LIONESS

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BLOOMSBURY CIRCUS
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I

Trevor turned off the alarm and rolled back to face me across the creamy hotel sheets. He gripped my wrist and held it on the pillow between us.

'I've got you.'

With my free hand I thumbed the sun-damaged skin below his neck. I thought of this part of his body, usually hidden by a shirt collar and tie, as mine.

'I'm going to be late,' I said.

It was our last day in Sydney. I was due to meet the real estate agent in Darling Point.

Trevor kissed me. As was my habit, I had got out of bed before he woke, to clean my teeth. Now he had my other wrist, and pressed them both above my head, against the padded headboard. His knee pushed between my legs. A memory of my neighbour, Claire – our last weird encounter – scratched at my brain but was erased by the morning smell of Trevor's sweat and his skin's heat as he moved on top of me. My blood rushed in response, and I shifted, arching to meet him.

'I've got to get up.'

'You've got to go,' he said. 'You've got to go to work.'

After all this time sex could still be a series of negotiations, small advances and retreats over territory. Yes. No. There. Briefly I floated out of myself to see us from the outside – the linen in the soft morning light, his tousled silvery hair, the thick curve of his shoulders, my blonde streaks spread across the pillow, one leg wound around his hips. The image took me to the edge of

an orgasm, but Claire's face appeared again, distracting me. Go away!

I had a weird feeling of triumph when Trevor came, as if I'd won a fight.

'Now you,' he said.

'Later.' I got out of bed and stood naked in front of him, watching him look. 'I've got to go.'

We had come to Sydney so Trevor could meet an investor face to face, and I could scout locations to open my first Therese Thorne store in Australia. It was early December, and the city had already attained a heat we wouldn't feel back in Wellington even at the height of summer. The open air malls were strung with Christmas lights, the sea burned in electric glimpses between buildings and trees, and that stink of flying foxes hovered in the Botanic Gardens – the sort of hot smell you can't help sniffing for, like from a marker pen, or a pair of knickers kicked off onto the bedroom floor.

The Darling Point site was an empty retail space in a converted worker's cottage fronted by frothing jacarandas. The small, low-slung building was the last of its kind on a side street, off a road lined by grand hedges which afforded occasional views of wedding cake villas and airy modern developments. The estate agent's motorbike dominated the path that led to the front door, a sleek black insect that had waited outside all my viewings that week. I manoeuvred around it, sweating and nervous from the rush to get there, but inside, a respite from the heat, the space was quiet, and smelled cleanly of sawdust.

A wall had been knocked down to turn two small rooms – the front and back of the cottage – into one larger area. My sneakers squeaked on the floorboards as I circled the space envisaging my homewares here, textiles lining the exposed brick, ceramic treasures laid out on scrubbed wooden tables, ferns in macramé plant holders hanging from the ceiling. The window frames had been enlarged and paned with reinforced glass, and would be good for displays. A familiar pressure rose beneath my ribcage: I wanted

it. I kept my expression neutral as I passed the estate agent. He pretended to be on the phone, but he was watching. I knew not to underestimate his baby-face, nor his compensating air of authority.

The back door led to a dark lean-to that must have been a kitchen, which I could use for storage. The windows looked out on a thin yard, an unappealing grey space that appeared wavy and distorted through the old glass. You couldn't tell what was out there. I had a queasy feeling, as if this cottage were floating through time, and I was stuck inside with the realtor. I turned back to the interior, imagining a family of Victorian settlers crammed in: thick black clothes, crying kids. Foreign heat.

'It's gorgeous,' I said. 'But is there much foot traffic?'

'It's an exclusive area,' the agent said.

'If I started here,' I said, 'and word of mouth was good, it would give a sort of cachet, right. Set me up to expand after a year or two. A department store tenancy, do you cover those?'

'Maybe,' he said. 'If that's the goal.'

It was. Therese Thorne Homewares had a flagship store in Wellington and boutiques in Auckland, Christchurch and Tauranga – the result of twenty-five years' work. The next step was to set up here in Sydney, where I would fulfil my ambitions and Trevor would retire to sail and play golf in the sun. We weren't quite ready yet – Trevor had to finish one final property development first, the big hotel project that was his last hurrah, and I needed to find investment to fund the move. If it weren't for my sharing Trevor's last name, the agent might have had me pegged as a tyre-kicker. But the real estate company had branches in New Zealand too, and they knew who Trevor was.

