

**THE
COVERED
WIFE**

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**PANTERA
PRESS**

PROLOGUE

THE MEN DANCE. Some throw their arms around each other, making tight heaving circles, their heads almost touching, their legs shuffling, the circles moving around and around, a black and white kaleidoscope. Others weave a snaking line through the spaces in between: man after man, his damp waist cupped by the warm hands of another, beneath his own palms the softness of the next man's belly. At the head, an elfin man with a wild beard and curling side-locks takes loping steps, lifts his eyes heavenwards, and yells his prayers directly to the Almighty.

The sweat drips from their faces, pooling on the parquet floor. A man slips, the smooth soles of his shoes sliding awkwardly, and is hoisted back into step by the men on either side, the circle continuing without pause, around and around, faster and faster, until the men become a blur, a pulsing entity in a frenzy of worship.

The circle breaks, revealing Daniel and Menachem together in its centre, facing one another, each gripping the other's forearms so tightly that the skin around is drained of blood. They spin – fast – first with scuffling steps, then jumping, leaning outwards, only the steady pull of the other keeping each from falling. Beneath their jackets, their shirts are sodden, pasted onto them. Their breath is

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heavy; their chests heaving; their mouths gulping air. The other men are drawn to them. They stop dancing to watch, bending forwards to recover, but keeping their faces raised, their eyes fixed on them. So intense is their connection, so clear is their exclusion of all others, that no one dares enter their circle until finally, laughing, Menachem steps away and they stagger backwards, teetering on their heels before regaining their balance.



PART 1

TODAY

CHAPTER ONE

COCKATOOS SWOOP OFF the eucalypts; their usual morning racket. Daniel is up. I know without opening my eyes and raising my head to check. It's been hours since I heard him shift on his mattress, or his breath, scratchy at the back of his throat, almost a snore.

I lie on my side, stiff beneath the covers; and still, except for the nail of my right index finger, which I run along the inside edge of my thumb, over and over. The nail is split and jagged. It cuts into skin scratched raw, makes sharp, stinging pain. But I don't stop. I don't think I can.

I think I have been here like this – still, but awake; quiet, but wound tight as a spring shoved into a box – since I lay down, not long after dark. But I must have slept, slept then woken, shifted from blessed nothingness to tortured waiting.

Now Yossi is here. He stands beside the bed, although I didn't hear him come in. His breath crackles through his nose, still plugged from a lingering cold. He leans closer and I feel it – a warm, wet whisper on my cheek. I brush the spot as if it's a mosquito, and he squeals, delighted. I open my eyes. What a sight rewards me! He beams at my awakening, shivers with anticipation. I could eat him up, such is the surge of love that swells inside me. There is

nothing so magnificent, I think, as to be the centre of his universe, the object of his devotion, and for a moment, I forget the rest. He waits. I shuffle over, lift the edge of the bed covers, and he clambers on, wriggling in beside me, placing his narrow face, his delicate features so close to mine that our noses almost touch. I smell last night's frankfurts on his tongue.

'Imma, can I tell you a secret?'

He cups his hand over my lobe and speaks straight into my ear. 'Imma, I love you to the moon and back ten times.'

He lowers his face to the sheet and wipes his nose vigorously across it.

'Possum, I love you to the moon and back ten hundred million times.'

He frowns and I see his brain working, calculating the distance of my love, and I can resist no longer, but pull him close, squeeze him tightly, kiss his cheek again and again, the softest kisses, my loosely puckered lips scarcely touching his skin. Angel kisses we call them. He submits momentarily before thrusting me off, pushing himself upright and rubbing at his cheek.

'I only like giving kisses. I don't like getting kisses,' he says.

I look to the ceiling and wipe away tears. 'I forgot,' I say. 'I'm sorry.'

He regards me through narrowed eyes. 'Imma,' he says finally, as if I am a dim child. 'The blessing.'

We say it aloud, his words chasing mine.

'Modeh ani l'fanecha Melech chai v'kayam,
she-hechezarta bi nishmatee b'chemla,
raba emunatecha.'

'We're thanking God for waking us up,' I say. 'We're bringing Him into our day.' If only it were that simple, I think.

He nods, as if it is obvious, and slides from the bed.



We pass Daniel on our way to the kitchen. He stands as usual in the far corner of the living room, in front of the small wooden side table, looking out through the window onto the lawn. He is shrouded by the loose folds of his prayer shawl. It cradles the back of his head, makes rolling hills of light and shade down his spine. Its knotted tassels tickle his shins. He is framed by first sunlight. It will be warming his face, as it did mine in the early days when I too stood in that spot, my favourite patch of our cottage; when I too looked out on that view and felt the certainty of God's hand in it.

He bows incessantly from the waist. I know his face without seeing it: eyes closed tightly below heavy eyebrows; forehead creased with yearning; pale, thin lips moving quickly, murmuring the ancient devotions by rote. He lifts his long hands to the ceiling and I see the leather straps of his tefillin winding tightly down his arm, around his hand and middle finger, starkly black against his lightly freckled skin. He arches back to gaze upwards and twists from side to side. He pounds his chest with his fist, slowly, repetitively, drumming the beat of his heart. He takes his prayer book from the table top and buries his face in its pages.

