

# skeletal

/'skɛlɪt(ə)l,skə'li:t(ə)l/

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Watch this. Watch this now. Those men - the ones in the fluoro vests and the hard hats and the mud-caked boots. They've removed the bricks of the house, by hand. They've piled them up and put them aside in neat square packages wrapped in tarpaulin, ready to use again when the time comes. They're about to raise the house off its foundations.

It's amazing.

Before the earthquake, no one had ever really tried something like this before. It was a proposition of something that might work in a trade magazine that no one would ever have read. Except now it was read, and practiced, because there were so many opportunities to try out things people had never tried before.

Opportunity, and the potential to save money. A perfect combination for experiments. And this thing works.

Watch them. Right there. They're lifting the denuded house up off the foundations. It creaks and groans but it holds together. Amazing.

And look down in the foundations. Where they're cracked and broken and the floor on one side has dropped almost a foot in height because of the liquefaction souping up the earth. That bit, where it's broken so much the bare earth can be seen straight through the concreted silt. Even before anyone starts to try to break it up. Broken along a prior instability.

That's where I am.

Watch them as they pull aside the hard clods, and now - that one - he's reaching forward, pulling one aside to expose a creamy white bone. He's taking a step back now. He's

calling over his shoulder to a colleague. His site manager is about to be wholly pissed off, and frustrated because he's not allowed to show it. Not in this situation.

But the whole site's going to be roped off and their work is going to be backed up and he's going to be on the phone for the rest of the day trying to shuffle everything around so he doesn't lose more than a day's wages for his crew.

It'll take a while before they know that it's me. There's going to be a stream of 'professionals' coming by. They'll carefully dig, and photograph, and exhume each bone. They'll lay it out on a board in a morgue, making sure that each and every little piece of me is tagged and laid out in place.

They'll drill into the bone, the femur, and try to get a read on the DNA left in the dried out marrow. They're going to find a match with a file on a missing person. And that missing person file is going to be me.

My mum's going to get a knock on the door that she's been waiting for, and dreading, for a decade. She's going to break down and cry with the easy tears of a drunk, even though her ten year chip takes pride of place in her jewellery box.

She'll cry, and won't hear half of what they say. But they'll be patient, and they'll go through everything with her again. And again.

I would cry too, if I still had something to cry with.

But for now that's all poised in the distance, a series of dominos not yet pushed into action. For now, there's just the hi-viz workers and the glimpse of something they know shouldn't be there. For now there's just my dead bones and the cold ground they've been stored in, hidden

in, waiting for the puff of fresh air to caress their curves and lines. Waiting for the dirt to be brushed aside and their porous surface to inhale the warmth of the sun.

Waiting to be found.

part one - bully

## chapter one

### *Coroner's Court 2014*

By the time the coroner sits down, the court is close to half-full. A lot of people for an inquest, but there's a bit of public interest in this one, and a lot of witnesses.

The court isn't in a building purpose-built for the function. Instead, it's an old community hall taken over by the justice department for use as an ad-hoc venue now that the old District and High Court buildings are out of action due to earthquake damage.

Wood panelling reminds the participants that style belongs to the decade, and the seventies were a long time ago by anyone's count. Still, it matches with the pews that were hurriedly installed after February, and at least it's a room somewhere, which something can be done in safely. It doesn't take long in Christchurch before you're sick of your pathway being blocked by danger tape.

Hah! I've been looking around me for so long I've missed the start of the coroner's speech.

'I'll try to call you in a logical order, to fit in with the anticipated timeline, but I'm afraid this may mean I'll have to recall some of you at a later date.'

He's talking to the witnesses who've all gathered along the front benches. Funny to see how they group themselves together. There's no love lost between some of these folk. No love lost between me and them neither.

'Mrs Harrow if you need to vacate the room during testimony at any time please feel free to do so, you needn't seek permission. Has your representative shown you the facilities available?'

My mother nods her head. She looks so dignified in this setting. Nothing like the sloppy mess she was the last time I saw her in person. When I was a person, I mean. She would've had a hard time putting herself together at that stage, but now her hair is arranged in a complicated knot at the nape of her neck, and it glows softly with care, conditioner and colour. Nothing like the

last time.

‘Okay. I want you to know that you can also ask questions through your rep at any time during the proceedings. Mr Anderson, you’ll let Mrs Harrow know when you’ll need to wait till the end, but otherwise?’

They nod to each other, old participants in this drama. Or similar dramas at any case. Mum looks content to know she’s being taken care of. It’s always nice to know that someone’s looking out for your best interest. I presume.

