

Jarek

By
Rigby Taylor

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Smashwords Edition

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Cover: Detail of **The Swimming Hole** by **Thomas Eakins**

Chapter 1. Zeno

Skinny-dipping with Raylene's friends was not Zeno's idea of a fun night out. He'd only agreed because he wanted to seem tough, and hoped if he felt her up in the water and fucked her afterwards her mates would stop spreading rumours he was queer.

The cars screeched to a halt at the boat ramp. Everyone piled out and headed for the small beach until Bob's girlfriend reckoned there'd be eels and leeches in the river and refused to go down. Then the others also chickened out, saying it was too dark, probably dangerous and a stupid idea.

'Fuck you lot are wimps', Raylene yelled, grabbing Zeno's hand and dragging him down to the strip of sand. A half-moon provided enough light to see and it was hot and humid so Zeno kicked off his sandals, dropped his shorts, jocks and shirt on a rock and ran into the water, calling to Raylene to follow.

The river was wide and deep at that point with little current, so he swam upstream a few metres then drifted back expecting to meet her in the water, but the beach was empty. She'd wimped out like the other wankers; all talk and no action. More money than intelligence. He waded out in disgust and found himself in the spotlight of half a dozen powerful torches.

'You're a pathetic turd, Zeno,' Raylene's sharp voice sneered. 'Did you really think I'd want to be with a creep like you? Crawling up teachers' arses to get top marks. You think you're so bloody smart but you're just a creepy faggot who thinks he's too good for us—won't even pay footy with the boys.' Her tirade was interrupted by a high-pitched giggle, 'Bob, get your hands off my tits.

Boozy laughter.

'You're a total reject, Zeno, even your name's a fuckin disaster,' one of the guys sneered.

Loud cheers and the clink of bottles.

'Piss off back to the city, arsehole. We don't want your sort here.'

Laughing drunkenly they ran back to the parked cars and drove off.

Zeno remained rooted to the spot, too stunned to react. As the noise of revving cars faded and vision returned it brought with it a sense of liberation. He wanted to be with them even less than they wanted to be with him. At least he hadn't made a fool of himself by rushing around grabbing his clothes or covering his crotch. That would have been really pathetic.

He took a deep breath, let it out in a loud sigh, turned, stretched, grinned up at the stars and jogged a hundred metres up stream where he swam for a bit, then drifted back to the beach and wandered across the sand to retrieve his clothes. The rock was still there but the clothes weren't. He ran up to the car park. Only old food wrappers, a couple of discarded drink cans and a burnt out car wreck. He retraced his steps imagining he'd forgotten where he'd dropped his gear, but found nothing that could be used as clothing for the eight-kilometre walk home. The bastards had taken everything, even his sandals!

It was about nine o'clock, so as the only road home crossed the bridge in the centre of town he'd have to wait at least three hours for the streets to be quiet enough to risk it. A slow smile softened his face and he relaxed. It felt as if he'd been tense for months. Wound tight in a fruitless effort to be like the locals. Not appear too clever. Pretend he liked their music, jokes, films. He didn't think he was too good for them, he knew he was and hadn't been more sociable for fear of letting his guard down and being himself—too different to be acceptable in this shitty arsehole of a town. As for their pathetic football, he hated team sports. As a rabid individualist he wanted to be judged on his own merits, not on the success or otherwise of a group.

He laughed softly. He'd given it his best shot but it hadn't worked, so his parents would have to let him go back to live with his grandmother next year. Lying back on a smooth rock he saw his future in the stars. A future devoid of the local cretins. 'A small farming community,' his mother had gushed when persuading him to make the move north so they could be near his father's work as a mining engineer. 'Fresh air and simple folk who appreciate the finer things in life. We're going back to nature.'

Ha! Simple-minded and not remotely natural. The kids he knew were ignorant idiots who valued nothing except junk food, porn videos and sex with their unwholesome, loud and vulgar classmates. His mind was made up and his parents would have to accept that he was not going back to that school next year. Although he might enjoy one more week so he could pretend the walk home in his birthday suit had been fun, making their stupid joke fall flat.

A soft cough made him look into the shadows. Bloody Raylene must have come back! Probably felt sorry and brought back his clothes. A pity; he'd been looking forward to sneaking home naked. He ought to drag the bird-brained bitch into the water and drown her. Determined to ignore her he turned his back and began walking down to the river when a cultivated voice called politely, 'Zeno! May I come over?'

He knew that voice! Ms Nimffo! What the fuck was she doing there? And how did she know who he was in the dark?

'Don't be shy,' she said in a singsong baby voice as if talking to an idiot.

That did it. One thing Zeno wasn't was shy, so he wandered casually over and stood unnecessarily close, hands on hips, towering over his diminutive History teacher who, in the detail-obscuring moonlight, appeared a decade younger than her twenty-eight years.

'I live a little way up the road,' she explained, placing a tiny hand on Zeno's arm as if worried she might frighten the wild young thing away. 'Every evening I walk past here for exercise and fresh air. Tonight as I was returning I heard shouts, then saw all those flashlights. Imagining it was hooligans I remained hidden but saw and heard everything, then waited till they drove away leaving you stranded.'

It didn't occur to Zeno to wonder what she'd been doing since the cars took off, instead he smiled and said it didn't worry him, he'd walk home.

'How resourceful of you,' Adele Nimffo said with not even a hint of scepticism. 'Perhaps you'd accept a little nourishment before you set off? Coffee and a sandwich perhaps? And something with which to gird your loins? I can't imagine you want to walk home like that.'

'Wouldn't worry me,' he boasted. 'There's no need to look after me, I'm OK, honestly. Anyway, I thought single teachers weren't allowed to invite pupils home?'

'Teachers don't usually find themselves on a deserted river bank in the moonlight with a naked and handsome young student,' she said with a light laugh. 'Come on.' She hoisted a small pack onto her shoulder and led the way along the track to the main road, across it and down a short gravel road past a row of old fishermen's huts set high on stumps in case of flooding. Over the years they'd been renovated and were now desirable properties. The hum of air conditioners and television soaps floated on the hot night air. Teacher and pupil seemed to be the only people abroad as he followed her along a path enclosed by dense shrubbery and up five steps to a small entrance hall where she kicked off her sandals, then through to a tiny sitting room with polished wooden floors, a full bookcase, two comfortable armchairs and a computer desk. No television set.

With no mention of his nudity, nor any offer of the means to cover himself, Adele Nimffo tossed her backpack onto a chair and disappeared through a doorway.

'What would you like on your sandwiches?' she asked as he followed her into a cramped but sparkling kitchen in which an antique gas oven at least as old as the house occupied the extension that had once held an old wood burner. After placing every possible ingredient on the spotless bench and putting the espresso coffee maker on the gas she turned to face him. The space was so small they were almost touching. She was wearing only a halter bra and abbreviated shorts. Zeno could sense the warmth of her skin and the first twinges of an erection announced themselves.

'I need freshening up, so while I'm showering you make yourself something to eat.'

Relieved that she hadn't noticed his arousal, Zeno made a thick sandwich of ham, mayonnaise and tomatoes and had just turned off the coffee when there was a loud bang and a cry from the other side of the house. He raced towards the sound and pushed open the door. Ms Nimffo was on the bathroom floor jammed between the toilet and the shower, head at an odd angle, legs spread, her right hand scrabbling at the edge of the vanity unit in a vain effort to regain her feet.

'Oh...' she wailed. 'My head.'

Zeno knelt and tried to move her but she seemed to be stuck. 'I'm going to have to drag you out a little,' he said.

'Just do it!' she snarled. 'My neck feels as if it's going to snap.' Positioning himself between her splayed legs he took hold of an ankle in each hand and gently pulled, wondering why the sight of her cunt wasn't more exciting. It looked like the photos in the textbooks, but with more hair. And her tits weren't anything to write home about—lumps of fat with long nipples. A bit creepy really.

Having dragged her out from under he straddled her and pulled her to her feet. On the way up her mouth brushed his penis and he wondered if it was accidental and why it didn't seem more exciting. She slumped, so he had to hold her against his chest like a bag of wheat. She put her arms around him and pressed herself against his groin. He began to harden.

'My bedroom's opposite,' she whispered.

He carried her in, laid her none too gently on the bed and was about to cover her when she let out a loud cry.

'I've got cramps! I need a massage! Quick!' Before her unwilling student could withdraw she grabbed his hand and thrust it between her legs, using his fingers like a dildo, rubbing her clitoris and thrusting them into her swelling vulva. Shocked, Zeno pulled his hand away. Ignoring him she rolled onto her side, reached into a drawer of the bedside cabinet and produced a foil packet that she ripped open with her teeth. Zeno, too stunned to react, was still standing in front of her when she rolled the condom onto his erection. It was so slickly done, so fast and professional his irritation dissolved into amazement, to be replaced by anger when with surprising strength she dragged him on top and drew her legs up to her chest. His response was a combination of fury and reflex. With all the force he could muster he rammed his manhood violently into the exposed swollen slit.

'Slowly, slowly, stupid boy!' Ms Nimffo snapped. 'I don't want you coming before I'm ready! Like this...in...out...in...out...and thus she gained the maximum personal satisfaction while Zeno avoided boredom by watching his leisurely thrusting in a large mirror above a dressing table beside the bed. After observing the play of light on muscles, buttocks clenching and relaxing, he raised his body a little so he could watch his shaft sliding in and out.'

'Stupid fuckwit! Put it back in!' his instructress almost screamed 'Stay in! Stay in! Deeper! Deeper!'

Curiosity replaced the urge to pull out and leave her unsatisfied. He'd heard tales of women screaming and writhing like wild cats as they orgasmed and he wondered what she'd be like—if she ever managed to have one. Tedium was rapidly overtaking curiosity by the time soft moans became grunts then whimpers and finally loud screams of delight. That was when Zeno thought he must have ejaculated—his penis was by then too insensitive to register anything except relief. He rolled the condom off and held it up. The bulb was filled and no leaks visible.

'What'll I do with this?'

'Flush it!' his hostess growled irritably; orgasm had clearly failed to improve her mood.

Desires satiated, Ms Nimffo dressed while Zeno ate his sandwich alone in the kitchen. Unsure whether to simply leave or wish the unpleasant woman good night, he was standing indecisively at the door when she bustled into the sitting room, opened her knapsack and tossed his clothes and sandals at him.

'You'd better put these on.'

'You've had them all along?'

'Yes.'

'So those guys didn't leave me naked?'

'No.'

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'You needed to be taught a lesson. Now get dressed and go. And if you mention what happened in this house to anyone I'll make sure you're expelled and fail your examinations.'

Zeno merely shook his head in disbelief and scurpered. There was no way he'd ever tell anyone he'd screwed that ugly bitch. A man has some pride!

As he jogged down the lane towards the main road a shadowy figure appeared and whispered, 'Zeno.'

He stopped and demanded angrily. 'Who the fuck are you?'

'George, from your Maths class. I need to ask you something.'

Zeno grabbed his collar, dragged the skinny guy to the nearest street lamp and peered at the narrow, nervous face. 'What the fuck are you doing here and what do you want?'

'Sorry, sorry...don't hit me! I shouldn't have...sorry, forget it, I...'

'I'm not going to hit you and stop being so nervous. What's this about?'

'Her!'

'Ms Nimffo?'

'Yeah. Has she...did you?...did she get you to screw her?'

'What business is that of yours?'

'None, it's just that she did it to me and I hate her so much I hang round here waiting for a chance to...to...hell, I don't know. All I know is I want to really, really hurt the bitch.'

'Why?'

'She picked me up one night when I was walking home and took me to her place. Reckoned she wanted to get to know her students better. She was making coffee when she suddenly fainted. I helped her to bed and then she got me to fuck her. At first I thought it was OK, but then she made me come over every second night for three weeks...threatened to have me expelled if I didn't. Then for no obvious reason she told me the only thing in my favour was the size of my dick, so not to bother coming by any more. Then she threatened that if I told anyone she'd deny it and make sure I failed all my exams.'

Zeno laughed wildly. 'George, mate, you're obviously a much better lover than me—this was my first and last time screwing the unlovely Ms Nimffo. I've just been unceremoniously dumped too. I think it was because I yawned and fell out of her hole during the interminable pumping.'

George giggled. 'The last bloke only lasted two days, so perhaps I'm not so bad after all.'

'Have you been checking up on her?'

'I stake out the place most nights to see if she brings someone home.'

'Kinky.'

'No. It's not like that. I hate the scrawny sow. She's stuffed up my mind. Don't really know how I feel about sex any more. I want to find out who else she's screwing.'

'What for?'

George shrugged despondently. 'Not sure. I guess I want to make her pay.'

'I thought it was only women felt like that. You know, Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'

'You reckon I'm mad?'

'Everyone needs a hobby. Who knows, you might see someone worth blackmailing.' Zeno grinned to show he wasn't serious,

'It's her I want to blackmail. Which brings me to the question, Why were you naked?'

Alex explained.

'The cunning sow! Since I've been watching she's had at least three other kids from school. You're the first one I've dared talk to about it.'

'Why me?'

'You're different somehow. You're not like the locals and won't be stuck in this place forever.' His sigh was heartfelt. 'I'll probably never leave so I have to be careful what stories and rumours get around. What do you reckon? Can we get Nimffo? Make her life hell?'

The thought was tempting, but Zeno discovered he wasn't particularly upset about it. He felt stupid. Exploited. But it hadn't damaged his self-confidence. He certainly wasn't going to lose any sleep over the fact that Ms Nimffo had used him like a dildo. In fact it had been educative to discover that vaginal sex with a female was the least interesting of all the methods he'd used to get his rocks off. Compared to his hand, pillow, blow-up doll and a previous girlfriend's mouth she didn't rate. Nevertheless he understood it might have been traumatic to an insecure spindly specimen like George—notwithstanding his apparently large cock. 'I don't know, George,' he said

making an effort to sound serious. 'All she's done is bore me witless for an hour. But I can see she's really upset you. Is it because of your girlfriend?'

George looked down and scuffed his feet. 'Yeah. I've been getting on really well with Sylvia. She's given out hints that she's ready to screw. She's a virgin. I was too till that slut in there raped me! Now...' He fell silent.

'She's spoiled the excitement?'

'Worse. I feel dirty! As if I've cheated on Sylvia. As if I'm not good enough for her now.'

Zeno pictured Sylvia and choked on his effort to stop laughing. The dumbest girl in class. Piggy little nose, lank, greasy red hair and shapeless legs. Perhaps it was her huge boobs George treasured. 'It's the opposite, George!' he said with manly certitude. 'Surely you know women appreciate a bit of experience in a man? You're now a sexy stud and instead of stuffing up Sylvia's first fuck through nervousness, as most guys do apparently, you'll give her an experience she'll appreciate forever.'

'You reckon?'

'Guarantee it. So, do you still want to get back at the witch?'

'I want to stop her from raping other young guys and threatening them with expulsion and failure. Surely you can see she must be stopped?'

'Put like that, I agree. What say we sound out the other kids you've seen here, and then decide what to do?'

'Yeah, that'll be excellent. I knew you'd be the right person to ask. You live out on the Koeran Road, don't you?'

'Yeah.'

'How're you getting home?'

'Jogging.'

'Want a lift? I've got my motorbike around the corner.'

'George, you're a lifesaver. After an hour bonking that sex maniac I can barely walk and I feel filthy. Got time for a quick swim first?'

'In the river?'

'Yeah.'

'No togs.'

'Skinny dip.'

'Naked?'

'There's no one else around.'

'I've never swum naked in my life.'

'Then you haven't lived.'

Four minutes later they'd dropped their clothes on the rocks and were leaping into the water.

'Hey! This is great. If I stand still with my legs apart the current caresses my cods. I'm getting a hard on.'

'I told you it's great.'

'Better than great! I'm going to bring Sylvia here.'

They swam and waded a few hundred metres up river then drifted back on the lazy current.

'Why have I never done this before?'

'Because you were born and bred in the arse end of the universe.'

'Is this place really so bad?'

'The place is fine; the people are narrow-minded, racist, bigoted, fundie fuckwits.'

'Yeah. I guess you're right.'

They jumped up and down to shake off the excess water.

'Fuck! You really have got a horse cock!'

George looked down in consternation. 'Is it too big?'

'I'm jealous. But honestly, you'll have to massage Sylvia's cunt till she relaxes enough to take it. Even then you'll have to go in really slowly. I've read about these things.'

'You're joking.'

‘I’m serious, mate. For goodness sake don’t just shove it in, you’ll split her in two.’

‘Shit it’s lucky I met you. I don’t think I’d have thought of that. Ms Nimffo just took it straight in and I imagined all girls would be like that.’

‘That’s because she’s a whore. Virgins are nervous, and unless they’re properly worked up their twats are tight and dry and easily hurt, especially by something as huge as yours! It’s bigger than Sebastian’s.’

‘Who’s Sebastian?’

‘A friend of my grandmother. He’s a farmer and I spend most of my holidays at his place.’

‘How do you know he’s...you know...?’

‘Got a fat long dong? Because we never wear clothes on the farm. They reckon it’s unhealthy.’

‘They?’

‘Him and Grandma.’

‘Is she naked too?’

‘Yeah, and a scrawnier bit of flesh you’re not likely to find. As tough as boots. I love her more than my parents and I’m going to live with her next year. Fuck this place and school.’

‘Shit, you’re lucky. I wish I’d got to know you before.’

‘Well, why didn’t you come up and talk to me? I was the lonely new guy who was made to feel as if I was diseased, totally stupid, unloved and on an unfriendly planet. I couldn’t just barge in and demand to be someone’s mate.’

‘I wanted to, but I felt too shy and inadequate. You’re smart and a loner and recently you’ve been sort of hanging out with those up-themselves wealthy wankers. I thought you and Raylene were on together.’

‘Well, we aren’t, and I’m definitely not one of them! Now where’s that motorbike?’

Chapter 2. Stephen

The following morning at school Zeno kept to himself, not that anyone showed interest in talking to him. At lunchtime he followed George’s cryptic signals to the back of an old shed where three other satisfiers of Ms Nimffo’s lusts were nervously waiting. An amusing recount of his own carnal misadventure soon had the neurotic victims laughing and agreeing that instead of seeing themselves as victims they should be proud at having been chosen, because it meant they were pleasant, clean, decent young men. She was the nasty one, abusing their good nature.

They agreed she had to be reported before she ruined some young guy’s life. However, it was up to Zeno, who would be leaving in seven weeks, to inform the Principal. They couldn’t do it because they were stuck in the town and would never be able to live down the shame of having been fiddled with by that hag. To their surprise he agreed without protest.

His agreement wasn’t generosity, it was self-preservation. When broached on the subject of his returning to stay with his grandmother for his last year of high school, his parents had been adamant. No way! That rebellious old biddy was already exerting her nefarious influence over him in the holidays. As for her over-sexed young farmer friend! The further Zeno lived from that reprobate the better his parents liked it. Not one to give up on his plans, Zeno had decided to get himself expelled.

‘Come in!’ The Principal had had a hard day and was not in the mood for complaining kids. ‘Stand there,’ he said firmly, pointing at a spot in front of his desk without looking up.

Zeno smiled to himself; the worse mood the old guy was in the better. During the next five minutes he counted the few remaining hairs on Mr. Noble’s bald scalp, noted his collar was beginning to fray at the neck, observed that his bony hands were hairy and he twitched his head every time he turned a page. The poor old bugger must be near retirement, Zeno reckoned. It should be easy to shock him and get kicked out.

Eventually, Mr. Noble looked up and frowned. ‘Yes?’ His voice was surprisingly pleasant—soft and deep. ‘I apologise for snapping at you when you came in. Zeno, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You’ve impressed your teachers in the few months you’ve been here, well done. Now, what can I do for you.’

‘Thanks for seeing me, Sir. I want to report a rape.’

Mr Noble sat back and frowned. ‘That’s serious,’ he said softly as he stood and closed the door to the secretary’s office. Studying the student with obvious concern he invited Zeno to take one of the armchairs at the other end of the room then joined him. ‘Are you able to give me details, or is it too embarrassing?’

‘Oh, I’m not embarrassed, Sir, just angry. I like to have a swim in the evenings in the river and...’ Leaving out all mention of Raylene and her gang, Zeno gave a frank and explicit account of his misadventure with Ms Nimffo.

The Principal sat still for at least a minute then looked Zeno in the eye. ‘How old are you?’

‘Just turned sixteen.’

‘You look at least two years older, so Ms Nimffo probably thought you were of legal age.’

‘That’s not worrying me, I’m perfectly old enough to have sex and this wasn’t my first time. I’m not traumatised or anything like that, so don’t worry on that score, it’s just that I was tricked into it and then threatened with expulsion and failure if I told anyone.’

‘Are you sure you did nothing to encourage Ms Nimffo?’

‘Absolutely not, Sir! I’ve never even spoken to the woman outside the classroom. I don’t find her attractive in any way—certainly not sexually! I had no idea she’d been spying on me at the river and couldn’t imagine it was her who stole my clothes!’

‘You said it wasn’t your first sexual experience.’

‘My girlfriend offered herself for my last birthday, but Sebastian warned me that if women let you screw them, from then on they think you owe them forever. He reckons that’s crazy because they like it as much as guys and we do all the work! So I played it safe and settled for a blowjob. I think she was pleased, really.’

‘Who’s Sebastian?’ the Principal asked hastily, determined not to show his embarrassment at his pupil’s frankness.

‘A friend of my grandmother.’

‘Do you miss your girlfriend?’

‘No way. Like Seb predicted, she immediately got clingy so I was pleased to come up here to get rid of her. But this place is worse!’

‘You don’t like it here?’

‘No! Because I don’t enjoy mixing with mean minded, racist, religious bigots. The local kids don’t like me; they think I’m stuck up and call me a poofter because I don’t want to be like them.’

‘Does that worry you?’

‘Not especially.’

‘That’s good. Now...let’s recapitulate. The teacher tricked you into going to her house, then while naked in the shower she pretended to fall, then enticed you to have intercourse with her. She’s a small woman and you are a tall, fit and strong young man. You could have left at any time. Is that correct?’

‘Yes, Sir, but she didn’t entice me; she made it seem it was my duty. She’s a teacher and I’ve been programmed to obey them.’

‘I see. Did you enjoy it?’

‘It was disgusting!’

‘Yet you managed to gain an erection and maintain it for many minutes.’

‘Sir, I get erections all the time. I have to jerk off at least five times a day to relieve the pressure. Wasn’t it like that for you?’

Mr. Noble had difficulty concealing his sadness. This young man was everything he admired; everything he would love to have been. Open, honest, easy, self-confident but not bumptious. Tall, strong and handsome. Clean-cut. Desirable to women. The Principal wasn’t jealous, there was

nothing mean in his character, but he was unable to conceal the despondency in his voice. 'I wasn't so fortunate.'

'I guess it was the novelty of being lusted after by a teacher, and then I kept it up by watching myself in the mirror beside her bed.' Zeno's laugh was infectious. 'I got so bored I lost concentration and slipped out. That made her really mad and she yelled to shove it back in harder. You wouldn't believe how noisy she is when she comes. Screaming and shouting.'

The Principal turned away to hide a smile that threatened to become a roar of laughter. Never in his entire teaching career had a student been so disarmingly and hilariously honest. He knew he shouldn't laugh; they were talking about a member of his staff! His eyes watered and he took out a handkerchief, dabbing at his eyes and blowing his nose before he was in a fit state to carry on. He took a deep breath and finally managed to look the student in the eye without subsiding into laughter. 'You're amazing, Zeno. I should be shocked, but you make the whole sordid episode sound extremely amusing.'

'Well, it was pretty bizarre.'

'I agree, but you can see that a good lawyer would have you laughed out of court if you pressed charges.'

'Oh, I agree and don't want to do that.'

'What do you want then?'

'Get rid of her! I'm not the only one she's raped. At lunchtime I met four other guys who've all been taken to her lair and threatened with expulsion or failure if they don't screw her and keep quiet about it. They won't complain to you or tell their parents because they're too worried about becoming a laughing stock. You see, everyone imagines real males would be grateful for the experience; but that's not true! Those guys are traumatised. They've lost their self-respect. They're depressed, worried they're now soiled goods and don't deserve to have a girlfriend. She needs to be stopped before she does any more damage.'

The Principal sighed deeply. 'Zeno, tell them from me that there is no way that woman has any influence over such things as exams and expulsions. I don't want them to tell me themselves what she's done to them, but they must stop feeling worried. Will you do that?'

'Of course, Sir.'

'I have a problem. This is a small country high school and finding staff is very difficult. There are twenty teachers, including me. Seventeen are women and three are men. The women are well organised and aware of their rights, which is fair enough. Mr. Adams, the technical teacher and I are both near retirement. The only young male teacher is Mr. Schwartz, whose qualifications are in biology and physics, but he has to take physical education and boys' sport because no woman will do it. He's twenty-five and only here because it was a condition of his study grant that he teach in a remote community for three years. This is his third year. Next year he will be gone. He too feels he has been psychologically abused by the women who are always making jokes about his lack of sexual interest in them. The fact that he has a local girlfriend who works in the council offices only makes them more vicious. He never attends staff functions, doesn't come to the staffroom, and doesn't think he will last the next two months. He doesn't want to be a teacher any more and I can't blame him. The pupils, especially the older girls, are as bad as the female staff, always baiting him.'

'I've heard them calling him a black bastard,' Zeno said quietly, 'but he's hardly darker than me. This place is so racist! I like Mr. Schwartz. Most of the guys think he's great, it's the girls who make his life hell.'

'I know, and can do nothing about it because they're too devious.' Mr. Noble sighed deeply. 'Tell me, Zeno, do you want to stay in this school to finish your schooling?'

'No way!'

'Is that why you ignored Ms Nimffo's threats and reported her? You hoped you'd be expelled?'

'Yes, Sir.'

The Principal sat and contemplated this unusual student who appeared so up front, honest and guileless. Was it a facade? Did it denote maturity, sense and responsibility, or was he just another braggart trying to shock—willing to say anything to get what he wanted? Zeno held his gaze for a

few seconds then smiled shyly and looked around the room as if interested in what was on the walls. Intuitively, Mr. Noble realised that the lad was politely giving him space and time to think. ‘Those other boys you met, are they very upset? Will they make trouble in the future, do you think?’

‘I’m pretty sure they won’t, Sir. I told them all about my experience with Nimffo, laying it on a bit thick to make them laugh, because laughter frees the mind to see things in perspective. Then we chatted a bit and decided it’d be pathetic to feel like victims when obviously we should be proud. Nimffo wouldn’t have chosen us if we weren’t pleasant, clean, decent young men. She was the nasty one, not us.’

‘And they all seemed happier after that?’

‘Yeah. They made jokes, reckoned they now had the experience to pull a bird and get themselves laid by someone their own age. They’ll be fine.’

‘Those boys are the same age as you, or a year younger! Yet you counselled them. Amazing. Where did you learn such wisdom?’

‘From Sebastian. He’s my role model. Brave, clear thinking, independent. He had an odd childhood then suffered a dreadful loss a while ago, but didn’t let it destroy him.’

The Principal sat back in his chair, satisfied that Zeno was genuine and could safely be taken into his confidence. ‘I believe your story, Zeno, and I will sort things out. Meanwhile, don’t be upset when I don’t fire Ms Nimffo. Here’s the plan. Today’s Friday. I’ve a few things to organise, but first thing on Monday morning I’ll summon her to this office and confront her with your accusations. She will deny them and go and fetch her friend, Ms Medlar, the Teacher’s Association representative. They will then threaten to take all the staff out on strike and shut the school down and sue us both if I allow you to continue with what they will call defamation.’

‘How do you know this?’

‘It happens every time there’s a complaint against any female. This is the first time for Ms Nimffo—I always thought she was a shy little thing. Just goes to show appearances don’t tell the full story. Then I will tell them I believe her, and will expel you from school immediately for malicious libel, and they’ll go away, happy to have once more proven how weak and useless men are.’

Zeno’s heart sank. This was not what he’d been expecting. ‘That means I won’t sit my final exams and will have to repeat my year at the next school. Not exactly fair.’

‘If that was going to happen it wouldn’t be fair, but it’s not going to happen. Diplomacy, Zeno, is the art of pleasing everyone. I have a plan that’s been brewing in my head for several months—years if the truth were told, but I need the weekend to make sure it is possible before going into any details. Go home and rest easy this weekend. You will sit your exams and pass them, but in secret.’

‘What do I tell my parents?’

‘Nothing yet. I’ll see you on Monday.’

The weekend was the slowest on record, but the following Monday everything happened as the Principal predicted. Ms Nimffo was profoundly shocked, burst into tears and solemnly swore that Zeno had knocked at her door pretending he wanted help with his homework, but once inside he had overpowered her and raped her. Ms. Medlar, a lean and handsome young woman in her late twenties, was sent for. It took several sniffling sobbing minutes to calm her distressed friend enough to sob relief that the lout would be expelled forthwith.

When asked why she hadn’t complained to the police, Ms Nimffo confided that she didn’t trust them not to broadcast it and thus besmirch the good name of the school. She hoped the Principal fully realised what a sacrifice she had made. He assured her he admired her courage, offered a day’s leave to recover, which was bravely refused, then closed the door behind them before sinking into his chair with such a feeling of revulsion he could barely refrain from smashing something.

At lunchtime, instead of sharing a cup of tea with Mr. Adams in the woodwork room, Mr. Noble took his sandwiches to the gymnasium for a chat with Jarek Schwartz.

During the last period a note was dispatched to Zeno's history class. Ms Nimffo read it, then with a smile of smug derision stared at Zeno. 'You are to report to the Principal's office directly after school, Zeno. I suggest you take all your schoolbooks, you won't be needing them in this school again!'

A chorus of whistles and cheers from Raylene and her mates greeted the announcement. 'Now you're for it faggot. Teach you to be such a stuck-up cunt.'

Ms Nimffo smiled.

Chapter 3. Jarek

'Everything's on track, Zeno, we're going to visit Mr. Schwartz. Bring your stuff.'

Zeno followed the Principal down the back steps and across the yard to the gymnasium. For a change it was empty of shouting kids practising gymnastics or karate or basketball. They entered, locked the door behind them and crossed to the poky office.

'Wait here and listen,' Mr. Noble whispered before knocking and entering, leaving the door ajar.

'Jarek, have you made up your mind or still thinking it over?' he asked.

'I've finished thinking' he said soberly. 'The plan's great. Exactly what I'd love to do, but there must be two responsible adults, not just me. No responsible parent would let their kids go away for a week with only one teacher and a senior student—especially not one of ours! The parents know them and their families and, quite frankly, they're trash. I couldn't work with any of them!'

'I told you to consider all the students from both senior years...well?'

'There's one, but I can't imagine he'd be up for spending six weeks living with me and packs of mongrel misfits. Apart from anything else, he's only sixteen and his exams are too important.'

'Who?'

'That guy who arrived a few months ago—Zeno.'

The Principal opened the office door and called Zeno in. 'Did you hear that?'

'Yes.' Zeno grinned shyly at Jarek's astonished face. 'Sorry for eavesdropping.' He shot out his hand as if to ward off anger.

Jarek Schwartz took it and held on, staring into Zeno's eyes as if waiting for him to shout, 'Only joking, nig-nog! As if I'd want to spend six minutes with you, let alone six weeks!' When that didn't happen he frowned and asked seriously, 'Are you sure you want to do this?'

A bizarre feeling of paralysis overcame Zeno preventing him from freeing either hand or eyes. Slight vertigo accompanied a feeling that he was being sucked into the darkness beyond the teacher's brown eyes into a pool of lonely sadness.

Jarek looked away.

Zeno breathed again and retrieved his hand, experiencing an unexpected twinge of melancholy as he did so

'Zeno doesn't know the plan yet, Jarek, I decided not to tell him until I knew you wanted him to assist. I'm sure he'll agree.'

'What plan?' Zeno was becoming annoyed with what seemed like cloak and dagger nonsense.

'The plan that all year eight and nine boys will have a week with you and Jarek; hiking, swimming and getting to know themselves and nature. There are six classes and seven full weeks left till the end of the year.'

'A week with us where?'

'I've a friend who has a cabin on several hectares of forest where he used to take his kids and friends on holidays and at weekends. There are three bunk rooms each sleeping four; an outdoor, covered kitchen area with a wood-fired stove; a small shower room with a couple of cold showers and washbasins; a decent sized recreation room for indoor games in case of rain; and a separate bedroom for the parents. He's now my age, his kids have quit the nest and the place hasn't been used for a few years. He's letting me have it for nothing as long as we tidy it up, make any minor repairs and leave it in good condition. He also owns a people-mover/minivan thing that could carry

the whole family and their gear. It's still in good order but he seldom uses it so we can borrow that too.'

'That's seven weeks and six classes...what happens on the seventh?'

'That comes first. You and Jarek will spend the rest of this week getting the place ready for the first group of ten lads that you'll pick up next Monday morning. It'll be a rush for me to organise this end, but as they aren't asked to pay a cent for the week, only provide their kid with sheets and a blanket, I don't envisage any problems.'

'What happens to the girls?' Zeno asked.

'While the boys are sweating it out in the bush, they'll be enjoying female activities, whatever they are. I'll dump that problem in Ms. Medlar's lap. She'll moan about girls missing out, so I'll promise they'll be going next year. Let the next Principal sort out that can of worms.'

'What about the classes the boys are missing?' Jarek demanded.

'When those who aren't at the camp would normally be doing Physical Education, they can catch up on the subjects they miss while away. As every junior class has different exams, they're no problem.'

'How old are these kids?'

'Thirteen and fourteen.'

'They're not going to pay attention to me when they learn I'm only sixteen.'

'So we'll tell them you're eighteen. You look it, doesn't he, Jarek?'

'Yes, he does. I had to check your records twice before I could believe it, Zeno. How come you're so young?'

'After seeing the results of my entrance exam my first High School said I'd be wasting my time in year eight; but that's not the problem; what about my study and exams this year? Zeno demanded.

'I'll get you a copy of all teacher notes so you can study in the evenings, and Jarek will invigilate your exams, which we both know you will pass. Does that suit you?'

'I hope my parents will approve.'

'Once you tell them you've been expelled they'll realise it's better than sitting at home all day. How about you, Jarek, are you going to miss your girlfriend?'

'Fuck no!' Jarek exploded. 'It's a toss up what's the most attractive part of this exercise—getting out of school or having the perfect reason to ditch the bitch. She's been putting pressure on me to get married. Hell, she can't cook, she's messy, doesn't wipe the shower down, doesn't stick to the agreed jobs schedule! Certainly not what I'd describe as life-partner material.' He glanced sideways at the Principal, grinned to himself and added, 'The sex also hasn't been up to much for a long time. This is a brilliant way to get out without causing tears and recriminations. She needn't know I won't be coming back for weekends, and you'll promise to tell no one, especially her, where the camp is?'

'I promise, as long as you keep a few spare batteries for your mobile phones. There's no electricity or phone up there. I'll ring you every morning and evening. I agree there must be no visitors. It'd be a disaster for the kids to have stray adults arriving at odd times, any rapport you'd built up would vanish and they'd become self-conscious.'

Jarek turned to Zeno. 'How about you, Zeno, are you happy to spend six weeks stuck out in the bush with me?'

Zeno had been studying the teacher. Still in his P.E. Gear he looked lean but not mean. Natural tan. Thick black hair cropped like a helmet on a well-shaped head. Small ears. Strong square jaw. Prominent cheekbones. Thick black eyebrows. Dark eyes separated by two frown lines. Hooked nose. Determined lips. Heavy five o'clock shadow. Short black hairs covering arms, chest and legs. 'I can't wait to get there,' he grinned. 'Can I call you Jarek?'

Jarek's laugh sounded a little wild even to himself. He'd given up hope of the boss's plans ever coming to fruition, but now everything was falling into place his heart sang. He'd be out of the school for the rest of the year! He draped an impulsive arm round Zeno's shoulders and a faint smell of fresh sweat and an odourless gust of breath set Zeno's pulses racing. Jarek was healthy, clean and intelligent. This was going to be a zillion times better than school.

‘As you’re now one of the staff, Zeno—albeit unpaid, you can call me Stephen,’ the Principal said shyly.

‘Wow! That’s an honour, Sir—I mean Stephen, thanks!’

‘Just makes me feel a little less ancient. OK, men. Time is of the essence so I suggest that as it’s only three thirty we drive to the property so I can show you around—that’s if we can use your ute, Jarek? The wife’s commandeered mine as usual to ferry her tame nuns around or whatever she does.’

‘Sure thing, Boss.’

‘Then on the way back I’ll introduce you to the owner. He wants nothing to do with this, so will leave you totally alone and expect you to do the same with him. As I mentioned, he’s also prepared to lend us his minibus as long as we service it. You can check it out later in the week. Then tomorrow you can take your gear and any tools you’ll need and start preparing the place for the first ten kids to arrive next Monday.’

While Jarek donned a tracksuit Zeno rang his parents to tell them he’d be late.

They piled into the front seat of Jarek’s mud splashed 4WD jacked-up ute in which he went bush most weekends, and forty-five minutes later turned off the sealed road onto a rough track that after a couple of kilometres ended at a small, overgrown parking area. Behind a dense hedge a track led about fifty metres to a substantial building nestling in a small clearing among giant rainforest trees and dense undergrowth.

‘This is no cabin, Stephen,’ Jarek said with a laugh.

The tall square structure constructed of rough sawn logs and roofed with tiles, was flanked on one side by a lean-to kitchen attached to a covered area for eating. On the other side a verandah protected the three doors of the bunk rooms.

‘What do you want to do first? Inspect the buildings or the land?’

‘You said there’s a swimming hole so let’s check that out first. I need to flush away the residue of all those sweaty kids.’

‘Excellent idea,’ Zeno agreed.

Stephen led them about a hundred metres down an overgrown sandy path to the swimming hole, a wide, placid, deep pool at a bend in the creek with a sandy beach on the nearest side and steep rocky banks on the other that dropped straight into the deep water. The creek was a tributary of the river Zeno had been swimming in before his brush with Adele Nimffo. Rainforest regrowth that surrounded and overhung the pool would have suited Tarzan. There was even a rope attached to a high, overhanging branch.

‘Come on Jarek! Race you!’ Zeno left his school clothes in a heap on the sandy beach and raced into the water. ‘It’s great! Come on you two.’

Jarek hesitated

‘What’s the matter?’ Stephen asked.

‘No togs.’

‘It didn’t worry Zeno.’ Stephen seemed almost disappointed at the teacher’s modesty.

‘Didn’t want to shock you,’ Jarek muttered.

‘I’m shocked that a guy who’s proud of his bush skills and fitness thinks twice about skinny dipping in a place like this! Where’s your sense of adventure?’

‘You’re right, I’m a fuckwit,’ Jarek mumbled as he stripped and hurled himself into the water, swimming strongly across, then clambering onto the far bank to pose on a rock like a god, before diving in again. Zeno dived, grabbed hold of Jarek’s foot and dragged him under. They chased each other through the water like kids, onto the sandy beach where they wrestled, then back into the water where Jarek escaped his pursuer’s clutches by grabbing hold of the rope and hauling himself to the top using only his arms, then screeching like a monkey before diving cleanly back causing scarcely a splash.

Years of teaching and counselling had given the Principal a fair insight into the minds of both pupils and teachers. Jarek’s manifest lack of interest in females, and Zeno’s frank admission of

similar feelings pointed to an obvious conclusion. Equally obvious was that neither realised. Normally this would not be a problem, but as they'd be together twenty-four hours a day and sharing a bedroom, Stephen thought it should be discussed sooner rather than later. The question was, how to broach it? With a sly grin he gathered up the young men's clothes and called, 'I'll go and open up the cabin. Don't be too long.'

Jarek and Zeno swung on the rope a few times, decided it was safe for the kids, swam a bit more, then reluctantly returned to dry land.

'Where are our clothes?' Jarek frowned.

'Stephen must have taken them.'

Back at the cabin Stephen told them he'd put their clothes in the ute. 'Didn't think you'd want to put them on till you were dry. Anyway, forget clothes, you look better without them,' he joked uneasily. 'Come and inspect your home for the next seven weeks.'

Jarek had no problem being naked, indeed it was his preferred state when alone; he simply felt awkward being naked with other people and was on the point of going to the utility truck for his gear when he saw Zeno blithely wandering around looking more comfortable than in his baggy school shorts and shirt. Silently he berated himself for his insecurity. It was pathetic to let ancient schoolyard bullying prevent him from doing what he wanted ten years later! Surely it was time to get over being called an ignorant savage? He used to wish his parents had never left Mauritius—until he read letters from relatives who remained there.

The warm air caressed his skin, his thighs caressed his balls, and a feeling that something good was on the way began to swell in Jarek's chest, only to shrink again when he reminded himself that nothing good happened to antisocial, self-conscious idiots like him. He knew that if he didn't change his behaviour he was doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past, but feared he had little hope of doing that despite three years of Stephen's praise and encouragement.

Deep in his soul lay an acid bath of memories telling him he didn't deserve success because he was unable to stand up for himself. For the last three years he'd toed the line in a job he'd grown to hate. Acted respectable—not that he wasn't. Always feeling as if he was negotiating a path through quicksand—one false move and he'd be sucked in and drowned. He hadn't told his girlfriend to pack her bags because he didn't want to hurt her feelings. He shook his head as if to dislodge an irritant and told himself not to be a fuckwit, but grab this chance to be himself, whoever that was. With a grin he slammed his fist into his other hand. 'Yes!' a soft voice whispered in his head. 'You're going to do and say exactly what you please! You're going to be honest! You're going to...' He laughed aloud. 'Perhaps I can't change completely,' he muttered, 'but I can at least modify my dopiness.'

'What's the joke?' Stephen asked.

'Me,' Jarek admitted. 'I'm laughing at what an anal-retentive-wanker I am.'

'And?'

'And I'm going to loosen up.'

'Your anus or your attitudes?'

Zeno roared with laughter and gave Jarek a friendly shove into the large, high-ceilinged room, empty except for a couple of chairs. There'd be plenty of space for games if the weather turned sour, and there was loads of light thanks to high windows that encircled the room just below the ceiling. Doors pierced the centre of each wall. The one on their left led to an ablutions area containing two showers, two hand-basins and, through a door in the end wall, access to a small shed with a composting toilet. The door directly opposite the entrance to the recreation room opened onto the verandah of the three bunk rooms. Each could sleep four people, having bunks on either side of the door. The ablution block and the bunk rooms were in need of a good scrub, but apart from one broken window everything seemed sound. Even the mattresses that had been draped over the rafters to air were clean and not at all musty.

Returning to the recreation room Stephen opened the fourth door. 'This is your bedroom,' he announced with a flourish. It was a tiny space with just enough room for an old-fashioned double bed complete with mosquito-net frame, and a chest of drawers.

‘A double bed,’ Jarek said with a frown.

‘If it worries you, I’m sure we could find a couple of singles,’ Stephen offered.

‘They’d never fit,’ Zeno grunted, wandering to the outside door and opening it. ‘It’s a relief to see that all rooms have an emergency exit,’ he observed. ‘Great view of the hills.’

‘The view’s not important if you’re sleeping,’ Jarek snapped.

‘What’s the matter, Jarek? Are you worried I’ll snore or fart in bed?’

‘No, it’s just that I’ve never shared a bed before.’

‘Not even with your girlfriend?’ Stephen was laughing.

‘I meant with another guy.’

‘Well, if you’re frightened I’ll rape you in the night, I’ll sleep in one of the rooms with the kids, there’ll always be at least one spare bunk,’ Zeno snapped, clearly thinking Jarek was being stupid.

‘No, you won’t!’ Stephen stated firmly. ‘It’ll spoil the atmosphere for the boys if they have an adult too close. They’ll think you’re checking up on them.’

‘Sorry, sorry, sorry. I’m being stupid, as usual,’ Jarek muttered. ‘Of course we’ll share!’ He threw himself onto the bed and patted the mattress beside him. ‘Come on, partner, mark out the boundaries. Which side do you like?’

Relieved, Stephen wandered outside to sit and gaze across the valley to the far hills, remembering the happy days spent here with his friends before marriage and responsibilities and his wife’s contempt turned his life into drear days of disillusion. He knew he’d never be fit and young again, but even when he had been he hadn’t realised how precious and transient it was. Youth had definitely been wasted on him. He sighed at the ache that invaded his chest whenever he saw fit and healthy young people filled with energy and innocent hope. His life had been circumscribed by religious parents, relations, what the neighbours might think, educational expectations. Then when he became a teacher the demands of principals, and now other teachers and pupils. His whole life, he realised, had been lived obeying the whims of people he often didn’t even like or respect!

As if that wasn’t enough, the drab, narrow tunnel of his life become further constricted by the burden of a demanding and eternally dissatisfied wife. His approaching retirement was a double-edged sword; he’d be glad to leave teaching but couldn’t face the prospect of spending more time with Violet. ‘No wonder so many blokes my age top themselves,’ he muttered sadly. He sighed impatiently and tried to relax using deep breathing exercises he’d found on the Internet. Eventually he drifted into a light doze.

The Principal’s departure left Jarek and Zeno acutely aware of the proximity of the other’s body.

‘Do you wear pyjamas?’

‘No, Grandma reckons they’re unhealthy. You?’

‘Don’t own any, they always feel as if they’re strangling me.’

‘Yeah, me too.’

‘So what happens if we accidentally touch each other in the night?’ Jarek asked, unsuccessfully trying to sound unconcerned.

‘Then I guess I’ll have to kill you.’

‘Ha! You may be slightly taller and heavier, but I’m leaner, meaner and stronger.’

‘I’ll knife you in the guts.’

‘Is this religion speaking?’

‘No way! I’m a freethinker.’

‘That’s a relief. So what does a freethinking sixteen year old reckon we should do if we accidentally rollover and touch each other during the night?’

‘Being sensitive souls, it will be a dreadful shock to our psyches, so I guess we ought to prevent irrational reflex reactions that could result in maiming or death of the perpetrator, by desensitising ourselves.’

‘Sounds verbose and flowery enough to be possible, but how?’

‘Start with something we’re used to and gradually move into uncharted waters until we learn to control our revulsion and violent spontaneous responses?’

‘The only times I’ve touched men is to shake hands, or in sports like gymnastics and the occasional game of rugby. I’ve never touched a naked man.’

‘We did battle in the swimming hole and wrestled on the sand only half an hour ago.’

‘Ah, yes. I didn’t notice. Enjoying myself so much I forgot we were starkers. But it’s scarcely the same thing.’

‘OK, let’s start with hands.’

They sat facing each other cross-legged on the bed and held hands. After a minute their initial embarrassment dissipated and they were able to explore each other’s fingers and palms, then move on to forearms, elbows and upper arms.

‘OK, my nausea seems under control, so let’s touch each other’s heads then move on down.’

They leaned forward and ran fingers through hair, down over ears and around necks.

‘I love your heavy beard stubble,’ Zeno said dreamily, stroking Jarek’s cheek. ‘It looks so virile.’

‘Thanks. But you’re just as masculine. Are you sure you’re only sixteen?’

‘Sweet sixteen and never been kissed—by a man.’

Jarek frowned.

‘What’s it feel like to have a hairy chest?’ Zeno said quickly to break the tension.

‘Feel it and find out.’

‘It feels sexy.’

Jarek suddenly twitched.

‘Ha! Your nipples are as sensitive as mine. Fuck they’re hard, like little steel points. Make mine hard too?’

‘Like your tool?’

Zeno looked down and giggled. ‘That’s amazing; it never got as stiff as that with Ms Nimffo, or when my girlfriend sucked me off. ‘Hey! You are too. Bet mine’s harder!’

They tested the relative tumescence of their organ pipes then moved on to adjacent bits and pieces. When Stephen silently re-entered the room they were lying on their sides, gently masturbating each other while lightly brushing lips.

The Principal stopped, took a deep breath and regained control of his rational mind. There was nothing wrong with what the young men were doing. It was perfectly legal. He had always been outspoken in defence of minority rights, including sexual minorities, and had frequently abused both staff and pupils who vilified someone for their perceived sexual orientation. Surely, therefore, he had to act as if what they were doing was normal? If they were a man and a woman he wouldn’t think twice about interrupting a bit of petting. Taking a deep breath Stephen said with a calmness that astonished himself, ‘It’s getting late, guys, I guess we’d better head off. I’ll see you outside.’

‘Fuck,’ Jarek said when they were alone. ‘Stephen saw us. He’ll think we’re queer.’

‘Well we’re not! We’re adventurous children of nature. Come on. Let’s get going.’

‘What do we do with these?’

‘Too late for a quick wank to reduce the tension so I guess we’ll have to grin and bare them. Pun intended. If he wasn’t shocked before he’s not going to be now. Come on.’

It took an effort, but Stephen remained true to his recent vow and behaved as if two naked young men wandering around with rigid rods was normal, chatting calmly about plans while they locked up, returned to the ute and dressed. Then, as they drove away he realised with a shock that after a few seconds it *hadn’t* been an act! He honestly did feel their behaviour had been normal! The understanding provoked a tiny smile of pride.

Misinterpreting the smile, Jarek’s tension returned and caused him to ask nervously, ‘Stephen, were you shocked when you saw us kissing and...and stuff?’

‘The complete opposite, Jarek. Very, very relieved would be nearer the mark.’

‘Relieved? Why?’

‘Because it means you guys are going to have something to do in the evenings when all the kiddies are asleep. Because it means you like each other. Because you are both handsome, young, and energetic. Because you both looked so attractive together on that bed, swimming in the river, wandering round the hut that I felt like weeping—both from being in the presence of beauty, and

from regret that I've never been like you. Never dared step outside the mould of other people's judgements.'

'Compliments will get you everywhere, Stephen, but you're much too hard on yourself. You're a really nice guy and an excellent Principal, and the kids like and admire you.'

'Kind sentiments, Zeno, but not shared by most staff members. If I'm honest I don't like myself much—at least not my prospects. But this isn't about me, it's about the two most promising young men I've had the pleasure of knowing.'

'You're not only a great Principal, but an A-1 guy, Stephen,' Jarek said with feeling. 'I'd never have lasted here without you. You're incredibly generous, and we really appreciate it, don't we, Zeno?'

Zeno secretly wiped away a tear and nodded. Too moved by Stephen's words to speak.

'It's bloody confusing, Stephen,' Jarek said slowly, determined to say exactly what he intended and remain true to his vow to loosen up. 'We want to continue doing...what we were doing...but we don't feel we're gay—we feel exactly like we did before—completely normal.'

'That's because you *are* normal! Get that into your thick heads! I've been a 'kids help-line' telephone counsellor for twenty years and there aren't many books I haven't read on the subject of homosexuality, because thanks to religious bigotry that's the most common problem of kids, and the most frequent cause of suicide. Unfortunately, because of my position as Principal I've kept a low public profile until recently, but now I'm about to retire I feel secure enough to speak publicly, as you'll know if you've been reading the 'Letters' page in the newspaper. Despite all the hype from gays as well as their supporters, there's no such thing as a gay person. Gay is just another pigeonhole to shove people into so politicians and administrators and red necks don't have to think. It let's them pretend same-sex-oriented people are all the same and not quite human or deserving of all the human rights accorded to heterosexuals! There's no such thing as a gay type, a gay mentality, or even a gay community.'

'That's a relief—I think,' Jarek said with a frown.

'I've attempted to counsel loads of depressed young men with homosexual leanings and they're all different. All just human sexual animals who, depending on the circumstances, can gain pleasure, comfort and courage from sometimes sharing themselves with other guys. Sane, healthy men have always done this. How do you think sailors coped at sea for years at a time, or hunters away for weeks? Soldiers on lengthy campaigns? For at least two hundred thousand years men formed loving bonds of friendship and trust with other men. Bonds often reinforced by sexual pleasure.

'Contrary to popular belief, these relationships strengthened the bonds of marriage with women and were instrumental in human survival when life was dangerous. If the husband died then his lover would take on the responsibilities. Women too formed deep mental and physical bonds with each other for similar reasons.'

'You're a fountain of knowledge, Stephen.'

'I've always been interested in social science and a recent article I read declares that sexual repression causes violence. Societies in which sexual exploration and activity is permitted from the outset of interest at about the age of twelve or thirteen, are the most peaceful. The reverse is also true. Thus the U.S.A., being the most sexually repressive democratic society is also the most violent and warlike. Sexual relations between men have been the norm in most societies until the dreadful plague of Judaism and its offshoots—Christianity and Islam—reared their evil heads.'

Stephen lapsed into silence, depressed by the truth he had concealed from himself all his life; he too occasionally desired intimate contact with another man. Not sexual, just an arm around the shoulders, the occasional brotherly hug would be enough. He had no doubts about his heterosexuality, but a sexless marriage with one jealous and overbearing woman had been a constant torment. He shook his head as if to clear it, then fearing he had been misunderstood restated his case. 'All I'm saying is that a healthy, normal man needs some form of intimacy with another man to feel complete. Women still allow themselves intimacy with other women; they are always touching, hugging, kissing, even sharing beds. Foolishly, men have let themselves be

persuaded that male to male touching, friendship and love is sinful, and because they're denied easy intimacy, men retreat to the solitude of their sheds and alcohol; far too many descending into depression, impotence, misery and early suicide.'

They continued the drive in companionable silence, each digesting Stephen's words. Two consoled and excited; one in danger of sinking into a dangerously deep depression.

Chapter 4. Bindi, Irma, Belle & Ari

Edgar, the owner of the cabin in the bush was a well-fed, cautious man a few years younger than Stephen. He lived alone in a large old house a couple of streets from his friend. His minivan started first time and sounded in excellent condition. Jarek promised to take great care of it and perform any maintenance required. They decided to pick it up on the following Sunday to have it ready to ferry the boys on Monday morning. Edgar gave Jarek a second set of keys to the cabin, a plan of drains and water reticulation, a brochure about using the composting toilet, and a warning not to waste the rainwater, suggesting swims instead of showers. Waving away thanks, he insisted he was pleased the place was being used and refrained from reminding the young men not to damage anything; trusting his old friend Stephen to have chosen carefully.

Stephen accompanied them out to Jarek's ute. 'You have to do all the driving of the minibus, Jarek,' he instructed. Zeno, you'll have to stay at the cabin while Jarek transports the boys next Monday. Gossip spreads and we don't want a parent to recognise you and say they don't want an expelled student in charge of their kids. You must know the whereabouts of every boy at all times, day and night. This is absolutely your number one responsibility!'

'One that I'll make sure I don't fail,' Zeno assured.

'Jarek, I'll follow you and the first load of boys up to the cabin on the first day, so the parents can see I'm ultimately responsible, and I'd like to visit this week while you're preparing the place, to discuss your programs and anything else that crops up. OK?'

'Very OK! You're welcome anytime at all, no need to phone first. It'll be great to see you.'

They shook hands warmly. Stephen returned to the warmth of his friend's company and the two young men drove back to the place Jarek was sharing with his girlfriend, Bindi. A beat up little Toyota was listing in the drive of an uninspiring weatherboard house in dire need of paint. They parked on the street and conferred.

'This is going to be difficult.'

'Why?'

'Because I'm taking all my gear and leaving immediately. Clean break. However, Bindi can be difficult, so promise you'll stick close?'

'No worries, mate. I'll watch your back. Got much gear?'

'Couple of suitcases, laptop, tramping gear... a fair swag, we'll just dump it all in the back of the ute and sort it later.'

'You're shaking.'

'Terrified. As I said, she thinks we're getting married.'

'I thought you'd told her to forget it.'

'I tried, but she's a leech. Like my mother and sisters she ignores everything she doesn't want to hear, then insists I've agreed with her. If I continue to disagree they start crying! I absolutely need you with me, Zeno. I've never learned to deal with women, especially when they cry. I know it's just a ploy, that they are only mad, not sad, that they're exploiting my weakness but...'

'Stop worrying, I'm tough. If I see you wavering I'll step in. OK?'

'You're a real mate, Zeno.'

A missile struck Jarek on the forehead as he opened the door.

'Where the fuck have you been? I've been calling you for the last hour? You know we've a party tonight at Angie's!'

Zeno gazed in astonishment at the tall, shapeless young woman. Frizzy hair dyed an improbable black, apparently to match the lace bra and panties that failed to arouse any feelings of lust in her audience. Arms akimbo, face a menacing snarl, she looked formidable indeed.

‘Who the fuck are you?’ she snarled.

Jarek groaned and slid down to sit on the floor, blood streaming from a cut. Zeno knelt and cradled the head.

‘Get some disinfectant and a plaster for goodness sake! Jarek’s hurt.’

‘Don’t you speak English? Who the fuck are you?’

‘A friend.’

She glared at his school uniform. ‘Christ he’s getting desperate making friends with school kids.’ She flounced away, returning a few seconds later with a wet, less than pristine rag. ‘Haven’t got any plasters. It’s not deep. Tie a hanky round it and get out. Jarek’s got some explaining to do and we’re late.’

‘You’ll have to ring and cancel, Jarek’s not going anywhere, something’s come up and he’s moving out tonight.’

‘What do you mean moving out?’ Her voice changed gear from a penetrating whine to a razor sharp snarl. ‘We’re getting engaged tonight and he’s not getting out of that.’

Jarek groaned. ‘Change of plan, my darling. You and I are history, and if you make any more trouble I’ll be suing for assault.’

‘Assault? You stupid prick, it was only my coffee cup. Hey, come on,’ she cajoled, kneeling and pressing her tits against his head. ‘Come on, a girl’s more attractive for a bit of temperament. You’ve always said you admired my fire.’

‘That doesn’t mean I want to spend the rest of my life getting burnt.’ Jarek shoved her aside and stood. ‘Come on Zeno, I need your muscle.’

Bindi threw herself onto Jarek’s back, clawing at his neck. He shook her off angrily and shoved her against a wall. She burst into tears.

‘Ignore her,’ Jarek said as if trying to convince himself. ‘Women cry for only two reasons, pity for themselves or to get what they want. They have no emotions other than selfishness.’

After a few minutes of hammering on the door and screaming abuse, Bindi apparently gave up and silence reigned.

It took twenty minutes to pack all Jarek’s gear into a couple of holdalls and some cartons he had stored above the wardrobe. Arms full of boxes they were confronted just before the front door by Bindi and Irma Medlar, the teacher who’d defended Ms Nimffo against Zeno’s charge of rape. Her jaw dropped on seeing the expelled student.

‘What’s that rapist doing here?’ she snapped. ‘And what do you think you’re doing, Schwartz? Got cold feet or just a typical male? Use an innocent young woman then dump her as soon as you’re sick of her?’

‘What the fuck’s it got to do with you, you scrawny cow?’ Jarek snarled. ‘Keep your pointy nose out of my affairs.’

‘When a sister is being swindled by a male chauvinist pig it becomes the affair of all sisters. You’ve promised to marry Bindi, and marry her you will, even if we have to drag you trussed and screaming to the registry office!’