Yossi shifts in my arms. 'I'm hungry.'

Daniel stiffens.

'Shush.' I press his cheek to my chest and carry him quickly away.



Half an hour later, I wash up at the sink. Yossi plays between my legs. On the back lawn, the roos graze near the lemon tree.

'The Rebbetzin called.'

I jump at his voice, spraying soapy water down my dress.

'Avital wants you there.' He drags a chair from the table. 'She insists that you come.'

I lower my hands into the water and close my eyes.

‘I told her you’d be there soon.’

From the bottom, I retrieve Yossi’s cereal bowl, still caked with most of the Weet-Bix I put out for him. It sticks, cement-like, to the melamine.

‘Straight after breakfast.’

I press my belly into the edge of the bench until it hurts. Yossi digs his nail into the dip beside my ankle.

‘Get out from there,’ Daniel rages at him without warning.

I grab Yossi by his underarms and hoist him onto my chest. He burrows his face into my neck and claws at my shoulders. I lower my head so we are cheek to cheek. His heart beats hard and fast through his onesie.

Daniel sighs. ‘Sarah, I know you’re hurting.’

I straighten and turn back to the window, peeling Yossi’s fingers off my shoulders and propping him on the bench beside me. I crouch until our eyes meet and smile reassuringly. I rub the frown from his brow with my fingertips.

‘Sarah.’ Daniel taps the sole of his shoe on the linoleum.

I place my elbows on the bench and lean onto them. ‘Yes?’

‘I know it’s hard for you.’

There are four roos by the lemon tree. As if sensing me watching, the largest lifts his head and looks towards the house. He startles when he sees me and all of them freeze, as if this makes them invisible. Stupid animals, I think: afraid of everything, yet unable even to flee.

‘Perhaps it is for the best.’ Daniel speaks gently and I almost turn towards him before I remember and catch myself. ‘We grow the most when we’re challenged.’

I say nothing, and there is a long silence. I feel Yossi watching me but I don’t look at him in case he speaks. Finally, Daniel clears his throat, scrapes back his chair, and leaves through the sliding door. We listen to his feet on the gravel, fading to silence.



Two skirts fit me. One is in the wash. I pull the other one – long, loose and black – off its hanger, step into it, and lift the elasticised waistband over my belly. I flick through tops, as if I have a choice in the matter, selecting one of the three shapeless black shirts that hang side by side, and the heavy black cape I wear whenever I am outside the home. I wince as I button a sleeve, ease it back to find a fresh ring of red at the base of my arm, where the veins branch out and disappear into my palm, where he grabbed it. I stare at the floor and swallow down vomit.



Outside, Yossi in the pram, I drag my feet through the pebbles. At the bottom of the drive, I stand and kick at them. They fly off the tip of my shoe, trailing dusty white tails like comets. I gaze left over farmland to the valley. Once, the view inspired me. Today, it is too vast, too dark beneath the bush canopy, and I turn away, fixing my gaze to the black canvas roof of the pram. We walk in silence along the short stretch of road. Yossi rests the heels of his smart navy shoes on the front metal bar, and I am thankful not to answer his questions. I hug the red rock face because there is no footpath and cars pass quickly on their way down to Sydney. Ahead, at the entrance to the walking track, there is a cluster of activity. I see police cars and a handful of people dressed in uniform. I cross the road and look straight ahead. I have learned not to draw attention to myself.

A woman stands with a boy on the skirt of the road beside a dark green station wagon.

‘Someone must be hurt,’ she says to him.

He wears a red and white baseball cap. ‘How?’ he asks.

‘Maybe he slipped and fell,’ she says. ‘It’s very steep.’

‘Maybe someone pushed him.’

They notice us and stop speaking. The boy stares, open mouthed. I guess he is five, in his first year of school perhaps.

‘Good morning,’ I say as we pass them. I mean to sound friendly, but it comes out high pitched and phoney.

The woman reaches for the boy and pulls him to her. Her fingers make creases in his superman T-shirt. ‘Hi there,’ she says.

Across the road, a man moves away from the throng. He is tall and solidly built and wears the white police rescue jumpsuit. He calls out, and a woman dressed in the same uniform joins him. I think they are looking across the road at us, but I can’t be sure because I don’t dare turn my head to confirm it. With my eyes straight ahead, I walk as fast as I can without running. If I run, they’ll think I have something to hide. A long truck passes between us, and four cars after that, and then we are around the corner, out of sight. I cross the road, not pausing to check for traffic, and run up the driveway and past the sharp bend carved into the hill. Only then do I stop and look behind me. No one is coming. I lean on the handle bar, sucking in air. It is too much, I think, placing my hand on my chest to steady my heart. I cannot bear it. Yossi bangs his feet imperiously and the pram shakes.

‘Stop it,’ I yell, fury surging, although it’s not his fault. None of it is his fault.