Trevor and I met in the 1990s, when I was not long out of university, having started in English Lit and ended up in Marketing. This was back when university was free. I was the first in my small family to go. At that time Trevor was a serial dater. He and Judith had been divorced a few years, after she

had fallen in love with a friend, another mother from the tennis club. The other woman wouldn't leave her marriage but things between Judith and Trevor were now, they agreed, over. They kept the details close, or as close as was possible in those scandal-loving circles. Judith asked Trevor not to tell the kids about her affair, and he didn't, and he'd suffered for that when the children were young. Even now they were adults – my god, middle-aged – they still thought the divorce was his fault.

He had gone wild for a while after the marriage ended, leaving the four children – Annabel, Rob, Caroline and Heathcote – with their mother, while he travelled alone to Mexico, the Venice Biennale, sex parties in Berlin. When we were introduced in a café by a man I was pitching an idea for a stationery business, Trevor had recently returned from racing motorbikes in the Angolan desert. I'd never met anyone like him in my life.

I make it sound like I knew what I was doing, 'pitching'. In fact, I had met the other man, whose face I can recall vividly but not his name, at the hotel where I was a receptionist. I was twenty-two. Since graduating, my life had stalled. He was a regular business traveller and he kept asking me out for coffee till I said yes. 'But not a date-date,' I remember saying, and he laughed at me as if the idea itself was parochial. 'Of course not.' That was why I was trying to sell him on my idea. I didn't want to lose control of the conversation.

Trevor, who knew this man from school, swung a chair over from another table and made me tell him why I believed nice stationery was important, and I spoke earnestly because I really did think people should have pretty things. I told him stuff I never meant to, about the girls in my class with their glitter pens and scented rubbers, the longing those pastel colours had instilled in me, the orderliness they suggested, houses that were clean and cheery, how could anyone with a pom-pom on the zip of their pencil case come from a home where people called one another a dumb bitch?

He listened, is what I mean. And the man, the business traveller, watched him watch me, and the next day when he was waiting for his taxi before flying back to Auckland, he told me he would put in $2,000 for a proof of concept.

'By the way,' he said. 'You're a pretty girl but you'd do better if you straightened up that eyetooth.'

Feeling brave and rich, I called the number Trevor had given me to tell him that news, and ask if maybe he would like to invest in the idea too.

'I'm heading into a meeting, but I'll call you back,' he said. 'I'll be asking you out. You can decide whether business and pleasure mix. You can decide which is which, Teresa.'

I was still Teresa Holder, then.

I learned about his marriage on our first weekend away together, when we were recounting for each other, on that bed in his Martinborough house, our pasts. No – he told me his stories, but I didn't reveal mine. My life seemed trivial next to his. He was more than two decades older than me. I played the blank slate, which no girl is.

Another thing I found out, but not till later, was he'd sent his old school friend $5,000, more than double his investment, to clear the field. At the time I thought that was romantic.

A year after we met, *Therese Thorne* sold its first line of stationery into shops. That was the start of it all.

'What about *Therese*,' he'd suggested when we were designing a label. 'More aspirational than Teresa. And a last name is good too – creates a character the shoppers can identify with. But not Holder. How about mine?'

Soon after we launched, he suggested that I myself drop Teresa and adopt the name Therese. Therese was the homeware designer and bright businesswoman; Therese relaxed in white shorts at the beach; Therese got that wonky eyetooth straightened so that she could open her mouth when she smiled. Therese didn't worry about what Teresa's parents might have thought; they just needed to get the good seats at the wedding. First the brand had become Therese Thorne, then I did.

I left the killer baby realtor at the retail site and walked across to the Museum of Contemporary Art in the humidity, inhaling the lushness. The excited, wanting feeling in my stomach drove me on. It was wonderful to see new things, and everything pleased me: a little dog in a sparkly harness, trotting along like a busybody; a musclebound man who strode through the park, elbows out as if he were at a hoedown – I half expected him to veer over and sling his arm through mine, whirling me off my feet.