‘I’ve never promised any such thing!’

‘Scum! Bindi told everyone at the sister’s meeting at least five weeks ago that you had proposed. There are fifteen women prepared to swear to that fact, so get used to it, mister.’

‘Why would you want to marry someone who doesn’t love you, let alone want to marry you?’ Zeno asked Bindi in genuine surprise.

‘Shut up, pervert!’ Irma Medlar snarled. ‘Men are useless fucks whose sole purpose is to fertilise women and provide for them and their children. Their bodies are ugly, their minds puerile, their desires vulgar, and their interests selfish. In a well-organised world men would be discarded the second they’re no longer useful; and trust me, Schwartz, if you don’t do the right thing by Bindi you’ll be discarded long before your use-by date.’

‘Is that a threat, Irma?’

‘Take it as you want.’

Jarek turned to Bindi. ‘Is this how you think about me, and all men?’

‘Of course,’ the young woman’s tone lacked conviction. ‘I’m not as smart as you, so you fooled me for a while, but when Irma invited me to join the Women’s War, I realised what an idiot I’ve been—how you’ve used me.’

‘I used you? You’re lazy and slutty and won’t even clean up after yourself. I’ve paid the rent on this place and for all the food. Your contribution’s been mess in all the rooms, unwashed underwear, and frequent bad tempers.’

Bindi burst into tears, subsiding into deep sobs, apparently wracked with misery. Irma Nimffo wrapped her arms round her friend and whispered into her ear.

‘I’m pregnant,’ Bindi announced sullenly, staring at her feet.

‘If you are, it isn’t mine.’

‘Don’t try to weasel out of this, Jarek Schwartz!’ Irma snarled.

Jarek lifted Bindi’s chin and looked her in the eyes. ‘Are you?’

Silence

Jarek’s voice was sad. ‘You’ve had far more from me than I’ve ever had from you, Bindi. I don’t resent it, I earn more than you and I’m a couple of years older. Surely you can see we have no future together?’

‘No!’ she wailed. ‘I want to get married!’

‘Then do so, but it won’t be to me. Tomorrow I’m telling the agent I’m leaving. There’s still a week’s rent paid in advance, so if you want to stay on after that you’ll have to go in and sign up in your name. You can use my bond, or keep it if you leave, so don’t tell me I’m selfish.’

‘You’re a brute! Schwartz,’ Irma hissed.

‘Come on, Zeno.’ They picked up their gear and carried it out to the ute. It took three trips to clear everything watched by the malevolent eyes of the women. As Jarek stood for the last time in the doorway he turned to Bindi and said sincerely, ‘Don’t listen to poisonous people like Irma, Bindi. She’s sour and embittered because no man will have her. You aren’t a bad person and will find the right man soon.’

‘Jarek Schwartz,’ Irma hissed, ‘you are a selfish, egotistical, cruel man and I hope something dreadful happens to you.’

‘Be careful with curses you venomous witch, they’ve a habit of returning to haunt you.’

Instead of appreciating Jarek’s generosity, Bindi stood on the front steps while they finished loading the ute, screaming insults about his minute attributes, pathetic performance in bed and accusations that he was a fucking faggot screwing his pupil. Neighbours on both sides were peering out their windows enjoying the entertainment as Jarek and Zeno drove away.

There was plenty of space in the driveway of Zeno’s house. They parked and sat in embarrassed silence.

‘Sorry about that.’

‘Not your fault.’

‘As for that dreadful creature, Irma Medlar, what did she mean by calling you a rapist?’

‘Tell you later. It’s a lie. Stephen knows all about it. It’s the reason I’m working with you instead of going back to school.’

‘I see. At least I don’t, but I’m guessing it’s not as bad as what you’ve just witnessed.’

‘Bindi’s not the sort of woman I imagined you’d be living with.’

‘Nor me. I rented the house, then advertised for someone to share the rent. She had a boyfriend so I imagined it wouldn’t get complicated. Then he shot through about a year ago and she came to my bed for consolation. She was a good fuck at the beginning, I’ll give her that. Then a few months ago she got clucky. Reckoned she was pregnant. We’ve never had unprotected sex, but you never know if a condom’s leaked, so I bought a test kit and forced her to use it. She wasn’t. But continuing demands that we get married and have a baby, set alarm bells clanging and I’ve never

toucher her since. So if she is up the duff it isn't mine. I wanted to move out earlier but couldn't find a place for just seven weeks till the end of term. Stephen's offer of these camps for the boys is a lifesaver. I haven't told her about it and Stephen promised he wouldn't tell her where I was, so we should be safe.'

'Medlar will know!'

'Yes, that is a worry.'

'I reckon you're a bit generous to Bindi. She's as nasty a bit of work as Medlar, in my opinion. Shouting down the street that you were screwing your pupils. That could get you in deep shit. Especially if you have been.'

'Keep that up and you'll be screwed good and proper, young man!'

'Mmm...can't wait. Meanwhile, where are you sleeping tonight?'

'In the back of the ute, I'm used to it every weekend when I go bush.'

'Did Bindi go with you?'

'Only once. Hated every minute. Moaned the entire time. Resented my going too after a while. Shit! The thought of marrying that woman makes my blood run cold.'

'How's your head?'

'It's nothing. Are you OK? Have you told your parents you've been expelled?'

'Nope. They're easy about things, but not easy to talk to because they never listen. Tend to leap in with their wishes or opinions before you've finished. Dad spends three weeks out of four up country at the mine. Mum refuses to let me go back to live with Grandma next year, insisting I stay with her for company. She'll have no choice now I've been expelled. This time it's me who needs *your* moral support. Come on.'

An imposing, buxom woman in a short skirt several sizes too small and a blouse exposing a cleavage that reminded Jarek of her son's magnificent butt, came onto the verandah to see who's vehicle had pulled in.

'Ah! It's you, Zeno. Where have you been? I've been trying to contact you all day. You're late for dinner.' Bright blue eyes lit on Jarek and the frown dissolved, the face lit up, bright red lips smiled, and a pleasant contralto demanded to be introduced to the handsome young man.'

'Mum, this is Jarek. Jarek, this woman wearing too much lipstick and too few clothes is my mother.' Zeno muttered irritably.

His mother merely tinkled a good-natured laugh.

'How do you do, Mrs. Paigan,' Jarek said nervously.

'Welcome, Jarek. I'm Belle,' Mrs. Paigan's smile was shrewd as she offered a plump hand decorated with several chunky silver rings. 'Oh! Poor man. You've hit your head. Come inside. Zeno, go fetch disinfectant, a bandage, some plasters and your father.'

'Out of the frying pan into the fire,' Zeno grinned at Jarek as his mother took hold of her visitor's head and pressed it to her bosom, practically burying his nose in her cleavage while conducting a thorough examination of the wound. Releasing the gasping young man she patted the chaise longue beside her.

'Come and sit beside me,' she said slyly. 'You're the first friend Zeno has brought home since coming to this place. Have you always lived round here? Have you brothers and sisters? How old are you? You must be the handsome one of the family?'

'No, yes, twenty-five, and I'm the ugly one,' Jarek laughed. 'I was just...'

Whatever he was going to say was interrupted by Zeno returning with a first aid kit and his father. Mr. Paigan looked like a classic ascetic—tall and slim with a long nose, hollow cheeks, hooded eyes and a sensitive mouth that needed a good reason to smile. Like the greyhounds he resembled, he ate sparingly and only when necessary. His habit of bestowing his undivided attention on whomever he was talking with, tended to make them not only loquacious but also nervously honest in gratitude at being listened to for a change.

'Dad, this is Jarek. Biology, physics and physical education guru at school.'

Mr. Paigann turned a penetrating gaze on his guest and smiled softly. 'You are very welcome, Jarek. I'd given up hope of Zeno making a friend in this place.'

'Jarek's hurt,' Belle interrupted before Jarek could transfer his attention to her husband. She held out her hand and Zeno passed a cloth moistened in warm water and disinfectant with which she lightly swabbed the wound.

'It's not serious, a plaster will do,' she decided, taking one from Zeno then accidentally dropping it on the floor. Bending to retrieve it, her right breast escaped the insufficient confines of her blouse and swung free. Apparently unaware, she dragged Jarek's head forward again and applied the dressing before sitting back, nonchalantly tucking the tit back into place.

Jarek wasn't sure how to react, especially as neither Zeno nor his father seemed to think anything unusual had happened. Feeling out of his depth and lost for words, he just smiled.

'How did you get the wound?' Mr. Paigann asked.

As Jarek was still lost for words, Zeno explained. 'His girlfriend threw her coffee mug at him when she realised he was dumping her this afternoon. I was there. It was awesome.'

'Goodness, how terrible for you' Belle sympathised. 'Where will you stay now?'

'I'm fixed, thanks,' Jarek replied with a strained smile.

'Well, if you need anything, you've only to ask.' Turning to her son she took both his hands in hers and in the tone of a penitent said pleadingly, 'Zeno, darling. I wonder if we've been a little thoughtless demanding that you remain here next year. Do you still want to stay with Grandma?'

Zeno burst out laughing. 'OK Mum, what's changed your mind? Don't tell me you're also sick of living in the arse hole of the universe.'

'Well, I have to admit that's part of the reason, the rest is that Ari's been offered a beautiful house only a few hours' drive from the mine, so as I'm sick of seeing my husband only one week in four, I'm going with him. Unfortunately, there will be no suitable school for you, so as it seems stupid to go to the expense of a boarding school, we thought...'

'Send the nuisance back to his grandmother,' Zeno grinned. 'Yes, I still want to go back, so that's fine. When do you want to move?'

'I know it seems selfish, but the sooner the better for my sanity. Of course I wouldn't consider leaving you in the lurch. How long till the end of term?'

'Seven weeks.'

Her face fell.

'However, this is your lucky day, mother dear, Jarek and I have been asked to take groups of junior boys for week-long camps out in the bush, starting tomorrow, so I'll not be here anyway.'

'Hold fire there, Son,' His father's face was severe. 'What about schoolwork and exams?'

'I'll complete them up there and Jarek will invigilate.'

'Is that true, Jarek?' Ari interrupted.

'Yes, Mr. Paigann. There's no worry about that.'

'Call me Ari.'

'Thanks.'

'What about all your stuff?' Belle demanded. 'What'll we do with that?'

'I won't be needing much at the camp—there's no electricity for a start, so when you get the movers in to help you shift, ask them to pack up all my gear and forward it to Grandma's.'

Belle sighed contentedly. 'How astonishingly fortunate. So, this is your last night in the arse hole of the universe?'

'Yes.'

'Will you stay to dinner, Jarek?'

'If you're sure it's no trouble, thanks.'

'Where did you find this delightful young man, Zeno? I thought politeness was extinct. So, Jarek, you'll also be leaving town. Where did you say you were spending the night?'

'I didn't.'

'I noticed.'

'Mum, Stop being so nosy.'

‘Why? How can I learn anything if I don’t ask questions?’

‘There’s no point in resistance, Jarek,’ Mr. Paigann laughed, ‘when the grand inquisitor gets her claws into you.’

Jarek couldn’t repress a laugh. ‘I’ll sleep in the back of my ute.’

‘You can’t, Jarek,’ Zeno said. ‘I’ve just remembered it’s totally full of all your junk. You’re staying in the house.’

‘Excellent. I’ll make up the spare bed.’

‘No, Mum, it’s stupid to dirty sheets for one night; he can sleep with me.’

Belle frowned.

Ari’s soft voice broke the silence. ‘Belle, stop being obtuse. Jarek and our son are lovers.’

Blood pounded in Jarek’s ears, Zeno felt unable to breathe. They both flushed deep crimson but no words of denial arrived.

‘Is that so, Zeno?’ his mother asked hopefully.

‘How did you guess, Dad?’

‘I never guess, I observe and draw conclusions. Your tone of voice when introducing Jarek indicated that he was special to you. His reactions when faced with the formidable breasts of my forever flirting wife, indicated disillusion with feminine charms. You are both relaxed with each other in a way that mere friends seldom are. You smile at each other more often than is usual, obviously share a secret, and you have never been seriously interested in girls.’

Zeno stared at him in amazement.

‘Ha! That surprised you, didn’t it? I know I sometimes appear uninterested in your affairs, but that’s because I’m committed to non-interference in your life and choices, and today I’ve been vindicated. Without parental interference you have chosen the right sexual path for yourself, and a partner for whom I already have respect.’ He sat back in his chair, smugly pleased with himself.

‘Goodness. How clever of you, Ari. Oh, I do feel silly teasing you like that, Jarek. I’m not really a tart, you know.’

‘I didn’t think for one instant you were, Belle. I think you’re delightful, and it explained how Zeno learned to charm and seduce.’

‘You mean I’m not charming and seductive?’ Ari rumbled from his chair.

‘Of course you are,’ Jarek laughed, ‘but in a different way.’

‘How different?’

‘Dad! Stop tormenting him!’

‘He isn’t, Zeno. He’s wonderful,’ Jarek laughed. ‘You’re dry and academic on the surface, Ari, but witty and down to earth underneath. Zeno has been very lucky with his parents.’

‘And your parents must be lovely to have raised you, Jarek,’ Belle interjected. ‘Come on, wash your hands everyone and get to the table, it’s an hour past the time I like to eat and I’m starving.’

Chapter 5. Adele is Taught a Lesson

The meal over, they moved out to the starlit verandah. Belle and Ari took the deck chairs leaving the double swing-seat for the young men.

‘Lucky it’s been so dry, there’ll be no mosquitoes to annoy us.’

‘It’s hot though.’

‘November’s always hot, and according to the forecasts it’s going to get hotter and dryer before the monsoons arrive.’

‘I hope they hold off till after school closes,’ Jarek said. ‘Dry heat’s fine; there’s an excellent swimming hole to cool off where we’re taking the kids, but I don’t fancy trying to keep ten boys amused if it’s pouring with rain, buzzing with mozzies, and leeches come out to feed.’

‘Apropos of which, isn’t it time you both came clean about what really happened?’

‘What do you mean, Dad?’

‘No High School Principal trusts a relatively new student who has only recently turned sixteen, with responsibility for looking after groups of boys at a bush camp, unless there are exceptional circumstances.’

‘Jarek’s the responsible adult, I’m just the dogsbody.’

‘Rubbish. You carry equal responsibility. I’m not saying you aren’t capable, I think you are, but I want to know what happened to cause the Principal to give you permission to study and do your exams away from the school.’

‘Nothing happened.’

‘Then, regretfully, I must refuse permission for you to assist Jarek with the camp.’

‘Dad! You can’t!’

‘I can and will if you refuse to tell your mother and me everything.’

‘And me,’ Jarek said with a frown. ‘It’s finally struck me that it’s more than a bit strange you arriving with Stephen at the last minute like that. I remember you had an odd expression as if you were escaping something, and there was that crack from Medlar when we were quitting my flat. She called you a rapist. You said you’d explain it.’

‘So you don’t know either, Jarek?’ Belle turned her steely gaze on her son. ‘How long have you two been lovers?’

‘Since about five o’clock this afternoon, if you must know,’ Zeno admitted wearily. ‘Until today we’d never spoken to each other apart from P.E. Lessons, and then only as teacher and pupil. Neither of us thought we were...you know...attracted to men, but when we discovered we had to share a bed up there, we talked it over and...suddenly it happened.’ He shrugged hopelessly.

‘So, it’s first love for you both! How wonderful,’ Belle gushed. ‘One’s first love is so exciting. I suppose you’ll both have lots of other affairs but you’ll never forget the first time.’ She sighed and beamed at them both.

‘Shut up, woman. As you well know, one doesn’t necessarily love one’s lover. However the oddities of the English language are not the issue, I demand to know every last detail of events preceding your elevation to child minder.’

Zeno recounted everything in unnecessarily lurid detail in a spectacularly unsuccessful attempt to shock his parents. Jarek, though, was clearly appalled, although he said nothing.

‘Irma Medlar,’ Belle muttered. ‘Where have I heard that name? Ah yes. Women’s War or something like that.’

‘My ex—the one who threw the mug at me, has recently joined that coven,’ Jarek remarked thoughtfully, ‘and Irma was egging her on this afternoon. Were you also a member?’

‘I was invited to join their little gang,’ Belle said with a cheeky grin. ‘I went to a couple of meetings but when they discovered I think men are wonderful creatures deserving of female adulation and servitude, they asked me to leave.’

‘Do you dear?’ Ari asked.

‘What?’

‘Think I’m all those things?’

‘You mean you hadn’t noticed?’

Ari burst out laughing. ‘Woman you’re such a fake. You decided you disliked them and set out to sabotage. No wonder I love you.’

Jarek and Zeno were looking from mother to father in confusion.

‘So...are you shocked?’ Zeno asked.

‘Of course not, you obviously suffered no more than a brief loss of face.’

‘And his virginity!’ Belle chortled.

‘And as usual you’ve landed on your feet in a better position than before. With your luck, young man, you should be cut up and sold as lucky charms.’

‘What’s so lucky about having to screw that worn out baggage?’

‘If she hadn’t trapped you, you’d not have discovered you aren’t fond of sex with females, you’d not have been angry enough to tell the Principal, he’d not have introduced you to Jarek, and you’d

have had to spend the next seven weeks in that dreadful school. If that isn't luck, I don't know what is.'

'I hadn't thought of it like that.'

'I can't imagine another Principal acting so wisely as yours—he even appreciates you enough to let you call him Stephen.'

'Yeah. You're right about that! He's great. But what about Ms Nimffo?'

'A thoroughly nasty woman who needs to be stopped before she causes some poor kid to suicide. Her friend Medlar is probably on the phone right now informing her that you're helping Jarek. That means tomorrow she'll be doing her darndest to destroy the bush-camp program,' Ari said thoughtfully.

'She must be stopped, and soon,' Belle stated firmly.

'Before she gets to school tomorrow,' Jarek added nervously.

Ari smiled at Jarek. 'Right on the nail, young man. What a shame we'll be sitting up late playing cards with you and Zeno so you won't have time to do anything about it yourselves.'

'What could we do?' Zeno grumbled.

'No idea, my son. But while Belle and I set up the cards, why don't you and Jarek go and have a lie down. You must be tired after such an exciting day. It's half-past ten. Most people are in bed by now on a Monday night, but as it's your last with us for a while we'll make a party of it. We should be ready to play in an hour or so, wouldn't you say, dear?'

'At least an hour, darling,' Belle said sweetly, giving both young men a push towards Zeno's bedroom.

'Your parents are amazing.'

'So am I.'

'You are.'

Zeno grinned wickedly. 'So how about showing a little appreciation of my amazingness.'

'How?'

'Bastard! Give us a kiss and I'll explain.'

Jarek felt as if he was dissolving. Could scarcely speak. All evening the doubts had been creeping up. It was too good to be true. 'Oh Zeno,' he whispered. 'You can't imagine how glad I am to hear you say that. I know we've told your parents we're lovers, but we aren't really, are we? We haven't actually done anything and I was worried it was just a game you were playing—I've seen how you like to lead your parents on and...'

'Jarek, I don't know if it's love, but it sure the fuck is lust. I could hardly keep my hands off you all evening. I'm just about coming in my shorts looking at your sexy arms, butt, face...come here!' He grabbed his new partner and the kiss carried all the pent up lust, frustration, hope and friendship that had been building since they first took a good look at each other in the gymnasium that afternoon.

When they broke apart Jarek's eyes were wet. 'That was the kiss I've always dreamed of but never experienced. Can we do it again?'

'Greedy bugger, just the one, and then I think we have other things to do.'

A mud splattered ute without driving lights drifted silently to the kerb at the beginning of the lane leading to Ms Nimffo's cottage. Two lithe shadows emerged and silently made their way unnoticed to the house, then through the gate and round the back.

'That light's on in her bedroom, perfect.'

They pulled stockings over their heads, flattening their faces to unrecognisable masks. Up the rickety steps to the back door. Locked.

'These old places were made of hoop pine, soft as cardboard. Support my back.'

The slightly taller shadow leaned against the other's back, raised his leg and smashed his boot against the lock. One sharp crack, the door swung open and they were racing across the small sitting

room to the lighted room beyond. Their quarry only had time to squeal, 'What's that noise? Who's there?' before the two avengers burst into the room.

The teacher was sitting on top of the bedspread, a book clutched to her breast in fear.

The shorter assailant grabbed her ankles and dragged her down the bed while the other leaped onto the pillow behind her, dropped to his knees, clamped her head between his thighs and thrust a handkerchief into her mouth. Then grabbing her flailing wrists he spread her arms wide and held them firmly while the other dragged her legs apart and lashed her ankles to the frame.

Eyes wide in shock, Adele Nimffo's body belatedly kicked into frenzied life, twisting and writhing in a vain effort to free her arms from the vicelike grip of her captor.

Satisfied the legs were secure, the man ignored his victim's muffled moans of distress, removed a sharp knife from his pack and calmly cut the flimsy night dress to shreds, tossing the strips onto the floor. Then with rubber-gloved fingers he explored, pinched, pulled and played with her vulva until it was swollen and open like a flower, as he'd seen done on internet porn sites.

He had just begun to film the result with a video camera when a guttural wail of terror announced a fountain of sour-scented urine. Her tormentor stepped back in disgust, still filming. Placing the camera carefully on his pack on the floor he joined his accomplice at the woman's head and pressed the point of the knife into her neck, not quite breaking the skin.

'I am going to remove your gag,' he said in a hoarse whisper. 'If you scream or call for help I will press the knife deeper. Do you understand?'

Ms Nimffo nodded wildly.

He removed the gag and she gulped at the fresh air.

'You're a filthy tramp,' he whispered menacingly, 'wetting your bed like an infant. You need to be taught a lesson.' With his free hand he pulled down his partner's tracksuit and freed the penis to hang only centimetres above the woman's face. She closed her eyes. He pricked with the knife. 'Look up!'

She stared up with wide, terrified eyes as the man with the knife stroked the engorging flesh. She twitched but remained staring up in terror.

'Gaze in awe, woman,' her tormentor whispered. 'This magnificent mature organ of desire is what a normal woman lusts after, not the innocent bodies of young boys. Your hatred of men has led you to despise their beauty and try to destroy their future.'

Returning to the foot end of the bed, he again took up the camera, ensuring the face was included in the shot, but not the hands that held her wrists.

'Be a good girl and smile for the birdie,' he whispered menacingly.

Her mouth twitched.

He slapped her thighs. 'I said smile, whore!'

The camera caught both the erection and the smile that became a whimper as she whispered hoarsely, 'Why? Why are you doing this to me?'

'You didn't seriously imagine the boys you raped wouldn't tell their fathers, did you?' asked the engorged captor in a rasping croak. 'We're here to teach you a lesson. To inform you that your man-hating feminism is destructive and immoral, and to ensure that you will never abuse boys and young men again.'

'With a few editorial tweaks here and there,' the camera operator whispered, 'we will have an excellent video of Adele Nimffo enjoying some kinky sex. If you ever return to the High School, or are still in town tomorrow night, stills of the best bits together with a list of the forty boys you've abused will be posted to the families of every child you teach, to the local news reporter, to the radio and TV station, to every high school teacher and the Education Department, and the video will go viral on every social networking site. Do you understand?'

'You're wrong!' she wailed desperately. 'There weren't forty...' Her voice trailed off as she realised her mistake.

'More like fifty or sixty, I imagine.'

'No! Only...And they all wanted it and...'

A sharp slap silenced her denials.

‘I don’t think you appreciate the seriousness of the situation,’ the man with the green gloves whispered menacingly, standing on the bed astride her and casually drenching her in the urine he’d been desperate to offload since entering the house. ‘If you were a male teacher screwing his female pupils you’d be put away for life and raped every day by the other inmates because everyone hates child molesters.’

‘I’m not a...’

‘One more word from you,’ he whispered, shaking off the last drops as he stepped off the bed and picked up the knife, ‘and I’ll widen that sloppy slit of yours.’

‘No, no, no,’ she whimpered through tears, cringing as he wiped the flat of the blade over her belly. ‘I will not return to school and I will leave town tomorrow.’

‘I hope you realise you are being let off lightly, Ms Nimffo? We are giving you a chance to start again and reform your ways instead of being prosecuted and spending years in a women’s prison where tonight’s little dalliance would be nothing compared to what some of those hardened women can dream up.’

She nodded wildly. ‘I do.’

‘A little thanks are in order, I reckon.’

‘Thank you.’

‘For?’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘You must say, thank you for pointing out the error of my ways and giving me a second chance! And say it as if you mean it!’ The command was reinforced by another slap on her sensitive bits. She whimpered pathetically and repeated the apology.

‘Tomorrow you will arrange for all your possessions to be packed and forwarded, and you will drive away, never to return.’

‘Yes.’

The woman’s wrists were released and the gag shoved back in her mouth, secured in place with one of the strips of her nightdress. After ensuring her phone was not in reach and they’d left nothing incriminating behind, they turned at the door and rasped, ‘Fuck it stinks in here! Makes me want to puke. Still, each to her own. Have a pleasant night; it’s been a pleasure to do business with you.’

They left the way they arrived and ten minutes later were pulling into their driveway.

‘You reckon she’ll have freed herself by now?’

‘Doubt it, those knots round her ankles will take a fair while.’

‘So, there you are, did you fall asleep?’ Ari asked. ‘I listened at your bedroom door but all was silent so we decided to let you rest a little longer’

‘Yes, Dad. We intended to just lie down for a minute, but fell asleep. Must have been more tired than we realised.’

‘All that fresh air. So, are you ready for a rubber of bridge?’

‘You’ll have to teach me.’

‘Delighted, Jarek. The game is divided into two parts, bidding for a contract, and playing it. You work with your partner to either make the contract or take the others down. Everyone is dealt thirteen cards that are....’

Belle burst into wild laughter. ‘Look at the pair of you, dying to get to bed and have fun, and here we are forcing you to play cards. Be off with you and make as much noise as you like; we’re down the far end of the house and anyway I think Ari’s going to make me scream tonight.’

‘Mum! We don’t need to hear this!’

‘Yes, you do!’ Ari said with a smile. ‘We all need reminding that our parents are as human as ourselves. I imagine, from the self-satisfied aura surrounding you both, that you’ve something to celebrate, so go and do whatever it is that makes you both happy.’

Chapter 6. Marriage

Their first lively lusts gratified, the young men lay facing each other on the bed, curious fingers already seeking new ways to pleasure, stimulate and reignite passion. The next time it was slower, more deliberate, more centred on the desires of their lovers and therefore even more rewarding. Eventually they lay back, sweating and satisfied.

‘Do you really think it’s a magnificent organ of desire?’

‘I think the last hour has made that perfectly clear.’

‘Yours is more beautiful.’

‘No it isn’t—and yours is longer.’

‘But yours is thicker.’

‘Every part of you is beautiful, sexy, hard, and lickable.’

‘Every centimetre of you is smooth, delectable, incredibly sexy, desirable and I can’t imagine anyone on the planet I’d rather be caressing, kissing and jerking off with than you.’

‘Fuck, I’m stiff again!’

Twenty minutes later they resurfaced.

‘Fancy you getting stiff like that in front of Nimffo! Did she turn you on?’

‘She looked like a plucked goose spread out for gutting. Soft white sickly skin. Not a sight to turn me on. Your professional stroking was the stimulant.’

‘Shame there was no battery in the camera; I’d like a photo of that. But as you said it’s best never to keep incriminating evidence. I must say it was brilliant of you to suggest we were the fathers.’

‘And of you to get her to confess to screwing those boys.’

‘We have to admit we’re brilliant.’

‘I wonder how Stephen’s doing. He seemed a bit down, don’t you think?’

‘He’s lonely, Zeno. None of the women teachers will even talk civilly to him. Old Mr. Adams is decent enough, but not an intellectual giant. It’s good Stephen’s retiring this year.’

‘He’s got a wife though.’

‘A bit of a dragon, if the rumours are correct.’

‘Poor bugger.’

‘Poor bugger indeed. I’m never going to marry a woman! They’re impossible. They don’t think like us. Have no sense of humour, are irrational, hate men and boys...’ Jarek sighed and grew silent.

‘Mum’s not like that, nor is Grandma.’

‘You’re right, your Mum’s brilliant. And I’d like to meet your grandmother.’

‘You will, because I’m taking you there in the holidays. We’ll have Christmas with her and Sebastian and...’ Zeno stopped talking and looked at Jarek. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing...I mean, nothing for you to worry about. I suppose your grandmother will also be as easy with us as your parents?’

‘Of course.’

‘Well, my parents will certainly write me out of their wills if they discover I’ve an intelligent, thoughtful, caring handsome young lover instead of a termagant of a wife.’

‘Then don’t tell them.’

‘They’ll expect me for Christmas.’

‘Don’t go. It’s easy.’

‘It should be...but...’

Watching the young men drive away to collect Jarek’s gear had left Stephen feeling empty. As if unable to support himself he had staggered a little on returning to Edgar’s house.

‘What’s the matter, Stephen? You’re looking pale and wan.’

‘Nothing, Edgar, it’s just...’

‘You’re becoming a recluse. You don’t visit like you used to.’

‘It’s Violet. She doesn’t like me to...’

‘To what?’

‘She thinks visiting friends, socialising and all that stuff is vanity. Not useful. She reckons we should spend every waking minute making the world a better place.’

‘Sounds exhausting.’

‘It is. She’s recently been consumed with women’s rights and has even less time for men than before—if that’s possible. Reckons all male pleasures are sinful. She’s always out at meetings or doing ‘good’ to people who wish she’d leave them alone. I don’t understand and don’t want to; but its driving me mad.’

‘Then you’re staying for dinner—if you’ll trust my cooking. Afterwards, Vanni, Derek and Angus are coming over. They’ve been asking why you don’t join us so often.’

‘Thanks, Edgar. That’s exactly what I need.’

After the first meal he’d been relaxed enough to enjoy for months, Stephen helped wash up and when the others arrived they sat on the verandah in the dark, sipping beers and talking about this and that until Derek told them about yet another divorce among their acquaintances.

Giovanni shook his head sadly. ‘There’s something wrong with marriage. Just about every married bloke I know is unhappy with his life. They don’t say much but you can tell there’s something eating away at them’

‘You too, Vanni?’ Stephen asked gently, unsure if he was surprised or pleased to learn he wasn’t the only disillusioned husband.

‘Yes, me too.’

‘I’m the same,’ Derek admitted. ‘Sometimes I can’t bear to go home.’

‘I know what you mean,’ Angus sighed. ‘Sometimes I get so upset it gnaws at me like a cancer. Perhaps it’s an inevitable consequence of marriage.’

‘Perhaps it’s because kids aren’t taught how to have a balanced relationship with the opposite sex. We’re fed crap about love conquering all, but we confuse lust with love, and when lust is satisfied there’s nothing else. I know my wife’s not happy. I know I’m not.’

‘Why should we be happy?’ said Stephen despondently. ‘I don’t ask to be happy. I’d settle for peaceful boredom. But there’s always been something acid in our relationship that eats away the joy of life for both Violet and me.’

‘I know the feeling,’ Edgar said with a shake of his head before turning back to Giovanni. ‘Enough of the vague analogies, Vanni, what’s the *real* problem?’

Giovanni sighed. ‘When my wife wants sex I perform. But when *I’m* randy and ready for it, she says, not now, not now, I’m tired. I’m not well. I don’t feel like it. She puts me off till I feel frustrated, insulted and angry and don’t want her any more. So what does the bitch do then? She puts her arms round me and caresses me till she rouses me again—and so I fuck her. It’s a power play. She doesn’t want it unless it’s she who initiates desire. And it makes me mad. But if I tell her what she’s like she says it’s not true. She says all she wants is that I should love her and desire her. But again, that’s putting *her* will first!’ Giovanni was intense. His face was strained, his brown eyes so stretched that they showed the whites all round as he gazed into his friends’ faces.

‘Does it matter which one of you initiates sex?’ said Edgar slowly. ‘Isn’t the result the same?’

‘It bloody well does matter!’ cried Giovanni.

‘It sure does,’ Angus interrupted.

‘Yes, it does!’ agreed Derek.

Giovanni looked from one to the other. ‘It used to be that men seduced the women, chatted them up, kissed and aroused them to awake desire. That’s why young girls used to be kept more or less innocent before marriage, so that women would learn the pleasure of being desired. But now they just see men as dildos to use when they feel like it; taking no account of our wants. I hate my wife when she just sees me as someone to serve her lusts, who’ll fuck her if she feels like it and leave her alone if she’s not in the mood.’

‘Ha! Women have always been like that. They pretend to be charmingly pliable and innocent to trap their man, and once they’ve got him they rule the roost. Read some old classic novels—they

knew what women are like. Men have always been their playthings. Why can't you let it go and be satisfied you've at least got something?' Edgar asked.

'Because I can't! I'm not a shopkeeper whose job it is to serve a fat and happy wife who says she loves her man but only on her own terms. I don't want to be the car and she the driver so when she presses on the pedals I must respond. Men who are satisfied with that are still little boys sucking at mummy's breast.

'You're right, Giovanni,' said Angus. 'You are quite right. They've got the remote controller and we've got to turn on whenever they press the button.'

'My wife tried that crap on me,' Edgar admitted with a wry smile, 'so once the kids were independent I turned the tables. She didn't like being treated the same way she treated me, so found a bloke prepared to be her slave and I've been free and contented ever since.'

'You are all correct,' Stephen added sadly. 'Women are the very hottest hell and there's nothing they won't do to you once they've got you. If you don't submit she'll hound you into submission and make a lap dog of you. When it suits she'll lie and cheat. The worst thing is that if she steps out of line she'll claim it was you who transgressed and force you to apologise, buy her presents and tell her you love her. A woman has an uncanny, hellish strength when she thinks she has the upper hand. Marriage is a terrible life if you're not one who likes to be terrorised.'

'Why can't marriage be a balance of rights and obligations?' Derek sighed.

'Like a seesaw you mean? When one goes up, the other goes down?' cried Giovanni. 'One acts, the other takes? Dream on! In a marriage women give orders and men obey—not very manly, is it?'

'Perhaps it's the natural order of things, Vanni?' said Derek.

'Fuck the natural order,' said Angus. 'No man with a drop of real spunk in him can stand it long.'

'I think,' Stephen said softly, 'that most men prefer it. All they want is for a woman to want them, and they're happy to satisfy her when she rouses them. Most men like to think they're the chosen one and are prepared to praise, worship, sacrifice and abase themselves to be her man.'

'Exactly, Stephen,' Edgar agreed. 'Women must be loved and adored and above all obeyed, particularly in their sexual desires—or lack of them. There she must not be thwarted or she becomes a devil. The trouble is, if she *is* obeyed she wants more. She's never satisfied. If you don't do as she wants she becomes a misunderstood woman looking round for the next man she can bring under her control.'

'That's so depressing,' said Giovanni. 'What's the solution?'

'For me the only solution is divorce,' Stephen surprised himself by confessing. 'My wife despises me.'

'Mine's losing interest in me,' said Angus.

'Mine too,' said Giovanni with a frown.

'What about yours, Derek?' asked Stephen anxiously.

'Not very different,' he responded. 'There seems no way to satisfy her. Everything I do makes her angry.'

'Things must change,' Giovanni said morosely

'It'll never change,' Edgar stated firmly. 'It's the nature of humans. Disillusioned older men marry young women who know nothing, because they think if they possess them while they're young, they'll learn to be soft and gentle and always respond to their wishes. But they're mistaken. Even the will of a young girl is strong enough to force a man. Today all females are liberated.'

'Frightening things, liberated women,' mused Stephen. 'I've a school full of them.'

'So what should a man do?'

'A real man leaves his wife, like Edgar did,' said Stephen.

'And seeks another woman?'

'Only if he's a masochist,' Edgar said wryly. 'I've never been happier since my wife shot through. I'm my own master. If I feel like sex there's plenty of casual, or I pay for it. That's the best. All the fun with no strings. The best thing about no wife is I don't have to spend all day in the shed because she wants to keep the house clean.'

‘I don’t think I could live alone,’ said Giovanni.

‘Even living with someone we’re alone.’ Stephen observed with a sigh. ‘Essentially, at the very core we are alone. Not sentimental or lonely, but alone because by nature one is alone. Being with another person doesn’t change that.’

‘One is alone,’ said Angus, ‘except when having sex.’

‘No,’ responded Edgar, ‘when screwing someone we are most intensely of all, alone.’

‘This is all completely incomprehensible to me,’ said Giovanni. ‘I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.’

‘Because we are individuals, we are alone. Happiness lies in accepting and living with that fact.’

‘Edgar, you are becoming metaphysical, and that’s as bad as softening of the brain,’ said Angus.

‘I was taught that the hearts of men and women beat in common purpose as ordained by god.’

‘How disarmingly Catholic, Vanni. But I’m afraid the heart beats alone in its own silence,’

Edgar replied with a sad smile.

On returning home Stephen tripped on the doorstep, twisting his knee. He limped into the lounge where Violet was sitting reading, dressed in her usual severe manner; hair pulled tightly away from a face devoid of colour or interest. The thought that he might be injured was intolerable to her because it would interfere with whatever she was doing, so in a voice empty of sympathy she asked if he needed help. He said he’d love a cup of tea, but the dishes had been washed and the kitchen tidied so she suggested a glass of cold water would be better, setting it down on the table with unnecessary force before retiring to her room.

Knee aching, alone in his single bed in the cramped little room that doubled as an office, the discussion with his friends at Edgar’s kept spinning round and round in Stephen’s head, increasing the feelings of emptiness, hopelessness and despair. He wondered when the leaden clouds that obscured his happiness had arrived and if it was his fault. When they married he’d thought himself the most lucky of men, but on the first night when Violet refused to sleep with him he suddenly realised she didn’t love him, and he didn’t love her.

What a cruel tradition it was to lead young people blindfold to the altar with promises of living happily ever after. At first he thought things would improve, but they hadn’t and he became aware of the sad truth—the saddest a man can know—that he had missed the great delight of youthful freedom. His chance had come and gone without his realising it. He was already dead in half his soul and was existing with the other half as well as he could, but the effort exhausted his reserves and the struggle no longer seemed worth the effort.

He had done no wrong; he had done his best; he had not sold himself to the flesh or the devil. He accepted that if you put your finger in the fire you’ll get burnt, but where was the justice in punishing a simple mistake with a lifelong curse?

Biblical anathemas from his childhood sprang into his head. *Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he in sleeping, and cursed be he in waking; cursed in going out, and cursed in going in.* Surely, no one was made a better person by such a punishment, for it is too late and solves nothing. It felt like death by slow strangulation that lasts a lifetime.

Chapter 7. Bindi and Adele

Bindi had been honest about one thing; there *was* a party at Angie’s but it wasn’t to celebrate her and Jarek’s engagement; it was just the usual Monday night bash for some of the council staff. For a few days she’d been toying with the idea of surprising everyone with the announcement, figuring that then Jarek would have no choice but to agree. She knew him well enough to be sure he wouldn’t embarrass her in front of all her friends and say they weren’t. He’d argue later, but he’d eventually get used to the idea and they’d get married in the New Year. A big church wedding, white gown, half a dozen bridesmaids, all the trimmings—make her girlfriends so jealous they’d want to slit their wrists.

But that bloody kid being here had given Jarek the courage to defy her. One of those impossibly good looking guys that are usually queer. Surely Jarek wasn't...? No, of course not, he'd been good in bed at the beginning. A bit unadventurous, but reliable. Perhaps she shouldn't have played hard to get so many times. Although the girls at work reckoned it made men hornier if you act as if you don't want it. Men like to think they're tough guys able to force a chick to screw. She sometimes wished he'd be a bit rough on her and force her. He was always so polite. If she said no he'd accept it and go to his own room. He'd be brilliant husband material. The thing that most annoyed her though, was losing the guy who paid the rent and did all the housework. Still, there were plenty of other suckers out there. All a girl had to do was flash her tits and guys came running with their tongues hanging out.

She decided to get a bit of fresh air and walk to the town centre and back. Might meet some guy at a loose end to bring home for a few drinks to help her forget the bastard who'd just jilted her. She deserved some compensation. It was so hot she'd wear that new sleeveless creamy cotton shift. Too hot for panties or bra, though. Turning her back to the mirror she bent over. The skirt didn't ride up too much. A pair of cream sandals and she was off, striding through the night, enjoying the feel of fabric brushing expectant nipples, and cool air over her cunt.

'Fuck I'm sexy,' she whispered.

Music was pounding from the Football Clubhouse as she passed, and the sound of laughter dragged her across the car park and into the crowded recreation room. She'd given up going there when she moved in with Jarek. Time to return to old haunts. A dozen couples were dancing, a group of guys were playing darts at one end, and Jerry, Col and Stu were hunched on stools at the far end of the bar as if they hadn't moved since she last saw them.

They'd had a bad-boy reputation at school, wagging, shagging, shoplifting. Several of her friends had lost their virginity with them. Bindi had wanted to do the same but always chickened out at the last minute, berating herself afterwards for being such a piker. Well, she was no longer a virgin, so perhaps...

Stu saw her and beckoned.

'Giddy Bindi, haven't seen you for a while. What're you drinking?'

'Same as you, thanks, Stu.'

'Been dumped by your pretty boyfriend?' Jerry grinned.

'I dumped *him*.'

'So you're looking for a replacement?' Col's smile was calculating.

'Could be,' she flirted. 'Are you offering?'

'Could be,' he replied, winking at his mates.

Stu arrived with her drink and stood behind her, reached round to place it on the table then briefly cupped her breasts as he withdrew his hand.

She giggled. 'Thanks, Stu.' Sitting between Jerry and Col, her smile was inviting.

'You're welcome, Bindi,' Stu leered, reaching round and cupping her breasts again. 'Mmm sexy nipples.'

She giggled again. Excited. These guys were fun. Bindi preened herself in the mirror behind the bar and relaxed her thighs allowing Jerry and Col's light fingers to explore. She looked around. No one was paying any attention to them. Stu put his hands on her shoulders, told a joke and pressed his erection against her back while they laughed. A normal group of twenty-somethings enjoying a few beers together.

'A word of advice, Bindi,' Jerry said mock seriously, 'check out the competition before lumbering yourself with Stu.'

'You and Col are the competition?'

'I reckon. Aren't we Col?'

'Are we ever, mate. Believe me, Bindi, Stu may look tough, but he's a pussy compared with us. Unless you aren't interested in *real* men.'

'I'm interested in real men,' she said, heart pounding in excitement. 'Are you interested in a real woman?'

‘If she doesn’t wear panties and gives me a meat sandwich.’

Stu and Col could barely stifle their laughter.

‘Are you hungry?’ Bindi asked innocently.

‘Very. What do you say we head over to your place for a snack?’

‘All of us?’

‘How else can you check out the competition? You are up for a fuck, aren’t you?’ His cool smile and the challenge in his voice was unmistakable. ‘Because if you’re just another prissy cock-teaser you can piss of now!’

Jerry’s blatant provocation had the desired result; she suddenly needed to prove herself.

Brazenly, she leaned back against Stu’s erection and opened her legs wider, allowing the fingers to invade completely. Of course she wasn’t just a crappy cock-teaser. She knew what she was doing. Tossing her head she said less calmly than she’d have liked, ‘Let’s go.’

‘Good girl! But first,’ he pointed. ‘See that bloke by the door?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’ve got to tell him you’ve invited us. It’s the new club rules. If a chick tells him she’s invited players to her pad for a fuck, then she can’t later on accuse them of rape. OK?’

Bindi was suddenly not so sure. Romance was fast draining out of this encounter, especially when the old bloke at the door was one of her father’s friends who’d known her forever. She hesitated.

‘Yeah, I knew it. Just another ball-buster. Fuck off, Bindi.’

‘Fuck you, Stu,’ she muttered, striding over to the doorkeeper, followed by the three Lotharios.

‘Hello, Bindi. Long time no see. Enjoying yourself?’

‘Yeah, great Mr. Lagard, thanks.’ Then before she changed her mind quickly stammered, ‘Apparently I’ve got to tell you these three are invited to my place, OK?’

‘How well do you know them, Bindi?’ he asked gently. ‘Their reputation’s not that hot.’

‘I went to school with them.’

‘You do realise they expect sex?’

‘Not that it’s any of your business!’ she snapped angrily. ‘But yes, I realise that. I’m not a kid any more!’ Turning on her heel she stalked into the night.

‘Take your shoes off boys, this is a civilized house,’ Stu laughed on entering.

Bindi smiled in relief. They weren’t such bad guys.

‘May as well get the rest of our gear off while we’re at it,’ Col added.

‘Good idea.’

Three naked men prowled into the front room, looking at everything, picking up ornaments, checking the bookshelf.

‘Nice carpet. Persian?’

‘Hardly. Just a cheap imitation.’

‘Then I guess we’ll have to make an imitation sandwich.’

Lewd laughter.

Bindi stared at her guests in rising panic. In their clothes the men had seemed mildly sexy. Nudity had wrought a transformation. All were heavy, muscled types that in a few years would run to fat. Stu’s hairy body and powerful dark brown erection lent him a bestial aura as he prowled, playing with himself. Jerry’s skin, white to the point of transparency, was speckled with freckles and blotches. The sight of his red, slack scrotum dangling when he bent over to check the carpet was bad enough, but less off-putting than the active pimples on his bum. Col was also pale, but chunkier and fitter than his mates, also cleaner perhaps. He was staring at her silently, playing with his erection, an odd smile on his lips that he kept licking with a long tongue. Only seconds had passed but it already seemed like hours. She realised she had to say something, but what? Ah, yes. They wanted a sandwich.

‘The kitchen’s through there,’ she pointed.

‘Here’ll be fine, won’t it guys?’

‘Perfect,’ Jerry purred. ‘Come on. We haven’t got all night.’

‘I just have to go to the bathroom,’ Bindi stuttered. ‘Won’t be a minute.’

‘Better not be. We’re fuckin’ horny.’

Bindi sat on the toilet and took long deep breaths, emptied her bladder then checked her image in the mirror. ‘You’re a sexy girl,’ she whispered in attempt to bolster courage. ‘Three men are lusting over you.’

Jerry was leaning against the wall stroking his nipples while watching Stu and Col mock wrestle on the carpet.

‘Took you long enough,’ Jerry snapped.

Stu and Col rolled onto their backs and grinned up. ‘Got tired of waiting,’ Stu laughed.

‘Where’re your condoms?’

‘In the cupboard beside my bed,’ she whispered. Stu went in search while Col and Jerry pulled off her dress and rubbed themselves against her, transferring powerful odours of day-old sweat and maleness that caused her to catch her breath. Torn between fear and excitement, she whimpered as teeth nibbled at nipples and fingers probed deep into vulva and anus.

‘Please, not that.’

‘Shut up, Bindi’ Col said not unkindly. ‘Remember you’re just the filling *We’re* the sandwich makers.’

Stu arrived with a hand-cream dispenser that he tossed to Con, then dropped onto his back on the carpet and handed Bindi a foil packet. ‘Wrap this round my manhood, missy and prepare yourself for the experience of a lifetime.’

Bindi knelt between his splayed legs but her hands were shaking too much.

‘Fuck you’re useless,’ Col laughed, tearing it open with his teeth then expertly rolling the condom onto his friend’s dark brown boner, then the other onto his own. ‘Now, Bindi, get that magnificent instrument inside you and make sure it’s as deep as it can go, we don’t want it to fall out.’

Whimpering softly, Bindi slid forward then slowly lowered herself onto the hardest, fattest penis she had ever experienced, not stopping until she felt Stu’s hip bones pressing against her buttocks. ‘Can we stop now?’ she asked pathetically. ‘I think I’ve made a mistake. Perhaps another time?’

‘Believe me, it’s no mistake, Bindi,’ Col leered, thrusting her forward, burying her face in Stu’s hairy chest. ‘This is what all truly sexy women long for, so enjoy!’ Before she could object he slapped a wad of hand crème against her anus and over his erection, then knelt and carefully inserted himself.

At first the pain was so bad she could only gasp, sucking in air as if drowning.

‘Yay! I can feel you going in, Col!’ Stu shrieked. ‘Our cocks are only millimetres apart. I’ll bet you come first you randy bugger. Take your time from me, you two.’

Bindi’s increasingly desperate efforts to lift her body away from the pain were foiled when Jerry knelt at her head, dragged her face up by her hair and shoved his ripe red phallus into her open mouth.

In a surprisingly short time the slow, rhythmic, coordinated pumping of three blood-filled organs into her orifices began to feel almost pleasant. The pain subsided to manageable levels until she let herself relax and the pain ceased completely, replaced by electric shudders that forced little shrieks of delight.

‘You’re loving this, aren’t you Bindi,’ Jerry whispered into her ear.

‘I’m nearly coming!’ Stu warned.

‘Me too.’

‘Me too.’

‘Now!’

As one, the three men heaved and thrust violently for several seconds, and then it was all over. Rapidly wilting penises were withdrawn; Bindi swallowed and managed not to gag. They all lay on their backs for a minute panting softly, then the three men hoisted themselves to their feet. Stu

patted her on the shoulder, whispered, 'Thanks Bindi, that was great,' and they disappeared, leaving the front door open.

As sexual ecstasy dissipated and the agony of unusual penetration reasserted itself, shame threatened to overwhelm Bindi. She'd been used. Used like a blow-up doll and left on the floor. She sniffed back tears of humiliation, then crawled to the front door and slammed it as hard as she could. That made her feel better. A careful examination revealed no blood, no bruises, no obvious damage. She stood shakily and discovered she could walk painlessly to the kitchen where she made a cup of tea that she took to her bedroom. Sitting on the bed, staring at her reflection in the full-length mirror she began to giggle. Not hysterically; softly.

'A sandwich.' The giggles became genuine laughter. 'I thought they meant food. I was the meat in their sandwich!' The smile broadened as she lay back, gently feeling the bits that were still a bit tender, but not minding them so much. 'Next time,' she whispered, 'next time I'll stroke Stu's sexy hairy butt and lick his nipples and have a lot more fun first. Some kissing as well. I'll be properly prepared and it won't hurt a bit.'

After a long shower that took all the hot water in the cylinder but still failed to wash away the defilement, Adele Nimffo dragged the stinking mattress out onto the verandah. The rest of the night was spent angrily thrusting her clothes books and knickknacks into suitcases and cardboard boxes that had been stored in the spare room. Round and round in her head churned the evening's humiliation alternating with panic attacks at the thought of exposure. As the night wore on, fear was slowly edged out by anger. She hadn't been physically damaged and it would take more than what had happened to undermine her self-respect. As the hours passed anger morphed to fury and a determination to exact retribution...but how?

The mill of her mind ground through every detail of nearly four years at the high school, and sifted the results through the filter of experience. She was innocent! The realisation electrified and sharpened tired senses. She, an honourable woman, had been attacked and terrorised. In the calm light of reason she knew, as all reasonable people would, that her behaviour had always been exemplary in every respect. All the boys had been well into or past their puberty and doubtless wanking themselves silly in frustration at not having a girl to be intimate with. She was a teacher who had simply been doing her job; instructing her more sensitive charges about the joys and mechanics of sex. She should be praised, not pilloried!

As she sorted, packed and dragged the boxes and suitcases through to the front room of the rented cottage, everyone she knew was examined under the spotlight of her sharpened intellect. The evening's unwelcome invaders wouldn't have been parents; they'd have gone straight to the police. The only possibility was Zeno with a mate. The problem was how to prove it? She'd been careless, no, incredibly stupid to do it with him. Quiet, insecure boys were the deserving recipients of her beneficence. Boys too shy to tell anyone. Boys who might be upset for a while but later on deeply grateful for the experience, just as she'd been on her fourteenth birthday when she finally accepted that her uncle hadn't wanted to hurt her when she was twelve—he only needed to show how much he loved her.

She fingered his first gift, the twenty-four carat gold chain she always wore round her neck, remembering his assertion that it was her beauty and purity that made him do it. She was like the blessed virgin, he'd said. So intelligent, serene and uncontaminated by the world that he wanted to purify himself by bathing in her. Her forgiveness had been total and they had made love again on the spot. When told, her mother's doubts about the suitability of the liaison dissolved when she learned the size of her brother in law's bank balance and his willingness to spend much of it on her daughter and herself.

The sun was just rising when Adele Nimffo dragged the suitcases down to her car, leaving the boxes for the carrier she would telephone later that day. She drove away without looking back, already planning her return and the vengeance she would exact. She'd never liked the uninsulated, damp little cottage so was glad to be leaving, but not for this reason. She saw no one she knew on her way out of town and had driven fifteen kilometres before the elusive memory arrived, triggering

a cry of triumph. She slammed on the brakes and a sly smile transformed her features into a mask of pure malice. She knew the person with the camera! When he was urinating on her she noticed the same small, diamond-shaped birthmark at the base of his penis that she'd observed when rolling the condom on Zeno the night he'd fucked her! His DNA would be in the urine-soaked mattress. She didn't have to leave town! She'd return, make an official complaint, he'd be found guilty of assault, the photos would be impounded before they could besmirch her reputation, and she would be avenged!

'Yes! Yes! Yes!' she shouted, slamming the car into gear and whipping the vehicle round in a tight U-turn that caused it to skid on loose stones and slide towards the soft shoulder of the road. Instead of accelerating out of the skid, she braked, sending the car juddering over the edge, where it teetered for a second before rolling down a grassy slope. Dew prevented the wheels from gripping when she applied the brakes. It wasn't a dangerous situation; the slope levelled out after about a hundred metres so the car would eventually roll to a stop. She'd have to get a farmer to tow her out. Irritating, but no big deal.

And that would have happened if a fallen tree trunk concealed in the long grass hadn't abruptly stopped the front wheels, causing the car to slowly somersault. That would have been uncomfortable, but not fatal because Adele was wearing her seat belt and the car was fitted with air bags that slammed noisily into her face and chest. Unfortunately, a short but solid vertical branch attached to the fallen tree smashed through the windscreen and stopped the vehicle at the height of its flip. Like an advertisement for a wrecker's yard the car remained propped on its nose, the exhaust pipe pumping carbon monoxide vertically into the air.

With tinnitus ringing in her ears the teacher struggled to free herself from a seat belt inextricably entwined with the deflated airbag and the invading branch. Despite her determination and effort, however, she remained suspended upside down, head pressing uncomfortably against the roof.

By four-thirty in the afternoon when she was found, blood had pooled in her brain and was seeping through wide-open eyes.

Chapter 8. Preparations

Despite having only a few hours sleep, sharing a bed and performing energetic horizontal gymnastics on waking, Zeno and Jarek emerged from their shower looking fresh and fit for anything. After a substantial breakfast they packed a holdall with the stuff Zeno would need, kissed Belle, hugged and brushed cheeks with Ari, promised to phone regularly, then drove into town to buy cleaning materials, tools and a week's supply of non perishable food before driving up to the cabin.

It seemed even more like paradise than before. Only bird, frog, and insect noises intruded on the peace.

'What'll we do first?'

'You're the teacher.'

'No. I'm not. I'm your friend. We're equals. We share all decisions.'

'But yours is the final responsibility.'

'If I wasn't sure you'd take responsibility for yourself I'd never have agreed to this. So promise that from now on you'll treat me as an equal partner.'

'OK, but I'll bow to your experience.'

'And I to yours. Despite my best efforts the kids will probably treat me like a teacher, so you'll have better and easier rapport with them. A perfect set-up. So, what'll we do first?'

'You'll think I'm a total wimp, but I can't enjoy myself if I've a job hanging over me. Can't even watch TV or go on the internet if I haven't done my homework, so let's get a start on cleaning and repairing.'

'Wow! I thought I was the only Goody Two Shoes on the planet. Oh excellent young man!'

Starting with their own room, they took the bed and mattress outside to air, then as it seemed stupid to make overalls or clothes dirty, they stripped, filled buckets with water and scrubbed and polished every surface. The place was much dirtier than they'd realised. Five years, Edgar had told them since anyone had cleaned the place, and in the meantime bugs, ants and wasps had built, eaten defecated and made the place home. Two hours later they reckoned they'd earned a break and raced down to the swimming hole for a swim.

A meal of tinned beans, ham and eggs fortified them for an afternoon of cleaning the covered cooking area, repairing a couple of loose sheets of iron, cleaning drains, refurbishing the wood fired stove, and generally making the place clean and capable of hygienically preparing food for a dozen hungry males.

A swim and a preliminary survey of the area followed. They needed to familiarise themselves with every track, lookout and possible danger before setting out with their charges on even the shortest hike. The actual area belonging to the cabin was quite small, but it bordered a National Park accessed by a stile a short distance from the far side of the creek.

They slept deeply after sex, in fresh sheets on a soft and dry mattress in a room that smelled sweet and clean, the window open to the sounds of nature.

While lifting the boys' mattresses down from the rafters to take them outside to air in the sun, a large python that had been sleeping up there fell to the floor with a thump. It was enormous, at least five metres long, as thick as Jarek's thigh and beautifully patterned in pale yellow and black.

'Fuck! What'll we do about this?' Zeno yelped.

'Grab the tip of its tail and drag it as far away as you can.'

'Won't it bite?'

'Unlikely. They're slow to anger and if you keep moving fast enough it won't have time to bring it's head back or wrap itself round anything. If it does that you'll never shift it, it's ten times as strong as you.'

'What if it bites?'

'It's not venomous, but it's got sharp teeth and can rip a fair hole that usually becomes infected. Ideally you lift it by the tail, but this guy weighs a ton and is too long. Off you go.'

'Why me?'

'You're always telling me you're taller and stronger, and you need the experience. Hurry up, it's on its way back up to the rafters.'

Nervously, Zeno, took a firm grip on the tip of the tail and dragged the virtually unresisting serpent across the grass and down the lane to the boundary with the National Park, then let it go. Calmly, it raised its head, sniffed the air with its tongue and slithered silently off away from the house.

'That's why there are no rats and mice here,' Jarek said on his return. 'If it was just the two of us I'd let it remain, but the kids might have been a bit upset if it had slithered into their bed one night.'

'Do they do that?'

'If it's cold, so I believe. A couple of times I found one sleeping on the canopy of the ute when I woke in the morning out in the bush. Probably felt the heat of my body percolating up from underneath. You've got to be careful though, they're usually slow and placid, but if they get annoyed they'll suddenly bite. That one could easily have swallowed a baby. They sort of unhinge their jaws. It's astonishing to watch them swallow something fatter than themselves.'

They made a fire that evening, not against the cold, just to feel romantic.

By the time Stephen paid a visit on Thursday after school, every wall, floor, window and piece of furniture sparkled with cleanliness, the cabin had been aired, was smelling sweet and fresh, and he was delighted. They discussed menus for the four breakfasts, five lunches and four evening meals that the boys would prepare for themselves, and were given four blank cheques to buy whatever they needed.

'For goodness sake don't tell anyone I gave you these cheques,' Stephen grinned. 'The School Committee would have a collective fit. They're all untrustworthy so can't imagine any one is.'