BEFORE

CHAPTER TWO

I MET DANIEL on a Wednesday night in December. I was twenty-nine: a mid-level lawyer in a top-tier firm that spanned fifteen floors of a forty-floor glass-clad tower in Circular Quay. It was after eight when Tali coaxed me out from behind my desk.

‘You have to come,’ she said, leaning on the doorframe of my office.

‘I can’t leave yet.’ I couldn’t. And even if I could, I would go home to bed, not out drinking with colleagues. In the morning, I would wake, get dressed and do it all over again.

‘For God’s sake, Sarah.’ She slouched forwards dramatically. ‘We need a fucking break.’

We’d spent the day reviewing documents in matching blue folders. I turned back to one now, pulling the top off my yellow highlighter.

Tali groaned.

‘You go, though,’ I said.

She placed her hands on my desk and thrust her face in front of me. She smelled freshly showered, although we’d been there since nine. ‘I’m not leaving without you.’

I put down the highlighter. ‘I’m exhausted, Tali.’

‘I’ll take that as a yes.’

You'd never have guessed she was the junior and I her supervising solicitor.

'You're a Jew, right?' she'd asked me on her second day at the firm.

She was a graduate, not yet qualified. I'd invited her downstairs for coffee and a chat. There, in the crowded lift travelling back to our desks, I almost choked on my banana bread.

'Sort of,' I said, after we stepped into the foyer and the lift doors closed behind us.

'I knew it.' She pumped her fist. 'I can spot a Yid in all situations.'

After that she'd begun to appear outside my office door. 'Coffee?'

We ate lunch together at my desk. She'd slip off her stilettos and tuck her bare legs up onto her chair.

'You're inspiring,' she said once, and bit into her salmon sushi roll.

'Hardly.'

'An island of dignity in a sea of arrogant dickheads.'

She was right about the dickheads, but wrong about me. I'd worked my guts out for years, only to become a glorified document manager, the team foot soldier. Give Sarah the crap no one else wants, the mind-numbing due diligence, the mega litigation. She won't complain. She's got an excellent eye for detail.

Still, she badgered me to go out with her – to drinks, dinner at hip restaurants, parties. I protested, but half-heartedly. In truth, I looked forward to her, always. She made everything fun. What did she see in me? I wondered more than once. I met her friends: eastern suburbs, private schools, biblical names.

'I hang with the Jew crew,' she said, and laughed from her chest.

Did she choose me only as a Jew to pull into her posse? I'd wondered, as ridiculous as that seemed to me then. I didn't believe I deserved to wear the Jewish label, at least not in the way Tali and her friends did, like a comfy sweatshirt they'd owned forever.

That night, we went to Quay Bar. It was the regular crowd: overwhelmingly white, slim and suited. We stood with two

colleagues around a high metal table and canvassed the usual topics: work, or more accurately people from work, the partners mostly. What those hallowed beings did for that small crumb of their lives when they were not in the office was scope for our endless analysis.

‘I saw Luke on the train this morning,’ said Katrina, a second-year solicitor.

Luke was a litigation partner who’d made a name for himself defending class actions.

‘I can’t believe Luke catches public transport,’ said Michael, a graduate who still lived with his parents in Castle Hill.

Beside him, Tali rolled her eyes at me.

‘You made me come, remember?’ I said to her, and she laughed and told me to relax and drink up.

Patrons filled the forecourt until we had to shout to be heard, concentrate to follow the conversation. I stopped trying and their words receded into the din.

‘Work,’ Katrina said.

‘Documents,’ said Michael. ‘Luke.’

It made no difference if I listened or not. Katrina said something and I nodded. Michael laughed and I smiled, amused by my deception.

‘Yes,’ I said.

I watched Katrina watching Michael, who ploughed on, oblivious to whether anyone could hear him. Tali wasn’t even pretending to listen. She stood with one hand on her hip, a bottle of craft beer in the other, scanning the crowd, searching for something better than this. *Something better than this.*

I want that too, I thought, turning my gaze towards Circular Quay. Cars roared across the overpass. I felt suddenly, painfully alone.

‘Another?’ Katrina motioned with her head to my empty glass.

I hesitated. Another drink wouldn’t help.

‘Go on.’

‘Sure,’ I said. Our faces were close enough for me to see the chickenpox scar on her right cheek. ‘Thanks.’

She left, and I turned and pressed on a spot of pain between my eyebrows. I wished I was at home, out of my tight, hot clothes, soothed by darkness.

‘Daniel.’ Beside me, Tali waved to someone across the crowd. ‘Daniel!’ She cupped her hands around her mouth and hollered to him, then pushed her way to where he stood, about a hundred metres away. When they hugged, the top of her head slipped easily beneath his chin and his arms encircled her with room to spare. I want to fling myself onto a guy like that and have him wrap me up tightly, I thought, the longing heavy on my chest. It had been a while between boyfriends. Tali took his hand and led him towards us.

‘Sarah,’ she said, looking pleased. ‘Meet Daniel.’

‘Hello,’ I said.

He smiled and said hi and we clasped hands briefly. He was unusually tall and thin, with thick dark hair that swept low on his forehead. Now, he ran his fingers through it and it remained standing in place, even after his hand returned to his side.

