

'Were we too noisy?' James said. 'I used to ask Simon to keep it down,' and laughed at the innuendo. 'But he doesn't know how to. Anywhere, anytime is his speed. Sorry, dear.'

'It did test our patience for us to wait until we were married,' Mary said.

Simon did the maths. 'And you lost patience.' He turned to James. 'We helped make the baby!'

'Simon, you're a dick,' James said.

'Have you ever had sex on the balcony?' Joe said.

'Brother,' Simon said. 'You wave a fluorescent light anywhere in this place and you'd be blinded.' He threw a leg over James and pulled him in for a noisy kiss.

James pushed Simon away. 'Why you ask?'

Joe looked away. 'No reason. Hey, I gotta work early tomorrow; we should push off; can I use your bathroom quickly?'

'Sure, you know where it is.'

'That was a little weird,' Simon said, when Joe had left the room. 'He's okay?'

Mary smiled. 'Just stressed about becoming a dad.' Hands resting on her tummy, she decided not to ask them for a sample.

Before pulling away from the kerb, Joe said, 'Seatbelt on?'

'Yeah, babe. It can still reach across.'

'I got them.'

'Got what?'

'Got their toothbrushes.'

'What! You're kidding me?'

'Nah, I got 'em. I'll send them off to be tested, and when bub's born, we can see if there's a match.'

'Oh my god, you're crazy,' Mary said. 'You don't think they'll notice?'

'Maybe. It's done now.'

Mary looked ahead at the familiar street – as a little ruckus started in her tummy – and decided it was the least of her problems. 'Oh well, you did it; guess that's good.'

'Yeah,' Joe said, 'I did it.'

Later that night, James called to Simon from the bathroom, 'Hey, where are those new toothbrushes?'

There was no trace of DNA. The lab went so far as to say they were the cleanest toothbrushes they'd ever tested. Joe was disappointed; it'd cost him \$195 for each brush.

'I'll get some hair next time; they said it was better.'

'Babe, right now I don't care,' Mary said, lying on her side on the wooden floor in the lounge, 'but if I get pinched by these loose floorboards again, they'll need DNA to identify your body – I'll bury it so deep.'

5.

Amara was born on 1 January 2000, a home birth free of complications and reasonably quick. During the labour, Mary's mum helped with hot towels and support. When she was delivered, Amara was placed on Mary's chest, covered with a blanket, her cheek against Mary's breast. She breathed quietly, her dark eyes gazing into Mary's. After a few minutes, the midwife cut the umbilical cord.

'Let's see about the placenta.' Following some contractions, it was delivered, filling the room with the metallic smell of blood. Lifting it with both hands, the midwife placed it in a bowl. 'Keep this in the fridge. You can bring it out and show it to people who are staying too long.'

Joe looked at the afterbirth, the bluish-white umbilical cord curled on top of the shiny grey placenta, and pictured organs in a butcher shop. 'We're going to bury it in the backyard. Plant a fig tree on top.'

'That sounds nice. Keep it in the fridge until you do that,' the midwife said.

Propped up with pillows, Amara sucking on her nipple, Mary smiled, looking spent and serene at the same time.

The next day, Joe, carrying a bowl with the afterbirth, helped Mary, holding Amara wrapped in a fleecy blanket so only her eyes peeped out – to a chair in the backyard beside a young fig tree, a pile of dirt, a spade, and a hole.

'Good spot?'

'Yeah, babe, perfect.'

'I got some compost from Dad; mixed it in with the soil.'

'Nice.'

'How do you want to do this?'

'You do it, Joe.'

'Want to say anything?'

'Up to you.'

Joe put the bowl down, knelt, slipped his hands under the placenta, and lifted it into the hole.

'Ewww, that felt a bit weird.'

'That was a bit of me.'

'Yeah, babe. You're pretty clever.'

He used his hands to scoop soil into the hole, then reached for the fig tree, planted it, pushed soil around it, and stood, brushing his hands.

'Say something?'

'You can, babe.'

'Okay. Um... thank you for taking care of our baby. Now please feed this tree, and make it grow big and strong, with lots of fruit.' He looked down at Mary. 'Okay?'

'That was sweet, babe.'

The weeks following the birth were auspicious. Amara continued to breastfeed without fuss, and Mary was able to get enough rest, with the baby sleeping peacefully between feeds. Joe – amazed by Amara's first bowel movement, he likened it to old engine oil – took responsibility for nappy changes. Family and close friends dropped off reheatable dinners, only staying to see the baby and mum if they were awake. The fridge was filled with shepherd's pie and macaroni cheese.

A few days after Amara was born, three young girls knocked and left flowers, a card, and a box of dates on the stoop. By the time Joe answered the door, they had retreated down the path and closed the gate, only stopping to wave, big grins lighting up their faces. He waved back and picked up the homemade card with pictures of stars, the moon, and a comet. It said, 'Look forward to meeting the new baby. We're sure she is going to be amazing,' and was signed Ariya, Linh, and Noor.

A month later, Joe raised Amara's paternity again.

'I think we should at least see if it was James or Simon.'

'Maybe,' Mary said, nursing Amara at the kitchen table.

'And we don't need their sperm. Hair or saliva will do.'

'Yeah right. That idea was a bit silly.'

'How about having them over for dinner? We've still got lasagna in the freezer.'

'Who made it?'

'Sara, Antonio's wife. He raves about her cooking. Should be good.'

'You want me to call them?'

'Yeah, you organise the invite; I'll take care of the DNA.'

Amara, little angel that she was, slept through James and Simon's ohhing and ahhing as they hovered over her cot, and stayed asleep when they moved to the kitchen.

'I think she looks more like Mary,' Simon said at the kitchen table.

'Lucky her,' Joe said, 'who wants a drink? We've got wine or water.'

'Me, me, I'll have a glass of whatever plonk you've got,' Simon said.

'I'm good for now,' James said, 'been peeing all day; too much coffee.'

Joe said, 'I'll get you a glass anyway. Mary?'

'Just water, hun,' adding, 'the lasagna will be ready. Can you sort the broccoli? It's in the pot, just need to turn it on.'

Joe got the drinks, steamed the broccoli, and put plates and cutlery on the table, while the boys quizzed Mary on breastfeeding and the state of her vag.

During the meal, Joe watched Simon finish his wine and take James's untouched glass. 'James, do you want water instead?'

'Nah, all good. Maybe a cup of tea after dinner.'

'I'll get you one anyway,' Joe said. He put Simon's empty wine glass on a shelf by the sink, set a glass of water in front of James, then watched him lean back on the wobbly chair, and wondered if his misplaced confidence might produce a blood sample.

Dinner over, the boys declined Joe's offer of tea or coffee.

'Are you sure? It'd be no problem. James, you haven't even touched your glass.'

'No, I'm good. But I'll help you with the dishes.'

'No, stay,' Joe said, putting out his hand. 'I want to show you something.' He went to the sideboard, opened a drawer, and took out a box.

'What do you think of this?' he said, taking the lid off and brandishing a wooden-handled hairbrush. 'Boar bristle – just bought it.' Moving behind James, he placed a hand on his shoulder and pulled the brush back through his hair.

'Fuck Joe, that must've been a gnarly boar,' James said, trying to angle his head away from the brush.

'Careful, Joey, his hair ain't that secure,' Simon said, 'you're gonna scalp him.'

Joe pulled the brush through a couple more times, then released his hold on James, and checked the brush. 'It's a bit stiff, maybe needs to wear in a bit.' He put it back in the box and returned it to the drawer.

'Fuck Joe, remind me not to ask you for a head massage – ever,' James said, his hands covering his scalp until Joe sat down.

'I'm the one who likes vigorous stroking,' Simon said, 'try me next time,' and to James, 'don't be such a poof.' They stood up; there was a carousel of hugs, James tilting his head as far away from Joe as he could.

Mary had left Joe in the kitchen to tidy up and was in their bedroom getting ready for bed, when Joe came in holding up two bags with *Test Sample* written on them. She tilted her head towards Amara, sleeping in her cot.

Joe moved closer, still holding the bags up, and said quietly, 'Got it. Hair and saliva. Just need a drool sample from Amara, and we're good to go.'

'Don't think James appreciated your brushing.'

'Yeah. But it worked.'

'How long until you know?'

'About six weeks.'

Amara stirred in her sleep, making little sucking noises.

'Do you think Joe acts a bit weird sometimes?' James said on their way home.

'Sweets, he's just had a babe, and Mary's vag is still out of bounds.'

'That was brutal with the brush.'

'I'd let him manhandle me.'

Turning onto the Hume Highway, James said, 'Still think he nicked our toothbrushes.'

6.

The next six weeks passed with Amara hitting all her developmental milestones. Joe loved watching her tiny hand wrapped around his finger – Mary loved the way Amara's eyes smiled when she picked her up.

Their mums visited most days, helping with chores. If they were both there, and Amara was awake, Mary listened to them croon to the baby before going for a rest.

When Joe wasn't working or doing running repairs to the house – doors jamming an ongoing issue – he continued his research. He had a brief flurry of excitement when he came across parthenogenesis in *The Stuff of Life: A Graphic Guide to Genetics and DNA* until he learnt it was limited to insects, reptiles, fish, and some birds. Mary, meanwhile, was conflicted – pleased to see him sitting at the kitchen table reading instead of banging things with a hammer, yet worried where it would all lead.

Mary pushed her shoes off at the front door, Amara still in the papoose, as Joe came out of the lounge.

'It's not the boys,' he said. 'Got an email – no match.'

'Oh, well.' Amara snuffled in Mary's arms. 'So that's it?'

'I dunno, can we talk about it?'

'Come to the bedroom. Amara will sleep after a feed.'

Joe followed Mary and they lay down on the bed, Amara nursing between them.

'Any chance they got it wrong?'

'Nah, all three samples were good. Got a bit lucky with the hair – I didn't know the root needed to be attached.'

'I'm sorry, Joe.'

'It's okay, just need to think about what to do next.' He propped his head up. 'There's that man who lives on the top floor. He's kind of the only other possibility – no one else lives close enough.'

'Right.'

'But how to get a sample? I don't even know his name.'

'Hey, Joe.'

'Yeah.'

'Some good news.'

'What?'

'My pussy feels good.'

A smile grew and lit up Joe's face.

'We need to be quiet though,' Mary said.

'I can be quiet.'

'Let me put her in the cot.'

Later, with his arm around Mary, her head on his shoulder, he muttered,
'Wouldn't be that hard to break in. If the door's like yours, has a pretty simple lock.'

Mary eventually said, 'You mean kick the door in?'

'Or maybe climb up from James and Simon's,' Joe said.

'Babe, that all sounds a bit criminal.'

'Need to find a way, Mary.'

'Do we? I mean, it'd be good to know, but does it matter? What if it was him
and it gets messy? What if there's a custody battle?'

Joe thought a bit. 'Jizzing off a balcony wouldn't give him parental rights.' But
he wondered if it would. 'Anyway, we don't have to tell him.'

'What if it isn't him? Then what?'

'Must be. Anyway, cross that bridge when we get to it.'

'I don't know, Joe. I've been thinking. That voice we heard when it all started.
Like maybe... like maybe He's the father.'

'Babe, you're a biologist – you know how it works. Let me work out how to
get a sample without any drama.'

'I'm think we should let it go.'

'Amara should know who the biological father is – she might need it for
medical profiling.'

'What?' Mary rolled onto her back, and stared at the ceiling.

'You know, with both parents' DNA it can help with' – Joe took a moment – 'identifying any inherited diseases or genetic pre... dis... positions.'

Mary snorted. 'Wow, Joe the academic. Okay, let's think about it a bit, not do anything dramatic.'

'Sure, babe. Nothing dramatic. Shouldn't need to be. Just need to find a way.'

A few days later, Joe was eating his lunch on a park bench opposite the building site he was working on when a long-haired, weathered-looking man, wearing a poncho made from a hessian sack, dark trousers, dirty white sports shoes, and carrying a plastic shopping bag, sat next to him.

After a brief glance, Joe kept eating his sandwich.

The man belched, turned to Joe and said, 'Good sammy?'

'Yeah, not bad. Cheese and salad.'

'I haven't had breakfast yet,' the vagrant said.

'I've only got this; it's half-eaten. You want it?'

'Fuck the salad off,' he said, 'give us the cheese and bread.' A clink of glass as he put down the plastic bag.

Joe had made the sandwich and was enjoying it, but used the top piece of bread to push the salad off and handed it over.

The vagrant took a bite and with his mouth full said, 'You Joseph?'

Joe, brushing salad off his jeans, said, 'What?'

'You deaf? You Joseph?'

'Ahh, yeah. Joe usually, how'd you know?'

'Just had a baby? Don't know who the father is?'

'What? How...'

The vagrant cut him off. 'Think some other man duffed your wife?'

'What? No, I don't. Who are you?' Joe stood up.

'Or was assaulted and didn't tell you?'

'None of that, who are you?'

The vagrant finished the sandwich, unfazed by Joe standing over him, and asked, 'Thought of any other possibilities, of a more spiritual nature? Like the Boss squeezed one out and your misses wore it? Wouldn't be the first time.'

Joe unclenched his fists, thinking this guy must be a nutter. 'Brother, whoever you are, you're mental. Find someone else to mess with.'

'Okay, fair do's. My advice, even though you don't want it, and to be fair, I didn't ask to give it, is to think you got lucky. Or unlucky. Whatever. Don't care.' He stood, picked up his shopping bag, and walked off, stopping to look in a rubbish bin.

Joe regretting giving him his sandwich. And then regretted not finding out how he knew his name and about the Amara.

That night, after switching the bedside light off, Joe said, 'Do you think what happened was an assault? Like you didn't ask to be pregnant, so you've kind of been assaulted?'

'By who?'

'I dunno. But if it was some sort of supernatural thing, you didn't ask for it.'

'Oh, babe, I haven't been assaulted.'

'But you didn't ask, or give permission – did you?'

'No. But it doesn't feel like anything wrong's happened. And Amara is perfect. And I feel good.' Mary turned and cupped his face. 'You okay, Joe?'

'Yeah, I'm okay. I just wanted to say it out loud. You're right, Amara's perfect.' He pulled his head away from her. 'I still want to know who got you pregnant.'

'Nothing stupid, hun. No stealing toothbrushes or aggro hair brushing.'

'Nothing stupid.'

'I love you, Joe.'

A few days later, when he was home alone, Joe called the boys' home number from the yellow wall-mounted phone in the hallway. Simon answered.

'Hey Simon, Joe here, quick question.'

'Hey Joe, what's up?'

'You know the man who lived above yours, he still there?'

'Mystery Man? Yeah, he's still around.'

'Oh, okay. Still the same, doesn't come out much?'

'Just on full moons,' Simon said.

'Really?'

'Nah Joe, just messin'. Still gets picked up Sunday mornings. Why? What's going on?'

'Nothing, um... somebody was looking for a flat, thought if it was empty, I would tell them.'

'Nah, he's there. Hey Joe.'

'Yeah.'

'James has a phobia of hairbrushes now.'

'No way, really? Because of me?'

'Just kidding. How's Mary and the angel?'

'They're great. Hey, give my love to James, tell him I'm sorry about the hairbrush.'

'Will do. And give Amara a wee kiss from us, and a sloppy one for Mary.'

When James came home, Simon told him about Joe calling.

'What did he want?'

'Wants to come around and brush your hair.'

'Piss off. He really call?'

'Yeah, wanted to know if Mystery Man still lived here.'

'Why?'

'Said he had a friend looking for an apartment.'

'Why'd he think it was empty?'

'No idea.'

'Joe's getting weirder.'

7.

A couple of weeks later, on a Sunday morning, Joe was parked across the road from Mary's old place, and waiting. He wasn't worried about the boys seeing him – they slept late on weekends. So, when they tumbled out of a taxi, still in last night's gladrags, he had to duck. He heard Simon call out, 'Hi Mr Mystery Man,' then, 'Bye Mr Mystery Man.'

He lifted his head enough to see the man from the fourth floor, dressed in black, wearing dark glasses and a grey cap with side and back panels, standing in the doorway. A black sedan with tinted windows pulled up at the kerb. The man walked to the car, a rear door opened, and he got in; the car pulled away immediately.

After a minute, Joe, wearing blue overalls and carrying a small tool bag, entered the building. Sidling up the stairwell, he heard no noise from the first two floors, then music, laughter, and shrieking from James and Simon's place. He continued to the top floor and peeked along the verandah.

At the door, he knocked, waited a beat, then took out a cordless drill, poked the bit into the keyhole and squeezed the trigger – the screeching of metal on metal making him wince. Joe bagged the drill, jammed a screwdriver into the cylinder and turned. The lock clicked. He stepped inside, shut the door and stood listening.

To his left was a spotless, dish-free kitchen bench and empty sink. He moved into the lounge and stood for a moment. The layout was the same as Mary's – a lounge and balcony, with bedrooms and bathroom to the right. The curtains were closed, but there was enough light to see a mix of black-and-white pictures; a small brown wooden crucifix with a silver figure of the crucified Jesus; a painting of a stone chapel with a man and a donkey looking back at the viewer; and a large, gilt-framed picture of an idealised Virgin Mary, arms spread wide, gazing heavenwards at a grinning angel leaning out of a fluffy white cloud, holding a small empty bow.

Under the crucifix was a desk with a grey desktop computer, a stack of manila folders, and a beige combined phone and answering machine. There was an upright bookcase with old-world porcelain figurines on the middle shelf; a small crimson sofa and matching armchair; a round side table with a desk lamp and a Bible; and a dining

table for two. The place was tidy and not what he'd expected, especially the religious stuff.

He was still looking around when the phone rang, the sound sending a prickly rush of adrenaline through his chest. It rang until the answering machine clicked, the caller hanging up before the message played. Joe stared at the phone, took a few breaths to settle, and smiled at the crucifix above the desk.

Checking the bathroom, also spotlessly clean, he took a toothbrush from a cup on the shelf above the sink, but saw no hairbrush. He tried the bedroom next, finding a single well-made bed, a bedside table, a dresser. He checked the two drawers of the bedside table and the top drawer of the dresser. No hairbrush. After failing with the boys' toothbrushes, he wanted more.

There was a laundry hamper in a corner, and after a rummage, he pulled out a pair of y-fronts and a sock and put them in the bag. As he was leaving, he spotted a handkerchief on the ground between the armchair and coffee table and stuck it in his pocket. Passing the boys' landing, he heard music and laughing. Where Mary used to live, he peeked and caught a glimpse of someone ducking back inside.

As he crossed the road a police car drove towards him, the flashers and screeching siren switching on as he got to his car. The officer on the passenger side raised a handset to his mouth. 'Remain where you're standing and drop the bag.' Joe took his hand off the door handle.

Two uniformed police got out of the car, one big, one skinny – an impulse to run passed as he noticed the skinny one had his hand on his gun. He dropped the bag and stepped away from the car. Looking back at the apartments, he saw someone standing in the doorway outside Mary's old place, a mobile phone pressed to their ear, and James and Simon outside theirs. Joe turned to the police and forced a grin.

The big one said, 'We've had a call about a possible break-in across the road.' Pointing back to the apartments, 'Mind telling us what you're doing here?'

'My wife used to live here,' Joe said.

'So, what are you doing here now? You guys have a row?'

'No, just collecting something.'

The skinny cop pulled on latex gloves. 'Can we look in the bag?' Without waiting for an answer, he bent down, opened it, and pulled out the sock and undies. 'Collect what?' He glanced at Joe, then his partner, pushing the clothes back in and lifting the drill out with a grunt so his partner noticed, and asked again, 'Collect what?'

'It's a long story,' Joe said.

'That was you breaking into the apartment across the road?' the big one said.

Joe paused a moment, looked back at the building. 'Yeah.'

'Your place?'

'No.'

'You mind coming down to the station to tell us what's going on?' the big one said.

Joe considered for a moment. 'I guess not.'

'We need to cuff you?' skinny said.

'No, I'll come.'

By this time James and Simon were standing on the other side of the road, holding on to each other. Simon in green fluoro bike shorts, a cropped tank top with TIGHT written across the front, and rainbow platform sandals; James in a sarong, oversized sunglasses – a model of the Opera House over one lens, the Harbour Bridge the other – and strappy Roman sandals.

'Hey Joe Joe, you okay? What's happening?' Simon called out.

'Friends of yours?' the skinny one said to Joe.

'Yeah,' and called across to the boys, 'Hey, can you call Mary, tell her' – turned to the big cop – 'where will I be?'

'Maroubra Station.'

'Tell her I'll be at Maroubra Police Station.'

'You okay Joe? Want us to rescue you?' Simon said, almost pulling James over backwards.

'Nah, I'm okay,' Joe said before getting into the back of the police car. When the door closed, he noticed a footprint on the plastic barrier between the front and back seats, and the funk of previous occupants. He leaned back on the sticky vinyl seat and closed his eyes.

Simon called out, 'Police brutality,' then 'Remember Stonewall,' and was shouting 'Attica! Attica!' as they pulled away.

The boys picked themselves off the ground where they'd toppled after Simon's brief protest. 'Told you he was going weird,' James said. 'Best call Mary.'

Simon, holding on to James, started up with *Attica Attica* in time with mostly putting one foot in front of the other, and they weaved their way back inside.

Joe was placed in a holding cell, the only other occupant lying on a bench facing the wall. When the door clanged shut, the man shouted obscenities about metal doors, bright lights, and hard benches – then farted uninhibitedly. He had long, dirty dark hair and seemed to be wrapped in a brown blanket. Joe registered a stainless-steel toilet at the same time as a sour smell of recently vomited wine, and moved to a bench on the other side of the cell.

Sitting as far from the toilet as he could, elbows on knees, head in his hands, Joe took stock. What was he going to tell the cops? What was he going to tell Mary? Lately she'd been less accepting of his need to identify the father; more convinced of their dream's exhortation to raise the baby as their own. It was this shifting priority that had driven Joe to break into the apartment.

'Fuck, I get all the shit jobs.' Joe looked up to see the man who ate his sandwich, sitting now and staring at him. 'Thought I told you to let it go.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Trying to give you a message, you dumb fuck.' He got up, moved to the cell door and shouted, 'When am I getting out of this shit hole?'

An officer came down the corridor, told him to 'Shut up and sit down,' and said to Joe, 'You, come here, they want to talk to you.'

The shouty vagrant hadn't left the doorway, and as Joe moved past, said, 'Dumbass, stop your stupid quest – if I see you again, I'm going to slap you sideways.'

The officer took Joe to a windowless interview room and directed him to a single chair at a plain laminate table, with two chairs on the other side. He looked around the room, then faced the empty chairs and thought about what he was going

to say. A couple of minutes later, the door opened and the big cop from earlier entered, carrying his bag. He placed it on the table and sat across from him.

'So, Joe,' the officer began, 'what were you up to back there? You want to tell me?'

'Not really, it'd sound crazy.'

'Well, you've broken into an apartment and taken some weird shit, it'd have to be some kind of crazy.'

Joe didn't want to see the Y-fronts. 'Can I just say it's got to do with a paternity suit?'

'The underpants and toothbrush?'

'I was hoping to get a DNA sample off them.'

'From the priest?'

'Huh?'

'The man whose apartment you broke into is a priest. You didn't know that?'

'No, I didn't.'

'So why him?'

'My wife used to live beneath him.'

'So?'

'I needed to eliminate him as a possible source.'

'She was sleeping with him?'

'Um, no. Do we need to get into this?'

The cop looked at Joe, looked at the bag. 'I gotta say, I don't know what you're up to, but the priest has been contacted, told what you took, and doesn't want to press charges. Guess he's all about forgiveness.' He continued staring at Joe, who, feeling a little hopeful, kept his face neutral.

'So, can I go now?'

'Yeah, we'll hold on to this,' indicating the bag, 'and a prosecutor will decide if the State wants to press charges, but for now, yeah you can go.'

Outside, the angry man – who'd been released while Joe was being interviewed – was standing next to a rubbish bin on the pavement. When he saw Joe, he called out, 'Remember... yours is not to reason why, yours is just to... fuck, how

does it go...?' Then, louder: 'Just do what you're told, dumbass,' and walked off down the street.

Joe put a hand in his pocket and felt the handkerchief.

Sitting outside a kebab shop in their patrol car, the big copper said to his partner, 'Priests get caught up in some strange shit.'

'Want to go around and have a chat with him?'

'Who?'

'The priest.'

'Why?'

'I dunno, see why he didn't press charges?'

'Nah fuck it. I'll grab our kebabs, and we'll find somewhere to park and see the shift out.'

'Works for me.'

Mary made Joe sit at the kitchen table and sat opposite him.

Joe reached his hands across, but she kept hers in her lap.

'Before Amara wakes up, tell me what happened.'

Bringing his hands back, Joe told her about the break-in and the arrest.

Mary bent forward, her nose almost touching the table. 'What if Amara gets dragged into it?'

'I don't think there's going to be a court case, unless the Crown Prosecutor takes an interest. The priest isn't pressing charges.'

'He's a priest?' Mary sat up.

'Apparently.' Joe told her about the religious pictures in the apartment.

Mary considered this. 'Are you finished with your sleuthing, Joe? Can you let it go now? Can we focus on being Amara's mum and dad?'

'I am focused on Amara. I won't do anything dumb again, I promise.'

'You said that before, and you've just been arrested breaking into an apartment.'

'Yeah, it was stupid. There is one thing though.'

'What?'

'They kept the stuff I took from the priest's house.'

'Good.'

'But I've got something.'

'Oh my god, Joe, what?' Mary gripped the edge of the table.

'I got a handkerchief they didn't take. I can get it tested.'

'Oh, Joe.' She smacked the table.

'Then that's it, I promise. That's the end. I'll drop it. Just you, me and Amara.'

'Promise?'

'Promise promise.'

'What are we going to tell James and Simon?' Mary folded her arms. 'I mean, what are *you* going to tell James and Simon?'

'I'll think of something – they think I'm nuts anyway.'

8.

A week later, Joe got a message from the Community Justice Centre, asking him to call back. When he did, the receptionist put him through to the mediator who was handling his case.

'Hello. This is Joseph Davison?'

'Yeah, that's right.'

'Hi, I'm Martin. Look, we've got in touch because the party to a recent offence you've been accused of has asked for a meeting.'

'Okay.'

'It is voluntary, and anything discussed would be confidential. We would just act as a neutral mediator.'

'Okay.'

He continued, 'The person initiating this mediation only wants to understand why the alleged incident happened. He's not seeking any retribution.'

'Who will be there?'

'The victim, yourself and me, or another CJC mediator.'

'Whereabouts?'

'We have an office in Surry Hills; we could meet there. And just to be clear, anything said is confidential. It won't impact any future criminal proceedings.'

'Will it make them less likely?'

'I can't say for sure. But in my experience, magistrates view community mediation positively.'

'Can I talk to my wife about it first?'

'No problem.'

That night, after he had settled Amara in her cot with an animal mobile spinning slowly above her, Joe returned to the lounge where Mary was on the sofa reading. The old TV on the long, low table Joe had made from an old scaffold board was on, the volume muted. He closed the curtains over the windows facing the street, then sat in one of the faded blue armchairs – hand-me-downs from his parents when they'd upgraded to matching recliners. Mary looked up.

'I had a call from the Community Justice Centre today. The priest wants to meet.'

'Why?' She put the book down on her lap.

'He wants to know why I broke into his place.'

'Joe, this is what I was worried about.'

'He's a long shot of being the one.'

'Long shot or not, he's getting involved in our lives.'

'He only wants to know why.'

'Know why you broke into his house and stole his toothbrush and undies. What are you going to tell him?'

'Not sure. I was thinking the truth – like how we think you got pregnant. He'll think I'm nuts and want to get out of the room.'

'He's a priest. I'm glad I won't be there when you accuse him of masturbating over the balcony.'

'Priests do stuff. They don't always act so priestly.'

'Do you want me to come?'

'I'll be okay. I'll say I was under pressure because you were pregnant and I wasn't the father, and I went a bit crazy.'

'Don't make me out to be some sort of jezebel.'

'A what?'

'A loose woman, the cause of all your woes.'

'I'll just say I went a bit crazy.'

'You're going to tell him about testing his handkerchief?'

'Nah. It'll be another negative anyway.'

'Don't worry, hun, we've got each other, we've got Amara. Maybe we can try for a normal conception,' Mary closed the book.

'Now?' Joe smiled and sat forward.

'Ha, you wish. Tonight – but just practice. I don't want to be a blimp again quite so soon. You talk to James and Simon yet?'

Joe's smile faded. 'Nah, not yet.'

The next day Joe called the Community Justice Centre to agree to the mediation. He was put through to Martin, who asked if he wanted to come in prior to the mediation to discuss how it works. He said no – just let him know when and where.

9.

At the Community Justice Centre, the receptionist led Joe down a hallway. She knocked, opened the door and said, 'The other party is here,' then stepped aside.

The room was unlit, with venetian blinds angled to shut out most of the natural light. The priest dressed in black and wearing dark glasses looked European, about fifty, medium height, slim. And mostly bald, which explained why there hadn't been a hairbrush in his unit. The grey cap with side and back panels was on the table in front of him. Martin, the facilitator, wore a yellow, short-sleeved shirt.

The round table had a third empty chair positioned so they'd be sitting an equal distance apart. Other than a few chairs against the wall, the room was bare. The priest watched him enter, turning his head to follow him, his dark glasses making it hard to guess his mood. Joe sensed they'd just stopped talking.

When Martin stood up, Joe saw he was wearing shorts and sandals. 'Thanks for coming.' He motioned to the empty chair.

Joe smiled at the priest, who gave a small nod in return.

'Okay, some ground rules. During the meeting, respectful listening and taking turns. If at any time I feel the situation is getting heated, I'll call a time-out, or maybe end the session.' Martin looked at Joe, then the priest, and continued. 'At the end of the session, I will check we are in agreement about what has been covered. Are you both okay with that?'

Joe and the priest nodded.

'And I am here to facilitate discussion, not to make decisions or take sides. Okay?'

They nodded.

'Great. So, again, thank you both for coming. I hope we can achieve some healing today. Now, who wants to start?' He looked at them in turn.

Joe said, 'I will,' and turned to the priest. 'I want to say straight off, I'm sorry, and I would like to fix the damage I caused – I am a carpenter, it would be no problem.'

The priest sat looking at Joe for a moment, 'Well, as for the damage to the door, it has already been repaired, so you could pay me for that.' Then paused, 'But what I want to know is why? Why did you break in? And why did you take what you took? You don't look homeless.'

Joe took a moment, then said, 'Do you recognise me? My wife – back then we weren't married, used to live on the second floor. I was around there a fair bit.'

'I don't go outside much, or know my neighbours very well. But I do remember there was a young lady who lived on the second floor. She moved out about six months ago?'

'Yes, that's right, that's Mary.'

The priest continued, 'But what has that got to do with you breaking into my house and taking,' – he closed his eyes – 'my toothbrush and underwear?'

Joe took a breath, and stumbled out his explanation. That Mary got pregnant; that it couldn't be his; that they were getting married and he went a bit nuts. Hoping that would be enough, he stopped.

The priest said nothing.

Joe looked to the facilitator for support. He only smiled. 'I got it into my head that somebody who lived nearby got Mary pregnant.' Hoping that would do it.

The priest looked over Joe's shoulder. 'Okay. But what has that got to do with me? I still don't see the connection with breaking into my house a week ago and taking my underwear.'

Joe's shoulders dropped. 'I wanted to get a DNA sample.'

The priest picked up his hat and flicked the sides up and down. After a few moments, he said, 'You think I slept with your wife?'

'No. I don't think that.'

He put his hat down. 'So how could you think I got her pregnant?'

'I got it in my head that it must be someone in the building.' Joe saw the priest's forehead crease. 'Like I said, I went a bit nuts. I didn't know you were a priest. But I'm finished now. I am okay with not knowing.'

'And your wife doesn't know who got her pregnant?'

'Ummm, well, that gets a bit complicated. We have talked about it, and she's not sure either.'

The facilitator saw an opportunity to get involved and asked the priest what he would like from Joe.

'I have a few questions. Joe, you have a baby now?' the priest asked.

'Yes, Amara, a baby girl.'

'And you and your wife are okay?'

'Yes, we're good.'

'But you still want to know who the father is?'

'I did, but I'm over that now. I am happy to let it lie.'

The priest turned to the facilitator. 'Can I make a request?'

'You can. We can make an agreement you both agree to. It provides – you could say – moral weight, it's not legally binding.'

'Okay then. Joe, I have some experience in counselling couples who are having difficulties in their relationships. I'd like to offer this to you and Mary.'

Joe wasn't expecting this, only hoping that coming here would give him a chance to apologise for breaking in and help if it went to court. 'Um, okay, can I ask my wife first?'

'I'll give you my number,' the priest asked the mediator, 'is that okay?'

'Sure,' he said.

Joe glanced at the card the priest handed him, and put it in the breast pocket of his shirt.

'Can I quickly recap what's been discussed and what you've both agreed to?' Joe and the priest nodded.

'He offered us counselling,' Joe said, staring at the yellow hard hat on the passenger seat, phone pressed to his ear.

'What! You're kidding! What did you tell him?'

'Said I'd check with you first.'

'No way, Joe! Not interested!'

'He really is a priest.' He took the card out and read it to her.

Mary asked, 'What's the Catholic Investigatory Commission?'

'Don't know. He said to call if we want to meet him.' Joe tossed the hard hat in the back. 'Honey, I've been thinking – maybe I need some closure on not being Amara's biological father. It could be helpful.'

'Joe, this is the man I never met the whole time I lived there – who wears dark glasses at night.' She paused. 'You really think he'd be helpful to talk to?'

'I dunno. Maybe it'd help me to stop thinking about it. Maybe it'd help me move on.'

'I don't know, Joe. Let's talk about it when you get home.'

In the kitchen, a roast chicken baking in the oven, Joe and Mary sat on either side of the table, with Amara between them in a baby bouncer. Joe made the case for meeting the priest. He leaned into how it would help if the State decided to press charges.

'How do we keep Amara out of it?'

Amara eyes shifted to Mary at the sound of her name; her gurgling and punching limbs increased in tempo.

'We stick to me going crazy and ask your mum to look after her, so we don't need to take her.'

10.

They reached the fourth floor without running into the boys. Joe noticed the shiny new silver doorknob, then knocked. The Priest answered, dressed in black and wearing dark glasses. He glanced down at their sneakers, told them they could leave their shoes on, and led them into the lounge, offering them the sofa. The blinds were cracked open, letting in enough early evening light to see, but lights would soon need to be switched on. A jug of water and three glasses sat on the side table. Mary looked around; Joe tried not to.

'Thank you both for coming. It's Mary, isn't it?'

'Yes, Mary. And I'm sorry for the trouble we've caused you.'

'Oh, you knew about it? I thought it was just Joe's aberrant behaviour. But I'm jumping ahead; let's get acquainted first. A bit about me. I'm Father Paul. I am a Catholic priest, though nowadays I don't lead a congregation, but am part of the wider diocesan community. I pastor to couples and families in the community, hopefully providing guidance and support.' He said this, looking back and forth between them. 'I remember you, Mary. We never met, I don't get outside much, but it's nice to see you. And Joe. Thank you for coming.'

'Thanks, and sorry again,' Joe said. Then, 'Mary didn't know I was coming here before,' he tilted his head towards the entrance and the front door. 'She was just being polite.'

The Priest sat back. Mary stayed hunched forward, hands between her knees. There was a pause as they wondered who should speak next. The Priest invited Joe to tell him what led to the incident.

Before arriving, they discussed what to tell him. They would avoid talking about flying semen and the dreams they'd had – only that the pregnancy had been a surprise – and convince him they were happy as a couple, were enjoying being parents, and Joe wasn't completely deranged.

Joe told the abridged story: how they were engaged to be married and Mary had got pregnant. Knowing he was not the father, he described how he took it upon

himself to try to identify who was, adding to justify his actions, 'To get a profile that might be useful later for the baby's gene history.'

The Priest listened, occasionally glancing at Mary. When Joe finished, he said, 'Would it be okay to ask a few questions? They might be delicate, but perhaps useful to help you move forward as a family.'

Joe said, 'Sure,' and Mary nodded.

The room had become a bit darker, but the Priest made no move to turn on any lights.

'Mary, can I ask you a few questions first?'

'Okay.'

'Of course you can choose not to answer.'

'All right.'

'And please don't feel judged, but rather listened to.'

Mary didn't say anything, stayed sitting forward, one hand a soft fist inside the other.

'Mary, is that a fair account of what led to Joe's folly?'

'Yes, Father, it is.'

The Priest paused, then asked, 'How do *you* account for the pregnancy?'

Mary looked at Joe, then back at the Priest.

'Father, I had not been with a man before I became pregnant. I don't know how I got pregnant. I am a biology major; I know how it happens, and I cannot explain it.' Her eyes flicked to the veranda. 'There had not been a normal impregnation. Joe believes me – that I had not been with anyone else.'

No one spoke. The Priest closed his eyes, nodding almost imperceptibly, and then turned to Joe.

'And you had difficulty accepting this?'

'Well, yes. Definitely at first. But we talked it through and, yeah – Mary had never been with a man in that way. I just got obsessed trying to find out who it was.'

'I'm sorry, Joe, find out who it was? You've both said there was nobody else? I'm a bit lost here.' He noticed them glancing at each other, looking a little less

composed. 'Maybe it doesn't matter for now, though if we're looking for some sort of closure – maybe now is an opportune time to take a leap of faith,' the Priest said.

'Father, it's a little dark in here, can we turn the lights on?' Mary said.

'Oh, I'm sorry, let me. He switched the light on and adjusted the dimmer, brightening the room before softening it. 'Is that okay?'

'Thank you, Father,' Mary said. Massaging her temples, she told the Priest how she thought she became pregnant: how Joe had trouble accepting this, why he broke into his apartment, and how he also got samples from the boys living below. She finished with the statement, 'I was a virgin before I got pregnant, Father, that's a fact,' and sat back.

'Oh,' the Priest said, 'oh.' He looked up at the picture of the Virgin Mary, at the angel with an empty bow. 'Okay, I'm trying to sort this out in my head. So, you think that's how you got pregnant? Unsolicited ahh... seed, from,' he struggled to find the words, 'let's say the heavens. And Joe, you thought it more likely a terrestrial source, and thought it prudent to try to get a DNA sample, for future... reference. Okay. Okay.' He took a moment to consider the story. 'I have to say that is definitely one, no, the most, interesting account of a pregnancy I've ever heard.'

'Tell him about the dream, Mary,' Joe said, worried the Priest might think Mary was mental.

'A dream?' the Priest said.

Mary looked at Joe for a long moment, then back at the Priest. 'We both had dreams, both said the same thing. To be happy with the baby, not to worry, and that everything would be all right.'

'And mine said to be the baby's father, and to love and trust Mary,' Joe said.

'Oh, now that is interesting. And when did you have these dreams?'

Mary and Joe spent the next few minutes telling the Priest about their dreams: Joe, how it convinced him to believe Mary; Mary, how it gave her peace of mind to go ahead with the pregnancy.

