Don't trust him. It wasn't me. It couldn't have been me.

J.P.POMARE

CALL ME

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For P. Pomare

Both of you

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I would forget it fain,
But oh, it presses to my memory,
Like damnèd guilty deeds to sinners' minds.

- Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, act 3, scene 2

Doubting what you see is a very odd experience. And doubting what you remember is also a pretty odd experience, because some memories come with a very compelling sense of truth about them, and that happens to be the case even for memories that are not true.

- Daniel Kahneman

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PART ONE SHADOW AND HEAT

In the past month, how much time have you spent thinking you will not live a long life?

0 - none; 1 - a little; 2 - some; 3 - much; 4 - most

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ONE

THE GREEN FIRST-AID kit is open, with rolls of bandages, eye drops, butterfly stitches spilling out over the vanity like entrails. In my hand are the tiny pointed scissors. Before my eyes, they open and close and open and close. I can hear him coming up the hall. The door creaks.

'Jesus,' he says. He palms his forehead.

I stop breathing.

'Put those down, Kate.'

I toss them beside the sink and sit back on the stool with my arms folded.

His eyes roam over the floor tiles, the clumps of dark hair. 'It's a real mess.' He stands for a moment, before reaching in under the sink and pulling out the hair clippers. He plugs them in at the wall, and they purr to life in his hand. 'Be still.'

Blood throbs in my chest. The clippers sing closer. When the steel thrums against my forehead, I scramble up from the stool. My feet slip on the hair, and I steady myself against the door.

'Kate,' he says. The clippers die in his hand.

I turn and run. The bathroom door whips closed behind me. I sprint up the hall and through the kitchen, sidestepping the bench.

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It's only when he shouts that I realise how close he is. 'Stop right now!' *Never run*, but it's too late.

I lunge for the front door, opening it inwards. I twist through the gap and try to pull it closed but his fingers grip the edge, whitening.

I haven't thought this through. I haven't thought at all. Goosebumps rise all over my body. The towel slips from around my torso and pools on the concrete. Pulling with all my strength, I turn my head back and look about me. I could scream. Would anyone hear? The door is opening. If I ran would I make the road? What then?

'Let go of this door,' he says, a sort of stillness on the surface of his voice. 'You are only making it worse.'

Squeezing every cell in my body I wrench, imagining his fingers crushed against the frame, clipping off at the tips.

'Please,' I say. My voice sounds so pathetic and high I hardly recognise it. 'Just let me go.'

The handle slips from between my fingers. My body thumps against the concrete.

'Shit, watch your head,' he says, rushing forwards, cradling my skull in his hands. 'What the fuck were you thinking? Look at you.' His face hovers over mine. The concrete saps the heat from my skin. 'Come on. Inside now.'

'No,' I say. 'I want to go home.'

He looks up towards the road, then back at me. The big wire-framed glasses have slipped down his nose and his cheeks glow red. His teeth are yellow; his voice is low and mean. 'If you want to act like a child, I'll treat you like one.' He snatches my head back by the remaining hair. The sound is cotton ripping in my skull. An electric shock shoots down my spine, poking between every vertebra to my hips and down the bones of each leg. I scrabble for purchase as he drags me with one hand knotted in my hair, the other under my shoulder. The concrete turns the skin over on one knee. Even though I know I shouldn't, I let out a scream.

I hear the sound first. A gunshot suddenness and my cheek is hot and numb. I look up and he's staring at his hand.

'I . . .' he begins. His face is still red but the anger is draining. He exhales. 'Just stop.'

Size is important; the smaller I become, the less he can hurt me. 'I'm sorry.' My voice is a wind chime. 'I was scared.'

A tear of blood rolls down my shin, carving a path among the goosebumps. He crouches. Hauling me up, he folds me over his shoulder. Like that he carries my weak and trembling body back inside to the bathroom.

'That was a stupid thing to do, alright? Where were you planning on running off to like that in the middle of the day? They could be anywhere. They could be watching us right now.'

I'm back on the stool and now when the clippers start, he positions his lean muscled body between the door and me. I can feel the naked patch in my hair like a burn. The clippers are whirring again; he brings them up my neck. *Vrrthonk*. The steel teeth gnaw, catching a thatch of hair and jerking my head. Hair brushes my neck. It falls over my scarred thighs to the floor. He thumps the clippers against his palm, blows on them.