‘Sarah is my favourite person at Milton Hayes,’ Tali said to him.

‘Is that right?’ he said.

Katrina returned and handed me my drink, and Tali introduced her to Daniel, and she asked how the two of them knew each other, and Daniel said they’d known each other since high school, through his sister. His voice carried easily around our circle, and though my feet ached in my heels, I put off making an excuse and heading home, telling myself that if I left now he’d think it was because of him, and I’d stay ten minutes more at most.

Katrina asked Daniel if he was a lawyer.

‘Afraid so,’ he said.

‘But he’s a barrister, which is much more interesting,’ said Tali.

Katrina used this opportunity to steer the conversation back to work, my mind wandered and I took my phone out of my handbag and checked the time.

‘Want to get out of here? Head somewhere quieter?’ Daniel said, looking at me.

‘Is it that obvious?’ I said, surprised.

He smiled. ‘I know a daggy place on Macquarie Street that’ll be empty.’



Katrina and Michael wanted to stay, so just the three of us walked up the hill, Tali chattering excitedly. She’d once been best friends with Daniel’s younger sister, I learned. Throughout high school, she practically lived at his house.

‘You and everyone else,’ he said.

He’d gone overseas. They lost touch. Tali and Keren weren’t friends anymore.

‘I think I pissed her off,’ Tali said. ‘Although I never worked out why.’

‘I wouldn’t worry,’ Daniel said. ‘That happens a lot.’

‘I was devastated,’ Tali said. ‘I still sort of miss her.’

‘She has a certain charisma,’ Daniel said, and Tali cracked up.

She spoke about his mother, who liked a house full of people to feed. ‘I used to wish Irene was my mum, that I lived at your place,’ Tali said, and I looked at her in surprise, because I’d imagined someone like Tali to have a completely fabulous mother.

‘I grew up on Kibbutz Kaldor,’ Daniel explained to me, and I thought of the small, walled kitchen of my childhood, the slope of my mother’s shoulders as she prepared our dinner at the stove, the tick of the clock on the wall.

Daniel took us to a sedate hotel bar. Except for two tables of men in suits, it was empty.

‘This is great,’ I said, feeling a faint flutter of excitement at the turn the night was taking. Did I imagine it, or was Daniel paying me particular attention? Hadn’t he noticed my discomfort back at Quay Bar and decided to bring me here, to a place that suited me perfectly?

‘Daniel’s a rising star of the Sydney Bar, according to Dad,’ Tali said. Her father was a Federal Court judge. ‘A formidable legal mind apparently,’ she’d told me soon after we met. ‘Although I wouldn’t know. He’s always working.’

‘Your dad’s being generous,’ Daniel said.

‘Daniel’s being modest,’ she said to me, and left to use the bathroom.

We watched her walk out of the bar and into the hotel lobby. Something had shifted between the forecourt and now and our silence felt weighty with anticipation. Still, I worried that it was Tali he was interested in. Why wouldn’t he be?

‘You’re a lawyer too?’ he said.

‘I am.’

‘I worked in a big law firm after I finished uni; lasted all of three months.’

‘That’s not unusual.’

‘Still, Dad was horrified. You’d have thought I’d ruined my life.’

‘Better to have got out quickly.’

He took a sip from his drink before leaning forwards in his chair. ‘And what about you?’

‘Me?’ Our knees were almost touching.

‘What’s kept you at Milton Hayes?’

I hesitated, conscious of the heat in my cheeks; liking his scrutiny and wanting to answer in a way that would hold him in place – his long body angled towards me, his brow furrowed in anticipation of what I had to say.

‘I enjoyed it at first,’ I said. ‘The work, the people, the plush offices and important clients. That world was new to me, and it

felt glamorous and consequential. The gloss wore off of course, but gradually. By the time I realised how unhappy I was, it seemed too late to leave, like I'd invested too much to walk away.'

'I get it.'

We examined each other.

'I don't love my job either.' He said. 'But I stay and feel shitty about it.'

Over his shoulder, I saw Tali approaching and wished she wasn't.

'What's going on?' she said.

'Nothing,' I said.

He winked.

I smiled.

Tali looked from me to him.

He picked up his glass and finished his drink. 'Your friend,' he said to her. 'I like her a lot.'



The next morning, he called me at work. We met that night at a bar in Bondi.

'It's funny,' he said, and I caught the woody scent of his aftershave and wanted him closer, his words whispered in my ear. 'We've lived a few blocks from each other for three years, but I've never seen you before.'

'You probably have,' I said. 'We've probably walked past each other a hundred times.'

'I would've noticed.'

I laughed, looked away, drank. Inside me, everything fizzed.