‘Okay, then we’ll start the proceedings. This is to re-open the coroner’s case file number 46782, the last verdict returned in this matter was manner of death undetermined. The transcript of that original hearing will be entered into evidence and will form the first part of this case.

‘The first witness I’ll call to the proceedings will be Ms Patricia Pearson.’

I settle back to watch the story unfold. It’ll be nice to see everybody again.

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### *Daina 2004*

I don’t know what it was about me that Ms Pearson the admissions secretary didn’t like, but whatever it was she didn’t like it a great deal.

The grimace of dissatisfaction her mouth screwed into when I appeared grew only deeper with distaste as I explained the reason for my appearance, late on a school morning, mid-way through term.

‘My previous school confirmed they forwarded the records through,’ I said and sat back in a hard wooden chair while she looked through the computer system for whatever the hell it was that she needed before I could be released into the horrors of the high school. This was the third high school I’d been enrolled at in a little under two years, and I believed I may have known just a tad more than she did about the process by now.

‘We haven’t received it through. We’ll need your guardian to sign you in.’

'My mother isn't available today. I can hardly call her away from work just to sign me in, when it's all already been arranged. Isn't there another place you could look?' Experience mixed with desperation had given me some confidence.

'Stay there,' she barked and stalked out of the room on high-heeled shoes that would've labelled her a whore at my last school. Still, the woman could barely scrape five feet with them on. Who was I to judge?

'Knock, knock, Patricia.' A man stuck his golden-curved head around the corner, a smile on his face. 'Who are you, and what have you done with Patricia?'

'Sent her away,' I replied. 'She's hunting down a transcript from my last school.'

'What year are you?'

'Year ten.'

'Come with me, then. You'll be in my English class that is due to start in,' he made an elaborate show of looking at his watch, 'Ten minutes ago. Pat'll be ages if she's chasing down paperwork. It doesn't get on with her.'

When I remained seated, he smiled even broader. 'You won't get in trouble for actually attending a class, you know. On your feet.'

'Not until you tell me who *you* are.'

'I'm Bond,' he said, coming into the room with his hand extended. 'Jeremy Bond.'

He wasn't like any teacher I'd come across before. But I followed behind him as he led me out of the main administration building and along to a wing that looked as though it had been added as an afterthought. Two prefab classrooms, standalone from the two wings we'd passed to get here. And a brand new shade of neutral.

When he walked into the classroom, the whole room gave him their attention. A popular teacher, then.

'Class, this is our newest student,' he turned to me with a question in his eyes.

'Daina Harrow,' I mumbled, embarrassed as I felt everyone's eyes settle on me.

'Daina.' He rested his hand on my shoulder as he turned back to the room. 'Daina Harrow, just transferred



in this morning so make her welcome. You may as well sit there at the front so that I can make sure you're okay.' He pointed and I slid into the seat. No relief from attention, as I could now feel everyone staring at my back instead.

'Right, where were we?'

'You were going to get a "sacred text" from the main office,' came a delighted yell from the back of the class.

'Oh, right. So I was.' He spread his empty hands wide. 'But I found a new student instead, and that's much better, isn't it? So where was I before *that*?'

There were half a dozen cries from around the classroom this time. All with completely different references.

'If I didn't know any better I'd think you were trying to trick me,' Mr Bond continued. 'So I'll just make it up myself.' He turned back to the board and wrote BLOOD in huge letters across it, then flourished it with a long line underneath. 'And whose blood would I be talking about?' he asked, turning back to the class.

'Lady Macbeth,' they chorused in unison.

'Well, not quite.'

'King Duncan,' came a lone female voice from the back of the class.

I wasn't the only one who turned to see a thin blond with a satisfied smirk on her face.

'Well done, Michelle. That's right. The blood was *on* Lady Macbeth's hands, but it was *from* King Duncan.'

He walked over to his desk, and looked puzzled at the lack of anything significant on its surface.

'It's in the office, sir,' came a helpful yell from the back of the class.

Mr Bond's face cleared, and he nodded. 'Right, well I'll just be a minute then. I need to fetch something...'

He walked out of the room, and there was a patter of snorts and giggles from the back of the class. 'Bet you five bucks he forgets it again,' said the same voice that had reminded his teacher he still didn't have the book he'd gone to fetch.

I turned around to look at the back of the room again, and identified it as belonging to a short boy with a

mess of long brown hair. He caught me looking and stuck out his tongue. I turned back to face the front of the class, my cheeks burning.