After showing Stephen the maps they'd drawn of the area indicating possible hikes, and a preliminary list of suitable activities and plans, they promised to have details of each day's activities ready for approval by the following Sunday when Stephen would come for a final check before the boys arrived on Monday morning.

It had been a rush to obtain written parental consent for this first camp, there being only four days' notice, so instead of a meeting he'd visited every parent and discussed it with them. After explaining that the best way to keep their children was to give them freedom, all agreed to allow their boy to go, and made no problem about leaving mobile phones at home and not communicating with their offspring because that could break the feeling of independence the boys would gain from being self-reliant. All were relieved to learn it would cost them nothing; the only things the boys had to bring were sheets and a blanket, clothes, toothbrush, towel and any medication. Surprisingly, none of the parents had asked who was assisting Mr. Schwartz.

Neither Jarek nor Zeno were able to mourn the death of Adele Nimffo. There was no room for thoughts about her in this healthy world of forest and stream. Indeed, her passing seemed to make the world a cleaner place.

'Well, the work obviously agrees with you,' Stephen smiled, 'you both look incredibly fit and healthy. I'm jealous of your all-over tans.'

'We haven't worn anything since we arrived; too lazy to wash clothes. It's been perfect, hasn't it, Jarek?'

'The best three days of my life—wish it would last forever. Never felt so free in mind and body. I'll resent wearing clothes when the kids come.'

'You don't have to wear much.'

'What do you mean?'

'Legally, you only have to cover your genitals.'

Jarek grinned. 'And you, the kids and their parents wouldn't mind if that's all we wore?'

'Fifty-one years ago I went on a camp like this. Fifteen fourteen year-olds and the teacher—a young, fit guy a bit like you. Two mothers came to prepare the food; sensible, pleasant women. Apart from the first day when they came to watch us swimming, they kept out of the way so we never felt watched or inhibited. The swimming hole wasn't as natural as here, although to us it was jungle. Sir's string bikini was much briefer than our Speedos, and when he swung from the rope he looked like Tarzan. It was hot so we lived in our togs, only putting on sandals for hiking. We got so used to being virtually naked that we never thought about it. If possible we liked him more for being so easy and relaxed, trusting us not to be silly. He used to shower with us, and a couple of nights we all skinny-dipped by moonlight. No one thought he was perverted because he wasn't. He treated us as sensible equals and made us feel like independent men, not dependent boys. He was the only teacher I've known who didn't try in some way or other to prove he was better than his pupils. When he thanked the mothers for giving up the time they joked that it was worth it to see so much of him in his bikini.'

'Great tale, but I don't have his charisma.'

'Yes you do,' Zeno said. 'All the guys think you're great.'

'Children are incredibly sensitive to adult behaviour,' Stephen continued, 'especially to adults placed in charge of them. It's a survival characteristic to prevent their being abused. If either of you appear nervous or embarrassed they'll pick up on it. Teachers should be like a parent—a perfect parent of course. Boys accept their fathers unquestioningly, as long as they don't abuse their power. It's natural for young men to try their social skills on adults whom they trust not to respond wrongly. So just as a father would never abuse this trust, neither should any teacher. Both girls and boys flirt, sometimes outrageously, with teachers and other adults. A few adults misunderstand this innocent behaviour and terrify the kids by responding sexually, too often with very bad consequences. I'm confident that won't happen, but you must be constantly on your guard never to give anyone cause to suspect your motives. Everyone gets individual treatment, but no one gets special treatment. Does that make sense?'

‘It does, thanks.’ Jarek frowned and stared into Stephen’s eyes. ‘I assure you I haven’t the slightest sexual interest in immature boys.’

‘I know! I never imagined you did. I was talking about perceptions.’

‘Yeah, that’s really interesting, Stephen,’ Zeno said thoughtfully. ‘Teaching’s a bit like walking a tightrope, isn’t it?’

‘An excellent analogy. Look, I’m not worried, Jarek, just thinking aloud. Take the pressure off yourself, remember this isn’t school, there’s no exam; they’re here to have safe exciting fun while getting to know and accept their own abilities.’

‘If you’d talked like this last week I don’t think I’d have dared take this on!’

‘Rubbish, you’re a natural. Everything will be fine. Just do what seems right and it will be. By the way, still no problems with the double bed?’

‘The opposite.’

‘So...you’re lovers?’

‘Philia is a better word to describe our relationship,’ Zeno said somewhat pompously. ‘Although it started off as Eros.’

Jarek laughed. ‘Philia, Eros... What’s all that about?’

‘You remember what Dad said about lovers not necessarily being in love? The English word love is virtually meaningless.’ Zeno turned to Stephen who was trying to hide a smile. ‘Dad’s Greek, and gets pissed off about English sometimes, especially when it comes to love. He reckons it explains the fear English people have of their emotions. Family love in Greek is *storgé*. The love of beauty or nature is *agápe*, lust is Eros, and philia is what Jarek and I have, mutual affection, a sense of responsibility for each other and sex if we feel like it.’

‘What the Yanks call fuck-buddies?’ Jarek asked mock seriously.

‘Trust you to lower the tone,’ Zeno laughed.

‘We’re best mates, Stephen, who enjoy each other’s company and the pleasures of non-invasive sex. Buggery sounds too painful to me. We’re definitely not “in love”; Zeno’s far too immature for me.’

‘And I’m certainly not going to fall in love with an old man,’ Zeno laughed, launching himself at Jarek. They wrestled lazily until suddenly remembering Stephen was there.

‘Sorry, Stephen. We forget we’re naked.’

‘Don’t be sorry, it’s a liberating experience. I suppose that’s what it must have been like when naked hunter-gatherers roamed the forests hundreds of thousands of years ago. The comforts and security of civilization have come at a terrible emotional price and, in my opinion, have not been worth it.’

Chapter 9. Cador

In a bedroom of a somewhat pretentious Mediterranean style villa on a plot of land far too small to display its doubtful charms, a slim young man gazed at his reflection in the mirror. Olive complexion. Sharply defined facial features. Dark, angry eyes. Hands clenching and unclenching as he prepared himself for confrontation. In an unbuttoned white shirt, slimness accentuated by black drawstring trousers, a gold chain at his throat, he could have stepped out of the *Arabian Nights*. ‘Fuck him,’ he snarled, eyes mere slits, lips a thin line of determination. ‘If he makes a fuss, I’m out of here.’

So engrossed was he in his thoughts that the call to dinner made him jump.

Corpulent, sedate and cunning, Hassid could not have been more different from his lean impulsive and forthright son. He was a proud father, eminent businessman, upholder of cultural and religious rectitude, and single minded in his determination that his son would become a suitable ornament to crown his financial and social success.

‘Do up your shirt,’ he snapped. ‘How dare you come to the table naked?’

‘I’m not naked.’

‘A decent man does not show more flesh than necessary.’

With a sigh he knew would irritate, his son complied. His mother brought in the meal. Hassid said a blessing and they ate in silence; Cador astonished that neither parent could hear his thumping heart.

After what seemed an age, Hassid put down his knife and fork, wiped his mouth, congratulated his wife on an excellent repast and asked if Cador was ill because he hadn't finished his meal.

'I'm not hungry, Papa,' Cador said softly, 'I'm sorry, Mother, it's delicious as usual.'

She smiled appreciation, but remained silent.

'How is school?'

Cador was relieved to have at least some good news. 'Good, Papa. I topped the class in Maths and I'm in the First Eleven cricket, the only guy from year ten. All the rest are in years eleven and twelve.'

Hassid's smile was smug and self-satisfied. 'Every day you do something to make me more proud. When I think of Mehmet's delinquent son I offer prayers of thanks.'

'Do you love me, Papa?' Cador asked nervously.

'More than my own life,' Hassid said grandly. 'Why do you ask?'

'Because I have a secret that might upset you.'

'I'm sure nothing you do could upset me.' Hassid's smile was strained.

'You see...'

'Well, out with it!'

'I'm gay.'

Silence. Cador hung his head, waiting.'

'You're not.'

'I'm sorry, Papa, I am. I can't help it.'

'You're fifteen. You have a girlfriend. You are my son. You are not one of those foul perverts! I would know if you were. What makes you think such stupidities?'

Already deeply regretting his decision to confide in his parents, Cador was torn between truth and deceit. He took a deep breath and chose truth.'

'I've had sex with another student.'

His mother gasped, put her hand to her mouth and hurried from the room. This was between the men and none of her business.

'You will never speak to that person again, never again say you are queer, and not leave your room until you swear to put all such evil from your head.'

Foolishly, Cador shook his head. All he had to do was wait a few years until he was independent, but internet friends had persuaded him he had to 'come out' otherwise he'd become an emotional cripple. 'I can't, Papa! I'm gay! I know I am and I can't be different. In every other way I'm still the same, I haven't changed.' He closed his eyes and prayed for understanding.

Hassid rose to his feet and stood over his cowering son as if undecided what to do, then suddenly slammed his fist into the side of Cador's head, knocking him to the floor.

'Papa, you said you loved me,' the lad whimpered, cringing in fear of another blow.

'I loved the son I thought you were. That son is dead. A monster that I despise has taken his place.' Reinforcing the words with a brutal kick to the shuddering young man's ribs he hissed, 'Get out! Get out of my house and do not return until you are a son of whom I can be proud.' Grabbing a handful of thick black hair he dragged Cador to the door, opened it and threw him onto the steps.'

'Papa, please! Please don't do this to me, I'm your son, I'm...'

'If I see you near this house again I will kill you.' The voice was low and menacing and anyone who heard it would not doubt he meant what he said. 'You are not my son. I am not your father. We are strangers!' He slammed the door and Cador dragged himself out onto the street; dazed, shocked and terrifyingly alone for the first time in his life.

The following night, it being Friday, Edgar visited an attractive widow prepared to augment her meagre income by pleasuring discreet, clean and healthy men. Afterwards, standing on the bridge over the river to admire the full moon, he glanced down and saw something dragging itself out of

the water onto the muddy bank. Cautiously curious, because it just might be a crocodile, even though they were so far from the sea, he wandered to the end of the bridge then took the steps down to the water. The muddy heap was shuddering and emitting faint whimpers as if in pain. Edgar squatted beside it, touched it lightly on the shoulder and, imagining it was one of the local drunks said softly, 'Can you stand?'

'Go away.'

'No. Not till you're standing and I can see you're OK.'

When the body remained silent, Edgar cursed his caring heart, grabbed hold of the surprisingly light bundle, hauled it vertical and turned the head towards him. The full moon gave enough light for him to realise this was no old soak. The kid looked no more fifteen. Ignoring the mud that filled his shoes and was being transferred to his best suit, he supported the young man up to the bridge, then the few hundred metres to his car, ignored by passers by who imagined they were just another pair of Friday night drunks.

The sun was barely up the following morning when the Noble's telephone rang.

'Stephen! It's for you!' Mrs. Noble snapped brusquely. 'It's Edgar,' her tone suggesting she'd prefer it to be the devil. 'What sort of person telephones people at this hour of the day?'

'Coming, Violet.'

'Well, don't talk too long!'

'No, dear.'

Ten minutes later Edgar ushered Stephen into his front room and closed the door.

'Last night I fished a kid out of the mud under the bridge. He looks about fifteen. No smell of alcohol. Either couldn't or wouldn't speak. I brought him home, stripped off his clothes—expensive stuff ruined by the mud and water, and shoved him into the shower. He just sat on the floor so I stood him up, washed, dried and put him to bed in the spare room. He's still there. Refused to get up, eat breakfast or speak. If he's a local kid he'll go to your school and you'll know him. Even if he isn't, and doesn't, you'll know better than me what to do. The last thing I need is a father on my doorstep suing me for child abduction.'

'That was very fine of you, Edgar. I mean that! Few people would bother. They'd just think it was another crazy junkie or drunk.' Stephen sighed deeply. 'OK, lead me to him.'

Cador was lying on his back staring sightlessly at the ceiling, covers clenched tightly around his neck.

Stephen studied the face for several seconds until he could place him. 'It's Cador, isn't it?'

No response.

'Cador,' Stephen said softly, drawing up a chair and sitting beside him, 'it's Mr. Noble from school. You're perfectly safe. No one knows you're here. The man who looked after you is my best friend and only wants to help. I promise to listen carefully and not do anything you don't want me to. So, how about telling me the trouble?'

'I'm evil,' Cador whispered.

'In what way?'

'I can't tell you...it's too bad.'

'Try me. If I'm shocked I'll wear a silly hat to assembly next Monday.'

Despite himself, Cador's lips twitched slightly. 'Promise?'

'Promise.'

The youth rolled on his side to face the wall. 'It's too embarrassing. I can't look at you.'

'You're not the only one, I'm not a handsome man.'

Cador gave a tiny grunt that suggested if not appreciation of the joke, at least a relaxation of fear. 'But you're nice. Everyone says you're fair and good. Not like me.'

'Let's make a deal—you tell me your woes and I'll give you fifty dollars if we can't solve them.'

'And then you'll let me go away?'

'If that's what you want.'

With a little prompting Cador's tale was told, from his expulsion for being gay, a night and a day hiding in back streets terrified of being recognised, to deciding to kill himself and jumping off the bridge into mud instead of drowning in deep water.

'I'm so useless I can't even kill myself.'

The principal sat in silence for a minute. 'It's a sad tale, Cador, but I'm still waiting to hear what you've done that would shock me.'

The young man rolled over, his face soaked in tears and said in a voice hoarse from anguish, 'I told You! I'm queer! I deserve to die. Allah hates me! Especially as I did it with someone.'

'What did you do?'

'The...the other boy and I touched each other and...you know...'

'You jerked off with another lad? So what? Half the boys at school are jerking off right this minute, some alone, others with their mates. It's normal for boys your age and no big deal.'

'It is to my father.'

As if to convince himself he really was evil, Cador explained that he didn't like kissing and touching girls and kept thinking about boys when he "touched himself" as he delicately put it.

'All boys or particular boys?' Stephen asked, not from morbid curiosity but from a genuine desire to understand. Popular wisdom had it that gays were indiscriminate in their lusts, while heterosexuals were more choosy. In his experience observing his peers and as a counsellor, there seemed to be no difference between them. Plenty of so-called straights were very choosy; others would fuck anything with a hole.

Cador looked slightly shocked. 'Oh no! Most other boys repel me! They're fat or stupid or unhealthy... This boy's slim and fit and all the girls have the hots for him. That makes him laugh because they haven't a hope.' He paused, blushed and suddenly blurted as if relieved to unburden himself of a secret too painful to bear 'There's one other guy at school I really like, but I'd never dare approach him, he's a year older than me in year eleven.'

Stephen smiled. 'Well, I congratulate you on being discriminating.'

Cador sighed and smiled nervously. 'Thanks.'

'So stop all this nonsense about evil and wrong, you're a fine young man.'

'I'm a faggot and that makes me evil!'

'Really? Tell me, Cador, what other things do you reckon are evil?'

'Murder, stealing, torturing, sadism, child molesting, wife-beating, kidnapping, slavery...'

'So...for an activity to be evil someone must be badly hurt either physically or emotionally?'

'Yes.'

'How badly did you and the other boy hurt each other?'

'Not at all! We're not like that!'

Mr. Noble let the silence drag on until Cador felt impelled to speak.

'So...Mr. Noble...Sir, you really don't think I'm evil for being queer?'

'Let's get this absolutely clear! You're *not* evil; you're *not* 'queer' as you call it. You're exactly the same handsome young man you were last week and the years before. Nothing has changed in you. You were born with dark brown eyes, black hair, golden skin, straight eyebrows, a slim body and healthy constitution. You were also born with a discriminating mind. You don't like all music, you don't like all sports or every person you meet; and when it comes to sex you seem to prefer males. That's how you were born. If your father doesn't object to your dark eyes and black hair, why should he object to any other part of the way you were born? It makes no sense to me.'

'It's Allah who hates me.'

'I thought he made you?'

'He did.'

'Isn't Allah perfect?'

'Yes.'

'So he doesn't make mistakes. Therefore the way you are isn't a mistake. Only humans make mistakes, so obviously it's your father and whoever is interpreting Allah's wishes who've made a mistake.'

‘But...’

‘You’ve a very important question to decide about this, Cador, and I want you to decide now. Are you ready?’

Nervously, ‘Yes.’

‘Who has decided that you, who are Allah’s creation, is evil? Allah or the men who think they know what Allah wants?’

Cador frowned, looking for the trick in the question. Slowly he looked the Principal in the eye and said firmly, ‘Papa is mistaken.’ He smiled wanly, sighed and lay back on the bed.

‘How long since you ate?’

‘I had a bit of dinner Thursday night.’

‘Well, unless you think you need to punish yourself by fasting longer, I suggest you join Edgar and me for something to eat. You’ll have to wear some of his clothes until we can fit you out more attractively, but you’re the lucky sort who looks good in anything’

Later that evening after a long talk with Edgar and Cador, Stephen Noble called at the home of the owner of the local supermarket and a chain of discount stores along the coast. Feeling somewhat awed by stone balustrades, broad steps and portico, he pressed the bell and was ushered into a lounge-room literally stuffed with deeply cushioned couches, arm chairs, small tables, oriental carpets, knickknacks, souvenirs and colourful daubs of minarets and camels silhouetted against desert sunsets. After introducing himself to Cador’s father, they shook hands, sank into the cushions of opposing armchairs and exchanged pleasantries.

‘Your son, Cador, wasn’t at school yesterday. I was wondering if he is ill?’

Hassid frowned, stared into his guest’s eyes and stated firmly, ‘I have no son.’

Feigning shock, Stephen said, ‘Surely he’s not dead?’

‘Physically, no. To me, yes.’

‘What happened?’

‘Family business. None of your concern.’

‘Where is he?’

‘I neither know nor care.’

‘Surely you want him back?’

‘Not unless he changes his ideas.’

‘What ideas?’

Hassid stood and turned on the Principal with a snarl, ‘Cador has joined the devil. He is no longer welcome in this house, I disown him.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Not that it’s any of your business, but that person insisted he is queer!’

‘There’s nothing wrong with that. Why did you disown him?’

‘It is the law of Allah.’

‘It’s not the law of Australia.’

‘Allah’s law overrides that.’

‘No, it doesn’t. Other people of your faith are able to accept homosexuality as normal for some people, why can’t you?’

‘Those people are not real Muslims.’

‘If you want to live by religious laws, shouldn’t you live in Saudi Arabia, or Iran or Indonesia, or any other country so governed?’

‘Enough of your questions!’

‘Will you tell the police your son has disappeared?’

‘I have no son and do not care whether he lives or dies. It is no concern of mine, but if he comes back here unrepentant, I will kill him.’

‘You shouldn’t have said that.’

‘Ha! There are no witnesses, only you, a stupid old infidel who is perverting the minds of his pupils. If I could have sent Cador to a Muslim school he would have remained pure.’ Hassid stood

and moved to the door. 'Goodbye, Mr. Principal. Please don't bother to call again unless you bring news that Cador has rejected your European perversions.'

Stephen nodded and left, saddened by the man but satisfied that the plans he was already hatching were in the best interests of his new responsibility.

That evening while Cador watched TV in his room, Stephen made a proposition to Edgar. After initial reluctance, he embraced the idea with enthusiasm.

'If it gets you out of the clutches of that woman, Stephen, then I'll do anything.'

'Thanks, Edgar, You've always been a real friend.'

Seeing no point in raising Cador's hopes of a reconciliation with his father, Stephen repeated verbatim his interview with Hassid, including his threat to murder his son for disgracing him. Cador was visibly shocked. His voice shook as he proudly thanked Mr. Noble for his help, and announced his departure for Brisbane the following day.

'What'll you do there?'

Cador shrugged. 'There are blogs on the internet about kids like me. I'll go to Twenty-Ten and stay for a while, see if I can find work... must be something in a large city.'

Stephen gazed thoughtfully at the young man's symmetrical face. Flawless skin. Straight black eyebrows above large dark eyes. A strong, slightly hooked nose and sharply defined jaw were countered by full lips suggesting vulnerable sensuality. Tall for his age, slender, but a posture that suggested unyielding toughness. There is plenty of opportunity for youngsters like you who know no one in the city, thought Stephen sadly; rent boy, sexual abuse, drugs and misery, followed by a short life of crime.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' Cador demanded.

'Because I'm thinking; working on a proposition I hope you'll accept.'

'I'm not going to beg my father to take me back!'

'Of course not. If you remember the bet I made, you'll realise that if you go to Brisbane I'll have failed to solve your problem and that'll cost me fifty dollars. So how about this. You stay here with Edgar and continue at school till the end of the year. It's not far to school. You can jog and get fit or use the bike in Edgar's shed.'

'But...'

'Hang on till I've finished. This is my last year as principal. I'm retiring at the end of the year, and what I'm about to tell you is top secret you understand? My wife and I have drifted apart, so I am going to transfer the ownership of my house to her, clean out my life insurance policies and all bank accounts, then when school finishes and my retirement starts I'm leaving. If you're still estranged from your father, I'd like you to come with me. I've no children of my own and will miss teaching, so your company would be appreciated. We'll find a good school, you'll complete your schooling and go to university if you like. What do you reckon?'

Tears were streaming down Cador's face. He was intelligent enough to realise he stood no chance alone in the city, but he also knew he couldn't accept charity from someone he scarcely knew. 'I can't, Mr. Noble. You are too good, but I would feel too... too obliged. I'd think I had to do whatever you wanted, even if I hated it. I'd never be able to disagree with you. I'd feel guilty if I wasn't constantly feeling grateful. It's different with parents, they owe it to their kids, but you?' He sighed, relieved at daring to tell the truth. 'Sir, I'd rather wash dishes for the rest of my life than be forever in your debt.'

'Fair enough,' Stephen said lightly, hugely relieved at the young man's response. 'I understand. You're a strong-minded young man who needs to be independent. I admire that.'

A nervous flicker crossed Cador's brow as he realised what he'd thrown away, but it was too late now and cold fingers clutched at his entrails as he thought about his future. Already he was regretting his hastiness.

'So, how about a legally binding business deal, drawn up by a lawyer, in which we both state the conditions under which we will live. For example, you can promise to repay every cent of the

money I spend on your upkeep and welfare when you've a job, and I can guarantee your total independence from any form of obligation, your own room and privacy—on condition you don't become a raving lunatic...that sort of thing. The contract will state it is for our mutual benefit. I get to experience the joys of living with an intelligent adolescent, and you get security until you are able to provide for yourself. The contract to be renewable every year, so you don't feel trapped.'

Cador frowned in disbelief. 'You want to help me, and yet want nothing from me?'

'Cador. I have plenty of money, I will have freedom from a wife I've begun to detest, and I have always wanted a child so I could watch him grow, mature and develop into a man. School pupils leave and are seldom seen again. Perhaps if you spend the next few years under my roof we will retain enough interest in each other that I'll be able to follow your life as you mature and age. I assure you I have no desire to replace your father, nor, in case you are worried, have I the slightest sexual interest in you.'

Cador visibly relaxed.

'It's late and I've been talking too much. Go to bed, think about it, and tomorrow tell me exactly what you think of the idea.'

Cador stood and gazed in astonishment at Mr. Noble for several seconds before moving unsmiling towards him, putting out a hand and gently stroking his cheek, then silently going to his room.

A shopping spree on Friday provided Jarek and Zeno with a week's food for a dozen hungry males, a well-stocked first-aid kit, a dozen small backpacks, buckets, soap, glass and putty to repair the three cracked windows, a supply of batteries for small torches and their mobile phones, three new pressurised kerosene lamps, three powerful torches, a couple of fluorescent lamps, six compasses, a mirror for the washroom, and a ball of thick white twine.

As it was during school hours, Zeno wasn't worried anyone would see him with Jarek and guess he was helping with the camp. The supermarket was jammed with apparently deaf, large-bummed housewives who parked their trolleys to gossip in front of all the shelves he and Jarek needed to access. Peering along an aisle he was surprised to see Ms Medlar, Bindi's friend and stout defender of Ms Nimffo, take something from a shelf and furtively tuck it down the front of her dress. She jiggled a bit to make it drop lower, then tossed her head and wandered around the corner to the next aisle. Fixing his eye on the spot Zeno ran over and checked. She'd taken a bottle of hair shampoo. It made no sense. He followed her to the checkout. The shampoo wasn't paid for. She was just walking away when Jarek joined him and she turned, looked directly at Zeno and Jarek, then disappeared onto the street.

'Fuck! She's seen us. Now she'll guess I'm not expelled.'

'Better warn Stephen.'

'I'll do it. I saw her steal some shampoo.'

'You're joking.'

'No. What's the school number?'

Zeno laughed when he disconnected.

'What did Stephen say?'

'He was delighted, as you can imagine. Where to now?'

'The National Park to see Greg and Hazel. Greg's a Ranger and I sometimes stay with them and help out when I'm in the bush on weekends. They rescued me when I got bogged once and we've been friends ever since. I want to take the boys there. It's a great walk and Greg loves talking to kids. I hope he'll let them climb the lookout tower.'

'Excellent.'

An hour later, Irma Medlar stalked into the Principal's office, plonked herself down in a chair and demanded to know why that young rapist was working with Jarek Schwartz when he had been expelled. Stephen merely smiled pleasantly and asked why she had not paid for the hair shampoo she had dropped down the front of her dress in the supermarket.

‘I won’t lose my job for giving a young man a chance to redeem himself, Ms Medlar, but you will lose yours and your reputation if your shoplifting habits are exposed. Good afternoon!’

Chapter 10. What To Wear?

On Saturday Edgar filled the minibus with fuel, oil and water and drove it up to the cabin, curious to see what they’d done to his place. He was more than delighted. Overawed was his exact word, then for an hour he relived old pleasures by skinny dipping with the two young men in the pool before Jarek drove him home so Edgar could be sure he knew all the idiosyncrasies of the vehicle.

While he was away Zeno took an old white T-shirt and, starting with the hem, carefully cut two, twenty-centimetre squares. After threading string through the tube created by the hem, he tied off the other end tightly with a shorter piece, creating a pocket. The longer piece was then fastened round his hips with a simple loop and knot, and after his genitals were tucked into the pouch he pulled the short string between his buttocks and fastened it to the waistband. A quick look in the washroom mirror satisfied him, so he made another for Jarek.

Jarek hooted with laughter. ‘Codpieces! Where’d you come up with that idea?’

‘Sebastian took me to Noosa Beach last year and we forgot our togs, so he hacked up his T-shirt like this and we wore them. Got loads of wolf-whistles, several threats of physical abuse from alpha-males with their girlfriends, and someone went over the road and came back with a cop who said although he couldn’t see anything wrong, in the interests of public safety would we mind moving to the western end of the beach where there were fewer families.’

‘Did you?’

‘Of course. We’re not troublemakers. Come on, put it on.’

To his surprise Jarek discovered it was comfortable. He was admiring himself in the mirror when the phone rang. It was Stephen asking if it was OK to bring Cadour the following day. Afterwards Jarek took another long look in the mirror.

‘Stephen’s bringing a kid up tomorrow. Cadour. A good kid. Can’t imagine what he’ll make of these things—they don’t hide much.’

‘They don’t hide anything; that’s the point isn’t it?’

‘What point?’

‘We’re all males together so we shouldn’t feel we have to cover our bits and pieces. Otherwise it means we’re ashamed to be male.’

‘In an ideal world, Zeno. Not the world we inhabit, unfortunately. We’ll let Stephen and the kid decide.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Cadour. Do you know him?’

‘Not the name. Probably by sight. I hope he’s not some pathetic wimp.’

‘No, he’s an excellent kid. Year ten. First eleven cricket.’

‘A team player...yuk.’

‘Don’t judge too soon.’

Zeno and Jarek’s minimal attire startled Stephen and visibly shocked Cadour when they arrived the following morning. The lad wasn’t sure what to think, so he said nothing.

‘You’re both looking fit and well. Do you know Cadour, Zeno?’

‘By sight. Giddyay, Cadour Welcome to paradise.’

‘Yes, welcome, Cadour.’

The youth shyly took Jarek’s outstretched hand, shook it and whispered, ‘Thank you, Sir.’

‘Call me Jarek. Here we’re all equal.’

‘I’ve just made coffee, fancy a cup?’ Zeno asked to break the silence.

‘Yes, please.’

While Zeno fetched the thermos and mugs, Jarek led the way to a bench in the shade of a gigantic benjamina fig tree. When small talk and coffees were out of the way Jarek and Zeno stood, turned then, feeling increasingly uncertain, asked Stephen what he thought.

‘Your bits are covered—just,’ Stephen said with a slight frown. ‘Who made them?’

‘I did, from an old T-shirt.’ Zeno admitted. ‘You don’t like them, do you?’

Stephen took a large breath and exhaled noisily. ‘I admit I was shocked at first, they leave so little to the imagination, but I suppose that’s the point, don’t you agree, Cador?’

‘What point?’ Cador whispered, flushing deeply at being asked to look at, let alone comment on the skimpy things.

‘That men must be proud, not ashamed of their manhood.’

‘I don’t know,’ the poor youth whispered, unable to believe his teacher would wear something that clearly showed the shape of his genitals.

‘Well, should we or shouldn’t we wear them?’

‘Having had time to adjust to the sight of your virility, I insist you wear them. Don’t you agree, Cador?’

Cador opened his mouth, shut it, shook his head and swallowed, unable to speak.

Taking pity on the youth, Zeno asked, ‘Should I shave my pubes?’

‘Definitely not! Females and prepubescent boys are hairless. Men have body hair. Encouraging men to shave their bodies is a feminist plot to infantilise them. They feel threatened by a real man who’s proud of his hairy chest and legs, because that makes him different from women. I think there’s a fair bit of jealousy there too, because without depilation, hair dye, make-up, plucking and preening, no man will give women a second glance. Until the rise of feminism in the nineteen seventies, heroes in films always had hairy chests—now they look like overdeveloped eunuchs.’

‘Then I’d better confess I’m not totally natural,’ Jarek said, his face a picture of contrition. ‘I run clippers with a fifteen millimetre spacer over everything including my head, otherwise I get shaggy and take too long to dry after a swim or shower.’

‘Trimming is not shaving, you great galah, it’s personal hygiene and desirable because we don’t want to frighten the kids, merely educate them. There is exactly the right amount of hair left to prove you’re a real man.’ He turned to Cador. ‘Do you agree?’

Cador failed to respond. He was on the verge of panic and didn’t know what to do with his erection. Since birth he’d been taught that decent men showed as little of their bodies as possible in order not to offend Allah. Nudity was akin to blasphemy—a perversion, and a man’s private bits were never to be seen or spoken of, let alone seen! Compounding the problem, one of these men was his teacher! Cador was torn between the desire to bury his face in Zeno’s groin, and run away.

Observing the youth’s alarm Stephen decided to force the issue. Inability to accept his natural sexuality had caused Cador months, if not years of misery, fear and shame. His acceptance that he wasn’t evil for being gay had already transformed him, so there was no point in pandering to idiotic religious brainwashing about nudity. ‘Cador, you’re only a year older than the boys who’re coming tomorrow, so I want you to tell Jarek what you reckon their reactions will be when they see these two for the first time.’

‘Come on, Cador,’ Jarek encouraged, ‘don’t be shy. It’s important for us to have your opinion. Be absolutely honest because in the morning the ten boys from Mrs. Jonsin’s Year Nine class will arrive for what we hope will be five days of fun and excitement. The success or failure of the next six weeks is in your hands.’

Mrs. Jonsin’s! They’re loose-lipped, smart-arse brain-boxes. Racist and homophobic too, always mocking kids they think are gay. I’m glad I won’t be here!’

‘Yes, they can be a handful, but I think it’s a form of self-preservation,’ Stephen said diplomatically. ‘This is a racist, religious, bigoted town and clever kids are often on the wrong end of bullying. I think they’ve figured it’s better to get in first before they’re got at. Without the other year nine kids around I reckon they’ll let their guard down. They’re sharp and perceptive and if treated as equals they’ll be fine. But you haven’t said what you think, or what their reaction will be.’

Cador swallowed, took a breath, then frowned. 'I won't tell you what *I* think.' His eyes sparkled giving his audience a glimpse of the irreverent urchin that dwelt inside. 'Instead I'll act out what some of the kids are going to say. OK?'

'Exactly what we need.'

Cador's voice changed to a nasal drawl. 'Faarck, did ya see Jarek Schwartz's fat bulge!' In another voice he replied. 'Yeah, but Zeno's dick's longer' 'Yeah, but Schwartz's balls are bigger.' 'You're joking. They only look bigger because they're tight, Zeno's hang low.' 'Don't ya reckon it's a bit gross?' 'No way, they look tough like those two warriors in *Conquerors of the Maidan*.' 'Yeah. Not so muscly but just as tough!' Sneering. 'You reckon they're tough? What's tough about showing your hairy ring when you bend over?' 'Ah! Now we know. Johnny's interested in Schwartz's arsehole.' Cador lowered his head and blushed.

The three men clapped.

'You've a future on stage, Cador,' Stephen said in delight.

'Yes, an excellent performance. So, what's their verdict?'

'That depends. If I'd wandered through here and accidentally seen you two looking like this, I'd have raced away. You look sort of wild and a bit crazy. Too sexy. Dangerous anyway. With my background even if you'd seen me and been pleasant I'd have imagined the devil had arrived to tempt me and been too scared and embarrassed to stay. If I hadn't been with Mr. Noble I'd have run for my life. But if he stands beside you and tells the kids he thinks you're the ideal men for the job—that sort of thing, then in five minutes they'll get used to you like I have, and start dragging their togs into their bum cracks to be like you. Like I said, you look feral.' Cador stopped, looked down as if embarrassed, then leaped off the bench and danced around Jarek and Zeno. 'I feel...I feel so...so free telling you this as if my chains are off. I can't explain.'

Jarek grinned. 'You don't have to. Zeno and I felt something similar last Monday. You've given us good advice along with some delightful flattery, for which we thank you. Feel like a swim?'

'Before we forsake business for pleasure there's one other thing,' Stephen said, producing a newspaper clipping. 'I want you to read this.' He handed it to Zeno.

'Three Shire Councils ban the wearing of Speedos in Public Pools,' Zeno read. 'A spokeswoman for KOCS, [Keep Our Children Safe] Ms Irma Medlar, a respected secondary teacher, congratulated the councillors for their brave stance, saying it was intolerable that men should still be asserting their domination over women by wearing clothes that revealed the shape of their sexual organs. Children and teenagers should not be exposed to such anachronistic displays of male aggression and supremacy. If nothing is done, men will soon be demanding a return to the days of female slavery and exploitation.'

Jarek exploded in laughter. 'Bloody Irma! She was the one who supported Nimffo and forced you to expel Zeno, wasn't she?'

'The same. An exceedingly dangerous woman who, like all bigots, thinks her opinions should be law. That's why I want you to wear those little things. They're an antidote to this pernicious nonsense that's making men and boys feel ashamed of their manhood. These women want to castrate males; turn them into lapdogs. We can't change society overnight but you two have the opportunity to teach sixty young men, by example, that to be ashamed of your manhood is to be less than a man.'

'Right.' Jarek sounded less than convinced.

'I keep an eye on the computer games boys play, and as Cador pointed out there's always an alpha-male hero, superbly, if unbelievably muscled, frequently wearing very little, who overcomes evil and saves his men. I've not found one youth who wants to see females saving the planet, because instinctively, and sensibly, healthy boys seek healthy *male* role models. However, what do they see around them? Suits and ties and unfit men in baggy shorts and T-shirts. Fat gutted by the time they're twenty-five. Feminists have successfully knocked sportsmen off the list of heroic role models by insisting they act like sensitive, new-age guys. Everything about men and maleness, sex and sensuality has been sanitised to passionless tedium.'

Jarek nodded thoughtfully. 'I was disgusted at the judgement on that footballer recently who was prosecuted for having sex with a girl who forced her way in to his motel room, sat on his erection and then decided she didn't want it after all. The judge made him look like a pathetic criminal pervert, instead of the fine young man his club declares him to be.'

'Exactly! Jarek. That's why adolescent males spend their time with fit, powerful, healthy, computer generated heroes who are proud to be men. They're symbols of primitive dominance, which is why they are usually almost naked, fighting with swords and fists. No sane young man wants to be a nerd directing drones to bomb innocents from a safe bunker in the USA. As Cador suggested, you two fit the heroic mould.'

Cador smiled shyly and looked at Zeno, who winked, causing Cador to blush.

'While flattery will get you just about everywhere, Stephen,' Jarek said seriously, 'and I thank you for those kind words, I'm worried our results might not come up to your expectations.'

'Don't be silly. I don't expect miracles in five days. Whatever you do will be better than nothing, but I can't help feeling it's going to be great. You both look tough, fit, and...awesome, I think is the right word. The kids will be so relieved you're not neat, prim teachers in pressed shorts and T-shirts, expecting them to be good little civilized boys, they'll be over the moon at having an adventure with two real heroes. All I want is for the boys to have fun, excitement and challenges in a natural setting where there are no examinations or any form of competition with each other—only with themselves.'

Silence. No one was tempted to laugh at Stephen's innocent sincerity, because all three would love to live in a more interesting, natural and challenging world; if only for a few days.

Hesitantly, Cador broke the silence. 'I understand. I understand completely. You two look totally brilliant. Like honourable warriors dedicated to truth and integrity. Here in the forest I feel transported back to ancient times.' He blushed slightly at his candour.

'Ah, Cador, your hours spent playing interactive computer war games have infected your vocabulary, but your sentiments are admirable and exactly the breath of fresh air I needed,' Stephen said with a smile. 'He's right, you two, so stop doubting yourselves.'

'Yes, Sir. May we swim now, Sir?' Jarek asked with a naughty grin.

'Certainly, boy. You've earned it.'

'Well, get your gear off you two. You didn't swim with us last time, Stephen, you're not getting out of it again.'

They removed their pouches while Stephen carefully removed shorts, shirt, sandals and underpants and folded them on the bench. Cador, after a few moments hesitation while he considered and rejected his god's injunction against nudity, threw off the shorts and T-shirt that Edgar's son had outgrown, then stood, hands covering his groin, suddenly embarrassed.

'Hands on head, Cador!' Jarek ordered.

The youth laughed at his own silliness, bravely raised his arms exposing an erection that no one commented on, and followed the finest pair of buttocks he could imagine down the narrow winding track overhung by trees to a sunny beach, pool, and its dense forest backdrop.

Stephen sighed happily. 'Ah, it's always so perfect. What do you think, Cador?'

'The youth was gazing around, mouth agape in awe. 'I didn't know such places existed so close to town. It is almost too beautiful. You both look much better without the pouches,' he exclaimed in surprise. 'More approachable, less mysterious—less sexually suggestive. With them on I couldn't stop wondering what was underneath. Now I know you're no different from me I can think about other things. I really think you shouldn't wear them.'

'That's what I suspected,' Jarek sighed. 'It certainly feels better without them, but the law says, No.'

'I agree, Cador,' Stephen said sadly. 'But as Jarek says...'

'You're brilliant, Cador.' Zeno laughed. 'It's great to have someone my own age. Being with old fogeys like Jarek twenty-four seven can get pretty dull.'

Jarek whipped Zeno's arm up his back and deftly kicked away his leg. Zeno dropped onto the grass, rolled onto his knees and launched a tackle. They wrestled for a bit before helping each other

to their feet and apologising to still grinning Stephen and an open-mouthed Cador. 'Now we're dirty and sweaty. Come on!'

They threw themselves into the water, climbed the rope, dived and splashed, swam and clambered onto the boulders on the far side and dived back in. After a while Jarek and Stephen lay in the shade on the sand, leaving Cador and Zeno to explore down stream.

Chapter 11. Eros

Cador wandered into a shaft of sunlight beside the creek, where a large tree had fallen across creating a small pool, then stood and gazed dreamily around, eyes unfocussed, a slight frown the only indication of unease. Zeno watched, captivated. Unable to find fault with this golden youth whose face, framed by straight black hair, looked simultaneously vulnerable and dangerous. Lips slightly apart. Strong white teeth. Eagle's beak nose. Determined jaw. Straight, uncompromising eyebrows. Would Cador be a risky person to cross? Zeno wondered. He determined to find out.

Cador looked sideways at Zeno as if unsure, then blurted, 'Don't be mad at me, but...I was wondering, are you and Jarek lovers?'

Caught unawares, Zeno hesitated. If Cador wasn't gay then this was bloody rude, so he countered with a question of his own. 'Are you gay?'

Cador blushed. 'Yes.'

'Good. No, we're just good friends. Have you a boyfriend?' Zeno managed to sound unconcerned, but his heart was hammering nervously.

'Not really. I've kissed Terry Alcott and sucked him off a couple of times and he fucked me once, but that's all.'

This was news indeed! Big, tough Terry Alcott! Who'd have thought? 'He's very handsome. Do you love him?'

'No way! He's not handsome in bed. He's rough and selfish. When he's satisfied he loses interest in me.'

'I'd *never* lose interest in you,' Zeno said without thinking. Then having made the statement he thought he might as well continue. 'You're the most handsome and sexy person I've ever met and I want to kiss you.' There, he thought. I've done it. He'll either tell me to stuff off, or take me on.

Cador didn't respond immediately. He gazed at the other youth for several seconds then wrapped his arms around Zeno's waist, buried his head in his chest and sobbed as if his heart would break. Zeno stroked the coarse black hair, caressed the cheeks and led the weeping youth to a mossy log where they sat, arms around each other. Then as abruptly as they started, the sobs ceased, Cador stood, blew his nose into the stream, splashed water over his face, then stood directly in front of Zeno, hands at his sides.

'The first time I saw you in the playground I thought you were sexy. You walk so tall, head high, sure of yourself and your place in the world. I'd been having a tough time at home, hiding my problems about sex with Terry...and other things. You looked so secure I wished I had you instead of Terry. Now I'm in a mess again it wouldn't be fair to get you involved.'

'What sort of mess?'

'My father kicked me out. Mr. Noble's looking out for me...I'll tell you more later. I don't want to think about it and spoil this place.' He frowned slightly.

'I don't mind getting involved. Stephen and I are mates.'

'If you kiss me, won't Jarek be jealous?'

'Like I said, we're just friends and it's embarrassing to admit, but you've had more sexual experience than either of us. We only discovered we're gay a week ago, and all we've ever done is kiss and cuddle and jerk each other off.'

'That sounds exactly what I'd like to do.' Cador pulled a wry face. 'Terry doesn't like to kiss and...and just be nice together. He says it's queer. I'm not going to see him again. I was so lonely,

you know? Thinking I was the only fag in school.’ He looked away and said softly. ‘If you still want to, I’d really like to kiss you.’

Taking advantage of the young men’s absence Stephen told Jarek about Cador’s problems and his own plans to leave his wife immediately on retirement. Before Christmas he hoped. He had no idea what he’d do, but whatever it was it wouldn’t be in this area. Jarek admitted he also had no idea what to do next. He’d saved enough to see him right for at least a year, and by then hoped to have found something that interested him.

‘Something in nature,’ he stated firmly. ‘Never again a small town full of right-wing bigots, or a school full of females. I’ve become paranoid about lack of privacy; being recognised by the kids and their parents wherever I go. I think I’ll become a hermit.’

‘I’m sure you’ll love the next six weeks, Jarek. Boys this age have fertile imaginations and from what you’ve told me of your plans I know they’ll be transported to a land far removed from their normal lives. A place of magic and mystery where they survive by their wits and skills. I guarantee within two hours you’ll be their undisputed ‘lord’ and they your loyal henchmen, scouting through the forest, spying and setting traps for the unwary, learning about the stars, the land, their own strengths and their dependence on others... and I’m raving and repeating myself, aren’t I?’

‘Yes, but I need to hear your dreams again, Stephen. Just when I’d begun to think life was a boring rut, you made me excited about tomorrow and the next weeks. Goodness, it’s time for lunch. I wonder where the other two are. I’ll go and check they’re OK.’

He returned smiling. ‘They’ve found each other.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I now understand what you meant after seeing Zeno and me on the bed last Monday. To secretly watch two young men kissing and exploring each other’s bodies is a beautiful experience.’

Stephen frowned. ‘You aren’t jealous?’

Jarek laughed. ‘I love Zeno as a friend, the best friend I’ve ever had, but it’s a huge relief to see him in lust with someone his own age. I was worried he wanted to have a permanent relationship with me, something I’m not only not ready for, but when I am it will be with someone my own age. It’s certainly not something I’d want to lumber myself with next year with all its uncertainties.’

‘Are you sure it won’t interfere with your working relationship and therefore the camp?’

‘On the contrary, it will make it easier. I won’t be always worried things are becoming complicated.’ He sighed happily. ‘Now this place is indeed paradise.’

As Stephen was leaving, Zeno handed him the assignments he’d completed during the week, and extracted a promise that Cador could spend every weekend at the cabin, promising in return that he would assist in the preparations for the following week, and they would both do all their homework.

‘Stephen,’ Zeno said seriously, ‘Jarek’s coming to my grandmother’s for Christmas, and I’d really like Cador to come and stay with me and go to the same school next year.’

‘Is that what you want, Cador?’

‘Yes! Yes! Yes! I want to be normal like Zeno!’

Stephen knew it wasn’t going to be easy to pry a son from his father, despite their differences, however he saw little point in being a prophet of doom. ‘Well, there are still six weeks to sort out the details,’ he said cheerfully, ‘but it certainly seems like a good idea. Now, tomorrow evening at seven, Jarek, don’t forget to come to the parents’ evening and persuade them to send their sons here for a week.’

‘I’ll be there.’

That evening while Jarek and Zeno were making last minute preparations, Stephen Noble, Edgar and Angus were marvelling at Cador’s aptitude for Contract Bridge. After only one lesson he was already bidding, finessing and counting trumps like a pro.

On the other side of town Bindi was trying not to yawn during the Sunday night meeting of Women's War, where Mrs. Noble was proudly trumpeting local feminist successes.

'Next year, the last male teacher in pre-school education will be gone,' she announced proudly, 'thanks to the efforts of almost every kindergarten teacher. The Brisbane chapter of Women's War International have received an assurance from the Education Department that they will consider their proposal that no child under the age of ten should be taught by men, as they can't be trusted with girls and are completely unsuited to the task of instructing boys to become socialised and sensitive to the special needs of women. It is envisaged that very soon males will be restricted to teaching Years six to twelve. However, that is merely an interim measure while we regroup before pushing for the removal of males from all teaching positions at all levels of pre-school, primary and secondary education, apart from specialist staff for boys' sports. Our own High School is the State leader in this campaign, having only three male staff members, all of whom are leaving at the end of the year.'

Clapping and assorted congratulatory noises gave Violet time to take a few sips from her tumbler of water.

'Strong lobbying of the Education Department has proved so successful that, according to my contact in the Department, my husband's position as High School Principal will be filled next year by Irma Medlar, whose campaign to ban men from public pools if they are wearing swimming costumes that reveal the shape of their genitals, has been so successful. She will ensure that the replacement for Mr. Jarek Schwartz, a living example of the dictum, all men are rapists, will be an older married man with no interest in promoting assertive masculinity. Mr. Adams, who decided yesterday to retire at the end of this year, will be replaced by a qualified female.'

Nods and murmurs of approval

'You'll agree we've come a long way since nineteen seventy, and I don't think I'm mistaken when I predict victory in our war against male aggression towards females. Thank you for your attention.' She nodded to her audience, smiled and sat down.

'Thank you, Violet' The President gushed. 'Your close association with the principal of the secondary school, and unstinting behind the scenes work with the school secretary to remove the CVs of male applicants from consideration, has been the primary reason for our success in that area. Now Bindi has a timely warning for those of you wondering if some males are worth bothering with. The male in this case is Jarek Schwartz, the teacher Violet Noble just mentioned.'

Bindi's nervousness evaporated as she enlarged on Jarek's treachery in first agreeing to an engagement, and then without any discussion, dumping her in front of strangers, causing great embarrassment and emotional distress. If it hadn't been for Irma's support she didn't know what she might have done. Her tale evolved in the telling and the roles became reversed, leaving her audience convinced she had been the perfect homemaker, picking up and caring for an ungrateful, messy slob. Such was her sincerity she convinced even herself, and the performance culminated in a genuine sob at the wickedness of men in general and Jarek in particular. She sat down to sympathetic applause.

A further denunciation of Jarek was then offered by Irma Medlar who related the abuse and insults she had been subjected to by both Schwartz and one of his loathsome pupil acolytes when Jarek broke his promise of marriage to Bindi. This was followed by even more inventive anecdotes about his disrespect for both female pupils and staff at the high school that aroused audible sighs of sorrow from her audience at the inexhaustible perfidy of men. The fact that Jarek taught no girls and never mixed with the female staff wasn't mentioned. It took all Irma's will power to keep the promise she had made to Adele not to tell anyone about the alleged rape, so instead of reviling Zeno, she launched into a paean of praise for her dear friend Adele, their beloved ex-secretary who had died so tragically. She missed Adele deeply and was determined someone should pay for the death that she refused to believe was an accident.

After a short fictional film depicting male depravity and female decency that had been unsuccessfully entered in the Queensland Premier's Short Film Awards by a graduate from the university school of cinema, the meeting ended.

Bindi was so flattered by Irma's support she invited her for a coffee after the meeting. While her hostess was working out how to use the espresso machine and noisily grinding beans, Irma made a practiced sweep of the house and was alarmed to discover a drawer full of condoms beside the bed. Dildos and other aids to female orgasm she heartily approved of, but condoms? Surely such revolting reminders of erect penises should have been tossed out with Jarek? This needed further investigation!

Chapter 12. Adventure

In tracksuit and trainers, Zeno nervously welcomed Jarek and the minibus with its cargo of ten sceptical fourteen year-olds, and led them with their holdalls to the covered eating area. Jarek, also in tracksuit and trainers, brought up the rear with Stephen.

'Welcome to the bush, guys,' Jarek grinned. 'Most of you will have seen Zeno round the school, he's an excellent woodsman and will be helping me keep you busy for the next five days. What do you want to do first? Swim or look around the cabin?'

'Swim!' was the universal demand.

'Excellent. Take your bags to the recreation room and change into your togs and sandals—remember no baggies or shorts, and meet me on the verandah over there, outside the bunk rooms. We'll allocate them later when you've decided who you want to share with.'

Zeno showed them the recreation room and the exit to the verandah, leaving them to change. In his own room he stripped to his pouch and sandals, slung a small backpack over his shoulders, then joined Stephen in his suit, and Jarek who had stripped to his pouch. When the boys were ready on the grass in front of the verandah the three adults wandered over, ignoring wide-eyed astonishment, audible giggles and a wolf whistle.

Stephen stood between his protégés, placed paternal hands on their shoulders and in a voice redolent of sincerity, respectability, sense, determination and authority, addressed the speechless students.

'I know you lads are going to have the time of your life with Jarek and Zeno, who are two of the finest men I know. They are reliable, expert woodsmen, strong and intelligent, caring and understanding. I have complete confidence in them and their abilities, otherwise I would never have given permission for this series of camps that you will remember with pleasure for the rest of your lives. They will treat you with respect, fairness and decency, and I expect you to treat them the same way. Well, you've exciting things to do, so I'll wish you all the best and head off back to school.' With a smile and a wave, the Principal disappeared.

While Stephen was speaking Zeno rapidly scanned the ten top-stream boys. Two caught his eyes. One, olive-skinned, clean-cut, confident and itching to cause trouble, the other quiet, lean and very dark, who looked as if he was pretending he wasn't there. Part Aborigine, perhaps. A couple of blonds, one slim, sharp and self confident, the other had obviously been lifting weights, probably to compensate for his shortness. The gangly one with glasses was concealing his insecurities behind a supercilious facade, and four obvious Christians were betrayed by their prim, pursed lips and disapproving manner. Holier than thou, as his father would say. Even their togs gave them away—loose so as not to cling and reveal their sex. One had an apron of flab, the others were pasty and pimpled. The other two were slightly overweight and looked in need of fresh air and exercise. He was glad Jarek was in charge.

Jarek knew and liked the boys in the structured school situation, but this was very different. Without the accepted hierarchy and externally imposed discipline it could easily degenerate into anarchy. He had to play it very, very cool. Appearing perfectly relaxed, his smile included them all.

'We're glad you're the first guys to test the course we've prepared,' Jarek said affably, 'because I know from having taught you for two years that you're smart enough and tough enough to have a go at everything and succeed. If you blokes can't handle something, then I won't try it on the next group. In case you were worried, this isn't going to be the same as school; you're here to have fun

so there's no schoolwork, no tests, no competitions, no winners and losers, and everyone who survives the week gets a certificate.'

Mutters of yeah, yeah, we'll believe that when we see it.

Zeno sighed. Jarek expected him to have some rapport with these kids because he was also a student, but they weren't the sort he'd ever had anything to do with. These guys had a reputation among the women teachers for being 'bad', 'difficult', 'too smart for their own good.' They were the ones teachers complained about and sent out of the room for their smart answers. There was no way he could be their mentor. Worse than that, except for the two tough guys and the Aborigine no one looked fit enough to complete the planned activities. It was going to be a total disaster!

'To get the most out of the week,' Jarek was saying, 'I want you to accept that we're all equals. While we're here I'm no longer a teacher, just an older guy who knows a bit more than you about living rough in the bush, so if you feel like it you can call me Jarek instead of Sir. I don't know everything, of course; some of you are more informed than me about many things, but what I know will be useful and could prevent accidents. If I tell you to do something I'm not trying to be the bossy teacher who thinks he's superior, all I care about is your safety and that every one enjoys themselves' His grin was disarming. 'Any questions?'

'Why're you wearing that thing?' The obvious sneer in the voice shocked Zeno. He'd never dare speak to anyone like that, let alone a teacher. It was the tall good-looking kid; the self-appointed tough guy who looked around for applause and received a few titters.

Jarek roared with genuine laughter. 'Because, Melvin, if I didn't you'd race home to your parents next Friday and tell them I was running around naked. Then, because most people think nude is rude, they'd create a fuss, call the cops, and the rest of the program would be scrapped in case I was a child molester, and I'd be out of a job!'

'Aren't you embarrassed?' A terse reprimand from the obese Christian.

With a good-natured grin Jarek spread arms and legs, inviting inspection. All the muscles that make action flick heroes so popular were visible, but being considerably leaner he looked not only strong and lithe, but wholly alert and slightly feral. 'OK, Arthur, tell me what I've got to be embarrassed about.'

'You're just about fuckin naked!' Melvin jeered. 'And you've got a bare bum.'

'Have you seen the girls at the municipal pool, topless in their bikini thongs? Do you object to them too?'

'They're females. It's different. They don't have their pubic hair hanging out like you two!'

'You've a head covered in hair, should that be covered too?'

The other students were looking embarrassed so Jarek included them with a smile and asked, 'Who can tell me why females should have the right to wear a thong, and males not?'

'We can see the shape of your goolies.' Melvin sneered, determined not to relinquish his position as top dog.

'Melvin, every male has a penis and two testicles, even you. They're all approximately the same and there's nothing exciting or dangerous about them. If you think you'll become a nervous wreck from seeing the shape of my goolies, as you call them, then don't look.'

Suppressed laughter and someone said, 'That's telling you, Melvin.'

'Shut the fuck up, shit head,' Melvin snapped.

Refusing to be drawn, Jarek said amicably, 'Let's make a deal, Melvin. I won't tell you what to wear, and you won't tell me.'

Melvin mumbled something that sounded vaguely obscene.

'Relax,' Jarek said solemnly. 'I'm grateful for your opinion, but I'll continue wearing whatever I feel comfortable in, while giving you the same right—apart from baggies for swimming; that's for safety reasons, not prejudice. I'm pleased you want to talk about this because I think it's important that we discuss it, but we don't want to spend time on it now, so bring it up this evening after supper so everyone can have their say. Deal?' He stepped forward and offered his hand. After a brief pause Melvin returned the grin and shook it, gratified to have his opinions seriously considered.

‘Sure thing...Jarek,’ he said, returning proudly to his place—the equal of any man.

Jarek asked them to choose a partner for the day. ‘This isn’t childish, it’s a safety measure. If each partner keeps track of the other, then no one gets lost or runs into trouble without help. For that reason no one is ever to leave the immediate surroundings of the cabin on their own.’

‘Why? Surely it’s not dangerous, Sir...I mean Jarek?’

‘Apart from getting lost, Simon, which is easy in the bush, there are leeches, scorpions, taipans, death adders, eastern brown and red-bellied black snakes, all of which have lethal venom. There are bluffs to fall over and break your necks; there’s a swampy area that’ll suck you in, and a twisted ankle could end in disaster if you’re on your own. I’ve seen large monitor lizards that could chew your hand off if you annoyed them, and when we cleaned out the bunk rooms Zeno had to drag a five metre python from the rafters and take him into the forest.’ Jarek stepped out five metres and smiled darkly. ‘It was as thick as my thigh, with long, very sharp teeth. If it wrapped itself round you and squeezed, you’d never get it off and you’d suffocate.’

‘Carpet snakes don’t attack, do they?’

‘No, snakes usually only attack if disturbed, but their camouflage is so good it’s easy to step on them if they’re sunbathing. Hands up those who intend to go off on their own.’

No hands were raised.

‘Excellent. The last rule is that you may wear, do and say whatever you like, as long as you hurt no one physically or mentally, and don’t damage any property.

‘What do you mean, hurting someone mentally?’ The questioner was the gangly kid wearing glasses, the obvious choice for bullying.

‘Good question, Anton. I mean things like calling someone unpleasant names, making anyone feel stupid, incompetent, inadequate. Daring someone to do what they don’t want to, being a spoilsport. It’s everyone’s duty to tell me or Zeno immediately anything like that occurs. If you don’t, then you are guilty of condoning the offence. Offenders will be given one chance. If they reoffend then Mr. Noble will come and take them back to school immediately. The unity and strength of our small band of men is paramount.’

‘When you say we can do whatever we like, what d’you mean?’

‘Exactly that. If in doubt, ask. I promise that Zeno and I will take every one of your concerns and questions as seriously as our own.’

‘Why do we have to wear sandals?’

‘There’s nothing worse than splinters if you’re hiking.’

‘You’ve got bare feet.’

‘Mine are hardened by weeks of walking barefoot.’

‘Before we set off,’ Zeno said, pushing a narrow stick into the soil, ‘I want you to look at the shadow cast by this stick.’

The boys gathered around and watched as Zeno lay another thin stick along the shadow line, then another from the stick towards the door of the bunk room. He stood back and asked if anyone could guess the angle between the two lines.

‘Easy,’ the short, well muscled lad said with a pompous smile. ‘It’s about twelve degrees.’

‘How do you know, Sasha?’

Sasha placed another stick to make a right angle. ‘That’s ninety degrees.’ He bisected the angle, muttered, ‘forty-five’, bisected it again, ‘twenty-two,’ bisected it again and announced, just over eleven degrees.’