There'd been relationships before. Not many, but enough for me to decide I wasn't good at them, was destined to be alone like my mother. Always, they'd happened more by reason of mutual convenience than a rush of attraction – John, the best friend of my best friend's boyfriend, the two of us thrown together on a road trip

to Byron Bay; Matt, a neighbour who'd moved back to the UK six months after we started dating; Stewart, from second-year property law. More recently there was a brief foray into online dating, at Tali's insistence, but I lacked both the confidence and the resilience the medium required. Time and again I'd felt rejected, or used and spat out, no matter how many times I told myself that intimacy for intimacy's sake was fine, that I did not need or want any more from a man. To meet a man and have a relationship in the normal, old-fashioned way seemed out of reach, not only to me but to all but a handful of the women I knew.

'You grew up in Clovelly?' Daniel said.

'Yes.'

'I love it there.'

'Me too.'

'Brothers and sisters?'

'None.'

'Wow,' he said. 'What was that like?'

'It was pretty lonely to be honest.' I put down my glass. 'I used to lie in bed and pray for a sister.'

'Take some of mine, I have three.'

'Three! That sounds terrifying.'

'It was.' He laughed. 'It still is.'

He's even nicer than I'd hoped, I thought, and I tucked my hair behind my ear and felt uncharacteristically seductive under his gaze.

'Are you close to your parents?' he said.

'It's just Mum and me.' I picked up a cardboard coaster and turned it over in my hands, buying time. But the truth was I wanted to tell him everything. 'Dad left when I was a baby.'

'Oh God, I'm sorry.' He sat back, looking mortified.

I was used to that look.

'I shouldn't be so bloody nosy,' he said.

'No, it's fine.' I waved away his concern, although there was a thickness in my throat and I worried I would cry in front of him.

'I've never known any different so it's not as if I suffered some big trauma. It's just the way things were.'

'I suppose,' he said, sounding unconvinced.

Mum met my father when he came to fix their television. Her parents were out. She was nineteen, in her first year of university. They'd dated in secret. She fell pregnant. Her father went ballistic.

There was a time, when I was between seven and twelve, when Mum sometimes told me the story before I went to bed.

'Why was your father so angry?' I'd ask her every time.

'Because we weren't married,' She'd say. 'And I was young, too young to have a baby, and I hadn't finished university, and we couldn't support ourselves, and most of all ...' She'd pause.

'Because he wasn't Jewish,' I'd finish.

'Correct.'

We'd lie on our backs on her bed beneath the ceiling fan.

'Why did it matter?' I'd say.

She'd laugh. 'I've told you, possum. It's the way things were. My father believed it was more important than anything.'

'Than being happy?'

'Yes.'

'That's strange.'

'It is to us now, honey. Things were different then.'

They'd moved in together. At first, it was great. Then, it was okay. And then he left.

'He was weak,' Mum said. 'When you were born, and things got difficult, he couldn't cope. But we did okay just the two of us, didn't we?'

'Yes.' She always asked and I always reassured her. Had he called? I'd wondered. At least in the beginning, to see how I was doing. Had he sent birthday cards with ten-dollar notes inside that she'd hidden away in a box on a high shelf for me to discover by accident one day?

'Whatcha thinking about?' she said.

‘Nothing.’ The truth was I’d searched the shelves, opened boxes and found nothing of him.

I had one photograph. For years, it sat in a pale pink frame on my bedside table. I was red faced, newly wrenched from the womb, wrapped in a striped hospital blanket. He clutched me to his chest and beamed into the camera. He had a beak nose and large front teeth. If I hadn’t known better, I would’ve guessed he was kind. And funny. The sort of dad who’d act the fool to make me laugh, like the dads on TV sitcoms; while I’d pretend to be unmoved, all of me trembling with the effort of keeping the giggles inside. When I felt sad, I would stare at his face in the photograph until my eyes ached. I hoped he would sense my longing and return. When I was twelve, I tore it into a hundred pieces, which I threw into the rubbish bin. We’d rarely spoken of him after that.

Daniel asked for the bill.

‘I’ll get this,’ he said, when I reached for my handbag.

He walked me home. I wondered if I should invite him inside, but at the gate to my building he stopped and took hold of my hands.

‘I had fun,’ he said and kissed me lightly on the lips.

A shiver ran over me and I didn’t mind that he saw.



On Friday morning, Daniel invited me to his parents’ house for dinner.

‘Mum still does Shabbat dinner every Friday night,’ he said. ‘It’s not at all religious. More an excuse to be together and for her to see the grandkids.’

‘Shabbos with the family already?’ Tali said when I told her over lunch. ‘That’s massive.’

‘I’m shitting myself.’

‘I don’t blame you. His sisters are scary.’

‘Stop it,’ I said. ‘I’m freaked out enough already.’

She put her container of salad down on my desk. 'But seriously, Daniel's an intense sort of guy. Don't let him rush you.'

I lowered my sandwich. 'What does that mean?'

'Just what I said. Go at your own pace.'

'Don't get hurt?'

She shook her head. 'I mean go at your own pace, whatever feels right for you.' Her phone pinged and she reached for it. 'Daniel's the kind of guy who falls in love one day, and rushes off to Afghanistan the next.'

I stared at her. Did she realise how hurtful that sounded?

She glanced up from her phone. 'Don't overthink it, Sarah.'

'You know that's impossible, right?'