The Priest listened to them patiently – asked questions about the voice, exactly what they heard, and were they still having these dreams. He even joked that they had considered him the progenitor – then looked embarrassed,

remembering how they'd imagined it happening. When Joe said he wanted to pay for the lock he damaged, the Priest waved him away distractedly.

Mary and Joe left soon after, deciding not to call in and see the boys. Back in the car they were quiet, until Mary said, 'He seemed a bit taken with our dreams.' Then, after a moment, added, 'Not sure how I feel about a return visit. I think we've done our bit for community relations. Hope it helps.'

'Probably shouldn't have given him my number,' Joe said.

11.

A month passed. The Priest phoned a few times, leaving messages for Joe. When the handkerchief results showed no match, Joe told Mary he wanted to call the Priest.

'Why?'

'He seemed to take us seriously. Like about how you got pregnant. It's kind of... his area of expertise.'

Mary rolled her eyes. 'He was nice enough. I've no bad feelings about priests.' She stopped, recalling child abuse scandals. 'Well, no bad feelings about this one.'

'Just an idea, I probably won't.'

'If you think it'll help you move on, go for it. Just don't go inviting him around for dinner.'

A couple of days later Joe phoned the Priest. 'Sorry for the delay, Father, I've been busy.'

'That's okay. I called because I would like to meet with you and Mary again.'

'Ahh... why?' Joe said.

'To see where things are at. I heard from the police that they're not going ahead with charges.'

'Cool.'

'How are things with you and Mary?'

'Everything's good... Father.' He felt awkward calling him Father. 'We're doing well.'

'Joseph, I want to talk to you about the conception. Some thoughts based on my experience of dealing with... with things that are difficult to explain. Could you and Mary come over one evening? It would be something I could add to my pastoral report. Show that I'm engaging with the community. Actually, you would be helping me.'

Joe felt he owed the Priest for not pressing charges. 'Ah, okay Father. I'll ask Mary. If she can't, is it okay if I come alone?'

'Certainly, Joseph. Have a talk with Mary, but if she can't make it, that will be fine. And thank you.'

Joe found Mary on the sofa in the lounge with Amara on a blanket, bright-coloured plastic toys scattered around her. When he walked in, she pushed herself up on her forearms, the effort forcing out small grunts. He shook a rattle in front of her face. She collapsed, and Joe rolled her onto her back, put the rattle in her hand, and played tug of war before letting it go.

'The Priest has invited us back,' Joe said.

'Told you, not interested.'

'Yeah, I already told him you were busy.'

'And you?'

'I'm thinking about it. I'd kind of like to talk with him.'

'Think you can do that without involving me and Amara?'

'Sure babe, don't worry, just a quick chat. I won't do anything stupid.'

When he arrived at the apartments, the boys were about to get in a taxi.

Simon called out, 'Hey Joe, what you doing? Everything okay?' They waited for him to cross the road.

'Hi guys, yeah, everything's good, got to make some amends with the Priest.'

'Yeah, he's a priest, we heard, go figure!' Simon grinned.

'When are you and Mary and Amara coming to visit?' James said, 'We're still waiting to hear all the details of your little home invasion.'

Joe looked embarrassed and said, 'We'll get you guys over soon.'

'Not if we get you over sooner,' Simon said, as they got in the taxi.

At the Priest's house, Joe asked about the subdued lighting and dark glasses.

'I have a combination of lupus and migraines. It makes me sensitive to light and sound. Which makes it difficult to fulfil normal pastoral duties, like celebrating Mass.'

'Oh, that explains the mysterious look. We used to wonder what your story was,' Joe said.

'Yes, a small burden for me. It makes it difficult to engage as much as I'd like – with the faithful, or with the community at large.' He looked down. 'Or even to live above exuberant neighbours.'

Joe looked down. 'Oh, the boys. Yeah, they can be loud. They're good but. I'll let them know you're not a weirdo.' He realised how that sounded. 'I mean I'll tell them about your condition.' When the Priest didn't speak, Joe said, 'So, what do you do?'

'The Archbishop of Sydney was able to create a role for me, so I could continue to be of service – as the Australian representative to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. I investigate supernatural phenomena, like Marian visitations.'

'Martians? Wow, that's cool. Been any?'

'Not Martian, Joseph. Marian, to do with people who are visited by the Blessed Virgin Mary. And yes, there have been instances of the Blessed Mary appearing. But the Church is wary of recognising them or wanting to investigate. We are a conservative organisation, Joseph; some might say too cautious.'

'Mary's cautious too, but I think we balance each other out.'

'Yes, well, being cautious, being conservative, is usually the right path, but not always. I have had my differences with the Church hierarchy. But, Joseph, can I ask you a few personal questions? They relate to why I asked you here.'

'Sure,' Joe said. He had a flash of Mary telling him to be careful.

'Do you mind if I record this?' The Priest put a small recorder on the coffee table, his finger over the on button.

'Um, I guess so. Never been interviewed before.' He folded his arms, then unfolded them, and leaned towards the recorder.

'Okay, the first question relates to Mary, and may seem intrusive or even rude, but you'll see where I'm going.' He started, 'Do you believe that Mary was a virgin before she got pregnant?'

Joe's face tightened. 'Yes. Mary has never lied to me, or anyone as far as I know – and I was her first serious boyfriend – and she offered to go to a doctor to prove it. Like, Mary is no prude, but she wanted to be married before we, you know, consummated our relationship.'

'Okay. So, you don't think there's been... anyone else?'

Joe moved his head closer to the recorder. 'Father, we told you how we think it happened. I've checked the boys – and your – you know, and there's no one else who lives close enough to...'

'Okay, Joseph,' the Priest said, saving him from continuing. And then stopped. 'What did you test of mine?'

Joe shrank back. 'Father, I took a handkerchief too. I put it in my pocket. They didn't find it. Sorry.'

'Ohh, the ripples of crime. I looked everywhere for that handkerchief. Thanks for putting that mystery to bed. But now, can you tell me about the dream you had?'

'I heard a voice. It told me to believe Mary and be the baby's father.'

'What did it sound like?'

'I guess it was male. And kind of familiar, like I knew it. And when I woke up, I didn't doubt it was real. I just wanted to see Mary.'

'Where were you in the dream?'

'I was asleep and heard the voice. Mary's was a bit different.'

'How was it different?'

'In hers she was floating in light, and in another she was on a lawn under a tree with me and Amara.'

'And the voice she heard?'

'It sounded the same as the one I heard.'

'A male voice?'

'Not so much that, just we both trusted it.'

'Amazing.' The Priest looked up at the picture of the Virgin Mary, at the angel with the empty bow, and seemed to decide something. 'I believe the Lord may have spoken to you.' He sounded less certain. 'Maybe more than just spoken to you

– but that's enough for now.' He sat up straight, hands on his knees. 'Thank you for sharing that with me, Joseph – and for being so forthcoming.'

Joe thought he'd handled things pretty well, but that it was probably best to stop talking. 'No problem, I enjoyed it.' He reached forward to shake hands – then awkwardly pulled back. 'Do you guys shake hands?'

'We do,' the Priest said. 'Before you go, do you think Mary would let me interview her?'

Joe felt a wave of panic, and wondered if he had been too forthcoming. 'Um, not sure, Father. She's quite busy now.'

'Please do that, Joseph. I'd like to ask her about the dreams. We could do it over the phone. I have to do a lot of my work like that.'

'Ahh, maybe, I'll ask.'

Joe was at the door when the Priest said, 'Oh, before you go, you said you're a carpenter?'

'That's right, Father. It's my job.' He beamed. 'I've converted an old barn into the house we live in. Amara was born there.'

'Amazing,' the Priest said.

'No way,' Mary said, when he told her the Priest would like to interview her. 'The investigation is over; peace will reign in this house from now on.'

Joe wondered if the Priest would let it go so easily. And if he could – he liked the idea of God involving himself in their lives.

12.

‘Loopy Lupus is at it again,’ Bishop Clancy said to the plump Archbishop of Sydney over elevenses in his private refectory at Cathedral House. ‘I received an email with his most bizarre revelation yet – I hesitate to say it out loud.’

‘Say it, Bishop, it may lighten my mood,’ the Archbishop said, his large buttocks, pushed together by the sides of the dining chair, allowing him to break wind with only a slight squeak.

‘He wants to investigate a *miraculous conception*. Here in Sydney.’

‘Oh,’ the Archbishop said, wondering if a salacious, clergy-led investigation could hinder his chance of being made a Cardinal. He reached for a pastry. ‘I have to ask, any substance to his request?’

‘Of course not. Someone got pregnant who claims to be a virgin, and some dreams. But get this, according to Loopy, the woman’s name is Mary, the father Joseph, *and* he’s a carpenter.’

‘That must have given him the holy horn. Well, I guess the usual, tell him to leave it alone, and forbid any use of Church resources.’

The Bishop waited for the Archbishop to notice a pastry flake sticking to his chin. Instead, he reached for another, holding it up to his mouth before asking, ‘How long until he retires?’

‘You could retire him now. He can’t perform many duties with his condition; it would look like an act of benevolence. Find him a place to ruminate in the countryside.’

The flake had fallen off and joined others on the white linen bib tucked into the Archbishop’s collar.

‘Should never have put him on that investigatory commission. How is his health anyway – declining?’

‘No, not really, seems as full of beans as ever.’

‘Hmmm.’

‘Oh yes. He also says the baby was born in a barn.’

‘Sounds made up. Trust Loopy to find it. You’re not eating, have a pastry.’

The Bishop, not wanting to appear self-righteous, managed a smile. 'I'm not hungry. Thank you.'

The Priest was used to his investigations of the supernatural being disparaged. He had been part of a major win with Our Lady of Yankalilla, where parishioners and minor clergy had made enough noise to force a diocesan blessing, after an image of the Virgin Mary appeared on a damp patch of wall behind an altar. It was an Anglican shrine now – a place of pilgrimage, Australia's very own Lourdes. The fact that it was an Anglican church wall, and that an Anglican bishop blessed it, hadn't made the Priest popular with his earthly bosses. He would love to bring to light a purely Catholic revelation.

The quarterly newsletter of the Lay Collective of Catholics, *Understanding the Supernatural and Divine*, had been ready to print for a few days – some of the contributors had already called to ask when they'd get their copy. But he wanted to add a short piece he wrote after his interview with Joe, and as the editor and printer for the newsletter, managed to squeeze it in on the last page. He wrote under the pseudonym Father Ted – a nickname jocular parishioners had given him – as he thought it gave him some cover from the constraints of officially representing the Church.

*Do we have a new messenger from God –
a baby sister of Jesus among us now?
A woman in Sydney claims a virgin conception.
She has dreams telling her it was a blessing – to rejoice in the baby.
Her fiancé has a dream telling him to believe her, to be the child's father.
Now they're married.
Her name – Mary.
His name – Joseph.
Joseph's job – a carpenter.
Where was the baby born? A barn.
Coincidence? I think not!*

That done, using stationery and stamps supplied by the parish – only feeling mildly conflicted – he readied the newsletters to take to the post office the next day.

He wasn't sure if there was much he could do. Mary didn't want to be interviewed, and the church didn't want an investigation. Whilst he was the editor of the Lay Collective's magazine, his involvement with the blessing of Our Lady of Yankalilla, being an Anglican win, had nearly imploded the group. Factions within the collective accused him of being a relativist, an indifferentist, and most hurtfully a Cafeteria Catholic and it was only their inability to agree on which one to hang him for that saved him – and that he was the only one with a printer.

13.

Peace reigned for Mary and Joe. Mary returned to university part-time, and Joe started a carpentry and odd-job business and was busy with new work or resolving issues from his previous jobs. Amara, six months old, continued to be a blessed baby, sleeping and feeding well – any room she was in seemed calmer and lighter. At two months, she had the recommended vaccines, watching the nurse administer the injection into her thigh with a preternatural calmness.

The three girls returned a few weeks after leaving the gifts and card on the doorstep. Ariya, slim and dark-skinned, and Noor, sturdier and fairer – refugee children from Sri Lanka and Iraq – had been in the same intensive English class at Fairfield Public School. Linh, slim like Ariya but not as dark, was born in western Sydney to Vietnamese refugees. Ariya and Noor's families had moved to Cecil Hills to set up small businesses; Linh's parents were already there running a market garden. Now they all went to Cecil Hills Public School.

On the concrete landing Joe had laid outside the front door – a stack of wood for a promised balustrade covered by a tarpaulin off to one side – they told Mary they all dreamt of Amara's birth on the same night, and that their dreams were the same: a bright star lit up a barn surrounded by tall trees, and a baby was born.

'And we thought of this place, because it looks like a barn, and got trees,' Ariya said.

'And one of your neighbours told us you'd just had a baby,' Linh said, 'so we went to Noor's place and made the card and got some flowers.'

'And my mum gave us a box of dates to give you,' Noor said.

'I remember. We still have the card. Do you want to come inside? Amara will be waking up soon.'

They followed Mary inside, down a short hallway, past an open door to the lounge, and stopped outside Mary and Joe's bedroom.

Mary saw Amara's eyes were open. 'Come in and say hello, she's awake.'

The girls looked down at Amara who was making little sucking sounds. When she saw them, her eyes widened and the sucking changed to a bubbling gurgle.

The three girls became willing carers for Amara, only occasionally squabbling over who was better at taking care of her, or who was her favourite. If they tried to sneak a solo visit, they usually found one or both already there. Amara, too young to notice the occasional strained truce, was equally serene with each of them.

Noor's mum and dad, Salwa and Omar, were the first of the girls' parents to check who their daughter was visiting. Mary, carrying Amara in a red cotton sling, opened the door to Salwa – a shortish woman with a round face and fair skin, long dark hair held back by a blue scarf, in a long-sleeved colourful dress and sneakers.

'Hello, I'm Salwa, Noor's mum. And this must be the Amara she is always talking about. I've come around to give you this' – she held out a box of dates stuffed with nuts – 'to thank you for looking after her, and to make sure Noor and the girls aren't being a nuisance.'

'Not at all. They're a big help, and Amara loves them.' Mary looked past Salwa to the car parked on the street.

Salwa noticed and said, 'That's Omar, my husband. He brought me – I still haven't got my licence.'

'Please, ask him to come in.'

'We don't want to trouble you.'

'Don't be silly. I could do with the company.'

Salwa waved to Omar to join them, and after a few moments, he got out. Dressed in blue jeans, a buttoned collared shirt and black slip-on shoes, with short dark hair flecked with grey and shaved except for the shadow of a moustache, he joined them. After a little awkwardness when he heard Joe wasn't home, Mary convinced him to come inside for a cup of tea, telling them not to bother taking off their shoes. They did anyway.

Sitting at the kitchen table, they told Mary they had been English teachers in Iraq but, unhappy with the political and economic conditions and worried about Noor's future, had moved to Jordan and, from there, had been accepted as refugees through Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program.

'Our teaching qualifications aren't recognised,' Salwa said.

'But we're doing okay – we've opened a small shop,' Omar said.

'What do you miss most?' Mary asked.

'The food,' they said at the same time.

'And our families,' Salwa said.

'And the markets,' Omar said.

'It's easier being a woman here,' Salwa said, 'not having to dress head to toe going out, or being stuck at home.'

Omar laughed. 'Yes, it's definitely better for wives here.'

'And daughters,' Salwa said.

Janani, Ariya's mum, came together with Phan, Linh's mum, and their daughters after school one day. Both women were small and dark – Janani in a checked saree, with gold bangles and earrings, and wearing sandals, Phan in jeans, T-shirt and trainers. A relative brought them in an old white van. The mums had met through their daughters' friendship, and knew Salwa the same way.

The little group stood on the landing after knocking on the door, the daughters in front in their navy-blue and white school uniforms, each holding a plastic shopping bag.

Joe answered the door, barefoot, in jeans and a T-shirt.

'Hi Mr Davison,' the girls said together.

'Our mums wanted to meet you,' Linh said, 'they want to give you these.'

The girls handed the plastic bags to Joe.

'Thanks,' Joe said, and to the mums, 'Hello.' He looked at Ariya and Linh, 'Are you going to come in?'

The girls turned to their mums who shook their heads, and Linh's mum pointed to the van with the waiting driver.

'Okay. Let me get Mary.' He turned and called out, 'Mary, come and meet Linh and Ariya's mums.'

Mary came to the door carrying Amara.

Janani said something in Tamil to Ariya.

'Hello Mrs Davison, this is my mum, Janani, and Linh's mum, Phan. They wanted to meet you.'

'Hello,' Mary said, smiling and jiggling Amara. 'Would you like to come inside?'

'Sorry. Not today. Go to work,' Phan said. 'Want to say hello and thank you for take care of girls. They no problem?'

'No problem, we love having them here. And Amara loves them.' Ariya took Amara from Mary, who gurgled, her wriggling limbs wrapped in a blanket. A pair of crested pigeons flew from a tree to the corner of the barn, settled, and, heads bobbing, began crooning.

'Thank you,' Janani said, grinning.

'We go now. Take the girls,' Phan said.

The girls wanted to stay. Mary said it was fine, but after a few words in Vietnamese and Tamil, Ariya handed Amara back to Mary.

'You can come tomorrow if you're allowed,' Mary said to the girls.

The little group left, the kids skipping ahead. The mums waved as they got to the van. The girls got in the back, and Phan slid the door closed behind them.

Joe looked in the bags. 'Nice.' Inside were bunches of Asian greens and golden-brown cakes.

14.

The Priest felt vexed at the lack of response to his article in the magazine. He had noticed a waning of enthusiasm within the collective lately, even allowing for age and competing agendas – the portrait of Blessed Mary MacKillop exuding oil and associated healings was running hot at the time. Only Mad Jess, as she was referred to by the other, all-male members of the collective, had been in contact. This didn't fill the Priest with joy, as her forthright approach could make it difficult to keep things under the church's radar. The fact that her usual focus was disproving claims of the supernatural, or as she put it *they're making it up until the church proves otherwise*, somewhat lessened his concern.

Mad Jess, a long-standing member of the collective, was in her forties. Medium height and slight, she didn't use makeup – *created by the devil to fuel the fires of lust* – and wore her dark hair in a tight bun. When she wasn't casting doubt on claims of revelation, looking for inconsistencies with the *one true faith* that could be the work of *the great deceiver*, she volubly picketed clinics that advocated for family planning and dealt with the consequences of couplings that hadn't been planned. This led to her being trespassed from most women's health centres in Sydney and arrested several times. Ever unrepentant, she'd say there was a war on, and she was *boots on the ground for the Lord*. To make that more literal, she wore black army surplus boots when out proselytising.

The Priest used his answering machine to screen her calls, but after her threat to just 'pop around and see if he was home', and knowing she had his address from the newsletter, he called and agreed to her coming over the following afternoon.

Now Mad Jess sat in his lounge, sharing a pot of tea, wearing a thick black winter coat she'd unbuttoned but declined to remove, and with her boots on. He hadn't had the nerve to ask her to take them off.

'I approve of your setup here Father, uncluttered with the accoutrements of false gods and with the Blessed Mary keeping an eye on you. Very proper, and very clean too.' Earlier she had run her finger along the top of a picture frame to check.

'Thank you, Jessica,' the Priest said.

'But can we turn the lights on? It's improper sitting together in this dwindling light.'

Not able to meet her direct gaze, the Priest looked down at his slippers, then her boots. 'Ah, remember Jessica, I have a condition that makes me sensitive to light. I'm sure I've mentioned it over the years?'

'Hmph. I'll just turn this on then.' She switched on the reading lamp. The Priest, sitting on the edge of the sofa – Mad Jess had taken the armchair 'to avoid any perception of impropriety' – moved back from the sudden glare of the lamp.

'Go on,' she said.

Composing himself, he gave as full account as he dared, leaving out what Mary was doing when she thought she got pregnant, Joseph's DNA investigations, and how he was briefly a suspect.

'And you believe she isn't a lying whore, covering up some shameful dalliance?'

'Ah, well, no. I believe her,' the Priest said, 'and her husband does too.' He looked past her, unable to face Mad Jess's narrowed eyes.

'Unlikely. When can I interview her?'

Just what he had feared, her bluntness. 'Well, I spoke with her, and her husband. Her husband several times, but she doesn't want to pursue it any further. She, they, just want to raise the child as their own.' He leaned further back into the sofa, hoping Mad Jess would accept that as an end to it.

'Hmph. Not really her decision, is it?'

The Priest didn't respond.

'Is it?' she repeated.

'Well, I think we have to proceed – if we want to proceed – with caution and some sensitivity.' He paused, 'But mostly with caution,' thinking he sounded like the Bishop. Reaching for the teapot, he said, 'Can I top up your tea?'

'Father, we have a duty to verify all claims of divine revelation. To guard against false witness and superstition – the tools of the Deceiver! To not examine, to ignore any, would be tantamount to a sin!'

The Priest, his hand on the teapot, said, 'Ahh which sin? Perhaps not a sin, Jessica, I think...' but she cut him off.

'The sin of negligence, Father; the sin of negligence,' she said, sitting erect and looking fierce.

'Negligence. Oh, possibly, possibly. But Jessica,' he said, letting go of the teapot, sitting back on the sofa and trying to appear equal to the conversation, 'how about you leave it with me for now, and I'll try to make contact with the couple again?'

'You do that, Father, and let me know. We may need to consider other measures. Do you know where they live?'

'No, I don't.' Thankfully not, he thought. He'd be sure to give up their address if she demanded it. The Priest spent a minute assuring Mad Jess he wouldn't rest until the 'jezebel' agreed to an interview. Eventually satisfied, she stood, thanked him for the tea, admonished him to get on with it, and took her leave. Over the next few weeks she called for updates, finishing each with a *hmph* and demanding he tried harder.

15.

Joseph mostly accepted that he wouldn't be able to identify Amara's father – that if it was a supernatural conception, it would be impossible to prove. Being a carpenter, he liked things that measured up and fitted together – even if his own efforts frequently didn't. He believed Mary, but would have liked some evidence of a supernatural progenitor, and wondered if they should be doing anything special for Amara.

So, after ignoring several messages from the Priest, he called him and said he'd like to meet.

'Joseph, that is good news. And Mary too?'

'No, just me.'

'It would be lovely if she could come too, perhaps you could try to convince her?'

'Not this time. I'll just pop in on my way home from work if that's okay?' He would tell Mary about it when he got home.

'Yes, that would be fine.' He paused. 'Is everything okay? Is the child okay?'

'Yes, everything's good. Amara's doing great, me and Mary too.'

'Good, then I'll see you when you get here.'

Later that day, Mad Jess called, as usual, not wasting time on niceties. 'It's been three weeks now. What have you got?' Before he could stop himself, he told her about Joseph visiting that evening. 'The hussy coming too?'

The Priest, feeling braver over the phone, said, 'Jessica, Mary is a lovely woman. There's no need to speak of her that way.'

'She's probably a lying. But if, mind you, *if* the Lord has visited, it would be a sin not to know.'

'Well, Jessica, Mary isn't coming. Only Joseph. And I think I should see him alone. He wants to speak to me. I should give him that opportunity.' He hesitated. 'It's my pastoral duty.'

'Hmph. What time is he coming?'

'I'm not sure exactly what time he is coming, Jessica.' He didn't know *exactly* so it wasn't a lie. 'Sometime this evening.'

'I'll be there at six, if he gets there early, don't let him leave.'

'Jessica, really, there's no...' But the line had gone dead.

When Joseph arrived at the apartments, he took the stairs quickly, hoping not to bump into the boys. The Priest opened the door glancing at his watch, and waited for Joe to take his boots off. He ushered him into the lounge room and towards a chair at the small dining table.

'Joseph, tell me, how can I help?'

'Father, I thought I'd moved on from wondering how Mary got pregnant, but there's a part of me that still wants to know if...' He looked down at his work socks. '...if Amara really could be God's child.' When the Priest didn't say anything, he continued. 'Like that would be amazing. Amara is amazing. But if it's true, maybe there's special things we should be doing?'

The Priest briefly considered this, but he wanted to get Joe out before Mad Jess arrived. 'Joseph, I'm sure you and Mary are doing everything that needs to be done.' He stopped and looked up at the Virgin Mary. 'True, Amara – or any child, for that matter – should be baptised and prepared for the sacraments.' He stopped. 'Has she been baptised?'

'Not yet. But Mary's Dad is pretty keen for it to happen.'

'Which tradition, Joseph?'

'Tradition?'

'Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian?'

'I'm not sure, Father. Does it matter?'

'Well yes, Joseph, I believe it does matter. I am a Catholic priest.' He wondered: *would Mad Jess lose interest if it was one of the others?*

'Oh, okay. I'll ask Mary. So, other than baptism, and preparing her for the sacra-thingys, anything else we should be doing?'

'Sacraments. No, Joseph, that is a good start. Look, I'm sorry, but is there anything else you wanted to talk about?' He looked at his watch.

'No, Father, that's about it.' He stopped and looked hopefully at the priest. 'I was wondering – is there any way we could find out if God, you know... like a test or something?'

The Priest looked up at the ceiling. 'Ahh, Joseph. The mystery of faith – the requirement to believe in the unknowable – so difficult in today's need for certainty.' He allowed a pregnant pause, then returned his gaze to Joe. 'I don't think it's necessary to worry about that now; let's wait for any portents that might suggest divinity.'

'Portents?'

'Miracles, divine interventions, and such like.' He stood. 'But thank you for coming Joseph, thank you for calling. And please let me know about the baptism. I could help to organise it.'

The boys were entering the building as Joe was leaving.

'Joooeey!' Simon said, 'What you doing here, you been visiting Uncle Crazy on the top floor again?'

'Hi boys, yeah, had a few things to discuss with him. He is a priest, you know.'

'Yeah Joe, we know,' James said. 'What is it? You feeling guilty about smashing into his place?'

'Hey, I didn't smash in, I...' he stopped, not sure what drilling out the door lock counted as, '... I was just asking for some advice.'

'Joey, you're already married, you got a kid, advice about what?' Simon said. Then, with hands on hips and exaggeratingly severe, 'Mary know you're here? It's usually best she knows what you're up to.'

A bus pulled up at the stop. They watched as a woman in a long, buttoned-up black coat got off, muttering something at the driver. As she drew near, Simon said, 'Nice boots, sister, them's are stomping boots!'

'Sodomites,' she said, and without slowing down, strode into the building.

'Yes, we are dear, and loving it,' Simon called to her retreating back, turned to James, 'Oh my God, haven't been called that for a while.'

'Hey boys, I've got to go. I'll talk with Mary about getting you over soon.'

'You said that last time,' Simon said.

'So did you.'

'It's a race then,' Simon said.

'Is he here?'

'Ah, hello, Jessica. No, he just left. You just missed him.' He looked past her and saw Joe crossing the road to his car. Mad Jess turned to follow his gaze.

'That's him?'

'Yes, that is Joseph.'

She whipped out a notebook and a short nub of pencil. 'What type of vehicle is that?'

'I think they call it a ute, Jessica.'

'Blast, it's too far away to read what's written on the door.' She wrote down *red ute, work vehicle, name on door*, then turned to the Priest. 'I walked past him, he was talking to two sodomites downstairs.' Noticing the Priest's discomfort, she asked, 'Why would he be talking to them, Father?'

'I'm not sure, Jessica.' Not entirely true – perhaps a sin of omission – but he felt keeping Jessica away from Joseph served the greater good. 'Do you want to come inside?' he added, hoping not.

'Hmph. I'll have a cup of tea. I've come all this way.'

Mary was in the kitchen with Amara in a baby bouncer on the table when Joe got home. Amara gurgled and cooed when she saw him, and started vigorously punching and kicking her little arms and legs. He leaned over and gave her his index fingers to wrap her hands around. She gripped them and kicked even wilder, her torso shaking side to side.

'Oh, you're a clever girl.' Then to Mary, 'I visited the Priest after work.'

She stopped cutting a carrot and faced him, still holding the knife. 'Why, Joe?'

'I was driving to work this morning, thinking about how we, you know, we kind of think of Amara as miraculous, and wondered if we should be doing anything special – like, because she's special.'

Amara stopped kicking.

'What do you mean?'

'Like, if Amara is the daughter of God – I mean if that's what we're thinking – do we have to treat her different?'

Mary briefly closed her eyes. 'And what did he say?'

'He said nah, just should baptise her and some sacra... stuff. I told him your dad was keen on baptising.'

'You'll be visiting him again?'

'Don't think so,' Joe said. 'He was different today, didn't want to talk, kinda wanted me to leave.'

'Good,' Mary said, dropping the knife to her side.

'I saw the boys when I was leaving; they want to catch up.'

'Yeah, we must. Have them over for dinner, or lunch or something.' Mary finished cutting the carrot, and started on a stick of celery.

'Maybe a chance for me to come clean about everything. They must think I'm mental, especially James.'

'Maybe.'

Amara started flailing her arms and legs again and Joe leaned down to her and said, 'Are we going to have the boys over, are we? Are we? Do you want to see Uncle James and Uncle Simon? Yeah?' The spastic tempo of her gyrating limbs increased, slobber rolled down her chin.

Then Joe stood and asked, 'Are we going to get Amara baptised?'

'Dad wants us to. Be a nice thing to do.'

'He said he could help organise it,' Joe said.

Mary put the knife down on the chopping board. 'The Priest?'

'Yeah.'

'I thought you said he wasn't so friendly?'

'He said it as I was leaving. If it was a Catholic thing, he could help.'

'You going to talk to the Priest again, Joe?'

'Probably not. But he's okay.'

Mary looked at him for a few moments, then returned to chopping the celery.

When Mary and Joseph decided on a believer's baptism – to wait until Amara was old enough to understand what it's about – Joe called the Priest to tell him.

'Hi Father. I just called to tell you we're going to hold off on the baptism for now.'

'Oh. And why is that Joseph?'

'We're going to wait until Amara's older.'

'Oh. Have you been baptised, Joseph?'

'Yeah, I think so. Like my parents aren't religious, but I asked them and they said my Nan and Pops organised one.'

'And Mary?'

'Definitely. Her folks are pretty religious. They're unhappy we're waiting.'

'Do they know how you think Mary became pregnant?'

'Are you kidding?' Joe huffed a laugh. 'That'd be a tough conversation. No, Father, it's just you, me and Mary who know.'

'Well, Joe, you keep in touch. Let me know if anything ahhh... let's say noteworthy happens with Amara.'

The Priest heard he was going to be *offered* a sabbatical in the countryside for his health and spiritual renewal – and worried he was being put out to pasture. He guessed telling Bishop Clancy about wanting to investigate a claim of a virgin conception had something to do with it. With Joe and Mary wanting to be left alone, and Mad Jess interfering, it seemed prudent to step back.

He called Mad Jess and told her that Mary was not interested in an investigation of her pregnancy and wanted to be left alone to raise the child.

'She does, does she?'

He waited for the invective.

'Well, if she's a lying trollop, and the husband a feckless cuckold, it would be a waste of our precious time anyway.'

'To the point as always, Jessica,' he said.

'Be that as it may, Father, keep an eye on them.'

'Yes, Jessica, I will. And a very good day to you.'

16.

Joe and Mary decided to share with the boys their theory of Amara's conception. They talked about it in Mary's car on the way back from shopping, Amara in a baby capsule in the back.

'Are we going to tell them everything?' Joe said.

'Might as well,' Mary said.

'Shit,' Joe said.

'Don't swear, babe.'

'Not looking forward to telling them.' He turned into their property through a gap in the fence where an old farm gate had been, and parked the car.

'I felt better after we told the Priest,' Mary said.

'That's news to me,' Joe said.

'It was saying it out loud to someone else. It made me feel less crazy.' Mary's seatbelt unclicked and whirred back with a thunk.

'I get that,' Joe said.

'It helped he didn't think we were completely bonkers.'

'For sure. Do you think they'll believe us?'

'Who knows,' Mary said, and opened her door.

They invited the boys over for lunch, and with the weather mild, decided to eat outside at the picnic table Joe had made from old railway sleepers – Joe and Mary on one side, James and Simon opposite. The table was solid and heavy, a single unit with bench seats that swayed when someone moved – though Joe assured everyone it was as safe. Mary, less certain, had forbidden Linh, Ariya, and Noor to play underneath it.

The girls were visiting, and had taken Amara inside to play with her toys. When they were out of earshot, Mary told them her story – about sunbathing on the verandah, the flying semen, her visit to the doctor, and the dreams. The boys were enthralled, only occasionally interjecting with, 'No way.'

When Mary told them they were the initial suspects for the flying semen, Simon said, 'Oh that's adorable, but,' leaning into James, 'I like him to wear it.'

After she finished, James said, 'Are you sure there was no one else?'

She shook her head. 'No one.' Then to Joe, 'You want to take over – tell them about your investigations?'

The boys leaned forward and folded their arms on the table, ready to be entertained.

'Well. Because we thought it must have been one of you, I wanted to get your DNA to check.' He described his first failed attempt.

James said, 'The toothbrushes – I knew it! They were brand new, stupid!'

'Yeah, clean as a whistle – a waste of three hundred bucks.'

Joe got to the second attempt, and the successful hair and saliva sample. James leaned over and smacked Joe on the forehead. 'My head still hurts, Joe!'

Joe continued, 'But there was no match. So, I thought it must have been the Priest – that's why I broke into his house.'

Simon said, 'You're kidding me. You thought the Priest was whacking off over the balcony?'

'I didn't know he was a priest then. Actually, I lost it a bit.'

James said, 'That's for sure. We couldn't think why you did it. We were worried about you.'

'And Mary,' Simon said.

James asked, 'What about now? Like, you've been visiting him – what's that all about?'

Joe said he found the miraculous conception difficult to accept, and he thought the Priest would be a good person to talk to about it. The boys agreed that it was difficult to believe; both turned to Mary.

Simon asked her, 'Are you sure? Absolutely ball-numbingly sure there was nobody else? Like, I've woken up once or twice a little foggy on how I got there.'

James said, 'Slut.'

She said, 'I'm sure. I know it sounds crazy – really crazy – but there's honestly been no one else.'

'You didn't leave a little gift on the toilet seat?' said Simon.

'Ha. Didn't happen,' Joe said.

'Well. She is a little angel – we best treats her like one,' Simon said, as the girls returned, Linh carrying Amara.

Later, on their way home, James said, 'Fuck, I thought Joe was mental. Now Mary too.'

Simon said, 'I don't know. I like the idea. Amara, the Christmas miracle.'

James said, 'Yeah well, poor Joe. I understand why he went crazy, must have been hard for him. Mary is a sweetie, and I want to believe her, but jeezus – that's a big one to swallow.'

'Mmmm swallow,' Simon said, then more seriously, 'but whatever, not our prob. They're cool, and Amara is adorable. I'm okay with it.'

17.

Things settled down for Joe after that. Needing to know who provided the X chromosome slipped down his priorities. His carpentry and odd-job business kept him busy, his customers tolerating the occasional remedial work.

Recently, two children had been stuck in a wooden playhouse he'd built, until a parent came home from work and heard them calling out.

'Joe, they were stuck for an hour,' the father said.

'They okay now?'

'Yeah, they're okay now. Told them you'd be over to fix it.'

'I will. I'll sort it out.'

'Joe.'

'Yes?'

'You know that sign on your ute – measure twice, cut once?'

'Yeah.'

'Change it to thrice.'

The Priest stopped challenging Mad Jess's thinking that Mary was probably covering up an illicit dalliance when she occasionally rang to check in, and he wrote no follow-up for the Lay Collective of Catholics' newsletter.

On a visit to his parish, he told the Bishop that after providing pastoral care to the couple with the unexplained pregnancy, there was no need for an investigation.

'Ah, good. And your health?' asked the Bishop.

'I'm well, thank you.'

'Keeping busy?'

'Yes. Plenty to do in the evening, counselling couples and community outreach.'

'During the day?'

'During the day, there's ministry support to get on with.'

The boys regularly visited Mary and Joe, and relished being called Uncle James and Uncle Simon. When Mary visited them, they grilled her about the conception, even getting her out on their balcony to describe how it had gone down.

'So, you were lying with your legs open, and cum rained down from the heavens,' Simon said.

'I thought it was bird poop.'

'You sure it wasn't?'

'I don't know Simon, I didn't look that hard. I just wanted to get it off.'

'That's what I'd want to do,' James said.

'Fair enough sister. You got a beautiful baby, and a hunky hubby, what's to care about?' Simon said.

Joe and Mary's parents loved being grandparents and were always available for babysitting. Mary's dad occasionally reminded her that *she* was baptised at Amara's age.

'You know, God forbid anything should happen – but it is necessary to enter heaven.'

'Oh Bob, there's plenty of time, nothing's going to happen. Stop that talk,' Dorothy said.

'I'm just saying. If you're not baptised... '

'Dad, she's going to be baptised. We just want Amara to be old enough to know why.'

'I know. But it's a risk you're taking.'

When Joe's mum and dad visited, Shelly fussed over Amara or did any housework she could find, and Michael looked around the property for things that needed fixing.

'That wood for the porch railing's been there for a while, where are you up to with fixing posts to the concrete?'

'Give us a break. It's Sunday,' Joe said.

'Perfect time. You got the anchors and brackets?'

'Ohh man. Really?'

'Imagine how happy you'll make Mary,' Michael said.

If Linh, Ariya and Noor visited while Dorothy or Shelly was there, there was a short period of awkwardness, with the girls standing in front of whichever grandmother held Amara, until one of them said, 'Would you like to have a rest?'

If that didn't result in Amara being handed over, they came up with a reason she should be. The last time, Ariya said, 'I think she wants to go outside – she looks a bit hot.'

'It's windy outside,' Dorothy said.

'Oh no, she loves it,' Noor said. 'And we'll wrap her in a blanket.'

'Our teacher told us we need to get fresh air,' Linh said.

PART TWO

2003

18.

All kids are special, but Amara was otherworldly in the serenity she radiated. This didn't mean she was without spunk; by the time she was four, she wasn't easy to dissuade if she'd set her heart on something. Dusty, a ginger tom, joined the family after Amara spotted him abandoned and sickly at the local park and insisted they bring him home. There'd been rescued lizards and spiders, and for a short time, a three-legged rat without a tail. The yard had a corner dedicated to a pet cemetery.

'Look, Mummy, I found a baby bird in the backyard,' Amara said, coming into the kitchen, holding a nestling in her cupped hands.

'Oh dear, it must have fallen out of a nest,' Mary said, thinking it was small enough to flush down the loo. 'It's too little to survive. Maybe put it back where you found it and its mummy will come back?'

'I can try to look after it,' Amara said. 'I can ask the girls. They know everything.' Moments later, the girls came through the back door.

'Hey Amara, what you got?'

Amara held up the tiny creature, which gave a few feeble chirps.

'You need to make it a home,' Ariya said.

'In a shoebox,' Noor said, 'with cotton wool. And you feed it cat food, but it needs to be soft.'

'Cats eat birds,' Ariya said.

'My brother did it,' Noor said, 'and the bird grew up and when it was strong, it flew away.'

'I think it's too small to feed, girls,' Mary said, hoping they would agree. 'And we've only got dry cat food.'