‘Paul, you don’t have five bucks,’ drawled Michelle. ‘And if you did you’d hardly pay up, welcher.’

‘Well fuck you, Miss know-it-all.’

Half of the class broke into horrified laughter, while the remainder ignored the two of them and carried on with whatever activities they’d chosen to fill their downtime with. I could see more than a few smuggled cellphones half-hidden in palms. At least I presumed they were smuggled. Cellphones were certainly contraband at the other high schools I’d recently attended.

There was a few minutes of peace, and then I heard the distinct sound of fist hitting flesh, followed by a low groan.

‘Fuck yourself, welcher,’ I heard Michelle whisper just before Mr Bond re-entered the classroom with a coffee in his hand and nothing else.

‘Now, where were we?’

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### *Ms Pearson 2004*

Patty left the office for a few minutes so the girl sat in there alone. She was a right piece of work. It wasn’t hard to spot the troublemakers, not when you’d been at this job for as long as Patty had.

She walked down to the end of the corridor and let herself into the staff room. It was gloriously empty, the whole coterie of teachers busy in their own classes. This was about the only time she used the room. Too much noise and too many people made her feel useless and alone. When she was actually alone she felt neither.

There was a chair covered with battered leather that had her name on it. As Patty sank into it with a sigh of content she counted down the days until Friday and release into the weekend. Her garden needed some attention now that the days were longer and the sun was warmer. If she didn’t pour herself into it now she

wouldn't have the rewards of fresh vegetables and warm sun-kissed fruit in the height of summer.

Only one term left and then she could relax properly in the long stretch of summer holidays. During the term she felt constricted, but with a whole six weeks of freedom in front of her she could truly unwind. All the benefits of being a teacher and none of the marking or daily class planning. And her mother used to tease her for being stupid! Well, she was enjoying the last laugh.

Five minutes had gone by, but that was probably enough. For a girl sitting alone in a strange office in a strange school it would seem like longer. Patty stretched herself out to her full height – not that there was much of it – and got to her feet.

Already her feet were protesting, and they had a good few hours ahead. Patty walked briskly back down the corridor. Not a person in sight. She was stuck in a permanent tiptoe due to the heels, but she wasn't about to give in and turn into a flat-foot. Nature's oversight could be corrected, and god knows Patty was going to correct it.

She could see as she closed the distance to her office that it was now empty. Patty shrugged, and wondered how she could fill in her morning. There were still some payroll forms to be processed. Duty registers to be checked. If she didn't get that done by Wednesday then the substitute teachers wouldn't get their pay. So she would definitely do that for the ones she liked. The rest, and there were many, could play roulette with whatever else took her fancy.

The scent of cologne that assailed Patty as she walked into her office made her screw up her face with distaste. Mr Bond had been in here, then. Nausea brought a rush of saliva to her mouth.

There was a textbook filled with notes that he'd left in a corner of her office. He seemed to delight in dropping by whenever he felt like it, half the time when he should've been in class instead, making a nuisance of himself. A bully, that's all he was. A stupid great bully.

She hinted as such every chance she could with Mr Fitzsimmons, the school principle, but he either didn't

get the hint, or didn't want to take action. Certainly his class response was positive, and the results from his level had improved under his tutelage.

Patty opened the cupboard behind her and pulled out the office shredder. She'd need to use a bit of force to tear through the spine of the book, her nails would be put in jeopardy, but it would be worth it.

Once she'd shredded the entire textbook she put the remains into the office wastepaper bin and put the machine back away. She'd had to use her own money to purchase the shredder – the school's budget didn't run to such frivolities – but it was worth every cent she'd spent on it.

Patty pulled the stack of time record sheets towards her and started to check them against the school register, a smile on her face. She could easily get everybody's cards through, she decided. No matter how much the subs had slighted her in the past. They'd all be paid on time.

No one could ever say that she wasn't diligent.

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### *Daina 2004*

Just before the end of class Ms Pearson knocked at the door and entered, not looking pleased. She beckoned me out of the room with her forefinger, and a wit in back went 'Ooooooh, new girl's in trouble,' in a sing-song voice as I obeyed the command.

'You shouldn't have left just like that,' she said sternly and handed me a clipboard. 'I've been looking all over for you.'

Mr Bond came out of the room behind me, and put a hand on my shoulder again. 'Sorry about that, Pat,' he said, as I tried to decipher what the form was all about. 'Thought she was better off learning something while you sorted out the paperwork.'

There was a sniff in response, and out of the corner of my eye I could see that most of Ms Pearson's face was fighting a sneer. God, she was awful.

