One

Edie

Early in the morning of Sunday, 5 November 1905, in Ballarat, when the sun has just woken, wiping sleep from its eyes.

Edie had a plan. She'd written it in her notebook and once something was written in her notebook, Edie knew it would happen. The letters had curved and spun on the paper as she wrote, as if they were threading themselves into the ordinary moments of life, quietly breathing their magic and putting things into place while no one was looking.

Edie's plan wasn't a big majestic plan that would up-end governments or bring love sweeping in like the gust of wind that roared up the wide main thoroughfare of Sturt Street to the big intersection at Doveton Street, where it would swirl like a tornado and whip women's skirts up around their thighs, throwing them off balance and into the waiting arms of lonely miners.

Edie had made a modest plan. A carefully thought out plan. A plan for a love that would be gentle and soothing like a freshly brewed hot cup of tea first thing on an icy morning.

The dim morning light wove its way through the trees into Edie's room and turned the leaves of the rose-patterned carpet from olive to chartreuse, gently announcing the day.

Edie had woken before the sun and now eased herself up onto her elbow. She tugged hard at her nightdress, which was caught under her hip, and reached under her pillow. Her notebook had slept there, safely tucked under her dreams, and now as she held it in front of her the sun lit up its gold-embossed initials. She loved the feel of the leather cover and ran her fingers over her initials on the front. When she held it to her nose the warm musky smell filled her heart. Her father had given it to her on her birthday. It had a leather loop at the side to hold a small pencil. She opened it to her latest entry and read it over:

Fifth November Five
I am nineteen years old.
Plan — Marry (try to make it Theo Hooley).

She always wrote the date out in words, it looked more permanent than numbers. Then she put the notebook on her bedside table, threw the blankets aside and jumped out of bed. She was ready to put her plan into action.

Now, Edie wasn't an ugly girl, not by anyone's standards. She didn't have skin that was cratered like the moon or a nose that was long enough to hang a coat on. She wasn't too fat or too tall. But her looks were unremarkable; men didn't turn to drink her in when she walked past. She was ordinary, as are most girls who don't have older sisters to show them the ropes. No one had shown Edie what suited her or how to attract a man's attention.

She didn't know how to tease with inviting words or how to catch a man's gaze for just long enough to pique his interest before quickly pretending disdain so he would come scurrying after her.

Just yesterday her mother Lucy had said, 'I think the problem is, my love, that none of the men match your intelligence and spark,' and passed her a cup of tea exactly how she liked it.

'You say that because I am your only child,' Edie replied. 'You have to say something to make me feel better.'

'Plainer girls than you have married,' said her father, jabbing his umbrella at an imaginary jury. 'Your mother is right — you are just too intelligent for them.' Paul Cottingham swirled his umbrella in the air as if it was a magician's wand, only just missing the glass lightshade. 'Edie darling, if I could click my fingers and conjure a devoted and loving husband from thin air I would do it in an instant. You know I will give you anything within my power,' and he bowed to her to show that he meant it.

Then she saw him dismiss her problems from his mind and focus instead on the stitching on the umbrella, as if it was far more important than she was.

Her father had been even more distracted than usual for the past month. He didn't really seem to listen when she talked about how Essie had got engaged to Vincent Jessop. More importantly, Essie was two years younger than she was — did you hear that? Two years younger. He would nod absently as she went on to tell him how Marjorie Hollings already had a baby that was six months old. He used to give her optimistic hugs and carefully kind words, but these days he mostly gave her preoccupied murmurs and inattentive nods. Edie had watched him, longing for him to think about her again. She knew, and she knew her father and mother knew, that now she was nineteen the chances of her finding a husband were dwindling fast. This was an urgent matter.

'I think they've got the stitching uneven here,' said Paul, and had held the umbrella out for inspection. 'Does that look like an even quarter-inch spacing to you?'

Edie ignored the umbrella and said, 'Well, if I can't find a husband I might as well find work. Perhaps what you can give me is a job in your rooms?' She knew the reaction she would get to this. Her mother had sighed and leant back in her chair and fussed over a drop of milk that had been spilt on the table. She'd whispered quietly to any spirits watching, 'Here we go again.' She had seen Paul and Edie have this same conversation many times.

Paul had snapped his head up quick smart, his eyes dark and blistering, and said what he always said, 'No daughter of mine is going out to work as though I am too poor or too negligent to support her.'

'You're so, so …'

'So what, Edie?' he demanded.

'Oh, I don't know — impossible and … and old-fashioned,' and she'd stormed off as she always did, leaving the perfect cup of tea lonely on the table before he could lecture her on his role as a father to provide and her role as a daughter to be provided for. She already knew his views on her working but as for his distractedness with that stupid umbrella — she really didn't know what was going on with him these days, and put it down to a problem bothering him at work. It certainly couldn't be a problem at home.

Her home — or rather, her father's home, because that was how she, her mother Lucy, and their maid Beth thought of it — was a home with fine filigree cast-iron lacework and great leadlight windows. The house had its roots buried deep in the soil and it sprawled into four bedrooms and a sun-filled sitting room, a reading room, a formal dining room, her father's study and the maid's room. Its wide verandah stretched from the front right-hand corner of the house around to the far left-hand corner of the rear

of the house, where it met the maid's bedroom and the laundry. Jasmine clambered over the verandah railings and took its moment in spring with vigour, filling the house with gusts of perfumed air that promised anything was possible. There was an expanse at the side of the house large enough for two horses and carts to come right up to the verandah if they were so inclined, and there was a brick path that wound through the garden from the front gate to the verandah steps and up to the front door. The house was her father's gift to her mother and was full of the sweet voice of her mother singing for her father.

Edie thought about the fabric that had built the home she lived in, she thought about it hard, the love her father and mother shared, and she yearned to share that love with someone of her own. She now sat cross-legged on the carpet, still in her nightie, hacking away at her best Sunday skirt with the enormous haberdashery scissors she had taken from Beth's sewing drawer. Her fingers ached with the cold. It was chilly and every now and then she shivered, but she was too intent on what she was doing to notice the goosepimples on her arms and legs, her head filled with the cruel words of the women at church.

Edie had tried to convince herself that she didn't care what the women said about her and tried to harden her heart, but she did care and her heart was soft and the women's barbs pricked at her heart like a splinter she couldn't scratch out.

'I'll show them,' she said to the skirt crumpled unhappily in her lap.

Even though she tried not to think of them, the most hurtful scenes repeated themselves over and over. Edie saw Vera Gamble, who still had a little-girl voice she had chosen never to grow out of, whispering to Marjorie Hollings. Could you even call it whispering when everyone within ten feet of her heard? Vera had looked around her, not to make sure no one was listening but to make sure everyone was listening, then she'd leant over and in a

big show of whispering confidentially had said to Marjorie, 'What hope has Too Girl got of catching a husband with her looks?'

Edie had rushed home and stared at herself in the mirror for a good hour, wondering if she really did look that bad. There was no sister to tell her that Vera Gamble knew Edie could hear her rotten whispers that were bitter like mouldering oranges or that Vera was just being nasty for the sake of it to give herself a little thrill. Ever since that whisper Edie had accepted that at best her looks were unremarkable and at worst downright unpleasant to men.

She slashed at the material of her skirt with the scissors. She cared very deeply. It gave her a physical pain in her chest when she thought about it. And it wasn't just Vera Gamble.

Missus Whittaker always nodded her head disapprovingly when she looked Edie's way, and Missus Blackmarsh had stood in the church kitchen doing the washing up and waved a soapy teacup in the air and said to Missus Turnbull, who was drying up, that the problem with Edie Cottingham was that she had no idea what a man needed in a wife.

'Edie,' she'd said, 'is full of toos. Too stubborn, too outspoken, too liberal — you can thank her father for that — too ordinary, too modern.' And Missus Turnbull had laughed with a strained noise that sounded like a cow mooing and Edie, who had been about to go in and offer to help, had heard it all from the hall. From then on Missus Blackmarsh had called Edie the Too Girl and then all the women started calling her the Too Girl, even though they had no idea how the nickname had started.

But Edie was going to change everything. She would make the men notice her and she would show Missus Blackmarsh what modern really was.

Edie had got the idea for her plan from *The Delineator: A Journal of Fashion, Culture and the Fine Arts*. The magazine had all the latest trends. It took those trends a good two years to reach her from Europe, but apart from Edie, the people of Ballarat were happily ignorant that they were at least two years behind the rest of the world. Edie ripped a piece of material away from her skirt. She'd be the very first girl in town to have a skirt like this.

Her father would die when he saw it. God only knew what he'd say.

Edie worked away, cutting and sewing. When she finished the skirt, she would have to adjust her petticoat to match. She heard Beth get up and start clanging china and pots in the kitchen as she set about breakfast and preparing lunch for after church. She heard the clock ring out six chimes.

Edie kept pulling at stitches. She kept cutting away cloth. She heard the clock chime seven and then eight.

Finally the job was done.

She stood up and held the skirt out in front of her. She shivered at her daring and smiled proudly as though she had created the entire garment herself. Then her father knocked on her door. It was as though he knew she had done something mischievous. He always knew when she was up to something.

'Damn it,' she said. Then she reminded herself that she wasn't a little girl any more and her father couldn't see everything she did. He couldn't see through the thick wooden door.

'Edie, are you all right?' he asked, and she thought she could hear suspicion in his voice. 'Are you coming to breakfast, Edith? You better get a hurry-on.'

She felt her cheeks burn as if she'd been caught out, even though his voice sounded far away, muffled by the thick closed door. She had to remind herself again that he couldn't see her through the

wood. She ran and put her weight against the door so he couldn't come in. Blimey, he'd have a fit when he saw what she'd done.

'Edith?' her father said, expecting an answer.