He picked me up from Edgecliff Station at seven. His parents lived on a winding tree-lined street up high in Bellevue Hill. He leaned out of his window to punch in some numbers to open the gate and glanced across at me. 'You okay?'

'Yes.' I felt parched.

'Don't worry,' he said, 'they'll love you.'

His father was a property developer, Daniel had told me as we drove there, who'd expected Daniel would join the family business. For a short time after quitting the law firm, he had. It hadn't worked out.

'We're very different people,' Daniel said.

The house was down a long driveway. Four dark cars were parked outside. There were wide stone steps to an oversized door, which was opened by a little girl with plaits.

'Uncle Dan!' He lifted her up and she bent around him to peek at me.

'This is Maddie.'

'I'm five,' she said.

A small dog jumped about his legs – 'Darlo, he's psycho,' Daniel said – as we walked through the foyer. I tried not to gape at the grand staircase, the high ceilings and the artwork on every wall.

We were the last to arrive. In the open-plan kitchen and living room, they all looked up from their Scotch and peanuts: his sisters, their husbands, and Daniel's father, Sam.

'Everyone, this is Sarah.' Daniel swept his hand along the row of them, sitting on stools at the island bench. 'Sarah, this is my family.'

'You can't do that.' It was the sister who sat closest. She had a delicate nose and arched eyebrows.

'That's Julia,' he said dryly. 'You can tell she's the eldest.'

'And I'm Eva, and that's Keren.'

I felt their eyes assessing me, and knew I came up short. They were stunning and elegant, all three of them.

'It's wonderful to meet you, Sarah.' Irene rushed around the bench from the fridge, a tiny whirlwind dressed all in black. She kissed me on one cheek then the other. 'Look what I've done!' She rubbed lipstick off my face with her fingertips. Dinner wasn't ready, she explained, speaking quickly, because she'd had a lunch function, and then taken four of the grandchildren for swimming lessons after school, and she'd had to collect her mother from the hairdresser in Double Bay, and they'd run terribly late.

'Settle down, Mum.' Julia smiled up at me reassuringly. I shifted on my feet, feeling drab and unsophisticated in my grey suit. 'Give her a minute to at least put down her handbag.'

But there wasn't a minute. There was Sam, Daniel's father, to meet, silver-haired and charming. The brothers-in-law: Gavin, Peter and Derek. Five nephews. Three nieces. And Bubbe, regal in pressed cream pants and a silk shirt. 'The matriarch of the family,' Irene said. Behind the crowd of them, a diminutive woman in skinny jeans and purple thongs calmly segmented a pineapple.

We ate at a long table in the dining room. Irene lit two candles. Sam mumbled through the blessings, and the children ripped apart two loaves of plaited bread. Irene sat on my left.

'I'm thrilled Daniel brought you here tonight.' She peered at me intensely through black-framed glasses.

'Mum,' Eva said. 'You'll scare her off.'

'I will not.' Irene glared at her. 'Will I, darling?'

'No,' I said.

Julia snorted. She and Eva exchanged a look across the table.

I smiled politely and thought, how lucky they are to communicate complex feelings about mothers and brothers with a mere roll of the eye, a raised eyebrow. I bore my mother's peculiarities alone.

'Mum's just pleased you're not in the army, like the last girl,' Eva said.

'Army *Reserves*,' Keren said, and the two of them tittered.

'Did Daniel tell you about his army phase?' Eva asked innocently.

I shook my head, tongue-tied in the face of their banter.

'Stop it, girls,' Irene said. She turned to me. 'Daniel was in the Army Reserves for a time. He's very fit, you know. He liked the physical challenge.'

The sisters burst out laughing.

'And Stephanie was a lovely girl.'

'Admit it, Mum, you hated the entire episode,' Julia said.

Beneath the table, Daniel took my hand and placed it in his lap. 'Ignore my sisters,' he said, loud enough for them to hear; and then turning to them, 'Be nice. She's an only child.'

They looked at me with renewed curiosity while the woman in purple thongs wordlessly served clear chicken soup with noodles and chunks of carrot.

'How did you two meet?' Eva said.

'Through Tali,' I said.

'Tali who?' Julia said.

'Tali Levy.' I looked from sister to sister. 'I think she's a friend of the family.'

'Keren,' Eva called to her sister across the table. 'Sarah is friends with Tali Levy.'

She and Julia watched Keren expectantly.

'Oh,' Keren said coolly. She tucked a wad of hair behind her ear.

For a moment no one spoke.

‘For God’s sake, Keren, relax,’ Julia said, which made Eva laugh and Derek look at Keren nervously.

‘What?’ Keren looked from one sister to the other. ‘Tali’s a great girl,’ she said to me. ‘We just lost touch, that’s all.’

I nodded. Eva winked at me conspiratorially. ‘Keren’s a kitten once you get to know her,’ she said.

Ignoring her sister, Keren turned to me, smiling sweetly. ‘Have you and Daniel been together long?’

‘Stop it with the third degree,’ Daniel interjected before I could answer. ‘I want Sarah to come back next week.’

‘So do I,’ said Bella.