'It's too thick,' he says.

I stare at the towel veiling the mirror. If I could reach it, pull it away, I would see that it's not real. I would know it's not happening. He runs the clippers through again, this time peeling the hair away from my scalp. A ribbon of it falls apart and strands stick to the dampness of my cheek. He flicks his wrist to whip the cord away. The molars at the back of my mouth are numb. I try to relax my jaw but I can't.

'Be still.'

Arms first, then legs, then stomach, but my chest will not become still. It rattles, and within it my heart is the quivering pulse of a bird held in the hand. Can a heart give up? Slow down, seize its valves, and close like a fist?

'It's almost finished, darling. Please.'

Vrrrthonk. The clippers tangle, clutch my hair like curled fingers, and pull. The skin of my thighs goes white beneath the grip of my fingers. This bathroom is smaller than the one at home. It's tacky and dated. This entire house is claustrophobic. Where the fuck are we? I could scream it and yet the headache looms, sharpening its teeth. And one thought rises through it all: He hit me.

Stepping back with one hand on his hip, he examines me.

'It will be fine.' My voice is desperate.

'No, it's patchy, it's a mess. You look like a starved dog.'

I squeeze my eyes closed and see a teenage girl. She's sitting on the edge of a bed. Then she slips to the floor, where she comes to rest. Her legs are tucked beneath her. Over her nose is a saddle of freckles. She rises with the boneless grace of a dandelion, tilts her head, smiles. It's the video of me. I'm reminded of why I ended up here.

I try to stand but his hand is heavy on my shoulder. It squeezes. I sit back down, tip my head forwards and close my eyes.

He takes most of what's left of my hair in his fist and picks up the scissors. 'Almost finished. Just don't move for one more minute.' As my hair falls around me, I imagine the scissors puncturing his trachea, lodging between a pair of vertebrae in his neck. These thoughts come and go as quickly as a sneeze. I remind myself of a time when I loved this man and feel sick with it.

'Oh,' he says, letting the word uncoil like smoke from his mouth. 'What have we done?'

In the shower, I'm still trembling with adrenaline as I watch the water chase the blood and nicks of hair down the drain. Up in the corners long-legged spiders dance webs across the avocado-green panels. The water pressure is weak and sprays with a panicked hum. Soon the water is cool, and when I shut it off I can hear the pipes shudder in the walls. I dry myself and pull the towel away from

the mirror, standing before it. An invisible fist thumps my chest as, for the first time, I see myself.

You can never know the shape of your skull, not until you have peeled the hair away. Even then the skin, the shadows and light, marks and spots, can obscure the bone that lies beneath. Seeing it isn't enough because, as with anything, what you see is not necessarily all there is. I almost don't trust my eyes. It's possible the cord stretching to my brain is knotted, or my brain may have a short-circuited connection or snapped synapse. I see only my skull. Closing my eyes, I squeeze a single tear out. I try to forget but the skin remembers, the fingertips remember. When I touch my shorn head I gasp. The thin layer of skin wrapping the bone cage of my brain is so soft and smooth, like the pink foot of a newborn. I can feel the shape, the planes and the curvature. But of course it's what lies within that is most important of all.

I think: What I know about the human skull, I learnt because of him.

before <

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TWO

THIS IS MY first memory. I am in the bath at the old house, the house down in Portsea. Mum was sick and we had a nanny who would drift about the house, laying out my clothes for the day, ferrying me to childcare, spreading raspberry jam over my toast and deftly cutting away the crusts. Her name was Eloise. She was the first woman I wanted to be like.

I recall snippets of her time in the house and her abrupt dismissal. I recall Dad passing her in the kitchen, his hand grazing her spine. I remember all the time I spent nestled against her chest as she read to me on the couch while Mum was sick. And, of course, I remember that bath.

Dad would eventually organise to have the hot water cylinder replaced, but back then the bath would only reach ankle-depth before the hot water ran out. Extreme emotions – rage, bliss, grief, ecstasy, agony – are amber; they preserve memories whole. I remember every detail of that time. I remember the gold locket that dangled from Eloise's neck as she bent to shut off the tap. I remember the cloying scent of the lemon bubbles.

