

PROLOGUE

NOW

My first instinct on hearing the front door crash open was to panic that we were being burgled. I was home alone, curled up on the couch watching E! News. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled as I weighed my options – did I fight or take flight? Then I heard my husband's keys land on the marble side table and he hollered out that his dinner meeting had been cancelled. I exhaled in relief, a wry grin at the thought that Curtis arriving home early was so out of the ordinary, a visit from our local break-and-enter squad seemed far more likely.

"Where's everyone?" Curtis asked, bumping my wine glass as he leant over to grab the TV remote and switch to the news bulletin. "And what's for dinner?"

I had been looking forward to a quiet night to myself while he was out schmoozing clients over sashimi and sushi. Reminding him that the kids were at his parents' house for the weekend, my suggestion that we head out for a nice restaurant meal, just the two of us, was met with a massive sigh as Curtis flung his socked feet up on the couch.

"Too tired, babe," he whined, loosening his navy Hermes tie. "It's been a long week, I need to chill."

As he raised the sports presenter's voice to ear-shattering levels, I downed my wine and stomped off to the kitchen. With its polished black stone benchtops and top-of-the-range stainless-steel appliances, it looked like it belonged in the pages of a glossy home interiors magazine. It really deserved an owner who liked nothing better than whipping up gourmet meals, standing at the island bench in a floral shift and dainty heels, looking orgasmic as she sliced onions and crushed garlic.

Instead a more usual sight would be me, in my tatty cargos, tank top and Ugg boots, looking peeved as I popped a frozen meal into the microwave or washed the dishes by hand because I'd never figured out how to get the dishwasher on the correct cycle.

Peeved was definitely my mood now as I surveyed the fridge to see what wonders it contained. My eyes landed on a hunk of cheddar cheese and slices of leg ham. Toasted sandwiches, perhaps?

"I worked through lunch so I'm starving," Curtis yelled from the lounge.

With a sigh, I resealed the bread packet and switched on the oven. There was a roast lamb and rosemary pie in the freezer somewhere, from the regular food parcels sent by his doting mother.

"A beer would be nice!"

"In a moment," I yelled back, then muttered to myself: "Or you could always come and get it yourself, and give me a hand while you're at it."

It surely wasn't that long ago that Curtis was more than happy to join me getting dinner ready. We'd whizz around our local Marks & Spencer food hall, then cram into our tiny kitchen with the putrid lime-green walls to pop the dish in the oven and prepare the vegetables. Still in our honeymoon phase, we'd often get somewhat distracted, and Curtis would have to pick the burnt-to-a-crisp coating off his chicken Kiev. But he never complained.

Now, with the potatoes simmering along with my frustration at having to step into the kitchen at all while the kids were away, I served Curtis a frosty beer and perched on the armrest to flick through the junk mail.

Curtis prodded my bottom with his foot. “So what did you get up to today?” He cast a disparaging eye around the room, the discarded newspapers on the coffee table, the tangled mess of gaming controllers in front of the TV, the laundry basket in the corner I’d been planning to sort while watching *The Bachelor*. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t been flat out all day either, squeezing in a gym visit and vital medical appointment between errands. In fact, I’d been so busy I hadn’t even had time to check my emails or Facebook.

“The usual,” I replied before turning my attention to the post-news panel discussing a Hollywood wild child’s run-in with the paparazzi. Jade Farrow made Lindsay Lohan look like a saint; her crazy antics surely gave her Christian evangelist parents heart attacks on a regular basis.

Then the next story nearly made my own heart stop.

“AJ Dangerfield, lead singer of rock band Danger Game, has been arrested for driving under the influence in Los Angeles. Dangerfield was charged and then released on a three-thousand-dollar bail, after failing sobriety and breathalyzer tests.”

The screen cut to a mugshot of the singer looking sheepish – his usually mesmerising green eyes half closed, his dark hair sticking out at odd angles. “A police spokesman said the thirty-eight-year-old singer was pulled over about two am after his red Pontiac Firebird was seen speeding along the 405 freeway. He had allegedly earlier side-swiped a garbage truck.”

Cue footage of Dangerfield out front of Danger Game, arms raised in the air leading his besotted fans through a rendition of the heart-wrenching hit *Runaway*. “He was driving home from the studio where the band had been recording its long-awaited follow-up to smash-hit album *Tomfoolery*. A spokesperson for Dangerfield was not available for comment.”