'I had breakfast earlier,' she lied, and the lie sat uneasily in her chest. Her father was a man of principle, the sort of man who could gaze into your soul and know immediately if you were guilty or innocent, especially if you were his only child. It was a talent that stood him in good stead in the courtroom and had frightened Edie when she was little.

She listened to her father's steps recede down the hallway and relaxed when she heard the murmur of his voice talking to Beth.

She waited for Beth to settle her father and serve him breakfast and then when the clock struck nine she rang her bell for Beth to come and help her dress. She'd have to rush now, to get dressed in only an hour, and she thought how good it was that she hadn't had any breakfast — it would make her waist look smaller.

Edie sat on the edge of her bed and pulled on her stockings, clipping them to the garter, and then she laced her short boots with the buttonhook, because once she'd got her corset on she wouldn't be able to bend over. She had the latest — a new health corset, imported from England and designed by a lady doctor to protect a woman's vital organs. But once Edie strapped her body into the corset she'd be nearly immobilised.

Beth knocked on the door and Edie called out, 'Come in, Beth.' She stood up as Beth walked in. 'Sometimes I envy you, Beth, that you're not expected to wear a corset,' she said.

Edie didn't notice the jealous frown that Beth threw at her expensive clothes, but she did notice that Beth yanked harder than she needed to on the lacing, and Edie's breasts were thrown unnaturally forward into the world, while her hips were pushed back and her spine was warped into an S shape, bowed like wood left out in the rain.

'Not too tight,' gasped Edie, 'I'm getting too old to expect miracles from corsets.'

'Do you want me to measure?' asked Beth. The corset had its own agenda and was aiming for a sixteen-inch waist.

'No I do not. I'm hopeful, not delusional.' She handed Beth the bust bodice, which, with the help of clean white handkerchiefs stuffed down it, consolidated her breasts into one impressive structure that presented a united front to the world.

Beth reached for the five-gored petticoat lying across the bed.

'I'll be right now,' said Edie. 'You go and change for church or you'll be late.'

She didn't want Beth to see what she'd done to her skirt. Not yet.

When Beth had shut the door behind her, Edie put on her silk chiffon bodice with its leg-of-mutton sleeves and boned lining, and finally the matching pale blue silk chiffon skirt. She tied the satin ribbon around her waist. She pinned the pompadour frame on her head and brushed her hair up over the frame, pulling the brush through strands that wouldn't grow past her shoulders; thin wispy fibres that, now she looked at them through Vera Gamble's eyes, she had to agree refused to speak of beauty. Edie might not have an older sister but she could read and she had learnt some tricks from *The Delineator*. She reached for the extra hairpieces she had purchased to make her hair appear abundant and secured them in place with hairpins, and then pinned on her hat. It floated high on her head, a cloud of ostrich plumes. She had bought the new plumes especially for today, on special at the milliner's, only seven and six for fifteen inches. The advertisement said they were an indispensable aid to beauty. Edie wasn't taking any chances; she'd take all the aid she could get.

Only now, when she was completely ready, could Edie bring herself to look in the mirror. She gasped at how short her skirt really

was. She hadn't quite expected to remove that much material. For a moment she wondered if she had the courage to go through with it. But she was desperate. Without a husband she'd never have a home of her own. She'd always be a child in her father's house. She'd always be the Too Girl. She would have nothing to do, her father wouldn't ever let her work and her mother looked after their house and didn't need her help. As much as she loved her father, she had to escape, she had to have her own home and her own life. She stood back a little and pretended she was Missus Theo Hooley.

Missus Blackmarsh always tugged her hair, black like her name, so tightly into a bun like a doorknob on the back of her head that her eyebrows were pulled up and her skin was stretched over the harsh pointy bones of her face. Her eyes became tiny dark slits through which she peered disapprovingly at the world. She had seen Edie through her slit eyes gazing at Theo one Sunday and said to herself, 'Well, well, well, fancy that.' And then she had turned to Missus Whitlock and said, 'Too Girl is far too loud to ever catch quiet Mister Hooley.'

'He'd never say another word,' added Missus Whitlock. And laughed as they looked at Edie, who knew they were laughing at her and blushed. Since her interest in Theo had been noticed, the other girls, who might not have thought of him before, thought that if Edie was interested in Theo he must have something worth being interested in and were now considering him a viable option. Edie had seen them flitting and fluttering around him. She'd seen Vera Gamble fluttering just last Sunday, giggling like a schoolgirl at every word he said, which, given Theo, wasn't many. Edie couldn't flutter or flitter or flirt. She gazed at the mirror to see what sort of an impact she could make on him, if it would be enough to whet his appetite.

Edie waited behind her door until it was time to leave for church. That way she could put off the inevitable hullabaloo over

her skirt. Her heart pounded against the bones of her corset. Her fingers began to sweat as they gripped her umbrella too tightly. It wasn't the possibility of her father being angry that made her nerves jangle, it was knowing that this was her very last chance. She had thought through all the available men in the district and there were no other possibilities. There was no one else for her if she didn't get Theo.

Two

The Cure

In church, where the air sits still and lazy around people's heads, making the women faint and the men sleepy.

Now Theodore Hooley wasn't a boy in his twenties whose chest was puffed with arrogance and newly discovered clout. Oh no. Theo had been to the African war and come back. He'd had the clout well and truly knocked out of him. At least he'd come back in one piece, and Edie thought that made him worth loving alone. Besides being physically whole, which was undoubtedly a huge plus, Theo Hooley had also come back quieter, hollowed out and embracing the ordinariness of life. He seemed content living with his mother and playing the church's newly imported organ on Sundays. The men occasionally commented that Theo hadn't decided on a career since getting back from the war. Many returned soldiers opened a shop or went to the mines, but Theo hadn't done anything except eat his mother's cooking and play hymns.

Missus Blackmarsh told everyone Theo didn't need to work because he had brought back gold from Africa hidden in the seams of his greatcoat, and the quantity grew each time she told the story.

When Edie had mentioned Missus Blackmarsh's theory to her father, Paul had laughed and said, 'Well, as I manage the estate for Missus Hooley I think I would know if there was golden treasure involved.'

It didn't bother Edie that Theo seemed content with an uncomplicated life. It was precisely why she knew that, even though she was now nineteen, she might have a real chance with him. She could just slip into his life almost unnoticed; she could fill a hollow space and the two of them would be comfortable.

She took one last look in the mirror and a deep breath for courage.

'Edith — we're leaving.' Her father's voice called out again and suddenly, full of the possibility of Theodore Hooley, Edie did feel brave and 'so what' if everyone was going to be outraged by her short skirt. She flung open the door and it banged against the doorstop and shuddered like a washboard. The jasmine filled her lungs with hope, she stepped into the entrance hall with its glistening tiles and frowning portraits. She smiled broadly, trying desperately to keep everyone's attention on her face and not on the shortness of her skirt. By jiminy her father would go berserk seeing his only daughter — his only child — scantily clad. Her father was always so intent on setting a standard in the community and expected Edie and her mother to follow suit.

'I've never seen you so happy about going to church before,' her father commented dryly, seeing her expectant face; then he tapped his fob watch, swung his umbrella in little circles and said, 'Righteo.' He was bound tightly into his three-piece suit; it was pulling at his middle, which was slowly expanding with age.

Edie was perplexed. In truth she was a little annoyed. He hadn't even bothered to look at her skirt. He was so vacant these days. She looked questioningly at her mother, who was leaning against the wall. She had dark rings under her eyes and a large

loose cape over her dress. But Edie didn't notice her mother's tired appearance and looked back at her father, who was still tapping his watch, timing their departure perfectly, and then she looked at Beth standing a few feet away in her linen skirt, waiting to see if she was family or servant today. She was always fluctuating between the two, sometimes an intimate, at other times an observer; the tide entirely depended on the family's mood.

Two years ago Beth had been lost and empty, living with her oldest sister Dottie's family and working for Mister Scully at his bakery. She knew she wanted something different but she didn't know what that something was. Beth at thirteen was the youngest of four sisters; Dottie was the eldest and was fifteen years older than Beth. Dottie liked to remind the other sisters that she was the practical one, like their mother, but Aggie (who was two years younger than Dottie) said Dottie was just plain bossy and it had nothing to do with being practical or being like their mother. Beth bit her lip when Aggie said this because she couldn't remember their mother; whenever she was mentioned the other three sisters looked uncomfortably at each other and changed the subject. Florrie was one year younger than Aggie and Dottie called her Aggie's shadow — not to her face, of course. Florrie and Aggie worked at the Bunch of Grapes where they poured warm beer into cold miners' stomachs and didn't come home until four in the morning. Dottie said the two of them were as useless as their father, who had upped and disappeared when their mother died. Beth said nothing because she couldn't remember their father either. Dottie's husband was called Laidlaw, but even Beth couldn't tell you his first name. He worked down the mines and when he got

home and collapsed into his chair at the end of the kitchen table the whole house became noisier as his laughing voice boomed its way around the kitchen and up the hall. If Dottie's two kids had been asleep, they were soon awake. When his voice filled the house, Beth knew there was no room left for her.

Every day Beth came home from Scully's bakery with her clothes covered in flour, but one night she came home and the flour was imprinted with Mister Scully's fingerprints fluttering all over her like flies she was forever trying to brush away. Dottie had stopped mashing potatoes and looked at her good and hard but she didn't say anything. The next night her mother's friend Nurse Drake had turned up at the door and spent a good half-hour whispering with Dottie in the entranceway. Beth had stood and watched them, leaning against the hallway wall. She knew they were whispering about her because they turned at regular intervals and gave her long meaningful looks, and after much nodding of heads Dottie had turned and said to Beth, 'Get your things, Bethie, you have a new job. Nurse Drake is going to take you there now. It's live-in.'

'You mean I won't be living here?' said Beth, and added pointedly, 'With my family?' just to make Dottie feel guilty, even though they both knew there was no room.