'Sign there,' she said, pointing at the bottom of the

form. 'We'd usually get your parent or guardian to sign, but we'll make do until your mother can come into the office.'

Fat chance that would happen. I fully expected we'd be on the move again several times before my mother would ever pull herself together enough to visit a school office.

'Is that legal, Patricia?' Mr Bond asked in a teasing tone.

There was a loud bell that made me jump, and he laughed. 'No need to be so tense,' he said as he gave my shoulder a squeeze and released it. 'It's only the end of period bell.'

I handed the clipboard back to Ms Pearson, and she handed me a handwritten timetable. 'Here you go. Your next class will be biology. Just follow this lot; you'll be with them for all standard classes, and you've been enrolled in graphic design and computer science for your two voluntary classes.'

At my raised eyebrows, she added, 'They're the only classes with room at the moment. You can try to select next year. If you're still here.'

She turned away, and gave Mr Bond a look I couldn't decipher. 'You left your text in my office. I put it in the staffroom for you.'

I tagged into the stragglers from class and followed them out of the prefab building and into one of the more solid-looking wing buildings.

'Hey Daina,' called a voice behind me, and I turned to see Michelle coming up behind me. I slowed my step so she could catch up.

'Looks like Mr Bond took a real shine to you,' she said, her smile revealing the whitest teeth I'd seen on a real person.

I shrugged, unsure of what response to give. I wasn't used to being approached. Teenagers tended to have formed into their social cliques well before I turned up, so I was used to being ignored or being stared at. Not being talked to.

'Hand on the shoulder and everything. He wouldn't go into bat with Patricia for just anyone, you know.'

I shrugged again, feeling less comfortable by the minute. It was almost a relief when I felt the sharp jab of her knuckles in my kidneys. It was a well-practiced shot, but I was well-practiced at receiving them.

Michelle leaned forward, so close I could feel her breath on my face. 'You'd do well to stay clear of him from now on, got it?'

I nodded. I got it.

## chapter two

### *Coroner's Court 2014*

Jeremy Bond doesn't look like he used to.

The hipster appeal he exuded to his class ten years back has aged into seediness. His unkempt blond curls speak now of holding onto a look too far past its prime. Mutton dressed as lamb. They suit the shop window though.

His smile reveals teeth yellowed with nicotine, a habit that seemed daring and unusual at a different time, now just frowned upon by society everywhere.

His voice on the stand is hesitant. I remember his easy charm, the lilt of his voice matching perfectly to the teasing expressions that were his trademark, but now his voice tremors and he seems petulant when he would once have pouted.

Some things don't change though. Michelle is seated right in the front row, hanging off his every word. She married him, you know. After everything that happened, everything he did to her. Some dogs like being kicked.

She's sitting right next to my mother. As though she were family. As though she were someone who cared. The lying bitch. She's not there to make sure justice is done, or to find out what happened. No, she's seated right up the front there as a fanbase for Jeremy.

She's still thin and blond. She still looks like a cunt.

'Mr Bond, when was the last time that you saw Daina Harrow?'

Jeremy angles his seat towards the coroner. *He* seems like a nice man. Quiet voice, making sure that no one is feeling pressured. Aware that being in the front of the room could be hard for some people, and going out of his way instead to make it seem like a private chat.

'Oh, I think I probably saw her last about a month before her death.'

'Keep in mind that we haven't yet established a time

or date of death, so you'll have to give us an approximate date, if you don't mind.'

'Well,' Jeremy screws up his face. Fine. So he knows it's a month before my death, but he doesn't know when? Could that possibly be because he's lying through his teeth?

'I'd guess around November or December 2004.' Jeremy notes the frown on the coroner's face, thinks back and hurries to amend, 'Around December. Definitely.'

'Okay. And how did she seem at the time?'

'Oh, much as usual. She was always quiet, introspective, you know. Maybe she was a bit pale.'

Listen to him. Just listen. A bit pale. I was down to 45kg and all he noticed was that I was a "bit pale". Sic him, Judge.

Except the coroner isn't a judge, and he isn't going on the attack. He just accepts this testimony the same way he accepts all the rest.

What I want is a trial. A good juicy trial. Have a prosecutor ready to jump to her feet and yell, objection! Not that they run a courtroom that way here. But still, would be nice.

'Well, thank you for your time Mr Bond. Unless there's anything further you'd like to add at this time you can step down. Keep in mind that I may call you back to give evidence at a later time if it becomes necessary.'