“That guy is such a moron.” Curtis tossed me his empty beer bottle. “How long ’til dinner?”

As I returned to the kitchen to find the potatoes boiling over, I muttered to myself: “That moron, I’ll have you know, was my first love.”

THEN

Two decades earlier

I could barely make out the stage from where I was standing, nestled next to the hairy armpits of a guy with a serious need for Lynx deodorant. A splash of warm beer slopped down my legs – at least I hoped it was beer – as I tried to avoid the two dolled-up blondes in front of me who seemed intent on pressing their stiletto heels into my toes.

I patted the back pocket of my jeans, checking that my twenty-dollar note and fake ID were still there. Even though my card stated I was twenty-one – three years older than my real age – I preferred to keep under the radar and stay well away from nosy security guys. I startled as someone tapped me on the shoulder but it was only to ask where I got my band T-shirt. It was such a cool design – an orange sign with a skull and crossbones on the front and Danger Game written graffiti style across the back. They were selling them near the entrance for fifteen bucks, I told the guy.

“Check, one, two. Check, one, two.” Lifting on to my tiptoes, I spied a roadie moving about the stage. It’ll only be a few more minutes now, I thought, squeezing through the raucous crowd to get closer to the action.

Gerry, the floppy-haired bass guitarist, catapulted out from backstage, trying to rev up the four-hundred-strong crowd. Dom, shirtless and wearing baggy black shorts with a baseball cap jammed over his curly mop, took up his position behind the drum kit, carefully placing his bottle of Jack Daniel's to minimise the risk of spills.

Lead guitarist Heath sauntered out, winking at a group of girls pressed up against the stage. He was gorgeous and boy, did he know it. As one of the girls lifted her top, he grinned appreciatively at her bare breasts. Then the three band members launched into the opening riff of Rare Acceptance.

The scene was set for frontman AJ Dangerfield to burst on to the stage. Ignoring the guys headbanging beside me, I gazed up at the singer as he slammed away on his guitar. With messy brown hair, crooked teeth and a long pointy nose, he was certainly not your usual pretty boy pin-up. He was wearing a Sex Pistols T-shirt, with one sleeve rolled up to reveal a tribal tattoo, and snug-fitting black jeans that had faded almost to grey. But with his intense green eyes, to me he was the most gorgeous guy on the planet.

And I was certainly not the only one under AJ's spell. Though he was in a small, sweltering warehouse on the outskirts of LA, he performed like he was in front of a massive stadium crowd. He handled the hecklers, he cajoled the cheers and he raised the roof.

After a few rock numbers, the pace slowed and the singer swapped to his favourite red and black acoustic guitar. As Heath burped into his microphone and Gerry leant down to pour beer into the raised plastic cups of the front row, a girl clambered on to the stage to fling herself at AJ. Unable to play his guitar because of her vice grip on his arm, he started singing a cappella. The girl shimmied her bottom against him, wobbling her double D cups at the cheering crowd. Those headbangers' eyes were popping like Roger Rabbit's did when he clocked Jessica Rabbit's ample curves.

As the song came to an end and Jessica Rabbit was steered offstage, AJ's eyes picked me out of the crowd. He smiled, shrugged and launched into Going the Distance, a bittersweet song about the pain of being miles away from your lover. It felt like he was singing every word to me.

Later with backstage in my sights, I weaved through the throng. Maybe my luck was in tonight and I could get the singer on his own for a while. From a distance I could see Heath surrounded by his usual fawners. Dom was downing his second bottle of whiskey with a gang of bikies. And Gerry was bouncing up and down, still on a performance high. But I couldn't see him. For one despairing moment I imagined Jessica Rabbit had got her paws on him. She'd pushed him into an alcove, on her knees showing her appreciation. It made me feel sick.

Lifting my long hair off the back of my sweaty neck, I scanned the crowd frantically. I tried catching Gerry's eye but he turned away.

Then the drummer spotted me. "AJ's gone to have a slash."

And then I could see him being backslapped as he made his way back to his bandmates. He reached me, pulling me into a tight hug. "We killed it, tonight, baby."

"You certainly did, Andy," I said to my boyfriend, leaning in to give him a long drawn-out smooch. Out of the corner of my vision, I could see Jessica Rabbit giving me the evil eye.

CHAPTER ONE

Nikki was on the phone first thing, knowing my keen cyclist of a husband would be out on his Saturday morning ride.