'It's an opportunity,' said Nurse Drake. 'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, missy.'

Well, it just so happened that Beth liked opportunities. She liked to spot them and jump on them because you never knew where they might lead, and as long as they led somewhere, she didn't mind taking a risk on the unknown.

So Beth had gathered her other dress, her hairbrush and her stockings and underthings and shoved them into her small tattered suitcase with someone else's initials inscribed in the worn leather

and followed Nurse Drake up the street. Nurse Drake nattered all the way, filling Beth's head with noise, which was annoying because she wanted to take in where they were going.

'They're a good family; you've really landed on your feet, missy. I'm doing this for your poor mother because I said I'd watch out for you. Don't waste this opportunity, young lady.'

Beth had no intention of wasting the opportunity to get away from Mister Scully's fat clammy fingers and Dottie's full house, where Beth had to share her bed with Aggie and Florrie who woke her as they clambered in tipsy, giggling, and loudly sshh-ing every night.

And the Cottinghams were good to her. Miss Cottingham told her she would be treated like one of the family and they were true to their word — most of the time. Missus Cottingham taught her how to iron Mister Cottingham's shirts the way he liked and how to use the hot meat fat to make sure the potatoes crisped. She was a patient teacher and now Beth could do it herself. She ate the same food as the Cottingham's at the same table at the same time, but she prepared all the food and served it and cleaned up afterwards. She had her own bedroom and her own bed, but hers was a wooden bed in a tiny room at the back of the house, whereas Edie had a brass bed in the front room with bay windows and velvet curtains. The Cottinghams provided her with everything she needed so she didn't need the wage they paid her of a sovereign each week. She always changed the coin into two half sovereigns when she did the grocery shopping and took one half to Dottie and stashed the other half in a washed golden syrup tin, and when she counted how many sovereigns she had at the end of each month she always had to wash her hands afterwards because the coins were sticky. But all in all Nurse Drake had been right. Mister Cottingham never tried to flutter his hands over her as though he was grasping for gold dust, and Missus Cottingham

was kind and quiet and like the mother she never had. Edie gave her all her old dresses and sometimes it was almost like they were sisters. The risk had paid off.

Edie stood in the hallway, gave a little nervous laugh at absolutely nothing, and fidgeted with her hat. Then she saw her mother frowning at the bottom of her skirt.

'Don't look at me like that, Mama,' Edie leaned forward and whispered, 'I haven't killed a Chinaman.'

She watched her mother's face closely. She was expecting a lecture but Lucy only sighed and leant back against the wall. A shiver ran down Edie's spine, a sense of foreboding. Nothing was happening as it normally would. Her mother should have said something to alert her father, she should have said, 'Father, see what our Edith has done to her Sunday best,' not just sighed as though her mind was elsewhere altogether, concentrating on things more important than Edie. And her father should have noticed and demanded she go and change. Edie had always been the focus of their attention. But suddenly it seemed that her mother and father weren't interested in her any more and she felt immensely put out. She looked at her father again, demanding his attention with her gaze, but he was still tapping away at his watch as though enough taps would give him control of time. His brow was furrowed and his thoughts were far away.

Edie sulked; she didn't care now what they said about her skirt. They could say what they jolly well liked if they were going to treat her like a piece of glass. She looked from one to the other and what was really only a minute or two seemed to stretch into the future. But her father stayed focused on his watch and her mother's eyes gave nothing away.

'What are you hiding under that cape, Mama?' Edie fingered the fur trim and wondered why her mother insisted on wearing it when the morning had become quite warm. It was past ten and they would be back from church well before the afternoon chill set in at four. Lucy didn't answer; she just looked at Edie with watery eyes. Edie failed to see how drawn and pale her mother was, as if talcum powder had been smeared over her cheeks.

Edie turned her attention to Beth and said, 'Lovely skirt, Beth,' even though it was the same skirt Beth wore every Sunday.

'You'd be a hit at the Bunch of Grapes in your skirt,' said Beth, thinking of the miners who her sisters said could be filled up with beer but could never get enough loving to sate their appetites.

'Really?' asked Edie.

'Oh yes,' said Beth, thinking of the miners.

'Righteo,' said Paul. He had given up tapping his watch and instead swung his black umbrella, which doubled as a walking stick, in a figure eight and tapped it on the ground three times. Then he went back to his watch, like a boy that couldn't leave something alone for one minute. 'Righteo then, we better be off,' he said finally. And without looking back he led the way out the front door that was framed by the reds and greens of the flying rosellas in the leadlight windows.

The windows cast rainbow beams that bounced off the walls, lighting the entranceway like children's wishes. When Edie was a child she had sometimes sat in the coloured beams, letting their magic play over her skin, and as she sat there she would ask God for the things that she wanted. God had always seemed to answer. So as she passed under the beams this morning she quickly asked for a husband and if God was in a good mood could he make it Theo Hooley.

Paul was already walking smartly down the verandah steps and the timber boards bounced under the weight of his determined

footsteps and the tapping of the umbrella. The three women scurried to keep up with him. He stepped out onto the driveway and the gravel crunched under his shoes.

The women followed.

'Men!' Edie said to Lucy as they walked down the steps after him. He hadn't even looked at her skirt once. How could he not even notice her hours of hard work?

'Which man?' asked Lucy absently, putting her arm through Edie's and giving a little squeeze.

'Father of course — look.' And Edie stuck out one stockinged foot showing the new length of her skirt, as though her mother hadn't already seen it. Her ankle poked out, sitting right between her boot and the new bottom of her skirt, clothed only in a black woollen stocking.

'But what about a dust ruffle? Beth will be constantly washing it.' Lucy was a practical woman.

'Me and whose army,' muttered Beth.

'I don't need a dust ruffle now that it can't drag on the ground,' Edie pointed out.

Her mother raised an eyebrow.

'Fashions change,' said Edie.

'Not if your father has his way,' said Lucy and they looked ahead to where he strode in front of them, leading the women of his family down Webster Street to Drummond Street and on towards the church in Dawson Street as though he was leading a regiment.

'*Onward Christian soldiers*,' sang Edie.

Edie sat in the hard pew, bored senseless by the monotone preaching of weedy Reverend Whitlock, whose high-pitched voice sounded like a child whining for a treat. His sentences were shrill

but he always dipped on the last two words, which he drew out like a Gregorian chant. She shifted her weight from side to side and looked about for a distraction to occupy her mind for the next three-quarters of an hour. A good Baptist sermon has three main points and lasts for twenty minutes exactly, but Reverend Whitlock was a man who liked the sound of his own voice and rambled off his points regularly. As far as Edie could tell his main point was always a warning to the young women to stay away from the miners whose hands were so used to the dark they could find their way to any secret place. Many of the miners had wives and kids back home in Ireland that they forgot to mention to the single young ladies in town.

Theo was sitting up the front of the church at the organ he'd played every Sunday since he returned from Africa. Edie could only see the back of his head, his hair smooth and shiny with oil. She watched him for a while, willing him to look at her, but he didn't, and soon even the back of Theo's head lost its appeal and she turned and watched her mother. She studied the wrinkles around her mother's eyes and began to notice that Lucy was slumped in her seat, whereas normally she sat straight and dignified. Her eyes were puffy and dark and she'd definitely put on weight, and when Edie really thought about it she couldn't remember the last time she had heard her mother singing.

Edie wondered why she hadn't noticed all this before, why she hadn't worried more about her mother spending so much time in her room. Edie felt she should have realised sooner and prescribed some remedy. She was a bit of a whiz when it came to medical knowledge, you could learn a lot from reading the advertisements in the local papers. If she hadn't thought of her plan, and hadn't written in her notebook that she was going to marry Theo, she might have learnt nursing, though her father would never permit it. Paul thought work was something only

the poor did, or rich men like him did for a hobby so they didn't get bored with life. Edie knew she would make a darn good nurse. She knew a lot about bodily functions. She knew the Swiss-Italians in nearby Hepburn pined for feathers of crisp snow during the Australian summer heat and that sometimes in the middle of January they sweated until they hadn't an ounce of moisture left in their shrivelled bodies and lay down on their cane divans on their verandahs and died of 'nostalgia'. She'd read that in the paper: *Mister Pedretti, father of fifteen, died on Monday in Hepburn of Nostalgia.*

Edie also knew that for a child's hacking cough at night Wood's Peppermint Cure was guaranteed, and for gravel and bladder problems Warner's Safe Cure was concentrated and would restore complete health within a week. Edie shook her head at her mother's puffy fingers. Must be her bowel; nearly all health issues, particularly those of women, could be attributed to fermentation in the bowel. She'd get some of Dr Sheldon's Gin Pills first thing in the morning. They'd fix anything, and better late than never. She wondered at a world that could turn gin into pills, so even those who abstained from alcohol could still reap its medicinal benefits. Of course Lucy's ill health could be 'women's failures' or 'the change' or old age, but either way Gin Pills would be sure to do the trick. Edie took out her notebook and smiled at Missus Hooley sitting just over the aisle, who assumed she was so engrossed in the sermon she was taking notes. Edie opened to a fresh page and wrote:

Fifth November Five
Plan — Heal Mama. Buy Gin Pills from Connell's Chemist

Satisfied that she'd considered all the possibilities of her mother's ill health and arrived at a sensible diagnosis and remedy, she

glanced towards Theo sitting at the organ and was filled with pangs of an unrecognisable feeling that made her want to leap across the pews and rip Vera Gamble's hat from her head. The hat was so small it barely constituted a hat. It sat cheekily on the side of Vera's hair and a few coloured flowers poked out of the band; it was picnics and sunshine in that little hat. Edie looked at Theo again and then back to Vera and back to Theo. There was no doubt he was gazing longingly at Vera Gamble, who sat just a few pews ahead, her curled blonde hair piled on her head in luxurious pillows of softness. A halo of sunlight through the windows touched Vera's hair with magic, turning it golden and glowing as though it was filled with stars.