'Thank you.'

He stands and walks to the nearest bench to sit down. Not because that's the seat he's chosen as the most advantageous, but because that's the closest and he wants to get out of the limelight. Well, well, Jeremy. Events echo, don't they?

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*Daina 2004*

'So what I want you to do is pull back the tables and chairs. We'll create a space in the centre. Shove all the tables over here, and line up the seats. Just like a theatre.'



Mr Bond directed the operation with a theatrical flourish, fitting in with the occasion he was trying to create.

‘Right,’ he said, clapping his hands together and rubbing them. ‘Now all I need is a volunteer to play the Lady Macbeth. Don’t all raise your hands at once.’

His irony was lost on the class, and they remained motionless. While helping to reposition every piece of furniture in the class I’d somehow managed to be in the front of the group. I tried to step back and behind the next person, but it was Jason who, completely in thrall to his fear of public speaking though there’s little chance of him being chosen, gave me a shove that not only had me back in the front line, but falling forward a step.

‘I’ll do it, Jeremy,’ Michelle said, stepping forward. He encouraged the use of his first name, but she made it sound like honey on her tongue. Beside her, Sharon stuck her finger in her mouth, completing the mime with a simulation of retching.

‘We already have our volunteer,’ Mr Bond said as he grabbed hold of my arm and raised it above my head. I tried to pull it back in horror, but it was too late then. I glared at Jason as I stepped in front of the class.

‘Right, I’ll take you outside for a five minute consult to offer you direction, and then you can come back through once I’ve talked these guys through the program.’

He pushed me gently between the shoulder blades out of the class, and I walked out. I even managed to resist the urge to just keep on walking.

‘Right, so I just want you to mime the actions of Lady Macbeth,’ Mr Bond said as he closed the door gently. ‘I’ll have the class read out the soliloquy on your behalf, so you just need to follow along with what they’re saying. Okay?’

It wasn’t okay. It was anything but okay, but I didn’t have a way of telling him that.

Michelle had already been scrutinising everything I did. Being picked out for this role was probably as much to her horror as it was to mine. There was no way of retrieving the situation now, though. If I tried, it would

only make things a hundred, a thousand, a million times worse.

And Mr Bond just headed back into the class as though he hadn't singled me out as a target. As though he hadn't just made my life hell.

I waited in the hallway until I receive the knock to come back through. I acted out the stupid charade of a stupid woman stupidly trying to take back something she never can. I acted it out, and tried not to catch Michelle's eye, even as I tried to keep track of where she was and what she was doing.

By the time I was allowed to sit back down, and it was someone else's turn to have a fool made of them, my head ached.

And that was the first class of the day.

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At lunchtime, I walked down the footpath at the front of the school to go into the mall. There was a teacher standing on the path, and as soon as I saw them I got a bad feeling in my stomach, but I kept going.

'Do you have a note?'

'Pardon?' I stalled, trying to get by.

'You want to go through to the mall, so you have to have a note. If you don't, you can head back.'

'I didn't know. I'm new here.'

I tried my best to insert full little-girl-lost into it, but I think my expression may have tipped into full-bitch mode while my control wasn't looking. She glared at me as though I'd told her to go fuck herself.

'Well, you know now.'

She stepped to the side to stop another girl who was using my encounter as her own opportunity. I turned back to the school. It wasn't as though I could slip by her. The path was the same width as the footpath, and it led to the only gap for 100 metres in the chain-linked fence that bounded the school.

I still needed to get to the mall though. It was already ten minutes past twelve, and I was cutting it fine if I wanted to get to the bank before my mother woke up.

I slipped down the side of the school where the secondary bike sheds were. There was a six-foot wooden fence down this side. The joists were on the other side as well, so there weren't any footholds.

I trailed my hand along the rough wooden surface as I strode half the length of the school without finding a way to hoist myself up. There was a possibility that I could make it out through the back of the school, across the playing fields, but then I'd have to walk three blocks to get back to the mall entrance which was where the bank was located. If I tried that I'd be late to class, and that would draw even more unwanted attention to me. I was already the new girl: I already had a skank targeting me because of some bizarre crush. I really didn't need to be known for skipping class on top of that.

I looked back towards the front of the school. I couldn't see the path from here, but I had no real reason apart from absurd hope to believe that it was now vacated.

I looked at the bike sheds again. If I could get up on the roof, I could just jump down on the other side of the fence. They backed up almost to the fence line. But there was no handy way up onto the roof either.

I walked back anyway, an idea starting to gain traction in my brain.