'You soak it in warm water to make it soft,' Noor said. They all looked at Mary, Amara standing with the baby bird cupped in her hands.

Mary gave up. 'Okay, you girls get the cat food from the pantry, just a little bit, and I'll look for a shoebox and a cloth.'

'Cotton wool is better, Mrs Davison,' Noor said.

'A cloth will do,' Mary said, 'and keep your noise down, Joshua's sleeping.'

Noor and Linh left Amara sitting on Ariya's lap, her cupped hands resting on the table, and got the cat food. Mary returned with a shoebox.

'It's not moving,' Ariya said.

'It looks dead,' Linh said.

'Oh honey, I think she's right. It must have been too small to survive,' Mary said.

Amara brought her cupped hands to her face and blew on them gently. The baby bird twitched, moved its head, and gave a few weak chirps. 'No, she's okay. We can feed her now. She's hungry.'

Mary looked at the small, grey-and-black chick in her daughter's cupped hand as it tried to lift its head.

The girls, used to things working out when they were with Amara, made the cat food into soft pellets.

Later that night, Joe came into the bedroom and said quietly, 'Fed the bird, it seems to be getting stronger.'

Mary rocked Joshua's crib. 'That little bird was dead this afternoon. We all thought it was dead. Then Amara blew on it and it woke up.'

'Really?' Joe said. 'Hopefully it'll still be alive in the morning.'

'Really. It wasn't moving, and she blew on it, and it woke up.'

'She's an angel, our girl,' Joe said. 'We mightn't have to bury it with the mouse she found last year.'

'That mouse was long dead. She knew that. But this bird died while she was holding it. Well, it looked like it had, until she blew on it.'

'She's special for sure.'

Mary realised Joe's mind was elsewhere. She remembered his past well-intentioned investigations and decided it was best to let it go.

A month later, Amara and the girls released the bird – now identified as a magpie and named Maggie. They placed it on the picnic table and stood back. It hopped a bit, then took off in a disjointed flight to the fig tree and perched on a branch, looking back at the group.

'Bye bye, Maggie,' Amara said. The bird hopped along the branch, made a few high-pitched squeaks then flew to a neighbouring jacaranda tree. From there it flew to a gum tree and eventually disappeared from sight.

19.

Mary finished her biology degree and teaching certification and was working at Cecil Hills High School. She had another child, a son, Joshua, whose first two years hadn't been as easy as Amara's. He'd been difficult to breastfeed, suffered more from teething, and hadn't slept as well as she had; his frequent crying fracturing the peace they were used to. None of this affected Amara, and in fact their go-to when he was troubled was to put them together; her presence calmed him. The girls were good too. Though their first loyalty was to Amara, they were helpful baby minders, and because Joshua rarely cried when he was with his sister, they included him in their little group.

Joshua was two and a half when, during a routine check-up, the doctor found an abdominal lump. He explained to Mary it could be nothing – that young children's organs are proportionally larger and sometimes stick out, or it could be as simple as constipation. A urine test would show if there was anything untoward. Mary took the children home, hoping because the lump didn't trouble him, it was nothing.

The next day, Mary was called back to the medical centre. She left Amara with her mother and drove in silence to see the doctor. In his office, he explained the lump was likely a neuroblastoma – a cancer of the nerve cells – and that they needed to do an ultrasound for further analysis.

A nurse took Mary to a small, dim, windowless room with an examination table and a large cream-coloured machine mounted on a mobile cart. A sonographer in blue scrubs sat in front of a computer; a lamp clamped to a shelf shone a circle of light on the desk. The nurse gave her Joshua's file, and told Mary she would be back to get her.

After looking through the file, the sonographer asked Mary to put Joshua on the examination table. Speaking softly, she explained what she was doing, and asked Mary to help keep Joshua still. She applied gel to Joshua's abdomen and moved the probe around, occasionally pausing to capture images. Mary smiled at

Josh or watched the grainy image on the console. The sonographer gave an occasional 'hmm'.

Later, a nurse took her back to the doctor's office.

'I'm afraid the images show there is an abnormal mass there. We'll need to get Joshua in to see a paediatric oncologist at Westmead Hospital.'

Mary looked at the doctor. 'When?'

'We'll be able to get Joshua seen in a day or two.'

'And what happens after that?'

'Well, a neuroblastoma can require chemotherapy. I know that sounds bad, but it is usually successful.'

'Chemotherapy –' Mary closed her eyes and took a deep breath, 'for how long?'

'It's too early to say, but probably a few months.'

Mary and Joe's parents came over that evening. Joe's brought pizzas, and Mary's a roast chicken. They sat quietly around the dinner table and ate the pizzas, but forgot about the roast chicken in its bag on the kitchen bench. As they left, Mary's father prayed, his hand on Mary's shoulder, Joshua cradled in her arms.

'Dear God, please have mercy on this little child. In your infinite mercy please remove the sickness from his body, and make him whole. Dear God, please grant a healing.'

Amara held Joshua's bare feet and hummed quietly. When the grandparents left, Joe put his arm around Mary and pulled Amara close. Mary cried quietly.

Amara looked up and smiled. 'Don't worry, Mummy, Joshy's going to be okay.'

'Yes, honey, he'll be okay,' Joe said, and pulled them tighter.

'Joshua is going to get better,' she said again, 'I promise.'

'Oh, sweetie, let's hope so,' Mary said.

Over the next few days, Amara stayed close to Joshua. She sang to him, and rubbed his tummy where she'd been shown the problem was.

Joshy, you'll be okay.

Mummy loves you, Daddy too.

*Don't worry about your tummy,
God will make it better,
he loves you too.*

At Westmead Hospital paediatric oncology department, Joe and Mary sat on blue vinyl chairs in the waiting area – Joshua on Mary's lap and Amara standing between Joe's legs. They joined other parents looking at a TV mounted on the wall, letting its burbling and waves of canned laughter provide a distraction. Amara had hummed and chatted on the drive over, but quietened once they got inside the hospital.

When the nurse came to get them, Joe picked up Amara, Mary carried Joshua, and they followed her down a corridor, through doors that swished close behind them, to the doctor's office.

'Come in, please, sit,' the doctor said, getting up from her desk and gesturing to chairs. 'And what's your name?'

'My name is Amara.'

'What a lovely name. I'm Doctor Dunbar. And this must be Joshua?'

'Yes,' Mary said.

She ran through why they were there, and what would happen. 'Okay. Let's have a look, shall we. Could you put him up here.'

Mary laid Joshua on the examination table, resting his head on her arm.

The doctor smiled at Joshua, lifted his jumper, and with both hands felt around his abdomen. After a few moments, she said, 'Hmm, that's odd.'

Joe picked Amara up and moved to where they could see what the doctor was doing.

'I can't feel it. Nurse, can you put the scan up.' The nurse mounted the scan on the light box. 'Okay, there it is.' She tried again, her fingers pressing around in small circles. 'No. I can't feel it. Well, that is strange.'

'But good though?' Mary said.

'It could be. We'll need to do another scan. But it's definitely smaller.'

'You couldn't feel it at all?' Mary said.

'Right. That doesn't mean it's gone, but it is a good sign.'

'Can they go away on their own?' Joe asked.

'Sometimes patients have what we call a spontaneous remission, but at Joshua's age that would usually happen over months, not a week.' She made notes, then said, 'Let me see if I can organise an ultrasound while you're here.'

The new ultrasound showed no tumour. The doctor smiled, but, wary about giving the all-clear too soon, asked the nurse to collect a urine sample and told Joe and Mary they would know the results tomorrow. She also scheduled a follow-up for two months' time.

When Joe and Mary left the oncology department, they kept their voices down and tried not to look too happy. Amara was quiet and pensive; her arm looped around Joe's neck. She looked back at the people they passed in the corridors – some wearing pyjamas, others pushed in wheelchairs, and a few who walked with a drip attached to a pole on casters.

Back at the car, Joe turned to Joshua and Amara, who sat buckled into their infant car seats. 'Pretty good, eh? All better,' his fingers patting Joshua's stomach. 'No problems in the tum-tum.' Amara stared out the window. 'What's up, honey?' Joe said, 'you don't look so happy?'

'There were a lot of sick people in the hospital, Daddy. It made me feel sad.'

'Yes, sweetie. Hospitals are where people go to get better. Let's hope they all get better like Joshua,' Joe said, and gave Amara's thigh a gentle squeeze.

'I hope so,' Amara said, 'but I don't think all of them will.' He gave her thigh another squeeze, turned, and started the car.

'We'll pray for them tonight, honey,' Mary said, 'okay?' On the way home, she wondered if Amara's ministrations to Joshua had anything to do with his spontaneous remission – but decided not to bring it up with Joe. She didn't want to set him off on a new investigation.

But Joe had been thinking about it. Only his previous paternity sleuthing, and not wanting to remind Mary of it, stopped him bringing it up. The Priest said miracles could indicate the divine, which could be evidence that God was Amara's father. He would keep an eye out for any other signs and visit a library to research miracles.

Through a friend, Joe had picked up some contract work on a building site in the inner west. When he had to wait for an engineer to inspect some structural work, he borrowed a pushbike from a workmate and rode to the Marrickville Library.

A librarian directed him to the Religion and Spirituality section. Initially, the scholarly tone of the books daunted him, but he chose four that resonated: *Miracles* by C.S. Lewis, because the author's name was familiar; *An Encyclopaedia of Miracles*, because it touted an A-Z of everything; *Miracles: A Parascientific Inquiry into Wondrous Phenomena*, because it sounded sciencey; and *The Miracle Detective*, because he liked crime novels.

Spotting a table at the end of the aisle where several people were reading, he set the books down next to a woman in a high-necked, long-sleeved maroon dress. Her dark hair was pulled into a tight bun, a black coat draped over the chair beside her, and a stack of books with a small notebook sat in front of her. She looked up with a discouraging scowl, then watched him through narrowing eyes.

Joe didn't sit down. Instead, he picked the books up one by one and read the descriptions on the back. The scowling woman squinted to read the titles as he lifted each book, and jotted things in her notebook.

She rose and followed him to the loans desk and watched from behind a shelf of children's readers as he checked out the books. Then she followed him out of the library, and watched him unlock the bike and wobble off with the books under his arm.

She returned to the library and fronted the librarian, her hands spread wide on the counter. 'That man who left, was his name Joseph?'

Like all the staff, the librarian knew Mad Jess – or The Shusher as they called her. She prepared for what was coming – rolled her chair back from the desk and slipped her shoes on.

'I'm sorry I can't tell you that.'

'Can't or won't?'

'In this case, they mean the same thing.' She worried that sounded impertinent and checked she was out of arm's reach.

'It's church business,' Mad Jess said. 'You'd accrue the blessings of the saints.'

'I'm sorry, but I can't.'

'What a pity. You've missed a chance to redeem the stains on your character. Hmph.'

The librarian watched her walk away, relieved at the brevity of the exchange, happy she could add another tale to the workplace anthology of interactions with The Shusher.

Mad Jess had a co-conspirator at the library, the Library Security Officer. Like her, he actively removed books he deemed corrupting and unchristian. His particular focus was female nudity, especially books that showed women frolicking nude in bucolic settings or engaged in lascivious activities in chintzy boudoirs.

Sometimes he discovered these books when he encountered a group of sniggering schoolkids, or a lone adolescent, furtively looking over their shoulder. He would stand next to them until they returned the book to the shelf. If he deemed a book's illustrations particularly troubling, he removed it and took it home to add to his collection. He occasionally opened one to remind himself of the transgressive power of unclothed women.

'I need your help,' Mad Jess said when she found him cruising an aisle with a clipboard and pen.

'What's up?' he asked.

'Need to identify a person of interest.'

'A doodler of... male appendages?'

'No.'

'Women's...?'

'No. For an investigation of claimed divine propagation.'

He stood back, momentarily flummoxed. 'Like a child born, without a man...'

Mad Jess shushed him. 'More likely born of salacious seed, but it needs checking.'

He leaned in. 'How can I help?'

Mad Jess passed him a piece of paper with the list of the books Joe had borrowed. 'Find out this man's full name. And address.'

The Library Security Officer folded the list, put it in his pocket, looked around, touched his index finger to the side of his nose, and headed to his office.

Later, he put a book – *Confessions from the Inquisition: Illustrated* – in front of her. 'I think you were looking for this.' Inside was a folded piece of paper with *Mary??? McIntyre, dob 25/05/1976, 24 Bangor Street, Moorebank. 2170.*

21.

Over the next few weeks Joe worked through the books. He found accounts of babies born to men or women past the usual age of fertility, but none on virgin births – other than the big one – and no miracles attributed to children. But there were lots of examples of people healed through touch or prayer, after they, or someone, asked God for help through divine intercession.

He wanted to keep his research from Mary and initially read the books out in the shed. But a couple of nights after he brought them home, before he turned off the reading lamp on his side of the bed, she asked him what he was working on *out there*.

'I'm reading about miracles,' Joe said. Mary waited for more. 'You know, like with Amara, there was the bird, and Joshua getting better so quick.'

'You remember the bird?' Mary said.

'Yeah,' Joe said.

Mary was surprised. 'You didn't seem to think much about it at the time?'

'It's Joshua, mainly. His cancer going away, and, you know, because of how we think you got pregnant. Like maybe they were miracles.'

Mary was not sure where to go with this; she had her own suspicions, but didn't want to set Joe off again. 'Please be careful, hun. We want Amara to have a normal life, don't go doing anything that attracts attention. Are you going to talk to her about any of this?'

'What do you think?' Joe said.

'No, babe, let's be her normal mum and dad,' Mary said. They lay quietly.

'You want to see the books I got from the library?' Joe said.

'Sure, bring them in,' Mary said. 'I thought you were looking at porn out there.'

Joe rolled to Mary and pulled her tight. 'You're my porn star,' he said, kissing her face until he found her lips.

Mary pulled back. 'Be careful, Joe. Don't go doing anything crazy,' Mary said.

'Just with you, babe,' he said.

The next night, in the room Amara shared with Joshua – both beds on white bases with drawers, an old wooden dresser under the window between them – Amara sat with a book open on her lap and watched Joe put toys into the box in the corner. He pushed a drawer closed under Joshua's bed, leaned and kissed his forehead.

'Night, little man,' Joe said, putting his teddy next to him, and pulling the Superman duvet under his chin.

Joshua's eyes struggled to open, then closed

Joe sat on the edge of Amara's bed. 'Finished?'

'Almost,' Amara said.

After a few moments, he said, 'Sweetie, why were you so sure Joshua would get better?'

'Because I asked my other father to make Joshy better. He told me not to worry, that Joshy would be okay,' Amara said.

'You mean God?' Joe said.

'Yes, silly,' Amara said.

'He talks to you?' Joe said.

'He talks to everybody. Do you want to talk to him now?' Amara said.

'Sure, why not,' Joe said.

Amara took Joe's hand and closed her eyes, then opened them to look at Joe. 'It better if you close your eyes,' and waited for Joe to close his. 'Our Father in heaven – that's what Grannie and Granddad say – please look after *all* my family, and Ariya, Linh and Noor, and Uncle James and Uncle Simon, and Dusty and Maggie. Thank you, love Amara.'

'Who's Maggie?' Joe said.

'Maggie the bird, silly,' Amara said.

'Oh. That was cool.' Joe closed a small gap in the curtains. 'Do you want to finish the book before I turn off the light?'

'Yes, please,' Amara said.

'Okay, I'll come back in five minutes and turn it off.'

Joe straightened her rainbow duvet with the doe-eyed unicorn, and left the room.

Mad Jess didn't believe there'd been another divine birth. She didn't put much stock in women who, when they found themselves pregnant, cried foul. She even had her suspicions about the Blessed Mary being a virgin, though had learnt to keep that to herself. But since the Priest who'd started this was an ordained minister, and she was a foot soldier for the Holy Roman Catholic Church, it fell within her purview. Her less militant sisters had encouraged her to take a break from picketing the abortion clinic in Surry Hills 'to preserve her voice,' they said. So, she had the time.

She caught a train to Liverpool and a bus to Moorebank, and walked the short distance to Bangor Street, past brick-veneer houses, tidy front lawns and carports, to number 24. Lifting the latch on a white wrought-iron gate set into a low brick wall, she walked up a concrete path to the front door. A woman about her age, a little shorter, dressed in pastel colours, with lines around her eyes from smiling rather than scowling, answered. She stood with the door open, taking a few moments to assess the woman in the black trench coat and black boots, who was eyeing her with suspicion.

Mad Jess spoke first, 'You're not Mary McIntyre. Mrs McIntyre senior?'

'Yes, that's right, can I help you with something?'

'I expect so. Church and library business.'

Inside the house, a voice called out, 'Who is it, Dorothy?'

Mad Jess continued, 'Some books were borrowed from the Marrickville Library by a man using a card belonging to a Mary McIntyre.' Dorothy waited for more, but Mad Jess stared back at her.

'Mary would be our daughter. Who used her card?'

'That's why I'm here, to identify that person – to check their bona fides.'

By this time Mr McIntyre stood behind his wife and heard the last exchange. 'Probably Joseph, her husband. What's the problem?'

'First, you are not supposed to use another person's library card, and second, the nature of the books borrowed is of interest to the church.'

'I'm sorry,' Mr McIntyre said, 'why is the church interested?'

Mad Jess hadn't thought this through and took a moment to think of an answer. 'We need to know where they live, so a priest can visit and talk with them.'

'About what?' Dorothy said.

'This sounds a little strange,' Mr McIntyre said, 'which church?'

'The Holy Roman Catholic Church.'

'The Sydney Archdiocese?'

'For now, it's local, parish level.'

'We can let Joe and Mary know,' Mr McIntyre said, 'who should they contact?'

'It would be better if you gave me their address now. That's why I'm here.'

'I don't think we can do that, can we Bob?'

Bob agreed. 'How about you give us your name and number?'

'I can give you the Priest's number.' She pulled out her notebook and wrote the Priest's name and number on it, tore the page off, and handed it to Dorothy.

'This is all very odd,' Dorothy said, 'who are you?' Bob put his arm around her.

'Call the Priest, he'll explain.' She turned and strode back the way she came.

'How odd,' Dorothy said.

'Strange lady,' Bob said.

'I had a call from Mum,' Mary said, when Joe and the kids came back from the park. 'She had had a visit from a weird lady who wanted to know about library books and where we live.'

'Huh?'

'She left a number to call a priest,' waving a piece of paper at him.

'I'm lost, hun.'

'What's the Priest's number you're such good mates with?'

Joe checked the number on his phone against the one Mary was holding in front of his face. 'Yeah, same number. But I have no idea who this lady is or why she's visiting your mum. I haven't talked to him for years. I didn't even know I still had his number – honest.'

Mary stopped waving the paper at him. 'This is what I've always worried about. Other people taking an interest in Amara.'

'Babe, we don't know what this is all about.'

'Joe. Think. What else? You get out some books on miracles, and next thing there's a lady asking where we live, and the Priest is back again.'

'No one's back, hun. We don't have to call anyone.'

'Who's the lady?'

'No idea.'

'Mum says she looked fierce.'

'Did your mum call the Priest?'

'I told her not to.'

'Do you think I should call and see what's going on?'

'I don't know. Let's think about it.'

Amara came into the kitchen, barefoot, holding a large picture book open against her chest. 'Who's the priest, Mummy?'

'Just somebody. What's that book you've got?'

'It's the one about Noah's Ark. You want to read it with me?'

'Daddy will,' Mary said.

Joe eased past Mary and picked Amara up. 'Let's read it in your room.'

They left Mary looking out at the fig tree in the backyard.

A few years previously, it had been suggested to the Priest that a break from parish responsibilities – perhaps some time in the countryside to renew and reflect – was deserved and appropriate. At the time he had seen it as an attempt to silence his unsanctioned investigations of the supernatural. Since then, the quarterly newsletter he edited, *Understanding the Supernatural and Divine*, had folded, mostly due to its contributors reuniting with their maker. The Priest's suggestion to

shift to an electronic newsletter was its death knell – the few remaining members seeing email as a sign of the end times.

The Priest had enjoyed writing for the magazine and was attempting a seminary text with the working title *The Authority of the Church in Australia, Apostolic Succession: The Sacrament of Holy Orders*. When he discussed this with the Bishop, the shift from parishioner agency to divine authority implied by the project went over well. The Bishop suggested a sabbatical to give him the time to finish it.

So, when Mad Jess called, leaving three increasingly belligerent messages, he felt a foreboding that the Bishop's recent embrace was about to be jeopardised.

He answered on the fourth call. 'Hello, Jessica, it's been a long time. I hope everything is going well for you.'

'I visited the hussy's parents today. Gave them your phone number to call.'

'I'm sorry, what? Whose parents?' Though an unwelcome wave of adrenaline suggested he knew.

'The miracle peddler. The one who claims she got pregnant by the Lord's seed.'

'Oh. And how did you come to be visiting them, Jessica?'

'I saw the husband at the Marrickville library, getting books on miracles. I was able to get the parents' address.'

'How did you know it was him?'

'I never forget a face, Father.'

'I see. And did you tell them why you were interested?'

'I said it was church and library business and gave them your number to call. Have they called?'

'No.'

'You still have the man's number?'

'I probably do; it has been a while, Jessica.'

'Call him. Find out if there's anything going on with the child.'

'I could try. Anything else, Jessica?'

'No, Father. But get on with it. In the unlikely chance there's any truth to the hussy's story, we need to be out in front, ready to stake our claim as witnesses and provide spiritual leadership.'

Joe was building a deck extension for a house in Hoxton Park when the Priest called. He didn't answer it, and the Priest didn't leave a message. When he got home from work, he told Mary.

'I don't like it, Joe. Who is this woman? Dad called again, he wants to know what's going on.'

'What did you tell him?'

'I told him you knew a priest, and you'd call and find out.'

'So, I should call?'

'I wish this wasn't happening. Let's sort dinner, put the kids to bed, and decide.'

When Joe came into the kitchen later, Mary, without looking up from wiping Joshua's high chair, said, 'Okay, call him. Find out who the woman is. Don't tell him about the bird and Joshua.'

Joe thought a moment. 'He's going to ask about the books for sure.'

'Tell him you got curious about miracles.'

'Yeah, could do. But I think he'll be suspicious, given what we've told him.'

'Just don't go on. Ask him who the lady is and why she went to Mum's. And tell him everything is normal. Keep it short.'

'I will.'

'Do it now.'

'Oh, okay.' Joe went to the wall-mounted phone in the hallway. Mary stood in the kitchen doorway watching him.

'Hello, Father Paul speaking.'

'Hi, Father, it's Joe. You called today.' Mary made cutting motions with her hand.

Joe stopped talking.

'Yes, that was me. Thank you for calling back, Joseph.' He paused a moment. 'I had a call from an acquaintance who bumped into you at Marrickville Library – she said you borrowed books about miracles. In the light of our previous conversations, we wondered if there was any particular reason?'

'Yeah, I did borrow some books. But, Father, who was the lady who went to Mary's folks' place?'

'A parishioner. She has a shared interest in supernatural events.'

'How does she know me?'

The Priest flushed. 'It was a mistake. She visited me once just after you'd left. I inadvertently told her your story and she was quite taken with it.'

Mary raised her palms in a *what's happening* gesture.

Joe replied with an *I've got this* nod. 'Father, I thought we spoke in confidence.'

'You're right. It was a wrong and I apologise. She must have recognised you from that evening. She's a, ahh, focused woman.' Wanting to move past this breach of confidentiality, the Priest continued, 'So the books? Any particular reason why you got them out?'

'No, Father, just curious. Mary's father is religious, he suggested it might be of interest. I think he's trying to convert me.'

Mary gave him a cautious thumbs up.

'Oh. Okay, I see. By the way, your child is well?'

'Yes, she's great. We have another, Joshua, just over two and a half.'

Mary started chopping the air.

'The girl, I'm sorry I forget her name, she's been baptised yet?'

'No, not yet. We're thinking when she's six. Father, is that all? I'd best be going; I need to clean up the kitchen.'

'No. That's it, Joseph. Thanks again for calling back. Oh, and remember, if you need help with the baptism, please let me know.'

Mary whispered in Joe's ear.

Joe asked, 'So, will that lady be visiting Mary's parents again?'

'No, no. That won't be happening.'

Joe put the phone back on the wall, and grinned when Mary nodded her head.

The Priest looked at the crucifix above the desk, mumbled a few words, then called Mad Jess.

'Late for a call, Father.'

'Yes, Jessica, I'm sorry, I thought you'd like to know that Joseph called me and explained about the books. He's doing a bit of research; his father-in-law is instructing him in the faith.'

'And you believe him, Father?'

'I do, Jessica. I do.' Then he added, 'And they're going to have the child baptised.'

'When? Are you involved?'

'No, I'm not. They've chosen to wait until she's old enough to know what it all means.'

'I don't like it, Father.'

'Ahh, why is that, Jessica?' Wishing he hadn't mentioned the baptism.

'First, they claim divine propagation, then refuse to have the claim examined, and now they're acquiring books on miracles, and all the while with an unbaptised child. Sounds like *the filthy one's* at play.'

'Oh. I don't think so, Jessica. I believe Joseph.'

'What about the harlot, did you speak to her?'

'No, no need. The husband has been very forthcoming. I think we should leave them be.'

'I'll pray on it, Father. I'll pray for guidance and direction. For only He knows what's best.'

Later that night the Priest added to his prayers: 'Lord... please help Jessica to be kind and trusting. Your will be done... though in this instance, I pray it's the same as mine.' He thought if her zeal was tempered with compassion, with her robust health and grey eyes, she'd be an attractive woman.

In the lounge of the small, two-storey terrace house in the inner west, where she had lived since she was born, Mad Jess returned the receiver to the phone on the polished, wooden side table next to where she was sitting in a worn, wing-backed armchair. She stared at the grey screen of the boxy TV in the corner, then at pictures of Mary and the baby Jesus, Jesus's tortured body flanked by the two thieves, before stopping on a framed photo of Pope John Paul above the mantelpiece – sitting on a golden chair, swaddled in a red robe, hands clasped together.

'What do you think, John Paul the Second, sinners or saints? What would you have me do?' After a few moments, 'Ahh, you're no help.' The mantel clock struck nine. She picked up her teacup and walked past pictures of previous popes lining the hallway – each displaying the same pomp as their successors – to the kitchen. After washing the cup and saucer and putting them on a dish rack, she went upstairs.

In bed, she picked up a novel, its cover a stick-figure drawing of a hanged man. 'Let's see how Kinsey solves this one.' An hour later, before turning off her reading light, she decided to return to stopping unborn babies being stuck in limbo.

22.

Mary hadn't wanted to bring Amara to Joshua's check-up at the hospital. She remembered how seeing the sick people had upset Amara last time, but she insisted on coming – and Mary saw from her tight face, arms held by her side, it was easier to agree.

With Joshua in his stroller and Amara walking alongside holding the handle, they made their way to the appointment with Dr Dunbar. Other than the orderlies in blue scrubs chatting or calling to colleagues – people were quiet. Amara stared at the people they passed. She pulled back on the stroller to watch a thin, hollow-cheeked man in pyjamas being helped to stand from where he'd crumpled against the wall.

'Keep walking, honey, we need to see the doctor.'

'Mummy, that man, he didn't look old, but he looked very sick.'

'Yes, honey, let's keep going.'

They checked in at oncology reception and moved to the waiting area with the blue vinyl chairs, the messy pile of glossy, well-thumbed magazines on a low table, the daytime TV still burbling in the background. Mary lifted Amara onto a chair, faced the stroller towards the TV, and sat. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath through her nose, and, letting it out slowly, opened them. Without turning her head, she looked at the people in the waiting area.

In front of them was a woman, sitting next to a thin, sallown-skinned, hairless child, hands loosely clasped in their laps. The pink dressing gown suggested a girl. Her slippers had fallen off her feet and lay on the grey carpet tiles.

Mary noticed Amara was staring at the sick child. Leaning down, she whispered, 'You okay, sweetie?'

Amara didn't answer, crossed the room, and got up on the chair next to the girl. They were probably about the same age. The child's mother looked at Amara, smiled briefly, glanced at Mary, then looked down at the floor. The girl sat back in her chair, her eyes on Amara.

'Hi, I'm Amara. What's your name?'

The girl took a few moments to answer. 'I'm Sarah.'

'Are you sick?'

'Yes.'

'Do you want to talk to my father?'

The girl looked across at Mary, who was jiggling the stroller with one hand.

'Where is he?'

'He's here,' she said, looking around the room. 'He's everywhere. He's everybody's father. You close your eyes and talk to him. Do you want to try?'

'Everyone talks to your father?'

'Lots of people do. My Grannie and Granddad do. And my mum. And at church.'

'Oh, I know. Okay.'

Amara got off her chair, stood in front of Sarah and took her hands. 'It's better if we do this. And close our eyes. Are you ready?'

The mother glanced Amara, then leaned back and closed her eyes.

'Okay.'

'I'll go first. Are you ready?'

'Yes.'

'Dear Father in heaven, I'm at the hospital with Mummy and Joshy, and I just met Sarah. She's in her pyjamas and is a little bit sick. She's really nice. Can you make her better, please? Thank you.' Amara opened her eyes. Sarah's were closed.

'Okay, now it's your turn. You can say anything. He loves you.'

Sarah, still holding Amara's hands, looked at her. 'What do I say?'

'Ask him to make you better. He made my brother better.'

Sarah looked across at Joshua, who was watching them from the stroller. 'He made your brother better?'

'Yes.'

'What do I call him?'

'I call him Father. You can call him Father or God, that's what my Granddad told me.'

Sarah closed her eyes. 'Dear Father, I want to stop feeling sick. I want to go to school. I want to play with my friends. I want Mummy to be happy.' She opened her eyes. 'Do you think he can hear me?'

'He hears everything.' Amara let go of Sarah's hands and got back on the chair next to her. The girls looked across the room at Mary and Joshua.

'That was nice,' Sarah said, turning to Amara. 'I like talking to your father.'

'He's your father too.'

'I feel a bit better.'

A nurse in blue scrubs came into the waiting area and told Mary the doctor would see her now. She held the stroller, and gently called to Amara, 'It's time to go.'

Amara stood in front of Sarah and took her hands again. 'You can talk to Him anytime. And I'll ask him if you're better when I talk to him tonight.' The mother looked at Amara, the corners of her lips lifting slightly. 'I've got to go now. It was nice to meet you.'

'It was nice to meet you too,' Sarah said, and watched Amara join Mary and Joshua, and walk to where the nurse was holding a swing door open.

Sarah looked up. 'I feel better, Mummy.'

That night, saying her prayers with Joe, Dusty coiled nose to tail at the end of the bed, Amara reminded God to help Sarah get better. She asked Joe why Sarah had to get sick.

'Not sure, honey. It's just the way the world is. Let's hope your friend gets better soon.' He gave her a kiss on the forehead, scratched Dusty's ears, said 'Night-night,' and left her room, turning off the light and pulling the door almost closed.

Later, Joe said to Mary, 'Amara told me about that little girl. What happened?'

'She met her in the waiting room. Went and sat with her and they prayed together.'

'She's really into this prayer thing,' Joe said.

'The girl was so skinny. Had no hair. You could only tell she was a girl because of her pink dressing gown. Amara told me she prayed for her to get better like Josh did. It was sweet.'

'Our little angel.'

'She's confused why there are so many sick people. I told her to ask Dad. I did when I was young and wondered the same thing,' Mary said.

'I told her that's the way life is. Don't think she thought it was a good answer.'

Alone in her room, the light from the hallway shining through the open door onto silver balloons hovering in the corner, Sarah sat up, held her hands together, and closed her eyes.

'Please God, help me be ready for school.'

Then lay back, resting her cheek on the clean towel her mother covered the pillow with every night.

Amara asked her granddad why God let children get sick.

'It's like a garden. Grannie and me do our best to look after all the flowers, and if a flower gets hurt, we feel sad, and try to help it grow back strong. But sometimes it's too tired and stops growing.' He smiled at Amara. 'But we don't stop loving it.'

'But why did Sarah have to get sick?'

'That's the girl you met at the hospital?'

'Yeah. She's sick, and she's really nice.'

'God loves everybody.' Michael stopped to think. 'But sometimes, like the flowers, a body can't get better. And it's other people who are healed, by loving and taking care of the sick people.'

'Her mother didn't look happy.'

'No, I'm sure she's not happy.'

'I prayed with Sarah at the hospital and at home. She's going to get better, but she can't go to school yet.'

'You're a good girl.'

'Granddad.'

'Yes.'

'I still don't understand.'

'Yes, it's not easy. We just have to believe he loves us all, and try to be good.'

'He told me I would understand when I am older,' Amara said.

'Who did?'

'My big father.'

23.

The girls sat in a circle, cross-legged on a blanket, having a picnic under the fig tree in the backyard. Amara pointed to a magpie watching them from the picnic table. 'Look, there's Maggie,' she said.

'And Dusty too,' Ariya said.

'How do you know it's Maggie?' Noor asked.

'It's Maggie. She always comes and says hello,' Amara said.

'Hi Maggie,' Linh and Ariya called. Ariya threw a piece of bread, which Maggie ignored. Dusty got up for a sniff but, also uninterested, moved back under the table.

'Hey, Amara, you start school this year,' Noor said.

Yes. I'm going to,' Amara said, a word at a time, 'the-Holy-Spirit-Catholic-Primary-School.'

'We'll be at your mum's school. She might be our teacher,' Noor said.

The girls all said they hoped Mary would be their teacher. They talked about uniforms, friends and enemies who would join them, about teachers they were happy they wouldn't be seeing again, and whether Luca the Italian-Australian boy would be in their class.

'I hope so, he's cool,' Linh said.

'A bit naughty sometimes,' Noor said.

'Mrs Thompson picks on him,' Linh said.

'She's mean,' Ariya said.

When they finished talking, Amara said, 'The girl I met at the hospital can't go to school yet. She's still getting better.'

'Did you see her?' Noor asked.

'No. My big father told me.' After previous confusion, they knew this wasn't Joe, but the father she prayed to. The girls, with their own family religious traditions – Noor's Muslim, Ariya's Buddhist, and Linh's a blend of worshipped spirits, deities, and ancestors – had taken to praying with Amara.

'Let's pray together now,' Noor said. The girls held hands.

'You start,' Linh said to Amara. They closed their eyes.

'Dear Father, please help Sarah get better so she can see her friends.'

'Dear Allah, please help me do good at school,' Noor said.

'Dear God, please help me not make my Mum and Dad angry,' Linh said.

'Dear God, please help everybody be happy,' Ariya said, 'and for us to have fun for the rest of the holidays.'

They went around in a circle a few more times, until Linh said, 'Please make Luca sit next to me in class,' and the older girls fell back laughing.

When Linh and Ariya visited a couple of times without Noor, Mary asked them where she was.

'We haven't seen her all week,' Ariya said.

'I called their home, but nobody answered,' Linh said. 'Sometimes she has to help her mum in the shop if it's busy.'

'I called her too,' Ariya said.

'No answer?'

'Yeah,' Ariya said, 'I left a message.'

'School starts next week, we'll see her then,' Linh said.

Amara, who had been listening, said, 'Maybe we should see if she's ok?'

'Do they still have the dry-cleaning business in Bonnyrigg?' Mary said.

'Yes. And Noor's mum does sewing too,' Linh said.

'Do you know the name?' Mary said.

'No,' Linh said.

'You girls go outside and play. I thought I saw Maggie on the picnic table before. Take her some cat food. I'll see if I can find the number for the shop.'

Mary got the Yellow Pages from under the hall chair, sat, and, muttering, 'dry-dry-dry', turned the pages. She stood, checked the number again, and dialled. There was no answer.

When Ariya and Linh saw Noor at school, she told them her dad had a stroke and couldn't speak or move his body properly. She said this between little spasms

and sharp intakes of breath. She ate lunch with the girls and stayed near them at playtime, but didn't laugh at their attempts to cheer her up. After school Ariya and Linh waited with her at the bus stop, and waved goodbye as she went to help her mum in the shop.

'I'm supposed to help in the garden today, but let's see if Mrs Davison and Amara are home,' Linh said, 'and tell them about Noor.'

'You won't get into trouble?'

'I'll go after.'

When Amara heard the news about Noor, she wanted to visit her.

'We'll go tomorrow,' Mary said. 'I'll cook something we can take.'

The shop was closed. A handwritten note on the door read: *Open tomorrow at 8am. If you need something urgently please call 98234675. To drop something off please come to 26 Bonnyrigg Avenue.* Mary drove to their house.

Noor answered the door in her school uniform.

'Hi Noor. We've come to drop some food off for your mum. Is she here?'

Noor turned and called, 'Mum, Mrs Davison is here.' Then, 'Hi, Amara, how's school?'

'It's good. I'm sorry to hear about your daddy. Linh and Ariya told me. They're sorry too.' Noor nodded.

'Hello Mary,' Salwa said, coming to the front door in a long blue tunic, its cuffs, collar, and hem trimmed in a darker blue, with a dark blue scarf loosely wrapped around her head, the ends draped over her shoulders.

'Hi Salwa, I wanted to drop this off,' Mary said, holding out a casserole dish covered with foil. 'It's not too hot.'

'Mum, can I show Amara my room?' Noor said.

'Okay, quickly. Mary, come in. I'll put this in the kitchen.'

'Are you sure? We just wanted to drop it off.'

'No, please come in. Omar is with the imam.'

They added their shoes to those in the hallway.

Noor took Amara's hand. 'Come with me.'

Mary followed Salwa towards unfamiliar smells coming from the kitchen.

After looking at Noor's treasures – two white porcelain Arabian horses, a music box with a twirling ballerina, and her favourite books picked from a tall narrow bookshelf – Amara asked, 'Can I see your daddy? We can pray and ask God to help him.'

Noor looked uncertain, then said, 'Okay. I think it will be all right.' She led Amara back along the hall, knocked, and opened the door to the lounge. Inside, a bearded man in a white robe with a round white cap – an open book resting on his lap – sat next to Omar in a boxy, blue vinyl recliner on wheels, a pillow on each shoulder to support his head and a chequered blanket pulled halfway up his chest. He'd been talking when they entered, but stopped when he saw them.

Standing at the door, still holding Amara's hand, Noor said, 'Imam Ahmad, this is a friend of mine, Amara. She wants to pray for Baba.'

The imam looked at the girls, then at Noor's dad, who could see the girls standing in the doorway. He smiled. 'Come in Noor, come in little one. Prayer is good.' He closed the book on his lap.

Leaving the door open, the girls moved to the side of the recliner, Omar's eyes following them.

'Baba, Amara wants to pray for you,' adding, 'She made a bird come back to life, and healed her brother. And maybe a girl at the hospital too.'

Omar blinked, one side of his mouth rose, and he said, 'Eh-s,'

Noor put a hand on her father's arm above where it disappeared under the blanket. Amara reached out to the imam. He smiled, but left his hand resting on the book and lifted an arm across his chest. Amara put her hand on the blanket. The girls closed their eyes.

'Dear Father, please help Noor's daddy get better. Please help him to walk... and play. And please help him to talk. And please make him better quickly. I miss Noor a lot. Thank you, Father.' Then she said to Noor, 'You can pray too.'