Edie's heart sank as she realised her plan was in ruins.

Three

The Seduction

Under the vigilant eyes of Reverend Whitlock.

Theo turned around on his organ stool. He pretended he was considering the enormity of Reverend Whitlock's words as he gazed out the stained-glass window. He did that so that no one would realise he was really trying to find Edith Cottingham in the congregation. Finally he spotted her sitting in a pew halfway down. She was on the end and next to her was her mother and then Beth and then her father. When he thought it wouldn't be obvious, he twisted further around so he could properly take her in. Out the corner of his eye he saw Vera Gamble smile at him and he smiled back to be polite but his gaze was drawn back to Edith. He watched her as she fidgeted, looked at the ground, looked at the ceiling and then took out her notebook and wrote something. Obviously she was as bored with the Reverend's sermon as he was. She crossed her legs and swung one foot out into the aisle and he caught — was it a glimpse of ankle? No, it was more than a glimpse, it was her stockinged ankle laid bare for the world to see. Theo nearly fell off the organ stool.

He was shocked. Then he was spellbound. His emotions swirled in his chest and he grasped it tightly to stop the tornado inside him. He wanted to savour that ankle, to look and look until he was completely familiar with its curve and its softness. It was a fragile, slender thing that he could encompass in his hand. He reached out his hand to touch it, to run his finger along its arc, then he remembered where he was and quickly gripped the organ stool. He wanted to run down the aisle and claim that ankle as his own and cover it up. He felt urges that weren't right to feel in church and quickly pulled the hymnal off its perch on the organ. It fell to the ground with a thud and the Reverend stopped mid-sentence and waited and watched, and the entire congregation waited and watched with him, while Theo leaned over, picked up the hymnal, checked it for damage and then laid it over his lap. There were stirrings in his blood that he hadn't felt since looking at naked black women in Africa. Despite himself he couldn't tear his eyes away and gazed blatantly at Edie's ankle until he felt Reverend Whitlock boring holes through the back of his head. Theo glanced at the Reverend. The Reverend glared back at him and the sermon spilled out of his mouth once again. Theo felt his cheeks burn hot with embarrassment as Reverend Whitlock's eyes settled accusingly on the hymnal in Theo's lap.

Theo turned his back on the Reverend and stared at the organ. He turned the hymnal over and opened it to the next hymn, 'How Great Thou Art', and slowly placed it back on its stand. Reverend Whitlock finished his sermon and sat down behind the pulpit. Theo struck the opening chords; the notes blurred in front of his eyes and he played from somewhere inside him where he knew the hymn by heart, his brain filled with hot blood and images of Edith. Before he knew it, the congregation had stopped singing but he wasn't with them, so they had to wait for him to finish the last bars, which he did, thumping the keys as though he was

finishing with a crescendo on purpose. After Deacon Blackmarsh gave the announcements, the congregation stood to sing the final hymn, 'Abide With Me', and Theo played the introductory bars thinking how lucky he was that his fingers could again dance over the keys from memory, as the notes in the hymnal no longer wrote the song, but formed the word Edith, over and over, as if they were reading his heart.

Edie thought he maybe was looking at her after all. It was hard to tell. Just in case he was, she gave him her good side to study. She kept her head at an angle with the sun warming her cheek to a pink glow and she gave him a few minutes to admire her before she turned and gazed at the ceiling so he could see that she was thinking about God and Reverend Whitlock's words. Then she lowered her eyes, crossed her legs and put her ankle out into the aisle for him to see. She willed him to look down and notice it, but he didn't seem to and she wondered if all her planning had been for nothing.

These secretive looks were seen by everyone — well, they were seen by the women, and soon the men would know because their wives would tell them.

The women whispered, 'Nothing will come of it. Vera Gamble has much more hope. She's embarrassing herself, really.' While Reverend Whitlock bellowed the final prayer Missus Blackmarsh turned to Missus Turnbull next to her and said that if Theo was interested in Too Girl then maybe he had just spent far too long in Africa and perhaps any white woman looked good to him now.

Missus Horlick sitting in the next pew leant back and muttered that Theo might be getting on, but he still had the pick of any handsome young girl who'd be happy to marry him.

Everyone whispered, *What on Earth could he see in Too Girl?*

'Blowed if I know!' they answered.

And then they stood for the Benediction and the gossipers smirked as if they knew more about Edie and Theo than Edie and Theo did.

If Theo hadn't had the clout knocked out of him, he might have told the women exactly what it was about Edith Cottingham that made his heart feel as though it was going to fly away. Her lips, for example, were always curled at the ends, ready to smile. And Edie bounced when she walked, as though she was always dancing; yet when he listened to her talk she was down-to-earth and not giggly at all. Her chin was always held too high, too defiantly for a woman, and he liked that about her; she wasn't afraid of life. To him, Edie was straightforward. She didn't worry and fret continuously like the other women he knew, like his mother did. Edie was still so young and trusting and he felt so very tired and so very old after the war. He felt worn out and dusty, as though the slightest knock could make him crumble away to nothing. When he saw Edie he felt the warmth of her heart on his skin. It was as though she was bathed in light, as though the sun had blessed her and never left her.

Theo had never told this to anyone because all the words got shot out of him by the booming canons in Africa. Those canons made him stone deaf for a good six months. And even though his hearing had come back, he'd had trouble with words ever since. Words came to him slowly, taking their time to form in his mind, and often by the time they were ready to be said he found it was too late, and the words died away before they found life.

Finally the Reverend marched to the entrance of the church like he was the king himself and the congregation began to shuffle out. It was only after Edie turned to help her mother from her seat that Theo was able to force his eyes away from her. He turned to the organ and played out the notes, the music he was supposed to play while the congregation filed out of the church. Theo's hands kept moving over the notes but he watched over his shoulder as Edith carefully put her hymnal on her seat and filed out after her family into the pleasant midday sunshine.

As soon as she had gone Theo abruptly stopped playing, closed the lid of the organ and quickly walked out of the church. Old Mister Tonkins, who was stacking hymnals back onto the shelves in the foyer and was unable to look anyone in the face because of the perfect stoop of his back, tried to waylay Theo in the vestibule.

'Lovely playing today, Theo,' he said, his voice worn to a failing breeze by the years. Theo shook his hand furiously, making Mister Tonkins almost topple on his toes like a wobbly toy, and kept walking instead of asking how he was getting on as he normally would. Mister Tonkins was left reaching for the shelves to steady himself.

Theo squished past the people shaking hands with the Reverend and his wife on the church porch and looked around at the clusters of people standing at the front of the church. Then he saw her. She was standing next to Beth at the other end of the porch and for a moment it looked like she was praying.

He saw the women muttering at her skirt and casting glares at her mother and father for allowing it. He saw the groups of men smiling and saying how much they liked the new fashion — though not for their own wives or sweethearts, of course. Theo watched as Reverend Whitlock, having shaken everyone's hands,

walked past him, and he saw Edie's father walk up to the Reverend, take his arm and engage him in some obviously serious conversation from the look on Mister Cottingham's face. It was probably about Edie's hemline.

Theo smiled; he liked the length of Edie's skirt. He'd seen skirts that length in Europe, on his way back from Africa. The girl had gumption. He liked that. He felt he had lost all of his. In his head, he'd rehearsed what he was going to say to her. He had spent the week thinking about it. Now he took a deep breath and he was ready.

This time the words would come.

'The first Sunday of November and it's a beautiful day, Miss Cottingham, Beth,' Theo said as he took off his bowler with one hand and pointed to the sky with his cane, as though Edith needed direction to find the sky. He sighed with relief. He had got the words out.

'It is,' Edie agreed.

'Hello Mister Hooley,' said Beth and she surprised him by giving him a little curtsey as she looked up at him from under her lashes. He'd seen a lot of those looks from women in Africa.

'What was that for?' Edie said. 'You never curtsey, Beth.' Beth giggled into her hand. Beth was certainly young and pretty and Theo didn't miss the thunderous look she got from Edie; it made him smile.

'The Reverend's sermon was inspiring this morning, don't you think?' Theo said.

It was clear to him that Edie didn't have a clue what Reverend Whitlock had said as she answered, 'Oh yes, I was taking notes.' He teased her by waiting for more and seeing he wasn't going to

save her she said cleverly, 'What do you feel were the main points, Mister Hooley?'

'Well …' said Theo.

She was watching him carefully, and he tried frantically to think of something the Reverend had said, to arrange some words in his mind, and as usual they just weren't coming. 'His — he, he …'

'He spoke about the workers' claims. He said that a man who doesn't work doesn't deserve to eat,' said Beth.

'Did he indeed?' said Edie, her temper flaring in an instant. 'How can he say that from the pulpit? What about those men's children and wives? What good Christian should suggest that the children of these men go hungry? I believe in protection of our trade which will of course protect the workers, just like my father, just like Alfred Deakin. My father worked hard to have Mister Deakin back as leader of this nation.'

And then he saw the realisation spread across her face; she had been too outspoken, too vehement, too unwomanly. Did she think that maybe he wasn't a Deakin voter or a protectionist? He saw her face immediately lose all its light and she looked for a moment, just a splinter of a moment that was shorter than a single breath, as though she had lost her entire world. And his heart leapt into the clouds with joy and hope. She cared what he thought of her. He mattered to her. He tried to stop the smile that was forcing its way onto his lips.

Edie looked to Beth in a panic and Beth, a quick girl whose older sisters had taught her all the tricks, clumsily pretended to lose her balance on the edge of the porch and she fell in Edie's direction and pushed Edie into Theo.

Edie reached out and grabbed Theo's cane-holding arm and as she fell she flung her leg unreasonably high in the air, taking advantage of Beth's clumsiness and giving him the opportunity

to notice the shortness of her skirt and the fineness of her ankle once more.