“Why are you up so early?” I inquired. With no kids to worry about this weekend, I was out on the deck, reading the newspaper, my bare legs warmed by the spring sun. The lawnmowing man had been yesterday so the smell of clipped grass was still fresh.

Nikki, my best friend since first grade, was lucky enough to enjoy this sort of leisurely start every day. As a producer on Perth’s top drive-time radio show, she didn’t have to roll into work until well after lunchtime. Let’s just say what the day looked like before ten o’clock was not one of her specialty subjects.

Nicola Cordelia Millicent Palmer – to use her full title, which she banned anyone from doing since she despised inheriting her grandmothers’ names – was one of the things I missed most living on the other side of Australia. Phone calls and email exchanges kept us in touch but it certainly didn’t replace spending time together, sharing a tub of chocolate ice-cream and watching schmaltzy rom-com movies.

We first met in the playground on our third day of school. She was hanging upside down, her Holly Hobbie knickers flashing to the world, with her patchwork skirt caught on the climbing frame. I rescued her and from then on we were inseparable. And let me tell you there had been many occasions since when Nikki had been caught out flashing her knickers.

Nikki didn’t answer my question about her early rising and instead got right to the heart of the matter. “Did you see the story about the Shrimp getting done for drink-driving? He was looking rough.” She knew the chances of a celebrity scandal passing me by were next to none. Especially one involving this particular rocker.

The breeze rustled the newspaper so I set my coffee mug down on it, covering up the now-infamous mugshot.

“Have you heard from him lately?” Nikki asked tentatively, well aware I didn’t talk about Andy anymore.

She had been his biggest fan right from the start, when she invited herself along to check out my new boyfriend at his band practice session. She donned her best clubbing gear – a gold sequinned crop top and black lycra shorts – for the auspicious occasion. Towering over Andy in her chunky-heeled black boots, she nicknamed him the Shrimp. She loved the fact that he was my complete opposite – happy-go-lucky to my harried; mellow to my meticulous; untroubled to my uptight.

“No, not since, you know ...” I dragged myself back to the present and answered Nikki’s question.

“Well,” Nikki cut in. “According to Sebastian Sloane, all is not well at Casa Dangerfield. Siena’s dad is putting pressure on the band to get the album done. And Andy’s not happy with the direction it’s taking. There’s talk of him wanting to ditch it and start again.”

That wouldn’t go down well with Chandler Ellement. Andy’s father-in-law was the founder of record company Atticus, which unleashed Danger Game on the world in the mid-nineties. It had been six long years since their last album, Tomfoolery, and with every extra day in the recording studio costing big bucks, going back to the drawing board was unlikely to be an option for the notoriously headstrong music boss. And Siena would be leading the charge to get her husband to play by the company line.

“I don’t know why he ever married that woman,” Nikki harrumphed.

I also had no idea why Andy married Siena Ellement. Apart from the fact that he got her pregnant. And her adoring father controlled Danger Game’s future – one wrong move, like leaving his daughter up the duff without a ring, and all their aspirations would be dust. There were rumours that Chandler took a double-barrelled shotgun to the wedding ceremony, in case the groom got cold feet.

I’d never met Siena but her image was imprinted on my brain. She looked like Dita von Teese but instead of sultry burlesque star, think more snarling wolf. The dark-haired beauty with the porcelain skin was the creative director of Atticus; mother of three gorgeous daughters; owner of a sprawling Santa Barbara estate, a Fifth Avenue penthouse, a Kensington apartment a stone’s throw from the palace, and a holiday home on a private South Pacific island. And she got to share her bed with a rock legend. I’m sure I would have hated her on sight even if she had nothing to do with Andy.

“So have you mentioned him to Curtis yet, seeing he’s in the news and all?” Nikki asked.

“You’ve only been married for – what – a zillion years and he’s still blissfully unaware your first boyfriend is famous.”

“No,” I said, reaching down to stroke next-door’s tabby cat. “And I thought we agreed, I’m not telling Curtis. Ever. End of story.”

I’d made the mistake of dating someone before who knew all about Andy. How I felt about Andy, how I still felt about Andy all through our relationship. And that ended disastrously.

So from then on, I adopted a new approach: don’t mention the rock star.

* * *

“Sorry, sorry,” I exclaimed flinging my handbag on to my desk, narrowly missing the coffee mug I’d forgotten to empty out last week.

So far Monday morning had been a nightmare. My fourteen-year-old son, Ryan, claimed he was too sick to go to school. He’d been having lots of headaches lately, which magically disappeared as soon as I’d informed the school of his absence.