‘Brilliant,’ Zeno grinned. ‘Go to the top of the class.’

‘And jump off,’ someone laughed.

‘Remember that angle,’ Zeno said, ‘we’ll use it later. OK, let’s top ourselves up with fresh rain water.’ He filled twelve tumblers with water from a large urn. ‘Pump yourselves full so you don’t feel thirsty later. Dehydration’s a serious concern in this hot dry weather.’

When all were satisfied he led the way around the building to the composting toilet outside the washroom.

‘Inside this important little room is a porcelain squat toilet, common in southern Europe and all countries where public hygiene is considered important. There are places for your feet; you squat and do your business, making sure it goes in the hole, not around it, then drop a handful of sawdust from the box on top of your offering, wash yourself and the porcelain with the little spray nozzle, then come out here and wash your hands. Because too much liquid prevents it from composting correctly, if you only want to urinate, piss outside, but not on the grass or anywhere where other people are going to walk or sit. It’s best to stand at the edge of the forest, or go a little way in. All right, in pairs, go up and look, I don’t want any mistakes.’

In pairs they mounted the five steps to inspect.

‘It’s just a hole in the floor!’ was the general comment, clearly not impressed.

‘Exactly, better than sitting on a seat someone else has piddled on.’

‘Everyone laughed and agreed and followed the two adults to the edge of the forest.

‘Follow the brown bums,’ someone giggled.

‘Shhh, they’re watching with their nether eyes,’ Simon whispered loud enough for all to hear.

Everyone laughed good-naturedly and when they saw Jarek and Zeno unhook their strings and direct streams of clear liquid into the bushes, they joined them, amazed and delighted to be treated so sensibly.

Bladders emptied, a line of youths headed by Zeno warily entered the forest.

‘Where’re we going?’

‘We’ll find the creek, explore that, then follow it to the swimming hole.’

In the shade the temperature dropped several degrees and Jarek noted with satisfaction that everyone suddenly seemed more alert.

The brave band walked in a pre-planned, gently curved trajectory that not only made the stream seem much further away, but was also disorienting. The going was easy as the canopy prevented heavy growth on the leaf-littered forest floor. Large spider webs, bandicoot holes, possum droppings, the vast root system of a curtain fig... Everything of interest was noted and observed and the boys were encouraged to draw attention to anything they thought seemed interesting. Under a tall tree Jarek pointed to some discolouration around a hole about ten metres above the ground.

‘What do you reckon that indicates?’

‘Snakes?’ ‘Fairies?’ ‘Borer?’

‘Native bees. Who wants to climb up and taste the honey, if there is any? We won’t take more than a taste, they work hard for it and we’re neither starving nor robbers.’

They looked at the stream of tiny black bees flying in and out and shook their heads.

‘They don’t sting. Come on, I’m going, who’s game?’ He stared at Melvin who rose to the challenge.

‘Take off your sandals; bare feet are best for climbing because you can grip with your toes.’

In silence, the others watched as Jarek seemed to flit from branch to branch followed by a more careful Melvin. Arrived at the level of the bees the youth looked down and suddenly froze.

‘Jarek! I don’t dare move!’ he whispered.

‘Well don’t let those pikers down there know. Come on, play the hero. They can’t see me hanging onto your togs. Look down, grin and wave as if you’re having a great time.’

Melvyn leaned back into Jarek, gave a quick look down and waved. ‘I think I’m going to be sick.’

‘Better warn them to close their mouths then.’

‘Not funny.’

‘Melvyn, I know you’re only pretending to be frightened so you won’t have to put your hand in the beehive. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. But if you fall and break your neck it would spoil things for the rest of us, so while I turn to face the tree, hold onto my waist and watch what I’m doing.’

‘I’m not scared.’

‘Good, but you’ve still got to hang on to me.’ Jarek turned suddenly and reached into the hole. Melvin clutched at his waist but his hands slipped on the sweat and he grabbed onto the only dry, firm thing, and hung onto that.

Withdrawing a finger dripping with honey, Jarek licked it then shouted down, ‘Delicious.’ Twisting his head he looked over his shoulder. ‘Melvin,’ he said calmly, ‘if you stop squeezing my balls I’ll give you a taste.’

Melvin winked and let go.

With a flourish at their audience, Jarek shoved his finger into Melvin’s mouth, nearly overbalancing him. Everyone laughed. Melvin sucked and grinned mischievously.

‘You’ve overcome your fears then?’

‘I was nervous, up here alone with a naked man.’

‘Cheeky bastard, I’ve a good mind to throw you down.’

‘You’ll have to catch me first,’ Melvin laughed, scrambling down as agilely as a monkey, then assuring everyone it was easy, the honey was delicious, and he’d like to go up again.

Jarek shook his head in admiration. He’d known the lad for two years; known he was an accomplished liar and con artist, but still he’d been fooled. ‘I hope it was only fun and not a set-up’ he muttered to himself.

About half an hour later they stopped in the middle of a small clearing created by a fallen forest giant. Sunlight lent a cheerful note and they checked for witchetty grubs, finding instead millions of ants, several giant centipedes, two termite mounds, hundreds of russet butterflies clustered around a damp spot in the soil, a strange flat black spider and a scorpion.

‘I thought scorpions were larger?’

‘They are in some countries, Sasha, the Australian ones are not that impressive to look at, but the poisoned needle on the tip of the tail still packs a punch.’

A terrified shout from one of the fat boys. ‘Sir! I’ve been stung by a scorpion!’

‘Did you see it?’

‘No. I was just kneeling here and...it’s incredibly painful!’

Everyone withdrew to a safe distance while Zeno and Jarek checked his knee, then the ground.

‘You kneeled on an ant nest.’ Jarek called the others and showed them a swarming horde of small, dark-blue vaguely metallic looking ants. ‘These are a variety of so-called bull ants, they bite, not sting, and inject an acid that hurts but isn’t lethal.’

‘It’s killing me! Feels as if my knee’s broken.’

‘Yes, I’ve had more than my share of bites, but it only lasts about half an hour. So take it as a warning everyone to check carefully before kneeling or sitting.’

Suddenly the forest wasn’t such a great place to be, and when the whine and crack of a whip bird disturbed the silence, everyone jumped.

‘At least there are no snakes,’ someone said in relief.

‘There are probably dozens in the area, but with the pounding of all our feet on the ground they keep well out of our way, only being interested in attacking things small and tasty enough to fit down their throats. They aren’t like humans, killing for fun.’

‘You sound as if you don’t like humans much, Jarek,’ Simon said with a frown.

‘Some are fine, others aren’t. I just wish people would understand that all the animals and plants we’ve seen today, and the thousands we haven’t seen, have as much right to live and breed as humans. Unfortunately, very few people believe that. They say they do, but if it’s a question of giving up something to protect other living things then suddenly they’re not so keen.’

‘Giving up what?’

‘Like the question about whether Zeno and I should be allowed to wear these pouches, it’s a good topic for debate in the evening so I hope you’ll bring it up then. Meanwhile, Zeno has a question for you.’

‘Who reckons they’d be able to find their way back to the cabin?’

Every hand was raised.

‘OK, which direction is it?’

At least ten different directions were indicated.

‘Well, as we can’t race off in more than one direction at once, it seems we’re lost. What do we need to work out what direction to go?’

‘A compass?’

‘How would that help?’

‘We’d know where north is.’

‘Yes, and in what direction is the cabin?’

‘Silence.’

‘Remember just before we set off we measured the angle between the sun’s shadow and the direction of the cabin? Well, that will give us a rough guide. Someone get three sticks.’

A stick was laid along the direction of the shadow, and another at an angle of about twelve degrees.

‘Any comments?’

‘The Earth has turned since then,’ Sasha said authoritatively.

‘Brilliant. How long do you reckon we’ve been walking?’

After a discussion they agreed about an hour, so Zeno drew a circle around the vertical stick, marked it off into twelve equal segments. Each line marks an hour, now which way would the shadow move?

After an argument it was agreed counter clockwise because they were in the southern hemisphere, so it was easy to mark where the shadow would have been when they set out, and place a stick at twelve degrees to that.

‘It’s very inaccurate and you’d probably end up going round in circles, but if you could manage a straight line then heading in that direction would take you in the general direction of the cabin and the road, which is at least better than heading off into the national park never to be seen again.’

‘That’s impossible, Zeno,’ someone said petulantly. ‘You’re pointing in the exact direction we’re heading. We’ve been walking away from the cabin for ages, not towards it!’

‘Who agrees with Henry?’

Everybody did.

‘Then that shows how easy it is to get lost. What should you have if you’re going bush walking without a guide?’

A good map and compass that they knew how to use, was the easily arrived at consensus.

‘Not having a map, what do you reckon’s the best way to the creek? We can’t be far away now.’ Again ten different directions were suggested.

‘What senses have we used so far?’ Jarek asked.

‘Sight.’

‘And feeling! That ant bite still hurts!’

‘Any others we could use?’

‘Smell?’

‘Some animals can smell water, but I’ve never managed.’

‘Sound?’

‘Better be quiet then. Find a tree to lean against, check you’re not going to interrupt an ant column or rest your butt against a wasp, then close your eyes so you aren’t distracted by what you see, and open your senses to sounds and smells—in case one of you can smell water.’

They laughed good naturedly then stood or leaned in silence. It was a bit like the lights going down at the cinema or the theatre, but instead of a curtain rising or lights coming on, sounds they’d not noticed began to intrude on their consciousness. Leaves disturbed by a breeze in the canopy. Faint chirruping of a distant cicadas. A slightly louder screeching of tree frogs. The flute-like call of a butcherbird and the mate’s responding warble. Rustling among the litter as skinks, imagining the invaders had departed, scurried around in search of insects. A distant whip bird crack. Then...

‘I can hear water!’

‘Where?’

‘Over there.’

‘What’s it sound like?’

‘A tap trickling.’

Stillness again and then the others also heard it and ran the twenty metres to the edge of the creek where the bed narrowed and rocks caused turbulence.

‘Can we drink the water?’

‘Yes, but don’t piss in it!’

‘Can we go in?’

‘Of course, but keep to the sandy bottom; standing on rocks can be lethal if they’re slippery. It’s too shallow for swimming, but you never know what you might find under stones.’

The boys explored the stream bed, unearthing the usual collection of may and caddis fly larvae, a couple of dragonflies, some bivalves and a few small shrimps.

‘What’re those holes at the water line?’

‘Yabbies, probably,’ Jarek told them. ‘If you want to see one, dig it out.’

‘Do they bite?’

‘They’re probably only about ten centimetres long, but their pincers are fairly powerful. Go on, dig one out and see if I’m right.’

‘No way. You do it.’

‘Surely you’re not scared?’

They were.

‘Wimps.’ With a friendly laugh to show he didn’t mean it, Jarek knelt over the hole and scraped away at the soft clay. Within a few minutes his head was pressed against the ground, his arm deep in the hole, and the eleven observers behind him had an unobstructed view of firm, slightly hairy buttocks, the back of a well-filled white cotton pouch, and a thin string crossing the neat, dark-brown entry to his own hole. To Zeno’s astonishment, apart from a couple of nudges and shared grins, no one seemed perturbed at the sight, being more interested in what Jarek was doing.

‘Got it,’ he exclaimed, kneeling back and holding aloft a bluish yabby about twelve centimetres long, its impressive pincer clinging firmly to his forefinger.

‘Does it hurt?’

‘Not much.’ He pulled the yabby off and a drop of blood appeared. Then holding it by the back, offered the wildly waving legs to the boys. Only Melvin dared accept it, holding it carefully so they could all inspect and admire.

‘Can you eat them?’

‘Of course. Drop them in boiling water and they throw off their legs, turn red and cook in minutes. Delicious.’

‘That’s cruel.’

‘Yes, but probably not much worse than being slowly swallowed by a snake, or chewed up bit by bit by an echidna.’

‘Will we eat it?’

‘What do you reckon, guys? Eat it or put it back?’

‘Put it back!’

‘Which way to the swimming hole do you reckon?’ Zeno asked when the yabby had crawled gratefully back into hiding.

Half pointed upstream, half down.

‘Some confusion there. How about the cabin? We’ve not come far from where we worked out the direction, who can remember which way it is, and for the big prize, how far do you reckon we are from it?’

Responses ranged from two to five kilometres, and no two directions were alike.

‘Sorry, guys. No prizes today. The cabin is slightly less than a hundred metres from here, and it’s over there,’ Zeno laughed, pointing behind them.

Shocked disbelief. ‘Not possible!’ ‘We’ve been walking for well over an hour!’ ‘You’re having us on!’ ‘Prove it!’

Zeno took off his backpack and extracted an ordinance survey map and compass. Everyone gathered round and he pointed out the cabin, the entrance drive, the track leading to the main road, the creek that wound around the boundary with the National Park, and the swimming hole.

‘We entered the forest here,’ he explained tracing a line on the map with his finger, ‘and wandered in a great circle to here. This is where Melvin climbed the tree for honey and here’s where we worked out the direction of the cabin. You all said it was impossible because it should be behind us, but we were just about spot on because by then, as you can see, we were walking towards it. Then we heard the water and you all made a dash for it not realising what direction you were going. It’s that easy to get lost.’

‘You fooled us!’

‘Yes. Did anyone guess we weren’t travelling in a straight line?’

Ten heads shook their astonishment.

‘We did it to demonstrate how tricky it is to keep to a straight line in a forest. How dangerous it is to just wander in for a stroll. When you’re out of sight of where you entered you’re already lost unless you’ve cut gashes in trees or marked your trail in some way. Why isn’t that a good thing to do?’

‘Damages the tree?’ ‘Too slow?’ Suggestions dried up.

It was a quiet, young-looking kid with light brown hair who understood. ‘Because the next person who comes along might mistake your cuts and marks for his and get lost.’

‘Excellent, Robert. So what’s the solution?’

A chorus of, ‘Never go bush walking without a map and compass.’

‘You’re fast learners and have earned a swim, Which way?’

They checked the map, agreed it was downstream, and after injunctions to go carefully, keep their partner in view and not enter the water until Jarek and Zeno arrived, they set off bubbling with excitement. Two minutes later shouts of delight echoed through the trees.

Chapter 13. Acceptance

By the time everyone had swum and dived and Melvin and Sasha had proved themselves the equal of Jarek and Zeno by easily hauling themselves up the rope; it was time for lunch. When, after walking fifty metres they realised how close they were to the cabin and how they’d been fooled, the larger boys laughingly hurled themselves on their two leaders and wrestled them to the ground, forcing a return to the swimming hole to wash off the debris.

Lunch was cold savoury rice that Zeno had cooked that morning, tinned corned beef, sweet raw capsicums, olives and tomatoes. Desert consisted of bananas, dates and handfuls of nuts. Everyone took a plate and helped themselves from pots, bowls and dishes. Those who wanted could make themselves tea, otherwise it was reconstituted milk or water. Everyone washed their own plates and a roster was posted for washing communal dishes and keeping the kitchen area spotless.

When all food and utensils were securely back in the well-sealed larder to keep out marauding possums and monitor lizards, Zeno explained that everyone in future would have to prepare their own meals from the ingredients available. They were free to help themselves to all food at any time and use the wood-burning stove, provided their partner was with them, they observed the strictest hygiene, and never left the larder unlocked afterwards. It was a trust system. They were shown the entire food stock, agreed it should be enough to last them easily until Friday lunchtime, but if anyone took too much they’d all have to starve as there was no way to get any more.

A rest period was declared in which they would choose their sleeping arrangements, make their beds and rest for twenty minutes. Predictably, Arthur and his three religious mates took the nearest room; Melvin and Sasha raced for the end room and barred the door, and Simon, Anton, Robert and dark mysterious Leon, who had not uttered a word as far as Zeno knew, happily took the middle room, relieved at not having to share with Melvin.

When all were rested, Jarek gave them maps and compasses and, after instruction, set them off exploring the rest of the property belonging to the cabin while he remained accessible in a clearing, and Zeno caught up on his studies in their room.

To conserve precious drinking water they were each given a bucket before the evening meal, to fill at the swimming hole and use instead of showering.

‘Will we take our towels?’

‘No need. We’ll be dry by the time we get back. There’s nothing worse than wet towels in this heat, they soon stink.’

‘Where’ll we change?’

‘Here, unless you want to leave your towels and clothes on the ground; there are no hooks out there and they’ll attract ants.’

‘You mean we have to be naked?’

‘Of course not, nothing is compulsory. It’s entirely up to you.’

‘You and Jarek too?’

‘As long as you don’t tell on us.’

They all laughed.

‘We’ve already seen everything you’ve got. When your pouches get wet they’re transparent and cling like skin.’

‘Yeah, we won’t grass on you,’ murmured several of the quieter lads.

Laughing excitedly, eight naked young men accompanied by four demurely wrapped in towels, ran down to the pool and dived and swam in the darkening evening. Unlike the stream, the fields didn’t mind a little soap residue so they carried buckets over a low rise to a slope that looked towards distant mountains and a reddening evening sky. After soaping loins and everything else, they poured water over their partners to rinse off, then wandered through the enchanted balmy night back to the cabin, fully expecting to see a centaur, nymph or satyr.

Jarek stayed to check that nothing had been left behind, then wandered slowly back, enjoying the solitude. A hand stroked his elbow.

‘Jarek, Sir, I want to say sorry, and thanks.’

‘Sorry for what, Melvin?’

‘For pretending I was scared up the tree and grabbing hold of your...bits.’

‘Was it for fun, or were you setting me up so you could laugh about it with your mates later?’

‘Oh no Sir Jarek! Nothing like that.’

‘Like what? By the way, I’m not Sir Jarek; one name’s enough, I don’t care which.’

‘I’d never set you up, Jarek. It was for fun. I sort of dared myself to do it because I...I just sort of wanted to...to touch you and...’

‘Melvin, when I said we’re equals, what did you think that meant?’

‘Dunno, just the usual teacher crap, I suppose. Creepy. Trying to be mates with the kids, but feeling all superior.’

‘Do you still think that?’

‘No way! It really feels as if you are one of us, as if you respect us, you don’t treat us as if we’re imbeciles.’

‘That’s because you aren’t. So next time you feel like shoving your groin against my bum and grabbing my goolies, ask first.’

Melvin subsided in a fit of giggles. ‘You’re not serious?’

‘Why not?’

‘I’m not queer!’ Defensive.

‘Nobody is. We all do what seems natural to us, so nothing is queer. It’s only narrow-minded people who think everybody should be like them, who label others as queer, idiotic, stupid, weird. You were doing what seemed a normal fun thing, and it was...now I know you weren’t setting me up. However, like most people I’m choosy about who touches me and where.’

‘Yeah, but if I’d asked, you’d have told me to fuck off, wouldn’t you?’

‘You’ll never know, and we’re going to be late if we don’t get a move on.’

‘Can I touch you now? It’ll be better without that silly pouch.’

‘Why?’

‘Because...because...I don’t know, but I’m getting a hard on thinking about it. Look.’

Jarek looked and nodded sagely. ‘Very impressive. How many people have you touched in that way?’

‘None! Have you looked at most guys and those cretins up there! Fat, skinny, pale and pimpled, the idea of touching them make me feel sick. But you’re...’

‘Sasha’s nicely made and as tough as you, even though he’s short.’

‘Yeah, but he’s too much of a brain-box for me.’

‘Rubbish! You’re just as smart. You should ask if you can touch him—you might be surprised. Meanwhile, I suggest you slip behind the cabin and jerk off, unless of course you’d like to impress everyone with your flagpole.’

‘I wouldn’t mind. Would you be shocked if I did?’

‘Of course not, although Arthur and his mates would be. Wait till after I’ve gone in before making your grand entrance, I don’t want anyone thinking I was the cause of it.’

‘You’re a champ, Jarek.’

Jarek stood in the shadows watching the open area in front of the kitchen. Two boys were pumping the pressure lamps bright; Zeno and two others were placing bread, biscuits, fruit, jam and nuts on the tables, while four overweight boys in T-shirts and shorts were struggling to light the fire to boil eggs. Two others were wandering round, reluctant to go and change.

‘Skinny dipping’s great. Can we do it every day, Zeno?’

‘Of course, Sasha. We’re the only people here, we can do as we like.’

‘Do we have to get dressed?’

‘No, only if you want to’ Zeno said. ‘I reckon it’s too hot for clothes.’

A chorus of agreement from five lads. The four in their shorts looked disapproving, but said nothing.

‘What’re we going to do after supper?’

‘We’ve two things to discuss, remember? Whether Jarek and I can continue wearing our pouches, and...’

‘You’re not wearing anything at all now.’

‘That’s because, like you, I’m still drying out after the shower.’ They grinned complicity.

Jarek wandered in and helped get the fire going, the proximity of his naked loins causing some consternation among the four puritans. He suggested scrambling the eggs as it was quicker. When all was ready, Jarek and Zeno put on their pouches, took their plates and one for Melvin, then joined the others who’d taken their food and the lamps into the recreation room to escape from moths and huge beetles that were buzzing everywhere, attracted by the lights. When Melvin arrived a few seconds later, having nervously waited to make his entrance, a cheer erupted and Jarek could scarcely stop himself from laughing.

The laughing chorus of stiffy, fatcock, horn, rod, boner, was silenced by Arthur, the natural leader of the disapproving boys who shouted angrily, ‘Melvin you’re disgusting!’

Remembering Jarek’s response to his own jibe that morning, Melvin spread his arms in surprise and stared down at his erection in bewilderment, frowned and said innocently, ‘What’s disgusting?’ Turning to Zeno he asked in wide-eyed astonishment, apparently on the verge of tears. ‘Zeno! What’s disgusting about me?’

Zeno pulled a sympathetic face, pretended to peer closely then said, ‘Nothing, Melvin, please don’t cry. Arthur’s mistaken, everything looks perfectly normal and obviously in excellent working order.’

More hoots of laughter as Melvin made a display of being cheered up.

‘Jarek! Tell him!’ Arthur insisted.

‘Tell him what?’

‘That it’s disgusting and he’ll go to hell for wandering around like that.’

‘Murder is disgusting, Arthur. Bashing people is disgusting. Swearing and cursing people who annoy you is disgusting. Dropping rubbish and polluting the air, land and waterways is seriously disgusting. Forcing people to do what you want instead of what makes them happy is disgusting. Telling people they’re going to hell is disgusting! A healthy erection, on the other hand, is a magnificent sight. It proves Melvin is a man able to father a child and ensure the continuation of the human race. Throughout history the male erection has been worshipped. You’ve heard of Aphrodite the goddess of Love? Well Hermes is the male equivalent and Ancient Greek households had a statue of him in their front garden. Not the whole man, only a carved stone image of an erection because they believed proper respect for what it represented would bring fertility, prosperity and a long and healthy life to the inhabitants.’

‘Yeah, when my uncle came back from Europe he showed us a photo of a Danish church with a phallus out the front, only a few hundred years old, so it wasn’t only the Greeks.’

‘Very interesting, Joseph, thanks. Meanwhile, let’s eat and think about Arthur’s objections so we can discuss them rationally afterwards on full stomachs.’

Seated on their towels on the floor, appetites gratified, muscles satisfied after an active day, they leaned back in silence.

‘Arthur, just because you don’t want to do something yourself, does that give you the right to tell the person who does want to that he’s disgusting?’

‘Yes! And I don’t want to look at it either.’

‘Then why did you?’

‘What?’

‘Look at it. You could have turned away. In my opinion, telling someone they’re disgusting is trying to force your values on him. Does anyone think we have the right to force our opinions on others?’

A chorus of noes.

‘Four against eight. Do you accept that, Arthur?’

‘You started it! You said we had to go naked like savages for a shower! Then Melvin and Sasha called us wimps and other names because we wouldn’t!’

‘Be careful with the facts, Arthur, or your lies will return to haunt you. I said there were no hooks for clothes down there and it was entirely up to you! There could be no misunderstanding about that. As I said very clearly when you first arrived here, you’re free to do as you want as long as you grant others the same freedom. I also said that if anyone transgressed, I was to be told. Why didn’t you tell me about the taunts from Melvin and Sasha?’

Sullenly. ‘You wouldn’t have done anything.’

‘Don’t you trust me? Do you think because I don’t bother much with clothes I’m an uncivilised savage?’

‘Close to tears, Arthur whispered, ‘Sorry.’

Jarek’s smile would have melted steel. ‘Forgiven, Arthur. However, I said you all had only one warning. You, Melvin and Sasha have now been warned and the next time you deliberately make someone feel uncomfortable about themselves, then you’re out of here, understood?’

The shock on their faces sent a chill through the room.

‘But...’

‘We have only four days left. I want them to be the best days of our lives. That will only happen if every one of us feels accepted for ourselves, no matter the differences physically, mentally and in outlook and behaviour. Every one has a part to play, and no one, including Zeno and me is more important, valuable or better than anyone else. Who’s enjoyed themselves so far?’

Every hand shot up.

‘So have Zeno and I. I feel as if I’m in paradise where we are free of all the stupid constraints of society. This will probably be the only time in your lives that you experience total freedom to be yourselves—the sole proviso being you allow others the same freedom. However, it won’t stay like that if we make others feel inadequate. That’s the poison that starts wars and misery.’

‘I don’t want Melvin and Sasha to be punished,’ Arthur said tearfully. ‘They were only kidding us, it wasn’t serious and we didn’t really feel silly wearing our towels.’

‘How about you, Melvin? Do you want Arthur to be put on warning because he said you were disgusting and would go to hell?’

Melvin was strangely quiet, astonished at Arthur’s generosity. ‘No, it didn’t hurt me either, especially as I don’t believe in heaven and hell.’

‘Does everyone agree they be let off?’

A resounding, ‘Yes.’

‘Very well. You’ve all just proved what fine young men you are, so let’s never mention it again. Now, back to this morning when Melvin objected to our pouches. Care to tell us why?’ Jarek asked.

‘I was stupid. Showing off. It was a hell of a surprise for everyone to see you practically naked and old Noble treating you like his favourite sons. I was expecting you to be all neat in your white shorts and T-shirt like at school, and Zeno the same. I’d imagined this was going to be the same boring old school, but out in the paddocks with no TV, Videos, computers and stuff. So I seriously didn’t want to come. It was my father who forced me and I wasn’t going to surrender without a fight.’

‘And now?’

‘Today’s been the best day of my life, honestly! Thanks to you two. You both look great in your pouches, like a superhero and his sidekick, and it’s been nothing at all like school, it’s...it’s real!

Arthur’s sidekick, similar of shape and appearance but with more pimples, stood and said nervously, ‘You said you wore those little things because if you were naked we might tell our parents and you’d get sacked. But you were naked when we showered and in the kitchen.’

‘True, Adrian, but surely your parents don’t wear clothes to shower and wouldn’t expect us to? We didn’t dress until we were dry. Were you offended? Have you any rational objections to what we’re wearing now?’

The lad frowned and conferred with his three mates. ‘No. Well, at first we were, but you’ve made us realise that the only way we can be sure we’re free to wear and be what we like, is if everyone else has the same freedom. I hadn’t thought of that before.’

‘Noah’s son was punished because he saw his father naked,’ Arthur explained. ‘That’s why it’s wrong to be naked.’

‘Hang on, Arthur. Noah wasn’t punished for being naked. The son was for not respecting his father. As I’m not your father, you have no need to worry that god’s going to smite you,’ Jarek said with a friendly smile.

‘How about you, Sasha?’ Jarek asked. ‘Don’t you think a scientist should always be open to difference; new and odd ideas and behaviours...an observer, not a dictator of behaviour?’

‘Yes, I’ll never again try to force people to conform, or poke fun at them for being different from me. Sorry guys. Friends?’ He and Melvin stood and offered the hand of friendship. Zeno could barely suppress a smile watching two totally naked, fit young men standing in front of the four Christians, genitals at their eye level, hands extended. Fortunately, the thick skins that unattractive kids develop to cope with bullying, preserved them from understanding that their two new friends were forcing a comparison between their sexy fitness and their classmates’ puny bodies. The four lads shook hands without a blush, clearly delighted to at last be included as one of the ‘gang.’ Zeno wondered how long it would last once they returned to the prison camp that is school for so many pupils.

‘OK, then. We can wear our pouches, is that agreed?’

‘I don’t know why you bother. You look much better without them,’ Anton remarked with a frown. ‘With them on you look sort of dangerous, you know? We wonder what’s behind the pouch? Is it something we should be afraid of that you keep it hidden? Naked we can see you’re no different from us. Simon’s cock’s bigger than yours. You look friendlier, easier, more natural when you’re naked.’

‘Yeah,’ Henry agreed, leaning forward to ease the pressure on his buttocks. ‘My aunt and uncle are nudists and took me to their club once. They were all friendly and pleasant but it was horrible!

Fat old men with miniature dicks, fat women with huge tits flopping, a few young kids, no one my age, I thought if this is nudism I'm glad everyone has to wear clothes! Until today. It was great swimming and horsing around in the pool; the water feels excellent flowing round your balls. And I loved making supper and just sitting around here like this, seems so natural and cool. If I was dressed I'd be sweating like a pig. That's all.' He sat down and everyone clapped.

'So the nudist club wasn't sexy?' Melvin asked, clearly disappointed.

'Fuck no! Check out the internet. They're all old with fat guts and sagging tits and bums.'

'If people don't wash their bums it could get pretty gross.'

'A very good point, Robert,' Jarek said. 'As you're discovering, it's liberating and feels great to be naked, but whereas hygiene wasn't a major issue in the past when hunter-gatherers lived by a river and could just hop in and wash their bums after shitting, today we're not so lucky and most people use paper, which doesn't do a very good job. That's why it's essential you use the water jet in the composting toilet properly. While you're still squatting, direct the beam onto your ring and use your finger to ensure it's clean.'

Howls of gross, argh, sick...

'And directly afterwards,' Jarek continued as if unaware of the reaction, 'wash your hands thoroughly with the soap and water in the basin outside. You obviously think it's odd, but bear in mind that your anus is simply the other end of the tube that starts with your lips, and unless you're diseased, shit is not infected with anything dangerous. Apparently, there are many more bacteria, and dangerous ones too, around the female vagina that many men are desperate to lick, [chorus of arch, gross, fuck, yuck...] and therefore on toilet seats that you all sit on without thinking. Squat toilets like ours, and water washing, in Europe they use a bidet, are the most hygienic methods for maintaining cleanliness of your nether regions. So, if you want to run around naked, then I insist you take great care with that.'

'Do you do all that?'

'Yes, Anton, of course, I do.'

'Yeah, we all saw your ring when you were digging out the yabby, no dags on you.'

'Thank you Sasha for raising the tone,' Jarek laughed, completely at ease with the revelation.

'OK, has anyone else something to say about the camp so far. Anything at all. All opinions and comments are welcome.'

Leon stood nervously. Everyone turned, astonished. Leon never spoke. Never joined in games and debates. He was the silent shadow that everyone forgot. Tall, lean, fit. Almost black skin.

'Leon, the wisest men are those who speak the least, so as you're obviously the wisest man in the room, we welcome your thoughts.'

His nerves were obvious. Hands shook, lips quivered, but he stood straight, took a deep breath and, as if these words had been fermenting inside him for centuries, said in a deep voice loaded with passion, 'Today is the first time in my life I feel part of anything. I know I don't talk much, but that's because I feel hated because I'm black, skinny and hairy. All you guys,' he indicated the other students, 'are pale and hairless, but when I was ten I got pubic hairs and when I was twelve I started to get hairs on my legs, and I hate it! But I'm not as hairy as Jarek and he looks fantastic, like superman. So...so...I guess I'm not the monster I thought I was.' Courage ran out and he turned away, face hot with embarrassment.

'You're an early maturer, Leon, and you're not especially hairy. By the end of next year most of the guys here will have hairy legs too, just as they all got pubic hair a year or two after you. So stop worrying.' This was dangerous territory; such heartfelt confessions could easily backfire arousing contempt instead of comfort. Leon needed instant support before insecurity returned and he regretted his honesty.

'Where are your parents from, Leon?' Jarek asked.

'Mum's from near Townsville and Dad was from south of Darwin. He's dead—died when I was five.'

'That's very sad. So that's how you got your permanent tan.' He turned to the others. 'As we're being honest tonight, who thinks Leon's skin colour is unpleasant?'

‘I’m jealous! Sasha announced. ‘I lie in the sun and go red and then peel. I’d love to be able to not care about sunburn and go dark brown like you, Leon.’

‘You wouldn’t like it.’ Leon replied with a wry grin. ‘You’d soon get sick of hearing, “Fuckin Abbo trash” as you walk out of a shop, or from passers by on the street.’

‘You’re joking!’ Robert was totally shocked.

‘Unfortunately, no.’ Leon said softly.

‘Sasha and Leon, would you be so kind as to join me?’ Jarek asked cheerfully.

‘Why?’

Jarek’s smile was irresistible and, albeit suspiciously, they stood on each side of him—one tall lean and dark, the other short stocky and pinkly pale.

‘OK everyone, time for a quiz. The first question’s about height. If you had to choose to be the same height as one of these men, who would it be, raise your hand for Sasha? Leon? That’s eight zero for Leon. Next question; the body. Which type would you choose to be, Leon—lean, agile and elegant? Sasha—stocky, well muscled and tough? Four votes each; a draw. Next question; suppose you need a head transplant, ignoring skin colour, which head would you choose, Leon’s wiry black hair, strong nose and jaw, prominent cheekbones, black eyebrows, sexy come-to-bed eyes, (genuine laughter) and kissable lips. (Even more laughter), or the thick, curly, light brown hair, blue eyes, smiling mouth, small fine ears chubby cheeks and noble brow of Sasha? Another draw. Next question: you need a hand transplant. Would you choose Sasha’s square, powerful hands with short strong fingers, nails bitten to the quick, or Leon’s long, expressive, perfectly manicured fingers? Four votes each, another draw. Last question. You wake up one morning with your own head but the body of one of these handsome young men. Would you choose Sasha’s smooth strong arms, hairless muscled chest, flat hard belly and smooth powerful legs? Or Leon’s slightly hairy, well-formed arms, smooth lean chest, and powerful hairy legs?’

By now his audience were laughing continuously. The whole thing was too absurd, and both Leon and Sasha were obviously enjoying the attention, playing up to the results with glum or happy faces.

‘Before we vote, there are two things you should know. Until the nineteen seventies, handsome, strong men in films and stories usually had hairy chests and legs, like Leon and me. The fashion for hairlessness is recent, coinciding with women’s liberation and their efforts to turn men into women by demanding they become sensitive new age guys who love to do housework, tell their wives all their problems, and look less masculine by shaving their faces and bodies to look like women. Now, as I want a free and fair ballot, I suggest you remember that I am stronger than you and have hairy arms, chest, legs and bum! OK, hands up.’

Jarek made a great show of counting, then shaking his head announced, ‘Sorry, Sasha, but they prefer hairy men.’ He held up Leon’s hand and said, ‘A round of applause, please, for the sexiest man in the room.’

For the first time since entering high school, Leon laughed. His generous mouth, filled with improbably perfect white teeth, opened to emit a low, barking guffaw of pure delight. ‘You guys really take the cake. I know you would all prefer to be like Sasha, and so did I until a few minutes ago. No offence, Sasha, but I’ve suddenly decided I prefer to be me.’

‘No offence taken, Leon, I too prefer to be me, although I wouldn’t mind having your all-over tan, but I don’t think I’d be as brave as you when it comes to racism.’

‘Ah. You get used to it,’ Leon smiled, returning to his place against the wall, the smile lingering.

‘Thanks, Sasha,’ Jarek said softly, ‘you’re a hero.’

Sasha winked, ‘I know.’

Zeno was close to tears. How on earth had Jarek done that? In a few minutes, a boy he’d thought was irretrievably engulfed in insecurity and self-hatred, had become a charming, engaging, and attractive person. Jarek was a genius, a true hero.

Robert, a quiet, blond boy who looked slightly younger and was markedly better looking than Arthur and the other two Christians, whispered to his friends then stood and in a high voice that was on the verge of breaking, said, ‘Doesn’t god condemn nudity in the story of Adam and Eve?’

‘On the contrary, Robert. He was proud to see them running around naked and having fun when they were innocent and without sin in paradise. It’s when they listened to lies and started to steal and do bad things that he said they’re no longer welcome and kicked them out. It isn’t god who tells them to cover their sexual organs, they decide to do it themselves because they’re frightened out in the wide wicked world. Our most vulnerable parts need protection when there’s danger.’

The four young men conferred briefly while everyone else wondered what all the fuss was about, then pimpled Adrian stood and announced solemnly, ‘We think you and Zeno should have the same freedoms as us to wear what you want, and we promise we won’t go round telling anyone that you were naked and rude or anything like that.’ He sat down abruptly, face crimson with embarrassment.

‘Yeah, me too’ chorused the rest of the boys.

‘Thanks Adrian and the rest of you. You’re all so much smarter than most people I know. Tonight you’ve proved you’re just as capable of thinking about problems and issues as any adult, as well as being sensitive and compassionate. I’m proud to know you. Your next assignment is not to grow into bigoted and prejudiced adults.

A confident chorus of ‘We won’t, Jarek.’ But Jarek knew it would take more than five days to change what had been instilled in them since birth.

‘Good on you. Now, we’ve a long walk tomorrow to the National Park Ranger’s house where we’ll have lunch, so I’m ready for bed. First, though, let’s go outside for a minute to look at the sky and empty our bladders.

Light cloud obscured the stars, but the still, warm air caressed like sensual fingers while night sounds of frogs and a lone curlew lent a little magic.

Afterwards they stood on the verandah, reluctant to go into their rooms while Zeno showed them how to operate the fluorescent lamps.

‘Do we have to wear pyjamas?’

‘If you do you’ll sweat. Just lie on top of the sheet and leave the window open, the screen will keep bugs out. There is one last, but very important thing I want to say. You’ll have noticed that the mattresses are clean and fresh, even though they’re many years old. I insist they remain that way. So when you wank, please have your towel handy to catch it all and rub it off your bellies or wherever it sprays before it seeps through the sheets. There is nothing more sordid than cum-stained mattresses and I’ll send the bill to your parents if you’re careless.’

Silence, then loud hoots of laughter. No adult had ever spoken to them about wanking before. All had secretly thought they were sinning when they jerked off and the sense of relief was almost too much to bear.

‘How d’you know we wank?’

‘Every male does.’

‘Even you?’

‘Even me. So, do you promise to keep the mattresses clean?’

‘Yes Jarek!’

‘I’ll come past in ten minutes or so to check that you’re OK and don’t need anything. And remember, don’t just piss over the edge of the balcony if you have to go during the night. Take care you don’t bump into anything, there’ll be plenty of starlight, and you won’t get attacked between here and the trees.’

Chapter 14. Secrets

‘A nerve-wracking day.’

‘But fun.’

‘If someone had told me you could turn the worst behaved class in school into a functioning unit who already respect each other, think the sun shines out of your arsehole, and can see nothing wrong in you and me spending the day starkers, I’d never have believed them! And who’d have

thought that Arthur and his doughy band of fundie Christians would publicly tell you they were easy about your nudity? Not to mention gangly four-eyes Anton, who gets up everyone's nose at school with his superiority complex, how'd you make him so conciliatory and eager to please? Even better, you've got Sasha, the tiny but perfectly formed nerd who acts like a cyborg, and Melvin, the terror of year nine eating out of your hand! Honestly, when in the first minute he started sneering about our pouches, and had the others sniggering in support, I was ready to either slam my fist into his face or run for cover. But you! You smiled sweetly as if they were your favourite, people, said a few calming words and within seconds they were following you around like well-trained ducklings.'

'They *are* normal. It's all those women teachers that have driven them insane! Expecting them to conform to female standards instead of their natural male instincts. Two things contributed to our success, the shock of seeing us virtually naked shook them out of their preconceptions and made them rethink everything, followed by the calming, yet stimulating effect of a natural forest, stream, and interesting activity. Treating them as sensible, responsible people is the next most important thing. We all respond to the way we're treated—treat me like a fool and I'll be one.'

'I could never be a teacher.'

'You could, but I doubt it would satisfy you. Melvin's a breath of fresh air, don't you reckon? Coming in with his erection?

'I'd never have dared. He's going to be sexy in a couple of years.'

'Not as sexy as you. Are all your studies done?'

'Just two things to complete, no more than half an hour.'

'Good, I'll go check on the kids.'

'You're a martyr to the cause. By the way, why are you wearing your pouch? After the bible bashers said they were happy for us to wear nothing, if you don't they might have second thoughts.'

'Sounds reasonable. Be interesting to see what they're wearing.' Jarek tossed his pouch on the bed. 'When I get back there'll be time for a little...?'

'Or a lot.'

'Melvin and Sasha were lying together in the bottom bunk, both aroused, both deliberately exposing themselves. Testing authority as usual.

'I hope you asked Sasha before touching him, Melvin?' Jarek said with mock seriousness.

'Didn't get a chance, he just pounced on me and is holding me helpless.'

'I have to, otherwise he'll fuck me.'

'You wish.'

'Surely you want to have a bit of fun before you start screwing each other?'

'Like what?'

'Touching, kissing, caressing... Research has proven that the longer you play around, exploring each other's bodies, discovering what arouses and pleasures your partner, the more earth-shattering is the orgasm when it arrives.'

'You mean people actually do research on these things?'

'Of course, Sasha. Sex is the primary life force, and if it's fun with no guilt feelings and shared with someone you fancy, then it can be the most rewarding experience you ever have.'

'I thought sex was just fucking.'

'No, Melvin, fucking's the optional culmination of foreplay, and may not even happen. Some people prefer mutual masturbation and never practice penetration. If all you want to do is shove your cock in a hole and ejaculate, then get a blow up doll or wank. It's a release, but has almost nothing to do with sex.

'Those things...kissing and stuff, that's for girls and queers.'

'No, Sasha, it's for everyone who wants to share the joys of sex with someone else. As I said earlier, no one's queer. Everyone is normal, it's just that there are as many ways of being normal as there are humans.'

'So, if we kissed and stuff, that'd be normal?'

‘Perfectly normal if you enjoy it. Abnormal if you don’t. Sex is a bit like travelling; the journey should be as much fun as arriving. For many men, ejaculation is disappointing because the journey’s been too short and perfunctory. Here’s the deal, if, after three nights of exploration of each other’s bodies, discovering what turns each other on, what gives the most pleasure...you still want to see what it’s like to fuck, then I’ll get you some olive oil from the larder to grease the passage.’

‘How do you know all these things?’

‘I read a lot and the internet is a mine of information.’

‘Why are you being so honest?’

‘Because dishonesty about sex is the cause of half the world’s woes. Too many people’s lives have been ruined by the lies their parents and religion tell them. Sex is too important to get wrong. So, have fun, but no more than half an hour. We’re swimming at dawn.’ With an easy wave he was gone, leaving the two lads excited, nervous and impatient to begin doing what they imagined would be very daring and exciting, but had lacked the courage to suggest for fear the other would think they were queer.

Simon, Anton, Joseph and Leon in the middle room were lying on their bunks talking quietly.

‘Everything OK?’ Jarek asked.

‘Brilliant,’ was Simon’s response. ‘If my parents knew I was going to sleep naked without sheets they’d have a fit. I have to wear pyjamas and a sheet even on the hottest nights at home, in case of fire, Mum says. This is so fantastic! I know I’ll sleep perfectly.’ ‘Me too,’ from the others.

‘Good lads.’ As Jarek turned to go, Leon leaned over from his top bunk and touched his arm lightly, pulling him closer. Jarek bent forward and, unnoticed by the others, was enveloped in a chaste hug. ‘Thanks, Jarek,’ Leon whispered in his ear. ‘You’re the best.’

To Jarek’s surprise, Arthur and his three cohorts were standing, leaning against their bunks, apparently arguing. They quickly covered their loins with their hands when he walked in.

‘Hands on heads!’ he snapped. Taken by surprise they complied. ‘No real man is ashamed of his genitals so don’t do that again, it looks pathetic.’

‘No, Sir...I mean yes, Sir...Jarek.’

‘Everything OK?’

‘We’re trying to get used to being naked. We want to just walk around as easily as you and Zeno,’ Robert said with a faltering grin. ‘You look just as dressed naked as in your shorts at school.’

‘And we’re wondering how to behave tomorrow’ Arthur said nervously. ‘For the first time I can remember the other guys have been speaking to us as if we’re normal.’

‘Yeah. When we were outside looking at the stars they talked to us as if we were, you know, the same as them. We don’t want them to despise us again, but we’re not sure why they did in the first place,’ Adrian stuttered in the longest speech Jarek had heard him make’

‘Why do they hate us?’ Joseph asked petulantly.

‘They don’t hate you, but they do get sick of you implying they’re sinners because they don’t believe in your god, or behave as you think they should. You guys stick together as if you think you’re better than them. They’ve been treating you like normal guys because you’ve only mentioned god once today. They also warmed towards you because of what Robert said about us all having the right to wear what we like. Keep it up and they’ll accept you permanently.’

‘It won’t last,’ Arthur sighed. ‘They also hate me because I’m fat. I hate being fat but don’t know what to do about it!’

Jarek’s heart sank. He’d imagined that giving the boys a taste of freedom from rules and external pressures so they could be responsible for themselves and accept other’s differences would change their lives. But he could see it was going to take more than a few days. Every boy held within him a closet full of unconscious inhibitions, fears and foibles that would prevent any useful change unless the lad was forced to face up to them. Just about all kids need to share their confusions with a

sympathetic adult. That should be the job of grandparents or kindly retired neighbours. As a kid he used to talk to his grandmother for hours, telling her all his problems. She'd listen and nod and make sympathetic noises but say nothing useful. Yet later on he'd discover he knew what to do. Bringing problems into the open was all it took to see solutions. He didn't have to become involved with these kids or even offer support. They were smart enough to support themselves—all kids are, given the tools. All he had to do was let them feel safe enough to talk, and they would do the rest themselves. The realisation released the tension that had been accumulating all day and with an uncertain smile he accepted the role of facilitator.

'Stand over there,' Jarek instructed. 'Face me.'

Self-consciously, Arthur did as he was bidden, making an obvious effort to keep his hands at his sides. He was indeed fat. Navel buried in a spare tyre that must have rendered his tiny penis and balls invisible to him. Breasts and distended nipples that on a girl would have demanded a bra. Neck and cheeks too chubby to be attractive. From behind, his buttocks were full, pink and wobbly. Only arms and legs were normal.

'You don't look half as fat naked as with your togs on,' Jarek said judicially, 'that's because the tight waistband creates an apron of fat. Naked you're all of a piece, smooth and more attractive. Yes, you're overweight, but you're young, your skin is elastic enough to take up the slack when you lose weight. If you were my age it'd be too late. The point is, how motivated are you? Do you really want to lose the fat or are you just saying it?'

'I really, really want to.'

'How about you, Robert? You're slightly overweight, but will become a handsome young man if you keep fit and slim down a little. Are you going to help Arthur?'

'Yes.'

'Joseph and Henry. You look nervous. I know you're both fine young men because I've watched you for nearly two years, and yet you walk around as if you're expecting to be beaten with a stick. Human children, like the young of all mammals, don't like to associate with diseased or frightened kids. Chickens will peck weak ones to death. If you stand tall, look people in the eye and never hang your heads as if you're ashamed to be alive, then you'll be left alone.'

'Their father hits them,' Adrian said thoughtfully.

'You've no right to say that!' Henry muttered.

'If it's true, then you must tell Mr. Noble when you return to school. He will help you. Parents are not allowed to treat their children cruelly. It affects everything you do and ruins your lives. Come on. Stand tall, head up, shoulders back, chest out! That's the way. Stand like that and you look almost slim and attractive. Walk around the room like that then approach me and say, 'Hi, Jarek, what're we doing tomorrow?'

They tried it several times before he was satisfied. 'If you really want your lives to change, then it is entirely up to you. No one else can do anything. The most important thing is to honestly believe you are as good as anyone else. Not better than them but just as good. Whenever you can, practise walking and speaking together as you did with me just now, and critically observe each other when you're with other kids so you can later on offer advice. Promise?'

'Yes, Jarek.' their voices were awed whispers.'

'As for you, Adrian. Your classwork is good, you're polite and pleasant, why do you overeat and under exercise?'

'I'm useless.'

So am I at all sorts of things. No one is good at more than a few things. The trick is to be proud of the things you're good at and silently tell people who criticise you to fuck off. I have a good friend who when she's with people who are seriously annoying her, says dreamily, "I wish I could fly..." and we all laugh because we know the rest of what she wants to say.'

'What's that?'

'So I could shit in your eye.'

'The four boys laughed, mainly from the illicit thrill of listening to a 'dirty joke.'

'You're just buttering us up.'

‘Why would I do that, Arthur? In four days’ time you’ll never see me again. Believe it or not, I like you—I like you all and see something worthwhile in each of you. I’m not saying you’re not overweight, you are. However, if you’re serious about losing it, there are three things that will ensure success; an unwavering determination, eating less, and exercising more. I noticed you all ate twice as much as I did at both lunch and evening meal. You’re growing, so you do need a little more, but only if you’re very active.’

‘What sort of exercise?’

‘Whatever you enjoy. Walking is excellent. Set yourself a target of ten kilometres every day. Never use your bike or accept lifts in cars if you could walk. Always run up stairs and never take lifts. Offer to do the shopping, take out the rubbish. Look for ways to exercise instead of sitting around. I don’t mean team sports. I dislike them and imagine you do too. They don’t make you fit, they only turn you into cogs in a machine. Players get fit in their own time by jogging for hours and lifting weights in a gymnasium.’

‘Should I do that?’

‘Waste of money. All four of you should ride your bikes together into the country then go for long walks till you think you can’t walk further, and then walk another kilometre. Challenge yourselves. Do a few press-ups and lift stones...Be active and work up a sweat at least once a day, and with a smaller food intake you’ll be slim and handsome in no time. If you feel hungry, drink a few cups of water—not sweet soft drinks, and don’t confuse dehydration with losing fat. Drink plenty if you’re sweating.’

‘I’d like to have muscles as hard as yours.’

‘You will if you put your mind to it.’

‘What does it feel like, being so...so tough and strong?’

‘And hairy,’ Robert added with a grin.

‘It feels as if I can do anything, go anywhere and never feel ashamed or frightened. I used to be frightened when I was your age; I wasn’t so tough then, and there were a lot of bullies in my neighbourhood, but now I’m my own master.’

‘Is your father strong?’

‘He used to tell me to punch him in the stomach. It was like punching a wooden board, and he would bunch up his biceps and make us laugh when it moved. He’s a tough man, but not affectionate. Never hugged or kissed like a real father should.’

‘Neither do our parents. We all go to the same church and fathers have to be firm and mothers have to obey them. All expression of emotions, you know, like holding hands, kissing, even laughing in public is forbidden. The men sit on one side, the women on the other and we kids at the back. If we laugh or talk we’re called up the front to be criticised.’

‘Yeah, Adrian was stood up in front of everyone for the whole service two weeks ago because his mother caught him playing with himself. The minister told everyone and we all had to pray for his soul.’

Adrian blushed, but said nothing.

‘When you say, playing with himself, I suppose you mean masturbating?’

Nervous smiles. ‘Yeah. We nearly wet ourselves when you talked about it before.’

‘But you all do it?’

They looked at each other in despair. ‘No,’ Arthur said finally, ‘but I’ve had a wet dream. Luckily I was wearing thick pyjamas.’

‘Do you really wank?’ Adrian and Henry asked together?

‘Started when I was eleven and haven’t stopped.’

Jarek wondered why he was telling the boys this. He’d not told anyone about his childhood before, imagining that if he didn’t think about the emptiness, lack of affection and neglect that had poisoned his childhood, he’d eventually get over it. Maybe it was still bugging him and was the reason he wasn’t prepared to commit to a relationship. Why he felt he couldn’t love. Conceivably, he was using these camps as an excuse to exorcise his own demons. By presenting the kids with alternative ways of looking at their world was he really trying to help himself?

‘Can I feel your muscles?’ Henry asked nervously. ‘My Dad’s all soft and jelly like. Never does any exercise. You’re the only man I know who’s tough and strong. All the church people are sort of soft—you know?’

Now they wanted to touch him! Just as he’d desperately wanted to touch one of his teachers and be touched by him. Not sexually, just to know that someone liked him enough to touch would have made him happy. Sadly, no one had. Skin hungry was the term. People who haven’t had enough affectionate touching, cuddling, stroking and physical contact as children became cold and unlovely. He looked at the four boys. They were an unattractive bunch, but pleasant enough. He felt not the slightest sexual attraction; and it was obvious they didn’t either—all they wanted was to know they weren’t untouchable, like biblical lepers.

Jarek took a deep breath, flexed his muscles and grinned. ‘Sure, feel free, pun intended. My stomach muscles are the toughest, if you punch them you’ll break your wrist. Go on, don’t be shy.’ He tensed his abs, flexed his chest and biceps and contracted his thigh muscles. Perhaps, he rationalised, if he let them experience what a healthy body felt like, it might reinforce their desire to do something for themselves about their decadent physiques; although he was honest enough to admit it was a real ego boost to be admired.

‘Don’t be shy, just pretend I’m a stone sculpture.’

Tentatively, they touched his belly, became more daring and rubbed soft hands over his chest, then with inoffensive curiosity felt his thighs and buttocks, squeezed his biceps and giggled as they tried to prevent him from bending his arms. Robert then landed a punch on his abdomen and squealed in shock. ‘It’s like concrete!’

‘That’s enough for tonight, I think,’ Jarek said with an easy smile, careful not to sound critical and spoil their innocent daring.

‘Thanks, Jarek,’ Arthur said seriously. ‘Now I understand the difference between a healthy body and mine. I promise I’m really going to try to get healthy.’

‘I’m sure you will, you’re a determined fellow when you set your mind to it. OK, then, Time for bed. Swimming at dawn, and the rule about no compulsion is firm. You only do and wear what you’re comfortable with, is that clear? I want the next four days to be even better for you than today. Sleep well.’

‘Night, Jarek, and thanks.’

Jarek felt strangely happy. His students had trusted him with their secrets, and he had entrusted some of his to them. Nevertheless it was a very fine line he was treading—not with the boys, they understood; the danger lay with their parents. At some stage he must make clear that secrets from parents are essential if a child is to grow up independent.

‘You were a long time?’

‘They wanted to talk.’

‘Problems?’

‘No. Just excited about tomorrow.’

‘You’re a soft touch.’

‘I’m afraid you’re right.’

They lay on the bed, cuddled, kissed and felt perfectly at ease.

‘I like what we do. It relaxes, excites and leaves me contented’ Zeno said sleepily. ‘Mind you, when I think of Cadon’s cute bum I do feel a certain urge.’

‘Eros?’

‘Perhaps, but you’ll always be my special friend.’

‘And you mine.’

Chapter 15. National Park

‘They woke to sounds of laughter from the bunk rooms; doors slamming and voices outside. Zeno stretched out on top of the bed, rolled over and protested, ‘Hell, what’s the time? The sun’s barely risen.’

‘Come on handsome, get your fat arse outside and help me bathe and feed the hordes.’

‘Morning men,’ Jarek’s deep voice made the ten self-consciously naked youths fooling around on the verandah jump and grin. Faces alert and ready for adventure, they were obviously relieved to see they hadn’t made a sartorial mistake.

‘Race you to the water!’

Leon surprised everyone by sprinting into the lead. He, Sasha and Melvin were already swinging from the rope and laughing at a joke when Arthur arrived with Zeno, who wanted to make sure the fat kid didn’t feel left out.

The swim was refreshing and by the time they’d jogged back, made themselves breakfast from assorted fruit, cereal, bread, eggs and tea, they were dry. Melvin and Sasha came and sat beside Jarek, nudged each other, checked no one was looking then confided that they’d tried it that night but nothing happened. They kept thinking about their girlfriends. Having unburdened himself, Sasha joined a group at the other end of the table.

‘So I’m not gay,’ Melvin said with what sounded like a touch of regret.

‘Be happy, you’ve far more choice now.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Heterosexuals outnumber gays ten to one, so you’ve ten times as many partners to choose from.’

Melvin looked unconvinced. ‘Sasha’s a bit young for me. Perhaps I prefer older men. If it had been you, for example...’

‘Away with you, wicked lad, trying to lead an innocent old man astray!’

They both laughed and Melvin joined the others, clearly proud of his bravado.

When the kitchen was locked away from marauders, each boy was given a small back pack containing a water bottle, a packet of biscuits, a map and compass, a pocket knife, a whistle and a compact first-aid kit containing a needle, small pair of scissors, tweezers, two bandages and half a dozen sticking plasters.

After telling the boys to get into different pairs from the day before, they spread their maps and Jarek explained the route. Across the river, follow a branching valley up to a ridge, follow that to a lookout point, down to another valley then along that to an escarpment, on top of which was perched the fire-watch tower. Behind that was the Ranger’s house. Jarek explained that the ranger and his wife were friends and he sometimes stayed there and gave Mr. Forté a hand on weekends.

‘As we’ll be in the forest most of the time there’s no danger of sunburn, so wear what you like, the only compulsory article being good strong sandals or trainers. Anything you’re not wearing keep in your pack and put it on just before we get to the Ranger’s place, not because Mr. Forté and his wife would be shocked, far from it, but because Mrs. Forté would certainly tell all her friends that she’d been visited by ten naked youths, and that would lead to scandals and the shut down of the camp.’

‘But if you ask her not to?’

‘You can’t ask a woman not to gossip, that would be like asking her not to breathe.’

‘My mother spreads rumours about everyone,’ Joseph said sourly. ‘Dad wishes they’d bring back the gossip’s bridle.’

‘My grandfather used to sing a song that was popular when he was a boy,’ Jarek laughed. ‘It goes like this: Don’t telephone, don’t telegraph, just tell-a-woman and the news will get around.’

‘It’s a good lesson to remember,’ Jarek said seriously. ‘You gain nothing by telling other people more than they need to know about yourself and your affairs, because too often that information will later be used against you in an argument—or worse. A sensible man learns to guard his secrets and share them only with someone he would trust with his life.’

‘Do you mean his wife?’

‘No. I mean a male friend. Men save people’s lives, women expect to be saved.’

They pondered this for a few seconds while Jarek and Zeno conferred.

‘Zeno agrees that you guys should guide us using map and compass, starting with Arthur and Anton. Guides will change every half hour. I’ll be in front with them, and Zeno will bring up the rear. However, I suggest you don’t trust the leader blindly, but check for yourselves that we’re on the right course. Two more things. I’d like everyone to be silent while we’re walking, and only whisper when we stop. If we make a noise then we’ll see and hear nothing except the obvious, because every living thing will get out of our way and hide and you might as well be walking in town. The last thing is, don’t walk over the same ground as anyone else because the forest is fragile and if twenty-four feet pound the same spot that will make a track that lasts for months, and our enemies, if we had any, would be able to follow us. Spread out across about twenty metres, walk softly, duck under spider webs, don’t wander across ant hills or sit on termite mounds, lift your feet, don’t stumble, and do as little damage as possible. A true woodsman keeps his eyes open, sees everything, misses nothing, and leaves no trace of his passing.’