It was her last hope.

He caught her swiftly.

'Steady there,' he said putting his hat back on, amused by her efforts.

'Thank you, I don't know what happened, my shoe must have caught on a stone,' said Edie as she removed her hand from his arm. He immediately felt stung by the removal of her touch.

'No, it was my fault, I fell,' said Beth quickly, but neither of them took any notice of her.

So she shrugged and said, 'I'll just see where Mister and Missus Cottingham are,' and walked off.

Theo scratched behind his ear. His hat wobbled on his head.

'Did you kill anyone in Africa?' Edie asked seriously. 'It would be awfully exciting and mysterious if you did.' Then she scolded herself and whispered, 'Stupid stupid — too forthright.' She looked miserable, sure she would lose him now, and his heart leapt higher.

'I'm sorry, I'm too forthright — just ask Missus Blackmarsh — she'll warn you soon enough,' she said and stared at the ground, willing it to open up and swallow her.

Yet this was a question Theo got asked frequently by curious people who had no idea what war was. He had an answer prepared: *A man does what he has to do for his country and his king.* But that answer wouldn't do for Edie. She was a person who demanded honesty. He looked down at his arms and wondered what it would be like to wrap her up in them. He knew what it was like to wrap up a naked woman, to cover her body with his own, to feel her warmth and softness, to know that a woman could make everything else in the world disappear. But he also knew that Edie Cottingham was a well-bred young woman who would know nothing

of these things. She would not know these needs of men. For her men were respectable and reliable like her father. They kissed you when you were engaged to them and you set up a home together. She would know nothing about sex and its blistering hold on a man. He loved her for it. It made him feel new.

To anyone looking on at that moment, they were a picture of misery: she waiting to dissolve into the ground and he unable to find any words to give her.

Theo stepped closer and Edie felt his warmth envelop her and dared to look up at him.

'I wonder if I could …' Theo began and scratched behind his ear. When he could stretch his scratching no further he added, 'A …'

'A word in private?' she finished for him.

Theo took Edie by the arm. He led her down the steps of the porch and up the dusty street a little way, where they wouldn't be overheard. He saw her look over her shoulder at the intense gazes of the churchwomen. Missus Blackmarsh looked as if this was the best entertainment she'd had in years; Missus Whitlock had her face screwed up like she had sucked on a lemon; Missus Horlick looked as though there was nothing between her ears and Vera Gamble looked smug and very pleased with herself.

'Don't worry about them,' he said quietly in her ear. 'Let them think what they will.'

Theo walked her over to a tree still struggling from the cold frosts that had come during the winter. It cast a pitiful shade that wasn't enough for them to stand under.

He scratched behind his ear some more.

'You didn't bring back lice from Africa, did you Mister Hooley?' she laughed.

'What? No,' he said and thought he must stop the scratching and concentrate on getting something out of his mouth. He

motioned to her to come closer and when she was close enough he bent to speak to her, his spine curving over her in an arch like the trees that arched over the road and listened quietly to the whispers spoken in the houses.

Her breath was hot on his neck. It burnt the ends of his fingers. He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. 'I want to ask for your permission to speak to your father,' he said almost whispering.

She laughed nervously and whispered back in his ear, 'Well Mister Hooley, you can speak to whomever you want without asking my permission.'

'No, Miss Cottingham, you know what I mean,' he said, looking unswervingly at her.

Her eyes were glorious, so steady and firm. He couldn't measure how much he wanted her — it went on forever.

She took an enormously long deep breath as she absorbed his meaning and let it become real. He felt he was waiting forever, he could feel his heart had completely stopped and until she answered he would never be able to move from this spot under the sickly tree.

He stood and waited some more.

Finally she said, 'Of course I give my permission and I am sure he'll say yes and if he doesn't I will throw an almighty tantrum.'

'All right then,' said Theo.

Everything in his life had just suddenly fallen into place. He put his hat back on, straightened and standing tall, tapped his stick on the ground a few times as if he knew there was something else he should say or something else he should do but it just wouldn't come to him, so he strode away while Edie stood, her eyes closed waiting for his kiss, the kiss that would seal him to her. The kiss that would show the world she was worth something because

someone named Theodore Hooley wanted her for his own. And the churchwomen, watching her standing with her eyes closed and her head held up and her lips waiting as Theo walked away, laughed and nodded at Vera Gamble. Edie Cottingham was just Too Much.

Four

Paul

A seed is planted but may not grow because the sun at its most spiteful burns any vulnerable thing.

Paul Cottingham had Reverend Whitlock pinned up against the cold bluestone of the church wall.

'Reid is a joke,' said Paul vehemently. 'All he managed to give this country is Empire Day — one lousy holiday, a holiday we already had and he gave it a new name and everyone acted as though he was the workingman's hero.'

Reverend Whitlock's hair bristled and his thin eyes narrowed until they disappeared.

Paul was furious with the Reverend's sermon and had hauled him off to have it out with him. Reverend or not, the man was a top-class idiot. Paul had swung his umbrella about as if it was a sword and Whitlock had retreated in the face of Paul's advance until his back was up against the church wall and he stood pinned like a dunce in the corner of a schoolroom.

Whitlock's cheeks turned beetroot.

'Now, Reverend,' Paul took the Reverend's fine slender hand firmly in his own broader one and held it tightly.

The Reverend winced. He hated to admit it but it hurt. He wouldn't ever tell anyone that. He might say, *Oh, that Cottingham's got a handshake like a bear,* but he'd never say it hurt.

'Do you think it's reasonable to denounce a man in his absence?' Paul put the question as though Whitlock was on the witness stand and he was addressing Judge Murphy.

Whitlock knew exactly what he was talking about; Cottingham made no bones about his political commitment.

'Well now, if Mister Deakin wanted to lead this country again, then surely he put himself forward for public scrutiny, wouldn't you say, Mister Cottingham?' The Reverend thought he defended himself quite nicely. 'The trouble with the protectionists,' he went on, gathering confidence, 'is that they want too much too fast.' He nodded in agreement with himself. He didn't like change. Change brought conflict and conflict unnecessarily churned up your gut and pushed acid into your throat and you could taste its bitterness. That couldn't be good for you. He felt the need to burp and stifled it. If only Paul Cottingham would keep his blasted opinions to himself. But he could see the wretched man wasn't going to, and after all, he never had. Obstinate fellow. The daughter was painted with the same brush. No wonder she was still single. He'd seen the outrageous shortness of her skirt. That would be the topic of next week's sermon. He'd put a stop quick smart to such sluttiness before it caught on.

'Yes, in the public arena,' said Paul, 'but your words from the pulpit are considered to come from God. We are building a new nation, Reverend Whitlock. Do you honestly believe that God would have us build this nation on the backs of starving families? This town we live in, Reverend, is gloriously built on the backs of the miners. Look at this very building, at St Patrick's Cathedral opposite there; look at our immense Town Hall with its glorious clock that chimes every hour. It's mining money that's purchased

those bluestone blocks and the carved organ they house. It's the hard labour of ironwork that has decorated the buildings, but do you see the miners living in fine buildings? No sir, only the mine owners, who never get their hands dirty, can afford to buy their way into heaven with bricks and mortar. We must pray that Mister Deakin remains prime minister of this nation for many a year so he can protect our trade and our workers as much as possible.'

Surely, thought Paul, this supposed man of God should care first and foremost for those who had little.

'Mister Deakin! Well! We all know exactly where that man got his ideas from. Mister Deakin is a Satanic spiritualist,' the Reverend spat.

'Mister Deakin is a staunch admirer of Bunyan and what finer Christian example could anyone wish for?' snapped Paul.

'I hear tell,' the Reverend said slowly, producing his trump card, 'that our honourable Mister Deakin claims he channelled the words of his book from the great man Bunyan himself. There is only one place spiritualism comes from, Mister Cottingham, and it isn't our Lord Jesus Christ.' Reverend Whitlock smiled, then he leant in close and whispered, 'Because I am a man of God and don't spread another man's sins far and wide I won't say this too loudly, but — I think you're a bit of a radical socialist, Mister Cottingham.'

Paul laughed, loudly and deeply, rolling back on his heels. The stupid man thought he had insulted him, when in fact Paul was proud of his socialist beliefs. To him it was the only Christian option.

'Don't you take anything seriously?' the Reverend sneered.

Paul stopped laughing and grinned, as though Whitlock was a bit slow on the uptake. Then Paul spoke slowly, as if he was explaining to a child — obviously the Reverend had the social intelligence of a six-year-old.

'We have, Reverend, a choice between free trade and protectionism; one dependent on chance, the other on care. Do you leave the wellbeing of your flock to chance, or do you care for it?'

Paul's gaze scorched the Reverend, who had to look away, and as he did so, his eyes widened. Paul turned to see what the Reverend was gawking at and saw Edie standing under a tree with the Hooley lad.

'That girl of yours is being very forward with the church organist. If they stand any closer they'll be fornicating in public view.' The Reverend raised an eyebrow. 'But I'm not one to point out another's sins. It's not my style, Mister Cottingham.'

Paul had already forgotten the Reverend and murmured absently, 'You may step down.'

Paul watched his daughter closely. Hooley whispered something in her ear and after a while she whispered back. Then she lifted her face as though she expected Hooley to kiss her, right there in public, for goodness sake. But Hooley put on his hat and walked away.

Oh no, thought Paul, *the stupid fool has cast her aside*. He got ready to rush over to comfort Edie but then when she turned in his direction he saw she was triumphant, her eyes filled with everything she had ever hoped for. She took out her notebook and wrote something and then she rushed over to him.

'Oh Papa, it's like I'm walking on a sunbeam, can you see it? Can you see all the pieces of me just floating around in the sun?'