“Too busy at work today, sport. You can’t take the day off cos I can’t take the day off.” I gathered up a pile of manky clothes, stepping on a CD case in the process. “The floor isn’t a storage facility, you know.” I picked up the CD and instantly recognised the band on the cover. Since when had my son become a Danger Game fan?

Ryan pulled a pained, but brave, expression. “I can stay at home myself, I’m old enough. I’ll rest in bed, catch up on sleep.”

Yeah, right. I grew up with Ferris Bueller, you know.

“If your headache is that bad you can’t go to school, then we’ll need to see a doctor.” I pushed his fringe out of his eyes to rest my palm on his forehead. He didn’t appear to have a temperature.

Grumbling to himself, Ryan – who would probably elect not to seek medical help even if both legs fell off – rolled out of bed and made for the bathroom. He returned, buttoning his light blue shirt. Thankfully that stubborn tomato sauce stain was tucked away below the waistband of his grey trousers.

“I’m sure you’ll feel better once you’re at school,” I said, fastening his burgundy and white striped tie.

“I’m sure I won’t – especially with this thing cutting off my circulation.” He pulled at the tie, as if gasping for breath.

“You’ll survive. Now go get something to eat quick – and try to do something with that hair.” Ryan roughly ran his fingers through his dark matted locks before smoothing the long fringe back over his eyes. It still looked a frightful mess.

It was then that his younger sister, Ciara, who had been painstakingly straightening her honey blonde curls for the past half hour, reminded me that she needed something for international food day. And by remind, I meant told me for the first time.

It was too late to do anything apart from divert to the sparsely stocked continental deli on our school run. Muttering under my breath about teachers making life difficult for busy parents, I grabbed a few packets of Walkers crisps and HobNobs biscuits, tossing a bag of aniseed balls in for good measure. Her father was English so it was either that or a can of mushy peas and out-of-date rice pudding.

Waiting in the queue for a kiss-and-drive spot at Chesterfield Ladies’ College, I cringed as the other students piled out of their 4WDs and BMWs, carrying containers bursting with nutritious curries, home-made sushi and patisserie-quality baked goods. One girl wandered past with a tray of mini beef burgers with American flag toothpicks flying proudly. And Matilda Grinsted – who always boasted about her ancestors being on the First Fleet (without specifying if it was officer quarters or convict class) – was bearing a giant casserole dish of shepherd’s pie. Organic lamb, no doubt.

“Ciara,” I hissed, pulling into a free parking spot at last. “If anyone asks, I’m away for the week and your father arranged the food. Got it?”

Anyway, the upshot of this morning’s domestic dramas meant I missed my usual bus and was late for work. Hopefully my boss wouldn’t notice.

“Ah, Kellie. You’re finally here.” That would be my boss noticing.

Starfix editor-in-chief Zara Conrad – a willowy former model who was rocking a Camilla Franks kaleidoscope kaftan today – was the type of woman who broke through the glass ceiling and then pieced it back together with superglue so no one else could follow her.

“I’m afraid Adele has rung in sick – again,” Zara tutted, shaking her glossy black bob. “And Bethany is running late because of some child-care emergency.” Nothing short of a real emergency involving the police, ambulance, fire services – and possibly the SAS – would excuse this. When it came to her employees having to deal with family stuff, Zara showed zero tolerance.

“So that means I’ve got no one to attend the Kris Carson presser.” She tapped her purple glitter-tipped fingernails on my desk, ignoring Lenny, who piped up from the corner that he would be happy to cover it.

Kris Carson, Kris Carson. My mind went into overdrive trying to place the name. Ah, yes, that sixteen-year-old singer from the outback who was causing a stir with his YouTube videos.

“So I need you over at the convention centre. Like now. Get going. I’ll forward the details to your phone.”

As my taxi sped to Darling Harbour, I checked for her message. “YouTube sensation Kris Carson ... blah blah blah ... in town to promote his first EP ... blah blah blah ... ten-thirty press conference with Atticus Records creative director Siena Ellement.” Oh crap!

* * *

Kris Carson and Siena Ellement were fashionably late so I had plenty of time to stake out a spot in the third row. First row was too try-hard. Back row was too rebellious. Third row was just right.

I was skim-reading the media kit handed to me at the door, when a text from Zara pinged on to my phone screen: "Make sure you ask Siena about husband's arrest. Don't come back without." Zara was the principal of the my-way-or-the-highway school.