Noor looked at the imam who sat with his eyes closed, then to her father who looked at her with shiny eyes. 'Ya Allah, please help Baba. Make him strong again. Let him speak and move like before. Please help him.'

The room was quiet, seemed lighter. Nobody moved. The imam's deep, slow breathing was the loudest sound. Then he spoke. 'Ya Allah, please listen to these children's prayers and grant health and strength to the child's father. Ameen.'

Salwa and Mary watched Amara and Noor still holding hands, smiling at Omar, and the imam smiling at the girls.

Mary said to Amara, 'Come on, it's time to go.'

Amara said to Noor's dad, 'You'll be better soon,' and to the imam, 'Goodbye, it was nice to meet you.'

Salwa walked them to the front door to say goodbye, and Noor followed them to their car. She asked Amara if she really thought her dad would get better.

Amara said, 'I think so.'

24.

The phone rang as Mary closed the door after picking up Joshua from daycare and Amara from school.

She put Joshua down and said to Amara, 'Put your bag in the kitchen and take your lunch box out,' and then, 'Watch Josh, he's following you,' and answered the phone.

It was Salwa. 'I called to say that Omar has got much better. He's walking now. And talking.'

'Oh, that's wonderful, Salwa. That's great news.'

'He's still a little weak, but getting stronger.' She paused. 'He started getting better after you visited.'

'Wow.' Mary heard the back door open and Amara say to Josh, 'You want to play on the swing?'

'Noor thinks it's because of Amara. She told the imam too,' Salwa said.

'Really.'

'He's a good man, good with kids. He said, "Who are we to say whose prayer Allah hears?"'

'That's nice. Salwa, that's such great news. Noor must be so happy.'

'Yes, we all are. Alhamdulillah. Praise be to Allah.'

'Amara is going to be thrilled too.'

'Mary.'

'Yes?'

'Omar also thinks it was Amara's prayer that fixed him.'

'Really. Well, she is good at praying,' Mary said, pressing her forehead against the wall.

'He said he felt something. Like a warm flow, or a light, going through his body.'

Mary pushed herself upright. 'That's amazing.'

The silence stretched.

Then Salwa said, 'Please thank Amara for me. From all of us.'

'I will, Salwa. And tell Omar I'm so happy for him.'

In the Liverpool Hospital Neurology Department, a doctor compared scans on a wall-mounted lightbox. 'The original MRI showed an area of infarction, and this one confirms that some tissue remains damaged.'

He turned to Omar and Salwa. 'But what's remarkable – almost miraculous – is how quickly your brain compensated; what we call neuroplasticity. The brain can do extraordinary things, but even so, how quickly yours did surprised us.'

He looked at the scans, then back to Omar. 'I'd like to consult with some colleagues and schedule more tests – if you're comfortable with that? Maybe we can learn something.'

Omar, Salwa, and Noor visited Mary and Joe a month later. Salwa was driving, and Mary watched through the lounge window as she manoeuvred the car to the kerb. Omar got out of the car by himself, using the door and a dark-brown walking stick to stand. Noor went ahead and opened the gate, waited for Salwa and Omar to catch up, then ran ahead to the door as Mary opened it.

A magpie flew over the corner of the house, settled in a gum tree, and started cawing as Omar negotiate the step up to the porch and Joe and Amara came around the side of the house, Amara carrying a small hammer.

'Hi Amara,' Noor called.

Amara handed her hammer to Joe and climbed over the railing. Joe put it down and, swinging his legs over, joined them on the porch.

'Joe, this is Omar and Salwa, Noor's parents,' Mary said.

'Hi,' Joe said, holding out his hand to Omar.

Omar shifted the walking stick to his left hand, leaned on it and put his hand out.

'Oops, sorry about that,' Joe said.

'It's okay. Good to meet you, Joe,' Omar said.

'Come inside,' Mary said, 'have a cup of tea or coffee.'

'We can't stay,' Salwa said, 'Omar wanted to bring Amara a gift.' She took a cloth bag off her shoulder and lifted out a box. 'This is for all of you,' and handed it to Mary. 'Some baklava.' Then took out a purple gift-bag with a yellow cord handle and handed it to Omar.

Omar put a hand on the balustrade. 'Is it okay to sit on this?'

'Sure,' Joe said.

Leaning on it, he propped the walking stick against his leg and held out the gift. 'For you, Amara.'

'Can I open it?'

'Please do.'

Amara lifted a blue box out of the bag.

Mary took the bag off her. 'Careful, honey.'

Amara opened it. Inside was a gold necklace with a filigree pendant shaped like a hand.

'It's the hand of Fatima. It will protect you,' Omar said, 'and attract happiness and prosperity.'

'It's beautiful. Thank you Mr Hassan.'

'Thank *you*, Amara. You know I started getting better after you visited.'

'I knew you would,' Amara said, smiling.

Mary helped Amara fasten the chain around her neck, settled the pendant on her pink t-shirt, and turned her so Joe, Omar, and Salwa could see.

Omar looked like he wanted to say something. He looked at Salwa, at Joe and Mary, then back to Amara. The magpie cawed again. He put his right hand across his chest. 'As-salamu alaykum. Thank you, Amara. Thank you from all of us.' With a sharp breath through his nose, he turned his head away.

'Can I stay and play with Amara?' Noor said.

'We have to go, Noor. Another time.' Salwa put the carry bag back over her shoulder and moved to Omar.

'Actually, we're going out later, we could drop Noor off if you like,' Mary said.

'Are you sure?' Salwa said.

'Yeah. It'd be no problem.'

Omar turned back, his eyes bright, and smiled. 'Okay then. Be good, Noor.'

'I will.'

'I'll show you what Dad and me are building,' Amara said. The girls ran around the side of the house. The magpie flew over the roof.

Salwa took a deep breath and said to Mary, 'I love the smell of the gum trees.'

25.

Dropping Amara after church the following Sunday, Bob called to Mary from the front door.

'Hey, Dad. You want to stay for lunch?'

'No, your Mum needs to get home, she's got some friends from church coming over.' He stood looking at the porch's wooden railings.

'I'll come out and say goodbye.'

'I see Joe still hasn't painted the railings.'

'He says he likes the natural look.'

Barefoot, Mary joined Bob to walk to his car. The passenger window whirled down.

'Hi, darling.'

'Hi, Mum. Dad says you can't stay for lunch?'

'I've got friends coming over.'

'Another time,' Mary said.

'Did Dad tell you?'

'Tell me what?' Mary looked across at her father, who had opened the driver's door. He raised his eyes. She leaned down to her mum.

'What happened?'

'When we picked her up from Sunday school, she wanted us to tell the teacher about *Uncle James* and *Uncle Simon*.'

Mary straightened her arms, and looked at her dad across the roof.

'Really. Why?'

'She wanted us to tell him they were married,' Dorothy said.

'They're not married,' Mary said. 'Not yet anyway.'

'Amara said they are the way God means it.'

'What'd you do?' Mary said.

'I could see the man she was talking about; he was watching us. I waved and smiled, and told Amara we had to go.'

'She didn't make a fuss?' Mary said.

'She said he didn't understand, but they could talk about it another time,' Dorothy said.

Mary stepped back from the car. 'You know Simon and James?'

'Yes. Nice boys. But perhaps have a talk with her later,' Dorothy said.

'Sure, Mum. Thanks for taking her.'

'Oh, no problem. She's a one, that girl,' Dorothy said.

'She is,' Mary said. 'Bye, then.'

The first two terms of school established Amara as a good student with no difficulty in key academic and movement-learning areas. For the mid-year parent-teacher interview, Joe joined Mary – leaving the kids with Dorothy.

There were parents waiting outside classrooms further down the corridor, but no one outside Amara's classroom. After seeing her teacher was with someone, they looked for Amara's drawings amongst the families, flowers, and animals on display. 'Little people,' whispered Joe, standing next to a row of coat hooks running along the wall, holding his hand at hip level.

Mrs Johnson sat at her desk in the corner on the window side of the classroom, with two adult-sized chairs placed in front. She stood as they crossed between a carpeted area and the blackboard. Four groups of knee-high desks and tiny chairs filled the rest of the classroom. More student artwork covered the walls, along with numeracy and literacy charts. On a low shelf sat Easter resurrection craftwork: wooden crosses and a painted shoebox with a hole cut out – a rock set to one side next to a figurine of Jesus in a white robe. Pictures of painted eggs were on the wall above.

'Hi. it's Mary and Joe, isn't it? Please sit.' She gestured to the empty chairs.

'Hello, Mrs Johnson,' Mary said.

'I feel like a giant in here,' Joe said, looking at the desks and tiny chairs.

'I guess it's been a long day for you?' Mary said.

'Yes, a long day. But you know about them – you're teaching at Cecil Hills High School, aren't you?'

'That's right. We've got our parent-teacher interviews next week.'

'I hope they go well for you.' Mrs Johnson settled back in her chair. 'Look, we don't really need to talk about Amara's schoolwork, or her socialisation skills – or her physical development. In all those areas she is excelling.'

Joe, who had been looking out the window at the playing fields, turned back to the teacher.

'But there are a couple of things you might want to know. Nothing bad, just a little... unusual.'

Joe and Mary waited.

'Well, firstly, and this is great for me. She has a settling effect on the class, especially with children who are having difficulties. You know the ones,' looking at Mary, 'those kids who aren't getting it, become frustrated, and act out.'

'What does she do?' Mary said.

'She goes over and calms them down. Maybe shows them what to do, or just talks nicely to them. They usually settle, and she goes back to her seat.'

'Is it disruptive her moving around the classroom?' Mary asked.

'No. Not at all,' Mrs Johnson said, shaking her head. 'I just wanted to mention it. It certainly makes my job easier, and isn't interfering with her own work at all. It's extraordinary how she calms those kids.'

'She's great with Joshua too. Her younger brother,' Joe said, 'always has been.'

Mrs Johnson smiled at Joe. 'The other thing, that I guess sets her apart, is the way she talks about God. And Jesus. It's like she really believes God is her father, and that Jesus is her brother.'

Joe repressed an urge to look at Mary, and waited for the teacher to continue.

'It doesn't cause any problems. We call God our Father in class, and thinking of Jesus as a brother is in itself not wrong. It's... the sureness of her belief. It's unusual for a young child. I've certainly never experienced anything like it.'

Joe looked at Mary, then back to Mrs Johnson. 'We know. She really takes God seriously. She prays a lot.'

'Does she go to Sunday school?'

'My parents take her to St Joseph's in Moorebank. She joins the Children's Liturgy program and stays for Sunday School.'

'Well, it seems to have filled her with the spirit,' Mrs Johnson said.

'Do you want us to talk to Amara about this?' Mary asked.

'No, it's not necessary. None of these things are a problem, or a concern – quite the opposite. I just wanted to share them with you. Amara is a pleasure to teach and to have in the class.'

In Mary's red Toyota, before they fastened their seatbelts, Joe turned to Mary. 'What do you think about what she said?'

They hadn't spoken much after leaving the classroom. They'd held hands, swinging them as they walked down the corridor, then out to the carpark. Joe said he felt like a school kid again.

'About Amara being helpful in the class?' Mary said.

'Yeah. And the other stuff.'

'We know she calls God her *other* father and Jesus her brother. She said that was normal,' Mary said.

'She didn't say normal. Just that it wasn't wrong.'

'What do you think?' Mary asked, turning to Joe.

'Amara's special, Mary.'

'Everyone thinks their kids are special.'

'You know what I mean.'

Mary watched a couple in the rear-view mirror walk past to their car. Joe, palms resting on his thighs, watched a cloud of bats fly from a stand of trees, circle, and move out of sight.

'I don't know, Joe, she's doing well at school. She's got good friends. Her grandparents love her. The girls love her. The boys love her. I think we keep doing what we're doing.'

'A lot of weird stuff has happened,' Joe said.

'I know.' She waited for more, then put the key in the ignition.

'You don't think she might need some special instruction?' Joe said.

Mary watched a white car in the rear-view mirror drive past; it was the couple who walked past earlier.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, maybe not instruction. But talk to someone who knows about this stuff?'

Mary let go of the key. 'You're not thinking about calling the Priest, are you?'

'Maybe we could all meet. He could talk to Amara.'

'Don't even think about it, Joe.'

They sat in silence, watching cars on the road driving past. Mary clicked her seatbelt in.

'Can we talk about it later?' he asked.

Mary started the car, turned the lights on, and without looking or answering, drove out of the school's carpark.

After a few minutes of silence, Joe said, 'Josh's doing good too.'

'Yeah. Josh is doing good.'

'We're lucky, babe.'

Mary focused on the road.

The Priest had been given time at the Hermitage Retreat in Mittagong for spiritual reflection and to write. But instead of the scholarly exposition on apostolic he'd told the Bishop he would write, he was working on a treatise about the challenges of living the sacrament of holy orders in the modern age.

The novelty of having no parish responsibilities felt like an indulgence – sharing a bathroom with an incontinent Father Thomas the only time he needed to practise humility and service. His room was simple: a single bed, a writing desk, and a window framing a manicured lawn and a rose garden. Beyond that, a fringe of exotic trees gave way to deeper stands of native bush. His days settled into a monastic rhythm: morning prayer, breakfast, a few hours at his desk, lunch and a brief rest, more reading and writing, before a long walk around the grounds. Evenings were dinner, prayer, and perhaps some socialising in the lounge.

He met a fellow spiritual traveller, Father Duffy, whose interest in supernatural manifestations had also led to the displeasure of his earthly bosses. Once Father Duffy trusted the Priest wasn't there to test his fealty to doctrinal authority, they shared their experiences of falling out of favour during long walks through the native forests, open meadows, and gardens that made up the retreat. The Priest dressed to avoid the sun and venomous fauna – long-sleeved shirt, long pants, hat, dark glasses and walking shoes; Father Duffy in khaki shorts and shirt from an army surplus store, and against local advice, sandals.

'So, after being thought too supportive of the family with the weeping statue, what happened?' the Priest asked.

'I was sent to Our Lady of Lourdes in Western Australia, which seemed ironic given why I was sent there.'

'And how did you end up here?'

'You've heard of the Weeping Madonna of Rockingham?'

'Of course.'

'Well, after a few years of keeping my head down it looked like I was going to be bumped up from curate to priest – until that phenomenon came along.'

'The church investigated it, didn't they?'

'Yes. Found it not to be a *proven* miracle. The Archbishop acknowledged the statue's presence had positive spiritual effects – bums on pews were up while we had it – but we were told to withdraw it from public display.'

The Priest followed Father Duffy over a wooden stile built to cross a wire fence separating the eucalypt forest they'd been walking through and a paddock with large, rich-red coated cattle, moving slowly, heads down, mowing the grass.

'So, what happened?'

'In general, they thought I was too enamoured with mysticism and too supportive of parishioners – instead of following directives from the archdiocese. You heard of Father Finbarr Walsh's claim of applying tears from the statue to a dying priest who recovered almost immediately?'

'I have.'

Father Duffy stopped. When the Priest turned to face him, he said, 'Supporting him didn't help either,' and smiled.

'Oh.' A cow looked up, then went back to grazing as they continued across the paddock. 'What does the future look like?'

'After this period of reflection and contemplation, as long as I don't do anything to upset the top brass, I'm expecting another posting, God willing. And how about you? What was that you were saying about a divine conception?'

They came to another wooden stile, the Priest climbed over, turned, and said, 'Want to sit for a minute?'

'Sure.' Father Duffy sat down on the flat wooden step; the Priest did the same on his side.

Four strands of wire separated them, the top one running through white porcelain insulators attached to the wooden posts on either side of the stile, and through orange plastic insulators on the battens where the fence continued on either side.

They sat for a moment watching the cattle.

The Priest took in a deep slow breath. 'It is good to be out of the city.'

'It certainly smells better. Even the cows,' Father Duffy said, looking at a large fresh green cowpat near his sandal.

'Do you think this wire is live? I'm fighting an impulse to touch it.'

Father Duffy smiled. 'I'll witness the experiment if you do.'

'Maybe not. Impulse control is a virtue.'

'So, the virgin birth?'

'I came across it by chance, after someone broke into my apartment.' The Priest told Father Duffy how he met Joe and Mary, and their strange account of her pregnancy.

'And you thought it credible?'

'Well, I thought it *incredible*, but they seemed to believe it. And I guess I did – enough to want to investigate it anyway. I never met the child – a girl.'

'You think that's why they sent you here?'

'Not entirely. At the time I was discouraged from examining it, and there were whispers of being put out to pasture – that, and the family making it clear they didn't want anyone prying – encouraged me to let it drop. I am officially here because of health issues that make normal pastoral duties difficult, and to write a book. Though the plan's changed a bit – it's gone from a text on Church authority, to my own experience of navigating it.'

Father Duffy cocked his head. 'Can't see that winning you any brownie points.'

The Priest let out a little snort.

'You're not in contact with them anymore?'

'I spoke to the husband on the phone last year. He was researching miracles, which made me curious. But no, not since then.'

They sat quietly, breathing in the early evening air.

'Shall we head back? Dinner will be ready soon,' the Priest said.

27.

The day before Amara's sixth birthday, James and Simon dropped off a large, glossy shopping bag – its handles tied with a pink ribbon, a paper-wrapped shaft poking out the top.

'Can I open it now?' Amara said, holding the bag against her chest and trying to look inside.

'Go for it,' Simon said.

'No, you have to wait until tomorrow,' James said.

'James is mean, eh, Amara?' Simon said. 'He always makes me wait too. I get him back by waking him up really, really early.'

'Why can't you come tomorrow?' Amara said.

'We're going to be up very late tonight, and won't be in a fit state for anyone tomorrow,' Simon said, smiling at Mary.

'Why?' Amara said.

'Sweetie, we're going to be busy celebrating the New Year, and that can be tiring. We'll need time to recover,' Simon said.

'Okay. Thanks for the present.'

'You're welcome, princess,' Simon said, leaning down to give her a hug.

'Happy Birthday for tomorrow.'

James hugged her too, wishing her a happy birthday. 'Bye, girls,' he said.

'Say hello to Joe for us,' Simon said, as they walked to the gate. 'Tell him James wants a head massage.' James gave his head an air-slap.

When Amara untied the ribbon on the bag the next morning, inside she found: face paint, costume jewellery, pink one-kilogram dumbbells, red boxing gloves, a shepherd costume with a fake beard, a crook, and a black soft-toy lamb. Wrapped separately for Josh as a late Christmas present was a Barbie Fashionista Ken doll.

The family ate Amara's birthday lunch at the picnic table, under a large red umbrella. The pole went through a hole Joe had drilled in the centre of the table

into a concrete base. Mary next to Joe, Josh on his lap, with Michael on one side; Shelly, Amara, Dorothy and Bob were on the other. Dusty was under the table, curled around the pole, and the magpie watched from the fig tree. The plates in front of them were empty or had leftover slivers of ham fat, chicken leg bones the skin bunched around the knuckle, or crusts of bread. The salad bowl had squished pieces of tomato lying in a watery mess at the bottom.

'Time for the birthday cake,' Mary said.

Joshua, who had settled into Joe's chest, sat up, eyes open wide, checking the table.

Joe laughed. 'Hey, little man, Mum's going to get it.'

'Let me help,' Shelly said. Between them they stacked the plates and bowls and took everything into the kitchen. They returned a minute later with a tub of ice-cream, plates, spoons, a serrated bread knife, and the double-layer sponge cake – halved strawberries in two concentric rings set on thick cream, six pink candles in a circle in the middle. The cake was placed in front of Amara, Mary used the wand lighter from the kitchen to light the candles, and they sang her Happy Birthday.

'Remember to make a wish,' Dorothy said.

Amara leaned forward, blew them out, and closed her eyes. 'Okay, finished,' she said a moment later.

'What did you wish for?' Joe asked.

'Don't say,' Shelly and Dorothy said at the same time.

'You have to keep it a secret for it to come true,' Dorothy said.

'It's okay. It's the same as what I always pray for,' Amara said. Mary felt Dusty's tail swish over her ankle.

Then Josh yelled out, 'Cake!'

Later, after a large slice of cake and ice-cream put Josh into a sugar-induced torpor, Mary took him inside for a nap, Amara following them with the leftover ice-cream.

'Did the teacher say anything more about Amara helping kids in her end-of-year report?' Dorothy asked Joe.

'Nah, just that she was a pleasure to teach, and a good influence in the classroom.'

'Good things seem to happen when she's around,' Bob said.

'Yeah, she's a special girl,' Joe said, thinking he should keep quiet about the recent *miracle* of Omar's recovery, but giving up. 'Noor's dad thinks he recovered from a stroke because she prayed for him.'

'What?' Bob asked.

Joe told them about Omar recovering. They sat for a moment staring at the birthday cake.

Bob broke the silence. 'Did Mary tell you how she stuck up for your friends James and Simon at Sunday School?'

'Yeah,' Joe said.

'What was that?' Michael asked.

'She told the teacher their relationship was the same as a normal marriage,' Bob said.

Michael laughed. 'She is quite sure of herself.' The magpie chortled and flew away.

Joe briefly thought about sharing his *suspicions* about Amara with them, but it passed when he remembered Mary's face when the Priest got involved. He should probably check first.

Ariya, Linh, and Noor came around the side of the house, each of them carrying a gift in bright red wrapping paper, wearing almost-matching, blue cotton dresses, school sandals, their hair in two neatly braided strands. The magpie returned to a branch on the fig tree, warbling as it settled.

'Hi girls. You look all dressed up. How'd you get here?'

'Ariya's mum brought us,' Noor said.

'You all look lovely,' Shelly said.

'My mum did our hair,' Ariya said. 'Is Amara inside? We didn't knock on the front door in case Josh was asleep.'

Just then Amara came out the back door wearing her red boxing gloves.

'Hi!' she called, running to join them by the table, and stood with the gloves raised the way Joe had shown her.

'Cool boxing gloves!' Linh said.

'We've got you presents too,' Ariya said. 'Do you want to open them now?'

'Yeahhh.'

'Shall we go and sit under the fig tree?' Noor said.

'Yeah let's,' Amara said. 'Pops, can you pull these off?' Michael held them and she pulled her hands out.

'Take the cake with you,' Joe said. He handed the plate with the cake to Noor. 'Who wants to hold the knife?'

'I will,' Ariya said.

'Be careful,' Dorothy said.

The magpie hopped from branch to branch as the girls sat cross-legged in a tight circle holding their wrapped presents; Amara sat back on her heels, the cake in the middle.

'Cake or presents first?' Noor said.

'I've had my cake,' Amara said.

'You open your presents and we'll have some cake,' Noor said.

The girls passed the presents to Amara. Two were about the same size, rectangular and flat; the other a long roll. All were wrapped in the same red paper.

'We went shopping together,' Ariya said, 'and wrapped the presents at my place.'

Amara started unwrapping one, as Ariya leaned forward with the breadknife to cut the cake. Linh reached out, ready to take the first slice.

'My brother!' Amara said, holding a small, framed picture of Jesus in a white robe, his feet bare, one brown hand on his chest, the other stretched forward open-palmed.

As Ariya cut through the strawberries, Linh looked up and said, 'I picked that for you.' Then she cried out, and pulled her hand back, the top of her index finger a mess of red. The magpie shrieked and flapped its wings.

Amara dropped the picture, reached for Linh's hand, pulled the finger to her mouth, and sucked it.

'All clean,' she said.

Joe stood up and called out, 'You guys okay?'

Linh held her wrist and stared at her finger. Ariya sat back, leaving the knife in the cake.

'What happened?' Noor said.

'I thought my finger was cut,' Linh said. 'I felt something sharp.'

'I thought so too, when you yelled,' Ariya said. 'I freaked out.'

'Okay?' Joe called, then sat when he got no answer. 'Must be.'

Noor leaned forward to check the cake. 'It's got red stuff, but just strawberry I think.'

The girls looked at Amara, who smiled and picked up the picture from Ariya.

'I love it,' she said, 'thank you.'

'Did you do something, Amara?' Noor said.

'I kissed it better.' She put the picture down. 'Can I open my other presents now?'

Noor looked from Linh, examining her finger, to Ariya, who was staring at it.

'Let's pray first,' Noor said.

'Okay,' Amara said. The girls held hands. Linh looked at Amara's small hand inside hers, and gripped it tighter.

The three visitors thanked God for their friend Amara, and wished her a happy birthday and a happy new year. Amara thanked God for her friends and her family. The colour returned to Ariya's face, and Linh, after waiting for Noor to cut three slices of cake, took a piece. Amara opened her other presents – a mini-tapestry of Jesus standing in a wooden boat, speaking to fishermen pulling in a net full of silver fish, and a hardcover edition of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

'Nice to see them praying,' Bob said. They'd kept watching the girls after Linh had cried out.

'They often do when they're together. Amara's big into prayer,' Joe said.

Mary came out the back door and joined them at the table. 'What are you talking about?'

'The birthday girl,' Bob said.

Joe smiled at Mary.

'Has he been going on about how amazing she is?' Mary said, smiling back at Joe.

'He told us Noor's father thought her prayers helped him recover from his stroke,' Dorothy said. 'Do you think it's true?'

'Oh. That. I don't know,' Mary said, shrugging her shoulders, 'it never hurts to pray. Anyone want a cup of tea?'

'Joe said Omar felt something,' Dorothy said.

'He'd had a stroke, Mum, he probably felt a lot of strange things,' Mary said.

'Michael and I always thought Joshua getting better was a miracle,' Shelly said.

'What do you mean?' Mary said, and looked hard at Joe, who gave a tiny shake of his head.

'Just that it was amazing his tumour went away.'

'Yeah. It was amazing. That was a difficult couple of weeks.'

'Did Amara pray for him too?' Dorothy said.

'She's always praying,' Mary said.

'I watched her praying and rubbing his tummy,' Shelly said, and turned to Joe, 'What do you think? Amara's prayers have anything to do with Joshua and Omar getting better?'

Joe looked at Mary, and said, 'Couldn't have hurt, Mum.'

'Maybe she's got some special power,' Shelly said. 'There's the stuff in the classroom too.'

'She has an unusually strong faith in God,' Mary said, then added emphatically, 'but a normal girl.' Dorothy and Shelly looked at each other, picking up that Mary didn't want to talk about it.

After an awkward pause, Michael said, 'Six years old now. You guys have done a great job.'

After a moment, Mary smiled at him, then at Shelly, Bob, and Dorothy. 'You have helped so much, you've made it easy. You're the best grandparents. Amara loves you, Josh too. We're lucky.'

Joe relaxed his shoulders and smiled, 'Yep. We sure are lucky. Who wants a tea or coffee?'

'I've been meaning to ask, who was that crazy lady that turned up on our doorstep?' Bob said.

'She's been back?' Mary asked.

'No,' Dorothy said. 'But who was she?'

'Some nutter from Marrickville,' Joe said, and stood. 'Tea or coffee?'

'Tea please,' they all said. Joe walked over to the girls, then inside to make the tea.

'She was strange,' Dorothy said.

'I know. Joe called the Priest she left the number for; he said to leave it with him.'

'Strange lady,' Dorothy said, 'wouldn't want to meet her on a dark night.'

PART THREE

June 2010

28.

Mystery saviour

Young girl ‘banishes demon’ from knife wielding man.

Sydney – A young girl at Liverpool Station on Sunday calmly approached a man shouting wildly and brandishing a knife. Witnesses said the girl approached the man smiling and spoke to him. He dropped the weapon took her hands and sank to his knees in tears.

Several witnesses said they were amazed how composed the girl was, saying it was “as if nothing had happened”. The girl reportedly told onlookers: “He was troubled by a voice in his head; I just asked Got to make it go away.”

Three girls traveling with her told onlookers she was “always doing

amazing things” and that they were “used to it”. By the time police arrived, the girl and her three companions had boarded a train and left the station.

Inquiries at the local police station revealed the man was known to police and had been detained while the circumstances surrounding the incident were investigated.

A police spokesman commended the girl’s bravery but warned members of the public not to approach armed individuals. He said CCTV footage verified witness accounts and inquiries were under way to identify the girl.

The paper received dozens of letters in the days following the story and published them under the subject line *Angel at the Station*. Most commended the bravery of the act; a couple went further and suggested divine intervention; and a few were sceptical, pointing out the incident could have ended differently. One, from a witness to the incident, claimed the girl went to her daughter’s school and was known for being gifted.

It was late on a Friday afternoon. Florence, a general news reporter, was calculating when she could leave the office – not wanting to be the first to go – when she was told the News Editor wanted her in his office. *Fuck*, she thought, making a show of straightening some loose papers to cover the novel she'd been reading and logging off. The screen faded to the newsroom login. *Fuck*, she thought again as she pushed her chair away from her desk and stood. The colleagues in her work pod kept their heads down.

When she got to the office, the door was open. She tapped on the glass and stepped in. The editor was looking at a TV suspended from the ceiling, showing Sky News. His desk had a stack of newspapers, a higher stack of manila folders, two computer monitors, a keyboard, and a digital desk phone with a small LCD screen – an indicator light flashing red.

'You're covering the God beat while Williams is away, right?' he said.

'Yes, boss.'

The editor looked at Florence for a beat, seemed about to say something, then stopped.

'Happy camper?'

'Sure, boss.'

He gave her a long look. 'Ok, take this and follow it up. I need interviews and background by Monday.' He handed her a printout with KEYWORDS: LIVERPOOL STATION, MIRACLE, DEMON at the top, followed by the text of the story. 'There's a letter from a witness who claims to know the girl, start there. Try to up the miracle angle.'

'Williams will be back next week,' Florence said.

No response.

'I've already logged off, boss.'

He sat back with a squeak as the chair reclined. 'Your point?'

'I have plans.'

'Yeah, well, change that to *had*.' Dramatic chords blared the intro to a program change on Sky. 'Take a company car, and get on to that letter before Barmy leaves.'

Florence turned and left the office. 'Fuck,' she thought, then wondered if she had said it out loud.

Barmy, or Barney as he preferred to be called, shared a corner of the open-plan office with Williams. Unlike the modular pods of pale laminate desks, their desks were wooden

and angled so they could see anyone approaching. He wasn't happy when she braced him for a witness letter.

'I've already put everything away,' he said, lifting his chin toward the empty spike where he impaled rejected, crazy, or legally dangerous letters, then to the telephone directories stacked upright in a blue milk crate next to a neat pile of fat manila folders. He made a show of locking a silver letter opener in a drawer. 'And I have an appointment to get to.'

'Yeah, at the Strawberry Hills Hotel, and it smells like you've already started that appointment,' she said, not moving.

Outstared, he gave up and turned to his computer. 'Lucky for you I haven't logged off.' He found the letter in the system – an email – and printed it. At the top of the sheet, it showed the name, address, and phone number had been verified. Florence heard 'bitch' as she walked away.

Her workmates had left when she got back to her desk. There were two Post-it notes on her monitor – a pink one that said *Bad luck sister off to get smashed*, and a yellow one that said *Sucks to be you* with a smiley face. She cursed Williams for being sick, and the stupid kid for doing whatever stupid thing they did, and sat down, took her notepad, logged back on, and pulled the phone closer.

With the printout next to the pad, she called the number.

It rang a few times before being answered. 'Beryl speaking.'

'Hi. My name is Florence Knightley. I'm a reporter with the *Daily Telegraph*. I'm following up on a letter you sent to the Editor. Do you have a moment?'

'What is it?'

'I want to confirm that you recognised the girl who disarmed the man at the station last week?'

'That's right. She goes to my youngest daughter's school.'

'Great. Look, my editor wants to do a follow-up on the girl's bravery and asked me to get some background. I'm going to be in your area tomorrow – if you're free I could pop around for a couple of minutes?'

'That might be all right.'

'Great. What time would suit you?'

'Let me talk to my husband.'

Florence heard a clunk as the receiver was put down, a door being opened, and the sound of canned laughter. She held the receiver between her shoulder and chin, opened the *Telegraph's* website, and scrolled to the letters page. Then she heard a door closing, and a light scrape as the receiver was picked up.

'We're going out at ten tomorrow, if you can come before nine that would be all right.'

'Sure, that would be great, Beryl. Thank you. See you tomorrow. Have a nice evening.' She put the receiver down and thought – *an hour to get there, get up seven-thirty – could just pop into the Strawbs for some sympathy.*

The vibrating alarm in her jeans pocket woke Florence the next morning. 'Fuck,' she said, and sat up. 'Fuck,' tripping over her sneakers as she tried to walk pulling her jeans off. 'Fuck,' struggling out of the hoodie and stripping for the shower, 'fuck, fuck, fuck.' Then stopped, held her head in her hands, mouth open in a rictus scream, as her head reminded her of last night's *sympathy* drinks. She stumbled to her jeans, dug the phone out, turned the alarm off and sat back on the bed to piece together the night.

By the time she showered, dressed in a black pantsuit, grey button-up shirt and black court shoes – her hair still damp and tied back in a ponytail – she'd found the car keys and remembered most of the evening. Her colleagues had taken turns buying her a shot of tequila every time she said, 'I'd better get going.' The colleague who left the *bad luck sister* note on her monitor, who'd been alternating drinks with trips to the bathroom 'to freshen up', had driven her home. She'd dropped Florence and the pool car off and headed for the bright lights of Oxford Street.

The white Ford Falcon was parked on the other side of the road outside her terrace house, and after checking the brown leather tote bag in the back seat had her Press ID, recorder, notepad and pen, mints, and paracetamol – she silently thanked God no one stole it – headed to Carnes Hill. About halfway there, tired of the dull feeling in her head, she pushed a CD that stuck out of the player, and sacred choral music started playing quietly. By the time she arrived at the address, she felt less sketchy, and a park right outside the two-

storey sandy-yellow brick home – with its double garage and small lawned yard – felt like a small win.

A thickset man, round-faced and unshaven, dark hair flecked with grey, wearing a flannel shirt, track pants, and thick socks, answered the door and looked uncharitably at Florence.

'Good morning. I'm Florence Knightley, the reporter from the *Daily Telegraph*. I spoke to your wife yesterday. Is she here?' She showed him her Press ID.

'Christ, a lady leading the Labor Party, and a lady journalist knocking on my door. You'll be after my job next.' He looked behind Florence, screwed his face up, and shook his head.

'It's a new world, Mr Smith,' Florence said, holding a smile and eye contact as a woman and a young child, both wearing dresses, cardigans and slippers, came along the hall and crowded either side of him.

The woman said, 'You must be the reporter.'

Florence introduced herself again and showed her Press ID.

'George, how about you shave, and we'll talk to the lady. We haven't got much time.' She said to Florence. 'Come in. We can sit down and I'll tell you what we know.' The young girl pulled a face at something behind Florence. George stepped aside, and Florence followed the woman and child into the house.

After okaying the interview being recorded, Florence got the mother and the daughter to describe what they saw. She prodded for details about the other girls, then about the girl herself – learning the name of her school and the grade she was in.

The daughter, in her first year at the school, didn't know the girl's surname but knew of her reputation for being kind to new kids, despite being a senior student. The mother had heard parents talking about 'the girl who calmed unruly students' when she'd been waiting to pick up her daughter – and had seen the girl receiving awards at an end-of-semester presentation.

After saying goodbye at the front step, Florence turned and saw the smear of yellow-green dried vomit that started under the front passenger window, spread wider across the rear door, and finished in streaks along the rear quarter panel – a blurry memory from the

previous night returned. Without looking back, she walked to the car, got in the driver's seat, tossed her bag onto the passenger seat, and wondered where the closest car wash was.

An hour later at Liverpool Police Station, Florence held her Press ID to the glass and asked a pale, stony-faced uniform if she could speak to the Duty Officer.

'About what?'

'The young girl at the train station who calmed the man with the knife.'

'Why?'

'We did a piece on Monday; got some traction. Boss thinks it's got legs; he fucked my weekend wanting background by Monday.'

'Poor you,' the cop said, looking around at the resigned, the desperate, and the angry citizens in the waiting area, before stopping at a man in a dirty black raincoat talking loudly to a missing persons poster on the wall. 'You're lucky – the duty officer's been going on about it all week. He might want to talk to you.' He picked up a black phone on a high desk behind him and spoke to someone. 'You've got five minutes. Through the door, first office on the left. Sergeant Phillips.' He moved to the wall, waited for Florence, and pushed a large green button. There was a loud buzz and click – Florence opened the door and stepped through.

'Florence Nightingale?' an older cop said after she showed him her ID.

'Almost. Sometimes feels like I have to nurse my editor,' she said, sitting on one of the chairs in front of his desk. 'It's Knightley.'

'Yeah, got that, just joking. You're here about the girl at the station last Sunday?'

'That's right. There's been a bit of interest in the story, the boss's got me out for background and any developments.'

'I can give you the Event Number for your records, but any statement would have to come from the Media Unit.' Using his index fingers he typed on the keyboard, looking at one of the black monitors on his desk.

Florence got her notebook out and flipped it open. She followed a tangle of black cables from the monitors down the desk and around the side to a whirring computer tower, then back to Sergeant Phillips when the staccato typing stopped.

The sergeant read the event number, rested his elbows on the edge of his desk, and asked Florence, 'What have you got so far?'

'I visited a couple of witnesses to the event. Got an account of what they saw, and the school the kid goes to, and a bit about the girl – have you identified her?'

'There's CCTV footage on the Crime Stoppers website, pretty grainy – but no victim, no crime, so it's not being prioritised.' He tilted his head to the side. 'You believe in miracles, Nightingale?'

She ignored the misnomer. 'Why not? I got in to see you, didn't I?'

'Ha. No, I meant real miracles.'

'Like the ones from Sunday School?'

He hesitated, then sat back. 'I'll give you a steer, don't quote me – okay?'

'Sure,' she said, flipping her notebook closed theatrically.

'I've known the man who was waving the knife for years. He's been in and out of here, getting madder and madder, or sicker and sicker, whatever.' He paused. 'I saw him when he was brought in last Sunday. He wasn't the same. Still filthy, the usual mess. But quiet. Not his usual ranting self.'

Florence waited. The computer fan whirred; a phone rang in the background.

'I watched him being charged. Eye contact with the officer talking to him, answering questions. No twitching, voice normal – quiet even. I talked to the custody manager later. He said the man told him, "The voices had stopped. The girl had freed him."'

Florence waited for more. But the sergeant's attention had moved to the screens. When the silence grew awkward, she asked, 'Where is he now?'

'You've got the event number. And off the record what I saw. That's me helping, that's *your* miracle for the day.'

'Silverwater?'

No answer.

'Has he got family in the area?'

'Journalists,' he said, punching a button on a grey phone. 'Jonesy, come and buzz this lady out.' He looked at Florence. 'Nice to meet you, good luck with the story.'

29.

Florence briefed the editor on Monday morning, standing in front of his desk while he shuffled his attention between the monitors on his desk and the television suspended from the ceiling, occasionally tapping at his keyboard.

When she finished, without looking at her, he said, 'No ID on the girl yet?'

'Not yet. Caucasian, long brown hair, about ten. Went to her school, it was locked up. The Priest at the parish church next door was filling in...' She looked down at her pad, 'for Father Hooley. He's due back at the end of the week.'