An exhibition by an artist called Pippilotti Rist had recently opened. I spent a long time in her room of hanging lights – a dark space lit by strings of organic crystal shapes that pulsed with soft, changing colours. It was like being in an underwater cave, or a nightclub on Venus. We all drifted around softly, like divers gawping at jellyfish. Jellyfish, I had recently read, would pack the oceans before too long. Or was it krill? Something that would survive at high acid levels and render the water viscous, unswimmable. In pushing that thought away I felt the blind poke of the morning's other unwelcome memory, from bed, about Claire. Like having a piece of food trapped between your teeth.

A woman caught my eye through the hanging colours and smiled as if to say, *can you believe this exists*. A thrill ran through me, the sound of a small bell.

As I was leaving the gallery I saw her again, now in front of a video installed in a bright corridor, and I slowed to see what she was looking at. On the screen, a younger woman in a blue dress, her hair in a high ponytail, sashayed down a city street, bearing what looked like a huge flower – a red hot poker perhaps. She looked as effortless as her cotton dress, enjoying the day. As we watched she drew back the flower like a weapon, gave a skip to get momentum, and whacked the driver's window of a parked car, smashing it.

The other woman glanced over her shoulder at me and I realised I had made a strange noise.

On the video the ponytailed woman skipped on, to another car, and did it again.

My phone buzzed in my handbag. It was Trevor.

'Just checking. Are you getting something for Judith?'

'Yes,' I said. There was time to go to the gallery gift shop. I already had the Christmas presents for his children and grandchildren.

Back at the hotel I released the shopping bags onto the floor with relief, my inner forearms striated with red lines where the handles had cut in. I had brought an empty suitcase with me and proceeded to pack it carefully as I waited for Trevor to return from his meeting.

The second bag was soon full, and I opened Trevor's suitcase to fit in the excess purchases – he always had space. As I tucked the grandchildren's stocking fillers down the side, my fingers met a small, hard object. It was a pill bottle – Viagra – something I didn't know he used. Had he woken too and left the bed in the early light of that morning, while I was cleaning my teeth and dusting sleep from my eyes in the bathroom mirror, to quickly pop one? Why didn't he tell me?

I put the bottle back where I had found it. This was our last night, and an old school friend of Trevor's had invited us to dinner on his yacht. I was looking forward to the rolling twilight on the water, the city lights glimmering around us, being poured a drink on the deck. There would be crab and silver and white linen. I was good on boats, never seasick.

★

On the plane the next day it came back to me: a drab, functionary part of my brain was anticipating the climb up to our fourth floor apartment with the suitcases, and I remembered the thing at the edge of my consciousness, about Claire. A week ago, I had been rushing down those stairs to get to work, and a floor below ours, outside her door, I ran into her returning home in her early morning workout gear. There were sweat marks on her T-shirt. I had said hello and she'd said in her smoky voice,

'Oh, Therese. I had a dream about Trevor last night.'

What?

She plunged a hand into her gym bag, feeling for her keys.

'It was so strange,' she said – almost as if I wasn't there. 'We were in bed.'

In bed? Even recalling this in the sterile plane, I flushed at the intimacy.

'Yes, and then—' She drew the keys from her bag's depths and held them aloft. 'Aha!'

'Then what?'

'Sorry.' A key in the lock. 'Never mind.'

'Claire.' I wasn't going to leave the landing until she told me.

She turned back to me. 'We were having sex. Like, it was really hot. I mean, intense.'

To my astonishment she maintained eye contact. Why was I the one blushing?

'And he pulled out a gun from beneath the pillow and held it to the side of my head.' She pointed to her temple.

A gun?

Now an air hostess came down the aisle offering landing champagne. Trevor shook his head. Trevor of other women's sex dreams. Sex play with guns? In our country only farmers and gang members have guns. Trevor was a property developer. I could feel him register the fact that I accepted the glass of gold bubbles, my third of the flight. Though I had been with Trevor nearly thirty years, I would never take business class for granted. Before we met I didn't even have a passport.

'What then?' I had asked Claire.

'Well, then…' Claire paused. Sun from the stairwell window lit up the silver streaks in her damp, dark hair. She gave a little shrug. 'Then I came.'

I stared at her. My feet were pinned. 'Excuse me?'

Alarm crossed her face, as if she'd remembered normal behaviour. 'Are you offended? I don't know why I told you that. I seem to have lost my filter.'