‘Me too,’ said Maddie.

I laughed, feeling overwhelmed. The Friday before, I’d eaten Thai takeaway alone in front of the TV. This was all happening so fast.

As if he knew my thoughts, Daniel squeezed my hand. ‘You’re doing great,’ he said.

The children feasted on bread smeared with butter. They barely touched the soup or the chicken and vegetables their mothers carefully arranged on their plates – a different combination for each child – and ran from the table as soon as Julia said they could, tumbling in and out of the dining room, reporting on one sibling or another, alternatively screaming or laughing or crying until Keren yelled ‘Stop hanging off me,’ at one of the boys and Derek said ‘Keren,’ and Keren snapped ‘Oh fuck off, Derek,’ and Eva made a face, and Keren said ‘Like you’ve never told Peter to fuck off,’ and Julia said, calmly, ‘Guys, just chill out,’ and Irene said ‘Why don’t they all go downstairs and watch TV?’ to which the children cheered, and Keren threw up her hands and said ‘Whatever.’ Throughout it all, Daniel hunched down close to his grandmother, seemingly oblivious to the drama.

‘Bubbe, would you like another piece of chicken?’

He bent his head to hers. She stroked his cheek with a shaky hand. There were numbers burned into her arm.

‘So tell me, Sarah,’ Irene said later, spearing a piece of pineapple with her fork, ‘are you related to the Abelson family that used to live on March Street?’

The sisters turned to look at me.

‘Um, I’m not sure.’ Their stares made me nervous.

Irene turned to Sam. ‘Wasn’t Naomi Stein originally an Abelson?’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ he said mildly.

‘That’s my mum’s sister.’ I touched my cheek, burning under their scrutiny. ‘But we’re not close.’

Her house was down the road from here, around the corner, on the right-hand side of the street. There were four sets of stairs to their shiny front door. ‘Remember your manners,’ Mum would say when she delivered me there on a Friday afternoon. In my memories, Aunt Naomi wore long, silky dresses with thin straps that floated back against her body, revealing the line of her underwear, the bones of her hips. To my ten-year-old self, she was movie-star glamorous. She’d always begged Mum to stay for dinner.

‘She’s just a harmless old woman, Bibi,’ she said once; and another time, ‘Soon it will be too late.’

But Mum always had an excuse, and Aunt Naomi would hold my hand as we watched her pick her way down to her battered red car and drive away.

‘She’s a stubborn woman, your mother,’ she’d say.

Irene’s cool hand on my forearm made me jump.

‘Sarah,’ she said, ‘you haven’t touched your fruit.’

Across the table, Keren sucked on a grape.

‘Poor Sarah,’ Julia said. ‘She doesn’t know what’s hit her.’ And to me, ‘On behalf of the family I apologise for our complete lack of decorum.’

I smiled. ‘It’s fine, honestly.’

A phone vibrated, and Derek went outside to take the call. Irene watched him leave and shook her head.

‘What?’ Keren barked at her.

‘Nothing.’ Irene raised her hands in surrender.

‘It’s okay, Mum,’ Julia gave her mother a kiss on the cheek. ‘Keren, you need to get to yoga pronto. Wanna drop the kids to me in the morning?’

‘Sorry,’ said Keren softening. ‘Work is hectic and I’m not sleeping well.’

‘Where’s the bathroom?’ I said.

It was off the foyer, cool and quiet, a vanilla-scented candle flickering on the marble bench top. Below the vanity, two white hand-towels hung over a copper rail, their long tassels precisely aligned. I locked the door, sat down on the closed lid of the toilet seat and put my face in my hands.

‘You need your space,’ Mum had said. ‘It’s an only-child thing.’



When I was nine, two weeks before Christmas, Mum picked me up from after-school care with a cat in a cardboard box on the back seat of the car.

‘I found her wandering outside my classroom. She doesn’t have a collar.’

Except for a splotch of white below her right eye, she was black. Her fur hung off her bones and there was a grey patch on the inside of her front left leg that looked like rubber.

At home, she trembled under the couch. We tried to coax her out, calling to her softly, but she didn’t budge. Before we went to bed, Mum filled a cereal bowl with milk and left it on the floor. It was empty in the morning.

‘She whined all night. I haven’t slept a wink,’ Mum said.

But soon Midnight grew fat and lazy. She sunned herself on the couch, lying flat on her back with her legs spread, the grey scabby bit and her six pink nipples in two rows on full display. I sat on the floor to watch TV rather than have all of that in my face. Mum laughed as she walked past on her way to the kitchen. 'Act like a lady, Midnight.'

Midnight didn't move.

Mum said we were good at rescuing cats, and the cats knew this and found us. After Midnight, there was Max, and then Cocoa, and soon after, Tabitha. Max and Cocoa fought sometimes, and once Cocoa scratched Max along his right side and he bled and we had to take him to the vet. But they all knew Midnight was the boss.

'She thinks she's human,' Mum said when Midnight sat up at the table with us, eating her food straight from the bowl.

'Very neat and clean,' Mum said.