It was within a metre of the fence. If I could manage to prop my back against the shed I could shimmy up by legs, then use pressure to move my back up again, and then my legs.

I didn't think about it for too long, otherwise I wouldn't be able to try it. I pressed my hands and back against the fence, and placed my foot a metre up on the side of the bike shed. I closed my eyes and brought my other leg up as well. It felt like I was laughing in the face of gravity, but for the moment it worked. Now I just had to get up another couple of feet, and manage to wriggle over the top and I was home free.

'What the fuck are you doing?'

My eyes popped open, and I saw Michelle advancing upon me, with an entourage following close behind. Elvira, if my memory from home-room roll-call

served me okay, and Alicia, also from Mr Bond's English class. In panic I pressed hard back against the fence and stepped up the wall to raise myself another foot.

'Oh, dear god,' Michelle snorted at my attempts. 'You know there's a road out front you can just walk down?'

I tried to hitch myself up again, but the constant pressure required was already making my arms shake, and my back twitch. I didn't get much further upwards, but at least I didn't fall.

'What are you going to do if I do this?' Michelle lunged for my feet, and I made another desperate move upwards, trying to get up and over before she could catch me.

I was still short of the top of the fence, but I avoided Michelle's outstretched hands. Her smile, and the tense line of her body let me know she was about to make another attack.

I pushed back hard against the fence, freed one of my legs, and as Michelle came at me again instead of placing it back on the shed wall I placed it firm in the middle of her chest and shoved myself back and up. Twisting I caught the top of the fence, pulled myself up to my middle, and swung my legs over. I held for a moment to try to ascertain I wasn't about to land in anything life-threatening. But my arms shook so much I couldn't hold for long and I dropped down, turning my ankle slightly on the soft bark, and scratching the side of my arm on some overgrown lavender, but otherwise safe.

'You fucking bitch!'

Michelle's head popped up over the side of the fence. For a moment I thought she would be on me in a second, and I stepped back. But then I heard the frantic scrabble of thick rubber soles failing to make purchase on the lichen-slippery wood, her elbow slipped from the top of the fence, and she disappeared with the thump of a hard landing.

I didn't need a repeat performance. I ran for the mall entrance.

I stopped outside the bank and waited until my breath had returned to normal before entering. There was a queue of people waiting for the tellers, but I stayed in the lobby and used one of the automatic teller machines.

I entered my mother's card and then typed in the pin. The hand around the keypad was a bit theatrical maybe, but there was someone in line behind me and I kept seeing news stories about people shoulder-surfing their way into your bank account.

There was a beep and the screen registered 'PIN incorrect – try again.'

I entered the number again. Fast fingers must have got it wrong.

The same message appeared, and I heard an impatient grunt from the line forming behind me. I should've stayed outside and used that machine instead. There was only the one user there.

My heart was thumping noticeably in my chest. I told myself that was simply due to my exertions, and entered the PIN for the third time.

And watched as my bank card was swallowed.

The man behind me in line laughed. I turned, cheeks burning, shoulder bumping him as I walked by. Arsehole.

'Steal it, did you?' he shot back at me as I reached the door.

I carried on without looking back.

My mother must have cancelled the card. So either I'd have to steal her replacement again, or just live in hope that she used the money for its intended purpose, unlike every other time her benefit was paid out.

Shit!

I couldn't believe I'd gone to all this trouble for something that was already a no go. My selfish mother. Okay, so it was her bank card, but now she'd just take the money out and waste it on her favourite hobby. I'd started to get used to having the money available to buy groceries so we could both eat, and pre-pay electricity so I didn't have to endure cold showers every morning.

When I was getting close to the fence I scanned the wood to see if there was a knothole anywhere. I could always go back through the normal pathway, but I couldn't imagine that I would be able to enact a re-entry with having earned the third degree from Ms Simons. And, okay, my current situation didn't warrant a return visit, but that wasn't to say I wouldn't need it in future. I didn't want a teacher patrolling the pathway *and* the bike sheds the next time I needed to get across to the mall.

There was a gap in the fence further up from where I'd originally landed. I tiptoed through the bark and bush covered ground and put my eye up to it. I couldn't see shit. Or, should I amend that to, I could see shit. Whatever. There was no one standing directly in front of the knothole, of that much at least I could be certain. And it was further down from where I'd gone over so maybe I'd have a few seconds lead time even if Michelle and her friends were still hanging about.

I could hear the five minute bell go. Class was about to begin again anyway. No options left.