As Jarek hoped, the restrictions placed on the adventurers only increased their excitement.

Silently they set off across the stream and into the depths of the National Park, fanning out, but keeping in sight of each other, carefully avoiding trampling and disturbing. Each youth feeling as if they were alone with the termites, bandicoots, echidnas, monitors and snakes. Tension was high and it was with silent sighs of relief they emerged from the trees after a fairly steep climb onto a sun-warmed flat rock with a view down the valley. Birds soared, butterflies fluttered on shrubs, skinks scuttled and they warmed their bums in silence. They were the only humans alive and the bonds between them and the other eleven men strengthened.

Rainforest remnants in the valleys were more difficult to traverse than open sclerophyll, as well as cooler and slightly intimidating. Despite the lianes, bush lawyer, and occasional dense thickets they maintained their separate trajectories, determined not to be the one who transgressed the rules of good bushcraft. When they stopped at a small waterhole, Melvin noticed a slug-like thing about three centimetres long hanging off Sasha’s buttock.

‘Don’t pull it off,’ Jarek ordered. ‘It’s a leech. As it’s only half way through filling itself with your blood it’s so firmly attached that if you pull it off you’ll take a patch of skin with it, and the wound could get infected. Sasha, take out your scissors and get your partner to cut it just below the head.’ They watched in horror as Simon snipped, blood gushed down Sasha’s leg and the shrunken body sac stuck to the scissors. After a few seconds, the head let go and dropped off.

‘Why didn’t I feel it?’ Sasha asked.

‘It injects an anaesthetic and anticoagulant, that’s why it’ll bleed for a bit before clotting. Don’t worry, you can afford the blood. Everyone, check your partners.’

Seven more leeches were found, mainly on the lower legs, cut in half by their partners using their scissors.

‘Pick the long bit up and try to tear it,’ Jarek instructed.

Everyone tried pulling, twisting, ripping but failed to do any damage to the extraordinarily tough body. ‘If you pull a leech off,’ Jarek told them, ‘it’s best to kill it unless you want it to latch onto you on your return. They sit on grasses waiting for a warm-blooded creature to pass by. If I’ve no scissors I tear it off and put it on a hard stone then grind it to pieces with another one. I must say I admire you guys for not making a fuss. Most people go berserk the first time they find a leech on them.’

Despite the excitement they had kept their voices low, and as they set off again any desire to chatter was again replaced by awe and a sense of anticipation. Like thieves padding silently through someone’s magnificent house, they stole glimpses of orchids, butterflies, sunbeams, a slithering snake, golden spiderwebs as tough as cotton thread. Mostly it was easy walking until they mounted a ridge and then slithered down, grasping handholds of roots and grasses. Only the escarpment below the Ranger’s house posed a problem.

Three metres of vertical rock seemed insurmountable until Leon removed his sandals, stowed them in his backpack, and with fingers and toes inserted in tiny crevices, clambered up the rock face and hauled himself over. Jarek followed by squeezing himself into a narrow cleft, then pressing

hands and feet against the sides while hoisting himself little by little to the top. As this was beyond the abilities of the others Zeno found solid footing at the highest point at the base of the cliff, then allowed the others to climb on his shoulders from where they reached up to Jarek who was lying on his front, reaching down. He gripped each lad's hand and with no apparent effort hoisted them over the top.

'What about Zeno?' Simon whispered.

'We'll pick him up on the way back,' Jarek replied, as Zeno appeared over the top, having followed Jarek's path. They dusted each other down to remove sticks, leaves and other detritus, put on whatever clothes they'd brought, and three hours and ten minutes after leaving the cabin presented themselves at the Forté's door. It was eleven-thirty.

Mr. Forté was tall, obviously strong, barrel-shaped in dark green shorts and shirt, standing firm on powerful, shapeless, slightly bandy, hairy brown legs. He extended a giant paw that looked as if it could crush rocks, stretched thin lips into a somewhat crooked but kindly smile, and shook everyone's hand. His lean and harassed-looking wife appeared from the house carrying a tray containing two large jugs and a dozen plastic tumblers. She also smiled warmly, welcomed everyone and told them to help themselves to fruit juice.

Lunch would be at twelve-thirty so they had an hour to climb the tower, take in the view, and learn as much as they could about the reclusive life of a ranger.

The lookout tower had been built eighty years before. Although in excellent condition it was no longer used by human observers. They'd been replaced by electronic gadgetry that could 'see' smoke and use GPS and satellite technology to not only automatically inform the fire fighters, but also estimate the severity of the fire. It was a stable structure, however what seemed merely high from below quickly became stomach churningly lofty the higher they climbed. Steps narrowed and became steeper. A narrow slatted walkway surrounded the more slender, topmost tower on which the electronic sensors were positioned, and that was where all except Jarek, Melvin, Arthur, Sasha and Leon decided they'd climbed high enough. At the very top the light breeze had become a wind, causing the structure to sway slightly. But the view was worth it and they descended on a high to the silent admiration and slight jealousy of the rest. Arthur was careful not to brag and his stocks rose accordingly.

After prolific thanks for their welcome, information, and especially the lunch of cold pork, chicken, and salad, followed by pavlova and peaches with lashings of whipped cream, the intrepid band of woodsmen set off to follow a slightly different route back to the cabin. They arrived exhausted, hungry and thirsty, having finished their biscuits and water well before they fell into the swimming hole to relax and wash off the dust and leaves and sweat. Preparing their evening meal would have to wait.

Later, leaning against the walls of the Recreation Room they recalled their day's adventure. Already it seemed more like a dream than reality. Everyone agreed that maintaining silence and having to use the maps and compasses themselves had been highlights. All felt proud, but quietly so. They knew they'd acquitted themselves well and had no need to show off.

In a cupboard of the kitchen Zeno had discovered a pack of cards and a box of board games; chess, ludo, scrabble, snakes and ladders. So while he was studying and writing assignments in his room, everyone else laughed and argued and tossed dice and had more fun than expected playing the social games that, thanks to TV and solo computer games have all but disappeared.

Jarek telephoned Stephen as usual to report on the day's events, and was delighted to confirm that everything was going even better than they had hoped.

Chapter 16. Waterfall

It rained quite hard during the night, topping up the drinking water tanks. Although the morning air was slightly cool, and water droplets sparkled on leaves and a myriad of spiderwebs, nothing

could prevent the early morning skinny-dip. By the time breakfast was underway the temperature was back in the high twenties and rising.

‘Who’s too tired to go on another hike?’

No hands raised.

‘Good. Today’s jaunt will take us up stream to a spectacular waterfall—at least in the wet season it’s spectacular, at the moment it’s probably not much more than a trickle. It’s a popular spot so there’s a car park only a kilometre away. Sealed walking tracks lead to a lookout and the falls, and there’s a loop to rock pools at the bottom of the waterfall. Several thousand people visit the site every year, so if the tracks weren’t provided and maintained by National Parks there’d be irreparable erosion. Do you want to hike along the tracks and meet with other walkers, or would you sooner plan alternative routes to avoid them?’

‘No tracks!’

‘We don’t want to meet other people!’

‘This is *our* forest!’

‘We’ll find our own way there.’

‘OK. Get your maps, I’ll show you the spots I think you’d like to visit and we’ll plan the route.’

After a lengthy discussion they pencilled in a route that required wading through a semi swamp, traversing two steep ridges, then following a stony creek bed up a valley to the pool beneath the waterfall. After that they’d ascend a rock face nearly as steep as yesterday’s escarpment, to reach the top of the waterfall, and then climb another hundred metres to the lookout platform. Their route would cross three tourist tracks and run parallel to another for about a hundred metres.

After replenishing their backpacks and filling up all empty spaces with sandwiches in place of lunch as they’d be away for most of the day, they chose new partners and prepared to depart.

‘Are you sure we won’t meet other people?’ Melvin asked with a sly grin.

‘That depends on you. If you’re silent, listen for their approach and remain still when they pass by, you’ll be invisible. No dogs are allowed in the parks so they won’t smell us out.’

‘Good, because I know how to make it *really* exciting,’ Melvin said with a challenging glint in his eye.

‘How?’

‘Leave all our clothes behind so we have no choice but to be super careful.’

Jarek and Zeno weren’t convinced it was sensible, but were overruled by ten excited young men determined to prove their invisibility and tracking skills.

With Joseph and Henry in the lead, the courageous little band set off into the forest.

Every half hour as the pairs changed leadership, Jarek could scarcely conceal his astonishment at their ability to already read maps, understand contours, take compass readings and maintain a reasonably true course, allowing for unforeseen obstacles.

Again they fanned out to leave no lasting tracks; anyone following would only see what looked like traces of a family of kangaroos.

They’d been hiking for about an hour when Robert, who was leading, raised his arm. About thirty metres away across a grassy clearing was a large grey male kangaroo at least two metres tall and alarmingly powerful. His female, about the same size and colour as Jarek, with her youngest joey’s legs sticking out of her distended pouch, was sitting on her haunches beside him. Directly behind them grazed an older joey about the size of Robert. Everyone stood stock still. The kangaroos’ ears twitched as they straightened up and stared directly at the invaders.

‘Stand absolutely still,’ Jarek whispered. They won’t attack, but we don’t want to frighten them. To be polite and prove you’re not aggressive, look away—it’s as rude to stare in the natural world as it is in the city.’

From the corners of their eyes they could see that the kangaroos also turned their heads away as if unconcerned, but their twitching ears and sensitive noses were as good as eyes.

‘You can look now,’ Jarek whispered.

The family, having decided the visitors were no immediate threat lowered their heads and nibbled a few blades of grass to demonstrate their right to be there, then hopped gracefully off into the trees where they immediately disappeared.

‘Stay still and turn your heads slowly. Can you see them?’

‘No.’

‘That’s because they’re totally still. They’re there all right, but they’re not looking at you, and their colour blends. Time for a demonstration I think.’

Five boys turned their backs while Zeno and the other five walked twenty metres into the sparse, dry sclerophyll forest and disguised their outline by standing or crouching with legs slightly apart, arms bent, grasping a branch. With only a few twigs, clumps of grass and brushwood between them and their audience they felt totally exposed as they lowered and turned their heads sideways, slitting their eyes until they could just see the others.

‘OK,’ Jarek ordered when he was satisfied. ‘The observers may turn round. Can you see them?’

They stared but saw nothing; the play of sunlight and shadow on both flesh and vegetation confused outlines and everything blended into nature.

Jarek clapped softly and the concealed boys moved, lifted their heads and looked at him. Instantly, all were seen.

‘What gave them away?’ Jarek asked.

‘Movement.’

‘Their eyes. When they turned their faces towards us I could see it was a head.’

‘Exactly. Humans are very clever at noticing heads. Any oval shape with a pair of dark dots is instantly seen and recognised. To be invisible, simply place your limbs in unusual positions, remain utterly still and keep your head turned away a little with your eyes almost closed. You’ll be able to see sideways, but the shape of your face is altered and there’ll be no reflections from your eyes. You mustn’t close them completely though, because you’ll become nervous, won’t know if it’s safe to move, and if you’re not aware of what’s happening you won’t be able to escape if they happen to notice you.’

The experiment was repeated for the others with the same results, and everyone felt less apprehensive about concealing themselves from wandering tourists as they approached popular spots.

‘Fuck I’ve an itch!’ Joseph whispered, showing a red spot on his arm with a tiny black speck in the centre.

‘Try not to scratch, it’s a tick; a present from the kangaroos most likely, although bandicoots and echidnas, birds and other animals also have them. They’re small at this time of the year so you can’t dig them out, and anyway, like leeches it’s always best to let them release their hold and fall off in their own time.’ Jarek took a tiny plastic flask of kerosene from his pack and applied a drop to the spot. ‘That will kill the tick in seconds and after a while it’ll fall off. The redness will go away and the itching will stop for today. Then tomorrow it’ll start up again for a while as the infection ticks carry has go at you. After that you’ll be fine. Remember, scratching doesn’t help.’

Five leeches were assassinated during the traverse of the swamp, and a dozen more ticks were doused in kerosene before they reached the top of the first ridge, which they ascended without difficulty. A clump of invading lantana gave them scratches as they crossed the valley to a difficult climb over loose rocks to the second ridge and beautiful views back down the valley.

Leon, who was leading the party, suddenly stopped and held up his hand.

Laughter, voices, the loud beat of a Heavy Metal band.

They felt defiled, shocked. Their sanctuary had been invaded. The voices came closer. Leon pointed and suddenly they realised they were slightly below and only about ten metres from a pathway. What they’d taken for a natural clay bank ahead was the cutting that enabled the path to be level and wide at that point. It was a corner and they could clearly see the trampers walking directly towards them. With no time to squat or lie on the ground, not that anyone wanted to risk lying on an ant nest, they slipped behind narrow trunks, brushwood stands, clumps of tall grass, and

froze. Far from invisible, they were perfectly noticeable to anyone walking silently and alert to life and nature.

Predictably, the six young people, three men in baggy shorts, T-shirts and loudly flapping rubber flip flops, and their girlfriends in abbreviated shorts, flimsy sandals and loose blouses, were neither silent nor watchful. A ghetto blaster competed with the females' shrill screams, loud laughter, arguments about what song was playing, whether it was worth going on as they'd already been walking for ten minutes, and how pathetic it was that they couldn't drive the car right to the falls.

The noise passed and the boys watched in dismay as the six invaders wandered round the bend and disappeared.

'Are they going to the pool?'

'No, the lookout on top.'

After checking the coast was clear they crossed the track and continued over the ridge and down to a stony creek bed which they followed silently until the sound of water splashing, children shouting, and a woman yelling, forced another halt.

'Where are we, Anton?'

'According to the map the pool is just behind that rocky outcrop. The splashing must be the waterfall, and it sounds as if there's a family swimming. What'll we do, Jarek?'

'Eat a sandwich, drink, and wait to see if they leave.'

'After that, if they're still there can we scout around and watch them?'

'You know you can do as you want as long as you keep in pairs and don't endanger the rest of us; so make sure you remain invisible.'

Fifteen minutes later, twelve refreshed and fully alert naked youths encircled the pool, clearly visible to each other, invisible to the two adults who were becoming increasingly irritated with their recalcitrant children. The father waded into the pool and dragged the two young boys roughly out of the water, holding them while their mother gave each a resounding slap that would have knocked them to the ground had their father not been holding them upright.

'When I say come here I mean come here! Do you understand?'

Muffled sobs.

Another vicious slap. This time the father let them fall and writhe on the ground, blubbering and begging not to be hit again.

'Get up!' the father ordered, nudging the shivering heaps with his toe.

They stood, took the shirts and shorts from their mother, hurriedly dressed then set off at a trot up the path, followed by arguing parents.

'I told you this was no place to bring the kids.'

'It'd have been OK if you were stricter! You always....'

The watchers had just decided it was safe to swim when a nasal voice broke the stillness and a young man and his girlfriend appeared.

'Wanna swim?'

'You're joking! There'll be all sorts of bugs in there. I never go in water that's not filtered and chlorinated. You go.'

The man removed his T-shirt and dropped his shorts, revealing a pale belly twice as large as it had seemed when clothed. In baggy underpants he lowered himself into the water, declared it too cold, clambered awkwardly out, lay on the rock beside the woman and shoved his hand up her skirt. She giggled and told him to stop it.

'There's no one here. Those people with the yowling kids were the last visitors and ours was the last car in the car park. Stop worrying.'

'Well don't take too long, someone might come.'

'I'm the only one coming, woman,' he laughed, pulling the front of his underpants down to expose a raw-looking erection somewhat less impressive than Melvin's. With a bored sigh the woman took off her panties and spread her legs while her partner rolled on a condom, lifted her feet

onto his shoulders, positioned his penis and rammed it in and out while she gazed into the distance. About thirty seconds later the quivering white buttocks clenched in spasm and he collapsed.

‘Get off you great fat lump!’ she complained. ‘You weigh a ton.’

‘Only ninety-two kilos,’ he retorted, rolling onto his back and removing the condom from an unrecognisably shrunken appendage. After tossing it into the bushes he pulled his underpants up without wiping himself, dragged on his shorts and T-shirt, stuffed her underpants in his pocket, then pulled her to her feet.

‘That was real, you know? Out in the fresh air? We should do it more often.’

The woman sighed and said nothing as she followed the unremitting drone of her boyfriend’s voice back up the path.

Twelve increasingly fit, already slightly tanned, alert and silent young men emerged from their concealment only a dozen metres from the pool, and silently slithered in, dived, swam, and sat under the trickle of water that fell in a drop of about thirty metres from a cleft in the rocks above.

‘This is the magicalist spot I’ve ever swum in,’ whispered Robert, to the nodded agreement of everyone else.

Before returning to the trees to climb to the lookout about a hundred metres further up the ridge, they found a discarded plastic bag and filled it with chocolate wrappers, cigarette butts, a yoghurt tub, the recently used condom, five partially eaten meat sandwiches and an old ballpoint pen. Zeno carried it in his pack and, together with Simon, plotted their path to the summit.

The rock wall directly beneath the lookout—a platform cantilevered out over a vertical drop, at first glance seemed impossible, but it was one of Jarek’s favourite climbing spots and by carefully following the placement of his hands and feet everyone discovered the joy of hauling themselves up using the muscles of both legs and arms.

They were squatting directly beneath the platform; visible through the slatted floor above, when voices alerted them to approaching visitors. In the shade and relative comfort they finished their sandwiches and most of the biscuits and water, intending to replenish it in the stream later, unworried that anyone above would think to check what lay beneath their feet.

‘We’re the Invisible Naked Spies,’ Anton whispered.

There seems to be an unwritten law that in the open air most people think they have to shout, or at least speak louder than usual, so as the youths silently munched they learned that Greg would be pleased when his mother went home. Susan confessed she hated her mother in law, because she said Susan wasn’t good enough for her son. Greg foolishly defended his mother, causing Susan to fire off a litany of grievances that ended with Greg telling her to shut the fuck up or he’d knock her lights out. Instead, it was Susan who launched into an attack.

Looking up through the slatted decking they could clearly see Susan pounding her fists into Greg, scoring a beauty on his nose, causing it to bleed. He grasped her wrists, apologised and begged her to calm down. She kicked him viciously on the shins and in the crotch, causing him to let go and grab his balls in agony. A mighty swing with her handbag caught Greg on the side of the head and he dropped to the deck. Blood from his nose splashed on the rocks only centimetres from Arthur’s feet. Susan’s feet marched angrily off the platform. Greg dragged himself to his feet and staggered after her, still apologising.

At a signal from Zeno, Sasha emerged to check, signalled the all clear, and twelve bodies clambered over the side of the platform to stare in wonder, transfixed by the vista that seemed to go on forever till it merged with the sky. A view made infinitely more significant now they’d tramped, waded, clambered and sometimes crawled over and through it, getting scratched, bitten and stung in the process. Tree-covered hills receded in size and tone from warm greens through pale green-grey to distant blues under a cloudless sky in which raptors wheeled. Pride was perhaps the dominant emotion as they retraced with their eyes the ridges and valleys they’d tramped over and through to get here. Just as the rock pool below the waterfall was the most idyllic spot they’d swum in, so this view eclipsed all others and it was only the sound of distant voices that forced their departure.

After depositing the bag of rubbish in the bin provided, they stood silently among the trees a few metres from the path as five young men in motorcycle leathers stumbled noisily past. All five were laughing and swigging from beer bottles. The leader finished his and casually tossed it over his head. It landed at Zeno's feet, smashing on a rock, covering his toes with shards. Fortunately, none caused cuts and once the louts had passed everyone followed Adrian down the easier, far side of the ridge, then along a densely rain-forested valley to a spring where they drank and refilled their water bottles. From there it was simply a matter of retracing their steps, increasingly tired, but maintaining silence and leaving negligible traces of their passing.

A quick swim in the pond removed the worst of the dirt and dust that had accumulated, and after disinfectant had been liberally applied to a multitude of scratches and grazes, they made their evening meals, which they again took to the recreation room, away from buzzing beetles.

'What're we doing tonight?'

'Relaxing. The sky's clear, the moon won't rise until late, so I thought a little stargazing might be in order.'

'Where? Aren't the trees too close to get a wide enough view?'

'A few hundred metres past where we soap ourselves, there's an open area large enough to see most of the sky. There are three tarpaulins in the storeroom we can spread out and lie on to keep ants at bay. Sasha's an amateur astronomer and says he will be happy to point out the constellations. But if you're too tired we can play games like last night.'

It was no contest. Twenty minutes later they were on their backs on tarpaulins, peering into the sky as Sasha pointed out the constellations that they checked off on their maps by torchlight. Having identified the South Pole of the sky using the Southern Cross, they understood how navigation could be accomplished at night if you had no compass. Despite their interest, tired muscles reclaimed their attention and they headed back for supper and bed.

Jarek, more tired than he realised from the strain of responsibility, decided to lie a little longer in the warm night and was half asleep when someone lay beside him and gently stroked his arm and chest before leaning over and lightly brushing his lips in a delicate kiss.

He relaxed and let himself be caressed; light grunts of pleasure escaping his lips as an adventurous tongue explored nipples, navel and erection until with a groan of ecstasy Jarek arched his back and ejaculated.

'That was perfect,' he whispered, wrapping his arms around the man who had given him such pleasure. He froze. It wasn't Zeno! This body was very lean and the arms slightly hairy. He could feel an erection and a bony pelvis pressing against his thigh. Carefully he extricated himself and said softly, 'Leon?'

'Yes?'

Jarek was too tired to panic. Technically he'd been raped by a fourteen year-old. But of course it wasn't rape. He'd enjoyed every second. Bindi's efforts at fellatio had been very unrewarding; nothing like this. Even Zeno lacked Leon's fervour. Perhaps it was the warm night, starlight and fresh air, but he didn't have the energy to worry about something that was now done.

'How did you learn to do that?'

'Watching videos.'

'Was it your first time?'

'Yes.'

'Shouldn't you have asked me first?'

'Would you have let me?'

'No, you're underage and no one would believe I was not the instigator. No matter what you said, they'd all assume it was the other way round and I'd end up with life imprisonment for child molestation and be murdered by the other inmates in prison. Is that the future you want for me?'

'Of course not! I *really* like you and wanted to show you how much, so when I realised you'd stayed behind I came back hoping we could talk, but you seemed to be asleep and I just...I couldn't help myself...sorry.' He sat silently, obviously very distressed.

‘I enjoyed it,’ Jarek said simply, unable to be dishonest, ‘and I like you too, but it’s not love. I’m twelve years older than you and if I ever have a serious relationship it will be with someone my own age.’

‘I didn’t expect you would love me or want to have a relationship, I just wanted to show you how much I like you and appreciate what you’ve done for me.’

‘The risk, Leon! I might be a rabid homophobe and kill you for daring to touch me. You took an enormous risk. I might have a sexually transmitted disease!’

‘I’ve seen you naked for three days, even your ring, and there’s not a blemish on your body, no sores, warts on your penis, nothing. You’re far too fit and healthy to be ill, and you’re far too nice a guy to run around naked if you had a sexually transmitted disease, for fear of accidentally infecting someone. I knew you wouldn’t be seriously angry because you have sex with Zeno.’

‘How do you know?’

‘From the way you look at him and the way you both act together. I overheard you telling Melvin to try it on with Sasha. I could have told you they weren’t gay, they just like acting sexy to shock people. It’s not the first time Melvin’s flashed his boner. He was trying to see if you were gay, but you didn’t tell him and he doesn’t guess. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.’

‘You still shouldn’t have done it,’ Jarek said with a sigh.

‘Do you still like me?’

‘More than ever, but don’t ask me why.’

Leon’s deep laugh was infectious and they both ended up smiling into the night.

‘Will you tell Zeno?’

‘Of course not. This is our secret. But we’d better get back before tongues start wagging.’

‘Can I hold your hand as we walk?’

‘Your Honour, I am not a paedophile; the child just sucked my cock while I wasn’t looking, and then asked if he could hold my hand, so clearly he hasn’t been adversely affected by the experience.’

‘Yeah, it does sound a bit weak as a defence.’

‘Come on.’ Jarek picked up the tarpaulin, folded it then grasped Leon’s long, lean fingers. Hand in hand they wandered back through the balmy night to the cabin where everyone else was either in bed or nearly there. Another first. He’d never walked hand in hand with a man before.

‘You’re late, what happened?’

‘Fell asleep under the stars.’

‘Hasn’t it been a great day?’

‘The best ever,’ Jarek said, meaning ever word.

‘Where’ve you been, Leon? We were just about to report you lost.’

‘Stood and looked at the stars again, then desperately needed a crap.’

‘Wasn’t it an excellent day?’

‘The best ever,’ Leon replied fervently.

Chapter 17. Secret Places, Secret Thoughts

‘Our last full day. Any requests?’

‘Explore more places.’

‘There’s an abandoned quarry and a magnificent stand of trees I’d like you to see.’

‘Will there be people at the quarry?’

‘Never in the dozen times I’ve been there. The road’s closed, it isn’t spectacular, and few people bother to go where there are no well-made tracks.’

‘If it’s not spectacular, why are we going?’

‘To see how, in only twelve years, nature has reclaimed what was a stinking, polluted, barren hole blasted from the rocks so the roads in this area could be formed and sealed.’

‘What about the trees you mentioned; we don’t want to see other people.’

‘Not many bother to go. Sometimes schools take busloads of students to see them, but they never stay more than half an hour and it’s unlikely we’ll coincide. Neither place is far from here, but they’re in opposite directions so I suggest we visit the quarry first, return here for lunch, then hike to the ancient trees. Any problems with that?’

There were none.

‘Check you’ve got your whistle because there’s an exercise that might require it.’

Packs checked, water bottles filled, feet secure in sandals or trainers, they chose new partners and set off

As if they’d been doing it all their lives Anton and Melvin led the Naked Spies south via a steep ridge, which they followed silently. After about a kilometre a steep and slightly hazardous descent brought them to a disused road that they followed till it entered a gap in what looked like the side of a cliff. Inside, rough stone walls curved away on each side, their contours and definition obscured by rampant vines, trees, shrubs and grasses. Underfoot, the coarse stony gravel was fairly level. Walking was at first difficult due to lantana, thorny creepers and many-stemmed bushes, but as they progressed towards the centre of the ‘colosseum’, as Arthur had already dubbed the place, vegetation thinned and they had an almost unobstructed view of the extraordinary space.

‘What do you think?’ Jarek asked when they’d time to take in the view.

‘It’s hotter than outside,’

‘And quieter.’

‘There’s a sense of—not menace exactly, but that something not very pleasant might happen.’

Simon said softly.

Several boys agreed that, although it was obviously silly, they too felt, not exactly nervous, but less at peace than out in the forest.

‘And why is that do you think?’

Ideas were tossed around until gangly Anton who had surprised everyone by being just as adventurous and active as the others during the week, suggested it was because the place was so obviously man made. Despite the invasion of nature and the quiet, the walls betrayed it’s violent and destructive origins. The young men’s new found respect and reverence for nature was affronted by this evidence of destruction.

Jarek, applauding their impassioned adolescent fervour, wisely refrained from pointing out that their normal lives they assumed were natural, even the food they’d been eating all week, depended on the continuing destruction of nature, mostly worse than this.

‘What I’d like you to do is have a good drink of water, hang your whistle round your neck, leave everything else here, set off alone to explore for a bit, then find a comfortable spot to sit in silence where you can’t see anyone else, and let your mind roam freely. After an hour I’ll blow my whistle and you can all come back.

‘Why have we got a whistle?’

‘In case you fall and hurt yourself. If you think you might be in the slightest danger, blow your whistle hard, is that clear? You are not here to be heroes, but to experience silence and solitude, naked like any other animal, for one hour.’

They stood in the centre, each facing a different direction, then Jarek watched them stride bravely off towards the walls. This was the first time they’d been alone. Not backed up by a partner. Within a few metres they lost sight and sound of the others and a creeping nervousness tingled their spines. Perhaps it was all a ploy? Everyone else was pretending and creeping away, leaving them here to die. Were there giant snakes waiting in the rocks to strangle and inject them with venom? Giant monitors waiting to take a bite? Bull ants, leeches, ticks, poisonous spiders, centipedes, scorpions. And there was no water!

For everyone, including Zeno, the desire to race back to check if Jarek was still there became a gnawing urge. Then reason slowly intruded. They were only a few kilometres from the cabin. The

way back was simple, along the old road, up to the ridge, along it and down to the stream and home. And why would the others do that? Little by little irrational fears were pushed back where they belonged in the prehistoric part of the brain, and an interest in both nature and the quarry itself took over. They were not going to disappoint either themselves or Jarek!

With relaxation, enjoyment arrived and each youth inspected, observed, climbed the blasted rocks, found a comfortable spot, sat and unshackled their minds.

Jarek, well aware he was being followed, was wondering how to handle the problem. Leon was fourteen but seemed older. Intelligent, sharp, strong and sexually aware. He hadn't been indiscreet, but there was a new sadness in his manner since the night under the stars, that was troubling. It was essential to define their relationship in a way that would not raise false hopes, but still bolster the youth's self confidence, not undermine it. He led the way through a cleft then up to a ledge, invisible from below, that fronted a smooth-floored cavern several metres deep in which he sometimes spent the night at weekends. Frowning, he turned to face Leon who was only metres behind.

'Should I go?'

'No, Leon. We have to talk.'

Leon's smile faded, he shrugged and sat. 'Yeah, I suppose we do.'

'I like you and want us to be friends, but that's all.'

'Why?'

'Because sex is complicated and too often creates more problems than it's worth.'

'Problems?'

'Jealousy and suspicions; deep feelings of hurt when one wants to stop and the other doesn't. I don't want to go there. I want to have gay friends without being expected to have sex with them.'

'I've never had a friend I could share secrets with.'

'Neither have I until a couple of weeks ago when I met Zeno. And now I have you too, so I'm lucky.'

'You have sex with Zeno.'

'Scarcely more than cuddles, and it isn't serious—we both agree we want a lover of our own age.'

'So do I. But couldn't we...?'

'No, we couldn't. Sex with you would put me in prison, and friendship won't, so that's the way it's going to be. Believe me, you need a gay friend your own age more than you need a lover.'

'Not much chance of that in this place.' Leon gazed off into the distance then turned and bared his perfect teeth in a grin. 'So, you're not just a sexy hunk, there's a brain as well.'

'Cheeky bastard.'

'As you're such a philosopher, what do you think about bum fucking?'

'Not my choice. It's interesting that most straights think that's the only way gays have sex, when only a small percentage do. I suppose it's because for most men, sex is only shoving their dicks into holes. They think gentle touching and caressing isn't manly or something.'

'That's a relief. I don't fancy it either.'

'Good, there's less chance of disease, and it saves on condoms.'

'Do you believe in karma?'

'As in reincarnation, or destiny?'

'Destiny.'

'I think we all make our own with what's available to us.'

'Good. So do I. You'll be here for another five weeks, with weekends free. Who know what might happen.' His smile was enigmatic.

Jarek returned the smile but remained silent, slightly worried about the intentions of this young man who seemed too clever, knowing and experienced for his age.

On their solitary rocky eyries, nine young men luxuriating in the sensuous, still heat, shifted both gaze and attention from their surroundings to themselves. Naked. On a rock. Open to the sky. In

what felt like voluptuous delirium they stroked thighs, chests, nipples and erections while fantasies of heroism and lovers fuelled natural impulses resulting in grunts of ejaculatory rapture.

Jarek and Leon returned by different routes. Jarek blew his whistle and a few minutes later was joined by the eleven youths, Leon inconspicuous among them. All slightly bashful until Melvin defused the situation as usual.

‘I’ll bet we’ve all been wanking!’ he laughed.

‘It was the heat.’

‘The solitude.’

‘The silence.’

‘The sight of my own sexy body...’

Jarek laughed with them and the last barrier between adult and young men fell. They were as equal as humans can expect to be with each other.

After returning to the cabin there was time for a quick swim before lunch, then another very brief map session to plan the route to the giant trees. This time there was a well-used road and several popular walking tracks to avoid, a small ravine to cross, a bluff and two very steep ridges. The total distance was only five kilometres but it would be slow going and they’d have to keep up the pace to arrive back before dark.

Packs replenished, they set off as usual in silence, making excellent progress up the ridge, along the top and down a vertiginous slope that managed to graze several incautious buttocks.

The ravine presented them with two choices, cross it by a fallen tree placed there by the Ranger for hikers, or clamber down four metres then up again. It was only five metres wide but seemed much further.

Everyone was determined to cross the bridge, so they removed shoes and sandals, tied them to their packs and practised walking along another similar log nearby until they were used to the feel of it underfoot, didn’t have to peer down at their feet, and felt confident. Jarek crossed first, Zeno last. No one even wobbled, although all were secretly shuddering at the thought of what might happen if they fell. The bluff posed no problems and the descent, with plenty of foot and handholds dropped them straight into the densest and most ancient rainforest they’d seen.

‘This magnificent patch of old-growth forest was only left standing because it was too difficult to get the trees out—people in the past cared as little for nature as they do today. Humans don’t change, unfortunately. This is the sort of forest that used to cover almost all eastern New South Wales and Queensland from the Great Dividing Range to the coast, so be impressed.’

‘They didn’t need to be told. Trees forty metres tall with great buttressed trunks. Giant lianes as thick as their thigh. Stands of tall palms. The dense canopy of dozens of other varieties of eucalyptus and other species created a golden twilight through which they moved in awed silence over a leaf-littered floor almost devoid of undergrowth.’

After crossing both walking tracks without incident they slipped round the edge of the empty car park then hugged the rocky sides of the narrowing valley that led to their goal. For the last few hundred metres they were forced to jog only five metres from the path, padding over roughly mown grass dotted with spindly shrubs that offered little concealment.

Jarek, who was leading, stopped. They’d all heard it. A bus pulling into the car park behind them. Seconds later the air was filled with high-pitched chatter and laughter, excited calls and the sharp tones of an older woman. Sasha ran back to see what was happening. He returned in despair.

‘It’s a bus with about fifty Catholic cows from Saint Vestal’s College. They’re already coming along the path.’

It was too late to climb to safety.

‘Turn yourselves into rocks and use whatever cover you can find.’

‘They’ll see us.’

‘No, they won’t. Females aren’t hunters. They focus on what they’re expecting, and are mainly interested in what other women are doing, and what their husbands or boyfriends are looking at. They’re going to the large trees so won’t be looking at anything else.’

And so it turned out. Clutching notebooks and cameras, forty-four young women, neatly encased in brown shoes and socks, pale blue tartan skirts, beige blouses, blue blazers and sun hats, chattered and gossiped their way along the path. A severely dressed middle-aged woman led the parade and a nun brought up the rear.

‘They’ll be about twenty minutes so we might as well relax. Follow me.’

They scaled the cliff and found large, flat sun-warmed slabs of granite on which to lie, barely suppressing giggles of nervous relief.

Jarek stretched out on his back, arms under his head. Exhausted. He felt as if he hadn’t relaxed in four days because everything depended on his remaining at full alert to prevent accidents, arguments, problems... He looked around and automatically counted everyone. Zeno was awake and talking quietly. It was safe. He lay back and was instantly asleep.

He woke in the middle of an erotic dream but kept his eyes closed. Listening. A slight rustling. Was it wind in the trees? The gentlest of tickling on his penis. Suppressing the urge to slap it off in case it was a snake, he remained absolutely still. The tickling continued and he realised he was fully erect.

A whisper. ‘I dare you.’

Something stroked his penis. A finger? Surely not!

Jarek opened his eyes and stared into bright blue eyes.

Simon froze, his finger seemed glued to Jarek’s erection and everyone erupted in suppressed laughter.

‘Thanks, Simon,’ Jarek said lazily, stretching the blood back into his muscles. ‘You caused me to have a delightful dream, but you can stop now.’

As if stung, Simon pulled his hand away and stuttered an apology.

‘What’re you apologising for?’

‘For touching you.’

‘No need; people touch each other all the time. I pushed your hand into a more suitable spot when climbing the last rock face. Someone grazed my shoulder when they squeezed past me going into the quarry.’

‘But he was touching your cock.’

‘So? It’s just skin, Henry. In some early Australian desert clans, men used to grasp each other’s penises on meeting in the same way we shake hands, to prove they were carrying no weapons and came in peace. I also read that in some tropical countries instead of a written contract, men would cup each others balls while swearing to honour the agreement, and that made it binding. I agree it’s a very special organ that needs protecting, but forced to make the choice between having it or my hands cut off, I think I’d prefer to keep my hands.’

‘Must’ve been a great dream, you’re still stiff.’

Jarek wondered where this was heading. He took a deep breath and reminded himself that it was he who wanted them to treat him as an equal. They’d talk to each other like this, so he now had to accept the consequences. ‘Thank you, Anton for pointing out the obvious. It was.’ If only there was a pool handy to dive into and cool things, he thought. Instead he was surrounded by eleven curious, friendly young men, all smiling, all wondering how far they could go. Ah. It was subsiding. However, before he could relax....

‘Are you cumming? There’s a clear syrup dripping out of your cock. My cum’s thick and milky.’ The question was a genuine request for information from a frowning Robert. Everyone was genuinely interested and no one was laughing.

‘So is mine, Robert. This is what people call pre-cum. It’s a lubricating fluid that some men like me produce in copious quantities when they’re aroused, some only a little, and some not at all. It makes intercourse easier by smoothing the entry, especially if the woman’s vulva is rather dry or tight. If you buy condoms then you’ll notice they’re lubricated. Any more questions?’

‘How many women have you fucked?’

‘Enough.’

‘Did they like it?’

‘Presumably, since they came back for second helpings. But it’s always difficult to tell. Women want the men to tell them they are wonderful, but they think men who like compliments are vain and so they seldom give them.’

‘How come you’re so easy about us seeing your boner, and talking about sex and stuff?’

‘Because erections are as normal as breathing; we all have them—they’re nothing to be ashamed of. I’m sick of the stupidity of a society that thinks children don’t need to know the truth about the beginning of life, and the end. How babies are made and born, and death, are the two big events in everyone’s life, but they’re sidestepped by parents and schools. The sexual urge is the strongest instinct and one of the most important things you will have to think about and deal with in your lives. Sex is a completely normal activity like eating and shitting, so why can’t we talk about it sensibly? The safest and least aggressive societies with the fewest rapes and family violence, teen pregnancies and child abuse are those in which sex is treated as a natural thing and young people like you feel free to ask questions and experiment when they become interested.’

Everyone, including Jarek, was slightly disappointed when the discussion was interrupted by the distant chattering, laughing and screaming of the girls clattering back to the bus. By the time it drove away in a fog of stinking diesel, they were standing in stunned silence in front of four forest giants. Holding hands it took eight of them to encircle the smallest, and all of them to reach right round the largest. The silence encroached and Sasha began to weep silently.

‘Sasha? You OK?’

‘I just feel so sorry that all the forests have gone. I know it’s stupid, but it feels as if my heart is breaking. I love it so much here, and to think it was like this everywhere...and now....’ His voice trailed off.

No one laughed. Simon put his arm round Sasha’s shoulders and murmurs of agreement from everyone calmed the distraught youth.

It was almost dark by the time they reached their swimming hole and plunged in to relieve the grazes, cuts, ant bites, and other irritations endured without realising it during their trek.

Chapter 18. Philosophy and Farewells

That evening the discussion returned to the subject that is ever-present in the minds of all humans—sex. The afternoon’s joke had created an opportunity they didn’t want to let go.

‘You said sex and wanking are normal, like eating and shitting, so why won’t people talk about it?’

‘Yeah, why does it feel as if it’s dirty and something we shouldn’t do?’

‘The short answer is religion. Until Christianity arrived about seventeen hundred years ago, and Islam a few hundred years later, most human societies were relaxed about sex. They had the usual sensible laws against rape and child abuse, and not screwing your sister because of the possibility of deformities, but apart from that, what adults chose to do with each other in private was up to them.’

‘Including homosexuality?’ This from Leon.

‘Of course, that’s as natural as all other forms of sexuality.’

‘My father says queers should be shot.’

‘That’s because he’s a victim of religious propaganda, Henry.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s well known that whether you fancy having sex with boys or girls is fixed before you’re born, like eye colour and the length of your nose, so to persecute people because of that is criminally ignorant and goes against reputable research. It’s no different from burning people who thought the world wasn’t flat, or said the earth wasn’t the centre of the universe. Unfortunately, Christianity and Islam never bother with facts unless it suits them. That’s how they hang onto power and influence.’

‘Do you think it’s OK to be a homosexual?’

‘Do you think it’s OK to be a human, Arthur?’

Arthur frowned in confusion. 'That makes no sense.'

'Neither does your question. We are what we are and there's precious little we can do about it.'

'Stop distracting him, Arthur. He's telling us about why no one will talk honestly about sex and nudity. Get on with it, Jarek.'

'Certainly, Sasha, as you ask so politely. Basically, it's all about power. If you want to control what people think and do, then either bash them into submission or make them feel guilty. Christian and Islamic leaders understand that, and have always done both things. By insisting there's an invisible god who knows everything, they easily made everyone fearful of disobeying even the craziest laws. The worst guilt trip arrived when they declared that the most natural and strongest of human impulses, sex, is a sin unless it is to make babies. Nudity is also a sin because it exposes the penis. The reasons they give for concealing that inoffensive little organ are truly bizarre. It goes like this: god created us; the penis is the organ we use to create babies, therefore it belongs to god and is not ours to play with. It is to be kept sacred and covered until he wants us to use it to create a baby.'

Astonished silence greeted this revelation.

'That makes no sense.'

'It makes as much sense, Melvin, as insisting there's an invisible super hero in the sky who created the universe and arranges everything, even caring whether you are properly dressed, thinking the right thoughts, or using your penis wrongly by wanking.'

Slightly shocked giggles.

'Hands up who feels guilty listening to me saying such things.'

Eight hands slowly raised.

'That's the power of guilt. You've been taught to unquestioningly accept that there's a god who must be worshipped and never criticised. You've been taught there's eternal punishment for people like me, and eternal reward for people who do as they're told. It's clever, isn't it?'

Heads nodded, brows frowned and eyes searched Jarek's face to check if he was serious.

'As no human can stop their natural desire for sex, everyone who believes the Christian and Islamic god stories lives in a constant state of guilt and fear of eternal damnation. Some people, like Henry's father, don't trust god to settle his scores after we die; they want to punish or kill everyone in this life who disagrees with them.'

No one laughed.

'If that's true, how come there's sex and nudity on the internet?' Anton asked.

'There are some things Christians don't control yet—they're working on it. You'd be hard put to find any of that in an Islamic country. The thing about the internet is, it isn't real! You can't touch the naked bodies, and they can't see or touch you. It's second hand, and instead of making viewers feel liberated it increases frustration. It's nothing like we are experiencing here—we are real! We can touch and see each other, speak and understand, share laughs, confidences, affection and become friends who trust and respect each other. That's how humans should interact together; not with invisible strangers on the internet who we can never touch or know. After four days of us being naked together, Who feels they've been sinful and dirty?'

No one raised a hand.

'It isn't sinful!' Anton said clearly. 'It's clean and good and healthy and I feel much better than at school.'

A chorus of 'Me too.'

'If you'd been told last week that we were all going to be naked, and Simon was going to tickle my penis with a straw while I was asleep so I got an erection, and then we'd laugh and talk about lubrication and Robert would tell us his cum was thick and creamy, What would you have imagined?'

The consensus was they'd have imagined an orgy. A rude, dirty, disgusting event that might be exciting at the time but would leave them feeling ashamed.

'Who feels ashamed now?'

No one did.

‘As for the internet and TV, sexy stuff is only broadcast late at night in a few countries, and it’s always heterosexual. Even that is disappearing as censorship increases. Australian TV was much more liberal and open about sex and nudity in the 1970s than it is today. What do your parents think of it, Arthur, Adrian, Robert and Henry?’

‘They won’t allow me to see anything like that, and my computer is in the dining room so they can check what I’m doing.’

‘Same with us.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with that. Parents should monitor what their children watch and do on the internet; we all need guidance when growing up. I think it’s bad for young people to watch porn and explicit sex programs, because of what I said earlier—it isn’t real, and sex without affection and gentleness is a very poor model that harms the development of healthy relationships. We’re naked now, but because we’re real, we’ve been able to think about and practise treating each other with respect. Has it done you harm or good?’

‘It’s made me feel great,’ Melvin said bluntly. ‘I’m going to hate going back to that crappy school.’

Another ‘Me too’ chorus.

‘You’re all intelligent young men,’ Jarek continued quietly, ‘for whom I have great respect. How many of you are going to be content to unquestioningly allow other people to tell you what to think and how to behave?’

No one raised their hand.

‘That means there’s hope for the future.’

With a smile Jarek left them to talk, play board games or simply sit and think, while he assisted Zeno with a problematic maths assignment. Despite spending so little time on his work, Zeno was already ahead of schedule.

‘That’s because you’re smart and teachers have to go at the pace of the slowest student.’

‘And because Ms. Albrechtson is a crappy teacher.’

Jarek didn’t disagree.

Before going to bed everyone briefly repeated the experiment of the quarry; walking in different directions into the darkness until they couldn’t see the cabin, where they stood silently, letting the smells and sounds of the surrounding forest invade their senses. Scuffling bandicoots. Sniffing echidnas. Ear-splitting screech of tiny tree frogs and crickets. Tock-tock-tock of mating cane toads down by the creek. Fluttering moths and night beetles. Then imagination crept in to fill the spaces. What was behind them? Had a creature crept up ready to pounce? Perhaps a stray serial killer was on the loose—they hadn’t heard the News all week. The rest of civilization could be dead. They were the only survivors on the planet! A giant spider might be crawling up their leg! Panic invaded and when Jarek’s whistle blew five minutes later to release and guide them back, they ran as if chased by the demons of Dante.

Breakfast was a collection of morose faces.

‘We don’t want to go. Can’t we stay all weekend at least?’

After a brief discussion it was decided they would have the morning to themselves, but as always, if they went further than the cabin boundaries they had to take a partner, their pack, water, and a whistle.

Time passed too quickly. Swimming, short hikes unto the surrounding bush, climbing the nearest ridge and sitting in a silence and solitude they were already beginning not to fear.

After lunch they gathered on the verandah in front of the sleeping rooms.

‘This has been one of the most enjoyable weeks of my life,’ Jarek said seriously. ‘And you’ve all been braver, fitter, more energetic, friendly and resourceful than any other young men I’ve taught. Although this week has been important to you, don’t be surprised if people don’t ask you much about it. Few people are interested in things they haven’t done themselves, or in good news stories. Disasters and unhappiness are what grab their attention.’

‘This is not a bad thing, because the less you share precious memories, the less chance there is that someone will spoil them with unpleasant comments. If you simply say, ‘I had a great time,’ that’s all most people want to know. If they ask for details, tell them, while taking great care to guard jealously the things you know they could never understand unless they had been here, such as the fact that clothes have been optional. Do you agree?’

‘Yeah, definitely.’

‘Those who haven’t shared this week can never understand the atmosphere, the respect we have for each other’s differences, or even that you treat me as an equal with no more rights than you. As I said last night, if you tell them the truth, their imaginations will have you participating in nude sexual orgies and they’ll be disgusted and want to hang me out to dry. You will probably have a problem with your mothers. Women in general and mothers in particular, know instinctively when you’re concealing something, and they’re very skilful at forcing you to tell them. Are you obliged to tell your parents everything? Absolutely not! I repeat. You are not obliged to tell mothers and family members everything! You are allowed to have secrets that might be misunderstood by people, including parents, who would spoil your precious memories. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, Jarek.’ The mood was sombre as the spectre of a return to real life drew closer.

‘Have you the right to decide for yourself what to think, what to believe, how to act and what to keep private? Yes! Because you have proven yourselves to be real men. If you always feel obliged to confide in others then you will never be independent; you will always be in someone’s power.

‘Lastly, please don’t tell the other boys at school what to expect, except in the vaguest of generalities. A great deal of your pleasure was derived from the fact that you were faced with a totally new situation that you adjusted to magnificently. If you’d come prepared, knowing how I’d be dressed, what to expect, then nothing would have been the same and I don’t think you’d have enjoyed and developed yourselves half as much. So, can I rely on you to keep what happened here a secret from the rest of the junior school, at least until they’ve all been here?’

As they started to speak Sasha stopped them. ‘Hang on a second, Jarek, I want to discuss something with the guys.’

Jarek nodded nervously hoping they weren’t going to do something that would set sentimental tears rolling. It was sad enough to be losing them without that embarrassment.

After a brief conference the ten young men came and stood in front of him.

‘You are asking us to agree not to divulge anything that might be misunderstood, or spoil the experience for others. We would like to seal this agreement in the manner you described to us. Solemnly, Sasha stepped forward and gently cupped Jarek’s scrotum in his hand. It took a nanosecond before Jarek understood, reciprocated, and Sasha said clearly, ‘I contract never to say anything to anyone that might spoil the memory of this week, your reputation, or the pleasure of those still to come.’

With a similar seriousness that failed to completely conceal their distress at leaving, the other nine repeated the gesture.

‘Thank you, gentlemen. I have never before been so honoured. Now it’s time to present the certificates you have well and truly earned.

Zeno handed out ten beautifully printed, named certificates stating that the bearer had earned the honourable title of *Woodsmen* because of his insight, appreciation of, and experience in the natural environment.

While the boys were cleaning, hanging the spotlessly clean mattresses up to air, and unwillingly putting on clothes and packing bags, Jarek took Zeno into their room, heartsick that the boys were going; relieved it was over.

‘I couldn’t have done it without you, Zeno, he whispered, drawing his friend into a sad hug. ‘It was only the knowledge that you were always there in case I fouled up that gave me the confidence to go on.’

‘Thanks, although I felt useless sometimes,’ Zeno said softly. ‘You were magnificent, Jarek! Honestly! I had no idea what it was to be a real man until I saw the way you treated those kids.’

‘You’re too generous. Now of course I’m worried about the next lot. They’re a different sort of lad so you’ll tell me if I’m going about things the wrong way, won’t you? I depend on you more than you realise.’

‘Of course I will. Stop worrying, it’ll be great. To change the subject, are you sure you don’t mind Cador spending the weekend here?’

‘Mind? I’m very, very pleased. I need to get away for a few days to unwind and was hoping you and he would act as caretakers. Do you think you could manage?’

‘Zeno’s relief was evident. ‘We’ll be fine, and thanks. I know you’re only doing this because you’d feel in the way, but you wouldn’t be.’

‘Liar. I’d be the proverbial gooseberry. After we’ve left, take my ute and I’ll meet you at Edgar’s once I’ve finished talking with Stephen.’

Zeno shook all the boys’ hands, watched as they boarded the minibus, waved goodbye and locked up the cabins.

Chapter 19. Feral

At one minute to three Jarek parked the minibus outside the school. Most of the returning boys were greeted by parents and whisked away with the barest nod of thanks. Leon winked and said, ‘See ya,’ before dashing off. The others waved sadly and lugged their bags home, leaving Jarek with a euphoric Principal who had been kept abreast of everything Jarek thought he should know with nightly phone calls. When all ten students had been accounted for they went to Stephen’s office to discuss whether the next week’s program had to be modified to suit the new group of fourteen year-olds who were neither as intelligent nor as lively as the previous class. A dull lot, Jarek remembered, and therefore adored by their female teachers. It was going to be a challenge.

He drove to Edgar’s where Zeno was waiting to be taken to the supermarket to restock with the same foods that had proved so successful in the first week.

‘That’s Cador’s father, isn’t it?’ Zeno asked. ‘He owns this supermarket according to Cador.’

‘Sure is, I remember him from a parent’s evening. Do us a favour. Watch his reaction when I talk to him.’

Smiling innocently, Jarek approached the heavily built, thick-jowled man wearing an impeccable business suit.

‘Good afternoon, sir, I’m the physical education teacher at the high school. We met at a parents’ evening earlier in the year. Your son hasn’t been to cricket practice for a few days, I hope he isn’t ill?’

‘With barely a pause for thought the man snapped, ‘You’ve got the wrong person, I have no son. Good day!’ He turned away to speak to a nervous employee.

‘Fuck he’s an angry man.’

‘Did you get the feeling he’s sorry about losing his son?’

‘No way! He really meant that he had no son. Will we tell Cador?’

‘I’ll leave that to your judgement. You’ll have plenty of time to see how he feels over the weekend, which, by the way, I hope you’ll make the most of.’

‘Without soiling the mattress,’ Zeno laughed.

On returning to Edgar’s, Jarek thanked Edgar again for his generosity. His host insisted that gratitude was unnecessary; he was pleased the place was being used and taken care of. When he realised Jarek was carting all his worldly possessions around in the back of his ute, he offered to store them; an offer too good to refuse. Jarek did refuse the offer of a bed, however.

After a cup of tea, Zeno and Cador drove back to the cabin in the minivan. Cador leaped out exclaiming again at the beauty, peace and privacy. Impatiently, they unloaded the supplies,

organised and secured them from predators, then raced to the swimming hole, afterwards lying together on the sand in the afternoon sunlight, rediscovering the delights of simply touching and being together. After a light meal they retired to bed where they remained until very late on Saturday morning, still intrigued, still desiring more of their lover's body.

Forty minutes after leaving Edgar's, Jarek was parked in his usual spot behind the Forest Ranger's office.

'Jarek! We hoped you'd visit. Staying the night?'

'Yes, Greg, but in the bush. I've some serious thinking to do. OK if I leave the ute here?'

'Of course.'

Turning to Greg's wife, Jarek handed her fifteen hundred dollars.

'No! We don't want anything,' Greg insisted, taking it from his wife and handing it back. 'We love having you and are perfectly able to manage on my wages.'

'Thank you, Greg, and I love coming here. However, I don't enjoy being in your debt. You two have saved me from depression more times than I care to remember. You splashed out on a lovely lunch for twelve people a few days ago, and I'm going to ask you to do the same thing five more times. I'm living rent free, all meals paid for. I earn twice as much as you, I have no debts or responsibilities, and if you refuse what I give in love and appreciation then I'll have to leave.' He held out the money.

Reluctantly, Greg took it. 'Thanks. You're a real mate. At least stay the night with us?'

'I'd be rotten company; I need to think. On Sunday, though, I'd like to stay with you; freshen up, recharge my razor and learn to be civilized again.'

Realising it was as useless to protest this time as it had been on so many other weekends, Greg and his wife watched Jarek remove his clothes and place them in his utility truck. Then, like a sleek feral animal he slipped into the forest.

Stephen couldn't face returning to his increasingly disagreeable spouse, so spent the evening playing cards with Edgar and his friends, afterwards sleeping in one of Edgar's spare rooms.

Violet Noble did not notice her husband's absence, being in conference with Irma Medlar. Like all members of the local branch of Women's War International they had been deeply insulted by Belle Paigann's rejection of their core beliefs, so when they discovered her son, Zeno, was also behaving despicably, they decided it was time to act. Someone had to punish the youth for raping Adele Nimffo; causing her to leave town in such anguish she'd had a fatal accident. Using the bedroom telephone extension, Violet had eavesdropped on Stephen's nightly calls to the camp, and learned that instead of being taught a lesson, Zeno was completing his studies and assisting Jarek Schwartz, who had left Bindi Hussey in the lurch after promising marriage!

'I've had enough, Violet!' Irma announced 'Neither the police, the education authorities or your pathetic husband are prepared to do anything about Paigann and Schwartz, so we must do as the bible suggests.'

'What does it say?'

'God helps those who help themselves. That means it's up to us to ensure justice prevails.'

'I agree, but what can we do?'

'We use our secret weapon.'

'What secret weapon?'

'Annie.'

'Annie? She's insane! She's on bail for grievous bodily harm! I'm terrified of her.'

'So am I, but she learned martial arts in prison, although why they'd teach crazy people that beats me. Despite her size she's very strong.'

'You mean?'

'Yes, Violet dear. Thanks to you we know where Schwartz and the Paigann kid are, so we send her up there to put the frighteners on them—I think that's the right expression.'

Violet's pulses began to race. Already she was planning how to break the sad news of Zeno's death to Belle Paigann. 'I want more than the frighteners, Irma—I want the terminators!'

'Termination. I like it!'

'When shall we have it done?'

'The sooner the better. Tomorrow night? I'll give Annie a call now and invite her round.'

Annie was tiny and lean and proved her toughness by arriving on a motorbike—a very small and not particularly powerful one—but a motorbike nonetheless. Exactly one and a half metres tall, she wore a scuffed black leather jacket, several chains attached to a studded belt that held up her baggy camouflage trousers, army boots, and black leather gloves. Without wiping her boots she plonked herself down with her legs apart, and removed her crash helmet. Eyes that were disturbingly close together, and an exceedingly narrow face were not improved by mauve bristle cut hair, three nose rings, five earrings and several others through the eyebrows. Rumour had it that the lips of her vulva were sealed by a large silver ring, but no one dared ask for confirmation.

'Whadayawant?'

'We've a job for you.'

'I'm leavin town.'

'Oh dear. It is just the sort of thing you'd be so good at.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow night.'

'How much?'

'How much what?'

'How the fuck much do I get out of this?'

'Oh...we hadn't thought. You're a sister so...'

'So you thought I'd be a cheap trick? Well fuck you too, sister.'

'No, no. How much do you need?'

'What's the job?'

They told her.

'A thousand.'

'Excuse us a minute.' Violet and Irma went into a huddle in the hallway. 'All we can manage is five hundred,' they apologised on their return.

Annie counted on her fingers and thought aloud. 'Fifty for that bitch in the squat, then there's the repairs for the bike, then...' she looked up. 'OK, I'll do it. Give.' She thrust out her hand.

Irma went to her room and returned with a pile of notes and coins. Violet added several and Annie counted it several times before nodding.

'OK. Where's the gig? I'll do it tomorrow night on my way out of town.'

'But how do we know you won't just scarper with the money?'

'You don't. Now again; exactly were and who the fuck is it you want skewered?'

This was more unpleasant than they had anticipated, but they had no choice. At least when it was done Annie would be out of their hair. She was a strange and unpredictable young woman and none too bright. It took thirty minutes to explain the hand drawn map. When she finally understood, Annie stomped out leaving the door open, muttering gleefully about getting her own back on all those bastard males as she puttered off.

'That leaves us free to check on Bindi, who I fear is again the victim of predatory males.'

'Surely not, Irma. Why isn't she more careful?'

'Being such a sensitive girl she has no defences. I'm reasonably certain the only reason for that drawer full of condoms was in case men force themselves on her. Over the next few weeks we must keep watch. She needs our protection because the weather's getting hotter and that's when men are at their most dangerous. Are you with me on this?'