She slept with us too, on her back under the covers like a person. And she never scratched me in the night, although it was a tight fit with Midnight and Mum and me all in the one bed. The other cats sprawled across the doona, Max in the right corner, Tabitha on the left, Cocoa in the middle on top of my feet.

'Lucky I'm so short,' Mum said.

When she gave me a bird for my tenth birthday, Matt, Mum's best friend, said, 'Why on earth would you put cats and birds together in the one house?'

'He's really intelligent,' I said.

'I'm sure he is, sweetie.' He glanced at Max and Tabitha eating scraps off the plates stacked on the bench and scrunched up his nose. 'Barbara, this place is a zoo.'

I felt bad for Mum when he said that, and when he didn't touch the sandwich she made for him, even though she put his favourite salami and pickles in it.

Mum laughed. 'Nonsense,' she said as if she didn't mind at all.

But after he left, she'd washed and dried and put away all the dishes in the sink, not leaving any for the morning; and later, when I was watching TV, she'd filled the bucket and mopped the floor with so much detergent I smelt it on my pillow when I went to bed that night.



Outside Daniel's parents' house, we sat in his car watching the gate slide slowly open. I shifted in my seat, unable to settle for the butterflies in my belly. Even with the cover of darkness I didn't dare look at him.

'Want to come back to my place?' he said casually.

'Yes.' He was handsome and smart and kind, and his family were big and loud and fabulous. I couldn't quite believe he wanted me. It scared me how badly I wanted him back.

The drive to his apartment in North Bondi seemed longer than the ten minutes it must have taken. Neither of us spoke. Silently, I willed him to drive faster. His bedroom windows looked across the water to the cliffs. Later, I lay my cheek on his chest and smiled into the darkness.

'The aunt,' Daniel said, and I jumped right off him.

'Jesus,' I said. 'I thought you were asleep.'

'Tonight, when Mum mentioned your aunt, your mind went somewhere else altogether.'

I was too surprised by his perception to respond immediately.

'Did something happen with her?'

'It's a long, sad story,' I said.

He felt in the dark for my body and drew me back to him. 'Your face is amazing, Sarah,' he said. 'It shows your every emotion.'

Never in my life, I thought, has someone paid me enough attention to read my face. Even Mum was too consumed by her dramas to really see me. With his fingertips he stroked the soft inside of my arm, while I quietly cried.



I was eleven when Aunt Naomi called. It was late afternoon. Mum cooked. I did my homework at the kitchen table.

‘Geez it’s hot.’ She opened the back door and hooked it to the outside wall before pouring salted pistachios into a bowl.

‘Eat,’ she commanded.

Oil spat in the pan. She crouched in front of the open fridge.

‘I know we had half a cucumber. Where is it?’ She wasn’t asking, but rather thinking out loud. ‘Ah, there it is.’ She slammed the door and stood up. ‘Shit. Shiiiiit! I’ve burned the oil. Bloody hell.’ She tossed the pan into the sink, where it sizzled and spat, spreading a sour smell through the kitchen. She pulled at her singlet and puffed air to the black frizzy hair that framed her face like a bonnet. ‘Okay, Barbara. Start again.’ She grabbed the pan’s handle and wiped its surface with a paper towel. ‘Ouch, it’s hot.’ Took it back to the stovetop, turned on the gas. ‘Where’s the oil?’ She surveyed the kitchen, hands on hips, then saw me watching her. ‘Ignore me, possum. Keep working.’

I looked down at the page and lifted my pencil.

‘No, not the schnitzel, Tabitha. That’s for me and Sarah. Shoo.’

Tabitha landed next to me and padded past my chair. The phone rang. We looked at it, smooth and cream, mounted on the wall at the end of the bench. Mum picked up the handset.

‘Hello?’ She glanced at me then turned to face the window. ‘No, I haven’t hung up.’ Her voice caught in her throat. ‘You sound the same too.’

They spoke for a long time. Mum mostly listened. The kitchen darkened, my stomach grumbled, but I knew better than to interrupt.

‘Right.’ At last, she banged the phone back into place. ‘Goodness, is that the time?’ Her voice was strange, like she was an actor in a

TV commercial; falsely bright. 'You can't do your homework in the dark, honey.' She switched on the light.

I blinked, momentarily blinded.

She took a tissue from the box on the bench and loudly blew her nose with it. 'That was my sister on the phone.'

'Your sister?'

'Yes, your Aunt Naomi.' She brushed her hands down the front of her apron.

'I have an aunt?' I felt my heart beating hard in my chest.

'Of course you do.' She went to the sink and turned on the tap. 'I told you about my sisters.' She tossed in dirty dishes. 'She rang to tell me my father died.'

I opened my mouth but no words came out. It seemed like news from another planet.

'Oh, honey.' She turned off the tap and came and stood opposite.

'All this time, I've had aunties?'

She placed her palm over her mouth and pressed her face into it.

'Are there cousins?'

'Honey—'

'Are there?'

She nodded.

I pushed back my chair, but I didn't leave. 'How many?' I whispered.

'Ten.'

I gasped.

'Maybe more.'