The change in her tone gave me back some control. 'All good,' I said. 'At least someone's having sex dreams about my husband.'

'Oh, god. We don't even know each other that well.' She had the apartment door open and the hallway beyond it gave off the chaotic vibe of working parents with a teenage child. Claire and I were roughly the same age, but my husband being so much older made it feel we didn't belong to the same moment in time. 'I'm so sorry.'

'It's OK,' I said as I crossed the landing away from her. If she apologised again it would make me feel like the butt of a joke. To show it really was all right I added, 'I hope you're coming to our Christmas party.'

'Oh – are you having one?'

'I left an invite in your letter box.'

'I'll ask Mick,' she said. Mick was her husband. 'He's in charge of these things.'

And she was swallowed by her hall.

The plane jolted, my champagne glass nearly snatched out of my hand by an unseen force. Landing in Wellington was infamously hairy, and even a jet like this could shake about in turbulence. The seatbelt light dinged on repeat. I drained my drink and tucked the glass into the seat pocket. Trevor was engrossed in the spreadsheet on his laptop, headphones on. We lifted and dropped, plateauing with another bump. I reached for his forearm and he unhooked his headphones. At the next bang of air, he closed the laptop. We held hands, our fingers interlaced, as around us people gasped and yelped in the shaking cabin. At the top of the galley the air stewards stared into the middle distance from their perches. If the plane crashes, I thought, it won't matter which class we are in. Another part of me thought, it will never crash with Trevor on board.

The next lift in the air – almost sweet, weightless – was followed by the sharpest drop yet, and someone screamed, and a woman behind us in the cabin started singing 'Amazing Grace'. Someone had sung that at our wedding. It was funeral music, a mistake, Trevor tried to talk me out of it but I'd insisted,

twenty-three years old and it was the closest thing to classical music that I knew.

With my free hand I clutched the juddering headrest in front of me. My armpits felt slick.

'It's fine,' said Trevor, just as, with a plastic slither, the oxygen masks came down, prompting a general cry of terror. The panicked voices hushed for the captain's announcement that this was only due to a drop in cabin pressure and not to be alarmed, but to please put your own mask on first, and make sure it was fitted over your nose and mouth.

My fingers snagged my hair as I pulled the elastic over my head, and I felt a second's relief it fitted, despite a long-held fear that in a crisis I would be incapable of donning the mask – but what about the life jacket, I thought, as the pilot dragged the plane through the thick air and we tilted so that my window was filled with the sight of nothing but sea. We couldn't, in a matter of moments, be thrown into the raw, bobbing ocean, or worse, trapped in the cabin, sucked below the water – but we could, it was possible, anything could happen.

'Therese, look at me,' said Trevor, holding his mask away from his face. 'We're OK.'

I tried to take in the people around us. They couldn't all die. But already they looked like aliens or ICU patients, already the man across from me was on his phone, the mask around his chin, a steward waving at him, telling him to put the phone away. Who was he calling? Who would I call to say goodbye? Trevor was here beside me. I had no siblings, no children of my own. My parents were on the Gold Coast – my mother, in fact, was right now at a clinic recovering from a facelift – a facelift Trevor was paying for – now the plane shivered with a thin hard vibration that was somehow more terrifying than the great circular bounces and I stared at Trevor's hand to cling only to those details, nothing else. The liver spots. Those neat square fingernails. The hair on his knuckles. The wedding ring with a swirl in the metal. He kept the ring from his marriage to Judith in a small navy box in his underwear drawer. What

would Judith say if he died, what would his children say – it would be my fault, I thought, my thoughts unhooking again, whirling out across space – I was killing Trevor, his work would go unfinished, his family would lose him, who would replace his vision, what would happen to the energy he brought to the world?

'Right,' said the captain over the intercom system. 'The northern approach is clear now. We're going to try that again.'

The calm in his voice was awe-inspiring, a greater skill than landing a plane. He continued talking, evenly, about landmarks and elevation. I wanted to give him my body with gratitude. Actually lie down on the cockpit floor and have him fuck me. Someone called out, 'Good on ya, mate,' and we laughed through our masks.