'The three friends?'

'Older, maybe fifteen or sixteen. Non-European. No lead on them yet.'

He stopped typing and looked at Florence. She couldn't tell if he thought she'd done a shit job.

'Nothing more on the knife man?'

'Nah, I hung around the station, tried a few of the uniforms, asked one man in a cheap suit I thought might be a detective – he told me to “fuck off”. Drove around a bit, couldn't find any street-lifers.' Actually, her only 'driving around' was via a McDonald's drive-through to get home. She'd be able to get all the info on Monday.

'Okay. Courthouse first, get the man's name and whereabouts, try to see him if you can. Then the school. But go easy, they're precious about their little charges.'

'Sure, boss, on my way.'

'Brief me when you get back.'

'Look forward to it.'

'Piss off.'

She was assigned the same pool car on Monday, the McDonald's bag still scrunched in the passenger footwell where she'd tossed it. She dropped the front windows to let out the stale takeaway smell, turned the AC to heat, and cranked up the fan. At the exit, the steep angle of the ramp pressed her against the seat as the heavy steel roller ground open, letting in a strip of blue sky.

When the concrete walls of the motorway hid the patchwork of suburban sprawl and it was only the cars in front she had to look at through a dirty windscreen, she tapped the

disc sticking out of the CD player. There was a whirr as it was pulled inside, and choral music filled the cabin.

Florence walked the short distance to the Liverpool Local Court – from the outside it looked like the parking building she'd just left, only with windows and a better entrance. At the registry counter, she joined a queue of people paying fines, then spotted a suit to her left putting some paperwork he'd been handed into a briefcase on the counter. When he turned to leave, she took his place, holding her ID up to the clerk.

'Hi, Florence Knightley, *Daily Telegraph*. Don't mean to be pushy – thought I'd chance it. I've got an event number, just need the details. Boss is on my case,' she said, sliding her notebook across the high counter, the event number facing him. She noticed the silver name bar on the pocket of his white shirt – J. STEVENS – SENIOR REGISTRAR. 'You're the boss here?'

He stood back, looking deadpan at Florence, deciding whether to engage. 'Not the boss. Just been here too long,' he said.

'It's the knife wielder from the station a week ago. A girl talked him down – we ran a story. Heard the offender's a changed man,' Florence said.

'I saw it. Have my doubts; plenty change when they sober up,' he said, then paused. 'Mind, a mate from the station did say it was strange. He knew the man, said he was "transformed" after the girl spoke to him.'

'Train station or police station?' Florence said.

'Pardon?' he said.

'Where your mate works,' Florence said.

'Train station,' he said, and made up his mind. 'Can I take this?' He pointed at the notebook. A second's panic, then Florence said, 'Sure. Cheers.'

The clerk went to the back of the office, returning a few minutes later with some sheets paper-clipped in the corner, and put them on the counter, with her notebook on top. 'Statement of Facts, Court Result and Charge Sheet – that's the lot,' he said, adding, 'My mate will be interested if there is a story.'

'What's his name? I'll have a chat with him. Get his name in the paper,' Florence said.

The clerk wondered if he'd been too helpful. 'Ask at the station. He can talk about it if he wants,' he said.

'Fair enough. Hey, thanks for this – much appreciated.'

Back in her car, Florence pushed the button for the overhead reading light and scanned the printouts, noting the offender's name: Shaun Miller, date of birth 12/05/1972, and his Legal Aid solicitor, Janine Spring. She saw that after his arrest, he spent three days sectioned at Liverpool Hospital before being charged on Friday, sent to the Silverwater Metropolitan Remand and Reception Centre, and remanded to appear again in two weeks. In the Statement of Facts, under Witnesses, Garry Bennett was listed as station staff, and she added his name to her notebook. There was also an entry for unidentified persons not interviewed: female minor (approx. 10 yrs) in the company of three older females (approx. 14 – 16 yrs).

Looking through the dirty windscreen at a green painted stripe running along the middle of the garage wall, Florence nodded as she said each word, 'solicitor, station, school,' and glanced at the time on the dashboard – 11:25. Then she put everything back in her bag, hit the switch to turn off the reading light, thought about grabbing the crumpled McDonald's rubbish, and got out of the car.

On the other side of the security check at the courthouse, she retrieved her bag and headed to the Court List noticeboard – ten sheets, pinned five across and two deep, behind thick glass, showing the time, name of defendant, case type, and solicitor. An old couple stood in front of the noticeboard, the man slowly running his finger down the glass, the woman, clutching a handbag in two hands, standing next to him. Florence moved to their right and found Janine Spring's name listed several times for Court 4, mostly for bail reviews, starting at 10:15 a.m., with the last one scheduled for 11:40.

At the top of the stairs, she headed down a corridor. Couples and small groups sat squashed together on heavy wooden benches along one wall; a small circle stood, heads bent towards a man in a dark-blue suit; a couple of small children ran around. As she got to the double doors of Court Four, they opened. A woman a little older than her, hair tied back and wearing a similar dark pantsuit, stepped into the corridor, lifting the flap of a satchel to put a manila folder inside.

'Hi, Janine Spring?'

The woman stopped in front of Florence. 'Yes, and you're...?'

'Hi, I'm Florence Knightley.' She pulled her ID from her jacket pocket by its blue lanyard. '*Daily Telegraph*.'

'Why do you want to talk to me? Nobody famous on my caseload, or done anything particularly heinous.'

'It's about Shaun Miller. We've heard he's a changed man since the incident at the station. I'd hoped to be able to speak to him,' Florence said.

'Oh. Miller. Yeah. He does seem to have had a bit of an epiphany.' She looked at the people waiting in the corridor.

'Do you think we could find somewhere to talk?' Florence said.

'I'm heading back to the office; we could talk on the way.'

By the time they got to the Legal Aid office, the solicitor accepted that a story in the paper about a reformed man could help her client, and she found an interview room where they could sit.

'Here's what we've run so far,' Florence said, and put a copy on the table in front of the solicitor. 'We're interested in the transformational encounter between the young girl and Miller.'

The solicitor read it and looked up. 'And that prick Sergeant Phillips also thought he was different?'

'Yes. Was even a little helpful,' Florence said.

'Interesting. Like I said, I only spoke to him briefly before he was remanded, but I've seen him around, heard him ranting and raving, and he wasn't the same.' She stopped. 'He was quiet. Untroubled.'

Florence waited; the fluorescent tubes the ceiling hummed.

'Okay. What I can do is organise a call to Miller to see if he's okay with this. If he is, and if your editor wants to run with it, I'll support an application for an interview. I can also give him your number' – she picked up Florence's business card – 'to put on his PIN list, and suggest he calls you.'

'Is it okay if I quote you saying he wasn't the same man you've witnessed behaving erratically in the past?'

Janine took a second. 'Just say his Legal Aid lawyer. Don't need to advertise I've spoken with a journalist.'

'Last thing. Anyone else been asking about him?'

'No. Just you.' The solicitor stood.

At a booth near the Liverpool Station ticket barriers, Florence pressed her ID against the safety glass and, speaking through a circular metal grille, identified herself and asked the blue-uniformed customer service officer if she could speak to Garry Bennett.

He picked up a phone, hit a key, and she heard him say, 'It's Nirvan at the barrier. I've got a journalist asking to speak to you.' There was a pause, then he said, 'Righto.' He put the phone down, and turned to Florence. 'He'll be right out.'

Florence stepped away, choosing a corner that would provide some privacy from passing foot traffic. When Bennett arrived, she showed her ID and asked him about last Sunday.

'I was there when the girl walked up to him. Someone had called saying there was a crazy man waving a knife on the platform. We notified Transit Police and I went to have a look. It was like what you said in the paper. The girl spoke to him and he dropped the knife and got down on his knees.'

He told Florence he'd seen Miller around; was one of the regular misfits in the area – occasionally a nuisance, usually having loud arguments with himself and slapping himself in the head – one time smashing a bottle over his head and cutting himself so badly he'd been taken to hospital.

'Did you talk to the girl?' Florence asked.

'No, I got involved with Transit when they turned up. She'd gone by the time I finished with them. Pity. Would love to know what she said.'

'And how about the man? How was he behaving?' Florence asked.

'Calm. No problem. Did everything he was asked, quietly left the station with the Transit boys,' he said.

Florence asked a few more questions, finishing with, 'Can I quote you on this?'

He scrunched his face. 'Call me a RailCorp employee. Saves me having to clear it with Communications. Not worth the fuss. But I hope you find out about the girl, and how that fella is now.'

'Before I go, anyone else been asking about him?' Florence asked.

'Nah. Just on the day I gave a statement to the police.'

When she left the station, on a corner where a narrow laneway ran off the main road between office buildings, she saw a group of street people. Two of them, bearded and greying, were facing the street on a bench built into the side of a square concrete planter. A figure lay covered by a thick dark coat, a shopping trolley filled with clothes and plastic bags – a stained pillow without a pillowcase pressed against the wire frame – pulled close.

A young woman, wearing a winter coat reaching to her bare feet and a crimson beanie pulled over her ears, joined them from the laneway after changing direction to ask an office worker for change. He didn't slow down or acknowledge her, and she sat on a bench, ignoring the two older men.

Florence went up to them. 'Hi. Do any of you know Shaun Miller? Apparently, he stays around here.'

The smoker and the woman looked at Florence; the other man stayed looking at his feet. The smoker said, 'Crazy Shaun? He's locked up. Why? What do you want him for?'

'I heard he's a changed man.'

'Wouldn't know, miss,' he said.

The woman said, 'I heard that. He said the voices had stopped.'

'How'd you hear that?' the man asked. 'He hasn't been around. You're full of shit.'

'Sally told me. She was locked up in the ward with him.' She put her hands in her coat pockets. 'Said he was nice. Gave her his dessert.'

'Probably zonked on pills,' the man said.

'How long have you known him?' Florence said, looking at the woman's swollen feet.

'You got a dollar?' the man asked, jerking his chin up.

'Maybe. How long have you known him?'

'He's been around since I got here,' he said.

'Me too,' the woman said.

'Has he got family? A wife, girlfriend?'

'You're not listening. He's crazy. Always arguing with himself. Not a cunt, but not much use either. You got a smoke?' He had sucked the cigarette to the filter and dropped it at his feet.

'Don't smoke. Filthy habit,' Florence said.

'I'll show you filthy,' the man said, wiggling the tip of a cracked tongue at her.

'Anyway, why do you want to know?'

'I'm writing a story about how he changed.'

'You a reporter?'

'Yes. From the *Tele*.'

'Why don't you report on how we're always getting hassled by the cops?' he asked.

'Yeah, even when we're doing nothing, we get made to move,' the young woman said, 'and they take our stuff.'

'Maybe I will.' Florence gave the woman all the change she had in her pocket. As she walked away, she heard the man say, 'How much? Give us half.'

Parked in a visitors' space at the school, Florence saw a sign on a small triangle of grass beside a path leading to the school buildings. In bold black letters it read: ALL VISITORS MUST REPORT TO THE SCHOOL OFFICE.

Following a path to the main building, she pushed open a door with square glass panes, stepped into a small vestibule, then through another set of doors into a lobby lined with timber panelling. On one wall was a large framed colour photograph of the Pope next to a slightly smaller one of the Archbishop of Sydney; on the other, a large crucifix with Jesus's tortured, loin-covered body. A high, narrow table held a statue of the Virgin Mary beneath a tapestry embroidered with the school motto *Inflame Our Hearts*. Unlike the other offices she had been in that day, this one smelled of cleaning products – a mix of waxy wood polish and tart glass cleaner.

A sturdy older woman in a navy, knee-length woollen skirt, a thick, sky-blue cardigan with over-large brown leather buttons – their opposing buttonholes hemmed in a darker thread – and a white blouse, stood up from a desk and came to the counter.

'Hello. How can I help you?'

'Hi. I'm following up on an act of bravery by a student identified as coming from your school.' The woman blinked but said nothing. 'We feel that a positive story would balance the narrative that kids nowadays are anti-social and lacking in civic pride.'

The lady's grey-blue eyes, magnified by large clear plastic-framed glasses, didn't move from Florence's. 'And you are?'

'Oh, sorry, yes,' Florence said, and handed the secretary a plastic card she had ready in her jacket pocket. 'It's my NSW Police Media Card. I've already spoken to them; they are also keen on the girl being recognised for her act of bravery.'

'Do you have a business card?'

'Sure,' Florence said, reaching into her bag, finding a card and handing it across the counter.

'Thank you. I'll pass this on to the principal. He handles any requests for student information.' The corners of her lips lifted fractionally.

'Thanks. By the way, did you see the piece in the *Telegraph* about the incident?'

'I read *The Liverpool City Champion*.'

'Oh, okay,' Florence said, smiling. 'Did you hear about the incident? At Liverpool station, the girl calming a man with a knife?'

'No,' she said, and held the card up. 'But I will be sure to pass this on to the principal. Are you parked in the carpark?'

Florence ignored the question. 'Any chance the principal is free now?'

'He's busy. But I will make sure he gets your card. Good afternoon,' she said, not moving.

'Okay, thank you. Tell him he can call anytime.' On her way out, Florence saw reflected in the glass that the lady hadn't moved.

Back in her car, Florence slapped the steering wheel with both hands. 'Idiot.' She reached for her phone.

'Hi, Mrs Smith?'

'Yes.'

'It's Florence from the *Telegraph*.'

'Oh. Hello.'

'Look, I'm such a klutz. I'm writing up the story now, the boss wants it finished today, and I realise I still haven't got the girl's name. The feeling here is she deserves a medal. I was wondering if, when you pick your daughter up, you could ask? Saves me driving all the way out there again. Traffic will be wicked now.

'Actually, I know it. Some of the parents were a bit concerned. They thought she could have got hurt, and didn't want their kids thinking it was a good idea.'

'She took a risk, no doubt about that.' Florence paused briefly. 'So that I can get this finished, her name is...?'

'Amara Davison. Her younger brother goes to the school too.'

Florence called her office.

'Hey, Copy Kid, it's Florence. I'm in the car out west. Can you jump on the White Pages and find me an address for 'Davison' in Western Sydney? Their kid goes to school in Carnes Hill, so start there and move out. Try the Electoral Roll if nothing comes up.'

'I'm an Editorial Aide,' a flat, youthful male voice replied, 'and I don't need you to tell me how to do my job.'

'Sweetcheeks, no offence. Just got a break. I'll love you forever; buy you lunch if you can find it in ten minutes.'

'Lunch for a week.'

'Two days. Just sandwiches. The clock's ticking.'

The street where Joe and Mary lived now had a concrete footpath and kerbing, and had been subdivided into small sections filled with large brick houses in various shades of red or orange – some two storeys, all with double garages – just big enough for front and back yards, some with remnant gum or eucalyptus trees.

In contrast, Joe and Mary's property was large, anchored to the past by tall trees lining the borders, the converted barn, and the original wire-strand farm fence – now updated with a metal gate and shingled driveway. The evenly spaced evergreen shrubs planted along the street fenceline, a blue, boxy aluminium letterbox, and the mown lawns connected it to the present.

Florence waited in her car outside the property. She had gone in earlier to see if anybody was home, and a magpie had swooped down from a tree – close enough to make

her duck and run for the door – before perching on the corner of the roof, its head rocking side to side. When she knocked, a large ginger cat sloped around the side of the house, stopped, sat back on its haunches, and stared. Both animals watched her run back to the car holding a satchel above her head.

About three-thirty, a red Japanese four-door pulled up in front of the house. Florence watched a girl with plaited brown hair get out of the front, followed by a younger mop-haired boy from the back, both in school uniforms carrying bags. They went through the gate by the letterbox, called to the cat, and were unfazed by the magpie swooping over their heads. As they reached the door, the driver – wearing a mismatched dark trouser suit and holding a satchel – got out.

Florence got out of her car before the woman reached the gate.

'Excuse me, Mrs Davison?'

Mary stopped. 'Yes.'

Florence closed the gap between them, smiling. 'Hi. I'm Florence Knightley from the *Daily Telegraph*. Have you got a minute?'

'Not really.'

Florence noticed the cat had moved to the gate, and the magpie had landed on a nearby fencepost. 'It's about an incident at Liverpool station the Sunday before last. It's been reported that your daughter disarmed a man with a knife by talking to him.'

Florence tried to keep a smile on her face as the mum's face tightened.

'I'm sorry, I've got things to do.'

'Mrs Davison, if it was your daughter, the paper just wants to recognise her bravery.'

The cat jumped up on the letterbox; the magpie hopped several fenceposts closer.

'Okay. This seems like a bad time. Can I give you my card?' Florence – her eyes moving from the cat to the bird – slowly took one out of her breast pocket and held it out to Mary.

Mary took it and went through the gate, closing it behind her.

'Okay, Mrs Davison. I might call later, though.' Eyeing the animals, Florence walked backwards to her car.

Back at the office Florence gave the News Editor an update. He listened without interrupting, occasionally glancing at the TV or the screens on his desk.

'No one else been sniffing around?' he said.

'Not yet.'

'You've seen Williams is back?'

'Don't need him. Got it covered.'

The editor leaned back, folded his arms, and smiled. 'How quickly the worm turns.'

Florence ignored the dig. 'Boss, I need you to get Legal to fast-track a prison interview request.'

He sat forward. 'That could take a while. You've talked to the *redeemed* man's family?'

'Not yet.'

'Do that, and follow up with the solicitor getting you on the approved-caller list. Worst case, you can interview him over the phone.'

'I need a couple of days to find the three friends that were with her on the platform and find out what else she's supposed to have done. And have another crack at the mum.'

He looked at the TV. 'Write up what you've got in case we have to break the story. And tell a snapper to get a pic of the girl.'

'I don't want to spook the mum. She shut up tight when I asked about her daughter. Which was weird – most parents love talking about their kids if they've done something good.'

'They'll be discreet. And see if you can get in touch with the regular parish priest.'

Joe and Mary heard what happened at the train station when the girls brought Amara home, and had seen the newspaper story. When Florence left that afternoon, Mary called Joe.

'What's up?'

Mary whispered, 'I just had a visit from a journalist asking about Amara.'

Joe took a second to respond. 'The train station thing?'

'Yes.'

'What did you say?'

'I didn't. I said I was busy and came inside.'

'She's gone?'

'Drove away in a white Falcon.' She heard someone call out – 'Joe, come on bro.'

'Okay babe, nothing we can do now. We'll talk about it when I get home.'

Mary had put a Disney DVD on for the kids and was in the kitchen preparing dinner when she heard Joe's ute on the shingle driveway. She slipped out the back door, around the side of the barn, and saw Joe reading something on his phone. He looked up when she walked in front of the ute, tossing his yellow hard-hat and orange high-vis jacket over the back as she opened the door and got in.

On the radio, an announcer said: 'Your favourite station's favourite station. Triple J: we love music.'

Mary switched it off. 'What are we going to do, Joe?'

'About the reporter?'

'Of course.'

'From the *Telegraph*?'

'Yes.'

'So, doing a follow up.'

'I suppose so.' Dusty jumped up and settled on the bonnet facing them. The ute's engine ticked as it cooled. 'We need to talk to the kids, and tomorrow I'll talk to the school when I drop them off – ask them to keep them after school until I get there,' Mary said.

'You don't think we should talk to the reporter?'

Mary gave Joe a long stare. 'Joe, we do not want reporters or anyone else nosing around Amara.'

'What if they keep at it?'

'We have to avoid them until the story dies down.' Mary stared through the windscreen at Dusty. 'I'll ask Mum if the kids can stay there for a bit.'

'Tonight?'

'I'll take them after school tomorrow.'

They sat, both looking at Dusty – who stared back, then closed his eyes.

Joe said, 'It was amazing what Amara did.'

'It was. But we need to think about how to keep Amara safe so she can grow up like a normal kid.'

'You're right... just thinking out loud.' Dusty blinked at them through the windscreen. They got out, Dusty jumping off the bonnet to follow them.

After dinner that night, when Joe was dishing Nana's baked rice pudding into four mismatched bowls, Mary told the kids about the reporter and how they shouldn't talk to her.

Joshua pulled a spoon out of his mouth and asked, 'Why?' Then before she could answer, he said, 'I want the blue bowl.'

'Because children should be with an adult when they talk to a reporter,' Mary said.

'Why?'

'It's the law.'

Eyeing Joe's portioning of the dessert, Joshua said, 'Lots of ice cream in mine.' Then, 'Why?'

'To keep kids safe,' Mary said, reaching for the blue bowl and putting it in front of Joshua. 'Eat up.'

Joe passed bowls to Amara and Mary. 'You okay with that, Amara?'

'Sure, Daddy. But I would quite like to see that man again.'

Joe, not noticing Mary's slight shake of her head, asked, 'The man at the station?'

'Yes,' Amara said, putting her spoon down.

'Why?' Joe asked.

'To say hello.' She picked up her spoon and dipped it in her bowl.

Mary slapped the table. 'If anyone asks you questions, you tell them you're not allowed to talk to people you don't know. Okay?'

The kids looked at Joe, then went back to eating.

'How's the pudding?' he said.

Joshua, mouth full, shook his head up and down, swallowed, and said, 'Nana's pudding is the best.'

30.

Florence called Father Hooley at the Holy Spirit Church next to Amara's school.

'Hello, Father. I am Florence Knightley from the *Daily Telegraph*. I'm sorry to disturb you, but I was hoping you could tell me something about Amara Davison.'

There was a sharp squeal, a rustling sound, then a shaky voice. 'Sorry – had to adjust my hearing aid. You were saying?'

Florence repeated herself.

'And this is about...?'

Speaking slowly, Florence said, 'Did you hear about her interaction with a mentally unstable man at Liverpool Station? She calmed him down, and now he seems to be a changed man.'

'Amara Davison did this?'

'Yes. The man said the voices he'd been hearing left when she spoke to him.'

'It's possible, she is a gifted child.'

'How long have you known her, Father?'

'Since she started school here.'

'Why do you say she's gifted?'

'She glows; she does.'

'Glow?'

'So serene for such a young one. Full of the Holy Spirit.'

'Father, any particular instances of her "glowing"?'

'She won the *Junior St. Vincent de Paul Award*. We have a lovely picture of her on our noticeboard.'

Florence wrote *photo Amara church*.

'Calls Jesus her brother.' The Priest coughed and cleared his throat. 'Always saying we should love each other, be kind to everybody.' He coughed again and hmm'd a few times.

'Not so interested in sin though.'

'Any examples of her doing something that's difficult to explain, something supernatural?' Florence said.

'Unnatural? Oh, I don't suppose so.' He paused. 'When her class is celebrating Mass, the church seems brighter.'

'Father, one last question. Do you know the three older girls she hangs out with?'

'Yes. She has lots of friends. A popular girl.'

'Three older friends – they probably go to a different school.'

'That's right. Soon they'll all go to a different school.'

Florence finished the call, thanked the father, and underlined *the girl who calls Jesus her brother*. She called the legal aid lawyer and left a message asking if she was on Miller's approved caller list.

A little after four, the photographer called her.

'I got the picture from the church, it's good. But nobody's come home. I'm going to head back now.'

Fuck, Florence thought. 'Can't you wait a bit? Maybe the dads picking them up after work.'

'No can do. Going to take me an hour to get back as it is.'

'Tomorrow?'

'See what the boss says. Hang on a minute.' There was a soft smack as the phone was put down – then a distant *gotcha... gotcha... gotcha* and clicking and whirring. Then she heard the phone being picked up. 'Three girls turned up, two Asian. About fifteen, in school uniform. They knocked on the front door, and one of them went around the back.'

'That's great. I need to identify them. Good pics?'

'Of course they are. Wait a second. They're leaving now.'

'Don't suppose you can follow them?'

'Not a chance.'

'Can you send the pictures?'

'I'll name the folder *teenage girls*,' the photographer said.

'Not a good idea. Change it to *Cecil Hills*. Hanging up now.'

Florence opened the graphics program and navigated to the incoming queue. After a minute of tapping the refresh key, a small thumbnail image tagged CECIL_HILLS_01.JPG appeared at the top of the list. One by one, more files appeared.

Florence identified the girls' school uniforms – a navy and bottle-green jacket over a white shirt, matched with a pleated navy and green tartan skirt, with *CHHS* embroidered over a crest on the jacket pocket with the motto *We believe in Success* on a scroll running through the middle. Cecil Hills High School.

She updated the News Editor, booked a pool car for the next day, and, after tidying her workstation, stood up, looked at her three colleagues typing on their computers, and said, 'My work is done here, adios amigos.' She heard *bitch*, and *fuck off* as she walked away.

Florence returned to the office the next day as the colleagues in her pod were heading off for lunch.

'Nice of you to show up.'

'Whose willy are you polishing?'

Florence put her bag on her desk. 'Brothers and sisters, I've been entrusted with a story of great import, so be nice.'

'Yeah, whatever. Want anything while we're out?'

'Just your undying love and support,' Florence said.

With several *pffts*, they left.

Florence dialled the number for Miller's solicitor. She heard the buzz of an eatery and the sound of a cup being put down on a saucer.

'Hi Janine, it's Florence from the *Telegraph*.'

'Oh, hi, I got your messages, just been flat out. I've sent a legal fax to Silverwater requesting your number be added to his approved caller list, and I've added his name to a bunch of clients I'm seeing tomorrow morning. I'll tell him what it's all about.'

'That's great, Janine, cheers, much appreciated.'

'Yeah, well, if he's a changed man, a story in the paper could help him. We'll see.'

'Yeah, thanks again. Also, we've got a fast-track request in for an interview. I'll let you know how it goes,' Florence said.

'You do that. Bye.'

Florence laser-printed colour photos of the girls – cropped close-ups of each face, and one with them walking together. Back at her desk, the photos spread in front of her, she

prepared some questions. About 2 pm she packed her bag and took the lift to the underground carpark.

The pool car in a corner of the garage was the same one she had used previously. Getting in, she noticed the McDonald's rubbish had been removed from the passenger footwell, but when she closed the door, she caught the stink of a cigarette smoker, said 'arsehole,' and pressed all the window switches.

Just before 3 pm, the school gates opened and a few kids trickled out. Florence, wearing jeans, a navy hoodie, and trainers, a satchel over her shoulder, was waiting across the road. In the pocket of her hoodie was a picture of the three girls, folded into a square, showing them from the shoulder up.

A lad in a different school uniform had glanced at her briefly before turning back to watch the entrance. The initial trickle turned to a ragged tide of small groups, pairs, and individuals – mostly boys with boys, girls with girls, lots of laughing and shouting. She noticed the lad peel off, and a girl cut diagonally across the road to meet him.

Florence checked the picture again, then, holding it by her side, panned left and right, focusing on the faces. The wave of jostling blue-uniformed students, flecked with white shirts, went on for ten minutes before it started thinning. Groups loitered near the entrance, crowding the nearby bus stops and pavement. When the buses filled, they pulled away, occasionally blocking her view.

She had thought three non-white girls together would be easy to spot, but hadn't figured on the number of non-European students. After about twenty minutes, when there was just a trickle of students coming through the gate, she realised she needed to ask for help, something she'd hoped to avoid.

There were still students waiting for buses, or standing on the pavement that ran alongside the tall iron fence that ringed the school. She approached three girls standing in a small circle and unfolded the photo to show them.

'Hi there, I wonder if you could help me. Do you know these three girls?'

Two of them looked at the picture. The one who didn't said, 'Who are you?'

'Do you recognise them?' Florence asked the girls that looked.

They shook their heads and turned away from Florence. The one who didn't look at the picture said, 'Nah. Try someone else,' then quietly, 'nosey bitch.'

Florence moved on – *just kids, don't take it personally*. She showed other girls standing behind the bus stands and it got easier, as those nearby became curious to see what she was showing people. She asked a boy who had been watching her move along the pavement. He looked at it, and tilted his chin towards the bus shelter in front of them.

Sitting by herself, she saw one of the girls holding a schoolbag on top of her black school shoes, and put the picture back in her pocket.

'Hi, you're one of Amara's friends. Which one are you?'

'I'm Noor.'

'Noor...?'

'Noor Hassan.'

'Nice to meet you,' and sat next to her. 'You were with Amara when she calmed down a crazy man – you said she's always doing amazing things like that.'

Noor looked around to see if anyone else was listening. 'That's right. She cured my father.'

'Really? Amazing. How?'

'She prayed for him, and he got better. The doctors said it was like a miracle.'

'He was sick?'

'He'd had a stroke. Even the imam thought she did something.'

'The imam?'

'Imam Ahmad was there.'

'Wow, cool. Hey, I'm writing a story about the man she helped. He's in prison, but we think if people really believed he'd changed, it might help him. His lawyer thinks so.'

'He definitely wasn't the same after Amara talked to him. He even got on his knees and thanked her.'

'Maybe your friend should get a medal or something. Hey, can I interview you properly? I don't want to get any of the details wrong.'

Noor looked around again; there were still students waiting for buses to arrive, and two boys on the road in front of them were passing a rugby ball to each other. 'I'm not sure.' Then said, 'I have to go and help my mum.'

'Tell you what, how about I give you a lift?' Florence reached into her satchel and pulled out her press card, holding it so Noor could see. 'I work for *The Daily Telegraph*, my

car's just over there,' pointing down the street. 'It'd help me convince the editor to run the story.'

'I'm not sure if I can.'

'Fair enough.' Florence looked across the road. 'Okay, so, how about we use my car for a quick interview? It's a bit hectic here.'

Noor tightened her hold on the school bag, then nodded, 'Okay.'

'It's a pool car, belongs to the paper. And there's only one CD, you wouldn't like it. Mind if I take notes?'

After Noor had described what happened at the station, Florence said, 'I don't want to get you in trouble with your mum. If you want to call her, you can use my phone.'

'No, it doesn't matter. You could give me a lift if you want? It's in Bonnyrigg.'

'Sure. If you're okay with that.' She put her notebook back in her bag and tossed it onto the back seat. 'Show me the way.'

By the time they arrived at the family's dry-cleaning business, Noor had told Florence about the bird, how Amara always prayed, and about Linh and Ariya.

Noor's dad sat behind a counter on a high wooden stool. Florence could see a woman using a sewing machine through a gap in the snaking lines of hanging clothes sheathed in clear plastic – probably the mum. It was warm in the shop, noisy with tumbling motors and humming fans. Florence wondered how healthy breathing in dry-cleaning fumes all day was. Noor said, 'Hi, Baba,' then moved around the counter, dropped her schoolbag, and went down the tunnel of clingy plastic to her mum.

Florence introduced herself to Omar, then Salwa, showing them her press ID. 'I'm following up on a story we ran a week ago – one your daughter witnessed.'

There was a flat, metallic chime as a man entered. He nodded at Omar and handed an orange ticket stub to Salwa, who moved down the rows of hanging clothes.

Noor said to her dad, 'She wants to help the man Amara talked to. He's in prison.'

Salwa returned, two fingers holding the wire coat hangers of several shirts sheathed in plastic, and used her other hand to lay them flat on the counter. He said, 'Thanks,' glanced at Florence, and left the shop. Salwa took a little red notebook from next to the cash register, made a note, then turned to Florence.

'What is your interest in Amara?' she asked.

'Like I told your daughter, a number of people who've known the man for years, say he changed after she spoke to him. His solicitor thinks public interest in his story could help him. From all accounts he's had a difficult life.'

Salwa looked at Omar, then back at Florence, and said cautiously, 'She is a special child. There is no doubt. Have you spoken to her mother?'

Florence turned to Omar. 'Is it true she prayed for you and you got better?'

The rumble of a machine stopped, followed by the sound of clothes settling in the drum.

'I need to get back to work,' Omar said, and got off the stool. 'Excuse me.'

'Thank you for bringing Noor from school, but I also have work to do,' Salwa said, and then to Noor, 'and you have homework to do.'

Noor picked up her schoolbag, gave a little wave to Florence, and followed Salwa to the back of the shop.

Florence stood for a moment, put a business card on the counter and left, the door chiming behind her.

From the car she called the office and got through to the copy boy.

'Hey there sunshine, it's your big sister Florence, just need a number.'

'You still owe me lunch.'

'I know, let's add a coffee too.'

'I'm recording this.'

'Good move. No flies buzzing 'round your 'bot hole.'

'You're gross.'

'Just need a number for the closest mosque to Cecil Hills. I'll call back in five,' and hung up.

When she called back, Florence was given the numbers for mosques in Liverpool and Bonnyrigg, and called Liverpool's first. The man who answered told her Imam Ahmad was at Bonnyrigg. She called there.

'*Assalamu Alaikum*,' a man's rich voice answered.

'Hello, is this Bonnyrigg Mosque?'

'Yes, Bonnyrigg Masjid, who is calling?'

'Hi, I was hoping for a quick word with Imam Ahmad. It's for an inter-faith community story.'

'You are a journalist?'

Damn. 'Yes. I'm Florence Knightley with the *Daily Telegraph*.'

There was a pause. She heard him say, '*Assalamu alaikum*,' and someone in the background said, '*Wa alaikum assalam*.' Then back to her, his voice measured, but warm, 'I am Imam Ahmad. How can I help you?'

'Hello, Imam Ahmad, I've just been with Omar and Salwa Hassan. I was told you were present at a prayer session that preceded a miraculous cure for Omar.'

There was the distant sound of men's voices, and something being moved. 'Oh. You are talking about the little girl who come and pray for Omar. Yes, I was there. It was a special. Omar said something shift in him and he recover very fast.'

'Do you think the girl had anything to do with it?'

'*Alhamdulillah*. All praise is due to God.'

'Do you think it was a miracle?'

'Ahhh, who can say? *Masha'Allah*. As God wills it. But please excuse me, I have some business.'

'Can I come and speak to you sometime?' Florence asked.

'It could be possible,' he said.

'Thank you, I'll be in touch,' she said.

'May God guide your work. Goodbye.'

At an Italian café and deli near where she'd parked, and still a little early for dinner, Florence had ordered a flat white and a punnet of fruit salad. She speared an orange wedge with a plastic spork and considered whether to drive to the Davisons' house or call.

There were no other customers in the café, just one person wiping down tables and another taking trays of food out of the display fridge and covering them with clingfilm.

'Closing?' asked Florence.

'Yes. But don't worry, you have plenty of time,' said the girl wiping the tables.

The girl's mum was clearly not keen on talking to her, Florence thought, but what about the dad? He should be home now and might answer if she called. She got out her mobile and flipped through her notebook to get the number.

'Hi, Joe speaking.'

'Oh, hello, Joseph Davison?'

'That's right.'

'Hi. I'm Florence Knightley from the Daily Telegraph. I'm doing a follow-up on a story we ran about your daughter disarming a man. I have a couple of questions; it won't take a sec.'

She heard a creak of a chair. He spoke quietly. 'What do you want to know?'

'Well, first, other than the bravery of your daughter, many people who've known the man say he completely changed after their encounter.'

'I don't know anything about that. My daughter told us what happened, and I read your story. That's all I know.'

Florence continued. 'I've spoken to a police chief and the man's solicitor, both have known the man for years. They're amazed how he's changed.'

'That's good, isn't it?'

'It is. Just unusual for someone with mental health problems to suddenly change.'

Joe didn't say anything. Florence heard pots clanging in the background.

'Do you know the Hassan family?'

'Why?'

'Their daughter Noor knows your daughter.'

'Why?' he asked.

'They think that Amara healed...' Florence turned a page, '...Omar from a stroke.'

A woman's voice called out, 'Who is it, Joe?'

The chair creaked and the line went dead.

Florence returned to her car. Before turning the key, she took for her phone, flipped it open and redialled the last number. She was about to shut it when it was answered.

Florence waited a moment, then said, 'Hello, this is Florence Knightley again. I just want to say, the paper is likely to run the story with what we have. If at any time you think it

would be a good idea to speak to a journalist, you have my number. Please call anytime.' She waited a few beats, then said, 'Hello?'

The phone went dead.

'She must have spoken to the Hassans,' Mary said.

'I guess so. She knew about Omar recovering from his stroke.'

Mary and Joe were sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table. A covered pot simmered on the stovetop, the room warm from something meaty cooking in the oven. Between them were two mismatched wine glasses, a corkscrew, an unopened bottle of red wine, and an unlit candle on a white saucer.

'I think the kids should stay at Mum and Dad's a bit longer. Until we see what happens if they print another story,' Mary said.

'They'll be okay with that?'

'I think so. We can ask Michael and Shelly too,' Mary said.

Joe turned the bottle around to look at the label. 'You definitely don't think we should talk to her?'

'No, Joe. Let's just wait and see what they come out with.'

'You still got her number?'

'Somewhere.'

They sat silently until Joe said, 'Shall I open this?'

'Let's save it,' Mary said.

31.

The phone rang on Florence's desk mid-afternoon the next day. Glancing at the small LCD display as she lifted the receiver, she saw PRIVATE CALLER. An automated voice said: 'This call is from a correctional centre and is being recorded and may be monitored. You have a collect call from... *Shaun Miller*... an inmate at a New South Wales Correctional Centre. To accept this call, press one. To refuse this call, hang up now. To block future calls from this inmate, press seven.'

She pressed one; there was a brief moment of static, a click, and she heard men's voices and shouting in the distance.

A second later, a voice said, 'Ah, hello? This is Shaun Miller. I got your number from my solicitor. I'm calling from the Silverwater Remand Centre.'

'Hello Shaun, Florence speaking, thanks for calling. I don't think we have much time, right?'

'Six minutes.'

'Shaun, let me quickly tell you why I wanted to speak to you, then I have a few questions. Is that okay?'

'Sure.' There was no hurry in his voice, unlike the nearby conversations she could hear.

Florence outlined the story – his transformation after being spoken to by Amara, evidence from people who knew him that described it as a miracle – and finished by saying his solicitor thought a favourable transformation story could help his case.

While she was talking, a conversation nearby ended with someone yelling, 'Ya fucking dog!' and the crack of a receiver being thumped into the slot where it hung. There was laughter in the distance, then the sound of the receiver being picked up, buttons being pressed, and a new voice.

'I want to thank her,' said Shaun.

'Let's see if I can help get you out of here then. What did she say to you?'

'She asked me if I wanted *it* to leave me alone. When she spoke, the voices in my head started screaming. But I heard her clearly, and said yes, and *they* were gone. And they haven't come back.'

An automated recording cut in: *You have one minute remaining.*

'How do you feel now?'

'I feel good.'

'What do you hope for the future?'

'I want to stay like I feel now. I want to do something for her if I can.' He paused. 'But mostly, I want to thank her.'

'So, what's the plan?'

'I'm not sure. Stay clean. Don't drink. Maybe go to church.' 'I....' He stopped talking. Florence waited; other conversations around him continued, and there was a tinny, but loud, announcement: *Wing Two. Meds. Line up at the hatch. Bottom tier first.* 'I think I have to help other people like me. Like I was,' he said.

'Do you have family in Sydney?' said Florence.

'No family in Sydney.'

'Where do you come from?'

'I'm from the country.'

'Where?' said Florence.

'Small town.'

'What was the name?'

The line went dead.