'Oh, certainly, Irma. Certainly. If we can't protect each other, what's the point of our existence?'

'Exactly, Violet. We are of one mind.'

After leaving Greg and his wife, Jarek set off at a brisk pace to find a meal, irritated by unwelcome youthful memories that had recently been invading his thoughts. Two working parents had provided food and shelter but little in the way of affection, interest or love. He became a loner with no understanding of other boys his age. Unlike him, they eagerly replaced parents with gangs, and were content as long as they were left alone to indulge in petty theft, and experiment with the forbidden fruits of sex, alcohol, smoking and the occasional puff of marijuana. Pupils who studied and sought approval from adults were fag wankers. Bullying was rife, and self appointed tough guys regularly gave juniors they suspected of being queer, a lesson in manliness that left the boy traumatised, depressed and fearful. Jarek knew of at least one boy who had suicided.

Female teachers weren't interested and males did nothing for fear of being labelled a queer-lover, or a queer themselves. If parents complained they were told it was just boisterous fun and their boy should get used to the real world.

Fear of becoming a victim had motivated Jarek to increase his fitness and strength so if they discovered he wasn't really one of the boys he could defend himself. It worked. He was permitted to be a lone wolf. An addiction to superhero comics had him dreaming about giving the bullies a taste of their own medicine, but as they always worked in twos or threes he needed a weapon. There was always a body, bag, and locker search if weapons were used, so he had to think of something he could carry on him that would never be found.

"Papillion", the autobiography of French felon Henri Charrière, provided the answer. Needing a secure spot to hide his money and documents, Charrière rolled them tight and placed them in a metal charger that he shoved up his backside. With this in mind Jarek saw the potential of an object in a second-hand shop; a slender, ten centimetre long metal cylinder that could be pulled apart. It had been used to store needles, according to his grandmother. Laborious polishing revealed the object to be silver, more valuable than either he or the shop owner had realised.

In his father's workshop Jarek took a twelve millimetre wide steel strip the length of the case, and filed it into a sharply pointed stiletto with two very sharp edges. The blunt end he securely embedded with epoxy resin in the three-centimetre-long cap. When the blade was exposed and the longer end of the case jammed on behind the cap, he had a dagger with a firm handle and a seven centimetre blade. When sheathed it was merely a slim silver tube with rounded ends—scarcely thicker than his thumb. Lubricated with a little hand cream it slid easily into his anus, but it took a fair while to get so used to it that his sphincter remained closed and it didn't pop out when he lifted something heavy, squatted or farted. After a couple of weeks he became so accustomed to it he felt unarmed unless it was there.

Jarek hated weekends when either their house was full of friends and family, or they went to one of their multitude of relations for noisy family gatherings. Unlike his parents and siblings he disliked his cousins, aunts and uncles and the weekly get togethers with their drinking, singing, smoking, eating, fighting, arguing.

He'd just turned fourteen the first time he told his parents he was going camping for the weekend. They didn't ask who he was going with, what gear he needed, or where he was going, probably because if they knew nothing they wouldn't feel obliged to stop him.

An hour's bike ride took him to an enormous State forest in the foothills. Large signs prohibited the public from entering or using all maintenance tracks apart from the seven kilometre road to a swimming hole that was popular at weekends with the locals. Large fines would be imposed on anyone camping in the forest, or lighting fires except in the places provided.

Concealing and chaining his bike a hundred metres from the road, Jarek shouldered a pack containing a bottle of water and enough bread and biscuits for two days, then spent the day trudging through dense undergrowth. Scratched, bitten, lost, exhausted, he arrived at the picnic area just before dark. He savoured the stillness, stripped and swam, exercised to dry off and warm up, ate sparingly, then found a soft patch of sand to lie on, excited at the idea of sleeping under the stars. It was October so the nights were chilly and the grass and bracken he piled on himself did little to

warm him. At first he thought he would die of cold, but eventually fell asleep. During the night he got up and did press-ups to warm himself, then slept again until woken by the sun.

After an early morning swim he explored the area until he heard visitors' cars, then filled his water bottle and spent the rest of Sunday wandering back through the forest, delighted to observe the complete indifference of all life to his presence. Trees and other plants paid him no heed. Birds called to each other—not to him. Lizards scuttled after prey, ignoring him. Spiders, ants, beetles, moths butterflies went about their business with not so much as a glance at him. He startled a couple of bandicoots who ran off without asking who he was, what he was doing there or shouting at him to be more careful. He nearly trod on a basking red-bellied black snake that set his pulses racing. One bite and he'd die in agony, but the snake wouldn't have lost a second's sleep over it. It was exciting, dangerous, and he had to do it again.

No one quizzed him about his weekend, for which he was grateful. Lying came easily but always left him feeling guilty. The following weekend he was off again, unworried about dying of cold in his sleep because an internet search informed him it was impossible in the temperatures experienced locally. This time he was going to use his knife to provide at least some food. He took a slightly different route, stuffed his shoes and clothes in his pack the minute he was out of sight of the roadway, removed and prepared his knife, then padded along in increasing agony as splinters, stones, sharp grasses and other unexpected obstacles inflicted painful wounds on feet and legs.

Disheartened, he sat on a stone, dagger ready, wondering what he was doing. A rustling heralded a large skink poking its snout into view. Jarek froze. The lizard waddled forward, tongue flicking. Unaware of danger it made its cautious way between Jarek's feet. Not daring to breathe he swooped and grasped the creature round the neck. It writhed, twisted and scratched. Anaesthetised to pain by excitement, Jarek stabbed and stabbed and stabbed until the struggle ceased and the beautiful thing seemed to deflate.

Skinned and gutted it was even smaller. With no way of making a fire Jarek took bites of the raw flesh that tasted like rotten fish. He gagged, sick at the thought of killing for no purpose. Ashamed, he silently asked the reptile for forgiveness and buried it. He only killed one more native animal. It was the following year. A bandicoot, heavy and solid and so tough after roasting he couldn't get his teeth into it. Accepting that he wasn't really a child of nature, merely a well-fed intruder, he determined to continue his weekend odysseys, bring his own food and leave as little trace of his visit as possible.

After a great deal of practice he could remove his knife and ready it for defence in five seconds, ten if he was wearing trousers. He practised stabbing imaginary assailants in the chest in the hope of reaching the heart, until he learned that the rib cage deflects most such attempts. A stiletto like his should be slid up under the ribs through vital organs to touch the heart, triggering a fatal reaction. That's what the Romans did when they fell on their swords.

By the summer holidays he had become addicted to the solitude and independence. His feet were tough and impervious to splinters and rough ground. He was dark brown all over, no longer scratched himself, and had gained an intimate knowledge of large tracts of the forest. Barefoot, naked and alone, each weekend he purged himself of the contamination of other people and returned to civilization brimming with self respect. If he'd been asked if he enjoyed himself, he'd have been at a loss what to answer. He did it because he had to. He certainly wasn't unhappy, despite it being hard, frequently unpleasant, sometimes cold and wet, almost never comfortable—because it was better than the alternative. He suspected he had been born with a sense of unworthiness that could only be assuaged by regular self mortification.

Punishing bullies was something he felt he needed to do to make up for his inadequacies. There was no point, though, if he was hurt in the process, so he spied and learned and planned carefully. The out of bounds area behind the rubbish bin enclosure was where victims were taken to learn the lessons of manhood, so Jarek worked out a couple of alternative routes from there to his bolt hole—the crawl space beneath the Art room, accessed via a loose board.

Wednesday intervals were the preferred times, so Jarek excused himself from class early, went to his hideout and removed his trainers and anything else that would identify him, then barefoot in his

school uniform, dagger ready, an old stocking pulled over his head, he concealed himself behind the largest bin.

Waiting to be sure it really was bullying, not just kids smoking, Jarek darted forward at the first cry of pain, jabbed his dagger into the thighs of the first two and the upper arm of the third, then in the confusion leaped the fence and disappeared. There had been almost no blood so it took less than a minute to clean, sheath and replace his dagger and shoes, check the coast was clear and wander innocently back to see what all the noise was about.

The entire school was kept in the assembly hall for three hours while all bags, lockers, and students matching the sketchy descriptions the louts had given were searched. The police arrived to interview possible witnesses and lecture on the dangers of knives. The stab wounds were serious and all three bullies were away from school for a week. On their return they were feted as heroes, invited onto the stage at assembly and became the targets of female adulation. No mention was made of bullying.

The intimidation stopped, which was good, but it was bad the bullies became martyrs. If you're going to punish someone, he realised, you have to make sure the punishment can't be turned to advantage. He was pleased he felt no remorse or pity. Defending oneself against humans was no different from defending himself from wild cats in the forest, Jarek decided, knowing he would never hesitate to use the dagger again if it was needed. Human life was no more valuable than that of any sentient animal. The game of life had rules, and if you stepped outside them you had to accept the consequences.

It was nearly dark before he arrived at a small stream where he tossed memories aside, dug up a yabby, killed and secured it with a small rock in front of him in the water, squatted, extracted his knife, unsheathed it, then remained still as a stone for several long minutes. Suddenly his hand smashed into the water and came out grasping a metre long eel just behind the gills. With a practised slash the head was off, and a few seconds later the guts were on the bank—a meal for bandicoots and ants. A shake of the empty end of the charger dislodged the spark generator from a cigarette lighter, and before long a fire was burning between rocks, the eel was cooking, and for the first time in a week Jarek was at peace.

Chapter 20. Crime and Punishment

Saturday dawned warm and wind free; a day for cleaning and preparing the cabin and bedrooms, completing school assignments and tramping in the forest. Zeno enjoyed himself initiating Cador into the ways of nature, albeit in a somewhat self-conscious tribute to Jarek. That evening, being too hot to stay inside, they took a mattress out onto the verandah and lay in the moonlight, chatting quietly.

'Do you often think of your parents, Cador?'

'Of course I do.'

'Miss them?'

'Difficult question. My mother's so under Dad's thumb she barely exists as a person. I imagine she loves me—at least she says she does, but she never sides with me against Dad. Even when I told him I was gay and he began hitting and abusing me, she just left the room although she must have known what was going to happen. I made enough noise, pleading and begging, but she never came back and I haven't seen her since.'

'Does it make you sad?'

'I imagine she's sad, so that makes me sad, but in a way it's a relief not to be there and see it.'

'What about your father?'

'He's a callous bastard. If someone owes him money he doesn't give a stuff if they're having troubles. He's thrown tenants out of houses because the guy lost his job and needed time to find another to pay the rent. Even one couple with a baby. I've been talking a lot with Edgar over the last week. He's a great guy by the way, a freethinker. That means he makes up his own mind about

what to believe and think and do. He made me realise that I've been brainwashed with all this Allah stuff...invisible gods and crappy rules that say if I'm queer I have to be crushed to death under a stone wall. You know, I reckon my father would do it if he thought it would earn him brownie points with the faithful.'

'Surely not!'

'I'm pretty sure he only saw me as a trophy. If I'm no use for impressing his mates then he doesn't want me.'

'Do you want him to want you? I mean, if he asked you to come home, would you?'

'Not unless he accepted me as I am, a freethinking queer.'

'We saw him in his supermarket yesterday and Jarek said, "I haven't seen your son for a while." Guess what he answered.'

'What son?'

'Almost, he said, "I have no son." I wasn't sure if I should tell you.'

Cador turned pale as the truth he'd been avoiding sank in. It'd be bad enough if a friend dropped you, but his father? Tears welled and he couldn't speak.

Zeno reached out to comfort him, but was brushed angrily away. 'Jarek shouldn't have done that. It was too soon! Knowing my father, now he's said those words to a teacher he'll never go back on them. It's finished.' Cador stood, stared down at Zeno as if at a stranger, then ran off into the forest.

Shocked at the reaction, Zeno ran after him shouting at him to stop, but there was no response so he followed him into the forest, calling desperately, imagining everything that could go wrong. Cador was naked, bare footed and knew little of the dangers.

Zeno stopped. It was stupid to race blindly; he should go back to the cabin and try to phone Jarek, then make a loud noise so Cador would know where he was. He turned to go back but suddenly realised he had no idea which direction to walk. He was lost.

Relaxing in the quarry after the most delicious roasted snake he could remember eating, Jarek was content. It had been a fruitful day of thinking, stress-releasing exercise and winding down. He always looked too far ahead, he realised, envisaging problems that would probably never exist, imagining so many possible scenarios that he was in danger of becoming paralysed with indecision. A day alone in nature was all it usually took for him to see his life in perspective and plan the sensible path. Having sorted his thoughts on how to approach the next group of pupils and what to do about Leon, he could sleep peacefully. Tomorrow he would go and see if Greg Forté needed any work done.

He stretched out on the warm rock, but instead of sleep his heart began to pound and he had to sit up.

'Zeno and Cador,' he whispered. 'I shouldn't have left them on their own for so long. Neither have any real experience of the bush. It's the weekend so there could be visitors...'

Silently, he slipped out of the cave and into the forest.

Annie considered herself a professional, having modelled herself on Wonder Woman and fictional female cat burglars. After stowing her meagre possessions into the motorbike's saddlebags she set off in a black leotard, hooded sweat shirt, gloves and trainers. Hugging the verge and keeping to the speed limit she attracted no unwanted attention. A few hundred metres down the rutted lane that led to the cabin she dismounted, unhitched a sawn off pump-action .22 rifle from under the frame, checked the magazine was full of hollow-nosed bullets, and tightened the string on her hood so only her eyes were visible. After pushing the bike into bushes, she jogged the remaining distance to the cabin, arriving somewhat out of breath as lifting weights only added muscles, not fitness.

The building was in darkness but there was enough moonlight to see two cups and a mattress on the verandah. She stood still and listened for a minute. Silence. A stealthy check of the bunk rooms and cabin revealed nothing. They must have gone for a walk, so she'd wait. But where? Not inside. They'd probably return to the verandah. Concealed in the shadow of the cabin doorway she

surveyed the scene before deciding to cross to a clump of bushes directly in front of the verandah where she could sit all night if necessary. When they returned, bang bang they'd be dead. Not that she was a crack shot, but from six metres even with the abbreviated barrel she couldn't miss. If the first shot didn't kill, at least it would explode in the flesh making such a mess she'd have all the time in the world to pick them off.

Fantatising about following two men dragging their ripped and torn bodies around the buildings in a vain attempt to escape her vengeance, was very arousing. With a smile of anticipation she slipped softly out into the night.

Forty minutes after leaving the quarry, Jarek silently padded up the path from the swimming hole towards the cabin. Everything looked peaceful in the moonlight. Silent. It was only about eight o'clock. Surely the boys wouldn't be in bed? Intending to sneak round to their bedroom window to check, he noticed a slight movement in the shadows. Small. A child perhaps? Remaining utterly still he watched as the figure crossed the patch of open ground and concealed itself in the bushes in front of the verandah. He squatted, removed his charger, prepared the knife and silently crept forward.

Annie was not a child. She was small and strong with excellent reflexes. As Jarek's right arm wrapped around her neck she instantly dropped, escaped his grasp, swung round and fired a shot that grazed his thigh. He didn't notice.

In the split second it took to reload, Jarek's toe slammed into Annie's throat. The rifle fired harmlessly into the air as she went down, already pumping for a third shot, but Jarek stomped on her arm, grabbed her by the throat and hauled her to her feet, kicking the rifle away.

She struggled and clawed, but soft leather gloves prevented scratching. A sharp knuckle tap on the side of her head stunned her long enough for Jarek to get behind her, wrap his right arm tightly round her neck and press the point of his stiletto into the taut flesh directly beneath the lowest rib.

'Why are you here?'

'Who the fuck are you? Fucking naked savage!'

'As you said, savage, so don't tempt me. Who are you and why are you here with a loaded gun?'

'None of your business.'

'It is when you start shooting at me.'

'Pity I missed.'

'Why?'

'Because you're a man.'

'Who sent you?'

'Fuck off.'

Jarek pressed the dagger slightly and felt it puncture the skin. Annie hissed from pain and shock.

'This is your last chance.' His voice softly menacing. 'Who sent you and why do you want to kill me?'

'Fuck off, b...' Before she completed the sentence the stiletto slid in and up, passing easily through stomach and liver before puncturing her heart, which stopped beating.

After removing the dagger, Jarek lowered her to the ground while pressing her head forward onto her knees to close the wound. After cleaning the blade under a tap in the kitchen area he returned it to its hiding place, then plugged the tiny hole in her chest with a lump of clay. With Annie over his shoulder he picked up the rifle and trotted down the driveway to the gate.

No vehicle. She must have left it down by the road. As he approached, moonlight reflected off the headlamp. Dropping the body he pulled the motorbike from under the bush. The key was still in it so he draped the corpse over the gas tank, secured the rifle under her sweatshirt, and rode down to the main road. After checking it was clear he took a risk and rode a hundred metres west before turning onto a narrow track that led to an electricity sub station built on the site of a disused municipal cattle dip.

There was no longer any trace of the wooden rails and holding pens, but on one of his early exploratory hikes in the area, Jarek had discovered that the dip itself, a concrete-sided hole three

metres deep, ten long and two wide had never been filled in, only covered with concrete slabs, and apparently forgotten. It probably still contained chemicals long since banned. Queensland was full of unmapped toxic dumps. Despite the high fence and faded signs warning of prosecution for trespass, it took only a few seconds to lift a corner of the rusty hurricane netting, slide under and drag body and bike to the edge of the old dip.

The reinforced concrete slabs that covered it were about forty centimetres wide and just over two metres long. A star picket from a nearby telecom sign gave him enough leverage to slide the first slab back onto solid ground. Before disposing of the would-be assassin's remains he searched her belongings and discovered a wad of cash wrapped in a hand-drawn map. As it would be stupid to keep anything that might identify the woman, and finding nothing else of interest, he kept the cash and sent her on her way. A slight splash announced her arrival, and with a bit of manoeuvring the bike and gear followed. Replacing the slab was hazardous as it wanted to follow the body into the pit.

After carefully replacing soil, dirt, fallen leaves and other detritus, he backed to the fence, under it and all the way down the track to the main road, sweeping the ground as he went with a length of brushwood to remove obvious evidence of the visit. A naked man jogging along the main highway at night would attract attention, so he crossed it then headed across a couple of cow paddocks to the track, and thence to the cabin. He'd been gone nearly half an hour. Nervous voices were issuing from the verandah.

'Hi, it's Jarek,' he announced from a distance so as not to startle them.

'Jarek! What're you doing here?'

'Dunno really. Suddenly felt like a run and ended up here. Everything OK?'

'Yeah...except we heard a couple of shots and got a bit worried.'

'Just someone taking pot shots at cane toads probably. I heard them too. That's why I headed in this direction. I've been for a bit of a scout around but there's no one anywhere near here. You're not missing the bright lights, Cador?'

'No way, but I did get lost when I went for a walk half an hour ago. Luckily Zeno found me.'

'Never go into the forest on your own, that's the rule.'

'Your leg's bleeding. Are you all right?'

'It's just a graze. Slipped on a rock. Be healed in the morning.'

'Shouldn't you put disinfectant on it?'

'No need. Thanks.'

'Are you staying the night?' Zeno sounded hopeful.

'No way! I've a comfortable little spot waiting in the forest. Beds give me backache. See you Monday morning early. Cheers.'

Suddenly they were alone and wishing they'd told him they'd been lost and it was the gunshots that had led them back to the cabin. But after copious apologies, declarations of affection and swearing they'd never argue again or take off without telling each other where they were going, residual fears dissipated and they discovered they were pleased to be alone. After all, if Jarek hadn't worried, why should they? He wouldn't have left them alone if he thought it was dangerous, would he? Zeno also realised it meant Jarek trusted him, and his self-respect soared. After dragging the mattress inside, they returned to their room and made up for lost time.

Jarek remained concerned. Was that mad woman a lone cannon or sent by someone? Would she be followed by the heavy artillery when she didn't report? Who would want to kill him? Bindi? No, she was far too lazy. Irma Medlar? The idea was insane. It was foolish to waste energy on speculation so he silently extracted one of the small tarpaulins from the storage area to keep off the dew, and lay down among bushes beside the entrance to the cabin's parking area so he'd be able to intercept any intruder.

When Zeno and Cador emerged soon after sunrise for a swim, Jarek had already jogged through the forest to Greg and Hazel Forté's.

'You're looking a bit rough, Jarek,' Greg greeted him. 'Keep out of sight of visitors or they'll tell the papers there's a wild man roaming the National Park.'

‘That’ll bring in the tourists. I feel like doing a bit of hard work, any jobs going?’

‘Had breakfast?’

‘No.’

‘Come on then.’

A day sawing and removing fallen logs and branches from tracks was the medicine needed, and after a long hot bath, a close shave and running the clippers over his body, the shabby, sweaty, feral creature was transformed into a clean, neat, fit and sleekly attractive young man who would excite but not frighten his next class of fourteen year-olds.

Chapter 21. Another Successful Week

‘She cheated us, Irma!’ Violet hissed into the phone at eight o’clock on Monday morning. ‘I’ve just phoned the camp, pretending my husband asked me to phone and see if they were ready to pick up the boys this morning, and Jarek Schwartz answered! Nothing happened to him or the Paigann boy! Annie tricked us out of five hundred dollars! She’s lucky she’s left town!’

At nine o’clock a neatly track-suited Jarek and twelve excited fourteen year-olds in shorts, sandals and shirts drove out of the high school parking lot. This time Stephen gave his little pep talk in the car park in front of both parents and pupils, declaring his full confidence in Jarek’s expertise and suitability to run the outdoor activities program.

Jarek had decided on a slightly different approach with these students. They were a class that did as they were told, never questioned orders, accepted what was told them as truth, and would become the backbone of society—hardworking, honest, reliable workers. This was their last chance to be stimulated and shaken out of their boring certitude that all they had to do was follow directions and their lives would be complete.

Instead of being in the car park to greet them, Zeno was waiting at the swimming hole.

The boys piled out of the van, looked around in delight and turned to Jarek for instructions.

‘The first thing to remember out here is that I’m not your teacher, I’m just another guy, so I insist you call me Jarek. Not Sir, not Mr. Schwartz, but Jarek, OK?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ in unison.

Silence. Then a timid, ‘Yes Jarek,’ followed by shy laughter.

‘The second thing is that being equals we allow each other to think and say and do whatever we like as long as...’

Having established the ground rules Jarek suggested they go for a scout around before unpacking. Locking the van, he jogged off followed by his trusting flock down the sandy track to the swimming hole. The air filled with shouts of surprise and delight at the sight of Zeno swimming in a clear pool fringed by rainforest, with a large smooth rock on the far side, a small sandy beach, sun, shade, birds twittering.

‘That’s Zeno. You’ve probably seen him around the school. He’s assisting me and is someone else to go to night or day with any questions, assistance, information, suggestions, help or a shoulder to cry on. We’re both here for one reason only, to make this your most memorable and enjoyable week, and as unlike school as it can possibly get.

‘Come on in!’ Zeno called.

Consternation. ‘We haven’t got our togs.’

‘Neither have I,’ Zeno laughed, walking out of the water like a young Poseidon, sunlight glinting off water droplets, skin burnished bronze, face a friendly grin. ‘Come on, don’t be pikers. You too, Jarek.’

‘Try to keep me out,’ Jarek laughed, dropping his tracksuit. ‘Come on, guys, last one in has to clean the minivan.’

He splashed into the pool and in the scramble to follow no one could be certain who was last. They splashed and swam, climbed and swung on the rope, dived, and after half an hour gathered on the large smooth rock in the shade awaiting instructions.

‘What do you say we go back to the cabin a more interesting way, up stream and through the forest?’

Excited agreement.

Unnoticed, Zeno had crossed to the sandy beach, gathered all the sandals and was swimming back with them held above his head.

‘Get your sandals from Zeno, then we’ll head off.’

‘What about our shorts?’

‘They’ll only get dirty. Skin washes a hell of a lot easier than clothes.’

‘You’ve no sandals.’

Jarek leaned back on his elbows. ‘Inspect the soles of my feet. Touch them and see if you can work out why. Go on, don’t be shy.’

But they *were* shy. Apart from their fathers they’d never deliberately touched another man yet here was Jarek inviting them not only to touch, but also to take a close look! The feet were very clean and brown and healthy-looking, and their owner’s head was turned away while he chatted to Zeno, taking no notice of them...so they dared.

Like timid birds they touched, felt, rubbed, manipulated and softly commented to each other on how thick and smooth and flexible the soles of his feet were, all the while surreptitiously admiring powerful legs, firm scrotum and a soft penis no larger than their own, that lay harmlessly on top.

As they touched and looked, opinions and ideas and beliefs that had seemed immutable began to soften. Without being conscious of it, they understood they had nothing to fear. This man was like them—just a human, and as the song said, everything they’d been told wasn’t necessarily so. The possibility that there were more ways to be and think and live than they’d realised was already beginning to influence their thinking. Unwittingly, they were observing differently, looking at both Jarek and Zeno through less rigid lenses.

‘The soles of your feet are like soft leather—how’d you do that?’

‘I’ve been running around bare foot all my life. Although it doesn’t just happen. Like every finely tuned instrument our bodies require careful, regular maintenance. Feet must be kept scrupulously clean; calluses have to be rasped smooth to prevent the skin from cracking and drying out. It’s no different from cutting your nails, washing your face and hands, exercising to keep muscles fit and strong, eating well but not too much. All healthy animals spend a fair amount of time grooming and keeping themselves in top working order. I hope you’ll do the same and not become unhealthy couch potatoes.’

‘Yeah, our hens preen all the time—keeps them waterproof and bug free.’

‘And our cats are always licking their coats.’

‘Exactly. You’re smart guys. OK, shall we go?’

With nervously excited glances back at their clothes, they followed this naked, exhilarating, touchable action-man into the forest.

After digging for yabbies, losing their sense of direction, seeing a large monitor, nests of bull ants, listening to birds, and climbing to a wild bee nest for a finger of honey, they arrived at the cabin with ravenous appetites.

‘This is how the food system works,’ Jarek began to explain.

‘But what about our clothes?’

‘They’re safe enough down at the swimming hole, but you can shoot down and get them if you want.’

‘Can we get our things out of the minibus?’

‘Sure.’ Jarek patted his naked thighs as if searching for keys. Shrugged and laughed, ‘Sorry, my keys are down at the pool. Anyway, I’m more comfortable like this, but as I said at the beginning, it’s entirely up to you. There is nothing you have to do, no way you have to behave, as long as you

keep safe and healthy, so I don't get into trouble with your parents. But if you're going to get your clothes, be quick, we're making lunch.'

Three boys went and retrieved their shorts. After a sharp look from Jarek, the boy who was preparing to call them wimps, shut his mouth.

By the time lunch was prepared and eaten they appeared to have forgotten about clothes, so Zeno took them on a tour of the cabin, explained the toilet arrangements, the necessity for outside 'showers', and then let them choose bunks and bedrooms. After another swim and then unpacking, it hardly seemed worth getting clothes dirty for the rest of the afternoon's activities.

During the evening of the third day, Hank, a serious lad, solid, tall, with curly, light brown-hair, asked Jarek if he could speak to him alone.

'Jarek,' he stated bluntly. 'I'm gay. What should I do about it?'

'Be grateful you're healthy, decent and don't feel compelled to act like a dizzy queen.'

'That's all?'

'No. You must also make sure your studies are successful, you don't get into trouble with the law, you work well and are honest. It would also be a good idea to one day make one or two really good friends, and never feel sorry for yourself. Being gay isn't a punishment, you know. For most of us it's a reward—we live slightly outside mainstream society and can often see things in better perspective than guys embroiled in the search for wives, children and security.'

'So, you're gay too? I hoped you were but...'

'Yes.'

'And Zeno?'

'I never discuss the private lives of others. That's gossip and one of the deadly sins.'

'Should I come out? Tell my parents and everyone?'

'What on earth for? What business is it of theirs? If it's becoming difficult for you to cope with the pressure to be like every other boy, and you think your parents won't kick you out, then tell them, but definitely *not* in a way that asks for their approval! Just state it as a fact they have to accept. It's not up to anyone to approve or disapprove of you. You're your own judge of yourself. Understood?'

'Um...I think so.'

'If someone has a problem with it, then they have the problem—not you! Remember that.'

'Yeah, makes sense when you say it. Have you got a boyfriend?'

'Unfortunately, no, but I fully intend to find someone to share my life with. Have you?'

'No, and it's all I can think about. I feel so alone. The other guys are all going out with their girlfriends. I make excuses...but...'

You probably need a friend more than you need a boyfriend. Have you one?'

'There's no one I trust.'

'Do you know Leon?'

'Of course.'

'Ever spoken to him?'

'I didn't think he'd want me to. Aborigines mostly hate us and won't mix.'

'He's a good friend of mine. Next time you see him, tell him I sent you and invite him to do something together.'

'Like what?'

'Go to the flicks, for a walk, play video games...I don't know. Whatever guys your age get up to. Use your imagination.'

'Are you saying Leon's gay?'

'I'm trying to set up a friendship because I like you both and you have several things in common. Now it's up to you.'

The week was as interesting, challenging and exciting for this group of young men as for the previous, and just as stressful for Jarek and Zeno. Friday's departure elicited the same sadness and gratitude, but no scrotum-holding declarations of fidelity. That sort of wit tinged with seriousness

was unlikely to be repeated. When the other boys had been forgotten, that first group would always be fondly remembered for their individuality, intelligence, daring and independence.

Chapter 22. A Proposal

After waving goodbye to the last of the boys, Jarek filed his report with Stephen and arranged to meet him back at Edgar's. Waiting for him beside the minibus was a lean, dark, man in his late middle age. With a grin of pleasure Jarek extended his hand. 'Leon's father, I presume?'

The man laughed. 'Leon's grandfather. How did you guess?'

'A stab in the dark—certainly nothing to do with the fact that you're fit, lean and handsome with a permanent tan as dark as Leon's.'

'No wonder Leon likes you,' the man said in a deep, soft voice remarkably similar to his grandson's.'

'It's mutual. Have you come to see me, Leon's grandfather?'

'My name's Claudius. Yes, I would like to talk.'

'Me too. I was coming to see you when I finished shopping for next week's camp.'

'What were you coming for?'

'To talk.'

They laughed, already at ease.

'Walking or driving?'

'I always walk.'

'How about coming with me? I have to pick up Zeno to help with shopping, then I'm free. Have you met Stephen, the Principal?'

'No.'

'Then you must. Come on, hop in.'

'You're a pushy bugger.' Claudius got in and carefully fastened his seatbelt, not speaking till they were driving. 'I want to thank you. I thought I'd lost Leon...but I'd prefer to talk about it at home. Can you eat with us this evening?'

'Sure can. Thanks.'

While Jarek and Zeno shopped, Claudius and Edgar relaxed on the verandah sipping cold beers, amused to discover they both enjoyed cards and gardening.

'I'm somewhat stuck in my ways since I retired, Claudius,' Edgar confided. 'A few of us meet for cards once a week, but apart from the garden and reading I don't do much. Stephen's my best friend, but he's leaving in four weeks, so you'd be doing me a favour if you'd join us for cards on Wednesday nights—that's if you've nothing else on.'

Claudius was almost as shocked as surprised. Edgar was wealthy, lived in a large house and was white. His first instinct was to refuse, preferring to not push his luck only to be hurt later when the novelty wore off. He looked Edgar in the eye and said bluntly, 'Is this be kind to a blackfella week, or is it a genuine invitation? I'm sorry if I sound ungrateful, but I'm not used to being treated like this. I've no ambition to be someone's good deed.'

Edgar's eyes narrowed. He gazed speculatively at Claudius. 'I don't do good deeds. What's happened to make you distrust my invitation?'

'I'm black and live in Queensland. Isn't that enough?' Claudius sighed and decided he was sick of sparing the feelings of well-meaning whiteys. Whether they liked it or not they were part of the problem and if he wanted to put the past behind him he had to tell someone. 'When my daughter got married I did a correspondence course and topped the year in my accountancy degree. This area is my home turf so I applied by mail for the accountant's job at the local grain store, and got it. However, when I arrived to take up the position, suddenly there was no job. The boss apologised and as a favour offered to take me on as a labourer. I must have used all my energy in the struggle

to get that far because suddenly I couldn't be bothered any more. I took the job and a few days later they appointed a whitey accountant.'

'That's terrible.'

'I thought so too at the time, but now,' Claudius's grin seemed to lighten up the room. 'I'm pleased it happened. I have no worries, no one to account to, pun intended, no corrupt business practises to cover up, my hours are fixed...OK so I'm poorer, but I'm free. The racist prick unintentionally did me a good turn.'

'I'd want to blow the bastard up.'

'Ah, it's nothing compared to what happened to my parents and grandparents. At least I have a job and a house that's all mine.'

Edgar nodded his understanding. 'My invitation to join us was sincere, Claudius. I've only known you for half an hour but I like you. So if you want to join us, I'd be pleased.'

'Of course I would! I'm not that cranky. Just can't be bothered with racism. Will your other mates be OK with it?'

'Doubt if they'll even notice, all they think about is their own problems. So, next Wednesday evening around seven?'

'Thanks, Edgar. I'll be here.'

Shopping over, Cador was waiting with an overnight bag for Zeno to drive him back to the cabin in the minibus.

Stephen arrived and joined Jarek, Claudius and Edgar on the verandah for a beer.

'Did you ask your wife to phone me this morning?' Jarek asked Stephen.

'Of course not. I seldom go home any more—not that Violet notices, she's so absorbed with her Sisters of Persistent Interference or whatever they're called. Edgar's kindly given me a bedroom and I'm in the process of bringing here the few possessions I care about. I can't imagine why she phoned you, the woman's insane. What she'd say if she knew I'm spending Friday evening with a friend of Edgar's current girlfriend, I daren't think.'

'Don't tell me...you're going to get laid.'

'Yes, Jarek, and all for the price of a good meal. I can't remember the last time I had a shag.'

Jarek laughed. 'Shag! Really Stephen. Such subtlety.'

'Well, it isn't making love. What would you call it?'

'Fucking? Screwing? Rooting?'

'Ah yes, subtle indeed.'

'And are all your other plans coming to fruition?'

'Yes, indeed.' Stephen turned to include Claudius. 'I'm leaving both the town and my wife on the day school finishes; taking off to freedom and probably disaster, but it'll be better than rotting here in the shipwreck that's my marriage. I'll miss Edgar, of course, and maybe later I'll return, but the urge to escape is on me and not to be denied.'

'I understand the feeling, but I'm stuck here until Leon finishes his education.'

'Where are his parents?'

Claudius frowned and his lips trembled slightly.'

'It's OK, Claudius. I was just making conversation. You don't have to tell us.'

'I want to,' Claudius bit his lip, 'I just don't want to cry. Done enough crying in our family.' He sighed and looked up. 'My daughter was smarter than me. Got a scholarship. Degree in teaching. Met a young fella from the bush, Djirbalngan. Not much education but not stupid. They moved down to Cairns. She worked as a teacher, he cleaned offices. No drink, no problems. One night the cops came. Got the wrong address. The lad said it wasn't him and they couldn't come in because his wife was feeding the kid. They began to push past so he threw a punch and they shot him dead on the spot. My daughter came running and when she saw what had happened screamed and punched the three officers, so they tasered her half a dozen times. The electric shocks melted her

brain they reckon; anyway, she's a vegetable now in a nursing home. So Leon, their son, came to live with me.'

'What about the cops, Claudius?' Jarek asked in a shocked whisper. 'Were they prosecuted?'

'An internal police enquiry decided it was self defence.'

No words could heal that sorrow, so none were offered; silence said it all.

Jarek slung a bag of personal items he thought he might need into the ute, then he and Claudius drove the short distance to a neat but otherwise unremarkable weatherboard house in an exuberant garden on a quiet street.

'Does Leon know you came to see me, Claudius?'

'No, and I'd rather he didn't.'

'Me too.'

'He'll be in the back garden doing his keep-fit routine. You go round and say no one answered the door. Meanwhile I'll let myself in and pretend I arrived just after you and don't know who you are. OK?'

'Excellent.'

Leon was in his swimming togs lifting a solid stick with two-litre plastic containers filled with water slung on each end. Jarek stood and watched until the exercise was completed.

'How many?'

Leon turned. His face broke into a huge grin and he raced forward and wrapped his arms round Jarek's waist, squeezing hard. From the kitchen window, Claudius watched in delight.

'I never thought I'd see you again! It's great you're here. Does this mean you do like me?'

'I thought I'd made that clear.'

'Yeah, but when I got home I began to think about all the kids you teach and how you'd probably just felt sorry for me and were being nice to make me feel good but it wasn't anything more than you doing your job and I'm no more important to you than any other kid and... ' He fell silent and hung his head. 'And now you know I'm just a mad fuckwit shooting off his mouth. Sorry to be so pathetic. Did you come to see my grandfather?'

'No, I came to see you.'

Leon looked sideways, cautious. 'Really?'

'Really.'

'I've missed you.'

'I've been thinking about you too.'

'You were right—as usual. It's better to have a friend than a lover.'

'Hank?'

'Yeah. Thanks to you. We've been swimming in the river. We get on pretty well. I help him with his homework. He's coming for a sleepover next Wednesday. Gramp likes him too. His parents are afraid of me, I think. No one knows we're queer though. We reckon they have to get used to their son having a black friend first.'

'Good idea. Hasten slowly is the expression I believe.'

'I still can't believe you've come to see me.'

'I was wondering if you'd like to do something.'

'What? Yes, of course I'll do it, whatever it is. Tell me.'

'I think your father...'

'Grandfather.'

'Grandfather should be there. When's he due home?'

'Should be there now. Come on, let's see.' He raced inside, followed by Jarek.

'There's a Utility truck at the gate, who's is it?' he heard Claudius ask.

'It's Jarek's! He's come to see me! He wants to talk to you! Jarek, come on, meet Gramp!'

'My name's Claudius. Pleased to meet you, Jarek, Leon's not stopped shouting your praises.'

'He exaggerates. Good to meet you too, Claudius.'

They shook hands seriously.

‘You in a hurry?’

‘Not especially.’

‘Eat with us?’

‘Love to.’

‘Good. Leon, give us a hand.’

‘Jarek wants to ask you something.’

‘It’ll keep.’

Jarek also helped and they took their trays out to the rear verandah where there was a welcome cool breeze.

‘Now, what’s the problem?’

‘No problem, Claudius. I was just wondering if you could spare Leon for a couple of weekends to go bush with me. I take off with nothing but a knife and a bit of food; eat what I catch and sleep rough. It unwinds me—let’s me see things in perspective. I’m not a lover of humans in general, although the few I do like I like unreservedly. Until I met Leon I’ve never found anyone I’d want to share my weekends with, so I hoped he’d join me, if that’s OK with you both.’

Leon’s eyes were popping. ‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’ he shouted. ‘Gramp, I can go can’t I?’

‘Of course,’ Claudius said with a slight frown. ‘But...does Jarek know you think you’re gay?’

‘I *am* gay! Tell him, Jarek.’

‘What did you think you were, Claudius, when you were fourteen?’ Jarek asked softly.

‘I didn’t think, I knew I liked girls.’

‘So you reckon Leon is too dumb to know what he wants.’

‘No! He’s just confused.’

‘Why weren’t you confused?’

‘There weren’t all these gays going round telling kids they’re gay.’

‘Do they do that now? Who? Where? You must go to the police if you’ve the slightest evidence of that.’

‘You know perfectly well I’m right.’

‘I know perfectly well you’re not only wrong, but you’re putting your own desires onto your grandson instead of letting him be his own man. That’s what happened to me and I suffered dreadfully.’

Silence. Then.

‘So you’re gay?’

‘Yep. Got a problem with that?’

‘Is that why you want Leon with you?’

‘There you go again. Jumping to unpleasant conclusions. How disappointing! I was looking forward to meeting Leon’s parents, imagining they’d be like him. Open minded, intelligent sensitive. Sadly, you’re the opposite. I’ve discussed all this with Leon. We’re mates, not lovers, despite him sucking me off one dark night when I thought he was someone else.’

‘Yeah, we did discuss it, Gramp. In the cave at the quarry. It’s nothing like you think. I had a crush on him, but not now. He talked sense into me. He’s too old anyway.’

‘And you’re jailbait, Leon. Well, Claudius. You’re looking a bit confused. What’s the problem?’

‘I don’t understand why you’re being so truthful. Why did you tell me about Leon doing that to you?’

‘Because it shows his independence, character and daring. He wasn’t sure I was gay but he tried it on, accepting the risk I might clobber him, because he likes me. I’m telling you because I want to be totally honest with you, as I am with everyone I deal with. Are you gay?’

‘No.’

‘Does that mean no woman, young or old is safe with you because you’d expect them to have sex with you?’

‘Of course not.’

‘But you think because I’m gay I’ll be screwing Leon, unable to control my lusts?’

‘No...but...’

‘When I was at school, kids reckoned Aborigines ate babies. How many babies have you eaten?’
Silence.

‘You were lucky to survive, Leon. Wasn’t he fat enough to roast, Claudius?’

‘Evil lies,’ Claudius whispered. He was shaking. Whether from anger or misery Jarek had no idea. Whatever it was he was in no mood to humour him.

‘If they’re lies, why did people spread them?’ Jarek demanded.

Claudius faced Jarek and snapped, ‘To justify their evil treatment of indigenous people.’

‘Exactly. And you believe lies about gays to justify your homophobia.’

Silence.

‘He won’t have sex with me, Gramp,’ Leon whispered, increasingly upset at how the meeting he had dreamed about was developing. ‘We discussed that.’

Claudius looked up, deeply shocked. ‘Is there anything you don’t discuss with your pupils?’

‘My personal life, and the personal life of others. Apart from those things I will discuss ideas, facts, hopes, fears, dangers, techniques, sex, society, birth, death, good and bad... I’ll talk about anything, if they’re interested. Do you think adults should censor what they say to young men?’

‘Until now I have thought that.’

‘So they’ll never learn until it’s too late the lessons that might save them from misery.’

‘Such as?’

‘You told us at Edgar’s that your life was spoiled because you were expected to be like a whitey and give up your culture. Well, I was expected to be like you, a heterosexual, to take out girls and all that crap! It nearly drove me insane! I lost the best years of my youth because it wasn’t until three weeks ago that I accepted I’m gay. I’ve been living with a woman, fucking and kissing and pretending I didn’t feel disgusted at worst, bored at best! Why do you think I spend every weekend alone in the bush?’

‘I’m sorry for you, but it doesn’t change the fact that...’

‘The fact that you’ve been brainwashed into believing gays are paedophiles, when the reverse is the case. Valid statistics prove that opposite sex oriented people, both women and men, are far more likely to molest children than gays. Of course some gays are bad, just as some hets are, but only fools tar everyone with the same brush! Gays are as variable in everything as you guys. Is it true that all Aborigines are drunken wife-beaters? Your opinions derive from religious hate merchants determined to maintain the lie that gays are evil so they can ‘Save’ us from them. They have a problem, you see, all the old things that used to be evil such as premarital sex, abortion, women not wearing hats or too few clothes...no one considers sinful any more. Without sin they’d have no reason for their existence, so they aren’t going to stop telling everyone that gays are the devil’s brood.’

Claudius frowned, then smiled slightly but avoided Jarek’s eyes as he went to the CD player and selected a track from a disc. It was a duet sung with a full orchestra. They listened in silence and when it ended Jarek’s cheeks were streaked with tears.

‘What do you think of that?’ Claudius asked quietly.

‘It’s almost too beautiful,’ Jarek replied as softly. ‘I’ve no idea what the words were, but the music said everything I want to say about sadness, confusion, the difficulty of being myself and convincing you I’m not evil. What is it?’

‘A duet from the opera *William Tell* by Rossini.’

‘It’s wonderful. Thanks for playing it. I’ve never been exposed to that sort of music. Schools just give kids the same stuff they hear on popular radio, and my parents weren’t into music. The pop songs of their youth were their choice. Another thing to feel cheated about if I’m feeling maudlin.’

Claudius returned to his chair, sighed and scrutinised both Jarek and Leon. ‘I want to apologise. I’ve been wrong about everything. Too wrapped up in my own problems to see that other people are hurting as much as me and for similar reasons. I hope you can forgive me. You are sensitive to good music. Edgar likes you and I like Edgar. Leon loves you, and I love Leon more than life. And now I suddenly discover I like you as much as anyone I’ve ever met. So I guess I’ve just had a Zen moment.’

‘There’s nothing to apologise for. You were being protective of Leon, using the information available to you. I admire you for that, and also for being one of the few men on the planet able to admit he’s made a mistake.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I wasn’t worried,’ Leon lied. ‘I knew you’d like Jarek, Gramp; but what’s a Zen moment?’

‘It’s when in a flash everything falls into place. Ideas that have been swirling in a fog you thought you understood, suddenly sort of explode in your head and reform instantly into a blindingly clear perception of the truth about something. All my life I’ve thought I knew how people should live and how children should be brought up, but now I see I was blind to reality. Jarek’s right! Only total honesty, openness and truth about the important things when dealing with children, will lead to a healthy adult.’

‘Don’t be hard on yourself, Claudius. Leon’s the product of your upbringing and that means you’ve got it pretty well right.’

‘Thanks. I’m also convinced you’re not a paedophile. So when do you head off? It’s a bit late now. Stay the night and take off in the morning?’

‘That’s sensible. Is it OK with you, Leon?’

‘Yes! But where’ll you sleep?’

Claudius’s grin was mischievous. ‘There’s no spare bed, so as you’ve a double, Leon, he’ll have to doss down with you. As you’re both just mates there shouldn’t be a problem, although I should warn you, Jarek, he wanks a lot.’

‘I’ll probably join him.’

Gramp! How do you know?’

‘You’re my grandson.’

Leon hugged his grandfather, they did the dishes, then Jarek brought in his bag and put it on the lounge room floor.

‘What’s in there?’

‘A couple of things for you.’

Minutes later a sharp knife in a soft leather scabbard was strapped to Leon’s upper arm, and he was shod with soft but strong leather sandals with a loop for the big toe and a strap round the ankle—the next best thing to bare feet.

‘Despite what you think, your legs and arms are not especially hairy, Leon, but it’s a good idea to trim them like I do because you dry quicker and it’s easier to find ticks and leeches.’

‘Yeah, I’d really like to look like you.’

Within three minutes he did and was more pleased with the result than Jarek could have imagined.

Having become slightly shaggy during the previous week, Jarek ran the electric clippers over himself.’

‘Amazing,’ Claudius said. ‘You looked good before, but now you look sleeker, more intimidating somehow. I’d think twice about accosting you. Do you do martial arts?’

‘No. I often think I should. I rely on speed of escape. If that’s impossible I’d have no compunction about disabling—even killing an assailant. I don’t have fear, you see, so I’m not immobilised as most people are when attacked, and that makes me dangerous. Muggers expect fear and are unsettled when they don’t see it.

‘You’ve been attacked?’

‘Yes.’ Jarek’s tone did not invite further questions.

‘Do you really live off the land on weekends?’

Jarek’s laugh was self-deprecatory. ‘That’s the ideal. In reality of course it isn’t possible, there’s relatively so little forest left and therefore so few animals I only do it if I have to—the occasional snake, bandicoot, eel and yabby. I lug a pack of food to a base, and return there when hungry. When I leave the forest I like to think I’ve left no trace.’

‘Would you like to live like that permanently?’

‘No way! It’s rough and tough, cold and uncomfortable. I figure it’s an antidote to my soft, civilized normal life among people who seem stranger to me than wild birds. I’ve no idea how long I’ll go on doing it, but for the moment it keeps me sane, whereas playing football for a club would drive me nuts.’

‘Makes sort of masochistic sense. What do you wear?’

‘What I’m wearing now—nothing. Leon can wear whatever he likes.’

‘What if you meet people?’

‘I’m silent and can hear them at least a kilometre away. Humans are noisy creatures and easy to avoid.’

‘Yeah. Once we were standing only five metres from a track and four guys came past; didn’t see us.’

‘But you were dressed?’

‘No.’

‘What? All the boys?’

‘Yeah. It’s much better like that. Feels real. You should know being a blackfella. But you’re not allowed to tell anyone or Jarek’ll get into trouble from the parents.’

Claudius looked at the two lean, fit young men and shook his head in admiration. ‘I’m jealous! Why didn’t I have that experience instead of trying to be a whitefella...even pretending I believed in his stupid religion? I was really fucked over.’ He sighed. ‘I mustn’t think about it or I’ll get sick. So I suppose you’ll be naked too.’

‘You bet! We’ll be two savage hunters.’

‘Where are you going and can I keep in touch?’

‘The National Park. There are several places I haven’t been because I need a partner. For example I want to climb the escarpment to the plateau and spend a day in those swamps. Might need insect repellent for that. I don’t take a phone. If someone can contact me at any time, or if I know I can just phone for help, then I’m not alone and there’s no adventure. I don’t take risks because I don’t have back up. It makes me extra careful.’

‘You’ll be cold at night.’

‘Not at this time of year, unless it rains for a few days. This month the coldest night’s been twenty-five degrees, and the forecast is for continuing dry, hot weather until Christmas.’

Claudius looked at his grandson with pride. ‘Leon, you are a fit, strong, smart and attractive young man and I’m proud of you—really proud.’

Leon glowed. ‘It’s all thanks to Jarek.’

‘No. Other people can only point out the way. You are the person you are because you have made the right decisions and put real effort into living the way that suits you best.’

Chapter 23. Partners

Weekends with Leon were exactly as Jarek had hoped. Neither spoke unless necessary, each seemed to know intuitively when to offer assistance and when not, and neither man complained, even when hungry, dirty and exhausted. Both exhaled sighs of pleasure when they returned to base and could relax, knowing they’d pushed themselves to the limit.

On the second weekend they made the perilous, three hundred and fifty metre ascent up the escarpment to the tablelands where they spent two days and a night tramping between swamps, covered in mud to deter biting insects. Life was abundant. Leeches, spiders with super strong webs, lizards, monitors, kangaroos, wallabies, possums, fruit bats, birds, snakes—most of them deadly. Fortunately, unlike humans snakes aren’t crazed predators killing everything that moves. Like most animals in their natural environment they take only what they need and, in the case of snakes, only what they can swallow. The danger lay in inadvertently stepping on a sleeping serpent. Even then it would probably only bite and not waste venom. Nonetheless, they walked with extreme care.

Deforestation had caused the swamps, and attempts to drain them had made everything worse, creating barren, infertile wastelands of inedible grass and stunted melaleucas. Jarek had planned to climb the escarpment, cross the swamps and return to the sea-level forests in one day, but when they chanced on a clear, sandy-bottomed lake surrounded by sedges and paper barks, they couldn't resist a swim. Leeches plagued them in the wet forests, here it was mosquitoes. Small tortoises and thousands of fish were untroubled by their visitors. A freshwater crocodile sunned itself on a bank, sliding silently into the water at their approach, far more afraid of them than they of it.

A temporary dam of brushwood across the delta of an inflowing stream allowed them to trap enough fish to satisfy their appetites. Then, covered with a thick layer of sedge that kept most of the mosquitoes at bay, they slept back to back, grateful for the other's warmth as it was several degrees colder at that altitude than at sea level. The descent the following morning was perilous. Steep, almost vertical sections of rock and gravel with few handholds. Several times they arrived at impassable precipices and had to retrace their steps and try another route.

Tired to the point of exhaustion, ravenous and jubilant, they wolfed down all the remaining food and slept till dawn, arriving back in town only just in time for Leon to leave for school; too late for Jarek to get back to the cabin and return in the minivan to pick up the last group. Zeno, anxiously waiting by the phone, drove the bus to Edgar's, dropped Cador off and picked up Jarek. They arrived at the high school exactly on time to greet ten nervously expectant boys.

Zeno and Cador's romance blossomed. The more they discovered about each other, the more they argued and the more they delighted in sparring with an equal. Physically they were also well matched; fit and not into organised sports, despite Cador's success at cricket. Both were mental extroverts and mild exhibitionists, both knew a little about classical music and wanted to know more. Destiny had been working overtime to organise this meeting of minds and bodies.

On Wednesday in the last week of term, Violet Noble and Irma Medlar decided something had to be done about Bindi. She had been a regular at their meetings, joining in discussions about the perfidy of men, and yet there had been something not quite right about her behaviour. Not only had several women reported seeing her in the company of young men in the town, but the drawer full of condoms still rankled with Irma. After a brief discussion they decided to settle the question that evening.

They were ready to call the surveillance off after two hours cooped up in Irma's little sports car, three doors along from Bindi Hussey's house, when the young woman slammed her front gate and tottered across the street only metres from the spies, who sank down in their seats. They needn't have worried; Bindi's brain was concentrated on not tripping in her ridiculously high heels. A mini skirt and a sleeveless lace top that failed to reach her navel were her only other garments. In the middle of the road she dropped her purse and bent to pick it up.

'She's not wearing a bra.'

'Nor panties.'

'She's very brave,' Violet muttered.

'She's a credit to us. Women must claim the right to dress exactly as they please without fear of predatory males.'

'She's walking, so can't be going far.'

'Just to the corner shop, I expect, for some milk. When she returns we'll join her. She must be feeling lonely, poor lamb.'

They got out of the car, stretched, and followed Bindi as far as the Footy Club. Without a backward glance the young woman entered, waved to someone and was immediately lost in the noise and crush of patrons.

Silently, the two social workers, for that was how they saw themselves, returned to Irma's car and waited.

Bindi didn't waste time. Stu, Col and Jerry were sitting in their usual spot. They seemed uninterested so she bought them a round of drinks and invited them home for some fun.

They looked at each other, shrugged, said they had nothing better to do and followed her out, waving to the team coach on the way.

‘She’s coming!’

‘Followed by three young men.’

‘Are they going to attack her?’

‘No, they’re laughing and talking.’

The two women lay back in their seats as their prey walked past, then after waiting a couple of minutes followed them through the gate. Instead of knocking at the front door they decided to reconnoitre, as Violet quaintly put it.

The lounge room sliders that faced a high wooden boundary fence, were open to the warm night air. Keeping to the shadows, Violet and Irma squatted among the shrubs about five metres from the open doors, leaning fairly comfortably against the fence. Almost immediately the three young men entered, followed by Bindi who immediately threw off her clothes and began tongue kissing the men while undoing shirt and trouser buttons. They looked at each other and shrugged as if wondering if it was worth staying.

‘Got any booze?’ the good-looking one asked.

Bindi hurried to the kitchen, leaving her three lotharios to undress. They tossed their clothes on the floor then sprawled side by side on the couch like the three monkeys, arguing about the last football match. When she returned with bottles, condoms and a hand cream dispenser on a tray, the men lazily drank beer while their hostess knelt in front, performing fellatio on each in turn. While she was occupied with the sexy hairy one, the skinny pale fellow rolled on a condom and took her roughly from behind. She laughed delightedly. Then the chunky, tough guy took his friend from behind. The sexy one then grabbed Bindi’s hair and rammed her head up and down on his erection, setting the pace. Ninety seconds of thrusting and grunting in unison was all it took for the three men to simultaneously orgasm.

‘All for one and one for all,’ the chunky one whispered as he withdrew from his mate. They stood and gave each other a high five.

‘The Three Fuckateers score again,’ the hairy one laughed as they tossed their condoms on the floor, dressed and made to leave the room.

‘You can’t just go,’ Bindi whined. ‘I haven’t come yet!’

‘Use a fucking dildo, Bindi,’ the stocky one snapped, leaving her clawing irritably at enraged genitals.

Irma and Violet were too shocked to think and didn’t dare move. Agonising cramps were attacking their knees and thighs by the time the young woman finally achieved some satisfaction with the neck of a beer bottle, and left the room. As they were rubbing circulation back into aching joints they heard a bath running.

‘We have to confront her,’ Irma said nastily. ‘This is worse than Belle Paigann’s sneering.’

‘Confronting is scarcely enough, in my opinion,’ Violet hissed. ‘Such a traitorous bitch doesn’t deserve to exist. She has brought shame on all womanhood. Offering herself like a whore to men unable to appreciate the magnificence of a woman. They just used her as a rag to wipe themselves on. Her shame must be wiped out, and we, as the agents of feminine superiority are the ones to do it.’

Nervously, Irma followed her tiptoeing friend into the house, wondering what she had in mind. They stopped outside the bathroom door.

The taps were turned off. Silence, broken by Bindi’s grunts of pleasure as she immersed herself in hot water. The avenging angels crept into the bathroom. Violet thrust the offending head under water while Irma held the legs firmly. Their victim struggled rather more than they expected, and it took much longer than either had imagined, but eventually the last bubble escaped from Bindi’s mouth and they crept out the way they’d come and drove home, Irma hoping the splashed water hadn’t ruined her new silk blouse.

The body wasn't discovered until Friday afternoon, when friends from work finally decided to see why Bindi hadn't come in to the office. By the time the police and other experts had finished with the scene, Stephen, Zeno and Cador, who's father had made no inquiries, either official or unofficial about his son's whereabouts, were two hundred kilometres away in Stephen's car—the only major possession he'd retained from the separation with Violet.

Jarek was only an hour behind them in his ute, having paid a short farewell visit to Leon and Claudius. While Leon was in the kitchen making tea, Jarek gave Claudius the five hundred dollars taken from Annie, to assist with Leon's educational needs. After a friendly drink they swapped addresses and promised to keep in touch.

Walking out to the ute with Jarek, Leon confessed to feeling guilty because although sex with Hank was OK, he found him intellectually dull.

'Hang in there, Leon. A friend is a friend and worth more than gold. As you mature you'll drift apart. That's normal. You haven't declared eternal fidelity to each other. He's probably feeling something similar. So stop worrying.'

'I wish I was twenty-four now, then you'd never get away from me.'

'I wouldn't want to.'

Jarek stroked his friend affectionately on the cheek, climbed into the ute, and Leon waved till he was out of sight.

Zeno's carefully worded letter to his grandmother had resulted in personal letters to Stephen, Cador and Jarek, inviting them to stay with her at least until after New Year.

As Bindi's ex-lover, Jarek was a person of interest to the police. When he couldn't be located they tried to contact Stephen. He was also nowhere to be found. His wife's fury when she discovered her husband had slipped the noose, rendered her speechless with wrath. Even a visit to the lawyer who informed her she now owned the house outright but was not to attempt to contact her husband, did nothing to calm her outrage.

Invoking justice, decency and honour, she volunteered to the police an imaginatively embroidered account of Jarek's perfidy in dumping sweet, innocent Bindi, suggesting it was he who had murdered the girl, probably assisted by the rapist, Zeno Paigann, who was surely involved in the death of dear Adele Magister, and whose mother was a sly, underhand cheat.

Enthusiasm undeterred by a cautious reception from the interviewing detective, Violet felt duty bound to also mention the three young footballers she had witnessed accompanying poor Bindi on the street. Just in time she stopped herself from admitting she'd seen them entering Bindi's house. That might have triggered unwanted questions.