He did find another way, and we closed in on Wellington with nothing more than the usual buffeting. My shirt was soaked through under the arms, we were still surrounded by tubes and the dinging seatbelt bell, but we all knew we were going to live. I gave Trevor's hand another squeeze and pulled my mask aside to kiss him.

I forced my mind back to normal things. What had I been thinking about before the first jolt? Oh yes – Claire. Not that she was, as I understood the word in those days, normal. I knew her family only vaguely, as my downstairs neighbours, and of course Heathcote, Trevor's youngest, had the other apartment on their floor. Now I found I was oddly pleased she'd told me her dream; it was a little cotton stitch attaching us together. No one else I knew spoke like that. Was it acceptable? I didn't know. I was a woman without opinions.

The city looked incidental as we descended: a scattering of suburbs around the one-scoop harbour, nothing inevitable about it. A clutch of office blocks. The dense green of the town belt. I was on the wrong side of the plane to see the construction site of Trevor's hotel. I strove to see our building, where we lived.

Once I was down on the streets in the city again, I knew, the scale would revert to human size and I would forget how

close it was, how like a small town. I didn't care. I loved living here. I loved Trevor. I loved the pilot and the stewards and the other passengers and I even loved the wind above that terrified me. There was another thunk and alarming jolt as the wheels dropped, but we hadn't yet landed.

2

The night before our Christmas party I stayed at our place in Martinborough, and headed home to the city early the next morning with the car boot full of cellar door wine and the back seat laden with armfuls of fresh cut dahlias, lilies and delphinium from the garden there, stems wrapped in wet tissue, the coolness of night still on them. Potted gardenias nestled in the footwells. The car was filled with so much scent I felt it infuse my skin.

Not long after leaving I passed a wild S of tyre tracks that ran off the road into churned mud. The tar seal was silky from the night's rain, and I was glad of the 4WD's grip. The river ran high beneath the one-lane bridge, tips of grass poking through the surface where it had risen up the banks. Out of nowhere, a swarm of bikers appeared behind me, the matt black domes of gang helmets above their blank stares in my rearview mirror. They overtook my car with a quick roar as soon as I had crossed the bridge. I didn't recognise the patches on the backs of their jackets. I drove on into the air they had parted, but it took a few seconds to recall my thoughts. My plans for the night.

A mix of people usually came to our parties: rogue politicians from left and right, philanthropists, architects, civil engineers, property developers, maybe a visiting ambassador. Old satirists and their new wives, gallerists with favourite artists, Trevor's children, any non-weird city councillors and, occasionally, the Mayor. Wine merchants. Antique dealers. Actors. My hairdresser. A student we sponsored to study jazz performance at Julliard,

who might be persuaded to sing. An old school friend of Trevor's I privately called Flat Tax because he could talk of nothing else.

I'd invited everyone who worked for the Therese Thorne brand, but had also thrown the staff blowout they preferred: dinner and drinks and karaoke, where, as usual, Emalani and Rebecca had goaded me to sing the dirtiest song on the playlist, and the sales girls did drugs in the loo then told me everything that needed to change about my generation, and I'd paid the bill for this self-inflicted Festivus. They were great young women, warm and talented; I loved to hustle alongside them during the rush. Although I was mortified they saw me as more Trevor's age than theirs, I couldn't blame them. Gen X, Boomer: to them, what was the difference? Still, after an evening with their young faces it was a shock to look in the bar's bathroom mirror and see my mother looking back.

Trevor had been forty-four when we got together. He was now in his early seventies. Through him, I spent most of my time with older people, and was used to feeling comparatively youthful, even since turning fifty. His friends were my friends – we took holidays with David and Sarah Russell, for instance, and went sailing with Matteo and Frank, or played cards with the Novaks. I had joined the women of our loose group on some of the Great Walks. I enjoyed it, didn't I? They appreciated life, those older women. They ran companies or schools and did their part for the community and they all breathed deeply of the clear air as we reached the ridge at Luxmore Hut and the views opened up. They were opinionated and worldly, and over the decades I'd grown comfortable with them. If at first I had gone overboard to ingratiate myself, to assure them I was not aware of their husbands' occasional stares, if I found myself compelled on those hiking trips to leap up and scrape the enamel plates and boil water for the coffee, if I did sometimes feel like a mascot, well that was on me. And there was no one to tell about it.