He looked hard at her. Excitement was building and twirling in her head and her heart; it was bubbling so furiously it was threatening to spill out in front of everyone. She reached out as if to catch the sun, to catch her dreams and hold them tightly in her hands forever.

'Steady, steady,' he said.

Edie took a deep breath. 'He didn't kiss me but that doesn't change anything. Not really, does it?' Paul saw her tuck away that first tiny disappointment. 'He's going to ask, Papa,' she said. 'That's all that matters. He's going to ask you.'

'What's he going to ask me?'

Edie twirled around. 'Look. I wrote in my notebook.' She held the book open and he saw she had written:

Fifth November Five
Plan — Papa will give permission.

'What shall I say? Not on your sweet Nellie, I suppose.'

Edie dug him in the ribs.

Then she burst into laughter and ran, triumphant, in front of Missus Blackmarsh and Missus Turnbull and twirled in front of Missus Whitlock and they all tutted and glared at Paul as if it was his fault that his daughter had finally lost her marbles, and Theo, who was watching her from where he stood with some of the men, smiled. She was everything he wasn't.

Edie ran to Beth and grabbed her hands and jumped on the spot; soon she'd be an engaged woman. She turned to her mother and threw her arms around her, and her mother held her tight. Lucy was still not sure what all the excitement was about and looked questioningly at Paul as he walked over to them.

'We're off home now, girls, we're not staying for morning tea this week,' he said. 'It's time that scandalous skirt was put back in a cupboard where I hope it will spend the rest of its life. It's done enough damage for today. Maud Blackmarsh will be telling stories about it for many years to come and the skirt will get shorter every time she tells it.'

'Oh no,' said Edie, 'this is the best skirt I've ever had.'

All the way home they tried to keep up with Edie but failed, so she was waiting at the front door for them.

Paul stopped to catch his breath and reached into his pocket for his key. He looked at Lucy, who was pale and winded.

'You look done in,' he said as he helped her through the door. She leant against the cool wall. 'It was probably the brisk walk home,' he added with no conviction. If only it was just a brisk walk that was causing Lucy to look so ashen. He stood in the rainbow beam and wished Lucy would be all right; only then would he be able to breathe properly again and lose the constant constriction he felt in his chest.

Lucy took deep gasping breaths. 'I'm just going to have forty winks. I won't have lunch, Beth.'

'Beth can bring you in a tray,' Paul said, hoping she would eat.

'No, thank you all the same. I don't think I can eat.'

'But you must eat, you must keep up your energy.' Paul felt his chest getting tighter and the air becoming heavier. Lucy didn't reply, she took another deep breath and walked to her room, using the wall for support.

'I'll come and check on you in a while,' he said after her.

'Mama's all right, isn't she?'

Paul looked at Edie. He knew there was something important happening with Edie but for a moment he couldn't remember what.

'Papa? Mama's all right? She's not sick or anything?'

'She's just a little tired, nothing to worry about; the vigorous walk home from church has done her in. She's just having forty winks.'

Paul took Edie by the arm and walked her into the dining room, and they sat at the oval blackwood table. Beth made several trips to the dining room, carrying the lamb, then the potatoes and gravy, and finally the peas and carrots.

Edie lifted the lid covering the roast lamb and it seemed a live thing staring back at her; it looked just like Missus Blackmarsh who had said she was Too Plain. *He won't come, he won't come,* the Blackmarsh lamb taunted as its heat hit her face and she quickly put the lid back on to shut it up.

'I can't eat — when do you think he'll come to ask, Papa?'

'I expect given his age — what, he must be thirty at least — I'd say he's as eager as you are, dear,' said Paul. 'Now pass me the vegetables.' He didn't want to bother with this fellow wanting his daughter at the moment.

'You'll be the bridesmaid, won't you Beth?' Edie asked, ignoring her father's jibe at Theo's age.

'I don't have a dress,' said Beth.

'That's easily fixed,' said Edie. 'Besides, you have to be my bridesmaid, you're practically my sister.' Edie grinned at her father and kicked her feet feeling her skirt brush against her ankles. She put her hand in her pocket and felt her notebook resting snugly there. Her plan had worked. Without a little extra incentive Theo might have spent the rest of his life considering whether or not to ask her. She may not be pretty but she knew how to make plans and solve problems.

Just as well I pushed her into him, thought Beth as she tried to avoid the peas and only pick up carrots, *or he'd never have had the courage to take her by her arm and ask*.

Paul sliced up the lamb as though he was slicing up the Reverend. The pulpit was not the place for politics and Paul had pressed his point home with the Reverend, a man so spineless it was no wonder his compassion was so thinly spread. Without the pulpit as a fortress for his thoughts, the man was feeble-brained. After lunch Paul would go and tell Lucy how the Reverend had whispered in his ear, 'You're a bit of a radical socialist', as though he'd just cleverly unmasked a secret.

Paul had felt like patting him on the head when he came out with that, the way you pat a child who has just worked out a simple equation or how to spell c-a-t. 'Good boy, Reverend, good boy,' he'd felt like saying, 'you're starting to figure things out by yourself.'

Of course Paul hadn't said anything; he was too busy laughing at the man's incompetence.

'Compromise is not the same as defeat.' He hadn't realised he'd said it out loud.

'Sorry?' asked Beth.

'It's what I always tell my clerks,' said Paul. He put a slice of lamb on Edie's plate, ignoring her protest, and a slice on Beth's. He put two slices on his own.

Of course what had really got in the way of his little talk with the Reverend was Edie. He looked over at her; she was playing with her food.

'For goodness sake, Edith, stop chasing that pea around the plate.' She looked at him. He'd hurt her, he shouldn't have snapped at her like that. 'Chase all the peas you want, love,' he said and got up and took yesterday's papers from the paper basket and buried his nose in *The Courier*. It was four broadsheets and took up a good deal of space on the table — he had to push his crockery out of the way — and if he read he didn't have to think about Lucy. *Oh Lucy*. But he couldn't help thinking about her. If she was at lunch she'd be giving him her look for reading at the table. But she was lying down, and it was his fault and he'd check on her soon. But he turned to the page with the cablegrams and pretended to be more engrossed than he was, building an invisible wall of 'don't disturb me', because he knew that Edie badly wanted to interrupt him.

'Papa?'

'Hmmm,' *here it comes*, he thought. He'd never get his few moments of relief with the paper. He watched as she swallowed the last of her stewed apple whole, gulping it down like a dry piece of steak.

'Papa,' she said again.

'If it's about Hooley, you don't need to prep me,' he said.

'Well, what are you going to say to him?'

He sighed. He just wanted to read his paper. He didn't want to think about his only child being claimed by that tall, too quiet man who was nearly half her age again. Edie's chin was out, that was a bad sign. He'd never get any peace. He folded the paper and put it on the table.

'I suppose that first of all I shall warn him about your persistent temperament, your stubbornness, the way you put your nose in the air when you're cross — which you are too often, and the way your chin juts out when you're determined to have your way — which you always expect. I shall warn him that unlike most women you always speak your mind whether it's needed or not, and that if he persists in marrying you he shall never have a moment's peace.' He smiled at her worried face and added, 'And then I shall say it's up to you because you've never listened to anything I've ever said anyway.' He stood up, dodged her swipe at him and pushed his chair into the table. 'I've got to go to the office for a few hours.'

'Working on a Sunday?' asked Edie. 'What if Theo comes by?'

'Theo already, is it? Then send him down to the office.'

'What are you going for?'

'I have to go and prepare my speech for tomorrow night's meeting at the Mechanics Institute,' he said, thinking he might also finish the paper. 'If we're to build a new nation, Edith, it must not be built on the backs of factory workers and miners — they're

a sorry bunch, being paid tributes instead of decent wages. As if you can feed families on tributes! I had a fair mind to walk out of the Reverend's sermon this morning, I was that riled. I can only hope the rest of the congregation took as much notice of the Reverend's words as you did, Edie.' And he ducked another swipe. 'Well, you know where I'll be,' he said.

'But what about Theo?'

'What about him? I already said — send him down to the office.'

'But Papa, he might not want me if he has to walk to the office,' she said, sounding six years old.

'If a three-block walk puts him off, Edie, then he's not worth having.'

'Four — it's four blocks.'

'Well, if it's four blocks then we can test his commitment and stamina at the same time.' Paul picked up *The Star* from the basket, rolled it and *The Courier* together and tucked them under his arm as he walked to the door. Damn that man for wanting his daughter. He'd miss her terribly when she was married.

Paul stood at the door of his wife's bedroom. She was asleep, lying in her clothes on top of the made bed, her arms flung above her head, her dress falling over the side of the bed in a waterfall. He watched the tides of her body rising and falling. It was quiet. Not a sound except her breathing. He knew she was too old to be going through this and the guilt made his chest begin to hurt as if a bluestone block was sitting on top of it. She was so thin, she hardly showed. He'd seen her body through the bathroom door; she was like a twig bending under the weight of

an emperor gum's cocoon. The shame made him slump against the door.

She opened her eyes and looked at him.

'I was just going to the office,' he said, 'but I can stay here with you.'

'What about Edie's beau?'

'He can come down to the office. I'll only be sending him back to Edie anyway. If he's serious he won't resent a little running around for our daughter.'

'Well go on then, I'm only going to sleep anyway. You go, dear,' Lucy said, but he didn't move.

'I don't want to leave you.'

She tried to laugh but only a small wheeze came out. 'I'm not going anywhere in this condition. Going to church has done me in for the day.'

'I would have thought Edie would have worn you out for the day. If I'd noticed she was going to church practically showing her undergarments I would have locked her up. But all I've been thinking about is you.' He walked over and put his hand on her forehead. Dear God! She was burning up. Paul lay down beside her and put his head on her belly. Her clothes, damp with her sweat, wetted his cheek. The growing baby inside, feeling the presence of its father, somersaulted in its wet cocoon. He remembered reading once about the underground houses the opal miners built in the middle of the desert to stay cool in the searing heat. Lucy felt the heat so badly and the summer was coming. He wished he could give her one of those houses.