Florence's follow-up story on Amara and Shaun Miller ran in the Saturday edition of the paper, filling a third of page seven above an advertisement for a massive clearance sale at a department store. The headline – *MIRACLE GIRL CALLS JESUS HER BROTHER* was followed by the strapline *Florence Knightley talks to the man 'cured' by train station prayer and the community who says it's not her first miracle.* There were three photos – one of Amara copied from the church noticeboard, a grainy one showing her talking to Shaun from the Crime Stoppers website, and a file photo of people living on the street.

The story used quotes from Liverpool's homeless to say Shaun had been crazy for years; the police source and Shaun's Legal Aid solicitor as evidence he had radically changed; Beryl Smith and a RailCorp employee as witnesses to the transformation; and the Hassans and the Imam to suggest Amara was responsible for other miracles. Underneath the story, a

small box read – *HAVE YOUR SAY: Do you believe in miracles? Join the debate at dailytelegraph.com.au.*

Florence suggested to the News Editor a companion piece on the link between homelessness and mental health. He mimed a yawn and told her to focus on the miracle angle, and have something ready for next week if the story got traction.

PART FOUR

32.

Mad Jess went to the Marrickville Library every day to read the Daily Telegraph. Today, she hovered behind an old gentleman at a long wooden table for several minutes until her tutting and clucking persuaded him to give up the paper. He sighed and muttered, 'Have it then.'

She read Florence's write-up on page seven, and stared into the distance until she felt the presence of someone behind her. Without turning around, she said loudly, 'I haven't finished with it. You'll know when I have.' She read it again, then reached into her jacket, took out her mobile phone, scrolled for the priest and texted: Call me.

Leaving Amara with Dorothy, Bob joined the rest of the family at the picnic table to discuss what they should do. The remnants of an impromptu lunch – eggshells, carrot and celery sticks, half a baguette, a few slices of wholemeal bread, butter, and a piece of ham – were still on the table. Joshua was swinging on the tyre suspended from a jacaranda branch. Maggie was watching from the fig tree; Dusty sat underneath the table on his haunches, tail curled around him.

'Has anyone been knocking on the door?' Shelly asked.

'Not yet. People have been ringing,' Mary said.

'Reporters?' Shelly said.

'Just that lady.'

'What about Noor's dad? Have they been hassling him?' Shelly said.

'I called Salwa. She told me a journalist picked Noor up from school, surprised them in their shop. She was sorry Noor had spoken to her. They won't be talking to any more reporters,' Mary said.

'Her two friends?' Shelly said.

'I asked Salwa to get Noor to call and warn them.'

'Do you think it's a big deal? It won't just die down?' Michael said.

'That's what we're hoping. If nobody feeds the story, it should go away,' Mary said.

'The kids going to school on Monday?' Shelly said.

'I'm not sure. I need to speak to the principal.'

Shelly was sitting between Michael and Bob, opposite Mary and Joe. Bob sat straight, his arms folded over his chest, his eyes closed. When they stopped talking, he took in a breath, and said to Mary, 'What about the story? Is there any truth in it? Amara and that man with the knife.' He shook his head. 'It's incredible. And Omar too.' Then, before Mary could answer, he added, 'And Joshua getting better.' He paused. 'Do we know everything?'

Joe was looking down at the table. Everybody else looked at Mary, who kept her eyes on Bob. 'Dad, can we talk about that another time? Can we just get through this first?'

Maggie took off squawking; Dusty got up, stretched, and walked back to the house.

After a moment, Bob gave a small smile. 'Sure, of course we can.'

The Priest, looking a little heavier, had been staying for several weeks at the Hermitage Retreat in Mittagong, in a room with an ensuite but no kitchen, supporting the Operations and Facilities Manager and acting as chaplain to celebrate liturgies for those visiting.

That Saturday, returning to his room after lunch to work on his manuscript, he saw the envelope icon flashing on his mobile phone. Seeing who it was from, a wash of unease spread to his groin and a strong desire to ignore the message.

Now it was evening, and the Priest was sitting in a boxy blue armchair in the beige-carpeted reading room in the main building. A book, *Priests: Balancing Competing Narratives in the Age of Reason*, was open on his lap, but he was looking out the window at the growing darkness.

A housekeeper came into the room to close the curtains. When she was near the Priest, she said, 'Dinner's being served – roast lamb and gravy, bread-and-butter pudding for afters.' He thanked her, closed the book, and headed to the dining room.

After dinner, he tried to ignore his phone, but saw he'd missed three calls. Feeling guilty, he sat on the edge of the bed, saw Jessica's name with a *three* in brackets next to it, and pressed the call button.

She answered after two rings – the sound of canned laughter in the background, a shuffle, then silence.

'Hello, Jessica. Father Paul here. It's been a long time. How can I help?'

'I called three times and left messages. You must be very busy.'

'I try not to be wed to my phone, Jessica.'

'Did you see the *Daily Telegraph* today?'

'No. We don't get papers delivered here.'

'You're at that retreat, then?'

'Yes, Jessica.'

'Must be a cushy number.'

He thought of her bright grey eyes. 'How can I help, Jessica?'

'The child's surfaced.'

The Priest had a feeling he knew who she was talking about, but tried dissembling.

'Who would that be, Jessica?'

'The child whose parents claim she was *not* born of human seed.'

'And what makes you say that?' He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, one hand holding the phone next to his ear, the other under his chin, and closed his eyes.

'Hold the line, I've got it here. Listen to this...'

She read out the newspaper story of the incident at Liverpool Station. 'That was a week ago. I didn't make the connection then, but today...'

He cut in. 'This is a mobile call, Jessica.'

'Just listen, Father.' She read out the story from today's paper. Then she summarised, as she put it, the salient points – *they live out west, the child's the right age, they're talking about miracles*, and finished with, 'Even the Muslims are involved! So, what are we going to do? We have a vested interest in this.'

Despite his unease, the Priest felt a prick of vindication – he had been right to want to investigate further. This was followed by an overwhelming desire to have nothing to do with it. 'Jessica, it's a lot to take in. Let me sleep on it. I will call you when I have given it some thought.'

'Tomorrow, Father. The vultures will be out, looking to get their hooks in.'

33.

Sunday morning, Channel Seven's *Weekend Sunrise*, in their "What's Making News" segment, introduced the story with the camera zooming in on the page-seven spread. The shot lingered on the headline – MIRACLE GIRL CALLS JESUS HER BROTHER – as a voiceover declared, 'Extraordinary claims out of Liverpool yesterday,' then paraphrased the story over file footage of homeless people and the perimeter fence of Silverwater Jail, finishing back in the studio with a presenter turning to their co-host: 'Well, the community is certainly convinced. We'll keep an eye on this.' Channel Nine's *Weekend Today* followed twenty minutes later with almost identical coverage.

Mad Jess saw the Channel Nine version. She had been out and bought the *Sunday Telegraph*, scouring its pages for any stories on the 'miracle girl' and until the segment had aired was resenting wasting two dollars on the paper. She reached for the phone and called the Priest, letting it ring until she was asked to leave a message and hung up. She tried again immediately, then one more time, before leaving a message: 'Call me.'

Then, because morning Mass at the local church had been 'taken over by Koreans', she left for her constitutional and vocation to mutter at anyone with unnatural-coloured hair, face piercings, flamboyant clothing, or looking non-heterosexual. Her previous favoured invective, 'Sinners, repent or rot in hell,' had been toned down to, 'I'll pray for your sins at Mass,' after years of complaints had led to a visit from social services.

Joe's dad brought around a cream-coloured Telstra answering machine, which he'd hooked up and left sitting on the wooden floor in the hallway under the phone, to allow Mary and Joe to screen calls.

Later that morning, the principal of Amara's school called and told Mary she had spoken with the Diocese's communications team and was waiting for a call from a Police School Liaison Officer – and that someone from the Parents and Citizens Association wanted to know how any media interest was going to be handled.

'I didn't call you, Mary, but we had a journalist here earlier this week, asking about Amara. They were sent packing, but it seems the story isn't going to go away. How is Amara?'

'She's fine. She's been staying at my Mum's. Joshua was too, but he's home now. What about school next week? We're thinking Amara should stay away, but I wasn't sure about Joshua?'

'He should be okay to come, if you're comfortable with that. Have you been harassed at your place?'

'A journalist from the *Telegraph* came around this week, but that's all.'

'A young lady? Mid-twenties, brown hair, ponytail?' the principal said.

'Sounds like her,' Mary said.

'Probably the lady Mavis described. I've got her card somewhere. Okay. Let's keep in contact. The most important thing is to keep Amara safe. Joshua, too. Let's hope this blows over. We'll miss having Amara here. I know Mrs Johnson will.'

When Joe, Mary and Josh returned home from a Sunday roast at her parents', the red light on the answering machine was blinking and the display showed three missed calls.

'Josh, give me your jacket, and get ready for bed,' Mary said.

'Can I play on the swing first?'

'No, sweetie, it's dark and you've got school tomorrow. Jump in the shower, get in your jammies, and Dad will read you a story.'

Mary waited for Joe to hang the jackets, then pushed the play button.

There were a few seconds of recorded silence from the first two before the caller hung up. The third was a message from Florence.

'Hello, this is Florence Knightley from the Telegraph. I'm not trying to harass you, and I understand how this might be difficult for you, but I'm sure you have seen Amara has made it onto TV. We are going to continue to run with it, and I hope to have an interview with Shaun Miller, the man Amara seems to have saved. I want to offer again the opportunity to give your side of the story in a relaxed environment. Please feel free to call me anytime.'

34.

A week earlier, before she went to stay with her grannie and granddad, Amara was playing in the backyard when Maggie started cawing and hopping around in front of her. She followed the bird to the front of the house and saw Dusty sitting by the fence in front of a grimy-looking, barefoot man in a heavy brown coat, cinched in the middle with a length of white electrical cord. There was a black garbage bag, twisted at the top where he'd been holding it, at his feet.

He said in a smoker's rough voice, 'Amara. Don't go doing stuff other people can't.' Maggie had flown and perched on a fence post near him. Amara walked up and asked him who he was.

'Think of me as a cousin.'

'My cousin?'

'That's what I said.'

'Are you an angel?'

'What's with the questions? Do what you're told.'

Amara stood looking at him for a moment. 'You're quite dirty. Are you hungry?'

'Oh, Miss Goody-Two-Shoes, no wonder He loves you.' He picked up the bag. 'And don't go talking to journalists.'

'Journalists?' she said.

'People you don't know asking questions. Don't talk to them.'

'Why?'

'Say okay. Okay?'

'Okay.'

'And don't tell Joe about this visit. Actually, don't tell anyone.'

'You know my dad?'

'Shu...' he paused. 'Listen. Don't attract attention – and forget you saw me.'

'Why?'

'Ask his-upstairs,' he tilted his chin.

'God?'

'That's him. Meek and mild, remember. We good?'

‘But I tell Mum and Dad everything.’

The angry put down the garbage bag and held the top wire of the fence. ‘Look, just trust me. It’s God’s will. Do it. Okay?’

Amara felt Dusty rub against her legs. ‘Okay.’

‘Good. That’s me done. Don’t forget, and don’t make me come back.’ He picked up the black garbage bag, spun it around to get a better grip, and walked away, Maggie hopping from fence post to fence post beside him, before flying off screeching.

‘I could make you a sandwich,’ Amara called. She couldn’t hear what he said in reply.

She thought about his warning a week later when she heard her name mentioned as she walked in on Grannie leaning over Granddad’s armchair in the lounge, pointing at the page he was reading.

Later, she found the newspaper face down on the folding table he ate his dinner off while watching TV. She turned it over and found the story with her picture. This was probably what her *cousin* had warned her about, and she wondered if he’d be able to find her here. She hoped not; he was quite grumpy.

The Priest woke on Monday morning with the anxious feeling of someone who had been avoiding his responsibilities. He checked his watch – 7 am, half an hour until breakfast, and slipped his feet into fleecy-lined slippers. Sighing and thinking *at least she can’t ‘pop’ round*, he called.

‘Good morning, Jessica, you’re up early.’

‘And you’re using your phone. What are we going to do about the girl?’

‘I haven’t had much time to think about it, Jessica. Perhaps nothing? I do recall they weren’t interested in talking about their daughter.’

‘It’s a bit late for that, Father. She’s all over the news.’

‘Jessica, it’s still early, I haven’t fully woken up. Can we discuss this later?’

‘We can, Father. I’ll catch a train to Mittagong. I’ve checked the timetable – \$14 return, and I can be there by 11.’

The Priest took a moment to think of an excuse that wasn't a lie. 'Jessica, I can't come into Mittagong today. I have work to do on a manuscript and some odd jobs around the centre.'

'Is there a bus that goes where you are?'

'Unfortunately not, Jessica. Let me go to the chapel and pray for guidance, and I will call you after breakfast.'

After a couple of moments, she said, 'You do that, Father. Time is of the essence.'

After breakfast, body thick with fried eggs, baked beans, bacon and toast, he called her back.

'So, what are we going to do?' she said by way of answering.

'Jessica, I'm going to be here for maybe another fortnight. It's going to have to wait until I return.' He heard the clink of a cup being put down on a saucer. 'And to be honest, I'm not sure we need to do anything.'

'As I thought. A cushy little number you've found.' She paused. 'Hmph. Well, needs must, looks like it's up to me to follow this up.'

'I really think, perhaps, you *don't* need to?'

'You look out for yourself, Father. I'll keep you informed.'

The line went dead. The Priest said, 'Heaven help them.' He looked at the computer, the empty chair. 'I need fresh air.'

The News Editor accepted that, for now, Florence had done all she could with the parents, but should contact Beryl Smith for more about what the girl was like at school, find the two other teenagers who were with the girl at the station, try the Hassans again, and talk to the Imam. He would check with Legal about the interview at Silverwater Prison.

Back at her desk, she called Beryl, who seemed reticent to speak. The talk at the school gate that morning had been about the article in the paper and the TV segment. Mavis the office lady had been standing watch, warning parents not to talk to reporters.

Florence changed tack.

‘Do you believe in miracles, Beryl?’ Before she could answer, she continued, ‘Because the paper wants to shift the focus to Shaun Miller – the man who was waving the knife. We want to see if we can help him, support his rehabilitation back into society.’

‘I’m not sure how I could help with that?’ Beryl said.

‘Well, I’ll be visiting Shaun where he’s locked up in prison. I’d like to be able to tell him about the girl – we think if he believes she’s special, he has a better chance.’

‘I’m still not sure how I can help?’

‘Anything that would encourage Shaun to believe in her would help. When we spoke before, you mentioned she’s helped difficult students at school. Perhaps you could find out what she did? It would be off the record of course.’

‘Off the record. I didn’t expect I’d ever hear someone say that to me – sounds important. I suppose I could try.’

‘Great, Beryl. It’ll be anonymous, but if it helps Shaun, it’ll be worth it.’

Florence went to the Bonnyrigg Mosque to speak to Imam Ahmad. She found the office in a small building alongside the prayer hall and introduced herself to a man with an early five-o’clock shadow wearing a brown suit with no tie. She asked to see the Imam. Someone wearing a small white cap poked his head around a door at the back of the office.

‘Imam Ahmad?’ The man, wearing a white robe over pants and brown slip-on shoes, moved into the doorway. ‘Hello, I’m Florence Knightley from the *Daily Telegraph*. We spoke last week about Omar Hassan.’

‘Yes, I remember. How I help you?’ He moved to the counter, saying something in Arabic to the man in the brown suit.

‘I was wondering if you could tell me more about the girl praying and Omar Hassan’s miracle recovery?’

‘Sister, only Allah heals. Sometimes through doctor, sometimes His will.’

‘Would Allah hear the girl’s prayers?’

‘Allah hears everyone.’

‘Can He grant miracles?’

‘If it is His will.’

‘Do you think Omar’s recovery was a miracle?’

‘It was something to celebrate, praise Allah for.’

‘Have you seen other miraculous recoveries like Omar’s?’

‘His was special. Very quick. But life has many miracles.’

‘The girl’s prayers could have helped?’

The Imam paused, then said, ‘We say: the prayer is the asking; the recovery is His answer.’

The Hassans would not speak to Florence, other than to ask her to ‘please leave, and not to talk to our daughter.’ Waiting across the road from the Cecil Hills High School gate as the wave of students exiting started to thin, she wondered how she could manage that if the three girls were together.

She spotted Noor with two girls, one with shoulder-length hair, the other with two long braids circled with red lace, finishing in a tight bow at each end. They said goodbye to Noor at the bus stop and kept walking.

Florence caught up to them at a pedestrian crossing, and could hear them talking about a boy called Luca – the one with braids defending him, the other saying he’d gone too far this time.

‘Hi girls, I’m Florence. You’re friends with Noor?’

They looked at her, then at each other. The crossing signal started chirping. The one with the braids said, ‘Who are you?’ The other looked across the road at the flashing green walking figure, and moved next to her friend.

‘I’m Florence Knightley from the *Daily Telegraph*. I have a couple of questions about what you witnessed at the train station a couple of weeks ago.’

‘Did you talk to Noor?’ the girl with the braids said.

‘Yes, that was me. I talked to her parents, too. And I’ve spoken to the man you saw. He’s in prison. I want to help him.’

The braided girl said, ‘How?’ as the other said, ‘Noor said we shouldn’t talk to you.’

Florence nodded. ‘Noor’s really nice. I gave her a lift home. Probably her parents didn’t want her getting involved. Some families don’t like attention.’

‘My parents definitely don’t want me to attract *any* attention,’ the taller one said, shaking her head so her braids flicked back and forth. The walk signal’s chirping sped up.

‘We should cross, Linh.’

‘What do you want to know?’ Linh said.

‘Which way are you walking?’ Florence asked.

‘That way,’ Linh said, as the crossing sign changed from a green walking figure to a flashing red hand, and the chirping went ballistic.

‘I’ll walk with you when it’s safe to cross,’ Florence said. ‘You’re Linh, and you’re...?’

‘Ariya. Linh...’

Ignoring Ariya, Linh said, ‘So you’re a reporter? Sounds cool. You met anyone interesting?’

‘Sure. But I think everybody becomes interesting when they get in the paper.’

‘Really?’ Linh said.

‘I think so. Hey, before the light changes, I’m curious about what you said at the station about... Amara. What’s so special about her?’

Ariya looped her arm inside Linh’s and tugged her towards the crossing.

Florence reached into her shoulder bag, pulled out her spiral notebook and pen, holding it against her thigh, but maintaining eye contact with Linh.

Linh pulled back against Ariya. ‘She’s an angel. She can heal people, and we all dreamed about her when she was born. We’re her best friends.’

‘You two and Noor?’

‘That’s right. We all had the same dream when she was born. There was a star, and it landed in Cecil Hills, and Amara was born.’

Ariya pulled at Linh more forcefully and said, ‘We should go.’

The crossing’s slow chirp started again.

‘Okay, I won’t hold you up, but before you go, take these.’ Florence handed them business cards. ‘If your school does work experience, maybe you could do it with us. Give me a call.’

‘Sounds cool,’ Linh said. The girls crossed the road. Florence stood and watched them and did a quick mental check to see if she had crossed any ethical lines. *Nothing major*, she thought. Looking at her notebook, she read, *we all had the same dream when she was born. There was a star, and it landed in Cecil Hills, and Amara was born.* Smiling, she put the notebook back in her bag.

An hour after hanging up on the Priest, Mad Jess had knocked on Dorothy McIntyre's door. A girl with dark brown eyes and long, thick dark hair, wearing jeans and a blue T-shirt, answered.

Mad Jess eyes narrowed. 'You're the girl all this fuss is about?'

'Hello. I'm Amara. Nice to meet you.' Amara stood inside the door, one hand on the latch. 'My Grannie is in the bathroom; she won't be long.'

Mad Jess wasn't used to dealing with children, except to shout at them for being noisy or getting in her way. And this child seemed unfazed by her – not in the belligerent way kids usually were, but in a calm and open way.

'Joseph your father? Mary your mother?'

'That's right. Excuse me, but are you a journalist?'

Jessica thought for a second. 'I'm a sister in Christ.'

Amara smiled. 'Me too.' She let go of the door handle and stuck out her hand.

Mad Jess slowly reached out. She watched their hands move up and down.

Not normally stuck for words, Mad Jess finally managed, 'Oh. Well, that's good.' They stood – Jessica looking down at Amara, Amara up at Mad Jess – until she realised Amara had let go of her hand.

'What's your name?' Amara said.

'I'm Jessica. I wanted to ask you about...' She trailed off.

In the background, there was the sound of a toilet flushing, a door opening and closing. Dorothy called out, 'Who is it, Amara?'

'It's Jessica, Grannie. We're talking out here.'

Jessica moved back as Dorothy came up behind Amara.

'You. What do you want?' Dorothy tried to step in front of Amara, but the girl moved forward, staying in front of her. Dorothy settled for putting her hands on Amara's shoulders.

'She just wanted to talk, Grannie.'

'About what?' Dorothy said.

'About the child,' Mad Jess said.

'You can call me Amara if you like.'

'What's your interest?' Dorothy said.

‘We’re both sisters of Christ,’ Amara said, looking up at Dorothy, then back at Mad Jess. ‘Is that what you want to talk about?’

The warmth Mad Jess had felt when the girl held her hand had travelled up her arm to her chest and through her body. ‘I... I was going to ask about the claims of her doing miracles,’ she said to Dorothy.

‘First, she hasn’t made any such claims – what other people say is their business – and we don’t want her being harassed by the media or anyone else. It would be best if you leave.’

Dorothy stepped back, trying to bring Amara with her so she could close the door. Before she managed to pull her inside, Amara said, ‘Mrs. Jessica, I just pray like you do.’ As the door began to close, she leaned out and said, ‘It was nice to meet you.’

Leaving the property, Jessica turned the wrong way and walked for a dozen metres. Then stopped, stood for a moment, turned around – and slowly headed in the right direction.

35.

Legal came through. Late Tuesday morning, Florence was in a small, cold room, sitting with her back to the door on a grey moulded plastic chair bolted to a vinyl-covered concrete floor. On a laminate table was her recorder and notebook. She noted the red call button on the wall to her right and reassured herself there was a viewing window in the door behind her – then sat for ten minutes listening to the dull clangs, footsteps, and muffled voices coming from outside, until a lock clicked and the door groaned open.

'In you go,' said a guard wearing a two-tone blue uniform.

Shaun entered in a dark green sweatshirt, matching tracksuit bottoms, and thin-soled black canvas slip-ons. He was tall and thin, with long, straggly dark hair and a beard, and looked clean – there'd been no change to the lingering ammonia smell in the airless room. The door banged shut, followed by the click of the lock. Florence stopped listening for noises outside the room and smiled at Shaun.

'Hi Shaun, good to finally meet you.'

'Hi,' he said, smiling shyly. 'Likewise.'

Florence had interviewed several people who told her Shaun had completely changed after the train station incident. When she'd spoken to him he'd seemed normal, but she hadn't expected him to look so calm, serene even. His teeth were yellow-brown, but his eyes were clear, with no challenge in them. Other than the stained teeth, he looked like someone who practised yoga and meditated religiously.

Florence picked up the small black digital recorder. 'You okay if I record this?'

'Sure.'

She used her thumb to start the recorder, checked it was working, and put it in the middle of the table, pointed towards Shaun.

'Can we go back to that day at Liverpool Station? Do you remember waving the knife around? What was happening for you?'

Shaun looked up for a few moments, then back to Florence, and said, 'I used to feel I was in a never-ending battle to control myself. I'd find myself in different situations with no idea how I got there, or why I was doing whatever I was doing.' He looked down at the table.

'That day, I could hear myself shouting, see the knife in my hand, see people backing away, feel their fear...' He stopped talking, seeming stuck.

Florence checked the red light on the recorder.

'Until that girl walked up to me, smiling, her hands open.' He paused; a grin faded.

'The voice in my head started... I'm sorry. It's crude.'

'Started what, Shaun?'

He continued quietly, 'Started screaming... and swearing at her... and then it was gone. It was totally gone.'

Florence, keeping her voice matter-of-fact, said, 'What do you think *it* was?'

'I don't know. My madness, I suppose. Anyway, it went.'

'Do you think it could come back?'

'No.'

'Do you think the girl made it go?'

He paused; the smile returned. 'I held her hands afterwards. I saw my whole life, right back to when I was a baby. And I felt clean.'

'Did you see the girls she was with?'

'No. I was on my knees and crying. And then I was taken away; I didn't even know who she was.'

'Her name is Amara.'

'I know. I have seen your newspaper story. I hope to meet her when I get out. I want to thank her.'

There was a tap on the glass, footsteps, and another tap further down the corridor.

'What does your solicitor say about your case?'

'She says the knife makes it serious, but hopes to show I'm no longer a danger to society.'

Florence looked down at her notebook. 'One last question, Shaun – sorry if it's a bit personal – but are you on any medication now?'

'No. At the hospital the doctors knew me. They saw I'd changed. They prescribed meds, but they didn't make me take them. And when I got here, my notes said if I wasn't causing any problems, I didn't have to take them.'

'And your family? You told me you were from the country.'

'I haven't seen them for years.'

There was a clunk and the door opened.

'Got to get Shaun to muster,' a guard said. 'Up you get, Shaun.'

Florence said, 'Maybe I can help you find them?'

'Maybe. Hey, thanks for coming.'

As he moved around the table, she said, 'Good luck in court; I'll be there to wish you luck.'

'Okay.' He turned sideways to get past the guard and out into the hallway.

The guard said, 'Sorry Miss, need to lock this. I'll be back in a minute to get you.'

Without waiting for her reply, he closed the door and locked it.

Back at Holt Street, Surry Hills, the News Editor told Florence to write 500 words on the Shaun interview for page five of tomorrow's paper, and tease there would be more on Saturday.

'What have you got on the girl?'

'Other than what Shaun said, I've got quotes from her friends and the Imam. And a parent on the inside at the school – I'm hoping that'll turn gold.'

'You need something from the parents, or at least some family – even a *piss off and leave us alone*.'

'I've got the maternal and paternal grandparents' addresses. I'm going to door-knock them tomorrow.'

'Williams is still keen to help.'

'Don't need him, boss.'

He made her wait a beat, then said, 'Well, you'd better get something from the family then.'

She finished her draft by 5 pm and sent it to the sub-editor, suggesting a headline SINNER TO SAINT? and a standfirst: *Freed From a Lifetime in Hell*. She described the prison-interview setting, but mainly used Shaun's words to narrate his madness and its sudden removal by Amara. A photo editor selected a photo of the mental health unit at Liverpool Hospital and the sub-editor captioned it – *HIGH SECURITY: The Donovan Unit at Liverpool*

*Hospital where Miller was assessed after station standoff. It finished with: THIS SATURDAY:
WHAT HER FRIENDS, A PRIEST, AN IMAM AND A PARENT SAY ABOUT AMARA – MIRACLE
MAKER?*

Mad Jess read the story at Marrickville Library, after waiting patiently while an older gentleman methodically worked through the paper, starting at the top of each page, moving slowly to the bottom, shaking or nodding his head, occasionally taking his glasses off and cleaning them with a handkerchief. Even when he turned it over and it looked like he might start again, Mad Jess said nothing.

She left the library and walked to the Church of Saint Thomas and sat on a wooden pew, staring at the humbled figure of the crucified Jesus hanging high above the altar. She didn't notice the parishioners who stopped talking, then resumed in whispers, when she entered. Nor, on the way home, did she notice the kids kicking a ball back and forth on the pavement in front of her, the feral-looking busker juggling devil sticks, the homeless man with a handwritten message on a square of brown cardboard in front of him, or the skinny, multi-pierced teenage girl working a corner for change turn her back when she walked past.

At home she cooked dinner, watched TV, went to bed and read a book. At ten o'clock she switched the bedside light off. A few minutes later she switched it back on, got on her knees, elbows on the bedspread, palms together, and spoke to God.

It was not her normal prayer, calling on Him to wash the streets clean of sinners, send abortionist doctors to hell, or send Muslims and immigrants back to where they came from.

Dear God,
 please forgive me where I have been unchristian,
 please help me grow in tolerance, compassion, and humility,
 please keep the child and her family safe,
 please take care of Father Paul,
 Amen.

When Florence checked the paper, she was happy to see the sub-editor had kept her headline and tease for Saturday's edition – only rephrasing a couple of sentences and dumbing down a few vocabulary choices.

She wasn't happy the News Editor sent a kid from the video unit to tag along with her that day. She objected – saying it would be hard enough getting someone from the family to speak without sticking a camera in their face, but he replied a clip of getting a door slammed in hers would be a great teaser for Saturday's paper.

Now, in the middle of a suburban street in Chipping Norton, across from Shelly and Michael Davison's two-storey, double-garaged house with its neat rose garden and nicely mown lawn, she argued with a wraparound-sunglassed, backward-baseball-cap-wearing millennial know-it-all about him getting back in the car.

'I was told to film you getting a door slammed in your face,' he said.

'No, dickwad, you were told that would be better than nothing, but what we want is to talk to a member of the family.'

'Pretty sure they just want to see you get a door slammed in your face,' he said.

'Listen, shit-for-brains. Get back in the car, stick your wanky camera out the window and film.'

'Not up to you, sister.'

'Don't call me sister, cock-breath. Just get back in the fucking car.'

The last hour had not gone well. He spent most of the journey from Surry Hills with his high-top trainers up on the dash, fiddling with a Sony camera, head bobbing to a beat Florence could hear despite the fat black headphones. Halfway there he cracked the window and smoked a joint he said was herbal tobacco, ignoring her threat to report him. All that, and his fusty body odour stinking up the car, meant that by the time they arrived, she couldn't work with him.

Staying out of her reach, he followed her through the pillars of a red brick fence – a letterbox with '27' in brass numerals built into one side – down a pebbled concrete path. She heard a phone ringing as she stood on the porch and rang the doorbell.

She rang again and knocked, but no one answered. Walking back to the car, she saw curtains twitching at the house opposite and went over; the kid stayed on the pavement. But that door stayed closed too.

No one was home at 24 Bangor Street either. Shelly had seen them arguing in the street with a video camera before they knocked on her door and called Dorothy to warn her.

Florence did manage to talk to a neighbour, who told her a boy and girl sometimes stayed – grandchildren, the woman thought.

The kid had lost interest by the time they got to Joe and Mary's. Florence got out of the car, scanning the nearby trees for the bird. She saw the big ginger cat sitting in the middle of the path. Taking in a deep breath, she bolted, bag held above her head, leaving the gate open and giving the cat a wide berth. She knocked and stood with her back against the door, listening for beating wings, then dashed back to the car, almost tripping over the cat, who stood up and got in her way. The kid was laughing.

Florence got in and told him to get some footage of the property.

'Why?' he said.

'Do it, and I won't dob you for smoking pot in a company car.'

He said, 'Loser,' but got out of the car with his camera.

She locked the doors and drove off, lowering all the windows.

When Mary got home after work, the red light was flashing on the answering machine. She told Josh to put his schoolbag in the kitchen and go play on the swing, then pushed the button to play the messages.

There was a click, then over a soft hiss: *'Hello, it's Florence Knightley from the Telegraph again. I understand you wanting privacy for your family, but trust me, the interest in your daughter isn't going to go away. In fact, in my experience, your silence will only add to it. I suggest it would be better to share your story – take the opportunity to ask for your family's privacy to be respected. We could do it with a sit-down interview, or over the phone. You can call me anytime.'* She left her mobile and office phone number, and the machine clicked off.

That night, there was a series of phone calls between the family. Michael wondered if they should talk to the reporter and get it over and done with – let the circus move on. Mary said the circus wouldn't move on, just get more intrusive. Dorothy told them about the 'witch' visiting again, and now that a journalist had been around, didn't think their home was safe.

When Mary said goodnight to Amara over the phone, she told her about the lady who visited the day before. 'I talked to her, Mum. She's not a witch like Grannie thinks, just a little bit broken. I think she's better now.'

'Are you okay staying at Grannie's another night?'

'Sure, Mum. We're having lots of fun. We play card games. Granddad reads to me in bed, then we pray together.'

After speaking with Joe and Mary, Dorothy called Shelly.

'This is getting out of hand. Do you think Amara is really doing miracles?'

'I don't know. The newspaper makes it look like she is,' Shelly said. 'Michael thinks it could be coincidence. He says, "The rooster crows, the sun comes up." It means because two things happen at the same time, one doesn't necessarily cause the other. I'm not so sure.'

'Bob has always thought Amara was special,' Dorothy said. Then after a pause, 'Sometimes I don't think Mary tells us everything.'

'Joe too. When things settle down, we'll have a heart to heart with them,' Shelly said. 'How's Amara doing?'

'She's fine. In bed now. Bob's reading to her.'

'What about asking her?' Shelly said.

'Bob says to let her be. Anyway, she'd just say she prayed for them. God does everything. You know what she's like.'

In the lounge, the curtains were shut, the wood-burning stove was cold, and the TV was off. Joe's feet, in thick work socks, were on the low coffee table in front of the sofa. Mary sat on the sofa's armrest nearest the door, arms folded.

Joe was talking about the journalist. 'I mean, if they're going to keep at it, we may as well have some control over it.'

Mary closed her eyes.

'Dad thought it'd be a good idea,' Joe said.

Mary asked him if he wanted a hot chocolate, and went to the kitchen. He followed and watched her get out the cocoa, brown sugar, and milk.

'She could take a picture of us standing on the patio. A normal family.' He waited until she'd finished stirring the hot chocolate, poured it into two mugs, and sat across from him. 'I just think...'

Before he could continue, Mary leaned forward and took his hands. 'Joe, Amara is not normal. She healed Joshua, and Omar, and that crazy man. At school, she calms down hyper kids. She probably brought that bird back to life. Who knows what else she's done we don't know about?'

Joe sat back but didn't pull free of her hands. 'You've never...'

'What do you think would happen if everyone thought she could heal them? Or someone they love?'

'But...'

'Imagine, Joe. Do you think she could go to school, have a normal life? Do you think Joshua would be left alone?'

'I...'

'For now we need to keep her safe, Joe.'

When Joe noticed Mary's eyes were wet and shiny, he leaned forward. 'You've never said this before. If Amara...'

'Joe, we both know she's special. Everything about her is special. Her conception was special. But right now, we just have to keep her safe.'

'How?'

'I think we should ask James and Simon if she can stay there, until we decide what to do,' Mary said.

'Wow. I suppose. What about Auntie Sue?'

'They found our parents easily enough – so family is out.'

'And Joshua?' Joe said.

'We need to talk to him again, but I think he'll be okay staying with us.'

'Do you think they'll agree?' Joe said.

'James is working from home now, so that works. And they've known Amara since she was a baby. And she loves them. It's a long way from here too; that's a good thing.'

'For how long?' Joe said.

'I don't know. Maybe this'll blow over. But if it doesn't, we might have to move.'

Joe let go of Mary's hands and sat back. He closed his eyes, let out a sigh, and said, 'This is really turning to shit.'

'We'll be okay, Joe.' When he opened his eyes, she said, 'Maybe we can ride this out.'

'Hope so. Don't want to move.'

Mary got up, the chair squeaking on the wooden floor. 'I'm going to call the boys before it's too late, see if it's okay for Amara to stay there. Tomorrow I'll sort out some home schooling for her.'

Joe sat staring down at his mug.

'Want me to warm that up for you?' Mary said.

37.

Mary took the morning off work to pick Amara up from her mum's and drive her to James and Simon's. She watched her rear-view mirror for anyone following, circling the block before parking out front. Amara carried her school bag and Mary a small suitcase up to the boys' place and knocked.

James opened the door.

'Hi Uncle James, I'm going to stay here with you.'

'Hey honey, I know. We're so excited. Come in, come in.'

Mary wrapped her arms around him, leaning her head against his. James looked down at Amara. 'We're going to have so much fun.'

They followed James down the short passageway to the lounge.

'Is Uncle Simon here?'

'He's at work, sweetie, but he'll be home later.'

When Mary released James, he smiled and said to Amara, 'Let's put your stuff away,' and led them to the spare room, stopping inside the door to survey it – purple curtains opened to let the light in, maroon towel and face cloth folded neatly on the black duvet, framed black and white picture of Judy Garland straight, mirrored door of the built-in wardrobe unsmudged.

'Smells nice, Uncle James.' Amara put her schoolbag on the bed.

'Lotus flower.' He pointed to a reed diffuser on the side table next to the bed. 'Let's sort that out later, come and sit.'

'James, I have to run, I've got to get back to work. But thanks for this. We really appreciate it,' Mary said.

'Are you kidding? This is a dream come true for Simon. Since the talk about changing the law, he's been banging on about adopting. He thinks this'll be good for our resume.'

'Cowboys,' Amara said, pointing at a Brokeback Mountain poster, then at a black and white print of a lady in black tights and bra, microphone in one hand, flipping the bird with the other, 'and a beautiful lady singing.'

'That's Lady Gaga – you know Poker Face? Po-po-po-poker face?' James said.

Amara laughed, 'Don't think so.'

'I'll play it for you later.'

'James, I'm going to pick up some school work for Amara today, is it okay if I drop it off later?'

'No problem. You can stay for dinner; me and Amara will knock something up.'

'I help Mum do cooking now. I can chop vegetables and make spaghetti.'

Mary said, 'You'll be able to get your work done? Amara's got some books with her.'

'I'm reading *The Lord of the Rings*. I've already read *The Hobbit*,' Amara said.

'No problem. Amara is an angel.' James saw Mary grimace. 'You okay?'

She said, 'Let's talk about it when I come back later.'

'Joe will come?'

'No, just me. I'll pick some stuff up from her teacher, and come straight here.'

When Mary returned, Simon and Amara were out buying cream. She joined James in the narrow kitchen, where he was washing potatoes.

'I haven't been here for ages.'

'Yeah, our bad, we should have had you over ages ago.'

'I can't believe you still live here.'

'Location and low rent. Sometimes I think it's what keeps us together.'

'Have you seen the articles in the paper?' Mary said.

'After you called last night, we went online and searched them.' He stopped scrubbing a potato. 'So, did she do those things?'

Mary kept her eyes on the running water. 'Maybe.'

'Maybe probably, or maybe maybe?'

Mary didn't reply, but stared at the water splashing over the potato in James's hand.

James started scrubbing again. 'Sister, if it's true. Like, if she came from, or *He* came – out there,' tilting his head towards the verandah. 'Like literally, if she is the daughter of...'

Mary looked at James. 'You know, we only told you, Simon, and the Priest.'

James tried to remember if he'd told anyone.

'Which reminds me, does he still live upstairs?' Mary said.

'The Priest? He does. But I haven't seen him for a bit – maybe a couple of weeks. You want to talk to him?'

'No. I want all this to go away. If it doesn't, we may have to move.'

'Why?'

'What do you think will happen if every sick person out there thinks she can cure them?'

'Hadn't thought of that.' He wondered if Amara could get rid of the anal warts he and Simon kept reinfecting each other with. 'What does Joe think?'

'Well, he doesn't want to move, so for now he's on board keeping Amara out of the news.'

'For now?'

'You know Joe.'

James nodded. 'Right. I remember his *investigations*. Have you asked her?'