Over the Remutaka hill, now cell phone reception was steady, I made work calls, signed the head designer off on a scouting trip

to Korea, and barely noticed the rest of the drive. Before long the harbour came into view, reflecting the pink still in the sky, warning of more rain. I refused to care. It would be warm and we could pull the balcony doors open and light candles in heavy glass lanterns and the rain could come down as hard as it liked.

The slow motorway traffic came to a standstill in the Terrace Tunnel. I wound the windows up against the exhaust fumes; the scent of lilies in the warm car was overpowering. I grabbed my phone and checked emails. A couple of people had written to apologise for not being able to make it tonight after all, citing family reasons. I replied *bring them!* and signed off with a kiss, the emails taking a while to send because of the weak signal in the tunnel. But as I wrote, another message came in:

Just checking the party's still on. Understand if not.

Was there a siren then, or did I imagine it? Or have I supplied it in retrospect, knowing what was coming next – does the siren sound come from the prop table of sensory associations that has already been laid out for me by the circumstances, the limited influences of my life? Wherever it came from, it's what I remember now. A blue flicker of light rotated along the wall from the tunnel's far curve, around which I could not see. A tuning-in feeling came over me, my senses honed as if at the sound of your own name in conversation across a room. I reached to the passenger seat for the paper I'd picked up from the gas station at the bottom of the hill, but hadn't yet read.

Trevor's hotel project was mentioned above the masthead. He wasn't named there but at the phrase *Council links trigger hotel enquiry* I knew. I turned straight to the business section. The article stretched across the top third of a page, next to a photograph of Trevor with his arm around a man of the same age – the councillor under investigation – both of them laughing. It had been taken somewhere outside: possibly it was lifted from social media. He had on a pale blue jumper I'd bought last winter. He wore it to please me but now I could see that it didn't fit well.

'Oh Trevor,' I said out loud. 'Oh no.'

I read the article in gulps; the words bunched and jerked so it took a minute to absorb. *Questions for councillor and developer over hotel development. Council to launch enquiry, construction to halt.*

I thought of Trevor's spreadsheets, his careful timetables, the domino effect. All those people who wouldn't have a job to turn up to on Monday.

The hotel plans, the article reported, had already caused controversy with rumours it would house a casino. Now there were questions about the speedy permissions process. An anonymous source alleged the council had favoured the hotel over an application to put social housing on the same cleared land.

This was the first I'd heard of social housing being in the mix. No way would Trevor scupper that. Hang on, I thought through my nausea, the enquiry was into the councillor who'd approved it, not Trevor. Maybe he would be OK. But then I got to the part that said construction would be on hold until the enquiry reached a conclusion. That could be months.

I made myself read the article again. The case against: Trevor and the city councillor had been at school together. The hotel plans had been green-lit indecently quickly. The usual decision-making process had not been followed. Meanwhile a fully developed plan for multiple units on the same site, which would meet the council's commitment to mixed public and private funding of social housing, had been one step away from approval, then passed over in favour of the hotel. The city suffered from a dearth of such suitable sites: the social housing project had gone cold.

The question to be answered, claimed the journalist, was if the councillor chairing the planning committee had taken some kind of kickback from Trevor? Or had he simply acted according to the old boys' unwritten code?

'That's two questions,' I said to the empty car.

The byline was not a name I knew. Ink from the paper had smeared onto my fingers. My other hand gripped my phone. Trevor voted Labour, or at least he used to; he would never ride roughshod over social housing plans, and if that part wasn't true, why should I believe the rest of the article?

I willed myself not to call anyone until I was calm. That helpless feeling – where's my dad – the hot need for someone to come and save me. More lights flashed further up the tunnel and I registered that horns were tooting.

After a few deep breaths I called Trevor. A long silence emanated from the line before the dial tone connected, but when he answered his voice came through clearly.

'Therese. Have you seen this nonsense.'

'Did you have any idea?'

'No.'

That was a bad sign, that no one had sent warning.

'Are you all right? Where are you?'

'I'm pretty frustrated. It's not a story. I'm just waiting on a call from Guy, then I'm onto the investors. Strictly speaking it's a problem for the councillor but the abatement's a fucking disaster and they've got to lift it pronto. Guy'll knock some sense into them.'