I grabbed hold of the vertical strut and put my foot on the horizontal and boosted myself up. I could clasp the top of the fence before I was even fully standing, and then I just had to jump up and swing my legs over.

It was as I passed the gravitational point of no return that I heard them running.

I tried to swing my legs back mid-turn but all I succeeded doing was hitching my skirt on the top of the fence leaving my backside and legs fully exposed.

There was a whoop of laughter as I struggled to free the fabric, and then I felt a hand grab at my underwear and yank it down.

The cool air against my buttocks. A flash of light. And then more laughter, running away this time.

I hung on one hand as I pulled my knickers back up. My skirt tore from the weight of me. It would be a hell of a repair job, but at least I was free now to drop to the ground.

There was no one in sight.

My skirt had torn in a vee shape down the side, but

I adjusted my kilt pin to move the front further over, and that hid it well enough. The bell rang for class and I started to run towards the science wing. My mind worked through the series of events trying to make sense of them. A laugh, the pull on my pants, a flash.

They'd taken a photo.

The bitches had taken a fucking photo.

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When I walked up the drive I could see that the curtains in the lounge were pulled shut. I tried to be quiet as I slipped my key into the lock, but every sound seemed to reverberate until it was all I could hear. With the door closed again behind me I could only make out the outlines of furniture in the gloom. There was a heavy fug of cigarette smoke, old fast food grease, and alcohol fumes that made me want to gag and cry at the same time.

If I had my way I'd stride through the house opening every curtain and window wide to let in the cleansing sunshine and clean, fresh air. I would vacuum up the ash and throw out the half-empty food containers, and pour every full and half-drained bottle down the sink. I'd throw my mother in the shower, and her clothes in the washer, and prepare something for the table that involved fruits and/or vegetables, and didn't rely on grease and salt for flavour.

If I tried that right then, I'd have a slap across the face before I was halfway round the room, and a punch in the stomach if I tried to go further. Not that my mum is violent by nature; she's not. But if she's in pain she lashes out, and nothing caused her pain during the day more than sunlight and noise. And me. Being present. Even quietly.

If I were a romantic I could try to pretend that she was a vampire. The sunlight would spell her death, so she drew the curtains as a barricade against mortality.

That would be the romantic version.

I tried not to make too much noise as I walked through the room and out the side. The stairs up to my

room on the second floor creaked at my every step. I'd tried in the past to step at the edges, at an angle, at alternate sides, but there was no way around it. So I just got up them at top speed. The noise was the same, but at least it wasn't stretched out, and my nerves with it.

When I sat down on my bed I could hear the distant rustle of movement. I breathed slow and even through my mouth so I didn't make a sound, and listened as though it was a participatory sport. The thump of my heartbeat, but little more. Five minutes, ten minutes. I stopped concentrating on how much noise my breathing made. I stretched out on the bed even though the slumped springs squealed with the change of pressure.

My stomach grumbled with hunger, but I was too tired to be worried about it now. I couldn't think what there'll be to eat anyway – I'd been counting on getting the money out of the bank to go grocery shopping.

Maybe some jam, with nothing to spread it on. Maybe some margarine. I was sure the eggs had run out. Too tired.

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I came fully awake all at once. There was a deep thump of a bass beat issuing from downstairs. Oh great. Another one of mum's parties, and I was sure she'd remember that I need my beauty sleep on a school night.

I pulled off my uniform and had a look at the tear in my kilt. I'd need to fix it up before I wore it again the next day. It was already starting to spread further. If I didn't fix it straight away, it'd be unfit to wear by the next week, and there was no money to buy another one. I could only get this one by trading in another school's and pretending it had never been worn. Well, it had only been worn for six weeks, and that hardly counted.

The song shifted, and the volume increased. There were cries of admiration. A favourite, no doubt.

The neighbours'd be round soon to complain about the noise. If they did they'd probably be on the receiving end of a fight rather than gracious compliance.

I pulled on a sweatshirt and some sweatpants. If I



was lucky, someone'd have brought some food along with them. Fish 'n' chips or Maccy Ds to soak up some of the alcohol. I trotted downstairs, taking no care about the level of sound. The bass beat had some audible notes now. And the cracked voices of people joining in without any true appreciate of tone, or rhythm, or melody, or the right words. It probably sounded great in their own heads. And they were unlikely to care about anyone else's.

Just as I was about to push the door open, there was a tinkle of breaking glass, and I paused, head to one side, trying to identify the sound.

A bottle. Definitely just a bottle.

Someone was out near the street deciding that what Christchurch needed now was broken glass strewn across the road for the morning traffic to appreciate.