Thanks to Violet Noble's testimony, Zeno, Stu, Jerry and Col joined Jarek as murder suspects, but their police intelligence stalled. Zeno too was nowhere to be found, and the strenuous denials of the footballers were collaborated by an elderly neighbour who had seen them leave and heard Bindi moving round the house several minutes after they had left. She hadn't been spying, of course, she just happened to be in a room whose window was only a couple of metres away over the dividing fence. Anyway, it was impossible not to know what went on in the young woman's house, she wasn't a quiet person, playing her music loud and late without regard for her neighbour and inviting young men in for orgies on a regular basis. She wasn't surprised the nice young Mr. Schwartz had left!

How did she know they were orgies?

'Well, Inspector, why else would a young woman invite three single young men into her house? You had better ask them if you're interested. But I've already told you, it wasn't them!'

The police officer praised her for her observational skills and asked if she had any idea who it might be then.

A smug smile settled and the old woman dropped her bombshell, describing the ridiculous little sports car that had been parked a few doors along from the murdered girl's house on several occasions, one of which was the night in question. Yes, she'd noted the numberplate, and there were two women in it—one in her twenties, the other elderly.

The following day the information was checked, but by the time a car was sent to Irma Medlar's house it was too late. Violet's rage at the man who had so ignominiously dumped her had reached incendiary level and without much effort she had persuaded Irma to join her in exacting retribution.

Using the duplicate keys she had illegally acquired several years previously, Violet had searched the High School records and discovered the forwarding addresses of her husband, Jarek Schwartz and Zeno Paigann. When she realised they were all going to the same place her head nearly exploded. It took Irma several minutes to calm her enough to realise it was lucky, because they could kill three birds with one trip, so to speak.

Hearts full of hope, heads full of hot revenge, minds empty of plans; they sped east and south.

Chapter 24. Chloe

'You're looking glum, Chloe. I thought you'd be more cheerful with Zeno and his friends arriving tomorrow.'

'Have you never heard of multitasking, Sebastian? Women can be simultaneously ecstatically happy and inconsolably sad. The thought of my grandson having to forge a future for himself in a world in which manhood is dead, breaks my heart.'

'Goodness, I didn't realise my manhood has passed away.'

'That's because you're a man,' Chloe snapped. 'Those most involved never realise what's happening to them until it's too late. I've been keeping clippings,' she said reaching for a bulging scrapbook.

'How organised.'

'Indeed. They're annotated, dated and indexed with links to relevant TV and radio broadcasts.'

'Admirable.'

'Contained in these pages is proof that masculinity is moribund, femininity is feral, and human hara-kiri is looming.'

'I'm impressed. I can't believe you worked that out simply by pasting stuff in a scrapbook.'

'Don't be patronising.'

'I wouldn't dare.'

'Ha!'

'So, the human race is in the process of topping itself?'

'Figuratively, yes.'

'Climate change and all that?'

'Much worse. There's no need to look sceptical, Sebastian. I've plenty of examples.' Chloe opened the scrapbook at random and read; 'The Beach Volleyball Association decided to ban the wearing of Speedos by male players. Henceforth they must wear shorts. "We don't want to see men's bits jiggling around on the court," Amanda, the group's spokesperson said. "It's disgusting." She's president of the local chapter of Women's War International, whatever that is.'

'If she's anti male, why doesn't she change her name to Apersonda?'

'Good point. Here's a photo.'

Sebastian looked and laughed. 'Her bum's exposed in a thong and that bra scarcely covers her nipples. I'll bet those knockers jiggle around more than any guy's balls.'

'Especially as men now have no balls to jiggle. Listen to this. "Municipal Pool Authority follows local schools and bans the wearing of Speedos in public." Have you seen how young women dress on the street? Bum cracks deeper than their breast cleavages. Navels exposed and skirts and shorts so abbreviated their cheeks hang out, while their boyfriends' baggy, all-concealing shorts reach from navel to knee.'

‘That’s young people. It’s only a fashion.’

‘A fashion that decrees the female body is so wonderful it must be displayed, and the male body so horrible it must be covered. There was a piano competition on TV last night. The young men all wore dark suits, white shirts and ties. The women were virtually naked from the nipples up, and all wore whatever colour and style they wished to cover the rest. Can you imagine the advantage they get from not overheating and the extra freedom of movement? One young woman’s skirt was split to her thigh on the side facing the judges. Guess who won? At all public events women are free to expose as much flesh as they like, flaunting their female attributes, while men are forced to conceal every vestige of their manhood. That means the guy with scrawny limbs and a potbelly looks no worse than the fit young athlete. This is absurd and is breeding a race of men ashamed of their bodies, ashamed to be men, ashamed to admit they have a penis and testicles!’

She paused for a well-earned breath and Sebastian smiled benignly.

‘Instead of proudly asserting their animal right to display their strength, beauty and prowess, men are intimidated and repressed by sneering women and laws that by default declare them to be inferior citizens.’

‘Come on, Chloe; surely that’s going a bit far?’

‘Listen to this.’ She turned to another article. ‘Malcolm Z, an eighteen year old engineering student, has been convicted of rape and sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment.’ She looked across at Sebastian. ‘What do you reckon the young man did?’

‘Grabbed the girl in the park, tied her up, bashed and rooted her then left her bleeding and torn?’

‘Malcolm Z had been to a bar with his mates. A young woman he had never seen before came up to him and demanded he buy her a drink. Malcolm refused so she dropped her cigarette into his beer and left. Later, the young woman followed him home, apologised profusely, said she was homeless and only wanted to crash on his floor. She cried, well aware that men are rendered impotent by women’s tears, so he reluctantly agreed and gave her a blanket on the sofa. Later that night she crept into his bed and sexually aroused him. He responded, but just as he was about to penetrate she changed her mind. Too late, Malcolm completed the act. The following day she reported him to the police for rape. She doesn’t deny the facts, but insists he should have stopped when she told him to. The police and courts agree and an intelligent and kind young man’s life is ruined.’

‘Terrible, I agree, but women need protection.’

‘And men don’t need protection? Why are men supposed to take responsibility for their actions but women aren’t?’

‘They’re the weaker sex.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous! Five times last year young women have forced their way into the motel rooms of football players, partied with up to seven of them, gone to their rooms, allowed themselves to be petted while playing with the genitals of these fit young men, but when someone puts his finger up her twat, she screams digital rape and the men are prosecuted.’

‘They shouldn’t have allowed her into their rooms.’

‘Of course—it’s their fault again. How about this one—Two o’clock in the morning in Fortitude Valley. Two girls wearing only halter brassieres and mini skirts with no underwear, approached five young men crossing the Robbie Burns park, said they were seventeen and wanted a bit of fun. The young men gave it to them. The following morning all five were charged with sexual molestation of minors. The girls were fifteen years old and, according to our laws, they have the right to wear next to nothing in the early hours of the morning and accost drunken young men without the risk of anything bad happening to them. This isn’t sane! If they take the risk they must take the consequences. Humans are animals. Civilization has softened the edges, but the basic instincts survive and to ignore them is to court disaster.’

‘Even so...’

‘The result is a generation of young men denied the expression of their masculinity and despised as weaklings by women. Men have become pathetic creatures at the mercy of the slightest whims of any passing female—a situation exemplified in almost every contemporary film in which women call the tune and men act like well trained lap dogs. It’s sickening. Having lost all self respect as

well as the respect of the law and females, depression and suicide are soaring. How many young women suicide? Virtually none. How many young men? Hundreds! If not thousands! Most are never reported and there are no investigations into the reasons. The silliest thing is it's entirely the men's fault.'

'How do you make that out?'

'They invented all those labour saving devices that freed women from housework, giving them an unwarranted sense of importance. Women then began to imagine they were too good for mere housework, and idiotic males infected with Victorian pseudo medieval crap about the sensitivity, nobility, and mystery of women have allowed them to act like spoiled princesses, demanding their husbands provide more and more luxuries; insisting that a *real* man would give his wife her every desire. Shopping malls are teeming with underdressed and poorly educated women whose sole aim in life is to shop till they drop, spending their overweight and over worked husband's money on worthless junk; never satisfied, never content, muttering the matron's mantra "When I have such and such, *then* I'll be happy". They have tits enlarged by one doctor, brains shrunk by another. The more they have the more they want in a never ending race to be more spendthrift, more banal, more wasteful, more artificial and less useful than any other woman in history.'

Sebastian sat back and gazed in delight at this energetic neighbour who at sixty-five still did all maintenance and repairs on her three hectare bush block that bordered his own large holding. A better neighbour he couldn't imagine. Tall and lean, grey hair dragged back in an untidy chignon, hooked nose, deep-set eyes and prominent cheekbones. A handsome face as devoid of artificiality as it was of conventional beauty.

'Are you laughing at me, Sebastian?'

'Didn't you once tell me that forty years ago you burned your bra and marched in the streets for women's rights and liberation, demanding equality with men?'

'Equality! Not superiority. I have never asked for favours, only for equal treatment; in the same way as gays don't want any special treatment, they don't want gay-specific laws, they want all laws to apply to them. Gender and sexuality should not be mentioned in an egalitarian society. If it's good enough for women to have adequate health care, it's good enough for men—but they haven't! Women are far better accommodated than men in both prevention and cure of ailments. All laws should apply to all citizens equally, and that's that.'

'Very interesting, Chloe. I'm reminded of Noosa Spit. Remember when it was crowded with nudists all year? Couples, singles, kids, straights, gays, we all hung out together, sunbathing, swimming, playing ball games. Tits and cocks bouncing as we ran—innocent, guiltless fun. Then the moral brigade set the cops on us, cleared the scrub, put footpaths in, banned nudity in case children should see a bloke's cock and suffer trauma. Then they patrolled Alexandria Bay and slapped fines and convictions on nude males—not females of course; and that was the end of innocence.'

'Ah yes,' Chloe sighed. 'Those were fun times. I feel so sorry for young people now; such mixed messages they're receiving. Graphic sexuality on the internet; Puritanism in real life. I'm afraid for the future if women aren't reigned in. Apart from emasculating men, women are the driving force behind more, bigger, better, faster—the attitudes that are destroying the planet. Bachelors are usually happy with enough. It's wives who nag and bitch and force their husbands to work themselves into the grave so they can impress other women. If you define success as having the biggest and best, then the saying, "Behind every successful man there's a woman" rings true. Without that wife he'd be contented with a simple life and house and car, valuing things for their beauty, efficiency, engineering excellence...not for how jealous their wife's friends will be.'

'Sounds sensible, but where's this going, Chloe? What's driving you?'

'I'm concerned about Zeno. He's a bright lad who needs to get into an environment where he will meet intelligent, decent young men and learn to be proud of his mind and body. I want him to learn to stand up to women. To only accept the sort of behaviour from them that he demands from himself. To realise he doesn't need them any more than he needs a wheelchair. If he decides to share his life with one then it must be as equals, not as a cringing, snivelling constantly appeasing,

apologising, doormat—a pathetic hen-picked male eventually paying maintenance to a brutal tart who has never given a toss about him, I want...’

Sebastian placed a calming hand on her shoulder. ‘Commendable aims, Chloe. How do you intend to achieve them?’

Chloe shrugged. ‘I don’t know, Sebastian. As you know he’s bringing a couple of friends and his school principal who’s just retired. I insisted they stay as I want to know what influence they’ve had on him. Grandmothers have a duty of care, you see. Parents are too young and inexperienced to be of much use except as providers. I know he likes you, so I hoped you would talk with him? See if he’s on the right track. Even if he isn’t, insist he goes to Rex’s establishment, not the local high school. OK?’

‘No problem.’

‘Thanks. They’re arriving tomorrow. Come to dinner the following evening; you’ve no jobs Monday night.’

‘Perfect. Goodness, look at the time! You said I have three jobs tonight.’

‘Oops, sorry. Hang on.’ Chloe took a hand written note from her roll-top desk. The first one’s near here—nine-thirty—a woman’s fiftieth birthday, large family gathering, ages five to ninety. I penned a bit of amusing doggerel to read out just before the finale. Husband wants a traffic cop, total nudity but no erections. At ten-thirty, two kilometres away, the Rifle Club ladies night. Raunchy Cowboy; go as far as you will for three hundred dollars. Husbands will be there, so make them jealous are the instructions. Unless you’re feeling strong, however, I suggest you don’t ejaculate because that wealthy bastard from Brisbane has brought his blonde floozy to the Tidal Motel’ again and wants to watch you masturbate while she sucks him off. Any problems?’

‘Nope. You’re the best agent any performer could desire.’

‘You’d better get changed; you’ve only forty-five minutes.’

Sebastian picked up his leather holdall, pecked Chloe on the cheek and headed for the downstairs bedroom to make the transformation.

Chapter 25. Refuge

Zeno was dreaming away as the car hummed through the dusk. It was only eight months since he’d seen his grandmother and Sebastian, but it seemed like years. Would everything be the same? The first thing he’d do was dive into the pool. It wasn’t large but it was deep and overhung by a large eucalyptus from which Sebastian had hung a rope. Zeno was seven the first time he managed to climb the three metres to the top, let go and fall shouting with terrified delight into the water. Sebastian was like Jarek, able to haul himself up non-stop using only his arms. He was responsible for remodelling a skinny child into a lean athletic young man. Rope climbing took care of the arms and upper body, long walks and jogging gave him decent legs and bum.

‘Never trust a man who has no bum,’ his grandmother used to say.

‘And never rely on anyone who’s fat,’ Sebastian would add.

His grandmother was always ridiculously proud when he did well at school. It made him nervous; worried he would one day disappoint her. He kept insisting it didn’t mean he was clever, it was just that the other kids were stupid, but she would nod her head, smile and repeat dreamily that he was exactly the grandson she’d order if it was possible to breed children to order. He wished she wouldn’t lay that responsibility on him.

‘I hope your grandmother isn’t disappointed when she sees I’m just a scrawny old man with no special talent.’ Stephen said nervously, already doubting the wisdom of accepting Zeno’s invitation. It did seem a bit strange now he had time to think about it, that he’d made a friend of a sixteen year old ex pupil. What did it say about him? He didn’t want to think about that.

‘She’s just a scrawny old woman about the same age as you. Don’t worry, she’ll love you, she’s always saying she wants to meet a congenial man; well now she’s going to.’

‘Flatterer.’

Zeno turned to smile at Cador, stretched out across the back seat. 'She'll be surprised to see Cador. When I left I had a girlfriend. Now I'm returning with a boyfriend.'

'Will that be a problem?'

'The opposite, I think. She never liked my girlfriends. Said they just used me. At the time I couldn't see it, but looking back I understand what she meant. I always had to be at their beck and call, telling them how wonderful, beautiful, desirable they were, or they went into a sulk. Sebastian's her neighbour and he's gay. His partner, Reginald, died last year. They'd been together since high school. Reggie was big and tough and a karate expert. That's what got him into trouble. He saw some guys getting beaten up one night so ploughed in to help them—five against one. Someone clobbered him over the head with a pipe and he died. The guy who killed him got done for manslaughter, a light sentence because he pleaded self defence. Don't mention it to Sebastian; he's still very upset. They really loved each other. Reginald was a horticulturist, growing and marketing all sorts of interesting edible varieties to make vegetarianism more palatable.'

'Does Sebastian work?'

'Not really. He's filthy rich. His stepmother's a smart cookie and made some brilliant investments for him when he was still at school. He's a stripper and dancer—mainly private shows. Don't ask me why, I think he just likes it and it takes his mind off Reggie. Nana's his agent.'

'Nana?'

'My grandmother. She wrote that the school run by Sebastian's father will be exactly right for me. If Seb's got anything to do with it, it'll be great and I won't have to go back to the old high school.'

'Wasn't it any good?'

'Academically it was OK, but it's one of those religious places. There's a huge born again Christian group—youth for Christ or something and they're always rabbiting on about carrying Jesus around in their hearts, whatever that means. The staff were constantly telling us we ought to join, suggesting that we're immoral if we don't. What they don't know is it's the religious ones that are immoral—especially the girls.'

'Immoral?' How?

'There's a group that goes down to the beach after school for sex in an old boathouse.'

'How do you know?'

'I used to swim near there and a gaggle of older girls from years eleven and twelve would call out and make me feel silly. I ignored them till one came up and told me Miriam wanted to have sex with every good looking boy in the school, so I had to do it. I didn't even know Miriam so I told them to fuck off. They reckoned it was every boy's duty to fuck girls if they asked, so as I refused I must be queer. Later they spread a rumour that I was being fucked by the groundsman.'

'That's terrible. What did you do?'

'Nothing I could do, so I ignored it. It made no sense.'

'It does if you realise it's a power game.' Stephen said thoughtfully.

'The really bizarre thing is, the groundsman's quite handsome and a champion weightlifter so quite a few kids started to admire me.'

'It didn't undermine your self-confidence?'

'Impossible.'

Stephen sighed and smiled. 'Ah Zeno, you're such a breath of fresh air.'

The sealed road that served the monotonous little boxes of the North Western suburbs began to rise steeply and the houses petered out about a hundred metres before a farm gate. Beyond it loomed a rocky escarpment that looked like a barrier to further driving. Zeno opened the gate and closed it carefully after the car.

'I hope Jarek can follow your directions.'

'Of course he will, he's a genius, didn't you know?'

'I had guessed. Is this a private drive for your grandmother?'

‘She shares it with Sebastian. He’s Nana’s only neighbour. She has three hectares cut off one corner of his land. His house is about two kilometres further along the track past Nana’s.’

‘How much land has he?’

‘Hundreds of hectares. It’s huge like a national park. I’ll take you there soon.’

‘If Sebastian doesn’t mind.’

‘He’ll love you and Cador. He’s the greatest.’

The dusty track followed a winding creek that had eroded its way through the bluff and been widened to take large vehicles. After a hundred metres the canyon widened and forest encroached on the road, branches and vines hanging over the car, brushing the roof in places.

‘Nearly there,’ Zeno said excitedly. Cador leaned forward nervously, wondering what sort of reception he’d get. ‘There, on the right. Just drive in, Nana’s opened the gates.’

Stephen drove in and parked on the gravel in front of a traditional old Queenslander house; set high on stumps, encircled by a wide verandah decorated with simple wooden fretwork. Painted forest green, it was another unobtrusive object in a living tapestry that included every possible texture and shade of green and brown imaginable.

Chloe came striding out, barked a laugh of pleasure and wrapped her arms round Zeno as if she hadn’t seen him for years.

‘Nana, this is Stephen who believed me, and this is Cador my boyfriend.’

Chloe’s eyes lit up. She grinned, shook hands enthusiastically, said how pleased she was to meet them and ushered everyone inside to relax and freshen up after the drive. An hour later Jarek arrived to a similar welcome.

After a fine dinner and a question and answer session on the verandah, bed beckoned even the apparently inexhaustible youths. Zeno and Cador were delighted to find they’d been put in a room with a double bed. Stephen and Jarek each had pleasant rooms, and silence reigned until sunrise when roosters crowed, kookaburras cackled, noisy minors screeched, a flock of rainbow lorikeets fought for nectar in grevilleas and Chloe set about preparing breakfast.

The day was a dream. Stephen and Chloe hit it off immediately and spent the day discussing, questioning, and relating their histories. Chloe’s laugh when she heard about Stephen’s last couple of months planning and ultimately escaping his wife could be heard from the back boundary where Jarek had wandered to think, and ask himself if he had done the right thing. He felt a little lost and superfluous. The feeling worsened as the day progressed. After lunch the other four relaxed by the pool; Zeno and Cador swimming and laughing, Stephen and Chloe indulging their apparently inexhaustible urge to converse.

Jarek wandered into the forest, guilt adding to his feeling of superfluity. He should be spending Christmas with his family—not that he ever enjoyed it. There were always arguments, recriminations for perceived neglect or insults during the previous year; and this time would have been worse because he’d have to tell them he was gay. He sighed and accepted it was better to be staying with people who liked and accepted him—even if they didn’t need him, than with people who thought they had the right to control him simply because they were related. He’d outgrown his family the day he first went to the state Forest on his own, he now realised. It was a pity it had taken him ten years to accept this, but better late than never—he had to break free and get on with his life.

When Zeno took Cador to see the boundary with Sebastian’s property, Chloe offered Stephen a massage to relax him after the long drive and the stresses of the previous weeks.

‘You’ve an excellent body for an oldie,’ she laughed. ‘Good tight bum, not even an incipient pot, and strong legs.’

‘That’s thanks to Zeno and Jarek. When I saw them naked the first day we prepared for the camp, I realised I was letting myself go a bit, and when I became a de-facto parent to Cador I thought I’d better set an example. So for the last six weeks I’ve been eating and exercising properly. You’re not too bad yourself for a senior lady. No excess fat, and small tits. I like that.’

‘Ha! When I was young I wanted huge breasts, but now when I see great sagging, wrinkled dugs on old women I’m glad I never had anything larger than lemons. Mmm, this is looking interesting.’ Chloe had been massaging Stephen’s feet and was working up to his thighs. His erection was firm

and larger than she'd expected. 'I think you'd better get rid of this before I go any further with the massage.'

'How do we manage that?'

'Like this.' Chloe lay on her back beside Stephen, pulled him on top between her legs, raised them, and without a second's hesitation he slid into her as if he'd been doing it all his life.

'Ah...she sighed. Long, slow strokes—exactly as I love it. How did you know?'

'It's what I like.'

Cador and Zeno returned and slid noiselessly into the pool, watching in amused astonishment.

'You never think of old people having sex,' Cador whispered. 'He's not too bad. Can't imagine my parents doing it, and if they did it'd look revolting. Dad's gross.'

Zeno was delighted. It was the first time Cador had spoken about his parents. Perhaps he felt able to because he was now safely away from them.

'Let's get a closer look.' They swam across the pool underwater, surfacing silently only a couple of metres from the self-absorbed pair, watching in awe as the elderly couple pleased each other, murmuring softly, the occasional soft moan of gratification escaping into the air.

'They look great,' Cador whispered. 'Who'd have thought two old people could do that and still look sexy.'

'Shit, Stephen's got a long cock!' Zeno whispered in astonishment. 'You wonder how Nana can fit it all in.'

'She's loving it.'

'They both are. Look, they're coming.'

A soft wail escaped Chloe's lips and Stephen's growl was audible as he arched his back and clenched his buttocks for several long seconds before subsiding, kissing Chloe, carefully withdrawing, then rolling onto his back.

'That was the best fuck I've had in living memory.'

'Me too,' Chloe laughed. 'We must do it more often.' They lay back and chatted softly.

Zeno and Cador submerged again and emerged rather noisily on the far side, hoping to look as if they'd just arrived. Cador was looking worried.

'What's the matter?' Zeno asked.

'If Stephen falls for Chloe he won't be interested in me any more. He'll want me to go back to my parents.'

'Rubbish. He dotes on you. If he and Nana decide to shack up together that means he might stay here permanently and you and I can be together. The house is big enough, Stephen's got no plans and enough money to pay his share, so we'll both go to the same school together. Better hope they do get it on together.'

They were talking louder than they realised and when they looked up Stephen and Chloe were looking at them speculatively.

'Been there long you two?'

'A few minutes, Nana.'

'So you've just had a lesson in how to do it.' She turned her gaze on Cador whose face reflected his embarrassment. 'What're your plans, Cador?'

'None, Chloe. I just...that's to say...Stephen...I mean...'

Helplessly he turned his looked at Zeno.

'Cador, how would you like to stay here a little longer than we planned?'

Cador's eyes widened in hope. 'I'd love it, Mr. Noble...Sir...Stephen! This is the best place I've been in my life, but I don't want to get in your way...if you've changed your plans and...'

'Cador! As far as I'm concerned you're my son. You come first. Chloe's invited us—that's you and me—to stay longer; would you like that?'

'More than anything.'

'Then that's settled.'

'Are you sure you're not missing your parents, Cador?' Chloe asked seriously? 'You've had time to think about things. Are you sure you wouldn't like to give them another chance?'

‘No! Please don’t send me back! Jarek, Zeno and Stephen have shown me what it’s like to live without the fear of an angry god. You’ve already shown me that women are different but just as good as men. I was taught that the body’s a bag of sin never to be enjoyed, but here we’re all naked and I’ve just seen you two having sex and it was beautiful, even though you’re old.’

‘Not too old to enjoy ourselves.’

‘No, no, I didn’t mean that, I think you’re both wonderful! You can’t imagine how great it is not to feel wicked when I kiss Zeno. I don’t even feel sinful being naked now. The first time in my life I didn’t feel frightened was the day Stephen said I didn’t have to go home. And the first time I ever felt happy was the day Zeno kissed me. I never, ever want to go back to feeling I’ve disappointed my parents and their stupid, angry, vicious god. I never, ever want to see them again!’ It was a good speech and wasn’t spoiled when he burst into tears and clung to Zeno for support.

‘Cador, you are precious to me and I will do all I can to help you remain a free spirit for as long as you want.’

Cador swam straight across the pool, hauled himself out and wrapped himself round Stephen in a hug of desperate gratitude.

That evening Sebastian came to dinner. Bronzed. Handsome. Lean. Sexy in butt-hugging faded jeans, scuffed rope-soled boat shoes, no socks, denim sleeveless jacket hanging open to expose a tight, leanly muscled chest. He shook everyone’s hand, Jarek’s last, looking into his eyes and maintaining a firm grip for several seconds as if he’d forgotten where he was, then with a slight shake of his head he came back to life and charmed his hosts for the rest of the evening by listening to their stories as if nothing else on the planet was more interesting, while shrugging off attempts to talk about himself with a self-deprecating smile.

Everyone was invited to lunch the following day at his place.

Violet and Irma had arrived on the coast, found a motel, and were meeting Amanda of Women’s War International that night.

‘She knows how old I am,’ grumbled Violet. ‘Why does she want to meet at eleven o’clock?’

‘She’s young. Take a rest, Violet. A nap for three hours will make you perky again. Relax, I’ll wake you.’

But Violet couldn’t relax, couldn’t sleep, and was not enjoying herself when they arrived at the meeting place. The bar was busy. A pleasant, friendly place filled with women of all ages, shapes and sizes.

‘Could be a meeting of Young Farmers’ Wives,’ Violet said with a slight sneer. ‘Not the sort of place I’d imagined a revolutionary would choose for a meeting.’

Two pleasant young women approached. ‘Hi, Welcome. Tourists or new residents?’

Irma smiled frostily. ‘We’re here to meet an acquaintance.’

‘Everyone’s welcome,’ the younger of the two said quietly, somewhat taken aback by Irma’s tone. ‘Perhaps I know her?’

‘Amanda.’ Irma said with a sniff as if expecting the girls to open their eyes wide in admiration. Instead their faces closed down abruptly. ‘You don’t look that sort,’ the older one said, shaking her head as they walked away.

‘What on earth did she mean by that?’

‘Heaven knows. They’re lesbians!’ Irma snorted in contempt.

‘Surely not?’ Violet was shocked. ‘They were pleasant!’

Before Irma could respond, a tall, lean woman in her early thirties stomped over; topless in brief black-leather shorts, breasts decorated with silver rings through thick nipples, hair cropped and dyed crimson, feet in heavy boots. She stuck out her hand and growled, ‘Amanda.’

They shook it, unable to find words.

‘Beer?’ Without waiting for a reply the Amazon marched to the crowded bar at which a space magically appeared, ordered three beers, extracted some notes from a pocket, paid and brought her

booty to her guests who sipped in trepidation while their hostess guzzled it down, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and announced to half the room, 'Can't speak here with all these fucking Lizzies making such a ruckus, come on!'

'Leaving their untouched beers they followed the half naked woman out to the street where a dusty Land cruiser was parked with its front wheels on the pavement. They piled in and with a snarl of smoky exhaust took off towards the beach where they sat on a bench lashed by salty wind.

Amanda listened to their tale, nodded enthusiastically and seemed genuinely excited at the prospect of bringing a couple of male chauvinist pigs to a sticky end. It was decided that Amanda would pick them up from their motel the next day and take them back to her place where they could discuss plans.

'Don't put anything in writing,' she warned. 'Nothing should ever be written or put on computers or mobile phones. The only safe place for information is in your head.'

Violet and Irma nodded and smiled. Retribution was beginning.

Chapter 26. Sebastian

Sebastian lived on a vast and virtually unmapped property previously owned by his dead mother's boss. The land varied from sloping rough grassland dotted with ancient eucalypts, to low hills and increasingly dense rainforest that became steep forested slopes down which tumbled several streams and waterfalls creating excellent pools. As a sixteen year-old he'd worked for the previous owner taking young men for hikes in the forest, having no idea of their ultimate dreadful fate.

To delete all memories of the man he hated, he'd had the large ugly house and pool bulldozed and the land it had been on planted with a melaleuca forest. He and Reginald then designed and built their ideal home near an all-seasons creek they diverted to run through what looked like a perfect forest pool—although it was entirely artificial. They did all the work themselves on house, garden and pool, and the result was both exotic and cosy.

The house was a twelve-sided polygon constructed inside an imaginary twelve metre diameter circle. Wooden poles sunk in the ground supported a hardwood floor a metre above the soil, so snakes and other wildlife could pass beneath without mistakenly entering the house. The twelve walls were crowned by a twelve-sided tiled pyramid that extended beyond the walls to cover a three metre wide verandah that encircled the entire house. A spacious but surprisingly cosy environment. A lantern over the opening at the apex of the roof allowed light in and hot air to escape.

Inside, the large open space was cleverly furnished and divided so that each space was not visible until you were almost in it. Sitting in the lounge area one was not conscious of the study in the next space. On leaving the study, the large bedroom appeared unexpectedly, as did the bathroom, laundry and other services, followed by the kitchen. Then it was a surprise to take a few more steps and discover you'd arrived back in the lounge room.

Windows were small, keeping the interior pleasantly dim and cool and allowing plenty of wall space for paintings. As usual in the tropics, the wide verandah had become the most used area where Reginald and Sebastian would sit in the evenings and continue the conversation that seemed to have been going on seamlessly since they first fell in love at high school.

Chloe and her guests arrived early. Sebastian wasn't in the house so they strolled around to the vegetable patch. Wrought iron gates gave entry through a two metre high stone wall that enclosed the entire garden. Inside they spied their host picking herbs for lunch. Jarek was rapt to be in a walled garden replete with fruit trees, bushes, herb gardens, neat paths and a bountiful vegetable patch! It was the secret garden he'd dreamed of since reading Edith Nesbit stories as a child. Being able to grow all one's fruit and vegetables without worrying about possums, bandicoots, hares and other wildlife appealed strongly, and within minutes he and Sebastian were deep in conversation.

The other four left the two men to talk, returning to the part of the verandah that faced the pool. Jettisoning clothes they cooled off in the water. About twenty minutes later, after giving Jarek a

quick tour of the house that left him unable to find sufficient words of praise, Sebastian served a vegetarian lunch on the verandah. Over coffee he asked Jarek about his plans.

‘No idea. Just about anything except teaching in a normal co-educational high school. That particular hell I never want to revisit.’

‘He’s too modest,’ Stephen laughed. ‘He’s a great teacher, the kids love him, and he’s just given sixty teenagers the greatest experience of their lives at a series of bush camps. Quite the best teaching I’ve seen in all my years.’

Jarek blushed and mumbled that he wasn’t that good.

‘He is that good, Seb,’ Zeno said with feeling. ‘Believe me.’

Sebastian, not wanting to frighten Jarek off by seeming too inquisitive, turned his gaze on Zeno. ‘Apparently your teachers were right, young man. I infected you, then you infected Jarek, and not satisfied with that you’ve gone and infected Cadour as well. It’s like being a vampire! I should have been put down at birth.’

Zeno nearly fell off his chair laughing before explaining to the others. ‘The teachers at the school I went to when we lived here told us that homosexuality was a disease and if we mixed with queers we’d turn into one. Seems they were right.’

It was a joke, but a sad one, so Stephen added to the mood by recounting Zeno’s rape by the teacher and her unhappy end. Neither Jarek nor Zeno mentioned their little act of retribution. Then Cadour’s presence was explained. Sebastian congratulated him on his maturity and mentioned he’d had a similar experience with his mother, whom he’d disowned without regret. Fortunately, his father was the complete opposite and now Principal of an alternative school nearby. He looked at Jarek. ‘Could be just the place for you.’ Before Jarek could respond he leaped to his feet and announced they were going for a walk.

‘Do we need clothes?’

‘Not on my property.’

Sebastian led the way diagonally up hill towards a stand of trees that became a dense forest. After nearly a kilometre the vegetation ended abruptly at a strong, seven-wire boundary fence. On the other side was a steep, barren slope that bottomed out onto sun-dried, mown grass flats, crossed by a stream flowing out of Sebastian’s forest. The difference between the two properties was surreal. Instead of lush vegetation the creek now ran through an alien, desiccated world dotted with a few dead trees. A low house was visible on the far side of the property, and a row of sterile palms lined its driveway. After the rainforest the contrast was shocking. A brown line of herbicided grass and weeds followed the boundary and continued on each side of the stream, transforming it into an eroded drain flanked by cancerous brown dust.

Standing in the shade of their trees, Sebastian and his guests gazed down in sadness as the neighbour drove his ride-on mower up and down.

‘He mows every day. Retired a couple of years ago. Used to be a primary school teacher. I dread to think what influence he must have had on the kids because he seems to hate nature. No wonder so many people misunderstand the ‘Greens’ if teachers are like him! Seems to have nothing to do now except sit on that bloody thing and mow whether it needs it or not. No one ever walks or plays on the land and no animals graze—except for a few brave kangaroos and crows that he chases away.’

They watched in fascinated horror.

‘There are large lizards around my forest pools that climb trees then leap into the water and seem to walk across it, you’ve seen them, haven’t you Zeno?’

‘Yeah, they’re real dags.’

‘I was checking this boundary the other day and saw one sunbathing over there on the bank of the stream. He also saw it and deliberately diverted his mower to drive over it. Horrible death.’

‘I feel sick,’ Zeno whispered. ‘The fucking fat bastard!’

‘I can’t bear it!’ Cadour said softly. ‘Where can insects live? Where can spiders hang their webs? Where are the seed heads or nectar for birds? I don’t want to even think about it!’

‘And I can’t bear to look. Let’s go.’ Chloe was about to lead them away when the mower turned towards the stream and began driving across a narrow plank bridge so he could mow the side nearest the watchers. Halfway across he must have sensed he was being watched and looked up. A loud crunch resounded as the mower slipped to one side and slowly tumbled into the stream two metres below—upside down, the blades still whirring like the wings of a giant insect. Shouts for help were audible above the noise of the motor.

‘He’s trapped,’ Chloe said casually.

‘Yes, but his head’s obviously out of the water, so he won’t drown.’

An arm appeared round the side of the blade cover, seeking something to grab hold of so he could haul himself out. The crunch as the blades smashed into the arm was audible. Blood spurted and the hand—partially severed, flopped wildly on the end of the waving arm. His cries had attracted no attention so they continued walking back to Sebastian’s house.

Soft-spoken Cador surprised everyone with the unsentimental observation that it was probably less than he deserved having caused the death of so many millions of other living things. Everyone nodded and the incident wasn’t mentioned again.

Amanda’s house was all but concealed behind a tall, unkempt hedge that brushed the sides of the car as she negotiated the narrow entrance to the driveway. A lawn in need of mowing and a few diseased mango trees surrounded the old high-set house. The space underneath had been enclosed with unpainted concrete blocks and served as a garage and rumpus room. She parked, closed the garage doors, then led the way up an internal staircase to the house. The lounge was clean, somewhat bleak, and painted white. Three large ‘art’ photographs of their hostess in varying states of undress adorned the otherwise bare walls. Elaborate woven Indian rugs and colourful cushions on sleek modern furniture lent an unexpected cosiness.

The three women drank coffee while Amanda scoffed at each of their suggestions.

‘Shooting, garrotting, tampering with the car...the police aren’t idiots. It can’t look like a murder; it has to look like an accident. Round here, the best accident would be drowning; next best is falling off a cliff in the hinterland while bush walking.’

Her guests nodded dutifully and recalled with pleasure the memory of Bindi’s struggle as she slowly drowned, a fitting punishment for insulting them with her fake liberation. In an attempt to impress Amanda, they told her about Bindi and her well-deserved exit.

‘Did Bindi invite the men?’

‘Yes.’

‘And then she took charge?’

‘No! She was less than a doormat, just something for bored guys to stick their...things into. Immediately after satisfying their lusts they took off, leaving her unsatisfied, and their used condoms on the carpet.’

Amanda shrugged, nodded and said, ‘Serves her right then. Unfortunately, drowning’s difficult to make seem like an accident. No one swims in the sea because of stingrays, sharks and crocodiles, and there are always too many people at City pools. I haven’t even got a bath, so as there’s no way we could arrange an accidental drowning. I reckon we should kidnap Violet’s husband, then use his phone to text that kid who raped his teacher, telling him he’d gone up to the lookout but was feeling ill, so would the kid come and get him. As soon as the kid arrives, we have fun cutting them both up slowly, then dispose of the bits by feeding them to the sharks, or tossing them over the fence into the crocodile enclosure of the wildlife park!’

Irma and Violet remained silent, then laughed nervously. It was a joke, surely. Amanda’s expression was inscrutable. Her plan was simple enough to seem plausible, so shaking off the disagreeable joke, they decided to leave immediately and stake out the place where Stephen and Zeno were staying, note their movements, and be ready to grab the first chance that presented.

As Sebastian and his guests wandered thoughtfully back to the house, he lagged behind and signalled Jarek to join him. Against all his expectations he'd been attracted to the teacher from the first meeting, and what he'd learned today had only increased his interest. In the months since Reginald's death he had faced the truth that life has neither purpose nor aim when one is alone and unloved. He'd drifted aimlessly, unable to stop thinking about big, beautiful, tough, fighting-fit Reginald. His death had left a hole too large for anyone to fill. In despair and feeling somehow to blame by not being able to protect his partner, he'd returned to what Chloe called exotic dancing. It kept him busy and stopped him thinking. He was among people, his mind forgot its misery and he wasn't expected to mix socially afterwards.

Chloe had become his sole confidante, but even she had no idea how close he was to ending it all. His decision to invite her guests to lunch had surprised and delighted her, prompting hope that her dearest friend was on the mend. It was she who'd offered to be his agent, it being the only way she could see to keep him from shutting himself off from the world. The flicker of interest when he was introduced to Jarek had not escaped her notice, and she was determined that nothing would get in the way of a possible romance, which was why she hustled everyone else back to the house, leaving the two men alone.

Sebastian warned himself not to get too hopeful. Jarek was everything he admired in a man. They were the same age, fit, loved nature, educated yet not precious about it. Perhaps...but no, why would anyone as successful as Jarek, the darling of his pupils as well as Zeno and Stephen, be interested in a twenty-six year old recluse? Realising he was talking himself out of doing something sensible he shut off all thought, stopped, grabbed Jarek's arm and asked abruptly, 'Can you fight?'

'If I have to, but not for pleasure.'

'What would you do if you were attacked on the street by a gang of toughs?'

'Run for my life.' There was no hesitation.

'If Zeno was being attacked?'

'Kill her!'

Sebastian paused, clearly surprised by Jarek's vehemence and choice of a female attacker. 'Have you killed someone?' he asked quietly.

It was Jarek's turn to hesitate. Did he trust Sebastian not to be shocked and tell the cops? He looked across at his host, searched his face and decided to risk it. 'Yes,' he stated bluntly.

'Wanna talk about it?'

'Wanna listen?'

'Yes.'

Until that moment Jarek thought stabbing the young woman had left him emotionally untouched, but as he described the incident he discovered it was a great relief to talk about it.

Sebastian thought for a few seconds, nodded and grinned. 'You did the only thing possible. Zeno and Cadour have no idea they narrowly missed being shot?'

'No. The fewer people who know the safer I'll feel. You're the only person who knows.'

'Sorry you told me?'

'No, relieved to share the secret. I don't feel bad about doing it, but it seems I needed confirmation that I was right.'

'You were absolutely correct, so will you stay with me tonight?'

'Yes.'

'Do you want to know why?'

'No. I'm too happy to be invited. I've been wondering what I could do to get to know you better, so I'm not going to question good fortune.' He grinned and Sebastian's heart felt it would break from an odd mixture of sadness and hope.

They caught up with the others by the pool where everyone relaxed and downed more fruit juice, then the Chloe, Stephen, Zeno and Cadour dressed and walked the two kilometres back along the track, leaving Jarek lounging in a deck chair wearing a slightly nervous grin.

Before she left, Chloe smiled and said softly, 'Stop worrying, Jarek. Sebastian likes you. I haven't seen that look on his face since Reginald died. Just be yourself and he'll tell you everything.'

He always does everything in his own time.’ With a light tap on his cheek she followed the others, who turned and waved.

While the Chloe and her guests were visiting Sebastian, her house and grounds were visited by Irma, Amanda and Violet who spent the afternoon testing doors which were strong and well locked, peering through windows that revealed nothing useful, and wandering around the garden, delighted to see there was no security and plenty of places to conceal themselves.

Violet suggested they hide near the pool and wait for a chance to grab either Stephen or Zeno, then immobilise and drown them, making it look like an accident.

‘Of course they won’t shout and attract the others,’ Amanda sneered. ‘You’re obsessed with drowning. Get over it!’

‘Just a thought,’ Violet muttered irritably, hurt by the woman’s tone. ‘We’re not stupid. It’s best to have lots of ideas so if an opportunity arises we can act quickly.’

Violet was becoming an embarrassment to Irma. Back home the principal’s wife had conferred a certain prestige, but here in the city surrounded by people more her own age, Irma saw the real Violet—elderly, unfit, overweight, unattractive and prone to whining self-pity. They were obviously wasting their time. The house was isolated, which had the advantage of no nosy neighbours, but the disadvantage of being on a private road so they had to leave their vehicle far away and creep through the bushes along the sides of the track so as not to be seen approaching.

Irritation turned to panic when they heard voices from the front of the house. Amanda and Irma had no trouble squirming under the broken paling of a fence and creeping through bushes to the roadside a few hundred metres away, but Violet was neither so flexible nor slim, and became wedged between two stout wooden planks. She was forced to withdraw and sit hunched in mulch, barely concealed by thin shrubbery, terrified of being discovered, bitten by ants, crawled over by spiders, afraid to move or breathe.

The voices entered the house, then two naked young men came out holding hands. One must be Zeno, she surmised. Who the other was she had no idea, no one having told her that Stephen had unofficially adopted Cador. Even Violet had to admit they were handsome. They dived in, chased each other through the water then dragged themselves out and lay wrestling on the side of the pool. At least it looked like wrestling until she realised they were kissing. She tried to be shocked, but no suitable emotion arrived. They were beautiful—there was no other word to describe the lithe, golden brown young men locked in an embrace more sexual than anything she had ever experienced in her own life. She wanted to cry.

The urge to weep turned to despair greater than she could ever have imagined possible when Stephen, naked, looking wonderfully fit, lean and handsome, appeared with a woman as slim and healthy as he. They watched the young men, smiled, then they too kissed and the woman fondled Stephen’s penis, causing him to have an erection. He laughed, completely at ease. The youths looked across and joined in the laughter.

‘Stephen, you’re a randy old goat,’ the taller youth called.

‘You’re just jealous you can’t keep up with your elders, Zeno’ Stephen replied before diving cleanly into the pool, followed by the woman.

At that moment Violet wanted to die. She had never touched Stephen’s penis. Never aroused him or fondled his erection. He had asked her to pleasure him in the first months of their marriage, but a severely Catholic upbringing had made that impossible. Sex was dirty. It was a mortal sin to engage in sexual intercourse unless it was for making children. However the thought of children was nauseating to her. The idea of Stephen forcing his flesh into her private and sensitive parts, causing a parasite to grow inside her body, triggered an hysterical reaction that terrified her husband.

On returning from their honeymoon they agreed to have separate bedrooms until she overcame her revulsion. She never did, and only now did she realise what she had missed—what Stephen had missed! That was perhaps the hardest thing to acknowledge. She had always thought of herself as a caring, compassionate woman, administering her god’s will, but the truth was suddenly obvious.

She had been cold, unfeeling and unreceptive to the warmth and love of a wonderful man. And now it was too late. She had lost him forever.

After what seemed an age the laughing couples wandered into the house. Noisy conversation, the clink of plates and cooking smells only added to Violet's misery.

Thirsty, hungry, aching, itching and sick at heart, she wriggled from the shrubbery and massaged her painful varicose veins, then sat in utter wretchedness until it was dark enough to pass in front of the house and regain the roadway. By the time she arrived at the spot they'd left Amanda's vehicle she was too exhausted to even cry on discovering it was gone. Stoically, she set off to plod the five kilometres back to the city. At least it was mostly downhill.

Chapter 27. Developments

Meanwhile, back in the bush the police investigating Bindi's murder had been as resourceful as Violet and discovered the probable destination of their major suspects. However, instead of proudly announcing their discoveries to the press and setting out in pursuit, a chance remark by Constable Green had set them thinking. They'd been discussing the previous night's episode of *Home and Away* in which a woman being propositioned by a deranged surfer, told him he was ugly and she was going to call the cops. Predictably, when she took out her mobile phone and pressed triple zero she was strangled and dumped in the bay.

'How could she be so stupid?' Green had asked. 'If she had kept him quiet by agreeing with him, he'd have let her walk away and *then* she could have called the cops.'

Everyone agreed, and that was when Senior Sergeant Smart decided to pretend they knew nothing. 'Let the killers think they've got away with it,' he suggested, 'then they'll be less worried about covering their tracks.'

Newspaper, Radio and TV News bulletins had therefore to be content with reporting that the suspicious drowning of a young council employee had the police totally baffled with no credible suspect.

The summer holiday season was underway on the coast, bringing with it the usual swag of problems for the City police from backpackers, wealthy foreign tourists and more southerners than usual. A murder in some hick town in the back of beyond was not a priority, especially as a cyclone and severe flooding were predicted within the next fortnight. As they were short staffed, an officer should be sent with all the information, and office space and equipment would be provided as necessary.

A coin was flipped and Constable Green was sent, arriving in the City the same afternoon as a triple murder behind the Aquatic Centre, and a media furore over the shooting deaths of two innocent teenagers by a nervous police officer. Green was allocated the corner of a larger office and granted access to their database, then left to pore over maps and plan where to go and what to do the following day.

That evening, rather than mope alone in the motel, Constable Green swapped his uniform for jeans and an expensive T-shirt his wife had bought as a going away present, then strutted along the Esplanade. A full moon lit up the ocean. It was hot, windless and sticky. Streets throbbled with music, youth, alcohol and other drugs. Like all men who escape the shackles of marriage, no matter how briefly, inhibitions slipped away and he returned to the carefree state of premarital youth, unable to remember the last time he'd walked alone along streets where no one knew him. Anonymity excited and offered thrilling possibilities to a twenty-nine year old single man. Boldly, he checked out the talent.

Being a normal country boy, the constable was overweight, flabby, unfit, and deluded by the certainty that simply because he was a white male he was irresistible, which is why he felt no surprise when an extraordinarily attractive young woman with a charming accent responded to his banal chat-up line and suggested they go to a nearby nightclub. It was crowded, dark and smoky.

The music was loud, the drinks expensive, and he danced like a toad. That didn't prevent his sexy new girlfriend from inviting him back to her luxurious nearby apartment for some fun.

Ten minutes after entering he was back on the street in nothing but his jeans, nursing a bruised jaw, sore shoulders and a black eye, having been stripped of his wallet, money belt, expensive T-shirt and shoes. By the time he'd found a police officer to assist him, his assailants had disappeared. The following morning, unable to produce any identification, and under suspicion of being an accomplice to the burglary of the luxurious apartment he'd been taken to, he was returned to the bush.

The same evening, sprawled on the lawn in the moonlight, Jarek and Sebastian gazed at the moon and stars, content just to be with each other.

'There's no TV in your house.'

'No.'

'Mobile phone?'

'Nope. Only landline. You?'

'No. I borrowed a simple mobile for the camps, but normally there's no one I want to phone and I'd hate to be available twenty-four seven.'

'I've a computer, satellite dish and internet.'

'I noticed. So you're aware of all the news.'

'Not usually. You?'

'Too depressing. Porn?'

'Occasionally—but very soft.'

Jarek grinned. 'Me too.'

'You said Zeno's the only man you've been sexual with?'

'I did.'

'Did you fuck?'

'No. We were both too shy and nervous. We only touched, kissed, stroked and jerked off. That was adventurous enough for both of us I think. At least Zeno said he wasn't interested in anything else. It probably sounds banal to you, but it was heaven after...' Jarek paused, wondering how much he should reveal of his unadventurous past.

'After?'

'After Bindi. At first we were only flatmates—sharing rent, but when her boyfriend dumped her she started making subtle insinuations about my manhood. I was very confused, not to say concerned, about my sexual identity—masturbator not being the alternative descriptor to either heterosexual or homosexual, although I can't see why it isn't. Anyway, to quell the rumours I screwed her, and ended up being screwed.'

'Did you like it?'

'Not after the first time. Once curiosity was satisfied it was a bore. She didn't care about me. All she wanted was long slow fucking so she could scream and moan in constant orgasms that I reckon were often as faked as mine.'

'How many women have you had?'

'She's the only one.'

Condoms?'

'Always.'

'So you're healthy?'

'Very. I had a check before the camps to make certain I wasn't harbouring any nasties I might accidentally pass on to the kids. How about you? I suppose you've screwed hundreds?'

'No women, so you're ahead of me there. About twenty males. Started when I was fourteen. It was my mother's idea. Don't ask,' he grunted to forestall Jarek's interruption, 'I'll tell you everything one day. Then it all stopped suddenly when I realised I loved my school friend. I've been tested for every known disease and declared impossibly healthy. Reginald, the cleanest and

healthiest young man on the planet, is the only person I've had intimate sexual contact with since I was sixteen. So we are both pure and clean.' His smile was tinged with nervous sadness.

'How do you fill in your time?'

'I went to an expensive and exclusive private school for boys. Rex, my father, was a teacher there. When the economy crashed, so many parents withdrew their sons that the place was no longer viable and was put up for sale. The government didn't want it, and neither did any religion as they all had more schools than they could justify already. My stepmother is a financial wonder and in eight years had increased my already large accidental inheritance tenfold, so Rex suggested I buy the school, set up a foundation to finance it, appoint him principal, and then we could choose the students that suited our curriculum.'

'Which is?'

'In some ways similar to what you were doing with the boys over the last six weeks, that's why I've been wondering if you'd like to teach again. We need a good outdoor education specialist, and you could use this place for camps. It's huge and wild and dangerous. You've had some experience in the wild, haven't you?'

Jarek told Sebastian about his weekends in the National Park.

'Then you're ideal for the job! Please say you'll consider it?'

'Jarek laughed. 'You're not supposed to sound desperate. It's an attractive offer, but I don't fancy teaching kids in uniforms with me in a track suit.'

Oh! There are no uniforms, everyone wears whatever they want—teachers too. The school grounds are totally private. The whole place is surrounded by hedges concealing two-metre-high cyclone netting fences. Most kids swim starkers. They'd be pleased if a teacher joined them. You can wear as much or as little as you want for all sports, and in the classroom too if you want.'

Jarek smiled his disbelief. 'How many kids?'

'Several seniors left at the end of the year. Next term there'll be about thirty, I think.'

'What levels?'

'We don't bother with levels; they make kids think learning is a series of packages instead of a seamless, continuous process. Every student works at his own pace—that's simple with computers. In every subject area there's a full range of levels from beginner to HSC. Rex has arranged for university and other specialists to be available via video link for any advanced students who need extra tuition or explanation. The tutors get a good hourly rate so there's competition for the work.'

'What's the pass rate in external exams?'

'Believe it or not, a hundred percent. Mind you, we only accept super intelligent students who are motivated to succeed scholastically as well as physically, because if they don't put in maximum effort they return to the state school system—and after being at our school that would seem like hell.'

'So you don't have a top student. No Dux and all that malarkey.'

'Exactly.'

'How about sports, are they competitive?'

'Not in the usual sense. Starting a 'ladder' or keeping the scores of other kids is forbidden. Each pupil competes against himself by trying to improve against previous performances. Only ad hoc team games are played, and the scores are not recorded. Organised team games mean competition for places, and then you have to compete against another team and it becomes a source of pointless warlike conflict. We have athletics and tennis, archery and self-defence—all those individual sports, but the results aren't recorded. The purpose of sport in our opinion, is the pleasure of learning skills and the enjoyment of honing the body into an instrument as fine as the brain. Sport, like purely intellectual pursuits, should not be a tool for asserting dominance or superiority.'

'Are the kids all local?'

'Only a few. We draw from the whole country. That's why it's residential.'

Jarek sighed. 'Sounds like heaven. What about afterwards? Can they find jobs?'

'They all go on to tertiary education, and the ones who've completed their degrees have all been snatched up.'

‘I’d love to teach in a place like that, but will your father want me?’

‘When he knows I’m in love with you and will pull the financial plug on the place if he doesn’t, he’ll come into line. No, seriously, he’s as keen to have someone like you as I am. He’ll love you, and so will Fee, my stepmother.’ Sebastian paused and scrutinised Jarek’s face. ‘What is it? What have I said? You look unsure?’

‘You said you’re in love with me.’

‘Yes! I am! I believe in love at first sight, don’t you?’

‘Not until yesterday when you shook my hand and held it for a second longer than normal. Now I can’t imagine why I was so happy being alone every weekend in the forest.’

‘It amazes me that you did that for two years.’

‘Me too.’

‘No tools? Not even a knife?’

Jarek frowned, embarrassed, which was odd as he hadn’t been shy to show Leon where he kept his knife, nor to produce it. Then he realised why. He hadn’t been in love with Leon and didn’t mind if the kid was shocked. Sebastian, though, was too precious to lose. What if he thought it dirty, kinky or obscene? Fortunately for his future, an important truth about love and relationships dawned on him. Both partners must feel free to be themselves, otherwise it won’t work. If he was always going to worry about offending Sebastian then he’d be better off alone. With a shy grin and a sigh he described his defence of bullied kids at school with a weapon he’d secreted up his backside.

Sebastian laughed in delight. ‘That I’d love to see!’

‘Then watch carefully.’ Jarek squatted, reached round, and within seconds a vicious-looking dagger was pressed against his lover’s ribs.

Sebastian didn’t move a muscle. ‘I’m impressed,’ he said, obviously meaning it. ‘Have you been wearing it all day?’

‘I never go to new places without it.’

‘Is this the one you used to...?’

‘The same.’

‘Doesn’t it get uncomfortable?’

‘For the first few days it did, but now I forget it’s there. At first if I lifted anything heavy or farted I risked losing it, but you soon learn to control that. It’s a bit like wearing contact lenses I suppose.’

‘It looks clean and doesn’t stink. Why not?’

‘I polish the silver regularly and coat it with hand cream before inserting. That seems to prevent anything except diarrhoea from sticking.’

Sebastian admired the workmanship. ‘The handle looks a bit thin, but apart from that I can’t fault it.’

‘Believe me it seemed quite large enough when I first shoved it up!’

Sebastian sat back on his heels in admiration.

‘It’s wonderful,’ he said with a slow smile. ‘I wonder if you’d be averse to me putting my dagger in there from time to time? It’s a trifle larger, but I’m sure it wouldn’t cause you the slightest discomfort. It might even give a little pleasure, and would certainly give me a lot.’

Jarek pretended to think about it. ‘Would I have to remove my dagger first?’

‘It would seem prudent.’

‘I guess you’re right. Then maybe I can return the compliment?’

‘I’m counting on it. Meanwhile let’s go somewhere more comfortable where there’s no danger of being attacked by ants. Which raises the questions, where did you sleep in the forest, wasn’t it cold, and how did you cope with ants and other vermin?’

If it was cold I used sheltered places with more or less flat stone floors on which I’d build a fire to cook my meal, then make a low wall of ash to enclose me. Lying on the warmed stone after a full day looking for food, hiking, climbing, living, meant that sleep came quickly. Creepy crawlies seldom breached the ash barrier.’

‘Fires? In a National Park?’

‘The resident Ranger and his wife are good friends, I always told them what direction I was heading. They trusted me.’

‘You’re a wonder. Are you sure you wouldn’t sooner hive off into the forest to sleep tonight?’

Jarek’s laugh was tinged with the sadness of self-awareness. ‘I’m beginning to realise I only did it because I was dissatisfied with my life. There were so many things missing—happiness, contentment, peace of mind, self respect—not to mention love. I blamed myself for my melancholy and imagined the cure lay in becoming a fully natural creature. Yes, I know, a ridiculous notion. Perhaps I have a masochistic streak and was punishing myself for not being like everyone else.’ He stopped and looked at Sebastian for a few seconds as if wondering whether to continue. Then with a diffident smile he admitted that now, after meeting Sebastian, the thought of a cold night in the bush didn’t appeal at all. ‘Sharing a clean bed with a sexy man who says he loves me is exactly what I was looking for,’ he admitted shyly.

A feeling of lightness—of floating—enveloped Sebastian. Jarek’s innocence, straightforward honesty and unpretentiousness had magically lifted his self-imposed burden of guilt and sorrow. With a sudden short laugh of delight he led the way to the bedroom.

Irma and Amanda had reached the road before realising Violet wasn’t with them. A sense of duty forced Irma back to see what had happened. The sound of young men laughing and splashing in the pool prevented her from going too close.

‘The silly cow’s stuck,’ she informed Amanda. ‘She’s hidden behind the hedge, but she’ll have to wait till dark to leave by the front.’

‘Then let’s go home. We can come back later to pick her up.’

Relieved at not having to slow down to accommodate Violet, they jogged back to the car. Later, settled in Amanda’s lounge with a glass of vodka they giggled like schoolgirls.

‘Poor old Violet.’

‘Yeah. She’s too old for this game. What about you, Irma, do you get much sex?’

Irma couldn’t conceal her nervousness. She’d been half expecting this and had her response ready. ‘You mean with women? No, I’m not interested in that.’

‘Neither am I! I mean with men.’

‘Oh! I thought you were a lesbian? You met us at that bar and...’

‘No way! Other women’s bodies leave me cold. I can’t stand those prissy, eager beaver lizzies. They’re too bloody serious; demanding marriage rights, having babies and living in domesticated bliss. I only go there to frighten them. They hate it if straights see me because they’re trying to prove they’re normal; just like everyone else. Silly dykes. Can’t they see no one’s normal? Everyone’s fucked up.’

‘Yes...but lesbians keep demanding equality with men, that’s good, isn’t it?’

‘Fuck no! I don’t want equality, I want superiority! Men have had the upper hand too long. It’s our time now! I want to shove men’s masculinity up their bums, let them see they’re no use except as a source of cash and pleasure for women.’

‘So that’s the reason for your campaigns! You’re emasculating them.’