'OK.'

'Listen, a couple of years ago this wouldn't have warranted a second glance – business as usual.'

'Don't say that,' I said, paranoid that someone might be listening.

'Well it's a fact. This is how things get done. This is how they've always got done. He knows me, he trusts me, he pushed it through without the usual needless delays. But everything was in order.'

'Are you sure,' I said. 'You didn't, I don't know, buy him box seats to the football or contribute to his election campaign?'

He ignored this, or didn't hear. 'No one really gives a shit, they're all for the hotel anyway. They're just covering their own arse. And look,' he said, gathering steadiness, 'the council's not about to reverse their decision on the building permission. The thing's half up.'

His tone had shifted to mild irritation, as when the letterbox was jammed with junk mail, or the rugby hadn't recorded all the way through. So this was how we were going to handle it. I

still felt dread. But I would follow Trevor's lead. Slow news day, storm in a teacup. The press, I thought, was a soft problem. It was the pause in the hotel construction that was a real problem. Like burning money.

'I'm stuck in the Terrace Tunnel,' I said.

'There's been an accident. Just heard it on the radio. You must be right behind it.'

'I'll be home as soon as I can. Should we—'

'What?'

'I think we should still go ahead with tonight, don't you?'

He laughed. 'What? Of course! I'll get T-shirts made with the headline printed on them to hand out.'

'Trevor?'

'Mn?'

'Did you know that, about the social housing development that was after the same space?'

'No!'

'I didn't think so.'

He'd worked on community projects himself in the past, on his own dime. But we were in a housing crisis now. That was the part of the article that cut through. And the chummy photo didn't look good.

I rang my brand manager. Denise was in Auckland and hadn't seen the news, but found the article online while we spoke.

'It doesn't mention Therese Thorne,' she said in that chesty rasp of hers: her breakfast was three cigarettes. 'Or you.'

'No.'

'Quite a bit about the need for better low cost housing in Wellington.'

'Yes.'

'Do you want me to do anything?'

'No, I just wanted to make sure you'd seen it. Maybe keep your ear to the ground? It's a worry for Trevor about the hotel but it'll blow over.' I had an image of the hotel being dispersed by the wind, girders and rebar flying away like so many pieces of straw.

'Shall I open a wee file. I'll update you if there's anything else. Oh, and I'd suggest you let Rebecca and Emalani know.' They were my PA and the Therese Thorne Homewares accounts manager, respectively. 'Nobody wants to feel blindsided by something like this.'

Something like this. You could never tell what Denise was thinking unless she wanted you to; she was good at her job.

While we were speaking, road cones had been put out and now a traffic cop came through the tunnel on foot, explaining that the accident area was nearly cordoned off and we'd soon be able to pass. Her uniform made me feel instantly guilty, as if I'd done something wrong.

'Thanks for your patience,' she said.

'Is everyone all right?'

'There's a medical team up there now.'

'I hope they're all right,' I said, but she had moved on. The crash seemed connected to the article. I knew that was insane.

I wound the window back up and put the air conditioning on high. The flowers would live.

The stony solidity of our building, the cool, quiet air in the foyer, reassured me for a minute as I carried the flowers in from the car. It was a four-storey former sewing factory that dated from the late 1800s and was originally owned by Thorne & Sons, who were ancestors of Trevor's. There was no lift, but we planned to move to Sydney before the stairs became an issue for Trevor; we lived on the top floor, the whole of which our apartment covered. The other apartments, which ran two to each of the other floors, were either rented or leasehold.

On the second floor I passed the padlocked door of the one that belonged to Annabel, Trevor's eldest, and her husband John. It was meant to be their bolt hole from Singapore, where they lived, but they never used it, and it sat cold, stripped of fittings, while Annabel hired and fired a series of architects to remodel the inside. Trevor's youngest son, Heathcote, had the free use of the one on the third floor, across the hall from

Claire, and sometimes lived there, but often let it out for the income.

Trevor wasn't in the apartment and his phone went to voicemail. He was probably at Guy Benson's office. I put the flowers in the bath and took two armfuls of lilies to display at work.