I glanced around to see which other media outlets had shown up. Lots of skinny girls were tottering in on their impossibly high heels, no doubt from the gossip mags or blogs. There were no TV reporters in sight, nor any of those grungy, bearded blokes who typically populated newspaper music sections. Damn it, I needed someone here who would ask the hard questions.

After briefing our photographer, Zoe, to get a good shot of Siena too, I had just retaken my seat when a cacophony of squeals started up outside. That would be the Justin Bieber of Birdsville arriving. Even though it was a school day, a fervent crowd of his teen fans – KrisCrushers as they were known – had camped out near the entrance, glittery posters in hand.

They, no doubt, like me had been earnestly following his Twitter feed. "Morning to my gawjess fans." "Got dressed in dark, might explain odd socks." "Chowing down a Subway meatball sub." "Talking music with aj freakin dangerfield's missus. defiantly love my life :-)"

I flipped open my notebook as the wunderkid strutted out but my attention was drawn to the woman accompanying him. She was immaculately dressed in a burgundy satin dress with cinched-in waist. How tiny was that waist? She'd make Kate Middleton look bloated.

All those photos of Siena looking gorgeous at red-carpet events, I had always hoped they were the result of advanced airbrushing techniques. I now realised they didn't do her justice at all – she was even more stunning in the flesh. However, it felt as if the room temperature plummeted several degrees as the renowned ice queen walked in.

Meanwhile Kris didn't look like a kid who came from a tiny settlement on the edge of a desert. No Akubra hat or flannelette shirt for him. Instead he was wearing black leggings, long black boots, and a ripped tank top under a sleeveless distressed denim jacket. I couldn't see the odd socks from here. A nice-looking kid, if you got past the multiple piercings and razor-sharp black mullet. It was hard to believe Kris was only two years older than my Ryan.

He sauntered over to his seat like he owned the place. A good-looking man with shaggy sandy hair hovered nearby – his father maybe? They shared the same gappy smile.

With a publicist conducting proceedings, the blogger squad fired away with their questions: "Kris, can you tell us about being discovered on YouTube?" "Was it fun shooting your first video?" "Do you have a girlfriend?"

With a vision of an enraged Zara in mind, my hand shot up, almost involuntarily. "Kellie Carmichael, of Starfix. My question is for Ms Ellement, can you tell us why your husband, AJ Dangerfield, was drink-driving last week?"

The publicist paled and sucked in her breath. Siena fixed me with a steely glare: "This media conference is about Kris and his amazing talent. I am not commenting on other matters at this time."

“So what time will you be commenting on this other matter?”

If looks could have killed, those would have been the last words I spoke. After shooting me a death stare, Siena ignored my question, motioning to the publicist to get another, more satisfactory one. Someone obliged with a query about whether Kris was likely to guest star on *Home and Away*.

At the end of the session, as everyone gossiped about how much they loved Kris’ denim jacket, I motored out of the room and headed straight past the cluster of fans to the carpark. Just as I suspected, there was a limo waiting. I smiled at the young driver who was having a sneaky smoke, and then glanced around nonchalantly. I planned to corner Siena when she left. I’d lie down on the road in front of her car if I had to.

With Kris busy signing autographs and posing for photos with fans, I got stuck into reviewing my story notes. I didn’t notice Siena approaching until she barked at the driver. “Put that cigarette out NOW. I don’t want your disgusting fumes polluting my airspace.”

“Yes, Ms Ellement. Right away,” he stammered, grounding the butt under his pointy-toe shoe.

Then I felt her laser-beam eyes alight on me. “Kellie, isn’t it?”

I nodded, surprised she remembered.

“It’s my daughter’s middle name.” Her nostrils flared. “Not really a name I like but my husband chose it.” Siena looked me up and down, coolly appraising my well-worn black trousers and purple silk shirt.

I tucked my arms tightly by my side, praying no sweat signs were visible, and willed myself to stop staring at her wedding ring, a gaudy cluster of pink diamonds that reached to her knuckle. “So are you ready to comment on Andy’s – I mean AJ’s – drink-driving charge?”

Siena’s eyes flashed with annoyance. They were the colour of coal and the thick black eyeliner made them look even more sinister. If anyone was looking to cast a new Maleficent, the evil sorceress of *Sleeping Beauty*, look no further. I wondered what sort of spell she had cast on Andy to make him choose her.

I squared up my shoulders, unwilling to let on how intimidated I felt. “I was his first,” I repeated silently to myself like a mantra. Where on earth had that come from?