He stood and bent to kiss her cheek, taking in the sweet smell of her perfume and the warmth of her neck. She turned her head towards him and her soft black hair, speckled with grey and released from its usual bun, fell momentarily across his cheek. He

was reminded of the first time he had loosened it with trembling fingers, pulling each clip out slowly as if pulling out fragments of her soul. When her hair was free he'd buried his face in it.

The first time he saw her she had been wearing a white summer dress and a wide-brimmed hat with a pale blue ribbon that lifted gently in the breeze. She was holding her baby sister in her arms and singing to her, and her voice was tender like whispers on the wind. The hat cast a shadow over her, as if she and the baby were in a separate world created by her song, and he wanted desperately to enter that world. His own was full of rules and precedents, claims and litigation; he knew he needed her quietness, her voice to lull him to a place of gentleness.

She was sixteen when they met, eighteen when they married, and they had hoped for so many children. But till now only Edie had come.

He kissed her cheek again and said, 'I can stay,' but she shook her head and said, 'Go, go.' So reluctantly he left her room.

'I'll be back by five,' he said, but she was sleeping again. Every time he left her it felt as if it would be the last, and it was like a kick in the gut.

'I'm off now, Edith,' he called and closed the front door behind him.

He stepped out into the afternoon sun, looked up and swore at it. 'You're a bloody problem you are!' The sun smirked and grew hotter, and the hotter it got the more he could feel Lucy slipping away from him. It was as though she was melting away to nothing.

Last year the summer heat spawned bushfires that ate up farms and took jagged bites at the edges of the town. The heat and smoke from the fires filled everyone's lungs. Women dissolved in their skirts and corsets, and men put on brave faces. Lucy had

wilted like a plucked wild daisy. Watching her, Paul's heart had seared and stung. Then winter had come and she had picked up for a while, but now it was warming up again and she was dwindling away. There seemed to be nothing he could do to help her. He jabbed his umbrella at the sun seven times and then sighed and set off.

It was a comfortable stroll to the office. He always said to his clerks that it was important for a man to be on his own between work and home to make the transition from the duty of work to the duty of home. A man's life is a matter of keeping these two responsibilities in equal balance so that neither is neglected nor put upon by the other. That's what he told his men and what he lived by. His walk was his space, and he banged his umbrella along the fence posts making a racket the way schoolboys do with sticks. By the time people looked out their windows he was gone, so they ran to their front gates and shook their fists at the boys who were kicking tin cans down the street. He got to Drummond Street and decided to cross the main road and walk down Dana Street. It was steeper but it was downhill and his office was right on the corner of Dana and Armstrong in the centre of town, just a block from the Town Hall. The Town Hall clock sounded as loudly in his office as if he was standing under it.

His mind turned back to Lucy. He might have a son this time. Not that he cared, as long as Lucy was all right. He hadn't missed having a son; he always told people that 'You don't pine for what you've never had.' But thinking about it as he walked, his umbrella now tapping on the road, he thought it might be nice to have a son, someone to leave the business to. But his bones ached with worry and his chest refused to take in a decent amount of air. If Lucy didn't survive the coming summer there might not be any baby at all, and even worse there might not be any Lucy. He thought of the miners who worked beneath the very streets he

walked on, working away in the dark coolness. The idea grew in him and gave him hope.

'Why couldn't I?' he said to himself. What was to stop him? Not money. 'Why bloody not?' He smiled.

He turned the key in the office door, pushed it open and secured it with the boot scrape so a breeze could blow in. It was silent inside. Dead silent. No tapping typewriters, no chatting staff, no clients making demands. He was surrounded by the woody, responsible smells of oak and teak and he let them seep into him. He propped his umbrella in the stand and he went to his desk behind a glass partition at the back of the office. He was protected there. Clients had to get past his staff to get to him and he could see everything from where he sat. There was his pipe, patiently waiting for him. He took it and filled it with the Havelock that he kept in his top drawer. The tobacco, the wood, the oily polish seeped decency and steadiness into his pores.

He dipped his nib in the inkwell and thought of what he wanted to say at tomorrow night's meeting. Most likely his audience would be a bunch of rowdy miners and some council members, not to mention hecklers. If he was lucky there'd be some like him who were concerned about the future of the nation. He should mention Eureka. He thought of Eureka as Australia's first war. Most of the miners could cite an uncle, a father or grandfather who had been part of the uprising fifty-odd years ago. It had taken place just a few blocks from his office. The town had memories of rebellion that sat rumbling and fermenting in its bowels. He wrote:

> *I have never come across a miner who would take tributes if he could take wages and the miners of this town only take tributes because they CANNOT get wages! What man would work for piece rates instead of a wage? The chance of a miner coming across a block that will give*

him twenty pounds a fortnight is as likely as winning one thousand pounds in Tattersalls sweeps …

Paul paused to collect his thoughts. He looked at his watch and the time surprised him. Already it was past three and here was Beth coming in to see him. He smiled.

Five

The Gift

Which is unwanted and cannot be returned.

It took Paul a moment to realise that Beth was in a panic. She leant on the clerk's counter, her whole body heaving. Beads of sweat wet her hair and tears stained her cheeks. He jumped up and ran to her.

'You must come. Edie sent me and said to come immediately,' she panted.

Paul didn't ask any questions; he was too afraid of the answers. He kicked the boot scraper away from the door too hard and it toppled over and he had to kick it again to get it out of the way. As the door swung shut he caught it and held it open for Beth. He told himself not to panic until he knew what he was panicking about, even though he knew full well what he was panicking about. His pulse was racing and he could hear his breath coming in short ragged gasps. He grabbed his umbrella and bowler hat. Beth stepped into the street, still breathing heavily and holding her waist and he wondered how quickly she'd be able to get back home in this state.

'What's happened?' he asked at last, bracing himself. But Beth just looked at him.

'Go on,' she said, 'hurry.'

And he did. He ran home, his heart thumping furiously, his thighs burning. What had seemed a short walk now seemed like an expedition. Finally he got to his house, which buckled and bowed, its iron lacework drooping like melting ice-cream as moans and sobs escaped its walls. He gasped for air. His lungs had shrivelled and the air he needed wouldn't come.

'Oh house,' he said, 'what shame are you hiding?'

He went in through the back door that was always open and in the kitchen his heart froze at the sounds of pain echoing down the hallway. He dropped his umbrella on the kitchen table. It rolled off and clattered onto the floor but he left it and ran up the hallway to Lucy's bedroom and stood in the doorway. Edie was bent over the bed, mopping her mother's forehead with a flannel. He saw his wife, her skin clammy, her body heaving. Sweat trickled down her forehead.

Edie was crying. 'I don't know what's wrong. She collapsed in the hallway. There's blood. If you call Doctor Appleby he's more likely to come than if I call him. He'll think I'm just a panicky woman.'

'I think this is normal. This is what happens. It's just too soon, that's all,' he said.

'What's normal?' Edie cried, terrified. 'What's too soon?'

He tried to answer, but the words suffocated in his airless lungs.

'I'll call the doctor,' was the best he could manage.

He went to the telephone on the wall beside the hallstand and put the call through.

'There's no answer,' Doris the operator told him in her I-don't-care voice. He looked accusingly down at the earpiece and slammed

it into its cradle. He went back to the bedroom door. He wanted to go to her and sweep her up in his arms but it was as if there was an invisible barrier that he couldn't get past — women only.

'He's not there, we should get your mother to the hospital, I'll call the ambulance cart,' he said.

'I don't need the hospital, call Nurse Drake,' said Lucy from the bed. It didn't sound like her voice; it was harsh and rasping instead of supple and inviting. She hardly sounded alive. He watched with sudden horror as she heaved herself out of bed, stumbled to the door, leant her weight against it and shut it in his face.

He was on his own now. Shut out of their world. He heard Lucy cry out again and he had never felt lonelier in all his life than he did in that moment. The hallway that he walked up and down each day was now alien and cold. Another cry stabbed into his heart and he shivered. He had to do something, take some kind of action no matter how futile, so he went to the telephone again and commanded Doris to try this Nurse Drake.

'I would,' said Doris curtly, 'but p'raps you should remember that most of us isn't made of money and most of the town hasn't got a telephone!'

He slammed the telephone down. Useless contraption. He swore and thumped his fist against the wall, not knowing what to do. He paced the hallway, past the portraits that looked at him accusingly and the landscapes that beckoned and he struggled to breathe. Fears swirled inside him and gave him a splitting headache. He fretted for Lucy, for his unborn child, for his daughter who was unmarried and knew nothing about the birthing of babies.

'Well, I suppose she's about to learn,' he laughed out loud to himself in a brief minute of respite but then the fears grabbed him again and he had to do something so he picked up the telephone again.

'Try for Doctor Appleby again!'

'I have!' Doris said.

'Well, keep trying until you get him!'

Doris told him that she didn't need reminding to keep putting the call through thank you very much and disconnected him before he could hang up on her again.

Eventually Edie appeared, white faced and stony, and he watched her walk straight into her bedroom and emerge with the scissors she had used on her skirt that very morning. She walked past him as if he was a shadow she could walk through and into the kitchen. He followed uselessly and watched as she got a pot, filled it with water and put it on to boil. Then she threw the scissors in.

'Who told you to do that?' he asked.

'Mama.'

He stood there for fifteen minutes watching her watching the clock. Neither of them said anything until Beth burst through the door.

'What's happened? Has the doctor come?'

He shook his head and thought that Beth was looking at him accusingly, as though it was his fault the doctor hadn't shown up.

'What about a midwife then? Nurse Drake's real good, she delivered me and my sisters,' said Beth, thinking they were useless without her around to organise them.