'In you get,' Eloise said, her voice sweet and light.

'It's still cold and empty.'

She frowned and flattened the front of her blouse. 'You don't need to stay in for long, Kate.'

'I don't want to get in. It's too cold.'

'Come on,' she said. 'Arms up.' She pulled off my top, but when she went to pull off my shorts I held on to them and dropped to my knees.

'No.'

'Kate, please. It'll only be for five minutes.'

I let her undress me. She picked me up, deposited me in the water, then I screamed.

'Kate,' she said with an owlish lean of the head. 'That's enough.'

I splashed water over the edge of the bath onto the floor as she left the room, then to stop my shivering I wrapped my arms around myself. When she returned, Eloise slipped and had to grab at the sink to keep from falling. She clicked her tongue. 'You've got water everywhere.'

'It's cold.'

'Do you want to get out?'

'No,' I said. 'Just make it warmer.'

'There's no more hot water, Kate. We can't make it warmer.'

'Dad makes it warmer.'

'Well, I don't see how,' she said. She was on her knees now, dragging a towel over the floor tiles.

'Dad heats the water up in a pot.'

From her position on the floor she looked up at me. I splashed water at her. 'Make it warmer!' I said. 'Make it warmer!' My voice had become a shrieking demand.

She winced. 'Okay, okay,' she said.

She left the room again.

It seemed a very long time before Eloise returned, carrying a large steel pot. Steam drifted in her wake as she strode across the room and set it down on the wooden seat beside the bath.

'Okay, Kate, move your legs away so I can pour a little in.' I drew my legs up to my chest and Eloise poured. A gust of steam rose as the hot water rushed beneath me. It was too hot but it quickly cooled. Eloise set the pot back on the seat. 'Better now?'

'I'm still cold.'

She tested the water with her hand. 'You'll be fine. That's warm enough.' She tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. 'Can you just sit for a few minutes? I have to get your dinner on.'

Leaving the door open she walked away up the hall.

The water was still too cold.

'Eloise!' I called.

No response.

'Eloise!'

Still nothing.

Gripping the edge of the bath, I stood and reached for the handles of the pot. It was heavy, almost too heavy for me to lift. Stepping backwards, I dragged it over the lip of the bath. The water rocked within. The edge came to rest against my stomach. It seared. I fell back and a scream ripped from my throat as the pot tipped over my legs. I screamed and screamed as, beneath the surface of the water, blisters bubbled on my thighs.

Then Eloise was there, her hand covering her mouth, her eyes wide. She pulled me from the bath but the pain didn't stop. The screaming didn't stop. I thought it never would. A howl escaped that may have lasted seconds or minutes or hours. Hands holding me under flowing water. I couldn't distinguish hot from cold. A long throat-scorching vowel of pain. This is my first memory.

OUT OF ITS MISERY

In the past month, how often have you been upset or scared by something that happened unexpectedly?

0 - never; 1 - rarely; 2 - sometimes; 3 - often; 4 - all the time

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THREE

HE IS IN the kitchen, thumping about. I've decided to call him Jim. The grinding of the juicer fills the house as the first piece of beetroot churns through. The carrots go in next, then small stringy mushrooms, a pair of Brazil nuts. The spout coughs out a foaming blood-rich concoction. When the juicer thunks to a stop, the classical music coming from the small stereo in the lounge can be heard again. He has made toasted sandwiches, crusts removed and cut into triangles. His glasses are on the bench. I try them on but the world through them doesn't change. The lenses are just glass.

'Go on, darling,' he says. 'Eat.'

I'm surprised by how my body responds, how quickly I wolf down the sandwiches. It's as though I haven't eaten in weeks.

'How do you feel?' he asks.

'I'm okay.'

'You're doing really well.'

'My hair,' I say, looking up at him.

He sucks his lips, standing so close that I can see the tiny constellations of blood vessels in his cheeks, the pores of his nose.

'It'll grow.'

He stirs a scoop of white powder through the juice and brings

it over to me. I block my nose and take a long sip. The taste is earthy and bitter. I cough.

'Good girl. Keep it down.'

He goes up the hall and returns with the camera, sliding open the door to the back deck, overlooking the yard and the sweeping bay far below.

We step outside and the air, so cool and unfamiliar on my scalp, sends a ghost down my spine.