Siena scrutinised my face. I wished I’d taken the time, like Ciara, to straighten my unruly hair this morning but thank god I’d had my eyebrows shaped on Friday afternoon – remember that vital ‘medical’ appointment I’d talked about? My beautician was so good she had a doctorate in waxing.

“You look familiar. Have we met before?”

I shook my head vigorously and tapped my pen on my notepad, to remind Siena that I was chasing a comment about her errant husband.

“Well, if you say so. I normally have an excellent recall for faces. You can contact my representative for a statement.” And with that she pivoted on her Christian Louboutin heels, heading back towards Kris.

She had only gone a few paces when my phone rang. Siena’s head whipped around, recognising my ringtone as *Going the Distance*, one of *Danger Game*’s lesser-known songs. In my haste to silence it, I cut off whoever was on the other end. Siena fixed me with her beady eyes and made to approach me again – her female intuition bells no doubt ringing sharply – when screams from the fans distracted her. A couple of the more well-

cushioned girls had enveloped Kris in a bear hug and looked like they were going to squeeze the life out of him. I seized the opportunity to hightail it out of there.

* * *

Back at the office, I wrote up the piece about Kris – he had some fascinating stuff to say about how fame wouldn't change him (said while twisting a bling bling ring on his finger) and how he loved playing the Twisted Metal video game. From my background research, I discovered his mother had remarried a cattle station owner, while his dad Marty (that was him at the press conference) was a former professional triathlete who ran a surfing school in Byron Bay. I tossed in a bit of colour about Kris' plans to climb the Sydney Harbour Bridge at twilight and a few quotes about how he thought the local chicks were totally "gawjess", and the story was ready to post, together with a great photo of him being mobbed by fans.

Working for the online media was all about speed. Journalism used to be about "if in doubt, leave it out" – now it was more "don't get it right, get it written". I checked our competitor websites to see if their stories were up yet – those flaky girls were probably still back at the convention centre talking about Kris' jacket.

"Where's the story on Dangerfield?" Zara pounced.

Thanks for filing that Kris Carson story so quickly. Oh, don't mention it Zara.

"I'm waiting to hear back from Siena's rep."

The emailed response when it came, cced to Ms Ellement, was short and not-so sweet for someone needing to write a four-hundred-word article from it. "My husband regrets his actions and intends to plead no contest."

Later I saw Siena had given a more considered, heartfelt interview to American gossip king Sebastian Sloane, including: "I believe AJ was suffering from the combined stress of working on the album and being away from his loved ones."

Hah, being away from you, Siena, would be reason enough to have a celebratory drink!

"He certainly feels very sorry for his actions but didn't realise he was over the limit. AJ would never knowingly do anything illegal."

You obviously don't know him as well as I do then.

"I am heading home soon and can't wait for us to be reunited. AJ is the most wonderful, loving husband and we can't imagine our lives without each other."

Pass me the sick bag.

CHAPTER TWO

I was all sweaty and out of breath the first time I clapped eyes on Andy. My doubles partner, Guy, and I were slogging it out on the centre grass court – I needed some serious work on my backhand before the under-eighteens pennants season started – when four boys on skateboards entered the bitumen courts behind us.

Whooping it up as they tried out tricks, their noise distracted us from our tennis practice.

"Can't you find somewhere else to do that?" I called through the fence. "Like in front of a roadtrain?"

The skinniest of the boys skated over, his long brown hair flying behind him. He jumped

off his board just before it hit the fence. “Don’t go getting your panties in a bunch,” he said in an American drawl, tilting his head as if trying to get a peek under my sports skirt. “Oh, a Yank,” I said. “I’ll speak slower so you can understand. Piss off, beat it, take a hike, get lost. Got the message yet?”

“It’s a free world, ain’t it?” The boy squatted down on his skateboard, pushing his black cap out of his eyes. “In fact, I might stay here and watch you and your boyfriend for a while. Don’t mind me, please carry on bending over for the ball.”

“You’re a creep,” I fired back. “And by the way” – I flicked my ponytail over my shoulder – “he’s not my boyfriend.”

Tugging down the hem of my skirt, I nodded to Guy that I was ready for his serve. But as our hit-up continued, I couldn’t get back into my rhythm. I was more than aware that the boy’s eyes were following me. It was most disconcerting – and perhaps a touch flattering. The rest of the skateboarders had long gone when Guy and I finished up but the boy was still hanging around. He sloped over while I packed up my gear.