'She says she didn't do anything. Just prayed – that God was going to do it anyway. Do you want a hand with anything?'

James got a wooden chopping block from behind the taps, took a knife from a drawer, and a bowl from a cupboard. 'I'm good. They should be back soon.' He started cutting the potatoes.

'What does Simon think?'

'Ha. He's fully on board with her being the daughter of God. He'll be sweet-talking her so he doesn't go to hell.'

They heard Simon say 'Beat you,' and Amara laughing, then watched them pass by the window over the sink.

'Speak of the devil,' James said.

Later, when Amara was in bed, James and Simon were watching *Letters and Numbers* on SBS. The buzzer had just sounded.

'I got *sweet* – five letters,' Simon said.

'Hey, did you ever tell anyone about the whole verandah, God-spunk thing?'

'Don't think so. Oh, yeah, I told that dyke Muff. She was going on about Cindy wanting a baby, but didn't know whose sperm to use. I told her about Mary and suggested she open her legs and point her fanny at the heavens.'

James laughed. 'What did she say?'

'Said I was a stupid fruit.'

'Ha. What are they doing now?'

'Broke up. Cindy's back on the cock.'

Mad Jess had spent the days since Amara touched her thinking about her life. On Tuesday, she caught a bus into town, wandered through the Royal Botanic Gardens, and sat on a bench at Mrs Macquarie's Chair, eating cheese and tomato sandwiches she'd made. In the quiet coolness of the Art Gallery of NSW, she moved through rooms of Renaissance and Baroque religious works, occasionally sitting on a low divan to take in the larger paintings. She spent twenty minutes gazing at *The marriage at Cana of Galilee*, Christ's first public miracle, transforming water into wine during a marriage feast.

On Wednesday, she went to confession during evening Adoration Hour at St Thomas's. Despite her strident religiosity, Mad Jess was not a regular confessor. But Father Ivan knew her, and like the parishioners, tried to stay out of her way. When he heard the prayer kneeler squeak, he slid open the wooden panel covering the brass grille.

'Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.'

Recognising Mad Jess's voice, despite its unusual hesitancy, he waited for her to confess everyone else's sins.

'Father, I have been shown the truth by an angel.'

Here we go, he thought, and wondered what was for dinner.

'I have been guilty of the sins of self-righteousness and judgement. I have lacked compassion, and tolerance, and understanding. I have been ill-tempered in my speech and actions. I have caused a great many people pain and suffering.'

Father Ivan leaned forward and tried to see through the grille, but it was too dark.

Mad Jess continued, 'I thought I was doing his work, but I was only feeding my disconnection to His will. For these sins and all my sins, I am truly sorry.'

It sounded sincere, contrite. It sounded meek. It didn't sound like Mad Jess. He considered asking for clarification – he was curious about the angel – but he had to know for sure. He assigned a trivial penance, gave absolution, and waited for the creak of the kneeler. As soon as he heard the curtain fall closed, he opened the door a crack and peeked out.

'Mother of God,' he thought. Although from the surprised looks of the waiting penitents, he might have said it out loud.

On Thursday, Mad Jess called the Priest and left a voice message – *I met the girl. She is an angel. She has saved me. Please call me when you have time.*

Like the priest in the confessional box, the Priest was taken aback by the tone of her message, playing it twice to be sure he had heard it correctly. He briefly wondered if it was a ruse to get him to call back, but didn't think subtlety was her style. He called her.

'Hello, Father Paul, thank you for returning my call.'

This wasn't normal. The Priest took a few seconds to process the changed dynamic.

'Hello, Jessica. I got your message. You've met the girl?'

'I have, Father. I have.'

He waited for her to go on.

When she didn't, he said, 'And you think she is gifted in some way?'

'I do, Father.'

'And how are you... dealing with that, Jessica?'

'Father, I don't know what to do. I want to see her. But I'm not sure how to. And I don't want to cause her any trouble.'

The Priest, sitting at his desk, looked out the window at a lemon tree and thought the bright yellow fruit, the smaller green, immature fruit hiding in the foliage, looked like baubles on a Christmas tree.

'Father, I have sent the newspaper clippings to you. Please have a read of them. There's supposed to be more this weekend. I am worried for the child; I think she's going to be hounded.'

You were a hound, the Priest thought. 'I will, Jessica.'

'I sent them addressed to Father Paul, care of the Hermitage, Mittagong.'

'That's right. I'll check in the office.'

'Remember our newsletter, Father?'

'I do, Jessica.'

'This would have been on the front page.'

The Priest found the envelope addressed to him. Inside was a short note from Jessica and three newspaper cuttings. He read them through several times, then sat back and

closed his eyes. A sudden carolling of magpies broke the silence. He sat up, tapped a key to wake the computer, and began an email.

'Dear Father Duffy, Do you remember at the Hermitage, I told you about the supposed virgin birth...'

The parish secretary took Florence to Father Hooley's office at the presbytery next to Amara's school. Unlike the Father in his well-worn clerical black, the office was light, the furniture Scandi-styled modular, the carpet a low-pile fawn broadloom. Only old religious iconography and framed black-and-white pictures reflected his long service.

'Have you seen the articles about Amara in the paper, Father?'

'I have; Agnes collects everything to do with the parish. It does seem the girl has a gift,' the Father said, scratching the patchy white stubble on his chin.

'Could they be miracles, Father?' she said, watching flecks of white skin swirl and float down.

'Miracles? That's not for me to say. Wasn't there an Imam in one of the stories? What did he say?'

'He was in the room when the man was cured of his stroke, and implied she had something to do with it.'

'Well, perhaps she did. She is a lovely child.'

'Will the Church investigate, Father?'

The priest tilted forward. 'Investigate what?'

'The miracles.'

'Oh,' he said, fiddling with his hearing aid. 'I suppose they could. It does take a long time.'

'Do you think Amara will be safe in the meantime?'

'Safe?' He tilted forward again. 'Safe from who?'

'People who think she can perform miracles.'

'Oh.' He sat back. 'The Church will keep her safe.'

'How will the Church keep her safe, Father?'

The priest straightened a leather desk blotter on his desk. 'We keep all our children safe.'

That's a crock of shit, Florence thought. 'Father, will the Church take responsibility for Amara's safety while they investigate the miracles?'

'Ah, ah, it's Miss Nightingale, isn't it?'

'Knightley, Father.'

'Oh, yes. Miss Knightley. It would be best if you speak to someone at the Chancery.'
He tried to stand, but wedged between the chair and the desk, bent awkwardly, he said,
'Can you find your own way out?'

Despite no comment from the family, Florence's interviews with Ariya and Linh, the Imam, and Father Hooley were enough to keep the News Editor happy and Williams off the story. Calls to the switchboard, traffic on the website, and sales of the Saturday edition in Western Sydney reflected growing public interest in Amara and prompted the *Sunday Telegraph* to cannibalise the three stories from the *Daily Telegraph* under the heading *MIRACLE GIRL IN HIDING: Church to keep her safe*.

On Monday morning, breakfast TV shows flashed the newspapers' headlines before cutting back to presenters saying the story was 'hotting up' and 'crews were out getting to the bottom of it'. Likewise, radio hosts promised interviews with a reaction from the church or someone who knew Shaun Miller.

Following several requests for comment, the Chancery's media office provided a response: *The Church is aware of the reports. We treat all such claims with care and prayerful discernment. At this stage, it is a matter for the local parish, but the Chancery is monitoring the situation.*

Unable to get any comment from the family, Florence pivoted in her Monday follow-on to safeguarding the interests of the child. It began with a quote from a Uniting Church minister, citing the need to 'focus on the wellbeing of the child and the community impact of the story, rather than the supernatural mechanics of the miracle.'

She argued this change of direction with the News Editor as a way to gain trust with the family. 'They've hunkered down, boss. No one else is getting near them. This is our best bet.'

'Better be. Tell Williams to get a reaction from his holy contacts.'

'Don't need him, boss.'

'Tell him to copy you in with whatever he gets,' the News Editor said.

'Fat chance. He's a selfish cu...'

'Unlike you, who just wants what's best for the paper?'

'Absolutely.'

'Tell him. Okay?'

Florence did not move from the doorway. 'I've built a good relationship with Shaun Miller. He's in court later this week.'

The News Editor gave a micro-nod.

'Boss, if they let him out on bail, could we spring for a couple of nights at a hotel? I'm thinking – get him cleaned up, get some pics, get an interview.'

'You've spoken to him about this?' the News Editor said.

'Sure have. He's in.'

The TV hanging in the corner blared out a news update. The News Editor glanced at it. 'Nothing fancy, get receipts, organise a photographer.'

Florence smiled.

'And don't forget to talk to Williams.'

'Sure, boss.'

Florence walked back to her desk, ignoring the colleagues who looked up. *Fuck, better get Miller on board with this.* She called his legal aid lawyer. 'Hi, Janine. Just wondering what you think the chances of Miller getting out on bail? And can you ask him to give me a call? Cheers, hope your day's going well.'

Out west, there were media vans from Channel 7, 9 and 10 parked outside Amara's school. Black cables ran to cameras and microphones with reporters delivering monologues with the school gates in the background.

The principal put the school into lockdown. He reminded staff they represented the Church, that the code of conduct prohibited them from speaking to reporters, and that all enquiries should be referred to the Catholic Education Office media unit. Students were instructed not to talk to anyone they didn't know and were given a handout to take home.

At Mary's school, the media contingent was smaller. She avoided them by entering through a rear service entrance, and was with the principal in her office.

'How are you holding up, Mary?'

Mary was in a beige chair in front of the principal's desk. 'I'm okay. Amara's staying with friends.'

The principal came around her desk and sat next to Mary. 'What are you thinking?'

Mary pulled her bag against her chest. 'We just want to keep Amara safe. So, whatever that looks like.'

'How about taking the rest of the week off? I've spoken to the Director, and she's approved it. We think it's best for your safety and, with this circus out the front, probably for the school too.'

Mary's shoulders relaxed. 'Thank you. I'm sorry about all this. It's not been easy.'

The principal touched Mary's knee. 'You worry about you. Don't worry about us, we'll manage our end.'

'Thank you.' Mary glanced at the door. 'But, now that I'm here, I might as well finish the day.'

'Stay for a second.' Mary settled back.

'The director spoke to the department's Media Unit, and they had a few suggestions – for us and for you. They think it might be better to front the media. They could help organise a meeting for you to take questions – and ask to be left alone.'

'Have you been following the news?'

'I have,' she said, 'I'm not sure what to make of it. If it's true...' She turned to look out the window. There was an awkward silence. Mary wondered if she was thinking about her sister's uterine cancer. Then she sniffed, and sat straight. 'Okay, Mary, you do what you think is right. Thank you for staying for your classes, that'll help. But, please, keep in contact. We will be here for you.'

Mary smiled first, then the principal.

'Oh, I almost forgot. Amara's friends – Linh, Ariya and Noor – the media are interested in them as well. We'll be taking care of them.'

Linh, Ariya and Noor sat cross-legged in a small circle, on the edge of a playing field, knees almost touching – a line of silky oak trees and an iron fence between them and the road, their lunchboxes open between them.

'I freaked when we were told to go to the principal's office,' Linh said.

'Me too. She was nice though,' Ariya said.

'Nicer than usual. Have you talked to Amara?' Noor said.

'I've called a few times,' Linh said, 'but no one answers.'

'Did you leave a message?' Ariya said.

'Nah, just hung up.'

'Mrs Davison spoke to my mum; she said Amara's staying with friends until all this is over,' Noor said.

'Amara's a rock star now,' Linh said, and closed her lunch box.

'I hope she's okay,' Ariya said. 'Aren't you going to eat your sandwiches?'

'I'm good. Amara's always okay. And she's famous now,' Linh said.

'Mrs Davison wasn't happy, asked my mum not to talk to any reporters. They told me not to either,' Noor said.

'I'd talk to them if they asked me,' Linh said.

'What would you say?' Ariya said.

'I dunno. Probably that we're her best friends. And it's true she can do stuff.'

'I won't talk to anyone,' Noor said.

'Me either,' Ariya said.

'They might offer money. That reporter might pay for an interview. Or maybe we could get on TV. That'd be cool,' Linh said.

'I don't think Amara could live a normal life if everyone thought she could heal people,' Ariya said.

'She could make a fortune, more than doctors, more than hospitals. We could be her disciples,' Linh said.

'She's not Jesus,' Ariya said.

'She's a bit like Jesus. And she says he's her brother.'

'She says he's everyone's brother. And I don't think she would want to make money helping people,' Ariya said.

'She could though; millions,' Linh said.

The wind gusted, making the branches squeak. There was a crack, and a branch fell from a nearby tree, cracking again as it hit the ground.

The girls looked up. 'A branch hit a kid last week,' Noor said. Then to Linh, 'You should eat your lunch, you look skinny.'

'I eat enough,' Linh said.

'I don't think we should talk to them,' Ariya said.

They picked up their lunchboxes and started back to the classrooms.

‘Luca and me are going to the movies on Friday,’ Linh said.

‘Your dad allow?’ Ariya said.

‘Haven’t told him.’

‘Watch his hands,’ Ariya said.

‘He better watch mine.’

They were laughing when the bell rang for the end of lunch break.

A Channel Nine car parked outside the red brick Salvation Army building on Memorial Street in Liverpool. A reporter in a dark blue suit, and a cameraman in a black field jacket and green cargo pants got out. The cameraman hefted the camera onto his shoulder and tethered it to the reporter’s microphone. They moved towards a line of twitchy street people standing beside a wall leading to the building’s shut double doors.

A man with long, straggly dark hair, in a brown coat cinched together with a piece of electric cable, moved away from the wall and stepped in front of them.

The reporter pointed the bulb of black foam above a blue Nine logo towards the man. ‘Good morning, Channel Nine News, can I...’

‘No, you can’t, so fuck off.’

The reporter said, ‘We’re here to ask about Shaun Miller, the man the miracle girl saved,’ and looked past the angry man to the line of homeless – several grinning and leaning back against the brick wall. No one moved into the gap the man had left in the queue.

The angry man grabbed the microphone and pulled it towards him; the reporter hung on, and said, ‘Whoa, take it easy.’

The man turned to the camera. ‘Sydney, find another way to get your jollies.’

The reporter grinned, attempted to look in control as he tried to wrest back the microphone. ‘Hello, and I’m talking to...?’

Still facing the camera and holding the microphone, the angry man said, ‘Leave us alone,’ he cocked his head, ‘or take us to the movies, and we want popcorn and ice cream.’

There were shouts of ‘You tell ‘em, Angry,’ and laughter.

‘We just want to...’ the reporter said.

Still ignoring him, Angry said, 'See my brother and sisters behind me...' He turned, pulling the reporter off balance.

The cameraman did a quick pan along the line then back to Angry.

'... leave Shaun alone or we'll come to your door for a feed...'

'So, you know Shaun?' the reporter said gamely.

'... and stink up your washing machines with our manky rags.' Angry pulled the microphone in closer, jerking the reporter forward. 'And leave the girl alone.'

The reporter turned to the cameraman. 'Cut. Let's try somewhere else.'

Someone called, 'Doors are opening, Angry.'

Letting go of the microphone, Angry said, 'If I see you again, arsewipe, you'll be leaving with the plague,' and rejoined the queue shuffling towards the open doors.

Back in the car, the cameraman said, 'Intense fella. You want to look for some other homeless to talk to?'

The reporter, staring straight ahead, said, 'Let's see how they're getting on at the high school.'

That night on the news, the stand-ups outside Amara and Mary's schools fanned the story but offered no new updates. Channel Nine reported that members of Liverpool's homeless community were rallying around Shaun Miller and were hostile to reporters' questions.

Bishop Clancy was with the Archbishop of Sydney in his office at St Mary's Cathedral House, having their regular Monday morning review of the previous week and what needed attention for the week ahead.

The Archbishop, in a voluminous black cassock with a large white bib tucked into the collar, sat behind a heavy walnut desk, within arm's reach of pastries on a silver tray. Opposite him, Bishop Clancy sat in an olive-green Victorian armchair, wearing a black suit and a purple shirt with a white clerical collar.

Eyeing an almond-topped sacristain, the Archbishop said, 'The ABC is still hammering us on *Towards Healing*. Thursday night Ferguson said it wasn't a "restorative justice program

but an orchestrated retributive injustice program.” And now there’s a survivors’ group calling our confidential settlements *gag orders*. We may need to tweak our efforts...’

‘I have heard whispers of a Royal Commission,’ the Bishop said, expression neutral. ‘But I have an idea for moving the spotlight elsewhere.’

‘You sure you don’t want one?’ the Archbishop said, pointing his chin at three pastries on the tray and pushing his fat stomach into the heavy desk to reach for one. ‘I have a problem with odd numbers. Your idea?’

‘You’ve heard about this miracle girl?’

‘Of course. Other than our misguided brothers, it’s all anyone wants to talk about.’

‘You remember Father Paul?’

‘Loopy Lupus? Mostly harmless. We made him our representative to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.’

‘That’s right. I think this is the child he wrote about back in 2000. I thought we could ask him to investigate,’ the Bishop said.

The Archbishop bit off half the pastry, chewed briefly and swallowed. ‘I remember, virgin birth, born in a barn. Bit preposterous, no?’

‘Could be just the thing to remind people of the mysteries of faith.’

‘What are you thinking?’

‘Well. The family’s got her in hiding. Maybe we can offer sanctuary? I was thinking the Hermitage.’

‘To what end?’ the Archbishop said.

‘A child safe in the bosom of the Church, a priest who protects, a Church that cares about every child... there are a number of narratives that could help shift attention from the current headlines. Father Paul happens to be staying there now.’

The Archbishop pushed the last of the pastry into his mouth, looked out the arched window at the creeping-fig-covered sandstone wall on the other side of the courtyard, and said, ‘No harm, I suppose. How do we manage it?’

‘I’ve had cause to... guide Father Paul over the years. He’s quite amenable. I’ll ask him to contact the family.’

‘How do we let the public know we’re helping the girl?’ the Archbishop said.

‘There’s a chap I use at the Telegraph.’

‘Trustworthy?’

‘We’ve helped him in the past. He knows which side his bread is buttered on,’ the Bishop said.

The Archbishop considered the last two pastries. ‘Then proceed.’

The Priest had been meditating and praying for guidance on how to deal with the child of Mary and Joseph re-entering his life. The challenge of living the sacrament of holy orders, when those orders went against one’s intellect and intuition, was the chapter in his manuscript he was having the most difficulty with, and the main reason the book wasn’t finished.

So, when he got a message from the Bishop asking him to call at his earliest convenience, he felt a foreboding that one of those difficult orders was about to manifest. The facilities and operations manager was at lunch, so he went to the office, said a quick prayer for courage and open-mindedness, and called him.

‘Father Paul, so good of you to call back so promptly. I hope the book’s going well.’ Before the Priest could reply, he continued, ‘I have a request to make. Have you been keeping up with the news? I know you’re quite sheltered out there. I’m referring to the child they’re calling the miracle girl.’

‘I have,’ the Priest said.

‘It seems it’s the child you wrote about many years ago?’

The Priest waited to be told not to get any ideas about resuming his investigation.

‘Interesting, no? Who would have thought?’ the Bishop continued. ‘We’re worried about the child, the family too. I’ve spoken to the Archbishop and we would like to offer them sanctuary. Protect the child from the vulturous press. We thought, given you have some connection to the family – you do still have some connection?’

‘I haven’t spoken to them for a long time, but I have the father’s number.’

‘Good. Good. Okay, feel them out. Assure them our only interest is in providing a safe haven for the child.’

‘I can try, Bishop.’

‘And another thing. That newsletter you used to be involved with, what was it called?’

'Understanding the Supernatural and Divine.'

'Good. We would like you to start that up again. The Chancery will provide editorial support and resources. Perhaps you could begin with an investigation of this girl? What do you say?'

'Ahhh.... thank you?'

'Good. Let me know how you get on with the family. Time is of the essence, Father.'

After the call, the Priest drummed his fingers on the desk. He was curious about the child but didn't entirely trust the Bishop. And he'd got used to an uncomplicated and unchallenging life. The office manager returned and told him to hurry if he wanted lunch – they were cleaning up.

Sitting alone in the refectory with a wholemeal bun, two carrot sticks and a boiled egg on a plate in front of him, he considered what to do. Call the father of the child and then Father Duffy, he thought, before having a surprising inclination to add Jessica.

Joe did not answer, so he sent a message: *Joseph, I can offer sanctuary and privacy for all of your family at the Hermitage Retreat. You will be safe from the media here. There is no ulterior motive.* He hoped there wasn't. *Call me if you would like to discuss this.* He added a link to the Hermitage Retreat.

Then he called Father Duffy, 'What are you up to now, Duffy?'

'Still twiddling my thumbs waiting for a permanent posting,' Duffy said.

'Could you come back to Mittagong? I've been tasked by the Bishop with something I could use your help with.' He updated him on the situation, and what the Bishop proposed.

Duffy said he needed to be careful, and told the Priest his work with the marginalised of the parish had strained his relationship with his masters – how he'd been censured for allowing rough sleepers to make use of the headstones in the cemetery behind the church for their bivouacs. He asked, 'Are they definitely behind this?'

'Yes Duffy. The girl *and* the newsletter. I've left a message with the father and am going back to Sydney tomorrow. As soon as I know something, I'll let you know.'

On Monday night, when Joe got home from work, Joshua lay on the sofa with his head on Mary's lap, watching *Toy Story 3*. Joe lit a fire in the wood-burner, sat on the end of

the sofa, and gave Mary an abridged-for-Joshua's-ears version of the message from the Priest. She listened without reacting, staring at the TV, running her hand through Joshua's curly brown hair.

'I'll go and put dinner on,' he said, 'we can talk about it later.'

'What's for dinner?' Joshua said.

'Tuna pasta!' Joe said.

'I hate fish.' Joshua said.

'You love Joe's dolphin-free-creamy-tuna-delight.'

'No, I don't. I'll just have the pasta.' Joshua said.

'There's bolognese sauce in the freezer,' Mary said.

'Yeah boly-naise, not stinky tuna,' Joshua said.

40.

Doorstepping by reporters at Mary and Joe's place had ceased. Between Maggie divebombing anyone that passed through the gate and Dusty hissing, arched-back, coat spiked like he'd had an electric shock, they stayed in their vehicles, only getting out when someone arrived or left – the presenter with an umbrella, the cameraman wearing a hard hat.

Reporters visiting the building site where Joe worked had no luck getting anyone entering or leaving to say anything that could air on TV, or was longer than two words. If they tried to enter the site, off-cuts of four-by-two rained down. When half-bricks replaced wood, and someone started calling out 'missed' when they landed close, the reporters gave up.

Joshua had been able to stay at school. Mary dropped him off and picked him up from the staff parking area. His classmates were aware something out of the ordinary was happening, but being eight years old, they were easily distracted by whatever was going on in front of them. Occasionally someone asked if his sister really could 'fix' people, and once he found an envelope with a note and five hundred dollars in his schoolbag.

Mary told Joe about it when Joshua was in bed. 'It's from a mum, says her kid has a brain tumour.'

'What should we do?'

Dusty jumped up on Mary. 'First, we don't know if Amara has cured anyone. She says it's what God wanted. So maybe it's just right time, right place, and can't be forced. And second, if everyone believed she could cure them... I can't even imagine what that would look like.'

Joe's face puckered like he'd eaten something sour. 'Sucks to be that mum but.'

Mary scratched behind Dusty's ears. 'How many sick kids are out there, Joe? In Sydney? In Australia? The world? Sick kids, sick mums, sick dads. We need to give Amara a normal childhood. She can decide what to do when she's an adult.'

'Guess so.'

Dusty curled up on Mary's lap and started a rumbling purr.

'I'll give the money and note to the principle. She can sort it out,' Mary said.

Mary and Joe tried to figure out how to give Amara a normal life. Moving to a location where no one knew them seemed the only option. Fronting the media and asking to be left alone was dismissed as having no chance of being respected. They considered finding an off-grid alternative community, moving to a small town in the outback, buying a caravan, living on a boat, or going to New Zealand, Fiji, or Asia.

Mary was searching websites on how to live off the grid when Joe leaned down, close enough to smell her hair and see the screen.

'Found anything interesting?'

She kept reading for a moment, then said. 'It's all about cash, ditching digital, living off the land, and solar. And being remote.'

'Sounds doable. Where?' Joe said.

'There are some established communities, some areas worth looking at. Maybe a caravan to start with.'

'Go to the lounge? It's warmer there, fire's still going,' Joe asked.

'Josh go back to sleep okay?'

'Yeah, he's good. Misses Amara. Asked for the millionth time when she was coming home.' He stood up and took her hand, 'Come on, let's go to the lounge.'

Mary closed the computer and let Joe lead her past the answering machine, its red light blinking, to the sofa.

He cracked a curtain and peeked out the window. 'No one there.'

Mary rested her head back on the sofa and closed her eyes. 'Maybe. Mum and Dad occasionally get harassed.'

'Nana and Pops too. I was thinking of an automatic gate so they don't have to get out of the car,' Joe said.

'Dad's thinking of a remote control for the garage door so they can go straight into the house.' She opened her eyes to the long, narrow painting above the TV: a pastoral scene of tall gum trees, a slow-moving stream lined with willows, dark-red cattle with white chests, and grazing horses. 'I don't think we can stay here, Joe.'

After pushing the unburnt ends of the wood into the glowing embers, Joe closed the stove door and said, 'We'd need a loan to buy a caravan. My olds would help.'

'Mine too,' Mary said.

'Hate to leave this place,' Joe said.

'No choice,' Mary said.

'You want to talk about the Priest's offer?' Joe said.

'Not really.' Mary pushed herself up off the sofa. 'I'm going to call and see if Amara is still awake.'

When he arrived home, the Priest met a young girl and the couple from downstairs in the stairwell. He stepped onto the second-floor landing and put his suitcase down to let them pass.

'Welcome back,' one of the boys said.

The girl, with a big grin, said, 'Hi,' and they continued down the stairs.

His apartment felt cold after the central heating of the Hermitage. In the lounge, he switched the radiator to high and stood looking around the room, noticing the red light flashing on the answering machine. When the oil heater started plinking as it warmed, he went to the bedroom and unpacked his bags, then to the kitchen to put cheese, milk and bread into the fridge – checking the door for marmalade, and the pantry for tea bags.

The phone rang; he thought it must be Duffy, picked up the receiver and said, 'I just got in.'

'Hello, Father,' Jessica said, softly.

'Oh. Hello, Jessica.' Then, 'How did you know I was home?'

'I didn't. I had a feeling to try. Am I disturbing you?'

Where was her bite? he thought. 'Not at all. Let me sit down. How can I help?'

'I'm worried about the girl.'

'Why? What's happened?'

'Today I heard an American preacher say she should be investigated – to see if she's doing the Lord's work or the Devil's,' Jessica said.

'Where did you hear this?'

'On the radio. He's here doing healings, fills stadiums with desperate people.'

'Her parents appear to be keeping her safe.'

‘For how long, Father? She can heal people. Just by her touch I was released from bitterness and resentment. Just imagine...’

The Priest had never heard Jessica run out of words before. ‘What does she look like, Jessica?’

‘Beautiful, Father. A beautiful smile. Long brown hair, dark eyes. So sure of herself.’

The girl on the steps? the Priest thought. *The boys knew the parents. Could she be here?* He turned and looked at the painting of Mary, at the detail of a grinning angel leaning out of a fluffy white cloud, holding an empty bow. ‘Jessica, we need to have faith. If the Lord put her here, he will protect her.’

‘It didn’t work out so well for his son,’ Jessica said.

‘No one will be wanting to crucify a child, Jessica.’

‘I’m not so sure, Father. Terrible things happen to children.’

‘Let us pray on it, Jessica. Let us pray for the child’s safety.’

After an awkward silence, the Priest asked, ‘Is there was anything else?’

‘Father, can I come and visit you? I want to make amends.’

‘Um, not tonight, Jessica. I’ve just got home.’

‘No, not tonight, Father. Tomorrow though? If it suits?’

The Priest realised he wanted to see the *transformed* Jessica. And she’d seen the child. ‘Sure, Jessica. What time were you thinking?’

‘Would eleven o’clock be suitable?’

He opened the door to a very different Jessica. No army boots – instead, sensible court shoes, the same dark winter coat, but underneath blue jeans, no tight bun – her long hair in a simple, loose ponytail. And most surprisingly, a smile.

Surprised by his own smile, he said, ‘Good morning, Jessica. Come in.’

She slipped off her shoes and stepped past the Priest, but stopped before entering the lounge.

‘Cup of tea?’ he said.

‘Please. That would be nice.’

‘Take a seat. I won’t be a minute.’

When he took the tea into the lounge, along with some digestives from the pantry, Jessica had taken her coat off and draped it over a chair. She stood looking out the sliding doors.

‘You’re lucky to have a view of some bush,’ she said.

‘Yes. It is nice.’ He stood holding the tray, waiting to see where she sat, and wondered why her saying *bush* triggered a wave of unease.

Jessica took the sofa. The Priest put the tray down, looked at the space next to her, before sitting in the armchair opposite.

‘I can’t remember if you take sugar?’ the Priest said.

‘No. No sugar, thank you.’

‘Either mug, then. The digestives were in an airtight container; they should be okay. I could put them in the oven for a bit...’

‘Thank you. No need,’ Jessica said, picking up one of the mugs and taking a biscuit.

They sat sipping at their tea, Jessica looking out the sliding doors. The Priest had never seen her without a coat, or wearing jeans, or even seen her feet before. The grey polo-neck jumper she was wearing showed the swell of her chest, and he noticed the colour matched her eyes.

Jessica put the mug down, and the biscuit back on the plate, and looked at the Priest. ‘Father, I have been driven by fear, not by Jesus’s message of love, compassion and forgiveness.’

He looked at the biscuits. ‘It is the human condition to be fallible, easily overcome by fear and resentment towards others. We try daily to battle that.’

Jessica’s eyes glistened. ‘I am sorry for the way I’ve treated you. Please forgive me. You’re a good man.’

The Priest felt something shift in him. *It was good to be recognised as a man*, he thought. A good man even. ‘Thank you, Jessica. I certainly accept your amends. You make me want to inventory my own shortcomings, which I assure you, are plenty.’

They sat quietly, smiling when their eyes crossed paths. A girl laughed and called out, ‘No way, Uncle James.’

The Priest looked down at Jessica’s feet.

‘Jessica.’

‘Yes.’

‘I think the child is staying downstairs.’

On their veranda, James and Amara were waving pieces of apple. He’d just told her that a rainbow lorikeet had taken a piece of rockmelon out of Simon’s hand, then pooped on him when it flew away.

‘What a naughty bird,’ Amara said.

‘Maybe it’s how they say *thank you*,’ James said.

‘Silly! What did he do?’

‘Had a hissy fit, then went inside and washed it off.’

‘Poor Uncle Simon.’

‘Actually, it was pretty funny. It looks like they don’t want any. Let’s leave it on the rail.’

The Priest and Jessica went out on the verandah and heard the sliding door downstairs click shut. He told her about the girl on the stairs, the Church’s offer of sanctuary, and the unanswered message he’d left for Joseph. He saw Jessica had wrapped her arms around herself, looked down at his tartan slippers, then at her blue cotton socks, and said, ‘Shall we go back inside?’

‘Can we trust the Church, Father?’ she said.

The priest also worried about this. ‘I think what we do is pray, present the offer to Joseph and Mary, and let them decide.’

At ten pm, the Priest, wearing clerical blacks and a white collar, knocked on the boy’s door. Simon answered in a purple velour onesie with a gold zipper running from neck to crotch.

‘Wow,’ Simon said, hand covering his mouth, ‘a handsome priest in uniform knocking on my door late at night. What will the neighbours think?’

The Priest stepped forward and said quietly, ‘It’s Simon isn’t it?’

‘That’s right, and you’re...?’

‘Father Paul.’

'How can I help Father Paul?' Then, 'That sounded weird, I already have a father.'

'You can call me Paul. It's no problem.'

'Just joshing. So, what gives?'

'Can I come in? There's something I need to discuss with you and your partner.'

He looked back inside the apartment, then back to the Priest. 'You can't tell me here?'

The Priest whispered, 'It's about the girl.'

'Oh.' Simon's face scrunched. 'Wait a second, just let me check.' He closed the door.

A minute later, James opened it. 'How can we help?'

The Priest leaned forward and whispered, 'I know the girl is here. I have no intention of telling anybody. I just want to relay an offer of sanctuary for her and her family.' He stood back, hands by his sides.

James stood to one side. The Priest looked down at his slippers.

'You can leave them on,' James said.

It was 11:30 when Joe and Mary, carrying Joshua wrapped in a blanket, arrived at James and Simon's place. They put Joshua top-and-tail with Amara, comforted by the bedroom smell of their sleeping daughter. When the kids had settled, they joined the boys in the lounge.

The Priest came from upstairs and sat tight against one end of the sofa, Joe and Mary on the one opposite. The room was warm and scented with patchouli. Simon asked if anyone wanted a drink. When everyone said no, he fell back onto a green corduroy beanbag. 'Let the council of war begin,' Simon said.

After a moment's silence, the Priest said, 'Hello Joseph, Mary.'

'Hi Father,' Joe said. 'It's been a while.'

Mary leaned forward, hands clenched. 'Does anybody else know Amara is here?'

'There is someone else. She's met Amara. But she wouldn't do anything to jeopardise her safety. In fact, the opposite – she would do anything to protect her.'

'That crazy lady who hassled my parents?' Mary said.

'She's changed, Mary. Since meeting Amara. I was with her today.'

Mary remembered what Amara had said, that the lady *was better now*. After staring at the Priest, she sat back. 'Okay, what's this proposal.'

He told them about the Hermitage. How there was only a skeleton staff there due to scheduled maintenance. That their accommodation would be away from the main site, had its own kitchen and access, and backed onto a large nature reserve. He said he would be their conduit to the outside world, taking care of their material needs.

'How long could we stay there?' Joe said.

'As long as...'

Mary cut in. 'Why does the Church want to help us?'

The Priest, who had been sitting with his hands loosely in his lap, looked at Mary. 'The Church does help people in their hour of need, but I can't say for sure why the Bishop made this offer.' He paused, then continued, 'The cynic in me wonders if it is a distraction to the bad press the Church is getting.'

'So, they will tell the world where we are?' Mary said.

'I have thought about that. I suggest we come up with a memorandum of understanding. Key to that would be the Church not disclosing your whereabouts and supporting you through to a solution that keeps the gir... Amara safe.'

'Can we trust you?'

'As your pastoral advocate,' he said, wincing, 'if you agree I'm that, I could stand by your side, even if it became difficult.'

'Against the Church?'

'That is why the memorandum is important. It would give me some authority.'

'Better not cross mummy bear,' Simon said to the Priest.

41.

The pressure to deliver copy that wasn't re-hash or filler had been constant for Florence since the story gained traction. When Williams got an interview with the shonky evangelist from America, she knew a lot was riding on getting an exclusive with Shaun Miller.

She had maintained a relationship with his solicitor, Janine Spring, based on getting Shaun favourable media coverage. And in a phone call with Shaun, had sold the idea of a couple of nights in a hotel on the paper's dime if he made bail. She would just need to get him away from the courthouse without being followed.

On a wooden bench in courtroom one, the sketch artist's elbows dug into her again when he closed his pad and stood with the other press pushed their way to the aisle. Florence was in no hurry; she probably had an hour. Shaun had been granted bail and would be taken back to the holding cells while it was processed. When Janine turned to leave after whispering a few words to Shaun, Florence gave her a thumbs up. As the court emptied, her phone beeped. It was from the News Editor. *Williams has information on the girl. Call him.*

'Wanker,' she mumbled.

The spiriting of Shaun away from the courthouse went as planned. TV crews were waiting when Janine emerged leading her client, a jacket covering his head and shoulders, leaving a gap only for black sunglasses. Reporters swarmed them, jabbing microphones – cameramen pushing from behind. She forced her way through the shouting mob, pulling him to a waiting car, all the while repeating, 'No comment, no comment.' Once he was inside, she faced them and said, 'A media statement will be issued in due course.'

Ten minutes later a door at the back of the courthouse opened into a wire-roofed courtyard where prisoners arrived and left in prison vans through a grey sliding iron gate. Shaun was led to a grey metal door set in the sandstone, next to the gate. There was a loud *buzz*. The guard pushed the door open, and he stepped through onto the street where Florence waited. They drove to a Travelodge in Bankstown.

The trickery was made possible with the help of Sergeant Phillips. Unused to miraculous transformations of recidivists, he wanted to help Shaun return to the free world and was able to smooth that process. Sticking it to the media was a bonus. Janine agreed

after being guaranteed access to Shaun at the hotel, and a career-enhancing press conference in a less pressured environment than a media scrum outside the courthouse.

Shaun wore the same prison issue he had on when Florence visited him in jail – the outfit he'd been arrested in had been disposed of as biohazard. She brought a black trench coat, a baseball cap, and mirrored sunglasses to help disguise him. On the way, she stopped the car and gathered his hair into a ponytail, using one of her hair ties. They made it to the room without anyone paying them undue attention.

Shaun sat in a salmon-coloured armchair by the window. He'd showered and was wearing a sky-blue Nike hoodie, with RUN splashed across the front, and matching trackpants Florence had bought.

'Fit okay? I wasn't sure of your size.'

'They're good. How is the girl?' Shaun said.

'No one's seen her. Her parents are keeping her out of sight,' Florence said, peeking out the window, then sitting in the other chair. She put the recorder on the side table between them.

'I'd like to see her.'

'I'd love to be able to arrange that.'

'I think she's an angel,' Shaun said.

'Like literally?'

'I'm not sure about that. I mean she's special, she glowed.'

'She was glowing when you spoke with her?' Florence said.

'It's hard to remember exactly. When I held her hands it was like a speeded-up sunrise. One minute I was in the dark, then I was in the light.'

'What did she say to you?'

'She said, "You're okay, don't worry, God loves you."'

'Then what happened?'

'I was on my knees. I was crying. I think she said "Don't worry, He loves you," again. Then I was taken away.' Shaun smiled at Florence.

Florence got her notebook and a pen from her bag. 'Shaun, can we talk about your past?'

‘Okay.’

‘Great. Let’s do that. Then I’ll order some food, and we can talk about what the future looks like.’

Thursday’s front page of the *Daily Telegraph* featured a mugshot of a demented-looking Shaun alongside a photo taken at the hotel – hair washed, beard trimmed, eyes clear, teeth a little cleaner. The headline read: *DEMONS BANISHED*. The subhead: *Shaun desperate to thank Miracle Girl*. Beneath that was: *Full exclusive pages 4–5*.

‘Not too bad,’ the News Editor said.

Florence had been pointed to a seat – it would be seen as a pat on the back by colleagues looking into the glass-walled office. She had hesitated before taking it, preferring the doorway for a quicker exit. ‘Thanks boss,’ she said.

‘Been able to get anything from the family?’

‘Still trying.’

‘Talked to Williams?’

‘Been busy with Shaun,’ Florence said.

‘What have you got for tomorrow and Saturday?’