'Right there,' he says. 'In your underwear.'

I step out of my tracksuit pants, grasp the sleeves of my hoodie and pull it off. Standing in my underwear on the deck before the weathered timber wall, I face him. I clutch myself to keep warm.

'Just be still for a minute, then we can take a walk.' He holds the camera up and snaps photos of me from front on; I flinch each time I hear the shutter. Then I turn and he takes photos from the side. Looking down I can see the stencil of my ribs, the sharp ridges of my hipbones. It's as though I have stopped ageing, no longer a seventeen-year-old girl but working back to being a child.

'Okay,' he says. 'Let's go.'

•

As we trek up to the headland, I draw my fingertips along the skin of my head; I palm the planes of my skull.

At the top I step near the edge and I can feel the nervous energy coming from him, radiating in waves. The boom from the sea is so loud that I widen my stance, as if the wind driving up the cliff face could reach out like a hand and pull me over. Below, the water twists white in the channels between the rocks. He breathes almost silently and he's light on his feet, yet I can feel he's close.

'Well, you've seen it now,' he says from behind me. If I didn't know any better I would say there was fear in his voice. 'Let's head back. It's not good for you to be out in the cold.'

Stepping a foot closer to the fence I peer down over the edge. There are people, tiny from above, standing along the crescent of sand.

'Hey,' he says, not disguising the strain in his voice. 'Come on. Now.'

I turn and start back towards the road. He looks grim, his eyes weary behind the clear glasses. His face is stiff as I pass. *Does he regret shaving my head now?* I stuff my hands into the pockets of my hoodie. We cross the farmland. There's a rusted iron shed in one of the paddocks, the type of thing someone might take a photo of. I make a rectangle of my thumbs and forefingers, close one eye.

'Funny how some things are different here.' I wonder if he means the shed, or maybe the bird with the blue bill watching us from its eave. Thinking about home is a twist in the heart. I bite my cheeks and force my face to remain neutral.

We climb the wooden steps over the last fence and continue along up to the road. Nearby, the black skeleton of a car leans down the bank. The grass, which is richer and greener than at home, reaches up to the door handle. This country is a million shades of green. Ferns plume out over a neighbouring fence like small emerald explosions, branches hang down towards the road under the weight of fat leaves, and there are those strange brown fingers from which the ferns unfold – *punga*, he called them. Some properties are fenced in almost entirely by them.

Somewhere far off an engine rumbles. I press my hands into my thighs to help with the incline. In a way, my body has become unfamiliar to me; the drag of breath that comes with some small effort, the hardness of my skin where it's drawn tightly over my femurs. I look up, shocked.

'I know,' he says. 'Need to get meat on those bones.'

•

Back at the house, I leave him in the kitchen. Stepping out onto the deck once more and leaning against the balustrade, I look out

over the steep yard, towards the curl of the bay and the hills, moss green in the twilight. Two streetlights near the beach flicker on. I'm shivering with cold but I make a study of the land, particularly the road out, from where a pair of headlights can be seen tracing the route into town. I had tried to memorise the drive – the turns, the landmarks – but we drove for so long and the pills had made me so sleepy that it had all faded by the time we reached the house. I recall a tower; a steel-trussed structure of red and white thrusting towards the sky and held in place by wires.

I see then, down towards the corner of the block, a steel shed, the roof thick with foliage from an overhanging tree. I climb down the steps and cross the yard to the shed. The door is clean, recently painted with a new steel door handle. I try it but it's locked. I climb back up the steps to the deck as the back door slides open.

'You'll catch your death out here,' he says. 'I've made you a hot drink.'

'What is it?'

'Dandelion and chamomile. Good for the liver apparently.'

I drink the tea. Then, when I hear the shower drubbing in the bathroom, I pull on a sweatshirt and my Chuck Taylors. I'm allowed out of the house with him. What about on my own?

I open the door, step through and silently pull it closed behind me. The driveway is steep and gravelly. It's an effort to climb up it towards the road. We could have gone anywhere in the world, I think, but he dragged me here. An old bus shelter juts out at the corner, flimsy wood and a rash of flaking brown paint. I feel eyes and glance over. Inside, in the near darkness, sit two boys and a girl. One of the boys throws his head forwards, narrows his eyes at me. I look away.