'Where's this Nurse Drake live?'

'Eddy Street,' said Beth, 'off Peel down near Grant. I sometimes see the boy that lives next door.'

This was news to Edie and Paul but it went by without even a wink. Their minds were congested with fear for Lucy. Paul shook his head again. He watched Beth join Edie standing over the stove. The two girls stood studying the boiling scissors as if it was the only thing happening in the entire world. He wanted

to join them at the stove but felt outcast. Then when the hands on the kitchen clock ticked over again Edie grabbed the scissors with the dish towel and, with Beth behind her, hurried back to Lucy's bedroom. The door closed in his face.

Slam.

He couldn't stand it so he went outside into the front yard. The children next door were playing cricket using a rubbish tin as a wicket. He called, 'Arthur, Arthur, I need you to run a message for me.'

The boy came over to the fence, followed by his two younger brothers Geoffrey and John. Paul thought Arthur was about eleven, certainly old enough for responsibility. Paul fished in his pocket and pulled out a coin.

'Do you know where Eddy Street is? I need you to run to Eddy Street, off Peel. Find Nurse Drake, she lives there. Tell her she's wanted here — no, tell her she's needed here immediately.'

He looked at the younger boys, 'You two, go and tell your parents what Arthur's doing for me.' He handed Arthur the coin. 'Well, go on Arthur, quickly — a life may depend on it.'

The boys scurried off, the younger ones jealous that only Arthur got a coin. Why weren't they getting a coin when they were also delivering a message? It wasn't their fault it only had to be delivered to the kitchen where their ma and pa were having a pot of tea and what they called 'a discussion'.

Paul walked in circles and prayed to God to save his wife and child, but if a choice had to be made he'd have his wife. He prayed until he heard Edie calling him. Then he rushed inside, where the door of Lucy's bedroom was wide open. He blinked at the scene before him, trying to make sense of it.

Beth was picking up bloodied linen and cloths.

Edie stood still against the wall, her back pressed against it hard, as if she wished hard enough it might swallow her up and

take her back to the beginning of the day and they could all start again. Her father looked at her and his soul filled with pity. Her day had started out so bright and was ending up so black.

'Edie,' he called.

Edie didn't hear him. Her ears were filled with buzzing and she was wringing her hands. Her white, tense knuckles knocked against each other, her fingernails dug into the skin and a drop of blood spilt to the floor. She hadn't even noticed. The pain in her heart was so great. She didn't know yet that her mother was dying, but she did know that this baby that had appeared out of nowhere was an evil thing. It had been here no more than a few minutes yet had brought nothing but sorrow and pain to those she loved. Imagine what horror it would wield over the course of a full life. All her fear, all her shock over learning where babies come out, was dissolved in her hate for it as quickly as sugar dissolves in hot tea. She would drown it later, like an unwanted kitten.

Her brain was hurting, the blood tearing through her veins at impossible speeds, and with it, shards of her heart.

Paul wanted to comfort his daughter but his wife needed him more and he needed her. He went to the bed, bent over her and kissed Lucy and saw the new baby, wrapped in a thin tea towel, cradled in her arms.

'She's heavy,' whispered Lucy.

The baby was so tiny and scrawny he wondered for a moment if it was even alive, and decided that it wasn't. It was so small it couldn't be. But Lucy was alive and for that he was grateful.

'Beth, get me a knee rug,' he said, and he ran a trembling finger through the river of sweat on Lucy's brow, saying 'Sshhh' over and over. When Beth brought the rug he reached to take the dead infant from Lucy's arms and it screwed up its face. It was alive.

He wrapped the baby in the rug. It was wet and damp, covered in the fluids that had aided its birth. He pulled up a chair and sat

next to his wife, clutching his new child in his arms as though it was made of fairy floss and would float away and disappear.

The room was filled with silence. Everything was shocking and new.

Paul was so wrapped up in his new child and his wife that he didn't hear the knock at the front door or see Beth leave the room.

'Beth, let me in,' said Doctor Appleby, suddenly appearing far too late. 'The operator said you tried to ring.'

Paul moved to stand up, but the doctor motioned for him to stay where he was as he strode into the room.

'The doctor's here,' Paul said to Lucy, but she barely opened her eyes. He looked at Doctor Appleby and could read the worry in his face. Paul felt his heart lurch as he registered that look.

Doctor Appleby lifted the blankets and murmured, 'A lot of blood loss.'

Lucy's eyes were closed now.

Paul watched as Doctor Appleby picked up Lucy's fragile wrist. He knew somewhere inside him that Doctor Appleby was taking her pulse but routine actions seemed out of place in a world that was churning and turning. The doctor leant over and whispered in his ear so Edie couldn't hear.

'This happens with the change of life ones — always a risk. Not much I can do here for the moment.'

Paul stared vacantly at the meaningful glance the doctor was giving him. He knew what the glance meant but he wouldn't acknowledge it. He'd prove the doctor to be an unreliable witness, guilty of perjury, even. Paul could feel Edie looking at him, her panic rising. To restore some normality he said, 'Would you like a cup of tea, Doctor Appleby?'

'I just got back from lunch at the Tonkins'. I could do with one. I like it white with two sugars.' And Doctor Appleby looked

meaningfully at Beth, who knew she had to make the tea but made no motion to leave.

Paul needed the doctor out of the room. He needed to be alone with his wife and children.

Beth didn't want to go. She was part of the family, wasn't she? That's what they always said. Lucy was the closest thing she had to a mother. Paul nodded in the direction of the kitchen, so she motioned grudgingly for Doctor Appleby to follow her.

Paul could never remember when the realisation hit him that Lucy was going to die. It might have been when he saw Edie's blood drop to the floor, a single tear that fell from her clenched hands and burst on the polished mirror of the floorboards. It might have been when Doctor Appleby came back into the room, balancing his tea cup on its saucer, and leant over and whispered in Paul's ear, 'There's nothing I can do for her. I'm sorry.' It might have been when Lucy opened her eyes, looked over at him and whispered, 'Name her Grace,' with her last ounce of energy and closed her eyes. But whichever moment it was, it was as if someone ripped his heart and soul from his body and tossed them carelessly aside.

Half an hour had passed since the doctor had left the room for an arrowroot biscuit and a second cup of tea. Paul clutched baby Grace as though she was his anchor, the only thing able to hold him back from following his wife as she slipped through the tides of life. Death was in the room, bringing its awful odour with it. It was an odour that curled the corners of the soul if you were living, but perhaps if you were dying it was rose petals and the sea

because suddenly Lucy smiled and sang — just a few words of the song that had ensnared Paul's heart at the very beginning.

'*Dear Child who me resemblest so, it whispered, come oh come with me, happy together let us go, the earth unworthy is of thee*.'

Her voice was as light as the first day he heard it and it gave him hope.

'Mama,' called Edie and rushed to the bedside.

With an enormous effort Lucy looked into Edie's eyes and reached out and gently touched her cheek with her finger. Edie burst into heartbroken sobs.

'You must be her mother now,' whispered Lucy.

'No, you must stay,' cried Edie.

'Promise me,' pleaded Lucy, her hand touching Edie's hair. But Edie was crying too much to answer.

It was hard work for Lucy to stay in this world, even for a few minutes. It was only love that was keeping her. She looked at her new daughter, wrinkled and pink in the rug in her father's arms.

'Gracie,' she whispered.

Paul nodded. 'I'll agree to any name you wish, if only you wouldn't leave.'

She looked at him and tried to send him all her love as she sang, '*When one is pure as thou art now, the sweetest day is still the last*.'

The baby Gracie, wrapped in the knee rug Lucy had crocheted, was quiet as she turned her tiny face. Then she twisted and turned her body. Paul jumped, surprised to feel such strength in such a spindly newborn, and wondered what the baby was trying to do. Then he realised she was turning to see her mother.

'Go on, look at your mother,' he whispered in her ear, 'for you will surely follow her and stay by her side.'

Gracie focused her brand-new eyes, still filmy, on her mother's face, reached out her tiny fingers, and smiled. That first smile filled Paul with peace.

It was Gracie who sent her mother on her way. Lucy, having received all she needed in that one tiny smile, lay back on the pillow and left them. The room was filled with icy silence, aside from the muffled weeping of Edie.

And the broken heart of Paul.

After a long while Edie spoke. 'I don't want her, send her back to God and exchange her for Mother!'

Paul considered his girl. She sounded like a five-year-old child. He looked at the baby and suddenly he knew what to do to push his and Edie's grief to somewhere controllable.

'Come and welcome your sister,' he commanded, 'she is so small she may not be with us for long.'

Edie didn't move.

'Now, Edith!'

Edie shuffled across the room, her face red, wary and angry with grief. She didn't want to look at the thing that had just taken her mother's life. She didn't want to see what had spread blood and pain through her home. Paul moved the baby so Edie had to look at her, then he placed her in Edie's rigid unwilling arms. Edie turned away. Her father might put the child in her arms like a parcel, but that didn't mean she had to acknowledge it. So Edie missed it when the baby girl smiled, and everything turned and shifted in their house once more.

Doctor Appleby stood in the doorway wiping crumbs from his face with his white monogrammed handkerchief. He coughed.

'I see you need me now — to sign the death certificate.' Feeling he should offer more, he said, 'It's all right, I've already rung Reverend Whitlock and he's on his way.'

Down in Eddy Street, a narrow street with only a few sparse trees and small struggling gardens, Young Arthur thumped on the front door of Number 12.

Beatrix Drake and her fella George hid under the blankets.

'Shhh,' she giggled, 'whoever it is will think no one's home and bugger off.'

Arthur thumped for as long as the coin Mister Cottingham had given him was worth, then put his hands in his pockets and wandered slowly home.

Theo, waiting at the front door of the Cottingham house, felt the house shift and the world turn and was filled with sorrow.