I continued on through, and winced against the smoke in the room. From biology I'm aware that I should breathe through my nose when I'm confronted with pollution – the nose hairs help filter, or something – but stuff that for a joke. The smell'd make me retch.

'Love, you're home. You're home. Come and give your mother a hug. Mmmmmm.'

I was enfolded into the loose and fume-filled embrace of my mother.

'Caw, love – you're too young to have a grown girl, aren't you? Sisters, are you?'

My mother burst into appreciative laughter, and my insides groaned. She'd been turning on the flirt again then. I'd probably come across this one again tomorrow.

'Here, girl. Get yourself a drink then,' the man continued, shoving a half-empty bottle into my hand. Fill your own. Two litre. 'Cause that's appropriate, right?

'I'm good,' I say as I turn out of mum's gropey hands. 'Is there anything to eat?'

'Course there is love, course there is. I'll fetch you something. What d'you want? Chips?'

I nodded and followed Mum through to the lounge proper. There were about twenty people crowded into a space that usually felt confined when it was just the two of us. One of them was stubbing a cigarette out in a beer

bottle cap, and then the carpet when it twisted to the side. Stubbing out our damage deposit.

The low table was covered by opened containers of Chinese food, the soy smell pungent even in the smoke-filled room. That, and the opened flowers of white paper with chips as their centre. Their floral scent grease.

I tore off an edge of paper, and scooped a couple of handfuls in, turning to take them back to my room. I was pulled into a rough embrace on the couch instead.

‘Don’t be leaving us, love. Sit here and talk for a while.’

Uncle Charles had to shout over the noise from the stereo and the impromptu backing singers, but that didn’t seem to register as a reason his suggestion wouldn’t work. I wriggled forward to the edge of the sofa, about to stand up, but he caught me roughly by the shoulder and pinched me back into place beside him.

‘Whatchoo been up to then? Got a job yet?’

I resigned myself to staying seated beside him, and shook my head. I started to eat the chips. I could be here a while.

‘Why not? Why aren’t you helping your mother out?’

‘I’m still at school.’

‘So? You’re over fourteen now, aren’t you? At your age I had a paper round and worked on the milk deliveries.’

‘They don’t have milkmen anymore,’ I shouted back. ‘And the only paper round is fully signed up.’

‘Those are just excuses. You need to help out more. Your mother can barely get by as it is.’

I shrugged and continued eating, until the whole parcel hit me in the middle of the face.

I shrank back into the sofa, blinking, trying to grasp what had just happened. My uncle had hit the food straight into my face. My lips stung where the force of the blow had split it, the salt crept into the fissure and made my flesh scream.

‘Bout time you learned some responsibility, girl,’ Charles shouted at me.

I burst into tears and tried to leave the couch. It was

late. I was tired. I was still hungry. I was sick of these awful people making their awful mess in my awful house. Why did my mother invite them? Why couldn't she drink alone like a halfway decent alcoholic would? Why was everyone out to get me?

A blow across the face shut me up. And then Uncle Charles' face softened. 'Oh, honey I'm sorry. You just get me riled when you don't pay attention. Here, let me get you some more food and you clean yourself up.'

He patted me on the knee, and headed off to the kitchen. I wiped my lip with the back of my hand – blood smeared across it in a wide crimson line. After a second it started to pull upon itself and form into droplets. Clotted.

I pulled the edge of my sweatshirt over my knuckles, and rubbed my eyes dry. A chip fell from my shoulder onto my lap. I swept my hand behind me and pushed another half-dozen onto the floor. They already smelt of cold grease. My stomach lurched once, twice, and I was running across the room out to the back bathroom. I retched over the toilet and some chips came back up. They hadn't even started to digest.

I tried to breathe through my mouth but the smell still overwhelmed me and I retched again. And again. I stopped when the effort grew too great for my stomach muscles to handle. I could still feel my throat trying to gag. Still had the sting of acid in my throat; my stomach. But I just couldn't anymore.

There was a pounding on the front door. The loud exchange of angry and indignant voices, and the volume being pumped up even higher on the stereo. I flushed the toilet and put my forehead against the seat while the cistern filled back up with a series of burps. There was an angry scream, and the soft sound of fist hitting flesh. Another neighbour learning the hard way.

He didn't have to worry. At this rate we'd be moving on soon enough.

I slowly walked back upstairs. My clock showed the time as being after two o'clock. There was noise, and I was agitated, but the tiredness gripped me even stronger, and I chased it down into sleep.

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