'You're a lesbie, eh?' he says, ugly and mean.

I turn again and let my gaze creep up from the road. I remember my bare skull and feel a sudden urge to run.

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He flicks his tongue between his fingers. The others laugh. 'Fucking lesbie,' the girl says. She holds a paper bag to her mouth and sucks in a breath.

I quicken my pace and when I get to the bottom of the hill near the beach, I can't convince my feet to go any further or to turn back, so I stand rubbing warmth back into my arms. I look out around the bay, following the road with my eyes. Nearby, a white dog sniffs at the grass. By the way it hops along, I see it's missing its front left leg. That narrow head turns to me. Its eyes are black and glossy as oil seep. It turns away and continues on in a rolling gait. The town is in shade now as the sun disappears. If I can get far enough away, if I can make it to the highway . . . then what?

Something hits the asphalt. A stone? A sharp sting strikes the back of my head. I hunch forwards, touching where I was struck. Spots of blood come away on my fingertips. The headache is back, grinding just below the surface. Where the bus shelter sits at the road's edge, the silhouette of a head pokes out, then disappears. I stand there weeping, holding myself together in the cold. Why here? I think. A lacquer of hopelessness pours over me, standing alone as the occasional car passes and the last light fades from the sky. There's nowhere to run. We are so far from the airport.

After we landed, before we got into the car, he made me swallow a small diamond-shaped pill. A calm rolled over me at once, and on the drive I drifted in and out of sleep. I regained consciousness to find we had stopped at a service station. I was too drowsy to get out, but I watched the world from the passenger seat. I listened to the strange accent of the other customers, short formal vowels, hard stops between words. I thought we were on the other side of the world. The birdsong, the quality of light, everything is different here.

Soon enough the sedan comes around the bend. He pulls up beside me and when I climb in, he just stares. I brace myself.

'What the hell are you doing?'

'I don't know.'

'Shit.' He thumps the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. 'What do I have to do? Tell me, what the hell do I have to do to make you realise what sort of trouble we're in?'

'I'm sorry.'

A knot pulses at his jaw. I wait for pain, for anything. He shifts the car into gear and silently we glide away from the kerb.

'I just felt like a quick walk.'

He lets all the air out of his lungs at once. 'We had a bloody walk today. You know what will happen, don't you? You know what I will have to do.'

When we pass the bus shelter, I look in. The kids are gone.

•

All houses have their own quirks. This house is nothing like home. This house is nothing like anywhere I have been before. The cupboards don't quite close all the way. Windows shudder when a door is slammed, and when the wind picks up the structure seems to yaw.

The light is on above the deck outside and a pair of moths fly about it in delirious elliptical whirls.

'You can't disappear like that,' he calls, marching down the hall. 'Just say if you want to go for a walk and I'll take you. It's dark out there.'

'I'm sorry,' I repeat.

'What if someone saw you or recognised you on the road? What then?'

He comes back, pulling a jumper on over his shirt. He slams something down on the bench. It's a deadbolt. I look up into his eyes.

'It's not that I don't trust you. It's just something that will give me peace of mind in the evenings.' As he says it, I notice the loops of sleepless bruising about his eyes. He didn't sleep on the plane. 'You don't seem able to grasp what is at stake here. I'm protecting you from yourself.' Then he's off up the hall towards my room.

'From now on, you don't leave this house and you don't leave this room, not without my permission.'

I wonder if it is loneliness, his fear of me escaping, that seethes inside of him, or if it is something else.

The headache still looms as I sit at the kitchen bench. I hope it's just an echo of the slap or the stone that hit me, not something I now live with like the phantom pain of a missing toe. I press the bump at the back of my head with my thumbnail. Fresh blood seeps out. The pain is addictive, like worrying an ulcer with my tongue.

I hear Jim testing the lock, sliding it into place, blowing the wood shavings away. The cutlery drawer is across the bench. It would be easy to reach in and pull out a steak knife, slide it into my pocket. Just something small to make me feel safe.

When he comes back up the hall he stands before me, hands on hips. 'You go taking off like that and things are going to get a lot worse. Right now, you're free. But that freedom is tenuous. Understand?'

I nod.

'I've been through this before, and I'm not going to let you leave me.'