‘You’re not stupid, Irma. And when they feel guilty enough, guess what? They come crawling to be punished. If you haven’t enjoyed that, you haven’t lived.’

‘So it’s OK to have sex with men?’

‘Only if you’re the dominant partner and they’re your slaves. Want to try it?’

‘How?’

‘There’s a club in the city, *Momma Dommina*. It’s for women like us and pathetic guys begging to be thrashed. It’s too early to go yet, but if you’re up to it I’ll give a couple of guys a call. It’ll keep us occupied till it’s time to go and get Violet.’

Irma was terrified; still a virgin at twenty-six because she’d refused to allow herself to be dominated by any man. However Amanda’s challenge was clear and she wanted to prove her worth,

so she nodded with what she hoped looked like enthusiasm. The two men lived several kilometres away across town, so the women had plenty of time to prepare before they arrived. Irma nervously put on a pair of Amanda's crotchless leather shorts, a boob-exposing harness, leather cap and high heels, and listened carefully to her hostess's instructions in the art of male abasement. Then she practised with a whip while Amanda prepared fake handcuffs, a couple of dildos, a mask and other bits and pieces that might prove amusing. For herself, she wore nothing but the mask, heavy boots and nipple rings. Irma was almost paralysed with apprehension by the time the men arrived.

They were in their thirties. One had a paunch, the other needed a good feed. Neither were fit or looked very healthy. Both were pale and the skinny one smelled unwashed. However, with the curtains drawn and a single red bulb in the standard lamp they looked tolerable and were clearly delighted to have two attractive and athletic younger women to punish them.

Cowering under physical and verbal abuse, they knelt and begged forgiveness, cringing in delight at blows rained on heads and bodies as they stripped and crawled round the room whimpering like dogs as whips stung their sensitive bits. Squirring between their tormenters' thighs, the slaves' tongues worked overtime until their mistresses tossed them condoms and kicked them onto their backs. Astride and squealing in ecstasy, the two women impaled themselves and rode their victims to orgasm.

The excitement and novelty of her first fuck made Irma forget the time. It was so much better than even her largest electric vibrating dildo that she also forgot to collect Violet. Amanda had never intended to remember.

Violet, exhausted beyond anything she could ever have imagined, had literally staggered the last hundred metres to Amanda's house, let herself in during the final noisy episode, and sank, all reserves depleted, to the floor in a corner, too horrified to look, too curious to look away.

Lusts satiated, Irma and Amanda climbed off the men and told them to fuck off. They laughed, collected their clothes, said to call them any time, dressed and left, unaware of Violet huddled in the corner.

As the door closed, Violet let out a long wail of pent up misery, horror and despair. Amanda and Irma froze in shock. Amanda turned on the overhead light, saw Violet keening and tearing at her hair, and slapped her viciously across the cheek. She stopped and began to sob. Irma sat beside her and apologised for not coming to pick her up, but Violet wasn't listening. Amanda brought a tumbler full of what looked like water and told Violet to drink it. Her thirst being so acute, Violet downed the vodka in one go, then leaped to her feet as if her throat and chest were aflame. Eyes popped. She grasped her throat. Whispered, 'You've poisoned me,' and collapsed.

Amanda dragged on a pair of jeans, shoved a bottle of vodka into her pocket and drove them back to their motel where she guzzled while Irma put a partially comatose Violet to bed.

Appetites aroused by the recent experience, Irma was impatient to go to the club, but Amanda, who was a little short of cash, had lost interest

'Come on, Amanda,' Irma pleaded. 'It's far too early to go to sleep. Anyway, I'll never sleep! This afternoon was fantastic. Take me to Momma whatsername's! My shout.'

Amanda never turned down a free ticket to anything, and Irma seemed to be loaded so they returned to her house, showered, put on leather gear and heavy makeup, and spent the rest of the night in an orgy of whips, moans, fucking and torturing every pathetic male who'd let them—and there were a surprising number.

After three hours, Violet awoke with a dreadful headache. A wave of nausea sent her scurrying to the toilet where she dry heaved till her throat was aflame. After a drink of chlorinated tap water that increased her nausea she sat on the bed and attempted to think. The pain and semi-paralysis due to overworked muscles after such a long walk, convinced her she had been poisoned and was about to die. The thought calmed her. At that moment death seemed preferable to her present state. However, if she was going to die she'd bloody well drag the others down with her.

Taking pen and paper from her bag, with a supreme effort she managed to write in her usual neat script an apology to Stephen for her failure as a wife and lover. She made no excuses, knowing in

her heart there were none. Her confession of regret for assisting Irma to drown Bindi in the bath, also lightened her burden of guilt. After folding the letter and placing it on the table, she offered a prayer to her god, begging for mercy when he sat in posthumous judgement. After popping all her remaining valium tablets from their foil, she crushed them to a powder in a tumbler, topped it up with vodka, gave it a stir, tossed the lot down and sagged back onto the bed.

As her eyes closed a guilty smile twitched her lips. She knew she couldn't kill herself with valium—she'd just fall asleep and wake hours later feeling better. It was a token gesture; a way of showing god she understood she'd been a bad girl and had repented. In the morning she'd tear up her silly confession, renounce revenge, and try to make it up with Stephen—she should be able to get him away from the clutches of that scrawny old woman she'd seen him with. At this point Violet's thinking stalled. Consciousness began to slip away. She retched, this time successfully, spewing foul-smelling goo. Mentally aware but physically unable to react, Violet drowned in her own vomit.

Jarek and Sebastian's sexual delights differed from Irma and Amanda's in that theirs excluded pain and dominance, concentrating instead on gentle caressing while learning how to please their lover; desiring only that the other should experience the greatest enjoyment and satisfaction possible. Neither derived pleasure from administering or receiving pain—the emotionally damaging and spurious solution to impotence advocated by foolish men who imagine that sex without affection is all they need for happiness.

Being physically and mentally fit, delighting in their own wellbeing, contented with their abilities and secure in their masculinity, they had no need to trample on others to feel superior. They didn't want to feel superior. They wanted to share their lives with an equal; for that is sanity.

A few kilometres away, Stephen and Chloe's lovemaking was very similar, and so was that of Zeno and Cador. Each dedicated to the delight of their lover; each having their love returned with interest.

Chapter 28. Plans

Irma spent the night in Amanda's spare room. She woke at her usual time. Head, throat, back, groin, aching. She ran her hands over her body. Naked! Where was she? Where were her clothes? She sat up slowly. The room whirled and she toppled sideways. Lifted fingers to her face. Sticky. Raised her arms. Filthy smell. Awareness percolated and she dragged herself to the bathroom, relieved herself, then leaned against the wall until everything stood still.

'I drank too much,' she whispered.

It had seemed fun at the time but her head ached too much to think any more so she showered off the sweat and stench, dried herself, stumbled back to bed and fell asleep, not waking till Amanda put on a rock music CD at full blast.

The previous night's pseudo sadism had whetted Amanda's appetite for the real thing, so to keep her guest happy she placed a pot of strong coffee and three aspirins beside a slice of burnt toast and marmalade on the table, and selected a pair of her own jeans and a pleasant summery top to keep Irma happy in case she was going cold on the idea of revenge. Amanda's hatred of men fed on a dwindling supply of victims whose deaths could never be traced to her, so Irma's arrival was particularly welcome because the blokes she wanted eradicated were even less likely than usual to arouse dangerous suspicions. If everything went belly-up it would be Irma who took the rap—especially when Amanda told the cops about Bindi.

‘Coffee!’ she shouted through the bedroom door, screeching with laughter at the sight of Irma holding the pillow over her head. ‘Come on, girl, it’s ten o’clock. You’ve slept long enough.’ She tossed the clothes onto Irma’s bed. ‘Put these on and come for breakfast.’

Irma managed to down the coffee and aspirin but was unable to stomach the toast.

‘I can’t stand Violet; bloody frowsy old baggage,’ Amanda growled, ‘and I don’t give a fuck about her husband. I reckon it’s the boyfriend who dumped the slut you drowned, and the kid who accused your friend of rape who deserve to suffer. What do you reckon?’

Irma nodded, and wished she hadn’t. Spending another day with Violet would indeed make an already bad day worse. As there was nothing she needed at the motel they immediately drove down to the Esplanade in case Violet took it into her head to come round to Amanda’s and demand to join them. The sight of hundreds of teenage backpackers excitedly jabbering, greeting, planning, studying tourist brochures and maps, piling into camouflage painted four-wheel drive busses for the ‘Safari Adventure of a Lifetime’, taking photographs...were an unpleasant reminder of a youth that had all but passed them by. Feeling older than they wanted, they drove to a park away from the tourist strip and sat on the grass to plan. But every scheme seemed either too complicated or dangerous, leaving them with Violet’s idea of hiding in Chloe’s garden until opportunity knocked.

‘What then?’ Irma’s brain refused to think.

‘Then we slit their throats.’ Amanda slid her jeans up over her right calf, exposing a neat scabbard strapped just below the knee, and the handle of a knife. Looking around carefully to ensure they were unobserved, she drew it out.

Irma gasped. It was a small and very sharp-pointed kris, the wavy blade reflecting the sun on each razor sharp edge.

‘A ‘gift’ from a Malaysian student.’ Amanda said with a complacent smirk. ‘He didn’t need it any more after I tried it on him.’

She handed it carefully to Irma who grabbed the handle fiercely as if frightened it would swing round and stab her.

‘You look really professional,’ Amanda complimented, ‘so as I’m the strongest I’ll immobilise them while you do the honours.’

Irma was not sure she wanted the honour. It was all becoming too real. It had been Violet, she now remembered, who had insisted they drown Bindi. Picturing the jagged hole such a blade would make when pulled out, drained the blood from her head. She had to steady herself.

Carefully observing Irma’s reactions, Amanda realised confidence building had to be the next activity if she wasn’t to lose this chance. Playacting at the club was OK for laughs, but she needed to hear some real screams; see some real blood. Dragging Irma to her feet she gave her a long hug and whispered compliments about how lucky she was to have such a beautiful, brave and intelligent friend—someone with whom she could be totally honest and trust to back her up.

Irma was only human and therefore prepared to believe even the most outrageous compliments. She drank the praise greedily. Gazing into Amanda’s sincere and candid eyes she returned the warm and loving hug—and was lost.

Jarek and Sebastian rose at dawn, hiked three kilometres to a pool between gigantic granite boulders, returned for a healthy breakfast of eggs, papaya, pineapple, toast and avocados, then weeded the vegetable garden. At ten o’clock they drove to the hills west of the city for lunch with Seb’s father and stepmother.

Fee and Rex greeted Jarek with little ceremony but much warmth; grateful their son seemed to have sloughed off his depression and might even be ready to accept a new lover. Lunch was pleasant, although Rex, who had spent the entire morning preparing the elaborate feast might have been a little disillusioned had he known that for Jarek food was merely fuel—necessary but not worth spending time on. He would have preferred a bowl of lentils and a boiled egg.

During lunch it became obvious that Jarek was being examined—not on his suitability as a mate for Sebastian, but to discover his ideas, values, beliefs. The realisation excited him. All his life, it

seemed, he'd been searching for a disinterested sounding board for ideas that most people would think stupid, rude or insane, if he were foolish enough to share them. These two people were different. He knew, intuitively, that they would consider his ideas seriously and perhaps even understand.

'I'm not a fan of Homo sapiens,' he said bluntly. 'We're not that different from most so-called higher social animals apart from clever tool making that's enabled us to over breed, build war machines capable of horrendous mass destruction, deforest the planet and destroy the biological systems in which we evolved. Instead of thinking rationally to prevent problems we wait till catastrophe overtakes us, with the predictable result; we're on the brink of annihilation.'

'You have a solution, I imagine?' Fee asked with a smile.

'Not for the human race, we're on an express train to extinction; just like all the other species that have perched for a while on top of the food chain. All I can do as a teacher is encourage kids to develop their independence so the future will be a little less horrible for them.'

'What sort of educational program would do that?'

'There is nothing in all human knowledge that children should not be taught and know about from the earliest age, if they show interest. How we're made, born, age and die, and how we should live.'

'How should we live?'

'Within our means, leaving the world richer and better able to support life than we found it. Destructive natural urges must be curbed. Unless everyone understands and lives by the rule that more than enough is too much, we are doomed. Plenty of wise men have told us how to live, however they are ignored while our leaders hang on the lips of charlatans who ignore the reality of existence and insist there are invisible supernatural gods in charge of things, offering life after death.'

Where is the individual in all this?'

'He is central. Only independent people value independence in others. Countries, societies and relationships based on dominance and servitude can never be happy, productive or stable.'

'What about love and marriage?'

'They are the foundation on which the individual flourishes. There is nothing more tragic than a great individual who wanders alone. Aristotle understood that when he spoke about the complete man.'

'What values should we espouse?'

'All wise men not infected by religious dogma have always advocated kindness, generosity, consideration, affection, honesty, hospitality, compassion, charity, humour, gentleness, equality, listening, egalitarianism, respect for the elderly, love of children, and diligent respect for the land, plants and animals. These are sensible behaviours owing nothing to imaginary gods.'

'I can see you've thought a great deal about this, and I have the impression you embody most of those admirable qualities.'

'Fee, you are too kind. Regretfully I confess to being merely mortal,' Jarek laughed.

'What methods did you use to teach those sorts of things at a bush camp?'

False modesty wasn't one of Jarek's faults, so he described the rules of tolerance and non competition plus several of his tricks for combating pupils' insecurities, such as drawing Leon out and making the fat boys feel worthwhile, thus giving them self confidence and the impetus to improve their fitness.

'I'd never dare do anything like that,' Rex shook his head in admiration. 'I'd be terrified that forcing them to face their fears would backfire and they'd feel even more inferior, having been singled out.'

'I guess it helps that I point out my own imperfections and oddities, and explain that it's our differences that make us interesting. It wasn't difficult to get everyone to agree that in the skin cancer capital of the world Leon's almost black skin was superior to Sasha's dead white variety. As is yours Fee. Have you problems with being so dark skinned?'

'I don't, but plenty of people I meet do. You'd never believe how many refuse to believe a black woman can use a computer, let alone understand the banking and financial system.'

'It's very useful,' Rex laughed. 'Fee let's them think she's dumb, then makes deals she'd never get away with if she was a white man.'

'I believe it. Leon and his grandfather haven't been so fortunate. Claudius is a qualified accountant unable to find an employer. His daughter and son in law suffered tragically. It's amazing they're so sane.'

Fee turned to Rex. 'You've no indigenous students, have you?'

'Not yet.' Rex replied with a smile. 'I was wondering when you'd bring that up. The answer is Yes! If he's as bright as Jarek says.'

Jarek frowned. 'I don't think it'd be fair to ask Leon to leave his grandfather; it would leave the old man alone. I couldn't do it.'

'What if his grandfather was offered the position of resident accountant? We need one, Fee's too busy with her other work, and he could double as concierge and live in the old Principal's house. What do you reckon?'

'I could contact them and see what they think. Meanwhile, when am I going to see the school?'

'Now.'

From the main road no one would guess the school was there. Clever planting of trees and shrubs concealed the high, wire-mesh fence and gave those driving past the impression they were seeing the back fences of private properties with entrances on another road.

The school occupied the entire six hectare city block so they had no curious neighbours backing onto their land. The only access was a private lane that seemed to lead only to the principal's house. However, when they continued past the garage the view opened onto playing fields, tennis courts, vegetable gardens, and, nestled amongst a stand of tall eucalypts, the two-storied main building with its single storied annex, a gymnasium, and a long, low dormitory.

Thanks to the trees and dense shrubs that surrounded the property, traffic noise was minimal and peace reigned. The school had been intended for up to seven hundred pupils, so thirty were easily accommodated. The ground floor contained study and lecture rooms, library, services, kitchen, dining room, lounge and games room. Three futuristically well equipped science laboratories shared the top floor with compact bed-sitting rooms with en-suite shower and toilets for advanced students and teachers. Three young men in lab coats were at work in the central lab. They looked up, greeted Sebastian and Rex warmly, were introduced to Jarek and Fee, nodded vaguely and returned to their investigations.

'They're certainly keen,' Jarek remarked. 'No holidays for them?'

'This is their idea of a holiday.'

'They didn't know Fee?'

'This is the first time I've met any students,' Fee explained. 'Before starting this project we decided, for a variety of reasons that I fully agree with, that this was to be a male-only environment.'

'What're they working on?'

'Secrets,' Rex laughed. 'If you decide to join us, all will be explained.'

'That's sensible.'

Attached to the main building by a covered way was a well-equipped gymnasium, and an intimate, professional looking theatre. Behind that a dormitory block with comfortable individual bed-sitting rooms for the rest of the students.

After inspecting the buildings they wandered past the tennis courts to the pool. It was hot so they stripped off and swam, then lay in the shade to discuss what they'd seen.

'I like it,' Jarek said firmly, 'but I wouldn't like to live in.'

'I wouldn't let you,' Sebastian announced. 'You're living with me.'

'That's a relief. You've such a beautiful house.'

'What about the owner?'

‘Yeah, he’s OK too.’

Sebastian’s grin was luminous.

‘The school’s only a few minutes drive from Sebastian’s. We already have ten teachers living in so there wouldn’t be room for you anyway if you do decide to join us.’

‘I suppose they’re all single and young?’

‘No. Ages range from twenty-eight to sixty. Some were married, all except one are separated and he goes back to his wife on weekends.’

‘What do you mean by physical education, Rex?’

‘All the things you mentioned. Fitness, health, stamina, independence, self-respect, self-reliance, respect for others, respect for nature, acceptance of our evolution as wild animals with a smart brain and exceptional tool-making abilities but not much common sense...plus anything else you can think of.’

‘Do you want me to use the methods that proved successful at the camps?’

‘Definitely. I must say you were daring, considering the area’s in the bible belt.’

‘It wasn’t really my idea. Stephen, the Principal, is concerned about how young men have lost pride in their masculinity, wearing board shorts from navel to knee, baggy clothes...while young women flaunt their female attributes, wearing so little they might as well be naked.’

‘That’s very interesting,’ Sebastian said with a slight frown. ‘Chloe was lecturing me about that a couple of days ago. Have you been talking to her Rex?’

‘No, I have,’ Fee acknowledged. ‘The program has reached a critical stage, and Rex thought we should canvass the opinions of people we respect. I visited Chloe last week, after she asked if her grandson could come to our school, and when I brought up the topic of male/female interaction, she gave her opinion. It took no prompting from me, but she was clearly delighted not to have her ideas discounted. I admire her immensely and understand why you’re so attached to her, Sebastian. She will be an excellent ally if we ever need one.’

‘So will Stephen,’ Jarek added. ‘It’s no wonder they both hit it off, they’re a pair of iconoclasts. It was he who persuaded me to teach the boys to be proud of their manhood and refuse to become feminised snags, because that’s a form of castration, concedes female domination and turns youths into angry young men, prone to violence and contempt for women.’

‘Very perceptive. What I find extraordinary is that there hasn’t been a word of complaint from parents about you and their kids baring all,’ Rex remarked

‘That’s because as far as I know no student told them. We agreed that most people, including their parents wouldn’t understand, so after I pointed out that we’re not obliged to tell our parents everything, they decided they wouldn’t. Just as I haven’t told my parents I’m gay.’

‘Few people can understand people like us who are relaxed about nudity,’ Fee interrupted, ‘especially indoors, classrooms or school grounds. How would you explain, or justify, a naked life?’

Jarek smiled, frowned, pursed his lips, and shared thoughts that had been buzzing in his head for the last seven weeks. ‘I had no intention of running a nudist colony until Stephen told me about his experience as a fourteen year-old at a similar camp, where the teacher wore nothing but a brief bikini. He said how liberating it was for everyone and suggested I be similarly relaxed. Naked, we expose not only our exterior, but also our self respect and discipline—or lack of it. The mind and body are not separate entities, you see, they’re an indissoluble unit. That means an unhealthy body indicates an unhealthy mind. Of course accidental and birth disabilities don’t necessarily indicate unhealthy bodies. I’ve known people with seriously deformed bodies who were, if you take into account their difficulties, healthy and fit. That applies to old people as well. There are men in their seventies and eighties who, although relatively weak and easily tired, are lean and fit for their age and as sharp as nails.’

‘You’re right,’ Sebastian interrupted, turning to his parents. ‘Stephen is an excellent example, as you’ll see when you offer him a job.’

‘I thought he was retired,’ Rex grinned.

‘Yeah, but he’ll soon get tired of that. Sorry, Jarek. Carry on, it’s interesting.’

‘Flatterer.’ Jarek grinned. ‘Jews, Christians and Muslims insist nude genitals offend their god because they reckon god created us, therefore our organ of creation belongs to god, not us, so must be concealed and only used for making babies. Before these mad monotheists arrived to stuff us up, most human societies accepted penises along with noses, fingers and everything else as natural—which they are. We considered and discarded G-strings because wearing them meant we agreed they should be covered. Worse, they draw attention to the genitals, making them seem more important than noses, fingers, knees. They’re important, of course, but I could live without them easier than without legs, arms or a head. As for the nonsense that seeing a penis sends everyone into an orgy of sexual frenzy, nudists know that after a quick look to check what the bloke’s got, the penis ceases to be an object of rumour, curiosity, fascination and excitement.’

‘Good point,’ Rex muttered. ‘How did you go about discarding your gear?’

‘The first thing I did was take them down to see the swimming hole where, by a happy accident, Zeno would be skinny dipping. Instead of going back for togs I persuaded them we shouldn’t waste time but just join him. Afterwards we all lay on the rocks for a bit and I’d pretend to be distracted, chatting to Zeno, giving the kids the opportunity to take a good look. After less than a minute of excited whispering they lost interest in my cock and balls, after all they’re nothing special, and from then on naked was the same as clothed for everyone, only more comfortable and less fuss.’

‘So easy. Isn’t there always the size problem? Guys with small cocks feel inferior.’

‘That never happened, perhaps because, as you can see, mine’s on the small side of average and half the fourteen year-olds’ penises were larger than mine. If the problem looked as if it might arise, pardon the pun, I’d point out the disadvantages of long slacks and hanging balls when climbing trees and walking through long grass, while not denying the value of larger appendages for impressing others. Like your generous testicles, Rex. I’m impressed but not jealous when I think of how much more vulnerable they’d be in a fight.’

General laughter.

‘That’s why I’m a coward. What if someone gets a hard-on?’

‘A couple of kids did, so I congratulated them on having a fine functioning organ and told them to be proud of it. That leads to discussions about erectile dysfunction, how it’s often psychological because boys are made to feel erections are sinful when they’re not, they’re natural...all that stuff.’

‘Have you ever had an erection in front of them?’

‘Only once when I fell asleep and someone tickled it with a blade of grass. Their laughter woke me. It was amusing, not naughty. I wasn’t embarrassed and neither were they, and it led to a discussion about the value of pre-cum and lubrication.’

When Rex and Fee stopped laughing, she said, ‘One last question. Don’t be offended, but is being naked with the boys a sexual turn-on for you?’

‘That would make me a pederastic exhibitionist, I suppose. No. I often feel sexily alive when I’m active and naked in the fresh air, but I’m not turned on by kids, or by exposing myself to people. The least hint of disapproval would unman me. I don’t go home and wank afterwards, and I never think about sex when I’m in front of a class—I have to concentrate too hard. I guess I’m so used to it after all these years I simply don’t feel naked. Like now. We’re all naked but none of us is sexually aroused.’ Jarek looked at his feet for a few seconds then looked up at Fee and said clearly, ‘There is nothing sexual in my desire to convince young men that a healthy mind demands a healthy body, and in the right place, at the right time, nude is fun, exhilarating, liberating and comfortable—not rude.’

‘I guess I’d better clarify my position on this. It is my firm opinion that it would be totally inexcusable, indeed criminal, for a teacher or anyone in a position of responsibility or authority to initiate sexual behaviour with minors, or to respond sexually to their overtures. First, because their inferior position makes it almost impossible for the minor to say no, and the results can be catastrophically bad for them; and second, because overtures from kids are almost always innocent explorations in which the young person is discovering how to develop their social skills and learning how to charm and manipulate. To respond as one would to an adult would be as bad as initiating sexual activity.’

‘As for being naked inside, I can’t see why not, as long as everyone has a personal cloth to sit on and no one is leaking fluids—but that’s no different from what we already consider correct. To treat inside differently from outside is illogical. Either it’s OK to be naked, or it isn’t.’

‘Thanks. I thought that would be the case. What will you do with students who refuse to be naked?’

‘Nothing. No one has the right to make someone else feel inferior, insecure or wrong for any reason, or to try to force them to do what they don’t want. Everyone must feel free to do as they wish with the usual provisos about the rights of others. I’m reasonably sure if I took them away for a week, though, they’d lose their shyness, and I bet I could get the whole school spending the day comfortably naked.’

‘Fifty bucks say you can’t.’

‘You’re on.’

‘Does that mean you’ll be joining us?’

‘Looks like it.’

‘Chloe phoned this morning and asked if her grandson’s boyfriend could also come to school here. Would you recommend him?’

‘I’d never have managed the camps without Zeno, he’s a wonder, and Cadon’s been informally adopted by Stephen. They’re both academically outstanding; two of the best students I’ve ever taught. Also, as Sebastian said, Stephen would be good value if you need a relief teacher. Without him the camps would never have happened.’

‘Is he staying in the area?’

‘It seems Chloe wants him to; he’s certainly smitten by her.’

‘This is all very neat. Too neat! You and Seb. Zeno and Cadon. Stephen and Chloe.’ Fee was frowning. ‘Nothing so perfect is ever allowed to happen. I see problems. Don’t you, Jarek?’

Jarek looked hard at Sebastian’s stepmother to see if she was serious. ‘I always expect the worst, Fee. I think I’ve been on guard against the world since birth. Not because the world is filled with malevolent people, but because most people are thoughtless and their unpredictability makes them dangerous. Last night with Sebastian was the first time I can remember when I felt totally relaxed and let my guard down. I may not have your intuition, but I understand what you mean. We must never take our lives and happiness for granted.’

Chapter 29. Abduction

Monsoon clouds blanketed the city the following morning, threatening a deluge and fraying tempers. Violet’s body was discovered by a cleaner, the cops were called, her documents examined and the suicide note studied. The police in her home town were relieved—at least they’d been correct about one of their suspects in the drowning of Bindi. Her companion, Irma, had to be tracked down immediately. As the death occurred on their turf, the City police put two officers onto it, but were having trouble locating Ms Medlar, so a picture of her taken from a school staff photo was displayed on television with a request for anyone who knew her whereabouts, to contact the police.

Chloe saw the item, but had no idea who Irma was, so forgot it.

Sebastian didn’t have a television and subscribed to no newspapers, so Jarek, who was equally uninterested in what passes for news, remained ignorant of both Bindi’s murder and Violet’s suicide.

Time was of the essence for Irma and Amanda who also had not seen the News bulletin. Heavy monsoonal rains and winds would ruin their plans so they spent the day exploring the area surrounding Chloe’s house in search of a suitable place to trap their prey. It was much easier

without Violet puffing along constantly complaining. She would have argued endlessly about concentrating on Jarek and Zeno as the targets of their vengeance, while forgetting her husband. Without realising it, their survey of the house and area included parts of Sebastian's land that surrounded Chloe's few acres, and at one stage their prey had been only a few hundred metres from them. On their disconsolate way back to the car a slight sound sent them scurrying for the trees bordering the private road. Relief flooded their senses as, unaware of the watchers, Zeno jogged down to the gate to collect the mail. If he did that every day, they had him.

The following afternoon they drove through the unlocked gate to a secluded clearing they'd noticed about a quarter of a kilometre up the dusty road. After draping a rough camouflage of leafy branches over the car, they stretched a strong thin rope across the track, concealed it in the dust, then hid in bushes on each side. Their plan was simple; lift it suddenly when Zeno jogged past, trip him, hit him on the head with the sand-filled socks they both carried, tie him up, take him home, get Jarek's phone number from him by whatever means it took, then demand that Jarek come and rescue him.

Such a pathetic plan should never have worked, especially on someone as fit, fast and observant as Zeno. But he was wearing headphones, listening to music, thinking about Cadour, and dreaming about how good life was. He tripped on time, fell, was hit on the back of his skull as planned, and woke lying across the back seat of a moving car with his hands firmly tied behind his back, ankles equally well shackled, a blindfold, and a gag stuffed in his mouth.

Amanda drove straight into the garage under the house, closed the doors and with much difficulty they pushed, punched and dragged Zeno through the doorway into the rumpus room where they cut off his shorts, the only article of clothing he was wearing, with a pair of sharp scissors, and checked the pockets.

'Eureka,' Irma laughed producing a mobile phone. She checked the addresses, found 'Jarek' and pressed the button.

In the past Jarek had resisted buying a mobile phone for two reasons; because he knew no one he wanted to contact urgently, and because the idea of being available to anyone day and night was anathema. But Sebastian had insisted. It was a first for him too. Having at last found someone to love he wasn't going to risk losing him because they couldn't contact each other in an emergency, as had happened with Reggie.

Jarek answered immediately.

'We found your friend,' a pleasant, sympathetic female voice announced. 'He was lying unconscious and, I suspect, concussed on the footpath outside our place. It looks as if he's been beaten up and dumped. We brought him inside. He seems to have lost his memory so I checked his phone and tried the buttons. You're the first person to answer. If you want to pick him up, I'll be parked outside the Hardware Supermarket on the corner of Daley and Nooranbah in twenty minutes.'

'Can't I come direct to your place?'

'It's too difficult to explain directions. This'll sound weird, but I've had several unfortunate experiences with strangers, so don't bring anyone else. I'm a privacy freak and panic when confronted by more than one person. If I see you're with someone I'll just drive away and dump the kid back on the street.' She disconnected.

Almost immediately Zeno's phone rang.

'Zeno? Is that you?'

'How wise of you to check. Yes, this is the young lad's phone but he's in no condition to speak to you. I'm not strong enough to carry him to my car and this is wasting time. You might have to take him to a hospital. I'm leaving now.' Amanda switched off and grinned. 'Yes!' she whispered. 'Irma baby, we've got them both!'

'Already the world wants to phone you,' Sebastian laughed, then realised something was wrong. 'What's the problem?'

'That was a woman using Zeno's phone. She said he'd been beaten up and dumped outside her place. I've got to go and pick him up.'

‘Where?’

Jarek explained, but Sebastian insisted he come too. ‘You’ve no idea where the Hardware Supermarket is, and I’m not letting you out of my sight. You drive, and when we get near I’ll lie down so she thinks you’re alone. Then I’ll keep an eye on you in case it’s a trick.’

‘Why on earth would anyone play a trick like that?’

‘Goodness knows. The world’s full of nut cases, especially when the monsoons are approaching.’

‘Twenty minutes later Jarek pulled up just beyond the Hardware, looked around but couldn’t see anyone waving at him.

I’ll get out and look lost so whoever it is realises it’s me.’

‘Don’t do anything stupid.’

‘You’ll be watching.’

Jarek trotted down the footpath to the front of the store and looked around. A hand waved at him from a small red Toyota. He went across and peered at an attractive but dowdily dressed woman, in a modest print dress.

‘Jarek?’

‘Yes.’

‘Hop in and I’ll take you there.’

‘No, I’ll follow in my car.’

‘No, I don’t like being followed. Get in and when you’ve carried Zeno to the car, I’ll drive you both back here. I’m sorry, but that’s the way I am.’

Worried beyond rational thinking, Jarek glanced in the back of the car, saw no one, climbed into the front seat and Amanda sped away. They had barely turned the first corner when Irma smashed a sand-filled sock into the side of his head.

By the time Sebastian had scrambled across to the driver’s seat, started the vehicle and taken off in pursuit, he’d lost them. Heartsick he fought down panic. He hadn’t even noted the numberplate! What to do? Should he phone Stephen and Chloe? No. There was no point in worrying them unnecessarily. Surely Jarek wouldn’t have got in the car if he hadn’t been certain it was safe. He wasn’t a fool. Deciding to wait, Sebastian drove back to the meeting place, parked where he could see every car that came and went, and sat in an agony of worry. Surely it wasn’t going to happen all over again?

The world spun, Jarek’s head ached and he felt sick. Women talking. Zeno’s voice. ‘If you’ve killed him I’ll...’

‘You’ll what, pretty boy? He isn’t hurt yet, but he will be and you’ll have the pleasure of watching.’

‘Pretending to be still unconscious, Jarek opened his eyes slightly. He was lying on a sheet of black plastic. It was dim. High windows. Probably a basement. He was naked. Wrists tied tightly behind his back, ankles securely bound. No wriggle room there. A bare foot just beyond his feet. Must be Zeno. He groaned to let Zeno know he was alive, then struggled to sit up.

‘Welcome, Mr. Schwartz.’

He knew that voice. Turning his head he saw Irma grinning evilly. For some reason it didn’t surprise him. She’d always hated him. But why was she dressed in a stupid black leather harness thing with her tits hanging out? And those high heels! She looked ridiculous in a short skirt, hadn’t the legs for it. A movement caught his eye. Who was the other woman wearing nothing but black leather hot pants and nipple rings? Then he saw the whips, knuckle-dusters, handcuffs, knife. The black plastic suddenly made sense and his blood ran cold. But why Zeno? Then he remembered it was Zeno who’d told Stephen that Irma had been shoplifting. Controlling an urge to curse he said politely, ‘Ms Medlar, we meet again.’

‘It’s going to be hello, goodbye,’ she sneered. ‘For you and your catamite.’

‘Are you going to tell us what we’ve done to annoy you?’

Irma walked up to him and slammed him across the face with his mobile phone, smashing it. 'You're a smarmy, stuck up, arse-licking creep. Crawling up to that stupid old fart, Noble to get your way. Then dumping poor Bindi so she went completely off the rails and began screwing everyone on the football team! Your contemptible behaviour turned her into such a psychological mess that Violet Noble and I had to put her out of her misery. Her death is on your hands you arrogant, male chauvinist pig!'

'Bindi's dead? How?'

'In the bath. We drowned her after Violet and I saw her being raped unmercifully by dozens of men she'd invited into her house to stop the pain of being deserted on her wedding night.'

'We weren't even engaged!'

'Exactly! You backed out of that commitment!'

The woman was clearly mad, but Jarek needed to know more. 'Where's Mrs. Noble?'

'Chickened out. As usual I have to do the dirty work of cleaning up the world to make it safe for women. Even Annie just took off after we'd paid her five hundred bucks to shoot you four weeks ago!' her voice had risen to a scream.

Amanda was becoming anxious. The neighbours were away but a passer by might get curious at the shouting and call the cops. She was seriously regretting asking Irma to join her. A trouble shared might be a trouble halved, but unfortunately that seemed to apply to pleasure too! Belatedly, she realised Irma had been far too personally involved with these two, so could never be trusted. She placed a calming hand on her partner's arm to remind her this was a very dangerous amusement; real life S&M with two dispensable guys. Irma would have to join the men directly after they'd had their fun. She smiled in anticipation. She'd never cut up a woman.

Irma spat on Jarek, who remained silent. The woman was insane and he had no intention of making her madder by saying anything stupid.

'Right,' she snarled, turning to Zeno who cringed in fear. Irma's admission of at least one murder meant he was going to die, and he didn't want to.

'Stay away from me!' he wanted to shout, but a gag stuffed deep in his throat was making even breathing difficult.

With a slow smile, Amanda slammed the sand-filled cosh into his ribs and Zeno's eyes widened in pain.

'Let's get him in position to watch the show,' she said, tossing the long end of the rope round his wrists over a hook. Together the two women dragged his arms up behind until his weight was supported on his toes, then secured the rope.

Sitting was not the position Jarek wanted to be in—he needed to squat, so while Zeno was being hauled up he managed to stand and lean against the wall, head throbbing, eyes watering, cold anger stirring his guts. He caught Zeno's eye and winked. Zeno closed his eyes and moaned from the agony that had already begun—his arms felt as if they were being torn from their sockets every time his toes refused to support his weight.

Back at the hardware store Sebastian finally accepted that something was seriously wrong. Jarek's mobile was turned off. It was over an hour since he had got into that car. His phone rang.

'Chloe! Hi. What can I do for you?'

'Is Zeno with you?'

'He's with Jarek.'

'Oh, that's all right then. We were getting worried. Cador is convinced something bad's happened. Zeno isn't answering his phone and its so unlike him will you tell him to ring us? It really is too bad. He went down to collect the mail and disappeared.'

Sebastian could hear the panic but saw no purpose in increasing it until he knew what had happened. 'OK Chloe, I'll tell Zeno to wear a crash helmet when he sees you. Apologise to Cador, and I'll get back to you the second I catch up with them.'

Now he really was worried!

Irma approached Jarek with a sneer, grabbed his balls and twisted. He cringed in pain but said nothing. She stood back, raised her foot and aimed the spike heel at his groin. He dropped to a squat and rolled sideways. The heel smashed into the wall. By the time she'd regained her balance Jarek had the sheathed dagger in his hands, but he needed a few more seconds.

Amanda had watched Irma's outburst with increasing annoyance. This was not how to do it! There should be a sense of ritual! She'd explained that to Irma at the Club. A Mistress of ceremonies remained cool and calm while slowly turning her victim into a blubbing heap of agony as she sliced and cut little bits off here and there until it was all over. Grasping her kris in one hand she angrily pushed Irma out of the way, granting Jarek a few more precious seconds, then grabbed him by an ear and attempted to pull him upright.

He pretended to lose his balance, remained squatting and squirmed to conceal the contortions required to unsheathe the knife and slice through the ropes—a manoeuvre he had practised for fun many times as a teenager. 'Just in case,' he had told himself, never imagining he would ever find himself in such a situation. The knife was extremely sharp, the ropes thin, and the relief when they fell from his ankles and wrists sent a pulse of energy surging. As if still tied, he allowed himself to be pulled to his feet; hands still behind his back, knife ready for an upward jab.

Amanda too was ready to stab. She stood back, smiled and began a swing with her knife that would have driven it into his upper arm if he hadn't stepped aside, grabbed her shoulder with his free right arm and swung her body around. The kris gained momentum and when it hit Irma just under her left breast, it penetrated to the hilt. Furious, Amanda dragged the knife out, leaving a gaping ragged hole from which blood gushed. Irma was too shocked to scream. Her face blanched. She pressed her hands to the torn flesh and sagged to her knees.

Before Amanda could lash out at Jarek he had his right arm round her neck and was pressing the point of his dagger up under her rib cage. She tried to kick backwards with her spike heels, but Jarek deflected her foot and with all her weight on the other, her ankle twisted and she sagged onto his weapon.

'No! No!' she whispered hoarsely. 'Please no.'

'What were you going to do when Zenon or I begged you to stop?'

Silence. Amanda seemed frozen in fear.

'This is what you were going to do,' he whispered, thrusting his stiletto up, deep under her ribcage. Her mouth opened in a silent scream as life left her. Jarek lowered her carefully to the floor, removed his knife and placed it aside, then took her hand that was still clutching her dagger, and inserted it carefully into the hole left by his own weapon. Then he grabbed his knife and cut the ropes suspending Zenon in agony. The young man dropped to his knees and began rubbing his shoulders.

'No time for that,' Jarek ordered. 'Go round the room and find every last thing that belongs to us, every shred of clothing, my mobile and yours. We must leave no trace whatever. With a bit of luck the cops will think it's a murder suicide.'

'But Ms Medlar's not dead.'

'She soon will be.'

'But shouldn't we...'

'Shut the fuck up and do as you're told!' Jarek snapped. 'And be quick unless you want to be framed for murder. Come upstairs as soon as you've got everything. Hurry!' He ran out the door, up a flight of stairs and searched for the sort of place Amanda might keep electricity or water bills. He was still searching when Zenon appeared and joined in.

'Why are we looking?'

'Do you know where we are?'

'No. Oh, I get it, we need the address.'

'Exactly.'

'Jarek! Over here.'

In the bottom of a wardrobe in a cardboard carton were the papers they were looking for.

'Your mobile still working?'

‘Yes.’

‘Call Sebastian, give him this address, tell him it’s extremely urgent. He mustn’t stop on the street, he must back the car into the driveway as if he’s just using it to make a U-turn. When we get in he mustn’t look round, and the instant we’ve closed the doors he has to drive off so if anyone’s looking they’ll never suspect he’s picked someone up. Got that?’

While Sebastian made the call Jarek went back to the cellar to check on Irma. She was very weak, and could scarcely lift her head.

‘Jarek,’ she whispered. ‘I’m sorry. Please get me to a hospital. I’m dying.’

‘Yes, Irma, you are, and I’m very pleased about it. This is the second time you’ve tried to murder me. Annie didn’t cheat you. She did arrive at the camp but luckily I saw her and she ended up like your friend over there. You had no qualms about murdering Bindi, Zeno or me and I am delighted that soon you will be dead.’

Jarek made a quick check of the room, found nothing that could possibly incriminate him or Zeno, then returned to Irma. She was choking on blood that trickled between her lips. The pain was obviously severe. Suddenly she gave several prolonged shudders and lay still. He felt for a pulse. There was none so he raced back upstairs where an alarmingly pale Zeno was nervously waiting. He patted the lad on the shoulder, grinned, picked up the landline, dialled triple O, asked for the police, gave them the address and said in a nervous voice, ‘I was passing on the street and from the sound of it there’s been a murder.’ He gave the address and hung up.

‘OK, Zeno, you’ve been great. Now we conceal ourselves down by the gate ready to get in the instant Sebastian backs in.’

He made a tight bundle of their torn clothes and phones and led the way around the house to the entrance to avoid being seen by anyone who happened to look in the driveway. Sebastian must have driven like the wind as they had less than a minute of squatting behind the hedge before the 4WD backed up, they scrambled in, closed the doors and lay on the floor as Sebastian drove out again.

‘Your phone call was just in time, Zeno. Another minute and Chloe was going to call the cops. She was very worried. So was I. Are you OK?’

‘I think so. My ribs and shoulders ache a bit and she cut me on the thigh in several places. Nothing serious, but it stings. What did you tell Nana?’

‘I said you’d tripped on your way to the mailbox and hit your head, felt a bit woozy, wandered into the forest looking for a shortcut back to the house and got lost. Feeling foolish, you phoned me. Jarek, being an expert woodsman, kept in contact with you by phone and went searching while I waited in the car. After your last phone call I risked the anger of the gods and told her you were safe and we’d be bringing you home shortly.’

‘That’s excellent, Sebastian,’ Jarek said seriously. ‘The fewer people who know about this the safer I’ll feel.’

‘Why? You mean you...’

‘He had to!’ Zeno whispered before shuddering with sobs of fear, relief and horror.

Jarek wrapped his arms around him. He was very cold. ‘Got a blanket, Sebastian? Our clothes are cut to shreds and Zeno’s in shock. It was gruesome. Worse for Zeno. After cutting him a bit they trussed him up painfully and he thought he was going to have to watch my execution. You held up bravely, Zeno. Anyone else would have been useless. I’m proud to know you—seriously.’

Sebastian stopped the car, ran round to the boot, fetched a blanket and Jarek wrapped them both in it, their combined warmth soon having a positive effect.

‘Is Ms. Medlar also dead?’ Zeno asked nervously.

‘Yes, so there are no witnesses. As long as no one but we three know what happened, we are safe. It seems Bindi was murdered by Irma and Stephen’s wife. She also admitted sending the young woman out to kill us in the second week of the camps.’

‘So there *was* gunfire that night? I thought there was’

‘Yes.’

‘What happened?’

‘I was scouting round to make sure you and Cador were OK when I saw her with her rifle levelled at the mattress you and Cador had dragged out onto the balcony. I gave her a chance to explain, but she took a shot at me instead.’

‘Why didn’t you tell us?’

‘And spoil your first sexy weekend with Cador? Why would I do that? One careless word from either of you and the camps would have been cancelled and I’d be in prison till I was sixty. That’s why I’m relying on you never to speak of this to anyone except Sebastian or me.’

‘I’ll never tell a soul. Not even Cador.’

‘Excellent.’

Chapter 30. Resolution

Chloe and an obviously distraught Cador came running out of the house at the sound of the car. Hugs, explanations, apologies for getting lost, promises to be more careful and not trip while going for the mail...and they were hustled inside. Jarek explained his lack of clothes by saying he’d been in the garden when Sebastian called and hadn’t bothered to dress. Zeno was still wrapped in the blanket to hide the cuts, so he said he was cold and would love a shower. Cador joined him, soothed the cuts that Zeno said came from climbing through barbed wire fences, failed to notice Zeno’s shorts weren’t in the laundry basket, applied disinfectant and took him to bed until dinner.

Stephen had been on the phone when they arrived and he came out to the patio. ‘That was the police,’ he said with a perplexed frown. ‘They said my wife has committed suicide in a motel in the City and they want me to identify the body. What on earth was Violet doing here?’ He gazed around as if looking for an answer in the surrounding trees.

Chloe placed a soft hand on his shoulder. ‘I’ll put on something more respectable than this old tracksuit and drive you.’

‘Thanks, Chloe. I’d like that.’

‘Are you upset, Stephen?’ Jarek asked.

Stephen shook his head. ‘I don’t think so. It hasn’t sunk in yet. It’s possibly a mistaken identity or something. I’ll work out what I think when I see if it’s true.’

‘Very wise. We’ll head off home for a shower and change, then come back if you like,’ Sebastian offered.

‘Yes. Please come back. I’ve no idea how long we’ll be and I don’t like leaving Jarek and Cador alone too long.’ Chloe smiled her thanks then went and told the boys she was going out for a while so they had to prepare dinner.

Stephen and Chloe were ushered into a comfortable interview room by an overweight officer. ‘I’m sergeant Mordant,’ he announced as if expecting them to know the name. ‘May I see your driver’s license?’ Stephen produced it. Mordant studied the photograph, grunted satisfaction and handed Violet’s suicide note to Stephen.

‘Is this your wife’s handwriting?’

‘It is.’

‘Who is the Irma she mentions?’

‘I imagine it’s Irma Medlar, a teacher at the school I was principal of until a week ago.’

‘Did you know the woman she calls Bindi?’

‘She was the flatmate of another of my teachers until seven weeks ago, when he left and taught at a series of camp schools. I can’t believe Violet would have murdered her! Why would she? And with Irma Medlar! It’s all too ridiculous. And yet this note...’ Stephen flapped the piece of paper in the air in bewilderment.

‘Do you know where Irma is now?’

‘No idea. I didn’t even know my wife was here. We are separated, you see—have been for most of the last seven weeks.’

‘Most of?’

‘I did it slowly so she didn’t notice. She was very preoccupied with her group of charity workers—at least I think that’s what they were. WWI or something like that. I didn’t take much interest.’

‘Was your wife a killer, do you think, Mr. Noble?’

Stephen hesitated for some time. He scarcely knew his wife. They hadn’t talked about anything other than the weather for years. He frowned and looked into the sergeant’s eyes. ‘I’ve no idea, Sergeant. She was a difficult woman, prone to violent outbursts of temper; seemed to dislike men. I think she either hated or at least despised me. Our marriage of thirty-four years was unconsummated...’ His voice trailed off. He wasn’t embarrassed, although this was the first time he had ever admitted the fact to anyone. A great sadness overtook him and he bowed his head. Chloe took his hand in hers and stroked it gently.

‘Then why did you remain married?’ The sergeant asked in manifest disbelief that anyone would put up with such a situation.

‘She was a Catholic,’ Stephen sighed, ‘and it seemed the easiest thing to do.’

As there was nothing useful anyone could say, the sergeant coughed and continued, although his manner was a little less impatient. ‘I need your current address and contact details in case we have more questions, and we’d like you to identify the body.’

‘Certainly.’

They followed the police car to the morgue where they were told the circumstances of Violet’s death.

‘She obviously intended to kill herself,’ the pathologist said brusquely, ‘otherwise she wouldn’t have left a note. So she was lucky she choked on her own vomit, there was insufficient chemical in her blood to kill her. She’d have woken up in about ten hours.’

I’m the lucky one, Stephen thought. Violet was not the sort to kill herself—too religious for a start. This was probably one of her macabre attention-seeking games gone wrong. She looked unusually peaceful. At first he felt nothing, and then was overcome by a sensation similar to awakening from a nightmare. He looked at her again to make certain she was dead, and then took a large breath of freedom for the first time since his marriage. It was intoxicating and he had to restrain himself from shouting ‘Violet is dead! I’m free! I can do whatever I like!’ It was better than being drunk, although in some ways similar. Borne on a cloud of euphoria he dragged Chloe out of the building and the minute they were out of earshot gave vent to a wild whoop of delight. Taking both her hands in his he swung her round in a dance. Chloe’s eyes lit up. Holding hands they ran back to the car like adolescents, impatient to get home and start their new life without the spectre of an angry and vindictive wife.

Jarek and Sebastian were on the patio with Zeno and Cador when Stephen and Chloe returned with the news that Bindi too was dead, having, according to the suicide note, been murdered by Violet and Irma. No one evinced the slightest sorrow for either death, which left Cador worried and confused. Until now Stephen and his friends had seemed loving, kind, thoughtful and caring of each other. But instead of being sad, he was obviously pleased his wife was dead. The others were no better! Instead of commiserating and offering condolences, they’d congratulated him on his freedom, and showed no more emotion about her murdering Bindi than if it had been a news item on TV about people they didn’t know.

Cador had been to several family funerals where everyone, especially those who hated the dead person, had wept and cried and wailed about how tragic it was that he or she had been taken from them. The keening and hair pulling had been greatest for his dictatorial ninety-three year-old great grandmother who’d been riddled with cancer and in agony for several years. No one said she was better off dead. They all beat their breasts and reckoned they wished she’d stayed alive.

He looked from one to the other of his adopted family, frightened by their apparent callousness. Would they just dump him when they got sick of him? Stephen, observing his confusion beckoned him over and explained the situation. A slow smile spread over the young man’s features as

understanding trickled through the morass of social and religious conditioning. Then he laughed and hugged his new father, who was clearly touched by the gesture. 'Thanks, Stephen,' Cador said seriously, 'for showing me what honesty is.'

The television was turned on that evening to see if Violet was mentioned on the News. She wasn't, but the cameras zoomed in on a high hedge, then travelled through the gateway stopping at the entrance to the basement of Amanda's house.

'This afternoon the police were called to this house where there was a horrific double murder. Unofficial sources suggest it was a murder-suicide. The names of the two victims have been withheld. The police would like to speak to the anonymous caller who alerted them to the crime, and to any neighbours or passersby who may have witnessed or heard anything unusual. Several promising leads are being followed.'

It was just another murder and the three who were uninvolved forgot it. Zeno, however, couldn't forget. Later, in bed in the dark his thoughts swirled. Images of the day's horror seemed projected on his brain. The cellar, the knives, being cut, tied up and suspended. The pain! Jarek kicked and slumping. Then it was all too quick to know what had happened. Amanda attacked Jarek but she was swung round and accidentally stuck that awful wavy dagger into Ms Medlar. Then Jarek stabbed Amanda, lowered her to the ground before carefully forcing her own dagger that she still held, into the wound he'd just made.

Waves of cold nausea swept over him as he recalled how Amanda's wider blade had made the hole bigger and Jarek had had to jiggle it around to get it in, careful not to touch the handle himself. Zeno couldn't equate the two sides of his best friend! Jarek had murdered her without stopping to think, and later admitted he'd murdered another woman who'd been sent to shoot him and Cador. Neither of those killings were in self defence. He could have immobilised both the women and then called the cops. The Jarek he knew was a good, kind man. But the law was the law. It had to be obeyed or anarchy would result. Society would crumble. The police had to be told. Murder is murder no matter what the reason.

These thoughts chased each other round and round until Zeno wondered if he was going mad. He didn't know what would happen if the truth came out, but it had to, because he didn't want to live in a lawless society. Somewhere it had to stop. People couldn't just go round avenging themselves. He tossed and turned until Cador asked what was wrong. Zeno kissed him, said he was hot and would go for a walk in the cool air.

'Shall I come with you?'

'No, go back to sleep.'

'Sure?'

'Sure.'

Cador was asleep before Zeno had picked up his mobile phone and crept out of the house.

Outside it was cooler and a myriad of stars in a clear sky gave enough light to see by, but the demons didn't go away. If anything they crowded closer, audible in every night noise. Bravely he went out on the road and began jogging, pursued by unwanted fantasies. Panicking he dialled Sebastian who answered immediately.

'Zeno, I hoped you'd call. Where are you?'

'Jogging towards your place. Sebastian, I'm frightened.'

'Keep cool, keep jogging, stop thinking. We're coming to meet you.'

Three minutes later he made out two men running towards him. They met, hugged and jogged back to Sebastian's in silence.

Curled up in a large comfortable chair Zeno's fears slipped away as Sebastian gently stroked his neck and hair as he'd done on so many past occasions when his young friend found life unbearable. Having at last unburdened himself, Zeno was able to relax. Sebastian would solve everything.

But it was Jarek who spoke. 'So, you think that I should have immobilised the woman I discovered with a sawn-off rifle preparing to shoot you and Cador, and called the cops?'

'Yes.'

‘The likely consequences of that would have been an invasion of newspaper reporters, the camps would have been closed down as too dangerous, the woman would have sworn she had been abducted by me, abused and then falsely accused. You and Cador would have been named as lovers with photos on the front page of the paper. I’d probably have been locked up, unable to prove her accusations were false, especially as Irma and Violet Noble would have backed her story. Is that what you wanted to happen?’

‘No; but...’

‘You want me to go now and confess to stabbing her and then getting rid of the body. You want me to spend the rest of my life in prison where I’ll get beaten up and possibly murdered?’

‘No! Of course I don’t! But what about the law? What about justice?’

‘Don’t you think justice was served? Do you think someone who is prepared to murder two young men for five hundred dollars deserves the protection of the law?’

‘I don’t know what to think.’

‘Why didn’t you race down and save the fellow who upended his mower and sliced off his hand the other day? Failing to act and save someone’s life when that is possible is an offence. Are you going to go and hand yourself in to the cops?’

‘No. He deserved it.’

‘But that woman didn’t? How about Irma and Amanda. Having tied us up and started hacking bits off us, were they going to let us go?’

‘No.’

‘What were they going to do?’

‘Kill us.’

‘I didn’t deliberately get Amanda to stab Irma, that was an accident. What would have happened if I’d simply tied Amanda up and called the cops?’

Silence.

Angrily Jarek shouted, ‘Answer me, Zeno! Think about the situation, the reality, the facts, about justice! Was there any doubt that they were murderers? Irma had just bragged about drowning Bindi! The law is there to prevent miscarriage of justice. To prevent innocent people from being punished. Is the system perfect?’

‘No.’

‘You’re suffering from the delusion that the law is omniscient and administered impartially, and therefore fair and just. You seem to imagine the function of the courts is to protect the innocent and convict the guilty, but it isn’t! All a court can do is interpret laws on the evidence available! As you are unwilling to work out for yourself what would have happened, I’ll tell you! Amanda would have accused us of attacking her and Irma. I would have been blamed for Irma’s death. You would have been named as my accomplice. We’d have spent the next year or more in prison waiting trial. By that time, trial by media would have ensured that public sympathy would be with the women and we’d almost certainly be found guilty. Is that what you want?’

‘That’s enough, Jarek. You’ve made your point.’ Sebastian said firmly. He turned to a thoroughly cowed Zeno. ‘Your idealism does you credit, Zeno, but you are totally wrong and I agree absolutely with Jarek. I understand how you feel, having been in a similar situation when I was your age. We had the choice of calling the cops or punishing the evil people ourselves. We risked our own lives to punish the foul bastards who’d been murdering young men for their organs. Some of the people we punished died, others were maimed. All were ruined. For a while I wondered if we had the right to do that, but Rex and Fee convinced me that when it’s one person’s word against another in a courtroom, then the woman, or the most attractive, or the richest and most influential person always wins; and that, young man, is not justice. We will not stop you handing yourself in to the police, confessing to your small part in the events, but if you involve Jarek in any way whatever, then you and I are finished. We will deny everything, I will provide him with alibis for every incident, and use every penny I possess on the best lawyers to ensure it is you, and not he who spends the rest of their life in prison.’

Zeno's eyes were stretched wide in astonishment. 'No!' He shouted. 'No! I don't want Jarek to suffer. I didn't understand. I thought the law was different. I hadn't understood it wasn't perfect. I'm sorry, I'm sorry! You saved my life twice, Jarek, and I'm so stupid! Forgive me!' He flung himself at Jarek's feet, wrapped his arms round his legs and sobbed.

Jarek leaned over, drew the young man onto his knees and cradled him like an infant. Rocking, stroking, and calming. 'It's OK, Zeno. I understand. Your intentions are honourable and in a perfect world you would be right. I was a bit harsh on you, but it's desperately important that you understand the precarious position we're in. Our lives depend on absolute secrecy. It's tempting to think we could tell our best friends, but the people we tell won't be in the same danger as us and could easily let something slip that would start suspicions. It's going to be difficult for a few years to live with our actions, but we can, and you have me and Sebastian to share it with if the burden becomes too great.'

'Your problem is you're too virtuous, Zeno,' Sebastian said with a smile. 'Think of all the political leaders who happily send young men off to fight in other countries simply to protect our wealthy industrialists. They know our soldiers will be murdering innocent people, and some of them will also be killed, maimed or injured. But politicians, generals and those who run the country don't lose a second's sleep over it. Be virtuous with people who deserve it, but be careful with everyone else. Justice has been served. The people who deserved to die have, and those who are innocent are safe—except for Bindi—she didn't deserve to die, but her killers are now dead.'

'You're both right and I feel stupid. I was going to punish the man I admire more than any other because of some idiotic notion of justice that's been brainwashed into me. I've been learning at school about concepts and values and how notions of morality change as circumstances change, but failed to see how it applied to me. Jarek, can you forgive me?'

'There's nothing to forgive. You came to us because you were smart enough to understand you had a problem. It's been solved and now we move on. OK?'

'Yes. Yes. I don't know how to thank you. I don't deserve people as good to me as you two.'

'If we all got what we deserve then few people would be happy, but it's nearly dawn so I suggest we take you home so you can wake up next to that handsome boyfriend with a clear conscience and no desire to burden him with secrets he doesn't deserve to be troubled with.'

'That was dangerous,' Sebastian said when at last they were back in their bed. 'Thank goodness he came to us instead of confiding in his grandmother. I love her but she can be loose-lipped.'

'Zeno had no idea how close he came to disaster. There's no way I'd have let him incriminate me and split us up.'

'Agreed. It was very foolish of him to come here at night without telling anyone. After yesterday's adventure his final disappearance would have seemed almost inevitable. Still, we didn't have to do it. He's a good kid and I think you're safe; but we'll keep a tight rein on him. It's lucky he's going to our school next year.'

'Sebastian, I wasn't alive till I met you.'

###

Thanks for reading 'Jarek'. I hope you enjoyed it. If you're interested in my other titles they can be found [here](#).
Best wishes, Rigby.