“I’m AJ,” he said.

“Kell,” I replied, ignoring his outstretched hand. “What does AJ stand for – American Jerk?”

“Andrew Jovanni. So is it a coincidence that Kell rhymes with hell?”

“Touche.” I couldn’t help but smile. “So Andy – you don’t mind if I call you Andy -?”

“You can call me anything you want, honey. In fact, give me your number so I *can* call you.”

“Not likely – but I am intrigued, what are you doing all the way Down Under?”

As Andy entertained me with his impressions of Australia, I took in every detail of his face. His Roman nose with a bump on the bridge, the scar cutting through his thick eyebrow, eyes that changed colour from a murky seaweed green to a sparkling emerald depending on the light, the canine tooth that jutted out, the two silver hoops in his left earlobe.

Guy interrupted Andy’s stand-up routine just as he was explaining how he thought everyone here was obsessed with disfigurements, until a cousin informed him “scar none” was actually an Aussie asking “what’s going on?”.

“Kell, I’m heading off to pick up my sister. You okay to get home by yourself?” Guy looked at Andy pointedly.

“I’ll be fine.” I waved Guy off to his car, before heading over to unlock my bike.

As Andy walked me home, pushing my bike with his skateboard balancing on the seat, I discovered his move to Australia was actually no laughing matter. His father had died in a workplace accident the year before so his mother had moved to Perth to be near her sister.

I glanced over at Andy. His jaw was clenched and his eyes were glassy. Even though I had a million questions zipping through my head, I sensed it wasn’t the time to pry. “I’m sorry,” was all I said. Andy nodded, before kicking a loose piece of gravel into a drain.

A year older than me at seventeen, Andy had dropped out of school to help support his mother but he didn’t mind because all he wanted to do was be a musician. With his best friend Gerry, he was in a band called Danger Game back in San Francisco.

“I hate being away from the whole scene but ma needs me around right now. Anyway that’s my story. What about you? What do you do when you’re not bashing tennis balls?”

I told Andy about how I was also an only child, raised by a single mum, after my loser of

a father up and left before I was born. Last we heard he was in England.

"I never really thought about it like that before," Andy said. "In a way I was lucky to have sixteen years with my pops. You never even met yours."

"But then again," I replied, "what you've never known, you'll never miss."

When we reached my house, it was like we didn't know how to say goodbye. So we didn't.

"Is your ma waiting for you to come in for dinner?" Andy asked, nervously twirling the crucifix on his necklace.

I explained that my mother was a waitress at a Mexican restaurant and worked nights.

"So are you going to ask me in?"

I hesitated for a second before blurting out: "Can you cook?"

He puffed out his chest. "I'm from an Italian family, of course I can. Food is our lifeblood."

"So why are you so skinny then?"

"I'm not skinny." Andy flexed a fairly insignificant bicep at me. "I'm built like a rock star – Mick Jagger, Iggy Pop, Kurt Cobain. How many fat frontmen do you know? That's right, nada."

"Meatloaf."

"Okay, apart from Meatloaf."

"Elvis Presley."

"He was fine before he hoed into the burgers."

"Sir Mix-a-lot."

"Who the hell is he? Now you're just making them up."

"Getting back to the topic at hand – if you're willing to cook tea while I study, you can come in."

Leaning my bike against the side gate, I unlocked the front door and steered Andy towards the kitchen at the back of the house. "Do you have any specialty dishes?" I called over my shoulder.

"Spaghetti bolognese?" he offered.

I scrunched my nose in distaste. "I don't eat meat. What about spaghetti with a plain tomato sauce instead?" I tossed him a couple of tomatoes before slamming shut the fridge with my hip.

"Stand aside woman and be prepared to be amazed. You got a stick blender?"

I pointed towards the bottom drawer. Our tiny kitchen was really only a one-person zone. Mum had vowed for years to rip out the wood-vinyl cupboards and orange laminate benchtop to redesign the poky space. But we were still waiting for our lottery win.

I left Andy to whip up our dinner, humming to himself as he chopped up a salad, while I finished a maths worksheet at the dining table.

"What on earth are you doing?" I exclaimed as he flung a strand of spaghetti against the wall next to the fridge.

"Testing to see if it's ready. You really don't know much about cooking, do you? It needs a few more minutes." He sauntered over to flick through my files. "Ninety-five per cent, A-plus, Excellent effort ... geez, don't tell me you're one of those freakin' smart kids who's enrolling in pre-med."