•

Jim finds me balled up on the couch with my blanket wrapped around me. I didn't sleep well. Maybe it's the spongy mattress, or could it be the lock on the door? There is something about the idea of being trapped that keeps me on edge. More likely it's the dreams. While I lay in bed, eyes wide open waiting for sleep, I heard the floor as he paced back and forth. He didn't sleep well either.

'I'll light the fire,' he says, looking down at me. 'It'll get warmer soon. It's almost spring.'

Spring. He plans on keeping me here until spring.

He heads outside to search for wood.

The television sits in the corner. He lets me watch it during the day, but it's not like home. We don't have all the channels. No guilty pleasures, no *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, no *Ex on the Beach*; the world through the screen is not the one I know. It seems absurd that there are only a few channels. Apparently he no longer believes in the internet or smart phones – not for me anyway. He's trapped me in the nineties.

It's only been a couple days but already I miss what I know. Even the small things: Boost Juice; catching trams to the city; the Yarra River, churning with plastic bottles and shreds of rubbish. On sunny afternoons we used to watch the rowers from the banks as they dragged themselves along and the heat bleached the grass. One night, Willow and I pushed a shopping trolley into its depths without a second thought. Isn't it strange how one moment you can be taken by a destructive impulse and the next you're fine?

I rise from the couch, shed the blanket and go to the kitchen. The old steel tea tin is where the white powder for my smoothies comes from. I pull the lid off and sniff. There's something in it, strange smells that weave into my sinuses. He told me it's a mix of protein and carbohydrates to help me gain weight.

'Leave that,' he says, coming through the back door. I jump. He crosses the room and takes the tin from my hand.

'I was only -'

'It's fine, just don't. There's no wood.'

'Oh.'

'I'll organise some. For now we can collect driftwood and use that. How's your head? Feeling better?'

'It's okay.

He takes me gently by the back of the neck and presses his lips to my forehead. I wince, resisting the urge to wipe the dampness away.

'I'll give you some pills,' he says, stepping back, opening a drawer. 'No,' I say.

He swivels at the neck like an owl. 'Why not?'

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'I'm okay.'

There is a tray of sealed pills in his hand. He punches two out onto the bench. 'Come on. Take these.'

'What are they?'

'Ibuprofen. They'll help with the headache.'

I hold them in my hand and steady my breath. When he hands me a glass of water, I swallow them, then show him my tongue.

'Good girl.'

'When will you take me home?' I hate the pathetic lilt in my voice.

'You know what will happen.' He reaches up and gently taps his forefinger against my temple. 'Only time will heal this, and what happens out there –' pointing to the backyard, the world beyond '– that's out of your control, but it will only get better when everyone moves on.'

'I know.'

'Do you remember? Is it coming back to you?' He leans forwards, his eyes sharp.

'I just remember the car. I remember being in the car.'

But I can remember more. I can remember gripping the steering wheel, the crunch of the car hitting something. Then there is only darkness. There is only me, my body thrumming with adrenaline.

'I remember small things. That's it.'

'Like what?'

I shake my head. 'Not much.' I can feel the tears coming.

'It's okay, we'll get there.'

'Can I send a letter now? You promised.'

He regards me; I know he doesn't want anything going out or coming in. Only he is allowed to use the internet – using a special *Tor* browser and VPN, only visiting certain websites. 'Yeah,' he says. 'Fine.'

I take up the pen but I can barely hold it. I go to my room and sit on the edge of the bed, plotting each word before I press the nib to the page.

He doesn't want anyone to know where we are. The first thing I want to tell you is I'm safe and happy. We must stay hidden for obvious reasons. I'm not allowed to text or use Instagram – he won't even let me on the internet.

I've actually been thinking about you a lot lately. Thinking about what we did.

I do miss you. I miss spending afternoons lying in the study, listening to music. Maybe one day we can go back to that time.

I sit with the letter in my hands, carefully folding it into thirds. I slide it into the envelope and leave it unsealed.

When Jim calls to me I return to the lounge room and hand it to him. He removes the letter, unfolds it and scans my words while his cracked lips make subtle movements. 'It's fine,' he says, stuffing it into the pocket of his jeans. 'I'll send it on our way.' He steps back and gestures to the door.

'On our way where?'

'The doctor.'