‘Tomorrow, the second part of my interview with Shaun and a plea for the family to let him thank the girl.’

‘Saturday?’ the News Editor said.

‘We’ll have photos and content from Friday’s press conference.’

The News Editor considered this. ‘The conference, give an hour’s notice, invite Seven, Nine, and Ten. No other print, or photographers.’

‘Right,’ Florence said.

‘What’s he like?’

‘Shaun? He’s good. Hard to believe he had mental health issues. Sanest man I’ve met in a while. Credits it all to the girl.’

The News Editor scratched his elbow, looked up at the TV then at the computer screens.

‘That all?’ Florence said.

‘Talk to Williams. He’s got some intel on the girl.’ He looked at Florence. ‘Work with him, okay?’

‘What’s he know?’

‘Talk to him.’

‘Eww, it’s the super-sleuth,’ Barmy said.

She ignored him and put her bag on top of some folders on Williams’s desk. He lifted the bag and dropped it on the floor.

Cocking her head, she said, ‘I think your desks are bigger than ours.’

Barmy scoffed.

‘So, what have you got on the girl? Boss says you gotta share.’

‘I have nothing as yet, Florence. Just a contact who thinks they might know something soon.’

‘Who?’

‘Ms Nightingale...’

‘Knightley, Granddad.’

‘Florrie dear, I will let you know, as soon as I know,’ Williams said.

‘Smooth. Well, you’d better. Boss’ll be pissed if you don’t, and I’ll make sure he knows.’ She picked up her bag, slipping the strap over her shoulder. ‘By the way, he loves what I’ve done with the story. Would have been yours if you hadn’t needed time off.’

She smiled when she heard Barmy say, ‘Bitch’ as she walked away.

42.

Joe called the Priest the morning after their meeting to say they were still discussing the offer but would decide soon.

That night their parents came over. They sat in the kitchen; plastic takeaway containers of Chinese food and a rice cooker's inner pot on the table, a plastic scoop poking into the brown rice.

'Mary makes us eat brown rice,' Joe said, using disposable chopsticks to push white rice from a tray onto his plate. 'Got to make the most of this.'

Joshua looked at his mum. She smiled. He said, 'Me too.'

'It'll keep,' Mary said.

'I'll try some brown rice, but chopsticks slow me down. Pass me a spoon, please,' Bob said.

'Biggest problem with Chinese food is they don't do dessert,' Michael said.

'We have fruit,' Mary said.

'Not really a dessert,' Michael said.

After putting Joshua to bed, Joe returned to the kitchen. The takeaway containers had been binned, the few dishes washed, dried, and put away, the leftover brown rice on the bench in a plastic container.

'Make yourself a cup of tea and join us. Kettle's just boiled,' Mary said.

'Mary says you think the church's offer is worth considering,' Bob said.

Outside, Dusty meowed. Joe let her in and joined them at the table. 'It would get us all together.'

'You think it would work long term?' Michael said.

'Don't know about that,' Joe said.

'You trust the Priest?' Michael said.

'He's okay. I think he's telling the truth,' Joe said.

'I'm surprised the church is getting involved?' Shelly said.

Bob folded his arms, and said, 'The Church does help people. But even if they want to help, I don't know how long you'd be able to stay there before the press finds out.'

Mary put her cup down with a clunk. 'I think we have to leave Sydney.'

‘Oh, honey, there must be another way,’ Dorothy said.

It was midnight when their parents left. Dusty, who’d been under the table while they talked, followed them out to the front porch.

‘You still being hassled?’ Joe said.

‘It’s hard to tell. I’ve stopped rapping on windows if I see anyone sitting in a car,’ Michael said.

‘Yeah. They just sit and look at you anyway,’ Bob said.

‘You?’ Michael said.

‘Just assume they are. Could be looking at us now for all I know. Amara’s not here, so sucks to be them.’

There was a round of hugs, ‘goodbyes’, and ‘take cares.’ Dusty watched the parents walk to their cars, then lifted his head to follow the dark shape of a bird circling.

‘You coming in, Dusty?’ Mary said, holding the door open.

Dusty walked off the porch towards the trees.

‘Have you spoken to the parents?’ the Bishop asked.

The Priest had put a plate with two pieces of wholewheat toast, buttered and topped with marmalade, and a mug of tea on his small dining table, and just sat down when the phone rang.

‘I have, Bishop. I made the offer, and they’re considering it.’

‘Did they tell you where the child is?’

The Priest looked at the crucified Jesus on the wall above the desk, and said, ‘No.’

There was some dead air, then the Bishop said, ‘What about the magazine?’

‘The newsletter? I have been in contact with one of the previous contributors. Unfortunately, many have been... called home.’

‘Put something together about your pastoral connection to the family. We can put it on the website. Digital is the future I’m told. And I’ve got someone coming to interview you. We want to build on the Church’s connection to this... phenomenon.’

‘Oh,’ the Priest said. ‘That could harm the family’s trust in me.’

‘Don’t worry about that. His name’s Williams.’

Later, the Priest went downstairs and knocked on the boys' door. He thought after all these years, it was only the second time he'd been to his neighbours' apartment.

From inside, one of the boys said, 'Who is it?'

'Your neighbour from upstairs,' the Priest said.

The door opened, there was a wave of warm air, and James, wearing a t-shirt and shorts, said, 'Hi.'

'I'm sorry to disturb you, I wanted to forewarn you about something,' the Priest said.

James's eyes narrowed. He hissed, 'You've told someone she's here?'

'No, no,' the Priest said, leaning back. 'Not that. Perhaps I could come in to explain?'

James pursed his lips. 'Oh. Sorry. Come in.'

The Priest told James what the Bishop has asked him to do, and could they relay that to Joseph and Mary because he didn't want them to get the wrong idea.

'The reporter's going to come here?' James said.

'No. When he calls, I'll arrange to meet him somewhere else.'

'What will you tell him?'

'That I haven't met the child but in the past I had a pastoral relationship with the parents.'

'I'll let them know.'

'The child's not here now?' the Priest said.

'No, out with Simon.'

'Oh. Okay. Thanks.'

Florence was pissed Williams got an 'additional reporting by' acknowledgement for a few quotes from the Priest added to Friday's instalment of her story. She found a pink Post-it note stuck to her computer monitor: *'Glad I could be of service, Willy.'*

But it gave her a lead. She called the parish office where Williams met the Priest and, claiming the *Telegraph* needed it for their records, was given Father Paul's surname – Frederiksen. A quick search of the electoral roll via the paper's internal database, and she had his address.

The Priest, wearing dark green corduroy pants and a navy-blue skivvy, answered the door.

‘Mr Frederiksen?’

He smiled. ‘I haven’t heard that for a while. But yes, I am he.’

‘Look, I’m sorry to barge in like this, but I was wondering if I could have a few minutes of your time?’

The smile gone, the Priest said, ‘And you are...?’

‘I’m Florence Knightley from the *Daily Telegraph*.’

The Priest tilted his head toward the lounge. ‘Actually, I have someone with me, so it’s not the best time, and I don’t have anything to add to what I told your colleague.’

‘Just one follow-up question, Mr Frederiksen. You said you haven’t met the child, but did recently speak with the parents. Was that face to face or over the phone? It wasn’t clear.’

The Priest looked over Florence’s shoulder into the distance. He hadn’t meant to tell the reporter that, but it slipped out. ‘I met with them once, briefly, to offer help and support.’

‘Did they come here?’

Little mercies, he thought. ‘No, not to my place.’

‘Where did you meet them?’

‘I was meeting them on a parish matter, so I can’t discuss that. I shouldn’t have told your colleague.’

‘He’s a wily old dog that one,’ Florence said, ‘could suck marrow out of an old bone.’ Then, ‘Do you think you’ll be seeing them again?’

‘I’m afraid I must be getting back to my guest. I’m sorry I can’t be of help.’ He stepped back inside, ready to close the door.

Downstairs a girl’s voice called out, ‘Hurry up, Uncle Simon.’

A look of alarm crossed the Priest’s face, and he stepped back onto the balcony and held his hand out. ‘Do you have a card? Perhaps I’ll think of something.’

Florence found one and handed it to him.

The Priest held it up and studied it. ‘You work for the *Daily Telegraph*?’

‘That’s right...’

‘How long have you worked there?’

‘This is my second year.’

He turned the card over. ‘How much does it cost?’

‘What?’

‘The paper.’

‘Subscription or single copy?’

‘Both.’

‘\$1.20 for a copy, you’ll need to call about subscriptions,’ Florence said, turning to leave.

The Priest grabbed at her arm, letting go immediately. ‘Did the man I spoke with ask you tell you to come here?’

‘What? No, if anything, he works for me. Thanks for your time, Mr Frederikson.’

‘Please give my regards to your colleague when you see him,’ the Priest said.

‘Will do.’ *Not*, she thought. When she reached the stairwell and glanced back, he was looking over the balcony.

Leaving the building, she watched a man with artfully tousled hair, in tight purple pants and a black leather jacket with multiple silver zippers, close the back of an old Jaguar, and heard him say, ‘Buckle up, sweetie.’ On the driver’s side, a man in a camel hair duffle coat, with plastic red-framed glasses and a Clark Kent haircut, looked across the car’s roof at her before getting in the car.

Jessica hadn’t moved from the armchair when the Priest returned.

‘Dear me,’ he said. ‘That may have been a close call. I’m not sure how she got my address.’

Jessica pulled on her earlobe. ‘When I was a misguided crusader, I used the electoral rolls.’

‘You can do that? I thought it must have been the Church.’

Their eyes met, then flicked away. Jessica looked at the floor. ‘Do you think we could visit them downstairs?’

‘They just left, Jessica.’

‘Will the parents accept the Church’s offer?’

‘I don’t know.’

'Father, can we pray for the child?'

'We can,' he said, tensing as Jessica moved to the sofa. 'Do you want me to lead us?'

'Together, Father. But silently.' She took his hand, and closed her eyes.

He was surprised how warm her hand was, how much slimmer than his. He remembered to breathe, and to slow the breath down.

A few minutes later the phone rang. The Priest eased his hand out of Jessica's and answered it. Jessica didn't open her eyes.

It was Joe.

'Father, we've decided to accept the Church's offer. If it's still available.'

'It is, Joseph. And that is welcome news.'

'Can I come over this evening to discuss the arrangements? Around seven?'

'That will be fine, Joseph.'

Taking the armchair opposite Jessica, the Priest said, 'That was Joseph. They're going to stay at the Hermitage. He's coming over tonight.'

'That's good,' Jessica said. 'Father, I would like to see the child again. Perhaps before they leave?'

The old Jessica would have already kicked their door down, the Priest thought. 'I'll ask Joseph when I see him tonight.'

Joseph sat opposite the Priest at the small dining table. In front of him was a list with crossings out and arrows he'd taken from the back pocket of his jeans.

'So, Saturday night, you will pick up Amara and take her to the Hermitage?'

'Right,' Joe said.

'Okay. I'll be at the Hermitage, and I'll make sure the lights are on in the house you'll be staying in,' the Priest said.

'It'll be easy to find?' Joe said.

'There's a separate driveway, about a hundred metres before you get to the main driveway. You'll see a red letterbox by the gate. I'll make sure the gate's open.'

'Can you see the house from the rest of the place?' Joe said.

'A row of tree runs from the road up past the house. It's quite private.'

Joe checked the list. 'And nobody will come to the house unless invited?'

‘That’s right, Joe. I’ll make sure there are provisions there, and if you need something, you can contact me. I will be your only contact.’

‘I think that’s everything.’ Joe folded the list and put it in his pocket.

He joined Mary downstairs with the boys.

‘It’s all been arranged?’ Mary said.

‘Yeah, babe, all sorted.’ Nina Simone finished ‘Feeling Good’ and started ‘Wild Is the Wind’.

Simon clapped his hands. ‘I love this cloak-and-dagger stuff. Don’t you worry, Joey, I was born for this.’

‘You’re just a drama queen,’ James said.

‘There’s no queen without a bit of drama,’ Simon said, throwing his arms up.

‘Amara still awake?’ Joe said.

‘She’s in bed reading.’

‘I’ll say goodnight,’ Joe said.

43.

The Priest met with the Bishop at the diocesan chancery, a short walk from St Mary's Cathedral. They both wore clerical black – the Bishop's jacket, shirt and pants a little sharper and blacker, his Roman collar a little brighter.

When he was shown into the office, the Bishop came out from behind his desk. 'Hello, Father. Thank you for coming. I'm sorry to make you come into the city.' He steered the Priest towards two crimson armchairs angled to face a large bay window flanked by heavy green curtains gathered and tucked behind golden hooks. The Priest noticed the Bishop's shoes were thin, patent leather lace-ups, and was glad he'd given his slip-ons a light buff that morning.

'We haven't seen each other for a while, have we?' Before the Priest could answer, the Bishop said, 'So tell me again, where do things stand?'

Father Paul told him about the arrangements for the family's stay at the Hermitage.

The Bishop hemmed a few times. 'And you said you'd be their only contact?'

'Yes. That's what they've requested.'

'Right. There are a couple of things. We'd like you to talk with this Shaun Miller.'

'Actually...' the Priest said.

'We're thinking it would be good to get him together with the child at some stage.'

'Excuse me, Bishop, I need to leave for the Hermitage to get things ready for the family. It might be...'

'Sit there, Father. Let me call for some tea. I'll see if it can be arranged for this afternoon.'

Florence was on her laptop at the desk in Shaun's hotel room when the News Editor rang and told her Williams and the Priest were on their way to meet the source, and then hung up in the midst of her protests. She put down the phone. *Fucked again by slime-bucket Williams.*

'Bad news?' Shaun said.

'No, no. Everything's fine,' she said collecting herself. 'A cun... colleague and a priest are on their way for a chat before the media conference.'

Shaun was on the end of the queen-sized bed in the prison outfit he'd been released in, white hotel slippers on his feet, watching a science documentary on the ever-expanding universe. The bed had been made; in the bathroom, a towel hung on a hook, a bath mat lay over the shower door, and a toothbrush stood in a glass next to the basin.

'You're okay with that?' Florence said.

'Sure. No problem. But can I ask, what's happening after the conference?'

'You can stay here another night, maybe two. Has Janine suggested any accommodation?'

'She mentioned a halfway house. We're going to talk about it this afternoon. Actually, I'm not worried about that. What's happening with Amara.'

'The girl. Yeah. Right.' Florence swivelled to face Shaun, reached for her mobile phone and opened a recording app. 'Shaun, you've experienced being healed by her touch. Do you think it's fair she keeps that gift to herself?'

On the TV, a presenter said, 'Many scientists think the universe may be infinite...'

'I think Amara – like most children – just expects things to happen. Maybe that's all it was. I met someone who didn't believe in my madness; it flicked a switch, and I believed it too.'

'... stretching galaxies and cosmic structures further apart ...'

'So, you don't think it was a miracle?'

'I think she was the reason I returned to sanity. But I don't know how. Maybe God.'

'...the universe's fundamental laws mirror the beauty of natural structures... '

'So, you believe in God?'

'I think there's a power greater than me. I want to form a relationship with him.'

'Him?'

'Him, her, it – I don't know.' He picked up the TV remote and bumped the volume up. 'Check this out, it's amazing.'

When Williams arrived, Florence pointed the Priest to a fawn tub chair by the window near Shaun, and took the desk chair. Williams said 'Great' and bumped past her to sit on the side of the bed facing them.

'So, you wanted to talk with Shaun because...?' Florence said.

‘My Bishop requested it. He’s been following the story and has tasked me to investigate its veracity.’ The Priest looked at Shaun and smiled.

‘Do you mind if I ask you a few questions first?’ Florence said.

‘I have a few questions too,’ Williams said.

Without looking at him, Florence said, ‘Pipe down in the cheap seats. So, Father, does your being here mean the Church believes a miracle may have taken place?’

‘The Church believes that God can and does intervene in the lives of men. However, it is rigorous in verifying such instances, and many supernatural phenomena do not meet the criteria to officially be declared a miracle.’ He felt like he’d just channelled the Bishop.

‘What about you, Father? What does your gut tell you about this one?’

‘Well, I would like to ask Shaun a few questions.’ He turned to Shaun. ‘If that’s okay with you? And I do hope to speak with the child.’

‘You, me and everybody,’ Florence said. ‘One thing – we don’t have long. Shaun has a media conference to get ready for.’

Williams, notebook on his knee, said, ‘You take as long as you need, Father. It’s why we’re here.’

‘Willy,’ Florence said.

‘What?’

‘Pull your head in.’

The Priest’s questions didn’t uncover anything Florence didn’t already know. She thought the setting – the honky priest in black clerical garb, and Shaun, swarthy, bearded, long-haired and wearing prison greens – looked like Jesus doing a breakfast show chin-wag.

After another 10 minutes, Florence pointed to the clock next to the bed. ‘I’m afraid we have to wrap up now,’ Florence said.

The Priest and Shaun stood. ‘It was nice to meet you, Shaun, thanks for your time, I hope we can meet again.’

‘You too, Father, and I hope you get a chance to meet Amara.’

‘When I do, I’ll arrange to get you there. The Bishop would like that,’ the Priest said.

‘When you do? There-where?’ Florence said.

‘I spoke presumptively,’ the Priest said, quickly turning to Williams. ‘Could I trouble you for a lift to the station?’

Williams looked at his watch. 'I was going to sit in on Shaun's presser.'

'Invite only, Willy, all seats accounted for,' Florence said.

'You're such a...' Williams pushed past Florence, knocking her with his hip. 'Okay, let's go, Father.'

'Where are you off to, Father?' Florence said.

'Oh, just some church business, not too far away.'

'Sydney?'

'Ahh, no. Near Mittagong.' He squeezed past Florence and picked up his bag.

'What did you think?' the Bishop asked.

Father Paul was sitting on a green vinyl bench seat, his bag on the luggage rack above him, on a train to Mittagong. 'He's genuine. Seems totally sane. And would certainly like to meet the girl.'

'Are you able to contact him?'

'He doesn't have a phone. I could contact him through the reporter.'

'Williams?'

'No. A female. She doesn't seem to get on well with Williams.'

'We'd prefer you liaise with Williams.'

'Liaise about...?' The phone went dead, replaced with the rattle and vibration of the carriage.

A little later, the Bishop knocked on the Archbishop's door and entered. He found him sitting with a young man wearing sportswear. Between them on the table were a bunch of bananas and a black plastic tub with *GET SHREDDED* emblazoned in red across it.

'Come in, Bishop, we've finished here.'

The young man got up, putting down a thin folder next to the bananas. 'So, I'll see you tomorrow morning at 8 am. And if you could read through that,' pointing to the folder, 'and sign it, that would be perfect.'

'I will. And thank you for coming,' the Archbishop said.

The young man steepled his palms. 'I am excited to be of service on your journey to greater physical wellness.' He bowed his head. 'Whilst being closer to God in your presence.'

As soon as the door closed, the Archbishop picked up the folder and glanced through it. 'I don't think I'm ready for this. Remind me to get Father Richard to postpone tomorrow.' He put down the folder. 'Banana?'

'Thank you. I'm good.'

'So how was it?'

The Bishop sat down. 'Loopy said he seems genuine. Nothing new to report.'

'And the family will go to the retreat tonight?'

'Yes.'

'Remind me why we're helping them?'

'Well, it will divert some media attention from the ahh... governance issues we're facing. The key will be controlling it, and keeping it in the spotlight on our terms. If we can do that, I think it will play well.'

'Those... governance issues, you're more up to date. What's the current situation?'

'Not good from a liability perspective. In Victoria, one school in Ballarat has thirty untimely deaths of former students, and Bishop Gregory fears more will come to light from other schools.'

The Archbishop shook his head. 'Make sure none of those priests are reassigned to New South Wales.'

'We have our own problems. Newcastle and Maitland, particularly Maitland, have similar... unfortunate clusters.'

Another year to make Cardinal, the Archbishop thought. 'Run your plan past me again.'

That evening, Amara phoned her mum and asked if she could call her friends.

'I haven't spoken to them for ages.'

'You know you can't tell them where you are, or where we're going?'

'I know. I won't.'

'Can I speak to James?' Mary said.

'He's not here. Simon is. Do you want to speak to him?'

'Yes, please.'

'Simon, Mum wants to speak to you.'

Mary heard Simon say, 'Move over princess.' She asked him if it would be okay for Amara to call her three friends.

'Sure, hon. Does she have their numbers?'

'They're in the front of that diary you and James gave her.'

'Yeah, seen it. She doesn't even lock it.'

'Can you make sure she doesn't accidentally say anything about where we're going?'

'Sister, she has her friends' numbers and asked if she could call them. That's otherworldly self-control.'

'We plan to get to yours around 11,' Mary said.

'We'll be ready.'

First Amara called Noor. Her mum answered.

'Hello, Amara, everything okay?'

'Yes, Mrs Hassan. I'm good. How are you and Mr Hassan?'

'We're both good. Omar is one hundred percent good.' Omar said something in Arabic. 'He says hello, and wishes peace on you and your family.'

'Thank you. Is Noor there?'

'Yes, she's doing her homework. I'll take her the phone.'

Amara heard soft footsteps, then a door opening, and Salwa saying, 'It's Amara.' There was a yelp and the sound of a book hitting the floor. 'Here she is. Give my love to your parents.'

'I will,' Amara said.

'Amara! I miss you so much! How are you, where are you?'

'I'm good. I miss you too. I haven't been to school.'

'Yayyy. No homework!'

'Mum gave me school work to do. I've only seen Josh a couple of times, and I haven't seen Dusty for ages. Or Maggie.'

Simon, scrunched down on the sofa with his head near the receiver, patted her leg and pursed his lips in a 'poor you' expression.

'Last week a reporter drove me to the shop after school and asked Mum and Dad some questions. And she tried to talk too Ariya and Linh. They didn't say much – I didn't

either – but Linh wants to call her and do work experience with her. Other reporters have come to the shop, but Mum and Dad ask them to leave. Are you okay?’

‘I’m okay, I’m having fun.’

‘When can we see you?’

‘I don’t know. I think we’re going to...’ Simon put a finger to his lips. ‘I don’t know. But not too long I hope.’

‘Me too. And see Josh, Dusty and Maggie. Guess what? Linh is going out with the Italian boy. They’ve been to the movies together.’

‘I want to say goodbye to her too.’

‘Are you going away?’ asked Noor.

Amara looked at Simon, who put his finger to his lips again. ‘Mum and Dad don’t want me on TV or have people asking lots of questions. They want me and Josh to have a normal life.’ Simon turned over his bottom lip.

‘Linh thinks you could be famous. Like super rich. But me and Ariya aren’t sure about that. I think she wants to be on TV. What’s your idea?’

‘Well, I would like to go to school. And see you. And live at home. But I think I can’t now. When I pray about it, my father tells me to trust mum and dad.’

‘Have you seen you in the newspaper and on TV? They call you the Miracle Girl.’

‘I’ve seen some. I’m glad I helped that man put his knife down.’

‘My dad thinks you cured him when he was sick.’

Amara was silent for a moment. ‘I think everything happens as it’s meant to happen. My granddad tried to explain that to me, but I still don’t understand. Anyway, everybody can pray and help people.’

‘Me and Ariya pray. And Linh sometimes too. And my mum and dad, but they do it different.’

‘God doesn’t care. He listens to everybody.’

‘It’s hard to imagine that.’

‘Yeah. He’s a little bit unimaginable.’ After a moment’s silence, ‘I better call the others now.’

‘I’m going to miss you a lot, you know. We’ll always be friends, won’t we?’

‘Noor! Of course, yes.’

‘Okay. That’s good. Say hello to your mum and dad for me. And Josh. Okay?’

‘I will.’

‘Bye.’

Simon took the phone and ended the call. ‘You want to call the others straight away?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘You call out the numbers and I’ll punch them in.’

Amara picked up her diary and read out Ariya’s number.

When the Priest got to the Hermitage, he went to his room and unpacked. He hung his dressing gown on the back of the door, put two long-sleeved black shirts, one flannel shirt, two pairs of black pants and a pair of corduroys in the closet, put his socks and underwear in the drawers, a pair of slippers by the door, and his toiletries bag in the bathroom. Then he went to the kitchen, to the walk-in cooler, and took out a loaf of bread, a block of butter, milk, a bunch of bananas and some apples, placing them on a stainless-steel workbench, then into a carry bag.

The kitchen faced a line of trees separating the main building from the house where the family would stay. He went out the back door and followed a shingled path to the top of the windbreak, through a gate, and down to the back door of the house. He put the bread and dairy in the refrigerator, found a bowl for the fruit, and checked for coffee and tea. Then he made sure the bedrooms had enough blankets and the bathroom had toilet paper. Before returning to the main building, he went to the front door and turned on the porch light.

That night the Priest woke to the glowing red numbers on the digital clock showing 02:07. He lay for a moment, then got up and went down the corridor to the kitchen and out the back door, a light switching on as he stepped outside. He walked far enough up the path to be out of the glow and stood letting his eyes adjust to the dark. Through the trees he could make out a glimmer of light coming from the house and maybe someone laughing. He looked up at the universe, feeling tiny but connected to it. Until his neck began to stiffen and he noticed his ankles were cold.

44.

Saturday afternoon, after updating the News Editor on her story plan for the coming week, he asked if she was going with Williams to Mittagong.

‘Mittagong?’ Florence said. ‘What did he tell you?’

‘His contact in the church asked if he wanted to ride along on a pastoral visit.’

Mittagong was where the Priest was going. ‘He’s supposed to share that stuff. It could be about the girl.’

‘Maybe. But you focus on Shaun. Your interview ran well; people want more. Visit his old haunts – take a photographer with you.’ When Florence turned to leave, he said, ‘You can book him another night at the hotel.’

Williams wasn’t in the office and didn’t answer his phone. She left messages and emails saying the News Editor wanted her kept in the loop. *Fucking weasel*, she thought, *I’ll fuck him*.

On Sunday morning, the Priest was in the rose garden when the office window opened and the centre manager called to say someone was on the phone for him. He retraced his footprints in the dewy grass and stepped out of his gumboots, leaving them next to a smaller green pair on the concrete porch.

When he got to the office, the manager was waiting outside.

‘It’s Bishop Clancy,’ he whispered, moving aside. ‘I’ll leave you to it.’

The Priest stood in front of the desk and picked up the phone. ‘Hello?’

‘Hello, Father. Has the family settled in okay?’

‘I think so, Bishop. I haven’t been over to see them yet.’

‘And why is that?’

‘Giving them privacy. It’s what they wanted the most. I believe the last few weeks have been difficult.’

‘Right. Right. Well, there’s been a slight change of plan. The Archbishop has taken a special interest in the child, and to safeguard her wellbeing has decided that the Episcopal Vicar for Canonical Affairs, the Very Reverend Patrick Poole, and a medical expert from St Vincent’s should visit the child.’

‘What! That’s not what... when would this be?’

‘That’s why I’m calling. They’re actually on their way. It is short notice, but I was inspired at Mass this morning to do everything in my power to support the child and her family.’

‘I haven’t even spoken to them yet. Bishop, we need to allow them some time to settle in. This is too soon.’

“Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. Let us begin.” Mother Teresa said that. I think I may have been inspired by her in chapel this morning. So, Father, I’ve told them to see you first, that you would take them to the house.’

‘Bishop, this is not what I told the family would happen. I said we would offer them sanctuary, somewhere away from prying eyes.’

‘And we are. And we will continue to do so. But the child-safeguarding policy of our secular masters offers little wiggle room. We have no choice. We need to be sure she is safe.’

‘She is with her family. She is safe.’

‘Remember your vows – don’t allow personal opinion to cloud your obedience. It will be a quick visit by trusted and caring professionals. I will leave you to make the necessary arrangements. Go in the peace of Christ, Father.’

The Priest moved around the desk and sat in the chair. He put his elbows on the desk, his palms together, and prayed. Then he went to his room and called Joe. There was no answer. He sent a message warning him of the visit.

He called Father Duffy and told him of the new development.

‘Difficult,’ Father Duffy said, ‘springing it on you like this. How do you think the family will react?’

‘I don’t know. I think they trusted me – this is going to test that. I told them I would be managing everything.’

‘From what you’ve told me about your pointy-hats, it would appear they like to be in control.’

‘Were you still planning on coming here? There is plenty of room, the centre’s closed for building maintenance.’

‘I had thought perhaps later this week.’

‘Okay. I’ll let you know how things stand after this visit.’

‘Righto. Good luck, Father. Stay strong.’

Then he called Jessica and told her.

‘Father, that is not good. Why are they doing this?’

‘The Bishop said it was to check on the child’s safety and wellbeing.’

‘Pray for the child, Father. Pray for guidance. Call me if I can help in any way.’

He thought how strange it was that she was now a confidant.

The Priest changed into clerical blacks, then went through the kitchen, outside, and up the path. He heard the wind moving through the trees, birdsong, cattle bellowing, but no noise from the house. He wondered if he had time to warn them of the visit. A car came along the road, slowed, and he heard the crunch of gravel as it made its way to the front of the centre. ‘Oh dear.’

The Priest recognised the Vicar, in a black cassock and Roman collar, wearing a stiff boxy black hat with a pom-pom on top. He was standing, chin raised as if sniffing the air, next to a man in a grey suit holding a fat leather bag, who must be the doctor. Another man, in crumpled brown slacks and a brown sports jacket, was standing where the car had parked. There was a click, and a thin curl of smoke rose over his head.

‘Father Paul, it’s good to see you again,’ the Vicar said, adding without taking his eyes off the Priest. ‘This is Doctor Freeman from St. Vincents.’

‘Hello Father,’ the doctor said.

‘Over there is Mr Williams. He will be recording our visit.’

‘Recording?’ the Priest said.

‘No, cameras, Father. I understand you are uncomfortable with this visit?’

‘The arrangement I made with the family was that I manage all contact.’

‘Which is why we will let you introduce us,’ the Vicar said, his lips pulled thin. ‘And to that end, lead the way. I am most interested to meet this girl.’ He turned to where Williams was standing with the driver. ‘You, please join us, we are going to visit the family now.’

After waiting for Williams to use the bathroom, the Priest led them around the side of the building and up the hill. Where the path narrowed, they walked in single file, the reporter bringing up the rear. At the gate, the Priest opened it and stepped aside to let them through.

While they waited for Williams, the Vicar, holding his hat against gusts of wind, and the doctor looked down at a yellow weatherboard house with white window frames and a grey corrugated iron roof. There was a large green water tank on the corner nearest them, connected to the house by a white pipe. A gravel driveway ran from the road to a flat-roofed stainless-steel double garage, its roller-doors down.

As they walked down to the house, a car slowed and stopped just past the driveway.

Shaun had got up before it was light on Sunday morning to go for a walk before the city stirred. He wore his prison T-shirt and track top under the hoodie Florence bought for him. The streets were mostly empty of cars, the traffic lights bright in the early morning twilight. He felt the cold, hard pavement through the thin soles of his prison issue shoes as he stood outside the hotel, deliberating which direction to take.

‘Over here, buster,’ a man called, standing next to a couple of bulging black garbage bags on the other side of the hotel’s entrance. Shaun walked over. ‘Remember me?’ the man said.

‘The smell rings a bell,’ Shaun said, grinning. ‘They call you Angry, right?’

‘That’s me. Angry – but always right. Grab one of these bags and walk with me.’

‘Where?’

‘Grab a bag, and I’ll tell you.’

‘I can’t go too far; I’m getting picked up later this morning.’

‘You want to see the girl again?’

‘Amara?’

‘Who else, dipshit.’

‘I do. She saved my life.’

‘Yeah, whatever. I do the shit work, nobody notices. You got everything?’

Shaun felt the money and the hotel door card in his pocket. ‘We’ll be coming back?’

‘You want to meet the girl?’

‘Yes.’

The angry man picked up one of the bags and started walking. Shaun looked at the hotel entrance, then picked up the other bag and followed him.

Florence watched the four figures coming down the hill to the house. From the flash of white at their necks, their black dress, she picked the first two as clergy. She had no idea who was in the grey suit, but the one at the back had to be Williams. She'd been pissed when she went to pick up Shaun and he wasn't there, but decided to head to Mittagong on her own. Now it appeared her hunch to try the Hermitage Retreat before the churches in the area had been a good one.

She drove slowly up the driveway, arriving as the Priest, followed by the Vicar and the doctor, came around the side of the house. They stopped and watched her get out of the car. Williams came around the corner behind them, stepping on a cigarette.

'What the f... What are you...?' he said. Florence ignored him and lifted a camcorder onto the roof of the car, aimed at the front door. Williams turned to the Vicar, 'You didn't say she was coming.'

'Who is this?' the Vicar said, pointing his chin at Florence.

They turned when they heard heavy footsteps and saw through the pebbled glass pane in the door that someone was on the other side. Florence started recording.

The door opened and Simon, in a purple sequined magician's outfit, stepped out, stomped a shiny black platformed shoe on the wooden verandah, spread his arms wide – a top hat in one hand, a black cane in the other – and said, 'Ta da!'

Williams, standing to one side, said quietly, 'Who the fuck is this?'

Simon put his hat on and waggled the black cane at the priests. 'What's this, the Spanish Inquisition?' Then, at the doctor, 'What's in the bag, ducky, an electric prod?' James, in jeans and a jumper, joined Simon on the verandah, standing with his arms folded.

'Ah, hello Simon, hello James. This is the Very Reverend Poole, Doctor Freeman, and a Mr Williams. I tried to contact Joseph to tell him, but got no answer. I only found out they were coming this morning.'

'And why, why, why are you here?' Simon said.

'The Bishop wanted confirmation the child was safe,' the Priest said.

'Amara? Why wouldn't she be?' James said.

'Quite. That is what I said, but ...'

'You know these people, Father?' the Vicar said.

'I do. They are friends of the family.'

The Vicar moved forward but was stopped from stepping onto the porch by Simon barring the way with the cane. 'Be off with you, foul devil.'

'Really, Father. Please sort this at once. We need to investigate the girl,' the Vicar said.

'Eww. That sounds a bit pervy,' Simon said.

James moved next to Simon. 'Father, weirdo, doctor, you,' he nodded at Williams. 'She's not here. We're here for some fresh air, and for Simon to practise his magic routine.'

Simon banged the cane on the deck, held it above his head, said, 'Hey presto,' and a small red umbrella popped open.

'This is too much. You are on church property,' the Vicar said, 'and I am going inside.'

Simon pointed at the Vicar's hat. 'Oh my god, that is adorable. Swapsies?'

'She's really not here?' the Priest said.

'She's really not here,' Paul said.

'Do you mind if the Vicar has a look?' the Priest said.

James stepped to one side. Simon, taking his hat off, bowed deeply, and a pink dildo fell onto the porch and bounced off the verandah. 'Hat's off inside,' he said as the Vicar walked past, nose high.

While he was looking through the house, the Priest said to James and Simon, 'I am truly sorry about this. I really did try to warn Joseph.'

'Don't sweat it,' Simon said. 'Can we stay until tomorrow?'

'As far as I am concerned, that will be fine.'

The Vicar returned, went past them without saying anything, and headed back the way they had come. The doctor walked to the corner of the house, turned to the Priest and said, 'It looks like he's going,' and followed him.

'I best go back too. I'll pop back later to let you know about staying. It should be okay. Mr Williams, are you coming?'

'I'll just confer with my colleague here.' He walked to Florence who panned the camera to follow him. 'That wasn't what was expected. Can I get a ride back into the city with you?'

'Fuck off. Private car. Go back with your buddies,' and lifted the camcorder off the roof.

Williams stood for a moment, then turned and walked back around the house.

‘He called you a bitch,’ Simon said.

‘That’s me,’ Florence said. ‘I don’t suppose you want to tell me what’s going on?’

‘No sister, trust has left the building,’ Simon said.

‘Fair enough. Nice outfit. Liked the routine. I got it all.’

‘Make me a star!’ Simon said.

‘I’ll do my best,’ Florence said, ‘The Priest has my number,’ and got in the car and drove down the hill.

Angry crossed intersections without checking it was safe, and didn’t talk. When Shaun asked where they were going, he’d say, ‘You want to see the girl?’ without slowing down. Occasionally he stopped to poke at rubbish put out on the street during the night.

On Liverpool Road, hazard lights flashed on a caravan and the van towing it, parked in a bus stop. A man opened and closed the caravan’s door, pulling on the handle. As they got close, Angry said, ‘Hey, fuckface.’

Joe turned, said, ‘What?’ then stepped back onto the pavement.

Angry put the garbage bag down. ‘Recognise me? Think back. We were locked up together.’

Joe tilted his head. ‘Oh yeah, you’re that crazy dude. What’s up now?’

‘Doing my job. This is Shaun, he wants to thank your kid for helping him.’

Joe looked at Shaun, who put the garbage bag down. ‘You’re the man at the station with the knife?’

‘Yes. Hi.’

‘Um. The kids are in the van. I think they’re asleep.’

The van door slid open. Joe heard Mary say, ‘Stay in the car,’ and Amara reply, ‘It’s okay Mum,’ and watched her step onto the pavement, Mary getting out too.

‘Hello Amara,’ Shaun said.

‘Hi Shaun. It’s good to see you. You look much cleaner.’

Shaun laughed. ‘I am. Thanks to you. Are you good?’

‘Yes. But we have to leave Sydney. We’re going to live in the country.’

‘That’s enough, Amara,’ Mary said. ‘We need to go.’ Then, to Joe, ‘The door fixed?’

‘Yep, all good,’ he said.

‘Do you want to come with us?’ Amara said. ‘We’ve got room. Our new car’s a seven-seater.’

‘Introduce me to your better half,’ Angry said to Joe.

‘Um, Mary. Remember years ago, I had to go to Maroubra Police Station. He was there.’

‘I gave him advice,’ Angry said. ‘He was hell bent on trying to find out who...’

‘And how do you two know each other?’ Mary said to Angry and Shaun.

‘We moved in the same circles,’ Angry said.

Amara pulled on Mary’s sleeve. ‘Can Shaun come with us, Mum? It would be good for him to live in the country too.’

‘I don’t want to...’ Shaun said.

‘Look, the deal is, the big man,’ Angry’s eyes flicked up, ‘wants him out of the city. And you’re going out of the city. I suggest you don’t go pissing off His Almightyness.’

‘Is God angry at you?’ Amara said to Angry.

‘Let’s say, I have a bit to do before he wants to cuddle. Look, it’s getting light. There’s going to be a bus here in,’ Angry closed his eyes, ‘two minutes and forty-seven seconds. Get going and sort it out on the way. I’ve got a breakfast to get to.’

‘Come on, Shaun. My brother’s in the car, and our cat, but there’s heaps of room.’

Mary said to Shaun, ‘Is that what you want?’

‘I could come, if there’s room, and it’s no trouble. I have nothing here.’

‘Is that yours?’ Joe said, pointing to the black garbage bag at Shaun’s feet.

‘Fuck off, that’s mine.’ Angry picked up both bags. ‘And get a move on.’ He turned and walked away.

‘You can sit next to me. Josh is asleep in the back,’ Amara said.

Mary looked at Joe. ‘We should get going. We can work it out as we go.’