The shop ran across the entire ground floor of a building that was a Trevor Thorne creation: the upstairs units had been sold off during the planning stage, but the open space at street level was always intended to house my flagship store. Before Trevor developed this building, my shop had occupied a series of rented spaces with difficult landlords, and the business kept losing traction. During the global financial crisis my rent rose while sales ground to a halt, and I nearly lost everything. In 2009, when his own business was still at risk, Trevor purchased this site and created the home for the store that I needed. The day we opened to the public, he surprised me with new letterhead stationery and a brass plaque beside the entryway: *Therese Thorne House*. He saved my career.

Just being outside the shopfront, now, soothed my anxious mood. It was gorgeous – steel-framed windows, cabinetry from recycled wood, lighting that could be angled to pick out a particular item. We filled it with pretty things. The furniture was for sale too, but sometimes people would simply come and sit on it to rest.

Over the years Trevor, his children, and then grandchildren had appeared with me in advertising campaigns, the seasonal newsletters and later in the website's blog. Therese Thorne Homewares portrayed an artfully imperfect life, illuminated by pontoon lights, outdoor candles and shafts of golden sun. It was fresh flowers cut from the garden, a jumble of sandshoes by the door, long grass weighted down by dew. Rugs, cushions, wall hangings in neutral colours. Homemade crafts, cupcakes, gratitude boards. It sold the fantasy of time to read poetry and handwrite letters to women who scrambled to make it through the day without braining themselves on a desktop paper spike, and mini versions of the same fantasy for their daisy-chained

daughters. When I started it, in my twenties, I didn't know about the paper spikes. I still believed in poetry and handwritten cards.

Now I arranged the lilies in big vases, though there was barely any display space among the strings of Christmas lights and baubles. The girls teased me for keeping my sunglasses on – 'Big night?' – and I nodded and smiled. They wouldn't have read the business news. No need to explain.

I was quickly reviewing the week's sales figures when I heard familiar voices and saw two women I knew from Pilates cruising the scent table, picking up bottles, sniffing, replacing. Before I knew what I was doing I had ducked down behind the sales desk and was squatted there, staring at a tangle of cables and miscellaneous crap. One of the sales assistants tripped over me on her way to the wrapping station and I shuffled along to the end of the desk and rose slowly, as if I had just bent down to pick something up. I grabbed my phone and called Trevor, pretending to be talking as I smiled and nodded at the women on my way out the door – *busy sorry* – though once again he did not answer.

It was a shock to see the hotel site devoid of people or any activity, where only yesterday it had been ringing and grinding with the sounds of construction. Its layers of room shells and hallways were protected from the weather by white polythene. Ponderous cranes loomed, now still, above them.

The building sat on reclaimed land at the harbour's edge; two nineteenth century warehouses, once used for customs clearance, as well as a winter skating rink and a tiny local museum, had been razed to make way for it. Perhaps because of the location by the water, the massive structure made me think of the cruise ships that appeared in the harbour overnight. Locals had started calling it the Hulk; it had taken Trevor's son Rob to explain that it wasn't a comic-book reference.

I removed my sunglasses to peer through a crack in the padlocked jib across the entrance way. Only days ago I had walked through it wearing a hard hat, surprised at the level

of detail going up alongside structural basics: light fittings and switches hanging from wires beside doorframes and from the uncapped ceilings; a stand of full-grown nīkau palms growing from a square of soil that marked an indoor courtyard, while the lobby interior was unfinished and still looked like a concrete car park. Now a cordon roped it off, and although instinct had told me I'd see Trevor there, the place was empty. Who would look after the nīkau palms?

I checked the news website again on my phone, to see if Trevor's story was in the headlines. But the first item past the ad page was about the crash in the Terrace Tunnel, between a motorbike and a family car. The biker had died at the scene, and two of the family members were being treated for injuries. The bikers had been coming through the tunnel the wrong way, an eyewitness said, and the car had swerved to avoid them.

When I had finally exited the tunnel I had seen an overturned car, perched on the narrow shoulder outside the tunnel mouth, as though the laws of nature had been upended. But the driver couldn't have been going fast enough, in that rush hour traffic, to lose control and flip it, I'd thought – then I saw the sprawled motorbikes and the stretchers beside the ambulance.

Now I turned the corner towards the sea, and kept walking into the wind. A bit of grit flew in my face and I fished in my pocket for my sunglasses as protection.