Over dinner – and it really was the tastiest pasta I'd ever eaten – I explained my plans to become a political reporter after I finished school the following year. Three years for a

university degree, then a newspaper cadetship – I had it all mapped out.

“Why don’t you become a music writer? Then you can tour with us and write about how brilliant we are.”

“Standing shoulder to shoulder with a bunch of sweaty music fans ain’t really my scene,” I grimaced.

“Better than hanging out with lame politicians. Hey, can I use your phone? I should let ma know I’ll be late.”

Just after he hung up from speaking with his mother, the phone rang.

“DON’T ... answer it.” I trailed off as he picked up.

“Hello ... This is Kell’s boyfriend” – he grinned at me – “who’s this?”

I could hear Nikki’s shrieks from where I was standing.

“You want me to tell her what? You’re never speaking to her again? Hang on.” He turned to me. “Your best friend demands to know why she wasn’t told you have a boyfriend.”

“Can you inform her I don’t have a boyfriend – that we only met today.”

“Hey, I’m back. She says she hasn’t told you I’m her boyfriend because we only met this afternoon.”

More shrieks. “She wants to talk to you.” Andy passed me the phone.

“What the heck is going on? Who is this bloke? And what’s he doing at your place?”

“His name’s Andy. He was riding his skateboard at the courts and walked me home for tea.”

I listened to Nikki some more, then looked at Andy coyly. “No, I’m not being held against my will. I don’t need to use our secret codeword because I’m not in any danger.”

“Yet ...” Andy said with a devilish smile.

“He’s a musician ... seventeen ... San Francisco ... about my height, long hair, a bit like Andre Agassi’s in fact but darker ... I guess you could describe him as sort of cute.”

“She means very cute.” Andy leant on me to speak into the receiver.

“Okay, now she wants to speak with you again.” I passed the phone back. And for the next twenty minutes Andy answered a barrage of questions. I think the only thing she didn’t find out was which brand of toothpaste he used.

“So has your ma always worked nights?” We were sitting on the couch, with the TV on in the background. Seinfeld. That show always cracked me up. But we were too busy getting to know one another.

“Only the last few years. When I was a little kid, we lived with my Aunt Beth. Then when she moved down south, neighbours looked after me after school until Mum finished work. Once I was old enough to stay by myself she took the job at the restaurant. It’s much better pay on night rates.”

Andy kicked off his battered sneakers. “Can we go to your bedroom?” he asked.

“No, we can’t,” I replied indignantly. “Not if that’s meant as some sort of proposition – like can I come up for coffee.”

“Nah, I just want to see your room. You can tell a lot about a person from their room. Although if coffee is on offer...” He made the quote mark gesture on coffee as a filthy grin spread across his face.

I punched his shoulder, before leading the way to my bedroom.

He fake gasped as he took in the poster on my door. "New Kids on the Block! There is no way I can hang out with someone who likes them. Wait, tell me, who's your favourite?" "Donnie."

"Hmmm, that might be alright then. Seeing he's the bad boy. With the teensiest bit of street cred."

Andy examined a framed photo of me on my first day of school, all pigtails, dimples and missing front teeth. "So you're smart, sporty, vegetarian ..." he said toying with one of my tennis trophies. "I'm feeling a bit out of my league. All I've got to offer is 'sort of cute'."

"Maybe make that very cute," I said shyly.

The telephone rang again. I bet that would be Dawn. Nikki would have been straight on to our friend the minute she got off the phone with us.

Neither of us answered it. Instead Andy leant in and brushed his lips against mine. My first ever kiss. My heart was thumping as he cupped the back of my neck and caressed my hair. Second kiss. Then third. He teased open my mouth with his tongue. And then I lost count.

And so it became a regular fixture: Andy would start work at six, heaving boxes of fruit and vegetables at a warehouse alongside a family friend. I would go to school, heaving a bag filled with textbooks. By five o'clock he would be at my house, cooking dinner while I did my homework. Sometimes even when Mum didn't have a shift, Andy would tell her to put her feet up while he cooked for the pair of us.

On paper, Andy was hardly the type of boy you'd want to take home. A long-haired high school dropout who played in a band. But he knew how to turn on the charm and my mum loved him. Plus he could make a mean veggie casserole.

And the truth is, I loved him too. One minute he was this annoying kid on a skateboard and the next he was someone I couldn't imagine not having in my life.